



THE
ALPHA
KING

A FATED MATE OMEGaverse ROMANCE



EMILY NORTH

The Alpha King

Emily North

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To my fellow rule breakers.

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A Note From Emily

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Author's Note

What to expect from this book: A dystopian omegaverse story in which all the characters hold an alpha, omega, or beta designation. Also, everyone has a fated mate, alphas mark and knot the omegas, and pretty much everyone has extraordinary senses.

What not to expect from this book: Shifters. No one will ever shift into a wolf, potato, mountain lion, or a Christmas tree ornament. They stay human-looking at all times.

Now that we've established that, enjoy!

Prologue

A beautiful omega once lived in a town surrounded by a towering fence.

The town, Goldenrod, was settled by people eager to rise above their corrupt instincts. Their lore spoke of ancestors who built the fence to keep out the rest of the world and maintain conformity and peace.

They called the rules they lived by the Order.

But Goldenrod's Order left the omega sheltered. Nothing from the outside world could penetrate the fence, and she couldn't leave.

She didn't care, though. She was beautiful, pampered, and safe. What reason could she have to be unhappy?

Until one day, she was driven out of Goldenrod, and forced to come face-to-face with a complicated and unpredictable world—there was beauty and ugliness everywhere.

She met an urchin who summed up these contradictions perfectly. He was handsome and hideous. Gentle and coarse.

Smart and simple.

She was both drawn to him and repulsed by him.

And one portentous day, after a series of deadly events, he stole her away, and brought her to his home. A place thick with decay and populated with empty buildings and dirty people.

He ruled the ugly place with an iron fist.

The omega was both disgusted by the urchin and his home, and in awe of his great power.

But that's when she realized the greatest contradiction of all...

He wasn't an urchin at all.

He was a king.

Part I

Hot Summer Rain

Rill

I knew she was mine as soon as I saw her.

She was unconscious. Drooling from her pretty little mouth as a couple of dumb-looking betas dumped her in the back of a truck.

And to think, I wasn't even supposed to be there that day.

I don't risk getting that close to Goldenrod's gate anymore, especially when there's a truck. The men who guard it are trigger-happy pigeons, and they'd like nothing more than to get their tiny little hands on the likes of me again.

I usually send a couple of my hunters to catch them unaware when they're a good distance from town, laughing obnoxiously and listening to their terrible music.

That's when they spring on 'em, stealing any leftovers that might be hanging around in the back of the truck. Fabric.

Tools. Food. Once, Run even found a live chicken.

But there wasn't a scheduled delivery that day. There are usually only two a year—one in the spring and one in the fall—and at this point, we're well into December.

So, when we happened to pass through on a scouting mission, we were surprised to see that familiar truck rambling down the bumpy dirt road toward Goldenrod's shiny fence. Presumably on its way to deliver everything the residents needed for survival.

Of course, we followed it.

We stood in the bushes, watching the two pigeons peck at each other for a while. The little idiots were arguing about who could shoot a pinecone hanging from a tree branch for what seemed like hours.

We were just about to turn away, bored, when my eyes caught on two betas pushing wooden carts on the other side of the fence.

We'd watched them approach the gates with similar carts dozens of times before that day. Usually, the carts were empty on the way to the fence and full when they walked away. But this time, the betas struggled to keep the heavy, blanket-covered carts from tilting to the side as they pushed them toward the gate.

The men unlocked the gate, holding it open for the betas. That's when I saw a delicate hand slip out from under one of the blankets, and my heart froze.

“Are there *people* in those carts?” Nick muttered quietly from behind me, voicing my thoughts.

He’s young and doesn’t remember, but I do. The residents of Goldenrod throw away any omega they find inconvenient to the silly rules they created. I’ve heard they mostly stopped doing that, though, so it couldn’t be...

But that’s when I caught her scent on a stiff breeze—lilies and hot summer rain. I’d soon discover that she always smelled like that. Even when she’s sweating through her heat and covered in filth.

The world stopped spinning as her fragrance infused my body, taking root in my bloodstream. After that, I was like a hooked fish making my way toward that truck. Pike grabbed my arm, trying to stop me, but I easily shook off his grip.

And when they pulled the blanket fully off her, I felt like I’d been shot in the heart. I think I may have taken a step back from the impact of her face alone.

Dark, silky hair wrapped around her head in intricate braids, framing a perfectly symmetrical, gloriously beautiful face. Her lips were plump and pink, her nose small and adorable, and her lashes thick and dark against smooth, rose-petal skin.

She looked soft. Special.

I knew I’d never see anyone like her again. So, if I wanted her, I needed to take her.

Pike came up behind me, urging me to back away, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“I gotta get on that truck, brother,” I told him. “Break me out when you get the chance.”

He sputtered as I stealthily made my way toward the pigeons. They could have shot me right away. Actually, I’m surprised that they didn’t. But one of them recognized my scar, I think, so they resisted—they’d get a fine booty if they captured the king. It took both of them to wrestle me to the ground, even with me half-assing the fight.

But before they attached that damn olfactory plug on my face and chained me to the wall of the truck, I caught a whiff of her lying in the opposite corner.

I knew then that I’d made the right choice. This would be the best damn decision of my life.

And now, well... What do they call an omega’s heat in Goldenrod? Her *call*? Well, she called to me, so she’s mine and I’m hers.

That’s that.

And after days of trekking through the frigid, wet woods on the most eventful scouting mission of my life, we’re home.

My *kingdom*, I told her. I don’t even think she knows what that word means. What do they know about kings and queens in a place like Goldenrod?

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch her suck in deep breaths as she takes it all in, her nostrils flaring and her eyes wide with shock.

I suppose her pink dress was fine at one point, but it now hangs heavy on her slender body under the weight of a few days' worth of mud and water. Her long, dark hair is matted and tangled, and her face is grime-smearred.

She's filthy and distraught.

She's still the most beautiful omega I've ever seen.

My omega.

A surge of something primal courses through my blood at the thought, and I know she can see it when she looks over at me. Her blue eyes flash with alarm, fear, and something else. Something I still haven't been able to figure out with her.

"This is *it*?" she asks in that nasally, haughty voice of hers. Everyone I've ever met from Goldenrod talks like they have a clothespin pinching their nose. "I've never seen a place like *this* before."

Behind me, I can hear my hunters—Pike, Run, Nick, and Mud—catching up to us. I keep my eyes on her, though.

Feeling the familiar urge to provoke, I smile at her smoothly. "Well, Liz, by my account, you haven't seen much of anything before."

She hates when I remind her how little she knows about the world, and she *really* hates when I call her Liz. Her friends from Goldenrod called her *Elizabeth*—a mouthful of unnecessary syllables if I ever heard them.

As if on cue, she wrinkles her small nose and scowls at me. "That was my polite way of telling you it's hideous and ...

dirty.”

She’s fuming and adorable, glaring at me under delicate brows. Thinks that’s an insult, does she?

I shrug. “Well, you’re covered in dirt. So, you’ll fit right in, huh?”

Her face after I say that ... I’d love nothing more than to capture that horrified look for all eternity. A delicate red blush travels up her neck under all that dirt and sweat, and her blue eyes shine like the hottest flame as they focus on my face.

Fucking priceless.

“What did you say it’s called?” she grits out. “Something ... *rock?*”

“Crescent Rock.” My voice is quiet as I turn to survey my domain.

Crescent Rock is an abandoned mining town. The main road, Railway Row, has a railroad track going down the middle of it, straight into a giant gaping hole that was blown into the mountain about a thousand years ago.

We can’t see the peak of the rock now, hidden under the fog and low-hanging clouds, but it curves up, creating a waning crescent shape that shadows Railway Row and the smattering of ramshackle, sun-faded buildings and houses that populate it.

I’m sure the town was brand new and bustling once, filled with coal-stained men and overworked women. Or at least that’s how I like to imagine it ... like the old black and white

photos that we found under the floorboards of one of the houses.

Whatever it used to be, we've made it something special. Maybe the streets aren't paved in gold like in *Goldenrod*, but it belongs to us.

It belongs to *me*.

Because the best part about Crescent Rock? I'm the king. And I fucking love it. As the blazing scar across my face is evidence, my power came hard-earned, so I don't take it lightly.

I inhale deeply. "Sure is good to be home, Liz."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her frown doubtfully as her eyes flicker over the buildings.

"C'mon. I'll show you." I grab her arm and drag her forward a little too roughly. She flinches when my hand touches her skin and trips on the broken asphalt.

With anyone else, that flinch would bother me, but not with her. Because while outwardly, she may hate my touch, inwardly, it's a different story.

Her skin isn't cold like you'd think it would be on a rainy December evening. It's hot and clammy. That's because she started her heat. Specifically, *I* started her heat.

Her *call* sings loud from some secret place deep inside of her, buzzing with the rhythm of a coffee grinder.

It gets louder when I touch her, and now, it's singing over the noise of the rain like a warbler in search of a springtime mate. She digs her heels into the broken asphalt as I yank on her arm, her small, wet hand coming down firmly on my wrist.

“No. I don't want to see it right now.” She scowls and attempts to pull her arm free. “It's *raining*, and I need some privacy. I *need* a nest.”

I can't contain the annoyed groan that burgeons in my chest at the word “nest.” Although I can only count the number of omegas I've ever known on both my hands, I've never heard about *nests* as much as I have from this one over the past few days. Why she needs a special bed to fuck me in is beyond me, but what do I know about omegas and their traditions ... let alone Goldenrod omegas.

Apparently, they're a special breed.

“Such a goddamn priss...” I mutter the words darkly before I can stop myself.

She stiffens, her eyes darkening so much that they look purple, before she successfully shakes her arm loose.

“Is that any way for an alpha to talk to his omega?” she bites out viciously, glaring at me as she moves to wipe away the wet hair stuck to her forehead.

I sigh. “Look, if I had it my way, I'd have knotted you back there in the mud. I'm not picky.”

She pulls back as if I slapped her.

“Well, I *am* picky,” she says slowly. “Get. Me. To. A. Nest. *Now.*”

We stare at each other for a few tense beats as if daring the other to crack. She doesn't move. It barely looks like she's even breathing.

Damn, she's stubborn, and I'm fresh out of patience.

“Pike!” I bark out loudly.

She jumps at the sound, not moving her eyes from mine as my friend runs to catch up with us.

“Take care of this.” I motion toward her, and she scowls. “You know where to put her. Have Lyn help her get settled.”

I pull away then, snapping my fingers until Run, Nick, and Mud come running after me. I don't look at her again as I walk away, purposely splashing in the potholes.

Getting in that truck was the best decision of my damn life, right?

The Perfect Omega

Elizabeth

I never saw it coming.

I was in my bedroom. My favorite place.

My family's home, Cypress House, is at the very end of Dogwood Street, the main road that runs through Goldenrod. There's a gate separating the house from the street, but it doesn't keep out the noise and the smells from town.

Goldenrod is nothing like Rill's dead town. It's bustling, clean, and bright.

Even so, I'd recently become grateful that my room was at the back of the house and overlooked a quiet field and Arrowhead Pond rather than the town. Lately, it's like all I ever want to do is sit on my wide window seat with a book on my lap and a cup of tea.

My only books were *How to Be a Proper Omega* and *Goldenrod: A History of Herbs and Plants*. Once those became too mundane—which they often did—I'd stare out the window and watch the happenings in the field.

It was a meeting place for the betas, so I'd see friends walking arm-in-arm or couples slipping away for romantic meetups. Betas and their practices were foreign to me, so it was interesting.

Sometimes, I'd pretend I was one of them—wearing a gray dress and a scarf over my hair and laughing with my best friend as I lugged a basket across the field.

That's where I was that day—sitting in my window with a book, pretending to be someone else.

Who could blame me? I was rejected by the alpha who *should* have been my mate.

For as long as I can remember, I thought I'd mate with Wyatt Sage. It's what my parents planned for me before they died. They wanted nothing more than for our families—the Sages and the Cypresses—to become melded together by our mating, cemented as the most powerful alphas and omegas in Goldenrod.

Our families couldn't be any closer. In addition to our parents' friendships and working relationship, my older brother, Orion, grew up alongside both Wyatt and his brother, Noah, and I was always attached at the hip to Stella and later Jason, the younger Sages.

Orion, knowing how important it was to my parents that Wyatt and I mate, pushed it *so* hard over the past year since their deaths. Each time I failed to *call* to Wyatt, it was like I'd really failed him. And then, when Camilla Maidenhair called to him, and he honored the call, Orion fell off the deep end a bit. We both did.

I'd failed, after all. Again.

Despite that, I didn't think I had anything to actually fear that day as I sniffled pathetically onto the pages of *How to Be a Proper Omega*. I knew I'd move past this, just like I did everything else. I only needed some time to sulk about it.

I'm Elizabeth Cypress, after all.

Everyone in Goldenrod knows I'm the perfect omega.

Even so, when Colleen, my beta maid, quietly stuck her hands through the drapes holding a cup of my favorite tea, I was relieved that *someone* noticed I needed something.

After she wordlessly left the room, I sipped slowly as I stared out into the bright December day. Eventually, my heartbeat quieted, and my crushing panic settled into gentle waves as I watched the sun glimmer off the pond and a couple of chickadees flit over the field.

And before long, I was exhausted. Ridiculously so. My eyelids were heavy, and my fingers were uncoordinated as I dropped the half-empty teacup onto my lap.

Wrestling with the curtains, I tipped off my window seat and clumsily took a few steps to my bed, collapsing on top of it.

The last thing I remember is my face hitting the silky blue bedspread.

Something must have been in that tea because when I woke up, I was with Camilla. Cold and dirty in something she called a *truck*.

Rill was there, too.

And now, I'm in a completely different bedroom, far away from my own. Soaking wet, filthy, and alone ... at least until Orion arrives to save me. That is, if he's even able to make it here after what Rill did to him.

I try not to cry at the thought of my battered brother as I watch Rill's lackey, Pike, scurry around the room, lighting lamps with a match.

I didn't see much as he led me through the rain, into this dark house, and up some creaky stairs, so I have no idea where I am or what awaits me.

The thought doesn't leave me scared so much as drained. I fear I won't have the energy for what comes next.

"My omega, Lyn, will be here soon to help you..." Pike's gruff voice breaks the silence as he moves to the next light. He doesn't look up at me, and I don't offer a response as my eyes flick around the newly lit space.

A large bed, layered with brightly colored quilts and pillows, takes up most of the room, but there's also a mammoth desk pushed under the window, stacked high with papers and books. In fact, there are books *everywhere*. Not only on the

bookshelves, but also in random stacks and piles against the wall and on the windowsills.

Besides the books, there's *stuff*. Knick-knacks, bottles, and rocks. They're spread out on the shelves, on top of the stacks of books, and across the floor.

It's cluttered and messy, but ... I like it. It's interesting. I'd like to walk around and look at everything, weigh things in my hands, and open random books.

I don't, though. Instead, I stand perfectly still, dripping water on the bright red carpet.

Once Pike finishes with the lamps, I barely hear his mumbled promise to fetch Lyn. Turning just in time to see the door closing behind him, the room's earthy, herby scent finally hits my senses, triggering a low sound in my chest.

It's my call.

I realize far too late that this isn't just any room—and that's not just any bed.

It's Rill's.

Fresh Herbs

Elizabeth

My heart soars as I simultaneously groan in dread.

When we arrived at Crescent Rock, and I stood so close to Rill—as close as I’ve been thus far, really—I had to stop myself from staring.

With the strong tendons of his throat spattered in raindrops, his long, dark hair slicked back from his ruined face, and his thin clothes sticking to his lithe, muscular body, he looked ... *magical*.

He’s covered in scars—small ones speckle his bare arms, and one long scar streaks across his face from one eyebrow to his chin. It glowed an angry red against his pale, wet skin as we stood in the rain.

So, no, he’s not handsome.

Wyatt was undeniably handsome. I always admired his good looks in the same way I admired a stately piece of furniture.

Rill, though ... he looks *alive*. He's constantly moving. Always thinking. And he has a beautiful, earthy scent. Like fresh herbs in a late spring garden.

Just like this room.

There's a quiet knock at the door, and I jump, surprised out of my reverie, before fear and dread descend upon me.

"Who's there?" I yelp, my voice coming out high-pitched and alarmed.

There's no response as the doorknob turns.

I shield my face to keep from looking at him. I know, deep inside of me, that once he comes for me—once I become his mate in truth—there will be no turning back. The prospect fills me with a sick excitement.

But when I dare to peek through my fingers, I don't see Rill coming to ravage me.

I see an omega.

Sugary, sweet relief thumps through my body as I swallow the lump in my throat.

Of course, it's not him. He *knows* I need a nest. A promise party. A mating ceremony. Everything that needs to happen before *that*.

He's not a complete animal ... right?

As my relief ebbs, I focus on the omega in front of me. She's small and smiling brightly. I barely get a look at her, though, before she takes a few quick steps toward me and wraps her plump arms around my stiff body.

"You poor thing." Her soft voice vibrates against my shoulder. "I'm so sorry this happened to you."

At first, I stand frozen in her arms. We Cypresses aren't much for hugging, after all. But after a few moments, I can't help but relax against her. She's soft and smells like buttery sugar cookies.

I've always been a crier, so it's no surprise when my eyes start burning and my nose snuffles.

"Are you Lyn?" I pull away before I make a fool of myself. "Pike's mate?"

Her eyes flash, and her smile falters a bit. "Yes, I'm with Pike. He told me some of what you've gone through. I'm sure you're terrified."

There's something familiar about her. I can't put my finger on it. Her brown eyes sparkle, and her light brown hair curls wildly around her face.

"It's been quite an ordeal," I admit, standing straighter and frowning at the long, wet mark I've left on her durable blue dress. "But I must apologize. I'm afraid I've ruined your dress. I'm such a mess." I motion up and down my filthy, wet form.

"Oh, no bother." She waves her hand at me dismissively. "But we should get you in the bath right away. I'm sure you're

ready for it. Come.” Rushing past me, she picks up one of the lamps and opens a door in the far corner of the room.

Following her, I’m relieved to see that the door opens to what looks like a normal but small bathroom.

“You have bathrooms here?”

“Of course, we do. Plumbing, too,” she says proudly, turning toward the tub. “Pike helped set it up from a nearby spring. I’m afraid we only have cold water, though.”

She keeps talking about the plumbing, but I stop listening as I turn to catch my reflection in the grimy mirror above the pedestal sink.

Well, that’s disheartening.

I don’t recognize myself. My face is covered in dirt, I have dark circles under my eyes, and my hair...

My long, dark hair has always been my pride and joy. I never cut it, just a trim here and there. It’s usually silky, spiraling down to my waist in soft curls. Colleen would spend hours brushing and braiding it. But I rarely kept it down—it was too much trouble. So, it was always just wrapped around my head in neat braids.

It felt heavy hanging around my face for the past few days, but I didn’t realize how bad it was. I don’t think I’ll ever get these tangles out.

I’ll have to cut it.

“Can I help you with your dress?” Lyn interrupts my impending hysteria.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.” I clear my throat, thick with emotion, and look down at my filthy dress. “Is there a beta maid that can assist?”

She frowns. “There are no betas here.”

“Really?” I pull back, surprised. “Who does all the low work, then?”

“We *all* do *all* the work,” Lyn says firmly, motioning me forward. “Now come here. I’ll help undo it for you.”

Blinking away my surprise, I move to stand in front of the shorter omega. Her fingers make quick work of the buttons that line the back of my dress.

“Haven’t seen a dress like this in years...” She hums distractedly. The dress hangs loosely on my body as she moves to stand in front of me.

“You can ... bathe yourself then?” she asks with an awkward chuckle.

“Of course,” I say quickly. In truth, I’ve never bathed myself—Colleen always did it—but I certainly don’t want *her* to do it.

The feeling must be mutual because she visibly relaxes. “Wonderful. The water’s cold, so you’ll want to be out as soon as possible. Everything you need is there, and there’s a towel and robe on the back of the door. I’ll wait for you in the bedroom to help with all that hair.”

With that, she slips out the door, and I'm left to my own devices.

I'm a bit at a loss, staring blankly at the bathtub for a moment before I start moving, mechanically taking off my filthy dress and underthings and setting them delicately on the floor.

Dipping a toe in the bathtub, I realize she is right—it's freezing. And while I'd like nothing more than to soak, I don't waste time getting to work, cleaning the dirt and grime off my skin in the cold water.

There's only one unscented bar of soap. No shampoo or cream rinse. I've watched Colleen enough times to know that bathing requires a full spectrum of bottles and lotions. I make do, though, and once I'm standing on the frigid tile, wrapped in the thick terry cloth robe, I feel like a new omega.

Returning to the bedroom, I find Lyn sitting at the desk, flipping through one of the books. She's turned off all the lamps except the one she's reading by, so the room is dim.

"Well, that sure helped, didn't it?" She rises to her feet, setting the book aside. Her brown eyes sparkle as she picks up the lamp and takes me in. "You look much better. Let's tackle that hair, shall we? I found a comb and a ribbon."

I smile at her gratefully and sink down on an ottoman that she directs me toward. She stands over me and begins slowly and delicately working the comb through my tangles.

“Thank you for being so kind,” I say after several seconds of combing.

She hums softly. “I can’t imagine what it’s like in those woods this time of year.”

“It was awful,” I admit quietly. “I’ve never slept outside before.”

She just chuckles, so I keep talking. “I’m from a place called Goldenrod,” I explain, wincing as she pulls a bit roughly. “It’s much different than ... this place.”

There’s a pregnant pause before she speaks, her voice a whisper. “I know, dear.”

“You know Goldenrod?” My heart jumps.

“Mm-hm.” I hear her breath come out stilted, like she starts and stops speaking a few times. “I’m from Goldenrod, too.”

“You are?” I try to turn to look at her, but she firmly positions my head back so I’m facing forward. “What are you doing *here*?”

She doesn’t speak right away but keeps combing through my hair intently.

“I was released.” There’s a pregnant pause before she continues. “Like you.”

Released

Elizabeth

“Oh, but I wasn’t released.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I know they’re not true.

Lyn must know, too, because she doesn’t say anything.

I *was* released, I silently admit to myself. I’ve seen it happen before, after all. Omegas who just ... disappeared.

Like Sally Beech.

Sally’s mate was Geoffrey Bristol. The Bristols were never the most powerful or the smartest of alphas. For years, they were firmly in the mediocre category of Goldenrod’s social order.

But Geoffrey broke the mold. He was bright and strong-willed—more so than anyone in his family. Soon after leaving school, he secured a coveted position in my father’s office. He

thrived in the structured environment, quickly rising above the fray and making a name for the Bristol family.

My father, taking note, started grooming him for a more powerful position in his office—one that would elevate his family for generations.

Geoffrey and his family were thrilled. To be noticed by the likes of Anthony Cypress was no small feat.

They leaned hard into the opportunity, moving from their home on Spruce Street and into a larger house closer to Cypress House. After that, the Bristols were frequent guests at Cypress House parties and teas, and Geoffrey often accompanied my father on visits to Sage House.

All of this almost came to a screeching halt, though, with Sally Beech.

If the Bristols weren't particularly prolific, the Beeches were the lowest of the alpha-omega class. Located somewhere between a Maidenhair and the betas that burned the leaves in the field every fall, they didn't even live in town but rather in a cottage on the fringe.

They'd never visited Cypress House nor Sage House. I don't think my father would even acknowledge Sally's father, Kurt, if he passed him on the street. The Beech children rarely went to school, and the rumor was that Sally, the eldest, couldn't even recite the basic concepts of the Order.

I remember thinking she was very pretty, though, with bright red hair and mischievous green eyes.

She was always leading a pack of Beech children around town, playing with them in the park or buying them ice cream cones. I'd watch them longingly as I silently followed my mother on shopping trips, frequently dreaming of how wonderful it must be to be a Beech.

To be so unrestrained ... so wild.

But in the end, I wouldn't have traded places with Sally Beech for anything.

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon when she had the bad luck to pass Geoffrey Bristol on Dogwood Street.

Something happened—maybe she caught his scent on a stiff breeze or glimpsed his face in just the right light—but she called to him right in front of Coriander's, Goldenrod's only department store.

Half of the town's most influential omegas were going in and out of the store and saw it happen with their own eyes. There was no way to hide it—Sally was Geoffrey's fated mate.

Geoffrey was mortified. Abandoning Sally on the street, he ran straight to my father.

I was eleven and stood outside the door to my father's study, listening to Geoffrey describe the incident in a panicked voice, begging my father for advice on how to handle his misfortune.

“Can we ... send her to the Home?”

Peeking through a crack in the door, I could see him leaning over a chair in front of my father's desk, sweat pouring down his forehead.

I knew he was talking about The Home for Unwanted Omegas that was recently built on the fringe.

Cyrus Beebalm, the Administrator of the Order, had given a big speech about the Home a couple weeks before. He said that it was more compassionate to send unwanted omegas there rather than releasing them over the fence.

“No, my boy,” my father said in a silky voice—his *I have an idea* voice. “An alpha will never truly rid himself of an unwanted omega that way. I know many don’t want to hear it these days, but the Home’s no good for an alpha’s prospects. We have to get rid of her—*release* her. That’s your only chance.”

As Geoffrey groaned in despair, I yelped and ran to my room, hiding in my window seat for the rest of the afternoon. I didn’t want to think about happy Sally Beech being released to the other side of the fence, left to whatever dangers and evils lurked over there.

All because she was inconvenient to an alpha with aspirations.

But she was gone after that. The next time I saw the gaggle of red-headed Beech children at the park, they were being led around by Sally’s sister.

And no other omega called to Geoffrey Bristol again.

I think of Geoffrey and Sally as Lyn brushes my hair. She’s not going easy on my scalp now. It should be painful, but I don’t feel anything.

Why would I be released?

While we were in the truck, Camilla said Wyatt's mother, Isolde, was responsible, but that's just absurd.

But then again, there was something in your tea, a small voice reminds me, and who knows more about herbs than Isolde?

Something inside me immediately shuts down at the thought. It's impossible—Isolde was my mother's best friend.

Isolde Sage is the epitome of the Order, my mother's voice reminds me. As omegas of a certain standing, we must follow her lead in all things.

And when Camilla called to Wyatt, Isolde embraced her as Wyatt's mate completely, taking Camilla on extravagant shopping trips and holding an elaborate promise party and ceremony for the new couple.

I suffered silently—or mostly silently—through it. All because my mother told me Isolde was right in all things, and who was I to question her?

“Did you know my family?” I ask Lyn quietly, snapping out of my memories. “The Cypresses? My mother's name was Eleanor Lily before she called to my father, Anthony. They both passed away, though...”

“I knew them,” she says firmly, pulling on a knot particularly hard.

“Were you friends with them?” I ask tentatively, my head yanking back.

“No,” she says, pulling through my tangles with a renewed roughness. “We didn’t run in the same circles.”

I nod, my eyes blurring as I stare at the bright carpet. “Why were you released?”

“My alpha didn’t want me, Elizabeth,” she says roughly. “I’m sure you’ve heard of that happening?”

“Yes.”

She pauses and then sighs. “Outside alphas used to forage the woods around the fence,” she explains softly. “Looking for released omegas. When I was released, they saved me—*Pike* saved me.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what else to say.

She seems to finally be done with her tortuous combing, at least. After working the strands of my wet hair together in a long braid, she ties the end with a forest green ribbon and sets it gently on my shoulder.

“There!” She pats me on the back in finality, a forced brightness to her voice.

As we both stand to face each other, I see that her eyes are red like she’s been crying. My heart drops. I didn’t realize...

“Are you all right, Lyn?”

She smiles and nods tightly, her hand coming up to rest on my cheek.

“How old are you, Elizabeth?” she asks, almost in a whisper.

“Nineteen.”

She sighs mournfully. “So young... Do you know—” She shakes her head, cutting herself off.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She laughs nervously, waving her hand dismissively. “Go to bed. I’m sure you’re ready to make yourself a nice nest. I’ll be here in the morning with some breakfast.”

“Thank you for your assistance tonight, Lyn.”

She flashes a wobbly smile before wordlessly walking out the door, closing it behind her.

When she’s gone, I look around the darkened room, my gaze settling longingly on the bed. It looks so warm and welcoming. As soon as I called to Rill, I longed for a nest ... and this looks perfect.

Even if Orion shows up tonight to rescue me from this wretched fate, I don’t think I’d be able to stop myself from creating a special place for me and my mate here.

Even if he’s the wrong mate.

This bed’s my nest, I decide immediately.

Picking up the lamp, I pad across the rug and stare at the thick, quilted blanket before setting the lamp on a stack of books.

Before I know what I’m doing, I sink down on the soft mattress on my hands and knees, crawling to the stack of pillows at the head of the bed.

As soon as I catch his scent on the linens, I'm overwhelmed with warm exhaustion. I haven't had a proper night's sleep in days, and this feels almost too perfect. I turn and bury my face into the soft cotton pillow—his herby scent is so strong.

I think of poor Sally Beech again. She barely had the chance to acknowledge her mate. She never got to build him a nest or surround herself with his scent.

Maybe I should be easier on him while I'm here—make an effort to be ... sweeter? Although, "sweet" has never really been my style. I'll try tomorrow, I decide. Unless Orion gets here sooner.

Surely, Rill wouldn't come here tonight, though? It wouldn't be at all proper. There's too much that's supposed to happen before I welcome him into my nest. I'd have to follow the Order and do everything correctly.

The worry gnaws at me but doesn't stop my eyes from fluttering. As soon as I allow them to fully close, I know I won't be getting up again.

I distantly think I should at least figure out how to turn the lamp off before my mind goes blank.

Mighty

Rill

Once, when Da had too much sun water, he told me how I got my name.

I was born small, he said, but not small enough to spare my mother. She died of an omega's pains soon after I came into this world.

But she held me right before she succumbed and made Da promise to look out for me. I was too small, she said, like the tiniest trickle in the most insignificant rill. Not at all like Da, who was powerful and mighty like the Roanoke River after a heavy storm. I'd need all the help I could get if I were to thrive in this great and terrible world.

Da's voice slurred as he told me the story. His eyes drooped, and his lips looked like they were having trouble touching each other.

“I would have left you at the gates of Mercy City,” he told me, taking another slug of sun water. “And let the pigeons do what they wanted with you. But my omega asked me not to, and I’d do anything for her.”

Needless to say, I always knew where I stood with him.

And now, I’m not small or insignificant. I’m powerful and mighty. Like the Roanoke River after a heavy storm. Like my da.

But as I slouch deeper in my large wooden chair, I’ve never felt smaller or closer to my namesake.

As soon as we got home, I took the pussy’s way out. Abandoning my mate when she didn’t act exactly like I wanted her to. Making her someone else’s problem as I escaped to my comfort zone.

My throne room, as it were.

A dull oak bar lines one of the brick walls of the long, drafty room, the words *Crescent Rock Mercantile* splayed in chipped, colorful paint on the ancient brick. Sometime after Crescent Rock was a functioning coal town and before it was abandoned to my ragtag group of alphas, the Mercantile served as some sort of trendy watering hole for travelers.

Now, it’s our gathering place.

When the guys and I showed up here tonight, there were already a few alphas sitting around one of the many tables scattered around the spacious room, anxious to hear tales of our travels.

We've been sitting here for longer than we should, swigging cloudy pint glasses of hoppy, home-brewed sun water while Nick, Mud, and Run told stories of my supposed ineptitude with my omega.

"You should have seen her reaction when she realized Rill was her mate." Run's deep guffaw snaps me out of my thoughts. "She wanted to run for the hills."

I shrug, carefully fixing a smirk on my face. "I got her right where I want her, brother. Don't you worry about that."

"Oh yeah?" Run says gruffly, reaching up a meaty paw to hide his smile. "So, you *want* her spittin' in your eye?"

"He wants her spit somewhere, but not his eye," Nick quips with a slanted smile, causing them to all howl with glee.

Nick's young, bearded face brightens at their reaction. He only recently got his legs and started running with the hunters. In fact, this was his first scouting trip. I've tried to tell him they're not all this exciting, but he won't hear of it.

So, I don't bust his balls, just shake my head and laugh along. Lucky for them, I'm no vainglorious peacock who smacks around my subordinates for a few harmless jokes.

"Well, what are you gonna do with her?" Mud's gruff voice rises up as the laughter dies down, his dark scowl erasing my good humor.

Mud's an odd duck. He's new to Crescent Rock, and he's not as comfortable with the rest of us as we are with each other.

I've always thought he seemed like the kind of alpha who'd seen some shit, though, so I dismissed his strange attitude.

"Meaning?" I arch my unscarred brow.

"I'm guessin' you'll fuck her, and then what?" He leans closer to me, tapping his dirt-rimmed fingernails on the rough-grained wood.

I shrug. "Probably fuck her again."

Laughter erupts again and Run slaps me on the back. But I keep my steady gaze trained on Mud's humorless eyes as the laughter fades again.

"Out west, if we find an omega, we let *all* the alphas have a go with her." He mutters the words darkly under his breath.

The last titters of laughter turn to silence, and the hair on the back of my neck rises. I take a deep breath and push the tight anger in my chest outward, sending a shudder through the room and shaking the glasses on the table.

Complete silence descends, the laughter sucked out of the room.

"Well, that's not how we do things 'round here, brother." My voice is quiet and deathly serious as I lean back in my chair and bite my lip softly with my fangs.

It doesn't take him long to flinch. His nostrils flare as his eyes dart around the room. His yellowed fangs bite his bottom lip as the scent of challenge settles over the group, thick and sharp like fresh blood.

I hear Run hiss next to me. He's never liked Mud, but to be fair, he doesn't like many alphas lately. His mate, Jade, is pregnant with their child. I almost had to knock him out to get him away from her side to go on this scouting mission with me.

Mud ignores Run, obviously not as worried about him as he is about me.

"It's been a long week." I don't take my eyes off Mud as I set a hand on Run's shoulder. "Tempers are high. Let's not do anything we'll regret."

Mud curses softly and looks down at his hands, muttering something about "real alphas." Before I can respond to the insult, though, I'm interrupted by the sharp crashing sound of glass hitting the hardwood floor behind me.

Dirk, Nick's brother, who we'd sent behind the bar for refills, is scowling at the ground where he just dropped about five glasses of sun water.

The bloody anticipation for a fight evaporates as everyone laughs again and ribs Dirk, and Nick rushes over to help his brother. Well, everyone's laughing except Mud, who uses the distraction to rise silently from his seat and slip out of the room without another word.

I catch Run's gaze as Mud disappears out the swinging door, exchanging a silent agreement to keep an eye on that alpha. We've had guys who couldn't hack living in this place before. It's not in an alpha's nature to play nice, after all, but what can I say? We're an evolved bunch.

After the ruckus from the spilled drinks dies down, everyone officially decides it's too damn late. The young guys go back to their bunks, and Run, apparently anxious to get back to Jade, bounds for the door without a word edgewise.

And now, I'm alone.

Mud's bullshit aside, as much as I hate to admit it, they're all right—I *don't* know how to handle my mate. She doesn't like me, and to tell the truth, I'm not too sure about her.

Sure, she's beautiful, and I don't want that asshole, Mud, anywhere near her. But she can barely take care of herself. I survived five years in the Mercy City lockup. In the ten years since I escaped, I've challenged men with guns and bombs, fought hundreds of alphas, and had a face-off with a fucking bear—but one prim, helpless omega, and I'm flummoxed.

Yet here I am.

Leaving my empty glass on the table, a surge of purpose thrums through me as I rise, a bit wobbly on my feet, to make my way to the door.

The frigid air tickles my face as I stumble onto the road, my footsteps crunching on the crumbling asphalt as I walk toward my house. The rain's stopped, and now it's quiet and clear. I almost wish I was still camping out under the stars—this would be the perfect night for it.

But at the sight of the unguarded house, a dower sense of disapproval settles over me. Anyone could have snuck in here and had his way with her. I think of Mud's pissy face and his

rough, dirty hands. I'll have to make sure that if I'm not around, someone's keeping an eye on her.

But the house is quiet when I push the door open and step into the entryway. Right away, I know that she's here and she's fine. Not only can I smell her up there—she must have taken a bath because her scent is even more vivid—but I feel like a little piece of my heart is being yanked toward her.

She's upstairs in *my* bed. That tiny bit of heart thumps wildly at the thought, and I float up the stairs like she's made of metal and I'm one of those bright red, U-shaped magnets.

When I reach the bedroom door, I stand for a few seconds, listening to the silence as my heart threatens to burst from my chest.

Pushing the door open softly, I see there's only one lamp lit, sitting precariously on a stack of hardback books by the bed. I stagger toward her, the old floorboards creaking under my feet, and stare in awe at her face under the dreamy glow of the lamp. She shines through the darkness like the north star on a clear July night.

Damn, she's pretty.

Her lush, dark lashes flicker over her radiant skin, and her pink lips pucker out gently as if she's pouting in her sleep. I breathe out a laugh. Even in her sleep, she's angry about something.

Long strands of her long, dark hair frame her face, making her look young and innocent.

She *is* young and innocent, and she's lying in my bed so bright, shiny, and new.

My bed.

Something in me roars to life at the thought, and without thinking, I pull my shirt over my head and throw it aside, my pants following quickly behind.

I haven't bathed and probably smell like cow dung and piss, but it doesn't stop me from crawling over the soft mattress to lie next to her. She's on top of the covers and wearing my thick terry cloth robe.

I press the length of my body against hers. I'm hot and hard as my hand comes up to hover over her face.

Lightly, I drop it to graze her cheek, my rough fingers catching on her smooth, silky skin.

She moans and tilts toward me, her call humming in her chest. The sound wraps like a vise around my heart ... and my cock.

My mate. I've waited for her for so long.

I move my face to her neck and inhale deeply. My eyes roll back in my head like I'm drunk on her hot floral scent, and my lips graze her skin, tasting her essence mixed in with a tang of soap.

At the feel of her, I can't help but scrape my fangs gently on her neck. The need to mark her, to make her mine, pulses through me as my hand travels down her lithe back, attempting to cup her backside through the thick robe.

It's much too thick to get the feel of her, and I gently nudge her closer—like we're one. Every particle of my body throbs with need.

This is what it's like to have a mate? This perfect? This strong? I'm just lying next to her, barely touching her, and it's more intense than it's ever been with anyone else.

She moans softly, turning to her side to writhe gently against me, the robe slipping to reveal a pert breast topped with a dark pink nipple. It calls out to me.

Blood rushes to my cock, and I can't help myself. I move my head down to take her in my mouth, my lips pulling the heavy silk in a long drawl.

She moans softly and arches toward me, but mid-motion, something seems to snap inside her. She jolts and goes stiff, her hands rising to press against my face.

“What...?” she mumbles slowly as she begins to move away from me. “This isn't a dream, is it?”

Aw, shit.

“No, love.” My voice comes out even more rugged and coarse than usual. It also seems to disintegrate any vestige of the magic between us.

She scrambles off the bed, staring at me with wide, horror-stricken eyes.

“What are you doing in my nest?” Her voice is higher and more frantic as she takes a step backward, bumping into a stack of books that tumble to the floor.

Hoisting myself up by my elbow, I fix my face into its usual cocky smile in an effort to hide my disappointment.

“I hate to break it to you, Liz,” I tell her with mock sorrow.
“But your nest is *my* bed.”

6

Wretched

Elizabeth

My entire life has been defined by the need to find the perfect mate.

He'd be strong, powerful, and cunning—not crude or impulsive. He'd have polish ... manners.

My mother told me that the way to attract the perfect alpha was to become the perfect omega.

A Cypress omega must stay proud, unsullied, and quiet, she told me. The perfect alpha won't accept anything less.

I did my best.

I stayed home when it rained. I brushed my long hair a hundred strokes on each side. I took tiny, delicate bites of food. I *never* looked an alpha in the eye.

So, it's no surprise that I have so much bitterness welling up inside of me as I take in my fated mate. A mate who obviously

has no desire to maintain even the slightest bit of order and decorum.

“Well, pardon me for assuming you might possess a sliver of decency and avoid sneaking into my nest uninvited.”

I say the words with a confidence I don't feel. In truth, my legs are weak and wet, and my resolve is delicate as I cross my arms to pull the robe tighter.

My call is buzzing away merrily, though, pleased with my mate's attention but also mildly disappointed that he's not ... *touching me* anymore.

I was dreaming of welcoming him into my nest before I woke up.

I never quite understood what happens after an alpha enters an omega's nest, so I was surprised that in my dream, I knew exactly what to do. He pressed his hot, strong body against mine, tickled me with his breath and his scent, and touched my skin with his coarse hands and his silky mouth... *All* of my skin.

It felt magnificent.

It wasn't until I felt his mouth on my breast that I realized it wasn't a dream at all. He was *here*, in my nest—*touching* me.

And now, his dark eyes are narrow as he pulls himself up on the bed, his knees sinking into the mattress. His black hair hangs to his wide shoulders, and his scarred chest has a dark, hairy trail leading down toward...

I quickly pull my eyes up, settling them safely on his chest. Even in the dim light, I can see *that* part of him jutting forward, long and proud. I felt it when he was lying next to me, too. It's so big. I may not know much, but I know *that's* supposed to go inside me.

"This *is* my bed," he says calmly in his scratchy, rough voice, the slick between my legs growing at the sound. "And you seemed okay with me being there a few minutes ago."

"Well, I'm *not* okay with it now." I hold my breath and keep my eyes glued to his face. I really wish he'd put some clothes on.

But he only tilts his head, studying me.

"What did you think would happen?" he asks, his voice tinged with amusement. "You could tell this was my room, right? You could scent me?"

"Yes." I spit out the word tightly, holding my head high, annoyed to acknowledge he's right—I did curl up on a bed that's ostensibly his, after all. "Regardless, I've claimed this as my nest, and you're not invited into it."

"What?" He bursts out a laugh, his mouth agape. "What kind of fuckery is that?"

I press my lips together, holding firm. "An alpha is not permitted into an omega's nest until she formally invites him," I recite sternly. "It's the Order. Now, please remove yourself from my nest and this room."

“Well, that’s some bullshit.” He guffaws loudly. “I’ve never heard anything like that before.”

“Please refrain from using such language in my company.” I try to stay calm and keep my voice measured, but it’s becoming harder. My last words come out a bit high-pitched.

He rolls his eyes. “I’ll talk any way I damn well please,” he spits out. “I’ve been with my share of omegas, and I’ve never once been issued a *formal invitation* into their beds. I look at her, she looks at me, and we go at it.”

My heart stops beating, and I pull back like he slapped me. “You’ve ... been with other omegas?”

He shrugs. “Of course.”

A piece of me shrivels up and dies. It’s amazing that there was anything left of me to feel affront or disgust, but it was there, and now it’s gone.

I’ve been very accepting of what’s happened so far, really.

I recognized Rill as my mate. Who am I to argue with my call, after all?

I presented myself to him and let him take me to this ... dirty, disgusting place after he beat my brother to a pulp and then proceeded to drag me through the woods for endless days of torture.

And while I’m still counting on Orion to rescue me from this miserable place, I’ve done everything my mate’s asked of me.

But *this* I cannot abide—it’s a step too far.

“How is that even possible? You’re only able to ... *be* with your fated mate!” If I thought my voice was high-pitched before, it can now only be described as shrill.

He bursts out a short laugh before fixing his face into a serious expression, but his mouth is still battling with itself not to smile.

“That’s ... not true, Liz. I can fuck and knot anyone I want. But you’re the only one who can carry my children. Them’s the brakes.”

Disgusted, I press my lips closed and turn away. Tears burn the back of my eyes, and a lump rises up my throat even as my call hums away happily, pleased to still see him in my nest and to have his scent wafting around me. She has no idea that he’s betrayed us.

But I only give myself two seconds to cry before I take a deep breath and turn back around. Bracing myself for the sight of his strong body and that long ... *thing* jutting out, I keep my eyes focused on his scarred face.

I don’t know how he got that scar, I think viciously, but I’m sure he deserved it.

“Get out.” I spit the words out at him like venom.

He shakes his head in disbelief, still holding that mocking smile on his face. I wish I could smack it off.

“This is my town, Liz. My house. My room. And my bed.” His dark eyes spark in the dim light, challenging me. “I’m not going *anywhere*.”

“That’s not yours anymore.” I point to the bed roughly. “It’s my nest. And you’re not invited into it. In fact, I don’t want you anywhere near it. So, *get out.*”

The seconds tick by as we stand there, eyes locked. I keep my gaze fixed on his face, my resolve painted plainly across my features. There’s no way I’m going to budge on this.

“Make me,” he enunciates softly. His lips are full and stubborn as he levels a gaze at me, but I see something in his eyes. A flicker. He’s worried. He doesn’t like this any more than I do.

That’s all I need.

“I’d rather not stoop so low.” I make a concerted effort to keep my voice even, but there’s a slight tremor that I hope he doesn’t catch. “But if you won’t get out, then *I* will. I’m going home.”

I turn on my heels, my long braid swinging as I start stomping toward the bathroom to gather my ruined clothing. I think I’m actually going to make it, too, before I’m pulled back swiftly, landing against Rill’s hard, bare chest.

Releasing an inelegant huff of surprise at the feeling of his hot skin, I immediately start squirming, trying to get free.

But my fight dies away quickly. When it comes down to it, he’s my alpha. And as much as my brain urges me to get away from him, my body only wants him to bring me closer.

His herby scent fogs my brain as I stop moving. Slickness drips down my legs, and I feel heated and angry. He’s so

strong, and his fingers dig through the robe into my upper arms.

I strain my neck to look up at him from where my head hits his chest. I'm not short, but he towers over me by at least a foot.

"Let go of me. I don't want you to touch me." I'm standing perfectly still, my call singing happily. It picks up its pace, urging me to rub myself against him and breathe him in deeply.

He chortles loudly before lowering his face to my neck. My knees knock as he inhales and exhales deeply, his breath hot on my skin.

"You smell like *heat*," he snarls into my neck, his fangs grazing my skin and catching slightly. "And that heat belongs to *me*. So, no, Elizabeth, you're not going anywhere without me ever again."

I twist around to stare at him. His dark eyes are blazing, his fangs biting into his bottom lip, and his long scar glows against his pale skin in the dim light.

I've never heard him sound like this before. His voice is always teasing and mocking like the whole world is a joke. But this ... it's dangerous.

"Then stay away from my nest." I parse out the words quietly and slowly, my bluster deflated a bit. But I don't look away from his face, my eyes straining.

Growling, he releases me roughly, and I stumble on my feet, catching myself before I fall. The second I'm free, I long to be closer to him.

"They really fucked you up in Goldenrod, you know that?" he barks out roughly.

"I don't know what you mean." I straighten my posture and hold my chin high.

"I mean, you're messed up in the head." He twirls a finger around his ear. "Crazy."

"We do things right in Goldenrod," I say sternly. "We have the Order."

"*Please*. You're religious fanatics." He sneers with disgust. "Ignoring reality in favor of your ridiculous rules. None of that matters here. That's not how the world works."

"The Order matters to me," I say fervently. "And I'd rather be dead than mate with an animal like *you*."

He cuffs his chin with his big, scarred hand and looks away. When he glances back at me, his face holds its usual mocking glint.

"You'll relent, omega." He fixes his dark glare on me.

"Orion will be here soon," I say with confidence. "He'll bring me home."

He shakes his head. "I told you—where you go, I go." He takes a step closer, a wicked glint in his dark eyes. "You're mine. Forever."

I wobble back a few inches, half hoping that he'll grab hold of me again and half hoping the floor will open up and swallow us both.

But in the end, after one last disgusted sneer, he stomps out of the room, slamming the door behind his glorious, naked behind, and leaving me alone.

I should be relieved, but I only feel lost and empty. I don't move right away, and when I finally do, it's just to look around desperately. I'm searching for something to throw at the door, I realize. I want to hurt something of his just like he's hurt me.

But I don't do anything like that. Instead, I wrap my arms around my middle and kneel over, releasing a wretched, painful sob. Falling to the carpet, I stare at the swirls of subtle color in the red weave and remember another bit of wisdom from my mother.

Don't be lulled into complacency by your pretty face, Elizabeth. It's only as pretty as your words and actions. The second you slip will be the beginning of your wretchedness. A Cypress earns her bread.

I curl up into the fetal position, moaning loudly as my call throbs through my body with longing, missing him and hating him in equal measure. I'll be better tomorrow. I just have to convince him that we must do things in accordance with the Order.

The right way.

He'll understand.

That will buy me some time until Orion gets here, at least, and then he'll take me home, and I can be Elizabeth Cypress again.

When the tears finally stop, I rise to my feet and make my way slowly to my nest. I only cry a little more before I'm asleep again, leaving my wretchedness for another day.

The Cream in My Coffee

Rill

The watery morning light may as well be a sledgehammer to my senses.

Rolling over to my side, I breathe into the crease of the musty couch as the ache in my head pounds a staccato rhythm through my body.

I can sense Liz still sleeping upstairs. Her presence is a warm, golden glow, holding me hostage.

All night long, I dreamt of her. In one dream, she was a mermaid twirling through the water, the tendrils of her long, wet hair slipping between my fingers. In another, she was running through the forest in springtime, her hair braided with flowers and her blue eyes flashing with mischief as she glanced back at me.

But now, I'm awake. It's a frigid December morning, and I'm sleeping alone on a dusty couch with a hard cock, blue balls, and a sore head.

I messed that up. Big time.

I knew I needed to handle her delicately. But, in my very weak defense, I'm not a *delicate* alpha.

Although the omegas I've known were few and far between, none of them were anything like *her*—fragile and needy.

I'll have to protect her and keep her safe forever. And for someone who's always lived his life unafraid of consequences, that's a hard pill to swallow.

A heavy burden.

She's my *mate*, though.

And instead of following my instincts and wooing her gently, I got shitfaced on sun water and rubbed myself all over her like some sort of juvenile alpha.

I lost control, which I seem to do a lot with her.

Letting out a loud groan, I jolt off the couch with a start. I won't roll around and feel sorry for myself all day. There were too many times I could have done that in the past, and did I lower myself? No, I forged on.

My scar throbs at the thought, my fingers coming up to delicately touch the raised skin. It's always bad in the morning, especially when I end up sleeping on it.

I twitch my nose and blow out my cheeks in an attempt to loosen the tight skin as I stumble toward the hall bathroom's rust-rimmed toilet.

I wince, delicately lifting my heavy, hard cock. As my bladder empties, I bring my hand up to the wall, leaning my weight against the faded wallpaper as I let out a loud, frustrated moan that causes me to release a strong burst of pressure. The old house trembles around me, dust raining from the ceiling.

Feeling marginally better after the piss and moan, I shuffle into the kitchen, cringing when I see the state of it.

This place is fucking mess.

Number six, Railway Row probably wasn't much to look at in its heyday. And now, after years of being exposed to the likes of me, it's in piss-poor shape.

The countertops are chipped and greasy, the tile floor is broken and coated in a thick layer of dirt and grime, and the appliances are ancient and useless blocks of metal. It has a working gas stove, though, which I don't hesitate to waste on boiling a pot of water for coffee.

Like most things in Crescent Rock, coffee is hard to come by. But a few months ago, I lucked out and swiped a bag of beans from a truck. I've tried to use them sparingly, but if any morning called for a strong cup of coffee, it's this one.

The nutty, caramel scent fills the air as I methodically grind the beans. The scent and the motion are both so consuming

that I barely hear Pike clear his throat behind me.

“Hey, Pike.” My voice is gritty from disuse as I glance back at him.

“Boss,” he greets me as he stomps in like an oaf, sliding into one of the kitchen chairs before pulling a sealed jar of milk from his deep coat pocket. “Pour me a cup of that, will ya? Bess was generous this morning.”

I laugh despite my bad mood. That cow was the best thing we ever swiped. It’ll be a shame to slaughter her for steaks one day. “Comin’ right up.”

I’ve known Pike longer than I’ve known anyone else. He and Da were kids together at an alpha settlement down south, and when my father moved north to be closer to my mother’s people, they never lost touch.

Every time Pike stopped by our little farmhouse, he’d have a book and a conversation for me. There wasn’t really anyone to talk to on the farm, just my surly, drunken da, the cows, pigs, and chickens.

I don’t know what would have come of me without Pike’s influence. Maybe I’d be a mean, useless drunk like my da—who’s to say? But those books and conversations with him were my safe haven. They gave me the knowledge and self-awareness I needed to rise above everything that came next.

After Da died and the pigeons took me to Mercy City, Pike was the first alpha I sought out when I escaped. Ever since, he’s always been right next to me, and somewhere along the

way, as the changes Mercy City inflicted upon me became more apparent, he started standing behind me and calling me “boss.”

That was also when we started collecting alphas like they were lost puppies. We’d come across a lone, wild alpha, and after we fought and sparred a bit, he’d ultimately decide to stick with us. We found Run, Nick, Dirk, and Tor that way ... all of them, really.

For years, our group got bigger as we traveled around the region, stealing from pigeons and getting shot at more times than I can count.

But one snowy evening about nine years ago, we came across Crescent Rock. I was immediately struck by the rows of cold, empty houses looming in the dark. Shelter was hard to come by. We decided to set up camp for the night, and we never left.

“So, how’d things go with your lady love last night?”

Pike’s gravelly voice brings my grinding motions to a halt. I press my lips together as I dump the fresh grounds into the unwashed coffee press. When I turn around, I see his face fighting with the impulse to laugh.

“Not great.” I pour hot water into the press, shaking my head absently. “Not great at all.”

He can’t stop the laughter now—it bursts out in a sputter that strings together a long chuckle. Once he finally gets a hold of

himself, he leans back and wipes his hands over his mouth as he considers me.

“Well, I can’t say that surprises me.”

“Hey, I do just fine with the omegas,” I say caustically, remnants of last night’s conversation drifting back to me. “That one’s just fucked in the head.”

He chuckles again before the smile drops off his face. “You know, Lyn told me that Goldenrod has a way of doing things—*customs*—so our lovely Liz may have *expectations*.”

I scoff loudly. “Rules? *Order*? From those people? You don’t say.”

“It might be smart to give a little? Make her feel like this is happening in a way that she’s used to?”

“No. I’m not following *the Order*.” I sneer at the very thought of it. “She’s not in *Goldenrod* anymore. She’ll need to come to terms with that sooner or later.”

“Ah, well.” Pike sighs and shrugs, obviously giving up. “As much as I enjoy lecturing you on your love life, that’s not why I’m here.”

I look up at him expectantly as I set a cup of coffee on each side of the kitchen table and drop into the other chair opposite him.

“Tor was guarding the east perimeter last night and caught wind of a disturbance,” he continues. “Don’t know if it’s pigeons or not. Can’t smell ’em very well, but they have ways of covering that up.”

“No, it’s probably Liz’s idiot brother.” That’s just what I need—to kick that pansy’s ass again.

“You don’t think he went home with his tail between his legs?”

Liz’s brother was ... shall we say, *resistant* to the idea that his sister be mated with scum like me. I put him in his place. But, as someone with the same fanaticism for “order” as Liz, I doubt he’ll give up that easily.

I’m not worried, though. An alpha like him, his senses dulled by generations of disuse, isn’t a threat to me.

I wave my hand dismissively. “Nah, something tells me we haven’t seen the last of him.”

“And you’re not worried about the pigeons?” Pike presses, his brows low over his gray eyes. “There may be news that Liz and her friend were released? You know they don’t let omegas slip through their fingers without a fight.”

There’s a shade of alarm in his voice, and I know he’s thinking of Lyn.

