



THE UNCHAINED OMEGAVEVERSE

# HUNTER

CALLIE RHODES

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**All he ever wanted was her...**

From the moment she appeared at the Boundaryland border months ago, Courtney has consumed his waking thoughts and haunted his dreams. The only beta whose inner desires elude his senses, she's a mystery he can't solve...and the only woman he desperately wants.

**All she ever needed was him...**

Past trauma taught Courtney to keep her emotions bound up tight. So far it's been the only way to protect herself from the chaos swirling around her. But now that war is imminent, and the future of the Boundaryland is in peril, she'll risk anything to keep her friends safe...even if it means risking her heart.

## CHAPTER ONE

If Courtney Fischer had a dollar for every time she was described as ‘fearless’ by the media, she would have been a damned millionaire. But as was often the case these days, the journalists had gotten it wrong.

Most days, Courtney was downright terrified—and glad of it because fear was what kept her alive. It might have gone against the grain of popular belief, at least for those in positions of power, but to Courtney, fear was never the enemy. Rather, it alerted her to danger, reminding her to pay attention, cover her tracks, and stay on her toes. Courtney had known too many hotshots who’d gone down hard when their overconfidence made them sloppy. She was determined that would never happen to her.

Carelessness and inattention—those were the real enemies. You could throw rashness and stubbornness in there too. But most deadly of all was panic.

Unlike fear, which was an invaluable warning device, panic offered nothing but sensory overload. All it could do was leave you exposed, vulnerable, and incapable of reason.

The best way to avoid panic, Courtney had found, was to steer clear of extreme emotions. Terror, hopelessness, rage, horror—all of these needed to be nipped in the bud, shut down before they had the chance to grow into something dangerous.

That was something Courtney was very good at. She’d spent a good portion of her life learning to control her emotions, keeping them tightly contained where they couldn’t disrupt her missions or her life.

It was a particularly useful skill in moments like this— inching toward an armed roadblock just this side of the Arkansas/Missouri border. Courtney needed to be in complete command of herself if she was going to pull this off.

Preparation could only take a person so far, but that didn't stop Courtney from doing everything she could to increase the odds of success—starting with assembling her disguise. By the time she left Geri's house early that morning, her brown braid was pinned up under a long blonde wig that reached past her shoulders, bright green contact lenses disguised her light brown eyes, and her face was spackled with more makeup than she'd worn in her entire twenty-four years put together.

As long as Courtney lived—a dicey prospect for a founding member of the controversial Society for Alpha Liberation and Equality—she would never forget the gray-haired former school principal turned SALE member who had taken her in when Courtney found herself in more trouble than usual. Geraldine Weatherby was not only smart, funny, and deeply committed to the cause, she was also tough and sly enough to weather the firestorm engulfing the alpha rights movement.

Hell, the old lady had even helped Courtney steal a car—a bright yellow VW bug belonging to one of her neighbors, who had mentioned she was off to spend a week with family out of state. That meant Courtney could be confident the car wouldn't be reported stolen for at least a few more days.

For the better part of the morning's drive—an hour and a half of rural Arkansas farm roads to reach the Missouri border—Courtney kept doing double-takes whenever she checked the mirror because the face that stared back was a stranger's. With the curly blond wig, the winged eyeliner and bubble-gum pink lipstick, the borrowed red sweater that was tight enough to reveal the outline of her breasts and a couple inches of her abs to boot, Courtney looked nothing like herself.

And that was a good thing. Because her usual tactical gear, no-nonsense braid, and mirrored sunglasses were a lot more likely to draw attention at the checkpoint than her current

disguise, which screamed *Girls just want to have fun* in time with the pop tunes blaring from the radio.

Sure enough, the soldier barely glanced up from his clipboard when Courtney pulled up to the hastily-constructed barriers. “License,” he demanded before the car even came to a complete stop.

“Sure thing!” Courtney turned down the radio before digging around in the purse that Geri’s granddaughter had accidentally left behind a few months back, a fire-engine-red leather number with metal hearts dangling from the strap. She wasn’t too worried about the counterfeit documents in the wallet she handed the soldier; the Society for Alpha Liberation and Equality—SALE, for short—worked with some of the best forgers in the world.

“Jessica Cotter.” The soldier glanced from Courtney’s fake driver’s license to her face, which was starting to hurt from smiling. “What has you visiting Missouri today?”

“Prob’ly the same reason as everybody else,” Courtney said, leaning into a drawl and rolling her eyes. “Those goddamn alphas.”

“What does that mean?” The soldier’s expression remained inscrutable behind his dark sunglasses.

“Okay, so this morning, I get a call from my mom, right?” Courtney had practiced this with Geri last night until she nailed the Ditzzy Blonde cadence. “And she’s like, ‘Jessica, I need you to drive to Fredericktown and get your Aunt Karen. Her car’s in the shop, and the tanks are going to start rolling into Missouri any minute.’ And I reminded her like a hundred times that I have to work today, but she never listens. She starts in with the guilt trip, like I’m so selfish, and if Aunt Karen gets hit by a missile it’s my fault. Like I started the Boundarylands war or something! So finally I was like, ‘Fine, I’ll go, but if—’”

“Enough.” The soldier, his patience obviously worn thin, tossed the license back through the window. “Move along.”

“Jeez, you don’t have to be so rude,” Courtney huffed, already turning the radio back up.

She kept her eye on the rear-view mirror for a few miles, but there was no sign of the army jeeps and police vehicles clustered around the checkpoint. Just thin traffic on roads that were crumbling from neglect nearly a decade into the government’s program of moving its citizens out of the rural parts of the country and into cities.

Fifteen minutes into Missouri, Courtney had passed no more than half a dozen other vehicles. But it wasn’t time to rip off the ridiculous wig yet. The year-old Ozark Boundaryland was still hours away, and plenty could go wrong in the time it would take her to reach it.

Since her promotion to Director of Field Logistics for SALE, Courtney had headed up over a dozen supply convoys to the boundaryland—including the one two months ago that had blown up in their faces. Too many lives were lost in the FBI ambush, too many friends, too many colleagues. People who’d become like family to her.

Now she was in danger of losing many more.

The fallout from her doomed mission had mushroomed into a national military crisis. Just days ago, a guerrilla journalist had publicly released damning evidence that proved just how deep the beta government’s lies had gone. The woman, whose real name was Tabitha but went by Truth, had done what Courtney couldn’t. She’d shown the world that not only had the Pentagon engineered the deaths of dozens of innocent betas, but that they’d been covering up an extermination campaign against the alphas for years.

No one in SALE was surprised at the beta government’s response to the reporting. Just last night, in a televised speech to the country, the president had denied any advance knowledge of or responsibility for the attack. Then he’d announced that the Accords—the treaties between the beta and alpha populations signed upon the formation of the first boundaryland—were now void due to the alphas’ ‘flagrant and repeated violations.’ Then, while the nation was still absorbing

that shock, the president got to his real point and officially declared war on all three US boundarylands.

At this very moment, all the branches of the beta armed services were scrambling to organize the attack. Preparing to spill the blood of their own people, on their own land, for the simple reason that they were different.

Every single alpha living in the boundarylands—not to mention their omegas and a handful of beta family members—had been born in this country. Not only that, they'd all been born beta. But at some point—late adolescence for the alphas and from physical contact with their mate for the omegas—their natures had changed.

The young men became bigger, stronger, and faster, all in a shockingly short stretch of time. Their senses deepened dramatically until they could see, hear, and smell things far beyond any beta's abilities. Even their immune systems eclipsed those belonging to any other creature in the natural world.

To some, that made alphas freaks or monsters or worse.

Though betas once lived in harmony with their alpha brothers, the government had been turning more and more virulently against the alphas for decades. Over the last few years, there had been a handful of skirmishes between the military and the alphas of the Northern Pacific and Southeastern Boundarylands. The public uproar had led to an embargo that was nothing more than a thinly disguised effort to starve the alphas out of existence.

It hadn't worked, but tensions were at an all-time high when dozens of alphas escaped from a secret government facility where they'd been tortured and experimented on. The establishment of a third boundaryland had been a concession by a panicked government under increasing fire from its citizens, its leaders realizing too late that they had fatally underestimated their foe.

Truth's bombshell had landed in an increasingly divided public. Most people still believed the pro-beta propaganda flooding the nation's schools and media. Still, opposition was

growing with every revelation of government-sponsored assassinations and terror. SALE, an early defender of alpha rights, was recruiting more volunteers than ever before and making real inroads in the court of public opinion.

But now that war had come, it threatened to change everything. Fear had replaced complacency in an environment rife with false information and rumors. And Courtney feared for the future of SALE and organizations like it, which had been forced into the shadows just to survive.

Courtney had long ago sworn to never give up as long as she still drew breath, but she was starting to wonder exactly how long that might be. She might be damn good at what she did, but she wasn't bulletproof.

She'd breezed through the checkpoint at the Missouri border, but there would be others. And not just today, but—assuming she survived the next twenty-four hours—on the way back to...to...

*Shit.*

Courtney had known since the moment she'd left that morning that she couldn't return to Geri's. It was too risky, and the last thing she wanted was to repay the old woman's kindness with the trauma of an early morning black ops raid.

Having landed near the top of the FBI's most-wanted list, Courtney's face had been in the news for months, and it would only get worse now that war had been declared. Her documents were solid, but they had to be regularly replaced, and it was anyone's guess how long the forgers would still agree to work with SALE before they decided it was too hot to take the chance.

One way or another, Courtney was going to get caught. And then...

Well, then it would be all over. But that wasn't going to happen today.

Not just because it was unthinkable that she'd never see her friends again. Not because the tanks still had a long way to

travel before they started rolling into the military exclusion zone.

No: the reason that Courtney was certain she'd beat Death at least a while longer lay safely at the bottom of that gaudy purse. Something so valuable it was worth Courtney's life a hundred times over.

## CHAPTER TWO

Hunter Ward hadn't slept in almost two days, and it was starting to catch up with him. He wasn't alone—no one in the Ozark Boundaryland had gotten any rest since Tabitha and Kane had posted their explosive video online—but while the other alphas seemed to be handling the effects of sleep deprivation reasonably well, Hunter was starting to fall the fuck apart.

That was both surprising and worrying because back in the Basement—the secret underground facility where Hunter and the rest of his Ozark Boundaryland brothers had been imprisoned for nearly a decade—he had been denied sleep for up to a week as part of the government's 'research'.

And yes, toward the end of the week, Hunter had been plagued by mild irritability, fatigue, and impaired memory recall—the same symptoms experienced by betas in a tenth of the time. But he'd never experienced visual and auditory hallucinations, and certainly not olfactory ones. In fact, until this moment, Hunter hadn't even known that was a thing.

But there was no denying the faint scent teasing at the deep well of memories Hunter had buried deep within him.

He was standing at the back of Kane Luckey's living room, where a couple dozen alphas and a handful of their mates had been camped out for the last two days, going over the most recent assaults on their boundaryland and exploring every possible response, every strategy and its implications.

The Accords that had governed beta-alpha relations since the inception of the boundarylands lay literally shredded on

the floor. No one seemed willing to clean up after Wyatt tore them to pieces when they got news of the beta president's official declaration of war. The ruined documents served as a visual reminder that the delicate balance between the two worlds, protecting the sanctity of alpha territory and the rights of its residents, had been breached at the cost of mayhem and bloodshed.

The omegas served food and kept the coffee going around the clock, sleeping in shifts in Kane and Tabitha's spare rooms. Still, as platters, plates, and mugs were brought out and cleared and tidied, the ravaged Accords remained.

Every single person in the room knew who was to blame, that the lives lost in all three boundarylands in the lead-up to the war—most of them beta soldiers—could have been saved if they had simply honored the agreements made long ago.

Of course, that wasn't the version of the story being told in the beta world. The government propaganda had reached its tentacles into every news outlet and social media platform in the country. Now a good portion of its citizens believed the lie that alphas were the aggressors, the brutal, inhuman monsters who raped and killed to feed an insatiable hunger for violence.

Perhaps it was the unspeakable cravenness of the betas' leaders that was fueling the unflagging energy in the room. As Hunter looked around, he saw rage, determination, and calculation on his brothers' faces...but none of the confusion that he was starting to experience.

Maybe it was time to take a break.

He slipped out the back of the huge three-story house to the small meditation garden Kane had built last year. There was no denying the stunning views from the decks on every level of the house, the exquisite craftsmanship of the finishes Kane had replaced with his own hands—but it was this simple space cobbled with river stones and screened by bamboo that Hunter liked best.

It offered an excellent counter to his scientific mind, a reminder that all the observations and calculations fueling his thoughts meant nothing if they weren't grounded in the land

that was the heart of every alpha's life. Soil, sun, water—these had sustained every generation since the first walked the earth and would long after he was gone.

“But I'm not going down today, motherfuckers,” Hunter muttered as he stared into the small stone basin fed by one of the countless natural Ozark springs.

Here, alone, he tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and breathed in...and there it was. He shook his head in disbelief. It was almost too on the nose. Fate must have a sick sense of humor to start tossing phantom scents at him on this of all days.

And not just any scent...but *her* scent. Only one person he'd ever known smelled like a rushing stream breaching its banks with spring snowmelt, redolent with bright green possibility.

Strangely, the hallucination made a twisted kind of sense. With his nervous system under tremendous stress, preparing for a war that could destroy this nascent homeland, Hunter's subconscious mind must have compensated by dragging up his most comforting memory.

Courtney Fischer's scent.

It was so faint as to be barely there, as if Courtney was walking in the woods dozens of miles away. On an ordinary day, Hunter wouldn't even notice the mélange of scents at the far edges of his sensory reach, but this was no ordinary day, and the scent belonged to no ordinary woman.

Hunter cleared his head and inhaled again.

It was still there.

His heart sped; his blood came alive. For a moment, despising his weakness, Hunter allowed himself to believe it was really her—then forced himself back to reality. Because if he couldn't trust his thoughts, he couldn't trust himself in the fight that could come at any moment.

False hope was more dangerous than an entire stockpile of beta weapons, and Hunter pushed it away. There was no way that the one precious thing he'd hoarded in secret, the longing

he hadn't been able to extinguish in the two months since he'd had last seen Courtney, would appear now in this atmosphere of chaos and threat.

She had come into Hunter's life when she started leading a weekly supply convoy through the military exclusion zone to the very edge of the Boundaryland, evading armed patrols with shoot-to-kill orders with little thought to her own safety in order to deliver badly needed goods. Until two months ago when her convoy was attacked. Courtney and one other beta were the only survivors.

A week later, Courtney left the boundaryland and hadn't returned since.

Hunter couldn't blame her. He knew firsthand the trauma of watching your friends slaughtered before your eyes. The atrocities he'd experienced in the Basement still haunted him. There wasn't a force on earth that could compel him back to that place.

But that didn't mean he didn't wake up every morning hoping that this would be the day she returned. That he'd get to see her face just one more time. Touch her hand again. Maybe even hear her laugh.

God, he'd give everything for that laugh.

It wasn't easy to come by. Courtney was serious and methodical by nature; it was probably one of the main reasons she'd lasted so long in such a violent occupation. But she wasn't humorless or dour. There was a softness to her that not everyone got to see—only those she truly trusted.

Of course, there was another possible reason for her extended absence, one that made his stomach twist just thinking about it: Courtney might be dead.

The oppressive government she fought so hard against might have finally found her, and...

Yet, somehow Hunter knew that nightmare scenario wasn't the truth. He *knew* her—better, he'd wager, than anyone else, even the men and women she worked with every day. She was too damn good to be caught.

But his belief was rooted in something that went beyond trust and even instinct and drew from his soul. Somehow, he simply knew she was alive.

If she wasn't, the sun wouldn't shine in the morning. The stars wouldn't sail across the sky at night. The whole world would stop spinning on its axis.

At least, *his* world would.

Hunter knew how audacious his certainty was. For an alpha to be attuned enough to 'feel' another soul over such a distance, a mating bond would need to be present—or at the very least a hell of a connection, one strong enough to change a beta woman's nature into an omega. And that wasn't the case.

No matter how much he might wish it was.

Alphas weren't known for wallowing in shame, but there was no other word for the heaviness that had befallen Hunter since Courtney's departure. But no amount of ridiculous self-pity would change the truth—he had deep feelings for her, and she didn't return them.

For months, Hunter had spent every free moment with Courtney, not just unloading the goods from the back of her truck but talking, joking, sharing life stories. Hell, they'd even spent a week under the same roof while Courtney waited for things to cool down after the ambush.

Every other beta woman who spent that much time with a single alpha was now an omega...but not Courtney. So, yeah. If there had been any chance of a connection, it would have formed long ago.

Hunter had done his best to put Courtney in the past, but nothing worked. He still thought about her almost constantly, and when he closed his eyes at night, he dreamed about her. And now it seemed she was haunting even the air he breathed.

Suddenly, Hunter froze. It was still there...that rushing water scent, mineral silt, and the first wildflowers of spring. And it was getting stronger with every passing second.

This was no hallucination.

He raced back into the house, making as little sound as possible, and grabbed the arm of the first brother he saw.

“Rowan. I need you to come outside for a second.”

Rowan must have caught the urgency in Hunter’s voice because he didn’t hesitate. Outside, he gave Hunter a hard look.

“What’s going on?”

“I need you to close your eyes and tell me what scent you pick up.”

Rowan frowned but did as he was asked. After a second, he started ticking off the same things Hunter had detected a few miles from the house. “Car exhaust. Wolf scat. Axel’s smokehouse—”

“Farther,” Hunter cut in. “Really faint.”

Rowan opened one eye a slit and gave him a skeptical look, but then tried again, his forehead creasing in concentration. “I don’t know... there’s a bear coming out of hibernation near Xander’s runoff pond, but—”

Suddenly Rowan’s body stiffened, his expression tightening. “Is that... Courtney?”

Hunter released the breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. His brain hadn’t been misfiring after all.

“What the hell is she doing here?” Rowan demanded.

“I don’t know,” Hunter muttered. “And I don’t know what to do about it, either.”

He didn’t need to explain himself. As much as Hunter wanted to see Courtney again, a war was barreling toward them. Blood would be spilled on both sides. It was no place for a beta civilian, especially one wanted for treason.

The alphas’ losses wouldn’t come anywhere close to the beta casualties. Not only did it take more to hurt an alpha—their size and physiology meant they could absorb more than ten times the force that would take down a beta—but it was damned hard to kill them.

Hunter would gladly take a bullet for Courtney, but that wouldn't do much good when the government started dropping bombs and spraying everything in sight with automatic fire. Fear nearly dropped him to his knees, even as his heart surged at the thought of seeing her.

The only thing that had kept Hunter going for the last two months was his certainty that Courtney was still alive. But alive wasn't the same thing as safe. It wasn't the same as free.

Hunter and every other alpha in the boundaryland had been alive while imprisoned in the Basement, but it had been hell. The thought of Courtney going through that, with beta interrogators torturing her for answers, burned away every trace of his identity as a healer and left only the warrior.

"I think she's headed for the old delivery spot," Rowan said.

It made sense. Courtney knew that route better than anyone, and even though it had been heavily guarded in the days after the attack, the local patrols had been replaced by specialized forces who, despite their technology and AI-driven surveillance, had opted for a complicated strategy that would leave a multitude of gaps until they perfected it.

"I'm on my way," Hunter said.

"Hang on—there's no way I'm letting you go alone. This could be a trap."

Hunter had to suppress a surge of fury at the suggestion that Courtney might betray them. She'd die first. Hunter knew it like he knew his own name.

But reason followed on the heels of his first response, and he had to concede that Rowan had a point. Courtney would never willingly aid the beta military, but she might not have a choice. Those in power had proved time and again that they weren't above sacrificing innocent lives.

Rowan disappeared into the house and returned a moment later with Bronn Hayes in tow. Bronn was a good choice. Among a hundred modified alphas capable of near-supernatural strength, he stood out as the fiercest. Hunter

wouldn't be surprised if Bronn could destroy an entire convoy of armored tanks with his bare hands.

They were in the truck and tearing down the road before Rowan had a chance to explain the situation to Bronn. Hunter focused on controlling his emotions, knowing it was pointless to even try to shield his thoughts from his brothers. The secret he'd tried to keep for so long had probably never been much of a secret anyway.

He'd been the butt of constant joking about Courtney since the first day she showed up to replace another smuggler who had recently taken an alpha mate. Though he'd denied there was anything going on, his brothers had been undaunted—even though there was nothing significant between him and Courtney; no bond, no shifting omega nature. Not even a handshake, for God's sake.

And yet no alpha would miss the obvious, the way Hunter had to use all of his willpower to keep from touching Courtney when he was around her, how hard he had to work to keep the conversation neutral. Still, what mattered was that after all this time, she was still a beta. A beta who'd been able to walk away—and stay away—from him without a second thought.

## CHAPTER THREE

Considering that alphas weren't designed for sitting around doing nothing, and that patience wasn't exactly at the top of their list of traits, Rowan and Bronn were doing a pretty damn good job of faking it.

Which was bothering Hunter almost as much as the fact that they were hemmed in at the border while Courtney's pace, the gradually moving presence he was tracking with every sense he possessed, had slowed to a maddening crawl.

How could his two alpha brothers just lean back against his tailgate, shooting the shit like they were at some fucking barbecue while his own world was turning into a five-alarm fire?

Okay, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration.

Rowan and Bronn weren't actually saying much of anything, though Rowan had his eyes closed and looked like he might be dozing, and there wasn't really an emergency with Courtney—not yet, anyway. Hunter was still picking up on her steady heartbeat, and she was still moving ahead, if at a snail's pace. But it was a war zone out there, and if he kept pacing much longer, he was going to wear a ditch along the fence.

Hunter cursed under his breath. What the hell was taking her so long?

None of this was Rowan and Bronn's fault. And he knew they weren't indifferent to Courtney's fate, either. After all, she'd been responsible for the steady delivery of supplies that had ensured the boundaryland's survival over the winter. No,

they were simply being rational, waiting until there was a reason for concern before jumping to any conclusions.

The truth was that it had been more than decent of them to leave the critical planning meeting for what might well be a fool's errand. The fact that neither had questioned his reasons spoke to their respect for him. They might have given him shit about Courtney before, when she was showing up every week to torture him with her presence, but now that her life was on the line, there was no more joking around.

Which meant that Hunter was left alone with his thoughts.

He kept busy, tracking Courtney's progress with every bit of focus he could muster, sensing every time she encountered an obstacle or setback from the minor shifts in her scent. The hollow leaden note of her misery was constant. She was cold—shivering, even—which meant that she had either been ill-prepared for the elements or that she'd encountered trouble on the way.

