

BOOK  
*four*

*Seraphina*  
*xoxo*

A CASTLE OMEGA NOVEL

ELLE LINCOLN

*Seraphina*

CASTLE OMEGA  
BOOK FOUR

**ELLE LINCOLN**

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# *Blush*

## ***An omega's guide to getting snowed in during a heat, with a pack that isn't even mine.***

As winter's icy grip tightens its hold, my heat threatens to steal all reason, leaving me vulnerable to the whims of fate. Trapped on a secluded estate with a charismatic alpha who ignites desires I dare not acknowledge, I'm left with no choice but to surrender to the inevitable.

I never envisioned I'd be a slave to my hormones, craving the heat of another's touch. I longed to explore the world, freed from the restrictive laws that once bound omegas, yet a captivating stranger and his pack kindle my heat, and we spend a week together full of fiery passion. They pursue me in ways that awaken my desires and unravel the frosty barriers around my heart. When all is said and done, they refuse to release their claim, beckoning me into a world I never sought.

As the snow piles high, I question my instincts and choices. Is it the heat or something more profound that draws me to them? With each step I take, I feel their presence grow nearer, their warmth promising refuge in the coldest of storms.

Danger lurks in the shadows of this snowbound paradise. An unknown threat with sinister intent roams the wilderness, and with their sights set on none other than me, I must confront the chilling reality that my newfound desires may lead me straight into this merciless predator's path.

I am swept into a winter of passions, where destiny weaves a tale of desire and connection that blurs the line between choice

and inevitability. I yearn for the embrace of pack Armana, who chase after me. Can I allow myself to accept their love while also evading an unknown threat hell bent on sabotaging my first heat?

Seraphina is a snowed in omegaverse, and it's the fourth book in the Castle Omega Series. With a lighter tone than the other books in this series, it's a standalone novel, and you do not need to read the previous books to understand this one.

# *Omegaverse*

***Alpha:*** Dominant figures, known for their leadership qualities and strong presence, often playing central roles in societal hierarchies and personal relationships.

***Beta:*** Represent the neutral class, neither dominant like Alphas nor submissive like Omegas, often depicted as the societal balance, integrating traits from both ends of the spectrum.

***Delta:*** Similar to Alphas but lacking self-control, serve as the primary security force, tasked with maintaining order and protection due to their innate strength and assertiveness.

***Gamma:*** Undeveloped version of Omegas, without the characteristic heat cycles, often depicted as nurturing and supportive, yet with a distinct social role from other classes.

***Mage:*** Gifted individuals who wield magic, often serving as healers and crucial problem-solvers, using their mystical abilities for the benefit of their community.

***Omega:*** Characterized by their submissive and gentle nature, often playing peacekeeping roles, and are unique for their ability to go into heat, influencing their interactions and relationships.



***Ascendance:*** When a Gamma, upon encountering a perfect scent match, undergoes a hormonal transformation, awakening their dormant Omega traits, and ascending into a full Omega designation. *Who?* Gammas.



***Berserker Rage:*** Uncontrollable fury and heightened physical prowess, entered during combat or under extreme stress. Making them formidable and fearsome warriors. *Who?* Deltas

***Bonding:*** Process by which an individuals forms a deep, often permanent, emotional and psychological connection. *Who?* All Designations.

***Heat:*** A period of intense sexual arousal for Omegas, often a critical plot element in Omegaverse. Only Omega's go into a heat. *Who?* Omegas.

***Impregnation:*** A key element, where pregnancy becomes a significant plot or character development factor. *Who?* Male Omegas.

***Knotting:*** A specific sexual mechanism unique to Alphas, pivotal in mating rituals and bonding processes in the Omegaverse. *Who?* Alphas.

***Magic:*** Mystical abilities wielded by Mages, used for healing and other purposes. *Who?* Mages.

***Mating Bites:*** Often used to signify a deep bond or claim between characters, typically during a mating ritual. *Who?* Alphas.

***Pheromones:*** Chemical signals released by characters, influencing the behavior and emotions of others, crucial in attraction and mating dynamics. *Who?* Alphas & Omegas.

***Rut:*** The Alpha's counterpart to the Omega's heat, characterized by a heightened state of aggression and sexual drive. *Who?* Alphas.

***Scent Marking:*** A behavior where characters use their unique scent to mark territory or individuals, significant in mate selection and social interactions. *Who?* All Designations.

***Scent Match:*** Profound and instinctual connection where an individual instinctively recognizes another's unique scent as perfectly compatible, often leading to a deep, instinctive, & irreversible bond. (Also referred to as a Fated Mate) *Who?* All Designations.

*“Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the  
darkness.”*

*— Desmond Tutu*

## *Prologue: Seraphina*

Two types of people exist in this world—those who rise with the sun, and those who rise with the moon. Personally, I'd choose the moon every time. There's a unique peace in the twilight hours when the sky transitions from cool to warm hues. Purples and reds mingle, casting streaks of pink across the heavens. It's the perfect blend of opposing forces.

As I kick my feet out, watching the sun dip below the horizon from the service kitchen window, my ice cream shows signs of battle—dented and half devoured. I wonder how much more vanilla cinnamon swirl ice cream with little chunks of shortbread cookie I can consume before I reach my limit. Clearly, I'm eating my feelings, and I'm not sure I care anymore.

“Seraphina,” the gamma cook at the omega sanctuary chides, circling the island where I sit. She wears a warm smile. “You're going to make yourself sick.”

“I'm trying, Celeste. Trust me, I am,” I reply, tapping the pint with my spoon. “But it hasn't happened yet. I think I'll need more.”

She tilts her head, concern etched on her features. “It's not that bad. Tomorrow, you might find a pack and fall for the perfect alphas.”

I hum, scooping another mouthful of ice cream. Why bother explaining when what I have is what many yearn for? It just isn't my dream.

Celeste sighs, her round cheeks flushed with mild irritation. “You’re eating your feelings, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am,” I answer, pointing my spoon at her playfully. “But tell no one.”

She rolls her chocolate brown eyes. “Your secret’s safe with me. At least the new dean doesn’t make you count calories.”

“Exactly,” I retort. “Now, let me indulge in my sugary solace.”

“Don’t stay up too late,” she advises, tossing me a towel to prevent any ice cream casualties from soiling my silk pajamas.

“I won’t,” I promise, even though we both know I might. Celeste leaves the kitchen, locking the outside doors but leaving one path open—the steps to the dorms. Here I am, in my gilded prison, with only one way out.

I turn back to the window, my ice cream in hand, idly kicking my legs against the island as the sun bids its daily farewell. Tomorrow is significant. It’s my twenty-first birthday. According to the alpha council, that’s when I become eligible, a prize for alphas to claim. My virginity is something to be auctioned off.

The world is shifting and evolving, though, and I refuse to be a trophy. Not yet, if ever. I yearn to taste life on my own terms, thrive independently, and discover who I am beyond the omega identity ingrained in me. For eight years, this sanctuary has taught me the art of being the perfect omega—dressing, cooking, cleaning, and mastering the role of a submissive mate—but I’ll go to the gallows kicking and screaming if that’s what it takes, and believe me, I will.

There’s someone, though, who’s already captured my heart.

I catch his scent before I see him—cinnamon buns. Perhaps that’s why I adore this ice cream so much. Without glancing at the door, I reach for a spoon and extend it toward Avery Griffin. He’s my secret rendezvous, my man-crush Monday, my delta dreamboat.

He's not truly mine, though, always keeping a careful distance. He ushers me to bed after we share ice cream, maintaining boundaries.

Always with those stupid boundaries. I want to set them on fire.

He's the reason I stayed here and didn't beg my parents to rescue me from this place.

In the silence that envelops us, a thousand unspoken words hang in the air. It's our last night together, and my stomach knots with nerves. The thought of never seeing him again slices through me.

For years, we've skirted around this inevitable night. Our friendship has blossomed and evolved into something uniquely ours, with memories I'll cherish for the rest of my omega life.

His presence soothes my frayed nerves as he glides through the kitchen, his steps silent and predatory. I watch him from beneath my lashes, my hair shielding my eyes just enough to observe him as he leans against the counter I'm perched on.

He takes the spoon I offer and dives into the ice cream. I close my eyes, simply relishing his existence, his fiery spirit somehow tempered in this quiet moment.

As the sun finally disappears, and the creaks and groans of the castle reach our ears, I break the silence. "Did you get the assignment?"

He turns to me, his light eyes rimmed with an intensity that's inherent to him. His gaze holds a smoky depth, complemented by his deep voice that could easily lull me into a peaceful slumber. "I won't know until morning. I can't..." He pauses, clearing his throat.

"I get it," I say, flipping my hair over my shoulder and tucking my legs under me, sitting cross-legged. "You don't want to walk me down the aisle, huh?"

"Seraphina." He groans my name, which sounds like a plea. "You know that's not it."

“Isn’t it?” I retort, my frustration mounting as I toss my spoon across the room. It clatters into the sink, a loud and jolting sound that resonates with the turmoil inside me.

He sighs, taking the ice cream and walking across the kitchen in his black fatigues, which are standard issue for a delta. Nonchalantly, he stows the ice cream in the freezer before returning to me, still keeping distance between us.

That distance stings a little. More than a little, actually.

I hate it.

“Then what, Avery?” I can hear the edge in my voice. I know I’m picking a fight.

“I can’t just stand by and watch you choose a pack when I’ve been watching over and protecting you for years,” he snarls, the raw emotion in his voice unmistakable. It mirrors the emotion inside me.

I stare at him, a mix of shock and validation swirling within me. Despite being warned to keep his distance from the omegas, he always broke that rule for me, but until now, it’s always been platonic.

Well, forget that.

“Avery,” I say, my voice quivering slightly as I lick my lips, “ruin me.”

“What?” He pushes off the counter, his hands falling to his sides in disbelief.

“You heard me.” A bold smile spreads across my face despite the nerves churning in my stomach. I don’t want a pack. I refuse to be paraded before them like an offering. No, I’m seizing control of my destiny, and I choose him.

“Seraphina, you can’t say things like that,” he whispers, but his actions betray his words as he takes a step closer, his chest rising and falling with each heavy breath.

“Break the rules, Avery. Ruin me.”

Avery’s eyes search mine, a storm of conflict raging within them. His stance, once defiant, now wavers as he takes in my

resolute expression. The air between us crackles with unspoken words and suppressed desires, a dance we've mastered over the years, but tonight, the music has changed.

“Seraphina,” he starts, his voice a rough whisper, “you don't know what you're asking for.”

“Don't I?” I challenge, sliding off the counter to stand and close the gap between us. My heart hammers in my chest in a wild, untamed rhythm. “I know exactly what I'm asking for, Avery. I'm choosing to live, feel, and break free from the chains they bound me with.”

He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. “This... This could ruin everything.”

“Maybe,” I concede, reaching up to trace his jawline with a tentative finger. “Or maybe it's the start of something new, something that's ours and not dictated by rules or councils.”

His hands lift, hovering inches from my waist as if he's fighting every instinct to pull me closer. “Seraphina, I—”

“You're my anchor, Avery,” I whisper, each word infused with raw need. “Please, make me yours in a way no one else can. Ruin me for any other pack, let your touch linger like a scar that never fades. I can't bear the thought of being without it, of being with anyone but you.”

For a heartbeat, the world stands still. Then, with a resolve that matches my own, Avery closes the distance, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that seals our fates. It's a promise, a rebellion, and a scar that will never fade.

Avery's raw, unrestrained groan echoes my own loss of control. The sun's descent into night mirrors the crumbling of our carefully maintained boundaries. He lifts me effortlessly, carrying me toward the small table. Our fervent, exploratory kisses sweep away the anxiety and uncertainty of what tomorrow might bring. His kiss alone is my undoing.

As I wrap my legs around him, holding him tight, fear tickles my spine—the fear of him pulling away at this critical juncture, but he doesn't. Instead, he pulls back just enough, his lashes fluttering as if to clear a haze of lust.

He steps back, but I keep my legs firmly around his waist, unwilling to break this connection. With a swift movement, he rips off his shirt, revealing a devil-may-care smile. He leans in, his breath teasing the shell of my ear. “Do you really think I’d walk away now when I have you all to myself? I don’t fucking think so, Seraphina.”

His words leave me breathless, my fingers trailing down his muscular abdomen, feeling it tense under my touch. “I thought you’d say no,” I admit, turning toward him, inhaling the scent that I want to embed in my memory, especially if this is all I’ll ever have of him.

“No, sugar, I’m incapable of saying no to you,” he murmurs, his fingers deftly removing my camisole. “And I’m not sure I can take this slow either.” He gently pushes me back until I’m lying on the table, his gaze devouring me with an intensity that promises more than just tonight.

Avery’s actions send shivers cascading across my bare skin, his fingers deftly sliding my shorts down my legs. “Legs up, sugar,” he instructs. As the fabric falls away, I follow his direction, resting my feet on the table, vulnerably exposed under his intense gaze. My heart races as he kneels before me, whispering, “Just a taste, I swear.”

His tongue explores me, a perfect harmony of desire and skill. Every stroke ignites sensations I’ve only dreamed of, intensifying with each movement. I’m like a live wire, charged and waiting to erupt. Years of watching him from afar, fantasizing in the shadows, never prepared me for the reality of Avery’s touch.

With just a few expert motions, a fierce orgasm rips through me. I thread my fingers through his hair, holding him close as I surrender to the waves of pleasure, marking him with my essence.

As the intensity ebbs, Avery pulls back. My eyes flutter open to meet his, finding a storm of contemplation in their depths. We are shattering every rule, every boundary.

“Ruin me,” I whisper again, though he already has.



Propping myself on my elbows, I watch him wrestle with his decision. Finally, he exhales deeply, his scent enveloping me, intoxicating my omega senses. I realize something irreversible is happening. Our scents mingle, and his intense gaze cements a truth—there’s no turning back, even if this is where it ends.

He reaches for his belt, swiftly removing it. I sit up, seizing him by the back of his head, drawing him into a fierce, urgent kiss. Our teeth clash as we fumble with his pants, each of us driven by a hunger that’s been building for far too long.

Our movements are both urgent and clumsy, a dance fueled by desperation and desire. Heavy, ragged breaths blend as we fumble with the last barrier between us. Finally, his pants join the growing pile of discarded clothes, leaving us with no more shields to hide behind.

Avery’s eyes, deep and crystalline blue, lock onto mine, echoing a silent question. I respond with a nod, a silent plea, a wordless affirmation. This is exactly what I’ve always craved—him in his most raw and unguarded state. Our connection goes beyond the mere physical. It’s a confluence of souls, a melding of hearts.

As he leans in, his lips brush against mine with a tenderness contrasting our earlier urgency. “Seraphina,” he whispers against my lips, his voice tinged with a vulnerability that causes my heart to swell. This moment transcends the mere act of breaking rules or defying conventions. It’s about us seizing a moment that belongs solely to us.

He eases into me gently, crossing a boundary that packs will undoubtedly vie for tomorrow—a prize I’ve willingly ceded to Avery.

As he fully claims me, a gasp parts my lips—not from pain, but from an overpowering sense of completeness. We find a rhythm as ancient as time, each movement deepening our bond, imprinting this occasion into our very essence.

His movements are slow and deliberate, and he holds me close, his breaths syncing with each deliberate thrust.

The crescendo of our passion builds, and I cling to him, my nails embedding in his back, anchoring me to him. When our climax washes over us, it's overwhelming. Lying here, entwined and breathless, I realize that no matter what tomorrow holds, this night, this moment, is now a part of my soul.

Avery's forehead rests against mine, his breath a warm caress. "Seraphina," he whispers, his voice a blend of promise and farewell.

I have no regret over choosing him, and I never will.

## CHAPTER 1

# *Seraphina*

*“IF YOU WERE A FOOD, you’d totally be a soft pretzel,” Thea says, her eyes gleaming with the kind of mischief that only an older sibling can muster. Her smirk suggests she scored a point in our ongoing banter war.*

*I roll my eyes, not even slightly offended. “Really, Thea? I thought you’d come up with something more original by now,” I tease, leaning into the comfortable familiarity of our sibling rivalry. My admiration for her quick wit has always been there, even if she uses it to compare me to snack food.*

*Thea sticks out her tongue in response, just as Lex, my twin and our brother, saunters into the room, a bag of freshly baked pretzels in hand. He tosses one to me, joining our playful dispute. “You’re both like pretzels, twisty and salty.”*

*I laugh, catching the pretzel. Lex has always been the peacemaker, the one who could turn any argument into a joke. As we munch on our snacks, Thea shifts the topic to something she’s been obsessed with lately. “I’m an omega, you know. One day, everyone’s going to recognize my brilliance.”*

*Lex chuckles, shaking his head. “Keep dreaming, sis.”*

*A look from me stops Thea’s retort short. We all know our dynamics well—Thea, the ambitious omega, Lex, the laid-back brother, and me, the pragmatic sister. Our parents’ rare visits to the sanctuary where Thea stays for her own safety—a sprawling castle that feels more like a fortress—often stirs up these old roles, but we’ve learned to find comfort in each other’s company despite our differences.*

*Lex adds, “Though sometimes you’re more like a sour apple, Thea.” His eyes dance with amusement as Thea bites into a green apple she’s been holding. “Rotten to the core.”*

*Thea narrows her eyes on him, but there’s a playful edge to her annoyance. “At least I’m not a pretzel like you two.”*

*In that moment, comfortable atmosphere falls over us, filled with the familiar sounds of the three of us bickering and bantering. I cherish these moments the most, away from the complexities of designations and the burden of what we will become in the future.*

*I find myself rolling Lex’s words over in my head. They are harsh, but not entirely untrue. Thea, with all her ambitions and flaws, does have a streak of bitterness in her. It’s a trait that often causes friction in our family, especially during our parents’ infrequent and somewhat tense visits to Thea’s castle-like home.*

*Despite our differences, though, I hope that one day, Thea will understand that strength lies in unity, not in the power games of alphas, betas, and omegas. Perhaps she’ll come to see that her status as an omega is more than just a societal label—it’s a part of who she is.*

“SERAPHINA, ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME?” DEAN Matilda Anderson inquires, her gaze piercing through her glasses. It’s not the first time she’s posed this question, and her concern is understandable given her newness to the position. “Are you certain this is the path you wish to take?”

The truth? My desires are crystal clear. They definitely don’t include joining a pack, at least not in the foreseeable future. My sister Thea always craved the adoration of a pack, a dream that turned sour for her. Lex’s assessment years ago still rings true—Thea is fundamentally flawed.

“Yes, ma’am,” I respond, making sure I drench my tone in politeness. These formalities are crucial in securing the independence I seek. Dean Anderson sets her unique hexagonal glasses aside and clasps her hands, leaning forward on the desk that symbolizes recent changes in leadership. Her voice deepens with seriousness.

“Seraphina, this is a decision demanding your full clarity.” I can’t let her continue with that line of thought.

“Let me just stop you right there,” I interject, cutting her off. “It’s not that I’m against the idea of a pack, it’s just that I don’t want one right now.”

She sighs, a mix of resignation and tolerance. “Legally, I can’t keep you here against your will, but as the new dean, I must urge you to reconsider. Omegas might have full autonomy now, but your first heat is approaching. Without a pack, you face serious risks.”

Ah, the inevitable reminder of my impending heat. “I’m well aware,” I retort confidently, “and I have an ace up my sleeve—a skilled mage who can keep me sedated. I plan to sleep through the worst of it, even if it’s risky.”

Dean Anderson nods, a stray gray curl falling across her forehead. “Very well. I’ll authorize your leave, but on two conditions,” she begins, her expression serious. “I’m introducing monthly galas, starting this Friday. They’ll be open to all unbonded omegas and gammas, free of charge, in our ballroom and atrium. I want you to attend these events. Mingle and meet the alphas of Terra and their packs. Who knows, you might even find a compatible match.”

I inhale slowly, processing her words, then exhale with deliberate calm. Does she not understand? I have no interest in a pack. My dream is a peaceful life with a horde of cats and maybe a no strings attached companion for those challenging heat periods.

“BEFORE YOU DISMISS THE IDEA, CONSIDER IT,” SHE URGES again.

I hum thoughtfully, weighing my options. “Give me one year away from this place and your little parties,” I propose, understanding the need for a compromise. “Let me embrace my omega life for one year.” I can tell she wants to object, it’s written all over her face, but she nods.

“Alright,” she agrees, her lips curling into a knowing smile, as if she’s privy to secrets beyond my understanding.

Ridiculous, considering I'm the protagonist of my own story, and she's merely a supporting character.

I really didn't think she'd go for it.

The room's musty scent of old books and polished wood is punctuated by a faint floral fragrance—a subtle reminder of the sanctuary's gardens just outside, a world away from me now.

“And the other condition?” I ask, itching to leave.

“If anything goes wrong, I will assign you a bodyguard,” she states solemnly, her seriousness making me suppress a wave of nervousness. “This is nonnegotiable. The administration will give you a job and an apartment. There are alpha business owners willing to have an omega as an employee, though I will say these are limited. In a year, we'll review your situation.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Clearly, these are three conditions, not two, but I remain silent, knowing when to hold back. I've won this round.

“Fine, one year without the galas and a potential bodyguard if needed,” I say, although I am never going to those galas. I'd rather shave off all of my hair. “But after that, we renegotiate.” I echo her terms for clarity.

Dean Anderson nods, satisfaction in her eyes. “Agreed.” We shake hands, sealing the deal.

“Did you say gammas?” I ask, casually wiping my hand on my pants as I retract it.

“As you're aware, gammas are a lesser version of omegas,” she remarks, her tone casual despite the offensive nature of her words. “I'm opening the sanctuary to all gammas.”

“That's a lot of gammas,” I say incredulously.

“Not all will come, but I'm sending welcome packages to every gamma in Terra in case they are a scent match with any available pack.” She shifts uncomfortably, a sign she's aware of the implications. Gammas outnumber omegas, and recent

discoveries show they can ascend to omega status if matched perfectly with an alpha scent or bonded pack.

“So it’s become normal,” I respond nonchalantly. I’m not offended at all by the gamma presence. In fact, there are far more packs than omegas. If gammas can find a scent match, then more omegas can exist on their own terms.

“And I’ve arranged for you to live near a gamma named Violet. She’ll be in the apartment across from yours,” she says with a smirk, as if she scored a point in some game.

I stand, feeling a mix of nerves and excitement. “I’ll go get my keys now,” I announce, ready to embark on this new chapter.

As I reach the door, she calls out, “Oh, and Seraphina.”

I pause, almost out the door, and turn back to her.

“Be careful. The world has changed.”

Her words carry an ominous tone, one I brush off as I step out of her office. A year of freedom awaits me, defined on my terms, yet a small voice in my head cautions me to be wary, especially at these galas. The last thing I need is to fall for some alpha prince and his merry pack of horny men.

## CHAPTER 2

# *Seraphina*

ONE YEAR later

“CUPID SEEMS MORE INTERESTED IN HIS COFFEE WITH A SPLASH of whiskey than in aiming his arrows at my round behind,” I joke, giving my friend Violet a playful wink. She cackles from her corner in the bakery where we work. “Don’t laugh at me. I don’t need that kind of trauma in my life—well, any more than I’m already dealing with.”

Violet attempts to clear her throat, but it erupts into a comical coughing fit, likely karma for her earlier alpha-centric advice.

Before she can continue her pro-alpha spiel, I cut her off. “No, thank you, Vee.” I shake my head, my thick blond hair falling across my face.

Sawyer, who wisely stayed quiet during Violet’s rant about alphas, finally breaks her silence, rustling her newspaper and setting it down on the counter. “You know—”

“Uh-uh,” I interject, slapping the counter and making them both cackle at me. “No, you don’t get to talk. You found a pack by accident. Keep your happily knotted ass over there.”

“Have you ever had your ass knotted?” Sawyer asks, nearly sending Violet into hysterics. Seriously, she’s cackling like a hyena over there.

Do hyenas even cackle?

Doesn’t matter. “If I wanted an alpha,” I start, nervously wiping down the counter for the twentieth time, “I wouldn’t



have fought for my freedom from a pack.”

“And look at you,” Violet chimes in, dropping her feet to the floor and resting her chin in her hand. “You’re miserable.”

“You need to get laid,” Sawyer suggests, unfolding her paper and pushing her glasses up. “You’re getting cranky.”

“I am not cranky,” I protest, tossing the rag into the bin beside the door to the back of the bakery.

Thursdays always look the same here, and while I usually love it, today, my two closest friends are on my case about finding a pack. Why? Oh, just this pesky little thing called a heat.

“You’re in denial,” Sayer adds, scrunching up her nose. “And you stink.”

“It’s rude to tell people they stink,” I retort, then casually sniff my armpits. After all, if your bestie says you stink, then the odds are pretty high that you actually do.

I only catch the faint scent of brown sugar on myself, thanks to the scent dampeners I sprayed on before leaving this morning. Working in a bakery is strategic for me—it lets me blend in, in more ways than one.

I glance up just in time to catch Violet giving me a knowing side-eye. Her dark gaze pierces through me, fully aware of my little sniff test. She shakes her head, her coiled ringlets bouncing around as she leans back.

“You’re in PHS,” she declares sassily.

“Preheat syndrome,” Sawyer adds absentmindedly before slamming the newspaper on the table and growling at it. “Can you believe these old men are still fighting omega rights? How can they even debate basic rights?”

“Not everyone sees it as fundamental to, I don’t know, have choices,” I mutter, leaning over the counter and resting my head in my hands. Thursdays are the slowest days, and I fail miserably at stifling a yawn.

The argument is always the same. Should omegas—and now gammas—have rights? Gammas, like Violet and Sawyer,

don't enter heat until they find a scent match. Sawyer found hers, but Violet is still looking, and she accepted the sanctuary's stance on scent matching. For her, it is beneficial if she wants a pack.

As for me? I'm an omega who will go into heat with or without a pack, and there's a limit to how many pills and potions I can take before my hormones revolt and thrust me into a full-blown heat.

"Well, you're the one who made waves," Sawyer reminds me. "Ms. No Pack, preferring to live in peace with her cats."

"You say it like it's a bad thing," I pout, my eyes drifting toward one of Violet's freshly made chocolate croissants. "That's definitely lunch material," I muse, mostly to myself.

"No one is saying it's a bad thing," Violet assures me, though her tone lacks conviction.

"I would never," Sawyer chimes in, pushing her glasses up. "But we are in unfamiliar territory. You can't just ask a random pack to help you through a heat. They might bite and bond you."

I wrinkle my nose at her, a snarky retort ready on my lips, but we're interrupted by the bell jingling over the door, bringing in a gust of cold winter air.

Violet springs into action. Her smile is as wide as a stadium announcer's. "Hello!" She greets the newcomer with her usual exuberance. "Welcome to Knotty Things, where indulging in every craving is okay."

Pushing off the counter, I face our new customer, and oh my. If I hadn't been popping scent suppressants like they are candy, my signature brown sugar aroma would fill the air right now, but I'm an omega who keeps her cool—mostly.

The man is easily over six feet tall, clad in worn board shorts and sneakers. His white shirt, riddled with holes, barely contains the muscles beneath. Yep, my omega senses purr with pleasure.

However, it's his piercing blue eyes that truly grab me. They seem to see right through me, and he looks... irritated.

“You’re an omega, and they may as well be,” he sneers, speaking more to me than Sawyer and Violet.

“Was it the scent or curves that gave it away?” I retort. Despite the scent dampeners, I know I’m throwing out some sweet sugar vibes. I didn’t fight for my independence from the council and argue that we could survive without a pack just to let some alpha waltz in here with his judgments.

His frown deepens, his glare shifting between the three of us. What an absolute jerk.

Violet shoots me a glance, her hazel eyes twinkling with amusement. Neither of us are known for our filter, especially not today. After waking up late and opening the bakery just an hour ago, our patience is running on fumes.

“Where’s Elenora?” The man’s frown deepens as he inquires about our boss, an alpha lady who’s even more badass than us. He crosses his arms, glaring. I’m used to this. It’s not the first time someone’s surprised to find an omega and a gamma running the shop instead of being pampered princesses in a nest.

“Well...” I draw out the word, mirroring his standoffish vibe. Despite his golden retriever looks, he’s all grumpy bear energy, and I’m not here for it. “She’s probably recovering from tending to her omega and pack. One of them went into heat, so guess what? You’re stuck with us. What can we do for you?” My tone edges into snarky territory.

No matter how handsome he is, I peg him as one of those alphas who thinks omegas should be barefoot, pregnant, and constantly... well, you know. Typical alpha breeding kink.

He just stands there silently, so Sawyer breaks the tension. “I’ll take a large apple crisp and a double shot of espresso, please. Got a day full of mind-numbing meetings ahead.”

I hum and turn to prepare her order, glancing back at the alpha, who still looks shell-shocked at the door. He’s like a statue, just glaring. It’s unnerving me a bit, but whatever. They usually leave when they see an unbonded omega behind the counter. Even more, with the options of gammas transitioning,

they are getting the same treatment. This one, though, seems frozen in place.

The tension thickens, and a palpable friction hangs in the air.

Sawyer, oblivious to the strain, rambles on. “These council meetings are like watching paint dry. Absolutely torturous.”

“I’d rather avoid both, thanks,” Violet comments, nibbling on the breakfast sandwich I made her. “Anything interesting on the agenda today?” she asks, skimming through a magazine.

Sawyer grunts. “They are making some headway with omega and gamma rights. The sanctuary’s enrollment spiked nearly fifty percent with the new dean. Things are changing, slowly but surely.”

We’re all aware of the ongoing debate about omegas. Traditionally, we’re expected to pack up our lives and head off to the academy at the first hint of our perfume. It seemed logical initially, given that our pheromones can drive an alpha wild. Either way, being shipped off to a new home, leaving everything behind, was never an appealing prospect for most omegas. Thankfully, it’s optional now, just like college for everyone else, and that’s how it should be.

“Which is where you ladies should be,” the alpha interjects, just as I finish putting the lid on Sawyer’s coffee. His comment ignites a spark of irritation within me.

Some alphas really should stick to being seen and not heard.

Ignoring him, Sawyer smiles at me. “Chocolate croissant to go, please. I sense a heat coming on.” She then turns to the man, who’s still glaring. “Sir,” she says in her most diplomatic tone, “have you been living under a rock for the past year?”

Finally, he shifts his attention to Sawyer, blinking as if he’s noticing her for the first time. “Yes,” he replies, sounding infuriatingly confident. “I have.”

“Well, sir,” I say, drawing out the word since I don’t know his name, and I’m not sure I want to.

He cuts me off in typical alpha fashion. “Maximillian Harrington,” he announces smugly, as if his name should mean something to me.

It doesn’t.

However, Sawyer’s cheeks turn a bright shade of red. “Harrington? Why does that sound familiar?”

Max simply tilts his head, smirking pompously as if expecting recognition. I shoot Sawyer a glance, warning her that we might be dealing with more than just a difficult customer.

“Max,” I quip, glancing toward Violet, who seems entirely disinterested in the unfolding drama, “you’ve been in a hole, have you?” I give him a once-over. “Looks like it.”

“Oh, now I remember,” Sawyer suddenly pipes up, standing and gathering her things in a rush. Dropping a twenty on the counter, she heads for the door. Pausing, she glances back. “Good luck with that.” Her eyes flicker to the alpha before she quickly exits into the crisp late morning.

Turning back to the alpha, I start, “So, Max—”

“It’s Maximillian,” he interjects sharply.

“Sure thing, Maximillian,” I retort, the sarcasm in my voice unmistakable. “What dragged you out of your hidey-hole?”

He exhales a sigh of exasperation, crossing his arms and grinding his jaw. His nostrils flare, possibly trying to catch my scent, which he won’t easily detect amidst the bakery’s aromas. “I have a meeting with Elenora,” he finally says.

“That’s tough, but when an omega’s in heat, you know the drill.” I shrug nonchalantly. It’s common knowledge that during a heat, a pack is untouchable, sequestered away. Ironically, it’s one of the few laws I actually agree with.

A timer dings, and Violet mutters under her breath. She stands, her boots clanking against the floor, and turns off the timer. Casting a glance from me to our alpha guest, she saunters past him and ducks behind the counter to the back. I

can't help feeling a bit abandoned, left to deal with an alpha sporting a man bun who seems utterly out of his element.

Trying to be somewhat accommodating, I offer, "I'll leave a message for Elenora to contact you, but her omega just went into heat last night, so it'll be at least a week before she's available."

He finally softens, perhaps realizing his earlier demeanor was less than charming. Taking several long strides, he approaches the counter. He towers over me, every inch the bear—large and imposing.

"I'd appreciate that, thank you," he manages to say, though the words seem to cost him.

"That was difficult for you, wasn't it?" I say, turning to pour him a cup of coffee. "On the house for your troubles."

"I've spent the last three years on an expedition, uncovering the oldest civilization in the southernmost desolate areas of Terra," he states, bypassing my comment. Instead of answering, he opts to talk about himself.

"Listen, Max," I begin, lightly patting his chest across the counter—a slight miscalculation. This man is solid, clearly more than just an academic. "It's impressive, sure, but you also smell like you've been deep in the forest, not just digging up artifacts."

His eyes flash, a hint of danger lurking there, and I can't help but find it intriguing. There's something exhilarating about this back-and-forth, though I suspect I might regret it.

"Oh, that must be it," I murmur to myself.

"What?" he asks, his interest piqued. "What's on your mind?"

I can't resist. "Well, considering the name of this shop, Knotty Things, one might mistake it for a sex shop. If that's what you're looking for, it's just five doors down. They have some interesting gadgets, or so I hear."

To my surprise, he shifts from looking dangerous to amused, chuckling. "I can assure you, I'm not here for that."

My meeting with Elenora was genuine.”

Leaning in, I tease him further. “Feisty is my middle name, Max. So are you ready to order, or are you just here for the scintillating conversation?”

I can’t help but notice that our conversation only sparked once Sawyer and Violet left. Is it wrong to think this stranger reserved his charm just for me? Ah, probably.

He lifts his head, his scent tinged with the earthiness of dirt and grime, masking what I imagine is his natural aroma. I’m not eager to take a deep breath of it, but a part of me is undeniably curious. His face, hidden behind a full beard, conceals the subtle expressions that betray one’s emotions.

“Oh, and by the way, sugarplum, I don’t think they have one that’ll accommodate my” —he leans in close, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper— “girth.”

I force myself not to retreat despite secretly reveling in the pet name. I hum nonchalantly, feigning indifference. “They definitely come in small sizes,” I say, letting my eyes briefly flick downward suggestively, as if I’m assessing him through the counter. “And micro.” I meet his gaze again, catching what I’m sure is a suppressed grin on his face.

“Micro,” he repeats, almost choking back a laugh. “Do you even know what a knot looks like, sugarplum?”

I can’t resist smirking back. “If you think I don’t have a subscription to Knotty Hub, you’re sorely mistaken,” I whisper teasingly.

His expression shifts to something other than irritation at encountering an unbonded omega behind the counter. I almost think I hear him mutter, “I’d love to see your search history,” but his voice is too low for me to be sure.

Recognizing our conversation’s potentially hazardous turn, I clear my throat. “Is there anything else I can get for you?”

“Your name,” he asks.

“No, thank you,” I reply, glimpsing a bond mark just visible beneath his collar. He has a pack and possibly an

omega. That's disappointing.

"What?" He looks taken aback, as if I just insulted him.

I point to my name tag, which humorously reads, "No, thank you." Elenora, ever amused by my quirks, allowed me to keep this playful moniker. The "thank you" is my nod to politeness, since I originally wanted it to simply say "No."

"What do you recommend?" he finally asks, stepping back, but not without adding, "Sugarplum."

I suppress a smile. Only one person has ever given me a pet name, and he's been gone for a year, but I do have a soft spot for them. It also suggests he caught a whiff of my scent underneath the bakery's aromas.

"The almond croissant is my personal favorite," I suggest. As Max peruses the pastries, I can't help but note the shift in his demeanor—from grumpy to seemingly interested—but I might misread the situation because I don't get many chances to flirt.

"I'll take one of those and a breakfast biscuit," he decides. "Since I've been out of the loop, can you explain why omegas work outside the castle?"

"Want the CliffsNotes version?" I ask, stepping back to don some plastic gloves to prepare his order.

"Sure," he replies, a trace of amusement in his voice.

"Well, long story short, the castle was corrupt," I start, popping his sandwich into the toaster. "Omegas thought they were going there to learn about knots and mating to become the pinnacle of society," I say with a hint of drama. "Turns out, if you weren't submissive enough, they'd send you off for *reprogramming*."

"What?" he growls, leaning in closer.

"Oh yes," I affirm, a playful glint in my eye, even though what they did is anything but playful. "So now, when we come of age, we have a choice—pick a pack or live independently for the time being."



“There are unbonded omegas on the streets?” His expression is a mix of shock and conflict, his eyes locked on mine. Behind his words, I sense his discomfort with my being out in the open, which irks me a bit, especially since I suspect he’s flirting with me.

“Well, it’s a bit of both. I’m not allowed out here without suppressants. Wouldn’t want to cause a commotion.”

“So you’re unbonded?” His gaze briefly drops to my neck, searching for a mark that isn’t there.

“Yep,” I answer with a sly grin. “My plan is to die as a content old cat lady with a plastic knot.”

He blushes, which, to my surprise, is incredibly appealing. “Unbonded omegas,” he murmurs, shaking his head. “This is all...”

“Go on,” I urge, flashing a flirtatious wink. “Do tell.”

“It’s just, I’m not accustomed to this,” he admits, clearing his throat, his eyes alight with curiosity and desire. “Could we start over, perhaps?”

His question catches me off guard, and I hesitate briefly. Then, extending my hand across the counter, I say, “You can call me sugarplum.”

His laughter, deep and resonant, reminds me of rich, dark chocolate. “Max,” he responds, firmly shaking my hand before releasing it.

As the bell dings, signaling his sandwich is ready, I package it up and announce, “Seven twenty-four.”

He slides a black card across the counter toward me, his intense gaze never leaving mine as he takes his bag. There’s something undeniably comforting and warm about him, and a part of me yearns to catch his scent, though I resist the urge.

After completing the transaction in silence, I hand him back his card.

“Well, sugarplum,” he drawls, holding my gaze. “Apparently, I need a shower.” With that, he picks up his bag,

nods, and strides out of the bakery, leaving a trail of excitement and lingering desire in his wake.

“Is he gone?” Violet emerges from the back, her tone implying relief. “Good, before the lunch rush. What a peculiar alpha.”

I can’t help but keep my eyes on the door, my mind swirling with thoughts. Maximillian Harrington isn’t like any alpha I’ve encountered before. He’s a paradox—brooding yet protective, distant yet oddly engaging.

“Hey.” Violet nudges me, pulling me from my thoughts. “Earth to Seraphina, you still with us?”

“Yeah,” I reply, shaking off the daze. “Just wondering if I’ll run into him again.”

Vee chuckles. “Well, we’re open for business, and who knows, maybe he’ll decide to grace us with his charming presence again.”

I cross my arms and lean against the counter. “Charming is not the word I’d use.”

“True,” Violet agrees with a grin. “But they say opposites attract. Who knows? He might end up being your knight in not so shiny armor.”

I roll my eyes, though a hint of a smile tugs at my lips. The prospect of encountering Maximillian Harrington feels like an inevitability—whether that’s good or bad, I don’t know yet.

Violet teases, mimicking me. “Cupid’s too busy to hit me in the ass with his arrow.”

“He smells,” I retort, though we both know it’s a weak excuse. Besides, she and Sawyer just told me I stink too. I turn back to her, deciding to make myself a latte.

“But he sparred with you,” she points out playfully. “Don’t worry, he’ll be back.”

“You really think so?” I gesture vaguely around my face. “I thought my resting bitch face would have scared him off.”

“You do like him!” Violet exclaims.

I roll my eyes. “Did you miss the bond mark on his neck, Vee? He probably has an omega.”

“No,” she laments, dragging out the word. “Curse the Fates!”

“I know, right?” I agree, though a part of me recalls a certain Delta and his twin who had caught my interest once. Fate, however, had other plans. “We’ve got work to do, Vee. Go prep.”

“Hey, you coming with me on Friday?” she asks, pausing at the kitchen door. She’s planning to attend the inaugural gala at the castle, an event meant to facilitate interactions between omegas, gammas, and alphas without the usual awkwardness.

“Why are we even going?” I ask, sipping my mocha latte. “There are better ways to spend a Friday night, like watching the latest *Alpha Pack Bachelor* show.”

Violet scrunches up her nose. “I want to see what’s out there, you know, alpha-wise.” Now that Violet knows match she can transition with the right scent, her interest in all things omega has tripled. I don’t blame her curiosity, I just wish she used more caution. Unlike her, I was born an omega and have seen firsthand how it broke my sister. I want no part of it.

“I don’t want to go alone,” she implores with puppy dog eyes.

As the doorbell jingles again, signaling another customer, I relent. “Fine, but I’m not dressing up.”

“You can wear your work clothes for all I care. I’m just happy you’ll be there,” Violet says, her smile genuine.

Despite my reluctance, the gala intrigues a small part of me. Maybe it won’t be as bad as I fear, and there’s always the chance I’ll run into Maximillian Harrington again.

Oh boy, what am I getting myself into?

## CHAPTER 3

# *Seraphina*

**MOST OMEGAS** in the castle sanctuary pour their hearts and creativity into meticulously planning their bonding ceremonies. Dorm room shelves are full of scrapbooks filled with fabric swatches, carefully selected color palettes, and dream dresses. Each page is a canvas of hope and aspiration, destined for the inevitable news broadcast covering our ceremonies.

Not the biting and knotting portion, just the dedication to each other that is more formal than necessary. I guess ever one wants in on the gossip because omegas make up a small portion of our society.

Some omegas take it even further, not just selecting one dress, but multiple. I don't know why. I've just never been that bitch. I don't need a different dress for every hour.

For me, the process was an entire class, an eight-year endeavor I had to endure during my time there, and I just barely managed to pass that class. Not that they would ever fail me, that would be unheard of, but the idea is that any future pack considering me would receive my neatly packed assortment of grades and that darn scrapbook.

Why, you ask? Well, it's so my future pack could go on a shopping spree, buying all the materials listed in that scrapbook. Mine probably won't surprise anyone who knows me—it's full of cats.

As my keys jingle in the door to my apartment, I hear the first of my four babies, Minnow, calling for me to feed him.

He's the youngest and most vocal of them all. He also has separation anxiety, so the eight hours I'm at the bakery is a very long time for him.

As the door creaks open, his little orange head peeks through to stare up at me, and he releases the sweetest little meow just before he climbs up my leg with his devilish claws until I grab hold of him. He's like a little baby, clawing my neck and digging in to settle in. He'll stay like this for the rest of the night.

Kicking the door closed, I toss my keys down and snuggle into his fur as his purring soothes me.

Will I ever admit that his little purr only soothes me because it reminds me of an alpha? No, and I'll die on that hill. Minnow doesn't talk back, and it doesn't count in meows. He also doesn't bark at me and tell me what to do with my life, his loyalty to me is unending.

I flip on the lights in my studio apartment above the bakery, and another little head peeks around the corner where the pantry is. Tuna stares at me as though I'm the one intruding in her space before she lets out an indignant yowl. Tuna and Minnow are the best of friends, just like Violet and me, and their antics never fail to brighten up my day.

"I know what you're up to, kitty, so don't you talk back to me," I sass as I step into the kitchen. Sure enough, the bag of treats she tried to chew open is on the floor. She sits beside the bag, licking her white and gray fur as though she doesn't have a care in the world. Tuna has the personality of a pampered princess, and when she doesn't get what she wants, she takes it.

Shaking my head, I set Minnow on the island, reach for the treats, and shake the bag. Only Minnow and Tuna will come out for them. Finley is a scaredy cat, and Sushi is far too pretentious to come when called. Oh no, I'll have to bring it to her. Tossing treats to each, I shrug off my coat and throw it on my little couch.

My entire apartment is pretty much one room with a loft that overlooks the living space, which isn't that large. The

apartment used to belong to Sawyer. While I took this apartment, Vee took the one across the hall, only after Sawyer's mates beefed up security and rebuilt the deathtrap staircase leading to the apartments.

I mounted a large television on the left wall, and my little seating area sits opposite it. There's a bathroom to the right and a small table outside of it. Steps lead up to the loft area above, right beside the closet at the entryway. Sawyer said she rarely ever used it because the steps were too steep. I don't mind it, not really, and honestly, I like how the entire place is set up. I almost wish I took the apartment across the hall, but that one had no scents to it, and Vee needed that more than I did.

As I take the steep steps to the loft, I see green eyes peering at me. Sushi lounges on my bed. I toss her a treat that she looks at with displeasure before she sneers at it. She won't eat it until I turn away, but that's fine by me because this bra needs to go.

Knowing Finley, my tuxedo kitty, will come out when it suits him, I fling the treats on the bed and plop down on the mattress.

This is my little nest. It really isn't much, but it's all mine—not the castle's or one a pack made for me. Mine.

The queen-sized bed had to be lifted over the railing, but that's just fine because Sawyer made her mates do it for me. The frame sits low to the ground, and only the mattress lies on top. The bed itself is about the same height as a couch, which is perfect for my short stature, but my favorite parts are the colors and blankets.

Behind the bed are gauzy curtains in white and gray that span the length of the small room. At the head of the bed, I have six normal pillows with cream-colored pillowcases. The sheets are the same color in a soft, silky fabric, but it isn't silk because, well, fuck silk. I have no idea why I hate it so much, only that I do.

My favorite pieces are the dozens of white and sage green pillows scattered everywhere and matching fuzzy blankets that

spill across the bed onto the floor. I'm a slut for blankets, but then again, I can't name an omega who isn't a slut for blankets. I even have a cream heated blanket that is quite literally the best invention I have ever experienced in the entirety of this world. No lie. It's a gift to all of us, and I think every single person alive should have a heated blanket.

However, the reason I have that heated blanket is to replace an alpha. My strict diet of no packs means that I need that blanket, along with the body pillows I sleep with and Minnow, who purrs all night long, keeping me asleep.

Peeling off my shirt, bra, and my leggings, I flop back on my mattress. Violet will head over any minute now, as she does every day after work. One would think we'd get sick of each other, but we don't, even though many omegas have an issue with another omega in their space. I don't, but she does. It's why she comes here, and I don't go there. I get it. It's more than just her omega potential though. Trauma messes a person up, and Violet never had a space to call her own. I have, and that's alright with me.

I can't seem to bring myself to roll off the bed, though, not when Max's face flashes behind my closed eyes. He's the first alpha who has truly interested me. That bastard. How dare he intrude on my solitary thoughts with his sparkling eyes and gruff, grumpy exterior? All those muscles and sex appeal.

"No!" I shout and shoot up as though the bed burned me. Grumbling, I grab my comfy sweats off the floor and a hoodie. "I will not think about him." Or any other man for that matter. Like the twins...

Grumbling to myself, I make my way down the steps just as the front door opens and slams against the far wall.

"I got bubbly," Vee shouts as she slams the door closed. Thank the Fates. Violet, I've learned, has two levels—quiet or loud. There is no in-between, which is a normal level for the rest of us. She is also obsessed with champagne, but it has low, and I do mean low, alcohol content. Omegas can't hold their liquor. As far as gammas, Violet holds her own, but only just slightly better than I can.

As I round the steps, I see Vee and her bright smile. Her hair is down, jet-black ringlets springing away from her face as though they are angry at her for restraining them all day. Her hazel eyes glitter with excitement against her light brown skin. Wearing similar sweats and a T-shirt, she looks just as cozy as me.

However, it's the scrapbook in her arms that has me squinting at her. "What are you doing with that?" I grab the bottle from her and enter the tiny kitchen where I grab a towel to pop open the top.

"Oh, this?" she taunts as she slides onto the stool at the counter. "The new dean gave it to me." She blushes as she sets the scrapbook on the counter. "I was hoping you'd help me."

I pop the cork first as I think through my reply. Vee became my friend by proximity, but it's remarkable how easily she became an integral part of our tight-knit group. Sometimes when someone enters a friend group, they don't always mesh, but it was never like that with Violet. She fit as though she always belonged with the rest of us.

We are a mishmash of puzzle pieces, placed together by designation and circumstances out of our control. Violet is a gamma, and she's had to navigate a world that always saw her as the bottom of the totem pole. It's so much more that her never getting to do things the rest of us did, like make the scrapbook I loathe. Gammas aren't often seen as individuals, but as the maids of our society, so I swallow my pride, grab two glasses, and fill them to the brim. Saying nothing, I walk over to the closet, Violet's eyes burning through me as I tug out the tote on the floor. I look over at her as I set it on the carpet.

First things first, I push up my sleeves, then bend over and put my long blond hair in a top knot.

"Oh, this must be serious if you're putting your hair up," she murmurs, a teasing smile dancing on her lips.

I stand there with my hands on my hips, looking at my friend. "Inside this tote, you'll find everything you need to fill



that scrapbook,” I inform her, observing as excitement lights up her face. “Which one did the new dean give you?”

Violet turns in her seat, her eyes fixated on the tote. “She gave me the guide. I thought the empty one might be a bit overwhelming.”

“It can be. That guide doesn’t have a lot of direction,” I remark, finding a spot to sit on the plush hallway carpet. “Can you grab the bubbly? We are going to need it,” I request as I remove the lid to the tote.

Violet rushes over, balancing glasses of bubbly in one hand and her scrapbook under her arm. I take the glass she hands me and place it next to the tote’s lid, which serves as a makeshift tabletop. Vee’s eyes scan the tote, spotting my scrapbook on top. “Mind if I take a look?”

“Go ahead, but it’s not your typical scrapbook,” I caution her, all while Minnow nestles into my lap, purring contentedly.

With a curious look on her face, Violet retrieves my scrapbook as if it were a precious artifact. As she opens it, I reach for the little boxes filled with fabric.

The dean sent this tote to me upon my departure, saying that one day I might want to create a scrapbook of my own. I never planned to, but as I run my fingers along the box’s edge, aware of its contents, something inside me shifts. I spent eight years denying my true nature, suppressing who I really am, yet all it took was one encounter with an alpha, one I don’t even particularly like apart from the fact that his muscles are incredibly tempting, to make me consider making a scrapbook.

I cringe as I open the box, and Violet bursts into laughter. “Seraphina, all of these are cats cut out of fabric!” She runs her fingers over one of the cat shapes, her eyes twinkling with amusement. I had known exactly what I was doing when I put those together.

“Yep,” I confirm and reach for the scrapbook beside me. “I didn’t want to follow a single instruction.”

“Can I ask you something?” Violet pulls a magazine from the tote, filled with images of bonding ceremony dresses.

“Of course,” I reply, though a sense of apprehension lingers. Personal questions have a way of making me feel exposed, which is something I’d rather avoid, especially on a good day.

“Why do you despise it?” She flips a box open, her gaze averted. “Being an omega, I mean.”

I understand what she’s getting at.

“My sister,” I begin, my voice wavering slightly as I extract a bundle of fabric samples, still bound by the untouched paper. I tear it off like I’m ripping off a bandage, causing numerous fabric samples to scatter between us. Without waiting for her to inquire further, I plunge into my explanation. “Dorothea embodies the stereotypical mean girl omega.”

Violet tilts her head, genuine curiosity in her eyes. “Isn’t that true for most of them?”

“Some, yeah,” I reply, mindful of the fact that she wouldn’t have taken this class since she grew up as a gamma. “Alphas and mages make up about the same low percentage in society. I think it’s like ten or below each. Betas make up the most now that they learned they can produce offspring with each other.” My fingers glide over a sage green fabric sample, appreciating its perfect texture and color, before I set it aside.

“That doesn’t tell me about the mean girls,” she remarks, reaching back into the tote for scissors to cut out a picture from her page.

“I’m getting there,” I assure her with a faint smile. “Deltas and gammas share a similar percentage of the population. Don’t ask me for exact numbers, because I have no idea. I think it’s more than alphas and mages. Anyways, all of this makes omegas rare. When they perfume, it’s exciting, new, and celebrated.”

“It goes to their heads,” she chimes in, her voice filled with understanding. “I get it.”

I nod, appreciating her insight. It’s much more complicated than a simple division of roles. Some omegas can be truly

awful, and that's why I've dreaded that gala I managed to avoid the entire year. "My sister was one of those omegas. She had a mean streak a mile wide." I sigh as I pick up another square in the perfect shade of cream and set it aside.

"Well, they aren't very humble. Any of them." Violet's eyes narrow in thought as she flips through her magazine. After a moment of silent contemplation, she holds up a picture of a slinky black lace dress, its fabric hugging every curve with long slits on either side. "What do you think of this?"

"I think it would look amazing against your skin tone," I tell her, my excitement mirroring hers, but it isn't real, because just sitting here going through fabric reminds me of Thea all over again. Needing to talk it out, I continue, "When Thea presented as an omega, she packed her bags before our parents could even talk her out of it."

Vee looks up, sadness in her eyes. "She wasn't normal when I spent time with her," she admits, reminding me of the time they were both held captive. Violet probably knows Thea better than I do now. She doesn't often discuss her time as a captive, and I'll never push her to do so. "She always seemed a little fractured. Her eyes had a wild look."

"I'm sorry if she was ever mean to you." I apologize on my sister's behalf because I know how cruel she can be.

Violet shrugs and goes back to cutting out her picture without saying anything.

We sit in silence for a while, sorting through fabrics, pictures, and even celebrity nests. We make little piles of everything that catches our eye. Minnow doesn't move from my lap, peacefully asleep. The only time we get up is to refill our glasses. Well, Violet gets up because Minnow yowls in protest when I move.

"I grew up two miles from here." Violet breaks the silence. "Foster homes, abuse, and starvation were my norm until I decided to take life by the balls and become a stripper. I loved dancing, but when I got out of the labs, I couldn't go back."

My heart aches for her, imagining the hardships she's endured. "I'm so sorry," I whisper, struggling to comprehend the difficulties she faced. Compared to Violet, I lived a sheltered life.

"It's different to have others look at me like I deserve to exist. It's all so fascinating," she says, glancing at me from beneath thick black lashes. "It's so different. Before, I had to fight just to eat, and now? Now I get to go to galas and balls and wear pretty clothing, and I'm..." She pauses, setting the magazine aside. "I'm wanted."

Swallowing any lingering annoyance I may have about being an omega, I reach out and gently touch her knee. Omegas may be touchy, but not when it comes to other omegas offering comfort.

"Listen, Friday after I get back from visiting Thea, let me take you shopping," I say with a bright smile. I'm determined to help her embrace this new life.

Violet looks up at me with wide eyes and nods slowly. "You'd do that for me?" There's so much hope in her voice, I feel guilty that I haven't gone to any of her monthly galas yet.

I nod firmly. "Hell yeah, I will," I reply, trying not to think too much about the fact that I'm suggesting something so omega-like in public. I release an uncomfortable laugh that Violet politely ignores.

We finish, and Violet stretches her arms and lets out a big yawn before standing up to head back to her apartment. "Thanks for tonight," she says with a soft smile and gives me a quick side hug. It's a brief embrace, but it leaves a warm feeling on my skin, reminding me of how great it is to have someone like Violet as a friend.

As I watch her go, a dull throb settles in my chest. Omegas are the rarest of the designations and, in my opinion, we get the short stick as well. Some days, it feels like I'm trying to walk through water while keeping my head above the surface. I often feel like I'm drowning in my own thoughts. Being an omega isn't all glamor and glitz. There are days when I just want to curl up and hide from the world, when the weight of it

all feels suffocating, but then, there are days like this, when I get to hang out with a friend who wants the whole omega experience. We can openly chat about our struggles and fears, making us feel less alone. Moments like these make it all worth it.

While gathering the fabric and paper scraps, I come across a picture of my sister stuffed inside my old scrapbook. She's warm and smiling, a stark contrast to the cold, ruthless woman she became. I wonder if having someone to talk to, someone who understood her, could have changed her path.

It's a sobering thought, one that gives me hope. Maybe I can be that person for Violet, helping her navigate all things omega and preventing her from heading down a dark path.

Deep in thought, I tuck the picture away as Minnow stirs and jumps off my lap. It's time for bed, and one of my favorite activities awaits—dreaming. Although I know whose face will fill my dreams as soon as my eyes close.

## CHAPTER 4

# *Seraphina*

AS I GROW OLDER, I find myself revisiting the cherished memories of my childhood. Back then, my brother, Alexander, and sister, Thea, were my closest companions. We inhabited the untamed wilderness of northeast Terra, where playmates were a rarity, but for me, my siblings provided all the company I ever needed. Regrettably, Thea couldn't say the same.

Alexander and I are twins, our bond running deep. Thea, our elder sister by a few years, possessed a different spirit. Her penchant for mischief was legendary, constantly daring us into reckless escapades that left our parents wringing their hands in worry.

“Hey, Seraphina, see that tree over there? I dare you to climb it,” she once challenged me. Without a second thought, I ascended the tree. Disaster struck when I plummeted to the ground, fracturing my arm as I desperately tried to break my fall. Mama had to summon the healer, who expertly reset my arm, but the pain lingered, and the memory of the ground rushing up to meet me haunted my dreams.

“Lex, the swamp is teeming with creatures sporting razor-sharp teeth, and I lost my favorite bracelet. Can you retrieve it for me?” Thea's request sent Lex on a perilous journey into the swamp, where he faced the wrath of a vicious swamp lizard that bit him. It resulted in a week-long ordeal of treatment by the healer, battling a nasty infection.

My recollections of those days don't paint Thea in the best light. We always had a hunch that she would perfume early,

which she did. She possessed an innate desire to push boundaries, challenge limits, and test the patience of everyone around her. Despite the hard lessons Lex and I learned from her reckless antics, it did little to curb her daring spirit.

My love for Dorothea is complex and unique to the bond of siblings. It is a love that persisted despite her being a troublemaker. Love didn't necessitate liking or condoning her actions, but it remained steadfast regardless of her choices. That didn't mean I liked her.

Quite the opposite.

When we received the heartbreaking news of her passing, I found it hard to admit that I felt a sense of relief, secretly fearing that it would brand me as heartless, but the truth was undeniable. Her departure seemed to lift the weight of the world from my shoulders. Does that make me a terrible person?

When I experienced my first perfume, the last thing on my mind was leaving home. The mere thought of joining the same sanctuary that claimed my sister's life filled me with dread. It wasn't even a consideration. My plan was to remain with my brother and embrace the life of an omega in hiding, perhaps evolving into the eccentric old cat lady I whimsically envisioned, but life has a way of throwing curveballs when you least expect them. Curiosity about her life inside the walls of the castle welled up inside me.

Who really was Dorothea? I had to know.

More than that, I had to know who killed her, and I needed to meet her mate, the one who I already considered a sibling. He had to be shattered by her loss, and his pack's very survival hung in the balance. It is this insatiable curiosity that ultimately compelled me to leave behind the safety of our home and embark on a journey into the unknown.

Leaving my brother behind, the one who somehow defied all expectations and became an alpha, was a decision that still weighs heavily on my heart. We had all assumed he would follow in my footsteps as an omega. The plan was to attend the sanctuary together.

I had a choice to make, and the choice to leave was one I agonized over perhaps more than any other in my life. That's why I find myself, even now, parked in my car with the heater blasting my face, staring at the imposing mental institution that houses my sister, Thea.

Yeah, she never died. Someone kidnapped her.

She may not have physically perished, but she has succumbed in every way that truly matters. I want to blame the madman who subjected her to his experiments, to say that he tortured and broke her beyond any hope of repair, but as I've learned, the truth is far darker.

Dorothea's broken soul originated at birth. Yes, someone shot her all those years ago, and another madman indeed revived her, but he didn't stop there. He manipulated her, inundating her with pheromones until he made her compliant and coerced her into working for him, recruiting gammas and omegas for his horrifying experiments. When the news first broke about her crimes, it left me stunned, struggling to process the revelations. It's been almost a year since those shocking events, and her crimes keep emerging like hidden scars resurfacing.

Every Friday, I drive to this prison in my trusty, albeit slightly battered, pale pink Volkswagen Beetle. Sin, the man she had convinced was her mate, stopped visiting long ago. His pack and their mate, Sawyer, pursued their own happiness and distanced themselves from Thea. I don't blame them one bit.

What I blame myself for is sitting in this car, staring at the imposing mental institution, and not wanting to go inside. I feel like an awful person for not wanting to see my sister and hear about her and all the terrible things she did. Now that it's all out in the open, she can't stop bragging. She's proud of her actions, and every time I hear her words, a piece of my soul dies inside.

A gentle knock on my window interrupts my thoughts, and I blink to see Lex wearing that familiar look he gives me every Friday. It's a gaze filled with pity and understanding because



he feels the same way I do. Maybe it's the unspoken connection of twin telepathy, or perhaps it's just a logical understanding that no one can save Thea.

Swallowing down the bitterness in my throat, I turn off the engine and open the car door, stepping out into the chilly winter Terra air. Lex leans casually against my car with his head tilted back, his eyes closed, as he inhales the crisp air. We might look like polar opposites—me a short, curvy omega, and him a tall, muscular alpha—but deep down, he's still my brother, my rock, my anchor, and my confidant in this strange world.

“It tastes like snow,” he whispers. I slam the car door shut and join him, but I don't close my eyes. Instead, my gaze lingers on Lex. He's the baby, born only a few short minutes after me, but I still hold it over his head. His red, cropped hair hides under a beanie, and his thick ginger beard is partially concealed by a checkered scarf. The man knows how to style himself, always looking put together, but he's also without a pack, at least for now, and that's by choice.

I lean into him, resting my head on Lex's shoulder. His arm wraps around me, and he presses a soft kiss to my forehead. I inhale his scent, a comforting blend of sweet caramel and something uniquely him, and close my eyes, savoring this moment with my brother, my twin.

“How much longer do you want to keep torturing yourself, Seraphina?” he whispers, hugging me tightly.

Sighing, I open my eyes and stare at the institution. It's more extensive than you'd ever imagine, resembling an old school building with its weathered brick façade and formidable entrance. However, the bars on the windows and the haunting screams emanating from within indicate that it's far from being a place of learning. It's an institution for those of us who have lost our minds in this harsh world, for those whose mental illnesses are beyond the healer's reach, and betas who remain unhealed. Inside its grim walls, it houses deltas without anchors, alphas driven by their mindless need to rut, omegas like Thea, and betas who aspire to be more than nulls.

“I don’t know,” I whisper to Lex, stepping away from him, not wanting to lean on his strength more than necessary. I glare at the imposing building as if it has personally threatened my well-being, which, in a sense, it has. The thought of what awaits me inside fills me with dread and apprehension. “Let’s get this over with,” I grumble, mustering up the courage to take two steps toward the building. My voice may falter, but there’s determination burning within me, no matter how fragile it may seem.

Lex catches up with me in a single stride, easily matching my pace despite our height differences. His voice carries a note of concern as he says, “I spoke with the doctor yesterday.”

I snort softly, a mixture of frustration and cynicism. “They could have called me.”

“You know they won’t,” he replies gently. As the alpha sibling, the medical staff will always defer to him despite me being the next of kin, or rather, the oldest. “They said she’s spiraling even more. They have to allow her heat to pass.”

I stop abruptly and turn to face my brother, my expression a mix of disbelief and anger. “They can’t do that.”

“That’s what I said.” His blue-gray eyes, mirrors of my own, glance down at me and then back at the institution. “The doctors tied my hands when they called our mom and dads. Based on the evidence, I said we’d see how she is and decide.”

“Suppressing her heat will only make her worse,” I remark, my voice filled with conviction. I link my elbow with Lex’s, and we walk toward the institution’s entrance in heavy silence.

My fingers tremble as I press the call button to notify them of our arrival, and then I wave at the small camera. As the door buzzes, Lex grips it and ushers me inside.

A warm blast of heat slaps me in the face as I step indoors.

“Good morning, miss,” the large security guard greets us, a delta dressed in black fatigues. “If you could just step through the detector, please.”

I glance at the imposing rectangle before me and suppress a shudder. I loathe it. The device doesn't just check for weapons, it also assesses a visitor's proximity to illness, mental or otherwise—a mage-designed contraption. It will inform the guard if I'm nearing a heat, which could potentially send the alphas into a frenzy, and it can detect if Lex is close to rut. More than that, it can indicate if I'm mentally impaired in any way.

Swallowing hard, I step into the box, obediently following the instructions. My hands hover above my head as the sensors whirl. Being inside this confined space feels precarious, and I hold my breath in anticipation. When it buzzes green, I step out, exhaling a sigh of relief.

“Go ahead and check in at the desk,” the guard directs, his tone respectful as he addresses Lex.

Feeling a little more at ease, I make my way to the receptionist's desk and sign in. The small beta behind the glass offers me a warm smile. Most of the staff here are betas, a safer choice given their lack of pheromone emissions, general levelheadedness, and reduced hormonal fluctuations.

Am I a bit jealous? Yes, indeed.

“Good morning, Seraphina!” the friendly beta greets me.

I can't quite recall her name, as it lingers at the edge of my memory. Thankfully, Lex steps up behind me. “Hello there, Melody. You look incredible today,” he says, winking.

“Ever the flirt, Alexander,” she replies, blushing. “All clear, you two can go in now. Thea is actually in the craft room today.”

Nervousness churns in my belly. The last thing my sister needs is access to scissors or even a needle. Pushing my worry aside, I force a smile and whisper, “Thanks.”

As soon as we're out of earshot, Lex moves ahead, muttering, “I guarantee she's up to something.”

“Agreed.” There's a reason the craft room is usually off-limits to Thea. She's truly insane in every sense of the word.

The halls are lined with yellow tiles and peeling paint, but right now, I hardly notice any of that as I navigate the first floor. The cafeteria lies straight ahead, and all the classes and the library are on this level. The patients sleep on the second floor, and the lower level houses the doctors' offices, while all the activity rooms are in the center of the ground floor.

The craft room is just across from the library down the hall. Lex and I move in silence, his longer legs covering more ground. He glances back at me, and I can see the concern in his eyes, not wanting to leave me behind.

"Go," I tell him, and he rushes around the corner. I slow my pace, uncertain what awaits us and whether I even want to find out. As I round the corner, and the absence of screams greets me, but it doesn't bring relief, only heightened apprehension.

Pushing open the door to the craft room, I step inside. Yarn, needles, and long tables are scattered all around. Lex eases into a chair beside Thea, who gazes at him with a new, unsettling expression. I've never seen her look at him like that.

*Happy.*

Swallowing my unease, I walk over and sit across from her. She looks... different. She colored her hair a jeweled purple streaked with black, making her pale face stand out and her freckles pop against the uncharacteristic purple hue. There are faint dark circles under her eyes, but her blue eyes sparkle with clarity as she turns to me.

"Seraphina!" she exclaims, jumping up and abandoning her sewing circle to envelop me in a hug. Her usual scent of spun sugar seems devoid of any toxins, almost like the Thea we grew up with. "You smell amazing." She buries her head in my neck, and I glance over at Lex, who clenches his jaw.

We all carry scents reminiscent of sugar. Thea smells like spun sugar, Lex smells like caramel, and I smell like brown sugar.

Pulling back from the embrace, I look down at my sister. In just one week, she put on a few pounds, regaining some of

what the past year took from her.

Unable to suppress my curiosity, I turn my attention to her sewing circle. “What are you making?” I ask, purposely injecting excitement into my voice. However, it doesn’t come naturally, especially considering the fact that needles make me uneasy, especially Thea holding a needle.

“It’s a curse word,” she says with childlike enthusiasm, tossing herself back over the table to proudly display her project, which indeed spells out the word “cunt.”

“Sure is,” I reply.

Fortunately, the doctor chooses that moment to walk in. “Seraphina and Alexander, may I speak with you two for a moment?” she requests, fully aware that we will, in fact, speak with her, because what on earth is going on?

I’m the first to pop up, and Thea doesn’t even notice as we walk over to the doctor. Dr. Isabella Blackwood is a beta woman in her late forties with a regal, commanding presence that matches her position. She stands tall with an air of confidence, her long, dark hair pulled back in a neat bun. Behind black-rimmed glasses, her hazel eyes hold a sharp intelligence and a hint of warmth.

Dr. Blackwood’s attire is professional yet stylish, a tailored suit that complements her figure and exudes authority. She moves with purpose, every step radiating competence and assurance. She doesn’t say a word as she ushers us into the hall and quietly shuts the door.

“Glad I caught you two,” she says, her voice measured and reassuring, as though she ran here to head us off. “We’ve started Thea on a new medication.”

I peer through the little window in the door, seeing Thea staring at me, unmoving. “I can see that,” I grumble. “Who gave you permission?” I don’t mean for it to sound harsh, but I can’t hold it back now that I said it.

“Seraphina,” Lex scolds me.

“No, no. She’s correct,” Dr. Blackwood says, pushing her glasses up. “We called your parents,” she says slowly. “They

called us Monday morning to see how Thea was doing.”

My stomach nearly drops through my hoo-ha. I love my parents, but they also didn’t want anything to do with Thea and her crimes, so the fact that they suddenly want to be a part of her treatment pisses me off.

Dr. Blackwood rushes out, “Legally speaking, my hands are tied,” she says, knowing it’s just to appease us, her siblings, who have been here from the start. “They are her legal guardians. I apologize for not contacting you sooner.”

“What is she on?” Lex scrubs a hand down his face.

“There’s a new medicine on the market. It’s new, very new, but I want you to know that we’ve had amazing results with it so far. We all had so much hope when Dr. Harrington discovered this new plant in the southern hemisphere.” She beams and blushes a little.

Now, where have I heard that name before?

“What drug?” Lex grits out.

Again, Dr. Blackwood blushes. “Know that we got full consent from your parents.” She twists her hands. “It is all natural, no chemicals like we’ve tried in the past, and she’s taken to this so very well. It’s like the true Dorothea is finally emerging.”

“What drug?” Irritation crawls up my spine until my words drip with it.

“Psilocybin,” she says, her voice tinged with excitement.

“What is that?” Lex questions, his brow furrowing.

Dr. Blackwood adjusts her glasses as she explains, her enthusiasm evident in her hazel eyes. “Right, okay, so archaeologists have discovered that ancient people used this to self-medicate. We consulted a knowledgeable mage who confirmed this, and we have been monitoring all the patients in this medical trial.”

I glance at Lex, his expression a mixture of curiosity and concern. Dr. Blackwood continues her explanation, her words flowing with more clarity and detail.

“Anyway, Dr. Harrington discovered ancient texts about the use of this plant, and he went in search of it. We never thought he’d find it, as this particular strain of mushroom died in an ancient battle.”

“Mushrooms?” Lex looks hesitant, his voice filled with unease.

“Yes, it’s in the trial phases, and the laboratory is trying to replicate them, but he wanted to test this immediately,” she gushes, her excitement growing. “And I have to say, it seems to work. We put Thea through the scanners just this morning, and she beeped yellow.”

I turn to Lex, my heart hammering with a mixture of hope and fear. The sterile surroundings seem to close in on me, and I find myself yearning for a glimpse of Thea through the window in the door. I meet her gaze, and her smile, though forced, is like a beacon of hope in this clinical setting.

“Thea has always...” I begin, my voice trembling as I look through the door to see her. My emotions swirl, a chaotic mix of relief and trepidation.

Dr. Blackwood opens the door and steps inside, her demeanor more somber now. “Thea, are you finished for the day?” she questions, her voice gentle.

“I sure am.” Thea smiles as she hands over a sewing circle.

That’s when I notice it—a slight eye twitch, a subtle sign of something amiss.

A shiver rushes up my spine as I exchange a glance with Lex. Something isn’t right. Lex must sense it, too, as he quickly takes action, moving to protect me.

Before I know it, Thea raises her hand, clutching a needle, and points it at me. Lex reacts with lightning speed, knocking the needle out of her hand and restraining her on the floor.

Dr. Blackwood slams her hand on the emergency alarm as my heart pounds and my mind races to comprehend the situation.

I press my hand to my lips, my gaze fixed on Thea. Her laughter, once hopeful, now carries a haunting quality. Her eyes, which had briefly appeared clear, are now filled with unmasked insanity as they stare right at me without blinking. I don't see an ounce of remorse in her gaze.

As the doctors rush to inject her with something to sedate her, I can't help but reflect on Thea's complex and troubled existence. She has always been a little bit broken, and this new treatment may hold the key to mending her shattered mind. I just hope this isn't a setback or seen as a failure. I want nothing more than to see my sister thrive.



## CHAPTER 5

# *Seraphina*

SOMETIMES, a day just starts off on the wrong foot, and today's one of those days, but I can't let my cruddy morning spill into the afternoon, especially with Violet counting on me for the gala. I have to be a supportive bestie, even if the idea makes me want to scream.

Dramatic? Absolutely. But hey, that's me.

Not many things can lift my spirits after a rough morning with my siblings. Sure, there's the classic ice cream binge, which always reminds me of Avery and brings a smile to my face, but then I end up crying because I miss him, so scratch that.

Drinking away my sorrows is an even worse idea than ice cream, and my go-to bathtub nest? Love it, but nope, not today. I made a promise, and I'm sticking to it.

"Here?" Violet raises an eyebrow as we pull up to this old-timey thrift store in downtown Central City, wedging into a diagonal parking spot. It's Friday afternoon, and she's eyeing the place like it's a high-end boutique in disguise. "A thrift store, for real?"

"Nope." I lean back, gazing through the windshield. "It's a thrifty dress store. Big difference. All these dresses used to belong to other omegas."

"The only difference I see is an extra layer of dust," she retorts. "We could just rent a dress, you know."

“Like buying one from those swanky boutiques and wearing it with the tags still on?” I raise an eyebrow, knowing full well that’s what she’s hinting at. “No way, I’m way too clumsy for that.” Knowing my luck, I’d end the night with some sort of food on the dress.

“Fine.” She pouts. “Guess it’s better than nothing.”

“There’s the spirit.” I swing my door open and climb out into the bright afternoon sun. Shielding my eyes, I take a quick look up and down the street. We’re in that weird middle ground of Central City—not too shady, not too fancy, just right in the heart of it all.

The street is lively, with people meandering about, bags in hand, their laughter creating a cheerful ambiance. I gently shut the car door and turn to see Violet still glaring skeptically at the little shop.

A man’s voice cuts through the air, reaching us. “Ladies.”

Violet’s hazel eyes widen in surprise as she looks behind me. Sighing with a hint of annoyance, I turn around and force a smile. Three alphas are approaching us. At first glance, they seem normal enough, but there’s something off about their scents—sour, almost bitter. Definitely not a good match.