When the pigeons get an itch for an omega—especially one from Goldenrod—they don’t give up that easily. I know more than anyone the lengths they’ll go to if they don’t find what they’re looking for.

Lyn’s not Pike’s fated mate. She had one of those in Goldenrod. He got rid of her, but I imagine she’s better off without the bastard. Pike rescued her from a terrible fate, and

although they could never have children, I can't imagine an alpha and omega better suited to one another.

One night, when we were drinking, I asked Pike if he regretted never finding his *fated* mate. Sure, what he has with Lyn is special, but an alpha grows up with the prospect of life with his fated omega—the most fulfilling relationship he'll ever have, and the mother of his children. With omegas so rare, it's not always likely that an alpha will find her, but to give up on the prospect ... that's a bitter pill to swallow.

When I first asked the question, I thought he was going to hit me. I wouldn't put it past him—he's done it before. But he resisted and shook his head wistfully as he stared down into his whiskey.

"Rilly," he said. "She's the cream in my coffee. Without her, life is bitter and pointless. So, no, I've no regrets."

I reach for the milk and look Pike straight in the eye.

"I dare them to try and take my omega away from me," I say, pouring a bit of milk into my coffee. "And something tells me that Wyatt alpha wouldn't take too kindly to that either."

Liz was dumped in that truck with an omega called Camilla—another mouthful of a name—a tiny thing with the rosy scent of pregnancy around her and a mark on her neck.

Camilla's mate, Wyatt, showed up with Liz's brother to "save" them. Unlike the brother, *he* was an interesting alpha. He was strait-laced and spoke in the same nasally Goldenrod

accent as the rest of them, but when he used a heavy dose of pressure to kill a pigeon, it blew me away.

I'd always heard that the alphas in Goldenrod didn't use their pressure—they'd forgotten it after years in their gilded cage—and I was pleasantly surprised to see him wield it so handily.

So, wherever he and his mate are now, I've no doubt that he's keeping her safe from the pigeons.

“What are you two gabbing about?”

Pike and I look up to see Lyn, grinning at us from the doorway, holding a tray topped with a steaming pot of tea, a few slices of bread, and a dish of butter and preserves.

“The lady herself,” I declare as I jump from my chair, my arms spread wide to wrap her in a hug.

She stops me, holding the tray in front of her purposefully and blocking me from getting too close.

“No. You smell like a swamp.” She pauses and frowns. “And you kept Pike away for far too long.”

“What can I say?” I flash a roguish grin. “That alpha loves the road.”

Pike just grunts and rises from his chair to take the heavy tray from her arms. She looks up at him with a grateful smile, but as her eyes settle on the kitchen, her smile fades.

“Oh, Rill. I had no idea it was this bad...” she murmurs under her breath.

“What?” I ask, looking around as I fall back into my chair, my legs spread casually and my brow raised.

“This place is a pigsty.”

I shrug. “Yeah, I noticed that, too.”

“Elizabeth will not approve,” she says portentously.

“Well, she’s the lady of the house. She can clean it.” I bark out a loud laugh at the thought of her leaning over, scrubbing my floor.

Lyn shakes her head slowly, her face fixed with dismay. “Rill, you don’t understand. Elizabeth is a *Cypress*. She’s been waited on hand and foot by betas since the day she was born. She is not going to clean your dirty house.”

“If she knows what’s good for her, she will.”

Lyn groans and looks up to Pike for help, but his glowering expression is fixed on me. He’s probably blaming me for getting her upset.

“You’re going to drive her away,” she stresses. “You need to meet her halfway. When you try to mate her, she won’t be receptive unless things happen just so.”

I shift my eyes to the ground guiltily. There’s a heavy pause before I hear Lyn’s alarmed gasp.

“Don’t tell me you went to her nest last night?” she whispers in horror.

My eyes dart up angrily. “Her *nest*? You mean *my bed*?”

She groans and throws her head back dramatically.

“I did pick up that I shouldn’t have done that,” I mutter the words contritely as I lift my hand up to rub my burning neck. “Something about an invitation?”

Her head jolts up. “The call. The nest. The promise party. The ceremony. The invitation.” She marks the words off on her fingers as she says them.

“Huh?”

“First, she calls to you,” she says with exasperation. “Then, she builds a nest for you. Followed by a promise party and a ceremony. Only after the ceremony will she invite you into her nest, and that’s when you’ll be permitted to mate her.”

“That’s the stupidest goddamn thing I’ve ever heard.”

She shrugs. “It’s the Order.”

“So, she wants me to throw her a fucking party? Just because she’s lucky enough to be my mate?”

She doesn’t answer, just glares at me, her eyes burning with accusation before she abruptly turns to take the tray from Pike.

She’s walking through the door frame when she calls out, “You *will* have a promise party for that omega, Rill, or you will never win her over. And you also need to stop cursing ... and clean your house.”

Pike shrugs as we stare at each other in bewilderment as we hear her voice yell out one last time from the hallway.

“And take a bath!”

Pressure

Elizabeth

I wake with a start, the bed shaking under me.

Bolting straight up, I lean back on my hands as the burst of energy stops almost as soon as it begins.

I blink and take in the quiet, sun-draped room. It looks even more cluttered in the daylight, the bright sun showing off the layers of dust that cover some of the books and the small particles floating in the air.

Inhaling deeply, I rub my eyes. I could have sworn that the bed, the room, and the very air around me quivered with a familiar, potent energy.

I know because I felt the same energy about a week ago, standing in a forest clearing, surrounded by poplar and dogwood trees, with Orion, Wyatt, Camilla, and Rill.

After taking us from the truck, Rill led me and Camilla to a spot in the woods. We met up with his barbaric friends there, enjoyed a very uncomfortable fireside chat, and eventually slept on the cold, hard ground.

It's all a blur now. Mostly because, the entire time, I felt so sick and miserable. After months of willing my heat to start, it was finally happening. I was hot, sweaty, and irritated. But it wasn't for Wyatt like I'd always imagined.

No, my body was like a live wire that buzzed with pleasure every time I saw *Rill* or breathed in *his* scent.

I was in denial, though. I wanted no part of a future in which Rill—last name unknown—was my fated mate. The father of my children. The alpha of my dreams.

And the next morning, when Orion and Wyatt arrived, I felt like I was going to keel over. All I could think about were the way Rill's lips moved and the long tendons in his arms as he artfully weaved a story about Goldenrod and the origins of our people.

A story in which alphas were created to be violent, omegas to bear their savage children, and Goldenrod, a cage built by our creators to contain us.

A world in which I knew nothing—in which I *was* nothing.

I couldn't believe that anything he said could possibly be true.

That disbelief lasted all of ten minutes—until *they* showed up.

Men.

Or pigeons, as Rill calls them.

They were small, dressed all in green, the sour scent of fear thick around them. They looked at us like they'd like nothing more than to stomp us out. Like we really were the scourge that Rill described.

I barely had the opportunity to be scared, because Rill almost immediately killed one of them and Wyatt the other. Quickly and mercilessly. They used something they called their "pressure."

It felt like an invisible wave of energy, vibrating through the air toward its target until it snapped, rendering the target unconscious. Immobile. Dead.

Wyatt had shown me that he was capable of that type of thing before. His pressure was brutish, disorganized, and not at all thoughtful.

It left me feeling nothing but a detached fear and a mild disgust.

But Rill's pressure made me feel as though I were on fire. I couldn't fathom what great power he must have inside him that he was able to wield it with such precision and grace.

That's when I first called to him.

And just like that morning, the same need pounds within me. My neck is hot and itchy, and my thighs are wet and sticky as I slowly move them apart, the place between my legs pulsing as my lips curl in disappointment.

I grimace as I look around the room, trying to focus on something, *anything* to divert my attention away from the heat that encases my body at the reminder of this terrible part of my mate—a part that unfortunately draws me to him like a moth to a flame.

Luckily, my search for diversion doesn't last long before one presents itself to me.

“Wonderful, you're awake,” a chipper voice calls out as the door swings open, revealing Lyn standing in the door frame with a tray balanced on one arm.

“Good morning,” I say with as much grace as I can muster, pulling the robe tighter around my body and scooting back into the pillows.

I feel a little disquieted at the sight of her in my current state. But as she smiles brightly and walks into the room, the slight discomfort morphs into a new emotion: raw alarm.

My heart pounds in my throat as I pull the blankets close to me, glaring at her, ready to pounce. My lips curl as I envision myself hitting her. Scratching her. I'd sooner push her out the window than let her get close to this bed.

She seems to understand, though, and her lips quirks up in a knowing smile. After pushing the door closed with her foot, she gently sets the tray on the crowded desk before pulling the chair to the far corner furthest from the bed and gracelessly plopping down on it.

“Don’t worry.” She laughs and holds her hands up in front of her. “I wouldn’t dare touch another omega’s nest. I just want to chat, dear.”

“Thank you.” My back is stiff as I attempt to relax into the pillows. My nostrils flare at the strong, pungent notes of the tea. It doesn’t smell like anything fancy—a basic black tea—but maybe that’s what I need to snap out of this.

I watch her for a beat, but she stays seated and not moving, a serene smile plastered on her face. Finally, the savage feeling inside me ebbs a bit, and not taking my eyes off of her, I rise and shuffle to the desk, pouring the dark liquid into a chipped ceramic teacup.

All of the dishes are speckled beige and sturdy. They look like they’re about a million years old. In addition to the teapot and cup, there’s a plate of fluffy bread and a small bowl holding butter and what looks like strawberry jam.

My eyes flicker to the bread, and I realize I should find it appetizing. I’m not hungry, though, which is odd. I don’t know when I last ate. Maybe it’s my ... current predicament, but the smell of the food turns my stomach.

“Thank you,” I repeat as I sit on the foot of the bed and take a bracing sip of the strong tea, its bitter flavor bursting on my tongue.

She nods and considers me. “How are you feeling?”

I shrug. “Peculiar.”

She nods knowingly. “That’s to be expected. When I started my heat, I thought I’d explode. I put all my energy into sewing my mating ceremony dress. It was the only thing that saved me.”

My head shoots up in surprise. “You and Pike had a mating ceremony?”

Her eyes flick to the ground before she looks up with a brittle smile. “No. Pike’s not my mate.”

“But I thought—” I cut myself off. I don’t know what I thought exactly.

She said her alpha in Goldenrod released her, but I also believed she was mated with Pike—did she call to both alphas? I’d never heard of anything like that happening before.

If an alpha loses his omega—or releases her—another omega *might* call to him eventually. It’s rare, but I’ve heard of it happening. An omega, however, can only call to one alpha in her lifetime.

“I had a mate in Goldenrod,” she says quickly, the words running together. “He was ... not a good alpha. He released me when I never gave him a son.”

“So, you called to two alphas? Pike and this other alpha? I didn’t think that was possible.”

“It’s not. Pike’s not my fated mate.”

“Oh...”

Several awkward seconds pass before I close my mouth quickly, sure that I'm gaping at her like a fish. An omega *being* with an alpha other than her fated mate isn't something I've ever considered before. Lyn seems to read my confusion because her face settles with understanding.

"We're taught many things growing up in a place like Goldenrod," she says slowly as if carefully considering her words. "Some are true and valid, and some ... aren't."

I narrow my eyes. "Like what?"

"Well, for instance, some of the mating rituals that the Golden Alpha and various administrators created," she says, her eyes probing, "aren't practiced outside of Goldenrod. So ... take *that* for what you will."

My expression falls as I again think of the story Rill told us in the woods. One thing he said in particular stuck out for me: at some point in the past, men put thousands of alphas and omegas in fenced-off places similar to Goldenrod.

But the ones in Goldenrod were the only ones who stayed put, who reveled in our lives imprisoned within the confines of the fence. We created rules for ourselves, names, and everything.

The Order.

But that's not what we're taught in Goldenrod. Instead, we learn that The Golden Alpha built the fence and created the Order to contain our people's destructive impulses until we were ready to be free.

So, the truth is not unlike Rill's story, but it has one core difference. A difference that's continued to nag at me since he told the story.

Specifically, that we were put inside the fence by someone other than ourselves. And that just can't be true ... it puts everything I've believed about myself and my world into question.

I swallow the nausea that rises within me at Lyn's reminder and react to the discomfort the only way I know how. The way I was taught.

Pulling back my shoulders and grasping my teacup tightly, I narrow my eyes on her—my "Cypress pose," as my mother always called it. It's what's kept me so safe in Goldenrod all these months without her.

It's important to maintain a sense of superior purpose at all times, her voice reminds me. In both your voice and your posture, always be calm, even, and straight.

"Are you suggesting I relinquish the Order, Lyn?" I ask coldly. *All because you have?* The unvoiced question pulls at my lips.

She pulls back, obviously surprised by my tone. "No, dear, I'd never—"

"You know, I'm a Cypress, right?" My words run together as panic spreads through my body. "The Order is very important to my family—my brother works very closely with the Administrator—and I will not just ... *abandon* it."

She frowns at me for so long that my bluster slowly withers on the vine. Gradually, the look in her eyes transforms from surprise to pity, and my confidence disappears.

This won't work with her, I realize with a dawning panic. She's been away from Goldenrod for too long and doesn't care that I'm a Cypress. She doesn't think I'm better than her and can see through my bravado, my Cypress posture, and my smooth words.

"Of course not, dear," she finally says with a gentle smile. "I'd never suggest such a thing to someone like *you*."

I press my lips together to keep from screaming.

"Let's not talk about such unpleasant topics anymore." She pauses for a beat. "Why don't we go outside for a bit? I promise no one will go near your nest."

"I don't know..." I mutter the words in a cross voice, feeling very small and silly. "Aren't I supposed to stay close to my nest?"

"It's a beautiful day," she says coaxingly, dismissing my concern. "I'd love to introduce you to the other omegas. Believe me, the best way to deal with your heat is with distraction."

My heart jumps, my melancholy momentarily forgotten. Other omegas would be nice. Maybe they're released from Goldenrod, too.

"That might be nice," I say with renewed vigor in my best Elizabeth Cypress voice.

Her lips pull into a relieved smile. “Good.”

But as she starts talking about the town and what clothes I’ll wear, a panic settles over my heart again.

And when she finally rises from her chair with promises to return with clothing, I think longingly of my beautiful bedroom with my large vanity, blue silk comforter, and wide window seat. The memories create a gaping hole of longing inside me. One that feels impossible to fill with this place and these people.

I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get up. I’m not strong enough to go through with this.

But when Lyn comes back with a blue wool dress—quite possibly the ugliest dress I’ve ever seen—it’s surprisingly easy to rise from the covers and leave the room.

The Mercantile Kitchen

Elizabeth

The frigid air is refreshing on my hot, sticky skin as I step outside, squinting and lifting my hand over my face to block out the bright morning sun. But before my eyes have the chance to fully adjust, a hand wraps around my wrist and yanks me forward.

“Come on,” Lyn says urgently as I trip on the crumbling road. “The others should be in the Mercantile by now.”

She’s been yanking me like this ever since I stepped out of the bedroom. I barely got a chance to look around the house as we passed through it. I’d love to explore it a bit, see if there were as many books and interesting things in the rest of the rooms as in the bedroom.

But Lyn won’t allow it, continuously claiming the only thing that will save me from my heat is a steady distraction.

And as we make our way down the main road, my eyes adjusting, I find distractions aplenty as I squint at the sights whizzing by me.

Unfortunately, the benefit of sunlight isn't doing much for Crescent Rock—it's still quite bare and dirty—but I suppose everything in late December looks ugly.

The most remarkable thing about this place, by far, is the sloping rock that hangs over the main road. The sparkling stone lurches forward at a point like the top of a crescent moon. It seems unnatural that such a rock would exist, but even more disconcerting than the shape is the giant, dark cave at its wide base.

Cold gusts of air waft out of it, bringing forth a sharp mineral scent that tingles my nostrils—it's strangely pleasant in an earthy sort of way.

Although I like the smell, the thought of getting too close to the cave sends a shivering sensation down my spine. I'm relieved when Lyn pulls me toward the line of buildings, forcing me to look away.

They're all made from sun-bleached clapboard. Some hold the remnants of peeling paint, and others have smashed-out windows or doors hanging on their hinges. It's hard to believe that anybody actually lives here—everything looks like it's been abandoned for decades.

But as I peek through the narrow gaps between the buildings, my heart leaps at the sight of the grassy field spread out behind them—it's wide open and endless, the yellowed grass

speckled with puddles of mud and spindly trees. It must be overrun with wildflowers when the sun is bright and the air is warm.

Beyond the field, I can see the peaks of the towering mountains surrounding us on all sides, bursting toward the sky at heights I've never fathomed.

I could only ever see mountains in Goldenrod from the Sage's house—it's located on a hill and allows a greater view—and the giant rock formations always seemed so far away, like it would take years to get to them.

Now, it's eerie to stand right in the midst of them. I can't help but wonder if I walk around a specific bend or stand on the highest peak, I'd be able to see Goldenrod laid out below.

The mountains weren't far from us, after all. I may be much closer to home than I thought.

A sharp pang beats through my body. Dropping Lyn's hand, I stop in the road, taking in the view with awe.

"No dilly-dallying," she says sternly, grabbing hold of my hand again. "We're here, and there's work to be done."

That's when I see that we're standing in front of a sprawling two-story building covered in chipped red paint. There's a towering sign over the door that reads "Crescent Rock Mercantile" in elaborate, faded text.

I swallow nervously as I follow Lyn over the wobbling boards of the porch and into a dark, cold room. It's empty with the exception of a smattering of tables and chairs. When the

wooden door slams behind us, I jump a few inches in the air at the loud echo.

But through the darkness, there's light shining from a corner doorway, the telltale sound of female chatter diluting the silence.

I automatically reach up to smooth my hair.

I braided it by myself this time. I know it looks sloppier than when Colleen does it. She always braids it in a clean, straight line that she wraps around my head like a crown. But the unscented soap in Rill's bathroom didn't do me any favors. It left my hair frizzy and my skin dry. Combined with this hideous dress, I'm sure I look a fright.

This isn't at all the type of first impression a Cypress is meant to make.

But Lyn either doesn't notice or ignores my hesitancy as she drags me into an ancient-looking kitchen, her voice loud and bright.

"Good afternoon, ladies. There's someone I'd like you to meet. Elizabeth, this is Rosie, Jade, and Lulu. Girls, this is Elizabeth. Rill's mate."

The three omegas turn around as Lyn points to each of them, and I can immediately tell that they're sisters. They all have the same delicate features but with marked differences.

Rosie looks like the oldest and is the most striking, with aquamarine eyes and bouncy strawberry blonde curls that remind me of Camilla's. She's tall, like me, and I find myself

striking my best Cypress pose as I nod at her shortly and pull my lips into a benevolent smile.

It doesn't work. She looks me up and down, her own smile fading away as she takes me in.

My hand rises up to my hair again at her disappointed face. Before I can respond or apologize for my appearance, though, the next sister pushes her aside.

"I'm Jade." She pushes her dough-covered hand toward me. She has straight straw-blonde hair, slanted blue eyes, and is wearing a giant blue sweatshirt with a faded picture of a smiling lizard.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Jade," I say softly, looking down at her sticky hands before shrugging regretfully.

She scowls before she's pushed out of the way by the next sister, who rushes at me in a blur. I can't help but release an inelegant *oof* as thin arms wrap around my waist, squeezing me tight.

"I'm Lulu," comes a voice from under the mop of bright blond hair resting on my chest, "and you're the most beautiful omega I've ever seen."

I laugh despite myself as Rosie pulls her sister back by the shoulder, her eyes urgently apologetic.

"Sorry," she mutters softly with a slight cringe.

Lulu looks to be about eleven or so, and her blue eyes watch me with awe as Rosie wraps an arm around her shoulder.

“Lulu, all the omegas you’ve ever known are standing in this room,” Jade points out as she turns back to her dough ball. “And I think Rosie is much prettier,” she mumbles under her breath.

Rosie’s indecipherable eyes flick to Jade, but her mouth stays closed in a tight line.

“It’s lovely to meet you all.” My voice is bright despite my wilting heart—not only because of Jade’s rudeness but at the realization that there’s no way these omegas are from Goldenrod.

“Can you girls find some way for Elizabeth to help with dinner?” Lyn asks, glancing over her shoulder, already halfway out the door. “I’ve got business to take care of this afternoon.”

I feel a slight panic as she rushes out of the room, but I pull my lips into my best Cypress smile as I turn toward the other omegas.

Lulu is the only one who smiles back. Rosie looks like she’s about to burst into tears, and Jade doesn’t turn from kneading her dough.

We stand like that for several seconds—no one saying anything—until I realize it will be my unfortunate responsibility to break the ice.

“I love your dress, Rosie.” I motion toward her patched, forest-green wool dress. It’s plain, long-sleeved, and ankle-

length, just like the one that I'm wearing. "The color looks lovely with your hair."

I smile dumbly like some sort of subservient beta, but she just watches me wide-eyed and confused.

"I like yours, too," she finally mumbles in response.

"Oh. *No*. This isn't mine." I laugh, my hand coming up to the scratchy blue bodice. "I'm afraid mine was destroyed on the journey here. None of my clothes were meant for walking for days in the woods."

I continue to laugh uncomfortably at my attempt at self-deprecation, but she just stands there, the blood draining from her face as her eyes fill up with tears.

That's not good. I open my mouth to ask her what's wrong, but I can't quite form the words.

I'm way out of my depth here, I realize. My only close friends in Goldenrod were Stella and Jason.

Stella's as mean as a scalded cat—not one to cry if I said something she didn't like—and Jason thought everything I said was marvelous. No one else in Goldenrod was good enough to be friends with me, so I mostly just ignored them all.

I suppose Camilla and I became friendly when we bonded over being released, but not *that* friendly. Am I saying the wrong thing now? How can I be sure?

"So, how can I help?" I pipe up, pushing my doubt down deep. I pull at my collar as sweat breaks out under it. I'm not

sure if I'm hot due to my heat or embarrassment. "I'm afraid I don't have much experience in the kitchen. We have betas for that at home..."

This seems to be what pushes Rosie over the edge. Her face collapses, and without another word, she rushes past me, knocking into my shoulder as she runs from the kitchen.

"*Shit*," Jade yelps, watching her in alarm before turning to scowl at me. "Lulu, get *her* peeling some potatoes or something. I've gotta go fix Rosie now."

And then she, too, rushes from the room.

"Is everything okay?" I ask slowly, shifting my gaze to Lulu.

She shrugs. "Rosie's been crying since the alphas came home from the scouting trip yesterday."

"Oh, no." I frown at the door. As an omega with a propensity for tears, I understand it to a certain extent. "It's not because of me, is it?"

"Yeah, it's cuz she doesn't like you," she says bluntly as she reaches down, her fingers wrapping around my hand. "C'mon, let's do the potatoes. I don't want Jade to yell at me."

My mouth falls open in shock as I silently let her lead me to a wooden table in the corner, piled high with potatoes of various sizes.

I fall in the chair and watch doubtfully as she reaches for a knife and a potato, her little hands working the skin off at the speed of lightning.

Staring blankly at the second knife in front of me, heat rises up my back and tingles my neck. I have so many questions on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow them. There's no need for me to burden this child with my insecurities.

She manages to snap me out of my self-pitying haze pretty quickly, though. "When are you and Rill gonna have a baby?"

My head jolts up inelegantly. "Er, what?"

"Jade's gonna have a baby," Lulu continues, finishing yet another potato. "She's so fat now." She stretches her hand in front of her stomach.

"Oh, really?" I hadn't noticed Jade was pregnant under the sweatshirt. "So, Jade has a mate?"

"Run," she says distractedly as she moves on to the next potato.

"Oh! I know Run." Pike and Run were the alphas who freed me, Camilla, and Rill, from the truck.

"Yeah, he was telling us last night about how he saved you from the pigeons."

I frown. "Why do you call *them* pigeons?"

"*Damn city birds,*" she says in a sing-song voice. She laughs as she picks up another potato. "Jade said we never called them that until we met Rill. We just called them 'those bastards.'"

"When did you meet Rill?" I pick up the knife in one hand and a potato in the other, looking at them blankly.

“I dunno,” she says absently. “When I was a baby.”

I hum as if that makes perfect sense. “What about Rosie? Does she have a mate?”

“No.” She glances up at me wryly. “Rill was supposed to be her mate. *That’s* why she hates you ... and because you’re so pretty. I heard her crying to Jade about it last night.”

I lower my hands to the table slowly. Is Rosie one of the omegas that Rill’s ... *been with*? Is that why she was so upset that I’m his mate?

A hot panic surges inside me at the thought. I can’t breathe as I stare at the potato and the knife in my hands with blurry eyes.

When I found out Camilla had called to Wyatt, it felt like the world had come crashing down around me. I tried so hard with him, but nothing worked.

It’s crazy to think that I called to Rill with no effort at all.

If what he said in the woods was true, then I called to him because my body recognizes his body as its best option for producing children. It was the same for my parents. Wyatt and Camilla. Run and Jade. Lyn and her mysterious Goldenrod mate ... but not for her and Pike.

Were Rill and Rosie planning on being together like Lyn and Pike? Some sort of faux, childless mates?

Sour bile rises up my throat at the thought. I imagine them kissing, and my fingers wrap tight around the potato, my nails digging into its skin.

There's one way to make this stop, I realize. The *only* way.

I'm about to follow Rosie's path and run out of the room crying when I catch it.

Rosemary. Basil. Thyme. Herbs.

My call reacts immediately, humming loudly in my chest and sending a surge of prickling anticipation to my nerve endings.

I jump as Lulu shrieks in joy and hops from her chair.

I don't want to turn around and look at him. I know when I do, it'll all be over for me. There's no more pining over the perfect mate. The perfect life. *This* is my mate, and I want him with every cell in my stupid, stupid body.

Gripping the potato in one hand and the knife in the other, I brace myself, and I finally turn around.

I almost melt into a puddle at the sight of him. His hair is wet like he's just bathed, and his eyes are bright and clear as he smiles at me in the familiar, mocking way.

He must see something of my indecision, though, because his smile falls from his face almost immediately. As he slowly drops Lulu to her feet, his dark eyes drill in on me, intent and serious.

"Get on out of here, Lulu," he mutters, gently pushing the child toward the door. "I need to be alone with my mate."

I lower my head and step toward him.

Toward my wretchedness.

Sine Qua Non

Rill

As Lulu skips out the door, Liz walks toward me, holding a potato in one hand and a knife in the other. Her call pulses through the kitchen, aligning with the rhythm of my heartbeat like a battering ram.

I don't say anything, but I keep my eyes trained on her, attempting to decipher her.

Figure her out.

Things are different since last night.

I said some things, after all, and so did she. Something tells me I shouldn't tease or provoke her today. It wouldn't do either of us any good.

She's clean and neat, her hair pulled back from her face, and her skin bright and rosy. But her gaze is sharp, and her mouth is set in a grim line. It's like she's trying to decide between throwing the potato at my head or stabbing me in the eye with the knife.

Lucky for me, she does neither. Instead, stopping in front of me, she drops them both on a nearby countertop. Her chest is moving up and down in quick, sporadic breaths, sweat beading on her forehead. She smells earthy and fresh—like her heat and freshly washed omega.

“Peeling potatoes?” I ask stupidly, nodding at the table.

“No.” She shakes her head softly, sticking her lower lip out as she glances down. “I don’t know how.”

I tilt my head, considering her. Who doesn’t know how to peel a potato?

Delicate, I remind myself. She’s delicate.

“How are you feeling?”

She shrugs as she reaches up to wipe sweat from her forehead. “Terrible.”

Staring at her, I’m speechless. Her blue eyes are swimming in emotion, and the pulse in her neck flutters delicately. My eyes are glued to the motion as she swallows deeply, a line of sweat pouring down her neck.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” I ask before I give into the urge to push her down on the table and have my way with her.

Finally, her eyes brighten. “Yes.”

She squints as we walk out the kitchen door and into the bright winter sun. Without thinking, I reach down and weave my fingers through hers gently. They’re small and soft. I don’t think I’ve ever felt skin with so few calluses.

There's a trodden path that leads to the grassy knoll behind the main line of buildings, and about twenty to thirty feet away is a steep cliff that oversees a narrow gorge and the mountains in the distance. It's one of my favorite outlooks around this area.

Letting go of my hand, she drifts like a ghost toward the ledge, wrapping her arms around her waist and staring into the distance. Moving to stand next to her, I watch her perfectly cut profile as strands of hair come loose from her braid and whip around her face.

"It's nice out here," she says stiffly, the wind pushing her salty scent over my face. "I like the view."

"I'd like to fuck you, Liz," I tell her somberly and abruptly.

Her head jolts up to stare at me in accusation. "What kind of a thing is that to say?"

"Do you know what that word means?" I step closer to her. "Fuck?"

She scowls. "Of course, I know what it means. But you shouldn't talk about such things."

"It's fucking!" I lift my arms in the air, perplexed. I want to remind her that fucking me was the whole reason she was created, but even I'm not that stupid. "What else is there to talk about?"

"Plenty," she bites out in a thick voice.

Silence descends again while she stares at the mountains, and I stare at her. Until finally, she lowers her eyelids and

peeks at me from under her lashes.

“Were you born here?” she asks, surprising me. “In Crescent Rock?”

“No.” I can tell she wants me to elaborate, but I don’t. Instead, I step closer to her.

She rolls her eyes. “Well, where were you born?” She turns to face me. “And don’t say ‘I wouldn’t know it.’ Just tell me about it.”

“I was born on a farm,” I say softly, watching that pulse flutter again as I move even closer to her. “Not far from here.”

“You lived with your parents?” she probes weakly, her eyes downcast and her breaths heavy and deep.

I’m standing just inches away from her now, and I lower my gaze to her lips. “With my da and a lot of animals.

“Your da is your...?”

“My father.”

Her mouth forms an O shape as her eyes dart up. “What about your mother?”

“She died from the pains of bringing me into this world.”

She pulls back with a start, her mind working at my words. “Giving birth? That’s terrible. I’ve never known an omega to die while having a baby... Didn’t she have a doctor?”

I shake my head. “There are no doctors that will treat alphas or omegas—they’re all pigeons...” I trail off, not wanting to elaborate on *that*, either.

“I’m sorry.”

I shrug. “I never knew her.”

Her breath is shaky, and her voice uneven when she asks, “Is your father alive?”

“Nope.” I’m only wearing a thin cotton shirt, so I can feel her hot breath and her scent on my skin. Very slowly, I lift my hand to graze a fingertip over her shoulder, working my way up to her bare neck.

Her skin is the softest there, and her scent the thickest. I immediately decide it’s my favorite part of her.

She releases an almost imperceptible moan and tilts her head to the side, presenting herself as her call sings loudly.

“My parents are dead, too,” she says under her breath, her hands coming up to rest gently on my chest. She seems undecided about the amount of weight to put on them, and they dance across me delicately.

“Hmph,” I grunt, not in the mood to talk about dead parents. I can barely breathe as I look down at her shiny hair, so overwhelmed by her scent and her heat. What a beautiful thing to breathe in on a freezing ledge in December.

With seemingly a great deal of thought, she shuffles forward. Slowly and gently, her body settles against mine.

“I’m sorry I called you a religious fanatic.” I grit out the words roughly, almost painfully, as my hand finally rests on her back between her narrow shoulders. I’m really not sorry, but I’ll say anything at this point.

Her breath comes out so heavy that she's almost panting. "It's okay... I don't know what that means," she admits as she moves the last millimeter toward me, her soft body flush with mine. I stifle back a groan at how perfectly she fits against me, biting my lip and resisting the urge to thrust against her.

We stand against each other like that for several seconds, panting and breathing in each other until she says, "I want to ask you something, Rill."

I garble incomprehensibly in an attempt to offer my consent.

"Have you *been* with Rosie? Is she one of the omegas you mentioned last night?"

My heart freezes in my chest, and a couple beats pass before I respond. "No."

I only hesitate because up until the time I caught Liz's scent, I would have killed to have Rosie as a mate.

Pike and I came across Rosie and her sisters while on a hunt about seven or eight years ago. They were half-wild and living in a dilapidated cabin high up in the Alleghenies.

Their father had died a few months before, and they were jumpy, filthy, and had nearly starved to death in an effort to stay hidden from the pigeons. He'd kept them under lock and key for their entire lives, well aware of the dangers omegas face in our world, so they knew very little of life outside of their little hovel.

We took them in, protected them, and Lyn all but raised them as her own.

But they've always had a toughness to them, even Lulu, so they easily become members of our work-heavy community filled with barely civilized alphas.

And when Jade called to Run a few months ago, it was a beautiful thing. We celebrated for days. Fated mates can be rare, so when they happen, it's important to treasure them. There was even more to celebrate when Jade became pregnant. The longevity of our people is the ultimate *fuck you* to the pigeons.

After that, Rosie and I ... *talked* about things. Things that never actually happened. I didn't think I'd ever have a chance with anyone else, and I was her safest option. She would have been a fine mate, too—she's a little skittish, but she's a hard worker with a beautiful rack.

She's not for me, though.

This omega with the fluttering pulse and the soft hands is mine. The beautiful, crazy one who doesn't know how to peel a damn potato.

But even so, I think one of the most fucked up things I ever did was follow that lilies and rainwater scent into that truck without a second thought to Rosie.

"I'm glad nothing ever happened... I don't know if I could do this otherwise," Liz admits distractedly before sucking in a deep breath. "I need you to come into my nest, Rill."

She says the words with a muffled firmness against my chest, her fingers digging into the fabric of my shirt. My heart

soars in celebration—*is that an invitation?*

She pulls away to look at me fully, speaking again before I can respond.

“I don’t want to feel *this* anymore ... this longing.” She looks like she’s in pain, like she has an ache that only I can soothe.

“Well, then let’s go.” My voice catches in my throat as I begin to pull her toward the house.

“No.” She gazes up at me, her blue eyes filled with tears. “I can’t. The Order.”

I curse and clench my fists. I want to throw her off the ledge. I want to throw myself off the ledge.

“You’re not in fucking Goldenr—”

She puts her soft fingers on my lips, silencing me.

“I know,” she whispers. “So, how about ... a compromise?”

I arch a brow. “I’m listening.”

“It wouldn’t make any sense to have a ceremony. There’s no Administrator here, no Earth, and you don’t know the vows.”

No idea what any of that shit means. “Okay...”

“I need a promise. I need you to declare your intention to mate me to all of your ... people. Then, I’ll invite you into my nest.”

I grab her by the hand and pull her forward. “C’mon. I’ll do it right now.”

But she doesn't move. "There's more."

"What?"

"Orion's coming. He'd never give up on me..."

I scoff, but she glares at me sharply, shutting me up.

"When he gets here," she continues. "You have to promise not to hurt him. I could never take an alpha to my nest who hurt my brother."

I resist the urge to remind her how sorely I've already hurt him. Instead, I shrug and wrap my fingers around the back of her head, weaving them through her loose braid and pulling her toward me again.

"All right, love," I say gruffly, my fingers still in her hair. "I promise not to hurt your idiot brother."

"He'll want to take me home," she pauses, her eyes searching my face. "And you have to—you have to let me go with him."

I freeze as the realization of what she's asking sets in. Slowly, as the words register, something unravels inside of me. It started when I first caught her scent, and now it's completely disintegrated. Replaced with a hollow, gutless anger.

It only took a handful of words for it all to leave me.

My decisiveness.

My control.

My rationality.

Everything that made me sane.

I've never felt closer to the mindless sense of destruction and devastation that my alpha ancestors must have felt than I do right now.

"You want to leave me?" I grit out in disbelief, my fingers digging into her scalp.

She stiffens and arches against me. "I just—I thought about it, and really, it's the only way we can both be happy. I know I'll become pregnant when I take you to my nest, but I'll raise our child in Goldenrod ... under the Order. I'll never go into heat again without you near, so I'll never be with another alpha... There's no other way, really."

She yelps as I pull her to me, holding her body tight against mine. She's so small and light. I could crush her if I wanted to.

I lower my mouth to her neck, breathing in her thick, hot scent. I'm shaking, and she starts to struggle and pull away.

"Let's talk about this rationally, please," she gasps.

I don't respond, and I don't let go, but I pull her tighter into me as a burst of clumsy pressure escapes me and crumbles the edge of the cliff close to our feet.

She screams and attempts to jump back as I scrape my fangs against her soft, sweet-smelling skin, and her hands come up to my chest to push me away.

"*Rill!* What are—"

She stops speaking and screams loudly as my fangs sink into her delicious neck, penetrating her.

Marking her.

Making her mine.

Settling into her, I taste the coppery scent of her blood as an explosion goes off inside of me—a burst of energy that burrows deep inside of her.

Her body arches against me, the high sound of her screams echoing in the gorge.

“You think you can leave me, *Elizabeth*?” I hiss in her ear as I pull away, her blood dripping from my mouth. “Well, now I’m your alpha. Forever.”

“Rill—”

“No!” My roar echoes in the gorge, and she jumps in my arms. “We’re done talking.”

Without thinking, I pull her tiny body up and throw her over my shoulder like a bale of hay.

I hear her alarmed shriek, but it barely registers. My mind is black as I carry her across the field, past the Mercantile, her fists raining down on my back.

“Put me down!” she screams angrily. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I smack her on the ass in response as we cross Railway Row, which only causes her to shriek louder and twist more. As we approach my house, we pass by Nick and Pike standing on the doorstep. They watch with matching looks of confusion but don’t move to stop me as I swing the door open.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I pass Lyn standing on the landing holding a broom and a dustpan, eyes wide with alarm.

“Rill, what are you—” she starts, but I cut her off.

“Get outta here, Lyn,” I bellow as I push open my bedroom door and throw my mate on the bed.

She immediately scuttles back toward the pillows. I expect her to be crying or to look scared, but no, her eyes are fiery, and her cheeks are red.

She’s pissed.

“You’re mine, Liz,” I growl. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you that. You’re not going anywhere without me *ever again*. And you’re sure as hell not taking my child into your goddamn religious cult.”

“I thought you’d be happy to be rid of me.” I can tell her composure is forced as her call starts purring loudly through her body. The salty scent of her heat battles with the warm, coppery smell of the blood dripping down her neck and under the collar of her dress.

I want to tear it off of her and lick her clean.

So, it’s with a great deal of restraint that I take a measured step toward her.

“I’m coming into your nest, omega. We’re gonna fuck. We’re gonna have babies. You’re gonna be my mate. Forever.”

Rising to her feet, she stands up on the bed, bringing her face almost to my eye level as she takes a few steps closer to me.

“*Never,*” she hisses viciously over the sound of her call, the blood dripping down her neck in rivulets. “I’d never mate with such an uncouth, uncivilized...” she pauses as if trying to find the right insult. “*Bastard.*”

I feel a surge of power as my cock grows hard at the sight of her, so furious, so goddamn beautiful and self-righteous. I reach my hand up to graze her neck, swirling my finger in the blood.

Her eyes flutter at my touch, and I smirk.

“We’ll see about that,” I murmur, a new calmness falling over me. “You’re off kitchen duty for now. Stay in this room until I say you can leave. That’s an order from your alpha, *Elizabeth.*”

Her bright blue eyes darken to indigo. “I hate you so much.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I smile and shake my head lightly. “I’ll be back.”

As I turn to leave, I swear I hear her say, “You better.”

But that couldn’t be right.

Boss's Orders

Elizabeth

My feelings have always been a problem.

I don't know how many times I was told to not make a fuss.

Good omegas manage their emotions—*especially* if their last name is Cypress.

But I've always been too sentimental for my own good, my mother used to say. I'd cry over everything as a child, and it frustrated her to no end...

When I didn't get my way.

When I'd find a baby bird that had fallen from its nest.

Once, when Orion went to stay the weekend at Sage House, I missed him so much that I cried myself to sleep each night he was gone.

My mother always wanted me to be stronger. She'd force me to stand in my bedroom with a book on my head for hours—

usually *How to Be a Proper Omega*, the thickest book in both our house and all of Goldenrod.

I'd do my best to stand perfectly still, but every time I sniffled, cried, or flinched, the book would fall to the floor and make a loud smacking sound, alerting my mother that I'd moved.

She'd walk calmly into my room, not making eye contact with me, and balance the book on my head again, silently adding another five minutes to my punishment.

It didn't work, though. All these years later, I still cry too easily over every little mishap that comes my way.

Some perfect omega I turned out to be.

Maybe that's why I'm not angry with Rill. I know how difficult it is to lose control of your emotions. To act in an impulsive manner. I can forgive him for letting his passions get the better of him.

No, I'm more upset that he didn't come to me that night. Or the next night. Or the night after that.

Tonight's the fourth night since he left me.

Each morning, I prepare for him—bathing, braiding my hair, and dressing for the day. I sit in this room, my body on fire as tortured thoughts flit through my mind...

His strong herb smell, the way he effortlessly threw me over his shoulder, and even that stupid, cocky smile.

But he never comes.

For as dramatic as he was about my—all things considered—*very reasonable* request, I'd thought he'd stick to his word and come ravish me as promised. I was hoping for sooner rather than later, honestly.

It did something to me to see him like that. He was so strong ... so *open* with his anger with me. I never dreamed I'd have a mate like this—that type of alpha just doesn't exist in Goldenrod.

Goldenrod alphas are all the same ... at least the ones I knew. Measured, controlled, upstanding citizens. So, I'm sure that a life with Wyatt Sage as a mate wouldn't be this eventful. It would probably be pretty boring, actually.

The day after Rill left, I was overwhelmed with frustration and searching for a distraction, so I pushed a long, padded bench from the foot of the bed to a corner window. The set-up allowed me to lean against the wall while I gazed out the window—just like my window seat at home.

But instead of watching the betas laugh and talk, I've been keeping my eye on Crescent Rock's goings-on and searching for my mate.

It's cathartic to watch the residents go about their business. They all seem to lead such busy, meaningful lives.

Before coming here, I'd never seen an alpha or an omega do a stitch of manual labor. That type of work is reserved for the betas in Goldenrod. But, as Lyn said, there are no betas here. And there seems to be no shortage of work.

Each day, a small group of younger alphas strut around with tools, fixing broken doors or fence posts. They're not very good at their job if the state of the buildings in this town is anything to go by, but they're definitely well-occupied in their futile attempts to keep everything from falling down.

And then there are a handful of alphas that spend their days herding animals—one cow, two pigs, and a handful of sheep—from a tall barn on the edge of town to the field, shoveling hay into troughs or lugging buckets of water.

But both of these groups look enviously at the largest group of alphas—the big ones who hold weapons and wander in and out of town sporadically. Maybe hunting? I'm not sure what else they would be doing with sticks and long spears other than hunting game.

Despite the frigid weather, these alphas dress scantily in thin black clothing. They hoot and holler loudly, scaring the animals and annoying the other alphas.

They seem savage. Wild and unpredictable. I'm sure this is the group Rill would be in if he ever showed his face.

I also catch glimpses of the omegas—Lyn, Rosie, Jade, and Lulu—lugging baskets of laundry and carrying food in and out of the Mercantile. Rosie and Jade seem to be in better spirits in my absence, chatting earnestly as they traverse the distance from one of the houses to the Mercantile each day.

Every afternoon, Rosie goes off by herself for a few hours—down the path Rill and I followed when we entered town. She usually returns with a basket full of leaves and branches that

piques my interest. Is she collecting herbs? Maybe Winterberry, since it's the time of year for it.

Although I never see Rill, I know he's not far. Our invisible connection beats steadily between us, my mark providing a persistent drumbeat of need and awareness. Probably due to the mark, what was just a slight feeling has turned into a tight, moody tether. Something that constantly hangs in the back of my mind.

It's terrible and wonderful.

The couple times that I had trouble sensing him, the connection went crazy, and my heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. But then I picked up on his signal again, and all was well.

It's made me realize the impossibility of ever going home with Orion, though. No matter where I go, there will always be a special piece inside of me that only my mate can touch. A place that misses his face ... needs his scent and body.

It's *very* annoying, but maybe that's what he meant when he said, where I go, he goes.

Other than the heat and torment, keeping watch on this high perch isn't so bad. This is more or less what my life is like at home—watching the world pass but not participating in it—so it's comforting.

But in Crescent Rock, I don't have the sporadic conversations with Orion or visits from Jason—my closest friend lately—to break up the time.

Instead, I only have Lyn. She brings me food, drink, and futile attempts at conversation. She's quite cheerful despite my sour mood, reassuring me that everything will be just fine if I give it enough time.

Outside alphas aren't like Goldenrod alphas, she said, and I need to learn how to compromise with Rill.

I don't want to compromise, though. I want to stay angry. It's easier than attempting to get my mind around what's happening to me and everything that I'll have to give up if I fully accept this.

But now, as I press my hot cheek against the cold glass, a forgotten book on my lap, all of my regrets and *should have been's* feel so far away.

I was so hot earlier that I wrestled with the window for a few minutes, trying to let the cold air in. But the frame was so swollen and stuck that I was only able to pull it up a couple of inches.

The whisper of cold, fresh air over my lap is comforting, as are the sounds of conversations that drift up from the road.

Railway Row is always lively in the evening when the light is dim, and the air has a stronger bite to it. The work of the day is finished, and everyone takes a few minutes to relax. Any second now, Lyn will step out of the Mercantile and ring the dinner bell, causing a mad rush through the old wooden doors.

Jade and Run are talking on its porch now, and clusters of the wild, scary alphas are scattered around the road. Some of

them carry their hunting weapons, but they're all getting along in a strangely civilized manner. Happy and at peace. None of the good-natured fighting or carousing that happens during the day. They seem to know when it's appropriate to quiet down, at least.

My eyes catch on the dark figure of an alpha walking toward Rill's house. He stops just below my window and begins chatting with another alpha—the one who's currently guarding the front door. There's been at least one on guard below my window every day since Rill left.

I don't know if they're meant to keep me in or others out.

The low hum of their voices floats up through the crack in the window. They're discussing something boring—perimeters, obstructions, unfamiliar scents—and I'm not paying attention until I hear Rill's name.

“Should we really talk about this in front of Rill's house?”

“He's not in there,” a gruff voice responds. “He's in the Mercantile holding court ... stupid ass.”

“Well, his mate's upstairs. I've seen her staring out the window.”

I frown and lean back, pulling the curtains more fully over me.

“You think omegas understand anything beyond fucking alphas?”

I scowl at the insult and the language. I probably know more about the world than those two combined. Pulling aside the

curtain a couple inches, I try to look down and see if I recognize either of them.

I can only make out the top of two dark-haired heads standing directly under the window. Even if I could see their faces, I probably wouldn't know who they were. All of these Crescent Rock alphas look identical. Except for Rill...

I crawl down on the floor, leaning over the bench and moving my ear closer to the narrow crack in an effort to hear better. I missed some of what they said as I moved, but I can hear much better here.

"...which I told him days ago. Something needs to be done," Gruff Voice says.

"Well, what did he say when you told him there's someone hiding out near the east parameter?"

"That he's not worried. He says it's probably his omega's pansy-ass brother."

I gasp softly. Orion? Did he find me?

"Rill said he beat his ass on the scouting mission," the other alpha chuckles. "And that he's not a threat... If we see him on rounds, we're not supposed to hurt him."

"Well, I was there when he beat his ass," Gruff Voice says. "Sure, *that* one wasn't much of a threat, but they're not all weak. The other alpha killed a pigeon with his pressure. And whether it's pigeons or Goldenrod alphas, we should take any intrusion seriously."

“I get what you’re saying, Mud, but it’s the boss’s orders,” the other voice says dismissively. “And if Rill thinks there’s nothing to worry about, then we gotta follow his lead.”

My brows shoot up my forehead at the name *Mud*. I remember him from the woods. He was one of the alphas waiting for us at their camp after we were rescued from the truck. He stared at me too much.

“That’s bullshit,” Mud curses. “We’re supposed to just sit here and twiddle our thumbs? Real alphas don’t take orders. When we sense a threat, we squash it. I’ll tell ya, Tor, I’ve been in the Mercy City lockup, and I ain’t goin’ back.”

My mind reels at the unfamiliar words. Mercy City? Is that a place like Crescent Rock? Or is that where the pigeons live?

“Yeah, it’s all over when you set foot in that place.” Tor’s voice is threaded with a new nervousness. “My da got taken there by the pigeons, and my brothers and I never saw him again.”

“Well, that’s where we’ll end up if we don’t do something about Rill. You don’t think that the pigeons would love to get their hands on so many alphas? Wipe us all out in one fell swoop? And we’re even more at risk with that fancy Goldenrod omega of his hanging around.”

My heart freezes, and before I can hear more, the sound of Lyn’s dinner bell clanging through the cold air interrupts the alphas’ conversation.

I don't catch their last few mumbled words as one of them jogs across the road toward the Mercantile—I can't tell whether or not it's Mud in the darkness.

I rest my head on my hands, absorbing what I just heard. It doesn't sound like Mud is all that fond of Rill.

He may be in danger... And if he's in danger, then *I'm* in danger.

Maybe Orion is here—breaking into Crescent Rock to save me. I frown as my Rill connection flutters nervously at the thought. I gently run my fingers over the broken skin on my neck as it throbs with need at the thought of him.

I can't leave him. I know now that it's out of the question. And I can't let anyone hurt him either.

He may be uncouth, uncivilized, and unbearably obnoxious, but ... he's mine.

Ugh.

I look outside again. The sun has mostly set now, and the Mercantile glows like a beacon on the dark road. The low hum of conversation coming from the open windows crackles through the cold night air, and I can just barely make out the scent of roasted meat wafting from the direction of the Mercantile kitchen.

As I take it all in, I feel overcome by something I don't recognize—an urge to do something unexpected. Something risky.

Rising to my feet, I walk to the door and push my feet into the too-small shoes Lyn gave me. Taking a deep breath, I put my hand on the doorknob and pull the old door open.

The dark hallway is quiet, and the musty scent of the house drifts toward me. I stare into the darkness for a full minute before I finally step out of the room and slowly make my way over the creaking floor of the hallway, tiptoeing down the groaning stairs to the first floor.

At the bottom of the stairs, I pause and wait for something horrible to strike me.

But nothing happens. I don't burst into flames, and a giant bolt of lightning doesn't take me out.

Rill's my alpha. The mark on my neck makes that more than obvious. And he told me not to leave the room—*boss's orders*, as the alpha outside the window said—but I'm not listening to him.

I'm listening to *me*—something I've rarely done before. The thought bubbles inside me, making me feel delirious.

I like it, I decide, peeking out the front window at the alpha standing guard outside the door. There's a boldness in breaking the rules, escaping authority.

But as I look over my shoulder toward the kitchen and a large, low window, I can't help but wonder where that boldness will take me.

A Melding of Minds

Elizabeth

Mud's not a very perceptive alpha.

Nor are any of these alphas particularly intelligent.

Not only was the back of the house unguarded, but after I slipped out the window, I looped around and crossed the road to the Mercantile with Mud none the wiser.

I know now that it was him guarding the door. I recognized his scent as the wind blew in my face —oily and onion-y. I suppose some would describe it as savory, but I find it sour.

And now, moving stealthily through the shadows, I slip through the Mercantile doors and press my back against the wall as they fall closed behind me.

The sounds from the Mercantile thump in the background as I stare at the floor, holding my breath and waiting for Mud to throw the door open.

But as the seconds tick by, and he doesn't barge in, my breathing finally evens out, and I lift my eyes to take in the

bright, crowded room in front of me.

When I walked through here the other day, it was dark and empty, but now it couldn't be more different.

There's a giant light hanging from the ceiling. Narrowing my eyes, I can see it's some sort of gaslight, similar to the lanterns in my room. It casts a dreamy glow over the tables, which are populated with the various groups of alphas that I recognize from the street. They're all sitting together, talking and laughing, a couple of them arguing.

It's loud, like they're all trying to talk over each other. But they all pause and bow their heads in gratitude when Lyn or Rosie, weaving through the tables, stops to lay down a platter of food or take away a dirty glass.

Despite the fact that the alphas are seemingly being polite about it, I don't love seeing the omegas work tooth and nail to serve them. They're sitting there—seemingly just resting and enjoying themselves—while Lyn and Rosie carry stacks of heavy plates, their faces red with exertion.

My ire doesn't last long, though. It's interrupted by the loud, scratchy voice that breaks through the conversation.

Liz.

My head pops up at the sound of my name. The alphas are still talking, their animated faces moving in conversation, but their voices fade to a low hum as my gaze swims through the crowd, searching for him.

Eventually, the crowd parts, revealing my mate.

He's silently staring at me, sitting at the center of a long table at the head of the room, flanked by Pike and Run and a long row of formidable alphas on each side. It's like we're the only two people in the crowded room as I take a couple of tentative steps toward him.

Get over here, Liz.

There's his scratchy voice again, but his lips aren't moving, and the room is still loud. He may as well be yelling at me, though; his voice is so loud and clear. Not realizing what I'm doing, I slowly start walking through the crowd.

The others don't notice me at first. But as I move toward him, weaving through the tables, each set of eyes eventually lands on me as a heavy curtain of silence falls over the room. I don't stop until I'm standing in front of him.

There's a glint in his dark eyes as he leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest, his long legs spread wide under the table as he considers me.

"Move over, Run." He doesn't take his eyes off of me. "My mate needs to sit."

Run shoots him a wry look before nudging the shoulder of the alpha on his other side. Everyone moves over a seat until the young alpha at the end has to get up, left with nowhere to sit. He grunts in annoyance before stomping over to one of the other tables.

Sit down, Liz, I hear again. I look quickly from the displaced alpha to my mate. His lips are sealed shut, and he's watching

me with shrewd expectation.

I blink but don't question.

His eyes follow me as I walk around the long table and gently fall into the chair that Run abandoned.

Within seconds, Rosie is in front of me, pushing Run's dishes down the table. Lyn comes from just behind her, setting a plate in front of me. Neither of them looks at me, but everyone else in the room is more than making up for it—all their curious eyes glued to my face.

I realize that this is the first time many of them have seen me, although I've been watching them all week. My breaths come out fast, and my skin prickles in discomfort until Rill snaps his fingers.

They all immediately turn away from me, mumbling into their plates.

I inhale and exhale deeply as I stare at my own plate—it holds a hunk of dark meat and a couple of roasted potatoes and carrots. Everything is doused in a light brown gravy.

Before I can make a move, a glass of some sort of cloudy, yellow drink is slammed down next to it, the liquid sloshing over the side and puddling on the table. I look up to see Rosie's long skirt swooshing away from me.

I frown at the frothy drink. "What is that?"

"Sun water."

“I’ve never heard of it,” I confess, looking up at him tentatively as I wait for him to make a smart comment about how I’ve never heard of anything.

He presses his lips together and shakes his head. “Sun water’s been the fall and saving grace of many an alpha... Try it.”

I scowl at the glass as I delicately lift it to my lips and sip tentatively. As soon as it hits my tongue, I blanch. It tastes sharp and sour.

“Bleh.” My voice is choked. “That’s disgusting.”

Rill chuckles and shrugs. “It’ll grow on you.”

“We’ll see,” I push the glass away and look at my lap as my heart thumps in my chest. It’s strange. After my earlier bravado, I now find myself speechless and unable to look at him. Will he be angry that I disobeyed him?

“I told you to stay in your nest,” he finally says in a low voice, reading my mind.

“I know, but I heard these alph—” I cut myself off before finishing. Gulping, I look into his eyes, so brown they look like black coffee. “I wanted to see you,” I whisper instead of telling him about the conversation I overheard.

