



VIOLET FOX

PART
ONE

SPARE

THE BETA TRIALS

Spare

The Beta Trials

Violet Fox

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Foreword

Spare is a contemporary Omegaverse that takes place in an alternative/ militaristic world where the human characters exhibit animal-like traits, such as growling, nesting, and knotting. There is no shifting involved.

This story features forced proximity and an unwanted Beta in a pack of three Alphas and one male Omega. It is enemies to lovers and a slow-burn/medium-burn romance. No mpreg is involved.

I'm a British author masquerading as an American, so please let me know if any British spellings appear. If you find any pesky typos, please email kayleerymerauthor@outlook.com and I will get those fixed.

Trigger warnings:

There is a scene where the FMC is almost raped, gun violence,

and all the typical OV tropes like knotting, slick, and heats. There is the death of a family member too and descriptions of grief.

I also apologize in advance for the Alpha known as Gryphon. He is an asshole; I won't sugarcoat it.

Prepare to hate him.

So, without further ado, I bring you Spare...

Sorry for any emotional damage this book may bring.

This book is dedicated to anyone who has ever had their heart
broken.

I hope you find your own Oliver one day....

A close-up portrait of a woman with long, wavy, light-colored hair, looking slightly to the left. The entire image is tinted with a deep purple color. The text is overlaid on the image.

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PART
ONE

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THE BETA TRIALS

Prologue

A Beta's survival guide for joining an Alpha-Omega Pack.

1. Don't look an Alpha directly in the eye.
2. Don't upset the Pack's Omega and remember that their needs come first.
3. Never speak to the Omega unless the Alpha(s) have given you permission.
4. And last but not least... Never go into an Omega's nest. Especially in the weeks leading up to a heat...

It could mean the difference between life and death...

Chapter One

Mila

Three bullets hit the target, blowing the head clean off my dummy. Yet I hold my stance, preparing for the gun's kickback.

The room stops, and I lower my weapon, removing my ear protectors. I glance over at my instructor.

Horace is a Beta male and a formidable one too. He's hard on us all, but that's because he has to be.

It's a terrifying world out there. Well, for the Omegas in our society. The most revered and cherished designation. Everyone wants an Omega because they produce the strongest offspring, and that's why they need to be protected.

Traditionally, it's the Alphas' job to protect and take care of the Omegas, but not all Alphas are trustworthy.

That's why the government has implemented its new initiative: the Beta Trials. A brand new scheme where Betas are trained in combat, and later placed with a pack to act as an extra protective measure.

As you can imagine, the Alphas are furious with this new enterprise. They don't need help when it comes to protecting their Omegas, especially from Betas.

Most Alphas view Betas as a threat. As if it is our sole purpose in life to steal away their precious Omegas.

Alphas don't like anyone touching what they deem their property.

Me, personally? I couldn't care less. After all, I only joined the government's training program for my elderly father.

He's sick, and he needs around-the-clock medical care.

The training pays too well. Once we graduate, our income triples.

I am currently in my fourth year of training at the Beta Academy. In just a few months, I will graduate with honors.

I'm the best in my class. I'm the best in hand-to-hand combat, and I am the best when it comes to shooting a gun.

Soon, the government will start its first round of selections, and Instructor Horace thinks I will be the very first Beta to be called up and joined with a pack.

The other Betas don't like me because I'm at the top of my class, but I never did any of this for glory; I just wanted to keep my father safe.

Instructor Horace steps up beside me. His eyes trail toward the dummy and then back toward me. He nods.

“Good work as usual, Stone.”

I give him my thanks, and the room falls graveyard silent. There are a few mutterings, but no gunshots.

Instructor Horace snaps, “Back to practice, the lot of you. You wanna make the first selection? Then train!”

A few of my classmates stumble, readying their stances once again. Instructor Horace grumbles and marches toward a skinny Beta male with a nervous disposition.

He was holding his gun all wrong. Now he is going to get a firm scolding.

I move my eyes back to my target, thinking of the only person who matters in this world.

Dad.

He’s all the family I have.

And he is worth every drop of blood, sweat, and tears.

“I heard her father is about to kick the bucket. That’s why she signed up for the Beta Trials...”

Laughter echoes through the locker room, but I ignore them.

Jealousy is an ugly trait after all.

We’ve just finished training for the day as I gather my things from my locker. Soon it won’t even be my locker anymore.

If I make the first selection, then it will belong to someone else.

Some other shiny-eyed Beta will take my place with the hopes of being placed within a pack. That's if they make it through their first year.

My class were the guinea pigs. The first team of recruits to be selected for the Beta Trials. Many of us made it, but others failed.

We started at fifty and ended at twenty-five, and tensions are extremely high.

No one knows what the future will bring, or what our grades will be.

If I fail, I won't get another chance.

The Alpha governor is already on board with the trials, albeit begrudgingly, so we should have no problem with the Alpha population. The Omega population is very far and few between, and they hardly get a say in any matter.

Seems unfair. It should be up to the Omegas who they want to protect them.

At least they can finally choose their own packs now.

Our society is made up of three populations, but we only have two cities: The Alpha and the Beta City, respectively.

But there is no Omega City.

The Omegas just live with their Alphas once they find their pack.

Before, the government matched every Omega to a pack through a specially curated algorithm based on DNA, likes,

and interests.

But all that changed when scent matches came along.

Scent matches are a pretty new phenomenon, and it all begins with the Omega. Alphas are drawn to an Omega's perfume, and from the moment they inhale it, they are sworn to protect, fighting tooth and nail to keep their mates alive and comforted.

We learned about it all in theory.

Doctors still don't know how it works, but it almost sounds like something from a fairy tale to me.

To find your pre-destined mate...

True love.

"She's so smug, but she has no idea she's just a guinea pig. Does she think the government actually gives a shit about her or her dad? Ten bucks says she won't last five minutes with whatever poor pack gets stuck with her..."

More harsh laughter and I slam my locker door at last. "You know I can hear you, right?"

My classmates stop, but there's no missing the smirks on Heather and Jason.

Nothing but a pair of bullies.

Heather is useless at hand-to-hand combat, and Jason can barely hold a gun. But for some reason, they take their anger out on me.

I'm not going to just stand here and let them talk shit about me or my dad.

No one disses my dad...

“Just stop, okay? You're all capable soldiers. So, there's no need to tear me down.”

Nothing. The smug pricks continue to smile as if they are in on some secret or something.

In all my four years at the academy, I have never grown close to anyone. I couldn't allow myself to.

If they had known...

My father wasn't the only reason why I joined the Beta trials.

Heather scoffs and grabs her bag. Then her gang of fools follows her example, leaving me alone in the locker room at last.

I'm always the last to leave.

There's a reason why I have to train harder than the others, why I have to run the extra mile.

It started halfway through first year. Just a small whiff of gingerbread here and there. It became more prevalent when I sweated.

However, it has yet to happen. As of this moment, I am still Beta. The harder I train, the more I can keep that gingerbread scent at bay.

I have no ambition to smell like a Christmas cookie. No matter how sweet it may be.

Quickly, I grab my small spritz bottle and dowse myself with desensitizer. It's pretty strong stuff, bought off the black market.

It masks my scent, enough to be undetected by the government.

The academy makes us do random drug tests, so tablets are a no for me.

So, I have to make do with the desensitizer and training that extra bit harder.

No one will be any the wiser. If my secret gets out, then I will be kicked out of the Beta population, and then my father will be left alone.

Like hell that will happen.

I am Mila Stone, and I am a Beta. Nothing more, nothing less.

And I am going to get through this. By this summer's end, I will be placed in a pack, and no one will ever suspect that I am anything other than a Beta.

Chapter Two

Oliver

“O liver, come out.”

I wrap myself up in my fuzzy green blanket, becoming the perfect Omega burrito as I shut out the world outside my nest. “No. Go away. I’m not talking to you.”

There goes my bratty Omega attitude again. I get like this.

I have no idea how my poor Alphas cope. Yet they do because they are built to deal with my stroppy Omega hormones.

Gryphon is furious outside the nest. I can smell his angry Alpha pheromones on the other side of the door. His campfire and marshmallows scent now has a hint of brimstone, and it smells as if he has summoned the fires of hell.

Good. He should be pissed. He’s supposed to be my Alpha, yet he yields to the government’s new initiative where every pack must be given a Beta.

The Beta’s role will be to protect the Omega, allegedly. An extra preventive measure in case the Alphas fail to do the job.

They will also be keeping an eye on the Alphas to ensure that their work is up to snuff.

Stupid. I don't need a Beta to protect me. I have three six-foot-five Alphas who would do anything for me, but the government seems to think that they are not enough.

Apparently, not all Alphas are to be trusted, and that is why Governor Lily caved in the end, letting the Beta government walk all over her.

Some Alpha she is. I heard she doesn't even have an Omega.

I bet she is lonely...

The Betas are just trying to worm their way in. They are fascinated by us Alphas and Omegas and our way of life, and they are feeling left out.

We form these strong bonds, and they can't stand it. Now they want a piece of that pie.

"Oliver! This is ridiculous!"

More fist thumping on the door, and I sigh, wrapping myself up further in my blanket burrito.

It truly is. So, why is he caving? He is trained in combat. They all are. Even I've had a little training.

I'm not bad with a gun myself, and I'm a smooth fencer.

Once upon a time, we all trained at the Alpha Academy. There, we learned how to be a formidable force of nature.

We were trained to fight and to kill, and how to protect an Omega.

I was always a little smaller than the guys. Yet it soon became apparent that I was never going to be as big as they were, and then during my first year, I perfumed...

That was the day I discovered that I was an Omega. And then I had no choice but to leave the academy and join the Omega School where I learned how to knit booties, cook, and to be pretty, basically.

It's not what I asked for, but it's what I am now, and I have long accepted that grueling fact.

Besides, it's not all bad. I get to have a nest.

The guys do make this whole Omega bullshit easier. They shower me with gifts and take care of me when I am sick.

When I am nearing my heat, they go out of their way to ensure I am comfortable. When I cramp, they give me their knots, and when I am hungry, they make me food.

It's obvious by my current mood swing that I am creeping closer to another heat. Perhaps sooner than I realized. Three weeks max. The spikes are unbearable.

My Alpha's scents surround me. They each give me an item of their clothing when the heat spikes start. Unwashed too.

"That's it. You leave me no choice..."

It looks like he is going to smash the door down. Alphas. So violent.

Unwrapping myself from my blanket burrito, I approach the door, swinging it open just as Gryphon is about to kick his leg

out.

His pupils blow out when he sees my state of undress. All I wear are boxers.

My clothes lay in a heap somewhere in the nest. I was getting too hot.

Gryphon's gaze lingers on my refined six-pack, and I give my abs a little flex before I divert his attention to my eyes.

“Eyes up here, Gryphon.”

Finally, he meets my eyes, and it's reddish brown against sea blue.

“Oliver... if I had any other choice, I would refuse. But the Beta government—”

“I know... I know it's not your fault. I'm just... sad...”

Sad, and I have no idea why. It's headache-inducing, and I don't even know how to keep up with my own Omega body half the time.

This next heat couldn't come soon enough.

Gryphon peers around the door into my nest. “Can I come in? I can't stand you being in here alone, Ollie. You know it.”

He cares so much about me, and I fight back the urge to cry. The day I became an Omega, I had to give up my masculinity.

Even as a boy, I always wanted to be an Alpha. I wanted to be a soldier, someone people could depend on.

I wanted to be a hero.

But I only ended up becoming the damsel.

Knots and blankets, knots and blankets... That's the mantra I have to tell myself.

Being an Omega has its perks.

Finally, I step aside, letting him into the nest. I lay down on the blankets to continue my sulk, and he has the common sense to indulge me.

Damn it. It really is hard to be mad at him when he is so good to me. He doesn't tell me to stop sulking. He just lays with me while I have my moment.

Everything is changing, and I don't like it. The past six years have been perfect. Even though I wanted to be an Alpha, at least I managed to get the best Alphas in the country.

Even before I perfumed, I was attracted to them. It's in our biology.

They are my scent matches. We knew it from the day we met at the Academy.

Gryphon big spoons me, wrapping his leg over my body as we don't speak. There are many pressing matters on my mind.

Something is on the horizon, and it's not good.

“What's going to happen to us now?”

Gryphon doesn't answer. He just keeps his red-brown eyes on the gauzy green curtains that drape around us like a canopy.

Green is my favorite color, and I have no idea why. It was what my Omega was drawn to when I created this nest.

It's a beautiful color. Reminds me of nature.

“We accept the Beta into the pack. Begrudgingly...”

He growls through gritted teeth, and I smirk, lifting my head from the pillow. “You're going to give them a hard time, aren't you?”

His mouth crooks up at the corner. “Naturally.”

I shake my head, placing my cheek back on the dark velvet green of my pillow. “Fuck...”

“Fuck indeed.”

Neither one of us has said it. But it's obvious why the government has implemented this new initiative.

They want to breed more Betas into the Alpha and Omega population. So, they are going to send us a female.

As a male Omega, I can't produce an heir for my Alphas. And it pains me sometimes.

Not that I have any intention of having children, but it still hurts that I can't give them heirs. Oftentimes, I can't tell if it's just me thinking that way or my Omega.

I ball my fists when I think about the female Beta that is about to be forced into our lives. One who will no doubt try to take my Alphas from me.

I won't let her. They are my Alphas. *Mine*.

And I will fight tooth and nail just to keep it that way.

Chapter Three

Mila

“Dad, I’m home!”

I push through the front door of our one-story home, and already the smell of boiling potatoes reaches my nose.

Dad must be in the kitchen.

I enter the kitchen to find him over the stove. He’s pretty capable of cooking his own meals right now, but he still needs a lot of help getting about the house.

He’s what I call an old seventy-five. Because I know plenty of men in their seventies who can still run laps around the training yard.

Some of them are my instructors.

My dad has done a lot of hard manual labor in his life, so it wasn’t good on his bones.

He was an older father when he and Mom had me. The pair of them were nearing fifty. Sometimes, I would have liked

younger parents, but I have no regrets.

I had the best parents in the world growing up. They raised me to be who I am today, and I am forever grateful.

They made me strong and determined. If not for them, I probably would have given up years ago. I would have never made it through my first year of training at the academy.

They taught me how to survive, and as a result, I am now in the running for first place in the Beta Trials. The first round of selections is coming up, and the anticipation is killing me.

But I am torn about leaving my father.

It's just with Mom being gone for nearly ten years, Dad will be on his own once I leave.

Of course, I am doing this all for him. The money is just too good. It will keep a roof over his head.

When I am gone, I can pay for someone else to look after him.

This is all for Dad.

All for Dad...

“Welcome home, honey.”

Dad hobbles over on his walking stick, wrapping his arms around me feebly when he pulls me in for a hug, and walking is getting harder for him.

I place him on his chair by the fireplace as I finish cooking his dinner. I take the chicken out of the oven once it's ready,

then remove the potatoes from the stove, draining them over the sink.

Pepper, Dad's old cocker spaniel, stops by my side, and I pet her ear.

Silence drifts through the living room as Dad eats his dinner by the warm fire. I already ate at the academy, so I'm not hungry.

"So, how was training today, sweetheart?"

I continue stroking Pepper's head. She's a pretty old girl herself, but she has been a loyal companion for Dad since Mom died.

We got her as a puppy not long after she passed away. Sometimes, I think the dog is Mom reincarnated, but I know that sounds silly.

She just does these odd little things... She rummages through Mom's old clothes and likes to sniff them for some time. I once found her with Mom's old hat on her head, still perfectly intact. Considering she was a teething puppy at the time, it was strange. Puppies like to chew everything they get their teeth on.

I tell Dad about my day, and he is thrilled when he hears how well things are going.

"My trainers think I will be the first Beta to make the selection. Then once I am chosen, I will be placed in a pack in the Alpha-Omega population."

"Darling, that is wonderful news!"

It is, but he does know what my success at the first selection will mean, right? That I will have to leave him...

“You know all I have ever wanted for you was to find someone and be happy, Mila. If you find a pack, all the better!”

My heart plunges, and it feels as if I have swallowed a bag of rocks. Betas hardly ever form packs. At most, they join them.

Pack life is an Alpha and Omega thing, usually with the Omega at the center. I don't think Dad quite understands; I'm not joining this pack for romantic reasons.

There will be no love involved. I am there to protect the Omega, that is all.

I doubt they will even want me there.

I suck in a shaky breath, trying to find the strength to say the next thing on my mind. “Dad?”

“Yes?” he asks, leaning across to feed Pepper some chicken, no matter how many times I've warned him not to feed the dog off his plate.

“You do know that I will have to leave, right?”

“Of course, of course... you do what you have to do.”

I pause, studying him carefully now. If he is heartbroken about me possibly leaving, then he doesn't show it. I know he has Pepper, but I'm the only family he has left in the world.

He's all the family I have left, and I will miss him terribly if things go to plan at the selection.

But I have to do this. The last four years have helped us immensely.

My training pays well, and it will only increase when I am selected to go to my pack.

“Dad...”

“It's okay, Mila. I want you to go out and see the world. I don't want you tied to an old man like me. You need to find your own family. I've had mine. I will be fine.”

I hide the tears. It hurts hearing him talk like this. It sounds so final, but truth be told, I can't leave him. I can't let him go.

He is my dad. He taught me how to ride a bike...

Finally, Dad looks up, and when he sees my eyes, he stops. “Oh, dear...”

I can't help it now. The dam explodes, and I cry. I wish I could bring him with me, but I doubt whatever pack I am placed with will want me *and* my father.

Accepting me into their pack will be hard enough.

Dad rises shakily from the chair, and now he wraps his arms around me, shushing me like he did when I had nightmares as a child.

I got them a lot when I was a kid. I still get them from time to time.

“Everything will be fine. I will always be here when you need me. I will never stop being your dad.”

He’s right. He won’t. But it’s something I don’t like to think about. One day, he won’t be around, and I will be alone in the world.

I will have no family.

The thought terrifies me...

But he’s here now, and that’s all that matters. So, I hug him tighter, and I just... be. I live in the moment. I don’t worry about the past or the future.

It’s just me and Dad here in the present.

Oh, and don’t forget about Pepper, too.

Chapter Four

Gryphon

I take out my frustration on an old punching bag, picturing the smug face of the Beta Governor, Frederick.

How I hate that son of a bitch. If I ever get my hands on him, he's dead. It's his fault why my Omega is sulking at home in his nest, why his normally sweet honeycomb is tainted with anxiety.

Oliver is worried that the Beta governor is imposing on our lives by placing one of his soldiers into our pack. He is worried that the Beta will steal us away from him.

We don't need a Beta to protect Oliver. Me, Lachlan, and Barret are perfectly capable of taking care of him ourselves. Just like we have done for the past six years.

We're Alphas. It's in our DNA to keep him safe and to cater to his every whim. We have knots. A Beta would never be able to satisfy his need for wholeness when his heat rears its ugly head.

The Beta won't ever be a part of our pack. That I will make sure of.

“Alpha Gryphon Hart? Governor Lily sent me. She demands an audience with you.”

I cease punching the bag, gripping it with my hands to stop it from swinging side to side.

I peer over my shoulder at the large security guard who just addressed me. He's dressed to the nines and wears an earpiece around his head.

There's a gun in his holster too, and there's no missing the bulletproof vest beneath the nice suit.

I refrain from laughing. As if the governor would need any protection.

She is the most formidable Alpha I know.

Anyone would be a fool to cross her.

I'm training at the Alpha Academy today. I come here when I need to unwind and vent, and it appears that the governor was doing just the same thing.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead. “Where is she?”

The guard waves his fingers, indicating for me to follow.

We walk down the massive gymnasium. Alphas beat at punching bags or run on treadmills, and the air is electric with energy.

Every day, we train as if we are heading for war. It's what is drilled into our brains from the moment we're deemed old

enough to hold a gun, which is age fifteen.

Every new day is a day for war...

Finally, the security guard takes up his position beside a tall, well-muscled woman, keeping his eyes ahead. "Governor Lily. Alpha Gryphon."

The woman sends a last roundhouse kick at the bag, and the thing goes flying off its chain. Nearly every Alpha in the room draws a collective breath.

Despite her delicate name, Governor Lily is one tough Alpha. She dominates any room she enters and demands the attention of every person without even having to open her mouth.

I stare at the place where her sorry excuse of a punching bag just landed. It sends up a cloud of dust in its wake, and I picture Frederick's beat-up face on the battered leather.

Lily and Frederick seem to be on pretty good terms, but everyone knows that it's just for appearances. The two despise each other, and one day, one of them is going to cave and kill the other.

My bets are on Lily. Her body is just muscle. Zero fat.

I have seen her twist the neck of a full-grown Alpha with just her thighs.

Now those are a pair of legs I would not want to find myself between...

Governor Lily tried to oppose the Beta Trials at first, but Governor Frederick got his way in the end.

Like me, she doesn't want to let the Beta population into our society. She likes order and structure, and for everyone to belong in their place.

Either way, I don't really care. I just don't want the Beta government to force their way into my pack. My pack is perfect right now.

We have an Omega and three Alphas. What more could we need?

However, it has occurred to me that they will most likely send us a female Beta. One with a working womb, I presume, and I grind my teeth.

I refuse to be bred like livestock.

Finally, Governor Lily deigns herself to look at me, and I merely shrink in her magnificence.

I can't look her straight in the eye because she will view it as a challenge. Instead, I address her feet and only meet her gaze when she tells me to.

It's a mark of respect for our most revered Alpha leader.

One of her employees passes her a towel, and she uses its fibers to absorb the sweat from her tanned face.

Lily and I are the same height. Female Alphas tend to be as tall as male ones, but male Omegas are always taller than female Omegas.

It always struck me as odd.

“Ah, Gryphon... just the Alpha I wanted to see...”

As usual, I keep my gaze on the ground, clearing my throat.

“What did you need to see me for, Governor?”

Lily takes a bottle of water from another member of her entourage, swigging the whole thing in one go. Then she fixes those jewel-black eyes on me.

Every Alpha watches us.

“Resume your training. Remember, every new day is a day for war...”

They don't need to be asked twice. They resume their training, and once again the gym fills with the sounds of punching and grunting.

Lily steps closer, standing at eye level with me. She gives me permission to meet her gaze by tipping her chin, and I do just that, trying my best to hide the lump in my throat.

“I have news that may be of interest to you, Gryphon. One of my spies in the Beta government has come bearing some news...”

I swallow the lump, nodding my head for her to continue.

Governor Lily walks the room, speaking openly with confidence. She trusts her soldiers not to betray her. She has them all whipped, pretty much.

If they do go against her, then she will personally see to it that they are removed.

“I have been informed that your pack is to be given a female Beta soldier by the name of Mila Stone.”

I try to hold back the growl in my throat.

I knew it...

“As you can imagine, the Beta governor is very aware of your pack’s interesting case...”

I nod. “That we are one of the few packs in the world with a male Omega.”

“That is right. And the governor hopes to breed her into your pack, having either you or your other two Alphas mate with her. Since your Omega is incapable of producing young.”

Again, I hold my tongue. All I really want to do is roar at the top of my lungs and take out my anger on another punching bag, but I must show respect in front of the governor.

She may think that a challenge has been issued, and she would beat me to a pulp.

“That’s not all... I believe he has another use for her, but I can’t quite fathom what yet. However, I advise you to remain vigilant. Do not let this Beta get close to you or any member of your pack. Keep them at arm’s length. Always.”

Oh, I plan to. Though I can’t understand what other motive the Beta governor would have for our pack other than to breed one of his soldiers into it.

“I am told she is their best soldier...”

Strange. It just so happens that I was the best in my class too.

But no one can take care of my Omega better than me. When this ‘Mila’ arrives, I will stop at nothing to prove that she is ill-fitted to protect Oliver.

I swear it.

We come to a stop, and the governor takes a moment to gather her thoughts. Training continues all around us, and I prepare myself for what she says next.

“Gryphon... The Beta governor is truly up to something, and he intends to infiltrate our defences somehow. So far, he has managed to be successful. These Beta Trials are merely the first step... So, I repeat... Do not let this Mila Stone get the best of your pack. Do I make myself clear?”

Oh, she does. She makes herself perfectly clear.

As clear as crystal.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She places her hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. She’s marking me with her scent as a way to show that she is my superior.

She is also showing me that she owns me...

I have just become her creature.

“Good. I am counting on you, Gryphon. Do not disappoint me. The whole of Alpha and Omega society is counting on you...”

It’s a lot to put on my shoulders, but I take on board what she says, promising that I will do all that I can to keep this Mila

Stone and the Beta governor at bay.

They will not force their way into my pack. But I am willing to play their dirty little game.

Governor Lily wants me to keep this Beta at arm's length? Oh, I can do that and so much more.

I can't wait to meet you, Mila Stone.

Chapter Five

Mila

Governor Frederick invited me to his office before training, and why does he want to see me all of a sudden?

I'm surprised he even knows that I exist.

Could it possibly have to do with the selection? It is getting awfully close now, and I'm becoming a complete bag of nerves.

Instructor Horace is now fifty-five percent confident that I will make it to the first selection, but I'm not going to hold my breath.

After all, it's best to always anticipate the worst.

I guess it wouldn't be so bad if I didn't make the cut. I could always make the selection next year, but the money is just too good to resist, and it could really change my dad's life around.

It could change both of our lives.

But I don't think I can wait another year. It has to be now or never; I don't think my body will wait that long.

One day, my secret will get out, and then it will spell the end for me.

Sometimes, it's not even worth thinking about.

I have to make the first selection.

Finally, I arrive at the governor's door, and he calls out my name before I even have the chance to knock.

"It's open, Mila Stone..."

It's almost as if he could sense my arrival, and had he been listening out for me? I can't help the shiver that runs down my spine.

It feels like stepping into the office of Dracula. And the way he said my full name...

Taking a deep breath, I step into his office, and Governor Frederick offers me a faux smile through his carefully cut beard of black.

There is nothing genuine about him, and this man has always given me the heebie jeebies.

I often wonder if he truly does have the Beta population's best interests at heart, and if he is more in it for himself.

One thing I know for certain; he hates the Alpha population with a roaring passion.

Especially their appointed Governor, Lily...

That female Alpha could twist his limbs like a pretzel, and he knows it. Hence why he is always trying to one-up her.

These recent Beta Trials are proof of his valiant efforts, and it seems his gambling is paying off.

So far, Governor Frederick has the upper hand.

The only thing Lily can do is sit back and watch as the Beta Governor takes over. But I have a feeling she is just a viper biding her time.

The resulting chaos that will possibly ensue from their clash could spell doom for us all...

“Please... take a seat, Mila Stone...”

Always my full name. Most people just call me Mila. But Governor Frederick likes to go the extra mile.

He says my name like I am something sacred.

The door clicks shut behind me, and now I feel boxed in. No way out. Again, I shiver, feeling as if I have entered the office of the devil himself.

Frederick already has the beard to match.

I take my seat before his mammoth-sized desk. The governor is just finishing signing a document. His scratchy pen fills the painful silence, and I try to focus my attention on the scene outside his large glass windows.

A bird has perched in a tree.

The pendulum of the clock swings, but I keep my hands planted firmly on the arms of my chair, trying not to lose my

nerve.

What the hell has brought on this unprecedented meeting, anyway? I always knew that the governor had an eye for me, but I never would have dreamed of the day he would be inviting me to his office.

He puts his fountain pen down, giving me that disingenuous smile again.

“Mila... thank you for coming at such short notice...”

I breathe in, tasting blood. It seems I bit my tongue. “It’s no trouble, Governor, sir.”

He leans back on his leather seat, steepling his fingers as he regards me with those calculating eyes, and I keep my posture straight.

I hope he doesn’t notice the beads of sweat forming on my forehead. I hope I dowsed myself with enough desensitizer today.

The last thing I need is for the governor to find out about my gingerbread-scented secret. The moment he learns the truth about me, I will be kicked out of the Beta population, and my dad will be alone.

There will be no one left to take care of him.

“So, Mila... can you hazard a guess to the strange nature of this meeting today?”

An odd way to start a conversation, but I keep my wits about me, keeping my voice even. “No, governor, sir.”

He taps his steepled fingers together, narrowing his eyes, and I don't want to show him how nervous he is making me feel.

“Your instructor tells me that you are the best in his class...”

I maintain some modesty, nodding my head. “I am very grateful for his praises, sir.”

Again, the governor smiles, and it warps his face. “I hear that you are on your way to making the first selection.”

“That is correct.”

“Some say that you will even be the first to be called up and sent to live with a pack in the Alpha population.”

I notice how he just says Alpha. He omitted Omega, and it's curious...

I don't reply. I don't like where this is leading.

He continues. “Well, it just so happens that I can make those rumors a reality, Mila Stone.”

My heart accelerates.

“I would be happy to give you what you want. After all, making first place is what you desire most, right?”

I suck in a trembling breath. “Yes, sir.”

“That way, you can continue to keep looking after your father. Even though you will be away from him for a while...”

I try not to show any signs of vulnerability on that part. For some reason, I don't like the governor bringing up my father.

It's as if he is exploiting my weakness.

“You just have to promise me something, Mila Stone... After all, I have a pack in mind for you. Their Omega is one of the few males in the world... and I want you to gain his trust... get to know him better...”

He doesn't specify why, and I taste metal in my mouth. Have I bitten my tongue again?

Why do I need to get to know this Omega? Earn his trust? I have only been trained to protect him. I don't plan on getting close to any member of the pack that I will join.

I don't see the point. It's only a trial for the time being. Once the Beta Trials are over, I will return back home to my father. I may even be placed in a new pack.

I doubt I will stay with the same one.

“Is that all, Governor? Just... get to know the Omega?”

“Yes... and earn his trust...”

I lean back. I'm too afraid to ask why. But I am getting the odd inkling that I am being used like a puppet in his twisted games.

What interest does he have in that pack's Omega?

“That will be all now, Ms. Stone.”

I rise from my seat, trying not to look too eager to leave. Something about his office is making me uncomfortable, but why do I have the impression that I just made the worst decision of my life?

What exactly did I sign up for?

I suppose only time will tell.

Chapter Six

Barret

We gather by the main door of the pack house, and Oliver, per usual, is as anxious as a kid starting his first day at his new school.

He gets like this whenever we leave the house. As a male Omega, he is rare and highly desirable amongst our kind, but he has nothing to worry about.

We're his Alphas, and we will protect him. Most of all, we will protect him from the new Beta who we'll be letting into our home.

Gryphon was informed by Governor Lily that our Beta would be a female, and I ball my fists when I think about that woman intruding on our lives and messing up our perfect pack.

I haven't even been able to look at a woman since Oliver presented. As soon as he became an Omega, I knew he was my scent match and someone I needed to protect for the rest of my life.

Oliver is the only one I want now, the one I want to knot, and I know Gryphon and Lachlan feel the same way too.

We would move mountains for our Omega.

“Everyone ready?” he asks, checking his pockets for his desensitizer for the umpteenth time.

He doesn’t like to leave the house without it, and it’s almost as if he is ashamed of his designation.

What does he have to be so embarrassed about? I see the way other Omegas look at him. They’re jealous of him. They are jealous of his pack.

The Beta who is about to come into our lives will have nothing on him...

“Fuck... where is it?” he whispers yells, searching his pockets frantically now.

Gryphon places his hand on Oliver’s shoulder, and the Omega pauses, savoring his touch. He breathes a little easier now.

The Alpha rubs his shoulder with his thumb next, and the Omega breathes out a soft sigh, closing his eyes.

Good. Crisis averted.

I hate seeing him like this. It’s not fair that the government are forcing this new initiative on us, but most of all, it’s not fair on Oliver.

Do they have any idea how precious Omegas are about their things? Not that I mind being Oliver’s ‘thing’, but I am his.

His whole life is inside this house that we call a home. It's where his nest is and where his family lives.

We don't need some stranger messing up our heaven.

"Oliver.... you don't need the desensitizer," Gryphon reassures. "Don't mask who you are... You have *us*. We will protect you."

Oliver meets the Alpha's eyes, and he smiles tightly, nodding his head. "You're right. It's just... you know..."

We do. He hates that he can't protect himself. He did do a few months of military training at the academy, but the moment he perfumed, he was sent to the Omega School.

It's just the way of our world.

Omeegas are not soldiers or protectors. They are the *protectees*.

Highly desirable and very coveted.

We really do have our work cut out, and we have to be on our best guard tonight.

No one will get their hands on my Omega...

I will cut them before they have that chance.

Gryphon squeezes Oliver's shoulder again for extra measure. "You will be fine, Ollie. The Beta government won't even get within ten feet of you."

Like hell, they won't. The Betas hate that we big-strong Alphas are hogging all the Omeegas for ourselves.

Oliver smells like a honeycomb, and so all noses will be drawn to him. He may smell sweet, but he can sting like a bee when he wants.

Inside that sweet hive is a swarm of buzzing bees ready to strike, and I have seen him in action...

The Omega can fight, and he's good with a fencing sword.

However, I still have to teach him some fighting moves from time to time, and we have a lot of fun those days.

Lots of sex and knotting...

"Besides," I purr, stepping closer.

Oliver cocks his brow at me, fixing his tie.

I yank on his tie, bringing him closer. Now our mouths are inches apart. "You know I will chop the balls off anyone who steps too close to you... and then serve them to you in a boiling hot stew..."

My purr rumbles deep in my chest, and Oliver loses himself to the sensual sound.

But he manages to mutter from his fuckable lips. "You're disgusting at times, Barret. A stew?"

"Yes... a hot, boiling stew... with plenty of carrots..."

He grimaces, pushing me away.

I chuckle. Did I forget to mention that I'm something of a psychopath?

Only when it comes to protecting my Omega...

“You messed up my tie,” he complains, gazing at his reflection in the mirror to fix said tie.

I move in for more, but Gryphon pushes me away. “Keep your dick in your pants now. We need to leave. We can fuck him later when we get back home.”

I scowl at the Alpha. Who exactly appointed him pack leader again? But he is, and I suppose the role of leader just comes naturally to someone like Gryphon.

It’s the strong jaw, I think. And the butt chin.

Well, fuck Gryphon and his butt chin...

I wink at Oliver, promising him all sorts of dark wicked things in the nest later. The Omega rolls his eyes, pretending to be distracted by searching his pocket for that stupid desensitizer again.

I swear to God, one day, I am going to find every bottle in this house and bury it in the yard.

He doesn’t need it.

We’ve got him.

“Where the hell is Lachlan?” Gryphon huffs next, gazing down at the expensive gold watch that his old man gave him before he died.

Never goes anywhere without it. A totem of good luck.

We could do with all the good luck tonight.

“That fucking bastard is late again...” he growls.

Oliver finishes fixing his tie, and peers at the Alpha. “I’m sure he will be here soon. Give him a chance, Gryphon. You know how he gets...”

Don’t we just. Lachlan is a bigger maniac than I am.

He takes his job as protector very seriously.

Lachlan arrives soon enough, wearing a leather baldric with ten different knives. He smiles like a madman, looking as if his eyes are about to pop from his skull, and it’s exactly as I said...

Crazy.

“Lachlan... we won’t get past security with you carrying all those *knives*...” Gryphon curses.

“We’ll be fine,” he croons, pulling a knife out so he can demonstrate his skills. He flips it around, catching it by the handle again. “Ta-da!”

He’s a total idiot and not exactly the brightest tool in the shed. If he wants to bring a knife, then he needs to be more discreet at least.

I have one hidden in the sole of my shoe.

“Besides,” Lachlan continues. “They make for a neat party trick. Look!” He starts juggling three knives this time, and I howl, slapping my knees.

Oliver shoots me a look. “Don’t encourage him, Barret. You know better...”

Gryphon shoves Lachlan back toward his room. Lachlan pouts, dropping all his knives. “You ruined my party trick...”

The Alpha only has a growl for him, and Lachlan best does as he says or we’ll all be in deep shit.

“Take them back. You’re only allowed *one* knife. Keep it hidden.”

Lachlan rolls his blue eyes, heading back to his room. “Fine...”

When he returns, he pulls out his pockets to show that they’re empty. Then we head out the door, and on to city hall.

Let’s get this shit show on the road.

Chapter Seven

Mila

The selection will be a formal ceremony.

All the Beta soldiers will stand in an orderly line, waiting for their names to be selected. I should be one of the first.

It took me four years just to get here, and I should be proud. I may have to leave my dad, but at least he will be taken care of.

I am dressed like a soldier. No ceremonial robes, no nothing.

Everyone in the room is dressed in military gear.

Well, apart from the packs.

When they enter the room, going to their designated seating areas, the crowd hushes.

No wonder the Betas are obsessed...

Alphas and Omegas are something else, and they make us mere mortals shrink in comparison.

I spy all those beautiful Omegas, women dressed in flowing gowns and shining jewels that catch the lights of the room.

Their Alphas protect them as if their very lives depend on it, and a heavy blanket weighs down upon me, dampening my mood.

No one has ever protected me in my life. I have always had to protect myself and my dad.

I have never even worn a dress...

I've never been allowed to.

My eyes scan the crowd as I hope to get a glimpse of my future pack. Governor Frederick said that I would be going to a pack with a male Omega, but all the Omegas in the room are female.