I quickly assess each one, wondering if I can just whisk Violet into the dress shop without further ado. “Fellas,” I say, flashing a strained grin. I make a point of locking my car, the beep loud enough to signal that I’m ready to hit the alarm button if needed.

“Ladies, are you looking for a dress for tonight?” the front alpha asks. He’s tall and conventionally handsome, but there’s a slimy vibe about him that’s hard to ignore.

“Well, I did park in front of a dress shop,” I reply with a laugh that’s more forced than charming, sounding a bit like nails on a chalkboard, but hey, I tried.

“Yes, you did,” he says, his eyes wandering over me in a way that makes my skin crawl. He licks his lips, and I can’t help but think he couldn’t be more blatant.

“Well, we’re going to head in and, you know...” I say, stepping toward the sidewalk, eager to distance ourselves.

“Maybe we’ll see you when you come out,” he suggests, laying what he probably thinks is charm on thick. “Or tonight. Save me a dance?”

Ugh, as if, but I don’t let my irritation show. “We’ll see,” I reply noncommittally, gently grabbing Violet’s arm and steering her toward the thrift store. The sooner we’re inside, the better.

*Not if my life depended on it.*

I giggle, forcing a blush by thinking of Max in, well, less than proper attire. Grabbing Violet’s hand, I give the alpha one last glance, then hustle us both through the shop doors.

As soon as they close, Violet shoots me a glare. “You should get an Oscar for that performance.”

“You’re welcome,” I reply with a shrug.

“Uh-huh,” she retorts. “That little show was just leading him on.”

I throw my hands up in exasperation. “And what would you have me do? Snap at him?” I glance around, hoping we haven’t drawn too much attention.

“You’re playing with fire,” she warns, peeking over her shoulder. “They are gone now.”

“Exactly.” I exhale, relieved. “Being mean to alphas like that isn’t a good idea. They don’t take rejection well.”

“Let’s just focus on dress hunting,” she says, already moving past me, her eyes scanning the countless racks of dresses.

I can tell she’s annoyed, and I get it, I really do. I’ve explained enough about Thea for her to know it’s sometimes safer to play nice than to be confrontational, which is often my go-to move—like at the bakery, or with Max.

Max... He had a totally different vibe. He was grumpy at first, sure, but not hostile. He seemed curious about why an

omega like me was even working there, not like he owned me or something. The alphas today had a predatory look in their eyes, like they saw me as something to possess.

I leave Violet to her dress hunt, trying not to dwell too much on my decision to play it safe. Instead, I focus on the racks of colorful dresses, hoping to find something that'll turn this day around.

I'm immediately drawn to an emerald green dresses, and I'm starting to pull a few options when the sales associate bounds over to us. "Oh my gosh, I didn't even hear you two come in!" she exclaims, her face lighting up with a smile.

The woman, a gamma probably in her early forties, has a cherubic face that instantly reminds me of Celeste from the castle. Her matronly scents and easy smile put me at ease. If those alphas dare to step foot in here, I'm sure she'd shoo them away without a second thought.

"You look like a perfect size six," she chirps, her brunette barrel curls dancing around her face. She eagerly takes the dresses from my arms, then from a stunned Violet. "Go on, go on, I'll find the perfect dresses for you two!"

As she sorts through the dresses, muttering to herself, I head into a dressing room. The first dress I pull down is silk. Nope, it's not happening. "No silk," I declare, returning it to the gamma, who just nods, still lost in her thoughts.

"So," Violet calls over the low partition of her dressing room, the curtain fluttering slightly, "are you planning on finding a pack?"

I quickly peel off my sweater and leggings, laying them down as if they are designer pieces. They aren't, but they are mine, bought with my hard-earned bakery money. "Nope, I only want to dive into their buffet like a trash panda."

"Girl," she groans, her coiled hair visible over the partition, her eyes peering down at me. How is she tall enough to see over these walls? "What about your heat?"

I roll my eyes, even though she can't see it. "Let's not go there right now, okay? Tonight is about fun, not about my..."

biological clock.” I grab another dress from the rack, this one a deep blue and all glitter, and start to try it on. “Let’s just focus on finding something fabulous to wear.”

The dress sparkles like a sky full of stars, but the fabric feels all wrong against my skin. I slip it off almost as quickly as I put it on.

“If we don’t talk about it, it doesn’t exist, right?” I quip, carefully hanging up the dress and reaching for a velvet wrap number. It’s nice to the touch but nowhere near gala-level glam. “Ugh.”

“Can you look at this?” Violet’s voice interrupts my thoughts, followed by the sound of curtains gliding on rods. She flings open my curtain, standing there in a sleek, black silk dress.

“Freaking silk,” I spit.

“What’s wrong with silk?” she questions.

“It’s all I ever wore at the castle,” I grumble. “Silk, silk, and more silk. It’s not that I hate it. I’d just rather not.”

“Well, I think it looks nice, but does it work?” She does a little spin in front of my mirror.

Before I can respond, the gamma sales associate interjects. “No, no, that won’t do,” she says, piling more dresses into Violet’s arms and ushering her back to her dressing room, then she turns to me. “No, take that off.”

“Agreed,” I say, quickly shedding the velvet dress.

From her dressing room, Violet jumps back into our earlier conversation. “Seraphina, you really need to think about this.” Her eyes peek over the partition. “I think you should consider looking for a pack tonight. They set up this gala because you made waves by leaving.”

I grab another dress, her words echoing in my mind. “I’m not totally against the idea.”

“Oh, thank the Fates,” she murmurs, relief evident in her voice, making the gamma chuckle from the other side. “I was about to knock some sense into you with a frying pan.”

“That wouldn’t work,” the gamma says, popping in again like a dress ninja to hand me more options. “Your hormones would just wake you right up.”

“That’s awful,” Violet comments, but she sounds more intrigued than horrified, the traitor. “What about Max?” she suddenly asks.

“What about Max?” I retort as I eye a corset dress with intricate beading along the ribs and an enticing off the shoulder cut.

“Girl, I know you liked him,” Violet replies sassily, tossing a dress at my head. “Don’t even try to deny it. If you could really scent him, you’d know you’re a match.”

I scrunch up my nose, a wave of denial ready to spill out, but deep down, I know she’s right.

“And what about the twins?” she continues, touching a nerve I’ve been trying to ignore.

The thought of the twins, especially Avery, stirs a flutter of nerves in my belly. It’s been over a year since I last saw them. Avery and his twin were deployed the day after... well, after that night in the service kitchen. The idea of seeing him at the gala crossed my mind, but... “I don’t know,” I mutter, slipping into the corset dress. “We knew what we wanted then, and that was that.”

No big deal, right?

“Bullshit,” Violet protests.

“Language,” our gamma associate scolds from somewhere nearby.

Violet is undeterred. “It’s true though. You blush every time you mention his name.”

“He’s somewhere else, not here,” I counter, letting the dress fall around me. I twirl and—damn it all to hell—I look like royalty, and I absolutely love it.

I fling the curtains back to show off.

“Oh yes, that’s the one!” the gamma exclaims delightedly.

“Let me see,” Violet says, emerging from her dressing room in a stunning silk dress, the fabric hugging her figure perfectly.

“Vee, you look exquisite,” I gush, my fingers brushing against my lips in awe. “That dress is just perfect for you.”

“I know,” she says confidently, striking a pose with her hand resting on her waist. “I’m definitely wearing this one.”

“You both look gorgeous,” the gamma chimes in, clapping her hands together in excitement.

Violet isn’t done yet though. “What if Max is there tonight? Or Avery? Or his twin?”

I pause, feeling the weight of her question as my hands glide over the fabric of my dress. “Well,” I start, sounding nonchalant, “I guess I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.” I spin around and slip back into the dressing room, taking a deep breath. As my scent briefly escapes, I struggle to contain it, grateful that neither Violet nor our helpful associate comments on it.

I carefully hang the dress up and slip back into my casual outfit. Standing here, looking at my reflection, I can’t help but feel a mix of anticipation and nervousness about the evening ahead. Whatever happens, I know I’ll be facing it in a dress that makes me feel like a queen with Violet by my side. That thought alone gives me a bit of comfort.

The gamma’s excited voice cuts through my thoughts, bringing me back to the moment. “Come on, girls,” she says, bustling toward the counter with our dresses. “I’ve got a two-for-one special for you!” Her enthusiasm is infectious, and it’s hard not to smile at her energy.

Violet and I exchange a look, a mix of amusement and disbelief in our eyes. As we follow the gamma, I pull my hair up into a top knot, feeling a sudden wave of warmth. “All I want is something natural, you know? An organic pairing. Is that really too much to ask for?”

Violet’s expression softens, a hint of guilt mingling with concern. “You’re right, I’m sorry,” she admits. “I just worry

about you sometimes.”

I give her arm a gentle squeeze as we walk. “Hey, don’t do that,” I say with a playful nudge. “Worrying ages you, and we can’t have that.”

We reach the counter, and the gamma is all smiles as she rings up our dresses, her energy never waning. As she hands us our bags, her warmth is a reminder of the small joys and unexpected friendships life can bring.

“Tonight is about you though,” I tell her. “Let’s find you a pack.”

“That’s the spirit.” The gamma sighs. “Oh, I love the early days of love.”

Giggling, I drag Violet away.

As Violet and I step out of the thrift store, bags in hand, the fading sunlight casts a serene glow over the city streets. We chat animatedly about the gala, our spirits lifted by our successful shopping spree, but our lighthearted banter is abruptly cut short by a familiar, unwelcome presence.

The alpha from earlier, the one with the slimy vibe, blocks our path. His expression is harder now, his eyes carrying a predatory glint that sends a chill down my spine.

“Fancy seeing you two here again,” he sneers, his gaze lingering on me in a way that makes my skin crawl.

I instinctively move closer to Violet, trying to keep a casual façade. “Just heading out,” I say, aiming for a tone of disinterest, but my voice betrays a hint of tension.

“You didn’t answer my question earlier,” he presses on, stepping closer. “About the dance.”

I can feel Violet’s unease mirroring my own. “We’re really not interested,” I state, trying to move past him, but he sidesteps, effectively blocking our way. The situation is escalating, and I can sense Violet’s growing fear. “Listen, we just want to leave. Please, just let us pass,” I plead, my heart pounding.



He's not backing down. His eyes narrow, and he takes another step toward us, his stance aggressive. "I think you owe me that dance. After all, I was nice enough to ask."

His tone is menacing, and I realize we're in a dangerous situation. I glance around, hoping someone might notice and intervene, but the street is surprisingly empty.

Violet's voice trembles as she speaks up. "We said no. Please, just leave us alone."

He lets out a cold, humorless laugh that sends a shiver down my spine. "You omegas think you can just walk away after leading me on?"

I feel a surge of anger at his words. "We didn't lead you on. We're not interested. That's it."

His face contorts in anger at my defiance. "You're going to regret that," he threatens, moving even closer.

Panic sets in, and I know we need to act fast. "Violet, run," I whisper urgently, ready to make a dash for it.

Before we can move, though, another voice interrupts the tense standoff. "Is there a problem here?"

We all turn to see a delta enforcer approaching, his expression stern as he assesses the situation. The alpha's confidence falters at the sight of him.

"No problem here," the alpha says quickly, his tone shifting to one of innocence. "Just a misunderstanding."

The delta looks unconvinced. "I suggest you move along then," he says firmly.

The alpha hesitates, glancing at us one last time with a look of resentment before finally stepping aside.

The delta enforcer waits until he's walked away before turning to us. "Are you two alright?"

"Yes, thank you," I reply, my relief immense. "We're fine now."

The delta nods, giving us a reassuring smile. "Be careful. If you have any more trouble, don't hesitate to call."

As he walks away, Violet and I let out a collective sigh of relief. “That was too close,” she says, her voice still shaking.

I nod, feeling a mix of fear and gratitude. “Let’s get out of here.”

We rush back to the car, our earlier buzz now overshadowed by a harsh reminder of the dangers hidden in seemingly safe places. I quickly toss my dress in the back and slide into the driver’s seat, my fingers trembling as I grip the steering wheel and start the engine. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the delta enforcer standing guard at the shop entrance, his gaze fixed on us.

Every so often, I sneak a peek at Violet. Each time, she’s nervously chewing on her lips, lost in thought. “Don’t let them get to you,” I encourage, trying to penetrate her cloud of worry.

“It’s never going to stop, is it?” she asks, her eyes meeting mine. The same words she muttered just minutes ago, but now they are soaked in a different, deeper meaning. “Wherever we go, there’s always someone bigger, someone more powerful, ready to knock us down.”

Her words land heavily in my chest, a resonating truth that’s hard to shake off, but I’m not about to let it defeat us. “We’ll stand our ground,” I assert with conviction. “Together, we’ll face them head-on. We’re not their playthings.”

Violet’s eyes light up with a newfound resolve. “You’re right,” she agrees. “We’re not backing down.”

As we drive, the setting sun casts a warm, orange hue across the landscape, offering a sense of calm despite the day’s events. The steady hum of the car is soothing, and I find myself lost in the rhythm of the road, my thoughts drifting.

I recall my mama’s words from years ago when I left home. “Don’t ever let anyone make you feel small.” Back then, it seemed like typical mom advice. Now, it’s a mantra that fuels my determination.

I’m determined not to let anyone belittle us, no matter how hard they try. Today, at least, we stood our ground, even if just

barely, and I silently hope that when the next challenge comes—and I know it will—we'll be just as strong, just as fortunate as we were today.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Berlin*

CLOSED-DOOR MEETINGS MAKE me want to gouge my eyes out and jam them into my ears just to escape the droning voices of these old men. They aren't even supposed to arrange these damn gatherings, but here we are, enduring their endless debates about how to revert things back to the good old days—before they found themselves outnumbered and the world recognized them for the emotionless, apathetic fools they truly are.

I barely stifle a yawn, knowing it'll burst forth the moment I'm out of this room. However, I can't contain the sneeze that escapes, drawing all the men's attention, including my father.

“Are we boring you, son?” he snaps, his words laced with a cruelty one wouldn't expect a father to use on his only child, but my father is a ruthless bastard, and I loathe him to my core. His cruelty runs deeper than the surface, and it's the very reason my mother and her pack fled from him. They didn't look back once, and that truth stings like a fresh wound. You see, back then, my father made the rules. He decreed that the lead alpha retained custody of the children if the omega departed. He still clings to the power to claim any future offspring she might have.

I despise him for what he did and live for the day when I can overthrow him. I imagine it every day, but my pack isn't complete, not yet. I must exercise infinite patience. The day we find our omega will mark the beginning of my plan to unseat him once and for all.

I grind my teeth and don the mask I learned to wear at a tender age when facing my father and his henchmen. “Of course not, Father,” I reply, layering on the charm as thick as possible. “We are, after all, hiding in the castle library—the very place you barred omegas from not a month ago. It’s quite dusty in here, wouldn’t you agree?”

I can see the tension in my father’s jaw and the narrowing of his eyes as he glares at me. Devlin Armana Senior despises it when I talk back, almost as much as I hate sharing his name and likeness. He once told me that when he looks at me, all he sees is disappointment, because I’m like a mirror reflecting his failures. Unlike him, I choose to lead with empathy for our nation, not apathy, and certainly not with an iron fist. He should understand by now that such tyranny is the root cause of a kingdom’s downfall, yet he remains indifferent.

“Well...” He clears his throat. “I’d love to hear your thoughts on omegas strolling down the streets, working jobs, and going to stores alone.” His face flushes with red spots as he continues speaking, his olive skin taking on the hue of a tomato. His anger radiates throughout the room, and I can feel the intensity of his alpha aura.

I hum softly under my breath as the other council members shoot me disapproving glances, mostly his loyal followers with a few exceptions. Absently, I run my thumb along my bottom lip, as though deep in thought. I firmly believe that omegas and now gammas should enjoy the same rights as everyone else in Terra. Unfortunately, not everyone in this world shares that view, and it leaves them perpetually vulnerable. That truly scares me more than anything else. There are individuals who would stalk and abduct omegas just for the purpose of breeding.

“You concur,” my father interjects before I can respond.

An immediate chill runs down my spine. I shouldn’t have hesitated.

My father appears almost pleased, his chin rising as he regards me with newfound appreciation. Damn.

“In part.” I sigh, resisting the urge to flee the room by gripping the armrest of the leather chair I sit in. I know I need to offer him something, but not everything, so I choose my words carefully. “Terra isn’t quite prepared to see omegas on the streets, and while the gamma union has successfully integrated gammas into the workforce, they have faced challenges recently, as some packs without omegas have attempted, and failed, to abduct them.”

A breakthrough in beta science revealed the original classification of designations comprised alphas, omegas, and betas, with deltas as an evolutionary variation of alphas and gammas as the counterpart to omegas. However, thanks to a mad scientist’s discovery, it became apparent that a gamma exposed to a scent match could biologically transition into an omega. That’s the basic idea, at least. Currently, beta scientists have established a laboratory to conduct further research, and this revelation has caused quite a stir in the community. I can’t blame them. For a gamma, discovering they could have always been more is a lot to digest.

My father huffs at me, his displeasure etched across his face as his gaze bores into mine. I envision him as blind, oblivious to the cruelty he inflicts upon this world. He must be blind, for no alpha in existence should be capable of inflicting such immense horror.

“Well,” he begins, his mouth making an unsettling click as it opens. His dry tongue darts across his lips, a sight that sends shivers down my spine. “It isn’t right. If they choose to leave this sanctuary we built for them, then I say they should bear the consequences.”

Bastard. “You wouldn’t intervene if they were in danger?”

“Why should I?” he growls at me, his anger saturating the air with his bitter scent. “If they choose to leave, it’s their decision, not mine. I voted for them to stay in this castle, in this sanctuary. Omegas had the opportunity to find a pack.”

“They never had a real choice,” I explode, leaning forward in my seat. “Packs bought omegas. Only those with the most money found an omega. You damn well know that.”

I can see the denial on the tip of his tongue, the ruthlessness in his eyes. I want no part of it. One of his loyalists chimes in, "They never should have left. This gala is a mockery." The former dean glares out the window, his gaze likely fixed on the arrival of numerous omegas, many of whom have lived in hiding for years, all because they didn't trust the men before me.

I don't even know why I'm in this room when the other heirs aren't. My father insisted on my presence. Perhaps that's why my next words cut like a whip. "They voted you out."

He jerks his head around, a snarl on his lips. "Not for long. My son will prevail. He will take charge and restore our good name."

His son is a bastard, just like him, if not worse.

I'm done here. "Well, considering that the gala begins in less than five minutes..." I trail off as I rise from my seat. I can no longer bear to listen to them complain about the wrongs they believe the world has inflicted on them when they are the ones in the wrong.

"SON, THAT'S WHAT WE WANT TO DISCUSS WITH YOU," MY father says, a cruel smile stretching across his lips, sending a spike of fear through me. The man is capable of inspiring fear and nothing more. Never love, never understanding.

I swallow hard and keep myself upright, my gaze locked on my father seated across from me. He raises a glass to his lips for a sip, never breaking eye contact.

"Yes, Father?" I prompt, though I'm not particularly eager to hear what he has in mind, but the need to know gnaws at me.

"The gala presents an opportunity for us to demonstrate that we are still in control, that we possess power," he declares smoothly. The other men in the room slowly shift their attention toward me.

"The gala was the brainchild of the new dean," I reply thoughtfully, crossing my arms. "Not yours."

"Semantics, we had to vote on it," he retorts.

“And if I recall correctly, you voted against it.” What game is he playing?

“Now I intend to leverage it to my advantage,” my father taunts. I choose to remain silent, refusing to play into his hands. “You have thirty days to find an omega.”

“Excuse me?” My arms drop to my sides, and I fix my father with a glare. “That’s not something you can rush.”

“Speak to the new dean, consult the scent books, or explore the options among the omegas downstairs. I don’t care. Do whatever it takes,” my father asserts, leaning forward and placing his glass on the coffee table between us. “Otherwise, I’ll find an omega for you.”

“So this is an ultimatum?” I huff. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

“You should consider yourself fortunate that we’re giving you this opportunity,” my father states. “It’s a gesture of goodwill.” His cold, heartless goodwill. “We’ll be presenting a bill first thing Monday morning, and we have the votes.”

“What?” Surprise surges within me, shattering the carefully maintained façade I thought I had in place.

“No active council members can hold their positions without a pack.” My father smirks. “Or without an omega. It’s too precarious, son.”

Councilman Finch chimes in, “Alphas require the stabilizing aura an omega provides to maintain their seats.”

“And,” my father continues, “you have two deltas in your pack, son. We all know that deltas without an omega are susceptible to illness.”

“Leaving them in need of institutionalization,” Dean Finch says with an unusual semblance of compassion. However, I can see right through it. It’s a façade, as always.

I chuckle. What other response is there in this situation? The laughter bubbles out of me, devoid of humor. “Well then, Father, what do you have to say for yourself?” I gesture



around us. “Because, in case you’re unaware, you are an alpha without a pack.”

“I wouldn’t worry about me.” My father glances at Finch.

They are scheming.

“Neither of you are a part of a pack,” I point out and then turn to the third councilman in the room—Rossi. “None of you have omegas. If I recall correctly, you even passed one among yourselves.”

“And now we do,” my father asserts, turning his attention back to me.

“You can’t just coerce an omega into bonding with you,” I exclaim, throwing my hands up in frustration.

“We didn’t,” Finch states. “We courted.”

“We wooed,” my father adds.

Something doesn’t sit right.

“Now, son...” My father smirks at me. “Go mingle and have fun.”

He’s dismissing me.

I pivot on a heel and stride out of the library, forcefully slamming the door behind me. Engrossed in a handheld game, my packmate, Avery, sits against the wall, his eyes locked onto the screen.

I approach him, taking in his scent as I draw closer. Even from five feet away, I can discern the comforting notes of cinnamon lingering in the air. It immediately soothes me, washing over my senses and seeping into my very bones. He’s like a freshly baked cinnamon bun, his scent offering the comfort home.

As my shadow blankets him, he finally glances up, his bright blue eyes—a distinct feature of his designation—meeting mine.

He furrows his brow at me, likely sensing my frustration through our bond. “What did the old men want now?”

I extend my hand to help him up from the floor, even though he doesn't require it. It's my way of connecting with them, offering intimacy when I can't provide more.

"My father gave me thirty days to find an omega," I mutter as he slaps his hand into mine, allowing me to pull him to his feet. "Come on, I'll fill you in."

"Thirty days." He nods, a peculiar smile forming on his lips. "I bet."

"Avery." I give him a sidelong glance, already anticipating his reaction. He's infatuated, nursing a schoolboy crush on an omega he encountered a couple of years ago at the castle before his reassignment. "This is a serious matter."

"Oh, I know." He turns to face me, his smile filled with hope and wonder. That's Avery for you, brimming with spirit and a playfulness that I find endearing. "But still, I bet."

I sigh, glancing down at my tuxedo. It feels constrictive, suffocating. Inside, I'm weary and drained. They thrust this life upon me, I never asked for it, and I'm not even sure I want to attend this gala.

"My father has a few tricks up his sleeve," I whisper, aware that Avery will relay this to the rest of our pack. "He'll either arrange a marriage if we don't find an omega, or he'll oust me from the council."

Avery shrugs. "Would that be such a bad thing?" He pauses by the stairs leading down to the ballroom, turning to face me. I notice the faint dark circles under his eyes, accentuated by the deep shadows cast by his dark lashes. Avery and his brother are identical, but Avery is a bit more playful. He stands nearly six feet tall with the build of a wrestler. Deep dimples appear on his cheeks as he smirks at me, his unruly hair sweeping across his face. Initially, he intended to let it grow out, but he grew tired of it and shaved the sides. Now, his dark hair curls around his head in a thick mohawk mullet.

"Yes," I reply. "I have no idea how they garnered enough votes to push this through." I run a hand down my face. They

are impossible to deal with and even harder to get rid of. The old men, that is.

“I’m just saying that you hate sitting on the council, so why not leave?” He shrugs as though it’s a simple decision. “Listen, let’s discuss this later tonight.” He playfully slaps me on the back and starts to walk away.

With one foot on the steps, I grab his black shirt and yank him back. “What are you scheming?”

“Nothing.” He smirks, but I know he’s up to something, and I’m not sure I trust him. Actually, I don’t trust him at all.

He snaps his teeth playfully at my hand, confident I’ll release him, and when I do, he bolts down the steps and disappears from view.

In need of a drink, I descend the steps slowly, taking in the throng of people. There must be at least two hundred attendees here.

I look at the door where delta enforcers stand guard while the local healer distributes suppressants. At least they are handling this situation intelligently. No one wants an alpha or delta to lose control in the middle of a gala, especially the first of its kind.

I pause at the entryway, grabbing a suppressant for myself before heading straight for the bar. I pay no heed to anyone in my path, including the omegas who offer admiring gazes and whispers as I pass.

I’m halfway to the bar when a scent hits me, like brown sugar. It’s faint but undeniable. It sets every alpha instinct within me ablaze, and a subtle purr threatens to escape, one I hastily suppress as I scan my surroundings, making sure no one heard.

My steps falter, causing the man behind me to bump into me. His curses roll right off me as he shoulder bumps me and walks off.

Tilting my head, I spin around in a full circle.

*Nothing.*

Shaking off the odd sensation, I continue to the bar just outside the ballroom. There's no way I'm going in there. Naturally, I find my packmate Max standing at the bar, more than likely hiding from the world.

"Dev," he greets me, handing me a drink as I approach.

Maximillian Harrington is the last member of our pack, also an alpha. Despite his disheveled appearance, he's as sharp as a whip. Most days, he looks like he's been living on the streets, including today. Despite the fact this is a formal event, he's dressed in tan cargo pants, untied sneakers, and a white shirt—his small slight against those who planned this gala.

"Dev," Max says, his voice low and cautious, "you seem on edge. Tell me what went down."

I take a long sip of the drink Max handed me, feeling the warmth of the alcohol soothing the turmoil inside me as it goes down my throat. "My father," I mutter, "gave me an ultimatum. Thirty days to find an omega or face consequences."

Max furrows his brow. "That's absurd. You can't just find an omega like you're picking up groceries."

I nod in agreement. "Exactly, but he's determined, and he's using the gala to showcase his power and influence. I have no idea what he has planned tonight."

Max takes a thoughtful sip of his own drink. "So what's our plan?"

The word *our* catches me off guard, reminding me once again that I'm not alone in this. These men are my packmates, my family, and we'll face whatever challenges come our way together. I smile at Max, a surge of gratitude welling up inside me that he's home from his expedition.

"We'll do what we can to find an omega, but we won't rush into anything," I reply. "Is it too much to ask that it happens naturally?"

Max's eyes shimmer with determination. "Agreed, and no, I'm on your side here."

As we clink our glasses together in silent solidarity, movement in my peripheral vision catches my attention. I turn my head and spot a group of omegas entering the gala, their faces a blend of excitement and apprehension. It serves as a stark reminder of the weight of responsibility I bear.

“Dev.” Max interrupts my thoughts, drawing my focus back to him. “Don’t worry. Hey, have you seen the twins?”

“Yeah,” I respond, sliding onto a barstool and scanning the room. “Ashton is on duty, and Avery is up to something.”

“When isn’t he up to something?” Max growls, his hands threading into his hair, tugging out his bun, and then reworking it. It’s his tell, his tick when he’s uncomfortable. “How long do we need to stay?”

“One round just to appease my father,” I explain. As a council heir, my presence is required. I have to show up, make the rounds, smile, nod, mingle, and even flirt with the older omegas and their packs, many of whom are donors to this very event.

Max shifts his gaze to me, and his bond mark peeks from beneath his collar. Surviving three years without him is nothing short of a miracle. “Let’s get this show over with,” he declares. “I’m not dancing,” he adds as a warning.

“I’ll dance, you...” I toss back my drink. “Try not to scare everyone away.”

“I’m nice on the inside.”

“You look like you want to cut everyone’s throats out,” I hiss at him.

“I do.”

“Try to curb the intrusive thoughts.” I lean in and sniff him. “You need to shower in bleach. I can barely catch your scent.”

He buries his nose in his armpit, uncaring of anyone watching us. “Damn, I showered once today already.”

“Three years of not showering,” I tease, clapping him on the back. “It’s going to take a while. Maybe all that sweat

clogged your glands.”

“Leave my glands out of this,” he grumbles, embracing his bear-like persona.

We make our way into the ballroom, where the opulence of the gala unfolds before us. Music wraps around us from every corner, fighting against the tide of chatter. Chandeliers cast a soft, golden glow, and the sound of laughter and music fills the air. Omegas and alphas mingle, dressed in their finest attire.

*One hour, I promise myself, and then we are out of here. Just one hour.*

## CHAPTER 7

# *Seraphina*

WE DON'T FIT in here, or more accurately, I don't belong in this setting, but that's inconsequential as I steal a glance at Violet, her brilliant eyes absorbing the procession of cars ahead. Most of them are limousines transporting alphas and their packs to the castle's entrance.

I attempt to envision the scene unfolding before me as if I'm witnessing it anew. Still, it proves to be a formidable task. This is particularly true when I recall that the first time I laid eyes on this place was with Lex—Lex, who is likely present as an alpha without a pack.

*"IT LOOKS HAUNTED," I MUTTER TO MY BROTHER, MY VOICE barely audible above the soft hum of the car's engine. Lex leans forward, his curiosity piqued, and I can't help but wonder what's going on in his mind. Lex is usually as talkative as I am, so his silence suggests that this place has genuinely caught his attention.*

*He hums under his breath, the sound barely breaking the silence in the car. Lex has always been one to think before he speaks, a trait that often irritates me when I'm itching for conversation.*

*"You like it," I accuse, giving him a playful nudge with my elbow.*

*"It's enchanting," he responds, his voice tinged with a touch of wonder.*

*"It's falling apart," I retort, jabbing a finger toward the decaying brick security house. "See that?"*

*“Again, enchanting,” Lex counters, his eyes fixed on the castle.*

*“You’ve been reading too many fantasy novels,” I grumble, my arms crossed tightly across my chest. My frustration is building because I can’t fathom why he’s so enamored with this decrepit place.*

*“I like fantasy,” he says with a shrug, leaning back into his seat. “I can’t believe this doesn’t interest you,” he scoffs as though he’s surprised.*

*“I want nothing to do with it,” I reply, my voice laced with stubbornness. I sound like the petulant child they have often accused me of being.*

*Mama turns in her seat, her eyes filled with bright, affectionate warmth as she smiles at me. “This castle was once the only thing standing between rogue alphas and omegas during the great war.”*

*I roll my eyes, my teenage defiance momentarily taking over. “So?”*

*“So it’s a part of who we are,” Mama insists, her voice gentle but resolute. “The halls are teeming with memories and stories.”*

*I look out the window again, trying to see what they see, but all I see is a gilded prison, a place that has bound our family for generations. Deep down, I know that a gilded prison is still a prison, and the thought of willingly imprisoning myself here is something I can’t bear to entertain.*

TODAY, TWINKLE LIGHTS ILLUMINATE THE LONG DRIVEWAY, conjured by mages to hover above the pathway leading to the castle. On that day, the sun shone brightly in the sky, a stark contrast to the present moment where the moon barely forms a sliver in the night sky. Dark trees line the drive, adorned with even more fairy lights.

My brother found the castle grounds enchanting that day, and I reluctantly admit that it looks just as enchanting today, maybe even more so. As we inch closer, a flicker of unease courses through me. Here I am, driving us in my beat-up car,



which has backfired twice since we joined this line. Suppressing my nerves, I steal another glance at Violet. She can hardly contain her excitement.

She looks mesmerizing, and part of me hopes she'll find a pack tonight. She deserves that happiness. As directed, I veer to the right, parking my car among the more luxurious vehicles in the parking lot and cutting the engine. I'd rather walk up than drive to the valet and fall on my face when I get out of the car.

"One last chance, Vee," I say while gazing out the window. "We can hightail it out of here, go home, grab some chocolate and wine, and watch a movie or maybe that new documentary. I heard the newest bachelor features a male omega."

"Uh-uh," she replies, opening the door and stepping out. She leans down, her hair in its natural state of tight, dark curls, a bold statement that suits her beautifully. "You can hide in here, but I am going in. Free drinks for omegas."

"Free food," I correct. We have to sneak around to get drinks.

"Then let's go." She slams the door in my face.

I was asking for too much, it seems. As I clamber out of the car, a blast of cold air stings my face. It carries the scent of impending snow, and a part of me secretly wishes for a snowstorm to provide an excuse to escape this night. Unfortunately, Violet isn't waiting for me, and the needy omega in me despises that. I catch up to her, linking my elbow with hers, and we join the long line to enter the event. Chatter fills the air as omegas and alphas mingle before getting inside.

My body shivers from the cold, although it seems I'm the only one affected by the icy chill. Despite living in this place for years, I never considered the castle my home. Its imposing walls, hidden passageways, dungeons, and dean, who ruled this place like a prison, made me feel like an outsider.

So many omegas cherish this place, willingly showing up in pursuit of a better future—a future where a pack would love and care for them. The same hopeful future is reflected in

Violet's wide-eyed gaze. Hope for the future fills her eyes with stars, a sentiment I long to share. I want to feel what she feels.

Only I can't.

I glance around and find myself surrounded by a sea of omegas, their expectant smiles and palpable excitement filling the air. I even spot a few gammas scattered throughout, their hope evident as they yearn for a chance to activate their omega genetics. All I see around me is hope, but deep within, all I feel is a pervasive chill.

"Girl, you can try to smile." Violet nudges me as we inch forward in line.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, blowing a loose strand of my long, honey-colored hair out of my face. I twisted it into a side ponytail, but one stubborn strand flutters in front of my eyes. Giving up, I try for the empathy that Violet deserves from me. "I just..."

Violet reaches out, her hand brushing my arm. "I get it." She sighs, gazing longingly at the castle as we draw closer to the front door. "Listen, if you really want to leave, we can go."

"No." I shake my head firmly, my resolve strengthening. "I made a promise, and I will keep it. I swear."

Behind me, another omega speaks up. "Oh my gosh! You're Seraphina." I turn to look at the young woman, vaguely recalling she is a couple of years behind me.

"Hey..." I struggle to remember her name. "Why are you in line? Don't you live here?"

In fact, a lot of these omegas reside here.

"Oh, the new dean sent us to town to get ready." She giggles. "She booked out all the salons and dress shops and put it all on the council's dime. She wanted us to have the whole experience, riding in a limo and pulling up the drive."

"Wait." Violet spins to glare at the girl. "You're telling me I could have gotten all dolled up on the council's dime?"

I shrug and mouth, "I didn't know that."

“Mm-hmm.” She shakes her head at me.

“Oh, look, the front door.” I step forward. I should have checked to see if the dean made plans, but I really don’t want to be indebted to them any more than necessary.

Violet and the omega continue to chatter away as we approach the door. Nerves flutter in my belly, and I swallow hard. Just inside the door, multiple mages hand out scent suppressants. I take one and pop it under my tongue.

“Here you go.” A gamma inside the door offers me a dance card and a small pencil with a warm smile. “Enjoy.”

I grab the card and tuck it into my small purse. Chatter rises around us as we step into the foyer, filled with gasps of awe. Behind me, Violet squeals with excitement.

They’ve truly outdone themselves in making this place appear magical. I can’t blame the new dean for wanting this. Why have a ballroom if it never gets used? I understand the sentiment.

The foyer opens up, revealing a grand staircase that splits at the second level, leading left and right. Two ornate railings overlook the foyer below. At the top of the stairs, double doors open into the atrium, illuminated by glowing twinkle lights creating a pathway through the garden. The castle is nestled up against a mountain, explaining its unique layout. They built it here for protection, to keep intruders out and omegas in.

To the left of the sweeping staircase lies a long hallway beautifully decorated for the ball. At the far end, a bar beckons, and two double doors lead into the ballroom.

“I want to go dance.” Violet tugs on my arm, her new omega friend trailing closely behind. “Come on.”

“Go ahead, I’m going to get a drink,” I tell her as we approach the doors to the ballroom, the entrance adorned with foliage and hanging flowers, their scent dominating the entire castle, at least for now.

“Girl.” She shakes her head. “This place is beautiful.”

“Go find an alpha dance partner,” I urge her, nudging her toward the doors where her omega friend awaits. “I’ll be right there.” A lie.

I’ve barely spent two minutes in this room, and I’m already itching to escape. Violet doesn’t pick up on my unease, her ability to sense it dampened by the scent suppressant dissolving under my tongue. I watch her vanish beneath the archway, then turn my attention back to the throng of people.

The doorway remains crowded, with most heading straight for the ballroom doors and a select few making their way to the bar. I inch along the wall, hoping to remain unnoticed, blending into the background. A few alphas loiter down this part of the hallway, but most pay me no mind, which suits me just fine. My goal is to reach the bar without drawing attention to myself.

I can play the extrovert when needed, but deep down, I’m a hardcore introvert. Given the choice, I’d opt for my cats, a heated blanket, and pillows any day over this social gathering.

As I near the bar, I spot a potential issue—they roped the area off, and a delta is eyeing me. Giving up on subtlety, I walk past him.

“Evening.” I nod to him, attempting to move on.

With a sigh, he steps before me, careful not to touch me. “Miss, I can’t let you go to the bar.”

“Why?” I question.

“Alphas only,” he says, his tone apologetic. “The dean doesn’t want omegas drinking tonight.”

My face falls. That woman. “You can’t be serious.”

*I should have claimed I was a gamma.*

“Listen, I’m just trying to keep my job here,” he pleads, raising his hands and drawing the attention of a few nearby alphas. I don’t want that kind of attention.

“Got ya,” I chirp, a note of gratitude in my voice. “Thanks anyway.” I back away, but before I can turn around, I collide

with a solid chest. I literally bounce backward, but muscular arms catch me in a firm yet gentle hold.

“Whoa, are you alright?” a deep voice inquires, steadying me. Even from one touch alone, I can tell this man is an alpha. There’s power in his presence that’s undeniable.

“I’m good, I’m good,” I reply, exhaling and looking up into a handsome face. Blue eyes gaze down at me, and the alpha smiles. Fortunately, I can’t scent him, and he can’t smell me. “Thanks for catching me.”

I try to move away, but he holds me still, making me acutely aware of his proximity. This is the problem with alphas, they often lack an understanding of physical and personal boundaries.

“Are you alright?” he asks again, his voice low and concerned. His warm eyes hold a hint of something wild, something I can’t quite put my finger on. It’s unsettling.

“Great, I’m so sorry for bumping into you,” I mutter, licking my lips, a less than ideal choice as it brings me closer to the lingering pheromones in the air. They float around like invisible dust motes, reminding me of the secrets this place holds.

“I’m not mad at all,” he assures me even though I didn’t even ask him, his boyish charm slightly intriguing yet off, almost as though he is trying too hard. “I’m...” He pauses momentarily, his hesitation noticeable. “Dave. Call me Dave.”

“Alright,” I respond, drawing out the word as I blink up at him. “Seraphina.” I break free from his grasp, my eyes now locked on the hallway I initially intended to explore.

“Dance with me,” he requests, jutting his chin forward, his smile concealing a mysterious secret that I can’t quite decipher. It’s difficult to read him, especially with the lingering effects of the scent suppressants. I can’t tell if we’re a match or if he’s genuinely interested in me. All I know is that he sets me on edge, and something about him doesn’t sit right.

“Here.” I reach inside my purse and retrieve my dance card. I mark off the first two slots since they’ve already passed and quickly scribble Violet’s name into the next hour, then hand it over to Dave.

To my surprise, the alpha takes the card and adds his name across two slots before handing it back to me. “I’ll see you soon, Seraphina,” he says, his voice warm but his eyes intense. As he reaches for my hand, I expect a simple gesture of politeness like before, such as a kiss on my knuckles, but this time, he does more. He runs my knuckles down his neck to his scent glands, a strangely intimate action that sends a shiver down my spine—and not in a good way.

I can’t hide the snarl of irritation that escapes me. I quickly plaster on a polite smile and carefully walk away, mindful not to provoke any instincts that might compel him to follow me. Dave is intriguing, but something about him unsettles me, a vague sense of foreboding that lingers in the air as I make my escape.

Passing by the grand staircase, I resist the urge to bring my hand to my nose for a quick sniff as I make my way down the opposite corridor, heading straight for the kitchen. As I push through the double doors, I pay no heed to the scathing looks from the gamma staff and make my way to the second kitchen, just a bit farther down the hallway—one for the students, and one for the staff, a sensible arrangement.

The second kitchen offers a much needed respite from the bustling crowd, and I make a beeline for the sink. Without hesitation, I flip on the faucet, and the cool water rushes out, providing soothing comfort.

“Rotten alpha and their rotten scent glands,” I mutter through clenched teeth, frustration seeping through my words. “I hope he trips over himself and falls flat on his stupid face.” My hands are a blur as I scrub my skin, anger and irritation pouring into each motion.

I continue to scrub until my hands feel raw, as though they might bleed, but I don’t stop. “How dare he mark me like a

caveman,” I seethe, my anger giving me the strength to keep going. “Micro dick energy.”

My rant serves as a release valve for the frustration and discomfort that Dave’s unexpected gesture stirred within me. With each word, I feel a bit more in control, a bit more like myself.

“I always enjoyed your colorful mouth,” a voice I know all too well whispers close to me. It sends a shiver racing up and down my spine as the body associated with that voice presses firmly against my back. “I knew I’d find you in here.”

I freeze, my heart hammering in my chest as I swallow down a swirl of emotions—emotions I can’t even dare to name right now.

Strong arms reach around me, and skilled hands gently set two spoons and a small container of ice cream on the counter, then he shuts off the water.

I brace my hands on the kitchen sink, my body already melting in response to his presence. Avery Griffin presses himself closer to me, pinning me between the sink and his muscular body. It’s a familiar feeling, and my senses ignite. I know him, his touch, and his scent, which I hate that I can’t fully perceive right now, but my memory fills in the gaps—cinnamon buns. I resist the urge to moan and instead glance at the ice cream.

A laugh bursts free as I reach for the small quart. “Vanilla cinnamon swirl,” I say, looking over my shoulder at him. “You remembered.”

“Did you think I’d forget?” he murmurs, burying his nose in my neck. “I miss your scent,” he whispers, his breath sending shivers down my spine. He slowly inhales, sending goosebumps racing across my shoulders.

I close my eyes, a mixture of emotions welling inside me. I want to say it was only one night, but it wasn’t. Avery is the reason I stayed for so long, and also the reason I eventually left. I knew he and his pack would put in a bid for me, even though I only ever met him and his twin.

I want to say I never let him touch me like this, that I left here untouched, saving myself for a pack that would claim me, but the truth is I gave all of that away to the man holding me close.

I push back gently, turning around to see his face. He's just as breathtaking as he always was, just as devastating. "Hey, you," I say, holding the ice cream to my chest like a barrier between us.

"You finally showed up," he says, snatching the ice cream from my hand and popping open the lid. He backs away and hops up onto the kitchen island, wiggling his fingers for the spoons.

I grab the spoons and choose to stand, not wanting to ruin my dress by attempting to sit on the counter. I wait until he takes a scoop of ice cream and hands the quart back before I dig in myself.

We've done this a thousand times before, always in the middle of the night. He'd find me here, stealing the gamma's ice cream. I'd sit right where he is now, cross-legged on the island, munching on ice cream.

Eventually, instead of carting me back to my room, he'd find a spoon for himself and join me for a while. Sharing this moment in silence became something more—something so much more.

I can't recall who made the first move that fateful night. All I remember is that it happened, and we broke every single rule by falling into each other. Packs that bid for an omega here want them as virgins, clean and untarnished.

As silence stretches between us, it grows increasingly awkward. I know I should just rip the bandage off and talk to him about how he is, how he feels, and what he's been up to, but I can't bring myself to do it. I don't know if it's because so much time has passed between us or because neither of us is the same person anymore.

"Any new assignments?" I finally break the silence, my voice sounding strange and distant, even to my own ears. To



mask my discomfort, I shove another scoop of ice cream into my mouth and then hand the quart back to him.

“Yeah, I have a new one,” he replies, his voice warm and cozy, like one of my favorite blankets. Avery always had this charming playfulness about him, one he never held back from me before. I can tell that the only reason he’s holding back now is because he senses the strange divide between us—a divide I created.

“Anything fun?” I glance at him from the corner of my eye, not quite ready to meet his gaze directly. Not yet, at least. “You always wanted the assignment for Dragonstall Isles. Is it that one?”

Why is that the first one I think of, and why do I hope that he tells me no?

“Never got picked,” he admits, though he doesn’t seem as bitter about it as he used to. “I just got back from the southern province. Ashton and I played security for the researchers down in the ice caps.”

I nod, although I don’t know what he’s talking about. I’ve tried not to pay too much attention to the news. It only makes me sad, knowing that so many people suffer. “So what’s the new assignment?”

He nudges me lightly with his elbow, and even that small touch sends a jolt of excitement straight to my core. That’s Avery, and this is what he does to me. He destroys me with a single touch.

Deep down, I’ve always known that he is my end game, that he and his pack are where I belong. Maybe that makes me a fool for making them wait, or maybe it’s just me finally putting myself first.

“Security,” he says, his tone a bit hesitant. “Apparently,” he drawls, “I’m a pretty good bodyguard.”

Something in the back of my mind sparks, and I look over at him. His eyes twinkle under the dim kitchen lighting, and his playfulness seeps through. I swear there’s an electric

charge in the air between us, something that's been dormant for far too long.

Clearing my throat, I steal a glance at the clock behind him, acutely aware that my time in this kitchen was always limited, just like my time with him. Turning slightly to face him, I rest my hip against the counter. This unconscious invitation hangs heavily in the air between us. "I can see that," I tease, my voice playfully laced with innuendo. "All that ice cream is filling you out." Instead of touching him like I want to, I curl my hand around my spoon and dip it into the ice cream.

Avery reaches out, grips my spoon, and drags it to his mouth, causing a small plop to fall onto his thigh. White cream splatters on his black fatigues, a stark contrast that ignites a simmering tension between us.

"Well, that looks questionable," I comment, my eyes fixated on that lone plop of ice cream, my voice a low, sensual purr, even as Avery licks the spoon in my hand before releasing it.

I don't know why I do what I do next. I'll blame it on temporary insanity and the irresistible pull that has always existed between us.

Leaning down, I slowly drag my tongue across the cool trail of ice cream on his thigh. The explosion of cinnamon and vanilla bursts all around me, assaulting my senses in the most intoxicating way imaginable. It invades my mouth, caresses my taste buds, and fills the air with an alluring, decadent aroma as I savor every delicious inch of him, and then I moan.

I freeze, my eyes snapping open, my heart pounding in my chest. When did I close them? All I can do is stand here, my gaze fixated on his pants, my lips tingling with the lingering taste of ice cream. I hear his soft breaths, the beginnings of a pant as his breath brushes against my hair. I see his hand gripping the counter, and I realize I just took a rather bold step into uncharted territory, the sensual tension between us reaching a fever pitch.

*What am I doing?*

I pop up, my face blushing to a deep crimson. “I have to go,” I mutter, my voice shaky, and I take a step back, tossing my spoon onto the counter beside the ice cream.

Avery has unraveled all my senses, tearing into them until all I see is Avery, all I know is Avery. The raw intensity of the moment leaves me disoriented and overwhelmed.

Before he can utter another word, I spin on my heel and dart out of the kitchen, my mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. There’s no damn good reason to run, not one, but I can’t stay—not when being close to him ignites a fire within me that threatens to consume everything I’ve built.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Seraphina*

WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, my favorite fairy tales were always those with princesses. However, as I got older, they began to bother me. The more I think about it, the weirder it sounds. There's this damsel in distress, living in an attic of her father's home—her dead father—playing servant to her stepmother and stepsiblings. It's the epitome of a tragic existence, and the part that always threw me was that damn shoe. I don't even care that the woman had tiny feet—that detail only made me think she was a child, but I digress. What got me was that the princess met the prince once, interacted with him only once, and from that single encounter, she *knew* that one day she'd fall in love with him, so the next day—and it was the very next day—the prince came to the house with that stupid shoe so they could all try it on.

Bam, it fit. The teeny tiny shoe fit the princess, and that was after she had to make herself known, as if her presence in the house had gone unnoticed all those years. Then there she was, marrying the prince that weekend.

I hate this story because it's the closest fairy tale to real life, which terrifies me. One scent, that is all it takes, and then bam, a bond forms. What happens if that scent match doesn't end in happily ever after? What if the pack doesn't get along? Or worse, what if the pack abuses the omega? These thoughts race through my mind, a relentless torrent of worry and doubt that I can't seem to shake.

As I dash out of the kitchen and back into the hall, I can't help but draw parallels between the princess's plight and the

complexities of my own life. Like the princess, I dart down the hall, my heart pounding as I rush for the stairs. My fingers itch to take off these stupid heels so I can run faster and escape the expectations and constraints that come with my unique scent. You know, maybe that's all the princess even wanted. Perhaps she was trying to toss off her shoes to run faster and break free from the shackles of her destiny.

As I spin around the staircase, I pause. The line at the door has vanished, replaced by the sound of laughter spilling out of the ballroom, and there, standing in the middle of the archway, is Dave. Damn my luck, because this alpha is no Prince Charming, and he sees me.

My heart races as I glance at the door. It's as though he knows I'm ready to make a beeline for it, because he walks in my direction. Panic surges within me, but I swallow it down and plaster a smile on my face, hoping that the Fates are smiling down on me, and he can't smell my arousal.

"There you are," he says, smiling at me, but his smile is unsettling, as though a madman is grinning. His wild eyes hold a sliver of insanity, and my whole body rejects him as I catch the faintest scent of burnt oranges. I fight the urge to sneeze.

"Here I am," I reply with a humorless laugh, my gaze darting around the room, avoiding his. I notice a couple of alphas at the bar in the far corner, but their heads are together, so they aren't looking my way. Even the bartender seems disinterested.

"Are you ready for that dance now?" Dave inquires, raising a brow.

No, I'm not.

Summoning my resolve, I heave a sigh. "Yeah, let's do this," I mutter, eager to get it over with.

"So, Seraphina," he says, looping his elbow in mine and leading me toward the bustling ballroom. They packed the place with people, who all talk simultaneously to be heard over the noise. "Are you a castle omega or a wild omega?" he

questions, an odd inquiry that makes me feel as though he's trying to lead me into a proverbial corner I want no part of.

"Not sure what a wild omega is..." I trail off as we step onto the dance floor. In about three seconds, he's going to find out the answer to his question, because the castle trained me in all the fancy dances. I decide to take control of the situation and swirl around to face him, gifting him a smile that I don't quite feel as I bow before him, lowering my eyes just enough to maintain a semblance of poise.

"A castle omega," he purrs, and a chill runs down my spine. Every alarm bell in my head rings, but there isn't much I can do about it as he whisks me into a dance.

His chest rumbles as he twirls me around, and I fall into the rhythm of the dance. Despite the unsettling company, I cherish this moment. I revel in having a skilled partner guide my movements and the music's intoxicating flow that brushes against my skin as I spin.

I used to take dance lessons right here in this ballroom. During those sessions, I often daydreamed about dancing with a partner where the boundary between dance and seduction blurred.

For a brief moment, I almost forget my unease. I almost allow myself to be consumed by the pure joy of dancing, but then Dave's voice interrupts my reverie.

"You are absolutely stunning," he murmurs, holding me close as the world spins around us. His words bring me back to reality with a jolt, shattering the enchantment of the dance. I can only nod in response, rendered speechless by his presence.

"Tell me, Seraphina, how did I never know you lived here?" he asks as the music transitions into a slower, more intimate melody. I try to maintain distance between us, but it's futile. I don't want to provoke him, so I reluctantly relent.

"Well..." I pause, drawing out the word as we move toward a dimly lit corner at the far end of the ballroom. From the corner of my eye, I spot Violet conversing with the omega she befriended in line. They monitor us, especially Violet, who

seems vigilant. “If I wanted someone to see me, they would. I preferred to remain invisible.”

“A beautiful omega like you shouldn’t hide,” Dave says, his warm breath on my skin. His words send shivers down my spine, but not the pleasant kind. His scent is overpowering, carrying a nauseating undertone of decay. I fight the urge to gag and shrug, looking past his shoulder and avoiding direct eye contact.

“Like I said, I didn’t want anyone to notice me,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

“And here you are, the belle of the ball,” he whispers against my ear, and his tone takes on an unsettling edge, causing a wave of discomfort to wash over me. *Only one more song*, I tell myself as I struggle to maintain my composure. Just one more dance, and then I can escape this unsettling encounter.

I glance over his shoulder again, my eyes darting toward the other alphas who shoot him hostile glares. It’s unnerving, this silent confrontation brewing among the dominant males. They are probably wondering why he’s monopolizing my time while a line of eager omegas waits patiently for their chance to dance with potential mates.

Then, out of the blue, he steps on my foot, and pain shoots through my toes as they get crushed beneath his heel. He doesn’t seem to mind my discomfort. In fact, he seems to take some perverse pleasure in it.

Gritting my teeth, I mentally prepare myself for what’s inevitably coming next. However, to my surprise, he doesn’t insist on further contact as the song ends. Maybe the crowd serves as a deterrent to any inappropriate behavior on his part.

“Saturday, let me take you to brunch,” he purrs, his sharp nose held high and his eyes locked onto mine. “I’ll be here for you at one sharp.” He reaches for my hand again, and I can’t help but dread the possibility of him marking me once more.

Despite my unease, I flash him a polite smile, my gaze still scanning the room. “We’ll see,” I reply ambiguously,

unwilling to commit to anything. The last thing I want is to be entangled with someone as unsettling as him, but I also can't risk offending him in a room full of powerful alphas.

Luckily, Violet steps beside me and grabs my hand, spinning me to face her. "I'm starving," she declares, not once glancing in his direction, perhaps because she isn't as adept at concealing her feelings as I am. Her presence is a relief, as she effectively extracts me from his creepy clutches.

"I owe you a cheeseburger," I whisper to Violet, shaking out my hand.

"Damn right you do, and fries and a strawberry milkshake."

I wrinkle my nose at her. "Everyone knows that chocolate is the better flavor."

She leads me to a table where the other omega, whose name I still don't know, stands with wide eyes.

"Poppy, what's the superior flavor?" Violet asks, halting before our new acquaintance. Poppy's dark eyes and hair look familiar now that I'm inspecting her under the bright lights.

"Vanilla malt," Poppy beams.

"Girl, no." Violet playfully mimics vomiting before turning to me. "Poppy is Sawyer's little sister. I didn't even know that girl had a sibling."

Neither did I. This time, when I look at Poppy, I offer her a warm smile. "It's nice to see you again, Poppy."

"Do you know who you were dancing with?" Poppy interjects without a care for introductions.

"Some alpha named Dave. That's all I know," I reply as we approach the buffet table. My stomach grumbles. I neglected to feed it in order to squeeze into this dress.

Poppy grips my arm and steps closer. "No, Seraphina, that was Davey Finch."

The strawberry in my hand plops onto my plate. "You're kidding me?" The heir to the Finch pack.



“Rumor has it he’s a dick,” Violet chimes in, positioning herself on my other side. “He’s no good, Seraphina. We weren’t sure how to get you out of that.”

“I’m glad you did.” My stomach grumbles in agreement as I pile a colorful assortment of fruit onto my plate. “He asked me out for brunch tomorrow,” I mutter under my breath, my appetite momentarily forgotten.

“Get out of it,” Poppy urges with a hint of concern. “I can call my sister and have her say that all omegas are on lockdown.”

I can’t help but chuckle at the thought. “No, he thinks I live here,” I reply with a mischievous smile. “I don’t mind letting him make that assumption.”

My eyes lock on a tempting chocolate fountain as we navigate the buffet table. It may not be the same as a drink fountain, but its allure is undeniable. “You know they aren’t serving omegas alcohol tonight?” I comment as I make a beeline for the chocolate, with Poppy and Violet trailing behind. “Blasphemy. Dean Matilda and her strict rules should at least let us have some fun if we have to put up with this crowd.”

“Does she now?” The voice of Dean Matilda Anderson, a petite yet imposing figure, breaks into our conversation.

I halt my progress toward the chocolate fountain and turn on my heel, clutching my fruit plate. Violet and Poppy stand behind Dean Matilda, both wide-eyed and trying not to laugh. I squint at them briefly before addressing the dean. “Matty.”

“Don’t you ‘Matty’ me,” she scolds, brandishing a finger in my direction. Despite her small stature, she has a presence that demands attention. “No drinks,” she reiterates sternly before walking away, but not before adding, “And do not spike the punch.”

“I hadn’t thought about it until now. Thanks for the idea,” I quip.

Ignoring the traitorous giggles from Violet and Poppy, I finally reach the chocolate fountain. There’s something

enchancing about fountains, even ones filled with chocolate. I dip a succulent strawberry into the flowing chocolate and bring it to my lips, savoring the indulgent treat. I take a moment to savor the sweetness before catching a faint scent in the air—chamomile tea with a hint of cream. It's delicate but intriguing, evoking a desire for a cup of tea.

Moving too quickly to satiate my curiosity, I accidentally spill some chocolate on my dress. "Oh no," I mutter, gazing down at my bodice, a mix of annoyance and amusement coloring my expression. I may not be a princess, but the chocolate fountain never fails to leave its mark on me.

"Looks like you got a little something on you," a man's voice chimes in beside me. He pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and extends it toward me.

"How very gentlemanly of you," I reply, accepting the handkerchief without hesitation. He takes my plate without me even asking. I focus my attention on the chocolate stain, dabbing at it with the handkerchief, though I'm well aware that it's likely to leave a mark that's impossible to remove.

"A little bit of club soda might get that out," he suggests.

I glance up at him, the faint scent of tea wafting over me. It teases my senses, leaving me yearning for more. However, it's not just the scent that captivates me, it's the alpha who carries it. Standing before me is a strikingly handsome man, the epitome of grace and symmetry. It's as if the creator meticulously sculpted every detail of his appearance with an artist's hand. His piercing green eyes twinkle above a perfectly proportioned nose. His low, contemplative brows give him a perpetual air of thoughtfulness, and while his eyes may appear somewhat severe, something inside me recognizes the falsehood in that impression.

To me, he'll never exhibit cruelty, or at least that's how it seems in this moment. I can't help but wonder where that thought sprung from. Clearing my throat, I casually glance at his neck, attempting to spot a bond mark, but his collar conceals it from view. Returning my gaze to his vivid green eyes, I realize he caught me searching for it. Busted.

“They probably keep some in the kitchen,” he remarks, leaning in closer to whisper, “I’ve heard there’s ice cream in the freezer.”

His words make my face contort with surprise. Only Avery and I ever ventured into that hidden treasure trove of ice cream. How on earth does this alpha know about it? Foolish Seraphina, everyone knows that’s where we hide the ice cream.

“It’s a secondhand dress. I can get it dry-cleaned.” Feeling self-conscious, I grab a hunk of cheese and pop it into my mouth to keep from blurting out something foolish.

“Well, do you have a free dance?” he asks with a charming smile, his sparkling eyes focused entirely on me.

I like it.

Turning my attention back to my friends, I find their jaws on the floor as they stare at him. “Oh, so you also see him?” I nod. “Glad he isn’t imaginary.” I hand my plate to Violet.

“Devlin,” he introduces himself, giving me his actual name and not a fabricated one.

“Seraphina.” I loop my arm in his, chocolate stain and all, as we glide onto the dance floor. His smile never wavers as he gazes down at me. This feels like the princess’s magical night.

Giddy excitement surges within me, one I struggle to contain. Every time he directs that smile at me, it sends a thrill coursing through me. I can’t deny it—I want to know more about him. I need to know.

“Do you come here often?” I inquire as he leads me across the dance floor, the breeze caressing my cheeks as my heart races.

His laughter, like warm honey with an undercurrent of chamomile, envelops me, sinking deep into my senses and making me yearn for more. It’s as though the world around us fades, and there’s only the two of us dancing in a dream.

“No,” he answers, his voice a low, intimate murmur as he leans closer, his breath warm against my ear. “I hate coming

here, if I'm honest."

"That makes two of us," I reply, my words infused with humor. As the song changes, I allow myself to melt into him, our bodies swaying to the rhythm. Devlin's heat envelops me, sending sparks of electricity zinging between us. I wish the song would stretch on forever.

"Is it all the pompous assholes?" he asks, his question catching me off guard. "The muted scents? Or the politicians?"

I let out a soft grumble as I tilt my head back to look up at him. He's tall, with the lean, athletic build of a swimmer. "You want me to be honest with you?" I ask, just before he smoothly spins me and then guides me back into his embrace.

My palms press against his chest, and I clutch his lapels, feeling the reassuring fabric beneath my fingers. "I always want you to be honest with me."

His response lands like a punch in my gut, and I can't help but lick my lips, aware of his eyes tracking the movement. His gaze is lazy yet intense, and it ignites a fiery sensation deep in my belly. "It's the whole dynamic."

"Explain," he encourages, his fingers threading through mine. With that simple touch, the outside world fades into insignificance, leaving only the two of us in this grand ballroom. Just him and me, our scents mingling, our breaths harmonizing.

"One scent," I whisper, my voice barely audible above the music, "and my entire world can change in the blink of an eye. I've seen firsthand what that can do. I never wanted to become a victim, losing myself to a pack of individuals who saw me not as a person, but as a prize."

We continue to dance, our feet moving in perfect harmony. I'm drawn to Devlin in a way I can't explain, and with every passing moment, I long to uncover more about him, to understand the enigma he presents.

Devlin's fingers gently trace patterns on the small of my back as we sway together on the dance floor. The music shifts, wrapping us in its sultry embrace, and I find it increasingly

difficult to focus on anything other than the man in front of me.

“Seraphina,” he murmurs, his voice a soft caress. “This world, our lives are complex, driven by pheromones and instinct, and sometimes...” He pauses, his eyes seeing through my entire soul. “Sometimes moments of clarity allow us to finally see what’s in front of us.”

*Did he just scent mark me?*

I tilt my head slightly, regarding him with curiosity, my head fuzzy and my body burning. “And what do you see?” Is that my voice? It’s smoky and sensual. I swallow as a prickling sensation wraps around me.

He smiles, and it’s devastating, his gaze unwavering. “Right now, I see a beautiful omega I want to get to know.” His cheek brushes mine, his scent deepening until all I taste in the air between us is him. “I see what truly matters. Past the complexities of our world, I see the essence of a connection I want to unravel.”

His words resonate with me, striking a chord deep within. Devlin’s presence, his charisma, all feels so genuine. I’ve spent so long shielding my heart, but I’m tempted to let my guard down.

*Or does he just have a silver tongue?*

“Would you take a walk with me through the maze?” he asks, pulling back, his eyes filled with a mix of hope and longing. “I promise I just want to get to know you better. I want to learn all the intricacies that make Seraphina tick.”

His proposal hangs in the air, the weight of it pressing down on me. The maze has always been a symbol of the complexities of our world, but Devlin offers me a chance to navigate it on my own terms. It’s a risk, but one worth taking.

I smile, my heart fluttering with anticipation. “I’d love to.” The words leave my lips before I can swallow them.

*I just hope I don’t regret this.*

## CHAPTER 9

### *Seraphina*

ELECTRICITY DANCES ACROSS MY SKIN, igniting with every touch from Devlin. It's an exhilarating sensation, sending sparks racing up my arm and setting my entire being ablaze. This feeling is unlike anything I've ever encountered, a strange mixture of warmth and elation that surges through me like a fire burning within my soul. Something lingers at the fringes of my consciousness, hinting that there's more to this sensation than what meets the eye. My body yearns to convey a message, but I struggle to interpret it.

As foreign as this sensation may be, one thing is abundantly clear—I would willingly follow Devlin to the ends of the earth. A peculiar thrill washes over me at the mere thought, as if I've stumbled upon a hidden portal that promises to unlock my deepest desires.

Devlin leads me away from the bustling ballroom, and I can feel the weight of curious eyes upon us as we ascend the grand staircase. Their lingering gazes falter in the face of Devlin's unwavering confidence, and I can't help but stand a little taller, basking in the warmth of his admiration. At the summit of the staircase, Devlin interlaces his fingers with mine, guiding me further away from the throngs of people. The allure of the unknown is intoxicating, and my heart quickens with anticipation. Though I have no inkling of what lies ahead, I'm certain it will be nothing short of extraordinary.

We enter the atrium, a vast sanctuary adorned with elegant statues and verdant plants. The intoxicating scent of damp earth and fragrant flowers envelops my senses as we meander

through the room's breathtaking beauty. This place has been my sanctuary for as long as I can remember, a hidden gem offering respite from the demands of my everyday life. It grants me the luxury of breathing in fresh air without prying eyes. The castle's ingenious positioning against the mountain ensures this spot's safety, making it the perfect refuge. A cobblestone path winds its way through a riot of overgrown flowers, their leaves forming a lush canopy overhead while the soft, twinkling lights scattered about lend a magical aura to the surroundings.

Devlin leads me toward a discreet door nestled in the back right corner of the atrium. Ordinarily, this door remains firmly locked and under vigilant guard, but tonight, it stands wide open. Stepping outside, I draw in a deep, invigorating breath, a sense of relief washing over me even as a faint chill races down my spine. Devlin's hand rests gently on the small of my back, and he nods toward a lone guard stationed just outside, the ember of his cigarette the only visible sign of his presence.

The path leading to the maze follows the contours of the mountain, descending gracefully. An iron railing ensures our safety, though we're not perched high up. The world around us is shrouded in a twilight embrace, and the distant stars twinkle in a celestial dance, casting their soft, silvery glow upon our path.

"So, Devlin..." I nibble my bottom lip, our path illuminated by softly glowing orbs. "What's your favorite food?"

"My favorite food?" Devlin questions, a smile dancing in his eyes as he looks down at me. "That's not quite where I expected this conversation to go." His laughter wraps around me, sinking deep into my soul.

"Well," I drawl, "it can make or break a relationship."

"How's that, sweet Seraphina?" The endearment Devlin uses sends a thrill of excitement rushing through me.

"You could eat liver every day," I deadpan. "That's a deal breaker. Imagine the breath of someone who ate liver daily."

Once again, Devlin chuckles as we step onto the path that winds through the heart of the maze. Up ahead, a fountain is aglow with blue lights. An omega statue, her face veiled by lace, gazes over her shoulder from its pedestal in the center. I've always felt she exuded a sense of melancholy. There have been times when I've wanted to topple that statue, but now, I wonder if she was peering through the lace, playing coy. It's intriguing how a slight change in perspective can entirely alter the outlook on a single statue.

"Well, I can assure you that I don't eat liver," Devlin says, drawing me back into our conversation.

"Then what do you eat?" I gently tug him in the direction I want to go. It's a rare opportunity to walk through the maze. I only ever admired it from a distance during my stay here, but I know there's a gazebo at the center, and I want to see it illuminated.

"Are you trying to feed me, Seraphina?" Devlin quips, grabbing my hand and twirling me around until my palms press against his chest, and I grip his lapels. It's reminiscent of our dance on the ballroom floor, but out here, we're alone. Whispers from others meandering through the grounds echo faintly in the background, but I pay them no mind. It's just him and me. "An alpha might take that as an invitation."

"I assure you that I can't cook," I reply, blinking up at him as heat surges through me, sending goosebumps dancing across my skin. "Although I do love a good Crock-Pot meal."

Devlin's eyes glitter as he gazes down at me. "Don't worry, one of my packmates loves to cook," he says with a smile.

"Do you have a pack?" I ask, stopping my pursuit of his favorite food. However, I can't help but secretly entertain the idea of preparing it for him.

The fragrant scent of chamomile and cream envelops me, growing deeper and more potent now that we're alone. I slowly inhale his essence, imprinting his unique scent on my soul, but then a thought flashes through my mind—imprinting. Red flags urgently wave in my thoughts.



“I have a pack, yes,” he replies, leaning closer until his warm breath tickles my ear, effectively banishing my concerns. “But my favorite food just so happens to be brown sugar shortbread.” His lips graze my ear, and my scent bursts forth, betraying my body’s response to his proximity. Brown sugar—such a sweet indulgence.

I swallow and pull back, a teasing smile playing on my lips. “Have you ever been lost in a maze, Devlin?”

Deep within me, I’m aware that my pheromones are taking control, propelling me forward with an irresistible urge. Logic and reason no longer hold sway. Right now, I am all omega, and she’s yearning to play. Tomorrow, I know I’ll dissect every action from tonight, but that’s a problem for future Seraphina.

“This one?” Devlin’s gaze briefly shifts to the maze behind me and then to the sliver of moon overhead before returning to my face. “No,” he responds, and I can’t discern whether he’s navigated this maze before or not.

Despite every instinct telling me to hold on, I release his fingers and take a step back. Warning bells chime inside me. This behavior is unlike my usual self, but I take another step, a moment guided solely by instinct. With one more step, Devlin catches on, and he inhales sharply.

There’s one thing we can always count on when it comes to designations and the power dynamics between alphas and omegas—the chase. Alphas revel in the thrill of pursuing an omega, eagerly tracking them down and pinning them in place, witnessing their submission, and seeing them bare their necks. It’s one of the first lessons ingrained within these very walls.

“One minute head start?” I inquire, a crisp breeze tousling my hair as I prepare for the challenge.

“One minute? Starting now,” Devlin responds, tilting his head before removing his suit jacket. His ethereal eyes never waver from mine, creating an enticing power play that dares my gaze to wander and appreciate the corded muscles of his arms. “Time is ticking, sweet Seraphina. It’s your choice—watch me or run.”

I find myself surprisingly weak willed, unable to tear my eyes away as Devlin drapes his jacket carefully over the edge of a nearby fountain. He leisurely unbuttons his white shirt sleeves, and I'm torn between watching and running.

I kick off one shoe and then the other, shedding my shoes with haste before darting into the maze. Laughter spills from my lips, and for the first time in years, the weight of the world seems to vanish.

Gone are the thoughts of my sister, my brother, the power of the council, and the need to conform. Out here, it's just me, an omega running through a maze, barefoot and free.

My fingers glide over the foliage, and my feet crunch through the cold grass. The hedges rise around me, forming an endless barrier, obscuring the path ahead. My heart races with anticipation as I navigate the intricate maze, my senses alert and my eyes scanning for any sign of escape.

As I round each corner, excitement courses through my veins. I can almost sense something great waiting for me just around the bend, and I want nothing more than to find it and seize it. With each step I take, I feel more and more connected to the moment, and the overwhelming presence of the hedges feels strangely comforting and safe.

Or maybe it's knowing that somewhere behind me, Devlin stalks through the maze as well, tracking my scent, trying to find me. The thought alone sends tingles racing through me, and I pick up my pace.

On any normal day, no one would catch me running, ever, and right now, it shows as my breath becomes choppy and my lungs gulp down air. As I spin around another corner, I come face-to-face with a dead end.

“Sweet Seraphina, my princess, where are you?” Devlin's voice has a guttural tone that wasn't there before, the alpha in him coming out to play in full force.

I step behind the lip of the hedge. Devlin sounds so close. I slow my breathing, trying to keep it from giving me away, as I back up to the wall and turn to see if I can sneak through it.

“I can smell you, little one.” This time, Devlin moans, and even though he isn’t anywhere near me, the purr in his voice curls my toes.

I shove a hand through the hedge and push it apart. Peering through, I see an empty path.

Can I get through there?

A shadow moves along the other hedge, and I snap my fingers back and take off in the other direction, heading toward the path I didn’t take. Devlin’s laughter rings all around me, and I can’t discern exactly where Devlin is.

I have to be getting to the center of the maze.

“There you are.” He’s so close.

I glance over my shoulder, spotting him at the far end of the path. With a squeal of delight, I take off again, darting down paths, hoping to find the center of the maze where the gazebo is, but once more, I find myself in another dead end.

This time, though, strong hands catch me, spinning me around, and lips crash down on mine. Devlin’s lips meet mine before I can even take a breath. His kiss is soft and delicate yet filled with so much passion that it makes my head spin. His fingertips trail up and down my spine as my scent blooms all around us.

I lose myself in this moment, the heat of his body seeping into mine as our lips move in perfect harmony. I feel like I’m melting into him, and the world around us fades into a distant memory. All I can see and feel is Devlin—his arms around me, his scent enveloping me, and his kiss igniting a fire within.

A soft moan escapes my lips as I feel his hands moving down to the small of my back, pulling me closer to him. My fingers tangle in his hair as I kiss him back with an equal amount of fervor.

Suddenly, Devlin pulls away, causing me to pout at the loss of contact. He grins down at me, mischief glittering in his eyes.

That's when I feel a sharp cramp. It starts at the apex of my thighs and shoots upward to my belly button before branching down to each leg. I stumble into Devlin, my scent deepening.

My gaze remains locked on his. His pupils dilate, the darkness swallowing the light, and his lips part as his nostrils flare.

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.

"Seraphina..." Devlin's voice trembles. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, and he licks his lips. "How close—" He inhales deeply, his eyes rolling back for a moment. I know in this very moment, my hormones have devoured the suppressants, reducing them to nothing but placebo pills. "Is your heat?"

My fingers slip inside his unbuttoned shirt, the warmth of his chest providing some relief from the cramps. My breathing becomes ragged, and a stronger cramp courses through me, making me moan. I can't tell if it's pleasure or pain, but then slick pools in my panties, soaking them.

I squeeze my thighs together, hoping Devlin doesn't catch a whiff, as it could ruin us. If I keep this up, I might find myself presenting for him, begging for his knot and then his bite. I'm teetering on the edge of insanity, and I have no idea which way to go. Slowly, logic trickles in before my hormones can shut it down, and I answer him. "Haven't had one," I say in a choppy sentence. "They keep me on suppressants."

Devlin's body trembles as he holds himself back, his hands flexing on my waist. "I want..." He tilts his head back as he takes steady gulps of air. The position may help him, but his scent wafts down to me, still muted because his suppressants haven't failed.

"I'm not in control," I whisper a moment before I tear his shirt open and lick his chest.

"That's okay, because I am."

As my tongue laps at his chest, the logical part of my brain gapes at me in horror, as though there are two of me inside my

head fighting for dominance.

Devlin tastes like honey and sin.

Devlin tastes like cold nights wrapped in a blanket, sitting before a raging fire.

He *tastes* like a perfect scent match.

The softest moan escapes my lips, and that's all it takes for Devlin to react. With a swift yet gentle motion, he lifts me up his body, his lips finding mine once again. Our mouths crash together, our tongues dancing in a fiery tango. My legs struggle against the fabric of my dress, seeking to wrap around him. I climb him, pushing myself upward until my head hovers above his, allowing me to take control of the kiss.

