

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 1: The Vanished Bride - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 1: The Vanished Bride

Chapter 1: The Vanished Bride

FIA

The morning sun painted everything golden, and I should have been happy. My half-sister Hazel was supposed to marry Alpha Cian Donlon today. The Skollrend pack had traveled from three territories over, bringing their finest warriors and elders. Our small pack territory buzzed with excitement we hadn't felt in years.

I smoothed down my pale blue bridesmaid dress and checked the time. Twenty minutes until the ceremony, and the guests were already seated in neat rows outside. Children from both packs chased each other between the chairs while their parents exchanged pleasantries and business talk. This wedding meant everything to our pack. An alliance with Skollrend would secure our borders and bring prosperity we desperately needed.

Alpha Cian stood near the altar, his dark suit pressed perfectly, but his eyes kept darting toward the main house. He ran a hand through his black hair and checked his watch again. The man looked nervous, which wasn't like him. I'd only met him twice during the courtship negotiations, but he struck me as someone who never showed weakness.

"Where is she?" he asked his Beta, loud enough that I caught the words from my spot near the flower arrangements.

Good question. I hadn't seen Hazel since yesterday evening. She'd been quiet during the rehearsal dinner, picking at her food and giving short answers when anyone spoke to her. I thought it was just wedding nerves. Every bride got nervous, right?

The crowd started murmuring. Heads turned toward the house, then back to the Alpha, then to each other. Someone coughed. A baby cried and was quickly hushed. The longer we waited, the more restless everyone became.

Alpha Cian walked over to me. "Have you seen Hazel?"

"Not this morning. She might still be getting ready with Mother." I gestured toward the house, though doubt crept into my voice. "You know how long these things take."

His jaw tightened. "The ceremony should have started ten minutes ago."

Fear sprouted in my chest, small but insistent. "I'll go check on her."

I hurried toward the main house, my heels clicking against the stone pathway. The closer I got, the more my stomach churned. Something felt wrong. The air itself seemed heavy, like a storm was coming.

I found Isobel in the small anteroom adjacent to Hazel's bedroom. My stepmother sat in a chair, her face pale as morning mist, staring at a piece of paper in her trembling hands. She looked up when I entered, and I saw something I'd never seen before in her eyes. Pure terror.

"Mother? What's wrong? Where's Hazel?"

Isobel held out the paper without speaking. Her lips moved but no sound came out.

I took the letter and recognized Hazel's handwriting immediately. My eyes scanned the words, but my brain refused to process them at first. I read it again, slower this time, hoping I'd misunderstood.

Dearest Mother and Father,

By the time you read this, I will be far from here with the man I truly love. I cannot marry Alpha Cian when my heart belongs to another. I know this will cause problems, but I cannot live a lie. Milo and I have been planning this for weeks. We are going somewhere no one will find us. Please forgive me, but I had to choose love over duty.

Your daughter, Hazel

The paper slipped from my fingers and fluttered to the floor. "No. No, no, no. This can't be real."

But it was real. I looked around the room and saw Hazel's wedding dress hanging abandoned on its hook, the pearl buttons catching the light. Her shoes sat empty beneath it. The veil lay crumpled on the vanity next to her unused makeup.

Milo. My fated mate. The man I'd loved since we were teenagers. The man who'd told me just last week that he needed time to think about our future together. The man who served as a sentinel in our pack.

My phone was in my hands before I realized I'd pulled it out. I dialed his number with shaking fingers.

"Fia?" His voice sounded different. Guilty.

"Tell me this isn't true. Tell me my sister didn't run away with you on her wedding day."

Silence stretched between us like a chasm.

"Milo, answer me!"

"It's true." His words hit me like a physical blow. "I'm sorry, Fia. I never meant for it to happen this way."

The room spun around me. I gripped the back of a chair to keep from falling. "How could you do this? Today of all days? What happens now? What happens to us?"

"There is no us anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm rejecting our mate bond, Fia. I'm sorry, but Hazel and I... we're meant to be together."

The pain hit me like lightning, starting in my chest and spreading through every nerve ending. The mate bond stretched thin, then snapped like a broken guitar string. I gasped and doubled over, clutching my ribs as agony flooded my system.

"What happens to Alpha Cian?" I managed to ask through gritted teeth. "What happens to our pack?"

"I'm just a sentinel, Fia. My choices are my own."

Just a sentinel. Like that made it acceptable to destroy everything. "He'll be humiliated in front of the other powerful pack in the region! This will wreck us!"

"I have to go. We're already hours away. Don't try to find us."

The line went dead. I stared at the phone, waiting for him to call back and tell me this was all some sick joke. He didn't.

"Fia!" Isobel grabbed my shoulders. "We don't have time for this. Look outside."

I stumbled to the window. The guests had begun standing up from their chairs. Some pointed toward the house. Others checked their watches and whispered among themselves. Alpha Cian paced near the altar like a caged wolf.

"The ceremony is already late," Isobel said. "If we don't produce a bride soon, Alpha Cian will know something is wrong. When he finds out what Hazel did..." She covered her mouth with her hand.

"What do you mean?"

"Think, Fia! This isn't just embarrassment. This is a broken contract between two packs. When the Skollrend wolves realize they've been insulted this way, what do you think will happen to us?"

The truth crashed over me like ice water. Pack alliances weren't just political arrangements. They were sacred bonds sealed in ceremony and witnessed by both groups. Breaking one was considered an act of war or at minimum, grounds for severe punishment.

"Alpha Cian could demand compensation," I whispered. "He could claim our territory. He could have Father imprisoned."

"Or worse." Isobel's voice cracked. "He could have us all killed for the insult. Hazel didn't just abandon her groom. She spat in the face of his entire bloodline."

My legs gave out. I sank into the chair Isobel had vacated, my head spinning with implications. Our small pack had maybe fifty adult members. Skollrend had over two hundred. If Alpha Cian decided we'd dishonored him beyond forgiveness, we wouldn't stand a chance.

"There has to be something we can do," I said. "We could explain. Tell him it wasn't planned. That we had no idea."

"You think he'll care? His pack traveled days to get here. They brought gifts. They arranged business deals contingent on this alliance. And now what? We tell them sorry, the bride ran away with another man?" Isobel laughed bitterly. "We might as well dig our own graves."

Outside, Alpha Cian's voice rose above the murmur of the crowd, though I couldn't make out his words. Whatever he was saying made several Skollrend wolves stand up from their seats. The tension was building like pressure in a kettle.

"Maybe we could offer something else," I said desperately. "Money, part of our territory, anything to make up for this. We have to tell father about this!"

"What do we have that they want? Our pack is barely holding together as it is." Isobel walked to the window and peered through the curtains. "Oh god, he's coming this way."

Heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway outside. Alpha Cian's voice carried through the door, though he was trying to keep it low. "I need to speak with my bride immediately."

Isobel spun around, her eyes wild with panic. She looked at me, then at Hazel's abandoned wedding dress, then back at me. I saw the exact moment the idea formed in her mind.

"No," I said, reading her expression. "Whatever you're thinking, no."

She moved to the dress and lifted it from its hook. "You're about the same size as Hazel."

"Mother, no. That's insane."

"Is it more insane than letting our entire pack be slaughtered?" She carried the dress toward me. "You could walk down that aisle. Complete the ceremony. No one would know until it was too late to back out."

"Alpha Cian would know! He's courted Hazel for months!"

"From a distance, with formal visits and chaperoned meetings. How much time have they actually spent alone together? How well does he really know her face?"

The footsteps in the hall stopped right outside our door. "Mrs. Hughes? I need to see Hazel now."

Isobel grabbed the wedding veil from the vanity and shook it out. The delicate lace fell in layers, thick enough to obscure someone's features if positioned correctly.

"This is madness," I whispered.

"This is survival." She held the veil toward me. "Please, Fia. Save us. Save your father. Save everyone you've ever cared about in this pack."

"Mrs. Hughes?" Alpha Cian's voice carried a warning now.

My hands shook as I stared at the veil. Everything in me screamed that this plan would never work. But what choice did we have? If we opened that door and told Alpha Cian the truth, we'd all be dead before sunset.

I thought about my father, who'd worked his whole life to keep our small pack together. I thought about the children playing outside, innocent of all this adult scheming. I thought about Milo and Hazel, already hours away from here, safe while the rest of us faced the consequences of their choice.

The door handle turned.

"Put it on me," I said.