My attention falls on one Omega in question. She gives me a scornful look, throwing back her mane of glistening brown hair, and I spy that bite mark.

She is taken, and she wants me to know it.

Must be nice to be bonded...

That crescent-shaped mark shines brighter than any of her jewels, and I bite the inside of my cheek, my jealousy writhing deep inside me.

Here I am, dressed like a boring soldier while she gets to wear a pretty white gown.

She smirks, and it appears she knows exactly what I am thinking.

I'm not sure how long we stare at each other. But the moment the Alpha spots me looking at his Omega, he bares his teeth, and I avert my eyes.

He steps in front of her now, and the bitch vanishes from my eyes.

We are trained not to look Alphas directly in the eyes, especially when it comes to their Omegas.

They deem it as a challenge.

I am starting to think that these whole Beta Trials were a mistake, but Governor Lily was forced to sign a decree.

No Alpha will harm a Beta soldier during the trials. So at least I am safe.

I just wonder how long it will be until an Alpha breaks the rules of the decree.

No male Omega enters the room, and I am starting to think that Governor Fredrick was pulling my leg until *they* arrive...

Three of the most vicious-looking Alphas I have ever seen. The one in front has short auburn hair, and the one on the left has long hair of raven black. The third Alpha on the right has hair as light as the sun's rays, tied back in a loose ponytail.

It's them. It has to be. I just know it.

I spy the way every other Alpha backs away, keeping their own Omegas safe, but they only have eyes for the stage.

The Alpha with the short brown hair, the one I am assuming is their leader, looks straight at me at the front of the line, and

my heart cleaves in two when I spy the loathing in his eyes.

He hates me. They all do. Well, except for the crazy, smiling blond maybe.

It almost seems as if they know who I am, and someone must have tipped them off, just like Governor Frederick advised me.

Finally, they take their seats, and I didn't even get to glimpse their Omega. They are keeping him hidden.

Hidden from me...

Silence bleeds through the room, but I keep my stony face ahead, preparing myself for the selection. This is the day I have been waiting for, and it feels as if I am going to war.

Governor Frederick takes the podium, Alpha Lily right by his side, and she dwarfs him in comparison.

Sometimes, I forget how big she truly is.

She is larger than life.

The Beta Governor smirks at me, a knowing expression on his bearded face, but I keep my gaze forward, careful not to look any Alpha in the eye.

There are no familiar faces in the crowd. My dad was too ill to make it today, but he promised he would watch the ceremony live on TV.

I hope he is proud.

Governor Lily speaks into the microphone, and I don't even dare look her way. Her reputation truly precedes her, and I am

surprised that Governor Frederick has the gall to stand so close to her.

He knows he has the upper hand.

“Thank you all for coming,” she says. “As you all know, today marks the first day of the highly anticipated Beta Trials. A new initiative created by Governor Frederick...”

There is no applause, and the tension becomes so thick, I can almost taste it. It’s obvious that the Alpha governor doesn’t agree with the Beta Trials, but unfortunately, she was outnumbered.

There are far more Betas than Alphas in this world.

They may be stronger, but we are smarter. Also, we have numbers on our side.

Governor Frederick smirks at Lily, and she passes the microphone to him now, her lips pressed tight.

She wears a pretty dress herself, but she looks far from feminine. That woman is not delicate in the slightest. The muscles of her arms and legs are proof of that, and I would hate to get on the wrong side of that Alpha.

“As Governor Lily just informed you, today marks a very special day in our history. It is the dawn of a new age. The day we finally create a bridge between the Beta and the Alpha populations...”

What about the Omegas?

“So, let the ceremony begin!”

Frederick turns his gaze to the row of Beta soldiers. We stand so still and formal. Just as we were trained to do.

The governor's eyes find mine, and I shudder when I spy that evil smirk.

That man does not have good intentions, and I don't believe for a second that he wants to build any bridges.

More like he wants to burn them.

"I would like to call forward the first candidate... Mila Stone. Please, step forward."

Just as I was forewarned, the first to be selected. I can feel my classmates' ire as I step forward, trying to make myself taller.

I have always been small, but no one has ever questioned my stature, and I would like to keep it that way.

Being short is perfectly normal.

I don't look at the pack. I can't. I'm too afraid to see their expressions.

"Pack Hart. Please step forward and accept your new Beta," Governor Lily speaks through clenched teeth.

Pack Hart comes closer, and again, I show respect, careful not to look any of them in the eye. They are still hiding their Omega, but sooner or later, they are going to have to let me see him.

After all, he is the one I have been trained to protect. Yet they don't trust me.

One by one, they all step out of the way to let their Omega pass.

The stage dissolves beneath my feet when I get a look at those perfect blue eyes.

The color of the ocean. And just as turbulent.

The sea is a place I have always wanted to see.

He has to be the most beautiful man I have ever seen, and I can't help but feel drawn to him.

No one has ever made me feel like this before. He's too far away for me to catch his scent, but the small hint that I can detect is enough to confirm my fears.

Fuck. This can't be happening. This is near impossible...

But there's no denying the way I am compelled by him. As if every instinct in my body is on fire, telling me to go to him, to sniff him, to *claim* him...

Those ocean-blue eyes are like magnets, pulling me closer, but I keep my wits about me, not daring to take another step.

The Alpha with the short brown hair bares his teeth at me, and the message is all too clear.

I am not allowed anywhere near his Omega.

It's just unfortunate that his Omega happens to be my scent match.

Fate is a cruel, twisted bitch.

Chapter Eight

Lachlan

D^{amn.} Our new Beta smells really pretty. It's faint and masked by a shitload of desensitizer, but it's still strong enough for me to get a faint whiff.

Even from all the way up on stage.

Gingerbread. Nice.

She's the first woman that has caught my interest since I started courting Oliver. Before I met my Omega, pussy was all I could think about.

I was a horny Alpha back then, seeking out female company in any way I could.

I slept with a lot of Beta girls in those days. They were the only females I had access to. Omegas are too precious in our society, and it's rare to just find an unmated one these days...

And female Alphas scare me.

But Mila is something else. She is a Beta with all the allure of an Omega, but with the strength of an Alpha.

Everything about her is small but strong. Her nose, her mouth, and even her hands and feet. But she knows how to fight. Knows how to protect herself and others.

The only thing large about her are those big green eyes, and are we sure she isn't an Omega?

I glance around the room, peering at the shady Beta Governor, Frederick. Surely, they are mistaken, right?

Mila isn't Beta...

But they all seem to think so. Not one person questions her designation. Even when she is the first to be called up to meet her new pack, no one utters a sound.

They just accept that she is Beta.

I am not so convinced.

Oliver isn't happy. It's obvious he deems her a threat.

Who wouldn't in his case? She's perfect in every way. Long, blonde hair with caramel undertones, and a small, freckled nose.

Gryphon senses his discomfort, placing a hand on his shoulder, and then he looks at Mila, baring his teeth again.

That's a threat. He knows how she makes his Omega feel, being as ridiculously perfect as she is, and it almost seems unfair.

After all, I doubt she asked to be on that stage. This is all Governor Frederick.

Mila is just his pretty little puppet.

“Well, Mila Stone... step forward and bow to your new Alphas...” Frederick sneers and I resist the urge to jump on stage, turning him into a lump of Swiss cheese with one of my knives.

I managed to hide one in my special place...

Mila glances up with those bright jade eyes, and my heart thumps in my chest.

I have never seen a pair so green. They remind me of moss, and it's hard to get mad at a woman with eyes that beautiful. They make me feel calm, zen, and they are taming my mania.

Mila does the smart thing. She goes straight to Gryphon and shows her respect. She kneels, submitting to him and acknowledging him as her new Alpha. She also keeps a safe distance from Oliver, and again, she is showing respect by keeping a few feet away from his Omega.

No one in the room speaks. We just watch as the beautiful woman kneels for her new Alpha.

Gryphon looks a little put out. But he does seem to approve of her submission.

“Rise, Beta, and show the same respect to the others of your new pack,” Lily intones viciously, and I shiver.

She makes me want to pee in my pants.

Mila rises, and now she proceeds to bow for me and Barret.

I have no idea what is going on in Barret's mind. His face is hard, a furrow between his dark eyes as he seems to be concentrating on not breathing.

Does she smell good to him too? I try to tug on him through the bond we share with Oliver, but he pushes me out.

Fine.

I have no idea what to make of her. My mind is conflicted. I should hate this little creature, but my every instinct is telling me to claim her as *mine*.

I have a vision of me bathing her in my scent, rubbing my cheek over every surface of her flawless, porcelain skin, but I don't want to upset Oliver.

I can feel his anxiety through the bond. He does not like any of this.

And he also hates that she is beautiful. He can't stand it.

But... I also sense something else, too. Buried deep beneath his insecurity.

It almost smells like... desire... but I must be mistaken.

Oliver has never had any interest in a female. That Omega likes cock and cock only. I've seen the way he sucks and licks mine when it weeps.

Mila keeps her head bowed, and my eyes trail toward her tits.

That tight-fitting black uniform leaves little to the imagination, and why did they have to make that material so thin?

I can almost see her bra.

Looks like lace.

Fuuuck.

I hope my erection isn't showing.

Oliver tugs on the bond, and he is telling me that it is fine that I find her attractive, and now the guilt cuts me like a knife.

I don't want her. Not like that. I only want *him*. I send a reassuring tendril his way, letting him know that he is the only one for me.

Mila is still kneeling before me, and it's obvious she isn't going to move unless we tell her to. She is like a trained dog, and she will literally do anything we ask of her.

It almost sounds sinister, and I can only imagine the kind of shitty Alphas that will take advantage of someone like that.

These Beta soldiers have been trained by their government to concede.

“Um... you... you m-may rise again... B-Beta...”

At the sound of my stuttering voice, Mila rises, and now she stands like a beautiful statue before us.

I stare, transfixed.

How is she real? I swear, I am looking at a little doll.

None of us speak. We all wait on Gryphon. He only has eyes for Governor Frederick.

The Beta governor has a slimy smile on his devil's beard of a face, and I resist the urge to storm the stage and turn him into a chunk of dairy again.

I don't like the way he is looking at Oliver, and neither does Gryphon.

"So, Alpha Gryphon of the Hart Pack. Do you accept your new Beta?" he says.

"Yes," Gryphon hisses through clenched teeth, having no choice but to accept her.

Governor Frederick really does have us whipped.

We're all just his little puppets in the end.

Governor Lily does not look happy. I don't miss how she glares at Frederick from the corner of her eye. She, too, has no choice but to go along with this whole charade.

She lost to the other governors, a board that is mostly made up of Betas, and I am starting to wonder who the superior designation is here.

The Betas far outnumber us.

Frederick continues. "And you promise to treat her as you would any member of your pack, at least until the time the trials have come to pass?"

They never gave us a timeline. For all we know, the trials could go on for years.

Again, Gryphon stands his ground, but he never takes his eyes off Frederick. The Beta male smiles that evil smile, and we're really in over our heads.

The guy has us right where he wants us on his chessboard, and there is nothing we can do to protest.

It fucking sucks, and poor Oliver has to pay the price.

I can feel his happiness wilting away, and he is going to be one unhappy Omega. His heat is due in a few weeks, and he hasn't stopped spiking.

I hope he doesn't spike in the middle of the ceremony.

If he does, then I will need more knives...

Oliver's sadness turns his honey scent sour. My poor Omega.

This is going to be the hardest on him of all.

Mila is clearly a bigger threat than we previously feared. I'm just glad she is Beta.

If she were an Omega, then she could easily steer us away.

I'll admit... my Alpha likes the idea of her giving him a baby, and I curse myself and him.

No. I don't care for all that family nonsense. Babies are not my end goal.

Just sex and more sex with my hot Omega.

I will not hurt Oliver. I don't care about Mila at all. Only my dick wants her.

My mind and heart belong to Oliver.

“Of course,” Gryphon finally replies, and that settles it.

We are taking Mila home with us.

It’s time to get used to having a Beta around.

Even if she does look suspiciously like an Omega.

Chapter Nine

Mila

I rode in the trunk of the jeep on the way back home. Though, of course, home is subjective here. It will never be my home...

Gryphon made absolute sure of that.

The Alpha hates my guts, and living with him won't be fun.

I just wish that I got to say goodbye to my father. But I can make peace with the knowledge that he is being taken care of now.

He's the only reason why I am doing this.

The jeep is silent. Gryphon drives while Oliver sits with him up front. Barret and Lachlan take the back seat.

A glass screen separates us, but I don't question it. I suppose they just want to keep me as far away from Oliver as possible.

How far do they think they can keep this up? After all, I am only here for Oliver's protection.

Omegas are highly vulnerable, and the Beta government wants to ensure they are thoroughly protected.

They don't believe the Alphas are doing a thorough enough job, and my being here is only an insult.

I offend them just by merely existing.

Sometime later, we stop, and I look around. The guys get out of the car. Gryphon goes around to let Oliver out. It's raining, and he wants to protect his Omega from the elements.

That's understandable.

Not one of them offers to help me out, but it's not as if I was expecting the same treatment.

I am nothing to them. I am just some trained Beta they have brought home against their wishes.

If they had a choice, I wouldn't even be here.

All three Alphas head to the house, and it's almost as if they have forgotten about me. One of them even offers their coat to Oliver so he doesn't get wet.

I guess I'll see myself out of the car, then. I didn't even have a seatbelt or a proper seat. I was made to sit crouched around piles of discarded takeout boxes, and how disgusting.

Don't they ever clean their jeep?

I push the door open, landing on the wet, muddy ground in my heavy boots. It's a real downpour, and I am soaked in seconds.

But it's okay. I am trained for the elements.

I don't feel the chill as it goes straight to my bones, freezing my soul. Instead, I just head up the steps to the large country house, stopping at the door.

Do I just let myself in? They haven't given me permission, and it goes against my training to just barge into their home.

But it's raining.

Have they really forgotten about me?

My whole body is shaking by the time the door opens, and it's the black-haired Alpha, Barret. He narrows his onyx eyes at me as I stand alone in the pouring rain.

I am as still as a statue, waiting for him to give me permission into the house.

My shirt is soaking wet with rain, and his eyes flick toward my breasts quickly. His face hardens, and then he looks at my face with those empty black eyes again.

"What are your orders, Alpha, sir?" I ask.

Clouds of vapor escape my mouth as it's still raining. But I maintain my composure, keeping my arms by my sides.

Barret rolls his eyes and shuts the door. "Cut the military crap. You're not at the academy anymore, sunshine."

I bite my tongue at the insult as he leads me across the yard, and it looks as if I won't be going into the house after all.

Oliver mustn't want me touching his stuff, and it seems we need to come to some arrangement.

I can't very well protect him if I am not even allowed inside the house.

How will I know if he is in distress?

Barret takes me toward a tool shed at the edge of the yard. There's a peaceful wood beyond the small building, and it must be nice to live around so much nature.

There is just something so calming about nature. And the ocean.

That's if I ever get to see it one day.

I just wonder why Barret is taking me to a tool shed. Maybe he is showing me where they keep their weapons.

"Here you go. Home sweet home..."

What?

The Alpha pulls on the door of the tool shed, and it opens out onto a small, empty room. There's a simple cot with threadbare sheets and a shelf with buckets of paint.

It's cold. I can see my breath even when I step into the shed.

Is he for real? Surely, this is a joke.

"Permission to speak, Alpha?"

Barret sighs, and he clearly hates it when I use my military speak. "Yes."

"Will I not get a room in the house?"

Barret sharpens those onyx eyes. "Are you not happy with the room we have given you?"

“No, it’s just—”

“I mean, you could always sleep in the yard...”

A yard which is covered in mud and puddles.

I get it. He is being an ass on purpose so I will leave. After all, I don’t have to be here. It’s all optional.

But I won’t be going anywhere, so tough luck to them.

I am here for my dad in the end. He is the only person who matters.

I am going through all this trouble just so he can be happy.

The things you do for love...

I maintain my calm, remembering my training from the past four years. My instructors told me that Alphas could be difficult.

I suppose the guys are just antsy because their Omega is coming into his heat.

I have been trained to spot all the signs. Though I haven’t had a chance to even speak or stand anywhere near Oliver.

The biggest giveaway is his Alphas. They are extra protective because of his approaching heat. Such as keeping him dry in the rain.

And keeping me as far away as possible.

There’s also Oliver’s scent. I don’t normally know how he smells on a good day, but his perfume was another telltale sign. Too strong, too sweet.

Plus, I think I heard him having a spike on the front seat. But I couldn't hear properly because of the glass. The car vibrated too, which I assume was the combined sounds of all his Alphas purring.

I would find it sweet if they weren't offering me a shed to sleep in.

"I was just concerned. How am I supposed to guard Oliver when I am sleeping all the way out in the shed?"

Barret smirks, and he folds his arms, looking down straight into my eyes. He's trying to intimidate me, but it won't work. I have been trained to deal with Alpha bullshit.

"Why? You want a room right next to his?"

"Well, yes, actually, I do. That would be ideal..."

Barret scoffs, and what an asshole. "Give me a fucking break. You're not fooling me, sunshine. You think you're so tough just because you've had military training. But I've got news for you. So have I. I think I can speak for my pack when I say we can take care of him ourselves..."

"And I believe that. I saw the way you kept him dry from the rain, and the way you protected him from every other Alpha at the ceremony."

And I see the way you protect him from me, too, I want to say, but I keep that one to myself.

Some things are best left unsaid.

Barret doesn't speak. He just continues to gaze down at me, a look of utter disbelief on his face. "Wow... quite the smart mouth, aren't we?"

I don't reply. He is just trying to bait me.

He tries to offer me an olive branch next, playing the affable Alpha at last. "Look... if you stay in the shed, then I may bring you something nice to eat from time to time. Warm meals. How does that sound?"

Well, he should be feeding me anyway. They all agreed that they would treat me like any member of their pack, and that includes meals.

I did spy a few ration tins by the cot, and there's an old rusty tin opener on the shelf.

That's okay. I have survived on far less.

I also have my hunting knife too.

They won't break me. I will be staying for as long as I need to.

I will be staying for as long as my dad is taken care of.

I couldn't give a shit what any of these fuckers think of me.

"That's okay. I can always hunt for small animals in the woods."

I yank out my knife, flipping it around. Barret stares impressed when I catch it by the handle.

"If you're really nice," I go on. "Then I may even share some rabbit meat with you. You ever had rabbit?"

His mouth curves at the corners, and I spy one dimple. Just the one, though, but it's enough for my body to have a reaction.

They're all so easy on the eye. Barret, with his heavy metal rock vibes and the charcoal eyeliner. Lachlan looks like a fallen angel who got kicked out of heaven, and even Gryphon the Grump has a chin dimple that's enough to make me weak in the knees.

But then there's Oliver...

Soft, curly brown hair, ocean-blue eyes, and a plump pair of lips that are shaped just like a heart.

I only saw him for a few moments, but it was enough to make a lasting impression.

His face will be forever burned into my memory.

I will never forget it.

Barret chuckles, leaning closer until he is inches from my face. Then he whispers, just low enough for me to hear. "No. I'm a vegetarian..."

An Alpha who is a vegetarian? That will be the day...

Finally, I pocket my knife away, folding my arms. "Fine. I will stay here. But I need to come into the house sooner or later. Oliver will need protection."

Barret's eyes flash and a shiver goes through my spine when he growls, "No. He won't. He has us."

He whirls away from me, heading back to the house in the pouring rain, and it seems I touched a nerve.

Well, it looks like I am staying in the tool shed.

But that's all right. I've slept in far worse places.

I meant what I said. They won't break me.

Chapter Ten

Barret

I feel like a complete pile of shit as I walk away from the shed.

I've never been an entirely pleasant guy, but that just took the cake.

Gryphon was instructed by Governor Lily to treat her as horribly as possible, but I have to fight every instinct in my body to run back and get her the hell away from that tool shed.

She may be military-trained, but she's too small and vulnerable. With the woods being so close, anything could get to her.

There are bears in those woods.

Poor little thing never asked for any of this, but we have no choice. Governor Frederick is up to something, so we have to keep that beautiful Beta at arm's length.

We can't let her big, pretty green doe eyes fool any of us. In the end, she is the enemy. Nothing but a government puppet. But I would be fooling myself if I wasn't at least a bit curious.

Her lips reminded me of candy. Would they taste just as sweet?

I never thought I would be interested in a woman again once I met Oliver. Once my Alpha recognized him as my Omega, the rest was history. No one else could compare.

Well, until Mila...

I have to be careful around her. Otherwise, Oliver would be crushed if he found out that I was attracted to another.

That's all it will ever be, though. Attraction.

I could never feel the same way about her. Oliver makes me come alive; he makes me feel like I could move the sky for him. And I would.

I climb the steps to the house, and at least the rain has cleared somewhat. The guys are waiting with Oliver in the living room when I arrive.

Oliver's face is pale, and he is chewing his nails. He does that when he is anxious. Gryphon purrs to him on his left, a deep furrow etched between his heavy brows.

Poor Lachlan looks discombobulated.

My Omega gazes up from his seat by the fireplace. I see that Gryphon has already put it on for him; I see that he has already removed his wet shoes.

"Well? How did she take it?" Oliver asks.

I sigh, slumping down on the couch next to Lachlan. He's still lost inside his own head, and it looks as if the *voices* have

gone to bed for the night.

It's been an exhausting day for all of us.

I meet the waves of Oliver's sea-blue eyes. They are stormy as ever, and it's obvious he is not feeling good about any of this.

"Pretty well, to be honest. Her only concern was that she wouldn't be able to take care of you if she was sleeping all the way out in the shed."

Oliver gripes, placing his face in his hands. "This is awful... The shed? Seriously? We can do better than that..."

Gryphon growls, kneeling down before Oliver. He massages his feet. Oliver wore his smart shoes today, and they always give him blisters.

"No, we can't. Are you forgetting what Governor Lily said? We cannot let that Beta into our lives. Governor Frederick is definitely up to something, and we have to be vigilant. This is for the best. She will grow weary of us sooner or later, begging to leave..."

"But wouldn't the governor just place another soldier into our pack?"

Oliver makes a point. That man has already gotten this far. The trials were all his idea.

"And we will make them feel just as unwelcome," Gryphon replies.

A quiet settles over the room, the only sound the crackling fire. I can't stop glancing out the window.

My eyes find the shed. The light is on inside, and it looks as if Mila is making herself at home.

I swallow back a lump of guilt. I won't feel sorry for one of Frederick's puppets.

"I hate this, Gryphon. It fucking sucks..."

No one speaks for some time after Oliver makes his declaration.

I agree with him. It doesn't feel right to make her sleep in that old dusty tool shed.

There are probably spiders in there.

Not that she struck me as the type of girl to be afraid of spiders. What with her hunting knives and all...

"Have you ever had rabbit?"

Of course I've had rabbit. I'm an Alpha.

We eat prey.

Oliver glances up at me, and a small smile forms on his face. Then he peers at Lachlan.

"It's okay, guys. I know you find her attractive. I'm not an idiot."

That lump swells in my throat again, blocking my airway.

I wish I didn't find her lovely, but I do.

So lovely, but so dangerous...

She can skin me with that hunting knife any day.

Gryphon growls, gripping Oliver's chin gently. He forces him to look into his eyes, eyes that gleam red before the light of the fire.

"No one could come before you, Oliver."

The Omega bows his head. "Still... must be nice having a girl around. Someone who can bear young..."

"Hey, we have talked about this. I couldn't give two shits about having children," Gryphon hisses through clenched teeth.

I feel the exact same.

I have taken care of children my whole life. The eldest of seven brothers...

"You may not care, but the government does. Our numbers are growing smaller. There just aren't as many Alphas and Omegas as there used to be. That was the reason why it was a unanimous vote in the end. We need Betas so we don't die out."

The fire continues to spit in the silence that follows. Gryphon glares into the flames, dark shadows settling in the contours of his face.

Lachlan is still lost in his thoughts, and sometimes I wish I knew what was going on in that insane head of his.

"I want to go to my nest..."

We all perk up at that.

He wants to fuck? Now?

Gryphon strokes his chin. “Anything for you, Ollie...”

“No fucking... just...”

Cuddling then? It may still help to take the edge off things. It just doesn't feel right for us all to be in the nest while Mila is alone outside.

Oliver is right. We can't keep this up. Sooner or later, Mila is going to have to come into the house.

Gryphon helps Oliver out of the seat. Then we all lead him to the nest at the end of the house.

It's a small, windowless room, and just the distraction we need.

Maybe if I can shut myself away in a cushioned shoebox of a room that smells like my mate and my pack, then I can forget all about the poor Beta sitting outside alone in the rain.

I really do hope the rain stops. Because I am not so sure how secure the roof of that shed is.

Chapter Eleven

Mila

I lay on my new cot, staring up at the yellowing bulb dangling from the ceiling.

I wonder how long it has been since it got changed last?

This is stupid. They can't expect me to protect Oliver if I am sleeping all the way in the shed. I need to come into the house.

I understand their game.

They are treating me horribly so I give up and go home. But they have really no idea of what I am capable of. Of all the things that I had to do to pass my training.

I am prepared for this.

Besides, do they think I will give up that easily? I have always been a fighter. Even as a kid. I am too stubborn for my own good.

Then there's Dad. My poor, elderly dad who is sick and needs professional medical help.

Hell will freeze over before I let my dad suffer.

So, if I have to sleep in a shed and be treated like shit, so be it. I have been through worse.

Much, much worse.

My stomach rumbles, and I get up to make myself dinner. I have a tin of cold beans. Nice.

I never expected to be invited for dinner, but a warm meal would be pleasant.

I could always go out and hunt in the woods. It's dusk now, so plenty of rabbits will be out foraging.

However, it could be a while before I get my hands on a little cottontail, so cold beans it is.

I can hunt for rabbits tomorrow night. I could even set up some snares.

Just as I open my tin, I cut myself on my finger, hissing through my teeth.

My eyes search the shed fruitlessly for a first aid kit. In the end, I rip up my bedsheets and wrap the cloth around my cut finger.

I hope I don't get an infection.

Thunder sounds overhead, and my eyes find the small hole in the corner of the roof. Rain will get in, and I'll probably drown in my sleep.

Once I eat my beans, I fall down on the bed, thinking about my father.

What is he doing right now? Is he sitting down for his own supper? Has his new help arrived yet and are they making dinner for him?

Are they nice? Will they treat him right?

Damn, I miss him, and I can't help it now. The tears come.

It sucks that I can't be with him. I don't know how much time he has left on earth, but it can't be long.

I should be spending as much time with him as much as possible.

But I have to be here. I need to be able to afford to keep a roof over his head.

Even if my own one has holes in it.

Soon, I nod off, dreaming about my father.

His face is sad in the dream.

Chapter Twelve

Oliver

I can't eat. I can't stop thinking about Mila all alone in the shed outside.

Is she cold? Hungry?

Fuck.

I barely know her, but I can't stand the thought of leaving her out in that shed. It's inhumane.

We are not assholes...

But in the end, she is a threat to me and my pack. I have to remember that.

Governor Frederick sent her here for a reason, and we have to keep our wits about us.

We can't be fooled by her soft green eyes...

Her eyes really are pretty, and I haven't even seen them up close yet.

Green always has been my favorite color. It's the color I even chose for my nest.

It just calms me and makes me feel at ease.

I know that Barret and Lachlan find her beautiful. I would be envious, but I find that it doesn't bother me so much.

I'm pretty curious about her myself.

Why is she so small? I could have sworn I was looking at a porcelain doll when I first saw her at the ceremony.

Quite frankly, Mila is adorable. Despite the fact that she has been military trained and that she could be a potential spy, she is sweet.

Well, at least to look at.

Gryphon looks up beside me. He has nearly cleared his whole plate, and he seems to be the only one of us eating.

My other two Alphas barely touch their food, and when Alphas don't eat, you know something is wrong.

I feel sick. As if I want to vomit up my organs.

Is it the anxiety? The guilt?

"What's wrong?" Gryphon asks, placing his fork into his mouth again.

We're eating takeout, per usual, but I can't touch it.

If I do, it will just come back up again.

I sigh, placing my fork and knife down. "I can't eat."

Gryphon presses his mouth into a firm line. Then he grabs my fork and attempts to feed me himself.

Normally, I would approve, but not tonight.

“Eat. You need your strength.”

“I’m not hungry, Gryphon.”

My Alpha purrs, shoving the fork toward my mouth. What’s he going to do next? Airplane sounds?

I’m an Omega, not an infant.

“I said, I’m not hungry, Gryphon...”

That seems to settle it. The Alpha throws the fork down and attempts to clear my plate.

None of us speaks as he scrapes the food into the bin, keeping his back to us.

It seems to be an awful waste. Considering there’s another mouth to feed.

“It’s the Beta, isn’t it?” he asks.

None of us reply. Lachlan hasn’t spoken since we returned from the ceremony, and he’s normally pretty lively.

Barret hasn’t been any better either. Just curt responses and grunts.

Gryphon is the only one who is acting like himself, but he does seem extra moodier.

“Look,” he goes on, placing the plate by the sink beside the mass of other dirty dishes.

I haven’t had much time to clean. I’ve been too distracted by the ceremony and my heat spikes.

“We can’t let her in. Governor Lily...”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, yes, she is a threat and we have to be careful. It’s just... do we really have to let her starve too?”

Gryphon grits his teeth. “She has tins.”

“And a hunting knife,” Barret chimes in.

I pull a face. “Oh, yeah. Cold beans. Very nice. And a *hunting* knife? Seriously?”

I can’t believe what I am hearing. You would think Mila was living on a desert island.

There is a house within ten feet of her! One with a not-so-civilized pack, if how we’re treating her is anything to go by.

We’re worse than animals.

Neither Alpha replies. For a moment, I think I spy something in Gryphon’s eyes, but it passes quickly.

He is determined to keep her away at arm’s length.

Finally, I speak. “We’re inviting her inside.”

They all look up. Even Lachlan, the lost little lamb, comes to life at last.

He looks hopeful. Barret almost chokes on his drink.

Gryphon’s eyes flash in warning. “Oliver... careful...”

I ignore him, standing up as I approach the door. Lachlan and Barret follow.

“No. You two stay. I’m good on my own.”

“Oliver!” Gryphon yells.

“It will be fine, Gryphon. Relax.”

Yet he is having none of it. He is determined to view her as the enemy.

Me? I just want to be hospitable. It's called being *nice*, but I know it has to do with the fact that Mila reminds me of a small baby doll.

Not that I was ever into dolls, but I feel this strange urge to keep her safe from the rain.

It's a sensation I haven't felt since my little sister was still around. Back when I was just a kid of twelve.

That was before I became an Omega. Back when I was just a regular young boy, hoping to grow up to be an Alpha.

Gryphon catches up, but he soon backs off when I flip around and meet his eyes.

I don't know what he sees in mine, but it's enough to make him back off.

Thoughts of my little sister can have that effect. It's been nearly fifteen years...

She was just six.

Mila may be no small, fragile child, but she is still a person. Someone who needs a warm bed and food.

"I am doing this. You can't stop me..."

I'm growling, and it even shocks me.

Gryphon won't stop staring at me. He doesn't think I should invite her in, but he isn't going to stop me now.

Once I thought of my sister, that was it.

It's like she is still with me at times. I sometimes feel as if her spirit never left, and whenever I need guidance, she helps.

Isabelle would never leave Mila out in the rain.

No one follows me across the yard, and when I arrive at the shed, I find myself alone.

Good.

I knock and the door swings open.

All the breath leaves my lungs when I finally gaze into those green eyes. I spy different shades, and I can't look away.

This is the first time I have been allowed anywhere near her.

But her eyes have nothing on her scent. It's faint, but there's no missing the scent of gingerbread buried beneath a layer of desensitizer.

Why would she feel the need to wear desensitizer?

"Oh... hi, Oliver..." she whispers, her cheeks blushing bright red.

I fumble for words and maybe I really should have brought one of the guys with me.

My body is having a strange reaction to the way she says my name. Her voice is wispy and ridiculously feminine, and I am pretty sure my balls have tightened.

What the fuck?

Coming out here was a mistake. But I am seeing this through now. She cannot spend another moment in that shed. Especially as I spy that dirty, bloodied rag around her finger.

She cut herself.

“Hi, M-Mila... I... I was wondering if you would like to join us for dinner?”

Mila’s eyes widen, and just when I thought they couldn’t look any bigger. Then she closes her mouth, her cheeks turning an even darker shade of red.

“S-sure... all right.”

I bet she wasn’t expecting me at all. It seems she truly did resign herself to sleeping in the shed for tonight and for the rest of her time here.

She steps outside, going to close the door behind her, but I stop her in time, collecting her bags from inside.

Mila looks at me confused.

“You won’t be staying out here after all. We will have a room prepared for you.”

Her shoulders sag in relief, and I bet she is thrilled to be staying inside the house after all.

“Okay. Will the others mind?”

I scoff. “Like they have a choice...”

That seems to settle it. In the end, it’s me who makes all the rules. If I am happy to have her in the house and eating at our table, so be it.

Time to show her some hospitality.

Chapter Thirteen

Mila

Dinner was an awkward affair, but I was just grateful to get away from the tool shed.

I'm surprised Oliver came for me in the end. Out of the entire pack, I would have assumed he would hate me the most. After all, he has the most to lose with me being here.

I'm a strange female entering his pack. I'm a potential threat to him, one who could steal away his Alphas, but he only showed me kindness.

He even cleaned my finger and gave me a band-aid, and my heart was beating in my mouth the whole time he tended to me.

It's his Alphas who have a problem with me. Namely Gryphon, the most inhospitable, unfriendliest person I have ever had the misfortune of meeting.

He didn't like having me anywhere near his Omega, and he kept throwing me the stink eye across the table.

He even ensured that I sat as far away from Oliver as much as possible.

Despite his attitude toward me earlier, Barret didn't give me any more grief. But he still ignored me.

Lachlan was a little more approachable, and I would catch his eyes drifting my way.

He reminds me of an elven prince with his long, golden hair, piercing blue eyes, and sculpted cheeks. Despite how delicate he may look on the outside, he is far from soft.

He has corded muscles running up and down his arms, arms that look as if they could squeeze the life from me.

I also get the sense that he's a little unhinged—okay, *very* unhinged...

There's no missing the crazy light of his pretty blue eyes, and the careful way he cuts his meat whenever he watches me eat my own food.

Barret is the opposite of Lachlan in terms of features. He's all dark, rugged handsomeness, with shoulder-length black hair, onyx eyes, and a scruffy beard.

He pretends as if I don't exist, and it's like our conversation outside the shed never happened.

Has he forgotten being rude to me?

Then there is sweet old Gryphon. His hair is short and a deep auburn. His eyes are just as reddish brown, but just like

Lachlan and Barret, he's beautiful beyond compare. Perfectly cut jawline, dimpled chin, and smoldering gaze...

That fiery gaze is on me right now.

He hates me. Or he hates what I represent, mostly.

In the end, I am not here for him. I am here for Oliver, and if we are going to live together, then he needs to lighten up.

While I can acknowledge that they are all handsome, I can't help but be drawn to the Omega the most.

He's ethereal. Like a cartoon prince that walked out of my TV screen, or stepped out of the pages of a book.

Oliver may be slight and smaller than the others, but he is still masculine.

He has kind, deep blue eyes, perfectly rounded.

They remind me of the ocean. They are as turbulent as the ocean...

Oliver has known loss. It's easy to tell once it has happened to you.

My heart breaks just thinking about him losing someone he loved, and I hope none of the others notice the shine to my eyes.

It's just been an exhausting day, and I am missing my dad.

Perhaps I can call him later.

"How do you like the food, Mila?"

Oliver is addressing me. It's best I answer so I don't offend the others.

I peer up, meeting his ocean eyes.

Gryphon glares at me. Lachlan still regards me in that strange manner, cutting his meat very slowly. Barret doesn't even glance my way.

I try to think of a reply that isn't offensive. While I love takeout, surely, this can't be all they eat, right?

I remember the discarded boxes at the back of the jeep.

Some of them had mold in them.

When I peer around the kitchen, I spy those dirty dishes by the sink. Maybe they haven't had a chance to clean with the trials coming up.

They must have been stressed.

The oven doesn't look as if it gets used much.

"Our Omega asked you a question, Beta," Gryphon growls, and I sit up straighter, remembering my place.

I guess I got lulled into a false sense of security for a moment. I am not their guest. I am their subordinate. I have been trained to heed my new Alphas' every order as a good Beta soldier should.

But does he have to be such a shithead about it, though?

Oliver turns his way, shaking his head in clear disappointment. The bronze-haired Alpha still regards me like I'm a moldy takeout box at the back of his jeep.

Lachlan chews his meat carefully, keeping his crazed blue eyes on me the whole time.

Barret wears a stupid smirk on his face, the one that shows his one dimple.

“It’s... good. Do you always eat takeout?”

Oliver is about to reply, but Gryphon cuts him off. “And what’s it to you, Beta?”

I hold my tongue. While I was trained to heed my Alpha’s every command, I was never trained to put up with bullshit.

They still taught us about boundaries at the academy, and I don’t like Gryphon’s attitude one bit.

But reporting his behavior would only affect my father.

If I returned home, they would stop my money.