And knowing Courtney, it wasn't the former.

Hunter bet she'd never been unprepared for anything in her life. She was simply the most badass human being he'd ever met—a hell of a sexy trait, one that had caused him to waste hours of his life imagining what it would be like to spar with her in bed, to match her power and ferocity and control with—

Hunter stopped pacing long enough to kick a fence post, sending it flying into the woods and leaving behind a splintered stump.

*Great*—not only would he have to come back here and mend the damn thing, but his friends had seen him lose his shit.

But that was the least of his problems.

Yeah, it was making him wild not to be able to go after Courtney, especially since he'd caught traces of blood in her scent, probably from minor scratches and cuts picked up on the way. But Hunter been dealing with Courtney being under threat for months now.

No, it was something else that had him crawling out of his skin, something new in her scent: fear.

The Courtney he knew had never given off a hint of fear, even when everyone else on her team was queasy with it. It was as though she'd been built for risk, for running into fire. But that had changed. It was a subtle shift, one he doubted his brothers had picked up on. But woven into the determination and courage she was giving off was the unmistakable poison of fear.

Hunter had never glimpsed this part of Courtney before. He didn't know what to do with it.

Courtney wasn't an automaton—he'd seen her react to shifting threats with concern, caution, and even irritation. But she only indulged in those emotions for a second before immediately shifting into strategy mode, playing with her ponytail and worrying her lip with her teeth while her mind flew a mile a minute.

And even though, like always, she was doing a damn good job of tamping her emotions down, fear was making her vulnerable...and that was making Hunter feel like tearing his heart out.

She was still nearly two miles away, and her pace was approaching a crawl, which meant it was going to take her another hour or two to reach them.

Yeah, that wasn't going to cut it.

"Screw it," he said before he could demolish another fence post. "I'm going after her."

Rowan pushed himself off the tailgate. "I'm not sure that's a good idea, brother."

"I *know* it's not," Bronn added.

Hunter knew what they were thinking. One of the founding principles of the Boundarylands—written into the Accords that their ancestors had helped author—was respect for the sacred nature of their land. Betas were only allowed onto alpha land if given permission. In return, alphas never crossed the border

into what they considered foreign territory. The price for breaking either of those laws was bloodshed.

But since the shredded remains of those laws were currently lying on Kane's floor, Hunter figured he was no longer under any obligation to honor those imaginary borders.

Especially not when Courtney was out there.

"Something's wrong," he muttered, testing the wind for the thousandth time. "I can feel it."

Rowan and Bronn exchanged a look before taking their own surveys, tilting their heads to listen and parse the scents carried by the breeze. After a few moments, they relaxed.

"She's fine," Rowan said, Bronn nodding.

The hell she was.

Hunter bit back another curse. They didn't know Courtney the way he did. If he were in their shoes, assessing the situation as if Courtney was any other beta, Hunter would probably reach the same conclusion—her pulse was steady and regular, her movements methodical. There were no bitter notes of panic or irrational thinking.

But Courtney wasn't like any beta Hunter had ever known. And in ways he had neither the time nor ability to explain to his brothers, he could tell she was in trouble.

"I'm not asking you to come with me," he said tightly, already kicking the rest of the section of fence over.

To his surprise, he heard movement behind him. "I mean, this is an absolutely terrible idea. You know that, right?" Rowan said.

"One of the worst I've ever heard," Bronn grouched. The two of them now flanked Hunter, waiting for him to take the lead.

Hunter was taken aback. "You don't have to—"

"You really think we'd let you have all the fun?" Rowan snorted. "No chance. Besides, Bailey would kill me if anything happened to Courtney on my watch."

Hunter couldn't tell if Rowan was still giving him shit—he found it kind of hard to believe that the woman who had once betrayed Courtney actually cared what happened to her now—but Bailey was Rowan's mate, and no alpha would dream of criticizing another's mate to his face. That was one law that would always stand, war be damned.

But it didn't matter. Bailey wasn't here. And Hunter trusted Rowan and Bronn with his life, and, even though it took a hell of a leap of faith, with Courtney's.

Hunter took a deep breath, steadying himself against the weight of what they were about to do. “Okay, then,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

And then, for the first time since they'd broken out of the Basement and fought their way to this sacred homeland, the three alphas walked over the border and into beta territory.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Courtney knew full well how dangerous the military exclusion zone surrounding the Ozark Boundaryland could be. It wasn't just the armed patrols she had to worry about. With its dramatic cliffs plunging to jagged crevices, the five-mile-deep stretch was nearly impossible to navigate on foot in some places.

There was a good reason that the words 'Stay on the trail' and 'Stick with the pack' were splashed in bold lettering at the start of the Zone Procedures section of the SALE mission handbook. Too much could go wrong.

But today, Courtney was breaking both of those rules. She didn't have a choice.

Just outside the exclusion zone, she had reluctantly pulled into a leaning, abandoned barn where the stolen car would be shielded from view. Once inside, she ripped off her wig and ridiculous outfit, wiping off the makeup and trading chunky heels for hiking boots. She didn't relish the thought of hoofing it the rest of the way, but the only other vehicle in the barn was a rusting wreck of a bicycle with two flat tires.

Just as well—the only thing that would stand out more than a bright yellow VW Bug in the mostly deserted area surrounding the Boundaryland was an unauthorized beta on an ATV, an image that had become synonymous in the current media hysteria for the phrase 'dangerous traitor.'

Courtney shouldered her pack and took a couple of grounding breaths. She'd made it this far undetected, which was miracle enough. Still, she needed her luck to last two

more days, long enough to hike her way into the boundaryland and back out again.

Being on foot would slow her down, but a few hours' exertion seemed a small price to pay for not being taken out by a sniper's bullet.

She couldn't risk walking on the supply trail proper, so she stuck to the contours, which meant dealing with muddy runoff conditions, hidden ice patches, and roots and rocks exposed by months of storms. Each step was an act of faith; each stumble a moment of terror. Twice Courtney lost her footing and slid dozens of yards on her ass, ripping the thin fabric of her athletic pants and long-sleeve shirt.

It was in moments like those that she most missed her high-tech gear, but while packing last night, she'd decided it wasn't worth the risk. If those guards had decided to search her car at any of the roadblocks, she would've had a hard time trying to explain why she had military-grade gear in her bags. Off-the-rack gym gear, though? Everyone from teens to grandmas wore that sort of thing these days.

Courtney continued on, shivering and banged up, keeping her focus on the environment around her, on high alert for anything out of place.

It was one of the first tricks she'd learned as a child. With four older brothers and a father who shared a taste for violence, she had to create a self-preservation toolbox early. By age eight, Courtney had learned how to hide in nearly any setting; by ten, she'd mastered moving as silently as a panther. By twelve, she'd started fighting back when cornered.

If only the threats she was facing now were as undisciplined.

Instead, Courtney knew she was up against a whole new level of threat. Since the declaration of war, she had to assume that longstanding military protocols had gone out the window. The government was treating the conflict like a street fight, where no rules applied.

If she died here, it was a safe bet that no one would ever know.

No one, that was, but...

*No.* Courtney gave the strap of her pack a vicious yank, dragging herself back from the brink. Over the years, she'd worked hard to strengthen her fighter identity while letting the other, more emotional side atrophy. Eventually, it was easy enough to pretend it didn't exist.

Right up until she met Hunter Ward.

And yeah, Courtney was looking forward to seeing him again, and yeah, maybe she wished things had been different between them. Maybe they *would* have been if she'd ever learned how to do those things that seemed to come naturally to other women. A little primping and flirting might have gone a long way to catch Hunter's eye.

But that wasn't her. She wasn't the simpering kind. She was the bitch who did her job and stayed alive.

Hopefully, she'd get to see Hunter for at least a few minutes before she had to leave again. He'd always been the first and last face she saw during supply runs, and she'd stretched their time together as long as she could without raising eyebrows, but those had been scheduled events. This time she wasn't expecting to find a welcoming committee waiting for her at the border. This was eve of war, and the alphas had more important things to worry about.

Given Courtney's experience with the alphas, they were probably deep into planning their strategy against the beta forces. And Hunter, with his logical mind honed and sharpened by his medical training, would be right in the center.

She could probably expect his usual warm greeting and friendly conversation. But there would be no embrace, no sheltering strength of his arms encircling her, no breathing his scent with her cheek pressed against his chest, no matter how many times she'd dreamed about it.

In the days before this latest boundaryland was formed and populated with former Basement prisoners, people used to say

that a mere touch from an alpha could activate a dormant omega. And Courtney supposed that was still true, but it didn't matter since she'd tested negative.

But this new group had upended everything people thought they knew about alphas. As a result of what had been done to them during the cruel 'experiments,' something in their makeup had shifted. Now a bond could form even between an ordinary beta woman and an Ozark Boundaryland alpha based on the strength of the connection between them.

If Hunter's feelings matched Courtney's, that connection would have been a hundred proof. That was how she knew they would never be more than friends.

Still, on the few occasions when Hunter had touched her, his hand grazing her wrist or resting for a second on her shoulder, an electric current had rocketed through her body. In those moments, Courtney always found herself wondering—okay, wishing—that it might spark something. But it never did. Hunter clearly didn't think of her that way.

And why would he?

A rare flash of misery rose up in Courtney at this traitorous thought. Ordinarily, she wasn't given to self-doubt. She knew her strengths—tough, disciplined, brave, quick on her feet—and was equally aware of her shortcomings—stubborn, aloof, about as far from the feminine ideal as a person could get.

Courtney had long ago stopped trying to please anyone, not even herself. In her experience, practicality beat out whimsy and indulgence every time, and the pursuit of pleasure tended to make people complacent or immoral—and often both.

She'd made her peace with who she was. So she wasn't going to win any prizes for beauty or grace—SALE didn't care, and she'd never heard anyone in the boundaryland complaining.

Not even the omegas, to her surprise. Courtney didn't have much experience with female friendship, and she'd been apprehensive about meeting the alphas' mates, who she'd

expected to be mysteriously alluring domestic goddesses. After all, omegas were known for their unique feminine energy.

Instead, Courtney had easily made friends with the women in the boundaryland. It was hard to define the elusive quality they shared since it defied categorization. It wasn't physical appearance since omegas came in all shapes and sizes—though they all had incredible skin and enviable thick, glossy hair. Some were soft-spoken, while others could be even more direct than she usually was. Some were visibly sensual, but others were playful and even eccentric.

Courtney wasn't sure why she remained fascinated by and even envious of omegas when it was clear that she would never be one. She faced many hard truths in her lifetime, but for some reason, this was the one she couldn't seem to get past.

Strike that—she knew damn well what the reason was.

If only she could satisfy herself with a platonic crush on Hunter. It shouldn't have been hard; sex had never been all that important to Courtney. She tended to think of herself as a fighter first, a strategist second, and a friend third. As for lover...she wasn't even sure that was a rung on her personal ladder.

And therefore she had no right to be surprised when no one else saw her that way either...no matter how badly she might want them to.

No matter how often she thought about the days she'd spent in Hunter's house after the ambush. Seeing him every day for a week had been wonderful, but it was far from romantic.

She'd tried not to take it personally when he'd made himself scarce during the day. She knew how much alphas treasured their privacy and solitude. It was beyond kind of him to offer to let her crash at his place at all.

Courtney felt a stab of shame at the longing she'd experienced during those days. She'd pushed all that desire

down at the time, of course. It had been easy enough during the day when Hunter wasn't around, but after a week of having dinner together every evening and talking long into the night...well, that had tested even her legendary self-control.

It got easier when Courtney returned to the beta world and didn't have to look into Hunter's brown-sugar eyes every day. Or watch him absently rub his sun-bleached brush cut when he was thinking. Or hear his deep laugh. Or any of a thousand other little details she'd memorized.

Besides, there was plenty of work to keep her busy. Even though the round-the-clock media coverage of the convoy ambush had forced her out of the field and deep into hiding, Courtney was busier than ever helping run the back end of SALE operations.

But even as the days passed and life took her farther from Hunter all the time, she still never stopped thinking—and dreaming—of him. They might not have a bond, but that didn't stop her from fantasizing about him in bed every night.

His hands on her body, moving slowly over her curves, learning her, savoring her in a way she'd never been able to savor herself. The heat of his skin under her own hands and lips, the feeling of his heart beating as fast as hers.

His mouth on hers...their bodies entwined...

Gradually, the shame Courtney felt at these thoughts gave way to a kind of comfort. Because as much as her fantasies turned her on and left her aching, they always ended with her lying in his arms, safe and protected in a way she could never remember feeling before.

Every night Courtney drifted to sleep imagining that Hunter would always be there, that she would never have to be alone again...and if she woke up hugging her pillow for dear life, a little embarrassment wouldn't kill her. At least she'd slept.

Courtney still had a mile and a half of hard terrain to cover when she heard a distant whine. She stopped abruptly, partly

hidden by an overhanging bough, and focused on the sound, concentrating for all she was worth.

An engine...a four-wheeled vehicle, from the sound of it. Still a good distance away, but coming in hot.

Panic beat frantic wings in Courtney's chest, and she had to force herself to take steady breaths.

She should have caught the sound sooner. Should have been paying attention instead of mooning over Hunter. And now she had mere seconds before whoever was out there discovered her frozen like a deer in headlights.

Courtney dove into a snowdrift, rolling under the cover of a dense copse of sumac. Her heart pounded as what sounded like a standard army jeep approached on the road she knew was only a hundred feet or so up the rise. It had nearly passed by when a male voice barked a command and the jeep squealed to a halt.

"I've got a hit on the thermal," another soldier reported.

*Fuck.* Courtney squeezed her eyes shut and pulled her body into an even tighter ball. The new ranks were outfitted with the best technology available. Her only hope was to be mistaken for an animal.

"Where?"

"Five o'clock, sir."

"Hostile?"

"I can't tell, sir. Signature is hot enough to be human. But it's not moving, injured or asleep probably...could be a bear, maybe, but my guess is deer."

"Not worth the risk," the other voice barked. "Take it out anyway."

*No.* The warrior side of Courtney sprang into action and she was off and running before she heard the snick of a safety. The pointlessness of trying to outrun a bullet didn't even enter her mind, since this side of her knew only pure determination, the will to fight until her final breath.

A loud curse. “Definitely a hostile, sir.”

“Alpha?”

“No. Too small.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Take the shot.”

Courtney zigzagged, her feet flying over the terrain, her body executing the almost balletic maneuvers she’d practiced a thousand times in a thousand drills. A tree trunk exploded to her right, splinters flying, the ground thundering when it fell. More shots, some so close she could hear them whizzing by.

A feint-dodge-spring maneuver brought her to the lip of a drop-off, and Courtney didn’t hesitate. She threw herself over the side, praying she’d hit a gentle slope and not the bottom of a steep cliff.

When her body bounced off a steep angle of hard-packed snow, she had little time for relief before starting to skid over scrub and rocks. Her hands and feet clawed and kicked for purchase until she slammed into a log and knocked the wind out of her lungs.

The shooting stopped... but not for long.

Courtney was on her hands and knees sucking air when she heard the jeep’s doors slam, followed by shouted orders.

“Get your eyes back on the hostile!”

“I’m trying, sir! He went down—I’ve got him, sir! Two o’clock, past the—”

“Take the damn shot!”

Courtney staggered to her feet, rage flooding her entire being, turning her vision red. This couldn’t be happening. She couldn’t die before she could save her friends. She scanned the top of the hill for her executioner, every muscle in her body tensed for a fight she would never get to have.

“Yes, s—”

The soldier’s words were cut off by a sound that didn’t make sense, like half a ton of freight falling off a truck. Then came the roar.

It filled the entire forest, seeming to come from every direction at once, a sound so terrifying and threatening that Courtney's legs turned to jello. She would have collapsed if, in the next moment, something hadn't crashed into her out of thin air.

In the next instant, she found herself lifted off the ground, strong arms wrapped tightly around her as she was hurtled away from the threat. Huge hands held her against the solid mass of a powerful chest rumbling with the aftermath of that roar.

Then more shots, rapid-fire rounds coming much too close. Courtney cringed, waiting for the inevitable shock of bullets slicing through her flesh. But that wasn't what happened.

Instead, the shooting stopped, and the screaming began. High-pitched, inhuman sounds that made Courtney press her face into the warmth of her savior, praying for it to stop.

It did...after a few other wet, guttural sounds that Courtney hoped she'd never have to hear again.

Only after the echoes of terror faded did she dare to open her eyes and look up at her savior's face.

*Hunter.*

...but how? What was he doing outside of the boundaryland?

"Is it really you?" Courtney knew better than to trust her wild hopes. Maybe she'd been hit with that volley of bullets after all, and this was a dying hallucination.

If so, it was curious that Rowan and Bronn stood behind Hunter, looking every bit as real. And she doubted she would hallucinate the two red-streaked masses lying in the snow. Which meant that Hunter truly had come to her rescue.

"You saved my life," she breathed, staring to tremble—with shock, adrenaline, and the collision of every fear and dream that had hounded her for months.

In a rare lapse of self-discipline, Courtney threw her arms around Hunter's neck and hugged him tight. But a sticky

warmth seeped against her hands pressed to his back. She yanked them away and found them covered in dark red blood.

And then it was her turn to start screaming. Because Hunter had been shot.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**H**unter had never heard Courtney scream before. Raise her voice? Sure. Yell? Occasionally. But a full-bore scream? Never.

For a fraction of a second, Hunter feared she'd been hit. But no. He didn't sense any of the physical trauma a bullet would inflict. There was no metallic tang of bloodied flesh, no spasms of pain in her body. All he senses was shock—the mental kind, not physical.

Before Hunter could slap a hand over her mouth to muffle her, she stopped, clamping her lips together. And just like that, the emotions had caused her to lose control were buried so deep he couldn't reach them.

“Hunter, You've been shot.” She had full control of herself now, speaking in a firm but urgent voice. “You're bleeding.”

But Hunter's adrenaline and rage refused to abate, stoked by the sudden stifling of her emotions. Courtney had been running for her life from those soulless cowards, and he longed to kill them all over again. The terror he'd sensed moments ago, Courtney's racing pulse and ragged breathing, were a stark contrast to the relief and joy he'd sensed rushing through her when she recognized him. Hunter had detected a hint of something that came dangerously close to desire—but just as abruptly it was overshadowed by deep caring and concern before giving way to Courtney's familiar fierce control. And it all happened before Hunter could dissect the meaning behind any of it.

The unsettled fury inside of him grew. The idea that anyone would dare to hurt Courtney had already honed his rage into an unstable explosive that needed to detonate, to find its target and crush it to nothing—but it was too late. Vengeance had already been taken.

Hunter shut his eyes and gave himself a vicious internal shake. He couldn't be like this, not now. Later, when he was sure Courtney was safe, he'd take his sledge out to the boulders at the rear of his property and smash rock until he was too exhausted to move...even if he had to destroy the whole damn mountain.

“Hunter, did you hear me? You're hurt.”

Hunter only growled in response.

For the moment, it would have to be enough that Courtney was safe in his arms, shielded from the remains of the threat. He needed another moment to make sure his anger was under control, something he could ordinarily do almost without thinking—and he could thank the Basement for that.

In his six long years of imprisonment, Hunter had honed his anger into a hard, razor-sharp weapon. Day after day, he was subjected to tortuous experiments that turned his body into a cauldron of pain and his mind into a fog of nightmares. Again and again, he was forced to watch the dead bodies of his fallen alpha brothers being wheeled past his cell like so much offal to be fed to the dogs. Eventually, all of Hunter's other emotions faded away, leaving a creature who could barely be said to be alive, one whose every cell was fueled by rage and a thirst for vengeance.

He would not—could not—go through that again.

Hunter's life in the Boundaryland had slowly healed him, but the scars remained. He'd worked every day to reject the bitterness and hate that would poison him and choose hope, service, and gratitude instead.

But right now, the anger was in charge, and he couldn't trust himself until he got it under control. So, he focused on the pain piercing his back instead.

Hunter had been racing on foot when he heard that first shot echo through the woods. The terrible scent of Courtney's spiking fear set him on fire and instantly shrank his world to contain only him, her, and the enemy. Reason fled, and Hunter's instincts took over, driving him faster than he'd ever moved in his life.

He wouldn't have thought it possible to run so fast that the forest around him disappeared, his footsteps a blur. He navigated by some primal compass that needed neither sight nor strategy. He forgot his brothers, forgot everything but his need to defend and destroy. And when he reached Courtney and saw that she was unharmed, he'd wrapped his body around her like a shield.

Then came the bullets, three in all, that tore through his flesh. One passed straight through his shoulder, and the other two were lodged in the dense muscle of his back.

Bullets were nothing to Hunter; he would recover from his wounds by morning. But even one of them would have shredded Courtney. To shoot her three times was the kind of overkill that marked the stupid and the weak.

But those beta soldiers had been neither of those things. They'd acted from pure desperation, as any reasonable beta would if they knew the enemy that awaited them in the boundaryland.

It was no excuse. Hunter had sniffed out their spineless ruthlessness a mile away. Every one of them had been filled with hatred and high on the belief in their own superiority and power.

He was instantly filled with a dark and terrible need to punish them. To tear the limbs from their bodies and silence their screams with the heel of his boot. To drench the earth with their blood, a stain that would forevermore mark the site of their unforgivable crime.

But when Hunter finally mastered his emotions enough to turn and face his enemies, both soldiers were already dead. Bronn and Rowan stood motionless next to what remained of their despicable bodies.

Hunter fought his emotions down. His friends had done what any good alpha brother would—they had his back. He would have done the same if he had been in their place. And so he nodded his gratitude.

“Hunter!” There was steel in Courtney’s voice now, and she struggled in his arms. “I said, you’re *bleeding*. You need to put me down.”

No chance. Not while she was still in danger.

“They didn’t have a chance to radio for backup,” Rowan said before Hunter could ask.

“There’s another patrol incoming,” Bronn added grimly. “They must have picked up the shooting. About ten minutes out.”

All three alphas tilted their heads to better hear the sound of the second jeep’s approach.

“Let’s move,” Hunter barked, ignoring Courtney’s protests.

As he led the way through the forest, the other alphas matched his pace, all three of them fueled by anger and adrenaline. But Hunter alone held a woman in his arms, one he’d dreamed of touching for what seemed like forever, the reality so much more than he ever could have imagined. She was soft and warm and light as air and as delicate as the lilies of the valley growing near his house, and—

“Goddamnit, Hunter!” Courtney slammed her fist into his chest. “I’m talking to you.”

The shock of being struck—even if her fist bounced off harmlessly—was enough to bring Hunter back from his rose-colored fog.