Chapter 2: Unveiled

FIA

Isobel's hands moved quickly, draping the veil over my head and adjusting the layers so they fell across my face and shoulders. The world became soft and hazy through the lace, like looking through fog.

"Keep your head down," she whispered urgently. "Don't speak unless you have to. If he asks you direct questions, just nod or shake your head."

A sharp knock rattled the door when it would not budge. I did not realize when Isobel had locked it. But she had.

Isobel stiffened at the knock.

"Wait," she called, her voice edged with forced calm. "The bride isn't ready yet." She spun back to me, fingers flying as she tugged me out of the blue bridesmaid gown. The fabric slid down my arms and pooled at my feet. In one practiced motion, she lifted the heavy wedding gown and guided it over my body, fastening it quickly but carefully, smoothing it into place before I could even take a full breath.

The door opened and Alpha Cian stepped inside. I held my breath, my heart hammering so hard I was sure he could hear it.

"Finally," he said, and I caught the relief in his voice. "Are you ready?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

"You look beautiful," he said softly. "I know this is overwhelming, but everything will be fine once the ceremony is over."

If only he knew how overwhelming it really was. I was about to marry a man I barely knew to save my pack from destruction. I was about to take my sister's place at the altar and hope nobody noticed the deception until it was too late to matter publicly.

Isobel moved to stand beside me, her hand finding mine and squeezing tight. "She's just nervous," she told Alpha Cian. "Wedding day jitters."

"Of course." He offered me his arm. "Shall we?"

"Just a few more minutes," Isobel interrupted smoothly. "I need to perfect her makeup."

Cian studied us, his gaze sharp and assessing. For a moment, my stomach dropped, certain he saw through everything. Then he inclined his head. "Very well. I'll wait outside."

As he reached the door, Isobel added lightly, "Your woman is going nowhere."

A faint smile tugged at his mouth. "Then all is well," he said, and stepped out, closing the door behind him.

The silence he left behind was heavy. Isobel exhaled sharply. "See how dangerous that could have been? Just get it over with. I'll think of what to do next."

The moments after Cian left felt like hours. Isobel worked on my face with makeup, her hands steady even though I could see the worry lines around her eyes. She kept glancing at the door like she expected him to burst back in at any moment.

"Remember," she whispered, dabbing powder under my eyes. "Keep your voice soft if you must speak. Hazel has a higher voice than you. And for the love of the Moon Goddess, keep that veil down."

My throat felt dry. "What if someone recognizes me? What if my father sees?"

"Your father is too busy playing politics with the other Alphas. He won't look too closely." Her voice was sharp, but her hands were gentle as she adjusted the veil one more time. "Besides, who would think this would be happening? You are safe."

She stepped back and looked me over one final time. "It's time. We can't keep him waiting any longer."

Isobel opened the door and peered out into the hallway. "The coast is clear. Come."

I followed her through the packhouse corridors, my heart hammering with each step. The wedding dress rustled around my legs, heavier than anything I'd ever worn. The sound of voices grew louder as we approached the main hall where the ceremony would take place.

"Keep your head down," Isobel reminded me one last time. "Let me do the talking."

The doors to the ceremony hall were closed. Through the wood, I could hear the murmur of the assembled pack members, waiting for their Alpha's bride to appear. Isobel smoothed down my dress and adjusted my veil once more.

"Ready?" she asked.

I wasn't. I would never be ready for this. But I nodded anyway.

Isobel pushed open the doors and suddenly we were surrounded by people. Pack members lined the walls, their faces turned toward us with curiosity and excitement. I recognized some of them, people who had known me since I was a child. My heart hammered against my ribs.

The hall had been decorated with white flowers and silver ribbons. Candles flickered from tall stands, and the scent of sage burned in the air. It was beautiful, exactly the kind of wedding Hazel had always dreamed of.

At the front of the room stood Cian, looking handsome in his formal dark suit with silver buttons that caught the candlelight. His hair was combed back, and even from this distance I could catch his scent. Pine and something wild that made my Omega wolf stir restlessly.

Beside him waited Elder Moira, the pack's healer and spiritual guide. She was ancient, her silver hair braided with moonstone beads, her eyes the pale blue of winter sky. She would be performing the ceremony.

Isobel guided me down the aisle. Every step felt heavy, like walking through mud. People whispered as we passed, but I couldn't make out their words over the rushing sound in my ears.

"Beautiful," someone murmured.

"She looks radiant," came another voice.

"Hazel always was the prettiest of the sisters," a woman added, and I flinched inside at the words.

We reached the front and Isobel squeezed my hand before stepping aside to join the other witnesses. Cian moved closer to me, offering his arm. I took it, my hand shaking slightly as it rested on his sleeve.

Elder Moira smiled at us, her weathered face creasing with joy.

"We gather on these grounds to witness the joining of two souls," she began, her voice carrying easily through the hall. "Alpha Cian of the Skollrend Pack and Hazel of the Silver Creek Pack have chosen to bind themselves not just in marriage, but in the sacred bond of chosen mates."

My breath caught. Chosen mates. That meant more than just a political marriage. It meant they would attempt to create a mate bond artificially, something usually reserved for true fated pairs.

Elder Moira lifted a silver chalice filled with what looked like moonwater, the ceremonial drink made from spring water blessed under the full moon. She handed it first to Cian.

"Drink, and open your soul to your chosen mate," she instructed.

Cian took a sip and passed the chalice to me. My hands shook as I lifted the veil just enough to bring the cup to my lips. The water tasted like nothing, but it seemed to tingle as it went down my throat.

Elder Moira began chanting in the old language, words that spoke of bonds and souls and forever. She took out a length of silver rope and began wrapping it around our joined hands.

"With this binding, your souls reach for each other across the void," she said. "What the Moon Goddess has not fated, you choose to create through will and love."

The rope grew warm against my skin. Then suddenly, something fluttered in my chest. A strange sensation, like a butterfly trying to take flight. I gasped and looked up at Cian through the veil. His eyes had gone wide with surprise.

I had felt it once so I knew what it was.

The mate bond. It was actually working.

So that was when terror shot through me like ice water. This wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to just go through the motions, not actually bond with him. A chosen mate bond could be broken, but it would still tie us together until we did. It would let him sense my emotions, my location, maybe even my thoughts if it grew strong enough.

"The bond takes hold," Elder Moira announced with satisfaction. "Now, let the union be sealed with a kiss."

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause. Cian stepped closer, his hands coming up to lift my veil.

"No," I whispered, but the word was lost in the noise. I grabbed at the lace, trying to keep it in place.

Cian chuckled. "Still shy? That's alright."

"She's been nervous all day," someone called out from the crowd. More laughter followed.

"Hazel always was the bashful one," another voice added.

I turned desperately toward where I knew Isobel was standing, but when I found her face in the crowd, she simply looked back at me with blank innocence, as if nothing catastrophic was about to happen.

It was odd. The look on her face.

Cian's hands were gentle but insistent as they moved to the edges of my veil. "It's alright," he said softly, meant only for me. "I'll be gentle. I won't hurt you."

But his reassurance only made my panic worse. I tried to pull back, to keep the veil down, but his hands were so much stronger than mine. The lace began to lift away from my face.

"Please," I whispered, but he didn't hear me over the shouts of 'kiss kiss kiss' around us.

The veil came up and over my head.

The hall fell silent.

Cian's face went through a series of expressions. Confusion first, then recognition, then something that might have been anger or betrayal or both.

His voice, when it came, was deadly quiet.

"You are not my bride."

The words seemed to echo in the sudden silence. I stood frozen, my face fully exposed now, nowhere to hide.

His eyes, which had been warm and reassuring just moments before, were now cold as winter stone.

"What is this deception?"

The question rang out like an accusation, and I knew that everything was about to fall apart.

Chapter 3: The Better Sister

FIA

The silence stretched like a taut wire ready to snap. Every face in the hall turned toward me, their expressions shifting from celebration to confusion to something darker. I stood there with my face exposed, the wedding veil crumpled in Cian's hands, feeling like a deer caught in headlights.

"You are not my bride."

Those five words hit me like a physical blow. Cian's voice carried across the entire hall, cold and sharp as a blade. His eyes, which had been warm moments before, now looked at me like I was something dirty he'd found on the bottom of his shoe.

Then the voices started.

"Wait, that's Fia, isn't it?"

"Where's Hazel? What happened to Hazel?"

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"What the hell is going on here?"

The whispers grew louder, multiplying and spreading through the crowd like wildfire. I heard my name repeated over and over, each time sounding more accusatory than the last.