Dad would no longer get the care he needs.

Gryphon is really going to test my patience.

I know what he’s doing. He thinks by being a dick to me, I will run back home, crying with my tail between my legs, but that’s not going to happen.

Not as long as my dad has a roof over his head.

“I was just curious... do any of you cook?”

Silence. Oliver blushes, and it’s the most adorable sight I have ever seen.

His embarrassment makes his honeycomb scent even more mouth-watering...

Barret is chuckling like an idiot. Lachlan keeps those protruding eyes on me, and it's been some time since he blinked.

Gryphon pokes at his food angrily. Then he shoves some noodles into his mouth. "We don't cook much, no."

Barret flies backwards on his chair, howling in pure laughter now. Oliver tells him to shush.

Lachlan still stares at me with the intensity of a thousand suns.

Finally, Oliver sighs, meeting my gaze. "Truth is, Mila. None of us can cook much. I never really did develop an aptitude for it, and I know... *embarrassing*... An Omega who can't cook for his pack."

Barret stops howling, leaning forward on his chair again so he can sidle up close to Oliver. He purrs sensually, playing with his curly brown locks. "Hey, it's all right. You can do plenty of other things for us..."

My cheeks burn, and I peer down into my food.

Did it just suddenly get hotter in here?

I can feel Lachlan's piercing eyes, and I'm pretty sure he just sensed my arousal.

I think he even purred at me.

No, no... I never meant to steal his attention away from Oliver.

Lachlan is his Alpha, not mine.

“Barret... not here... We have a guest...” Oliver whispers, eyeing me warily.

“So,” the dark-eyed Alpha purrs yet again, speaking close to the Omega’s ear. “She could always watch...”

Lachlan finally makes a sound. He laughs, a high-pitched chortle of sorts, and it makes his eyes light up feverishly.

I think he likes the idea of me watching one of them fuck his Omega.

Gryphon slams his fist on the table, shaking all the cutlery. “Enough! Barret, stop.”

Barret finally stops, and now he leans away from Oliver, glancing over at me. That dark smirk returns, along with its menacing dimple, and I shrink in my seat.

What the hell did I sign up to?

Oliver sits rigidly in his seat, his arousal painted all over him. His hair looks deliciously mussed, and there’s sweat on his face.

But he only has eyes for me.

Shame licks my own cheeks, and I hate that I got a little aroused by Barret licking his ear.

They all know it, too.

Lachlan licks his lips, and he still won’t stop staring at me.

Finally, Gryphon rises from his seat, grabbing his and Oliver’s plates. Then he scrapes the leftovers into the trash and discards them into the sink.

If there's one thing to turn off my arousal, then that's a pile of dirty dishes.

Seriously... how can people live like this?

"Time for bed."

He's speaking to Oliver.

Oliver rolls his eyes. "Come on. We were going to stay up watching a movie tonight."

"Well, change of plans. Now to bed."

Oliver goes to protest, but I cut in. "No. I think bed sounds like a good idea. I'm pooped."

"Huh, *pooped*..." Lachlan mutters, licking his fork clean.

I refrain from rolling my eyes.

What is he? Six?

"Well, then, it's a good thing we had the shed prepared..." Gryphon remarks, and my heart dips.

I guess I thought I would be staying in the house.

Oliver even grabbed all my things.

Oliver looks at his Alpha incredulously. "Gryphon, she is not sleeping in the tool shed."

Gryphon clears the rest of the table, and it's like I'm not even present anymore. "Why? It's a perfectly nice shed."

Oliver fumes, and I step back, wishing I didn't have to be here for this.

It has nothing and everything to do with me, and it just sucks.

“No. Mila is staying in the house and that is final. If you don’t like it, Gryphon, then... feel free not to sleep in the nest tonight.”

Gryphon looks at his Omega in shock. “You’re kicking me out of the nest?”

Oliver starts clearing the table himself, and I decide to help.

At least I can make myself useful.

“Only if you continue to be a dick to Mila...”

Gryphon’s burgundy eyes flame. Then he looks at me, baring his teeth, and I drop a fork in fright.

Barret and Lachlan freeze, weighing up the other Alpha.

I have no idea what is about to happen. But Gryphon looks ready to kill.

Thankfully, Oliver snaps him out of it. “Hey...”

He shakes his shoulder, and finally, Gryphon falls back to earth. Once again, he’s just grouchy rather than murderous, and what the fuck is wrong with him?

That Alpha looked as if he wanted to kill me for a moment.

I guess I shouldn’t take it personally. After all, I’m here as a representative of my people.

It’s very well known that there is tension between Alphas and Betas. There has been for some time now, and the Betas have always been on top.

While Alphas may be stronger, in the end, Betas have their strength in numbers.

Governor Frederick always gets the final vote. The final say.

The Alphas would be wise to listen to him.

Oliver shucks off his shirt. Now I get a view of his muscled chest as he hands the garment to Gryphon.

I look away, pretending that I didn't just notice the happy trail leading down to Oliver's pants.

Fuck.

Oliver is small but compact. It's enough to drive a girl crazy.

"Here, take this with you and head to the nest..."

Gryphon grabs the shirt, breathing in Oliver's scent as he leaves the kitchen.

I heave a sigh, closing my eyes. When I look back again, I find all three of them watching me.

Barret has returned to being indifferent. Lachlan's eyes dance with light, and Oliver has nothing but sympathy.

"I'm so sorry about that, Mila. Please know that you are not in any danger here."

Is he sure about that? I don't feel very safe right now. In the end, I am nothing but a threat to Gryphon and the pack. A potential spy sent by the Beta government.

Governor Fredrick told me to get close to this pack, especially Oliver, but I can't allow that to happen.

I'm afraid of what would happen if I did.

I have no idea what plans the governor has in store, but they can't be good.

No matter what, I will never be a part of this pack. No matter how much I may want it.

I guess I really am on my own.

Chapter Fourteen

Gryphon

Oliver finds me sulking alone in the nest.

Lachlan and Barret didn't join us tonight. They have gone to their own separate bedrooms, knowing that Oliver and I needed some time together.

I have no idea what happened in the kitchen. For a moment, I was convinced that Governor Frederick was standing in my very own house, stealing my Omega from right beneath my nose.

I know Oliver didn't mean it when he said he would kick me out of the nest. Even when we fight, he always has room for me.

But it just felt as if she was taking him away from me.

I was worried she would take my place in the nest. *Hell* will freeze over before I let that Beta into my Omega's nest.

Oliver is *mine*...

The door to the nest opens, and Oliver has arrived at last. The moment he steps over the many green pillows and blankets, I smell her.

Mila Stone.

A growl rumbles in my chest. Oliver sighs and kicks me in the shin.

I look up, and the growl dies in my throat.

He lays down next to me, snuggling up close, and how the tables have turned.

Normally, he's the one sulking in the nest. Not me. The Alpha.

At least Oliver has an excuse. His heat is coming up.

I'm just a moody bastard.

“What's the matter, Gryphon?”

I don't speak. I continue to glare at the cushioned walls, imagining her face there.

Why does the green have to match her eyes?

“Look, she's not going to steal me away from you...”

I lift my lips, snarling at the mere suggestion. I will rip her head off before that day ever comes to pass.

“But that's no excuse to rip her head off.”

My growl stops, and I close my eyes, keeping his shirt by my nose. How did he know what I was thinking?

He tugs on the bond, reminding me that nothing between us is sacred anymore.

I gave up my private thoughts the day I decided to give him my mark.

Now we know all of each other's hopes, dreams, and wishes.

"I smell her on you," I mutter, scowling at the wall.

I still see her eyes.

Oliver pauses, glancing down at his chest. He must have found another shirt.

Good. I saw the way that Beta looked at him. She's hungry for my Omega. Not that anyone could blame her, but Oliver is *mine*...

I won't have her or Frederick taking him away from me.

"I'm sorry, but she's going to be around for a while. So it's best you get used to her scent."

I roll around, meeting his eye. "You like her?"

Not that I would normally be bothered. If my Omega wanted another mate, I would happily oblige him.

But I don't want him to choose someone who could be a threat to us or our pack.

"She seems sweet enough. It's hard to say, but I don't think we have anything to worry about with her. At least not yet."

I agree... maybe. While Mila may be innocent, her reasons for being here are not.

She is Frederick's creature. So that makes her the enemy by extension.

Governor Lily warned me. I can't let my guard down and neither should my pack.

Otherwise, the consequences could be dire.

Oliver laughs, and I peer up. "What?"

"You trying to take a page from my book? Normally, I'm usually the one who comes here to sulk. You sure you're not really an Omega, Gryphon?"

He kicks me playfully, and I take his flirting to mean that he isn't mad at me anymore.

With a growl, I roll us around and pin him to the bed. I'm stark naked beneath these sheets, and I don't miss the way his eyes darken when they trail down my body.

They stop at my knot. My dick kicks up, stretching against my stomach. I meet his round eyes, smirking. "Does this look like an Omega's cock to you?"

He licks his lips and whispers. "No, Alpha..."

"Care to give it a try?"

Oliver has had my knot plenty of times, but tonight, I am going to give him what he truly deserves.

He has been a bad Omega after all, disobeying me by bringing that Beta into the house, and it's time to teach him a lesson.

He smells like her now, and it makes me angry.

Horny...

She smells so good on his skin.

My mind wanders, wondering what it would be like if she were in here watching us right now, and the idea isn't all that atrocious to me.

In fact, I think I like it.

It's just unfortunate that she may be a potential spy.

For that reason, she can never join the nest. The moment we let our guard down, that's it. No going back.

Oliver lays down on his stomach for me, and I slip his pants off, exposing his toned ass.

He's already wet for me, and I use his slick to coat my shaft.

I press my inflamed head to his backside, yanking his hair back with my fingers. I growl deeply into his ear. "Think you can take my knot, Omega?"

He's panting for breath. "Y-yes, Alpha..."

"We'll see about that."

Finally, I enter my Omega, and the pleased sounds of his release fill the nest as I rut him into oblivion.

My hips snap against his ass, working him up to a second orgasm, and when he clenches around me tightly, crying out my name, I think of her...

And I know I am not the only one.

Through our bond, I catch him thinking about her too, and I rut him harder, snarling viciously so I can chase all thoughts of her away.

My hips stutter, and when I come, letting him milk my cock with his ass, my mind blanks. My knot swells, sealing me in place inside him, and now I lose myself to the rut.

Unfortunately, her face is all I can see as my thoughts bleed back into awareness, and I am going to have to do something about that.

Oliver is the only one for me.

I will never let her in.

Never.

That Beta will never be a part of our pack.

Chapter Fifteen

Mila

I couldn't sleep last night with the sounds coming from down the hall.

Gryphon and Oliver went at it all night in the nest, and in the end, I had to touch myself to stop myself from imploding.

But I barely got myself off, and living with them is going to be hard.

I am aware Oliver has a heat soon, and I think it's best I move back into the shed after all.

I don't think I will be able to manage. The sounds he was making even when not in heat were enough to undo me.

I have never felt this turned on in my life. No other man has made me feel the way Oliver does, and I am dreading his heat. Truly.

At least I can busy myself with other tasks, and the first thing I am going to do is tackle that kitchen.

First, I find some yellow dishwashing gloves, then search the house for disinfectant.

The guys don't wake for hours, and it seems they are all late sleepers.

Good. I need the space to clean and focus.

It's not until noon when I hear the first set of footsteps, and I look around, spying Lachlan in the doorway.

His hair is loose, falling down to his waist.

Damn. He is one beautiful Alpha. With all the looks of an angel...

But with the eyes of a devil.

Those devilish eyes are trained on me now, and I busy myself with the dishes, hoping he doesn't see the blush on my cheeks.

There is a lot of dishes, I'm afraid.

I wonder if they have always been so messy. Or have they just been so stressed with the trials coming up to bother with cleaning?

I just hate that I am the cause of that stress, so at least I can make myself useful.

This kitchen will be spotless.

Lachlan slinks to the coffeepot. Actually *slinks*. He moves like the wind, and I almost yelp when he stops behind me, a steaming cup of coffee in his hand.

"Sleep well?"

My hand is on my chest, and my heart beats like a rabbit in distress. “Yes. As a matter of fact, I did. You?”

I am just making conversation. I did not sleep well.

“Yes.” He sips his coffee, blue eyes protruding.

Seriously. Why does he keep looking at me like that? What is his deal?

Lachlan watches me put the dishes away, leaning on the counter on the opposite side of the kitchen, and I find the whole thing unnerving.

I don’t know what his interests are in me, but I’m a little worried.

What would Oliver think? Would he be mad that I was stealing his Alpha’s attention away?

Finally, another set of footsteps arrives, and thank God. That creepy angel was starting to freak me out.

“Fuck... what a rough night... I need some coffee...”

Barret plods to the coffee shop, and at least I’m not the only one who hardly slept.

Was Barret distracted by Oliver and Gryphon too?

The Alpha yawns, making his coffee absentmindedly. It’s only when he goes to search for a spoon from the sink that he finally notices.

“Holy shit... this place is clean...”

He turns around to look at me slowly. His black eyebrows raise when he spots my yellow gloves.

Lachlan makes that strange high-pitched laugh, and what the hell does he find so funny?

“Maybe some elves snuck into the house at night and *cleaned* for us...”

“Or maybe our new Beta has actually proved herself useful after all,” Barret replies, standing beside his blond friend.

Now they both stare at me.

Finally, I speak. “What? I like a clean space...”

Neither of them talks for a while. They just watch me in amusement.

Lachlan smiles a creepy smile. Barret smirks, showing me that lonely dimple.

His eyes are smudged with makeup, and the disheveled look really suits him.

It suits them both.

Alphas.

“Hey, if you’re just going to stand there and watch me, then the least you can do is help.”

Barret’s smirk widens. “Not only does she clean, but she’s sassy too... If you’re not careful, Lachlan, she will skin you like a rabbit...”

Lachlan’s eyes flash, and just when I thought he couldn’t look more insane.

“Oh, I would like that *very* much...” Lachlan giggles, sipping his coffee.

That's it. "Put some glasses away. Now! Please..."

Manners. I have to remember my place after all.

Barret blinks, gazing around. "We have glasses?"

Is he pulling my leg?

"Yes, you do. They were in the cupboard on the left that was covered in dust. I decided to wash them in the dishwasher."

Barret pouts. "We have a dishwasher?"

Lachlan approaches a glass, beaming wildly. "I can see my face!"

Barret yanks the glass from his hand. "Give me that before you break it."

Now the three of us work in tandem as we go about reorganizing the kitchen, and soon we get it nice and clean.

Lachlan even brought in some wild bluebells from the yard, placing them in a glass vase in the middle of the table.

He shrugs. "It gives the room a feminine touch."

Barret grumbles, pulling out a chair. "I'm starving. Did you actually manage to find anything to eat?"

He looks at me.

There wasn't much in the fridge, save for a box of free-range eggs, a jug of milk that hadn't gone off, luckily, and some grated cheese.

I could always make omelets.

Again, proving myself useful.

“I’ll make omelets. And then we can think about going out and doing some shopping.”

Because I do not want to be eating takeout for the duration of my stay here.

I like a varied diet.

“Ooh, I do love omelets,” Lachlan peeps.

Barret kicks him from under the table. “You’d eat anything if Mila made it.”

Lachlan doesn’t deny it. “Yeah... I bet her eggs are all buttery and fluffy...”

Fuck. How am I supposed to react to that? The best I can do is keep my back to them as I go about cracking eggs into a bowl.

My cheeks are bright red.

“What the hell is going on?”

I startle at the sound of Gryphon’s voice. He hovers in the doorway, looking slightly more relaxed than he did yesterday, and I bet all that delicious sex with Oliver blew away some of the cobwebs of his mind.

Oliver’s scent wafts from his clothes, and I return to my task, squeezing my thighs together.

Just keep mixing, Mila.

“What the fuck happened to this place?” he says, stepping into the kitchen.

He actually sounds disappointed.

“Mila cleaned!” Lachlan cheers. “And now she’s making us omelets!”

Gryphon growls, storming toward me, and this will be good.

It seems nothing is ever good enough for this guy.

“Don’t think this changes anything, Beta. Don’t think I don’t know your game...”

I look up, avoiding his eyes. “My game? All I did was clean your kitchen, and now I am making your pack breakfast.”

He bares his teeth, and I sigh, returning to my mixture.

I don’t want the eggs to stick to the pan.

“I didn’t give you permission to clean. You should have come to me first.”

“But you were sleeping. Was I supposed to wait until you were awake?”

I have him tongue-tied. He presses his mouth together, and his lips almost turn white.

Is he really that pissed that I cleaned his house?

I get it. I am an intruder here, and he never asked for my presence. He was forced to house me by the Beta government, but if he thinks I am going to live in a messy house during my stay here, then he has another thing coming.

And if he thinks I am going to ask for his permission every time I want to clean a dish or cook, then he can go and cry to his Mommy...

I am trained to heed my every Alpha's command, but I refuse to ask permission to breathe.

Besides, his house looks amazing. I even plan on cleaning some other rooms.

I am going beyond the call of duty here. I am trained in battle, as well as keeping my Omega safe.

But I am no housewife. I've just been taking care of my dad for so long, it has become second nature.

Barret and Lachlan watch the whole exchange amused, and they aren't helping. They're like a pair of schoolboys. So immature.

Gryphon's face is beetroot red, but I won't let him intimidate me. He is being ridiculous.

If we are all being forced to live together, then the least he can do is be more cooperative.

"Please, sit down, Gryphon, and wait until I serve you your breakfast. I make a mean omelet. Just ask my dad."

He stands his ground for a few moments longer, but I stand mine too. Something else I am trained in.

I still show respect. I don't look him directly in the eye, but I'm also assertive.

Finally, he gives in, joining the others at the table.

Lachlan snorts, but then he yelps once Gryphon whacks him across the head. Now all three Alphas wait in silence.

I've almost finished with the omelets when Oliver walks in.
"My, what smells so good?"

You...

That's what I want to say.

Oliver smells even better in the morning, especially when he has been thoroughly knotted by Gryphon.

Gryphon is one lucky bastard.

I can't say the same for Oliver, though. His mate is a jackass.

Gryphon pulls Oliver onto his lap, and now he cradles him with his arms, protecting him from the world.

Mostly, he is protecting him from me.

I serve the pack their breakfast. Lachlan wastes no time, grabbing his fork as he digs in.

Gryphon yells. "No! Stop..."

Lachlan glares at him. Even Barret looks pissed, his eggs halfway to his mouth.

Oliver watches his Alpha strangely. "Gryphon? What's wrong? It's just an omelet."

Gryphon's burgundy eyes fall on me, and they're more red than brown today. "Mila should eat first."

Oh, I see. He thinks I have poisoned the eggs.

This should be good.

I take my seat at the table, grabbing my fork. I gather up some eggs, placing them into my mouth, chewing very slowly.

All four of them watch me with bated breath, and you would think they had never seen a woman eating some eggs before.

Maybe they haven't. Everyone at this table likes cock.

Oliver's pupils blossom when he watches me eat, and Lachlan drops his fork. Barret's eyes darken, and that dimpled smirk only promises dirty things.

Gryphon curls his fists, picking up on the tension. He didn't exactly think this through, did he?

Oliver doesn't even look at him. He only has eyes for me, and I look away, blushing bright red.

Several purrs sound across the table. Even Oliver makes a little sensual sound.

Thankfully, the moment is ruined by Gryphon. "Enough. It seems the eggs aren't poisoned after all. You can all eat."

Oliver, Lachlan, and Barret have lost all interest in their food now.

Their attention is only on me.

"I said, you can eat!"

They snap out of it and eat their food. Gryphon actually hand-feeds Oliver, despite the Omega's protests.

It seems he doesn't want to be fed like a baby in front of me, but it's okay.

I find it adorable.

I just wish I could be the one to hand-feed him instead, watching those plump, delectable lips closing over the prongs

of the fork.

Never going to happen.

The best I can hope for is respect in this household.

That is my sole duty here now. To cook and clean as well as laying down my life.

I can't wait.

Chapter Sixteen

Lachlan

I pick some wild flowers in the woods, wondering what color Mila would like most.

It's been three days since she moved in, and already the house is so much cleaner. The carpet is soft and fluffy, and the sheets are all crisp and fresh.

Best of all, the food...

Now we can all eat like kings.

So, the least I can do is pick her some pretty flowers.

"Do you think she would like these ones?"

I bring the flower to my nose and sniff. Snowdrops. My favorite.

Barret leans against a tree, rolling his eyes. "I don't fucking care. Come on, we have a job to do."

Oh, yeah. Right.

We were supposed to be setting up some traps in the woods, but I got distracted when we stumbled across a clearing of

white and purple flowers.

Bluebells and snowdrops.

So pretty, just like Mila...

The government has been extra cautious lately, sending us various warnings by text.

With the onset of the recent trials, our governor, Lily, fears for our Omega's safety. That is why we are setting up these traps today. I can sense it myself. Something bad is coming, and we need to be prepared as a pack.

We need to protect Oliver. He is the center of our universe, and keeping him safe is paramount. Plus, his heat is coming up, and the traps will keep any nearby Alphas away who may scent him.

But lately, my attention has shifted to that pretty little Beta.

She is so beautiful, and I can't get her off my mind.

When I was sucking Oliver's cock the other night, I was picturing her.

Normally, the Omega picks up on those things, but he doesn't seem to mind.

In fact... I have a feeling he was thinking about a certain green-eyed Beta, too.

It seems we both like her...

It's odd for Oliver to like Mila. She's Beta. He should only like Alphas, but I see the way his eyes wander.

He hates it whenever Gryphon makes a fuss of him around her. As if he is almost ashamed.

Once upon a time, Oliver was able to take care of himself. He could feed himself, and he didn't have to worry about having a heat three to four times a year.

He used to be happy. When we all first met, we were doing Alpha training together. None of us had presented yet, but Oliver's family just assumed he would get his Alpha by seventeen.

It's why they sent him to the academy.

I remember the early days when we would all talk about forming a pack and sharing an Omega. I used to get so excited.

The idea of sharing a woman with all three of my pack mates.

But we just never expected that Oliver would become our Omega.

He was the smallest of us. He's not even six foot, and sometimes I think I spy disappointment in his eyes. He never got to be the Alpha that his family always dreamed he would be.

When he presented, it soon became clear that he was our scent match. And then the rest was history from there.

I haven't thought of anyone since claiming Oliver as my Omega.

But lately, that has changed since Mila came into our lives.

She's all I can think about.

The way her eyes sparkle and her nose crinkles when she laughs...

My heart can't take it.

I tuck the snowdrops behind my ear and follow Barret deeper into the woods.

He grabs the end of one wire as I take the other, and now we go about setting up a trap.

Hopefully, the wire will keep intruders out. Oliver's heat needs to go smoothly.

In all the six years we have been together, no harm has ever come to Oliver. Yet there are horror stories on TV about Omegas who go missing all the time...

Oliver will not become a missing Omega.

"What do you think Mila is preparing for breakfast?" I wonder dreamily, tying wire around a tree.

If anyone walks into it, the wire will snap and hook around their ankles.

My design.

Barret shakes his head from his own tree. "Will you please stop thinking about your stomach for one second and focus? We have about another one hundred feet to cover."

I don't hear him as I think about Mila making some delicious pancakes.

"I hope it's chocolate chip pancakes again...."

I drool, and Barret snaps like the wire. “For fuck’s sake. Get yourself together. It’s just pancakes.”

“Not when Mila makes them. I swear, when I eat her cooking, it’s like tasting a little piece of heaven...”

Barret curses under his breath, and I watch him suspiciously.

My eyes fall on his belly. It’s a little rounder than usual.

“Hey... don’t think I haven’t noticed. You like her cooking too.”

He grits his teeth. “No, I don’t. I just appreciate eating something that doesn’t come in a takeout box for once.”

I chuckle, and he looks at me strangely. “What the fuck is so funny?”

“I hate to break it to you, Barret... but you’re gaining a little weight...”

He pauses, glancing down at his stomach. He shrugs. “So? You are too with the way you’ve been eating lately. Looks like we’ll all have to hit the gym later and do some push-ups.”

“Don’t deny it. You love her pancakes too.”

Barret swears, moving off to set up some more traps without me. “Come find me when you’ve stopped being a delusional idiot.”

“Right back at ya!”

Barret has already disappeared.

Instead of setting traps, I decide to pick more flowers for Mila.

I can't wait to see her face later when I present them to her.

Chapter Seventeen

Mila

“Thank you, Lachlan, they’re beautiful...”

The blond, cheery Alpha smiles as I take the snowdrops from his hand. Then I find a small vase, placing it on the windowsill by the sink where we can both admire them.

Out of all the members of the Hart pack, Lachlan has surprised me the most. It turns out that he is actually quite sweet beneath all that crazy, and who would have guessed?

This is the fifth time he has picked me flowers from the woods, and once again, I show him how grateful I am.

I don’t think anyone has ever given me flowers. Now my room is filled with flowers that Lachlan handpicked for me himself.

He finds all kinds in the woods outside the house, from snowdrops, bluebells, daisies, and even dandelions. They brighten up my little drab bedroom.

I got a room at the end of the house, and it’s the smallest. But I’m okay with that. Last to come, after all.

But it's not as if I am an official member of the pack. Things are still tense.

My being here creates trouble for the guys. They don't trust me. It's not hard to see.

Well, mostly it's Gryphon who seems to have a problem with me. The others at least have been civil. Although Barret was rude when I first got here, he has come around.

Oliver has been nice since the night I arrived. He always makes a fuss about the food I cook, and sometimes, I catch him staring at me from the corner of my eye.

I have caught them all staring. Gryphon, however, mostly glares, but I try to ignore him.

He's just not worth my time and stress.

I glance at the small glass vase on the windowsill of the kitchen, and the snowdrops really do brighten up the room.

Lachlan watches me the whole time I make pancakes, asking me questions nonstop, but I am happy to indulge him.

I actually enjoy his company.

He laughs when I flip the pancakes, but when he tries, it gets stuck on the ceiling.

That's okay, though. We can just make another.

Once the pancakes are done, I place them down on the table, peering around. Oliver and Barret are already seated. The only person missing is Gryphon.

Not that I'm complaining there.

“Where’s Gryphon?” I dare ask, pulling out a chair for myself.

Barret and Lachlan immediately tuck into their pancakes. Oliver is a little more polite, waiting until I start eating before he digs in himself.

The Omega answers my question. “He had an errand to do...”

That’s it. An *errand*. Yet I get the feeling that he is avoiding telling me the exact specifics of Gryphon’s whereabouts, and it just reminds me of how much of an outsider I truly am in this pack.

Maybe if we met in different circumstances, we could have all been one happy family. But, unfortunately, I am a pawn sent by my government in a bid to infiltrate their own.

I am a threat, and I don’t even know in what form or manner. Governor Frederick has plans for me, and I have no idea what.

It makes me sick with anxiety. So much so that I can’t even eat my pancakes.

Barret snorts, stuffing his mouth with fluffy pancakes. “Why, you missing him, Mila? I’d have thought you’d be happy to see the back of that Alpha for a while...”

He’s not wrong. The house is a little sunnier when Gryphon isn’t around. That man seems to suck the joy and laughter from any room, and I never understood people like that.

Always so negative.

Always having to ruin the happiness of others just to satisfy their own misery...

It makes me wonder what Oliver even sees in him. He must see something that I don't, but then again, Gryphon *is* his mate, and I am not in love with him.

"Leave her alone, Barret," Oliver scolds, glancing at me again.

His smile is sad, and it's obvious he wants to tell me so much more. It's obvious he wants to get to know me more, and I can see that he is trying, but he doesn't want to upset his moody Alpha.

"These pancakes are delicious, Mila. We've been eating like kings since you arrived..." he compliments, and I blush, hoping my cheeks don't show my embarrassment.

He's trying to change the subject, and I'm thankful for his thoughtfulness, but I still can't remove the knot from my chest.

I am nothing but an outsider. I will never belong anywhere.

Most of all, I will never be a part of his pack.

I will never be Oliver's...

I may be surrounded by people now, but truth be told, I have never felt more alone.

I miss my dad.

My eyes prick, and again, I hide the tears. The last thing I want is the pack seeing me cry. I doubt they would care,

anyway.

Yet when my eyes land on the pretty white snowdrops on the windowsill, I question that last thought.

Would they care?

I have had to be strong and brave my whole life. Once my mother died, I took care of my father. I had to grow up much more quickly as a result.

For once, I would like to be taken care of.

To my pleasant surprise, Lachlan offers to clear the table and to do the dishes. Even when I protest, he insists, and he really is an enigma, that Alpha.

Then there's Barret. He likes to act like an asshole, but he offers to dry the plates because he worries that Lachlan will drop them with his butter fingers.

I don't know what their game is, but I am a little impressed.

When I got here, the kitchen was a dump. Soiled dishes were everywhere, and I even found an old pizza box with a moldy leftover slice.

I threw it out, of course.

But now the kitchen shines.

Since Oliver has nothing to do but wait until Gryphon comes back, he asks if I would like to watch a movie.

"But... wouldn't that be stepping on Gryphon's toes?" I ask, biting my lip.

Oliver rolls his eyes, leading me away from the kitchen.

Is it even smart to leave Barret and Lachlan alone? What if they make a mess, and then Gryphon will blame me, of course.

“It will be fine, Mila. It’s just a movie.”

“But we will be alone in a dark room...”

I try to make light of the awkward moment, but Gryphon acts as if I will steal his Omega right from under his nose.

He doesn’t like us spending too much time together. He is trying to create some boundaries between us, but Oliver just won’t keep away.

“Come on, let me show you to the movie room.”

“You have a movie room?”

Oliver chuckles. “Yes, but it’s mostly mine. The guys built it for me when we arrived. My request.”

Wow. Must be nice to have Alphas who will build you a movie room wherever you so desire.

I have never really been a fan of movies. I just never had much time these past few years to watch any.

“But I should probably finish cleaning up in the kitchen...”

“It’s fine. Lachlan and Barret are taking care of it.”

I glance back. They really are, and what can I say? I am deeply impressed. Not one of them has smashed a plate, and Lachlan even wipes down the spoons.

Though breathing on them won’t necessarily make them any cleaner. Shinier, maybe.

I know they are only helping me because it would satisfy Oliver, but a small part of me believes that they are doing it for my benefit, too.

Those Alphas want to prove how useful they can be.

“Come on, I have the perfect movie... let’s go!”

Oliver yanks on my hand, and I’m pretty sure a spark ignites when our skin makes contact.

But it was probably just in my head. Despite the fact that Oliver may be my potential scent match, I push the sensation to one side and resign myself to watching a movie in a lone, dark room with him.

Should be fun.

Let’s hope I can make it through the movie without smelling like a gingerbread cookie.

Chapter Eighteen

Gryphon

My shoulders are tense as I wait in the seating area outside Governor Lily's office.

It's busy in here. Phones are ringing nonstop, and people bustle around, handing each other important papers to read over.

They're mostly Alphas in here. There are a few Beta employees. They tend to have the lowest-ranking positions, while the Alphas reign supreme above them all.

The Governor thinks she has some new intel regarding Mila, and a knot of anxiety has lodged deep in my chest.

I hope it's good news, and that she tells me that we have nothing to worry about after all and Mila is just innocent.

Because I want to like her, I do. But I'm too afraid of letting her get too close.

I'm afraid that she will destroy everything we have built.

Mila *is* an innocent party in this, but she is still Governor Frederick's pawn. And I can't forget that.

For that reason, I cannot trust her. Period. No matter how beautiful she is.

And no matter how lovely she smells...

Her scent reminds me of Christmas, and I can't quite pinpoint why.

It makes me feel happy and content.

As if my life is complete somehow.

Fuck. Now my mouth is watering just thinking about her sweet, Christmassy scent, and I quickly think of something else.

Oliver.

Since he perfumed and presented as an Omega, I haven't looked at another woman. No one else came close to the way I felt about him, and once I gave him my bite, it solidified our bond.

But Mila makes me remember why I was attracted to women in the first place.

I forgot the way they made my balls feel tight whenever they laughed or smiled. The sweet, feminine sound of a woman's voice was once a huge turn-on for me.

Mila's voice makes me feel the exact same way, but I feel immediately guilty. It would upset Oliver if he knew that my

attention was being diverted to someone else, but I haven't missed the way he looks at her, too.

His perfume... changes. When he's with me, it's sweet, almost edible, but with her, it becomes woody... masculine.

He has always smelled like the inside of a honeycomb, but lately, I get a faint hint of cedar.

Is it possible for an Omega to have *two* scents?

Just as I'm pondering that very idea, the door to the governor's office opens, and a short woman steps out. She is Beta.

Her bland papery scent wafts my way, and it's odd how different she smells from Mila.

Mila should smell just as bland, yet she doesn't.

She smells leagues better than this little stout woman.

I rise from my seat, and the Beta woman moves out of the way, giving me passage.

She is not one of Governor Frederick's pawns. The Betas in the Alpha population tend to be treated like second-class citizens. They do all the menial tasks.

Governor Lily is at her desk when I step into her large office. She wears a light pink business suit today.

The color doesn't suit her at all, but she seems to make it work somehow.

Her brown hair is tied back, and her dark eyes are sharp and focused. She's just finishing signing some papers. When she

glances my way, a tight smile forms on her hard face.

“Ah, Gryphon... just the Alpha I wanted to see. Take a seat.”

I do as she instructs, and now we sit in silence as she finishes signing her documents.

She does not look pleased with the task, and when she grabs her stamp, she presses it down extra hard.

“There. That should be enough to satisfy them for a while. Bastards.”

I wonder what she is signing, but it's not my place to ask. Probably more papers from the Beta government.

They really are pushing their way into our lives. Soon, they will take over completely, and then there will hardly be any Alphas left.

Which is probably their endgame.

They want this world for themselves.

They want our Omegas...

My Alpha growls when I think about them getting their hands on Oliver and Mila, and that's odd.

Why would he react that way? Mila isn't even an Omega.

“So, Gryphon...” Lily asks, leaning back in her chair. She fixes those careful black eyes on me. “Anything to report? How is the new *Beta* settling in?”

For a moment, I forget where I am as I can't get Mila's big green eyes from my mind. She really is small in every way, and I don't think I have met a Beta so petite before.

It makes it hard to hate her.

I clear my throat, careful not to look the governor directly in the eyes. “Quite well, ma’am. She is respectful and does her duties efficiently.”

Governor Lily drums her long nails on the desk. They always stay intact, even after she boxes a punching bag in the gym.

“What duties has she performed?”

I swallow. “Mostly ensuring that our Omega is safe, happy, and comforted.”

Lily drums her nails faster, and I almost lose my nerve. “Comforted? In what fashion?”

Shit.

“Well, she has been cleaning and cooking...”

Lily freezes, and her fingers stop tapping the wooden surface of the desk.

I wish I could turn back the clock and stop myself from saying that.

“Cleaning and cooking? Seems to go behind the call of duty, don’t you think, Gryphon? Her job is to protect Oliver with her life. She is a trained soldier. Not a housewife.”

I know. But I couldn’t stop her. The pack just looked so happy when she cleaned the kitchen and cooked for them.

Although I love Oliver, he isn’t much of a cook, and he’s pretty messy.

He's always leaving candy wrappers in his nest.

"I warned you, Gryphon. This was Frederick's intention. That Beta is trying to ascertain her place in your pack. Soon, she will make you all feel as if you couldn't live without her. Cooking and cleaning is a way to an Alpha's heart after all..."

It really is, and I would be lying to myself if I said that I haven't been enjoying her cooking. My belly is always full when Mila is around.

The house even seems brighter. More cheerful.

But all that changes when I step into the room, sucking all that life away.

"You have to do better than this, Gryphon. Show her who is boss. Tell her she can no longer cook or clean for you. That is an order. I warned you to set these boundaries. Don't let her get too close. There's a reason why Frederick picked her for your pack, and it has nothing to do with the fact that she is good with a gun..."

Governor Lily doesn't have to specify. No one could look at Mila and say that she isn't pretty. She's not just pretty, but small and cute too.

She has the kind of eyes that could break your heart. Sometimes, I want to take that sadness away, but I can't. I can't let my pack get too close to her, but I'm afraid the damage has already been done.

Lachlan picks her flowers for crying out loud.

I have never seen him this way. He was never that romantic, even with Oliver, and what's worse is that Oliver doesn't seem to mind.

He is not even jealous or territorial, and it just makes things so much harder for us all.

I have no choice but to heed Lily's order.

After all, she is our superior. We work for her, and if she thinks we are no longer catering to our Omega's needs, then she will cut us off.

Worse, she could kick us out of our home, sending us to live in the wilds. We would be on our own, cut off from the rest of our society, and I can't allow that to happen.

Oliver's life could be at stake.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Governor. Crystal."

Lily nods her head in approval, and it seems she is satisfied with my answer. My heart won't stop pounding, and I hope she doesn't see how nervous I am.

Sweat drips down my back.

"You may be excused, Gryphon."

I try not to leave too quickly, heading out of the office as calmly as I can.

But my thoughts are turbulent, and the first thing I am going to do when I get home.

Set some boundaries.

Mila is not allowed to cook and clean for us anymore.

