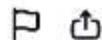




Chapter 12



Kieran's POV

I drive to Lia's penthouse at midnight because ending this needs to happen now—before I see Thalia again, before I touch those kids again and completely lose my mind.

Eight years. Eight years of going through motions with a woman I never wanted, playing devoted fiancé while searching for the one who got away.

I stayed because breaking it off meant explaining why. Meant admitting to my father, to the pack, that I let the perfect match slip away for a wolfless girl who haunted me. Stayed because every investigator came back empty, and ending things with Lia meant admitting Thalia was never coming back.

Stayed because pack politics and my father's expectations were easier than facing the truth: I destroyed the only woman I ever loved.

But I never married her. Found excuses every time she pushed—wrong season, business demands, pack politics, my father's requirements for traditional ceremonies.

The truth was simpler. I couldn't stand at an altar and promise forever to the wrong woman.

Eight years of dinners where I imagined Thalia sitting across from me instead. Eight years of Lia's laugh grating on my nerves while I remembered Thalia's rare, genuine smiles. Eight years of touching Lia and wishing she was someone else.

And the guilt. Christ, the guilt of what I did to Thalia in high school, how

easily Lia manipulated me into becoming a monster.

With time that guilt curdled into something darker: hatred. For Lia, for what she made me do, for the years she stole by turning me into Thalia's destroyer.

I don't knock. Just use the key she insisted I keep.

Find her in silk lingerie and champagne ready, candles lit across every surface. Always performing, always manipulating.

Time to end the performance.

"We need to talk." I stay by the door, don't sit.

"About what, darling?" She pours champagne with practiced seduction. "The wedding? I was thinking we could move it up, maybe spring instead of—"

"There's not going to be a wedding." The words come out flat. Final.

Her hand freezes mid-pour. "What?"

"I'm ending this. Tonight. We're done."

The champagne glass shatters on marble floor. She's on her feet, face cycling through shock to rage in seconds. "Because of HER? That wolfless nothing who ran away eight years ago?"

Her voice climbs. "She abandoned you, Kieran! Left without a word while I stood by you through everything!"

"You didn't stand by me." My voice stays controlled, cold. "You manipulated me. Made me believe Thalia was pathetic, desperate, that her feelings for me were obsession."

I move closer and she actually steps back. "You turned me into her bully,

Lia. Made me destroy the one person who actually—"

I stop myself. "I know what you did. All of it."

She switches tactics instantly. Goes soft and pleading, tears starting—real or performed, I don't care anymore. "I love you. I've always loved you."

Her voice breaks. "We've been together eight years. We're getting married in two months—the venue's booked, your father's planned the ceremony, the entire pack is expecting—"

"The pack can handle disappointment."

"But I can't!" The tears are coming faster now. "Kieran, please. We've built a life together. You chose me. You put this ring on my finger—"

She holds up her hand, the massive ruby catching light. My grandmother's ring, the Fenris family heirloom my father insisted I give her.

"Take it off." The command makes her flinch.

"What?"

"The ring. Take it off. It's not yours anymore."

"No." She clutches her hand to her chest. "You gave this to me. You promised—"

"I promised nothing." I hold out my hand. "Give me the ring, Lia."

"You can't do this!" She's backing away now, frantic. "We're perfect together. I've done everything right—been the perfect Luna, supported your career, stood by you while you searched for some girl who clearly didn't want to be found—"

"You turned me into a monster." My voice drops to something dangerous. "Made me hate myself." I take another step closer. "And I can't stand one more day pretending I don't hate you for it."

That's when she goes nuclear.

"You're throwing away eight years? Fine." Her voice goes cold, calculated. Tears drying up like they were never real. "I'll make sure everyone knows exactly what you're doing. Your father, the pack elders, everyone."

She's pacing now, rage giving way to vindictive planning. "I'll tell them how you're ending our engagement—the Fenris family engagement—for a girl who abandoned the pack. Who came crawling back as your employee. The scandal alone—"

"I don't care about scandal."

"Your father will." She spins on me. "Alpha Magnus has been planning our union for years. The political alliances, the bloodline merger. You think he'll just accept you throwing it away for pack shame?"

She moves closer, voice dropping to something vicious. "And Thalia? I'll destroy her. Make sure she loses that corporate job, blacklist her from every firm in the Northwest."

Her smile is cruel. "She survived eight years away? Let's see how she survives when I'm done with her reputation."

I move so fast she doesn't see it coming.

Have her by the throat, not hurting but absolutely in control. She's pinned against the wall, finally understanding what I'm capable of.

"Say that again." My voice is death. "Threaten her one more time."

She's frozen, actually scared now, finally seeing past the CEO mask to the Alpha who would kill to protect what's his.

"Touch her, come near her, try to damage her career or her life in any way, and I'll end you, Lia." I release her and she stumbles back, gasping. "Completely."

"You're choosing her." Lia's voice breaks. "After everything I've done, everything I've sacrificed—"

"You sacrificed nothing." I hold out my hand one final time. "The ring. Now."

She pulls it off with shaking hands. Holds it for a moment as if letting go means losing everything.

Maybe it does.

She drops it in my palm and I pocket the family heirloom that should never have been hers.

"I'm choosing Thalia. Choosing my children. And if that costs me the pack, my father's approval, my inheritance—" I meet her eyes. "I don't give a fuck."

Walking out, I don't look back. Feel lighter than I have in eight years.

Would burn it all down for her.

Gladly.

End of *The Chapter*