“I didn’t scare you?” he asks roughly, his eyes probing. “The other day, I said and did some things that I...” He trails off, his eyes probing as if willing me to understand.

I shake my head slowly. “I’m not scared of you.”

Seconds pass as his eyes slowly brighten with surprise.
“You’re not, are you?”

We stare at each other for a few beats, neither of us saying anything until I hear his voice rumbling through me again.

I wanted to see you, too.

I pull back with a start. His mouth hadn’t moved. “How are you doing that?”

“What?”

“I can hear your voice in my head.” I cringe immediately after saying it.

He tilts his head and cocks a brow. I prepare myself for him to deny it and call me crazy.

“The mark,” he says instead, pointing to the throbbing spot on my neck.

“What?” My fingertips come up to touch the raised skin.

“I marked you, Liz. We’ll always be a part of each other now.”

I shake my head slowly in confusion. “What does that mean?”

“It means you’re mine. Forever.” He says the words viciously, almost as if he’s daring me to argue.

But instead, I study his face. How did he look before he got that scar? Without it, he might be handsome. He has a strong jaw, full lips, and bright skin.

“No one ever told me that a mating connection would be this ... *strong*,” I whisper fervently. “This melding of minds thing isn’t something that happens in Goldenrod. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

The confession feels unnatural. I should always know what I’m doing, right? And if I don’t, I shouldn’t ever let anyone know.

But Rill shrugs like it means nothing and leans in close to me, his mouth grazing the shell of my ear. “Your lot has stifled much of what makes our people so special,” he says bluntly, his hot breath tickling my ear and sending a shiver down my spine. “All to be more like *them*. Now you’re away from Goldenrod, and you’re becoming who you were always meant to be.”

As I consider his words, I wait for the indignation to wash over me. Like it has every time that he or Lyn has insinuated that all the beliefs and the ceremonies that we hold so dear in Goldenrod mean nothing.

But it doesn’t come. Instead, I feel nothing ... just hot and bothered, per usual.

Spontaneously, I lurch away from him and wrap my hand around my glass of sun water. Lifting it sloppily to my lips, I drink deeply from the glass. My throat moves mechanically with each gulp, the liquid splashing over the rim of the glass and onto my chest and lap. It burns as it travels down my throat, and I pull away to cough loudly as it settles in my stomach and ignites my blood.

“Careful,” Rill murmurs quietly, taking the glass from my hand and pushing a ceramic cup of water toward me. He looks at me gravely. “You look pale. You need to eat.”

I clear my throat and shake my head. “I’m not hungry.”

His eyes darken, and a shudder of pressure passes through the room, earning us a few concerned glances from the other alphas. “You’ve barely eaten anything since you’ve been here.”

“I told you,” I say with forced sweetness, “that I’m *not hungry*.”

“Eat.” He bites out the word sharply like it’s not up for further discussion.

My earlier desire to balk at him nips at me. I glare at him for a few seconds before looking at my plate.

I reach for the fork and use the side of it to delicately slice off a piece of potato. Popping it in my mouth, I glare at him as I chew.

He looks entirely too pleased with himself. “Not too hard to do what you’re told, huh?”

So obnoxious.

He chuckles as I narrow my eyes on him again, resisting the urge to jump from my chair and rush out of the room in a huff. Instead, I put the rest of the potato in my mouth.

After a few more bites, I look at him quizzically. I put my fork down and decide to try something.

Can you hear me? I think as I concentrate on his face.

He smirks. *Of course.*

I get right to the point, then. *I heard two alphas outside my window this evening talking about you. They weren't happy with the way you've been running things.*

He doesn't look disturbed by this, arching a brow before responding. *What did they say?*

I shrug. *A lot of stuff I don't understand about the east perimeter. And about how you don't care about a breach there?* I huff out an annoyed breath in memory. *They also said some very rude things about me and Orion.*

He leans back in his chair, his face thoughtful. *You know who it was?*

Yes. One of the alphas was—

I'm interrupted as the door to the Mercantile slams open wide, bringing all the murmured conversations surrounding us to a halt. My head turns quickly toward the door to see Mud's hulking form in the doorframe.

His nostrils are flaring angrily, and his stringy dark hair hangs in his face as he stares into the room, his eyes searching.

When they land on me, his eyes stop their searching as he starts moving through the now-silent crowd toward the front of the room.

Toward me.

I Don't Share

Rill

The way that Mud's storming into the Mercantile, I think he'll immediately start turning over tables with his pressure and screaming hysterically about the injustices he's always hammering on about.

If any alpha ever had the potential for a hissy fit of epic proportions, it's this one.

Liz must think so, too. At the sight of him, she leans into me and frowns severely. I can feel the trepidation vibrating off her in waves as she absently grasps my hand, clinging to me tightly.

Now, that's surprising—she's looking to *me* for protection? The one she hates with the passion of a thousand suns?

Well, I gotta play *this* up as much as I can. I wrap an arm around her shoulders, pulling her stiff body close. But I don't take my eyes off Mud as he abruptly stops in front of us.

He swallows, his eyes darting between me and Liz. I can see the cogs turning—he's wondering how he wants to frame this.

“What can I do ya for, Mud?” I force an amiability to my voice despite my growing aggravation.

“I was—” he pauses and looks back at Tor—who *should* have been guarding my mate. He's slumped at a back table, his eyes shifting to the floor. “Tor said the omega got out, so I was lookin' for her.”

I know for a fact that Tor didn't say *anything* like that. He slipped in a few minutes before Liz got here, plopping down at one of the back tables and immediately shoveling food into his piehole like I'd be none the wiser.

I'm not sure how Mud talked him into giving up his guard. I thought I could rely on Tor. He's one of my strongest hunters, but obviously, he's not an alpha I can entrust with the honor of guarding my mate. In fact, maybe I should put him on livestock duty after this...

I've had a hunter stationed at my front door for the last four days. The guards were meant to protect Liz from the likes of Mud or anyone he's managed to corrupt with all his complaining.

When I noticed that Tor had abandoned his post, I knew that Mud was up to something. Just as I was about to rush out of the Mercantile, though, I sensed Liz was on the move. I decided to let it play out and see what my strange little mate was up to.

Who knew it would be to warn me of a conversation she overheard between Mud and Tor? Cautioning *me*—her “uncouth, uncivilized bastard” of a mate—about the same shit that Mud’s been spreading around for the past week. Since we got back from the scouting mission, his complaints have been louder. Magnified. More annoying.

I used to think he could get over his hang-ups and make a life here. But maybe such a community-based lifestyle isn’t right for him. He wouldn’t be the first alpha to struggle with it.

The question is, what am I going to do about it? Send him on his way? Or make an example out of him?

“Here she is,” I say blandly, my hand tightening on Liz’s shoulder as I tilt my head at him inquiringly.

He watches us, breathing deeply through his nose like an angry bull. “She should be punished.”

Well, now he’s done it...

I pull back in exaggerated surprise. “*Punished?*”

He nods blankly.

“I couldn’t punish her if I wanted to. Look at that face ... look at that *mark*.” There’s a thread of viciousness to my final words, and an angry red color travels up Mud’s neck and over his cheeks.

“She doesn’t belong to just *you*,” he bites out before he can think better of it. “Omegas are everyone’s responsibility, and if she’s not following orders, then we should—”

He doesn't get to finish that sentence. My pressure swoops out of me like a lasso, tightening around his neck and cutting off his words as he lurches forward and grabs at the invisible rope squeezing his neck.

Breathing evenly, I watch dispassionately as he claws at it, gasping for air.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jade and Lulu wander out of the kitchen. Jade takes in the scene with wide eyes before she hurriedly rushes Lulu back through the door. But Lyn and Rosie don't move. They and the other alphas watch silently with expressionless faces, no one intervening.

I don't typically have to go this far on my own people. Everyone knows the drill at this point, but every now and then ... someone like Mud pops up, and I've gotta remind them how this works.

There's a reason I'm the king, after all.

"You're having a hard time understanding this, Mud." My voice is light and taunting as he writhes on the floor. "I get it ... this isn't what you're used to. But I'm starting to lose my patience a bit. You see, this omega *does* belong to me and *only me*. She's *my* mate, and I don't share."

He chokes and claws, falling onto his knees and gagging. He tries to push out pressure of his own, but he's no match for me. It falls around him lazily, landing by my feet like sloppy streamers.

“So, if you want to stay here. Eating the food, living in the house, and enjoying the protections, you need to shut up and stop causing trouble.”

He gargles a bit, foaming at the mouth as he moves to the fetal position.

Liz reaches over and grasps my thigh. I look away from Mud to find that her eyes are wide and filled with tears. My pressure wavers a bit, and Mud attempts to take a deep, relieved breath in its absence.

“*Rill.*” Her voice is urgent, her nails digging into my thigh. “Stop it now, *please.*”

I glance over at her bright eyes and flushed skin and can’t help the smile that plays on my lips.

“Anything for you, love.”

Quickly and suddenly, I release Mud, and he falls into a pile of limbs on the floor, wheezing loudly and holding onto his neck. It’s the only thing you can hear in the now-silent room.

“Tor, why don’t you help your friend to his seat,” I yell out, pulling my arm off Liz and cracking my knuckles. “I got something I wanna say now that Mud’s settled, and I want everyone to hear it.”

Tor jumps from his chair but doesn’t look at me as he drags Mud to one of the tables in the very back of the room. He clumsily pulls out a chair and dumps his limp body onto it.

I shoot a glance at Liz, who’s watching him with wide eyes. She reaches for her sun water, taking a big gulp, followed by

another, and then a third. I eye her with concern. Sun water on an empty stomach is never a good idea.

She jumps with a start when I take the glass from her, lifting it to my mouth and swallowing its remaining contents in two gulps before I slam the empty glass on the table.

Although the altercation with Mud has left me invigorated, what I'm about to do next scares me more than almost killing one of my fellow alphas. I'm going to need some liquid courage.

After what happened with Liz on the cliff, I knew I'd fucked up with her ... again. Obviously, I'm not used to this shit—I don't *woo* omegas.

And although there's no way in hell I'm letting her leave, I think I can manage to comply with her other requests.

The first being that I don't hurt her idiot brother when he finally shows his ugly mug.

I'm not stupid. I know the eastern perimeter's been breached, and I know it's him. When he finally shows up, I want to have this thing with Liz settled. She needs to be mine—mentally *and* physically. If I'm not going to hurt him, then I need her help convincing him to go home and leave us alone.

So, that's why I'm going along with her second request. Namely that I *promise* for her ... just like they do in her beloved Goldenrod. Unfortunately, I've no idea what in the hell that actually means.

Luckily, I have Lyn and her great knowledge of Goldenrod's many and ridiculous rules and regulations. Through her, I tried to learn the proper language involved in what they called a "promise party."

I can't quite imagine what life is like in Goldenrod. The closest thing I can compare it to is probably Mercy City—the only one of the pigeons' cities that I've ever had the *privilege* to enter.

All the pigeons there looked the same—severe haircuts and matching dark clothes. Granted, I was in the lockup where there wasn't an ounce of good humor to be found.

But when I described Mercy City's austere streets and towering skyscrapers to Lyn, she shook her head silently.

"No, Goldenrod is grand," she said a bit wistfully. "There's much work put into keeping up a veneer of beauty and ... order. The Order is valued above anything else. It creates a hierarchy that's almost impossible to shift. *Especially* when it comes to mating rituals."

As I considered her words for the first time, I felt a bit overwhelmed by the differences in my and Liz's lives and perceptions of the world.

So, I figured I could give a little. Especially if it meant that she'd give a lot.

But now, pushing my chair back from the table and looking around at the faces in the room—still, a bit shaken up from my

confrontation with Mud—I'm surprised by how ridiculous it makes me feel.

Typically, I love being the center of attention. Making others laugh or piss their pants in fear—these are the things I do best.

But this type of attention is different from what I'm used to ... this declaration would only be described as a sign of vulnerability or weakness by many of the alphas I've known in my life.

I can't help but wonder how my da would react if he could hear what I'm about to say. He and Mud would probably laugh that I'm a powerless pigeon, bowing to the whims of an omega.

Good thing the fucker is dead then.

When my eyes land on Lyn, standing in the back of the room, holding a pitcher of sun water, she nods encouragingly, bringing the words she taught me to the surface of my mind.

“Elizabeth Cypress,” I proclaim loudly, bolstered by Lyn's silent support. “I'm—”

I cut myself off as I glance at her, still sitting and staring at me like she has no idea what the hell I'm doing.

I frown. She should be standing for this.

Roughly, I reach down and grab her by the arm, pulling her up to her feet. She doesn't resist, but she doesn't come up smoothly either. She wobbles a bit on her feet before she wraps her arms around her midsection, her eyes darting over the crowd nervously.

What are you doing? Her voice vibrates gently through my body as she looks up at me fiercely from under her lashes.

Well, damn. If this isn't obvious to her, of all people, then I'm really fucking this up.

"Elizabeth Cypress," I start again, my loud voice wavering. "I'm honored by your call. And in accordance with my authority over Crescent Rock, I accept it. I promise to make you my omega and my mate ... but with no other ceremony whatsoever." I say the last words quickly and look at her fervently. "I'll just fuck you after this, and that'll be that."

A dead silence pulses around us as she stares at me with wide, horrified eyes.

When I hazard a glance at Lyn, I see her hand covering her shaking head. I'm sure I butchered the speech, but I must have at least got the point across. This is what Liz wanted, right? A public declaration? A promise? It doesn't have to be *exactly* the same.

The way that Lyn explained a Goldenrod "promise party" and the mating ceremony itself it sounded like hours, days, and weeks of endless planning, pageantry, and torture. This is much more straightforward, I know, but still in the same vein ... right?

But the longer Liz just stands there, not moving or saying anything, the more worried I become that this won't be enough for her.

A sweat breaks out on my forehead, and just when I'm about to say something—anything—the silence is mercifully interrupted.

A loud, thrumming buzz sets the room on fire and immediately hardens my cock.

Her call.

It sings from her chest as she bites her lip, considering me until she abruptly grabs me by the hand. She sets it on her chest where her call is the loudest, vibrating from her chest in a clear declaration.

“I call for you, my mate,” she says softly before lowering her eyes to stare at the floor.

I watch her for a few beats, wondering who's supposed to make the next move. Me or her? Lyn's instructions ended here.

But finally, she looks up. As we lock eyes, an energy travels between us, communicating a silent understanding.

Suddenly, I know exactly what to do.

I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her slight body hard against mine. Her call gets louder as I dip my face down, my lips taking hers. She's soft and silky, and a surge of greed pulses through me as I pull her tighter against me, drinking roughly from her supple body.

She tastes like hot rain, smells like heat, and her call pounds through me, body and soul.

When I finally pull away from her, her eyes are glazed over, and the skin around her lips is bright from the rubbing against my rough face.

“I won’t hurt your brother, Liz, but you’re not leaving. You’re mine. Forever.”

The words rumble from my body as a low order, and she looks up with a start. Her eyes narrow for an instant before her gaze falls to the floor, her dark lashes casting shadows on her pale skin.

“Yes, my alpha,” she says in a low voice. At the sound of her submission, I feel like I’ll explode. I want to throw her over my shoulder and take her to her nest.

But I don’t do anything like that. I’m civilized now, after all. But still, my voice catches in my throat when I speak again.

“Well, let’s have a fucking party then.”

Fresher Than New Fallen Snow

Elizabeth

I don't feel the cold as I stumble down the Mercantile steps.

My heat makes me a bit immune to the frigid weather, but even when we were traveling in the freezing woods, I theoretically *knew* it was cold. But now, standing in the fresh snow, there's a familiar warmth buzzing through my body, alighting my nerves and keeping away any sense of cold.

Snow started falling while we were in the Mercantile. It's coming down fast now, and the ground is covered in a soft, white blanket—it almost makes Crescent Rock look pretty. Flakes stick to the tip of the dipping rock and coat the roofs of the old buildings. I guess fresh snow can bring peace and beauty to any ugly corner of the world.

A handful of alphas are trudging through it toward their homes, disturbing the smooth sheet of sparkling white with their rough footsteps. Rill and I are the last to leave, and I wait as he closes up the dark Mercantile.

I hiccup softly and giggle as my too-small shoes sink into the smooth powder. My warmth must be due to all the sun water I drank tonight. There's only been one other time in my life when I imbibed this much. It was about a year ago ... when my parents first got sick.

It was snowing that night, too.

I should have known something was wrong with Mother and Father if they refused to go to a promise party. Nobody in Goldenrod ever dared decline an invitation to a newly called couple's promise party.

Although mating ceremonies were quieter and more private, a promise party was the place to put forth all a family's resources to prove a couple's affection for one another—not to mention to see and be seen.

My favorite part was always when the alpha would accompany his omega into the room, the delicate string sounds of *The March of the Omega* twirling in the air. He'd recite his promise, she'd accept it, and they'd seal it with a kiss.

It always felt so magical.

To decline an invitation to such an auspicious event was the ultimate offense in good society. But, as I prepared to go out that evening, my mother told me that she and my father just weren't feeling up to it.

I shrugged it off, kissing them both on the cheek before Orion and I left.

But walking into the party on my brother's arm, I was nervous. Up until that point, I'd never attended a function without my mother. She usually kept a sharp eye on me and was adamant that I refuse any champagne or wine at parties in fear it would cause me to lose control of my senses.

So, in her absence and at my best friend Stella's urging, I indulged in more champagne than advisable. Four glasses, to be precise—Mother would have thrown a fit if she'd found out.

Orion thought it was hilarious, though, laughing at me as I giggled and tripped home on snow-covered Dogwood Street. I felt like a balloon on the verge of flying away.

"If Wyatt Sage could see his beloved Elizabeth now," he laughed as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders, guiding me down the empty street.

I beamed and sighed. I'd danced with Wyatt *three times* that night. I was sure I'd call to him soon—I could feel my desire for him growing. I was sure it would only be a matter of time before we were throwing a promise party of our own.

When Orion and I walked into the house, we simultaneously eyed Mother and Father sitting in the parlor, huddled in blankets and reading in front of a roaring fire. I pressed my hand over my mouth, sure that I'd bark out a laugh and give myself away.

"Orion, Elizabeth," Mother had called out weakly, peering over her shoulder. "How was the party?"

Orion and I made swift eye contact, my eyes widening in horror. Without saying anything, he threw me over his shoulder and ran me upstairs to my room. I gave into deep belly laughs and shrieked loudly as I heard my mother call out to us.

I felt so warm with happiness that night. Absolutely confident in the world and my place within it.

But my conscience reminds me just a week or so after that, they died, and I lost everything.

My smile falters at the memory. It happened so fast ... within a matter of weeks, really. The doctors could never pinpoint how they got so sick. There was some concern for me and Orion initially, but we survived it just fine.

For so long, I thought their deaths were my fault. I could only surmise that bad things happen when I lose control. Maybe that's why this is happening to me now, I think sourly. Why I've ended up in this place with these people.

I jump as a pair of thick arms wrap around me, a firm chest pressing against my back. Breathing in Rill's herby scent, I tentatively lean back against him as a surge of fire ignites inside of me, my call singing out loudly.

Well, this place isn't all bad, I suppose, but still...

Shaking off the foreboding feelings, I turn in his arms to look up at him. Maybe the sun water isn't the only reason I feel so warm. His rough fingers graze my cheeks, leaving a trail of sparks in their wake.

“Little Lizzie,” he says in a mocking voice, his scarred lips twisting. “You feelin’ good?”

I nod silently, not taking my eyes from his face. Seeing him this close—the way his hair curls and the glint in his dark eyes—he looks soft. Nothing like the alpha who hurt Mud earlier.

He smirks and arches a brow. “I guess a gallon of sun water will do that to you.”

“What do you mean?”

He says something—a word I don’t know—but I’m not listening. Instead, I tilt my head and consider him in a dazed way. He’s beautiful in a rugged sort of way. Not neat or orderly like all the other alphas I thought handsome before, but wild and uncontained.

I should be disgusted about what happened this evening, and maybe I am a little bit. There’s something dark inside this alpha. He hurt Mud so casually and then brushed him aside like he meant nothing. If he could hurt one of his own men so easily, logic says that he could probably hurt me, too, right?

But something tells me that wouldn’t happen. And even if it did, I don’t think it would stop me from wanting to curl up inside of him, reveling in his darkness, his wickedness.

I’m not sure what that says about me, but I don’t think it’s anything good.

To be fair, the rest of Crescent Rock seems to be under his spell, too. After Rill’s promise, Lyn quickly refilled everyone’s

glasses of sun water. Within minutes, the atmosphere shifted from wary anticipation to loud celebration.

I was content to sip my sun water as Rill interacted with his alphas. He introduced me to the different groups I'd noticed from the window—the hunters, who were the top of the pack; the herders, the lowest in the hierarchy; and the builders, young alphas whom he was still trying to figure out if they were good enough to be hunters.

He joked with them all, and it was obvious they were as much under his spell as I am. He's just so loud and animated. Watching him is more entertaining than any book I've ever read. His facial expressions and the things that come out of his mouth—they constantly surprise and entrance me.

It was easy to forget about how angry I'd been just days ago or to contemplate how thoughtlessly he hurt Mud.

None of that mattered, basking in his glow.

And now, standing with him in the quiet snow, the doubts and worries that have plagued me are even farther away. Everything seems so simple now as I gawk at him in my sun water stupor.

“What did you say?” I ask lightly. I didn't catch his response; I was so enraptured by the movements of his face as he smiled and spoke.

He blows out a laugh. “I said that you're *shitfaced*.”

My glow dims a little bit, both at his tone and at the unknown word.

“What does *that* mean?” I ask in a crisp voice, pulling away from him slightly.

“You’re drunk.”

I take a full step back. “I am *not*.”

Obviously, I drank *a smidge* too much, but how dare he point it out? And using such crass language?

He laughs harder at my denial, his eyes wrinkling and his scar stretching across his face.

I glare and slap him gently on the chest. “That’s by far the worst thing you’ve ever said to me,” I tell him haughtily, “and you’ve said some of the most horrible—”

He grabs me by the hand and pulls me toward him swiftly, and I land roughly against his hard chest. I immediately start trying to push and twist my way out of his grip, my feet slipping in my shoes as cold snow seeps through my stockings.

He easily holds both my wrists in his hand, twisting me until my arms are behind my back. I’m powerless against his strength, but I keep wiggling and scowling up at him angrily, anyway.

His lips quirk up in a taunting smile as his eyes dart over my face.

“It’s okay, Liz,” he says hoarsely. “I like you with a little swill in your bloodstream ... you look prettier than the new-fallen snow.”

“*Swill?*” I shriek. “Is that supposed to be a complime—?”

He cuts me off as his mouth swoops down to capture mine.

I try to pull away, but it only makes him kiss me harder, pressing my wrists into my back. Artfully, his lips move over mine in sharp, rough movements until he finds the right angle that aligns us perfectly.

The earlier heat ignites something within me, and I forget everything that bothers me about him—his crass jokes, his rough attitude. None of it matters.

Sensing my acceptance, he drops my hands. I slowly bring them to his chest, digging my fingers into his shirt to avoid falling into a pile of limbs on the snowy ground.

His hands, meanwhile, travel greedily up my side, searching and pressing into the fabric of my dress. He releases short grunts of frustration until, finally, he finds my breast, his large palm massaging it through the heavy wool of my dress. His fingers dig under the high collar, looking for an entrance.

I release a short gasp of surprise as zings of pleasure travel up and down my body, and he takes the opportunity to push his tongue in my mouth. I release a half cry, half moan at the feel of him stroking inside my mouth.

An overwhelming energy rises within me, and I pull away from him quickly, tripping backward in the snow and breathing heavily as I gaze up at him.

He's breathing heavily, too, his eyes wild as he rubs his mouth with the back of his hand, watching me savagely.

Finally, he takes a step toward me. Standing inches away, staring at my face, he's watching and waiting.

It's time for me to invite my mate into my nest—we both know it.

There's a war in my mind, though, as I consider what this really means for me.

Once I do this, there's no turning back. I can never be Elizabeth Cypress again.

I consider him as snowflakes gather on his dark hair, sticking to his lashes. He doesn't blink them away or shake them out of his hair. He's perfectly still waiting for my verdict.

“What's your last name?” My voice is low and choked.

He sticks out his lower lip and quirks a brow. “I don't have one. I'm just Rill.”

Tears burn the back of my eyes as I press my lips together and nod tightly. I don't let them escape, though.

“I'd like to invite you into my nest, Rill,” I whisper quietly, a stray hiccup escaping at the end of the sentence.

He exhales deeply, biting his lips with his fangs and watching at me with those fiery, dark eyes.

“Well, it's about fucking time.”

Nowhere But Here

Elizabeth

Someone put out all the lanterns while I was in the Mercantile, so the bedroom is mostly dark when we walk through the door.

But the curtains are all pushed aside from the windows, allowing the bright snow to cast an eerie glow over the room.

Rill walks in ahead of me. When I turn from closing the door, I see him standing at the foot of my nest, unmoving and silent under a particularly severe stretch of light. The sharp shadows shine on his hands, a swath of unscarred cheek, and the corner of his lips, giving him a ghastly, rough look.

I swallow as, for the first time, I feel a twinge of fear. I only vaguely know what's expected of me in this situation. My mother was most likely saving the specific details for the days between my promise party and my mating ceremony.

I watch to see what he'll do next—surely, he'll make the first move? But he doesn't and he doesn't say anything, either.

Because he's waiting for me.

The seconds tick by as words drift up my dry throat, only to die on my tongue. My heart beats a steady drumbeat, and sweat begins to pour down my back in rivulets.

Eventually, his frustrated groan echoes through the silence. “Are you just going to stand—”

“*Shut up.*” I don’t recognize my voice, and an angry bile roils in my stomach. “For once in your life, Rill, just *shut up.*”

To his credit, he shuts up, but that just annoys me even more.

“Ugh!” I release an ugly, animal sound of exasperation as I take two long strides toward him, throwing my body roughly against his, wrapping my arms around his neck, my lips landing clumsily on his shoulder.

He releases a slight grunt at the impact, but he recovers quickly. Within seconds, his arms are around me, and his hands move to my waist to hold me steady as his mouth roughly meets mine. The kiss is harsh and rugged. My lips feel bruised as he pulls at them, his tongue exploring me.

I push myself against him, never feeling like I’m close enough, as a wild, savage emotion erupts inside of me. His strong, herby scent mixed with a heady musk that radiates off him makes me even crazier than the sun water.

Instead of a balloon that’s threatening to fly away, I’m already gone—high up in the sky, a million miles away from my body. This isn’t me doing this. It’s someone else, and I’m just watching from a window seat somewhere up there...

His hands move down my waist toward my bottom, pulling up the folds of my skirt until he reaches my bare skin. He releases a growl of surprise at the feel of my undergarment-less skin, and his fingers dig into my bottom, pulling me up so my feet are inches off the ground.

I gasp but don't stop kissing him as I wrap my legs around his waist. He lifts me high and tight, and kisses me deeply, ravaging me.

Finally, it becomes too much, and I release a frustrated moan at the feel of the rough clothing against my delicate skin.

"I have to get out of this dress." My words run together as I pull away from him.

A low laugh escapes his lips, but he doesn't say anything as he throws me roughly on the bed. I land with a thud and bounce like a rag doll.

I don't take the time to be offended by the brutal treatment, immediately reaching behind me and grappling with the back of my dress. My fingers are clumsy as I struggle with the fat plastic buttons, and I whimper pathetically until he rises above me.

Immediately, I realize that he's already naked. While I was struggling, he apparently stripped off the very few articles of clothing he wears. As he reaches forward, I expect him to rip the dress off me with his teeth or cut it off with some secret knife he hides in his bootstrap, but he doesn't.

Gently, he moves my hands out of the way and begins to methodically unbutton the dress. His fingers are quick and agile, and my breath catches in my throat.

Within seconds, I wiggle out of the dress and my slip. From the window's light, I see him looming next to me. He looks huge and fearsome in the dark.

It's time.

Backing up on my nest until my head is resting on the pillows, I lay, my body in a stiff, straight line, my arms at my side.

"I'm ready for you, my alpha," I whisper, my voice wavering. "You may have your way with me now."

He doesn't pounce on me like I expect or even laugh at me, which is his usual go-to. Instead, he moves slowly toward me like a cat.

My call sings loudly, and the slick between my thighs grows at the sight of his long, lithe body moving over me. Through the darkness, I see the large part of him jutting forward—long and ready.

He positions his arms on each side of my shoulders and holds himself over my body. The heat radiates off him, and the smell of fresh herbs. I can't help but release a moan as I arch my back toward him.

"Please, alpha," I groan thickly, my impatience growing. "*Please do it.*"

In response, he slowly lowers his face to my neck, his hot, wet mouth trailing down my skin. I wiggle and release short, frustrated moans at the slow pace. He makes his way to my neck, his lips traveling slowly, savoring my skin and tasting me.

I wiggle and squirm until he reaches my stomach, his hands sliding up each of my thighs as he slowly eases my legs apart, revealing my hot, wet center. His lips trail down the soft flesh of my thighs, peppering them with light kisses that send bursts of pleasure through my body.

“What are you doing?” I lift my head off the pillow in alarm. “I thought you were supposed to put your ... in my...”

“I fully intend to put my cock in your pussy, Liz,” he rasps, lifting his head up to grin at me wryly. “But I wanna have a little fun first.”

“What do you mea—*Oh!*”

His mouth is *on* me, *inside* of me. He’s spreading me with his tongue.

I bolt up, smacking him weakly on the top of his head. But I quickly abandon the fight ... it feels good, I realize as I slowly relax against the pillows again. *Too* good. How is it possible for anything to feel this wonderful?

His tongue plunges in and out of me, flicking and prodding over my deepest, darkest place. If I thought I was wet with slick before, I am drenched now. A semblance of

embarrassment passes over me, and I make weak sounds of protest.

It's quickly overruled by another feeling inside me, though. It's coming, and I know that I need to chase it. Everything is tighter, more urgent as the sensation grows stronger and stronger. And as Rill's tongue flicks steadily, it taunts me as it grows bigger. Suddenly, it's so big that I think there's no way I can possibly contain it all inside of my body at once.

And I'm right—I can't hold it all in. The energy explodes, breaking me into a million pieces and a montage of colors and images. A low, deep sound begins in my stomach and travels up my throat until I release it out of me like some sort of ancient call.

I writhe and twist, digging my fingers into his hair as he takes me for all I'm worth. When I'm finally spent and splayed, he gets up and travels up my body, a wicked, self-satisfied smile on his lips as he lays his large, hard body against mine.

I'm in a daze. "What...? How...?"

"I'm gonna fuck you now, Liz," he says against my lips as he kisses me gently, a new, earthy taste on his lips. "My beautiful omega."

I nod weakly, still recovering from whatever he just did to me. I'm pliant and ready as he probes at me with ... what did he call it? His cock?

Rising shakily, he positions himself over me. Through the gray window light, I see a slight look of uncertainty on his face—like he’s just as nervous about this as I am. I reach up to touch his face tenderly, my fingertips playing across his scar.

“I’m ready for you, my mate.”

He smiles at me. It’s a different smile than I’m used to seeing from him. Soft and gentle. Instead of mocking me, he looks young and nervous ... beautiful. I know for certain now that this is where I’m supposed to be and who I’m supposed to be with.

There’s no one but him. Nowhere but here.

On that thought, I brace myself as he starts to press into me.

A sudden, high-pitched scream from outside the window causes him to stop mid-motion.

We both jump at the noise. His eyes meet mine briefly before we hear it again. It’s an omega screaming. She sounds terrified.

“Help! Someone help me!”

I meet Rill’s eyes urgently. We both pause, reluctant to acknowledge the interruption. But then, she screams again.

“Help!”

“Go,” I push his shoulder. “Help her.”

Without another look, he wordlessly jumps off me and bolts from the room, grabbing his pants on the way.

After he leaves, I'm freezing. It seems when he left the room, he took all the warmth. I slowly rise from the bed, my sticky legs making my walk to the bathroom a bit tricky. Grabbing the robe from the back of the door, I make my way to the window to see what the fuss was about.

The clouds from the snowfall have moved on, and the stars and moon are bright in the winter sky. Rill's standing in the fresh snow, shirtless and barefoot. An omega stands next to him, crying while Rill mutters to her. She's tall but unrecognizable, hunched in the darkness ... Rosie or Jade?

There's someone lying on the ground in the snow, directly under the tip of the rock. He's perfectly still. An alpha? Is he dead?

I squint my eyes in the darkness, but I can't make out who the alpha is. One of the scary-looking herders who approached us at dinner?

Another alpha opens the Mercantile door, casting a dim light on the scene, and starts speaking to Rill. Kneeling, I press my ear against the crack in the window—still open from when I sat here earlier. The cold wind bites at my ear, but I strain to hear what they're saying.

“...east perimeter...”

“...attacked Rosie...”

“...said he kept saying Elizabeth...”

I jolt up and narrow my eyes out the window. Something clicks into place in my brain, and a wave of goosebumps

erupts on my skin. I don't think as I turn, rushing out of the room and flying down the stairs.

When I pull the front door open, I see Rill standing in the snow with Rosie and Pike, but I barely register them as I look to the ground—the figure laying in the snow is still and dark. He's wearing a parka and heavy pants, a black beanie pulled low over his head.

“Orion!” I scream as I rush forward, my bare feet sinking into the soft snow as I struggle to move as quickly as I'd like. “Orion! It's Elizabeth. I'm here.”

He jumps with a start, his head moving back and forth. The snow makes my movements slow and awkward, and I don't stop until I'm standing over him. His face is turned away, and he starts coughing roughly to the opposite side.

I sink to my knees.

“Liz—” Rill starts, reaching over to touch my shoulder.

“What did you do to my brother?” I look up at him sharply, my blood pumping wildly. “You said you wouldn't hurt him!”

I don't wait for him to answer. Instead, I fall in the snow as tears burn my eyes. I place my hand on his face and tilt him toward me.

“Orion, it's me—” I cut myself off with a gasp.

It's not Orion.

“Am I too late?” he croaks. “Are you ... ruined, Elizabeth?”

“Jason Sage?” I say his name with a broken breath. “What are you doing here?”

“Finding you...” he bites out before a strong pressure comes from behind me, pushing me aside and knocking him unconscious.

Best of Friends

Rill

God damn fucking shit hell.

I was almost home until this fucker showed up. I had Liz right where I wanted her—wet, willing, and ready.

For a brief moment in time, it was as if everything I'd ever dreamed was finally happening. I had my beautiful mate under me, and she was looking at me like I'd hung the moon.

But just when I was in the perfect place to take her—to put my child in her—it was over before it started.

And now, instead of relaxing my knot into her warm, wet embrace, I'm standing balls deep and barefoot in the snow.

I don't know who this alpha is—Liz muttered his name before I knocked him out, but I wasn't listening. I could only focus on one thing.

Over the crisp scent of the cold snow, the sour stench of Rosie's fear, and Pike's burnt anger, a pungent odor emanated from the mysterious alpha as soon as he laid eyes on my mate.

Lust.

So, while I may not know who he is or why he's here, I know he wants her.

I can't say I blame him. She looked like an angel kneeling beside him, sinking into the moonlit snow wearing nothing but my robe, messy curls escaping her thick braid, and her blue eyes luminescent with shock.

But, again, I don't share. Liz is my mate. No other alpha is allowed to look at her like he wants to eat her for dinner ... at least not while I'm around.

So, I did the first thing that came to mind—I got rid of him, at least for a little while.

And now, as his head falls back into the snow, Liz struggles to her feet to stare at me with accusation.

“What did you do to him?” she demands, her voice thick with anger.

“Don't worry.” My face is grim as I motion Pike forward. “He's fine ... Just taking a nap.”

“Well, don't hurt him,” she orders as Pike lifts him by the shoulders, and I grab hold of his feet. He's not a heavy alpha, but I need Pike to keep me in line so I don't accidentally snap his neck.

Rosie rushes to hold the Mercantile door open wide as Pike and I walk him backward, and Liz stumbles through the deep snow to catch up with us.

“I said I wouldn’t hurt your brother, Liz,” I tell her dryly as I purposefully knock his hip into the doorframe. “Not whoever the fuck this is.”

“He’s...” she sputters as she and Rosie follow us inside, letting the door close behind them. “He’s my friend.”

“Ah.” Friend my ass. “What did Liz’s friend do to you, Rosie?”

As Pike and I dump him on a table, Liz jumps at the mention of Rosie as if she forgot that she was even a part of this.

“Oh! Rosie!” She rushes toward the other omega, her hands on her heart. “I’m so sorry! Jason’s really the gentlest alpha.”

Rosie stares at Liz with wild, horrified eyes but doesn’t acknowledge her before shifting her gaze to me and Pike. She seems hesitant to get too close to the alpha, standing hunched over by the door.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she tells us flatly. “So, I came downstairs for something to drink ... I didn’t want to wake Lulu.”

I take a step toward her, nodding encouragingly. Rosie and Lulu have rooms above the Mercantile. They sometimes sleep up there during bad weather so they can easily get to the kitchen in the morning.

I nod, urging her forward. “Go on.”

“I went outside on the porch to watch the snow for a bit when I—I smelled him. I turned around, and he was standing behind me. He was in a craze. His eyes were so...” She trails off, tears streaming down her face. “He grabbed me by the

shoulders and shook me hard. He kept saying *her* name over and over again. I—I didn't want to tell him..."

"Hey, it's okay, Rosie." I squeeze her shoulder reassuringly. "I'm not gonna let him hurt you."

She nods softly, pressing her lips together and sniffing gently.

Anger thumps through my veins. More so than her sisters, Rosie's wary of unknown alphas. Her father did a number on her while she was growing up, scaring her with stories of what pigeons and alphas did to omegas. It was only because of Lyn that we got her to come here, and it took years for her to let down her guard.

"I screamed, and Pike came out of nowhere," she continues as she gains control of herself. "He used his pressure to throw him into the snow."

"Lyn and I were up late," Pike explains, stepping forward. "I recognized this alpha's scent from what we picked up in the east last week. I smelled him out here and then saw him with his hands on Rosie. It seemed like I got here just in the nick of time."

I nod shortly, my hand falling from Rosie's shoulder as I consider the situation. I can feel Liz's rabid thoughts and anxiety behind me as she worries over her friend. A friend who attacked Rosie—an omega under my protection—and who had my mate's name on his lips.

I didn't listen to my hunters when they told me about the unknown scent, and I wasn't ready to protect Rosie. I wanted to ignore her screams, actually ... I only came down because Liz snapped me out of my lust-filled stupor.

"I'm gonna take Rosie to Lyn, Boss." Pike takes a step toward me, whispering gruffly in my ear and interrupting my thoughts. "When I get back, we can figure out what to do with him. I'll also wake up Nick so he can keep an eye on *her*..." His eyes shift to Liz, where she's standing over the alpha.

I nod once as he wraps his arm around Rosie's huddled body and leads her out the door.

After they're gone, I turn to see Liz frowning at the alpha, brushing his hair off his forehead. I know there's nothing between them—at least not on her side. If our connection is good for anything, it always knows what she's thinking and how she's feeling.

The only thing she's feeling now is confusion and a little sadness.

But this doesn't look good. It would be one thing if this was her brother, but to have this strange alpha showing up for her, smelling of lust and attacking another omega in search of her...

"Who is he, Liz?" I blurt angrily. "A lover of yours?"

Her gaze snaps up. "What? No!"

"That alpha wants to fuck you," I say bluntly, enjoying her slight squirm.

“He does *not*,” she insists angrily. “It’s Jason Sage! We’re the best of friends. I’ve known him since I was a baby.”

“He sure smelled like he wanted to fuck you.” I keep a forced calmness, although I’m anything but calm as I take a step toward her. Now we’re talking directly over him.

She scoffs. “What does that even mean?”

“I think you’d know what fucking smells like after what happened earlier.”

She growls in response—actually growls! My anger starts to dissipate as I fight back a surge of desire. Fuck, I love getting her riled up.

We’re inches apart now, and I can see the blush on her cheek and the spark in her eyes. I graze my finger down her silky cheek with my finger, and her anger fades as her eyes flutter closed.

“That’s not how things work in Goldenrod, Rill. We don’t —”

“So, alphas scare the hell out of unsuspecting omegas in Goldenrod? That’s how it works there?”

“I’m sure he’s going to feel just terrible about that.” She grimaces, her eyes flicking up to me. “And as to his identity, he’s Wyatt’s brother. You remember Wyatt? Camilla’s mate? He ... used his pressure on those pigeons in the woods?”

“Ah.” I glance at his face. I guess I see the resemblance. Although, this one looks smaller. His hands are pale and soft,

and his face young and smooth. I'd be surprised if he has the same abilities as his brother. "What's his name again?"

"Jason," she whispers, not taking her eyes off him. "Jason Sage."

My head jolts up at her tone—there's a thread of tenderness in her voice. She cares about this alpha and doesn't want to see him hurt. Something bitter roils inside me at the thought.

"What the hell's he doing here?"

"I don't know." She looks up at me pleadingly, tears covering the surface of her eyes. "I don't understand why *he's* here, and Orion's not. How did he even know where to find me? Did Wyatt and Camilla go back and tell him what happened? Or did Orion ... go home without me?"

While she's distraught over the prospect, I can't seem to muster much emotion. I'd love nothing more than Liz's brother to give up on her, not to mention this fucker. I've already met enough of these pompous Goldenrod alphas to last a lifetime.

So, I'm not too disappointed when the sound of Pike and Nick stomping into the room interrupts us. Neither of them says anything, but Pike looks at me knowingly.

"Nick's gonna take you back to your nest." I purposefully keep my face blank as I step back from her, creating distance. "Pike and I will make Jason more ... comfortable for the night."

“Will he wake up normally in the morning?” she asks, her voice laced with worry. “I’m sure he’ll want to make amends with Rosie right away.”

“Yep,” I assure her. “He’ll be good as new in the morning. Go get some sleep.”

She smiles weakly. For the first time since we were drawn into this situation, she looks tired. Light circles decorate the pale skin under her eyes.

She takes a step toward me until she’s standing flush with my body. I try to hold my breath as her scent infuses my body, lighting it on fire, but I give up after a few seconds. My hands come up to touch the soft skin around the mark on her neck.

I can’t resist her ... she has to know it. I’m shaking at the effort not to sink into her, to throw her over my shoulder and make her mine at last. We breathe each other in for a few beats before she pulls away, her call purring in a low hum.

“Thank you for understanding, Rill... I’ll be in my nest. Waiting for you.” The words come out low and heady, stopping my heart in its tracks.

I watch as she saunters toward the door, glancing at me one last time from under her long, dark lashes before she walks outside.

When she’s gone, I rush to the window, my eyes following her as she walks clumsily through the snow, Nick following behind her. She doesn’t look back as she enters the house.

Once she's safely inside, Nick leans against the closed door with his hands in his pocket.

I groan loudly as I turn around—Pike's standing in the center of the dimly-lit room, watching me.

Looking back and forth between him and the alpha, I take two strides forward and stare at his soft, unlined face before releasing another groan.

Pike shifts on his feet as he watches me expectantly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“What the fucking hell am I supposed to do with this idiot?” I bark out loudly, motioning toward said idiot dramatically.

Pike shrugs. “I'd say we should put him in the hole, but I know things are ... complicated for you.”

I groan again—louder this time—my hands wrapping loosely around my head and weaving into my hair. Taking a deep breath, I study him again.

He's wearing some sort of pigeon clothing—stark black pants and a jacket that covers him from head to toe. It's that special fabric the pigeons have ... the one that's meant to keep you warm and dry no matter what.

As alphas, we're naturally predisposed to stay warm—I don't get cold that often. But this alpha has probably lost all that, coddled on Goldenrod's warm teat for generations...

I think of Liz's blue eyes staring up at me as her scent suffused my body ... mottling my brain.

Suddenly, I know exactly what I need to do.

“Things aren’t that complicated. Let’s put him in the hole with Mud. I’ll keep watch tonight, and when he wakes up tomorrow...”

“What?”

“He and I are gonna have a little chat.”

“What about your mate?” he asks wryly. “Aren’t you *promised* now? Seems to me you still got work to do on that front.”

“She can wait.” I shoot him a knowing look, and he barks out a laugh and rolls his eyes.

“Your funeral, I guess.” Nevertheless, he grabs the alpha’s shoulders. “Let’s go then.”

We’re silent as we walk him through the door. But outside the Mercantile, as my bare feet sink into the snow and we begin making our way toward the hole, I can’t help glancing up at my house and the figure sitting in the window, watching me.

Part II

The Hole

Rill

We had an alpha named Buck who lived with us for a while, about five summers ago. He came from somewhere up north and was a master at molding metal with fire.

Once, we caught some pigeons and tied them up with ropes in the hole, but we were disappointed when they shimmied out of the ropes and got loose one night. So, Buck stepped up and pointed out a pile of old steel and iron mining tools piled high at the mouth of the hole.

“I can make you something that no pigeon can escape from,” he said with certainty. “I bet it would also contain any alpha of middling strength.”

So, Buck built us a couple of cages. He also fashioned a couple locks and keys—I have no idea how he learned to do *that*. The cages and the locks are sturdy as hell, too. Sometimes, when they’re bored, the hunters will come in here and try to bend the bars. Not one of them has yet to succeed.

That's how the hole—the great big mining cave blown into Crescent Rock—became our lockup. It's actually one of my favorite places here. I feel like I'm at the center of the earth when I stand inside it. The acrid scents of coal dust and sulfur infuse my body, and the cool quiet creates a certain type of peace of mind.

I don't have much reason to come in here that often, though. Mostly, when we catch a pigeon or two, we throw them in here for a few days to scare the shit out of them before we kill or maim them. But they've kept their distance lately, ruining our fun.

We've rarely, if ever, had to lock up alphas in the hole. But now we got a full house of 'em—Mud sits in one cage and Jason the other.

After Pike left, Mud woke up and garbled some nonsense at me.

“Let me out!” he yelled, attempting to rattle the heavy bars of the cage.

“Nah.” I shook my head as I sank against the wall. “I think it's only right that you're *punished*.”

“You can't do this to another alpha, Rill. It's not right...”

Blah, blah, blah.

I didn't want to deal with his shit, so I sent some pressure his way to keep him asleep. Since then, I've been content to sit on the cold ground, lean against the rocky wall, and stare into the darkness as I wait for Jason to wake up.

Scenes and images from my short time with Liz play through my mind on repeat. Her legs spread for me, dripping honey, the feel of her lips against mine, her silky tongue in my mouth.

Even though she was nervous at first, she gave herself to me so completely. I'd never seen anything so beautiful as when she finally let go.

She blossomed like a flower.

But the longer I sit in the hole, the more the doubts wiggle their way into my thoughts.

She's been adamant that it would be her brother who came for her. Hell, I was sure of it, too. I ignored all signs of danger because I could only think about one thing—fucking her.

And what happened while I was wrapped up in my solitary goal? Some sort of sloppy attempted coup by Mud, and then this fucker broke in and attacked one of our omegas.

If this is what happens when I let down my guard and allow myself to be distracted ... is it really something I can afford? Maybe there's a reason I've always been so powerful. I didn't have all this shit dividing my attention.

My heart sinks as memories of past distractions and what they did to me float to the surface. I shake my head, pushing them down deep.

Perhaps I'm not meant to have this happiness. Not if it means becoming weaker. If I don't have power, if my people are getting hurt because I'm too distracted to protect them, then what good am I to anyone ... especially her?

And now, it's just before dawn, and I haven't slept a single wink or fucked a single fuck. Instead, I've been pining and pondering as I watch these two troublesome alphas sleep.

My thoughts are interrupted, though, as Jason finally wakes with a start, sucking in a surprised breath as he struggles to catch his bearings. I turn up the lantern that sits by my feet, casting long shadows on the stone walls.

He pulls himself into a sitting position and looks around in confusion, his hand planted on his head.

"Morning, sunshine," I finally say, my scratchy voice echoing through the cave. He jumps with a start as he squints into the darkness, his eyes adjusting as he finds me in the shadows.

He gasps loudly when he finally sees me. "Who are you?"

"You know who I am, Jason."

I can see him battling with himself about whether or not to play dumb before he finally makes a decision.

"Where is she?" he chokes out.

I smile, relieved that we're not playing games.

"She's around," I assure him with a measured smirk as I slowly climb to my feet. "Why don't you tell me what you're doing here."

He pauses briefly, his eyes darting over me nervously as I hold the lantern next to my face and walk toward the cage. I know what he's seeing—the same thing that everyone sees.

The biggest alpha he's ever laid eyes on.

The ugliest face that could possibly exist.

If he's smart, he'll wonder how I got so big and ugly and tread carefully.

"She needs to—" He cuts himself off, not meeting my eyes. "I want to make sure she's okay."

"And you attacked another omega in the process?"

He scoffs. "I didn't attack anyone."

"The alpha who knocked you out says differently," I say firmly, remembering Pike's description of what he witnessed.

He was holding Rosie by the arms and shaking her senseless, he told me, when we dumped Jason in the hole.

I send a shudder through the cave, dust and rocks falling from the ceiling. I can't stand the thought of this alpha putting his hands on an omega under my protection ... and my mind being too far away to help her.

"Why are you here instead of her brother?" My gaze zeros in on his wide green eyes.

He swallows and takes a step backward. "He's ... not here."

I nod slowly. "I see that... So, where is he?"

"Look, I'm not going to answer any more of your questions," he barks out, his voice strained with emotion. "You obviously aren't going to believe anything I have to say. I want to talk to Elizabeth."

“Well, you can’t. You’re going to stay here with Mud.” I tilt my head toward where Mud lays in a heap in the cage next to his. “Just wait ’til he wakes up... He’s a real pleasure.”

“But I *need* to see her,” he insists, grasping the warped bars and pressing his panicked face between them. “You don’t understand... I came all this way, and ... it’s important.”

“Why should I let you see my *mate*?” I hold the lantern up to my face.

By the slight grimace on his smooth features, I’m sure I look especially ugly by the dancing flame. But after his disgust fades, something else takes its place as he registers my words.

Surprise and disappointment.

“She called to *you*?” His voice is deeper than it was just a few seconds ago, and his knuckles are white as his fingers tighten around the bars.

I bark out a laugh. “The brother didn’t tell you? He was there ... and he was pissed about it.”

“Orion’s gone.” His voice is blank, and his eyes vacant. “He didn’t have a chance to tell me much of anything.”

Gone, huh? Well, that makes my life a little easier.

“Well, as the Goldenrodians say, she *called to me*,” I say in a mocking, nasally voice. “We had a promise party and everything.”

“Then you’ve ... taken her already? She’s carrying your child?”

I pause and turn away from him, walking slowly toward the mouth of the hole. I can see the sun coming up, casting a shimmering glow on the white snow.

When I get to the lip of the cave, just where the daylight is starting to hit, I turn around and glance at him. He's watching me from his cage, his eyes wide.

“She's mine,” I announce loudly before I can stop myself, “and don't you fucking forget it.”

I don't give him a chance to say anything else as I leave the hole, walking toward the Mercantile. Thoughts of her cloud my brain ... again.

I imagine her pulling me into her nest and wrapping a pretty, pink mouth around my cock, rubbing that soft, sweet body against me as she works me.

When I get to the Mercantile, I throw one last glance at my bedroom window before I put all the images in a little box in the back of my brain, packing them away.

“Pike,” I bellow loudly toward where he and Lyn are sharing a cup of coffee. “We're going on a hunt, brother.”

It's time to focus.

That Pretty Face

Elizabeth

Right after my parents died was about the time that Stella gave up on me.

I can't say it didn't hurt. She'd been my best friend for my entire life, after all.

She was frustrated with me, and honestly, I could understand why. Before my parents died, I'd been willing to do all sorts of things with her.

Stella loved nothing more than flouting convention. While I attempted to fall in line with my mother's mandates and the Order, Stella handled her own Order-obsessed mother's dedication in the exact opposite way.

It was always mildly terrifying but ... fun. Something about being around her made me feel brave and wild. Like anything was possible.

With Stella whispering in my ear, it was perfectly reasonable to slip out my back door to play tag in Bluestem Meadow

while my mother napped. And when Stella encouraged me to drink four glasses of champagne at a promise party, there was no way I could resist her pleading.

But when my mother died, everything changed for me. It felt more important than ever that I become the omega she'd envisioned. So, I gave up my flirtation with breaking the rules. I stopped escaping. I didn't take a single sip of champagne.

I focused on being quiet and circumspect.

The kind of mate that any alpha would covet.

An omega my mother would be proud to call a daughter.

But that wasn't what Stella was looking for in a friend. So, just like that ... she was gone.

The only person I had left was Orion, and although he tried, he was a busy, full-grown alpha. He was taking over my father's work ... whatever that actually involved. Every time I saw him, he was stressed and angry, complaining about everyone from the beta who did his laundry to the Administrator.

So, he didn't have time to gossip or to press herbs with me in the solarium.

That's when Jason started coming around.

I'm not stupid. I know Jason ... *liked* me. Probably more so than was proper. And honestly, I can't pretend like I didn't enjoy the attention. I often felt my life would be easier if I'd just call to him.

He was a Sage.

He was sweet and good-looking.

Most importantly, he treated me like the perfect omega.

But all he ever inspired within me was lukewarm feelings of friendship.

To be fair, I didn't feel anything for his brother either. But Wyatt, at least, held the weight of all the expectations my mother and I had heaved on him. It was enough to make my heart flutter every time he walked through the door.

Jason and I talked about everything, though. He became my best friend ... my only friend.

"Stella should be more like you," he told me once while he sat with me in the solarium, sorting herbs fresh from the garden. "She's been hanging out with Camilla Maidenhair lately. Can you believe that?"

"Really?" My heart skipped a beat. "I'm surprised your parents would allow such a thing."

"Father's been ill," he confided. "And mother's ... distracted. I'm not sure what's going on with her, honestly."

I frowned. He looked so sad, rubbing a lamb's-ear leaf between his fingers. I knew far too well the perils of change and how they wreaked havoc on one's spirit.

"What are they doing exactly?"

"I heard Stella tell her beta maid that they're planning on going to the fence."

My head popped up. “You can’t let that happen, Jason. At worst, they’ll be hurt, and at best, they’ll be caught and taken before the Administrator.”

He shrugged mournfully and started tearing the leaf into tiny pieces. “You’re right... I should say something. I doubt anyone will listen to me, though...”

Without thinking, I reached over and grabbed his hand. His skin was cool, but his face immediately reddened as he looked up to meet my eyes. I yanked my hand away quickly.

“You’re the best of them, Jason,” I said quietly, focusing on the herbs in front of me. “Remember that.”

I meant it, too. No one helped me during that time more than him. So, while I don’t know why he’s in Crescent Rock instead of Orion, I have an obligation to stand up for my friend. Just like I always encouraged him to stand up for himself.

It’s a daunting prospect, though, and under the bright morning light—after the events of the previous evening—it seems impossible.

I tossed and turned all night as I waited for Rill to return. He never came, so I never slept. Now, I have a dull ache behind my eyes, and my body is crusty and slow as I stare out the window, searching for my mate.

I could feel him earlier this morning, but the connection was fuzzy. Now, it’s all but disappeared. I attempted to send him a couple messages in my mind, but he never responded—

leaving me to feel pretty foolish. Was I just imagining all that last night?

It was an eventful evening, after all—everything from watching Rill hurt Mud to Jason showing up. Not to mention what Rill and I did in my nest...