Chapter Nineteen

Mila

After the movie with Oliver, I made a start on cleaning the house.

The upstairs is in desperate need of a vacuum, and it's as I said; I am going to make myself useful.

I never go into any of the guy's bedrooms. I only Hoover the landing and the stairs.

Somehow, it feels wrong to intrude on their spaces.

I'm not entirely sure how much the guys would appreciate me touching their things, but the thought of getting my Beta scent all over their stuff just feels criminal.

After all, I am still an outsider. So long as I am under Governor Frederick's command, I am a threat to this pack and its happiness, and I have to remember my place.

I'm too distracted in my morose thoughts before I realize where I am.

It looks like I have ended up at the end of the hall.

The hall curves at a bend, leading to the one room in the house that I know for a fact I am definitely not allowed inside.

Oliver's nest.

I stare at the door. It has been left slightly ajar, where I get a slight glimpse of a forest green room.

My feet move before I can stop them, drawn to the room beyond that door.

I have never seen an Omega's nest before... I don't know what I expect to find. A room of riches and comfort? The one thing I do expect...

Oliver's warm, addictive scent.

I bet his scent is buried deep in those blankets—blankets that are made of silk, velvet, and cashmere...

My mouth salivates.

I won't just find Oliver's scent. I will pick up on Lachlan's sweet woodland grass too, and Barret's cool, fresh running water.

And don't forget Gryphon's campfire and marshmallows.

I want to be buried deep in those blankets.

I want to be buried deep in the pack.

“What do you think you are doing?”

My heart leaps to my throat, and I whirl around, coming face to face with those angry burgundy eyes.

Once again, they gleam bright red from the light that creeps in from the window, and I back away from the door, regretting my choice.

“I... I was...”

Gryphon steps forward, peering briefly into the nest.

Oliver is not there. He is spending the afternoon with Barret and Lachlan in his bedroom.

Which was why I decided to vacuum. I needed a distraction. Anything that would take my mind off the two Alphas and the Omega.

With a huff, Gryphon slams the door, and now Oliver’s nest vanishes from my eyes forever. Then he spins, pinning me with a vicious stare, his nostrils flaring.

I make sure to look away from his eyes.

“You do not enter the nest by any means, Beta. You are not welcome in there.”

My heart caves in my chest, and then my eyes sting.

Ever since I arrived here, I have been extra weepy. Extra hormonal, but I brush it aside.

Maybe my next period is due.

Not that it ever affected me in the first place.

Even during my time of the month, I perform at my best.

Nothing ever gets in my way.

Except maybe this... whatever this is that I am feeling.

I have no idea what is going on lately with me, but I have never felt so lost.

One thing I do know; I hate it here, and I miss my dad.

But some deep intrinsic part of me also wants to make this home mine, too.

Foolish. But there's just something about this pack. Especially their Omega.

I have a connection with them all. Even the grumpy one...

Finally, Gryphon points up the hall, and his blazing eyes never leave me. "Leave."

Before I depart, I meet his eyes.

I don't care if I forget my place, going against everything that my instructors taught me at the academy.

Gryphon is a bastard, and I want him to know that.

Where I expect him to growl and snap his teeth, he only stares, bewildered. I think he even swallows, but I don't stay around long enough to find out what he has to say about my insolence.

I run, run far away from that Asshole Alpha.

I can always count on Gryphon to make me remember my place in the pack.

I am not welcome, and I am merely a threat.

Forget vacuuming the stairs. What would be the point?

Nothing I ever do would be good enough, anyway.

I run past Oliver on my way down the stairs.

He flattens his back to the wall, concern written all over his perfect face. “Mila, what’s—?”

I don’t stop. I can’t even bear to meet his eyes. I am too ashamed.

I almost trespassed on his territory, his nest. I bet he will hate me forever now.

I almost got my Beta stink all over his silk-green sheets. All because I had been a foolish, curious girl.

Finally, I find my room at the end of the house. My room is downstairs and away from the pack.

God forbid I should sleep anywhere near them.

The door slams behind me as I shut myself inside, and then I lean my back against the wall, falling down to the ground as I cry like a pathetic princess in a story.

As if I would ever be the princess...

I’m a Beta, and I am expected to be strong and tough.

I am trained to be a fighter, a protector.

Only Omegas get to be the princesses of their stories. While I am the background character. The forgotten one.

All I want is my dad. I want him to tell me that everything will be fine and that he will always be there for me.

But I can’t leave. Because he would only suffer.

I could never be that selfish. I will just have to accept that I will never belong anywhere. I will just be passed from pack to pack, the unwanted Beta.

A threat to any pack's happiness.

That's the most I can hope for in this life.

Chapter Twenty

Oliver

I storm up the stairs, finding Gryphon with his face in his hands.

He's crouched outside my nest, the door sealed tight shut as if to ward off demons, and I grind my teeth.

“What did you do?”

Gryphon rubs his fingers into his temples. He doesn't answer me at first. But I step closer, and my voice takes on a tone that I never thought I could ever possess.

“Hey! I asked you a question...” I growl, literally *growl*, like an Alpha, and that finally gets his attention.

He glances up at me confused, a deep furrow between his eyes. “Huh?”

I show him my teeth, and he tenses. “What did you say to Mila? Why did she run off crying just now?”

His eyes waver when I say the word *cry*, and then he sets his jaw in place, straightening his posture. “I said what I had to.

That she was not welcome in or near your nest.”

He fucking what?

Another growl and Gryphon flinches this time. Then his lip twitches and he has never looked so torn.

His Alpha senses the genuine threat, and it is merely reacting.

It wants to defend itself.

But the danger is coming from his Omega...

“That is not your decision to make, Gryphon. It is *my* nest. I get to decide who comes and goes in the end, not you.”

Gryphon’s eyes flash, and then he stands, coming closer. He grips my shoulders. “Don’t you see what is happening? She is forcing her way into our pack! We can’t let our guard down around her. Once you let her into your nest, Oliver. That’s it. No going back. Governor Frederick wins.”

“Fuck Governor Frederick. Fuck them all! I don’t give a shit.”

I push him away, and I ignore the hurt and frustration in his eyes.

Governor Lily must have filled his head again with more pointless fear-mongering.

I honestly don’t think we have anything to worry about with Mila. She’s obviously just an innocent pawn in whatever game the Beta governor is playing.

We can trust her.

I leave him alone at last, turning back up the hall.

“Where are you going?” he demands.

I don’t bother looking back at him. “To fix your mistake. One of us has to make this right.”

“Oliver...”

“Fuck off, Gryphon. And you can sleep in your own bed tonight.”

He growls now. “I forbid you from talking to that Beta. I forbid you from getting too close!”

I laugh, turning back. “You forbid me? You are not the boss of me.”

His eyes blare, and then he shows me his teeth. “Fine. Then I *order* you not to talk to that Beta.”

Finally, I stop, having no choice. He just used his Alpha bark, and how dare he... he has no right.

He may be my Alpha, but I am not some subordinate he can order around to his liking.

Gryphon can kiss my ass.

I glare at him from the corner of my eye. “Undo the bark, Gryphon...”

He folds his arms, and his decision is final. “No. I... had no choice. I will not let you destroy yourself, Oliver. That Beta is dangerous.”

“Undo the fucking bark!”

My shout rebounds off the wall, and no doubt everyone just heard.

The house seems to draw a collective breath.

He keeps his eyes trained on me, refusing to back down, and it looks like he is showing me my place.

I am the Omega here, not the Alpha.

He is the one in charge.

Well, I guess I will just get him where it really hurts.

“Fine. Then let’s see how you like it, Gryphon. You are not welcome in my nest anymore. Hurts, doesn’t it!”

His face falters, but he maintains his stance. “If it stops you from making the biggest mistake of your life, then so be it.”

Is he really that pigheaded? Would he really be that willing to sacrifice his place in my nest just so I won’t get close to Mila?

He is an idiot.

I *am* going to get to know Mila. His bark can only work for so long.

Omegas still have free will. Well, at least I do.

I am not a weak Omega, after all. I am much stronger than my designation dictates, and I am going to console Mila whether he likes it or not.

Something has been happening between me and Gryphon. It’s as if our bond is growing weaker and weaker.

That once strong tether between us has weakened, and it all started when he abused my trust, using his Alpha bark on me.

It was weakened when I said he was no longer welcome in my nest.

I may have his bite mark, but in the end, my will is my own.

It's the Omega that maintains the strong bonds of a pack, not an Alpha.

It's the Omega who calls all the shots in the end.

We're the real ones in charge. It's why we are so cherished in this world.

The effects of his bark finally wear off, and I scoff, turning my back on him.

I hardly register the shock or hurt on his face. I don't bother turning back to my Alpha to comfort him.

No Alpha of mine abuses my trust like that.

“Oliver...”

I ignore him.

“Oliver!”

It seems he has finally realized what he has done. Maybe one day when he apologizes and gets down on his hands and knees, I will forgive him.

But until then, he is not my Alpha anymore.

Now, I have a Beta to console.

I have to make this right again.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mila

“Mila, open up. It’s Oliver.”

I wipe the tears from my eyes, not wanting him to see me like this.

“No, go away. Please... I just want to be alone...”

“No. I can’t stand the thought of you in there crying alone. I just want to talk and make it better. Gryphon is too stubborn to apologize, so I will.”

I hold back another sob at the memory of Gryphon’s enraged face, at the shame and humiliation of almost entering Oliver’s nest without permission.

I had no right.

“But aren’t you mad at me? I almost went into your nest, Oliver.”

He pauses for a moment. But then he speaks again, louder and clearer this time, and to my surprise, he isn’t angry. At all.

If that were me, I would be furious if another Omega went inside my nest.

No, I would be murderous...

That nest would be my sanctuary. A place where my mates and I can lose ourselves in each other's bodies, giving in to the throes of my heat.

But it's not as if I'm an Omega or anything.

"I don't care about that, Mila. It's just a bunch of blankets and pillows. Now come on, open up."

I bite my lower lip, jumping up to my feet quickly to check my face in the mirror. My eyes are all puffy, but there's nothing more I can do about that.

It appears I have become a crier now of all things, so I am going to have to get used to the puffy, red eyes.

And the mood swings.

So, I let Oliver inside, holding my breath when he steps into the room. His honeycomb scent catches me off guard, and I move back, keeping a respectable distance between us.

It may be my room, but it is still his house.

A place he forged with his Alphas.

It's Oliver's home. Not mine.

He points at my bed. "Am I okay to sit?"

What? He is asking me for permission to sit on my bed? A bed inside *his* house?

He really is full of surprises, this Omega.

I nod. "Sure."

Oliver takes his place on the bed, and now he glances around the room, sadly.

I still keep my distance.

"You don't have much in here, do you?"

No. I don't.

I never had much in the way of belongings.

All that sits on my nightstand is a couple of photographs of Mom and Dad. That's it.

No pretty, shiny things, no jewelry, no nothing.

I never had anyone to buy me that stuff.

All I have are the things I need. Not the things I want.

That's how it is for a Beta soldier. A Beta pawn.

Oliver glances up, apologizing quickly. "I didn't mean to be rude. I'm sorry. But I'm sure we can give this room a more personal touch. What colors do you like?"

I have no idea how to answer. Instead, I hug myself, feeling vulnerable for the first time in years.

Ever since I started at the academy, I have had to be strong and tough.

I had to be the best.

But since moving in with the pack, I feel... small, helpless. It's hard to explain.

It's the longest I have ever been away from home, and maybe I'm not the soldier I thought I was after all.

"I like blue..."

Oliver smiles. "Blue? Good choice. How about we get you some blue curtains and blue bedsheets? How does that sound?"

I stare at him, shocked. He is not acting at all like an Omega should—an Omega who almost had his nest violated by a Beta stranger.

Instead, he is genial and friendly.

I don't understand. Why isn't he more... territorial? Feisty?

Why isn't he scratching my eyes out?

He does not harbor any ill feelings for me whatsoever.

Not even when his Alphas look my way.

Not even when Lachlan brings me flowers, or when Barret gives me that mischievous, one-dimpled smirk.

Oliver is an odd creature, I have decided.

Odd he may be, he still makes me weak in the knees.

I still maintain my distance. After all, he *is* Gryphon's Omega, and that Alpha hates me enough as it is.

I must show respect.

Oliver pats the bedsheets beside him. "Sit down, Mila. I don't bite."

The word *bite* makes me blush, and I peer away, hoping he doesn't see the color my cheeks have turned.

Oliver falters, realizing his mistake. But I don't miss the change in his perfume.

It becomes stronger, more potent, like an Alpha's, and the more I blush, the stronger it grows.

Finally, I take my place on the bed, and the two of us sit in awkward silence.

Our fingers almost brush, and I gasp, yanking my arm away. "S-sorry..."

Oliver breathes a little harder than he did before, and I'm pretty sure he felt the spark that ignited when our fingers brushed.

"It's... okay, Mila. It's your bed, after all..."

Yes. It is.

And Oliver is *sitting* on it.

My heart thumps faster, and I get a silly notion of never wanting to wash these bedsheets ever again now that they have his scent all over them.

Oliver's eyes fall on my nightstand. "Are they your parents?"

I look at the photographs. "Yeah..."

"Are they back at home waiting for you?"

"Yes, but only my dad. My mother died."

Silence drifts between us, and all I want to do is break the vast distance between us and get to know him.

Why is he here? And where is Gryphon? Does he not object to his Omega being alone in a room with me?

We've already had to keep our movie date a secret from him.

That Alpha doesn't like us being alone together.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mila."

"Don't be. It happened a long time ago."

Another quiet spell, but truth be told, Oliver doesn't have to talk much to make me feel better. Just having him here has cheered me up already.

He really is trying, despite everything.

Oliver has every right to hate my guts, yet he reaches out to me, talking to me when I am sad.

He makes me feel seen.

"I once had a sister..."

Okay, I didn't expect him to say that.

I look up. "What happened to her?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. She just... vanished one day. We think she was..."

He doesn't finish his sentence, peering down at his hands. They're shaking.

It's obvious he doesn't like to talk about his sister. It's not hard to imagine why.

Losing someone is hard. But at least I know that my mother is at peace. I watched as she died peacefully.

I held her hand.

Poor Oliver has no idea if his sister is even alive, or if she is safe or happy.

I couldn't even fathom what that would feel like.

I do the unthinkable next. I move my hand across the bed, taking his fingers in my own.

Oliver's eyes widen, and now he looks up at me in surprise. Then a small smile takes over his face, and my eyes are trained on his dimples.

He has two of them, one on each cheek, and they're deep and pronounced.

Barret can eat his heart out...

His honey scent blooms around us, mixed with a hint of cedar wood, and I think my own strengthens a little too.

Thank goodness I dowsed myself with desensitizer.

That way, my dirty little secret will remain my own.

"So, we friends again?" he asks.

When were we ever not? This Omega...

I return his smile. "Friends."

Well, maybe life with the pack won't be so unbearable after all.

Oliver isn't mad at me for going near his nest, and he wants to maintain a friendship with me.

It's more than I deserve, but I will take all the happiness I can get in this world.

After all, the world can be a very dark place.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Barret

I don't know what my Omega is up to, but the moment he shoved a pot of blue paint in my hands, I knew it must be something good.

Apparently, we are decorating Mila's room, and we are going to do all we can to ensure that Beta is comfortable.

It's funny, really. She arrived in this pack as a threat, but now it's as if we are finally accepting her.

She still has no official place in our pack, but when I spy the way Oliver looks at her, I wonder how long that will last.

The poor sap is falling for her, and when he finally realizes his feelings for her, well, then, we're truly and utterly doomed...

Oliver is the glue that holds us together, the heart and center of our pack, and as his Alphas, we have to do everything in our power to ensure that he is happy and satisfied.

Even if that means that Mila's room gets a fresh new coat of paint, so be it.

Gryphon took no part in the decorating. He and Oliver's relationship has been rocky for the last few days, and Lachlan and I can feel the tear in the bond.

It's as if we lost a vital cog in our machine, and the effects have not been pretty.

Things have been extra tense, and Lachlan was a little disoriented at first.

I had a migraine from the separation.

Their bond is still there. It's just not as strong, not as tight.

It seems Oliver closed off the bond between them, and what the hell did Gryphon do to make him so mad?

Happy Omega, happy life, they say at the academy.

When your Omega is mad at you to the point where they no longer want to be as connected with you, then you know things must be bad.

It's obvious the breakup has to do with Mila.

It seems that pretty Beta has created a tear right through our pack, and maybe we should be more careful.

But when I look at her, I don't feel as anxious as I should, and that worries me.

I'm conflicted, and I don't know what to do.

The best I can do is make my Omega happy. His happiness seems to correlate with Mila's now, and I suppose that will be my new purpose.

I'm sure Gryphon will come around. When he pulls his head out of his ass.

Maybe if he embraced her, things wouldn't be so bad. After all, it's what our Omega wants.

What is his problem?

He has been taking a lot of trips to the central government lately. Has Governor Lily been filling his head again?

Apparently, Governor Frederick is hatching up a plan to overthrow us all, and he is using Mila as a means to get to us.

I was worried at first, but the more time I spend with her, then the more I start to doubt Governor Lily's claims.

Mila is blameless here.

I'm aware Beta soldiers get paid a high fee in order to be placed within an Alpha/Omega pack.

I was only rude to her at first because my Omega was scared that she would take his place.

Her presence upset him, and I wanted her to know that she would never replace him and that we never wanted her here.

That's why I took her to the tool shed the first night she got here, and I am still kicking myself over my behavior.

I know I'm no Prince Charming, but that was just too much.

Well, I'm going to make up for all that now by painting her room for her.

I will make it up to her and Oliver.

The pair of them paint the south wall of the room together, and they work in perfect tandem.

Lachlan and I paint the north wall, and we can't take our eyes off them.

As a result, we're not doing the best job.

Oliver will be pissed.

Fortunately, he seems to be too distracted by Mila to care, and who could blame him?

She's alluring. This small, seemingly docile creature who is trained in combat.

Who blushes at the mere sight of my Omega...

It's mouth-watering.

Mila is a true enigma.

She has fire in her soul, and I bet she could knock out any grown man twice her size with all the training she has had.

But she also happens to be one of the sweetest girls I have had the pleasure of meeting.

Most Beta girls are cruel and vindictive. They are spiteful and jealous of Omegas and want us Alphas all for themselves.

Yet Mila doesn't seem all that interested in me, Lachlan, or Gryphon.

She only sees Oliver.

Oliver flicks his paintbrush at her, and she giggles softly when he gets paint on her face.

Flecks of blue stick to her button nose, and I lick my lips, half tempted to walk over and wipe it from her lovely face.

Yet Oliver does the honors for me, grabbing a cloth as he cleans her perfect nose and cheeks.

She's so much smaller than him, she has to crane her neck just to smile up at him. Through our bond, I can sense that Oliver likes this.

He appreciates that she makes him feel like a man.

It even changes his usually sweet scent into something masculine, woody, cedar, I think, and holy fuck... it smells... Alpha.

Is it possible his whole genetic makeup can change just like that?

I gasp next when blue paint speckles my own face, and I round on Lachlan.

The blond bastard wears a shit-eating grin on his face, his manic blue eyes alight with mischief as he fucks with me.

Was he feeling left out of the tender moment between our Omega and Mila?

Well, he's barking up the wrong tree.

I grab my paintbrush, swiping it down his face as a declaration of war.

Lachlan and I have a paint fight now, and it looks like we haven't changed much since our academy days after all.

We're still just a couple of immature brats.

It was Gryphon who always kept us in check and made us remember our place.

That Alpha has a major case of ‘stick up the ass’, and as a result, he expects us all to be just as stiff.

“Hey! Cut it out, you two. You’re making a mess of Mila’s room,” Oliver scolds.

“He fucking started it,” I curse, chucking more paint at Lachlan.

Lachlan cackles like a deranged circus clown, flicking his own paintbrush at me once again, and what a fucking lunatic.

“And I’m ending it. Seriously. Act your ages, not your shoe sizes...”

Considering that my shoe size is thirteen, I guess he kind of makes a point.

We really are acting like a couple of teenage brats.

I wonder what shoe size Mila is. Judging by her tiny feet, I would have to say three...

Fucking adorable.

Finally, Lachlan and I stop. He sneers at me. “I won.”

I wipe my face with a cloth. “None of us are winning here, Lachlan.”

His smile falters when he gets the double meaning, and now we both look across the room at Oliver and Mila.

Once again, they work in tandem, and I can’t help but feel left out.

I just want to be a part of whatever is going on between them.

I guess I now know why Lachlan started that paint war. He was craving attention from our Omega and Mila.

But his efforts only proved futile.

The best we can do is just be present. We're trying, and that's all that matters.

I'm sure our Omega will grace us with his undying attention once again.

But truth be told...

I am just as happy to watch them on the sidelines.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mila

We eat lunch after painting my room, and to my surprise, Lachlan and Barret actually cook.

What has changed?

The best Oliver and I can do is humor them.

They're not the best cooks, but we will try to appease their sensitive Alpha natures.

“What do you think they have in store for us, Mila?” Oliver teases.

I smile, nudging him with my elbow. “Lay off, Oliver. Your Alphas are trying.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah. I can't say the same for all my Alphas...”

My mood sours, and I curl inward when I think about Gryphon.

Because of me, Oliver and Gryphon are no longer talking.

Oliver severed his bond with the Alpha, and it's all my fault.

I bet Gryphon hates me even more now.

Though he hasn't bothered to show his face. He leaves early every morning to train at the academy, and it's like he can't stand to be around me.

It hurts. I understand why he hates me, but I never had any intention of stealing away his Omega.

My only goal here was to do what I was trained for, and that was to protect this pack's Omega.

I just never expected that the Omega would start protecting me...

Oliver is doing everything he can to make me happy and comfortable, and I am ever so grateful.

I know I don't deserve his kindness, but he is making an effort.

When we were painting earlier, I felt this draw to him. It was magnetic, and all I could think about doing was leaning in and kissing his perfect plump lips.

Those lips of his were just meant for kissing, and I'm pretty sure the air around me sweetens when I think about exploring his body, gazing straight into his stormy blue eyes when he enters me for the first time.

There's a reason why I chose blue for my room.

It reminds me of the color of Oliver's eyes...

Oliver stirs, and he glances up at the guys.

Lachlan is stirring a pot of pasta. Barret is cutting up hotdogs.

“Are you guys making something sweet over there?”

“No. Just our specialty meal. Penne pasta with hotdog chunks,” Barret smirks, wiggling his brows.

I try to hide the grimace on my face. While not exactly what I would call fine cuisine, I suppose the pasta and hotdog chunks will fill a void.

I’m starving.

Oliver purses his lips in thought. “Funny. Could have sworn I smelled gingerbread for a moment. Fuck... I could do with a gingerbread latte...”

“On it,” Barret says, ditching the hotdog chunks for the espresso machine.

Oliver glances at me. “You want anything, Mila?”

I chew my bottom lip. “You have any honey-flavored lattes?”

Barret smirks, and his lone dimple shows. “You fancy something a little sweet too, sunshine?”

Oliver scoffs. “Ignore him. Just make her the latte, Barret. That’s an order.”

Barret whistles. “And who made you the leader, hey, Ollie boy?”

Oliver bares his teeth. “I did. When I cut Gryphon off from the pack bond. So, now I’m the one in charge. Like it or lump

it.”

Lachlan giggles, and I never thought I’d see the day an Alpha giggles.

“Looks like someone’s getting *grouchy*...” he peals again.

“Oh, shut up, Lachlan, and hurry up with my pasta.”

I glance at Oliver. He really is getting grouchier. While he’s sweet with me, he’s short-tempered with his pack.

His cheeks are flushed, and his scent comes and goes in waves.

So, that’s why I was craving a honey latte...

The room smells like the inside of a beehive now.

Oliver is getting closer to his heat.

Fear spikes inside my veins, and I try to hide away the anxiety lest Oliver picks up on my mood.

I will have to make an effort to leave the house when his heat begins.

I can’t stand the thought of him being needy and in pain while I sit alone in my room touching myself. It’s bad enough when he is alone with any of his Alphas.

His delicious moans fill the house whenever any of his Alphas please him, and I am sick of changing my underwear throughout the day.

Barret finishes our coffees, and now he brings them over, placing them down on the table.

He touches Oliver's head, and a low whistle escapes his teeth.

“Damn. You're burning up, Ollie. I think Lachlan is right. Your heat is just around the corner.”

Barret's dark eyes immediately go to me. It passes quickly, but there's no missing the spark of desire.

Why does he look at me when he talks about his Omega's heat?

It makes no sense.

Oliver grumbles, pushing his hand away, and he's so adorable when he's moody. “Get back to my hotdogs.”

The desire intensifies in Barret's eyes, and now he grips Oliver's cheeks, keeping his focus on me the whole time. “Now that's no way to talk to your Alpha, Ollie boy...”

Oliver pouts, trying his best to drink his gingerbread latte.

But Barret keeps his hand on his chin.

“L-let go, Barret...” he gasps, losing his breath.

He's getting hotter.

Barret only smirks. His dark gaze remains on me the whole time he touches his Omega.

I can't stop looking at Oliver.

The Omega is panting, loving the way his Alpha controls him. His eyes become hazed, pupils wide and dilated, and it's becoming painfully obvious that his heat is fast approaching.

Barret squishes his cheeks, and it puckers up Oliver's lips, making them look even more plump. Then he drags him in closer for a kiss, and now I watch as the two of them suck on each other's tongues.

The Alpha's eyes are trained on me the whole time. My fingers grip my coffee cup, and I'm pretty sure the ceramic is about to crack beneath the pressure.

I can't look away from their passionate kiss.

The way Oliver goes limp in Barret's hold... My heart can't take it.

It's almost beating out of my chest.

And don't even get me started on my pussy. She's thumping pretty hard too.

I have to squeeze my thighs together.

The pot boils over, and my eyes drift over to Lachlan by the stove.

His gaze is fixed on me too, and there's no missing the flames of desire burning inside his own eyes.

Both of them are watching my reaction.

They want to see what I will do as they please their Omega...

They know I am attracted to him. There's no missing the way my perfume blooms whenever Oliver steps close to me.

Alphas are usually very good at detecting these things.

Fuck. Lachlan has an erection. It's tenting his pants, and finally, I tear my gaze away from all three of them, trying to catch my breath.

My skin is hot and sweaty, and I have a sweat mustache.

I try to wipe it away before any of them notice.

Finally, Barret stops kissing Oliver, and the poor Omega has never looked so befuddled.

His face is red and his lips are swollen. Several soft brown curls fall in front of his face as he gasps, trying to catch his breath.

I can't stop stealing glances at him from the corner of my eye.

He's beautiful...

Finally, he drinks his gingerbread latte, his arms shaking, and it seems he's afraid to look at me now.

His honey perfume fills the kitchen, and I'm not going to last a minute of his heat.

Even if it is going on down the hall and far away from my room.

Lachlan and Barret finish cooking, and now they return to the table, placing a pasta dish in front of me and Oliver.

They tuck into their food right away, wolfing it down.

The pasta's actually pretty good, and who would have thought that hotdog chunks actually tasted good with penne?

Barret offers to feed Oliver, but he declines, saying he can feed himself.

I suppose Barret is just offering in Gryphon's absence, trying to be a good Alpha.

Speaking of Gryphon, he has just returned from the academy, and my good mood vanishes instantly the moment he enters the kitchen.

He doesn't look at any of us. Instead, he goes straight to the pot and fills a bowl.

Oliver doesn't acknowledge him. He just pretends as if Gryphon is a ghost, and things have never been so awkward.

Again, I can't help but feel responsible.

Oliver should have all three of his Alphas for his heat.

I catch Barret's and Lachlan's eyes, communicating with them silently on whether they should interfere, doing something about the rift in their pack.

They're all pack. They should try to mend the bond between Oliver and Gryphon.

It's obvious Gryphon is hurting. His gaze keeps trailing over to his Omega, but Oliver acts as if he doesn't even exist.

I actually feel bad for the guy.

Gryphon's eyes fall on me briefly, but I look away before he can send a hurtful dagger.

It's okay. I already know that he hates me.

The pack is broken.

And it's all my fault.

What have I done?

Finally, Gryphon scurries away, and I never thought I'd see the day an Alpha scurries out of a room.

Normally, they dominate any room they enter.

But what's an Alpha if he doesn't have his Omega?

Oliver finishes at last, placing his fork down as he rubs his belly. "Ah, that was actually quite nice. What did you think, Mila? Out of ten?"

While the food can never be described as anything inspired, it filled a hole.

So, I decide to be generous. "Eight."

Lachlan visibly glows. Barret smiles on the inside, but there's no missing the satisfaction in his black eyes. He even winks at me and I flush.

Though I think I will cook tomorrow.

Oliver's heat finally came in the middle of the night.

I woke to the sound of Lachlan and Barret carrying him up to the nest from the living room, and I had never heard a more mournful sound from the Omega's lips.

Poor thing. I've heard heats are unbearable for Omegas, and I hope he gets everything he needs.

I cannot stay.

That is why I prepared the cot in the shed in advance.

It looks as if I will be staying in the yard tonight.

And for the next few nights after.

I grab my overnight bag, gazing back at my room.

Oliver really went out of his way to make my room as blue as I asked. Now the room resembles a scene from beneath the ocean.

He even painted seaweed and several schools of fish, but now... now he is in pain.

I wish there was something I could do to help, but I am useless.

I would only be a spare in the nest.

I would only get in the way.

Just as I sneak down the hall, and away from the glorious sounds of an Omega getting thoroughly knotted by his Alphas, I freeze.

Someone stands guard at the door.

Gryphon.

Well, it looks as if I won't be escaping just yet.

Crap.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Gryphon

“**W**here are you going, Beta?”

The small female bows her head, avoiding my eyes at all costs, and just as I thought...

She's running away.

While I would love nothing more than for her to leave our pack forever so that things can return to the way they were, I also realize that her leaving will also break my Omega's heart.

Even though he has untethered me from the pack for the time being, Oliver is still my Omega.

And his happiness is paramount.

Anyone who shits on that happiness has to answer to me.

Mila is a threat. That, I have already established a countless number of times.

Her being here only means that Governor Frederick will get what he wants.

Plus, Governor Lily's warning still rebounds through my mind.

"Don't let your pack get too close..."

But do I put the needs of my superior before my Omega?

I really am stuck between a rock and a hard place.

One thing I know for absolutely certain: Mila's leaving frustrates me.

Not just because it will upset Oliver...

It annoys me because I don't want her to go. Having her here has been a blessing and a curse.

"Look... I was just going to stay in the shed for the next few days. At least until Oliver's heat is over."

While I agree that that course of action would be best, I also know that Oliver will be pissed at me for even allowing her to stay in the shed.

I'm sure I am going to regret this, but I need to make it up to my Omega.

I cannot allow Mila to stay in the freaking tool shed of all things.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "You are not staying in the tool shed, Mila..."

She perks up at that, furrowing her brows, and I hate myself for thinking that she looks cute when she pulls that expression.

"No?"

"Oliver would rather you stayed in the house..."

Mila blows a heavy sigh, and my dick reacts accordingly at the sight of her blushing.

Why does she have to be so beautiful?

It's like Governor Frederick is fucking with us all on purpose.

Asshole.

"I'm sorry, Gryphon. But I can't stay inside this house. Not while he..."

She trails off, and I step closer, inhaling her scent.

Just as I thought. She's aroused by the sounds and smells coming from Oliver's nest.

While any Alpha worth his salt would be incensed at the idea of anyone who is not a member of his pack being aroused by their Omega's heat, I also can't help but be excited.

Just thinking about sweet little Mila getting wet between the legs over my Omega just makes me...

Shit. My knot. It's swelling.

Can't have her noticing now.

This is wrong. I should not be interested in Mila.

She is a Beta, and I have an Omega.

Oliver is the only one for me.

I also can't allow myself to get attached for all the obvious reasons.

There is too much at stake.

What do I do? She clearly wants to leave, but Oliver will be angry at me for letting her go.

I suppose I can offer her more than the tool shed.

It's kind of like meeting in the middle.

"Here," I pull out my phone, booking her a hotel. "There's a hotel nearby. You can stay there for the next few days. I will pay."

Mila's mouth flies open. "You would really pay for my hotel?"

I clench my jaw. "Yes. I agree. I think it's best you leave for Oliver's heat too. Your presence will certainly be problematic, and Oliver doesn't need any more stress."

Her spirit deflates, and now she hangs her head yet again. "I suppose you are right. The last thing I would want to do is make Oliver's heat worse for him. He has been nothing but good to me since I arrived..."

He has. The poor sap is falling for her, and there is nothing I can do.

But if he can't sense her presence in the next four days, then he won't have to mourn for her as much.

Besides, it's not as if Mila has anything to offer him.

She is Beta. She has no knot or lock.

This is for the best. That way, Oliver's heat may just go a little smoother.

"The hotel has been booked. I've also ordered you a cab."

Mila folds her arms, gazing absentmindedly at the wall.
“Okay.”

I can tell that she is torn about leaving, and maybe I should cancel the cab and the hotel and ask her to stay.

But I don't. I proceed with my choice.

One day, I will probably live to regret it.

The pair of us don't speak as we wait for the cab to arrive.

It takes its damn freaking time.

Meanwhile, Oliver can be heard all the way from the nest, his deep, throaty moans echoing into my soul as I resist the urge to go in there and rut his brains out.

He hasn't once called for me, and it hurts. But it seems that Barret and Lachlan are giving him everything he needs.

Still. I am his Alpha. I have been there for all his heats.

A sweet smell wafts from Mila when Oliver groans yet again, and I whirl around and stare at her.

She hides her face behind her long blonde hair, but there was no mistaking that scent.

It smelled like... gingerbread.

And it's fucking mouthwatering.

Something sounds in my chest, and it takes me a moment to realize I am purring. At Mila.

Why the hell does she smell so good right now? I had no idea Betas could smell like this.

She's enough to rival Oliver's honeycomb...

I take stock of her features for the millionth time.

She's short, *very* short, and her feet and hands are small. Her mouth is little too, and her nose, but her eyes are ridiculously big, like a Japanese manga character.

Mila is contradictory in every way. Looks Omega, smells like an Omega, but is registered Beta.

The cab arrives, and Mila couldn't run out the door fast enough.

I stand and watch by the door as she tells the driver the address, and before she drives away, she meets my eyes.

There's nothing but despair inside those big eyes, and I fight every urge to run back out there, rip the car door open, and demand that she stay for Oliver's heat.

But this is for the best.

The future is still uncertain after all. I have no idea how things are going to play out.

Unfortunately, we are all stuck in a war between Governor Lily and Governor Frederick, respectfully.

The car drives off at last and now I shut the door, pressing my back to the wood.

For the best.

For the best.

If only I could believe my own bullshit.

Oliver is going to be heartbroken.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mila

I check in at the hotel quickly. Then I go up the elevator to my room, slam the keycard onto the reader, and shut the door.

Thank God. Anything to get away from that house.

It's not that I didn't want to stay, but I just couldn't stand to be around Oliver. Not when he smelled and sounded so delicious, and I could only imagine what wondrous things were going on inside that nest.

Fuck. I need a cold shower.

Right now.

Thank goodness for all the air conditioning in this hotel. At least Gryphon sent me to a nice one. That was kind of him.

I bet he just couldn't wait to get rid of me. It's as he said: my being in the house would only be 'problematic'.

Oliver's heat needs to go smoothly, and I would only makes things worse for him.

He doesn't need me. Not when he has three alphas.

What could I do for him?

I rush to the shower and turn the dial to cold. Now I stand under the stream, slipping my fingers between my legs as I circle my clit, biting my lip.

Images of Oliver getting knotted by Lachlan and Barret fill my mind.

Barret takes him from behind, while Lachlan goes for his mouth, and the blissed-out expression on Oliver's face is enough to fucking undo me.

I scream out my release, grateful for the soundproof tiles in the bathroom, coming all the way down my finger.

My imagination isn't done with me just yet.

Now I see Gryphon coming to Oliver's rescue. After all, he will need all of his Alphas with him for his heat.

The two of them will make up, and once Lachlan unlocks his knot from between Oliver's lips, Gryphon will take over.

Gryphon wipes the cum dripping from Oliver's plump lips, then tips his chin, fire burning deep inside his burgundy eyes as he smirks at his obedient Omega.

Oliver loosens himself from Barret's knot, laying down flat on his stomach as he presents for his Alpha. Then Gryphon smacks his ass, and I come all over again, hating myself for picturing these explicit images.

It's the only way I can relieve myself.

I have never been so horny in my life. My pussy is tender and swollen, and I wish I had someone to relieve the pain.

Gryphon finally knots Oliver inside my head, and the pure rapture on Oliver's face sends me over the edge yet again.

If only I could be watching them for real.

But I am not allowed inside the nest.

I never will be.

I lean against the tiles, trying to catch my breath.

The cool water isn't enough to remove the heat from my skin. I am still hot, still irritated, and sensitive to the touch.

What the hell is going on with me?

Finally, I switch off the shower and climb out. Then I stand over the sink, gazing into the mirror.

My cheeks are flushed, and my eyes are black and round with lust. My heart is pounding through my chest, and the room spins.