Amidst the whirlwind of sensation, I'm well aware that my heat is attempting to assert itself. It makes sense, at least in a logical capacity. However, logic has taken a back seat. A shadow momentarily obscures us from above. I barely register the possibility that someone might stumble upon us, but it hardly matters. All I can think of is the intoxicating taste of Devlin's kiss.

Devlin pulls back from our heated embrace. Despite the intensity of the moment, he remains firmly in control. His pupils, once dilated with desire, gradually relax, though a flush still colors his cheeks.

"I need to get you out of here," he whispers against my lips, his tongue tracing a tantalizing path along their seam, eliciting another whimper from me.

"Tongue. Not. Helping," I gasp as my head falls back, my body arching toward his. My desperate need for his touch intensifies with every passing second. "Help," I plea, my head swaying from side to side in anguish.

"Seraphina," Devlin groans, burying his face in my neck. His tongue traces the sensitive junction of my neck and shoulder, causing shivers to race down my spine. "You have no idea what you are asking of me. You smell... Fuck, you smell like mine." He delivers his words with conviction in a guttural voice that starkly contrasts his usual control.

“I need...”

“I know, sweet Seraphina, I know what you need.” Devlin curses softly, gently setting me down on a bench. He releases me, and then he reaches into his pocket for his phone. His fingers fly across the screen before he stows it away. “Backup is on its way.”

In my dazed state, I gaze up at him, taking in the sight of this beautiful alpha who’s showing remarkable restraint in this heated moment. I recognize the intensity of his desire, but his respect and self-control stand out. Many other alphas might have seized this opportunity, plunging into their instincts and claiming me as their own, driven by the primal urge to mate and ensure their lineage, but not Devlin.

Instead, he takes deliberate steps backward, creating distance between us. He moves away, making me whimper in protest.

“I know, sweetheart, I just...” Devlin groans and drops to his knees. “I need you to give me consent,” he says, his fists clenching at his sides, the struggle for control evident in every tense line of his body.

“I consent,” I declare without hesitation, my fingers curling around the edge of my dress and inching it upward, revealing more of my body. My skin burns, and the tulle is too scratchy.

Devlin’s breath hitches, his gaze momentarily flickering behind me. “Stop,” he chokes out, his eyes returning to mine. “Backup is here. Don’t lift your dress.” He advances toward me cautiously, like he’s approaching a wild creature. “If I smell your slick, then I won’t...” He pauses, his words caught in his throat. “I’m going to take care of you, just keep your dress down.”

Another cramp sears through my body, and I desperately rub my thighs together. “Please,” I whimper.

“We have an audience. Are you okay with that?” I attempt to avert my gaze, but he gently lifts my chin with his

fingertips, forcing me to look directly into his eyes. “It’s my pack. Just one person, a bodyguard, to ensure I behave.”

“Please,” I plead again. In this heated moment, I couldn’t care less who watches. I just need relief. The timing couldn’t be worse though.

Devlin glances over my shoulder then nods swiftly. Devlin’s hands find my hair, and he releases the ponytail holder, allowing my hair to cascade freely around my shoulders and down my back. Tilting my head up, he presses his lips to mine once more.

As Devlin deepens the kiss, I feel my heart racing with excitement, my core beginning to burn with desire. His hands move from my hair to my waist, pulling me closer until I can sense the heat radiating from his body. Our tongues dance together in a passionate tango.

Breaking away for a breath, I glimpse a myriad of emotions in Devlin’s eyes—a potent blend of desire, hunger, and something more enigmatic that I can’t quite discern. I yearn to explore these feelings with him.

“You’re burning up,” he whispers into my hair, his lips grazing my skin as he kisses me again. His hands trace a path up my legs, traveling under my skirt.

“Yes,” I moan, letting my head fall back. My fingers clench his shirt tightly despite the cramps that gnaw at them. “More,” I whimper.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” he assures me, gently pulling back. His voice is commanding, and he instructs, “Watch me as I touch you.”

My head feels heavy, weighed down by desire, as I drop my chin to my chest. My mouth remains puffy and swollen from our passionate kisses. Devlin’s hands continue their ascent, tenderly caressing my skin and drawing out the anticipation as long as he dares.

I swallow hard, my breath catching in my throat as his fingers find my wet slit, boldly pulling my panties to the side. A breathy moan escapes my lips, and I feel my body tremble

with anticipation. Devlin teases me for a brief moment, his lips brushing against mine before he spreads my lips apart.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he whispers, his voice barely containing his excitement. His index finger moves teasingly over my sensitive clit. “Do you like that?”

My response is a long, low whimper. Each touch sends electrifying shockwaves of pleasure racing through my core.

“My god,” I moan as his movements transition from teasing to frantic. The heat within me intensifies, and I burn with desire.

“Tell me,” Devlin growls, his voice husky with need. “What do you want?”

Arching my back, I thrust my core toward him in a wordless plea. “More,” I growl, my voice laced with primal desire as though something otherworldly has taken control of my body.

As I grind against his hand, he slips two fingers inside me. “Do you like my fingers inside your tight little pussy?”

I’ve lost the ability to form words, so I nod vigorously in response. He brings his slick thumb to my lips, urging me to taste myself on him as if he wants to imprint the memory of my flavor into my mind for future fantasies.

I eagerly oblige, moaning as I twirl my tongue around his thumb, savoring every drop of my essence. “So fucking sweet,” he growls in my ear before withdrawing his slick digit.

Before I can fully regain my senses, he thrusts three fingers inside me. The sensation is exquisite, the stretch exactly what I’ve been craving, and his knuckles mimic the feeling of a knot.

“My god,” I cry out, feeling as though he’s splitting me in two. The suddenness of his deep penetration makes my breath hitch. Devlin bites his lip, his eyes locked on mine as he continues his relentless assault.

“Devlin,” I whisper as he slowly withdraws his fingers before thrusting back in, this time with a bit more force. My



body quivers with pleasure, and I'm completely under his spell, lost in the intensity of the moment.

"More?" Devlin's voice is a sultry whisper as he tilts my head up to meet his gaze. His fingers continue their tantalizing exploration inside me, causing waves of pleasure to ripple through my core. I struggle to focus on anything other than the intoxicating sensation of his touch, nodding quickly in response to his question. "Such a needy, sweet omega," he murmurs, his eyes locked on mine.

I can't help but roll my hips, the burn of desire spreading through me, making my muscles tense and my breasts feel heavy. My eyelids flutter, but I keep them open, captivated by the raw intensity of the moment, watching Devlin watch me.

His voice, laden with desire, teases my senses. "Do you want to come for me, Seraphina?"

Words elude me, and all I can manage is a whimper. I cling to him, my body reacting with a mixture of anticipation and longing.

Devlin skillfully adds a fourth finger, pushing inside me and twisting sensually. His eyes never leave mine as he commands, "Come for me, omega."

His fingers delve deep within me, driving me to the brink of ecstasy. The pressure builds relentlessly, sending electrifying waves of pleasure throughout my body. Gasps escape my lips as I cling to Devlin's shoulders, my body surrendering to the overwhelming sensation of release. My orgasm crashes over me in an explosive wave of pleasure, leaving me breathless and trembling in his embrace.

I'm lost in the throes of passion, and it takes a moment to register that Devlin is gradually slowing his movements until they cease entirely. He slowly withdraws his fingers, allowing the sensations to dissipate, then he gently places a tender kiss on my forehead.

"Good girl," he whispers in my ear, his praise washing over me as he holds me close in a warm embrace.

A sense of clarity gradually returns to my foggy mind, and my preheat is temporarily sated. My body still tingles with residual pleasure, but I'm slowly regaining my composure.

*Don't think, Seraphina, just fucking feel.*

Devlin's scent grows more pronounced as he nuzzles me, marking me with his intoxicating fragrance. I understand and welcome the significance of his actions. I want to be saturated with his scent, a tangible reminder of our shared intimacy.

As the intensity of my orgasm slowly subsides, he pulls back, and I realize I'm shivering from the aftershocks of pleasure.

"Well," I say, my cheeks warming with a blush, "you certainly fed the feverish preheat beast, and now she's left feeling cold."

A charming smile plays on Devlin's lips as he nods, acknowledging the unexpected turn of events. In the distance, I hear approaching footsteps. Still, I refuse to allow embarrassment to overshadow the intensity of our shared experience. With a sense of newfound confidence, I turn, my jaw dropping at the sight that awaits me.

"Ashton?" I blink at the delta, momentarily taken aback by his presence. He's shaking out Devlin's suit jacket and holding it open as if offering to wrap it around me. My gaze quickly confirms his identity. Unlike his identical twin, Ashton's body is adorned with tattoos, and he sports a short, dark beard, yet beyond these physical differences, the warmth in his eyes unmistakably marks him as Ashton.

"Molasses munchkin," he teases, his voice filled with playful familiarity as he extends the coat toward me. "Fancy meeting you here."

"You two know each other?" Devlin's head tilts to the side, and a strange, knowing smirk graces his face. It's as if he's privy to a secret, and my curiosity intensifies.

I clear my throat, feeling a mix of discomfort and surprise. I know Avery quite well, but Ashton only by proxy.

“This is awkward for me,” I chirp, eager to break the tension as I quickly slip my arms into the offered suit jacket and pull it closed around me. “And I am not a munchkin,” I playfully scold Ashton.

“Yeah, you are,” he retorts with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“You guys are bonded?” My gaze shifts back and forth between the two men, my mind racing to process this new information. “A pack?”

Devlin turns to face us, his response simple and to the point. “Yes.” His tone carries a weight that hints at the significance of their bond. However, he remains oblivious to the implications this revelation holds for me. Little does he know this will give Avery more ammunition to use against me.

A sudden cramp ripples through my core, catching me off guard and nearly causing me to double over in pain. Gasping for breath, I struggle to regain my composure.

“Rain check on this,” I say between breaths. “Get me out of here.” The discomfort of my preheat continues to intensify, and I’m desperate for some relief. Only this time, I can wait until I get home and either sleep it off or surrender to some silicone relief.

Ashton’s brows furrow with concern as he watches me grapple with the discomfort of my preheat. His playful demeanor quickly shifts to a more empathetic one, and he approaches with a gentle touch on my shoulder. “Seraphina, are you okay?” he asks, his voice laced with genuine worry.

I offer him a strained smile, acknowledging his kindness despite the pain coursing through my body. “Just... heat things,” I mutter, my voice trembling.

Devlin, ever the attentive alpha, steps closer and takes my hand. His eyes search mine, filled with a mix of compassion and determination. “Let’s get you out of here,” he says, his grip on my hand reassuringly firm.

With Ashton’s support on one side and Devlin’s on the other, I regain my footing. It’s a slow, laborious process, but

I'm grateful for their unwavering presence. We make our way out of the maze, one step at a time, with Ashton leading the way and Devlin keeping a protective watch over me.

As we finally emerge from the maze, the cool night air hits my face, offering a welcome respite from the stifling heat of my preheat. My body trembles with relief as the worst of the cramps subside.

"Thank you, both of you," I murmur, genuinely appreciative of their support. It's a strange twist of fate that has brought us together like this, and I can't help but wonder how it might change the dynamics of our interactions moving forward.

Devlin's eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, it feels like there's something unspoken passing between us.

Ashton breaks the silence with a warm smile. "Anytime you need us, Seraphina."

There is so much unspoken in that one sentence that I can't hold his vibrant gaze, and I look away, finding my car. I nibble my bottom lip, wondering if I can even drive my ass home. Groaning, I mutter, "Violet."

"Let me take you home." Ashton steps forward, but I'm not ready to leave either of them. I grip Devlin's shirt, and I swear some bullshit leaves my mouth.

That's when Ashton picks me up and nuzzles me.

"I'll make sure your car and Violet get home," Devlin promises, leaning down to press a kiss to my forehead.

My eyelids already grow heavy with his scent, chasing all my worries away. When Ashton's spicy nutmeg scent washes over me, sleep drags me down into her clutches.

## CHAPTER 10

# *Seraphina*

A SPLITTING HEADACHE and a fur ball jolt me awake. I don't actually have a fur ball to cough up. Still, Minnow, my mischievous orange kitty, has decided that my head is the perfect spot for his early morning nap. I blink my itchy eyes open, and he responds with a contented purr. It's like he's mocking my situation.

As I slowly regain my bearings, the memories of last night come crashing back like a tidal wave. The gala, an extravagant affair filled with extravagant people. Avery, with that infectious smile that could melt even the iciest of hearts and the delectable ice cream that made me forget my troubles for a moment. Dancing with that insufferable alpha, desperately seeking an escape from his clutches. The dreaded chocolate mishap that left my dress in ruins. Then, the unexpected appearances of Devlin and Ashton, two powerful men who seem to be part of the same pack.

Groaning in despair, I roll away from Minnow, who voices his annoyance with an indignant meow. I bury my head under another pillow and toss a blanket onto it for good measure. What have I done?

I remind myself my heat does not define who I am as a person. I can't let it control me.

Can I just hide under these covers all day? Maybe. After all, it's Saturday, and I have the luxury of being off work on Fridays and Saturdays. Technically, I could cocoon myself in this blanket fortress and pretend the world doesn't exist, and that my heat didn't betray me while I was with Devlin.

However, I can't ignore the undeniable connection between us. Even with the suppressants, my body recognizes that Devlin and his pack are a perfect match.

A soft meow interrupts my introspection, and Sushi, my pampered princess, hops onto the blanket, looking for a way to snuggle in. I lift the edge of the blanket, granting her access. Her bright green eyes gleam in the dim light as she settles beside me, playfully rolling over in anticipation of some affectionate pets.

As my fingers glide through her soft calico fur, I ramble, my voice barely above a whisper. "What am I going to do?" I curl my body around Sushi, seeking comfort in her warm presence. Minnow purrs behind me, his soothing vibrations mimicking an alpha's calming influence. "The whole point of avoiding a mating ceremony was to give myself space to figure out who I am."

Sushi chuffs at me in a way that only cats can, her eyes closing as if to say, "Figure it out yourself, human." It's a rather rude dismissal, but I need answers, and I need them fast. The scents of nutmeg and cream, unmistakably Ashton's and Devlin's mingled scents, still linger in the room, intermingling with my own scent, creating a tantalizing aroma that ignites my senses and sets my body ablaze.

I CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL THE WALLS CLOSING IN AROUND ME, the weight of my choices pressing down. The complexities of the world and its intricate dynamics have never been more evident than they are now. The constant struggle between my own desires and the expectations of society is like a never-ending battle, one that leaves me torn and uncertain.

Sushi's purring and Minnow's comforting presence offer a small respite from the turmoil raging within me. I need to make a decision, and it won't be easy. Do I follow the path fate seems to have laid out for me, or do I forge my own way, risking the consequences of defying tradition?

The room remains silent except for the rhythmic sounds of my cats purring. As I lie here, wrapped in the cocoon of blankets and uncertainty, I know one thing for certain—the

choices I make in the coming days will shape the course of my life in ways I can't imagine.

Throwing the blanket off me, I sit up, realizing that something's amiss. "This isn't my shirt," I mutter to myself, yanking the unfamiliar garment away from my body. Devlin's scent hits me, and my cheeks flush with embarrassment. It's the shirt he wore last night. I can't help but remember how I whimpered when Ashton tried to pry me away from Devlin. Devlin stripped off his shirt and handed it to me, a silent promise of something more.

"Oh, I'm so screwed!" I groan, dropping my head into my hands. This situation is worse than waking up hungover and trying to piece together the events of the previous night. No wonder the dean banned omegas from drinking. I hate to admit it, but she knew what she was doing. It's a secret I'll take to my grave.

I blow out a frustrated breath and toss my legs over the side of the bed, letting my feet dangle. The early morning sunlight streams through my windows, casting a warm glow on the studio below. Glancing at the wall clock, I see that it's just past seven in the morning.

"Why am I awake this early?" I wonder aloud, wiggling my toes as I stand and stretch, mimicking what my kitties do on the bed. My entire body feels restless, like my skin is trying to shed itself. "Damn preheat." With a sigh, I rip off Devlin's shirt and toss it onto the bed.

The omega within me stirs, and irritation simmers in my veins. My nostrils flare as I glare at the white shirt crumpled on my bed. Every instinct screams at me to snatch it up and retreat under the covers.

I fight against the overpowering urge by turning away and grabbing a hoodie, slipping it over my head before reaching for a pair of leggings. As I put them on one leg at a time, the itch in my skin intensifies as though that stupid shirt is whispering to me. Finally, with the waistband securely in place, I close my eyes and take a slow, steadying breath before

dashing for the stairs. The farther I get from the shirt, the more relief washes over me.

“What kind of nonsense is this?” I mutter to myself as I descend the steps. Finley, my watchful cat, blinks up at me before assessing the top of the stairs. “Not you too,” I scold him, shaking my head, and march over to the kitchen to collect their empty dishes.

I open the pantry to retrieve their food, and that’s when Tuna meows loudly, startling me. A small yelp escapes my lips.

SATISFIED WITH HERSELF, TUNA LIFTS HER TAIL HIGH AND gracefully steps out of the pantry. I quickly pour their food into their respective bowls and set them on the floor. The urge to run upstairs and grab the shirt threatens to overwhelm me, but I resist.

Stomping over to the closet, I grab my shoes and hastily escape my apartment, hoping that getting some fresh air will help clear my head and dispel this strange sensation that has taken hold of me.

It’s like that shirt has become an addiction I can’t shake, and no matter how hard I try, my brain just won’t let it go. It’s as if Devlin’s scent has etched itself into my very thoughts, haunting me at every turn.

*Chamomile and cream.*

“This is what insanity feels like,” I mutter to myself, sliding down to the floor to pull on my chucks. The cold tiles beneath me send a shiver through my body. “And I don’t even have a bra on.” I glance around the empty foyer, relieved there isn’t a single soul here to witness me talking to myself like a crazy omega.

With my shoes on and no keys in my pocket, I decide to make my escape outside. It’s the safest option. If I return to that apartment, I know I’ll end up crawling up those stairs to retrieve that shirt. Right now, I need to feel some control, because it’s clear I’m not in control of myself.



As I open the door to the outside, the crisp morning air fills my lungs, waking me up further. I grip the wooden railing for support, clutching onto it as if it can anchor me to reality. The door quietly closes behind me, and I thank my lucky stars that the building's owner has implemented a code system. Thanks to Sawyer's pack, I won't have to go back inside for the keys.

Taking deep breaths, I descend the steps. Yesterday, my brother mentioned that it smelled like snow was in the air. Today, the sky is a brilliant white, as if to prove his words true. I'm unsure how cold it is, and my hoodie is far from sufficient to keep me warm, so I decide to walk.

The bakery is located just east of Central City, close to what some people call the slums, which are about a mile down the street. I don't live in the best part of the city, but it's also not the worst. The familiar surroundings bring me comfort, and it helps ease the growing tension inside me, at least enough for my shoulders to relax.

A few blocks away, there's a small park, and I head in that direction. Not many people are out and about this early on a Saturday morning. I shove my hands into my hoodie pockets and take a right, putting the apartment building out of my line of sight, but inside, my turmoil only intensifies.

My shoulders itch, and my legs twitch as though I need to go back and slip on that stupid shirt, inhaling Devlin's scent once more. A whimper escapes my lips, and I feel like a traitor to my own mind. It's as though I'm in a losing battle, and tears spring to my eyes, which I quickly wipe away with the edge of my sleeve.

I need a distraction.

Spinning around, I collide with a large figure. For the second time in twelve hours, I've run into someone. I'm two for two. My heart races as I try to gather my thoughts, looking up to meet the eyes of the person I accidentally bumped into.

"Whoa." A man reaches out and steadies me, his strong grip preventing me from stumbling.

His scent hits me before anything else—musk, dark amber, and all alpha. It soothes the persistent twitch I've been fighting all morning, which, strangely, only makes me cry harder. The scent calms my jittery omega instincts, as if it were some kind of balm for my frayed nerves.

“Hey, hey.” He gently tilts my chin up, and scorching blue eyes sear into mine. “Hey there, sugarplum.”

“Oh, by the Fates, it's you,” I say with a mixture of relief and surprise. Maximillian Harrington, of all people. In my emotional state, his presence is both a comfort and a shock.

Really, who is this mushy bitch, and how do I kill her?

“Ah, sugarplum, you're killing my ego.” The grumpy alpha wipes away my tears with surprising tenderness. “Walk with me?”

Taken aback by his sudden appearance, I look up at him. He's still wearing a shirt with too many holes, cargo pants, and untied shoes. He pulled his dirty blond hair back into a man bun, and damn it, I want to rip it free and run my fingers through it. Despite his disheveled appearance, there's an undeniable charm about him that makes me want to get closer.

I sniffle, grateful that my nose is filling with mucus because if I can smell him even more, I might end up with my nose in his armpit. I'm experiencing a strange mixture of emotions, but his presence is oddly soothing.

“Why do all of you alphas smell so good all of a sudden?” I blink, my gaze momentarily fixated on his pouty, kissable lips.

“I smell good, huh?” He raises a single eyebrow, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

I notice his bond mark, and more tears spring up. Seeing it brings a flood of emotions—longing, envy, and a strange sense of loss.

“What just happened?” He pinches my chin, his brows furrowing in concern.

“Bite,” I rasp, knowing he’ll understand what I mean. It’s a simple word, but it carries a world of meaning. I take a step back out of his arms, and I wipe my nose across my sleeve. I sure hope he doesn’t judge me. “Your omega will smell me.”

“Come on, sugarplum.” He manhandles me gently, turning me around toward the park. He walks me toward the swings with his palm on my lower back. “And for the record, that’s my pack bond.”

I feel a strange sense of comfort in his presence, even though my emotions are still in turmoil. Max may be gruff and grumpy to everyone else, but he’s my anchor in this sea of confusion right now.

I should feel ashamed, but my hormones are still in the driver’s seat, and there’s no turning back now. “No omega?” I inquire, my voice tinged with curiosity. The haze of desire clouds my judgment, making me bold.

“No omega,” he whispers gently, his voice a soothing balm to my frayed nerves.

“I’m hormonal,” I say as if defending my omega induced insanity. “One alpha whiff, and I’m struggling in a sea of want and need.”

He hums softly under his breath, acknowledging the complexities of my situation. His eyes, a deep, soulful blue, look down at me. He’s so tall, so big, like a huge, growly bear. Strangely, my hormones and instincts both tell me that he’s safe. Something about the way he carries himself, a sense of quiet strength, makes me feel protected in his presence.

“Swing with me,” he suggests, his deep voice grounding me. He guides me to a swing and carefully maneuvers me to sit on one lone swing, like a silent promise that he won’t let me fall. Then, he positions himself to sit facing the opposite direction, creating a cozy cocoon of safety around us.

I look out along the street, resting my head on the cold chain of the swing. My hair falls over my shoulder in waves, fluttering back and forth as I gently swing beside Max. The cold breeze chills my lungs, allowing me to take a deep breath

of crisp air. Above, the white clouds hang low in the sky, thick and ominous, as if just threatening to drop snow on the entire city.

The swing above us squeaks as we rock in silence, the only sound in the quiet morning. The longer we sit in silence, the better I feel, and the easier I can breathe, especially as small wafts of Max's musk drift over to me. I keep glancing at him through my curtain of hair, quietly observing the giant of a man.

His hair must be long and wavy, and though trimmed, his beard retains a wild quality, as if it's a direct reflection of who he is on the inside. When he looks my way with his piercing eyes, I sense there's so much more hidden beneath his façade, and I find myself wanting to know more about this soft alpha who makes me feel small and delicate.

"Tell me what you're thinking about." He leans back in his swing, closing his eyes as it rocks gently. Something inside him feels almost childlike, and it intrigues me. Despite his gruff exterior, there's a vulnerability in his demeanor that draws me in, and I can't help but wonder what lies beneath the surface of this enigmatic alpha.

Clearly, I can't tell him how he makes me feel, so I turn away and glance at the sky again. "Snow," I say, because it isn't a lie, even though he sits at the forefront of my mind.

"I spent three years in the south, surrounded by snow," he says, still rocking on his swing. "You'd think I'd be sick of it, but I'm not. It's peaceful. It gives everything a blank canvas."

I smirk, his words reminding me of Ashton and the one time he joined Avery and me for ice cream late at night. He had paint stains on his fingers and told us how he stared at a blank canvas all day.

"I don't know how I feel about snow," I whisper, looking away. "I used to love it. My twin and I would spend hours trying to make snowmen and then lying in it, creating snow angels."

“You have a twin?” He looks at me with only one eye open as he leans back on his swing, his curiosity piqued.

“Yeah, Lex.” I sigh, remembering those winters and how long they always felt when we were cooped up inside with my sister. I hated being confined to a house with her.

“You just haven’t had a good snow day,” he teases, making me laugh.

“And what, pray tell, Max, is the perfect snow day to you?” I pause my swing to turn to him fully, intrigued by his answer.

“Well, sugarplum...” He closes his eyes and inhales slowly, savoring the moment. As he speaks, he keeps his eyes closed the entire time, allowing himself to be transported by his own imagination. “We sleep in, and there are no shades on the window so I can see it drift across the glass. There are so many pillows and blankets, and then we’d get up and have a late breakfast. I’m a pretty decent cook.”

I chuckle at him, feeling warmth spread through me as he paints this vivid picture. Feeling brave, I add, “Good, because I’m an awful cook.” Nerves fill my stomach, thinking that he’s actually including me in his vision. Hell, he may not, and I’m over here being presumptuous, but there’s a connection between us, a spark that seems to grow with each passing moment, and for now, that’s enough to keep me swinging higher, even amid a storm of emotions.

He chuckles, and the sound is like a gentle caress, making my stomach flutter with excitement. “I bet you love all the pastries. I’d prep those the night before,” he comments, and his words have a magical effect on me, making my insides melt. It’s as if he’s painting a vivid picture of a cozy morning, and I can’t help but smile at the thought. “After breakfast, I’d put hot chocolate in the Crock-Pot, and then we’d go outside. There’s a perfect sledding hill on our estate.”

“Sledding?” I question, my curiosity piqued. The concept is almost foreign to me, given that I grew up in a forest and didn’t have designated sledding hills. “I’ve never gone sledding.”

Max pauses in his swinging, sitting up to glare at me in mock shock. “Well, I’ll have to change the fact that you’ve never been sledding. Really? Never?”

“Never,” I admit, biting my lip as I meet his gaze, the intensity in his eyes drawing me in.

“Were you deprived as a child?” he blurts out with a grin, making me laugh.

“No, I just missed out on a lot because of my sister,” I explain, my smile fading as I recall some less pleasant memories.

Ever attentive, Max pinches my chin and tilts my head up, his touch sending tingles through my body. “I promise I’ll take you sledding,” he says, his eyes dipping to my lips, a hint of desire flickering in his gaze.

I don’t know how we got to this moment. Still, Maximillian Harrington is quickly moving from being my enemy to becoming my current alpha crush at least for this hour.

“Wait...” I frown, realization dawning on me. “You are Maximillian Harrington.”

“We covered that,” he says, amusement dancing in his eyes, his palm moving to cup my face, sending shivers down my spine.

“You work at the mental institute.” I slap my forehead in exasperation, dislodging his palm, and he looks genuinely amused at my outburst. “How did I not see this? Gosh, I’m dense.”

“Seraphina.” Max’s voice turns serious again, and once more, he pinches my chin gently. “Don’t talk negatively about yourself,” he warns, his eyes locking onto mine, conveying a sense of protectiveness.

I nod in agreement, but he still holds my chin.

“Tell me why my job is making you ramble.”

I swallow, and he doesn’t let go, his touch both grounding and reassuring. “You are caring for my sister’s new treatments.

Doro—”

“Thea.” He nods in acknowledgment, finally releasing my chin and humming softly under his breath. “She tried to stab you with a needle on Friday,” he says, his voice tinged with a mixture of concern and frustration.

“It isn’t the first time.” I sigh, turning away from the street view, which is anything but appealing, and I spin my swing to face the pond. “When we were little, Thea used to dare Lex and me to do ridiculous things. Lex nearly got himself killed before he stopped listening to her. It took me a little longer to wise up.”

He turns to me, his gaze unwavering, and for a moment, it feels like there’s only the two of us in the world.

“One snow day, we had so much snow,” I begin, my fingers tightly wound around the swing’s chain as if I can physically contain the memories that have been festering within me for years. “The snow came up to my knees. Lex and I were so excited to go outside and play.” The words flow from me, and with each one, I feel a small weight lifting from my shoulders, a long buried pain finally finding its way to the surface. “Our parents insisted we bring Thea. With no choice, we went outside to our usual spot in the woods, where our dad had built us a tree house. We didn’t have hills to sled down, so we made our own path through the woods by shoveling snow into a pile.”

Max listens attentively, his eyes filled with curiosity and empathy. “What did she do?” he asks softly, his voice tinged with concern. “Will you tell me?”

I find it difficult to look at him as the memories resurface, but I press on. “Thea pushed me out of the tree house,” I admit, my voice steady despite the painful recollection. “Lex ran to get our parents while I lay there in the snow. It was only a story high, but it was enough to knock the wind out of me. I thought I was dying, but that isn’t the worst of it.”

Max turns to me fully, his gaze focused on my face as I continue to wind the chain of the swing.

“She slowly descended the steps to hover over me. There was this look on her face, the same one that alarmed me the other day. It was as though there was nothing in her mind,” I recount, closing my eyes briefly to hold back the tears. “She stood over me and said, ‘You lived,’ as though it surprised her, then she took the shovel and buried me.”

I shudder at the memory, feeling the icy touch of snow against my skin, the suffocating weight of it pressing down on me. To this day, I can’t stand small spaces. It’s always made me feel like a broken omega. By nature, we are supposed to like the weight of small spaces, but they still make me panic.

“I don’t think you or anyone else can cure her,” I confess, opening my eyes and lifting my feet, allowing the swing to spin freely. The chain snaps in the other direction, spinning me quickly. I want to release the memories, to let them go and toss them back to the universe. I don’t want them anymore.

As the swing gradually stops, I look at Max’s face. There’s something about the way he listens, the way he absorbs my words, that makes me feel strangely safe and connected in this moment of vulnerability. It’s as if he’s become the anchor in my turbulent sea of emotions, and I find solace in his presence.

“I’m so sorry, Seraphina. You didn’t deserve that,” Max says, his voice a mixture of regret and empathy. His eyes, filled with unspoken emotions, lock onto mine. Words fail to capture the depth of his understanding.

But then, as his gaze shifts over my shoulder, his brows knit together in concern. Simultaneously, we hear a scream, a piercing sound that slices through the air like a jagged blade. It sends shivers down my spine, and my heart quickens its pace in response.

Instinctively, both of us rise from the swings, our eyes fixed on the serene pond and the surrounding trees in the park. Fear creeps in like a persistent shadow.

“Stay here,” Max orders, his voice firm, as he abruptly takes off toward the scream. The warmth that once lingered from our conversation on the swings dissipates, leaving behind an unsettling cold that seems to penetrate deep into my bones.



I watch him hurry toward the running path. The park isn't vast, just a modest mile around, adorned with trees and a well-trodden running path. I can't help but track his movements, observing his figure as he vanishes around the bend, disappearing into the tree-lined path.

I wait, each passing minute amplifying the gnawing worry for Max that churns within me. The urge to stay put becomes unbearable. What if he's in danger? This thought ultimately propels me forward, urging me to defy his instructions. My pace quickens as I approach the tree line where he vanished from view.

As I step into the woods, the faint sound of Max's voice reaches my ears. Drawing closer, I finally see him kneeling beside a woman on the ground. He's speaking urgently into his phone with one hand while his other tries to keep her calm with a soothing alpha voice.

With each step I take, the gravity of the situation becomes increasingly apparent. Max is trying to save her, but my mind struggles to fully process what's happening. I collapse to my knees beside him, and my eyes fixate on her torn clothing and the bruises covering her partially naked torso.

The sight is too much for me to bear, and I can no longer suppress the overwhelming surge of nausea that rises within me.

I puke into the bushes right there.

*Avery*

“THICK THIGHS SAVE LIVES, BROTHER,” I exclaim, clapping Ashton on the back as we ascend the steps leading to the sanctuary. It’s late afternoon, and the weather shows no mercy. Despite the sun hanging overhead, it grows colder by the minute. Ashton, the picture of seriousness, barely acknowledges my playful banter. We’re here to follow a line of deltas, each of us eager to receive our assignment—bodyguard duty for the omegas.

“I’m just saying if I can breathe, she isn’t relaxed,” I quip, attempting to infuse a little levity into the tense atmosphere. Besides, that’s what I’m good at.

“I swear to the Fates, shut the fuck up,” Ashton snaps without bothering to look back at me, the broody asshole that he is.

“I kind of want to know where this is going,” one of my fellow deltas, Zero, chimes in, curiosity sparking in his eyes.

“Well,” I drawl, pausing on the steps as we await entry, turning to face Zero with a grin. “Any position, really. I want her to sit on my face, her thick thighs caging me in with a sweet, juicy, plump—”

Ashton swiftly wraps his hand around my head, his palm muffling my words. “Not another word,” he warns, his voice firm.

Zero can’t help but laugh, his white-blond hair slipping off his forehead. He’s the only delta I know who is albino. While

most deltas have blue eyes, signifying our designation, Zero's are red, giving him an eerie vibe that I low-key love.

"Ah, come on, it was just getting good," Zero remarks, his laughter echoing in the tense air.

Ashton doesn't release his grip, so naturally, I take the opportunity to give his hand a playful lick because why the fuck wouldn't I?

"Not going to work," he cautions, pulling me to the side where no one can overhear us. Finally, he drops his hand, wiping it on his pants. "You're more obnoxious than usual."

"Because we are going to get our girl today," I tell him smugly, a mischievous glint in my eye.

Ashton glances at the line of deltas gathering on the steps of the castle sanctuary, his expression a mix of doubt and hope. "If they allow us to choose her," he says with a shake of his head, the skepticism evident in his voice.

"We have a secret weapon," I proclaim, bouncing on my toes with excitement. I've been eagerly anticipating Seraphina joining our pack since the first night I caught her in our kitchen. "Max is with her."

Ashton's face falls, and he whips his head toward me, his eyes wide with surprise. "What?"

"Bro, do you ever check your texts?"

"I muted you assholes," he mutters, crossing his arms and glaring at me, the broody ass.

"Rude." I pout, giving him an exaggerated wounded look. "Check your messages. Go ahead, I'll wait."

Rolling his eyes, he digs his phone out of his pocket and finally reads the messages Max sent to our group chat hours ago.

"Fuck," he murmurs, his cheeks burning red as the realization dawns on him. Our chances of getting Seraphina just got a whole lot more interesting, and I can't help but smile in triumph.

“You should take us off mute.” I playfully jab Ashton in the shoulder for emphasis. He really should have known better than to silence us.

“They found a woman who was attacked by the woods,” he murmurs, running a hand down his face, his worry etched across his features. When he drops his hand, he scowls at the closed door as if it’s to blame for our predicament. “How long are they going to keep us out here?”

“Ah, there’s the spirit.” I clap him on the back, trying to infuse a bit of optimism into the tense atmosphere surrounding us.

Zero saunters back over to us with a cigarette hanging from his lips, unlit as always. He won’t smoke it, but he keeps it there, an unlit comfort. “You two going to pair up?”

“Do we have a choice?” I smirk and tilt my head, giving Ashton a mischievous look that hints at my willingness to abandon him, even though I have no intention of doing so. It’s all in good fun, and he knows it. He’s the softie of our duo.

“You two? No.” Zero shakes his head, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Did you hear?”

“What?” Ashton barks at him, his frustration making him sound like an alpha on edge. I know he’s on edge because he’s thinking about Seraphina, but she’s okay. She’s with Max. Max may look big and scary, which is intimidating as hell, but he’s a cuddly teddy bear inside.

“The omega died,” Zero whispers, his voice heavy with a somber tone. “They called a mage from the isles to heal her psychological wounds. She freaking teleported to her side, and she still couldn’t save her. Apparently whatever happened warped her mind, and she just noped right out of life.”

I whistle softly, absorbing the gravity of the situation. I hadn’t read the update on my phone, even though it buzzed like crazy. Typically, no news is better news, and when my phone goes into overdrive with notifications, it’s usually not a good sign. Okay, maybe I’m not better than my twin at staying informed.

“To get a mage healer to transport means she must have been important,” Ashton says, his thick, dark brows furrowing as he contemplates the implications of the omega’s death.

Do I look like that when I think? Yikes.

Zero snorts, bringing our attention back to him. “I was on duty last night. They accounted for every single omega that came in, including the one that went into preheat.”

Ashton can’t hide his smug smile at the thought. I’m still jealous he got to watch. I nearly licked Devlin’s fingers when he came home last night. Okay, I admit it. I licked his fingers. I have no regrets, and I’d do it again if he’d let me. As it is, he boxed my ears.

“Anyway...” Zero gives me a strange look, making me wonder if I said any of that out loud. I probably did. “She made it back to her room at midnight. The floor’s resident gamma logged her in. She shouldn’t have been at that park, miles away.”

“Curious.” I nibble my fingernail, a terrible habit I’ve given up on quitting. “What was she wearing?”

“Jogging clothes,” Zero remarks, his gaze distant as he ponders the situation, the furrow on his brow deepening. “There’s a gym here, so why was she jogging outside of castle grounds?”

“New dean,” Ashton chimes in, his voice tinged with a hint of annoyance. “As long as the omegas log out, they can come and go now as they please.”

“They are always offered a delta guard,” I add, scratching my head as I try to make sense of it. “I get it if she didn’t take one.”

“Me too. These girls just want the freedom to exist.” Zero spits on the steps, his frustration with the whole system evident. “They love this place as much as they hate it.”

The creaking of the heavy doors interrupts our discussion, revealing a white-faced gamma who nods at all of us. “Well, come in then. You have a lot to do. Hurry up. Let’s go.” She ushers us into the building with an air of urgency.

Ashton, Zero, and I make our way up the steps, passing by an older, motherly woman whom I give a small chin tilt and a wink. She chuckles knowingly as we move forward, and I can't help but feel a twinge of warmth in her presence.

"Come on, boys, sign in," one of the gammas sitting behind a large desk at the center of the foyer orders. "If you are with a pack, please stick with your pack."

"I'm going to go find some shade," Zero declares before melting into the crowd of deltas, his easygoing nature allowing him to blend in effortlessly.

"Let's go." Ashton takes my arm and guides me through the throng of deltas to the registration table at the front.

As we approach the table, I put on my charming smile, the one that's been described to me as panty melting. "Ladies, ladies, ladies. You all look ravishing today."

"Oh, don't you use honeyed words on me, boy," the older gamma scolds with a playful wag of her finger. I recognize her as the cook, a woman with a good sense of humor. "I know you stole my ice cream." She gives me a knowing smirk. She *leaves* me those precious cartons.

I gasp dramatically and press a hand to my chest. "I'd never."

"You would," she says with a knowing grin before pointing at the logbook. "Sign in. Your alpha is waiting for you right down the hall. Head straight to the office."

I scribble my name in the book with a flourish and then wait for Ashton to do the same. Afterward, I practically skip down the hall, eager to see Seraphina and reassure her that everything will be okay. However, Ashton grabs my bicep, once again halting my progress.

"I know you're excited that we'll probably be watching Seraphina day and night, but for the love of the Fates, wipe the smile off your face," he hisses, his concern for Seraphina evident in his voice. "She just saw a woman who was attacked. She's probably in shock."

“I agree,” Devlin adds as he approaches, his presence a reminder of Seraphina’s safety.

“Where were you hiding?” I lean in and sniff him, detecting the faintest scent of Seraphina still clinging to him. He didn’t shower, and I love it. “Never shower again.” I go to grab his hands and bring them to my nose, my playful antics making him chuckle.

“Relax.” He pushes me away gently, but a smile tugs at his lips. “She’s inside with Max, relaying everything to Bast, our lord and savior.” He mocks Bast playfully, though I know he doesn’t really hate him.

“Can we go in?” I flash a charming smile, my excitement evident in my eager expression.

“Stop smiling. A woman is dead.” Devlin’s voice is stern as he glares at me, his eyes betraying his frustration. “I swear if you don’t get yourself under control, I’ll—”

“Tie me to your bed and fuck the smile off my face.” I lean closer, teasing Devlin shamelessly. “Newsflash, that won’t work.”

Devlin’s lips purse in irritation, but before he can respond, the doors swing open. I seize the opportunity to dart inside, leaving my brother and alpha behind to deal with my antics.

Once inside, I put on my serious face, knowing I have to be there for my girl, but it’s hard to contain my excitement when my pack gathers here together with the omega of my dreams.

As Bast exits with Riot, his personal bodyguard, I slip inside the room, where the dean scowls at Seraphina. My fierce Seraphina scowls right back, and Max stands in a corner, his arms crossed, though he’s failing miserably at hiding his smirk.

“Oh, thank the Fates. You are all here.” The dean throws up her hands in exasperation. “Can you please explain to this one why she needs a bodyguard?”

I don’t waste any time. I quickly move around and kneel at Seraphina’s feet, offering her a warm smile despite the grim

situation. “What, did you think you’d get someone other than me?” I can’t help but let my gaze slide down to her thighs, which are perfectly tempting for a different kind of suffocation.

If I have my way, she’ll be straddling me by the end of the week. I just need a catalyst to get her into my bed.

Seraphina blinks at me and slowly turns to see Ashton and, finally, Devlin, who softly closes the door behind him. I love watching her reactions, and right now, she’s realizing that we are a pack. Her sexy mouth parts, and her head swivels around, taking in the unexpected development.

“Seraphina, this is Pack Armana,” the dean announces, attempting to ease the tension that hangs in the air.

Seraphina groans and tosses her whole body back into the chair, a mix of frustration and exasperation written all over her features. She smacks her forehead dramatically. “The Fates have been playing with my emotions this week.” She sits up straight, curiosity shining in her eyes. “All of you?”

“See, baby?” I reach for her cold hand, hoping to offer some comfort in this whirlwind situation. “I knew you were perfect for us. Even fate thinks so. Now, I can’t wait to hear all about the first moment you met Max because his version is probably vastly different.”

“Mr. Griffin, can you please take a seat?” The dean sighs with a deep sense of exasperation. “I need to get a few things clear because you took off with one of my omegas,” she scolds me, her frustration evident.

I spin around, my grin still firmly in place, and plant my ass between Seraphina’s thick, inviting thighs right there on the floor. The dean may be rolling her eyes at my antics, but I couldn’t care less right now. It’s as if it’s a holiday morning, and I’m a child giddy with excitement.

“According to Devlin, you are a scent match,” the dean says, her hands folded on the enormous table before her, which seems to dwarf her. “Because of this, I can’t assign you any bodyguards other than these two numbskulls.”



“I knew I liked you.” I wag my finger playfully at the dean, my charm on full display and my carefree attitude firmly in place.

Ignoring my antics, the dean continues, “Not only that, but Devlin spiked your preheat. It’s out of my hands.” She raises her hands in the air, clearly exasperated. “According to omega law—”

“Fuck omega law,” Seraphina interrupts, her tone fiery, and she sits up straight, her legs tensing around me in a way that makes my heart race.

Ah, perfection.

Max, our loyal guardian, hides another smile, and I can’t help but appreciate his patience and support.

“Seraphina,” the dean scolds, unimpressed by her outburst, “that is not omega-like.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard,” she argues, her frustration evident. Even her little nose turns red. “I just need...” She looks around the room, a thoughtful frown on her perfect, flushed face. “I don’t know, a gun maybe?”

Oh, she is just adorable.

She slaps her hands on her thighs and stands, the movement graceful and confident. I don’t think she even realizes it, but I can scent her arousal, and oh man... I can barely contain my enthusiasm as she swings a leg over my head without skipping a beat.

She smells like lunch.

“That,” she announces to the entire room, her voice commanding attention, “is exactly what I need.” Spinning around, she slaps her palms on the top of the dean’s desk, and the dean simply blinks at her, seemingly unfazed, as though she has dealt with Seraphina’s outbursts on more than one occasion.

“Sugarplum.” Max steps closer to her, attempting to soothe her with a term of endearment.

Seraphina wags a finger in his face, her fiery spirit refusing to be tamed. “Don’t you sugarplum me.”

I look over my shoulder at Ashton and mouth, “Sugarplum?” He raises an eyebrow in response. I guess it’s no better than molasses munchkin.

“I’M JUST SAYING, BEFORE YOU JUMP INTO NEEDING A GUN,” Max continues, gently grabbing her wrists and placing a soft kiss on each inner wrist, immediately disarming Seraphina, “let the twins shadow you.”

I can hear her teeth grinding from here, and I can’t help but anticipate the adventure that awaits us all.

“We will keep Avery in line,” Devlin assures Seraphina. Still, instead of calming her, it elicits a soft whimper. The sound is like a seductive melody, sending a jolt of desire through me. My gods, it’s the sexiest little sound I’ve ever heard, and it makes my body react in ways I can’t control. My heart quickens, and my senses sharpen, focused on the captivating omega before us.

“No,” she protests, turning to Devlin, who takes a cautious step closer. “No.” She jumps behind the dean’s imposing figure, her eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief. I can’t help but think this is going swimmingly. “You smell.”

Devlin rolls his lips into his mouth to stifle a laugh at her playful insult, then slides a hand down his face, likely to hide his amusement.

“What will it take to get you out of this room?” Ashton asks, holding his hands up as he steps to my right, attempting to diffuse the situation.

I watch as Seraphina’s face wrinkles up in thought. “Chicken nuggets.”

I can’t contain my laughter, and it bursts out of me, a full-on belly laugh that nearly startles every single one of us. “That’s all?” Tears stream down my face as I wipe them away. I push off the floor to stand before the dean and, more importantly, my mate. “Baby, you can have all the chicken nuggets you want if you’ll let me take you home right now.”

She eyes me with suspicion, her little nose wrinkling up. “Wait, you will take me home?” Her face falls at that, and I can see the disappointment in her eyes.

She really thought we’d just pick her up and whisk her away? Never. “Yep, I even got cat treats.” All she ever talked about was how she was going to adopt all the cats she could and give them fish names. She found it hilarious.

“You got cat treats?” She’s on the verge of tears now, and Max shoots me a warning glare.

Panicked, I try to appease her. “I got a cat tower too.”

Sobs burst out of my tiny, curvy woman, and before I know it, she rushes toward me so hard that I barely have time to plant my feet and catch her. Her nose burrows into my neck, and one leg wraps around mine. Fuck, she smells like sugar just before it caramelizes, and she’s marking me.

I want to say, *Mark me up, baby*, but I restrain myself. Instead, I kiss her forehead gently. “Did you find Tuna?”

She nods and sobs into my neck, and I couldn’t care less about her tears. Even her tears smell like little drops of her that I want to savor. That’s it, I am never washing this shirt again. Ever.

“Well, that solves that,” the dean announces, her patience finally wearing thin. “Get the hell out of my office.”

SHE DOESN’T HAVE TO TELL ME TWICE.

I lift Seraphina, and my girl wraps her legs around me.

Ashton holds the door open, and my entire pack steps into the hall with our mate. Is it ideal? Of course not. If she didn’t put up a fight, I doubt she’d ever truly belong to us. Seraphina’s fiery spirit and her determination to make her own choices is part of what makes her irresistible. I can’t help but admire her for it. She deserves a reward.

I don’t pause. I keep moving forward, not stopping until we’re outside and halfway down the steps, headed toward the parking lot. The beep of a car alerts me that we’re not alone. I

glance at Devlin, who's walking beside us, his head swaying from side to side as we cross the parking lot.

“Hey,” I say, slowly lowering Seraphina when we reach Dev's car. “Do you want to play passenger, princess?”

Seraphina lets out a snotty chuckle, followed by a snort. She flips her hands in her hoodie sleeves and uses the fabric to wipe her tears, looking at the car. “Yeah, I want shotgun.”

Max grunts, opens the door to his truck, and slides in. He's a man of few words, but his actions speak volumes. He's fiercely protective of Seraphina, just like the rest of us.

I open the passenger door for Seraphina and lift her into the seat. Savoring her squeak of surprise, I lean over her to inhale her sweet, delicious scent. My heart races, and every fiber of my being tunes into her. I buckle her in, my fingers trembling slightly with the need to touch her, to claim her, but I resist. I don't kiss her, even though I'm itching to taste her lips again. Patience is key.

Slamming the door, I turn to my brother and Devlin, standing outside the truck. I put on my serious face now that our girl is secure. We're a pack, and we'll protect her with everything we have.

“Did they figure out who did it?” I cross my arms and plant my feet, ready to guard our omega with my life if need be.

“No one knows,” Devlin answers, his eyes fixed on Seraphina behind me. “I'm heading into work. Who's on the first shift?”

Ashton yawns, giving it away and making me smile. Are we twins? Yep, but we are also night and day, with him playing the knight. His sense of duty and responsibility toward our pack is unwavering.

“See you at nightfall?” I ask.

He waves at me, still yawning. “Yeah, I'm going home.”

“I'll drop you off,” Devlin offers, taking one more long look at Seraphina before physically turning Ashton around and

walking away. He's the anchor, the steady force that keeps our pack together.

Perfect. I have hours alone with our girl before my brother takes over. I can't wait to show her that she belongs with us. This is the beginning of our journey, and I'm determined to make her see that we're the missing pieces of her puzzle.

## CHAPTER 12

# *Seraphina*

IF I DON'T DO something soon, I just might lose my mind. The tension inside the truck is palpable, and I'm torn between strangling one of the men or silently begging for Max's knot. Frankly, I'm not quite sure which one will occur first, or maybe all of them will happen simultaneously. That's precisely why I shut my mouth for the entire ride home.

As Max pulls into the bakery parking lot, I turn to him, a mixture of surprise and curiosity in my eyes. Not once did I tell him where I lived. Sheepishly, he side-eyes me, his admission laced with a hint of embarrassment as he throws the truck into park.

Avery pushes his head between us, causing me to back away slightly, my suspicion growing. He's been unusually excitable this entire time, and quite frankly, it's starting to disturb me a lot. "Yeah, the dean gave it to Devlin last night after your preheat attack."

I groan and shove the door open, eager to get away from the overwhelming testosterone building in the car. I also snatch the bag of chicken nuggets they stopped to get me on the way home. The truck is far too big for my short, curvy frame, but I'm determined to make it down to the ground without their help.

"Wait!" Max shouts as he exits the truck, but my feet are already on the pavement.

Avery still wears that disturbing smile as he leisurely gets out and softly shuts his door. That one is going to be a

problem.

I turn to face the steps of my apartment building and look around. From here, I can see the edge of the park, the rest hidden behind a building. It's so close that a chill works its way up my spine, knowing that it could have been me. I left this building alone this morning without keys, needing to escape Devlin's scent, and now I'm returning with half his pack.

"You guys really don't need to come in." I clear my throat, not looking back as I climb the steps.

Hands grip my waist, causing me to squeal, as Max physically lifts me and hands me off to Avery. All Max does is place me between them and grunt out, "Code," pointing at the door.

I mutter my apartment code, and the door swings open. We enter the foyer. I watch Max's gaze sweep the hall, his eyes scanning up and down then resting on Violet's apartment and mine. In two long strides, his hand is on my unlocked doorknob. Max freezes, his eyes glued to the doorknob as he inhales before finally twisting the doorknob.

"Wait." I scramble forward just in time, my heart racing as the door swings open. I have to prevent one of my two mischievous kitties from making a dash for freedom. A flash of gray fur shoots past Max's legs, and Tuna narrowly avoids my arms. In the blink of an eye, she darts down the hall, heading straight for the exit.

PANICKING, I SPIN AROUND, RELIEVED TO FIND THAT THEY shut the outside door. Avery holds out treats to lure the cunning escape artist. Tuna rushes to him, her betrayal stinging as she begs for treats like the little treat obsessed feline she is. "Traitor," I hiss at her, a mixture of irritation and fondness bubbling up inside me.

On the other hand, Minnow gives me a friendly meow and starts pawing at my legs, making it clear that he wants to be picked up. I oblige because, in my eyes, he is the most perfect kitten in all of Terra.

Meanwhile, Max frowns down at me as we step inside. “How many of these creatures do you own?”

“Four,” Avery replies without missing a beat. “Don’t you pay attention?”

“I do,” Max growls at us, herding us farther inside. “But Seraphina never specifically mentioned how many cats she has.” He shuts and locks the door, ending my initial plan of kicking them both out as soon as we entered.

I try to stay calm. With Minnow purring contentedly in my arms, I flick on the lights, attempting to listen to them bicker about my cat collection.

“You know she did.” Avery tries to downplay it, but I realize Max is probably right deep down. I didn’t explicitly inform them about the number of cats I have.

“You’ve been stalking her,” Max accuses, his arms crossed as he stubbornly refuses to back down.

“No,” Avery says as he snuggles Tuna, who promptly falls asleep in his arms, the little turncoat. She would shower love on anyone who offered her treats.

The toilet flushes, and we all freeze. Max is the first to react, swiftly approaching the bathroom door. In the meantime, Avery gently sets Tuna down and takes Minnow from my arms, carefully placing him beside Tuna, then he grabs my arm and tugs me down to the floor on the other side of the kitchen island, out of sight from the potential intruder.

I find myself oddly unfazed, as if nothing else that could happen today would surprise me. After all, whoever is in here knows my passcode, and my main concern lies with the file the sanctuary handed over to the guys. What could possibly be in it?

The door swings open, and I hear two very different alpha voices exclaiming, “Who the fuck are you?”

I slap Avery away and quickly stand up, shouting, “Don’t hurt him!” Both Max and my brother Lex remain frozen in their positions.



Max doesn't take his eyes off Lex while he grumbles, "I won't."

Lex scoffs, crossing his arms. "She was talking to me."

I introduce them, saying, "Lex, this is Max. He's one of Thea's doctors."

Lex doesn't take his eyes off Max as he crosses his arms and shoots a suspicious glare in Max's direction. "Why is he in your apartment?" Lex demands, his tone edged with concern and protectiveness.

Avery steps forward and answers, "Hey, I'm Avery, Seraphina's castle sanctioned bodyguard." He nudges Max out of the way and offers his hand to Lex, who takes it while finally diverting his gaze from Max. Avery adds, "This is Maximillian Harrington, one of my alphas."

Lex turns his attention to me and questions, "Pack protection? What did you do?" He doesn't hesitate to blame me, and I immediately go on the defensive, asking, "Who says I did anything? Why do you have to blame me?"

Lex realizes how offensive his comment was and quickly changes the subject, holding up his hands as if to prevent an argument. "I heard about this morning and wanted to check in on you," he explains. "When I got here, there were deltas all over the block, and I heard someone had found a woman."

Max pieces it together and comments, "And you couldn't find her." His voice is calm and analytical, as if he's unraveling a mystery, which makes me feel a little less overwhelmed by the situation.

Despite the awkwardness of the moment, I can't help but smile at the two of them squaring off. Lex is always the protective big brother, and Max is the cautious, observant doctor. It's like watching two different worlds collide, and I'm caught in the middle.

"You didn't search for her because you knew she was alive," Avery chimes in, pointing to his temple with a playful grin. "Twin telepathy, right?"

Lex just gives Avery a strange look before turning his attention back to me. “I knew it wasn’t you because Violet filled me in,” he counters.

Sounding genuinely disappointed, Avery mutters, “So no twin telepathy?”

Lex, ignoring Avery’s comment, continues to scrutinize me. “You are okay, aren’t you?”

A denial hovers on the tip of my tongue, but I catch it just in time. If I answer honestly, I might not be able to get rid of my brother. As much as I adore and love him, I don’t want him to know I’m close to my heat, so I change the subject again, employing my masterful evasion skills. “Did Violet get assigned guards?”

“She was just summoned half an hour ago. I’ve been sitting with her all morning so she wouldn’t be alone,” Lex responds, which eases my worries a bit. “When she left, I waited for you, assuming you’d come straight home.”

I grumble a bit, feeling a tad annoyed. “I’m not that predictable,” I mutter, choosing that moment to check the cat’s water dish and clean it out. It’s one of those ones with a gallon jug on top that keeps the water flowing, but it gets grimy and gross. Besides, I need something to do with my hands.

“Seraphina, how long have the cats been alone?” Lex moves closer, and I hear the stool slide out.

I decide not to look at him as I admit, “Hours.”

“Exactly. You’d never leave them alone for too long,” Lex remarks. “Also, as much as you want your freedom, you won’t leave the little nest you’ve got going. Hey, whose shirt is that?”

I drop the water dish and spin around, growling, “Did you touch it?”

Lex slides off the stool with a chuckle, seemingly unfazed by my protective reaction. “Just checking,” he says before turning to Max. “Another one of yours?”

With an audible sigh of relief, I turn my attention back to them. The tension in the room has eased, and Lex seems to have accepted Max's presence.

"It's mine," Max replies, his tone steady. "Seraphina needed something to wear."

He just lied for me to appease my brother.

On the other hand, Avery seems to be enjoying the interaction between the two alphas. He leans closer to me, whispering, "Your brother and Max are like two alpha wolves sizing each other up."

I shake my head in amusement. "Yeah, they are. Let's hope they don't start marking their territory in my apartment."

It's enough for Lex, and he walks toward the closet. "Call me after your heat."

Lex's abrupt decision to depart leaves me baffled, and I can't help but call out, "What?" as confusion wraps around me like a shroud. My brother avoids me as if I'm carrying a contagious disease, careful not to get his scent on me.

"Seraphina, you are about to go into heat." He retrieves his coat from the hanger and turns to Max, his tone laden with concern. "Take care of her and keep her out of whatever mess happened today."

Max gives his solemn vow. "You have my word."

No one is addressing the omega in the room, and I'm ready to throw a tantrum. Lex turns back to me, and I see him wince. "Sorry, sis, but I don't want to be anywhere near you when the next preheat cramps kick in. I love you, and maybe" —he turns to Avery and then to Max— "let yourself indulge for once." With that, he silently exits the apartment, leaving me bewildered and irritated.

"What the hell was that?" I frown, my irritation burning through me.

"I like him," Avery comments, unfazed.

Horror washes over me as I realize he's heading for my nest and will see the button-down shirt. They are going to

know just how weak I am.

“Avery,” Max barks at him when he’s halfway up the steps. Avery pauses and slowly turns to face us.

“Did she invite you into her nest?” Max’s tone is firm.

Avery stammers, “Well, no—”

“Get down.”

“But—”

“No,” Max interrupts, shaking his head. “You are supposed to protect her. Do I need to babysit you while you protect her? Screw your head on, man.”

Avery blows out a resigned breath and concedes, “You’re right.” He stomps down the steps, clearly chastised.

I yawn, exhaustion slipping over me like a heavy blanket. Napping isn’t something I do often, but I know with my heat close, I’ll need to. I glance up at my nest, longing for its comfort, and then back at the guys. I could go up, grab the shirt, and snuggle down, but I’m not quite ready to invite them up, so I stand frozen, uncertain how to navigate this new territory.

“Seraphina, do you want to gather some pillows and blankets, and we can rest on the couch?” Max offers, breaking the silence and providing a simple, comfortable solution.

With a sigh of relief, I nod, mustering up a weak smile and appreciating Max’s thoughtfulness. “That sounds good,” I reply, relieved to have a plan to escape the swirling confusion of the day. I head to the closet and pull down my backup tote of pillows and blankets. The sofa already has more than enough, but I’ll need more if I’m napping there.

I pull my hair to one side, absentmindedly twisting a strand around my finger. “I just need a nap.”

Realistically, I know that it’s the preheat preparing me. Soon, I’ll be ravenous, and there’s no escaping it. Except, I don’t want to stop this heat. I have held it off long enough. All I need is to just get through it.

“Why don’t I order pizza?” Avery offers, pulling out his phone. “I need to secure the windows and doors anyway.” He walks over, grabs the tote from me, and sets it down. “Is there anything you want?”

My stomach grumbles in response to the mere mention of food, and I immediately know what I’m craving. “Breadsticks,” I say, the thought making my mouth water.

He presses a soft kiss to my temple, and his scent wraps around me like a comforting blanket. Swallowing my whine because I am a badass omega, I drag the tote over to where Max stands in my cozy little living room. He’s dimming the lights and making a space for me on the couch. I appreciate the sentiment, but he’s got the pillows all wrong.

I pop the tote open and turn to the couch, my vision tunneling. The cushions feel like pillows, so I have to fluff them up before setting them back down. I point to a spot. “Max.” It’s the center, and I just need him and his alpha scent to park his ass right there. Then, I stack my pillows. I need exactly three to my right where the lounge is. I have to sit in the corner, it can’t be any other way. Next, I pile on the blankets.

When Avery returns, I stuff him in the other corner, where Tuna sits in his lap. The pizza box is open on the coffee table.

Somewhere in my little omega blackout, I went upstairs, got my heated blanket, and collected my large water cup that holds over forty ounces. It’s like waking up after a coma, not that I know, but I assume omega hyper-focus is relatable to that.

When I come to, I’m sitting in my corner with three slices of pizza on my plate with one already devoured, but Max is gone. When the hell did he disappear?

As I chew slowly, I turn and stare at Avery, worrying my bottom lip. I already know they want me, but what do I do? Do I take my impending heat by the balls and just ask them to help me through it? No biting. Or do I suffer with my toy box hidden in my upstairs closet?

“I want to negotiate,” Avery says as the sun slowly dips outside. He leans forward, dropping his plate on my squishy coffee table before he turns to face me head-on. “Your heat is coming.”

Can he read my mind?

“Looks that way,” I grumble, glancing at the pile of cream and sage blankets surrounding us. “Don’t say it though,” I whisper. “I don’t want to bring it on just yet. I have a week.” If I’m lucky.

“I won’t jinx it,” he promises. “But you need to think about how you want to get through it.”

“I know,” I reply, picking off a pepperoni. “Logically, I should have picked out a pack to help a long time ago. I just don’t trust anyone not to bite me without consent.” Now, my time is running out.

Avery nods at me in understanding. “Do you trust me?”

I blink at Avery, already knowing the answer to that. Avery showed up for me when I had no friends in the castle, when I felt the most alone. We spent so many nights talking about nonsense. He never pushed me to tell him my whole story. He never begged for it. Avery waited and ate the breadcrumbs I fed him as though they were a seven-course meal. He’s shown me that I can trust him on more than one occasion.

“Yeah,” I whisper, knowing that it’s true.

“Let us help you through your heat.”

As soon as the words leave his lips, Max walks back into the room, his eyes finding mine immediately. He freezes mid-step and his body tenses.

Avery’s proposal hangs in the air, and I can feel the weight of the decision pressing down on me. The thought of navigating my heat alone, like other omegas have countless times before, feels daunting and painful, but it’s not just about physical needs, it’s about trust, vulnerability, and the possibility of forming a deeper connection with these two alphas who have shown me nothing but care and respect.

I meet Avery's gaze, my eyes reflecting a mixture of uncertainty and longing. "I want to," I admit in a hushed tone, my voice betraying my vulnerability, "but I need assurances. No biting, no claiming. I want to remain in control."

Avery nods, his understanding evident. "Of course, Seraphina. Your boundaries will be respected by the whole pack."

Max, who slowly creeps toward the couch, his gaze locked on mine, adds his reassurance. "We'll be here to support you, to make you feel safe and comfortable. You set the pace."

A wave of relief washes over me, and I manage a small smile. "Thank you," I murmur, genuinely grateful for their willingness to accommodate my needs. It's not just about satisfying the physical aspects of my heat, it's about finding balance between desire and trust.

Am I really going to do this?

*Don't think. Just feel. What do you feel?*

Chewing on my cheek, I look back and forth between them and swallow down my thoughts about why this is a terrible idea.

Because it is a terrible idea.

"Yes," I blurt out.

What could go wrong?

## CHAPTER 13

# *Seraphina*

FOR THE FIRST time since I moved here, I wake up to the enticing aroma of bacon and eggs mingling with the rich scent of fresh coffee instead of the usual feline musk. Blinking my eyes open, I stretch luxuriously. Pillows surround me like a fortress of comfort and fluff, cocooning me in warmth.

I snuggle deeper into the cozy haven of my bed, not really wanting to get up, but my bladder insists on delivering a harsh ultimatum, and it eventually propels me out of bed. I don't remember making my way up here, so one of the guys must have carried me up.

I should probably feel embarrassed about that, especially when I spot Devlin's button-down shirt beside my pillow, along with a black shirt that suspiciously carries Ashton's scent of nutmeg.

Just omega things.

I wiggle my toes, casting an expectant gaze around the room, only to realize that no cat is in sight.

Nibbling my bottom lip in contemplation, I creep over to the railing and peer down into the kitchen, where Max is diligently plating breakfast. My jaw practically drops when I catch sight of him. Dressed in low-slung gray sweatpants and nothing else, he's the epitome of a god right out of every fairy tale I've ever read. He pulled his hair back into a man bun, with delicate tendrils framing his handsome face, and the contrast between his chiseled muscles and the softness of his skin is a sight to behold.



Honestly, I could watch him all day. It's my own personal omega hell, because looking like that, he could easily send me spiraling into a heat—a heat I just agreed to let them help me through.

May the Fates have mercy on me.

“Are you going to keep staring at me, or are you going to join me for breakfast?” I'm busted. Max's eyes meet mine, a mischievous sparkle dancing within his seductive gaze.

“Honestly, I'm good just watching,” I blurt, unable to contain the truth. Max's laughter ripples up to me, and I savor every melodious note of it.

“Get your sweet ass down here, sugarplum,” he playfully orders, returning to his task of plating food. “We have a big day ahead of us, and you aren't working today.”

I pout, but my disappointment is far from genuine if it means I get to feast my eyes on him all day. “How did you manage that?”

“I happen to know the owner,” he retorts with a playful wink.

With my knees audibly cracking as I rise, I slowly walk down the steps and into the small bathroom, determined not to check my reflection in the mirror because I already know I'm flushed.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Max is still gloriously shirtless—thank the Fates for that—and he's leaning against the counter, his intense alpha presence sending a thrilling shiver up my spine. The fact that he directs all his masculine energy at me is both exhilarating and nerve-racking.

“Where are the twins?” I inquire as I slide onto a stool across from him.

He doesn't answer immediately, choosing instead to push a plate of eggs, bacon, toast, and a glass of orange juice toward me. “They are at the base, checking in. They have to register that they'll be with you during your heat.”

*Don't think about it, Seraphina.*

I let out a thoughtful hum as I pick up a piece of bacon and savor its delicious, salty crunch. It tastes better than anything I've ever consumed in my entire life. "So what's the plan?"

"The plan is that I have to go into the institute today," he says slowly, gauging my reaction to this news.

"I'm close to a heat," I confess, nibbling on another bite of bacon before diving into my eggs, reveling in their cheesy goodness. That's it. He can never leave me. I'm completely and utterly screwed.

"You are," he agrees. "However, you'll be with me the whole time."

"What if I spike?" I ask, pushing my eggs around, unsure how to navigate this new territory. At the sanctuary, if we went into preheat, it was time for hydration and filling up on calories, as if we were hibernating bears.

"Then I'll take you into my office," he whispers seductively, leaning closer, "set you on my desk, and eat you for lunch."

"Oh," I stammer, my cheeks flushing as heat rushes through my body in response to his suggestive words. "Just that?"

This eccentric philanthropist is certainly full of surprises. Trying to distract myself from the enticing view of his unmarked skin, I focus on my food, taking another bite as he stands up, a knowing smirk playing on his lips as he saunters over to a bag by my bathroom.

"Where are the cats?" I realize that none of them have bothered me this morning.

Clearing his throat, he points to a corner of the living room, just to the right of my kitchen cabinet. "The twins were busy while you slept," he says, grabbing a change of clothing from his duffle before setting it down and walking over to the corner.

I almost don't want to know, but my curiosity gets the better of me, and I quickly slide off my stool to peek around the corner. What I see leaves me nearly breathless—it's one of

the largest cat towers I've ever laid eyes on. It's something I've always wanted but never purchased because these things can be insanely expensive.

This cat tower boasts five levels, providing ample space for all four of my feline companions, even Sushi, who's the most antisocial and territorial of the group. I find her curled up in the bottom house, her eyes closed as she enjoys a peaceful slumber. On the next level, I see Finley's black fur as he snoozes comfortably. Above him, Tuna glares at Max with a toy clenched in her mouth. Minnow sprawls out at the very top, his head partially hanging off the edge and a leg up in the air.

"Did they drug them?" I gesture toward the towering feline paradise that's as tall as me.

"Catnip," Max explains, reaching down to scratch Tuna behind her ear. Apparently, the traitorous little cat wants to claim all my men, and she closes her eyes in contentment, letting out a rumbling purr.

My men.

Oh, I am in deep.

I slowly back away from the adorable scene and return to my stool, silently eating my breakfast as Max gazes at Tuna with a sappy little smile on his face. I wonder if the tough exterior he presents to the world is just a façade to keep people at bay. Perhaps he's a big, soft-hearted teddy bear deep down.

Clearing his throat, he gathers his clothing and heads to the bathroom, only briefly glancing at me from beneath his lashes before disappearing inside.

I chug my orange juice, realizing I'm parched and feeling the heat building within me. So much for my independence.

*No*, I scold myself. I can have a pack help me through my heat *and* independence. Just because I'm daydreaming about knots doesn't mean I'm any less independent. In fact, I choose to let them into my golden hot pocket. The choice is entirely mine.

I hastily devour my breakfast, giving myself hiccups in the process. I pop my plate into the sink before dashing upstairs, throwing open my closet door in a state of mild panic. I'm unsure what the hell I should wear. Chewing on my lip, I eventually settle on a pair of jeans and a cozy sweater because I want to look at least somewhat presentable and not like a hobo.

Who even cares though?

Apparently, I do. Oh man, I'm even dressing to impress now.

Grabbing a pair of socks, I make my way back downstairs just as Max steps out of the bathroom. This time, he's wearing a pair of jeans that have seen better days, riddled with holes and so worn in that they look incredibly comfortable—so comfortable, in fact, that I want to steal them. He also donned a band T-shirt featuring a group I've never even heard of before.

"Is this okay?" I pause on the steps, allowing myself to meet him at eye level.

Max pauses, his eyes moving from my toes all the way up to my scalp. His gaze darkens just a fraction, and his musky scent envelops me, pulling me closer to him. "Stunning."

I want to say it's just jeans and a sweater, but instead, I smile. "Thanks," I reply, giving him a wink before breezing past him. There's only so much of his attention I can handle. Whenever Max looks at me, it's as though he's seeing me for the first time each time, and it's always with the same mix of hope, infatuation, and lust.

"My car or yours?" I ask as I slide my boots on.

He raises an eyebrow as if that's even a question.

"Right," I say, dressed and ready to go. I grab a coat and stomp toward the door. "Yours because you're far too big to fold yourself into my car."

My hand is on the doorknob when Max suddenly spins me around, pressing me against the door. His body radiates heat,

making my toes curl, and my hands land on his hips, my fingernails digging into his jeans.

My mouth parts in shock, and his eyes dip down before they slowly roll back up. There's a smoldering intensity in his gaze that sends a delicious shiver down my spine. "What are you trying to say, sugarplum?"

I'm caught off guard by his sudden proximity and teasing tone. "Huh?" I say, feeling a surge of warmth that has nothing to do with my cozy sweater. This is precisely why I chose to avoid alphas for months—because they can easily distract me.

Max leans down, his warm breath ghosting over my ear, causing my fists to tighten on the fabric of his jeans. "You think I'm big," he purrs in a low, suggestive tone.

I burst out laughing, releasing my grip on his pants as I lean back slightly. "You are ridiculous."

Leaning back, he smirks at me, his lips curving into an enticing grin. "Avery taught me that anything can be turned into an innuendo if you try hard enough."

"That sounds just like Avery," I murmur, letting my head thump lightly against the door. "I'm sad I missed Ashton."

Max chuckles softly, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Don't be. He carried you up to bed and left you his shirt."

I roll my eyes playfully, stepping past him as he opens the door for me and retrieves the key from the hook, which I hardly ever use.

In the hallway, the chill of the cold air hits me abruptly, making me shiver. I hug my sweater tighter around me, my thoughts drifting to Ashton, the silent and serious delta. He's reserved and watchful, and there's an intensity about him that I'm eager to understand. I can't wait for his next shift, when he'll be watching over me, and I'll do my best to stay awake the entire time.

"Ready?" Max asks as he steps ahead, holding the door open for me. A gust of frigid wind slaps my face, intensifying my shivers. "Damn," he mutters, peering outside into the bright white sky.

“It smells like snow,” I remark, moving closer to Max to steal some of his warmth. I breathe in the crisp scent of winter, a hint of excitement dancing in the air.

“The weatherman didn’t say anything about snow,” he says, perplexed, while eyeing the steps. “Is there another exit?”

I glance around, but the staircase appears to be our only way out. “No,” I reply.

Max raises an eyebrow, his concern evident. “This looks hazardous.”

I can’t help but tease him, grinning as I squeeze past him and slowly descend the steps. “Aww, look at you being all alpha-like.”

“That’s because I am an alpha,” he says right behind me, his tone filled with genuine concern. “If it snows, you could easily fall down the steps and break something.”

I stifle my laughter at his protective instincts and continue walking toward his truck. Loose gravel crunches under my heels as I go. “Haven’t fallen yet,” I retort over my shoulder, though I have, in fact, tripped up these very steps—a feat that should be impossible but somehow isn’t.

“Only a matter of time,” he mutters with a playful smirk, making me laugh as he rushes ahead to open the door for me.

Thankfully, there’s a sturdy footstep, allowing me to climb up into the truck. This time, I decide to buckle my own seatbelt. As I look ahead, the park appears desolate, devoid of kids playing and anyone just casually strolling past.

Max climbs into the truck and follows my gaze. “No one knows anything,” he says, locking the doors and pulling out of the parking lot. “The deltas are hoping it’s just a one-time thing.”

I watch him closely as he speaks, noticing how his features contort and how he rolls his lips in thought. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

“I’m not sure,” he answers, navigating down the street. The institute is only a ten-minute drive away. “No one just attacks and hurts an omega.”

I chew the inside of my lip, a strange thought washing over me. “Last year...”

“I know,” he says with a sigh, his gaze steady on the road. Last year, I discovered that my sister never died, and Sawyer and her mates stumbled upon mutilated bodies of gammas and omegas. “I don’t know if it’s related.”

“It’s strange to me,” I whisper as we come to a stop at a traffic light.

“What is?” Max turns up the heat and glances at me from the corner of his eye.