Cian stepped closer to me, his presence suddenly threatening instead of comforting. The mate bond I'd felt forming between us twisted into something painful, like a rope being pulled too tight.

"Again, I ask, what is this deception?" he demanded, loud enough for everyone to hear.

I opened my mouth but no words came out. My throat felt like sandpaper. What could I possibly say? That my sister ran away with my fated mate and left me to clean up the mess? That this whole thing was my stepmother's idea? That I was trying to save our pack from destruction?

"Answer me!" Cian's voice boomed through the hall. "Is this a declaration of war against my pack?"

War. The word hit me like ice water. I looked frantically around the open space and saw the Skollrend wolves rising from their seats, their faces dark with anger. Some had their hands on their weapons. This was exactly what I'd been trying to prevent, and somehow I'd made it worse.

"I... I can explain..." I stammered.

"You will explain." Cian's eyes blazed with fury. "Where is my actual bride? Where is Hazel?"

Before I could answer, my stepmother pushed through the crowd. Isobel's face was white as bone, her eyes wild with what looked like genuine shock and horror. She walked straight up to me and slapped me across the face so hard my ears rang.

The sound echoed through the silent hall like a gunshot.

"What the fuck, Fia?" she screamed. "What is going on? Where is your sister?"

I stared at her in complete bewilderment. My cheek burned from the slap, and my head spun from the force of it. This was the same woman who had dressed me in this gown. The same woman who had told me to save our pack.

"Mother, what is going on?" I said, my voice barely a whisper.

She slapped me again, even harder this time. Stars burst across my vision.

"You have always been like this but this is too far!" Isobel shrieked. Her voice carried a hysteria that made my blood run cold. "I will only ask this once. Where is Hazel?"

The world tilted on its axis. She was acting like she had no idea what was happening. Like she hadn't been the one to come up with this plan in the first place.

"Mother, you're scaring me," I said, my voice shaking. "Did Hazel not run away and this is why I had to..."

I couldn't finish the sentence. The words died in my throat when I saw the look on her face. Pure, convincing confusion mixed with rage.

She raised her hand to slap me again, but suddenly Cian's fingers wrapped around her wrist, stopping her mid-swing.

"You had no idea," he said slowly, his eyes fixed on Isobel's face, "that the girl you walked here with was not your daughter Hazel?"

Isobel dropped to her knees like her strings had been cut. Tears streamed down her face as she looked up at Cian with desperate pleading eyes.

"I apologize, Alpha Cian," she sobbed. "This is a happy day for me. My daughter is marrying into a pack with honor and valor like yours. I had no idea when and how this happened."

My mouth fell open. She was lying. She was lying to his face and making it sound so believable that even I started to doubt my own memory.

"After you came to the anteroom, and I made up my daughter, it was still Hazel in that room," Isobel continued, her voice breaking with emotion. "I just stepped out for maybe a minute because of something important we missed, and when I got back, she was veiled and ready to go. I had no idea that Fia here, in jealousy of her sister, had made the most insulting move to you of all."

Jealousy. She was saying I'd done this out of jealousy.

"Spare our pack," Isobel begged, still on her knees. "We had nothing to do with this girl's madness."

Cian studied her face for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was deadly quiet.

"The thing is, I don't believe you."

Isobel's face crumpled. "Alpha, please..."

That's when the door burst open.

Hazel stumbled into the hall, and I gasped at the sight of her. Her face was bruised, with a dark purple mark spreading across her left cheek. Her lip was split and bleeding. Her dress was torn at the sleeve, and she walked like she was in pain.

"My mother is not lying," Hazel said, her voice carrying clearly through the silent hall.

Every head turned toward her. She looked like she'd been in a fight and lost badly.

"Fia came into my room," Hazel continued, limping forward. "She violently attacked me and attempted to take my place."

The words hit me like a sledgehammer to the chest. I stared at my half-sister in complete shock, trying to process what she was saying.

"That's not..." I started, but my voice came out as barely a whisper.

"She knocked me unconscious," Hazel said, touching her bruised face gingerly. "When I woke up, I was locked in the storage closet. I've been trying to get out for the past thirty minutes."

The hall erupted in angry voices. People were shouting, some calling for my blood, others demanding answers. The sound crashed over me like a wave, but I couldn't focus on any individual words. Everything blurred together into a roar of accusation and rage.

My head spun like I was on a carousel going too fast. Nothing made sense anymore. I remembered Milo calling me and rejecting our mate bond. I remembered the letter in Hazel's handwriting. I remembered Isobel putting the wedding dress on me and telling me to save the pack.

But looking at Hazel now, bruised and beaten, and hearing her story, I started to doubt everything I thought I knew.

Had I attacked her? Had I somehow blocked out doing something so horrible? The mate bond rejection had been agony. Maybe the pain had driven me temporarily insane. Maybe I'd done something I couldn't remember.

"I would never..." I tried to speak, but the words came out weak and unconvincing even to my own ears.

"Look at her," Hazel said, pointing at me. "Look at the guilt on her face. She knows what she did."

Did I? I touched my own face, wondering what expression I was wearing. My hands were shaking so badly I could barely control them.

Cian stepped closer to me, and the mate bond between us pulsed with his anger and disgust.

"Is this true?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous. "Did you attack your own sister to steal her place at the altar?"

"I... I don't..." My voice failed me completely.

The crowd pressed closer, their faces twisted with outrage. I saw my father pushing through the crowd, his face gray with horror and shame. When our eyes met, he looked at me like he'd never seen me before.

"Fia," he said, his voice breaking. "Please tell me this isn't true."

But I couldn't tell him anything. My mind felt like it was fracturing into pieces. Everything I thought I remembered was being rewritten before my eyes.

Hazel moved to stand beside Isobel, who wrapped protective arms around her injured daughter.

"She always resented me," Hazel said quietly, just loud enough for the crowd to hear. "She couldn't stand that I was chosen to marry an Alpha while she was stuck with a sentinel."

Chapter 4: The Sweetest Revenge 1

HAZEL

I stood at the back of the ceremony hall and watched Fia's world crumble around her. Every confused gasp from the crowd, every horrified whisper, every accusatory stare sent a thrill straight through my chest. This was better than I'd imagined. So much better.

The bruises on my face throbbed, but the pain was nothing compared to the satisfaction bubbling up inside me. I'd done this to myself. Punched my own face against the bathroom wall until the skin split and darkened. Ripped my own dress. Messed up my carefully styled hair. Every injury was deliberate, calculated, worth it.

Fia stood frozen at the altar in my wedding dress, her face pale as death. She looked like she was going to be sick. Good. She should feel sick. She should feel every ounce of the terror and humiliation she'd put me through my entire life just by existing.

Many would be led to believe that I was the villain in her story. Like I was cruel to poor, sweet Fia for no reason. But they didn't understand. They hadn't watched their mother's face crumple with shame when Father brought home his pregnant fated mate. They hadn't been five years old and suddenly expected to call some random Omega woman their stepmother. They hadn't watched their real mother, a proud Luna, reduced to nothing more than a discarded trophy wife.

I remembered that day so clearly. Father's voice when he told us. Mother's face. The way she tried to hold it together for me, but I could see the cracks forming. She'd been Luna of this pack. She'd stood beside Father for years, had given him a daughter, had done everything right. And none of it mattered because some Omega showed up along the way with a mate bond glowing between them.

The worst part was that everyone expected us to just accept it. To smile and nod and pretend everything was fine. To welcome this interloper and her parasite child into our home like they belonged there.

I'd prayed every night that they would die. That the childbirth would go wrong. That the baby wouldn't make it. That something, anything would happen to send them away and restore my mother to her rightful place.

But Fia survived, even if her mother did not—at least not for long. She came into the world small and delicate, with big doe eyes that everyone seemed to love. Even as a baby, she drew attention. People would coo over her in Father's arms while me and mother stood to the side, forgotten. Fia's mother lingered for a while, her weak body and compromised immune system succumbing piece by piece to the rot. And when she finally passed, it wasn't Father who was left alone. It was me and mother, left to raise someone else's child under the scrutiny of a pack that no longer saw us at the forefront.

I thought maybe she'd be born a Luna. That would have been the final insult. The daughter of a mere Omega ranking beside me in the pack hierarchy. But fate had been kind in that one small way. Fia was an Omega, just like her late mother. Weak. Submissive. Below me.

Surely that would be enough. Surely my position was secure now. I was the Luna daughter. I would stay the pride of Silver Creek. I would marry well and bring honor to our pack. Fia would fade into the background where she belonged.

