

Chapter 16

Riley's POV

I knew it long ago—they never cared about me. But hearing Alpha Alaric's words still sent a sharp ache through my chest.

He couldn't even pretend to love me. Not for a second.

I kept my expression impassive. On the outside, I looked as stubborn and cold as ever. No one could tell how badly I was bleeding on the inside.

"Fine," I said.

Alaric's brow furrowed. "What did you just say?"

I lifted my eyes and looked at the four figures watching from the second-floor landing.

"I said fine. I'll leave the Ebonclaw Pack. Starting today, I sever all ties. Don't worry, Alpha Alaric, Luna Zara—I won't cling to you."

Even if I die out there, I'll never come crawling back. That was the vow I made in my heart.

I turned. No more hesitation. I had no illusions left about this place. Three years of pain had taught me better than to hope for love that never existed.

Each step away from them was agony. My leg throbbed with every movement, but I kept going. For the first time in years, there was light ahead of me. Not hope. Not happiness. Just freedom.

I flung open the front door and didn't look back. Not once.

Behind me, Kael's voice broke through the air like a whip.

"Riley! You get back here right now—!"

The roar echoed through the manor, fierce and desperate.

But I didn't turn around.

I couldn't hear it clearly anyway. My right ear hadn't worked properly in years, and with the door closed behind me, it all became a faint blur.

It didn't matter what he shouted. None of it did anymore.

For the first time in years, I felt the weight lift. My body was tired—so, so tired—but my spirit felt lighter.

Five minutes into my walk, I spotted someone approaching from the opposite direction.

At this hour?

I instinctively stepped into the shadows beneath a flickering streetlamp.

As the figure drew closer, I recognized the tall, lean silhouette. Theo.

Kael's friend. The so-called Healer.

My stomach turned.

I remembered the first time I met him. He looked me up and down like I was a stray mutt, then sneered, "So this is the long-lost sister? Doesn't look like much.

If it weren't for her eyes, I'd say you picked her up off the street."

Kael didn't defend me. He just exhaled through his nose, like he agreed.

That hurt more than Theo's words ever could.

I was fifteen. Just a girl trying to belong. And they made sure I knew I didn't.

Theo passed right by me now, oblivious to my presence in the dark.

I watched until he disappeared inside the manor.

Probably here to treat Kael. Again.

I stepped out from the shadows and moved faster. I had a plan.

Originally, I wanted to find a cheap motel and rest for the night. Then, tomorrow, start looking for work.

But now? That wasn't enough.

I needed to leave the city. Leave Ebonclaw behind.

I'd heard them in the study. Alaric wanted me to bow my head and kneel before Ronan's comatose sister—to pay for a crime I didn't commit.

They all knew it was Scarlett who pushed her.

They were willing to sacrifice me for the good of the pack.

Again.

I'd already paid five years. I'd lost a leg. Lost an ear. Lost a kidney.

I had nothing left to give.

And now Kael had burned their last bridge, and they'd come for me to make it right.

No. I had to get away. Far away.

Ronan was still the most terrifying wolf I'd ever known. I'd suffered in the dungeons because of him. I would not survive round two.

I counted the money Mia gave me. Two thousand credits.

Tears burned my eyes.

Mia was the only one who'd ever treated me like I mattered.

I flagged down a cab.

"Where to?" the driver asked, leaning out the window.

"How much to get to Southpoint Station?"

"Middle of the night? That's far. Five-fifty."

I climbed in without hesitation.

My plan was simple. Take the night train out of Mooncrest City. Get to Ironhold, far in the northern frontier. A place so cold, so remote, that no one from the Ebonclaw Pack would bother to follow.

They'd never look for me in a dead-end city with no pack ties, no economy, and no future.

But that was fine.

I didn't need a future. I just needed peace.

I stared out the window as the city flew past. Glass towers sparkled with runes and lights. Signs glowed with the names of elite packs and magical academies.

So beautiful. So out of reach.

The cab reached the station after two hours.

I bought a ticket with my ID—miraculously, there was one seat left on the 1:00 a.m. train.

Just one more hour.

The waiting room was almost empty. I curled up in a corner, arms around my knees.

Somewhere in the distance, an announcement droned over the speakers. I didn't catch it.

I was tired. My leg throbbed. My ears buzzed. I drifted.

Then another announcement. This time clearer.

"Passengers traveling on line seventy-two to Ironhold, please proceed to platform three. Final call."

My eyes snapped open. I leapt to my feet.

It was time.

My escape was seconds away.

I joined the line at the gate, heart racing.

When it was my turn, I handed over my ticket—

Only to feel a cold, firm hand close over mine.

The ticket was yanked back.

I turned.

My heart stopped.

Kael.