“It just doesn’t feel right,” I admit, my frown deepening. “It’s almost surreal, as though I’m disconnected from that woman you found and her death. I should feel something more. My friend Audrey, she would want to know more. She’s more cautious than Sawyer, but just as curious. I didn’t know her that well, but does it make me a bad person that I don’t want to know more?”

“No,” he says softly as we hit a traffic jam. “You don’t need to push for more, Seraphina. You don’t have to solve anything that happened to Thea or anyone else, and you aren’t obligated to if you don’t want to. It is *enough* to know that Thea is safe right now and that the deltas will figure out what happened. In fact, self-preservation is what all omegas and gammas need right now.”

“I just feel like I should be doing something, anything” —I gesture helplessly with my hands— “instead of nothing.”

“You are staying alive, and that’s just as important as finding out who hurt her,” Max assures me, his voice calm and soothing. “Leave it to the deltas in charge and try not to worry.”

I lean back in my seat, rolling my head to look at Max. He’s so easy to talk to, as though I’ve known him all my life.

Maybe that's why, when I first met him, I had this innate desire to push his buttons and drive him insane.

"What is going on?" he asks as he inches forward in his seat.

Turning around, I look out the window. We're passing the council headquarters, and there are dozens of protestors out front. Delta enforcers are everywhere, redirecting traffic and maintaining order.

Nerves awaken inside me as I stare out of the windshield. "Alphas," I whisper just as Max locks the doors. Dozens of them are holding signs and taking up space outside the council headquarters. "Are they all—"

"Yeah," Max grunts, his thumbs tapping on the steering wheel in frustration. "It looks that way."

"It looks like they are tailgating," I remark, my gaze fixed on the scene outside. Some of them have coolers full of drinks, while others have tables lined up with food.

As we get even closer, Max rolls down his window. A delta enforcer takes note of Max and jogs over.

"What is this?" Max asks with a furrowed brow.

The delta shakes his head, his expression grim. "Alphas protesting unbonded omegas outside the castle." He looks at me and nods, his voice low. "I hate to say this, but you're going to want to steer clear of public spaces for a while."

I swallow hard, my gaze locked on the alphas outside who seem to be treating this like some sort of frat party, laughing and joking as though they aren't protesting my very existence and life. Why do they get to live out their dreams and have their freedom while I'm stuck in this complicated web of politics and expectations?

Max watches my face, scenting the turmoil brewing within me as my perfume sours. He reaches over and places a reassuring hand on my shoulder, offering silent support.

The delta slaps the side of Max's truck. "Get the hell out of here, and whatever you do" —his eyes flicker to mine for a



mere second— “keep her safe.”

“Do you think one of them hurt the omega we found yesterday?” Max questions, leaning back in his seat.

“Oh shit, man, that was you?” He shakes his head and glances over his shoulder at the crowd. “I don’t know, but I wouldn’t doubt it. There are only a handful of omegas living outside the sanctuary.” He turns back around, his words hushed. “Go on before they spot her.”

“One more question,” Max says, waiting for the delta to nod. “Have any other omegas been hurt?”

“Not that I’m aware of, and let’s keep it that way.” He leans back, glancing at the sky. “Snow is coming.” He takes a step back before he turns around and walks away.

Max silently rolls up the window, casting a nervous glance at me.

I get it. He doesn’t even need to say anything. To those alphas, I’m not a person, I’m not a woman, I’m not even entitled to rights of my own.

To them, I’m nothing more than a commodity.

*Seraphina*

AS THE VEHICLE comes to a stop in the institute's parking lot, a wave of anxiety crashes over me, causing my stomach to churn with unease. The sight of the imposing brick building has always stirred an unsettling feeling within me. It's a peculiar mix of emotions that I experience every time I come here—perhaps because Thea resides within these walls, or maybe it's simply the eerie aura that the place exudes, like a forgotten relic of a bygone era.

Max skillfully maneuvers the car to the back of the building, steering down a small hill until we reach an employee parking area. Relief washes over me as I realize we won't have to face the front entrance, the scrutinizing security guard, or the sympathetic receptionist. After the unfortunate incident during my last visit, I'm not eager to endure their pitying glances again. The mere thought of it sends shivers down my spine.

Max breaks the silence, his voice laced with understanding. "I want to emphasize that not all alphas are like that," he says, focused on the task of parking the car in a space with his nameplate proudly facing the rear of the building. "But I do understand how harmful it can be to even utter or entertain such a thought."

A partial smile tugs at my lips in response, though it's more of a courtesy than a genuine expression of joy.

He unbuckles his seatbelt and then mine. "I also understand why you've chosen to live outside the sanctuary. In this institute, I'm the lone alpha—the sole doctor."

“So you’re a doctor?” I tease, the playful banter providing a momentary distraction.

“More of a scientist,” he corrects with a nonchalant shrug. “I have a deep affinity for plants.”

“But not people?” I prod, wanting to lighten the mood.

Max responds with a meaningful look that speaks volumes. It’s clear that while he might not be overly fond of most people, his pack, and perhaps even me, holds a special place in his heart. That revelation warms me from the inside, creating a sense of belonging I hadn’t expected to find here.

“Thank you,” I say, expressing my gratitude as I reach for the door handle, “for understanding that I have to approach all alphas cautiously, as if any one of them might pose a threat.”

“You don’t owe anyone an explanation,” Max whispers, his eyes fixed on the imposing structure before us. His gaze seems to drift off into a world of his own, hinting that there’s more beneath the surface, something he isn’t quite ready to reveal. My fingers hover over the door handle, poised to exit, yet Max remains motionless. “My sister is an omega.”

The revelation catches me off guard, and I’m left wide-eyed with surprise. “You have a sister?”

“Grace,” Max replies, leaning forward with a peculiar smile playing on his lips. “You can see her room from here.”

“She’s here?” I push forward, scanning the row of windows on the top floor. Curtains hang in various states—some drawn open, some tightly closed, and others partially parted to reveal fleeting glimpses of the rooms beyond. One curtain, though, is slightly ajar.

Max nods in confirmation, his finger pointing to a room at the far end of the building. “She has a suite in the corner. Right there.”

I squint at the room above, straining to determine whether the curtain is open or closed from our vantage point. A sinking feeling settles in my chest, because if Grace is here within these walls, it means she isn’t well. It means that some part of her is broken, and I can’t help but worry about her well-being.

“When Grace was sixteen,” Max begins, his voice carrying the weight of memories and regrets, “and I had just turned twenty, I recently met Devlin and the twins, and that night, we were trying to bond to see if we could truly become a pack. The twins were around Grace’s age.” He speaks with a poignant tone, his body still leaning over the steering wheel as his gaze remains on Grace’s suite. Though the truck’s cab is gradually cooling, the story he’s sharing holds us both in its grip.

“We lived close to here, in the estates north of Central City,” Max continues, his voice tinged with a hint of bitterness. The estates, an exclusive neighborhood where politicians and the wealthy reside, seemed worlds away from the lives most people could only dream of.

“You know,” Max says, looking over at me with a mixture of sadness and understanding, “Grace yearned for independence from the pack, and she truly deserved it.” His words resonate deeply with me, reminding me of my own struggles and aspirations. “I fought for her, against our parents, to let her get a job, even though she didn’t need it. Our family was well off, and she never had to work a day in her life, but she wanted to carve her own path, especially as an omega.”

My pulse quickens in my chest as I anticipate the heart-wrenching tale that’s unfolding. Deep down, I know it won’t lead to a happy ending, but I can’t help but hope for the best, particularly for Grace.

“That night, I made plans with the guys,” Max continues, his tone filled with self-reproach. “We were going to play some pool and watch movies at Devlin’s place. Usually, I was the one who picked Grace up from work.” He lets out a sigh, overwhelmed by the memory. “But that evening, she insisted that she’d be fine. She was only working at the estate apothecary, and she finished her shift before dark. It was just a half-mile walk. She insisted she’d be fine.”

Max leans back over the steering wheel, his gaze unwavering from Grace’s window. “I can’t explain it, but something didn’t feel right that night. When six o’clock rolled around, I decided to grab Ashton and go get her, just to be

safe, except when we got to the apothecary, Grace wasn't there. She wasn't walking home, and she wasn't at our house."

I blink back tears, touched by the depth of Max's love and commitment to his sister. It resonates with the bond I share with Lex.

"We called the guys, and we searched for her," Max says, his voice heavy with sorrow. "We found her half an hour later, but it was too late." He sits back, running a trembling hand down his face. "I won't go into the gruesome details, but an alpha found her while she was walking home, and he didn't take no for an answer. It's been a decade, and I've spent all that time trying to find a way to help her."

Max finally looks at me, his eyes filled with a potent mixture of despair and understanding. "I don't know if I can ever truly fix her, but when I say I understand, I really do."

I nod in understanding because, really, what can I say to that? No words in the universe can alleviate the weight of his feelings. When he walked into the bakery and saw us, he wasn't angry that we were working, he was worried.

"She's lucky to have you," I offer genuinely.

"Is she?" he asks, his voice taking on a harder edge than a minute ago. "I should have been there for her, picked her up, and fought him off, but I wasn't, and he got away. No one could ever figure out who hurt her. And Grace?" He glances at her window and then back to me. "Her mind shut down to protect her. It doesn't happen often, but if an omega encounters something super horrific, they can die or their subconscious will pull in their consciousness."

"You can't take on the blame for someone else's crimes," I whisper softly, even though I understand why he feels guilty.

"No," he concedes. "I can't. But Grace? She was and is my responsibility." He opens his door and steps out, his breath forming a cloud in the cold air.

I follow suit, opening my own door and coming around the truck to stand beside him, offering silent support. Taking a chance, I slide my fingers through his, feeling his warmth and

channeling as much healing energy as I can into that one touch.

Max looks down at our joined hands, his gaze tortured. Moments later, he brings my hand to his lips and gently kisses my knuckles. “Come on, sugarplum.”

“What are we doing here on a Sunday?” I ask, allowing the weight of the moment to slowly recede, but it’s not gone because wounds like these take years to heal.

“I want you to see my world,” he explains, punching in a code to unlock the door. Once it clicks, he opens it for me, and a rush of warm air envelops us.

“This has been your life for a long time, hasn’t it?” I ask as I step into the long hallway, which splits in two directions—left and right. I assume the layout is much the same down here as it is upstairs, with offices along the edge and community rooms in the center for group therapy.

“It’s all I’ve known,” he answers, taking my hand again and leading me down the white hallway. “The guys are tolerant of me taking off for long periods of time to research natural medicines, but this last one took a toll on us. The twins ended up coming out to work as my personal delta security.”

“You were the job Avery spoke of,” I remark, a rueful smile playing on my lips. Everything suddenly makes sense.

“Yes,” he confirms, leading me to a door with even more security features. He lets go of my hand and punches in codes, even leaning down for a retina scan.

“How did you meet them?” I inquire as he opens the door, and the scent of bleach wafts toward me.

Max flips on the lights, and the hum of fluorescent bulbs fills the space. “The twins or Dev?”

“All of them, I guess,” I reply with a nod as I step into the room and casually shrug off my coat. My gaze sweeps around the space, revealing an unexpected sight. Instead of sterile white walls and clinical atmosphere, it feels more like a cozy reception area in a doctor’s office. The room boasts a wardrobe, a comfy couch, a small round table for meals, and a

television. Across the hall, a long window and a mysterious door beckon, suggesting that the real essence of this place lies beyond.

Max, following suit, explains more about his connection to this place as he hangs our coats on a hanger. “Dev and I grew up together,” he begins, his voice carrying a nostalgic tone. “We practically went through school together, from the moment we could walk until we graduated from the alpha academy.”

“And then?” I ask, my curiosity piqued as I run a finger over the table, noticing a light film of dust.

“We went off to college,” he continues, flipping on the lights to the adjoining room, revealing a dazzling array of blue and white cabinets, computers, and various pieces of equipment that seem beyond my comprehension. “Dev was eager to delve into the world of politics, and I, well...” He smirks, throwing his arms up dramatically. “I ended up right here.”

“What about the twins?” I inquire, my interest growing with every revelation.

Max’s tone softens as he delves into the story. “The twins were friends with Grace,” he whispers, settling on the edge of the table. “Back when our designations were still a mystery, we all attended the same elementary school. They took to Grace like she was their long-lost sibling. For the longest time, they were inseparable. It was like they were made for each other, and even after...” He trails off, running his hand along the base of his neck before meeting my gaze. “Even after they continued to visit her every single weekend.”

“Like today?” I move closer to him, eager to uncover more about his past and his connections. There’s still so much I don’t know about Maximillian Harrington, and I’m eager to explore it all.

“Exactly like today,” he confirms, his voice filled with meaning. “They’ll stop by once they are finished.”

“So what do you usually do on weekends here?” I take another step closer to him, feeling his warmth.

He seizes me by the waist, pulling me closer and sending a shiver of anticipation down my spine. His eyes darken, and his long, luscious lashes add a touch of mystery to his gaze. “Today, we get to play.”

I raise an intrigued eyebrow. “Play?”

He leans closer, whispering, “Come on, I’ll show you,” as if inviting me into a secret world. Despite his words, he doesn’t move away. Instead, he leans even closer, his eyes fixed on mine. “Will you let me show you why this place means so much to me, even though I know it’s painful for you?”

I moisten my lips, my heart racing as I contemplate how he’s come to understand me so well. My breath catches in my throat as he inches closer, his lips just a breath from mine.

“Yes,” I whisper, because even though I understand Thea may never fully heal, I’m eager to grasp why this remarkable alpha dedicates himself tirelessly to helping others like her.

His lips brush against mine with care, releasing a musky scent tinged with vanilla that envelops me. I rest my palms gently on his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heart beneath my touch. Kissing Max is like a slow burn, tantalizing torment I yearn to prolong. Amid this kiss, time stands still, and I draw him closer until our lips meld together seamlessly.

A soft gasp escapes my lips as Max takes control of the kiss. His tongue explores the depths of my mouth, dancing sensually with my own as he savors my taste. His lips are incredibly soft, like plush pillows, and they radiate warmth like my favorite blanket on a snowy night. I can’t contain the slight whimper that spills from me.

Max’s eyes blaze with lust as he pulls back, and his lips curl into a wicked smile. “I had to taste you.”

I grip his shirt tightly, wanting more. “And?”

“And if I don’t stop now,” he murmurs against my mouth, “I won’t be able to resist tasting every inch of you.” He steals



one more kiss before pulling away. “Let me show you my world.”

I take a step back, my fingers tracing the tingling sensation on my lips where his kiss lingers. I can still feel the heat of his lips against mine.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Max says, gripping my hand and leading me out of the office, back down the hall, and toward the stairs.

It takes me a moment to respond, my mind still in a blissful haze. “Like what?”

“Like you don’t want me to stop.”

“I don’t,” I admit, my voice a soft confession.

“I know.” He chuckles as he glances over his shoulder.

In an attempt to cool down the heated desire between us, I change the subject. “The third floor is where the dorms are, right?” I ask as we reach the final stretch of stairs. I can already feel my breath quickening and my thighs protesting the workout that climbing stairs provides.

“Yeah,” Max confirms, pushing through the door and facing a security guard station.

“Dr. Harrington, my man,” the security guard, a delta, reaches out and shakes Max’s hand. The door to the security room is open, and beyond it are locked double doors.

“Jarrod.” Max nods in greeting. “This is Seraphina, she’s joining us today.”

“I was wondering if you were going to show up today,” Jarrod says as he heads over to the logbook at the station and hands it to Max.

“Ran into a slight issue downtown. The twins will be here shortly,” Max replies as he signs both of our names.

“No Devlin today?” the guard inquires, taking the clipboard back and setting it down.

Max sighs with a shake of his head. “His father.”

“Council bullshit,” the guard grumbles with a hint of frustration as he buzzes us in through the secure doors. “Corrupt, the lot of them, except for Dev. He’s too soft.”

“He’s got an edge you don’t always see,” Max remarks, his hand extending to hold the door open for me. As I step through, realization hits me.

“He’s an heir,” I state, the pieces clicking into place.

“Devlin?” Max raises an eyebrow, chuckling softly as the security doors close and lock. “Didn’t you know?”

I shake my head slowly, puzzled by how I missed such a significant detail. “Honestly, I have no idea how I missed it all this time. The signs were there.”

Max leans in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone. “Devlin doesn’t like to flaunt his status. He probably enjoys the fact that you don’t know.”

“So what you’re saying is I should keep it under wraps for a while?” I suggest, noting a mischievous glint in Max’s eyes. It seems he finds the idea just as entertaining.

“Are you ready?” Max asks, changing the subject.

“Sure,” I respond, curious about what awaits us on this uncharted floor. I’ve never been allowed access here before, and for a moment, I wonder if Thea might be among the patients here. If she is, I’ll have to confront that reality when the time comes.

Max pushes open the door to the central area of the dorm level, and the sudden burst of brightness momentarily blinds me. As my vision adjusts, I’m struck by the sound of every single patient in the room excitedly shouting Max’s name.

I’m gently pushed aside by the fervor of their greetings, but I don’t mind at all. He greets each of them with a genuine smile, and there are so many patients here that my heart aches just from taking in the scene. Observing this side of Max, a side reserved solely for these patients, fills me with a sense of warmth and admiration.

While the cafeteria is situated downstairs, this floor features a few vending machines for snacks, a tucked away pharmacy, a cozy living room area, and a section filled with games and entertainment. There are about a dozen patients here, representing various designations, including a mage who lies in the middle of the floor, conjuring enchanting blue butterflies and releasing them into the room. She doesn't rise to greet Max, but instead offers a friendly wave from her spot on the floor.

I find a comfortable spot against the wall, content to observe Max as he greets each patient by name. Their conversations revolve around his recent trip and whether he brought back any surprises for them. It strikes me that this may be the first time many of them have seen Max in years.

*Just how long have they all been here?* I wonder as I contemplate the unique bonds he shares with these individuals, each needing his care and attention.

As I continue to observe Max's interactions with the patients, I can't help but be moved by his genuine connection with each of them. They hang onto his every word, their eyes filled with admiration and gratitude. It's evident that Max's presence brings them a sense of comfort and hope that they may not find elsewhere.

One of the patients, a young gamma no older than me with a gentle smile, approaches Max with a drawing in hand. "I made this for you, Dr. Max," she says, her voice filled with excitement. Max takes the drawing and praises her artistic skills, making her blush with pride.

Another patient, a burly delta with twitchy eyes, claps Max on the back and shares a hearty laugh with him. Their camaraderie is infectious, spreading warmth throughout the room.

As I watch, my heart swells with admiration for Max and his unwavering dedication to these individuals who need him. He doesn't just treat their mental ailments, he tends to their physical well-being as well, offering a sense of belonging and family that many of them may have lost.

As the minutes tick by, I watch with a sense of pride that he even allowed me to witness this. My cheeks ache from the prolonged smile that's graced my face. However, every few minutes, my gaze sweeps the room in search of Thea, who never appears, leaving me uncertain about my feelings regarding her absence.

A few minutes later, a mage approaches me, cradling a delicate blue butterfly in her hands. "For you," she mutters in a broken dialect, a reminder that our native tongues differ.

"Thank you," I respond, extending my palm, and she gently deposits the butterfly into my hand. An unexpected electric tingle of magic races up my arm, causing me to gasp.

"Sometimes," she whispers, her dark eyes reminiscent of a beetle, her long hair cascading down her back, "we are our own worst enemy."

"Excuse me?" I inquire, peering at her over the butterfly.

"You heard me," she states. "We are the ones who hold ourselves back from love."

I steal a glance at Max, who's engrossed in a game of checkers on the floor with an older woman. Am I indeed holding myself back?

"Not just him," she murmurs, as though she can sense my inner thoughts. "All forms of love." With a wink, she turns away, her petite stature almost elf-like.

The butterfly in my hand inexplicably sinks beneath my skin, and I frantically shake my hands, but it's already embedded within me. Panicked, I look up at the mage, but she's on the other side of the room, smirking at me.

*What the hell just happened?*

"Minerva has a knack for unsettling people," Max chimes in, surprising me with his presence. "She's a seer. Committed herself a decade ago. What did she say to you?"

I turn my gaze back to Max, swallowing my unease as I offer him a soft smile. "Nothing," I fib.

However, her words linger within me, settling like a heavy stone. I know I'll carry them with me for a long time.

*Seraphina*

A FIERCE HUNGER ripples through my entire body, unlike anything I've ever experienced. Only one word can even come close to describing what I'm feeling right now—*ravenous*—and it isn't even for... you know, dick.

No, I'm honestly just starving.

My stomach lets out a rumbling growl that I swear reverberates through the windows, drawing amused glances from the others in the room. Sitting beside me, Ashton catches my eye, and his lips curl into a crooked smile.

"Was that you?" he whispers, a hint of playful curiosity in his tone, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. We're nestled in the corner of the room, surrounded by scattered art supplies. Most of them are strewn about haphazardly because some patients here apparently prefer gnawing on crayons rather than using them for their intended purpose. Not going to lie, I succumbed to curiosity myself and tasted one earlier because, after the third patient tried to snack on a crayon, I became convinced I missed out on some profound culinary experience.

Turns out, I didn't miss out on anything other than wax I still can't get out of my teeth. It's not just the taste but the texture. It's all awful.

"Yeah," I hiss, my impatience seeping through as I run a hand through my wild hair. We've been over here since he and Avery walked in just half an hour ago, and my stomach is staging a full-blown rebellion. "I'm so hungry." Yep, I whine, and I'm not proud of it, but I'm starved, and food will only

appease the stomach gods. “Does that vending machine take change?”

Ashton, who is now lying on his side on the floor, sits up and looks over his shoulder at the vending machine, a little frown creasing his forehead. “Honestly, I think it takes tokens they give the patients.”

“Tokens?” I blink at him, genuinely surprised. “I mean, I know that change is almost a thing of the past, but tokens?”

Biting his lip, he leans in closer, a conspiratorial glint in his eyes. “What do you say we get out of here and I get you something to eat?”

My stomach rumbles in excitement at the prospect. “I swear, this thing has a mind of her own right now, and she is all on board.”

“Come on.” Ashton stands up, hovering over me. Unlike Avery, he isn’t as bulky. He’s slimmer, with a slightly harder edge to him. His black jeans and combat boots give him a bad boy vibe, but I know better. He’s just as soft as Max on the inside. He holds his hand out to me, so I place my palm in his, and he hauls me up effortlessly.

Warmth spreads through me at the contact, and excitement hums in my veins. I haven’t spent a lot of time with Ashton one-on-one, and there’s a thrilling sense of anticipation at having him all to myself right now.

“Where to?” I whisper, as though getting food is a thrilling secret between us, and the mischievous glint in his eyes tells me this adventure is about to get a lot more interesting.

Without a word, he slips his warm hand into mine and guides me over to where Max perches on a chair that seems to groan under the weight of his presence. What really touches my heart, though, is the sight of Max braiding the hair of a woman who sits on the floor beside him. She shares the same dirty blond hair as Max, and her eyes are the same shade of captivating blue. Max’s fingers move skillfully, weaving her hair into an intricate French braid. As I glimpse her vacant expression, I just know this is Grace.

Even though her eyes are looking in my direction, it's painfully clear that she isn't seeing me. Her gaze seems distant, lost in some inner world, and that realization tugs at my heartstrings even more.

"Hey, Gracie." Ashton's voice is gentle, bringing a lump to my throat. "You look beautiful today."

Grace blinks at Ashton, her eyes lighting up as a radiant smile graces her face. Ashton gracefully sinks to his knees in front of her, and she opens her mouth. "Max is braiding my hair."

"You look absolutely incredible," Ashton says with sincerity. I can see the depth of his affection for this woman in his blue eyes. A strange sliver of jealousy tries to creep in, the kind that only an omega can understand, but I push it aside.

"You guys are the best big brothers ever," Grace whispers, her voice filled with so much love that it melts away any trace of jealousy I might have felt.

I remain silent, not wanting to intrude on this intimate moment. I don't know the extent of Grace's fragility, and I don't want to disrupt the fragile happiness she seems to have found in this space.

"Oh, yeah." Ashton's voice wavers as he swallows and licks his lips. His eyes, however, reveal a different story. They hold a hint of doubt, likely connected to the reason Grace is here in the first place. Ashton glances over Grace's shoulder at Max, who continues to work on her hair. "I'm going to take Seraphina for some food."

Max nods, his gaze briefly darting to the clock on the wall. He appears torn, as though he's wrestling with an internal conflict.

"Are you leaving?" Grace looks up at Ashton, her big, innocent eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Yeah," Ashton replies softly, "but I promise I'll be back to teach you how to paint an owl."

Grace's face lights up with a grin. "Okay." With that simple word, she dismisses Ashton as easily as she dismissed



my presence, returning to her world of contemplation.

“Straight home after you get food.” Max finally looks over at us, pausing his braiding. “I’ll see you later?” he questions hopefully.

“Maybe.” I give him a quick kiss on his cheek, a small thanks for showing me a vulnerable part of himself, but I’m not ready for sleepovers just yet.

With Grace now enveloped in her inner thoughts, Ashton rises to his feet and takes my hand, wordlessly leading me out of the community room and back into the corridor. As we walk, he casts a wistful glance back through the open door, and there’s longing in Ashton’s gaze that’s hard to ignore.

We reach the security desk, where Ashton signals for me to stay quiet as he signs us out. Beyond the desk, the delta I encountered earlier is taking a casual nap, embodying an intriguing mix of strength and vulnerability.

Ashton’s finger presses to his lips in a silent gesture for me to remain hushed as he completes the sign out process. Then, with a sense of mystery and anticipation, he leads me to the stairwell.

“He works too much,” Ashton remarks as the door closes softly behind us. His voice is smooth, carrying a hint of concern. “Few deltas want to stay here or visit, for that matter.”

I match my steps with him as we descend the steps, the rhythmic clattering of our shoes filling the air. My curiosity gets the better of me. “Why?”

Ashton casts a sidelong glance at me, his expression a curious mix of sympathy and understanding. “Because it’s a reminder of what can happen to them.”

My mouth drops open as I look back up the steps, the weight of that statement sinking in. I feel awful, and a wave of empathy washes over me. “I’m sorry,” I say, though I know it’s an insufficient response.

He gently squeezes my hand as we continue to descend. “It’s alright. There are two institutes like this—this one here

and one closer to the delta base. The one near the base has alpha guards.”

I’m well aware of both facilities, and a pang of sympathy for the deltas and their daily struggle tugs at my heart. While deltas share many traits with alphas, they bear a unique burden—a higher likelihood of going berserk, a term society uses to describe their uncontrollable episodes. Their striking, light blue eyes serve as a constant reminder of their inner turmoil, something they confront every time they look in a mirror. Deltas are essentially an offshoot of alphas, lacking their counterparts’ self-discipline and grounding abilities, making them more susceptible to losing their minds.

Packs play a vital role in deltas’ lives. Without an omega to anchor them, their mental stability deteriorates. They find grounding and stability with a strong alpha and a close-knit pack, but with an omega by their side, their minds remain their own, safeguarded against the encroaching darkness.

“What are you hungry for?” Ashton’s voice pulls me from my thoughts as we reach the ground floor, heading toward Max’s lab.

“Honestly, I’m not even sure I can begin to narrow down what I’m hungry for,” I admit, my stomach growling uncomfortably. It pulses with a persistent ache, and a subtle cramp in my groin serves as a reminder that my heat is an ever-present Damocles’ sword hanging over my head.

“I have an idea,” Ashton murmurs softly, his words tinged with a hint of mischief as he opens the lab door to get our things. His gentle whispers always seem to strike the right balance, a perfect counterpoint to Avery’s louder and more boisterous nature.

“Perfect, because right now, I want everything. I’d eat fabric if I had to.” I chuckle and rub my stomach, trying to soothe the gnawing hunger. “Can I ask you something?”

A warm smile plays on Ashton’s lips as he helps me slip into my coat. “You don’t have to ask if you can ask me a question.”

“Alright.” I turn to face him, taking in the sight of him slipping into a black leather jacket. With his dark, curly hair falling gracefully across his forehead and the intriguing tattoos adorning his skin, he exudes a captivating aura. He embodies temptation and carries the irresistible scent of a spiced latte.

Clearing my throat and averting my gaze, I gather my courage to ask the question that’s been swirling in my mind, even though I know it’s driven by my omega instincts. “Grace. Were you... Did you... Were you involved?”

“No,” he says, shaking his head ever so slightly, his eyes locked on mine with a reassuring warmth. “It wasn’t even a question. Ever.” His hand slides smoothly into mine, making my heart beat a wild rhythm as he leads me out of the lab and into the corridor.

A sense of guilt nags at me as I squeeze his fingers. I hadn’t initially considered the idea of joining a pack, at least not yet, but the notion of them not being a part of my life stings more than I’d like to admit. After all, I don’t want to share them, even though I should have known better. Max is one of them—a vital member of their pack—and they wouldn’t have his sister as their emotional core without a good reason.

“Brace yourself,” he warns as he swings open the outside door. A frigid gust of wind nearly steals my breath, making me gasp. “Yeah, the temperature keeps dropping.”

Shivering, we hurriedly approach his car, carefully avoiding patches of slippery black ice. Ashton almost skids to a stop and opens my door to a warm car, and I practically fling myself into the running vehicle.

“When did you start it?” I inquire, my teeth chattering as I slam the door shut. The car’s interior is plush and inviting, with the heat cranked to a blissful level.

“Remote start,” he explains, still shivering just as much as I am. He rubs his hands together, generating warmth, before leaning over me to buckle my seatbelt. It’s a sweet gesture that sends a delightful shiver down my spine. It’s amazing how everything feels like an innuendo when I’m this close to my

heat. It isn't, but my hormones seem to think otherwise, reveling in their own little party.

As Ashton pulls out of the parking lot and onto the main road leading back to the city, the sun slowly dips overhead. He leans forward, glancing at the setting sun and the dropping temperature before shaking his head in disbelief. "Normally, I'd trust the weather guy, but I think he's wrong. We're going to get slammed at some point here."

Worry creeps in, and my mind races with what-ifs. What if he's right, and we find ourselves trapped in a sudden snowstorm? What if I'm not with them in time and get snowed in? What if I am trapped with them?

Anxiety bubbles up inside me, but I force myself to focus on Ashton. My eyes fixate on the intricate black tattoo on his neck, resembling a jellyfish with tendrils that seem to float in water, giving it an otherworldly quality.

"It's a jellyfish," he confirms, catching my curious gaze with his own.

"What does it mean?" I reach out and run a finger along one of the tendrils, causing goosebumps to ripple across his skin.

"Did you know jellyfish are immortal?" he asks, his voice filled with intrigue. "Max can nerd out over that fact, by the way. He'll talk your ear off between that and his passion for mushrooms."

I can't help but smile, the warmth spreading across my face. "I kind of want to hear about it."

"Don't." Ashton exaggerates a dramatic shudder. "Anyway, when Grace got hurt, I didn't know how to reach her. Besides Avery and the guys, she was, and still is, one of my closest friends. I miss that."

"I'm so sorry," I murmur softly, feeling a pang of sympathy for the pain and loss he carries with him.

Ashton simply nods in acknowledgment, his eyes reflecting the weight of the past. "They are graceful, you know," he begins, his voice carrying a sense of admiration.

“We could have lost her that night, and though we lost a part of her, she somehow adapted in her own unique way. Life can be cruel, but Grace?” He glances at me again, and I can see a hint of tears shimmering in his eyes. “She adapted like a jellyfish. She didn’t fight the current it swept her into. Even though parts of her shut down, I still see her in her eyes. She’s there, just no longer resisting the current it swept her into. She taught me to let go and find balance and harmony in all of life’s circumstances.”

“So you got a jellyfish tattoo,” I observe, my finger tracing the intricate tendrils of the design. “And the purple flowers?”

He nods, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “They are her favorite. Delicate little purple flowers,” he explains. “Does it bother you?”

Surprisingly, it doesn’t bother me at all. In fact, there’s an unexpected beauty in his gesture that I can’t help but admire. While most omegas might have an issue with another woman in a pack’s life, especially when considering becoming a part of it, I find myself strangely drawn to this symbol of his connection to Grace. “She means a lot to you.”

His solemn nod confirms my intuition. “She does. What happened to her...” He trails off, his grip on the steering wheel tightening.

I reach over and gently lay my hand over his, offering a comforting touch. There are moments when words fall short, and all you can do is be there for someone. In this instance, not even a simple “it’s alright” feels appropriate, because what happened to Grace was nothing short of brutal and heartbreaking.

“We have his DNA, but it’s only recently with the change in the council that they’ve even started accepting beta science,” Ashton continues, his voice tinged with frustration. “We’ve kept it frozen for years—one there, and one in Max’s lab. We had to get a special mage to take it and send it north.”

“You’ll find him,” I say with unwavering conviction. I have to believe it. Not just for Grace, but for all the women who have suffered similar fates.

Briefly, I wonder if it's the same person who attacked the woman in the park or confronted Violet and me outside the dress shop, but I can't begin to answer that question, as there are far too many alphas willing to harm an omega or a gamma just to sire a child.

Ashton skillfully navigates away from the bustling downtown area, leading us down a side street that eventually takes us to a quieter section of Central City—a part I haven't had the chance to explore much. This area is nestled in the northern region, closer to the estates where I know the guys reside in a cozy subdivision.

Curiosity and anticipation pulse within me as the landscape shifts from row homes to single-family houses. Here, the homes are closer together, and trees line the streets, barren and frozen. Ashton eventually turns onto another road, where quaint little shops dot the street. He parks the car neatly near the sidewalk.

"Where are we?" I ask, scanning the surroundings and spotting a small movie theater nearby.

"Central east," he replies, playfully pointing toward our destination. "And right there? That's where we're heading, but before we get there, I just need one little answer from you."

I can't resist the opportunity to tease him in return. "You don't have to ask me if you can ask me a question."

A hint of mischief dances in his eyes as he indulges my banter. "Alright, munchkin," he says, using the nickname that always makes me smile. "So, here's the real question. Do you want tacos to go, or would you like to dine in?"

I hum thoughtfully and tap my lips, feigning deep contemplation. "If we go for takeout, where are we going afterward?"

Without a moment's hesitation, he answers with a casual confidence that sends a spark of intrigue through me. "We're heading to the estate," he declares, his voice holding the promise of coziness and relaxation. "I can see the gears

turning in that beautiful head of yours. At the estate, we've got a fireplace, cozy blankets, pillows, and an array of movies."

My decision is finally made, and I nod, peering over his shoulder at the small restaurant that looks like a hidden gem. "To go, please. Will you be so kind as to order for me? I need to call Violet and have her check on the cats."

"Consider it done," he says, demonstrating his thoughtfulness. Instead of leaving the car, he pulls out his phone to place our order. With a crooked smirk, he playfully needles me. "Did you really think I'd leave you alone in the car?"

I can't help but chuckle at his teasing, appreciating how these men look out for me. I quickly send a text to Violet, promising to call her later for a *proof of life* update before returning my attention to Ashton.

It's fascinating how identical twins can evolve to have distinct identities as they age. Avery and Ashton's individuality seems to be as much about how they carry themselves as their physical appearance.

I realize I've been staring. A hint of color tints his cheeks as he looks at me from beneath his thick lashes, his fingers finishing up the order on his phone. He presses a button and sets the device aside before fully turning toward me. Those striking blue eyes of his, flecked with gold, are like a magnetic force drawing me in.

"You have golden flecks in your eyes," I remark, tempted by their mesmerizing allure. I curl my fingers into tight fists to keep myself from reaching out and touching him.

"Avery and I are the only deltas in our family," he shares, his gaze drifting to my lips, heating up the atmosphere inside the car. "We suspect it's because we come from a long line of alphas."

I can't help but tease him about his illustrious family history. "The infamous Griffons, right?"

"So you know." He grins playfully, turning to face me more directly and resting his head on the seat. It's a

surprisingly intimate gesture, and for some reason, it sparks thoughts of romance movies—couples sitting in cars on Lover’s Lane, sharing conversations, and perhaps something more.

“Is it true?” I ask, my fingers gently tracing along the lines of his palm as I indulge my curiosity. The intimacy of the moment feels electrifying, and I can’t help but wonder about the intriguing tales of his family’s history.

Ashton’s breath hitches ever so slightly, his hand held still beneath my touch. “My brother can lengthen his nails, and he can move faster than most alphas,” he confesses. There’s a hint of vulnerability in his voice as if he’s sharing a cherished family secret. “There’s a story in our family, a legend that dates back before the war that tore our society apart. It’s said that Griffins could shift into mighty beasts.”

I pause my exploration of his palm, my eyes locking onto his. Shifters? “I’ve never heard of that before,” I admit, my curiosity piqued. I imagine the possibility of Ashton shifting into a legendary creature, and it sends a thrilling shiver down my spine. Would I still recognize him if he transformed before my eyes?

“I don’t know if it’s true,” he confesses, his fingers curling around mine as if seeking comfort, “but I like the story. I like to think that we were so much more than we are now.”

“More in tune with nature? Wilder?” I inquire, my gaze rising to meet his. Our eyes lock, and the connection feels magnetic, like we’re sharing a secret language known only to us. It’s a feeling I’ve experienced with each of these men, and it’s both thrilling and intoxicating.

“Exactly,” he affirms, his gaze dropping to my lips. “I want to kiss you, Seraphina.”

My heart flutters in response to his words. “You should kiss me,” I reply, my anticipation building with each passing second.

Ashton hesitates, his uncertainty evident, so I take the initiative, leaning in to capture his lips with mine. The taste of



nutmeg mingles with brown sugar, creating a delightful sensory explosion that fills the car. I gasp softly into our kiss, feeling a cramp ripple through my core at the touch of his lips.

I press closer, savoring the sensation as our lips meet again. This time, I pause, gently biting down on his lower lip. A soft moan escapes Ashton's lips, a sound that sends a delicious thrill coursing through me. I want to hear more of it, so I bite down a second time, earning another moan from him.

Ashton responds eagerly, deepening our kiss as he captures my lips with his. He's remarkably soft, his kisses filled with a slow, burning passion that ignites a fiery desire within me.

As I moan into our passionate kiss, savoring the connection between us, an unexpected knock on my car window startles me. I jump slightly and let out a surprised squeak.

"That's our food," Ashton whispers with a smile, reluctantly breaking our kiss before leaning across me to roll down the window. "Hey, Sal."

"Sorry to interrupt, man, but it is cold out here," Sal apologizes, handing over two large bags of food before hurrying off.

My cheeks heat, and I can feel the warmth spreading to my core, creating a delicious kind of tension. Ashton's presence alone has that effect on me—a magnetic pull that's hard to resist. The playful banter and stolen kisses only intensify the longing between us.

Ashton leans closer, his eyes filled with desire, and for a moment, I forget about everything else. I'm tempted to unbuckle myself, climb over the center console, and capture his lips again. The memory of our previous kiss still lingers in my mind, and I can almost taste nutmeg and brown sugar on his lips.

Reality sets in as a cramp ripples through my body, a stark reminder of my growing hunger. It's a hunger that's for the electrifying connection between us, not food. I bite down on

my tongue to suppress any sounds of need threatening to escape. Damn, I'm hungry.

Ashton's voice breaks through my thoughts, returning me to the present. "Let's get you to the estate," he suggests, his tone tinged with desire and concern.

Closing my window, he turns his attention fully to me, his eyes never leaving my face. It's a look that ignites a fire within me, and I can't help but feel the intense attraction that pulses between us.

The desire for food takes a back seat. What I'm truly starving for is Ashton, and I can't help but entertain thoughts of what might happen once we reach our destination. The anticipation of being with him, of exploring the depths of our connection, sends shivers of excitement down my spine.

My hunger may be a constant reminder, but right now, in this car, with Ashton's gaze locked on me, I'm consumed by a different kind of hunger—a hunger for him.

## CHAPTER 16

### *Ashton*

SERAPHINA MAY NOT RECALL our first meeting, but I etched the memory in my mind. She wouldn't remember anyway. I remained hidden in the shadows, silently observing her from the art room's corner. On the other hand, Avery was smitten with her at first sight, but as deltas in the sanctuary, we were forbidden from interacting with omegas.

They are off-limits, unattainable for deltas like me.

Avery, however, was undeterred. With a mere glance, he fell deeply for her. I endured endless hours listening to him fantasize about the perfect omega. The most critical issue, though, and in my view, the most concerning, was her age. She was underage.

I mustered up every ounce of my willpower to persuade Avery to delay his introduction until she neared graduation, but I knew he disregarded my advice. Our duty was to protect the omegas, unseen and unknown. Most of us adhered to this rule, but not Avery. Discovering his secret escapades to the kitchens after dinner, when the omegas should have been safely tucked in their beds, infuriated me.

He flouted every rule, and I'm certain he overstepped others with Seraphina. Her scent lingered on him, an aroma so alluring it drove me to the brink of madness. It led me to drag him to Terra's coldest region, hoping to quell his fervor.

Did it work? Not in the slightest.

Now, as I drive up to the estate with Seraphina beside me, I ponder if I truly regret his relentless rule breaking, because

here she is, in my car, coming home with me, and she responded to my kiss.

I steal a glance at her. Seraphina gazes out the window with wide eyes as we approach the gatehouse. The delta guard acknowledges us with a nod, lifting the barrier skyward.

“All my life, I’ve only ever imagined what this place looked like,” she murmurs, her voice barely audible. I catch every word, her awe sending a shiver of anxiety through me.

Does she envision our home as a sanctuary? A nest we started building for an omega we never expected to welcome?

“Did you often dream of Central Estates?” I ask softly, letting my voice drift toward her, filled with a mix of curiosity and hope.

She gazes at me with those baby blue eyes, the very ones that captivate me, drawing me in every time she turned my way. “Only sometimes,” she responds, speaking of her scrapbook dreams. “We only had access to magazines then, and we’d scour them for homes we fancied.”

As we ascend the winding path, curiosity nudges me to ask, “What did you envision?”

Settling comfortably in her seat, she flashes me a gentle smile. “I was raised in the Ashe Woods,” she reminisces, her expression hinting at cherished memories. “Despite all the myths about the woods, akin to the Forsaken Forest, it was always serene.”

“I have a fondness for the forest too,” I confess as we cruise past numerous driveways. The estates sprawl north of Central City, nestled at the foot of the Omega Mountains. “There’s an enchanting quality to it.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” she replies, her voice tinged with excitement as she briefly closes her eyes. “My ideal home would be unorthodox—surrounded by woods, not excessively large or small, with a unique charm. Perhaps with dark hues and a moody ambiance.” Her eyes flutter open as we turn into our driveway.

“You might be pleasantly surprised by what awaits,” I tell her as towering pine trees envelop us. Although not as dense as the redwoods in the Forsaken Forest, they possess an equal measure of ancient grandeur. The journey is brief, and soon, we’re approaching our house.

Our home emerges through the trees, a harmonious blend of Victorian elegance and rustic cabin charm, its dark gray stone walls complemented by wood accents.

Her eyes widen in awe. “Oh, it’s beautiful,” she murmurs, visibly stunned.

A wave of unease washes over me. “It may not be as grand as some other homes here,” I admit, feeling a twinge of nausea. I can’t help but wonder if our home, in its quaint uniqueness, might fall short of an omega’s deserving grandeur.

“It’s perfect.” She blushes, a delicate pink tinting her cheeks. “I wouldn’t want to get lost in your home anyway.” Her wink sends a flutter through my heart.

I don’t tell her that, should she choose us, this would become her home too, but first, I need to convince her, which means revealing all my deep, dark secrets. I swallow my fears, park the car, and before she can react, I unbuckle her seatbelt. Then, I gather the sizable bags of food I bought for the guys.

“Come on, munchkin,” I coax her, stepping out of the car and trying to see our home through her eyes. Our garage, built for five cars, has a reserved spot for our future omega. Currently, only Avery’s car is there, a vivid purple counterpart to my black sports car.

As she smirks at the car, I can’t help but smile. “Avery’s?” she asks.

“What gave it away?”

“It matches his personality,” she replies with a shrug. “This door?”

“Go ahead,” I encourage her. We seldom lock the door. She reaches for it, opening it into the mudroom. The lights flicker on as she steps in.

Following her, her sweet scent of brown sugar lingering in the air, I close the door behind us and enter the mudroom, which doubles as a laundry room. I hang up her coat, which she's already slipped off, then mine. Silence envelops us until we step into the kitchen.

"Oh wow," she exclaims, her voice brimming with awe. "This is incredible."

"Devlin designed it," I inform her. Devlin, along with Max and Avery, love to cook. "All the guys took cooking classes together."

"They did?" Her eyes widen in surprise as she turns to me, watching as I place the bags on the island, a long butcher block lit by rustic overhead lights.

"*They* did," I confirm, licking my lips. "Cooking isn't my forte. Avery is into baking, Max prefers rich foods, and Devlin enjoys crafting gourmet or 'bougie' dishes."

"What even is a bougie dish?" She laughs, helping me unload the tacos onto the counter.

I laugh with her, the sound echoing warmly in the spacious kitchen. "It's Devlin's term for fancy, elaborate meals," I explain. "But tonight, it's all about simple pleasures—like these tacos."

"Tacos are far from simple," she counters passionately. "They are a classic comfort food, something I never tire of enjoying."

I can't help but smile at her defense of the dish. After a moment of staring at her too long, I answer her earlier question. "A bougie dish is essentially a tiny portion of protein, a drizzle of some avant-garde sauce, and perhaps a garnish of vegetables," I describe with a playful grimace, eliciting a laugh from her.

"So not your cup of tea then?" she deduces.

"Let's keep that our little secret," I reply with a wink, and she responds by miming the locking of her lips.

“How about a picnic in my art room?” The words tumble out before I can stop them, and a flutter of nerves ripples through me.

“Are you trying to lure me into your room, Ashton?” she teases, leaning across the counter, her scent intensifying and parching my throat.

Her beauty leaves me momentarily lost for words.

Feeling bold, I mirror her posture, leaning in. “My bedroom’s upstairs, the art room’s downstairs. So yes and no.”

“Yes,” she answers, and I’m left wondering which invitation she’s accepting.

Regardless, elation spreads across my face. I’m afforded extra time with this captivating woman. Whether or not she wants to see my actual bedroom doesn’t matter. She wants to spend her time with me, and that increases my heart rate.

“I’ll just prepare these for the guys,” I say, stowing their food in the fridge, then grabbing water and sodas for us. I pack our tacos, beverages, and Avery’s frozen brownies into a basket.

“What’s in there?” she inquires, craning her neck toward my basket.

“Avery’s brownies,” I inform her, closing the picnic basket. “We don’t get through sweets quickly enough, so he slices them up and freezes them.”

“Not eating them?” She feigns shock, her hand to forehead, and collapses against the counter playfully. “Blasphemy.”

“Come on, drama queen, I’ve got something to show you.” I guide her gently by the small of her back, leading her across the kitchen toward the door to the basement.

“I am not dramatic,” she protests.

“And who makes that claim?” I tease.

“Me,” she retorts with a sassiness that shows she’s becoming more comfortable with me. Her growing ease

around me is unmistakable, stirring warmth within me.

I hum softly under my breath, flipping on the lights to illuminate the staircase. Seraphina looks up, unsure who should lead, so I take the initiative, descending the sturdy steps into the basement.

As we make our way down, a grand stone fireplace comes into view, casting a cozy glow in the otherwise cool space. The fire isn't real, it's just a screen in front of the actual fireplace we rarely use. Our house, perched on the valley's edge, has a basement that opens to the outside, and enormous floor to ceiling windows grace the far wall, offering a breathtaking view of our surroundings.

We step into the movie room, where a plush, wrap-around couch faces both the fireplace and the television. On the other side, there's a pool table and a door that leads to the indoor pool.

Seraphina's eyes light up with excitement, and she hurries over to the pool, practically bouncing on her toes. "That's a pool!" she exclaims.

"Yes, and it's heated," I add.

She lets out a groan of delight. "Swimming here while watching the snow fall must be magical."

"Would you like to try it sometime?" I inquire, charmed by her enthusiasm.

Her face lights up with a beautiful smile. "Yes, please." She then turns her attention to the opposite side of the great room, pointing at another door. "What's through there?"

"That's what I wanted to show you," I say, leading her across the basement. Along the far wall are doors styled like shop fronts, each with large windows. "Avery thought of setting up these spaces for our hobbies," I explain.

"This is incredible," she marvels, moving toward the first door. She reads, "Avery's Drum Haven," aloud and glances back at me, a hint of amusement in her eyes.



“Completely soundproof. He can get quite loud,” I comment. We decorated the storefront in Avery’s favorite colors—black, white, and deep, jewel-toned purple. His drum set sits prominently in front of the window, and they adorned the walls with black-and-white photos of renowned drummers.

Seraphina’s eyes dance with curiosity and wonder. I wish I knew what she was thinking as she looks at the small touches of our pack we put into the rooms.

Her exploration continues to Devlin’s Cigar Oasis. The façade is a classic brick with a wooden sign, exuding an old-world, smoky charm. Inside, there’s a small bar cart with his preferred whiskey and an oversized leather chair.

“It’s fully ventilated to keep smoke out of the house,” I reassure her.

Next, she’s drawn to Maximillian’s Green Thumb Emporium. He adorned the entrance with ivy, which climbs over a faux stone front. Inside, he transformed the space into a verdant oasis with floor to ceiling shelves and a hammock, Max’s preferred spot for napping.

“Max has a passion for his plants,” I say with a light shake of my head. “These are just his indoor collection. You should see his garden outside.”

She smiles softly, moving to the last completed shop, Ashton’s Artistic Hideaway. My heart flutters nervously as she gazes through the window at the mural of a jellyfish surrounded by other sea creatures.

Her attention shifts to the last storefront, the one still unoccupied. It’s a space reserved for our future omega. She pauses there, her hand lingering on the handle to my studio, before turning back to me.

“Go ahead,” I encourage her. Though not as spacious as our bedrooms, the studios are sizable, akin to a one-car garage. She turns the knob and steps inside, the lights flickering on overhead.

I lean against the doorframe, observing her as she takes in my studio. Oversized canvases line one wall, and a small

workstation sits in the center. A couple of easels stand in another corner, and two deep purple chairs, courtesy of Avery, occupy another space.

“This is incredible,” she exclaims, spinning around before settling into one of the chairs. “I love this little town vibe.”

“It’s something that grew on us,” I admit, joining her and placing the picnic basket on the coffee table. “Avery insisted on the chairs, saying I needed to take breaks now and then.”

“You should,” she agrees, reaching for a water bottle as I open the basket. “Have you ever seen the sanctuary’s art room?” she asks.

And there it is, the moment of truth. Time to confess my hidden observations, my unseen presence in her world.

“I have,” I reply, handing her a foil-wrapped taco. I chose chicken for her, with onion, cilantro, and lime—simple yet delectable. Also, Avery’s favorite.

I pick my own pork tacos and settle back, turning to face her as I fiddle with the foil. Seraphina wastes no time, eagerly unwrapping hers, the aroma eliciting a groan of anticipation. She takes a large bite and moans in sheer delight.

Her enjoyment, the little dance she does, and that sound compel me to avert my gaze, fearing she might sense my arousal. “I used to visit the art room late at night when everyone was asleep,” I confess, slowly peeling back the foil, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. “That’s where I first saw you.”

I glance at her shyly. Her head tilts, and her eyes widen in realization. “Oh no,” she murmurs.

“Oh yes.” I recall that night vividly.

Her reaction is one of shock, her mouth opening and closing before she takes another bite, opting for silence over words.

That night, I saw her in those enticing silk pajamas, her hair messily bunched atop her head, her eyes red and weary. She stumbled in the room wearing slippers, clumsily making

her way to the corner where the clay lay. She slammed a chunk onto the turntable and sat down, never noticing me hidden behind an easel.

“I’d been staring at a blank canvas for hours, and then you walked in,” I continue, popping an onion into my mouth, daring to meet her gaze again.

Her cheeks are flushed, and though she chews defiantly, her sweet scent fills the air, growing denser.

I swallow hard, maintaining eye contact, the words spilling out with effort. “You were there in those sinful red silk pajamas, the ones with thin spaghetti straps.” I feel my heart rate quicken, and my breathing deepens with anticipation. “For an hour, you worked on a vase, completely absorbed, until nearly three in the morning. You were so focused, and then you leaned back, chest heaving...”

I pause, absorbing the intensity of the moment. Her reaction, a blend of embarrassment and fascination, adds a tangible weight to the air, charged with the silent admission of my covert observation.

Closing my eyes, I recall every detail of that night. It’s a memory that haunts both my waking thoughts and dreams, and it’s undeniably the most arousing experience I’ve ever witnessed. Now, I’m laying it bare before her.

“Did you watch me?” Her voice is a soft whisper, floating to me like a tactile memory, rekindling the past.

A shiver of excitement courses through me as I remember her that night, covered in clay, inadvertently enhancing the allure of her silk pajamas. “Yes, I watched,” I confess. “The way you casually brushed your nipple was... provocative.”

Running my hands down my face, I reopen my eyes, feeling a surge of desire so potent that it’s almost overwhelming. “Please, go on,” she urges, her whisper laden with her own arousal.

Emboldened, I continue, “You moaned with that accidental touch. It’s a sound that still echoes in my mind.” The vividness of the memory is striking. “You were so uninhibited, using the

silk as a barrier while you touched yourself. I watched you surrender to your pleasure and heard your cries of release. It was raw, uninhibited.”

Her reaction is immediate. Her pupils dilate with desire, and her breathing becomes heavy. Then, a mischievous smile plays across her lips. “Turnabout is fair play, isn’t it, Ashton?” She sets aside her taco, her gaze locked on me.

Confusion takes a moment to clear. “What?”

“You heard me,” she whispers. “Turnabout is fair play.”

Her implication dawns on me, leaving me momentarily speechless. She can’t be suggesting that I... here... now...

“You know what I want,” she states boldly, her cheeks flushed with excitement. “I want us to be even.”

She wants to watch me, something that sends a thrill of anticipation and nervous energy coursing through me.

## CHAPTER 17

### *Seraphina*

"I DON'T HAVE A TURNTABLE," he says, gazing at me under his thick, dark lashes. Each time he blinks, they brush his cheeks, and I find myself captivated. His cheeks flush crimson just for me, and he's constantly running his tongue over his teeth like he's weighing his words or buying time.

"Paint for me, Ashton," I urge, momentarily forgetting all about the tacos. My eyes drift to one of the many easels scattered around the room. "You saw me create that terrible vase. Now, it's your turn to paint."

He flashes me a roguish, pirate-like smile that suggests he knows all the universe's secrets and is playfully coaxing me to beg for them. Even though, I suspect, he'd reveal them just to see me smile. "I'll do one better," he declares, standing and striding toward a wire rack brimming with totes full of supplies on the other side of the room. He selects one tote, placing it carefully on the center table. As he reaches in, he pulls out that very vase.

"You kept it?" I'm on my feet before I realize it, drawn to him, my gaze trying to pierce his very soul. "After all these years?"

Tears prick the backs of my eyes as he turns the vase over in his hands. "You left it there, so I finished it for you."

He chose mesmerizing blues and greens for the vase, intertwining them with swirls of black as if smoke was fighting its way through the colors. "It's beautiful," I whisper.

Still holding the vase, he smirks at me with that same devilish grin from moments ago, then he gently places it back in the box. Silently, he stows away the vase and then the tote, only to pull out another, placing it on the table between us.

“I’ve been saving this one,” he says, catching me off guard. His fingers lightly tap the lid, and I can’t help but lean closer, my curiosity piqued.

“What is it?” I ask, even though it seems like just another box of supplies, but Ashton’s scent deepens, filling the room with a rich, sugary nutmeg aroma that makes my mouth water.

“You told me to paint,” he replies, peeling off the lid to reveal a white tarp, which he casually tosses onto the floor. “Let me paint you.”

I shift my gaze from the tarp to Ashton and back again. “Somehow, I don’t think not planning to paint me on a canvas. You actually want to paint on me,” I say, playful suspicion in my tone.

“I do,” he confirms, beginning to unpack paints he’s never used before. He peels off the plastic wrappers and then pops open the lids. “All of these are hypoallergenic and edible.”

“What?” I can’t help my surprise as I pick one up, inspecting the label. “It has your name on it.”

“They are mine,” he says casually. “Dev and Max invested in me.” He tries to downplay it, but I know it’s a big deal.

“This is incredible, Ashton.” I don’t even have to push the awe into my voice because it already exists.

He brushes off the compliment as if it’s nothing, and then he takes his shirt off, and suddenly, my thoughts scatter.

His torso is a canvas of black ink. An intricate octopus design swirls from his back to his chest, its tendrils wrapping around his arms, slinking down past the band of his pants to his legs and hips. It takes me a moment to realize it’s all a single, connected piece.

“It’s like a coloring book,” I blurt out, awestruck.

“And you,” he whispers, “are a blank canvas.” Our eyes lock, and I see the excitement of an artist eager to work on a fresh surface.

Taking a deep breath, I step back, my heart racing as I lift my shirt over my head. I’m acutely aware of the extra curves across my hips, belly, and chest, but with Ashton’s gaze on me, those perceived flaws fade away. In his eyes, I don’t see the insecurities that normally cloud my mind.

I feel beautiful.

Ashton stands silently, his eyes traveling over my form before meeting my gaze again. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen,” he says, his voice tender and honest.

“What will you paint?” I ask, a shiver running down my spine.

He responds by unbuttoning his pants and peeling them off, along with his shoes. I’m captivated by the octopus ink that seems to come alive on his skin. He stands before me, his muscular form leaving me breathless, clad only in boxers that reveal more than they hide. Overwhelmed, I have to turn away because, damn.

*It* looks right at me and likes what it sees.

I quickly shimmy out of my pants, standing there in only my simple cotton bra and panties. I hadn’t opted for anything sexy today, just comfort.

“Okay, so...” Ashton’s voice is a mix of excitement and lust. “We’ll sit in the center of the tarp.”

I bend over to straighten the tarp, and I hear his deep, guttural moan. Peeking up, I catch him ogling my backside as if it’s the most tempting thing he’s ever seen.

Every woman in this universe needs an Ashton to stare at her ass like he wants to bite into it.

I give my hips a playful wiggle, glancing down to see his reaction, and oh, how he reacts.

With a giggle, I smooth out the tarp and sit down, feeling a little jolt in my chest as I do.

“You’re killing me, munchkin,” he growls, hauling the tote over to us.

“Good,” I reply, peering into the tote as Ashton sits before me. I select purples and blues to paint in his octopus tattoo.

“Legs out, munchkin,” he instructs, his voice quivering slightly.

I love how I affect him. Stretching my legs over his, I scoot as close as I dare. His breathing quickens, and his excitement is barely contained by his boxers—part of me really wants to see it unleashed.

With a sinful smile, he leans in. His hands reach behind me, grabbing my backside and pulling me closer, so close that my most sensitive spot gently rubs against his arousal. I can’t hold back a whimper.

His hands then glide up my back, unhitching my bra with a slow, deliberate movement. It feels like the most exquisite torture until the damn thing is off. With a smile, he tosses it aside.

He hands me a paintbrush and then selects one for himself. The anticipation is palpable.

Nibbling on my lip, I try to concentrate on Ashton’s body, on the tattoo beneath my brush, but this is swiftly becoming one of the most intense moments of my life. I don’t want to rush it. I want to savor every brush stroke, every glide of paint across his skin.

I uncork the purple paint and dip my brush in. As I glide it over a suction cup of the octopus tattoo, goosebumps ripple outward from where my brush touches his skin. Ashton pauses, sitting up straight, his eyes following each of my strokes.

“Is it cold?” I ask, looking up at him.

“Yes,” he replies. With trembling fingers, he dips his brush into the green paint and sweeps it along the underside of my breast.



A sharp exhale escapes me as my eyes flutter shut, and my nipples harden in response. I arch my back toward him, my entire body quivering with pleasure.

When I slowly open my eyes, Ashton's smirking face greets me. "This is some bullshit," I mutter, but it only makes him laugh, a sound as sweet as he is.

"Oh, really? And why's that, molasses munchkin?" he teases, his focus returning to my breast. He swipes his brush with an artist's precision I could never replicate.

"The feel of the brush..." I shiver, my body reacting so strongly to his touch that I can't finish my sentence. "I need a distraction."

"When was the last time you sat down with clay?" he asks, his brush strokes steady and confident.

Shaking slightly, I continue to color in his tattoo, grateful for the distraction. The thickening scent of my slick fills the air, an unmistakable sign of my state. "That was the last time," I murmur.

He pulls back, his gaze questioning. "Why?" he asks.

I shrug, deciding to be honest. "I felt guilty, in a way. My sister had just been found alive but broken and sent off to the institute. Her supposed mate had found a pack that didn't include her, choosing another instead. It rocked my world. I was racked with guilt because there she was, suffering, while I was in the sanctuary, living a stable life and thriving in my own way."

He hums thoughtfully, momentarily letting silence stretch between us. "Do you mind telling me why it affected you so deeply?"

As I roll the purple paint over another little suction cup that's actually his nipple, I can't help but smirk at his involuntary shudder. "Scent matches, fated mates... It all started to feel like bullshit to me. She said he was a perfect scent match, as was his pack, but..." I pause, dipping my brush in the paint and meeting his eyes. "So was Sawyer."

"Ah," he whispers, understanding dawning in his eyes.

My voice takes on a sour note. “You get it, right? If an omega and a gamma can both be a scent match to a single pack, does that mean multiple packs could be a perfect match? If that’s true, then we’ve got it all wrong.”

“I think we did get it wrong,” he admits, surprising me. “Gammas are essentially weaker omegas, hormonally speaking, but the right match can trigger all the hormones they need to become an omega. All they need is a kickstart. I actually like the idea of having options.”

His words stir something in me. “But what if there’s a gamma out there who’s your perfect match?” I ask, my insecurities seeping through.

Ashton doesn’t miss a beat. “Seraphina, there might be other scent matches out there in the world, but they aren’t you. No one will ever compare to you. I’ll only ever want you.”

His words send a wave of warmth through me, dissolving my insecurities in an instant.

“I once got Grace to talk after her attack,” he says, and I brace myself, unsure where this is heading. “She said the alpha was a perfect match.” My mouth falls open in shock. “I like the idea of multiple matches because it gives me hope—hope that, somewhere in the world, there’s a pack that can bring her back to us. We used to think her mind would eventually heal. When Max left on his first expedition, he left her home with their parents. When Avery and I stopped to check in, she hadn’t eaten in days. It was then we realized the depth of her despair. Max called the institute, knowing someone there could watch her when he can’t.”

My heart aches as I understand his perspective. All this time, I’ve been so wrapped up in my own feelings, not seeing the bigger picture. “That makes perfect sense,” I admit softly.

“I hope, one day, we can introduce her to different scents and maybe find one that helps ground her,” he confesses. “I just want my sister back.”

His words hit me hard. He’s always seen Grace as a sister, and here I was, consumed by my own concerns. “I’m sorry,” I

say, feeling guilty.

“For what?” he asks, changing his color to a deeper green.

“For being selfish, worrying that you didn’t want me.”

“Your feelings are valid, Seraphina. Many omegas would feel the same, and that’s okay,” he reassures me, gliding the brush along the underside of my breast, sending waves of sensation through me. “Choice is what matters.”

I nod, letting silence envelop us as we continue painting.

“You’re right,” I eventually say. “I was worried about attending my coming of age ceremony, scared of finding multiple packs that wouldn’t have my best interests at heart.”

“Not all alphas are good,” he agrees, moving the brush over my ribs. “Your concerns are valid.” He pauses, looking at me with a serious expression. “But remember, Devlin and Max are good alphas.”

I can’t bring myself to meet his gaze, so I focus on painting, aiming for one of the suction cups near his hip, but my hand slips, accidentally brushing the tip of his penis.

I jerk my hand back, horrified. Even though I yearn to touch him, the heaviness of our conversation makes this neither the time nor the place for such intimacy. Well, maybe it’s the place, considering we’re both sitting partially naked on a tarp, painting each other.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur, accidentally dropping the jar of purple paint onto my thigh in my rush to cover my mouth.

Ashton’s low, reverberating moan at the inadvertent touch nearly undoes me. My mouth parts instinctively, and I reach out, tracing the tip of his cock through his boxers.

He reaches out, gripping my hand, his eyes wild. “Are you sure?” he asks, his voice laced with concern and desire.

My heart swells at his question. Leaning forward, I grab the back of his neck, pulling him into a desperate kiss. He tastes like sweet nutmeg and vanilla.

My tongue delves into his mouth, exploring him. He groans, the vibration sending shockwaves through me. I never want this kiss to end.

Pulling back, he looks down at me, gripping my hips, his arousal evident. I watch, entranced, as a bead of his precum wets the fabric of his boxers, a silent invitation.

With that devil-may-care smirk, his hands move from my hips to the spilled paint, smearing it along my thigh. His fingers trace circles in the paint before he pulls back to grab the green paint, pouring it over my heated skin, cooling it. My breath hitches as his fingers glide up to my nipple, sending shivers of pleasure through me. Every nerve feels alive under his touch.

His hands continue their journey up my body, cupping my face, his intense gaze searching for permission, for reassurance. I nod, pressing myself closer, our lips meeting again in a passionate embrace. Our tongues dance together, bodies pressing closer in an insatiable need for more.

Ashton's hands explore every inch of me, eventually resting at the small of my back. He pulls me even closer, as if trying to merge us into one. Shifting to my knees, I rise above him and push him down on the canvas, taking control of our never-ending kiss.

Ashton's touch is both gentle and insistent, a silent dialogue spoken through the language of our bodies. The world around us fades, leaving only the sensation of his fingers tracing the contours of my back, mapping a journey of intimacy and discovery.

His gaze holds mine, communicating a depth of emotion that words could never capture. In his eyes, I see the reflection of my own desires, fears, and the burgeoning hope that intertwines our souls.

The coolness of the paint contrasts with the heat of our skin, an interplay of sensations that heightens every touch, every breath shared between us. His fingers glide over my skin, leaving trails of color that mark me as his, even if only for this stolen moment.

My hands explore the expanse of his shoulders, feeling the strength that lies beneath his skin. The gentle rise and fall of his chest syncs with mine, our hearts beating a harmonious rhythm in this intimate dance.

In a surge of boldness, I trace my fingers down his chest and over the contours of his muscles, feeling him shiver under my touch. His reaction emboldens me, and I lean in, pressing my painted body against his, the colors blending and creating a vibrant tapestry that mirrors the chaos and beauty of our emotions.

Our kiss deepens, a fervent promise of things unspoken, a testament to the connection that defies the complexities of our world. It's a moment of pure, unbridled passion, a declaration of a bond that transcends the physical.

My scent surges through the room, and a sharp cramp ripples through my body, causing me to pull back, a whimper of pain escaping my lips.

“What is it?” Ashton’s concern is palpable as he cups my face, his light eyes darkened by dilated pupils, his nutmeg scent enveloping me in comfort.

“My heat,” I gasp, clutching his shoulders, my nails instinctively digging into his flesh. An overwhelming urge takes over me—I need to leave my mark on him. My nails drag down his chest, cutting through the paint and leaving a trail of red that sends a thrill through me. The desire to repeat the action is irresistible.

“Seraphina.” He groans my name, a plea, as he grasps my wrists, pulling back slightly. His chest heaves, brushing against my sensitive skin with each breath.

“My heat,” I repeat, the cramp slowly subsiding, but my arousal only intensifies.

“Is this it?” he whispers, his lips parting, his tongue flicking out.

“No.” I shake my head, my hair cascading over my shoulders, gliding through the paint. “I need...” I moan, rolling my hips against his erection, trying to communicate my

desire through movement. “You.” I elongate the word, my body winding tighter and tighter.

He starts to suggest an alternative, but I cut him off, leaning in to nip his lip. “You, Ashton. I want you. Right now. No one else.”

“We can’t... Not yet,” he says, his voice laced with tortured restraint. He lets go of my wrists, reaching for another jar of paint. This time, it’s green. He pours it down my chest, his fingers trailing down to pinch my nipples.

“Yes,” I encourage, rolling my hips against him, then batting the paint aside. My hips gyrate frantically against his erection.

“Take what you need, Seraphina,” he murmurs, his hands sliding down my back, still wet with paint.

My tongue dives into his mouth as my hips slide against his cock, the delta barbs hitting exactly where I need them to. My slick wets the fabric between us, the paint becoming a sensual, colorful lubricant.

My body tightens with each thrust against him, our passion escalating. His moans fuel my desire, and for a fleeting moment, I consider breaking his resolve, yearning to feel him inside of me, his barbs pressing and sliding in all the delicious ways. My whimpers and mewls fill the air as I devour his mouth, my nails digging in to restrain myself from stripping him down and using his body to satiate the primal need inside me.

A slow burn starts at the base of my spine, and I tear my mouth from his, needing to see him as we both come undone. Paint streaks around us, a vivid testament to our passion.

Ashton’s eyes nearly roll back in ecstasy. “I want to see you,” I tell him, my movements becoming more deliberate. “I want to watch you come for me.”

His face contorts with pleasure, and with a few strategic rolls of my hips, he shudders against me in climax.

The sight of him pushes me over the edge, my own orgasm crashing over me in waves, quelling the preheat simmering

within. I prolong the moment, our eyes locked in silent understanding.

“That was the hottest thing I’ve ever fucking seen,” Avery declares from the doorway.

Ashton groans, burying his head in my neck. “Came in my boxers like a teen.”

I gently cradle his head to my chest, savoring his breath against my sensitive skin. Avery’s appearance sparks a tantalizing thought—twins, one in front, one behind. The thought sends shivers down my spine.

Not yet. At least we had the presence of mind to keep our underwear on, now soaked with slick, cum, and paint. It’s an erotic image, one I know will fuel future fantasies.

Avery approaches, crouching before us as we catch our breaths. “How long before your heat?” he asks, brushing my hair off my shoulder.

I swallow, feeling uncertain. “No idea. I thought a week, I could be wrong. I just don’t know.” Even to my own ears, I sound so dejected.

He nods, then nudges his brother. “Come on, let’s get you two cleaned up.”

“Don’t ruin the canvas,” Ashton warns. “I want to keep it.” His eyes seek mine for approval.

“You should hang it on that blank wall,” I suggest, kissing him before rising. Avery scoops me up effortlessly, indifferent to the paint smearing on him.

In Avery’s arms, the world seems to steady. His strength is a quiet promise, a silent assurance that grounds me back to reality. His touch is different from Ashton’s, firmer yet equally tender, a contrast that stirs a mix of emotions within me.

As we move away from the canvas, our makeshift monument to passion, I can’t help but glance back at it. The swirls of color, the chaotic beauty of our intertwined forms captured in paint, is more than just a memory. It’s a piece of art that speaks of desire, connection, and unspoken promises.

Avery sets me down with a care that belies his rugged exterior. His eyes, so similar to Ashton's yet uniquely his own, hold a depth of understanding and curiosity. "You okay?" he asks, his voice a low rumble that resonates within me.

I nod, still catching my breath, feeling the afterglow of the intense encounter. "I'm more than okay," I reply, my voice a whisper of awe.

As Ashton joins us, there's a moment of unspoken communication between the brothers—a look that conveys a thousand words. They stand side by side, two halves of a whole, yet each so distinctly individual.

The room fills with a sense of completion, a feeling of contentment that envelops us all. In this moment, the complexities of our lives and the challenges of our world all seem distant, overshadowed by the simple yet profound connection we share.

"Let's get cleaned up," Ashton says, his voice breaking the silence. "Then I'll take you home."

Home. To my cats. My nest. It's where everything I worked so hard for remains. Only the thought of home no longer seems as appealing.

Not when I want to stay here.



## CHAPTER 18

### *Seraphina*

A **YAWN POPS** my jaw as I fumble around the bakery, flicking on the lights at the crack of dawn. Behind me, Violet mumbles something about Monday mornings being the worst. At least, that's what I think she's mumbling about. She could be talking about something entirely different. My brain is just filling in the blanks, not running on all cylinders yet.

"I'm going to get the coffee brewing," I announce, stifling another yawn. My head shakes in a feeble attempt to wake up more because, honestly, I did not get enough sleep. My eyes burn as if someone rubbed sandpaper in them.

Getting in just before midnight, only to start a shift at five in the morning, is possibly the worst decision I've ever made in my life, but honestly? I don't have a single regret. Not one. My time with Ashton was simply incredible. Every touch from him had my toes curling and my brain melting, from the first to the last.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I shuffle to the front of the bakery and peer out at the darkened landscape. The walk down from the upstairs apartments was brutal this morning. The chill in the air made my face hurt, and Vee and I had to dash back inside just to find hats for the short walk to the bakery below.

Still wearing my hat and coat, I start the coffee, and, without shame, I admit that I stand there staring at it. Why does it feel like it takes forever when you watch coffee brew? It's like watching paint dry or grass grow. Literally the worst. My patience begins to thin.

A knock on the bakery door nearly makes me scream. I turn around and squint against the darkness of the morning, a shiver racing up my spine. We don't even open for another two hours.

I can't quite see who is outside, so I take a hesitant step forward and spot a man bundled up against the cold.

Something in the back of my brain screams at me not to let him in, which is fine by me. I have self-preservation instincts, and I'm not afraid to use them. Plus, even if he yells at me through the door, it won't be as intimidating as him standing before me.

As I take a step closer, I point to the sign displaying our hours and shake my head, throwing my hands in the air. It's the universal sign for *you just gotta wait, bro*. I watch him press his face to the door, and a flicker of recognition ignites inside me.

It's the alpha from the day Violet and I went dress shopping. The one who followed us from the moment we stepped out of the car until we left the shop. The one I had to race away from.

How on earth did he figure out where we work? That's not creepy at all, said no woman ever.

My throat tightens in shock, and my mouth goes dry. When he smirks at me as if he won a prize, I instinctively take a step back, grateful for the glass barrier between us.

My resolve kicks in. It's way too early for this kind of nonsense. I haven't even had my coffee yet. Screw this alpha.

DOING SOMETHING I'D NEVER DARE WITHOUT THE SAFETY OF the glass, I give him the universal sign to fuck off, then I turn my back just as Violet walks through the doors to the back, tying her apron.

"What did you do?" she asks, barely getting the words out before the alpha slams his fists on the door. "Seraphina," she scolds me.

I ignore the jerk, though it takes every ounce of my willpower. I cock out a hip. "It's too early to deal with brutes. I

don't have time for it.”

She glances from me to the door, where the alpha is still peering in. “Is that...” She trails off.

“Yep,” I say, fully aware that Violet can see him too.

