



Broken
OMEGA

A SWEET OMEGaverse ROMANCE

ROMY LOCKHART



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BROKEN OMEGA

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FOREWORD

This is the third book in my Sweet Omegaverse series, set after the events of *Secret Omega* and *Lost Omega*, following a new set of main characters. I set out to write this series because I love to write shifter books, and sweet omegaverse books are essentially shifter romances where the characters display some shifter traits, but they don't shift forms.

The sweet element relates to the tone or feeling of the romance within the book, not the steam level. *Broken Omega* contains a slow burn romance that quickly heats up once the main characters meet and connect.

Please note that the male main characters have intimate relationships with each other in this novel. This book is also a reverse harem which means the female main character ends up with multiple romantic partners.

Chapter ONE

BROOKE

My heart sinks when Lana hands me the black envelope with my name scrawled on the front in my father's harsh lines. The gold ink, and the bow that seals the thick card by the corners, are pretty touches on an invitation I'd rather not have gotten.

"Birthday card?" Lana asks, her smile bright, as usual.

The pretty Beta receptionist steals my breath a little more every single time I lay eyes on her.

With big, hazel-brown eyes, flawlessly tanned skin, and a warmth that seems to radiate from within, seeing her always makes my day feel so much lighter. Even if she's out of my reach as a true friend or lover, I appreciate her.

So, I won't darken her day with my mood.

It's not her fault my father summons me like this every year.

That honor rests entirely on my own pale, narrow shoulders.

I'm the only child of Doctor Warren Corvina.

I give her a smile. "Looks like it. Thanks."

"No worries," she tells me. "Are you doing anything special?"

"I'll be visiting my father," I respond, managing to keep my tone neutral.

My enthusiasm might be lacking but at least I'm not telling her I'd rather poke my eyes out with a rusty spoon than spend another night being chastised and preached at by my only living parent.

"Well, I hope you have a nice time," she says, meaning it.

She's so damn pure. If I could perfume for anyone, I'd want it to be her.

Too bad if it broke every rule in Goldcrest. If fate would just give me that one little win, I could find the strength to walk away from this damned academy and its stupid, archaic rules.

"Thanks," I tell her. "Call me if you get bored later. It looks like a quiet one."

"That would be why Geraldine has me on file archiving duty." She rolls her eyes, but she's still smiling. That's the benefit of working a job that makes her happy. Even the dull parts look fun.

"Well, have fun poking around in those files all afternoon."

She lets out a gasp, feigning shock. "As if I'd read private files on previous students!"

Oh, she's so going to read those files.

She's not *quite* as innocent as she looks, which is just another reason to love her. We have so many fun conversations when there's something even vaguely scandalous to gossip about. It breaks up the general, everyday boredom.

"Of course not."

She leans forward and stage-whispers, "I'll call you if I find anything juicy."

That's a promise I can get behind. "I'll be waiting."

We say good-bye, and I force myself to walk away.

The lightness she's given me fades quickly. It doesn't linger like it usually would, pushing me into sweet daydreams full of hopeful wishes coming true.

I don't need to ask myself why. It's the presence of the envelope. My annual summons.

Daddy Dearest wants to know why I'm still on the shelf.

At twenty-four-years-old, I'm the oldest Omega at the academy.

Probably the most stubborn, too.

Finding an Alpha was never going to be an easy task, and it doesn't help that Goldcrest is so damn picky about who they let through the doors. Only the progeny of the wealthiest Alphas with the best connections are allowed to attend the socials and meet the Omegas here.

It makes Goldcrest sound elite, but really it means the majority of the Alphas are entitled pricks who treat the academy like a brothel their fathers pay for them to visit.

Sure, some decent Alphas have come and gone, formed connections and become bonded to an Omega. Some of them even claimed to have met their one true mate in this very building.

Those Alphas are a rarity. They're the exception, not the rule.

All we have left are the entitled pricks, and it's been like that for a while. Four months, maybe six.

Fresh blood is getting rarer. The academy's going to have to widen its net.

Or else the head of the school needs to step in and do something differently to fix the problem.

Geraldine doesn't seem concerned right now, but I'm sure I'm not the only one with an irritable father who expects results. I doubt all the Alphas who come here are under zero pressure to find a mate. After all, that's what the academy's supposed to be for.

It's no use telling my father there are no good Alphas left here.

To him, these men are perfect matches that I'm ignoring.

They have the means to give me a comfortable lifestyle. And, of course, Omegas who bear the children of Alphas are guaranteed to have Alpha and Omega children to keep our bloodlines trapped in the same vicious cycle that I'm stuck in right now.

I can't think of anything worse than settling down with one of the assholes who come to the socials.

My mother probably had the same thought about my father.

She never seemed happy. All I can remember about her was that she spent a lot of time crying in bed while I was a kid.

Of course, my father put that down to her inability to give him more children, which he absolutely blamed her for, as if she was personally refusing to give him what he was due.

In reality, she got sick the year after I was born and was quickly bed ridden.

He didn't look after her like he should have. He was too busy working.

When she died a few years later, I felt relieved for her.

She'd be in a better place with people who loved her now.

If there was one thing I was sure of, it was that.

For a while I expected I might get sick and die, too.

The housekeeper told me I wouldn't, but I didn't believe her.

I got obsessed with the idea and Dad noticed once he actually paid me a tiny bit of attention.

He ignored it to begin with, telling me and everyone else it was a phase I would outgrow. Eventually he took me to the doctor who examined me and told me I was healthy.

Death wasn't imminent. I didn't need to worry about closing my eyes at night and never waking up again.

He had that part all wrong.

I wasn't afraid to die.

When I realized I could have the same sickness as my mother, I'd felt that same relief I felt when I was told she'd passed on. If I was next, I'd get to see her again and I knew she'd be happy this time.

It would make me happy to see her happy.

Knowing that wasn't going to happen left me empty inside.

All I had left was my dad, the man who barely seemed to notice me.

Some days that made me feel sad and lonely.

Other days I wished he would just forget about my existence entirely.

This is one of those latter days.

Unfortunately, he never forgets my birthday.

I open the envelope once I get back to my suite.

Predictably, he's sending a car for me at seven.

I suppose I should start getting ready.

Chapter

TWO

BROOKE

The drive out to Crystal Grove takes us through the vibrant, beating heart of Cressidan City. I stare out the window at the busy streets and imagine what my life could have been like if I'd been born a Beta. I wouldn't be stuck in an Omega academy waiting for a man to come along and make my life complete, that's for sure.

"Peter?" I ask the driver, already knowing what he'll say.

The old man has worked for my father for years. He knows what flies and what doesn't.

Still, what's the harm in trying? There's always a chance he might decide to help me.

"Yes, Miss Corvina?" he asks, his gaze catching mine briefly in the rear view.

"I've changed my mind about visiting my father. Please take me to the corner of North Street so I can get the bus back to the academy."

He clears his throat. "Apologies, Miss Corvina, but that isn't how this works."

"This?" I ask, trying not to let his refusal get to me. He always refuses. It's not unexpected.

"I was hired to pick you up and bring you to the estate. I can't drop you off anywhere else."

Of course. My father would fire him if he did. I understand that.

Sighing, I sit back in my seat. Feeling the chill of the leather against the naked parts of my back and arms, I start to shiver. The sapphire-blue midi dress is excessive for a dinner party for two inside a house, but it's what the academy expects and so it's what my father expects, too.

I've spent most of my life trying to conform to what my society thinks a perfect Omega is.

It's like I'm always wearing a dress that's too tight and too short. I have to keep adjusting it, and it doesn't matter how hard I try. There's nothing I can do to make it fit. I can't shrink myself down enough. I'll never get the damned thing to fit properly.

It's because it wasn't made for me. It was made for a smaller girl with a different dream.

Too bad it's mine now, and as much as I want to, I can't take it off.

I try another tactic with Peter. "Can we at least stop to pick up—"

He shakes his head before I can finish. "I can't make any stops."

There goes escape plan number two.

Plan number three is the riskiest, but we don't slow down enough to make it a real option anyway.

I'm sure the door is locked, so it's pointless to think about making a jump and run for it even if we did get stopped by any of the sets of traffic lights we seem to be breezing through tonight.

Despite the city's bustling streets, the roads are kind of quiet. I guess it's after the main rush for a weekday. I'm all out of luck.

Might as well give it up.

“He doesn’t even get me a birthday cake,” I mutter, mostly to myself.

It’s clear that Peter isn’t going to be swayed by any of my arguments.

I can’t stand feeling sorry for myself, but it’s all I have left.

Gazing out the window, I focus on people-watching, making lazy guesses to what each person who captures my attention might have a career in and what they might be like.

I didn’t realize professional clothes could be so alluring, but the pretty, petite brunette in the skirt suit really makes pinstripes work. I bet she’s an accountant, or a lawyer. Probably owns a fluffy cat and a top floor apartment. Looks a little bit too young to be married. She’s probably still looking for the right girl or guy, or she could be a pack kind of woman. The best ones always are.

Ooh. There’s a hot construction worker smoking by the side of the road. There’s dirt on his bright orange jacket and a little smear on his cheek, too. Smoldering good looks and I bet he’s good with his hands. He’s probably waiting on a ride home. Can’t wait to get back to the suburbs, most likely to a home-cooked meal made by a stunningly gorgeous and super sweet stay-at-home wife and mother.

I sigh as they vanish from sight.

What I wouldn’t give to be one of those people.

I live out those little fantasies inside my head while the city disappears around us.

The drive to Crystal Grove is much blander. Forests take up either side of the road when we leave the main part of the city. It’s too dark to see much other than the dark masses of trees.

Then, the estate comes into view, on the road into Crystal Grove.

The land is split equally over the town and the city, making it practically impossible for the estate to receive any mail. There are two zip codes involved and two very separate

addresses on differently named and numbered streets. It's a mind-fuck for mail men and women, which I think was my father's intention when he had the house built. He doesn't like to make anything easy on anyone.

My stomach churns when we pull into the road that leads to the estate.

The car slows down. The gates open after we pass the first security camera.

Daddy's watching, then. Of course he is. He doesn't miss a trick.

I look out into the woods that surround the estate.

The car's going slow enough to jump out of now, but there's no point in attempting to run, even if the door was unlocked.

I check and find out it's locked. *Oh, well. I wouldn't have gotten very far anyway.* There are cameras all over the place. My father would lock the gates and have me caught and dragged back to the house like he did when I was a kid having a tantrum.

I put my hand back in my lap and give Peter a fake smile when he glances at me.

He drives to the steps that lead into the house and stops, just as my father appears at the entrance.

His slim face is pinched, his white beard well-groomed but longer than I've seen it in the past.

He's been stuck in his study writing these last few months, which would be his excuse if I dared to mention it. Who the hell knows exactly what he's been working on. The research he does is tedious, meticulous, and peppered through with words that have to be looked up to be understood.

The human mind is fascinating, but the way he writes about it is not.

Whatever the research is, he's deeply immersed as usual.

My whole life it's been like this.

He's never not working.

There's always something taking up most of his valuable time.

Tonight that something is me, and he doesn't look particularly pleased about it.

I'd have been happier to skip this dinner, too, but something tells me that was never an option.

It's an unpleasant but somehow necessary encounter.

The car rolls to a stop in front of my father, and Peter kills the engine.

He gets out of the driver's seat while I sit in my seat, waiting helplessly to be let out.

I feel like a kid. I always do when I come home.

The dress and heels make me feel like I'm pretending to be a grown up.

Makes a change from feeling like I'm in disguise as a perfect Omega, I guess.

Goddamn. Less than a minute on the estate and I'm regressing.

This night better not last too damn long. I might not have a working brain left by the end of it.

Peter opens my door, and I take a breath before I step out gracefully, painting on a smile.

"Brooke, you made it," my father says, as if I had any choice in the matter.

"Of course," I tell him.

"Happy Birthday," he mutters, like that's not just the most convenient excuse to drag me out here.

The academy doesn't typically allow Omegas to come and go as they please, but considering I've been there for six years instead of the normal three, and considering my father is the academy's biggest financial supporter, I get to be special. *Yay, me!*

“Is dinner almost ready?” I ask, as Peter gets to my side with my overnight luggage.

My father nods slowly and takes a step toward the open door. “You have time to clean up.”

Because clearly, my hands got dirty on the way over in the spotless town car.

I’ve been here a couple minutes and I’m already exhausted by his attitude.

Here’s hoping our chef leaves the wine bottle on the table.

Chapter THREE

BROOKE

I let Peter follow me to my room and place the bag down on the floor by the side of the bed, but only because my father would have chastised me if I tried to carry my own bag. I thank him as he leaves. Closing the door, I glance around the bedroom I spend a single night in every year.

It's the same room I slept in while I was growing up, and it hasn't changed since I've been gone, probably because I never changed anything about it while I was here.

It feels like a spare room. There's nothing special about it.

Well, except the wrapped box on the bed that I know is from my best friend. That makes me smile, even if it fades quickly. I never get to see her anymore. Zelena is out in the big, wide world living her dream life, because her parents were supportive when she told them she wanted to go into the creative arts. Now she's the hottest popstar on the planet.

I get a little burst of pride at the thought of that, like I do every time I see her on TV, or when I hear one of her songs playing at the socials. She worked so damn hard to get to where she is, and she deserves every bit of the success she's found.

I pick up the card and read it first.

A bundle of concert tickets and backstage passes fall out of the envelope, dated for October.

My stomach twists up when I see them. I'd love to go watch my bestie do her thing onstage, but asking my father to request my absence from the academy would mean owing him a favor, and I know what kind of favor he would ask of me.

I can't do it. I wish to hell I could, but the cost is too high.

I put them in my purse, so my father doesn't get the chance to see them.

Happy Birthday to my sister from another mister!

Guess what? I get off tour in a few months and I'm not going to add more dates, no matter what my manager says. It's been way too long since we hung out. I'll call you soon, BAE. Love and hugs, Zey.

The line of kisses is so long that I can't count them.

My vision blurs just a little as I stare at the note.

I miss her so much. It's been years since we did anything but text and email and talk on the phone.

Before she was touring, she used to come over on my birthday when I was back.

My father didn't like it, but he didn't try to stop it.

I wanted to be able to go see her on her birthday, but he wouldn't ask Geraldine if I could have the day off campus out of the goodness of his heart. No, he saw it as an opportunity to exploit my love for my friend. He told me I could see Zelena if I agreed to choose my Alpha mate by the end of the semester.

That proposal crumbled my hopes up into dust.

I tried again the next year, and his proposal was the same.

It got less appealing each year after.

He knocked months off the deal each time, giving me a shorter window to choose a mate by.

I didn't bother to ask last year, and I won't mention it tonight at all.

Clearly, he's getting impatient with me.

I leave the unopened present on my bed, saving it for later. I have a feeling I'll need something to lift my spirits once my father crushes them with his questions.

I go into the bathroom and wash my hands.

The soap has a strong lavender scent that makes me screw up my nose.

I suspect my father uses it so he can tell if I've cleaned up before I come to the table.

The smell lingers as I head down the stairs.

It's pleasant enough now, I suppose, but it's hardly one of my favorite things.

This house doesn't contain anything I'm particularly enamoured with. It never has.

I find my father waiting at the head of the table. My place has been laid out to his left.

The last thing I feel is hungry, but I sit down anyway, allowing one of my father's staff to pull the chair out for me, and push it in once I'm seated.

We're served the first course within seconds.

No words are exchanged between us.

I murmur my thanks to our server.

A few bites per course is the right amount. My father is very particular about certain things, and how much a lady should eat at a meal is one of those things. It's disturbingly misogynistic, I'll admit, but right now while I'm packed full of nervous energy, I'm glad I'm not expected to finish my meal.

The final course is a rich chocolate dessert that looks divine.

I'm glad my appetite isn't what it should be, otherwise it would be impossible to put my fork down.

"Well," my father says, speaking his first words since my birthday dinner began. "Here we are again."

Dread swells in the pit of my stomach. I take a sip of water and shrug as I set the glass back down.

No wine tonight. Apparently, this wasn't a celebration after all.

"Here we are," I echo, trying and failing to keep the sarcastic edge out of my tone.

"Brooke, what are you doing?" he asks, his hard gaze cutting through me.

"Celebrating my twenty-fourth birthday with my only living relative?" I ask, waiting for him to tell me the real answer since, clearly, I know nothing.

"I didn't bring you here to celebrate," he snaps.

"Obviously," I murmur, not letting my gaze fall from his.

He leans back in his chair. "Why haven't you chosen a mate?"

Inquisition question number one. It's been the same every damn year.

"I feel like I answered that question last year."

"It's time to stop playing games," he snaps at me. "You're already too old to still be at that academy. Some of those Alphas wouldn't choose you as their Omega now for that reason alone."

"Those Alphas are all that's left. Goldcrest is really scraping the bottom of the barrel."

"Goldcrest is elite. It's why you're there and not at one of the other academies."

"Elite. Right. That's why the Alphas get away with treating it like the world's most expensive brothel."

Oh, that pisses him off. His nostrils flare and his eyes spark with anger. Anyone would think he personally founded the damned academy.

"I've had enough of your attitude," he barks.

"And I've had enough of yours," I snap back.

He stares at me. “You’ll give me a list of your preferred Alphas the day after the first social of the year.”

“How would you like me to categorize this list? Alphabetically, or in order of how disgustingly misogynistic they are?”

“If you don’t give me a list of your preferred Alphas, I’ll pick one out for you myself.”

He throws his napkin down over his plate and gets up.

He’s completely serious, and it’s enough to shock me into silence.

I knew I was pissing him off, but I never expected him to go this far.

“This is the last dinner we’ll have together. You’ll be married to a Goldcrest Alpha before your twenty-fifth birthday.”

My lips part, but I can’t bring myself to say a single damned word.

I sit there stunned as he walks out of the room.

He’s being ridiculous. He can’t force me to get married.

The server comes out of the kitchen and takes his dessert plate away.

Putting my hand over mine, I shake my head.

He leaves while I sit at the dining table, remembering my mother.

She was never happy, and I’d always wondered how she ended up with someone as cold and distant as my father.

Maybe it hadn’t been her choice.

God, that’s so fucking awful.

What’s worse is how likely it is to be true.

He didn’t cry when she died. He didn’t show any emotion at all. I doubt he ever loved her.

What would make a woman marry a man who didn't love her?

I pick my fork up as the server steps back into the room.

He sets down a wine glass and proffers a bottle.

I nod, managing a hollow, "Thank you."

He leaves the bottle once he's half-filled my glass.

I finish the dessert and drink until my emotions are dulled.

Picking up the bottle, I leave the dining room.

Chapter

FOUR

BROOKE

The first drop of scarlet liquid that lands on my sheets is completely accidental and reminds me that I'm still wearing heels. I hold the bottle upright as I kick them off my feet. The expensive shoes hit the side of the closet with a clatter. Sounds like I might have scuffed the delicate material. Too bad.

I probably already stained them with the wine on my stumble up the staircase anyway.

On a normal day, I'd be horrified at my complete lack of concern.

But my twenty-fourth birthday is extra special, because it's the day I learned my own inherent specialness has an expiration date.

Apparently, twenty-five is the age when Omegas are no longer seen as desirable by Alphas.

I might as well be a scuffed-up pair of velvet designer heels with wine stains on the toes.

None of those assholes from Goldcrest want me as their mate, and I don't want any of them as mine, either. So, what does it matter if I age another year and that situation never changes?

Being alone is better than being married off to someone I can't stand.

I yank off my dress and toss it to the floor.

Then, I sit on the bed and take another gulp of wine before I look at the present in front of me.

My father never gets me anything. This is the only present I'll get from anyone.

I take my time untying the bow. It's a deep emerald green, because we both decided that was my color, a while back, when we were in high school, and we almost went to prom in the same dress.

It was pretty funny. The memory makes me smile.

Zelena immediately told me she had to change because I looked way better in the dress than she did. That was a lie. She looks better in anything than I do. But she saw the emerald necklace around my neck, one of the only things I own that belonged to my mother, and she instantly decided she was the one who should wear something else.

"I miss you so damn much, Zey," I whisper, as I start to unwrap the box.

I push the wrapping aside and lift the lid to find a framed picture of us from prom night.

Just the two of us, before we picked up our "popular guy of the hour" dates.

Tearing up, I try to tell myself it's the wine.

I set the picture down on my nightstand.

There's a pair of pink and purple unicorn patterned pajamas inside that I decide to wear. They're something teenage me would have chosen, before she was sent to the academy to become the perfect Omega. I love that Zelena hasn't lost that side of herself. She's free in ways I'll never get to be, and I hope she never has to change.

I go back through the box when I'm dressed for bed, and I quickly find out there are fancy chocolates that taste divine, as well as an insanely large bundle of newly released makeup kits and brushes. She completely outdid herself this year.

I swig at the wine between mouthfuls of chocolate, and I decide not to open the rest of the kits after I manage to drop one of the lipsticks on the sheets while the cap was off. I carefully put it all back inside the box and close the lid.

That's another red stain on the cream sheets. The housekeeper's going to love me when she turns this room over in the morning.

I put the wine bottle down when I realize there's nothing left inside it.

My head's a little fuzzy. I should probably use the bathroom before I pass out.

Or not. The pillow feels nice and I'm warm in my new PJs.

I let myself get comfortable, and I pass the hell out.

Chapter

FIVE

BROOKE

I wake up in the morning with a headache, big surprise. Sitting up, the room swirls a tiny little bit, and my stomach seems to move with it. *Oh, please no. The last thing I want is to vomit.*

Probably should have thought of that before I downed a whole bottle of wine last night.

I sit still, waiting for the dizzy spell to pass and hoping to hell my stomach settles at the same time.

It takes a few minutes for the room to stop moving. Once that happens, I stay right where I am, taking in long, slow breaths until I stop feeling sick.

When I finally decide it's safe to move, I discover a wine stain on the leg of my PJs, over the left knee, and that's when I realize I must have been drunker than I thought. I don't remember ruining my new pajamas. Though, considering how clumsy I was being, I can imagine spilling the wine and not noticing.

After grabbing my change of clothes from my overnight bag, I go into the bathroom.

The first thing I start to do is cleanse my face. It takes a second to realize I look like I already took my makeup off. Strange. I don't remember getting out of bed to remove it. I also vaguely remember needing to pee, which I assumed would wake me pretty soon after I dozed off.

I guess I must have gotten up and used the bathroom at some point during the night.

Kind of weird that I don't remember it.

Then again, it wouldn't be the first time. It's been a while since I had a blackout, but it used to be a whole thing with me. Started when I was a teenager, and it's happened kind of sporadically ever since. I actually quit drinking wine for a year to see if it was alcohol related, and it wasn't, but I did seem to be more likely to blackout if I'd been drinking a bit too much.

Damn it. This is the last thing I need right now.

As if being given an impossible choice by my father wasn't bad enough.

I clean myself up, take a shower, and put on the jumpsuit and heels I'm wearing to get back to the academy. The shoes I wore to get here aren't as ruined as I expected, so I pack them away carefully, along with the dress. My gift items fit inside my bag, sans the chocolate box which is now empty and sitting on top of the dresser.

While I'm putting on my makeup, I notice that the wine bottle is gone from where I thought I'd left it on the nightstand. That's not a good sign.

I ignore it until I finish up my look with my usual bold red lip. Examining my face in the mirror, I decide I'm ready for setting spray. I've managed to conceal the dark circles under my eyes, and I look like my usual, polished self.

Once I've stashed my makeup in my bag, I start to look around for the missing wine bottle.

It would be just typical if it fell off the nightstand and dripped onto the carpet.

Nothing makes my dad go batshit quicker than an indelible stain. Sheets can be replaced by getting the housekeeper to go shopping. Carpets are a lot less simple to replace. He'd have to deal with that shit himself, and that's what would drive him insane.

I get on my hands and knees to look under the bed but there's nothing there.

Letting out a relieved sigh, I get back to my feet and glance around the rest of the room. It's so weird. I don't see the bottle anywhere.

Did I leave the room? I check the bathroom, but it's not there, either.

When I walk back into the bedroom, my gaze catches on the sheets. The pristine, cream sheets. I move over and straighten them up. I can't see the stains from the wine or the new lipstick I dropped.

I take a closer look, turning them over, but the stains aren't there.

"That's not possible," I murmur, wondering what exactly happened last night.

Did I imagine spilling the wine? I unzip the bag and see there's still a dried-up stain on my PJs. Maybe they soaked the spill up? Or maybe I spilled on myself instead of the bed?

I guess it's possible. I'm not all the way convinced, but it doesn't matter.

So, I had another blackout. Who cares? It's not the first and it certainly won't be the last.

All I'm doing by standing around is delaying the inevitable.

I need to say good-bye to my father so I can get the hell out of here.

Chapter

SIX

BROOKE

I can hear talking as I creep down the stairs. When he's angry, my father doesn't hide it very well. His voice rises, and in this house, it carries. I don't catch the full conversation, just a few words, but it's enough to make me wonder what I did when I blacked out last night.

I riled him up at dinner, and he was already in a shitty mood. That was bad enough.

I suppose things can't really get any worse for me, so I might as well face his wrath.

Heading toward his study, I make sure I walk loudly so he can hear me coming.

The door creaks open before I get to it, fist raised to knock, smile frozen in place.

He gives me a frown and holds a finger up. The one-minute signal.

I roll my eyes as he closes the door on me.

"Deal with it," he snaps, which doesn't tell me much, other than he's just hung up the phone.

It's one of his favorite end-call catchphrases.

The door opens again a few seconds later, and I move back to let him step out into the hall.

"I'm heading back to the academy," I tell him.

He frowns at me. “You don’t remember, do you?”

Shit. I really did something last night. “Remember what?”

“Sasha found you sitting on the dining room table last night, drinking wine you took from the cellar.”

Ah, the cellar wine. His personal collection of rare vintages.

It all tastes like getting drunk to a teenager.

How was I supposed to know those bottles weren’t for general consumption?

I knew better after Dad grounded me for the month the first time I stole a couple bottles. It didn’t stop me from doing it again whenever he pissed me off, and it looks like it didn’t stop blacked out me from repeating those embittered teenage actions last night, either.

Looks like I really did regress when I got here.

I’m not sorry about it, so I don’t bother to apologize.

“I must have had another blackout,” I tell him, shrugging it off.

“You haven’t been keeping up your therapy appointments.”

“They haven’t been getting me anywhere.”

He scowls. “Have you had a blackout since you started going to them?”

Way to make me see your point, Dad.

“Last night is the first blackout I’ve had in a while.”

“And how long has it been since you last went to therapy?”

Ugh. I hate it when he’s right. Of course, I’d bet my platinum credit card that I wouldn’t have had a blackout at all if he hadn’t given me a messed-up ultimatum that’s going to negatively effect the rest of my so-called-life.

“I don’t know,” I tell him, trying to count back. “Six weeks, maybe.”

“Well, clearly something was working. You’ll start going back next week.”

It’s not the worst thing he could make me do. He’s already decided to push an Alpha I don’t want on me. That’s more horrifying than making me go back into therapy. Hell, I’ll need more sessions than ever once I’m married to a fuckboy Alpha I’m expected to have children with.

“Yes, sir,” I tell him, fighting against the urge to sneer. “Can I leave now?”

He takes in a breath and nods. “Straight back to the academy, no detours. Doctor Prentice has been told to let me know if you stop going to appointments again.”

I’m surprised she didn’t tell him this time. All she seems concerned about is doing what my father wants. Geraldine’s the same. Men who have money make people jump to tend to them.

It fucking sucks.

“No detours,” I mumble under my breath.

“I’ll see you when you’ve chosen your mate.”

So, never. I nod like a good girl, and he leaves me in the hall while he fetches his live-in driver.

Peter has a life of his own that he escapes to when my father doesn’t require his services, but when he’s working, he’s supposed to remain on site. Heaven forbid my father might ever have to drive himself out of the estate like a regular rich guy.

If I’d been a little smarter this morning, I might have plotted to have an Uber pick me up outside the gates in the early hours. Of course, that would have required not getting hammered last night and remembering to set an alarm on my phone.

It doesn’t matter. He’d find me if I did that, and I know it.

I don’t have anywhere to run to, and I’d have to avoid using my credit card to pay for stuff which would be kind of hard considering I don’t have any cash and the card won’t

allow for cash withdrawals. I've always been told I can spend whatever I want, but it's got to be trackable.

It means I have no real way to escape.

But there's also no way in hell I'm going to choose an Alpha out of the fuckboy assholes that attend the academy socials. Granted, there might be some new ones since we're onto a new year, but I doubt they'll be any better than the likes of Colby Summers, that threesome-obsessed idiot who started attending socials last semester, basically right after he turned eighteen.

I don't think he's been successful in his quest yet, but I know a couple of the younger Omegas fell for his questionable charms in fairly quick succession, before his vile personality made them change their minds about him.

He's a definite no, and there are a whole bunch more just like him to varying degrees.

There are a few softboys among the fuckboys, too. I think I hate them even more, because they're pretending to be better than the other guys, but the truth is there's no real difference between them.

Of course, there are worse options than fuckboys among Goldcrest's "available" bachelors. There are also some real creeps that no Omega wants to find herself left alone with. Creeps like Lachlan Darvish, the guy who's somehow still allowed to walk into the socials like he isn't a vile piece of shit despite mounting evidence that shows, clearly and unequivocally, that he's a predatory rapist.

I don't even want to think about that guy. The others are bad enough.

Ugh. I don't want to have to draw up a list of Alphas just so I can pour over it and decide which ones are the least disgusting. I mean, how does a woman even decide if it's better if her potential husband has a snobby personality, or a weird sexual kink that everyone knows about?

I don't want people looking at my feet for the rest of my life, wondering if they're satisfying my pervy mate, but I also

don't want a guy who thinks I'm beneath him because he's so fantastically successful and remarkably handsome, and I'm an old maid some asshole hoisted on him because he couldn't refuse the increase in wealth that came with her.

Thinking about it is enough to piss me off.

By the time I get in the car to be taken back to the academy, I'm only sure of one thing.

I can't choose any of the existing Alphas at Goldcrest.

I don't like what that might mean for my future, but I can't deny it's the truth.

Here's hoping some fresh, new Alphas arrive this semester.

Anything's got to be better than what we already have.

Chapter

SEVEN

KELLAN

It feels good to be out in the sun, even if it seems incredibly bright and I've had at least one allergy-induced sneezing-fit since I stepped out of my dark, dingy apartment building. I can feel a second one starting to build up courtesy of my parents' flowerbeds, the first hint of a tickle making me screw up my nose as I reach out to ring the doorbell.

I grab a tissue out of my pocket and turn away from the door just in time to start sneezing my ass off. It's unbelievable how much the outside world seems to hate me just for existing.

My mom answers the door when I'm crumpling the tissue up in my hand. As usual, she's wearing a flowery dress and a cheery smile, and a pair of heels to push her height just over five foot.

Her smile droops quickly when she sees my face. "Oh, Kellan. You look terrible."

"Thanks, Mom," I reply. "I really needed that."

"Did you run out of your antihistamines?" she asks.

"No, I took one before I came over. Dad said you were having computer issues?"

She steps back, hugging me one-armed as she lets me into the house, and, as usual, she lets the door swing closed behind us with a bang. The noise makes me wince. For such a dainty, little woman, my mom can be pretty heavy-handed. She moves

ahead of me into the dining room where their ancient PC sits on a desk in the corner of the enclosed space.

“If you need to know what the issues are, you should ask your father,” Mom says, crossing her arms. “As far as I’m concerned that piece of junk is ready for the garbage can.”

“I’ll buy him a new one,” I promise.

“If you do, he’ll probably leave it in the box.”

He probably would. “I’ll set it up for him when I get it. Where is he anyway?”

“Out back talking to Mr. Smith over the hedge.”

“I’ll wait inside,” I tell her, pulling a chair out from the table.

She nods and scrutinizes my face. “You’re not sick, are you? You look so pale.”

“That’s just the curse of working from home, Mom. I don’t get a lot of sun.”

“Hmm. You’re looking skinny again, too.”

“I haven’t lost any weight.”

She always thinks I’ve lost weight, when the truth is I’ve had the same body mass since I turned seventeen. I’ve been slim-built ever since I was a kid, and, at twenty-six, I’m long past the point where a growth-spurt might suddenly come on to bulk me up.

My mom frowns at me as if she’s trying to decide if I’m lying to her. Then she smiles and snaps her fingers. “I made cupcakes this morning! You’ll have one with your sandwiches.”

She turns on her heel and disappears into the kitchen.

I bite back the urge to try and stop her from fussing over me. She likes it, and if it makes me feel guilty for not being around as much as I should be, then I deserve to feel bad.

I’ve had my head down for so long, it’s become close to impossible to slow down and take a look around to see

everything I'm missing. I've lost countless weekends to work, and it's gotten to the point where I barely notice the weeks flying by until a client mentions a holiday. Last one was a couple of months ago. The Fourth of July. Independence Day. It felt like Christmas was barely over.

How the hell did six months pass in the blink of an eye like that?

Yeah, I'm probably long overdue to schedule a couple weeks off. Maybe even a month.

I run a hand through my hair and realize it's been way too long since I got it trimmed.

I'm usually more on top of the little things, but this year has been more manic than most.

Losing myself in my work has an upside, too. Aside from speeding up the passage of time, it gives me something to obsess over that takes my mind off the bigger picture that I'm working toward.

And, of course, there's the money.

That's the main part of the bigger picture. It feels more than a little weird to be sitting at my parents' dining table in a cheap plain shirt and jeans with worn-in sneakers on my feet and hair that's long overdue for a cut, while I'm literally a millionaire.

Of course, my savings just inched over the million-dollar mark this month, and that never would have happened if I moved out of my boxy little studio apartment after college.

I've made a lot of very deliberate choices in order to scrape together the absolute maximum that I could in the smallest amount of time possible. I keep any kind of treats to a bare minimum, and I use an older model handset as my phone. My only real luxuries are occasional lunches out of the apartment and a gym membership that keeps me from becoming a total recluse.

It hasn't been easy, exactly, but my patience has held out pretty well so far.

My mom hums cheerfully as she steps back into the room with a serving plate full of sandwiches. When she says she's going to whip something up, she really goes all out.

"Tell me you didn't make all of that for me," I protest, even as my stomach starts to rumble at the sight of the massive sandwich pile.

She gives me a pointed look as she sets it down. "See? I knew you were hungry."

"Mom, no one's ever that hungry."

She rolls her eyes. "Don't be silly. It's not *all* for you, but you'd better make sure you eat your fill before your father comes in from the garden. I already called on him, and you know he's a bottomless pit when it comes to anything with bread and meat involved. Wait right there and I'll get the rest."

"There's more?" I ask, as I pick up a ham and cheese loaded sandwich.

She nods before she slips back into the kitchen.

I take a bite of my heavenly lunch and sigh in satisfaction.

My mom buys the best of everything, so the food always tastes amazing.

I could eat like this every day if I wanted to. I know that.

Maybe I'll start now that I've hit my big financial target.

Most of the time the guilt of not making it to that financial goal has been enough to keep me from succumbing to the temptation to spend more on groceries, or anything else. It'll be nice not to think about that anymore. Well, for a while at least. Chances are, I'll have a new goal soon.

I pick up another sandwich, and my mom comes into the room with a pitcher of lemonade in one hand and a bowl of mixed chips in the other. She dumps them down with a clatter and a splash, quickly disappearing back into the kitchen. I pick up the chips that have fallen onto the tablecloth and decide instantly that beef and prawn cocktail are two flavors that should never be tasted together.

Mixed chips are a weird thing that my mom loves, while the rest of the world knows it's nothing short of a crime against snacking. Avoiding the bowl, I finish up my sandwich.

When Mom is done filling up the table with snacks and cakes, she retreats to the kitchen one last time and comes back with plates, glasses, and silverware.

I can tell something's going to get broken otherwise, so I get to my feet and take the pile of items out of her hands so she can finally sit down and relax.

"Thank you," she says as she takes her regular seat across from me.

I set the plates down carefully and distribute the glasses between our three usual place settings. The plates are next, then the silverware. When I sit back down, my mom lets out a happy sigh.

"I don't know about your father, but I'm famished," she tells me as she picks up a chip and pops it into her mouth.

I'm not surprised she's starving. She's probably been running around in those heels all morning, doing all kinds of housework while my father pottered around in the garden, chatting to the elderly neighbor over the fence.

"Well, you'd better get started before Dad joins us," I warn her, the same way she warned me.

She picks up a sandwich and puts it on her plate. Pours herself a lemonade and manages to leave a little puddle at the side of her glass without even noticing. She offers to pour mine, and I take the pitcher out of her hands.

"Thanks, Mom," I tell her.

"So, what's new?" she asks, as she picks up another chip.

"Nothing, really," I admit, though that's not exactly true.

I know what she wants to ask about. It's probably futile, but I'm hoping she doesn't.

She takes a bite of her sandwich, and I can hear the back door creaking open in the kitchen.

Dad stomps his feet on the mat, then the tap starts to run at the sink.

Mom looks back, and calls out, “Take those horrible crocodile feet off before you come through here.”

“I was taking them off,” he calls back, with the offense-taken tone of a surly child.

He wasn’t taking his gardening Crocs off. He only bothers to do that when Mom reminds him.

Some things never change. It’s oddly reassuring.

I pick up a second sandwich, deciding if I’m having cake afterward, I might as well eat my fill like my mom requested. She gives me a bright smile as I start eating it.

Dad walks into the room a minute later, wearing old clothes and a sheepish smile.

“Sorry, Old Jack wouldn’t shut up about this new fertilizer he thinks everyone should be using.”

Mom screws up her nose. “Don’t talk about gardening stuff at the dinner table, dear.”

“I wasn’t going to,” he says, holding up his hands.

She inspects them and nods, letting out a breath. “Well at least you’ve cleaned your hands properly.”

“I used the nailbrush like you told me. I’m not completely useless, love.” He leans in and kisses mom’s cheek, making her blush and giggle like a teenager.

My parents may argue all the time, but they’re still in love. I used to think their behavior was utterly revolting. This would have been one of those moments where I’d go hide in my room to finish my lunch without having to see them fawn over each other. Eventually, I realized it was a good thing, even if I’d rather not witness it.

Dad picks up a sandwich. “Oh good, there’s still some left.”

As if between us Mom and I might have polished off the insane buffet she laid out.

“I was just asking Kellan if anything was new with him,” she fills him in.

My dad makes a grunting noise since his mouth is full of food.

“Don’t try to talk with your mouth full, dear.”

“Nothing’s really happening,” I add, covering up the fact that I hit my financial goal.

I’ve spent years working toward it, and they both know it was likely to happen this year, but they have no idea when, and I’d rather not talk about my application to the academy until I’ve already submitted it. Which will be after a pep-talk from my new friend and mentor, Lana, the main full-time receptionist at Goldcrest.

“Nothing at all?” Mom asks. “No big, fancy, new clients or anything?”

“I might have a new client set up for later in the year. He’s not ready to start until December.”

“Will that be the one who pushes you over the million mark?” Mom raises her eyebrows.

I should have known she’d bring it up. It’s not like I have much else going on.

I shake my head.

“He’s already there,” my dad cuts in, reaching for the lemonade.

“What?” Mom asks. “No. He would have said ...”

“I was waiting until I put my application in,” I admit. “I didn’t want to say anything until I got approved.”

Mom looks shocked. “You’re serious? You’ve got a million dollars in the bank?”

Dad smiles. “Always knew you could do it.”

Because he knows he could have, too. We’re both Alphas. We both have the potential to reach any goal we set for ourselves. He chose a different kind of path when he met my

mom. That was it for him. It didn't matter that she was a Beta, and that his parents expected something more from him.

When he tells the story of meeting my mom, it's obvious the second he laid eyes on her he didn't care about meeting Omegas, or any other women. He knew Mom was meant for him, and he knew he wanted to be near her as much as possible which would be harder if he went into the kind of high-flying business life that most Alphas choose. So, he found work as a fire-fighter locally instead, and his parents promptly disowned him.

I don't understand how people who claimed to love him could be so heartless.

I know my parents would never disown me over a choice I made, even if they didn't agree with it.

"Thanks," I murmur, still feeling weird about my financial success.

Truth is, I've been working my ass off for years to make myself financially viable, so I'd be accepted as a suitor to the Omegas at the most elite academy in the country. However, actually getting to the point where I have a million dollars in the bank is crazy.

I knew I could do it, and I worked hard until it happened.

Still, it's not something that's achievable for most people, so it feels kind of weird that I set my sights that high, and I got there. If I wasn't an Alpha, I'd have had no hope in hell of doing that. That's what makes me feel a little uneasy about it.

"Why haven't you applied yet?" Mom asks. "The year is more than halfway through, and you're met their standards. I don't understand."

I can feel my dad's silent gaze on me, watching carefully and avoiding commenting.

My mom can be a bit oblivious to the obvious, but he doesn't miss a thing.

He can tell I'm torn about it now that I'm so close to the finish line and everything I've been trying to achieve. Now

that I can see it, I'm having doubts. It's hard not to, after so many knock backs up until this moment. If I get one more standard letter that tells me I didn't meet Goldcrest's criteria, I think I'm done chasing this crazy dream.

I take a long sip of lemonade and then smile at my mom reassuringly. "I'm just taking my time. Making sure the application is perfect. Lana said she'll check it over for me next week. Help me tweak it."

"Lana? Oh, right. Your friend who works at the academy. Can't she get you inside for a visit, or something?" Mom inquires.

I shake my head. "It's not the kind of place you can just visit. Once my application gets approved, I could request to take a tour, but not before."

She exchanges a look with my father and manages not to blurt out that Goldcrest's rules are stupid.

I know she thinks I'd be happier if I just met a girl out in the real world, but she knows how I feel about this and she's trying to be supportive about it. My father probably has similar feelings, but he's not as vocal as my mom.

Mom picks up her glass. "Well, you just make sure you get that application in soon. They have to approve it now. They have no excuse not to."

I'm not so sure about that. Most of the Alphas on Goldcrest's approved list are billionaires, or close to it. Or, at least, their parents are. I beefed up my parents' investment portfolio when I started being rejected, but a few years of work on it hasn't amounted to huge dividends yet. I'm not as good with that stuff as I am with data science reports.

I smile anyway. "Don't worry. I'll hand the application in soon."

That seems to satisfy my mother, and the conversation starts to move along to other things.

When lunch is over, I'm left in the dining room with my father, going over what's wrong with the computer while my mom does the dishes in the kitchen.

I start up the computer and look over at my dad.

He's still sitting in his usual chair, sipping at his lemonade.

"Does it always take a while to load up?" I ask, checking the screen.

"Forget the computer," he says, putting his glass down. "I need to throw it out."

"Uh ... okay—" I tell him, wondering why I'm here if it's not for that.

"You're not sure about applying to the academy anymore. What changed?"

I knew he could tell. Alpha instincts are sharp. It's a gift and a curse.

Letting out a sigh, I turn off the computer. "I'm just tired. It's been a long wait."

"You knew it might take a while when you made it your goal to get in."

"I did," I admit. "But I wasn't really prepared for all the rejections. It's starting to feel like no matter what I do, I'll never be good enough to get approved for entry."

"When you think about that girl, does it still feel like she's your true mate?"

My skin flushes a little. I never told my parents that's what it felt like, but apparently, I didn't need to. I suppose suddenly going from an aimless teenager to a young man with a mission was more suspicious than I expected. Nothing less than staring into the face of fate can give someone that kind of motivation.

"It does. It always has," I admit. "But what if I was wrong?"

Ten years have passed, and now I'm starting to wonder. Surely, if we were meant to be together, I wouldn't keep being rejected from the academy? Considering there's no other way to get the chance to see her again, while she's unclaimed, I can't help but wonder if something might have misfired the day I ran into the pretty blonde girl with the soft cherry scent.

Maybe I only thought we were fated because she perfumed for me.

It wasn't something that should have happened. It was way too early.

So, maybe it was a mistake. A painful mistake that's swallowed up the last ten years of my life.

"I knew the second I laid eyes on your mother that she was my true mate," my father admits. "I know some people think that's only something that can happen between Alphas and Omegas, or Omegas and packs, but I think if fate's hand is involved, anything is possible."

I'm a little stunned to hear him call Mom his true mate.

I don't know why. He's always talked about her that way.

I guess it's because he's never used those exact words before.

"I trusted my instincts, and they've never steered me wrong. You can't doubt yours. Life has a way of throwing obstacles into your path right when the road looks clear, but you can't let that push you off course, son. You need to trust your gut. It might not feel like it now, but nothing can stop true mates from finding their way to each other."

He sounds so certain.

I wish I felt as confident about trusting my instincts as he thinks I should.

I nod slowly, feeling around for that one spark of hope that I know is inside me.

It doesn't matter how crazy it makes me feel to believe she's still destined to be mine.

Holding onto that hope is all I have left, so I can't let go.

Who the hell knows what'll happen if I do?

I guess I'll find out if my application gets rejected again.

It feels like this is my final chance. If they don't accept me now, they're never going to.

Please, God, let them accept me.

I always thought my patience was endless. That's why I was more than willing to play the long game, because I knew the moment I met my one true mate that she was going to be mine.

All I really needed to do was wait.

There's a contentment in knowing something with absolute certainty. It gave me a sense of serenity that made the passage of time so much more bearable.

It didn't matter that we met when we were too young to fully comprehend what it meant. We still felt that connection to each other. It was the turning point in my young life, the catalyst for change.

I'd been drifting before I set eyes on her.

Ready to let the world shuffle me along in its wake.

The instant she walked into my life, everything changed.

I found my purpose, and I'm not going to let go of it.

For better or worse, all I can do now is wait.

Chapter

EIGHT

KELLAN

Brooke Corvina, only child, Omega, and sole heir to the Corvina Company's billion-dollar fortune is the most unlikely true mate a working-class Alpha with no incoming fortune could ever expect to find. I should have known from the start that it wasn't going to be easy to get to her.

Yet, I didn't let anything dissuade me. From the day I met her, I trusted in my instincts completely.

I set goals and came up with plans that would allow me to meet them. Overnight, I went from having zero prospects and interests to becoming highly driven.

My parents were pleasantly surprised, for the most part.

I was showing them I wasn't going to waste the potential they'd always known I had.

They were proud of me for my sudden acceptance of my Alpha tendencies. The same traits I'd repressed for years to fit in amongst the Betas at school were suddenly the traits I was depending on daily to push my grades up in every class and help me reach my full potential.

It turned my life upside down, I'll admit. Suddenly, I was attractive to the girls who wouldn't give me a second glance when I was hiding the real me. The Betas I'd befriended were pissed that I hadn't told them I was an Alpha, and a whole lot of strangers thought it was some kind of joke.

How could the incredibly average kid turn out to be an Alpha?

Of all the reactions I got, that's the only one I truly understood. I was never particularly handsome or muscular. The physical properties most people expect from an Alpha don't fit. I have the drive and ambition, and the instincts of an Alpha, but I'll never look like I'm anything other than a Beta.

Despite the upheaval, I held tightly to my drive and ambition for the first five years, until I got my second rejection from the academy, and then I started to realize it might not be enough.

Every year, the academy expected a hefty donation. I'd worked incredibly hard for every penny of the thousands I tried to hand over, and they threw the check back with my rejected application each and every time.

What good was making money if it wasn't enough to get me past the gates?

I'd never get the chance to meet my mate if I couldn't get myself approved.

More than ten years have passed now since I met her.

A whole damn decade come and gone, and I've failed in every attempt to cut through the red tape at the academy, despite working like a demon and becoming a millionaire in the process.

No one can tell me I didn't try, but I do have to question the sanity of putting myself through this process every year, hoping for different results when it feels like nothing has really changed.

It's crazy to keep trying. Clearly, I'm never going to be good enough for Goldcrest.

I should give up. Walk away. Forget I ever met her.

Nope. Impossible. Not going to happen. You can't undo obsession.

It can only snowball until it reaches an inevitable conclusion.

That's what makes the doubt creep in. I don't want to quit trying, but it's starting to feel like an exercise in futility. I won't be the same person if I keep going down this path. The frustration of trying and failing is changing me, and I don't know how to stop it.

It already feels like I've gone too far.

I didn't become friends with the academy's main receptionist with the intention of using her for information, but that's where I'm at now. Lana took dozens of calls from me when I started trying to get answers on why I kept being rejected, and she eventually took pity on my pleas.

She's been a good friend to me.

I shouldn't be repaying her kindness by jeopardizing her job.

This is so fucked. I should call her and tell her not to come.

I check the time and realize it's too late to call off lunch. She'll already be on her way into town.

Too late for regrets now anyway. She has the file. She already stole from her employer to help me out. Anything that happens to her because of that is on my shoulders.

Cressidan City isn't my favorite place, truth be told, but there's nowhere closer to the academy that we can meet. I usually come into the city to meet the clients I work for so it's no real hardship to make the drive over from Crystal Lake.

I get to Lana's favorite café early, and I order an espresso while I wait.

Sitting down makes me twitchy, so the coffee's probably a bad idea.

I drink it anyway.

I order lunch when I'm done, knowing Lana won't be much longer. She'll appreciate the time it saves, and I might feel a bit less guilty about dragging her out here if I'm not going to make her late when she has to get back to her reception desk.

She shows up right after lunch does, her eyebrows raised as she approaches the table.

“I hope that’s all for you,” she tells me.

“Chicken salad on rye isn’t your usual?” I ask, sure that it is.

She has her long brown hair up today and she’s wearing a white sweater and black pants with flats, which is a fairly typical look for her. It’s kind of casual while still being tidy and professional enough for her role at the academy.

She sits down, putting her huge black purse on the seat next to her.

“It does look good, but I have a dumb family thing this weekend ... Long story. I was thinking about ordering soup.” Her gaze moves over the sandwich, and I can see her willpower fading fast.

“The soup today is French onion,” I inform her, knowing that’ll make the sandwich seem more attractive, even if she is on some kind of crazy, unnecessary diet.

She shivers. “Oh. Ew. No thank you. I’ll stick with my usual.”

I eat when she does, avoiding the urge to blurt out everything I’ve been thinking about.

She chews slower than normal, apparently savoring every bite.

This is definitely a woman on a diet.

“Mmm,” she murmurs as she sets the sandwich down and reaches for her latte. “So good.”

I smile. “Well, it is your favorite.”

She shakes her head. “Actually, the mighty meaty sandwich you have is my favorite, but it has more calories than a six-pack of donuts so it’s not a regular treat.”

“It is pretty tasty,” I admit, though I had no idea about the calorific content.

“Don’t tease a woman when she’s watching her weight,” she says.

I push my plate at her. I’ve demolished half of it, but the other half is completely untouched.

“Have the rest. You deserve it.”

She licks her lips, eyeing the sandwich salaciously.

“Okay, fine, but if my mom makes any comments about my ass, you’re getting all of the blame and probably a late-night call to bitch about it, too.” She switches our plates and starts on my sandwich, using silverware and taking small bites. She gives me a warning glance with her first mouthful, lets out a sigh after she swallows, and then shakes a finger at me. “Not one word about how I’m eating this, or I walk, and you don’t get the inside scoop on your application.”

“Did I say anything?”

“You gave me a look,” she says.

I put my hands up. “I had no intention behind it.”

“Sure you didn’t,” she mutters, as she slices herself another dainty bite.

“What is the inside scoop, anyhow?” I pick up the untouched half of her chicken salad sandwich.

She holds up a finger. “Let me enjoy my rare treat. Then, I’ll give you what you asked me to get, and you can ask as many questions as you want.”

“Deal,” I agree.

We eat in relative silence, her little moans of appreciation making nearby tables glance over.

It’s not quite a full-on *When Harry Met Sally* moment, but it’s close enough.

“Mighty meaty,” I explain to the other diners, while her mouth is full, and her focus is on the food.

I hear a few of them ordering the same thing and I’m half tempted to catch the attention of the server to ask for another.

Maybe once Lana goes back to work, I'll order a second.

Depends what she found out. Bad news really kills my appetite.

I put the unsatisfying chicken sandwich down and take a sip of my Americano.

She takes her time and pats her mouth with a napkin when she's done.

"A moment on the lips," she murmurs. "But it was so worth it."

She opens her purse and pulls out what looks like a slip of paper.

"Something's definitely weird with Brooke's file," she tells me in a low voice as she hands it over.

I unfold the slip of paper and start drinking in the details greedily.

"I did a cross check and it's not like any of the other files. There's a lot of information that's just missing completely. I would guess because her father's the richest regular donor, he gets a say in what's on there."

I blink as I finish reading. There really isn't much on the file, and what is included is enough to rile me up. I look up at Lana, my brows knitting together.

"What the *fuck*?"

"I know," she says, shaking her head.

"This doesn't make any sense."

Brooke's file marks her as a top priority, urgently awaiting a match.

Yet, I've applied year after year only to be denied access to the academy and its Omegas.

How many other applications have they denied when they have Omegas urgently awaiting matches?

I have a feeling I wouldn't like the answer if I knew it. I hate this stupid, elitist academy.

Taking in a breath, I try to calm down. “You think if I specifically mention Brooke as an old friend, my application might be approved this time?”

She shrugs. “Honestly, I don’t know. I’ve heard of Alphas doing that in the past, but it really depends on who their parents are. If they meet the criteria, it’s always a yes.”

Ah, the criteria. Apparently, it’s a changeable list that will never be set in stone or kept in writing, so it’s pretty much impossible for an applicant to know when they’ve ticked all the boxes. All I know for sure is that a solid financial footing is important.

“Do you think I’ll meet the criteria this year?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Honestly, I don’t know, Kellan. What you’ve done is impressive. Seriously. In the time it’s taken me to get one tiny raise working in the same job for the past five years, you’ve become a self-made millionaire. That’s amazing. It’s more than most people achieve in a lifetime.”

“But it’s probably still not enough.”

She lets out a sigh. “I wish things were different. Maybe mentioning Brooke will work. I heard Geraldine talking to her father last week. He wants her to choose an Alpha this semester. So, she’s under pressure to make sure that happens.”

“Maybe that’ll work in my favor,” I murmur.

“She rarely bends the rules.”

“But she does bend them?”

“Not that I’m supposed to know about it, but yes, she does occasionally decide other things are more important than the criteria.”

It’s all I wanted to hear. Well, maybe not *all*. “Can you get me a meeting with her?”

“I’m not her personal assistant, and you know she doesn’t take meetings with Alphas who aren’t approved to be inside the academy.”

“What about a phone call?”

“She doesn’t take calls from unapproved Alphas, either.”

Leaning back in my chair, I try to think.

She’s not going to approve my application. It’s just a piece of paper. It means less than nothing to her. I need another way to get her attention.

“I assume if I turned up at the academy, I’d be thrown out?”

“You assume correctly.”

“Would I even get through the door?”

“Are you crazy? Wait. Don’t answer that. I know you are.” She starts to look like she wishes she said no to this lunch. “Bursting in uninvited is guaranteed to get you on the ‘never approve’ list.”

“I’m not already on that list?”

“You know what I’m saying. It’s not a smart move.”

“Well, what is?”

She shrugs. “Keep doing what you’re doing. Mention your connection to Brooke when you submit your next application. I think that might be enough.”

She drinks her latte. I’m done with lunch. All I can think about is finding a way to speak to Geraldine in person. I know the academy doesn’t really condone true mate matches, if only because it doesn’t align with that they’re doing. Telling her Brooke is fated to be with me won’t mean anything.

I clear my throat. I’ve been speaking with Lana regularly for the past year. She’s become a friend, and even so I’m a little afraid to ask what I’m about to ask, but I know I need to.

“What do you know about Brooke, personally?”

She seems surprised by the question. Her hazel eyes widen. Her mouth drops open as she stares at me in shock. “What do I know about Brooke? Personally?”

“I assume you know who she is?”

She nods slowly. "I've seen her around."

"So, what do you know?"

"Oh. Um. She ..." she starts, trailing off.

"What?" I ask, curious now that she's acting so strangely.

"Um, sorry. I just wasn't expecting that question."

"You didn't expect me to ask about the Omega I've been trying to get approved to visit?"

She laughs lightly. "I guess I didn't expect to feel weird about it. She's very ... alluring."

I blink as the truth sinks in. She's attracted to my mate.

I guess that happens kind of a lot with Betas. It doesn't mean Lana's going to try and steal her away.

"Is that why you agreed to steal her file for me?"

"Keep your voice down," she mutters, glancing around.

"Relax. Everyone in here is more interested in their food."

Well, the only other woman nearby is looking at me as if I'm one of those mighty meaty sandwiches, but that's not totally unexpected when I'm around people. I might not be a typical Alpha, but there are always some Betas who recognize me as one, and all Alphas attract Betas like flies to honey.

It's one of the reasons I prefer my quiet, little hometown over the city.

Everyone back home knows me, and they know I'm not interested in dating anyone who isn't Brooke Corvina. It got to be a running joke in high school, and most of the girls who used to be interested think it's weird that I'm still chasing someone who's basically out of my reach.

I can't give up now. I don't think I'll ever be able to do that.

One look, one smile, one inhale of her cherry scent and I was hooked.

"I like Brooke," Lana admits, her gaze moving to the table. "She can be spiky sometimes, but I get it. She doesn't like the

academy. She's there because of her father's expectations, not because she wants to meet an Alpha. She plays the perfect Omega so well, but it's an act, and I don't think she can keep it up for much longer."

"So, she's dressed up all the time and she takes part in all the socials?"

"Pretty much," she confirms. "That's the academy's definition of the perfect Omega."

"I assume she's never mentioned me."

"She doesn't talk about anything too personal. When she calls me on reception, it's usually to gossip about something that's been going on at the academy, or to talk about whatever TV show she's been binging ... which is pretty much always something everyone's already seen and loved and moved on from. She's never mentioned a super-determined, self-starter Alpha she once knew. Sorry."

It makes me smile to get to know my mate through the eyes of someone else who appreciates her, even if it also reminds me that Brooke knows as little about me as I do about her. We're virtually strangers, and I'm determined to change that before she's mated to some random Alpha by her father's orders.

"How does she seem, when you speak to her?"

"Well, she's kind of wry, I guess, but she can be sweet, too. There's this sparkle she sometimes gets in her eyes when she smiles, but it never lasts. It would be nice to see her really, truly happy. She deserves that."

"I'll do my best," I promise, making Lana smile.

"Of course you will." She takes my hand across the table. "Good luck with this year's application. I hope you get approved. I've got my fingers crossed for you."

She puts the strap of her purse over her shoulder, and nods at the slip of paper.

"Be careful with that. I could get in some real shit if anyone from the academy found out."

I fold it up and slip it into my pocket. “I’ll destroy it once I’ve memorized it.”

She snorts. “Okay. Lunch is on you, Mr. Millionaire, and next time order me a mighty meaty instead of chicken salad.”

“No more crazy diets?”

“I get the feeling our next lunch will be celebratory. If my snooping helped you get in, I might even make you upgrade lunch to dinner. Someplace fancy, with expensive wine and desserts we can’t pronounce.”

My lips twitch. “If you’ve help me get approved, I’ll buy you that Lexus you’re always talking about.”

“Hell, yes!” She waves. “Until next time.”

Waving back, I lift my mug to my lips only to find out my half-finished coffee is cold. I set it back down and remove my wallet from my back pocket. It’s just as well. I probably shouldn’t sit in a public place, pouring over a file that’s supposed to be confidential, anyway.

I pay the bill and get moving.

I have an application to fill out.

Chapter

NINE

BROOKE

Considering I shouldn't still be at the academy, Geraldine gives me a bit of flexibility with my classes. I've been through all three years like normal. The past few years I've stuck with the first-year classes, because I like to know what competition I have for any fresh, new Alphas who show up at the socials.

The girls this semester are kind of boring, honestly. At least last year there were some brighter sparks. A few Omegas who would never fit the mold. The only difference between me and them is my desire to make myself look like a true participant.

Pretending has gotten me this far, but I'm not so sure that's a good thing anymore. It hasn't saved me. I'm still stuck here, and if my father gets his way, I'll be hitched to the richest Alpha who takes him up on whatever bribe he offers to be rid of me.

Then, I'll end up like my mother.

What I want doesn't matter. If it did, I never would have been sent here.

I would have been out in the world chasing my own dreams, like Zelena.

The sweet, pretty Omegas around me gossip and giggle like children, making me feel even older than I am. I start to

regret my choice to sit in on the first-year classes, but not quite enough to bother to leave.

I've already picked out the queen bee of the group and decided she's no real threat if a decent Alpha shows up. She's too hot-tempered. Her emotions are completely out of control.

One look at her and any Alpha with half a brain would walk the other way.

The others are nothing new. They're all trying too hard to look like they haven't made an effort, and they're all swimming in uncertain emotions.

The first class starts, and I know the teacher's lesson word-for-word. I can feel my brain slowly turning to mush inside my head.

I have to get out of here.

Not the class, but the academy.

I don't have an escape plan, and there are a million different ways my father could find me if I did run, but if I don't find a way out, I know I'll end up a wreck like my mom. I might hold it together a little better than she did, but that's only because of my father's conditioning.

The end result would be the same.

I don't want the life my father's laid out for me.

He doesn't care. He won't listen to me when I tell him it's not what I want.

As far as he's concerned, I'm an extension of him and I'll do as he wishes.

Well, I can't do it anymore. I've been hiding in this academy, trying to get through to him via my actions. It hasn't worked. All it's done is piss him off.

The queen bee gives me a look as the teacher hands out materials.

"Is this class for real?" she asks, in a low voice with utter disdain in her tone.

On the inside, she's pleased. She clearly thinks being here will be one big party.

It kind of feels like that, sometimes.

"That's what it's like here," I murmur back, making her smile.

"You should know," she says. "I've heard you've been here a while."

"Six years," I tell her, realizing this will be my seventh, and my last.

"Wow," she murmurs, looking me over curiously. "I thought the Alphas who come here are supposed to be the best of the best. They're not good enough for you?"

"You be the judge," I tell her. "You'll meet them a week from Friday."

She shivers. "I can't wait. I'm going to meet my true mate here. I can just tell."

This girl seriously needs a reality check. It's cute to fantasize that there might be a perfect Alpha or pack out there for every Omega, but that's not how life really works. Chemistry is real, but falling in love at first sight is a crazy enough way to spin that kind of feeling without adding in the thought of the encounter being fated.

"I wouldn't talk about true mates in class," I tell her. "The academy doesn't subscribe to flights of fancy, and it could earn you a visit to Geraldine's office."

"True mates are real," she says. "I don't care what the academy says about it."

She sounds so sure. Her words even match her emotional state this time.

There was a time when I believed in true mates, back when Zelena and I used to talk about meeting our perfect matches.

Hers were going to be her back-up singers. She was determined to find a pack, and she didn't care if they were all Alphas or not.

Mine ... I have vague memories of a dream I had once.

Of meeting someone I didn't really get a chance to talk to, but who instantly made me feel safe.

A stranger with boy-next-door good looks. I don't know who he was, or what job he would have.

So, I told Zey I'd take a whole football team for my pack, and their cheerleaders, too.

At least it made her laugh.

"Brooke," Mrs. West calls out.

I look up, realizing I was doodling in the margins of my notebook. "Yes?"

"We need to start our tour of the building. Since you've been here as long as I have, I thought you might like to take half the class and begin in the gardens, where I'll finish up. It might be more satisfying than following me around again."

In other words, she knows I wasn't paying any attention and she's trying to keep me occupied.

"Sure. I can do the tour backwards."

I could do it upside down with my hands behind my back if you'd really like.

She nods. "Great. You can take the right side of the room. I'll take the left. Make sure you're back in class in half an hour."

"No problem."

Chapter

TEN

BROOKE

My dull as dishwater week starts to get more interesting just after hump day with the arrival of two new Omegas. A pretty girl with long, dark hair and terrible dress sense named Secret, and a kind of cute but scruffy guy with bright green eyes named Dylan. The two of them are in the first flushes of love, or at least attraction. They're trying to hide it, but any Omega can tell.

It's sweet, but it makes me sad for them.

I make a bitchy comment about the girl's clothes in the hopes of embarrassing her into playing pretend. It would be much easier to hide how different she is if she listened, and therefore much easier to conceal her relationship with her friend.

Curiosity eats at me. *Who are these people, and what the hell are they doing here?*

I text Lana to tell me what she knows at lunch.

She tells me she doesn't have time to meet me, but she can call me in a while, so I get settled at the kitchen table in my suite and order my lunch from the academy's kitchen. The salad arrives about ten minutes later, and I'm just starting to pick through it for the best bits when I get Lana's call.

"Hey, Lana," I answer, putting the fork down.

"I'm just heading out to my car, so give me a second," she says, before a gust of wind makes her location more obvious.

A few seconds of wind whistling later, I hear the distinct noise of a car door opening, and then closing.

“Okay,” she starts. “This is all kinds of crazy and I don’t want to be caught talking about it in reception. So, get this ... the male Omega, Dylan Cain, is rumored to be Cassidy Halloran’s Omega, and I say rumored because his father is super traditional and absolutely can’t stand the fact that his son has taken a male Omega. Now, Cassidy has never announced Dylan as his Omega, but there have been a whole bunch of incidents that make it obvious, according to students at Cassidy’s college, and locals who knew Dylan when he used to be a bar tender in the city.”

She pauses, and I can just tell there’s a lot more to come.

“Why do I know that name?” I ask. “Halloran?”

“Oh, right. You know it because everyone knows it. Cassidy’s father is seriously loaded. He’s been a billionaire for a long time. One of his companies owns the biggest electricity supplier in the country.”

“Wow,” I murmur, realizing he’s probably one of the top donors like my father if he’s that rich.

“The girl Dylan came in with is a bit more of a mystery. She’s from Silver Lake. Didn’t seem to know she was an Omega until she went to college in Cressidan City and one of the Alphas there triggered her perfume.”

“She seems pretty cozy with Dylan. They were brought in together, right?”

“Yeah. I think Cassidy brought them both in with another Alpha.”

Well, I guess that means they could both belong to Cassidy. It’s not super common for an Alpha to take two Omegas as his mates, but it’s possible. Still ...

“If they have an Alpha, why are they here?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Lana tells me. “I have to get back to reception now, but you can call me after five if you want to talk more.”

“Okay. I’ll speak to you later.”

I don’t have anything more to ask, but I’m sure I can think of something. The invitation to call Lana later is too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Chapter

ELEVEN

BROOKE

I immediately picture Lana when my phone starts ringing on Friday night. I'm already dressed for bed in a loose T-shirt and plain, old cotton panties, my skin stripped of make-up and slathered in night cream. I feel weirdly self-conscious, while my heart races just a little at the same time.

"Hey," I answer, wondering if she has more info about the new Omegas, or if she's finally calling me to talk randomly about something like I so often do to her.

"Brooke, dear, I was hoping I'd catch you before you went to bed," Geraldine's voice carries down the line.

Disappointment makes my shoulders droop.

It's after seven, dummy. Lana doesn't work this late.

"Oh?" I ask, not sure I want to know why she's calling.

I know my father must have spoken to the head of the academy about his little plan for me by now. It makes my stomach churn to think of them organizing my future together.

"I have an Alpha visiting the academy tomorrow. I'd like you to give him the tour and get to know him a little."

It's not even a question. She's basically calling as a courtesy, to let me know it's happening.

I should have seen this coming. She's pulling out the big guns now, inviting Alphas around for tours.

“Haven’t I already met all of the eligible Alphas who come here?”

“This one hasn’t been to any of the socials, despite being approved for a long time.”

I take a seat on the edge of the bed, knowing that I’m white-knuckling the receiver in my hand.

As much as I can’t stand the assholes who come to the socials, I like the sound of this even less.

“What’s wrong with him?” I ask her, being blunt because I have nothing left to lose.

She laughs. “Absolutely nothing. It’s just the first time he’s shown an interest in coming to Goldcrest.”

“If he’s old enough to be my ...” I start, ready to argue.

“He’s maybe a year older than you. You might have heard of him. Cassidy Halloran.”

I clamp down on the urge to ask if she’s joking.

What are the chances that the Alpha rumoured to belong to the school’s two newest Omegas is coming for a visit now, right after they got here? *Seriously?*

“Um ...” I murmur, while I try to think of actual words.

All I can think about is how obvious it is that Cassidy’s coming here to check up on his Omegas.

I don’t want to get anyone into trouble, and there would definitely be trouble if Geraldine knew about this.

“You’ve heard of him?” she asks.

I scramble to find words, and finally they start to flow out of my mouth.

“Oh, um, no. I was trying to think of where I’d heard his name before, but I can’t remember.”

“Well, I think you’ll be pleased. He’s quite a catch.”

“I’m sure he is.”

“Don’t forget to go to your therapy appointment in the morning.”

“I assume I’m not touring this Alpha around in the morning then?”

“It’ll be the afternoon,” she assures me. “You’ll have time to go to therapy and your class.”

“Okay. Great.”

“I knew I could count on you. Make sure you take good care of this one, Brooke. He could be your ticket out of Goldcrest.”

She hangs up, and I let out a sigh.

I should have known something like this would happen. She’s going to do whatever it takes to keep my father happy, including finding me fresh, new Alphas to turn down.

I’m sure Cassidy’s fine, but given the circumstances and the rumors, I’m certain he has other intentions for coming out to the academy. His Omegas have been here a couple days and the next social isn’t for a week. If he’s missing them already, they’ll be missing him, too, and there’s no way they’ll last much longer here.

If they’re really his, he’ll have to claim them.

I don’t want to get mixed up in that.

I could do without the heartache of starting to like someone who’ll never be into me.

My impossible friendship with Lana is painful enough.

I never should have started calling her. She’s only humoring me because she’s at work, and she’s way too polite to put the phone down when I call.

I haven’t told her about my father’s ultimatum.

Truth is, I’m a little afraid of what she might say.

Would she be horrified?

Would she ask me why I’m here if I don’t want an Alpha?

I think she'd be horrified, and if she was, I wouldn't know how to react.

I've tried standing up to my father. I've pushed his boundaries, resisted his demands.

It never gets me anywhere. He has too much clout. Too much money. Too much power.

I look like I have everything, but I have nothing.

Poor, little rich girl drowning in her diamonds.

I get how it looks, but I'm not the one in control of my life and I desperately need to be.

If only I could find a way.

Chapter

TWELVE

BROOKE

The Saturday morning therapy slot couldn't be any more inconvenient. It probably amused my father to reorganize it so that I'll never get to sleep late on one of my rest days. Of course, it's perfectly possible that he thinks it's an acceptable time for an appointment. He *is* a psychopath.

I get up at the crack of dawn to make sure I'm presentable for the day ahead.

I'd never complain about the chance to practice and perfect a makeup look, but I'm getting pretty sick of the façade I put up daily at Goldcrest. There's no room to be creative here. I'm stuck with classic beauty looks that are considered appropriate for an Omega.

When I'm done beautifying, I set my makeup and then step into the walk-in.

Looking at the racks of designer dresses, I can't help thinking I'd be more comfortable wandering around the building in my underwear. The dresses are all figure hugging and make me feel super conscious of my posture and anything I eat or drink while I'm wearing them.

What I wouldn't give to put on a pair of jeans and a comfy sweater, for once.

Instead, I slip on one of my prettiest dresses, knowing it'll please Geraldine when she brings Alpha Cassidy to visit me later. I find shoes that complement the dress and a matching

purse. Stepping out of the closet, I look like I'm ready to go to a red-carpet event.

Not a therapy appointment followed by a dress-making class and topped off with meeting a supposedly eligible bachelor who might want to claim me as his mate.

I check the time before I leave the suite.

I'll be early, but not by much.

Doctor Prentice's office is in the wing of the building that contains the rooms they use for medicals. It's separated from the rest of the building by the reception area. The reasoning for this is apparently to prevent Omegas from easily accessing that side of the building where all manner of drugs are stored.

It's for our own protection, according to the health and safety rules.

As if all the Omegas in the building are a bunch of weak-willed addicts.

I personally think this is where Geraldine hides any side projects she's got going on.

No one's supposed to loiter around in these corridors because they might hear or see something she doesn't want anyone to know about. See, Geraldine likes to pretend she's a nice person, but she has her own agendas, and if anyone screws any of those up ... well, she has a mean streak a mile wide and five miles deep.

So, I take my time when I visit my therapist.

I saunter down the corridor slowly, being observant of anything that might be unusual.

This morning it's deathly quiet, like a morgue, really. The hum of overhead lights that are ready to go out are the only sound that rises above my own soft footsteps on the carpet.

I get to the therapy room and pause, wondering if my father would have sent me back to therapy if I hadn't had another blackout. I wouldn't have had that last one if he hadn't insisted on inviting me home for my birthday as a ruse to give me a shitty ultimatum.

It's his fault, really. And this is his solution.

With a sigh, I step forward and knock on the door.