Holy shit. What am I going to do?

I have never felt like this before, and it can only mean one thing...

I need to fuck.

Now.

Anyone.

I'm pretty sure this hotel will have a bar.

But do I really want to lose my virginity to some rando I met at a shitty hotel bar?

Regardless of the costs, it's got to be better than this...

So long as he is Beta. I should be okay.

But out here, in Alpha territory? I highly doubt it.

It's not an Alpha's knot I want. It's Oliver.

My sweet, sweet Oliver. The one who painted my room blue and made me honey lattes.

I move out of the bathroom, opening my suitcase. I don't have any dresses at all. I am not a girly girl.

I have never had the option to be girly. I was trained as a soldier for most of my adult life, but I do own one glitzy halter-neck top and a pair of skin-tight jeans.

Hell knows why, considering I never had the opportunity to wear them. I never went out dancing with the class back at the academy.

I never had any friends.

I dry my hair quickly, letting it fall loose down my back like a waterfall. Then I put on the top and the jeans.

I own one pair of heels. Again, something I bought on the off chance that I may one day get invited to go out dancing with the class.

Maybe one of the guys would sweep me off my feet.

They never did. They were all assholes who used to laugh at me from behind my back.

The girls were just as bad if not worse.

Finally, I gaze into the mirror, applying some lipstick to my lips. Then I make my eyes pop with mascara and leave the room.

I don't have foundation, but luckily, my skin is flushed and clear tonight, so I don't need any.

That means my freckles get to be on display.

I soon find the bar and order a vodka shot.

I don't drink at all, but I am going to need the shot if I hope to get through tonight.

Hopefully, someone at this bar will be willing to go back to my room with me.

That's when I spot him. Alpha in a business suit.

He will do.

I saunter over to his table, trying my best at what I hope is a flirtatious smile.

But his sleazy, slimy smirk makes me want to abort this plan and run back up to my room.

Do I really want to do this?

“Hey there, beautiful. You looking for a friend tonight?”

I don't answer. I just grab his drink and swig it back. I almost balk.

What the hell was that? Rum?

Ugh.

He seems amused by my antics, and now he proceeds to order us both drinks. I get another vodka shot while he orders more of that gnat's piss.

I barely even remember his name as we talk. Because it is not important.

All I want is his dick.

I will stop before he has a chance to knot me.

An hour later, we're tumbling into my room, with me all wrapped around his waist as we suck each other's faces.

Then we're on my bed. He's removing his shirt.

I lean on my elbows, keeping my clothes on.

I am not quite ready to take them off yet.

He fumbles with the clasp of my bra, but I bat his hand away, hoping he gets the message.

But he's persistent, determined that he is going to see my breasts tonight.

"Come on, just one glimpse..."

I try to laugh it off. "Not just yet..."

He starts to get impatient. Now he growls, and I freeze, my heart splitting in two.

Shit. I never saw this through. There is a good chance that his Alpha bark may actually work on me.

If all my deepest fears and insecurities do turn out to be true.

Time to end this before it gets ugly...

“I want you to leave.”

Fuck boy doesn't leave. He just sneers, showing me his crooked teeth. His eyes flash.

I speak a little louder. “I don't think you quite heard me. Leave. I have changed my mind.”

His growl deepens, and fear thrums through my veins.

One way or another, this Alpha is going to try and get me naked tonight.

“No. Take off your—”

His voice cuts off before he can finish his sentence.

I am squeezing his balls, and if he doesn't leave this hotel room soon that Gryphon oh so kindly paid for, then I will make it so that he won't ever be able to bear any children.

I may be a sprite in comparison to his sheer size, but I am trained in combat.

I bet fuck boy didn't expect me to bite back.

Or yank on his balls, for specifically.

Now I pull out my hunting knife, and the fear dances inside his eyes when he spies the glint of steel. “F-fuck... I-I'm sorry... I... I will...”

I squeeze his balls a little bit tighter, reaching up to his eye level. I look him straight in the eyes.

Fuck my training. I am going to teach this Alpha his place.

“Get. Out.”

He wails as I guide him out of the hotel room by his balls, keeping my shiny knife plain in sight.

Sweat drips down his face, and I bet he regrets coming back to my hotel room with me tonight.

This sweet little china doll just happens to be a psycho.

When I open the door, I yank his balls closer, glaring up at his face. “By the way, no means fucking no, asshole. Now get out of my sight!”

I push him out the door, then lock up. I hear him on the other side, cursing under his breath as he rushes down the hall.

He left his shirt on the floor.

I will have to dispose of it to remove his vile scent.

He smells like burned car tire.

Now that I’ve sobered up enough, I opt for a second shower to remove that Alpha’s stink off me. Then I go to bed, grabbing some extra pillows and blankets from the closet to make my own little nest.

May as well make myself at home here.

For it will be my home for the next few days.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lachlan

Poor Oliver.

Normally, I delight in pain, but seeing my Omega writhing and squirming in his nest just shatters my heart.

Barret and I are trying. We have given him our knots, but it's not enough. He needs all his Alphas with him.

So far, Gryphon has stayed away, but he's going to have to rejoin us again soon.

I don't think Oliver can last.

Omegas can die after all if they don't get the help they need for their heats. It's why it's imperative that we do all that we can to keep them safe.

It's what me and the guys were trained for. Catering to an Omega's needs and keeping them alive and comforted.

Barret bounces Oliver on his lap, kissing his bite mark tenderly. I feel it through the bond, but still... it's not enough...

Oliver is locked on Barret's knot, but he grimaces in pain, baring his teeth. "N-not enough..."

His face glistens with sweat, and he looks feverish rather than satisfied.

So I reach forward, stroking my finger along his chin and purr.

It doesn't soothe him.

Oliver grips my shirt, gazing up at me with unfocused eyes.

I don't think he can even see me right now. His eyes are blown out and delirious.

He has to touch my face to confirm it's me. "Lachlan... Lachlan..."

I purr for him again. "I know, I know... we're going to help you get through this, Ollie..."

He whimpers, squeezing his eyes tightly, and he never lets go of my shirt. "F-find... find Gryphon... p-please..."

I nod. "On it."

It seems Oliver and Gryphon's little fight is over. Oliver forgives him enough to let him back into the nest.

An Omega can only be so angry at their Alpha for so long.

I rush around the house in search of Gryphon. It takes me a while, but I soon find him sitting alone in the living room, gazing into the fire.

He has two fingers of whiskey in his glass.

“Gryphon... it’s Oliver...”

The Alpha huffs a heavy breath, rubbing between his brows.

“He doesn’t want me.”

I shake my head. “No... he asked for you...”

He looks up at me with hopeful eyes.

“Gryphon... I don’t think he will last the night...”

The Alpha jumps into action. He downs his whiskey, and we both run back to the nest.

Barret has finally unlocked himself from Oliver. Now our Omega lies on the green sheets, curled up like a prawn.

He’s whimpering.

His honeycomb scent is bitter and acrid, and I wrinkle my nose.

I have never felt so helpless. But it’s fine now.

Gryphon is here.

The Alpha purrs, moving to our Omega’s side at once. “It’s okay. I’m here...”

Oliver opens his eyes, searching the nest when he hears his voice. “G-Gryphon?”

“Yes, Ollie, it’s me...”

He pants for breath, closing his eyes. “Oh, thank fuck... it hurts...”

“I know, but I’m here now. I will take away the pain...”

Oliver whimpers again, letting Gryphon take him in his arms, and it seems all is forgiven between them.

Their bond re-connects, and Barret and I release simultaneous sighs.

Never again.

From now on, if Gryphon and Oliver want to fight, then they talk things through. Simple.

Or we all pay the price.

It's like there has been a hole in our pack since Oliver cut Gryphon's bond.

Oliver takes Gryphon's knot, and the Omega falls slack in his arms, shutting his eyes.

It's like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders, and I lay back on a pillow, gazing up into the gauzy ceiling of Oliver's nest.

I can't help but feel as if something is missing.

Our pack may be complete again, but there's a certain, blonde, green-eyed Beta I can't stop thinking about.

She's not in the house. I can sense it.

The building feels cold and lifeless without her presence, and I swallow back a lump in my throat, gazing across the nest at Gryphon.

He's too focused on Oliver, shushing and purring him to sleep, and I curl my fists.

He sent her away... and he couldn't give two shits.

If I could, I would go and find her, but I can't leave Oliver.

Who knows when the next wave will hit?

The next one could be even worse than the first.

Finally, Oliver falls asleep. We can tell by the gentle puffs of breath that escape his parted lips.

He sleeps like a perfect angel.

I guess now we can finally talk.

“Gryphon...”

The Alpha doesn't stir when I say his name. He just continues to stroke Oliver's head, brushing away a sweaty brown curl from his face.

I project my voice a little louder. “Gryphon.”

He glances up.

I clench my teeth. “Where is Mila?”

It takes him a moment to register the name.

Barret rises up from his pillow, looking at the Alpha expectantly.

We both want to know.

He's still purring and soothing Oliver, making up for lost time by the look of things. He shifts, and Oliver stirs.

“She's gone to a hotel...” he whispers, so as not to stir the sleeping Omega.

Fire shoots down my spine. I jerk up.

“She what?”

The Alpha glares at me in warning. Oliver whimpers in his sleep, nestling his flush back against Gryphon’s chest.

He doesn’t think he will get out of this so easily, does he?

I want answers, and I want them now.

Barret looks just as eager.

“Did you make her leave?”

My question creates a bitter tang in the air. Oliver senses it, opening his eyes just slightly.

Gryphon purrs, lulling him back to sleep, and I don’t fucking believe this...

“Gryphon...” Barret growls.

The bastard sighs. “No. I didn’t. She left of her own free will. Now shut up. Our Omega needs us right now. We can worry about Mila later...”

My heart breaks, and I fight back the urge to punch that Alpha in his smart mouth.

I don’t believe him. He made her leave, I know he did.

We all know how he feels about her, and he is just using Oliver’s heat as an excuse.

Oliver will be pissed when it’s all over. I hope he is aware of that.

And then they will go back to arguing, and that big, gaping chasm will return to our pack, breaking us apart further.

What a fucking dick.

He's too blind to see that Mila is the best thing to happen to our pack.

Just when will he wake up and realize that?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Oliver

Large, green eyes fill my feverish, heat-filled dreams, eyes framed by lovely locks of dark, honey-blond hair, and finally, I snap awake.

“Mila?”

Her soft voice doesn't come, and panic seizes me instantly.

Someone purrs behind me, but the sound can only soothe me long enough. Anxiety claws its way back down my throat, stealing the breath from my lungs.

“Where... where is Mila?”

I can't think straight. All I can think about is her.

One thing is certainly clear to me; I am in serious, serious pain, and I need her with me. Right now.

Or I could die...

“It's okay, Ollie... I'm here... we're all here...”

Gryphon.

It seems I caved in the end and begged for him to join me in the nest, and I'm grateful. Truly.

I wouldn't have survived that wave last night if he hadn't arrived, and I bite the inside of my cheek, swallowing my pride.

This has to be one of the most painful heats I have ever had to endure.

None have ever been this intense before, and what the fuck is going on with me lately?

I have not been myself.

Normally, I am pretty needy in the weeks leading up to my heat, but I have been so focused on Mila and making her happy that I seemed to have forgotten that I was an Omega who has his own needs.

It's almost as if I was putting her needs before my own. I even cut off one of my Alphas from the pack bond, and I bet that was why the first wave of my heat had been so painful.

I was pretty sure I was going to die.

It seems I have my wits about me again. My heat has left me alone long enough to help me think straight again.

Well, somewhat straight.

It's hard to think rationally when your body is craving fucking knots, and once again, I condemn the day I awakened as an Omega.

I am dependent on my Alphas in order to survive, and I hate it.

I will die without their touches.

Some life, hey. But at least I get to have a nest...

Mila makes me feel like I am needed. Like I'm a protector.

There's no missing the pain in her big green eyes. I just want to kiss that pain away whenever I see it.

I look up, meeting all three of my Alpha's eyes.

Lachlan's are bloodshot and shiny. Barret's eyes are hard and cold, and Gryphon's are filled with fire.

The latter's jaw tics as I repeat myself.

"Where is Mila? She's not in the house..."

Is it possible to feel someone's absence? Her room is down the stairs, all the way at the end of the hall, but I know she's not there.

The house is cold. Empty. Devoid of life.

Where the fuck has she gone?

Gryphon purrs, reaching across to wipe away a curl from my face.

I grip his wrist, looking straight into his red-brown eyes. "Bring her back. Now..."

My voice is low, dangerous, ending with a growl, and my Alphas stir uncomfortably.

It almost sounded like a threat.

The fire intensifies in Gryphon's eyes, and they become more red than brown now. "Oliver..."

"Bring her back to me, Gryphon. I know you sent her away..."

Silence spreads across the nest. No one seems to know what to do or say.

Sure, I am not thinking rationally here. I am telling my Alphas to bring an unbonded Beta into my nest.

Mila is an outsider. Also, there's the whole thing with her being a possible threat, but I never believed for a second that she was a danger to us.

Not until after I met her and gazed into her lost green eyes.

She's only doing Governor Frederick's bidding in order to keep her dad safe. The old man is sick, and he needs a roof over his head in his final years.

He needs constant care twenty-four-seven.

That is why Mila is here. I haven't told any of the guys because I swore I wouldn't tell them, but it only made me respect her more.

Family is important after all.

I would have done the same for Isabelle.

I can only hope that she is being taken care of, wherever she is...

If not... then I hope she is no longer suffering and has found peace.

“What are you all waiting for her? Go and find her. Now!”

They don't move. Barret and Lachlan look torn between leaving me and searching for Mila, but they don't have to worry about me.

Besides. I would rather die than leave Mila alone out there.

I don't know how, but I know she's in danger. I can just sense it.

Something bad is about to happen.

Gryphon growls. “Oliver... you're in pain and you are delirious. We understand, but Mila—”

I whirl on Gryphon, and I don't know what he sees in my eyes, but it makes him shut up. Good.

“Find her, Gryphon, or so help me...”

The threat is all too clear. If he doesn't go out there and bring that Beta back to me, then I will cut the final string.

Even if it kills me.

An Omega needs to be bonded to all of their Alphas in order to survive.

Once we commit and accept their bites, we are tied to them forever.

If those bonds break, then I die.

But he's no Alpha of mine if he keeps Mila away from me.

If I suffer, then we all suffer.

It never bodes well for an Alpha, too, if their Omega dies.

They go into a state of despair. They are banished from the Alpha population and shamed for failing to keep their Omega safe.

But I am willing to risk all of that. So long as Mila is by my side tonight.

She has to be here. My next wave is about to hit, and I need her.

Her touch is the only thing that can save me now.

Then my life will be complete.

My stomach pinches, and I curl up yet again, crying out in pain.

It's too late. I have fallen victim to the next wave.

But before the wave buries me under, I manage to say, "Find her. Mila. Bring her back. Need—"

The flames engulf me, and another sea of fire drags me under.

I just hope I survive this time.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mila

I jerk awake to someone banging on my hotel door, peering over at my bedside clock.

3 am.

What the fuck... who is waking me up?

“Wakey, wakey, I know you’re in there, queenie...”

My stomach bottoms out when I recognize the voice.

It’s the Alpha from before, and it looks like he’s come back for round two.

I don’t think he got the message before.

What part of ‘no’ is so hard to understand?

I can smell three of them in total. It appears he has brought back up.

So, I search for my knife beneath my pillow, pointing it at the door. Then I circle the room, creeping closer to the window. I try the lock, but it doesn’t open.

Some security system they have here, and they're getting a poor review from me...

"Come on, open up. My balls are missing you..."

His balls? The ones I grabbed and squeezed?

Yeah, right. He's just pissed that a little doe-eyed Beta got the better of him, and now he has bought some friends.

That's okay. I can fight them all.

The door kicks in, almost coming off its hinges. I should ring the panic button by the bed, but I'm already across the room.

A shame I didn't have the sense to click it before. But that's okay.

If I have to fight dirty, I will.

Finally, the door bashes in, and the three Alphas storm into the hotel room. Someone screams down the hall, and let's hope they call the police.

The same Alpha from before, fuck boy, sneers at me, and it's a shame I never did get his name...

I smile. "Come back for your shirt?"

He growls, backing me up to the wall. I point my knife as all three of them surround me.

My breaths come quickly, and if I don't act soon, I will die.

These Alphas are going to kill me.

"You fucking Beta bitch. You think you can just come into our town and do us dirty like that? All I wanted was to give

you a good time, and look at how you repaid my kindness.”

My arm shakes as I hold my knife steady. “Don’t come any closer...”

Hopefully, he’s as stupid as he looks and doesn’t use his bark over me.

It was why I had to act before. The man was going to force me to sleep with him.

He views me as nothing more than a Beta, and let’s keep it that way.

He smirks, showing me his crooked teeth again. “Grab her.”

I swoop out of the way before the Alpha can get his arms around me. I slip between his legs, swiping my knife behind his knees.

The Alpha yelps, falling to the ground, and now he can no longer move his legs.

The other rushes in, grabbing for my air, but I sliver out from beneath him too, stabbing the back of his heels.

He tumbles to the floor, becoming as immobile as his friend.

I have to be quick here, aiming for their weak spots.

Now my friend from earlier is the only one I have to defeat.

I’m aware of a commotion outside. Several people have gathered outside my hotel room, and hopefully, help is on its way.

The police will arrive and arrest these bastards.

My intention is not to kill them. I will not go down for murder.

But I still need to protect myself somehow.

The Alpha growls, yanking me by the hair. He drags me across the room.

Two men step into the room to come to my aid. “Get off her, asshole!”

He snaps his teeth at them. They back off, and some help they are.

It’s every Beta for herself out here.

I struggle in his hold, and he barks down my ear. “Stop moving.”

I stop. My arms drop to my sides, and I no longer fight.

Fear grips me, and all I can think about is my father.

Will my death be the final thing that kills him? Will he lose his house, his care, if I die here tonight?

Tears drip down my cheeks. The people have vanished from the hallway, and now it’s just me and my friend.

The bastards.

The Alpha lifts me up and throws me down onto the bed. Then he starts unbuckling his belt, and I just lay there, gritting my teeth.

I dropped my knife somewhere on the floor.

The other Alphas are already stirring.

“It’s payback time, little Beta. You should have just stayed in your own city. We don’t want your kind here...”

Fuck. How I wish Zeus would strike him down right now with one of his lightning bolts.

People like him deserve to die.

“Time to get even—”

A fist collides with his face, and I look up, meeting the deranged blue eyes of Lachlan.

There’s a knife in his hand, and he brings it down on the Alpha.

Screams fill the room. Blood splatters my face, but all I can do is lie there.

They came to my rescue...

Barret’s face swivels up before me, and now he lifts me in his arms, his soft purr soothing me. “It’s okay. We’re here. We’re going to take you home...”

Home?

Lachlan keeps stabbing the guy, cackling like a maniac the whole time, and it looks as if a homicide ended up taking place in this humble little hotel room after all.

Let’s hope we vanish before the police arrive.

“Lachlan, enough. He’s dead,” Barret snaps.

The other Alpha stops, whirling around to look at me.

His face is a mask of gore. The only thing I recognize about him now are his piercing blue eyes.

“Snowdrop... you’re safe...” he whispers when he sees me.

Snowdrop?

Barret grimaces, peering around the room. He kicks someone out of the way from beneath his feet, carrying me toward the door.

“Grab her things. We’re going back home. Oliver is expecting her.”

Oliver asked for me?

Finally, the tears escape. Barret whispers and purrs, and his voice bleeds into my ears, sending me to sleep.

“It’s okay. You’re safe now. We’ve got you.”

My eyes close, and then I finally fall asleep in his arms, dreaming of nothing but Oliver.

I can’t wait to see him again.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Barret

Mila grips a tight hold of my shirt as she breathes in my scent, and I'm just so glad we got to her on time.

If only we got there sooner, then those fuckers wouldn't have been able to lay a hand on her in the first place.

Thankfully, Lachlan already took great care of one of them, and it looks like we've got a lot of explaining to do.

But I'm pretty sure Governor Lily will pull some strings and get us out of trouble like she always does.

She seems to like our pack a lot, and there's no denying that Gryphon is her little bitch.

She's really got that Alpha pussy whipped, and the poor fucker has no idea.

Quite frankly, that woman scares the living crap out of me.

I have fought many Alphas, and I usually come out on top. But there's just no beating that woman.

She truly is the Alpha of all Alphas.

She has us all pussy whipped...

“It’s okay, we’ll get you out of this hotel...” I whisper to Mila as we head down to the lobby, using the stairs.

A startled gasp alerts my attention when we cut past reception, but I only care about the trembling woman in my arms.

“Hey!” someone shouts, a male. “Stop... or I will call the police!”

Lachlan growls, grabbing the male by the throat, and the guy squeals.

“You,” Lachlan breathes, his eyes enraged. “It’s your fault why she is in this mess. What kind of system are you runnin’ here, letting rapists into your hotel!”

“Please... don’t hurt me!”

Wow... some man he is. I guess Lachlan just has that effect on a lot of people.

It’s the eyes. They cut right through your skin, like cold shards of ice.

“Fuck you... I will kill you!”

A woman screams this time, and I roll my eyes, turning to meet Lachlan.

He has the guy by the throat, squeezing the life from his lungs. The woman trembles behind the desk, most likely a Beta, by the looks of her.

“Lachlan... let him go. We have to get back home to Oliver.”

We do. The Omega sensed she was in danger, and how is that possible?

Do his heats give him clairvoyant gifts of some kind?

Still, I'm just glad he regained some sense before the next wave took over. He is in a lot of pain, and there is nothing we can do.

Our knots don't quite sate him like they used to.

It's as if something is missing, and it's this precious little female in my arms.

I just know it.

She may be small and vulnerable, but she managed to get the better of those guys for a while.

She slit the backs of their feet and knees, cutting off their mobility, and it looks like this little girl knows what she's doing.

What exactly did they teach her at that academy?

Could she cut me up into delicious little bite-sized pieces too? Damn...

Now that I would like to see one day.

The man splutters, and I use a bit more force. "Lachlan!"

The Alpha looks at me, loosening his grip around the man's throat.

"We need to get out of here before the pigs arrive..."

Lachlan bares his teeth, flashing his eyes. Then he drops his victim, and now I watch as the guy stumbles away from the bat-shit-crazy Alpha, leaving behind a piss trail.

As I said, Lachlan has that effect. He may look like a pretty angel, but he's fucking lethal.

“All right. Just one more thing...” Lachlan says, his voice all airy and singsong again.

I raise a brow as he grabs the fruit bowl from the reception desk. The woman yelps, ducking out of the way, but Lachlan ignores her, biting into a juicy red apple.

What are we going to do with him?

I kept Mila cradled in my arms on the drive back to the house.

She's very subdued, and I think back to the awful image of her lying on that bed, submitting to that Alpha.

Now that I have had time to look at her, I spy no injuries.

It seemed the Alpha got her to submit by using his bark.

My heart pounds. That can't be.

Mila is a Beta. An Alpha's bark wouldn't work on her.

There must be some other explanation as to why this normally feisty Beta would submit so easily.

None of that matters. We're home now, and Oliver can get his Mila fix.

He will be so happy to see her, and anything for my Omega...

Anything for Mila. I can tell she's excited at the prospect of being around Oliver again, but she's still tense in my arms.

"No... I can't be here. Oliver... in heat..." She wriggles on my lap, her eyes falling on the shed.

Over my dead body.

She is not going anywhere near that shed again.

"It will be fine, Mila," I purr, brushing aside her hair so I can see her bright green eyes.

They're beautiful.

She shakes her head. "No... t-take me to the shed..."

I growl at the mere suggestion, and I force her to look at me now, losing myself in those big green orbs.

"No. That shed needs to be burned down. It never should have been an option to begin with..."

Her lip shakes, and her eyes pool with tears. "But Oliver... I can't stand to be around him when he's..."

"Oliver asked for you. It's why we came for you. He knew you were in trouble."

Her face lights up. "He... asked for me?"

"Yes, now come on. You don't have to worry anymore. You're safe with us. We'll all take care of you."

"But... Gryphon?"

“Can kiss my fucking ass. He will come around too. Our Omega wants you in our lives, Mila, and that’s all that matters.”

And if he didn’t... then I’m sure I would have taken her on as my own mate.

I would have tried to appeal to my Omega’s better nature and begged, pretty much, that she could be mine.

I would have done everything in my power to ensure that he is still very much mine as much as Mila is, but he wants her too.

Now I don’t have to beg. I can be there for them both.

We get out of the car and head to the nest.

Mila tenses again, and I purr, telling her it is safe.

Lachlan comforts her too, promising her he will find more flowers for her in the woods when Oliver’s heat is over.

She’s terrified of entering his nest. As if she will be intruding, but she soon relaxes, letting me carry her into the cozy, cushioned room.

Let’s hope she likes Oliver’s nest as much as we do.

Chapter Thirty

Mila

I pinch my eyes tight shut, holding my breath as Barret carries me into Oliver's nest.

I brace myself for the moment I am hit by a wave of delicious honeycomb...

Oliver's heat started less than twenty-four hours ago, and already, the place smells of him.

However, that usually delicious sweet honey comes with a bitter tang now, and finally, I open my eyes.

The Omega lays curled up in a fetal position in the middle of a pile of pillows and blankets, and he's nothing but a hot, shivering mess.

I wriggle in Barret's arms, eager to be by his side.

It's as if my body is calling to him somehow, and there's no way I can ignore the yearning in my bones.

I need him.

"I'm okay now, Barret, let me down..."

I truly am. My shock is wearing off from the attack, and I can hardly remember those ass hats back at the hotel.

The only person I can see now is Oliver.

He's in pain.

Barret places me down gently on the floor of the nest, and I stagger when my feet bury into a soft mattress.

Gryphon lies beside Oliver, watching me warily as I step toward his Omega. A part of me thinks that this may have been a trap all along, and they only wanted to catch me out so they could ship me back to the Beta government as soon as possible.

But any shred of doubt soon washes away the moment Oliver opens those soft blue eyes. "Mila..."

He reaches out a hand, and now time seems to slow down as I take his fingers in mine, letting him yank me toward him.

"Oh, thank God, Mila, you're safe... thank *fucking* God..." He growls next. "You smell like burned car tire."

I do. I wish I'd had the chance to get a bath beforehand, but my main priority was Oliver and helping him through his heat.

I'm not even sure what my purpose in the nest will be. Will he just want me close while his Alphas knot him?

Will he want me to pleasure him too?

The blood rushes hot through my head, and I almost pass out at the thought of touching Oliver, of him touching me, and I don't think I am going to last...

Oliver rubs his nose with mine, kissing me gently on the lips, and my heart thumps hard in my chest.

“Did they hurt you?” he asks, his voice coarse, almost feral.

I close my eyes, nestling in closer to him. It’s so good to be by his side again, feeling his warmth.

Already, his honey perfume smells sweeter now that he is happy again.

“Are they dead?” he probes again.

Barret answers. “One of them is, anyway. The police will have got the other two by now.”

Oliver’s eyes flash, and is that satisfaction I spy inside his eyes?

It both terrifies and thrills me.

“That’s okay. We will deal with them later... Come, Mila, it’s time to give you a bath...”

What? A bath?

Gryphon stirs, raising up from the bed. “Oliver? What are you doing?”

The Omega barely hears his Alpha, only having eyes for me.

“You must have been so terrified, but don’t worry, Mila... I will get that bastard’s scent off you...”

Oh, no. No, no, no, no. I can’t allow him to do that.

It’s fine. I don’t mind...

His needs come first.

“It’s okay, Oliver. I can—”

He growls, gripping my cheeks with such gentle force, and I stare, spellbound, into his eyes.

They are as turbulent as the ocean during a storm.

“I will not have you stinking of that animal, Mila... His repulsive scent is making me sick. It only reminds me of my failure to keep you safe. You never should have been sent to that hotel in the first place...”

No one speaks as it’s obvious who Oliver is throwing the blame at here.

It was Gryphon who booked the room for me after all. He was the one who sent me away, saying it was for the best.

I didn’t want to be a bother, distracting Oliver from his needs.

But it didn’t work in the end, anyway...

I still messed up his heat.

Oliver rises shakily to his feet, gripping my hand. He guides me up to my own feet, despite Gryphon’s protests.

“Oliver... you can barely stand... sit back down...”

But Oliver’s mind is set. Despite the fact he’s doubled over, wincing in what I can only imagine is terrible pain, he still lifts me in his arms, carrying me out of the nest bridal style.

“Oliver...” Gryphon growls.

“Fuck off, Gryphon.”

And that marks the end of that conversation.

Oliver is determined to give me a bath, even though he is in a tremendous amount of pain.

Lachlan and Barret fuss around us as he carries me down the hall, his breathing heavy and labored.

Sweat drips from his hair and into his eyes, but he's seeing this through.

He wants to ensure that I am bathed and comforted. He wants to remove that Alpha's burned tire scent from my skin so I can forget this awful night and put it behind me.

No one has ever taken care of me or put my needs first in my entire life, and I don't know how to take it.

A lump blocks my airway, and the tears drip from my eyes.

I have had an exhausting evening, after all. I almost got raped, but I tried my best to brush it aside because Oliver needed me.

He's in heat. Omegas can die if they don't get what they need, but he doesn't care about that.

He only cares about me.

Still. I won't have him endangering his life. I am not worth it.

He is worth ten of me...

"No, Gryphon is right... Oliver, we need to get back to the nest... you need your Alphas..."

“No. Fuck that gaslighting prick. He can’t manipulate you anymore, Mila. You are not in the way or a hindrance to me or my pack, and I am going to ensure that all your needs are met from now on.”

I have no idea what to say. I am stunned into silence.

Barret and Lachlan have no protests. They go along with Oliver’s needs, but would they still care so much about me if it weren’t for their Omega?

It’s hard to say, but I think those two Alphas do care about me as much as Oliver does.

Maybe they have a little more autonomy here than I give them credit for.

They are helping me because they want to.

Oliver kicks the bathroom door open, settling me down on his lap as he sits on the lip of the tub. He reaches down, turning the taps, and now he waits until he gets the water to a comfortable temperature.

He doesn’t look away from me the whole time. Sweat still drips down his face, and I wipe it away with my sleeve.

“Oliver, you are in pain...”

He shakes his head. “I’ve survived worse. I’m tougher than I look, Mila...”

Same here. People often take my looks for granted, too.

Like that Alpha at the hotel surely found out.

My heart hiccups when I remember the way he used his Alpha bark on me, and if Barret and Lachlan hadn't arrived... then he would have taken my virginity...

I shiver, and Oliver whispers me sweet nothings, promising me that he will always keep me safe and that no strange Alpha will ever get his hands on me again.

Finally, he fills the tub, gazing into my eyes as he grabs the hem of my shirt. "May I?"

I smile, albeit a little nervously. My face flushes. "Yes."

The Omega undresses me, and I lay still like a little doll as he takes off each item of clothing. The only thing I want to keep on is my bra and panties.

I don't want him seeing what's going on between my legs. I am pretty sure I have slick there...

My secret will get out, and then they will all know what I truly am.

Oliver lays me down gently in the tub, and he won't even let me climb in for myself.

He grabs his own loofah, rubbing it in circular motions up and down my arms and legs, replacing that Alpha's burned tyre with his honeycomb.

He wants me to smell like him, and that lump blocks my air passage again.

Oliver wants me for himself... and I don't know how to handle it.

So, I relax for once in my life, and just let him bathe me.

It's the least I can do for him.

It feels so good to be taken care of for once...

He never goes below my panties. He keeps all his focus on my arms and legs.

He no longer gasps for breath, and it appears bathing me has taken away some of the pain.

His eyes are laser-focused on the task, and they are completely black with lust.

Barret and Lachlan wait outside, giving me and Oliver some privacy.

Now it's like we are the only two people left in the world.

I want him to see more of me...

So, I start to unclasp my bra, reaching my hands around my back.

"Mila?"

I unclasp, wriggling my arms out of the straps.

He starts panting again.

"Mila... it's fine. You don't..."

He soon changes his tune when he finally gets a fill of my breasts. They bounce freely before me, and he doesn't take his eyes off them.

My nipples are hard and I'm sure my perfume floods the steamy air of the bathroom, spreading the scent of

gingerbread.

Oliver gulps, moving his gaze back up to my eyes. Sweat gathers under his nose, and he's aroused.

That can't be good for his heat.

Yet he pushes his desire aside, reaching across to rub his honey-scented loofah over my breasts.

I close my eyes, sighing in deep satisfaction when he brushes my budded nipples, a soft sound escaping my lips.

It sounded like a moan.

Oliver freezes, and his breathing accelerates, growing heavier. One of his hands grips the lip of the tub, and his knuckles turn bone white.

My cheeks flush. "Sorry... I didn't mean to make that sound..."

He shakes his head. "D-don't be sorry... It was a good sound..."

Well, things just got very awkward.

Oliver looks at me through hooded eyes, and I'm pretty sure he is growling. A strange rumble vibrates from his chest, and can Omegas purr?

It's not as deep or profound as an Alpha's purr, but it's still having an effect on me.

This just won't do. He is too far away, and this tub is big enough for the two of us...

I lick my lips. "Will... will you join me?"

He drops the loofah into the water in shock. Then he stammers, running a hand through his brown curls. “I... suppose I could. I could do with a bath myself...”

Please... he smells intoxicating.

And I like the various scents of all three of his Alphas. Each of them lingers on his skin, creating a heady aroma, and one day...

I'm gonna taste it.

Oliver climbs into the tub behind me, albeit a little clumsily at first. He's still weak from his heat, but somehow, he finds the strength to look after me.

When he dips into the water behind me, he lets out a sigh.

His breath brushes the back of my soaked neck, and I shudder, closing my eyes.

He's so close now, and he's hard, digging into my tailbone, and thank goodness for the panties.

I don't think I could have lasted ten seconds...

I bite my lips. “Will you wash my hair?”

Oliver sighs shakily behind me, and I feel the air on the back of my neck. “Of course...”

The Omega grabs a shampoo bottle and massages my scalp, getting right behind my ears.

His fingers feel like heaven, and I can only imagine what they would feel like all over me...

When he's done massaging my head, he grabs a jug and washes the soap away. Then he grabs conditioner and spreads it through my long hair from root to tip, using a soft comb.

"You have beautiful hair, Mila. I have never seen so many shades of blonde... caramel, honey, ash..."

I smile. He's too sweet.

"Thank you. You have nice hair too. Are those curls natural?"

"Yeah, unfortunately... I looked like a hobbit as a kid."

A laugh bursts freely from my lungs, and I regret it immediately.

Damn. That was not an attractive laugh, but his comment just got to me.

Oliver chuckles along with me, and it appears he approves of my dorky laugh.

When he's finally done with the conditioner, he rinses it out, and now he lays us both back in the tub, wrapping his arms and legs around me.

That's how we stay.

I eventually fall asleep, my head rising and falling with his chest as I listen to the sound of his Omega purr.

Before I drift off, he whispers in my ear, "I will take care of you. Promise."

Chapter Thirty-One

Gryphon

Oliver is mad at me. And I don't know what to do with myself.

Sure, during the highest peak of his first wave, he was needy, begging for my knot and touch, but once he came back around, his anger for me increased by a tenfold.

I'm no idiot. I know why he is pissed; he is angry that I sent Mila to stay at a hotel.

He is livid that I put her in direct danger.

And now he is making me pay.

As a result, he kicked me out of the nest.

He only calls me in when he is very desperate, and I have come to the horrible realization that I deserve his treatment.

Barret and Lachlan get to stay inside the nest, but that's because they went to Mila's rescue. I would have too, but my main concern was Oliver.

One of us had to stay with him.

An Omega can die without an Alpha's knot during their heat, and it's like Oliver is forgetting that gruesome fact.

With Mila, it's like he is forgetting that he is an Omega entirely, and I'm pretty sure he is trying to be an Alpha.

He purrs at her, and this is getting ridiculous.

I was warned not to let the pack get too attached to Mila, but it was inevitable in the end.

Governor Lily is going to be pissed at me, and sooner or later, she is going to take matters into her own hands.

Soon, the Beta and the Alpha governments are going to go head to head, and it's as they taught us at the academy...

Every day is a new day for war...

What the fuck am I going to do?

I am currently sitting in the hallway outside the nest, sporting a massive hard-on.

The sounds coming from inside are tempting in every way, but even if I did go inside, Oliver would just kick me back out.

I guess I should be grateful that he is still letting me inside the nest at all.

But it's been over a day since I went in last. The moment Oliver scooped Mila up from the tub, all wrapped up inside a fluffy white towel, he shut me out.

I even slept out in the hall. Just in case...

My Omega may have needed me during the night.

He never did call for me, though. It's as if Mila is sating all of his Omega needs, and I won't deny that I am fucking jealous.

Jealous of her, and jealous of the fact that Oliver gets to have a taste of her...

I swore I would never let myself get close. My plan from day one was to always keep my distance, but Mila is always on my mind.

I had to fight back every instinct in my body to stop her from getting in that cab and heading to that hotel.

Mila is not pack, but my Alpha seems to recognize some aspects of her that could be.

