

Chapter 1 Ashes of Eight Years

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Freya

After surviving the cruelest truth,I was ready to leave everything behind.

"I'm resigning."

The words left my mouth before I could think twice. I sat by the window of my penthouse,watching the city lights blur into the night. For three years,this place had been called home,but right now it felt like a stranger's cage.

On the other end of the line,Beta Timothy went utterly silent. I could picture his face,brows knotted,jaw tight. "Resigning?" His voice finally broke the pause,sharp with disbelief. "Freya,are you even hearing yourself? This isn't just a job. You're throwing away your Gamma title. Do you know what that means for you? For the pack?"

"I do." My voice was steady,but my heart pounded against my ribs."Alpha already signed the withdrawal papers. I'll finish the transition within a week."

"The hell he did. " he muttered,sharp with disbelief. "Alpha Jasper must've signed off on this without even noticing whose papers he was signing. He's going to lose his mind when he realizes it was you."

A bitter smile tugged at my lips,though it hurt more than it soothed. "If he didn't notice,that only proves I never mattered."

"You don't believe that,Freya." Beta Timothy snapped,anger sharpening his tone. "For four years you've been his right hand,his shadow. Do you even realize how much he leans on you? The man sleeps because you keep the pack stable. He breathes because you're there covering his back."

I pressed my palm against the cold glass,fighting the sting in my chest. "He depends on me,yes. But he doesn't love me. Timothy,you know why I joined the Stone Lake Pack."

Timothy's voice grew sharper,almost accusing."This is about Mia,isn't it? She's his mate,yes,but she abandoned him. You stayed. You gave him everything. Don't tell me it meant nothing."

I closed my eyes. Of course I knew the truth. From the beginning, I was never his mate. He was bound to her the moment he came of age. I was only the woman foolish enough to fall for an Alpha who could never belong to me. I thought I could heal his wounds, that my devotion could replace what he lost. But I was never more than a shadow in his life.

"I'm going home," I lied softly. "My parents need me."

Timothy knew it was an excuse, but he didn't call me out. He just sighed, defeated. "Then I hope you won't regret this."

The call ended, and silence filled the apartment. I stared at the walls, at the traces of my life with him scattered everywhere, and I felt like I was suffocating.

Eight years ago, I thought I had been blessed by fate.

I still remember Harvard, the day I met Elena. She was dazzling, the kind of girl who made everyone stop and look. Somehow, she chose me as her closest friend. Through her, I met her brother—Alpha Jasper of the Stone Lake Pack.

From that moment, my heart belonged to him.

After graduation, Elena went to Paris, and I stayed. I became his gamma, his assistant, the one who cleaned up his messes, filled his schedule, kept his world in order. I told myself it was enough. That even if I wasn't his mate, I could still stand beside him.

Until that night.

Someone spiked his drink. He cornered me, kissed me like he couldn't breathe without me, and by dawn, I had given him my first time. But when his lips parted in the dark, the name he moaned wasn't mine.

It was hers. Mia. His destined mate. The one who left him behind.

The next morning, he stood by the window, cigarette smoke curling around him, his eyes cold as ice. "You like me, don't you?" His voice was detached, like I was nothing but a stranger. "Last night shouldn't have happened. I love someone else."

Then he tossed a bank card onto the bed. "Take it. Forget it."

I should have walked away. Instead, I begged. "Give me a chance. If she doesn't come back, if you can't let her go, I'll leave."

He hesitated. Then nodded.

That hesitation was enough for me to chain myself to him for the next four years.

By day, I was his gamma, his trusted assistant. By night, I was his secret lover. Nobody knew, nobody would ever know. And I told myself it was happiness.

Until his birthday.

I planned a surprise for him,waiting for the moment he would finally look at me and see me. But at midnight,his social account lit up with a message: Found my mate what I lost.

The photo showed him kissing Mia beneath the fireworks.

My hands trembled as I called him,desperate for an answer. But it wasn't Jasper who picked up—it was Mia. Her sweet,syrupy voice slid into my ear."Jasper,come back to bed. Your Gamma is calling."

And then his voice followed,sharp and merciless."She doesn't matter. Don't waste your time on her."

Something inside me shattered.

I made my decision. After drafting the resignation notice and the withdrawal papers required to leave the pack,I slipped them onto his desk as if it were routine. He never checked the documents I prepared for him—his signature always came quick,confident,automatic.

For years I told myself that was proof of his trust. The truth was crueler: I was nothing more than a highly competent subordinate,a convenient body in his bed.

Never a mate.

Days later,I packed my suitcase and met him at the door.

"Got a new place?" he asked casually,as if I were just another employee moving on to a different job.

"My old apartment. Just for a month," I replied.

He nodded,unbothered. "I'll drive you."

The car was filled with Mia—purple seat covers,plush toys. I froze,and he noticed,but only said,"They're hers. She likes them."

I forced a smile. "I'm happy for you."

Halfway there,she called. She wanted to build a snowman with him. He pulled over and looked at me.

"I'll take a cab," I said before he could speak. My voice was calm,but my heart was already in shreds.

He helped me unload my bags. That was when a box tipped over,spilling across the snow—letters I had written but never sent,photos I had taken in secret,even trinkets he once

discarded but I had kept like treasures. All of my hidden devotion lay bare under the streetlight.

He froze, staring. For a heartbeat I thought he might say something—anything.

But he said nothing. He turned, got back in his car, and drove away.

Snow fell harder. My wolf whimpered inside me as I knelt in the cold, gathering the pieces of my obsession with numb fingers. Alone. Always alone.

When I finally stumbled home, half-frozen, my phone buzzed. A single message lit the screen:

[Don't be stuck on one person. Give yourself a chance.]

His words cut deeper than the winter air.

At dawn, I carried the box outside. I set it on fire, watching the flames devour my love letters, my memories, my eight wasted years.

Ashes scattered into the snow, carried by the wind like ghosts. My wolf let out a low, mournful cry inside me, but I whispered to her, to myself:

"It's over."

Not just with him. Not just with the Alpha who never chose me.

I was leaving the Stone Lake Pack. Leaving the poisonous love I had chained myself to.

Maybe he would never notice, but for the first time in eight years, I was finally free.