“Why’d you do that?”

“You need to put me down!”

That again.

Hunter shook his head. It was pointless to argue with her. He picked up the pace, not from any concerns about the other

patrol that was still miles away, but because none of them would breathe easily until they were back in alpha territory.

“You’re bleeding,” Courtney repeated with exaggerated patience, as if he didn’t already know. The scent of her frustration, sharp and gingery, teased at him.

“It’s nothing.”

“A fucking bullet went through you, Hunter. That’s not nothing. Let me down before you hurt yourself.”

“Not going to happen.”

Bronn and Rowan showed no sign of having heard this exchange, though Hunter knew he’d hear about it later.

Courtney exhaled a guttural hiss—a familiar sound, the one she made whenever things went wrong during deliveries. Damaged packaging, missing items, tires that picked up nails, first-timers who pissed their pants the first time they came face to face with an alpha—these minor snafus were the only time Courtney allowed herself to show any frustration at all.

Strange: Hunter hadn’t realized how much he’d missed that little sound, but when he sensed her tamping down her emotions like she always did, he wished she’d do the opposite and let it all out. She’d just survived an armed attack, after all—though he could do without the screaming. In such close proximity, it was hell on his ears. Now if she was screaming his name, on the other hand—

“Okay.” Courtney’s frosty voice brought him back again. “Let’s try this again. Why won’t you put me down? Are you worried I’ll slow us down?”

“That’s one reason.” He wasn’t about to tell her the truth, that now that he finally had her in his arms, he couldn’t bear the thought of letting her go.

“Fine. I get that,” Courtney said, with a calm that belied the emotions Hunter was certain were simmering deep inside her. “But there’s another way to do this. One where you don’t have to be a self-sacrificing jackass.”

*She's damn good*, Hunter thought—better than any alpha, beta, or omega he'd ever known at projecting control. There was a reason both Rowan and Bronn had failed to pick up on her fear earlier. Wherever Courtney buried her feelings, it was so deep that not even alpha senses could sniff them out.

Hunter stared directly into the challenge in her flashing amber eyes. “Yeah? What’s that?”

“Hand me over to Rowan or Bronn. They can carry me the rest of the way back.”

*Oh, fuck no.* The thought of another alpha touching Courtney was like a thousand volts straight to his nuts. His arms tightened involuntarily around Courtney, and he bent down to make himself clear beyond a shadow of a doubt.

“*Never.*”

---

Courtney had faced plenty of fearsome opponents in her time, from violent anti-alpha protesters to the corrupt government officials who had put a price on her head. Still, she'd never seen anything like the intensity in Hunter's eyes as he glared at her.

The raw conviction there was like a wall of granite a mile high, so harsh that, for a moment, she couldn't breathe. And when her lungs began to work again, her breath was shallow with something that felt a lot closer to excitement than fear.

Courtney wasn't used to seeing Hunter angry. As alphas went, he was usually fairly laid-back. Of course, there was no denying that, in this moment, anger made sense. If one of those soldiers' bullets had hit her shoulder, she'd be pretty damn pissed off too. But the dark energy that had overtaken Hunter was something else. Something almost...feral.

Which shouldn't surprise her. Hunter was an alpha, after all, with everything the name implied—not just a dominant nature but a savage temper in the face of any assault on his person or property. She'd been around enough alphas to have

become accustomed to their brutal honesty and inflexibility, as well. But no matter what—or who—was caught in their crosshairs, there was always a reason for their reactions. Perhaps not one that would satisfy a beta, but it was always there nonetheless.

And that went double for Hunter, who was the most measured alpha she'd ever met. Courtney had always suspected it was because of his upbringing, that the practice of medicine had taught him the kind of patience and meticulous reasoning that was unusual around here. In fact, the only other time Courtney had seen him come close to losing it was after hearing about the convoy ambush. She had a feeling Hunter still hadn't forgiven Rowan's mate, Bailey, for her part in that disaster.

But even then, he'd kept his anger in check and reaction under control.

Now though, there was nothing controlled about the way he was looking at her. And yet—oddly, confusingly, perplexingly, Courtney did not feel afraid.

If any other alpha looked at her like that, no matter the reason, Courtney would have been praying—if only just to let God know there was a good chance she was on her way to his place.

But the reaction she was having, the sensations in her body, were barely recognizable. Yes, she was shivering, and her nerve endings quivered with anticipation. It was as if some wire had gotten crossed because instead of imagining herself knocked out on the ground, she was picturing...

Oh no, no, *no*.

With a tremendous effort, Courtney pushed all that back down where it belonged. With any luck, she'd been quick enough to escape detection by those damn alpha super-senses, which somehow extended past things like hearing and smell to a person's emotions. Because she'd have a hell of a time explaining why a near-death experience had turned her on.

Hunter had presented the first challenge to Courtney's emotional control in many years.

Her childhood had taught her to conceal the fears and desires that were fodder for her father's and brothers' cruelty, and her adulthood had steeled and honed her self-control.

Private thoughts were for private moments, a rule from which she had never wavered. A convenient result was that her observation skills were a lot sharper than most people's, something that had saved her life on more than one occasion.

Once she came to the boundaryland, those observation skills had quickly taught her that there was no point trying to argue with alphas when they were riled up. If their unwavering adherence to their laws was their most defining trait, then stubbornness was a close second. Which meant that if she wanted to change Hunter's mind, she needed a new tactic.

“I just don't like seeing you hurt.”

Courtney had softened her voice and lowered her gaze, but her plea only made him run faster. She had to hold on for dear life as the passing landscape blurred, and in moments they reached the border.

Now he would finally put her down. This was alpha land, and even if the heavy artillery was on its way, the patrol pursuing them wouldn't take the chance of breaching the border without reinforcements.

For the moment, she was safe—and yet Hunter still held her tight as he carried her to his truck, opened the passenger door, and set her gently inside.

Courtney was so flustered that it took a moment to register that his truck was parked at the very transfer point she'd been heading for, which was pretty damn weird considering that it hadn't been used since autumn.

Come to think of it...what had Hunter been doing on beta land in the first place?

And why had Bronn and Rowan been with him?

A treacherous tendril of hope escaped from the steel tank and curled hopefully around her heart, and Courtney was so panicked by it that she spoke without thinking.

“Did you know I was coming?”

Hunter was carefully fastening her seat belt as if she was the injured one. “I sensed you a dozen miles out,” he said flatly.

Courtney swallowed a lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. “And...and you came to get me?”

“Of course.”

He was so close that she could feel his breath against her face. But Courtney needed to be absolutely certain that he was saying what she thought—what she hoped—he was. “You crossed the border, trespassed onto beta land...for me?”

The fluttering feeling, the warmth spreading throughout her body, was back and getting more intense.

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“Because I thought you were in danger.”

“You could sense that?” From miles away? Maybe, the little hope tendril suggested, there had been a connection, no matter how slight, between them after all. Maybe—

“Not exactly.” Hunter finally got the buckle fastened and straightened, his face impassive. “I mistakenly thought you were too smart to do something as reckless as hiking through a war zone unless you were being forced.”

*Oh.* The flutters retreated back into the shadows.

“You don’t understand.” Courtney ducked her head in a vain attempt to hide her disappointment. “I had to come. This is a thousand times more important than me.”

She pulled the thumb drive from her pocket and handed it to Hunter, glancing at Rowan and Bronn, who were standing a few paces away looking slightly embarrassed.

“What is it?” Rowan asked when Hunter remained silent, still glaring at her.

“It’s, uh...” This wasn’t how she’d expected this moment to go down. “It’s the user codes and passwords for every surveillance and navigation satellite in beta government operation.”

“How the hell did you get this?”

“Are you certain it’s legit?”

“I bet it’s a double-cross—fuckin’ beta scum—”

Courtney felt like covering her ears against the aural assault of all those booming alpha voices coming at her from every direction, but this was definitely not the time for her to lose steam, no matter how exhausted the trip had left her. Instead, she held up her hands for silence, and the cacophony miraculously subsided.

In the months she spent making weekly visits to the boundaryland, Courtney had gone from being nearly as intimidated and awestruck by the massive alphas as the rest of her crew to a place of relative comfort with them. It helped that she’d spent years under the thumb of someone even more terrifying—her father, who made up for what he lacked in size and strength with pure contempt and a willingness to do whatever it took to keep her in her place.

Alphas, by contrast, were utterly secure in their dominance and didn’t need to stoop to violence unless they were threatened. That made it easy for Courtney to acclimate to their company. Her ability to trust, it turned out, hinged on honesty and fairness—two qualities alphas possessed in spades.

As long as she respected their boundaries, they respected hers. Not every alpha gathered in Kane’s living room was a friend, but Courtney considered all of them allies and confederates.

Still, being the locus of their agitation was really damn uncomfortable, and in the sudden silence, she struggled to clear her thoughts. Specifically, to clear away the image of her father that came to mind when all those male voices rose around her: her father shoving her into the linen closet when she was twelve, his face red and furious as he slammed the door.

*You can stay in here until you learn to act like a lady.*

Her offense? Getting mud on the frilly pink sweater he'd made her wear. Courtney hadn't bothered to tell him she'd fallen while trying to escape from one of her brothers, who was threatening her with the pair of garden snakes he clutched in his fist. The irony was that Courtney had been terrified of snakes back then—and wasn't that ladylike?

She'd been locked in that closet for hours in total darkness, unable to sit or even turn around, while her brothers pounded on the door and jeered.

The experience had a silver lining—it forged her into the rare beta who could keep her shit together in a room full of alphas. Unfortunately, it came at the cost of opening old wounds...but Courtney had a remedy for that too.

Push it all down.

“Guys, I'll answer all your questions,” she said in a calm, clear voice. “But I can only do it one at a time.”

As the alphas jockeyed to speak, Courtney glanced down the hall at the closed door behind which Rowan was digging bullets out of Hunter's flesh. She hadn't heard any cursing or moaning, but it had to hurt like hell.

Courtney hadn't even known about the other two bullets until they'd arrived at Kane and Tabitha's place. As Hunter peeled off his coat, she saw the jagged red-soaked holes ripped into the back and felt nauseous—not from the blood, but from the knowledge that the bullheaded son of a bitch had been even more seriously hurt than she'd realized when he insisted on carrying her all the way back.

That stubborn chivalry or sense of honor or whatever it was—that was on Hunter. It damn well wasn't Courtney's job to make men more comfortable with her.

But it was still her fault that he'd gotten shot—three times. No wonder he was so angry, especially since he'd made it clear that he blamed her recklessness.

So now Courtney was saddled with a heavy dose of guilt in addition to worry and fear. It hadn't helped when Rowan pulled her aside before following Hunter into Tabitha and Kane's spare bedroom, whispering that Hunter was going to be fine. "A few bullets to the back is the alpha equivalent of skinning your knee." Courtney had appreciated the sentiment, but the only thing that was going to reassure her was seeing Hunter restored to full health.

And that would have to wait until she'd finished what she'd come here to do.

An alpha in the back of the room demanded to know how Courtney had come into possession of the information on the drive.

"We've had undercover SALE members in various positions in the beta government for years now," she explained. "In the past, we've used the information they gave us about patrol strategy and the technology they were using to avoid clashes with them. It's the reason we were able to keep the supply line open all winter."

"Why would some fucking soldier give anything up to you?" someone called, adding belatedly, "With all due respect."

"Good question," Courtney said, trying not to flinch at his tone. "As the beta government's alpha policy became more draconian, and staff members who spoke out were fired or worse, those who objected went underground to find a way to help the cause. SALE was an obvious choice, and over time we've managed to recruit an impressive number of sympathizers—spies, if you will—in powerful positions, with access to key information."

“Yeah, but why focus on navigation satellites?”

“After the Snyder family nearly triggered a bombing incident, we shifted resources to get access to the critical beta flight navigation systems. It had become obvious that it was only a matter of time before the government found sufficient reason to declare war. Since the military’s only hope of success is to avoid fighting on the ground, we needed a way to hobble their air superiority.”

The questions kept coming. “Sure, but what good is it to go after navigation? They know where to find us on a fucking map.”

That got a chuckle—one that felt like it came at Courtney’s expense. *Don’t take it personally*, she reminded herself.

“You’re right. That would be a problem if we were up against planes from fifty or sixty years ago,” she explained. “But these are state-of-the-art, modern fighters and bombers were talking about. Taking away their instruments’ data means they can’t even get off the ground, let alone make it the couple hundred miles from the nearest Air Force Base.”

There was silence for a moment as the alphas absorbed what she was telling them—and calculated what it meant for them.

“And you’re sure the information on the drive is good?” Archer asked quietly. As a founder and leader of the Boundaryland, his word carried extra authority, and Courtney knew how much was riding on her answer.

“It came from a highly reliable source,” she said carefully. “One who’s never steered us wrong in the past.”

“But why bring it here?” That was Wyatt, a generally laconic and laid-back alpha. “We’ve got maybe three computers in the whole Boundaryland, and our only source of electricity is from generators. Even if we figure out how to use that information, none of us have the skills to do anything with it.”

“Maybe not,” Courtney said, “but someone here has access to the best hackers in the world.”

She waited while everyone turned to look at Kane's mate. Tabitha Dunn—aka 'Truth'— the most famous guerrilla journalist in the world. She had connections in all the darkest corners of society. If anyone could take down beta satellites and radar systems with the information on the drive, Tabitha had a good shot at finding them.

Kane took his mate's hand. "Is she right? You could really do that?"

"Oh hell yeah," Tabitha said, her eyes bright with determination. "I know people who would be overjoyed to get their hands on that information."

"How long would it take?"

"I can't say for sure, but probably no more than a day or two."

"Good." Archer gave Tabitha a nod, the stoic alpha's equivalent of a victory dance. "That gives us enough time to coordinate with the two other boundarylands. The chaos this will cause will give us the cover we'll need to move on their ground forces."

Conversation swelled again as the alphas broke into groups to discuss this new information. Courtney gratefully ceded her place at the center of the room. Her job was done.

The room resumed its atmosphere of frantic planning—but now the mood was a little lighter, a little more hopeful. Courtney was doing her best to fade into the background when Archer sought her out.

"Miss Fischer," he said formally. "You've always been a good friend to our people, and now you've given us a real chance at defeating these bastards."

Courtney swelled with pride at this ticker tape parade of a compliment. She'd never heard Archer be so effusive, and the fact that it was due to her efforts made it a victory she would cherish.

Before she could respond, however, Archer had moved on to a different discussion. Alone for the moment, Courtney was tempted to let out a sigh of relief. She'd survived long enough

to accomplish what she came here to do—give her friends the ammunition they needed to mount a powerful defense against the corrupt beta government.

It was the most important thing she'd ever done, an act of courage that had the potential to make an enormous difference to the entire alpha population. But even as she basked in her pride, it was tainted by shame.

*Get it through your head, girl. You're nobody, and you never will be.*

The echo of her father's voice stung as it had all those years ago.

Courtney glanced around the room, looking for the one sure-fire remedy she could count on for this particular brand of melancholy.

She found Hunter standing in the hall, staring at her, filling the space with his massive and preternaturally still presence. He was cleaned up and dressed in fresh clothes, a bandage visible through his thin T-shirt, but he didn't look any happier than before.

*Damn it.*

This wasn't how Courtney wanted their last meeting to end. She'd thought there would be more time—if not to love him, then at least to deepen their friendship. She cursed the evil forces bent on destroying the Boundaryland...because they were also destroying something precious, something Courtney somehow knew she would never find again.

But even as she sagged with the weight of that loss, something else was stirring inside her. One look in Hunter's flinty eyes only confirmed what Courtney already knew: there was still unfinished business between them. And until it was taken care of, neither of them would know peace.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Courtney watched from the corner of the room as Hunter moved from one conversation to the next. First he was approached by a pair of alphas who wanted to discuss the supply inventory for the infirmary. Next she spotted him filling Archer in on the rescue that saved her life. Then he was off to speak with Rowan and Bronn, but she couldn't get close enough to catch what they were saying.

After twenty minutes, Courtney was left with the distinct impression that Hunter was avoiding her. In fact, she had to head him off on the way to the kitchen to get his attention.

"Hey," she said awkwardly when Hunter nearly collided with her. "Can we talk for a minute?"

Her heart was thumping in her chest, and she knew damn well he could tell how nervous she was. In fact every alpha in the room undoubtedly could. She could feel her face turning red as she did her best to ignore the stares directed their way.

There was something about the way Hunter was looking at her now that felt like a spotlight exposing every inch of her, every secret she'd ever kept. But whatever he saw there, his expression gave nothing away.

"Sure."

One cold syllable—it didn't bode well for their talk. Courtney waited for Hunter to lead her somewhere private, but he only moved out of the way to let others get by him.

"Um...could we talk alone?"

There was an uncomfortable pause. “If that’s what you want.”

He headed for the door, and though he held it for her with stiff politeness, his behavior made it seem as if he would rather be anywhere but with her. At the same time, there was no letup in his scrutiny, the way his eyes bored into her.

Courtney had never seen him like this, not since the first time they’d met.

It hadn’t struck her as unusual then; every alpha she’d ever met was reserved around strangers. It took time for an alpha to decide if he could trust someone, especially betas. Knowing what they’d gone through at beta hands in the Basement, Courtney didn’t blame them.

But in time, she’d gained the trust of everyone in the Ozark Boundaryland. And in Hunter’s case, they’d moved on to genuine friendship—but you’d never know it by how he was acting.

Still, she was probably overthinking it. The poor guy had just had to instruct his best friend on how to dig two bullets out of his flesh with no painkillers or proper equipment. If he hadn’t been giving her the cold shoulder, she would have insisted they go to his house, where there were sterile scalpels and antibiotics. But knowing Hunter, he would have considered it a waste of time, especially since she’d taken him away from the living room discussions once today.

So, yeah. If a little irritability was all Hunter directed at her, Courtney knew she would be getting off easy. Which was why it was so important to get this apology right.

Outside on the wraparound deck, there were incredible views over the barren trees down to the sparkling lake below. The last of the ice clung to the shore like a lace border around all that placid blue. But Courtney wasn’t here for the view.

She took a steadying breath, knowing that every alpha inside could hear what she and Hunter said. The thought made Courtney’s cheeks burn, but she had no desire to be alone with Hunter right now, and at least they were out of view. Maybe it

was even better this way. If the alphas and omegas in the house saw that there was nothing to this, no sign of any connection binding them together, they might finally stop teasing her.

The thing was...Courtney had a feeling that people kept up the ribbing because they could tell it bothered her. Ordinarily, that kind of thing went over her head, probably because the people she worked with didn't think of her as a sexual or romantic being. And that made it safe, in a way, to joke around about her being too much to handle, too intimidating for any of the SALE guys to get up the nerve to ask her out.

With Hunter, though, it was different. She couldn't imagine anyone being too much for him to handle. If armed special forces didn't intimidate him, then nothing would.

Courtney propped her elbows on the railing, pretending she was taking in the view one last time. She knew she wasn't fooling anyone, but it would be a lot easier to say what she needed if she didn't have to look at Hunter while she said it.

"So...I haven't had a chance yet to thank you yet," she said in a voice that sounded too thin and high. "For, you know, saving my life. If you guys hadn't been there, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have made it."

Hunter's only response was a grunt.

Out of the corner of her eye, Courtney could see him standing stiffly several paces away, staring at one of the redwood support columns as if trying to set it on fire with his mind. So he wasn't going to let this go easily.

Courtney sighed and forced herself to turn slightly to face him—then immediately regretted it. There were way too many storm clouds in his eyes.

"But what I really want to say is I'm sorry you got hurt," she stammered. "Especially since it was my fault."

Hunter's jaw tightened. "I told you, it's nothing."

"Three bullets is definitely not nothing. I was just hoping that—I thought maybe once you saw what I brought with me, you'd see that I wasn't being stupid or reckless." Courtney

blinked several times, a hot stinging in her eyes, one that definitely had nothing to do with tears because she never cried. “I had to get through the exclusion zone. There was no other way.”

Somehow her apology had turned into an explanation. Why was she so desperate for Hunter to understand what she’d done?

*Because you know you might not make it back.* The little voice that only showed up when Courtney was being especially stubborn stamped out the last of her denial.

And it was right. Her chances of surviving the return trip, especially now that the entire armed services had her in their crosshairs, were almost zero. This was probably the last time Courtney would ever see Hunter. She couldn’t bear to leave things between them like this.

“The thing is, Courtney,” Hunter said coldly, “that’s not true. There are lots of other ways you could have sent that information, and every one of them would’ve been faster and a hell of a lot less dangerous than the path you decided to take.”

“You’re wrong!” The words came out before she could stop them. “I mean, I thought it through last night, and this was the only way.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Every word felt like it was grinding against Courtney’s bruised heart. “You could have emailed those files to Archer or me. You could have texted them or called us and read the information over the phone or—”

“I couldn’t take a risk like that.” Courtney felt like she was hyperventilating. “I had to assume the military was monitoring all communication in and out of the boundaryland. If they’d intercepted those files, the information would be useless.”

Hunter gave an impatient shake of his head. “That’s nothing new. It’s why you’ve always encrypted every communication you’ve sent.”

Courtney stumbled back half a step in the face of his tightly controlled anger. She hadn’t anticipated this—at least, not to this degree. And for the first time since Hunter had

come tearing out of the woods to save her, she was starting to feel a little angry herself.

Hunter wasn't stupid; he had to know this might be their last goodbye. Courtney was working hard to make amends, to leave with a clean conscience. She didn't want to go to her grave burdened with the weight of regret.

“What do you want me to say?” she demanded, beyond caring that she was raising her voice to an alpha. “That I screwed up? That I'm an idiot? Because you're right, okay? I get it. I'm a total control freak, and I didn't trust anything or anyone to get the drive to you but myself.”

Something in Hunter's gaze shifted, becoming even darker. Courtney swallowed hard—but not from fear. She'd learned early on how to read a man's explosive emotions in order to save her skin, and nothing about Hunter suggested he would ever direct his fury into hurting her.

“What I want,” he said, each word carved from rock, “is for you to drop the shit and tell me why you really came here.”

Courtney sucked in a breath, feeling almost as if she'd been struck. “I already told you. I knew how important the codes were, so—”

“Stop.” Hunter brought his fist down on the porch rail so hard the deck shook. So much for not drawing attention. “You didn't get those files yesterday, did you?”

“No, but—”

“So you could have sent them any time. Even if you were determined to come yourself, you had time to put together a crew, arm yourself, come up with a new route. You had time to think.”