I have never been so confused. That's why I sit in the hall with my face buried in my hands.

It's hard to ignore the delicious sounds coming from the nest.

Between Oliver's groans, and Mila's high-pitched, feminine moans, I'm a horny fucking mess.

My hard-on won't budge. I've tried masturbating, but it won't go down.

Oliver is still in heat. So, it won't go down once it's over.

They haven't had sex yet. Even though I am a bystander and forbidden from the nest, I can tell by the smells and sounds.

For now, they are just touching, exploring each other's bodies...

It's too late to stop things between them now. I just hope that everything will turn out all right.

Hopefully, Governor Lily is wrong about Mila.

My phone buzzes, and I jump, pulling it out from my pocket.

My throat closes up when I see the name.

It's Governor Lily...

I go to another room, and far away from the nest.

The governor cannot hear the sounds coming from that room.

"Gryphon," Lily says when I answer the phone. "I was just checking in. Did you take my advice on board? Is the Beta no longer cooking and cleaning?"

I bite my lip, grateful that she can't see my expression.

Oh, she's doing more than cooking and cleaning now...

I clear my voice. How do I lie to my superior? Do I just twist the truth?

"Yes, Governor..."

"And you reminded her of her place?"

I have. Plenty of times. But she kept coming back, despite my attempts to push her away.

Besides, it's not as if I could keep Oliver away. I tried, and look at where that got me.

Sleeping out in the hall...

"Good, good..."

She doesn't sound so convinced, and I'm just glad that she isn't in the room with me now.

She can't see the droplets of sweat that are forming on my top lip.

Nervous sweats.

“Well, I guess that's all I needed to know. Remember to keep me updated, and I will see you at the Governor's Ball.”

Fuck.

How could I have forgotten? The Ball is in just two weeks!

It's an annual ball, a way for both governments to meet and discuss politics, but in a more casual setting.

It also builds rapport between the Alphas and the Betas.

Many affluent packs attend the ball, and as Governor Lily's favorite creature, I will be expected to be there with my pack in tow.

It's also a way for the governors to see that we are taking good care of our Omegas, and that goes for both governments.

The Betas hate that we get to keep the Omegas for ourselves, so it's a chance for them to poke their noses into our lives.

It also gives the Alphas a chance to show off their pride and joy.

A happy, healthy Omega equals a happy, stable life.

With the new Beta Trials, our Beta soldiers will be expected to attend too, but not as a member of our pack. As our security.

Mila will be expected to go, and all eyes will be on us.

As the only pack with a male Omega, we draw too much attention.

“Yes. I will see you there, Governor.”

At least that is not a lie.

“Goodbye, Gryphon.”

She switches off and I breathe a sigh, pressing my back to the wall. I run my fingers through my hair, cursing out loud.

“Fuck!”

I just lied to my superior.

Alphas have been court-martialed for lesser crimes.

I’m a bad Alpha and a liar.

Nothing but a disgrace.

There is no way I can ever crawl back from this.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Mila

I guess the tales are true.

Omegas do produce a lot of slick during sex, and it's the most irresistible thing I have ever seen.

The nest fills with the scent of honey, and I don't want this heat to ever end.

Oliver's heat ended up being some of the worst and best days of my life.

The scenes at the hotel are almost like a distant memory now. I never thought I would want to be touched ever again after such a traumatic event, but Oliver has such a way of putting me at ease.

He helps me forget for just a moment that I am a lonely Beta with no pack.

He has pleased me plenty of times, too. In fact, he seems more concerned with pleasing me than pleasing himself.

Barret and Lachlan have tried. While he doesn't deny their knots, he still makes sure that I am satisfied first and foremost.

It's his heat, his nest, but he makes it all about me and what I want.

And considering I don't have much experience either, he still makes me feel like a goddess.

So far, we have only touched. He has massaged my breasts, and I have tried to suck on his cock, yet he pushes me away.

"I have my Alphas for that," he says.

I pout, folding my arms, but then I smirk, going for his cock yet again.

Oliver pushes me away, raising an eyebrow at me in a playful manner.

Lachlan and Barret watch our shenanigans in the background, and the former has jerked off plenty of times.

"Why not?"

Oliver smiles, gripping my chin to bring me closer to his mouth. "Because... I want this to be all about you..."

"But you are the one who's in heat, Oliver. Forget about me..."

His eyes flash, and then a growl rumbles deep in his throat. My muscles seize at the sound, and then an excited thrill slithers down my spine.

I love it when he makes that sound. It makes make him sound dominant.

“I would never forget about you, Mila... you are the only thing on my mind lately, so please... lay back... and let me *love* you...”

“Oh, fuck...” Lachlan grunts, working his hand faster.

I toss him a look. He seems to like it when Oliver shows some dominance.

Albeit still gentle, Oliver is showing dominant, Alpha-like tendencies.

Oh, he still has Omega needs. When he cramps, he calls one of the Alphas and lets them notch their knots onto his ass, but that’s it.

It’s the feeling of fullness that Omegas need the most.

But his need to pleasure me takes over.

I don’t understand.

I gaze into his eyes again to ensure that this is what he wants, and I don’t have to ask twice when I spy that dark look in his hooded eyes.

Well, who am I to argue?

No more pouting. Not when this beautiful Omega wants to do what he wants to my body.

Finally, I lay back, bringing him with me as I snake my arm around his neck, locking my lips with his.

Damn. Oliver is one good kisser...

The way his tongue takes command, stroking my own, and I lose myself in his taste.

Honey explodes in my mouth, and I groan, letting him run that perfect tongue along the inside of my teeth.

Another grunt and it looks like Lachlan liked my sound just now.

Oliver releases his tongue from my mouth, and now he peppers kisses up and down my neck. He nips my skin with his teeth, and I buck beneath him, stars shooting in the corners of my eyes.

Darn, that felt good...

I run my hands up and down his back, teasing my fingernails along those taut muscles, and it looks like this Omega works out.

Oliver responds in kind, grinding his hips against me when I dig my nails that bit farther, and he likes it when I get my claws out.

He has no idea how much I want to scratch him... and mark him as *mine*...

Now I'm starting to sound like an Alpha.

Probably just the pheromones.

My body is pretty flushed lately, and my skin is sensitive to the touch and not to mention, itchy.

But it goes away whenever Oliver touches me.

It's like I could die without his touch.

Could Oliver possibly feel the same way? Is that why he begged his Alphas to find me?

His dick prods me, and I have to see, have to have a taste...

I rake my fingers up the length of his back and the deep sigh of satisfaction that escapes him sets my nerves on fire.

Lachlan makes another happy grunting sound, and he's not the only one.

Barret is working up a sweat too.

"Mila..." Oliver whispers my name, and I rake my claws higher, getting my scratch marks all over him.

His hips snap toward me, and I buck, mimicking his action.

The way our bodies respond to each other. It's almost primal. Nature.

A Beta and an Omega who are made for each other...

Oliver growls, a feral light igniting inside his eyes, and now he goes rogue.

He rips off my shirt, actually shreds it in half, and exposes my breasts.

They pop loose and Lachlan's woodland scents intensifies...

"Jesus... Barret... you seeing this...?"

Barret replies with a grunt.

Oliver doesn't hear him. He has gone full beast mode, his burning eyes leaving scorch marks on my soul, and my heart flutters.

I am the only thing he sees now.

No one else matters.

Only me...

“Oh, God, I’m gonna...”

Oliver growls, shouting over his shoulder. “Shut up!”

And shut up Lachlan does.

Oliver’s head jerks back to me, and a dark smirk creeps across his face.

Damn. I’m done.

Without warning, Oliver grips my hair, exposing my neck, then leans down, nibbling gently.

I trust him not to bite, though.

It’s Alphas who are usually the danger in a rut of biting without consent.

Oliver may have gone feral, but he’s still there.

Still my Omega...

He kisses my neck, licking, nipping, and tasting my skin, and I squeeze my eyes, damning those flashing lights in the corners of my eyes.

Not yet...

He moves past my clavicle, down to my breasts, and my back arches off the bed when he bites my nipple.

Another groan slips from me, and the distant sounds of growling, satisfied Alphas responds, but all my focus zeros in on the Omega...

Everything else is a blur. My vision tunnels with him at the center, making him the only thing I see.

Forget everyone else.

Just me and Oliver...

He lets go of my nipple, and his mouth pops when the pebbled flesh escapes his teeth.

He kisses burning trails down my stomach, and my body shakes in anticipation when he reaches my pubic mound.

The stars glow brighter, and I don't think I am going to last another five minutes...

Oliver stops between my legs, and fear claws its way up my spine when I remember.

Slick. He will see my slick.

However, Oliver doesn't question the suspicious amount of slick that my pussy produces. He just does what his instincts tell him to do.

I still have on my panties. He presses his nose to the cotton, inhaling my scent, and his pupils blow out.

Then his eyes find me.

They're more black than blue now.

He growls, and the sound vibrates against my pussy lips, making me wetter.

Some of my slick coats his lips when he presses his face up close, and fuck...

He extends his tongue, slipping it between the folds of my sex, right through the cotton panties.

Another moan, and now more grunts echo in the background.

More... more...

Finally, Oliver pinches the cotton between his teeth, and now the panties come off.

Where does he find the strength?

To my relief, I am not as wet as I had feared... I'd just felt wetter because my panties were sticking to me, and due to my recent shave, the skin is now bare.

Yeah, I prepared.

Now my pussy is exposed to him. Oliver takes a moment, gasping for air.

“Damn, Mila... you’re fucking magnificent...”

A pregnant pause.

Meanwhile, my breaths echo through the room, my skin hot and flushed.

My fingers and toes curl in anticipation.

Oliver buries his face between my legs, and I throw my head back when the stars explode into supernovas, making everything burn bright white

“Yes, yes, fucking yes!”

His face is all the way inside me, his nose, his mouth, as he laps me up with his tongue.

The nest becomes a cocktail of various scents. Two Alphas, one Omega, and me...

My scent takes precedence, and now everything smells like gingerbread.

His tongue curls inside me as his nose buries against my clit. But then he pulls back, biting the hard nub, and my senses sing yet again.

More fire tears through my veins, and I grasp fistfuls of his silken green sheets, thrashing my head from side to side.

Oliver resurfaces, my slick shining across his plump lips, and when he gives them a lick, I'm gone.

“Fuck... Oliver...” I gasp.

He leans over me, and I smell myself dripping from his lips, splattering my face.

“You taste amazing, Mila... fucking amazing...”

His praise makes my heart swell, and I shut my eyes, damning the tears that threaten to escape.

No one has ever told me that.

“I promise... when I take you for the first time... I will make it count... the night will all be about you and no one else...”

I close my eyes, savoring the sound of his sweet promise.

It looks as if his body is calling out for one of his Alphas again, and I know it can't be helped.

He's still in heat.

But I've noticed the pallor has gone from his face. He's still covered in dew drops of sweat, but his skin is flushed and has a healthy glow now.

Finally, he peers over his shoulder.

Lachlan looks up hopefully.

"You two can finally join. But you do not touch Mila... she is *mine*..."

His possessive tone makes my heart flutter again.

Finally, Lachlan and Barret join Oliver's side. They squabble about who gets to big spoon and knot him, and Barret wins as he pushes Lachlan to the foot of the bed.

The poor blond nestles down by Oliver's feet, careful to stay far away from me.

The warning growl Oliver gave him was clear enough.

So, Oliver big spoons me, while he is big spooned by Barret. I sense the moment the Alpha notches himself inside him.

The Omega breathes a satisfied breath on the back of my neck, and I shudder when he buries his nose into the crook of my shoulder, breathing me in.

My heart won't stop pounding, and I'm pretty sure Oliver can feel it too when he splays his hand across my breastbone, massaging my nipple with the span of his palm.

He just wants me close, and I nestle into him, smiling when his hard dick presses against my backside.

I bite my lip.

He wanted to wait until his heat was over until he finally entered me, and I truly appreciate his thoughtfulness.

Though I wouldn't have minded either way.

I know he would have still made the moment all about me.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Lachlan

The house is abuzz with excitement as every member of the pack prepares for the Governor's Ball.

Well, Mila technically isn't pack, but as our Beta, she is expected to attend.

Oliver will need extra protection while he dances with his Alphas.

Every year, the Alphas get the chance to flaunt their Omegas, each member taking turns with them on the dance floor.

As the only pack with a male Omega, we will draw quite the attention.

Omegas are extremely vulnerable at these events, and Oliver even more so. That is why this year the Betas from the trials will be chaperoning their packs.

They will watch on the sidelines as the Alphas dance with their Omegas, and it almost seems unfair to put poor Mila in such a position.

What if I want to dance with her *and* Oliver? Would that be allowed? Would it be frowned upon?

Governor Lily will be there, as well as Governor Frederick.

Lily has Gryphon on a tight leash, so if she suspects in the slightest that we have allowed ourselves as a pack to get closer to Mila, then we will all be in deep shit.

Gryphon has drilled us nonstop. When we enter the ballroom, we must be surrounding Oliver at all costs.

Gryphon will take Oliver's right while I have his left. Barret will take up his rear, and lucky bastard...

Mila will come in behind us, keeping just enough distance to satisfy Governor Lily.

I think it's all a little ridiculous. While I am not denying that Governor Frederick is up to something nefarious, I do believe that Mila is innocent.

She is no threat to us, and seeing the way she cared for Oliver during his heat only made me appreciate her more.

I still bring her flowers, as an olive branch. But I also want her to know that she is special and that I am thinking about her...

If only I could dance with her and Oliver at the ball, but fate has other ideas.

Oliver booked us in at the local tailors to have suits fitted for the event. The guy is taking my measurements before a three-

way mirror as I spread out my arms, looking as if I am about to take flight.

Barret already got his measurements. He lounges on the chaise, drinking complimentary champagne.

Oliver sits beside him, as Mila stands to the Omega's right in her uniform.

She is dressed to the nines in weapons, and I have never seen a more deadly creature.

My pretty little snowdrop... I bet she could cut up any man...

I bet she could throw a knife and take out the tailor who keeps cupping my balls in a very peculiar manner.

I'm taken, sir...

"Yes, yes... that seems about right..." he mutters, and what is right? My balls?

Do they meet his satisfaction?

I'm not used to having another Alpha touching my balls...

Barret stirs when he senses my discomfort. "You all right over there, Lachlan?"

I answer him by waving my arms up and down, smiling at him in the mirror.

Barret raises an eyebrow, then looks at the tailor. His eyes darken, and he places an arm around Oliver protectively.

Shit. I don't think I will be able to hold back if this old perv goes for Oliver's balls.

I will literally splatter his clean windows with his blood.

“Hey... do you think you could tailor the suit to fit knives? I carry a *lot* of them after all...” I warn, flashing my eyes, hoping he takes the hint.

I will cut him up if he keeps up his rotten behavior.

The Alpha chuckles, wrapping his measuring tap around my waist. “I will bear it in mind...”

Yeah, sure you will.

When he’s done, he steps back, beckoning for Oliver.

Barret already had his turn, and I wonder if he got the same balls massage too.

If he did, he never said anything.

However, he does seem rather anxious about leaving Oliver alone with the tailor.

If the old, perverted bastard liked my balls, then how will he cope when he cups a feel of that Omega’s perfect jewels?

Oliver does have a nice pair of balls...

“Arms out wide.”

Oliver spreads his arms like an eagle taking flight, and now the tailor takes his measurements.

He lines up the tape with Oliver’s torso, then wraps it around his waist. When his fingers wander a little too south, Barret and I rise, baring our teeth.

Growls sound from our chests.

The tailor has the gall to look surprised. He knows exactly what he just did.

“Whatever is the problem, gentlemen?”

We are no gentleman. Just as he is about to find out...

Oliver, bless his innocent soul, looks at us confused. “Guys... what’s your problem? He’s just doing his job...”

I managed to grit my teeth when the old bastard cupped my balls, but if he even dares to touch my Omega... then I will hang his own balls on our tree next Christmas...

The tailor waves his hand. “Yes, it’s all protocol. So, sit back and—”

He doesn’t finish his spiel. Mila has him by the back of his throat, squashing his face into his clean, shiny mirror.

A giggle bursts from my throat as I watch the beautiful sight of Mila taking action.

Her hair flows behind her like spun gold, and I don’t think I can take it anymore...

I want to make Mila *mine*...

I spy my reflection in the mirror. My pupils are blown out, leaving only a thin ring of blue.

Barret looks the same, and his dark eyes are even darker as a result.

Oliver... he licks his lips, his eyes roving up and down Mila’s form as she twists the Alpha’s arms behind his back, a man twice her size, and she is magnificent...

The lucky bastard has already had his taste of her, and it's not fair...

Sometimes, I wish I was an Omega...

“You finish his measurements properly. Then we go home and call it a day. Do I make myself clear, sir?”

The tailor cries out when she twists on his arm again, and he nods his head, desperate to escape her grip. “Yes, yes, fuck...”

Satisfied, Mila lets go of the Alpha, and now she refuses to leave Oliver's side as the man finishes his measurements.

Barret and I look at each other impressed.

It looks like Mila has everything under control, and we fall back on the couch, helping ourselves to some complimentary champagne.

It's not so bad having a female Beta around after all.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Mila

We return from the tailors, and the blood is still rushing hot through my veins.

I saw what he was doing to Lachlan and Barret, but the Alphas didn't want to cause a scene.

Probably in fear of upsetting their Omega.

Apparently, the Governor's Ball is a huge deal for him and Omegas in general. It's their one chance to leave the confines of their homes and be treated like royalty.

Omegas don't get out much, it seems, and my heart aches for poor Oliver.

I bet there is so much of the world he would love to explore, and maybe one day we will get to see it together.

Maybe we can see the ocean together.

I bet it's as beautiful as his eyes...

"I still don't understand what the problem was. That man's hands were nowhere near my balls," Oliver gripes as we enter

the front door, heading for the kitchen.

I promised everyone coffee for when we got back.

Anything to take their minds off their troubles.

Gryphon comes out of the living room when we arrive, and I freeze, showing him the respect and reverence he deserves as Pack Leader.

His eyes are focused on Oliver, as if he is the only person who matters.

He barely acknowledges me.

He and Oliver still aren't on talking terms.

Once Oliver got what he needed from his Alpha, he kicked him back out of the nest, and Gryphon hasn't returned since.

The Omega is still pissed that he sent me to a hotel.

I don't blame Gryphon for what happened to me.

After all, it was my choice to pursue that Alpha at the bar.

If I had just stayed in my room, then I wouldn't have gotten into that mess in the first place.

Gryphon's eyes gleam red in the light. "Whose hands were on your balls, Oliver?"

Oliver clenches his jaws, curling his fists at his sides. "I don't think that's any of your concern, *Alpha...*"

The Alpha's eyes flash as he steps closer, taking Oliver's cheek in his hand. "I think it is. You are my Omega, Oliver, and if another man outside of this pack has touched you in any

way, then I would like to know. Was it the tailor? I can get him fired...”

Oliver rolls his eyes, pushing his arm away. “I’m fine. Nothing happened. Besides, Mila already took care of it.”

Finally, Gryphon peers my way. His face is hard.

I try not to look him in the eye.

Instead, I look at his chin. His gloriously dimpled chin...

“She did now?” he whispers.

“Yes. And are you going to say thanks? She protected your Omega, Gryphon. Show her a bit more respect.”

Gryphon’s jaw tics, and my heart pounds.

“Thank you, Mila, for taking care of our Omega. Where would we all be without you...?”

Silence. None of us speaks as Gryphon finishes his thanks.

Oliver shakes his head. “Yeah, with a little less sarcasm next time, Gryphon. Come on. I’ll make you coffee, Mila.”

I look around at him as he pulls me into the kitchen. “But... I was going to—”

“My way of saying thank you. Please, I insist.”

I drop my shoulders and relax for the first time in hours. I was tense throughout our time at the tailor’s.

I’m just glad that he didn’t get a chance to put those hands on me... I won’t need a custom-made dress for the ball after all.

Because I am expected to wear my uniform...

I've never even owned a dress before. I've never had the chance to.

I wonder what it would be like to feel like a princess, like you see in all those old classic storybooks.

Must be nice.

Oliver places my coffee down before me on the table, and I take a leisurely sip, humming when I taste the honey.

My favorite.

Barret and Lachlan had to make their own coffees. Gryphon headed out to God knows where, and I can truly relax when he's gone.

I just don't understand that Alpha. He seemed angry with me that I protected his Omega. I was just doing what I was trained to do.

He thinks I am trying to steal his place in the pack.

But I can never replace him. Oliver may be mad at him now, but he still loves him.

He won't shut up about him, moaning about what a big asshole he is being.

If that's not love, then I don't know what is...

But what would I know? I have never been in love before.

Just like I have never worn a dress.

“When you’ve finished your coffee, there’s something I want to show you, Mila...”

I look up at Oliver. “Really? What is it?”

The Omega taps his delicate nose. “You will soon see. I want it to be a surprise...”

My heart hiccups, and I wonder what he is hiding.

Lachlan sniggers and I glance across at him. “What’s so funny?”

“You.... you have froth on your lip...”

I reach up and wipe my mouth. How embarrassing.

Lachlan laughs, slamming his fist down hard on the table as he makes everything shake. Barret shoves him to make him stop, but the Alpha has lost it.

It seems he is easily tickled.

Oliver huffs, standing up. “Come on. Let’s forget about him...”

He reaches his hand down for me, and my mouth dries. It looks as if he is about to show me my big surprise.

Lachlan is still tittering when we leave the kitchen. Barret shoves him harder, pushing him off the chair this time.

I guess the sight of me with a cream mustache was just so amusing...

We stop outside my room, and I look at Oliver.

“What am I going to find behind the door?”

He shrugs, placing his hands in his pockets. “Not much. Just my way of saying thanks. I... was kind of pathetic during my heat. But you were there to help me ease the pain. I really appreciate your help, Mila. Even though it goes beyond the call of duty...”

My cheeks flush, and I peer down at my feet. “It was no trouble at all. I couldn’t stand to hear you in pain, so I tried to help in any way I could.”

Oliver’s breath hitches, and I’m too afraid to meet his eyes. I’m too afraid of what I may feel when I do.

I do not deserve him at all, and if only there were more people like him in the world. He truly is one of a kind.

“Well, let’s go in. I can’t wait to see the look on your face...”

My. It must be something exciting. There’s no missing his anticipation.

It makes his eyes shine bluer.

He opens the door, pushing me inside at last, and I double-take when I spy the beautiful ball gown waiting for me on a hanger.

I don’t breathe. I don’t blink.

All I see is that dress...

“Ta-da!” the Omega cheers. “This is your surprise!”

I gaze up at him in shock. “Is this dress really for me?”

He chuckles. “No. It’s for Lachlan... Of *course* it’s for you, Mila. You didn’t think I was going to let you go to the ball in your uniform, did you?”

I step closer, running my hands down the silk bodice. It’s encrusted with real gems, and I jerk my hand back as if they’re made from fire.

I can’t wear a dress like this. It’s too nice for me...

I am unworthy.

“But... this is an Omega’s dress...”

He shrugs. “So? And you have all the right Omega measurements.”

I shake my head. “No, no, I can’t... Betas aren’t supposed to draw attention. I can’t take away the attention from you, Oliver. It is your night, not mine...”

Silence spreads between us as I make my sad little declaration.

It’s true, though. No one will care about me at that ball. It’s all about the Omegas.

A chance for their Alphas to show them off.

“I don’t care, Mila. Honestly, I’ve never cared for all the attention. But... when I imagine walking into that ballroom with you on my arm, wearing that dress, then... yeah... for the first time, I do want all eyes on me... I want them all to see you... to know that you are *mine*...”

All the breath leaves my lungs. Oliver gazes at me so passionately, and the way he growled the word *mine* just now... he almost sounded Alpha.

He steps closer and takes my face in his hands. I have to crane my neck just to meet his eyes. “You will look perfect, Mila. I just know it.”

Tears spill from my eyes, and now I feel stupid. I am supposed to be a soldier, the tough girl...

I do not care for pretty shoes and dresses...

Except I do.

I really do.

I want a guy to sweep me off my feet. I want him to protect me and put me first. It's highly selfish, but I can't help these feelings.

They live deep inside me.

I've always put others first. I have been taking care of my dad since I was fourteen.

But no one has taken care of me...

Until now.

He wipes my tears away with his thumbs, purring softly to soothe me. “And don't worry about Gryphon. I will handle him.”

I whimper now, and he presses my face against his chest, and his purr doesn't stop. He runs his hand down my back.

“It will be your night, Mila. Your night. Not mine. All for you...”

It's more than I deserve, but I don't want to be ungrateful.

I want him to know how much I appreciate his thoughts.

Okay. I will make the night all about me.

Anything to make him happy.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Oliver

Gryphon is tense as he paces back and forth in the living room, all suited up in his tux for the Governor's Ball.

He's not the only one. We're all wearing our custom-made suits, and I can't help but notice that the pants have been made a little too tight.

Did Mila piss off the tailor? Even so, he is getting a bad review from me...

Maybe he really was just looking for an excuse to touch my balls.

It's something I have had to deal with ever since I awakened as an Omega — unwarranted attention from Betas and Alphas alike.

Everyone has wanted a piece of my body since I presented, and it gets tiring. I never wanted the attention anyway as I had always been a shy kid, a bit of a wallflower.

It will be the exact same at the ball, and I will have to be on my best guard.

At least Mila will be there to protect me and keep me safe.

I know she didn't want to wear the dress in fear of retaliation from not only Gryphon but her superiors, too.

But I will handle the brass. If any of them give her trouble, then they can talk to me.

An Omega's happiness is paramount, and I will just say that I didn't like her uniform.

It didn't match our outfits or something stupid like that.

Honestly, I have never really given a single shit about fashion, but most Omegas do. They will buy it.

Besides, she will still have a gun hidden in her dress; I made sure the thing came with pockets.

She just seemed like the kind of girl who liked pockets.

Anyplace she can stow away her weapons.

I have to remember that she is a trained soldier, and she is used to being armed.

She is no princess...

Well, except for tonight.

Who said Cinderella can't be a soldier, too?

"This is ridiculous, Oliver... Where the hell is Mila?"

Gryphon rounds on me from where he has worn a groove into the carpet from pacing too hard.

I don't look at him. I don't give a fuck about his obsession with timekeeping.

He's the kind of Alpha who would rather get to every place half an hour early, and someone needs to teach him about being fashionably late for once.

Instead, I keep my gaze at the foot of the stairs. I let Mila get ready in my room so that she could make her grand entrance like in all the fairy tales. I have even left the door open to the living room so I can see the moment she makes her grand entrance.

My heart won't stop pounding.

"Oliver... you go and tell her to hurry. We are running late. Governor Lily—"

"Fuck Governor Lily."

The room falls deathly still. Lachlan makes an idiotic sound, placing his hand on his mouth.

I just cursed our oh-so-gracious leader.

Blasphemy.

I don't see the big deal. It's a free country. A democracy. Besides, I didn't exactly vote for her.

There's just something about her that I don't like, and I can never quite place my finger on it.

Yet Gryphon bends over backwards for her, and he's afraid of her.

Well, I'm not. I'm not scared of any of them.

Gryphon's eyes flash in warning, and they burn bright red. Then he bares his teeth, and I glare at him.

“Don’t you bare your teeth at me, Gryphon... I said what I said. I don’t give two shits what Lily thinks. So sit down, be patient, and wait until Mila arrives. I want this to be special for her...”

His lip twitches when I say *special*, and it looks like he wants to show me his teeth again.

No Alpha of mine bares his teeth at me. I am not his fucking enemy, and neither is Mila...

He needs to chill out.

Mila is getting her hair and makeup done right now. I paid someone to do her up for the ball.

She told me she had never had someone do her hair and makeup, and my heart swelled at her innocence.

She reminds me of a sheltered kid. Despite the fact she is trained in battle, she has never experienced much of life.

Well, not the things that really matter, anyhow.

Not every day has to be about war.

I pick up on the sound of heels on the landing next, and I jump to my feet.

Lachlan and Barret do the same, and it looks like we are all anticipating her arrival. The former even slips a breath mint into his mouth, and what the fuck...?

Why didn’t he offer me one of those?

I hear another set of steps, and it appears that the stylist had to help her in her heels.

Mila told me she could walk in heels, but she has a habit of stumbling if she is nervous.

I guess I have put her in quite the predicament.

Gryphon rolls his eyes when he spies our reactions, and then he mutters under his breath, scowling into the fireplace.

It seems to be his favorite brooding spot lately.

“Just a few more steps...” says the stylist.

I don't hear what Mila says to her next. Her voice is too quiet, but my heart pounds just hearing how obviously excited and nervous she is.

I can't wait to see her...

Finally, the stylist stops at the door, coughing for our attention. “Fellas... behold... your lady for the night...”

Our lady. It has quite a nice ring to it, and I can see that the others agree with me, too.

Gryphon doesn't even look at the door. He keeps his gaze on the empty fireplace. We haven't lit it because we aren't going to be home tonight.

I plan to stay out dancing until the wee hours of the morning.

I doubt Gryphon will stay for that long.

The stylist steps aside, and a fairytale princess takes her place.

My heart skips a beat, and she looks even better than I imagined...

Mila is beautiful. Simply put.

The bodice of her dress hugs her tiny waist, and the tulle skirt flairs just right, seeming to make her float along the floor.

And the lights of the room catch the gems off her dress, sparkling like real starlight, and I can't believe she is real.

One day, I am going to make her *mine*...

Lachlan and Barret are just as entranced, and Lachlan's eyes shine.

I spy the snowdrop he twirls in his hand in anticipation of giving it to her, and I smile.

Even Gryphon looks up from his brooding, and all the worry lines vanish from his face when he spies the living fairy tale princess in our very own living room.

At least I know he isn't completely broken. I know Gryphon is developing feelings for Mila too.

He's just too stubborn to admit it.

Mila blushes when we all gawp at her for too long, and I truly mean gawp.

We look like a bunch of morons.

Love struck morons.

Mila will definitely steal all the attention tonight, and I can't wait to showcase her on my arm.

Something primal awakens deep inside of me at the very idea of all those Alphas seeing this perfect beauty on my arm,

and once again, I swallow back the growl that's hiding just behind my lips as I approach her, presenting her my arm.

“Ready to go?”

Mila chews her bottom lip, her eyes flitting over to Gryphon quickly.

He no longer gawps at her or me, and it looks as if he has finally given up on complaining.

We're still going to be on time anyway, and it looks as if he was worrying about nothing now after all.

Finally, she takes my hand, and I wrap my fingers around her silken ones, leading her toward the door.

We don't go in the jeep.

Lily hired a limousine in our honor, and that was nice of her.

However, I can't help but feel that she is just doing it to keep track of us.

That woman is up to something, and I don't trust her one bit.

I help Mila into the back of the limousine, sitting by her side the whole ride to the venue.

She's afraid, and she shouldn't be.

She looks gorgeous.

“It's okay, Mila. I will protect you. If anyone has a problem with you, then they can deal with me.”

She giggles nervously, meeting my eyes. “But I'm supposed to be the one protecting you...”

I smile. “Not tonight.”

With that, I take her gloved fingers again, pressing my lips to the silk, sensing her warmth beneath.

Her scent blooms around her, and the back of the limousine smells like gingerbread.

She always smells so sweet, and it makes me wonder at times...

The moment we arrive at the venue, Gryphon goes on high alert, being the first one to climb out of the car.

Normally, he would be the one to escort me into the building, but not tonight.

Tonight, I decided to break protocol and lead Mila into the venue instead.

I’m going to show off my Beta to the world.

Gryphon is not pleased with breaking protocol. His eyes dart around the front of the venue in fear of any pissed-off government officials, but I don’t care...

I’m the Omega of the group, and I’m the one who makes all the rules.

Finally, we step out of the limousine, taking up our places.

Gryphon leads our procession, while Barret and Lachlan take the rear.

Mila and I stay in the middle.

I guide her up the red-carpeted stairs, and then through the wide, double doors and into the spacious foyer.

She grips my hand tightly, and I pull her closer to me, purring softly.

Mila closes her eyes, and I can tell that she is frightened.

After all, she is going against a direct order from her superiors.

She is not wearing her uniform, but screw her superiors.

Screw everyone who isn't a part of this pack.

Mila *is* pack now.

I have decided to claim her as my mate, and I don't care what Gryphon thinks.

We arrive at the main door that leads into the ballroom, and this is it.

All eyes will be on our pack.

But if things go my way, they will all be on Mila.

“You ready, Mila?”

I peer down at her. Even in heels, she is shorter than me, and it fills me with pride.

A man should always be taller than his date...

She shakes her head. “No.”

I chuckle, squeezing her hand. “That's okay. You're going to knock them all dead...”

She laughs, and now we wait until they announce our arrival.

“Pack Hart!”

With a deep breath, I step into the ballroom with my beautiful Beta on my arm.

It seemed I anticipated right.

No one even looks at me. The Omega.

They only see Mila.

I smile in victory. Just as I hoped...

Mila is the belle of the ball.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Mila

I grip Oliver's arm tightly, holding on to him as if my life depends on it.

This was a bad idea. I don't like this, and I have to turn back now and change into something appropriate.

The whole room is looking at me. Not Oliver, but me. The Beta.

Everything spins, and the room soon becomes a whirling mass of lights. I think I am going to pass out.

Luckily, my prince charming keeps me upright, and then he whispers close, his breath teasing the shell of my ear.

"You can do this, Mila... I won't let any one of those vultures get to you, I promise. This night is all about you... like every night should be..."

I squeeze my eyes, hoping I don't ruin my makeup.

Finally, I glance up, catching sight of my reflection in a glass door.

I don't even look like myself anymore, and truth be told...

It terrifies me. Not because I look different. But because I finally recognize myself.

The girl who stares back at me in the beautiful ballgown was who I was always supposed to be.

Not some soldier who was trained to protect, but someone who was meant to be cherished, and protected.

Someone who could draw the eye of every person in a room.

All eyes are on me, and I am not used to the attention. It truly is like entering a vulture's nest.

Most of those eyes are vicious and unforgiving. I spy several Omegas, looking me up and down inside the arms of their Alphas.

They know what I am, and they don't like it.

They hate that a Beta is getting more attention than they are, and in turn, their Alphas bare their teeth at me because I am upsetting their Omegas.

Worst of all, are the eyes of the top brass.

All the governors regard me with contempt.

Governor Lily stares at me with ire. Her knuckles turn white around the handle of her champagne flute, and if she's not careful, the glass will shatter and ruin her pretty baby pink dress.

Baby pink isn't really her color, but the Alpha always insists on wearing some variation of the color.

As if to emphasize how tough she truly is.

Pink makes her stand out. Pink contrasts with her sheer brute strength, almost putting her enemies at ease who may take her for granted.

As if anyone could take that woman for granted.

Right now, she looks as if she wants to eviscerate me. Gryphon especially.

Oliver's Alpha shines with sweat. It glistens on his forehead, catching the light of the chandeliers as he looks at everything but Governor Lily.

Instead, he leads us into the room, a nervous tic in his jaw as he marches forward.

Oliver guides me into the room, and I almost feel like I am floating across the ground in my dress.

Lachlan and Barret step in line after us, and now whispers echo through the ballroom as they watch me and Oliver.

Why has Pack Hart's Omega put his Beta in a sparkly dress?

Why is he giving her all the attention?

Surely, he can't be in his right mind...?

Oh, but he is.

Oliver wants this to be my night. He feels that I should be seen rather than blending into the background like my fellow Betas.

I spot some of my old classmates with their respective packs, their expressions neutral as they don't break protocol.

Instead, they keep a fair distance from their assigned Omegas, ensuring their safety throughout the night.

That could have been me tonight. In fact, that should have been me...

This is all wrong.

It's not too late to turn back and change into my uniform.

I just hope I am not punished for this.

Oliver said he would protect me. That the brass wouldn't dare go near me while I hang onto his arm.

For that reason, I cannot leave his side all night.

I may be trained in battle, but there is no way I would be able to go up against all these enemies.

There's just too many of them.

"Would you like a drink, Mila?" Oliver asks, and I wet my lips with my tongue.

"Yeah... a drink may help..."

My mouth is too dry.

He eyes me up and down appreciatively, giving me a delightful smile.

I focus on his dimples. They put me at ease, and I sigh, smiling back up at him.

"You really do look lovely tonight. Look at the way they all *glare* at you..."

We gaze toward a gaggle of gossipy Omegas. All female, and all vicious.

I recognize one of them from the selection. Her Alpha had stood in front of her, keeping her from my line of sight.

That same Alpha looms above her, and when he sees me looking at his Omega again, he snarls.

Luckily, Lachlan notices the exchange between us, settling his ice-blue eyes on the other Alpha.

The other Alpha loses all his bravado, and now he grabs his Omega, tugging her away.

No one can beat Lachlan in a staring match. I've seen the guy...

Sometimes, he doesn't blink.

Lachlan grins down at me, reaching across to stroke the petals of the snowdrop he tucked behind my ear earlier.

“He won't ever be a problem for you ever again, snowdrop. If he gives you trouble, I will dice him up *and* his Omega for you...”

His eyes flash, and how sweet... If not incredibly disturbing...

