

Chapter 18

Third Person's POV

Riley met Kael's furious gaze with cold defiance.

"I've already lost everything," she said. "What else would I be afraid of?"

Kael's eyes narrowed. It was the first time he'd ever truly seen it—that look of disgust in Riley's eyes. At him.

She used to worship him. Obey without question. For three years, she had followed him like a shadow, clinging to his every word.

And now?

Now she stared at him like he was nothing.

He'd turned on Ronan for her. Endangered the alliance with the Blackmaw Pack—sacrificed even Scarlett, all for Riley. What more did she want?

"If you try running again," he said, voice low and furious, "I'll fire Mia."

Riley's heart seized.

Mia—the only person in the Ebonclaw Pack who had ever shown her an ounce of kindness. Her daughter, Carmen, was in university. Mia worked herself to the bone to make that happen.

Riley's fists clenched. "Fire your own housekeeper. It's none of my concern."

If she pretended not to care, maybe Mia would be safe.

Kael chuckled darkly. "Oh? Then maybe I'll have Carmen expelled, too."

Carmen. The same girl who, five years ago, had biked through a storm to bring Riley her entrance exam pass. Carmen had fallen, broken her arm—and Riley had barely made it to the test in time. The pass had been found in the trash.

Without Carmen and Mia, Riley would have had no future at all.

Her entire body tensed, but Kael mistook her silence for submission.

"Heard she's on scholarship," he added coolly. "Shame if that disappeared—"

Smack.

The slap echoed inside the car.

Theo jerked in his seat. "Whoa."

Kael's head snapped sideways. His expression shifted from disbelief to seething rage.

He lunged.

His hands closed around Riley's throat like iron vices, slamming her against the seat. She choked, gasped, clawed for air. Her face turned violet, lungs burning.

"Kael!" Theo barked. "Let her go! You'll kill her!"

"Let her die," Kael growled, but his grip loosened.

"Not in my car," Theo snapped. "I like this car."

Kael threw Riley aside.

She collapsed in a heap, coughing violently, her ribs aching.

"That was your last warning," Kael hissed. "Next time, Mia and Carmen suffer."

Riley didn't answer. She didn't even look at him.

The rest of the drive passed in silence.

When they returned to the Ebonclaw Pack estate, Luna Zara rushed to the car, face etched with maternal worry.

She reached for Riley.

Riley flinched away.

Zara's hand hovered midair before she slowly withdrew it, forcing a soft smile.

"Riley, your father didn't sleep a wink. We've all been so worried."

Scarlett ran up beside her, linking arms. "You really scared us, sister."

Riley said nothing.

She walked right past them.

Kael's voice rang out behind her. "Riley! Don't you see how much they care?"

She stopped.

Turned.

Took in Zara's silk robe, her glossy hair, Scarlett's freshly painted nails.

"Did they worry before or after their spa night?"

Silence.

Zara's gaze shifted.

Kael opened his mouth, but no excuse came.

Riley walked inside.

That night, Kael tossed and turned in his pristine bed.

Eventually, he crept to the supply closet where Riley slept. He stood outside the door for thirty minutes, unable to knock. In the end, stomach cramping with guilt, he retreated.

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Morning came.

Riley woke feeling better than she had in days. Across the estate, the Vale family looked haggard, especially Kael.

Dark circles ringed his eyes.

They gathered for breakfast.

Alpha Alaric's tone was firm. "Riley, you'll go to the Blackmaw Pack house today. Ronan expects sincerity. Make sure he sees it. Our alliance depends on this."

Riley didn't respond.

Zara placed a calming hand on Alaric's arm. "Let her eat first."

Servants brought out a lavish breakfast: smoked salmon, truffle eggs, fresh-pressed juice.

Each plate was set before Alaric, Zara, Kael, and Scarlett.

None for Riley.