“It's more complicated than that.” God, she sounded like she was pleading. But she had to make him see. “After the ambush, leadership made it clear I had to lie low for a while. They never would have authorized another run into the exclusion zone.”

“But you did it anyway.” The disgust in Hunter's voice cut straight through Courtney's defenses, and she tried to turn

away. But he grabbed both her wrists and forced her to look at him. “Knowing exactly how fucking reckless you were being. Which brings me back to my question. Why did you really come here, Courtney?”

*Shit.*

Lying was out of the question. Hunter would know before the words were out of her mouth. And given how tightly he was gripping her arms, Courtney knew she wasn't going anywhere until she told him the truth. The real truth—the one that had next to nothing to do with the files on that drive. That didn't even have much to do with knowing she couldn't live with herself if something happened to her friends when she could have prevented it.

“I came...to say goodbye to you.”

Whatever Hunter had been expecting her to say, it wasn't that. His hands stilled, then slid away from her. As her words sunk in, something shifted in him, some palpable change in his energy that Courtney shouldn't have been able to detect, not as a beta.

For the first time in her life, she found herself looking into a face that terrified her more than her father's ever had. She tensed, waiting for the devastation he was about to visit on her.

But Tabitha chose that moment to stick her head out the door. And suddenly, Courtney realized that the house—raucous with voices only moments ago—had fallen as silent as a library. Shame flooded through her.

“Hey, guys,” Tabitha said apologetically, a tentative smile frozen on her face. “I know you're right in the middle of something, but do you mind having this conversation at Hunter's house? We're kinda busy in here trying to plan a war.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Ordinarily, Hunter would never dream of laying a finger on another alpha's woman, but he was sorely tempted to push Tabitha back inside the house and slam the door. Instead, by the time she said her piece, the real, raw emotions that had been pouring off Courtney just seconds before—frustration, passion, shame—had vanished.

Until today, Hunter had never seen her let down her guard, not even a crack. She was the most tightly controlled person he had ever known, which was saying something, given that Hunter was surrounded by other alphas. Most of them would sooner cut off their dick than admit to being afraid, even as war loomed right outside their border.

The thing was, betas weren't generally capable of that level of self-control. From the first moment they met, Courtney had always been in danger. Delivering supplies to the alphas was not only illegal, it was also potentially deadly because there was a shoot-to-kill order for any suspicious activity within the military exclusion zone. And yet, she'd never evinced more than a mild sense of trepidation.

The closest she'd come was when Hunter was forced to break the news that Bailey—a woman Courtney had considered a good friend and compatriot—was actually an undercover FBI agent whose entire mission centered on bringing her down. Even then, Hunter had only sensed a brief rush of shock and outrage, and that had less to do with the fact that Bailey had nearly gotten her killed than with her sense of betrayal.

But then, as now, Courtney's short-lived torrent of emotions were nearly impossible to tease apart. All it took was Tabitha's appearance, and Courtney shut down like a slammed lid, leaving only the scent of watchfulness, calculation, and determination.

It almost made Hunter question what he'd experienced. But no, all that he'd sensed coming out of her was too intense, too urgent, for him to have imagined it.

Her words might have been bullshit, but the emotions behind them—those were real.

And he wanted more.

But first he was going to have to get past the unrivaled defense mechanisms that had come roaring back with a vengeance. Once again, Hunter was well aware that he was only sensing what Courtney allowed him to.

Meanwhile, she was apologizing to Tabitha with enough aplomb to convince anyone that she was as calm as a cucumber. 'Diplomat Courtney,' Hunter privately thought of her in this state, every inch the official SALE representative. The model of beta social grace. But now Hunter knew it was total crap.

"I'm so sorry," she said with a warm smile. "I didn't mean to get so loud."

"Don't worry about it." Tabitha laughed. "I'm still getting used to living around people who can hear every whisper. That was why I thought you two might want to go somewhere more...private."

"It's okay," Courtney said, ignoring the emphasis Tabitha placed on that last word. "I think we're done here."

"The hell we are."

No way Hunter was going to let Courtney drop a bomb and pretend it never happened. But the look she shot him suggested he was in for a struggle. Despite sensing the faintest cracks in her defenses, Hunter still felt like he was looking at a brick wall.

“Hunter,” she hissed, tilting her head in Tabitha’s direction. “People can hear.”

“What difference does that make?” Hunter wasn’t about to tread on eggshells, not when they’d come this far.

“I really—”

“I get shit from them all the time about you,” Hunter plowed on with growing frustration. “Just like I know you get from the omegas. They all think we’re secretly screwing anyway, so what does it matter if they hear us argue?”

Courtney’s mouth fell open in shock, but for the first time ever, she seemed to have no response.

In a flash, Hunter suddenly realized that this had been the secret to breaking down her walls all along. Although Courtney could face the worst truths head-on when they had to do with disaster or danger or bloodshed, her defenses were practically non-existent when it came to her personal life. Just speaking the rumor out loud had stunned her into silence.

Having stumbled onto her kryptonite, and Hunter could kick himself for never intuiting it before. All he’d had to do was tell her how he felt about her, the things he wanted to do with and to her, and—

“Hang on a second,” Tabitha cut in, much too breathlessly for Hunter’s liking. “You mean you two aren’t a thing? I admit I’ve only seen you two together for a few minutes, but the sparks—”

“No sparks,” Courtney yelped. “There’s nothing between us. We’re just friends. Hunter, tell her.”

He was alarmed by her pleading tone, and took a moment to breathe in as deeply as he could. There was desperation in her scent...the shame he’d sensed earlier...and now, guilt.

The first two, okay, though Courtney had never struck him as especially prudish before. But what did she have to feel guilty about? Yet as soon as the thought formed in Hunter’s mind, so did the answer: Courtney was lying.

But accusing her wasn't going to get him anywhere. "Why do you care what anyone thinks is going on between us?" he asked instead.

"Because—because it's not true," she sputtered. "I thought you'd get that. I mean, isn't the truth sacred to alphas?"

"There are facts, and then there's truth."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Courtney shot Tabitha a sickly grimace, probably hoping for commiseration. "You aren't making any sense, Hunter."

Something inside him snapped. It was one thing to lie about something you couldn't entirely accept but another to try to make it go away. And Courtney—his Courtney—was better than that.

"The fact," he said stonily, taking a step closer, so their faces were only inches apart, "is that we've never fucked or even discussed it. The truth is that we both want to."

Courtney's eyes flew open in horror...but the guilt surged instead of going away. It was all the confirmation he needed. She wanted him—or had, anyway, at one time.

"This is ridiculous," she stammered with a strained attempt at a laugh. "I don't even know...listen, Tabitha asked us to leave because we're distracting everyone."

"Oh, they're fine," Tabitha said dismissively, practically rubbing her hands together in glee. "Everyone can probably use a break anyway. I know I can."

Courtney rounded on her, looking positively frantic. "Anyhoo, it doesn't matter because I really need to get going. It's a long walk back, and I want to get to the car before dark."

"Don't be ridiculous," Hunter growled. "You're not going anywhere."

She refused to look at him. "I need to get back to work. SALE needs me."

"You just said leadership had ordered you into hiding."

“That was before the war was declared. It doesn’t take a genius to realize—”

Courtney stopped abruptly when the door opened again, and Archer came out onto the porch. He stood with his hands on his hips, taking in the scene.

“Leaving is out of the question,” he said sternly. “From here on, no one crosses the border until we’ve nailed down our strategy.”

“But—”

“No one.” Not for the first time, Hunter observed that Archer’s nickname suited him well. When the chips were down, The General left no doubt as to who was in charge.

When Courtney didn’t reply, he gave a brisk nod. “All right, showtime’s over. Everyone back to work.”

“Well, that was fun,” Tabitha said as he disappeared back into the house. “He’s got a point, though. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a few calls to make.”

Once she’d gone back in, Hunter could hear the conversations starting up again, but he didn’t pay any attention to what people were saying. Instead, his entire focus was on Courtney and the stupefied shock on her face.

Obviously, she hadn’t seen this coming any more than he had. An awkward moment passed before Hunter cleared his throat.

“It looks like that goodbye is going to have to wait.”

Then he took her hand and led her to his truck.

**S** *top.*  
*Breathe.*

*Think.*

Those three little words, pounded into her head years ago while training for her first activist role, had changed Courtney's life.

It was long before SALE, back in her freshman year of college. One autumn night when she didn't have anything better to do, Courtney's roommate had dragged her to a planning meeting. Only after they'd arrived at the gracious old limestone classroom building did she learn the topic—a massive protest in response to the university's announcement that they were dismantling the women's studies program.

Up to that point, Courtney had never considered herself political. Her only cause had been trying to stay one step ahead of her brothers and avoiding the worst of her father's venom. But in the few weeks since she'd left home, she'd not only experienced her first taste of freedom but vowed she'd never allow anyone to abuse her again.

So when the woman running the meeting took the podium and announced plans to fight back against the all-male board's decision, Courtney felt something powerful stirring within her, something that felt both daring and exciting.

Until that night, she hadn't even known that women's studies were a thing; in her own household, men were in charge of everything. But when Nora, a senior with corkscrew

curls, a vintage peasant skirt, and heavy leather boots, vowed not to back down until women were restored to positions of authority in university administration, something clicked into place.

Courtney hadn't worked so hard and overcome so much to make do with less than male students took for granted. Soon she was on her feet, adding her voice to the chorus. She couldn't take her eyes off Nora, who was unlike any woman she'd ever met: strong, proud, resolute, and clearly unwilling to take shit from anyone.

"The powerful men on campus—the administration, security, police—all of them will be looking for any excuse to escalate the situation, so they can claim that they had no choice but to clamp down hard." Nora swept the crowd with her gaze, seeming to linger on Courtney for a second. "Your job is not to give them that excuse. It might sound simple, but it's harder than you think."

The lights were lowered, and Nora deftly took the audience through a slide deck presentation about how anger and stress manifest in the mind. She explained how frustration triggered the amygdala to release a chemical called epinephrine that inhibited the neural pathways to the brain's prefrontal cortex. It was how anger shut down rational thought and caused people to lash out.

"This," Nora said gravely as the lights came up, "is how fuck-ups happen. Make no mistake—no matter how well you understand this concept at an intellectual level, each of us has a limit. There are only so many times a human being can be jabbed in the ribs with a baton before the damn breaks, and the epinephrine comes flooding out.

"That's the bad news," she continued. The room was so rapt you could have heard a pin drop. "But there is a way to keep yourself from drowning in it."

That was where those three words came in, the cardinal rules for keeping your shit together.

*Stop*: the moment you feel the first sign of anger—increase in heart rate, shaking hands, tightening of the chest—

acknowledge and honor it. Don't fight it. Don't say or do anything yet.

*Breathe:* focus entirely on the breath entering and leaving your body. That was how you put distance between yourself and the situation, preventing emotional overload. As you became completely present, the body's initial response would be tempered. Only then would you be able to reengage with reason.

*Think:* test to check for executive function. Are your thoughts simple and reactive, or complex and reasoned? Only take action when you've returned to a state of total control.

Courtney would be lying if she said she walked out of that meeting having fully mastered those rules. But in the weeks and months that followed, as she went from being a bystander to taking an active role to ultimately helping to lead the protest movement that nearly brought the university's administration to its knees, she returned to them over and over again. And in the years that followed, after she left college to fight for the rights of marginalized people outside the ivy-covered walls, those three rules saw her through every protest, every act of civil disobedience, and eventually, every illegal supply run that came after.

Her upbringing may have given her the discipline and coping strategies to survive, but what Courtney learned from a stranger that night enabled her to become a fearless leader who could stare down any problem thrown her way.

Until today...when a single conversation with Hunter shattered everything she knew.

She'd acted like a damn rookie out on that porch with him. She didn't stop or breathe or think, and now...

Well, now she was hyperventilating in the passenger seat of a truck heading into what felt like the most dangerous situation of her life.

If her mind wasn't in a state of semi-shock, Courtney might have tried consoling herself. Sure, she'd made a mistake, but it was an understandable one. After all, she'd

nearly been killed earlier in the day. Not only that, Hunter had been shot, and she'd had to explain herself in front of a room full of short-tempered alphas. God knew that most betas would crack under that kind of pressure.

But Courtney rejected every one of those excuses.

She'd been shot at before. Hunter would recover. And she'd been interacting with alphas for months.

She couldn't even blame a simple lapse in perception. All the signals had been there—the escalating heart rate, the tightening of her chest, the twisting in her gut. She'd felt every one—then completely ignored them.

The inescapable truth was that Courtney simply didn't want to follow the rules...not when Hunter was the one sending her dangerously close to the edge.

Even her backup system had failed. Long before that night when she'd listened to Nora speak, Courtney had mastered the art of forcing her emotions down until she couldn't feel them anymore. Sure, some 'experts' preached that doing so was a self-destructive practice, but they weren't the ones who'd had to endure years of abuse from men twice her size.

And yet, out on Kane's porch, the largest man she'd ever known had raised his voice in anger at her, and her defenses were nowhere to be found.

It didn't help that Courtney was finally facing the fact that she was a fraud. That every interaction she'd had with Hunter had been tainted with lies. She'd come here today determined that her final conversation with him would be genuine, that she'd speak only the truth, no matter the cost.

Instead, she'd ended up being humiliated—by her failure, by the knowledge that everyone in that house knew it, by the look on Hunter's face. And now, hurtling down the road toward his house, she had to live with the fact that it wasn't even the last conversation they would have, meaning the humiliation would go on and on.

“So are you ready to tell me what that bullshit was all about?”

Courtney started when Hunter abruptly broke the silence. *Stop*, her mind implored. *Breathe. Think.*

“Or are you just going to sit there and wallow in self-pity?”

Courtney dug her nails into her palms so hard she nearly drew blood. *Stop. STOP!*

“That’s disappointing.” Hunter’s voice was a low rasp that felt like velvet sandpaper along Courtney’s spine. “But I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Every beta has a weakness.”

*Stop, for fuck’s sake!*

“...I just never took you for a coward.”

“I am not a coward!” Spittle flew as Courtney roared the words. Fury propelled her past the limits of her self-control and straight into chaos. She wrenched around in her seat to face Hunter, her hands twitching with the urge to strike, to punch, to flail.

Goodbye, prefrontal cortex.

But Hunter’s only reaction was a twitch at the corners of his lips. The truth flooded Courtney’s veins with icy shame. The son of a bitch had played her.

“That’s right,” he practically drawled. “You’re not a coward. So stop acting like one and talk to me.”

In a matter of seconds, the adrenaline drained from Courtney’s system, leaving her leaden and despairing. “What do you want me to say?”

“The truth.”

“Why this sudden obsession with the truth? I have never once lied to you—or to any alpha.”

That earned her a hard look, Hunter taking his eyes off the road he probably knew like the back of his hand. “That’s not the same as telling the truth, and you goddamn well know it. Come on, Courtney. You can do better than that.”

Something about the way Hunter was speaking to her now threw her even further off balance. Gone was any trace of the

tentative, almost tongue-tied alpha who took the better part of every conversation to relax. There was also no trace of the just-friends ease that had ultimately surfaced between them.

No, this alpha slammed the brakes on the final turn to his house, sending up a spray of mud that splattered her window. This alpha got out of the truck with a growl of warning—of what Courtney couldn't say and didn't want to guess.

The mud obscured her view of Hunter's house, but that didn't matter. It was etched in her memory from the week she'd spent here. She knew every detail, from the feeling of the refinished oak floors under her stocking feet to the woodsy, masculine scent that clung to the clothes in his closet—because, yes, damn it, she'd explored every inch of the place when Hunter was out.

Courtney squeezed her eyes shut and tensed every muscle in her body, holding back the scream that threatened to come flying out of her. Then she ripped off her seat belt, jumped to the ground, and slammed the truck door.

“You want the truth?” she shouted, standing with her legs spaced wide and her hands in fists at her sides. She couldn't remember ever feeling so furious...or so reckless. “Fine. The truth is that I just experienced one of the most humiliating moments of my life in front of a whole houseful of alphas. So forgive me for taking a minute to recover.”

“Don't lie to me.” Hunter strode around the truck, moving more lightly on his feet than a man his size should have been able to, fire burning in his eyes. “And stop lying to yourself while you're at it.”

Courtney stood her ground, her spine rigid, her breath hard, her hair coming out of its braid. Even though there was still a wintery chill in the air, she felt burning hot. “You stop this ridiculous chest-thumping of yours first.”

She shot a glance at the house, a tidy rancher that Hunter had re-sided with lumber he'd felled on his land. If she could just get to the door, she could lock herself inside the guest room she'd stayed in before. Not that Hunter couldn't destroy

the flimsy lock with a swipe of his hand, but maybe he'd take pity on her. Or maybe he'd just ignore her as he had last time.

If they could just get back to that, maybe she'd be okay.

Courtney made a break for it, but Hunter grabbed her wrist before she'd taken two steps. In the next second, he'd pulled her hard against him.

"Let me go!" She sounded out of control even to her own ears, a cornered animal clawing at its flesh.

But this was Hunter's land. His home. He could do whatever he wanted here.

"Tell me what you meant," he growled against her ear, his grip like iron. "When you said you'd come to say goodbye."

Courtney shivered almost violently. Her instincts told her to keep fighting...even as another sense, something deeper and darker, compelled her to obey.

*No.* She didn't have to obey him. She didn't have to obey anyone, not anymore.

As her anger surged back, Courtney bared her teeth and landed a kick to Hunter's shin.

He didn't even flinch, his eyes narrowing to dark slits, tracking every shift of her emotions. "Tell me."

"Let me go!"

Abruptly, Hunter did just that—and Courtney lost her balance. Before she could fall, Hunter gripped her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him, so close that she could trace the thin, pale scars that bisected one eyebrow.

"Were you saying goodbye because of the war?" He spat the words as if they were poison in his mouth. "Because you thought something might happen to me?"

"N-no, I—"

"Because I'm telling you right now, girl, I don't plan on dying any time soon."

Courtney shook her head, but it was hard to make words when he called her ‘girl’. Her father and brothers had called her that sometimes, but only when they were mocking her, cursing her.

This was nothing like that.

She gulped for air and tried again. The results weren’t much better. “I get it. They can’t kill you. Shot three times and good as new.”

Hunter shook her—once, just hard enough to get her mind moving again. “Then why the fuck would you need to say—”

He froze...and Courtney knew the truth had hit him. And behind it came such a powerful look of raw grief that she didn’t think she could bear it.

“You don’t think you’re going to survive.” His words were eerily hollow.

Courtney took another shuddering breath.

“It’s been a tough couple of months.” She had to pause because her voice threatened to break, and she would sooner die than cry in front of him. “The government isn’t holding back this time. It’s not a matter of if but when they will find me.”

The pain in Hunter’s eyes hardened. “Then don’t go back. Stay here, and we’ll protect you.”

Courtney was already shaking her head, her heart feeling like it was on the verge of disintegrating. “You know I can’t, Hunter. This war isn’t just going to affect the boundarylands. SALE needs me.”

“Fuck SALE. *We* need you—alive.”

“That’s...” ‘Sweet,’ she almost said, but that would have been another lie. ‘Sweet’ didn’t come anywhere close to her feelings for the man taking up all the room in her heart. Instead, she frantically tried to appeal to his reason. “Don’t get me wrong. I value every friendship I’ve made here—especially yours. But in the end, I’m just a field logistics grunt

who spent a few hours a week here. I promise you, I can be replaced.”

“I don’t give a shit about your position,” Hunter bellowed. “I need you.”

Courtney blinked, wishing she could stop time, hold onto those words, gild them, and lock them away forever.

But she was done lying to herself.

“As much as I wish that was true,” she said quietly, “you don’t. The last time I was here, we barely talked. You went out of your way not to run into me. I saw you for an hour or so each evening. That’s not need.”

Hunter loosed a string of curses that would have impressed Courtney in other circumstances.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she said hastily. “I don’t blame you. You’re an alpha. You need solitude—and I know what it took for you to put me up for an entire week, and I’ll always be grateful. But you don’t need anyone, Hunter—and even if you did, it wouldn’t be me.”

He stared at her as if he was looking into the jaws of hell. “I never should have let you go that day. I should’ve made you stay.”

Suddenly Courtney felt exhausted—as if she would slide to the ground if he wasn’t still holding her up. “Why? What would have been the point?”

Hunter’s eyes flicked away as if he was teetering on a knife edge above a depthless chasm. And then something shifted in him, and when he returned his gaze, all his doubts had vanished, leaving nothing but pure, raw hunger behind.

“This,” he growled—and in the next second she was slammed up against the truck while his mouth came down on hers.

## CHAPTER TEN

It was as if a dam had broken inside Courtney. Every emotion, every hope, every longing she had ever felt for him came roaring out, nearly drowning him in her want and passion.

His mouth had barely brushed against hers before she was kissing him back, devouring him with her lips and teeth and tongue, a woman so starved that she wanted all of him at once.

And the sounds she was making...if Hunter hadn't been rock-hard already, the little moans and cries would have blasted him there in an instant.

He couldn't have kept his body from moving even if he wanted to. His fingers tangled in her hair. His other hand cupped her beautiful ass. And when she wrapped her legs around him, it was all he could do to keep himself from grinding between them.

But Hunter forced himself to slow down. There was too much to savor. Too much to experience. To learn.

He'd dreamed of this moment for so long. He refused to be cheated of even a second.

Later—and fuck yeah, there was going to be a later—he'd have a chance to lose himself inside Courtney, to learn every inch of her velvety skin, but for now he focused on her warm, soft lips, a shade more beautiful than any cosmetic, like the rock face above the south end of Victoria Lake at sunset.

Though now those lips were well on their way to being bruised a deeper pink. But this wasn't just two people whipped

in the winds of lust. No, Hunter could sense an intense mélange of all the emotions Courtney usually worked so hard to cover up. The ones that, against all odds, she'd managed to hide from him.

She was either a witch or the most self-possessed creature on the planet. But now the truth was out, and it wasn't ever going back, not if Hunter had anything to do with it.

And he would. Oh fuck yeah, he would.

The thought drove a sound of his own from his lips—a growl that revealed the depths of his instincts to take, to protect, to possess.

But there would be time for all of that.

For now, Hunter met the torrent of Courtney's kiss with his own. He closed his eyes, the better to feel their emotions colliding, lighting up his nerve endings, filling his lungs, washing over his tongue.

A rush of physical sensations mixed with his heightened emotions, which would separate in one breath only to tangle into knots again in the next. Frustration, yes, but also sadness. And regret. And fear.

But running deeper than all of that was an astonishing, almost overwhelming vein of want. Of need. Of unmet desire made more urgent by all the time they'd wasted.