I would rather he didn't cut people up for me, thank you. Though I appreciate his offer.

My head whips about the room, and I only just realized that Gryphon is missing.

Where could he have gone?

“Wait, where’s Gryphon?” I ask, searching the crowd.

I’m actually concerned, and I don’t know why. Considering the Alpha has been nothing but rude to me since I arrived.

I am a threat to his happiness.

I also kind of stole away his Omega...

That was probably why the Alpha from earlier blocked my view of his precious Omega.

I have myself a reputation now: The Omega stealer...

Oliver shrugs, only having eyes for me. “Probably gone off to wallow somewhere. Who could blame him? Look at you... he’s probably jealous...”

“Yeah, but he’s your Alpha. He... wait... do you mean jealous of me or you?”

Barret smirks, showcasing that one dimple. “Why do you think he hates you so much?”

I shake my head, confused. “Because I stole his Omega? Took his place in the nest?”

Barret doesn’t say anything, he just shakes his head. Lachlan wears a stupid grin on his crazy face as usual.

Oliver chuckles, pulling me closer. His lips brush my cheek, and I shudder. “He likes you, Mila. Just as much as any of us do...”

No, that can’t be right.

Gryphon hates me because I stole Oliver. Not because he likes me, too.

My cheeks blush, and I peer down at the floor. “So... you *all* like me?”

Oliver nods, affirming my question. “We more than just like you, Mila...”

My heart thunders, and suddenly my vision tunnels and I almost pass out again.

That champagne couldn't come soon enough.

As if reading my mind, Lachlan snatches a flute from a passing server and hands me my champagne. I down it in one go, and all three guys watch me impressed.

Lachlan peeps, and grabs me another. Barret has to stop him by the third.

“But she looks so pretty when she's binge drinking...”

Barret snarls. “Getting her drunk won't help, Lachlan. There are enough eyes on her already...”

He's right. I shouldn't have even drank one champagne flute.

I am supposed to be on duty!

If the brass decides to react, then I could be in deep trouble.

My dad could lose his house. His care.

Oliver seems to sense where my thoughts have gone, and he grabs my cheek. “Mila... nothing will happen to you. I will keep you safe. I promised you...”

His voice reassures me, but when I spy the glare in Governor Lily's eyes, I am not so sure.

I don't care what they do to me. I just hope they don't take it out on my father.

He is innocent in all this.

I feel another set of eyes, and I peer up, my blood running cold when I spot Governor Frederick.

He raises his flute to me in salutations, almost as if congratulating me.

After all, I was only acting on his orders. If there is going to be anyone who protects me, then it will be him...

Governor Lily can't touch me, so long as Governor Fredrick is around.

Forever his little pawn.

He was the one who told me to get close to this pack, and Oliver especially.

My heart skips on the back of my tongue, and the room spins again.

What have I done?

I have a bad feeling in my gut. It weighs me down, and I grab my head, wishing that the room would stop swaying.

My body feels flush and tight in the bodice, and my perfume spikes.

Oliver grips my cheek. "Mila?"

I look up into his ocean-blue eyes. So full of concern for me, and my heart can't take it.

I had no idea what I signed up for when Governor Frederick asked me to his office that day, but it couldn't have been good.

No wonder Gryphon hates me.

I only became what he feared in the end.

What kind of danger have I put Oliver in with the Beta governor?

The Omega leads me across the room, finding me a seat, and now he stays by my side.

The music changes, and it looks as if the Alphas are going to have their first dance with their Omegas.

Yet Oliver doesn't move for the floor. He remains by my side.

“You should go and dance with your Alphas, Oliver...”

He scoffs. “And leave you alone? No chance, Mila.”

“Ditto,” Lachlan replies, kneeling down on the floor beside me.

Barret stands on my other side.

So, are none of them going to take Oliver for a dance? They are his Alphas...

They should want to show him off.

Instead, they stay by my side, waiting while my wooziness passes.

Maybe then, they will take him to the dance floor.

And I will have no choice but to remain on the sidelines.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Gryphon

I step out of the ballroom for some fresh air, rounding a corner with a marbled statue when I come face to face with Governor Lily.

I freeze, my face heating up as I stand straight, showing my superior the respect and reverence that she deserves.

The Alpha doesn't smile at me or acknowledge my show of respect. She just keeps those shrewd, black eyes on me, piercing through my armor and straight into my heart.

Does she see how it beats for Mila?

Fuck, I am in deep, deep shit.

"Hello, Gryphon," she greets, her voice monotonous, devoid of emotion.

She stands with her arms crossed, tapping her long fingernails slowly against her skin.

I still don't meet her eyes; I will only look when she gives me permission.

“Look at me, Gryphon...”

My mouth dry, I slowly lift my head, meeting her jewel-back eyes. My heart thumps twice as fast.

I wouldn't be surprised if she could hear it.

An Alpha like her, she probably could.

Lily narrows her eyes. “Do you know why I have cornered you like this, Gryphon?”

I try to keep my expression neutral as I swallow, conscious of the way her eyes follow the movement of my throat.

This woman can see every nervous tick and every drop of sweat, and I know this is it...

My final warning.

She steps closer, and my back goes ramrod straight of its own accord.

The woman doesn't even have to utter a breath. My Alpha just recognizes her as his dominant.

“Pray tell, Gryphon... why is your Beta walking arm in arm with your Omega, as if she is a part of the pack?”

My face remains a mask of stone as I answer my superior's question. I wet my lips, another nervous trait her cruel eyes pick up on.

“Because...”

My throat closes in fear, and I am left tongue-tied in her mighty presence.

My body doesn't know whether to run or to fight. Considering both options would not end well for me, I decide to stand still.

"Go on," she coaxes gently, her voice like poison honey.

Lulling me into a false sense of security.

I'm pretty sure my balls shrink back into my scrotum as Lily's dominant scent overwhelms me, the scent of rotten flowers.

I am a dead Alpha.

"B-because... Oliver..."

She arches a plucked eyebrow. "Does your Omega make all the rules now, Gryphon?"

When did he never?

I have never exerted that kind of dominance over Oliver. Our relationship was always built on trust.

The only time I ever abused my position was when I used my bark on him, and our bond has never been the same since.

I will never do that to him ever again. I care about Oliver too much, and I respect his autonomy and his right to make his own choices.

Alphas like Lily never would.

They revel in such power.

I'm not sure how to answer her.

It seems my silence isn't enough. In a flash, she swipes out, raking her claws down my left cheek. Then she shoves me hard against the wall, knocking the breath from my lungs.

She holds me in place with just her thigh and her hand alone.

That hand is currently placed on my chest, feeling the frantic organ pounding beneath. I try my damn best to keep my breaths even, but when she curls her fingers around my neck, I can't help it.

I shiver, and I have never been more ashamed to call myself Alpha.

I could fight her back, but I know I would lose.

Lily is just too powerful.

The way she has me on a tight leash. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.

“I have warned you several times about that Beta... yet you disobeyed me again and again, letting her walk all over you and your pack. Now because of you, an enemy has infiltrated our defenses... all just because you can't keep your Omega in check!”

Warm blood trickles down my left cheek where she scratched the skin, but I have no time to tend to the wound.

Not when she has her fingers around my neck like the jaws of a viper.

She applies a little more pressure, and the woman delights in the stuttered sounds I make as I struggle for air.

My vision darkens, and I think she is truly going to kill me.

I just hope Oliver will be okay without me. I never got to tell him I was sorry. Not really...

I never should have used my bark on him.

My vision tunnels, zeroing in on the madwoman before me as she prepares to squeeze the life from me.

My heart pounds inside my skull.

Finally, she leans closer, and our lips are mere inches away from a kiss.

A kiss of death.

Lily brushes her cheek softly against mine, marking me with her scent as she goes to whisper in my ear.

My muscles seize up, and I have lost the ability to move my limbs.

“This is your final warning... If you ignore me once again, Gryphon... then you are finished...”

I don't have to ask twice what she means by finished.

She will kill me. Right in front of Oliver.

She removes her hands from me, and I don't move. My back remains plastered to the wall, my heart racing a mile a second.

Lily gives me one last look over, her expression indicating that she finds me extremely wanting.

Every inch of me is covered in sweat, and the more she stares, the hotter I become.

With one final snort, she gives me her back, trusting that a pathetic Alpha like me would never fight her.

I'm nothing but a lowly coward...

And if I don't buck up soon, then I will lose more than my life.

I will lose Oliver.

My perfect, perfect Oliver...

The moment she vanishes down the hall, I release the breath from my lungs and slide down the wall. Then I reach up a trembling hand, and my fingers come away with blood.

Her claws went in deep. Not enough to leave a scar, but enough to leave a message.

Don't disobey me again.

What am I going to do?

It's hopeless.

Truly hopeless.

One thing I know for certain.

Mila has to go. I am finally putting my foot down.

I just hope my pack will forgive me one day.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Mila

Gryphon is still MIA, and none of the guys seem worried about him in the slightest.

Meanwhile, I am worried sick.

Where did that broody Alpha wander off to?

Omegas waltz around the dance floor with their Alphas, and despite the merriment in the air, I am tense.

My perfume spikes every now and then, and my skin is hot to the touch.

Plus, all eyes are on me. Even the dancing Omegas and Alphas turn their gazes my way, and I wish I had worn my Beta's soldier's uniform in the end so I could blend into the background, unnoticed.

My eyes land on a familiar, sour-faced Beta, and I recognize Heather immediately.

The look she gives me next could set me ablaze.

I spot her partner in crime, Jason, not too far off, standing guard over another pack.

So, those two idiots found a pack in the end... I'm surprised they were picked during the selection.

They were pretty incompetent during training, and Instructor Horace was nearly blue in the face whenever he had to drill one of them.

They hate me even more than they did during training. That's because I broke protocol by turning up to the Governor's Ball in a big blue dress.

Betas aren't meant to be seen after all. They are meant to blend into the background, where they are not a bother to anyone else.

At least Governor Lily has disappeared.

Just around the same time as Gryphon did, funnily enough.

My heart pounds in fear, and I worry for the Alpha who has been nothing but a jerk to me from the moment I arrived into his life.

Just as my imagination gets the better of me, Governor Lily steps out of an alcove, not a single hair out of place, her baby-pink dress perfectly clean.

People clear a space for her, and now she circles the edge of the room, her eyes razor sharp like a hawk's.

They land on me, and my body goes inside out as her cruel eyes lay me bare, exposing me for what I truly am.

An incompetent soldier, and a threat.

That gaze only promises me great suffering, and I peer away, my throat swelling up in fear.

My scent must spike again because Oliver looks down at me. He hasn't left my side.

Lachlan and Barret left to get us drinks.

“Mila? Are you okay?”

He places his hand on my shoulder, putting me at ease, and I gulp deep breaths, gazing up at him through my eyelashes.

Governor Lily has vanished, and I thank whatever God or Goddess heeded my prayers.

“I... I'm fine, Oliver.”

The Omega squeezes my shoulder, letting me know that he has my back and he will protect me.

But could he protect me from Lily?

The only person in this room who can protect me from that woman Alpha's wrath is Governor Frederick, who currently eyeballs all the beautiful Omegas on the dance floor, licking his dry lips.

He makes me want to throw up.

The Alphas glare at him, but that's all they can do. The man is untouchable, and soon he will have his way.

Soon, all packs will be placed with one of his soldiers, and to say that things are tense would be the biggest understatement of the century.

The air is so thick with animosity, that it stings the back of my throat, making my eyes water.

Every Alpha protects their Omega, and I spy the way Jason's pack snaps their teeth at him whenever he looks at their little blonde, blue-eyed Omega.

The Alphas don't want us here.

But they have no choice because Governor Frederick has all the power.

Even Governor Lily has to bow down to him, and the Alpha is not happy.

I have a bad feeling in my stomach.

Why did I have to wear this poofy blue dress? I stick out like a sore thumb.

All my thoughts dissipate when I spy a familiar, brooding shape stepping out of the alcove where Lily just appeared, and my heart cleaves in two when I spy the three red marks on his cheek.

"Oliver, Gryphon is hurt!"

Alarmed, Oliver whirls his head around, and his skin pales when he sees the state his Alpha is in.

"What the...?"

Neither of us can move as the Alpha makes his way toward us, and it's worse than I realize.

A strong, overpowering scent of dead flowers wafts from his suit, and I cover my nose with my gloved hand.

I know that cloying, sickly scent.

It belongs to Governor Lily.

The Alpha nods his head at Oliver, completely ignoring me.

Oliver is speechless, and automatically, he steps toward his Alpha, checking his wound.

The Omega may be mad at him, but Gryphon is still his Alpha.

“Gryphon, what the hell happened to you?” he whispers, gripping his Alpha’s cheek.

The Alpha doesn’t flinch from his touch. He merely closes his eyes, all the tension leaving his shoulders.

Oliver growls, actually growls, like a beast, and I gasp.

“Who did this to you? Tell me?”

His eyes still closed, Gryphon shakes his head, gripping the Omega’s wrist. He places a soft kiss on the inside of his hand, and despite how furious he is, Oliver shudders.

“I... I am fine, Oliver...”

Oliver’s eyes flash, and then he leans in closer to Gryphon, sniffing his suit. He hisses.

“Did Lily do this to you?”

Gryphon flattens his lips, and I spy the nervous tic in his jaw.

It only confirms my fears. That deplorable woman did hurt him.

All because of me...

My guilt feels like lead in my chest, and it weighs me down, making it hard to swallow.

I really am tearing this pack apart. Because of what I represent.

I can't do this to them anymore.

“Gryphon, answer me...” Oliver growls.

The Alpha sighs, and his eyes burn a soft burgundy when they settle on his Omega.

“It doesn't matter now, Oliver...”

Oliver bares his teeth. “Like hell it doesn't!”

His yell catches the attention of a few packs, and anxiety claws at my lungs. I'm afraid. Afraid for Oliver...

I don't want him to go after Lily.

She would kill him.

“Oliver, stay calm... I'm sure it was just a simple misunderstanding...” I say, hoping he will listen.

Oliver doesn't hear me. He only has murder in his eyes as they trail across the room, finding that woman in that ridiculous baby-pink dress that contradicts with her muscular, Alpha frame.

“No, it was not,” Oliver replies, his eyes gleaming as they focus on Lily.

Lily sees his challenge, but she doesn't take him up on it. Instead, she circles the room, pretending as if the Omega doesn't exist.

Either she is merely indulging him or she just doesn't deem him worthy enough of attention.

I don't care. I'm just grateful she didn't take him up on the challenge.

We'd all be dead trying to protect him.

"This isn't over, Gryphon..." Oliver rumbles.

Gryphon doesn't hear him. The Alpha just purrs as he thrives on all the attention from his Omega.

The poor thing has been starved of his Omega's attention these last few days.

Finally, Lachlan and Barret arrive with our drinks. Gryphon growls, snatching the drink from Barret's hand before he can pass it to Oliver.

He samples a taste, then deems it appropriate enough before he hands it to Oliver.

He doesn't check my drink.

Lachlan does me the honor instead. He takes a small sip of my drink, and his blue eyes don't leave me the whole time.

My cheeks burn.

"All safe, snowdrop..."

The Alpha hands me the drink.

I utter my thanks, taking a leisurely sip. It's only sparkling water.

I wouldn't dare drink alcohol again.

Gryphon snaps at Lachlan. “Don’t call her that...”

The blond Alpha raises a fair eyebrow. “Call her what?”

Gryphon’s eyes burn red. “You know what...”

Lachlan feigns ignorance next, shrugging like a careless villain. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Gryphon.”

Gryphon bares his teeth, and then his gaze snaps to me.

Once again, I only meet hatred inside those burgundy eyes.

I’m the reason why he has those three scratches.

They glisten under the lights of the chandelier, and I resist the urge to reach across and tend to his wounds.

He’s still bleeding. It doesn’t look as if he managed to clean the scratches properly, but they don’t look deep enough to scar.

I have a feeling though that Lily’s next strike will be more permanent, and again, the guilt weighs heavy in my chest.

All my fault.

All my fault...

Oliver finally loses all sympathy for Gryphon, and now he goes back to being mad at him as he returns all his attention to me.

I don’t miss the hurt in Gryphon’s eyes nor the hatred.

From the start, I have done nothing but steal his Omega’s affections.

His feelings for me are very justified.

Oliver weaves his fingers with mine, and now he pulls me to the dance floor.

“Come on, Mila...”

I shake my head, digging my heels into the ground. “No, no, no, I can’t dance!”

“Yes, you can. I can dance with whomever I choose, and Mila... I choose you...”

Me, but not Gryphon or any of his Alphas.

This is bad, very bad.

All eyes will be on us.

Oliver weaves through the crowd of dancers. I sense several Alphas growling at me as I pass too close to their Omegas, but then Oliver shows them his gleaming teeth, and they step back.

I don’t think they were expecting an Omega to show his teeth. The Alphas simply don’t know what to do with him.

Most Omegas are submissive in our society.

“Ignore them, and ignore that bitch over there too,” Oliver growls when he spies the Omega glaring at me several feet away.

It’s the same Omega from the selection ceremony. The one who smirked at me because she knew exactly what I was thinking. She knew that I was jealous of her and her pack of Alphas.

She knew I wanted what she had, and she was rubbing it in.

But now... she looks pissed.

After all, this dance floor is for Alphas and Omegas.

A Beta has no place here.

Oliver threads his fingers with mine, tugging me close. He keeps his gaze on the other Omega.

“Seriously, whore, fuck off!”

Her Alpha comes to her aid, but then Gryphon is there in a flash, blocking his way.

The other Alpha stumbles and his Omega nearly goes flying backwards. Luckily for her, one of her other Alphas catches her, pushing her upright again.

Gryphon is fast.

He’s protecting Oliver though, not me... But then I’m surprised when he breathes, “Stay away from them...”

The Alpha backs away, yanking his Omega close. Then the whole pack scurries off the dancefloor, leaving room for Oliver and me to dance.

Good. The dancefloor was getting a little crowded.

Gryphon keeps his back on us. Meanwhile, Oliver holds me close.

“Thanks, Gryphon...” he mutters.

I sense the surprise in his voice. It’s the least I expected him to do too.

Finally, Gryphon turns, and his eyes fall on me. They're not as hard as they were before.

In fact, they look... sad. Full of regret.

He regards us both, hand in hand, preparing to waltz around the dance floor.

The Alpha knows it then. There is no stopping us now.

There is no stopping his Omega...

So, he lets us dance.

"I'll be over here..." he moves off, finding a place to stand on the sideline.

He takes up a space on the same wall as a Beta soldier. Someone I don't recognize.

Now Gryphon is the one protecting us.

The Alpha takes up the place that should have been mine...

It's not right.

Oliver smiles lightly at his Alpha, and now his beautiful blue eyes fall on me. His dimples deepen, and my heart trembles.

"Ready, Mila? This is your moment after all... wow them all..."

Please. As if I could wow anyone with Oliver around.

But I keep the thought to myself, pressing up close, and now I return his smile, craning my neck to gaze into those eyes.

"Yes."

A devilish smirk, and without warning, Oliver whirls me around the room, never missing a beat.

My chest loops, and despite my two left feet, Oliver manages to move us around the floor with ease, and I feel like I am floating.

It's obvious he has had dance lessons.

Meanwhile, I am more trained in battle.

I have never danced in my life. Not even in front of my mirror as a kid.

I never dared to let myself dream...

He presses me flush to his chest, breathing in my hair as he still twirls us around, and how does he not miss a step?

His heart beats close to mine, and I shut my eyes, losing myself to the dance and the music.

I feel like I am in a fairytale.

The moving pieces in a music box...

The way we spin and spin, like no one else is in the room.

Like no one else matters.

The dance floor is empty, and it seems everyone has cleared a path for us.

Now we have the whole room spellbound.

I tense up in his arms. "Everyone is looking at us..."

Oliver still keeps me close, running his hand smoothly up my back. A shudder trills up my spine.

“No, Mila... they are looking at *you*...”

My heart pounds, and I squeeze my eyes shut, just losing myself to the music, to Oliver...

All I can smell is his honeycomb, all I can feel is the fine spray of ocean waves as he never stops moving around the dance floor.

“Mila...”

I suck in a trembling breath. “Yes.”

“I... think I am falling in love with you...”

And the world comes screeching to a halt.

But we never stop. Oliver never allows me to.

No one has ever taken the lead in my life...

No one has ever swept me off my feet.

“Oh...” is all I can say, tears pricking the back of my eyes.

“Shh, don’t cry now, just dance. I promise... I will take care of you. We all will, Mila... even Gryphon...”

I bite my lip, holding back a sob.

“You were meant to be protected, Mila... and I *will* protect you... and make you *mine*...”

The word shoots down my back, settling in the core of my spine. I don’t think.

I just... be...

Somewhere at the back of my mind, a voice tells me that this is wrong.

I cannot let them all fall for me. Especially Oliver...

He is the most vulnerable of the pack.

Governor Frederick has plans for him. I don't know what those plans will entail, but all I know is that it is not safe for him to be around me.

I... I must leave...

Before midnight.

I guess the night truly is becoming more and more like a fairytale...

A blast goes off, and Oliver flips me around, shielding me from the attack. Then he stills, his eyes wide as they fall on me.

Someone shot at us.

"Oliver?" I whisper.

He's gone into shock, and his eyes don't see me anymore. Then he loses consciousness.

My world comes crashing down.

Oliver just took a bullet for me.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Barret

Chaos.

That's the only way to describe the commotion that follows straight after the gun goes off, and now everything moves in slow motion.

Oliver. Mila...

I have to protect them.

Security rushes past me, apprehending the one who fired the gun, but I don't stop or dwell.

I shove the crowd aside as I rush forward, a bad feeling deep in the pits of my stomach. Lachlan is right by my side, flinging people out of his way.

My heart is pounding through my ears.

Please, let them be okay.

When I reach them, a strangled sound escapes my lungs. Lachlan skids to a halt beside me, his face pale with dread.

Our Omega lays in Mila's arms. Alive, but wounded.

Blood pours from his right shoulder.

No vital organs, thank goodness, but he is still hurt.

Oliver. My Oliver...

And Mila.

She appears to be okay.

“What the hell is going on?” a familiar voice roars close by, and I barely register the familiar scent of Gryphon as he stops beside me, all the blood draining from his face.

“Oliver...” he whispers.

I don't move. Lachlan is frozen beside me.

Gryphon growls, and then he pushes me aside, rushing to Oliver's side.

All I can do is stand in total shock, and some Alpha I am.

Lachlan still hasn't come to life yet. It seems we are both numb with shock.

“Move!” Gryphon snaps, trying to drag Mila away, but she growls at him.

“Don't fucking touch him!” she shrieks.

Finally, she looks up. It appears she has created a tourniquet with a piece of her dress, and my heart plunges.

Oliver got her that dress. And now Mila uses it to stanch his bleeding.

She barely seems to realize that she just screamed at Gryphon — an Alpha. All she cares about is protecting our

Omega.

Meanwhile, Lachlan and I just stare in shock, completely useless.

And we call ourselves soldiers...

I was trained for moments like this. But it's different when it's someone you love.

Mila bares her teeth at Gryphon, and something has come over her. The Alpha goes numb with shock, and it looks like he has joined the useless club.

Maybe that is why I couldn't come another step closer. My Alpha must have sensed the protective energy coming from the Beta.

Someone called for help. Sirens sound outside, and now paramedics rush into the room, laying my Omega onto a stretcher.

That's when I snap back to life.

"Where are you taking him?"

A paramedic looks up. A woman. "Stay back, sir."

"No, that is my Omega!"

The woman barely flinches when I tell her that fact, and I suppose she is doing her job. Oliver's life is on the line, and he needs surgery immediately to remove the bullet from his shoulder.

He's lucky to be alive...

Mila pines for Oliver when they load him onto the back of an ambulance, and she and Gryphon fight about who gets to go into the vehicle with him.

In the end, Gryphon wins. However, she wasn't afraid to look him in the eyes the whole time she challenged him.

She hasn't been since he got shot.

It looks as if Oliver's injury is making her bolder.

She won't take Gryphon's shit anymore.

Oliver is rushed off to the operating room, and Mila won't stop pacing back and forth as we gather in the hospital waiting room.

Gryphon hasn't turned up. We have no idea where he is, and none of us seem to care.

We're too fixated on Oliver.

Lachlan is still a ghost. He hovers in the corner, his back to us as he faces the wall, looking as if he is a schoolboy on time out.

Anxiety and grief do the strangest things to people.

I lounge in the most uncomfortable chair that my ass has ever had the misfortune of sitting on.

You would think they made these seats more comfortable. Considering we could be here for hours...

Mila doesn't even deign herself to sit or face the wall. She just paces, over and over, wearing a groove into the ugly, blue linoleum floor.

The walls are beige. There is a hideous watercolor picture of a kite on the wall. I think it is a kite...

My brain doesn't know what it is seeing.

"What's happening in there, do you think he will be all right? Oh, God..."

Mila finally stops pacing, crouching down on the floor. In her big blue dress, she looks like a cupcake, and it's a stupid thought to have when one's mate is having surgery to remove a bullet from his flesh.

But I smile. Even though I shouldn't.

What is right or wrong in this situation? Grief is weird...

Fear is weird.

I get up off the floor, approaching her side. It seems I have come out of my own body long enough to make her feel better. I felt trapped for a moment.

Only hearing my own dreary thoughts.

I kneel down with her, taking her shoulders. Despite myself, I purr for her. "Come now, Mila... it will be fine..."

She covers her face, shaking her head back and forth. Her beautiful updo hair falls around her shoulders.

"It won't. This is all my fault. Because of me, Oliver is..."

I can't help myself then. A growl tumbles from my lips, and I rip her hands away from her face, staring into her bloodshot eyes.

Her makeup has smudged, and her tears create smears through her foundation, but God, she is still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

I won't have her blaming herself.

Someone shot Oliver. We don't know why yet, but it is not her fault.

"Hey. Don't ever let me hear you say that again..."

My voice is a growl, and I sound like Batman, but I don't care what she or anyone else thinks.

Mila is not the one to blame.

She closes her eyes and tears gush from her lashes. "It is my fault... it's obvious that bullet was meant for me!"

Her shout rebounds off the wall. Meanwhile, I don't move my iron grip from her.

My fingernails are creating crescents on her fair skin.

"We... we don't know that..."

"But we do! Everyone hates me. I'm Frederick's little pet. Gryphon was right from—"

"Fuck that prick. Mila... It. Is. Not. Your. Fault."

Her big, green eyes capture the lights of the waiting room as she gazes straight at me, and I mean every word I say...

“Not your fault. And we will find the one who shot Oliver and protect you both. You may not like to hear this, but you are a part of this pack now...”

Her eyes widen, and stray tears slip down her cheeks. I wipe them away.

“So, please... don't blame yourself...”

I don't know what happens next. One moment, she's looking at me, and then the next her face contorts as she wraps her arms around me, burying her face into my neck.

Her sobs fill the waiting room. All I can do is place my arms around her and purr while she cries in my arms.

She may be able to skin a rabbit, but she is still vulnerable. This little Beta...

It feels good to comfort someone else when I am dying inside myself. It takes my mind off my own fear and grief.

Makes me feel useful.

Lachlan finally comes away from the wall, and he joins me in comforting Mila.

The poor thing shakes with sobs, and my heart breaks just hearing the anguished sounds coming from her mouth.

Who could want to hurt this thing? She's so small, and I swear I will visit the shooter in prison myself and blast a bullet through his head.

Who was he working for? Or was he acting on his own?

We will find out. Just after Oliver pulls through.

For now, all we can do is wait.

Until then, I will comfort my Omega's Beta.

Chapter Forty

Mila

I wake to the smell of roasted marshmallows, opening my eyes to find Gryphon looming over me.

Barret and Lachlan made me a makeshift bed in the hospital waiting room. They put together two chairs so I could get some rest for the long night, but I hardly slept a wink.

The Alphas slept on the floor, sacrificing the chairs for me, and it warms my heart.

They care so much about making me feel happy and safe. Even though I don't deserve their consideration.

Why aren't they mad at me? Their Omega is in this mess because of me...

They should despise me, yet they only show me kindness.

However, when I gaze up at Gryphon, I find the anger that I crave.

The anger that is rightfully justified.

I can always count on Gryphon to make me feel special.

I jerk awake, wiping the drool from my lips. The chairs groan beneath me.

“Oliver...” is all I get out.

Gryphon snarls, baring his teeth. “Is alive... barely... no thanks to you...”

His hatred for me is palatable, I can almost taste it on my tongue. But I find myself gazing straight into his fiery eyes.

My fists curl.

I know that I already blamed myself for Oliver’s condition, but there’s just something about Gryphon’s tone that gets my goat.

Who does he think he is?

He isn’t the only one here who cares about Oliver...

We all do.

Gryphon’s nostrils flare, and it’s taking a lot of his strength to rein that anger in.

I am prepared for his ire.

Lily’s scratches still mar his tanned cheek, and I can’t believe I had been so worried about him last night.

The Alpha is an ass, and it’s clear we are never going to see eye to eye.

The only thing we have in common is Oliver.

The Omega may not be my mate, but I have a feeling that won’t be a problem here.

Oliver may never be able to give me his bite, but I'll always still be his...

I will never leave his side ever again. Not after what he did for me.

So, Gryphon is going to have to get used to having me around, and his superior, Lily, too.

I'm not afraid of either of them.

"You have to leave," Gryphon says. "This is the final straw now, Mila... no more. You will have to be allocated to another pack."

"No. I'm not going anywhere..."

The Alpha stops short, balling his fists. His lips press into a tight line, turning them white. There is blood on his shirt.

I still have Oliver's blood on the dress that he bought for me.

All he had wanted to do was give me one night where I could feel special. And he only got caught in the crossfire of whoever has it out for me.

It's obvious someone had hired that gunman to kill me.

Thankfully, Barret stirs on the floor, gazing up bleary-eyed at Gryphon. Then he jumps up to his feet, kicking Lachlan awake in the process.

"Gryphon... where the fuck have you been... Oliver...?"

"Is alive..." Gryphon answers, never taking his burgundy gaze off me.

He is trying to get me to back down.

But I will never back down.

Barret pauses, his head snapping back and forth between us. Then his eyes darken, and he steps in front of me, protecting me just like Oliver did.

My heart skips a beat.

“Back away, Gryphon...”

Lachlan joins his side, and now Oliver’s two other Alphas protect me from the asshole.

Gryphon keeps a firm stance. “Step aside, Barret. This is between me and Mila...”

“No,” Lachlan replies. “You do not hurt Snowdrop...”

Gryphon growls. “Don’t call her that.”

I roll my eyes, pushing between Barret and Lachlan as I face Gryphon head-on. He steps back, clearly sensing the threat.

I recall holding onto Oliver when he was bleeding, not letting anyone get near him.

Not even Gryphon and the Alpha had clearly got the message.

Oliver is *mine*...

“Look, we can discuss this later. Right now, let’s focus on Oliver. He is injured and we need to be there for him. All of us.”

The Alpha doesn’t take his eyes off me, but they do soften when I mention his Omega.

It's clear he loves him, and I can't let myself forget that.

We have a common interest here, and I can work with that. Albeit begrudgingly.

This Alpha has stepped on my toes way too many times.

There comes a cough from the door of the waiting room, and we all turn our heads.

There's a doctor standing there, and my heart thumps so loud, I think I am going to pass out.

His scrubs are covered in blood.

Oliver's blood.

There was a lot of it after all...

The man nods his head, a tired smile on his face, and we all let out a collective breath.

Lachlan cries, holding on to Barret, and the Alpha pats his back.

I pass out on the nearest chair, thanking whatever God may hear me.

It's clear they answered my prayers, and I will be eternally grateful.

Oliver pulled through.

Everyone makes a fuss around the Omega as he lays in bed.

The paramedics had arrived on time, enough to get Oliver to the hospital so he could get emergency surgery.

Gryphon barks at the nurse, demanding an extra pillow for his precious Omega, and the poor thing runs out of the room terrified.

We get it. He is an Alpha, and his Omega is recovering from a gunshot to the upper arm, but that's no excuse to be an ass.

The Alpha hasn't looked at me since our conversation in the waiting room.

He knows there is nothing he can do to keep me away.

I am staying, and my decision is final.

When Oliver asks to be left alone with me, Gryphon protests at first. But then he gives in and leaves with the others.

His gaze flits to me briefly in warning, but I give him my back, focusing all my attention on Oliver.

He is the only one who matters right now.

"Mila," he whispers, his voice weak, but he still finds the strength to reach his hand across the bed and grasp my fingers.

I squeeze his hand tightly, tears building up in my eyes. All I can get out is, "Why?"

Silence. Except for the whirring of the machines.

Oliver's heart monitor is steady but strong.

"You know why..."

Finally, I meet his ocean-blue eyes.

I can't help myself next. I burst into tears, throwing my arms around him. He winces in pain at first, but then he chuckles, offering me a soothing Omega purr as he rubs my back, making me feel safe.

“I'm... so glad you're safe, Oliver...”

“And I'm glad you are, Mila. I don't regret what I did. I would take a thousand bullets for you... it's time someone protected you too.”

I sob, holding him tighter, and that's how we stay.

I know it deep in my heart then. I am never leaving this Omega.

Not after what he sacrificed for me.

Oliver is mine.

Chapter Forty-One

Lachlan

Oliver is discharged a week later, and finally, we can all put this horrible nightmare behind us.

Best of all, Mila will be staying with us forever...

She promised she would stay with us, and it looks like we get to keep her now after all. Despite Gryphon's wishes.

The Alpha is not happy, one bit. And instead of celebrating Oliver's miraculous recovery, he decides to brood.

We don't pay him attention. We just focus on Oliver and making him happy again, and if that means having Mila around, so be it.

Besides, Oliver's not the only one who's taken with her. I am too.

I keep bringing her flowers, and each time her smile grows even bigger and brighter. It's enough to replace the sun in the sky, and my heart never fails to skip a beat.

Gryphon is really missing out. If he just embraced this beauty like the rest of us, then we could all be happy.

I couldn't give two shits what anyone else thinks. It's obvious someone out there has it in for Mila, and I swear, I will protect her with my life.

I will protect her and Oliver.

They are both *mine*...

So, Lily, Gryphon, and everyone else can go and fuck off.

I don't care if she is Beta or Frederick's pawn.

Mila makes our pack whole.

I lean against the frame of the door, smiling at Mila as she tucks Oliver into bed.

The doctor advised that the Omega would need plenty of rest to aid in his recovery. He also gave Oliver a new diet, which he wasn't happy about.

Apparently, the Omega eats too much sugar, and he needs to cut back.

So, that means steamed vegetables from now on.

I can tell the Omega isn't fussed with being treated like a baby.

He is not made of china; we know that. But he is still vulnerable.

It must be the Alpha in me. He can't help but feel the need to protect.

But I also feel partially responsible for why he is in this state to begin with.

I should have been there to protect them both, and I know that Barret and Gryphon feel the same.

What kind of Alphas can't protect their own Omega and his mate?

I'm no fool; it's obvious that Oliver and Mila are mates. It's just sad that Oliver can never give her his bite.

Only Alphas can give bite marks, and my mouth salivates when I imagine sinking my teeth into Mila's neck for him, bringing her into the pack via the bond I share with Oliver.

I'm already connected with Oliver. Right now, I can feel the tug on our bond as he smiles at me from his place on the bed, letting me know that he is comforted and that Mila is seeing to all of his needs.

We have been taking turns looking after him. All of us.

Even Gryphon, but he looks like a sour puss the whole time.

That's because Mila refuses to leave the room, even when it is his turn.

Gryphon's turn is coming up now. I've just finished mine.

But I decide to linger, watching Mila tucking in the bedsheets all around Oliver, whispering him sweet, sweet nothings.

Oliver dotes on her attention. Omegas love to be spoiled. Even if Oliver likes to deny it at times, some part of him is

loving this.

I mean, who wouldn't want Nurse Mila tending to them twenty-four-seven? She even gave him a sponge bath the other day and no fair...

I want a sponge bath.

“Do you want me to fluff up your pillow again?” she asks.

Oliver smiles up at her tiredly, and my heart wrenches.

He truly is vulnerable.

Seeing someone you love in such a horrific state is traumatising, and I don't think I will ever get the image of him lying in Mila's arms out of my mind.

When I drift off at night, I can still see him covered in blood.

My fists curl.

I'm just glad they arrested the shooter.

Because I would have gladly gone to prison myself, making that asshole pay for what he did to my Omega.

The shooter may be behind bars, but that doesn't mean we're safe.

Someone hired that shooter to take out Mila. After all, she is Frederick's number one soldier.

When I find the one who orchestrated the attack... I will kill them.

“No, Mila, I'm fine. You go and rest. You haven't stopped once since we got back.”

Mila's eyes flash, and then she takes his cheek in her hand.
"I meant what I said, Oliver... I will not leave your side..."

Tears shine in her eyes, and I watch her strangely.

Does she blame herself too for what happened?

She was not the one at fault. I hope she knows that.

Barret and I don't blame her for what happened to Oliver.

I know why she feels this way, and once I scent his roasted marshmallows coming up behind me, I turn, glaring into his eyes.

Gryphon hikes up a brow, and he has the audacity to look confused.