My cheeks heat at the memories, and I gaze out the window at the snow-covered road in an attempt to distract myself. Where is he? Why didn't he come back to me last night? I've never been so sick of waiting around for someone in my entire life—I thought we had an understanding.

Overwhelmed by frustration, I spontaneously jump to my feet. I'm not spending another second in this room, just waiting for him to show his face.

No, I've waited for him long enough. I'm going to find him and talk to Jason.

So, that's how I end up standing on the icy doorstep wearing my only dress and my borrowed, too-small shoes. I squint my eyes against the snow sparkling under the bright morning sun, unsure where to start.

Luckily, a young, long-haired, bearded alpha from our journey is on guard—Nick, I think—and I offer him a shaky smile.

“Good morning,” I say in an overly bright voice. “Might you help me find my mate?”

He frowns at me thoughtfully. For a second, I think he's going to tell me to turn around and go back to my nest. But he

surprises me by nodding and jerking his head toward the Mercantile.

“Sure. I think he’s over there.”

I smile and follow his deep footsteps as he leads me through the snow. Although it’s still early, a few alphas are up, clearing the snow from doorsteps and creating paths to the various buildings.

When we reach the Mercantile, Nick opens the door and motions me forward. It’s dark and empty, but the kitchen light is on, and the smell of frying bacon hangs in the air.

“Why don’t you see if he’s in the kitchen?” he suggests. “I’ll check in the back. Sometimes, he’s in the weapons closet at this time of day.”

I nod in agreement and watch him walk in the opposite direction, disappearing through a narrow door.

When I reach the kitchen, I peek through the door expectantly. I assume I’ll see all the sisters and maybe Lyn preparing breakfast, but it’s only Rosie standing over the stovetop with her back to the door, frying bacon in an iron skillet. The sound of hot fat sizzling and popping is the only noise in the otherwise silent room.

I clear my throat. “Good morning, Rosie.”

She glances over her shoulder, her eyes narrowing on me briefly before sullenly turning back to her frying.

I take a couple steps to stand against the island countertop that separates us. “How are you feeling?”

No response.

“I’m very sorry about what happened to you last night,” I continue, despite her silence. “I’ve yet to see Jason this morning, but I’m positive that he’ll be anxious to make his apologies. He’s a very sweet alpha, really.”

She turns the dial on the stove slightly but stays silent. I frown at the back of her head—this is *quite* immature behavior.

“Have you seen Rill?” I ask, impatience seeping into my voice. “Nick and I are looking for him.”

She turns over a few pieces of bacon and remains silent. I watch her back for a few beats before releasing a long, exasperated sigh.

“Honestly, Rosie. You and I have exchanged maybe five words since I got here? Don’t you think you can give me a chance?”

That gets her attention.

“Give you a chance?” She’s still not turning around, but I see her knuckles tighten around the frying pan handle. “I’d say that you’ve already had more chances than you deserve in life.”

I pull back. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She shrugs. “Growing up in such a fancy place as Goldenrod. I heard you had a big house and silky dresses—like a princess in a fairy tale.”

“Um...”

She finally turns to me, holding the sizzling pan in front of her. She looks tired, her skin pale and dark circles under her eyes.

“Pretty house. Pretty dresses. Pretty *face*. But now, all you’ve got left is the face. You lost the rest of it.”

Her voice is soft, but her eyes are sharp as knives. I suddenly realize I have no idea who this omega is ... but I know she’s not the same one who cried to Rill last night.

No, that’s not her at all.

I take a step back from her, eyeing the pan. The oil jumps from the shallow pool surrounding the curling meat, a couple drops landing on my bare hands and stinging my skin.

“I suppose you’re right,” I admit quietly as I step back again, my eyes on the pan. “I did have all those things, but now I don’t.”

That seems to make her angrier, and her scowl deepens. My instincts are flaring, and I know that I need to get out of here, but Rosie looks like she’ll attack if I move too suddenly. I try to keep my breath even as we stare at each other, and I scour my mind for escape options.

“He left.”

At the sound of Nick’s deep voice, Rosie turns abruptly back to the stovetop and drops the pan loudly on the stove. I have to remind myself to start breathing again as I turn to watch the young alpha walk into the kitchen.

“What did you say?” I ask breathlessly.

“He just left but said you can either go back to your nest or work kitchen duty with the other omegas,” he explains in a bored tone.

“What? No!” I look back and forth between him and Rosie quickly. “I need to see ... my friend. The one from last night. Where is he?”

“I dunno.” Nick shrugs and starts edging his way toward the door. “So, are you staying here or going back...?”

He doesn't wait for me to answer before he's gone, his footsteps pounding on the wooden floor of the Mercantile as he makes his escape.

“Nick, wait—”

I flinch at the loud bang of the front doors slamming closed. When I turn to Rosie, she's watching me with a determined glimmer in her eyes.

“I guess your *mate* thinks it's about time you actually did some work around here,” she says sweetly, smiling genuinely for the first time since I met her.

Constant Headache

Elizabeth

The ensuing days are a blur, and the nights are torture.

The positive effects of the brief time Rill and I spent together quickly fades away, leaving me hot, itchy, and annoyed. My head constantly aches, and *all* the parts of my body throb painfully.

I can't see or sense him at all ... because he's gone. He left me. The realization sinks deep inside me, leaving me hollow and uncertain about everything. What kind of alpha *leaves* his omega?

Where you go, I go, he said.

What a bunch of rubbish.

Every night, I curl up in my nest in a state of exhaustion, sinking into the warm pillows and blankets that smell so strongly of him.

I dream that he returns to me and presses his long, hot body against mine before he moves his head between my legs like

he did that night. After that same wonderful feeling washes over me, he pushes inside me with his... What did he call it? His cock? It's glorious and fills me completely.

But I always wake with a start, sweaty and alone. I lie for hours, staring at the ceiling and lost in images from my dreams. Sometimes, I'm reminded that Jason is in Crescent Rock somewhere, and I don't know where he is or if he's even alive ... but those thoughts are fleeting as my brain much prefers dreams.

Tomorrow, I'll find Jason. The promise drifts through me every time I finally find sleep but disappears in a cloud of smoke as I fall into a new hazy, Rill-filled dream.

Despite the long nights, during the day, for the first time since arriving in Crescent Rock, I feel a spark of something.

In particular, *someone*.

Because Rosie? She doesn't like me—*at all*.

And while there are so many things out of my control, the one thing I know for certain is that *Elizabeth Cypress* won't be so easily cowed by this omega.

I won't hide from her in my nest all day, pining away for the mate that abandoned me and missing a life that no longer exists. The thought of sinking so deep and letting her get the best of me is intolerable.

I may end my day in tears, but I'll walk through it with my head held high.

So, it's been with more than a little determination that I've tackled all the unsavory tasks that Rosie's assigned me.

On the first day, she had me scrub the floor of the pantry—it was caked in dirt and grime. I couldn't believe they'd actually store food in such a place. In all honesty, if the food that they ate—that *I* ate—was stored in a clean, dry place, I didn't mind scrubbing it.

On the second day, Jade joined in on the fun and had me and Lulu scrub the dirty pots, pans, and dishes in a giant, free-standing bathtub behind the Mercantile.

I'm not sure why we couldn't use the sink in the kitchen, but she claimed she was using it for something else. Lulu chatted at me incessantly, and it was muddy, icy, and *very* unpleasant, but I followed through without complaint.

Things continued on in a similar vein with each task assigned, and Rosie grumbled and growled every time I smiled and requested more work. Don't get me wrong, I disliked it immensely, but all in all ... it wasn't as bad as I thought.

It's been distracting, and I very much need a distraction.

And now, on day three, I just finished polishing all the worn, scuffed wood furniture in the dining room. I'm not sure why I bothered—the tables and chairs are about a thousand years old—but the waxy polish smelled pleasantly of lemon balm, so I didn't mind too much.

I peek tentatively into the kitchen to see all three sisters laughing happily. I should ask for my next task, but I'm

hesitant to disturb them. I know a reminder of my presence will just throw a shroud over their fun.

The way the entrance to the kitchen is set up, there's a small alcove that I can stand in where they can't see me. I know it's wrong to eavesdrop, but I sink into the darkness, smiling distantly at the sight of them.

Lulu has a ripped towel on her head and is dancing around the kitchen with her arms spread wide.

"Do you like my hat?" She draws the words out in a nasally voice, bowing in front of Rosie. "Isn't it just *beautiful*?"

"That hat doesn't look very practical, Lulu," Rosie laughs as she dries a plate. "What do you think, Jade?"

Jade's wearing her usual jeans today, but she's matched it with a snug black T-shirt that shows off her protruding belly. She smiles wryly as she takes the dry plate from her sister and sets it in the cabinet.

"I think Lulu should get to work if we're going to get dinner out for the alphas on time."

"I don't need to work like you two anymore," Lulu sighs, twirling around on her toes. "I'm a fancy Goldenrod omega ... like Elizabeth."

Rosie's smile fades as her eyes flick to the floor. Jade glances at her sister worriedly before grabbing a damp towel and smacking Lulu on the bottom with it.

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, fancy Goldenrod omegas have to work here, too," she says as Lulu shrieks, her hat

slipping off her head. “Now, go out back and get the pots out of the bathtub.”

Lulu harrumphs but does what she’s told.

As the back door slams closed behind her, Rosie mumbles something I can’t hear. Jade gently puts her hand on her sister’s shoulder and whispers low, comforting words.

Why is she upset? Again, I know I should leave, but seeing them like this—happy and emotional. It’s so different from what I’ve witnessed over the past few days.

I can’t help but wonder what it would be like to have someone laugh with me.

Comfort me.

The mark on my neck pounds a reminder through my bloodstream. I reach up to touch it gingerly. It’s sensitive and achy.

“She doesn’t know what she’s saying.” Jade’s voice rises above my thoughts. “You know how Lulu is ... you can’t blame her for not knowing what she’s really like.”

My heart freezes. Are they talking about me? I sink deeper into the alcove, hoping they don’t scent or see me.

“I wish she’d stay hidden,” Rosie mutters. She sounds sad and dejected—not at all like the bossy omega that’s been ordering me around the past couple days. “She just reminds me of *him*. I miss him so much, Jade. I hope he’s not mad at me—”

“Shhh.” Jade’s voice is gentle as she wraps her sister in a hug. “Sooner or later, she’ll just stay in that stinky bed of hers, and we won’t have to see her anymore.”

I pull back, affronted. My nest does *not* stink. And how would they know? Have they been near it? My hackles rise.

“Where do you think Rill’s gone, anyway?”

“I bet he left to get away from *her*,” Jade says knowingly. “Imagine having such a useless mate ... that’s sure to be a disappointment to an alpha like Rill.”

I roll my eyes at the insult as Rosie mumbles something indecipherable into Jade’s shoulder. I strain my ears to catch the end of her sentence.

“...and he was right. She’s not even trying.”

Jade shushes her. “Don’t worry, Ro. Everything will work out. I’m sure of it.”

“She makes me sick,” Rosie says viciously. “You should hear some of the stories he told me about her.”

“I can only imagine—”

They stop talking as Lulu bursts through the kitchen door. “I got the pots!”

Jade laughs and says something to her as I turn silently back away, skulking dazedly into the dining room.

What sort of stories has Rill told Rosie about me? She *misses* him? The thought causes a new weariness to settle within me.

He told me nothing happened between the two of him, and I believed him.

But now that he's gone, I don't know what to believe.

All of these people are strangers. Even my mate with whom I have this unbreakable bond ... he just disappears for days at a time after gossiping about me with another omega?

That's ... disappointing.

Something has to change.

I *have* to find Jason. I don't know what will happen when I do, but it seems more important than ever that I talk to him.

Someone who knows me.

Who *loves* me.

Something to Prove

Elizabeth

After I compose myself, I return to the kitchen with a forced smile and sidle up to Rosie as she stares out a window distantly.

“Anything else I can do to help?” I ask, narrowing my eyes on her and lifting my chin proudly.

She scowls, obviously disgusted with my perseverance, and turns around as if searching for the worst possible task at her disposal.

Finally, her aqua eyes glimmer as they settle on the kitchen table where a familiar small knife and a pile of potatoes sit—my enemy from days ago.

Inwardly, I groan. Potatoes for dinner again? All these people eat are giant slabs of meat and potatoes. There seems to be no shortage of either.

“I was going to ask Lulu to peel the potatoes for dinner,” she says stiffly. “But I guess you can do it instead.”

“I can help!” Lulu skips into the room, an enthusiastic smile on her face.

“No! You help Jade set the tables, and you,” she turns and glowers at me like I’ve never been glowered at before, “*peel.*”

With that, she turns on her heels, rushing Lulu out of the room and leaving me to figure this out once and for all. Maybe when Rill returns, I think cynically, Rosie can tell him what an excellent peeler of potatoes I’ve become.

Or maybe not.

I wrestle with a solitary potato for about ten minutes, the knife sliding from my fingers clumsily and biting my skin. It’s surprisingly slippery, and working the straight edge of the knife around the circular shape of the potato isn’t easy.

Finally, as I stare down in exhaustion, I think it’s as peeled as it’s going to get. There are only a few slivers of skin left on the chunky bulb.

But my hands didn’t fare so well. I look at them in disgust—my nails were already broken and peeling from all the scrubbing, and now my skin burns a bright red, small drops of blood burgeoning on new cuts.

I suppose I got a little carried away, I think, with a disgruntled sigh as I glare angrily at the potato. If I never see or eat another potato again, it would be just fine with me.

That’s when I hear a shriek above me. I whip my head around—Lyn’s holding a basket of onions and staring at me in horror.

“What on earth are you doing, Elizabeth?”

I pick up the potato with a bloody hand and hold it up for her inspection. “Peeling potatoes.”

She cringes. “Put that down, and don’t touch another one.”

Setting aside her onions, she rushes over to the sink and wets a towel. She shakes her head as she falls into the chair next to me and starts dabbing at my wounds carefully.

“Why would you do this to yourself?”

“Well, I didn’t do it on purpose.” My voice is dazed even to my ears. “Rosie told me to peel the potatoes.”

She looks at me sternly. “I wouldn’t think a Cypress would lower herself to such a task. Did I see you scrubbing the pantry the other day?”

I frown, a bit piqued at the implication. “I *can* do all those things...”

And it’s better than waiting around in my nest for my alpha, who’s disappeared and thinks I’m worthless, I finish wordlessly.

“Hmph...” She’s quiet for a few beats, working on my hand. “So, I heard about your ... friend. A Sage alpha?”

My heart jumps—maybe she has news. “Yes, Jason Sage. He’s the youngest of Carson and Isolde’s sons. You knew them? When you were in Goldenrod?”

She’s quiet again, not answering.

Other than the first night when she told me she was released and the morning after, Lyn and I have never really discussed Goldenrod. I'm aching to talk to someone who understands it—who understands *me*. That ache is what pushes me on, trying to force her to talk.

"I'm not sure what happened with Rosie," I say with a forced lightness, "but I don't think Jason meant to hurt her. He's not like other alphas."

Lyn freezes and looks up at me slowly. "In what way is he not like them?"

"Oh, I don't know." I sigh, staring into the distance. "This is going to sound terrible, but he's smaller ... not as competitive ... kind of a dreamer. But I don't mean that as an insult. He's very gentle and..." I want to say *weak*, but I stop by myself. "There's no way he'd actually hurt Rosie. I'm sure it was a misunderstanding."

"I knew an alpha like that," she says so quietly that I almost don't hear her. "He was smaller than the rest, but I didn't mind. I liked him for it."

"Oh, really? Someone from Goldenrod?" I lean forward eagerly. Her mysterious mate, perhaps?

She levels a hard gaze at me. "I want to show you something," she says firmly, dropping the towel. "Will you come with me?"

"Um, of course." I rise from my chair and follow her out the kitchen and through the dining room. Jade looks up from

where she and Lulu are laying out silverware. She glares at me as I pass but doesn't dare say anything since I'm with Lyn.

Anyway, she's soon distracted by Rosie's voice calling out her name from one of the back rooms. As Lyn and I leave the building, she looks away from me and jumps to her feet.

I skirt closer to the older omega as she leads me down a cleared path through the snow and further down the road than I've ever been.

We're walking closer to the giant cave. It's even larger than I thought, looming over me as we get closer. It looks like it could swallow me whole.

My nose twitches at the mineral-like smell that drifts out of it as the cool air tickles my skin. I wonder if anyone has ever gone inside.

The thought sends a shiver up my spine, and I'm relieved when Lyn turns and opens the front door of the very last house in the row. The door's hinges creak when she swings it open.

The giant cave forgotten, I gasp at the sight before me.

"I know your mother was involved in the Goldenrod Herb Society—all of the grand omegas were," Lyn says, closing the door behind me, "so I imagine you were, too?"

"Yes." I breathe out the word as I turn and take it all in.

The house opens into a kitchen that's filled to the brim with herbs. Jars line shelves nailed into the faded wallpaper, and bushels and clumps of herbs hang from the ceiling. Their combined scent creates a heavy herbal fog.

It smells like spring ... and like Rill.

The house looks to be as rundown and messy as everything else in this town—the wooden counter is scuffed and scratched, and some of the dingy cabinets are missing their hardware. An ancient velvet couch is shoved against the wall, and a couple of teetering wooden stools sit in the middle of the room.

I walk toward the counter—it's lined with stacks of cheesecloth, bowls, and a stone mortar and pestle. Lyn pulls the two wooden stools in front of the mortar and motions me forward.

I sit slowly, my eyes still taking in the room while Lyn walks over to the shelves, her eyes scanning them quickly before settling on a small glass bottle filled with dried yellow flowers.

She opens it as she sits next to me, and the piney scent of yarrow mingles with the herby aura of the room.

“I call it the herb house.” She pours a few of the dried yellow bunches into the mortar and starts grinding. “This will be good for your wounds.”

“It's lovely, Lyn,” I finally say, wistfully. I can't stop looking around, taking it all in. “I didn't know you had an interest in herbs.”

She smiles wanly. “It's not only the grand omegas who know about herbs. I've always had an interest ... even though the Herb Society would never accept me.”

“That’s strange.” I tilt my head in confusion. I don’t ever remember the Herb Society outright rejecting anyone.

She lifts a brow as she turns in her seat to the sink, adding water to the mortar. “Is it? When was the last time a Beech omega joined the Society? Or a *Berry*?”

I open my mouth and close it quickly—the Berries are just as low as the Beeches. “I suppose I take your point.”

She moves aside the mortar and gently pulls my hands on the scratched wooden counter. “I didn’t come from the best of families to begin with,” she explains as she dabbles my wounds with the yarrow rinse, “but when I called to ... the alpha who would be my mate ... well, let’s just say my fate was sealed.”

I stay quiet and watch as she reaches for some cotton bandages, wrapping them around my wet hands tenderly.

I want to ask Lyn who she really is—if she told me her last name or her mate’s name, there’s no way I wouldn’t be able to place her—but something stops me. I’m worried the question would cause her to shut down, and I very much want to hear what she says.

“I didn’t care that he wasn’t powerful, though,” she continues pensively. “I loved him all the same. Even if we didn’t have as much as the Cypresses or the Sages, I was happy with whatever he could give me. And we were content ... for a while. He always had a smile on his face and was so easy going until...”

“Until what?”

She looks up with a start and drops my hand. “Until he wasn’t.”

I frown, and she studies me as if deciding something. “You understand how we—alphas and omegas—came to be in this world? Rill explained that to you?”

“Yes.” *Alphas were created to be violent creatures.* Rill’s voice floats to the top of my consciousness.

“Goldenrod has a way of raising alphas that takes something vital away from them. Something they need to stay balanced ... normal. For the alphas on top, it’s fine. They can be in charge and have their egos soothed, but for the ones who aren’t on top...”

She drifts off, lost in her thoughts.

“What?” I urge her on.

“They don’t know what to do with all that energy, and it’s got to go somewhere.” She shakes her head and reaches for a pin to secure my bandages. “My alpha loved me ... or at least he acted like he did for a while. But when the world demanded something from him that I couldn’t give—a son—he sacrificed me.”

“But Jason isn’t my mate—”

“It doesn’t matter. I know Rill’s not easy. He’s headstrong and bossy and mean, but you’ve nothing to fear from him. It’s the weak ones, Elizabeth. They’re the worst sort of alphas.

They have something to prove to the world, and they have no problem sacrificing anyone who gets in their way.”

I watch her rise from the stool and dust the yarrow off her dress. I think of certain alphas from Goldenrod—like she said, the Beeches and the Berries. They didn’t exactly work beta jobs but were maybe just a step or two above them. They were always mean, their omegas downtrodden, and their children pitied.

I never paid much attention to them. They seemed so far away from my life. All the alphas I knew were confident and strong ... except for Jason.

Lyn turns to put the extra bandages away. Tears fill my eyes as I stare at the remnants of yarrow left floating in the mortar. I don’t even know why I’m crying. Maybe all the frustration over Rill’s absence. He’s the most confusing, aggravating—

“But Rill...” Lyn pronounces, reading my mind as she turns to face me. “He’d burn the world down before he ever let you get hurt.”

“Well then, where is he?” I choke out, emotion thickening my voice. “Why did he leave me?”

“He’ll be back.” Her voice holds a calm certainty. “He can’t stay away from you for too long.”

I shake my head, tears streaming down my face. I wish I could believe her, but if time has taught me anything, it’s that expectations are pointless.

As Lyn moves to clean up the yarrow, my gaze shifts to the cloudy window over the sink. I can see the cave through it, huge and dark.

Suddenly, within the cave's darkness, my eyes catch on a movement. I gasp and wipe away leftover tears as Run walks out of it, holding an empty bag. He makes his way onto the road and stops to talk to Jade, who's rushing down the same path Lyn and I walked.

I stretch to see them, just barely in view of the window. Jade's upset about something, pointing at the cave, and Run is shaking his head. She looks disappointed, but Run pulls her into his arms, and she sinks into him helplessly.

"Take your time here." I jump at Lyn's voice, and I turn toward her. She levels a look at me that's—well, I can't quite explain it, but it's knowing. "Come back to the kitchen when you're ready."

"Thank you," I murmur distractedly as she leaves. As soon as she's gone, my gaze returns to the window and the mouth of the cave.

I don't go back to the kitchen.

A Sore Thumb

Rill

I've always loved nature. The smell of the dirt. The sound of the wind in the trees. Even the little birds and chipmunks flitting around, none the wiser to the evils of the world.

With my feet sinking into the mud and the loam, the world always seems to make a bit more sense. Like everything terrible that had happened was small and meaningless, standing in this giant, independent ecosystem. It didn't give a fuck about me or my problems, so why should I?

It's refreshing.

Unfortunately, it's not working this time.

Standing here in the forest, so far from Crescent Rock—away from my mate—it's as if an essential piece of me is missing. I thought if I got away, I'd be able to focus. But if anything, I'm even more distracted.

Fuck.

“Well, I guess we found 'em.”

I turn at the sound of Pike's gravelly voice. He's pointing to a flattish area up ahead. There's some sort of squat wooden structure built on the edge of a clearing, the smell of smoke and grilled meat wafting toward us.

“Yep.”

It only took us about three days to get here. I didn't think it would be too hard to track them, and it turns out I was more than right. They're sticking out like a sore thumb. I don't know what in the hell prompted them to set up camp on a mountain overlooking fucking Goldenrod—the very place they're trying to avoid—but who am I to judge?

I can see it down there now, the bright winter sun gleaming off the rooftops. I've spied on it from the mountains for years, and I never felt anything but pity for its inhabitants—stuck in their gilded cage.

For the first time, I'm curious about what life's really like there. At this very second, what are they doing? What would Liz be doing if she was there now?

“I'm not surprised he hasn't noticed us yet,” Pike scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest grumpily, glaring at the shoddy structure, sizing it up. “Useless ass.”

He was already predisposed to think badly of every alpha from Goldenrod, and our recent experiences with them have only reinforced that.

I laugh. “Don't worry, brother. He's noticed, so pack that temper away for when we really need it.”

He doesn't look convinced. "Are you sure this is a good idea? I don't want Lyn to get upset—"

"Short of me killing Jason or letting him rot in the hole forever, this is the only course of action." I hold up a hand to silence him. "And if you ask me, it's about time Lyn knows about them. We shouldn't have kept it from her."

Pike grumbles, and I bark out a bitter laugh.

"You're just worried because you know she'll be pissed at you. Rightly so, in my opinion." I motion him forward. "Now come on."

I don't wait to see if he's following as I start climbing the rocky path toward the clearing. As I scale higher and get a closer look at the structure, I see it's built of oak logs and saplings, the gaps filled in with heavy clay and rocks. It looks like it will tumble to the ground with the next stiff breeze.

They haven't been out here that long, and he already built a house? However makeshift it is, that's impressive. Maybe not all Goldenrod's alphas are completely useless.

But as we approach the clearing and he steps out of the house, I'm reminded of what I already knew about Wyatt Sage. He's formidable in his own right.

A huge bastard, his sharp green eyes narrow on me in disgust as he strides toward us. When I last saw him, his dark hair was severe and close-cropped, but now it's a bit shaggy, growing over his ears. It gives him a wild, wolfish look.

“It’s Rill, Camilla,” he calls behind him, his scowl deepening as he looks me up and down. “What do you want?”

“Well, that’s one helluva welcome.” I huff out a laugh. “Good to see you, too, brother.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but he’s cut off as a small omega with a flurry of brown curls pushes past him. She stops short in front of me, her large brown eyes searching.

“Rill!” she exclaims breathlessly. “Where’s Elizabeth?”

“She’s fine,” I say simply, my heart tripping at the sound of her name as I attempt a reassuring smile.

Apparently, I’m not doing a very good job. She tilts her head as she waits for me to elaborate. “What does that mean? Where is she?”

“What do you want?” Wyatt interrupts her, eyeing me severely. He wraps an arm around Camilla’s shoulders and pulls her into his side.

As she relaxes into him, green envy bubbles inside me. Was it just the other night that Liz was pressed into my side, looking for protection?

“It’s not what *I* want,” I say cryptically, sitting uninvited on one of the stumps surrounding the fire. “It’s that I have something *you* want.”

Wyatt rolls his eyes; any patience he has disintegrated. “What. Do. You. Want?”

I exhale and look at Pike. He's been hanging back, probably trying to avoid smacking Wyatt around. But no, he's silently studying Camilla, not paying any attention to our conversation.

"I have Jason." No reason to dance around it.

They both freeze dramatically—that obviously wasn't what they expected me to say.

"You have my *brother*?" Wyatt finally asks incredulously, breaking the silence.

"That I do," I state, sucking my teeth.

"Where?"

"In my lockup. He attacked an omega under my protection when he showed up looking for ... my mate."

Wyatt curses as he falls on the stump next to me and stares at me like he wants to rip my head off for several seconds. Finally, his fangs pop out as he growls, "Tell me what happened."

Briefly, I describe the night that Jason showed up in Crescent Rock and attacked Rosie. Wyatt's silent as I finish, his eyes focused on Goldenrod below.

Through the bare winter trees, I can see the sun glinting off the metal fence that wraps around the isolated town's buildings and open areas.

"How do you think he got out?" His eyes flick toward Camilla. "I wouldn't think that Jason would even be strong

enough to...”

“There’s still a lot we don’t know, Wyatt.” She comes up behind him. “Didn’t the Administrator stop you when you came after me? Maybe he sent Jason to bring you home?”

She starts rubbing his shoulders slowly, and he closes his eyes and tilts his head, leaning into her touch. Once again, I’m reminded of Liz... What’s she doing now?

I briefly open up our connection and sense a weak beat of emotion from her. She’s upset about something. Every time I reach for her since I left, she’s been upset. I guess I don’t have to wonder why.

I shut it off, and exhale, re-focusing on Wyatt and Camilla. Gauging them, I clear my throat before I ask the next question.

“Did anything ever happen between your brother and Liz?”

Wyatt scoffs as if the idea is ridiculous. “In his dreams. Jason always had a ... *thing* for her. It was ridiculous.”

Anger surges within me as I fist my hand and grit my teeth—I knew it. “Nothing happened between them, though?”

“No.” Wyatt shakes his head, his eyes distant. “It was always me that Elizabeth wanted.”

My heart sinks in my chest. “What?”

“We were supposed to be mates,” he mumbles, glancing at Camilla. “Our families planned for it and did everything possible to try to make it happen, but we’re not supposed to be together, obviously.”

“No, you’re *not*.” I need to change the subject before I break Wyatt’s neck. “He said Liz’s brother is gone. Do you know anything about that?”

“What? No.” Now it’s Wyatt’s turn to be surprised. “Orion’s gone? What does that mean?”

I shrug. “We’ve been waiting for him to show up to ‘rescue’ his sister. When was the last time you saw him? I left you in that clearing together.”

Before I took off with Liz, I knocked Orion, Wyatt, and Camilla out with some pressure. I didn’t think Wyatt and Camilla would come after us—Camilla’s pregnant, after all, and Wyatt’s the type of alpha who wouldn’t be too keen to drag her through the woods. But I knew that Orion wouldn’t give up on his sister that easily, and I wanted a head start.

“As soon as we woke up, Orion went after you,” Wyatt confirms. “He wanted to find Elizabeth and ... bring her home. The last time I saw him, he was walking into the woods, following her scent.”

He stares off a bit wistfully, and Camilla snuffles and rubs his shoulders again. We’re all quiet for a bit before I decide to get to the point. I didn’t travel all the way out here to chat.

I look over at Pike one last time. He’s still standing behind me, watching Camilla with a narrow, concerned gaze. Without moving his eyes, he nods at me, giving me his go-ahead.

“I need you to come back with me,” I state plainly, “or I’m going to kill Jason.” I hold a hand up as his face morphs with

alarm. “I respect you, Wyatt. That’s the only reason I’m here. Come deal with your fucking brother so I don’t have to.”

He bites out another curse and stares into the fire.

“Fine,” he finally says, and none of us says anything for a while.

“Do you want me to come, or should I stay here?” Camilla asks, biting her thumbnail. “I hate to leave everything unattended.”

He looks at her like she’s crazy. “You’re pregnant, Camilla. There’s no way you’re staying here alone.”

Well, here goes nothing.

“Anyway, I think you’ll want to come, too,” I tell her casually. “So, you can meet your mother.”

Complicated

Rill

“You know, you’re the biggest asshole I’ve ever met.”

I sigh and lean back against the tree that I claimed for the night. Wyatt’s standing over me with his arms crossed over his chest. I guess he decided it was finally about time I got a *talking-to*. He’s been glaring holes in the back of my head ever since we set off this afternoon.

If it was just Pike and me, then we would have kept going through the night, but Wyatt insisted we make camp for the night so that Camilla could rest.

As soon as the sun started setting, he refused to take another step, creating a little nest of dead leaves and covering it with a blanket. She sat there while he grilled her a squirrel and fed her meat until she passed out, exhausted.

Pike and I watched, shocked and appalled. I sure as hell didn’t treat Liz that way when *we* were traipsing through the

woods. I get it, I suppose—she *is* pregnant—but I don't like it, and I don't feel much like dawdling.

But here I am. Leaning against a tree while I wait for the sun to come up so I can get back to Crescent Rock.

Back to Liz.

To do what, I haven't quite figured out. I still want to fuck her—but it feels more weighted than it did just a few days ago. I'm starting to think that fucking her won't just be about scratching an itch but rather sinking me deeper into something I don't quite understand.

“Yeah, I hear that a lot,” I admit to Wyatt with a sigh. “But is that all you wanted to say? If so, I'd love it if you fucked off.”

But he doesn't fuck off; instead, he huffs and plants himself next to me, leaning against *my* tree.

I groan in annoyance. *Go away.*

“You show up, and ... we're just supposed to follow you?” he asks incredulously. “To where? This seems like a trap.”

“Well then, what the hell are you doing here?” I sneer. “Go back to your little wooden house and keep watch over your precious kingdom for the rest of your days.”

He ignores my sarcasm and presses on. “Is this omega—Lyn—is she really Camilla's mother? How would you even know that?”

I thought Camilla was going to keel over when we told her. She just let out a choked sound and kept insisting that her

mother was dead.

It was Pike who snapped her out of it. “Your mother is Gwendolyn Berry Maidenhair,” he told her calmly. “But I call her Lyn. She’s been with me for the past fifteen years ... ever since she was released from Goldenrod by your father, Alfonso. She’s very much alive.”

She looked white as a ghost, her mouth agape as she processed his words. I assume everything was accurate because five seconds later, she turned to her mate.

“Let’s pack up, Wyatt,” she told him quietly, and he followed her into their little hut. They both emerged an hour later, ready to hit the road.

But I guess Wyatt’s not buying it. I glance at him, and his eyes are glued to my face, probing me as if waiting for me to crack. I exhale loudly. I have no desire to get involved in this drama. I have enough drama of my own.

“Pike knew right away,” I say hollowly, focusing my stare on the darkness. “You should ask him.”

Plus, Pike probably wouldn’t hesitate to smack him around for his lip—he *really* doesn’t like Goldenrod alphas—and right now, I’d like to see Wyatt smacked around a bit.

“I’m asking *you*,” he bites out angrily.

I groan and glance at him again. He looks like someone pissed in his breakfast. Why do I always end up having to explain things to these people? Can’t they find a different fountain of information?

“Last month, when we met up with you guys, Pike could tell right away she was Lyn’s daughter,” I explain impatiently. “They look alike and have a similar scent. I guess going home and being around her confirmed it.”

“Does she know we’re coming?”

“Nope.” I turn around to face the darkness again. *Now go away.*

He groans. “This is going to be a shitshow.”

“Yep.”

He’s silent for a little longer, and I sit silently, listening to the sounds of the winter forest flicking and blowing in the background. I hope he’ll get the point and leave, but no such luck...

“Is Elizabeth really okay?” he asks gruffly. “Have you hurt her?”

Suddenly, my annoyance snaps into something different. Something angrier.

“She’s my *mate*,” I hiss, my fangs popping out as I release a hiss and move off the tree to sit on my haunches. This is the second time I’ve wanted to snap his neck today. “Keep her name out of your mouth.”

“Oh, calm down,” he barks, annoyed. “Maybe Orion was right about you alphas—you’re animals. I’ve known Elizabeth my whole life. I have a right to know if she’s happy and healthy.”

“That’s debatable,” I grumble, my anger settling back to annoyance as I fall back against the tree again and consider his words. “She’s healthy...”

“Not happy?”

“Things have been ... hard.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“She’s complicated,” I bite out. That’s the fucking understatement of the year. Yeah, she’s complicated because she’s crazy, beautiful, mean, and smart as a whip. I don’t know what to do with all that.

“Yeah, she is,” he agrees quietly. “But all the best omegas are.”

I raise a brow, surprised. Maybe—for once—he may be able to tell me something I don’t know.

“It’s distracting,” I admit in a muffled voice. “*Too* distracting, and I have ... responsibilities that I’ve neglected.”

He nods slowly. “My life changed forever when I found out Camilla was my mate. Once we were out here, I knew we could never go home to Goldenrod. There was no way that we could live the life we both expected we’d live. I lost ... everything.”

I pause, considering his words. “Are you saying that Liz and I need to live in Goldenrod?”

He scoffs loudly. “No. But the point is that while I lost everything ... my home. My family. Everything I’ve ever

known, really. None of it matters. I'd lay down my life for that omega."

"But I have others relying on me," I insist. "Alphas and omegas who'd be killed or captured by pigeons, and I can't let anyone go through..." *What I went through*, I stop myself from saying.

"You don't think I had others relying on me?" He turns and glowers at me. "I have a little sister and two brothers who I left with a dying father, an insane mother, and a corrupt Administrator. But it was worth it. *She's* worth it."

"Hm." I let his words sink in, closing my eyes as the cool night air rushes over my face. Flashes of her play through my mind.

Covered in mud as we walked to Crescent Rock. Snapping with anger when I came into her nest uninvited. Peeking at me through sleepy eyes after I pleased her... Is she worth it?

She is, I realize slowly. She's worth more than anything or anyone else.

The thought causes something to snap in my mind. I jump to my feet abruptly and look at Wyatt. He's still sitting against the tree, watching me knowingly.

"Tell Pike I went ahead." My voice catches in my throat at the thought of seeing Liz. "He'll lead you to Crescent Rock, and we'll ... deal with everything when you get there. I got something I need to do..."

“Yeah, sure,” he says shortly, smirking. I start striding into the dark trees when I hear his voice call out behind me. “Hey, Rill?”

I stop in my tracks, looking back at him. “Yeah?”

“If you lay a hand on my brother before I get there, I’ll rip every limb from your body.” His voice is so serious and clear, and I can’t help but bark out a loud laugh ... I’d like to see the pampered bastard try.

“Noted, brother.” I wave to him with a smile. “See ya in a few days.”

A second later, I’m flying through the trees on my way home.

The Herb House

Elizabeth

Over the next two days, I work exclusively in the herb house.

It's a much better fit for me than the kitchen, and it keeps me just as distracted. Not to mention, I don't have to interact with Rosie or Jade nearly as much.

They didn't seem to mind when I stopped showing up to be ordered around in the kitchen. If anything, when I caught glances of them from the herb house window, they looked pleased to once again pretend like I don't exist.

The feeling is entirely mutual, and I've mostly avoided the kitchen except for the times I know they typically take breaks. I sneak in and stock up on food, water, and a little bit of sun water that I store in the herb house.

So, I end up spending all my waking hours in the herb house and my sleeping hours in my nest. Minus the ongoing dreams and the regular discomfort of my incessant heat, my days settle into something a bit more bearable than before.

I spend every morning organizing the herbs and creating tinctures, soaps, and oils. Around midday, I eat and drink, work some more, and watch Run go in and out of the cave a few times.

It's always just him that goes into the cave, and it's only in the afternoon. Each time, he carries a string with a large, crude-looking key hanging on it and a brown woven bag filled with something. When he comes out, the bag's always empty.

I'm sure that's where they're keeping Jason ... and maybe Mud. I haven't seen him since that fateful night, either.

It seems like it should be simple for me to just walk into the cave and talk to Jason, but unfortunately, just because Rill's gone doesn't mean I'm not being guarded.

When I worked in the kitchen, my guard would disappear for the day and reappear to stand outside the door when I returned to my nest in the evening. I guess they trusted the bustling nature of the Mercantile to keep me looked after.

But now that I'm working in the herb house, I'm being watched more closely. It's always Nick or another young hunter whose name I don't know. They trade off guard duty, following me wherever I go. They don't talk to me, and I don't talk to them.

But they watch me like hawks, following ten steps behind me as I make my way from my nest to the herb house to the kitchen each day.

With all that, I'm more than happy to spend hours locked up with the herbs, organizing, cleaning, and creating. But most importantly, keeping an eye on the cave.

Lyn stops by every now and then, but it's Lulu with whom I spend most of my time. She loves the herb house. She's helped Lyn in the past and has a natural aptitude for everything herbal.

I attempt to teach her the things that my mother and the other omegas of the Herb Society taught me. Starting with the most important item: soap.

We shaved down the bars of scentless soap that everyone in Crescent Rock relies on, melting the shavings with grapeseed oil and experimenting with quite a few herbal combinations, eventually creating messy clumps of fragrant soap.

Our most sweet-smelling product contained dried mint and tea tree leaves with a dash of rosemary.

"Mmm." Lulu smiled up at me as she drew in a long breath of our finished product. "This is the first time I've ever been excited to wash."

I smiled. "Nothing makes an omega feel more complete than smelling nice."

Rushing forward, she wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug. Lulu was a hugger, I'd discovered, and while at first, it made me a bit uncomfortable, I'd gotten used to it.

"I hope I look like you when I'm a grown omega, Elizabeth," she said with a sigh.

“Oh, shush.” I looked down at her bright blond hair and fought a smile. “You’ll look like you, and you’ll be beautiful.”

She giggled and pulled away, moving to twirl on one of the stools in front of the sink, the cave looming large and dark through the window behind her.

“Lulu, do you know what they keep in the big cave?” I asked with forced casualness. “I always see Run going in there.”

She froze and looked at me, her eyes wide and scared. “That’s the hole.”

I scrunched up my nose. “The hole?”

Lulu nodded and started twirling again. “I’m not supposed to go in there.”

I hummed and began drying a bowl. I knew I needed to proceed carefully. “I wouldn’t want to go in there... It looks awfully scary.”

She nodded solemnly. “That’s where they keep the pigeons they catch.”

“Oh?” I frowned. “Are there pigeons in there now?”

She shook her head and pressed her lips together, pretending to lock them and throw away the key.

I smiled and changed the subject, but inside, I was reeling. That’s where Jason was being kept; I was sure of it. If I wanted to see him, I would need to venture inside.

I think that moment was the happiest I’ve been in weeks ... and the most scared. I’d need to proceed with caution if I were

to do this right.

So, I took a bath last night with the new soap, lathering it in my long hair and working it through the strands. Finding more ribbons and pieces of string in one of Rill's desk drawers—he keeps the strangest things—I twirled segments of hair into twisty little buns that I tied to the top of my head.

Before slipping into my nest, I gently massaged my skin with grapeseed oil infused with mallow root and lavender.

Waking up this morning, I found I felt more like myself than I had in weeks. Uncoiling my hair, I chose to braid only the top and wear the rest down, curling to my waist. It hadn't looked so good since Colleen had her hands in it.

Even though I'm wearing the same filthy blue dress and too-small shoes, my skin is dewy, and my hair shines and bounces as I step out of the house. My guard—Dirk, I think—looks at me agog, and I can't help the warm self-satisfaction that settles over me.

This is Elizabeth Cypress.

I flash a bright smile. “Shall we, Dirk?”

Eventually, he shakes himself out of his daze and trips behind me to catch up as I make my way down the road.

The snow has long since melted, but the crumbled road is dirty and icy. But I may as well be waltzing around the marble ballroom in Cypress House with the amount of ease and confidence that I manifest into my footsteps.

As I pass Rosie and Jade standing on the Mercantile porch, a gentle gust of wind blows against me, and my long hair flows behind me like a banner.

“Good morning, Rosie.” I raise my hand in a short finger wave. “Good morning, Jade.”

Jade rolls her eyes, but Rosie looks like she’s about to burst into tears at the sight of me. I plaster a bitter smile on my face as I focus on the herb house ahead of me—that omega can kiss my elbow.

Leaving Dirk at the door of the herb house, my good mood persists. I’m humming *The Waltz of the Omega* as I get to work.

I began re-organizing the bottles of herbs yesterday and making a list of things I’d need to replenish in the spring. There’s a narrow space behind the house that Lyn obviously uses for an herb garden, and I’d like to start creating some seedlings in the pots and jars stored in the cupboards. So, I start going through the motions, setting out the pots and lugging a huge bag of soil forward.

There’s only one small shovel, though, and I purposely left it in the kitchen yesterday. I just need to find the right moment to bat my lashes at Dirk and ask him to go fetch it for me. Then, I’ll finally have the opportunity to sneak away.

My thoughts trail off as my eyes catch on movement outside the window—someone’s moving toward the cave. It’s much too early for Run’s usual visits, but it’s not him this time, anyway.

It's an omega with reddish-blond curls.

Rosie.

She's walking quickly, glancing over her shoulder furtively as she disappears into the darkness.

Why would she be going in there?

She shouldn't want to go anywhere near the cave—Jason supposedly attacked her, after all.

“Dirk?” I call out excitedly, not moving my eyes from the window. “Would you mind going to the kitchen and fetching my shovel? I think I left it there yester—”

Suddenly, my breath and words are robbed from me. I'm frozen except for a tingling sensation that moves through my body and settles between my legs as I'm overcome by a pungent herby scent. Logically, I know I'm surrounded by the scent of herbs, but this is different.

Because it's him.

My call ignites within me, echoing through the small room. I press my lips together to stifle a cry, my fingers wrapping around the edge of the sink as I push down so many feelings—excitement, anger, anticipation. I don't want to turn around. I *refuse* to turn around.

Turn around, Liz, he orders me, reading my indecision.

Ugh.

Left without a choice, I turn.

He's standing in the doorway of the kitchen, watching me. There's a beard growing around his scar, and his hair is slicked back from his face and tied in the back. His dark eyes are searching as they travel up and down my body.

He looks impossibly tall and broad—did he get bigger while he was gone? The thought floats across my brain deliriously.

I can feel something building inside of him—his own desire and excitement.

We stand there, each of us studying the other warily. Neither of us says anything until all the anger and confusion I've bottled up inside combusts out of me in a single word.

“Bastard.” The word sounds guttural and comes from low in my throat.

He freezes briefly in surprise before his face breaks into a relieved smile. Taking two long strides toward me, he wraps his thick arms around me as I gratefully sink into him.

Nameless Grace

Rill

She looks like an angel, but she smells like rage.

I pull her against me, my pulse shaky as my fingers weave into her soft, sweet-smelling hair—so long and impractical. Only someone from Goldenrod would have hair like this.

Only *she* would have hair like this.

Watching her stand in the light of the dreamy morning sun streaming through the dirty window, I couldn't believe she was real. Just like the first time I saw her, I was struck dumb. Not only by her beauty but something else that radiates off her.

A nameless grace.

Something about the way she moves and speaks—she's a work of art. When she finally turned and looked at me, her brilliant blue eyes glowed with anger, and her lower lip shook in her attempt to control herself.

And then she threw that word at me.

Bastard.

That's what did me in. I couldn't stay away from her for another second. And now, she sinks into me, all fine bones and soft skin, almost against her will. Like she can't help herself.

I know the feeling.

I move my face down, nuzzling into her hair. I try to be gentle at first, but the more her hot, floral scent fills me, the harder it becomes. It's been too long, and now that I have her in my arms again, I can't go slowly.

"Are you angry with me?" I mumble in her ear, pulling on the lobe lightly with my teeth.

Groaning softly, she pushes against my chest. "Of course I am."

She seems to battle with herself about whether or not she wants to pull away or lean into me. Eventually, she gives in and tentatively settles against my chest.

"Where were you?" Her voice vibrates against my shirt.

"Hunting."

When I don't elaborate, she pulls back, her blue eyes flashing as she stares up at me. "That's all you're going to say?"

"There's nothing else you need to know right now," I say dismissively, trying to move my face down to hers.

She groans and steps away from me completely. Immediately, I know it's the stupidest thing I've ever said.

“*Nothing* I need to know? How about why my mate chose to leave me without a word?”

I sigh. “You wouldn’t understand, Liz.”

“Why wouldn’t I understand? Because I’m just a little omega? Only good enough to clean your filthy town or to ... *fuck*?”

She barks out the word like she’s speaking a foreign language, and I smile despite myself. Sounds like I’ve been rubbing off on her, huh?

She clenches her jaw at my smile, her eyes bulging—now she’s really pissed.

“But you couldn’t do it, could you?” she asks through gritted teeth. “Couldn’t *fuck* me? You got too scared and left.”

My smile evaporates as I step toward her, my hands fisted at my side. “I wasn’t scared.”

“It seemed that way to me,” she whispers, backing up until she hits the counter. “You weren’t able to finish what you started.”

I growl low in my chest. “I can *finish* anytime I want.”

I’m standing just over her now, looking down at her upturned face. Her skin is rosy, and her eyes are ablaze as they meet mine. There are so many alphas who can’t look me in the eye—who cringe and cower at the sight of my ruined face—but this omega has no problem with it.

She’s fearless.

Through heavy breaths, her voice is rough and laced with an unmistakable challenge when she speaks.

“Prove it.”

I jump her.

It’s not like just a few minutes ago. Not soft and gentle. No light strokes and hair smelling.

No, this is a hard and long-fought embrace. Our lips and teeth mash together, and our limbs battle with each other, trying to be the one who touches the most of the other.

My hands travel down her narrow back until I find her ass. I start pawing at it through the thick fabric of her dress, my mind buzzing with her call.

I lift her slight body up and against me, her long legs wrapping around my waist. She groans loudly as I walk her backward, and we fall onto a narrow couch. A cloud of dust rises from the impact of our bodies and sends up a musty smell to mingle with the scent of herbs permeating the room.

Through it all, I can only smell her.

Hot summer rain.

I can only feel her.

Soft.

Mine.

Her movements are quick as she shoves her hands under my shirt greedily, her fingers pressing into my skin. I release a

rough grunt at her touch, lifting up slightly to give her better access.

I pull at the high neckline of her dress, ripping the seams down the side and exposing her breasts.

She grumbles something about it being her only dress, but I'm not listening as I lower my head and take a long draw from her pink nipple. My rough beard rubs against her delicate pale skin, and she moans, arching her back toward me.

I can't wait another minute. Showering kisses on her breasts, I start wrestling with her long, heavy skirt. When it's finally around her waist, and I've got the access point I need, my hands start traveling up her knees and skirting her inner thigh.

Her skin is like damp velvet here.

Her breath hitches as my hand presses into the top of her leg, gently pushing her legs apart. My fingers move up to the thatch of hair that covers her.

I dip my fingers inside her folds to find her dewy and ready for me.

As soon as my fingers enter her, she sucks in a sharp breath as her back arches and her eyes close.

"Rill—" she starts, but I pull her lips in a rough kiss before moving my face into her warm neck, running my fangs over my mark.

"I dreamed of this perfect pussy of yours every night I was away," I rasp in her ear.

She groans loudly, throwing her head back and dropping her hands. I move my mouth over her soft, fragrant skin as I work her with my fingers ... back and forth. She's as soft on the inside as she is on the outside.

It doesn't take her long. Within seconds, her body seizes up as she releases a loud, long moan. I can't help but stare down at her in awe.

She's so goddamn beautiful, captured in the throes of pleasure. I've never seen anything like it.

When it passes, she relaxes on the couch, her body pliant. But while she's soft and finished, I've never been so hard in my life. I reach into my pants, pulling out my hot and heavy cock, rubbing it up and down as I look at her dazed face.

Her eyes crack open and widen at the sight of me with my cock in my hand.

"No," she reaches up and pushes on my chest weakly. "Put that away. It can only happen in my nest."

I release a frustrated growl. "How much longer is that fucking nest going to be a thing?"

"I made it for you," she insists in a pleading voice, "and it's the only place we're going to ... *do this*."

I breathe out a short laugh. When she orders me around like that, so prim and proper... I just ...

Dipping down, I take her lips, pulling her bottom lip up roughly in my teeth as I move away.

“Okay, love,” I grunt. “Anything for you.”

I jump to my feet and secure my cock. She shrieks as I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder in short order. I’m out the door in two seconds, passing Dirk’s slumped form on the ground next to the door.

She gasps at the sight. “What happened to Dirk?”

“I broke his arm.”

“Why would you do that?” She twists on my shoulder as I jog across Railway Row. We pass the shocked faces of the herders and builders—the only alphas who are around town this time of day.

“He was looking at you,” I say, kicking the door to my house open, “through the window.”

“So, you broke his arm? That’s barbaric,” she scolds as I run up the stairs two at a time. “It’s his *job* to watch me.”

“Not the way he was doing it.”

She doesn’t have the chance to reply. I push the door to my room open and throw her down on my bed. Skirting back quickly, she glares at me warily. Her ripped dress dips, exposing pert breasts surrounded by the waterfall of sable curls running down her shoulders.

“I’m the only one who looks at you, Liz,” I say, my voice hoarse as I pull my shirt over my head. “Now, invite me into this nest of yours.”

Nothing on My Mind but You

Elizabeth

I should be furious.

Yelling and screaming and throwing sharp objects at his head.

And I suppose I was angry for a while. But now ... I'm not.

Now, I don't care where he's been or why he left.

Jason, the cave, Rosie, and Jade—they're all distant memories. Things that used to matter but no longer do.

Because as I melt into the pillows and his large, warm body comes down on top of mine, the dark hair on his chest grazes my exposed nipples. I can't think about anything except for how beautiful his skin is or how the entire world seems to exist in his dark eyes.

He keeps himself just barely above me for a few breaths. There's no sign of the mocking sarcasm from just minutes ago as we breathe each other in.

He's close but still much too far away. So, I'm relieved when he finally relaxes his weight on top of me completely, his scent enveloping me.

He lifts up his head, and we lock eyes in silence. They're so serious and probing through the jagged scar streaking across his face. He never looks like this ... everything's always a joke to him.

He's not joking now, though. He's not even smiling as his rough hand reaches to caress my cheek.

In addition to his usual herby scent, he smells like smoke and the outdoors. I wonder briefly where he's been and what he's been doing, but the thought quickly dissolves when he blinks as if awakened from a trance.

"I'm sorry I was gone for so long," he mutters in a guttural voice.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him it's okay, but I realize it's *not* okay. I've lied to people my whole life ... to make them feel better. To accommodate them. To soothe their egos. But I don't want to lie to him.

"It was confusing." My voice is hazy and uncertain. "What happened to 'where I go, you go'?"

"I won't do it again," he says smoothly, his eyes flicking over my face. "Promise."

I don't know if it's because of how much I want him or something else. But at that moment, any leftover resistance I have melts away. I don't have the chance to respond, anyway,

as his lips meet mine. He kisses me slowly. His mouth is soft and silky, not coarse like the rest of him.

He moves a rough hand up my side, and I wonder if he'll be rough like he was in the herb house—pushing and pulling.

Instead, he moves methodically and thoroughly as he begins to palm my breasts, puckering my taut nipples and rubbing them with the palm of his hand.

It makes me feel warm and sedate, but breathless at the same time.

He moves to unfasten the waistband of my dress, rising off me a few inches so I can kick it aside. When he moves down on me again, we both groan simultaneously at the feeling of our bodies touching with nothing separating our skin.

“You’re not scared, are you?” He breaks the silence and moves his mouth to my neck, his lips traveling down in a wet, hot line.

“No,” I say honestly, and it’s the truth. I may not have as much bravado as I did in the herb house, but I could never be afraid of him—it’s impossible.

“Good,” he rasps as his mouth comes down to mine again.

He kisses me, harder this time, as his hand rubs up and down my side gently, soothing me until I’m languid and at ease. I don’t even realize what I’m doing as my legs spread wider, allowing him greater access, and my fingers start dancing over his smooth, hot skin.

He groans as he settles against me, his face pressing into my neck as he inhales deeply. He pulls his face up, and I swear his hand is shaking as he reaches up to clumsily trace my face.

“I don’t know how much longer I can be gentle, Liz. It’s been so fuckin’ long.”

“Don’t be ... gentle,” I gasp, my voice stilted as my heartbeat speeds up. I dig my nails into his back, pressing my hips against his to urge him forward. “Just do it.”

I don’t even know what I’m asking for—this is all a mystery to me. All I know is that I could stay like this forever, pressed up against him as his lips work me from the inside out. He drops kisses on my lips, my cheeks, my nose, and down my neck.

But then he reaches down and grabs hold of himself. After one last gentle kiss, he thrusts forward, entering me in one movement.

“Oh!” My eyes pop open at the intrusion, my muscles tensing.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” he whispers against my ear, his words slurring together like he’s had too much sun water. “I got ya.”

He begins to rub a spot right above where he’s halfway into me. It sends little zings of pleasure through my body, and I can’t help but relax a little into the bed as his cock presses into me further. I focus on easing my muscles, and he pushes forward once more, penetrating me completely.

I gasp as my body finally accepts him. He's inside me. The thought is surreal but true. It's such a strange feeling...

He mumbles soothing words in my ear as he pushes forward again and again—each time sinking deeper inside me.

There's no pain, I realize, as he takes one final surge forward, sinking into the hilt of his cock. I feel full. Maybe not as wonderful as the other times, but surprisingly satisfied.