“Oh hell no,” she mutters, and honestly, I don't blame her one bit for disappearing to the back.

Still ignoring the fuming alpha at the door, I pull out my phone and dial Avery. He answers on the second ring. “Baby girl, I'm literally pulling into the back parking lot. Please tell me you didn't go into the bakery without me.”

“I didn't enter through the back of the bakery without you,” I clarify, setting him on speaker as I reach for a cup. In the background, the alpha is cursing a little too loudly.

“What was that?” Avery's voice grows tense, and I hear his car door slam shut.

“Just a furious alpha at the door,” I reply nonchalantly, pouring myself that sweet, sweet coffee and almost moaning as I make it to my liking with more sugar and cream than usual—damn hormones have me doing things I normally wouldn't, like sassing angry alphas.

“Damn it, Seraphina,” he growls, and then the line goes dead. Casually, I turn around with my own smirk.

Do I need to wave at the jerk? No. Do I? Absolutely.

His nostrils flare, and his lip curls into a snarl, but I've had more than enough of his nonsense. He gives me one last lingering look before storming off.

It's just too bad that Avery comes around the side of the building, looking ready for a fight, his eyes scanning the area for the alpha. He shoots me a look of retribution before disappearing into the dark morning.

Shrugging, I grab a cup of coffee for Violet and take it to the back.

They divided the back area of the bakery into multiple sections. Passing through the double doors, I step into a long

hallway. To the left is the break room, and to the right is the prep room. Down the hall, bathrooms are on either side, leading to the large bakery back room.

As I step into the bakery's back room, the rich aroma of flour and freshly baked bread wraps around me like a comforting embrace. It's a scent that usually brings a sense of peace. Today, though, it fuels my already heightened senses, sharpening my resolve.

Violet, with her hands deftly working a batch of dough, looks up with an inquisitive eye. "Everything okay?" she inquires, her expression a blend of curiosity and concern.

Handing her the coffee, I grin, feeling a rush of audacious energy. "Just the usual early morning excitement," I say with a chuckle. Her brows arch in response, but she smiles, sensing my uncharacteristic boldness.

I stride to my station, sleeves rolled up, embracing the therapeutic rhythm of kneading dough. Each fold and press become a testament to my newfound brashness, the dough yielding under my confident hands.

Thunderous knocks slam against the back door. "I've got it," Violet mutters.

Avery appears, his face marked by concern. "Are you alright?" he asks, scanning me.

"My hands are in dough, and I'm kneading away my worries. I'm all good," I reply, my smile widening. "Did you find our angry alpha?" I ask him, knowing my reactions are off in the back of my mind. My heat is probably just days away.

"No, but I totally caught his bitter scent all the way to the curb. Someone scooped him up," Avery says, punctuating his words with another yawn. He grabs my coffee cup, guzzling half in one go, then sets it down, pulling a face. "Is this even coffee?"

"Rutt roh." Violet's voice is playful yet teasing, her hands deftly pulling pastries from the oven. "Looks like someone's gearing up for their heat."

At that, Avery's head whips around to me. He has this wild, almost caveman-like glint in his eyes for a second, as if he's ready to hoist me over his shoulder and bolt out of the bakery. Part of me wishes he would.

His gaze flicks to Violet. "Where's your delta?"

Violet snorts, her tone laced with sarcasm. "Zero?" His name comes out more of a growl than a word. There's definitely a juicy story there I'm itching to hear. "He passed out in the hallway. I should have left his drunk ass there, but I didn't."

Avery winces, shaking his head. "Need me to handle it?"

"Oh, hell no. I hog-tied him to my toilet," Violet declares with a wicked smirk. "In his boxers. Can't wait to see his face when he wakes up."

I just stare, momentarily speechless. My crazy friend is totally my spirit animal.

"How the hell..." Avery starts chuckling before trailing off.

"He's a heavy motherfucker too," Violet adds, scooping muffin batter into tins with a sly smile.

Suddenly, static cuts through the bakery, silencing the radio's music. I plop my dough on the scale, weighing out perfect rounds for sweet rolls.

*"We interrupt this morning's playlist with an announcement."*

"Is that Sawyer?" I glance at Violet, who's now glaring at the radio.

"Yeah," she drawls.

Avery pinches off a small piece of dough, popping it into his mouth. He chews the raw dough as if it's fully baked. I don't blame him, raw dough is the best.

Static crackles through the radio again, drawing our attention back. Sawyer's voice cuts through, serious yet tinged with her usual dry humor. *"Central Terra is in for a blizzard"*

*starting at two this afternoon. The heaviest snowfall is expected overnight and into tomorrow. Prepare for major delays and a city-wide shutdown for the next couple of weeks. We're looking at over three feet of snow, and come Friday night, another storm's adding another foot to that."* She pauses, and even her humorless chuckle sounds foreboding. *"Better hit the grocery store, folks. We're all about to be snowed in."* The music resumes, echoing through the bakery.

I pause, my fingers buried in the dough. I give it a squish before absentmindedly rolling out more balls. My brother mentioned snow was coming, but this?

Within two minutes of Sawyer's broadcast, chaos erupts. Every phone in the place starts ringing off the hook—the bakery line, my cell, Avery's, even Violet's.

"Get the bakery line," Avery says, already pulling out his phone to answer a call.

"I'm on it. Hands are clean," Violet chimes in, snatching the receiver off the wall.

Their voices drop to murmurs. I wipe my hands on my apron and grab my own phone. Unknown caller.

"Hello?" I swipe to answer, drifting toward the window to gaze outside. The sky's a blanket of light, endless white. Is it weird that I'm kind of excited about the snow?

"Hello?" I repeat, trying to focus on the call.

Just breathing on the other end. I pull the phone away, confused. The call is still connected. I cautiously glance at Violet and Avery, who are both deep in their own conversations.

"Hello?" I repeat, his time with an edge of sass.

*Click.* The line goes dead. I dismiss it as a scam, slipping my phone back into my pocket, and wander over to Avery. He's just finishing his call.

"All hell's breaking loose," he says, snagging another piece of dough from my pile and tossing it into his mouth. "That was Dev."

“And?” I grab a towel, cleaning my hands thoroughly. A gut feeling tells me we might not even open today, and if we do, it’ll be to sell out everything we have.

“And,” Avery continues, a knowing look in his eyes, “the whole city’s locking down. Dev sent Ashton to beat the grocery rush.” He pauses, gauging my reaction. “He wants everyone at the estate by two.”

“Oh.” The word slips out, tinged with uncertainty. My mind races to my cats. I can’t just abandon them for a week, or two, or even three.

Avery’s hand finds my belt loop, pulling me closer. His breath is warm against my neck, his scent enveloping me. “That includes you.” His voice is a low rumble. “A snowed in heat could be an interesting way to spend the winter.”

“Oh.” This time, my voice holds a different note, one filled with images of that pool and skinny dipping. “But my cats.”

“Max is already on his way to get them,” he murmurs, his teeth grazing my neck. A wave of arousal stirs deep inside me. “They are just waiting for you.”

Violet slams the phone down. “That was Elenora,” she announces, striding over to the table with her usual brash confidence. She doesn’t bat an eye at Avery’s closeness. “She wants us to stay open and sell all our stock.”

Avery mutters something under his breath, clearly displeased.

I gently push him away, turning my attention to Violet. “That’s a ton of stock to sell off.”

Violet nods, tapping her nails on the tabletop. “Elenora’s thinking ahead. If we’re closed for weeks, she doesn’t want waste. At noon, if anything is left, we take what we want and donate the rest to the shelter.”

“Noon isn’t too bad,” I muse, eyeing my sweet rolls. “I’m claiming these.”

“I call dibs on the muffins,” Violet declares, pushing off from the table. “No more baking. We should open early.”

With a sigh that sounds more like a groan, Avery asks, “Where are the aprons?”

“Hanging up there,” I say, nodding toward the wall hooks lined with aprons.

“I’ll handle the opening. You two start clearing out the inventory,” Avery commands, slipping an apron over his head and tying it loosely.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” I can’t help but tease.

Avery arches an eyebrow at me, a look so effortlessly sexy it almost makes me swoon. “Oh, sugar, I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“Better hurry,” Violet interjects, pointing toward the window. Several cars are already pulling into the parking lot. Outside, the streets are bustling more than ever with throngs of people in a frenzy to stock up before the storm hits.

“Alright, team,” I announce, clapping my hands together with exaggerated enthusiasm. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The next several hours promise to be a whirlwind of chaos.



## CHAPTER 19

### *Seraphina*

AVERY'S VOICE drifts down from upstairs, discussing something with his brother. "Is that black lace? Pack it." His tone is light but firm.

Nerves flutter in my stomach as I walk over to the windows. Max has already cared for my cats, giving them two bedrooms connected by a Jack and Jill bathroom. He even sent a video of them exploring their new space, which did little to calm my restless mind.

It's just past noon. The bakery sold out by eleven, letting us close earlier than we'd anticipated. That's a relief, but without the bustling rhythm of work, my thoughts wander unchecked.

The twins are helping me pack for an extended stay away from home. Max is with the cats, and Devlin... well, Devlin is being Devlin.

The moment I walked through these doors, I felt as frozen as the afternoon sky outside. Perched on the small window ledge, I watch the clouds roll in, thick and white with barely a hint of gray. As I press my palm against the cold glass, the chill from outside seeps through.

"Hey." Ashton's voice pulls me from my reverie as he sits down beside me. There's still a small speck of purple paint on his cheek from last night. I reach out, dragging a finger across his skin. The paint remains, and I decide it suits him. "You okay?"

I respond with a noncommittal shrug, pressing my forehead against the glass. How do I explain that everything feels like it's moving too fast? We were only thinking about dating or courting just a while ago, though neither of us ever said a damn thing, and now it feels like I'm moving in with them. They even have my cats.

More nerves dance in my belly, a tumultuous mix of excitement and apprehension.

I'm at a loss for words as I gaze at Ashton, a remarkably handsome and incredible delta. His expression is contemplative, focusing not on me but on something else. Curious, I turn to follow his gaze.

We're sitting on a small bench in my cozy nest by the window. These windows, probably as old as the building itself, aren't quite floor to ceiling but sit low to the ground. Ashton's finger traces the seam of the window, and I'm initially unsure what he's inspecting. Then, it hits me.

This window, which someone painted shut ages ago, has always been a fixed part of my surroundings. In the entire year I've lived here, I've never managed to open it. I vaguely recall Sawyer's mates attempting to pry it open when she lived here, but I'm unsure if they succeeded.

"Was this seam always like this?" Ashton asks, a hint of curiosity rather than worry in his voice. Given that this is a second-floor apartment overlooking an alley on the west side, it's not a pressing concern.

Fully turning to the window, I notice what he's pointing out. There's a tear in the paint that sealed the window shut. Intrigued, I run my finger along the groove, the dried paint peeling back under my touch.

"That's odd," I whisper, my finger trailing up to the lock at the top.

The lock is open.

"Was it always unlocked?" Ashton asks, his tone neutral.

I shake my head, more perplexed than alarmed. "I never managed to open this window," I admit. "So I really have no

idea if I ever locked it.”

“Locked,” Avery chimes in, joining us. He leans over me, inspecting the lock closely. “I made sure they were all secure,” he asserts, his brows furrowing as he points. “I locked it myself. I remember distinctly because it wouldn’t open afterward.”

“What are you implying?” I turn to face the twins. Their words echo in the back of my mind, but it’s as if I can’t fully grasp them. Whenever I try to think it through, the thought slips through my fingers.

Ashton gently tilts my chin toward him, steering my attention away from his fuming brother. “Does Violet have a key to your apartment?”

“I never used to lock it,” I admit, looking back and forth between them. The unspoken words hang in the air—I didn’t feel the need to lock it until you came into my life.

Ashton gives me a patient look, his chin dipping slightly in understanding.

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head. “No, she doesn’t have a key. Lex is the only one who does, and I’m pretty sure the idea of my heat freaked him out.”

“Alright, alright.” Avery paces, his forefinger tapping a rhythmic beat on his thigh. “The angry alpha this morning. Did you know him?”

I wince, giving away my answer.

Avery pauses, catching the expression on my face. “Explain now, Seraphina.”

I swallow, my eyes darting back to the lock and then to the twins. “When Violet and I went dress shopping, we had a run-in with him.”

“What does ‘had a run-in’ mean, munchkin?” Ashton taps my chin with two fingers, turning my face back to his.

“He didn’t seem awful at first,” I start, sounding nonchalant. “We got out of the car, and there he was with two

of his goons. You have to understand that some alphas just aren't kind to omegas. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary."

"Except he tracked you down to the bakery," Avery interjects from my right. Ashton's firm grip keeps me from turning to face him.

I chew on my cheek, pondering, "The dress shop isn't far, just a few miles away."

Avery starts pacing again, his frustration palpable. "And that omega found in the park just down the street, miles from the castle."

"She was jogging. A lot of omegas jog to manage their hormones. I'm not one of them, but it's a common thing," I snap, his irritation seeping into my aura, setting me on edge.

"I don't believe in coincidences, sugar." Avery stops pacing and turns in a complete circle. "Take a closer look around your apartment. Tell me if anything seems off, no matter how small it may seem."

I nod, exhaling deeply with puffed cheeks, and stand up. The apartment is small, so the task shouldn't be too daunting. Starting with the seating area, I look around. Everything appears normal except for the window.

I grab the tote of blankets and pillows, leaving the pillows out, and head to the closet. The top shelf where I usually store it is still empty. Shoving the tote up there, I search through the closet for a few minutes. It's not overly full, making my task straightforward. Nothing seems out of place.

When I turn around, I find Avery lifting the couch cushions and then Ashton actually lifting the couch. They exchange glances and then shake their heads at me in unison, indicating nothing suspicious.

"Bathroom?" I suggest, already halfway there. On opening the door, everything is as I left it, from the shower curtain to the line of products on the ledge. Even my little flask of peppermint schnapps beside the tub is untouched.

I peek under the toilet lid and check under the sink. My beauty regimen isn't extravagant, and all four of my products

are in their usual spots.

“Anything?” Avery asks as I step back into the room.

“No,” I reply. The apartment even smells normal, except for the scent dampener spray on the counter. “I’m sure everything is fine.” Glancing out the window, I notice the sky darkening with the approaching storm.

“Humor me, sugar,” Avery nearly pleads.

“Alright,” I say, barely suppressing an eye roll, and head to the kitchen, the last room to check. I spin around in the compact space, scrutinizing every detail. I lined the cat dishes up along the wall. “Cat dishes are still here.”

“Max only took the cats,” Ashton calls from across the room. “He didn’t even grab their food or treats.”

“I’d better check on those,” I say, turning to open the pantry. The cat food is right where I left it, but the treats... They are open and spilled on the shelf. “Damn it, Tuna.”

“Wait!” Avery nearly vaults over the island. “What is it?” he asks, pulling me back from the apparently perilous cat treats.

This time, I do roll my eyes. “Tuna always sneaks into the pantry for treats. Usually, she can’t open the bag and just leaves it chewed up on the floor.” I reach for the treats, but Ashton stops me this time.

“Let me check. It’s probably nothing,” he says, glancing at his brother over my head. Ashton reaches for the treat bag, gripping it in his hand.

A knock at the door startles us.

Ashton drops the bag.

Time slows as the treats scatter across the floor from the fallen bag. Ashton heads to the door, but I can’t tear my gaze away from the cat treats.

“They aren’t coated,” I murmur.

“What?” Avery quickly pulls me aside and crouches to inspect the treats. His nostrils flare, and he steps back,

dragging me along. “Poison.”

“Oh hell no,” Violet bursts into the apartment, pushing past everyone, followed closely by a tall albino man with red eyes. He scans the scene, pauses at the treats, and, after a sniff, pushes Violet back, confronting Avery. “Poison.”

“Yeah,” Avery agrees, running a hand along the back of his neck, his eyes ablaze with blue fury. “Someone broke into her apartment.”

“Excuse me?” Violet stomps on the man’s foot and rushes to me. “Where are the babies?”

“Max has them,” I whisper, fixated on the treats. It’s hard to look away, even as voices surround me. My eyes glance to the window, then back to the treats. My mouth opens and closes as I grapple with the reality of the situation.

In the back of my mind, I know what this means, but shock envelops me like I’m swimming upstream against a strong current. I understand the futility, yet I keep swimming.

“Someone tried to kill my cats.” Tears burn in the back of my eyes as I look up. “Who would want to kill a cat?”

My pulse roars in my ears as I struggle to steady my breathing. Ashton steps close, wrapping me in his arms. I rest my head on his chest, comforted by the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

“Come on, munchkin, let’s get you out of here, okay?” he whispers, kissing my temple before turning me around. With his palm on my back, he guides me into the hall.

The world around me becomes a blur of murmurs and buzzing lights. Time loses its grip on me. Only when I’m sitting in their car, with the heat blasting, do I regain my senses. Ashton is outside on the phone, and Avery is still in the apartment. I realize I left without grabbing anything—not my bag, not my phone, nothing.

I feel foolish yet detached, as if the past week’s events happened to someone else. It’s like watching my life unfold on a movie screen, detached from reality.

Can this really be my life? Such things don't happen to me. They are more characteristic of Thea's life, not mine. Seeking chaos was never my intention. All I ever desired was a peaceful life, waking up to cuddle with my cats, and enjoying a job I loved. Chaos was an unwelcome guest. Perhaps that's the reason behind my contentment in living life on my own terms, free from anyone dictating my daily routine.

The first time I indulged in a lazy morning in that little apartment still lingers in my memory. Waking up close to noon, I stretched until my jaw cracked, a novelty I'd never experienced before.

Ordering breakfast in bed, an unheard of luxury for me, didn't lose its charm, even though it was just food from the bakery below. Someone had brought it to the outside door, and coinciding with my need to use the bathroom, I picked up my food and coffee. Afterward, I nestled back into bed, immersing myself in movies for the rest of the day.

Simplicity. That's all I've ever craved in life. Maybe my hesitation in joining a pack stems from its complexity. Packs have dynamics that an omega needs to be mentally prepared to embrace.

For some, this acceptance might come easily, especially in packs that form early and iron out their kinks before taking on an omega to reduce her stress, but that's not always the case.

I just wanted peace, and this is anything but peaceful.

Someone tried to poison my cats.

As the shock gradually fades, seething rage takes its place. It's hot and violent, pulsing within me, burning until sweat beads on my forehead.

I wipe away the sweat, shrug off my coat, and turn off the car's heat. This small action pulls me back to reality, anchoring me there.

Looking up, I see Avery bounding down the steps with a huge duffle bag in hand. His face is a mask of fury, and his delta blue eyes glow intensely, signaling his loss of control. As I watch him, a mix of fear and fascination stirs within me.

Avery always appears so composed and in control, but now he looks like a tempest about to erupt. It's a side of him I've never seen, and it's both terrifying and strangely compelling. His raw emotion mirrors the turmoil inside me, and for a moment, I feel a kinship in our shared anger.

Reaching over, I honk the horn to get their attention.

Both twins turn to me, their sparkling blue eyes piercing through to my core. Their attention is riveted on me, just me. They might seem indistinguishable to anyone else, but their differences are strikingly clear to me.

Avery, standing beside his brother, is rounder and more filled out. His eyes, identical to Ashton's, sparkle with a playfulness and mirth that his brother lacks. Then there's Ashton. Looking at him sends a strange thrill through me, a reminder of last night's escapades in paint. Leaner than Avery, he leans casually against the car, a brow raised in my direction, his phone pressed to his ear.

Maybe it's the culmination of everything that's happened, or perhaps it's my walls finally crumbling down to nothing but rubble, but something inside me shifts.

As an omega, we hold the power to accept or deny a scent match, making us queens in our own right, but in this hazy afternoon sunlight, I realize I won't deny them. Somewhere deep within, I've already accepted their pack.

I honk the horn again, releasing a playful giggle as they stalk toward me. Danger may be lurking around us in the form of the intruder who snuck into my apartment, but I've never felt unsafe. Not with them around.

I know they'll always take care of me, and that includes my cats.

Ashton swings the driver's side door open and falls into the seat. Cold winter air presses against me, making me breathe a little deeper. With its crispness, there is just something about the winter air that allows me to breathe deeper than before. All too soon, he shuts the door.



“Listen, brat,” Ashton chides gently as he lifts my hand and places it back in my lap. “No need for shenanigans.”

Avery slides into the back seat and slams the door shut, shuddering. “Alright, we better get to the estate before the snow starts.”

“Too late,” Ashton notes, buckling himself in as he gazes skyward.

Curious, I lean forward to look up at the sky. Little flakes fall, each one unique in their own way, each one landing softly on the windshield.

I watch them, imagining them blanketing the ground, coating the world in white. It feels like a blank canvas, symbolizing a new beginning, a fresh start.

As the snowflakes dance their silent waltz outside, a cocoon of warmth envelops us in the car. Avery’s presence in the back seat is like a steady anchor, his occasional shivers mirroring my own internal tremors. I steal a glance at him through the rearview mirror, noticing how he seems lost in his thoughts as deep and uncharted as the snow that’s blanketing the ground.

Ashton’s focus, however, remains unyielding on the road ahead. His hands, firm on the wheel, maneuver us through the increasingly snowy landscape with a confidence that reassures me. Despite the chaos of the day, I find an unexpected serenity in his presence. It’s as if the snowfall has brought a hush over the world outside and the turmoil within me.

I settle back into my seat, allowing the quiet hum of the engine and the soft patter of snow against the car to lull my frayed nerves. My thoughts drift to the cats, to the safety of the estate awaiting us, and to the unspoken bond growing stronger between us. It’s a bond that feels as inevitable as the changing seasons and as comforting as the blanket of snow outside.

As we drive on, the snowfall thickens, each flake adding to the sense of starting anew. It’s like we’re leaving behind the troubles of the old world and heading into a future full of unknowns brimming with potential. The realization dawns on

me that maybe, just maybe, I'm ready to embrace whatever comes next with these twins by my side.

With this thought, I close my eyes, feeling a sense of peace I hadn't known I was missing. The chapter of my life that had been solely mine is closing, and a new, shared one is beginning to write itself.

*Seraphina*

WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, some of my favorite memories revolved around my twin. Long before we understood our designations, life was simpler. We were blissfully unaware of pack dynamics or what our futures might hold. Our world was the present.

We lived for the moment.

As teenagers, we drifted apart, not out of choice, but because of how our forefathers structured our world. My parents sent me to the omega sanctuary while Lex attended the academy for alphas. At the castle, the focus was heavily on preparing for the future—learning to bake, cook, and clean, basically everything expected of an omega. We were so consumed with planning ahead that we never learned to appreciate the present.

I've always believed the universe sends us little reminders to live in the moment. These can seem like inconveniences, like finding no parking spaces at the grocery store. This small detail tells me a lot, like anticipating a busy day ahead. Violet and I usually shop together, preferring late-night trips when it's less crowded. In my honest opinion, midnight is the perfect time.

One day, we had to go early. Cars packed the lot, and we parked at the far end. I knew this meant long lines inside, but I took it as the universe's way of telling me to slow down and just... exist, so we did.

We leisurely walked into the store, waited in long lines, and practiced patience. It reminded me that some things are beyond my control.

Like Ashton's jellyfish, learning to flow with the universe and just exist is a challenging lesson. It's about moving with life's ebb and flow and taking the time to slow down.

Snow has a similar effect. It's a reminder that sometimes we need a break, a nudge from fate to relax and take it easy.

As I nestle in a window seat, sipping hot chocolate, I watch as the world outside transitions from vivid hues to a monochromatic expanse. We haven't been here long, yet the twins have already dashed off in Max's truck. Their departure, shrouded in an aura of mystery, was probably to comb through my apartment for clues or to deliver treats to Max's lab. They promised to return before dusk, which arrives all too quickly in the winter months. Even now, the sun plays coy with the horizon.

This place, their home, sits securely within a gated community. Deltas strictly control all entry and exit points, adding a layer of exclusivity. Encircling the community is a dense forest, not quite a fence but a natural barrier, intended more as a deterrent than a fortification.

In the distance, the Omega Mountains stand tall, their snowcapped peaks a harbinger of the impending winter. From my vantage point on the north side of the estate, I have an unobstructed view of pine trees gradually donning their snowy mantles, their tips blurring into the overcast sky.

Thoughts of Lex drift into my mind as I gaze outside. He has always had a deep affection for snow, and a wave of nostalgia washes over me. I miss my brother terribly. Our time together is scarce these days, limited mostly to Fridays with Thea, but in this moment, surrounded by the tranquility he loves, I decide to find more opportunities for us to reunite.

"There you are," Devlin murmurs from the doorway of his small library. He's leaning against the frame, casually holding a mug that I guess is filled with hot chocolate. This is the most relaxed I've ever seen him—black dress pants, a white button-

down with the first few buttons undone, sleeves rolled up, and, notably, bare feet. It's this last detail that inexplicably heightens his appeal.

"Libraries are like omega crack," I say, lifting my mug to my lips, allowing a small smile to play across them.

"Omega crack?" He smirks at me, evoking memories of our first encounter. Back then, I had no idea he was essentially alpha royalty.

Years ago, the great war erupted among the designations. In my view, it was bound to happen. Hormones, pheromones, and auras were a recipe for ego-driven chaos. At the castle, we learned about this in our designation history class. The war decimated omegas, leading to a shift from the simple alpha, beta, omega structure to the alpha, delta, beta, gamma, omega, and mage designations we have now.

The war ended when seven alpha families, including Devlin's ancestors, united to create a sanctuary for omegas' safety. This lineage makes Devlin not just an alpha, but royalty. Despite changes over the years, he remains one of the most eligible alphas in the city, and embarrassingly, I overlooked this fact that Friday night I almost, *almost* fell on his dick.

And he's a perfect scent match for me.

"Books and fairy tales," I continue, pulling myself back to the present. My gaze drifts around the library, no larger than a two-car garage. They lined three walls with floor to ceiling bookshelves, while the north wall features two bay windows with cushioned seats. "At the castle library, they restricted our reading selection to what Dean Finch approved. We had to smuggle in all the juicy books."

Devlin's lips curl into a mischievous smile, reminding me of a swashbuckling pirate. I can't help but bite my lip as he strides toward a shelf on the west wall. "Name your poison," he says, glancing back at me. "Fantasy? Dark romance? Rom-com? Paranormal? This entire west wall is fiction. The center shelves are all romance."

“Who reads romance in this house, Dev?” I ask, sipping my cocoa, observing him over the rim of my cup. He exudes a princely air with his lean swimmer’s build and toned muscles, and his scent...

I forcibly push thoughts of his scent aside. It nearly drove me to madness just a few nights ago.

“They are for our future omega,” he whispers, scanning the shelves from top to bottom. I watch, my mouth agape, as he turns to me with a smile and settles into the seat opposite mine. He lounges casually with one leg drawn up, the other dangling off the seat. His demeanor is so unexpected, so unlike the Devlin I thought I knew.

“Did you each pick out a different book?” I clear my throat, settling in. A cream-colored folded blanket lies between us. I pull it over my legs, my bare toes wiggling against the soft plushness.

“We did,” he replies.

“What’s your favorite genre?” This library seems to house over a thousand books.

“I’m a simple man, Seraphina,” he says, my name deepening in his voice, stirring a flutter in my belly.

“I highly doubt that.” Most alpha heirs are anything but simple, even though I want to believe him. He’s soft-spoken, easygoing, and more laid back than any other alpha I know.

“I am,” he affirms. “I grew up in estates larger than this, but they never felt like home. My father’s craving for extravagance drove my mother and our pack away.” He says “extravagance” with a touch of disdain. “Amongst other reasons.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, feeling a genuine ache. “That must have been incredibly lonely.”

His smile is half-hearted, more a polite gesture than a true expression of happiness. “It was. But I had books,” he adds, his smile becoming warmer. “I enjoy stories with happily ever afters, love that endures time and trials.”

“I never would have guessed you were a romance reader,” I tease, understanding a bit more about him now. He is like a fairy-tale prince, and he looks like one too. Maybe he really is Prince Charming.

“I told you, I’m a simple man.” His lips tick up into a crooked smile that nearly makes my toes curl.

“And yet, you’re still an heir,” I point out, eager to understand him better.

That melancholic smile returns, and his eyes shift to a rich summer green, contrasting with the sentiment behind his smile. “I was born into this role. If I had a choice, it wouldn’t be what I’d choose.”

“What would you choose then?” As I ask the question, the need to know the answer almost overwhelms me.

“That...” He pauses, tilting his head. “Is an excellent question.” He takes a sip of his cocoa, then licks the remaining liquid from his lips. “What about you? If there were no designations, no alphas, no omegas, only betas, what would you choose?”

I hum, never having considered such a scenario. “Everything,” I burst out, laughter escaping my lips. “Everything,” I echo. “My parents were simple folk, living in a quiet village.”

“The Ashe Woods,” he nods. “Beyond the council’s reach.”

“I’m grateful for that,” I admit, my parents’ desire for us to find our own path resonating with Devlin’s imagined world. “First thing I’d want to experience is college.”

“College?” Devlin perks up, likely due to his own extensive education. “What would you study? And you can’t say everything.”

“History, maybe. I love uncovering things,” I say, searching for the right words.

“You and Max would enjoy working together on a dig site,” Devlin comments warmly.

“The ancient world captivates me. The rise and fall of countless civilizations before us, reaching their zenith and then crumbling into obscurity. Why did they crumble? What led to their demise? And how deep would I need to delve to unearth these mysteries?” My heart steadies as these thoughts swirl in my mind. This, I realize, is a path I’d love to explore.

“You wouldn’t consider running a bakery?” he probes, curiosity evident in his tone.

I offer a casual shrug. “The bakery is more a necessity than a passion. When I work there, the scent of my perfume makes customers think of freshly baked cookies. I often wonder if I genuinely enjoy it, or if it’s simply the only option the omega sanctuary has allowed me. It’s hard to tell if it’s a true fit for my personality or just a role I’ve adapted to.”

He nods, humming in understanding, and takes another sip of his cocoa. This simple action draws my gaze to his lips. After a moment, he shares, “I’d be a professor,” his voice carrying a hint of wistful longing.

That takes me aback, but only briefly. He possesses a gentle, more tempered demeanor. His interests seem to lean more toward intellectual pursuits than the typical aggressive posturing of council alphas. “What subject would you teach?” I ask, intrigued.

“Literature,” he answers without hesitation, his eyes lighting up. “At the academy, all the professors are betas. This creates a tense atmosphere. Most struggle to maintain control over the class. I remember sneaking onto a beta campus once.”

“You didn’t!” My surprise is genuine and unfeigned.

He grins, a playful spark in his eyes. “I did. It was right after graduation from the academy and the camp. We had a two-week break, and my father preoccupied himself with ruining his life. Max and I decided on a road trip.”

“Max joined you on this escapade?” Somehow, that surprises me most of all.

“How else do you think an alpha ended up as a medical doctor? A scientist, at that,” he says, his smirk revealing a hint



of pride.

I hadn't considered that angle. Alphas, particularly in our world, rarely venture into scientific fields or the beta medical system, with mages being the more common choice. "The Northern Province is a marvel," he continues, his voice taking on a dreamy quality. "It was a long journey, and we spent an entire day locating a mage to mask our scents, but we reached their main campus, and it was everything I'd dreamed of. The classes there operate on a term basis, and during summer, it's more serene. There were fewer people to notice our presence."

Intrigued, I lean forward, my cocoa forgotten. "What was it like there?" I ask, eager to hear more about his adventures outside our usual world.

Devlin closes his eyes, his lashes casting delicate shadows over his sharp cheekbones. "The first building we encountered was a castle-like structure, yet it was distinctly different from the omega sanctuary. Constructed with warm, inviting brick layered over stone, it exuded a sense of welcome. They adorned the campus with a vast green space circled by trees. People lounged on blankets, enjoying picnics on the grass. We were so captivated, we registered for the summer term on the spot."

As Devlin opens his eyes, a tinge of sadness flickers across his features.

Curious and eager to dispel his melancholy, I ask, "What classes did you enroll in?"

His face brightens a bit. "Creative writing, history, and literature—subjects the academy doesn't offer." He scrunches his nose, then adds, "Max opted for pre-med courses. We even had to take entrance exams to prove our mettle. We just scraped through."

His words paint a stark contrast to the limitations of our designated colleges, and a twinge of envy stirs within me. I've never envied a beta as much as I do now.

"I called my dad and concocted a story about finding a pack and needing time to bond. He barely cared, too engrossed

in tearing my mother's pack apart," he growls, bitterness lacing his tone. "That summer was the best of my life, and I didn't even have to dip into my trust fund. The education was free."

"That's..." I shake my head, searching for the right words. "Amazing," I finally say, though it feels too understated. It hardly captures the true wonder of his experience.

"As summer drew to a close, I had to leave," he continues, his voice tinged with regret as he sets his empty cocoa cup on the floor and leans back against the window. "My biggest regret is not fighting to stay longer, but I stood up for Max."

I lean in, my curiosity piqued. "What do you mean by that?"

"He was determined to save Grace and would go to any length to do so. Although I couldn't stay with him, I prepared to do whatever I could to assist," Devlin whispers, his voice low, as if fearing the mere mention might bring misfortune. "I hired a mage and secretly funneled money from my father to pay her. She modified Max's aura to resemble a beta's. The plan worked, and he graduated top of his class with honors."

I open and close my mouth in astonishment. "And nobody figured it out?"

He shakes his head, a mischievous smile playing on his lips. "Not a soul. They even offered him an internship at Dragonstall Isles, at an archaeological site where they had uncovered what looked like a pyramid."

I shake my head in amazement. "The great deception," I say.

"To my knowledge, they remain unaware, or if they do know, they've kept silent. Max has made significant contributions to their community. I think they might know his true nature and have accepted him." He shifts his gaze across the backyard toward the north. "This spot is my favorite on the estate. On a clear day, I feel like I can almost see the university, just over the mountains."

His words inspire me. “Why not establish a similar college here?” I suggest. “Create your own college, welcoming all designations.”

He gives me a warm smile. “Maybe one day, I will.” Leaning closer, he offers a change of pace. “Would you like to help me make dinner?”

My heart warms at the invitation. “I’d love that,” I reply, eager to spend more time together.

*Max*

FRUSTRATION SIMMERS IN MY VEINS, a methodical, deep-seated anger that seeks an outlet. The impact of psychological trauma on an individual is something I understand too well professionally. The irony in this situation is not lost on me. Seraphina, the unwitting victim, remains oblivious. This ignorance, paradoxically, is both her shield and her vulnerability. The twins' swift intervention spared her the immediate terror.

*For how long.*

Surrounded by a heavy snowfall, I observe the scene with a clinician's eye. The snow, while masking potential clues, also offers a fresh canvas for evidence. The ground, only recently cold enough to sustain a snow cover, necessitates prompt action.

I inhale deeply, my senses tuned to detect and analyze.

*Whose scent is this?*

Beneath her window, the air holds a distinct, acrid scent, akin to citrus gone bad. It's a chemical reaction, not just a smell, irritating the mucous membranes in my throat. I commit this scent to memory, a mental note etched with precision. Should I ever encounter this alpha—and my instincts, honed by years of study, tell me it is an alpha—recognition will be immediate.

Standing slowly, I methodically scan the old brick façade, seeking empirical evidence.

*Nothing.*

I turn, considering the layout. The parking lot and the building obstructing my view to the park all form part of the larger puzzle. Trusting the twins to conduct a thorough yet invisible search of her apartment, I stride toward the park with purpose.

My footsteps leave precise impressions in the thin snow. A brief glance back affords a view of Seraphina's apartment.

The guys and I have a longstanding connection, solidified in the crucible of Grace's tragedy. Initially, our bond was a byproduct of circumstance. The twins had been guardians of sorts to Grace since their shared youth. Their promise to protect her was a constant, at least until that night that altered everything.

I remember questioning Grace about her fascination with them. My inquiry was more than mere curiosity, it was a necessity. Their arrival in our family signaled a change. Their presence wasn't just notable, it was significant.

Our unique scents—an amalgamation of the biological and environmental—mark us. The twins, with their distinctive delta scent, embody the unpredictability of nature, like the charged anticipation of a storm.

I used to believe that all scents merged into a singular sensory experience for me.

Until I met them.

Their scents were like dessert to my analytical mind, and I have a sweet tooth for such mysteries. In the realm of scent matches, it's not unusual for male siblings to share similarities, but the occurrence is rare for male and female siblings. Given that Grace is an omega, and I am an alpha, our paths in the pack hierarchy would never naturally intersect, but she brought them home, sparking my curiosity. Was she drawn to their scents as irresistibly as I was?

I vividly recall her expression that day, an expression that seemed to say she knew, perhaps even orchestrated their meeting. "You are a match, aren't you? I knew it. I knew they

were perfect for you,” she exclaimed, her eyes alight with understanding, her squeals of delight still resonating in my memory, and her hug...

If I close my eyes, I can still feel that embrace. Since her attack, she’s refrained from such gestures, and I never pressed. It was only upon my return from my expedition that she allowed me to braid her hair again. That simple request gave me hope for her healing, a hope that I cling to. I used to braid her hair almost every evening, not because our mother couldn’t, but because I wanted to learn. I aspired to one day have an omega of my own to care for and pamper. In many ways, Grace was always the caretaker, even though she was younger. Bringing the twins to our doorstep was just one of her many thoughtful acts.

Even after her ordeal, she emphasized the importance of connecting with the twins, but I never did. It’s as though her attack cast a shadow over our young pack, a cloud that only started to lift with Seraphina’s arrival.

That fateful day, when I entered the bakery searching for Elenora, little did Seraphina know that Devlin, a character from our intertwined pasts, owned that bakery, among others. His ventures began after his departure from the beta university, but those details are inconsequential at the moment.

As I round the corner, I glance back, half expecting to see through the building to the twins inside. Since encountering Seraphina, it’s as if I’m seeing the twins anew. A pang of guilt stirs within me as I realize how my protective instincts toward Grace may have overshadowed my connection to the pack.

Now, when I look at Avery, I see more than a mere acquaintance. I see him as mine once again. His striking blue delta eyes, adorned with freckles, his lashes that seem almost artistically defined, and his unruly dark hair captivate me anew.

Ashton, on the other hand, doesn’t evoke the same primal attraction, but I still perceive him as part of my pack, albeit differently. Our connection is akin to the warmth of a familiar pub on a winter day, a place where everyone knows you, your

favorite drink is ready, and your preferred meal awaits. With Ashton, there is a sense of comfort, of home.

Avery, however, is a different story entirely. He's like a match to dry tinder. With a single glance, he ignites a fire in my veins, a connection we've never dared explore. Our paths, constrained by the circumstances of our lives, never seemed to align.

Yet.

I sigh as I pass the playground where Seraphina and I once spontaneously swung on the swings. That encounter with her was unexpected, a serendipitous moment born out of a failed business errand. Devlin had tasked me with surveying an empty building down the street for a potential business venture, but I found myself standing before locked doors, with no listing agent in sight. At the time, it didn't strike me as significant.

Now, though, a compelling urge drives me to double-check. A nagging feeling whispers that if I don't, I might live to regret it.

It is a feeling I now don't ignore.

I continue past the park, following the street as it winds around the woods, leading me toward the building. It looms ahead, a sentinel in the night. The streetlights cast a dim glow, flickering to life one by one, while my breath forms small clouds in the chilly air.

The snow settles more firmly on the ground, a reminder of our limited time, but I'm not concerned. We will return home, for that's where Seraphina awaits.

As I approach the corner, just before crossing the street to the building, a wave of nostalgia engulfs me. The structure before me bears a resemblance to the beta university I once attended, albeit in a state of disrepair. It's a shadow of its former glory, with crumbling spires and a struggling metal fence meant to deter intruders.

The streets are eerily quiet, the accumulating snow dissuading others from venturing out as night falls. This

solitude is precisely why I chose to come here now.

I swallow hard, crossing the street and ascending the hill to the building's front. This structure, once a bustling high school, carries a history even deeper than its educational past. It previously served as an asylum, a fact I'm acutely aware of each time I stand before it. The resemblance it bears to the institute stirs a shiver down my spine as I halt at the front steps.

The rusted gate, long since broken, lies askew. I push through, grateful for the lack of residential eyes on this side of the street. The gate rattles loudly as I maneuver my large frame through it, and I wince as the sound of fabric tearing accompanies a sudden chill up my leg. I pause, turning to ensure my intrusion remains unnoticed, then inhale slowly, searching for any lingering scents, but there's nothing.

Approaching the steps, I test the door handle—locked, as expected. I retrieve the small lockpick kit Ashton gifted me for my last birthday from my pocket. It's a skill he taught me one night when we found ourselves locked out of the southern base. I never expected Ashton to be adept at lockpicking, but I'm grateful for it now.

I glance around once more, ensuring the coast is clear, before working on the lock. It takes me a focused five minutes, but finally, the lock clicks open. I gently push the heavy glass door and step into the eerie quiet building.

Despite no open windows, a pervasive chill envelops the space, one that transcends mere temperature. It's an unsettling feeling, not of being watched, but of being surrounded by the echoes of memories and desolation. This building, now silent, was once alive with energy, its bricks imprinted with the lives that passed through here.

My boots crunch over shattered glass as I step toward the old office. The broken window on the door is typical for a building in such disrepair. Pushing into the office, I take a quick survey. It looks like everyone left abruptly, abandoning their belongings, including dusty pictures on the empty desks.



My phone's buzz interrupts the silence, and I answer Avery's call with a hushed tone. "Hey."

"Where the hell did you go?" Avery's voice, tinged with irritation as though he's upset about my absence, rumbles through the phone. A part of me wants to purr in pleasure at his concern.

"The other day when we found the attacked omega," I whisper back, moving quietly down the hall. The open doors along the corridor suggest a hasty departure.

"And?" Avery's voice sounds muffled as he speaks to Ashton.

"Unfinished business," I reply, pausing outside the nurse's office. Memories of Grace feigning sickness to spend time with me fleetingly cross my mind. "Did you find anything?"

"Unfortunately." There's a sound of doors slamming in the background, and through our bond, I sense his unease. "The cat treats were a decoy."

"Explain," I demand, a growl edging my voice as I stop at the school's entrance.

"It was all for show," Avery explains, his footsteps resonating on the hard floor. "Someone tampered with her sugar dish, almost imperceptibly. I nearly missed it, but Ashton noticed, and you won't believe what it was."

"What?" I prompt, urgency sharpening my tone.

"Sugarplum," he reveals.

My heart skips a beat. Sugarplum is a rare nut indigenous to the Dragonstall Isles, and it's seldom shipped to our region. In the southern Dragonstall Isles, they are known for their toxicity. Mages commonly use them in potions, skillfully extracting the magic while neutralizing the poison. If someone like me, untrained in such arts, were to consume one directly from the tree, it would be fatal. They resemble dark purple walnuts, soft enough to bite into like an apple, and are deceptively sweet.

I know this because during my time in the south, I spent weeks on the isles, learning everything I could. The three-day sail was a detour from my main research in the icy south, searching for the elusive peace mushroom, but the mystery of the sugarplum nut intrigued me.

Referring to Seraphina as “sugarplum” was no coincidence. The first time I caught her scent, that’s exactly what it reminded me of.

“Fuck,” I mutter, dragging a hand down my face.

“Exactly,” Avery growls through the phone. “Are you at that school?”

“A case of FOMO?” I quip, pinching the bridge of my nose. The situation is more serious than I realized.

“Yes,” he scoffs, followed by a muffled scuffle. “Damn it, Ashton, don’t push.”

“Just get through.” Ashton’s voice is sharp in the background.

“There’s no need to shove your thumb up my ass,” Avery retorts.

“I didn’t shove it up your ass. I merely implied that I would,” Ashton counters.

Hearing the door open, I quickly end the call, cutting off their bickering. I stand at the entrance of the hall, debating whether to proceed alone, but instead, I take just one step forward and close my eyes, inhaling deeply.

Maybe this is all a misunderstanding. Perhaps the real estate agent was ill and ghosted me because she was unwell.

Deep down, though, I know there’s more to it.

The only scents that greet me are mildew and mold, overpowering in their mustiness.

“There you are.” Avery’s voice reverberates down the hall, breaking my concentration. “This place is creepy as hell. Is this the building Devlin wanted you to check out?”

“Yeah,” I reply, absentmindedly running a thumb across my bottom lip, eyeing Avery as he joins me. He scans the area, his youthful face clean-shaven.

It’s only now that I truly notice him, see *him* in a new light. As I turn away, I inadvertently inhale a whiff of his cinnamon scent, but not before catching Ashton’s gaze. His head tilts, his eyes holding an unspoken question.

“Smell that?” Avery suddenly steps over broken glass toward a hallway, his nose wrinkling, followed by an unexpected sneeze. “Blood.”

I stride swiftly, pushing past him into what appears to be a dilapidated cafeteria. The disarray is striking—a serving line, a kitchen area, chairs haphazardly strewn about, and tables shoved against walls.

“I don’t smell it,” I admit, scanning the room.

“I do,” Avery replies, his confidence bordering on pretentiousness. He strides out of the cafeteria, glancing left and right with each step.

As we pause, his fingers rhythmically tap against his thigh, a silent drumbeat in the eerie quiet.

Suddenly, a faint, metallic twang catches my attention—blood. I swiftly turn to the right, and in two long strides, I push through the door into the art room. They divided the space into two distinct areas—a classroom at the front and an array of easels lined up against a row of windows at the back, the streetlights casting eerie shadows across the space.

My heart races as I scan the room until I spot it. “There,” I announce, heading straight for a wire rack that once held pottery.

“Max.” Ashton’s voice halts me, a chilling edge in his tone. “Max.”

I whirl around to face my packmate, standing just a few feet away, his gaze fixed on a vase among dozens on a shelf. It stands out, perhaps a demonstration piece from the last art class held here.

Ashton breaks from his trance and reaches for the vase, his hands trembling. “It’s not hers,” he murmurs, then corrects himself as he inspects it. “It is hers, just not the one I have.” He hands me the vase, revealing a little cat etched on the bottom, but no signature.

“How do you know it’s Seraphina’s?” I ask, passing the vase to Avery.

“The cat. She never signed her pottery,” Ashton explains, his head tilting slightly. “Instead, she drew cats.”

“That’s very on brand for her,” Avery observes, sniffing the vase. “But the blood scent isn’t coming from here.”

“No, but...” Ashton spins around, surveying the room.

I take a deep breath, and the scent of blood is unmistakable, but there’s something about it that stands out. “Old blood,” I conclude.

The stale air of the abandoned school hangs heavily as I step closer to Ashton, my boots crunching over shards of glass strewn across the floor. The sharp, acrid scents of decay and mold assault my senses, mingling with the faint, metallic twinge of blood that lingers in the air, elusive yet unmistakable.

Ashton’s voice, laced with a mix of curiosity and caution, echoes in the empty hallway. “How old though?” His words reverberate off the peeling walls, a reminder of the building’s forsaken state. I try to focus on the faint scent of blood, but it’s diffused, almost as if woven into the very fabric of the dilapidated building.

I glance upwards, a sense of foreboding crawling up my spine. The ceiling tiles, stained a sinister shade of red, speak of horrors past. “Above us,” I whisper, the realization hitting me with a jolt.

“What are the odds that’s blood?” Avery, with his usual blend of agility and brashness, leaps onto a desk. The floorboards groan under his weight, a somber reminder of the countless footsteps that once echoed in these halls.

“High,” Ashton confirms, his flashlight beam cutting through the darkness. Both of them possess night vision far superior to mine, a trait of their delta designation.

He prods at the stained tiles. “No way a person’s up there. Wouldn’t hold.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring, Avery.” Ashton steps back, his eyes flicking to me, and a silent exchange of understanding passes between us. The caution in his stance is palpable, a stark contrast to Avery’s impulsive energy.

I can’t blame him for his caution. I watch intently as Avery methodically removes tile after tile. “They are just stained... with blood,” he mutters, perplexed.

A small piece of fabric flutters down from the exposed ceiling, landing softly at my feet. The fabric is blood-red, with “cunt” crudely stitched in black—a vulgar blemish on the otherwise innocuous material.

Avery snatches it up, his voice laced with confusion and a hint of disgust. “Cunt?” His question hangs in the air, heavy with implications.

I remain crouched, the cold floor seeping through my pants, my mind racing. “It belongs to one of my patients,” I say, the words tasting bitter in my mouth. The realization that Dorothea, Seraphina’s sister, is somehow entangled in this dark web sends a chill down my spine.

Avery turns the fabric over in his hands. “Why’s it here?”

“Wrong question,” Ashton interjects. “Who does it belong to, Max?”

I know they suspect the answer, an obvious truth that eludes me. “Dorothea,” I reply, standing up. “Seraphina’s sister.”

Avery’s eyes widen, and he scans the room frantically. “Is it her blood?”

“No,” Ashton states confidently. “It doesn’t smell like her. She has a sweet scent, not a bitter one.”

“Whose blood is it then?” Avery’s voice edges with urgency.

I voice my suspicion. “My realtor.”

“Fuck,” Avery mutters, glancing up at the ceiling.

Avery and Ashton exchange a look, a silent conversation in their shared glance. The fabric in Avery’s hands is more than just a clue, it’s a symbol of a twisted puzzle we’re only beginning to unravel.

“We need to leave before we get snowed in here,” I say, the urgency in my voice a stark contrast to the oppressive stillness of the abandoned building. The weight of our discovery hangs over us as we hasten back, the echoes of our footsteps a solemn reminder of the building’s haunted past and the grim reality we now face.

“No thank you. Snowed inside a creepy building that is definitely haunted? Nope,” Ashton says, a visible shiver running through him. His voice barely rises above a whisper, but it carries the weight of his unease. The dim light flickering in the hallway casts shadows that dance across his features, accentuating his discomfort. “This place gives me the creeps.”

“Yeah, and Dev wants to buy it,” Avery adds, his tone laced with disbelief. He hands me the piece of fabric, his gesture slow, almost reluctant. There’s a furrow of concern etched on his brow, a reflection of the unsettling atmosphere that seems to seep from the surrounding walls.

I take the fabric, feeling its coarse texture between my fingers. The chill of the room seems to cling to it, a tangible reminder of the eerie energy of the building. I find myself lost in thought for a moment, pondering the implications of Devlin’s interest in such a place. My decision forms almost instinctively, reinforced by the cold, oppressive air around us.

*I think I’ll veto this building as well.* The words echo in my mind, a silent resolve forming amidst the shadows and whispers of the past that linger in the air. There’s a weight to this decision, a feeling of finality, as if closing the door on this haunted space could somehow keep its darkness contained.

CHAPTER 22

*Seraphina*

“RED OR WHITE?” Devlin asks, leading me into the kitchen with his palm resting gently on the small of my back.

“Red or white what?” I struggle to think clearly with his touch. His scent hangs heavily in the air, a perfect embodiment of his personality—like tea on the coldest of nights, enriched with a heavy dose of whipped cream. The urge to lick him from head to toe is overwhelming.

“Wine,” he whispers, sending shivers of anticipation through my body.

“Oh,” I murmur as he guides me to the island and pulls out a chair. I force myself to blink and focus on anything but him.

Earlier, when I came in here with Avery, I barely glimpsed the room. Now, as I sit here, needing a distraction, I take in the beauty of the kitchen. A butcher block island dominates the center, surrounded by rustic lights that cast a dim, ambient glow. Behind me, a fireplace lines the far wall at an angle, flickering to life as Devlin presses a button.

He moves to the end of the island, opens a small fridge, and retrieves two bottles of wine. “Red or white?”

“I don’t drink much,” I admit, resting my chin on my palm, watching him scrutinize each bottle. “The only wine I’ve had was what we smuggled into the sanctuary.”

“Nothing after?” He looks at me, a thick brow raised in surprise.

“No.” I clear my throat. “Not many places are willing to serve omegas without an alpha.”

He hums thoughtfully. “Well, these are sweet. We’ve been stocking them for a potential omega.”

I smirk at him. “Then either one will be perfect. What’s your favorite?”

“Red,” he answers without hesitation, putting away the lighter bottle. He moves around the kitchen with fluid grace, opening a high cabinet to fetch two glasses. Devlin moves like a panther in the night—silent and deliberate in every step.

As he turns to open the bottle, I glance up at the vaulted ceilings, where wooden rafters add to the room’s charm. My eyes then drift to the stone archway leading to a hall. Conversation comes easily with the others, but with Devlin, my tongue feels tied, as if I’m lost for words.

His aura is intense, purposeful, and consuming.

“My mother loved to cook, especially for the pack,” he shares, uncorking the wine. “She’d turn up the music, wine in hand, and just immerse herself in cooking. It always took her twice as long to finish a meal, mainly because my fathers would come in and dance with her before leaving.”

“Do you miss her?” I ask, feeling a pang of longing for my own parents. In our culture, back in the remote parts of Terra, once you leave home, contact becomes a rarity.

“Immeasurably,” he admits, a hint of sorrow in his voice. “When my father shattered his bond, it broke a part of my mother, and yet, in a way, relieved the others.”

His words carry an edge, as if he’s teetering on the brink of a deeper revelation. Taking a shot in the dark, I guess, “Royal packs?”

His expression grows serious as he pours the wine. “I just want you to be fully aware of what you could be getting into,” he says, his voice wavering slightly, betraying the pain of the warning.



“What, exactly, am I getting into?” I ask, curious and slightly apprehensive.

Licking his lips, Devlin takes a long, steadying breath. “My mother truly loved my father, if you can believe that,” he begins, pushing a glass of wine toward me. He leans on the island across from me, his intense gaze holding mine. “He wasn’t always seen as a bastard. In his youth, he wanted nothing to do with my grandfather’s legacy, or so he implied. He yearned to exist beyond the council’s walls. My uncle, older than him, gave him that chance.”

“What happened?” I inquire, bringing the glass to my lips. The scent of honey and blackberry merges, creating an intoxicating aroma. As I sip, the flavor bursts over my tongue. Devlin watches me intently, as though my reaction to the wine holds significant meaning to him. “That’s damn good,” I comment, impressed.

“I’m glad you like it,” Devlin says, pushing off from the island and moving around the kitchen. His next words are so casually delivered that I nearly choke on my wine. “My father killed my uncle.”

“What?” I cough a little to clear my throat.

He tosses a smirk over his shoulder. “My father was a master of deception, a manipulator. He fooled everyone. After securing his place in a pack that accepted him, he murdered my uncle and claimed his position as the heir apparent.”

“That’s terrible,” I say, shaking my head in disbelief. “Your mother had no idea?”

“Not a clue,” he scoffs with a hint of bitterness. “He put on a performance for her, convincing her and my other two fathers—who were more peace loving and passive—that he was like them, but by the time he twisted their love around, my mother was already pregnant with me.”

I hesitate, almost afraid to ask how she left, sensing the story doesn’t have a happy ending.

“My father then killed my grandfather,” Devlin continues, a dark shadow crossing his face. “Before Sebastian reformed

the council, the only way for an heir to ascend was through the predecessor's death. Many old members still adhere to this rule. Some even believe in it."

"What are you trying to tell me, Devlin?" I ask, twisting the wine glass in my hands as I study him.

"Seraphina, I want you. I want you to be with us," he declares, leaning on the counter, his gaze unwavering. My heart races with each word he speaks. "But I must be honest. Opting for us involves navigating council politics, outdated views, and facing degradation from older members—never at you, but at me."

A surge of anger courses through me, infuriated by what they've put him through.

Devlin's revelation comes with a clenched jaw, his muscles tensing as he grinds his teeth. "My mother had no choice but to leave without me when my father severed their bond. He cast her as the deserter, spinning tales that deceived everyone," he shares, his voice heavy with emotion. "He played the victim so convincingly that omegas flocked to him, but I assure you, I will never hurt you. I'll be your shield against any harm that might come your way."

I listen, my thoughts a whirlwind. The decision to bond lingers in my mind, unresolved, yet deep within, in a place I barely acknowledge, I already regard them as mine.

"Well," I murmur, a mixture of apprehension and excitement in my voice, "consider me duly warned."

"Pasta or rice?" He shifts the topic effortlessly, his voice lighter, as if to lift the somber mood.

"Pasta," I respond instantly, savoring another sip of wine. "Always pasta."

"Noted," he replies with a playful smirk, pushing off from the counter and moving around the room. His movements are a dance of strength and grace, captivating in their effortless elegance.

Outside, the snow whirls in a frenzied dance, contrasting with the warmth and tranquility inside this kitchen haven.

“Have the guys left yet?” I inquire, watching him pull various ingredients from the pantry and a well-stocked fridge. He pauses, retrieves his phone, and slides it across the island to me. “Check the group chat.”

“Dive into your phone?” I ask, surprised, setting my glass aside. Curiosity bubbles within me, eager for a glimpse into his private world.

“Twenty-two, forty-eight,” he says, implicit trust in his tone.

With a mix of excitement and a hint of mischief, I enter the code, gaining a rare window into Devlin’s personal space. He throws me a knowing smirk, as if he’s fully aware of the thrill this small act gives me.

That’s when a sharp cramp ambushes me, a sudden, unwelcome intruder. I grit my teeth, cursing the timing. It’s as if a sharp, icy blade has chosen this moment to twist within me.

I try to focus, unlocking his phone, my fingers quivering slightly. Each time Devlin glances back, concern flickering in his eyes, I steady my hands, determined not to show my discomfort.

The group chat is unexpectedly tame, slightly deflating my excitement.

**Avery:** Heading back.

**Ashton:** Max is driving, the snow’s thick. Should be home in about twenty.

Ashton sent that message only five minutes ago. I watch as new bubbles pop up, signaling more messages.

**Avery:** Max drives like a snail. We’ll be lucky to get home before dawn.

“It’s mostly lighthearted banter,” I remark.

“The twins are quite the conversationalists,” Devlin comments with a chuckle, igniting the gas stove, the flame coming to life with a soft whoosh.

Another cramp clenches through me, and beads of sweat form on my forehead, which I hastily wipe away. My clothes suddenly feel constrictive, suffocatingly tight. Desperate for a distraction, I take a sip of my wine and casually flip open to his photo gallery app.

There aren't many photos—mostly screenshots of books and pictures of the guys. Then, I spot it. “Oh,” I murmur, a hint of mischief in my voice, “a secret folder.”

A pan clatters to the ground, and I look up just in time to see Devlin recover it. “How did you...”

“Find it?” I chuckle. “After Dean Finch caught an omega with a smuggled phone, we all got pretty savvy with hidden folders.”

“Seraphina,” he says, a noticeable gulp in his throat. “Don't.”

“What's in there, Devlin?” My finger hovers over the folder, my curiosity piqued.

Devlin's actions are precise as he sets the pan down and quickly turns off the stove.

“You really don't want me looking in there, huh?” I quip, sliding off the stool while watching his reaction closely.

His response is a deep, warning growl. “I'm warning you.”

With a playful grin, I retort, “I'm hoping for some revealing shots,” as I step back and daringly press to open the hidden folder.

*All the dick pics.* Some girls like them, and some girls don't. I personally love to know what I'm getting out of a relationship. In my very uneducated opinion, starting off a conversation with a dick pic is like an erotic resume.

To my surprise, Devlin vaults over the island with feline agility, landing softly in front of me. He snatches the phone, and in one fluid motion, lifts me onto the island, the stool I was sitting on clattering to the floor. I realize then how controlled and precise Devlin always is, his calm exterior masking his swift decisiveness.

“You know,” I say, “that private folder is waving some serious red flags.”

His eyes blaze with a mix of lust and something unspoken, igniting another painful cramp. With him this close, I can't conceal the wince.

“Preheat,” he whispers, his pupils dilating with desire, yet he's remarkably composed. “You want to know what's in the folder?”

“Yes, I think I do,” I reply, mustering up more bravado than I feel.

Still clutching the phone, he steps between my legs, nudging himself closer. He hands me the phone, opening the folder for me.

It's far more revealing than just risqué photos.

“Oh.” I blush, feeling the heat in my cheeks as he places the phone in my palm.

Leaning in, he whispers, “I wasn't going to show you these because they are not just of me.” He groans softly, tilting his head to watch my reaction as I scroll through the photos. “Consent, sweet Seraphina, is everything. Now, you get to tell Ashton what you found.”

I find photos of them, images of limbs entwined and tongues tangling. My breath escapes me in a hushed exhale. “There's a video.”

“Watch it,” Ashton suddenly instructs, startling me into a small squeak.

I whip my head toward him, stunned. When did they arrive? Avery and Max are nowhere in sight, but Ashton methodically removes his cap, scarf, and coat, each item dropping to the floor in a deliberate sequence.

An unfamiliar sensation starts building within me, a slick warmth that drips down over my body like warm milk, as I shift my gaze between him and Devlin. Overwhelmed and unsure, I push the phone back into Devlin's hands.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he counters, swiftly unlocking the phone again.

Ashton slides closer to Devlin, his head tilted and eyes brimming with curiosity. “We could just show her.”

“What?” The word barely escapes my lips, my eyes darting from the phone to them. Could he really mean what I think he means?

Devlin’s lips curve into a roguish smile as he turns to Ashton. “Or” —he glances sidelong at me— “we could put this on the home theater and watch.”

I open my mouth to speak, but another cramp interrupts, this one so intense it demands my full attention. Wave after wave of heat courses through me. I lean heavily onto Devlin’s shoulder, breathing through the pain, feeling a rush of slickness building inside, poised on the edge of release.

When it does, it unleashes an aroma of molasses and sugar, soaking through my panties and pants. In a reflexive attempt to close my legs, I inadvertently trap Devlin between them, finding myself in a situation that’s both unexpected and revealing.

Ashton’s whisper breaks through the tension. “I think she wants to be dinner.”

Devlin, his hand entwined in my hair, tilts my head back with a firm pull. The man of composure I’m familiar with is now gone, overtaken by an alpha driven by primal need. “I agree. Let’s get the others. It’s time to eat,” he commands, his voice echoing with authority and desire.

My lips part, but the cramp persists, demanding they fulfill my every desire. The moan that escapes me leaves no doubt about what I want.

Devlin’s nostrils flare as he inhales deeply, his pupils dilating as he gazes down at me. He holds me in place, ensuring that when the others enter the kitchen, I fix my gaze forward. A wild thrill surges through me at this display of dominance.

I wet my lips in anticipation.

“What’s for dinner—” Avery’s voice cuts off mid-sentence, and I hear his sharp intake of breath. “Are you the dinner, sugar?”

“She is, but I’m not sure she’s in control,” Devlin observes, his voice a low murmur.

I’m certainly not in control, not right now.

“You know,” Avery chimes in, a playful lilt in his voice, “I once laid her bare on a table at the castle. I was just as famished then as I am now, and all my packmates envied me for having her as my midnight snack, which, of course, I told them about in full, explicit detail.”

Avery’s words ignite a wave of heat within me, my heart racing and my cheeks burning with a mix of embarrassment and excitement. I try to stifle a whimper, but it escapes my lips as the cramp intensifies.

“If someone doesn’t make me come now,” I begin, my voice husky with burgeoning need, “then I’m going to be really upset.”

“We can’t have that, can we?” Devlin responds, his tone playful yet laced with desire. His hands move from restraining me to grasping my shirt. With a swift, decisive tug, he rips it off, tossing it carelessly aside. His gaze lingers on my chest, taking in the lace that barely conceals my breasts.

I feel a gentle tug from behind as my bra is unclasped. Devlin wastes no time sliding it down my arms, leaving me exposed to his intense gaze.

I gasp as his hands begin a sensual exploration, tracing every inch of my bare skin. His fingertips dance over my curves and valleys, igniting a fiery trail of sensation. When his mouth finds mine, it’s a passionate, consuming kiss that sends tremors down my spine. My fingers entwine in his hair, moving in perfect harmony with his.

He ventures lower, his lips grazing my neck, then trailing down to the sensitive area between my breasts. His nips and licks leave me breathless, aching for more, before he teasingly pulls back.

“Lie back,” he growls, the command resonating deep in his voice.

A thrill of excitement races through me as I turn on the island, suddenly the center of attention. All four of them encircle me, their eyes ravenous as they take in every detail of my form. I let out a throaty moan and bite my lip, fighting the urge to squirm under their watchful gazes.

Now is not the time to be self-conscious. Besides, the way they each look at me, I feel nothing short of beautiful and cherished, and that alone is exhilarating.

I lean back slowly, my gaze drifting toward the ceiling. My breathing becomes shallow under the weight of their four intense stares, and a blush warms my cheeks as my desire for them swells.

A sudden chill runs over my skin, followed by hands gripping my ankles, pulling me down. Then, they are everywhere, their hands and lips pressing against my fevered skin. I let my eyes drift shut, surrendering to the sensation of hands exploring my body. Hot breath skims across my skin, and lips trail down my neck with light, teasing nibbles. They move around me in a symphony of touches, trading places and caresses until pleasure is all that remains. They strip away my clothes until the cool air kisses my dripping heat.

I reach out, desperate to anchor myself by touching one of them, and my body grows taut with need. One of them grasps my legs, lifting them until my feet rest on the counter. My eyes widen in anticipation of what's to come.

I'm held in place by four pairs of hands, under the gazes of four pairs of hungry eyes. This mixture of intense pleasure and a twinge of fear is overwhelming, promising an experience beyond anything I've ever known. My heart races uncontrollably, their every move sending me spiraling further into a whirlwind of lust and desire.

Curiosity overtakes me, and I push myself up on my elbows for a better view.



Max stands to my right, his palm pressed firmly against the counter. His chest heaves with each rapid breath, and his eyes wander over my naked form. When our gazes lock, he looks at me as if I am the most precious gift in the world.

Avery, to my left, presses a series of tender kisses along my side, his tongue tracing a path up over my breast. He gently nips my nipple, his eyes closed and hands clenched in a grip of controlled passion.

I gasp, my gaze drifting down my body to where Ashton and Devlin stand. Their gazes are fixed on my core, their bodies poised as if ready to pounce. The air around us is charged with anticipation, their heat nearly overwhelming.

In silent unison, they inch closer to my most intimate area. My heart hammers against my chest, threatening to burst from the sheer intensity of the moment. A tidal wave of pleasure engulfs me as their lips meet my most sensitive part, and I teeter on the edge of release.

My head lolls back, surrendering to the depths of their exploration. Their tongues delve deeper, coaxing moans from my lips. Just when I feel like I might succumb, they pause, allowing me a fleeting moment to breathe before returning with renewed fervor.

Every touch becomes more urgent, their desire evident in their clenched jaws and unsteady hands. They expertly guide me toward blissful oblivion.

Then, they simultaneously slide a finger inside me. I glance down, catching sight of Max and Avery each lavishing attention on a nipple, but Ashton and Devlin—their mouths are entwined in a fervent, three-way kiss with my clit, and their fingers move in a harmonious rhythm, plunging in and out of me.

My entire body quivers, a crescendo of ecstasy building along my spine. The intensity is almost too much, yet I won't hold back. My hips rock instinctively against their tongues, my mind unraveling in the vortex of sensation. The pleasure, so sharp and overwhelming, propels me toward the apex of bliss.

Their hands firmly grip my hips, intensifying their tantalizing movements, driving me inexorably toward the brink. The crescendo builds until I'm lost in a torrent of ecstasy, screaming out as each wave of bliss crashes over me.

The sensations are too intense, too consuming for words. All I can do is lie here, basking in the euphoric afterglow, enveloped in a haze of pure bliss.

Gradually, as my breath steadies and my senses return, they each tenderly kiss their way up my body. Their caresses are gentle, intimate, and knowing—a soothing balm to the storm they just unleashed. Eventually, they envelop me in an embrace that feels like a return to equilibrium, a sense of rightness surrounding us all.

As my breathing normalizes, and I flutter my eyes open, four pairs of eyes gaze down at me, filled with a mix of affection and satisfaction. With the intensity of my preheat quelled, there's only one thought left in my mind. "I'm starving."

Laughter ripples through the room, a welcome reprieve from the intensity of moments ago. "Then let's feed you," Avery says, his voice warm, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

They help me sit up, their touches now light and playful, a stark contrast to the fervor that had just consumed us. Ashton offers me his hand, steadying me as I slide off the counter, my legs still trembling slightly. Each of them is attentive, ensuring I'm grounded and cared for.

Max heads to the fridge, rummaging for ingredients. "How does a late-night feast sound?" he asks, his tone casual yet considerate.

"Perfect," I reply, the normalcy of the moment grounding me, bringing a sense of domesticity to the wild passion we just shared.

Devlin wraps an arm around my waist, guiding me to a seat at the kitchen table. The comfort of his embrace lingers, a reassuring presence. "You deserve the best after that," he murmurs, a soft smile playing on his lips.

As the guys move around the kitchen, a symphony of culinary preparation unfolds before me. Pots clatter, spices are sprinkled, and the aroma of cooking food fills the air. I watch them, a contented smile spreading across my face. This juxtaposition of raw passion and tender care encapsulates everything I've come to love about them.

*Love.* Dare I allow myself to love?

## CHAPTER 23

### *Seraphina*

A **WAVE** of exhaustion crashes over me, tying my stomach in knots as I sit at the kitchen table. My body still tingles from their recent touches, yet now there's a cold, desolate feeling creeping in. I'm yearning for something elusive, something just beyond my grasp.

A soft whimper escapes my lips, and my eyes flutter shut. Dryness takes over my mouth, and a peculiar sense of dehydration sweeps through me.

"Hey." Max is quick to notice, leaning in close with concern etched on his face. He gently tilts my head toward him, his thumb and forefinger guiding my chin. "Sugarplum, you're burning up." His hand cradles my cheek, the other pressed to my forehead. "Your heat is close," he observes with a mix of worry and tenderness.

Leaning into his comforting touch, I sigh, a wave of apprehension washing over me. Do I even need to fear my heat anymore?

The snowstorm intensifies outside, the blizzard promising to blanket all of Terra with heavy snow. I realize I won't have the chance to go anywhere. The guys have already taken care of my cats, ensuring their safety. Despite the recent attack on another omega, I feel secure here, cocooned in their care and surrounded by a sense of belonging.

*I feel safe.*

Embracing the moment, I finally allow myself to surrender to all that being an omega entails, just existing in this state of

being.

As I blink and raise my gaze to Max's, I'm struck by his rugged appearance, the growth of his beard enhancing his rough, masculine allure. "We have about a day, maybe," I say, feeling sweat bead along my forehead.

In his eyes, there's a visible spark of lust, an undercurrent of excitement. This isn't just going to be my first heat, it's theirs too, and there's something profoundly right about that, as if we're poised to embark on this journey together. A part of me is filled with eager anticipation.

Max nods in understanding, then turns to address the others. Despite Devlin's status as heir and the pack being officially recognized as Pack Armana by the council, it's clear they all look to Max for guidance. This unspoken hierarchy reveals who truly leads the pack.

"Devlin, make sure dinner is ready," he instructs. To Avery, he says, "Prep food for the week. We need simple, oven-ready meals for the heat spells." He looks at Ashton, the one who doesn't cook. "Your task is to prep the nest."

"The nest?" My interest piques, and despite the heat raging within me, the urge to see this nest and claim it as mine is almost overwhelming. I have this primal urge to find it and bury my face in every blanket.

"Yes, there's a nest," Devlin confirms, stepping closer to brush a kiss on my sweaty hairline. "I'll take care of dinner." His eyes linger on me with a look of longing before he returns to the counter.

Avery is ready with his phone, his eyes on me. "Ten seconds. Name your top five meals."

I don't hesitate, the memories of the castle's incredible cooks flooding back. "Chicken pot pie, turkey with gravy, Belgian waffles with bacon and ham, braised pork, and all the pasta," I list, my mouth watering at the thought.

"Do you need more time to think?" he teases, but his thumbs are already flying over his phone's screen. "How about desserts? They are absolutely essential."

“Chocolate lava cakes,” I quickly chime in, excitement bubbling within me. “And cookies, definitely all kinds of cookies.”

“Gingerbread,” Ashton adds with a smirk. “It’s the fragrance I pick up when all our scents mix.”

That thought sends a curious flutter through my stomach. The idea that he’s considered our combined scents, that he’s thinking of us as a unit, makes me think about forever rather than just the present.

“Cinnamon buns,” Max suggests, gazing at Avery, his expression filled with an unmistakable sensuality, a look of deep interest, and excitement.

“All noted,” Avery responds, completely oblivious to Max’s intense stare. “Anything else?”

“Iced sugar cookies,” I blurt out, feeling my cheeks warm up. “They are irresistible.” Just thinking about them makes me sigh.

I feel like a bear gearing up for hibernation, needing all the calories for my heat. The way these men, this pack, are preparing for it, not just focusing on the physical aspect, stirs something profound in me.

Max scoops me up from the island, cradling me against his chest. My arms drape over his shoulder, my head resting on his chest as a comforting purr emanates from him, soothing the heat simmering within me. “Can I see the nest?” I murmur, unable to stifle a yawn.

“I’m not keeping it from you on purpose,” he explains as he carries me out of the kitchen. “I want to bathe you, feed you, and let you rest first.”

“I want to see the nest,” I repeat, the omega in me needing to know where my sanctuary is. It’s an instinct I can’t ignore.

Max chuckles softly, holding me closer as he ascends the stairs. “If we go to the nest now, you’ll be fixated on the blankets and won’t rest,” he reasons with alpha confidence. His logic is sound, but I’m not ready to admit it. “Let Ashton

freshen up the blankets and gather some from our rooms. By the time we're ready, the nest will be perfect for you."

"Don't hit me with logic," I protest playfully, nipping his neck. He pauses in the hallway, his breath hitching, his body trembling under my touch.

"Sugarplum," he growls, and it's possibly the sexiest sound I've ever heard.

In response, I gently lick the spot where I bit him.

His arms encircle me tighter, and he shakes his head as if to clear it. "Bath," he says, his voice deep and almost unrecognizable.

I relent and begin taking in our surroundings, something I hadn't had the chance to do earlier. When I first arrived, we went straight to the kitchen, drawn by the aroma of simmering cocoa. Then, my curiosity led me to the first room I stumbled upon—the library.

Now, Max takes me up a staircase to the second floor. The hallway is impressively spacious, easily double the width of a typical house's corridor. The doors are set at least ten feet apart, some even further, accentuating the mansion's grand scale.

He nudges a door open, revealing the largest bathroom I've ever seen, and gently places me on the counter between two sinks.

"Don't move," he instructs playfully, tapping my nose before turning away.

"This doesn't look like a normal-sized bathroom to me," I observe, noting its pristine condition, almost as if it's never been used, and it's massive, equaling the size of my apartment. I'd feel self-conscious about that, but I can't because it's luxurious, and I want to take advantage of it.

