



Chapter 13



Thalia's POV

It's past eleven when Kieran appears at my desk. Everyone else is gone—just fluorescent lights humming overhead and the empty echo of a building that should feel safer without witnesses.

It doesn't.

"Come to my office." Not a request. Never a request with him.

I should say no. Should grab my bag, head for the elevator, go home to my kids and the life I built without him. My traitorous feet follow him anyway, drawn by whatever self-destructive impulse makes me keep orbiting these two men who could destroy everything.

The second his door closes, the air changes. Thicker, charged, dangerous in ways that have nothing to do with pack hierarchy and everything to do with the way he's looking at me.

He's not bothering with the CEO mask anymore. Just raw want and eight years of denied everything written across his face.

"Lia's handled." His voice is rough. "Engagement's over. Done."

The words hit me but I don't trust them. Don't trust him, don't trust this sudden declaration that comes right after he met my kids.

"Convenient timing." My voice comes out sharper than I intend. "Right after you meet Orion and realize he has your eyes."

He moves closer and I should back away but I'm frozen. "You think I'm playing games? You think I'd use them as leverage?"

His voice drops, goes rough. "I've been in love with you since we were kids, Thalia. Since before Lia twisted everything, made me believe—"

I laugh because what else can I do with a declaration that absurd. "Love? You destroyed me for two years. Made me believe I was worthless."

"I know." He backs me against the floor-to-ceiling windows, forty floors of nothing beneath us. "I was a coward. Let her manipulate me, turn me into someone I fucking hated."

His hand comes up, frames my face. "But that night—that night I saw what I'd been too blind to see. That you were mine. Always were."

Then he's kissing me and my brain short-circuits. This isn't gentle or asking permission—this is eight years of wanting compressed into desperate need. His mouth is hot, demanding, and I'm kissing back before I can think, before I can remember all the reasons this is a terrible idea.

My back hits cold glass. His body burns against me, solid and overwhelming and exactly what some broken part of me has wanted since I was seventeen.

His hand slides up my thigh, under my skirt, and I gasp against his mouth. "Fuck, I've wanted this. Wanted you."

His other hand tangles in my hair, angling my head back for better access. "Tell me to stop."

But I can't. I'm drowning in cedar and smoke and the feeling of finally being wanted by someone who knows exactly what I am and wants me anyway.

My legs wrap around his waist and he groans, pressing closer. We're headed toward something we can't take back, toward his desk or the

couch or just the floor—

Reality crashes through the haze.

The teenage girl who loved him and got destroyed for it. The woman who survived without him for eight years. The mother of three children who could lose everything if I make the wrong choice.

Lysander's face flashes through my mind. His gentleness, his steady presence, the way he makes me feel safe instead of consumed.

"Wait." The word tears out of me. "Stop."

Kieran freezes immediately. Breathing hard, visibly shaking with the effort to stop. "What's wrong?"

"I can't—" My voice cracks and suddenly I'm crying. Years of buried pain flooding out all at once, unstoppable. "I can't do this. I can't choose. I can't—"

I push against his chest and he lets me go immediately, stepping back. My legs give out and I'm sliding down the window, but he catches me before I hit the floor.

"Thalia—"

"You destroyed me." The words come out raw, broken. "For two years you made me believe I was nothing. Less than nothing." My hands are shaking, my whole body shaking. "And Lysander watched it happen and did nothing."

I can barely breathe through the tears. "That night in the guest house, I thought—I let myself believe that maybe you both actually—"

I can't finish. Can't say the words that make me sound pathetic.

He's on his knees in front of me, hands hovering just off my arms. Wanting to touch but not daring. "I know. Christ, I know what we did to you—"

"And now I'm supposed to what? Forget it?" I meet his eyes, mine burning with tears and rage. "Choose between the man who destroyed me and the man who let it happen? While raising three children who might belong to either of you?"

I stand on shaking legs, put distance between us before I do something stupid. Something irreversible.

"I spent eight years building walls so high nothing could hurt me again." My voice drops. "And the second I'm near you or Lysander, those walls start crumbling."

"What do you feel?" His voice is desperate, wrecked. "Tell me what you feel."

"Everything!" The word explodes out of me. "I feel everything and it's destroying me."

I force myself to meet his eyes. "With you it's consuming fire that terrifies me because loving you once almost killed me. With Lysander it's gentle warmth that makes me think maybe I could rest."

I watch that land, watch him process what I'm saying. "But choosing means destroying one of you. And what if I choose wrong?"

My voice breaks. "What if this intensity isn't destiny, just my body remembering? What if safety isn't enough and I spend forever wondering what we could have been?"

Kieran's face does something complicated. Pain and understanding and desperate want all warring for dominance.

"So you'd rather choose neither?" His voice is quiet. "Keep us both at arm's length forever?"

"I'd rather not choose until I know it's real." I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold the pieces together. "Until my children are safe no matter what. Until I know I'm not repeating the same mistake that got me pregnant and alone."

The silence that follows is devastating. Heavy with everything we can't have and everything we want anyway.

Finally he speaks, voice absolutely wrecked: "I'll wait. However long you need."

But the way he's looking at me—eyes dark, jaw clenched, hands fisted at his sides—says waiting might actually kill him.

"Just don't choose out of fear, Thalia." He steps closer, close enough I can feel the heat radiating off him. "You deserve more than that."

His hand comes up, cups my face with shocking gentleness. "When you choose—and you will choose—make sure it's what you want. Not what feels safe or what you think you should want."

He drops his hand, steps back. "But know this: I'm not giving up. I'll fight for you every day until you figure out what I've known since we were kids."

"What's that?"

"That you're mine." His voice drops to something possessive and absolute. "And I don't lose what's mine."

End *of*