Chapter 12

Mira's POV

Professor Blackwood nearly came off the stage.

"Well, now!" He didn't even try to contain himself — he clapped his hands together and practically bounced on his heels. He didn't need to ask Damon anything. His eyes were already on me. "And what are you, young lady?" 1

The whole auditorium was looking. Every camera in the front rows had swiveled. I could hear shutters clicking in rapid bursts, the kind that sounded like angry insects. 2

I had to stand. My legs didn't want to — they'd gone soft and strange under me — but I made them. I rose off Damon's lap, straightened my black long-sleeve, and faced the stage. 1

"Wolf shifter," I said. My voice came out thin but steady. "Silver Ridge pack."

Blackwood clapped his hands together like I'd handed him a birthday present. "A vampire and a wolf. Marvelous. Absolutely marvelous." He beamed at us both, rocking back on his heels with his hands in his blazer pockets. "You two would be very welcome in my cross-species study group. I run a longitudinal cohort — tracking pairings just like yours, their biology, their bond development. We'd love to follow your case." 2

The auditorium broke into laughter — warm, surprised, a little scandalized. Someone whistled. A girl two rows back leaned over to her friend and whispered something behind her hand.

My face burned. Follow our case. We were a fake couple who'd known

each other for less than a week. We were nowhere near the kind of thing he studied. The flashes kept going off, bright bursts that left spots in my vision every time I blinked.

I sat back down — back onto Damon's lap, because there was still no other seat — and looked at him, expecting to find him at least a little caught out. We'd just been volunteered for a medical study. For a relationship that didn't exist.

He wasn't bothered at all. He sat there easy and unbothered, one arm now resting along the back of my seat, his notebook closed on his knee. No guilt. No nerves. No flicker of oh-god-what-have-we-done. Like lying to a room full of cameras and a professor who wanted to track our reproductive compatibility was as simple as breathing.

I wished I knew how he did it. I wished I could borrow even a fraction of that calm and wear it like armor.

I thought the worst was over when the lecture ended and the lights came up. It wasn't.

People filed out around us — students chattering, checking phones, a few openly staring as they passed our row. I was already planning my exit. Straight out the side door, fast walk to the bus stop, home before anyone could —

We didn't make it out the main doors. A small knot of reporters was waiting in the lobby, arranged in a loose semicircle that didn't look accidental. The moment they saw us emerge, they closed in. Lanyards swinging, recorders lifted, one camera with a red light already blinking.

A woman with short hair and a press badge stepped directly into our path. "Mr. Voss. Could we get a quick word? Just a few questions, for tonight's

coverage."

"Of course," Damon said, smiling. Easy. Practiced.

I felt my stomach knot. Cameras. Questions. Things I hadn't rehearsed, hadn't even thought about. We had no backstory. No rehearsed answers. We hadn't even exchanged favorite colors. My breath went shallow and fast, the lobby suddenly too bright, too crowded, too close.

Damon's hand found the small of my back. Warm pressure, steady, guiding me forward instead of letting me shrink away. He leaned down, his mouth near my ear, his voice just for me.

"Breathe," he murmured. "I've got you. Nothing bad is going to happen. Just stay close to me." 5

The words landed strangely. Something about them was familiar — the cadence, the easy certainty, like a thing I'd heard before. Or maybe said before. In some place I couldn't quite reach. A dirt-walled pit. A boy with dark eyes. Someone's going to come. 2

The skin on my arms prickled. A shiver ran up my spine that had nothing to do with the temperature.

I didn't have time to chase it. The questions started.

"How did you two meet?"

"Over winter break," Damon said smoothly. "A few days after the mating ceremony night."

"And what first drew you to each other?"

That one was harder. I said something about a connection. He said

something about chemistry. The two didn't quite match. The reporter asked the specific date we decided to start dating and he answered a date before the last mating ceremony. She asked him about my purpose for coming to this lecture. He said I came here with him, but they already searched in the school system and found out that I wanted to study cross-species medicine. I covered with "we don't quiz each other on career goals," but it sounded thin.

Every answer showed the cracks. Two people who didn't know each other pretending they did, and doing it badly. I could see the reporters trading glances. The woman with the recorder — the one who'd stopped us — her friendly smile cooled into something narrower. More focused.

"Forgive me," she said. Her voice was still polite but the warmth had drained out of it. "But there are a lot of rumors that the Voss family might be looking for some good publicity right now. The bullying allegations. The leadership questions." She looked between us. "So I have to ask. How do we know this relationship is real, and not a performance?"

The lobby went quiet. Every recorder pointed at us. Every camera waited.

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my fingertips. The whole year was about to collapse in a single headline — Voss Romance a Publicity Stunt — and I'd be a wolf who couldn't shift, exposed in front of the entire world, with no boyfriend, no mate, and no reason for anyone to believe I was anything more than a fraud.

I didn't think.

I turned, grabbed the front of Damon's coat, pulled him down, and kissed him.