Because one thing was clear: Courtney had wanted Hunter from the start. Just as he'd taken one look at her, one breath of her scent, and slammed into the wall of need, she had done the same.

What an idiot he'd been to miss it. What a powerful force she'd been to hide it.

But all that stopped now.

Hunter didn't realize he'd uttered the word until Courtney cried out against his mouth, echoing the word back without ever taking her lips from his.

*Now, now, now.*

It became an insensible chant, one he knew she wasn't even aware of. She pulled him closer, her strong arms around her neck, her powerful thighs locked around him.

It was like being in a tiny rowboat on the brink of Niagara Falls. The thrill of being on the precipice of something so beautifully powerful, knowing that all it would take was one slight move, and the churning waters would swallow them whole, splintering and destroying any remaining illusions.

Hunter slipped his hands under the hem of Courtney's shirt, raking over the satin of her skin, desperate to feel more and more of her. All of her.

His cock ached. He'd yanked the band of her bra in his fist before Hunter realized what he was about to do and froze.

It was like breaking the laws of physics to drag himself back from that precipice, but he had to do it.

Because Hunter had waited so long for this kiss. Months of wanting, and dreaming, and fantasizing. Countless nights spent stroking his cock while he imagined the way she would taste, the feeling of her lips crushed beneath his, the tip of her pink tongue finding his own.

And now that his longing had become a reality, Hunter refused to rush it. He meant to savor every exquisite second, and if the ache of waiting was excruciating, well, he'd damn well take that pain and ask for more.

The two of them had all the time in the world now. Because there would be no going back. No more hiding. No more denying themselves ever again.

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**T**he barrier between Courtney's two selves—the righteous leader and the neglected, atrophied other, was in danger of being breached—and she couldn't make herself care. Warning bells were going off in every corner of her mind, but her body had come awake like a runaway train, and it would take the force of an exploding star to stop it now.

*Hunter.*

She was ravenous for him, kissing him while pounding her fists on his back. Still, she couldn't get enough. A part of her couldn't believe this was actually happening, but whatever dark alchemy had bewitched Hunter to want her, Courtney would sooner sell her soul than give it back.

He kissed like a dark angel, every second doubling her desire and then doubling it again. Courtney was vaguely aware that her panties were hot and drenched with slick. That in itself was a miracle considering hours with the vibrators in her nightstand had never had that effect.

But this kiss was already a hundred times more satisfying than anything she'd experienced with any toy—or man, for that matter.

And it was only a *kiss*, for God's sake.

One that made all those wasted nights seem like so many wrong turns.

Courtney felt the current running between their bodies, like a rapid-fire series of shocks, each signaling need and demanding to be sated. The promise of pleasure spiraled outwards through her body while she shivered and gripped Hunter even harder.

She wasn't sure how much more of this she could take. The sensations building inside her were both unfamiliar and intimate. They were almost primal, like they'd been passed down from the very first woman, building and building through thousands of years until they lived inside her.

Inside *her*!

Courtney nearly laughed at the absurdity of it, that such passion could take root in someone with such a stunted womanly nature. But her repression had vanished in the face of this current of need running between them.

She was only vaguely aware of the chilly blast of late-winter winds coming off the mountains, the snow and slush beneath her feet icing over as the sun sank in the sky. The cold

was nothing to her; she was alight with the reflection of Hunter's desire and burning out of control with her own.

This kiss—its massive power could supply an entire city, burn down a fortress.

And still, she wanted more.

Her fingers slid under Hunter's shirt and along the smooth burnished heat of his skin. She explored the ridges of his muscles, the hollows and planes of him. Finally, her fingers found his belt buckle, and she whimpered with frustration as they trembled too hard to find purchase.

Then Hunter's massive hand came down over hers, enveloping it, then pulling it gently away.

"Not yet," he murmured against her ear.

Courtney was hit by a bolt of frustration that felt like a physical assault. "Why?"

"Because I'm not done kissing you," he said, the words hot pearls between their lips.

But Courtney barely understood them. All her body heard was 'no.'

It happened in the space of a second, but the effect was immediate as a lightning strike. The haze of lust vanished, and suddenly Courtney felt the sting of her abraded lips, the tenderness left by the scrape of Hunter's stubble—the mortification of clinging to him like a sloth on a branch, her hot wet crotch pressed shamelessly against him.

Courtney stiffened and pushed Hunter away, pressing her back into the truck and trying to disentangle her legs. But he wouldn't let her, even as she kicked and shoved at him. Instead, he held her gingerly, cradling her hips as if they were made of glass, as if he was trying to prevent her from hurting herself.

She started to panic. Her reason had returned with a vengeance, and now her mind was frantically demanding that she get away, away, *away* until she was safe. "Let me go!"

“Oh no, you don’t.” The voice of the ancient mountains themselves, unmovable, eternal. Hunter seized her hair in his fist and twisted it so that she was forced to look at him—not quite hard enough to hurt but plenty hard enough to prove he wouldn’t be denied.

“No more hiding from me,” he said as he flicked his way up her neck with his tongue. “Not what you feel. Not what you want.”

His tongue gave way to his teeth, grazing the sensitive skin at the crux of her jaw and earlobe. The shiver that passed through Courtney was shockingly violent. It was like an orgasm compressed into half a second, over before it began, a threat and a promise of what awaited.

God help her, Courtney’s mind went straight to that tongue, those lips, those teeth trailing down her body, finding her clit, his strong hands shoving her legs apart—

“No!” She bucked so hard that even Hunter seemed taken aback—but not surprised. In fact, he looked almost smug, but only for a moment before he was back to tormenting her again.

“That’s right...open yourself up to me. Show me everything.”

*Never.* Courtney’s reason seized the wheel again, as recklessly as if she was in a headlong crash. Another tremor seized her, but this was the force of her body throwing off her traitorous desires, her shameful secret need, and giving control back where it belonged.

All that remained was her pride, a torn and soiled rag of an emotion, forcing her to turn her face away. But Hunter grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. His eyes blazed with intensity, and though it ought to have sent Courtney into paroxysms of fear, the opposite happened.

“No,” she repeated, but this time her voice was clear and cold. Despite the futility of the gesture, she gave him one last shove. “I told you to put me down.”

Because there was something much more terrifying than defying an alpha...and that was loving him.

A long moment passed as a storm of emotions that Courtney couldn't read passed over Hunter's face. Finally, he gave a barely perceptible shake of his head. "I'm not going to do that."

Courtney gaped at him in disbelief. There was no way in hell he'd dare to refuse her. "What do you mean you won't? You *have* to."

"I've waited my whole life for a kiss like that, Courtney," he said, his eyes boring into hers. "I've tortured myself for months imagining you in my arms, your mouth on mine. Wanting me the way I want you. And now that I have it, you better believe I won't let go. Not now—not ever."

And though Courtney wanted to deny it—to vow that she'd never wanted him and never would—the only sound as Hunter carried her to the house was the crunch of his boots on the snow and the treacherous pounding of her heart.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The dozen yards to Hunter's front door was the longest journey of Courtney's life. She'd never felt so conflicted, embattled not by soldiers or the government but by the desires she'd spent a lifetime trying to deny.

This wasn't about sex—at least not entirely.

Courtney had never been a particularly sexual person. She took lovers now and then but rarely found it worth the effort. She'd experienced arousal, a sort of itch that grew distracting if it wasn't satisfied—hence that drawer full of toys—though not to the extent that other people seemed to. Before meeting Hunter, it had been like a maintenance task she routinely checked off her list.

But not any longer.

This craving for Hunter's touch was something brand new. It went beyond the ache in her pussy, flooding all of her senses. It felt as though she'd die of thirst if she didn't taste him again, if she couldn't feel that possessive growl rumbling through her body.

But the other side of the coin was worse—much worse.

Courtney burned with embarrassment, unable to stifle her moans. She couldn't keep her hands off him. Hell, she couldn't even keep her damn legs shut.

*Hadn't. Wouldn't. Couldn't.* These weren't words that had ever described her actions before.

But it was the fact that she'd shown this side of herself to Hunter that really mortified Courtney. He'd read every shade

of meaning in her wordless cries. When he looked into her eyes, he'd seen every thought in her mind, every memory in her heart. He saw her as no one ever had.

Maybe someone else would have found that a welcome revelation. But not Courtney.

There was a reason she'd spent a lifetime building those protective walls around her. There was a purpose behind never letting anyone get too close.

*Safety.*

Not physical safety, of course. That was important, sure, but not her prime concern. These days every activist knew they'd be labeled a traitor, and that came with certain risks. Everyone did their best to avoid being caught but knew it would likely happen eventually, and Courtney had accepted her fate long ago.

Emotional safety, on the other hand, was far more critical.

Over the years, Courtney had recovered from all manner of injuries, from simple cuts and bruises to chemical burns and broken bones. In time they healed, sewn back together by scar tissue.

Her mind and heart were a different story. Courtney was still carrying the open wounds her father and brothers had inflicted years ago. They were why she was determined never to let anyone get close enough to cause that kind of pain again.

Still, she couldn't help tightening her grip on Hunter as he kicked his front door open, leaving it hanging on its hinges.

“Are—are you taking me to your bedroom?”

A guttural rumble resonated from deep inside him, causing the pooling desire deep in Courtney's belly to spread outward and overtake her entire being.

And Hunter knew it. It was obvious from the narrowing of his eyes, the quickening of his breath, and yes, the straining of his cock against his pants.

Instead of taking her upstairs, Hunter carried her to the couch and settled her on his lap. He didn't bother to restrain

her. There was no point. She could pound and scratch at him all day, and it wouldn't do any damage.

And what was the use of continuing to fight him with her hands when the rest of her body was actively betraying her? Instead of kicking, her legs were squeezing him tightly as she straddled his groin. Her breasts pressed against his chest. Her tongue licked her lips greedily in anticipation of the next kiss.

Hunter threw his head back and inhaled like he was taking in every molecule of air in the room. Horrified, Courtney realized he was *smelling* her. Smelling the traitorous wetness between her legs.

“Oh, God—” she yelped, but her thighs clenched him even tighter. Her hands fell to his chest, tracing the hard landscape of his body. The same dark alchemy that had her writhing against him outside roared to life again, and Courtney found herself rubbing her crotch against his erection.

“Patience,” Hunter said, stilling her hips with his iron grip. “Like I said, there’s no rush.”

*I’m fine*, Courtney insisted to herself. She had received advanced training in interrogation resistance and evasion in preparation for her field position with SALE and had lasted the longest of anyone in the class during the mock sessions. True, the sensual assault of this moment was nothing like sleep deprivation, stress binding, or waterboarding. Still, she would find a way to resist.

But then, with a hint of sly amusement, Hunter slowly slid his hand around her back and under her shirt and began to lightly knead and stroke her skin. The touch wasn't overtly sexual, no more intimate than a sports massage, yet her body melted into his touch. Her eyelids fluttered as the fog swirled around them.

“Look at me.” Hunter didn't raise his voice, but there was no pretending it wasn't a command, and Courtney was helpless to resist—until, with a powerful effort, she tore herself back from the brink and squeezed her eyes shut.

There. That was better. She caught her first full breath since Hunter had carried her into the house. Not having to look at him, denying even one of her senses, gave her just enough distance for her reason to begin to return.

Until Hunter laughed again, bending close to whisper in her ear, letting his lips graze her. “Closing your eyes won’t make those feelings go away. I’m still here...and so are you.”

Without warning, he drew her earlobe into his mouth and worked it between his lips. His tongue flicked, and his teeth teased, unleashing a stream of blinding pleasure that made her gasp and buck in his arms. Dear God, if he could do this to her with only that tiny bit of flesh...

Courtney knew she was losing control, and it was as terrifying as it was exhilarating. Despite pushing herself to her limits, nothing in her training had prepared her for this. For the first time since childhood, she was out of her depth.

*So give in.*

The stunted, abandoned part of her was finding its voice—and Courtney realized that she hadn’t come anywhere near killing it off. It had been there all along, biding its time, hoarding its grievances, honing its demands...waiting for the crack in her defenses that she’d foolishly allowed to form.

But she had made a promise to herself. On the cusp of adulthood, having finally escaped her hellish family, Courtney had vowed she would never submit to anyone again.

*He’s nothing like them.*

It was true that there was a world of difference between Courtney’s family and Hunter. Their power over her had been a savage perversion. His was an alpha’s natural dominance—wielded with respect, used in productive rather than destructive ways. She’d never felt threatened in the boundaryland, even when the atmosphere was electric with the promise of coming violence. Hunter would never hurt her—Courtney knew that in her bones.

But no matter how soft the glove, submission was still something Courtney couldn’t give. Her mind, still wounded

from so many years of abuse, simply wouldn't allow it.

Her body, however, didn't seem to give a fuck.

An image of Hunter looming over her, pinning her wrists to the floor with one hand while slowly stroking his cock with the other, filled her imagination. A new rush of slick drenched her thighs as she thought of him teasing her pussy lips apart with his fingertip, then sliding his hard length over the folds, coating every inch of his cock with her slick.

Beneath her, Hunter shifted with a groan. "You're so turned on," he muttered in a choked voice. "Tell me what you're fantasizing."

It was pointless to wonder how he knew—Courtney supposed she should be grateful that even his mighty senses couldn't discern the details of the wicked images playing inside her mind.

"Nothing." He had to know she was lying, but Courtney seized on the satisfaction of retaining enough strength to defy him. "And I'm not turned on."

His laugh was tortured this time. "So this is a game to you."

Was it? Courtney's reason screamed *no*, but it couldn't keep up with her escaped inner woman, who was taking on the contours of a vamp one second, an ingenue the next, a tease—cycling through all the roles she thought she'd cast off forever.

She forced her chin up and opened her eyes so she was glaring down at him. Steady on—she could do this. "No games. I'm just not controlled by base desires."

Surprise flashed across Hunter's perfect features, giving way to intrigue. He didn't seem to realize that if this was a game, he was the one losing.

"Is that right?" he drawled. "Fine. Since you won't tell me what you're fantasizing about, I'll just have to guess."

Warning bells rang in her head. This was a terrible idea... and yet Courtney didn't move to stop Hunter as he pretended to be deep in thought, cocking his head and tapping his chin.

“I’m guessing,” he finally murmured, “that you want me to kiss you again.”

He pulled her close, teasing the corners of her mouth with his lips and tongue, tracing delicate circles the length of her neck. Though she fought it with everything she had, her hips started rocking against him. “No!” she cried, gripping his shoulders hard. “That wasn’t it.”

He stopped with exaggerated reluctance. “So I should try something else?”

“Yes....I mean, *no*.” Courtney was being dragged into a vortex of confusion as if Hunter was rerouting her neural pathways, making pleasure the only thing that mattered.

“No good?” A mock frown. “Then maybe you were imaging me doing this...”

He opened her pants—slowly—giving her all the time in the world to protest. But she didn’t. Not even when he slipped his hands beneath the silky fabric of her panties, his rough, sure fingers sliding down her cleft, once, then twice.

“Fuck, Courtney, you’re so wet—” Hunter forced the words through gritted teeth. “And we’ve barely started.”

“But—”

His fingertip grazed the nub of her clit, and Courtney’s protest disappeared into the vortex. She was wracked with a sensation more intense than any orgasm she’d ever experienced, all from the merest touch.

“Your body’s been ready for me all day,” Hunter muttered. “You’ve wanted this for a long time, haven’t you?”

Courtney bit her lip as she shook her head. He hadn’t exactly made it sound like a question.

“Don’t lie,” he growled. “Your body is telling me everything I need to know.”

He flicked her clit again, and Courtney shuddered again, squeezing her eyes shut as her thighs clamped harder around him.

And then she lost the battle entirely, matching his rhythm as he teased her clit, bucking against him while he learned her. So avid, so gifted a student of her pleasure was Hunter that Courtney completely lost track of what she was trying to prevent and why she was fighting.

“Open your eyes.” Hunter flicked her hard for emphasis, his booming command leaving no doubt that he meant it. She complied without thinking. “Look at me while you tell me this is what you were fantasizing about.”

“N-no,” she stammered, tears leaking from the effort. “That wasn’t it.”

Hunter grinned like he was about to devour her. In the next second, he flipped her over so her back was flat on the couch, and he was kneeling in front of her. He yanked her pants off in one smooth movement and tossed them on the floor. A second later, they were joined by her panties.

“Then it must have been this.”

Courtney’s breath caught as she spread her legs, opening her to him completely. Slipping his hands under her, he cupped her ass, tilting her up to give himself access.

She could’ve struggled. She could have forced her legs closed or kicked and clawed until she was free. She could have done a lot of things, but instead, when Hunter swirled his tongue over her clit, Courtney gripped his hair and cried out in unbridled pleasure.

Over and over, she was engulfed in sensations she didn’t know were possible. It was indelicate, embarrassing, even animalistic, but Courtney couldn’t stop, even though things had gone entirely out of her control.

Hunter held all the power now, but she was too far gone to care, incapable of doing anything but feeling the waves crashing over her as Hunter worked his magic with his tongue.

“That’s right,” he growled, and “Give me that beautiful slick.”

Her mouth fell open, and she found herself saying his name. Over and over again, she couldn’t stop repeating it.

*Hunter.* Hunter—just the way it felt on her lips was a turn-on, a secret delicious shiver of belonging—not to him necessarily but to this moment. It was almost as if Courtney was meant to be here, like every choice she'd made in life had been leading to this exact moment.

At one point, Hunter pulled away just long enough to slip off his own pants, and a strange thing happened—Courtney felt his absence, the abrupt cessation of his touch.

And she hated it.

Her body felt robbed of—of something she couldn't define, some part of her that she hadn't even known was there. But the moment his hand stroked her thigh again, the feeling vanished and was forgotten in the beautiful chaos of her pleasure.

Until she looked down and saw the sheer size of his cock.

It was easily twice the size of the biggest one she'd ever seen. Hunter must have noticed the shock in her eyes because he paused, frowning.

“Don't worry,” he said gently.

“But...I don't think I can...” Courtney pressed her legs together in fear without realizing it.

“Don't worry,” he reassured her. “I'm not asking you to. At least, not right now.”

Hunter took his time parting her legs, teasing the soft flesh of her inner thighs in a way that was nearly as sensual as what he'd been doing earlier. She'd nearly forgotten her anxiety when he laid his palm over her pussy, warming it with his heat.

He began stroking her with one hand and his cock with the other. The pad of his thumb pressed against the nub of her clit and began to move in slow, gentle swirls. Then he lowered himself down again, repositioning his head between her legs, and let his tongue take over.

Courtney's back arched as he slipped a single finger inside her. Sensation flooded her whole body as the walls of her

pussy gripped him tight.

She looked down to see him stroking his cock even faster. It was the sexiest damn sight she'd ever witnessed. More arousing than any dream, hotter than any fantasy.

“Fuck yeah, you're almost there—”

But no, Courtney wasn't like that. She'd never lost control that way.

“I can't,” she panted, even as she writhed under his ministrations.

Sure, she'd come before—just not with someone else. Alone in her room with no one watching, she could get herself off with a whole string of tidy, vibrator-induced orgasms.

“Yeah, you can. Come for me, Courtney, come on...”

Oh God, why did he have to sound so damn sexy when he growled like that? It only intensified the quickening that was pulling at her core. It made her feel like a bit of flotsam on a turning tide, being drawn by the inexorable force of a power so much greater than herself.

“I...I...”

She tried to tell Hunter it was no use, that she simply wasn't capable of letting go and riding the wave of pleasure like other women seemed to be. But she couldn't seem to make her lips form the words.

She couldn't focus on anything beyond the sensations he created inside her.

Her legs shook. Her back arched. Her hips bucked and twisted. But through it all, Hunter held her steady, held her down as easily as if she were a doll, circling faster and faster with his tongue, driving his finger in and out of her. Courtney's breath came in sharp gasps, and she tasted the hot tears rolling down her cheeks.

She wasn't crying—not really. Not with sadness or anger or frustration. It was just that her body was so overwhelmed. She had never been pushed this far, never experienced pleasure this deep. It was almost more than she could bear.

And then Hunter slipped a second finger inside her. He growled against her, scraping her clit with his stubble.

“Come for me *now*.”

The wall of her resistance came crashing down, and the world splintered into a cascade of brilliant sensation. Wave after wave of exquisite, unbelievable pleasure. She gushed hot slick all over Hunter’s face, her hips writhing. Her hands tore at his hair and raked his shoulders.

It went on and on, far past anything Courtney had experienced before. Beyond what she was capable of handling. Until the enormity of her passionate release cracked and crumbled around her, taking her down into the darkness with it.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Morning arrived languidly, taking its time to fill the room with the pale light of dawn.

Cocooned in what felt like soft, downy clouds, Courtney was tempted to stay just as she was—eyes closed, body warm, peacefully dozing. But before she could fully fall back into dreamland, memories of the night before started to return.

One by one, every exquisite, excruciating detail came back to her: the gradual erosion of her resistance to the tidal wave of sensations and pleasure until she'd lost all control entirely and—

Courtney pulled the pillow over her face, mortified almost beyond what she could bear. She'd lost control. She'd had an orgasm—though the word seemed inadequate for the cataclysmic quake that seized her and flung her onto the furthest shores of ecstasy—and then...

Then what? Dear God, she must have passed out. Just another humiliation to add to the list after being publicly called out by Tabitha in front of the entire Boundaryland population.

When she finally got up the courage to open one eye, she found herself gazing out of a big window. No one had bothered to install blinds or curtains, but Courtney supposed there wasn't much point since Hunter's house was at least half a mile down a gravel lane, completely hidden by dense woods. Above the tree line, Courtney recognized the pinkish glow of first light, familiar from months of supply runs that began with loading the trucks in the dark of the wee hours.

But she didn't see Hunter.

Courtney let out a little prayer of thanks—a very quiet one because she was not ready to face him yet. She was lucky he was an early riser—or had never come to bed, which seemed the likelier scenario after her embarrassing performance.

Yesterday had been a day of humiliation, but at least it was over. It wasn't the first bad day Courtney had ever had, and it wasn't likely to be the last, but at least she knew how to deal with it—by reminding herself that each new day was a chance to start over afresh.

*Yeah, right.*

She propped herself on an elbow and took stock of her situation. She was in Hunter's huge bed, big enough for half a dozen of her to fit comfortably. If she'd had any doubts, his scent lingering on the much-laundered quilts confirmed that this was where he slept.

Quite an upgrade from the last time she was here, when Courtney slept on a creaky mattress down the hall.

When she threw back the covers, she discovered she was missing her pants. Of course she was—they'd come off practically as soon as Hunter had sat her on the couch.