But she didn't fade.

That was the thing about Fia that drove me insane. No matter what I did to her, no matter how much I tore her down, she bounced back. She had this confidence that

made no sense. She was an Omega. She should have been meek and quiet and desperate for approval. Instead, she walked around like she owned the place. Like she had every right to be here.

And people loved her for it. They called her beautiful. Not as beautiful as me, obviously. I had the classical features, the perfect proportions, the elegant bearing of a Luna. But Fia had something else. This girl next door prettiness that people found approachable. Comfortable. They gravitated toward her in a way they never did with me.

I tried everything to break that confidence. I spread rumors. I excluded her from social events. I made snide comments about her and her late mother. I reminded her constantly that she was merely the daughter of the second wife, the interloper, the Omega who'd ruined my mother's life.

Nothing worked. She just kept smiling and holding her head high and acting like she belonged. She did not even hate me for it.

Then she found her fated mate.

Milo. A sentinel. Nobody special. Just some warrior with muscles, a decent face and a ten inch cock. But he was her fated mate. The Moon Goddess herself had chosen them for each other. And suddenly Fia had something I didn't. This cosmic connection that made her special in a way I could never be.

I'd been eighteen and mate-less while my younger half-sister paraded around with her destined partner. Do you know how that felt? Watching them together, seeing the way they looked at each other, knowing they had this bond I might never experience?

It wasn't fair. None of it was fair.

So I decided to take him from her.

It was easier than I expected. Milo wasn't as devoted as he pretended to be. A few lingering looks, some carefully placed touches, a suggestion that maybe the mate bond wasn't as important as he thought. He fell right into my lap. Literally.

The sex was fine. Good, even. He definitely knew how to use what he had, and yes, the goddess Selene had been generous in that department. But the real pleasure came from knowing I'd taken something that was supposed to be Fia's. That I'd proven her precious mate bond meant nothing in the face of what I could offer.

Still, it wasn't enough. Milo was just a sentinel. Having him didn't change my position or bring me any real power. If anything, pursuing him was beneath me. I needed more.

Then when I hit twenty three, Skollrend showed a sudden interest in our pack.

Alpha Cian. Everyone knew his name, knew his reputation. Cruel. Powerful. Dangerous. His pack was one of the strongest in the region. An alliance with them would mean everything for Silver Creek. It would elevate us from a struggling border pack to something with real influence.

And he wanted a bride from our pack of all places in the world.

Chapter 5: The Sweetest Revenge 2

HAZEL

Of course he chose me. I was the elder daughter, the Luna, the obvious choice. Fia already had a mate, so she was out of consideration. That, to many-including my father, was my moment. My chance to finally have everything I deserved. To become the Luna of a powerful pack and leave this place.

But it still wasn't fair, was it? I had to settle for an arranged marriage while Fia got to keep her fated mate bond. She'd always have that over me. That cosmic connection I could never claim. Then with me as Luna of Skollrend, she would take over Silver Creek as honorary Luna.

Over my dead body.

So I took Milo away from her completely. Convinced him to reject the bond. Convinced him to run away with me, or so she thought. The plan was perfect. She'd lose her mate, I'd escape the wedding, and Cian would blame the pack for the insult. Our father would be ruined. Maybe even killed. And when the time was right, I would blame it on the obsessed Sentinel.

But then Mother came up with something even better.

She was the one who suggested using Fia as a replacement bride. At first I thought she was joking. But the more she explained, the more brilliant it became. We could set Fia up to take the fall for everything. Make it look like she'd attacked me out of jealousy and tried to steal my place. Cian would be furious. The pack would turn on her. And I'd swoop in at the last moment, injured and heroic, to save the day.

I'd still have to marry Cian, but it would be different now. He'd be grateful to me. Protective. And Fia would be destroyed in a way she could never recover from. Ever.

So I beat myself up. Split my own lip against the sink. Punched my face into the wall until the bruises bloomed dark and ugly. Tore my dress. Locked myself in a closet and waited for the right moment to make my entrance.

Watching Fia standing at that altar in my dress, her face exposed, the crowd turning on her, it was everything I'd dreamed of and more.

And now came the best part.

Father pushed his way through the crowd toward Fia. I saw the horror on his face, the shame, the desperate need to defend his precious daughter. Of course he would try to save her. He always protected her. Always chose her mother over mine.

"Wait," Father said, his voice shaking. "There has to be some explanation. Fia wouldn't..."

"Wouldn't what?" Mother cut him off sharply. She moved to stand beside me, her hand on my shoulder in a show of maternal protection. "Wouldn't attack her own sister? Look at Hazel's face. Look at what she did."

Father's mouth opened and closed like a fish. He looked between me and Fia, clearly torn. Good. Let him suffer. Let him feel what it was like to have his world ripped apart by choices that weren't his.

"Hazel," he tried again. "Are you absolutely certain..."

"Are you seriously questioning your daughter right now?" Mother's voice rose with indignation. "Your legitimate daughter, who has been beaten and locked away? You're going to side with the girl... the omega who did this?"

The crowd murmured agreement. I saw several wolves nodding. Father's face went gray.

I knew I had him. He might want to defend Fia, but he couldn't. Not in front of the whole pack. Not when I was standing here with visible injuries and a clear story. His spine had always been weak when it came to Mother. She'd spent years making sure of that. Comeuppance for his sin of betrayal.

This was my moment. Time to seal Fia's fate completely.

I walked forward slowly, letting my limp be visible. Every step looked painful. I'd practiced this in the closet, figuring out exactly how to move to sell the story of someone who'd been violently attacked.

Cian watched me approach. His face was unreadable, but I could feel the tension radiating off him. The mate bond between him and Fia must have pulsed in the air. I had to be careful here. Had to make sure he blamed her completely.

I stopped right in front of Fia. She stared at me with these wide, confused eyes. Like she still couldn't process what was happening. Like she still believed there had been some mistake, some misunderstanding that could be cleared up.

"What did I do to deserve this, little sister?" I asked softly.

My voice broke on the last words. Tears welled up in my eyes, real tears because I was thinking about everything she'd taken from me just by being born. The legitimacy. The attention. The stable position in my own home. The mate bond I never got to experience.

"I never..." Fia started, but her voice was barely a whisper.

"I loved you," I continued, letting the tears fall. "I tried so hard to be a good sister to you. Even though you were... even though your mother..." I trailed off, like I was too kind to finish the sentence. "But I accepted you. I welcomed you. And this is how you repay me?"

The crowd was eating it up. I could hear sympathetic murmurs. Several women were crying now.

"I wanted you at my wedding," I said, my voice growing stronger. "I wanted you by my side. I chose you as my bridesmaid because you were my sister. And you... you..."

My knees buckled. I'd practiced this too, the exact way to collapse that would look natural. My vision swam, and for a moment I wasn't entirely faking it. The adrenaline and satisfaction flooding through me was making me genuinely lightheaded.

Mother caught me before I hit the ground. "Hazel! Help! Somebody help me! Hazel!"

I let my eyes flutter closed. Let my body go limp. The perfect victim. The innocent sister betrayed by jealousy and malice.

The last thing I saw before I committed fully to the act was Fia's face. She looked broken. Shattered. Like everything she'd ever believed about herself had just been proven wrong.

Perfect. *Rot in hell bitch.*

Chapter 6: The Humiliated Groom 1

CIAN

The silence that fell after I lifted that veil felt like the calm before a storm. But there was no calm in me. Just confusion, then recognition, then something hot and sharp that burned through my chest like wildfire.

This wasn't Hazel.

The face looking back at me was similar, yes. The same bone structure, the same coloring. But the eyes were different. Wider. More expressive. And I knew this face. I'd

seen it earlier today when I'd walked past the bridal preparation rooms. The bridesmaid. The sister.

"You are not my bride."

The words came out colder than I intended, but I didn't care. My hands still held the veil I'd just lifted, the lace crumpling in my grip. The hall had gone completely quiet. Every wolf in attendance was staring at us, their confusion rolling off them in waves I could almost taste.

Then the whispers started. Low at first, then building. Names being thrown around. Questions being asked. The noise grew louder, angrier, and I felt my pack members rising from their seats behind me. I could sense their outrage through the pack bonds. This was an insult. A massive, public insult.

"What is this deception?" I demanded, my voice cutting through the growing chaos.

The girl stood there frozen, her face pale as bone. She opened her mouth but nothing came out. Just this small gasping sound that did nothing to answer my question.

"Is this a declaration of war against my pack?"

