Chapter 13

Mira's POV

This kiss was nothing like the first one.

The first had been an accident in the dark — survival, adrenaline, the café and Alyssa and a split-second decision that I'd barely registered making. This one I'd started on purpose, in front of cameras and recorders and an audience that was watching us like a live broadcast.

And the second our mouths met, purpose stopped mattering.

His lips were cool. His hand came up to my jaw — not pulling, just holding, the way you'd steady something fragile. My fists were still knotted in the front of his coat and I was pulling him down and the angle was wrong, too steep, my neck craned back, but I didn't fix it.

For a moment that lasted way too long, I forgot the cameras, the reporters, the lie, my own name. There was just the pressure of his mouth and the cool of his skin and the feeling of falling without any ground underneath.

When I pulled back, my head was spinning.

The reporters loved it. . Cameras flashed — bright, blinding bursts — and I could hear someone murmuring excitedly into a phone.

"Well, I guess that's proof enough." The recorder lady was beaming again, all her doubt gone, her posture shifting from interrogator back to friendly journalist.

The kiss had only made them hungrier.

"How long have you two been together?"

"Damon, is she the girl you were seen with last night?"

The questions came all at once, sharp and eager, closing in before I had even managed to breathe properly. My fingers tightened around the front of Damon's coat. I didn't mean to do it. I just needed something solid.

Damon noticed.

His hand slid from my jaw to my waist, steady and cool, and he turned toward the reporters with the kind of calm that made people instinctively quiet down.

"That will be all for today," he said, his voice smooth, formal, and impossible to argue with. "I need to drive my girlfriend home."

My girlfriend.

The words landed harder than they should have.

I barely had time to blink before he was leading me through the dispersing crowd. The flashes and murmurs followed us like a fading storm, but Damon's presence cut through all of it, pulling me away from the cameras, the questions, the heat of the lobby.

After we walked through the hallway heading to the parking lot, a voice called his name from the other side— one of his friends, sharp and carrying — and Damon turned. "I'll text you," he said, low, without quite meeting my eyes. Then he was gone, swallowed into a knot of pale, sharp -dressed boys by the exit doors.

Just like that, the spell broke.

The cameras lowered. Reporters started gathering their things, their excitement dissolving into murmurs and shuffling footsteps. The little circle around us loosened, and suddenly there was air again — too much of it, cold against my lips where Damon had just been.

Damon and I stepped apart. He cleared his throat. I stared at a spot on the floor. Neither of us looked at the other. 3

My face was burning. My pulse was hammering in my throat. I'd just kissed Damon Voss — in public, on camera, for the second time — and the worst part wasn't that it was a lie.

The worst part was that it hadn't felt like one.

Then a voice called his name from across the lobby — one of his friends, sharp and carrying — and Damon turned. 2

"Wait for me here. Just a quick talk with my friends. I'll drive you home later as planned," he said, low, without quite meeting my eyes.

I stood there for a moment. My hands were shaking. I pressed them flat against my thighs and breathed until my heart slowed, by degrees, back to something like normal. 1

The lobby was emptying around me. Students filing past, some staring, some whispering, a few grinning at me like we shared a secret. I didn't grin back. I walked to the nearest wall and leaned against it and stared at the floor tiles until the world stopped tilting. 7