Apparently, this new version of herself was easier than the Monday crossword. In fact, she was surprised she'd managed to keep her shirt on.

Clearly, the first order of business needed to be retrieving her pants from the floor where Hunter had flung them. She briefly considered trying to sneak out into the living room and grab them herself, but then she heard sounds coming from the kitchen.

*Shit.*

So much for hoping Hunter had gone out to do alpha things on his property.

Courtney shuddered at the memory of his mood yesterday when he'd taken every opportunity to tease and provoke her, all in the name of whipping her up into a sexual frenzy.

That sure as hell wasn't going to happen again. She was determined to shut down any flirting or rumbling or pheromones or whatever magic Hunter had used on her before it even started. But first things first—she needed to cover herself.

Courtney knew from the last time she went snooping that there wasn't anything even close to her size hanging in his closet. Given that Hunter was over seven feet tall, that wasn't much of a surprise. It just meant she'd have to get creative.

Courtney pulled a muted plaid flannel shirt off its hanger and experimented until she discovered she could wrap it around her waist twice and tie the arms in front like a belt. A glance in the mirror mounted on the wall next to the closet confirmed that her fashion nightmare of a skirt at least kept everything covered.

She opened the door to find Hunter standing just outside with a mug in his hand and a smug smile on his face.

“I heard you get up,” he said cheerfully, holding out the mug. “Figured you might need this.”

Courtney took the mug, inhaling the rich, aromatic steam from the coffee, and took a sip—mostly to give herself a moment to collect herself.

A moment wasn't enough, however. The coffee was black, not too strong, with a teaspoon of sugar. Hunter had remembered how she took it, throwing her even further off her stride.

Such a small detail, easily forgotten, and yet he'd been carrying it around with him all this time. Hunter had no reason to think she'd ever return, not after an absence of two months, and Courtney did not want to contemplate what that did or didn't mean. Her resolve to stay one step ahead was already coming apart—and she was going to have to work twice as hard to shore it up.

She skewered him with what she hoped was a no-nonsense glare. “I was just coming out to get my pants.”

“Later.” Hunter took her arm and guided her back into the bedroom. “First, we need to talk.”

Courtney tried to ignore the stutter in her heartbeat at his words. “I’m not sure I’m okay with the kind of conversation that doesn’t include pants,” she said lightly.

Hunter gave her a sidelong look, and Courtney had a feeling he wasn’t buying the act. “Relax. It’s not that kind of talk.”

Unfortunately, her body had other ideas. As she sat primly on the bed, she could already feel the telltale warmth pooling between her legs, the blood rushing to her face. And Hunter, of course, saw it all.

Courtney cleared her throat. It seemed there was nothing she could do about her reaction, so she just had to trust Hunter not to abuse the privilege of being able to read it like a book.

“What’s so important that it can’t wait? Has something happened with the beta army?”

Hunter remained standing but didn’t spare Courtney the full bore of his gaze. “Not yet. A few troop convoys came in last night, but it will take them days to organize.”

A spike of anxiety cut through the sensual fog. “How do you know all that?”

“Rowan came by last night after you were asleep. Archer sent a couple guys to the ridge to do reconnaissance, and they’re taking shifts on Mount Glazer.”

“Oh, God.” Mortified, Courtney buried her face in her hands. “Does that mean Rowan knows? I mean, could he tell?”

“Could he tell what? That I’d just spent hours eating your pussy until you came so hard you blacked out?” Hunter sipped his coffee nonchalantly. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure he knows. In fact, that’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“I can’t believe I...did that.” Courtney wished she could disappear under the floor. It looked like today was going to be every bit as humiliating as yesterday. “I swear it’s never happened before.”

“Courtney—”

“Not that it matters, obviously, since it’s never going to happen again. The, um...going down on me part, not the passing out. Actually, neither are going to happen, so—”

“Courtney.”

She jumped at the thunder in his voice. “Don’t do that, Hunter. I mean, at least give me a warning—I’m not like you, I can’t—”

Hunter sat down and took her hand, leaving enough space between them on the bed that the gesture seemed almost chaste.

“It’s okay,” he told her. “You can calm down.”

“I am calm!” The lie flew out of Courtney’s. Shit, she really was losing control.

“Why do you care what Rowan or anyone else thinks about our relationship?”

“I don’t.” Belatedly she added, “And besides, we don’t have a relationship.”

Hunter frowned down at his coffee, and she sensed he was finding it difficult to conceal his frustration. “Yes, you do. And yes, we do.”

His tone brooked no argument. Ordinarily, that would only have spurred Courtney to dig her heels in, but disagreeing with him wouldn’t just be disingenuous; it could be dangerous. Like every alpha, Hunter detested lying, and now she also knew how he responded when provoked.

“Fine,” she said cautiously. “You got me. I care what people think. But my reasons are no one’s business but my own.”

Hunter snorted. “Not anymore, they’re not. Not after last night.”

Courtney willed him to stop right there, to make a sharp U-turn from the direction the conversation was headed, but she knew it was hopeless.

“I hate to break it to you, but what happened between us wasn’t just sex,” he continued, taking her hand again. “I didn’t just eat you out. I drank you in, Courtney. Tasted every hidden layer of you. And when you lost control—when you gave up your control to me—I sensed feelings that you’d buried for so long that I doubt you even recognize them.”

Courtney felt cornered and exposed, not just by Hunter’s words but by the heat coming off him, the electricity between them, his unblinking gaze. He was relentless, refusing to leave any defenses standing for her to hide behind.

“What do you want me to say?” she blurted. “That I’m sorry for maintaining a little emotional distance between myself and everyone else? Because I’m not.”

“I didn’t ask you to apologize,” Hunter said calmly, but Courtney ignored him.

“The entire reason I was given this job is that I’m very good at keeping my private and personal lives separate. After Darlene succumbed to Wyatt—”

“Succumbed?”

Courtney ignored the rebuke in his tone. “Fine. After Darlene became Wyatt’s omega. My point is that it wasn’t lost on SALE that she became attached to an alpha in an incredibly short time, despite being one of the toughest women I’ve ever met. They reevaluated the requirements after that and decided that the key trait for the field director position was extraordinary self-control. When they promoted me, they said I had ice in my veins.”

A trace of amusement flashed across Hunter’s face. “And you believed them? Honey, last night that glacier melted all over my tongue.”

“Only because I allowed it happen,” Courtney stammered, but it wasn’t much of a comeback, and they both knew it. Just like that, Hunter had knocked her off balance again. Worse yet, the only weapon he needed was the truth.

“You’re right about one thing,” he said quietly, surprising her. “I’ve never known anyone who could hide their emotions

and desires from an alpha. No one but you.”

Was it supposed to be a compliment? An accusation? Courtney couldn't tell...and she didn't like it. Hunter had slipped back into his bedside persona, the clinical, measured voice of the medic. And while it would have calmed and reassured her if she was hurt, right now it seemed like a big step in the wrong direction.

“How do you do it?” he asked. “How do you hide from me?”

Courtney had been here before; everyone, from SALE's founders to the greenest recruits, wanted to know the secret to her legendary self-control—as if it was some superpower that had magically been conferred on her. She usually gave them some bullshit about reading *The Art of War* and meditating every day before dawn, but only because she knew they didn't really want to know the truth: that it was a self-defense mechanism forged from daily abuse.

“I don't want to talk about it,” she mumbled.

“Tell me anyway.”

Courtney grabbed a pillow and clutched it like a shield, but it did nothing to diminish the sense that she was losing control of the conversation. “Why? What's the point?”

Hunter's composure slipped a little, the familiar fire returning to his eyes. “The *point* is I have wasted the better part of a year keeping my distance because I didn't sense even a hint of attraction or desire. Hell, Courtney, you spent a week in my house and—nothing. I watched you walk away without a second glance, and then you stayed away for two months without any contact.”

Courtney was taken aback by the passion in his voice. She tried pulling her hand away to give herself room to think, but he only gripped harder.

“I was *miserable*, don't you get it? And now I want answers.”

She didn't know what to say. She had no idea that Hunter even cared about her, much less that he'd been wrestling with

his own desires. Alphas lived and died by their urges and instincts, and the fact that Hunter had managed to keep his distance astonished her.

“I’ll tell you,” she finally conceded. “But only if you promise not to say a word to anyone else.”

“Of course.” As if it was a given. As if she should have already known.

But Courtney had never talked about this with anyone, not even the psychologist SALE sent her to as part of the interview process. Opening up to anyone, much less the man she’d been yearning for in secret, felt as unnatural as trying to breathe underwater.

“Pushing down my feelings was something that I learned to do a very long time ago,” she began uncertainly. “Before I even knew about alphas or the Boundarylands. My father and brothers could be...cruel.”

“What does that mean?” Hunter asked sharply, and a ripple of fear ran through her. But not for herself.

Instead, she had the feeling that if he got a chance, Hunter would rip anyone who hurt her to pieces without a second thought.

“The details don’t matter,” she said, only realizing afterward that it was true. “The important thing was that even as a child, I knew what those people really wanted was to get a reaction out of me. To make me cry or beg. That’s what made them feel powerful. So I learned to take all my fear and anger, and bury it.

“After a while, it became second nature. I became good at it. Really, really good. Eventually, it got to the point that I could make any emotion I didn’t want disappear by shoving it down.”

Hunter said nothing, but Courtney could tell he was taking in what she’d said, weaving it into everything else he knew about her, which—like it or not—was a great deal at this point. In fact, she realized with very mixed feelings, Hunter knew her better than anyone in the world.

“That’s the whole story,” she concluded. “It was only ever a survival technique.”

“You don’t need it anymore.”

She jerked her head up, startled by the steel in Hunter’s voice. His anger had only grown—aimed not *at* her, but in her defense.

Somehow that was even worse.

Courtney had never asked for pity. She loathed it, in fact, and she sure as hell didn’t want it from him.

“Don’t be so quick to judge. That little trick comes in handy more often than you’d think,” she retorted. “Maintaining emotional distance is why I’m good at my job.”

Hunter was unmoved. “It’s also what kept you from going after what you wanted. You denied yourself pleasure. A chance to lead a real life.”

“It may not look like a good life to an alpha,” Courtney said defensively, “but it’s not my nature to be hedonistic. I don’t care much about pleasure the way you define it. What’s important to me is making a difference. All I want is for my life to mean something.”

Any trace of Hunter’s professional distance was gone, leaving only pure, raw alpha energy. “You can lie to yourself, but not to me. Not after last night. Not after being vulnerable in my arms.”

Courtney recoiled as if he’d slapped her. “Don’t call me that.”

“What, vulnerable?” Hunter edged closer to her on the bed. “It’s the truth. You are vulnerable when you’re with me—smaller, weaker, yes, but it’s more than that. Last night you were begging me to fill the emptiness inside you that you didn’t even know was there.”

Courtney forced herself to look him in the eye. God, how she wanted to tell him to go straight to hell. But she couldn’t... because yet again every word was true.

And now that Hunter had seen that side of her, the one she'd spent a lifetime trying to conceal, she knew there was no going back.

"I don't—I don't want to be any of those things," she said miserably.

Hunter cupped her cheek gently. "That's only because you don't understand yet what vulnerability really means. There's another side to it, which can bring you more pleasure than you can imagine. Let me show you, Courtney. Let me take you there."

Every one of Courtney's instincts screamed *no*, but there was nothing but honesty and the promise of safety in Hunter's eyes. So for the first time since she was a child, she pushed away the urge to flee from her feelings...and said yes.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Courtney's heart beat a ragged staccato as she leaned into Hunter. This time she was the one who instigated the kiss, the one who wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and pulled him close.

Hunter's passionate response took her by surprise. She'd assumed that yesterday it was the novelty of their touch, along with the release of pent-up attraction, that was responsible for his enthusiasm.

But if anything, his lips, his hands on her skin, were even hungrier and more urgent than before. Courtney might have initiated the kiss, but Hunter deepened it, lowering her to the mattress. It wasn't long before he was tearing off her makeshift skirt and the shirt she'd been wearing for what felt like days.

Then he sat back to look at her naked body, *really* look at it, taking his time as his gaze traveled slowly down and then back up again. The low growl that rumbled from his chest drove Courtney's need higher and she felt the warmth of flooding slick against her legs.

Only then did she remember that this was the first time he'd seen her completely naked, that she'd kept her shirt on yesterday. And because she'd forgotten, she hadn't automatically cycled through her litany of fears and self-criticism, the ones that caused her to avoid mirrors when she was undressing. Ever since she could remember, Courtney had been embarrassed by her body. By the contrast between her muscular limbs, hardened from her punishing training routine,

and the generous hips and breasts that belonged on some other woman.

But as Hunter stared at her, he didn't look the least bit conflicted about what he was seeing. "You're so fucking gorgeous," he said almost reverently—and then he lay down next to her fully clothed.

He pulled her into his arms and began exploring her body with his hands and mouth, slowly caressing her body as his lips made forays along her neck and earlobes and throat—even her eyelids. But he always, always, returned to her lips.

Each passing second turned up the heat burning between them until Courtney was back to moaning with pleasure and frustration. At any second, she expected her body to succumb to instinct and take over as it had yesterday.

But it didn't—and with each passing second, Courtney grew more anxious that it simply wasn't going to happen. That yesterday had been a fluke. That during the night, her training and reason had come back to seal the trap door on her emotions and desires tighter than ever.

Eventually Hunter pulled back and looked searchingly into her eyes. "You don't believe me yet."

"What do you mean?"

"That this will be good—us, together. That everything's going to be fine."

Of course she didn't believe it. Hunter couldn't make a promise like that. Nobody could—especially not with the drumbeat of war outside the door. But even if peace reigned in the country, she had a feeling she still wouldn't be able to get out of her own way.

"I want to believe you," she said unsteadily. "I just can't seem to—"

"Then I guess I'm going to have to prove it to you."

Hunter silenced her with a kiss as he reached between her legs. He splayed his fingers over her mound, her clit, her pussy, doing nothing but holding his hand against her as the

heat of his touch slowly melted some of her resistance and fresh slick coursed over his fingers.

“That’s right,” he murmured against her mouth, starting to stroke up and down, dipping into the creases of her thighs, along her outer lips, his thumb circling—but never directly touching—her clit.

Courtney began to squirm, not exactly resisting, but trying not to encourage either—though it took a huge effort. She was so turned on it was hard to think straight, especially as Hunter slid his fingertip along her opening, skimming but not entering it. It was somehow even more erotic than last time for the simple reason that he was forcing her to wait.

It was so much easier when she didn’t have to make the choice, Courtney realized. If only she could be swept along with the tide of passion without having to explicitly agree to it. Which felt uncomfortably close to things she’d sworn off forever...like submission, to name just one.

Hunter’s hand stilled. “Stop thinking so hard,” he growled. “Let your body take the lead, not your mind.”

How he could tell what was going on inside her, Courtney didn’t know—but her body complied. She felt herself relax. The muscles of her neck and shoulders and spine melted as his fingers worked their magic. Her breath came faster and faster, sighs turning to whimpers.

And then Hunter retreated, returning to sliding his slick-covered fingers in broader strokes, kneading the sensitive skin of her inner thighs, sliding under to cup her ass. Courtney cried out with frustration and need...and Hunter gave a dark chuckle.

“Patience. We’ve got—”

“All the time in the world,” Courtney finished his sentence through gritted teeth. “Easy for you to say when you’ve got all your clothes on and—”

She stopped when she realized she could do something about that. Trust was supposed to be a two-way street, after all—and while it was undeniably delicious to let Hunter set the

pace, now that her engines were shifting into overdrive, maybe it was Courtney's turn to take the lead for a while.

She rolled on top of him in a powerful burst of energy, relishing the look of surprise on his face. For once, he hadn't seen it coming—and Courtney enjoyed the little thrill of power. Before she could change her mind, she started unbuttoning his shirt, lowering her face to kiss the hard plane of his chest, trailing her lips along the velvet of his skin.

Hunter's sigh turned into a rumble she could feel through her lips and hands. A thrilling surge of pride ran through her. *She* had made him groan like that. *Her* touch had made him tense with need.

Encouraged, she tugged Hunter's shirt off and dropped it on the floor, then turned her attention to his pants. She was sufficiently nervous that her hands shook as she pulled down the zipper and pulled the denim over his hips. He wore no underwear, and the moment his cock was freed, it sprang up into her hands.

There it was—the beast she'd first seen yesterday. Somehow, now that it was in her hands, his cock seemed even more impossibly huge. It was as big as...a rolling pin...or a T-ball bat...or even one of those instant fireplace logs you could pick up at the hardware store.

Oh, for the love of God, what was she thinking? Courtney had given a few hand jobs in her time, but she didn't know where to begin now. She gingerly wrapped her fingers around the thing as Hunter took in a strangled breath.

"I know you're worried, but I told you—your body was made for this. For me. And you don't have to do anything you don't want to. Not until you're ready."

Courtney gave a meek nod. "Is it okay if I just...touch you for a while?"

"More than okay. *Ahhh...*"

There it was again, the shiver of pride at the pleasure on Hunter's face as Courtney began stroking and exploring his

shaft. *Let your body take the lead...* his words came back to her.

And damn if he didn't know exactly what he was talking about. Her body seemed to know what to do, her fingers cupping and squeezing and sliding up and down.

Just a few minutes of this was enough to make Hunter grind his teeth with barely contained desire. "I—need—to touch you, Courtney."

It wasn't a request. A second later, she found herself lifted into the air and when Hunter set her down she was straddling him again, only in the opposite direction. She tried not to think about Hunter's view of her naked backside as her hands greedily found his cock again.

But now she wasn't the only one doing the touching. He reached between her legs from behind, roughly parting them to give him access to her opening, and massaged her swollen pussy.

Courtney didn't think she would be able to stand it if he kept teasing her. "Please," she whispered, her hand moving faster on his cock. "I need..."

"I know exactly what you need." The command was back in Hunter's voice, and in the next moment, he drove his finger inside her and matched her rhythm, in and out, in and out, while she feverishly stroked him.

Pleasure built inside both of them as spiraled higher with want and need. Courtney lost track of how long it continued, too caught up in the swirling dance of pleasure inside her.

The frenzied movements became a blur, stronger and harder and faster, whipping them into a shared erotic frenzy until Courtney felt the gathering, mounting force of her approaching orgasm.

This time there was no fighting. She gave in to it completely. All of her resistance shattered.

Her hands tightened involuntarily on Hunter's cock as she came, and it jerked in her hands. He bellowed as thick, hot ropes of come jetted from him, splattering on Courtney's chest

and neck while she bucked and rode his hand, crying out with pleasure.

It went on and on, her cunt pulsing around his fingers, slick drenching the tangled linens. When finally the waves subsided and Courtney drifted back down into her body, she discovered that it was slathered in his cum.

If she'd been back home, this would have been where she excused herself and slipped into the shower. Although nothing like this had ever happened back home. And nothing could have convinced her to leave the warmth of Hunter's embrace now, especially when he lifted and turned her around so that she was nestled against his chest.

Lying in the warmth of his embrace, Courtney let her eyelids flutter halfway closed listening to his thundering pulse slowly return to normal.

*Was that okay?* she wanted to ask...but astonishingly, she already knew the answer. It was more than okay. It had been extraordinary...for both of them.

Courtney was sliding pleasantly toward a delicious nap when Hunter suddenly tensed. Pushing her roughly behind him he sat up and turned his face toward the window. Dread shot through Courtney as she realized that he had sensed something—a sound, a movement outside the window, an unfamiliar scent.

“Someone's here.” His words were clipped and urgent.

Then someone started pounding on the door.

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**H**ow the hell had Archer made it all the way to his front porch before Hunter detected his presence? Nothing like that had ever happened, not even when he'd been drugged to the gills and semiconscious in the Basement.

But he knew the answer: he'd been lost in the volcanic force of his and Courtney's pleasure. Every emotion, every

sense, every instinct had been laser-focused on her and her alone.

Yet looking over Archer's shoulder, Hunter couldn't help but be dumbfounded. In his driveway was Archer's beloved old Dodge pickup that Rowan had helped him restore. Even a beta could hear the thing coming from a mile away. Yet Hunter hadn't noticed until Archer practically drove right into his house.

"Sorry," he said ruefully, but Archer waved away the words.

"I'm the one who needs to apologize," he said. "I would never have interrupted if there was any way it could be avoided. Though I did wait to come to the door and knock until things seemed...resolved."

Hunter nodded stiffly, trying to snap himself out of his post-sex haze. Something must be wrong, some urgent development in the conflict. Under any other circumstance, he couldn't imagine an alpha coming uninvited onto the property of another, especially when they were mating.

"What happened?"

Archer met his gaze steadily. "Tabitha's hacker connections came through. They were able to set up a three-way link with the other two boundarylands, and we've been working out the details since you left. The attack is set for 3:00 am Central Time."

Hunter took that in. "That's 1:00am for the Pacific Northwest Boundaryland, late enough to limit civilian activity in the area, and 4:00 for the Southeast—still gives them a little time before daylight."

"That's the idea." Archer seemed relieved that Hunter had caught up quickly. "Listen. I know it's none of my damn business what goes on in your house, but seeing as I'm trying to run a pretty fucking huge operation here, I have to know: Is Courtney about to go into heat?"

Emotions surged in Hunter at the question. Such matters were treated with great respect among alphas. Asking the

question was no small thing. He couldn't help a spike of anger that quickly gave way to other, more complex feelings.

Courtney in heat—it was something he'd dreamed of for a long time. It killed Hunter to have to admit it wasn't happening. And it was even worse to know there was no guarantee it ever would.

“No. And...I don't think she's going to be. Not any time soon.”

Archer looked surprised by his answer. As much as it pained him, Hunter knew he couldn't let pride get in the way of giving him all the information he needed.

“She's still holding back,” he reluctantly elaborated. “I've never known anyone who could control her emotions the way Courtney can. She's still holding on to the last of her defenses.”

“That's hard to believe,” Archer said. “You're sure—”

“I'm sure.” Even knowing why Archer was asking the question, Hunter was enraged at the suggestion that he might not know what was happening with the woman in his bed...*his* woman.

“If it was any other beta, she wouldn't be able to resist the connection,” he clarified once he'd gathered himself. “But Courtney is different. Even after what she went through to get here, she's many orders of magnitude beyond what the rest of the resistance is capable of.”

“Wow.” Archer scratched the back of his neck, at a loss for words. “Don't worry, brother, I'm sure it will come with time. Courtney's a good woman, and she's got my respect. But I ain't gonna lie—with what's coming, I'm going to need every last alpha on the ground.”

