

Chapter 6 I Need Her

10-12 minutes

Jasper

I stared at the quarterly reports spread across my desk, the numbers blurring before my eyes. Three weeks. It had been three goddamn weeks since Freya walked out, and Stone Lake was crumbling beneath my fingers like wet sand.

"Alpha, the Henderson contract needs your signature immediately." My new assistant—what was his name again? Mark? Mike?—hovered anxiously in the doorway, clutching a folder that should have been organized, vetted, and summarized days ago.

"Put it with the others," I growled, gesturing to the mounting pile on the corner of my desk. My wolf, Leon, paced restlessly inside me, unsettled and irritable since Freya's departure.

The assistant's eyes widened. "But sir, the deadline is—"

"I said put it with the others!" The force of my Alpha voice made the young wolf flinch and scurry to obey, nearly tripping over himself in his haste to escape my office.

The moment the door closed, I dropped my head into my hands. This was the third meeting I'd missed this week alone. The finance department was in shambles. The council was breathing down my neck about territory negotiations I'd completely forgotten about. And my office...

I glanced around at the garish Pink and mint green walls—Mia's attempt to "brighten up the space" after I'd asked her to take on some of Freya's administrative duties. The color made my eyes hurt, but I couldn't bring myself to tell my mate that her decorating choices were giving me migraines.

Your mate. The words felt hollow in my mind. Leon gave a dissatisfied growl, confused by my conflicted emotions.

The intercom buzzed. "Alpha Kane,the Northern Alliance called again about the missed conference call. And Beta Timothy says the budget projections are... um... completely wrong."

I slammed my fist on the desk hard enough to crack the polished mahogany. "Tell Beta Timothy to fix it!"

"He says only Gamma Stone knew how to—"

"We don't have a Gamma Stone anymore!" I roared, knowing I was being unreasonable but unable to contain the storm of frustration building inside me. "Tell him to figure it out!"

The silence from the intercom told me my new assistant had wisely decided to retreat. Leon continued pacing in my mind, agitated and confused. *Find her,* he urged. *Bring her back.*

"She left us," I muttered to myself, ignoring the twinge of something uncomfortable in my chest. "She chose to leave."

The door to my office burst open without warning, and Elena stormed in, her eyes flashing with fury. My sister had returned from Paris three days ago, only to announce that she wanted out of Stone Lake entirely—to "find herself" or some such nonsense.

"You can't keep me prisoner here, Jasper!" she snapped, her golden eyes—so like our father's—blazing with indignation.

I rose to my full height, towering over her. "You're not a prisoner. You're a Kane, and Kanes have responsibilities to this pack."

"Responsibilities?" Elena laughed bitterly. "Like how you 'responsibly' drove away the best Gamma any pack has ever had? Like how you've 'responsibly' run this place into the ground in less than a month without her?"

The truth of her words stung like salt in an open wound. "Watch yourself, Elena."

"No, you watch yourself," she fired back, unafraid of my Alpha status in a way only family could be. "Have you even tried to contact her? To apologize?"

"Apologize?" The word tasted foreign on my tongue. "She abandoned her position, her pack!"

Elena's eyes narrowed dangerously. "After eight years of you using her, four years of you fucking her while making her hide in the shadows, and then humiliating her in front of the entire pack. Yeah, I wonder why she left."

I couldn't deny the truth in Elena's words. Still, I wasn't about to admit that to my rebellious sister.

"You will call her," I commanded, my voice cold and controlled. "Tell her to come back. She'll listen to you."

Elena's laugh was sharp and brittle. "Call her yourself, coward. Oh wait, you can't, because she blocked your number, didn't she?"

My control slipped, and I felt my eyes flash Alpha gold. "This isn't a request, Elena. As your Alpha—"

"You're pulling rank on your own sister? Really?" She shook her head in disgust. "You know what? Freya was right about you. You don't deserve her loyalty. You never did."

The door opened again, and Mia floated in, wearing a flowing sundress that made her look ethereal and fragile. My mate's eyes widened at the tension in the room.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, her voice soft and concerned as she sidled up to me, placing a possessive hand on my arm.

"Your mate is trying to force me to lure Freya back," Elena said coldly, glaring at Mia with undisguised contempt.

"I don't understand why we need her back," Mia said, leaning into me. "I'm your mate, Jasper. I should be by your side, helping you run things." Her lower lip trembled slightly. "Don't you trust me to support you?"