He grunts and starts moving slightly in and out, murmuring short words and phrases in my ear.

“You feel so good, Liz,” he grunts into my neck. “So ... perfect... My mate.”

His words urge me on, and I moan in encouragement as he reaches under my bottom and shifts me up.

The angle alights a new world for me. He hits me in a single spot over and over again. Every time, it sends bursts and sparks through my body, disintegrating any presence of mind I'd held onto.

Before long, the energy I recognize from our other moments together starts building inside me. I gasp, digging my fingers into his neck as I lean back, my breaths coming faster as I start meeting his movements, matching each ravenous stroke and thrust.

He releases a grunt of surprise and moves faster against me until it happens again.

Bam.

My body seizes as I release a long, loud groan of relief at the same time that he seems to lose his breath, bellowing a low, loud noise that shakes the room and penetrates deep inside me, sending a burst of pressure through the room.

It seems endless—I've never felt further away from myself or closer to him.

I can't help but whimper at the pleasure, tears escaping my eyes as the house shakes slightly, dust falling from the ceiling, and a couple of books smacking onto the floor.

When it's over, we lay there, catching our breath for several seconds.

Eventually, keeping our connection, he moves me to my side, pulling my leg over his waist. I nestle into his broad chest, enjoying the sensation of him buried inside me while his body cradles mine.

His cock stays inside me for an interminable amount of time, growing and pulsing. I know enough about how this works to know it's his knot, settling into me perfectly, like a key in its lock.

Planting his seed.

Creating our child.

I sigh happily as I relax against his big, warm body. I'm so small where he's large. Soft where he's rough. Quiet where he's loud.

There's so much about us that's wrong.

We argue too much.

We're from different worlds.

But none of that seems to matter when this is so perfect.

Because he's my mate.

He belongs to me, and I to him.

He kisses the tears on my face, his thumb rubbing them into my cheeks.

“For weeks ... I've had nothing on my mind but this,” he whispers gruffly in my ear. “Nothing on my mind but you.”

“Me, too ...” I mumble, my thoughts jumping briefly to all the other things that have been on my mind. But I push them aside and hum contentedly as he kisses me on the head.

My eyes flutter closed. As I fall asleep to his steady heartbeat pounding against my back, he truly is the only thing on my mind.

Conquered

Elizabeth

Rill and I mate continuously off and on throughout the night, and when we're not, we sleep, his knot planted inside me. With each mating, I'm lulled into a deep sleep—it seems impossible to stay awake. But I always wake up when his knot retracts.

In the pitch-black room, the absence of him creates such an overwhelming sense of emptiness and need that I immediately grope for him. Each time, I find his hands simultaneously searching for me. He silences my needy whimpers with his lips before sliding on top of me and starting it all over again.

And now, as I place my hand atop my flat stomach in the gray morning light, my skin feels different ... and my bones, my heart, my brain. *Everything*.

I'm cooler and more at peace than I've felt in weeks.

They always say an omega knows right away when she becomes pregnant. It's silly, though, since I don't look any

different, and I can't smell a baby in my belly. I just have a feeling. I know something's different...

Other than *that*, it's like I'm myself again. After weeks of torment and loss, trying to find Elizabeth Cypress in this foreign place, here she is ... lying in bed with her mate.

"Elizabeth Cypress," I mutter my name aloud. Despite my new self-confidence, it doesn't sound the same. It sounds like someone else's name.

I turn on my side to stare at Rill's face. His dark lashes are long against his pale skin, and his mouth relaxed and gentle.

Not for the first time, I wonder what he'd look like without the scar. Handsome, I think. He has a straight nose and high cheekbones, his brows slash across his face in a way that makes him look like he's always smiling. The scar disturbs it, though, making him seem more intimidating than he might be without it.

Slowly, he cracks his eyes open, pulling his lips in a half-smile.

"Morning." His voice is rough from disuse.

"Good morning," I whisper back gravely.

He moans low in his throat as his hand comes up to the small of my back, pulling me against his warm body.

"How long have you been awake?" I ask in a throaty voice I don't recognize.

“For a while,” he murmurs. “I was secretly staring at you while you were secretly staring at me and talking to yourself.”

I laugh and pull away, my hand coming up to weave through the sprinkle of hair covering his chest before traveling up to rest on his cheek.

We stare at each other in the darkness, just the sound of our breaths interrupting the early morning peace. I study his face in the gray light—particularly the long scar that breaks up his face. I’ve looked at it and wondered about it hundreds of times before, but this is the first time I feel like I’m ever truly noticing it...

“Does it hurt?” I ask abruptly, reaching up to trace its jagged path.

“No.” His voice is soft, an almost whisper. “Sometimes, it’s tight when I wake up, but that’s it.”

I hum. “There’s some aloe in the herb house. That would help with the tightness.”

He nods groggily, his hand distractedly rubbing my hip and wandering up to rest on the curve of my waist.

“How did you get it?” I blurt before I can stop myself. “The scar.”

His daze disappears as he pulls back and barks out a short laugh. I don’t think he’s going to answer me; he hesitates for so long.

“I got all my scars in Mercy City,” he finally admits hoarsely.

Mercy City? That's the place I overheard Mud and Tor talking about.

“What's Mercy City?”

“It's the closest city,” he explains gruffly, flopping on his back. “A few hundred miles northeast. You think the fence around Goldenrod is tall? Well, Mercy City's got a wall about twenty feet high surrounding it, made of limestone and cement. It's a putrid swamp, though. Flocks of pigeons live there.”

“What happened to you there?” I ask quietly, hoisting myself onto my elbow to look down on him.

He reaches up and cups my chin with his palm, his thumb pulling on my lip gently.

“When I was fifteen, some pigeons came to our farm. They heard we were harboring an omega ... Lyn,” he clarifies to my questioning gaze.

“Oh! When she was released?”

He nods. “Pike found her wandering outside Goldenrod's fence, lost and crying. He brought her to my da and me because our farm was the closest safe place he could think of.”

I watch the thoughts play behind his eyes, waiting for him to continue.

“I'll never forget Lyn's face. She was younger then, obviously. I'd never seen an omega before that. She seemed so tiny and delicate. Crying and traumatized. She didn't

understand what had happened to her.” He laughs darkly. “She didn’t come out fighting like you.”

I roll my eyes at his sideways smile.

“The two of them stayed in our barn for a few days, but sooner or later, the pigeons sniffed ’em out. Showed up in their giant trucks, guns blazing.”

“I don’t understand,” I admit. “Why did they care so much?”

It’s something I’d wondered about for a while. What would have happened to Camilla and me if we’d stayed on that truck? Where were the pigeons—the *men*—taking us? And when they showed up in the clearing—they wanted us then, too. Why?

“One thing you gotta understand about *them*, Liz,” Rill says gravely, “is they know they royally fucked up with us. They lost control of their creations. And to this day, they’re doing everything they can to get it back. Throughout their history, they’ve equated one thing with control...”

He trails off, hesitating as his eyes focus on my face.

“*What?*”

“Once an enemy’s females have been subdued—raped, enslaved, kidnapped—then the enemy has been conquered. That’s why we have so few omegas left... They’ve all been conquered by our enemy.”

I think of Rosie and Jade, specifically how mean and jumpy they are. I wonder what their lives had been like up until this point. Were they ever in danger? Or hunted?

“Anyway, the pigeons showed up at our farm,” he continues, speaking quickly, “and me, Da, and Pike ... none of us wanted to give up without a fight. But Da was drunk on sun water, so the pigeons shot him and killed him right away. Pike was busy protecting Lyn. So, that left me. I was much younger, obviously, and smaller. It wasn’t much of a fight. They took me to Mercy City, and that’s where I got this scar. That’s where I got *all* my scars.”

I stare at him blankly for a few seconds, registering his words. But he’s looking away into the dark room. He’s quiet and still for so long that a pang of worry shoots through me—Rill’s rarely quiet or still.

He doesn’t want to talk about what happened to him, I realize.

“Well, I like them,” I whisper, tracing the jagged lines on his shoulder with my forefinger.

“You do?” His head jolts to the side, a look of raw urgency on his face.

“Yes, I’ve always liked them,” I admit as he turns on his side and cradles my face with the palm of his hand. “Ever since I first saw you.”

“No, you were horrified when you first saw me,” he counters, his voice shaking a bit. “You thought I was a monster.”

I shake my head slowly. “They show how strong you are. I could only imagine what you survived to come out on the

other side of whoever—or *whatever*—gave those scars to you.”

He smirks and wraps an arm around me, bringing my body atop his. My body tingles as I feel him hot and hard under me. Subtly, I press my center against him, and he growls low in his throat.

“That’s not all you like about me, is it?” he asks roughly.

“Oh, I also like your cock.”

He spits out a loud burst of laughter. “What did you just say?”

“Your cock? Isn’t that what your ... appendage is called? And I have a pussy? I’ll have to take your word for it, though. We don’t have words for them in polite society.”

I shudder to think what my mother would say if I ever referred to that part of an alpha with *any* word.

“Oh, my little Liz,” he sighs, positioning me over him so that I’m just above, my bare body grazing him. “You really do fuckin’ amuse me.”

I smile and moan in the back of my throat; my thoughts become sporadic as his touch sends fresh flames through my body. “That’s because I’m very amusing. So are you... But mostly, you’re infuriating.”

He smiles wickedly. “Good thing I like it when you’re infuriated.”

I laugh distantly, but it quickly fades into a low moan because as I sink down on him, I've never felt less infuriated with anyone in my entire life.

Surprise

Rill

All in all, I've had a pretty shitty life.

I've been starved.

Burned.

Poked and prodded.

Cut until I screamed and bled.

But I wouldn't trade a second of that pain and torment if it meant missing out on the hours spent in Liz's nest. I've never known greater peace than just existing with her ... and fucking her, of course.

That's pretty phenomenal.

For a life centered on mere survival—every decision revolving around staying alive and fed, and later doing the same for my people—it's indulgent and a little disturbing to let down my guard so completely.

Despite my conversation with Wyatt in the woods, I'm still unsure how to handle her. Because the truth is, I'd give it all up for her. Crescent Rock and every alpha and omega within it.

And that's fucked up, right? That everything I've ever cared about and worked for is dwarfed by one small, prissy omega? An omega who questions everything I do, doesn't even have the sense to be scared of me, and *likes* my scars.

I still don't know what our future looks like. She's too refined for this place. She needs *things*, and I'm not sure I can provide them.

But as we lounge around in her nest—talking and fucking—we seem to have an unspoken agreement to not discuss the future. Or hell, even the present. Instead, we talk about the past, and in the process, she starts to make a bit more sense to me.

It's sometime in the late morning—we've been fucking and chatting for hours—when suddenly, she sits up straight in bed. Scrunching up her nose, her eyes move over my body.

“I have a surprise for you,” she announces.

“A surprise?” I wrap my hands around her waist and hoist her up to straddle me. “I like the sound of that.”

I lightly tickle her, and she arches her back and giggles—quite possibly the first time I've ever heard her giggle.

“No,” she squeals giddily, slapping my hand away. “It's in the bathroom.”

“The bathroom?” It’s my turn to pull up my nose.

“Yes, come with me,” she instructs primly as she slips down my body, her eyes fixed on me from under her dark lashes.

“This better be good.” I groan as I watch her slender body move away from me. Left with no choice, I follow her into the bathroom. Looking around, I’m confused at the state of it. “What’s all this?”

It’s more crowded than when I last saw it. Bottles of oils with specks floating in them and clumps of soaps dotted with colors and herbs are spread out on the small pedestal sink and bathtub.

“Soaps, oils, lotions ... I made them,” she says distractedly as she reaches over the bathtub, plugging it, and starting the water, her hair falling in front of her like a fan.

“We’re taking a bath,” she informs me with authority, “and I’m going to wash your hair.”

“A bath?” I growl, eyeing her bare ass as she bends over the tub. “I can think of a few better things to do.”

I move to stand behind her, framing my hands on her hips and pressing forward, but she slaps me away.

“Too bad. We both need a bath after all the ... physical exertion.”

I grunt non-committedly as she sets up the bath—at least it’s a naked activity.

Five minutes later, I'm sprawled out in the small tub, my arms and legs hanging off the side awkwardly while she sits on the rim and massages my hair with some sort of smelly soap.

"It's already better," she purrs low in her throat. "You really do have beautiful hair ... it's so thick."

I grunt in response. It's a bit overkill. But it does feel nice, and again, at least she's doing it naked. I peek through my slitted eyelids, watching her breasts sway in front of me.

"So, how'd you learn how to ... make soap?"

"Goldenrod values plants and herbs of all sorts," she explains quietly. "And creating soaps, tinctures, and medicine from them was a particular passion of my mother's." She pauses. "She taught me everything she knew. She and her ... best friend, Isolde."

She pauses again, gently working her hands through my hair. I lay back my head and release a deep breath. It really is relaxing.

"She and Isolde led the Goldenrod Herb Society for the past twenty years," Liz continues distractedly as she starts gently pouring a pitcher of water over my head. "I won its annual Award of Excellence three years in a row. Some said that it was rigged, but not those that knew anything about herbs."

"An award, huh?" I'm in a daze, her hands in my hair and her voice floating around me. "What'd ya get for it?"

“Oh, nothing really.” Her laugh tinkles like music. “Just a certificate from the Administrator, and the omegas held a brunch in my honor.”

“That’s something I don’t understand about Goldenrod. Who’s the Administrator? Like the king or the mayor?”

She scoffs lightly. “The Administrator is an unmated alpha who imposes the Order... He makes sure we’re all following the rules.” I feel her shrug. “Our current Administrator is strange, though. Many look up to him, but I always found him a bit loathsome.”

I remember what Camilla said—the Administrator had tried to stop Wyatt from coming after her. The thought of another alpha with this amount of power and influence sends a shiver up my spine. I can’t understand why, though. I’m not one to be threatened by another alpha’s power.

“Why don’t you like him?” I ask lazily.

“Well, the Administrator is supposed to be uncalled,” she explains. “So, he wouldn’t have a mate to distract him from imposing the Order. Rumor is that this Administrator had a mate, but he released her so he could become Administrator. That never sat well with me ... plus, he smells like metal or chemicals. I can’t explain it. It’s just ... bleh.”

I smile and crack my eyes open to see that she’s scrunched up her nose at the admission.

“Well, to be fair, you don’t like much of anyone, Liz.” I chuckle as I reach for a few strands of her hair, gently rubbing

them between my fingers.

I think she's going to deny it, but she just sighs and smooths my hair back from my face. "I like you," she admits with shy certainty. "I've no idea why, though. You're rude. Crass. Impulsive. An awful alpha, really."

I crack my eyes open more to see her watching me warily. The bathroom is bright, and with her messy hair tangled around her perfect face, she looks alight with life. Like an angel.

"Well, I like you, too," I say roughly, pulling my body up a bit. "Even though you're a stuck-up pain in the ass."

My hands slide up her wet legs until they reach her waist. I expertly pull her into the water, catching her with ease as she falls against my chest with a delicate *oof*, her legs settling on my side and my hard cock resting against her soft belly.

We both hiss out deep breaths as our slippery bodies slide against each other in the water.

Placing her hands on my chest, she pushes herself up and looks down at me seriously, her hair falling around her face and pooling on my chest.

"Give me your cock, my mate," she orders in a sultry voice.

"Gladly." I shift upwards quickly. I can't help but wince at the sensitive sensation as she grabs hold of me and positions her slit just over my cock.

Straddling and hovering over me like she is, I immediately decide she's no angel. No, she's a goddess with her tangled

dark hair flowing around her slight body, her blue eyes glowing under the gentle light. Her fingers lightly trace the scar on my face before moving on to the smaller ones, peppering my shoulders, arms, and chest.

Finally—*finally*—she sinks down on my cock, her head falling back in pleasure as a low, rough sound comes from deep within her throat. I close my eyes as my mind goes blank, and my heart stops beating.

I moan. “Fuck, Liz. You’re so goddamn beautiful.”

She doesn’t say anything, just moans as she starts riding me up and down, slowly at first, as we both savor the warm, slick sensation of each other. She clenches a muscle deep inside her, squeezing me like a vise, and I release a pained sound as sharp spasms erupt throughout my body.

Where’d she learn to do that?

I don’t have the capacity to ask as she starts moving more quickly against me, her breasts bouncing up and down as water sloshes over the side of the tub.

I dig my fingers into the soft skin of her ass, pulling against me tighter.

Before I even know what’s happening, I’m coming. I pull her toward me as I surge forward and pump into her. My head falls back as I release a loud shout—somewhere between agony and ecstasy—as she sucks in a surprised breath, and we fall over the edge together. Her beautiful face in the throes of

pleasure imprints itself on my brain before she collapses on top of my chest.

My knot grows long and wide inside her, ensuring that every piece of me is connecting with each piece of her. She relaxes her head against my chest, our hearts pounding, beating in unison with one another.

As my hand comes up to comb through her wet hair, she starts to snore lightly against my chest.

I huff out a laugh—she falls asleep immediately every time. But something about it makes me realize something again. Something that makes me mildly uncomfortable...

I'd do it all again for this.

All again for her.

Every second inside the Mercy City lock up, my hands and legs in chains and an olfactory plug wrapped tight around my face—the only good thing about it was that I couldn't smell all the shit and piss. I could hear the screams, though, and feel the pain. So much pain.

It was the pain that made me the monster I am today. I don't think a single day has passed that I haven't wished it away.

But now ... I swear I'd do it all again for her.

A Proper Omega

Elizabeth

It's me who breaks the spell eventually, which figures.

I'm sure if Stella ever had anything to say about me, it's that I know how to ruin a good time. It's somewhat ironic, though, because mentioning her is what does it.

“What did you do in Goldenrod when you weren't winning herb awards?” Rill asks as he—strangely enough—braids my hair.

When we woke up in the bathtub, he carried me back to my nest and wrapped me in his robe. That's when he insisted that he wanted to take care of me like I'd taken care of him and ... braid my hair.

“You know how to braid?” I was shocked and a little skeptical.

“Of course,” he said. “My da taught me. He said I needed to either braid my hair or let him cut it, and I didn't want that alpha waving a knife at my head.”

I dared not ask why they didn't have scissors.

So, for the past ten minutes, I've been sitting between his legs as he combs and gently braids my hair. So far, he's definitely giving Colleen a run for her money. She'd always scold me for complaining about how rough she was on my scalp. I haven't lost my skepticism, though, and am more than anxious to see it finished.

"Hmm?" I hum distractedly to his question, too enthralled at the feeling of his big, calloused hands in my hair. Maybe I can lure him to the bathtub again soon. Sliding against his big body in the water was so—

"I asked what else you got up to in *Goldenrod*." He uses the same affected accent he always does when saying the town's name.

"Well, I mostly studied *How to Be a Proper Omega*—this book my mother was obsessed with—or spent time with my best friend, Stella."

"And what's a proper omega?"

"A quiet one," I reply immediately. "If that book taught me one thing, it was that an omega should be seen and admired but never heard."

Rill scoffs loudly. "Well, that's not you."

My heart skips a beat. "What do you mean?"

"From the very first second I met you, you've been *loud*." He laughs, weaving the strands of my hair together tightly. "I

used to think you were delicate, but you cleared up that misconception real quick.”

“I’m not loud,” I insist, more than a little affronted. “I’m *very* polite ... and placid. Many in Goldenrod say I’m the *perfect* omega.”

“No, you’re not.” He laughs again like the idea is preposterous. I’m about to turn around and give him a piece of my mind when he speaks again. “I’m just sayin’ that if being quiet is what makes an omega perfect, you’re not perfect. But that’s what I like about you.”

My deflated heart starts beating again. “What?”

“Just like you like my scars, I like that you’re kind of a pain in the ass,” he says roughly. “It shows you have a backbone. That you can take care of yourself.”

“Hmph.” I frown at the wrinkled, patched quilt spread around us. I’m not sure Rosie and Jade would agree with that sentiment.

“What about your best friend?” he probes, his voice gentle and rough. “Is *she* a proper omega?”

“No,” I say with a soft laugh. “She’d be the first one to admit that.”

A memory of Stella’s face as she shrieks with laughter flashes in my mind.

“I remember once she dared me to walk a log that had fallen over Arrowhead Pond,” I remember dreamily. “It was wobbly and narrow, and I thought a thousand times that I’d fall into

the water. I made it, though, and when I got to the other side, we laughed and hugged and jumped up and down. That's what being around Stella is like ... scary but fun. ”

He chuckles. “She sounds like trouble.”

“She is...” I murmur, the smile freezing on my face. Even though every instinct is telling me not to say what's on my mind, I can't stop the next words from leaving my mouth. “She's Jason's sister.”

He grunts but stays silent.

I gather my courage as he ties the end of my braid with a ribbon and moves further back on the bed. I turn and watch him lie down on his back, his head resting on a giant pillow and his eyes closing on a deep breath.

“Sure is nice to be back in my bed again,” he murmurs, cracking open an eyelid and rubbing the bed next to him. “Why don't you come join me?”

But I won't give up that easily. “Where's Jason, Rill?”

He sighs heavily and opens his eyes completely. “You're not going to let this go, huh?”

“No. You should be happy I'm not asking you all the other things you haven't told me ... like where you were for the past week.”

“He's in the hole,” he says dismissively.

“That's what you call that cave?”

“Yep.” He closes his eyes again and crosses his arms over his chest.

I crawl closer until I’m just over him, standing on my knees. “I want you to take me to him.”

“No.” His voice is deadly serious. He doesn’t open his eyes, but he clenches his fists tightly.

My heart drops, and with it, the last twenty-four hours disintegrate.

The closeness.

The connection.

The fact that I’m most likely carrying his child.

All that’s left now is that he’s keeping something from me. I still don’t know where he was for all those days, and now he won’t let me see Jason? The only friend I had for so long? The alpha who stood by me when my best friend abandoned me?

“Why not?” I know I’m whining, but I don’t care at this point. I’m so sick of being yanked around like I’m incapable of making decisions for myself.

“I’m taking care of him,” he says cryptically. “You’ll never see him again.”

My eyes grow wide. “You’re killing him?”

“No.”

“No?! Just no? I’m not allowed to know anything else?” I let out a frustrated groan and jump off the bed. “You’re just like my mother, you know that?”

That finally gets me his full attention. He lifts himself up on his elbows and arches his unscarred brow. “Well, that’s one I haven’t heard before.”

Ignoring the sarcasm, I press on. “She always tried to control me, too, to protect me, and I ... I hated her for it.” It’s scary and cathartic to admit it. “I still hate her for it.”

“Liz,” he starts. “It’s my job to protect you—”

I release an ugly groan as I slash my hand in the air. “I don’t need protecting, Rill. I need to see my friend.”

He rises from the bed and looks at me skeptically. “You know, you’re a stubborn wench?”

I shrug and stick out my lower lip, and he laughs loudly before something inside him piques, and he sits up a little straighter. His smile fades as his eyes shift toward the window, and he rises to his feet, his gaze focused outside.

“What is it?” Wrapping the robe tighter around my body, I follow him and stare out on the street.

At first, my eyes catch on my reflection—my hair is in an elaborate braid that curves around my head—but looking past that, beneath the overcast sky, I see a smattering of alphas walking the muddy road. But Rill’s not looking at them. His eyes are focused on the horizon.

“Do you wanna know where I was?” he asks suddenly.

My mouth falls open in surprise, and I quickly catch myself and close it. “Of course.”

“I found your friends ... Wyatt and Camilla.”

“You did?”

He nods. “They’re living in a ramshackle hut overseeing Goldenrod. But they’ll be here soon. Pike’s with them now.”

My heart soars. “Are they okay?”

“Camilla’s Lyn’s daughter—did you know that?” he asks, unsmiling, his distracted eyes focused on the tree line in the distance.

“What?” If I thought my mouth was wide open before, now it’s positively gaping. “No!”

“When they get here, I’ll hand over Jason and tell them all to go back to Goldenrod,” he continues, ignoring my shock. “They’re barely surviving, Liz. They don’t belong out here... Neither do you.”

“Oh.” My voice is so quiet, it’s almost a whisper. I forget everything else he said. “So, you want me to go, too?”

“No.” His eyes darken as he finally looks at me and pulls me close. His arms are tight around my shoulders, and I can feel his heart pounding like a drumbeat.

“This world’s an ugly, hellish place, and I’m a selfish asshole,” he says firmly. “Even though I’m sure you’ll hate me for it one day, I’m keeping you.”

I release a reluctant sob as tears escape my eyes. Leaning into him, I breathe in his herby scent and listen to his heartbeat.

“So, let’s go see that fucker in the hole.” His voice rumbles deep in his chest. “You can say goodbye. To him and the perfect omega. Forever.”

Not Without You

Elizabeth

Crescent Rock is deathly quiet when Rill and I step out of the house.

The air is warm and humid, giving the late January evening an eerie vibe. There's a faint glow and the low timbre of the alphas' voices coming from the Mercantile, the familiar smells of meat and potatoes wafting through the air.

It's ordinary—like every other evening I've been here—but different somehow.

It leaves me feeling vulnerable and sick to my stomach. I'm glad that everyone else is occupied with dinner, and there's nobody here to stare at me—I can't quite muster Elizabeth Cypress right now.

Rill managed to find another old dress for me to wear. This one's green and in even worse shape than my last one—the seams are unraveling, and it's too long, dragging on the muddy ground behind me.

But at least my hair looks good. It's halfway up in elaborate braids and delicately curling down to my waist. I was awestruck when I studied my reflection more carefully in the mirror, but Rill just shrugged and kissed me on the forehead.

"I'm an alpha of many talents," he murmured before shuffling back to the window and staring at the horizon again.

He's been in a strange mood, staying quiet as we prepared to leave the house. I could feel his trepidation and nerves, though, as well as his wild thoughts. He thinks there's something portentous coming, and it's left him out of sorts and ill-prepared.

I don't say anything as we make our way down the road, but I peek over at him from under my lashes, reaching over to weave my fingers in his. He leans into my touch, grasping my hand firmly.

I'm glad to be with him when we finally approach the cave—the *hole*. I don't think I would have actually had the courage to come here alone.

Inside, it's dark, cool, and quiet with a sharp, pungent scent. A dim light up ahead is the only bit of brightness in the pitch black. But there's an endless darkness surrounding the light, and I'm glad when we don't walk too deep into it.

As we get closer to the light, I see it's actually a lantern sitting between two large cages with warped metal bars. There's a slumped, unmoving figure in each of them—Mud and Jason, I realize immediately based on their scents.

I suck in a breath, and Rill wraps his arm around my shoulders, stopping me from rushing forward.

“They’re fine,” he assures me. “Run’s been taking care of them.”

I nod, looking straight ahead. “Jason?”

Both of the figures jump with a start at the hollow sound of my voice. My eyes dart between them, but it’s the closest one that I recognize immediately.

“Elizabeth!” he cries out, his voice hoarse from disuse. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, of course.” I move away from Rill and hurry toward him, the smile fading from my face as I take him in. He’s dirty and greasy, sporting dark scruff on his face and longer hair. “Oh, Jason. What have they done to you?”

The familiar dimples pop in his cheeks as he smiles, sending a warm surge of appreciation through me. Despite all the uncertainty, his face reminds me of Goldenrod ... of home.

“I’m fine,” he says dismissively. “My appearance is mostly the result of my journey here. I’m just happy to see that you’re well. I’ve been so worried... How are you?”

His eyes dance over me critically, and I can’t help but reach up to smooth my hair.

“I’m fine, too,” I say inanely with a shrug. An awkward silence follows, and I look back at Rill, smiling tentatively.

He's not saying anything, just glaring at Jason fiercely, which is ... odd. He's always got something to say, either a quip or a threat of some sort.

But neither he nor Jason are acknowledging each other, and they're *both* ignoring Mud. Out of the corner of my eyes, I watch as Mud rises to a seated position, his elbows resting on his spread legs as he watches us curiously.

"Well ... what are you doing here?" I blurt out inelegantly, turning away from Mud. "Where's Orion?"

He pauses before looking up at me meaningfully. "Orion's gone."

The words beat the breath out of me. "What?"

He watches me silently, the flames from the lantern playing on his dirt-smeared face as his eyes shift briefly behind me, presumably to look at Rill, before he finally speaks.

"He was—what I mean to say is that he came home and said you were kidnapped by ruffians." His voice is grave and slow, like he's worried I'm going to burst into tears at any second. "He wasn't interested in trying to find you, but I ... I couldn't let it stand."

There's a weighted silence as I digest his words. My brother went home? Without me?

"So ... Orion's in Goldenrod?" I finally ask as my brain struggles to understand.

"I thought you said he was gone?" Rill walks up slowly behind me. I look back at him sharply—he knew about Orion

and didn't tell me?

“That’s not what I said,” Jason answers with calm certainty, not taking his eyes off me. “I said that he’s at home. Elizabeth, I’m the only one that’s coming for you ... to bring you back to your brother. Your home. Your real life. And I’m not scared of *him* ... I can do it.”

I hear Rill growl and hiss behind me, but I don’t pay him any attention. “I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t Orion come? Is he okay?”

Jason shrugs. “You know how important it is for your brother to keep your family involved in the business, and Goldenrod was ... chaotic when you disappeared.”

“But it still doesn’t make any sense—”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about,” he cuts me off; his voice is placating and slick as he sticks his hands through the bars of the cage, reaching for me.

I step back and run into Rill, who grabs me by the shoulders. Jason’s brows furrow as he stares at Rill’s hands.

“Well, I have good news!” I announce, lacing my voice with a forced brightness. “Wyatt’s coming! He and Camilla are going to take you back to Goldenrod.”

He’s silent for so long that I’m not sure he understood me. “Why would I need Wyatt?”

“So he can bring you home—”

“I’m here to bring *you* home,” he interrupts me, “to *rescue* you. Wyatt has nothing to do with this.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m not going back. I’m staying here—with my mate.”

Rill wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me against his large body, his dark eyes glittering with challenge. “I told you she was *mine*, brother.”

“But I came here to save you,” Jason continues, ignoring Rill and gripping the bars tightly. “And this alpha is an animal, Elizabeth. They all are ... just look at what they’ve done to me.”

He sweeps his arms out wide, motioning around the cold, dank cave as Mud starts chuckling darkly.

“The fucking little prince over here,” he mutters.

I ignore him, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Your friendship means the world to me, Jason. I don’t know what I would have done without you the past year, but I’m *not* leaving. I belong with my mate.”

He curses and turns away from us, pacing toward the back of his cage with his hands on his hips. When he finally turns to face us, he levels a look at me like I’ve never seen before, filled with anger and hate.

Frowning, I sink deeper into Rill’s embrace. He starts walking me back slowly toward the mouth of the cave and away from the cages.

“You’re coming with me, Elizabeth,” Jason states with calm certainty. “I’m not going back without you.”

“I’m sorry, I—” Rill nudges me, encouraging me to turn around. “I don’t know what else to say, Jason. I hope you find what you’re looking for one day. Wyatt’s coming, and you’ll get out of here. I’m just—I’m so sorry.”

And then I turn, with one final look at his face—my friend who was there for me when no one else was—as Rill leads me to the entrance of the cave.

“You’ll be even more sorry when I get my hands on you, Elizabeth!” he shouts. “I won’t go easy on you! You’ll have to be punished!”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. Jason has never talked to me that way before, but his words are eerily familiar ... I turn quickly to see Mud standing in his cage next to Jason, staring at me with a maniacal grin.

Punished?

I feel nothing but pity for Jason, though, and frustration—even though he’s looking at me with so much anger and disappointment. But I’m prepared to walk away and leave it all behind until all my thoughts and feelings disappear.

They’re eclipsed by something else.

Someone else.

A thick, dominating scent alights like a forest fire as a sardonic laugh echoes through the cave, filling me with a familiar sense of dread.

Rill's going to hurt Jason.

I don't have a chance to react, stumbling when he pushes me behind him. He raises a hand in the air, his fingers a giant claw holding up his invisible prey.

I gasp as I see Jason start to gag and rise in the air, scratching at his neck just like Mud was the night that Rill hurt him. There's a dangerous hum echoing in my brain as I grab at Rill's arm.

"Rill, don't—"

"You dumb fuck," he spits out as I hang off him, his voice deeper and more diabolical than I've ever heard it. "I'd like to see you try to take *my mate*."

I can't see Jason's face very well in the dim light, but I can hear him choking and coughing, attempting to draw oxygen into his lungs.

"Stop it, Rill! You're hurting him!" I pull on his arm with all my might, but he doesn't budge. He's too strong, his arm too thick.

Jason continues to gag and pull at his throat. He's going to die, I realize, and it's going to be all my fault.

"Rill, let him go!"

He's not listening; his eyes are deadly and focused on Jason's face. He's killing him. Jason Sage—an alpha I've known my entire life—will be dead because of me.

I do the only thing I can think of—I scream. It’s piercing, high-pitched, and echoes through the cave.

It works, though, and snaps Rill out of it. He drops his hand, flexing it as Jason falls to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

I rush toward him, kneeling in front of the cage. “Are you okay?”

He doesn’t answer, his eyes on Rill behind me.

“You’ll be sorry,” he gasps in a breathless voice, his eyes glued to Rill. “I won’t be in this cage forever.”

“No,” Rill says casually, like he didn’t just lose his mind. “Eventually, you’ll be in a different cage. C’mon, Liz.”

A shiver runs up my spine, and Rill pulls me close. I look back at Jason—curled on the ground, gasping for breath—and Mud, standing now and watching me with angry vengeance.

As soon as we get out of the cave, I turn toward Rill and slap him on the chest over and over. “How dare you? What’s the matter with you?”

I’m crying, tears streaming down my cheeks as I slap him over and over again. Jason’s crumbled form is imprinted on my brain.

He rolls his eyes and grabs me by the shoulders, shaking me lightly.

“You’re mine, Elizabeth,” he hisses, “and I won’t have that slimy, little weakling suggest otherwise.”

“I know I’m yours! I told you I’d stay here! So, why’d you have to hurt him? Just to prove you’re the biggest, strongest alpha there is? You’re an idiot! *Jason Sage* is not a threat. He’s gentle and weak.”

He sneers and shakes his head. “You’re a really shit judge of character.”

“Obviously! I chose you as a mate!”

He opens his mouth to reply but doesn’t get a chance. Our heads whip to the side at the sound of a loud, suggestive throat clearing.

It’s Pike, standing in the gentle light coming off the Mercantile and staring at us, a disgusted expression on his face.

And behind him, looking confused and mildly horrified, are Wyatt and Camilla.

Visitors

Rill

I'll be honest, when I first met Liz and Camilla, I didn't think they liked each other very much. While they were fiercely protective of one another due to the situation they'd found themselves in, there didn't seem to be much love lost at the end of the day.

But inexplicably, their reunion was filled with gushing tears and hurried words. You'd think Camilla was the one who braided her hair and tortured an alpha in a cave for her.

When she saw her, Liz broke away from me, leaving behind the incident with Jason and our argument. My heart soared with satisfaction when I saw her ignore Wyatt and immediately wrap her arms around Camilla.

But that's when the sobbing started—from both of them.

Wyatt tried to greet and embrace Liz, but as he got closer to her, I hissed, showing my fangs, and demanded that he back

the fuck off. He raised his hands in the air and looked at me like I was nuts.

Ever since he told me that Liz once had her sights set on him, I've lost a bit of the goodwill and admiration I felt for him. Now, I'd like both him and his crazy-ass brother to stay far, far away from her.

Anyway, the omegas didn't let go of one another until we led them into the Mercantile. They fell into two chairs around a far table and immediately started exchanging horror stories of their lives outside of Goldenrod.

The rest of the Crescent Rock alphas milled about for a bit as they finished dinner, watching the omegas and whispering curiously to each other. Ultimately, they became bored and headed to their houses or bunks for the night.

I heard bits and pieces of the conversation. Lots of talk about "hideous dresses" from Liz and "eating nothing but squirrels" from Camilla.

Pike had disappeared soon after he handed off Camilla and Wyatt, but he showed up in the Mercantile with Lyn about half an hour after we sat down. By the looks of her pale face and wide eyes, he'd already told her who was waiting for her.

I don't know what I expected from Lyn and Camilla—maybe a lot of the same sobbing and hugging. But if anything, it was the exact opposite.

Camilla could barely look at her, let alone talk to her, and Lyn gazed at Camilla like she was a ghost. Meanwhile, Wyatt

and Pike hovered over their respective mates, scowling at each other. It ended up being Liz who did most of the talking.

“So, you’re Gwendolyn Berry, Lyn?” she asked, awestruck. “I can’t believe I didn’t put that together.”

“Yes, Elizabeth,” Lyn said, not taking her eyes off Camilla. “I’m a Berry, and I mated with a Maidenhair.”

She seemed to want Liz to feel a certain way about that. “Well, that’s ... lovely that you’re well after all this time,” Liz said, blushing prettily. “Right, Camilla?”

“I thought you were dead,” Camilla muttered darkly. Everyone cringed ... even me, and I don’t embarrass easily.

After that, Liz babbled on about anything and everything—how much alike they looked and inventing things they had in common—while Lyn stayed silent, and Camilla mostly did the same with the exception of a random darkly muttered word.

Eventually and mercifully, Pike dragged Lyn to bed with promises to reconnect in the morning, and the rest of us breathed a mutual sigh of relief that *that* was over.

Now, it’s just us—Wyatt and I sitting at the head table and the two omegas across the room, hunched over their own table, speaking in low voices. Wyatt hasn’t lost his suspicious expression, sitting next to me with his arms crossed over his chest, glaring at me as I study Liz.

There’s something different about her, a glow and a new scent ... a sharp, minty aroma that hangs around her. Maybe a result of our mating? Could it be that she’s pregnant? It

happened with Run and Jade right away, so it could have already happened already with us.

And she seems cooler and softer ... like she's left her heat behind.

I'm so lost in her that I don't notice Rosie approaching, setting a glass of sun water in front of me and loafing off to the side until she shifts her body, blocking my view of Liz.

I move my head to look around her. "What is it, Rosie?"

"I—I need—"

She releases a strangled breath, and I finally look up, pulling back a bit at her appearance. I haven't seen her since the night that Jason attacked her. And now, she looks like shit—pale with dark circles under her eyes, her curls frizzy and wild.

"Are you okay?"

"I need to go to bed," she sputters, tears escaping her eyes. "I don't feel well."

"Well, get on out of here." I wave a hand toward the door. "Lyn can help—" I cut myself off with a wince. I can't say I'm anxious to re-live any more interactions between Lyn and Camilla. "Or don't worry about it. We can handle ourselves. Just go."

She nods and rushes out of the way. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see Liz again.

She glances up, locking eyes with me and frowning. I dial into her and sense a happy thought about Camilla quickly

interrupted with a furious thought of me ... something about me being a savage.

She's still angry, I realize with a laugh. She was so enraged and beautiful outside, spitting fire and vitriol at me. It was everything I could do to not swoop her in my arms and take her back to that nest of hers. I'm always in the mood for a good fuck and knot after a fight. Maybe I could take her to the forest and make her a soft bed of leaves under a giant slopping oak tree. She'd look up at me, and I'd say—

“Where's my brother?”

I jump and turn to see Wyatt's angry mug glaring from the chair next to me—not what I wanted to see in my current train of thought.

“Why don't you take a load off and have a drink?” I motion toward his untouched glass of sun water. “He's not going anywhere, and he was pretty pissed the last time I saw him. So, maybe now's not a good time for your brotherly reunion.”

Wyatt scowls at his sun water with disgust. “He's probably angry that you have him locked up. You haven't hurt him, have you?”

He looks like he knows the answer to that question—there's no way I'm 'fessing up, though. Wyatt doesn't need to know that I smacked around his baby brother.

“Absolutely fuckin' not.” I raise my right hand in the air as if solemnly swearing. “No, it's because Liz doesn't want him, and...” I trail off. I can't put my finger on it, but that alpha's

got something he's not telling us. "And he said some shit I didn't like... I think he's hiding something."

"Jason's harmless," Wyatt says dismissively. "He has nothing to hide."

"You know, everyone keeps saying that, but I'm not sure I believe it."

"You don't know him."

I scoff and roll my eyes. "He showed up here and attacked an omega. In fact, it was..." I trail off and look for Rosie, but then I remember she's gone. We're the only ones here. Everyone else went to bed. And now that I think about it, I haven't even seen Run, Jade, or Lulu since I've been back.

"Jason would never attack anyone," Wyatt says, leaning over the table. "He's not like that."

"He's an alpha, isn't he? That means he's *like that*. That's what I don't understand about you Goldenrod alphas. What makes you think that you're any different from me?"

He doesn't answer, but I can read it on his face loud and clear. Just like Jason and Orion, he thinks we're "animals." Well, that should make what I'm about to say make a whole lot of sense.

"Listen, you're right—I don't know your brother, but I know he doesn't belong here." My eyes dart to Liz again. "And neither do you."

"What do you mean?"

“I mean you and Camilla—how you’re living and whatever your expectations are—they’re unrealistic.” I pause, shaking my head gravely. “No, they’re fucking idiotic. You *all* need to go home—back to Goldenrod.”

He shakes his head. “We can’t go back yet.”

“Well, you can’t stay out here. I’m not sure how you both haven’t been caught by pigeons yet, living on that mountainside. It’s going to happen eventually, though, and not all of them are so easily controlled. They’ll kill you and take Camilla to Mercy City, and God knows what they’ll do with her.”

“I’d like to see them try to take my mate,” he bites out angrily.

“Oh, they’ll try, and sooner or later, they’ll succeed. Believe me.”

He’s delusional if he thinks he can protect Camilla out here alone after a lifetime with a golden spoon in his mouth. This world is dirty and ugly, and filled with death. I’m selfish to keep Liz here with me, I know... But at least I’ve got more wits about me than this guy.

But Wyatt doesn’t acknowledge anything I said. He just glares at me stubbornly. “I want to see my brother now.”

I shrug and throw the rest of my sun water down my throat. “Fine, but I’m not letting him out yet.”

We rise from our chairs, and Wyatt walks over to Camilla, leaning down to murmur something in her ear. I look to Liz

one last time to find her watching me.

Taking Wyatt to his brother. Be right back.

She doesn't respond, just narrows her eyes before re-focusing her attention on Camilla again.

My lips pull into a smile against my will as I glance back at her one last time.

Stubborn wench.

I swear I see her crack a smile, but otherwise, she doesn't move as Wyatt and I walk out the door, the warm winter evening washing over me.

Doesn't Happen

Rill

“*That's* your lock up?”

Wyatt stares at the mouth of the hole with a dazed expression. It's as if he's waiting for some tremendous monster to come waltzing out of it.

“That's it.”

I guess it does look more ominous tonight.

The moon is full and bright, alighting the clouds that waft slowly above us. The bright sky makes everything around us seem more vivid—the tall houses, the mountains in the distance, and the sloping rock are all ablaze and alive.

Everything's bright except for the hole. It's gaping, black, and looming.

A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead, and the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I've never been one to be scared of the dark—even with all my demons—but it doesn't mean I don't understand how much easier it is to hide in the shadows.

Something's off, and I can't put my finger on it. I've had this feeling before, and it's usually when I'm on the verge of something. Something big and ugly.

Maybe we shouldn't have left Liz and Camilla in there alone. I didn't think we'd be that long, and everyone else is asleep, but now...

As soon as the thought crosses my mind, I hear a shuffle behind me—footsteps on the broken asphalt. Wyatt and I simultaneously whip our heads around, searching the darkness.

“Stop!” I yell to a slight figure.

It's Rosie, standing frozen in the middle of the road under the dim glow coming from the Mercantile windows.

“What are you doing out here?” I snap angrily. “I thought you went to bed.”

She jumps at my tone, sucking in a shaky breath before she responds.

“I'm just getting something to drink,” she says in a strangled voice, pointing weakly to the Mercantile.

“Hurry up and get back to bed. You shouldn't be wandering around out here by yourself after what happened last time.”

She nods quickly, scrambling toward the Mercantile door.

“What happened last time?” I turn to see Wyatt watching me warily.

“Your damn brother attacked her.”

He blows out an exhausted breath, and points to the hole. “How long has he been in there?”

“About a week.”

“I know you don’t get this, but this isn’t normal,” he says with a growl. “In Goldenrod, alphas are taught that certain qualities need to be stifled. All the things that you revel in, we try to hide. To stay civilized and to keep within the Order.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know you guys are fucked in the head.”

“The point is even for the most out-of-control alpha, this type of thing would be strange. For someone like Jason, it makes even less sense. He’d never give into those types of instincts.”

I release a pained sigh. “I don’t know how many times I need to tell ya—at the end of the day, you’re no different from me, and neither is your brother.”

He scowls and starts moving toward the hole. “Whatever. Let’s just get this over with. I don’t want to leave Camilla alone for too long—”

“Wait.” I grab him by the shoulder, stopping him. “One more thing... When you last saw Orion, he was following me and Liz, right?”

He pulls his arm loose with a sneer. “Yes, like I told you.”

“At first, your brother told me Orion was ‘gone,’ and I didn’t question him. But tonight he told Liz that he’s back in Goldenrod, and wasn’t interested in coming after her.”

Wyatt pauses and blanches. “That can’t be true.”

“That’s what I thought. They’re close, right?”

“Yeah, Orion would never go home without Elizabeth. He’s protective of her—especially since their parents died.”

I hum and consider his words. “How’d they die anyway?”

I know Liz had complicated feelings for her mother, but we really haven’t spoken much about her parents. Mostly because I’ve no urge to talk about my da—I’m more than happy to keep the bastard buried.

“It was strange,” Wyatt admits, running his hands through his hair. “You may not know, but betas don’t live as long as us. They get sick easily with things that don’t affect us and tend to start fading around sixty or seventy years old. The Cypresses were only in their forties or fifties when they died. It looked like some sort of beta sickness, but ... quicker.”

“Did someone kill them?”

He frowns. “That doesn’t happen in Goldenrod.”

“It happens *everywhere*,” I say with a guffaw. “Didn’t your mother poison Liz and Camilla? Why couldn’t someone poison them, too?”

Wyatt shakes his head dismissively. “Look, I get what you’re saying. And I agree, something doesn’t feel right about this, but we’re not going to figure it out standing out here. I need to talk to my brother—that’ll clear a lot of this up.”

“Well then, let’s go.”

I start walking into the cave, and he follows quietly behind me. It's dark inside—even darker than when Liz and I visited. The light between the cages flickers low shadows on the ground, and there's a dripping sound echoing somewhere from within the blackness.

The cages loom in the faint light, a couple of dark clumps lying on the floor—just like before. Only this time, they don't move at the sound of our approaching footsteps.

“What the—*that's* where you've been keeping him?” Wyatt hisses “In a cage?”

I turn toward him, my expression serious. “Just what did you think a lock up was?”

Turning back to the cages, I study them. There's something wrong. I can't hear their breaths, and their scents are weak. I leave Wyatt behind as I step closer, my eyes focusing through the darkness as something sick and ominous rises inside me.

“Jason,” Wyatt calls out from behind me. “It's me. Wyatt.”

As I get closer, I see why there's no movement inside the cages. The ground is covered with their crumbled blankets, but otherwise they're empty. I look up at the lock on Jason's cage—it's unlocked.

Someone let them out.

Quickly, I glance back at Wyatt. He's frozen, looking to me for answers.

Answers I don't have.

But as I watch him—trying to make sense of the situation—his face transforms from confusion to shock. His eyes aren't meeting mine but looking into the darkness.

I turn around, and just past the cages, deep in the darkness, yellowed teeth flash into a knowing smile as a match is struck.

Mud.

I open my mouth to say his name when I notice something at his feet...

When my eyes lock on familiar wooden boxes, my heart stops in its tracks. I immediately start backing up, running into Wyatt, and pushing him toward the entrance of the hole.

I know there's no time to do anything else but run. We're not fast enough, though.

“Oh, shit!” I roar just before the world explodes.

Drudgery

Elizabeth

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Camilla’s been frowning at me doubtfully since Rill and Wyatt left the Mercantile. She seemed to think that once I got away from Rill, I’d tell her how I *really* felt about my new circumstances.

“Yes.” I sip my sun water delicately and smile brightly. “This is where I need to be—with Rill. I’d say the same thing to ... Orion if he was here.”

I swallow a lump in my throat. I can’t think of my brother without tears burning the back of my eyes, so I push my worries about him to a far corner in my brain.

“I don’t know, Elizabeth. This place is ... *not you.*”

She glances around at the scuffed floors and faded wood furniture. I know she’s seeing the same dilapidated place that I’ve stuck my nose up at since arriving. But for some reason, it

doesn't look so bad now. I polished these tables and chairs, after all.

They've become familiar.

"You don't really know what's me, do you?" I ask gravely. "No one does."

Her eyes soften, and I can see the thoughts running through her head. The truth is, if Camilla and I hadn't been released together, we probably would never have spoken. I'd probably still resent her for stealing Stella's friendship and for mating with Wyatt, and she'd keep thinking whatever terrible things she thought of me.

But when I saw her on the street this evening, I barely noticed Wyatt next to her—the alpha I was sure would be my mate for so long. I only saw the omega who'd become my unlikely companion throughout this surreal experience.

After the incident with Jason in the cave, seeing her alive, safe, and in front of me was like a salve on a bleeding wound.

I'd never felt a greater relief.

So, although no one in Goldenrod would ever believe that Elizabeth Cypress would become bosom buddies with a Maidenhair—one of the lowliest families in Goldenrod—confiding in her feels perfectly natural.

"*This* is you?" She motions around the room. "You'll be happy living here?"

"Probably about as happy as you are living in a *pile of logs on the side of the mountain.*" I raise a brow, purposely using

the same words she did to describe the house Wyatt built them. “It’s not what *I’d* choose,” I continue, shrugging like it’s out of my hands. “But my mate is here, so...”

She laughs. “Okay, point taken. I never realized how high maintenance I was before, but damn, I could use a hot shower.”

Although I don’t *exactly* relate—I’ve always known I’m high maintenance—I can’t help but giggle in understanding. After a bit, my smile relaxes, though.

“I know you caught us in a heated moment, but Rill and I are just ... different. It works, though. I feel more alive with him than anyone else I ever met.”

Except when he hurts people I care about. I think of Jason’s crumbled form, and my heart sinks. I won’t tell Camilla about that, I decide. She already thinks badly of him.

“Hmm.” She tilts her head, obviously doubtful. “I’m glad it seems to have worked out. Have you guys...?” She raises her eyebrows suggestively.

“Of course.” I grimace, my hand automatically moving to rest on my stomach. “I think I’m ... pregnant.”

Camilla bursts out another laugh. I think the sun water’s going to her head—her cheeks are bright red and her eyes aglow. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Well, what kind of a world am I bringing my child into? Is she going to grow up *here*?” I cringe at the thought. “And I

didn't have the best relationship with my mother. What if I follow the same path? And make my daughter feel..."

I sniffle, and Camilla's face softens.

"You know the baby's an omega?"

I pull back, surprised as I realize it's true. She *is* an omega, and she smells like peppermint.

"Yes." I laugh deliriously at the thought. "I suppose I do."

She leans back, sipping her sun water and considering me. "You know, it's crazy how you think you know someone based on ideas that only exist in your mind. I'd always have thought you had the perfect life. You were the perfect omega."

My heart stutters at her words. "No, that's not me at all."

"Well, I think you'll be a good mother. Wyatt and I are having a baby, too, after all, and look at the examples we have to live by. His mother *poisoned* me ... multiple times."

She laughs and shakes her head at how preposterous it sounds, but her words remind me of something.

"Camilla," I say tentatively. "How are you feeling about Lyn?"

It was almost painful watching the two of them interact earlier. Camilla was visibly relieved when Lyn left, and now, at the mention of her, she slumps in her chair and groans.

"I don't know how to feel about that, honestly."

"Your reunion was a bit—"

“It was really freaking weird!” She takes a long swig of her sun water and shakes her head. “I thought she was dead my whole life, and then here she is ... alive and well.”

“She really is a lovely omega,” I assure her quickly. “She’s looked out for me since I’ve been here and helped me make sense of so many things.”

“Look, I’m sure she’s great. I just don’t know how to act, and I don’t have the best track record with—”

She’s interrupted by the door swinging open. I hold my breath, sure it’s Lyn, and she heard us talking about her.

But it’s not Lyn. It’s Rosie.

I jump from my chair at the sight of her. She looks like death. Her skin is pale and sweaty, and she has dusty black streaks smeared over her skin and dress. She’s breathing heavily and looking at us like she’s about to do something crazy.

“Rosie! Are you well?”

She levels a gaze at me, her aqua eyes fiery and her mouth set in a straight line.

“No, Elizabeth,” she finally says, her voice thick and scratchy. “I’m not *well*.”

“Come sit!” I stand up to motion her toward the table. “This is Camilla Maidenhair, a friend from Goldenrod. Did you meet her earlier?”

I rack my brain. I thought I saw her around the Mercantile earlier, but everything was such a rush.

“I know who she is.” She doesn’t acknowledge Camilla as she shuffles toward us and falls in the chair I abandoned. “I was listening to your conversation.”

She sounds hostile, but I’m used to that with her. I flick my eyes to Camilla to see her watching Rosie worriedly like she’s not sure what she’ll do.

“You didn’t have to do that.” I pull up another chair and sit between them, my back to the dining room. “We’re happy to talk with you.”

“It made me sick,” she spits out viciously. “All of your whining and complaining about your perfect lives. You don’t know how easy you’ve had it.”

Camilla’s eyes widen as she slowly tilts her head in my direction.

What? she mouths dramatically.

“We’ve had many advantages,” I admit carefully. “But it was also difficult living in a place with so many rules—rules we weren’t allowed to question.”

“I grew up in filth,” she hisses, reaching up to wipe sweat from her forehead. “I never had anything nice. Nothing pretty. Just a father who hated me because I wasn’t an alpha, and two sisters to protect from him.”

A couple beats of silence pass as we digest what she said. When I look at Camilla, her eyes are focused on Rosie in

understanding.

“I get that,” Camilla interjects. “My father also wasn’t a very good alpha. He—”

“No, you don’t!” Rosie yells. “Because you grew up in Goldenrod. You had nice things, hot water, and plenty to eat. I was born to work for an alpha, I was *rescued* to come work here for other alphas, and I’ll die working for some alphas somewhere. My life is drudgery. It’s *pain*.”

I don’t know what to say, and apparently, neither does Camilla. We both watch her dumbstruck as she wipes angry tears from her eyes.

“But the worst part is that after everything else you two had, now you have mates who love you—who *want* you.”

“You could have that one day,” I whisper tentatively.

“I won’t ever have that.” She swipes her head in my direction, throwing the words at me like darts. “Because of *you*.”

Her eyes burrow into mine with so much resentment. But still, I’m scared to break eye contact with her. Something tells me I shouldn’t take any sudden movements right now.

There’s a noise behind me—the kitchen door opening—and Rosie’s eyes mercifully move to stare over my shoulder. She lets out a soft sob as her dirty fingers come up to cover her mouth.

Immediately, a sound breaks up the thick silence. A loud buzzing noise coming deep from within her chest.

Her call.

“Rosie.” Alarm rises within me, quickening my pulse. “Who are you calling—?”

She doesn’t let me finish. Reaching over, she grasps my wrist tightly. I try to pull it away, but she lifts my arm in victory. Like I’m a prize that she’s captured.

I try to yank away from her, but she’s holding onto me too tight. Her fingers are digging into my skin, sharp and painful.

