Chapter 8

Mira's POV

The cafeteria erupted.

Not loudly — it was more like a wave of indrawn breath, then a hundred whispers crashing into each other at once. Damon Voss had his arm around me. In the middle of the cafeteria. On purpose.

I didn't move. I didn't breathe. His arm was heavy across my shoulders and his body was cool beside mine, the way vampires always were — a degree or two below what a wolf would run.

Alyssa's mouth opened and closed. She looked from Damon to me and back, searching for the crack, the tell, the proof this wasn't real.

"We met over the break," Damon said. He wasn't loud. He didn't have to be. The whole room had gone silent enough that you could have heard a phone vibrate three tables over. "First time I felt the bond. You'd call it fated, wouldn't you? That's the wolf word."

He said it so calmly. Like he was reporting the weather. Like admitting to a mate bond with a wolf girl in front of the entire student body was nothing worth raising his voice over.

"It's — that's not — " Alyssa's face had gone blotchy. Red creeping up her neck, her jaw tight. She was trying to find her footing and there was nothing to stand on.

Then something shifted behind her eyes. I watched her find a new angle.

"Wait." She looked at Damon, and her voice turned soft. "I see what's going on here. You're a vampire. You don't know how wolves work — not

really. You don't have a wolf to feel the bond with. She could be lying to you. Telling you there's a connection when there isn't one. Trust me, she's using the difference to play you." 3

It was clever. It was the cruelest thing she could have said, dressed up as a kind reminder.

My stomach dropped. Because it was almost true. I was lying to him. Just not in the way she meant.

Damon looked at her for a long moment. The kind of look that made people remember that his family had won a war.

"You think I can't feel a bond," he said. "You think I don't understand that much basic shifter biology." He tilted his head. "Are you saying, in front of all these people, that the Lord's son is too stupid to understand the species he's going to rule?" 4

Alyssa went white.

"No," she said. "That's not — I didn't mean — "

"Because that sounds like an insult." Damon's voice didn't rise. It dropped. The temperature of the whole room dropped with it. "Maybe you'd be more comfortable finishing that thought somewhere else. Ridgemont high, perhaps. I hear they have openings." 2

Alyssa's eyes filled. Her chin wobbled. Ridgemont — the two-hour commute. The school that was more punishment than transfer. Everyone knew.

Jason appeared at her side. "No — we didn't mean anything by it." He had a hand on her arm, already pulling. "We're happy for you both. Really. Come on, Lyss."

He steered her away. She let him. But she looked back once over her shoulder.

It was hatred. Pure and patient.

Damon turned back to the room. "If no one else has a problem," he said, "I'm going to have lunch with my girlfriend."

The crowd dissolved fast. People found their seats, picked up their forks, pretended to be mid-conversation. But the phones didn't go away — I could see them under tables and behind water bottles, screens angled low, recording.

Damon sat down across from me at my little table like he'd always eaten there. He set his bag down. Folded his hands. Looked at me like he was waiting for me to catch up.

I still had my sandwich in one hand, untouched. My other hand was flat on the table, trembling slightly.

"Thank you," I said quietly. "And — I'm sorry. Again. I keep dragging you into things and I genuinely don't understand why you're helping me."

"I'm not helping you." He said it simply, like a fact. "I'm helping me."

"What?"

"I've been thinking about it since last night." He looked at me, calm and direct, the same way he'd looked at me in class — like I was something to be solved. "It turns out I need a wolf girlfriend. The rumors about my friends, the bullying stories — they're becoming a problem for my father. A vampire dating a shifter fixes it." He shrugged one shoulder. "And you need a boyfriend who actually exists. So we should make this real."

I stared at him.

"You want to fake date," I said. "With me."

"I want a convincing date with a shifter. For as long as we both need it."

I turned my sandwich over in my hands. I didn't pick it up.

Because here was the thing I couldn't say out loud. Those stories about Damon's group — pushing shifter kids around, abusing their status, making a wolf girl transfer schools for flirting — some of them were ugly. Really ugly. And he wanted me to stand next to him and make all of it disappear. To smile for the cameras and tell the world the Lord's son was kind.

Was I okay with that?

He watched me hesitate. He didn't push. He just sat there with his arms folded, waiting for me to finish thinking.

"You want me to help you cover up the bullying stories," I said.

"I want people to see that a wolf isn't afraid to be near me." He said it without flinching. "Whether the stories are true or exaggerated, that image does more than any press statement. You know that." A pause. "And think about it from the other side. Every vampire kid in this school who loooked down on shifters right now — if they see one of their own dating the a wolf girl and treat her well? That changes something."

"Or it makes me look like a traitor to the shifters."

"Or that." He almost smiled. "But your kind doesn't seem to treat you well anyways. Now you won't have to explain a fake mate anymore. And nobody's going to question whether you're a wolf when you're standing

next to me." 4

He was right. I hated that he was right.

"One year," I said. "We do this for one year. Then we 'grow apart,' or whatever, and it ends clean. No drama." 2

"One year," he said. "Agreed."

"Starting now," I repeated. Just to make sure I'd heard him correctly.

He nodded at the nearest phone screen, barely concealed behind someone's backpack. "Starting five minutes ago, actually."

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