He responds without looking back. "That's because we designed it specifically for our future omega. It's an omega bathroom suite."

I gaze around the bathroom with newfound appreciation. The claw-foot tub is enormous, easily three times the size of a standard one, positioned in front of a floor to ceiling window that showcases an impressive snowy mountain in the distance. The ceilings vault and arch elegantly above the bathtub, adding to the room's grandeur.

On either side of the bathtub, there are two showers, each uniquely equipped. One has a different showerhead and frosted glass, while the other is clear with a built-in seat. I continue to sit on the counter, admiring a beautifully crafted mirror behind me. To my left, a large barn door leads to a separate toilet room.

On the opposite side of the bathtub, there's a luxurious couch. Another barn door is situated nearby, its purpose a mystery to me. Perhaps it leads to another restroom. The main door is directly across from where I sit.

The bathroom's decor is a crisp white and gray, a neutral palette that I appreciate since it allows for personalization. I can envision adding feminine touches, like a teal vase on the counter or matching pillows on the couch.

I force myself to look away. The thought of settling into this space every morning for makeup or dressing feels premature and almost overwhelming.

As Max selects bath salts and other fragrances from the shelves, the room fills with steam, allowing my thoughts to wander.

Our society is built on the notion of instant gratification, especially in terms of scents and fate. It's nature's fail-safe mechanism. We find a scent match and either accept or reject them. If accepted and bonded, that bite is lasting. My alphas, my deltas, will never feel attracted to another *after* I accept their bond.

Beyond this, though, nature sidesteps the usual complexities. Sure, dating and courting still occur, but not to the extent that betas experience. I remember the gammas at the castle explaining how betas date. They use apps on their



phones, choosing people based on images and profiles, with no scents involved.

It's a completely different world from ours.

I find the concept of beta dating intriguing, despite its foreignness. I've never even checked if there are dating apps for alphas and omegas.

"What's with the frown?" Max inquires, approaching me as he peels off his shirt.

"How dare you," I murmur, half joking, half serious, my usual filters crumbling as my heat draws nearer.

Max arches an eyebrow, prompting an explanation.

"Why do you have to be so tempting?" I ask, my eyes tracing the contours of his muscular torso, admiring each ridge and line. Reluctantly tearing my gaze away, I add, "I was just pondering beta dating practices."

"That's both adorable and random." He smirks, placing his hands on the counter by my thighs.

This conversation isn't going anywhere meaningful, and strangely, I find myself wanting to continue it. Yep, I'm definitely in deep.

"So betas are nulls, right?" I query as he lifts me effortlessly and heads toward the bathtub.

"Betas are indeed an interesting anomaly," he replies, setting me down gently and turning off the water.

I test the water with my hands—it's the perfect temperature. As I step in, I look up at Max. "Join me?"

His eyes gleam with a mix of lust and restraint. "If that's what you want."

"Oh, I do," I confirm, sinking into the spacious tub with a contented sigh. It's designed for a pack, not just one person, I realize.

As I settle in, I watch Max unbuckle his belt, finding the action inexplicably alluring. He unbuttons his jeans, and I

can't help but stare, fascinated. His zipper lowers, and I follow the movement with my eyes.

His scent fills the room—a heady mix of dark amber with a hint of sweetness.

His jeans join his shirt on the floor.

I've watched more than my share of salacious videos, but seeing Max's knot in person is an entirely new experience. My fingers itch with the desire to reach out and explore.

Max's physique is imposing, particularly his prominent erection and the sizable knot at its base. It's almost overwhelming.

“You really shouldn't look at me like that, sugarplum,” he says, his voice deep and rough. He steps into the tub, his muscular thighs displacing the water. “I'm trying to maintain some decorum here, so maybe we could discuss something other than what your eyes are clearly suggesting.”

“And what might that be?” I tease, fully aware of the message my gaze is conveying. *Knot. Knot. Knot.*

Instead of responding directly, Max just arches an eyebrow and launches into an explanation. “As I mentioned, betas are quite the anomaly,” he starts, slipping into his scientific mode, which I find endearingly attractive. “They share our DNA yet lack certain characteristics. Fascinating, isn't it?”

“You're the scientist,” I reply, playfully splashing water at him, which earns me one of his alpha looks. My feet rest comfortably against his legs.

“Yes, I am,” he replies, a serious undertone in his voice that reminds me of our first meeting. “Many assume betas don't have scent glands, but my research suggests otherwise.”

“Do you think the council's reluctance to collaborate with beta scientists has limited our understanding of our heritage and evolution?” I muse, tilting my head back to wet my hair.

“Absolutely,” he responds confidently, his demeanor shifting from aroused alpha to passionate nerd, a transformation I find equally appealing. “I've worked

extensively with beta scientists. The council's long held belief was that betas couldn't reproduce without an omega. That's been proven false."

"Really?" I inquire, intrigued.

His excitement is tangible. "Yes. Betas have the same reproductive systems as us," he explains, pausing for my nod of understanding. "We thought they lacked certain hormones, but it's not that simple. It's the hormone levels that define our designations. That's why, under the right circumstances, a gamma can transition into an omega despite being born a gamma."

"What's the situation with male gammas?" I ask, curious about his insights.

"They don't have an internal uterus, so they remain solely as gammas," Max explains with a hint of sadness, then he quickly regains his enthusiasm. "For so long, the council believed that betas couldn't conceive, but why do they think that?"

I nod, recalling my biology classes. "They always taught us that only omegas can bear children."

"Actually, beta women can get pregnant," he corrects me, "but the catch is they can only conceive with beta males. Our previous misconceptions were based on attempts by alphas to impregnate beta women."

"That would explain why their population is burgeoning, almost outnumbering ours," I muse, a fact the previous administration lied about. I remember them explicitly stating how impossible it is for betas to reproduce without an omega.

Everything I learned is a lie.

"Exactly. In the Northern Province, this is well known. It's just the rest of the world that lags in this understanding," he says, playfully splashing some water. "And I've found out that betas do have scents, just not like ours. They have what they call sweat glands."

"You're really passionate about this research, aren't you?" I tease, sliding my foot along his thigh.

“I’m passionate about research in general,” he admits with a smile. “Learning about our designations has been fascinating. The council tries to make us believe we’re entirely different species, but we’re not.”

“What about mages?” I inquire, intrigued. “They are different enough to manipulate energy.”

Max becomes animated. “Mages are a whole other level of intriguing. I haven’t had the chance to study one directly in a lab setting, but they invited me to their island multiple times. While I can’t speak to their male anatomy, their culture is something I’ve observed closely.”

“Will you tell me more about mages?” I ask, my curiosity piqued. Mages are a fascinating, rare breed, capable of wielding magic and healing our race.

Max nods, a smirk playing on his lips. “Before the great war, they believed only three designations existed. However, the isles and mages are millennia old,” he shares. “Their culture is rich with history, serving as healers throughout time. Their records are the oldest in all of Terra, predating even the great war. During times of conflict on the mainland, they shrouded their island in fog, remaining hidden. They even hold knowledge of the first civilizations.”

“The first civilizations?” I frown, my face crinkling in curiosity.

“Yes, a time when betas solely inhabited Terra,” he whispers, as if revealing a secret.

“How did you learn all this?” I ask, knowing Max’s intelligence surpasses most. He’s probably the smartest alpha I’ve ever met.

A blush creeps onto his face, and he clears his throat, looking away momentarily. “Well, I had a... um...”

“A fling with a mage?” I guess, half teasing.

“I did,” he admits, shifting uneasily in the bath and causing water to spill over the edge. “She was a wonderful woman, different from you, of course.”

“Max, it’s okay,” I assure him, placing a comforting hand on his thigh. “That was before me.”

He pulls me toward him, settling me onto his lap. “Before Seraphina, I like that,” he murmurs, leaning in for a gentle kiss.

“Please, tell me more,” I whisper, resting my head on his chest, gazing out the window at the blizzard engulfing the world.

As his hands softly trace up and down my back, he continues, “Sheena was an intriguing woman full of magic. She didn’t reveal all their secrets, but she showed me their ancient cities beneath the volcano. An entire hidden world lies underneath the isles. She spoke of ancient betas fighting to the point of almost annihilating themselves, resetting timelines over and over.”

“Did the mages survive all that?” I ask, fascinated.

“Somehow, yes,” he confirms, kissing my temple. I internally nickname these baby kisses and crave more. “They documented everything. They only venture into our world when they deem it safe.”

“So are they all betas then?” I ask, captivated by the mystery of mages.

Max pauses, considering my question. “Anatomically, yes, they resemble betas, but they have traits of omegas, alphas, and betas, yet simultaneously, they are distinct from all these designations. They are an enigma that even I struggle to fully comprehend.”

“You just need the right mage to let you study them,” I suggest with a yawn, feeling the warmth of the bath soothing me.

He sighs softly, a hint of resignation in his voice. “I’m afraid that opportunity might not come in my lifetime, and that’s okay. Perhaps it’s a task meant for a future scientist, one who hasn’t yet emerged.”

We settle into a comfortable silence, the water gradually losing its warmth. In the tranquility of the bath, with Max’s

stories echoing in my thoughts, we simply exist. I feel a profound sense of peace and connection with him. His stories aren't just tales, they are windows into his soul, revealing a man who's deeply passionate about knowledge and understanding—a side of him that's both endlessly fascinating and incredibly attractive.

## CHAPTER 24

### *Seraphina*

A COCOON of heat envelops me, almost to the point of feeling like my insides are simmering. I'd love to claim that this cozy heat rouses me from sleep, but that's not the case. It's the urgent call of nature, insistently pressing me to rise before I inadvertently create a messy situation.

As consciousness seeps back, I become aware of a deep, rumbling purr behind me. Its soothing vibration almost lulls me back into slumber. Groggily, I blink my eyes open, gazing up at the rustic wood slats above. Stretching languidly, I recall fragments of the previous night—a relaxing bath, Max's gentle care as he wrapped me up, fed me while I drifted in and out of sleep, and finally brought me to this cozy retreat when he sensed I was too drowsy to protest.

Realization dawns. I'm lying in the haven they constructed for their omega. A thrill of excitement pulses through me. Is it so wrong to fantasize about being the official inhabitant of this sanctuary and to imagine that Max, Devlin, Avery, and Ashton are entirely mine?

*Not wrong at all.* Deep down, I know that if they ask me to be their omega, I'll accept without an ounce of hesitation.

Above, the slats converge in a way that obscures my view. Twinkle lights, now dormant in the daylight, wind around each beam. The only indication of morning is the soft, hazy sunlight filtering through the panes flanking the special corner.

Sitting up a bit, I take in the sight of Max on one side, and Avery on the other, both totally zonked out. Their peaceful

breathing adds to the calm atmosphere, while outside, the wind howls against the windows, a wild contrast to our serene little bubble.

This nest is more intimate than the bedrooms. My only comparison is a brief glimpse of the guest room, but this feels about half that size. It's like we're in a cozy attic, with the wind playing its symphony against the house. The room's lined with windows, giving it an airy feel, and I can just spot a cute little railing and a sitting area.

The floor is like a huge, fluffy mattress, the softest thing ever. In one corner is a pile of blankets—Ashton's picks—all in soothing, warm tones. There aren't any bright colors, but I'm already planning to sprinkle in loads of green as soon as I can.

Glancing at the two guys, I nibble on my lip, feeling torn. I really need to hit the bathroom, but leaving them feels tough. Deciding to listen to my body, I carefully ease out from between them. Max's arm does a quick cling before letting go, and Avery is just a curled up bundle facing the wall. I sneak out, stepping over their limbs like I'm in stealth mode, caught between the desire to stay or go to the bathroom.

Stepping out of the nest, I find myself in a spacious attic area. It's mostly empty but nicely finished—like they focused all their attention on the nest and left the rest as a blank canvas. I can't help but imagine all the decorating possibilities. The space is long, with steps at the far end near another door. The ceilings aren't vaulted, but they are high enough that the guys won't have to duck while walking around.

I'm thinking a cozy seating area would be great here, maybe with a TV and a gaming console. Oh, and a snack fridge—definitely a must-have.

I tiptoe across the room and open the door to a simple bathroom. After a quick pit stop, I step out and grip the railing, looking down the twisting staircase to the next floor.

I descend step by step, not quite sure where I am in the house, so I wander to the end of the hall. There's a railing



overlooking the living room below. The TV is on mute with Sawyer on the screen, clutching her hat and battling the wind.

I head down into the living room, which is empty. Drawn to the huge windows overlooking the outside, I take in the view. It's like a scene from a fantasy—no mountains in sight, just endless snow. The snow drifts are piled high, creating a dazzling white landscape that's almost blinding.

Blinking against the bright sun, I let the curtains fall back and glance at the TV. Someone left the remote out. I pick it up, turning the volume up just a bit. Sawyer is smiling into the camera, her voice struggling against the wind. "I suggest you all find warmth as the snow keeps falling. It's not stopping anytime soon, and some residents reported three feet of snow. Consider this your cue to hunker down in a nest or even just your bed. This is Sawyer, signing off to find my own cozy spot." The screen switches to another reporter, and I turn the volume back down.

My stomach lets out a rumble, so I head to the kitchen. The moment I step in, the rich aroma of coffee wraps around me. Like a caffeine craving zombie, I yawn and shuffle toward the beckoning pot of liquid gold. It's eerily quiet in the house, which feels a bit odd.

I almost don't know what to do with myself. Almost. After jazzing up my breakfast, I leave the kitchen through a different door, eager to shower some love on my pets. I can't shake the feeling that I've been neglecting them a bit.

As I step onto the landing, a soft moan drifts down the hallway, freezing me in my tracks. I tilt my head and hold my breath, not daring to move.

There it is again, another low, soft moan.

Nibbling on the inside of my cheek, I briefly wonder if I'm about to intrude, but that thought lasts all of two and a half seconds before I think, *Screw it*. They invited me into their nest, after all. I'm curious to see what they are watching.

It has to be either Devlin or Ashton, and I'm about to catch one of them in the act of watching something... spicy.

I wait, listening for another moan to pinpoint its source. It's coming from downstairs.

Pivoting on my heel, I tiptoe back down the steps, pausing every few moments to listen for another telltale sound, following the trail. The door to the basement is ajar, the lights dim, and there's a noticeable chill in the air.

*Dare I?*

The steps themselves are split at the halfway mark, pausing at a larger step before twisting and descending the rest of the way in a different direction. Instead of just popping around the corner, I peer around it and look at the television. Off.

Another moan, louder this time, reaches my ears, followed by a string of harsh murmurs. From here, the scent of arousal is almost tangible—musky but not as distinct as it could be.

*Get closer*, my internal temptress whispers, urging me to venture farther and fully capture the scent. Why am I so intent on busting them?

For a moment, I hesitate on the stairs, feeling a mix of uncertainty and intrigue, but then another soft moan seals my decision.

I quietly descend the next set of steps and peer around the corner. Nothing. The pool room is dark, and the sofa is empty. Strange.

I slip into the entertainment room. The snow outside is piled even higher against the glass door than upstairs, but I dismiss it, creeping along the wall until the row of storefronts comes into view. Most are dark—except for Devlin's.

The light is on, and through the glass front, I can just make out his shadow. I hadn't expected Devlin to be the one watching porn.

I step out for a clearer view, but what I see isn't what I expected. There isn't porn on the television, but the scene unfolding could very well be one.

I quickly duck back, setting my coffee on an end table. Closing my eyes, I struggle to calm my racing heart. I should leave, go back upstairs, and maybe distract myself with my cats and some catnip, but I can't.

Peering around the corner again, because I need to confirm what I saw—for research purposes, of course—I look into Devlin's cigar shop. Despite the light haze of smoke, it's clear that there are two bodies moving together.

I can't believe it. They never hinted at being into each other aside from them last night, but it's silly of me to think they wouldn't be into each other. Then again, Devlin had all those pictures on his phone. I nibble my cheek, not upset, just surprised. Most packs do form bonds before an omega joins them, often turning to each other for sexual release.

I'm aroused, my own sweet scent intensifying. If they were to come out now, they'd know I was here, so why not get a better look, right?

I lean out a bit more for a clearer view, just as another low moan—unmistakably Ashton's—fills the air.

In Devlin's den, Ashton is bent over a coffee table with his cheek pressed against the wood, his mouth open in bliss and eyes shut tight. Behind him, Devlin is holding his head down, moving slowly, intimately.

Slick pours from me.

I slam back against the wall, just out of view of them. My heart thunders in my ears, momentarily drowning out their sounds of pleasure. I squeeze my thighs shut, because one whiff of me, and they'll know.

*Would that be so bad?*

My eyes snap open as a thought strikes me. Would it be so bad to watch? I'm not sure. Yes, I want them all, but this is their moment, a private exchange. I'm the intruder here.

I swallow hard, my gaze fixed on the pristine white wall, so clean and unblemished. Why am I focusing on the wall? Because Ashton's growl echoes through the space, resonating

deep within me, sending vibrations right to my core. I can almost feel the hum along my skin.

*One more look*, I tell myself.

I peer over the edge again, taking a step to get a better view inside Devlin's space. From here, I can see around the corner. Devlin's shop front is the first, his door directly in my line of sight.

Feeling a mix of audacity and guilt, I slink to the floor and crawl toward the door. I'm not proud of my actions.

Staying low, I finally reach the door and peer through the glass. I know I should have left, should have run while I had the chance.

My mouth goes dry with arousal as I watch them. They are captivating in their rawness. Devlin still has Ashton bent over the coffee table, but now he's pulled Ashton up against his chest, his hand wrapped around his throat.

Their skin glistens with sweat, their expressions filled with unbridled passion. Devlin's lips move against Ashton's ear, and I'm dying to know what he's whispering. Ashton moans, his eyes squeezed shut, as Devlin moves again.

I didn't know what to expect from an alpha rut, and maybe this isn't it. Maybe it's just them being them. Devlin's hips roll slowly, and Ashton...

I bite my fist to stifle a gasp as he takes himself in hand, moving slowly. I had almost forgotten about the barbs.

Alphas have a single knot at their base, but deltas—it's like nature took that knot and scattered it in smaller pieces along a delta's length. My first time with Avery was a surprise, and I didn't get a good look then.

Now, as a voyeur to my deepest desires, I watch Ashton's head dip down. His gaze locked on his own movements. Devlin's hand joins his, as he whispers again in his ear, and I'm desperate to hear their words.

I glance at the doorknob, tempted, but it's a risk I'm not ready to take. Turning back to them, I freeze—they are staring

right at me.

Panic and arousal collide as I kneel at the door. Their eyes are full of lust, their breaths ragged. Ashton's gaze glazes over, drool trailing from his lip, and as he climaxes, I swear I feel it too. Behind him, Devlin cries out, his own release marking the culmination of their passion.

My body twitches, a small but unexpected orgasm rolling through me. I didn't even know that was possible.

In the quiet morning hours, we're all frozen, caught in a mutual gaze, coming down from the high. This relationship is new, uncharted territory for all of us, and none of us seems confident enough to speak about what just happened.

Or so I thought.

Devlin smirks at me, a clear sign that I'm about to be in deep trouble. He gently pushes Ashton back down onto the coffee table, whispering something to him, then pulls away. His arousal is evident, wet and glistening.

He stalks toward me, his eyes dark with lust. I swallow my own rising desire as he swings the door open, his gaze intense.

"Sit in the chair," he commands, his voice rough, laced with an unexpected authority.

Licking my lips, I rise and walk to the recliner, the scent of sweet tobacco enveloping me. As I collapse into the chair, Devlin purrs with satisfaction, turning back to Ashton. He leans in, whispering loudly enough for me to hear.

"We have an audience, Ashton," he says, gripping Ashton's hair, eliciting a strained response from him. The evidence of his recent climax still visible.

The sight is raw, dirty, and undeniably sexy, especially as Ashton moans when Devlin positions himself behind him again.

"You want to watch?" Devlin's voice is hard, a stark contrast to the softer side I've known. "Maybe we should give you a show."

There's a newfound hardness in Devlin, a contrast to his usual gentle demeanor, and Ashton, under Devlin's touch, seems lost in a sensual haze, his eyes heavy with desire.

Devlin whispers something in Ashton's ear, then they both turn their gazes on me. I swallow hard, wondering what I've gotten myself into.

They approach me, a predatory look in their eyes. The omega inside me stirs with interest, not fear, as my arousal builds.

"Take off those sexy little shorts, Seraphina," Devlin commands. Ashton kneels before me, his warm hands gliding up my calves to my thighs, helping me remove my shorts. Then, without a word, he helps me take off my cami.

"Sit back," Devlin orders.

I couldn't resist him even if I wanted to. I lean back in the chair, my heart racing as they continue to stare.

"Legs up and over the arms," Devlin growls, his pupils dilated, the color in his irises swallowed by desire.

I hesitate for a split second, earning a raised eyebrow from Devlin. Throwing caution to the wind, I lift my legs and drape them over the arms of the chair. I'm exposed, vulnerable, and dripping with arousal, but I'm safe.

Devlin purrs, a sound that reverberates with raw desire, as he runs his fingers through Ashton's dark, curly hair. "You're going to make our omega come while I fuck your tight ass," he declares, his voice a sultry blend of command and promise.

Ashton and I both let out involuntary whimpers, the air charged with erotic tension.

Ashton crawls toward me, his breath a warm caress over my sensitive skin.

"I want to taste her," Devlin instructs with an authoritative edge. "Lick her pussy then kiss me."

Ashton shoots me a smirk, filled with wicked intent, before his tongue traces a slow, tantalizing path from the bottom of

my slit to the top. Devlin, not content to merely observe, pulls him back for a deep, possessive kiss.

My arousal intensifies, my body responding with instinctual need. Their kiss, fervent and consuming, sends waves of slick desire coursing from me. As they break apart, lingering in each other's scent, I momentarily feel like an outsider to their intense connection.

"Absolutely delicious," Devlin whispers against Ashton's lips, his words laced with carnal appreciation.

Their gazes shift to me, full of predatory hunger. Devlin directs Ashton's face back to my core, growling, "If you want to come again, I suggest you catch her up." His voice is rough, laden with lust. "Three orgasms, Ashton. I want her soaking my chair."

As Ashton's warm tongue explores me once more, I reach out, my fingers entwined in his hair, anchoring him to my aching center. Devlin, clearly pleased, purrs his approval, then returns to Ashton, his hand caressing down his spine before firmly gripping and parting him.

"I love watching my cum spill out of you," Devlin murmurs, a note of possessive pride in his voice as he aligns himself once again.

With a single, powerful thrust, he enters Ashton, eliciting a low moan from the delta. A sharp slap to Ashton's ass is a reminder from Devlin to return to me, and Ashton's mouth returns to its devoted task, his tongue a relentless force driving me toward ecstasy.

Devlin's movements, vigorous and unyielding, and the sound of their bodies meeting, the wet, primal noises, all serve to accelerate my impending climax. "Fuck her with your fingers," Devlin commands, and Ashton, ever obedient, balances himself to comply, his fingers delving deep into me.

I moan out loud, my scent rich with pheromones, enveloping them in my desire.

"Fuck," Devlin groans, inhaling deeply before resuming his fervent pace.

My release is instantaneous and overwhelming. Ashton drinks in every drop of my slick, his own desire palpable.

Wrapped in a haze of pleasure, we lose ourselves to the sensations. My body is alight with fiery heat, teetering on the edge of an impending heat cycle. I surrender to the rhythm of their bodies, the wet sounds of intimacy, and the symphony of moans until we all reach a shared crescendo.

Devlin leans over Ashton, gripping him tightly. “One more. Give me one more orgasm. Come with me. Come with me,” he begs, his voice thick with urgent need.

As Ashton’s mouth finds my clit, his tongue working in fervent devotion, he gently slides another finger into me. The sensation is overwhelming, sending a surge of ecstasy through my body. It’s like a rush of stars exploding behind my eyes.

I grip his hair, instinctively riding the waves of pleasure his skilled mouth and fingers provide. He hums into me, the vibration mingling with my own release, amplifying the sensation to an almost unbearable intensity.

As the crest of the high ebbs, my body relaxes, collapsing into a state of satiated exhaustion. My skin is ablaze with a lingering heat, a telltale sign. My heat cycle is drawing near, the intensity of this encounter only a prelude to the heat that awaits.

In the aftermath, as Ashton slowly pulls away, I’m left panting, my heart racing like a drum in my chest. He sits back on his heels, his eyes still dark with unspent desire, but there’s a softness there too, a caring that sends a warm flutter through my exhausted body.

Devlin, meanwhile, watches us both, his breathing now steady, the predatory look in his eyes softening to something more tender. He steps closer, his fingers gently brushing away a strand of hair sticking to my forehead. There’s a quiet understanding in his touch, a silent acknowledgment of the passion we just shared.

The room is still, save for the soft hum of our breathing. It feels like we’re suspended in time, in a bubble of our own



making. I glance between them, seeing the same heat I feel reflected in their eyes. It's a connection, raw and undeniable.

With a shaky exhale, I sit up in the chair, my limbs feeling like jelly. "I think I need a moment," I whisper, my voice barely above a breath. They nod, understanding without words the tumultuous storm of sensations coursing through me.

Ashton offers me a gentle smile, reaching out to squeeze my hand, a silent promise of support. Devlin, ever the protective alpha, stays close, his presence a comforting shield.

I lean back, closing my eyes, feeling the last remnants of my climax fade away. My mind drifts, floating on the edge of consciousness, and I know I'm on the brink of something profound. This isn't just physical, it's the beginning of a bond that transcends the body. As I drift off into a light, exhausted sleep, I can't help but wonder what this means for us and our future.

In this quiet, shared space, as the first whispers of my heat linger in the air, I realize I'm exactly where I need to be—with them. In this moment, everything else fades away, leaving only the certainty of our connection.

*Seraphina*

THE LOOMING THREAT of my heat sends everyone into a flurry of action—well, the guys, at least. I’m actually enjoying watching them scurry around while I lounge in the library window, a book in one hand and a cup of hot cocoa in the other. I don’t see anything wrong with that, honestly. Avery even went as far as to open up the spare room, which, I’ve come to realize, they designated as the omega bedroom. It wasn’t ever a spare.

He pointed it out to me, but I never ventured inside. Here I am, sitting comfortably, my cocoa nearly finished, and curiosity is gnawing at me. It’s not just any bedroom—it’s the one with the special omega ensuite.

Minnow, my adorably sweet orange fur baby, hops onto the seat beside me, purring contentedly. Oblivious to the concept of personal space, he clambers over my outstretched legs and settles snugly in my lap, his amber eyes gleaming up at me expectantly.

“How did you sneak out?” I ask, scratching him behind the ear. “Honestly, I’m surprised it took you this long.” I converse with him as if he’s a person because, to me, he sort of is. Though, truth be told, it’s usually Tuna who’s the master escape artist.

I sigh, glancing up at the open door, half expecting to see some of my other babies making an escape attempt. There’s a hint of disappointment within me. Max installed automatic food dispensers for each of them, which is convenient, since I

don't have to set reminders to feed them anymore. However, I miss my little companions.

Minnow wriggles closer, snuggling under my arm, nearly causing me to spill the last of my cocoa. I quickly gulp it down and set the cup aside. Hugging my mischievous orange friend to my chest, I slide off the seat. I can't see much out of the window, but I'm secretly hoping Max keeps his promise about sledding later—the hill outside looks perfect for it.

With a soft meow, Minnow expresses his reluctance as I stand up and head toward the hall. The house has a mostly standard layout, just on a grander scale. The staircase in the foyer splits, leading to the second floor from the front of the house. Another staircase, on the opposite side, leads to the same upstairs hallway, but from a different direction.

I take the nearest one, the one in the living room with the vaulted ceilings and open space at the top.

Minnow snuggles in like a tiny baby, already snoring softly, as I make my way down the hall. My heart does a little skip as I approach the door to the bedroom specifically created for their future omega.

It's a known fact that about half of the registered packs have these special suites, while the other half, perhaps without the hope or expectation of an omega, never bother to set them up. Considering Devlin is an heir, it's no surprise this pack has one. Still, that doesn't lessen the flutter of anxiety as I stand here.

Omega suites are unique, each infused with little touches from the respective pack. They often include items that hold value to them, like shirts bearing their scents. I remember reading an article where a pack even placed their baby blankets in the suite. Strange to me, sure, but who am I to judge?

Creating an omega suite without knowing the omega and their preferences is a challenge. My gamma teachers often preached that a scent match guarantees the omega will adore whatever is created.

Calling that belief bullshit has always been my stance. I see myself as an independent woman, an individual with unique tastes all my own. The notion that fate should dictate my preferences, particularly in the context of bonding with a pack, strikes me as absurd. Thus, the concept that this room contains elements crafted for a future woman or man whom they have never met seems like nothing more than a load of fated nonsense.

*Just open the door, Seraphina.*

My palms are sweaty as I reach for the handle, my heart pounding in anticipation. The door swings open smoothly on well-oiled hinges, and a wave of nerves washes over me as I take in the room for the first time.

I'm torn between tears and speechlessness. It's perfect. The first thing that catches my eye is the lighting. Dominating the center of the room is a huge light fixture reminiscent of mage lights. The globe emits a soft, ambient glow, encapsulated in a cream outer layer that makes it resemble a muted sun.

Directly ahead is a wall of windows, framed by vaulted ceilings. An arched glass door leads to a snow-covered balcony, inviting in natural light that complements the artificial one. My gaze lands on the bed to the left. They decorated one wall with dark, warm gray wallpaper, creating a cozy backdrop for the low king-sized bed covered in cream and neutral blankets. A rustic wooden headboard contrasts beautifully with the gray, flanked by matching end tables.

At the foot of the bed is a small bench seat, where I gently place Minnow. I look at a huge knot blanket at the end of the bed. Leaning down, I inhale deeply, recognizing Ashton's scent. My fingers glide over the soft, light gray fibers, and I know he made this.

Curious, I approach an end table, picking up a little bear figurine. My fingers trace its aged design, and I instantly know this is from Max.

I set it back down and open the drawer, bursting into laughter at the sight of an array of sex toys, all thankfully still

in their boxes. Classic Avery.

Turning around, I take in the seating area on the right side of the room. They mounted a television on the far wall before a curved couch similar to the one in the entertainment room. A coffee table and a small coffee bar complete the room's furnishings.

Naturally, I'm drawn straight to the coffee bar. The labels read, "Knotty Things," on every coffee package. I pick up a disposable cup, examining it. *Devlin Armana*. I can't help but laugh. "You sly devil, Devlin. You own the bakery?" It suddenly makes sense why Max seemed so at home there. By pack rights, he owns it.

Shaking my head in mild disbelief, I set the cup down, and my curiosity leads me to the bathroom. Instead of heading into the ensuite, though, I open the door to the right of the couch and step inside.

It's not another bathroom, but a fully stocked closet. My heart races as I reach for the nearest sweater on a shelf. Stocking a closet for an omega isn't easy. We tend to have a similar build—wide, expressive eyes, a curvy figure with a small waist, and a short stature—but I'm a bit more on the curvy side, mainly because I refuse to conform to strict diets. No thank you.

Buying clothes for an omega you haven't met is definitely a gamble. Curiously, I check the size on the tag of the sweater—medium. Clutching it to my chest, I close my eyes, taking deep breaths through my mouth.

Not only is it my size, but it's also an oversized sweater. I know it'll fit just the way I like. I've always thought of sweaters as wearable blankets. They need to be cozy and comfortable, not restrictive.

"It was always you, Seraphina," Avery whispers from the doorway.

I blink, but a tear escapes anyway, my emotions heightened as my heat draws nearer. "How?" I choke out.

“The first day I saw you, I started preparing this room,” he says, stepping inside with bare feet. Gently, he takes the sweater from my fingers, folds it neatly, and places it back on the shelf. “Do you want to know the first thing I bought?”

“If you say silk pajamas, we’re going to have issues,” I say, swiping at my tears. I’m still clad in Ashton’s shirt, the one Devlin ripped off earlier, and nothing else. I haven’t been able to part with it. As I turn around, my duffle bag catches my eye, a stark reminder that *they* crafted this space, this reality, with me in mind.

“No.” He shakes his head, guiding me toward the vanity at the end of the room. While shelves and hangers line two opposite walls, with a bench seat in the center, it’s the area at the end he directs me to. “The mirror,” he says, leading me to stand in front of it.

The mirror spans the entire wall. With the press of a button, he turns on the lights set within it, brightening the room and highlighting every imperfection on my skin. “A mirror?” I question, looking over my shoulder at Avery, who steps up behind me, wrapping an arm around me and resting his chin on my shoulder, preventing me from turning away from my reflection.

“You looked so sad that day, almost broken,” he whispers, his voice barely audible. I’m not sure which day he’s referring to. “When I caught your scent, and it blended with mine, my heart jolted. I knew then you were a perfect match. Even in your sadness, you were beautiful. I made a promise to myself that if you ever became mine, I would show you just how beautiful you truly are.”

“Beauty always felt... strange to me,” I whisper, turning back to our reflection in the mirror. Next to Avery, I appear so much smaller, delicate, and somehow beautiful. In his presence, I feel like the omega that I am.

“How so?” he asks, brushing my hair off my neck.

I shrug, jostling him slightly, and avert my gaze from our reflection. “Beauty isn’t just what you see. It’s in how you treat others, in empathy and pain. It’s in how you treat those

who are more vulnerable than you. Not just the words you speak to others, but also the words you speak to yourself.”

“You don’t see the beauty of who you are, do you, Seraphina?” Avery’s question lingers in the air, a soft yet piercing inquiry that seems to echo around us. I feel his gaze on me, intense and searching, as if he’s trying to unravel the layers of self-doubt and apprehension that I’ve wrapped myself in. “You don’t see the beauty of who you are, do you, Seraphina?” he repeats, his voice a gentle nudge, urging me to see myself through his eyes.

I meet Avery’s earnest gaze in the mirror, feeling my heart flutter. “It’s hard,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. Tears well in my eyes. “Thea is beautiful, maybe even more than me, but inside? She’s rotten, broken. There’s nothing in her worth salvaging.”

“You are perfect, Seraphina.” Avery gently tilts my chin, urging me to face my reflection. “Do you want to know who I see when I look in the mirror?”

I hesitate, fear gripping me. What if his words hurt? But I nod, my curiosity too strong. “It’s hard to see what you see,” I confess. “I’ve always been in the background, unnoticed. Being told I’m beautiful, it’s... overwhelming.”

Avery’s grip tightens, a reassuring anchor. “But Seraphina, you’re more than what meets the eye. You’re strong and resilient. Your spirit shines like a beacon. You’ve weathered storms, yet you glow. That’s your beauty. It’s not just your appearance, it’s your courage, your kindness, and your fiery spirit.”

His words envelop me, warm and comforting, seeping into the crevices of my self-doubt, filling them with a budding sense of belonging.

“And that’s why?” he continues, his voice a steady hum. “When I saw you, I didn’t just see an omega. I saw someone extraordinary, a challenger, a partner... my equal. You’re not just any omega, Seraphina, you’re my omega. This room, this house, it’s not just for any omega—it’s a home for you.”

A soft hiccup escapes me, the salty taste of tears on my lips.

“I won’t lie, I find you incredibly attractive,” Avery admits, his other arm encircling my waist and pulling me closer. “I adore every curve, every smile, every sassy word you utter, but it’s deeper than that. I feel the love you have for your brother and see it in how you speak of him. I see it in the way you treat animals as though they are humans. You’re like a princess from a fairy tale. I half expect a bird to perch on your shoulder one day,” he says, kissing my shoulder softly. “Your heart resonates with others’ pain. You stand up for yourself and set a precedent for other omegas in this world. I’m incredibly proud of you. You feel with your soul, and it touches everyone around you.” He places his hand over my heart, and my eyes well with fresh tears. “You’re not defined by what you can do for a pack. You’re more than the sum of your actions. I see you, Seraphina. You love to bake, adore cats and animals, and find joy in the clouds. When alone, you dance with the freedom of the wind. Above all, you love unconditionally and spread that love as if it’s your purpose.”

Each word Avery speaks is a caress to my heart, resonating with every self-doubt and belief I’ve held about myself, about being an omega, and especially about the deep-seated love I nurture for him.

I pivot in his arms, and his gaze, intense and piercing, seems to see right through me. His touch is a constant, comforting presence as I lift my hands and gently cup his face. My lips part, ready to reflect the love he just poured out.

“Don’t do that,” he whispers, his breath warm against my skin as he leans in for a soft, tender kiss before pulling back slightly.

“Do what?” My voice is a mere whisper, laced with the scent of his cologne, a mix of wood and spice that’s become so familiar.

“Don’t just echo my words,” he replies, his eyes searching mine. “You owe me nothing. Just accept my words and let them sink in. Feeling your love is all the reciprocation I need.”



He gently places my hand over his heart. “I feel that right here, my love.”

Tears brim in my eyes, blurring his image as I stand on my tiptoes, pressing a kiss to his lips. His taste is a mix of coffee and something uniquely Avery. “I like that,” I whisper as I settle back onto my heels.

“Hmm?” His hands, strong yet gentle, flex on my hips, drawing me closer. The coolness of his palms contrasts with my flushed skin.

“You called me my love. I liked it,” I say, my smile growing wider, my heart fluttering at the endearment.

“I liked it too,” he murmurs, leaning down to capture my lips again. He suddenly recoils with a surprised squeak. “What the—”

“Finley!” My voice rises in surprise as I bend to pick up my mischievous tuxedo cat, whose fur brushes softly against my skin. I cradle him to my chest, feeling his purring vibrations. I glance at Avery, who’s rubbing his calf. “Did he bite you?”

“Yeah,” he grumbles, lifting his pant leg to reveal a red mark, the skin slightly swollen.

“Finley,” I chide, turning to my cat. His fur is silky under my fingers, and he responds with a contented purr, his paw gently tapping my cheek. “Don’t you act all cute now, you little rascal.”

*Meow.*

“Oh no, you don’t,” I say, wrinkling my nose in understanding. Finley only acts out when he’s hungry. “Did your food bowl not go off?”

“Is he hangry?” Avery asks, a chuckle in his voice.

“Yes,” I admit, looking up at him apologetically. “I’m so sorry.”

“A cockblocking cat,” he remarks with a grin, reaching out to scratch behind Finley’s ear. “That tracks.”

I hide my smile in Finley's thick fur as I step out of the closet. "You naughty kitty," I scold lightly, though my tone betrays my amusement.

Finley, utterly unfazed by the situation, just purrs happily in my arms, the vibration a comforting hum against my chest. His sleek fur reminds me of the simple joy and unconditional love pets bring, even in the most unexpected moments.

## CHAPTER 26

### *Berlin*

“THOUGHTS?” Ashton asks, pulling his gloves tighter, as if trying to ward off the blizzard’s chill.

“I don’t like it,” I reply, crouching down and pulling off my gloves to examine a singular track before us. It’s as if someone stood here and then vanished, teleported away—which is impossible. “Only mages can teleport, and not without a cost.”

Surveying the endless snow around us, I recall how our alarms had gone off at the edge of our property. We missed it, being otherwise engaged. I don’t regret what transpired between us this morning. It was more than overdue.

Fate, it seems, has its own games. Just as we finally gave in to our desires, someone triggered our alarms at the property’s edge. Worse yet, Ashton and I haven’t discussed what happened between us. We’ve been apart for so long, the twins only getting back a mere week ago, and he left with things between us strained.

I stayed here, apart from the pack.

Ashton came down, reeking of Seraphina, and I just... lost myself. Some might call it a frenzy, others a rut. To me, it was pent-up desire. In that moment, I needed him, and that became my sole focus. After our encounter, Ashton went to check the office because something had triggered the security camera. Now, here we are.

“The only explanation I can think of is that they stood here and then walked away, but that doesn’t make sense either,” he

grumbles, walking in a circle, leaving a hole in the snow already two feet deep. It's falling hard and fast. "If it weren't for the cameras, we wouldn't even know this track existed."

That's the crux of it. Our estate backs up to the mountains. In front of me, the Omega Mountains rise from the ground like looming sentinels. The thick tree trunks obscure the view beyond ten feet, providing a perfect hiding spot for anyone brave enough to approach from that direction. It's rare, given the treacherous nature of the mountain range, with valleys and dips that seem to emerge from nowhere. Many believe the mountains are alive, shifting and creating new paths to fool unsuspecting hikers during the night. Many have lost their lives here.

Someone approaching our estate from the mountains isn't impossible, but it's highly improbable.

"Did you check the security camera?" I ask Ashton.

He scoffs, a hint of frustration in his tone. "Complete whiteout. It's all white," he replies, shaking his head with a shudder as the chill of the blizzard seems to seep into his bones. "Saw nothing, but I'll double-check once we're back."

"No scents either," I note, standing up slowly. The tracks before us are already fading, swiftly being swallowed by the rapidly falling snow. There could have been more at one point, but now, they are long gone. "It's not unusual for prints not to get covered," I say, glancing up at the thick pines above us, the only trees still proudly bearing their needles. "Look up at the pine trees. These tracks are directly under their coverage."

"Don't hit me with logic, Dev," Ashton snaps, his eyes ablaze with a piercing blue that tells me just how much this situation is bothering him. "I don't like this. In all our years here, has that alarm ever gone off without reason?" His intense gaze locks onto mine.

As I exhale, my breath forms a cloud in the cold air. Shaking my head, I have to admit that it's never happened. These estates, home not only to the heirs but also to their families, are sacred ground. While many of us own condos in

the downtown apartment complex, this is where we choose to reside.

Trespassing here is unthinkable, and it's a known death sentence. Unlike the betas, we don't have prisons for criminals. We don't spare those who pose a threat. Unless they are severely mentally impaired, they don't get to live. Trespassing is particularly heinous because omegas are rare, cherished, and fiercely protected. We can't risk their lives.

"Yeah, exactly," Ashton agrees, shaking his head to dislodge snow from his beanie. "What do we do? Seraphina is about to—" He pauses, glancing around warily before lowering his voice. "Go into heat. We're about to be more vulnerable than ever."

Breathing deeply, I inhale the crisp winter air as I stand up. Ashton is right, of course. "We need to beef up our security."

"What?" he exclaims, throwing his hands in the air in disbelief. "In the middle of a blizzard? We can't just rush out for more tech, nor can we summon a mage to set up a ward on the house right now. We're practically sitting ducks."

"Ashton, try to think clearly," I urge, regretting my harsh tone immediately as the cold sharpens my words. "Consider this—anyone out here in this storm won't survive the night once the temperature plummets. I guarantee when this snow melts, we might find a body buried beneath it."

"It is freezing," he mutters, sounding disheartened. His cheeks are flushed bright red, contrasting with his pouty, pink lips. I find myself momentarily distracted, watching as he runs his tongue over his bottom lip. "Damn pheromones," he mumbles.

I huff slightly, gesturing toward the house. "Let's head back. We'll double-check every window and door, make sure everything is locked tight."

"Yeah, alright," he agrees, his teeth chattering as he follows me. "It's beautiful, though, despite the cold."

As we step through the deepening snow, I reflect on Ashton's anxious nature. I know his emotions often

overwhelm him. It's not the first time I've had to talk him down. He once shared his vulnerabilities with me, expressing fear that his nature as a delta might lead to him losing himself to the frenzy curse. His sensitivity, I believe, comes hand-in-hand with being an artist.

Now, there's a hint of that vulnerability in his voice. Ashton views the world as a canvas, always ready to paint or observe. Usually, our world is so vibrant that it can be overwhelming for him, but right now, through our bond, I don't sense the feeling of being overwhelmed. Instead, I feel his desire to add color to this monochrome landscape, even noticing his fingers twitch with the urge as we trudge through the snow.

"I love it here," I admit to Ashton, my voice carrying a softness that contrasts with the harsh winter around us. "The condos feel cold, impersonal, but here, it's different. It's warm. It's home." Sharing a bit of my soul with him, I add, "And I've missed you three more than words can express."

The confession feels like a release, a burden lifting as the words escape my lips. The year they were away, our bond stretched thin, leaving a hollow ache in my chest, a constant reminder of their absence.

Ashton stops abruptly, halfway to the house. His gaze, usually so fierce, softens as he turns to me, his eyes a deep, expressive blue. "We missed you too, Dev," he says, and his voice trembles with a vulnerability that pierces my heart.

We've skirted around the topic of their departure to work with Max down south. I would never want to hold them back, yet the thought of enduring their absence again terrifies me. I yearn to voice this fear, but the words seem lodged in my throat.

Our pack bond, however, speaks for me, transmitting my tumultuous emotions to him. Ashton swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing, reflecting his inner turmoil. He opens his mouth as if to speak, then closes it, as if words are too clumsy for what he feels.

“Never again,” he finally whispers, his voice cracking. “Next time, if there’s a next time, we’ll go together. All of us.”

His declaration sends a ripple of relief and apprehension through me. “I—” I begin, but my voice falters.

Ashton steps forward, his finger pressing firmly into my shoulder, his eyes alight with a fire that speaks of deep-seated emotion. “Don’t you dare put us second again,” he implores, his voice a blend of frustration and pleading.

All I hear, though, is him tell me not to put him second again.

I want to soothe him, to ease the tension, but my own emotions are a whirlwind. “My responsibilities—”

“No,” he interrupts, his voice firm yet laden with emotion. “You’ve always prioritized everything else over us. It can’t continue like this. If we go, you must come with us.”

“It’s complicated, Ashton,” I reply, the words tinged with my own frustration and pain. I had hoped for a different conversation, perhaps one that would revisit the intimacy of this morning. “My father—”

“Is a narcissist,” he interjects, his tone bitter.

“Just let me speak,” I plead, my voice rising in desperation.

He bites back his response, giving a curt nod, his jaw clenched in frustration.

I take a deep breath, the cold air stinging my lungs. “I’m aware of my father’s nature, but I’m all he has left,” I confess, the words heavy with unspoken grief.

“He doesn’t deserve you,” Ashton says softly, his hand falling away from my shoulder, leaving a cold absence that somehow hurts more than the pressure.

I close my eyes, battling the surge of emotions. “Without an heir, I can’t just walk away,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “His actions don’t change my obligations.”

Ashton's impatience is palpable. "What are you trying to say, Dev?"

Swallowing hard, I search for the right words to convey what I'm feeling, to explain what my previous statements couldn't. "My mother... if she, if my father..." Grief surges within me, a molten torrent as I grapple with the words. "If they had another child, and I stepped down, that child would legally be my father's. I can't allow him access to any potential sibling."

"You're protecting a hypothetical," Ashton observes, his brow furrowing as a flicker of understanding crosses his face.

I grind my teeth, frustration mounting because it's so much more than that. "They do exist," I whisper shakily.

The color drains from Ashton's face, and he scans our surroundings, but we are alone out here, with no one to overhear or spill the secret that's been burning inside me for what feels like a lifetime.

"What?" His surprise is understandable. Secrets are the currency of council members, and it seems I haven't fallen far from that tree.

"I tracked them down," I confess, the words tumbling out in a rush. It doesn't surprise me that Ashton is the first I'm confiding in. "I had this absurd thought that if I could find them, then so could my father. I convinced myself it was for the best, for their protection." Initially, that was true, but my motives blurred as time passed. My heart pounds in my ears, making it hard to focus.

"You found them," he says, his eyes filled with a mix of sympathy and a hint of pity and betrayal that I never told him anything about this. Ashton and Avery come from a loving family, and they would go to great lengths for us. Maybe it is selfish, but I yearned for my mother and her pack to know they have my loyalty.

I nod briefly. "Twice." His shock reverberates through our bond before he swiftly shields his emotions. "The first time I



found them, they were in Requiem.” The small fishing town lies in the northeast, at the very tip of Terra.

“By the Fates,” he whispers.

“I didn’t approach them directly. Instead, I traveled an hour away, carrying a bottle of scent reduction and suppressants.”

“That’s highly illegal,” he interjects, his voice tinged with surprise.

“I had no choice,” I insist, the cold air biting at my skin. “If I hadn’t, he might have found them. I went to a library near the Forsaken Forest and used a payphone. In the background, I could hear a baby crying.”

“What did you do? What did you say?” Ashton asks, his eyes widening in disbelief. “And what... what did she say?”

“I wanted to prove to her that I chose her. That despite her leaving, my choice is her, always,” I say, the words tumbling out as the ache in my heart intensifies. “All I said was, ‘If I can find you, he can too. Don’t let that happen.’”

“That’s it?” Ashton asks.

“That’s it,” I echo, imbuing my repetition with a depth of meaning that contrasts his simplicity. “The second time I found them, they were in the Veiled District down south. I called, repeating the same warning.”

“When did all this happen?” His hands reach out, gripping my shoulders with a firm, almost desperate hold.

“The first time, I was fifteen. The second, twenty-four.” Realization hits me—one of my siblings is at least fifteen years old.

“Have you—”

I interrupt him, needing to control the pace of this revelation. “No, they aren’t anywhere in Terra now.” For six years, my search has been fruitless, as if they vanished or... worse.

“I’m sorry,” he says, a hint of sorrow in his voice.

“Don’t be,” I reply, forcing a small smile as I gaze toward the house. “They are alive.”

“How can you be sure?”

“They sent a card,” I tell him, a fact I’ve kept close to my chest. “This morning, when I went to check the perimeter, the mailbox was open.” Delving into my jacket, I pull out the card, an envelope I haven’t yet allowed myself to open.

“It’s still sealed. How do you know it’s from them?” Ashton’s eyes narrow slightly, a mix of curiosity and concern etched into his features.

“I can smell her,” I say, bringing the envelope to my nose. The scent of candied lilacs, unmistakably my mother’s, fills my senses. “Open it.”

Ashton carefully takes the manilla envelope from my fingers, tearing it open. Glitter sparkles from the card, along with the word “Congratulations.”

“It’s from her,” he confirms, looking up at me before handing me the card. “No return address, but there’s a stamp, so it went through the mail.”

My hands tremble as I read the message inside, “Congratulations on finding your mate.” This has nothing to do with the cold now.

“They are watching you,” Ashton whispers.

I close my eyes, bracing against the wave of grief threatening to overwhelm me. When I open them again, understanding and resolve are etched into his face. “I won’t let my father hurt them.”

“Neither will I,” he responds softly, his voice carrying the weight of knowing the pain my father inflicted during my upbringing. “Damn it, Dev.”

“I’m sorry to burden you with this,” I say, the weight of my confession sitting heavily between us.

“We’ll find a way,” he assures me, his gaze drifting toward the house, filled with a longing for something more than just shelter. He pauses then looks back at me. “You need to tell the

rest of the pack. You can't think for one minute that we all won't back you up, and I won't leave you. Not after—"

"I know," I interject, a hint of teasing in my tone to lighten the mood. "I gave in to you."

His mouth parts in a mixture of surprise and realization. "You did give in."

I tuck the card back into my pocket and start walking toward the house, the heaviness of our conversation lingering in the air. It takes him a moment, but he hurries to catch up.

"Why now?" he asks, his curiosity apparent.

"Seraphina," I reply, knowing full well it's a feeble answer. "She's the catalyst."

"That's a crappy answer," he retorts, his frustration palpable. "You're using her as an excuse."

"I know," I admit, acknowledging Ashton's need for more—a need I deeply understand. "For so long, I braced myself for the day you three would leave. I feared being an heir wasn't worth the hassle, that I wasn't worthy."

"That's another poor excuse," he replies, his tone softer now, more understanding. "But I get it."

"Seraphina helped me realize that I want you, all of you. I can't keep denying my own desires," I confess as we finally reach the back porch. I kick off my boots, shaking the last bits of snow from them.

"Dev," Ashton says, grasping my arms and spinning me toward him. In the next breath, his lips find mine.

It's not a gentle kiss, nor a routine one. It's a kiss of possession, of claiming, and I want him to claim me. With Ashton, I don't have to restrain myself. I don't fear hurting him. With Ashton, I can utterly lose myself, so, in this moment, I surrender to him.

The cold air encircles us, but Ashton's body is a furnace against mine. His tongue invades my mouth, spreading a wave of heat through me. When he grips the back of my neck, I melt into him, yielding to his touch.

Seizing control of the kiss, I press him against the side of the house. A moan escapes, blending our breaths—his, mine, it doesn't matter. His teeth catch my lip, his canines sharp though lacking the venom to create a mating bond, but they draw blood.

I pull back with a hiss, meeting his gaze. His eyes blaze with that ethereal glow, and in that suspended moment, something shifts between us. A barrier we've long maintained crumbles, and I realize that if he asked me to leave Terra with him now, I wouldn't refuse.

He won't ask, not now. Not after my confession about having siblings I've never met and won't dare to meet—not until my father is gone. Even then, the prospect of meeting them is daunting, filled with uncertainties.

Where does that leave us? Standing here, in the biting cold, with a passion that defies the complexities of our lives, I'm left pondering the future—our future, which seems more uncertain than ever.

## CHAPTER 27

### *Seraphina*

I'M in a state of stasis that exists outside the boundaries of linear time and space, as if I'm floating somewhere else, bracing for my impending heat. This preheat stasis is probably the absolute worst. I've heard some omegas say the week after, with the inevitable cycle, is even worse, where our uterus throws a fit because it didn't get to grow a baby. I've never been through it, but I'm now officially thankful heats only happen one to two times a year.

But I digress.

The week leading up to a heat is a tangle of cramps and an intense need to satisfy those cramps. Here I am, standing in the enormous kitchen, mixing cake batter with more vigor than necessary. Chocolate splatters across the countertop in a messy array.

Avery glances up at me, his lashes fluttering over sly, amused eyes. He's methodically placing little cupcake papers in the tins.

"Don't say a word," I warn him, my tone more grumbly than I intended.

He pushes the tin aside, leaning on the countertop with a playful smile. "What's wrong?" he asks, trying to sound innocent.

Echoing his words with frustration, I ask, "What's wrong?" In a sudden burst of irritation, I throw the whisk into the bowl, surprising myself with an involuntary growl. "I

didn't even realize I was capable of that," I mutter under my breath. "This entire waiting game is nothing but torture."

"What, exactly, is torture?" he probes, his voice laced with caution.

"Waiting," I admit, whining a bit, and perhaps it's because, for the first time, I'm genuinely excited about a heat. The thought of spending a week knotted in a room with four incredible men is tantalizing.

Avery barely suppresses his amusement, but luckily, the back door swings open at that moment. Devlin and Ashton walk in, both looking flushed and somewhat guilty.

"You two look like you were up to something," I accuse, my irritation increasing. They've definitely been doing something secretive.

Avery leans to the side, a knowing smirk on his face. Their bond is a dead giveaway. He knows exactly what they've been doing. "Snowmen, huh? You better not have been building snowmen without us."

"I promised Seraphina sledding," Max comments, seemingly lost in his own world in the corner of the kitchen. He's half hidden behind his laptop, with glasses perched on the tip of his nose. They are not for vision, but to shield his eyes from the screen's glare.

I peer outside, and a whimsical thought strikes me. "I want to build a snowman." I contemplate timing the cupcakes with my outdoor adventure. "Can it be a she? I want to make her an omega."

"My love, you can do whatever the hell you want," Avery responds with a playful tone, dipping his finger into the cake batter and seductively licking it off.

I have never felt such intense jealousy toward a finger. The sight of his tongue darting out sends a surge of heat coursing through me, igniting a fiery response within.

It's as though my entire focus narrows down to that finger, his tongue, and I'm engulfed in the fantasy of feeling his tongue on every inch of my body. The thought is tantalizing,

forbidden yet irresistibly sexy, and I'm well aware that my internal musings are spiraling into a deliciously salacious territory.

"Oh hell," Ashton groans, a note of concern in his voice. "Can you smell her?"

Do I smell? I subtly sniff the air, but my gaze remains fixated on Avery and his finger.

My body responds with an involuntary shudder, and all I can detect is the sweet, heady scent of arousal, thick in the air. Licking my lips, I bite down gently, feeling the slickness within me.

"Oh," I murmur, realization dawning. A wave of heat radiates from my core, pulsing rhythmically, but unlike before, it's not painful. Far from it. This sensation is delectably pleasurable. "I think..." I pause, savoring the taste in the air. "This is it."

The moment the thought flickers through my mind, it dissipates, leaving me in a muddled, hazy state. My core pulses with insatiable need, a deep, throbbing desire that demands to be satisfied immediately.

"Why are you all just standing there?" I whimper. The fabric of my clothes suddenly becomes unbearable against my skin. It's too hot, too constricting, simply too much. The cupcakes, now forgotten, become a distant memory as I impulsively strip off my shirt.

The men stand frozen, staring as though they can't quite believe the proximity of my heat, but as Ashton's shirt falls to the floor, and I stand before them, nipples pebbling in the cool air and a sheen of sweat coating my skin, their stunned expressions transform into ones of raw desire.

*Finally.*

"Fuck," Devlin mutters, turning to Max, his eyes wide with a mix of urgency and anticipation. "I need an hour."

*For what?* I wonder briefly.

“I’ve got her,” Max declares, abandoning his laptop on the table as he rises. My attention instantly locks onto him.

“Avery, with me, now,” Devlin commands, his voice brooking no argument.

“Oh, man,” Avery groans, pushing off from the countertop with a reluctant pout on his face.

Their movements become background noise as my focus narrows to the alpha advancing toward me from across the kitchen. Max is an imposing figure, tall and broad and built like a bear. Just the sight of him sends a shiver of excitement down my spine, and I find myself wanting to climb him, to feel every inch of his strength.

*How have I never truly seen him before?*

Max is a masterpiece, as if he stepped right out of the pages of a romance novel or materialized from the most tantalizing of fantasies. He towers well over six feet, and his broad shoulders and muscular build epitomize every omega’s deepest desires. In this moment, he is entirely mine, a thought that sends waves of heat coursing through my body.

A rumble starts deep within my chest, halting Max in his advance. “Are you purring?” he asks, a hint of amusement in his voice.

“I have no idea,” I reply, though I suspect I might also be drooling at this point.

Reduced to basic need, my thoughts are rapidly unraveling, becoming more primal with each passing second. My heart pounds erratically, and my vision narrows until Max is my entire world. I inhale his scent deeply, as if it’s the only sustenance I’ll ever need. A touch of sweetness and a hint of whiskey laces his dark amber aroma, intoxicating my senses.

I lick my lips again, tasting the air and savoring his presence.

In less than two steps, Max lifts me effortlessly, his hands trembling slightly, a silent confession of the significance this moment holds for him. That thought slips away as he sets me



atop the counter, sending a cupcake pan clattering to the floor. Neither of us cares about the noise or the mess.

Max leans in, and I eagerly rise to meet his kiss. His mouth claims mine with a hunger that obliterates any lingering thought, and his tongue explores every inch of my mouth, but the kitchen feels too cold, too sterile, not like the nest I crave.

A whimper escapes me as I pull back, a wave of distress fraying the edges of my sanity.

“I’ve got you,” Max assures me, and his words are all I need to hear.

He lifts me into his arms, and I wrap my legs around him, craving the feel of his skin against mine. The fabric of his shirt is a barrier, intolerable and wrong. Growling in frustration, I nip the material, my canines tearing a hole. In a frenzy, I rip it open, needing direct contact with his skin.

“Sugarplum,” Max groans, his footing unsteady on the staircase.

I barely register our movement, but he suddenly sets me down on the wooden steps, the hard surface pressing against my back. He quickly sheds the remnants of his shirt, tossing it aside. My core pulses at the sight of his bare chest, the muscles and contours of his body sending waves of need through me, but it’s still not enough. I yearn for more, for a fulfillment that only he can provide.

Relief washes over me as I realize I only wore Ashton’s shirt, and it’s now gone, leaving me bare on these steps. My fingers instinctively find my clit, rubbing desperately for release. My need for him far outweighs my need for comfort.

Max, taking control, smacks my hands away. Right there on the staircase, he buries his face between my thighs, and a scream of pure pleasure escapes me as I instinctively clamp my thighs around his head, his tongue delving deep inside me.

My logical mind momentarily surfaces, cautioning me not to suffocate him. Heeding its advice, I relax my grip slightly, balancing my legs on the steps for support.

Max pauses, his eyes glazing over, clearly affected by my pheromones. “Suffocate me, sugarplum. Tighten those thighs around my head like you own me, because I own this,” he declares with a possessive intensity.

Well then, yes. Encouraged, I wrap my thighs back around his head, and his skilled tongue continues its exploration, sending waves of pleasure through me, intensifying my craving for all of him.

Uninhibited, my hips grind against his face as I chase that elusive peak of pleasure, but just as I’m about to crest, the sensation slips away, leaving me whimpering and arching for something just out of reach.

“I’ve got you,” Max whispers, his voice a balm to my frustration. He slides a finger inside me, pressing against that sensitive bundle of nerves and massaging it in a way that makes me twitch with renewed need.

He adds another finger, then another, stretching and filling me, unlocking something deep within. As if all the locks inside me fall away at once, I sigh out in pleasure, my orgasm rolling through me in a blissful wave.

It’s merely a tease, a prelude. I crave more, need more, the hunger within me insatiable.

“Knot me,” I plead, urgency edging my voice.

Max rises, my slick coating his beard and trickling down his chin. It’s the most erotic sight I’ve ever witnessed. Recovering quicker than me, he lifts me into his arms before bounding up the stairs with a determined pace.

“Just one more set of stairs,” he assures me.

“I’m not going to make it,” I protest, feeling an angry pulse in my core as if my earlier orgasm only fueled my body’s demands. “Now,” I demand breathlessly. “Against the wall. Knot me, Max.”

“Fuck,” he swears, swiftly turning and pressing me against the wall. One hand supports my weight while the other hurriedly undoes his pants.

I lap at his beard, tasting my own sweetness—a flavor reminiscent of apple pie glaze. Lost in this tantalizing realization, I’m jolted back to the present as Max slowly sinks into me. My head thumps against the wall, and I can’t help but moan out his name in a mix of pleasure and desperation.

When my gaze refocuses on Max, the man I knew is replaced by a raw, primal alpha. He grinds his jaw, his pupils dilating, consuming the color in his eyes. A smirk plays on my lips, knowing he’s struggling with his control.

Each deliberate thrust splits me farther open, igniting a need within me that eclipses all else. I look down, and the sight of him entering me is overwhelmingly erotic, even more so than my earlier thoughts of his muscular physique.

His cock, slick with my arousal, glistens invitingly. It’s thick and hard, and his knot grows more pronounced, glaring red as I fix my gaze upon it.

“Look how fucking sexy you are,” he growls, his hands gripping me firmly as he leans back, admiring the view with me. “Just look at you, pulling me in, enveloping me.”

Every pulse of my core around him, each slow, deliberate thrust, sends me teetering on the edge of insanity—a sweet, maddening brink I’d willingly embrace for this pleasure. Every sensation feels magnified, my world more alive, more sensitive, and infinitely more sensual.

The scientific, rational part of Max fades away, replaced by the raw, primal essence of an alpha, and I, in my purest form, am his omega.

I roll my hips, a desperate plea for more.

“What do you want, sugar?” he asks, his pace slow, torturously teasing. He knows exactly what I crave, what I ache for. “You want my knot?”

As if I haven’t made it abundantly clear already—yes, I desire that enticing knot of his...

“Can you wait?” he asks, trying to withdraw.

A cry escapes me at the thought of him pulling away. My body yearns for him right here, right now, against this very wall, indifferent to the rest of the world bustling around us.

“Knot me now, Max,” I plead, my fingers gripping his shoulders as my nails dig into his flesh. I relish the slight scent of blood in the air, a primal confirmation of my claim on this alpha.

He complies, thrusting into me, his knot teasing my entrance. “I’ve got you,” he whispers, his lips meeting mine, dispelling any fears about fitting together perfectly.

It’s as if the Fates sculpted me for him.

His kiss is a storm of passion, need, and assurance. As I lose myself in his embrace, he continues to move gently, pressing his knot at my core but never forcing. He waits for my body’s signal.

Max groans, breaking away from our kiss, his head thrown back in ecstasy. I’m barely aware of my own head thudding against something solid—the wall, the door. It doesn’t matter. All that exists in this moment is the overwhelming sensation of being completely and utterly his.

As Max drops his head and fully sheathes himself inside me with a satisfying pop, my body convulses with unbridled need. The orgasm that follows tears through me like an untamed wildfire, while Max’s growl resonates through every fiber of my being.

Instinctively, I tilt my head to the side, offering myself to him. I’m ready for him to bite, to bond, to claim me fully as his own. Max responds by leaning down, his tongue tracing my skin before his canines gently nip, heightening the sensation as he moves within me in a primal rhythm.

His mouth leaves my skin, and a whimper of rejection escapes my lips, the loss of contact leaving me confused and wanting. My eyes flutter open to a scene that ignites my senses anew—Avery is holding Max back, their lips locked in a passionate kiss, as Max’s movements become increasingly frantic.

This sight, so raw and intensely sensual, sends shockwaves through me, triggering a cascade of orgasms that rock my entire being. Max continues, his release filling me, each spurt intensifying my pleasure and making every thrust an exquisite torment.

Eventually, his movements slow, and he pulls away from Avery. They share a silent, profound exchange, a communication beyond words that I'm not yet a part of.

THEY FINALLY TURN THEIR FULL ATTENTION TO ME. MY INNER omega preens under their scrutiny, basking in their focus. Max offers me a lopsided grin, his cheeks flushed with a bashful red while Avery claps him on the back.

“No unwanted biting.” Avery winks at me, his voice a blend of firmness and teasing. “Not until you're out of your heat.”

I understand the logic in his words, but a twinge of rejection still stirs within me, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. As I struggle to maintain my composure, I'm suddenly enveloped in Max's embrace, his heart beating steadily against my ear, a soothing balm to my tumultuous emotions.

“I've got you,” Max murmurs, his lips pressing a tender kiss to my temple as he purrs soothingly. “Rest now, I've got you.”

In the safety of his arms, surrounded by the warmth of their care, I allow myself to do just that.

*Seraphina*

I AWAKEN WITH A FIERCE, primal craving pulsating through me.

For dick.

My body instinctively rolls over, seeking to satisfy this overwhelming desire even before my eyes fully open. As I blink away the remnants of sleep, I spot Avery lying next to me. He's sprawled out in a state of relaxed undress, one arm draped casually over his eyes, the other reaching toward Max. His naked form is a vision of temptation.

I gently nuzzle his thigh with my nose, my tongue playfully tracing his skin. Moving upward, I find my prize. Settling myself between his legs, I arch my back, pressing my hips into the air. The position feels exhilarating, igniting an even deeper longing within me. I'm not sure if anyone else is awake, but right now, that doesn't matter.

With my hands positioned on either side of Avery, I envelop his cock with my mouth, hoping to rouse him from slumber. The haze of heat fully consumes my consciousness, steering me toward pure, unadulterated instinct. Slickness trickles down my thighs, a testament to my arousal.

Avery hisses in response, his fingers threading through my hair as his length swells in my mouth. I sense him awakening, a subtle energy beginning to stir beneath his skin. His flavor is like a decadent dessert on a cold winter's night—sweet, tangy, and faintly spicy.

I intensify my efforts, sucking with fervor, my tongue pressing rhythmically against the sensitive bundle on the underside of his cock. Avery groans, a deep, resonant sound that sends waves of heat surging through me from head to toe.

Moving in a rhythmic dance, I take in more of him with each motion. The bed trembles under the force of his movements. His grip tightens on my hair, and his hips thrust in sync with my movements, propelling him toward climax.

My actions become a blend of gentle lapping, nipping, and fervent sucking. I'm lost in the taste of him, in the sensation of being this intimately connected. Avery has been my anchor, the first man who never even entertained the thought of leaving. Embracing this realization, I drink him in, each motion a declaration of how much he means to me.

Soft hands glide over my ass, their touch gentle yet insistent. Then, a slightly rougher touch graces my hips, unmistakably Devlin's. His presence brings an unexpected comfort, his unique energy enveloping me. Without needing to look, I wiggle invitingly, silently pleading for him to fulfill my craving.

Devlin seems attuned to my desire and willingly obliges. His grip on my hips is firm, pulling me closer until the length of his arousal slides through the wetness between my legs. I revel in his sharp intake of breath as he enters me, sending my excitement soaring.

I feel him harden further in response to my eager movements. Instinctively, I match his pace, pressing back into him, our rhythm steadily intensifying with each thrust.

Simultaneously, I'm anchored by Avery in front of me, his length driving deep into my mouth. The sensation of his barbs uncurling, teasing over my tongue, is intoxicating. His precum, with hints of cinnamon and sugar, bursts across my taste buds, and I lavish him with attention, sucking as if he were the most delectable lollipop.

The night embraces us, our intimate symphony the only sounds—the rhythmic slapping of Devlin's thighs against

mine, the wet slurping as I suck Avery, and our collective moans reverberating off the walls.

My mind whirls with arousal, heightened by the scents of their desire mingling in the air. This potent mix drives me deeper into a sensual haze, each sensation more intense than the last, pushing us all toward the brink of ecstasy.

My head swims in a whirlwind of pleasure as Devlin's knot presses insistently against my core. His thrusts intensify, gaining both speed and strength, until I feel his pleasure resonating through us. Clinging to him, I brace myself as he draws back in one long, slow motion, the force making us both tremble.

Devlin thrusts forward again, his knot pausing at my entrance. Beside us, Avery's rhythm picks up, his hips pumping into my mouth once, then twice, before he shakily releases, his seed spilling down my throat. I swallow eagerly, relishing the sweetness of his climax.

Avery's fingers weave through my hair as I continue to lavish attention on him, driven by an insatiable hunger. His moans of pleasure soon morph into sounds of exquisite pain, and he gently pulls my head away.

Panting heavily, I gaze up at him, his release still glistening on my lips. "You are the sexiest woman I've ever seen," Avery murmurs, his voice filled with awe.

A smile plays across my lips, and I take my time licking the lingering traces of him away. I tighten my core around Devlin, who is still deeply embedded within me, eliciting a needy whimper from my throat.

Avery gently extracts himself from beneath me, leaving me in Devlin's sole possession as he walks away.

Devlin leans his body over mine, his warm breath caressing my ear. "I'm about to knot this pretty little pussy of yours. Do you want that, princess?" His voice is a seductive whisper, sending shivers down my spine.

My heart races as I nod, unable to vocalize my desire. He smirks in response, pushing his knot deep inside me. His



hands find a firm hold on my hips, guiding me as he rocks into me with a steady, deliberate rhythm.

With each of Devlin's relentless thrusts, pleasure mounts within me, cascading from his body to mine. My mind blanks out, consumed entirely by the ecstasy coursing through me. In a moment of overwhelming sensation, I throw my head back, surrendering to the euphoria, every nerve ending tingling with delight.

Devlin drives into me with fervor, delving deeper with each movement until he's fully immersed, unable to venture farther. The overwhelming sensation sends shudders through my core, and I bite down hard on my bottom lip to stifle the screams threatening to escape.

Our pleasure crescendos in unison, building to a peak until we reach our climax together, plunging us into sweet oblivion. For a few moments afterward, we bask in the afterglow, lingering in the shared warmth of our lovemaking.

Eventually, I nestle beside Devlin until a sudden cramp jolts me back into the fervor of my heat.

With cum still dripping from me, I crawl over to Ashton, who watches me intently, lying on his side. Placing my hand on his shoulder, I straddle him, pressing him into the nest. With a swift, decisive movement, I impale myself on him, eliciting a groan of pleasure from his lips.

Rocking my hips, I chase the escalating high, my heat surging once again. Although Ashton lacks a knot, his barbs stroke every erogenous zone within me, offering the relentless pleasure I crave. I ride him with increasing intensity, the barbs creating a symphony of sensations.

His hands trail over my hips, gliding upward to pinch my nipples, heightening the fervor.

"More," I groan, my voice a mix of demand and desire. "I want more." The words escape me in a growl as I thrust with unrestrained force.

Suddenly, heat cloaks me from behind—Avery. His firm grip on my hips brings me to a momentary stillness.

Avery instructs, "Drape yourself over him."

Still fully connected with Ashton, I lean forward to kiss him. Our tongues entwine in a dance of passion, his kiss both claiming and soothing me. Behind me, I feel a wetness at the entrance to my ass, followed by Avery's careful touch. One finger, then two, gently massage me, preparing me for what's to come. Ashton's firm grip holds me in place, adding to my growing frustration.

Breaking the kiss, I glance over my shoulder at Avery with a growl. He chuckles in response, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I don't want to hurt you, love," he says teasingly.

"You're hurting me more by not fucking my ass," I snap back, eager for him to fulfill my craving.

Avery's eyes sparkle with anticipation as he positions himself, slowly pressing just the tip of his cock against me. A moan of pleasure escapes me at the sensation.

"You're irresistible when your heat brings out that sassy side," Avery remarks, inching inside me in a tantalizingly unhurried progression. The dual sensation of being filled from both ends sends waves of delight coursing through me, causing my knees to tremble.

Once Avery is fully inside, he firmly grasps my hips. With my legs weakening, he eases out until only the tip remains within me. I brace myself against Ashton, surrendering to the exquisite torment of Avery's movements. Each of his thrusts balances me precariously between pleasure and pain.

"Ah, fuck, you're tight," Avery exclaims. His barbs press, intensifying the sensation and driving me wild with pleasure. "Feel that?" he teases. "Now let yourself go. Be ours completely."

His words ignite a fire within me, and I feel every barb from Avery pressing deeper, unlocking a new level of ecstasy. "Do you like that, my love?" Avery asks, and I nod fervently in response. "You're so incredibly wet, dripping with desire," he observes, his hand tracing a path over my body, accentuating each sensation.

Avery thrusts into me with a force that's both deep and hard. My hands glide up Ashton's chest, reaching for his neck, finding a firm hold as they curl around the back of his head. Pulling him closer, I press my mouth to his, and a fresh wave of bliss washes over me, propelling me into a realm of pure oblivion. I lose myself in the sensation as Avery maintains a relentless rhythm, each movement sending tremors of aftershocks through me.

Then Ashton moves with me, adding to the intensity. Together, they elevate my pleasure to new heights. Having both of them inside me makes me feel so impossibly full, as if I could burst from the sheer intensity. Avery pushes me down onto Ashton, who thrusts up from beneath, almost unseating me in my precarious position. I steady myself, resting my palms on Ashton's chest as he wraps his arms around my hips, holding me firmly in place.

They move with a synchronicity that suggests familiarity, a perfect harmony in their actions. The timing of their movements is impeccable. Ashton withdraws at the exact moment Avery's barbs press into me, creating a rhythm that has me oscillating between them, the sensations teetering on the edge of being overwhelming.