The words left my mouth before I fully thought them through, but once they were out, I realized I meant them. What else could this be? You don't substitute brides at a wedding between Alphas unless you want blood. Unless you want conflict. My wolves were already moving, hands going to weapons. The temperature in the room dropped as everyone braced for violence.

"I... I can explain..." The girl's voice was barely audible.

"You will explain." I stepped closer to her, and she flinched. Good. She should be afraid. "Where is my actual bride? Where is Hazel?"

Movement in the crowd caught my eye. The mother, Isobel, pushed through the assembled wolves. Her face was white, her eyes wild. She marched right up to the girl at the altar and slapped her so hard the sound echoed through the hall like a gunshot.

I blinked. That was unexpected.

"What the fuck, Fia?" Isobel screamed. "What is going on? Where is your sister?"

The girl, Fia, stared at her stepmother with complete bewilderment. A red mark was already blooming on her cheek. She looked like someone had just hit her with more than just a hand. Like her whole world had been knocked sideways.

"Mother, what is going on?" Fia whispered.

Isobel slapped her again. Harder this time. The girl's head snapped to the side, and I saw stars of pain flash in her eyes.

"You have always been like this but this is too far!" Isobel shrieked. "I will only ask this once. Where is Hazel?"

Something about this felt wrong. Off. The mother was acting like she had no idea what was happening, but she'd been the one to walk this girl down the aisle. She'd been the one adjusting the veil, fussing over the bride. How could she not know?

"Mother, you're scaring me," Fia said, her voice shaking. "Did Hazel not run away and this is why I had to..."

She trailed off, but the implication hung in the air. Hazel ran away? Was this was some kind of backup plan? But Luna Isobel's face showed nothing but rage and confusion.

She raised her hand to slap the girl a third time. My hand shot out before I thought about it, catching her wrist mid-swing. Isobel froze, looking up at me with wide eyes.

"You had no idea," I said slowly, studying her face, "that the girl you walked here with was not your daughter Hazel?"

Isobel dropped to her knees like I'd cut her strings. Tears started streaming down her face, and her expression was so perfectly distressed that for a moment, I almost believed her.

"I apologize, Alpha Cian," she sobbed. "This is a happy day for me. My daughter is marrying into a pack with honor and valor like yours. I had no idea when and how this happened."

I kept my face neutral, but inside, doubt crept in. She sounded genuine. She looked genuine. But something still felt off about all of this.

"After you came to the anteroom, and I made up my daughter, it was still Hazel in that room," Isobel continued. "I just stepped out for maybe a minute because of something important we missed, and when I got back, she was veiled and ready to go. I had no idea that Fia here, in jealousy of her sister, had made the most insulting move to you of all."

Jealousy. That was her explanation. The younger sister was jealous and decided to take her sister's place at the altar. It was plausible, I supposed. Omegas could be unpredictable when their emotions got the better of them. But this seemed like more than just a jealous impulse. This seemed calculated.

"Spare our pack," Isobel begged. "We had nothing to do with this girl's madness."

I looked at her kneeling there, tears on her face, her whole body shaking. Then I looked at Fia, who stood silently beside me, her expression a mix of shock and confusion and something that looked like betrayal.

"The thing is," I said quietly, "I don't believe you."

Isobel's face crumpled. "Alpha, please..."

The doors burst open.

Hazel stumbled into the hall, and the sight of her stopped every thought in my head. Her face was covered in bruises. Dark purple spreading across her left cheek, her lip split and bleeding. Her dress was torn, her hair a mess. She walked like every step hurt.

"My mother is not lying," Hazel said.

The hall went silent again. Every eye turned to her.

"Fia came into my room," Hazel continued, limping toward us. "She violently attacked me and attempted to take my place."

The words hit the crowd like a bomb. Voices exploded around us, angry and accusatory. My own wolves were shouting for blood. I stood there, trying to process what I was seeing.

"She knocked me unconscious," Hazel said, touching her bruised face carefully. "When I woke up, I was locked in the storage closet. I've been trying to get out for the past thirty minutes."

I looked at Fia. Her face had gone completely white. She was staring at her sister like she'd never seen her before, her mouth hanging open in shock.

"That's not..." Fia started, but her voice was so weak I barely heard it.

The pieces were falling into place now, painting a picture I didn't want to see. An Omega desperate enough to attack her own sister and steal her place at a wedding. It happened sometimes. Wolves did crazy things when they wanted something badly enough. When they were willing to cross any line to get it.

But looking at Fia's face, seeing the genuine confusion and horror there, I felt that doubt again. Stronger this time.

Then I felt it. The bond.

It had formed during the ceremony when Elder Moira wrapped the silver rope around our hands. I'd felt the flutter in my chest, that strange sensation of something clicking into place. A chosen mate bond, artificially created but real enough to tie us together.

And right now, through that bond, I could feel Fia's emotions. Not clearly, not like a fated mate bond would be. But enough to sense the broad strokes of what she was feeling.

Terror. Confusion. Betrayal. Desperation.

No triumph. No satisfaction. None of the emotions I'd expect from someone who'd successfully pulled off a deception.

But the evidence was right there in front of me. Hazel, beaten and bruised. Fia, standing at the altar in her sister's place. The mother, shocked and horrified. The explanation that made perfect sense even if something about it felt wrong.

Maybe it was the artificial bond messing with my clarity and common sense.

Alpha Joseph pushed through the crowd, his face gray with shock and shame. He looked at Fia, then at Hazel, then at me. His mouth opened and closed several times before any words came out.

"Wait," he said, his voice shaking. "There has to be some explanation. Fia wouldn't..."

"Wouldn't what?" Isobel cut him off, her voice sharp as broken glass. She moved to stand beside Hazel, her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Wouldn't attack her own sister? Look at Hazel's face. Look at what she did."

Joseph's face crumpled. He looked between his daughters, clearly torn. I recognized that look. The look of a man who wanted to defend someone but couldn't find the words to make it believable.

"Hazel," he tried again. "Are you absolutely certain..."

"Are you seriously questioning your daughter right now?" Isobel's voice rose. "Your legitimate daughter, who has been beaten and locked away? You're going to side with the girl who did this?"

The crowd murmured agreement. Joseph's shoulders slumped. He looked defeated, trapped.

Hazel walked forward slowly, each step deliberate and painful looking. She stopped right in front of Fia and looked at her with tears streaming down her bruised face.

"What did I do to deserve this, little sister?" Hazel asked softly.

Her voice broke. The tears looked real. The pain looked real. Everything about her performance, if it was a performance, was flawless.

I could not help but trust it. Why would she lie after all?

"I never..." Fia started, but the words died in her throat.

"I loved you," Hazel continued. "I tried so hard to be a good sister to you. Even though you were... even though your mother..." She trailed off, too kind to finish. "But I accepted you. I welcomed you. And this is how you repay me?"

"I wanted you at my wedding," Hazel said. "I wanted you by my side. I chose you as my bridesmaid because you were my sister. And you... you..."

She collapsed. Or seemed to. Her knees buckled and she started to fall. Isobel caught her before she hit the ground.

"Hazel! Help me! Somebody help me! Hazel!"

Wolves rushed forward to help carry Hazel out of the hall. The crowd parted for them, everyone talking at once, voices raised in outrage and sympathy. The noise crashed over me like a physical wave.

I stood there at the altar, the silver rope still wrapped around my hand and Fia's, feeling the mate bond pulse between us. This whole situation was a disaster. A complete, total disaster.

I hadn't wanted this marriage. Not really. I was only twenty seven. Still young by standards. I could have waited years before taking a mate. But Mother was dying.

Chapter 7: The Humiliated Groom 2

CIAN

The rot. That was what they called it. The disease that ate away at wolves from the inside, stripping them of their strength, their senses, their very identity until nothing was left but a shell of who they had once been. My mother had been fighting it for two long years now, and the truth was she was losing. Every healer we brought said the same thing in different words. She had months, maybe six if she was lucky, before it claimed her completely.

She had asked me for one thing. Just one wish before the end. She wanted to see me married. She wanted to leave this world knowing her son would not be alone, that there would be someone by my side when she was gone. She wanted the comfort of believing there would be pups to carry on the bloodline, a legacy secured before her body gave out.

So I agreed. I did not have the time to court or negotiate, not with the disease taking her piece by piece every day. I found the smallest pack, the one most willing to bend quickly, and struck the bargain. The ceremony was arranged in haste because I needed this done before her time ran out. Mother could not even attend. That was how far her condition had worsened. She told me she did not want others staring at her weakness, whispering about her suffering. She made me promise instead to bring my bride to her straight after, so she could bless the union with what strength she had left.