“Let her go!” Camilla orders, rising from her chair before she releases a surprised gasp as her eyes move behind me.

Finally, turning around, I see him. Standing in the doorway, covered with the same black dust and dirt as Rosie, is Jason.

“Elizabeth.”

He whispers my name like an oath. My heart starts pounding in my throat—he looks so ominous standing there, so much bigger and stronger than he used to be. Not the weak alpha from Goldenrod or the crazy screaming one from the cage.

Someone different.

Scarier.

“Jason, what are you—how did you—?”

“Get down under the table,” he says calmly. “All of you.”

I don’t have the chance to think. Rosie pulls me down, and my palms hit the hardwood floor painfully. I gasp and lift myself up just as she reaches up to pull Camilla down.

Camilla yelps, but I barely have the chance to process what's happening before a loud blast resounds through the Mercantile.

Camilla and I scream in unison as dust and plaster fall to the floor. The chairs and tables around us dance over the floor, and then all three of us shriek and crowd together. It feels like the floor is going to open up and swallow us.

I look to Camilla to make sure she's okay. Her eyes are wide, and her arms are wrapped over her stomach. Our eyes connect. I think she's about to say something, but if so, I never hear it.

A strong pressure travels through the room, and the world goes black.

Boom

Rill

We never traveled too deep into the hole, so I'm not sure how far it goes back. But I remember the day we found the dynamite. It was about a hundred yards in, just about where the broken railroad tracks stop, opening up to a huge gaping hole in the ground.

Run found the wooden boxes. He and Pike pulled them out, and I read the words printed on them in faded stamped ink:

Globe Powder Company

Wilmington, Delaware, USA

Highly Explosive — Dangerous

Run didn't know what it was, but Pike and I sure as hell did. When I looked up at him, I could see the worried glint in his gray eyes. But in the end, we left them where we found them—what else were we supposed to do? Call the pigeons and ask them to use some of their fancy equipment to dispose of them?

Keep the other alphas away from these boxes, Run, Pike said gravely, *unless you have reason to blow up Crescent Rock and every alpha in it.*

We all laughed, joking about good enough reasons for us all to be blown up—if one of us decided to mate with one of the pigeons' females when someone drank all the sun water, and so on and so forth.

But now, in the darkness with a ringing in my ears and dirt in my mouth, I figure someone finally thought of a good enough reason.

Was that Mud I saw just before...?

I don't know. The thought disintegrates in my head before I can even latch onto it. I can't make sense of anything right now. Not even Liz. I try to dial into her, but all I get is silence.

No angry thoughts, pouting, or laughs with Camilla.

Just silence.

Where is she? Is she...

No. I won't even consider it.

But I need to find her—*now*.

I try to move, to get up, but my limbs just twitch faintly, my fingers scratching the dirt uselessly. I can't feel my legs, and my heart is slow ... like it's having trouble beating.

Through my exhaustion, a thread of panic takes hold.

Because for the first time in a very, *very* long time—since Mercy City—I'm too weak to do anything but lie here.

The March of the Omega

Elizabeth

Eucalyptus.

Isolde Sage had a silver dollar eucalyptus tree in her greenhouse. She'd let me pick as many leaves as I wanted. I'd steam them and extract the oil, sprinkling it around my room. The scent always made me fresh and alert—like I could manifest anything.

I inhale deeply, letting the familiar scent infuse my body. It's so vivid, like I'm actually there.

I twitch my fingers, lightly rubbing against something cool and smooth. Silk. I haven't felt anything this soft in so long.

Moaning, I crack my eyes open. The blurry blue hue from the blanket is the first thing I see. But as I open my eyes wider, I take in the rest of it.

My vanity with the big oval mirror hanging over it. My closet, holding all my pretty, colorful dresses. And my window seat with the gauzy curtain floating over it.

The window is open, and bright sun streams through the sparkling glass panes, the cold wind making the curtain dance over the wood floors.

It looks just like I left it.

Home.

I could stay here forever.

My bedroom. My favorite place.

I breathe it in and... Oh! There's music floating through the air—*The March of the Omega*. I start humming it lightly as I roll around on the soft silk. There's linen wrapped around my legs and a soft pillow under my head.

Any second now, I'll wake up in my nest with Rill. But until I do, I'm going to savor this.

A sharp knocking sound snaps through the room.

It's loud, echoing through my skull and pounding against my head. I rise slowly, my hand coming up to my aching head. Everything around me is blurry and stilted.

That's when I realize how much my head really hurts, how my mouth is so dry, and my nose so stuffed up. I feel ... terrible. I wouldn't feel this bad in a...

Horror fills me to the brim.

This isn't a dream. I'm actually in my room.

My breath becomes jagged like the broken notes of the music coming from the piano downstairs. Scuttling to the side of the bed, I slide off, slowly and awkwardly.

When my feet hit the soft rug, I gasp as I catch my reflection in the vanity mirror. I'm wearing one of my low-necked, snowy white nightgowns, and my hair is pulled back in a braid. Not the elaborate one Rill did, but a simple one, just like...

“Welcome home, miss.”

I jump and turn to the door. Colleen's sturdy form is standing in the door frame with a tray in her arms and a benign smile on her lips.

“We've missed you.”

Oh no. My heart stops in my chest as I crumble to the floor.

I'm home—in Goldenrod.

Part III

Keep Your Wits About You

Elizabeth

Liz, wake up.

Rill's voice rumbles through my body, his herby scent surrounding me.

"Rill? Where are you?" I try to open my eyes, but my eyelids are glued together. No matter how much I try to pull them up, they won't budge.

He doesn't answer, and my mind starts flailing. It hurts to keep trying so hard. I should give up and stay asleep.

You gotta get up, Liz.

His voice is faint but urging. If only I could open my eyes, this would be so much simpler. I whimper in discomfort, twisting and turning. Something is wrapped around my legs, and my frustration grows when I can't kick it loose.

I'm trying!

Try harder.

I groan. Even the whisper of him that exists in my mind is obnoxious.

Where are you? Are you here?

I don't hear anything for so long that I start pushing harder, trying and failing to open my eyes. I need to see him. Touch him. Talk to him. Then I'll be safe.

No, I'm in the hole, he finally answers me.

I wake on a gasp.

I'm not struggling anymore—my eyes are open, my body still. Sweet relief pumps through my blood as sweat pours down my chest. The struggle is over.

I focus my eyes on the white ceiling above me. It's decorated with sharp, still shadows. It could be any ceiling. Those could be any shadows.

Calming down, I close my eyes tight and turn my head to the side, holding my breath. Maybe if I wish hard enough, I'll open them to see piles of dusty books and a bench pushed under a narrow, dirty window.

I crack an eye open and see my cushioned window seat with the gauzy white curtains floating over it.

I'm in Cypress House. In Goldenrod.

I release a ragged breath and peer down to see I'm in the same nightgown I remember from earlier, my hair lying next to me in a tight Colleen-style braid.

Images float through my mind. The scent of eucalyptus. My room. *The March of the Omega*. I collapsed to the floor—so drowsy and confused—and Colleen put me right back to bed.

The room's dark now. No dancing curtains. No piano tinkling in the distance. Everything's quiet.

I sit up slowly and immediately realize it was a mistake to move. I don't feel as bad as I did earlier, but I'm still very fragile. Falling back, my head hits the pillow again as I focus my eyes on the ceiling, scouring my mind.

What happened?

I was in the Mercantile with Camilla. Rosie showed up. She acted mean and peculiar, and then we heard her call...

Jason's her mate. My eyes widen at the memory. When would she have even figured that out? They only ever saw each other the night that he attacked her. But then... I saw her going into the cave...

The day Rosie went into the cave was the day Rill came home. Once he arrived and I took him to my nest, I forgot everything else. Rosie. Jade. Jason. My unhappiness. I could only think about him.

I sniffle, my eyes filling with frustrated tears. Did Jason bring me home? What about Camilla and Rosie? Is Rill here?

No, Rill's in the hole.

His voice plays on repeat in my mind.

I'm in the hole.

I close my eyes tight.

The hole.

I let my head fall to the side toward the window. “What should I do?”

The window’s both un-answering and unhelpful.

I exhale loudly. I can’t just sit here while my mate is, at best, very far away and at worst ... dead.

No, he’s not dead. I’d know if that was the case. I reach my fingers up to graze my mostly heeled-over mark. It throbs faintly. He’s alive.

I close my eyes and almost drift off to sleep again, the events playing out in my head. Rill braiding my hair ... taking me to the cave ... hurting Jason just after he told us that Orion went home without me...

My eyes pop open. Is Orion here, too? If so, he’ll help me make sense of this and find Rill.

Slowly, I rise to a seated position and swing my legs over the side of the bed.

Orion’s room is just next door to mine. After our parents died, we both acknowledged that he should probably move into our parents’ room on the other side of the house.

With my father gone, he was the alpha of the house, after all. It’s where he belonged. He and his future mate.

But he never ended up doing it. He admitted to me that it was a bit morbid to think about moving into that room and

vaguely planned to move his things there “later.”

I agreed, and we kept things as they always had been, staying in our childhood bedrooms. I didn't mind. It's a large house, and it was comforting to have him so nearby.

And now, I'm especially grateful that he never moved. I won't have to walk so far.

Sucking in a fortifying breath, I move away from the bed, stumbling over the carpet as I make my way across the room. I trip and fall against the door, turning the handle slowly and looking out into the dark hallway.

The dimly lit sconces shine a dull glow over the dark carpet and blue-painted walls. I tiptoe the several feet to Orion's door and stand outside it with my hand resting on the brass door handle.

When I pull it down, the door clicks open. I hold my breath for half a second and push it open to reveal a dark, cold, empty room.

And a perfectly made bed.

There's no one in Orion's room.

Something inside me shrivels up and dies, but I just stand there, breathing in and out methodically. It seems like an eternity passes before a hand falls on my shoulder and squeezes gently.

I shriek and turn to see Colleen standing behind me in her nightgown, her thin lips fixed in a scowl.

“Colleen!” I breathe out, my hand pressing down on my pounding heart. “You scared me half to death.”

“I told you to stay in your room, miss,” she replies in a hushed, worried voice.

“What?” I scrunch up my nose. “No, you didn’t.”

She narrows her eyes. “You don’t remember.”

“No, it’s just that—”

She cuts me off, grabbing me by the shoulder and yanking me down the hall. I stumble inside my bedroom as she closes the door softly behind us.

I rub my arm and stare at her accusingly, but she just flashes a benign smile.

“I’ll pull down the blankets, miss. You best get some rest.” Her anxious eyes dart over me before she rushes toward the bed. “You’ve got a big day tomorrow. The Administrator is visiting!”

“Colleen.” I step toward her. “What’s going on? Where’s Orion?”

She doesn’t look up from the bed, shaking the blankets and sheets briskly before folding them down in a perfect triangle. When she’s done, she clamps her mouth shut tight and stares at the floor, waiting for me to move forward.

“Where’s Orion?” I keep my voice even and firm.

Her mouth stays closed tight, her eyes on the floor. I know her stubbornness won’t last long. Just like I can’t help but

yield to Rill every time he orders me this way or that, she can't help but answer when asked a question.

"I order you to tell me what's happening, Colleen," I say the words firmly, using the tone my mother had for the betas. She always got good results, and I can see Colleen start to waffle. As a beta, it's in her nature to follow orders. "*Now.*"

"Alpha Cypress isn't here, miss," she finally says, glancing up worriedly.

I watch her for a few beats, my throat dry. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," she whispers, her eyes darting to the door quickly and then back at my face. "He went after you and never came back."

My legs are weak. I stare at the bed blankly before falling on top of it.

Orion's not here.

The thought leaves me tired and weak. My parents are gone. My brother. My mate. I'm all alone.

"You're lucky you came back at all." She keeps whispering as if she's afraid someone is listening. She pushes me back gently until I'm lying with my head on the pillow. "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your wits about you and stay quiet. There's a new alpha in Cypress House."

I stare at the shadows on the ceiling while she tucks the blanket around my body and turns to leave the room.

Through the silence, I hear Rill's voice again.

I'm in the hole.

“Colleen,” I call out weakly.

She stops, her hand on the door handle, and looks back at me.

“Who’s the new alpha in Cypress House?”

“Jason Sage.” Her eyes dart to the door before settling on me in a way that can only be described as a warning. “Your mate.”

A Weak Consolation

Elizabeth

I stare blankly at my reflection as Colleen arranges my hair. Her movements are strange but familiar as her short fingers quickly work them into tight braids before wrapping the coils around my head and pushing in pins, securing them tightly.

I wince with each pull and sharp pin hitting my scalp. Braiding it myself every day—and even when Rill braided it—I got used to not being manhandled, and now my scalp is overly sensitive.

I'm sensitive all over, actually.

My fingers graze my stomach lightly. Even with all the uncertainties, I can feel the baby and her scent growing stronger. My eyes shift nervously to Colleen. I wonder if she can tell. Betas can't smell very well, but they've been known to have an extra sense when it comes to pregnancy and breeding.

After she left last night, I didn't think I'd be able to fall asleep again. I couldn't stop replaying the events from the Mercantile in my head over and over again. Rosie's grip on my wrist. Jason's fervid expression. The way the floor shook and the ceiling cracked.

And, of course, that last image of Rill walking outside and looking back at me with that scarred, lopsided smile.

What did he call me as he left?

Stubborn wench.

Such a rude, inappropriate thing for him to call his mate, I think, with a snuffle.

But despite all the thoughts swirling in my head, I fell asleep surprisingly fast.

My slumber was dark and filled with dreams of him. Dreams I can't remember now, but I know he was there. He talked to me and comforted me. Assured me that he would come for me.

And now, with Colleen silently doing what she's done hundreds of times before, it's almost like I never left. Ever since I was a girl, I've sat here like this—calm and quiet—with this beta's hands in my hair, pulling and twisting.

This time, though, I want to scream, knock her over, and demand to be told what's going on. But I keep quiet and keep my wits about me, just like she advised. I resist the temper tantrum.

“All right then, miss.” She inserts one last pin. “All done. You look lovely.”

Automatically and wordlessly, I rise from my vanity, spreading my arms as she pulls my robe from my shoulders.

And then, as she holds it out for me, I gently step into a periwinkle blue silk dress. The low collar of the dress is surrounded by a darker blue embroidery, and it swishes pleasantly around my calves.

Another familiar thing. Something I missed.

As she does up the buttons, I stare at myself in the mirror, and I realize she's right—I do look lovely. I look like Elizabeth Cypress. Pretty dress. Pretty hair. Pretty face.

Rosie's words from the kitchen echo through my skull. I press my eyes together and push the images from my brain.

When I open them again, Colleen's standing in front of me, staring at the carpet and silently waiting for me to dismiss her.

“Colleen, did I arrive with...” I clear my throat and start over. “Are there any other omegas here in Cypress House?”

“Other omegas?” She looks up, mildly alarmed.

“Yes.” I nod softly, fixing my eyes on her sternly. “In this house.”

She sucks in a breath, but before she can get a word out, there's a loud knock at the door. Breathing out a sigh of relief, she rushes toward it and peeks into the hallway.

When she sees who it is, she quickly swings the door open wide and looks at the floor immediately.

Jason walks in slowly, his mossy green eyes brightening as he inspects me.

He looks different than any other time I've seen him.

Before ... everything, he always seemed young. Like a little brother. Which is silly because he's five years older than me.

When I saw him in Crescent Rock, he was so dirty and crazed. Not all like I remembered him, but I could chalk it up to stress.

But now, he looks more like Wyatt or Noah. Hard. Rugged. There are new wrinkles around his eyes, and he seems bigger, looming over me and Colleen.

"Elizabeth," he whispers reverently. "You look lovely."

I swallow a lump in my throat and fix my face with what I hope is a brave expression. "So, I've heard." I turn around and walk toward my window seat, sitting delicately. "Tell me what's going on, Jason. Now."

He smiles softly before glancing at Colleen. "You're dismissed."

Colleen nods her head once and shoots out of the room like lightning—I don't suppose I blame her.

He pulls the chair from my vanity and sits across from me. His huge body looks almost comical on the small, cushioned seat. *Has* he gotten bigger?

He doesn't say anything right away, just stares at me for seconds upon seconds while I try to avoid shifting in my seat.

“Do you know how good it is to see you back here?”

I sigh. “Where’s Orion, Jason? And Camilla? Rosie? What about Rill? How did I even get here?”

The last question has been gnawing at me. I can’t imagine he carried me all the way from Crescent Rock—no matter how much bigger he’s grown.

“Stop asking so many questions,” he says sternly. I pull back a bit, surprised at his tone. “Camilla’s here in Goldenrod. She’s staying at Sage House. I’m sure you’ll see her today. But you don’t need to worry about the rest of them. Most of the other alphas and omegas in *that place* are still there. And Orion’s ... gone.”

I don’t even know where to start. My brother’s protective gaze flashes in my mind, laughing at me as I tripped down Dogwood Street after too much champagne. Holding me as I sobbed onto his shoulder after Mother and Father died.

“But you said Orion was here.”

He frowns softly. “I’m sorry for the falsehood. But at the time, I thought you’d come back with me if you believed your brother to be here.”

My mouth falls open. He acts like lying to me was completely acceptable if it served his end goal.

“Then where is he?”

“He’s gone.”

He keeps saying that word like it actually means something.

“Gone where?”

“There’s a lot about this world that you don’t understand, Elizabeth,” he says in a placating tone. “If I told you everything, you’d quickly become overwhelmed.”

I glare at him. “I understand more than you think, Jason. I did live out there with *my mate* for weeks.”

He exhales loudly as if he’s disappointed in me. “That’s another thing, he’s ... not your mate anymore. I am.”

His voice is harsher than I’ve ever heard him, and my heart trips a bit in surprise. I swallow a worried lump in my throat as I lean toward him.

“That’s not how this works, Jason. Rill’s my fated mate. There’s no changing that.”

He shrugs. “I disagree. I have reason to believe I changed it.”

“It’s not something you can disagree with. It just *is*.” I lay my hand flat on my chest, where my call would be singing if Rill were in the room. “There’s nothing here for you. *Nothing*.”

Fear rises within me as his eyes narrow on me, and he clenches his fist against his thigh. For a moment, I think he’s going to get up and slap me. Either that or throw me on the bed, and... No, the thought of that makes me want to vomit.

But instead, he exhales impatiently as he crosses his leg over his knee and studies me.

“You know, I remember the first time I ever saw you,” he says quietly. “I mean, *really* saw you. You were always running around with Stella, a couple dirty little brats. But one day—I think you were about thirteen—I *saw* you for your potential. I knew then that with an omega like you next to him, an alpha would be ... extraordinary.”

The blood drains from my face as my hand slowly falls from my chest. I feel like I should say something to that, but his eyes are glazed over, and his mouth is soft.

This isn't actually about me, I realize. He doesn't want me to say anything.

“True, you're beautiful. But it's more than that. You carry yourself so...” He drifts off, shaking his head slowly as if enthralled with the thought of me.

“I'm the only one who ever truly knew your worth. Wyatt never paid you any attention. You were just an omega. A decorative one, but nothing special enough to tempt his fucking idiotic ass. But I knew right away that you were special. I knew the alpha that got you would be admired. Respected.” He blinks slowly into the distance. “Only the most powerful alpha would be chosen by the *perfect* omega.”

“I'm not perfect, Jason,” I whisper, finally finding my voice. “And I don't choose you.”

He huffs out a soft laugh, his eyes finally meeting mine. “Well, I defeated the mate you chose. So, I don't need you to choose me anymore, do I? What you want doesn't matter. It never did.”

My face falls as my heart stops beating. “Yes, it does.”

“No,” he says with certainty. “It doesn’t.”

“Don’t you want to be with Rosie?” I push, my voice raising a couple decibels. “She’s your fated mate. Your omega. The one who can bear your children and make you happy. You’d really just get rid of her?”

He watches me for a couple seconds, his eyes moving up and down my face.

“Who says I got rid of her?”

I pull back in surprise. “She’s here, then? In Goldenrod? Not ... gone?”

“I know I ... *need* her for certain things,” he admits reluctantly. “But at the end of the day, she’s a weak consolation, Elizabeth. You’re the prize. The one I’ve always wanted. What am I supposed to do with some filthy, uneducated ... with *her*.”

Something inside me wilts at his words. Who is this alpha? Jason Sage? The one who always seemed so unassuming and gentle. He’s not those things at all. He’s the same as any other alpha—controlling, demanding, bossy—but he’s just been better at hiding it.

“I’ll have your beta bring you downstairs in ten minutes,” he says as he rises from the chair. “I have a meeting with the Administrator to discuss our promise party and mating ceremony, and I’d like you to make an appearance.”

I nod weakly, but he doesn't acknowledge me. He just gets up and leaves. I watch him, stunned, as he closes the door softly behind him without another look.

I sit in silence for a minute as I wait for the tears to come. The feelings of inadequacy. The overwhelming terror.

But it doesn't come. None of it.

Instead, I catch a whiff of eucalyptus in the air, and with it, a cold determination settles inside me.

I can manifest anything with this scent around me. I lay my hand on my stomach—and with this fluttering in my belly.

And I know with more certainty than I've ever held that there's absolutely no way that *this* is going to happen.

Prone to Hysterics

Elizabeth

“Oh, you beautiful girl!” Isolde Sage wraps her arms around me and pulls me tight against her chest, squeezing the breath out of me. “It’s so wonderful to see your face again.”

Isolde has always smelled like lavender. For a moment, I can’t help but sink into her familiar scent. It reminds me of hours spent in the greenhouse, the herb garden, and the solarium. Just me, her, and my mother working with the herbs as I listened to them laugh and gossip.

But now, when I pull away and look at her familiar, beautiful face, all I see is the omega who released me. Kicked me out of Goldenrod. All because I was inconvenient to ... something. I’m still not sure what I did wrong or why she wanted to get rid of me.

“Isolde. It’s lovely to see you.” My voice is shaking as a cold sweat breaks out on my neck.

She doesn't seem to notice my nerves, though. Her green eyes wrinkle as she smiles widely, glancing behind her. "And here's Stella."

She turns around and pulls her daughter forward, where she'd been hovering by the parlor door. I almost melt at the sight of my old friend. Her pretty, pointy features are affixed with horror as she takes me in like I'm a ghost she thought had finally disappeared from her life.

"And, of course, you know my daughter-in-law, Camilla," Isolde continues, stepping back.

And just like that, Camilla's in front of me, and all my poise comes crashing to the floor like a thousand delicate glasses.

The last time I saw her, we were sitting across from each other in the Mercantile. Both of us were filthy but ... happy.

Now, she's done up just like me. Her curls are pulled back from her face in tight braids, and she's wearing a pretty mauve silk dress. But her eyes are red and brimming with tears. When they land on me, she throws herself in my arms and releases a loud, wretched sob.

I wobble on my feet, catching her slight body in my arms.

"Camilla," I whisper her name into her hair. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know what happened," she sobs in a broken voice, her head on my shoulder. "I woke up this morning, and I was at Sage House. Wyatt's not here. I can't—"

She's pulled away roughly before she can finish as a new masculine voice booms through the air, interrupting her.

“Oh, omegas. I must say they can be a bit overly emotional for my taste. You'd think they'd be happy to be back home, in the bosom of their community, but this one can't stop crying.”

Cyrus Beebalm, the Administrator of the Order, is staring at me blankly, his cold, black eyes contrasting with the wide smile stretching his wrinkled, bearded face.

“Elizabeth Cypress,” he says with an appreciative sigh, twirling his gray mustache and looking at me like he's in on a joke that I don't know about. “The belle of Goldenrod. How fortunate we are to have you in our midst again.”

“Alpha Beebalm,” I murmur softly, holding my breath in an effort to avoid inhaling his terrible metallic scent.

“I must say, you don't look too worse for the wear.” His voice is bright, but his eyes are shrewd and focused on the mark on my neck. “Despite your trials.”

I blink. “Thank you?”

Behind Beebalm, I see Jason watching us, his hands in his pockets and a tight smile plastered on his face.

“It's true that omegas can be prone to hysterics,” he announces with a toothy grin. “My brother's smart enough to keep his distance.”

He smacks his older brother, Noah, on the back, who I hadn't even noticed was here. Noah jumps and looks over at his brother in annoyance, shrugging off his hand.

Noah's always been a pleasant, quiet sort of alpha, if a bit serious. He and I never had much to say to one another—we'd just smile at each other awkwardly the few times we were left alone in conversation.

He looks like he's aged about ten years since I last saw him. I swear I see some gray peppering his dark brown hair. He nods at me distractedly before settling his eyes shrewdly on Jason's face. Jason was always several inches shorter than Noah, but now they appear to be about the same height.

"It's a relief to see you back home and looking so well, Elizabeth," he says politely, not taking his eyes off his brother. "But remind me why I need to be here again, brother?"

Jason's eyes flash as they settle on his brother's face. "Because this is an important event for me. I'm planning my promise party with my fated mate, and I need my brother's support."

Under his breath, Noah hisses, his fangs peeking out from his lips. My eyes go wide as I watch the Sage brothers engage in some sort of stare-off. For a second, I think that Noah's going to storm out of the house or hit Jason or both.

But he doesn't. He relents and looks at the floor with a softly murmured, "Fine."

There's a heavy silence as Jason watches Noah, and Noah watches the floor, and I find myself more confused than I've ever been. This is not the dynamic I remember between these two.

“Well,” Isolde says brightly, loudly clasping her hands together and breaking through the tension. “I know the alphas would like to talk business, but I don’t think we omegas need to worry about that.” She tinkles out a light laugh. “Elizabeth, can you show us how your mother’s garden is faring this winter season? I’d love to see the work you’ve done.”

As I watch her, my mouth falls open wide in shock. The work I’ve done? I haven’t been here in weeks. But of course, I don’t say that.

“Of course,” I say quietly instead.

I gesture the other omegas across the hall and through the solarium, where I throw wide the French doors that open up to the garden. As we step outside and the frigid air wraps around me, I’m relieved to see that the garden looks like it always does in late January. Mostly dead, but still beautiful.

We walk up and down the gravel paths, Isolde leading the way with me, Camilla, and Stella trailing behind her silently. I’m dying to talk to Camilla and compare notes, but I dare not say anything in front of Isolde. She was the one who released me, after all, and something about the faraway look in her eyes tells me that’s not a topic she’s fit to discuss.

So, I’m left inwardly moaning and jumping in impatience as she points out things she likes about the garden and things that she thinks could use improvement.

“Your lily of the valley shrub looks splendid, but that potentilla is wilting in quite a few places, Elizabeth,” she

scolds gently. “Your mother would not approve. You should speak with the betas.”

“Oh—yes, of course,” I stutter, not exactly sure what’s going on as my blurry eyes take in some perfectly normal-looking potentilla.

“Mother,” Stella interjects. “I think I saw the gardener back there.” She points to the shed located about fifty yards away. “Why don’t you go say something to him? You always have a way with the betas. Much better than Elizabeth.”

“You’re right, my dear.” Isolde’s eyes soften as she reaches up to cup Stella’s cheek. “You’ll thank me for this, Elizabeth.”

“Of course,” I mutter as she marches away, leaving me, Camilla, and Stella alone.

That was entirely too easy, I think as I watch her waving down the gardener. I don’t take much time to savor her absence, though. Instead, I turn to Camilla immediately.

“Quick, Camilla.” I grab her by the wrists, frantically pulling her close. “Tell me what happened.”

She shakes her head quickly. “No idea. I just woke up in my room in Sage House, and Hetty showed up this morning to brush my hair. Nobody will tell me anything.”

“Let’s think,” I say, releasing a deep breath. “We were in the Mercantile...”

Camilla nods. “...and that Rosie omega showed up acting all crazy...”

“...and then she called to Jason...”

“...and the world exploded, and we passed out,” Camilla finishes. “That’s all I remember.”

“I know Rill’s not dead.” I touch my mark lightly. I can sense that he’s on his way, even if I can’t hear him in my mind like I could in Crescent Rock. “I know he’s coming...”

“Wyatt’s alive, too,” she says on a broken sob. “He has to be. But why, Elizabeth? What is Jason thinking? Why are we here? How did we even get here without realizing it?”

“Jason thinks we’re going to be mates.” I shake my head quickly, my nose scrunched in consternation. “I told him it’s impossible, but he won’t listen. I don’t know what’s happening or what you have to do with any of it.”

Before Camilla can respond, Stella pushes her aside, looking between the two of us with an angry, heated expression.

“Well, if you two would actually talk to the other omega in this conversation, maybe she—maybe *I*—could answer some of your questions.”

Meeting Stella’s green eyes, I see it’s not Camilla she’s looking at, but me. She looks annoyed, and the citrusy, sweet scent of envy throbs off her in waves.

It’s petty, but a part of me is pleased that she’s left out of this. She pushed me away for so long, and now she’s the one on the outside.

“All right, Stella,” I say evenly, crossing my arms over my chest. “What do you know?”

Her eyes dart between us. “Well, while you two have been gallivanting outside the fence having adventures—”

I can’t help but roll my eyes at *that*. Getting released is an adventure, is it?

“I’ve been here,” she continues in a hushed tone, “living with all these crazy people.”

“Well, tell us, Stella,” I say urgently, looking over my shoulder where Isolde is berating Peter, our poor beta gardener. “Before your mother gets back.”

She takes a deep breath and focuses her eyes on my face, ignoring Camilla. “It was terrible after you left,” she admits. “Everything almost fell to the ground.”

I look behind me at Camilla, and she’s just as surprised as me. “When *I* left? Like what?”

“Like everything. It was one thing for you to disappear, Cami—no offense. But Elizabeth?” She pauses to roll her eyes. “Elizabeth Cypress—*the perfect omega*—doesn’t just get released.”

I shrug. “Obviously, that’s not true. Thanks to your mother.”

“She’s sick,” Stella admits, leveling her eyes on me. “I can’t excuse what she did, but she didn’t know. She’s got all these crazy notions—she thinks Wyatt’s the Golden Alpha!”

She guffaws, and Camilla nods in understanding. “I can vouch for that. Isolde Sage has gone off the deep end.”

“But she still has a lot of influence,” Stella continues, still ignoring Camilla, “and certain alphas are using her for that influence. Including ... Alpha Beebalm.”

“In what way?”

“Do you really think my mother would have had the resources to release you all on her own?” She takes a step closer to me, her voice low. “It was *him*. Alpha Beebalm.”

I freeze. The Administrator had me released? Why?

Stella reads the question on my face. “She wanted Wyatt to be the freaking Golden Alpha, and she didn’t want you or Cami to interfere with that.” She pauses and exhales. “And he took advantage of that to manipulate and use her to get rid of my father. He died a couple weeks ago. Did you know that?”

I shake my head. Carson Sage had been ill, but dead? He was much too young.

“My mother poisoned him, but it was *him* who convinced her to do it.” My eyes widen, and her lip quivers like she’s doing everything in her power just to hold herself together. “I’m still not sure *why*, but I know it’s true. Noah and I have been holding our family together and what feels like all of Goldenrod.”

“I don’t think he realized the impact it would have—your parents and my father dying, and you and Orion disappearing all the span of a year. For the first time, there were ... questions in Goldenrod about Alpha Beebalm and the choices he was making.”

Camilla steps up next to me, and we both watch Stella, waiting for her to continue.

“Somehow, Jason got involved in it, and Alpha Beebalm put him in charge of the Cypress offices. He even let him move into your house. Then *Jason* left and told everyone he was going to go find you because you were his fated mate. For the first time ever, I think I heard talk about how suspicious this all was.”

“I’m not Jason’s mate,” I say quickly. “I have a mate, and he’s—”

“Oh please, I know Jason’s not your mate, but he’s changed. He’s bigger. And meaner. I don’t know what’s gotten into him. It’s almost like...” She trails off, looking away and biting her thumb.

“Like what?”

“Like he’s a different alpha,” she whispers. She shakes her head quickly, like she can’t bring herself to say anymore.

“I’m so sorry, Stella.” I take a step toward her. “That sounds like a lot of work and stress.”

She sobs pathetically. “It is. You haven’t been out in Goldenrod yet. You don’t know what it’s like. I’ve never seen it like this. I seriously don’t know—”

“Why, Stella Sage, I had no idea your life had become so difficult.”

We all jump to see Alpha Beebalm standing behind us. I was so enthralled with what Stella was telling us that I didn’t

notice him approaching. For a split second, I consider running and jumping over the garden wall.

“Why don’t you and your sister-in-law go inside at once for a glass of cool water? You need a rest, and I’d like to talk to our lovely Elizabeth and maybe clear up some misconceptions.”

Yes

Elizabeth

Cyrus Beebalm is small for an alpha—just an inch or so taller than me.

The Beebalms were a family of middling alpha and omegas that mostly died out a generation or two ago. Cyrus is the only one left. The story says that he became Administrator during a time of great confusion.

The Order calls for the Administrator—the conveyor of the Order—to be uncalled by any omega in order to avoid the trappings and distractions that come with a mate and children. When one Administrator dies, then the alphas of Goldenrod commune and appoint the oldest uncalled alpha as the new Administrator.

But when the previous Administrator died, there wasn't an uncalled alpha to take his place.

Nobody around now remembers it, but I've been told that Alpha Beebalm made the ultimate sacrifice and released his

omega to become Administrator. The people of Goldenrod were so grateful to him that to question him was considered blasphemy.

That mentality carried over, and omegas like Isolde—and my mother to a certain degree—considered Beebalm’s word to be gold. He always made me a bit uncomfortable, though. Something that I’m reminded of as I take a step back from him now, holding my breath as he watches me shrewdly.

“Don’t be angry with Stella, please. You know we omegas can be ... emotional,” I say soberly, remembering his words from earlier.

He and I are alone in the garden now, and I can’t help but wonder how much he heard before he announced himself.

Colleen arrived soon after he did, guiding Stella, Camilla, and Isolde back inside the house and leaving me alone with him. I’d been in his presence more times than I could count, but never alone. Usually, at the very least, my mother, father, or brother were there.

“Oh, I know, believe me.” He laughs heartily. “I don’t think anyone could have predicted what amazing individuals you females have become.”

“Yes.” I smile nervously, not sure what he means.

“So, tell me about your mate, Elizabeth,” he surprises me by saying. “How’s he holding up without you?”

“What?” Is he talking about Jason or...

“What’s his name?” He twists his face in exaggeration as if lost in thought. “River? Rust?”

My heart stops beating. “Rill.”

“Ah, yes. Rill. Amazing.” He guffaws. “What a name... How is he?”

My mouth falls open, and I shake my head in confusion.

“You two are...” He squints and points to my mark, waving his finger in the air. “...attempting to communicate, I assume?”

I cover my mark with my hand. I’m not sure how much he knows about how Rill and I are able to communicate. To my knowledge, that’s never happened with couples in Goldenrod.

“*Rill’s* my fated mate,” I say simply. “*Not* Jason.”

He laughs as if the idea is ridiculous. “Well, of course, Jason’s not your mate. But with one like him, you allow some concessions. If he has ... the *things* that he desires, then he’s more likely to do what he’s told. I think that’s true of a great many people—not only alphas, mind you.”

“What about what I desire? Does that matter?”

He flashes a placating smile. “Well, why should it? Alphas need to feel ... a sense of control. But you’ll do what you’re told by your alpha, regardless of your own desire. It’s in your very nature.”

But my alpha’s not here. I don’t tell him that, though.

“I—I have things to say, and feelings.”

“If you’re smart, you’ll keep them to yourself.” He tilts his head, considering my face. “I know Rill, you know. From many years back.”

“You do?” All my other thoughts come to a screeching halt. How would Cyrus Beebalm, the Administrator of the Order, know Rill?

“Yes.” He sits on a stone bench next to the wilting potentilla and motions me to join him. “I think you know enough of the world by now to understand some of what I’m about to tell you. Did Rill ever mention a place called Mercy City?”

I fall next to him, my eyes wide. “Yes.”

He nods encouragingly. “Good, good. And now that you know about Mercy City and life outside the fence, do you maybe appreciate Goldenrod a bit more? You think all the alphas, omegas, and betas here are living happy, fulfilled lives under the Order?”

“Um, yes, I suppose so.”

I don’t want to tell him how little I actually know about Mercy City—just the snippets I overheard and that something terrible happened to Rill there. I remember his face turning away from me in the darkness when he told me that’s where he got his scars. He didn’t want to talk about it. He didn’t want me to know.

“Your mate was just a teenager when I met him,” he says softly as if remembering something precious. “But still small for an alpha. We did some work on him in the city—trying to

see what could be made of him. I'm afraid it backfired on us spectacularly, though." He bursts out a loud laugh. "As many things have ... except for this place. Goldenrod. It's quite remarkable when you think about it."

For the first time, I wonder about Cyrus Beebalm—the way he looks and the way he smells. Could it be that he ... that he isn't even one of us? It's not something I could have ever realized without knowing Rill and Crescent Rock. But there's more to the world than I ever dreamed before.

"So, I'm happy that you appreciate Goldenrod," he says with certainty. "There's nowhere else in the world that exists like it anymore. And you've got an especially nice life here. A beautiful face. A big house. So many dresses and *things* ... and let's not forget, the *perfect mate*."

I nod slowly—he's not talking about Rill now.

Keep your wits about you. Colleen's words replay through my mind, so I smile brightly.

"Yes, of course. All of those things are very important to me," I say mechanically. "Especially after living outside of Goldenrod for that time."

"And now that you have them back, you want to keep those things, right?" He squints, his eyes traveling down my body. "As well as the little one in your belly?"

I pull back, my hand automatically resting on my stomach. "Yes."

“Good.” His voice is hard now, and he stares at me intently as if searching for signs of something before he jumps to his feet, smiling brightly. “Well, my dear, you’ve got a promise party to prepare for—it’s tomorrow night. I’m sure there’s much work to be done, and I want to see you with a smile on your face.”

“Yes,” I say again as I rise to my feet—that seems like the only word I’ve said for the past fifteen minutes. “Thank you for speaking with me, Alpha Beebalm.”

“Anything for you, my dear,” he says softly, studying my face. “The perfect omega. You’re an important piece of Goldenrod, you know ... and the Order. Shame on me for not realizing that until you were gone.”

The smile falls from my face as I watch him walk back toward the house, his narrow shoulders slumped as he shuffles in the gravel.

“Alpha Beebalm?” I call out before I can stop myself.

He pauses at the doors to the solarium and looks back at me.

“Do you know where my brother is? Orion?”

He considers me before answering. “Unlike you, I think Goldenrod will get along just fine without Orion Cypress. Let’s just say that he’s been donated ... to a most noble cause. But really, it’s best if you don’t ask questions like that. The answers will just make you emotional, and you *are* prone to hysterics.”

“Yes.” I nod breathlessly. “I am.”

“Remember Elizabeth,” he says, his tone ominous. “Make sure you promise yourself to the *right alpha* tomorrow night. I wouldn’t want you to disturb the Order ... or Goldenrod.”

And with that, he disappears into the house, and I’m left alone with the weight of his words.

Clear Away the Dust

Rill

“What’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to you?”

I look down to find Liz’s head resting against my shoulder, her blue eyes staring up at me, so pure and guileless. That’s how I know I’m dreaming. This isn’t at all what she’s like with me in real life—her eyes always snapping with fire and anger.

She blinks as I move a few strands of silky hair from her forehead. “Mercy City.”

“What happened to you there?” I still feel her next to me, but she sounds distant and echoing, like she’s drifting away.

“Different things,” I admit. “At first, it wasn’t so bad. They took me to this room... It was the whitest, cleanest place I’d ever seen. I sat on a soft leather couch, drank sweet fruit juice, and ate butter cookies. I’d never tasted anything that good before, so I stuffed them all down my throat like they’d disappear any second.”

I laugh softly in the back of my throat. “Eventually, a pigeon showed up. He asked me if I wanted anything else to eat. I said no, but I asked him if my da, Pike, and Lyn were okay. He wouldn’t tell me. He only wanted to ask me questions.”

“Like what?”

I look down with a start. She’s gone. Everything’s gone. I’m floating, surrounded by nothing. I lift my hand in front of my face and can’t see it.

“He asked how old I was, did I know how to read, if I ever ... killed anyone.”

“What did you say?”

“Fifteen, yes, and ... no.”

“Then what happened?”

Her voice is a whisper now, and there’s something different. It’s scratching my face, pounding against my ribs, yelling in my ear.

“He took me underground. There were other alphas there. He injected us full of stuff and chained us up, and then he slashed a long knife—”

“He has me, Rill, in Goldenrod,” Liz interrupts, her voice suddenly loud and clear, ringing through my body. “Now, wake up and find me.”

“Wake up, you asshole!”

I groan and roll to the side, my body crunching over rocks and dirt. Someone’s kicking me in the ribs over and over

again.

I don't want to wake up. I want to go back to my dream. Back to Liz. Even if I was talking about Mercy City, at least it was with her. But I know whatever I see when I open my eyes, it won't be her.

“Wake up, Rill!”

“All right, all right. Calm down.” My mouth is dry and filled with dirt. After a couple more kicks to the ribs. I push my hands out, trying to make it stop. Finally, it does.

I groan into the dirt some more, spitting out more clumps before slowly moving onto my back. Cracking my eyes open, I see Wyatt kneeling in front of me, glaring at me in that perpetually accusing way of his. He's coated in a layer of dust and dirt—everything from his fingers to his eyelashes is a tawny brown.

“What happened?” My throat is so dry that my voice comes out rough and uneven.

“Someone tried to blow us up,” he growls, yanking me up by the shirt collar. “One of your alphas.”

“What?” I finally manage to open my eyes all the way and get a look at where we're standing.

Rocks and dirt surround us on all sides in about a twelve-foot-wide space. There's hardly any light, just a few small slivers through the cracks and holes in the rocks.

It all comes back to me in flashes. Leaving Liz and Camilla in the Mercantile. The empty cages. Mud. The dynamite. The

explosion.

“God damn it,” I curse as I rise to my wobbly feet, squinting my eyes around the small space. It’s definitely the hole, but smaller and more compact, like a part of it caved in. I can’t see Mud or the cages, so who knows what the hell happened to them.

“Are you up?” Wyatt looks me up and down, inspecting me. “You’re okay?”

“What does it look like? I’m fine.” I attempt to spread my arms wide and stumble backward a few inches. Well, I’m mostly fine.

“Good,” he sneers. “I want you to be standing when I do this.”

All at once, his pressure bursts against me, knocking me backward into a wall of rocks. My body bangs into it harshly, sending cracks through it as dust falls to the ground. I slide against the jagged surface until I hit the ground hard, letting out a surprised groan. My head bangs into a rock, and I bite my tongue, my mouth filling up with the bitter taste of blood.

Before I have a chance to react, though, he throws it at me again, clumsy and harsh.

While Wyatt’s pressure isn’t very suave, it’s powerful. He could probably control any other alpha pretty well just by knocking into him so many times.

But unfortunately for him, I’m not just any other alpha.

I catch my bearings quickly. Just as he's about to throw another burst of energy at me, I swoop my pressure out of my body—long and smooth. It cuts him off and throws him across the small area, knocking him into another pile of rocks.

He tries to get up, but I hold him still as I wipe blood from my mouth and walk toward him, catching my breath.

“What the hell, Wyatt?” I breathe hard, reaching back to gingerly touch my sore head while I keep him down. Pulling my fingers away from it, I see they're coated in blood. “I'm not your enemy.” I spit a thick wad of blood out onto the dirt. “We can figure this shit out, but only if you hold yourself together.”

His eyes are about to bulge out of his head, so I release the pressure a little bit in order to allow him to speak ... and breathe.

“Camilla's gone,” he says in a strangled, slurred voice. “And so's Elizabeth.”

“I know,” I mumble softly as I turn around and look at the rocks. “But we won't find them if we're too busy trying to kill each other. You gotta keep a cool head, brother...”

I pull a medium-sized rock out of the pile. It easily breaks away and falls to the ground. This shouldn't be too hard to get through.

“Look, I'm gonna let you go.” I turn around slowly. “But you have to stay put. I'm wide awake now, and this will get ugly fast if you fuck with me anymore. Okay?”

I loosen up enough for him to nod his head. His eyes are telling a different story, though, glaring at me like he wants to snap my neck.

“All right. Here goes.”

I let him go, and he tumbles to the ground, gasping for breath and rubbing at his neck. After a few seconds, he straightens his posture and rests his arms on his knees, his head down. He breathes in and out a few times before looking up and settling tired eyes on me.

“Why are you like this?” he gasps.

My thoughts come to a halt. “Like what?”

“Strong,” he says simply. “I’ve never met another alpha like you... You can’t all be like this out here.”

“No, we’re not.” I sigh, my eyes focused on the ground. “And I wasn’t always like this.”

Mercifully, he lets it go and asks roughly, “Was my brother ever here? Or was this all some sort of trap?”

I burst out with a loud laugh. “A trap? No offense, but why would I wanna be trapped in a cave with you?”

He shrugs softly, staring at a spot on the ground. “You’re an animal. I don’t know why you do anything. Did you sacrifice Elizabeth, too?”

I shake my head softly and look toward the rocks, pushing at a few more and digging through some of the dirt.

“No, I’d never hurt a hair on her pretty little head,” I mumble distractedly as I step back and look at the rocks. “Stand back. This should actually be pretty simple.”

And it is.

Unlike the pressure I used on Wyatt, this isn’t suave. It isn’t calm. It’s angry and vengeful, smashing through rocks, bursting them apart like the dynamite should have burst into me and Wyatt.

Fortunately, we’re made of stronger stuff than a bunch of million-year-old rocks.

After the dust clears, there’s a stream of dirty sunlight pouring in on us. It shines a brighter light on our surroundings, including the new wall of rock blocking off the cave behind us.

Wyatt and I must have gotten trapped in an antechamber-type area created by the dynamite. And Mud, well, he’s likely still trapped back there ... unless he’s dead.

He was never the strongest alpha. I doubt he’d be able to burst through the thick wall of rocks—especially if he’s hurt. But as I consider the thick wall blocking off the cave, I can’t seem to make myself care.

Shaking aside thoughts of Mud—probably for good—I move quickly, pulling a still-recovering Wyatt to his feet and through the freshly blown hole. Once we step out on Railway Row, I know immediately that Liz is definitely gone.

We stare at it in silence. My home. My kingdom. It's funny; it doesn't look any different. Still as rundown as before. I suppose it never had much life to it. It was the people that made it special. I see a face peek out a window. Lulu. She drops down as soon as she sees me, though.

“Where do you think they are?”

Wyatt steps up from behind me, his hands on his hips as he breathes heavily, surveying my domain. He's still pissed but figures it's in his best interest to go along with me. I knew he was a smart alpha.

“They're in Goldenrod ... with him.”

Liz's voice vibrates my skull. *He has me in Goldenrod ... find me.*

He looks up with a start. “With who? Jason?”

“No, not Jason,” I scoff. “Someone else.”

I watch his silent, filthy face for a few beats. Once again, I'll have to educate him on how the world works and who really runs this stupid game we're playing. I suppose when I survived Mercy City, this became my lot in life.

Telling people things. Disappointing them.

“Wyatt, I'm afraid our beloved omegas are currently in the company of the most evil son of a bitch that's ever walked the earth,” I say lightly before pausing to spit more blood onto the ground. “But don't you fret. If anyone can beat him, it's me.”

“And why's that?” Wyatt growls.

“Because he created me.”

Rosie's Secret

Rill

“If Cyrus Beebalm is some sort of torturer, and he has Camilla, then we go after them *right now*,” Wyatt spits out at me over a table in the Mercantile, an untouched glass of sun water in front of him.

I sip from my glass and shrug him off. “The only reason we were left alive is so we’d go after them. He’s counting on it.” I shake my head at his furious expression. “Don’t get me wrong, we *are* going. But we need to be smart about it.”

Liz wouldn’t want me to be an idiot about this, and I have no intention of ending up in that sadistic bastard’s clutches again. But there’s no way he’s going to hurt her. She’s the bait, after all. As long as I can sense her, alive and healthy, then he can rely on my showing up in Goldenrod.

But we’re not going anywhere just yet.

Not long after we walked out of the hole, Pike sauntered out his front door, calmly looking us up and down.

“I was wondering when you were gonna dig your way outta there,” he said with a low laugh, nodding his head at the pile of rocks spewing out of the mouth of the hole.

“Eh, there wasn’t much digging.”

He nodded in understanding, his eyes glued to the hole. “Mud still in there? You think he’s dead?”

I just shrugged dismissively.

“Ah, well,” he sighed. “Shit happens.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I replied with an approving nod.

“Well, let’s go have a drink and think up the best way to get those omegas back.”

See? Pike gets it.

And now, we’re sitting around a table in the Mercantile, nursing giant glasses of sun water while Wyatt damn near loses his mind.

“You know that we can’t go in there all loud and obvious,” I tell him rationally. “Believe me, he’s thought this through. If we go tearing through that flimsy gate, he’ll be on us as soon as we take a step toward Goldenrod. It’ll be over before it starts.”

“Well, then, what do you propose we do?”

I stare at the foamy swirls in my glass before looking up at him. “Is the gate the only entrance in and out of Goldenrod?”

“As far as I know...” He looks off into the distance, the cogs in his mind turning. “Although, I’ve heard there’s a place near

the Home—kind of a gap in the fence.”

“The Home?”

“The Home for Unwanted Omegas. It’s on the northern fringe.”

“Unwanted omegas? You’re all a bunch of sick bastards,” I sneer, shaking my head at him shamefully. What a bunch of foolishness.

“You’re one to talk.” He pushes his chair back and rises to his feet, glaring at me angrily. “And it’s better than releasing them, right?”

Pike just rolls his eyes and stands to break us up, but before we can trade any more insults or start throwing blows, we’re interrupted by a loud throat clearing.

Run’s standing in the doorway, his arm protectively wrapped around a sniffling Jade.

“Hey.” I fall in my chair again. Jade is hunched over and holding a grimy handkerchief to her face. “You guys okay? Lulu and Rosie good?”

“No, that’s why we’re here,” Run says, hemming and hawing a bit. “There’s something Jade thinks you should know.”

I watch Jade for several seconds before she bursts out a loud sob, her face crumbling behind the handkerchief.

“Rosie’s gone,” she says in a muffled, choked voice.

“What?”

“He took her.” Tears are streaming down her face now, and Run rubs her on the back soothingly, guiding her toward the table.

“Who?”

“Her mate.”

I open my mouth to question her, but Run holds up a hand.

“Why don’t you sit and start from the beginning?” He glances at me apprehensively. “Go easy on her, boss. She’s all torn up.”

I nod my head reassuringly, staring at Jade’s downcast face. “What happened?”

She releases a broken sob and levels her watery eyes on my face. “Run’s right. I guess I should start at the beginning.” She pauses to take a deep breath. “After you came back with Elizabeth, Rosie was real upset. She was counting on you, you know?”

“I know.” A pang reverberates through my chest. “I probably should’ve had a conversation with her.”

“Yeah, you should have,” she says, glancing up at me with accusation. “Anyway, she needed an escape, so she started spending a lot of time in the east clearing... You know, where all the daffodils grow in the spring? She said she was collecting winterberries, but I think she was just sitting out there and crying.”

I nod uneasily. We knew there was an unfamiliar scent on the east perimeter—a disturbance—and Rosie was wondering out

there alone? Why wasn't anyone keeping a closer eye on her?

You would have noticed—a voice in the back of my brain reminds me—*if you hadn't been so distracted*. I shake off the doubt and focus on Jade.

“Well, one day she was out there and...” She looks up at Run worriedly. “She met *him*.”

“Who?” I ask even though I already know the answer.

“Jason,” she admits. “He initiated her heat.”

“Oh.” I pull back, a bit surprised. “Rosie was in heat?”

“Yes. She made that sound that comes from deep in her chest.” She lays her hand over her heart and looks up at Run. “What Elizabeth said was her call?”

Damn. How did I not notice that? I think back to that snowy night on Railway Row. Was she calling to him then?

“She was so happy at first,” Jade continues, her voice shaking. “Rosie’s struggled a lot lately. Things were always so hard with our da—she took a lot of abuse to protect me and Lulu—and then coming here has been...” She shakes her head and stares at her hands.

“Rosie’s not happy here?”

“No,” she admits. “It’s different for me. I have Run. And Lulu’s just a baby, really. But Rosie felt like she was missing out on so much. She’d always say, ‘This can’t be all there is to life, slaving over a bunch of filthy alphas.’”

“Well, I wouldn’t say we’re filthy,” I mumble under my breath.

But Liz’s words echo in my mind...

Uncivilized, uncouth bastard.

“But I guess I can see her point.” I sigh loudly. “Tell me more.”

“He wouldn’t let her tell anyone about him. She told me, though. We never hide anything from each other. They’d meet in the clearing every day, and he’d tell her stories about Goldenrod—what her life would be like there.”

“He said they’d live in a huge house overlooking all of Goldenrod, and she’d never have to lift a finger. She’d have beta servants to do all the washing. That’s the kind of life Elizabeth had, he said. *She* was the perfect omega, and everyone in Goldenrod loved and admired her.”

She pauses and looks up at me meaningfully.

“And that’s why they sent *him*—the most powerful alpha in Goldenrod—to find her and bring her home.”

“Yeah, right,” Wyatt scoffs quietly.

“What about the night he attacked her?” I ask, ignoring Wyatt. “Or was that even an attack?”

“Well, that’s when things got bad. She snuck him into town. They were going to take Elizabeth, but when Rosie told him that you were in her nest, he went crazy. He yelled at her and

said ... awful things. When Pike showed up when they were arguing, she panicked. Then he got thrown in the hole.”

Glancing up at Pike, I see his wrinkled eyes set on me thoughtfully.

“She wasn’t calling to him that night,” he says gruffly. “There were mating scents, but I thought they were from ... you and Liz.”

Jade’s tears are all dried up now as she works the handkerchief in her hands. She looks up tentatively, obviously nervous about what she’s going to tell me next.

“Anyway, after he got locked up, she snuck in to see him whenever she got the chance, and then the other night, I helped her steal the key from Run to let him out.”

My brows shoot up my forehead, and she reaches across the table. “Please don’t be mad, Rill. And don’t punish, Run. I had no idea that Jason was going to try to hurt anyone, and neither did Rosie. She was just listening to her alpha. Run said we had to tell you, though.”

I lean back in my chair, my arms crossed over my chest. “I’m not mad.”

“What about Mud?” Pike asks calmly. “Why did she let him out? And how did he know about the dynamite?”

I look at up Run—other than Pike and I, he was the only one who knew about the dynamite and what it was capable of.

Run weaves his fingers through his long hair. “I may have shown it to him one night when we were shitfaced on sun

water. I'm sorry, boss. It was before I realized what an asshole he was."

"I'm not sure why she let Mud out—she hated him," Jade admits. "He was always grabbing at her and saying things."

I blow out a deep breath and stare across the room, thinking hard. My whole life, I wanted a mate. Someone I could care about and who'd care about me.

And, truly, it's everything I always thought it would be—spending time with Liz is fucking magical. But once again, I wonder if it's worth it. Is my happiness worth more than the safety of all the alphas and omegas under my protection?

"You're mad, aren't you?" Jade asks, sinking into Run's side as she watches me nervously.

"No, not at you," I admit distractedly.

Run must realize I'm in a mood because he nudges Jade softly on the shoulder. "C'mon," he says. "Let's go check in on Lyn and Lulu. Rill's got a lot to think about."

She nods softly before they both rise and leave the room.