Three short, sharp taps in quick succession.

I cross my arms under my chest while I wait to be let in.

I heard vague sounds in the room before the door swings inward.

Doctor Prentice looks as tired as I feel.

She's only about ten years older than I am, but she makes it look more like twenty.

Bad haircut, bad skin care routine, the wrong shade of foundation and way too much concealer, making it look like she was just out in the sun with big shades on.

"Brooke, come in."

"Hi, Doctor Prentice," I greet her without any warmth in my voice.

I've already decided she can't help me. I'm only here on my father's insistence.

She gives me a tight smile. "I trust you're ready to take your father's advice for treatments going forward?"

Great. He's given her an earful, too. I'm off to such a great start today.

"I'm willing to consider any options you have for me," I tell her, unwilling to commit to whatever my father's told her without knowing what it is first.

She steps back a little more, as if she's just noticed she was inviting me in and not really giving me enough space to step into the room. I enter the reception area, and she closes the door behind me. The desk is unmanned, which would be unusual if it wasn't first thing in the morning on a Saturday.

"Elenor doesn't work weekends."

"Lucky for Elenor," I murmur as I follow Prentice into her room.

The lamp-lit room is supposed to feel intimate and cozy. To me, it only feels like a trap.

My father orchestrated therapy sessions for me a long time ago, and he seems to expect me to get something very specific out of them. I wish I could figure out what that something was. Maybe then I could be done with this crap.

“Take a seat,” she says, her voice still pleasant, though it has a tremble to it now.

Great. She expects something. My father must have given her a specific task today.

I sit down, giving her a frozen smile. “I’m honestly not sure why my father needs me to do this.”

“He made me aware that you had another blackout,” she tells me.

“Well, yeah, but drinking’s a trigger for that and he triggered my drinking, so ...” I shrug.

“What did he do to trigger your drinking?” she asks, not writing anything down.

I suppose if she did, my father might kill her.

“He gave me an ultimatum.”

“What kind of ultimatum?”

Oh, she knows. I can tell by her expression.

Of course he told her. He’s already got Geraldine stumbling over herself to get me matched off to a suitable Alpha, but why have one little helper when you could have two? Not that Prentice has any real sway over me, or the Alphas who visit. I’m a little curious now, I’ll admit.

She raises an eyebrow, reminding me she’s still waiting for my answer.

I shrug as I lean back in my seat. “It’s fairly typical as far as ultimatums go. It’s the kind where I pick the least rotten apple out of a bad bunch by the end of the year, or he chooses one for me.”

“The least rotten apple,” she murmurs.

Maybe it’s my imagination, but for a second, her lips look like they’re twitching.

“I realize I’ve probably been too fussy. I mean, an apple’s just an apple, right? They all taste the same in the end. And, besides, I’ve heard it’s possible to just cut the rotten parts right off,” I add, giving her a sweet smile as I make a chopping motion with my hand.

“Um ...” She smooths over the knee of her pant suit, blinking slowly before she finds the thought she wants to finish. “I understand your concerns about finding an appropriate mate, and we should talk about those, but I think it might be more productive to avoid using metaphors.”

“If you insist,” I tell her.

She takes in a breath and smiles. “Okay. I’m going to record our conversation now, if that’s all right with you?”

Shit. Talk about turning the tables. Now I’m the one who’s struggling to find the right words.

I mean clearly the right words are, ‘No, fuck off,’ but that’s not what my father wants to hear.

He wants to hear me talk about what I want in an Alpha.

I watch, stunned as she takes a phone-sized recording device from her jacket pocket and places it on the coffee table that’s separating us. It suddenly occurs to me how easy it would have been for her to record me without telling me.

“Brooke?” she asks. “I need your consent for the recording.”

“Can’t you just take notes, like a normal therapist?” I ask, my tone already frosting over.

I’ll be punished if I don’t meet my father’s expectations, and I know it.

It might not make a huge difference in the grand scheme of things, but I really don’t want to be forced down the aisle in two months instead of twelve.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs. “I have to supply a tape for every session from now on. We can take breaks if you need to, just give me a hand signal to cut, and I’ll pause the recording. Okay?”

Why does that tiny kindness make my eyes tear up?

She’s just trying to handle me. She doesn’t actually care if I don’t want to do this. It’s her job, and she has my father’s orders to comply with. She only wants to make sure she does what’s been asked of her, because otherwise the undoubtedly insanely high compensation she’s being rewarded will feel unwarranted and she’ll be fired and probably blacklisted from her profession.

Yeah, my father really knows how to motivate people.

I wait until the emotional surge that made me teary passes to nod slowly.

Prentice lets out a sigh and smiles as she presses the record button on her device.

“This is session number three hundred seven with Brooke Corvina, and Doctor Carolyn Prentice.”

God, she makes it sound so official.

“Now, Brooke, I understand that you have some concerns over finding an appropriate mate. Would you please state your main concern for the record?”

This is it, I guess. I could sit here and play nice to get through the next hour without becoming homicidal, or I could tell her where to go and expect to be getting fitted for a wedding dress in about two weeks’ time.

Literally the only thing that keeps me from flipping my lid is the realization that my father’s choice of Alpha would be made to torment me for fighting against his wishes.

I’d end up with the absolute worst filthy-rich asshole he could find.

Clearing my throat, I tamp down my anger.

“My main concern?” I ask, thinking it over.

The thought of telling the absolute truth is terrifying. Depending on how well I keep up with his demands, my father could use the information I'm about to give against me. On the other hand, being anything less than honest could work against me, too. He can always tell when I'm lying.

"If you have more than one, you can talk about all of them," Prentice encourages.

"I want to be treated like an equal, a partner," I tell her, finally. "I won't marry a man who'll treat me as less because I'm a woman, or an Omega."

"Okay." She nods slowly. "It's normal to want a relationship with an equal. Alphas and Omegas are very different in their traits and natures. It can be hard for an Alpha to realize that these separate traits combine to make a complete whole. They can be stubborn. We can work at making your chosen Alpha see you as his equal. Your father will pay for him to come to see me."

I raise an eyebrow at her, but I keep my mouth shut.

If she expects to reverse a lifetime's worth of misogyny in a few therapy sessions, she's more naïve than I ever thought she was.

"I haven't chosen an Alpha," I tell her.

She crosses one leg over the other. "Have you given it any thought?"

"I have, and I'm not sure, yet."

"You must be closer to some of the visiting Alphas than others by now?"

A dangerous question, for sure.

I've had flings with a few of them, flirty encounters with others.

Some, I've disregarded on sight or reputation alone.

"I've gotten to know several of them," I admit.

"Did any of them treat you as an equal?"

Ha! She seriously thinks it's going to be that easy?

“No, they pretty much all treated me the same way.”

“And what way is that?”

“Like a prize to be won.”

“So, they were interested, and you weren't?”

“Some of the time,” I answer, not willing to commit to the idea that I'm at fault for not being interested in guys who looked at me like I could be the one. Truth is, once they realize my perfume doesn't start to come in when things get physical, they no longer care to pursue me as a prize.

No one wants a broken Omega.

They may as well go out and date Betas, as I've been told more than once by some of the charming men my father's asking me to consider as my near-future husband.

“Then it sounds like there might be at least one Alpha you were interested in at one point.”

“At one point,” I echo back, not wanting to be too vehement in rejecting that idea.

Maybe if we make slow but certain progress in these sessions it'll keep my father away until I have a real plan. One that doesn't involve putting on a white dress.

“Did this Alpha, or Alphas, do something to upset you?”

I give Prentice a wry smile. “I might have been interested when they weren't.”

“So, there is more than one.” She beams back at me.

“There might be a few.”

I leave out the part where I'd never go near any of those guys again if my life depended on it.

“Of course, I'm also meeting a new Alpha this afternoon. Geraldine just told me about it last night.”

Prentice gives me the kind of look I imagine I give her every session, as if she's trying to work out how I can possibly be so dense.

“Ah, yes,” she says, after a noticeable pause. “Cassidy Halloran?”

I suppress the smirk that feels like rising. I wonder what my father will make of her hesitation.

“Yes, Alpha Cassidy sounds like a suitable match.”

“Of course,” she says. “However, you shouldn’t let that prospect detract your attention as you’ve yet to meet the man.”

Clearly, she knows Cassidy already has an Omega or two.

She might think I don’t know but admitting that would only show how well she really knows the Omega she’s been talking to once every week for six years.

I know everything that goes on around Goldcrest. I’ve been here too damn long not to.

“You’re not sure my father will approve of Alpha Cassidy?” I ask, before I can check myself.

I watch her face pale. She’s worried about saying the wrong thing in reply.

She should be. My father really doesn’t like it when his minions put words in his mouth.

“I’m sure he’s an appropriate match. Geraldine wouldn’t have arranged for him to meet with you if he wasn’t,” she answers, side-stepping my question carefully.

It was probably a bitch-move anyway, but I doubt it’ll be the last one I make.

She can take it. She’s paid well enough to compensate for having a client with a mean streak.

If she doesn’t like it, she can quit.

That’s an option I don’t have.

“I think we’ve made some progress,” she tells me, looking at her watch. “I’d like for you to go back to your room and make that list your father asked for. Bring it with you to our next appointment so we can narrow it down and Doctor

Corvina can approve your final selections before he approaches any of them with an offer.”

“Sure,” I murmur.

She stops the recording, and I get to my feet.

“Please make sure you have that list next week, Brooke,” Prentice pleads with me.

Looks like my stalling tactic isn’t going to work out quite as well as I’d hoped.

Being vague but making it obvious I’ll accept my father’s plan soon isn’t enough.

Presenting a list of suitable names completely ruins that idea.

I’ll need to be super indecisive over the list, I guess.

Shouldn’t be too hard, considering I don’t want to accept any of the Alphas who are going to be on it. I leave Doctor Prentice’s office, starting to worry over what’s going to happen next.

As soon as I make that list, I’m agreeing to what my father wants.

I might be able to delay it by skipping out on the next session, but I really don’t know how he would retaliate if I pull a move like that. I’m a little afraid to find out.

Once he gets the list, how long will it be before he makes someone an offer?

How long will I be waiting around, wondering which sexist pig I get to procreate with?

I move down the corridor slowly, stepping out into the garden when I come to the glass doors that lead outside. It’s bright out, warm and peaceful because it’s too early for the other Omegas to be awake right now. Taking a few deep breaths, I try to imagine a future that hasn’t been painted by my father. It’s hard to know what it would look like, but I think it would feel like standing out here in the fresh air alone,

enjoying the sounds of nature and the fragrant smell of blooming roses.

Running wouldn't be enough to get me to that different future.

There's nowhere I could go on foot that would get me far enough away to evade my father's influence. He has all kinds of people in his pocket. The city might be big enough to hide in, for a while, but I know I'd be found.

I know how much worse things would be if I defied him like that.

He has absolute power over my actions.

I can't escape, I can only hope to endure.

Chapter THIRTEEN

BROOKE

Waking up in yesterday's dress with no recollection of how I got to bed is never a good sign. When there hasn't been a drop of alcohol involved, it's even worse. I let out a groan as I force myself to sit up and attempt to recall what happened.

What's the last thing I remember?

My thoughts rush back to my meeting with Doctor Prentice, because that's when my head was clearest. When I was being careful about the words she was recording, I was on edge.

Afterward, everything felt hazier.

I know I stood outside for a bit.

Usually that helps when I'm emotionally overwhelmed. The relief it gave me yesterday didn't last.

My mood crashed before I even got back into the building.

I thought about going to bed to sleep, but I didn't go straight back to my room.

Class went by in a bit of a blur, but I think I said something to the new girl, Secret.

A warning, no doubt, about the dangers of staying at the academy.

No one should ever come here. Especially not someone who's found her mates.

Someone who knows what it feels like to be loved.

There was a dull ache in my chest as I walked out of the classroom.

The pain only increased when I could finally be alone in my suite.

I waited around for the visit from the Alpha, drowsy and in the mood to nap.

For a minute, I think I missed meeting him, and then I remember waking up to a knock on the door and Geraldine's voice calling on me to answer.

I did meet him.

He was completely disinterested, and I was surprised to find I felt the same way.

Within seconds of meeting his gaze, I could tell he wasn't the same as the Alphas who still come to the socials. Yet there was no attraction there.

This guy only has eyes for his Omegas.

He isn't interested in meeting single women like me.

A little stab of jealousy hit me, then, and I'm sure I was mean to him to push him away.

Geraldine wouldn't like it, but there was no way in hell this guy was ever going to take me as a mate.

This whole meeting was a waste of time and energy.

And that's the last thing I remember before I woke up on top of my covers.

I don't know what happened next. I could guess that I behaved myself well enough until Geraldine left us alone, and then I probably told him to go do what he really came to the academy for.

No. I probably told him to get Secret and Dylan out of here.

But I guess I'll never know that for sure, since it seems I had another blackout.

Clearly, my psyche is crumbling under the weight of my father's expectations.

He's the trigger for my blackouts. He always has been.

The only way they'll ever stop is if I can get away from here, get away from him.

I get up and take off my dress, inspecting it carefully before I hang it up to be cleaned.

It's not the first time I've passed out cold in my clothes, and it won't be the last either.

Though hopefully next time it'll be because I've had too much wine.

I get under the sheets when I go back to bed.

My father already ruined my Saturday. He doesn't get to ruin Sunday, too.

Chapter

FOURTEEN

KELLAN

Goldcrest's application process for potential Alphas is a pain in the ass. They have computerized systems, but they only accept postal applications ... and they respond the same way. It always takes about a week for them to receive and respond to it. This time when my rejection comes through in the post the Monday morning after I sent in my application, I'm ready for it.

Something in me knew it would be another rejection, and I'm not willing to accept it this time.

I know when I pick up the phone that I'm not calling to hear my friend's commiserations.

Dialing the number, I realize I know it by heart. I've called so many times over the years that I memorized it without noticing.

"Good morning, Goldcrest Academy! How can I direct your call?" an unfamiliar voice answers.

The woman has a cheerful tone, but it's not the one I'm used to.

"Hello?" the stranger asks when I don't answer her first greeting.

"Hi, who is this?" I ask.

"This is Paula. How can I help you?"

I wrack my brain, but I can't remember Lana mentioning someone called Paula.

"Are you in reception, because it's usually Lana ..."

"Lana's off today. She had a family thing, so she took a long weekend. I'm temping in her place. Is there something I can do to help you?"

"You could put me through to Geraldine Sawyer," I tell her.

"That's the head of the school."

"That's right."

"Who can I ask is calling?"

Could it really be this easy? Lana warned me multiple times that Geraldine would never speak to me, that she'd never in a million years pick up a call from someone who wasn't on her list.

That's when I have a lightbulb moment.

I clear my throat. "It's Colby Summers. I need to speak to her urgently."

There are probably better names I could have used, but considering I could only remember one of the more notorious Alphas from the academy's approved list off the top of my head, I go with it.

It doesn't really matter. All I need is a few minutes of her time.

"Hold, please," Paula says, before she cuts me off.

I curse under my breath and pull myself together quickly.

This isn't a failure. She was doing what I'd asked. I was mere seconds away from actually being put through to the woman who runs Goldcrest. *I can't quit now. I'm so damn close.*

I redial and try again, telling Paula she cut me off when she tried to put me through a second ago.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! This phone system is a real pain. Hold on. Oh good. Geraldine’s come out of her office.”

Fuck. This is it. This is really it.

I listen to Paula explain to her boss that she can’t figure out how to put me through.

Geraldine sighs before she explains how to do it, as if she’s talking to a small child.

The next thing I know, I’m on hold.

Great. More waiting.

I’m seriously starting to think people are given allocated amounts of patience to last their whole lifetime, and the massive amount I was gifted at first has now completely run out.

I count the seconds down in my head while I pace around my tiny living room, wondering idly if spending half of my fortune on a house might make me a better candidate for entry to the academy’s socials.

Somehow, I doubt it.

I’ve shown I’m on an upward trajectory by now. I don’t think my problem’s got anything to do with how much money I’m making. If it’s not that, I can’t see any other real reason for the academy to refuse me.

It shouldn’t matter that my parents are working class. I knew from the start that would make this harder, but it shouldn’t be a dealbreaker. Some of the parents of the Alphas they’ve let in started out that way, too.

My mother being a Beta shouldn’t matter, either. It hasn’t hurt other Alphas, as far as I can tell from the list of current approved Alphas that Lana was able to procure for me a while back.

I don’t know what’s left.

I’ve done everything I could to make myself what they need me to be.

All that hard work wasn’t for nothing.

I won't let it be.

A growl rises up my throat as I'm made to wait.

As if sensing my irritation, the woman who keeps denying my applications finally picks up the call.

"What is it this time, Colby?" she asks, her voice stone cold.

"Brooke Corvina is my mate," I snap at her. "And my name isn't Colby."

She lets out a soft sigh. "Kellan Mitchell, I presume."

My application's still fresh in her mind, then. It must have made an impression.

"I'm aware that you have ... a fixation on one of our Omegas, but you don't meet our standards, and now that you've shown you're prepared to use deception to get what you want, I'll be making sure my guards are aware that you're a risk to our academy."

It doesn't make any sense. She has Brooke listed as a top priority for a mate, yet she's resisted all their existing Alphas. Why wouldn't she want an Alpha who's clearly interested in the Omega she desperately needs to match up?

"You can't be serious," I tell her. "I've followed your rules for years, and all I want is a chance. One chance to meet with Brooke. That's all."

"I don't owe you any chances, Kellan. You're not an eligible candidate."

"Then tell me why I've been rejected."

"You don't meet our standards, and you never will."

She hangs up the phone, and I feel like smashing mine against the wall. Gripping it tightly, I try to force myself to calm down. The white-hot anger rising inside me is all consuming.

I spent a fucking decade waiting for the chance to claim my one true mate.

Everything I've done has been for her. They can't turn around and tell me it isn't good enough.

I was never going to be approved. That bitch confirmed it.

Having my suspicions proved right does nothing to soothe the rage that's burning through me.

It's not enough. I need to know why.

This isn't about money. It can't be. I've shown I know how to make a fortune.

It has to be something else. I can't let this go until ... I can't let it go.

Brooke Corvina is fated for me.

I'll do whatever it takes to get to her.

She belongs with me.

Chapter

FIFTEEN

KELLAN

When the academy blocked my number, I got a new phone. When they blocked that one, I got another. My thoughts were headed down the lines of using a voice changing device when my original cell phone started ringing in the other room.

Maybe I wore Geraldine down.

My smug smile dies when I see who's calling.

Shit. Don't tell me I got Lana into trouble.

"Hey," I answer as I pick up her call.

"What the hell's going on, K?"

"I can barely hear you."

"That's because I'm trying to be discreet. Most people don't use their phones while they're in the bathroom."

"That's debatable."

She sighs. "Seriously, what the fuck did you do?"

"How do you even know about this? Aren't you supposed to be off work?"

"I'm using up my vacation days. I got Paula to temp for me. She's a friend of my sister's and she knows I have a friend named Kellan, so when she heard your name, she texted to let me know you were getting yourself in trouble." She lets out another soft sigh. "I'm in the bathroom at my mom's place because it's the only way I can get any privacy, but if you

don't start talking soon, my sisters are going to make up pregnancy rumors or whatever and that's not a headache I want, so ..."

"Right. Sorry. I spoke to Geraldine," I tell her, not sure I want to admit to much more than that. "She basically told me to get lost, so I might have been harassing her, blowing up the academy phone lines all day."

Now that I say it out loud, it sounds kind of crazy.

She lets out a groan. "Seriously, K? I can't believe this. I take a one lousy long weekend off work, and you take it as a green light to go nuclear on my boss?"

"I wasn't thinking," I admit. "Does Geraldine know we're friends?"

I feel like shit for dragging her into this. I never should have done that. If she loses her job, I'm going to owe her so much more than a fancy car.

"Thankfully, no, but I'd appreciate it if you'd quit calling her now. The longer it goes on, the more likely it is that she finds something I did that helped you, and that's when it could become an actual real problem for me."

"Fuck. I'm sorry, Lana."

"Don't be sorry," she tells me. "Just stop making those calls, okay?"

I let out a sigh. "She rejected my application again, and she told me I'd never be accepted. I know the criteria is a big mystery, but I can't let go of this unless I know what's going on. Why I'm being rejected even if I could solve the problem she's having with Brooke."

"You know something, you're a real pain in my ass," Lana says. "But leave it with me, okay? Stop calling, and when I'm at work tomorrow I'll see what I can find out."

"She never tells you why she rejects someone."

"Well, that someone also never harasses her over the phone. She'll be pissy about it. I can guarantee it. I'll ask what happened, and she might let something slip."

“I’m done with mights and maybes, Lana. I need to know. I ... I can’t move on unless I know what’s so damn wrong with me that she’s refusing to give me a chance.”

“I’ll find out. I promise. Now stop calling.”

She hangs up, and my fingers itch.

Immediately, I want to call the academy again. I don’t want to wait another second.

I set my original phone down on the nightstand and toss the new one on the carpet.

Forcing myself to lay down on the bed, I try to relax.

Sleeping would while away the time, if only I could stop my thoughts from swirling.

It’s no use. I give up after a few minutes and get up. Pulling my gym kit together, I decide the only way I’m going to get through today’s hell is to keep my body busy.

It’s physically painful to make myself leave the phone in the bedroom, but I need to let go of the urge to keep trying.

It feels like I’m being tested.

Walking away doesn’t need to mean I’m failing.

Cursing under my breath, I pick up my keys and leave.

Chapter SIXTEEN

KELLAN

Time passes differently at the gym, depending on how long you've been going. Way back when I started, every minute felt stretched. Today, a couple hours pass in a haze of activity. I complete a half dozen circuits of my usual routine, and then it starts to feel like I'm wasting my energy.

I promised myself I'd never give up once I found out I had an Omega true mate out there.

Discovering who she was and what I'd need to do to be worthy was only the start.

I've worked so damn hard to do things the right way, and it's gotten me nowhere.

It would be insane to keep going down that same path.

My options are limited.

Give up on her, on us.

Or give in to crazy and hope I don't end up on the wrong side of the law.

Lana saved me today, but she won't be there every time I get close to stepping over a line. I know what's going to happen if I don't let go of this obsession, but every time I close my eyes the memory rushes back through my head and I'm certain my true mate is worth every bit of this torture.

There's an urgency inside me that I can't fully explain.

Instinctively, I know this is my last shot.

Brooke has waited for me for a long time. She hasn't chosen another Alpha, but that doesn't mean she won't. I don't have any room left for mistakes. I can't let her slip through my fingers. I've worked too hard to let that happen.

I hit the showers, no longer content to occupy my body with exercise.

Everything hurts a little on the walk home.

I guess it's been a while since I did more than a quick, easy workout.

I can hear my cell ringing inside the apartment as I shove my key into the lock.

Rushing inside, I leave the door open to grab my phone.

"Lana?" I answer, out of breath and hopeful.

"Kellan Mitchell?" a male voice asks, reminding me I'm still running a business.

"Uh, yeah, this is Kellan," I answer, pulling myself together and getting past the disappointment. "What can I do for you?"

"You can stop contacting Goldcrest Academy and you can stay away from my daughter."

Holy fucking shit. "Warren Corvina."

Brooke's father sounds as vicious and unyielding as his reputation led me to believe. A cutthroat businessman unafraid to make the hard decisions, with an extremely private side-line in something less savory that I've yet to determine, he's not someone I should want to be on the wrong side of.

"I don't give out second warnings. You're a smart boy. You know what you need to do."

He hangs up, and I sink back against the wall.

Geraldine must have told him I was harassing her.

I don't know why he'd care, or why she'd even do that, unless he's the one who blacklisted me in the first place.

"Fucking hell."

Brooke perfumed the day we met. He's an Alpha. There's no way in hell he missed that.

It was early. She was probably thirteen or fourteen at the time.

It doesn't usually happen until an Omega's at least sixteen.

The only time it ever happens early is when it's fated.

He knows we're true mates then, and he doesn't care.

I have no chance of ever getting into that academy.

No way to reach my mate.

I close the door to my apartment, and move my weary ass across to the kitchen, opening a text message to Lana and telling her she can forget it. I know why I can't get approved to see Brooke.

I'll never be approved.

I need to let go.

I put the phone down and open the cupboard under the sink.

The bottle of vodka's been sitting there since I moved in. The seal has never been cracked.

I set it down on the counter. If I'm waving good-bye to the only dream I've ever had, the only life I ever imagined, I'm going to need a little help to give it a good send off.

Chapter

SEVENTEEN

KELLAN

I pass out after a few shots of the potent clear liquid, and it's morning when I pull myself up off the couch. I should probably shower and find some work shit to occupy myself, but my head is pounding, and I won't get far if I don't do something about it. So, I sink another shot and then look through my kitchen cupboards for an unhealthy snack.

There are no snacks to be found, but I have some cheese left in the fridge that I decide to have for breakfast. It helps a bit, I think, but the vodka helps more.

Eventually, I put on the TV. Then I turn it off and put on the radio instead.

Music seems more soothing, and I go back to sitting around on the couch, getting drunk while the muscles I overworked at the gym ache quietly with every breath I take.

I spend a whole day on the couch, only getting up to poke around in the fridge for food.

Microwave meals are unappetizing at the best of times. There's no way I'm going to chance making one today. So, I settle for an apple for dinner and the rest of the cheese when the apple isn't enough. Meanwhile, I consider going to the bank and withdrawing a massive pile of cash to take over to my parents' house. Who gives a shit about money goals anymore?

They can have it all. I'll just ask to move back in so I can eat good food again and that'll be that.

I can be the guy who gave up on his dreams to live with his parents for the rest of his life.

I turn the radio up when I hear something rattling at the door.

“Go away!” I call out.

The neighbors can complain about the noise all they want, I'm not turning it down.

They don't turn their shouting down when it's wildly inappropriate, and I would never suggest such a thing, so they can fuck off. It's not as if it's an unsociable hour or whatever.

I down another gulp of clear liquid poison and sink down lower into my slouching position on the sofa. It's not really comfortable, but it's not *not* comfortable, either.

What do I care anymore about things like posture? Cares are for people who have dreams.

I don't have dreams. I have money.

Maybe I can buy some cares with my massive piles of cash.

Someone can sell me shares.

Shares of cares, going cheap.

“Hello?” a female voice calls out from the other side of the room. “Kellan, are you home?”

I would know that voice anywhere, even if it seems improbable to hear it now. It's Lana. The friend I almost maybe got fired. The one who lives in Cressidan City.

What's she doing all the way out here in Crystal Lake?

I quickly get to my feet and stumble in the direction of the front door.

Lana gives me a startled look when I crash into the wall by the bedroom doorway.

She's just closing the front door and she has something in her hand.

My keys!

"These were in your door. And when I say they were in your door, I mean they were on the outside."

"Well, they unlock the thing." I wave at the door, straightening up but keeping an arm against the wall, just in case I might still be a bit wobbly.

"Have you been drinking?" She narrows her hazel eyes at me.

"I've been at the gym," I tell her, avoiding the question.

"Is there a bar around here called The Gym?" she asks, clearly not buying it.

I blow out a breath. "Okay, fine. I might have had a drink when I got home from all the working out."

"Are you still having a drink?" Frowning, she glances around. "Wait a minute, I thought you were rich?"

"Rich guys don't get rich by spending money."

"Clearly," she says, raising her eyebrows. "I drove out here after work because I was worried about you. You weren't answering your phone."

"Did I even tell you where I live?"

"I got your address from the application you sent into the academy."

"Oh ... Well, mystery solved, I guess. I'm all good now, so you should go."

She gives me a look. "You seriously don't want to know what I found out?"

I shake my head. "Doesn't matter now."

Nothing matters now, because Brooke's father is the one who's keeping us apart.

If I thought it was going to be difficult to get to her before, it's going to be impossible now.

“Can we sit down for a second, please?” Lana asks.

“If you insist,” I tell her, leading her over to the living room area of the apartment. “If I’m walking weird it’s because of the gym, by the way.”

“So, we’re sticking with the been at the gym all day lie, then?” she asks, before she sits down on the armchair across from the couch.

She’s wearing a skirt suit and heels today, hair up as usual. Clearly, she came here from work.

“I was at the gym this morning,” I insist, before I remember. “No. Wait. That was yesterday. What day is it?”

She shakes her head. “I come all the way out here and you’re wasted. It’s Tuesday, by the way.”

“Why *did* you come all the way out here?”

“Will you even remember if I tell you?”

I shrug. It doesn’t matter anyway. Nothing she can tell me would change anything.

“Brooke’s father had you blacklisted. I overheard Geraldine on a call with him. He knows you’re Brooke’s fated mate. I assume you know you’re her true mate?”

“Why do you think I did everything I’ve done?” I ask, not wanting to say it out loud if it can never happen.

She nods slowly. “It made a lot more sense once I realized that was behind it.”

“Her father called me and warned me to back off. Geraldine must have called him after I harassed her. I’ve got no chance with Brooke, Lana. I never had a chance.”

“Brooke can’t stand her father, K. He sends her a birthday card every year with an invitation to dinner, and she has this fake smile that she plasters on when I give her it.”

“Warren Corvina’s a dangerous guy,” I tell her. “He’s hiding something. I looked into his business accounts, and I know there’s something that isn’t legit. I’ve never worked out

what, but it doesn't look good. He could kill me if I try to get to her. He could hurt people I love."

"I wouldn't be too surprised if he's a mafia boss or whatever," Lana admits. "But if she's your true mate, nothing will stop you from getting together. Isn't that what being fated for each other means?"

I reach for the remainder of the vodka bottle, and Lana picks it up.

"There's nothing else I can do," I tell her. "Let me have my consolation."

She shakes her head, getting up and moving over to the kitchen sink.

I watch in horror as she uncaps the bottle and pours the last quarter of the bottle down the drain.

After putting the bottle down on the counter, she moves back to the armchair.

"Brooke needs you. Geraldine's working with her father to find her a mate she doesn't want. We can't just let that happen when we know you're her true mate."

"Wait. Did you just say we?"

She nods. "I've seen enough love at first sight matches to know true mates really do exist. Geraldine pretends it's not a thing because she wants all her Omegas to be matched with Alphas that are pre-approved by her criteria. It makes the academy look more successful that way. Brooke's been there the longest because she's resisted every attempt to force her into taking a mate. She's strong, but she's been backed into a corner now. She has to take a mate before the end of the year, or her father's going to pick one for her. I can't let that happen."

I can't stand the thought of my mate with another man. I can't stand the thought of her being bonded to someone she doesn't even like.

Oh, God. I thought I was backed into a corner, but my mate's the one who's trapped like that.

She needs to be rescued. I need to find a way to save her.

“Do you hear me, Kellan? Brooke doesn’t deserve that. She deserves someone like you. Someone who’ll move mountains for her. I’ve seen what you can do. You can save her. You’re probably the only one who ever could. I guess that’s what makes you her mate.”

“That might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“Well, it’s only the truth.”

“You’re a good friend.” My best friend, really.

She gives me a wry smile. “That’s what everyone always tells me.”

“Well, it’s only the truth.”

Chapter

EIGHTEEN

KELLAN

Lana spends the night in my cramped apartment, telling me she doesn't trust me not to harm myself. It's not clear if she thinks it would be intentional or accidental. I'm too wasted to question her. I allow her to order me around as if it's her apartment, laying down on the couch when she hands me my sheets from the bed. Telling her where to find the spare sheets when she asks.

She leaves the door halfway open when she goes to bed, so she does trust me on some level, just not when it comes to taking care of myself, apparently.

Feels a little insulting when this is the first time I've ever really downed alcohol for the sole intention of forgetting my troubles, but Lana wouldn't know that. Even if she did, I think she'd stay to look after me anyway, because that's the kind of thing a good person does.

She's been a far better friend to me than any of the guys I hung around with at school.

I don't even speak to most of those guys anymore. The ones I do keep in contact with, I see so infrequently that they're more like old acquaintances now.

Truth is, Lana's the best friend I've ever had.

I don't know anyone else, other than my parents, who would have come over here to check on me like she did. If she

hadn't, I wouldn't have had the epiphany that snapped me out of my pity party.

I can't believe I didn't realize what things were like from my true mate's point of view.

Lana opened my eyes to the truth.

Brooke is trapped at that academy.

She's not happy there.

She doesn't want her father to choose an Alpha for her.

She needs help, and we might be her only hope.

That's all I can think about as I lie there on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling.

My true mate needs to be rescued.

She's a princess in a tower, and it's up to me to find a way to get her out of there.

All kinds of crazy thoughts race through my mind. Ideas that would never work in a million years.

There aren't guards with guns and security systems that trigger instant responses in typical fairy tales. I'll never be able to storm into Goldcrest without being grabbed or shot in the process.

I let the heroic fantasies keep my mind occupied, but I know once I'm clean and sober I'll have to work through a real plan with Lana.

Chapter

NINETEEN

KELLAN

I sleep half of Wednesday away, waking up in the afternoon to find Lana stocking my refrigerator.

“Hey there, sleepyhead,” she says, glancing back at me. “I decided to stick around since I had a vacation day pre-arranged. Of course, I regretted that idea when I realized there’s no real food in this place. I’d ask if you’re a breathatarian, but I’ve seen you eat so I’m guessing this is standard bachelor boy behavior?”

Sitting up, I frown at her. The room isn’t spinning, but my mouth is dry, and my head feels like it’s being squished in a vice. At least the aches and pains in my muscles are gone. Kind of.

Damn. I can feel them now that I’ve thought about them.

“Not a breathatarian,” I tell her. “Just kind of living like I am.”

“That needs to stop now, Mr. Millionaire. You owe me a hundred bucks for the groceries.”

“No problem. I was thinking about going grocery shopping anyway.”

“Well think harder next time and actually do it,” she grumbles as she comes closer and gives me a worried look. “You remember last night?”

“Should I?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Very funny. It wasn’t like that. You’re not my type.”

“You’re not into men, I get it,” I murmur. “I got it when you described my mate.”

She laughs. “Brooke’s a unicorn. She could turn anyone’s head. I usually date guys, but for her I’d make an exception.”

“Well, now that we’ve cleared that up, did you happen to get any painkillers while you were out?”

I give her a hopeful look, and she rolls her eyes.

“You’re lucky I’m the thoughtful type.” She takes a packet out of her pocket and brings it to me.

“Water?” I ask, not keen on the thought of moving right now.

Sighing, she goes to the sink. “What did your last slave die of?”

I snort at the weak joke as she pours me a pint glass of clear liquid that’ll make me feel less shitty.

“I’m back at work tomorrow, so you’ll have to promise me you’re not going to go out and buy more booze while I’m gone.” She turns off the tap and brings the glass over to the coffee table, where she sets it down in front of me. “I’ll make food when you’re feeling hungry. A real meal. I threw out those disgusting microwave dinners. You have a good oven that looks like it’s never been used. I don’t understand men who don’t know how to cook.”

I take the painkillers and drink half the glass of water before I set it back down.

“We should talk about how we’re going to rescue Brooke.”

She shakes her head. “We have time. I’m not going to talk to you about that until you’re sober, hangover-free, and thinking clearly. We don’t make a move until we’ve discussed it and agreed on a solid plan that gets neither of us killed or injured or fired.”

“Are you serious?” I complain. “You just basically told me she needs to be rescued, and now you’re telling me we

shouldn't be in any rush? I need to get her out of there, Lana."

She sighs. "You're such a pain in the ass, K. You've been patient for so damn long. Years. You can be patient for a little longer. It's not going to kill you but ignoring me and rushing in just might."

She's probably right, but I don't want to hear it.

"I can't stand the thought of Brooke trapped in that academy, waiting for her dad to pick one of the asshole Alphas for her husband. The guys on that list you gave me, they're all entitled pricks. A few seconds of social media searches and I can tell you that."

She gives me a displeased glower. "Fine. Try rescuing her yourself. I'll still be around when you meet a grisly end, and I won't have to worry about interfering with a true mate bond anymore, so ..."

I blink back at her. "Wait. Did you just threaten to steal my mate?"

She smiles. "I did, and don't think I don't mean it."

"I know you mean it." I smile back, it's impossible not to.

"So, you'll calm down and listen to me?" she asks, raising an eyebrow.

She's the best friend I've ever had. How could I ever say no?

"I'm listening."

Chapter TWENTY

KELLAN

Before Lana leaves on Thursday morning, we've come to the agreement that we'll shelf discussing the rescue until Saturday. Once she goes, I force myself to sit at my desk and work.

The only way I can get through the next two days is to focus completely on something else.

It's the best I can do to stop my thoughts from filling up with Brooke.

Yet, the second I turn my computer on, I'm consumed by the need to devote every minute of my time to finding a way to rescue her from the damned academy.

I start by looking for her on social media.

Every image I hold of her in my head is based on that single chance meeting we had as teenagers.

I've changed since then, and I know she must have changed, too.

When I try to picture her now, the image I conjure is too vague to hold onto.

The only thing that's ever crystal clear is the memory of her sweet cherry scent.

I know when I see her again, she'll perfume for me and that'll bring everything rushing back for us both. We were

always fated to be together, and now that I know she isn't happy at the academy, our reunion feels closer than ever.

Unfortunately, she doesn't seem to have accounts on any of the popular sites. I try a few of the more obscure ones that I can think of, but I can't find any trace of her.

It's disappointing, but not completely unexpected.

Considering how controlling her father seems to be, I doubt he let her use those sites when she was young. It's entirely possible she never ended up using any of them.

When I attempt a google search, Goldcrest Academy is one of the first sites that come up, alongside an array of her father's legitimate businesses. I look into him, first. Warren Corvina.

The man was born into money. He obviously had a good financial advisor, because when he inherited his parents' fortune, he made some shrewd reinvestments and basically doubled what they left him within a year. He spent a few years bulking up his business empire before he attended Goldcrest to find an Omega.

Farrah Yates married Warren Corvina a few weeks after her eighteenth birthday. She died six years later of an aggressive form of cancer, when Brooke was probably around five years old, and she was only twenty-four. The same age Brooke is now.

That's an odd coincidence, and I'm not convinced it's entirely coincidental.

Why is he forcing her to choose, and why is he doing that now?

She's been at the academy for years.

If he wants her to find a mate, why is he keeping her away from a fated match?

He knows that's what we are. I don't know how he found out, exactly, but I told friends after I met her, and eventually everyone at my high school in Crystal Lake knew I was holding out for Brooke Corvina, my one true mate.

If it's so damn important that she find a mate, why can't he accept me as that mate?

He doesn't know me. He could have found things out about me, but even if he knew my standing wasn't what he wanted for his daughter, he should know by now that I've made something of myself.

It doesn't make sense, unless he's keeping me from her because he thinks my family isn't good enough, that I haven't made enough money even now to make him consider allowing me to court his daughter.

That's a possibility, I guess.

Instinct tells me it's not the whole truth, but exhaustive searches don't reveal any bad blood between our families, so I can't find anything that might hint at a more personal objection.

Sighing, I get up and walk away from the screen. I need a break.

Chapter TWENTY ONE

BROOKE

My gaze moves down the list I spent all week compiling. The name of every last Alpha who still frequents the academy is on there. Writing each one of them down was enough to make my skin crawl. The re-read to check I haven't missed anyone makes me angry.

My hand grips the pen tightly, fingers shaking.

I want to shred the list to pieces. Set it on fire.

Anything to get it out of my sight.

I can't stand the thought of being mated to any of these Alphas, yet I'm supposed to find a way to narrow the list down to acceptable suitors. I feel like scoring a thick line through all of them.

Instead, I go through it as if I'm trying to eliminate the biggest monsters first, starting with Lachlan Darvish, and moving on to the other known pieces of shit who should have been flushed away before they had the chance to commit any transgressions against any of the Omegas here.

A half dozen names are ruled out instantly. These are the worst of the worst.

The truly predatory Alphas. Men who have so much money and power that they will never be turned away, no matter how many Omegas they traumatize with their fucked-up behavior.

I would never let one of those men get close enough to touch me.

They've threatened and coerced their way into the beds of some of the weakest and most naïve Omegas at Goldcrest, and those girls were never the same afterwards. A few of them left the academy shortly after being targeted as prey by one of those Alphas.

Lana told me about the checks she saw Geraldine sign in the aftermath of those incidents.

Several families threatened to sue the academy, but none of them actually did.

Settling for the payout Geraldine sent them was easier than putting their daughters through the pain and stress of a trial they would never win.

Those Alphas know they'll never be held accountable for anything they do.

Nothing will ever make them stop.

If my father knew any of that, he'd probably push me toward one of them, thinking he would be able to keep me in line better than some of the less predatory Alphas.

The thought makes me shudder.

My father's giving me the illusion of control by asking for this list.

I know he's heartless enough to take it away again if I put a foot wrong.

He might have already chosen my mate or approached his preferred son-in-law's family to start negotiations. He wouldn't tell me if he had, but it wouldn't surprise me to find out he has the rest of my life planned out for me.

He hasn't let me choose anything for myself before. Why start now?

Shuddering, I look at those scored-through names.

As soon as those Alphas started to look like bad news, any Omega with a sense of self-preservation avoided them like the

plague, and we all warned any new girls to do the same.

They still showed up regularly to try their luck, targeting any Omega who showed signs of being vulnerable. One particularly unlucky Omega ended up being messed with by a few of them, passed around like a chew-toy they were taking their time ripping to shreds. She was found on the ladies' room floor after one of the socials, paranoid and emotional, babbling incoherent nonsense.

Geraldine sent her to a facility to get help. Lana saw a huge check go out to her parents.

Going by the stories I've heard, those monsters would fit in better at Colvindale, the Wild West of Omega academies. That place has no entry requirements. The rules are lax, and the administrators change so frequently that there's virtually no control over anything.

In contrast, Goldcrest is supposed to be a safe place for Omegas to find their mates.

That's how Geraldine sells it, but the reality doesn't measure up.

Truth is, whoever has the most money, has the most power.

It's the way the world works, and it's the way the academy runs.

Groaning, I force myself to look back over the remaining names.

There are a lot of them. Way too many to consider my job complete.

I score through the names of a few men who are extremely pompous and arrogant. They'd be less likely to even consider a bribe from my father, anyway.

My fingers itch to do the same to every other name on the page.

I'm left with a page full of fuckboy assholes.

None of the guys listed leapt out at me as any different from the others.

Well, except Colby Summers. I score through his name with a little extra vehemence.

He's too young for me, and he's the biggest asshole outside of the group of predatory Alphas.

I work out rough ages of the others on the list, and I score out the rest of the youngest guys.

And just like that, I've somehow managed to whittle sixty-four names down to thirteen.

I put the pen down, not allowing myself to look at what's left.

I'm not interested in any of the remaining names, but I don't have any choice.

My father wants a list of names. I'm giving him one.

In case the damned list ends up actually deciding my future husband, I've made sure I'm not left with the most awful Alpha of them all. That's the best I can do.

I walk away from the list and start getting ready for the night.

The first social of the season begins in a few short hours.

My father's made it clear he expects me to attend.

Who knows? Maybe I'll be pleasantly surprised by a mass of new Alphas who aren't complete assholes. A girl can dream.

Chapter TWENTY TWO

BROOKE

Diamonds are forever. That used to be my mantra, way back when I was one of the only rich girls at Crystal Grove high school. As an Omega and sole heir to a billion-dollar fortune, I wasn't exactly relatable. My best friend, Zelena, was the only one who really understood what it was like to be envied and hated by almost everyone, while somehow simultaneously idolized and admired.

High school was a weird time for me. It's when I realized how fake people can be.

I used that mantra to feel better about myself every time the Betas said or did something shitty to try and bring me down, but I didn't take the meaning literally.

I was smart enough to know, even then, that the money my classmates hated me for having didn't belong to me. It wasn't going to bring me security and comfort. It didn't do a single damn thing to make me happy.

Zey was my diamond. A true friend, the one person in a million that I could count on. Always.

She shines brighter than anyone I've ever known, and I hope she never stops.

"I hope you get that pack you always wanted, Zey," I murmur, as I flip through the photos in my phone. I haven't taken a single new picture in six years. My phone might be the

latest model, but it's full of images of my past, most of which are selfies with Zelena

I guess, at least I might get to see her at my wedding.

Sighing, I come out of my photos and put my phone in my purse.

I seriously need to finish getting ready.

The theme for the first social of the year is solid gold, and I already know that means most of the new girls will be wearing flashy, eye-catching metallic dresses. My own dress is much more sedate, in black silk with gold straps. It's classy, but dull, marking me out as older.

It won't do much to catch an Alpha's eye, and that's perfectly fine with me.

I slip it over my head, and the material cascades down my body.

It feels nice against my skin, and it complements my slender body shape perfectly.

After slipping on my heels, I move over to my dresser.

I open the top drawer and take out my most expensive necklace.

Diamonds, of course, set in yellow gold.

Classy but dull perfectly describes the way I look right now.

I give myself a wry smile in the mirror.

As an Omega, I'm a rare breed. If only I could perfume, I'd be perfect.

Oh, okay. If only I was a few years younger, and I could perfume. Then, I'd be perfect.

I get my purse and take my phone back out of it, going back through the photos.

I smiled more when I was younger, but there isn't that much of a difference between me at eighteen and me now. At least, if there is, I don't see it. Everyone else clearly does.

Especially the Alphas. They don't look at me like they used to.

My Beta boyfriend in high school was kind of sweet, I guess, but I only said yes to dating him when his friend became Zelena's boyfriend, and I realized it would make it easier to keep hanging out together. I wasn't attracted to him, really, but I did at least like him.

I'd choose someone like him over the Alphas that come here any day of the week.

There's no way my father would allow that, of course. This whole thing about marrying me off to an Alpha is for the express purpose of giving him grandchildren with Alpha and Omega blood.

I might not have Alpha and Omega children if I don't marry an Alpha, and that would be the worst thing I could do to my father. He'd probably murder me and go back to the academy to find another Omega to marry and give him multiple kids like he'd wanted in the first place.

There's a knock on my suite door while I'm scrolling through prom photos.

I look up at the open bedroom door, startled out of my thoughts by the intrusion.

I didn't order dinner tonight. I knew my nerves would make it impossible to eat.

I picture Lana for a moment, but I know she'd never come to my door.

For a second, I picture my father, and I get shivers.

No. He wouldn't come out here. That would be way too much effort.

Then again, he's been very persistent about this whole finding a mate to marry thing.

Oh, God. I really hope it's not my dad.

Taking a calming breath, I force my feet to move.

I head out of the bedroom, into the main room, and then there's another hard, sharp knock.

My shoulders shake and I drop my phone, which I didn't even realize I was still carrying.

I step over it to get to the door, ignoring the urge to pick it back up.

My hands are trembling lightly. I'd only drop it all over again.

I stand in front of the door, catching my breath.

I'm almost afraid to look through the peephole.

It's probably just one of the kitchen staff bringing someone else's food to the wrong suite.

That thought calms me enough to let me check the peephole.

When I see who's standing there, I let out a relieved sigh, and I unlock and open the door quickly, not wanting to keep the head administrator of Goldcrest waiting.

Geraldine Sawyer stands in the hallway, looking like her face lost a fight with the floor.

My gaze is quickly drawn to the bruising around her eyes and nose, as I examine the color and swelling, logging the details in my thoughts for later. I know a photo is out of the question. Geraldine has no idea about my little SFX hobby, and I don't think she'd be too pleased if she knew I was going to use her injury as a reference point for future bruise work.

Come back to the present, Brooke. She's pissed, and she knocked on your door for a reason.

She's wearing a tight smile, which tells me she's angrier than her bruises look.

I heard Secret broke her nose. The news of what happened spread like wildfire through the academy on Tuesday afternoon, which was apparently immediately after the new girl introduced her fist to Geraldine's face, with good reason as far as the rest of the rumors go.

Apparently, Secret and Dylan were caught in a compromising position, and the academy takes a hard line on Omegas falling for other Omegas. I can understand why Secret hit her, knowing she must have split them up when she found out they'd taken each other as mates.

"Hi, Geraldine. Please, come in. What can I do for you?" I ask, breaking the silence between us and moving back to let her into my suite.

Whatever she needs, it can't be any worse than what my father's asking of me.

She steps into the room, and I notice the garment bag she's carrying over her right arm.

"I need you to go and get Secret ready for the social. Makeup, hair, whatever. She'll probably need to be coerced into dressing appropriately, too," she mutters, frowning at me as if she expects me to ask questions, or cause a fuss. "Here's her dress. I had to go fetch it since she was a late arrival to the academy."

I take the garment bag out of her hands when she thrusts it at me as if she's offended by it.

It feels light. I can imagine the short, lightweight dress that's hidden inside. I doubt Secret will be keen to put it on. Considering she hasn't touched the clothes in her closet since she got here it might not be so easy to get her into tonight's outfit.

Geraldine seems agitated. Her face looks painful, but I'm not sure it would be smart to mention it.

It's kind of an unusual situation. I don't think she's ever been assaulted by a student before, but then again, she hasn't tried to split up Omegas in love before, either. Not that there hasn't been some bed-hopping every so often between the Omegas in her charge, but there's a pretty big difference between girls with crazy libidos keeping each other company and getting a little freaky from time to time, and Omegas who take each other as mates.

I'll admit to feeling a little jealous of Secret's closeness with Dylan.

I've never felt that way about someone else.

Crushes, sure. Flashes of lust, you bet. Adoration? Nope. Love? What even is that, anyway?

I nod slowly. "Not a problem. I can get Secret ready for the social. Does her friend need help, too? I noticed he hasn't been dressing appropriately, either."

Something passes over her expression that makes my stomach start to churn all over again.

She's not happy that I asked about him.

She stares at me, her gaze frosty. "No. Dylan will not be needing your help."

Shit. Why do I feel like someone just walked over my grave?

What did she do to him, anyway?

"Um, seriously?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "He looked like he needed *a lot* of help."

I'm playing dumb, obviously, while I wonder if she knows Dylan belongs to Cassidy Halloran.

Everyone else figured that out pretty fast, and Geraldine isn't stupid.

She probably knows. It might even be why she kept them together.

Holy fucking hell. She was waiting for them to slip up.

I know that's the answer the second it pops into my thoughts.

It takes all my energy to keep my expression neutral.

Geraldine's lips twitch. She's trying not to smirk, I think.

"Dylan will not be needing your help," she repeats. "That boy is being transferred to Colvindale tonight. He will no longer be Goldcrest's problem."

Shit. She might as well have shot him through the heart.

“Colvindale?” I ask, unable to keep the shock out of my voice.

Omegas don’t go there if they have any kind of choice. It’s like sending him to a prison where he’ll get the bare minimum of care until he’s due to be released, and in the meantime, he’ll have to avoid the awful Alphas they allow into their academy. Alphas who hunt and torture the Omegas for fun.

I can’t believe Geraldine would do that to any Omega.

She frowns at me. “Don’t breathe a word of that to anyone.”

“I would never,” I promise, while I’m still reeling from the shock of it.

I’ve got more than enough problems of my own without adding on pissing off a woman who has the ability to suggest a punishment more horrifying than a forced marriage to my psychopathic father.

Worrying about Omegas who have Alphas out there that actually give a shit about them is pretty fucking low down on my priority list. I know I would warn those Alphas, given half a chance, but the truth is I’m unlikely to get that opportunity.

This place is my prison, and it may be a gilded cage compared to Colvindale, but it’s still a trap I can’t escape until I submit to the newer, tighter cage of mating and marriage.

Geraldine reaches out and pats my cheek lightly.

“Why can’t all my girls be like you, dear?”

“There’s only one Brooke Corvina.”

“Don’t worry about your father,” she tells me. “We’ll keep looking for the right Alpha.”

It’s oddly reassuring. If there’s one person who can calm Warren Corvina down, it’s Geraldine Sawyer. I’ve seen her use her Omega abilities to assess his emotional state on a couple of occasions, when he visited me out here at the academy way back at the start of my first year, and she cooled his rotten

temper so easily that he didn't even seem to notice her doing it.

I've tried it myself in the past, and he saw it coming every damn time.

She has years of experience. She seems to know exactly how much pressure to apply with her touch, how much calming energy to use. How to completely distract a man while she cools his temper.

It was a stroke of genius to have an older Omega run this academy. She deals with the Alphas so well they don't even realize it when they're being handled.

"I appreciate the help. I'll grab my makeup kit and go to Secret's suite straight away."

"When she's ready, take her straight to private booth number one. An Alpha requested her company tonight."

Uh oh. The new girl who's barely been here a week is being specifically requested by an Alpha already? That can't be good news.

"That's a little unusual," I murmur, knowing I probably still seem kind of shellshocked and not wanting to make it any worse. I manage to sound casual, God knows how. "Anyone I'd know?"

"Colby Summers, who else?" Geraldine mutters back.

She rolls her eyes. I roll mine right back.

That boy is trying to make his way through all the Omegas in the building. I've heard he likes to mess around with as many Betas as he can get his hands on, too. Considering Secret's clearly in love with Dylan, I doubt she'll be even vaguely interested in that idiot.

Of course, that's her problem. Not mine.

"Right." I nod. "Of course."

"Thank you, dear." Geraldine gives me a fond smile. "Have a good night."

When she leaves, I turn on my heel, ready to grab my makeup kit and go to Secret's suite.

My foot connects with my dropped phone, and I manage to kick it under the kitchen counter.

Well, that's going to be a pain in the ass to get back out, but that's a problem for tomorrow's Brooke.

Tonight's Brooke has a job to do, and she's going to do it well enough to please Geraldine.

That woman is my only real defense against my pig-headed father.

If anyone can knock sense into him, it's her.

Chapter

TWENTY THREE

BROOKE

I must admit, I'm a little surprised by the security detail I find when I step off the elevator that leads to Secret's suite. Geraldine was already keeping the girl close by giving her the biggest twin suite closest to her office. Adding in two guards standing outside the door to the suite seems excessive.

Of course, that must be new.

I seriously doubt Secret would have been comfortable enough to claim Dylan as her mate with armed Betas standing outside the door to their shared nest.

Clearly, Geraldine did this after they broke the rules, after she split them up.

I bet she didn't expect the girl to put up a fight.

If anyone had asked me, I wouldn't have pegged Secret Leto as the kind of girl who'd ever dare attack an authority, and around here Geraldine might as well be the sheriff. She lays down our laws, and no one dares to cross her.

At least, they didn't until now.

The second anyone tries to stand their ground after this shit, she'll be just as ruthless with them as she was with Dylan, and everyone will be shocked at her callous punishment.

No one will want to mess up.

I get to the door and smile at big, bad guard number one.

“Hey,” I greet him as I come to a stop. “Geraldine sent me to help Secret get ready.”

“Brooke, right?” He looks me over, and gives an approving nod.

“Uh, yeah. And you are?” I ask, certain that I haven’t met him before.

“Henry,” he tells me, shooting me a flirty smile.

Huh. He’s actually kind of cute, and he’s definitely new around here.

I don’t pay a lot of attention to the guards, mostly because I’m not supposed to. There are rules for everything in Goldcrest, including how we’re supposed to treat the staff. On a normal day, under normal circumstances, guards are there to protect us and we need to keep out of their way to let them do their jobs. Translation, we ignore them. Under other conditions when they need to maintain our safety in an emergency, we’re meant to do what they ask.

Talking to them like it’s no big deal is kind of weird.

I might not do that, usually, but I’m observant enough to know I haven’t seen this guy around.

I drink him in while I have the chance, my lingering gaze making his lips twitch into a smirk.

He’s built, of course, but a lot of Betas are. It’s what makes them so perfect for the job. They might not have the blessed genetics of an Alpha, but if they want to compete with that they’ll put in the work.

He definitely puts in the work, and he knows it’s getting the job done.

I really shouldn’t flatter him with a compliment. I think I’ve already stroked his ego enough with my stare. Clearing my throat, I point at the door.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Henry, but do you think I could get inside? I’m supposed to be getting Secret ready for the social tonight.”

He nods. “No problem.”

His gaze meets mine. “We’ll escort you to the ballroom when you’re ready.”

He reaches out and knocks on the door.

It opens slowly, and another guard peers out.

I can’t stop my eyebrows from jumping upward.

How many guards do they think this single, teenage, female Omega needs?

Is she a champion kickboxer or something?

“Geraldine said she’d send you,” the inside guard says. “Come in. She’s in the bedroom.”

He steps back to let me in, and I nod at Henry as I step into the room.

I have instant suite-envy. The living quarters are double the size of my own, but that’s not what makes me jealous. There’s a faint scent lingering in the air, sweet and fluffy and entirely intoxicating to Alphas and Omegas alike.

I doubt it’s strong enough for the guards to pick up, but Alphas and Omegas have enhanced senses, and there’s no way to mistake an Omega’s perfume. Of course, in this case, it’s the combined scents of two Omegas who’ve claimed each other as mates.

This suite is a nest, and it does something depraved to my Omega soul to be standing here, tasting the remains of a claiming on the air. My heart pounds a little faster, my stomach fills with the fast-beating wings of a dozen excited butterflies, and my breath hitches just a little which I cover up with a cough.

“Which room?” I ask the familiar guard.

He points to the door on the right side of the room. I nod my thanks as I pass.

I don’t know his name, but I’ve seen him around. He’s older, and clearly ready for retirement going by how little he appears to enjoy the work. I realize there’s another guard

standing at the side of the bedroom door, kind of shrouded in shadow. I get the instant creeps from how emotionally empty he is, and it tells me which guard he is without having to look.

He's one of Geraldine's right-hand men. Her hand-picked guards.

Those guys are the worst of the worst. Stone-cold psychopaths, every last one of them.

Why would an empath want to surround herself with emotionless killers?

You know what? I don't think I want to know.

I step into Secret's room and place my purse and makeup kit down on the nightstand.

The sound of the shower cutting out in the adjoining bathroom lets me know Geraldine's men already told Secret to get ready. It's encouraging that she's actually doing it, I guess.

I shake out the garment bag, hoping I haven't crushed the dress on the way over. I try to ignore the feelings that stepping into the suite have stirred up inside me. The last thing I need right now is to develop a crush on this girl.

Despite telling myself that, I go to the bathroom doorway and my lips twitch when Secret steps out of the shower in a hastily wrapped towel. She's a pretty, little thing with long, dark hair and big, doe eyes. I can admit she's gorgeous, but that's as far as it goes.

She reminds me a bit too much of myself when I was younger, I think.

"I heard someone needed help getting ready."

I dangle the garment bag, as if I'm trying to entice her.

She doesn't look too amused. "Just leave the dress and go."

I shake my head. "I'm here to do your makeup. Now go brush your teeth and wash your face. I'll wait."

I turn away, unzipping the bag and putting the dress on the bed.

It's a gold, silk slip dress, designed to make the woman wearing it the center of attention.

I'm sure Secret will hate it. I find out I'm right a few minutes later when she steps out of the bathroom and gives it a look of pure unfiltered horror.

"I can't wear that."

I can't help but laugh. "You don't want to wear it. You absolutely can. There's a big difference."

She tugs a drawer open and pulls out a pair of panties. Plain, white cotton panties.

I capture her wrist in my hand. "Nope. Sorry, no can do. Underwear will ruin the lines of the dress."

"I'm not leaving this room without underwear."

I give her a sad, little smile. "You'll do whatever Geraldine wants. She owns your ass, until she decides which Alpha gets to brand it."

She yanks her hand out of my loose grasp and drops the panties back into the drawer.

"There. Was that really so hard?" I ask.

She glowers at me before she drops the towel and tosses the dress over her head.

I blink and miss the opportunity to check her body for hidden marks made by her lover. I don't see any visible mating marks once the skirt swishes around her thighs. She's probably smart enough not to go that far. They at least tried to keep their romance hidden, I guess.

I open my makeup case and start looking for what I need.

"What exactly happens at these socials?" she asks.

"Oh, you know. The usual kind of party stuff. Dancing, drinking. Alphas being sex-obsessed dickheads, and Omegas giving them what they want so they can *maybe* hook a rich guy who'll take them out of this godforsaken school once and for all." I glance up and beckon her closer. "Take off the geek-makers."

I mix foundations on the back of my hand, aiming to get the right shade for her pale skin tone. She takes off her glasses, and I assess her skin. Looks a little dry. Ugh. I doubt she has a routine. Probably doesn't use the right products even if she does.

"Put on moisturizer and tie your hair back," I instruct, pausing my blending to pass her the right formula of cream for her skin-type.

She takes the tube from me and turns away to grab a scrunchie from the top of her dresser.

Once her hair is pinned back, she applies the moisturizer liberally before she hands me the tube back. Her skin's glowing now. If she didn't have dark circles from a lack of sleep, she wouldn't even really need base. I get started applying a thin layer that matches her coloring.

"You know, you're actually really pretty," I tell her. "These lips ..."

Sighing, I realize keeping the conversation light is impossible.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry they took your boyfriend away. They're assholes about 'fraternization,' as if we should be perfect, little virgins until they want us to turn into sluts to keep their Alphas happy."

She doesn't speak, keeping her pretty face still while I finish covering up minor imperfections.

"There's so much contradictory bullshit in this fucking place," I murmur as I check my work.

I spray my brush cleaner on a cotton pad and swirl the foundation-coated bristles around until they come away clean. After setting the brush on top of the others once it's cleaned, I start looking for my go-to eyeshadow palette.

"How long have you been here?" she asks.

Sooner or later, everyone asks.

"This will be my sixth year," I find myself telling her, unable to keep my eyes from rolling. "It doesn't get any easier

as time marches on. But Daddy's so damn sure I'll snag the perfect Alpha if I stay patient. Of course, he's been pressuring Geraldine because it's not happening, and she's been shoving me in front of every new Alpha who comes along, crossing her damned fingers as if she believes in true mates or whatever."

Sugar-coating the truth isn't my first preference, but I can't stand it when people look at me with pity in their eyes. Poor, little rich girl has a psychopathic father, big deal. What Geraldine's done to this girl is worse than what my father's plan is for me. She has my sympathy, but I don't want hers.

I start applying her eye makeup, deciding to go with smoky rather than natural. It's a more dramatic look, for sure, but she has the features to pull it off.

"The truth is, I'm not going to meet an Alpha I click with. Dick doesn't do it for me. Never has, never will. So, I guess I'm stuck here forever." I finish off my half-truth with a sigh, thinking of Lana.

She's the fantasy I'll retreat to from now on. The girl who got away.

I've started to tar all Alphas with the same brush, I know, but I can't see myself finding a guy here who'll make me feel anything other than disappointed. I know all men aren't the same, but the longer I stay here, the more it's starting to feel like it's the unvarnished truth.

I finish up the smoky eye makeup and move on to painting Secret's full lips.

They're too perfect not to go with red, and it only takes a second to figure out which shade.

I brush on the Red Rose color, smiling at the contrast between her pale skin and the rich crimson hue. If her hair was just a little darker, she'd make a picture-perfect Snow White.

I apply a touch of blush to highlight her cheekbones before I step back to admire my work.

A princess ready for the ball. Well, almost.

She takes the scrunchie out on her own, realizing it's no longer required. Her long, dark hair tumbles down around her shoulders, hiding the straps of the dress. It doesn't need styled, which I'm thankful for. Makeup is much simpler than hair. I keep my own style shoulder-length, so I never have to do much to it.

Secret stares at me in horror when I tell her to go find the gold heels that are in her closet.

"I can't walk in heels."

"Well, you're going to have to." There's no sugarcoating that one.

Her shoulders slump as she disappears into the walk-in.

She takes a couple minutes to find the shoes.

I finish quick-cleaning my brushes, and then I wipe the foundation off my hand carefully, making sure I don't miss a spot that could potentially stain my dress later.

Secret sits down on the bed to put on the heels.

She's resigned to doing what she's been told to do.

I knew that the second she slipped the dress over her head.

This place will destroy her, like it's been destroying me.

The girl standing in front of me is going to disappear.

I wish that wasn't true, but there's nothing I can do about it.

Chapter TWENTY FOUR

BROOKE

I remember when I was the new girl, as long ago as that was. Goldcrest didn't feel like a prison back then. Alphas were an interesting prospect I'd never been introduced to before, and the desire to meet one who might turn out to be my true mate was an intoxicating one.

With all those handsome strangers swarming around me at those first few social events, I was blinded by the fantasy the academy offered. I couldn't see the reality simmering under the surface.

Each Alpha I met was eager to catch a hint of my perfume. I couldn't help wondering if one of them might be the one to finally trigger it, awakening me fully as an Omega.

Even without that, the swell of attention was kind of nice for a while.

When I started to realize the Alphas were mostly players ... well, that's when the illusion shattered for me. Suddenly, the academy wasn't a wonderful place where my dreams could come true on one magical night that I just needed to hold out for. It was a seedy hook-up joint where Omegas got their hearts broken, and Alphas satisfied their baser urges.

Secret's not going to have that same experience. She already knows how messed up this place can be. I feel kind of shitty for what I need to do next, and if I thought she couldn't handle it, I might have tried to warn her first.

Unfortunately, the walls have ears. That psycho guard was close to the bedroom door while we were in her suite, and now Henry and his partner are following us down the hall to the ballroom's back entrance. I know they're watching me as closely as they're watching Secret.

If I try to help the new girl, Geraldine will hear about it, and considering what Secret did to her face, it's better not to give the impression that I'm on this Omega's side.

She looks shocked when I bring her into the booth where Colby the creep is waiting. His eyes gleam when they land on her. I leave them to it before I can have second thoughts about obeying Geraldine's orders.

My heart hammers as I click the lock into place.

I stay there for a minute, listening, my hand ready to release the lock.

Henry's eyes are on me. I can feel his stare and I hope he's not watching me too closely.

Turning, I smile at him, and I can tell he doesn't give a shit if I've locked the door or not.

My hand behind me now, I unlock the door and step to the side to avoid blocking Secret's escape.

"Busy tonight," I tell him, glancing from the crowd of bodies on the dance floor back to him.

"Not too busy," he murmurs, his gaze moving to my lips, and then my cleavage.

I don't know if it's because my heart's already racing, but I can't help wondering if it might be fun to sneak off somewhere with this hot guard. Considering how little a knot seems to do for me as an Omega, maybe I should be looking elsewhere to get my kicks. Like at an attractive and mildly cocky Beta security guard who definitely spends his spare time working out.

"Are you telling me you might have a break soon?" I ask.

He smiles. "I could be tempted into taking a break."

I get ready to move away from the booth and give the door a little push inward at the same time, so Secret knows she's not trapped in there. The door bursts open before I can take that step.

I smile as Secret storms out, headed toward the back of the room, the way we came in.

Colby bursts out of the booth with a growl, glowering at me before he gives chase.

Henry frowns at them, and I wonder if he's going to have to deal with this.

I'd really rather not end up arguing with the first guy I've been kind of attracted to in years, but I don't think I can let him drag those two back together if that's his plan.

"Do you need to—" I start, cutting myself off when I catch a flurry of movement from the side of the dance floor. Turning my attention to the commotion, I see Colby take a fist to the face before he lands on his ass.

Barely anyone seems to notice this outburst of aggression. It earns Colby a few disinterested stares and a couple of giggles from Omegas who think, rightly so, that it's hilarious to see one of the asshole Alphas get some kind of comeuppance.

I catch a glimpse of Cassidy Halloran's disapproving stare before he disappears from sight.

Best guess, he's gone after Secret. She went back the way we came to get here, and, clearly, she belongs to Cassidy. I might not be attracted to the Alpha, but I like his style.

She's lucky to have a guy who's so crazy about her, and she has two of them, including Dylan.

If I was in her shoes, I'd be begging for Cassidy's mark before the night was through.

Henry snorts, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Kind of glad someone finally decked that guy."

"Me too," I admit. "You don't have to ..."

He shakes his head. “Cam’s taking care of it. He’s closer. That’s our system.”

I glance back and watch as one of the older guards helps Colby to his feet.

The younger Alpha looks pissed off, but he doesn’t try to go after his attacker.

The guard is blocking that path. Clearly, a closer-by guard will be dealing with Secret and Cassidy.

I hope he gets the chance to mark her before anyone catches them. She’ll be safe if he marks her.

“So, when can you take a break?” I ask Henry, raising an eyebrow at him.

“What are you doing in fifteen minutes?” he asks.

This is it. My chance to back out, or double down.

It’s been a long time since I trusted a guy enough to consider jumping into bed with him. I can’t be sure Henry’s not an asshole, but I’m feeling the urges that being around the nest of two Omegas in love put in me, and I’d really rather not deal with a fuckboy Alpha’s wounded ego when his knot doesn’t make me perfume on command. Having a little fun with a Beta feels like the perfect solution.

“Well, that depends,” I tell him. “What do you *want* me to be doing in fifteen minutes?”

He gives me that hot-guy smirk as he leans in close to whisper in my ear.

Telling me where to meet him, his lips leave the faint trace of a soft kiss at my temple before he disappears into the crowd.

He’ll need to talk to his friends to make this happen.

I’ll need to be patient until it’s time to head outside.

My lips twitch into a smile.

It might not be a night out at a concert with my bestie, but the thought of getting to go someplace I wouldn’t be allowed

to wander off to on a regular day makes me feel a little bit lighter.

Chapter

TWENTY

FIVE

BROOKE

Sneaking outside is remarkably easy when the guards know you're coming out to have a quickie with one of their own. It might be the first time I've decided to do it, but it's not the first time an Omega has fucked one or more of the Betas on staff. The guards on the stairs nod me on my way, and my heart starts to pound ridiculously hard at the sudden and insistent idea that this could be my way out of the academy for good.

Don't be stupid, Brooke. It's late and you're in heels and the guards would catch you in seconds if you ventured into the woods. There's no way you can run in this dress even if you do ditch the heels.

I seriously doubt Henry will be your accomplice, even if you let him give you a good fucking first.

He'd have to be crazy to help you escape. They'd fire his ass and drag you back to the academy so fast you'd get whiplash.

The truth hurts, but the idea that this could be the night I get free won't leave me.

I could slip around to the front of the building.

I start moving that way, not waiting where Henry expects to meet me.

My thoughts race as I make my way over the changing ground by the side of the building.

Maybe if Timothy's hanging around out front smoking, he'll take me where I ask him to take me. He always has before. Of course, those have been prearranged appointments. He knows about them in advance, and I'm sure the academy's driver has rules like my father's driver does about where he can go and who he has to get authorizations from. Scratch that idea.

But, maybe, if his limo is parked in the lot, his keys might be in the sun visor.

I've seen him do that before. He probably doesn't do it when he's presumably parked up for the night, but still ...

A girl can hope.

I stumble into the side of the wall as the cobble-paved part of the ground takes me by surprise in the darkness. I stop to steady myself, considering taking the heels off.

No. I'd only end up with cut-up soles. There are too many loose bits of stone on the ground.

God, the lighting's awful out here. Almost makes me wish I'd picked my phone up instead of kicking it under the counter before I left my suite.

I half-expect Henry to show up before I get to the corner of the building, but it hasn't quite been fifteen minutes and I doubt he would expect me to walk this far away from the spot he asked to meet me.

Realizing I might not have much time left to get around front, I move a little faster, scraping my hand a bit on the wall as I try to keep my balance on the slightly uneven, stone-spattered ground.

I dart around the corner, avoiding the bushes planted close to the building, and I'm completely stopped in my tracks by a stationary vehicle with a bashed-in hood and a man hanging out of the back, body bent at an awkward angle. There are dark masses on the ground that make me jump back when I notice them. All three of them are mangled. Barely recognizable as human forms.

Oh my God. The blood. There's so much blood!

I fight to catch my breath as I stare down at one of the lumps on the ground that used to be a man. One glassy eye stares back at me sightlessly, and I double over to heave.

I remember I skipped dinner, and I'm thankful for that mercy.

Dry heaves are slightly less awful than the other kind.

"Brooke?" a voice calls out behind me.

Henry! I try to straighten up, but I'm shaking, and I'm still trying to understand what I just saw.

I can't speak. My chest is tight. I can't catch my breath.

Fuck. I'm going to pass out.

I can feel it. I can't stop it.

My purse drops from my arm.

I crash to my knees, and slump over onto my side.

The last thing I see before I lose consciousness is the bright white license plate of the car.

It's from Colvindale.

Chapter

TWENTY

SIX

FROST

It's another chaotic night in Cressidan City when the call to end all others comes through. Three possibly fatally injured persons found outside Goldcrest Omega Academy. No signs of life, but apparently the caller refused to get close enough to check for vitals. Could be a dangerous one.

Police are being dispatched to the scene, and the suspect may still be armed and at large in the area.

"Holy fucking shit," River mutters, clearly listening in to the radio from the back of the ambulance.

Donnie's lips curve into a smile at my side. His bright blue eyes light up as he looks at me.

I nod at him, and he tells the dispatcher we're on the way. We're only a few minutes out.

"Belt up," I call back to River. "And get ready to be the driver on the way back."