“I understand.” Hunter forced the image of Courtney's warm, pliant body out of his mind. “Just tell me what you need.”

A ghost of a smile passed over Archer's lips. “More like what *you* need. Take a cold shower, brother—then get over to

Kane's in the next couple of hours. I want everyone together before we head into battle."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The ride back to the base command established at Archer and Sarah's house was silent, Courtney and Hunter both lost in their own thoughts. Courtney knew that her anxiety would have been even worse without the comfort of Hunter's hand wrapped around her own, a source of reassurance that touched her at a level beyond logic or reason.

If it was unfamiliar, it was because it was a first—depending on someone else for comfort.

In all her training and years of resistance, Courtney had never leaned on anyone. She developed her own strategies, solved her own problems, and above all mitigated her own emotions when they got in the way. No matter how challenging a mission might be, she relied on the assurance of being the only one controlling her actions.

Once she was promoted to Field Director, there hadn't really been a choice. The safety of her team depended on how well she planned and executed each operation and adapted to the unexpected. It was true that Courtney had seen terrible losses in her role, but at least she knew there was nothing she could have done to prevent it.

But now Courtney was being forced to accept that Hunter was headed into battle whether she liked it or not. A battle in which there was no place for her.

The idea that she had no control over what happened to him when he set off for battle was twisting her stomach into knots. All of her careful conditioning would mean nothing. The years spent strengthening her body and mind, studying

every aspect of conflict strategy and psychology, and honing her mental discipline would be no use to Hunter when he left the base with the other alphas.

*She* would be of no use. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

When Hunter turned onto Kane's driveway, Courtney gripped his hand more tightly and didn't let go until he parked at the end of a long line of pickups parked along the side of his house. The second he cut the ignition, though, she threw open the passenger door and hopped down, determined to beat him inside the house. Because as hard as it was to accept what was happening, it would be even worse to have to talk about it.

But Courtney should have known she wouldn't be able to escape that easily. Before she could take more than a few steps, Hunter stood in front of her, barring her way.

"Courtney." He rested his hands on her shoulders as if to make it clear she wasn't going anywhere, not until he'd had his say. And naturally, her body relaxed at his touch.

"Don't," she said miserably. "Don't promise me everything will be okay."

For a moment, Hunter said nothing. Then he cupped her cheek gently. "All right, I won't. But—"

"There you are!" Courtney looked up to see a heavily pregnant Darlene coming toward them. The two had made fast friends the day Courtney showed up with her first supply delivery. Considering their shared history in the smuggling business, maybe it should have been no surprise.

"Tabitha needs to talk to you," Darlene said urgently. "She's on the second floor, where they set up the link. And Archer's around back getting ready to talk to the guys."

"We'll finish this later," Hunter muttered as he walked Courtney toward the house.

She didn't have time to say goodbye before Hunter was absorbed into a group of alphas coming around the side of the house. Courtney stood frozen and watched him go.

"He's going to be okay, you know."

Courtney turned to see Darlene watching her with a sympathetic smile, her arms open wide, and for the first time in her life, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to walk into the embrace of a dear friend.

“Wow,” she said, “It’s getting hard to wrap my arms around you. I’ve lost track—how much longer until the little one shows up?”

“Three months,” Darlene said proudly.

Courtney was astonished. Given the size of Darlene’s belly, she wouldn’t have been surprised if she went into labor right now on the porch.

That part, she kept to herself. Children were something she rarely thought about. Maybe it was because she’d had such a terrible childhood herself, or maybe because motherhood wouldn’t be an easy fit with her way of life. But she felt a pang nonetheless.

Courtney had always thought of moms as mild-mannered women who drove minivans and spent their evenings at PTA meetings—not powerful operatives who smuggled goods and sensitive defense secrets across alpha borders. A mom didn’t wear a wig to conceal her identity during traffic stops at the state line. And they definitely didn’t lose all control when they wrapped their hands around some alpha dick.

The problem was that Courtney knew for a fact that Darlene had definitely done all of those things—and here she was, rosy-cheeked and looking like she was ready to pop.

And if Darlene could do it, then...

A fragile tendril of longing took root in Courtney’s heart—one she shoved back with all her might. Hunter was about to march into war, for God’s sake. This was hardly the time to be daydreaming about babies and happily-ever-afters.

“I’m so happy for you,” she told Darlene. It wasn’t a lie.

“And I’m so happy for you too!”

Courtney frowned, confused. “For what?”

“You and Hunter—what else?” Darlene said with a laugh. “You have no idea how long we’ve all been waiting for you two to finally get together.”

Courtney was at a loss for words, even though this wasn’t the first time she’d had the dubious pleasure of receiving her friends’ congratulations for something that was in no way certain.

“Thanks, but—I mean the thing is we’re not—”

Courtney let out a frustrated breath, deciding to cut her losses. Screw it—she didn’t owe anyone an explanation. She gave a baffled-looking Darlene a final squeeze. “You know, I should go see what Tabitha needs.”

Once inside, she gave herself the luxury of a couple of seconds to compose herself before heading up the stairs. The second floor of Tabitha’s house didn’t look like it got much use. It consisted of a huge bedroom suite with a luxurious marble bathroom and a sitting area that had been converted to storage for an eye-popping collection of tools. The bed had been removed to make room for a long workbench that was currently covered in laptops and communications equipment.

Courtney spotted Tabitha in a corner, frowning at a device that was beeping intermittently. Sarah, Archer’s omega, was at her side refilling a printer with paper, while a third omega named Lili worked at untangling a knot of cords.

“Hey, girl,” Tabitha said, giving her an exhausted smile. “Glad you could make it. Yesterday when you left so quickly, we were afraid we wouldn’t see you for a while.”

“Not for four days at least,” Sarah joked.

Her comment was met by laughter as two more omegas came in from the balcony to join them. Courtney did her best to keep a smile fixed on her face despite her discomfort.

“Ignore them,” Bailey said, carrying in a pile of headsets. “Everyone here is dealing with the day’s stress in their own way.”

“That’s a nice way of saying that exhaustion is making us all a little loopy,” Tabitha said.

“Well, I’m here to help,” Courtney said. “Just tell me what you need.”

Tabitha nodded. “Bailey just finished setting up the audio downstairs so Gray and Jackson—they’re the leaders of the Pacific Northwest and Southeastern Boundarylands—can radio in with updates.”

Bailey set down her load on the last bit of empty counter space. “And there’s a second listening station that’s patched into Defense Department channels, so we’ll be able to monitor those as well.”

They’d coordinated all of this in less than twenty-four hours? Courtney gaped at the omegas. “How did you pull this together so quickly?”

Tabitha waved off the question. “My friends—the ones who like to hide out in the dark corners of the internet—happen to be very good at what they do.”

That was one hell of an understatement.

“Give yourself some credit, Tabby,” Bailey said with a grin. “Seriously, Courtney, she not only contacted the hackers, she coordinated the whole schedule so right after one group brings down the satellite systems, the other will cut the electrical grid outside all three boundarylands.”

“It’ll be complete chaos in the exclusion zones,” Sarah said. “Especially since troops are still arriving, and they haven’t had time to brief the new ranks.”

“Hunter mentioned some of that,” Courtney said, slightly dazed. “And you’re amazing, all of you. I mean, the security walls you had to get through—”

“But it wasn’t just us,” Tabitha interrupted.

“What do you mean?”

Bailey squeezed her hand. “The whole time we thought it was us against the world? That SALE and the rest of the resistance were playing David to the beta government’s Goliath? Well, it turns out that when you systematically take

away more and more rights from marginalized groups, eventually people tend to get mighty pissed off.”

“We found out that a lot of people have been waiting for an opportunity to rise up and fight back,” Lili said.

Courtney looked from one omega to another, seeing determination and fierce pride on every face in the room. “I—I don’t think I understand.”

“There was this caravan of laid-off female executives and former ranking military who managed to close down I-70 in two states.”

“There’s been reports of teachers and doctors staging walk-outs in almost every state.”

“This morning, the president threatened to shut down all social media after there was this mass protest calling for ousting the current administration.”

“The point,” Bailey said, her eyes sparkling, “is that the government has been targeting a lot of people, stripping away rights a little at a time. They thought they could squash dissent, and they succeeded for a while because all these smaller groups knew they couldn’t take on the fight alone.”

“But once it became obvious that the alphas weren’t going to back down, something changed,” Sarah said. “It was like, once the alphas led the charge, everyone who had been holding back out of fear decided to join the fight.”

The tangled, noxious mass of worry in Courtney began to loosen as the omegas talked over each other, their excitement sparking a small flame of hope inside her.

She’d been at this so long that she’d become jaded without realizing it. She’d forgotten she wasn’t alone, that there were others like her out in the world. People who’d suffered long enough, who were willing to strike back. Hunter, Archer, and all the other alphas had given them the hope and the example they needed.

As the omegas went back to their tasks, Bailey filled Courtney in on the rest of the details of the plan. At 3 a.m., when the power was cut, the alphas would launch a

coordinated attack on the ground forces ringing each of the three boundarylands. While that was going on, the omegas would monitor the hacked military lines of communication and pass critical information to the fronts. As soon as the front line was neutralized, the alphas would systematically destroy the beta's larger weapons of war, including tanks, rocket launchers, ammunition stockpiles, and supply vehicles.

"You really think the alphas stand a chance?" Courtney's voice sounded hoarse even to her own ears.

"I know they do," Bailey said firmly. "Those troops have no idea what's about to hit them. Not only that, so many resources have been diverted to the boundarylands in the last few days that what happens tonight will set the tone of the battle going forward."

"It's about to get fucking real out there." Courtney turned to find the source of the eerily calm voice and found Darlene just inside the door, resting a hand on her big round belly.

Bailey assigned Courtney to the group monitoring the secure voice and data lines of the DISN, the Defense Information Systems Network of the beta government. Other omegas and a few of the alphas' beta family members tracked real-time reporting on the major networks, social media chatter, and communications with nearly a dozen other governments around the world.

Courtney threw herself into the work, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't keep her eyes off the clock. As 3:00 approached, her anxiety was nearly out of control.

Even worse, everyone knew it. For the first time, she couldn't seem to stuff the horrible feelings inside her down into that dark vault. So Courtney tried reasoning with them instead.

*The alpha's plan is good, she told herself sternly. They're strong and fearless. Every foreseeable challenge had been factored in.*

Deep down, she knew all that was true, so why didn't she feel any better?

*Because Hunter is going to war...and you're staying behind.*

She'd never felt so helpless in her life.

With only half an hour to go, the alphas started to assemble in front of the house. Those with mates and family said their goodbyes. Watching the omegas, Courtney felt incredulous that they were handling this with such calm.

When Hunter found her standing at the far end of the deck, gripping the railing so hard her knuckles were white, Courtney forced a smile that quickly dissolved when he took her into his arms.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I want to be strong for you. But I'm just so afraid."

"Courtney...look at me."

She gazed up into Hunter's eyes and saw no fear in them. She could feel his heartbeat—strong and steady. "Tell me what to do," she pleaded.

"Stay here and keep doing what you were doing," he said. "We need all of you—you and the omegas and the other betas—to keep getting information to us. And I need to know you're safe so I can do what I need to."

Courtney nodded miserably, knowing he was right.

When Hunter tipped her chin up with his fingertip, she expected the chaste kiss of a preoccupied warrior.

That wasn't what she got. By the time Hunter joined the others striding toward the border, the kiss had seared not just her lips and body, but also her heart.

Her alpha was going to war.

But then he was coming back to her.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Hey, Court. How’s it going?”

Courtney startled, so intent on her task that she hadn’t noticed Bailey sliding into the chair next to her. She pulled off her headset and rubbed her eyes. It had only been an hour since Hunter and the rest of the alphas had left. At this rate, she didn’t know how she would make it through the night.

Unlike the other omegas and betas in the vast room, who seemed to have a handle on the stress, Courtney’s thoughts kept being interrupted by graphic images of what the alphas would face on the other side of that border. The work helped but wasn’t enough to keep her fears at bay.

“Good, I guess. Not much going on over DTN and DTelN,” she reported, naming the military interfaces for Australia and New Zealand, “but there’s been some chatter in on the DTFS originating in Scotland.”

“Interesting. I think a couple of the alphas have been in contact with boundarylands in the UK and a handful of other English-speaking countries. We’re working on getting real-time translation up and running so we can broaden our reach. Thanks for doing this, Court—I probably don’t need to tell you that you picked it up faster than anyone yet.”

“Thanks,” Courtney mumbled. “SALE maintains contact with rights organizations all over the world, but I was never part of that team.”

“It’s okay,” Bailey said with surprising gentleness, taking her hand. “You aren’t responsible for the entire operation, you know.”

A snort of laughter bubbled out of Courtney, and she covered her mouth with embarrassment.

“What?” Bailey looked startled.

“It’s just that you’re not the first person to say that to me. I had kind of a reputation at SALE—the leadership team used to call me Hoover because I took on everything that wasn’t getting done. My boss threatened to send me to ‘Play-Nice Camp’ for team-building training if I didn’t learn to stay in my lane.”

Bailey laughed. “Are you kidding? That’s one of the reasons I respected you so much. You were tough but never the hard-ass you appeared to be. And who cares about the higher-ups? The important thing is that your team loved you. Tell you what, Maggie’s downstairs fixing a snack, and I bet you haven’t eaten in a while—come take a break with me.”

On cue, Courtney’s stomach growled, and she realized Bailey was right. Food and some distracting conversation would do her good. But as she followed her down the stairs, she couldn’t get Bailey’s words out of her mind.

*The hard-ass you appeared to be.*

Her knee-jerk reaction was shame. The tough persona had undoubtedly helped her lead missions, but it had also cemented Courtney’s view of herself as unfeminine and closed-off.

But as the tantalizing smell of cinnamon reached her, another memory came to mind. Hunter’s face the first time he saw her naked.

*You’re so fucking gorgeous.*

Could both of those things be true? Could a woman be fierce, courageous, a strong leader...and also a sensual, sexual being? Could the very traits Courtney had assumed made her unappealing as a romantic partner actually make her attractive...to the right man?

*Trust me,* Hunter had said more than once. Maybe it was time she did just that.

Courtney hadn't realized how ravenous she was until she'd plowed through two slices of cinnamon toast and three strips of thick-cut slab bacon. "That was amazing, Maggie," she said, dabbing at her lips with a napkin.

"Yeah, I'm known for my toast," Maggie joked, tucking a lock of cobalt-blue hair behind her ears. "Though Axel would probably appreciate if I expanded my repertoire a bit."

"Are you kidding?" Bailey teased. "Last time we were over, he wouldn't even let me close to the kitchen. We're still talking about his mom's lasagna recipe."

"Yep, I'm a lucky bitch," Maggie beamed, topping off Courtney's coffee from the pot that had been kept brewing around the clock. "Care for a splash of Bailey's? Might help steady your nerves a little."

"Oh God, is it that obvious?"

The omegas exchanged a glance. "More like familiar," Maggie said diplomatically. "I think it's safe to say all of us took a while to adapt to the way things are done around here. Stuff that would have terrified the shit out of me back in the beta world doesn't even get me riled up anymore—but it wasn't always that way."

"I just don't get it," Courtney said. "You've got *two* loved ones in the battle, Maggie—your mate and your brother. How do you even keep breathing?"

Maggie looked thoughtful, twisting one of the many silver rings piercing the cartilage of her ear. "Yeah, it's weird," she said. "I mean, Xander's my twin, so we've always had a strong connection. But now—it's like I just know he's in the exact right place, being exactly who he was meant to be. Like I can feel it in my soul." She looked embarrassed. "But I'll kill you if you ever tell him that."

Bailey laughed, but she didn't take her eyes off Courtney. "What's really worrying you, Court? I mean, you saw how fast Hunter recovered from being shot. You know no beta is a match for him, no matter how many stripes he's got on his uniform."

Courtney sighed. The omegas clearly weren't going to stop until she opened up.

"I don't know exactly how to put it. I mean, Bailey, you and I have a lot in common, right?" Courtney's resistance training borrowed a lot from Quantico, where Bailey had spent her FBI years. "We were taught to take control of every situation, no matter what was thrown at us. But here, everything seems out of our control. And yet somehow, you seem okay with that."

Maggie snorted. "Have you *met* Bailey? Forget Archer, she's the real general around here. I half expect her to announce an inspection of how I did the dishes."

Bailey laughed. "Stop it, Mags, you're freaking her out. Seriously, Courtney, I know it's not easy to go against everything you know. But our time is going to come. This is just the first battle in what's going to be a long and complex war. Sure, we might not be on the front lines tonight, but this conflict is going to require a lot more than brute strength."

"Besides, we already *are* part of this," Maggie pointed out. "Everything we're doing—all the intelligence we're gathering—it's pivotal. You might not be picking much up overseas tonight, but you can bet things will get wild once the rest of the world sees what the US alphas pull off tonight."

Courtney thought about that. The omegas had a point. Lately, her career had focused on ground operations, but she'd spent plenty of time strategizing with SALE leadership, gathering and verifying data. Countless missions would never have succeeded without that support.

"Besides," Bailey said, "even if the alphas take out every piece of artillery they find tonight, the betas aren't going to raise the white flag. Knowing this administration, they'll double down."

"Which will make turning the tide of public opinion even more important," Maggie added.

Bailey nodded. "Exactly. But that's where people like you and me will make a difference. We have the skills to meet

people where they are and work together to dismantle systems that have been in place for generations.”

“I get that,” Courtney said slowly. “But it still doesn’t change the fact that Hunter—I mean, all the alphas are out there, they’re risking their lives, and I’m here sitting on my ass. It just makes me feel so...so...”

Courtney struggled to find the word for the emotion she’d pushed away her whole life.

“Helpless,” Bailey finished for her.

Oh, God. She was right. That was exactly what she was feeling. Utterly, completely helpless.

Bailey laid a hand on her shoulder. “I know it’s hard, but just wait. Once you and Hunter are, you know...” she tapped her own shoulder, where under her sweater Courtney knew there was the faint scar of a claiming bite, the ultimate commitment, the sealing of the lifetime bond between mates. “All of that doubt and worry will fade. You’ll never feel helpless again.”

Courtney flushed, still mortified that everyone apparently knew what had transpired between her and Hunter. “I know you guys assume that we’re—” She gave up trying to find the right words because the beta language was woefully inadequate. Sweethearts? Friends with benefits? “But we’re not. And we’re never going to be.”

The omegas exchanged glances again.

“Honey,” Maggie said carefully, “Is it possible that you’re...I mean, no offense, but it seems like you might be holding back. Resisting. Which I totally get, but—”

“You don’t understand,” Courtney blurted, both panicked by the upwelling of her feelings and fears and lulled by the genuine kindness on the omegas’ faces.

“So explain it to me. To us—we’re here to support you. Trust me, all of us have fallen apart at one point or another.”

“Some of us more than once,” Maggie sighed.

It seemed this was a week of firsts because this time, Courtney gave in and accepted the support these women were offering.

“It’s just that I’ve spent so much time with Hunter,” she said, unable to look anyone in the eye. “Every delivery day, he’d stick around after, and we’d talk. Sometimes we went for walks—him on one side of the fence and me on the other. But nothing changed.” Of course, they already knew that. “Then after the ambush, I lived under his roof for a whole week. Still no change!”

She glanced up to see Bailey trying hard to maintain a neutral expression. “That isn’t exactly news to anyone here.”

“Right, but this time we—I mean, we really...” Oh God, why did this have to be the one subject that made her feel so awkward? “We slept together. Well, kind of. Does hand stuff count?”

“That depends,” Maggie said. “Was it good?”

“Oh, hell yes.”

“Then it counts.”

Courtney knew her face must be on fire. “Not that it matters. I guess we just don’t have it—the chemistry, the bond, whatever the magic formula is.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Maggie said. “I think you took a wrong turn there somewhere.”

“You’re treating your relationship as if it’s a mission,” Bailey concurred. “Don’t get me wrong, analysis and strategy have their place, but not in an alpha’s bed.”

“Oh my God, you sound just like Hunter,” Courtney said, but she had to admit that the omegas’ reassurances helped a little.

“Don’t tell Hunter that,” Bailey said wryly. “That man is never going to forgive me for being a fed. But he’s right about this. I know it sounds counterintuitive, but you have to let go of control in order to find your true power.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Should’ve known they’d fold like a wet napkin.”

Hunter ignored his alpha brother Wyatt’s quip. He knew the older alpha was trying to distract him from his uneasiness, which—to his brothers, at least—had been on full display from the moment they left for the border. Now that they were headed back, he wasn’t the only one in a hurry to get back to his woman.

Just the only one planning a rendezvous with one who wasn’t his mate.

“Yeah,” Xander said, attempting to wipe the worst of the gore from his clothes with a handful of leaves while striding next to Hunter along the ridge, where it was only wide enough to walk two abreast. “I thought they would make it interesting, at least. We might as well have been fighting an army of ducks.”

That was an exaggeration, though the half dozen serious injuries sustained on the alpha side would all heal, most of them within a matter of days. Hunter had already treated a brother who’d taken a bullet to the neck and another who’d suffered severe burns over most of his body when an enemy tank burst into flames. Those two alphas were coming home in a transport vehicle the beta forces had abandoned as they fled.

The rest of the brothers had elected to walk, a ragged, blood-soaked, filthy corps of weary soldiers who’d defended not just their land but every brother, omega, and beta who called it home. It reminded Hunter of an old photograph of battered civil war soldiers walking the long way home, except

that no alpha brother would ever take up arms against another, and the outcome of the battle had never been in doubt.

In fact, judging from the faint sound of a radio transmission coming from Kane's house in the distance, alphas all over the world were now learning what had happened today.

Just like clockwork, the coordinated attacks had launched in the Ozarks, the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, and the humid inland forests of the coastal south in perfect synchronicity. Less than thirty seconds later, the army bases surrounding the three US Boundarylands were plunged into darkness and chaos with no way to communicate other than basic radio. It didn't take long for their shouts to turn to screams.

While it might have been true that scores of new recruits had recently swelled the ranks of the beta army, the troops Hunter and his brothers found charging into battle were far from seasoned soldiers.

They didn't lack enthusiasm; Hunter would give them that. It was to be expected after being fed a steady diet of propaganda and hate-mongering for years. But they quickly learned there was a big difference between testosterone-fueled fantasies of mowing down alphas and actually facing them on the battlefield.

Without adequate training, nearly half of the enlisted men on the front lines had turned and fled at the first sight of the advancing alphas. Those who held their ground had little time to regret the decision as a red mist descended on the battleground.