The wolf bond between us tugged at my heart, making me instinctively want to comfort her, to erase that wounded look from her face. But Leon remained strangely silent, almost... resistant.

"Of course I trust you," I assured her, stroking her hair. "But Freya has specific skills that—"

"Skills?" Elena interrupted with a snort. "Is that what we're calling it now?"

Mia's eyes filled with tears. "See? Even your sister thinks there's something between you and... her. How am I supposed to feel when everyone acts like your Gamma is more important than your mate?"

I shot Elena a warning glare. "That's enough."

"You know what? You're right. This is enough." Elena pulled her phone from her pocket. "I'll show you exactly what Freya's been up to since she escaped your toxic ass."

She scrolled through her messages, then abruptly froze, her eyes widening.

"What?" I demanded, suddenly alert.

Elena tried to pocket her phone, but I was faster. I snatched it from her hand, ignoring her protests.

"Give that back!" She lunged for the device, but I held it out of reach, my eyes already scanning the message thread with Freya.

[DETAILS IMMEDIATELY!! Did you survive the night of Alpha passion??] Elena had texted.

Freya's reply made my blood run cold: [Survived and then some. Coffee in 20? You won't believe what just happened.]

Alpha passion?

Leon roared inside me, a primal, possessive fury erupting from deep in my core. Before I knew what I was doing, I'd pressed call, the phone at my ear, my free hand clenched into a white-knuckled fist.

"Wow, that eager for details?" Freya's voice came through the line, light and laughing in a way I hadn't heard in months—perhaps years. The sound of it twisted something sharp inside my chest.

"Where the hell are you?" I demanded.

There was a beat of shocked silence. "Jasper?" Her voice hardened immediately. "Why do you have Elena's phone?"

"My sister was careless enough to leave it unattended," I said, my voice dropping into that cold. Elena's eyes widened with outrage, but I didn't waver. "Imagine my surprise when I saw your messages. Another Alpha, Freya? Really?"

The idea of her with someone else clawed at me, sharp as broken glass. My wolf, Leon, roared inside me, demanding I rip the nameless bastard apart. She belongs to Stone Lake. That was the line I clung to, but it didn't stop the jealous burn that spread through my chest.

I forced the phone down before it cracked in my hand. "You're coming back," I'd snapped at her. Even if it meant threats, even if I had to remind her what exile really meant, I couldn't let her walk away.

Elena lunged forward and snatched her phone back, her fury blazing. "Are you out of your damn mind?" she shouted. "You just threatened her with exile—for sleeping with someone else? Seriously? Meanwhile, you've been parading Mia around like she's your Luna-in-waiting."

I turned away from my sister's accusatory glare, unable to face the truth in her words. "She abandoned her responsibilities."

"No, you abandoned her," Elena shot back. "For years. And now you're jealous that she's finally moved on?"

"I am not jealous," I growled, though Leon snarled in protest at the lie. "I'm protecting the interests of this pack."

"Don't listen to her," Mia whispered, her voice trembling. "You're just doing what any good Alpha would do. We need the Gamma back to maintain order, that's all." Her hands slid up my chest soothingly. "It has nothing to do with... feelings."

Elena made a disgusted sound. "Unbelievable. Both of you." She turned to leave, then paused at the door. "By the way, Jasper? I'm officially requesting transfer papers. I refuse to stay in a pack that treats loyalty like this."

The door slammed behind her, leaving me alone with Mia, who buried her face against my chest, her shoulders shaking with quiet sobs.

"She's so cruel," Mia whispered. "I've tried so hard to be accepted here, to be the Luna everyone wants, but your sister hates me, and the pack still looks at me like I'm an intruder." She looked up, her eyes swimming with tears.

I pulled back to look into her eyes. "You are my mate, Mia. My only love. Freya is... was... just a valuable employee."

"Promise me," Mia insisted, her fingers digging into my arms. "Promise me that when she comes back, things will be different. She'll be just your Gamma, nothing more."

I nodded mechanically. "Of course. You're my mate. My only mate."

But as the words left my mouth, Leon turned away inside me, retreating to the depths of my mind in silent protest. And I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something crucial—something about Freya, about myself, about the mess we'd made of everything.

One thing was certain: Freya would return. She had to. Stone Lake needed her.

I needed her.