But now everything had unraveled. What should have been simple had turned into chaos. I stood at the altar with the wrong bride, accusations flying across the room, a mate bond snapping into place with someone I had not chosen. The fragile peace I had bargained for trembled on the edge of becoming war. I wanted blood, my rage boiling hot, but I could not. For her sake. For mother's peace, I had to hold back.

Still... the rage burning in my chest had nothing to do with wounded pride or political insult. I didn't care about those things. But this girl, whether through jealousy or calculation or whatever had driven her, had ruined the one thing I was trying to do for the one person I loved in this world.

My mother was dying. And this was supposed to make her happy.

"Alpha Cian."

Elder Moira's voice cut through my thoughts. I turned to find her standing beside me, her ancient eyes watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"Whatever has transpired here," she said quietly, "you must not reject this bride."

I stared at her. "Elder..."

"The goddess has given her blessing," Moira continued. "I felt it during the ceremony. The bond between you has already taken strong root. To break it now would be an act of blasphemy against the Moon Goddess herself."

The words hit me like cold water. A chosen mate bond could be broken, yes. But not easily. And if the goddess had truly blessed it during the ceremony, if it had taken root that strongly already, breaking it would incur her wrath. Possibly permanently.

Fate intended to make me its bitch today, didn't it?

I looked at Fia. She stood there shaking, her face still pale, tears starting to stream down her cheeks. Through the bond, I felt her terror and confusion and desperation. She looked like she wanted to run but couldn't move.

The rage came back then, hot and fierce. Whether this was jealousy or a setup or whatever the truth was, she'd put me in an impossible position. She'd trapped me as surely as if she'd locked me in chains.

Fine. If I couldn't break this bond without angering the goddess, then I'd make sure she regretted every moment of what came next.

I turned to face the crowd. My voice came out cold and clear, carrying to every corner of the hall.

"The wedding will go forward."

Gasps erupted. People started talking over each other, confusion and shock in their voices. I held up a hand for silence.

"But understand this," I continued. "This is punishment. She will be my mate, yes. But not out of love. She wanted this position badly enough to attack her own sister? Fine. She has it. And she will learn exactly what she's earned."

I turned to Alpha Joseph. The man looked like he'd aged ten years in the last five minutes.

"Does that satisfy you?" I asked him. "Or would you rather stake your pack to protect your unruly daughter?"

The threat was clear. Accept this or face the consequences. Joseph's face went even more gray. He opened his mouth but no words came out.

"Father, no, father please."

Fia had dropped to her knees beside me. She was begging him, tears streaming down her face. Her voice broke on every word.

"Get up," I said.

She looked at me, then slowly stood. Her whole body was shaking. She looked like she might collapse at any moment.

"I am sorry," she whispered. "I swear that this was not my intention and that everything is being twisted."

"Save it," I cut her off. My voice was ice. "You wanted me that bad? You have me now. Let's finish this."

I grabbed her, pulling her close. She gasped, her hands coming up to push against my chest, but I was stronger. So much stronger. I wrapped one hand in her hair, tilting her head back, and crushed my mouth against hers.

The bond flared between us like a flame catching gasoline. I felt it snap into place fully, locking us together in a way that couldn't be undone. Her lips were soft and tasted like salt from her tears. She made a small sound of distress that vibrated against my mouth.

I pulled back just enough to look into her eyes. They were wide and dark with fear and something that might have been heartbreak.

"You'll regret ever stepping into Hazel's place," I said quietly, making sure only she could hear. "I promise you that."

Then I kissed her again, sealing the bond completely while the crowd watched and the mate connection between us solidified into something permanent and unbreakable.

She was mine now. And I was going to make sure she understood exactly what that meant.

Chapter 8: The Devoted Protector

FIA

The kiss broke, and I stood there on that altar feeling like my soul had been ripped out of my body. Cian's grip on me loosened, but the mate bond between us hummed with a finality that made my stomach turn. It was done. Sealed. Permanent.

The biggest mistake of my life.

I looked out at the crowd, searching for even one friendly face. One person who might believe me. Who might think that maybe, just maybe, something wasn't right about all this.

Nothing.

Every single face stared back at me with the same expression. Relief. Actual relief. Like they'd narrowly escaped disaster because Alpha Cian had agreed to begrudgingly take me instead of declaring war on Silver Creek. Like I was the problem that had been neatly solved.

Mrs. Chen, who used to slip me extra pastries at the bakery, shook her head slowly. Archer, one of the sentnel warriors I'd trained alongside and a friend of Milo, looked at me with pure disgust. Even old Thomas, who'd taught me how to track when I was barely tall enough to reach his knee, turned away when our eyes met.

They were grateful. Grateful that I was being taken away. Grateful that my "madness" hadn't destroyed them all.

I had put on that dress to save them. I had walked down that aisle thinking I was protecting my pack from destruction. And now they looked at me like I was a monster they were glad to be rid of.

My vision blurred with tears. I blinked hard, trying to clear them, and that's when I saw her.

Isobel stood near the front of the crowd, her arm around my father's shoulders. She was smiling. Actually smiling. Not broadly, but I could see it there at the corners of her mouth. This small, satisfied curve of her lips as she held my father while he looked like someone had just told him his entire world had ended.

His face was gray. His shoulders slumped. He looked ten years older than he had this morning. But he wasn't fighting for me. Wasn't demanding answers. Wasn't calling anyone out on the obvious lies. He just stood there, broken, while Isobel held him close.

It was the first time he had never defended me. And that hurt the most. The man who had always been in my corner even in the worst of days doubted me. If he did, why did any other betrayal hurt and shock me?

Something in my chest snapped.

I took a step forward, pulling against Cian's grip. My hands curled into fists at my sides. All I could see was Isobel's face. That smile. The satisfaction in her eyes as she surveyed her handiwork.

"You," I started, my voice shaking with rage instead of fear now. "You did this. You put me in that dress. You told me to save the pack. You—"

Cian's hand clamped down on my arm like iron. Hard enough that I felt it in my bones.

"Are you thinking of running now, Omega?" His voice was cold against my ear.

I spun to face him, and the words bubbled up in my throat before I could stop them. Words about how blind he was. How stupid. How could someone who was supposed to be this powerful Alpha not see through the most obvious setup in the world? How could he stand there and believe every lie they fed him without questioning any of it?

But when I looked at his face, I saw nothing but ice. His eyes were hard. Final. Like he'd already decided everything about me and nothing I said would change his mind.

I wondered if it was because I was an Omega? That had to be it. It was always the answer.

I wanted to scream at him. To shake him. To make him see.

Instead, my eyes drifted past his shoulder, and I froze.

Milo.

He stood near the side of the hall, and in his arms was Hazel. She had apparently woken up from her dramatic collapse. He held her carefully, like she was made of glass, his face creased with concern as he looked down at her bruised features.

The air left my lungs in a rush.

Milo. My fated mate. The person the Moon Goddess herself had chosen for me. He was part of this. He had to be. The way he held Hazel, the way he looked at her, the way he'd rejected our bond this morning. It all fit together into a picture so ugly I wanted to look away from it.

But I couldn't. I just stood there staring at them while something vital inside me crumbled to dust.

Life in Silver Creek had never been easy for me. I knew that. I'd always known that. I was the product of a fated mate bond that had destroyed a perfectly good marriage. My mother had been an Omega who'd shown up and taken the Alpha away from his Luna wife. Isobel had every reason to resent me. Hazel had grown up watching her mother's heartbreak and hating me for it.

I understood that. I did. I never expected them to love me.

But I thought there were lines. Boundaries. We were still family, weren't we? Still pack. Still connected by blood and bonds that should have meant something.

Apparently not.

Apparently, they could orchestrate this entire thing. Beat Hazel's own face until it bruised. Lock her in a closet. Frame me for violence I never committed. Destroy my life completely and smile while they did it.

We were family. We were blood.

And they had done this anyway.

Hazel stirred in Milo's arms. She said something to him, and he nodded, helping her stand. Her legs wobbled, but she steadied herself, one hand pressed to her bruised cheek like she was still in terrible pain.

Then she started walking toward us.

Cian turned to face my father and Isobel. His voice carried across the hall, formal and polite like we were at a normal wedding instead of this nightmare.

"Alpha Joseph. Luna Isobel." He inclined his head slightly. "You are welcome to visit your daughter whenever you wish. Skollrend will always open its doors to you."

