



Chapter 18



Saturday afternoon, my phone rings. Lysander's name flashes across the screen and I stare at it for three beats before answering.

"Dinner tonight?" His voice is easy, casual. "There's this place in Seattle with incredible pasta. Thought you might want a break from kid chaos."

I should say no. Should remind him I promised Kieran I'd come back tonight, that "tomorrow" is now today and I'm supposed to be at his penthouse proving something neither of us has named yet.

"Yes." The word comes out before I can stop it.

Partly because I need to feel something other than Kieran's overwhelming intensity. Partly because saying yes to Lysander tonight is a statement—I'm not commanded, not owned, not predictable.

Partly because I'm terrified of what happens if I go to Kieran alone.

The restaurant is intimate in ways that make my skin prickle. Soft lighting, tables positioned for privacy, the kind of place designed for romance or confessions. Lysander meets me at the entrance looking unfairly good in dark jeans and a button-down, casual in ways Kieran never manages.

"You look beautiful." He says it like fact, not flattery.

Dinner starts safe—small talk about work, the kids, neutral territory. But somewhere between appetizers and entrées, something shifts. His easy mask cracks and I see the guilt underneath.

"I need to tell you something." He sets down his wine, meets my eyes.

"About high school. About what I did—what I didn't do."

My stomach tightens. "Lysander—"

"I was a coward." The words come out rough. "I watched Kieran tear you apart and did nothing. Lia would spread her poison and I'd stay silent because it was easier than standing up to her, easier than risking my own reputation." His jaw clenches. "You were drowning and I watched. Sometimes I'd throw you a rope, make you think someone cared, then pull it back when it got complicated."

The confession hangs between us. I should feel vindicated, validated. Instead I just feel tired.

"Why now?" My voice comes out flat. "Why tell me this now?"

"Because you deserve the truth." He reaches across the table, stops just short of touching my hand. "I'm not that person anymore. I want to be better. Want to be someone you can actually trust." His voice drops. "But I'm also not—"

He stops. Can't finish. The unspoken words fill the space anyway.

Not what Kieran is. Not capable of that world-burning devotion. Not willing to destroy everything for one person.

After dinner, he asks if I want to come to his place for wine. I know I shouldn't. Know this is a terrible idea that will only complicate everything. But Kieran's penthouse feels like a trap I'm not ready to walk into, and Lysander's apartment feels like breathing space.

"Just wine," I hear myself say.

His apartment is everything Kieran's isn't—warm, lived-in, comfortable. Books stacked on shelves, art that looks chosen for meaning instead of

price, furniture that invites you to sink in and stay. Soft music plays from hidden speakers. He dims the lights, pours wine, settles beside me on the couch with careful distance between us.

"This is nice," he says after a while. "Just being here with you. No expectations, no pressure."

But there are expectations. I feel them in the way his eyes track my movements, the careful space he maintains that feels like restraint instead of respect.

When he kisses me, it's gentle. Asking permission with every touch, giving me space to pull away. I kiss back and something in me loosens—this is manageable, controlled, safe in ways Kieran's consuming fire never is.

It escalates slowly. His hands careful as he unbuttons my shirt, reverent as he lays me back against the couch cushions. "You're so beautiful," he breathes against my throat. "I've wanted this for so long."

His touch is tender, worshipping, nothing like Kieran's possessive claiming. My shirt slides off and his hand traces up my thigh, soft and asking. Each movement deliberate, controlled, like he's terrified of moving too fast.

His hand reaches the edge of my underwear and I'm not thinking about whether this is right or wrong, just letting sensation override thought—

The door opens.

Kieran stands in the doorway, jaw clenched, eyes dark but terrifyingly controlled. My heart stops. Lysander's hands freeze on my body.

"You didn't come." Kieran's voice is deadly quiet, more dangerous for its control. "I waited. Said tomorrow, and you chose to be here instead."

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I'm scrambling for my shirt, trying to cover myself, but Lysander doesn't move. Just keeps his hands on me like a challenge.

"She's not your property," Lysander says, voice sharp.

"No." Kieran closes the door behind him, moves into the apartment like he owns it. "She's my mate. My future. The mother of my children. And you're trying to take what's mine."

"Yours?" Lysander's on his feet now, putting himself between me and Kieran. "She doesn't belong to you. She doesn't belong to anyone."

"Then why is she here?" Kieran's control cracks, just slightly. "Why is she letting you touch her instead of being where she promised to be?"

They're chest to chest now, Alpha posturing that makes the air thick with testosterone and threat. I'm still fumbling with my shirt, watching them fight over me like I'm not even here.

"You want to know why she's here?" Lysander's voice climbs. "Because you terrify her. That intensity, that obsession—it's not love, it's possession. You don't want a partner, you want something to own."

"And you want to be the safe manipulation." Kieran's laugh is sharp.

"The gentle option who makes her feel comfortable while you get exactly what you want. At least I'm honest about what I need."

"You need therapy, not a mate."

"You need a spine instead of playing the nice guy who gets the girl by default."

I'm buttoned now, standing, watching them argue about who deserves me, who I need, what I want—without asking me. About me like I'm

not in the room. Like I'm a prize to be won instead of a person making choices.

Something inside me snaps.

"ENOUGH!" My voice cuts through their argument like a blade.

Both freeze, turn to look at me like they forgot I was here.

"You want to fight over me?" My hands shake but my voice stays steady.

"Stake your claims? Decide what's best for me? Who I should choose? What I need?"

Kieran opens his mouth but I cut him off.

"I spent eight years free of this pack bullshit. Eight years building a life where no one owned me, commanded me, or treated me like property."

My voice climbs, all the rage I've been swallowing finally breaking free.

"And now you're both doing exactly what my family did. Talking about me like I'm not standing right here. Fighting over me like I'm a fucking conquest instead of a person."

I grab my bag, my keys, everything I need to walk out.

"Thalia—" Lysander starts.

"Don't." I meet his eyes, then Kieran's. "I'm not choosing between you tonight. I'm not choosing either of you. I'm choosing ME."

Kieran's expression does something complicated. "What does that mean?"

"It means I'm done being fought over like a prize." I move toward the door. Both of them step back, giving me space for the first time. "When I choose—if I choose—it'll be because one of you actually sees me as an

equal. As a partner. Not as something to win or claim or possess."

I'm at the door when Kieran speaks, voice rough. "I see you."

"No." I look back at him. "You see what you want me to be. What you think you deserve. That's not the same thing."

I walk out, leaving them standing there in Lysander's apartment. Don't look back to see if they follow. Just get in my car and drive, hands shaking on the wheel, rage and clarity fighting for dominance.

The drive home takes forever and no time at all. I pull into my parking spot and sit there, engine off, trying to piece together what just happened.

They were fighting over me. Literally arguing about who gets to have me like I'm a thing to be distributed. And some part of me had been flattered by the attention, had liked being wanted by two powerful men.

But that's pack conditioning talking. The part of me that spent nineteen years being told my only value was in who claimed me, that being chosen was the highest honor a wolfless girl could achieve.

Fuck that.

I'm not their prize. Not their destiny. Not their anything until they see me as mine first.

My phone buzzes. Text from Kieran: *I'm sorry.*

Then Lysander: *Please let me explain.*

I silence both and head inside. Tomorrow I'll deal with the fallout. Tonight I'm choosing me, and that means not answering to anyone.