"How did I not notice?" I say after several seconds, not looking up at Pike and Wyatt.

Pike shrugs. "You're newly mated. You were distracted."

"And that's the problem," I say sternly, my face darting up to his. "It's my job to make sure that—"

"No," he interrupts, holding up a hand. "None of that is your job, Rill. You need to protect yourself and your mate. The rest

of us will be fine without you.”

“But look what happened to Rosie.” I raise my voice and throw my arms in the air. “If I’m gonna be this way, I might as well be useful. But I let her down, and now she’s going to go through...”

“She’s not going to go through anything like what you did, Rilly.” He leans in close to me, his eyes serious and searching. “And even if she does, it’s not your fault.”

I shake my head.

“This world’s an ugly place, but it’s also huge,” he continues gravely. “It’s not your job to make sure that everyone you come across survives it.”

“He’s right.” We both look up at Wyatt, staring moodily at the table. “You’re only one alpha, Rill. Even if you’re ... stronger than most.”

I can’t help but smile—he damn well hated admitting that. “When’d you get so smart?”

“I’ve always been smarter than you,” he says dryly. “Can we go now?”

I look at Pike as I rise from my chair. “You coming?”

He shakes his head. “My omega’s here. Now go and get yours back. Run and I’ll hold down the fort until you return ... or until...”

“I’ll find a way to send word if I don’t come back,” I finish for him. I never know which way the wind will take me, after

all ... and now Liz. Of course, if I get killed, he won't hear anything from me, but neither of us acknowledges that possibility.

“You better.” He slaps me on the back before turning to Wyatt, his face transforming into a disapproving sneer. “Don't fuck this up. If Lyn's daughter gets hurt, I'm taking it up with you.”

Wyatt pulls back, surprised at Pike's tone, and I can't help but bark out a loud laugh.

“Don't worry about ol' Pike,” I tell Wyatt jovially. “He just thinks you're a useless dumbass. But come to think of it ... he has a point. What are we just standing around for? We can figure out a plan on the way, you know?”

Wyatt scowls, and I can't help but laugh at him. Are all Goldenrod alphas such serious fucks? I guess I'm about to find out.

Sham

Elizabeth

People have always stared at me.

I always thought it was because of my symmetrical face and my name. But I know it's also the air of mystery that surrounds me.

What Jason referred to as the way I "carry myself" was really, as far as I'd ever been concerned, just innate snobbery. When you have no interest in other people, they tend to have a great deal of interest in you.

Although, I'm sure the name and the face helped.

When in doubt, simply strike the Cypress pose, and you'll bring all of Goldenrod to their knees, my mother always told me.

My half-hearted attempts had mixed results in Crescent Rock, but it's most assuredly working here in Goldenrod.

Walking down Dogwood Street now, wrapped in my heavy wool coat, my silk dress swishing around my legs, and my

heels clacking against the sidewalk, I feel all their eyes on me—probing, trying to get to the bottom of me. I hear the curiosity in their murmured voices and see the fascination glowing on their faces.

The perfect omega with the Cypress pose.

But it's all a sham.

Because more important than anything else, Rill thrums through me. He's getting closer, but he's taking his time. He has to be smart, he tells me, and while I understand, I wish he was here now.

I want to walk down Dogwood Street on his arm and announce to all of Goldenrod that it's all a big lie.

The fence. The Administrator. The perfect omega.

None of it's actually real.

Colleen and I have just come from the back room of Coriander's, where I chose two new dresses—one for my sham promise party and one for my sham mating ceremony.

And now, we're on our way to Arabica to enjoy a cup of "something hot," as Colleen put it when she suggested we stop there on our way back to Cypress House. It was so out of character for her to suggest like that, I felt I had no choice but to accept.

As I step through the doors, the bell tinkling merrily, the whole coffee shop comes to a standstill. I suck in a deep breath and walk haughtily to the very back, falling at a small two-person table along the wall, my back to the rest of the shop.

“Sit, Colleen,” I tell her as she hovers behind me. “You’re the one who wanted to come here.”

Colleen’s brown eyes go as wide as I’ve ever seen them as she shakes her head frantically.

“Me? No, miss. I’ll go order you a drink.”

I groan as she hurries away. Now I have to sit here by myself with all these eyes on me? Lovely.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, adjusting the folds of my coat and glancing at the counter where Colleen is chatting vivaciously with another beta.

I just want to go back to Cypress House and wait out the time until Rill gets here. Not be paraded around town like some long-lost treasure. Is that too much to ask?

I’m so lost in my self-pity that I jump when a figure drops into the chair across from me.

“Stella!” I sit up straight and narrow my eyes on her. “What are you doing here?”

Strands of her straight dark hair are coming loose from her braids and hanging in front of her face. She blows them out of the way, her green eyes flinty as she leans over the table.

“I came to help you get out of having to mate with Jason,” she tells me with an air of conspiracy.

I pull a face and cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t need your help.”

“Oh, *please*, Elizabeth,” she scolds in a hushed voice, looking around nervously. “You forget how well I know you. You can barely take care of yourself. After everything I told you, you think you’re going to fight him and Alpha Beebalm alone?”

She says his name under her breath, looking around like he’s going to suddenly appear again.

“I’ve gotten out of a lot of things without your help, Stella,” I say vehemently. “I’ve peeled potatoes and ... scrubbed pots. You haven’t been around for a long time, and what? Now that I’m *interesting* again, you’ll swoop in and save me?”

She’s silent for a moment, watching me fiercely. “*You* peeled potatoes?”

“Yes.” My loud tone earns me a couple of sideways looks from the other patrons. I won’t tell her that it was actually only the one potato—it still counts. “I have a mate now, you know? He’s coming to save me.”

She slumps in her seat, sulking, as she’s prone to do when someone tells her something she doesn’t like. Stella’s a spoiled brat—even more so than me—and she doesn’t like to be told no. We sit for several seconds, both of us silently seething.

“How’s Camilla?” I finally ask sharply, unable to stop myself.

“Fine,” she grumbles, staring at the table. “But she tried to run away. She doesn’t understand that she has to actually play

the game to win. You can't just drop out of it and hope that you come out on top."

I nod slowly, and she looks up and meets my eyes. "Nothing worth having ever came easy."

"That's right." Her voice is soft, and my heart drops in my chest a bit.

"But she's a good omega ... Camilla. I understand why you and she have become such good friends. You can't blame her for not being used to this."

I motion between the two of us, meaning our dramatic and crazy families. Suddenly, Stella's lower lip quivers, and she blows out a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth, for ... bailing on you last year. Right after your parents died. I just felt so stifled, and Cami was different."

"It's okay." I shrug. "I get it, and I've mostly gotten over it."

"Really?"

"Yes," I lie, attempting a smile.

She releases a deep breath. "Good. Because there's something else I want to tell you."

I watch her expectantly.

She leans over the table again, getting as close to me as she possibly can. "There's another omega in Cypress House. Someone Colleen doesn't know."

My heart stalls. "Another omega? Is it Rosie?"

Stella scrunches up her nose. "Who's Rosie again?"

“Jason’s mate—his *real* mate.”

Her mouth falls open in shock. “Jason has a real mate?”

“Yes. She’s from Crescent Rock—the place I was living.” I pause to roll my eyes. “I think he’s ashamed of her.”

She pulls a disgusted face. “He has a mate, and he’s still having a promise party with you? What has gotten into him?”

“I don’t know.” I tilt my head. “You said he was like a different alpha, and it’s true. I don’t understand why he’s doing this.”

I explain in more detail what happened the night that Camilla and I left Crescent Rock and the tumultuous relationship that Rosie and I had.

“It makes sense that Rosie hated me so much. I guess I would have hated me, too.”

Stella shrugs. “It’s not your fault that Jason was always creepily obsessed with you. But it’s interesting that despite it, he can’t let go of his fated mate.”

“I suspected she was somewhere here,” I admit. “But why wouldn’t Colleen just tell *me* that?”

Stella shrugs and rolls her eyes. “She told Hetty, and Hetty told me. You know betas. Hetty’s the exception, not the rule.”

I look over to see Stella’s beta maid, Hetty, standing next to Colleen at the counter—her large blue eyes meeting mine warily.

Stella's always had a special relationship with Hetty. She'd play with us as children, and Stella was always telling me stories about the things they talked about and did together. I hadn't seen much of her as we got older, though. I guess she's busy doing whatever betas do all day.

For the first time, I wonder what that is exactly. Peeling potatoes? Scrubbing pots?

"Well, can you go tell Hetty to tell Colleen that I'm ready for that coffee she was supposed to go get me?"

I crack a smile, and Stella barks out a loud laugh as a crisp voice rings out above us.

"Excuse me, I can't help but interrupt."

Stella and I both jump in our seats, and I turn to see a tall, dark-haired omega standing over us.

Caroline Cedar, I think. She presses her thin lips together and watches me like she's about to burst into happy tears.

I force a smile. "Hello. Caroline, right? How are you?"

"I'm just so glad to see you," she gushes emotionally.

"Oh?" I pull back, surprised. Caroline and I have spoken maybe twice. The Cedars are not the type of family to be invited to Cypress House. Immediately, I wince at the cruel thought and attempt to hide it by smiling at her brightly.

"Yes," she snuffles. "When I heard you were released, I just couldn't believe it. You're *Elizabeth Cypress*. If *you* were released, then what's that mean for the rest of us?"

My mouth hangs open slightly as I try to think of how to respond. “Yes. I suppose—I mean, I’m definitely very *happy* to be home.”

She pauses, her face darting between me and Stella. “And it’s wonderful to see you two together again. Your families have been through so much. I’m happy that Alpha Sage was able to bring you home, Elizabeth. We were all so worried.”

“Yes, I—”

“And I’m so excited for your promise party tonight.” She smiles, clasping her hands in front of her chest. “Henry let me get a new dress from Coriander’s for it.”

“Oh? That’s lovely,” I say in a choked voice. “I’m looking forward to seeing you there.”

After a lot of head bobbing and awkward smiling, she finally turns away, and I look over at Stella to find her watching me through slitted eyes.

“What?” I clip out inelegantly.

“I *told* you.”

“I suppose you did,” I mutter with a groan of acceptance. I suppose I do mean a lot to many people in Goldenrod. The thought makes me shift in my seat uncomfortably.

Stella eyes me skeptically and says, “I forgot that tonight’s the promise party.”

“I suppose so.”

“You seem pretty unaffected by it?” she continues to probe, most annoyingly. “Considering Jason has a secret mate that he’s likely hiding in the attic, and you have another alpha’s mark on your neck.”

“It’s not actually going to happen,” I finally admit, lightly touching my mark with my fingertips. “My mate’s name is Rill. He’ll be here before the party. He’ll save me *and* Rosie.”

Her dark brows shoot up. “How do you know he’s coming?”

“Rill and I can...” I pause and bite my lip. This is going to sound crazy to her. “We can *usually* talk to each other in our heads. But it’s been off since I’ve been here. I’m picking up bits and pieces from him, but not as much as I’m used to... I’m getting enough to know that he’s on his way, though.” I shrug absently.

She watches me for several seconds, unblinking. “I’ve heard of *sensing* your mate, but full-on conversations?” She pauses, looking doubtful. “I don’t think Cami and Wyatt do that.”

I straighten in my seat—she definitely thinks I’m crazy. “It’s a *thing*.”

She finally blinks and shakes her head dismissively. “Well, whatever. Despite the mind reading, do you think Rill can take on the Administrator and all the alphas of Goldenrod? *And* rescue you, Camilla, *and* this other omega? That is if she even wants rescuing.”

I open my mouth and close it quickly. A surge of alarm spreads through my body. That *is* a daunting prospect.

I bite my lip and shift my eyes. “Wyatt’s probably with him, right?”

She cringes. “Ugh. I can’t believe I didn’t think about that. Another idiot Sage brother to deal with.”

I frown and look at the table as she keeps muttering about how stupid her brothers are. I think we’re done talking about me, but Stella’s not finished. Her green eyes glint with meaning as she tilts her head behind me, motioning toward the rest of the coffee shop.

“But in all honesty, you better hope Wyatt’s with him,” she murmurs. “Do you really think *they’re* going to let some stranger take the perfect omega from the newly favored Sage son?”

That’s when I notice that the coffee shop has gone completely silent. Nobody’s talking or looking at anyone else.

Because they’re all watching me.

I breathe out a shaky breath as I lock eyes with Stella.

“Well, if something doesn’t happen soon,” I whisper, “this whole mating sham with Jason is going to become all too real.”

A Beautiful World

Rill

Wyatt and I get to Goldenrod in record time. We don't stop to sleep or eat—only for random sips of water when we come across a clear stream.

Now, a day after we left Crescent Rock, I'm sweating bullets as I stare up at the towering fence in the crisp dusk light.

I've known about this fence my entire life, and I've loitered around it more times than I can count. But I've never wanted to venture to the other side of it.

Not once.

My alpha ancestors escaped from a similar enclosure, deciding to take their chances with the wider world and the pigeons. That always made sense to me. It meant freedom and choices.

But I never stopped wondering what the people of Goldenrod thought was so special about their lives. What made them stay inside their cage all these years?

I know they have their stories and lore, but didn't they ever wonder? Ever think about what could be out here? How special is this place that they could never fathom leaving it? Was their religion and belief system really that fulfilling?

I'm admittedly anxious to see it for myself.

As we've gotten closer to it, I can feel Liz's nerves bouncing around inside her. Tonight's portentous, and she's worried that I'm not going to arrive in time for something.

Sit tight, I assure her. I'm here.

Our connection is filled with static, but I can tell that she's not reassured. I hope our ability to communicate gets stronger as I get closer to her, but something feels strange. Now that I'm here, I'm not able to tap into her the way I was in Crescent Rock. It's a bit alarming, but I push it aside and try to send her soothing vibes as I watch Wyatt curiously.

Now I'm the impatient one, shifting my weight while he walks up and down the fence, studying it and frowning.

"How are we getting in there?" I bark at him anxiously.

He looks back at me from where he's pushing aside thorny branches and pulling down swathes of dead ivy.

"It should be right about here. That's the Home over there, I think." He points through the impending darkness. "I've never actually been there."

Through the trees and the dim light, I see a large, dark house propped up against the setting sun. There's no light coming

from it, and I can't pick up any scent. It doesn't look like it's actually inhabited by anyone.

I break my gaze away from the house at the sound of Wyatt's muffled voice.

"Well, this isn't what I expected."

"What is it?" I step toward him.

"A gap in the fence." His voice is hushed. "A big one. At least five feet."

I step closer to him and see the ivy and bushes that he's cleared away were grown over a space between two tall metal fence posts. He's right—it's a large gap. We could both easily walk through it.

But Wyatt's standing back and frowning at it like he doesn't trust it.

"This isn't right. I heard the fence was flimsy here... Can't remember who told me. But this? I've never seen such an open space. I can't imagine that something like this would be allowed to exist—especially near the Home."

"Well, who the fuck cares?" I shrug, pushing him aside. "It'll get us in there. And we *need* to get in there."

"Yeah, you're right," he admits softly. "I'm just not sure that this has always been here."

I growl low in my throat. At this point in time, I couldn't give less of a fuck about Wyatt's memories of his beloved fence.

“Well, I’m going in.”

“Wait,” he calls out. “Weren’t you the one who said we should be smart?”

I ignore him, pushing past him and through the bushes until ... I’m here.

I’m in Goldenrod.

I look behind me. The fence looms high in the darkness, and it hits me that I’m one of them now. Trapped like a rat.

Wyatt trips through the leaves and inhales deeply, looking around. He glares at me with accusation before motioning ahead through the trees.

“Town’s this way,” he says. “We’ll be able to scent them better when we’re there.”

Then he starts running, weaving through the trees and leaving me to catch up. I follow, my feet pounding hard on the dead leaves and pine needles and sinking into the mud.

As we pass it, I look sideways at the large, quiet house again.

Something about it’s not sitting right. If they stopped releasing omegas, there would be a shit ton in there, right? Basically, bursting at the seams. There’s no way anyone lives there, though. It’s so dark and lifeless.

But as the scents from the town start hitting my senses, I shake off my concerns and focus on what’s ahead of me.

Liz.

Goldenrod.

When we finally exit the woods, Wyatt runs down a dirt path. It looks like it was forged by some sort of wheeled cart—two lines of packed dirt on opposite sides of a strip of grass.

I'm glad he knows where he's going. This place is already bigger than I thought. But before long, the path comes to an end, and I'm standing on a road made of shiny cobblestones. He makes a sharp turn to the right, and then it's there. Spread in front of me in all its glory.

“Holy shit.” I come to a stop as I take it in.

Once, in some closet or drawer in Crescent Rock, I found a tied stack of small prints—drawings and paintings of people and places.

There was one that always stayed in my mind. It was an image of a bright street lined with pretty little snow-covered houses, colorful, twinkling lights hanging off them. There was a sunset in the background and smiling people walking up and down the street, carrying packages and waving to each other.

That picture invoked so many happy, cozy feelings inside of me. Feelings I'd never share with another living person ... except maybe Liz.

Sometimes, my mind wanders, and I can't help but think of it again. It was comforting to think of a place like that. A safe place where everyone got enough sleep and had plenty to eat.

No one was trying to kill the small people in that picture simply for existing.

Imagine that.

Those same feelings bubble up inside me now as Wyatt motions me down a long street lined with buildings and two rows of spindly trees. All the buildings have signs over them:

Coffee Shop Arabica.

Coriander's Department Store.

Sneezewort Apothecary.

Doctor Chamomile's Office for Pregnant Omegas.

I never realized how obsessed they were with their goddamn plants. It's ridiculous. What if my ancestors had stayed in their cages? Would they have built a community based on rocks and minerals? It wasn't too far from here, after all, up in the Appalachian Mountains.

But then I think of Liz with her herb-filled soaps and shampoos, and my heart softens a bit.

Maybe it's not all that ridiculous.

The town's set up in a grid, and as we pass side streets that spread off the main road, I peer down to see they're lined with large houses, cozy streetlights, and evenly cut grass.

Everything's clean. There are emptied trash cans on the street, and the windows glisten under the sporadic streetlights.

It's empty, though. I don't even see a beta on the street, and as we travel further, I see why. There's some sort of party up ahead at a big house behind a gate—bright lights shine from it like a beacon.

That's where Liz is. I know it immediately. As I step toward it, a trance-like mood settling over me, Wyatt drops a large hand on my shoulder.

"That's Cypress House." He points toward the bright house behind the gate.

"I figured. C'mon."

"This is where I need to leave you," Wyatt says gravely, motioning up the gravel path we've stopped next to.

"Camilla's at Sage House." He points to a giant monolith of a house on top of the hill. It's dark compared to the other house, with only a couple windows lit. "Do you think you can handle this alone? Or do you want to wait for me?"

"No, I don't want to wait," I say as if the idea is preposterous. "I'm not scared of *him*, and I want my mate."

He nods shortly. After everything I've told him, he knows exactly which *him* I'm referring to.

"Be careful," he says, eyeing the big house suspiciously. "There's something going on there tonight. It's not usually so quiet around town. Only when there's a big party. Usually, a promise party." He hesitates, his eyes shifting toward me. "Maybe we should come up with a plan?"

I shake my head. "Nah, I got this. See ya."

I start to take off when he stops me again. "You know, I wouldn't leave anyone else to handle this alone, but I know that ... you're special."

It looks like it pains him to admit it, and I can't help but bark out a loud laugh. "I think you're special, too, brother."

He rolls his eyes, but I swear he's smiling when he looks back at me. "I'll see you later."

"Yeah, see you." I watch him jog away for a few seconds before turning toward the big, bright house again.

I take a deep breath before I sink into the shadows, my eyes focused on the lights.

Thicker Than Water

Elizabeth

My promise party dress is stark white.

The silky skirt is full, and the bodice is strapless, but a long-sleeved silvery mesh lays over it, dragging on the floor behind me. During my shopping trip earlier today, the betas who work at Coriander's were adamant that I wear white.

"The purest color for the perfect omega," they said with star-struck smiles.

I could barely contain my eye roll. I don't quite remember them laying all this perfect omega nonsense on so thick before I left.

Or maybe they did, but you encouraged it, a voice reminds me. *You and Mother.*

Well, regardless of the before-times, what I wanted to tell them was that white isn't even a color, but a shade. A shade so bright and full that you can't see all the colors that go into creating it.

But I didn't say anything like that, of course. I just smiled and nodded at their expertise magnanimously.

But now, I'm wincing as Colleen sticks more pins into my scalp. I must say, she really pulled out all the stops on my hair. It rests atop my head in a heavy pile of intricately arranged braids, diamonds and pearls interwoven in the heavy up-do.

I stare at my made-up reflection blankly as she leans down to cut stray strings off the hem.

"Wouldn't want you to pull a seam, miss," she murmurs.

I nod politely until suddenly, with that casual comment, it hits me, and I freeze.

This is real.

Rill's not here.

It's actually going to happen.

I don't think I ever really considered it, but now that I'm standing here in *this* dress with *this* hair—seconds away from making my way downstairs and promising myself to a mate that's not mine—it's hitting me.

"Oh no." My breath becomes ragged as I try to tamp down my sense of impending doom.

It's okay, Elizabeth. He's here. He's coming.

My eyes dart to the open window and the night sky outside it. The air smells cold and crisp, like it's about to snow.

My throat goes dry as I envision him here, standing in this room or downstairs in the ballroom with all the guests. What

happens when he gets here?

Did I think he'd just step up to the house, excuse the proceedings, and clear up this whole messy misunderstanding? And then he and Alpha Beebalm will tell stories about the old days in Mercy City over glasses of brandy?

No, people are going to get hurt. They're going to die.

Maybe he'll get hurt or die.

All because of me.

Suddenly, I'm awash in panic. I choke on my breath and stumble backward on my heels.

I've pushed it down for days, so sure that this will all work out. But that's crazy.

How could I have believed something so ridiculous?

I raise my hand to my stomach in an attempt to steady myself. Colleen looks up from my hem with a start.

"All right, miss?" she asks nervously, rising to her feet. "Why don't you sit? You've been standing for so long."

"It's not the standing," I gasp breathlessly. "It's this." I motion up and down my form. "I need to get out of here, Colleen. I need to find my real mate. Will you help me?"

She sucks in an unsteady breath, obviously terrified.

"Please," I whisper.

Luckily for her, she's saved from answering my desperate plea by a soft knock at the door.

Immediately, she breaks away and opens the door, peeking into the hallway. When she sees who it is, just like the other day, she swings the door open wide and stares at the floor.

Jason.

I don't stop myself from lowering my brows and sneering at him. But he doesn't notice. He just strides in like he owns the place, which it seems like he does now.

“What do you want?” I bite out angrily as Colleen scurries out of the room and closes the door behind her.

“I just wanted to check in on you and make sure you understand what's required of you tonight,” he says quietly, striding over to inspect me. “You look beautiful. This is the perfect dress for this evening's festivities.”

I frown, sweat beading on my forehead. I suppose he looks handsome—not that I'd tell him that at this point.

There's something different about him. I've noticed it ever since Crescent Rock, but it's become more pronounced since we've been back in Goldenrod. For the first time, I wonder what it is exactly.

How did Jason Sage—by all accounts a weak and unpopular alpha—turn into *this* large, foreboding creature? And so quickly?

His tuxedo jacket stretches over his wide shoulders, his fingers are thick as sausages, and the tendons in his neck flex powerfully. He looks even bigger than he did yesterday when he last visited my room. Larger than even Wyatt, Noah, and

Orion, who were always considered the most powerful alphas of our age.

I sit delicately in my vanity chair and look at him pleadingly. “Jason, there’s still time to back out of this sham.”

“Sham?” He quirks a brow and pulls his face back like I’ve said something odd. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know this is fake. Rosie—your *true* mate—is here, and my mate—” I pause, not wanting to tell him how close Rill is getting to me. Our connection is loose, but I know he’s on his way. “He’s out there somewhere. We don’t have to do this.”

He’s silent for a moment, considering me. “Do you think he’s coming for you then?”

“Yes.” I lean toward him, hopefully. “So you can end this all before he gets here and avoid so much unnecessary pain.”

“I hope you’re right,” he replies in a quiet, calculated voice. “I hope he *is* coming for you, Elizabeth.”

“Why’s that?”

“We’ve been expecting him.”

My brows shoot up my forehead. “We?”

“The Administrator and me.”

My heart sinks as I tilt my head, waiting for him to continue. But he just crosses his arms over his chest and watches me with that stupid, self-satisfied expression on his face.

“Don’t be coy, Jason,” I finally scold him. “What are you talking about?”

He laughs under his breath. “All right. Tell me something, do you notice anything different about me? Do I seem bigger than before you left Goldenrod?”

“Yes, of course I noticed,” I admit with a dash of discomfort.

“And do you know why that is?”

Inwardly, I groan. Why can’t he just tell me instead of playing all these games?

“No,” I bite out through gritted teeth.

He blows out a deep breath and sits on the side of my bed, gazing straight ahead, out the open window.

“When you left, I was inconsolable. Wild. Running around town like the sky was falling. I was in love with you, you know. I couldn’t imagine life without Elizabeth Cypress.” He pauses to scoff. “Pathetic, really.”

“You weren’t in love with me,” I counter with a sniff. “But with the idea of me.”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “I’m not sure it matters anymore.”

I pull a face. What’s that supposed to mean?

“Anyway, I was at the fence, following Orion’s and Wyatt’s scents. I thought I’d catch up with them and join their search for you. I wanted to save you. Be your hero. But someone stopped me—Alpha Beebalm.”

“What did he want?”

“When I told him what I was doing, he asked if I really thought I was the kind of alpha that Elizabeth Cypress

deserved. At first, I was angry. I'm a Sage... If I didn't deserve you, then who did?"

Irritation bubbles inside of me. I hate when he talks about me like this.

"But then I realized he was right," he continues. "You're a prime omega, and only a prime alpha deserves such an omega. It's in your blood, your biology, Beebalm said, to only be attracted to the biggest, the strongest. You'd only call to the highest caliber of alpha ... and that wasn't me. The only omega that would call to me would be a lesser omega."

I open my mouth to ask him to tell me what a "lesser omega" is—Rosie's face flashing in my mind—but he keeps talking.

"I was about to return home, sad and dejected. But he stopped me and said all hope wasn't lost. If I wanted to be a bigger alpha—a stronger alpha—I could be one with his help."

"How?"

"At the Home for Unwanted Omegas."

"What?"

He nods, a smug smile pulling at his lips. "Have you ever seen an omega in that house, Elizabeth?"

I frown and scour my mind. "No, but I've never really been close to it—it's on the fringe."

The fringe is the area between the fence and Goldenrod proper, and we're strongly encouraged to give it a wide berth.

I've only ever seen the Home from a distance and barely set foot on the fringe.

“Well, there is no Home.” His grin spreads wider. “Every omega that was ever sent there was actually released.”

I stiffen as shock thrums through my body.

“That's ... terrible.” I shake my head in confusion. “Then what's in that house? Is it empty?”

“No, Alpha Beebalm uses it,” he tells me knowingly, “for something very special.”

He's enjoying this, I realize. Stringing me along and not letting me in on his little secret. It's *very* annoying.

“Well, what is it?”

He nods deliberately. “A place where alphas go to get stronger. Better.”

“And how does that work?”

“With blood,” he says bluntly, finally being forthright.

“*Blood?*”

“Yes, blood from powerful alphas—like my father and your father—injected into a weaker alpha will make that alpha stronger. Better.” He pauses and looks at me meaningfully. “Blood from alphas like Rill injected into alphas like me.”

My heart stops beating in my chest, quelling my breath and time itself as understanding dawns on me. Jason and Alpha Beebalm are waiting for Rill to arrive because they want ... his *blood?*

“Rill’s too strong.” I shake my head quickly. “You’d never be able to catch him.”

“One savage alpha?” He bursts out a loud laugh. “He can’t be *that* powerful. And Alpha Beebalm has his ways. He’s told me so much that you’d never understand.”

“I understand more than you think.”

“Oh? Do you know how my father got so sick? Or your parents? Do you know what happened to their bodies?”

My blood runs cold. Is he implying that Alpha Beebalm was responsible for what happened to my parents? And Jason knew about it and is somehow benefiting from it now?

I take a couple purposeful breaths. “How does he get the blood?”

He smirks. “He drains them at the Home. Rill’s done it before. Didn’t he tell you how he got all those scars? But this time, we’re going to take everything he’s got to give.”

I can only stare at him, shocked and speechless.

“So, don’t fret, Elizabeth.” He rises from the bed and strokes my cheek with the backs of his fingers. “When we mate, there will be a piece of *him* inside me. So, you can pretend you’re with him all you like, and it will be a little bit true.”

“Jason Sage, you’re a monster.”

“Maybe.” He shrugs and considers me. “But I could ask Beebalm to spare him ... if you’d do something for me.”

“What?”

Of course, I already know the answer, and he quickly confirms my suspicions.

“Say the words tonight.” His voice is soft but lethal. “Look me in the eyes, and say ‘I call for you, my mate,’ in front of everyone in Goldenrod, and then maybe ... just maybe, we’ll leave him alive.”

Live Wire

Rill

I've never seen so many smiling, civilized alphas and omegas before, and honestly, I'm not sure what to make of them.

In Crescent Rock, gathering around the tables in the Mercantile for dinner each night, there was always a wild, untamed vibe floating through the air—like at any moment someone might try to steal a slab of meat from your plate, leaving you with no choice but to snap his neck.

Don't even get me started on the alphas who are even less civilized than us—the Muds of the world, for instance. They'd probably start right away with the neck-snapping to avoid getting to the stealing part.

But I don't think any of *these* alphas would ever dream of snapping another's neck over a gristly hunk of meat. Just looking at these soft weaklings, I can't believe a single one of them is hard-wired for violence. They look so small, soft, and happy.

But maybe they just haven't been presented with the right opportunity yet.

Despite the scent of impending snow in the air, they're hanging around outside the enormous house, scattered across the front lawn. There's a merry murmur in the air as they laugh and call out to one another in their nasally accents—all bright white teeth and rosy cheeks.

The omegas are all wearing thick fur wraps and colorful dresses. The alphas are dressed in slick black suits.

And not one dirty, jaundiced face among them.

The betas look happy, too, or at least not *unhappy*, as they weave through the crowd balancing trays filled with tall drinks and tiny bites of food.

Betas don't really exist outside of Goldenrod anymore. When all the other fences fell, they couldn't hack it in a world of feral alphas, neglected omegas, and vengeful pigeons.

But here in Goldenrod, they seem to be thriving, serving the alphas and the omegas in an eager, unquestioning way.

I watch as an alpha leads his omega to a refreshment table. A beta dressed in gray clothing bows his head in submission. After the alpha points out the drink his omega wants, the beta wordlessly pours the drink and presents the bubbling liquid to the alpha, who hands it off to the omega.

She thanks him and doesn't even look at the beta.

Huh. Strange.

And the house. Is it just Liz's family that lives in this huge house? I've never seen anything like it—a tall brick structure featuring a wide, curved staircase leading up to a half-circle porch surrounded by white columns. A few betas sit near the front door, tuning up string instruments.

It seems like every light in the house is on, causing the giant structure to glow as bright as the sun in front of the cloudy night sky.

The atmosphere is alive and vivid, like a sparking live wire.

What did Lyn say about Goldenrod? That it was grand? After walking through the town and taking in this scene, I can see what she means. It's like an opulent dreamworld.

Well, if Goldenrod is a dream, then I can only be considered a reminder of a less than appealing reality.

My long, greasy hair hangs in front of my ruined face, and after being trapped in the hole and traveling here, dirt is stuck to every cell and within every crevice of my body.

Plus, I'm not exactly wearing any type of finery, just my usual black homespun clothes. For the first time in my life, I think it's probably a bad idea to put on my usual song and dance.

No, maybe I should avoid waltzing through the front door, hoping everyone will be so charmed that they'll let me throw Liz over my shoulder and cart her out of here.

So, I leave the sights decorating the front lawn behind and slink further into the darkness.

There's a tall stone wall that juts from the side of the house. I easily jump over it and land on a crunchy gravel path.

Studying my surroundings by the light from the house, I see there's actually a series of gravel paths crisscrossing through patches of plants and trees.

Some sort of garden?

Most everything's bare and dead, but when a stiff breeze smacks me in the face, I'm hit with the scents of rotting herbs, impending snow ... and Liz.

She's close.

My spirits renewed, I jog toward the house with a glass house built off the side of it. I rattle the handles of glass doors—they're locked. I wouldn't think a place like this would even have locks.

Sighing, I look around for another entrance. Seeing none, I close my eyes and put out my Liz sensors.

I'm here, I tell her evenly. Where are you? How should I get into this place?

There's no direct answer, but I immediately register how anxious and upset she is—much more so than when I sensed her earlier, walking through the fence with Wyatt.

Her heart pounds in her chest, and sweat pours down her back. At the sound of my voice in her body, her spirit initially jumps in excitement.

I hear you!

Yes, I reply, I'm—

But she cuts me off as a strong surge inside her revolts and pushes away from me; her attention diverted to something that's terrifying her, coming at her.

My heart starts pounding fast, and without thinking, I punch a fist through one of the glass panes of the door and reach a bloody hand through the jagged shards to turn the lock.

My heart's beating in my throat, and my hand is dripping blood as I walk inside the room, my feet crunching on the broken glass.

The room's lined with shelves, displaying pots and shovels. Two small wicker couches neatly sit in the middle with a table centered between them, and a harsh electric light glares from the ceiling, brightening every single corner.

Liz is close. Her heart's still pounding in her chest, her breath coming up short as I make my way across the room and toward the door.

I open it slowly and quietly, peeking my head into a wide hallway decorated with colorful flowers and a sparkling hanging light.

That's when I see her, standing at the top of a grand staircase lined with a bright red rug.

My breath catches in my throat, and I forget about everything else—my bleeding hand, the sounds drifting through the wide-open front door, and the various scents peppering the atmosphere.

She's never looked more beautiful or more regal. Her dress is sparkling white, and her beautiful hair is piled on top of her head, weaved with bright, sparkling things.

She has tears in her eyes, and she grips the stair rail tightly like she's holding on for dear life. Her eyes are focused ahead of her, on the open front door and the lawn, crowded with all the smiling and brightly civilized alphas and omegas. She swallows a lump in her throat as if she's bracing herself for something.

Two figures stand behind her, wearing heavy gray cloaks and holding the long train of her dress, but I barely register them ... I only see her.

My mate. I'm here.

She looks up with a start, meeting my eyes immediately and releasing a low whimper.

As soon as our eyes meet, the string instruments outside start playing. I guess it's supposed to serve as some sort of cue for Liz because one of the gray-cloaked figures behind her pushes her forward.

But as she starts walking down the stairs, her eyes are connected to mine. I start to move toward her automatically as if in a trance.

Finally.

But then I feel a sting on the back of my neck that stops me in my tracks.

What the hell?

I drop my eyes from Liz's face as I smack my neck quickly and feel a small bump on my skin. I start scratching at it, but almost immediately, my movements turn slow, like I'm underwater. I end up only weakly hitting my neck with my fingertips as my eyes start drooping.

"Fuck," I moan as I stumble backward into the glass room and fall to the marble floor, landing hard on my ass. I sit there dumbly, my brain trying to find a way out of this as footsteps pound behind me, a low voice *tsking* me lightly.

"You didn't even sense me behind you, did you?" The low voice sounds sluggish. "I've told you; it won't do to be so *distracted*, Rill. It's always been your biggest flaw."

I fall on my back with a thump, my arms dropping uselessly beside me, my breath coming out quick and shallow, and my eyes fixed on the blinding light hanging in the middle of the ceiling. I can't move or talk—just lie here like a slug.

But when a familiar face appears in front of the bright light, I know exactly what's happened.

I can't see him very well in front of the harsh light—I can just make out his mocking smile and familiar dark, beady eyes smiling at me with promise.

Him.

Wyatt calls him Cyrus Beebalm, the Administrator of the Order. I guess that could be his name, but I doubt it. I never called him anything except *him* or *Sir*, which he would insist on when he was particularly feisty.

He glances up at someone who closes the door with a soft click.

“Take him to the Home.”

Promising

Elizabeth

“Go, miss,” Colleen hisses behind me. “Please.”

The sweet, high notes of *The March of the Omega* drown out the gasps and low hum of conversation from outside, where the entire population of Goldenrod is currently milling about on the front lawn.

For just a little bit, I thought I could actually do this.

They’re just words, after all. They don’t mean anything. I’m not sure I would have said that same thing a few months ago. I thought this ceremony was the end all, be all of my entire life. But now I know it’s just another silly, meaningless thing.

About as real as the perfect omega.

But then Rill was here, and I wanted to collapse in gratitude.

He’d save me.

I wouldn’t have to do this.

Out of nowhere, he appeared at the door to the solarium, watching me with that same hungry look in his eyes as when I first saw him.

But just as soon as he was there, he was gone. His face went blank, and he backed up into the solarium, disappearing as the door closed behind him.

Was that just a figment of my imagination? I've barely been able to sense him or talk to him for so long that I couldn't be sure it was actually real. So, if he was even here at all, he was gone in a matter of seconds. Everything feels like a dream right now. Standing in my family's house in this giant dress with Jason's threats echoing through my skull.

Whether it was real or not, though, it turned everything upside down. I feel like I've been punched in the gut.

No one's going to save me from this.

"Just go, miss," Colleen pleads again, and I twist my head to look back at her.

She and another beta are kneeling behind me, holding on to the edge of my train. I don't know who the other beta is—I can't see her face past the deep hood—but she's shaking as her fingers grip the gauzy fabric tightly.

Turning again, I look down into the hallway.

The black and white checked floor. The abundance of flowers. The hanging crystal chandelier. I have so many memories in this hallway, and in this house, with Mother, Father, and Orion.

But now that they're all gone—my family—it's not the same place anymore. It doesn't even feel like mine.

When my eyes hit the front door, the faces of the alphas and omegas on the lawn blur into the background, I know what I need to do.

I need to get out of this.

But no one's going to save me. I'm going to have to save myself.

Jason's waiting for me on the front porch—or at least some new, grotesque version of Jason. His gaze brokers no argument—do this or face his wrath.

Colleen pushes my shoulder lightly again, urging me forward. So finally, I go. My heels clack as I cross the marble floor of the hallway, and I walk slowly and purposefully.

When I step out onto the porch, I hear breaths sucked into lungs, appreciative squeals escaping lips, and murmurs of joy from the crowd on the lawn.

“...so beautiful...”

“...she looks so lovely...”

“...the perfect omega...”

I step past Jason and let my eyes wander over them. They're all familiar in some shape or form—my people.

They deserve better than this sham. And so do I.

They're standing on the grass with the gravel pathway that leads to the open front gate, cutting down the middle of the

crowd. It's almost like they're encouraging me to escape, presenting me a direct path out of this.

As my eyes move down the path and past all the faces, I see Dogwood Street stretched in front of me. The dormant trees, the familiar buildings and houses.

He's out there. I know it.

Liz.

I close my eyes as he moans my name. Over the sounds of the crowd and the high notes of the violin, he nestles deep inside me. The betas holding my train back up as I step away from the ledge and face Jason, the music stopping as he steps toward me.

He watches me seriously for several seconds before his eyes jump to somewhere over my shoulder, focusing behind me for several seconds.

His eyes are gentle, almost loving. He's never looked at me like that. It's almost as if...

And then, I hear it—an omega's call reverberating loudly from close behind me.

“Elizabeth Cypress, I'm honored by your call,” he proclaims loudly, his eyes glued to the spot over my shoulder. “In accordance with the Order of Goldenrod, I accept it. I promise to make you my omega, my mate, in the ceremony of our ancestors.”

I turn around. That's when I see the hooded figure standing next to Colleen rise to her feet and push the hood off her head,

revealing golden curls.

“Rosie,” I whisper, but she doesn’t hear me. She can only see him.

She looks terrible—like she’s in pain. Her skin is pale and paper thin, and she has dark rings under her eyes.

Her nostrils flare as she locks eyes with Jason. She releases a soft moan, pressing her lips together as her eyes flutter closed and tears stream down her face.

I turn and look toward the crowd again. They’re all far enough away that they must think it’s my call they hear. No one’s looking at the sickly beta standing behind me—their eyes are all glued to me.

I think about when Rill promised to me in Crescent Rock. What did he say? *I’ll just fuck you, and that’ll be that.*

Such an uncouth thing to say. Especially in front of a large crowd. But his words set me on fire. I wanted to touch him. Kiss him. Be with him forever.

But now, a cold decisiveness falls over me.

I reach down and take off one of my heels, followed by the other, setting them neatly to the side before turning to watch Jason.

At first, his facial expression is fixed with wide-eyed confusion, but it quickly morphs into a hot anger.

I nod slowly, confirming this means what he thinks it does.

“I’ll never be able to run in those heels,” I say in a low voice. “I’m not going to do this with you, Jason. I need to be with Rill, and you need to be with Rosie. Treat her well. Be a *real* alpha.”

What’s he going to do? Force me to mate with him in front of all the alphas and omegas in Goldenrod? Maybe... Who knows what he’s capable of at this point? But that’s a risk I’m willing to take.

Gathering my train and heavy skirts in my arms, I back away from him slowly, my eyes leveled on his face—so familiar, yet so foreign. What happened to my friend? How did he turn into *this*?

“You’re making a big mistake, Elizabeth.” His eyes flick toward the crowd as their concerned whispers start floating around us in a low hum.

“Maybe,” I say under my breath. “But I’d rather die than be your sham mate, Jason Sage.”

“You take one more step away from me, and that can be arranged.” He grabs my arm, his fingers digging into my skin painfully.

“Let go of me.” I try to yank away from him, but he’s too strong.

“Jason.” A voice rises up from the rumbling crowd, and Noah walks up the steps toward us. He’s dressed smartly in a suit and shiny shoes, glaring at his brother dangerously.

“Let her go,” he orders, standing between us.

Jason's eyes are wild as he cocks his head at his brother. "You're not in charge anymore, Noah— *I* am."

"Maybe not, but do you really want to have a scene like this *here*?" he asks under his breath, taking a step closer. "Now? And in front of all these people? So, she's not cooperating. She's probably set up for a world of pain for it. You're better than this, brother. Let her go."

Jason considers his brother's words before releasing me roughly.

I stumble a bit—luckily, I'm not wearing my heels anymore—but Noah catches me by the arm and holds me steady. I flick my eyes up at him gratefully as Jason turns away, running his hand through his hair.

"This isn't over, Elizabeth," Jason promises darkly, his voice low and his movements jerky as he turns and glowers at me. "You can run after him, but it won't do any good. He's all but dead at this point. You'll have no choice but to come back to me, and then you'll be sorry."

I glance back at Rosie, who's collapsed on her knees as her call continues to sing for Jason loudly. I move out of the way, giving the crowd a better view of her.

"No matter what happens next, Jason," I say purposefully and loudly, "this is over. Go to your mate. I'm going to mine."

Several of the alphas and omegas standing closest to us gasp. I know they heard me and figured out what's going on.

They're all staring at Rosie, pointing and murmuring. Everyone in town will know by tomorrow morning.

I finally turn to leave, but before I can walk down the front steps, a hand grabs my shoulder.

Colleen.

Her brown eyes connect with mine for a heavy second before she pulls something from the folds of her cloak and presses it into my palm.

A knife, I realize, looking at the sharp blade pressed against my skin.

“Take this,” she hisses in my ear and pushes me forward. “And for once in your life, miss, listen and *go*.”

I settle my eyes on her gratefully before I turn, pulling my heavy skirts higher so my legs can stretch longer.

Not looking at Jason or any of the shocked faces in the crowd, I run.

The King

Rill

Beebalm's huge companion dragged and then carried my frozen, stiff body halfway across Goldenrod. He struggled, but he did it, which I had to admire. I'm a large, hulking alpha, and lugging my dead weight for a mile isn't easy.

Just like I did, he travels in the shadows past the sparkling party, the low sound of voices and the high notes of the string instruments drifting toward us.

As we leave the town behind, I recognize the place he takes me to as the giant house that Wyatt pointed out earlier—the Home for Unwanted Omegas.

When we reach it, Beebalm is already there—apparently, he's a faster walker than this huge alpha—and he opens the door for us, directing the big alpha toward a room off the front of the house. Big alpha throws me roughly on a couch inside a dimly lit room and then immediately turns and leaves without a single word spoken.

I take a deep breath and reach for Liz, but her thoughts are jumbled and filled with static. It's been hard for me to connect with her like we did in Crescent Rock. At first, I thought it had to do with the distance, but now that I'm here and it's still difficult, I have to wonder if it's something more. Something about this place.

Did she see me standing on the stairs? I thought so, but after everything that's happened since then, I can't be sure. Does she even know I'm here?

Regardless, I've gotten myself into a mess.

At least I can move now, but just barely.

I lift my head from the back of the couch and look around. Just as I thought, the place is seemingly empty of omegas, but it's all set up as if someone lives here. Bright floral paper on the walls, pictures of plants and birds hanging sporadically, and lots of clean, new-looking furniture scattered around in pleasing arrangements.

I painstakingly lift my bloody hand and flex it slowly.

"God damn shots," I mutter as I watch my fingers move up and down. I feel dissociated as if I'm watching someone else's hand move from a great distance.

I should have known what that sting on my neck was as soon as I felt it. I've been injected more times than I can count. You'd think I would have gotten better at detecting him coming at me with that needle, but he's a sneaky little fucker. Always has been.

“Alphas are focused,” he’d always say in that perpetually disgusted voice of his, “not distracted every time something shiny passes him by.”

Or my personal favorite...

“How are you going to take out armies if one man with a needle can bring you to your knees?”

How about I didn’t want to take out any fucking armies? I just wanted a house of my own, some livestock to barter or slaughter, and an omega to fuck every night. I wasn’t interested in fighting his battles, and I’m still not.

Too bad for me; he still seems completely oblivious to that.

Hearing footsteps, I look up to see him standing in the doorway and taking me in like I’m a five-hundred-pound heifer and he’s a gluttonous farmer.

“Young Rill,” he says with a sigh of longing. “Do you know how long I’ve been trying to get my hands on you again?” He laughs as he walks into the room, shaking his head in amazement. “And then you just waltz into Goldenrod and offer yourself up on a silver platter? Because of *her*? Amazing. You lot never cease to amaze me.”

“How long ‘til I get my pressure back with this one?” I slur out the words slowly, my mouth not caught up with my brain.

The old shots would freeze me for about ten minutes, but I wouldn’t be able to use my pressure for a good two hours afterward—that’s when all the fun happened.

He shrugs and settles into a chair that sits kitty-corner to the couch. “This is stronger stuff than we used in the old days, and, as you may have noticed, things work a little *differently* within the confines of Goldenrod. So, probably about five hours. You might be dead by then, though.”

I grunt and rub my wrist, trying to get rid of the pins and needles sensation under my skin.

“Where’d that other guy go? The one who carried me.”

At this point, I know it’s fruitless to expect that I’ll escape—I got out by the skin of my teeth last time—but what can I say? I’m an optimist. I need to at least try.

“Alfonso?” He raises a gray brow, and I notice how old he looks now—weaker, and that’s not saying much. All pigeons are impossibly small. He didn’t used to be this gray and wrinkled but had a mop of dark hair and clear tan skin. “He went to get our mutual friend, Wyatt. I want him to be here for this. I need him, too, after all.”

“Hmph.” I nod like this makes perfect sense. “Alfonso’s big for a Goldenrod alpha.”

He shrugs and smiles. “I’ve helped him like I helped you. But unlike you, he had the decency to be grateful. *He* does what he’s told.”

“Grateful, huh?” I look up and crack my bloody knuckles. “Not sure many alphas would be grateful to be pumped full of mysterious shit, incapacitated, and bled all in service to your stupid fucking pigeon dramas.”

He looks at me quizzically, as if every word that comes out of my mouth is fascinating, but eventually, he just shrugs as if it's inconsequential. "Well, he knows where his bread is buttered, at least."

"Whatever," I mutter, stretching my arms over my head.

"But really, I'm surprised with you, Rill," he says after several seconds. "You've evaded capture for so long, and then you enter Goldenrod willingly. My understanding is that you knew I was here, and you came anyway?"

"I'm not scared of you." I shrug like it's no big deal. "And I'm not fifteen anymore—you can't lure me around with a plate of cookies."

"Well, that's fairly stupid of you," he replies dryly. "You, of all alphas, know what I'm capable of. But it *was* for her that you came here, right? Your *fated mate*? The lovely Elizabeth? She's not a plate of cookies, but she's very important to you, eh?"

I clench my fists tightly and start stretching my feet inside my shoes. My heartbeat has been lethargic, but now it starts to pick up its pace, the blood pumping through my body, hot and ready.

"She better not be fucking hurt," I bite out, fiery zings of emotions shooting through me.

"Oh, I can't do anything to her." He waves his hand dismissively. "I need her to keep the peace. Everyone loves a

celebrity love story, and she and Jason have all the makings of a great one.”

I raise my head slowly. “What?”

“That big party you saw? It was a promise party,” he informs me as he bites his lip, unable to hide his glee. “Just a little custom celebrated here in Goldenrod. In another week or so, they’ll be *true* mates.”

“She’s *my* fated mate.” My voice is low and husky. “Not his. She’s carrying my child.”

“Well, as far as the rest of Goldenrod is concerned, that will be Jason Sage’s child. It worked out quite well, actually, since she’ll never be able to breed with him.”

“She’s mine,” I growl.

He barks out a loud laugh. “You’re attracted to her because of your breeding capabilities. Nothing more! Who knew you *things* would become so mawkish and attached to one another?”

I watch him steadily, not wanting him to see how much this shit is affecting me. I always prided myself on staying neutral and not letting him get under my skin. But someone like him... He knows how to push my buttons.

“Ah, come now,” he says, breaking the silence. “I like to think we mean enough to each other that we can talk about this, Rill. What we had was more of a father-son relationship, no? How was it for you to have found her and then lost her?”

“When I get back to normal, I’m going to snap your scrawny little neck.”

He ignores my threat and exhales loudly. “You know, they still talk about you in Mercy City. No one could believe that you managed to escape. The *king* ... that’s what they call you. I coined it, actually. There was so much hope in what you and I did—how we were saving humanity.”

“Saving humanity? You wanted me to murder everyone at your whim. Alphas, omegas, betas, men, women, children...”

“Just the bad ones,” he says contemptuously. “And to be fair, you’re very good at it.”

“Maybe I am.” I pause, cracking my knuckles again and stretching my arms over my head. Everything’s starting to feel a bit more normal. Five hours my ass. I’ve just got to keep him talking. Good thing he likes nothing more than the sound of his own voice. “So, what’s your plan? Pump me full of some shit and bleed me to death?”

He nods and smiles widely. “Something like that. We just need—Oh, speak of the devil! Our friends are here.”

We both look up as the huge alpha, Alfonso, walks in with Wyatt over one shoulder and an omega over the other ... Camilla.

He dumps them both on the couch next to me. They must have gotten shots, too. Their bodies are stiff and unmoving, but their eyes are wild as they take in the room.

Camilla's between me and Wyatt, and she delicately lifts her head to look at me in confusion before trying to sink into Wyatt.

“Whaa...” She attempts to talk but can't get the words out. The shot probably hit her harder. It was always worse on me until I got bigger, and then it became easier to process.

Wyatt's not moving or talking but staring at Alfonso like he wants to punch him in the gut.

“Alfonso! We don't need *her*,” Beebalm barks out, and Alfonso shrugs. “Sentimental, huh? Alfonso is Camilla's father,” he explains to me.

Her father? That means he's Lyn's mate. I look at him more closely. He has huge, veiny muscles looping around his arms, and his thighs are thick as tree trunks. His eyes are blank, though, and I still haven't heard him say a word. Beebalm's injections must be getting better.

Beebalm looks at all our faces expectantly. “Now that we're all here, we can finally get started. Alfonso, why don't you show the gentlemen to the draining room? I'm going to help Omega Sage get a bit more comfortable.”

Chains

Rill

As Alfonso lugs me toward the back of the house, my limbs lose even more of that pins and needles feeling. My strength slowly returns as my muscles start to loosen, and my blood pumps through my body.

Beebalm's new injections aren't nearly as good as he let on, but he obviously doesn't know that. He used to start cutting me right after I was injected. He knew I'd be pissed when I came out of it, and he wanted to be far, far away from me at that point.

So, he must think these are really good if he took all this time to shoot the shit with me.

I don't show that I'm stronger, of course. Instead, I hang off Alfonso's shoulder uselessly, making it all the more difficult for him to carry my weight.

He grunts and moans softly as he makes his way across the house until we arrive at a tall metal door, behind which I can

only assume is supposed to be the kitchen area.

But now, it resembles what they fondly call a *draining room* in Mercy City.

It's windowless, and the floors, walls, and ceiling are all metal. Chains hang from the ceiling— four with handcuffs and one with a large hook—and corresponding cuffs are attached to the floor to secure the ankles.

The hook almost looks like a giant fishing hook. There was one in Mercy City, too, but I only ever saw it used once.

There was an alpha who I used to have to fight a lot. He grew to be the second biggest after me, so we'd usually be pitted against each other. I never knew his name—I'm not sure he actually had one.

Once, he took a swipe at Beebalm, though, and after that, it was all over for him. They strung him up on the hook and bled him dry. I'll never forget the look on his face the moment he realized what was happening. He begged for mercy, but Beebalm and his pigeon cronies kept their faces blank and emotionless and sliced him to pieces.

Luckily for me, Alfonso bypasses the hook and fastens me into the handcuffs, clicking them around my wrists and ankles before he turns, leaving me without looking back.

I take the opportunity to scan the room. There are no windows and only one door. It's empty of furniture except for a small metal table near the door that holds all Beebalm's

sharp tools and giant jugs of rubbing alcohol. He'd always rub it all over me before draining me like a fucking sicko.

I shake off the memories as my eyes land on the hook. I begin to stare at it intently, attempting to focus my eyes as I try with all my might to make it swing to the side. After several seconds, it moves slightly, but just barely.

It's not much, but it's a start.

I've just got to keep the fucker talking and pretend like I'm still weak. Eventually, I'll be back to normal, and I can end this once and for all.

I pull on the cuffs, testing them against my strength. I'd have no problem breaking free of them at my usual strength, but now they just creak faintly as I pull my arms down.

When the door opens up again, I immediately stop moving and hang limply.

It's Alfonso again. This time, he's carrying a slack-bodied Wyatt over his shoulder. He slams the door behind him and silently fastens Wyatt into the cuffs next to me. A vacant look is fixed on his face—his eyes vacuous brown holes—as Wyatt starts spitting venom at him.

“If you touch her, I'll kill you, you fucker!” he yells as Alfonso fastens him in. “You hear me? I'll kill you!”

His words have no impact on Alfonso. He stares blankly at Wyatt's face like he doesn't know him and then leaves the room again.

As soon as he's gone, Wyatt does what I did and starts pulling on the cuffs, his sullen eyes focused on the hook as he fruitlessly yanks.

"You and Camilla's father don't get along?" I ask after watching him struggle against his bindings for a while.

He doesn't say anything, but his dark brows furrow over his eyes as he keeps pulling on the metal chains.

"It's too bad." I click my tongue. "Pike hates you, too, so you're striking out on all fronts, huh?"

"Shut up, Rill," Wyatt hisses, finally turning to look at me. "This is all your fault."

I pull back, surprised. "My fault? How so?"