Isobel's smile turned to a sneer that grew wider. "I will never come."

My father flinched. "Isobel, don't be cruel."

"I cannot help but be honest," she said, and her voice dripped with false reasonableness. "What she did was monstrous. I could not bear to look at her face knowing what she is capable of."

"That is enough, Mother."

Hazel had reached us. She stood there between Cian and me, Milo hovering protectively behind her. Tears streamed down her face, making her bruises look even more dramatic in the light.

She looked at Cian first, and her voice broke when she spoke. "I really did want to marry you, Alpha Cian. But the fates have spoken."

Then she turned to me.

I saw it happen. Watched her expression shift into something that looked like forgiveness and sorrow and sisterly love all mixed together. Her eyes glistened with tears. Her lip trembled. She looked like a tragic heroine from one of those romance novels the pack women read.

"And I forgive you, little sister."

The words hit me like a slap.

"If the goddess has blessed this chosen match with her hand of fate," she continued, her voice wavering like she was fighting back sobs, "then it was meant to happen no matter what you did to make it happen."

She pressed her hand to her mouth, her shoulders shaking. Milo moved closer to her, ready to catch her if she fell again.

"I wish you nothing but happiness," Hazel whispered.

Then she collapsed against Milo's chest, her face buried in his shoulder, her whole body trembling with emotion. He wrapped his arms around her immediately, murmuring something I couldn't hear. The picture they made was perfect. The wounded sister and

her devoted protector. The girl who'd been wronged but was still noble enough to offer forgiveness.

I wanted to throw up.

Hazel pulled away from Milo slightly, wiping at her eyes. Then she moved toward me with her arms outstretched.

"Let me hug you goodbye," she said softly. "Please."

I didn't want her anywhere near me. Every instinct I had screamed to back away. But I couldn't move. Couldn't speak. My whole body felt frozen in place.

She wrapped her arms around me, pressing close like we were real sisters who actually loved each other. I felt her breath against my ear. Felt her body shake like she was crying.

Then she whispered, so quietly that only I could hear, "Thank you for taking the trash brute. I will be busy with the sentinel and his ten inch cock tonight."

The words pierced through my shock like a knife. My hands flew up, grabbing her arms, and I shoved her away from me. She stumbled back a step, her eyes wide and innocent, like I'd just attacked her for no reason.

I looked at her. Really looked at her. At the false tears on her face. The calculated expression. The way she stood just close enough to Milo that everyone could see their connection.

Then I looked at Milo. At the man I'd thought was my destiny. Who I'd loved with everything I had. Who'd rejected me this morning without explanation. On the phone too. He did not even have the kindness to do it in my face.

My eyes swung to Isobel, standing there with her arm around my broken father, that satisfied smile still playing at her lips.

"You two." My voice came out strangled. I pointed at Hazel and Milo. "No. You three."

I had to add Isobel. How could I forget her.

I took a step toward them, and the words ripped out of me. "You will burn in hell. All three of you. You will—"

Hazel's expression shifted. Just for a second, her mask slipped, and I saw the sneer underneath. The pure satisfaction. The victory.

I took another step, moving down from the small platform where the altar stood. My foot hit the first step down to the main floor.

Then everything tilted sideways.

The hall spun around me. Faces blurred together. The light stretched into streaks of gold. I heard someone shouting, but the sound came from very far away, like I was underwater.

My legs gave out.

The last thing I saw before the darkness took me was Hazel's face, and she was smiling.

Chapter 9: I hate you's 1

FIA

I woke up to the smell of leather and something expensive I couldn't name. But it had to be liquor. My head throbbed. My mouth tasted like cotton and regret. I blinked against the dim light filtering through tinted windows and realized I was lying down in the back of a car. Not just any car. A limousine.

The memory of the wedding hall slammed into me. The accusations. The lies. Hazel's smiling face as the darkness swallowed me whole.

I sat up too fast. The world tilted, and I pressed my hand against the leather seat to steady myself. That's when I saw him.

Cian sat cross-legged on the opposite seat, his back straight, one ankle resting on his knee like he was lounging in his own living room instead of a moving vehicle. He had a tablet in his hands, and his fingers moved across the screen with casual efficiency. He didn't look up when I moved. Just kept scrolling like I wasn't even there.

The silence stretched. I stared at him, waiting for him to acknowledge me. He didn't.

Finally, he glanced up. His eyes met mine, and something that might have been amusement flickered across his face.

"Welcome back, Sleeping Beauty."

He paused. Then he laughed. Actually laughed. The sound was dry and humorless, more like a bark than genuine mirth.

"Though that's debatable."

I wanted to say something cutting. Something that would wipe that smug look off his face. But my brain felt fuzzy, and words weren't coming easily. Instead, I just looked at him. Really looked at him for the first time since this nightmare began.

He was rugged in a way that seemed almost deliberate. His hair had stubborn curls that refused to lie flat, and they caught the filtered light coming through the windows. His grey eyes were sharp and cold, and when he looked at me like that, judgy and dismissive, they turned almost silver. Like winter frost. Like something that could cut you if you got too close.

He went back to his tablet.

I found my voice. "I-"

I did not get to continue. He cut me off. "How do you feel?"

The question came out of nowhere. Like he hadn't meant to ask it. It was the kind of thing you said to someone when you cared, and he clearly didn't.

"Why am I in your car?" I asked instead.

He didn't look up. "Because we're married. Or have you forgotten?"

The words hit me like cold water. Married. Right. The bond hummed in my chest, that artificial connection the healer and the goddess had forced into existence. I could feel it there, this thread tying me to him whether I wanted it or not.

"This is what you wanted, after all," he added.

"No." The word burst out of me. "I didn't want this. I never wanted this."

Now he looked up. His expression was flat. Unimpressed.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why then would you harm your sister and take her place?"

I opened my mouth. The truth sat on my tongue, desperate to be spoken. I wanted to scream at him about Isobel. About the lies. About how they'd set me up and he was too blind to see it. But what was the point? He'd already decided. Everyone had already decided. They'd written the story, and I was the villain no matter what I said.

I swallowed the words back down.

"I'm not interested in you, Alpha Cian."

His eyebrows rose slightly. "I'm sure that's a lie."

"It's not."

"But I assure you, Omega, I want nothing to do with you either." He looked back at his tablet. "But the situation is dire for me, and I've always been known to make do with the lemons life gives me."

The casual cruelty in his voice made my stomach turn. He said it so easily. Like I was nothing. Like this whole disaster was just a minor inconvenience he had to tolerate.

"Then reject me," I said. "Let's get this over with. Hazel is the one you really want."

He kept his eyes on the screen. His jaw tightened just slightly. "Yes. She was a Luna. She would be able to birth strong kids worthy of my seed."

The bluntness of it stung more than I wanted to admit.

"You're just an Omega," he continued. "But you still stole her place, and the ritual the healer performed seemed to catch the interest of the goddess." He paused. Frowned at whatever he was reading. "I wonder why in seven hells she would believe that you and I could ever work."

"You seem resentful," I said.

"Observant."

"Just do it then. Reject me. There aren't many consequences for rejection." The lie tasted bitter. I knew better. I'd felt the pain when Milo rejected me. That hollow ache that settled in my chest and wouldn't leave. But I'd survived it once. I could survive it again. "I've gone through one before."

That made him look up. His silver eyes locked onto mine, and I saw something shift in his expression. Interest. The kind a predator shows when it spots movement in the grass.

"I was told," he said slowly. "A sentinel from your pack. He broke your heart three days before your sister's wedding."

My chest constricted. Of course they'd told him. Of course they'd twisted that too.

"Was that when you started to plot?" His voice dropped lower. More dangerous. "Stealing me from your older sister?"

I couldn't believe it. Even unconscious, even removed from the situation entirely, they'd managed to spin new lies. They'd taken my rejection and turned it into part of their narrative. Part of the story that made me the monster.

"I didn't even get to pack," I said. My voice came out quieter than I intended.

"Don't worry about it." He waved his hand dismissively. "My mother bought a lot of clothes for Hazel. You seem to be the same size. You'll make do."

"We're not the same size."

"Like I said. Make do."

The finality in his voice made it clear the discussion was over. I was expected to wear my sister's clothes. Sleep in her bed. Live the life she was supposed to have. And I was supposed to be grateful for it.

He sighed then. A long, heavy exhale that seemed to carry the weight of his irritation. "Done."