Waves of pleasure roll over me, each one building upon the last, escalating higher and higher until my entire body is numb with ecstasy. Then, suddenly, they both quicken their pace, each thrust becoming more powerful, more urgent. They drive into me like primal beasts, their singular focus on my pleasure creating a whirlwind of spiraling sensations that threatens to shatter me completely.

Avery's barbs dig into me relentlessly, driving me to a state where tears well in my eyes, overwhelmed by the intense sensations. My body reacts instinctively, clamping down on Ashton, who responds by increasing his own fervor. My mouth parts in a silent scream as Avery's barbs delve deeper, propelling me into yet another shattering orgasm. A harsh whimper spills out of me. My body convulses around him, shaking uncontrollably as he persists, undeterred by my overwhelming response.

Wave after wave of pleasure radiates through me, creating a sensation akin to an electrical fire. Warmth spreads from my chest, cascading to every point where their bodies touch mine. It's like an uncontrolled blaze, consuming me in pure bliss.

Somewhere behind me, a primal growl resonates, unfamiliar yet intoxicating. Then, Ashton's voice, husky and laden with desire, brushes against my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "Come," he whispers, his tone both commanding and pleading. "Come now, Seraphina."

His words ignite something deep within me, and the warmth inside swells to an overwhelming crescendo. A rush of intense pleasure explodes through me, leaving me voiceless as I scream soundlessly.

This warmth keeps expanding, engulfing me as I convulse atop Ashton, my muscles tightening around him in a relentless grip. Wave after wave of this fiery river courses through me, leaving me breathless. I shower his neck with kisses, occasionally biting down gently, unable to get enough of the sensation.

Lost in this otherworldly experience, my mind floats in a numb yet acutely aware state. The fire tears through me, and I am consumed by its intensity, thrashing helplessly in its hold until I am completely spent.

Avery's voice breaks through the haze. "What a delicious mess," he remarks as he carefully withdraws. With a soft pop and a rush of warmth, he slides free, and I feel a gush of release follow in his wake.

Lying here, in a tangle of limbs and heavy breaths, the aftermath of our fervor surrounds us. I'm sprawled atop Ashton, each inhale laced with the lingering scents of sex and satisfaction. Avery, still close by, wears a look of contentment, his eyes reflecting a mixture of admiration and affection.

The room is silent, save for our collective, labored breathing. It's a sacred hush, a testament to the intensity of what we just shared. I lift my head, meeting Ashton's gaze. His eyes, dark with lingering desire, hold mine with a passion that speaks volumes. There's a promise there, an unspoken

vow of more to come, of a connection that runs deeper than physical pleasure.

Slowly, I disentangle myself from Ashton, feeling a sense of loss as our connection momentarily breaks. My body is heavy with exhaustion, every muscle relaxed and satiated. I turn to Avery, offering him a smile that's both weary and blissful. He returns it with a gentle nod, his eyes soft with understanding.

The heat still simmers within me, a reminder of my omega nature, but it's tempered now, satisfied by the shared passion of these incredible men. I'm enveloped in a cocoon of warmth and care, a sense of belonging that goes beyond the physical.

In this moment, I realize the true depth of our bond. It's not just about the fervor of the heat. It's about the connection, the trust, and the unbreakable ties that bind us together. We are more than just bodies intertwined, we are hearts and souls in unison, a pack bound by something far stronger than mere physical need.

With a contented sigh, I let my eyes drift closed, surrendering to the embrace of post-bliss fatigue. As sleep claims me, I feel the gentle touch of a hand on my shoulder, a silent reassurance of their presence, their promise to always be there. In the arms of my pack, I find more than just pleasure—I find home.

*Seraphina*

**TIME LOSES ITS MEANING**, dissolving into a blur. The world beyond our intense connection fades, leaving nothing but the raging heat that sweeps through us. It shatters every last shred of caution, mine included, but maybe it's just the hormones whispering enticing notions.

This is what a pack embodies—love and security in each other's embrace.

Something feels off though. Deep in my bones, a sensation stirs, an inkling nudging me out of my heat-induced haze. Gaining a sliver of awareness, I pry my eyes open. Not to the fog of heat, but to clear consciousness.

I can't tell how much time has passed—hours, days, or maybe even a week—but that niggling warning persists in my veins, a whisper that something isn't right. Blinking away sleep, I sit up, rub my eyes, and yawn, trying to anchor myself in reality.

Several sensations hit me all at once. The first is the aftermath of our heat, a rather unglamorous scene. In the corner, a small pile of dirty, sticky, and stiff blankets lies abandoned. Surprisingly, there are only about three, fewer than I expected.

The second sensation strikes harder—I'm alone.

An eerie silence engulfs the nest, accentuating that this isn't how a heat should end. With this realization, my consciousness tightens, pushing through the haze until I feel secure again. Even that thought, however, triggers a sharp

cramp, a harsh reminder of the backlash from defying my biology.

Swallowing hard, I crawl over to a stack of water bottles against the wall. We've depleted just one out of the five cases, suggesting I'm only two or maybe three days into my heat. Omegas often experience three-day heats, but since I delayed mine, I should brace for at least three more days.

Frustration gnaws at me as I unscrew a bottle and gulp it down in one go. I'm parched—a clear sign my mates haven't been attentive to my hydration needs.

*Where are they?*

Then I notice a phone beside the water bottles—Devlin's phone. It's a lifeline to the outside world, and right now, it feels like my sole connection to understanding what's happening beyond this confined nest.

I hesitate for a fleeting moment before snatching it up. I tell myself that I'm just checking the time. That's all, nothing more...

My finger jabs at the screen.

Two days. That's all that's passed.

A sense of unease washes over me. I unlock the phone, punching in the code I memorized just days ago, and navigate to the pack's group message.

**Avery:** Breach at the north gate. The gate house security called the land line multiple times. They aren't even there.

**Max:** What do you mean they aren't there?

**Avery:** I said what I said. I'm not happy about it either, but I'm not going to force another delta to stand out there in this storm. There is five feet of snow outside.

**Ashton:** They found snowmobile tracks.

**Max:** How if there isn't anyone out there?

**Ashton:** Think straight. Next time Seraphina falls asleep, get your ass down here. I'm not having a fight over text message.

**Max:** I'll let Devlin know. He's knotting right now and glaring at me.

**Avery:** And for the record, when the alarm sounded, they came out.

**Ashton:** Stop arguing. We have a bigger problem.

*WHAT THE HELL? WHAT PROBLEM?*

A sense of urgency grips me as I realize there's a breach of security. They must be having a meeting. That explains the unsettling feeling I have. Hastily, I drop the phone onto the mattress and grab a sheet, wrapping it around my body. My hair is a tangled mess, and when I stand, I feel... well, let's just say it's clear what I've been doing for the past two days.

Screw it.

My legs tremble as I cross the mattress. There's no way I'm staying up here if something serious is happening. My whole body aches from two days of relentless knotting and sex. I should feel elated by that fact, but I don't. Instead, I'm irritated with them and whoever dared to interrupt our perfect week. Biting my cheek, I open the door to the rest of the attic, finding it deserted. I step out, and a chill wraps around my bare legs. The only heated part of this place is the nest.

I pad across the attic to the spiral staircase, descending the steps cautiously, straining my ears for any sound. Following the same path as the other day, I enter the hall. At this end, there's a window with a seat beneath it. Peering outside, I see nothing but a blanket of endless white. The storm must be at its peak.

Who would venture out in this?

Frowning, I head toward the railing that overlooks the living room. My hand rests on the cool wooden banister as I peer over. The television is off, and the entire room is empty and unwelcoming.

Then, the lights flicker once, twice, followed by a strange electrical sound, and everything plunges into darkness. I hear one of the guys curse, a door slam, then muted murmurs. We



just lost electricity in the middle of a blizzard. That can't be good.

CREEPING DOWN THE STEPS, I'M EXTRA CAUTIOUS NOT TO STEP on any squeaky slats. An overpowering instinct tells me to stay silent and remain unnoticed. It's so strong, so overwhelming, that I don't even consider fighting it. It's a primal, caveman-like reaction people talk about, the knowing that staying quiet is crucial for survival.

*From what?*

I can't stand the confusion and tension building inside me as I move past the living room toward the kitchen, drawn by the low, indistinct murmurs. The door is slightly ajar, swinging gently from someone recently passing through it.

Instead of entering, I press myself against the wall by the hinges. I reek of sex and our combined scents. Ashton once joked that we smell like gingerbread cookies, and he's not wrong. Unless the guys showered, they'll carry the same scent and hopefully won't detect mine.

Straining to listen, I slow my breathing and heart rate, quieting the pounding in my ears.

"We can't leave her outside. She will die." Max's voice, tinged with an alpha growl, seeps under the door, hitting me squarely in the chest.

*Who are they talking about?*

"You need to use your common sense, Max," Ashton counters, his voice strained with tension.

The sound of footsteps pacing back and forth suggests Avery is also in the room. Known for his restlessness, even in calm times, his compulsion to move becomes almost unbearable during emergencies. It's as if I can feel the breeze his movements create slipping under the door.

"Using common sense is exactly what I'm doing," Max retorts. "At my core, I'm a doctor. My oath is to heal those in need, not to abandon them to die."

“You swore an oath to see Seraphina through her heat, remember?” Avery’s anger is palpable, reverberating against the door.

Desperately pressing my fingers to my mouth, I try to remain silent. What in the world is happening?

“Fuck you. Don’t you dare throw Seraphina in my face like that. You know how I feel. Don’t make me choose between her and another innocent who needs me,” Max retorts, his alpha authority threading through his words.

“Max,” Ashton interjects, “if you go out there in the snow right now, you’ll have the scent of another woman on you. Seraphina is in the middle of her heat. She won’t be in her right mind to understand.”

Another woman? My emotions churn like a turbulent sea. Ashton is right. Even the thought of another woman anywhere near this house ignites furious jealousy within me.

Breathing through clenched teeth, I nearly hiss as I struggle to regain control. I try to reason with myself. If someone is in danger or dying, Max, as a doctor, needs to help. This isn’t about me, it’s about doing what’s right.

Despite understanding the logic in my own words, my heat threatens to obliterate all reason. There’s a reason why, during an omega’s heat, the entire pack goes into lockdown. We’re reduced to primal instincts. Instinctively, any omega or person outside the pack, no matter how innocent, is perceived as a threat.

This woman, whoever she is, poses a threat to my nest—a nest that, logically, isn’t even truly mine.

Grinding my teeth, I try to focus on the conversation, but my heart thunders too loudly in my ears. I do catch the sound of a door slamming and Ashton’s exasperated voice.

“Fuck, what do we do?” Ashton’s voice is laced with frustration.

There’s a lengthy pause before Avery responds. “I don’t know. We need to hide her so Seraphina never finds out.”

“That’s illogical, and you know it,” Ashton counters.

The idea of them keeping secrets from me is infuriating. I bite down on my cheek, hard enough to taste the sharp tang of iron on my tongue.

“I know, I know.” Avery’s voice betrays his panic. “I’m just... trying to think before Seraphina wakes up and realizes we’re gone, with another woman.” Anxiety laces his words. “Make space on the island for Max to lay her down.”

“Hell no, you are out of your fucking mind,” Ashton retorts. “I am not laying a strange woman on the island where our mate’s scent clings to the wood. There’s a folding table in the basement. Grab that and a tarp. Go.”

Avery mumbles something under his breath, and another door slams shut.

Leaning my head against the wall, I breathe as slowly as possible, inhaling through my nose and exhaling through my mouth, trying to calm the storm inside me.

*Someone is hurt and needs help.*

I almost whimper, closing my eyes against the storm of emotions raging within me. My heart feels like it’s breaking, sending fissures of pain through it. Dizziness overwhelms me, and I nearly collapse to the ground.

Nothing about this situation feels right.

Is someone deliberately sabotaging my heat? Or is this all just a horrible coincidence?

“Get the door!” Max’s muffled shout reaches me, sounding like it’s filtered through cloth, but his words are clear enough.

Footsteps sound in the kitchen, followed by the creak of a door swinging open.

“I got the table and tarp,” Avery says, and I hear something heavy slam onto the floor.

“Get my med kit from the garage,” Max orders, his voice strained, as if he’s exerting himself.

The scent of blood drifts to me.

I can't let myself smell it, or I'll lose control.

I press the sheet to my nose, blocking out the scent with our combined fragrances. It helps, if only slightly, clear my mind for the moment, but when my heat surges again, as it inevitably will, I don't know what will happen. Despite feeling unsafe, my biology will take over, compelling me to seek a mate. My body will crave a knot, and even if I'm angry, even if I no longer feel secure, I know I'll inevitably succumb to one of them, clinging on until I'm sated.

The sounds of a table banging and a tarp crinkling echo faintly.

"The cold stopped her bleeding," Max states, his voice clinical and devoid of emotion. He's in doctor mode now. Not my alpha, not my mate. "Does anyone know Devlin's progress in the lights and heat? It's going to get cold fast."

"The generator will take a moment," Ashton explains logically. "Is she..."

"Dead? No, she has a slight pulse," Max answers after a brief pause, his voice tinged with concern. "Very slight."

"Who is she?" Ashton asks, posing the most crucial question. Even though he can't sense my gratitude because we aren't bonded, I mentally thank him.

"My realtor," Max replies dryly.

A buzzing sound, almost too loud for my ears, fills the air—an electrical hum that reverberates off the walls. The lights flicker back to life, though not fully.

"Generator's up," Avery announces, his pace quickening. "How is your realtor all the way out here?"

"I don't know," Max mutters, likely preoccupied with saving her life.

"Do you think it's related to the sugarplum we found?" Avery probes, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

My stomach drops at the mention of sugarplum.

"I don't know," Max responds in a monotone.

I wish I could see their faces to gauge their emotions.

“Or the footprints,” Ashton adds. “Someone is sabotaging us. Between the old school building, Thea’s sewing, the attack in the park, our alarms, and now this?”

“Don’t forget the sugarplum,” Avery interjects, his footsteps heavy on the floor.

“Electricity’s up,” Devlin announces, slipping into the room quietly. “How is she?”

“Knife wounds. One penetrated her shoulder from the back, and another in her stomach, newer,” Max explains gruffly. “The wounds are precise. Whoever did this knew what they were doing. Avery, can you get me the poultice from that cabinet? Yes, that one. Thanks.”

“Max, you can’t apply it over her clothing,” Devlin advises gently. “You need to strip her.”

Hearing that, I see red.

My heart rate soars, and I struggle to regain control of my breathing. In through my nose, out through my mouth.

“Scissors,” I hear, followed by the sound of fabric cutting. “Shit, is that...”

“A brand,” Ashton states, his voice low and dangerous, “and it’s in the shape of a sugarplum.”

“Someone is fucking with us.” Devlin nearly loses his composure, a rare occurrence for the one who is usually the epitome of control. “We’re in a tough spot. All we can do is patch her up and make her comfortable.”

“Seraphina isn’t going to take this well,” Ashton notes, and he’s right. “She won’t be able to rationalize this until after her heat.”

“She’ll understand,” Max mutters, his voice devoid of emotion. “I need to sew her wounds. I’m not a healer, but she might need one.”

“In the middle of a snowstorm?” Avery scoffs. “That’s not happening.”

“Someone should check on her, make sure she’s still asleep. We need a game plan to break the news to her about the woman left practically dead at our back door,” Devlin says, his words imbued with his usual calmness.

I don’t want his calm. They’ve been keeping secrets from me.

“Not me,” the twins declare in unison.

Max snorts. “Chickens.”

“Then you do it,” Avery challenges.

“I’m busy,” Max retorts.

As a logical woman, I usually pride myself on rationality. However, as an omega, there are moments when logic seems to slip away. I’m aware of the unfolding events and understand their intent to keep me safe, but secrecy isn’t the right approach. I could have been understanding, or so I believe, until a woman’s soft moan from the kitchen reaches my ears, and my control vanishes.

Turning around, with sweat beading on my skin, I tiptoe through the living room, up the stairs to the second floor, then along the hallway. My head whooshes with the pounding of my heart.

Worse yet, a cramp ripples through me, stealing my breath and knocking me against the wall with a thud. I gasp. Hopefully, none of the guys heard that. Gritting my teeth, I ascend to the attic space where the nest is, but I can’t bring myself to go in there.

It smells like us.

It smells like the last forty-eight hours of our bodies intertwined, a mix of happiness, hope, and everything between. I wanted so much to be theirs, to be the one they’ve been waiting for, but as I stand before the door to the nest, I can’t bring myself to enter. I simply can’t do it.

Tears sting behind my eyes, and a hiccup escapes my lips. I stumble back down the steps and make my way to the omega suite. Their footsteps echo loudly through the house, but I

don't care. My heat surges through my consciousness, overwhelming my senses as I slam the door behind me and slide the deadbolt into place. Maybe it was a mistake for them to install that lock.

Blinking back the tears streaming down my face, I grab blankets off the bed and my phone, then stumble into the bathroom and slam the door shut. Damn my hormones. Damn my irrational behavior.

All my life, I've dealt with the repercussions of being an omega. I've endured Thea's cruelty and her unhinged behavior, but in this moment, I feel just as unhinged myself.

*Why couldn't I have been born a beta?*

I hiccup again as reality and logic slip away from me. Tossing the blanket into the bathtub, I crawl inside and pull it over my head just as another cramp rips through my body.

I can't suppress the scream that tears from my throat. In a last-ditch effort, I call the only man, the only alpha, who has never let me down.

My brother.

CHAPTER 30

*Avery*

I **KNEW** something was off the moment we scented a sweetness in the air that is all Seraphina. The whole situation's a mess, a giant misunderstanding.

The woman—whatever her name is—blinks up at me with dull, lifeless brown eyes. They lack the vibrance of Seraphina's, my love. She's pale, her color drained except for the blood pooling at her shoulder.

Max looks up at Ashton and Devlin. "Go to her," he commands. They don't hesitate, rushing off to our mate, the one caught in the throes of her heat. She's probably conjuring up the worst scenarios, and I can't blame her. Not even a bit.

A heat is a dangerously sensitive time for an omega. Their emotions soar, and their hormones push them to a point where they exist solely on feeling, on touch. They become the epitome of hedonism, relentlessly seeking pleasure, sometimes for a whole week.

And we let her down.

It doesn't matter that this woman means nothing to us. What counts is that we left Seraphina alone in the nest. One of us should have stayed, should have explained the situation.

A bit of care and communication could have easily avoided this whole mess.

Max meets my gaze, and whatever he sees makes him sigh and look away. His scientific mind is in control, which I think is complete bullshit right now.



“Do you know your name?” Max asks the woman, finishing the last stitch at her shoulder and gently laying her back down. She barely winces, luckily for her.

I inhale deeply, catching the faint scent of sugarplum. “Poison,” I mutter, leaning on the folding table, the tarp crinkling under my fingertips. “She’s out of it right now.”

“I hoped I was wrong about the sugarplum,” he mutters.

“Well, I can smell it,” I reply, glancing longingly at the door. Every fiber in me itches to go to Seraphina.

“I need you here,” Max says softly, clad in nothing but low-slung sweatpants that are damp from his dash in the snow—another irritating fact. He ran out into the snow, barely dressed, for a woman who isn’t our omega.

I want to punch him right in his smug, pompous, rugged face. Let him bleed a little for making a decision that hurt our girl. “You don’t need me here,” I say, crossing my arms to restrain my impulses.

As Max ties off the last stitch, he sets his tools aside and peels off his gloves, tossing them in the trash, then he stands at his annoyingly tall height and slowly walks around the table, towering over me. He might be taller, but I can take him.

PART OF ME IS CURIOUS TO SEE WHAT HAPPENS IF I DO, BUT right now, we have bigger things to worry about.

“I said I need you here,” he repeats, pushing me back with a firm hand.

Grinding my teeth, I jut my chin out defiantly, locking eyes with him. “What, to hold your fucking flashlight?”

“Yes,” he says, pressing the flashlight into my hand before turning away to grab a chair.

“This is bullshit, and you know it.” Despite my frustration, I hold the flashlight steady as he lays out new supplies beside the unnamed woman on the table.

“Avery, don’t push me,” he warns, his hands moving with precision. To anyone else, he might seem fine, but he’s not.

I tilt my head, observing his methodical movements. “You know you messed up.”

“Avery,” he warns again, slowly tearing open an alcohol pad.

I let out a scoffing laugh, the light quivering slightly. “Maximillian,” I mock him. “She thinks we fucking abandoned her.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” he roars, yet he doesn’t look at me. It’s shocking. In all the years I’ve known him, he’s never lost his temper. “I know,” he says softly, “but I can’t—” His voice cracks. “I can’t just leave her to die outside. Someone is fucking with us.”

Before we can delve deeper into this, my phone buzzes in my pocket. “This isn’t over.”

“I expected as much,” he mutters.

I answer the call without checking the caller ID, already drowning in this day’s chaos. “Avery Griffin?”

“Yes.” A simmering rage builds inside me, reflecting how this day has spiraled from ecstasy with my girl to the edge of a cliff.

“Yes.” The woman on the line clears her throat. “I’m trying to reach Dr. Harrington. His phone’s going to voicemail, and I can’t get through on the house line. You’re listed as his emergency contact. It’s crucial that I reach him,” she rushes out.

Max, with his alpha hearing, slowly turns to look at me. Oh, now he decides to pay attention?

“Put it on speakerphone,” he demands.

Pushy bastard. The only—and I mean the only—reason I’m even following his orders is because I’m his emergency contact. Weirdly, that gives me all the warm fuzzies.

“Is Dr. Harrington there?” the woman on the phone asks. Her voice a little stronger, sounding a lot like the receptionist at the institute.

“I’m here, Melody. What’s up?” Max replies, confirming it is her. He continues to clean the stranger’s wound without a hint of hesitation. The guy is a beast in so many ways, always utterly calm in any storm. I once saw him catch a child who fell off a bleacher midair, then set them down without breaking stride in his conversation.

I can’t help but resent him a bit for it, me being a whirlwind of chaos and emotion.

“Yes, oh, thank the Fates. Max, we have a problem,” she says, pausing.

Problem? She just called him Max like they are old buddies. *A bit too cozy with our resident doctor, aren’t we, Melody?*

Max, feeling my intense stare, blinks dully at me before returning to his task. “Spit it out, Melody. I’m in the middle of something here.”

“Well, that’s just it, so are we,” she whispers, her voice tinged with urgency that sets me on edge.

“Where’s Grace, Melody?” I interject, a storm of nerves building inside me.

“There’s been an incident,” she replies, her voice tight.

Max’s only sign of distress is his repetitive swallowing, but he threads the hooked needle with expert precision. “Explain,” he demands, his voice eerily calm.

“Well, you see, Ms. Cicero and Grace—”

Unable to contain my emotions, I interrupt, “What was Thea doing with Grace?” I need to move, to pace, feeling restless. Setting the phone down on the table near the woman’s head, I begin to walk back and forth. Staying still is impossible—not with all hell breaking loose and us caught in the middle of a blizzard.

“Of course, yes, well... Last night, we had a blizzard meeting with the resident staff. The patients have been anxious, not really used to blizzards, so we thought some comfort was in order.” I can almost picture Melody twisting

her fingers nervously as she speaks. Meanwhile, Max doesn't miss a beat, continuing to stitch the woman's wound. "Dorothea and Grace both passed a mental stability test, and we decided to let them bunk together. It was Thea's idea."

*I just fucking bet it was.*

Pausing, I curl my lip into a snarl, glaring at the phone. "That's complete bullshit," I mutter. Grace hasn't passed a single test since they started implementing them. Her mind is too fractured. And Thea? She's nothing but a ticking time bomb of instability, likely manipulating the tests to appear normal.

Is that what happened? Did they trick the tests?

"Impossible," Max states flatly, not pausing in his work. He's been Grace's physician since he first stepped into the institute.

"I assure you, Grace passed the detector, and it flashed green," Melody insists. "She's even been talking."

"Talking?" Max glances at the phone briefly before returning to his work. "Let me speak to her."

"That's the problem, Doctor. They are missing," she explains slowly, as if we're children.

My heart sinks, and a lump forms in my throat. Grace spoke? My gaze shifts between Max and the phone.

"Email me the security footage, now," Max demands, the picture of composure. Fine, he can play it cool. I'll be the chaos to his calm, and I'm not scared to unleash my crazy side.

"Yes, sir," Melody replies softly. "The medication you created is effective. Many of the patients are having longer bouts of lucidity." She sighs, sounding dreamy and likely unaware that Max is nearly mated.

"That'll be all," Max says, glancing at me. I promptly hang up on Melody.

Silence lingers heavily in the room until Ashton and Devlin return to the kitchen, their faces ghostly pale. "She

locked us out,” Ashton mutters, sinking into a chair. Through our bond, I sense his deep grief, convinced we’ve lost our girl, but I can’t accept that. Having left her once, I’m determined not to make that mistake again.

“You two are grown men,” Max snaps, a hint of anger in his voice. “Break the fucking door down.”

He’s cute, forgetting that we literally enforced that door to also act as a safe room. No one is getting in.

“She’s crying and screaming. I don’t know what to do,” Devlin admits, pulling at his hair in frustration.

I snort and head toward the garage.

“Where are you going?” Ashton calls after me.

“You heard the alpha.” I mockingly echo Max’s authoritative stance, trying to provoke him amidst this chaos. “We’re grown men. I’m going to break down the door, saw through the floor, or rappel down to her room from the attic.”

Actually, that last idea sounds insane enough. Perfect.

“I can literally feel which one you’re going to do.” Ashton’s voice squeaks a bit.

“Yeah, and she’s worth it. I’m going to show her we choose her, and then...” I pause as I open the garage door and glance over my shoulder. “One of you is going to bond with her, because I’ll be damned if I lose her over this.”

I ignore their protests, or rather their lack of immediate support. They need to be all in with me, and while I feel a twinge of sympathy for the woman nearly dying on the table, she isn’t my priority. I’m not a healer. I’m a fucking delta. Seraphina’s delta.

In the garage, I walk to a corner and see totes stacked on DIY sliders from floor to ceiling. I grab the one labeled “climbing gear” and open it. Everything I should need is inside—anchor, ropes, gear. I rifle through it to double-check, then close the lid and hoist it onto my shoulder.

Turning around, I see my brother standing there, his eyes wide with disbelief. “You’re serious,” he drawls.

I scoff. Can't he feel how serious I am? Like I'd leave her in that bathroom, alone and crying. Never. Without responding, I walk back into the kitchen, where Devlin and Max are whispering to each other.

They both turn to look at me as I reenter, still clad only in pajama bottoms. Luckily they are flannel, because I'm about to freeze my barbs off.

"You are one crazy fucker," Devlin remarks, smirking. His amusement pleases me.

"And?" I glance between them and back at the woman. "Better figure out what to do with her, because I'm done here."

"Avery," Max starts.

"Nope," I cut him off. "You got us into this mess, you figure it out."

"We need to discuss Grace," he insists, grinding his teeth.

"What about Grace?" Devlin's attention shifts to Max.

Content to leave the alphas to their mess, I start up the back staircase, feeling Ashton close behind. I should have known he'd never let me do something insane alone. For that, I'm thankful.

"Can you tell me about Grace?" Ashton asks as we reach the landing on the omega side of the mansion. Seraphina's soft whimpers drift from her bathroom. What a mess.

I plan to make it up to her, big time. Maybe I'll buy her a cat rescue first and let her run it and collect all the cats she ever wanted.

"Avery?" Ashton prompts as we approach the steps to the nest.

I can't respond, though, because as I look up, I see four cats glaring at us. "Ain't no way," I mutter.

Minnow, the orange one, steps closer, looking ready to kill me, and rightfully so. His mama is crying because of us. He lets out a wowl that resonates deep within me.

“If they attack...” Ashton starts but doesn’t finish. What can he say? If they attack, we won’t do a damn thing.

“Take this,” I say, handing him the tote. I step up to meet Minnow’s eyes. “Hey.” I feel ridiculous talking to a cat, but I know they must sense Seraphina’s hurt. “I need to get upstairs to Seraphina. I promise once I’m there, I’ll let you four in.”

His amber eyes hold mine for a long moment before he chirps to the others. Slowly, they all descend the stairs. The last one, Sushi, flashes me a look of pure rage with her green eyes before hissing and jumping to the floor.

“That is...” Ashton starts, then shakes his head, climbing the steps ahead of me. “Odd.”

“They love her,” I whisper as the cats line up at the door, waiting for me to fulfill my promise. I’ve never seen all four work together like this. It’s strange, but then again, cats are mystical creatures. Who knows what goes through their little minds?

I glance away and pursue Ashton up the steps. He sets the tote down in the spacious, empty area. “What now?”

“I rappel,” I declare, walking over to the window on bare feet, a bundle of nerves churning in my stomach. An itchy sensation between my shoulder blades urges me to hurry. “Grace and Thea escaped the institute last night.”

“Impossible,” Ashton whispers, echoing my disbelief.

“Melody called this morning,” I continue, not fully convinced myself. “She said the patients were scared of the storm.” That doesn’t sit right with me. We’ve spent countless hours with those patients, and they’ve always loved storms, often begging to go out in them. Ashton’s expression tells me he shares my skepticism. “So Thea and Grace bunked together. When an admin checked on them this morning, they were gone.”

“Bullshit. Thea is up to something,” he snarls.

She definitely is, but what goes unsaid is how our society deals with the irreparably broken and criminal.

*Death.*

Max can cling to his control all he wants, but we all know Thea's abduction of his sister won't go unpunished.

"There's more," I say, adding fuel to the fire as I drag the tote to the window above Seraphina's bathroom.

"What more could there be?" Ashton walks over, barefoot, and starts pulling out anchors from the tote.

"Melody mentioned they tested everyone last night with the sensors," I say, watching his reaction closely. "Grace went green."

His face drains of color. I can almost feel the turmoil inside him, the whirlwind of emotions and the disbelief at the impossibility of that statement.

We all knew Grace's consciousness was locked behind a mental barrier, but the idea of Thea being the one to coax her out is unthinkable. We've been a steadfast presence in her life all these years. Maybe it's selfish, but Grace is more than just our sister—she's a part of us we can't afford to lose.

Ashton pauses mid-thought, his frustration palpable. "We can't just leave Grace behind."

"Exactly. Whoever is orchestrating this chaos is deliberately scattering our focus," I reply, feeling a surge of protectiveness. "They threw a body at Max, and made Thea and Grace vanish... It's a calculated move. They know we share a bond with Grace that even Max, as her biological brother, can't comprehend."

Ashton's face tightens with concern. "That leaves Devlin," he murmurs, his expression clouding over with a realization that seems to come from somewhere deep. Our twin bond thrums with unspoken fears and suspicions.

"Out with it," I press, needing to understand.

He hesitates, then shares the unsettling news. "Dev got a card from his mom yesterday. Amidst this storm."

A wave of frustration hits me. Hastily, I grab the rope and harness, my movements sharp with agitation. "How does that



even make sense? Are we supposed to believe this is just coincidence?”

“It’s legit,” Ashton insists, his voice tinged with gravity. “Devlin’s connections to his family are deeply rooted, especially when it comes to his siblings. He’d never leave them behind, no matter what, and his father...” He lets the sentence hang, but the unspoken implications are clear and dark. The history there casts long, ominous shadows we both understand all too well.

“Great, just what we need. More chaos, courtesy of his dear old dad,” I grumble, wrestling with the harness. My insides twist tighter with each passing second, a spring coiled to the brink. “Devlin needs a heads-up, pronto.”

Ashton gives me a solemn nod. “I’ll get a subtle message to him through the bond.”

A part of me wishes we hadn’t voiced these fears. The air feels saturated with worry now. “Alright, let’s do this. Seraphina’s waiting for us.”

He checks the rope one last time, ensuring my safety with a firm tug. “Be careful,” he says, his voice laced with concern.

I force the window open, the icy blast of air hitting me like a wall. The cold bites fiercely, but it’s nothing compared to the urgency blazing within me. I have to reach Seraphina, to slice through this tangled web of fear and confusion enveloping us.

“Avery,” Ashton calls out, his voice cutting through the whirl of snowflakes that dance chaotically into the room. “Bring our girl back.”

I nod, steeling myself against the storm. Stepping into the swirling snow, I’m greeted by a thousand icy pricks against my skin. It’s a minor discomfort, a triviality in the face of my resolve. I’m determined to reach Seraphina, to be her rock in this tempest.

*Seraphina*

**STRUGGLING** against the haze of my heat, I try desperately to claw back to consciousness. Lex didn't answer his phone. That's not like him. Not at all. My fingers tremble as I dial his number again, only to be greeted by voicemail, over and over. Lex, the kind of alpha who'd never ignore his sister, is undoubtedly in trouble. I can feel it deep in my soul, and here I am, stuck in a bathtub, cold and alone.

A cramp seizes me, squeezing the breath out of my lungs. I gasp for air, my eyes rolling back. Everything feels off—the scents, the sounds, even my vision, and my head pounds relentlessly. Worse still, my usually racing heart thuds slowly, ominously stalling. My heat could actually be the death of me.

It's a rare but not unheard of fate for omegas who go into heat alone, without a pack or even a temporary partner. The absurdity of it all makes me despise every part of being an omega right now. What would my headstone say? Here lies Seraphina Cicero, died from a lack of affection? It's ridiculous.

Another cramp hits, tightening my chest and sending a strange ache through my shoulders. Regret churns in my stomach like a bad taco. I shouldn't have locked that door, but now, I'm powerless to do anything about it.

My phone slips from my weak grasp. I need to get out of this tub, out of this bathroom, but my body betrays me, heavy and unresponsive. Trying to lift my hand is futile, it just falls back down.

*Get up, Seraphina*, I mentally urge myself, gasping for air. I manage to lift my shaking hand and force my eyes open again. My hand slaps against the tub, only to fall limply, a whimper escaping my lips. The blanket over my head suddenly feels like it's suffocating me.

I tug my hand back under the blanket, not yet ready to surrender, but deep down, I know I already have. This realization only intensifies my swirling emotions. Abruptly, a crash echoes through the room, debris sprinkling onto my blanket. A howling wind tears through the bathroom, and suddenly, someone lifts me out of the tub.

The blanket is yanked off my cold body, but my eyes are too heavy to open. My whole body feels exhausted, completely drained.

"Seraphina, Seraphina, stay with me," Avery urges. My Avery.

Why did I run? Oh, right, the moaning woman. This whole situation is just a mess.

"Come on, love, stay with me," Avery pleads, his palm warm against my cheek as he moves me. My head rests against his chest as he carries me from the chilly bathroom into the omega suite. "Max! Devlin!" His voice cracks with panic.

Footsteps thunder through the house, mingling with the distressed yowls of my cats. My poor babies.

"What's happening?" Ashton's voice is close, his presence sandwiching me between him and Avery. "Damn, it's because she stopped her heat midway."

"Is that bad?" Avery asks, his voice laced with panic.

Maybe it's the morbid amusement inside me, but all I can think is, *Yeah, looks that way*. I wasn't thinking straight. Well, now I am thinking straight, mainly because my heart is on the brink of stopping.

"Her heart is slow. We need Max," Ashton declares, his warmth leaving as he dashes away.

The house seems to tremble with the urgency of his racing footsteps.

“Hey, sweet girl,” Avery coos, cradling my face as he gently lays me down on what feels like a cloud. “I need you to tell me what you need.”

I can’t even open my mouth to respond, but the answer, ludicrously, is intimacy.

How messed up is that?

My survival hinges on one of my alphas... well, you know, or marking me to forge a bond. Maybe just the bite would suffice, considering the current dry situation, not counting what’s left from earlier.

I definitely don’t count that.

“Move,” Max commands, breaking into my thoughts.

I’m mad at him, but paradoxically, I need him too. The Fates are indeed cruel.

The bed dips under his weight, and his hands press against my cheeks, feeling icy though I know I’m the one who’s cold.

“Oh, sugarplum, I’ve got you,” he murmurs, his hands stroking my hair, but he doesn’t really have me. He didn’t before.

Rushing in with a stumble and a curse, Devlin announces, “I have your bag.” If only I could muster the strength, I would laugh.

Max leans over me, his lips briefly meeting mine before he pulls away. “Forgive me,” he whispers. “We never should have left you.”

*No kidding.*

“Max!” Avery’s scream pierces the air as my chest tightens painfully. “Bite her now!”

“Not without her consent,” Max whispers.

“If you don’t, we might lose her,” Ashton interjects, his voice steadier now.

“And if I do, she might never forgive us,” Max counters, a tear splattering against my face.

*Is he crying?*

Leaning down, Max kisses my neck, his canines grazing my skin. “Accept our bite, Seraphina Cicero. Accept us, and we will spend the rest of our lives making this up to you.”

A slight whimper escapes me at his promise of a lifetime together.

*Damn right, they’ll make it up to me.*

“ALLOW US TO MAKE AMENDS AND EXPLAIN,” HE CONTINUES, kissing my throat again. “Know that only an emergency could pull us from your side.”

*A woman was an emergency?*

In the background, I hear the others arguing.

“I love you, sugarplum. Please, live for me, live for us,” he chokes out, tears spilling onto my neck.

Oh, what the hell. “Yes,” I whisper, or at least I think I do. My thoughts must have voiced it.

Max’s canines sink into my skin, his venom, the essence that binds us, seeping into my veins. Our auras blend together, flooding me with a spectrum of emotions from the pack. This is the magic of a bond, the power only an alpha wields.

I gasp, feeling my heartbeat strengthening in my chest. My eyes snap open, and I clutch the sheets, a cry of pain escaping me, echoed by choked sobs around us.

Max holds me close, his hands warming my icy skin as the bond invigorates my system. I shudder, overwhelmed by their grief, love, and horror at what happened, their conflicted emotions over their decisions, and the unseen antagonist in our story.

Every beat of my heart pulses their feelings into my veins.

As the intensity subsides, Max gently licks the wound and pulls back, tears streaming down the face of my stoic scientist.

He whispers apologies, kissing my cheeks repeatedly. “I’m so sorry I left you.”

My body still feels heavy, not fully recovered, even as the bond settles behind my sternum. My eyes are open, but all I can focus on is the glaringly white ceiling, too bright for my eyes. Breathing becomes my sole focus as sensation returns to my limbs, a painful process reminiscent of thawing after hours in the snow.

“You owe me a snow day,” I croak out, my voice rough and dry. I clear my throat, my tongue feeling like sandpaper in my parched mouth.

Max responds with a laugh, kissing my eyelids gently, a sweetness that almost stings.

“Princess.” Devlin’s voice envelops me, the bed dipping under his weight as he settles beside me. “Will you accept my bite?”

“Yes,” I reply, turning my gaze toward him and blinking slowly. He leans in, his lips brushing softly against mine.

His breath warms my skin, his canines grazing my neck before sinking in. Again, a flood of emotions, thoughts, and images bombard me.

Nobody prepared me for what this feels like. It’s overwhelming and nearly too much to bear, but there’s potency in the bite, a sense of Devlin’s resolve to make everything right.

As the bond deepens, I’m not just feeling their love, I’m living it through their eyes. Each one of them holds a unique view of me that intertwines beautifully into a tapestry of affection. Through Max’s eyes, I’m seen as a pillar of strength, unwavering and resilient. Ashton’s gaze reflects a vision of me imbued with an inspiring light, vibrant and full of life.

Devlin offers a perspective where I am the essential heart of our group, a sense of belonging that resonates deeply. Through Avery’s eyes, there’s a playful spark, a recognition of my vivacious spirit that’s both exhilarating and heartwarming.

He sees me as a whirlwind of joy and mischief, a free spirit that binds our pack with laughter and spontaneity.

Their love really shapes who I am in so many ways, making me feel more whole and beautiful than I ever thought possible. Every little bit of our shared life feels like a warm hug of love and understanding, giving me this awesome feeling of being complete and truly belonging.

Above all, I understand what happened. I'm not sure I'm ready to forgive them just yet, and I push that sentiment back through the bond with a mental nudge. I am definitely willing to let them grovel. A lot. So much groveling. Even though I know I was being hormonal, one of them should have stayed with me.

Max pulls back, lapping at the wound to remove traces of blood, then he lifts me into his arms. His need to touch and cradle me is overwhelming. He brings me to the head of the bed where all of them huddle close, warming me.

The bond weaves through my system, almost like magic, pulsing into every inch of my being. It churns and pulses until it locks in place behind my sternum.

Having accepted them, I harbor no regrets, even if it was a move to save my life. I wasn't prepared to die yet. There are still things I want to do, places to visit, and new adventures awaiting me.

"Explain," I rasp. The fervor of my heat has dissipated, likely quelled by the brush with death. A part of me mourns how horribly askew everything went. My first heat was supposed to be a joyous celebration with the pack I've grown to love.

A deep desire to confront whoever spoiled this for me simmers within.

"We heard ringing," Max begins, sitting next to Devlin who holds me. In front of me, the twins huddle together under a blanket, "so we sent the twins to investigate."

"I read the text messages," I croak out. "Water."

“Got it,” Avery says, leaping out of bed and stumbling to the mini fridge in my room. He grabs a bottle then launches himself back onto the bed, making us all bounce.

Max snatches the bottle, flips off the top, and holds it to my lips. I don’t offer any snarky comments because they should dote on me right now.

At least until I understand exactly what went wrong.

“Someone blew through the gate,” Ashton says softly, “and then headed here. They dropped a woman off at our back door.”

“The one downstairs.” I clear my throat. “I eavesdropped.”

Devlin’s arms tighten around me. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I wasn’t thinking straight. I was mid-heat,” I reply, the past tense causing them all to pause. “When I woke up, I was alone and thought you all abandoned me. My first instinct was to run.”

“I’m so sorry you felt you needed to run from us,” Ashton says, his voice heavy with regret as he grips my cold foot. “We shouldn’t have left you. That was a mistake.”

I just nod and swallow, feeling their remorse. The weight of their apology hangs in the air, palpable and sincere. An omega needs her pack, especially during a heat. It’s about safety in numbers, because an omega is most vulnerable then.

*Wait.* “An omega is most vulnerable during a heat,” I muse, the realization deepening my understanding of their regret. I adjust myself to sit between Devlin’s legs, seeking comfort. “Keep going.”

“Max felt he had to save her,” Avery says, his voice laced with apology as he crawls back under the blankets. His eyes reflect his inner conflict and remorse. They flicker between their berserker hue and his normal shade, sitting on the edge of those primal urges demanding protection. He seems a bit miffed with Max, and rightly so.



Contrition fills Max's expression. "I thought I was doing the right thing," he murmurs, "but I see now how it hurt you. I should have been here."

"Moving on," Devlin says, his arms wrapping tighter around me, his embrace conveying his apology. "The power went out, and I went to deal with that. We were all trying to protect you, but we lost sight of what you needed most."

"The entirety of this happening during my heat..." My voice trails off, sensing the guilt emanating from each of them. What's even more disturbing is that all of this reeks of sabotage.

"There's more," Devin adds, his voice a mixture of sorrow and concern. He nuzzles my neck, inhaling my scent. When he purrs, I can't help but melt a little. "The woman is my realtor."

"I was on my way back to the bakery to check if she'd gone there, but then I ran into you," Max adds softly.

"We went back to that building yesterday and found a few things," Ashton says, keeping his gaze down but looking at me. "Your sister's stitching was there."

Chills race through me, unbidden and uncontrollable. It feels like I'm trapped in a haunting fairy tale, and while I love to read fiction, living it is another story.

"Cunt, that was the word stitched into fabric," Avery snarls. "And one of your pottery pieces."

"She was working on it the day I last visited her." It seems impossible that Thea could be behind all this. She's been in the institution the whole time. That's impossible, isn't it? Or is it? As I look at each of them, I realize they believe she has a part in everything that's gone wrong.

As I look at each of them once more, I see their collective guilt shimmering in their gazes. Their desire to make amends almost feels overwhelming, and it's clear in every word and gesture. They each have their own way of expressing it, but the underlying message is the same—they are sorry, and they want to make things right.

“There’s more,” Max says again, his ominous tone filled with an undercurrent of regret. “As I was stitching up our realtor, we got a call from the institution.”

I can’t suppress the full-body shiver that races through me. This is the reality I was hoping wasn’t true. I lick my lips and hold Devlin tightly.

“According to Melody, the storm scared all the patients,” he says, but his tone betrays his skepticism. “The overnight nurse decided to test everyone for a slumber party. Grace and Thea both tested green.”

That impossibility doesn’t fully register, as my gut tells me something has gone terribly wrong.

“They are gone,” Ashton admits, his reluctance clear, and yet, I’m grateful he’s the one who breaks the news.

“I tried calling my brother,” I say, furrowing my brows in worry. The uneasy feeling in my gut intensifies. “He didn’t answer.” I blink away the threat of tears.

Lex is my rock, the one man who’s always been there for me. He’s my brother, always checking in, and somehow, he always knew when I was in danger. Now, with my heat over and my mind clear, I’m certain he’s in danger. Through the bond I now share with the guys, they can feel my alarm. Each of them reaches out to touch me.

At the center of all this chaos is Thea, my cruel, deranged sister. She orchestrated this. How she did it, I can’t fathom, but I know it’s her doing.

“We need to get out of here,” I say, the urgency to find Lex burning inside me, making my legs itch and my body buzz with discomfort.

“I thought you might say that,” Avery says, sitting up so quickly the blanket flies off him. “Shower, all of you,” he orders, giving everyone a pointed look. “You all smell like spunk and a sex fest. I’m going to hike to the shed and dig out the snowmobiles.”

“You can’t use your bathroom,” Ashton finally adds, glancing between his brother and me.

“How did you get into the bathroom?” I ask Avery.

“I rappelled down from the attic and broke the window,” he replies with a shrug, as if it wasn’t the most extreme action he could have taken.

“Excessive,” I murmur.

“Hey, we reinforced that door for safety,” he points out, gesturing to the bedroom door. “And breaking that window did us all a favor. It shattered way too easily. Now we can replace it with reinforced glass.”

“As soon as the storm eases up, I’ll get it replaced,” Devlin announces.

“I’m going to shower,” I announce, even though it’s the last thing I feel like doing. I attempt to extricate myself from Devlin’s arms, but his kiss on my neck sends a wave of arousal spilling across the room, drawing their gazes to me.

Despite my rising need, I just can’t.

“Want help in the shower?” Avery offers with a wag of his brows.

I flash them a soft smile at Avery’s playfulness, but it’s one I don’t feel completely. “No,” I state as firmly as I can muster. “I can’t until... My trust is gone.”

I sense their collective sigh through our bond. While I mostly forgive them and understand their decisions, there’s a part of me, the omega side, that yearns for them to grovel, to beg for my trust again.

“We understand,” Devlin says, pressing another kiss to my neck. “Use my bathroom. One of us will watch the door.”

Safety—that’s what I need right now, and Devlin offers it to me. I’m unsure where this day will lead, but one thing is clear—Thea is at the heart of this chaos.

## *Seraphina*

I CAN'T ENTER the omega suite, not even to grab clothes after my shower in Devlin's room. As I emerge, wrapped in a towel, I find a change of clothing on the bed. I sink onto the end of his bed, my mind whirling relentlessly.

Usually, my best thoughts emerge in the shower, but today, my memory is foggy. I barely recall scrubbing their scent off me, washing my hair, and cleansing my face. It's all a blur, my mind struggling to navigate the day's events.

Entering this heat, I was brimming with hope, and I haven't allowed myself to mourn the shattered image I held about my heat. At the sanctuary, they ingrained the sacredness of our heat in us, defining our essence as omegas. It's what sets us apart from those who don't experience it.

This should be the time when we feel most loved, most cherished. A part of me suspects Thea might have sabotaged it. Throughout my youth, she constantly undermined my joy.

Back in elementary school, long before we knew her designation, she spitefully told the only friend I ever made that I secretly thought she'd be a beta and befriended her only because I deemed her the ugly friend.

Her words were cruel and heartless. No matter how vehemently I denied it, the damage was irreparable.

This drove Lex and me even closer. We were each other's sole confidant, and until Thea left for the sanctuary, it was just the two of us. To this day, we receive odd glances. Even at the institute, when we visit Thea, people look at us strangely if we

walk in with linked elbows or if I lean on him for a hug or support. To them, we don't act like typical siblings, like twins.

Growing up with only each other forges a bond unbreakable by anyone else. Lex isn't just my sibling or twin or oldest friend, he's my anchor in this constantly changing world.

If Thea hurt him...

A tear escapes, rolling down my cheek. I press my hands against my face, resting my elbows on my thighs, as I fight to breathe.

"No, no," I exhale sharply, reining in my emotions. I can't let my mind wander, not until I have undeniable proof. Until it's irrefutable that Thea is behind all that's gone wrong, I refuse to believe it. I'll hold on to doubt until there's no other choice.

The memory of my parents approving Thea's new medication strikes me hard. At the time, it seemed logical, even though they understood her troubled nature and the challenges she was born with. The last time I spoke to them, they insisted the institution was her best chance for a better life. They wanted to see her improve, yet they handed her care over to Lex and me.

Rushing to get dressed, I nearly trip over my feet, pulling on the fleece leggings, thermals, and bulky sweater. The socks are thick and warm, and they match the boots on the floor. Slipping them on, I don't even bother to tie them before flinging the door open. There, across the hall, sits Devlin.

"What's wrong?" Devlin asks, rising from the floor. He hasn't showered yet and looks disheveled, but his attention sharpens as I pause at the threshold, my wet hair dripping onto my sweater.

"Where's Max?" I ask, stepping into the hall, probably looking a bit wild.

"Everyone was showering, and then we planned to meet in the kitchen to decide our next steps," he explains. "What's up?"

“I need to do this just once,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “Where’s my phone?”

“Do what?” He retrieves it from his pocket and hands it to me. “You left it lying around.”

“Just one of my quirks,” I reply, ignoring his question and cradling the phone to my chest. I lean up on my tiptoes and give him a quick kiss on the corner of his lips, feeling his stubble before pulling away. “Come on, I need to confirm something.”

I rush toward the kitchen, heart pounding, trying not to trip over my untied laces. Miraculously, I make it without incident. Skidding into the kitchen, I open my phone and call my parents, hitting the speakerphone button.

As the phone rings, Max and Ashton turn toward me. Avery walks in from the garage, bundled up from head to toe.

“Seraphina, sweetheart? Is that you?” My mom’s lyrical voice washes over me, a reminder of my childhood and the very reason for this call.

“It’s me, Mom,” I say, tasting the bitterness of adrenaline.

“How are you? Are you safe from the snow? Parts of Terra have lost electricity, but we’re okay here,” she rambles on.

Knowing I need to interrupt her or she’ll just keep going, I cut in. “Ma, did you approve a new medicine for Dorothea?”

“Goodness no,” she scoffs.

At her response, Max’s eyes widen. In two strides, he takes the phone from my hand. “Omega Cicero,” he greets formally. “This is Dr. Harrington, one of Dorothea’s physicians.”

I hear a sigh from my mom over the phone, and in the background, one of my fathers murmurs something, prompting a hush from her. “What has she done now?”

Avery can’t suppress a snort, shaking his head ruefully and scattering snow everywhere.

“I just need to confirm that you didn’t approve her new treatment,” I press.

“Why would I?” Mom’s voice tinges with irritation. “I gave that girl all my love, and she still turned out... broken.” Her sigh, heavy with guilt and defeat, echoes through the line.

This isn’t the moment to delve into her parenting.

Max, with a murmured urgency, asks, “Who approved the treatment?” His eyes meet mine, searching for an answer I don’t have.

I shake my head helplessly. “Did anyone from the institute call?”

“NOT A SINGLE SOUL,” MOM REPLIES FIRMLY. “SERAPHINA, what’s happening?” Concern threads through her voice before she rushes on. “I know Thea doesn’t deserve your love, but please, put yourself first. Whatever she’s done, let the deltas handle it. I hear you’ve found a pack.” The hope in her voice almost overwhelms me.

I can’t bring myself to burden her further with Thea’s deeds. “Don’t worry, Mom, I’m putting myself first.”

I’m still determined to find Lex.

Her sigh of relief is almost tangible. “If you’re with Dr. Harrington, does that mean...” She trails off, realization dawning.

“Omega Cicero,” Max attempts to interject.

“Oh, no, no, call me Mom,” she insists. In the background, I hear my dad’s bombarding her with questions, but now’s not the time for that conversation.

Max clears his throat, conceding, “As you wish, Mom.”

“You chose Pack Armana!” my mom exclaims, her voice ringing with delight. Max seems oblivious to how she just played him.

“Omega Cicero,” Devlin interjects, but as soon as he speaks, my mom bursts into sobs. “How about we all visit when the snow melts, yes?”

Devlin gives me a questioning look, unaware of the significance of his offer. I nod in approval, sensing the surprise

and pride flooding through the pack bond from Ashton.

Realizing that Devlin stayed behind while the others left with Max, I wonder if he often skips out on Max's adventures. I honestly don't think he goes along with them.

"Yes, of course," Mom agrees wistfully. "I'll see you soon. Send Lex my love."

"Love you, Ma," I say, hanging up before any more questions can arise. A heavy silence falls over us.

"If your parents didn't approve the medication, and neither you nor Lex did..." Max starts.

"Then who the hell did?" Avery bursts out, his voice echoing in the kitchen.

I bite my cheek, thinking. "Is there a way to check the call logs?" I ask, looking at the guys hopefully.

Avery cracks his knuckles with a coy smirk. "Ashton, bring me my laptop."

"It's already here," Ashton says, gesturing to the table. "The email from the institute with the security footage should be in."

"No way," I say, unable to hide my amusement. The thought of Avery, who hardly ever sits still, adeptly using a computer, seems almost comical.

"Yes, indeed," Avery replies, glancing out the window. "We have about six hours of daylight left. We need to figure out their location and head out ASAP." He slides into the booth, setting up his laptop in front of him. His focus narrows as his fingers dance rapidly over the keyboard.

"Ashton, make sure the snowmobiles are ready to go incase Avery forgot fuel," Max instructs.

Ashton barely waits for the command to finish before dashing out the door, but then the phone rings.

He halts and turns to glare at it, mirroring the rest of us. An ominous feeling cloaks us. Nobody wants to answer.



“Screw it,” Devlin decides, snatching the phone and setting it on the counter, switching it to speaker. “Pack Armana,” he answers with a guarded tone.

“Son,” comes Devlin’s father’s booming voice.

Devlin looks up at us, nervously licking his lips. This call is too timely to be a coincidence, but who orchestrated it? Thea isn’t this coordinated, or have I underestimated her all this time? The institute claimed she tested green. What if she’s been lucid all this time, and it’s just my bias to assume those committing terrible acts are legally insane? The thought that she might be fully aware of her actions is chilling.

“I need you to come to the condos immediately,” Devlin’s father demands.

“Father, have you seen the weather? We’re in the midst of a blizzard,” Devlin responds, his voice strained.

“Well, if you had chosen to live in the condos like the other heirs, this wouldn’t be an issue,” Devlin’s father retorts, his voice almost a growl.

“Father, our omega is in the middle of her heat,” Devlin reasons, but his father is unmoved, snorting disdainfully through the phone.

“She has Max,” he says venomously, sending chills down my spine. “Besides, I think you’d want to speak with your mother after all these years.”

The ensuing silence suffocates us, thick and heavy, as though the air itself is saturated with tension.

Devlin’s sharp intake of breath echoes through the room.

“Ah, now I have your attention.” Councilman Armana chuckles, as if this is some twisted joke. “I expect you in two hours.” The line goes dead.

“Fuck!” Devlin exclaims, pushing away from the island and tugging at his hair in frustration.

“We split up,” Max suggests softly, causing Devlin to spin around.

“We can’t,” Devlin counters. “That’s what he wants, or whoever’s pulling the strings right now. I don’t... I don’t know what to do.” He wears every emotion on his face as though splitting up is the last thing he wants.

*Same, Dev, same.*

“I do,” Max states, his voice even and controlled. He looks firmly at Ashton. “You and Devlin go to your father’s condo. Split up once you’re downtown. Do not let them know you are there, Ashton. Get Devlin’s mother out.” His gaze hardens as he turns back to Devlin. “You know what you need to do.”

Devlin exhales deeply, his eyes lifting heavenward before he nods.

I want to ask what he needs to do, but there’s no time to delve into it.

“Security footage from last night is useless,” Avery interjects, breaking my train of thought. “Someone shut down the cameras. My guess? We’re dealing with a group of individuals.” He speaks almost to himself, lost in thought.

Avery’s voice carries a pensive tone, as if he’s piecing together a puzzle in his head. “The phone records are intriguing. Thea took calls from one Davey Finch.”

“What?” I whisper, shock coursing slowly through my veins before my heart races. “The guy I danced with...” Memories of the girls’ warnings about him being trouble flash in my mind. “Why was he calling Thea?”

Avery, his gaze fixed on the screen, shakes his head. “He called her almost daily, always at seven in the evening.”

“After I left,” Max notes. “Check the visitor logs.”

“On it,” Avery responds, his fingers flying over the keyboard, occasionally hitting a key with extra force. “Son of a bitch,” he mutters. “Every Thursday, an hour before visiting hours ended.”

“What was Davey Finch doing there?” Devlin voices our collective thoughts.

“He didn’t come alone either.” Avery spins the laptop to show another alpha.

I gasp, feeling lightheaded as I approach the screen and slump into the chair. “I know him,” I say, looking up at Avery. “You know him as well.”

He frowns, spinning the laptop back. Realization dawns on him. “The alpha who was stalking the bakery,” he says. “The one you bumped into outside the dress shop.”

I nod, the events of the past month no longer seeming coincidental.

“What are they doing with Thea?” I wonder aloud.

“The better question is what was Thea planning?” Max counters before turning to me. “Can you think of anywhere Thea might hide?”

My gaze drifts, lost in thought, over Avery’s head. As kids, I always knew where Thea would run to when in trouble—the treehouse. Our dads built it for all of us, but Thea claimed it as her own sanctuary. She always believed the world owed her something, and often, we stopped trying to convince her otherwise.

Biting my cheek, I drop my head into my hands. Thea has no one here. She pushed away every friend she ever had, except Lex and me. We were the only ones who stuck around, mostly because she’s our sister, and we couldn’t imagine abandoning her.

“Does Finch or that other guy have a cabin?” I ask, lifting my head and blinking against the harsh overhead lights. I’d much rather be slick deep in my heat right now.

“He does,” Avery mutters, his fingers racing over the keyboard. “Not too far from here.” His dark brows knit together as he squints at the screen. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“What did you find?” I lean over the table, my stomach churning with every ticking second, fearing for Lex.

“Finch’s father owns a cabin near the delta base,” Avery explains, tapping his finger on the tabletop. “But Finch himself invested in a real estate venture three days ago.”

Devlin slides into the seat beside Avery, his eyes scanning the screen. “Can you get an address?”

“I’ve got one, and it’s just two miles in that direction.” Avery points toward the looming mountains. “Guess who the agent was on the sale?”

“Where is the agent now?” I ask, glancing around and noticing the table’s emptiness.

“In the spare room,” Max answers casually. “She’s in and out of consciousness with a fever. Needs a healer.”

Guilt twists my features. A woman’s life teeters on the edge, yet this whole time, all I thought about were my own needs.

“Alright, Devlin, you go to your dad,” Max instructs, crossing the kitchen to fetch a thick winter coat, gloves, and a hat for me. “Avery, you’re with me.”

I stand up slowly, slipping into the coat. Max surprises me by kneeling at my feet, beginning to zip me up.

“No matter what happens, Seraphina, you must follow my instructions. Do not—and I mean do not—go off on your own,” Max says earnestly, his eyes, stormy blue, locking onto mine. Underneath his intense gaze, I sense his worry resonating through our bond. There’s fear about an uncertain future, fear of failing me, and the dread of possibly losing me today. “Whatever we face, don’t stray from my side. I can’t protect you if you aren’t there.”

“And you,” Avery chimes in, snapping his laptop shut, “can’t hold me responsible if anyone lays a hand on you. They’ll be dead.” His tone is so casual that for a moment, I question if I heard him right.

“Who am I riding with?” I divert my gaze from Avery’s menacing look to Max, who smirks at me.

“With me, sugarplum. With me,” he replies, his words tinged with innuendo.

I can’t help but roll my eyes at his playfulness.

Max’s hand closes gently around mine, his touch grounding. “Let’s get going,” he says, a determined glint in his eyes that tells me he’s ready to face whatever comes our way.

I wish I had even an ounce of his alpha confidence, but with our pack split, dread churns in my belly. Somehow, I have a sliver of hope holding me together, telling me that all of this will work out, and at the end of the day, we will all return home to this estate.

*Home.*

## CHAPTER 33

### *Berlin*

COLD AIR WHIPS around me as Ashton and I navigate toward the heart of the city. Snow blankets the ground, untouched by plows, transforming the streets into a desolate, white expanse. Approaching the city's outer limits, we finally encounter a few plows, leaving behind trails of salt and dirty snow.

The snowmobile glides with ease, yet I find myself slowing down as the towering council buildings loom ahead. Tall and domineering, they are an explicit statement of power and importance. I can't help but think that whoever designed these buildings was compensating for something.

Ashton suddenly veers down a side street, his figure quickly concealed by the heavy, fat flakes of snow. I know I can't keep delaying what's inevitable. Reluctantly, I steer toward the towers, my heart heavy with caution.

Of course my father would choose today to summon me with the threat of my mother's safety hanging in the balance—or perhaps he's merely testing me. Either way, if she's truly there, Ashton will find her. If this is a bluff, it will be the last time my father plays such a game.

*You know what you have to do.* The words echo in my mind, stirring a whirlwind of anxiety. I'm acutely aware of my father's expectations and his dark legacy. What I doubt is whether or not I can follow through with what's expected of me.

The tale of the original seven alphas who restored our world haunts me. Their sons, craving power, ended their fathers' lives, setting a gruesome precedent. I'd like to think we've evolved beyond such barbarism, but the lengths to which my father might go to so he can control my mother leave me questioning our so-called civility.

A flicker of hope that he's merely bluffing still burns within me, but it's a fragile flame, easily snuffed out by reality.

I pull the snowmobile to a stop in front of the council building's doors. A surge of nerves ignites in my stomach as I pat my pocket, feeling the small baggie hidden inside. It's my contingency plan, an ironic one at that.

Stepping off the snowmobile, I take a deep breath, steeling myself. The cold air bites at my face, but it's the weight of my decision that chills me to the core. As I push through the doors, I brace myself for whatever lies ahead, the baggie in my pocket a constant reminder of the line I may have to cross.

Sugarplum.

The idea came from the alpha who broke into Seraphina's apartment, and it was Ashton who procured what I needed. Well, it wasn't exactly for me, per se. Max wanted it for lab testing, but I had other plans.

Tomato, potato—or however that saying goes.

As the automatic glass doors slide open, a blast of warm air envelops me. Inhaling the comforting warmth, I methodically peel off my helmet, followed by my scarf and hat.

“Mr. Armana.” The elderly doorman, Parker, bustles over with an eagerness that belies his age, reaching out for my winter gear.

“Parker,” I greet him warmly, noticing his round, robust figure. He always wears a smile, which I suspect the sherry in his hidden flask helps maintain. “Why on Terra are you working today? It's not like there are many coming and going in this weather.”

He assists me out of my coat, a gesture I find unnecessary but endearing. “Well, sir, your father insisted I be here today.”

A hint of concern crosses my mind. “Please tell me you didn’t shovel your way here.” At nearly eighty, Parker is in good health for a beta, but that doesn’t mean he should overexert himself.

He snorts—a real, hearty snort. “Certainly not. I attached a blade to my truck and plowed my way in. Quite the adventure, I must say.” His eyes twinkle with a hint of mischief.

I can’t help but smile at his spirit. “Just stay hydrated, Parker.”

“Now you sound like my wife.” He chuckles, using the beta term for his life partner. “You better head on up. Your father is in quite the mood. He stormed in here with a woman so fierce, I swear her glare could incinerate him on the spot.”

My heart sinks at his words, the last vestige of hope that my father hadn’t found my mother dissolving. “Thanks, Parker. Have a good day,” I whisper, my feet carrying me across the plush red carpet toward the elevators.

As I press the button to ascend, a knot of anxiety forms in my stomach. My father’s unpredictable moods are challenging enough, but the presence of this woman, likely my mother, adds a layer of complexity I’m not sure I’m ready to face. The elevator doors close, and as I ascend, I mentally prepare myself for whatever awaits me in my father’s lair.

It had to be that card—the one my mother sent to congratulate me on our pairing. As the elevator dings open, I step inside, pressing the button for my father’s floor. My thoughts swirl chaotically, the realization that my father found my mother because of me gnawing at my conscience.

Lost in my turbulent reflections, I barely register the presence of another person until a voice startles me. “I don’t recall you ever being this unaware,” a man comments, abruptly hitting the emergency stop on the elevator.

The elevator jerks to a halt, jolting me back to reality. My gaze snaps up, meeting eyes that are eerily familiar yet



different. He stands a few inches taller than me, his hair brushing his shoulders, and he looks like he's walked off a movie set rather than being in this elevator. His green eyes twinkle with unexpected mirth.

"Excuse me?" I manage, my voice a whisper as I struggle to place this man who looks so hauntingly familiar.

He shakes his head, his thick beard brushing his chest. He's a mountain of a man, rugged and utterly out of place. "How can you not recognize your own father? Really, Dev? I'm disappointed."

My heart plummets, my face draining of color. Disbelief paralyzes me. It's been over fifteen years since I last saw him. I'm left speechless, my mouth opening and closing wordlessly as I absorb the shock.

His lips twitch, clearly amused by my stunned silence. It's in those eyes—my eyes—that I finally see the undeniable truth.

"I bet you're here to rescue your mother," he states casually, crossing his arms and leaning back against the elevator wall. He seems completely at ease with having stopped the elevator. "Can I tell you a secret?"

My voice fails me, and I can only nod, still reeling from the revelation.

He inches closer, a conspiratorial glint in his eyes. "Your mother... She's not who your father thinks she is." His words are a whispered bombshell dropping into the silence of the elevator.

Confusion mixes with my shock. "What do you mean?" I finally find my voice, although a tremor runs through it.

He smiles a knowing, enigmatic smile. "Let's just say your mother has always been a few steps ahead of your father, and now it's time for you to catch up."

Who is my father, really? And my mother—what secrets does she hold? The man in the elevator, my father, just revealed a mystery I didn't even know existed. Now, I must

confront what lies ahead with a new perspective, one that changes everything I thought I knew about my family.

“Excellent. Your mother chose to get caught,” my father reveals nonchalantly.

“She did what?” The shock that gripped me melts away, replaced by disbelief.

“You found a mate, yes?” He continues, not waiting for my response. “Your mother regretted missing out on your life. She decided enough was enough, hoping the world had changed enough that your... father wouldn’t ruin our lives again.”

“Father holds a grudge,” I murmur, an understatement if there ever was one.

“Yes, he does. Even so,” he murmurs, shaking his head, “I think breaking the bond with him is what shattered him completely.”

Broken bonds... A thought strikes me, connecting to something Seraphina mentioned about Thea finding her fated mate but him choosing another. Was this what finally broke her too?

“Why are you here?” I ask, my mind racing. “Why would she believe...” I trail off, shaking my head in disbelief. “You need to get out of here.”

He waves off my concern. “Hush. Theo and Clara have been dying to meet you,” he says, throwing out names as if I should recognize them. “Your mother knew what she was doing. Your other father is around here somewhere, and your siblings are at the hotel next door.”

My back slams against the elevator wall as the weight of his words hits me. Am I hyperventilating? Yes, I think I am.

“Head between your knees, boy,” my dad instructs, pressing on my shoulder, guiding me down. “Breathe.”

Bent at the waist, I struggle to draw breath after breath, my body trembling uncontrollably. Through the bond, I sense Ashton’s concern, a distant anchor in the storm of my emotions.

“Slowly now,” my father coaxes, helping me back up. “I hope you have a plan because, frankly, I’m worried you don’t.”

His words are a jolt, pulling me back to reality. I straighten up, steadying my breath. A plan... I need a plan. My father’s unexpected appearance, the revelations about my mother, my siblings next door, it’s a lot to process, but one thing is clear—I can’t afford to lose control. Not now.

I meet my father’s eyes, a newfound resolve steadying my voice. “I have a plan. It might not be perfect, but it’s all I’ve got, and with everyone involved...” I pause, considering the weight of our actions. “We’ll make it work. We have to.”

My gaze darts around for a camera. “Ashton is making his way up the back entrance,” I whisper. Spotting one in the corner, I curse under my breath for forgetting about the ever-present surveillance.

“Oh, don’t worry about that little guy,” my dad says nonchalantly, smirking at the camera and waving his hand. “Say hello to Sven.”

“Who the hell is Sven?” I ask, utterly confused.

“You’ll meet Sven,” Dad assures me, clapping me on the shoulder with a grin. “He’s the new guy. We like Sven.”

“What?” I’m struggling to keep up.

“Sven,” he repeats, pressing his palm to my forehead as if checking for a fever. “Really, son, are you feeling alright?” His nostrils flare, and he pats me down. Finding the sugarplum in my pocket, he swiftly pockets it himself. “This will do.” He winks. “Alright, here’s what you’re going to do—”

“Wait.” I raise my hand, needing a moment to process. I have been without family for so long, and now he’s just barging in, acting like some hero. It’s disorienting, to say the least.

Static crackles in the air, breaking my train of thought. “Jack is en route to the Armana suite,” a voice announces over the speaker. There’s a pause, then more static. “That sugarplum would be perfect in his tea. Looks just like sugar.”

“Jack is here?” The mention of another of my fathers, Jack—always the more serious yet laid-back one—brings a whole additional layer of complexity. Jack, Torren, and now... Sven. Sven!

Dad suddenly slams his hand on the elevator button, causing the cabin to jostle. “Come on, we have an alpha to kill.” For a brief moment, grave seriousness replaces his usual playful demeanor. “Thank you. You didn’t have to keep an eye out for us. That was our job, and we failed you.”

At hearing my father’s admission, a swell of emotions threatens to overcome me. I’m a grown alpha with my own pack, my own omega, but his words cut deep. It’s a strange feeling, wanting to break down yet knowing I can’t afford to.

“We’re sorry, Dev.” Jack’s voice comes through the speaker, his tone laced with regret. “I can’t imagine what you went through to keep us safe.”

“What you did for us,” Dad adds, “it was love in its purest, most sacrificial form. You could have found us, but you didn’t.”

Their words and apologies are a balm to wounds I didn’t fully realize I had, but there’s no time for tears, not now. There’s too much at stake, too much to be done, and with my fathers here and my pack waiting, I feel a strength I hadn’t known was there. It’s time to face what’s coming and end this once and for all.

Choking out the words, heavy with unspoken pain, I manage to say, “I couldn’t. The thought that you had more kids weighed on me. The possibility of my father discovering them haunted me, knowing he’d do to them what he did to me...” My voice trails off as emotion tightens my throat, rendering me unable to continue.

“Well, let us make up for lost time,” Jack interjects as the elevator doors open. He stands there, his grin and warm brown eyes instantly comforting me. Despite his lanky build, Jack’s presence as an alpha is commanding, his aura filling the hallway.

“Found a delta scaling a wall,” Sven’s voice crackles over the speaker.

Shaking my head, I try to ground myself in this surreal reality. Torren, meanwhile, opens the sugar packet and casually dumps its contents into the sugar bowl on the cart. “Oops, me thinks I used too much,” he says nonchalantly.

Is this a bizarre alternate reality? Everything feels off-kilter.

“Come on now, don’t I look great in this uniform?” Jack twirls, showcasing the bellhop outfit.

“You’re wearing a bellhop uniform,” I point out, still trying to process everything happening around me.

“Yes, and twenty bucks says he doesn’t even notice,” Jack replies, then his tone turns serious. “I can bring this in, but it’ll be up to you to make sure your dad uses the sugar.”

I swallow hard, nodding. Are they really plotting to just end him?

“Let’s go,” Jack says with a whistle, striding down the hall.

I pause for a moment, then turn to Torren. “I’ll be right here,” he assures me, stepping out of the elevator. He opens a newspaper and casually strolls toward a couch in the hall, whistling nonchalantly.

Realizing I’m not alone, I find my resolve strengthening. I follow Jack, keeping my pace even and casual.

“Room service,” Jack singsongs at the door.

My father opens it, his gaze immediately landing on me. He seems to look right through Jack, not recognizing him as a former packmate. “Son,” he grunts at me. To Jack, without even a glance, he says dismissively, “Set it inside. Ignore the screams.” He chuckles darkly. “Sometimes omegas don’t know what they want.”

AS I STEP FARTHER INTO THE ROOM, THE SCENE BEFORE ME IS nothing like I expected. My mother isn’t screaming or distressed. Instead, she sits calmly in the corner, casually filing her nails.

*What the hell is going on?* The question echoes in my mind, but I remain silent.

“Dammit, how did you get out of the binding?” My father’s voice, sharp and accusatory, cuts through the room as he moves past me, his focus entirely on my mother.

I’m momentarily rooted to the spot, taking in the sight of my mother. Her long, wavy brown hair cascades down her back, and her blue eyes meet mine with a warm, reassuring smile. There’s a natural, effortless beauty about her, a perfect blend of strength and vulnerability, but my father is a barrier between us.

“Drink your tea, lest you give yourself a heart attack,” she murmurs without looking up from her nails. Her voice is calm, almost indifferent. The scene transports me back to my childhood—to the arguments, the raised voices, the feeling of helplessness as a child caught between two warring parents.

I can see my mother’s subtle strength now, the minute tremors in her hand as she files her nails—a sign of controlled tension, not fear. My father, in his ignorance, might see it as a sign of weakness, but I know better.

My mother’s scent fills the room. It’s not tinged with the acrid smell of fear or anxiety. She’s in control, a stark contrast to the woman who used to break under my father’s scowl.

Realization dawns on me. During our years apart, she had time to grow and change. She’s been preparing for this moment, mastering her emotions and becoming an unshakable force.

My father, oblivious to the subtle power shift, sips his tea, still believing he holds the upper hand. He doesn’t notice the change in my mother, nor does he see the resolve in my stance.

I step closer, my presence now more pronounced. “Mother,” I say softly, ensuring my voice carries a tone of respect and love.

She looks up, her smile widening as she sees the man I’ve become. In that smile, I find a silent acknowledgment of

everything we've been through, everything we've lost, and everything we are about to reclaim.

The moment is palpable with tension as my father settles into the small reading chair across from my mother, the dining cart creating a physical barrier between them. Jack's quiet exit from the room is like a silent herald of what's to come. My heart pounds in my chest, the rhythm a drumbeat to the unfolding drama.