"Is there something wrong, Lachlan?"

A growl rumbles low in my chest, and Gryphon squares his shoulders, puffing out his chest like a pigeon.

He may be my brethren, but right now, I hate him.

He made my snowdrop feel bad, and I know he hates it when I call her that.

Good.

I block his way into the room, and he doesn't take those red-brown eyes off me.

I always respected him as our self-appointed pack leader, but lately, I have lost a lot of respect for him.

Finally, the Alpha crosses his arms, rolling his eyes.
"Lachlan? If you have something to say, say it..."

The room beyond falls silent, and I feel Oliver and Mila watching us.

We're making Oliver upset, I know it. But I refuse to leave Gryphon alone with Mila...

He will make her feel bad again, and I won't let him.

"You know what," I mutter, folding my own arms.

I still block his entry into the room.

Gryphon narrows his eyes at me in challenge, but he never growls. I am trying his patience, but I couldn't give two shits.

He will not hurt Mila...

Finally, Oliver snaps. "For crying out loud. Lachlan, let him in. It's his turn on the roster."

I can't help but hear the sarcasm in his tone, and again, I feel for my poor Omega.

He hates having to be taken care of. Even if some small part of him enjoys the attention.

Well, at least where Mila is concerned.

I step aside, letting the Alpha into the room at last.

He doesn't even look at Mila. The Beta may as well not exist, and for some reason, that makes me even angrier.

How dare he...

Oliver peers up at Mila. "It's okay, Mila... I will be fine... Gryphon can take over from here."

Mila chews her lip, and my dick jolts when I spy her teeth digging into the plump flesh.

“Are you sure, Oliver? You’re still so poorly...”

He smiles tightly, taking her hand. His grip is feeble.

“It’s okay. You go and get some rest, Mila...”

Mila glances up at Gryphon. Again, he doesn’t meet her gaze, and I resist the urge to storm into the room and punch his nose.

Finally, Mila sighs, and now a yawn stretches her mouth.

She looks so cute when she’s tired.

“All right. But I will be back. I promise...”

She leans down and kisses Oliver on the head. Then she exits the room, momentarily blinding me with her gingerbread scent.

Funny how she smells so sweet.

I glance back over my shoulder. Oliver is in good hands.

I may hate Gryphon right now, but at least I know I can trust him where our Omega is concerned.

So, I follow Mila to her bedroom.

When she reaches the door, she looks up at me, confused.

“Are you okay, Lachlan?”

I put my hands in my pockets, grinning down at her broadly.

She looks as if she doesn’t know what to say.

“I was wondering... if you needed me to sing you to sleep? I have a *beautiful* voice...”

Her grin widens. “I’m sure you do... but save it for Oliver. He needs it right now.”

He does. But so does she.

“But...”

“I will be fine, Lachlan. But thank you for the offer, anyway.”

She reaches out and squeezes my hand, and my heart sings.

Something stirs deep inside me, and I resist the urge to wrap my arms around her, burying my teeth into her neck.

I wouldn’t just bite her for Oliver’s sake. But I would bite her for mine, too.

Mila is going to be mine...

Mine.

She opens the door to her bedroom and vanishes inside. But not before tossing me another sweet smile from over her shoulder.

Even long after she shuts the door, I linger outside her room.

One day... I am going to give that girl my bite.

But until then, I will keep my distance.

Only when she is ready, will I make her a part of the pack.

Chapter Forty-Two

Mila

My phone buzzes, and I roll onto my side, grabbing the annoying device. My eyes pop when I see the time.

It turns out I had slept for over twelve hours.

Shit.

Oliver...

I jump out of bed, checking my hair quickly before I rush out of the room.

I will not have Gryphon hanging this over my head. He will not accuse me of putting my needs before Oliver's first.

The Alpha is doing everything he can to remove me from the picture, but none of his tactics are working.

I meant what I said. I will not leave Oliver. Not after the way he sacrificed himself to protect me.

It's my fault that he is hurt.

So, I need to be there for him.

My phone vibrates again, and I pick it up, gazing at the screen.

Was that not my alarm before?

I slide the screen aside with my thumb, and my heart lurches when I recognize the name of my father's nurse.

“Hello?”

“Mila... it's your dad...”

She goes into detail, and my stomach bottoms out on the floor. The room spins, and I grip the sideboard for balance.

Somehow, I still find the strength to speak. “What... what should I do?”

“I think it's best you come home...”

I knew it would one day come to this. Before Oliver's accident, I would have gladly returned to my dad and taken care of him, but now I am torn.

I can't just leave Oliver...

But my dad needs me too.

I am all the family he has.

It's obvious which choice I have to make. I just hope that Oliver will understand.

Wiping a stray tear from my cheek, I breathe in then say, “All right. I will be back later...”

I just hope I am not too late.

We hang up, and I stare at the wall in silence for some time, my heart shattering to pieces.

I best go and break the news.

This will be painful.

We're all gathered in Oliver's room.

The Omega is barely allowed to leave. Gryphon simply won't let him, and for once, I agree with the moody Alpha...

Oliver needs his rest.

He will recover much quicker if he does.

Being only twenty-seven years of age, he is more likely to recover than say, someone my dad's age.

A blow like that would have killed my dad.

The Omega looks at me with so much trust...

He has no idea I am about to break his heart.

"What is it, Mila?" he asks, concern lacing his silken voice.

Gryphon stands on the other side of his bed, his arms crossed over his chest. He never takes those burgundy eyes off me.

His gaze is challenging. It's almost as if he knows what I am about to do to Oliver, but I have no choice.

My dad needs me more than ever...

Barret and Lachlan watch me carefully too, though they're less judgmental.

Lachlan only regards me with sadness. How someone can be so pure and absolutely batshit insane, I will never know... But that's just Lachlan.

The beautiful psychopath.

Then there is Barret. When we first met, he was a complete asshole. But now, he is a whole different Alpha.

He comforted me at the hospital when Oliver was undergoing surgery, and I will always be grateful.

That Alpha has got my back.

Finally, I take Oliver's hand in my own, and the tears splash from my eyes. They dribble down my cheeks, masking my perfect view of my Omega, and I hate this...

This will be one of the hardest things I will ever have to do.

But I won't be gone forever.

There will come a time again when I can return. And then I promise I will never leave again.

Oliver shuts his eyes. "It's your dad... isn't it?"

My sob echoes through the room, and the Omega, despite his injuries, shuffles along the bed, wrapping me up in his arms.

"Oliver, your wounds..." Gryphon fusses, but as always, his Omega ignores him.

"Will be fine, Gryphon. Trust me. I am going to make it. I'm a young, fit Omega in his prime... not everyone gets to be so lucky..."

I cry against his chest, breathing in his honeycomb scent.

He's referring to my father, and I truly don't deserve him.

Oliver is too pure for this cruel world.

It will give me comfort for the coming weeks ahead.

"It's okay, Mila... everything will be fine. Your dad needs you right now. You should go..."

"But... what about you?" I stammer, holding him close.

Oliver purrs, and I close my eyes, getting lost in the sound.

"I have my Alphas. Even if one of them can be a major thorn in the side at the best of times... I am in good company. You're your dad's daughter. The only family he has in the world now. He will want you by his side..."

He would. Though my dad would just be like Oliver, claiming that he'll be fine. But truth be told, he will be absolutely terrified.

No one should be alone at the end of their life. Not even the worst person imaginable.

"I... I will be fine, Mila... Now go. Stop wasting time here and go and be with your father..."

Finally, I look up from his chest.

His own eyes are wet with tears, and I think I know where his train of thought has gone.

Isabelle.

He still doesn't know whether she is alive...

I couldn't imagine anything more harrowing.

Oliver takes my cheeks in his hands, his eyes roving up and down my face, memorising my features.

I do the same with him.

His is a face that would be hard to forget...

Finally, he lets me go, but we hold on to each other's hands for a little while longer. His fingers slip away from mine, leaving a trace of his warmth on my palm, even when I exit the room.

Barret volunteers to drive me back to the Beta City.

Lachlan squeezes the life from my lungs by the door, and I promise him endlessly that I will be back.

“You... promise, Snowdrop?”

I smile. “Promise...”

He chokes me harder, lifting my feet off the ground. It's only when Barret tells him off that he stops.

When he places me back down, a cough alerts my attention, and I turn around to face Gryphon.

I bet he can't wait to see the back of me for a while.

I just hope he knows that this isn't it. I am going to come back.

Gryphon can't get rid of me that easily.

The Alpha reaches out a hand. “I guess this is farewell.”

I narrow my eyes, taking his hand. “Yes. For now. But I will be back, Gryphon. I hope you know that.”

He nods, and it looks as if he has something to say. His eyes flit over to Barret who waits by the door. Then they land on Lachlan, who looks ready to eviscerate his fellow pack mate.

Lachlan hates it when Gryphon hurts my feelings.

Finally, Gryphon settles those burgundy eyes on me, and lo-and-behold... do I detect sadness?

Is the grumpy Gryphon actually sad about me leaving?

“Take care out there...”

Well, that surprised me.

Who knew he cared about me?

“Because I would hate to have to tell Oliver that something happened to you...”

Oh, he is only concerned for Oliver’s sake.

I will still take it.

“You’ve probably already figured out who that gunshot was actually aimed for...”

Of course I have. I am not an idiot. It’s why I constantly blame myself for what happened.

“Don’t worry, Gryphon,” I say, turning toward the door. “I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

Just as I have my whole life.

That’s how I leave things between us. I half expect the Alpha to beg me not to leave. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but it was almost as if he didn’t want me to go.

For his own sake.

Does he actually like me? Who knows...

I will never understand that Alpha. A true enigma.

One thing I do know for a certainty; he cares about Oliver, and it's that doting nature that I will be counting on.

I get in the passenger side of the jeep, and how things have changed.

The first time I got in this car, I had to sit in the trunk away from Oliver.

They even had a glass screen installed.

That screen has gone now.

Just as we pull out the drive, I turn back to the house, spying a familiar shape in the bedroom window.

Oliver.

He got out of bed to wave me off. Despite how much of a strain it must have been on his body.

I wave back until the house is nothing but a dot.

Then I face the road ahead, breathing in deeply through my nose.

The next couple of days will be hard.

Barret pulls up outside the house.

It's an upgrade from the old house where my dad used to stay. Ever since the money started coming in from the trials, I was able to get us a nicer place.

The jeep is silent as I gaze up at the house.

My father is in there waiting for me.

A woman steps out onto the porch, and that must be his nurse.

I have never actually met her, but she seems like a kind woman. The kind of person you can rely on.

Now I look up at Barret.

He tries to act nonchalant, but I know he is dying inside. The Alpha smiles through his pain, and I concentrate on his solo dimple.

It still amuses me.

“Well, this is it, sunshine. Keep us updated, will you?”

I nod. “I promise...”

The Alpha is quiet for a moment, his gaze lingering on my lips. But he doesn't lean forward to kiss me.

I don't mind.

We can kiss when I get back.

I roll my eyes, bending forward to give him a hug, and the gesture takes him by surprise. Then he wraps his arms around me, and ruffles my hair, chuckling.

“You take care now... if you sense anything suspicious, you let us know...”

His dark eyes flash, and for a moment, I’m taken aback.

This Alpha truly does care. They all do.

Even Gryphon, though he doesn’t like to admit it.

I smile. “I promise, Barret.”

Finally, we let go, gazing at each other in silence. Then I step out of the jeep to meet the nurse on the front porch.

Barret doesn’t leave until I am in the house, and the moment the jeep disappears from view, I die inside.

But that pain will never compare to what I have to go through in the next few days.

My father’s nurse, Jane, leads me to his bedroom, and I almost don’t recognise the man lying on the bed.

Surely, that can’t be my dad...

He’s plugged up to a number of machines, and I cover my mouth, holding back a sob.

It’s worse than I thought.

“It’s okay, you take your time, Mila,” Jane says, placing her warm hand on my shoulder.

I go through the motions next and take the chair by my father’s bed. Then I grab his feeble hand, and that’s how we stay.

Jane gives us some privacy.

My father stirs, and I gaze into those familiar eyes. It takes him a moment to recognize me, but then a smile lights up his face, and I am grateful to Jane for calling me.

I never would have missed this for the world.

“Mila... you’re back...”

I laugh. “Yeah, Dad... I am... how are you?”

He shrugs. “Same old.”

I smile. It’s good to see he still has his sense of humor.

Pepper wags her tail by his side, and my dad must have asked Jane to place her there.

She’s my mom reincarnated after all.

“Hey there, girl...” I reach across to pet the spaniel, and she licks my hand, wagging her tail faster.

Dad squeezes my fingers, and I meet his eyes.

He watches me carefully. “Did you find a family, Mila?”

I have to think for a moment. I guess I did.

There’s no denying it. Oliver is my mate. My scent match.

I knew it from the moment I locked eyes with him.

I smile. “I did, Dad.”

My dad almost looks twenty years younger for a moment when he hears the words from my lips. Then he lays his head back on the pillow and sighs happily.

“I’m glad. You shouldn’t be alone, Mila... I want you to be happy, even when...”

He doesn't finish his sentence. But I squeeze his hand, letting him know that I understand.

"I know, Dad... I know..."

"So... why aren't you with them now?"

Now he has got me.

"I... wanted to be here for you, Dad..."

He looks at me pointedly. "I will be fine, Mila. I have Jane and Pepper..."

I half laugh, half cry. I knew he would say that.

"It's no problem, Dad. Really. I wouldn't miss this..."

These could be his very last days on earth. And I want to be here for every second.

"So, tell me about them..." he asks.

I smile and tell my dad everything about the Hart Pack. I leave out some details about Gryphon and the shooting, but all in all, he likes what he hears.

He soon falls asleep, and I stay by his side all through the night.

Even until the morning.

As I said, I will not miss a single moment.

Chapter Forty-Three

Oliver

Mila has been gone for a whole week, and I just hope she is okay.

She messaged me the first few days, but after a while, I stopped hearing from her.

I just wish I knew what was happening. She shouldn't be alone in this.

She needs me by her side, but I am on house arrest.

I am still recovering, and this fucking sucks.

Gryphon, as usual, mollycoddles me, and I am getting sick of him treating me like a helpless baby.

He barely leaves my side, and I think I am the first Omega in history who doesn't dote on their Alpha's attention twenty-four-seven.

I just don't like the fuss.

The Alpha very well knows that I am not helpless. He is aware that I received military training until the day I

presented.

And from that moment, my life changed forever...

Now I am this precious commodity, a thing to be cherished and protected, and I am not allowed to go anywhere without my Alphas anymore.

I have no independence, and sometimes, I just want to scream and say fuck it all.

Mila needs me to protect her.

I wasn't there for my sister the day she went missing. So I will be there for Mila.

My fists curl as Gryphon tucks me in for the millionth time, fluffing up my pillows. He has my pain relief all lined up on the cabinet with a glass of water.

I turn to Lachlan. Barret is setting up traps outside the property, a government mandate all Alphas must exercise in order to keep their Omegas safe.

Our safety is number one priority.

"Have you heard from her?"

The blond gazes at me with empty eyes, his usually perfect hair falling down the sides of his face like straw.

Lachlan is beside himself with grief. He misses Mila, and I have never seen my Alpha like this.

As his Omega, I feel the urge to comfort him. The best I can do is send a soft tendril his way, but he is numb on the other side. I barely get anything from him.

I have come to the conclusion that Mila is possibly my mate. I sensed it the moment I first saw her at the selection ceremony.

She was my scent match. I knew it even then.

But she is Beta, and it still doesn't make sense why an Omega like me would be so drawn to her. Especially as I have three Alphas.

But are my Alphas falling for her too?

Are they only feeling the effects of her absence because I am?

That would make sense, except Lachlan looks worse than me. Barret is in pain too, but he hides his grief through shitty jokes.

Gryphon is staunch, as usual. Nothing new there.

But I do spy something like regret in his red-brown eyes. They shine more brown than red lately, and has my surly Alpha with the permanent chip on his shoulder finally warmed to Mila?

As I live and breathe...

But he hides his feelings behind a mask of stone, and he truly is in denial.

“Lachlan?”

Finally, the Alpha stirs, and his normally azure eyes are clouded.

It's worse than I thought.

Shit.

I grip his hand. He barely flinches. “Hey, Lachlan... it will be fine... Mila will be back...”

He blinks at me absentmindedly, and there’s nothing more I can do. I purr, but it’s not enough.

I could suggest some time in the nest, but it just feels so wrong without Mila.

It’s hard to be horny when you are fucking dying inside.

Finally, he stirs, shaking his head, and my heart caves in.

He hasn’t heard from Mila either.

“Well, perhaps Barret will have...”

I look up at Gryphon.

He’s still fussing over that damn pillow.

This guy has read way too many Omega pamphlets. Every single one of them tells Alphas that we like things soft and fluffy.

Mila is soft and fluffy...

But also a total badass.

It fucking turns me on. So strong, but feminine.

Maybe Gryphon has heard from her.

Highly unlikely.

He is the last person Mila would ever call.

Barret arrives at last, and my hopes are immediately squashed when I ask him if he has received a text from Mila.

Nada.

None of us have heard a thing.

What the hell is going on?

I can't stand this.

That's it.

I'm going to the Beta city.

Something is off. My Omega senses are tingling...

The moment I try to wriggle out of bed, Gryphon immediately shoves me back. Not too hard, though. Just enough to make me remember my place.

“Oliver, you need your rest. Doctor's orders...” he growls.

I bare my teeth, rolling my eyes as I try again.

He pushes me back on the bed.

I snap. “Back off!”

“No. You are not marching over to the Beta city. You are vulnerable. Mila... she will be fine...”

Somehow, he doesn't sound so convinced.

I watch him warily.

“Do you know something?”

Gryphon doesn't answer my question. Instead, he just fluffs up my goddam pillows for the millionth time.

Fuck my pillows.

Mila needs me.

“No, I don’t. Mila is probably just distracted with her father...”

That could be the case. Obviously, her priorities right now are with her dad. I am not that selfish. I wouldn’t want to take her attention away from her dad. But I am worried.

Now we all watch Gryphon suspiciously as he tucks in my sheets around my legs. He avoids my eyes.

Barret sighs, heading out the door. “If you want, I could drive up and check on her...”

Lachlan perks up. “I’ll go!”

Gryphon speaks yet again, sounding like a broken record. “Mila will be fine... Oliver needs us more right now...”

I ignore him and focus on Barret. I should have asked him to stay with her in the first place.

I am such an idiot.

Maybe I really was thinking about myself.

Selfish to the core...

Sometimes, I despise being an Omega.

I am in pain, and my Omega hormones get needy.

But the man in me wants to protect Mila. But I can’t be there for her. Not like this...

She doesn’t need another sick person to take care of.

Barret watches me. “Your call, Ollie. Just give us the order, and we will go to Mila. For you.”

And they would too. They would walk to the ends of the earth for me as my bonded Alphas.

But maybe... she just wants to be alone.

It’s hard.

I have never technically been through loss. I have lost a sister, but for all I know, she could still be alive.

I remember how I wanted to be alone for weeks after she vanished. That’s because I blamed myself for her abduction.

I was supposed to be watching her...

Honestly, I think that’s why I took the bullet for Mila.

My absolution for failing my sister that cold, miserable day fifteen years ago.

Would Mila want the guys to intrude?

Would she want us there?

I am so torn.

Barret steps toward the bed, gripping my cheek in his hand. He pecks my head.

“We will think on it. For now, just rest, Ollie. You look like shit.”

I roll my eyes. “Gee, thanks.”

He chuckles and settles beside Lachlan.

Some light has returned to Lachlan, and I know he hopes for me to say yes.

But for now, I need to sleep.

I am so tired.

Chapter Forty-Four

Mila

I held my dad's hand all the way to the end.

The nurse told me it was one of the most peaceful deaths she had ever seen, but the experience still shook me.

It was the first time I saw someone die right before my eyes. Even as a trained soldier...

One moment, his eyes were open, and the next...

He fell asleep forever.

My brain went into a fog for three days.

It's hard to believe that he is gone. I still feel his spirit in the house.

But I know he is with my mother now.

It's funny. Even though my heart is broken, I am at peace.

Dad no longer needs to be taken care of.

Because he is no longer of this world...

My purpose in life has gone.

Everything I did was for the benefit of my dad. He was the reason why I signed up for the academy and trained to be a soldier.

He was why I joined the trials and worked my ass off. Just so he could get the care that he needs.

Needed.

Past tense now.

Fuck.

My chest hurts.

Can't believe he's gone...

Just me and Pepper now.

I find the dog on his bed. It's the first time I have been in the room since he passed.

Lately, I find myself wandering the house, not knowing what to do with myself.

Jane has kept me company. But she is leaving today.

Soon, I have to prepare for the funeral.

Not too soon, though. I needed rest.

“Hey, Pepper...”

I sit beside the dog, petting her gently behind the ear.

She doesn't stir.

It's the exact spot where she lay when Dad...

I have never felt so numb. But comforting that dog takes me out of my own grief-ridden head for a moment.

Like me, Pepper has lost her purpose. She took care of Dad when I had to leave, and now... she has no one.

I will bring her back to the pack house. Oliver won't mind. He likes dogs.

However, she has gotten rather close with Jane.

The nurse stops outside the bedroom door, and the dog lifts her head, wagging her tail.

It looks like Pepper has made her own choice.

Jane is just on her way out. I spy the bag around her shoulder.

She cried along with me and was a real comfort after Dad passed.

I really did get the best nurse that money can buy.

But Jane is worth more than money...

You can't put a price on her.

Like me, she is Beta, and has a naturally caring soul.

She got close to my dad. Even though they had only been together a month, I could tell that he meant something to her too.

Despite my dad's protests, she still called me to tell me about his condition, and I will be grateful to her forever.

We are definitely going to stay friends.

“If you need anything, Mila, just give me a call...”

A call.

That’s right.

I haven’t checked my phone for days.

Oliver will be worried sick.

I have been in limbo. At one point, I forgot how to use my fingers; I didn’t even know how to unscrew the lid from a jar of jam.

“Thank you, Jane,” I whisper, petting Pepper behind the ear.

The dog looks at Jane with that same longing in her eyes. Someone else is about to leave her life.

Jane doesn’t leave. She watches me with empathy, and I appreciate it.

It’s empathy that I need. Sympathy sucks at this time.

Someone who is going through grief with you makes it all the better...

I would hate to be alone for this.

“Jane?”

“Yes?”

I suck in a breath, “Would... would you take Pepper?”

The nurse gazes at the dog and smiles softly. The dog wags her tail in hope.

“Of course.”

A weight lifts from my shoulders. Thank goodness.

Jane's smile widens. "I will go and fetch her leash..."

The word leash makes Pepper jump to her feet, and just like that, she comes back to life.

At least she will have a happy ending.

Jane returns, and the dog won't stop wiggling with excitement.

"We got pretty close these last few weeks, so it would be an honor, Mila. Thank you."

Something tells me Jane needs Pepper more than me right now.

Does she have someone at home waiting for her?

I never asked about her personal life.

Besides, I have Oliver and the pack.

Honestly, it's what made all this so much easier. As soon as I make the funeral arrangements, I will be heading back.

And this time, I won't leave again.

Not long now, Oliver...

Jane and I hug on the front porch for some time, and we promise to keep in touch. She promises to send me pictures of Pepper, and I promise to send her updates about my own life.

Death isn't the end.

It can be the start of a new friendship.

Jane is just two years older than me, so it makes sense that we would connect.

She leads Pepper to her car, and I wave them both away as they disappear up the drive.

I watch until her red car vanishes.

Now I am alone.

For a moment, I am too afraid to step into the house, but I must.

I have a funeral to arrange.

First things first...

I will ring Oliver.

I haven't even told him yet. He must be worried.

When I look at my phone, I find that I have no text messages. Not even any missed calls.

When I try to ring, the connection cuts off, and it's odd.

It was okay for the first few days when I left.

Maybe my phone is broken.

Still, it would have been nice to have someone here...

Oliver won't be able to come, but maybe Barret or Lachlan.

It doesn't matter now.

I have a funeral to plan.

This is going to be the hardest thing I will ever have to do.

Chapter Forty-Five

Gryphon

Oliver won't stop fretting.

The longer we don't hear from Mila, then the more restless and anxious he becomes, and I hate seeing my Omega like this.

None of us can even get through to her. Even I have tried for my Omega's sake, but the signal just cuts off.

This has to be Lily's doing...

She must have gotten wind that Mila's dad was sick, and so the governor swooped in the first chance she got.

Anything to keep Frederick and his little pawn away...

Fuck.

I had to fight every instinct in my body to stop Mila from leaving, but she needed to be with her dad.

I may be an asshole, but I wasn't going to keep the Beta from being with her father for what could be his final moments on earth.

Even I know what it's like to lose my dad...

It's why I wear his gold watch every day.

I had a feeling this would happen, but I kept my mouth shut.

Oliver even looked to me for advice, and I lied through my teeth, saying I had no idea what was going on.

One morning, I find the Omega haphazardly packing his suitcase. He only has the use of one arm, so he just tosses everything in lazily, determination swimming in his blue eyes.

“Oliver, what are you doing?”

He clenches his jaw, and he won't even look at me.

“I am packing. What does it look like...”

I sigh, reaching up to rub my temples.

This is going to be tough.

“Oliver, you need rest—”

“Don't fucking tell me what I need!”

His scream rebounds off the walls, and now he finally looks at me, nostrils flaring and chest heaving.

Once, my Omega used to look at me with so much love, but not these days.

These days, I'm not so sure what he feels about me.

“I will tell you what I need. I need Mila. I need to know she is okay, and that she isn't alone or scared!”

My mouth dries, and I can barely swallow.

I need all that too. But I don't tell him.

Instead, I keep my emotions bottled up.

“I am going, Gryphon. Something isn't right...”

I lean against the wall, folding my arms. “She's probably distracted. Her dad is dying. It's not an easy time in anyone's life, trust me...”

His gaze softens at that, and now he looks down at his suitcase, closing his eyes.

I'm the only other person in the pack besides Mila who has lost a parent, so he doesn't argue.

If Mila is going through grief, then the last thing on her mind is checking in with people.

And I just referred to Mila as pack...

Fuck. It's already too late.

I got attached.

“Still,” Oliver whispers, his voice hoarse. “Why do all my calls keep getting blocked? None of them are going through.”

Mine are the same too.

I'm not sure what I would have said if I had gotten through to Mila.

Would I have been grateful to hear her voice? And not just for my Omega's sake, but for my own.

Just to know that she is safe.

I have been an asswipe to her, but I actually would have tried this time to be kinder.

Her dad is sick, and I have first-hand experience in that department.

“I’m sure she is fine...” I repeat, sick of the sound of my own voice.

Oliver curls his fists, looking up at me again. “Don’t fucking lie to me, Gryphon. Something is going on, and we all need to leave ASAP.”

We do. If we hope to have any chance of getting her back. But I stay put like a well-trained mutt.

That’s how tight the leash is that Lily has around my neck.

I deserve everything I am about to get.

“Oliver, go back to be—”

“Lachlan! Hurry up!” he dismisses me, throwing in the last few contents in his suitcase.

Lachlan’s voice echoes through the house. “I’m just gathering all the flowers and the knives that I can find!”

Oliver curses under his breath, tying the zip around his suitcase. He can’t even get it to shut.

Why does he even need it? An Omega’s need for comfort, perhaps?

Oliver can never go anywhere without an overnight bag. He is not one to rough it up.

Well, that was what I thought until he says, “Fuck it!”

He kicks the thing aside and proceeds to walk out of the room. It doesn't look as if he is going to bother bringing a toothbrush, and he really isn't the same Omega anymore.

Mila has changed him.

I grip his good arm, and he tenses, his muscles bulging up.

“Let go, Gryphon...”

I take several deep breaths, gathering all the strength I need.

“Oliver, this is madness. You are recovering from a gunshot. You need—”

His fist swings for my face, and now he breaks my nose, sending my head flying backward.

But I hold on.

I have to.

It's too dangerous out there.

We are dealing with forces far greater than ourselves.

Do not provoke the wrath of Lily. I still have the scars to prove that statement.

Oliver bares his perfect white teeth and growls, and my Alpha recognizes the challenge instantly. He just doesn't know how to take it.

He can't accept it because the challenge comes from his Omega, but he also knows that he is way out of his depth here.

My nose is bleeding, and I think it will be broken for a while...

Who knew he could punch that hard?

Sometimes, I forget that he isn't made of porcelain and that he can, indeed, fight. He trained for a few months at the Alpha Academy before he presented, and he was skilled in all kinds of combat.

Still, I won't let go. Even if it kills me.

“Gryphon...”

“No, Oliver. I almost lost you once. I won't lose you again. Lily will kill you...”

His eyes flash, and that growl becomes more animal than man now. “I fucking knew it. Lily was behind this all along, and yet you lied to me! Fuck!”

He goes to punch me again, but I grab his hand, twisting his arm behind his back.

He may have trained to be an Alpha for a few months, but I trained for four years.

This is for his own good.

He wriggles, but I hold him firm. No matter what, I will not use my bark.

I will not betray his trust again like that.

Unfortunately, Barret and Lachlan come to save the day, pulling me away from him, and now it's three against one.

I saw this coming from the day Mila came into my home.

I knew that I would have to go up against my own pack like this. I spied how besotted they were with her, and truth be

told... so am I.

My dreams are filled with her and Oliver, but I could never allow myself to get close.

All because I am afraid of my superior.

Lachlan and Barret create a wall around Oliver, and it looks as if my own pack has turned against me.

But I would do it again and again just to keep them safe.

Maybe in another life, Mila could have been ours.

But there is too much at risk.

Oliver glares at me for a few moments, and the pain is all too evident in his eyes.

He doesn't want to leave me behind. But his mind is set.

He is going after Mila.

"Let's go," Oliver says, moving out the door.

Barret and Lachlan follow him.

They are making a big mistake.

"Stop..."

My pack ignores me, moving for the front door, and I stumble after them.

My head is still ringing from where Oliver punched me.

"You can't..."

Oliver opens the door, and he doesn't even glance back at me.

But they don't even make it halfway to the jeep when the soldiers storm onto our property, and my heart slices in two.

It's happening...

"Back inside, all of you."

Oliver is the first to speak. "On whose orders?"

The first soldier looks at him, and I don't like the size of his gun.

"Governor Lily... Governor Frederick is dead. The Trials are over. We are here to seize your Beta on her orders..."

Shit.

Oliver's face pales, and for the first time, he looks at me.

I spy nothing but hatred and betrayal.

He thinks I planned all this, but I had no idea.

It looks like Lily only went and removed the threat for herself. She must have had help inside the Beta government, which was how she managed to overthrow Frederick.

She has won, and there is nothing we can do but bow down to her now.

The Trials are over, and we will never see Mila again.

Chapter Forty-Six

Mila

My father's funeral was a small affair. Only a handful of people came in the end, but even as I sat in the front row, watching as my father's coffin was lowered into the ground, I held on to hope.

Surely, they will come.

I haven't been able to get in contact with them, but I at least hoped that they would still turn up.

They didn't.

Had something happened to them? Or, maybe they realized that they didn't want me after all.

Maybe Gryphon finally managed to convince Oliver that he didn't need me and told him to forget about me.

No, that can't be. Oliver would never do that to me. He took a bullet for me; there is no way he would forget about me that easily.

Unless Gryphon did something behind their backs. Something so awful and deplorable that he can never crawl back from.

I knew the Alpha hated me, but not to this scale.

This past week has been hard; I have never felt so alone, and I just needed someone beside me while I was planning my father's funeral.

At least I had Jane. She helped guide me all the way and got me into contact with the right organizations.

But I needed my guys.

I needed my family...

My father was so happy when I told him that I finally found a family, and I promised that I would go back to them as soon as I could.

But it appears they don't want me anymore.

My thoughts are becoming dark, I am twisting things in my head, and I am finding it hard to remember exact details.

Did Oliver truly care about me? Or did I just imagine it?

Omeegas aren't normally the sacrificial type but he shielded me from a bullet.

My fears are just getting the better of me.

I'm sure they will still show.

My father's wake is happening right now. But I stay by his grave.

It's hard to see his name on a headstone.

But at least he's buried with my mom now.

They had a plot.

Jane has gone back to the house to host the wake in my stead. I needed more time.

It's raining, and I am getting soaking wet. But it's a fitting atmosphere.

A crow squawks nearby, and no wonder they call them the birds of death.

They love graveyards.

I hug myself to keep warm, but it has little effect.

Soon, I need to go back to the house. It's only a short walk from here.

"So, I guess this is it, Dad..."

Silence. Except for the smattering of the rain on his headstone.

I suck in another breath. "They... didn't come..."

More eerie silence, and now my tears blend in with the rain that soaks my face.

"I... really thought they would..."

The crow answers this time, and finally, I fall down to my knees.

I'm not sure what I have to do. Do I go back to the house? Or find a new pack?

After all, I am still a soldier. And I will need to protect another Omega...

My other pack has already made their choice.

They don't want me anymore.

It looks like I was a spare after all...

Someone steps up behind me, and I whirl around, trying to see through the rain.

They're too far away, but when I squint, I make out the silhouette of a woman in black.

My heart pounds, and I climb back up to my feet, backing away.

She stops several feet away, a sly smirk curling across her face, and I don't move.

Governor Lily...

I didn't invite her.

"Hello, Mila Stone. We finally meet."

I curl my fists, wishing I had a weapon.

It just didn't feel appropriate to take a knife to my father's funeral.

I had been a fool.

At least there are rocks around...

Lily steps closer, and I move around the grave. "What do you want?"

The smirk doesn't vanish from her face. She merely crosses her arms, and instinctively, I jerk my head around the graveyard, sensing them.

She has me surrounded.

“Governor Frederick is dead, Mila. The Trials are over, and I thought I should be the one to tell you myself...”

Wait... Frederick is dead? That's not possible.

She feigns a melancholy sigh. “I'm sorry. I know how close you two were...”

We weren't.

I know why she is really here...

Governor Lily has come to finish me off just like she finished off Frederick.

The soldiers close in, and now I have nowhere to run.

But I won't go down without a fight.

Lily smiles, and my heart thumps in my ears like an alarm. “Seize her.”

Two soldiers come up behind me, twisting my arms behind my back, and I kick my legs.

“Get off!”

Lily paces back and forth, careful not to step on my father's grave. How nice of her.

“I am going to give you a choice now, Ms. Stone. Either you leave and never contact the Hart Pack again, or die.”

I snarl. “And where am I supposed to go?”

She grins, glancing at the distant hills.

No man’s land, basically. No one lives out there. It’s just trees for miles.

The entirety of our country’s population lives inside the Alpha and Beta cities.

“You want me to leave civilization?”

“If that’s what it takes to keep you away, then yes.”

I look her straight in her black eyes. “Why?”

She raises a perfectly plucked eyebrow. “Why what?”

“Why do you want to keep me away from them so much?”

The woman looks me up and down, wondering if I am worth telling her deepest, darkest secrets.

All this time, I thought Frederick had been the one with a special interest in the pack. He told me to get close to Oliver because he was a male Omega, and male Omegas are rare.

As rare as he might have been, though, he could never bear an Alpha’s young. Well, not unless he...

The penny drops, and a protective growl escapes me. “You stay *away* from him...”

Lily rolls her eyes, looking away from me. “So, will you leave or not?”

My heart rages, and now all I can see is the color red. “Just so you can get your hands on Oliver? I don’t think so...”

Lily sighs, turning her back on me at least. She knows she has already won.

“A shame. I kind of like you, Mila. You remind me of a younger version of myself. But, unfortunately, you have to go... Well, fellers, you know what to do...”

A hand clamps around my mouth, and despite how hard I struggle, the soldier knocks me out.

Then I see no more.

I open my eyes to bright sunlight.

Birdsong trills around me as I come to, blinking up at a forest canopy.

Where am I?

The memories come flooding back, and I jump to my feet, searching the trees. I have no idea where I am, and I curl my fists, imagining Lily’s smug face.

That Alpha... she only went and decided for me in the end after all.

She decided to spare me and let me live.

Big mistake.

I will find my way back.

Oliver is in danger, and I won’t let that psychopath get her hands on him.

But I don't even make it two steps until the pain hits my gut, and I double over, gripping my stomach.

What on earth was that?

The cramping returns, and I twist around on the forest floor, biting my lip to stop from screaming.

There are wild animals out here. I have to be careful.

I will not end up as prey.

I guess it was only a matter of time until this day inevitably came. I had been ignoring all the signs, but they were there, warning me...

But there is no denying it anymore. What I truly am. What I always knew I was deep down.

I'm an Omega, and I have gone into heat.

END

Will Mila survive her heat? Find out in Part Two [Saved](#). (the release date is just a placeholder file for now).

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading my book! Please leave a review as it would mean a lot ♥

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About the Author

Violet Fox is a UK-based author who lives in the middle of the Welsh Mountains.

When she's not fighting dragons with swords, she's writing about hunky men who possess feral, animal-like qualities. Expect all of her fictional men to become major simps for their ladies by the end of each book/ series.

She loves to write about all kinds of women, be they shy, snarky, a diva. She believes they all deserve a chance in the limelight.