Chapter 9

Mira's POV

We worked out the rules like a class schedule.

Lunch together every day, where people could see. Leave campus together after school — or at least walk to the parking lot at the same time. If we ran into each other anywhere public, sit together, say hello, look like two people who wanted to be near each other.

"Physical contact?" I asked.

"Minimal." He said it like he was negotiating a lease. "Arm around the shoulder in public. Hand-holding if someone's watching. Nothing that requires effort."

"No kissing."

"No kissing." He looked almost amused. "Unless you plan to ambush me at another café."

My face went hot. "That was an accident."

"I know." He leaned back. "Can you manage the rest? Looking like you want to be near me?"

"I'll practice in the mirror," I said.

This time he actually smiled. Just the corner of his mouth, barely there, gone in a second, but I saw it. It made his whole face different. Less carved. Less cold.

"What about the rest?" I asked, pulling myself back on track. "Texting?

Social media? What if people ask us questions we can't answer about each other?"

"We exchange numbers. You can text me when you need it. Do it naturally though." He pulled out his phone and slid it across the table. "I don't do social media. If people photograph us, that's their business. As for questions — we met during winter break. Accidentally ran into each other after the mating ceremony. We felt a connection immediately. Keep it vague and people fill in the blanks themselves." 1

I typed my number into his phone. My hands were steadier now. Something about having rules made this feel less like a free-fall and more like a project. Projects I could handle. 1

"One more thing," I said, sliding the phone back. "When this ends — and it will end — you're the one who says it was mutual. I don't want people thinking you dumped the wolf girl because she wasn't good enough." 3

He looked at me for a moment. Something flickered behind his eyes — that same unreadable flash I'd seen in class when I told him my name. 1

"Fine," he said. 3

That was it. We had a deal.

I picked up my sandwich and finally took a bite. Across the table, Damon unzipped a small insulated pouch from his bag and pulled out one of the sealed blood packets inside. He peeled back the corner the way someone else might open a juice box — casual, habitual, like he'd done it a thousand times. 1

The smell hit me. 5

It wasn't like last night, muffled through paper and plastic. 1

This was open. Direct. Iron and salt and something rich underneath, something that pulled at the back of my throat and the bottom of my stomach simultaneously.

I'd never cared much about food. I forgot to eat half the time — would get to three in the afternoon and realize I'd had nothing since breakfast. Hunger, for me, was always a dull, ignorable thing.

This wasn't that.

This was sharp. Immediate. The cafeteria went quiet and far away, like someone had turned the volume down on the whole room. The light narrowed. There was just the dark red liquid and the smell and a want so deep and so wrong it didn't feel like mine.

My hand had drifted halfway across the table. I didn't remember moving it.

"Mira."

His voice snapped the room back into focus. The cafeteria flooded back — noise, movement, the clatter of trays. I was sitting in a plastic chair in the middle of a hundred people and my hand was reaching toward a vampire's blood packet like I was going to pick it up and drink from it.

Damon had gone very still. His eyes were on me, narrow and dark, and the easy calm was gone. He looked like someone cataloguing a piece of evidence.

"What was that," he said. It wasn't a question.

My face was on fire. "Nothing. I'm fine. I just — "

"You looked at my food," he said slowly, "like you wanted it."

"I didn't — it's not — " I pressed my palms flat against my thighs under the table. My heart was hammering. "It happens sometimes. With blood. I've seen a doctor about it. They said it's a kind of — like a special hemophobic response? A special reaction to blood. It's not — I don't actually want to drink it. "

That wasn't a lie. Not exactly. I'd been to a doctor after the second time it happened — in freshman biology, when Mr. Torres pricked our fingers for a blood-typing lab and I'd nearly grabbed the slide off Piper's desk. The doctor had called it an unusual hemophobic response. Nothing too strange about my body.

Damon studied me. His packet was still open in his hand, the dark liquid visible at the top. I kept my eyes on my sandwich.

"Hemophobic response," he repeated.

"Yes."

"You didn't look like you were scared or about to faint. You looked like you were about to eat."

"Well." I took a deliberate bite of my sandwich and chewed. "I wasn't. I'm eating bread. See? Bread. Normal wolf shifter food. Can we drop it?"

He sealed the packet closed without taking another sip. Zipped it back into his pouch. His face was unreadable.

"Sure," he said. He picked up his bag, slung it over one shoulder.

Then, casually, like it was nothing: "I'll drive you home after last period. Wait by the south lot."

He walked away before I could argue. People parted for him without

being asked, the way they always did. I watched him cross the cafeteria — tall, pale, unhurried — and disappear through the doors.

I sat there with my half-eaten sandwich and the lingering smell of iron in the air.

What just happened, I thought.

Not the deal. I understood the deal. The deal made sense. Fake boyfriend, one year, mutual benefit, clean exit.

What I didn't understand was the blood. The way it had pulled at me. The way my hand had moved without permission, like some part of me already knew what that dark red taste would feel like on my tongue.

Was it really just a special hemophobic issue? 11

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