

Chapter 22

Riley's POV

The silence in the room pressed in like iron.

I stood there, barely breathing, eyes fixed on the fragile body in the hospital bed. She hadn't moved. Not once. Not even a twitch.

"Tessa," I said softly. My voice didn't shake—but inside, my wolf was restless.

"It's Riley," I continued. "You hated me enough to recognize my voice, didn't you?"

She didn't respond, but I kept talking anyway.

"I heard some comatose wolves retain awareness. A flicker of consciousness somewhere behind the stillness. If that's true, maybe you're in there. Maybe you can hear me. If so, when are you going to wake up?"

The antiseptic tang of the ward stung my nose. Stark white walls and bone-white sheets made her look even more withered. Tessa had been a flame once—a golden Alpha-to-be with sharp teeth and a brighter smile. She'd been everything I wasn't allowed to be.

Now she was just... quiet.

I eased down into the chair beside her. My eyes didn't leave her face.

"You know they all think I did this to you. But you and I both know who really pushed you."

"I served five years for what Scarlett did. Five years. You've been asleep, but I've been in hell."

My voice thickened, pain creeping in despite the calm facade. "They used silver needles. They beat me. They took a kidney." I pressed my palm to my side, remembering the phantom ache.

"Your brother made sure they 'looked after me.' Every scar I have is for your justice."

Sunlight cut through the curtain slats, splashing the floor in strips of gold. It didn't reach me. It never did.

I swallowed, hard.

"I remember the first time I saw you. You were laughing, radiant in designer clothes, practically floating through the halls like a princess. I was so jealous. You had everything—a loving family, respect, safety."

"I came back to the Ebonclaw Pack thinking I'd found home. I was wrong. I was nothing but an intruder. An Omega they didn't want."

I let out a shaky breath. "Now, I'm not even that. I'm just a convict. A scapegoat." My throat burned.

"But you know the truth. You were there."

A tear escaped before I could stop it.

I wiped my face roughly and stood. "Tessa, you need to wake up. Not for me. For yourself. For the truth."

I turned to leave—and froze.

He was there.

Ronan.

His tall frame blocked the doorway, clad in a sharp black suit that only made the lethal aura around him more pronounced. Broad shoulders, narrow waist, features carved from marble—cold, perfect, and terrifying.

My heart jackhammered in my chest. Every nerve screamed danger. I couldn't move.

He started walking.

Each step was calculated. Measured. A predator closing in.

I stumbled back until I hit the edge of Tessa's bed with a dull thud. He kept coming.

The room shrank with every breath I took. Air thinned. The scent of him—pine, cold steel, and something ancient—curled around me like smoke.

I had nowhere to run.

"Alpha Ronan..." I managed, voice barely above a whisper.

His eyes flicked over me, slow and merciless. "You're afraid of me."

I couldn't deny it.

The memories were too loud.

He'd orchestrated my torment in prison. Every cruelty had come with his silent consent. I could survive the others—but not him.

I kept my gaze on the floor, trembling from the inside out.

"I spoke to Tessa," I said quickly. "I did what Kael asked. May I leave now?"

"Kael doesn't speak for me," Ronan said. His voice was a blade—precise and deadly.

He stepped closer. I flinched.

He stared down at me like I was something beneath his boot. "You think a five-year sentence settles your debt?"

My blood turned to ice.

I wanted to run.

But I couldn't move.

I couldn't fight him.

So I did the only thing left to do.

I dropped to my knees.

"I'm guilty. I wronged your sister. Please forgive me."

My head struck the floor. Hard.

Again. And again.

The impact reverberated through my bones, but I barely felt it.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

I kept repeating it. A broken mantra. The words tumbled from my lips like blood.

Ronan said nothing.

Then he spoke.

"Do you know what I see when I look at you, Riley?" he said, voice low. "I see a wolf who should have died five years ago. I see a liar wearing guilt like a badge. And I see weakness."

He crouched, bringing his face level with mine.

"Tessa trusted Scarlett. Just like I trusted you. And both of you betrayed us."

I tried to meet his eyes, but his glare burned too hot.

"Do you think kneeling fixes what was taken from her? What was taken from me?"

My lips parted, but no sound came.

"Tell me," he growled, "what else should I take from you to make us even?
Another kidney? Or maybe your voice?"

A sob escaped my throat. I couldn't stop it.

My forehead hit the ground again.

"Please... no more..."

Ronan watched in silence. His fists clenched at his sides.

This wasn't satisfying him. It wasn't enough.

Because breaking me wasn't the point.

Watching me shatter—again and again—was.