He held the tablet out to me. Not offering it. Just pointing it in my direction like I was supposed to know what to do with it.

I stared at him. Confused.

"Read it."

I took the tablet. The screen was bright in the dim interior of the limo, and I had to squint to make out the words.

CONTRACT.

The word sat at the top of the document in bold letters. Below it, paragraphs of text laid out terms and conditions like this was a business deal instead of a marriage.

I looked back at him. "What is this?"

"What I demand from this union you forced me into." He leaned back against the seat, his arms crossed over his chest. "If you want a sliver of peace."

I read.

The words blurred together at first. Then they started to make sense, and I wished they hadn't.

He would offer me pumps of his semen on our first night because he expected a child as soon as possible. I would not have any Omegas tend to me. I would serve in Skollrend like any other servant. If I became pregnant, I would be entitled to benefits for the nine months I carried Skollrend's heir. I was not to be nosy. I was not to question his decisions. I was not to embarrass him in front of his pack.

The list went on. Page after page of demands and restrictions. Each one more degrading than the last.

My hands started to shake. Heat rushed through me. Not embarrassment. Not fear. Rage.

"You must be insane."

I threw the tablet at him. Hard. Aiming for his smug face.

He didn't even try to catch it. Just watched it sail past his shoulder and hit the floor of the limo with a dull thud. The screen went dark.

We stared at each other. The silence in the car felt thick enough to choke on.

"Pick it up," he said. His voice was calm. Too calm. The kind of calm that came before violence.

"No."

"Pick it up, read it, and agree to the terms before we get to my territory." He leaned forward slightly, and those silver eyes pinned me in place. "Because I won't be as civil once we're there."

"Civil?" The word came out as a laugh. A harsh, broken sound that didn't sound like me at all. "You call this civil?"

"Compared to what I want to do to you right now?" His smile was sharp. Cruel. "Yes."

My heart hammered against my ribs. The mate bond pulsed between us, and through it I could feel his anger. His disgust. His complete and utter contempt for my existence.

"You want to treat me like a breeding mare," I said. The words tasted like ash. "You want to humiliate me. Break me. Make me regret ever existing."

"Now you're catching on."

"For something I didn't do."

"So you say." He tilted his head. "But the evidence suggests otherwise."

"The evidence is a lie."

"And yet here we are." He gestured around the limo. At the space between us. At the bond tying us together. "Married. Mated. Bound by the goddess herself whether either of us likes it or not."

I wanted to scream. To cry. To throw myself at him and make him understand that I was innocent. That I'd been set up. That the real enemy was sitting back in Silver Creek right now, probably celebrating with Milo while I was dragged away to my own personal hell.

But I looked at his face and knew it wouldn't matter. He'd already decided who I was. What I'd done. No amount of truth would change his mind.

"Pick up the tablet," he said again. "Read the contract. Sign it. Or I'll make your life at Skollrend so miserable you'll beg me to reject you within a week."

My hands curled into fists. "I already am begging you to reject me."

"Not yet you're not." His smile widened. "But you will be."

The limo turned. I felt the shift in direction, felt us heading somewhere new. Somewhere I didn't want to go. Toward a life I never asked for with a man who hated me for crimes I didn't commit.

I looked at the tablet on the floor. At the contract that would seal my fate even further than the wedding already had.

Then I looked at Cian. At the cold satisfaction in his eyes.

And I realized that no matter what I did, no matter what I said, I'd already lost.

The only question was how much more I'd lose before this was over.

But I was no man's bitch.

"No."

Chapter 10: I hate You's 2

CIAN

I heard the word "no" and something in my chest went cold.

The driver's hands jerked on the wheel. Just a twitch, but I noticed. The whole car noticed. You didn't say no to me. Not in Skollrend. Not in Silver Creek where I'd just collected my unwanted bride. Not anywhere that mattered.

The air in the limo changed. Got heavier. Thicker. Like the oxygen had been sucked out and replaced with something that made it hard to breathe.

Fia's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. The driver stared back at her for half a second before remembering himself and dropping his gaze. Smart man. He knew what happened when I got angry. He'd seen it before. One too many times.

I picked up the tablet from where it had landed on the floor. The screen had a crack running through it now, splitting the contract in half. Fitting. This whole situation was broken anyway.

I set it on the seat beside me. Right in the space between us. Close enough that she could reach it if she wanted to. Far enough that she'd have to make the choice to take it.

"If you want to enter my pack territory," I said, "you will sign this."

My voice came out flat. Matter of fact. Like I was discussing the weather instead of her entire future.

She stared at the tablet. At the cracked screen. At the words that would bind her to me in ways that went beyond whatever the goddess had decided to do with that bond.

"You will not strip me of my dignity."

Her voice shook when she said it. Not from fear though. From rage. This girl was furious, and part of me almost respected that. Almost.

"You had no dignity when you did what you did."

I let the words hang there. Watched her face twist with something that looked like pain. It felt good to see in real time. She should hurt. She'd hurt her sister. Attacked her own blood. Schemed and manipulated her way into my life, and now she wanted to act like the victim.

"I did have bad ideas," I continued. "About what I wanted to do to you."

That got her attention. Her eyes snapped to mine, and I saw the fear there underneath all that anger. She was scared. She should be.

"But then there's that bond." I gestured vaguely at the space between us. At the invisible thread the goddess had decided to tie us together with. "And of course, the rumors about the kind of man I am."

I'd heard them all. The brutal Alpha. The one who ruled with an iron fist. Who showed no mercy to those who crossed him. Most of the rumors were true. Some were exaggerated. All of them served their purpose.

"I do not want to go overboard."

Fia's hands curled into fists in her lap. Her whole body was rigid with tension. Like a bowstring pulled too tight.

"There is nothing you can do to me if I do not allow it."

The words came out defiant. Challenging. Like she actually believed them.

My knuckles cracked when I clenched my fists. The sound was loud in the quiet of the limo. I looked at her sitting there with her chin raised and her eyes blazing and I wondered how the hell I was supposed to present this woman to my mother. To my pack. To anyone who mattered.

She was supposed to be a Luna. A leader. Someone worthy of standing beside me. Instead I got this stubborn Omega who couldn't even follow simple instructions.

"Stop the car."

The driver hit the brakes immediately. We slowed to a stop on the side of the road. Trees lined both sides of the path, their branches creating shadows that fell across the windshield.

I turned to the sentinel sitting in the front passenger seat. Garrett. Good man. Loyal. Did what he was told without asking questions *most of the time*

.

"Get this woman out of my car."

Garrett turned around in his seat. His eyes went wide. "Alpha Cian—"

"Perhaps a little sun on her head and some time alone would do her good," I said. My voice stayed calm. Reasonable even. "While she reconciles her situation and comes to her senses."

Garrett looked out the window. Then back at me. I could see the conflict on his face. The war between following orders and whatever misguided sense of honor he had about how to treat women.

"This is private territory, Alpha Cian." His voice was careful. "And there is still plenty of ground to cover. Is it not unsafe—"

"I do not remember asking for your opinion."

The temperature in the car dropped another ten degrees. Garrett's face went pale. He knew he'd overstepped.

"My apologies, Alpha."

He turned to Fia. Reached for her arm.

"You do not have to be civil to an Omega," I said. More for his benefit than hers. Garrett was too soft sometimes. Too worried about doing things the right way. "Toss. Her. Out."

I reached for the whiskey. Poured myself two fingers of the amber liquid. The bottle was crystal. Expensive. The whiskey was older than the entitled omega probably was. I took a sip and let it burn down my throat.

Garrett grabbed Fia's arm. Tried to pull her toward the door.

She moved faster than I expected. Flipped his hand off her wrist with a twist of her body that looked practiced. Trained. She pressed herself against the opposite door and stared out the window.

I followed her gaze.

Private territory stretched in every direction. Miles and miles of land that belonged to Skollrend. Trees and hills and nothing else for as far as you could see. The road we were on cut through it like a scar. It would take hours to walk back to Silver Creek from here. Almost a day maybe, depending on how fast she moved. Though I doubt that should be a place on her mind. Given that she was practically banished.

And she was an Omega. She couldn't shift. Couldn't run faster than human speed. Couldn't defend herself if something decided she looked like prey.

No one was allowed on this land except my pack members. No one would give her a ride. No one would help her. She'd be alone out there with nothing but her anger and her pride to keep her company.

I watched her face. Saw the moment she realized all of that. Saw the fear creep in around the edges of her rage. She looked cornered. Trapped. Like an animal that had finally run out of places to run.

I relished it.