"Sit, boy," my father commands, though the only seats in the room are already taken by my parents, leaving no place for me to sit. His suite, modest by council standards, reflects his diminished status among the elite—a mere shadow of his ancestors' glory. He's become nothing more than a name, a placeholder in a legacy that has lost its sheen.

Grasping the situation, I pull a stool from the kitchen counter and sit on it, my posture controlled yet alert. The layout of the room, my mother seated near the window, splitting the space between the kitchen and the living area, and the doors to my father's private quarters, all form a backdrop to this intimate yet charged confrontation.

The cool wood of the stool grounds me as I focus on my parents. I push back the creeping fear, reminding myself that I'm not alone in this. My other fathers, including my biological father, are somewhere close by, their silent support a bolster to my resolve.

"Now, I hear you have two children," my father says, running a finger across his lips in a habitual gesture of contemplation. His eyes roam over my mother, searching for a reaction, but she remains stoically indifferent. His eagerness is palpable, a barely concealed desire to know if she bore him a potential omega heir.

The question hangs in the air, a loaded inquiry that seeks to pry into the lives he abandoned. I feel a surge of protectiveness, a need to shield the truth from his grasping curiosity.

"Yes, I have two children," my mother replies calmly, her voice devoid of any emotion that might give him satisfaction.

“And they are none of your concern.”

Her dismissive tone seems to take my father aback, but only momentarily. He recovers quickly, his expression hardening as he leans forward, trying to impose his presence.

In the charged atmosphere of the room, my mother’s calm demeanor is a stark contrast to my father’s growing frustration. She sets her nail file down with deliberate slowness and prepares her tea, intentionally avoiding the sugarplum laced sugar.

“My point is that they are, by law, mine,” my father asserts, his arrogance palpable as he pours liquor from his flask into his teacup, filling it halfway. “And I’ve heard Clara hasn’t yet bloomed.”

A minute twitch in my mother’s eye indicates her irritation as she sips her tea. “Again, what is your point?” Her voice is steady, a testament to the strength she’s cultivated over the years.

“I want her tested,” my father insists, throwing his hands up as though the decision is already final, “to see if she’s an omega. I have a mage ready on the health floor. We could know immediately.”

His approach has shifted from demands to manipulations, a sign of his desperation.

“No,” my mother states, setting her cup down with a quiet clink.

“What do you mean, no?” My father’s face flushes red. He busies himself with making his tea, adding two generous scoops of the sugar. It’s enough to incapacitate him, but a third scoop would be lethal.

As my father stirs his tea, my mother’s expression remains unreadably calm. “I said no,” she repeats firmly. “Theo and Clara do not belong to you.”

“You forget I make the laws,” he retorts, pouring cream into his cup.



My heart races as I watch him raise the cup to his lips, knowing the potential consequences of what he's about to do. My father, blinded by his own sense of entitlement and power, fails to see the trap he's walking into.

I can't help but admire my mother's resolve and her ability to maintain composure under such pressure. In this moment, she embodies the perfect balance of strength and subtlety—a true matriarch protecting her own.

“And yet, you do not own them,” I counter calmly, my voice steady despite the tension simmering beneath the surface.

“Theo is my heir,” my father asserts, clinging to his skewed perception of familial rights.

I can't help but let out a laugh, the absurdity of his claim resonating through the room. His scowl only deepens. “And what would I be, father?” I challenge him.

“Oh, we both know you hate it here,” he retorts dismissively. “Tell me, is Theo an alpha?”

My mother remains silent, a master of the art of patience, sipping her tea and letting my father's frustration mount. His scent turns acrid with irritation, filling the room with the smell of his impatience.

“Is he?” he presses, his voice rising in urgency.

“No,” she answers, her voice calm and measured.

“What do you mean, no?” He leans forward on the dining cart in disbelief, nearly causing a clatter. Catching himself before he spills his tea, he sits back, trying to regain some semblance of control. With forced calmness, he lifts his cup and downs the rest of his tea in one long gulp.

*By the Fates.*

I fix my eyes on him, watching every subtle reaction, every flicker of emotion. The room is thick with tension, the air almost tangible with the weight of unspoken truths and hidden agendas.

In this game of power and secrets, my father is a man scrambling to hold on to a crumbling façade of control, but the dynamics have shifted, and the truth is clear to all but him. He is no longer the puppet master he believes himself to be.

As he sets his empty cup down, I see the momentary flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. It's a fleeting glimpse into the vulnerability he's always hidden behind a mask of authority and dominance.

Shaking off my shock, I answer for my mother. "Father, not every child sired by an alpha becomes an alpha."

"That's ridiculous. Every man in your pack is an alpha, and you are an omega. I chose each of you for your genetics," he blabbers on, showing just what kind of person he is. "I don't believe you."

"Theo's sire is Sven." My mother hides her smile behind her teacup.

"Who the fuck is Sven?" My father's outrage lashes around the room.

"Sven is my mate," she reveals with an unflappable demeanor.

My mother's revelation sends shockwaves through the room, but it's her composure that truly stands out. As my father rages, demanding to know who Sven is, she remains the epitome of calmness, her control unshaken.

"Impossible," my father scoffs, his disbelief palpable, but the sweat beginning to form on his brow and the way he fumbles with his tie betray his growing unease—actions so out of character for a man who prizes appearances above all.

My mother leans forward, her voice steady and clear. "Did you know that everything the council stated as fact is actually wrong? A fully formed pack can find another scent match and choose to join that pack."

My father seems to choke on his own indignation, ripping off his tie in a moment of uncharacteristic disarray. My mother's face lights up with a smile, one that's both genuine and free, a stark contrast to the man unraveling before us.

“Sven is a delta,” she adds softly, her words like the final nail in the coffin of my father’s delusions. “Theo is a delta.”

His reaction is a mixture of disbelief and outrage, as if she has tarnished his legacy, but the sad truth is, he’s been the architect of his own downfall all along.

“What have you done to me?” he exclaims in horror, his actions growing erratic as he knocks over the dining cart. The sugarplum scatters across the floor, but my mother calmly sips her tea as the cart crashes, taking my father down with it.

I sit here, watching my father’s world crumble around him. The man who once loomed large and formidable in my life, unyielding in his authority, now lies as a pitiable figure on the floor, undone by his own schemes.

At this moment, I realize my mother’s true strength. She’s endured, outwitted, and ultimately triumphed over a man who sought to control her destiny. Her resilience is a beacon, guiding me in how to lead, how to protect, and how to love.

As my father struggles on the ground, his legacy crumbling like the sugarplum around him, I turn to my mother. In her eyes, I see not just the mother who raised me, but a powerful omega who has reclaimed her life.

This is the turning point, the moment where the old ways give way to the new, and I, along with my pack, my family, will be at the forefront of this new era—one built on respect, equality, and love.

My father, in his arrogance, fails to see the end coming. For years, he believed himself untouchable, invincible in his own twisted world.

“Did you truly think I came here for pleasantries?” My mother’s voice cuts through the room, laced with years of pent-up rage. She looks down at him with a gaze that pierces his façade. “Did you believe I was here for you?” Her eyes meet mine, softening as a smile touches her lips. “I never came here for you.”

Foam spills from my father’s mouth as he twitches on the ground. The sight is jarring, yet there’s a sense of inevitability

to it.

“No, I came to kill you,” she declares, her voice resolute. She rises from her seat, spilling tea as she tosses her cup onto my father. She crouches before him, her voice steady and cold. “Your reign of terror is over. Finally.”

Detached, my mother watches as my father draws his last breath, staring up at the omega he once abused. I had always imagined I would be the one to end his tyranny, but no—this privilege, this right, has always belonged to her.

I look at my father’s lifeless body and feel nothing. No love, no hate—only a deep sense of peace that his threats against my life and pack are forever silenced.

As he fades away, my mother’s shoulders sag with relief. She turns to me, her eyes brimming with pure happiness. “Devlin,” she whispers before rushing over and wrapping her arms around me, her soft sobs shaking her body.

It takes me a moment to respond, but then I embrace her tightly, her familiar scent enveloping me like a childhood balm. Suddenly, I’m six years old again, frightened by a storm outside, and there she is, my mother, crawling into bed beside me to soothe my fears, her scent a cocoon of love and comfort.

I want to savor this moment, to hold on to the feeling of being safe in my mother’s embrace, but I can’t. Not yet.

Pulling back, I put my mother at arm’s length.

“What is it?” my mother asks, her instincts instantly switching to alert mode.

“My mate is in danger,” I say, urgency coloring my voice.

Without hesitation, she moves to grab her coat, surprising me. “Let’s go help her. I’ve wasted enough years being held back by fear,” she declares, glancing at my father’s lifeless body before turning back to me. “You’ve got backup now, Devlin. I’m sorry it took me this long.”

Her words resonate with a deep sense of regret and resolve. I nod, accepting her apology, though my thoughts are

already racing ahead to Seraphina and the others. I need to be with them now.

The door bursts open, and Ashton strides in, followed by my dads, including the one I never met before. “Do you know this one?” Torren asks, his gaze moving between us.

Ashton, however, seems unfazed by the gravity of the situation. He whistles at the sight of my father’s body and comments, “Nice job, Dev.”

I’m about to correct him, to say I didn’t do it, but my mother speaks first. “A job well done, don’t you think, Devlin?” she asks, tilting her head slightly.

I understand her tactic immediately. If word spreads that she was the one who killed him, she would be putting her own life in danger, but if it’s believed that I, as his heir, was responsible, then they would see it as a rightful act of succession in our society.

“Yes,” I reply quietly, a mix of reluctance and necessity in my voice. I don’t want his death on my conscience, but it’s a necessary illusion to protect my mother and keep our pack safe.

There’s a weight to this moment, a turning point that marks the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. As I stand there, surrounded by my newfound family, I feel a sense of unity and purpose. We’re a pack now, bound not just by blood but by our shared experiences and the trials we’ve overcome.

With a final look at my father, I turn to face my family. “We need to move fast. Seraphina and the others are waiting.” My voice is steady, the role of a leader settling naturally on my shoulders.

As we leave the room, leaving the past behind, I step into the future with a newfound determination. We are stronger together, and whatever challenges lie ahead, we will face them as one.

## CHAPTER 34

### *Seraphina*

THE WIND WHIPS around my face, its frigid touch making the exposed skin on my neck sting sharply. Bundled up in layers of thick, insulated clothing, I'm grateful for Max's insistence on wrapping me up so well. Huddled against his back, I feel his warmth seeping through, a stark contrast to the cold air around us.

Gripping the edges of Max's jacket, I trust him to navigate the snowmobile expertly through the dense woods. Avery leads the way on another snowmobile, but I can't shake off the suspicion that we're going in circles. I've recognized the same landmarks at least three times, suggesting we've backtracked.

When Max finally slows down, coming to a stop beside Avery, the sudden silence feels alien after the constant hum of the engines. Max removes his helmet, his face a picture of discomfort from the cold. Avery, doing the same, looks equally affected by the freezing temperature.

"How far?" Max snuffles.

Avery points ahead, his breath visible in the icy air. "Half a mile. Straight ahead," he confirms.

"Alright, let's head directly there—"

"What?" I can't help but interject, my anxiety spiking. Struggling with my helmet, I fumble with the clasp in my haste. Max, ever attentive, helps me with it.

Avery looks at me, a mix of determination and concern in his eyes. "I agree with Max. We should go directly. I've

circled back numerous times, and there isn't an area they haven't scouted."

"But it could be an ambush," I counter, worry evident in my voice. "Driving straight up to the cabin might be exactly what they expect. And what if Thea is behind this? I still can't wrap my head around her being part of something so... dark."

"Unfortunately, we don't have the luxury of time," Max reasons, his eyes scanning the increasingly heavy snowfall. "Visibility is getting worse. We need to move."

I nod, albeit reluctantly. The urgency is clear, but so is the danger. As we ready ourselves for the next part of our journey, Avery suddenly tenses, his focus shifting to something in the distance.

"Wait," he whispers, his hand raised for silence.

We all freeze, listening intently. At first, all I can hear is the wind and the snowflakes' gentle patter, but then, a distant rumbling sound reaches us, growing louder, like another vehicle approaching. The possibility of it being either friend or foe sends a shiver down my spine, and I instinctively move closer to Max, ready for what might come next.

"Quickly, hide the snowmobiles," Avery whispers urgently. We immediately respond, pushing our vehicles into a dense thicket of bushes nearby. The physical effort leaves us breathless in the cold air, our breaths visible as ragged puffs of vapor.

We seek refuge behind a large tree, cautiously peering out. The dense pine trees in this part of the mountains provide excellent cover. The rumbling sound grows louder, and soon, the beams of headlights cut through the dim surroundings, revealing a large, black SUV navigating the woods. It's clear from the tracks that this isn't their first pass through the area, just as Avery had suspected.

"They are patrolling," Max says under his breath, a hint of worry in his voice. "Likely Thea's people. We need to be extra careful, and if Alpha Finch is involved, he has the council's

backing.” The implication is clear—they could act with impunity.

After the SUV passes, we cautiously step out from behind the tree. “We need a new plan,” I state, feeling a surge of determination. “We can’t just blindly walk into a trap.”

Max nods, his expression serious. “First, we scout the area. Understanding the layout and any guard positions will help us plan a better approach.”

Moving with caution, we use the cover of the trees and the terrain to remain concealed. The snowstorm, though a challenge, also provides us with a cover of sorts.

Approaching the cabin, we spot two figures standing guard about fifty feet from the porch. Wrapped in heavy clothing with rifles in hand, they seem prepared for trouble. The cabin itself is surprisingly large, more akin to a multi-family vacation home in the woods than the quaint, one-room cabin I had envisioned.

This realization adds another layer to our predicament. Not only do we have to contend with patrolling guards and potentially Alpha Finch’s involvement, but the cabin’s size and layout also present their own challenges. We have to be strategic, careful, and above all, we need to stick together to face whatever lies ahead.

“We’ll need to take them out quietly,” Avery suggests, his gaze vigilant as he scans for additional threats.

The implication of his words hits me hard. Wait, does he mean to kill them?

Max nods in agreement, and before I can process it all, he’s pulling me along with him. We split up to position ourselves for a coordinated attack. Despite the numbing cold, adrenaline courses through me, heating my blood. This moment is critical—the safety of the kidnapped, my sister’s fate, and the future of our pack all hang in the balance.

I await Avery’s signal, a soft whistle that somehow slices through the wind’s howl. At the sound, we’re in motion.



Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I brace for what's to come, my heart racing from fear and determination.

The whistle shatters the silence, and we leap into action. Max and Avery, with their honed precision, swiftly neutralize the guards. They move so quickly that by the time I emerge from behind the tree, it's over. I feel sluggish in comparison, my movements slow against their swift efficiency.

With the guards down, we regroup and advance toward the cabin with caution. It stands ominously before us, dark windows set against the swirling snow. Every step feels laden with both dread and determination.

"We need to check for more guards," Max murmurs, his eyes meticulously scanning the cabin's perimeter. "Stay here. Avery and I will circle around."

Alone? I nod, a knot forming in my stomach as they vanish into the snow-covered landscape. Left by myself, my thoughts race uncontrollably. I think of my kidnapped brother, the potential involvement of my sister, and the intricate web of betrayal that led us to this moment. The cold nips at my skin, but it's the pervasive uncertainty that truly chills me.

Minutes stretch on, feeling more like hours, until finally, Max and Avery return. Their grim expressions speak volumes before they even exchange words.

"There's a back entrance," Avery informs us, his eyes conveying the uncertainty of the situation. "No additional guards outside, but inside is a different story. We can't be sure."

"We'll have to be ready for anything," Max adds, reaching for my hand to give it a reassuring squeeze. Even through our gloves, the gesture is comforting, and I imagine the warmth of his touch.

Approaching the back of the cabin, we tread lightly, the snow muffling our footsteps. It's not too deep here, only about a foot, thanks to the tree cover acting as a natural barrier. Reaching the back door, I take a deep breath, trying to calm

my racing heart. This is the moment we've been preparing for—the confrontation.

Max cautiously turns the handle, finding the door unlocked. We share a look, a silent agreement, before he gently pushes the door open, and we step inside.

The cabin's interior is dimly lit, with the only source of light coming from a flickering fireplace in the main room. Shadows dance eerily across the walls, creating a sense of foreboding. A stale scent hangs in the air, hinting at long unused rooms and hidden corners.

We find ourselves in the main area of the cabin's ground floor. It's an open plan with a galley kitchen, a dining area, and a living room. Entering through the back led us into a mudroom. We move through the cabin in silence, methodically checking each room on this floor—two bedrooms and a bathroom, all empty. The tension escalates with each passing moment.

Above us, there's an open landing with a balcony that overlooks the space we're in. Narrow hallway doors line the second floor. *Where are they?* I wonder silently.

Suddenly, a muffled sound captures my attention—a whimper coming from behind a door at the end of the hallway. I signal to Max and Avery, and we approach the door with caution. It looks innocuous, like a supply closet, but in our world, appearances can be deceiving.

Max gives me a nod of encouragement. Carefully, ensuring the door remains between me and any potential threat, I turn the knob. The door creaks open, revealing a shadowy, cramped space.

There, huddled in the corner, is a bound and gagged figure—Lex, my twin brother. A wave of relief washes over me, but it's quickly replaced by concern. Where are Thea and the alphas?

The sight of Lex in such a vulnerable state ignites a protective fury in me. We rush to his side, untying his bonds and removing his gag. His presence here is more than just a

kidnapping—it's a personal attack on our family. With Lex now free, our focus shifts to finding the others and confronting the threat head-on.

Lex looks like they have beaten him to within an inch of his life. Large, round bruises disfigure his once handsome face, and the sight sends tears prickling behind my eyes. I hover over a particularly nasty bruise on his shoulder, where blood has clotted against his skin. I resist the urge to touch it, knowing I must wait until he's safe to tend to his wounds properly.

Max's eyes meticulously scan each mark on Lex, mentally cataloging them with grim determination. His analytical gaze speaks volumes about his protective instincts.

As Lex leans heavily against me, it's clear his condition is worse than I feared. His eyes, usually brimming with life and mischief, now reflect a haunting trauma. "Seraphina," he whispers hoarsely, a mix of relief and fear lacing his voice. He doesn't want me here, and I can sense his concern for my safety. "You shouldn't have come..."

But how could I not? Lex is more than just my brother, he's my twin, my other half, the one who's always understood me without needing words.

"We have to get out of here," Max says urgently, eyeing the only window as a potential escape route, albeit a risky one. "How bad are your wounds, Lex? Can you move?"

With a glance at me, Lex sighs, resigned to revealing the truth. "Three of my ribs are broken, and one of them stabbed me," he confesses, coughing and wheezing. "I think there's something wrong with one of my lungs." He waves away Max's attempt to examine him further. "Let adrenaline do the work now. You can check me later. You're Grace's brother, right?"

Max, with flared nostrils, gives Lex another once-over, his gaze analytical. "Yes."

The sound of approaching footsteps signals that we're not alone. Avery peeks out, his expression grave. "The alphas are

here. Finch and the other man are still missing.”

We brace ourselves, readying for what might come next. Max positions himself protectively in front of Lex and me, while Avery stands by the window, evidently formulating an escape plan.

The door bursts open, and two alphas allied with Thea step in. Their hard, unyielding eyes survey the scene before them.

“We’re not here for a fight,” I declare, stepping in front of my family, my voice steady though my heart races. I can feel Max’s displeasure at my bold move, but I stand my ground. “We only want Lex and Grace.”

The alphas exchange a look, their stance unwavering. “Leaving isn’t an option,” the one with a scarred face says coldly. Who are these men, and how did Thea recruit them?

Tension crackles in the air, a palpable sense of impending violence. Then, on an unspoken signal, one of the alphas lunges, and chaos erupts around us.

Max confronts the attacking alpha, moving with precise and forceful actions. Meanwhile, Avery and I concentrate on shielding Lex. The cramped space of the room limits our movements, adding to the desperation of the fight. In a protective gesture, Avery pushes me behind him, shielding me, his eyes turning a brilliant blue as he loses control.

Amidst the chaos, the door swings open again, and Thea appears, her expression one of shock. The fighting halts abruptly as everyone’s attention shifts to her.

“Thea,” I say, my voice a blend of disbelief and anger. “Stop this.”

She glances at Lex, and for a fleeting second, I see regret in her eyes before it’s quickly masked by determination.

“Stop,” she commands authoritatively, and to my surprise, the alphas cease their aggression, backing away on her order. This display of authority is unexpected and raises questions about her role in all this.

A tense silence envelops the room. Lex, leaning heavily against me, looks at Thea with a mix of confusion and hurt. “Why?” he asks, his voice strained with emotion.

Thea’s internal struggle is evident as she attempts to find the right words. She looks at us, her gaze lingering on Lex and me. Our shared past as siblings seems to mean nothing, both connecting and dividing us. She looks different—her hair a dark brown, her skin glowing with health. Dressed in a black turtleneck and matching pants, she seems oddly at peace, even happy.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” she begins, her voice shaking. “I didn’t mean for it to go this far.”

I’m skeptical. Thea has played the victim before, portraying herself as someone trapped by circumstances, when, in reality, she always had a choice. Her actions now seem too familiar, and I can’t bring myself to believe her.

There is always a choice.

The room remains charged with unsaid words and unresolved tension. It feels like we’re on the edge of uncovering secrets and lies. Max, standing close, his tone demanding answers, asks, “Explain, Thea. What’s going on?”

Her hesitation, the way she looks at us, suggests there’s more to this story than we know. I can’t shake the feeling that we’re only seeing the surface of a much deeper plot, and as much as I want to understand, I can’t let my guard down. Not with Thea. Not now.

Outside, the storm mirrors the chaos within the cabin. The wind’s howls seem to make the entire house quiver, as if resonating with the chaos of our emotions.

In the tense silence that follows Thea’s declaration, Lex’s eyes sweep the room, a mix of relief and fear still evident, but his gaze holds determination. “Seraphina,” he whispers, his voice hoarse but firm, intended only for my ears, “we can’t leave without Grace.”

I nod silently in agreement. Leaving her behind is not an option.

Max's reaction is immediate and visceral. At the mention of his sister, his protective instincts flare. "Where is she?" he demands, his voice laced with concern and urgency.

Thea hesitates, her eyes gleaming with an emotion that eludes my understanding. I feel like I don't even know her anymore, but I wonder if I ever even did.

"I won't leave without her," Lex asserts, his voice strengthening with conviction. "She's *mine*."

I freeze, turning to look at Lex, then at Max. The implication dawns on me—they are mates. The pieces of the puzzle slowly fit together, yet so many questions remain unanswered. Is this all a misunderstanding, or something more?

This revelation adds urgency to our situation. We can't simply back down. Finding Grace is imperative.

Thea, visibly conflicted, glances between Lex and the door. Her voice is barely audible as she speaks. "She's downstairs, locked in a room. I can show you."

Suspicion coils in my stomach. She's hiding something, and what about the man who confronted Violet and me? Where is Finch?

Max's expression hardens, his gaze fixed intently on Thea. "You'll lead the way," he commands, his tone leaving no room for argument.

We're deep in a web of lies and secrets, with danger lurking at every turn, but one thing is clear—we must find Grace, and fast. Thea, whether we like it or not, is our guide in this treacherous game. As we prepare to follow her, I steel myself for what lies ahead, determined to protect my family and uncover the truth.

We cautiously proceed, with Thea guiding us down into the basement. Max and Avery flank her, vigilantly watching every move she makes. Lex, relying on me for support, leans heavily against me. Each of his steps is a struggle, but he's determined not to give in to his injuries. The house feels like

an elaborate labyrinth, where danger could lurk around any corner.

As we descend the creaky, splintering wooden stairs, the atmosphere becomes increasingly tense. The air grows colder the deeper we go into the bowels of the house. At the bottom, the basement divides into two separate rooms. Thea halts in front of a door straight ahead, her hand wavering over the doorknob. Max, driven by urgency, nudges her, his impatience tangible.

The door opens, revealing a small, poorly lit room. Grace huddles in the corner, her eyes wide with fear and surprise. The relief and confusion that wash over her face at the sight of Max tug at my heartstrings.

“Max?” she mutters, her voice trembling with emotion.

Max is at her side in an instant, examining her for any harm. “We’re getting you out of here,” he tells her, his voice embodying the protective nature of a brother. The scene is so touching it reminds me of my own deep connection with Lex.

Suddenly, Thea’s voice cuts through the moment. “No.” The single word from her prompts us to spin around and face her. She stands at the doorway, a smirk playing on her lips. In one swift motion, she slams the door shut and locks us inside.

Trapped, we turn to face one another, a mix of shock and realization dawning on us. Thea’s betrayal, the precariousness of our situation, and the uncertainty of what she has planned next hang heavily in the air.

“That bitch,” Avery mutters with a smirk, slashing the tension in the room. I just wish I could share his amusement.

## CHAPTER 35

### *Seraphina*

**MAX REACTS FIRST**, banging his hand against the door. “Thea!” he shouts, his voice a turbulent mix of betrayal and desperation, but his call is met only with the hollow echo of his voice in the confined space.

I turn to Lex, his face pale against the stark bruises. Our eyes meet, silently communicating volumes. He’s clearly in pain, exhausted, and showing signs of malnutrition.

“Grace,” he chokes out, the raw emotion in his voice resonating through our twin bond.

Grace, still huddled in the corner, lifts her gaze at the sound of her name. Fear is evident in her wide eyes, but they light up with recognition upon seeing Lex. “Lex?” she murmurs, her voice a frail whisper.

Lex attempts to move toward her but winces, betraying the extent of his injuries. I’m by his side in an instant, helping him sit beside Grace. He wraps his arms around her, and I gently say, “Easy, Lex,” while assessing the gravity of his condition.

Grace’s reaction to Lex is immediate and tender. Her distant gaze sharpens as she inhales deeply, recognition dawning in her eyes. She offers me a tentative, slightly awkward smile, so different from the vacant look I had seen in her before.

Then, Lex purrs for her, a deep, comforting sound that seems to envelop both of them.



Max, giving up on the door, turns his attention back to us. “We need a plan,” he declares, surveying our surroundings. The room is basic, typical of a basement, but notably lacking any windows. Only a single bulb swings overhead, casting long shadows on the walls that appear freshly constructed.

Avery kneels beside Lex, carefully examining his ribs. “We need to stabilize him first,” he says, his voice calm yet urgent. He glances at Grace periodically, a hint of something unspoken in his eyes, but he remains in control, respecting their reunion.

I reach out to Grace, offering her my hand to help her up. She accepts it, but her eyes dart around, clearly trying to make sense of the situation.

“We’re going to get out of here,” I tell her, trying to sound confident, even though our escape plan is still unclear. In this dim, confined space, with the storm raging outside and the uncertainty of our situation, one thing is clear—we need to find a way out, not just for ourselves, but for Lex and Grace too. Our survival depends on it.

“Grace and I... we’re mates,” Lex blurts out, and you could hear a pin drop in the room as we all take a moment to let that sink in.

Max’s eyes are wide as he stares at Grace, a mix of shock and big brother worry all over his face. “How’d that even happen?” he asks, looking like he can’t believe his ears.

Chewing on her lip, Grace looks torn between wanting to spill everything and holding back. Her eyes keep darting to Lex, like she feels a magnetic pull to him. “Thea,” she starts, her voice a bit shaky. “She snagged your beanie right after you visited one day.” She gives Lex this cute, warm smile that makes him light up.

“My beanie,” he repeats, grinning like it’s some sort of private joke between them.

Grace nods, and it’s obvious she’s barely hanging onto reality, knowing Lex is her mate. Max moves like he wants to

comfort her, but then he stops short when she reaches for Lex instead.

“She would sit next to me, and I’d catch this amazing smell,” Grace continues, sinking back down next to Lex and curling up against his side. My brother starts purring, and it seems to give her the push she needs to keep talking. “Every Friday, she’d hit me with his scent. Then by Sunday, when you guys would visit...”

“It’d be gone,” Avery chimes in, looking Grace over like he’s trying to make sure she’s all good.

“Exactly,” Grace says, giving Lex’s chin a playful nudge. “Then Thea throws this curveball, asking if I want to meet her brother. She had his beanie, and I just needed that scent.”

Max kneels down in front of his sister, his face like an open book of emotions he can’t quite pin down. “She set you up with a scent match,” he says, piecing it together.

Turning to Lex, I need to know. “How long have they had you here?” I’m scared to even touch him, afraid I’ll hurt him more.

He makes a face, like he’s not too keen on answering. “You’re not going to like it.”

“Just spill it, Lex,” I say, feeling a knot of worry in my stomach.

“I got jumped last time we met,” Lex tells me, reaching for my hand. I can’t hide my shock. “Don’t give me that look. I was just leaving the apartment and bumped into this council dude at the end of your street.”

“Who?” Max demands, his voice sharp.

Lex scrunches up his face, trying to remember. “Guy looked kind of squirrely. Had a fresh mating mark.” He’s frowning hard now. “Name’s something like a bird...”

My eyes go wide as it hits me. “Finch,” I blurt out.

“Yeah, that’s him. One second, he’s chatting about the weather, the next, his buddy’s pistol-whipping me.” Lex

reaches up to his head, wincing as he touches a dried blood spot.

Max shakes his head, concerned. “You probably have a concussion too. You guys can’t move.”

The wheels in my head are turning fast. “So we know who, but why?” Thea’s twisted plan is making a bit more sense, but there are still missing pieces.

Max catches on to something. “Wait, did you say mated?”

“Yeah, the guy’s got a fresh mate mark,” Lex confirms.

As the details start to piece together, the bigger picture of Thea’s scheme becomes clearer, but it’s like we’re still missing a few puzzle pieces.

“Finch isn’t mated,” Avery mutters, pacing around. He runs his fingers along the wall, as if he’s searching for a way out.

Lex insists, “Oh, he definitely is. He reeks of Thea. I only pieced it together when I noticed they are always tailing her, like loyal puppies, and there’s something weird about her scent.”

Thea mated? My mind races. Why would she mess with our lives like this? Was it all just some twisted game to her?

I press for more details. “Off how?”

Lex hesitates, then says, “I think she might be pregnant.”

“What?” Max almost roars. “That’s impossible. The patients aren’t allowed—”

“They were there after you left,” I add, biting my cheek. Everything is spiraling out of control.

“We can’t just sit here,” Avery cuts in, giving the door a frustrated kick. “We need to find a way out now.”

The room, with its sparse furnishings and that stubborn locked door, feels like a prison, but our need to escape, to get Grace and Lex to safety, fuels our determination. I need to confront Thea and get answers.

Approaching the door, I inspect it. “We might be able to break it down,” I suggest, though I’m not sure how easy it’ll be.

Max joins me, his hands exploring the doorframe. “It’s old, just like the door they salvaged. We might have a chance if we work together.”

We’re about to charge at the door when a faint scratching sound makes us halt. We all freeze, straining our ears. The scratching intensifies into a series of thuds, and the wood gives way.

“Stand back,” Max whispers, positioning himself in front of Grace and Lex.

The door creaks open, revealing a silhouette backlit by the hallway light. Our hearts pound with uncertainty—friend or foe?

Then relief washes over us. It’s Ashton, his expression a mix of worry and resolve. He’s a twist we didn’t expect, bringing both hope and a new challenge.

As Ashton steps through the broken doorway, the tension dissipates. His arrival changes everything, and for a brief moment, we’re caught off guard, but there’s no time to waste. We need to act, and with Ashton here, we just might have a fighting chance.

“Ashton?” Max’s voice mirrors my shock. His unexpected appearance is a huge relief.

“I found them,” Ashton calls out, scanning each of us. “Had a hunch you’d be in trouble.”

Avery moves closer, his face set in a hard line. “How did you get in here?”

“Through the door,” Ashton says matter-of-factly. “Dodged Thea’s patrols, but we have to hustle. They are up to no good.”

Devlin appears, stepping into view. Relief floods me as I see he’s okay. Whatever he faced with his father, he came through. Now, our whole pack is together.

“We need to move,” Devlin announces, quickly checking Grace and Lex before turning to Max. “I’ll help them get out. My folks have a car waiting. Avery, Ashton, can one of you give me a hand?”

“Nose goes!” Avery chirps.

“Alright.” Devlin smirks, accepting the task. He gently lifts Lex as Max helps Grace.

Suddenly, a door slams upstairs, and the sound of boots thudding across the floor reaches us. Tension tightens in my gut as I walk toward the basement steps, eyeing the closed door above—the only exit.

A chill of foreboding runs down my spine. Shouts echo through the cabin, mixed with unsettling laughter. As I breathe in, a horrifying realization dawns on me.

The cabin is on fire.

Panic rockets through me as the acrid scent of smoke becomes undeniable. “The cabin’s on fire!” I yell, panic and urgency blending into my voice. Everyone’s attention snaps to me, their expressions morphing from relief to sudden alarm.

Max quickly peeks out of the small room, his eyes widening as he takes in a slow, cautious breath. “We need to move, now!” he commands, taking Grace’s hand and hurrying her toward the stairs. Ashton, Avery, Lex, and Devlin follow close behind, moving as quickly as they can.

It hits me then—Thea lured us into a basement with no escape and then set the cabin ablaze. My heart sinks, aching from her deep betrayal. She went to extreme lengths to harm Lex and me, and there’s no way to reconcile such a malicious act.

Worse yet, I know help isn’t coming anytime soon, not in the middle of a snowstorm and not out here in the wilderness. Sure, Devlin’s parents are on standby, but the cabin is on fire. Unless they can dump water on the home, we are screwed.

“Seraphina.” Devlin’s voice breaks through my thoughts as he steps in front of me, his hands gently cradling my face.

“Princess, you need to focus. We’re going to get out of here, okay?”

I nod, trying to believe in his words.

Avery steps up, determination etched on his face. “I’m going to check the damage,” he announces, nodding toward some gallons of water near the edge of the room. “Soak some fabric in water and cover your heads with it.” He hurries up the stairs, testing the doorknob. “It’s not too hot yet, but it’s locked. Ashton, we need you!”

The urgency of the situation grips us all. We have to act fast, and every second counts. I steel myself, ready to do whatever it takes to escape. This isn’t just about survival now, it’s about thwarting Thea’s twisted plan and protecting the people I love.

Ashton steps up beside us, his eyes glowing blue as he waits for Avery to join him at the steps. Ashton’s and Avery’s bodies seem to grow larger as they surge toward the door. Their combined strength crashes into it, and they burst through like an unstoppable force.

Smoke billows down like a thick fog, enveloping us.

“Here.” Devlin suddenly appears beside me, holding out his shirt. I hadn’t even noticed him stripping off his clothing, but he hands me his wet shirt. “Over your head.” He doesn’t wait for a response, draping his wet shirt over me.

As I adjust the shirt, the sound of wood bursting and cracking ahead signals the encroaching flames.

“Let’s go!” Avery’s voice echoes down to us.

Coughing and struggling to breathe in the smoke, Max takes the lead. “Stay low!” he shouts, his voice barely audible over the roar of the flames.

Devlin grabs my hand, holding on tightly as he leads me through the blinding, smoke-filled corridor. I can’t see anything, not my other mates, not my brother or Grace. All I have is the hope that we can make it out of this burning cabin in one piece.

We crouch, moving as swiftly as we can through the passage. I follow Devlin blindly as we make our way up the stairs. The oppressive heat surrounds us, a stifling force that threatens to overwhelm us. The cabin is quickly turning into an inferno.

All I can see is the floor and the thick cloud of smoke swirling around my calves. I'm grateful that Devlin is leading me, because if I saw more, I might panic. This way, I can pretend that this isn't my reality.

"Door is barricaded," Ashton rasps, his voice strained. "On two."

"One," Avery wheezes.

The smoke is thicker here, a choking cloud that obscures our vision and fills our lungs with fire.

"Two." I hear their footsteps again, then a crash, quickly followed by the roar of the fire engulfing the cabin. Moments later, a rush of blissfully cold air greets us.

We stumble out into the night, disoriented by the stark contrast between the fiery interior and the icy exterior. Behind us, the cabin is a raging inferno, crackling in the night like an all-consuming beast.

We don't get far before we collapse into the snow, Devlin's coughing disturbing to my ears. Worry consumes me as I whip off his shirt and turn to him, sitting in the snow. He's at least wearing his coat, but his face is blackened and burned.

"Don't," he wheezes then coughs. "I'm okay. We'll get to a healer."

My eyes turn to the cabin as the last of my family emerges from the flames that lick at the sky. Another explosion blasts out a window, and shattered glass rains down on the snow in the distance like tinkling bells.

The revving of an engine draws my attention as a large SUV with a plow blade cuts through the snow, heading our way. The truck veers toward us and then pauses.

The urgent voices of Devlin's parents, their silhouettes framed against the flickering light of the fire, greet us. "Hurry, this way!" Devlin's mother calls, her voice laced with concern. "It's going to blow."

We half run, half stumble toward the waiting vehicle, our bodies propelled by sheer survival instinct. Ashton and Avery usher Lex and Grace into the back seat, their faces ghostly pale in the firelight.

As I climb into the car, the heat from the burning cabin is still palpable, a reminder of the narrow escape we just had. Devlin's father wastes no time, the car engine roaring to life as he speeds away from the scene.

As the distance between us and the cabin grows, the fire becomes a distant glow on the horizon, a hellish beacon in the night. The reality of what we just escaped, and the uncertainty of what lies ahead, settles over us like a heavy blanket.

The car ride is silent, each of us lost in our thoughts, cramped inside the vehicle. My sister tested the bonds of our little pack, and somehow, instead of breaking us apart, she only pulled us closer. As I glance at the faces of those around me, I feel a sense of unity, of unspoken resolve.

"We need healers," Max rasps, his face covered in soot and burns. Everyone is hurt in some way.

"On it," the woman in the front seat replies, her voice laced with concern.

*Thea got away.*

As the large vehicle rocks over snow and fallen logs, I sink into Devlin, his warmth radiating through me. Avery, on my other side, is my anchor. I should feel happy that we are all okay. Hell, I should feel happy that no one died, because if I had to face Thea, I'm not sure what I would do, except all I feel is conflicted.

I could never kill my sister, and I damn well know that Lex would never hurt a fly, so at the end of the day, where does that leave all of us?



It leaves the realization that some stories, *our story*, doesn't have a complete happy ending. There are threads that remain unraveled, fraying with every mile that passes, and there they will stay—unresolved.

I hate that a part of me is okay that she got away, that she is free, even if she is a villain. To us, she is nothing more than our antagonist, and she almost got away with murder.

Does that make me too soft? Does that mean I'm just as bad of a person? Death isn't always the answer. Is that philosophy the harder path, or the easier one?

But to live, to really live... is that her punishment? At the end of the day, I can live with my decision.

Can she?

## CHAPTER 36

### *Seraphina*

**SHE VANISHED.** Dorothea Cicero and Alpha Finch are nowhere to be found. Disbelief sends a chill through me as I read recent articles. The headlines are haunting.

“Mysterious Fire Engulfs Remote Cabin: A Race Against Time.”

“Survivors Share Harrowing Escape Tale from Cabin Fire.”

“Arson Suspected in Cabin Fire: Unraveling a Deeper Conspiracy.”

It’s the one with my sister’s picture on the front that truly unsettles me.

“Stop reading that crap.” Avery’s voice cuts through my thoughts. He swiftly snatches the newspaper from my scarred hands—reminders of the fire’s wrath.

How we escaped still puzzles me. Some call it a blizzard miracle, but I’m not sure what to label it. I’m just grateful we’re alive.

Avery collapses into a recliner at the healing center, our sanctuary for the past three days. Here, I’ve watched my mates nurse the burns they gained while rescuing us from that cabin.

Lex and Grace have a room of their own. Lex is constantly by her side, a pillar of support. When he’s away, Grace retreats into herself, her eyes losing their spark. My heart aches for her and all she’s endured. I hope they find their pack, their family, and flourish together.

As for my own pack, this ordeal has strangely united us. All past tensions over my heat and hormones seem trivial now, especially with my sister's madness coming to light.

"Yes, I'd love more Jell-O," Max mumbles from his chair, only to frown in disappointment. "What do you mean there's no more orange Jell-O?"

Doctors really do make the worst patients.

Ashton takes the phone from Max, his voice firm. "Just bring whatever you have." He ends the call, ignoring Max's disgruntled look. "Don't give me that glare."

"I want orange Jell-O," Max insists.

"And you'll have to settle for what's available," Ashton retorts, his eyes flashing blue with a hint of his delta nature. Both he and Avery are under close watch here, a precaution against any potential berserk episodes, a side effect they both despise.

Beside me, Devlin sits in silent contemplation. His calm gaze rests on me, offering a serene contrast to the others. After Devlin revealed the truth about his father, his mother paid us a visit, introducing us to his siblings. His presence has been a grounding force amidst the chaos.

The group constantly checks in on us. Devlin's mom, in particular, is making up for lost time, showering us with attention and care. Concerned about Violet's solitude, I even asked her to visit Violet, but Violet's response was classic—first insisting she was fine and then demanding every detail of our ordeal.

GOSSIPING WITH VIOLET FELT AMAZING, AND SPEAKING THE hard truths out loud helps me heal. Acknowledging the reality of what we faced and using my voice to confront it has been crucial in overcoming the pain.

"Why are you staring at me?" I murmur to Devlin, my head resting against the cushion.

"I'm just grateful," he responds softly. "Grateful for you, for my family, and that we're all still here."

“Well, I’m disappointed,” I confess, earning a round of scowls from the group. “I never got to build a snowman.”

Peering out the large windows, I watch the snowflakes dance in the air. The second storm, swift and sudden, extinguished the fire and concealed Thea’s tracks. We must wait for the storm to pass before we can track her down and make her answer for her crimes, but for now, I’m fixated on a simpler desire—a redo of our heat and building a snowman.

At least a girl can dream, and that, I realize, is the most profound lesson.

### *Hope.*

All my life, I shunned hope, convinced it only brought pain, but I’ve learned that hope is more than its mere definition. Hoping for a pack is one thing, but allowing myself to fall in love with that pack is an experience of a completely different magnitude.

Max flips his seat upright and presses the call button, summoning a mage—a service he’s used frequently. The last mage’s irritation with him was completely understandable.

The door swings open, revealing a woman with long, dark hair braided over one shoulder and tattoos adorning her bare arms. Dressed in a skin-tight dress more suited for a nightclub than a healing center, she steps in. “Maximillian,” she says in a richly accented voice, a hint of warning in her tone, “the Fates warned me about you.”

### *The Fates?*

“We want to build a snowman,” Max declares, propped up in his sweatpants and long-sleeved shirt.

The mage, unimpressed with his antics, surveys the room with her kohl-rimmed eyes, almost black in color. She gives us each a measured look, her lips pursed and head tilting as if hearing a distant whisper.

“Half an hour,” she finally declares to our collective surprise. “You have half an hour to play in the snow.”

“Wait, seriously?” My feet hit the cold floor with such eagerness that the sensation shoots up my calves.

“Yes, stay put. I’ll fetch coats,” she says, turning on her heels, which click rhythmically as she strides down the hall.

Max smirks. “I’ll be honest, I didn’t think she’d agree to that.”

“Hey, princess,” Devlin says, sitting up. “Do you want to build a snowman?”

“Yes!” I leap from my seat, bouncing in my grippy socks. I never planned for a grippy sock vacation—as Grace calls it—but maybe, just maybe, it’s exactly what I needed.

The mage’s consent ignites a wave of excitement in the room, offering a much needed respite from the heavy atmosphere that has lingered over us. I catch Devlin rising, his smile reflecting the same eagerness I feel.

Avery, despite his grumbling, can’t hide the spark of mischief in his eyes. “Snowman, huh? This will be something to see.”

Ashton stands up, stretching his tall frame, his expression one of pure relaxation. “I can’t remember the last time I did something so spontaneous.”

“No inappropriate snow sculptures,” I caution them, half joking. “The moment one of you starts crafting anything obscene, that’s it.”

Avery, predictably, voices his mock disappointment. “Oh, come on.”

“No exceptions,” I retort, pointing at him for emphasis.

Max scoops me up in a whirl, playfully covering my ears as he whispers a mischievous suggestion to Avery. I swat his hands away, laughing. “I heard that, you goofball.”

The mage returns, her arms laden with winter gear. She efficiently helps us bundle up, her brisk movements leaving no room for dawdling. Once we’re all wrapped up, she surveys us with a critical eye, ensuring we’re fit for the cold.

“Follow me,” she instructs, leading us through the halls to a door at the center of the healing facility. The building, shaped like an octagon, encloses a garden meant for patient walks. Today, it becomes our snowman building arena.

The fresh, cold air feels like a balm, a stark contrast to the indoor warmth. The healing center’s garden is a pristine, snow-covered expanse, inviting us to leave our mark. Snowflakes drift lazily around us, each a unique, fleeting piece of art.

I tilt my head back, catching snowflakes on my tongue, savoring the crisp, refreshing taste—more therapeutic than any treatment inside.

Devlin shapes a snowball, his eyes shining. “Let’s build the grandest snowman this place has ever seen,” he declares, his tone playful and youthful.

I scoop up some snow, patting it into a snowball and, without a second thought, launch it at Avery’s head.

Avery spins around, faux outrage in his eyes. “Oh no you didn’t.” As he moves to retaliate, Ashton playfully trips him, sending him tumbling into the snow with a muffled thud and a burst of laughter from all of us.

The sound of my carefree giggle takes me by surprise, its lightness echoing the joy within me. It’s so pure, so liberating.

Our laughter and playful exchanges fill the air as we roll and shape the snow, each of us contributing to our growing snowman. Max, with his competitive streak, insists on using his largest snowball as the base.

Despite my warnings, my pack indulges in some mischievous snow sculptures on the side. I pretend not to notice, secretly amused by their teenage-like antics hidden away from the main path.

Avery, the tactician of our group, suggests using sticks and stones for the snowman’s features. Ashton finds an abandoned scarf and hat, giving our creation its finishing touches.

We step back to admire our work. The snowman, with its uneven smile and crooked hat, might not be perfect, but it’s a

testament to our togetherness and shared happiness.

As the snowflakes continue to fall gently around us, Max turns to me, his eyes brimming with unspoken emotions. “Seraphina,” he says tenderly, “these last few days have been incredibly tough, but having you by my side made all the difference. My love for you grows stronger every day.”

Avery, typically reserved, steps forward with a rare openness. “You’ve brought a light into our lives that we never knew was missing. I love you, Seraphina, for everything you are and everything you bring to us.”

Ashton and Devlin join in, adding their own heartfelt declarations. Their words, spoken amidst the quiet of the snowfall, weave a beautiful tapestry of love and dedication.

Tears of joy well in my eyes, overwhelmed by the love surrounding me. This moment, with my mates openly expressing their affection amidst the serene snowscape, feels surreal, yet it’s the most real experience I’ve ever had.

“I love you all more than words can ever express,” I respond, my heart overflowing with emotion. “You are my pack, my family, my everything. Together, we’re unstoppable.”

Our embrace, solid and comforting, is like a bastion against all the challenges of the world. As we eventually pull back from the hug, laughter and playful jostling take over, the joy of the moment utterly contagious. I seize the opportunity to pelt Avery with snowball after snowball, the rest of the pack eagerly joining in on the friendly onslaught.

The mage’s voice gently interrupts our snow day. “Time’s up,” she announces, though a hint of a smile plays on her lips. I can’t help but suspect she granted us a bit more than the promised half hour. Her next words bring a gleam to Max’s eyes. “I have orange Jell-O.”

Max practically sprints toward the door, his joy unmistakable. We all follow a bit more slowly, reluctantly leaving our snow-covered haven. The laughter and warmth of these moments have rekindled our spirits and solidified our

bonds even more. Our snowman, standing alone outside, is a symbol of our shared love and unity, a testament to the joy we found together amidst the snowflakes.

Walking back into our pack medical suite no longer feels like a prison. I'm the last to wander inside as I push the door shut and lean against it.

*Don't over think it.*

I flip the lock, sealing us inside.

“What are you doing, Seraphina?” Devlin, who was almost at his recliner, turns around at the sound of the lock flipping. His heavy-lidded stare burns through me as he faces me fully.

“I'm thinking we should take advantage of the next leg of the storm,” I muse aloud, glancing out the window. The snow, in its relentless dance, blots out the world with fat, fluffy flakes. I wonder if there's even a need to draw the blinds.

It takes Devlin barely a moment to grasp my implication. In two swift strides, he's standing before me, his eyes intensely searching my face for any hint of hesitation. He finds none. Not anymore.

Over a year has passed since I first asked Avery to ruin me. It feels fitting, almost poetic, to echo that sentiment now. “Ruin me, Devlin.”

His smile, a radiant blend of love and excitement, stretches across his lips. His hands, warm and reassuring, cup my face. He leans in slowly, deliberately, and kisses me. The kiss ignites a simmering arousal within me, causing my scent to permeate the room. Devlin's tongue explores my mouth with a fervor that's both tender and intense. As our tongues intertwine, I savor every aspect of him—the slight chip in his front tooth, the unique texture of his tongue.

Devlin kisses me the way he lives life—thoughtfully, thoroughly, and with genuine care. His lips move against mine in a rhythm that feels timeless, his hands tenderly caressing my face and neck. He draws back slightly, his breath a warm whisper against my skin. “Forever, princess,” he murmurs



against my lips. “I promise you forever, in this life and the next.”

His words send my heart racing, my body pulsing with desire. Devlin’s gaze, intense and filled with a blend of passion and tenderness, captivates me. Every touch, every kiss, is heavy with the weight of his love, his need for me.

His hands, still tenderly framing my face, glide down my neck, leaving a trail of goosebumps. The tingling sensation ignites a fire within me, a hunger that demands to be satiated. My body instinctively arches toward him, craving more of his touch.

Devlin’s lips find their way to my neck, each kiss sending shivers down my spine. His breath, warm and inviting, makes me yearn for more. I tilt my head, offering him unhindered access, surrendering to the pleasure he stirs in me.

With each kiss, he slowly peels off my saturated clothing, piece by agonizing piece. My hands mirror his actions, my eyes occasionally drifting over his shoulder. Ashton leans against the nearest wall, his coat and shoes already discarded. He’s dressed in just a pair of soft sweats and a shirt, his gaze heated and patient as he silently waits to join us.

Behind him, Avery and Max are in their own world, their gazes locked. A breathless anticipation fills the air as their lips finally meet in a kiss brimming with desperation.

Devlin’s hands continue their exploratory journey down my body, caressing every inch of my exposed skin. His fingertips press gently, yet firmly, against my sensitive flesh, sending electric jolts straight to my core. Time seems to suspend itself, allowing him to both eagerly and reverently strip away not just my clothes, but any remaining inhibitions.

I surrender to the intoxicating bliss that Devlin stirs within me, immersing myself in the moment. His touch grows bolder, his control over my body more assertive, as his fingers trace a tantalizing path along my curves. My skin tingles under his caresses, aching for more. The intensity of our connection escalates, fueling a feverish desire that threatens to engulf us completely.

His lips trail a fiery path down my neck, each kiss igniting a spark within. When his teeth graze my bond mark, it's like a direct line of fire to my core. A soft moan escapes me, a testament to the overwhelming pleasure he invokes.

Ashton's gaze captures mine, holding a mix of hunger and adoration. He steps closer, shedding his clothing with a tantalizing slowness that heightens the room's electric anticipation. Avery and Max, lost in their passionate embrace, mirror our own escalating desires.

Devlin's touch intensifies, his fingers drawing erotic patterns across my fevered skin. I arch toward him, seeking closeness and craving the release that only he can bring. His lips find mine again, the urgency in his kiss pushing me toward the brink of reason.

In a surge of unbridled need, I impulsively push Devlin against the nearest wall, our bodies molding together as we become utterly lost in our kiss. Lifting me effortlessly, he moves toward a chair in the room. Our lips remain fiercely connected as he takes a seat, and I instinctively straddle him. Cool air kisses my naked flesh, and yet Devlin radiates heat, warming me.

Ashton presses a soft, reverent kiss to my shoulder, adding another layer of intensity to the moment. His lips trail kisses down my shoulder then back up, and he takes care to trace his tongue over each individual bond mark. The room is steeped in profound silence, broken only by the deepening of our collective need, which is amplified through our pack bond. My arousal perfumes into the air, sweet and sharp, and with it, pheromones that cause the men surrounding me to growl with desire. I absorb each moan of pleasure and excitement from them, savoring their response.

Pulling away from Devlin, I turn my attention to Ashton, kissing him with the same fervor. Every touch, every shared moan becomes a point of heightened awareness. Ashton's lips crash against mine, his hunger mirroring my own. His hands grip my waist, drawing me closer, our kiss a fervent maelstrom of need. The mingling of his taste with the lingering scent of Devlin on my skin sends waves of pleasure through me.

Devlin, his gaze dark and filled with unspoken desires, reaches out. His hand finds Ashton's neck, drawing him even closer to me. Our tongues intertwine in a passionate, fervent dance, exploring each other with insatiable hunger.

Leaning into Ashton's embrace, I feel Devlin's hands on my hips. A shiver of anticipation runs through me as our lips collide in a kiss that's both desperate and deeply hungry. The sensation of being caught between both men, their skin against mine, ignites a blazing inferno of desire within me.

Devlin's hands travel over the expanse of my naked back, tracing each curve and contour, while Ashton's hands urge me closer to Devlin, his touch both tender and commanding. The room ripples with our mingled moans, a symphony of pleasure reverberating off the walls, each note echoing the depth of our connection.

Devlin's fingers dig into my flesh, drawing patterns on my back that match the intensity of his emotions. He groans deeply, his breath hot against my neck as his face burrows into the crook there. The smell of his body envelops me; it's a mix of musk and sweat and pure masculinity that sends shivers down my spine. His touch is rough yet gentle, and it ignites something primal within me.

Ashton's hands glide up and down my sides, caressing my ribs before cupping my breasts. He palms them gently but possessively, teasing the aching tips of my nipples through the lace. They harden under his touch, begging for more. I moan loudly, unable to contain myself as he gradually drags his hands down over my body.

I open my eyes to find both Devlin and Ashton watching me with a hungry intensity. My heart races as I feel their gazes caressing every inch of my exposed body. A hint of a smile tugs at the corner of Devlin's lips before he beckons me closer, his hands still firmly gripping my back. I eagerly oblige, feeling the heat radiating off his body as I straddle him.

Our gazes lock and time seems to stand still as our bodies merge, his arousal pressing against my core, seeking entrance.

I can feel Ashton's heated gaze on us, and it only adds to the intensity of the moment.

Without any hesitation, I sink down onto Devlin's hardness, a gasp escaping my lips as he fills me completely. He groans in response, his fingers digging into my hips as he urges me to move. And move I do, rocking my hips back and forth with increasing urgency.

Devlin's hands roam freely over my skin now, tracing every curve and dip with a possessiveness that makes me shiver with desire. Ashton joins in the exploration, his lips finding mine in a searing kiss that leaves me breathless.

I lose myself in the pleasure of their touch and taste, feeling like I'm floating on a cloud of pure ecstasy. Every nerve ending is on fire as they take turns pleasuring me, each touch sending shockwaves through my body.

Ashton's hands trail down over my back, his finger pressing against my ass causing me to tense.

"Relax." he whispers against my sweaty neck. Beneath me Devlin holds me still as Ashton gathers slick to lubricate his fingers.

Ashton slides a finger inside of me slowly, and I arch my back in pleasure. A shiver races through my body as he curves his finger to hit all the right spots. Devlin watches on with a hunger in his eyes, his own arousal evident as he strokes himself.

"Is this what you want?" Ashton asks, adding a second finger and stretching me gently.

I can only nod, unable to form words as the pleasure overwhelms me. He continues to move his fingers expertly, sending waves of pleasure through my body.

Devlin's hands are still on my hips, holding me steady as I ride out the sensations coursing through me. His grip tightens as Ashton adds a third finger and I moan loudly at the fullness.

But that's not enough for them. Ashton withdraws his fingers and positions himself behind me while Devlin leans

back against the pillows, pulling me onto him so that I am now facing him.

Ashton carefully gathers more slick from where Devlin and I are joined, using it to lubricate himself. The head of his cock presses insistently against my entrance, gradually penetrating me. Devlin pauses his movements, heightening the tension. Ashton guides himself into me slowly, inch by inch, until he's fully seated inside me. I gasp at the feeling of being filled so completely. Devlin's hands grip my hips, anchoring me as he thrusts with controlled, short bursts. The sensations are overwhelming—an enticing mix of pleasure and anticipation.

They start moving together, setting a rhythm that lights every nerve in my body aflame. Ashton thrusts into me from behind, while Devlin grinds against me from below, their bodies moving in perfect synchronization.

My cries become louder as they both drive into me with increasing intensity. I grip onto Devlin's shoulders for leverage, while Ashton's hands roam over my front, teasing and caressing every inch of skin he can reach.

My entire world narrows down to this moment—these two men pleasuring me in ways I've never experienced before. The pleasure is almost too much to bear, but at the same time, it's everything I've ever wanted.

My breathing becomes erratic, a mixture of need and desperation as Ashton enters me. The sense of fullness is intense. Every inch he advances sends a quiver of pleasure through my body. His movements are slow and measured as he delves deeper into me.

Devlin watches us with an intensity that's almost palpable, his eyes alight with fierce desire. Held between them, with Ashton fully inside me and Devlin's knot teasing my entrance, I am stretched to my limits, every nerve ending alive with an urgent throbbing need.

Ashton's grip on my waist tightens as he moves. Each of his thrusts sends waves of pleasure throughout my body, and I

moan loudly, completely engrossed in the overwhelming sensations.

My hands clench the arms of the chair as Ashton's rhythm intensifies, his movements gaining urgency. Devlin's hands leave my hips, encircling my torso and drawing me even closer as he resumes his own thrusts.

Caught in their synchronized movements, I am overwhelmed by a symphony of pleasure. My mind, engulfed in the sensation, can't focus on anything but the exquisite friction created by their combined efforts.

Devlin growls against my neck, his breath scorching my skin. He nips gently, and as his movements grow more fervent, his knot expands and becomes firmer against me. The crescendo of our combined desires spirals, drawing us ever closer to a climax that promises to be as intense as the storm raging outside.

Ashton's grip on my hips intensifies, his fingers digging in as his own urgency escalates. He thrusts into me with a fervor that's both forceful and impassioned, each movement driving us inexorably toward the precipice.

My moans amplify, filling the room as the sensations grow into an overwhelming torrent. Pleasure consumes every fiber of my being, propelling me into a powerful climax. My entire body tenses, caught in the throes of intense, undulating waves of ecstasy.

A surge of pleasure overwhelms me as Devlin's knot finally breaches my entrance, stretching me to the brink of my capacity. The sensation is a complex tapestry of intense delight and a hint of discomfort, drawing a sharp gasp from my lips.

My body quivers with anticipation as the three of us move in an exquisite synchronicity, enveloped in a maelstrom of pleasure. The intensity is all-consuming, every nerve ending ablaze with unquenchable desire.

With each of Devlin's thrusts, his knot rubs against my most sensitive areas, kindling a raging inferno of pleasure deep within. It feels as though I'm being simultaneously

unraveled and fused together, the pleasure skirting the fine line of pain as I stretch to accommodate both Devlin and Ashton.

Sweat trickles down my forehead, gliding along the arch of my spine and merging with the slickness that covers our intertwined bodies. The atmosphere is thick with the heat of our exertions, the tangible evidence of our unrestrained passion.

Devlin breathes raggedly, each deep, urgent thrust causing his knot to expand further within me, building intense pressure that threatens to engulf us in its explosive potential. Ashton tightens his hold, his rhythm now erratic and desperate, mirroring Devlin's.

The room resonates with our symphony—the harmonious blend of moans, gasps, and the distinct sound of skin against skin. The air is heavy with the scent of raw desire and the musky, intoxicating aromas of Devlin and Ashton. This heady mixture only serves to stoke the flames of our passion, driving us deeper into the realm of ecstatic release.

Ashton's lips crash against mine in a kiss that's both fierce and consuming, his tongue asserting dominance as we surrender to the raw intensity of the moment. Our bodies, entwined in a frenetic rhythm, pulse together, each shared thrust edging us closer to a precipice of unfathomable pleasure.

Devlin's hold on me intensifies, his nails digging into my skin as he plunges deeper, each thrust more forceful than the last. The relentless pressure of his knot sends exhilarating shock waves through me, igniting every nerve with the fire of impending ecstasy.

Breaking our kiss, Ashton trails scorching kisses down my neck, across my collarbone, each touch leaving a path of searing heat. His hands, driven by a hunger as deep as my own, roam my body, igniting raging flames of desire that threaten to engulf me entirely.

Devlin's movements become more fervent, his primal instincts surfacing as he claims me with unrestrained fervor. Each thrust propels me closer to the brink, heightening my

craving for the climactic release. My body arches to meet his passionate surges.

In the background, Avery and Max, lost in their own world of passion, contribute to the sounds of pleasure that fill the room. Their entwined bodies, their shared moans, all merge into the tapestry of desire enveloping us.

The intensity escalates to an overwhelming crescendo, the building pleasure reaching a zenith of unbearable ecstasy. I let go, fully immersing myself in the sensations, embracing the tumultuous waves of euphoria.

Amidst this chaos, Ashton's fingers deftly navigate between us, skillfully amplifying the pleasure at my most sensitive spot. This additional stimulation catapults me past the edge, shattering the last vestiges of restraint. A cry of pure pleasure escapes me, and my body is racked with convulsions, each wave of orgasmic force radiating through me, leaving me breathless and utterly spent in the aftermath of such profound bliss.

As the intense waves of pleasure slowly subside, my awareness of the world around me becomes hazy, enveloped in a blissful fog of sensations. Devlin, still moving within me, approaches his own peak. The pulsating rhythm of his knot inside me, coupled with the deep growls of pleasure emanating from him, intensifies the moment.

Ashton, also caught in the throes of his climax, moves with increasing fervor, urgency overtaking him. With a final, deep thrust, he reaches his release, spilling his essence into me, his body quivering in unison with mine.

Feeling Devlin's hold on my hips strengthen, he also finds his climax, his body convulsing against mine in a powerful release. The sensation of his warmth filling me triggers another wave of pleasure, echoing the remnants of my own orgasm.

Exhausted, we collapse into a tangled heap of limbs, our bodies slick with sweat, our breaths ragged and heavy in the aftermath of such intense passion.



As clarity gradually returns, I become acutely aware of Ashton's fingers, still tenderly tracing patterns across my skin, a gentle reminder of the intimacy we share. Devlin's arms hold me in a protective embrace, his presence a comforting warmth as we languish in the afterglow of our union.

In my mates' arms, I discover a sense of peace that had previously eluded me. Their embrace represents more than just physical comfort—it's a symbol of a future brimming with hope, love, and boundless possibilities. Together, we step forward into a life rich with promise, our hearts and souls intertwined in a bond that transcends time and circumstance.

## *Epilogue: Max*

Six months later

“Stop that!” I reach over and smack Avery upside the head. Avery, quick on his feet, dances away from me, laughter spilling from his lips. I hate to admit it, but the sound sends a thrill through me each time.

“What, this?” He whistles again, further irking me.

I’d pounce on him, but we’re out in public, following up on a lead. Again. It’s been six months since Seraphina’s sabotaged heat—six months of learning to love and respect boundaries, of rebuilding, healing, and finding peace, all while our assailants remain at large.

Ironically, Finch, the heir apparent, has also vanished, a fact that infuriates Devlin. After we finally convinced Dev to leave the council’s troubles behind for a short while and accompany us southward on a boat, we got a lead.

Not to mention, Seraphina could go into heat at any moment. We hoped to reach the southern base and settle in our temporary nest, safeguarded by deltas and free from interruptions before it happens.

Even from afar, Thea actively denies her sister and Lex any moment of joy, a fact made clear by the timing of this lead on her sister’s whereabouts.

Ultimately, that’s what this boils down to—hope and happiness. Thea couldn’t bear to see Seraphina find happiness. She seemed pleased when Seraphina chose a life outside of a

pack, wishing for her to endure a heat alone. When she discovered Seraphina's plan to attend the gala, she sent Finch's friends to intercept her at the shop, but Seraphina escaped, leaving Finch to handle it himself, as Grace revealed. All this was relayed to Grace by Thea under the assumption that she wasn't listening or was too affected to understand.

Grace, my sweet sister, was listening. She noted every fact, and throughout her therapy, disclosed every detail. With her new pack's support, she found the courage to heal and provide us with answers—answers that only deepened Seraphina's and Lex's wounds.

How sibling rivalry could twist so malevolently is a mystery I don't think I'm meant to unravel, and even if I could, I'm not sure I'd want to. My desire to help those trapped in their own minds doesn't blind me to my limits in assisting those beyond my reach.

Thea's disdain for her siblings, her bitterness at their happiness, is profound. Despite choosing a different pack, she couldn't stomach the thought of Seraphina or Lex finding joy, but happiness isn't a competition—it's an emotion everyone deserves.

The story of how Thea met Finch is darker and more convoluted than any of us imagined. He appeared one day at the institute, intending to discuss funding with the director, and that's when he encountered Thea. It was a scent match made in some twisted fate.

Now, we've received a call from a modest beta hospital in the Northern Province, far from my mate. They found a baby abandoned at their doorstep with a note—a note bearing Lex's and Seraphina's names. Lex, understandably, refused to leave Grace's side, given her fragile state. I can't blame him, and in fact, I'm grateful. He's become as much of a brother to me as Grace is a sister.

"You really think there's a baby here?" Avery asks skeptically, doubting the authenticity of the note.

I simply shake my head, whispering, "Beta society is peculiar," as we navigate the hospital corridors toward the

maternity wing. “They wouldn’t have called if this wasn’t significant.” I hesitate to believe that “significant” means a baby, considering Thea’s unpredictable and chaotic nature.

I had harbored a faint hope that if Thea were pregnant, she might have a change of heart, and that perhaps motherhood could awaken love and compassion within her. Now, I’m not so sure.

Approaching the maternity ward, a strange sensation ripples through me. I feel an acute absence, a sense that Seraphina should be here with us, but she’s with Ashton and Devlin, engaged in a council meeting about Finch.

Finch, whose siblings want nothing to do with the council, the sanctuary, or their father, has been elusive. Interestingly, a few months ago, Violet set up her own private investigation firm.

Violet viewed the search for Finch’s siblings as an exhilarating challenge, and Seraphina mentioned she plans to set out in the morning to track them down.

Avery, ever restless, bounces on his toes as he presses the intercom then turns to enthusiastically wave at the camera pointing down at us.

I swallow hard, feeling a surge of anticipation, and grip the door handle as soon as the buzzer signals our entry. Stepping through, we approach a high desk where a beta woman greets us with a warm smile.

“You must be Dr. Harrington. Your work on compost and mushrooms was brilliant.” She beams, causing a flutter in my stomach with her recognition of my professional achievements. “And tricking the dean of the beta college to get your doctorate,” she adds with a wink, “we’re all glad you did.”

I clear my throat, slightly taken aback. “Well, that explains that.”

She chuckles. “We’re not unreasonable here, even to an alpha and a delta.”

“This is my packmate and partner, Avery,” I introduce, earning a snicker from Avery. He revels in claiming me, and my acknowledgement of him as my partner clearly delights him.

“You must be here for the little one,” she says with a kind smile. “I hope it’s okay. We had a mage test her.”

Just then, a familiar figure makes her way toward us down the hall. Her long hair, embellished with feathers, is in a ponytail, while tattoos cover every visible inch of her skin. “Maximillian, I’m glad to see you healed from your burns,” she remarks with a discernible note of sincerity.

“I don’t think I ever caught your name to thank you,” I respond. This mage is the one Devlin’s parents had flown out to treat our injuries.

“I didn’t give it,” she replies, her smile hinting at a depth of untold secrets.

“What are you doing here?” Avery asks, his arms crossed. He’s always skeptical of coincidences.

“I go where Terra tells me I’m needed,” she replies, spinning on her high heel with a grace that defies logic. “Come along now.”

Avery and I exchange a glance, but we follow her. She leads us past nursery windows, where babies cry and mages work alongside nurses to soothe them.

Our enigmatic mage friend ushers us into a small nursing room, and there, in a bassinet, lies a baby. I stop in my tracks, a sense of disbelief washing over me. “That’s a baby,” I mutter, each word dripping with shock. Despite the call, I hadn’t fully believed a real baby would be involved.

“Yes, it is,” the mage confirms in a flat tone. “Your niece is an omega with royal blood, dropped off at this hospital by your mate’s sister. I’ve already sent the security footage to Ashton Griffin.”

Avery reacts with more composure than I can muster. As the baby cries, he quickly goes to her, lifting her gently and

cradling her against his chest. Surprisingly, he sits and rocks her, a smile lighting up his face.

I'm about to voice my concern that we can't keep her, but the mage's knowing look stops me. "Your sister might take her in," she suggests, one eyebrow raised.

"Grace?" I blurt out, my neck nearly snapping as I turn to look at this mysterious woman who always seems to arrive just when we need her most.

"Well, we're scheduled to head south in a few days," Avery interjects, turning his gaze toward us. "I think she might be onto something."

I step closer to the tiny baby. She's so small, her body curling and tiny fists tucked under her chin. "You're sure she's an omega?" I question, knowing that designations typically reveal themselves at puberty.

"Of course I know," she scoffs with a thick accent.

"Fucking Thea," I curse under my breath. How could she?

"Language," Avery hisses at me.

"I wouldn't worry about her," the mage says with a disturbing smile. "She'll get what's coming to her, one way or another."

I swallow hard, feeling conflicted. As much as I want justice for her attempts to harm us, I know Seraphina couldn't bring herself to hurt her sister, but this woman before me? She would not hesitate.

"I need to call Grace," I say, dragging a hand down my face. "She needs a name."

"Well, to me, she's a princess," Avery mutters, gently bopping her tiny nose. Observing this tender moment, I realize without a shadow of a doubt that this child will soon have every one of us completely wrapped around her little finger.

Avery's voice, soft and full of an affection I haven't often heard from him, echoes in the small room as he dubs the baby a princess. The sight of this tough, often guarded man

displaying such tenderness is a poignant reminder of the complex layers within each of us.

The baby, responding to his gentle touch, coos softly, her tiny hand reaching out and wrapping around one of Avery's fingers. It's a simple, instinctive action, yet it speaks volumes. In that small gesture, she claims a piece of his heart, a silent but powerful connection forming before my eyes.

I step closer, peering down at her. Her eyes, a deep and curious shade, gaze back at me with an innocence that tugs at my soul. A sense of responsibility washes over me, a protective urge that surges from within. This tiny, vulnerable life already feels like a part of our extended family.

"We'll take care of her," I say, my voice a whisper, "until Grace can... and even then, we'll always be there."

Avery looks up, his eyes meeting mine. There's an understanding there, a shared commitment that goes beyond words. We're more than just a pack. We're a family bound by choice and circumstance, ready to embrace this new, unexpected bundle.

As one chapter of our lives closes, I know that this little princess just opened a new one. She's a beacon of new beginnings, of hope and healing, and as I watch Avery cradle her, I realize that sometimes, amidst chaos and uncertainty, life offers us a glimpse of pure, unadulterated joy.

## *Afterword*

Dear Romantics,

Firstly, how are you? I hope this book finds you well and deepens your love for the Omegaverse, just as it has for me.

“Seraphina” was conceived as a beacon of light and softness amidst the darker themes of my previous works. I envisioned her character to be almost an omega, yet distinct in her reluctance to fully embrace that identity. This narrative choice reflects a broader theme I wanted to explore: the journey of self-acceptance, not as a passive resignation to fate, but as an active recognition and nurturing of our true selves with grace and kindness.

I’m aware that the ending of “Seraphina” might not sit well with everyone, and that’s perfectly okay. Even my editor had their reservations! But the key lesson I wished to impart is the acceptance of our inability to control others, a realization that’s both liberating and challenging.

As for Thea’s arc - yes, she escapes, leaving behind a tale untold and a future uncertain. Will karma catch up with her? Perhaps, but not within the pages of “Seraphina.” This narrative choice underscores a poignant reality: sometimes, life doesn’t offer the closure we seek, and we must find peace in that uncertainty.

As I now delve into the world of “Violet,” I promise you a story that’s starkly different from Seraphina’s gentleness. Prepare for a journey that might just tear at your heartstrings.



For those eager for more, “Violet” is available for preorder on Amazon.

In the meantime, I know you’re brimming with questions. The mysterious woman in the forest, her untimely demise - did you think I’d forgotten? Fear not, for “Tasting Madness” on the way. This novella ventures into Grace’s psyche, exploring her harrowing experiences at the institute and her unexpected path to love and forgiveness. It’s not quite ready yet but join my newsletter below and it will go out as soon as it is all polished up.

<https://www.subscribepage.com/ellelincoln>

Moonlight & Mischief,

;elle

# *Acknowledgments*

What a long, strange trip it's been.

A decade ago, my brother told me I should find a creative outlet to help my anxiety and depression. Neither of us knew at the time what that would lead to. What began as a suggestion to help me through the dark times became a passion that allowed me to thrive. I never anticipated publishing my thoughts for the world until, once again, my brother gave me encouragement to take that chance, to take that risk, and see where it led me.

“What do you have to lose?” he asked.

I had multiple snarky responses to that question, but we all know what I ended up choosing.

Dear brother, without you none of this would have ever happened. You are my anchor during life's hurricanes, and you give me clarity to see through every storm. You are the best friend I didn't know I needed, and I will always love you for every moment you gift me. Like breadcrumbs, my readers will find you in every novel I write.

To my parents, I want to say thank you for breathing life into me, for raising me to see the good in every soul and challenging me to persevere—also for the food and tequila shots.

My small creatures, those four humans I birthed and their friends who showed up along the way, your stories, laughter, and even the darkest moments give me purpose and motivation to be the best mom and pseudo-mom I can be. I love each and every one of you.

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## *About the Author*

Elle Lincoln has been writing out her dreams and even nightmares for over a decade. She believes in magic in all forms, and oftentimes you'll find her daydreaming in the oddest of places. Her passion is Urban Fantasy and Paranormal Romance, where the men are a little bit real and a dash of mythical.

When Elle isn't writing she's probably chasing around her four children, child-like husband, and a rambunctious Australian Shepherd. All who keep her on her toes. Nice try with the distractions, but mommy still got those books written and published. She resides in the beautiful state of Pennsylvania with lore and legends, and a whole lot of cornfields.

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