I catch a glimpse of our newest recruit as I glance in the rear view. River's big, brown eyes are wide with shock that he tries to cover up quickly. He runs a hand through his thick, dark hair, pushing it back from his face as he stares back at me in the mirror.

"Um, what?" River murmurs, a second before I hit the siren and move out from the parking bay.

"Good call," Donnie tells me.

It's the only call in this situation, and I don't like it one little bit.

River shocked us both when he said he wanted to do what we did.

I expected him to wash out of the training, to find out this job wasn't his thing.

After everything he's been through, I didn't want this for him.

Donnie and I are used to the big city shitshow. We're used to junkies and assholes and thieves. We know how to evaluate risk, and we can handle ourselves under fire.

River's still a kid. He can't even legally hit up bars for another month.

The desire to keep him safe from the big, bad world is strong, and it's never going to go away.

I don't like that he didn't wash out of training. I don't like that he's a month into on-the-job training and he's doing okay. None of that sits right with me.

He's not supposed to be here. We can't keep him protected once he's past his probationary period.

What the fuck are we supposed to do once he's partnered up with some random idiot?

Donnie whistles tunelessly as I drive, as if we're on a leisurely trip or something.

I frown at him, and he stops, shrugging back at me.

He barely knows how to exist without making noise. Case in point when he starts tapping the dash instead of whistling. I watch the road, trying to tune him out.

Two cop cars turn onto the rural road that leads to the academy just as it comes into view.

"Well, this is pretty high up on the list of places I thought I'd never see," Donnie murmurs as I slow down before stopping close to one of two fire trucks.

“There’s actually a fire,” River says, getting up and pointing out of the window.

The siren lights show a badly burned set of entrance doors up ahead.

A couple of reds are carting a hose back to their truck, and a couple more are loading body bags into the back of theirs.

“I guess we’re late to the party,” Donnie says, before he jumps out.

I glance back at River. “Get into the driver’s seat and don’t move.”

I pass him the keys, and he climbs into the passenger seat, moving over once I get out.

Closing the door, I don’t let myself look back.

Donnie’s already rushing toward the middle of the chaos. I speed up to join him.

“What are we looking at?” Donnie asks.

The red EMTs gesture to the body bags on the ground.

“No survivors out of the gun shot wounds and compound fractures. A couple people died from smoke inhalation, too.”

“Damn,” Donnie says. “What the hell happened here?”

No survivors. Should have guessed as much when we saw those body bags. If anyone was still alive, they would have been treated first.

“Who the fuck knows?” the female red EMT tells us before she closes the door. “I’ll tell you one thing. It looked like an execution.”

Donnie’s eyes widen. “Seriously?”

“The gun-shot wounds were efficient, and the beatings were brutal. The fire was started intentionally, with those people locked in the entrance hall with no escape route.” She shakes her head. “Whoever the hell did this, I hope the cops nail him to the wall.”

She walks away.

An uneasy feeling comes over me as I look around.

There are security guards outside an entrance on the side of the building, but I can't see an administrator. They're usually female, to make the Omegas feel more comfortable.

I keep looking, and I see a blonde head of hair next to another of the men dressed in black, through an open gate to a back yard area.

"I'll be right back. Check if the reds need help," I tell Donnie.

He blinks at me. "Uh ..."

I leave before he can ask what I'm doing. I'm not sure I'd have an answer.

A guard stops me at the entrance to the garden area, where the blonde seems to be sitting on a bench with another guard.

"Can I help you?" the guy in front of me asks.

I look him over. "No, but I think she can."

He frowns at me. "No unauthorized personnel are—"

"He's a paramedic, Lenny. Let him pass," one of the guards on the stairs calls out.

"Right. Sorry," Lenny mutters, standing down.

I move past him, and I don't even need to take in a breath to know who and what the blonde woman is. She's stunningly attractive, showing off a tall, slender body in a plain but clearly expensive long, black dress, and a single, unobscured glance is like taking a shot through the heart.

This Omega is my true mate.

I feel it before she even looks at me.

When she turns my way, her dark blue eyes connect with mine and her red-painted lips fall open.

Surprise lights up those sapphire eyes, and I know she feels it, too.

I don't know how much time passes while we stand there, staring at each other in shock, but I'm completely lost for

words, and she doesn't seem to feel any great need to speak, either.

I take in a slow breath, attempting to slow my racing heart.

That's when the faintest scent of dark, sweet cherries reaches me.

It's the softest, weakest perfume I've ever encountered, but it's also one of the most potent.

I walked past a group of Omegas to get to her, and none of their scents called to me like hers does now. Each inhale erodes my senses, bringing me closer and closer to the instincts that lie beneath.

All I can think about is claiming this temptress.

My mouth starts to water in anticipation.

She'll say yes to my mark.

Then, she'll perfume harder for me, and I don't know how much control I'll retain over what happens next. I pick up the sweeter scent of her arousal on my next breath, and it takes every ounce of my self-control not to move in close and announce my intent.

I don't know this woman, and she doesn't know me.

Aside from still working through the shock of this discovery, all I know is that she belongs to this academy and it's the kind of place that has all kinds of rules and regulations. We aren't out in the big, wide world. She isn't free to do whatever she wants, and I have no right to covet a woman I can't have.

She stands up, pale-faced and shaking as she takes a step forward.

"Finally," she says, her sultry voice forcing me to bite my lips. "I passed out before. I need to be checked over."

She stumbles a little in her heels, and the guard at her side catches her while I stand there frozen in place, staring at this goddess of a woman, an Omega who's apparently my perfect match.

“She’s fine,” the guard says, a hint of possessiveness in his tone.

“You don’t know that,” she tells him, pushing him away. “I feel weird. I hit my head when I fainted. I should let him check me out.”

She smiles at me, in a way that makes it obvious she’s used to getting what she wants.

“Well, Paramedic Frost, can you check me over?”

“Of course,” I find myself telling her. “Come with me.”

The touch of her hand on mine fills me with rabid, mounting anticipation for more.

I’ve felt this way about another person twice before.

The day I met Donnie, and again when we met River.

I already have two true mates, and we have enough to deal with without adding another complication to our existing situation. The universe doesn’t seem to care about that.

Fuck. This can’t be happening.

We already have an Omega.

She’s not ours. She can’t be.

Chapter

TWENTY SEVEN

BROOKE

Damn, I had no idea how much breathing in the scents of mated Omegas could affect my hormones. I'm so much hornier than I thought I was. I mean, I must be. It's the first time I've kind of liked one of the guards, and that was only the start of my seemingly endless thirst. It's forgotten him, already, moving on swiftly to bigger and better things.

I mean, I've never once looked at a guy before and thought, *Wow, I wonder if he tastes as good as he looks?* This one must make statues jealous as he passes because he looks like he's been cut out of the finest marble. With a shock of black hair, light blue eyes, and flawless, pale skin he's too pretty to be completely human.

He must be a vampire, or an incubus. Something sexy with sharp teeth. *All the better to eat me with.*

My body reacts to my thoughts as if I've slipped a bullet vibrator down the front of my panties. I shiver as intense heat flows through me. My clit throbs and my pussy clenches. I swell up with need ... desperate, hungry, insatiable desires rising inside me.

I can't tear my eyes away from this incredible stranger. I'm no longer the tiniest bit aware of the world that exists around us. He's all there is, and he's all I want.

My thighs are slick, a testament to my sudden, heady arousal.

I can't deny the effect he's had on me. I don't want to.

This man is too captivating. Too handsome.

It's been a long, damn time since I felt this way about a guy.

So long I can barely remember much more than the sensation it filled me with. It's like an echo of this moment, a faint, fleeting memory of something tangible that I can't quite grab hold of.

The realization knocks me out of my lusty thoughts.

This has happened before.

I've felt this exact same damn way.

I just don't know when, exactly, or who I felt it for.

That doesn't make sense.

Why the hell can't I remember it?

I stare at the gorgeous stranger as if he might hold the answer.

He doesn't say a word, his gaze is set on my red-painted lips.

Holy hell. He's just as caught up in me as I am in him.

I stand up, feeling a little shaky on my feet, and I take a step toward him.

"Finally. I passed out before. I need to be checked over."

I stumble a little bit, rocking backward slightly. That's when I'm reminded that Henry's still hanging around. He catches me, holding me in a side hug that doesn't feel as welcome as his earlier moves.

It has to be the fastest I've ever gone off a guy in my life.

"She's fine," he practically growls at the paramedic.

Why do men have to turn into cavemen around other men?

"You don't know that," I tell Henry, pushing him until he lets me go. "I feel weird. I hit my head when I fainted. I should let him check me out."

Really, I want to get the hot EMT alone, but Henry doesn't need to know that.

I smile at him. "Well, Paramedic Frost, can you check me over?"

"Of course. Come with me." No hint of hesitation, he takes my hand to lead me out of the gardens.

"Brooke ..." Henry mutters behind us.

He sounds pissed off, and he probably is.

Before Frost interrupted us, he was asking if he could come find me in my suite after the emergency services are gone and the building's been cleared. I was still kind of shaken up, thoughts spinning over what I'd seen. I'd been ready to agree to anything to avoid thinking about it anymore.

I'm glad now that I didn't.

He didn't make me feel like this.

And this is worth holding out for.

Unfortunately, Henry doesn't seem to have noticed I've moved on, and he's following us.

"You're exhausted, Brooke," Henry insists. "I should put you to bed."

"While the suspect is at large?" Frost asks, his icy tone and hard stare showing exactly what he thinks of the interruption.

He silences Henry that easily. Seconds pass. Minutes. He doesn't have an argument to give.

Holy hell. This man bleeds Alpha energy. Real Alpha energy.

Commanding, and protective, he makes me feel instantly safe in his presence.

If guess if he's really a paramedic, then he's probably a Beta.

That doesn't matter. He's already a million times sexier than every Alpha I've had the misfortune of encountering over my years at the academy.

“I should check you over,” he tells me. “Inside the ambulance.”

Unlike Henry’s offer, this is one I don’t want to refuse.

He lets go of my hand to go open the back doors to the ambulance.

I follow him slowly, taking care with the ground so I don’t stumble in my heels.

He doesn’t look back to check if I’m coming over. He knows I am.

After stepping into the ambulance, he turns and offers me a hand.

I take it, and he sweeps me up, into his arms.

His big, hard body is pressed against mine, and suddenly all I can think about is asking him to mark me. It’s such a primal need that burns through me when I imagine his teeth on my throat that I’m afraid to open my mouth, because I know that’s what will come out.

No, actually, I wouldn’t just ask him to bite my skin, making me his, I would demand it.

It’s insane. He’s a complete stranger.

I’ve never met him before in my life.

I don’t know him. He doesn’t know me.

Hell, for all I know he’s mated already.

I don’t see any marks, but if he’s as Alpha as he feels he wouldn’t let himself be marked.

It would be his mate who’d be wearing that scar.

The thought doesn’t turn me off. It only makes me curious.

Is he a pack kind of guy, or a one-woman man?

It doesn’t feel like the kind of question I could ask a complete stranger, straight out of the blue.

He’s clearly focused on doing his job. It’s not like we’re on a date.

I was about to have a little outdoor fun with one of the academy guards tonight. I didn't even know this guy existed then. How can I be so desperate for him?

I can't help feeling like this is happening because I was in Secret's suite, and the scent of her perfume mixed with Dylan's awakened something inside me that I didn't know was there.

Maybe this is a false heat. Those are pretty rare, but I'm a bit past the usual age for my first real heat, so it's a distinct possibility. I shouldn't trust my feelings right now. If my body is messing with me, this isn't real. I'm only fixated on him because he's the first Alpha ... No, Colby was the first and there were others I passed in the ballroom. Huh. Maybe it's because he's the first *new* Alpha. Maybe that matters. My body can't be tricked if I know better? Ugh. I don't know. This is too damned confusing.

Mr. Delicious clears his throat and settles me down into a hard, bench-like seat.

He sits next to me. I fight the urge to shuffle in my seat to get closer to him.

God, he has serious abs. I can tell, even through the shirt.

I don't care if he already has a mate, or a whole pack of lovers. I'd still demand his mark and beg for his knot to ease the ache in my pussy.

I stare into his eyes, and he stares right back at me.

The sexual tension between us is potently thick.

One assertive move would be all it took to lock our bodies together.

Unfortunately for me, he doesn't make that move.

He's interested, I can feel it, but his emotions are conflicted at the same time. It hurts that something's holding him back, I won't lie, but considering I know nothing about him other than what he does for a living, that's probably a good thing.

If this is a false heat, giving in to it would be a mistake.

I know that, even if my body doesn't seem to care.

"So, you fainted?" he asks, breaking eye contact to grab something out of a medical bag at his side.

Right. There's a reason I'm sitting in the back of an ambulance right now, and it has nothing to do with being pinned down by a hot guy. I shudder when I think about what I saw. Those people in that car were murdered. The gruesome scene is like something out of a horror movie as I replay it in my mind. The thing is, I can handle those. I can handle gore. I spend hours creating realistic wounds as a hobby.

I just never expected to see something as terrible as that in real life. It was the sudden shock of stumbling across it that made me sick to my stomach. That's the difference, I guess.

I'm prepared when I look at real-life reference photos.

I definitely wasn't prepared to see mangled bodies tonight.

"I didn't eat a lot today," I admit, trying to justify what happened. "Finding those dead people really shook me up. Who were they, anyway?"

"Sorry," he says, giving me a rueful smile. "Not a cop. I wouldn't know."

"Right," I murmur, nodding as he asks for my arm.

"I need to run through a few basic checks and questions, if that's okay?"

I nod again, and he checks my blood pressure.

Apparently, it's within the normal range.

He starts to ask standard health questions, and I answer them without giving them any thought, trying to understand his emotional turmoil and his almost completely blank expressions. I'm starting to think I imagined his interest in me, that this really is a false heat and that's kind of embarrassing.

"Are you pregnant?" he asks next, jolting me out of my thoughts.

"Uh, what? No! Of course not."

I sit up straighter, shocked that he even asked and suddenly kind of paranoid about the dress being too tight.

“I didn’t think so, but I had to ask,” he confesses. “It’s a standard question, believe it or not.”

“Right,” I mutter. “So, am I okay?”

He nods. “Seems like it. You’re mostly just a little dehydrated and you need to eat something.”

“Oh,” I mutter, reaching up to touch the scratch on the side of my head. “What about this?”

Now, he seems embarrassed that he missed my actual physical injury.

His cheeks burn red as his gaze moves to the cut.

He goes back to his kit and brings something out that he touches to my head.

It stings a bit. I guess he’s cleaning the wound.

“It’s small enough not to need stitches. You’re not concussed. You’ll be fine.”

He gives me a smile. “You’re all set.”

Damn. He isn’t going to hit on me.

Seriously? Not one flirty comment, Frost?

I feel a little lost as I give him one last nod.

I kind of want to make a move, but that’s probably the false heat talking.

Throwing myself at a guy who isn’t interested would be so cringy.

“Okay. Well, thanks,” I tell him, letting him lead me out of the ambulance.

The second the door swings all the way open, I regret it.

Henry’s standing a few feet away, and it makes my heart sink to know he’s waiting for me. He’d seemed like the right kind of guy to have some harmless fun with when I agreed to meet him out here. He was so cocky and sure of himself.

Apparently, seeing me melt under Frost's charms was enough to turn him clingy and possessive. It's probably just as well we didn't get the chance to do anything. I hate to think how much worse that would have made him.

He comes rushing over as we exit the ambulance.

Frost raises an eyebrow at me, but he doesn't ask.

"He's not my boyfriend, if that's what you were thinking," I murmur to Frost.

He doesn't respond to that confession, further bruising my ego.

Henry's right next to me a second later, looking me over as if he's checking for fresh injuries. He turns his worried gaze on Frost. "Is she okay?"

Frost nods. "She will be. Make sure she gets something to eat, and plenty of water."

"*She* has a name," I mutter, crossing my arms under my chest.

I can feel Frost's gaze on me as I glance up at the building. I ignore the temptation to look back, even when I hear the ambulance doors close.

"We should get going," Henry says.

Henry attempts to take my arm, and I shrug him off.

There's hurt in his eyes when I glance at him.

Trust the broken Omega to get into a weird unrequited romantic triangle with a couple of Betas.

I let out a breath. "You're not supposed to be looking after me, Henry. You're supposed to be doing your job."

"Brooke ..." he starts, sounding as dejected as he feels.

"I have to go eat something."

I head to the side entrance.

"You can't," he calls after me.

I ignore him, but one of the guards at the doors stop me.

“We just got the order to evacuate the building,” Lenny says. “You’ll need to wait over there.”

He points out the space by the side of the ambulance. The fire assembly point.

“Are you kidding me?” I ask, wondering what exactly is going on.

The fire trucks are packing up to leave. The cops are doing the same.

If everything is dealt with, why are they evacuating?

“Standard procedure. You’ll get back in once the building’s been manually cleared.”

Meaning, once the guards have walked every inch of the sprawling interior and opened every door to check for any possible hidden threats inside.

I walk back down the stairs as the doors are propped open and all the Omegas and Alphas from the social start to trickle out behind me.

It’s been a pretty crazy night, and it’s not over yet.

Chapter

TWENTY

EIGHT

DONNIE

I head back to the ambulance, ready to tell Frost the good news. The reds are transporting the bodies to the morgue. Everything's taken care of. We can leave. I find my partner leaning against the back door of the ambulance, his expression telling me he's a million miles away.

It gives me shivers when he's that deep in thought. Every time that's happened in the past, it's been right before some huge change in our lives. River's decision to become an EMT was the last time.

What the hell could it be this time?

"Hey, Frost," I call out as I dart toward him. "We can hit the road."

He doesn't look my way. His expression stays fixed.

He's not in his usual trance, then. He's looking at something, or someone.

I turn to work out what, exactly, and I see her.

A blonde woman in a long, slinky dress. Her expression is furious as she storms down the steps of the building's side entrance in killer heels.

Holy fuck, she's glorious. Her hair is blown back from her foxy face as she stomps along, headed in our general direction, looking ready to murder someone.

I can't take my eyes off her as she moves across the uneven ground without faltering.

Who is she?

I move toward her, and that gets Frost's attention.

"Donnie, what are you—" he starts, his voice tight.

"Give me a second," I call back to him, cutting him off.

There's something utterly bewitching about this woman. I want to get closer. I need to see what it feels like to have her turn those beautiful, foxy eyes on me.

Unfortunately, it seems I'm not the only guy who's chasing Blondie's attention. The academy guard with the deep scowl on his face brings out my protective side. I don't know who the fuck he thinks he is, but he's not worthy of this woman's time. Unless he's the one she's about to unalive.

She stops in her tracks, her gaze softening abruptly as her eyes fall on me.

There's a question on her crimson-painted lips as her sparkling sapphire eyes meet my stare.

Then, the guard puts his hand around her wrist, and I growl at him.

"Hey," I snap, capturing his attention instantly. "Hands off!"

Before I go get a bone saw and take them off ...

He looks me over with narrowed eyes, ignoring me. "Get lost. This isn't your business. The party's over. You can leave now."

"That's funny," the blonde says to him. "I was about to say the same thing to you."

He frowns at her, and her gaze sears through him until he lets her go.

"Fucking cock-tease bitch," he mutters as he walks away.

I've never had a stronger urge to chase after a guy to smack him down, and I've worked in strip clubs.

Unfortunately for me, smashing assholes' faces into the ground isn't quite as acceptable in my new career as it was in the old one.

So, I have to settle for staring at him until he disappears.

I don't stop watching until I can't see him anymore, which is probably only possible because there's a crowd gathered a few feet behind where we're standing. The guests from the social event are apparently evacuating the building to allow the academy's security to go through their standard procedures.

I turn back to Blondie to find her staring at me in wide-eyed shock.

This woman is beyond gorgeous. Deep, dark blue eyes, lightly sun-kissed skin, and golden-blond hair cut to just barely brush against her collar. Those lips ... I can't fucking stand the taste of lipstick, yet I want so damn badly to yank her into my arms and crush my mouth against those sweet lips.

If I hadn't already come into contact with dozens of Omegas in my life, I might be tempted to believe that's all this attraction is. I know some Betas find every Omega they come across to be completely and utterly intoxicating. I've never been one of those Betas. I've always known exactly what I wanted.

Anything less than a true mate isn't worth chasing.

I didn't think I'd be lucky enough to meet more than one, but fate smiled on me when he gave me Frost and River, and I think she's smiling on me again now.

As much as I love my mates, something's been missing.

I couldn't pinpoint exactly what, but now that I see her, I feel like I know.

We've been stumbling around in the dark. This woman's the light we've been searching for.

She's what completes our picture of a happy pack, and the start of family.

That's why fate brought us out here tonight, when there was really nothing left for us to do.

She was here. She's why we're here.

I take in a breath, and I'm rewarded with the most delicate perfume I've ever breathed in.

Fucking hell, yes. She smells like cherries.

I growl lightly as I stare into her darkening eyes. She feels it, too. I can see it in her gaze.

She gasps softly when I take a step closer, catching her in my arms as she passes out.

I carry my unclaimed mate to the ambulance, determined to take her home and make her mine.

Chapter

TWENTY

NINE

RIVER

I watch in the rear view as Donnie brings the girl back into the ambulance, laying her down on the stretcher. She had a strange effect on Frost, and it feels like she's having the same effect on Donnie.

I keep my hands on the steering wheel, at ten and two, watching my knuckles whiten as I tighten my grip to fend off the shakes that have been coming over me since I realized my position in our pack is being threatened.

The Omega's allure is undeniable. I feel it as strongly as they do. Stronger, I guess, given than I'm an empath. I'm feeling everything they're feeling. It's amplified inside me.

I shouldn't feel surprised. The Omega looks like she could be a supermodel.

Her scent is light and sweet, but it's still easy to tell what she'll taste like.

Those are the addictive perfumes. The delicate but intense ones.

They're the scents that make you want to get closer.

"What do you mean, she passed out?" Frost asks Donnie, sounding a tiny bit mad.

He sounds like that a lot, so I tell myself it means nothing, but I know better.

He's attached to this woman already. He might not be willing to admit it, but it's only the truth.

Donnie didn't do anything wrong, but Frost is worried about the girl anyway.

He cleared her to leave the ambulance. He's not happy that she passed out.

"Fell right into my arms," Donnie murmurs, spiking my jealousy with his dreamy tone.

I've only ever heard him use it when he's talking about me, or to me. It's special. Ours.

Now, he's feeling that way about her. A stranger he met five seconds ago.

Fuck. I knew this could never last.

Nothing this good ever does.

"Wake her up," Frost says.

"What the hell for?" Donnie asks, keeping his voice low.

"She's not hurt. She just needs to hydrate."

"She needs way more than that," Donnie insists. "You feel it, don't you?"

Frost might seem angry on the surface, and it does go a little deeper than that, but I can tell he's also conflicted. He feels the same desire that Donnie's caught up in. The desire that I'm absorbing from them both, regardless of what I want. I'm about to lose my mates to a better Omega, and my dick is harder than it's ever been in my life.

This is so fucked up. I wish we'd never taken this call.

"She belongs with us," Donnie goes on. "Tell me you feel it."

Frost doesn't answer him. He can't openly deny what he's feeling, but he's rejecting the idea of it.

I don't know how to feel about that. He wants her, but he doesn't want to want her.

Does that make me the winner by default?

Will he only stay with me out of some misplaced sense of duty?

I don't want that. Everything would change, even if he tried to force it not to.

It would be worse than having them leave me. I thought that was my worst nightmare, but it's not. This is. Having them stay with me when they desperately want to leave.

"She belongs with us," Donnie insists. "River, start the engine."

I jump in my seat, and glance back at Frost.

He shakes his head, and I ignore Donnie's instruction.

Frost is our Alpha. I take my orders from him, for better or worse.

Frost lets out a sigh. "I'm waking her."

"Don't do that ..." Donnie groans, cursing under his breath.

Frost uses smelling salts to rouse the Omega.

She moans lightly as she awakens, taking in a deep breath before she sits up.

"What the ... Are we on the way to hospital?" she asks, sounding a little out of it.

"Nope," Frost says, his tone echoing his emotions more accurately now.

He sounds depressed, because he is.

He doesn't want to let her go, but he feels he needs to.

I try to find the words to convince him he doesn't need to ruin his life for me, but they won't come. I'm too afraid to gather them up. Terrified that he'll say all the things that would destroy me the instant I give him the chance at an out.

I'm too fucking selfish to let them go.

"Damn," the blonde says, letting out a sigh.

She feels as depressed as Frost does.

They're meant for each other, and I'm standing in their way.

"Do you have any allergies?" Frost asks.

"Uh, not really," she tells him, as she sits up.

"I have a protein bar in the glove box. River, can you look for that, please?"

"I don't need it," she says quickly. "I'll be fine."

She doesn't sound like she'll be fine. I can feel her loneliness. She's been empty for a long time.

We shouldn't leave her here. It's killing her inside.

"River ..." Frost starts.

I can't move my hands from the wheel, and I can't find the right words. I meet my Alpha's gaze in the rear view. He trails off, as if he's seen something in my face. *Fuck. I haven't said a word and I've still managed to mess everything up.*

"I'll get out of your hair," the girl says, as she gets up and jumps out of the ambulance.

She's freaking out, and I'm not really sure why. I get a thicker taste of her perfume when I breathe in, and I wonder if she's close to her first heat. Some Omegas perfumes sweeten or deepen with a heat coming on. At least, that's what I've been told. Mine has never changed so I wouldn't know.

Frost lets out a sigh as Donnie chases after the girl.

"Any calls since we've been here?" he asks me.

I shake my head. The radio's been silent.

"I'll drive," he tells me, before he gets out of the back.

I have a handful of seconds to compose myself, so I force myself to let go of the steering wheel and I tap my fingers off my wrists. It's not exactly magic, but it helps to center me before I get out of the driver's seat. I manage to pass the keys to Frost without my fingers shaking.

Then I get into the back and close the doors.

I don't try to get another look at the girl.

As ashamed as I am to admit it, I hope we never see her again.

Chapter THIRTY

BROOKE

Why am I so fucking broken? I can't believe I thought that guy might have felt what I did. Clearly, he's not interested, and I'm having some kind of hormonal break-down now. Probably brought on by being stuck at the academy for so long without a mate.

Six damn years. Which makes me at least three years overdue for going into my first heat.

"Hey, Cherry," the other guy from the ambulance calls out.

The one I barely met before I passed out for the second time.

I'm almost afraid to look. From what I noticed before I fainted, my body reacted exactly the same way to him as it did to his partner. So, apparently, I either have a serious thing for EMTs or I'm so starved for affection that I'm craving every new man I meet.

I turn, pressing my lips together and trying to stay calm.

I lose my breath the instant my eyes land on him. He's big and tall, like Frost, but that's where any comparison stops. He's a little less sculpted. More toned than muscular. His skin is tanned, and I can see the edges of tattoos hidden under his shirt collar. Short, light brown hair. There's a bump on his nose that makes me think he must have broken it in the past. Somehow that little flaw makes his killer smile even sexier.

His bright blue eyes seem to sparkle up close like this. It's kind of hard not to get lost in them.

He's entirely as intoxicating as Frost, in completely different ways. His name badge reads 'Stark.'

"Name's Donnie, by the way," he says, clearly noticing me noticing his badge.

I smile. "It's nice to meet you, Donnie. I'm Brooke."

"Brooke, huh?" he asks. "Sounds kind of hard. Cherry's much sweeter."

"Cherry's a stripper name."

He rolls his eyes. "That's such a stereotype. Not all strippers have sweet names like Cherry and Candy."

"And you would know that because you know so many strippers?"

He laughs, and it's the huskiest, dirtiest sound I've heard in a long time.

"Well, I did a while back," he admits, his eyes sparkling. "When I used to be one. My social circle has changed a little bit in the last few years."

"You used to be a stripper?"

"I'd invite you to a private dance, but I've heard these academies are kind of hard to get out of."

He's flirting, for sure, and I can't help smiling. It feels so easy.

"Yeah. I'm stuck here until my Alpha makes himself known, or until a cute paramedic or two can help me escape," I admit, wondering if that's really as crazy as it sounds.

"You want to leave now, we can leave right this second," he promises, extending his hand.

I glance over at the crowd that's gathered close by now that the hall has emptied out. Not everyone is looking, but anyone who happens to be watching is whispering and

laughing. I look back at Donnie, wishing I could do it. Just take hold of his hand and never look back.

There's nothing here for me. I know that.

Yet, I don't trust myself enough to say yes.

"Maybe next time," I tell him, feeling all the hope drain out of me as I turn down the offer of a lifetime.

I can't do it. I can't walk away from the only world I know. The only world I've ever known.

Even if I don't want what it has to offer, I can't just leave.

The sexy ex-stripper gives me a wry smile, completely unfazed by my knock-back.

My heart races a little faster when he leans in closer, cutting off the world around us. All I can see, feel, and hear is the man who's standing right in front of me.

"We're on back-shift, most of the time," Donnie murmurs, close to my ear, "Call after six and we'll do whatever we can to be the first ones here."

It's the first offer I've ever had that's made my stomach flutter.

He's telling me he'll come back for me whenever I'm ready.

Oh, God, I wish I was ready.

He moves back, and I can't help but smile at him.

My skin feels flushed, and I definitely need a cold shower.

"I'll think about that," I promise.

"Take your time," he calls back as he leaves.

Chapter THIRTY ONE

BROOKE

Giving the crowd a wide berth, I move back toward the gardens, this time alone and very much concerned with keeping the faint scent of my freshly awakened perfume out of the range of any nearby Alphas. I can't risk that happening, even if it's so weak I doubt anyone would notice it unless they leaned in close and inhaled deeply, kind of like that second EMT did before he whispered his invitation in my ear.

I perfumed for a couple of insanely attractive Betas, and at least one of them noticed.

Apparently, I'm capable of doing things other Omegas can do, after all.

Still, I wouldn't exactly say I wasn't broken. Omegas don't usually perfume for Betas.

And it could be a false heat. My perfume is weak, and I was exposed to a nest before I became crazy attracted to a couple of hot strangers.

I just really wish I wasn't so close to every Alpha I've ever met right now. The first one to smell my perfume will think I'm his, and there's no way in hell I belong to any of those dickheads.

I don't start to relax until I'm back on the bench in the garden, close enough to the flowers to mask my scent. I don't know where Henry went, exactly, when Donnie told him to get lost, but I can't see him around. The other guards are

preoccupied with their jobs, and with keeping control of the noisy, intoxicated group of Omegas and Alphas who don't seem to realize the reason they're out here is because something terrible happened tonight.

My stomach churns when I think about what I saw, but then things start clicking together in my head.

Cassidy was here tonight. Geraldine was sending his male Omega to Colvindale. Those dead guys, that's where they came from. Maybe he did that to them. If he did, then he probably saved Dylan and got Secret out of here, too.

The thought makes me smile.

I hope that's what happened.

I just kind of wish I hadn't stumbled across what her Alpha did to those Colvindale assholes.

The shock of that find is going to stick with me for a while.

Eventually, it'll fade. Either that, or I'll end up sketching it out and using the memory to recreate some of the more gruesome details into an SFX wound for fun. It's probably not considered a typically healthy way to deal with that kind of trauma, but considering every day at the academy gets me closer to being married off to a man I don't like, much less love, I have a right to decide if I want to express myself by creating gory effects based on real murders.

Hell, I'll probably go insane if I don't keep up my hobby.

It's practically the only thing I have left that's mine.

I watch the side entrance as the rest of the Omegas in the building are evacuated.

A couple dozen girls didn't attend tonight's party.

The usual suspects are in attendance, the ones who don't go to any of the socials.

The smart girls, the creative ones.

They don't want Alphas.

I don't, either.

When I look over at the spot where the ambulance was parked, bitter regret washes over me. The missed opportunity hangs in the air like the last notes of my slowly fading perfume.

I could have escaped Goldcrest.

My chance came and went, and I just let it slip away.

Along with the first men I've been seriously attracted to in forever.

I don't belong here. I never did.

I was never meant for an Alpha mate.

I don't know if I'm meant for two hot Betas, either, but I'd definitely like to find out.

Chapter

THIRTY

TWO

BROOKE

My perfume has faded away to nothing by the time the guards let everyone back into the building. I avoid the side entrance, going for the back door and letting out a sigh of relief when it opens. If I thought there was a killer running around, I might be freaked at how lax security is around here. As it is, I'm relieved I can sneak back to my room without having to pass everyone else.

Call me paranoid, but I'd rather avoid getting too close to Alphas on the night my perfume decided it was time to finally show up. It might be gone now, but who knows when it could come back? That's not always predictable.

Slipping out of my heels, I step into the dark corridor. The carpet underfoot is thick and warm, and so much easier to walk on without the stilettos. I move quickly toward the corridor that leads into the main section of living quarters. Anyone else headed back to their rooms will be coming from the opposite direction because they came in the side door to the building.

Sneaking along the empty corridors gives me a tiny thrill that reminds me of the many minor exploits I had with Zelena in high school. Ditching class, writing on the bathroom walls, smoking in the lecture hall. Small acts of defiance that made me feel free even if I knew the opposite was true.

I can't help the rush of adrenaline that surges through me when I make it to my suite door without crossing paths with

anyone else. The hint of cherry sweetness that hits my nostrils as I take out my key is faint but unmistakable, just like it was before.

A couple of slow, measured breaths do almost nothing to calm me down. I shiver lightly and push the key into the lock with a shaky hand. My perfume stays faint, but it isn't fading.

I hope to hell that's not going to keep happening.

The low sound of voices headed my way pushes me to unlock the door and get inside the suite before anyone finds out about my perfume. Omegas know what it is when they smell it. We're more sensitive than everyone else. There's no way another Omega wouldn't notice.

Lucky for me, my scent is faint enough not to linger on the air without my presence.

I realize that after I slip into my suite and close the door quietly.

The voices out in the hall get loud enough to hear as the Omegas walking together pass by.

"I can't believe Frank Palmer was here," a vaguely recognizable voice murmurs.

I can picture her face, but I can't remember her name. She needs glasses but refuses to wear them, so she's almost always squinting. I think she has a name that ends in an A. Jenna? Carla?

"Well, believe it. Bella's sister has a super reliable source."

The other voice is more confident but could belong to one of several girls who sound kind of alike.

It doesn't really matter who they are, I guess. They didn't seem to notice my perfume and that's all that matters.

I roll my eyes when I replay the nonsense gossip they were spouting in my head.

Frank Palmer? Yeah, right. A serial killer who seems to have a thing for Beta women suddenly deciding to hit up an Omega academy? That's insane.

As for Bella's sister's reliable source, everyone knows that Beta is dating a cop. What they don't know is her boyfriend isn't always honest with her. She's a reporter and she has incredibly loose lips. No one would ever give that woman the whole truth.

I doubt she'd even welcome it.

Fiction's usually far more interesting.

I lock the door and turn on the main suite lights.

The warm illumination makes everything feel more relaxed, and I don't know if that's good thing.

I need to know what triggers my perfume so I can avoid letting it come out in public.

Putting my heels away in the walk-in, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror behind the shoe rack.

My skin is flushed, and my eyes are dark. I look like a woman possessed.

I suppose I am. That's kind of what a heat is like. A possession.

My perfume will come and go until I accept a mate or mates, whether those mates are temporary or permanent. I'll be stuck trying to control it until that happens.

It's still lingering on the air around me while I try to push away thoughts of the EMT who invited me to call on him anytime. Slick drenches my thighs when I take off my dress, the tease of the material brushing over my nipples. Pressing my thighs together, I moan at the soft throbbing pulse of my clit.

My first heat is long overdue. This isn't it, but it could be a false heat.

Either way, giving in to the desire to pleasure myself would only encourage my perfume to stick around and deepen. I don't want to risk that. I don't want anyone knowing about it. I might become more desirable to the asshole Alphas if I come in cherry flavor.

Sighing, I move toward my bedroom's adjoining bathroom.

A bath won't be as pleasurable, but I know the warmth of the water will relax my muscles and hopefully also wash away any trails of perfume that still exist on my body.

For a second, my thoughts go to the knotting sex aid that's under the sink.

It's been there since I got here, unused in its box.

I shouldn't think about using it. Besides, if this is a false heat, it won't work.

I let the bath water run while I take off my soaked-through panties and wash them in the sink.

I seriously need to be on my guard.

The minute Geraldine knows I've perfumed, she'll put me in a room with an Alpha my father deems as acceptable, and any hope I have of escaping Goldcrest without a mate will be crushed flat.

I can't risk letting her find out.

I should have run when I had the chance.

Chapter

THIRTY

THREE

FROST

Twelve-hour shifts can be grueling at the best of times, and the night only got more chaotic after the cherry-scented Omega gave me that hurt look. *God, she was beautiful. Sexy as hell, and definitely more trouble than any woman is worth.*

River sensed something when I was checking her over. He's been withdrawn ever since we left the academy grounds, staring out the window into space as if the weight of the world is resting on his shoulders. He struggled to focus on our calls, and my worry about what happens when his probational period is over has increased tenfold.

I keep my mouth shut while we're working, not wanting to make the situation any worse.

We'll never see that Omega again.

I should be glad about that, but the truth is, I'm not.

Parking the car, I kill the engine and press my lips together when River gets out of the backseat like a shot, darting up the path to the front door of our house.

"What?" Donnie asks, raising an eyebrow at me as he unbuckles his seatbelt.

"I didn't say anything," I mutter.

"Yeah, well, you didn't need to," he tells me. "River's been wound so damn tight all morning. What happened when I wasn't looking?"

“The Omega ...” I start.

“Brooke,” he corrects me, as if it’s important.

“Whatever her name is,” I tell him. “I checked her in the ambulance before you brought her back in. River ... I don’t know what he felt or sensed ...”

Donnie smiles. “He could tell, too, couldn’t he?”

“I don’t know about that. He seems upset.”

“He doesn’t understand. That’s all.”

“What’s to understand?” I ask.

It’s pretty clear we’re not on the same page.

“That she’s *ours*,” he says with a dreamy sigh.

“She’s not *ours*, Donnie. She’s an academy Omega. Goldcrest, no less. She’s way out of our leagues.”

Not to mention the fact that we already have an Omega.

That little fact seems to have escaped his attention.

“She perfumed for me,” Donnie says. “That doesn’t happen if it’s not fated.”

“It doesn’t need to mean anything,” I deny. “She was probably just close to her heat.”

He snorts. “Yeah, okay then.”

“She’s not ours,” I insist.

“Whatever you say,” he tells me, getting out of the car.

I untangle myself from my seatbelt and step out of the driver’s seat.

“I mean it, Donnie. Don’t mention this to River.”

He frowns at me from across the hood. “You’re serious.”

“Those academies exist for a reason. They’re not going to let us just walk in there and take her.”

“We’re her true mates. They can’t keep us apart if she wants us to claim her.”

“I checked Goldcrest’s application process on my phone earlier, Donnie. I would never get approved, so they’d never me in. We’ll never get the chance to claim her. It’s not happening.”

He gives me a wounded look. He’s an eternal optimist, so he can’t stand it whenever I have to give him a reality check. I don’t like to burst his bubble, but this is one of those times where it needs to happen. Holding on to the hope that the stunning Omega from the academy is meant for us is only going to make it sting harder when we eventually find out she’s marrying a rich Alpha who’s approved to be at her side.

“Stranger things have happened,” he practically sings.

Jesus Christ. He’s not going to let this go.

“Forget about her, Donnie. That’s an order.”

He shrugs, and I can tell he’s rolling his eyes as he heads up the path to the house.

He does a little salute, just in case I didn’t notice he’s ignoring me. “Yes, Alpha.”

Chapter

THIRTY

FOUR

DONNIE

River's in his room with the door closed by the time I get into the house. On a normal day, I'd leave him be, but I think all three of us can agree that what we experienced last night was the furthest thing from normal. I head right over to River's room and knock on the door.

Frost steps into the hall behind me and lets out a sigh.

"He's not going to let you in."

"We'll see about that," I tell him, feeling extra determined to prove him wrong.

Michael Frost might think he knows all my tricks, but he doesn't know I save a few of them especially for our Omega. River O'Reilly is a bit more complex than our Alpha, and he needs more delicate handling at times. Frost's habit of cutting straight to the point can be too blunt for River.

That's how I know our Alpha doesn't know everything, and therefore can't possibly know that Brooke isn't really fated for us, or that she's completely unattainable.

I also know that River's confused about what happened, because he has a tendency to hide away when he doesn't understand something. He doesn't know to ask, because he was raised to never question 'his betters'. His parents were abusive assholes. I'm glad they died in a fire his mom started with her cigarettes. He deserved better, and it might have taken

him a few years to find it, but he has us now, and we'll never treat him that way.

"I bet you're still out here when I get finished with my shower." Shaking his head, Frost disappears into the bathroom.

He's in the habit of always hitting the shower after a shift. I usually go for a run before I hit the hay, and I shower when I wake up at night. River's the only one with no set habits. Sometimes, he goes straight to bed. Sometimes he runs with me, or showers with Frost.

I wait until the sound of the water running starts up in the bathroom, before I clear my throat and call out, "River, I don't feel like sleeping alone. Can I come in?"

He doesn't immediately answer, and while it's possible he's already asleep, I seriously doubt it.

If I were trying to talk to Frost, I'd open the door and walk right in, basically demanding his time.

We can't do that with our Omega. Past traumas have given him a few triggers that are impossible to get past. When he needs space, we give him space. That's the rule.

"We don't have to talk if you don't want to," I coerce.

I hear the bed creak, and a second later the door opens.

River's standing in front of me in his boxer briefs and nothing else. His dark eyes meet mine with a hint of threat in their depths. "No talking."

I nod slowly. I know he needs to feel things to process them properly.

He needs time to work through his thoughts on his own.

He doesn't like to talk about his feelings.

All I can do is stay close to make sure he knows that meeting another fated mate doesn't mean our relationships with each other will change. It only means there's someone else out there who's supposed to be with us. All of us.

He lets me inside, and I strip out of my clothing while he closes the door.

There's a lock on the inside, but he's never used it.

He trusts us. He'll understand we're not going to let him down once he gets over the shock of last night's discovery. I just wish he'd let me tell him all of that. I think it would reassure him a lot more than he realizes.

I usually sleep naked, but River's mood is more solemn than usual, so I keep my briefs on when I slide under the covers to curl up next to my mate.

He has his back to me, his slender body curled up slightly in front of me.

I kiss between his shoulder blades, and he lets out a little gasp.

Wrapping my arm around him, I keep his body close.

My dick reacts to his body like it always does, with unbridled enthusiasm that my underwear can't quite contain. His slick makes his boxer briefs damp, and that tiny hint of his sweet perfume is so damn delectable that I can hardly resist the urge to tear his underwear off and eat his ass until he's begging to be fucked raw.

His breathing hitches when my fingers slip under the hem of his underwear.

I reach down past his rock-hard cock to stroke over his taut balls and finger his taint.

He arches against me, inviting more. I smile against his shoulder, kissing him there while my hand sinks lower to rub against his slick-coated entrance.

He groans as I finger that puckered hole, feeling how ready it is for my dick.

"Permission to talk?" I ask, as I push my finger in deep.

He glances back at me, nodding slowly.

"I will never, ever not want this," I murmur, rubbing my cock against the swell of his ass while I sink a second finger inside him. "I could eat your ass and suck your cock all fucking day and never ask for anything more."

“Oh fuck,” he groans, thrusting his head into the pillow as I fuck him with my hand.

I slide my other hand under him and use it to stroke his cock.

The tip is already wet and weeping pre-cum onto my fingers.

My dick strains a little harder against my underwear when I feel that sweet slickness on my skin.

River groans and bucks under me, breathing sharply as I tug on his cock a tiny bit harder.

“Come for me,” I whisper. “Come, so I can taste you.”

“Please fuck me harder,” he begs, his voice ragged.

I give him what he needs, pushing another finger inside him and thrusting harder.

He lets out a strangled gasp as he explodes and drips all over my hand and his slim stomach.

I give him a second to catch his breath before I move, carefully extracting my hand from under him and slowly licking his cum from my skin while my other fingers are still buried in his ass.

“I need you inside me,” River murmurs.

“Soon,” I promise. “Let me taste you, and then I’ll fuck you so hard you won’t be able to take Frost’s knot for a week.”

Chapter

THIRTY

FIVE

RIVER

Donnie always knows exactly what I need. Sometimes it feels like he knows me better than I know myself. I was so fucking tense until he put his hands on me, so closed down I didn't want to talk or hear him speak a word. One little kiss, and one little stroke, and he cracked me wide open.

Lust consumes me as he strips me of my underwear.

I want to be touching him. I need to feel him moving inside me.

He knows and he makes me wait, taking a second to stare down at me, before the hand he just licked clean of my cum moves gently over the marks on my inner thigh. I shiver at his touch on those marks. They show that I belong to him, and to Frost, and desire rushes through my body every time they touch them, skin on skin.

“One day,” he murmurs, in that soft, dreamy voice that used to be all for me. “We won't need to hide anymore, and we can mark you where everyone can see it. I'm waiting for that day, River. Don't ever think I've forgotten. Don't ever think I don't ache to sink my teeth into your throat.”

I know that he does. His bright eyes flash every time he talks about it.

He wants our bond for life. He's never once given me any reason to doubt that.

“I ache for that day, too,” I admit, making him gasp in a breath.

My skin flushes at the confession. I’m used to feeling vulnerable, but I’m not used to telling people what I want. In the past, anything I wanted or loved was used against me. I learned to keep my true feelings to myself. Undoing that lesson isn’t easy, but Donnie’s never given up on me.

He moves over me, pinning my body down with his as he captures my mouth in a deep kiss that makes my half-mast dick surge back to its full length and thickness. I can feel his thick shaft against my hip bone, with the tip of his cock leaving a sticky trail of pre-cum on my skin, while his kiss steals my breath.

Breaking away, he looks into my eyes. “I could mark you right now.”

He grinds his teeth when his gaze moves to my throat. He strokes the skin where he’s talked about marking me in the past. It’s a very specific, very visible area that would make my mark difficult to hide in public.

“You could,” I start. “But you know you can’t.”

He growls lightly at me, and a very big part of me knows if he made that suggestion one more time, I’d tell him to do it, effectively ending my chance at a career for the sake of a real mating mark.

I want a forever bond with him, and it’s more important to me than anything else, but I can’t make myself tell him that. I want it too badly. That’s why I decided to train to be an EMT. So I could feel closer to my mates without having to admit the thing I want more than anything else.

“Soon,” Donnie tells me, kissing my throat before moving down my body, disappearing under the sheets and putting his mouth to work between my legs. He starts with slow, deliberate licks over and under my balls, and gradually works his way up to the straining, wet head of my cock.

“Haven’t you tasted me enough?” I ask him, knowing my cum and my slick don’t taste the same while I’m taking strong

dosage suppressants daily. There's barely a hint of my perfume on me now, and that's while I'm in the presence of a true mate, naked and relaxed.

He laughs under the covers. "I could never get enough. Never."

His lips wrap around my tip, his tongue moving over the wet surface, tasting me.

He moans around me as he takes more of me into his mouth.

My dick is close to ten inches long, and he takes in every inch as if he swallows swords for a living.

Maybe he did, in another life.

His moans intensify with every movement, his saliva slickening me up as he works his way up and down my length, licking and sucking and moaning against me.

"Oh, Fuck. Donnie, you have to slow the fuck down."

Or not. I kind of love it. I just love it so much I'd like it to last a little longer.

He slows down slightly, and I let out a breath, trying to control the urge to rock my hips and let him swallow every last drop of cum that spills out of my cock into his mouth.

One more moan is all it takes, and it's a desperate, needy one, full of longing.

I lose control and come.

He drinks it all down and releases my cock from his mouth slowly, licking the tip before he lets it go.

"Now, turn over," he demands, with a wicked smile. "I'm not done tasting you."

Chapter THIRTY SIX

DONNIE

I'm still reeling from River's admission that he wants a real mark from me. I've felt his desire when I've talked about it before, and he said yes to the marks we already gave him, but this is different. Those marks we gave him before. Saying yes to those was like agreeing to take our promise rings. It was a promise to bond properly at some unknown later date.

The admission that he wants a real mark is like saying yes to an engagement.

He wants this bond with me, with us. I knew that, but hearing him say it has given me renewed hope.

However he's feeling about Brooke, it hasn't made him reconsider what we mean to him.

He still wants to be ours.

I give him a second to turn onto his back. He's relaxed enough now that sleep would probably be the sensible option. Too bad we're only just getting started. I don't want to give him any reason to think he's not exactly what we want. I know he'll feel enough of that from Frost, even if our Alpha doesn't mean it that way.

"You know what I want," I tell him. "Raise your ass for me."

I let the sheets fall back, and I put my hands on his hips as I lean forward to taste his slick and tease his entrance with my tongue. His sweet taste is muted by the suppressants he's

taking to avoid perfuming in public, but it's all the same to me. I'd never not want to do this.

He moans and squirms a little as I move my hands to spread him wider.

I can't believe I just had three fingers inside him. He's tightened right back up.

My tongue swirls against him, making him groan low and deep.

I push a finger inside, using his slick for lubrication.

My fingers get wetter as I push another inside.

He's getting slicker for me, inviting my cock to settle where my fingers are probing.

"Please, Donnie, your cock ... I need ... Oh, fuck."

I love to hear him beg. It shows me how much he loves what I'm doing.

"Soon," I promise, working him open a little more while he gasps and moans under my touch.

I keep him in place with my other arm when he dips forward and remove my fingers when I know beyond a doubt that he's ready for my cock. I work my slick-coated fingers over my length, and then I press the tip of my cock against his opening.

"Fuck yes," he hisses out.

I sink in, inch by inch, until I'm fully accommodated and being squeezed tight.

"You're so tight," I moan. "How the hell does Frost's knot have room to fit inside you?"

His breathing hitches, and he lets out a low groan.

"I don't fucking know, it just does."

I start to move, and he shakes under me.

It's been too damn long since we properly fucked. The long shifts can be tiring, but neglecting our Omega's needs

isn't the way to go. River only gets the shakes like this when it's been a while.

He's so full of need that he can barely handle the feeling.

"How do you need it?" I ask him, thrusting slowly while he catches his breath under me.

"I ... Harder, please," he murmurs, so softly I barely hear it.

I give what he asks for, holding on to his hips tighter and slamming my cock into him.

"Like this?" I ask, stopping to wait for his answer.

"Yes," he whispers. "Don't stop."

I don't stop. I fuck him deep and hard until he's crying out my name between ragged breaths.

I fuck him until he makes a mess of the bed with his cum, spilling out thick threads onto his sheets.

I fuck him until he's trembling under me, ready to collapse.

Then, I slow down, so close to the edge and ready to come that if he made the smallest movement, the tiniest gasp, I'd lose control in seconds.

I can't relax yet. I need to know something, and it needs to be now, while River's more open.

"The girl we met last night," I murmur.

"The Omega," he corrects me, his tone a little cold.

"She's our mate, River. Tell me you felt that."

"I ... I felt something," he says, clearly uncertain.

"I swear, River, she's fated for us. All of us."

I close my eyes when he doesn't respond.

"I pictured you with her, claiming her," I tell him. "I imagined her pinned under you while I fucked this tight, slick-covered ass."

He sucks in a breath. "You saw her with me?"

“I saw her spread her legs for you. I saw me fucking you deeper into her.”

“Holy fuck,” he mutters, clearly aroused by the idea.

“I saw her begging for your mark, River.”

Those sapphire eyes desperate with need, fixed entirely on River, her sultry voice full of hunger as she begs him to sink his teeth into her slender throat.

That’s the image that sticks in my head as I fill my mate with my cum.

The sexy, blonde Omega pinned under us, showing River how wanted he truly is, how loved.

“You really think she’ll want to be with all of us?” River asks, as if he can’t quite believe it.

“I know she will,” I tell him, convinced of it.

Alphas are supposed to be the ones who run on instinct, but Frost is too worried about losing what we have to trust his instincts fully right now. I know that girl belongs with us, and as long as River knows that means him, too, then everything’s going to work out just fine.

I don’t care how impossible Frost thinks the situation is. She’s meant for us.

I move back, and he turns to face me, moving out of the way of the wet patch in the middle of the bed. I lay down in it, not caring if it’s cold now or that I’m getting my Omega’s cum all over me. It’s not the first time and it definitely won’t be the last. I tug the sheets back up over us and rest my head on my hand, pushing it slightly above the pillow. His head rests on his pillow, tilted slightly so he can meet my gaze with his dark eyes.

“You really think she’s mine, as well as yours and Frost’s?” he asks, as if he’s trying to wrap his head around the idea. The frown on his face reminds me he has no damn idea how utterly delicious he is.

“Oh, she’s definitely yours,” I tell him. “Just don’t call her Cherry.”

“Isn’t her name Brooke?”

“It is, but I like Cherry better. She looks like a Cherry to me.”

Smiling, he shakes his head at me. “Just don’t go inviting her to spread her legs for me before we’ve gotten to know her, okay?”

I laugh. “I’m not that thirsty. Come on.”

“I don’t know,” he says, a shy smirk on his lips.

“You’re fucking adorable, you know that?”

He rolls his eyes. “All I know is you’re crazy.”

He clearly doesn’t know how adorable he is, or he wouldn’t be so dubious about how our newly discovered true mate will react to him. I’ve tried to show him, but he always tells me I’ve lost my mind if I think whatever he’s just done is cute, sexy, or some combination of the two.

“What does that make you for loving me?” I tease, as I wrap an arm around him.

“I guess I must have kind of thing for crazy people,” he says, as he turns to face away from me.

“Only *kind of* a thing?” I laugh as I hug him closer.

“Hmm,” he murmurs, lips curling into a smile. “Well, okay. It’s *definitely* a thing.”

“I’m so glad to hear it.”

He laughs. “Go to sleep.”

“Maybe I will.”

Chapter

THIRTY SEVEN

FROST

The heat of the shower usually helps to wash the night away. Coming home steeped in chaotic energy is part of the job. Letting go of that energy is the only way to keep ourselves together.

Donnie usually releases it by running. He goes out and comes back refreshed.

I release mine under the spray of hot water, allowing the warmth to relax me while I metaphorically, and occasionally literally, scrub the nightshift off my skin.

Last night's chaos was tame, compared to others, but it was packed with an intensity that won't let go no matter how hard I scrub, or how long I stand under the stream.

Every time I think about the blonde, I'm filled with the same desperate desire that I get around River. The feeling fills me with physical urges and instincts, but there's more than just lust and a feral need to mark her as mine. River needs my protection as well as my love. She's the same.

With one exception that I ignored because of my existing bond with River.

She needs to be rescued before I can give her everything else she needs.

I saw her disappointment when she awoke from her faint to realize we hadn't left the academy grounds. She doesn't

want to be there, and I should have known that the second I felt our bond.

Of course she doesn't belong there. She belongs with us.

Turning off the water, I let out a deep sigh.

However hard it is for River to accept it, she's supposed to be with us.

I shouldn't have ignored that. I messed up, and I'm going to have to find a way to fix it.

After grabbing one of Donnie's fluffy Cookie-Monster-blue towels, I dry myself off.

There's no way in hell I'm going to be able to sleep today.

I step out into the hallway and discover River let Donnie into his room. One little inhale of breath is all I need to know that's why Donnie isn't still standing in the hallway. River's perfume has been stifled by the high dose of suppressants he's using to keep his Omega status under wraps, but I can still tell when he's aroused, even from the other side of the house.

That hint of sweetness on the air is light enough to escape the notice of a regular person, but as River's mate and Alpha I'll never not be able to tell when it's him.

It takes some of my tension away knowing Donnie's taking care of our Omega.

He's so intuitive it feels like he's the Omega, at least some of the time.

When we first met, I was certain he was an Omega passing for a Beta.

Then, I saw his determined, decisive side and he felt like an Alpha.

One shift together and we were bonded by the end of the night, claiming each other as mates over our break, when the sexual tension between us just exploded.

It felt crazy, to make a decision to take each other as life-long mates after being together for six damn hours. That's how quickly things can develop when it's just meant to be.

I never felt a shred of doubt over that decision.

Things weren't so simple with River, but I never doubted that bond, either.

This one is different, and it's not just because it was unexpected. I didn't expect to make mates out of my first and only partner at work, and I definitely didn't expect to end up mated to someone we met on one of our calls, but I accepted those developments without the slightest hesitation.

Accepting Brooke would mean opening up our lives to a fourth person, and I'm not sure how to protect River from the changes that would bring.

He's been through so damn much.

I can't ask him to be okay with this.

It's not what he wants.

Sighing, I put on sneakers and pick my keys off the table by the door.

I have energy I need to burn off and it's going nowhere while I pace around the house.

Maybe I can walk it off.

Chapter

THIRTY

EIGHT

FROST

I get back home an hour after I left, and I don't feel any more relaxed than I did before I went out.

As I'm locking the front door, Donnie steps out of River's room. He creeps over to lean against the wall by the door while I step out of my sneakers.

"He let me in," he tells me, quietly.

"I could tell," I admit, giving him a wry smile. "I assume he's sleeping now?"

"He passed out right after," he says. "Well, almost right after."

"That's good." If he's sleeping, he's relaxed, which means he's not worried.

"I think he's coming around to the idea of another mate," Donnie goes on. "He didn't realize she would be his mate, too. He probably won't completely realize that until she's ours."

"He thought she'd be ours, not his?"

"Pretty much. I think he's afraid that she'll replace him or something. I tried to tell him it won't be like that, but you know how he was when he met us. He had a hard enough time believing both of us wanted him."

"Christ. I could kill his parents a thousand times over for what they did to him."

"Yeah, they really fucked with his head."

It took us months to work through the issues they gave him, and the shitty boyfriend he ended up with after they died wasn't any better. I should have realized those issues might rise again. We're talking about a huge change to all of our lives. We all need to be on the same page, or we can't even consider the idea of accepting this woman as ours and inviting her into our lives.

Donnie lets out a sigh. "So, anyway, River's going to be fine if Brooke becomes our mate."

He sounds so damn sure. I decide to take my lead from him, instead of swaying on it for any longer.

Truth is, if we put off helping her out of her current situation, she might be lost to us completely.

"She needs to be rescued from that academy."

"I know," Donnie says. "She knows, too."

I'm the one who messed up our best chance of setting her free.

"I should have let River drive us out of there."

"Well, yeah, but I don't think she was ready, anyway."

I blink at him. "What?"

"It's fate, Frost. If the moment was right, we would have gotten her out. She knows we'll be waiting for the next time. And we won't mess it up when they call us out there again. She'll be ready. We'll be ready. It'll happen."

I shake my head at him. "What if it doesn't?"

He lets out a sigh. "What if it does? It will. Trust me."

I'd rather have a guarantee, but if I need to trust someone, it has to be Donnie. "Fine, but we're coming up with a backup plan if she doesn't get us back there within a couple of weeks."

He beams at me, clearly pleased that I've come around. He pushes away from the wall.

“Now excuse me while I hit the little boy’s room. I don’t want River waking up thinking I’ve left him to sleep on his own.”

He heads to the bathroom, and I go into my bedroom.

There’s no way in hell I’m going to sleep, but I guess I should at least try.

Chapter

THIRTY

NINE

BROOKE

I wake up shivering. The water I soaked in last night is cold now and I don't know how the hell I managed to pass out in the tub. I take in a deep breath as I pull myself up and out of the water.

Well, my perfume is completely gone, thank God.

Shivering, I grab the towel from the rail next to the bath and wrap it around my middle.

The distant sound of a ringing phone catches my attention as I step out of the water onto the thick rug by the side of the bath. I vaguely remember kicking my cell phone under the kitchen cabinets last night, then I realize the ringing is the sound of the landline in the bedroom.

That's a little unusual, but I guess I wouldn't know if someone's been calling my cell since it's been under those cabinets all night while I was asleep in the bathtub, giving myself a stiff neck.

Of course, I'm probably lucky I didn't drown or end up with hypothermia.

Sighing, I move toward the bathroom door, bracing myself for a call from my father.

When I step into the bedroom, the ringing stops.

I let out my relief in a whoosh of exhaled breath, and then I get myself dried off.

Checking the time makes me grimace. I didn't sleep past my appointment with my therapist.

The thought of dressing and putting on makeup like usual makes me groan.

All I really feel like doing is relaxing. Sinking back under my bed covers and passing out for a few hours, then maybe dragging the covers to the couch to binge watch a TV show or something.

I curl up under the covers, not letting myself lay down.

It's a compromise I'm not entirely happy with, but I'll take what I can get right now.

Warming up nicely, I let out a sleepy sigh.

How much trouble would I really be in if I slept through my session?

My father should have known better than to make my appointments on a Saturday morning.

I mean, really it would be his fault if I missed one.

Or all of them.

Ugh. No. I have to make myself go.

He'll only punish me by making me marry one of the guys I crossed off my list of Alphas. Probably the worst one. Lachlan Darvish, or one of his creepy friends. I'm not even entirely sure which one is the absolute worst of the worst, but I bet my father already knows.

The sharp little beep the phone makes on the nightstand makes me jump under the sheets.

I glance at it and see the light blinking on the receiver.

Oh, shit. Someone's left me a message.

Please, please, don't be Daddy Dearest.

I let my arm work free of the sheets, but I stop short of reaching for the handset.

I could just ignore it. Pretend I didn't hear the phone ringing before.

It's not like I don't have an excuse.

I saw dead bodies last night, and I passed out in the bath once I got back to my room.

Neither of those things are normal occurrences.

Trauma is to be expected. In fact, I might insist on Doctor Prentice helping me work through my feelings about what happened, instead of quizzing me over my list. My father might be heartless, but she can't pretend what I saw was nothing.

Anyone would be shaken after that.

I pick up the phone before I can change my mind.

"Please tell me he isn't coming for a visit," I murmur as I click the button to retrieve the message.

I hold my breath as I wait for it.

My mouth falls open when I hear Lana's soft, friendly voice instead of my father's.

"Due to last night's incident, we ask that all Omegas stay in their suites this weekend and call the kitchen to order any meals as and when required. Please call reception if you have any questions and we'll be happy to help. Thank you."

It's a pre-recorded message that she must have sent to everyone at a set time.

That's not something that happens a lot, but it has happened before.

I dial the number for reception. The line is busy.

Guess I should put some clothes on and dig my cell out from under those cabinets.

I put the handset down and drag my ass out of bed.

Going through my dresser drawers, I pick out a well-worn pair of jeans, a tank top, and a loose sweater. I ignore the underwear drawer that I usually use, and pull out a basic, comfortable sports bra and cotton panties.

It feels good to put on my casualwear. I really don't want to leave my suite today, but I'm pretty sure that standard message Lana left on my machine doesn't apply to me. At least, not in the case of my therapy session.

I roll up the sleeves of my sweater and put the TV on when I step into the living room. I need the background noise to make the suite feel less empty. It always kind of feels like a bit too much space for one person to occupy, but I know that's only because I'm sick of being alone.

That's why I still attend classes I've long outgrown.

I need the company, even if it's superficial.

I lay down on my side on the cold tiles of the kitchen area to check under the cabinets. A cursory glance reveals my phone has gone all the way under. I can just barely see the edge of its sparkly gold cover.

My hand barely fits under the gap. I can't reach far enough to touch it. My fingertips don't even brush the edge.

Getting back to my feet, I let out a sigh as I look around the kitchen.

My gaze lands on a spatula, and I start to smile.

Turns out cooking utensils might be handy for something.

For the first time in six years, I use the spatula that's been hanging on the wall by the oven since I moved in. I push it under the cabinets, scooping up my lost phone and rescuing it from death by dust-bunnies. I pick my phone up and deposit the spatula into the sink, along with the thin trail of dust it scooped up.

It's probably the first and last time I'll ever find a kitchen utensil useful.

I wipe the surface of my phone before I unlock it.

Texting Lana, I ask what she knows about last night.

She's probably super busy with all the calls she'll be getting asking what's going on, but she usually keeps her cell

phone in her purse if it's not on her desk so I'll hear back whenever she has a second.

I put the phone down on the table.

It's been a while since I ate, and considering I was ordered to do so by an EMT last night, I figure I'll start by finding something edible in my fridge. After picking out a bottle of water and a fruit pot, I go sit down and start my healthy breakfast while I stare at my phone and half-listen to a shitty daytime soap opera that's on the TV.

When all that's left in the fruit pot are grapes, I go back to the fridge and take out a yogurt.

My phone buzzes on the table when I'm grabbing a spoon from the drawer.

I rush back around to the table, dropping the spoon and yogurt onto the table with a clatter.

Lana isn't texting, she's calling.

I pick up quickly. "Hey."

"Hey," she says, her voice quiet. "Are you okay?"

"I ... Um, yeah. I'm okay."

"I heard they almost took you away in an ambulance last night."

"Oh, that. I might have fainted slightly when I found the bodies."

She sucks in a breath. "You found the bodies?"

She didn't know. I guess probably no one knows. I mean, besides Henry and maybe some of the other guards. Whoever he might have told. Some of the Omegas probably know something.

Everyone who went to the social was out there when I was with those EMTs.

"It's a long story," I tell her. "Do you know anything about what happened?"

“It’s all been coming together in pieces, but as far as I can tell, Frank Palmer was here.”

“Wait. I heard that last night, but that was just a rumor ...”

“It was on the news this morning. He’s dead. He did what he did out here, and then he tried to kill another woman. He was caught and killed by one of his own kids. You know how he has a ton of them ...”

“Because he was a rapist before he was a killer.”

“Yeah, so, that’s what happened. Are you seriously okay?”

“Why did a serial killer who targets women kill a group of men from Colvindale?”

“They were here to pick up a transfer. The cops don’t know that because apparently there’s no admin on the transfer. I didn’t tell them, because that Omega is gone, and wherever he is, he’s better off than he would have been with those awful Colvindale Alphas.”

“So why do the cops think they were here? Isn’t Geraldine freaking out?”

“Oh, so you really don’t know. When you said you saw the bodies ...” She trails off.

“I saw the Colvindale Alphas. What do you mean, I don’t know? I don’t know what?”

She doesn’t speak, and I keep my mouth shut incase she’s being quiet for a reason.

A second later, she lets out a breath. “Sorry, I’m hiding in the bathroom. The other receptionist just came in and left again.”

“So?”

“Right. Geraldine is dead.”

“What?” I let out a gasp. “Are you sure?”

“It’s been on the news, Brooke. I’m sure.”

“Oh my God.” My father will be furious.

Geraldine has been like his right hand. She's dead? He is not going to like that one little bit.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm alive," I blurt, still trying to wrap my head around it. "How ... Why would Frank Palmer target her? It doesn't make sense."

"I don't think she was a target. Neither were her guards. They all just got in his way."

"So, then, why was he here?"

"I heard the cops talking. They think he came for the new girl. Secret Leto. When he couldn't get to her, he tried to kill her sister instead. I overheard the cops on that. I don't think anyone's supposed to know who Frank tried and failed to kill before he was shot by his own kid."

Holy fucking shit. "Who was his kid?"

"They haven't released that information. I need to get back to my desk before Paula goes nuts. The phone's been ringing off the damn hook."

"Right. Sorry. It must be insane down there."

"Yeah, it's pretty crazy."

"I was going to ask if I'm supposed to go to my therapy appointment. I know all Omegas are supposed to stay in their rooms, but ..."

"Sorry, I almost forgot about that. Doctor Prentice will come to you, at your usual time."

"Damn."

"It's better if you're not caught wandering around right now," she warns me. "The academy investors are coming to interview for a new head of admin. It's an unusual situation, but I've heard they do spot checks to make sure everyone's doing what they're supposed to be doing. They'll start calling parents if any of the Omegas aren't being compliant."

Any desire I might have had to go wandering quickly dies.

Anything to avoid triggering the attention of my father.

“I’d better go. I’ll call after my shift ends if I find out anything else.”

“Okay. Thanks, Lana.”

She hangs up, and I set the phone down on the table, feeling more than a little shaken up.

Geraldine is dead. My father’s right hand is no longer guiding Goldcrest.

I don’t know what that means for me yet, but I doubt it’s a good thing.

There’s really no point in worrying over what’s going to happen next.

Whoever the academy puts in charge is completely outside of my control.

My father might have enough influence to convince the investors to hire someone he thinks he can use the way he used Geraldine, but worrying about that isn’t going to do me any good.

Only one thing will help me drag destiny into my own hands.

I doubt Daddy would be happy to hear I’m ditching the idea of choosing an Alpha mate in order to run off with a couple of hot, Beta EMTs that I literally just met. Well, what he doesn’t know can’t hurt him. At least not until he realizes I’m gone. By then, what he wants won’t matter.

Finding the TV remote, I switch channels to a station that plays news all day.

Doesn’t take more than a few seconds to find what I’m looking for.

Proof that Cassidy Halloran was involved in what happened doesn’t get more obvious than his billionaire father being named as one of Frank Palmer’s victims.

I can disappear.

I doubted that before, but if one determined Alpha can come to this academy and rescue his Omegas while making it look like the world's most notorious serial killer murdered the people who stood in his way, well, then one determined Omega can surely escape this academy using her artistic talents and a little bit of patience.

All I really need to do is to pick my moment.

Then, I'll be free to live my life the way I want to live it.

Chapter

FORTY

BROOKE

Apparently, my therapist doesn't feel the need to be on time when she's forced to come to me, instead of the other way around. I'd say it doesn't matter, because on any other day it wouldn't.

But today, she's wasting precious time I could be spending on my newly hatched plan.

I give her a tight smile when she arrives, twenty minutes after our set appointment time.

"Hello, Brooke," she greets me, frowning as she takes in my casual dress. "I'm sorry we couldn't meet at my office today. I'm sure you understand why that is."

"Of course," I tell her, stepping back and inviting her into my suite.

I've placed the list of Alphas I finished last night on the coffee table.

I switched the TV channel back to the shitty soap opera a half hour ago, so it would look like I was watching mindless drivel when she showed up. I pick up the remote and turn it off.

"Sorry, I put it on when we were told to stay in our suites, and before I knew it, I was sucked in," I tell her, laughing as I set the remote back down.

I wonder how much she knows about last night.

It would be better if my father didn't know I was examined by EMTs.

I honestly can't imagine who would tell him now that Geraldine's not around.

It's not like he would waste his breath talking with the guards or the other Omegas.

The Alphas could be a problem, I guess, if any of them even noticed or listened to rumors when all they were really at the academy for was to have a little fun.

Yeah, I don't think I need to worry about it.

"I had no idea you enjoyed sitcoms," she says, making it clear she can't tell the difference between a drama and a comedy. I bet if someone told her about dramedies her head would explode.

I don't bother to correct her. I just shrug. "Guilty pleasure, I guess."

"We should get started," she says, looking at the couch.

She's probably pissed that we're going to have to sit closer than we do in her office. There won't be room for her to feel too superior. *Welcome to my world, Prentice. I hope you can find your way back out once I'm gone. My father certainly won't help you find the exit.*

"Sure," I tell her, sitting down on the far end of the couch.

She relaxes a little as she takes a seat that leaves a couple feet of space between us.

The L-shaped leather sofa is almost kind of like having a separate arm-chair and couch.

She takes her tape recorder out of her purse and her eyes catch on the list I've left on the coffee table in front of her. "Oh. Is this ... You made the list?"

"I always do what my father tells me to do."

"This is good," she says, nodding. "It's progress."

Her gaze runs down the sheet of paper. “The names you haven’t scored through are the ones you’re okay with?”

“They’re the best of a bad bunch,” I tell her. “I wouldn’t say I’m okay with them.”

She nods slowly. “Your father will be pleased that you’ve started to make your decision.”

Oh, I doubt it. At least, I doubt he’ll be pleased once he realizes the choice I’ve actually made.

I shrug. “Sorry, I couldn’t narrow it down more. The names left on the list are all the same to me.”

Assholes and fuckboys. What’s the difference? Seriously?

She sighs softly. “Let’s see if we can make a few more decisions this morning, okay?”

“Sure,” I tell her, nodding when she holds the tape recorder up, silently asking if she can start taping our session. “Let’s get started.”

Chapter FORTY ONE

BROOKE

Prentice whips out a folder full of personal details on the Alphas I haven't scored off my list. She takes her time asking questions that are designed to weed out the less compatible matches.

A few Alphas get scored off my list for making it way too obvious they're highly likely to produce bastard children with other women no matter who they end up mated to. As if there are any guys on the list who'll be more careful about who they fuck around with.

The Alphas who come here aren't subjected to sexual health checks like the Omegas are. They aren't asked how many partners they've had, and when they last got health screened. They don't have to choose a contraception method to ensure no children are conceived before they want to be parents.

They have none of the responsibility, and all of the advantages.