"Camilla and I were *fine*. We knew we had to come back here eventually, but we had time to come up with a plan and do it right. But you messed it all up, and now look at us."

"I didn't mess up anything. It was your god-damned brother," I remind him. "His warped ideas and actions. It would have been really easy for me to just kill him—I really fucking hate him."

I think about what Beebalm said earlier about him "mating" with Liz and raising my child, and a low growl burgeons in my throat as I yank on my chains again.

Wyatt stares at the floor and pouts for a few seconds before looking up at me. "We need to figure out how we're going to get out of this. Who knows what Beebalm's doing to Camilla."

At the thought, he, too, starts pulling hard on his chains. It's fruitless, though. While he also looks to be on the way to gaining his strength, he's still too weak.

“Just keep him talking,” I advise in a low voice. “The bastard loves the sound of his own voice, and the longer he talks, the more time we have to get back to norm—”

I cut myself off as Beebalm appears in the doorway, dressed like a lunatic and smiling like one, too.

I flex my hands and sum him up. Here we go.

The Metal Door

Elizabeth

I don't stop running until the Home for Unwanted Omegas looms large over me. It looks especially foreboding in the dark, snow flurries dancing around it wildly, sticking to the dark windows and the gray-painted siding. Other than the dim light glowing in one of the front windows, it seems completely lifeless.

I wouldn't think he was even here if it wasn't for what Jason told me earlier. The scents surrounding the house are varied and confusing. I don't recognize any of them. It looks empty—it *feels* empty.

I swallow a lump in my throat as I gather my skirts in my arms once again and walk slowly up the front steps, my stocking feet crunching on the newly fallen snow. When I get to the door, I rest my hand on the cold brass door handle and listen to my breath for a couple beats.

Closing my eyes, I push out something from deep inside my body—something that only he can hear.

Rill. I'm scared. Are you here? Are you hurt?

I feel a couple of pulses that vaguely resemble him. But there's nothing more as I push the door open quickly before I can change my mind.

I don't know what I expect to find when I open my eyes again—the Administrator holding a knife to Rill? Or Rill stomping on the Administrator's neck?

But I don't see anything. Just a long, empty hallway that ends with a tall metal door. The dim light I saw outside is coming from what looks like a living room off to the right—I can make out the edges of a few chairs and a tall lamp through the doorway.

Just as I close the door behind me, though, I see a movement coming from the living room. I suck in a breath and automatically sink into the corner.

It's fruitless to try and hide in such a small corner in this giant, white dress, but a huge alpha walks past me without noticing that I'm standing here. He takes a sharp right down the hallway without a single look at the door, shuffling toward the metal door.

That's when I notice that he's carrying someone else over his wide shoulder. An alpha with dark hair and tan skin—*Wyatt!*

I squeak and step forward. If Wyatt's here, then Rill's here, too, right?

There's something off about Wyatt, though. He's not fighting—his hands just hang uselessly, gently swaying against the

other alpha's muscular back. Is he asleep? Or ... dead?

When the alpha arrives at the metal door, he opens it. It creaks on its hinges and shines a bright light down the hallways. But the alpha slips through so quickly that I'm not able to see inside.

A slight herby scent blows out of the room as the door slams closed, and I just know Rill's in there.

Mindlessly, I begin to move toward it. It's as if I'm in a daze, my long skirts grazing the wood floor and my eyes glued to the shiny door, until I'm broken from my trance by a low groan to the right.

I snap my head toward the dimly lit room and jump when I see an omega in a white nightgown sitting limply on a floral print couch. Her legs are spread wide under the long skirt of the nightgown, and her head is resting on the back of the couch.

“Camilla!”

She attempts to lift her head, but it's too much work—she doesn't have the strength.

“Are you okay?” I ask in a rushed voice as I sit next to her, and she finally succeeds in lifting her head off the couch.

“What happened?”

“I'm fine,” she slurs like her tongue is too fat to speak. “Beebalm's ... here, and he drugged us. Me, Wyatt, Rill. We're all—”

At the sound of the metal door opening again, she stops talking, her eyes swimming in fear. Luckily, nobody comes into the living room. Instead, we hear heavy footsteps moving to the back of the house.

“So, Rill’s here, too?” I finally whisper when I think it may be safe. “Is he ... like you?”

She tries to nod and points weakly toward the entrance to the living room. “Tha’ way.”

“The metal door?”

“I dunno. I couldn’t see anything when I came in here.” She takes a fortifying breath, and her speech is clearer when she speaks next. “My father drugged me and Wyatt and brought us here. We couldn’t move or speak.”

“Your father? Where is he?”

I look around frantically for signs of Alfonso Maidenhair. He’s a short, unpleasant alpha. While I don’t fear him, it doesn’t mean I’d like him to jump out of some corner.

“He took Rill and then Wyatt. I dunno where he is now,” she says again, her voice threaded with emotion as she successfully lifts her body.

My mouth falls open. “That huge alpha was your father?”

“Yes, he’s different.” Her head wobbles as she tries to sit up even straighter. “I’m not sure how—”

She stops talking suddenly at the sound of high-pitched whistling coming from the hall—a merry, happy tune that

carries eerily through the house as a sense of dread falls over me.

Both of us stop our movements and hold our breath. I can't see him, but I immediately know that it's Beebalm who's whistling. His footsteps pound the wood floor, and his pungent metallic scent wafts through the house. Suddenly, his footsteps end, and we hear the metal door swing on its hinges.

"All right, gentleman," he bellows, his voice traveling down the hallway. "Let's get started."

We both sit up straight and stare at each other for what feels like an eternity after the sound of the heavy door slamming behind him.

That's when I realize that not only is Rill not going to save me, but I'm going to have to...

"We have to save them, Camilla," I whisper after a few seconds, grasping her cold fingers in mine.

"I know." Tears cover the surface of her brown eyes, making them seem glassy and luminous. "But I'm scared."

As I stare at her, I remember how much I used to hate this omega and resent her for taking away the life that I thought I was due. It all seems especially pointless now after we've experienced so much together.

I nod, tears streaming down my cheeks, and squeeze her hand tightly. "Yes, me, too."

She sucks in a deep breath and pulls her body up even more. Her voice is definitively stronger when she speaks next.

“You’re going to have to help me get off this couch.”

A Focused Alpha

Rill

Beebalm admires us from the doorway, a maniacal grin on his face. He's wearing his draining outfit—black rubber boots, a black shirt, and black rubber overalls.

I peek over to see Wyatt scowling at him, revulsion painted on his face. But when I settle my eyes on Beebalm again, I'm just exhausted. Unfortunately, I'm more familiar with those clothes than I'd like to be—I know they don't mean anything good.

As he steps forward, my sense of dread is interrupted as I catch a whiff of something hot and floral.

Liz.

My heart jumps in my throat, and I glance at Wyatt. Did he smell her, too? I can't tell—he's still scowling at Beebalm.

“All right, gentlemen, let's get started.” He snaps his rubber glove, chuckling heartily as he slams the door closed behind him. “Rill, have you filled Wyatt in on what to expect? I'm

going to need Alfonso to help me with the alcohol, so we have some time.”

“Nope.” I pause. “Why don’t you explain it to him? Slowly, so he gets it.”

“All right. Where to start...?” He takes a step closer to us, staring at us thoughtfully, and I meet Wyatt’s gaze, my eyes reminding him.

Remember, keep him talking.

“Did Rill ever tell you how he got that scar, Wyatt?” he asks. “The big one on his face?”

Wyatt’s quiet, his lips pursing together. “No. Why don’t you tell me?”

Beebalm raises a brow at me. “You’re sure that you wouldn’t like the honor, Rill?”

“Nah.” I shake my head, wiggling in my chains. “I think you’ll probably tell it better.”

He chuckles. “Well, you see Wyatt, when I met Rill, he was quite unsophisticated. He was brought to me by some soldiers whom he attacked in a minor scuffle in a remote Appalachian region. We’d been trying our best to gather as many alpha and omega specimens as possible—”

“Wait,” Wyatt interrupts. “I know you’re not an alpha, but I always thought you could be a beta...?”

He bursts out a loud laugh. “No, I’m a man—a very smart man. We decided to send someone to Goldenrod many years

ago, and I was able to infiltrate quite easily. You're a very distracted community here ... what with your *Order* and all. But you make a good control group."

Wyatt's eyes are swimming like he's trying to make sense of this, but Beebalm ignores him and keeps talking.

"So, about fifteen years ago, I left Goldenrod and traveled to Mercy City for a spell. I was involved in a very special project. We pumped a smaller alpha full of synthetic growth hormones and mind-altering drugs. When he was ripe, we'd bleed him and dilute his blood. We found that the blood could be turned into a serum that drastically altered alphas—more so than the synthetic injections. Something about the essence of the original alpha mixed in."

He shrugs like it's unexplainable. "Anyway, a soldier friend of mine recognized Rill as the perfect subject, and I agreed wholeheartedly. He was small for an alpha and trusting. Very easily manipulated."

I avoid the urge to tune him out—I need to keep track of where he is in the story—and put out my Liz sensors.

Are you here? You need to get Camilla and get out.

There's nothing, just static. I stifle a groan and flex my arms, subtly pulling on the chains.

"After I started injecting him," Beebalm continues, "he changed quickly. He became very strong, his telekinesis—what he calls his 'pressure'—became abnormally powerful. I

had high hopes that I'd actually be able to use him—not just harvest his blood.”

He pauses to consider me. “But alas, it wasn't meant to be. The drugs should have diminished any intellectual curiosity, but they seemed to have no effect on him, which I found most distressing. I decided to put him to the test.”

He stares at Wyatt with a wide smile on his face. I know this is his favorite part.

“There were these cookies that he liked. Plain old butter cookies. But he'd never had any processed food, so whenever he saw them, he'd lose his mind and eat them uncontrollably. So for about a week, I stopped feeding him completely, and before long, he was starving ... *savage*.”

Beebalm's staring into the distance now, lost down memory lane, so I test my cuffs again. I pull slightly, and the screws above me groan at the pressure.

“I made him do his usual work—I gave him injections, I bled him, and I made him fight the other alphas,” he blabbers on, none the wiser to my twisting and flexing.

“The whole time, I kept a plate of butter cookies sitting along the side of the room. I told him if he touched them, then I'd have his face ruined, and no omega would want to mate with a ruined alpha. They don't just want a strong alpha, but a handsome one, I told him.” He laughs heartily. “He took that threat very seriously, as you would, too, I'm sure, Wyatt. You're all programmed to procreate.”

I pull again. One of the screws becomes completely loose and falls from the ceiling. I watch it, worried it's going to clatter to the metal floor. But I quickly move my hip to the side, and it falls into my pocket.

Holy shit.

“He was doing very well until I came into the draining room one morning to find him stuffing the cookies down his throat. He was *hungry*, he said, and they were *distracting*.” He settles his eyes on me with the last word. “So, I ruined him.”

He says it matter-of-factly like it was bound to happen eventually, but Wyatt's face is fixed with confusion. He avoids looking at me as he shakes his head slowly, like he doesn't get it.

“I don't understand.”

“Let me break it down for you, Wyatt,” Beebalm booms, all traces of good humor gone. “I know you've never been the sharpest tool in the shed.”

That tone means we're running out of time, so I pull harder, grunting at the strain on my muscles.

He steps toward Wyatt, his back to me. “You see, you were created to *work* for men like me. We need you to do things for us. Things we don't want to do. But you got too smart—or at least some of you did—and while some people wanted to destroy you all, others of us have always wondered if you could be corrected.”

I clench my fists and pull harder. I might not have my pressure back anytime soon, but I'll have the rest of it if I can just...

“So, it's been my life's work to create a bigger alpha. A stronger alpha.” He pauses and glances back at me meaningfully. “But most importantly, a *focused* alpha. I've worked very hard to perfect my process, and I think I've finally got it. Both Alfonso's transformation and your brother's are going very well. Jason's is only just beginning, but he shows great promise. With you two, I'll have what I need for quite a long time.”

“So, you're going to take our blood?” Wyatt asks slowly, like he's still trying to understand.

“Yes,” Beebalm says with a wild smile. “All of it. I admit, when you left, Wyatt, I was worried what it would mean for Goldenrod, but I think it all worked out for the best since you brought me—”

I give one last powerful yank, and my arms finally fall from the ceiling, the momentum causing me to trip forward as the chains fall around my feet.

Beebalm turns at the loud crash, his eyes filled with terror. But I don't give him a chance to react as I wrap the chains around his puny little neck and squeeze.

Dazzling Pain

Elizabeth

“What was that?” Camilla gasps in my ear at the sound of a loud clatter coming from behind the metal door.

We’re halfway down the hallway, but it’s slow going. Camilla’s not able to walk on her own. Part of me wants to leave her behind, but I’m not sure who else is lurking around here—her father or someone we’ve yet to discover.

“I don’t know,” I whisper, my eyes switching between her frozen face and the door. “But we need to hurry.”

Holding my heavy skirts up with my left arm and Camilla with my right arm, I stumble clumsily down the narrow hallway toward the metal door. There’s a cold sweat pouring down my back, prickling my skin and sending jolts of energy through my body. I feel like my heart’s going to beat clear out of my chest.

The sounds are getting louder the closer we get to the door—male sounds of struggle, the rattling of metal, and hollow

thumps.

I'm as scared as I've ever been when my hand finally lands on the cold doorknob. I suck in a breath and glance over at Camilla, her hair frizzing wildly around her face.

She nods, and I turn the knob slowly. But just as I prepare to push the door open—bracing myself for whatever I'm about to see—a heavy hand lands on my shoulder, and Camilla and I both jump and shriek in unison.

It's Alfonso Maidenhair—huge and hairy. He looks at us with an empty stare as if trying to figure out who we are and where he came from.

“Father, please don't hurt us—” Camilla starts to plead.

The sound of her voice seems to trigger something in him. His face transforms from confusion into a wounded mask as he picks her up, hoisting her against him with one arm.

She cries out and tries to break free, but he's too strong. I try to move away before he can grab me, but he reaches around my waist and holds me against him in his other arm.

Then, with a loud roar, he kicks the door open, knocking it against the wall. As he charges into the room, Camilla and I twist wildly, at the same time, trying to see what's going on inside the room—I catch glimpses of what can only be described as pure chaos.

Wyatt's ankles and wrists are locked in some sort of chains attached to the floor and ceiling. They seem like they'd be an

easy obstacle for an alpha to overcome, but he's fighting against them with all his might and can't seem to get free.

Rill is in the same chains, but his wrists are free—he's using them to hold Alpha Beebalm in a chokehold. Beebalm's skin is purple, and his eyes are bulging as he pulls at them fruitlessly.

“Liz!” Rill's voice is guttural as he looks up at me with alarm, momentarily relaxing the chains and watching me with dawning horror.

Beebalm uses the distraction to squeeze his fingers in between the chains and pull. But Rill notices and tightens them again, trapping Beebalm's fingers under the chains.

All the while, Camilla and I are twisting and turning, trying to break free from Alfonso's strong arms. Eventually, he gets tired of trying to contain us and grunts, dropping me and Camilla to the floor.

We land on the hard metal roughly and scuttle backward against the wall, clinging to each other tightly. I pull the knife Colleen gave me out of the folds of my skirt and cover it with my hand, holding it close as I watch the scene unfold.

“Get outta here!” Rill roars, looking up at me again. “I gotta kill this fucker once and for all.”

But Beebalm takes advantage of Rill's distraction again, and this time, he manages to wiggle free from the chains, crawling away on his hands and knees. Rill grabs at him, but since his ankles are still attached to the floor, he can't reach him.

Beebalm gasps for breath and claws at his neck before noticing that Camilla and I are sitting against the wall.

“Get her,” he squawks, parting his blue lips and pointing to me weakly.

Alfonso jumps at the order and turns to look back at us, staring at me intently for a second as if he forgot I was here again. Suddenly, he’s stomping toward me decidedly, and I jump to my feet and clutch the knife in my hand.

“No!” I scream, waving the knife wildly. Alfonso’s big, but he’s slow—I sidestep him easily.

My thoughts race against each other. What should I do? Stab Beebalm? Stab Alfonso? Give the knife to Rill? Try to free Wyatt? He’s still struggling with his chain, aggravated that he’s trapped and unable to do anything.

My eyes fall on Beebalm, sneering at me from the floor and breathing heavily.

He’s the one.

Without thinking anymore, I lunge toward him, grasping the knife in my sweaty hand.

I’m too fast for Alfonso, and in a great flurry of activity and waving limbs, I manage to connect the knife with Beebalm’s neck.

At first, I think I’m just going to nick him, but the knife sinks deeply into his skin. It catches on something briefly—bone or sinew—but then I give it one more push, and it’s in there deep.

He backs up and falls to his bottom, blood spurting everywhere—it splatters on my dress, my hands, and my face. Eventually, he falls onto his back, grasping at his neck and making gurgling sounds.

My hand covers my mouth weakly as I step back. Shaking and stunned, I watch the Administrator of the Order choke on his own blood.

I just stabbed him.

I stabbed the *Administrator*.

I'm so shocked that I barely hear Camilla's scream.

“No! Father. Don't!”

I'm pulled out of my stupor as Alfonso wraps a large, rough hand around my neck, dragging me up and squeezing the breath out of my body as the knife falls out of my hands and hits the floor noiselessly.

I claw at the huge hand with my bloody fingers, uselessly pulling at the strong tendons, cutting off my breath. I can't get them off, though. He's too strong, and blackness starts to bubble around the edge of my vision.

In the background, I hear a giant roar reverberate around me and a great deal of action as I choke and struggle, my eyes bulging and my breath rasping.

Suddenly, I don't see or hear anything. Dazzling pain shoots through my body, and darkness envelops me as I sink into something black and soothing.

I'm still in the metal room, but I'm far away as my body starts to float. I don't feel pain or sadness. I feel nothing.

Peace.

My heart had been working so hard, but now it's giving up and weakening. It's too difficult to keep going. So, what if I just ... stopped?

I'm about to relax. To give in to the warm blanket wrapped around my senses.

But then it's over.

Everything is bright and loud again, and it all hurts. *So bad.*

I tumble to the cold metal floor, sucking in deep, delicious breaths. Everything hurts—my head, my neck, my skin—until the oxygen starts spreading through my body. I relax into a deep, muted trance, my eyes closed but cracking open every now and then to see blurry shapes moving around me.

Camilla's voice is behind me for a while. Her hands rub my back, soothing me. I hear murmured voices and the clanking of chains.

I don't know how much time passes before I feel Rill's arms wrap around me. It could have been seconds or hours. His familiar herby scent infuses my body. I cling to his shirt and attempt to burrow into him, my fingers grazing delicately over his face—the ridges of his scar, his strong brows, and his long nose.

I don't open my eyes, though. It's my last defense. I don't want to see what happened while my life was getting sucked

out of me. I want to stay here with him forever and never wake up.

“It’s over now, Liz,” he murmurs roughly in my ear. I feel us move through the metal door, leaving the mysterious room behind. There’s a smell in the air ... something chemical and burning.

“It’s all over,” Rill repeats. “They’re gone.”

“Camilla...? Wyatt...?” I sputter weakly.

“They’re fine.” His scratchy cheek tickles my face before he pauses to yell something out behind him. I drift in and out of consciousness as he continues to talk to someone, his deep voice rumbling through his chest and vibrating my body.

Suddenly, we’re moving fast, and I’m momentarily more awake than I am asleep. I need to try to stay awake. What if he’s gone again when I wake up? I already know I won’t be able to handle this without him.

I can’t keep *waiting* for him.

“Don’t leave me again, Rill,” I plead, clinging to his shirt. He pauses as if he’s surprised to hear me speak.

“I won’t ever leave you again, Liz.” He leans down to whisper gruffly in my ear. “I’m taking you home now, all right? I promise.”

“Oh, okay... Good,” I whisper inanely, as I lean into his chest, sucking in harsh, herby breaths as the cold, wet air hits my face and I pass out.

Fireball

Rill

I stop about a hundred yards away from the house, standing under some trees as I wait for Wyatt and Camilla to catch up.

Liz wheezes weakly against my chest, her fingers clutching my shirt.

For the past fifteen minutes, she's been mostly unconscious. But every few minutes, she wakes up with a start and then falls back asleep immediately. I'm sure it's due to shock more than anything else. But I'm glad she seems to be out for good this time. It's better that way.

I don't have to wait long until I see them trudging out of the darkness. Or at least I see Wyatt trudging—he's carrying Camilla on his back, and she's coughing over his shoulder.

There's a briny, smoky scent blossoming in the air, and through the new snow and the crisp night, I can just barely see the narrow plumes spreading from a couple of the house's windows.

“Did you do it?”

He nods, his breath coming out heavy as he glances behind him. “I had a hard time finding matches, but eventually—”

Suddenly, a roar of flames comes shooting out of the house’s living room window, causing the glass to shatter and the porch to catch the blaze. We all move back instinctively, and Camilla squeals loudly.

“Fuck,” I curse, glancing at Liz, still unconscious in my arms. She’s definitely out for good now. “How much of that alcohol did you use?”

Wyatt shakes his head slowly, not taking his eyes off the burning house. “All of it. I wanted to get rid of everything.”

“You’re sure as hell gonna do that,” I say distantly, watching the flames lick against the snow-speckled sky.

We all stand there together, watching the house slowly become engulfed in a giant fireball. It’s beautiful and terrifying to see something gain so much power so quickly.

Sometimes, decisions are made slowly and with great care. And other times, they’re made haphazardly and irrevocably, leaving only a sense of whiplash in their wake. Those are the ones that make you wonder what you’re really doing with your life and if you’ve really learned anything at all.

I can honestly say I’ve never changed my mind more than I have in the past twenty minutes or so. At first, I was all set to take Liz and get the fuck out of Goldenrod, but Camilla talked me out of it.

“No, Rill,” she insisted, stepping back from where she was rifling through Beebalm’s pockets, searching for the keys to the chains. Alfonso’s dead body lay next to me. The adrenaline from the kill still pumped strongly through my body, and I wanted nothing more than to take my mate away from this place.

“Elizabeth needs to stay here. We’re staying here—” She paused and glanced at Wyatt meaningfully. “We need to be ready if we’re going to survive out there, and so does she... Don’t leave just yet. Stay here ... for Elizabeth.”

I shook my head quickly. Stay here? In this cage? With all these brainwashed people and their fucking crazy denial of reality? No, but thank you all the same. I thought I needed to get the hell out of here and stay as far away as I possibly could.

But then, Liz was engulfed in a coughing fit, moving to her side as she tried to catch her breath. I leaned down, smoothed her messy hair, and really saw what had become of her.

What have I done to you?

Her beautiful face was filthy, her breaths came out harsh and uneven, and her white dress was covered in Beebalm’s blood. I lifted her in my arms and dropped my face to her neck, inhaling deeply. I could still smell the baby, but just barely.

I knew Camilla was right. I need to take care of Liz ... even if she is a badass evil-pigeon-murdering omega, she needs a break. She needs comfort, happiness, and love. But still...

“Well, what about all these fucking dead people?” I hissed as Camilla finally found a key in Beebalm’s pocket and unlocked mine and Wyatt’s chains. “Won’t the good people of Goldenrod wonder what happened to *them*?”

“We burn it down,” Wyatt said seriously as he stepped free of his chains. He’d obviously thought this through. “All people will have are their assumptions, and by then, we’ll be far away. Goldenrod is used to believing what’s easy.”

“And how you gonna do that?”

He nodded toward Beebalm’s rubbing alcohol collection. “That’s how.”

And now, here I am, watching that fucker burn to the ground. He’s gone. Forever. I know I should feel relief, but I’m just sick.

“God damn,” I hiss softly as I watch the roof collapse in on itself.

“We need to get out of here,” Wyatt says seriously, ignoring my shock and awe. “The fire brigade will be out soon, and I don’t want anyone to see us.”

“Yeah, okay,” I mumble distractedly, unable to take my eyes off the show as I pull Liz’s warm body close and turn toward Goldenrod.

“Do you want to come with us, Rill?” Camilla asks, pulling at my attention. “Or ... are you going to Elizabeth’s house?”

I look back at the town and think of Liz’s huge house and that asshole Jason Sage shacking up there. I’m not sure I’ll be

able to solve murdering him with a couple gallons of rubbing alcohol and a match, but it doesn't make me want it any less.

I shake my head. "I'm taking her home. I promised her."

Wyatt nods. "You know where to find me if you change your mind or if you need anything."

"Thanks, brother." I hoist Liz tighter against me. "But I got everything I need."

The Alpha in Cypress House

Rill

In the end, my conquest of Cypress House did not go as expected.

When I walked up to her giant house, smelling of smoke and holding Liz's slack, blood-covered body in my arms, I was prepared to fight my way in. I'd gladly kill or maim whoever got in my way at that point.

But the house was dark and empty—the crowd had apparently long since disappeared, and the lights had all been darkened. There were just a handful of betas cleaning up the mess from the party on the front lawn, a fine layer of fluffy snow covering everything.

They barely looked up as we passed, and no one stopped me when I walked in the front door. I stood there awkwardly for a few seconds. With no one to kill or maim, I was left with no choice but to shuffle pointlessly on the bright red rug. Eventually, I was greeted by a beady-eyed female beta.

“Where’s Jason Sage?” I growled meanly as she walked toward me.

She stared at Liz’s face for a while before glaring up at me with accusation. “Did you do that to her?”

In the light of the house, I finally got a good look at Liz. Not only was her white dress covered in blood spatter, torn and ruined, but her hair had mostly come down and hung over my shoulder. Her neck was just starting to burgeon with the bruises from Alfonso’s dirty fingers.

“No,” I snarled at her, and to her great credit, she didn’t cower. “She’s my mate.”

Her eyes flicked out the window where the flames encompassing the Home had started to rise toward the sky, and the loud sounds of what I assume was the fire brigade echoed through the night.

She nodded with certainty and met my eyes. “Alpha Sage isn’t here. There was a conflict, and he fled with his *true* mate,” she stated evenly. “Please follow me.”

Then, she turned on her heels and, without looking back, started walking up the grand, red-carpeted stairway.

I blinked in her wake, wondering if this was some sort of trick.

But no, as I looked around and inhaled, trying to sense Jason, I realized she was right.

He was gone.

So, I followed her.

Upstairs, she opened a door to a pretty bedroom with a wide window seat and a large bed covered with a silky blue bedspread. There were vases of flowers spread throughout and a vanity scattered with hairpins and a silver brush.

Liz's room? It knew it must be ... it smelled so strongly of her.

“Put her there.” The beta pointed toward the bed. After I gently set Liz on the bed, she banished me to a far corner of the room.

I watched, amazed, as she and a couple other female betas wiped the blood and grime from Liz's skin, braided her hair, and dressed her—all while she was unconscious.

Their movements were quick and efficient. Something made me think they'd done this before.

I had to fight with myself not to interfere. I'm not used to having betas about, and I'd much rather be the one who tended to her. But I knew Liz needed to feel like herself when she woke up, and no one better to accomplish that than these funny little ladies in gray.

When they were finished, Liz was free of blood and dirt, dressed in a clean white nightgown, and tucked under the covers of her bed. That's when the beta from the hallway approached me.

“Are you the new alpha in Cypress House?” she asked.

“Er, yeah, sure,” I replied, shifting on my feet and glancing back at Liz anxiously. When I turned back, she was staring at me suspiciously.

“What’s your name?”

“Rill.”

“Rill what?”

“Just Rill.”

She stared at me for several seconds before finally bowing her head slightly. “I’m Colleen—Miss Elizabeth’s beta maid. Please let me know if you need anything, Alpha Rill.”

“Will do,” I said stiffly, all but pushing her out the door and closing it behind her.

That was hours ago, and while Liz has slept the whole time, I’ve been awake and watching her.

Every now and then, I rest my ear against her chest to make sure she’s still breathing. I also lay my hand on her chest to feel the steady thrum of her heartbeat, and sometimes I nuzzle into her neck, inhaling deeply to make sure there are still minty notes of the baby inside her—a sharp bite mixed in with the scent of lilies and hot summer rain.

Definitely very strange behavior for me. I’m just grateful that she’s unconscious and all the guys aren’t here to see this.

I have to be delicate with her neck, though. She has dark, ugly bruises decorating her skin there, but at least she’s no longer stained with that bastard’s blood.

Otherwise, she looks beautiful and peaceful in a crisp, white nightgown, her hair pulled back in a long braid and tied with a blue ribbon. I feel like a grease ball lying next to her, touching her with my dirty fingers. Our differences are more apparent with her being so clean and fresh.

Finally, just when I think I can't bear to sit here and wait for her to wake up for a second longer, she starts to move, her eyes dancing under their lids.

She cracks them open slowly, jumping when she realizes where she is. But when she sees me, a delicate smile spreads on her face.

"Rill," she whispers, wiping her face with her palms before reaching up to touch my face. "Is this a dream?"

"No, it's real," I say earnestly, grazing her soft cheek with my knuckles.

She blinks and turns to face me. "Are we in my bedroom?"

"Mm-hm," I lower my lips to her face, peppering light kisses on her fragrant skin.

"Mmm, this is my favorite place," she moans softly, her fingers weaving through my hair. "I'm so happy you're here." She pauses. "But my throat hurts... What happened?"

"Here. Drink this."

I turn and reach behind me to pick up the glass of water Colleen left on the nightstand. She takes a grateful sip when I hold it up to her lips. When she's done, she lies flat on her

back, and I move my cheek against hers, breathing her in and resting my hand over her heart.

As the seconds pass, I feel her heartbeat pick up its pace. She's remembering.

"You stabbed Beebalm," I whisper. She stiffens, and I know she's realizing what happened. "And Camilla's father tried to strangle you to death, so I killed him."

"Ohh..." I feel her face crumble and her breaths quicken. "Oh no."

"Shh."

I pull her against me as she turns on her side and curls up in a ball against my chest, her breaths coming out short; she whimpers roughly as I rub her back methodically.

"Is Jason here?" she asks with a start. "And where are Wyatt and Camilla?"

"I don't know where Jason is, but he's not here," I explain softly. "And Wyatt and Camilla are at Wyatt's house—they're fine."

"Did they see...?"

"Yeah, but don't worry." I stroke her hair softly. "No one deserved to die as much as that asshole. They know that."

"Rill," she says sharply, pulling back. "The perfect omega does not *kill* the Administrator of the Order."

I don't know if it's the words or the tone, but I laugh—I can't help myself. "Good thing you're actually a pain in the

ass then. Not perfect at all.”

“Ugh.” She slaps me lightly on the chest and then snuggles up to me again, sniffing. “I don’t know how to feel,” she admits. “I’m not sorry I did it, and that feels wrong.”

I consider her for a moment. “Taking someone else’s life... It’s hard to come back from the first time.”

She groans into me, and tears stream down her face, sopping my chest.

“You know he gave me this scar—Beebalm,” I admit roughly. “He gave me all my scars.”

“He did?” she mumbles into my chest, pausing her moans and groans. I stroke her hair some more, the silken strands moving easily through my fingers.

I nod. “He said he was ruining me. If I was hideous, no omega would ever want me, and I could live my life in service. Service to him and his pointless cause.”

“I like your scars,” she whispers, pulling away and tracing them with her fingertips. “I like all of you. I ... *love* all of you.”

“I know you do,” I say hoarsely, my hand traveling down her side and pulling her nightgown up around her waist. She’s not wearing anything underneath. Her skin is hot. She moans and releases small shudders as I graze my fingers over her hip.

“No one ever hurt me like that bastard, Liz. I’ve never been happier than knowing that he’s dead. Thank you for killing him for me.”

She whimpers and moves onto her back, her hands reaching and grasping for me wildly.

I move atop her, balancing my weight on my elbows, and lean down to kiss her, a welcome warmth erupting in my body. It feels like a million years since I had her in her nest. She moans and rests her hands on my neck, her fingers dancing across my skin.

I kiss her with purpose this time, so there's no doubt that she's mine, and I'm hers. No one will ever be able to tear us apart again.

I pepper her neck with hot, wet kisses. I didn't intend for this to go here, but it seems it can't be helped with her. For a brief second, I wonder if she's too tired or too weak.

But when she fumbles with my pants and grabs hold of my hard cock, positioning me against her wet, hot slit, I have no doubt.

I tease her with a couple of shallow thrusts, balancing on one arm while I fumble with her breast clumsily through her nightgown. Eventually, I give up on all that shit, though, and thrust forward.

Straight home.

She lets out a deep, guttural cry at the impact. For a moment, I wonder if I hurt her, and I hesitate.

"No. More," she moans, sensing my pause.

I don't need to hear anything more. I bury my face in her bruised, soft neck, scraping her skin lightly with my fangs as I

pump into her. She surrounds me, tight and wet, her scent encompassing me like a heady, fragrant cloud.

Suddenly, she releases a sharp cry at the continuous impact, her legs falling apart. I pull my face up to look at her. Her head is thrown back, and her eyes are closed.

“I love you, too,” I say in a guttural voice as I pound into her hard, so hard that she cries out. “You never look more beautiful than when you’re taking my cock.”

I go harder and harder. I can’t stop myself. There’s so much emotion behind my movements. My feelings for her. The events of the night. My whole fucked up life.

It’s quick. And it’s not pretty.

There’s no way I can keep it going very long.

When her body starts to come apart under me, we release simultaneous loud cries, hot pressure thrumming out from each of our bodies, combusting between us.

I milk her for all she has to give and then fall to the side as we stare into each other’s eyes and try to catch our breath.

Eventually, she swings a leg over my hip and presses her face into my chest, pushing her pussy tight against me so my knot can take hold. I wish she wasn’t wearing this stupid nightgown, but I wouldn’t move away from her for any reason right now.

My knot pounds and throbs inside her until it settles inside her body, and I’m complete and satiated... Happy, I realize sleepily.

I haven't slept in days, and maybe that's why I'm the one who falls asleep right away this time. But before I'm out, her soft lips press against my skin, and her voice whispers in my ear...

"I'd kill him again for you."

Anything But Ordinary

Elizabeth

Rill and I don't leave Cypress House.

At first, we just lounge around in my bed, talking and mating. It's reminiscent of the short time we spent together in my nest back in Crescent Rock. We don't talk about anything that happened.

But eventually, we venture into other parts of the house. That's when I realize that Jason's definitely gone, and Colleen has gotten into the annoying habit of calling me "Omega Rill."

"There's a new alpha in Cypress House," Rill jokes, and I can't help but giggle.

I show him photos of my parents, and me and Orion as children. He makes quite a to-do about throwing my mother's copy of *How To Be a Proper Omega* into the fireplace. I giggle uncontrollably as he does it, but can't help looking over my shoulder like she'll appear at any moment with that disapproving frown.

He also takes pleasure in the smallest things, like hot water and the plethora of fruit and vegetables available in the kitchen. I feed him his first bite of pineapple, and he spits it out onto the floor, his face fixed in an exaggerated expression of disgust. I giggle even more.

While it feels extravagant and more than a little blasphemous to The Order to ignore reality and enjoy myself after everything that's happened, it's also surprisingly easy. And fun.

At first, I don't ever want to leave my small, insulated bubble, but three days into our seclusion, as we walk through the garden, my eye catches on the wilting potentilla. I remember that day with Alpha Beebalm, and I realize that I need to know.

What happened in between the time I thrust a knife in the Administrator's neck and woke up with Rill in my bed? I remember it all in bits and pieces, like a hazy dream. Like it happened to someone else, somewhere far away.

I suck in a deep breath, stopping in my tracks and staring at his familiar face against the bright blue afternoon sky, the sun's rays brightening his silky dark hair and sparkling brown eyes.

"What's the matter?" he asks, frowning. "Do you need to go lie down again?"

"No," I reply quietly, falling on the same stone bench where Beebalm and I sat. "I want you to tell me what happened. At the Home after I..."

I press my lips together and stare at the gravel. He sits next to me and watches me carefully before explaining.

“You’re sure you’re ready?”

I nod silently.

He sighs deeply and runs his hand through his hair. “Well, I was killing him, but I was struggling. I wasn’t strong enough yet.” He pauses to scowl. “You gotta understand, Liz ... I wanted nothing more than for that bastard to be dead. I finally had the chance, and I *couldn’t*. And then you showed up, and he slipped away from me.”

I cringe. “I’m sorry about that.”

He waves me off and smiles. “But then you walked toward him all cool confidence and composure. That’s how you were able to pull it off, I think. Not one of us suspected that you were going to do something like that. But then you *did* it—just like that.”

His smile fades. “And then when Alfonso got his hands on you, I thought for sure you were dead. You *looked* dead.”

“I’m not sure I wasn’t,” I say, my voice thick. “At least for a little while. I came to *save* you, but I only seemed to make things messier.”

He quirks a brow. “You *did* save me.”

“No, I did *not*, and I almost got myself and Camilla killed
—”

“You really gonna argue with me right now, Liz?” he asks, cupping my jaw. “You almost died. For a minute, I thought you *were* dead. Seeing that alpha’s fat fingers squeezing your neck ... that’s what gave me the final push I needed to break out of those chains. It was easy when it was you that needed the saving. My pressure and strength all came back to me.”

Sharp tears burn my eyes, and I wipe them away quickly. “What happened after you got free?”

He shrugs and smiles insolently. “I killed that huge fucker. I snapped his neck, and I don’t feel bad about it at all.”

I blow out a laugh and stare at his hands, tracing the scars that line them. When I look up, he’s watching me. His dark eyes are fixed and serious as they study my face.

“I’ve never seen anybody like you, Liz.” His rough voice catches in his throat. “I’ve never *met* anyone like you. No one will ever hurt you again.”

He kisses me then. His lips are soft and warm as they travel from my cheek and down to my lips, gently pulling on them. A warm heat blossoms inside me, and I moan low in the back of my throat before I pull away slightly.

“What would you have done if I’d died?”

“I would have strangled myself so I could have gone in the same way you did.”

He’s so serious, and I breathe out an appreciative breath. “That’s very dramatic of you.” I kiss him softly on the lips again. “But thank you all the same.”

He smiles quietly as his fingers dart over my skin and into my hair, but I clear my throat and scoot back.

“Tell me what happened next.”

“Next?”

“After you realized I wasn’t dead, and ... Alfonso was ... gone.”

“Ahh, well.” He leans back and spreads his legs wide, his hand resting behind his head. “Wyatt and I understood we had a problem on our hands, and Camilla sat with you while we figured out what to do about it.”

I shake my head slowly. “What did you do?”

“That fucker was your boss, right? The ruler of Goldenrod?”

I furrow my brows. “I’d say our civil structure is a little more complicated than *that*.”

He waves me off. “But people will notice that he’s gone, right?”

I grimace. “Yes, I’ve been wondering how that’s going while we’ve been here.”

The thought had beat a steady alarm under the surface of my mind constantly, actually. At any moment, I expected the alphas of Goldenrod to storm Cypress House and accuse me of murder.

To my knowledge, nothing like this had ever happened before. So, I’m not sure what the protocol would be. But regardless, once everyone realized the Administrator was

dead, and the perfect omega was last seen with him... I shudder to think of their reaction.

“It’s fine,” he states simply, frowning at my worried expression. “We took care of it.”

“How did you take care of it?”

“Wyatt and Camilla burned the house down.”

“*They did?*”

He nods. “The Home. Beebalm. Alfonso. They’re all gone. Tragic accident.”

I have so many questions, but I realize that I have no desire to ask them. So, I just join him in nodding. “And how very convenient for us.”

“Very.” He smiles and leans toward me again. “Apparently, the bigger scandal is what the Administrator was doing in the Home and what happened to all the omegas that were supposed to be living there in serenity. They weren’t being kept in the house at all but released in the gap in the fence to the pigeons. Wyatt thinks it’s so they could easily move them to the truck.”

“Those poor omegas,” I whisper distantly. Suddenly, I sit up a little straighter. “When did you speak with Wyatt?”

“He stopped by while you were sleeping this morning,” he pauses and considers me. “He and Camilla are staying in Goldenrod ... for a while, at least. I don’t think Goldenrod is long for this world, Liz. With Beebalm gone, things may get ugly.”

“I think that’s probably right.” I don’t know what goes into keeping Goldenrod afloat, but I’m sure it had more than a little to do with who Beebalm was and his connections to the pigeons. Now that he’s gone, how will this dream world survive?

“But I want us to stay here,” he surprises me by saying, “in Goldenrod for as long as it exists. And I want to bring everyone from Crescent Rock here, too—Pike, Lyn, Run, everyone.”

My heart soars. “You do?”

“With the baby coming ... we should enjoy this stability as long as it lasts, I think,” he says decisively. “And something Jade said about Rosie has been bugging me. She wasn’t happy in Crescent Rock, and maybe that’s how she ended up in the situation she’s in. I kind of failed her. I don’t want to fail anyone else ... especially you.”

“You didn’t fail Rosie,” I whisper intently. “She had a hard life.”

“But I want *you* to have a good life for as long as we can manage it,” he admits gruffly. “The same with the other alphas and omegas in Crescent Rock. I’d like them to have the chance to taste that pineapple shit and take a hot bath.”

“I’d really like that,” I whisper, my hand resting softly on my belly. “Are you sure that you’d be okay with that, though? With an ordinary life? *You*? The king of the alphas or whatever?”

He smirks. “Oh, it won’t be ordinary.”

“No.” I smile back at him. “I suppose with you, life will be anything but ordinary.”

Epilogue

Elizabeth

“They should be here by now. Why aren’t they here?”

I turn in my chair to peer out the parlor window. The early afternoon sun shines brightly on the green lawn and Goldenrod beyond it. But I don’t see any signs of Rill marching triumphantly through the Cypress House gates like he claimed he would be by this afternoon when he set off weeks ago.

I was skeptical of how precise he claimed he would be, but the vibes he’s sent me since he left were reassuring, so I’ve no reason to suspect he won’t be here today.

It’s frustrating that we haven’t been able to communicate like we did in Crescent Rock. Our connection is definitely weakened in Goldenrod—we can’t communicate as strongly unless we’re basically on top of each other. I can’t be sure why, but I suspect there’s a lot about my home that we’ve yet to learn.

“Relax, Elizabeth,” Stella says with a scowl. She’s annoyed, but that’s normal for her lately. “They’ll get here when they get here.”

“I know,” I say nervously. “We just haven’t been apart since...” I trail off with uncertainty. “It’s been a stressful two weeks without him here.”

I bite my thumbnail and stare forlornly out the window again.

“It’s okay.” Camilla reaches over to squeeze my arm. “He’s with Wyatt, and they’re also surrounded by all the other scary Crescent Rock alphas. There’s no way anything could happen to such a large group.”

Looking very green around the gill, she pauses to take a delicate sip of her drink. I noticed she looked peckish as soon as she and Stella arrived this morning to wait for the arrival of Rill and Wyatt.

Her pregnancy hasn’t been nearly as uneventful as mine. While my belly has been as pronounced as one of the balls the betas kick around in the Bluestem Meadow, Camilla looks like she’s *lost* weight.

“Do you want something to eat, Camilla?” I look toward the parlor door. “I can ask Colleen to get you some crackers.”

“No, no,” she insists. “No food. I’m just gonna go...”

She jumps from her chair and rushes away without looking at us.

“Poor Camilla,” I murmur. “I should make her some peppermint tea. Colleen and I just crushed some dried peppermint leaves this morning.”

“You two are making me want to avoid this whole mate thing, you know?” Stella says, a horrified expression on her face. “It’s been nothing but drama, stress, and kidnapping. And now Cami is sick all the time? Ugh. Gross.”

I shrug with a smile. “It’s not all that bad.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” she mumbles, shaking her head.

An awkward silence descends, and I sip my tea out of lack of anything else to do or say. Things with Stella and I have still been a little awkward whenever Camilla’s not around as a buffer. It’s strange since Stella was my best friend for so long, and I blamed Camilla for breaking us apart.

“So…” I start tentatively, cutting through the silence. “How are things in town?”

I haven’t strayed far from Cypress House in the months since Rill and I’ve been living in Goldenrod. I’m wary of showing my face even though there’s apparently no suspicion or outrage about what happened to Administrator Beebalm at the Home for Unwanted Omegas.

Apparently, overshadowing the community’s sorrow over his death is a lot of gossip about what he was doing in the Home at all that night and what happened to all the omegas who supposedly lived there. No one’s really talking about the hows

of what happened. I suppose we can just chalk *that* up to Goldenrod's predisposition to do what they're told.

Stella sighs and traces the rim of her teacup. "Oh, it's fine, I guess. *Administrator Noah* has been keeping the Order and squashing any unsavory rumors."

She rolls her eyes, and I can't help but smile. That's probably another reason why the community has been so ready to accept Beebalm's death, Rill's appearance, and Jason's disappearance.

Soon after Beebalm died, Goldenrod's alphas appointed Noah Sage as Administrator of the Order. Apparently, with Wyatt home to tend to their family's business, Noah was the logical choice and, strangely enough, the oldest unmated alpha in Goldenrod.

But Noah's influence is no doubt why they've been so ready to accept the fact that there are whole communities of alphas beyond Goldenrod's fence. And when Noah suggested that Rill bring them to Goldenrod? Why, of course! Who would disagree with the Administrator of the Order and beloved Sage son?

But it still sits strangely with me. Noah Sage as Administrator?

"I don't think that I'll ever get used to that," I admit to Stella. "He's so young. He could still find a mate."

Stella rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "I wouldn't count on it. He's so stuck up. I can't imagine any omega will ever be

good enough for him.”

I hum and consider Stella, frowning and staring into her tea. Although she went through a phase where she was wearing jeans and running through the meadows, now she’s wearing her normal dresses again, her hair pulled back in messy braids.

She looks miserable.

“Well, what about you?” I ask softly. “I know Camilla and I have had ... interesting experiences, but don’t you want to find your fated mate, Stella?”

She shakes her head quickly. “There’s not one alpha in Goldenrod who interests me. Maybe Noah and I are doomed to stay unmated and live at Sage House with our crazy mother for the rest of our days.”

I smile. Wyatt and Camilla moved into the Sage’s smaller house, further from town on the other side of the hill, but Stella and Noah live with Isolde at Sage House. I’m not sure how they stomach that. I haven’t seen much of Isolde since I’ve been back, and I’d like to keep it that way.

“I don’t think you should give up on—oh!” My eyes catch on movement outside the window. “They’re here!”

I jump to my feet, almost spilling my tea on my light green dress. Stepping close to the window, I see Rill walking through the gates to Cypress House, Wyatt at his side and a long row of alphas behind him. My heart leaps in my chest as I release a happy cry.

“Camilla!” I yell over my shoulder. “They’re here!”

“I’ll tell her when she comes back,” Stella laughs, rising to her feet. “Go greet your mate, Elizabeth.”

That’s all the permission I need. I skirt into the hall—not at all the perfect omega as I throw the front door open wide. The warm spring air feels fresh and alive on my face as I fly down the stairs.

“Rill!” I pause on the bottom step and wave my arm.

As soon as his eyes land on me, they brighten. He holds his arms wide as I sprint down the gravel path and tumble into them.

For seconds, I just stand there breathing in his warm, herby scent from the soft crease of his neck. Tears burgeon in my eyes. I didn’t realize how worried I was that he wouldn’t come back.

He pulls away and looks down at me. “Of course, I came back. There’s not a single pigeon out there who I wouldn’t kill to get back to you, Liz.”

I sniffle, grateful that we’re able to connect with each other again. All the more reason for him to never leave me again.

“You look beautiful,” he murmurs, his hands rubbing my protruding belly. “Your belly’s gotten bigger.”

I laugh. “I’ve done nothing but eat since you’ve been gone.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” he jokes, and I smile as he pulls me into his side. That’s when I notice everyone else.

First, Wyatt comes up behind him, leading Pike and Lyn forward.

“Lyn!” I step forward and hug her. “It’s so wonderful to see you home in Goldenrod.”

She pulls away, her eyes shifting nervously. “I never thought I’d step foot in this place again. I wouldn’t have dreamed about coming back if it wasn’t for...”

“She’s inside,” I assure her. “And she’s very excited to see you.”

I’m not sure how true that is. I think Camilla’s nausea was partly due to her nerves at being officially reunited with her long-lost mother again.

“Did Rill tell you about...” I trail off, not sure how to approach Alfonso’s death. He was her fated mate, after all.

“He did,” Lyn says, reading my mind. Her face seems to battle with herself like she doesn’t know how to make herself look at the news. “I was ... sorry to hear it.”

“Where’s Camilla?” Wyatt interrupts gruffly. Lyn jumps a bit at his sharp tone, and Pike pulls her close and glowers at him.

I stifle a smile. Rill was right—Pike is *not* a fan of Wyatt.

“In the house.” I point behind me. “She wasn’t feeling well. The baby’s been making her nauseous. There’s some crushed peppermint in the kitchen, Lyn, if you think that may help her?”

Lyn nods gratefully but is saved from responding when Wyatt stomps toward the house silently. She waves silently as she and Pike rush to catch up with him.

“Oh, I’m not sure how things are going to go with Camilla and Lyn...” I whisper under my breath.

“They’ll be fine,” Rill whispers, pulling me close and dropping a kiss on top of my head.

I smile up at him before my eyes start to dart over the crowd again—so many familiar faces. Immediately, I see Run, Jade, and Lulu.

Jade actually *smiles* at me, a hand resting on her pregnant belly, and Lulu’s jumping up and down to get my attention in the middle of the crowd. I smile at Jade tentatively and wave to Lulu enthusiastically. I’ll have to talk to them, too, about Rosie. Although, I know that Rill already broke the news about her disappearance.

I also see Nick and Dirk, and so many of the hunters and herders I watched through Rill’s window. But no one else.

“So, you couldn’t find him?” I ask, not looking up as I continue searching the faces in the hopes that I just missed him.

But no, Orion’s not here.

Rill’s eyes are watching me softly when I glance up at him. “No. I even took a detour further up north to ask some alphas I know who used to travel to Mercy City to root through the trash. They said the pigeons have been picking up alphas left

and right, so they've stayed in hiding. If he's not in Mercy City, they said that he's probably..."

"Oh." My heart wilts as he trails off. Will I ever see my brother again? I can't believe that he's dead. He's out there somewhere. Maybe alone and in pain... and it's all because of me.

I sniffle and look up at Rill again. "What about Jason and Rosie?"

"No sign of 'em. They're long gone by now. I only hope..."

I squeeze his hand. I know he still feels bad about Rosie. "Come on. Let's get everyone inside. Colleen and the other betas have prepared so much food, and Noah has a place for each of them to sleep tonight."

He grazes my cheek with his fingertips. "You look happy, Liz. Living in civilization suits you, I think."

"Hopefully, it suits them, too," I reply, nodding toward the crowd of motley alphas. They're looking around like they've walked into a portal to another world, which I suppose, to a certain extent, they have. It'll be interesting to see how Crescent Rock assimilates with Goldenrod.

"Only time will tell, I guess." Rill sucks in a breath, looking doubtful. "But I hope you didn't get your mother's good plates out for this meal."

"No, I did *not*." I pull him toward the house. "But still, I think Goldenrod will like what Crescent Rock has to offer. I know I do."

He looks behind him nervously. “I’m not sure if they’ll like them, but I think they’re going to need them. Things are getting wild out there, Liz. When the pigeons realize that Crescent Rock alphas are in Goldenrod *and* that Beebalm’s gone, things may get ugly.”

“Good thing we have the alpha king on our side then.”

He smirks. “Always. Now let’s go eat. I want to make Pike try some of that pineapple.”

I nod as we lead Crescent Rock into Cypress House and enjoy the comforts of home for as long as they last.

Bonus Epilogue

Meanwhile in Mercy City...

“Sixteen!”

Every time I hear that number, I salivate.

“Sixteen, check!”

A metal plate slides across the concrete floor and hits the side of my bare foot. My skin is so numb from the cold that I barely feel it, just a slight burning sensation that only lingers for a few seconds.

There’s a pale pile of cold slop on top of the plate. I’m not even sure what it is, but it keeps me full, and it’s the only thing I’ve eaten in months. Anyway, I can’t smell or taste anything with this strap they’ve attached to my nose.

I stare at it intensely, wishing I didn’t want it as much as I do. There was a time in my life when I wouldn’t force the beta who polished my boots to eat this swill. It looks like it was scrapped out of the bottom of a trash bin.

But in the end, I can't stop myself. I pick up the plate and shove it against my face, licking the cold slop up until the metal is dry.

Like an animal.

When I'm done, I toss the plate on the floor with the others and slump down on the cold concrete, feeling worse for having eaten it.

Lying on my side, I rest my head on my bent elbow and stare out the gap between the floor and the bottom of the door. It's quiet, but sometimes I see feet walking past.

In the distance, I can hear *them* laughing and talking, and every now and then, a scream breaks up the monotony. The screams are always agonized and pain-filled. Those are from other alphas.

But I'm not sad or scared by their screams anymore, just a slight relief that it's not it's not me this time.

To think, at one time, I was the sort of alpha who would have fought anyone forcing another into a situation that made them scream in such a way. I would have tried to free them. Save them.

But I also used to be an alpha who slept in a bed.

Ate steaks.

Drank champagne.

Smoked cigars.

Yelled at idiot betas.

I *used* to be Orion Cypress.

And now I don't know who I am.

So, I just lie here, listening to the screams and thanking my lucky stars it's not me this time.



Orion's book is coming, but it's not next in line. Coming up next is Noah's book—The Secret Omega. Pre-order it now and subscribe to my newsletter for updates. Also, turn the page to download a free novella—The Forbidden Omega, Stella's story.



Download a Free Novella

Visit my website to sign up for my newsletter and receive a FREE novella—The Forbidden Omega, Stella’s story. Go here to download: <https://emilynorthauthor.com/bonus-content/>

They said she wasn’t for him.

Nick’s life changes as soon as he meets Stella Sage. Everyone tells him to stay away—she’s crazy, mean, and off-limits—but he’s never been very good at following rules.

She only ever wanted to be free.

One bright spring morning, Stella encounters rugged, easy-going Nick. Suddenly, the world is alight with possibilities, and her long-desired freedom seems a little closer.

How much will you give up for someone you just met?

Over the course of a single day, Nick and Stella are thrust into a relationship neither of them expected. How much will they sacrifice for a mate they barely know?

A Note From Emily

Thank you for reading *The Alpha King*!

This book was so much fun to write—I absolutely love Rill and Elizabeth’s dynamic. I’m also loving the progression of the story as Goldenrod and the outside world continue to collide. I hope you’re enjoying it, too.

If you loved reading it as much I loved writing it, it would make me so happy if you’d leave a review on Goodreads or Amazon!

Also, sign up for my newsletter to receive news on upcoming books — including *The Secret Omega*. Noah’s story. Any guesses on who his fated mate is? Email me at emilynorthauthor@gmail.com!

All of my thanks are as follows:

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Cassie Weaver at Weaverway Author Service for proofreading, and assistance with all of the writer-type activities at which I *suck*.

My friend, Lauren, for secondary proofreading.

Connect with Emily

Emily North is a lifelong reader and lover of romance novels.

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Other Books By Emily

The Goldenrod series:

The Golden Alpha — Wyatt and Cami

The Alpha King — Rill and Elizabeth

The Forbidden Omega — Nick and Stella

The Secret Omega — Noah – Coming April 2024

The Alpha Captive – Orion – Coming summer 2024

The Lake Conrad series:

Fight — Jake and Lena

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Fault — Cole and Morgan

Fake — Ramona and Seth — TBD

Fortune — Julia and Kyle — TBD