All today's session proves to me is that I'm making the right decision to get the fuck out of here.

I'll never be considered an equal to any of the Alphas who come to the academy.

Prentice knows that as well as I do.

She can pretend she doesn't see it, but my father's process is making it crystal clear.

She shifts in her seat a few times as she moves from one prospective Alpha to the next.

A couple get their names scored through without a single question.

Clearly, my father's already given her his list.

We've whittled things down by a half dozen men by the time an hour has passed.

I feel a little better knowing this is a process that's likely to take a few weeks.

I won't be pushed off on an Alpha before we're done.

We won't get done before I'm out of here.

Win-win. At least, for me. Who the hell knows what'll happen to her when I'm gone, and she wasn't able to figure out what I was up to and tell my father to prevent it.

Maybe he won't blame her. Maybe he'll blame Geraldine.

She's too dead to care now. I'll be too gone to care.

Prentice lets out a soft sigh as she stops the recording.

"What now?" I ask, hoping to avoid any surprises that might be coming my way.

"We'll work through the list until we have it down to three potentials, and your father will take it from there. He's keen to start vetting your prospective mates."

"Sure," I murmur, almost sad that three assholes are going to miss out on that dubious pleasure.

I doubt any of the Alphas would want me after that kind of close scrutiny. No man wants a psychopath for a father-in-law. It's kind of funny. All this work, and I know he'd ruin everything he's trying to accomplish here at the final hurdle.

"Well, I'll leave you to watch your sitcoms," she says, folding up the list and slipping it into her satchel alongside the folder.

"Do these guys have any idea my father's doing this?" I ask, out of idle curiosity.

She smiles. “Their fathers know they’ve been visiting the academy long enough now that they can be vetted by any of the attending Omegas’ parents as suitable mates. They’re aware how long you’ve been here, waiting for a mate. It’s not going to come as a huge surprise to the Alphas when they’re informed that your father wants to meet with them. It’ll probably only be a shock that it didn’t happen sooner.”

Ha. They’ve been getting away with doing whatever they want for so long there’s no way in hell they wouldn’t freak out. It’s kind of funny. I’m almost tempted to stay just to see what dumb excuses get used to let them back out of what would basically amount to an arranged marriage to an Omega that no Alpha actually wants.

“I’ll see you next week, Brooke,” Doctor Prentice says as she leaves.

“Sure,” I tell her, hoping I won’t.

She gives me an odd smile. “You seem different today.”

“I’ve made peace with fate,” I admit. “I guess everything that happened last night affected me.”

“That’s good to hear. Your father would be proud.”

He definitely wouldn’t, but I smile anyway.

“See you next week.”

She leaves, and I lock the door behind her.

Now that she’s gone, I go into the bedroom and take my second makeup kit out of the closet. It’s the one thing I’ll hate to have to leave behind when I get the hell out of here.

It’s too big to take with me. There’s no way in hell I’d get it out without being noticed.

I run my hand along the top of the industrial toolbox, enjoying the feel of the sleek metal. It’s not exactly an MUA standard kit item, but it fits all my special effects essentials so perfectly that I’ve come to appreciate my luck at the rare find I made right before I was sent to this luxury-dressed hellhole. I unlock the box and pull it open.

My gaze moves over my favorite products, assessing what I could use to make my escape.

Bruises wouldn't be enough to have anyone call an ambulance.

And there's a nurse on duty during normal office hours for any minor injuries or ailments.

So whatever gruesome injury I plan to create will need to be outside of those normal hours.

Friday night sounds like a plan to me. Party bumping, and booze flowing.

My lips twitch at the thought of making a spectacle of myself.

Who hasn't hurt themselves while intoxicated?

It's the perfect storm of circumstance.

Plenty of people need to see it happen, to make it believable.

With no nurse on site, someone will have to call an ambulance.

I'll be out of Goldcrest and gone from my old life forever.

All I need to do is twist those EMTs around my finger.

They're already halfway there. The one who promised to come back for me will do whatever I ask. The other guy might be harder to crack, but I'll figure him out.

I guess I'm getting ahead of myself. I need to concentrate on the wound first. I need to make it look good and gory. Something that might make the other Omegas faint when they see it.

A burn could work, or a deep, nasty cut.

I shake my makeup setting spray. I'm getting low on that essential, so I can't use it on any practice cuts or burns. I haven't ordered anything in the last six months, and everyone thinks my supplier is just for beauty products.

No one knows about my little hobby.

I take out a bowl and get ready to start mixing up silicone.

I smile as I think about the prosthetics I'm about to make. The molds I have are perfect for cuts and burns. I'll make both and decide which to use later. I'll need a good story to go along with the prosthetic. It's got to be believable, and it needs to carry a sense of urgency.

I think I can manage that.

Anything to get me the hell out of here.

Chapter

FORTY

TWO

BROOKE

The new head of the school is a tight-faced, female Alpha named Edit Merritt. She arrives on Monday and wastes no time in asserting her dominance, leaving a sealed envelope on the kitchen table in my suite. I can tell she came here to deliver it herself, ensuring I know she has full access to my room and can enter whenever she pleases.

She's in charge of the academy now, and I'd best not forget it.

I open the envelope. I know an invitation when I see one.

Thanks to my father, they come with an impending sense of dread.

This one asks me to meet Edith in her office at seven-thirty tomorrow morning.

And I thought my father was a psychopath.

Now I can tell the new head of Goldcrest is cut from the same cloth.

Sighing, I drop the invitation and I call the academy kitchen to place my dinner order.

I'll have to eat soon so I can get to bed, and actually wake up in time for the ridiculously early meeting. The invitation doesn't state what the appointment relates to, but I can guess.

She'll have taken a cursory glance at our records and decided she wants to know why I'm still here.

My father must not have had the chance to speak to her yet.

I'm sure he's going to. He might have a hard time manipulating another Alpha, but cash is always a powerful incentive. I'm sure he'll give her a golden handshake. Eventually.

Then, she'll realize I'm already taken care of.

She doesn't have to push me to choose a mate, because my father's already on it.

He'll be perfectly happy if she leaves him working on his existing plan, and she'll be glad to know she doesn't need to waste any effort on me.

I set the alarm on my phone while I eat my early dinner.

Then, I take my time getting ready for bed, attempting to make myself unwind with a bath I don't fall asleep in before I dry off and slip into comfortable PJs.

Despite my best efforts, I don't sleep a wink all night.

I just lay in bed, staring at the ceiling in the dark, wondering why it's taking so long for the week to be over. Roll on Friday night, when I can finally get the hell out of Goldcrest.

I go onto automatic pilot when my alarm goes off.

I get up without hesitating. I go through my usual routines, getting washed and dressed and putting on my usual makeup.

The kit I left in Secret's room was brought back to me when I called reception and asked for it on Sunday evening. Lana didn't answer that call. The new girl, Paula, did.

Henry brought me the case and asked if I was doing okay. He looked concerned, and I could tell he wanted me to invite him in. I idly wonder if he forgot he called me a cock-tease bitch. He really doesn't seem to understand I'm not interested anymore. Despite everything that happened on Friday night, he thinks I still might want to fuck him.

Unbelievable. Betas can be assholes, too, it seems.

I smiled silently as I closed the door in his face.

Good-bye, Henry.

Hope to see you never.

I'll be out of here soon, so you'll just have to get a new obsession.

I already have an obsession of my own. Their names are Donnie and Frost, and they're hotter-than-hell, life-saving heroes who are going to help me escape this gilded cage.

I guess there's a chance a different ambulance crew could arrive, which might mess my plan up, but I know Donnie will do what he promised, and if we're really, truly fated to be together, it'll be them.

They're my true mates.

My perfume came out for them, and only them. It's been gone since they've been gone. It wasn't a false heat. It was entirely related to their presence. That can only make our connections fated.

Maybe it's crazy, but the more I think about them, the more certain I am that I'll get out of here.

I can't help the smile that comes out when I imagine the rescue.

That smile makes my usual icy lip twitches look pathetically muted.

Taking a slow breath, I wipe all thoughts of the hot EMTs from my head.

I don't want to give Edith Merritt the wrong impression, and looking very much like an Omega in love is definitely a bad idea for my first visit with our new head of admin.

My walk to Geraldine's old office is sobering enough to give me back my usual unimpressed facial expression. I enjoyed wearing casual comfortable clothes over the weekend. My second day back in a form-fitting dress and heels is a pain in the ass.

The reception desk is unmanned. The replaced doors to the main entrance are locked.

I'm five minutes early, and about to knock the office door, when it opens.

Edith looks out at me with a smile.

"Brooke, I'm glad you came."

Like I had a choice. There wasn't exactly an R.S.V.P. on that invitation.

I push my lips into an approximation of a smile. "How can I help you, Alpha Edith?"

"Please, just call me Edith. Come in."

She moves back and opens the door a little wider.

I step into the office and see she hasn't done much to change anything. Considering she's barely been here a day, I'm not surprised.

"Take a seat," she says, as she closes the door.

I do as I'm told, waiting to find out what I'm doing here.

She sits down opposite me. "I see you've been at Goldcrest longer than any of our other Omegas."

"Six years," I admit.

"I can also see that your behavior has been exemplary, and that despite this proven track record, you have yet to meet a suitable Alpha."

"Uh-huh," I murmur, wondering where she's going with this and how quickly whatever she's planning is going to be derailed by Daddy Dearest.

"I don't intend to leave things the way they are."

"Okay."

"There are a few Omegas who've been avoiding the social gatherings, and then there's you. An Omega who by all accounts has tried, but repeatedly failed to secure a mate. I don't think it's fair to keep things going the same way they always have, and I don't think it's only the fault of the Omegas

who've been passed over or have been avoiding joining in." She leans forward. "I'm going to start allowing other Alphas access into the academy. The rulebook Geraldine was following contained a few too many added clauses. She was making this place impossible for a lot of decent, upstanding Alphas to access."

I blink at her, taking in what she's telling me and struggling to believe it.

The rules have never changed once since I've been here.

Goldcrest is considered elite because of the way Geraldine ran the academy.

Then again, elite was starting to feel like another word for asshole.

Who knows what this change could mean?

Who cares, Brooke?

You're leaving.

This doesn't change that.

Even so, I must admit I'm kind of stunned.

Who knew a new administrator would mean new Alphas? Maybe even Alphas who aren't spoiled, rich brats looking to use the academy as their own personal, elite brothel?

Edith smiles at me, seemingly enjoying my shocked silence. "An Alpha who's been applying to the academy every year since you arrived is being allowed entry. He claims to have met you once, a long time ago. He was specifically asking to meet with you."

I blink at her, that butterflies in my stomach feeling I had when Zelena asked me who I'd want to be mated to when we were in high school crashing back over me like a tidal wave. The sweet face and tall build of the boy-next-door crush I had when I was a kid. It's so damn weird. I don't know where he came from, or when he started to seep into my dreams as a teenager, but, somehow, this feels like the answer.

“I didn’t know that,” I confess, my curiosity getting the better of me. “Who is he?”

“Kellan Mitchell. He’s been quite persistent as far as I can see.”

The name doesn’t ring any bells, but a persistent Alpha is usually a creepy Alpha.

I shrug off the butterflies. I’m making connections that don’t exist and I need to stop.

“Do you know him?” she asks.

I shake my head slowly. “I met a bunch of Alphas when I was younger. I guess he must have been one of them.”

It’s a lie, but the truth is too weird, so I stick with it.

“Well, I’m cancelling this week’s social,” she goes on, capturing my full attention.

“What?” I ask, unable to keep the shock out of my voice.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m replacing it with a smaller event. Something more intimate for you and the Omegas who’ve been avoiding the parties. I’ll be inviting new Alphas, and it will be a formal, sit-down dinner instead of a party.”

My initial panic dies down quickly. A sit-down dinner. That could work out better for my plan. It was going to be difficult to find a convincing way to injure myself in a way that would require medical attention. I was planning to tamper with one of the hot water taps in the ladies’ room, for lack of a better option.

A dinner setting could make getting injured in front of everyone a little easier.

“It will of course be compulsory attendance for all invited parties,” Edith adds.

“Even the Alphas?” I ask, raising my eyebrow.

She smiles. “Especially for the Alphas. If they don’t take this opportunity when they’re given it, they won’t be offered another.”

Well, one thing's for sure. Edith Merritt means business. I'm sure my father would approve of her attitude, if not the way she's decided to go about running the academy.

"Seems fair," I tell her. "Can I be excused, or do you need me for anything more?"

Her eyes narrow just slightly before her smile deepens.

"Of course. You'll be sent an invitation with the full details for Friday night."

"I look forward to it."

Chapter

FORTY THREE

KELLAN

The card that appears in my mail slot looks a lot like a wedding invitation. A crisp, white envelope with golden detailing and my name and address written on it in precise, thick, black lettering, apparently came hand-delivered by a limo driver, if my wide-eyed neighbor is to be believed.

The teenager lives with his mom on the floor above mine and he's always playing handheld video games on the staircase before and after school. This afternoon, his headphones are hanging around his neck, and his videogame is in his hoodie pocket.

"I think that's from the Omega academy," he says, his tone hushed.

"What?" I ask, laughing because I can't not.

How does this Beta teenager know anything about the academy?

He nods, his gaze solemn. "Did you know someone who works there?"

My thoughts go to Lana. "Well, yeah, I kind of do, actually. Why?"

"Didn't you watch the news over the weekend?" He takes his console out of his pocket.

"The news?" I ask, wondering what he's talking about.

Lana had asked me to give it a few days before we started to come up with a plan to rescue Brooke.

That was on me, I think. I hadn't exactly shown her my best side. She wanted to make sure I wasn't about to rush out and do something dumb. Well, something else dumb, that might screw up any plans we made later.

"Here," the kid says, pushing a screen in front of me with an online newspaper article showing on it.

I stare at the screen, losing my grasp on the envelope as I take in the headline.

"Oh my God," I mutter.

Frank Palmer went on a rampage at Goldcrest, on Friday night. I read quickly, my stomach churning as I hold my breath, waiting to find out about survivors. The first paragraph details out the grisly nature of the murders before the writer reveals that the notorious serial killer murdered the head of admin, a handful of security guards, and a few visiting Alphas.

I let out a breath. Brooke's name isn't mentioned. Lana's either.

"That's probably a funeral invite," the kid says as he takes the console out of my hands.

"I doubt it," I tell him, though I don't know what else it could be.

I guess one of my old friends from high school could be getting married.

I pick it up. The kid watches me, and I frown at him.

"That's definitely an academy envelope," he says.

"How do you know?"

"It has their stamp on the back. And, anyway, I think that was their limo driver, dude."

Their stamp? I turn it over and see it's been sealed with wax. Goldcrest's emblem is emblazoned into the wax. *Holy shit, he's right.*

“See?” he says, giving me a self-satisfied smile. “My best friend’s brother got an invitation once. He let us look at it.”

I open the envelope quickly, finding an invitation inside.

“You are cordially invited to a small, social gathering at Goldcrest Academy on Friday night at Eight.”

Even reading it out loud isn’t enough to let the information sink in.

The kid looks over my shoulder. “Wow. They let Betas in now?”

I shake my head. “I’m an Alpha.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, giving me a funny look. “You really don’t seem like an Alpha.”

“You’re not the first to notice,” I tell him.

There’s small print on the card, informing me that this opportunity won’t be extended again if for any reason I choose not to attend the event.

That’s kind of weird. I look at the kid who’s squinting at me as if whatever makes me an Alpha might be seen if he treats me like one of those ugly ass magic eye portraits.

“Is this what your brother’s friend’s invitation looked like?” I ask, waving it at him.

“Yeah, but his was more of a standard approval. It didn’t have any fine print or whatever.”

Sounds about right. I’m getting an offer after waiting for six years, but it’s an offer they can take back if I don’t play by their rules.

“Maybe they can’t tell you’re an Alpha, either.” The kid shrugs.

“Maybe. Any advice?”

He holds both forefingers up as he walks away, backwards down the hall.

“Try to look more Alpha,” he says, nodding. “Good luck with that.”

He turns and goes out of the building's front doors. I lean against the wall, looking down at the invitation, as if it might suddenly crumble to dust in my hands.

This is my shot. I'm getting into the academy.

I dart up the stairs to my apartment. I need to get prepared. I only have a few days.

Calling Lana, I step inside and head straight for my laptop, letting the door slam closed on its own.

My friend on the inside doesn't pick up. She probably can't take a call yet. It's pretty early.

I send her a text message instead, asking why she didn't give me a heads-up about all the shit that went down at the academy on Friday, and then telling her I got an invitation.

The academy website is full of shit, but it shows what they expect the Alphas to dress like and behave like in general. I'm going to have to go out and buy something to wear. I'll probably have to show up in a flashy car, too. Everything I do will be judged.

I search for the inside track, looking for chatrooms where Alphas can share what goes on at the socials. I find a few, but they're mostly full of bragging player types who keep score on how many Omegas they've fucked. I knew there was an ugly side to the academies, but I'd rather not witness it in such graphic detail. I exit those rooms quickly and keep looking.

There has to be some kind of information online that's actually useful.

I find what could be an urban myth about the invitation colors for the academies and what they mean the dress code is. It could be true, or it could be bullshit. The comments are a mixed bag, and most of them are posted by guys with the word 'Beta' in their handles. BasicBeta, BetaBadBoy, EverybodyBeta. OneTrueAlpha comments, "Of course you take white to mean formal suit, and black to mean black tie. What are you all, peasants or something?"

He doesn't confirm the other color meanings, but considering my invitation is white and I don't have anything

else to go on, I guess I'll be buying a formal suit.

My phone beeps in my pocket, and I jump in the seat.

“Damn it, Lana,” I murmur as I take it out.

She's sent me two messages.

I didn't want to freak you out. PS Brooke is fine.

You're welcome. I put your rejected application on Edith's desk yesterday.

Edith. That doesn't sound familiar. I look up the academy and find the announcement that an Alpha named Edith Merritt took over as interim replacement for the late Geraldine Sawyer as head of the school.

Lana got my application accepted by the new boss.

Holy fucking shit. This really is a one-time deal.

As soon as Brooke's father finds out, he'll put a stop to it.

I send Lana a thank you text and tell her I'll thank her in person soon.

Then, I head out to find the nicest suit I can get my hands on and a car dealership that will sell me a Lexus in the model and color that Lana wants. Might as well kill two birds with one stone. I'm sure Lana will let me borrow the car I just bought her for one night.

I can hardly fucking believe it.

I got into Goldcrest academy.

I'm days away from reuniting with my one true mate.

The hours can't count down quickly enough.

It's finally happening. Fate has put me on my path.

Chapter FORTY FOUR

BROOKE

Choosing the right spot on my thigh for the burn is incredibly difficult. I made the prosthetic to sit in a certain spot, but the dress I chose has a slit I didn't notice that's making it harder to place.

I need the burn to stay hidden until I spill something hot on my lap, and then I need to give everyone a nice flash of the gruesome third degree wound before I pass out.

A slit would be helpful for that, but this one is on the wrong side. *Damn it.*

Okay, so passing out might not be a hundred percent necessary, but I figure I'm a better SFX artist than an actress, so I don't want to have to rely on a convincing performance once I burn myself.

Plus, I passed out last weekend a couple times, so there's already a precedent for that behavior.

I thought about eating less in the run up to tonight, to make a real dead faint a possibility, but then I realized that might actually be dangerous. I've been eating regular meals since Frost told me to, wanting to please him when we speak again by telling him I've done what he asked.

I think he would like that. I know I'd be happy if he was pleased with me.

So, I just need to get this burn applied in the right spot and get the final touches added.

The blistering was tricky, but eventually I made it work. The dress might skim the surface a little bit, but if anything, that should only make it more realistic. I'll need to be careful when I spill a hot liquid, making sure it doesn't hit the wound, too.

Sighing, I get up and change my dress. This one isn't going to work.

I need to put the wound where I already expected to apply it, and I need to do that now, so the glue sets in time, and I don't have to wait too long to start blending the edges of the prosthetic and adding the finishing touches before I set the colors with my setting spray.

I find a dress that'll work, and I get changed.

It's red and has silver straps. I pick out silver heels and a silver purse to match.

I also have to pick out new underwear to make the new dress work, which kind of sucks, but only because the new underwear is the not-so-sexy, skin-colored, line-free style where I was able to wear a lacy G-string with the other dress. But, really, that's only a consideration because I've been thinking a tiny little bit about those EMT Betas.

Thankfully, I haven't perfumed while I've been daydreaming about them, but I seriously need to push those guys out of my thoughts before I end up perfuming in front of the Alphas who are arriving tonight. Including one Alpha who might already be a little bit obsessed with me.

Yeah, it's like an extreme sport to think about them right now.

I seriously need to stop it.

Concentrating on my work, I lose track of time and everything else other than what I'm doing in the moment. I blend until I can't tell where the lines used to be. I add color that looks textured on the sculpted silicone, and I set the look when I'm completely happy with it.

The setting spray is empty afterward.

I put it back in my kit once I've let my work dry. Everything is packed away carefully, and I hold my skirt high while I place the kit back where it hides in the closet.

It's almost time to go down to the ballroom.

I slip my phone into my purse, and my lip pallet. I don't have anything in the purse that might rouse suspicion. My dress flows perfectly, the prosthetic completely hidden as long as I don't cross that leg in front of the other. I'm hyper-aware of it under there while I put on my heels and touch up my lips.

It's time to go. I take in a breath and look myself in the eye.

"You can do this, Brooke. You have to do this."

It's my only way out.

Chapter

FORTY

FIVE

BROOKE

The ballroom doors aren't open yet when I get there. I smile at my fellow prisoner of the gilded academy cage, Ember Nestor. The pretty, dark-skinned Omega is quiet, but wary and I know she wants to be out of here as badly as I do. She was in love before she came here, and not with an Alpha. It feels like that's a crime at Goldcrest.

She's wearing a green dress, and that makes me smile.

The style is too fussy for her, but she's making it work.

"Nice dress. But it's so not you."

She shrugs at me. "Just playing the part."

"Gotta watch out that the part doesn't start to play you."

She glances around self-consciously, which makes me check out the other Omegas, too.

They're the oddballs and shy girls, the only women at this academy who seem to have minds of their own and who don't only think about everything they can do to please an Alpha.

I feel bad for them that the new administrator is forcing this shit on them.

Not all of us have escape plans.

Ember might, and she knows I want to leave, but the rest? I don't know.

“What time does this thing start?” the girl with bright red hair asks.

“Supposed to be seven,” Ember answers her.

“It’s seven now,” one of others complains.

The energy in this hallway is seriously low. No one wants to be here. None of us want the Alphas the new administrator is trying to push onto us. This is a recipe for disaster. I just hope I have my personal mishap before anyone else breaks up the party.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist,” I find myself saying. “The Alphas don’t even arrive until eight.”

“What?” Ember asks.

I turn to her. “I overheard our administrator on a call. We’re to be assessed before the Alphas get here, so she can fix any potential problem areas.”

She looks horrified. I shrug. Truthfully, Lana overheard that call, but I’m not ratting out a friend who might get in trouble for the overshare. I know Ember would never, but I don’t know the rest of these girls that well.

“There’s an Alpha coming that knows me,” Ember blurts.

I blink at her. “You know an Alpha?”

“He was at my high school.”

I can tell by her tone that he wasn’t someone she liked.

“Shit,” I mutter.

“I’d rather not have to talk to him.”

“What’s his name?”

“Garrett Thompson,” she tells me.

“I’ll flirt with him if you keep whoever she’s brought in for me occupied.”

“Deal.”

Then, both of us are distracted by the sight of an Omega with blue hair, who’s committed the worst mistake an Omega

can make in this academy. The dress she's wearing has been put together by two of the designer dresses that were handmade for her and placed in her closet. Pink and form fitting on one side, it's purple and flowing on the other.

"Wow. Points for creative flair, but Edith's going to have kittens when she sees that."

"Hey, Terri," Ember greets the dead-girl-walking.

"Hey, Ember," she greets back, beaming like I didn't just tell her she fucked up. "I guess your migraine's gone?"

"All gone," Ember says. "A nap and painkillers took care of it."

"Awesome. I'm so glad you're here ..."

"I'll be over there," I tell them, not wanting to get dragged through an awkward conversation while all I can think about is how pissed off our administrator's going to be that Terri messed with her custom-made closet. "Nice to meet you."

I walk away, going over to talk to one of the less insane Omegas.

Christy is even quieter than Ember, and I barely get a, "Hey," out before the ballroom doors start opening beside us. Everyone shifts their attention to Edith as her guards lock the doors into their open positions.

"I'm so pleased all of you are here," she tells us, her gaze moving over us quickly. She's already starting her appraisal. I see her expression fluctuating mildly as her gaze passes over all her charges. "Before we get settled inside, and await our guests, I need to do a quick appraisal of each of you, to ensure academy standards are being met."

I don't need to look to know everyone's listening in surprise.

None of them expected this. They weren't supposed to.

She wanted to find out what she was working with, and she can see quite clearly where the weak points are. Some of these girls have never even looked at the academy rule book.

I don't agree with the rules here, but I know what happens when they're not followed.

"Will Brooke Corvina please step forward?" Edith asks, her gaze moving to me.

Fixing a smile on my face, I move toward our head of administration.

She takes in my face, my hair, and my clothing. She sees that my posture is perfect, and I tick all those little boxes that make up the rules for presentation and appearance.

I stop walking when Edith tells me to, and I hand over my purse when she asks for it.

She opens the small clutch on a silver chain handle, takes a cursory glimpse inside and passes it back to me. I close it as she stares back at me. My expression doesn't change one little bit.

"Okay, you're cleared for entry," she tells me. "Next, Teresa Rayne."

I nod and move past Edith into the ballroom.

Cringing, I don't look back. I hear her question Terri on the dress. Her icy tone goes straight over the girl's head. It's impossible not to listen as Edith bitches her out for the trespass.

I keep moving, heading to the table that's set out for our small group and the Alphas who've been invited to show up once we're all approved by our new headmistress.

I take a random seat, sitting down carefully, side-on to wait and watch for Ember to be let into the room. Ember seems kind of on edge as she stands in front of Edith. She's let through quickly, and I smile at her as she steps into the ballroom.

She's actually never been in here before. She's never been to any of the socials.

Well, until tonight, if this could even be considered a social gathering.

“You made it!”

“I did,” she says, as she sinks into the seat next to mine. “I’m supposed to ask for your lipstick.”

I roll my eyes. “Edith clearly knows nothing about makeup, but sure. Give me a second. I have a spare applicator.”

I take out my lip pallet and find a spare individually packed applicator. Every skin tone has a perfect shade of red, and this one is mine. It’s not going to look as good on my friend. She can get away it, don’t get me wrong. I just wish it was the color that was made for her.

“Okay, it’s not bad. I could find your perfect shade if I’d brought my kit, but this is nice enough for tonight.” I smile at her. “We’re looking good. Maybe one of us will get lucky tonight.”

She raises her eyebrows as I finish up her lips. I let out a laugh.

I see Cora approach and I look over.

“How many did Edith send back to their rooms?”

The red head shrugs at me. “Another two before she sent me in. Something about bad shoes and unwashed hair.”

Not surprising, I guess.

Cora goes to the opposite end of the table and sits down, taking out her phone.

I open the pack of paper tissues that I always have on hand, and I pass Ember one.

“You’ll need to blot to keep the color from wearing off.”

I put the palette away and go to the nearest bathroom to dispose of the applicator and tissue when Ember’s done with it. I check on my prosthetic while I’m gone. It’s still in place, still looking like a realistically painful mess of a burn. I go back to the table with a smile on my face.

It only starts to disappear when I notice the place cards on the table, in front of the plates.

Oh, you have got to be kidding me. Edith can't be serious with this shit.

I look at each place setting as I sit back down.

It's as bad as I thought. Maybe worse.

"Boy-girl-boy-girl. How original."

Ember just stares at the name plates, looking like a horror movie heroine who just realized she's exactly the serial killer's type. She's clearly lost for words.

I'm a little bit stunned myself. I'm not sure why.

We should have expected this. Of course, the seating's been arranged. She's arranged specific dates for each of us. I'm supposed to be sitting at the other side of the table, across from this Kellan person who apparently remembers me from some random time in the past. She's supposed to be sitting a seat apart from me, across from the awful Garrett who went to her high school.

"Find your actual seats, ladies," Edith calls out as she comes toward the table.

Apparently, all the Omegas are now in the room. I roll my eyes at Ember.

I don't know if it makes her feel any better. She seems like a bundle of nerves, barely containing her anxious energy and showing all her terror in her eyes.

I squeeze her hand as we get up, trying to reassure her with my touch.

She barely notices. This stupid dinner is too stressful for her.

I wish there was something I could do.

Guilt rushes through me at the thought of leaving her behind if I go.

I'll find a way to get her out, too, but I can only do that if I leave.

“Good,” Edith tells us, once we’re all in our assigned seats. “Now, the Alphas will be arriving shortly, so please be ready to receive them. These are men of extremely good breeding and this social will determine if we allow other Alphas to apply to have access to the academy and its less outgoing Omegas.”

God, the tension in the air is so thick it could choke a horse.

One of the Omegas raises her hand, waving it around until Edith notices.

“You do not need to raise your hand to speak, Holly,” Edith snaps.

“Oh. Well, I just wanted to say this isn’t how things have ever been done before.”

“I can see that,” Edith tells her, before she lets her gaze move around the faces spread around the table. “And look where it’s gotten this academy. We have twelve Omegas here who’ve been avoiding their purpose and leaving countless Alphas out there without the mates they deserve. I can’t allow this selfish behavior to continue. Change is necessary for growth. You could all use a little change.”

There’s nothing quite like blaming women for problems men are having.

Apparently, not all misogynists are male. A lot of them do seem to be Alphas though.

I somehow manage to keep my mouth shut. Now isn’t the time to piss off our leader.

“Would anyone else like to say something?” Edith asks, her tone sharp.

The room stays silent. We all know better than to question her.

That smug smile that she plasters on when she feels her complete control over every Omega in the room is a serious temptation. If I get out of here, and I get the chance to meet her out in the real world, I’m not going to hold back.

“Now, make sure you’re being extra attentive to your assigned date tonight. I’ll consider moving seating if an Alpha asks, but until then please continue to use the same seat while we’re served a meal and drinks.”

“Are we allowed to use the bathroom?” I ask, leveling my stare at her.

“Of course,” she answers with a scowl. “You may politely excuse yourself when you must.”

“Then, please excuse me. I’ll be right back.”

I get up and stalk away from the table, grinding my teeth as I leave the ballroom to go check on my fake wound. I’d better be getting out of here tonight. If I don’t, I’m going to end up in a knock-down, drag-out fight with the only female Alpha I’ve ever met.

Chapter

FORTY

SIX

KELLAN

I always thought I'd be excited when this moment finally came. I've waited so long, and worked so hard that every time I imagined it, I felt like I could burst with happiness.

Now, I'm nervous in ways I've never felt before.

Worried about things I hadn't considered for even a second in the past.

"You're anxious," Lana warns me as she helps with my tie. "Calm the hell down, K. It's only a dinner."

"Only a dinner? It's the first time we're seeing each other in ten years, Lana. And that ... We barely met that day. It lasted like a minute. It was nothing."

No, it wasn't nothing. It was everything.

It changed the course of the rest of my life.

"Wasn't that the moment you decided you weren't going to give up?" she asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

"It was." I nod. "Do I need more cologne?"

She sniffs and shakes her head. "Actually, you need less cologne, and what the hell did you do to this hair?"

"I got a haircut, and it's not that bad."

"Not that bad." She sighs at me. "Okay. It's not that bad, actually. I think you're making me nervous for you. It's a

weird feeling. Especially since you're going to take my unicorn away from me. I should hate you for that, you know."

"I know," I tell her. "Does the car help?"

"Well, the car does have a nice body, too, but it's really not the same as a beautiful woman."

"But as far as consolation prizes go, it's okay, right?"

She smiles. "Thank you for the Lexus, K. I honestly can't believe you got me a car."

"I promised I would," I remind her.

"Well, yeah, but it was a crazy promise that I didn't take seriously."

"Too late, I can't take the car back."

"Good thing, too. I'm getting kind of attached to it."

She steps back. "You look good, and the cologne isn't too overpowering. I think it's time you get going."

"What if she's not ... I mean, what if we don't ..."

God, I can't even bring myself to say the words.

It would kill me if she wasn't interested.

I can't pretend it wouldn't.

"Relax," Lana says. "Take a deep breath. Don't catastrophize. Go to Goldcrest and concentrate on asking her questions about herself. Tell a joke or two. Be sweet to her. Let her steal French fries from your plate, or whatever."

"I doubt the meal will consist of anything that involves French fries."

Shit. Now I'm worried about what it will consist of. Something too fancy to consider eating, probably.

"Caviar, then," she jokes, making me worry a little more.

"Caviar. Isn't that fish eggs?"

"You're impossible."

She crosses her arms and stares at me. “If you don’t go now, I’ll call Brooke and tell her how I feel about her.”

“You’re kidding.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Do I look like I’m kidding?”

“I’m going.” I pick up the car keys from her kitchen counter.

Christ, I haven’t driven in years. If I rear end someone and that’s what makes me miss this dinner, I’m seriously going to hate myself forever.

“Have fun!” Lana calls out as I leave her apartment.

I have plenty of time. I just need to stay calm.

It’s totally not weird that I held onto my virginity for this woman I’ve barely even met.

She’s my true mate. Alphas hold out for their true mates all the time.

It’s expected, even. Probably. Probably not.

Shit. She’s going to think I’m crazy.

Or a loser. Or a crazy loser.

I shouldn’t go.

It’s not fate if it’s a one-time shot, is it, really?

It should be a real invitation. One that opens a door that stays open.

Fuck. I’m driving myself insane and I’m not even at the academy yet.

I get into the Lexus and take a few deep breaths.

Just ask her questions. Be sweet. Tell jokes. Eat her fries.

No, let her eat my fries.

Pretty sure women don’t like guys who eat their food.

Not sure where I heard that, but still. I’m not going to go there.

It’ll probably be caviar instead of fries anyway.

I start the engine and get moving.
Never keep a true mate waiting.

Chapter

FORTY

SEVEN

KELLAN

I make it to the academy with almost an entire half hour to spare. I park like an eighty year old who needs his license revoked. Luckily for me, I'm only the second car on the lot so it doesn't really matter. I just hope none of the other Alpha's ding Lana's new baby when they get here.

For a minute I consider staying in the lot, watching the car.

I don't consider trying to straighten up and only take up one space. Any corrections would make it worse. Practice doesn't make perfect when it comes to driving. At least not in my case.

When I was at high school and everyone was getting their licenses, my determination got me through, but when it comes to actually driving, I get worse the more I do it, not better.

I move around to the side of the academy, where the doors are being manned by two Beta guards.

Taking my time, I head up the stairs. My nose is tickly, and when I look around, I can see a garden area close by. *Damn. I'm going to sneeze.* I stop and get a tissue out of my pocket, sneezing a few times in a row before I feel like the tickle is gone.

I start back up the steps, and when I get to the top, the nearest guard raises his eyebrows at me.

"Can I help you?" he asks, as if he doesn't know what I'm doing here.

“I guess I’m kind of early,” I tell him. “I have an invitation.”

“Those invitations are for Alphas,” he says, looking me up and down.

I take out my wallet and pass him my driver’s license.

“I’m Kellan Mitchell. I’m an Alpha. I was invited.”

He looks over at the other guard, passes my ID to him.

The guard is older and he’s holding a tablet. He checks the tablet and looks at my ID. Then he looks up at me. I don’t get the dubious vibe from him that I get from his younger, incredibly buff friend.

I’ve gotten that reaction before, too many times to count.

It always seems to happen with Betas who are built, or who think they should have been born Alphas.

“You’re early,” the older guy says. “Normally, that wouldn’t be a problem, but you’re gonna have to wait out here until I get the go ahead to open the doors.”

He hands me back my driver’s license.

“When do you think that’ll be?” I ask, only slightly freaked out that I might be sneezing my ass off by the time I’m supposed to be meeting Brooke.

Checking the screen, he shrugs. “Fifteen minutes, maybe twenty.”

“Great.” I nod and head back down the stone steps.

I manage not to sneeze again until I’m back inside the car.

Taking out my phone, I watch as the minutes tick by.

It’s like being driven slowly mad.

I’ve waited ten years for this moment.

I can last another fifteen minutes.

Twenty? I don’t know.

Those extra five minutes might be enough to kill me.

“You’re being melodramatic,” I warn myself, gaze moving upward as another car enters the lot.

The guy’s going way too fast, and he barely slows down to park ... yet, somehow, he makes a great job of it. That’s cocky Alpha behavior at its most arrogant. He thinks he can do anything, so he does.

I watch him exit the car, whistling to himself. He glances at my parking job and shakes his head.

I slide down in the seat. This is why I didn’t want to have to wait in the car.

He passes, and I consider getting out.

I’ve still got at least ten minutes, so I force myself to wait.

Another car arrives, and another.

The minutes tick down excruciatingly slowly.

I leave the car when there are ten other cars in the lot.

There’s a group of Alphas on the staircase when I get around there.

Still waiting to get in then. Damn it.

I pace around at the bottom of the steps, listening idly to the other Alphas griping about being made to wait around like a bunch of morons. I’m not the only guy with nervous energy, it seems. That makes me feel a little better.

The doors open when the final Alpha arrives.

He has a smirk on his face, and it honestly looks like the doors opened once the guards caught sight of him, as if he’s the one they were waiting for the arrival of.

“Ballroom’s straight ahead. There are place markers at the table,” the older guard tells us as we enter. “Bathroom’s to the right, outside of the ballroom.”

He repeats the instructions, so I’ve heard them a few times before I even get to the doors.

Every Alpha heads straight for the ballroom. They take their time, but they don’t stop to look at anything. I check to

the right, so I can see where the bathrooms are before I step into the ballroom behind the others.

My heart is hammering as I step into the room.

There are a dozen Omegas in pretty dresses sitting around a long table.

My gaze zeroes in on the blonde in red instantly.

I know it's her, and I can't help but stare.

Her hair is shorter than it was when we were younger. It's cut just above her shoulders now.

Her expression is pinched, but I'd recognize those pretty eyes anywhere.

This woman is my true mate. Fate led me to this moment. It brought both of us here.

She doesn't look over as I approach. She's clearly annoyed about something.

"That fucking dickhead," she mutters, her gaze fixed on the Alpha who arrived just before the doors opened.

I'm glad to see my name on the place in front of hers. Taking my seat, I try to think of something to say to capture Brooke's attention. She seems to be watching the other Alpha as if she's ready to pick up her steak knife and filet him.

The woman at the head of the table gets to her feet and clinks a spoon against her champagne glass. I recognize her as Geraldine Sawyer's replacement, Edith Merritt.

"A toast to new friends and hope for the future."

The Alpha Brooke has been staring at answers with a loudly pronounced, "I'll drink to that."

Everyone picks up their glasses. I notice a champagne flute at my setting, so I do the same.

It's not really my drink, but since there's not a bottle of vodka on the table, I guess it'll do.

Brooke doesn't look at me as I clink my glass against hers.

She takes a long gulp before she sets it back down.

When her deep, dark blue eyes finally meet mine across the table, her irritable expression is lost to shock. Her red lips part, and she stares back at me as if she can't believe what she's seeing.

Wait-staff start to put plates of appetizers down in front of us.

She looks down, shaking her head.

I hold my breath, waiting for her to say something.

Words have abandoned me.

My mate is stunningly gorgeous, and she must know that.

I can't imagine what she must be thinking about me.

All I know is, she remembers.

She looks up and shakes her head again.

Takes another hefty gulp from her glass.

A waiter refills it for her, and then she finally seems ready to talk.

"You're real," she says, laughing. "I can't believe it."

"Real?" I ask, raising an eyebrow at her.

"This is going to sound crazy."

"I'm good with crazy."

I'm good with whatever she wants, but I'll keep that to myself, for now.

Lana told me I should hold back a little. I don't want Brooke to think I'm too thirsty.

"Well, then, Kellan, I guess we can talk," she says, after checking my name card.

Chapter

FORTY

EIGHT

BROOKE

Damn. Why did boy-next-door have to turn out to be real? I can't believe it, but I'm looking at the literal man of my dreams. Cute, sweet, kind of quiet. I'd know those dark brown eyes anywhere, and that hesitant smile. There's no way he should be an Alpha, but I can tell he is. It's instinctive. I can feel how protective he is, how determined.

He's exactly the kind of Alpha I could fall for, and he walks in right when I'm about to escape this hellhole. I shouldn't be entertaining this, but how can I not?

It's like Edith picked this guy out of my brain.

"Okay, you want to talk crazy? I've had dreams about you," I admit. "Back when I was in high school, I had this recurring dream that just came out of nowhere. It was so strange, like I was crushing on this guy I'd completely made up in my head, and it's you."

He gives me another hesitant smile. "You don't remember meeting me?"

My stomach flutters at the smile, but then his words sink in, and I don't understand.

I blink at him. "We've met?"

"It was like a couple minutes, out in a forest," he says. "I was fifteen. I think you would have been slightly younger. You really don't remember?"

I shake my head. “What happened?”

“Nothing, really,” he says. “We were both kind of in shock. Then, your dad called on you, and you rushed away. Mine came and found me. He’d thrown a frisbee for the dog. I was getting it back when I saw you. We had to leave, but he mentioned I’d wandered too close to the Corvina Estate, so I worked out who you were.”

None of it rings any bells, but finding out I met him once definitely makes more sense than thinking my brain randomly cooked his image up for me to dream about.

“I can’t believe I don’t remember it. I had dreams about you for years.”

“I guess that means it was meant to be,” he says, giving me a little stab of guilt with his earnest.

Ugh. I like this guy. Why did he have to show up now, when I’m ready to bust out of this place?

“You’ve been applying to come here for years, right?” I ask, trying to remember what Edith told me about him. Maybe he’ll say something creepy and that’ll put me off. I can only hope.

He nods slowly, pushing the food around on his plate. “It took a while to get approved.”

“That would be because this place has insane standards,” I tell him. “It’s totally cool if you’re a creep or a douchebag as long as your parents have way too much money and enjoy giving regular donations.”

“Yeah, my parents don’t have money,” he admits. “I own a data science company, which is basically just me analyzing spreadsheets for businesses who want to make more money.”

He’s downplaying it, but I can tell he likes what he does. There’s a little hint of pride in his tone.

“You know, that’s kind of all I ever wanted. To run my own business,” I admit, as the waitresses take away the appetizer plates and provide fresh champagne.

“Really?” he asks. “Doing what?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“Well, when you know what you want to do, I can probably help with the setup stuff,” he says.

“That would be awesome.” I give him a smile, trying not to think about the fact that I might never see him again.

I can hear Ember’s creepy date causing trouble with the guy sitting beside her, but I force myself to ignore it. We’re not close enough for us to flirt with each other’s dates like we’d decided to, and I’m splitting my attention way too much. That guy is an asshole, but Edith is the one in charge here.

All he’s doing is being mouthy. He won’t get away with anything more than that.

Ember’s safe, and I’ll find a way to get her out of here once I’m out.

Kellan ... well, I should probably forget about him.

I need to hide amongst Betas when I’m out of here.

Hooking up with an Alpha would be a terrible idea.

My father would find me too easily. Especially if it was the last Alpha I was seen speaking to.

Sorry, Kellan. I like you, but this can’t happen.

The waitresses put bowls of soup in front of us, and Kellan asks for a glass of water.

Here it is, I think as I look down at the bowl. *My best chance at an escape.*

I knock the bowl over as innocently as I can manage, tipping half the contents onto my lap.

I let out a pained gasp that’s completely real. The soup is hot enough to hurt.

It’s definitely not hot enough to leave me with a third-degree burn, but I stand quickly, tugging up my skirt by the split to make sure everyone who’s looking catches a glimpse of the wound I made earlier. That blistering skin is glistening. It looks damn good.

I push out of my seat and let myself go limp.

My eyes close as I fall, and someone catches me before I hit the ground. *Ember*. I hear her gasp lightly as she lowers me the rest of the way to the ground, being sweet and gentle with me.

I keep my muscles slack as I lay there, waiting for help to be called.

There's a lot of talking and whispering and chairs moving, but Edith's irritable growl rears above the other noises. I concentrate on staying limp as I hear her moving around the table.

Her footsteps are deliberate and slow, like most Alphas'.

I can feel her anger as she moves in close.

"She needs help," *Ember* pleads at my other side.

"Brooke, *darling*, get up," Edith says, ignoring my worried friend.

She sounds as pissed off as she feels.

"Is she okay?" Kellan asks, a second voice of concern at my right side.

"She's not," *Ember* tells him.

"I'll call an ambulance," he says, his decisive tone a pleasant surprise.

"There's really no need. She'll be fine in a moment," Edith brushes him off.

It's too late, bitch. You should know, when an Alpha makes a decision, he can't be swayed.

I hear him making the call, and it takes every ounce of my control not to let my lips curve into a smile. I can feel Edith's anger rising, and I can tell she's about to do something, right before a short, sharp stab of pain burns through me.

She pinched my face! What a bitch!

The shock of feeling is hard to ignore, but I do it because I don't have a choice.

“The ambulance should be here in a few,” Kellan says.

“Thanks,” Ember tells him.

I hear movement at my right before my head is moved gently by my friend, propped up under something soft. The sudden realization of the difference between the hard floor and the soft item kind of makes my body scream with the need to move.

I zone out of the conversations going on around me as I stay focused on keeping my body still.

I count out the minutes slowly in my head, waiting for the EMTs to get to me.

Eventually, the lack of stimulation and the counting combine to let me drift off to sleep.

I slip into dreams, hoping I wake in the back of a moving ambulance this time.

Chapter

FORTY

NINE

KELLAN

Despite the fact she's the one who approved my application to visit Goldcrest, I'm not a fan of Edith Merritt. She seems to think Brooke is just being melodramatic. That burn looked painful. Even if she hadn't fainted, I'd have insisted on calling for medical help.

At least the friend she seemed concerned about before immediately got worried when she passed out and rushed to her side to help. Seems like a nice girl. I'm glad Brooke has a good friend in the academy, one who looks out for her like this.

When the paramedics arrive, I've already decided I'm going with her to the hospital.

They start to do their job, and as soon as they see the burn, they're ready to take her in.

"Absolutely not!" Edith explodes.

The room silences. Everyone stares at the female Alpha.

She's completely enraged. I feel the same way, but my anger is directed at her.

"I'll go with her," I announce, not willing to let the issue go.

I can tell the EMTs are waiting to see if the head of the academy commands them to leave. They're Betas, and she's

an Alpha. She could force them to leave without Brooke if she really wanted to.

Her gaze is on me now, and mine is on her.

“No, I will,” Brooke’s friend offers, as if she’s trying to diffuse the situation.

Edith glowers at us both. She knows how it’ll look if she doesn’t let Brooke get help. Her job is to protect the Omegas in her charge. Not letting Brooke get medical treatment would damage her reputation before she really gets a chance to build it.

“Kellan will go with her,” Edith says, putting her furious gaze back on me. “Don’t let her out of your sight for one minute. Report back to me when she’s ready to come home.”

I nod. “Of course.”

She apologizes to Ember insincerely, and then the EMTs put Brooke onto a stretcher. I pick my jacket off the floor and keep it rolled up in my hand as I follow them out of the ballroom and out of the academy.

Chapter

FIFTY

DONNIE

Our new mate is kind of crazy, and I love it. That burn on her thigh looks realistic, but it's completely fake. A place this fancy would never serve food at the kind of temperature it would take to create a third-degree burn, and that wet patch on the skirt of her dress didn't match up to where the burn was placed either. It wasn't even close. Any idiot could see that.

Lucky for her, we know this is her escape plan.

River even insisted on being the one to come with me this time, telling Frost it would be a good way to check his suppressants were working since there would be other Omegas and Alphas around.

It's always a risk for him to be around Alphas, but considering he's on a strong dose and he's only ever perfumed for us since he met us, we decide it's a controlled plan.

He'll be put into a situation like this one sooner or later.

Might as well be sooner.

Well, he passed the test.

He's wearing a cute, lop sided smile as we go out the side entrance with our prize.

The guards stop us at the top of the staircase.

"Stop. Wait," the guy on the right says.

I recognize him from last week. The guy who was bothering our sweet Cherry.

“We need to go,” the Alpha in the suit says.

“They’ve been cleared,” the older guard says.

“What happened?” the first guard asks.

“Let them go, Henry,” the second guard mutters.

“Brooke,” Henry blurts, as if he’s trying to wake her up.

“Gotta go, lives to save,” I tell them, nodding at River to keep going.

He raises an eyebrow at me, but he moves. One step before Henry stops us.

“Wait. I’m coming with you.”

“No can do,” I tell him, somehow keeping the cheer in my voice.

“That’s not authorized,” the second guard adds.

“Who are *you*, exactly?” the Alpha in the suit asks suddenly.

Henry glowers at him. “I’m a friend of Brooke’s. A close friend. Who are *you*?”

I nod at River to go, hoping the Alpha and Henry get into something so we can get the fuck out of here without either of them tagging along.

We get down the stairs and walk over to the ambulance while the Alpha and the guard argue. Frost jumps out the driver’s seat and opens the back doors for us.

“What’s all that about?” he asks, nodding to the bottom of the stairs, where they are now.

“It’s complicated. We need to move,” I tell him.

He goes back to the driver’s seat, and River helps me get Brooke settled in the back.

“I’ll ride shotgun,” River tells me, getting out quickly and darting around to the passenger door.

I’m just pulling the back doors closed when a hand stops me.

Damn it to hell.

The Alpha in the suit looks at me. “I need to go with her.”

“Didn’t you come in a car?” I ask him. “Maybe it would be ... more comfortable if you followed us.”

“I need to go with her,” he repeats, making me back down.

Big Alpha Dick Energy. Damn.

I let him in and glance out at the guards, who are still arguing at the bottom of the staircase.

At least we only have one unwanted suitor attached, I guess.

I close the doors, and Frost gets us moving.

Chapter

FIFTY

ONE

BROOKE

I wake up with a jolt, finding myself in a moving ambulance and finally letting my lips pull into a smile. *I did it! I got out of the academy.* The euphoria that soars over me at that realization is unsinkable. Finally, I'm free, and I have my true mates to thank for that.

Donnie smiles down at me. "Hey, Cherry, how are you feeling?"

"Like I just won the lottery," I joke, deciding not to complain at the pet-name. It's a stripper name, for sure, but I kind of like the way he says it.

"Where do you want to go?" Frost calls back from the front seat, making my smile widen into a grin.

"Aren't we headed to the hospital?" Kellan asks, making me gasp in a breath.

I sit up on my elbows, and stare at him. "You're not supposed to be here."

"You were hurt. I wanted to make sure you were ..."

I reach down and peel up one of the corners of the prosthetic. My skin will be a bit red there now probably, but it does the trick of showing him that I'm not really hurt.

"I'm okay. Long story short, this is me escaping from Goldcrest, and from my father."

"Oh wow," he mutters, his expression conflicted.

“You can’t tell anyone,” I warn him.

“And where are we going?” Frost calls back again.

Good question. The truthful answer is I didn’t plan that far ahead, but I doubt that’ll impress anyone.

“Your place?” I ask, figuring that’s as safe as any.

“We live in Crystal Lake,” Donnie admits. “And we can’t go out of the city while we’re working.”

“I still have my old apartment,” Frost says. “It has two weeks left on the lease.”

“Good plan,” Donnie tells him.

Kellan doesn’t say anything. He seems completely shocked.

He’s so totally the boy-next-door. He’s so good and sweet.

I can’t drag him into this mess. I’ll never stop feeling guilty if I do that.

“We should drop Kellan off somewhere,” I tell them, making his dark eyes widen.

“No!” he says, shaking his head. “I’m with you. Wherever you need to go. Whatever you need to do. I don’t need to be dropped off anywhere else.”

I’m not sure he even understands what he’s getting into here.

“Kellan, I’m going into hiding from my father. It won’t be safe.”

“Safe is boring,” he says, starting to lose the shock from his expression. “I waited ten years to see you again, Brooke. I’m not walking away now.”

Suddenly, it clicks. He waited ten years. We only met for a few minutes way back then. I dreamt about him for years, as my secret crush who I thought I made up.

Oh my God. “We’re mates.”

He nods. “I knew it the second we met.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Donnie says. “This guy is your mate?”

He scrutinizes Kellan as if he’s trying to decide if he believes it.

“I don’t feel anything,” Donnie mutters.

“Who are these guys, Brooke? Are they really EMTs?” Kellan asks.

“As far as I know they are,” I tell him. “They also feel like my mates. I perfumed for them the first time we met. Like I bet I perfumed for you.”

“You did,” he admits. “It was way too early for that, but you did.”

“That’s probably why I dreamed about you after. “

“You dreamed about this guy?” Donnie asks.

“I did,” I confess, giving Kellan a smile.

“So, we’re all your mates,” Kellan says.

“It looks like it.” I shrug. “I mean, I’ve waited a long time for a true mate, so if a bunch want to come along all at once I’m not going to complain about it.”

“Oh, hey, what about that guard at the academy?” Donnie asks. “He tried to come with us just now.”

I shake my head. “He’s just a guy I thought was cute for half a second. There’s no fated connection there.”

“Thank God,” Donnie says. “He seemed like an asshole.”

“He was,” I admit. “I just didn’t realize it until I met you guys.”

The ambulance slows down, and Donnie helps me get up from the stretcher once we’re parked.

“This is it,” Frost says. “I’ll take you up to the apartment. We’ll be back in the morning when our shift is over.”

Kellan gets out first and helps me down onto the street.

The sounds and smells of the bustling city fill my senses.

Excitement runs through me as we start to walk together under the streetlights, the cool, crisp night air making me shivery but not cold.

Out under the stars at night, I feel so alive.

I can hardly believe where I am right now.

I did it. I got out. I'm free.

Chapter

FIFTY

TWO

FROST

River and Donnie agree to respond to any calls alone if they come in while I'm showing Brooke and Kellan up to my old bachelor pad. The small apartment isn't in the greatest neighborhood, but it's where I grew up and it's been hard to make myself get rid of it. I have so many memories of spending time with my mom here as a kid, before she had to go into a care home.

I'd tried to look after her on my own, but she would wander, and I couldn't hold down a job and keep an eye on her at the same time. Something had to give. I felt guilty as hell the day I admitted that. I had a damn hard time giving up the apartment, but after River moved in with Donnie and I in Crystal Lake, it just didn't make sense to keep it going anymore. I'd just signed up for a year, but I promised I'd let it go after, and that time is almost up.

"This is it," I tell my guests, unlocking the door and letting us in.

I come around once a month to clean up and check for mail that needs redirected, so it's not a complete mess, but it's also pretty bare bones. The couch is old but comfortable. Same situation with the bed. There are basics in the kitchen and bathroom, and old spare sheets in the bedroom.

"The electricity runs on quarters," I tell them, tapping my hand off the box on the wall. "There should be a handful in

that tin on the counter. Bedroom's at the back right, bathroom's back left."

"Thank you," Brooke tells me, turning to wrap her arms around me.

Every muscle in my body tenses up. She feels so damn good.

I hesitate to wrap my arms around her and discover how much I crave her touch.

In the end, I stroke one hand down her back lightly, and that's enough to let me know this woman is mine. She isn't perfuming, but she doesn't need to. Instinct would be enough.

I've only felt this way twice in my life before now.

Once with Donnie, and once with River.

She steps back and looks at the other guy.

Kellan, an Alpha. He's attractive in an unassuming kind of way, but he doesn't make me feel the same way she does. He also doesn't agitate me. Some Alphas do.

If this guy is a true mate of Brooke's, he might belong entirely to her.

It's not uncommon for the bonds between pack members to get complicated.

What I have with Donnie and River is rare.

It's rarer still that we have a second Omega who's fated for all three of us.

It's not a big deal if she has an Alpha mate who's not going to be in an intimate relationship with anyone but her. I'm kind of glad about it right now, because it means she won't be left alone tonight.

"I have to get going. If you need anything, like food, Kellan should go out to get it on his own."

Brooke shouldn't be seen. The academy will be looking for her eventually, and it's better if they don't have any idea where to start looking.

Kellan nods. “That makes sense.”

“We can all talk this out properly in the morning.”

I hand Kellan the keys.

I’m trusting this stranger with something very precious to me, and for once I’m not thinking about the apartment. My instincts don’t want me to leave my mate right now, but I picked the kind of job that gives me no real choice.

It’s the first and only time I’ve questioned that decision, and I know it’s only because I don’t want to leave her side.

“Lock the door behind me. I’ll knock three times when we’re back. It’ll be around seven a.m.”

One last glimpse of Brooke’s face, and I leave.

I have almost a whole shift to get through before I get to see her again.

It’s going to be the longest night of my life.

Chapter

FIFTY

THREE

BROOKE

There's a hint of awkward in the air after my hug with Frost, and it lingers after he leaves. This whole thing is probably kind of a lot for Kellan. He seemed shocked in the ambulance, and I think he still is. He locks the door and sets the keys down on the counter next to the tin of quarters.

It's pretty dark in the apartment now that the light from the hallway has been shut out. The drapes are open, so there's moonlight spilling into the left side of the room where the sofa sits, looking kind of small and cozy. Intimate, even.

"I have no idea how this thing works," Kellan admits, shining the light from his phone on the box by the door. "I don't think I've ever seen one before."

"Me either," I tell him. "This apartment block might be as old as the city itself."

He laughs. "You could be right. I'll try to get candles while I'm out."

"You're going somewhere?" I ask, wondering what he's thinking.

"We kind of skipped dinner," he reminds me. "So, I should probably grab us some food."

"Oh. Right. Dinner." That main meal that most people bother to eat every day. How could I forget?

"Do you have any preferences?" he asks.

I shake my head. “I’m not vegan, or whatever. Anything you pick will be fine.”

He nods slowly. “I’ll find someplace close by, and I’ll get back as quick as I can.”

“I’ll be right here waiting,” I assure him, because he looks a little concerned about leaving me here alone. It’s kind of sweet, I’ll admit. I’ve never had a guy worry about me before.

He turns and unlocks the door. The light from the hallway spills in when he opens it.

Turning back to me, he says, “Lock the door behind me. I’ll knock three times when I get back.”

He doesn’t wait for me to answer. He just goes.

I close the door and turn the key.

He could have taken the key, locked me in. He didn’t.

He’s given me the chance to run, to escape into the city on my own.

I don’t have to wait here. I have a choice.

Smiling, I move over to the couch in the moonlight.

This is right where I want to be.

Chapter

FIFTY

FOUR

KELLAN

I don't like the idea of leaving Brooke alone in that dark apartment. This part of the city looks kind of rough. It's off the beaten path, and the nearest fast-food place is a sandwich shop a couple blocks closer to the city's center. I take off my tie and stuff it into my pocket, and then I pick up my pace. Passing a drug store that seems to be open late, I make a mental note to stop in there on my way back to the apartment.

One thing I love about the city is the complete lack of greenery. My allergies are under control, even if the air pollution is appalling. It would probably make sense for me to move out here.

If this is where Brooke wants to be, it's where I want to be.

Or if she decides we need to move out to a remote cabin in the wilderness, where my allergies will go absolutely nuts, then that's where I want to be.

I don't care where we are, just that we're together.

The sandwich shop looks clean and it's busy, which I take as a good sign. They have similar sandwiches to the café I meet Lana at, so I order a couple that sound like the mighty meaty one that everyone loves there. I get a couple side salads and an assortment of chips and soda, too.

It takes a little longer than I expect, and I'm keen to get back to Brooke, but I remember to go into the drug store.

Mostly because a couple of guys are exiting the store as I'm about to pass.

I grab a bunch of general overnight supplies—toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, deodorant. Then I pick up some stuff Brooke might need. A hairbrush, makeup wipes.

There's a stand next to the sunscreen with palm tree print T-shirts, bikinis and sunglasses on it.

I pick up an oversized shirt for Brooke. The skirt of her dress is ruined, and it's not the kind of thing most Betas wear. She's going to need a real change of clothes, but this shirt should be okay for her to sleep in.

The main thing I came in here for is behind the counter.

I clear my throat as I put my haul down.

"I'll need a double pack of suppressants, too."

The pharmacist raises his eyebrow at me. "For you?"

He looks like one of those Betas who thinks he could be an Alpha.

Apparently, I look even less like an Omega than I do an Alpha.

"For my mate."

He nods. "Oh, sure. If it's your first time ordering them for him, then you'll need to fill out a form ..."

Damn it. I thought the whole point of suppressants was to help Omegas blend in with Betas. How does forcing them to fill out forms help with that? I can't give this place her name. A fake name might not work or could become a red flag that gives Brooke's father a lead to us. I can't risk it.

"Forget it," I tell him. "He can get them himself tomorrow."

He nods and starts to ring up my other items.

"This shirt is so cute," he says. "I have it in blue."

"It's a nice shirt," I agree, glad I picked the green version over the pink.

This guy thinks my Omega is male, and I have the cash to put down to avoid linking my name to this area right after I left the academy with Brooke. No one's going to know this is where we are, and it needs to stay that way, at least while Brooke is an unmarked, unclaimed Omega.

I'm not sure what her longer-term plans are. If she takes me as her Alpha, that's going to change our current situation. Right now, she's missing from Goldcrest, and their security team will be tasked with tracking her down. I left with her, so of course they'll be looking for me, too.

If we're mated, the academy will have no choice but to leave her alone. They approved me to visit, and she decided to take me as her mate. We've made things a little more awkward by running off together, but I doubt that'll matter when they see the bigger picture. There might be paperwork involved to make it official, or whatever, but they'll have no reason to punish either of us.

Her father could be a problem. He didn't want us to get the chance to meet each other.

I don't know why he's so against the idea of his daughter being with her true mate, and I might never discover his reason, but I need to be prepared for the inevitable uproar when he finds out what's happened between us.

Trouble is, I'm not completely sure what he's capable of. I was still looking into his businesses before I came out to the academy tonight. I haven't figured out what he's doing that isn't quite legal.

All I know is that his morals aren't black and white.

We'll have to be careful. The longer we can stay under the radar, the better.

I pay up for the toiletries and the T-shirt.

The handful of notes left in my wallet afterward are going to have to get us by. I wish I'd been a bit less conservative with the amount I got out of the bank the other day. A couple hundred bucks really doesn't stretch too far.

I make my way back to the apartment. There's a big clock built into the side of a building across the street, an old-fashioned looking jeweler's shop that looks like it shut down years ago. The clock still seems to be working. They really don't make anything like they used to.

It's just after ten o'clock now, which is probably something like an hour after we left Goldcrest.

The sudden buzzing from my pocket makes my heart sink.

No one calls this late. Not my parents, not Lana.

I take the phone out as I get to the apartment building.

The call is coming from the academy.

Shit. Should have known Edith was deadly serious when she told me to call her from the hospital.

This situation is going to escalate quicker than I thought.

My options are limited. Pick up and lie is the dicey option.

If I say all the right things, we might be safe for longer, but if I mess up there'll be academy guards trawling all over the city looking for us before I have the good sense to hang up.

It's not worth the risk. Better to leave Edith completely in the dark.

She has her hands full tonight, so maybe she'll get distracted while she waits for me to call her back.

I wait for the call to end, and I turn my phone off.

Then, I go inside.

Chapter

FIFTY

FIVE

BROOKE

I pick at the edges of my prosthetic, knowing it'll be a pain in the ass to get it off without my adhesive remover. Thinking about the kit I spent years collecting and perfecting, left behind in my suite at the academy makes me a little sad. I can recompile it, but it's probably going to take a while without access to my father's funding. A decent brush set alone will set me back hundreds.

It's a small price to pay for my freedom.

I know that, and I don't regret what I did.

If I had one wish, it would only be that my father had listened to what I told him I wanted, when I knew high school was about to be over and I was going to be enrolled in the Omega academy.

I'd wanted to go to college. More specifically, a film and theater school with a makeup and effects program, though I didn't reveal that part. I'd begged to be allowed to learn something before I had to be sent to the academy. I'd sworn I would go willingly to Goldcrest after my three years of college were up.

He'd shot those dreams down without wasting time thinking about them for one tiny, little second.

His defense was that I could pick a degree course while I was at the academy, any course I wanted, so there was no need to attend college before the academy.

Of course, I didn't choose to do that, because that would have been letting the academy know I had bigger dreams than those of becoming a housewife and mother for a rich Alpha.

I probably would have been steered toward a Family Science degree if I'd brought it up, anyway.

The head of administration has to approve any applications to study outside of the academy's nonsense curriculum, and Geraldine didn't greenlight anything that didn't fit with Goldcrest's image.

I'm still lost in my thoughts when Kellan comes back. His knocks are so light, almost as if he doesn't want to intrude. It takes me a second to snap out of my thoughts and realize the soft sounds mean he's at the door. As soon as I do, I get up from the couch, leaving my heels by the side of it.

"It's Kellan," he calls out, just loud enough to hear.

"I know," I call back as I unlock the door and tug it open. "Sorry, I was kind of in a daze, so it took a second to answer."

I move back, and he comes inside, his hands loaded up with bags.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his dark eyes full of concern.

"I'm fine," I assure him. "I can hardly believe I'm finally out of the academy. It feels like a dream or something. I keep waiting to wake up."

I close the door and lock it again.

"I know the feeling. This whole night has been kind of surreal," he says. "I definitely didn't picture this outcome when I set out to meet you tonight."

"I'm not surprised. I could barely picture the outcome, and I knew what I was trying to do tonight," I tell him. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this whole thing ..."

"I'm not," he says quickly. "I'm glad I'm here with you, Brooke. The escape I stumbled into was kind of unexpected, but I'd much rather be out here with you than pretty much anywhere else."

If he was anyone else, that might sound desperate and obsessively creepy. On my boy-next-door it's nothing but sweet. Well, maybe it's a little obsessive, too. I can't say I mind the thought of Kellan being obsessed with me. I think he should be obsessed with me if I'm his true mate.

I was obsessively dreaming about him for years, and I didn't even know who he was.

"I'm really glad you're with me, too," I tell him. "I wouldn't want you to be anywhere else, either."

It would have hurt to leave him behind, and there's no way I could have risked looking for him after I got out if he hadn't come with us. Fate really had my back tonight. I'm one lucky Omega.

It's too dark to really tell, but I think I made him blush again.

He clears his throat as he moves to set the bags down on the kitchen counter.

"It's darker than I remembered in here."

"I think my eyes have kind of adjusted to it. Did you get candles?"

"I didn't find any in the store. I got some other stuff I thought we might need. Probably should have checked what was actually in the house first, but dinner is sandwiches, so at least we don't need silverware for those."

"Ooh, I know what we can do!" I dart over to the under-counter fridge and open the door.

There's no light, and it's empty.

Duh, Brooke. Of course the refrigerator isn't running. The electricity runs on quarters.

How could I forget that? I shut the door and spot the plug sitting by the side of the appliance. It's not even plugged into a socket. Why would it be? This is Frost's old place. He's just letting the lease run out.

"Okay, scratch that idea. I don't know what we can do."

“Yeah, this is kind of weird,” Kellan says. “It’s definitely not the picture I was painting of our first date.”

I can’t help but laugh. “What? You were planning something grander than eating sandwiches in an apartment with no power?”

“It would be nice to at least see each other.”

“Hmm,” I murmur. “Maybe this is what all the cool kids are doing. It’s like those weird, trendy restaurants where the waiters lead you to your table in the dark and you eat random food without ever seeing it.”

“That sounds terrible. You’ve been to one of those places?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been practically nowhere but to school and home since I was born. In fact, the hospital visit my mom made to give birth was my first and final big day out.”

“Wow,” he murmurs. “That really sucks.”

“It really does,” I agree. “I mean, it did. Everything will be different now.”

At least, it will be once I’ve figured out how to sneak around without being identified as Brooke Corvina and promptly dragged back to the academy or my father’s house.

“You have plans?” Kellan asks, as he starts to check through the kitchen cupboards.

“Oh, I have *big* plans.”

Finally finding plates in one of the half-empty cupboards, he takes out a couple, and I put them on the table so he can keep up his search.

“I’d love to know what those big plans are,” he says, when I don’t elaborate.

“Maybe I’ll tell you over dinner,” I tease.

The truth is it’s actually a little nerve-racking to say it out loud.

I've never admitted what I really want to do with my life to anyone.

Not even Zelena knows, and she's the best friend I've ever had.

I mean, she knows I'm a makeup junkie, but she has no idea about the special effects stuff.

"I think ... Yep, I've found candles!" Kellan exclaims, removing two large candles from another cupboard. I glance up and smile. They're the expensive kind that come in thick glass holders.

"Good job. Now we just need matches and we'll be all set."

He passes me the candles, and I set them down on the table, removing the lids. One sniff and I can tell they have a vanilla scent. The sweet smell makes me realize I'm actually hungry.

I take the bag from the sandwich place and start emptying it onto the table.

A typical guy, Kellan bought a whole load of chips and soda.

Not so typical, he got salad to go with the sandwiches.

"We're definitely not going to starve," I tell him.

"That was the idea," he admits. "I used cash to make sure I couldn't be traced spending on a card out here."

"Thanks," I say. "I'd go Dutch if I had any cash. My father only let me use plastic."

"Your father is an asshole," he mutters, before he closes the drawer he just opened and sucks in a breath. "Sorry. That just slipped out ..."

I'm not shocked by the blurted slur. Most people know what my father is, even if they don't say it.

"Don't apologize," I tell him. "My father is an asshole. But how do you know that?"

It sounded like an opinion he had before I even told him about my money situation.

“He stopped me from being approved to visit the academy,” he confesses. “When I tried to get Geraldine to tell me why I was being rejected again, she wouldn’t say, but he called me back and told me to stop harassing her. He’s the one who blacklisted me. I think he knows we’re fated.”

“How would he know?” I ask.

It completely sounds like something my father would do, but I can’t quite connect the dots.

“You perfumed the day we met, Brooke,” Kellan says. “It was this really light, sweet scent of cherries. Your father’s an Alpha. He must have known it was your perfume.”

“That’s so strange,” I murmur. “I don’t even remember us meeting, and I ... I thought I *couldn’t* perfume. Until recently, I mean, when I met my ... other mates.”

“I was out in the woods near your house that day with my parents and our old dog. Our car was parked in a nearby lot with security cameras. If he didn’t recognize any of us, he would have been able to access the camera log for that parking lot.”

“He had that lot built,” I tell him. “There was a camera feed to it in the house. In his office.”

“Yeah, it’s his property. He owns that whole area of land that bridges Cressidan City and Crystal Grove. Including a second house practically identical to your own.”

“You looked into his financials?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Found them,” he says with a sigh, putting a box of matches down on the table.

“Uh-huh,” I mutter, ignoring the matches. “What did you find when you looked into my father’s money?”

He lets out a soft sigh. “I don’t know if you really want to know about this, Brooke.”

“I don’t *want* to know, I *need* to know. So, spill,” I demand, getting a little testy.

“I drilled down into the data for the companies he has and there’s no way in hell he’s making what he’s reporting out of them. There are different discrepancies all across the board, from the number of clients and the pricing of the products and services right down to supplier invoicing being too low to make anything close to the number of items being sold. All those businesses are covering up something else that he’s doing. Something a lot less legal.”

“Holy fucking hell.” I frown at him. “It sounds like you’ve spent a lot of time on that.”

Like an obsessive amount of time, maybe.

He shrugs, picking up the matchbox and opening it.

“After he called me, I felt like I had to do something.”

It really wouldn’t surprise me if my father was up to something illegal.

I never stopped to think about where he was making his money.

Why would I?

No one ever said anything to make me question it.

Now that I am, I can see it. He’s always been a psychopath.

The need for money and power top everything else in his life.

I don’t think there’s much he wouldn’t do if it helped him become wealthier or more powerful.

So, that leaves one really big question.

“You’re saying his businesses don’t make sense, but you don’t know what he’s doing that’s illegal, exactly?”

He lights the first candle and blows out the match before it can burn his fingertips.

“I’ve checked the data a couple times. Measured it against his competitors for every company. I’m sure his financial records make it look above board, but data doesn’t lie. If there isn’t enough demand for something, it’s not going to sell. Especially when there’s no advertising behind it. Anyone who knows the tech he’s selling would see something was wrong.”

I watch as he strikes another match against the side of the box.

“Finding out where the money’s coming from is a whole other thing. I found a list of residential properties he owns. When we get internet access, I’ll check that with you. It’s probably the only starting point we have to figure out what he’s actually doing.”

“What about the private hospitals? Those are what he’s known for.”

“I’m out of my depth a bit with those. They could be legitimate. The costs for treatments are sky-high, but that doesn’t seem to be abnormal. Can you think of anything he does that might be unusual? Any people he knows who seem sketchy?”

I think about it and shake my head. “He’s always been very private. His study at home was always out of bounds to me as a kid. He took a lot of calls that made him angry, but, honestly, if you know my father, that doesn’t mean much.”

I’m halfway thrilled and halfway terrified.

My father’s up to something that could get him locked away for the rest of his life.

But if we investigate, I’ll be putting myself back in his crosshairs.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought all of that up,” Kellan says, shaking his head.

“No, I’m glad you did. It’s important. It’s just a lot.”

He’s shocked me about as much as I shocked him earlier tonight.

I guess that makes us even.

“Let’s just forget it for now,” I tell him, shrugging it off.

It’s a little harder than I think to let it go, but I know that’s because the idea of my father rotting away behind bars for the rest of his miserable life would make me so damn happy.

I guess that makes me a bad daughter.

It’s only what he deserves for being a terrible father.

I pull out my chair and sit down as Kellan blows out the match he used to light the wicks of the second candle. It’s sort of romantic now that we have the candle-lit glow, and we can actually see each other’s faces properly.

He sits down opposite me at the small table.

For the second time tonight, we’re sitting down to dinner.

In my bare feet and a torn, stained designer dress, sitting in the dark with an Alpha who might actually hate my father as much as I do, I like the whole vibe of this dinner so much better.

Chapter

FIFTY

SIX

KELLAN

Despite the odd circumstances, and the less than pleasant pre-dinner conversation, Brooke is relaxed and happy while she eats her sandwich. Bringing up her father's dodgy business dealings wasn't the smartest idea I've ever had, but I realized I couldn't lie about it once I got started. She deserves to know the truth. She also deserves to have a good night after everything she went through to get out of the academy, so I'm glad we've shelved that conversation for now.

She sighs softly as she takes another bite of the sandwich.

"It's pretty good, right?" I ask.

"Mmm," she moans, making my dick twitch inside my pants.

Inappropriate, Kellan. The woman is hungry. That's all.

Unfortunately, my dick possesses a mind of its own. It doesn't take orders to settle down when it decides it's awake and ready to be used. I might need to excuse myself from the table if my sexy, unclaimed mate continues to eat as if she's in love with her food.

I try to concentrate on my own dinner, but it's completely lost any appeal it might have had before Brooke started moaning out her appreciation.

Reaching for a can of soda, I settle for a rush of sugar over a protein infusion.

That plan backfires quickly. The jolt of energy goes straight to my dick.

It becomes a steel-rod inside my suddenly way too tight designer suit pants.

Christ, these things have zero stretch in them.

Brooke finishes one half of her sandwich and gives me a smile. “Thanks for going out and getting that. I really needed it.”

“No problem.” I squirm in the chair, trying to find more room in the pants for my out-of-control dick.

Thankfully, Brooke’s attention is still on the contents of my sandwich shop haul. Her gaze moves over the bags of chips and unopened salad containers to the half dozen assorted cans of soda.

Her eyes light up as she reaches for the can of Dr Pepper.

“Oh my God! This was my favorite soda in high school.” She pops it open quickly as she looks up at me. “Sorry if I sound too excited over this, but my dad point-blank refused to keep junk food in the house. They had this stuff in all the vending machines on campus though.”

Taking a sip, she makes another sexy noise of appreciation.

Her dad is such an asshole. The reminder dampens my lust a little bit.

My dick reverts back to half-hard and twitchy.

“Of course, those vending machines only took cash, which I wasn’t permitted to have, so I ended up bribing one of my classmates with a Tiffany bracelet she couldn’t afford, to get myself one can a couple of times a week for the whole of the senior semester,” Brooke goes on, finishing up her story. “She got a bargain, and I got to have a treat when I wanted it. It sounds insane now, but coming up with shit like that was the only way to get one over on my dad.”

“It doesn’t sound insane. It sounds like a creative way to get through a shitty situation.”

She sips at the soda. “It’s even better than I remember. I haven’t had one in so damn long.”

I think back to our dinner at Goldcrest. I have no idea what the couple of courses we were served actually were, but they definitely weren’t the kind of items you’d ever find in a fast-food joint.

“Yeah, I assume the academy doesn’t stock junk food.”

She laughs. “The kitchen is amazing, actually, and they do stock some junk alongside the healthy stuff. They can make whatever we want. I just didn’t ask for anything my father wouldn’t allow, because I know he gets printouts from the kitchen detailing what I’ve been ordering. It was one of the first things he made sure I was aware of when I was enrolled.”

That goddamned fucking asshole.

I keep my mouth shut to avoid letting her see how pissed off it’s making me to hear about her father’s control over her life, trapping her so damn tightly that she can’t make a move without thinking about him.

I think she sees something in my face, which makes me wish we hadn’t found the candles.

“My life was pretty fucked up, wasn’t it?” she asks, a wry smile on her lips.

I nod slowly. “It was, but that’s done now.”

She’s out from under her father’s control.

She won’t need to think about him anymore.

Her gaze heats up as she looks me, putting down the soda can.

“You know what? You’re right. That old life is done. I’m ready to get started on the new one.”

Chapter

FIFTY

SEVEN

BROOKE

My perfume fills the air slowly as I think about asking the Alpha sitting across from me to put his mouth on my throat and mark me as his Omega. Who knew it would feel so easy to say yes to this instinct? All it took was meeting the right kind of Alpha. One who sees something more than a pretty woman who can take his knot. I guess we haven't known each other long, but sometimes when you know, you just know.

I push my chair back. "It's getting kind of late. Do you mind if I take one of the candles to go get ready for bed?"

He shakes his head. "I bought some supplies if you need them."

He gets up and opens the bag.

I pick up one of the candles and take a look.

I'm impressed by what I see inside. "You thought of everything."

"Well, probably not *everything* ..." He trails off, his gaze on my lips.

"I'm going to the bathroom to freshen up. Maybe you could check if the bed needs to be made up? I think Frost mentioned spare sheets, so it might be a naked mattress through there."

It's so cute how wide his pretty eyes get when he's shocked.

I know his feelings for me echo mine for him pretty closely.

That's the benefit of being an empath. I can feel what he's feeling, and he's having some very strong feelings about what the sleeping arrangements should be. I know if I reached between us, I'd feel exactly how much he wants to claim me as his mate and his Omega.

My thighs are already slick at the thought of seducing him.

I might have some experience, but this intense desire is new to me.

I'm not used to being around a man who makes me wet without doing anything.

"Sure," Kellan says, taking in a breath that he lets out with a sigh.

He must be drowning in my perfume right now. I can't even smell the candles anymore.

This is the strongest my cherry scent has ever been.

I'm not broken. I was never broken.

After so many years without that one tangible thing that makes Omegas so damn unique, I can hardly believe it was inside me all this time, just waiting for the right guy to come along.

Well, the right harem of guys. Kellan's not the only one I've perfumed for.

He's my true mate, but I have another two of those.

My thoughts slide to Frost and Donnie, and the idea of claiming all three of them makes my slick come in faster, deepening my scent and making Kellan's hungry gaze become ravenous.

He moves quickly past me, as if he's trying to avoid the urge to scoop me into his arms.

I can't help smiling as he disappears into the bedroom. I might not have ended up with that football team plus cheerleaders like I joked with Zey that I would, but I think the hot, sweet boy-next-door who runs his own business, and a tag-team of life-saving EMTs, is a pretty amazing pack to end up with.

I have zero complaints so far.

After picking up the bag from the counter, I take it with me into the bathroom, along with the candle.

The bathroom door is partially open, and so is the bedroom door.

I'm tempted to check on Kellan, but I don't intend to take too long in the bathroom, and I don't want to surprise him before I'm all the way ready. Mostly, I don't trust myself not to jump his bones the second he's close enough to be jumped on.

So, I step into the bathroom and close the door. After setting the candle down on the countertop next to the sink, I pick through the bag and take out the toiletries I'm about to use. My preference is for coconut oil and cotton pads to remove my makeup, but I've been known to use wipes in a pinch. I clean off my makeup carefully, using up a few wipes to make sure my face is left as clean as possible.

The sight of my pale skin without a hint of color is unusual, but I'm probably going to have to get used to it. It's better if I don't look like the old me from now on. It'll be harder for my father to find me if I change things up.

I brush my hair while I try to decide if coloring it would be a smart idea.

Red would draw too much attention, and anything darker would make me look like a vampire.

Maybe I'll just stay indoors as much as possible for a while or get one of my guys to buy me a wig.

I take off my ruined dress and ball it up. Even if I was good with a needle and thread, keeping something so

expensive would be too risky. It's a perfect, little Omega outfit. I'll have to get rid of it.

My panties are drenched, so I slip them off and wash them in the sink before hanging them over the towel rail to dry. They're ugly skin-colored panties that I'll be happy to be rid of, but right now they're my only pair.

There's a T-shirt in the bag that I'm guessing is for me. It's green with black palm trees printed on the front, and it's going to be a loose fit on me, but it would be a bit tight for Kellan.

The color makes me smile. It feels like fate that he got me something in my color.

Of course, it also reminds me that my mother's emerald necklace has been left behind at the academy. I couldn't have brought it. I couldn't find a way to accessorize any of my academy dresses with it. They were all too grand for such a simple piece. It didn't fit in with any of them, and my polished appearance was everything at the academy. Someone would have noticed if I started doing something differently.

I leave the T-shirt on the towel rail, ready to put it on in the morning.

I take off the last thing I'm wearing, a set of diamond earrings my father gave me the morning he took me to the academy.

They're one of the only gifts he ever gave me. He told me he was giving me them to symbolize my journey into maturity, and that he expected me to wear them again on my wedding day.

I feel like flushing them down the toilet, but that's probably kind of wasteful.

They might be expensive, but they're worth nothing as far as I'm concerned.

Setting them down on the side of the sink, I decide to leave it up to chance.

They'll sit there until I figure out what to do with them, or they'll get knocked into the sink and slip down the drain.

Either way, it's no great loss.

Suddenly, it feels kind of hot in the bathroom. Which is kind of weird considering I just got naked.

My skin feels warm to the touch, which I think has helped loosen the prosthetic on my thigh.

It feels loose in the middle now. I pry up a couple of edges without an issue, and it flops off and into my hand. Running a hand over the area, I can't feel any residue. Huh.

“Well, that was easy.”

It came off in one piece and I kind of want to keep it, but I doubt I'll ever need it again. It served its purpose, and it's not the last one I'll ever make. I set it down by the side of the candle.

There's a red mark where it was stuck down on my thigh, but I haven't torn any skin.

I should have needed a solvent remover to get it off.

I guess I'm sweating a little bit, and my skin is hot. That combination must have loosened the glue.

Fanning myself with my hand, I start to wonder why my body's heating up like I'm a human radiator while slick is coursing down my legs as if my pussy's trying to make up for six years of lost time in one night.

“Oh, holy fuck,” I mutter, my gaze moving to my eyes in the mirror.

I don't look half as cute in my shock as Kellan does, but I think I'm about to bring that same look out in him all over again in another few seconds, once I step out of the bathroom, and he sees what's happening to me.

A dull, desperate ache in my pussy makes me double over the sink, groaning out loud in the weirdest combination of pleasure and pain I've ever experienced.

I slip my hand between my legs and stroke my throbbing clit.

The climax that roars through me drops me to my knees.

My breath is torn from me as the ache in my pussy gets more intense, leaving me helplessly squirming on the bathroom floor.

I can't catch my breath, and I can't ease the ache.

It's too intense to handle. *God, I'm going to pass out.*

"Brooke?" Kellan calls out from the other side of the door. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head, trying in vain to gasp in a breath.

My vision starts to blur as the door handle turns.

Did I lock the door? Fuck, I don't know.

My eyes close, and there's an instant where I'm certain I'm about to pass out, and then I'm in Kellan's arms. I open my eyes and grasp at his clothes, clinging to him like he's a life-preserver.

"It's okay," he tells me softly. "It's okay, I'm here. I've got you."

His words are soothing, but they don't help me catch my breath.

He frowns as he looks at me. I must look like a fish on dry land or something. I'm gasping, but I'm not taking in any air. I don't know what's wrong. I can't catch my breath.

"Inhale," he commands, his Alpha voice rolling over me and sinking in deep.

My panic cuts out completely. Nothing else matters but his command.

I obey, taking in a breath.

Finally.

Tears of relief well in the corners of my eyes. I exhale and take in another breath, no problem.

My breathing returns to normal, even if the rest of my body doesn't.

He gazes down at me. "What happened?"

“You mean, what’s still happening?” I ask, my voice a little hoarse as I give him a wry smile.

“What’s still ... Oh ...” he answers, as he looks me over.

I’m naked and trembling in his arms. His presence makes it slightly easier to handle the ache. It’s as if knowing an Alpha is close, ready, and willing as my mate is enough to slow down the sudden, willful demands of my body. I know he’ll help me through this. I want him to.

“I’m in heat, so I hope you’re ready to have me as your mate.”

Chapter

FIFTY

EIGHT

KELLAN

When I found Brooke collapsed on the bathroom floor, gasping to catch her breath, I had no idea what might have caused it. The realization that she's suffering through intense pain because she's going through her first heat hits me like a ton of bricks. We should have known this could happen.

Her heat is overdue by at least a few years.

This was bound to happen sooner, rather than later.

I help her to her feet when she starts to get up, my heart racing as she turns to face me.

Stripped of her makeup and clothing, she's still cover model perfect. And her eyes ... God, her eyes. They sparkle with hidden depths. She's so much more than she seems, so much more than the image she reveals to the world. *How did I get this lucky?*

"I want you as my mate, Kellan," Brooke tells me, her hands holding onto the lapels of my suit jacket.

The most beautiful woman on the planet is standing in front of me naked, slick staining her legs, and I'm too lost for words to agree to what she's asking of me.

She doesn't need words, you idiot. She thinks you do.

Kiss her, before she thinks you're turning her down.

I lean in and brush my lips against hers, giving her my response. She takes it greedily, wrapping her arms around my

neck and taking charge. Her mouth works against mine, her breathy, muffled moans as she rocks her body against mine making my pulse race. I feel her desire rising as I hold her close. I stroke one hand over the swell of her ass while I slide my tongue over hers. Keeping the other on her back, I stroke over her soft, warm skin. Another muffled moan rises to her lips, making them vibrate, and I feel her slick soaking through the front of my pants. Her arousal makes her sweet cherry perfume deepen to a maddeningly dark and bite-able scent that I can taste on my tongue, and my dick rapidly turns to steel.

This is really fucking happening.

I'm about to knot my mate.

To claim her as mine.

She breaks the kiss. “Is the bed ready?”

I nod, still struggling to find words.

She gives me a mildly amused look of concern. “Are you okay?”

“The bed’s made up,” I tell her, finally regaining the ability to speak.

She nods slowly, clearly realizing I’m having some kind of internal freak out. “Are you ready? Because if you’re not, I’m sure we can figure something else out—”

She doesn’t sound sure, and as far as I know, in our current situation without the assistance of one of those very specific sex aids that simulate knotting, the only other alternative to me claiming my mate is for her to suffer until she passes out from the pain. Even if I wasn’t completely sure, that would be enough to change my mind for me.

“No,” I cut in quickly. “We don’t have to ... I’m ready. I’m just kind of in shock, I guess. I thought you were hurt or something for a second. I’m ... I’m still processing. I’ll snap out of it in a second.”

“You waited, didn’t you?” she asks, no hint of judgement in her voice.

“I did.” It must be so obvious. I thought we’d have more time before it came up, but it doesn’t seem like we’re getting the option to take things slowly.

She gives me a wry smile. “I waited for a while, too. Then, I guess I let the academy’s attitude sink in. I stopped believing in true mates. I thought they were all fantasy. None of the Alphas at Goldcrest were willing to wait for anything.”

I brush her hair back from her face. “You deserve so much better than those assholes.”

“That’s why I’ve got you now. Believe me, Kellan. If I’d known you were out there, I would have waited. Now, can you please take your clothes off and get into bed?”

I kiss her softly before I step back, pushing the bedroom door open.

She follows me into the room, as I stare openly at her naked body in the candlelight.

I’m already starting to feel like I’m ready to lose it.

I hope to hell I last long enough to satisfy her heat.

She closes the door behind her, and her perfume flares, that dark but sweet scent filling the air in the room, tempting me to claim her, enticing me to mark her.

My teeth tingle as they sharpen.

I want to mark her so damn badly.

She’s my mate. Mine.

And I’m about to claim her.

I kick off my shoes, losing them under the bed.

When I start to unbutton my shirt, she moves in close and unbuckles my belt at the same time.

Her hands shake a little and she starts to wince, but she doesn’t stop until she gets my pants and underwear to fall to the floor. She’s still hurting from the ache of needing a knot.

I’m going to have to take charge. This isn’t a normal first heat. At best it’s something that should have happened a long

time before this moment. She's suffering now because it didn't.

"Lay down," I tell her in my most commanding tone, as I shrug my shirt off.

She raises an eyebrow at me. "Yes, Alpha Kellan."

Moving to the bed, she slides on top of the sheets and into the middle, legs spread, arms above her head. She looks like a naked supermodel in that pose, head tilted to the side to watch me approach.

I stumble a little as I kick away the clothes that have bundled up at my ankles. I drag my feet out of my dress socks and I'm suddenly completely naked.

In a strange bedroom with the true mate I've waited ten years to claim.

I move onto the bed from the right, and she turns onto her side to face me.

"I'm sorry this is happening so fast," she says.

"I'm sorry it hurts so much," I tell her.

I kiss her lips softly. I never thought our first night together would begin with my mate going into heat, but we both know what we want. Neither of us have any doubts about claiming each other.

I ease my hand between her legs, and she rolls onto her back, opening up for my touch.

She's dripping with arousal, her pussy clenching around my fingers as I drive them inside her.

"More," she whispers. "I need more. Kellan, please."

She needs my knot, and I'm taking too long to give it to her.

I take my hand away, moving to kneel between her legs, and rub the head of my dick against her opening. She grinds against me, and I slip inside, gasping out a breath. Putting her hands on my ass, she pulls me closer, dragging me in deeper.

It feels so fucking good, I forget to breathe for a couple minutes while I'm filling her up.

My dick expands inside her the second I'm fully sheathed, making her moan deeply as it gets thicker.

Once I remember how to breathe, I start to move.

It's incredible how tight she feels around me, how hard she seems to be gripping my swollen length.

She looks up at me with a satisfied smile. "That feels so much better."

"I can't believe we missed out on this for so long."

We were too young when we had that chance meeting in the woods, but if the academy had just let me in the year she got there, we could have been mates for six whole years.

"Fate works in mysterious ways," she tells me. "I'm just glad we met tonight."

"Believe me, I am, too." Otherwise, she might have been out here alone, suffering through the pain of a delayed first heat with no one to help ease the ache.

Biting down on her bottom lip, she gazes up at me with longing in her eyes.

"Anything you want ..." I murmur, making sure she knows I'm willing to take direction.

"Will you mark me while you claim me?" she asks. "If it's possible."

I'm not that much taller than her, so it's definitely possible. Whether it's a smart decision to make while she's wrapped up in her heat is another question entirely.

"It's not the heat talking," she assures me, though if it was, I'm sure she wouldn't know.

I smile down at her, biting back a groan as her pussy starts to milk my shaft a bit harder.

I had no idea knotting would feel this intense. There's no way to simulate it without an Omega partner. No way to

practice. Considering I had my heart set on Brooke, there was no way to know what this would be like until we finally got together.

“I want to mark you, Brooke,” I tell her, my teeth sharpening slightly in preparation to mark her pretty throat. “But I don’t want you to have any regrets.”

I need her to be sure. I know it’s not the heat, but she’s so caught up in it that I don’t know for sure it isn’t making her rush something that most couples probably take a bit more time with.

We’re fated, so it feels right to claim each other. It’ll feel right to mark her, too, but I’ve had a lot longer to be sure about making her mine forever.

“I’ve been thinking about this day for ten years,” I admit. “I knew it was going to happen. I just had to wait. You’ve known me for a few hours. Maybe you need a bit more time.”

I kiss her throat, and she moans, making her skin vibrate under my lips.

“No,” she whispers. “I don’t need more time. You’re my Alpha, Kellan. I want you.”

“You have me. We don’t need to rush into this. I’ll be ready when you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now,” she moans, her walls tightening around me again.

My willpower’s not going to hold out for very long if she keeps tightening around my knot.

“Can’t you tell?” she asks, her gaze searching mine. “Don’t you feel how much I want you? I spent so damn long dreaming of you, Kellan. I’ve been ready for this for a long time, too. I want you inside me like this every day. I want everyone to know you’re my Alpha.”

I can definitely feel it. I run a hand over her breast before I bend my head back down to her throat.

She moans under my touch. I nip at her throat, teasing the skin with my sharpened teeth without breaking it. Her breath

catches. I tease a little more before I bite down to mark her.

She cries out my name, wrapping her arms around my neck, one hand stroking through my hair as she tenses under me.

Holy fuck, she's coming. Her pussy's throttling my dick like she's trying to drain it dry. I barely manage to hold back.

I kiss her newly made mark and move back as her grasp slackens off around my neck. I gaze down at her face while her pussy's still death-gripping my dick. She's flushed and gasping as she looks up at me with desire-filled eyes.

"My mate," she murmurs.

Hearing her say it, after making her come, is too much to take.

I lose control of the urge to come inside her.

Thrusting hard, I close my eyes and start to groan.

Apparently, coming with a knot isn't the same as coming without one.

It lasts a lot longer, and the swelling doesn't automatically go down after.

I'm in rut. She's my mate, and I need to keep her satisfied through her heat.

Stilling for a second, I gaze down at her.

"My mate."

Chapter

FIFTY

NINE

BROOKE

Apparently, sex with a true mate is much more satisfying than hitting up a random fuckboy. Who would have guessed? Knowing that I could have been with Kellan much sooner makes me kind of mad, but I know I need to let that go.

We're together now, and nothing can break the bond we've made.

Our bodies move together slowly on the surprisingly comfortable bed. The ache in my pussy has been eased by his knot, but the full feeling I have from his swollen cock is making me crave more and more. It's probably just as well I have the contraceptive implant, because otherwise there's no way I'd be getting out of this encounter without at least one bun in the oven.

I can feel how much he's coming inside me, and it's only making me want more.

"I think I want to be on top," I tell him. "Move in closer, we can roll over."

He does what I ask, and a few seconds later I'm making myself comfortable in the new position on his knot. It feels a little more intense, and when I start to rock my clit rubs against him a bit, pushing me into another climax with practically no warning.

"Oh, God!" I gasp out.

He gazes at me, that wide-eyed look on his face.

He knows when I'm coming, and he gets more turned on each time.

"Why do you feel this good?" I ask him, making him smile.

"It's all you," he says. "I'm just taking notes."

He proves it by tugging me down to rock on him, causing more friction on my slick-wet, swollen clit.

I groan at the sensation, inching toward another orgasm while he watches my face intently.

This guy is too damn good to be true. A virgin who waited for his true mate, but who also seems to be instantly good at sex ... how the hell did I get so lucky?

Maybe it's fate's way of making up for the first twenty-four years of my life.

Everything else turned out shit, but you're gonna hit the mate lottery before you turn twenty-five.

That's the kind of deal I can live with, especially since the payout is happening right now.

I come again, and his smile gets a little smirky. "I kind of made that happen, right there."

Even with a smirk, he's still too sweet to be anything other than cute.

"Yeah, yeah," I tell him, as if it's no big deal. "Talk to me when you've given me multiple orgasms."

"I think that can be arranged."

So damn cute.

Chapter SIXTY

KELLAN

Making my mate come on my knot is addictive. I stay swollen after I've come, locked inside her while her heat makes her needy and desperate for every touch, every thrust, every kiss.

She spends a little time riding it, coming incredibly easily from the increased stimulation on her clit.

I help her along a couple times, just to watch those sapphire eyes light up.

The sheer euphoria running through her is incredible to watch.

"I'm taking over," I warn her, as her head tilts back.

I catch a glimpse of the mark I made on her throat, unobscured by her golden-blond hair.

"Mmm?" she murmurs, sounding slightly dazed.

"I think you've had one too many orgasms," I tease. "I might have to cut you off."

She laughs lightly. "That's not a thing."

"Well, still, I'm going back on top."

"Yes, Alpha," she murmurs with a light growl as I roll us back to our original position.

She's definitely close to her limit. Coming might not be completely the same as drinking too much alcohol, but for an

Omega in heat, eventually the pleasure becomes so intense that it can be like being inebriated. She's getting drunk on sex, and it's up to me to look after her.

So, I thrust into her slowly, letting her recover a little from the last climax I helped her hit.

She lets out a soft sigh. "All Alphas should be like you."

I feel my skin flushing at the compliment. "Well, you would think that. You're my mate."

"True," she agrees, gazing up at me as she lifts her arms and wraps them around my neck. "I'm your mate because you're you, Kellan. I changed my mind. I don't want all other Alphas to be like you, because I don't actually want a football team's worth of mates."

"A football team's worth of mates?" I ask, amused at the image it paints for me.

She shrugs under me, wriggling her hips until I thrust a little deeper.

Her eyes close for a second, and she opens them again on a sexy, breathy inhale.

"It's a joke I made once. That I wanted a football team and their cheerleaders for my pack."

"And their cheerleaders?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"A girl's allowed to like more than one flavor of ice cream, Kellan."

Holy fuck. She likes women, as well as men.

"You're a unicorn."

She narrows her eyes suspiciously. "Is that some kind of slang I'm not aware of?"

I definitely can't tell her Lana called her that. They're friends, and I'm pretty sure Lana would kill me. I really don't want to be murdered, especially when my killer would absolutely move in on my girl afterward.

“No, I just meant you’re rare. You could have gotten a football team and their cheerleaders for your pack, if you really wanted. You still could.”

Her eyes widen. “You’d let me have that many mates?”

“I’d let you have anything that made you happy.”

I mean it, too. I wasn’t sure I would until I said it out loud.

I can’t say I don’t have some reservations about how a pack situation’s going to work, but I know those EMTs belong to her as much as I do, and I’m not about to demand she choose between us.

Brooke stares at me. “You’re serious.”

“I know you’re going to take those paramedics as mates, Brooke. I already knew I was willing to share to be with you.”

“Fuck,” she murmurs. “I’m not a unicorn, Kellan. You are.”

She tugs me down until I’m close enough to kiss, her fingers curling through my hair as she crushes her mouth against mine.

I don’t know how I feel about being likened to a mythical creature, but my mate can give me whatever pet-names she wants. I’m all hers. Even if she’s not completely all mine.

Chapter SIXTY ONE

BROOKE

Kellan is everything I dreamt about and so much more. He's so perfect, I'm half convinced this is still a dream, and I'm going to wake up on the floor of the ballroom at the academy, where Edith Merritt is shouting at me to get on my feet. It would make more sense than finding out the first guy I perfumed for is completely open to me having more than one true mate.

None of the Alphas at Goldcrest would ever agree to something like that.

But my Alpha has, and I know Frost and Donnie will agree to sharing me, too. They were open to sharing me with each other, and they feel like they're already pack. They might even be lovers.

The thought of that makes my pussy clench around Kellan's knot.

I grind into his slow thrusts, making him push a little deeper.

I slick my tongue over his and moan lightly into his mouth.

We've been fucking for so damn long now that I know my pussy's going to be raw when we're done. My heat feels like it's starting to wane, but I'm too close to coming again to let his knot go down.

I grind a bit harder, and it starts to happen.

My lips break away from his. The intensity of the climax is high. The swell of euphoria that hits is like a shot of pure, unfiltered pleasure that crashes over me in waves.

“You’re coming again,” he murmurs.

My eyes are closed, but I can feel him watching my face.

He loves to make me come. He loves to watch it happen.

I wonder if he’ll watch this intently when it’s someone else’s turn to make me moan.

I open my eyes, and stare back at him. “You’re going to come inside me one last time before I release your knot.”

“Yes, Omega,” he murmurs, desire burning in his stare.

I grind harder into his thrusts, making him thrust so deep I can barely handle the feeling.

A groan escapes my lips, and his breath catches in his throat.

“I want you to take me from behind next time,” I tell him.

“Oh, God ...” he groans.

He’s getting close, I can feel it.

I smile. “I want to feel your knot in every position, swollen in place until I’m satisfied.”

“Brooke ...”

“Every position, Kellan.”

He loses it, frowning deeply and giving out a low groan as he comes inside me.

I let my pussy’s grip on his knot relax. It’s common knowledge that an Omega controls her Alpha’s knot. She decides when it’s time for it to swell, and she decides when she’s done with it.

An Alpha has some control, but the Omega’s needs come first.

When I let go, his swelling goes down, and he gasps as he moves to the side to lay down next to me, pulling me into his

embrace.

There's no turning back now. The thought makes me smile.

My whole world changed since my heat came on tonight, and I have no regrets.

I didn't think I wanted an Alpha, but here I am with a mark on my throat.

I guess what I was waiting for was my unicorn.

Well, I found him and I'm never letting him go.

Chapter SIXTY TWO

KELLAN

The room gets rapidly colder as soon as Brooke's heat passes. I didn't expect the temperature changes involved would be noticeable enough to effect anything, but then again I didn't expect to be claiming my mate in an uninhabited apartment bedroom. The place has no heat, and now that we're not caught up in each other's bodies, creating warmth between us, it's cool enough in the room that we're going to have to move.

I know a heat can last for days, sometimes even weeks, and Omegas need to rest a lot between all the knotting. I don't think I did too badly for my first time satisfying my true mate, but my dick is ready for the resting part now.

I am, too. It's late, and I want to curl up with my mate and get some sleep.

"Ugh, I don't want to have to move," she moans next to me.

We made the mistake of getting comfortable without getting under the covers.

Now it's too cold to stay where we are.

"I'll move first," I tell her, knowing it's going to suck.

She pulls a face. "What if I need you while you're gone?"

I laugh. "I'll be two steps away from the bed looking for my underwear."

“Okay, you can go,” she says, giving me a smile.

I get up, glad the floor is carpeted, but there’s a draft coming from someplace.

I pick up my boxer briefs and put them on, shivering as I look around the room.

The candle’s still burning; it’s only about halfway used up.

Brooke sits up on the bed, knees up with her arms wrapped around them.

“When did winter come?” she asks me, shaking her head. “It felt like we were lying in sunlight until my stupid heat calmed down.”

“I think there’s a draft,” I tell her. “This place is so old, I bet the windows are single-glazed.”

“I’m not looking forward to using the bathroom,” she admits. “The floor will be like ice.”

“I could carry you,” I offer. “Or you can have my socks.”

“Socks, please,” she says, holding out a hand.

I smile. “Just give me a second to find them.”

They’re halfway under the bed, alongside my shoes, it turns out.

I pass them to her, and she puts them on quickly, covering her red-painted toenails.

She takes a deep breath and gets up, dashing to the door and into the bathroom.

I look out into the hallway. This place has seemed pretty quiet the whole time we’ve been here. I guess it’s late enough at night for most folks to be in bed. It’s also possible that a bunch of these apartments are empty. It’s an old building. It’s not rundown, exactly, but I doubt the landlord is putting anything into renovations if this place is still using a paid meter for electrics.

I have to admit, it’s probably a good hiding place for a runaway Omega.

No one would suspect she'd come to an old building like this. Not when she's used to the luxuries that come along with having a wealthy parent and being looked after in an elite Omega academy.

We're safe, for now. Her father might know about me, but I bet he has no idea about Brooke's other true mates. She didn't meet them that long ago, and it was at the academy. If he doesn't know about them, he'll have no damn idea about this place.

I look for more sheets, then put the couple that I find on the bed, making it a little warmer.

I tug the edge back and tuck in the bottoms under the mattress to keep the heat in the bed.

There's not much else I can do.

Brooke comes back in the green shirt I got her. She gets into bed, and I can see it's just long enough to cover her modesty. I catch a glimpse of her bare ass before she disappears under the sheets, and my dick twitches inside my boxer briefs, as if it hasn't had enough action for one night.

My mate raises an eyebrow at me from the bed, clearly noticing the movement.

"Ready for round two so soon?" she teases.

"Hey, I'm ready to go whenever my mate needs me," I inform her, moving in close and taking her hand to kiss her knuckles. "All I need is a couple minutes to freshen up."

She shakes her head at me as I let go. I glance back when I get to the door, to see her getting comfy under the sheets.

"Don't take too long," she tells me. "Or else I'll have to get my own motor running."

I'm ninety-nine percent sure she's joking. Especially since it looks like she's starting to fall asleep when she puts her head down on the pillow.

I go into the bathroom, wincing at how cold the tiles are under my feet. I don't have to wait for my dick to behave to

use the facilities. The shock of the icy-floor under my naked toes promptly removes any sign of life from my underwear.

I'm shuddering by the time I'm brushing my teeth.

The water's not warm, either. Thankfully, there is a towel though.

Coming back into this room isn't happening unless I'm wearing my shoes.

When I'm done, I rush back to the bedroom, relaxing a bit once my feet are at least on carpet.

After closing the door, I move over to the bed.

Brooke's lying on the left side, pillows propped under her arm.

She looks sleepy, but she's still awake.

I get under the covers and move until I'm right beside her.

My head kind of falls between the pillows, but I don't care.

I need to hold her. I lean my head back slightly onto the other pillows and put my arm around her middle. She shudders and moves in closer.

"I can't believe how cold it is now that I'm not burning up with weird heat side effects."

"It's okay. I usually run kind of warm. I'll keep you warm."

"You do feel pretty warm," she murmurs, as she snuggles up against me.

I tug the covers up over her shoulder. "You can wear my suit if you want."

She laughs softly. "Nah. This is good."

It feels nice. We get warmed up together, and eventually, she dozes off to sleep in my arms.

It's been a crazy rollercoaster ride of a night, and I'm still processing everything.

My thoughts spin for a while, until I start to just feel the moment.

Holding my mate close, and listening to her slow, steady breathing, I eventually start to nod off.

We're safe here, and we're together.

Nothing else matters.

Chapter SIXTY THREE

BROOKE

I wake up with a groan, ready to reach out and slap the alarm off at my bedside, then I roll into a warm wall of nicely toned muscle, and everything that happened last night floods back to me.

I'm not at the academy. I escaped.

I got out of that hellhole with my mates in tow, and I asked Kellan to mark me last night.

Oh, yeah, and he knotted me until I was ready to pass the hell out. Can't forget that. It was kind of the best part.

My lips twitch into a smile.

Then, the sound that woke me returns.

Three loud knocks on the apartment door. Nowhere near as brash as an alarm clock, but just as urgent. I free myself from the sheets, feeling weirdly self-conscious as I climb out of bed to let my other mates into the apartment.

The T-shirt I slept in is barely long enough to cover my ass, and I don't know where the hell Kellan's socks got to, but they're no longer on my feet.

At least it's a bit warmer this morning than it was last night.

Another three knocks sound out as I reach the door.

I turn the key and pull it open, tugging my shirt down at the front.

Don't want my Beta mates to think I'm propositioning them. Well, at least not until they're inside the apartment. A girl needs to draw the line somewhere.

"Sorry, we were sleeping," I apologize as I let them in.

"We figured," Donnie tells me, giving me a wink.

"We brought breakfast," Frost adds, heading straight to the table with a couple of coffee shop bags.

"You also brought a friend," I murmur, my gaze moving over the third guy curiously.

Well, all three of them are tall with dark hair, and I already know two of them are sinfully sexy.

This guy has a completely different vibe that makes me insatiably curious.

He's hot in a more understated but ultimately more devastating way.

Killer cheekbones, semi-permanent frown, full lips that don't look familiar with smiling. His eyes are the same warm, dark chocolate shade as his hair. And his hair is a little longer than mine. The way it's cut, I can tell he's used to hiding behind it.

He's not built like he lives in a gym. He's slim and his clothes are a little too big for him.

He feels a lot less outgoing than his friends. He hasn't said a word so far, and all I can seem to do is stare at him. I don't even know where to start with talking to him. It feels like I have too many questions and none of them are anywhere close to appropriate.

His dark eyes fix on Donnie, and I can instantly tell they're together.

There's a real submissive/dominant vibe between them.

I bite down on my lip when I imagine them alone together.

Stop thinking with your pussy, Brooke. You got knotted for hours last night.

Pulling my thoughts out of the gutter, I still can't help staring at the quietly alluring new guy.

It's so strange. I didn't meet him before, but I think he was with them. Both times.

Donnie moves to my side and pushes the door gently. I only realize I was still holding it open when I see it close. *Right, the door.* I should probably be more concerned about keeping it shut, especially when I'm standing around in nothing more than a T-shirt.

He locks the door, and I give him a flash of a smile. "Thanks."

It's a little embarrassing. I spaced out completely when I laid eyes on his boyfriend.

And, if I'm honest, I'm still distracted by his presence.

There's something so compelling about him.

"You two haven't been introduced," Donnie says, making me so damn grateful that someone's taking charge. "Brooke, this is River. He helped rescue you from Goldcrest."

So, he *was* there. I give him a smile, turning my gaze back to him.

"It's nice to meet you, River," I start, losing my ability to speak when his gaze finally breaks away from Donnie, and those dark eyes lock with mine.

That's the instant that I feel it.

He's mine, just like they are.

Well, no.

He's not mine in exactly the same way they are, I realize as another soft, sweet scent rises over the familiar cherry tint of my own perfume. He feels so different from his friends because he is.

He's an Omega.

His emotions are as intense as mine are. He's feeling very possessive right now, and feeling his desires echo my own is

enough to bring in my slick.

I move a little closer, breathing in his scent as if I'm trying to get high.

God, he smells good. Like hot fudge cake. A desert I love but that I've hardly had the opportunity to really get more than a taste of.

I let out a low groan as I open my eyes.

River's still standing in front of me, gazing down at me with naked lust in his stare.

I can feel Donnie next to us, but I can't break my gaze from River to look at him.

This is too incredible. I have another true mate.

His perfume is starting to mix with mine, the blended scent becoming something truly intoxicating.

It takes all my restraint to stop myself from acting on the urge to lean in closer and lick his throat.

My teeth tingle at the thought of it.

I want to taste him, to mark him. To claim him as mine.

He seriously needs to be claimed. I can feel that desperate need bleeding off him in waves.

If Kellan wasn't sleeping, I'd be dragging River back to the bedroom to take care of him right now.

"Someone needs to drag me away from this one," I murmur. "He smells way too good."

Donnie laughs and wraps an arm around me from behind. Being pressed against his hard body really doesn't help. It only gives me a fresh set of possibilities to consider.

"Oh, God, you feel good," I tell him, feeling my slick as it starts to drench my thighs.

My heat is awakening. Of course my body thinks it's time to get ready for another good, hard knotting. Why wouldn't it when I'm surrounded by my mates? Unfortunately, the only

guy in this apartment who could ease me through another round of my heat is sound asleep in the other room right now.

“Your scent is so much stronger this morning, Cherry.”

“She’s been marked and claimed by the other Alpha,” River murmurs, the sound of his soft, sultry voice filling me with desperate, feral desires.

I wriggle in Donnie’s grasp, but he doesn’t let me go.

He’s only using one arm to restrain me, but that’s all he seems to need. His free hand strokes over Kellan’s mark on my throat, making me still and then shiver in anticipation.

“This is what’s making your scent come out like that?”

I lean back and look up at him. “If you have to keep me pinned against you, you could at least put that free hand to good use.”

Donnie gives me an amused look. “Something’s definitely gotten into you this morning.”

“No, nothing so far,” I murmur. “But it’s early ...”

“She’s in heat,” Frost says, announcing my little secret to the room as if it’s obvious.

“This is what an Omega’s heat is like?” Donnie asks.

How can he not know? He has an Omega.

“River,” I plead, making their Omega move toward me.

“River!” Donnie exclaims, stopping him in his tracks.

He blinks at us and frowns at Donnie. “She’s our mate. We should take care of her.”

“The other Alpha has marked her,” Donnie reminds him quietly.

Other Alpha? I open my mouth to ask what he’s talking about, and then the first pang of pain makes me pitch forward in Donnie’s grasp. I let out a low groan.

“Fuck, it hurts. It hurts so fucking much ...”

“I’ll take you to your Alpha,” Donnie tells me, his voice soft.

“Don’t ...” I start, gasping in a breath as the ache deepens and another burst of pain hits me hard.

I pull away when he tries to lift me up. River captures me in his arms, and I rest my head on his shoulder, trying to concentrate on my breathing.

I don’t want them to leave me with Kellan, I want them to stay.

They’re all my mates. I don’t want to go through this heat without them.

I just can’t get the words out while my heat is punishing me for not immediately impaling myself on an Alpha’s knot the second it started to make my skin warm.

River touches my face, his hand cool on my flushed skin.

“Is it okay if I touch your stomach?” he asks.

He’s using his touch to calm me. My breathing feels less shaky already.

“You can touch me anywhere,” I tell him.

He lifts my shirt up and places a hand on my skin right where it hurts most.

“River—” Donnie starts, cutting off when his mate lifts his gaze from mine to shake his head.

River looks back at me, and I stare at him, barely believing what I’m feeling.

An Omega’s touch can be used to calm their mate or mates. I’ve never heard of it being used to ease pain, but that’s what seems to be happening. The ache doesn’t vanish completely, but it dials down to a manageable roar.

“How did you do that?” I ask.

“It might not last,” he tells me, not moving his hand. “An Omega’s heat is tied into emotional bonds, so it’s possible to calm the pain with touch.”

“I’m impressed.” I’m also finding it incredibly difficult to move away from him.

Our combined scents create one hell of a perfect blend.

It has me desperate to make a nest.

The only trouble is that would mean a home. This apartment is temporary, and all of us know that. I don’t know where we’re going to live permanently. I don’t know where our nest will be.

“You’re feeling better?” Donnie asks.

“As long as River’s touching me, I think I’ll be okay.”

I’m starting to feel really good again, now that the ache is less powerful. The desire I have burning inside me is ready to be released. I move my head back from River’s shoulder, just enough to gaze at his throat. His hair is obscuring some of the skin, but I can’t find a mark there when I brush it back.

“We should wake the other Alpha,” Donnie mutters, capturing my attention.

I clear my throat and straighten up, turning slightly to look at him. “Why do you keep calling Kellan the other Alpha? As if there’s ... Oh my God. That’s why Frost feels like an Alpha.”

The guy who looks like he was carved out of stone to resemble a powerful deity is an Alpha.

I feel a little stupid for not piecing it together sooner. Alphas don’t usually take the same types of jobs that Betas do, but that doesn’t mean they can’t ever.

“Most people assume he’s a Beta,” Donnie tells me. “That’s kind of how he likes it.”

I look at Frost over River’s shoulder. He’s an Alpha. He has a knot, and if River’s one of his mates, then he even knows how to use it.

“I thought he was when we met, but I couldn’t be sure. Then I perfumed, and all I could really think about was how much I wanted to climb all over him.”

River's lips twitch at that little reveal. Donnie releases a filthy, little chuckle. Frost just stands there, his icy-blue eyes fixed on me as I brush River's hair back on the other side of his throat. I think he's transfixed by us both, by our scents or how we look together. He's full of desire, but warmer feelings of love and adoration are under the surface of his lust.

I run my gaze over River's throat. His skin is completely unmarked. I don't understand.

"I'm sorry that I took Kellan's mark before I spoke with you," I tell Frost. "If I'd been thinking clearly, and if I'd known for sure you were an Alpha, I would have waited."

"You went into heat," Frost responds. "I understand."

I smile at him. "I'm glad it's not an issue, but I don't think you completely understand. I would have claimed Kellan and asked for his mark, heat or no heat. I was at the academy for six years. I played around with boys, and I'm way beyond ready for real men who want true mate bonds."

"Six years," Donnie mutters, letting out a low whistle. "How the fuck did you survive?"

"Honestly? I played the part of the perfect Omega so well even I started to believe it. I almost lost myself in that place. If I'd stayed, I would have had to marry someone I didn't even like. You have no idea the gift it was to stumble across true mates by chance. It made me realize something better was waiting for me out in the real world, and if I could just escape, I could have everything I ever needed."

"You're safe now," River murmurs. "We've got you."

"I feel safe now," I admit, "but I'll feel even safer once we're a pack."

Donnie sucks in a breath. "You want us to claim you? You want Frost's mark?"

I nod, keeping my gaze on Frost. "I don't want to rush any of you, but I'd like for all of you to be there through my heat. I know it's fast, but I don't have any doubts. I've waited long enough to be free of Goldcrest and make my own choices, and I know what I want."

It honestly feels like I just dropped a bomb in the room, inviting three men I barely know to commit to me as their mate, to adore and protect for the rest of their lives. Of course, it's also kind of crazy that I'm so damn ready to do the same for them, with zero reservations.

River gives me a slow nod, but I think both he and Donnie are waiting to follow their Alpha's lead.

This is Frost's decision, because he's the one who'll be marking me.

He feels a little conflicted. The lust and warmer feelings are still there, but there's something else now, something I can't quite identify.

Disappointment rises in me at the thought of his rejection. He already tried to reject me before, the night we met. The truth hits me hard. He could tell I was his, and he didn't want me.

It looks like that hasn't changed after all.

"She's ours," River turns his head to tell his Alpha. "All of ours."

The hint of conflict in Frost's emotions vanishes instantly.

His expression relaxes. *Oh. Oh, my God.* He was worried about upsetting River. That's why he tried to reject me before!

"We're ready, too," Frost tells me.

"Fucking hell yes!" Donnie exclaims.

"We are," River tells me, as if he knows I need to hear it from him.

I can already tell our connection is going to be extra special.

I smile. "I think you can risk moving your hand."

He moves it lower, surprising me when his fingers skim over my clit. I open my legs up, moving my arms around his neck and curling my fingers into the ends of his hair.

I can feel Donnie moving behind me, before a hand slides over my pussy from behind, fingers dipping inside quickly enough and forcefully enough to make me gasp.

“Too rough?” Donnie asks, as he pushes my hair off my neck and kisses Kellan’s mark.

“No,” I whisper. “It feels good.”

River’s fingers rub over my swollen clit while Donnie fucks me with his hand.

These guys really know how to make a girl feel good.

Frost is watching, so I lean back and strip slowly out of my shirt.

River’s fingers disappear from my clit, and I’m about to let out a little huff of annoyance when I feel his tongue replace his hand a second later. *Oh my God. That feels even better.*

I drop my shirt to the floor and lean back into Donnie. He’s using my slick to get as many of his thick fingers into me as possible, and the sensation is unbelievable. He uses his other hand to hold me steady against him while he kisses my throat.

I run a hand over River’s head, ruffling his hair as his efforts start to push me over the edge.

Frost takes his shirt off, and I stare at his impressive body as he starts to get naked for me.

Donnie fucks me a little harder, four fingers thrusting into me.

River rolls his tongue over my clit, and then sucks it into his mouth.

Oh, God. I’m going to come. I gasp out a breath as that climax hits me.

My body tenses, back arching against Donnie, clit thrust harder into River’s mouth.

I feel so damn good, but it’s not enough. That horrible ache inside my pussy is getting harder to handle.

My heat needs something more. I need Alpha cock, and I need it right fucking now.

Chapter

SIXTY

FOUR

FROST

This woman is trouble with a capital T. She's beautiful, and she's sexy, and she wants all three of us in her life and in her bed, no questions asked. It's too damn good to be true. The way River reacted to her, the spark between them ... That's what makes me say yes to everything she's asking.

I can't rely on my instincts. They're not working when it comes to Brooke. I'm blinded by how much I want to claim her, how much I want to see my mark on her pretty throat.

It pisses me off that the other Alpha marked her first.

I don't care that he claimed her, but I'm the pack leader here. He's a rogue element, tied to her but not to us. I don't see where he fits in. Truth is, he might only ever have a connection to her.

That bothers me. Pack comes first. Outsiders don't ever seem to understand that.

River gets up from in front of Brooke, taking off his shirt, and opening his pants.

Brooke is still catching her breath, her eyes unfocused as I approach.

The sight of her slender, flushed body makes my cock weep pre-cum.

Her tits bounce with every shaky breath, her nipples sticking out sharply, her flat stomach leads down to a waxed-

bare, slick-coated sex and shapely thighs made wet with a sheen of arousal.

The desire to make her mine is rapidly becoming a desperate need.

“Is my mate ready to be claimed?”

Donnie is now sucking on the fingers of the hand he had inside her, his other arm still holding her up on legs that are trembling from the climax my mates just gifted our pack’s newest member.

“Fuck, you taste good, Cherry.”

She smiles up at him before she looks back at me.

There’s a hint of trepidation in her eyes as she meets my steady gaze.

She’s an Omega. She can sense the uncertainty that’s lingering in me.

River can always tell when something’s bothering me. He doesn’t say a word, but I see it in his eyes.

Brooke has that same razor-sharp perception of emotional states.

I’m going to have to make an admission or two before she’s ready to do this.

I look at Donnie, and he gently lets go of her, giving her time to steady herself before he releases his grasp completely.

She hugs herself as she looks me over, appraising and appreciating.

Her mind is a little clouded right now. Heats are supposed to be intense.

She’s craving Alpha cock, and I’m standing in front of her with exactly what she needs.

Still, she isn’t telling me she’s ready.

And that’s on me.

“I have no doubts about you,” I tell her. “I knew you were mine the moment I saw you, and I only hesitated then because

of River. And I'm only having mixed feelings now because of your other Alpha."

"Kellan," she says, her eyes lighting up as she tells me his name.

"Right. Kellan. He's not pack. We're pack." I gesture to my pack mates.

Her eyes widen, and I glance back to see Donnie's naked, and he's sinking to his knees in front of River, clearly getting ready to worship our mate's cock with his mouth.

She looks back at me. "I like that you're pack."

I can't help but smile. "I thought you might. What about Kellan?"

"What about ... Oh." She nods. "I don't know."

"That's all that's worrying me. It doesn't mean I don't want to claim you. I do. It just might have been good if we could have had a chance to talk about it first. All of us, together."

"We can still talk," she says, putting her arms around me. "After. This is fated, Frost. We're meant to be together. You're not supposed to question fate."

She's right. I'm questioning fate's plan. I let out a laugh.

Rising onto the tips of her toes, she kisses the side of my throat.

"Now stop trying to vex the universe and just come knot your mate."

"Yes, my mate," I answer her, releasing my worries and lifting her off her feet.

I bring her to the couch and lay her down, perfectly positioned to watch my pack mates play while we claim each other. Her eyes light up as she turns her head slightly, and River lets out a gasp.

Donnie can deep throat, and it's always fun to watch.

I move between Brooke's legs, and she looks up at me.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

She smiles wryly at me. “Are you?”

I give her my answer in the form of a thrust, positioning my cock so well at her entrance that it glides right in up to the hilt.

She lets out a gasp. “Maybe I wasn’t ready ...”

“Too late,” I tell her, waiting to let my cock swell.

She digs her fingers into my shoulders, and I’m surprised to realize she doesn’t have long nails.

I didn’t spend much time looking at her hands, I guess.

“Well?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Well?” I repeat, hiding a smirk.

“You promised me a knot, Frost, and all I’ve got so far is a regular, big, fat cock.”

“Maybe you’ll have to beg for my knot to make my dick swell,” I tease her, thrusting a little bit without the knot. I could probably fuck her without it all the way to completion, if she wasn’t in heat, and it wasn’t taking every bit of my willpower right now.

She smiles up at me. “You think I don’t know some Alphas like to play dirty like that?”

Her pussy clenches around me so tight that for a second I think I’ve come.

I gasp at her as my cock starts to swell.

“Omegas control knots,” she tells me sweetly. “Alphas can try.”

I don’t bother to try. She’s already shown me it was a dumb way to tease her while she desperately needs the swollen version of my cock locked inside her. I’m trying way too hard, and it’s making me look like an asshole. I need to relax, let her set the pace.

“This Alpha’s going to leave his knot at his Omega’s mercy.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Chapter

SIXTY

FIVE

BROOKE

Frost makes a much better lover when he's not psyching himself out, worrying over things he can't control. I gave him a little bit of Omega calm after he tried to impress me with his control over his knot. I wasn't sure it would work while I'm in heat, but he relaxes pretty quickly, and once that happens, he becomes focused and attentive.

He makes me come with his knotted cock twice, listening to my moans and speeding up or slowing down accordingly. My heat is still going strong, but he feels like he's flagging a little bit.

I can't reach his mouth to kiss while he's inside me, and he won't be able to mark me, but I run my hands over his chest and realize quickly that his nipples are an erogenous zone. Lucky for him, I can reach those with my mouth.

He stills inside me the second I start to lick and suck his right nipple, his body going tense.

"Oh, fuck," he mutters.

I add in teeth, chewing lightly around the sensitive point.

"Oh, fucking hell," he whispers.

He thrusts jerkily, and a few seconds later, I feel him coming inside me before he starts to groan out his pleasure above my head.

I let his nipple go, and he straightens, which just so happens to also move his nipples out of my reach. At least now we can see each other, I guess.

“Talk about dirty tricks,” he murmurs, gazing down at me. “You’re the one who’s supposed to be coming, Brooke.”

“You’re mad that I made you come?”

“He can be kind of a dick like that,” Donnie tells me, appearing at our side.

I reach out to stroke the side of his face. His lightly stubbled skin is prickly against my palm. He closes his bright, blue eyes, leaning into the touch.

“I’m not being a dick,” Frost tells him. “I’m used to crashing out after a twelve-hour shift. That’s all.”

Right. These guys did just come off a night shift. Twelve hours is a lot. He’s probably kind of tired.

Now I feel a little guilty. They were out in the city, saving lives.

While I was sleeping next to my other Alpha.

River sits down by Donnie’s side, his gaze fixed on us. He doesn’t say a word, but he doesn’t need to. I can sense his contentment. He’s satisfied and sleepy, like his mate.

Mates, if you include Frost, but he’s not satisfied quite yet, because I’m not done with his cock, and he’s exhausted. I wish my heat would let me release him. Unfortunately, making a knot swell and making it deflate are two entirely different actions, and an Omega’s heat doesn’t help the latter happen.

“I might get through this heat faster with a little help,” I suggest, raising an eyebrow at Frost.

He smiles, knowing I’m thinking of his pack mates now that they seem to be at a loose end.

Donnie perks up immediately. “What can I do to help?”

River runs a hand over my thigh and brings his slick-coated fingers to my clit.

He starts to rub me, and Donnie kisses my lips, taking my breath away with his passion and giving me the light, chocolatey taste of River's cum at the same time.

I give Frost a little more of my calming touch, and he falls into a steady rhythm that couples with River's touches to make my heart pound harder. *Oh, God, it feels so damn good.*

I come with Donnie's tongue in my mouth, Frost's cock in my pussy, and River's hand on my clit.

The intensity of feeling having all three of them touching me pushes me over the edge of consciousness.

I sink into darkness, satisfied but not marked.

Chapter

SIXTY

SIX

FROST

Brooke comes hard, clenching around my knot as I thrust into her. The muffled moans against Donnie's lips are the last noise she makes before she goes limp under me.

River moves his hand first. He taps Donnie's arm, and our Beta releases her lips.

"What just happened?" Donnie asks, his hand going to her throat to check her pulse.

My knot deflates rapidly, releasing me from her hold. "I think she passed out."

"She did," River says. "It can happen during a heat."

He doesn't sound worried, so I try to tell myself I don't need to worry either.

It's impossible not to. She looks so vulnerable. The need to keep her safe and protected comes on strong. She'll get cold now that she's not caught up in the heat. She needs to be in bed.

"Pulse is normal. Breathing's normal," Donnie mutters.

"She's okay," River tells him. "She felt good when she passed out and she's still feeling that way."

"Okay. Can you two please move?" I ask, as I clamber down from the sofa.

They get up and move back. I pick her up and carry her to the bedroom.

The door's not all the way closed. I kick it open and take her inside.

Kellan is snoring, completely oblivious to everything that just happened in the other room.

I lay her down at his side and cover her with the sheets.

Then I step back out into the main room of the apartment and pick my shirt up off the floor.

"What's the plan?" Donnie asks, making me stop and think.

It's a good question, but the answer is complicated. The truth is I'm tired and I can barely think straight anymore. I didn't get to mark Brooke like she wanted. It's going to bother me until we get the chance to put that right.

"We're going to have to hole up here until they're awake," I tell them. "Go buy some blankets and the biggest inflatable mattress you can carry. We need some clothes for Brooke, too, and get me a new shirt. I'm giving her this one. She'll be in nesting mode and all she's got in that bed through there is the other Alpha's scent."

"Get me a new shirt, too," River tells him, handing me his.

"Okay, I'll get us all new shirts. You'll have to wait 'til I get back to give her mine."

He gets dressed quickly, not bothering with his socks.

I take the shirts through to the bedroom and lay them down on the bed over our sleeping mate.

I wish I could lay down beside her, but there isn't space, and I doubt her other guy would like that.

Sighing, I head into the kitchen where River's looking at the breakfast we brought in.

"Might as well eat it before it goes cold," he tells me, shrugging.

I decide he has a point. Maybe if we'd insisted on eating first when Brooke decided she wanted to be claimed, I would have been able to please her without overwhelming her.

Looking after her needs should be the priority from now on.

That means more than just reacting to her heat.

“Put these aside,” I tell River as I go through the contents of the bag. “We can reheat this stuff in the microwave when they wake up.”

Chapter SIXTY SEVEN

DONNIE

Fresh air is absolutely the best thing when you're tired, and cardio helps, too. I get in my usual jog on my route into the center of the city, where the stores are. It's still super early, but a few places are open twenty-four hours which is probably the single greatest thing about the city.

Oh, so you want to go shopping for pants at five a.m. and also pick up a toaster oven and some bagels afterward? No freaking problem. We'll even toss in an ugly-ass lampshade and someone shopping in their pajamas for ya, because why the hell not?

Man, the things I've bought on the way home from work. Frost would so love to clear out my room of the faux-retro junk I stockpiled before I met him, but there's no way in hell I'm getting rid of my gumball machine or my cheeseburger beanbag. I just need a Coke-can-shaped mini-fridge and my life will be complete.

At least, that's all I was really looking for before we ran into Brooke.

One last piece of junk for my collection.

Now, everything's going to change.

It's a little scary, but it's also thrilling.

I've been ready for something new for a while. Job-hopping used to feel like a hobby of mine. I'd start something

fun, get bored, move on. Up until I met Frost, that's what I was happy doing.

Then, I found out what having a true mate was like, and that settled me a bit. I didn't need to keep switching up my life to feel good. Frost helped me see things differently, he helped me focus on the good parts of the work we were doing. It kept me interested for longer than usual, and I'm glad it did, because I wouldn't have been there to help River if I'd moved on to something else.

That kept me going, but seeing River push himself to get into the same kind of work started to make me question it again. It's not the right job for an Omega, and it's definitely not what he wants. It's what he thinks we want. Even Frost can see that.

There's no denying the satisfaction we get from the work we do, but it's also pretty full-on. I don't see the EMT gig working out while Frost and I have two Omegas to care for. Even with Brooke's Alpha in the mix, it would never work.

That conversation might not be on the cards yet, but it's coming.

I find a female fashion 'emporium' that's open and head inside.

I walk around as if I know what I'm looking for, and the sales assistant ignores me. She looks like she's nursing a hangover, not even attempting to be discreet with the chain-store coffee cup she's drinking from. I feel kind of sorry for her. I remember working retail. The worst customers always come in when you've had a heavy night before.

I don't know Brooke's size, but I got a good look at her body, so I can figure it out.

I pick up a few things before I decide on the size I'm looking for, then I pick one size slightly bigger, because maybe my shopping spree will seem suspicious later if I nail it too perfectly. I mean, I doubt the hungover sales assistant will even wonder about who I'm buying the clothes for, but there's always a chance she might find me sketchy.

After picking out a couple of plain, ordinary outfits, I head over to the shoes. I checked the size of the silver heels she was wearing last night before I left the apartment. She's gonna have to be a sneakers kind of chick for a while. Can't be inconspicuous in skyscraper heels.

I pick out a couple styles in white and head over to the counter.

The sales assistant abandons her coffee and gives me a weak approximation of a smile.

"Welcome to Bella's Emporium," she greets me with an impressive and sudden jolt of enthusiasm. "Did you find everything you were looking for today?"

"Yep," I reply, getting out my wallet. "Got everything I need."

"Great!"

She doesn't look at me, she just deals with the clothes, ringing them up and bagging them as if she's not ready to pass out. The girl is doing what she needs to do to get through the day. She has zero interest in what I'm doing in here at nine in the morning buying women's clothes. I'm just another customer.

Two full bags later, she's telling me the price, and I'm handing over my one and only credit card.

I leave the store and go over the list of other items in my head as I walk down the street, trying to decide where I need to go next. I smile when I find the kind of store I'm looking for. It's one that sells basically everything. After this stop, I'm done with this trip.

Three plain, black T-shirts, a stack of sheets and pillows, and one king-sized inflatable mattress later, I'm pushing my trolley back toward the front of the super store where the cash registers are.

I pick up a foot-pump on the way to get the mattress ready quicker.

I almost forgot the damn mattress when I spotted mini fridges in one of the promotional aisles. They were sold out of the Coke can style, but they had others, and I might be tempted to come back and buy a couple.

Frost would absolutely kill me if I went back to the apartment with something that big and dumb and unnecessary. I have no desire to piss him off more. He's already starting to act like a dick.

I've never known another guy who gets so pissy when he's tired.

There should be a word for that, like there is for when someone's hungry and angry.

Hmm. Let's see. He turns into a dick when he's tired.

Anything I can make out of that is already a real word.

Maybe I could just call it getting dicked.

That would really dick him off.

I whistle lightly as I move down the aisle, tempted to go take another look at those mini fridges. I mean, I'm probably out of a job now. I really shouldn't. On the other hand, I'm not out of a job *yet*.

That's when I catch sight of Brooke's face on a TV set. I stop at the side of the TV display aisle, eyes widening as I realize she's on every screen. *Holy fucking shit.*

The TVs are muted, but no one's around. I move down that aisle and stop in front of one of the TVs, picking up the remote that's beside it. Sound would be jarring in the relative quiet of the store.

Instead, I hit the button for subtitles, and take a furtive glance around before I decide it's safe enough to stay where I am for a couple minutes.

The news channel the story's playing on is local.

Details are minimal, but as far as I can tell, they're reporting that Brooke Corvina went missing from Goldcrest Academy, and that she's a vulnerable Omega who may have

been taken advantage of. The caster is urging anyone who might have information about her whereabouts to call a hotline that's been set up by her father.

I turn the subtitles off and move along.

Getting back to the apartment sounds like a good idea right about now.

The academy administrator hasn't wasted any time. The private hotline part seems weird, but I guess the cops' hands are tied for the next day and a half. She hasn't been gone for long enough to be reported missing officially. We only have a matter of hours before the shit really starts to hit the fan.

Chapter

SIXTY

EIGHT

KELLAN

I wake up when I hear voices in the other room. I sit up quickly, before I remember where I am.

I'm not at home. I'm in an apartment in the city. One that's owned by one of Brooke's other mates.

My true mate is asleep at my side, but when I get close her scent is different.

There's something else mixed in with the cherry. She's also naked.

I get out of bed, shoving on my shirt and tugging on my pants.

Once I step out of the room and confirm it's just Brooke's other mates in the main room, I relax a little bit.

"Morning," the one called Frost mutters at me from the table.

That same scent that's Brooke but different is in the main room, too.

I button up my shirt, leaning against the wall. "I take it Brooke let you guys in earlier?"

"She did," the other guy says, giving me a nod from the floor in front of the couch where he's taking something out of a box.

He was in the back of the ambulance with me. *What the hell was his name again? Stark?*

“Is she still sleeping?” Frost asks.

I nod. “She is. I was just going to the bathroom.”

The third guy is sitting at the table with Frost. They’re all wearing black T-shirts. In fact, it kind of looks like they’re the same black T-shirts.

“Did something happen while I was sleeping?” I ask, knowing it must have.

They’ve put Brooke to bed with their shirts around her as if she started to show the desire to nest.

“We’ll talk when you get out of the bathroom,” Frost tells me.

“I’ll be there in a second.”

He nods, and I step into the bathroom, shivering a little at the cold tiles under my feet.

It’s not as bad as last night. Thankfully, it feels a bit warmer this morning.

I wash up and brush my teeth, wondering when Brooke might wake up.

It seems like her other Alpha serviced her through her heat this morning.

That doesn’t explain the change in her scent, exactly, but I’m sure it’ll all make sense once I talk to her other mates.

I check in on her when I come out the bathroom, but she’s still sound asleep.

The resting phases of her heat seem to be almost as important as the heat itself.

After closing the door, I step into the main room of the apartment, where I notice Stark is pumping up an inflatable mattress that takes up most of the living room floor, while his friends watch from the table. I join Frost and the other guy, starting to get a bad feeling that we might be stuck in this place for a while.

“What did I miss?” I ask Frost, as I crack open a can of soda.

“We’ll need to hole up here for a bit,” Frost tells me, confirming my fear. “The academy and Brooke’s father have reported her missing. It’s all over the news. The cops can’t get involved for a couple days, but we should probably pull together a plan by then.”

“Shit.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

“If you knew about Brooke’s father, you wouldn’t be either.”

“What can you tell us?”

Chapter

SIXTY

NINE

FROST

Kellan knows enough about Brooke's father to make it clear he's not a man people mess with. I knew Brooke was trouble, but I didn't expect this. It would be bad enough if Goldcrest were sending their security teams into the city. It sounds like Warren Corvina's used to having complete control over Brooke's life. I doubt a man like that will just accept it when if she tells him she's found her mates.

"The academy would have to accept Brooke's choice if we stepped forward," Kellan says. "We could get them off our backs if Brooke agrees to doing that. I don't know what we do about her father."

I appreciate honesty, but it's not the news I want to hear in this situation.

"If we found out what he was doing ..." Donnie starts, still getting our bed pumped up.

"I've been trying. He's smart. Cops would have a hard time finding a way to get at him."

"You really think the academy would let Brooke go if you spoke to them?" I ask Kellan.

He nods slowly. "They have a set process. I was approved to visit Goldcrest, so they would be going against their own rules if they disallowed me to be Brooke's mate. Technically, we should have filed statements agreeing to become mated that the academy's administrator would have to sign off on.

Considering we've already claimed each other, and she's wearing my mark, it should be treated like any other premature bond."

"And how do they treat a 'premature bond'?"

"From what I've read, they would separate us for twenty-four hours to test the bond's strength, and then we'd be allowed to file the official paperwork. There might be a fine involved."

"When you say you'd be separated, what exactly does that mean?"

"In previous cases, both parties were held in separate rooms at the academy."

"Wouldn't you need to go through all that shit, too?" Donnie asks, raising an eyebrow at me. "You're both Alphas, and you've both claimed her."

I look at Kellan, but I already know the answer, and it doesn't exactly endear me to him.

"It might be smarter to let them think it's just me she's mated to," Kellan says. "If you hold off on marking her, they won't know any differently. It'll keep you under the radar, if they can't link her to you."

"You want me to hold off on marking my mate?" The thought infuriates me.

"Hey, I don't like the idea of going to the academy, but I don't see an alternative. I'm not asking you to give up your claim."

"Maybe we should all slow down and give it a bit more thought," Donnie says, as he finishes up with the inflatable mattress. "We already have enemies out there. Does it really make sense to look for them in here, too?"

"We shouldn't talk about it until Brooke's awake," River murmurs, giving me a shrug as he leans back in his seat.

Shit. Maybe I should hold off on marking her.

River doesn't have a proper mark yet.

I don't know how he'll feel if I mark our new mate's throat first.

If our positions were reversed, I wouldn't like it one little bit.

"You're right," Kellan agrees. "She should be a part of this."

"If she can even be around us without going into heat," I add, making everyone smile.

Donnie picks up the bags he got from the clothes store. "I should leave these in the room with her. She might be a bit less bothered by her heat if she's dressed."

He disappears into the bedroom.

"She'll need to eat something when she wakes up. She didn't have any breakfast." River gets up, clearing away the empty coffee containers into one of the empty bags.

"We should have brought more food," I realize out loud.

"The nearest store's a pharmacy," Kellan tells me.

"There's a mini supermarket around the corner," I inform him.

"Right. You used to live here."

Donnie comes back out of the bedroom, closing the door quietly.

"It'll be faster if I go," I decide, getting to my feet. "Donnie, can you get the electrics started? We'll want to use the refrigerator if we're gonna be here a couple days."

Chapter

SEVENTY

KELLAN

A couple days in a tiny apartment with my true mate and three strange men. What could possibly go wrong? Well, I've already pissed off the pack Alpha and I've barely been awake five minutes.

"Don't let Frost get to you," Donnie tells me as he messes around with the meter, feeding it full rolls of quarters. "He's always getting dicked about something. Back me up, River."

"Getting dicked?" I ask.

"When he's tired, he turns into a dick."

"I wouldn't call it getting dicked," River says, shaking his head.

"Well, I would." Donnie shrugs and slaps the side of the meter.

The sudden hum of electricity as the overhead lights flicker on makes me blink.

"That's how that thing works?"

"It's probably not how it's *meant* to work," Donnie admits, shrugging. "But, hey, you work with what you've got. Can't believe Frost didn't tell you. Well, actually, I can. He's been getting dicked a lot lately."

"And that's why I wouldn't call it that," River murmurs.

"Don't pretend you don't love my double innuendos," Donnie says, catching River in a hug from behind and kissing

his neck.

River laughs, clearly used to Donnie's behavior. "I like them when they're appropriate."

Oh. Okay. These two are a thing. And apparently watching a couple of men be playful with each other is enough to make my dick twitch. That's definitely new.

I try to wipe the shock from my face before they turn around.

A rush of blood to my cheeks is slightly preferable to walking around with a raging hard-on, but I'd rather not have to explain either reaction while I'm still trying to understand what I'm feeling.

Picking up my soda, I take a long gulp, spilling a bit down the side of my mouth in my haste.

I set the can down and wipe my face. I've stained my shirt. *Damn it.*

I'll probably be forced to buy a new set of clothes to go to the academy anyway.

They're all about appearances. I wouldn't want to take the risk of turning up in normal clothes.

"You should probably try to get that out before it stains," Donnie tells me.

"I might do that if I knew how."

"Let me check under the sink."

He moves to the counter and opens the cupboard.

"We're in luck." He waves a full container of dish soap at me, before he sets it down at the side of the sink. "Hand it over."

"I kind of don't have anything else to wear," I tell him.

"Well, you either want the stain out of your pristine Armani shirt, or you're too rich to care."

I unbutton it, not sure it's a great idea but hating the thought of ruining it when I just got it.

“Interesting choice, Mr. Rich.”

I laugh. “I’m not really rich.”

“You were approved for entry to the country’s most elite academy, weren’t you?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“That makes you rich. I’m gonna assume you’re not a billionaire if you don’t think you’re rich, but believe me, you’re loaded.”

I take the shirt off and hand him it, glad my body’s partly hidden behind the table.

He’s pretty built, and Frost is even more jacked. Donnie takes the shirt, and I can feel his gaze burning my skin for a few seconds while I pretend not to notice.

I wait for the Beta who thinks he should have been an Alpha comment, but it doesn’t come.

“If you wanna know how to get a soda stain out, this is how,” he tells me, as he runs the tap and starts filling the sink. “Soak in hot water. Wash with dish soap. It’s easy, and as long as you catch it fast, it works every time.”

I raise an eyebrow at River. He shrugs at me.

“Did you learn that from a commercial audition?” River asks, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

Donnie laughs. “Nah. My grandma insisted on teaching me every little household tip she knew when I was a kid. It’s not the first time this one’s come in handy.”

“Well, thanks,” I tell him.

“River, will you text Frost and ask him to bring back a shirt for Kellan? This might take a while to dry once the stain’s out.”

“Doing it now,” River says, taking his phone out of his pocket.

“That would be awesome, thanks.”

River shrugs like it’s not a big deal.

I guess it's not. These are decent guys. Maybe it's not going to be so hard to be with them.

Maybe Donnie's right that Frost's just kind of a dick because he's tired.

I can only hope.

Chapter

SEVENTY

ONE

FROST

The supermarket is pretty small, but I pick out food that should last a couple days between the five of us. I find a market stall when I leave the store, and pick up a cheap shirt for the other Alpha who apparently stained his designer shirt the minute I left the apartment.

It's getting close to midday as I head back there, well past the time where I'm usually in bed asleep.

My phone starts to ring, and I roll my eyes as I bring it out of my pocket.

I'm ready to tell Donnie it's too late for any other last-minute requests, when I see Doctor Black's number on the screen. I've already accepted the call, but my heart drops into my stomach as I answer it.

"Hey, Doctor Black, how can I help you out?"

"I'll keep this short, Michael. You took the call to Goldcrest Academy last night, is that correct?"

Shit. I knew this was coming, and I'm still not prepared for it. "We did."

"And you assessed the patient at the scene, determining she was not in need of medical aid before leaving?"

"That's right."

"I'm afraid that patient has gone missing, and the administrator of Goldcrest is claiming that the patient was last

seen being led into the ambulance by your partner and a new recruit you're currently training."

"Okay," I murmur.

"The hospital has no choice but to put you on suspension while this matter is investigated further. I hope you understand this wasn't an easy decision, but we have to follow the rules."

"I understand."

"You'll hear from me when there's an update."

"Of course."

She hangs up without another word, probably afraid she might say something she shouldn't.

I expect Donnie and River are about to get the same call.

I can't say it won't sting, but my love for the work has been waning.

The hours are grueling, and the salary's low.

I probably should have been thinking about making a change before now, but I guess then we wouldn't have met Brooke and she might still be at the academy, trapped by her father's plans and Goldcrest's rules.

Whatever it costs us, I don't regret saving her.

But I know I'll regret it if I don't do everything in my power to make sure she's safe from that damned academy and her psychotic, control-freak father.

If the best way to play this is to avoid marking her until we clear the finish line, I can handle it.

Chapter

SEVENTY

TWO

BROOKE

When I wake up in bed for the second time in the same day, it feels kind of weird, and it's especially strange to wake up alone, when I have so many mates, some of whom were already pretty cranky from a lack of sleep before this stupid heat even made me pass the hell out.

I sit up, and I find three T-shirts on the bed in front of me.

That is so damn cute. They're helping me with my urge to nest.

I hug the shirts in close, breathing in their combined scents.

Then, I start to wonder what they're wearing if their shirts are on my bed. My lips twitch at the thought of my mates hanging around topless in the other room.

My body doesn't immediately react to that sexy image, but I'm pretty hungry now, so my heat will probably wait for that need to be taken care of before it rushes forth again.

I push back the covers and instantly regret it. I'm naked, and it's way too cold to wander around without clothes. I pick up River's black T-shirt and slip it over my head. It covers a little more than the green T-shirt Kellan got me, wherever that disappeared to, and River's scent is stronger because of his perfume so I don't need to worry about losing his scent when I inevitably need to sleep again.

Finally, not quite so naked, I get out of bed quickly and dart to the door.

Okay, that warmed me up a little.

I open the door and step out into the main room, where I find one topless mate and two fully dressed all hanging out in the kitchen.

I blink at Kellan as he turns to me. “Okay, I’m confused. I’m wearing River’s shirt right now, and Donnie’s is on my bed, and you’re the one who’s topless?”

Donnie laughs. “He spilled soda on his shirt. It’s gonna take a while to dry.”

He’s leaning against the sink, and he nods to the radiator on the wall where Kellan’s shirt is hanging to dry. River stands up and puts his arms around me from behind.

“I like you in my shirt,” he murmurs, close to my ear.

I bite down on my bottom lip at the sweetly sexy sound of his voice.

Maybe my heat could be tempted out before I’ve eaten after all.

It certainly feels like it as my body starts to react to his gentle touch.

I feel Kellan’s gaze burning through me, and I let out a soft gasp of surprise at the intensity of his stare. He’s incredibly turned on just watching River stroke a hand lightly over my stomach.

My slick starts to come in as River moves his hand lower. He can feel what I’m feeling, he knows I’m starting to get aroused. He has a little time before he needs to hand me off to my Alpha.

I’m wet when River’s hand reaches between my legs. He plunges two fingers inside me, and I melt back against him, breath quickening as he starts to slowly remove them, before he pushes them back inside. I rock against him, moving in time with his fingers.

My gaze fixes on my Alpha, and I can hardly believe the naked desire in his eyes as he watches River touch me. There's no hint of jealousy, no irritation or anger. He really, truly is the perfect Alpha.

"We're supposed to be feeding our mate, River," Donnie remarks, his protest weak.

I can tell by the way he's watching us that he couldn't care less about food right now.

"If you really need to put something in my mouth, I'd rather it wasn't food," I murmur.

Kellan's eyes widen, his cheeks flushing red.

He'd like that. I don't think he considered what this might be like, letting me have all these mates. I'm not sure he realized how much he'd enjoy it.

"Don't tempt me, Cherry," Donnie murmurs, undoing his pants and letting them drop to the floor with his underwear. "There's something I'd much rather slip past those pretty lips."

Kellan sucks in a breath when he turns to Donnie.

My wild Beta is running his fingers up and down his thick cock, rocking back against the countertop excitedly. I can see a flash of the stripper he once was in his movements, and it only makes me want to sink down onto his cock.

"There's only one cock you need right now," River murmurs. "Once I make you come, he should take you off my hands."

Kellan turns back to me and quickly pushes out of his clothes, staying on the chair but facing me and watching me with River.

"I think you should ask Alpha Kellan to take me off your hands," I tell River, feeling his arousal swelling alongside my own and knowing he's meant to be with Kellan just as much as I am.

River's fingers move up to my clit, where they move around in slow circles.

I hear the way his breath shakes before he raises his voice, “Alpha Kellan ...”

Oh, God, I’m so damn close to coming.

Kellan’s dark eyes rise to meet River’s, and I swear, I see the moment when they both realize what I already have. They’re mates.

River’s perfume gets stronger.

Mine reacts to his, and they start to blend again.

“Get your knot ready,” River whispers, before he turns me around and lifts me up, only to lower me down on Kellan’s cock. He kneels in front of me and kisses my lips gently.

Kellan’s knot swells, locking us together as his arms hold me close.

I hear him inhale deeply behind me, an unfiltered moan escaping his lips.

I can tell River wants to stay close. He just discovered Kellan’s his mate as well as mine. I want him close, too. I gaze across the table at Donnie when River breaks our soft kiss.

He’s leaning back against the counter, spent, cum dripping down his defined abs. He looks like he just ran a marathon, he’s so breathless and he’s starting to sweat. Even so, he’s still got his cock in his hand, and he’s gripping it tightly as he watches us.

River removes his shirt from me, and I raise my arms to let him do it.

He’s getting ready to move away, and I don’t want that.

I grab the front of his shirt, twisting it in my fingers to tug him in close.

“I want my mouth filled while I ride our Alpha’s cock,” I tell him.

He closes his eyes briefly, and nods slowly.

I let him go, and he backs up to undress.

Kellan’s knot gets thicker as River strips.

I can tell he's not having an easy time with this unexpected attraction, but he's so turned on I know what he wants, even if he doesn't yet. He'll figure it out. He's smart.

I rock back on him until River's ready. Then, I tell our Omega to sit on the edge of the table.

Kellan moves us around a little, and I tug River forward a bit.

Donnie finally moves closer. He sits next to Kellan, but not close enough to touch. I sense he's hanging back as a spectator. He feels good about what's happening, but he's also starting to feel a bit cautious.

I know he must feel something happening between his mate and mine.

It's impossible not to feel it.

Though maybe it's a little more obvious for me while my Alpha has me impaled on his knot and it's going kind of crazy inside me, as if it's trying to get bigger so it can handle two Omegas at once.

Leaning forward, I start running my tongue over River's cock.

Kellan lets out a deep moan at the same time as River, which makes Donnie mumble a string of curse words beside us. He can definitely feel what's going on.

River stretches back on the table, and I stroke his length gently in my fingers while I run my tongue over his wet, decadent, dessert-flavored tip. If his cum tastes this good, he'll have me on my knees begging to giving him head every damn day.

I start taking more and more of his shaft into my mouth slowly, getting him nicely lubricated to take him deeper. His breathing hitches while I work on him, his perfume deepening when he's getting close to climaxing. I might not quite be deep-throating him, but he's as turned on as he was when I saw Donnie go down on him this morning.

Apparently, Frost's the only one who's grouchy when he's tired.

River's been quiet, but he hasn't been afraid to make a move.

Donnie's been his usual brash and unapologetic self.

I'm already falling deep for them all.

If anyone tried to part us, I'd raise hell to get back to them.

They belong to me, and I'll protect them with everything that I've got.

River's breath hitches again, and I feel his arousal peak right before his climax hits. I close my lips tightly around his cock as his cum hits my tongue, the insanely perfect taste making me moan.

I start to come around Kellan's knot while River's cock is still in my mouth, swallowing his cum after I've hit my peak hard.

"Fuck, Brooke," Kellan murmurs, rocking harder into me. "You're so fucking tight."

He's ready to come, so I clench his knot a little bit harder.

He sucks in a breath, and I feel it when he comes inside me.

My pussy releases his knot, content for now, probably because my stomach is growling for actual food. I get to my feet and look for my shirt. Well, River's shirt, really.

"That's it?" Kellan asks.

"I guess," I tell him, shrugging. "I don't control the heat. The heat controls me."

"Huh," he murmurs, his gaze moving to River who's just sitting up on the table.

"Maybe someone else is in the mood to keep going," I tell him, "but I could really use a sandwich, or you know, whatever we have."

Donnie nods at me, getting up and throwing his shirt back on. "I'll take lunch duty."

I guess it's up to Kellan and River now.

Chapter

SEVENTY

THREE

RIVER

I'm dazed as I sit upright on the table, completely thrown by the idea that I might have a second Alpha. I was shocked when Frost wanted me, even if it felt like a true mating, I could hardly believe it when he claimed me. Donnie was more vocal about everything from the start. I knew exactly what he wanted, and it helped me accept Frost when I had doubts that he really wanted me.

This is completely different. Brooke accepted me the same way Donnie did, saying yes right from the start and showing me how sure she was.

When I look at Kellan now, he seems as shocked as I am.

I get down from the table and pick up my clothes. "If you want to talk, we could go into the bedroom."

He nods slowly. "That might be a good idea."

He gets dressed, so I do the same.

Brooke and Donnie are at the counter, checking through what's left of the food.

I head to the bedroom when Kellan seems ready, trying not to let my nerves get the best of me.

It makes me a little shaky when he closes the door, but that's my issue, not his.

He doesn't know me yet. All he knows is we both felt a fated bond.

“I don’t know what you’re feeling about this,” he starts, putting me at ease by taking charge. “I barely know what I’m feeling, and that’s no reflection on you. I just ... For ten years, I thought Brooke was it. My one true mate. The woman I’d marry, and you probably know the rest. I didn’t expect any of this. It’s a lot to take in.”

“Brooke is amazing,” I tell him, smiling. “I wasn’t expecting her. I wasn’t expecting you, either.”

I’m a little disappointed, but I’ve already got more than I ever asked for. It’s not going to kill me if he can’t accept our bond. It’s just going to feel bad.

He lets out a relieved breath. “So, you’re okay if we take this slow?”

“Slow?” I ask. *Is he just asking for time?*

He leans in and kisses me, making my heart skip a beat.

His hand is suddenly on the front of my shirt like Brooke’s was before.

I lose my breath as his tongue sweeps into my mouth.

When he breaks the kiss, I can’t do much more than stare back at him.

He releases my shirt from his grasp and smooths the fabric down before he looks back up at me.

“I want this bond with you, River,” he tells me. “But this is all really new to me. I just need a little time to process it.”

He’s overwhelmed. I guess this situation might feel that way if he was only looking for a relationship with one other person involved. He’s not just telling me what I want to hear. He’s in shock about his feelings.

“It took me a while to wrap my head around having two mates,” I admit.

“I think I’m still in shock,” he says.

“Well, you won’t be the only one once Frost gets back. I don’t think he expected you to have a connection with anyone but Brooke, either.”

He might not be pleased, but I'll take any reaction with a pinch of salt since he's going to be an insufferable dick until he's slept no matter what.

"We could go eat now," I suggest, kind of keen to get out of the enclosed space.

Rationally, I know Kellan's not going to hurt me, but the closed door unnerves me.

It's different at home. We have rules there. I feel safe.

Kellan and Brooke don't know about that.

I'll have to tell them at some point, but I'd prefer it to be when I'm fully comfortable with them both.

That might take a while if Kellan wants to take things slow.

"That sounds like a great idea."

Kellan opens the door for me.

I give him a smile as I walk out, but only because he's so genuine. I take in a few slow, deep breaths as I step back into the main room of the apartment. Most people have less pleasant triggers. I have triggers for a bunch of things that look sweet but can have malicious undertones.

Like having the door held open for me, because I'm being invited into a room where I'll be beaten for something I did that my boyfriend didn't like. My ex was constantly spouting crap about finding a way to get me to obey him. I always felt like his outbursts were my fault. I was never doing anything well enough. It took a damn long time to realize he was the problem.

Almost too long. If Donnie and Frost hadn't gotten to me when they did, I would have died that night. Another minute, and I wouldn't have made it. They saved me months before they accepted me as their mate. They're my everything, and I don't take that lightly.

I can tell Brooke needs us like we need her, and she's becoming a part of us.

I don't know about Kellan yet, it's way too soon to tell.

Chapter SEVENTY FOUR

KELLAN

I sit back down at the table in a daze. I went back there to talk to River, not to manhandle him into a kiss. Instinct got the better of me, and I almost took it further. He's my mate. I feel it as strongly as I felt it for Brooke. I just can't seem to get past the shock of the discovery.

A phone starts ringing and I check my pocket.

Right. Yeah. It's not mine. I turned mine off when the academy was calling. Last night.

I switch it back on as Donnie answers his, next to the counter.

He doesn't say much on his call.

Brooke is standing next to him eating a muffin by picking chunks of it off as it sits on the counter and putting them into her mouth a piece at a time. She's sipping on the only other can of her favorite soda.

My phone takes a few seconds to start dinging with messages and missed calls.

Brooke glances over at me with her eyebrow raised.

I shrug helplessly as the dings go on.

They're just stopping when Donnie gets off his call. "Heads up, River. We're getting suspended."

Brooke's eyes widen. She sets her can down and taps Donnie's arm. "What?"

“It’s no biggie,” Donnie says, putting his phone away.

“Yeah, I was gonna quit,” River confesses, avoiding Donnie’s startled gaze by glancing my way.

“You were?” Brooke asks, frowning. She shakes her head. “Wait. This is because of me, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t mean we’ll be fired,” Donnie says. “And if it does, I was ready for a change. I usually change jobs a lot. Like every couple years or so.”

Brooke doesn’t look too happy, and I can guess why. She didn’t think her escape would cost them anything. But the call to 911 would have been recorded. If the academy contacted the hospital, which clearly they did, then there’s going to be an investigation.

“Sorry,” I tell them. “If it helps, I can call and tell them this was my plan to get Brooke out of the academy because I wasn’t sure they’d accept my submission to be her mate.”

“That could work,” Brooke says, pointing at Donnie. “You could tell them you dropped us off on the way to your next call when you realized I wasn’t hurt.”

Donnie sighs. “We’re not being asked for anything yet, so I don’t know what we can tell them.”

River’s phone starts to ring. He brings it out of his pocket and answers the call quietly.

His call goes pretty much like Donnie’s did. He says very little and hangs up quickly.

Brooke’s frowning, staring at the wall when I turn back to her. She snaps out of her thoughts and locks gazes with me, her lips pursed. “We should go to the academy. We should have gone to them this morning. If we start the process now, we could be done with all this shit in a couple days.”

River shakes his head. “No. You don’t feel sure. You’re afraid to go back there.”

“I’ve hurt you,” she says, shaking her head. “I can’t stand the thought of that. My dumb plan is going to cause you to lose your jobs.”

Donnie puts his arm around her as she starts to tear up.

“I honestly don’t want to be an EMT anymore, Brooke.”

“I never wanted to be one,” River admits, looking at the table. “I haven’t found the thing I want to do. I just thought it would be easier to do something that made me feel closer to Donnie and Frost.”

“Are you serious?” Donnie asks him.

River nods. “It’s stupid, but I ... We should talk about it later.”

He runs a hand through his hair.

“We have to go to Goldcrest,” Brooke insists.

“We don’t have to,” I tell her. “I can go. I can let them talk to you, without bringing you in.”

“Would that work?” Donnie asks.

I shrug. “It’s worth a try. If they keep me there, to separate us, then she has Frost out here for her heat and we don’t even need to mention that she’s in heat.”

“Kellan, I don’t know.” Brooke doesn’t look happy.

“What’s the worst they can do to me, Brooke? Seriously?”

She lets out a sigh. “Geraldine was going to send an Omega to Colvindale. I know she’s not there anymore, but I’m not sure Edith’s much better. The truth is we don’t know what they’re really capable of.”

She’s right. We don’t. That’s why I need to go speak to them.

I’ll clear the pack’s names and make sure Brooke doesn’t need to spend her life running and hiding.

Just as soon as my shirt is dry enough to wear.

“I need to do this,” I tell her. “It’s our safest option.”

Of course, it might not get her father off our backs, but if he attempts something illegal to take his daughter away from us, he’ll find out how far true mates are willing to go to protect the ones they love.

She shakes her head at me, but she doesn't say another word.

I glance at my phone. I have a lot of missed calls from the academy. I also have a couple from Brooke's father. My voicemail looks like it's been filled up, too.

"Someone at Goldcrest has been calling me a lot," I tell them. "Brooke, your father's called me a couple times, too."

She blows out a breath. "Seriously? My father?"

I nod. "I have messages."

The knock on the apartment door comes as I'm calling my voicemail. It makes everyone jump.

The two further knocks ease the tension.

"It's just Frost," River says as he darts over there to unlock it.

"He should hear these, too," I murmur, as I listen to my options.

"I should hear what?" Frost asks as he steps back into the apartment, carrying groceries.

River shuts and locks the door. "Kellan has messages from Goldcrest, and Brooke's father."

"I turned my phone off last night," I admit when I notice Frost's confused frown.

"They're probably only demanding you bring me back," Brooke mutters.

"Probably," I tell her, before I hit play all and put the phone on speaker.

I turn the volume up and put the handset down on the table.

The first few calls are from the academy, all of them basically demanding I bring Brooke back immediately. Of course, they're making it sound like I kidnapped her.

"This is a waste of time," Frost says, clearly still cranky.

"Shh!" Donnie hushes him.

The next message comes with a deliberate pause at the beginning.

“Kellan Mitchell, I don’t know how you did this, but you’re going to regret it. Bring my daughter back to Goldcrest right now and we can brush this ugly incident under the rug. If she’s not back by morning, you’ll suffer a terrible loss.”

My skin crawls at the threat in his tone. I look up at Brooke, and she shakes her head. She doesn’t know what he means. I don’t want to know what he means. I don’t need further proof that he’s a psychopath. I already know he is.

Crossing my arms, I wait for the rest of the messages to play through.

The urge to call my parents is at the forefront of my thoughts.

If anything happens to them, he’s a dead man.

Edith Merritt leaves a couple more threatening messages, making me wonder if my plan to go back to the academy to officially claim my mate would even work. It doesn’t sound like they’ve even considered it as an option.

The last message is another call from Warren Corvina.

It starts with a pause again, which is seriously weird.

“Hop along home, Brooke, dear.”

It’s his voice, but it sounds pre-recorded somehow.

Brooke blinks. She breaks away from Donnie’s arms and goes to the door. Her hand starts rattling the handle like she’s trying to get out, and she can’t tell it’s locked.

“Good girl,” her father murmurs.

River goes to Brooke and wraps his arms around her. She squirms against his touch, fixated on the getting to the door. He turns to us. “She feels strange. Like she’s trapped inside her own body. She’s scared. I don’t think this is the first time it’s happened.”

Oh my God. “She has black-outs. She doesn’t know what causes them.”

“I think we might have just found out,” Frost says. “Turn that off in case it gets worse.”

I grab my phone, finger over the end call button when he speaks again.

“Now, Kellan, it’s time that you broke free.”

Horror fills me as the room around me turns dark. The last thing I feel is the phone dropping out of my hand. The last thing I see is Brooke bursting out of River’s grasp and turning the key to unlock the door.

Chapter SEVENTY FIVE

DONNIE

Whenever someone says, and then all hell broke loose, I never fully understood that expression, until Kellan dropped his phone, his eyes turning dark. Brooke somehow got away from River and unlocked the door in the same breath. All hell really did break loose, all at once.

River crashed onto the inflatable mattress. Brooke bolted from the apartment. Kellan picked up one of the hard wooden chairs and fucked it off the wall, breaking off a leg and wielding it like a bat. Frost took off after Brooke as Kellan ran at me, leaping across the table like a feral jungle creature thirsty for blood.

Holy fucking shit! I can't move fast enough to avoid it when Kellan swings his make-shift weapon at me. I take a hit to the side, and fuck me, this guy's stronger than he looks.

That's gonna be a bruise in the morning.

Backing away from him, I pick up a chair, using it to deflect his next swing. I move the chair upwards quickly and the bat is yanked out of his fingers.

Well, that was lucky. Now I need to subdue him without hurting him.

He growls at me, his stare blank. The lights are on, but no one's home. Well, not no one, exactly.

The mild-mannered Alpha is just out to lunch. Something vicious and nasty has taken his place.

“Kellan, dude, come on. What’s going on with you right now?” I ask as I slowly back away.

“I don’t think reason’s going to work,” River says.

“If you’ve got something else, I’m listening.”

“I think he’s been triggered,” River mutters.

“Triggered?” I thought that was a phrase used by snowflake-types to describe virtually anything that doesn’t fit with their ideals. “It’s more like he’s possessed.”

I swing the chair, and he backs up, snarling at me.

“Well, he flipped when he heard that message. I think Brooke’s father triggered him to do this. I think he triggered both of them.”

Kellan lifts up another chair and smacks it into the chair I’m holding.

The whole weight of his body goes into the swing. My teeth clamp shut as pain rings through me, my arms taking the brunt of force from the sudden impact.

Whatever the hell this is, it needs to stop, now.

I suck in a deep breath, steeling myself to end the fight.

This could get messy.

Kellan turns quickly, and I can tell he’s about to smash that second chair off the ground.

I toss the one I’m holding to the side, and I charge him, tackling him from behind, and dragging him backward. He drops the chair as he falls back into me, but that’s only the start of the real struggle.

He claws at my arms, fighting blindly to get free. *Holy fuck.* His strength is unbelievable. The only reason he’s having trouble is because he’s not acting rationally. He might not look like he could beat a guy into the ground, but clearly, he could, and if I let him go, I’d be the guy getting his face slammed into the floor. His elbow stabs back hard into my guts, and I let out a gasp. My grip around his body loosens for a second and

he starts to pull away. I yank him back quickly, moving one arm up to trap him under his throat.

He's behaving like a panicked animal ensnared in a trap. I can't let him get loose but containing him is going to be a goddamned nightmare. I drag him toward the inflatable mattress, throwing us onto it in a backward dive. River jumps out of our way as we land, watching us wrestle around on the mattress as Kellan tries to wriggle out of my grasp.

I trap his legs between mine to stop him from kicking my shins.

He elbows me in the guts again, harder this time.

Jesus, it fucking hurts. I tighten my grasp instead of loosening it.

I'm not keen at the thought of choking him out. It's too risky.

He twists in my grasp, fingers digging into the arm around his middle.

He seriously needs to calm down before he makes me hurt him.

"River, can you use your touch?" I ask, my voice raspy and strained.

He blinks down at me, before he nods and sinks to his knees beside the mattress.

I've warned him before to stay out of the way if there's a fight. Protecting him is my priority, always.

Asking him to help is a last resort.

Kellan isn't calming down, and he's a danger to all of us while he's like this.

River pushes Kellan's shirt up and touches his side.

I hold tight, my breath ragged as I wait to see if this works.

He's still thrashing around in my arms, attempting to get loose.

River frowns as he looks up at me. “I don’t think my touch is working.”

“Shit. I don’t want to choke him out.”

I’ve only done it once before. The guy passed out. He was fine later.

That doesn’t mean the same thing will happen if I do it to Kellan now.

“I ... I think we need Frost,” River admits. “He has that Alpha command voice.”

“You really think that’ll work on another Alpha?”

He shrugs, moving back. “Brooke’s father gave him a coded order and he followed it. I think it’s safe to say it’s a strong possibility.”

“Then we wait,” I tell him, not willing to send River out to chase down Frost and Brooke.

If they’re not back yet, there’s a reason. I can’t allow our other Omega to run around the city on his own.

Kellan lets out another feral growl.

“Try your touch again,” I ask, all out of ideas while we wait.

The last thing I want is to let him get loose.

River nods, moving a little and touching the side of Kellan’s face, locking his gaze as he tries again.

I really fucking hope it works, because I can’t hold him down like this forever, and the thought of chasing Kellan around the city in the lunch rush would be a nightmare. I’d never find him if he ran like Brooke did.

Closing my eyes, I hope to hell Frost has caught our girl and they didn’t run into any trouble.

Chapter

SEVENTY

SIX

FROST

Self-doubt is the single biggest threat to an Alpha's success, and I'm full of it as I run out of my old apartment, chasing after Brooke instead of staying to fight the other Alpha. As much as I trust Donnie and River, I know instantly that I made the wrong call when the shit hit the fan.

I saw two options, and I chose to rush after my mate.

Brooke was a couple of steps in front of me before she ran out the door. I should have caught up to her on the staircase. I don't, and I see the building's outer door swinging shut when I'm at the top of the final landing. Instead of running down the stairs, I leap over the railing.

It probably only shaves half a second off the chase.

When I get outside, I catch a glimpse of golden-blond hair disappearing around a corner up ahead. It's all I have to go on. I keep my senses open as I race after my mate, catching traces of her perfume on the air as I run. Those are the only reassurance I have that I'm headed in the right direction.

Every corner I turn, I see her in the distance, right before she disappears around another one.

My heart sinks as I realize she's headed into the center of the city.

She's probably going to the train station, or the bus depot.

Her father just ordered her to come home, and she obeyed as if he'd hypnotized her with his voice.

It was too vague for an Alpha command. The word choice too specific for a general request.

If I had to guess what he was asking her to do, I wouldn't need more than one try.

He wants her to come home. Whether she sees home as his house or the academy remains to be seen, but she doesn't want to be in either place. She escaped Goldcrest to get out from under her father's control. I can't let him drag her back.

I push myself harder, run faster. I can do better than I'm doing. I can catch up to my mate.

Donnie can take care of himself. He'll protect River, and he'll get Kellan under control.

All I need to concentrate on is catching up to Brooke. Preferably, before she gets to the busier streets. The crowds will slow her down, but they'll also swallow her up.

I can't lose her. I won't lose her.

I'm getting a little closer, closing the gap.

She hasn't looked back, not once, not for a second.

She's just running, never hesitating, never slowing down.

I'll have to command her when I catch her. It's the only way to break another Alpha's command.

I fucking hope I don't need to do that in front of too many people.

It's easy to be invisible in the city, but the second someone notices something that looks or sounds shady, suddenly you become bright as neon lights.

"Brooke!" I call out, now that there's only a few feet between us.

The streets are starting to get busier. We're getting close to the city's beating heart.

She doesn't look back, doesn't react to her name being called.

A burst of adrenaline catches me up to her, finally.

I reach out and grab hold of her hand, trying to look inconspicuous.

She tugs it away, frowning at me.

She's annoyed that I've slowed her down.

I get in front of her, forcing her to come to a stop.

"Stop," I tell her quietly, in my command voice.

She stills, looking at me in confusion.

She doesn't speak. Doesn't ask me why.

She just stands there, waiting for instructions.

A woman with a baby in a stroller gives me an irritable look, and I walk Brooke out of her way, letting her pass us by.

I take Brooke's hands in mine and look her in the eyes.

They're unfocused, clouded with confusion.

I need to give her a new instruction, and I'm not sure where to start.

Sighing, I fight past the exhaustion I'm feeling now that I'm standing still.

"Brooke, I need you to remember," I start, jolting something inside her with the incomplete command.

She shivers as she looks at me, coming back to herself. "I tried to run home."

"You did," I confirm, glad it looks like she's back to normal.

"He's made me do that before," she says, tears welling up in her eyes.

"He has?" I ask, wondering if I messed up by not telling her exactly what to remember.

She nods. “Over and over again. He had to make sure his order was working.”

“Well, it didn’t work this time.”

“Because you stopped it,” she says. “Thank God you stopped me.”

She wraps her arms around me, and I hold her close, glad that she’s okay.

I made the right choice. I didn’t think I had, but if Donnie had chased her down, there’s no way he could have stopped her. I have to stop second guessing my instincts.

“This is a little bit public,” I tell her. “We should head back to the apartment.”

She breaks away from me. “You’re right. We need to get back there.”

“Come on,” I tell her turning away from the main street we were about to go down.

I catch sight of a guy dressed all in black, like one of Goldcrest’s guards, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I take another glimpse as I walk Brooke back down the street.

It’s not just someone dressed like one of the guards, it is one of the guards.

It’s that guy, Henry. The one who seemed obsessed with Brooke.

He’s crossing the street, eyes on the phone in his hands.

We’re about to pass him when he steps onto the sidewalk, so I open the gate to the apartment building we were about to walk past, and I tug on her hand. She joins me in walking up the path, realizing something’s wrong. I close my eyes briefly, keeping a steady walking pace as we get up to the building’s double doors.

Thankfully, they don’t have a security lock.

I hold the door open for Brooke, and she steps inside.

I follow, not daring to glance back until she's behind me in the unlit hallway.

Her hand is on my arm, her brow furrowed when I turn away from the door.

“What did I miss?” she asks quietly.

“That guard from Goldcrest. The one you were with the night we met.”

Her eyes widen. “He's out there?”

“He was crossing to our side of the street, looking at his phone. Seems like luck was on our side. I don't see him anymore. He must have passed while we came in here. We should give it a few minutes before we leave.”

She nods, keeping close. “I can't believe I didn't even notice.”

“You're shaking,” I murmur, noticing her hand trembling on my arm. “Brooke, you're safe. I've got you. Nothing bad is going to happen.”

I feel something jab into my back, and Brooke's worried stare goes past me.

“Think again, Romeo. Nothing bad will happen to Brooke, but you're completely expendable.”

Chapter

SEVENTY SEVEN

BROOKE

I spent so long trapped in Goldcrest's gilded cage, feeling I was trapped in a private hell of my father's construction. I'm just starting to realize that place wasn't even close. It was more like purgatory. All I did there was wait.

It felt like torture, but it wasn't the same as watching a psychopath point a gun at someone you love, threatening them with death in their gaze.

"Don't hurt him," I plead. "I'll do what you want."

"How about I kill him and you do what I want anyway, Brooke?"

I shake my head. "I won't give you what you want if you hurt him."

He raises his eyebrow at me. "And you will if I don't? Call me crazy, but you haven't exactly been very trustworthy so far."

Frost lets go of my hand. I can't look at him.

"If you shoot me right now, at that angle, you'll hit Brooke, too," Frost tells him. "You must know that."

"Well," Henry says, looking me over as if he's trying to decide whether I'm worth it. "I'm not sure I'm quite so enamored of our pretty, little Omega anymore. Maybe she deserves a second-hand bullet."

“Put the gun down,” Frost tells him, using his Alpha command voice.

Henry laughs, and my heart drops.

Why didn't that work?

Oh wait ...

Henry sinks to his knees and puts the gun on the ground.

“Stand up,” Frost says, not dropping his command voice.

Henry gets back to his feet. He looks like a soldier waiting for orders.

“You fucking prick! I can report you to the cops for this shit,” he snarls.

I scowl at him. “Oh, yeah? What are you going to tell them, exactly? That he got you to drop a gun you were about to use to shoot him?”

He scowls right back at me, looking ready to call me some nasty names.

“Shut your mouth, Henry. Go back to doing what you were doing before this,” Frost commands. “Forget you ever saw us. Now.”

Frost gives him a little push and he turns, walking out of the apartment building and down the path.

He doesn't look back. I watch him leave, like Frost told him to.

“That's what my father's been doing to me,” I tell him, hugging myself. “Giving me commands and making me forget.”

“Shit. I'm sorry. I didn't ...”

I shake my head. “You did the right thing. He would have told someone. It's just all coming back. I'm remembering everything.”

That's why I didn't even notice Henry out in the street. Frost used his Alpha command voice to disrupt my father's

orders to return to him, and ever since then, every memory that was stolen from me has been slipping back.

“What are you remembering?” he asks.

“I’m remembering my father finding me after I ran into Kellan in the woods. I perfumed and I was in shock, but I was happy. I just met my true mate. He was so angry when I told him. He told me to wait in his study. I wasn’t allowed in his study. Oh, God. He told me he was going to make sure I never saw that boy again. He told me he had ways to make sure I complied with him. Then he started taking notes and asking me the same questions over and over again, until I gave him the answers he wanted. When he was done torturing me, he told me to forget everything that had happened that day. No, he didn’t just tell me, he commanded me.”

It makes me shudder to think about it. My dad was shaking with rage when I told him about Kellan.

Frost holds me for a long moment. “It’s okay now. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

I cling to him tightly, my arms closed around him while I look over his shoulder out into the path and the street beyond. I know he’ll protect me, but I’m not safe. I’ll never be safe while my father is still out there. He’ll find a way to force me to come back. I know he will.

Letting go, I take in a deep breath. “We should go back to the apartment. What do we do with the gun?”

I can see it’s between Frost’s feet now, so he clearly moved it to make sure it didn’t wander off on its own. He crouches to pick it up, and he puts it in the waist-band of his pants when he straightens, covering the handle with his shirt.

“Safety’s on, but I’m guessing he’ll get in trouble for not having it if anyone notices.”

“Honestly, I’d be surprised if anyone noticed. The last couple weeks at Goldcrest haven’t exactly been typical. The guards don’t really carry guns thinking they’ll be using them. I’m pretty sure they mostly have them to deter any Omegas

who might think about trying to leave without the express consent of their parents or the academy administrator.”

“Good. Now, we should get back. When we left, things were getting a little bit crazy back there.”

“Back there in the apartment?” I ask, confused.

“It was after you took off. I can explain when we get closer, but we’ve got a few busier streets to navigate first. Follow my lead, and I’ll find us a hiding spot again if I need to.”

I nod in silent agreement, ignoring the pile of unearthed memories that are vying for my attention.

“Okay, let’s get the hell out of here.”

Chapter

SEVENTY EIGHT

FROST

That was pretty fucking dicey, and it's not over yet. The street is full of people walking along at a leisurely pace that we have to match to fit in and look like every other couple out for a nice lunch-hour walk. Donnie did a good job choosing clothes for Brooke the other day. She's wearing styles everyone else seems to be wearing, in muted colors that don't stand out.

We weave our way through the crowds while I pay extra special attention to any potential threats on the horizon. So far, I'm not seeing any other Goldcrest guards wandering around, and the only Alpha who's close by is dry-humping a Beta girl on a park bench across the street.

Brooke's perfume died down after I woke her. Thankfully, the stress of the situation hasn't allowed it to come back so far. I'm a little worried that her heat could return, but considering it has some kind of link to her emotional state, I cross it off the list as a serious threat.

She's way too shaky over getting her memories back.

By the sound of it, her father's a psychotic prick.

We're going to have to do something about him, but that's for later.

Right now we need to navigate our way back to the apartment safely.

One street down, I hold my breath that the next one will be so simple.

Brooke stumbles over a loose paving stone, and I help her regain her balance.

“Sorry,” she mutters, seeming annoyed with herself.

She’s still preoccupied, and I don’t blame her one little bit.

Another Alpha gets a bit close on the sidewalk, but he passes without looking at us.

I had no idea how precarious it could be to walk around the city with an Omega.

It feels safe in Crystal Lake with River. He goes for runs with Donnie, and he shops with me. No one bothers him. That said, the small town is more of a family place. Any Alphas have come there to settle with their mate or mates. There are hardly any single guys and no single Alphas.

The city is a completely different story.

It’s not a safe place for Omegas.

I could never let River or Brooke wander around out here alone.

Mating marks obvious or not, some Alphas are born predators.

Those Alphas tend to live in cities where there’s plenty of prey.

I hold Brooke’s hand a little tighter as we walk past a group of Beta males on their lunch break.

They notice her, but it’s her body they stare at as we pass, so I doubt they’re thinking they just saw the missing Omega from Goldcrest. They’re just loading up their spank-banks.

Even though the thought of that makes me want to kick all of their asses, I ignore the urge because it would only draw attention. That’s the last thing we need.

I realize I’m grinding my teeth by the time we’re on the street that leads into the apartment block.

“Finally,” Brooke murmurs when she sees it. “I feel like we’ve been walking for miles.”

“Just a couple, probably,” I tell her, giving her a wry smile.

We made it, but I have no damn idea how Donnie and River are doing with Kellan.

“So, what was happening when I took off?” she asks, as we walk toward the building’s entrance.

“Well, I guess Kellan might have a few repressed memories caused by your father, too. Because something really similar happened with him after you left. I didn’t see much of it.”

Hopefully there wasn’t much to see.

“So, he ran off, too?” she asks, frowning in confusion.

“Not exactly,” I say. “He started looking for a fight.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was. Don’t worry. Donnie’s been a bouncer, he knows how to handle a tough situation. He’ll have it under control.”

“I hope everyone’s okay,” she says, as we rush up the staircase side by side.

Chapter

SEVENTY

NINE

BROOKE

The door to the apartment is open when we get to the landing, which really doesn't seem like a good sign. I rush ahead of Frost, too worried to hang back. My heart is pounding hard in my ears when I get inside. What I find isn't exactly nothing.

“Oh my God, Donnie!” I move to River's side at the foot of the mattress.

Donnie is basically trying to wrestle Kellan into submission while Kellan claws at his forearms to get him to let go.

My Alpha is completely gone in the eyes, snarling like a wild animal. His emotions are vicious and out of control. He's reacting to something my father did to him, following some fucked-up order he was given.

My Beta is in physical pain and completely exhausted from doing the right thing. He can't keep control for much longer. He's barely hanging on.

My Omega puts an arm around me. I want to help, but I don't know how.

I feel my own helplessness echoing through River. Neither of us can do anything here.

My vision starts to blur.

“Frost,” River says, as his Alpha marches over. “Can you command him to stop?”

“Stop what you’re doing, Kellan,” Frost commands.

He moves to Donnie’s other side as Kellan goes limp in the Beta’s arms.

A lump rises in my throat at the sight of my mate staring blankly into space, waiting for instructions as if he’s a mindless drone. This is happening to him because of me. My father did this because I told him I met my true mate.

I watch as Frost issues the command and moves onto his knees beside them.

Kellan goes limp in Donnie’s arms, making my breath catch.

“Remember,” Frost commands, nodding at Donnie.

Kellan gasps in a breath, and Donnie releases him.

“Christ,” Kellan mutters, rubbing at his throat. His fingers are bloody, and he shudders when he looks down at his hand. “I’m so fucking sorry ...”

“I won’t say it was a fun time, but you weren’t yourself, so forget the apology,” Donnie tells him as he gets to his feet.

Tears drip down my cheeks. I always knew my father was a psychopath. I never realized how fucking awful he was until I got my memories back. So much for unexplainable blackouts that caused me to need a therapist. He caused those himself, and she was probably his way of making sure I definitely wasn’t remembering anything I shouldn’t.

River hugs me closer, feeling my pain.

I don’t deserve his sympathy.

“My father did this.”

Kellan gets up and wraps his arms around me.

“I know,” he murmurs. “I know.”

“We’re gonna have to do something about your dad,” Donnie says.

Kellan moves back, and I wipe at my eyes. “I can’t get near him. He has too much control over me.”

“He’s been working on me for a while, too,” Kellan admits, frowning. “I had no damn idea. He caught me outside the gym every week for months and made me forget the conditioning he went through with me. It’s so fucking weird. I didn’t even notice I was losing time.”

“He doesn’t know about the rest of us,” Frost says.

“If someone could get into his study, I know where he keeps the files on this ‘project’,” I admit.

“You do?” Donnie asks.

I nod. “Frost helped me remember everything that asshole ever made me forget.”

“Good work, Frost.” Donnie nods slowly.

“I also picked up a free weapon,” Frost confesses, lifting his shirt to show off the handle of the gun.

“We ran into one of the guards from Goldcrest,” I add. “Frost made him leave and told him to forget he ever ran into us.”

Kellan’s face falls. “We can’t just keep hiding out here, can we?”

I shake my head. “My father will find us. I think it would be better if we got the jump on that. It could be our only chance to nail him to the wall. Once he knows we know what he’s been doing, he’ll know we’re going after evidence and he’ll destroy it, or he’ll do something worse to make sure we can’t take it to the cops.”

“What has he been doing, exactly?” Donnie asks. “I feel like I missed something.”

I smile at him. “We all kind of did. My father’s been using me as a test subject. He’s been deep in research on something for years. He must have dozens if not hundreds of other test subjects in this messed up experiment of his.”

“You know what he’s been doing?”

“Kind of. At least, I think I do. He’s been brainwashing Omegas to make them compliant to their mates. That’s why he didn’t want Kellan to be let into the academy. He knew we were fated. He couldn’t use me anymore if I met a true mate. He probably decided I’d make a good test subject because I’m so damn stubborn.”

“That fucking prick asshole,” Donnie seethes.

“So, one of us needs to break into his house and get evidence of this brainwashing experiment while he’s otherwise busy elsewhere,” Frost says.

I nod. “Kellan and I can turn ourselves into the academy. I’ll demand to see my father. That way he won’t be home when you break in.”

Everyone’s quiet as the plan sinks in.

It’s risky, and we have a lot of planning to get through.

“I vote we eat lunch and get some sleep,” I say. “We’re really going to need the rest before we talk over the details and go do this.”

No one tries to argue with me. I wince when I look at Donnie’s arms.

“River, can you sort out lunch? I’ll help Donnie clean up his scratches.”

“Yes, boss,” River murmurs, giving me a flash of a smile and a peck on the cheek as he moves to the kitchen side of the apartment’s main room.

“I’ll help with lunch,” Frost says.

“I should ... I should help with Donnie,” Kellan says, as I start to lead Donnie into the bathroom.

He looks a bit pale, and he feels incredibly guilty.

“I did that to him.”

“Yeah,” Donnie says. “You’re a real dirty fighter, Kellan Mitchell.”

Kellan flushes beet-red, clearly embarrassed.

“I didn’t mean ...”

Donnie laughs. “Relax, dude. I know it wasn’t you. You went completely feral. It was like watching a wild animal break out of his cage and go fucking nuts.”

“I kind of wish I’d been here to see that,” I confess.

“I’m glad you weren’t.” Kellan runs a hand through his hair. A bloody hand. He’s really making a mess of himself right now. He winces when he notices, pulling a face.

“Come on, we’ll get you cleaned up, too.”

Chapter

EIGHTY

DONNIE

My arms are a damn mess. The blood makes it look like I got Freddy Kruegered, but when Brooke rinses that away it starts to look more like I got attacked by a group of angry cats. I'm all scratched up, but most of the scratches are shallow.

"Damn. I don't think I'm going to be left with any cool scars," I tell her as she dries me off and gets the antiseptic wipes out of the cabinet. I screw my face up at those. "Let's skip that part."

She laughs. "I don't think so."

It's gonna sting. I let out a sigh.

"We could do both arms at once, that way it's over quick," Kellan suggests, at my other side.

He's feeling guilty because he's the one who scratched me up. It wasn't his fault, but I don't think knowing that's making him feel any better.

"Wash your hands, then," I tell him, making Brooke laugh.

Her eyes twinkle when she laughs. She's so damn beautiful.

I move back from the sink as Kellan reaches over to run the tap.

My gaze lands on a pair of expensive looking earrings. "Oh, hey, you should move those if you don't want them

ending up down the drain.”

She picks them up and looks at them in her hand. “They were a gift from my asshole father.”

She tips them into the toilet and flushes.

“I wish it was that easy to get rid of him.”

Kellan finishes washing his hands and dries them off.

I take the towel when he’s done and wet the corner of it with the hot water tap.

Dabbing it over his throat, I clean up the mess he made there with it.

“Thanks,” he murmurs as I rinse the bloody spot off the wet corner of the towel.

It’s so damn weird. I don’t feel like he’s a true mate, but there’s something about him that makes me feel a little off balance. It’s not just that he’s attractive. I can’t figure out exactly what it is.

It definitely had nothing to do with the crazed behavior incited by that message Brooke’s father left.

Maybe it’s just because he’s going to be mated to River. We’ll be sharing more than one mate.

It’s kind of kinky, and I’m all about kinky.

“So, we’re doing this, then?” Brooke asks, raising an eyebrow when I blink at her.

Ha. She’s only talking about cleaning your wounds. She’s not talking about letting you watch her with Kellan. Don’t be such a pervert.

I hold my arms up. “All right then.”

Brooke passes Kellan a wipe and takes another for herself.

“Be gentle,” I tell them. “I’m sensitive.”

Brooke snorts, but she uses a soft touch as she goes. Kellan follows her lead, being a little rougher but not in a bad way really. It nips a bit, but it doesn’t really hurt. Mostly, it feels good.

I like having two people fuss over me. What's not to like about that?

"Okay, we're clean. We can wrap them now," Brooke says, taking the used wipes and putting them in the empty waste bin next to the toilet. She brings out the gauze.

I see little spots of blood here and there. Having bandages will soak that up until the scratches scab over, I guess. I wouldn't normally bother with gauze for a scratch, but if I don't use it, I'll end up getting blood all over my shirt.

I let them wrap me, and Kellan does the better job. Brooke's bandage is too loose.

"Oh damn," she says when she notices. "What did I do wrong?"

"I can fix it," Kellan tells her, taking over.

She watches what he's doing, nodding when she sees what he did differently.

"Well, that just makes sense," she says.

She kisses my cheek, making my face warm up.

"It's definitely time for lunch. Let's go eat."

Chapter

EIGHTY

ONE

FROST

Brooke's heat hasn't shown any signs of coming back, and everyone seems to be feeling much more relaxed after a decent meal. Our plans have been firmed up. All of the details have been ironed out.

Now, all that's left to do is get a few hours of sleep so we're rested for what comes next.

Kellan surprises me by offering to take the couch.

"I've had more sleep than you," he says. "I don't need it that badly."

"Thanks," I tell him, giving him a smile.

He's not a bad guy. He still doesn't feel like pack, but I can see the five of us working something out.

I think River will be more content once they've mated, and it'll work out well for his heat when it comes if he has two Alphas. Having Brooke as his Omega helped his perfume come in stronger.

He's already acting way more relaxed than I would have expected around them both.

It's comfortable, and it's easy.

If only we didn't have a psychopathic father-in-law type to deal with, we'd be golden.

"Okay, I'm seriously ready to pass out," I announce, getting to my tired feet.

“Me too,” Brooke tells me, taking my hand.

We head for the bedroom, and everyone says goodnight.

“Is it weird that my heat went away so fast?” she asks me, as she lets go of my hand.

“Well, usually a heat ends after a week, or if the Omega gets pregnant ...”

Hadn't really considered that second option, but then again, we didn't exactly ask if Brooke was on birth control, either. *Holy hell*. She must see the shock on my face because she gives me an amused smile.

“I have the implant, so we don't need to worry about that second thing.”

“You mean, we don't need to worry about it right now.”

She blinks at me. “We should really talk when this whole plan thing is over.”

“We will,” I assure her. “There is one other reason an Omega's heat can go away. It's probably the stress of everything we're going through. River's read up on a lot of Omega stuff and he talks about it so we can be prepared. Heats are tied to an Omega's emotions, so they only usually come on once an Omega's ready to settle down. But if there's too much stress in the Omega's life, or any kind of threat lurking around, it can interrupt the physical stuff.”

“Well, River knows more than I do. They don't teach any of that at the academy,” she says, taking her sweater off and sitting it on top of the dresser. “The classes are all surface stuff. It's honestly pathetic.”

She finishes stripping out of her clothes, leaving on a tank top and panties.

My dick gives a little twitch of interest, but I'm way beyond the point of exhaustion. I'm not even going to attempt to suggest anything sexual. There's no way I wouldn't pass out before we got much further than a kiss.

I start to haul my clothes off as she gets into bed.

When I slip under the covers beside her, she immediately shuffles closer, taking my arm and wrapping it around her. I lean in and kiss her shoulder.

“No funny business,” she murmurs.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Well, I *might* dream about it. The bed is doused in her scent, and she’s curled up in front of me, her fingers lacing through mine to keep my arm around her warm body.

Closing my eyes, I inhale her sweet cherry perfume as I pass the fuck out.

Chapter

EIGHTY

TWO

KELLAN

Donnie offers to swap places with me on the couch when we're getting ready to get some rest. I'd feel too strange about sleeping right next to River while I'm still processing the idea of him as a mate. It's been a crazy day, and I still feel incredibly guilty over attacking Donnie, even if it wasn't really me. He isn't holding it against me at all, but I wouldn't blame him if he did.

"I know it's not that comfy," Donnie says. "I've crashed on it before."

"It's fine," I tell him. "I might not really sleep. You guys need the rest."

"I don't know," Donnie murmurs as he turns off the lights and closes the shades on the window. "You were fighting pretty hard back there. You might need a rest more than you think."

"You were stronger," I tell him, which I'm glad about.

Who the hell knows what might have happened if he hadn't restrained me?

I hate to think what I could have done.

"We were pretty evenly matched, actually," he admits. "I got lucky. You seemed to be obsessed with the idea of breaking those chairs."

“I think I was looking for a weapon,” I tell him, feeling kind of weird admitting it. I couldn’t control anything that was going on once I heard that phrase. I saw everyone in the room as an enemy, and it would be easier to take them out with a weapon. “He trained me to do that. To find a weapon and use it on whoever was with me.”

“That’s so messed up,” Donnie says as he arranges the rest of the sheets on the mattress. “Why would he do that?”

“You really want to know?” I ask.

“You know?” he asks, his bright blue eyes widening.

“I remembered. He talked a lot while he was conditioning me. He hated me. Thought about killing me himself. Once, he got angry enough that he got a knife. He wanted to do it, but he would lose a test subject. I’m pretty sure that’s the only reason I’m still around. He was going to use it as a way to get rid of me if I got in the way of his plans for his daughter. Have me kill, or at least brutally attack whoever I’m with, and I’ll be locked away while he finishes his research and proves to his clients that he has the perfect way for them to control their unruly Omegas, or anyone else they need to rein in.”

“Holy fuck,” Donnie mutters. “How does he plan to prove it?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know, but I’m worried it has something to do with Brooke.”

It’s totally fucked. His daughter only matters to him for this deranged project that’ll hurt others who are like her. He doesn’t give a shit about her, or anyone else.

“Yeah, that seems pretty likely.”

River comes out of the bathroom in his underwear, his hair wet. “I took a shower. Figured everyone might be queuing to use the shower later when we’re getting ready to leave.”

“You’re probably right,” Donnie says. “I’ll need to wait a bit to take these bandages off, but you can shower if you want, Kellan.”

I nod. It makes sense. I was going to have to use the bathroom anyway. Might as well wash up while I'm at it. "Where are the towels, River?"

"Under the sink. We should move Brooke's prosthetic, so it doesn't get ruined. I don't know where to put it."

"Her what?" I ask, feeling like I didn't hear him properly.

"The burn she made," River explains.

"Right," I remember. "Wait. She *made* that?"

"I think it might be her thing," River says. "I'll go get it."

Her thing. I remember her telling me she had ideas to start a business, but she never got around to telling me what for. She seemed a little shy about it, actually.

River comes back into the room with the piece of rubbery flesh. It looks like something from a horror movie. A realistic bit of burned skin, with blistering.

"Holy shit," I murmur. "She made this."

"It's pretty cool, right?" River says.

"I've seen burns that look like that on the job," Donnie adds. "Whatever she used as a reference, it's pretty spot on."

This is Brooke's dream. What she would have been doing if she hadn't been trapped at Goldcrest.

She has a real talent, and, clearly, it's something she's passionate about.

She's been hiding it. She didn't even feel comfortable enough to tell me.

It makes me mad that she's had to do that.

That she couldn't follow her dream.

Her father's controlled her life for way too long.

It's time we set her free of his chains.

Chapter

EIGHTY

THREE

RIVER

Kellan uses the shower after me, taking his time in the bathroom while I look for a place to put Brooke's prosthetic burn. I don't know a lot about SFX makeup, but I love a good movie, especially a good horror movie. Effects like this are part of the movie's magic.

I'd love to watch Brooke work on something, to see how she does what she does.

"Some of the kitchen cupboards are empty," Donnie reminds me. "The ones above the sink might be a decent place to keep it safe."

"Good idea," I tell him.

This way nothing's going to spill or be spilled on it.

I'd hate to ruin the piece she made to escape the academy.

She should frame it or something.

I open the cupboards until I find a clean, clear, empty spot to set it down.

"I offered to take the couch," Donnie tells me as I navigate my way around the table.

The room is a bit dark, but it's not pitch black. It's still light outside. The shades don't quite block it out all the way. I get under the covers on the inflatable mattress.

"Kellan wants to take things slow," I murmur, glancing in the direction of the bathroom.

The shower's still running. I feel a little strange talking about him, even if it's with Donnie.

"He told you that?" Donnie asks, as he gets under the covers beside me.

I nod. "This isn't what he expected when he met Brooke. He had the classic true mate mindset."

"Ah. The one true mate mindset."

"A lot of people have that, if they even believe in true mates."

"True. How are you feeling about it?"

"I'm okay," I tell him. "There's so much going on it makes sense to give it time."

Donnie wraps his arm around me, and kisses my cheek, my jawline, my neck.

"Maybe I won't share you with him. He isn't sure what he wants, he can miss out."

His hand strokes down my chest and slips inside my shorts.

"Donnie ..." I start, moaning softly when he closes his fingers around my half-mast cock.

"Any man or woman would be a fool not to claim you the instant they knew you belonged to them," he whispers close to my ear. "I know you belong with me, and I'm not in a sharing mood, River. He's going to have to get past me if he wants you now. I'll decide if he's worthy."

Holy fucking hell. He's not kidding. Donnie can seem playful, and a lot of the time he is, but when he's serious about something, he doesn't let it go.

"What will you make him do?" I ask, as he teases my dick back to life.

"Hmm," Donnie murmurs as he looks at my lips. "Maybe I'll make him watch me pleasure you until he's desperate to taste your sweet cum. You know your perfume has been

getting stronger since we met Brooke, and you taste even sweeter than you already did.”

“I noticed,” I admit. “She’s been good for us.”

I’ve already decided I’m done with the suppressants I’ve been taking. I’m not going to try to live like I’m a Beta anymore, and that’s thanks to Brooke.

She’s made me feel a little bolder, and she’s going to soften Frost’s rough edges.

She might even keep Donnie occupied when Kellan’s ready to claim me.

Donnie pumps my cock in his hand, making me lose the capacity to think straight.

He nudges the sheets until they fall away.

My slick comes in, and my perfume gets stronger.

“Oh, fuck, you smell so damn good,” Donnie breathes, arousal in his stare while he speeds up his movements. “I’m going to make a mess, but I’ll make sure I clean up every last drop.”

“You’d better,” I warn him, my eyelids fluttering closed as the sound of the shower shuts off in the bathroom.

Donnie’s expert touch gets me off quicker than anything, and he knows it.

“Push down your shorts,” he tells me.

I do as I’m told, as if Donnie is my Alpha. When Frost isn’t around, he might as well be.

That’s going to change with Kellan around.

I’ll have two Alphas to officially take care of soon enough.

I feel it when Kellan steps back into the room. My eyes are closed, but I can feel his nervous energy.

“Our Omega’s about to make a mess of himself,” Donnie tells him. “Come help me get him cleaned up.”

I open my eyes, ready to tell him he doesn’t need to.

He's staring at us, lust starting to burn through his body.

I know if I dropped my gaze to his crotch, I'd see the outline of his cock straining to be released from his boxer briefs. He's thought about knotting me. He's thinking about it again, now.

It makes me think about it, too.

His gaze rises to meet mine, and he moves forward silently, kneeling down on the mattress at my left side. Feeling his acceptance to Donnie's invitation is enough to tip me over the edge.

I let out a low moan as my cum splashes over my stomach in thick threads.

Kellan moves closer to kiss my lips softly, and Donnie moves down and runs his tongue over a splash of my cum, groaning in pleasure at the taste.

I kiss Kellan back and he moves away, not deepening the kiss like I expect him to.

He moves down and brings his tongue out over the closest splash of cum, making soft noises of pleasure as he licks it into his mouth. Just seeing the wet sheen on his lips makes me so fucking horny that I'm hard again in seconds.

"This doesn't feel slow," I whisper.

"I was wrong about that," he admits. "I know what I want. We both know what we want."

There's no doubt in him, now. Everything that happened today changed things.

"You'll claim me?" I ask, my heart racing at the thought of taking his knot.

"I'll claim you," he confirms, glancing at Donnie who moves back.

"I'll let you two—" Donnie starts, before Kellan surprises us both.

He sits up and leans over me, wrapping one arm around Donnie's neck. The kiss he gives is slow and heated. I can tell

how much he means it, and I watch in stunned silence as he makes Donnie tremble under his touch. I can feel how much my Beta wants this. How much he fucking needs it.

I thought I was the needy one, but Donnie feels just as desperate to be with Kellan as I am.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Kellan tells him firmly when he breaks the kiss.

“We’re ... I mean, I don’t think we’re fated,” Donnie mutters, as he looks Kellan in the eyes.

“Do we need to be fated?” he asks. “I want to choose you.”

“Choose me?” Donnie murmurs. “You want me as a chosen mate?”

Kellan nods. There’s no hint of hesitation, no doubt in his feelings.

He means it. He wants us both, even if he’s not fated for Donnie.

“If you’re not sure—” Kellan starts.

Donnie shuts him up with another kiss. I can’t help the slow smile that spreads on my face as they make out. True mates might be rare, but sometimes a chosen mate can feel even more special.

My Beta is used to looking after me, like Frost.

We try to look after him, too, but he’s just better at that stuff.

This feels different. Kellan will be protective and caring as his Alpha and his mate, in ways that Frost doesn’t know how to be.

I know how happy that will make him, and I know how much harder it’ll make Frost try to be better.

Donnie breaks the kiss, his expression kind of dazed.

“We need to talk to Frost about our marks,” I remind him.

He nods. “I want real marks. From all of you.”

“Frost was your Alpha first,” Kellan says.

“He should mark us first,” I agree. “But that doesn’t have to happen right now.”

“Maybe I should wait and ask Frost if I can claim you, too,” Kellan teases.

“No freaking way,” Donnie tells him. “You’re claiming our Omega. He hasn’t had a knot in days, and you made him watch you knot Brooke earlier. You have no idea what that did to him.”

“I had no idea,” Kellan admits. “But I saw what it did to you, Donnie.”

“You were watching me?”

“How could I not?”

“Oh, fuck, just mark me already,” Donnie mutters, his hand disappearing into his shorts.

“Soon,” Kellan promises, moving back to strip out of his underwear.

Donnie moves down and finishes cleaning me up, taking long licks over my stomach.

Then he tugs off my shorts and tosses them away.

Kellan moves back in at my side.

He starts with a kiss, but this time it feels different. He’s not denying his feelings, he’s embracing them. He wants to be with me, he wants to accept the bond we have as true mates.

When he breaks the kiss, he strokes his fingers over my cock.

“He likes to be fingered before he’s fucked,” Donnie tells him.

“Don’t tell Kellan what to do,” I complain.

“I’m just making sure he knows what you like.”

“I’m fingering him,” Kellan says, innocently as hell.

“You’re stroking his cock.”

The realization dawns on Kellan's face and it gets a little bit red.

“Oh.”

He sits up, facing away from me, and I spread my legs as his fingers move from my cock, to my balls, and down to my ass. He pushes two fingers into me, and I let out a moan. I'm already covered in slick from being stroked and licked by them. I get a little wetter as the desire to be knotted washes over me while Kellan pumps his fingers into me.

It's been too damn long since Frost gave me his knot. Aiming for a job alongside my mates was a mistake. My Alpha's been too worried about everything to give me his best. He's always exhausted.

Donnie's practically never tired so we end up spending more time together than with Frost.

I didn't realize how bad it was until now.

I don't think I've felt this desperate to be knotted since my first time.

Donnie was mine for months before Frost fully claimed me.

He was so damn worried about hurting me after everything I'd been through. He couldn't see how badly I needed him, until he finally walked in on Donnie and I together. That's what made him realize I was ready. I think he had to see it to believe it.

I loved it when he finally begged me to let him claim me.

I love this because it feels so damn easy.

Kellan didn't need months to be ready.

He's ready now.

“You won't need to lube up,” I tell him. “My slick knows what's about to happen. It's enough.”

“Fucking hell, that's hot,” Donnie murmurs as he lays down next to us.

Kellan removes his fingers and moves between my legs, rubbing my slick onto his cock anyway.

He rubs his hand over the marks my mates made on my thighs.

“I’ll wait to mark you where it can be seen,” he promises, as he sinks down, pushing inside me and covering my body with his.

I wrap my arms around him, and I find out the lack of a height difference means we can kiss while he’s inside me. Donnie and Frost are a bit taller, so it’s impossible. It feels good, and it feels even better when his knot swells up inside me. I moan against his tongue.

He thrusts deep and slow, and I feel Donnie’s hand close around my cock while Kellan fucks me.

I come quickly from sensation overload, but my dick stays hard.

Kellan breaks the kiss to catch his breath, and I see it in his eyes when he starts to come.

I feel him losing control, thrusting harder and pushing deeper, and then he lets out a low groan.

“Done already?” Donnie teases.

Kellan shakes his head. “Don’t tell me you don’t know how a knot works.”

Donnie laughs. “Just testing your stamina. You’ll need to leave something in the tank for me.”

“Not until he’s done with me,” I tell Donnie.

Donnie looks at me. “I don’t care if he comes inside you a half-dozen times. He’s claiming me tonight if it kills his dick.”

Kellan laughs. “It’s not going to kill my dick.”

Chapter

EIGHTY

FOUR

KELLAN

My cock stays swollen inside River until Donnie's made him come with his hand a few times in a row, and both of us are wet and sticky enough to know we're definitely going to need another shower.

I expect Donnie to want us to clean up, but he just licks a trail from my stomach to my chest and lets out a sultry little sigh. My dick is well lubricated, and still completely hard. I can't help wondering what it's going to feel like to use it without the knot.

"This is a first for me," I let Donnie know. "I've never done this without knotting."

"I'm your first Beta?"

I nod slowly. "You're the only Beta I could ever imagine being with."

"You don't have any Beta celebrity crushes?"

"Not one. Celebrities don't get me off."

"Then I guess I'm one lucky dude."

He lays back and fingers himself, his hand covered in River's juices.

My dick throbs watching him. River's sated gaze fixes on the guy I intend to take as a chosen mate.

Donnie's nothing like the guys who treat me like I'm joking when I say I'm an Alpha. He knows what I am, and he

likes what he sees. I didn't realize that was something I needed until that happened.

I move into place, and he takes his hand out of my way.

"You're sure you're ready?" I ask.

He nods. "Completely."

He's not quite as wet as River, but he's definitely ready.

I ease my cock inside him, inching my way in.

He groans under me, his cock twitching against his stomach.

River moves over to his side and takes his cock into his mouth as I sink the last inch inside him.

"Oh, fuck, I'm so not going to last," Donnie moans out.

River shoots me a smile between mouthfuls of Donnie's cock.

"He'll last," River murmurs. "He always thinks he won't."

I start moving, and Donnie wraps his fingers around the sheets, grabbing them tight.

"Fuck, yes. Fuck, no. River, stop sucking me."

River stops using his mouth, stroking gently with his hand instead.

He straightens a bit and leans forward to kiss me.

I stop thrusting to kiss back, and Donnie lets out a soft sigh.

"Watching you two together is way too fucking hot," Donnie moans.

I break the kiss, wondering if Donnie's always this dramatic during sex, or if it's only tonight.

River looks back at him and starts stroking him slowly again.

"You think you've already come too many times," River tells him. "But you haven't."

I thrust gently, and Donnie moans, running a hand over his face.

“Let your new Alpha claim that tight ass, and maybe I’ll let you eat me out after.”

“Fuck,” Donnie whispers. “You’re so fucking filthy, River. Give me more.”

“Well, you didn’t get to suck Kellan’s dick, but you’ll get to taste his cum if you lick me out.”

“Oh, fucking hell,” Donnie grunts, as his body jerks suddenly and he comes all over River’s hand and his own stomach.

River grins back at me. “I probably shouldn’t have started talking dirty.”

“I don’t think you should have stopped,” I tell him, as I thrust a little harder and claim Donnie as mine.

My teeth tingle a little bit at the thought of marking him, like they did with River.

This won’t feel complete until I’ve marked them as mine.

I move back and watch as River gives Donnie his prize.

A smile hits my lips that won’t leave.

I have two more mates than I thought I was getting, and I’m happier than I’ve ever been.

The ten-year wait doesn’t seem so harsh now that I’ve met my pack.

They’re completely worth every second.

Chapter EIGHTY FIVE

BROOKE

I wake up wrapped up in Frost's arms, warm and safe and just a little bit uncomfortable. He doesn't hear Donnie's wake up call, still completely out of it and snoring. I give him a bit of a nudge, hoping to ease his grasp, but he doesn't take the hint.

"A little help, please, maybe?" I ask Donnie, giving him a pleading stare.

He laughs from the doorway, where he's standing all dressed and ready for tonight's plan, but he gives me a nod and comes toward the bed. "He's been known to sleep like the dead. I should have warned you."

"That might have been nice."

"Hey, Frost," Donnie calls out. "Wakey-wakey, eggs and bakey!"

Frost snores a little harder, like he's purposefully ignoring his pack mate.

"I seriously need to pee," I warn Donnie.

He moves around to Frost's side and manhandles his Alpha. I see an escape route under his arm, and I take it, darting underneath and rolling to the edge of the bed. I jump up and dash across the hall to the bathroom.

"You're welcome!" Donnie calls loudly over the sound of Frost snoring.

"I'll thank you later," I call back.

I get ready for the night once I'm relieved. The shower gives me my energy back. I feel ready to go rattle some cages at the academy and see what happens. Hopefully Frost and Donnie get the evidence we need, and the cops arrive to rescue us from Goldcrest and Daddy Dearest quickly enough to let Kellan and I avoid the twenty-four-hour separation the academy will insist on.

I want this crap over with so I can get on with my life.

Going into the bedroom wrapped in a towel, I find Frost is finally awake, even if he still looks halfway asleep.

"Oh, boy, you really are one of those guys who can't handle missing one night of sleep, aren't you?"

He yanks me into his arms from where he's sitting at the side of the bed, holding me in that same damn vice-like grip he had me trapped in while we were sleeping, while he growls, "Didn't anyone ever teach you not to poke angry bears?"

I slip down onto his lap, practically melting into him. "I guess I missed that lesson."

He nuzzles against my neck, nipping me lightly with his teeth.

It makes me crave his mark, but that doesn't fit our plan.

"I should eat you up," he murmurs against my throat. "That would teach you."

Oh, God. I can feel his cock rising against my leg. He's so damn aroused, and it's making my slick come in. I'm glad he didn't wait until I was dressed to grab me.

"But we're on a schedule, so you'll need to wait," he says, losing the growly, sexy beast voice.

"Um ..." I mutter as he picks me up and sets me down next to where he was sitting.

He leaves the room, and I shake my head as he goes.

We do have a schedule, so I get dressed in the second outfit Donnie got for me while he was out shopping. Everything's just slightly loose so it's super comfy. The jeans

are a light grey color, and the sweater is pale green and super soft material. I'd definitely let Donnie pick out more clothes for me. He has great taste.

I put on socks and slide my feet into the slip-on sneakers.

I guess I'm ready to go convince the academy that I've found my mate.

Stepping out into the main room of the apartment, I find most of my mates waiting for me, all dressed and ready to go. Kellan holds his hand out to me. He's wearing the suit and shirt he was wearing on Friday, and he looks just as handsome tonight as he did then.

I take his hand, and he hugs me in close.

"This is it," he tells me.

"It is," I say, hardly believing it. "Did you call your friend to give us a ride?"

He nods. "She should be getting to the pickup location any minute now."

"We should leave."

"Be careful," Donnie tells us.

"Remind your friend to call us with updates."

"I will," Kellan promises.

He leans in and kisses River, and I get a little burst of excited butterflies in my stomach a second later.

Oh my God. They claimed each other!

My lips widen into a huge smile as Kellan moves past him, stopping in front of Donnie.

River grins at me, and I gasp out a breath as I watch Donnie grip Kellan's lapels and plant a swoon-worthy kiss on his lips. My mouth drops open. I raise my eyebrows at River.

"It all happened last night. I'll tell you about it later."

"You'd better," I warn him. "No leaving out any details."

It's crazy hot watching two men you have feelings for make-out. I can't believe Kellan accepted River and Donnie as mates so damn quickly. It's awesome. I'm so damn happy for all of them. I'm so damn happy for me.

"We'll see you later," Kellan says.

I follow him out of the apartment.

Chapter

EIGHTY

SIX

BROOKE

It's another cool and breezy night in Cressidan City as we leave the building and walk to the pickup location two blocks away from the apartment. Of all the finer details we discussed, this one was probably the most hotly contested. Kellan didn't want it too far from the apartment in case someone recognized me on the walk, and Frost didn't want it too close in case Kellan's mystery friend turned out to be untrustworthy.

We walk in silence for a little bit, mostly because my mind is still blown over finding out my Alpha was very busy last night claiming mates I haven't had the chance to properly claim yet. I don't know how to bring it up without making him blush, so I decide to leave that conversation to the side for now. Despite knowing we're going to Goldcrest to do something that won't be easy, I feel pretty good.

"I would love to be able to walk around more of the city like this," I admit.

"You would?" he asks, raising an eyebrow at me. "Why?"

"I don't know. It's nice to be out somewhere that isn't the gardens at Goldcrest, or the forest at my father's house. I'm sure there's a ton of fun stuff to do around here and I'd love to get to just wander around watching people and eating city food."

"We can go on date nights in the city whenever you want, when this is over."

When this is over. Yeah. We've got some pretty dangerous hurdles to jump over to get to that part.

"I'd like that," I tell him.

"We're almost there," Kellan says, meaning the pickup location.

"Oh," I murmur, looking up ahead and seeing my favorite academy receptionist standing next to her car.

Lana sees me and waves. I glance at Kellan and see him waving back.

"Wait. Lana's your friend?"

He nods slowly. "Yeah. Sorry, I would have told you, but I didn't want Frost freaking out because she works at Goldcrest. Are you mad?"

"I'm stunned," I admit, feeling pretty much the same way I did when I saw him kiss Donnie.

Of course he's friends with Lana. She's awesome. He's awesome. I'm just lucky they didn't fall for each other. I'm completely into watching my men with each other, but I wouldn't want to share Lana with them if we were talking anything more than friendship.

We stop walking at Lana's car, and she gives me a bright smile. "Hey, Brooke. I love the new look. That top is so cute."

"I have a new stylist," I tell her. "You've met my mate, Kellan."

"I have. He's one of the good guys. I'm so glad you two got to meet."

"It took a while," Kellan confesses, shooting me a smile. "But we got there."

"So, you're cool with all of this?" I ask.

She nods, her smile fading. "I think it sucks that you felt like you had to run away to do it, but honestly, I understand. Edith Merritt went A.W.O.L. not long after you guys left, and the investors had to hire a replacement immediately. Another Omega ran off after you did, Brooke. Same night."

“Really? Who?”

“Ember Nestor,” she says. “I know you were friends. She had all this stuff in her purse that made it look like a plan she maybe had for a while. She forgot to take it with her though.”

There’s so much I could say about that, but I keep my mouth shut.

Lana still works at the academy. I don’t know for sure that she’s trustworthy.

I want her to be, but I don’t want to screw anything up for Ember if I’m wrong.

“Oh, wow,” I murmur.

“We should probably get going,” Kellan reminds us.

Lana nods. “Right. Get in. I can’t promise it won’t be a bumpy ride. I was about to get a new car before the shit hit the fan.”

She gives Kellan a pointed look. He takes a set of keys out of his pocket as they get in the front. I open the back door and slip inside. Kellan gives Lana the keys, and she shoves them back at him.

“Hell, no, Mr. Helps the Unicorn Escape. I’m not having the investors, or the new administrator, associate me with your ass. You’ll give me it after you drive it away from the academy.”

He puts the keys away with a helpless sigh.

“Mr. Helps the Unicorn Escape?” I ask, leaning forward in the middle of the backseat.

“Long story,” Kellan says.

“You’re the unicorn,” Lana tells me.

“I’m not really a unicorn.”

“Oh yes you are,” Kellan murmurs.

Clearly there’s some subtext I’m not picking up on, so I drop it.

“Okay, I know where the cameras are, so I’ll drop you off out of range,” Lana says, as she starts the car. The engine makes a weird noise, and nothing happens. She perseveres. The car gets going after a few tense, failed attempts. Sighing, she pulls out of the spot and we’re on the move.

“Thanks for doing this,” Kellan tells her. “I didn’t know anyone else we could ask.”

“No problem,” Lana says, bright and cheerful as ever.

I can’t help but feel a little lighter just being around her.

Considering we really don’t know what we’re walking into, I’ll take any positives I can get.

“What’s the new administrator like?” I ask.

“She’s older,” Lana says. “Like really a lot older. Apparently, they weren’t taking any chances after Edith messed up and disappeared. They went and called Marissa Sawyer, Geraldine’s mother.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Didn’t I read somewhere that she was the administrator when Goldcrest started up?” Kellan asks.

“Sounds about right. She’s not the most fun to be around from what I’ve seen so far.”

Shit. I exchange a look with Kellan. Geraldine was strict enough. I’m not looking forward to finding out how much worse her mother is. Edith would have been pissed, but on some level it would have looked good for her that we came back. Who the hell knows how Marissa Sawyer will take it?

“How do you think she’ll react to us showing up like this?” Kellan asks, while I start to panic internally.

Lana shrugs. “Honestly, I don’t know her too well.”

“You think she’ll let us claim each other?” he asks.

“Probably,” Lana says, shrugging again when Kellan glares at her. “She’s a bit of a wild card, K. Going by the rules her daughter set in place, I’d say yes. She’ll insist on the proper procedures being followed, but she’ll likely allow it.

When all is said and done, it looks better to let a match happen. She might call your dad though, Brooke. I overheard her arranging meetings with the fathers of the Omegas who were at that dinner on Friday night. I think she intends to assure them their daughters are safe despite what Edith allowed to happen.”

“Great,” I say, playing the part of father-hating-daughter.

Kellan gives me a look. Clearly, he’s closer to Lana than I am.

It wouldn’t take much to be closer to her, really. I only talk with Lana about superficial nonsense, because I can’t completely be myself around her. She works at the place that’s been like a prison to me. She has an entirely different experience of what it’s like there.

The slow crawl drive out of the center of the city starts to drive me mad.

I don’t like that we’ll have a new administrator to deal with, but the plan is what it is.

I can’t break free of these people without dealing with them.

It’s ridiculous considering I’m legally an adult. My Omega status legally requires me to be in the care of a mate, or an academy. Well, I’m wearing Kellan’s mark. He’s my mate.

She can’t force me to stay.

My father probably could.

He might in fact do just that.

Force me to stay at the academy until he can arrive and give me another brainwashing session.

He can do his worst. It’ll only give my other mates the time they need to gather evidence.

His psychotic ass will be behind bars before I’m forced to give him the proof he wants for his clients.

I barely notice the city disappearing as Lana takes the road that leads out to the academy.

The car stops a few feet before the trail into Goldcrest's grounds begins.

"First camera's on the streetlamp by the open gates," she says. "Security's probably been increased since the incidents, so I'd expect some guards to receive you before you get near either entrance."

Kellan gives her a hug. I'll admit, it makes me a little jealous.

"Thanks. You'll turn back to the look-out point and tell Donnie when you see Brooke's father arrive and leave?"

She nods. "I got the memo and I'm on my way. He won't know what's hit him."

"Perfect. Thank you so damn much."

"Thank me with the Lexus you promised for getting you into Goldcrest later, okay? Now, Godspeed."

She turns to me. "Invite me to the wedding, B? I want to see you get your happy ending."

"I promise you'll be invited, Lana."

I can't promise not to shock the shit out of her with a group wedding, but I think she'd like that.

"Good luck," she says, squeezing my hand before I get out of the backseat and join my mate on the road that will determine our future.

"This is it," I tell him, as Lana turns and heads back.

He smiles. "This is it."

"I guess it's time to go demand we be signed off as mates."

Chapter

EIGHTY

SEVEN

KELLAN

I can't help but notice every security camera on the way up the trail to the academy. Were all of them there before? I don't remember seeing all the blinking red lights, but I was probably too busy trying not to crash into a tree to pay much attention to anything else.

"Are the cameras a new thing?" I ask Brooke.

She shakes her head. "I've honestly never seen them cleaned up and looking like they were switched on before, but I only ever saw them when I was being driven out of here to visit my father on my birthday. Maybe Marissa insisted on it after everything that happened out here. I mean, her daughter was killed here. Having a couple of Omegas escape not long after that makes Goldcrest's security look like a joke."

"It does."

I wonder what that makes us look like for coming back.

Lana's right about the security detail.

Four guards get to us just as the building comes into sight in the near distance. I can see the Lexus I parked on Friday night sitting in the front parking lot, a few spaces away from the academy driver's Rolls Royce. If Marissa Sawyer's here, then she was driven into the place.

"Halt," the guard in charge demands.

I look at Brooke as we come to a stop.

She doesn't seem particularly bothered by the guards. She probably recognizes them. She's standing a little taller now, as if she's slipped into the persona of who she was when she lived here.

"Is this really necessary?" Brooke asks, cocking her head at them. "I know I don't look as good as I usually do, but surely someone here knows who I am."

"Brooke Corvina," the guard in charge states her name. He looks at me. "Kellan Mitchell."

"So, you know who we are." Brooke places her hands on her hips. "We came back so we can claim each other as mates."

The guard lets out a sigh. "Is that really the card you want to play?"

Brooke moves her hair back from her throat. "I'm marked. He's my mate."

"Hold," he says, taking a radio communicator from his belt.

He steps back, making a hand gesture that has the other guards moving around to stand at our backs.

Fantastic. We've just been surrounded.

Brooke rolls her eyes and crosses her arms under her chest.

The guard is talking to someone, checking for instructions.

I can't help wondering if it's Marissa, or another guard.

He comes back, clipping the radio communicator onto his belt.

"Okay. If you have any weapons, it's advisable to surrender them before you enter the building. They will be detected on entry, and you'll be penalized for lying to an academy guard." He pauses, glancing from Brooke to me and back again.

"We don't have any weapons," I tell him.

“Follow me. We’re taking the side entrance. Mrs. Sawyer will meet with you in the ballroom.”

He walks off at a fast pace, making us rush along to catch up.

There are several guards stationed outside the front entrance, which looks to be locked down for the night. There are several more around the side and in front of the garden.

It feels like overkill, but I guess that’s the point.

Nothing’s getting past this many armed guards.

It would be crazy to even attempt it.

The guard walks us up the stairs to the entrance, where two other guards hold the doors open for us. I feel my nose tickle a little right before we walk inside, but the sneeze doesn’t come.

I think the metal detector that’s now set up right inside the doors shocked the tickle away.

“Wallet, phone, keys, watch, jewelry,” the guard who led us in says, holding out a plastic tray.

Brooke shakes her head. She doesn’t have any of those things. She didn’t get out of here with her purse. I feel a bit weird about handing over my wallet, keys and phone, but I’m not getting a choice.

I drop them into the tray.

“Step through,” he says, motioning to us to go forward.

Brooke goes first, looking like she does it every day. She turns to wait.

I walk through next. Nothing.

The security guard puts the tray behind a desk where another guard is stationed. He puts his gun into a second tray and passes him it before he walks through the detector after us.

“Straight ahead,” he tells us.

“My wallet—” I start.

“You’ll get your personal effects back afterwards.”

Right. Sure. Brooke shrugs at me. I take her hand as the guard opens the door into the ballroom.

It's partially dark inside, with only the front row of overhead lights on. A desk sits straight in front of us, behind which a woman in her eighties with wispy, cotton-candy white hair and a death glare like I've never seen in my life appraises us as we're brought over to her by the guard.

He leans forward and whispers something I don't hear.

Nodding, she shoos him away with a flick of her wrist.

He leaves, and we're closed in the large room with the old woman.

There are no chairs in front of the desk. She leans back in her high-backed leather seat and turns that vicious stare on Brooke.

"Brooke Corvina. I've known your father for a very long time. He's a wonderful man, very ambitious and driven. I'm disappointed that you've chosen to hurt him like this."

I can see Brooke pushing away her instinctive response to try and appease the administrator.

She fixes her gaze on Marissa and nods. "Firstly, I'd like to offer my condolences for the loss of your daughter, Mrs. Sawyer. Geraldine was a wonderful administrator I respected a great deal."

The woman's stony look remains unchanged. "Geraldine was an unfortunate victim of a psychopathic killer, and her loss will be felt for the rest of my days on this earth, but she isn't relevant to your situation. Please keep any statements relevant to why you came here."

Her voice is completely toneless. She doesn't seem to give a fuck that Brooke's trying to be sensitive.

It's a bit strange for an Omega to seem so emotionless. She's recently experienced the loss of one of her adult children, so I guess I could be looking at grief. People deal with things in different ways.

“Of course, Mrs. Sawyer. It was never my intention to run away from the academy. Everything just got out of hand, but as you can see, I’ve taken Kellan Mitchell as my mate, and we would like to file the relevant paperwork and get on with our lives.” Brooke leans forward, pulling back her hair to expose her mark.

“Mm hm,” Mrs. Sawyer mutters. “I’m aware that you’re claiming Mr. Mitchell here as your mate, but your father is not in agreement with this decision.”

No shit, but I guess we’ve discovered her father holds sway with the administrator.

“I don’t understand why my father wouldn’t agree to this,” Brooke says. “He told me he wanted me mated by the end of the semester. He got me to draw up a list of potential suitors ...”

“Was Kellan Mitchell’s name on that list?”

“No. I met him after I made the list.”

“Now, that isn’t exactly true, is it?” Mrs. Sawyer asks, with a nasty smirk. “You met in the first place when you were a precocious thirteen years of age and Mr. Mitchell was fifteen. Your father was outraged at this older boy for making you perfume, something that can only happen if something deviant precedes it. I believe your father was justified in disallowing Mr. Mitchell a chance to court you. The fact that he immediately stole you away the first chance he got only tells me your father was right in his assumptions that this Alpha is unsuitable for his daughter.”

Brooke looks like she’s ready to explode. I shake my head when she meets my gaze. We need to stay on track here. The plan only works if we don’t veer off course. *She knows. I know she knows.*

“I don’t know anything about that,” Brooke says, shrugging. “All I know is this man is my mate and we intend to get married.”

“If this man is truly a suitable mate, then you’ll be able to fill out the forms and he’ll be able to pay the fine for marking

a Goldcrest Omega before her guardian or parent agreed the mating.”

She pushes a pile of papers forward, and I pick them up.

“As you’ll see, our forms have been updated recently to reflect how elite our Omegas are. I can’t just hand a Goldcrest Omega over to any old Alpha off the street.”

The forms are fucked up. They ask for an address within an estate that the academy deems safe, a wedding venue taken from their list of acceptable choices, among other asinine details that basically amount to any mate would have to be a billionaire to check all of their boxes. The fine for becoming mated outside of their procedures is scandalously high.

We can’t fill these out without lying.

“Oh, and of course there’s the small matter of your donation,” she says, flashing me a bright smile. “You owe Goldcrest a half-million dollars for the extraordinary chance Edith, bless her heart, was so kind as to give you. You can settle up when it suits you.”

Brooke takes the forms out of my hands. She frowns as she looks them over.

“Take me back to my suite,” Brooke says. “I’ll call my lawyer, and we’ll have all of this done for you within the hour.”

Mrs. Sawyer raises an eyebrow at her. “You mean you’ll call your father’s attorney?”

“No,” Brooke says, shaking her head. “I have my own.”

“You can stop toying with me, Brooke. I know this man can’t afford you, and I know he’s not the only man you ran off with. Your father had a delightful chat with Henry this afternoon. He identified the man who took his gun as a Michael Frost, who was one of the EMTs who picked you up because of a burn that you got from soup?” She laughs. “In case you think I was born yesterday like Edith Merritt, I found your makeup case, hidden away in your walk-in closet. I know you faked an injury. I know everything, so you might as well be honest with me before your father gets here.”

“You have no idea what this man can afford,” Brooke starts. “Now take me to my suite and we can have all of this sorted out before my father arrives.”

“I think you’ve forgotten who’s in charge here. You will not be permitted to take this man as your mate. There are no circumstances under which that outcome will be an option. Nor will you be permitted to take Michael Frost as your mate. You can let both men go of your own accord, or you can allow them to be prosecuted by the academy to the fullest extent of the law. Either way, you’ll never see them ever again.”

Fuck. I can’t leave Brooke here, but there’s no way in hell we’re getting past all those guards without this woman’s say-so. There are too damn many of them. A single stray bullet could get Brooke killed. It’s not worth the risk to attempt to run.

“Tell your guards to stand down,” Brooke says, dropping the papers onto the table. “I’m bonded to this man. If anything happens to him, I’ll know. I’ll comply with what you’re asking as long as you let him leave without having someone kill him or stalk him. Same goes for Frost.”

Mrs. Sawyer gives out her first genuine smile. “I’m glad we were able to reach an agreement. Your father will be so pleased.”

I’m speechless as the guard who brought us in takes my arm and leads me out of the room, away from Brooke. I brought her back here and her father’s made damn sure she’s staying.

I hope to fuck Frost got that evidence, because we need to take that bastard down before he can hurt her any worse than he already has.

Chapter

EIGHTY

EIGHT

KELLAN

I'm ushered toward the side exit by the guard, while every instinct inside me screams at me for leaving my mate behind. The shock of how badly our plan backfired is still sinking in while I try to think of something I can do. Something that will help her.

I'm not foolish enough to think I can walk back into that room.

Marissa Sawyer isn't going to let me walk out of here with Brooke.

There are way too many armed guards outside under her control.

I yank my arm out of the guard's grasp before we get to the doors.

"My wallet," I demand, a seed of a plan forming as I glower at him.

He nods at his friend who's still behind the desk. The guy gets up to retrieve the tray.

I turn back to the guard who's been tasked with leading me outside, clearing my mind of everything but the real problem. It's easier to see the solution when I focus. Everything simplifies.

Every Alpha has a command voice. A tone with intent behind it that bends others to their will.

I've never had to use mine, but now I have no choice.

I set my gaze on the guard while his friend pulls out the plastic tray. Keeping my voice quiet, I growl a command at him. "Don't let anyone hurt Brooke Corvina."

He nods slowly, accepting the command. Afterward, he starts to frown, then shakes his head.

If he knows what I just did, he shows no sign of concern.

It's not enough. I turn to the other guard, giving him the same quiet command as he shoves the tray in front of me. He nods his acceptance as I pick up my wallet, keys, and phone.

If I'm being forced to leave, I need to make sure my mate is protected.

This is the best I can do right now. Commanding two Beta guards to look out for her.

They might never be around her. They might not see what her father's doing as harm.

Frustration fills me as the doors open and I'm ushered outside.

If only I could have all these guards ready to lay down their lives to protect her.

That might be enough to keep her safe until I find a real way to rescue her.

The guy who brought me outside hands me off to one of the guards at the door.

I hear those double doors being locked shut behind me.

Then, I'm being dragged down the stairs by the guard.

I could make my command of him, but I know it'll work without question if I make eye contact.

It's safer if I wait until I'm able to face him.

Safer? A burst of rage fills me. Fuck safer.

My mate is at her psychotic father's mercy every second she spends in that fucking building.

Yanking my arm out of the guard's grasp, I turn around, my gaze moving over every guard present at this side of the building. I make a command of them all as I growl out, "Attack anyone who tries to hurt Brooke Corvina."

I see the command reach each one of them, all guards nodding back at me in silent agreement of my command. The one I broke free of scowls after he nods.

He glowers at me, apparently not going to escort me all of the way off of the property.

"You have two minutes to be on the other side of the academy gates," he tells me. "If you're not gone by then, we have the authority to shoot you dead."

Considering how impossible that is on foot, I dart around to the front of the building, taking the keys to the Lexus out of my pocket. I get inside, ready to take off, but I stall the damn thing twice in my haste before I finally get it going.

I roar down the dark road that leads to the exit, scattering a couple of guards who were waiting near the gates with hunting rifles in their hands. The sound of gunfire rings out into the night as I exit the academy gates, my heart hammering while I burn rubber.

I don't slow down until I get to Lana's lookout point. I roll down my window as I get to her car.

She rolls down her window and nods at me. "Park up down the street and come sit with me. That car stands out way too much here."

She's probably right, so I follow her advice and leave it where anyone driving past won't see it.

Her old car is a darker color, and it isn't exactly clean on the outside.

She unlocks the doors, and I slide into the passenger seat.

"I'm guessing Marissa didn't let you claim Brooke as your mate?"

"She changed the procedure to make sure we couldn't officially claim each other."

“Damn,” Lana says, shaking her head. “So, she took Brooke back in, and had you escorted off the premises?”

“That would be the short version,” I mutter.

“Well, you might as well give me the full story,” Lana tells me. “We don’t know when her father’s getting in, and it’s not like we have anything better to do.”

Chapter

EIGHTY

NINE

FROST

Waiting around for Brooke's father to get out of his mansion in the middle of the woods is fucking torture. Brooke was able to tell us where the cameras are so we could find a way to avoid them, which is probably the only reason we're still out in the middle of the damn forest waiting around while he sits inside doing whatever the fuck rich psychos do when they're home alone.

"He must have been told by now," Donnie mutters, pacing around in circles in one of the few blind-spots close to the house.

"Quit pacing," I mutter back.

River's leaning against a tree, holding onto Donnie's phone because he kept dropping it taking it out to check it every five seconds.

"Can't help it," Donnie says, shrugging. "All this waiting around is killing me."

River moves, putting an arm around him, and stopping him in his tracks.

"They're both fine," River tells him, putting a hand on the side of his neck and stroking the skin there. "Relax. This whole thing is almost over."

It's hypnotic watching my Omega calm our Beta down.

Donnie leans into his touches and lets out soft sighs as he starts to relax.

All the tension slips out of his body, and his fingers stop tapping against his leg.

The frantic, nervous energy he was steeped in is gone.

Then, his phone vibrates in River's other hand, and our Omega lets out a sigh as his work is undone in a second. Donnie gasps in a breath, his bright eyes widening as he stares at River.

"What's happening? What's Kellan's friend saying?"

River steps back, opening the text as I lean in over his other shoulder.

Shit. It's the worst-case scenario.

Brooke's been detained at the academy, and Kellan's life was threatened as well as mine. Apparently, Brooke's father found out I met Henry.

Fuck! I should have given him back his gun.

"They know about you," River murmurs.

"They don't know we're out here now," I remind him, hoping to hell that's true.

"We knew he was smart," Donnie says. "It's not that big a surprise, right?"

It shouldn't be, but it is. I thought I covered everything. That was cocky of me.

I need to be smarter than that now.

"We can't go back to the apartment in the city," I tell them. "We get this file, and you two need to take it straight to the cops."

"What?" Donnie asks. "Why? Where are you going?"

"They know about me. They'll know about the apartment. They don't know about either of you."

They won't know about Crystal Lake. That's Donnie's place, left to him by his grandmother when she passed. I might

have made it my home, but my resistance to give up the apartment meant I never updated any paperwork to make that official. I can't be linked to Donnie or River, except through our work.

“What do you mean?” Donnie asks. “We were all there the night Brooke escaped.”

“Yes, but as far as her father and the academy administrator knows it's Kellan and I who organized the escape. We're the Alphas. As far as they know, you two are unrelated Betas.”

And like any rich asshole, I'm pretty sure Brooke's father isn't going to waste much time thinking about the Betas who just happened to be there while his daughter was being set free by two Alphas.

“Unrelated?” Donnie sounds pissed.

River nods. “We're the secret weapon.”

“Right,” I tell him. “We need to make sure you two stay off this asshole's radar.”

I'm used to being protective of my mates, to doing whatever I can to keep them safe.

Knowing they need to be the cavalry on this only makes me more determined to save Brooke and deal with her father before it comes to the point where they would be needed to step in.

The sound of a car engine starting captures our attentions.

I turn to the right. It's impossible to see the car itself from this spot, but the lights are visible, and I know it's Warren Corvina's car. He's leaving to go to the academy.

I turn back to Donnie and River.

“Okay, change of plan. I'm going in alone, and you two are going to wait out here for the files.”

Donnie shakes his head. “You can't do that, Frost. Who the hell knows what's waiting in there?”

“Brooke said he doesn’t have guards. He has cameras. I’m the only one who should be seen on those cameras. It’s the only way the plan works now. You two need to be the ones to take those files to the cops.”

“Where will you be while we’re doing that?” River asks, while Donnie lets out an irritable sigh.

“I’ll go back to the house once I’ve given you the evidence. You’ve got Kellan if anything goes wrong.”

“If anything goes wrong?” Donnie looks ready to smack the shit out of me. “What the fuck do you mean, if anything goes wrong? I’m not leaving you out here on your own ...”

“We have to,” River tells him. “He’s going to make Brooke’s father let her go.”

Donnie frowns at me. “He turned Kellan into feral monster with a single command. How the hell do you expect to get him to let Brooke go?”

“He won’t have a choice,” I tell him. “Look after River. I have files to dig out.”

“Frost ...” Donnie growls.

“He’s right,” River murmurs.

I leave River to calm Donnie down.

We don’t have any time to waste.

Chapter

NINETY

KELLAN

It's probably a good thing Lana told me to park her new car out of sight and join her in hers. The second she sits up straighter, seeing Warren Corvina's car approach in the near distance, I know I would have driven out in front, stopping him from getting anywhere near my mate.

He's done enough damage. I'm ready to end it in the only real way it can be ended.

"Okay, I've told your friends he's arrived," Lana says as the car moves on past us.

"Fuck," I curse as the car moves past us.

"What is it, K?" Lana asks, as she returns her phone back to its stand between the seats.

She glances back out the window, as if she missed something.

"We should have had a better plan."

This one isn't good enough. It was never going to be.

Even if I hadn't been forced to leave, I wouldn't have been allowed the option to stay at her side. We would have been separated. Kept apart until Marissa Sawyer decided if we were allowed to become mates.

"I don't know, K. Your plan's pretty solid if you ask me."

"We're leaving her at the mercy of a psychopath, in the hope that we can find evidence that might send him to jail. I

wouldn't call it a guaranteed win."

"Nothing good in this life is ever guaranteed, K. When there's something you want, you need to fight for it, and it's not always easy." Lana gives me a pointed look. "I feel like I need to clarify that the fight I'm talking about here isn't literal. I'm not recommending a knock-down, drag-out with Brooke's father. You look like you might be in the mood for that kind of thing. It's freaking me out."

I let out a breath. "I'm worried about Brooke. It's driving me crazy that I had to leave her back there."

"I know. It sucks," Lana tells me, putting a hand over mine. "But you have met Brooke, right? I mean, you're her mate and you already did the whole claiming and marking thing. So, you must know she's strong. She can handle her father. She's got the plan down as well as you do. She knows you guys have her back."

She's right. Brooke tried to take control when she realized Marissa changed the rules on us. She had fire in her eyes. She was ready to exhaust every option before she'd quit.

Her resolve didn't falter when Marissa gave her a tough choice.

She made that decision without flinching.

She knew what we were getting into coming out to the academy, and she wasn't afraid.

"She's pretty tough," I admit.

There's no way we would have gone ahead with this plan if she wasn't. She decided it was how we needed to do this. I wouldn't have chosen it. I doubt the guys would have, either.

Did we need to go to the academy to lure her father away from his house?

Brooke had been certain it was the only way to be sure he would leave.

He needed her, more than anything else.

She's proof positive that his method of conditioning works.

Or at least she will be, once he gets her to take an Alpha she doesn't want as a mate.

"I'm sure your guys will get the evidence to get him arrested tonight." Lana gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. "And once that happens, we can do whatever it takes to get Brooke out of Goldcrest."

"Yeah," I mutter, trying to relax.

We fall into silence, waiting.

Chapter NINETY ONE

BROOKE

My stomach churns for the safety of my mates. I know I can survive in here, but they're out in the real world where anything could be happening. I only have her promise to go on that they won't be killed, and I don't trust that crusty, old bitch one little bit.

"You'll be taken to your suite in a moment where your father will meet with you," she tells me. "You'll find it's been ... re-organized. Anything deemed unnecessary has been confiscated."

Translation, they've taken all my personal belongings away.

I roll my eyes. Right now, I couldn't care less if she told me they burned it all.

"Your father is only doing what's right for you. I think you should be more grateful."

I stare at her. "My father is a cold-blooded psychopath who only cares about power and money, and I can see now that you're cut from the same cloth. I'm not standing here because of either of those things, and I never would be. I'll do what I need to do to keep the people I care about safe, but don't ever expect me to be grateful to either of you."

She raises an eyebrow. "You have a lot to learn. I'm glad your father's coming to start teaching you."

The door opens behind me, and the same guard who escorted Kellan out takes my arm.

I pull it out of his grasp. "I'll come with you. There's no need to assault me."

He frowns as he holds the door open. I step into the hall and start walking in the direction of my suite. Everything looks a bit different now. There are way more cameras in the hallways and all of them look like they're on.

When I get to my suite, I have to stand back and wait for the guard to unlock it.

He motions to me to go inside. As soon as I do, he shuts the door, and I hear him turn the key.

He's locked me in. I felt trapped before, but now I really am.

I hit the lights and look around to discover that bitch did more than strip the place of my personal belongings. The couch and coffee table are gone. The TV, too. All that remains of the kitchen table and chairs are the indents on the carpet where they stood.

I shake my head. They planned this shit. They expected me back here, and they thought it would bother me to be without comforts. It doesn't.

I check the fridge. It's full of water and fruit. Nothing else.

The kitchen drawers are empty. The cupboards are empty, too.

I step into the bedroom and turn on the light.

Everything's gone, pretty much, besides a pile of sheets and a couple of pillows that are resting against the far wall. I go over there and discover the landline phone is still a feature. I pick it up and dial the operator. I get a standard message back that the phone can only take incoming calls.

I look into the closet and find it empty. No more glamorous dresses for me, then. No more death-trap designer heels. The only thing that makes me a little sad is the absence of my makeup kit.

I sit down in the closet, back resting against the wall, staring at the empty spot where I used to keep it. The case blended in with the detailing on the closet. It didn't stand out. I'd hoped they wouldn't find it, but clearly that bitch had her minions turn my room upside down and inside out.

I stand up when I hear someone rattle the handle of the suite door.

The thought of confronting my father makes me feel sick to my stomach.

He's spent years brainwashing me, trying to force me to fit the mold he wants me to fit.

He should be rotting away in a prison cell for everything he's done, not practically running the show at an Omega academy while he's trying to make girls like me easier for their unwanted Alpha mates to handle.

I move into the main room of the suite as he enters and closes the door.

It's not locked now, I suppose, but why would it need to be?

There are dozens of men with guns I'd have to get past if I wanted to get out of here.

"Brooke. I'm so pleased you decided to come back."

"I bet you are." I stare him down, wondering how easy it would be to gouge his eyes out with my fingers. I'm sure it would be messy, and I might even throw up, but I think I could do it.

"Now that you understand why I can't allow you to mate with just anybody, I'm sure you'll be very pleased with the mate I've chosen for you."

"I won't, but that doesn't matter to you."

"Don't be difficult, Brooke." He frowns at me. "I allowed you to have your fun. To go off with those pathetic Alphas and do whatever you needed to do. It's time to put that behind you and grow up."

“Whatever. Who do I have the displeasure of marrying?”

“Lachlan Darvish. The youngest billionaire who attends Goldcrest. He’s independently wealthy, and he’s been looking for an Omega to marry for the past two years.”

He really is a fucking psychopath, and I should gouge his goddamn eyes out before this goes any further. Lachlan Darvish is the first name I scored off my list.

“He’s a rapist, and a creep, and I’m not going to go anywhere near him.”

My father laughs. It’s as if I just told him Lachlan drinks milk out of the carton, or something equally inane. “I expected better of you than to listen to rumors, Brooke. He’s a fine, ups —”

“He’s a rapist. He’d just left Lacey Maris bruised and bleeding in the toilets the night I met him. It’s not a rumor. He likes to hit women and force himself on them. That’s the kind of man you want me to marry?” My voice rises as I stalk across the floor toward him, ready to attack.

“Freeze,” he commands me.

I stop on the spot, forced to obey by his Alpha voice.

“A good Omega doesn’t question. A good Omega does what she’s told. A good Omega complies.”

His words enrage me to my core.

He smiles and taps my cheek. “Good Omega. Now, I expect you to get some sleep. I want you to look your best for your new husband. Goodnight, Brooke.”

He snaps his fingers and leaves.

I break out of his control and lunge at the door.

I can hear it being locked and I rattle the handle anyway, anger taking over as I slam my fists into the wood. “You’ll regret this, you fucking prick asshole!”

I growl as I force myself to leave the door alone.

The sight of the empty room makes more sense now.

I know why they took everything away.

So, I wouldn't have a weapon.

Well, I'll find a way to make one.

I'm not going to marry Lachlan Darvish. I'd sooner die.

I'll find a way to fight my asshole father to the bitter end.

I'll never give in to what he wants.

Chapter

NINETY

TWO

FROST

Security at Warren Corvina's house is surprisingly lax. Like Brooke told us, there's no alarm system. No security guards patrolling the grounds. All he has are cameras. They're everywhere, the closer I get, but they're standard kit. Nothing fancy.

In comparison, I'm all dressed in black, with a hoodie and gator covering most of my face. I have leather gloves on my hands, and I have black shoe covers ready to put over my boots, to avoid leaving footprints inside the house.

Donnie had the gator, the gloves, and the shoe covers in his car. He's worked a lot of jobs in the past, but I didn't consider a burglar might be one of them until he started digging out helpful items.

He even found me a mini flashlight that I'm carrying in my pocket.

I have the gun on me, too, but I don't expect to have to use it until Warren gets back here.

That's the part of the plan I had to change, because I already know when he sees the files are missing, he'll have some kind of contingency plan. Something that'll let him escape the ugly fate that's rightfully his. I'll have to come back and watch what he does.

If he tries to run, I can stop him. Fingers crossed that's all he can do.

Truth is, we don't know if he might have sway with someone high up.

Could be, he has a Get out of Jail Free card in his back pocket.

We can't let him evade justice like that. The least he deserves is to spend the rest of his miserable life rotting away in a prison cell. If it looks like that won't happen ... well, I'll have to decide what I can live with.

The chance to play judge, jury and executioner doesn't come along all that often.

He won't get away with what he's done to Brooke.

I won't let him.

On approach, I can see the house is mostly dark inside. The small glimmers of light seem to be coming from a central source. The hallway, most likely.

It looks like no one's home.

Brooke said her father has a half-dozen live-in kitchen staff and housemaids, but if any of them are inside it doesn't look like they're awake. I make my way around the exterior of the house, and I find I have my pick of entry points. Two ground floor windows are halfway open. The gap is plenty big enough to climb through, and both rooms appear to be vacant.

I go with the sitting room, which Brooke told me comes out into the hallway behind the main staircase. It's almost directly across from the study.

The gap isn't as big as it looked, but I make it.

My new black hoodie doesn't survive fully intact, but I can live with the superficial damage caused by the catch on the bottom of the open window's frame. My next surprise is the discovery that the boot covers aren't quite as non-slip as Donnie claimed, but I guess polished hard-wood flooring is their natural enemy.

I get the hang of walking after a few missteps, and I head straight for the door to the hallway.

It's bright in this mid-section of the house, and I spot the cameras in the hall, right where Brooke told me they'd be. All I can really do is avoid looking at them directly. There's no way to avoid showing up on the feed. The only real saving grace is the system is old. He's doesn't have alerts set up, and he doesn't have a security guy watching his screens, so he won't find out someone's in his house the second I'm visible on the feed.

I'll just have to move quickly and make sure I'm out of here the second Kellan's friend alerts us that he's leaving the academy.

I leave the sitting room, crossing the bright hallway to the study door. It's locked, like we expected it to be. There are a few ways to get a locked door open in an emergency, but considering I don't have a battering ram on hand tonight, I'll be employing my second favorite method. The credit card.

At least that's the method I'll be using. I never use an actual credit card. I have an old, scraped-up gift card that I keep for this singular purpose, and it's never failed me yet.

It's a bit trickier with the gloves, but I get the door open in under a minute all the same.

I push the door inward and slip into the room, closing it quietly.

Hitting the lights, I take in the room.

It looks like a typical psychiatrist's office.

Leather chair, leather sofa. Big desk. Bookcases.

I move behind the desk and find I need to break into the drawers like I broke into the room.

For a second, I'm not sure the card will work. When it does, I let out a sigh of relief.

I find what I'm looking for without any trouble. The thick file is marked Project O.

I remove it and check inside, discovering neatly written notes on a conditioning technique that can be applied to Omegas to ensure obedience. There are bound casefiles inside

with subject names on the covers. Some of them are marked complete. Others, like Brooke's, are marked ongoing.

Checking the drawers, I make sure I'm not missing anything else that might be important.

Then, I put the file under my hoodie, sticking the edge into my waistband and keeping an arm around it as I hit the lights and leave the room.

I dart back across the hall and leave the way I came in.

My phone doesn't start to vibrate until I'm on my way back to the blind spot where Donnie and River are waiting. Checking it, I find out Warren's left the academy.

I move faster, getting to the blind spot and pushing the file into Donnie's hands.

"Get moving," I tell them. "I have to get back there."

"You can't," River says, shaking his head. "It's too late. We all have to get back to the car. Now."

"He could run when he finds out this is gone," I tell them. "We'd never find him, and he'd always be a threat to Brooke."

Donnie shakes his head. "Fucking go, if you're going. If you let yourself get killed, I swear—"

"Not gonna happen." I bolt back through the woods, feeling as if I'm moving in slow motion.

Chapter

NINETY

THREE

KELLAN

Lana's checking her phone when Warren's car leaves the academy. I touch her arm, and she looks up, nods at the car, and sends Donnie a text alerting him that Brooke's father is on his way back home.

She gets a text back almost immediately. "They have the file."

"Oh, thank God." I let out a breath.

It's starting to feel like we're halfway home.

Lana relaxes back in her seat. "That was intense."

"It's not over yet," I tell her.

"Right," she says, nodding. "We need to go meet them at the police station."

"We?" I ask. "You only need to drop me off. Lana, you've done more than enough."

She gives me a look as she starts the engine. "You seriously think I'm bowing out this late in the game? I want to see how this ends, K. Brooke deserves her happy ever after. If I can help her get there, I will."

"You're the best friend ever."

She smiles. "Thanks for noticing."

We head to the police station.

Chapter

NINETY

FOUR

BROOKE

I don't sleep. I lay down in the darkness of my old bedroom at the academy and it finally feels like this place has become what it always really was. My prison. The place where I'm trapped until an Alpha takes me as his mate.

If the rules were really that simple, I would be free right now. I have claimed mates, and at least one of them was academy approved. I'm a grown adult, and I'm having the decisions I made on my own denied by the one person who's supposed to care about me more than anyone else.

My father doesn't care about anyone but himself.

If he had a soul, or even a speck of empathy inside of him, he wouldn't be able to do what he's doing. Handing his only child off to a monster, to prove that he can force an Omega to do anything he wants, is the single most fucked-up thing I've ever heard of.

Anger swells up inside me every time I think of what he's already had me do.

My returned memories only make me realize how much more heartless he is than I thought.

He made me sit in the dark basement with the lights out as a kid, the one place in the house that freaked me out. He turned me off certain foods with his conditioning bullshit, for no other reason than to prove he could.

But the worst part is, he gave commands to Geraldine to use on me when I got to the academy.

Some of the blackouts I had here were in the company of Alphas. Men I showed no interest in until Geraldine used her commands to change my demeanor. I let those men have whatever they wanted.

I remembered nothing, until my memories started to seep back.

Frost woke me up. He made me remember.

Lachlan Darvish wants me because he's already had me. I just didn't know it.

Some part of me wishes I still didn't.

That's the part that wants to stay curled up in a ball on the floor and never leave this room.

It's not the kind of attitude that's going to help me get out of this.

I stretch as I sit up, easing the aches and pains in my body from lying on the hard floor.

Getting to my feet, I continue stretching.

Once I'm done, I go drink some water and eat some fruit.

Taking care of myself is important. I didn't used to think it was but coming so close to having the life I want, a life where I can be happy, changed something inside me. I know now there's something better out there waiting for me.

All I need to do is fight for it.

I'm ready to do that.

Chapter NINETY FIVE

DONNIE

The cops take our statements and the file, and honestly, it doesn't look like they're ready to do anything about it, until Kellan tells them it's urgent due to our Omega's life being in immediate danger. That's when they assign us a detective and things start to feel like they're heading somewhere constructive.

We're put into an interrogation room and left there for a while.

Kellan looks ready to explode. He's looked that way since we told him Frost stayed at Warren Corvina's place, to make sure he doesn't do a runner over the missing file.

I'm worried about Frost. I know he can take care of himself, but I'm not so sure he can be chill with the guy who's been torturing our Omega her whole life. I want to see Brooke's father go to jail tonight, not my first Alpha mate and best friend.

"It really feels like those cops think this is nothing," Lana murmurs.

"Those cops were preoccupied," River says. "Pretty sure we interrupted them talking fantasy football league transfers."

"I don't like how long this is taking." Kellan runs a hand through his hair, making it look even more like he just rolled out of bed. He looks seriously good with messy hair.

"There's not much we can do about it," I remind him.

We're locked into this plan now. There's no other real way to stop Warren.

I mean, besides in the final sense, and I think Frost might already have that covered.

It's driving me insane that we haven't heard from him since he went back there.

I want to know if he's okay, but I don't want to compromise him if he's hiding.

We sit in silence for a few more minutes before the door opens.

A short, female cop enters the room and closes the door. She's holding the file and wearing a wry smile. "Good evening," she greets us as she sits down across from us at the table, slapping the file down. "I've just been informed that the life of an Omega woman may be in danger and that you'd like to fill me in on why that might be."

We all look at each other. Either those cops didn't pass along our statements, or she wants to hear them over again from scratch. It's enough to give anyone a headache.

Kellan sighs. "My mate's father has been conditioning her with a combination of Alpha orders and brainwashing techniques, and he's also used a lot of other people in this testing without their knowledge. Including me."

She raises an eyebrow. "You? You're an Alpha."

"That's what makes it so dangerous," he tells her. "He somehow triggered me with one of his commands. I still have the message on my phone. I could show you, but it would need to be under controlled conditions with an Alpha ready and waiting to snap me out of it."

"Well, this isn't what my colleagues led me to believe it might be."

"What did they make you think this was?" I ask, curious.

"They said you four were high as kites. Clearly, you're not." She shakes her head as she tips out the contents of the file onto the table. "What exactly is all of this?"

She picks through it, her gaze moving over sections of the handwritten notes carefully.

“It’s his case notes,” Kellan answers. “We were able to procure them from his office.”

“Procure?” Raising an eyebrow, she shakes her head. “You know what, don’t tell me. You guys aren’t cops, so how you got this doesn’t matter. What does it prove?”

“It proves that Warren Corvina’s been using Alpha commands on Omegas. He’s been working on a conditioning technique to allow Alphas to control their Omegas completely, no matter how strong willed they are.”

“Warren Corvina?” she asks, letting out a low whistle. “Doctor Warren Corvina? The guy who runs private hospitals specializing in care for Omegas? This could be huge.”

“Could be?” I ask, raising an eyebrow when she shrugs back at us.

“I’ll need to see what we have here. If there’s enough to warrant an arrest, I can have a couple patrol officers go pick him up. If there’s not quite enough for that, then I’ll go question him at his home.”

“You can see his command in action, if it helps. I didn’t give him consent to do that to me. He did it anyway. Surely, he could be arrested for that?” Kellan says.

She nods. “Well, sure, but he’s loaded, and he’s probably connected. He won’t pay more than a fine for using a single command on another Alpha. The bigger case is if he’s been commanding Omegas for the purpose of selling those techniques to other Alphas. There might just be enough weight in a case like that to make it close to impossible for the guy to evade a jail sentence.”

Might? Just enough? Close to impossible?

Shit. Frost was right to lay in wait at Warren’s house.

This fucked-up shit he’s been doing has a decent chance of being brushed under the rug.

“What about Brooke?” Kellan asks, making her raise her eyebrows.

“Brooke?”

“His daughter. He’s been commanding her for years. He intends to use her as proof that his methods work. She’s in imminent danger.”

“Does she reside at the same address as Doctor Corvina?”

“She’s at Goldcrest Omega Academy,” Lana says, when Kellan doesn’t answer.

“The Omega academies are considered safe havens for Omegas,” the cop murmurs. “I’m afraid as long as she’s there, I have no authority.”

“Are you serious?” Kellan asks. “Frank Palmer killed a whole bunch of people at that academy ...”

“Yes, he killed security guards, the head of administration, and some visiting guests who had the misfortune of being outside when he arrived. He wasn’t able to get into the building. It’s still considered safe for Omegas to reside there.”

Holy fucking shit. Even the cops can’t get to Brooke.

“He intends to mate her to an Alpha she doesn’t want,” Kellan says. “There’s a good chance he’s already set that plan in motion. We can’t let it happen. She has no protection while she’s in that damned academy.”

“My hands are tied here,” the cop says. “I’ll look into the file and proceed shortly as I previously stated. I’ll do whatever I can to keep your mate safe from her father while we investigate. Now, I can get moving on this if you’re ready to leave?”

She’s ready to get rid of us, and Kellan doesn’t waste any time.

He gets up and leaves the room without another word.

“Thanks for your help,” Lana says, giving the cop a vaguely apologetic glance before she follows Kellan out.

“No problem,” the cop murmurs.

“Can you call us to update us?” I ask as I get up.

She nods slowly. “If there’s anything to update you on, I’ll call.”

She already has our contact info. We gave it when we made our statements.

River follows me out of the room, and we head out into the early hours of the morning in Cressidan City.

Chapter

NINETY

SIX

RIVER

The mood is somber all around as we leave the police station. It doesn't sound like the evidence will lead to an arrest, and to be fair, I doubt an Alpha who can command other Alphas would have too much trouble getting out of a prison sentence before it was even issued. The plan was fucked from the start, and we're going to have to come up with a better one if we want to save our mate.

"Anything from Frost?" I ask Donnie, after I check my phone.

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

"We could go to a lawyer," Lana suggests.

"A lawyer?" Kellan asks.

"Marissa Sawyer pulled a fast one when she changed the academy's claiming procedures. That probably wasn't done legally. I doubt she had time to file anything properly, and even if she did, it takes time for that stuff to go through. You could start the fight to officially claim Brooke as your mate."

"It's something, I guess," Kellan says. "I assume it won't necessarily mean we can get Brooke out of Goldcrest?"

"If Marissa and Warren are working together, probably not, but it could at least have Marissa's judgement overturned, then you'll be free to claim each other."

"After a day apart like the old rules state?" Kellan asks.

“Well, yeah, probably,” she says.

“Fine. Are there any lawyers with offices open twenty-four-seven in the city?”

“I’ll look them up,” Donnie says, taking out his phone.

Chapter NINETY SEVEN

FROST

It's probably unlikely that Warren Corvina didn't make it home due to a horrible accident, but a guy can dream. It's hours after he was supposed to get back when I find my way into the basement of his house. His study was the only vaguely interesting room on the ground floor, and even then, it was only of any real interest because of what I found in the desk's drawers.

The rest of the house was expensively bland. Barely lived in, and with virtually no personal items laying around to tell any kind of story about the owner.

Clearly, his work is his life.

That I can believe.

It would make sense to go find a hiding spot in his study. He'll retreat there when he gets home. I doubt he spends much time in any of the other rooms in this place.

Yet, my instincts tell me there's something more important in the basement.

It was the only other locked door on the ground floor of the house, and I got it open the same way I got into his study. The lowest level of the house shows no sign of being touched by the staff who keep the ground floor clean. The stair railing is dusty, and half the lightbulbs don't seem to be working. I walk by a couple of burnt-out bulbs, and another flickers

above me as I move past the empty corner section the stairs led me down into.

The middle section of the basement seems to exist for the sole purpose of storing wine. Racks housing hundreds of dust-covered bottles stretch out across the entire length of the room. There are boxes scattered across the floor in front of some of the filled racks. I check on a few bottles and discover the wine has been organized by year.

Moving past the racks, I reach a storage area.

Whatever brought me down here is contained here.

I look through the boxes, knowing the stuff that's been put in most of them means less than nothing to Warren. The pictures, clothes and ornaments look like they belonged to a woman. While I can believe the man who lives here would box up everything that belonged to his wife when she died, I seriously doubt he'd keep anything of hers for any reason other than to hide something amongst the clutter.

I check through everything, becoming so absorbed that I realize I've stopped listening out for noises from the floor above. Probably should have ignored the instinct that brought me down here. I'm losing track of time and I haven't found anything discriminating for my efforts.

If I'd hoped there might be something worse than the evidence I already passed on to Donnie and River to take to the police, my hopes have been dashed.

I still don't understand why Warren would keep the belongings of the woman he married, but whatever he's using them to hide, it's been well concealed.

Sitting down, I take out my phone.

I take off a glove to unlock the screen, and the sudden illumination of the floor to my right makes me wonder if Warren might be hiding something under the boxes, instead of amongst them. The ground is concrete, but I just saw what looks like the corner of a hatch.

I get to my feet, push the boxes back, and keep the light shining on the floor.

When the square hatch is revealed beneath, I can't help but smile.

This is what I came down here to find.

Whatever's on the other side of this hatch is better than the evidence we already gave the cops.

There's a padlock, but the metal's rusted on the chain it's attached to.

A couple good, hard yanks and the chain breaks.

I set the lock to the side and open the hatch.

The space inside is small, it's literally the size of the hatch's door, and probably around the same depth, and all it contains is a wooden box that's only slightly smaller than the space it occupies.

Dampness has made the wood expand. I can't get the lid to open until I get a fire poker out of one of the boxes and pry the corners up. It cracks a little, but I get to my prize.

“Holy fucking shit.”

Chapter

NINETY

EIGHT

BROOKE

I know this is the calm before the storm, the moment of peace before my life is turned upside down and inside out. My father is an unstoppable force. He's ready to push me into a situation I have no control over, but I can't say that's any different from what he's done to me for the whole of my life.

I feel like I'm waiting on the edge of a cliff, trying to judge how jagged the rocks at the bottom are.

Will I survive, or will death be instant?

If only I could throw my father over that edge. That would end his control over me. It would stop him from continuing to use people to further his ambitions for more money and power when he already has more than most. It doesn't matter if he becomes the richest man on the planet. It'll never be enough. He's not going to stop until he's dead.

A smarter Brooke would have figured that out sooner.

That Brooke might have found a way to poison him before things got so desperate.

This Brooke is mad she didn't think of it.

She's pissed that she had no idea how truly awful her only living relative was until one of her newly found mates stopped him from further torture and made her remember everything her father had ever done and made her forget.

The sound of knocking on the suite's outer door brings me out of my thoughts sharply.

It's too soft to be my father, and I doubt Marissa Sawyer would waste her time with a visit.

I move to the door and peek through the peephole.

A familiar, red-headed Omega is standing on the other side of the door, a garment bag and heels over her shoulder. Erika is a much better perfect, little Omega than I ever was. She plays by the rules of the academy, and she actually seems to enjoy her life at Goldcrest.

I can see why Marissa might have asked her to come to my suite.

Hearing the lock turn, I let out a sigh and step back from the door.

It opens, and Erika steps inside.

"Hey, Erika," I greet her, arms folded under my chest.

She turns slightly as the door closes behind her. The lock engages with a click.

"Brooke, I was so worried when I heard about what happened on Friday night!" Her dark eyes go wide as she talks. "Are you okay?"

Clearly, Marissa didn't give her all the details. I'm not so sure I want to, either.

She's trapped here like I am. She can't do anything to help me.

"I've been better," I admit. "I assume our new head administrator sent you?"

She nods, her eyes going wide again as she looks around the suite.

"What happened?" she asks.

"I guess they decided to redecorate while I was gone." I shrug.

She bites down on her bottom lip, releasing it only after her shock has turned to horror.

“You tried to get out of here,” she murmurs. “That’s it, isn’t it? You weren’t hurt. It was an escape.”

“Unfortunately, I made the mistake of coming back,” I tell her. “I wouldn’t advise it.”

“Oh my word,” Erika utters, giving me an appraising glance. “So, this isn’t a happy occasion.”

A happy occasion? I frown at her. “What exactly are you here for, Erika?”

“You don’t even know ...” She shakes her head. “This is awful. I’m so sorry, Brooke.”

“You’re sorry for what?” I snap as my patience runs thin.

She puts the silver heels down in front of me and unzips the garment bag. A delicate, white lace dress peeks out at me. I close my eyes as I start to tremble. The sheer frustrated anger that courses through me is making me shake with untapped rage. I feel like I need to scream.

“You’re getting married at two p.m.”

Like hell I am.

Chapter

NINETY

NINE

KELLAN

Frost meets us after he's been to the cops with new evidence that Warren Corvina's committed a crime. We gather outside the academy gates, waiting for the arrival of our lawyer and her hired help.

Turns out, Lana's idea had legs. The new head of administration was guilty of adapting rules to suit a situation she deemed as unfavorable, with no apparent intention to submit the new rules to the investors to have them written up legally. The previous administrator had used the official Goldcrest rules to admit new Alphas, and I'd marked Brooke after gaining admission, so Marissa was wrong to deny us the chance to claim each other as mates.

"This had better work," Frost grumbles beside me.

"It will," Lana assures us.

"Something feels off," I mutter, not sure exactly what.

"Yeah," Frost says. "Where the fuck did Warren go when he left here last night?"

Lana shrugs. "We would have followed him if we thought he'd do a disappearing act. I don't get it."

"You think he was watching his cameras remotely?" I ask. "Maybe he knew we got that evidence out of his office."

Frost shakes his head slowly. "I searched the whole fucking house. That was a basic as shit camera system.

Nothing fancy. At least a decade old. There's no way in hell he had the feed on his phone. In fact, I'd be surprised if he had a cell phone. If he does, it's probably a brick from the mid-nineties."

River looks from Frost to me and back again.

"Maybe he didn't leave the academy," River suggests. "Brooke said his driver was allowed to return to his own home whenever he didn't need him. That would explain why the car didn't get back to the house."

"You think he's in there?" Donnie asks, his posture changing.

He looks ready for a fight. I think we're all ready for that.

"If he is, I'm sure we'll find out soon enough," Lana says, nodding to the lawyer's car as it pulls up behind us.

Tessa Masterson is a tall woman with dark hair pinned back from her thin face. She's in a gray suit and she's flanked by two guards a little taller than she is.

"Good afternoon," Tessa greets us. "Are we all ready to meet with Marissa Sawyer?"

"Ready," Lana tells her, when no one else does. "Lead the way."

"You're sure about this?" I ask Lana, not wanting her to jeopardize her job.

She raises an eyebrow at me. "Are you seriously still asking me that?"

The lawyer heads through the open gates, Donnie and River following close behind.

Frost waits, scowling after the lawyer.

I look back at Lana. She gives me an impatient patient stare.

"You're cute, K, but you're not so smart."

"Did you just call me an idiot?" I ask.

“I have a unicorn to set free,” she says. “I’m the one who came up with the lawyer thing, don’t forget. We’ll see who Brooke’s really impressed with today when she finds out.”

I laugh as she moves after the others.

Frost follows her, and I rush to catch up.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED

BROOKE

I change into the dress and heels for Erika, and she buttons up the back. Like every other dress that's ever been custom made for me at the academy, it fits like a glove and makes me look like a spoiled princess.

"Well, the dress is beautiful," Erika tells me, as if that might make me feel better.

It has a neckline that covers my mark, and there are so many buttons on the back that I know it's going to be a nightmare to take off, or even to sit down in.

"The dress is always beautiful," I tell her.

"Well, that's true," she says. "If you want some support, I can be your bridesmaid."

It's a typically sweet offer from someone who might have been a friend in another life.

"I think I'll swallow this bullet alone," I tell her. "I don't want my father to think I changed my mind about wanting to get married."

That's definitely what he'd read into me deciding to have a bridesmaid.

I won't give him the satisfaction of thinking he's winning.

Whatever happens today, I'll fight the fate he's trying to force on me with every step I take.

“Well, if you change your mind ...” Erika starts, shrugging.

She’s one of the less easy to read Omegas, but I can tell she feels sorry for me.

“Mrs. Sawyer asked me to make you up, too, but I assumed you would have your kit.”

“They took everything away,” I confess. “I don’t know where they put it.”

She nods. “That’s okay. I’ll go get mine. We have time.”

I guess we do. I step out of the shoes, not caring that the skirt of the dress is creasing a bit without the added height. Erika winces, but she doesn’t say anything.

She knocks on the suite door to be let out, and I hear her talking to the guard before she leaves.

I pace around, working out the best way to walk in the dress with its more restrictive top half.

It’s not possible to walk very fast, which I presume is the point.

I can’t run away if the dress makes running impossible.

Erika comes back before one p.m., knocking lightly before the door opens again.

She steps back into the suite with a small makeup case that she takes over to the kitchen counter.

“Well,” she tells me. “I guess we’re doing this standing up.”

She steps out of her heels to match my height out of mine.

“I think you might be taller than I am,” I tell her.

“Probably,” she says, before she taps the side of her head. “Of course, my hair always adds an inch when it’s up like this.”

She opens the makeup case. “I’m probably not as good with this as you are, but I’ll do my best.”

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED ONE

FROST

The lawyer explains what we're doing here to the guards who approach when we get to the end of the road into the academy. She's authoritative and demanding for a Beta, but the guards seem more impressed by her hired muscle. It probably gave their ego a good boost to see someone bring in protection. I bet she does that on purpose. She seems like the kind of person who doesn't do anything without a reason.

"Call Marissa, and ask her to meet with us," Tessa says. "If she refuses, we're within our rights to bring in a police escort with a warrant. I'm sure she'd much rather avoid that sort of unnecessary unpleasantness."

The guard she's focused on rolls his eyes. "Mrs. Sawyer is not to be disturbed for the next hour. Come back later. Maybe she'll agree to see you then."

"If I come back later, I'm coming with police officers, and she can explain to them personally why she prevented a request that was made in good faith using the academy's standard practices. I'm sure they'll be very interested in learning exactly what made her choose to break the law. Fingers crossed she wasn't employing other shady practices which those cops will definitely look into while they're out here. Like hiring men as guards who might not be in this country legally."

The guard frowns at her. He turns to his friend, who shrugs.

Clearly, he's trying to decide if it's worse to disturb his boss, or potentially be sent back to wherever he came from. I can't believe he even has to think about it. Marissa Sawyer must be a real piece of work.

"Wait there," he tells her, backing away.

"If your friend disappears as a stalling tactic, neither of you are going to be happy with my reaction," Tessa tells the other guard. She brings her cell phone out of her purse. "I have an outstanding relationship with C.C.P.D. They can be out here in a click of my fingers."

"Good pick on the lawyer, by the way," I tell Kellan.

"Actually, it was Lana's idea," Kellan says.

"I knew she'd be awesome," Lana murmurs.

"Maybe pause the celebration until we're inside?" Donnie asks, sounding a little worried.

River puts his arm around our Beta. I'm usually the pessimistic one out of the three of us, but our current situation is so far out of control that I'm not surprised it's getting to our group's ball of sunshine. This is the first time we've had to deal with a serious threat to one of our mates.

"We're getting in," River assures him. "It's just going to take a few minutes."

The guard comes back and nods. "Front entrance. Follow me."

He moves before anyone can respond. His friend trips over his own feet to catch up to him.

I frown as we start to move, Alpha instinct telling me we're missing something here.

"I knew Tessa would be awesome," Lana murmurs, practically skipping along next to me.

I glance at Kellan as Lana catches up to the lawyer and her guards.

"You don't think that was a little too easy?" I ask him.

“I don’t know,” he tells me. “But something feels off.”

Shit. I’m not just being paranoid if his instincts are telling him the same thing that mine are.

“What if River’s right?” he asks me. “If her father didn’t leave, then what is he still doing here?”

“Nothing good,” I mutter.

As if I wasn’t already itching to get my hands on that guy.

“I’m not giving Marissa five minutes once we get inside,” I mutter.

“We know where Brooke’s suite is. We should go straight there.”

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED TWO

BROOKE

My father makes his appearance about twenty minutes later, once Erika's done making me look like Arranged Marriage Barbie. My makeup's too soft and pink, and my hair's been teased back into an updo that looks incredibly eighties, which is clearly an era Erika's a little fixated on. I catch a glimpse in the mirror when I decide to attempt using the bathroom in the dress.

Ugh. I look all pink and white and fluffy. I feel like a marshmallow.

I resist the urge to scrape all the makeup off. Ruining Erika's work won't stop the wedding. It might only make my father angry at both of us. She doesn't deserve to incur his wrath, and I'm not interested in earning it out of petty frustration. I'd much rather anger him by ruining the display he's trying to make out of me with a wedding to one of the worst Alphas Goldcrest has ever seen.

He gives me a disdainful once-over as he closes the door.

"This is the best the most elite academy in the country can do at a moment's notice?"

It makes me laugh that he actually cares about what I look like.

I mean, he always has, but it seems extra amusing today.

"Compose yourself," he snaps, unimpressed with my moment of levity.

I roll my eyes. “You took away all my stuff. So, if I look like shit, it’s not my problem.”

“You look like your mother did on our wedding day.” He takes a closer look and screws up his nose.

That look lights a fire inside me, igniting the rage I’ve been trying to push away since he left the last time. I stare him down. “Well, I’m sure she’ll be looking down on us today, wondering how the hell she ever forced herself down the aisle to marry a monster like you.”

His expression is bored, but I can feel how angry he is. He can’t hide that from me.

“Is this what you had to do to her that day? Use your Alpha command voice to make her say yes?”

“Your mother was a timid, little mouse,” he tells me, his lips turning up into a sneer. “She was weak, and pathetic. She didn’t need to be ordered to do it. She knew what would happen if she didn’t.”

Oh my God. I fucking knew it! She never would have married him.

She was so sweet, so sensitive.

She never would have willingly agreed to be mated to someone like him.

“Well, I know what’ll happen if I don’t do this,” I tell him, through gritted teeth. “Do you see me going anywhere?”

He laughs. “There’s nowhere for you to run to, Brooke.”

“Yeah, and there never was,” I admit. “I shouldn’t have tried to run. I knew I was trapped. I know there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Except attempt to convince my father that I’ll do what he says without his mind tricks.

Avoiding being triggered is the only option that’ll give me a shot at freedom.

There is one good thing about the hairstyle Erika gave me.

It required a couple of six-inch-long pins to hold it in place.

I have a precision weapon I can use when I get in close to my father, or Lachlan. All I need to do is be ready to grab the opportunity whenever it presents itself. Right now, while I'm trying to convince my father I've realized I can't run away anymore, isn't the time.

"I'm ready now," I tell him, my voice hollow. "I'll do whatever you think is best."

He looks at me, and I keep myself as emotionless and still as possible.

I know that's when he trusts me the most. When I act as if I might be like him, under the surface.

"There's an old fable, Brooke, about a scorpion and a fox. The scorpion promises not to sting the fox if he'll only carry him across the river, but he stings the fox anyway, because it's in his nature. I'm not sure why you'd ever think I was as stupid as the fox."

I'm not the scorpion in that scenario, though, Daddy Dearest. I'm the river, and I'm long past ready to drown you and the fox both for your fucked-up behavior.

I stay silent, knowing he isn't going to change his mind.

He's still that same scorpion. I can't expect him not to sting me.

"I almost believe you're ready to do this," he tells me, sounding pleased with himself.

"It must be time," I murmur, feeling oddly calm in the face of this new nightmare.

Checking his watch, he smiles viciously. "Follow my lead, Brooke, sweetheart."

Every word is part of the spell. He already primed me for this one. I remember it so damn clearly. He had me echo every word he said verbatim. I'm ready to follow along with my vows then, I suppose.

“Where are your earrings?” he asks, as if he’s just noticing I’m not wearing them.

The urge to tell him I flushed them down the toilet comes and goes.

“Where are your earrings?” I echo back at him, frowning like he just did.

He smiles. I smile.

“You’re definitely ready,” he tells me.

“You’re definitely ready,” I copy, as he puts my arm in his.

I guess I’m about to walk down the aisle.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED THREE

KELLAN

We're led into the main entrance way of the building, slowly of course. The doors were locked, and the guard is a fumbling idiot, which I think is an actual fact, and not just another stalling tactic.

His friend takes over after he drops the keys the second time.

Frost is grinding his teeth loudly enough to make anyone nervous.

If I wasn't so damn worried about our mate, I might have a little sympathy.

Like my patience before it, my allocation of sympathy seems to have dried up pretty damn fast.

The second guard holds the door open for us.

Tessa walks in ahead of us, her bodyguards behind her, and Lana behind them. Donnie ushers River inside, and then that first nervous, awkward guard tries to slip in before Frost. He earns himself a nasty glower before he backs up. He doesn't try to move again until after we're all inside.

"Which way to meet with Marissa Sawyer?" Tessa asks, raising an eyebrow at the guards.

They glance at each other, and I look at Frost.

We're both having the same thoughts. These guys are trying to keep us busy.

The only reason they'd need to do that is if something's happening that they don't want us to know about. I don't want to think about what that something might be, but I don't really need to.

I nod at Frost as the guards ask us to wait in Mrs. Sawyer's office while she finishes up her current meeting elsewhere in the building.

Fuck this charade. We need to go find Brooke.

Frost moves first, headed to the corridor that eventually leads to her room.

"Stop! You aren't cleared to be here," the second guard calls out to him. "I have full authority to shoot you dead."

Frost stops. When he turns around, he has a gun in his hand. He releases the safety and points it at the second guard's head. "I'm here to retrieve my mate, before her father does anything to hurt her. You can let us do that, or your brains can paint this hallway. Your choice."

"Brooke Corvina," the guard says. "Her father's trying to hurt her?"

I smile as his face slackens. He must have been one of the guards I commanded last night.

The other guard looks like he's gone a bit slack as well, but honestly, I can't tell if it's because of my command or because he's just kind of stupid.

"He's ready to help," I tell Frost as I follow along.

"You did that?" Frost asks, impressed.

"Last night."

"Good job."

Tessa clears her throat. She gives us an expectant look.

"Obviously, what you're about to do is not advisable. In the slightest. It's going on record that I advised you not to run off looking for your mate. I'll be waiting right here for Marissa. If you happen to come across her, let her know."

I nod, and Frost gets moving, the guards following him.

The rest of us rush along behind him, with myself and Lana at the tail end of the group.

“This is starting to get pretty crazy,” Lana admits.

“I have a feeling it’s going to get even crazier before we’re through.”

“Is this it?” Frost asks, looking back at Lana.

She weaves past Donnie and River, cranes her neck past the guards, and nods.

“This is her suite.”

Frost nods and takes a card out of his pocket.

“The guards might have keys,” I remind him.

He looks at the more competent guard.

“Do you have keys?” he growls, his Alpha command tone a bit more feral than mine.

The guard unhooks a set of keys from his belt and Frost commands him to tell us which key is the right one for this suite. He’s opening the door a few seconds later, and then all of us are looking in on an empty suite.

It doesn’t look like anyone’s been living here, but Frost marches straight into the adjoining room and comes back with the sweater Brooke was wearing when we left the apartment last night.

“They definitely tried to stall us,” Frost says, staring at the guards.

The sudden sound of pipe organ music playing the wedding march makes all of us freeze on the spot.

I grab the closest guard. “Where’s the wedding?”

“Out in the gardens.” He blinks at me. “Did Brooke’s father hurt Brooke?”

“He did, and it’s time we stopped him.” Frost marches out ahead of us, moving toward the back entrance that should lead out that way.

I rush after him, leaving everyone else to trail along behind.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED FOUR

BROOKE

Being led out to the gardens, one of my favorite places at the academy, to be married off to the second worst Alpha on the face of the planet, only makes me hate the first worst Alpha even more than I already do. My father's holding my arm as if we have the kind of relationship where I'd invite him to give me away at my wedding.

There are chairs gathered in two rows facing the gate I walked through with Frost the night we met.

On one side there are around a dozen academy Omegas sitting in the chairs, in their finest dresses, with perfect postures. On the other, there are maybe ten people I don't know, but who all have the same thick blonde hair that Lachlan has. Kind of makes me wish I were a brunette. Maybe then that creep would have fixated on someone else.

Of course, no one else is broken like me. None of the other Omegas at Goldcrest have been undergoing a weird conditioning process designed to make them obedient to their mate, regardless of how truly awful he is.

It's not outside the realm of possibility that he's been testing this process on other Omegas here at the academy, but I seriously doubt he's spent anywhere near as much time on them as he has on me. I'm the proof that his method works.

Forcing me to marry Lachlan is the evidence he wants his buyers to see.

Everyone knows I've been here forever and that I haven't been interested in any of the Alphas that come here. He can make the case that Geraldine tried everything, but that he was the one who finally got me to marry someone. An Alpha who's known to be abusive to women, no less.

That'll impress his disgusting clients. It shows it doesn't matter how awful they are. They can still have whatever they want in whatever way they want it.

I'm so distracted by my anger that I almost miss my father whispering, "Be a good girl, now."

"Be a good girl, now," I whisper, repeating his trigger phrase to make me stand still expectantly while I wait for the vows. This command overrides the echo command, but I know he'll utter that again once it comes to that part. I don't intend to allow that to happen.

The music, thankfully, stops, and he leaves me standing at the end of the pathway next to another creep in a suit. A priest moves onto the platform. God only knows where he came from.

He starts a dull sermon about marriage, and Lachlan makes a noise to get my attention.

I ignore it, and he leans in close, whispering in my ear, "The wedding part is boring, but think of all the fun we get to have later."

I'm certain he's grinning as he moves back. It takes all my restraint not to shudder at how close he was, his hot breath on my ear. My father can't see my face right now, but he can see my posture.

I stay calm and composed as I wonder what damage one of my hairpins would do, depending on where I stabbed it into him. They won't be quite as lethal as the hatpin, but I think I'll be capable of summoning enough force to do some real damage.

When we're told to face each other, my father issues his command from before.

I stare at Lachlan's smirking, over-privileged face and I know I can't contain my anger for another goddamned second. I reach back, as if to scratch my head, and I tug one of the hairpins free.

"Brooke!" my father seethes a foot away from me, shaking his head.

He gets to his feet as I slip the pin between my fingers, grasping the jeweled head tightly.

"I preferred it up," Lachlan says, giving me an unimpressed once-over.

"And I prefer it this way," I tell him, as I lash out at my father's face.

I turn to watch Daddy Dearest stagger back, falling into his seat, his hand reaching up to clutch his bloodied face. I straighten the pin between my fingers as he pushes back onto his feet, his shock turning quickly back into anger.

Bring it on.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED FIVE

FROST

The sight of my mate in a wedding dress makes my heart leap into my throat. The music cut off just before I got to the door and found it locked. I smack my fist on the glass before Kellan reminds me we're with two guards who have keys.

Brooke just vanished from sight, clearly reaching the end of the aisle her father was forcing her to walk down. Pausing to unlock the doors is fucking torture.

When I get them open, I bolt around the corner to see Brooke smacking her father across the face. No, not smacking. Slashing. He crumples to his seat in front of her, clutching the wound.

The split second of terror in his stare makes me smile.

My mate is capable of saving herself, but I'm already sick of this shit, so it's time to step in.

Her father stands back up as I approach, and the groom yanks her arm back when it looks like she's about to slash at her dad a second time.

"Take care of our guest!" Warren Corvina roars at his daughter.

She laughs, yanking her arm out of the groom's grasp and tearing the material. "You seriously think that shit still works on me? I know what you've been doing, and it all stops now."

Marissa Sawyer gets to her feet and starts darting back toward the building, muttering under her breath, “Everything’s fine. Stay calm.”

I don’t know who the fuck she’s supposed to be talking to, but when she realizes I’m in front of her and she tries to step past me, I block her path. “Go sit the fuck back down, or it won’t be fine in a minute.”

She stares at me, horrified. “You ... You’re not on our approved list!”

“Yeah, well, you need to update your list,” I tell her, motioning to her to sit down, using the gun.

She pales as she moves back, reaching her seat and doing what she’s been told.

The Omegas sitting in the rows behind her look like they don’t know what to do. The people in the other seats across the aisle are talking quietly and shaking their heads.

I move past them and reach Brooke. My mate takes a second to react, blinking until her sapphire eyes fill with relief and a smile reaches her soft-pink lips.

“Frost! How did you get here?”

“Long story,” I admit. “We’ll tell you all about it later.”

“We?” She looks past me and smiles. “You brought everyone.”

“Brooke Corvina, is your father hurting you?” one of the security guards asks.

She raises an eyebrow at me. “Um, who’s this, exactly?”

“We should probably tell you about that later, too.”

“Right,” she says, shaking her head and looking back at her dad. “Where was I?”

Warren Corvina is starting to look decidedly nervous, standing in front of a daughter he’s just realized he can no longer control, and the loyal pack who’ll do anything to keep her safe.

He starts to slowly back away, using the path he walked Brooke down a few minutes ago to look for a way to escape his obvious fate. He should know better than anyone, there's nowhere for him to run to. We have him outnumbered, trapped.

"Better catch Warren Corvina," I tell the guards. "He hurt Brooke."

The guards bolt after him, bumping into chairs and mussing up Marissa's hair on the way past.

I pull Brooke back, out of the way, and she wraps her arms around me, resting her head on my shoulder. "I missed you so much," she murmurs, looking up at me.

"I missed you, too." Leaning down, I kiss her gently on the lips.

The sweet scent of her perfume reaches me, and I wish I could will the rest of the world away.

Unfortunately, that's not how the world works.

I open my eyes and see that the guards are still chasing Warren around up ahead.

Closer by, Marissa Sawyer is looking like she seriously regrets coming out of retirement, and the groom is staring at me with an ugly sneer on his spoiled, rich-boy face.

"Who the fuck are you?" he spits out.

"We're her pack." I look back and nod at Donnie. "Can you go the long way around the trail, Donnie? Make sure those feeble-minded guards catch Warren."

"Easy," Donnie says, shaking his head at the groom before he takes off.

"This won't take long," River murmurs, before he sprints off after our Beta.

"Damn it," Lana curses, sighing as she steps out of her shoes. "Wait up! You guys have no idea where you're going." She runs off after them, leaving me and Kellan with Brooke.

"So, who is this guy?" I ask, waving the gun at him.

“Yeah, right. Like you don’t know who I am,” he says. “Let my lady go, or I’ll have you ripped to bits by my security detail.”

I exchange a glance with Kellan, who steps forward, cracking his knuckles.

“His name is Lachlan Darvish, and he does have a personal security detail when he’s out in public,” Kellan says. “However, he mostly needs them to grease palms and get rid of evidence when he abuses women and Omegas. He’s a piece of shit.”

The rich asshole looks pissed now. “I own a fortune 500 company! I—”

“You were gifted a fortune 500 company from your parents when you turned twenty-one,” Kellan goes on, his eyes darkening as he approaches. “And you’ve already had to settle in five court cases against women you assaulted at work. You’re a piece of shit who has the money to avoid going to prison for being a piece of shit.”

“He is most definitely a piece of shit,” Brooke agrees.

“If I’m a piece of shit, you’re a fucking whore,” Lachlan snaps.

Kellan slams a fist into his face, and Lachlan topples backward, hitting the ground hard and sliding back against the chairs his family are sitting in. Two people at the front get to their feet.

The woman raises her hand and looks at me expectantly.

Oh. She’s waiting to be allowed to speak.

When Lachlan starts to get up, the man standing next to her puts his foot down hard on his middle, keeping him down. His gaze moves downward, and he hisses, “Don’t even think about it!”

I nod at the woman, clearly the piece of shit’s mother.

She clears her throat. “We were led to believe Lachlan was marrying his true mate today. The arrangements were very sudden, but we had no reason to doubt the veracity of the

event. As it seems our son has once again lied to us, we will be disowning him and cutting him off from the family fortune.”

The spoiled creep groans from under his father’s foot. His father spits on him.

Lachlan mutters something barely audible, calling his parents assholes, I think. It’s hard to hear through the strained tone he’s gone into now that he’s crying on the ground.

“You deserve worse,” his father snaps down at him.

Murmurs of agreement rise up around us.

This guy has hurt a lot of women. It sounds like some of them are present.

Brooke’s looking at him with her head tilted.

She smiles strangely before she leaves my side to approach them.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED SIX

BROOKE

As satisfying as it is to see Lachlan crying on the ground with a bruise under his eye and a foot in his guts, I think his father is right. *He deserves worse. Much, much worse.*

“Your son here abused a lot of women. I had no idea I was one of them until I remembered what my father did to get me to be compliant to any of the academy Alphas. He made me forget, so I’d never suspect what he was up to. Now that I know, I’ll never forget, and I’d like to give Lachlan a present he’ll never forget, either.”

His father gives me a nod. He’s furious with Lachlan. I can see it in his eyes, and I can feel his rage swelling around me as he looks up. I can hear a couple of the Omegas behind me crying. I can hear others cursing Lachlan’s name to hell and back.

Everyone moves when I kneel at the crying rapist’s side.

“Get that bitch away from me!” he screeches up at his dad, thrashing wildly under his well-placed foot. “She’s fucking crazy!”

I take off my heels, because God knows where my hairpin went.

I have a feeling the stiletto will be easier to wield. I grip the shoe tightly and bring the thin heel down hard over his groin. He lets out an unearthly shriek, and I hear his pants tear a little bit.

“Wait, that didn’t work out like I planned,” I tell him, disappointed that it didn’t actually stab him.

There’s no blood on the stiletto. Not yet anyway.

“Well, you know what they say, Lachlan. If at first you don’t succeed ...”

I bring it down harder this time and I’m rewarded with a fine mist of blood on the sleeve of the dress. He howls like a banshee. I tug at the heel, but it stays wedged tight.

“What was I saying? Oh, yeah. Try, try again until the rapist is castrated as painfully as possible.”

I get to my feet and rip off the sleeve of the dress, letting the bloodied rag fall to the ground in front of the crying, shrieking piece of shit in the tuxedo.

The other arm is falling off, so I rip that one off, too.

I can’t quite describe how satisfying it is to destroy a piece of clothing I got from the academy. It’s not quite as good as stabbing a rapist in the unmentionables, but it still feels pretty damn good.

I turn to Frost and Kellan. My true mates and Alphas don’t look at me any differently after seeing what I did or hearing what I admitted. They each wrap an arm around me, and I’m quickly enveloped in a hug that offers so many other possibilities. If only we didn’t have such a big audience.

“Please tell me you guys are my ride home.”

“Which home?” Kellan asks, making a very good point.

I move back. “Well, my home isn’t in Crystal Grove anymore. I don’t really care where it is now, as long as it’s with both of you, and Donnie and River.”

“We can talk about how we’re going to work things, but we should probably deal with this creep first,” Donnie murmurs, nodding toward the path. “I’m guessing we need to call the cops, too, but maybe we could check with our lawyer.”

“We have a lawyer now?” I ask as I turn to watch the guards marching my father back toward us.

“We do,” Kellan admits. “That was Lana’s bright idea. She’s good. I’ll let her know what’s happening.”

He brings out his phone.

The guards stop in front of us, and I look at the man who’s been running my life since forever.

He’s old and tired and the only emotion he’s familiar with is anger.

“You’re going to be locked up for the rest of your life,” I tell him, knowing I have something on him that he can’t talk his way around. Out of all the memories that came back, it’s the most painful.

“You ungrateful little bitch,” he snaps. “You’re exactly like your mother!”

He has no idea what a compliment that really is. “My mother survived marrying a monster. She was stronger than you ever gave her credit for. So am I.”

Frost looks at me, offering the gun. I shake my head.

I want my father to suffer. Killing him won’t allow that to happen.

My father sneers at me. It’s clear he thinks I’m spineless because I won’t take the gun.

“Don’t think I’m not killing you because I can’t. I could. I could do it a million different ways for everything that you’ve done. I choose not to, because I want you to rot in prison where you belong.”

“I won’t spend a single day in a jail cell,” he seethes.

“Oh, yeah?” Frost asks, transitioning to his Alpha command voice. “Forget your lawyer’s details. You don’t have one. You don’t want one.”

“Ooh, I like it,” I tell him.

“Yeah?” he asks, smiling.

“Yeah. That’s so good. I love it.” There’s no way in hell my father will be able to win his case defending himself. He’s

too unlikable, and that's just for starters.

“What's that about loving something?” Kellan asks, as he slips his phone back into his pocket.

“Nothing important,” Frost says. “What did Tessa say?”

“She's calling the cops, and an ambulance for any casualties. She'll be out here in a minute.”

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED SEVEN

BROOKE

One very long afternoon of explaining every detail of what happened to the cops ends when I'm done going over the hardest part. The part that has my heart ripped out of my chest and bleeding on the floor in front of me. It's bad enough that my father was conditioning me to be a good, little slave of a wife to a despicable Alpha. It's irredeemably awful that he created a trigger to make me sexually pliable to any Alphas who decided they wanted to spend a night with me.

But the final straw goes back to when he first commanded me to forget.

Some of my memories are hazy, but that's the one that came back sharpest, and I know exactly why it did. He used me to help cover up Zelena Ortega's death. I was ten when it happened, when her parents came to the door sobbing and desperate for help.

My father saw an opportunity. All I saw was a dead, little girl in the arms of her grieving parents.

He told them what he could do to help them. I listened to every word, some of it going over my head in the moment. He went out and found another needy couple with a daughter of the same age and ethnicity, a ten-year-old girl who loved to sing.

That couple sold their daughter to the Ortegas, where they were convinced she'd have a much better life full of wonderful opportunities. Of course, now that I know what else my father

was doing, I don't think it's a coincidence that the girl they used to replace Zelena is an Omega.

He used his voice on her, to erase her identity and give her Zelena's new and improved life in the estate he built next door. He made it look as if the Ortegas purchased the house, but they did so with the money he was making helping Omega traffickers find vulnerable targets.

The Omegas have all made their statements and been sent back to their rooms. A couple of them gave more detailed statements about what Lachlan had done to them with the view to having him locked up behind bars for longer. I gave them information on what he did to me and told them he knew what my father was doing. He was, essentially, a client of my father's. Lachlan's family had surprisingly little to say, most of it bad and all of it about Lachlan, before they all started leaving the academy. Lachlan was taken to the hospital with a police escort.

My father was taken away by the police. Marissa was an accessory to my father's crimes, so they took her away, too.

All I want to do now is call Zelena, and it's the most awful conversation I can ever imagine having.

Most of her life has been a lie. The real Zelena Ortega's bones are rotting away inside my father's basement. The worst part is, he killed her. I saw him come in from the forest, blood on his sweater.

He killed a little girl that night, and he did it to have leverage over that couple.

To break them down more than they already were and manipulate them into helping hide where his extra money was coming from. That little girl had hopes and dreams, but I'll never know what they were. They died with her.

It makes me feel hollowed out inside. I thought Zelena had been my friend since forever. What happened doesn't erase what we built together, but I doubt she'll ever look at me the same way once she knows what my father did.

I get up from the seat outside Marissa's office as Tessa finally steps out.

"Did you find out where they put my stuff?" I ask, and not just because I want to get out of this ugly ass wedding dress. I left my phone here. I can't call Zelena without it. I don't know her number.

"I think so," Tessa says, showing me a set of keys. "If Lana can point you in the direction of the medical room, you'll find a storage cupboard where Marissa decided to put all your personal items."

Lana nods and gets up, taking the keys from Tessa's hand. "I can take her."

"Good," Tessa says. "I'm seriously ready for this day to be over. That scene out there was a real mess. Luckily no one died, but you guys really know how to make a lawyer's job harder, for sure."

"It was nice meeting you," I tell her. "We'll see you again soon."

"Hopefully not too soon," she says as she puts on her jacket. "I'm ready to curl up in bed for a couple days. Fingers crossed that gets to happen."

We say good-bye and Lana walks me across the reception area to the corridor that leads to the medical room.

"Well, this has been a day," Lana jokes.

"At least you're not the one in the dress," I tell her, pointing to myself.

"Yeah, I'm surprised you haven't tried to tear more of it to bits, honestly."

"I thought about it."

She laughs. "It's been fun hanging around with your mates. They all seem great."

"They are," I admit, unable to keep the smile off my lips.

"I think I'm gonna get back out there," she says, nodding. "It's been a minute, but I'm beyond ready to meet a great guy."

Yours give me hope that they actually exist.”

“Believe me, when I was stuck in here, I wasn’t sure they did.”

“Well, I’m about to be stuck here for longer than I thought,” Lana says. “While the cops were taking your statement, I answered a call on reception. One of the head investors wanted to talk with Marissa over the changes she was trying to make, calling them unacceptable and over-the-top specific. I gave him a brief rundown on what had just happened, explaining that this is my day off, and he offered me the job on an interim basis. I’m the new Head of Administration.”

“That’s so awesome!” I can’t believe they’d do something so smart.

“Really?” she asks, raising her eyebrows. “It’s not kind of messed up?”

“Lana, if anyone can set Goldcrest on the right track, it’s you. It’s a raise, right? You’ll be in charge?”

She beams back at me. “It is! Honestly, I could almost afford that Lexus on my own in like three months. I’m so fucking excited.”

“Congratulations!” I give her an impulsive hug that reminds me of my attraction to her.

It hasn’t vanished in the haze of meeting my true mates, it just feels a little bit less intense.

I guess my loneliness kind of latched onto her friendliness for a few years.

She doesn’t feel like a true mate, even if I’m still really attracted to her.

She’s blushing when I step back. “Thanks.”

“Thank you for helping my guys come and save me.”

“Oh, please,” she says. “You barely needed the help.”

“Well, I need it now,” I remind her. “This dress needs to be tossed in the nearest trashcan and preferably set on fire.”

She laughs. “Come on. Let’s find you some real clothes.”

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED EIGHT

DONNIE

By the fourth time I've been questioned by the fourth cop who's spoken to me, I'm ready to shove my head in a blender. I repeated the same story of chasing Warren around the garden while who the hell knows what else was going on until the guards caught him and I heard the cops were on their way. It's nowhere near as exciting as Frost's story, from what little I did overhear, and Kellan was with him, so I guess he had a bit more fun than I did, too.

"Finally," I utter as I'm told the cop has everything he needs.

I get up feeling like I've spent the last couple of hours circling around in a fishbowl, the other fish constantly forgetting what I've just told them. If I don't need to speak another word today, I'll be happy.

I head out of the room, finding River waiting against the wall outside.

"They aren't out yet," he tells me. "Brooke went to go get her stuff. Lana had the keys to the medical room where it apparently got taken."

"I bet those two will really be getting roasted," I mutter. "Did you have to keep repeating stuff, too?"

"A little. That's why I didn't say much. That last cop thinks I'm a stoner, I heard him uttering that under his breath."

"Well, were you acting like a stoner?"

He shrugs. “Maybe. Kind of. Cops can’t stand stoners.”

I shake my head. “Why the hell didn’t I think of that?”

“You’re too honest?” he asks.

“Yeah, that’s probably it. Can you remember where Brooke said the medical rooms are?”

He nods. “You want to go find her?”

“I’ve missed her. Haven’t you?”

“Of course,” he says. “She was talking about getting changed when they left, so we’ll need to knock when we get there.”

I snort. “I’m not knocking. She’s our mate.”

“Yeah, well ...” River shrugs.

He’s giving me that he knows something I don’t know vibe right now and it’s kind of annoying.

“Just lead the way,” I tell him.

He leads the way, across the big, open reception area into an enclosed corridor.

“It should be at the end of the corridor and into the right a little bit.”

“Well, I hope so,” I tell him.

I don’t feel like wandering around this place aimlessly looking for our mate.

Those cops bored me a bit too close to death. I’d hate to pass away because we got lost.

I stifle a yawn as I follow River down the corridor.

“That’s it,” River points out, heading toward a door that’s already open.

I move a little faster, spurred on at the thought of seeing Brooke.

He knocks on the door, and calls out, “Brooke? It’s River and Donnie.”

He has the softest, sultriest voice. It's great for bedroom talk, not so much for rising above a stage whisper. He steps inside, and follow him closely, only to end up with his knee in my balls when he turns around to make a swift exit.

"Aaah!" I groan, moving back until my ass is up against the wall while I buckle over.

The white-hot pain of a bruised ball-sack makes me feel like puking.

"Shit, sorry!" River says, covering his mouth with his hands.

I give it a few seconds, breathing like I'm about to give birth, before I manage to stand a little straighter. The urge to puke has passed, and the pain is starting to fade.

"Why did you jump back like that?" I ask, frowning at him.

"Oh. Um ... Brooke was getting dressed." It's all he's saying, but it can't be the full explanation.

"Uh huh. You've seen her naked, River."

"Well, I haven't seen her stare at another woman while she's naked before, so ..."

I blink at him. "What was that?"

"I think she might have a crush on Lana. They were both feeling a bit ... aroused."

"Um, okay," I manage, moving toward the door.

"Don't," River says, shaking his head.

"We could have another mate—"

"She doesn't feel like a mate."

"Well, then we have an extremely sexy mate who might be into girls sometimes and that's pretty hot."

River looks at me as if I'm a stereotypical man-pig, telling me off with his big, dark eyes.

"Whatever it is with them, it's new, so leaving them alone is the not creepy way to deal with it."

“We’re her mates ...”

“And Lana’s not.”

“Right. Shit. You’re right. Fuck. I’m just so bored, and now I’m kind of sore, and I really wanted to see Brooke.”

River smiles at me. “It’s cute when you get all desperate.”

“I sounded like a spoiled brat, didn’t I?” I ask, trying to dial my desperation down a bit.

“You sounded like a guy who’s been missing one of his mates, but I think you should remember Brooke’s only one of your mates.”

“You’re right.”

He nods. He doesn’t always share what he’s thinking, but when he does, he’s always right.

“So, we wait out here for them to ... finish whatever’s going on in there, or ...”

He moves in close and drags me down to kiss him by the front of my shirt.

I think we have Brooke to blame for that move. She seems to have taught it to him.

I kind of like it, so I won’t complain.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED NINE

RIVER

Donnie's desperate boredom is turned into sexual energy so easily it feels like I'm using a cheat code on him every time I take advantage of it. He switches from restless energy to laser-focused precision in a heartbeat, apparently deciding this hallway is a good place to relieve me of my jeans.

I'd protest, but the instant my cock is in his hands, I have no words.

All I have is sensation. He tugs his hand over my shaft, using the other to rub my balls slowly, fingers dipping lower every move, until he's bringing my slick up over my balls to make them wet and deepen my arousal. I perfume while he still has his tongue in my mouth, and I perfume a little more when his grip on my length tightens.

He groans as the scent reaches him, breaking the kiss to look back at me with lust-filled eyes.

"Why do you smell so damn good?"

"Why do you feel so good?" I ask.

"Holy fucking shit," he curses, looking me over. "You're going into heat."

"I can't be," I tell him. "My perfume's just been coming in stronger since we met Brooke and Kellan."

"Omegas aren't supposed to go into heat until they meet their Alpha, or Alphas. We didn't know you had two of them.

You've been perfuming more because the time is finally right."

Why is he starting to make sense?

Fuck, I was just thinking I would need to get some of Brooke and Kellan's things to make my bed feel right when we get back home. If that's not a nesting behavior, I don't know what is.

Holy fuck. He's right. I am going into heat.

"I probably shouldn't be teasing you right now," Donnie says.

"You're not walking away from me."

"Well, no, but I probably shouldn't fuck you."

"Why the hell not?"

"You're craving a knot, River. I can't give you that."

Right. Shit. "We need Frost and Kellan."

"And they're kind of tied up with the cops."

Donnie lets go of my cock and lifts me off my feet, bringing me over to lean me against the other wall. He gets down on his knees in front of me.

"Just think how good it'll be when we get home, and you have two big, fat knots to get you through your heat," Donnie murmurs, before he starts licking his way around my cock.

I let out a low moan. Everything he does gets me off.

He's so good at sucking down every inch of me. He's always been so damn desperate for my cum, even when it barely had a hint of sweetness in it. He wanted me when my perfume was nothing.

And I know he'll want me that same way for the rest of our lives.

He's mine, and I'm his, and that's never going to change.

"I wish you could feel their knots," I murmur as he pushes me closer and closer to the edge with his eager mouth and

swirling tongue. “It feels so damn good. The way they swell and lock.”

Just talking about it is doing things to my body. I’m getting warmer, starting to sweat. My slick is coming in fast, making me ready for more than Donnie can give me. I’m tempted to beg him to fuck me, but I know it won’t be enough, and that’s kind of messed up.

I need an Alpha to see me though this.

We both know that.

Unfortunately, both of our Alphas are otherwise engaged.

I know how good it would feel to be knotted while he’s on his knees in front of me like this. It’s rare that both Frost and Donnie are with me at the same time. They spent so long alternating vacation days so someone could always be with me, that it hardly ever seems to occur to them to be with me at the same time when there’s actually a choice.

I close my eyes as I lean my head back against the wall.

The soft moans that come out of Donnie’s mouth as he takes me deeper and deeper are so damn sexy. I don’t know how he finds a way to breathe while he has me in his mouth, but somehow, he manages to inhale between taking me down his throat and letting me almost slip out, just so he can swirl his tongue around the sensitive tip of my cock before he sinks deep again.

He starts slow, but usually he speeds up until I’m breathlessly pushed over the edge, and I come while my cock is firmly wedged at the back of his throat.

He’s showing no signs of speeding up right now, and I feel like I’m going to be driven mad while he teases my cock with his hot, wet mouth.

“Donnie,” I groan, reaching down to stroke through his short hair.

He doesn’t change his pace, he keeps going slowly, moaning the way he does when he’s getting close to coming. *Fuck, it’s hot.*

I can't see what he's doing with one of his hands, but I can imagine.

He moans a little louder, and I bite down on my lip.

We're right outside a room where our female mate might be getting to know another woman more intimately, and I'm about to come in Donnie's insatiable mouth.

I let out a low groan when it happens, moaning as Donnie's tongue flicks over my tip.

I squeeze my length as thick threads of cum spill into his mouth.

He drinks every last drop down, moaning between swallows.

"Fuck, you're sexy," I murmur.

He lets me go with one last, long lick over my tip. "You're definitely in heat."

His bright eyes have gone dark by the time he's tugging my jeans and underwear back up from my ankles, covering me up when it's the last thing I really want. I let him do it, because somewhere in the back of my mind I know where we still are.

"We'll be going home soon, River. Really fucking soon."

He secures my jeans and leans in to kiss me.

My taste is on his lips, in his mouth.

I can feel the hard outline of his cock against me when he tugs me closer.

He wasn't making himself come while he sucked me. Clearly, his willpower hasn't been completely eroded by my heat. I can't say the same about mine.

The moment he gives me a second to catch my breath, I'm thinking about finding our Alphas and begging to be knotted. I don't care if they're still speaking to cops. This is my heat. My first heat.

I need them, and I know I'll only get more needy for their swollen cocks the longer I go without.

“We need to get—”

“We’re getting out of here,” Donnie tells me, the certainty he’s feeling echoed in his voice.

He knocks loudly on the door we closed before he started to give me head.

I feel like he shouldn’t be doing that, but my heat-addled brain doesn’t remember why.

We need to get our Alphas and go home. That’s all that matters now.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED TEN

BROOKE

Just when I'm starting to feel like I've had enough surprises for one lifetime, I get one more.

The dress is impossible to get out of on my own. I try to rip the damned thing but apparently only the sleeves were easy to tear off. I give Lana a pleading look, hoping she'll take pity on me.

"This thing has a million buttons," I tell her. "Is there any chance you could ..."

"Oh!" she says, nodding quickly. "Sure."

I turn around, wondering why she suddenly seems so jumpy. I'm the one with the inappropriate crush on a straight girl. I have four seriously sexy true mates already, and she doesn't feel like she's meant to be a part of that. Of course not. She wants to meet a guy, or a pack, like I have.

It's not until she's undone a few of the buttons that I start to realize I might be wrong in at least some of my presumptions. Lana goes from nervous to shocked to aroused within about ten seconds.

"You're not wearing underwear," she murmurs, her voice shaking just a little bit.

"The dress was too tight. It would have ruined the lines," I admit, wondering if I'm imagining it.

I've never picked up on anything that might make me think my attraction to the friendly receptionist could be anything more than one-sided. At least, not until now.

"I just ... maybe your mates should be helping you with this."

Oh, she's definitely into me. I can't count the number of times Beta boys at high school got all awkward around me before taking off to the men's room in a state of arousal. She has that same vibe right now. The only difference is, I need to know if she's feeling this because I'm an Omega, or because I'm me.

Damn. Kind of wish I didn't care, but it would be messed up if I didn't. I can't consider taking a chosen mate who might not even want to live with my other mates, if she's like those boys from school, craving something exotic simply because it's rare.

"My mates are busy with the cops," I tell her. "And I seriously can't stand the thought of being in this thing for another second. I think I can get it the rest of the way if you can get another couple buttons for me."

"Okay, sure," she says, sounding almost like herself again. "But maybe I should go looking for your clothes while you get it the rest of the way."

"Sounds like a plan," I say, though admittedly I think my plan of kissing her to see how she reacts is better.

Maybe that makes me a terrible true mate.

Nah. My guys would totally understand.

She undoes a few more buttons. She's still completely aroused, and I'm not even perfuming.

Should I be perfuming? If she was a true mate, then yes.

She's clearly not, but I think I get why.

"You're not into Kellan, are you?" I ask, turning to face her.

The look of horror in her pretty eyes tells me the answer about a second before the quick-fade of her arousal does. “No! Of course not. He’s your mate. He’s just a friend.”

I slip my arms out of the dress and turn it around, so the buttons are at the front.

Lana’s lusty feelings come back twice as strong.

She’s clearly trying not to let her gaze drop to my exposed breasts when I glance back at her.

“I’m sorry, but I had to make sure.”

“I completely understand.”

She doesn’t, but she will.

I unbutton the dress the rest of the way and let the skirt drop to the ground.

“I want you to find what you’re looking for, Lana, but I also think we should explore the attraction we have for each other. I won’t stand in your way if you find a mate, or a pack, but you’re the one person in this academy who could always make me smile. I like the way I feel around you, and I’d like it if you wanted to spend more time together.”

“Won’t your mates be kind of mad if I ... If we spend time together?”

I shake my head. “They like you, and they more than like me.”

“I ... Just to be clear, I’m only interested in spending time with you, Brooke.”

“I know. That’s what I’m suggesting. A chance to bond as more than friends, outside of my pack, and outside of yours, when you meet them.”

She nods slowly. “I’m not going to say no, but I’d like to wait. Just ... Your pack is so established, and I’m single. It would feel a little strange. Even if I’ve been thinking about it for a really long time.”

“You have?” I can’t help but beam at her.

“You’re my unicorn,” she says, as the skin on her cheeks turns bright red.

“What is this unicorn reference?” I ask. “Kellan mentioned it just meant ‘rare’ which I guess could apply to any Omega, really.”

She shakes her head. “It only applies to you. There’s only one unicorn. I was pretty sure I was completely straight before I met you, Brooke. You turned my head. I started looking at other girls, and other Omegas, but none of them gave me the same feeling. You’re the only woman I’ve ever been interested in.”

“I think I like the idea of being your unicorn. If you’ll be mine, too.”

“What would that entail, exactly?”

“Being the only woman in my life, and the only person I care about outside of my pack.”

She smiles. “We should talk about this some more, but I like where we’re going with it.”

“You should. We’re both beautiful, mythical creatures.” I veto the idea of a kiss since she wants to take things slow, and I realize I should probably get dressed. “Only difference is this unicorn is getting kind of cold.”

“Right.” She shakes her head. “We came in here for your clothes!”

She moves past me to the storage closet.

I pick up the ugly dress and hold it against me, minimizing my nakedness while Lana gets the closet unlocked. She opens the door and reaches out for the light switch.

When she steps back, I’m disappointed. At first, all I can see are the rows of expensive dresses on a hanger in the middle of the space. Those were never really mine. It doesn’t matter if my father basically paid for them with the donations he gave annually. They were never what I would have chosen for myself.

Then, I see the boxes of plain clothes at the bottom, and I breathe out a sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank God!”

I crouch down and pick out a tank top that I put on immediately. I find a sweater next, and jeans, and finally sneakers. My underwear and socks must be in another box. I don't really care. I just get dressed in the casual outfit and instantly I feel more relaxed.

“Wow,” Lana says. “This is kind of a lot of stuff.”

“Not really,” I tell her, as I look for the small suitcase I brought most of my stuff here in.

I find it and drag it forward, opening it and emptying the box of clothes into it. Ignoring the heels and the dresses on the rack, I open the next box and smile. My makeup kits are inside. I can fit the basic one inside my case. It's a little bit of a squeeze, but I manage it.

The SFX case, I'll have to carry.

I check the final box and find the silver bag I was using the night I escaped.

My phone is inside. It's dead, and fuck knows where the charger is, but I found it so who cares?

I decide to keep the bag. I would have had it with me when I escaped if I'd had a choice.

Besides, this place owes me more than one dumb little designer purse.

“What about that box?” Lana points out a smaller box behind the one I just opened.

“I almost didn't notice that one,” I murmur, as I open it.

Boxes of expensive jewelry are stacked up inside.

I shove them out of the way until I find the only box that's mine.

My mom's emerald necklace never fit in here, but neither did I.

“Can you help me with this?” I ask Lana.

She nods. “Maybe stay sitting down. You’re taller than me.”

I move my hair up out of the way as she takes the box out of my hands.

“Oh, wow,” she says. “This is gorgeous.”

She puts the box down by my side and places the necklace around my neck, closing the catch behind me.

“It’s the only thing my mom left me when she died.”

“It looks good on you.”

I get to my feet. “Okay, I’ve got everything. I should go wait for my mates, so they don’t worry when they get out of those meeting rooms.”

“Right.” Lana nods. “And I should check on a couple things before I leave since this place is my responsibility now.”

She picks up my suitcase by the handle, and I pick up my makeup kit.

“I’ll grab the door,” I tell her, since she has the heavier item.

I move past her quickly and pull the door open, only to find Donnie standing in front of it with his hand raised to knock. He gives me a quizzical look.

“You got changed.”

“Uh huh. That dress was a pain in the ass.”

“What’s with the tool kit?” he asks me.

“It’s not a tool kit, but thanks for offering to carry it for me. Lana has my suitcase. You can carry that, too.”

I turn and watch Lana step through the door, her cheeks burning red as she hands over the case.

Pretty sure she’s worried what my mates will think of us being together if she has nothing to do with the pack, and in fact she might end up with her own pack.

“Thanks,” she says as she moves off to the side.

Oh, yeah. She needs to lock the door.

I step out of the room and Donnie takes my kit from me.

“This definitely feels like a tool kit.”

I shrug at him. “It’s not that heavy.”

“It’s kind of heavy.”

“Sure,” I murmur, realizing I can smell River’s perfume out here.

I move out of the way to let Lana close the door, and I see River behind Donnie, breathing a little quickly, his hand hot to the touch when I reach for it.

“River, are you okay?” I ask, my eyes going wide.

He nods slowly. “I’m going into heat, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” Donnie says. “We really need to get him home.”

He feels a little shaky but at least he’s not in pain.

The sooner we can get him home, the better.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED ELEVEN

FROST

There's a very good reason Alphas don't typically ever use their command voices. Aside from the fact that very few instances of its use are legal, it can become addictive. I'm sure Warren Corvina knows all about that, though he probably doesn't view himself as an addict.

I've seen plenty of addicts on the job, and I notice it when I start to act like them.

It starts with idly tapping my foot, but my agitation grows the longer I'm interrogated by the police. To make things worse, I'm questioned on the same things all over again by another officer. And another. And another.

I've been grinding my teeth so much, my jaw hurts, and I'm seriously fucking tempted to use a command to get the hell out of this room.

It would be so damn easy. Too damn easy.

That's what makes it addictive.

It's so much easier to get whatever you want if you bend everyone to your will. Unfortunately, that would make me just as bad as Warren and the assholes he had lined up as clients.

I'm not like them.

I only did what I had to do and I'm not going to keep trying to control people just because I know it's possible.

The cop closes his notebook. "That's all for now."

“We’re done?” I ask, ready for him to tell me someone else needs to ask me questions.

He nods. “We’ll be in touch if we need anything more.”

“So, I can leave?”

“Yes, Mr. Frost, you can leave.”

“Thank, Christ! No offense,” I utter as I get to my feet.

I spent the last two hours in a damned plastic chair. My ass is sweating, and my legs seriously need a good fucking stretch. My back is stiff, too. I can’t wait to get home.

I leave the room, stepping out into an empty hallway.

Shit. Don’t tell me everyone else is still being questioned.

I start to walk down the corridor, and the first door next to the room I was in opens.

Kellan steps out, looking as worn out as I feel.

He glances up as he closes the door behind him.

“Well, that was pretty rough,” he mutters, shaking his head.

“Did they keep sending in new cops to take your statement over again from the beginning?”

“I think it’s standard procedure with the academy. It has something to do with prejudices Betas may have against Omegas. If any of those cops write up something that doesn’t sound impartial, the academy might appeal to the police commission to have the cop put on desk duty.”

“Well, that makes me feel a little better,” I admit. “I thought none of those bastards believed a word I was saying.”

“Yeah, I got that feeling, too, but I think it’s more likely that they didn’t want to have to come out here.”

That would make sense. That procedure does seem like a huge pain in the ass.

“I’m guessing no one else is done yet?” he asks.

“I just got out, so your guess is as good as mine.”

“I’m sure Donnie was in the next room down,” he says, heading that way.

The door’s locked and the lights are out. *Huh.*

“Maybe we were the last ones out,” I murmur, wondering where they would have gotten to.

“Brooke might have wanted to get something out of her suite,” Kellan suggests.

I shrug. “We should knock on the head administrator’s door in passing. Tessa was going to hole up in there. Maybe she’ll know ...”

I trail off when I hear footsteps and talking. We both dash along the corridor to the main reception area, arriving as my missing pack members start heading toward us.

“Is everyone ready to get the hell out of here?” I ask.

“Everyone but me,” Lana says. “I’m the new interim head of admin, so, yeah. I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Kellan gapes at her. “What? Really? That’s ... Wait. That is good news, right? You’re happy?”

“It’s good news, but also, I have a lot of work to do. So, I’ll see you some other time.”

She goes into her new office and closes the door.

“We should get home,” Brooke says. “We have an Omega in heat.”

I blink at her. “I thought your heat stopped?”

“It did. I’m talking about River.”

I swallow thickly. River looks kind of dazed, and his perfume is heavy in the air.

I feel my cock swelling up, ready to be used to sate his heat and make him feel better.

“This place has beds, doesn’t it?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at Brooke.

She smiles. “It does, but he needs his nest. It didn’t matter to me at the time because it all happened so fast and I was in

pain, but it matters to River. We need his bed. Wherever that is.”

“Then we’d better get moving,” I tell her.

Crystal Lake, here we come.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED TWELVE

BROOKE

I use my calming touch to keep River in a sedate mood while we travel. I can feel the almost feral lust bubbling under the surface, and it's kind of hard not to let myself get swept away by the feeling.

Knowing my mate needs my help is the only thing that keeps me anchored and sending calming energy through my fingers to his. I didn't know using my touch could feel like this. It's a wonderful feeling to realize I can do something to help him.

Donnie has his other hand at River's left side, and he's stroking his fingers gently with his free hand.

River's calm enough to fall asleep, and for a few minutes I think he's going to.

Then we hit a bump in the road, and Frost issues a guilt-laden, "Shit! Sorry!" that only helps keep our Omega awake.

"The good news is we're not that much farther from home," Donnie tells me.

I'm looking forward to seeing where they live. Where I'm going to live with them.

"The better news is I won't have to move towns," Kellan adds.

"You live in Crystal Lake, too?" Frost asks, surprised. "Maybe we should go to your place."

“My place is a one-bedroom in a shitty apartment building,” Kellan admits. “I stayed there to save money. I might have close to a million in the bank now, but it wasn’t an overnight fortune. I made a lot of sacrifices. A nice house was one of them.”

“Damn. I would have guessed you had one of those high-flyer, fancy, top floor apartments in the middle of Cressidan City,” Frost says.

Kellan laughs. “I thought about moving to the city once or twice. I like Crystal Lake too much. Plus, it’s where my parents are.”

“Well, I guess that means we have at least one option for babysitters when the time comes,” Frost says, his gaze meeting mine via the rearview mirror.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “We haven’t even had the talk about kids yet. Can we try not to get ahead of ourselves, please?”

It’s kinda funny. I’m not quite as against the idea now that I’ve found the men that were meant for me. I wouldn’t say I’m ready to start trying—let’s not get too crazy—but I don’t completely hate the thought of it.

“You’ll be a kickass mom,” Donnie tells me, like I don’t already know.

“Not for a while,” I warn him. “I had plans when I got out of Goldcrest.”

“What kind of plans?” Donnie asks.

“The kind where I go to school to be an SFX artist and then maybe get to work on a few movies.”

I shrug, and his jaw drops open.

“That’s what the toolbox is, right? Your supplies?”

“That’s what’s in there,” I confirm.

“Cool. Will you practice on me? I’ve seen some shit. I could tell you if it looks real.”

“I will definitely take you up on that offer.”

“Me too,” River says, his voice soft.

“You want me to practice on you, too?”

“It sounds like fun. Maybe you could show me how to do some of that stuff.”

“Ooh, an apprentice. I like that idea.”

I can tell River’s getting a little agitated by his heat now. He isn’t having the same cramping pains I had, but that’s because this is a normal heat. My heat should have come on during my first year at the academy. It only didn’t because my father blocked Kellan from visiting me, permanently blacklisting him with Geraldine. The delay was what caused the intensity, and the pain.

River’s heat is proving to be a bit more manageable.

I’ve calmed him as much as I’m able, and it looks like we’re close to the home stretch now.

I’m not sure what I’m expecting when we pull up at the pack’s house, but it looks like a nice, big family home, all on one level for some reason.

“This is it?” Kellan asks, sounding like he doesn’t believe it.

“Why? Were you expecting something smaller?”

“No, but you guys live across the street from my parents.”

He points out a house across the street and down a few doors.

“That’s kind of a weird coincidence,” I murmur.

“There’s no such thing as coincidence,” Frost says. “It’s all fate.”

He gets out, and Kellan follows.

“I’ll carry River to the house,” Donnie tells me. “You can get out and close the door.”

I nod, bringing River’s hand up to my lips to kiss it before I let go.

I step outside and close the door, looking up at the house.

Big garden in a cute neighborhood, in-laws living right across the street.

It's the complete opposite of the creepy house in the woods that I grew up in.

I move around the car and take Kellan's arm in mine. "Well? What do you think?"

"I think we're going to end up needing a second floor," he says, giving me a smile. "And my parents will hardly ever be out of this place once they know I'm living here with my new pack and my mates."

"Would that really be so bad?" I ask, raising my eyebrows, and expecting the usual 'you haven't met my parents' response.

He shakes his head, his smile brightening. "It wouldn't. I mean, besides in this kind of scenario, where we have a mate in heat. My mom is kind of oblivious to ... well, anything really."

"I look forward to meeting her," I tell him.

"You do?" He raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Your parents raised an amazing guy who clearly loves them. Why wouldn't I want to meet them?"

He wraps his other arm around me and pulls me in for a kiss.

I let myself enjoy it, standing out under the fall sun and making out with one of my mates.

Then, the backdoor of the car closes next to us, and I remind myself that River needs help. He's in heat, and all his mates should be there.

I break the kiss. "To be continued," I tell him.

He smiles at me and gives me his hand. Frost is marching up the path to the door, and Donnie's carrying River along behind him. We catch up to Donnie and follow our pack into our new home.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEEN

DONNIE

It feels kind of weird to be carrying River to bed, knowing he'll be taken care of by Frost and Kellan. I know this is his heat and he needs his Alphas to ease him through it, but my first instincts are always to take care of him. Whenever he's in need, I look for ways to sate him. So far, I've been able to keep him satisfied. Tonight, it's not up to me.

Frost clears his throat as I move across the hallway, heading to River's room.

"Where do you want your nest to be, River?" he asks, making me stop a few feet away from the trio of doors. I'd been headed to the middle, to River's room, assuming it's where he'd want his nest to be. It's where he feels safe. It's between my room and Frost's.

"River?" I ask, when our Omega doesn't answer right away.

He looks up at me with those dark, needy eyes and I want to set him down and start things right here on the hallway carpet. A low growl rumbles from my lips as I gaze down at my mate.

"My nest," River starts, raising his hand to stroke over the stubble on the side of my face. "I know it should be the place I feel safest, and that's Donnie's room."

I gaze down at him. "My room?"

"Is that okay?" he asks, his voice shaky.

I can't help the grin that breaks out on my face. "It's perfect."

Frost fucking hates my room. Too bad. He's going to be spending a lot more time in here now.

He shakes his head at me as he opens the door and holds it open, letting me carry River inside.

"You should take it from here," I tell him as I lay River down on the bed.

I start to back up, but River drags me down until I'm precariously balanced over him, ready to kick out of my sneakers and collapse into him.

"Where do you think you're going?" River asks.

"I was just moving back to give your Alphas some room," I murmur, grazing my lips with his, "but I'd much rather stay right here and give my Omega my full, undivided attention."

I kick off my sneakers and move up onto the bed to straddle his slender body, rocking my hips so the lump in my pants moves against the lump in his. He moans under me, head pushing back into pillow.

"Oh ..." Brooke murmurs behind us. "Oh, wow."

She's come into the room to stand by the side of the bed, her wide-eyed gaze focused on my crotch as I rock against River. Clearly, she's enjoying the show.

"You were definitely the hottest stripper any club has ever seen," she tells me, when her eyes come up to meet mine. "I'm glad you don't do it anymore. I wouldn't want anyone else but us seeing you like this."

"I second that sentiment," Kellan murmurs, closing the door and leaning against it.

All my mates are in my bedroom right now.

We're finally together in one room without any urgent plans looming over us.

"I'll secure the front door," Frost tells us, forcing Kellan to move.

Of course, Frost would be the one to start freaking out.

“Hurry back,” I tell him, for River’s sake.

“Don’t worry, he will,” River murmurs, putting his arms around my neck.

“I’m not worried,” I assure him. “If Frost isn’t back here in five seconds, I’ll go grab him while Kellan warms you up.”

“I’m not sure our mate needs warming,” Kellan admits. “It feels like he’s ready to be knotted.”

I turn to catch him stripping out of his shirt, his gaze on us.

Brooke lets out a soft sigh. “He’s definitely ready to be knotted.”

“Then I guess Frost’s out of luck,” I tell River as I lean in and give him one last kiss. My jeans feel so damn tight it hurts to move, but I roll off my Omega and get back to my feet, stripping out of my T-shirt and unbuttoning my jeans automatically. I push my jeans down and I let out a sigh as they hit the carpet.

“We should wait for him,” Kellan says, sighing softly as Brooke kisses his naked shoulder, one arm wrapped around him from behind. “We haven’t exactly talked about who the pack leader is.”

“River’s ready to be rutted unconscious by a big, fat Alpha-knot,” I remind him. “Do you really want to keep our sweet, little Omega from his prize?”

River groans on the bed. He loves it when I talk dirty.

I could almost make him come without touching him.

Too bad that’s not going to be enough.

“Take care of River, while I go find out what’s happened to Frost.” I tug on the waistband of Kellan’s pants as I pass, undoing them and bumping the tip of his cock against my fingers. No underwear. Naughty boy. Brooke slips her hand down to grasp our Alpha’s cock. She lets out a needy sigh.

“Help Kellan with River,” I tell her, making her eyes flash when I teasingly add, “Don’t be greedy with this one’s knot.”

She growls lightly at me. “Go find Frost. *I’m* taking care of River. Don’t worry about that.”

I hold up my hands before I open the door and leave the room.

Frost isn’t in the hallway. I close the door behind me and let out a sigh.

Where the fuck did he go?

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEEN

KELLAN

As much as I want to help River through his first heat, I can't fight the feeling that Frost should be in my place right now, that he should be the one stripping our Omega, getting him ready to take his knot. There's an order to everything in a pack. I don't know much, but I know Frost isn't going to relinquish hold as the leader of this pack, and if I'm being honest, I wouldn't want him to.

Being second Alpha to a pack with two Omegas and a Beta with Alpha-energy isn't something I ever thought I'd want, but that's only because I had no idea Brooke and I were fated for life together in a pack. What we've found together is more than I could ever have imagined possible.

Brooke is naked before I've gotten River halfway stripped, and she climbs onto the bed beside him, a wicked little smile on her pretty lips, and a world of intent glimmering in her sapphire eyes.

He turns to watch her while I toss his jeans to the floor.

"I'd like to claim my mate while he's knotted," Brooke murmurs, as she moves in close to River. "If that's okay with him?"

River's breath catches and I know there's no way Frost's going to be back here fast enough to stop me from locking my knot in our Omega before he can get the chance to take the first rut.

“You mean ...” he starts, his voice a reedy whisper.

She nods as she grabs the front of his shirt and tugs. “I want you deep inside me while Kellan gives you his knot.”

River moves onto his side and kisses Brooke, his arm closing around her.

God, the sight of them together ignites something primal inside me.

These perfect, sexy Omegas belong together, and they belong with me.

They’re both mine, and I’ll do everything in my power to love and protect them, always.

River breaks the kiss, and gazes at Brooke. “I’ve never been with a woman before.”

She smiles. “Well, it’s not the same as taking a knot, but I think you’ll like it.”

“I know I’ll love it,” he tells her. “I just ... might not last very long.”

“That’s okay,” she says, gripping his shirt tighter and growling just a little. “I want you to drown my pussy with your perfume, River. We make a sweeter scent when we mix together, and it needs to be all over this bed so your Alphas can’t keep their knots to themselves.”

“Holy fucking hell,” I murmur, stroking a hand along my cock as a bead of pre-cum spills from the tip.

Brooke rolls onto her back and spreads her legs.

Her thighs and her sex glisten with her sweet cherry scented slick, but I only get a glimpse of that piece of heaven before River sits up and moves between her parted legs, taking off his shirt and dropping it to the side of the bed before his hands move along her sides and grasp her hips.

His scent is already mixing with hers before he lifts her hips and sinks into her.

Brooke lets out a moan as her legs wrap around our Omega, dragging him in as close as she can get him. Fuck,

they look good together, and they smell like a decadent dessert I could eat all damn day long and never tire of tasting.

I almost don't want to disturb them as they claim one and other, but I know River's being consumed by his heat and no matter how good Brooke's pussy feels around his length, he's not going to be fully satisfied by anything other than a knot.

Glancing at the door, I listen for any hint of Frost's approach.

There's nothing. I don't know why he isn't here, but I know River needs one of us.

I move onto the bed behind him, and he turns to look at me, dark eyes full of desire.

"Please," he whispers, as Brooke unwraps her legs to give me access to his slick-soaked entrance.

He's wet enough that he doesn't need me to lubricate my shaft. I rub my tip against him, and he groans. He needs more, he needs so much more. I thrust inside, my knot swelling as I reach down and grasp Brooke's hips, my fingers entwining with his.

The low moan that he makes is echoed by Brooke under him.

Now that my knot is locked inside River, I realize I'm in complete control of both of my Omegas.

Every move is mine to make. Every thrust will affect them both.

I close my eyes and breathe in deep.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEEN

RIVER

The instant Kellan's knot swells, I'm lost to sensation. Everything around us ceases to exist. The room might as well be suspended in space and time. All I can see, hear, and feel are my mates.

I catch my breath as Kellan starts to thrust into me, his hands locked over mine on Brooke's hips.

His movements push me deeper into Brooke, and she gives out sweet little moans of approval, her gaze locked on mine as Kellan fucks me into her.

The tight, wet sheath of her pussy is like nothing I've ever felt before. She tightens around me, gripping my cock as her breathing quickens. She's ready to come. I can feel it, and it makes me struggle to retain control of my own desire to fill her with my cum and make our mixed scent official.

"Oh, River," she whispers, undoing me with the lust in her voice.

I come inside her while she keeps my dick hard as steel in her pussy's vice-like grip.

She comes under me, crying out and bucking under us.

Kellan lets out a low groan behind me. He moves his hands around my body, stroking and grasping. He feels needy and desperate, and I suddenly realize this is what it means when an Alpha goes into rut. He needs me as much as I need

him. His knot is mine until I'm done with it, and I don't want to ever be done with it.

He thrusts a little harder, a little deeper, and it feels like his knot is swelling up even bigger, making every nerve-ending tingle inside me, and satisfying the craving I have to be filled up by my Alpha.

The feral desire that starts to bleed from his touch into me is almost too much to take.

"I want your mark, too," I tell him. "But I need Frost to mark me first."

He growls lightly and kisses my shoulder, sucking my skin lightly into his mouth before letting it go.

"The second he marks you ..." Kellan murmurs.

"We get to mark you," Brooke finishes for him, her gaze on my throat.

She moves her hands up my body while Kellan kisses my upper back, and I want to melt into their touches. I'm torn between them right now, impaled on Kellan's knot while I fuck Brooke's tight wet pussy as hard as Kellan decides he wants it.

Right now, he's slowing down, making every movement feel stretched out.

I want both of their marks, desperately, but I need Frost and Donnie to give me theirs, first.

The marks on my thighs don't count. They need to be on my throat, where they're visible.

I don't want to hide who I am anymore. That includes the fact that I'm an Omega.

It's not shameful like my parents made me believe. I know now my mother lied about who my father was, and that's probably why the guy I called dad hated me so damn much. That part of my life is over. It's been over for a very long time.

It took me a while to really let it go, but now that I know I can have the kind of life I always wished for, I'm finally ready

to bury my past and walk away from it. No looking back.

I want that better life I was given when I met Frost and Donnie.

I want to hold on tight, and never let it go.

These are my mates. This is my pack.

I'm ready for it to be official.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEEN

FROST

A laundry-list of excuses flood my thoughts the second Donnie walks into my bedroom, but none of them make it past my lips. He knows. He can see it on my face, or his instincts are picking it up like usual. Whatever it is, my Beta and the first true mate I've ever known can tell that I'm not with our Omega who needs me because I'm afraid.

"It's been a crazy day," he starts, giving my excuses for me, "And no-one was expecting River to go into heat this suddenly, but it happened, and he needs you."

"I know," I admit.

"Everything's been happening so fast we all could use a minute," he adds.

"Even you?" I ask, raising an eyebrow at him.

He laughs. "Well, maybe not me, but we all know how thirsty I can be."

"This has nothing to do with sex."

"You're right. It's an instinct thing, and you've been ignoring yours for too long," Donnie tells me.

Shaking his head, he moves to stand in front of me at the side of the bed.

"Tell me you know that?" he asks, watching me carefully.

I can't help but frown as I think about it.

He's right. He's always right.

“I knew River didn't really want to become a paramedic,” I confess, feeling like an idiot. “I thought he'd admit it on his own when he was ready, but I ignored the instinct that told me he wouldn't. That I'd have to speak to him about it.”

“You were worried about talking to him about what he wanted to do?”

“I was afraid he might decide we weren't right for him.”

“He's our true mate.”

“That's the problem.”

“That's a problem?”

“How did we get so damn lucky?”

Donnie laughs. “I don't feel the need to question the universe at every turn, but if I had to guess I'd say we've done enough good deeds to earn a lucky break or two. Well, three, I guess, if we're counting Kellan.”

“Four,” I tell him, making his smile widen.

“Is the dark cloud gone yet, or is it still hovering?” he asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

“I think it's going away,” I tell him. “I don't want to let him down.”

“You could never let River down. You're his Alpha. He knows how much you care, and he knows sometimes you think too much and let that get in the way.”

“I fucking love you, Donnie.”

“Well, thank God for that,” he tells me, holding out his hand. “Now come knot your Omega. He wants a real mark from his Alpha, and I have a feeling Kellan might need some help by now.”

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEEN

BROOKE

The second time I come on River's dick, I start to get really fucking warm. And I'm pretty sure it's not just because I'm being pounded while my new mate is being knotted. I've been feeling what River's been feeling, but this is different.

Oh, God. I'm in heat.

His heat has triggered mine.

Damn it. That's no good. He needs his Alphas. This is his big moment. It's not mine.

"Brooke?" River asks, sounding vaguely concerned through his lust.

I realize I just closed my eyes tight and pressed my lips together.

Relaxing my face, I open my eyes and give him a smile. "That felt so damn good."

I'm not cramping up this time, at least. There's no pain. I'm just warm, and incredibly wet and my pussy's getting a little desperate to take a knot.

River's gaze moves down, and back up again. "We need Frost."

"What?" I ask, feeling my face pale.

He can't tell I'm in heat, can he? He's in heat. Anything I'm feeling can be explained away as my empathic ability to

feel what he's feeling. There's no way he can tell it's something more than that.

"What's wrong?" Kellan asks, going still.

River looks me in the eyes. "Brooke's in heat, now, too."

"No, I'm not!" I protest.

"You are," River tells me. "I can feel it. You need a knot."

"No, I need *you*," I insist, rocking into him a little.

He moans lightly. "Brooke ..."

The sound of the door creaking open captures my attention, and I look up to see Frost and Donnie entering the room, both men completely naked and touching each other in ways that make it obvious they already know each other intimately.

God, the possibilities in this pack are so damn droolworthy.

"Good, you're back," River tells our mates. "Brooke just went into heat."

Frost's eyes widen, and Donnie grins.

"I'm not in heat," I tell them, trying to wrap my legs around him and Kellan both. "And I'm perfectly comfortable right where I am."

Donnie laughs. "Yeah, you do look pretty comfy all twisted up like that."

"I want all of River's cum during his heat. Every last drop. It's mine."

Frost raises an eyebrow as he comes to our side. "I'm not sure how we can manage that, if you need to be knotted as badly as he does."

"I don't," I lie.

"You do," he growls back at me, before he leans in to kiss me.

"Alphas are in control during a heat," he reminds me, before he turns to River and Kellan. "Pull out, and make sure

any cum stays inside her pussy.”

They move back and River uses his fingers to push a drop of his cum back inside me.

“I still want him inside me,” I murmur as Frost turns me to face him.

He smiles. “That can be arranged.”

“I like where this is going,” Donnie admits.

I look past Frost to see him watching us, his hand on his cock.

“Wait,” I tell them. “You two need to mark River before anything else happens.”

They look at each other before they turn to River.

He nods. “I want real marks, and I don’t want to wait any longer.”

I get to watch as Frost and Donnie move to either side of River to mark him while Kellan’s knot is buried in his ass. The sounds he makes are enough to make my pussy clench with need.

I feel another drop of cum sliding through my lips, and I push it back inside.

Frost lays back down beside me. “Now, do you want to face me, or River?”

“River,” I tell him, without having to think about it. “If I’m facing you, I’m being suffocated against your chest.”

“Hmm,” Frost says. “That might make things harder.”

“Nah,” Donnie tells him. “I have a plan. Everyone lay down.”

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEEN

DONNIE

Frost lays down on the left side of the bed and takes Brooke into his arms from behind. Kellan and River mirror them at the other side, which leaves just enough room for me to slide into the middle and position myself between Brooke and River.

I reach between Brooke's propped open legs to stroke a hand over Frost's cock before I position it at our mate's leaking pussy. The tip pushes some of River's delicious cum back inside her sweet pussy. The urge to push Frost away and eat her out comes and goes.

I'll get plenty of chances to do that some other time when she's not flushed with need for the knot of an Alpha. She lets out a soft moan when his cock swells inside her. She's slim enough that I see her stomach jump when it happens, and it makes me want to see her belly swollen for another reason.

Don't get ahead of yourself, Donnie.

Kids are a long way down the line.

Right. Yeah.

I lean in and lick her clit to hear her moan for me.

She grinds lightly against me while I suck and lick, my hand wandering over to take River's cock and gently stroke it at the same time. Both of my Omegas are being knotted slowly while I tease them, and it feels so damn good I can barely handle it.

Brooke's breath catches and her scent deepens as she comes.

Frost feels the benefit, with his cock swollen up inside her.

I turn to River and run my tongue over his tip.

He shakes a little at the feeling, and I know he'll be expecting my mouth to do its usual disappearing trick with his long length, but I have a different mission tonight, which I'm sure he'll appreciate once he realizes it. I use my hand to pump his cock while I swallow less than half his length. He takes a lot longer than usual to come for me, but I know why and it's worth the wait.

Brooke comes on Frost's knot behind me, right before River comes in my mouth.

Kellan moves back a second later, and I can see River's ready to fall asleep.

He smiles at me as he dozes off.

I'm about to turn to Brooke when Frost does the same, and she moans softly as he lets her lay down.

I part her legs, deciding to feed my mouthful of River's cum into her pussy.

"I'm passing out," she murmurs, as I lick her lips open.

"Holy fuck," Kellan whispers.

It takes a few minutes to get River's cum inside her, but if that's what she wants, that's what she'll get. I push it back in with my fingers when it starts to spill out.

"Every last drop," I remind her, before she actually passes out.

I get up with Frost and Kellan, putting sheets over our Omegas as they sleep.

There's no way in hell I could sleep right now.

My dick is harder than rock.

I look at Kellan and Frost, wondering if it's right to ask anything of the Alphas who need to keep two Omegas in heat

satisfied. I should probably go jerk off in the bathroom.

“We should let them sleep, right?” I ask, as Kellan and Frost surround me.

“We should all sleep,” Frost tells me, his gaze drifting to my lips.

He runs a finger over my bottom lip.

“You missed a drop,” he says, before he puts it in his mouth.

“That belongs to Brooke,” I remind him.

I watch him suck River’s cum off that finger before it leaves his lips, and the hunger in his eyes takes my breath away. He just sated Brooke’s heat with his knot, but, clearly, he’s not quite ready to lay down and pass out at her side.

“Brooke belongs to us,” he reminds me. “Just like River, and just like you.”

I feel Kellan’s lips on my back, his hands trailing down my sides, before he murmurs, “And we have to take care of you in the same way.”

“So run your hand over Brooke’s thigh and get Kellan’s cock covered in her slick,” Frost orders, with the tiniest hint of his Alpha command voice adding an edge to his tone.

“It’s already covered in River’s slick,” Kellan murmurs, rubbing the tip against my ass.

I swipe my hand over Brooke’s glistening thigh. My beautiful blonde moans lightly in her sleep but she doesn’t wake. Turning, I sink to my knees in front of Kellan, and take his slick covered shaft in my mouth, swallowing River’s taste deep, and cleaning every inch of slick from my new Alpha’s cock.

He groans as I suck him clean. “Fuck, Donnie, you’re too good at that.”

I let go, smiling as I start to rub Brooke’s arousal fluid all over his cock.

Her scent is so entwined with River's now that it's impossible not to taste both of them when I breathe in. It's thoroughly intoxicating, and I'm already seriously aroused at the thought of having my Alphas all to myself.

Kellan gets down on his knees behind me when I move into position to be fucked.

"Wait," Frost says, stopping him right as his well-lubricated dick is poking at my entrance.

He sinks to his knees in front of me and kisses the side of my throat. "Do you want to be marked?"

"Fuck, yes!" I growl out, glancing back. "By both of you at the same time."

Kellan doesn't hesitate to move in at the right side. His breath tickling my skin as he asks, "Ready?"

"Ready," Frost tells him, before the pinch of his teeth on my throat makes me moan.

Kellan's bite comes a second later and it's the sweetest pain I've ever felt.

It twists into pleasure so quickly I almost feel like I could pass out from the ecstatic energy that rushes through my body and sets all of my nerve-endings alight.

Frost moves back, those pale blue eyes fixing on me in an intense stare while I ride out the rush.

"Oh, fuck, that feels so damn good," I murmur, right before Kellan moves back and thrusts his slick coated cock into my ass. He sinks deep and holds me upright when I start to fall forward.

Frost moves down low and licks the wet tip of my throbbing dick.

"So, this is what it feels like to be an Omega," I murmur, as my Alphas push me toward my climax, each of them using tiny, measured movements that feel so damn intense I can barely handle the sensations.

Frost starts to slowly devour my dick while Kellan fucks me slowly, with thrusts that take him deep.

“I wish I could *really* make you feel what it’s like to be an Omega,” Kellan whispers, before his cock seems to throb inside me, swelling just enough to let me feel it.

I groan. “Keep doing that and I’ll come in Frost’s mouth any second.”

“You can feel it?” Kellan asks.

“Mm hm,” I murmur, trying to keep it together while he gives me more.

That light swell is enough to push me over the edge. My Alphas wish they could knot me. They’re taking care of me like I’m an Omega in heat. They’ve both given me their marks.

This is everything. I can’t believe how fucking good I’ve got it.

The head of my cock hits the back of Frost’s throat as I come, and he moans before he starts swallowing. Kellan’s slightly swollen cock thrusts a little harder, a little deeper and he wraps his arms around me, head against my back as he comes inside me, making sexy groaning noises until he’s done filling me up.

Frost moves back, breathing hard. I see the sheen of come on his belly and I realize he must have jerked himself off while he was sucking me. *Fuck, that’s hot.*

“Are we supposed to sleep now?” I ask them, while Kellan’s cock is still buried in my ass.

“Fuck that,” Frost murmurs, moving in closer and kissing me hard.

He reaches down and strokes my shaft, keeping it stiff and ready.

Kellan starts to move again behind me, his slightly swollen cock feeling thicker still inside me as he fucks me slow and deep. If this is anything like being knotted, I totally get why Omegas go into heat for it.

Frost sucks on my tongue and pumps my shaft the way he knows I like it.

He only breaks the kiss when he's breathless and ready to give another order.

I wait for the order, and I watch him reach across the bed to steal another handful of slick from Brooke's thigh. She's laying there looking like a sleeping Goddess, next to sweet River, who I already worship as if he's a God. It takes a second to realize Frost is lathering her slick over my cock.

Oh, fuck. I watch wide-eyed, not quite believing how much better things are about to get.

It's not like I've never fucked Frost before, but we'd been drifting a little since River came along, and the last time we were in bed together we passed out before we got the chance to do much more than kiss. It's been a long time since we were this intimate, and I never want to wait this long to get so close to him again.

"Promise you'll let me take you like this when you're fucking Brooke, or River."

He smiles his most teasing smile and I know he's saying yes even if all he's willing to say is, "I promise you won't feel left out."

"I promise we'll both beg you to take us," Kellan murmurs at my back, making my dick throb as Frost turns around.

Frost moves back, and I spread my legs a bit wider to give him room. Then, I keep him steady in place with one arm while I use my other hand to guide my cock to his tight hole.

He resists a tiny little bit to start with, but he pushes back against me, forcing himself down on my slick-covered cock inch by inch until I'm as deep as it gets.

"How does it feel?" Kellan asks.

I reach around to capture Frost's cock in my grasp. My fingers are still slippery from Brooke's sweet juices, and he gives out a low groan as I stroke him how he likes to be stroked.

“It feels like I’m about to make two Alphas come for me.”

“And will you come for us?” Frost asks, his voice tight.

He’s close to the edge already. I hold him less tightly.

“I already have, and I’ll come as many times as you want me to, Alpha Frost,” I tell him, as I start to thrust, following Kellan’s movements through smoothly and getting into a rhythm that feels good.

“Fucking hell, Donnie, don’t call me that.”

“You’d prefer me to use your given name?” I tease.

A burst of laughter erupts from him, quickly followed by a low moan.

“You know what I mean,” he tells me.

“You don’t like it when I call you Alpha?”

“I like it,” he growls. “Just don’t use it like it’s a title.”

“Fine,” I tell him. “Alpha.”

“You can call me whatever the fuck you want,” Kellan murmurs, as he speeds up his thrusting.

Frost groans as I fuck him a little faster, stroking him harder at the same time.

“Yes, Alpha Kellan,” I murmur back, making him moan.

I love how excitable my new Alpha is. He’s so open to everything, so ready and eager and willing.

It’s a nice contrast to Frost’s more gruff and serious personality.

“Fine,” Frost says. “Call me what you want, too.”

That’s the kind of invitation that doesn’t come along too often.

“Yes, Alpha Frost,” I whisper, as I tug tighter on his cock, squeezing around Kellan’s at the same time and thrusting hard inside Frost.

Kellan gasps out a breath, and I feel his cum spilling into me as Frost makes a hot sticky mess of his chest and my hand.

I feel pretty fucking powerful, having just made two Alphas come for me, but Frost's wild groan is what sends me over the edge.

I come inside my true mate, and we collapse in a pile on the carpet of my bedroom, breathing like we just crossed the finish line at marathon. We're all done for the day, now.

Kellan's the first to get to his feet. He helps me up and Frost gets up on his own.

"Sleep?" I ask.

"I should shower," Frost tells us, giving me a bemused smile.

I guess he's kind of a mess compared to us.

"Which side?" Kellan asks, looking at the bed.

"There's more room next to River."

He lays down next to our male Omega, brushing his hair back from his closed eyes and wrapping an arm around him from behind. It's so fucking cute. I stand there staring for a second before I realize they're probably going to get cold in a while when the temperature drops.

I turn to my closet behind us and grab a fresh pile of sheets. I cover my mates up and then I get into bed behind Kellan, snuggling up behind him and putting my arm around him and River, both.

Kellan falls asleep quickly, as if touching River made him sleepy.

I'm tired, but I can't relax fully until Frost is back in the room with us.

He comes back maybe ten minutes later and gets into bed next to Brooke.

I smile at him as he lays down and a few minutes later, he's snoring and I'm halfway to passing out.

I didn't think the bed would be big enough for all of us, but I guess I was wrong.

Somehow, we all fit, and I know we always will.

This is our home, and our nest.

It's where we belong.

Chapter

ONE HUNDRED NINETEEN

BROOKE

Four Months Later

It's kind of funny how fast life moves when you have so much going on. Time felt like a curse at the academy. The minutes moved so damn slowly that time might as well have been going backwards.

In Crystal Lake, I have the complete opposite issue, and that's actually a pretty awesome problem to have. It's Christmas Eve and I've hung up my prosthetics-making apron to put on my cookie-baking apron, because as River and I discovered a couple months ago, no one cares if they look a bit creepy as long as they taste good.

"Should we do Christmas gravestones, or Christmas bats?" River asks, showing me the cutters.

"Hmm. I think we should do both. We can put Scrooge's name on the gravestones and use coconut shavings like they're snow, maybe?"

"We have a lot of edible glitter, so we should make the bats look like tree ornaments," River says. "I guess we could also make cookies that are just round and make those look like baubles."

"That sounds really cute."

I love it when he starts coming up with stuff. He's still in the 'working out what he wants to do with his life' phase of things, but I think he's getting closer to discovering his true passion. He's creative at heart, and I do everything I can to encourage that.

"What sounds really cute?" Kellan asks, as he steps into the kitchen in his work gear, which consists of jeans and a shirt.

It's midday, so we should have guessed he'd be down from his home office to forage for treats when we started to pull out the baking supplies. He pretty much insisted on building a second level on the house within a couple of weeks of moving in, because he needed an office, and we needed a couple spare bedrooms. Honestly, there are usually only a couple of beds being slept in at night, at most. The other rooms are pretty much for storage.

"We're making Christmas cookies."

"Like gingerbread men and stuff, or horror cookies with a holiday theme?" Kellan opens the refrigerator.

"Maybe both," I tell him, before I turn back to River. "You feel like doing some gingerbread?"

"I think we have what we need for it," River says. "But won't that make you want to do your crime scene investigation cookies?"

Kellan snorts. "Please do those again. The expression on my mom's face when she realized she was eating a crime scene body shape was priceless."

"Nah, I think River's having some cool ideas, so I'll let him choose how to decorate the gingerbread men."

"Either way, they'll be amazing," Kellan says as he closes the fridge. "Any volunteers to help me out with lunch?"

River smirks at me. Kellan hates to cook, and Frost isn't much of a chef, either, but it hardly takes an expert to throw together a sandwich. I roll my eyes.

“I thought we were living in a non-stereotypical household?” I ask him, putting a hand on my hip as I turn away from the baking station.

“There’s something stereotypical about an Alpha asking his Omegas to make him a sandwich? Huh.”

“Pass me the ham, the pickles, and the butter,” I tell him. “Make those Alpha muscles useful while I get the bread out.”

River shakes his head at me. He never takes the bait. I fall for those sad, boy-next-door eyes every time. Of course it helps that I enjoy taking care of my mates’ needs.

I grab the bread and a plate as he smiles, heading back to re-open the refrigerator. I use the island to make his sandwich while River starts making dough for the cookies.

“How’s work going?” I ask as I open the butter.

He shrugs. “Kinda slow. I haven’t completely figured out how to make part-time hours work yet, but I’ll figure it out.”

“You know I don’t mind. You like your job.”

“I don’t like it more than spending time with you.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

He could do pretty much anything he sets his mind to. He managed to get to me in Goldcrest because he never once gave up on me. There were so many obstacles, and somehow, we still made it here, together, and with multiple mates. It’s kind of crazy, and also spectacularly impressive.

I finish making his sandwich and slide the plate across the counter to him. “Don’t eat this at your desk. I’ll put on the coffee maker if you sit and talk with us while we bake.”

Okay, so he is a little bit of a workaholic, but we make sure he doesn’t work too hard.

“Lana sent me a text earlier,” Kellan says as he pulls out one of the bar stools at the other end of the island. He sets his phone down on the table. “She was pretty excited that you two finally made a date.”

He sounds kind of amused. I switch on the coffee maker and turn back to him.

“Let me see!”

He hides his screen, raising his eyebrows at me. “Um, have you heard of privacy?”

River laughs. “We share everything, remember?”

“Yeah,” I tell him, knowing he’s only teasing, or he wouldn’t have mentioned it in the first place. I motion with my hand, asking him to hand it over without speaking.

He lets out a fake sigh and hands it over. “Just don’t text her back. She always knows when it’s you.”

“Like I ever would,” I lie as I open his messages.

I’m instantly distracted by a group chat he’s in with the guys.

“Hey! What are you guys doing in a group chat without me?” I tap River’s arm, and he turns around sighing. “Seriously? And you set this one up like a month ago?”

River shakes his head. “Well, we might as well tell her.”

“I guess it is Christmas Eve,” Kellan says, keeping me hanging.

They both seem pretty amused by this whole thing, which makes me even more curious.

“You know you don’t have to tell me, right? I have the phone. I can read every ... whoa!”

My vision blurs as I look at the screen. I raise my hand to my mouth.

The sound of the front door opening and closing snatches my attention, but when Kellan tries to take the phone out of my hand, I spin away from him to avoid letting it go.

My breath hitches, a lump growing in my throat as I try to tell myself I didn’t just read what I think I read.

“Guess who earned a half day?” Donnie sings as he walks in, pulling up a stool beside Kellan and taking his sandwich

when our Alpha doesn't complain about it.

Frost steps into the room a minute late, shaking his head. "It's just as well this is a small town where the biggest emergency is usually caused by a drunk guy who's only done something to hurt himself."

The dark navy uniforms suit them a little better than the white ever did, but I'm too stunned to appreciate them right now.

My emotions are overflowing ... literally. My tears start to fall.

"Shit," Kellan whispers, looking and feeling worried.

"What happened?" Frost asks, sounding mad.

The overwhelming concern in the room is nice, but they're not going to be so worried when they realize I just ruined a surprise that was a month in the making.

It's not like I can pretend I didn't see it.

"Is that *your* phone in her hand, Kellan?" Donnie slaps Kellan's arm.

"You were supposed to delete the group chat," Frost tells him. "Tell me you deleted it?"

Kellan gets up and comes over to stand in front of me. "This was supposed to happen tomorrow, obviously. I kind of ruined it, but ..."

He takes a little, black box out of his pocket and gets down on his knees in front of me.

River kneels down beside him, and Donnie and Frost move in closer to do the same.

"Will you marry us?" he asks, opening the box to reveal a yellow gold and emerald ring that matches my mother's necklace perfectly.

I wipe at my eyes. "Of course I will!"

The last thing I thought I'd do if this moment ever came was cry.

Kellan smiles as he takes the ring out of the box and places it on my finger.

It somehow fits perfectly and looks like it belongs there.

“Oh my God,” I murmur, not really believing it.

They all get back on their feet. I’m pulled into a group hug so quickly I barely get the chance to catch my breath, and then Frost’s hand is on my ass, and Kellan’s lips are on mine, and I know we’re all about to get swept up in a celebration that’ll probably last all night.

I break away, just enough to get Kellan’s phone in front of me.

“What is it, Cherry?” Donnie asks, reaching out to stroke the side of my face.

“One second,” I tell him, looking at Kellan. “I just want to tell someone.”

He nods, and I go into his text message trail with his mom.

I type in three little words: **She said yes.**

I might never get to tell my own mom, but Kellan’s mom is pretty great.

I’m glad she’s close by to go dress shopping with and all that crazy, girly stuff.

Pressing send, I smile at the phone before I hand it back to him.

“You don’t want to tell anyone else?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Everyone else can wait.”

Author's NOTE

I hope you enjoyed *Broken Omega*! I'm working on a story for Lana that will include her budding romance with Brooke, and of course the bombshell that dropped in Brooke's story about Zelena will be addressed in her story, [Stolen Omega](#), releasing September 2023.

If you loved this book, please consider leaving a review.
Thank you!

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Sweet

OMEGAVERSE SERIES

You may enjoy this series if you enjoy my *Hybrid Shifters* books, however, please be aware that unlike all my other books, some of the main male characters have intimate relationships with each other as well as with the female main character in this series.

[Secret Omega](#) is the first standalone in this new series, about an Omega called Secret who moves to the big city for college and quickly discovers that pretending to be a Beta is harder than she realized. Note: The Alphas have intimate relationships with their male Omega in this book.

[Lost Omega](#) is the second standalone in this new series, about an Omega called Ember who is grieving the loss of a mate when her life at the academy is suddenly turned upside down. Note: There are no intimate relationships between the men in this book.

[Broken Omega](#) is the third standalone in this new series, about an Omega called Brooke who escapes the academy and drives her mates crazy as she builds a new life for herself.

Note: Most of the male characters have intimate relationships with each other in this book.

[Stolen Omega](#) is the fourth standalone in this new series, about popstar Omega Zelena who gets kidnapped on the way to her next tour stop.

Note: There are no intimate relationships between the men in this book.

More books in this series are coming soon.

So far, I have books planned for Leanne, Beth, and Lana!

Hybrid Shifters

WORLD BOOKS

If you like my *Sweet Omegaverse* series, you may also enjoy my *Hybrid Shifters* world. These are suspenseful and steamy new adult reverse harem paranormal romances. The novels can be read as standalones, but the following reading order is recommended if you'd prefer to avoid spoilers!

[Vicious Love](#) follows Cheryl, a witch being sent to a wolf academy against her wishes.

[Shifting Hearts](#) follows Rachel who needs to escape a boyfriend who's trying to kill her.

[Hybrid Rejected](#) follows Amanda, a hybrid who's rejected by her true mate.

[Runaway Mate](#) follows Jillian as she rejects a chosen mate and runs away to find a better life.

[Hybrid Hearts](#) brings Amanda, Rachel, Jillian and Cheryl back with their mates for a novella that hints at how their stories will continue in future standalones!

[Necromancer Bitten](#) follows necromancer Kelly as she travels to a facility and meets vampires.

[Moon Cursed](#) follows Cheryl's pack as when Oscar is accused of murder by another pack.

[Shifting Spirits](#) follows Rachel and her mates into a mansion full of ghosts on New Year's Eve.

[Vampire Bait](#) follows Roxy as she adapts to life on her own now that Kelly no longer needs her help.

More books in this series are coming soon.

Looking FOR MORE?

Looking for the rest of my paranormal reverse harem novels? Here's a list of my other works:

If you love mystery/suspense with your paranormal, check out my completed wolf shifter reverse harem trilogy, [Claiming Her Alphas](#).

Need a completed wolf shifter series with steam, suspense and a sense of humor? Check out my [Claimed by Wolves Trilogy](#).

If you love stories about unusual shifters, you might also like [Flashing Her Gators](#), which is a standalone that's slower burn with eventual steam and features multiple POVs.

Need steamy, twisted standalone fairytale reverse harems? Check out [Devilry](#) for a vampire filled version of Snow White, or [Cursed Slumber](#) for a demon filled version of Sleeping Beauty, or [Beastly Beauty](#) for a gender-flipped shifter version of Beauty and the Beast. Lastly, [Ruby's Pride](#), inspired by the Wizard of Oz, is the first in a series of steamy fairytale standalones which also feature shifters.

Need a complete series with serious steam and multiple POVs? Make sure you check out my completed low fantasy [Rock Goddess Reverse Harem Series](#).

Looking For SHORTER RH READS?

Looking for shorter RH reads? Here's a list of my shorter works:

If you're looking for a standalone shorter read, be sure to check out my seriously steamy snake shifter novella, [Venom's Kiss](#). This was originally published in [Falling for Them Volume Five](#).

If you're looking for something short and steamy with vampires, check out my *Charming Their Djinn* trilogy serial. This complete trilogy of novellas is all yours when you sign up to my author newsletter! The first story, [Lucky in Love](#), was originally published in [Lucky Between the Sheets](#), with the title *Charming the Djinn*. The characters demanded their story be expanded on so there are two more novellas in the series, [Hard Luck](#) and [Lucky Streak](#).

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