It was over almost before it began, leaving the alphas free to destroy far more of the military infrastructure than they'd dared to hope. The whole mission took less than twenty-four hours. As the bloody day wound down toward midnight, it was done.

Hunter's clothes were ruined. Between the blood of the alpha brothers he'd patched up on the field and the viscera of the soldiers who'd gotten in his way, he was a mess.

He briefly considered peeling off from the group and making a detour to rinse off in one of the many thawing ponds nearby. But no. That would only delay him getting back to Courtney, and right now, the only thing that mattered to him was taking her home and finishing what they'd started.

Hunter quickened his pace to catch up to a recently arrived beta, the father of one of his alpha brothers, who had been an ER nurse. He was the only beta they'd taken into battle and had already proved to be invaluable.

"You sure you can handle the clinic for a few days, Erik?"

"In my sleep," the man replied with a grin. "Taking care of alphas is a cakewalk compared to beta patients. I'll be nothing but a glorified babysitter, watching those guys sleep and heal themselves."

"Just don't drink all my whiskey before I get back," Hunter joked.

"No promises."

Just then, the quiet was broken by the sound of excited female voices.

"They're back!"

"Better get the coffee going!"

"Grab your phone, Bailey—we need a few shots of them returning for the media!"

By the time they reached the house, the lower deck was ringed with cheering omegas and family members. The transport vehicle was parked out front. Rowan broke into a run and threw his arms around his beaming mate.

It didn't take long for the house to be swallowed up in a riotous celebration, everyone hugging while the two wounded alphas were safely ensconced in the same room where Hunter had his bullets removed.

But even though Courtney's scent teased at Hunter's nose, she was nowhere to be seen. He had checked every room in the house, even the master bedroom—something that went

against every alpha instinct in his body—when Sarah waved him over.

“Did you hear?” she said excitedly, Archer’s arm slung over her shoulder. “Every report that’s come in says the same thing—total victory at the Southeastern and Northwestern Boundarylands. Even network TV is reporting that the beta army is seriously compromised.”

She frowned, her eyes narrowing. “Wait a minute—haven’t you checked on Courtney yet?”

Alarm shot through Hunter’s veins like intravenous poison. “What do you mean, ‘checked on her’? Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no—she’s fine. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. She’s asleep, that’s all—she tried to power through, but she’d been glued to the transmission data desk ever since you left. You know how seriously she takes her work, and—”

Hunter stopped listening as his body reversed the rapid ramp-up of adrenaline.

*Courtney was fine. She was unhurt.*

“—so about an hour ago, when she passed out on the keyboard, we tucked her under the desk and piled some blankets on her.”

“Thought you were about to lose it there, brother,” Archer said.

Hunter’s hackles rose until he realized that Archer was watching him with concern, not judgment. Only now did Hunter realize how keeping up the ruse—that there was nothing between him and Courtney, that they were just friends—had worn him down until his reactions were controlled by a hair trigger.

Maybe it was time to let that go.

“Yeah.” One word. Not much of an admission, but it was enough.

“Courtney did a hell of a job,” Sarah assured him. “Thanks to her, we were able to make contact with alphas in the

Philippines and Malaysia as well as monitoring traffic with Australia and New Zealand.”

That sounded important. Hunter would be sure to ask Courtney all about it—later. There was only one thing on his mind right now, and data had nothing to do with it.

“Just so you know—” Sarah called after him as he raced for the stairs. “Courtney was talking about you all night. We couldn’t get her to shut up.”

“Get your woman and get out of here,” Archer added, loud enough to ensure that even the betas in the house heard it. “We won’t be needing you.”

“Not for four days, at the least,” Sarah added with a poorly contained giggle.

Hunter found Courtney where Sarah had said—tucked beneath a pile of blankets on the floor of the second-floor workshop where the women had been working all night. Even in sleep, her face was tight with anxiety, tiny lines bracketing her mouth and eyes.

Lines that relaxed instantly when he gathered her into his arms.

Courtney’s eyelids, veined in tiny red lines that signaled her exhaustion, fluttered in the space between sleep and waking, the remnants of a dream showing in her distress. “Oh no,” she mumbled as tears spilled onto her cheeks, and Hunter realized too late that he was still streaked with dried blood and gore. “Mistake...”

At first, Hunter thought Courtney meant that he’d made a mistake, that she was horrified by the evidence of the attack. But that couldn’t be right—she was as fierce a warrior as any of his brothers, and a little blood had never spooked her before.

“Courtney. I’m fine,” he told her, but her eyes had closed again as sleep tugged at her.

“They killed you.” Her words were barely audible, her face pressed to his chest. Hunter watched her breathe deeply, unconsciously anchoring herself to his scent.

“Nobody killed me,” he whispered. “I’m here, my love. I’m alive.”

Courtney didn’t appear to hear him. “Now I’ll never get to make things right. Do what I should have done in the first place.”

Hunter’s breath hitched as he pressed his lips against her ear, praying he could break through her exhaustion, if only for a moment.

He had to know.

“What? What should you have done?”

“Trust,” she sighed. “With everything. Give myself to you. All of me.”

That was all Hunter needed. He picked her up and raced back down the stairs, past the startled-looking crowd. He barely heard his brothers’ cracks about finally getting the job done, about seeing him next week.

The trip home passed in a blur. Hunter’s next conscious thought was that he couldn’t get Courtney’s clothes off fast enough—and that she was no less beautiful after the strain of the last few days.

Once he’d settled her into the bed and tucked her under his softest blanket, Hunter headed for the shower and stayed there until he’d scrubbed every inch of his body in the scalding heat. The water ran red, then pink, and finally clear. He toweled off, then took a moment to collect his clothes and take them out to the burn barrel, where tomorrow he’d reduce all traces of the beta enemy to ash.

Then he got into bed next to Courtney. She barely stirred as he gathered her into his arms.

“Don’t worry, my love,” he whispered into her tangled hair, knowing she was deep asleep. “We have all the time in the world.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**T**he omegas had moved her again.

That was Courtney's first sluggish thought upon waking.

She'd stirred briefly when the omegas had settled her on the floor last night, her protests swallowed by her exhaustion. It turned out that she did have a limit after all.

The makeshift bed they'd made from quilts layered over the thick carpet was soft but chilly. Cold air had seeped in through the sliding doors a few feet away. That must have been why they'd moved her, and wherever they'd put her, she was lying on a warm, solid, hard surface that—

“Oh!” she yelped at the unmistakable sensation of something prodding her in the thigh, strong arms wrapping around her. Her eyes flew open. “You're alive!”

Courtney's joy was tempered by confusion. How could it be true? She'd seen Hunter's bloody, ravaged body for herself when he appeared to her from beyond the veil separating life and death.

But the man beneath her now, the one kissing her hair and holding her as if he never meant to let her go, had only a few scratches and bruises on his naked body. His beating heart, the warmth of his skin, the smile on his face all proved that he was very much alive.

Either this was a very vivid dream, or—

“But I saw you,” Courtney said, pulling away to examine his face, to touch his hair, his lips, the hard planes of his jaw.

“Your clothes were ripped and soaked in blood and—”

“Hush,” Hunter murmured, and Courtney felt her anxiety ebb away. His voice, his touch, his presence was a healing elixir. No dream could be this powerfully real.

“Tell me you’re okay,” she pleaded, knowing he had to tell her the truth. Alphas didn’t lie.

“I’m more than real,” he growled, “I’m your alpha. Your man.”

Those words, that truth, sent Courtney into a frenzy of need.

In the next second, she was kissing Hunter as if her life depended on it. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she straddled his cock, moaning as the erect shaft pulsed against her hot, wet pussy. But even though she was fiercely turned on, questions still plagued her. There were things she needed to know.

“That blood wasn’t yours?”

“A little was.” The worry must have returned to her eyes because Hunter rushed to add, “A *very* little. The important thing is that through the entire battle, whether I was fighting or clearing debris from the explosives or taking down the transmission tower with Axel, I never stopped thinking of you. And all I wanted was to get back here...and finish what we started. To feel you give yourself to me.”

*Oh...wow.* The thrill of hearing Hunter claim her so boldly was tainted with the old, familiar fear. Courtney tried to push away the old anxiety that always surfaced during the threat of intimacy.

*The threat of intimacy.* For the first time Courtney recognized the absurdity of it.

In her life, Courtney had endured real threats—to her safety, her freedom, even her life. Last night, she and Hunter both had played a part in what would surely go down as one of the most important battles of the modern age. But it wasn’t the looming prospect of war and death that she’d been afraid of—it was living her life.

Her *real* life—with Hunter.

“I want to,” she said earnestly. “I just don’t know if—”

“Stop.” Hunter pressed a fingertip to Courtney’s lips. “Remember what you told me last night?”

She frowned, trying to separate the haziness of what she’d thought was a dream from the words she’d spoken out of her grief.

“Well, *I* remember. You were full of regret about holding back, about never telling me the truth about what you felt—all of it. We’ve wasted too much time hiding from this thing, Courtney. Now it’s time to live.”

The fact that he’d chosen the same word to describe his desires wasn’t lost on her. It was more proof that they were truly in synch. Made for each other—and each other only.

And it made the Hunter’s growl as he began kissing her neck even more arousing. As the seconds ticked by, the kiss grew bolder and more demanding. Slick began to course from her pussy.

It seemed every time Hunter touched her, it took less time for the fires inside her to catch. And every time, those flames burned brighter and hotter.

Without thinking, Courtney began to rub herself along the length of Hunter’s cock, the exquisite friction putting her directly on the path to orgasm.

Only days ago, she thought in wonderment, she had believed she’d never get off through intercourse. Now she didn’t think she could stop herself.

Except...as the tightening, swirling feeling took her closer, she ran into that familiar wall again, the mental barrier that repelled the possibility of letting go.

*Fuck.* She wanted to be past this. She was done feeling frustrated and broken. But clearly, it wasn’t done with her.

Like a doll tossed on turbulent waves, Courtney felt helpless as the cycle repeated itself again and again...advance and retreat, advance and retreat.

“I’m trying,” she whimpered, digging her fingernails into Hunter’s powerful shoulders. “I swear to God, I’m trying.”

He took her hands and kissed her fingers one by one, then settled a steadying hand on the small of her back.

“So stop trying,” he murmured. “You don’t have to do anything. Just be here with me. Right here. Right now. Just... be. Just feel.”

Courtney wiped the tears of frustration from her eyes. She stopped writhing, stopped trying to rub herself on Hunter’s cock. Instead, she closed her eyes and sagged against him, feeling her body melt against his.

She focused on the sensation of his soft caress, the gentle patterns he traced on her back.

Yes. Starting slow made sense, starting with nonsexual touch and then—

But who was she kidding? Even what would have been a platonic touch with anyone else made her body come alive. Deep inside, in a primal place Courtney had never dared to explore, came a pull—not to seek her own pleasure, but to wrap herself around him. To revel in the sensations without trying to understand them.

*Just be. Just feel.*

Hunter’s hands were familiar, almost as if she’d memorized his every scar and callus. And as Courtney did as he asked and let her thoughts go, an unfamiliar emotion started to bloom inside her.

*Trust.*

The realization threatened to knock her out of the blissful spell Hunter was weaving with his magic hands—but she *did* trust Hunter, not just with her life, but with every part of her. Her fear, her hesitation, a lifetime’s accumulation of hurt and trauma—he was strong enough to help her overcome it all.

Not just strong enough, but willing.

It was a radical thought. Somehow Hunter didn’t just want her body or her talents, but *every* part of her. The good and the

bad. The strong and the weak.

Just as she wanted all parts of him.

There was no ‘her’ problem and ‘his’. There were only *their* problems.

And it didn’t apply only to the hard parts of life. Everything could be shared—their joy, their dreams...their future.

All she needed to do was let him in.

Hunter’s touch became firmer as his hands worked their way down to her hips, kneading the flesh with his thumbs. Gently, he began to grind her against him.

“Look at what you do to me,” he said raggedly, dragging her hot, wet opening slowly along his cock, making sure she felt every inch of his hardness. “Feel what I do to you, how you ache for me.”

A tremor of pleasure shuddered through Courtney, like the warning of an earthquake to come. Hunter’s response was almost savage, kissing her shoulder, nipping and biting. He dragged his rough stubble over her skin and down to her breasts. Without warning, he drew a nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it.

Courtney cried out, overcome with another shudder. Hunter was unrelenting, rolling her hard pebble between his lips and teeth, driving the hard, pulsing rhythm of her desire higher.

Abruptly, he pulled away.

Slipping the fingers of one hand between her legs and growling approvingly, he drenched himself in her slick. His other hand raked through her hair. Pulling it back, he forced her to look at him.

“I know you’ve been hurt, my love, but I’m not the one who hurt you, and I never will be. I’m the man who will protect you with my life. Who will always be at your side.”

Tears spilled from Courtney’s eyes, landing on Hunter’s chest. No one had ever spoken to her this way. She had given

up hoping long ago. But *this*—the honesty in his eyes was real. The strong arms holding her were real.

The nearly unbearable need for Hunter—to be joined with him, claimed by him, fucked by him—was as real as the sky above or the ground below.

Hunter pulled her down so that his face filled her vision. There was no escape from the laser-like intensity of his gaze.

“I’m your alpha,” he said, “and you’re my woman.”

Hunter was right—he was the opposite of her brothers and father, of anyone who had looked at her and seen a challenge, an object of scorn, an enemy of the state. Those who were meant to protect her had failed. Those meant to defend her rights had betrayed her.

But Hunter would never hurt her. As long as Courtney lived, he’d never let her down.

“Hunter, I—” But whatever she’d been about to say was ripped from her lips by his searing kiss.

Instantly, Courtney was caught up in the current of need rushing around her and dragged into the undertow.

Hunter grabbed her hips again, and, in one powerful thrust, he pulled her down on top of him. Ecstasy drenched her like a gilded waterfall as he entered her. Courtney moved with the tide, writhing, taking him deeper, needing him inside her, needing all of him.

She cried out as the turbulent waters rose around her, shimmering walls forming a cave in which all that existed was the two of them, bound together, suspended in time and destiny.

And then she exploded. The waters crashed down, and Courtney was tossed into the chaos of unimaginable ecstasy. Pleasure, joy, and rightness churned around and through her. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her.

After a final powerful thrust, Hunter held her tightly against him and his roar broke through her fog of pleasure.

Slick gushed from her as his cock swelled and they came together. Hunter's seed jetted hot and hard until Courtney was filled completely. Until there was no him or her, only the union of their bodies.

She came down slowly, like a lazy whirlpool fading to a trickle, the aftershocks of her pleasure a steady, gentle rain. Collapsing against Hunter's chest, Courtney reveled in his warmth and strength...until she felt something shift inside her.

It seemed Hunter wasn't done yet.

Instead of softening, his cock swelled at its base, rapidly growing inside her, stretching her, filling her almost to bursting.

He roared again, so loud that the walls shook around them. "Mine!" he bellowed as his knot bound them forever.

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**T**he hours Hunter spent in bed with Courtney had been transcendent, beyond anything he'd dared to hope for after the alphas escaped from the Basement. In the years he'd been imprisoned there, Hunter believed that some essential part of him had died, the part that could experience joy and peace, the part that connected him to every other human on the planet.

The months he'd spent living in the Ozark Boundaryland had gone a long way to scouring that poison of hatred out of him. But it wasn't until the day he'd first seen Courtney climbing out of her matte-black truck that he'd actually regained an ounce of hope.

He'd had to wait to catch a glimpse of the gold-flecked amber eyes beneath her sunglasses, but it had been worth it. Even that first day, Hunter had felt drawn to the tall, confident, beautiful woman with the thick plait of sun-streaked light brown hair and curves that even her camouflage pants and flak jacket couldn't conceal.

Hunter thought about her constantly in the days that followed. He dreamed of her at night. But as the weeks turned to months, and he didn't sense any sexual interest from her, he worked to keep his fantasies under control.

It was fairly easy at first. Hunter had trained himself to resist all kinds of pointless longing during his Basement years to survive the torture, inedible rations, and lack of basic human comforts. But as time went on, it became increasingly difficult to see Courtney drive away.

The first time they'd made love, Hunter knew there would never be another woman for him. He knew it the way he knew the contours of his land. But it wasn't until yesterday, when Courtney finally gave herself to him completely, that he finally truly believed they belonged to each other.

It had been the finest moment of his life.

The moment when Courtney let go of the last of her fears, Hunter sensed it in every possible way—the shift in her scent, the fervor of her touch, the hunger in her kiss. And, of course, the way she screamed his name.

Knotting her had been everything he'd ever dreamed about and more—a pleasure so consuming and exquisite that it felt as though his very soul had been changed forever.

But it wasn't just the sex. His erotic fantasies about Courtney may have consumed him for countless sleepless nights, but now it was the little things that solidified and deepened their bond. Things that brought a smile to his face and returned his ability to feel joy.

It was the way she'd melted into the crook of his arm with a contented sigh when his knot had faded, as if she'd been molded just for him. It was the easy conversation when they finally rose many hours later. The meal they'd thrown together, grilled sausage from the smokehouse and a salad of early lettuces—the most delicious he'd ever eaten, his sudden ravenous hunger just more proof that Courtney had brought him back to life.

The fact that they ate naked under a woolen throw in front of his fireplace might have had something to do with it. Long after the last morsel was gone, they traded stories of their lives.

Courtney didn't share everything—Hunter could sense when a memory was too painful and her mind shut it down before she could speak it out loud—but he didn't mind. Now that she'd started opening up to him, he was confident that her comfort with him would continue to grow until, in time, they'd share everything there was to know about each other.

Night had fallen again, and they were back in bed, their bodies entwined, when Courtney shifted in her sleep with a little whimper. The next thing Hunter knew, she began rubbing herself against him. The scent of her slick filled the room.

It was different now—deeper and more intense, layered with every new emotion she allowed herself to feel—and nothing could have turned Hunter on more. His cock was as hard as iron when she mumbled his name in her sleep, and he knew that, even in her dreams, she was begging for him.

His woman—his omega—was going into heat.

Hunter's joy approached euphoria, seizing both mind and body with the need to be inside her, to give her his essence, to take her over and over again, sealing their bond forever. The fact that this was happening only hours after Courtney let down the last of her defenses proved it: they'd been meant for each other from the start, steadily putting down invisible roots so, when the time came, she could burst into glorious bloom.

Knowing that Courtney was in heat did something to his own desire, multiplying it until each second was agony until he could be back where he belonged—back inside her.

She wrapped her legs about him, so it took almost no effort to seize her hips and enter her slick-drenched opening in one fevered thrust. Immediately, Courtney began to come.

Her eyes glazed over, her lips soundlessly making the shape of his name as the last tattered shreds of her beta nature fell away. And Hunter felt his own animal nature taking over,

too, so when—only moments after Courtney—he began to come, his triumphant roar was one of almost feral satisfaction. And even as his knot swelled within her, their need was already building again.

They couldn't get enough. Hunter knew he'd never be satisfied, not even if he made love to Courtney for eternity.

In the end, it wasn't an eternity but rather four blurred-together days of lust and pleasure.

Hunter barely noticed the sun rising in the sky and sinking again at night. He could barely tear himself away long enough to get something for them to eat. For four days, Hunter took his omega in every imaginable position, drinking in the emotions emanating unfiltered from within her, expressing his unfettered bliss with every touch and kiss.

When, finally, Courtney faded into unconsciousness on the fourth day, her arms still wrapped around him and her hips still bucking weakly, Hunter knew it would never be enough, no matter how many times they made love. He held her in his arms and knew he would never be alone again.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## ONE MONTH LATER

**B**y the time Destinee, an omega who'd recently arrived at the boundaryland with her mate, arrived for her shift, Courtney was exhausted from eight hours of monitoring beta military communications.

After years of fieldwork, it still felt ridiculous to be tired after sitting at a desk all day. But this fatigue was different from that which followed an all-night supply run. This was emotional exhaustion brought on by hours and hours of non-stop concentration.

Either way, Courtney couldn't wait to get back home and spend a quiet evening with Hunter.

Well...maybe *quiet* wasn't the best word to describe their nights together. Ever since her heat, most days still ended with hours of lovemaking. Amazingly, even four solid days of non-stop sex had done nothing to dampen their hunger for each other.

"I brought you a little treat," Destinee said, setting a napkin-draped basket in front of Courtney before draping her sweater over her chair and picking up her headset.

Courtney lifted a corner of the napkin and inhaled deeply. "Oh my God, is that lemon shortbread?"

Destinee shrugged. "Just a little something I whipped up."

Destinee's first child was due in the fall, and she had been baking up a storm because, she claimed, expecting an alpha's pup meant eating for three or four.

Courtney closed her eyes in rapture as she took a bite.

"Please, please tell me you won't stop once the baby arrives. You're the best baker I've ever known."

"Thank you," Destinee responded with a pretty blush before moving on to more serious business. "Anything interesting coming over the wire today?"

“Nah,” Courtney answered. “It’s been pretty quiet. There was a little excitement over a stray weather balloon someone mistook for a drone...but that’s about it.”

“It’s getting downright boring around here,” Gabby chimed in, emerging from the plywood ‘cubicle’ she’d built for herself in the corner of the ops center. A former publicist, Gabby spent her days coordinating the many volunteer groups helping to spread the alphas’ information campaign to combat the endless stream of government propaganda. “No one’s been arrested in weeks.”

In the month since the coordinated attack, the beta military had struggled to regroup. Several senior officers had died in battle, in addition to scores of infantry, but it was the loss of the equipment and ammunition that had been massed at the boundarylands that dealt the biggest blow. Now alphas around the globe were destroying the production facilities that made the tanks, weapons, and communications technology the government relied on.

And that wasn’t the only good news. The tide of public opinion was turning—fast. Dozens of celebrities had come out in favor of alpha rights, and businesses were pulling out of states whose governors had introduced anti-alpha legislation. Self-declared sanctuary cities welcomed deserters from the army, many of whom were shocked to discover that the ‘enemy alphas’ were just fellow human beings.

Letters of support poured into the boundaryland every day, delivered by volunteers to the same spot where Courtney had first met Hunter.

Change was happening faster than any of them had dared to hope—and yet there was still a long way to go.

For every ally, there seemed to be a truth-denying zealot. For every emboldened marginalized group offering to join forces, a new hate group seemed to spring up.

Still, with public sentiment radically changed, many of the programs and rights that had been stripped in the past decade were starting to return.

“There was a news report today that they’ll be letting women back in the military,” Gabby said.

“I saw that,” Destinee said with a smile. “Did you see that the president is calling for a suspension of the Supreme Court docket until the new justices are confirmed?”

Courtney took her time gathering her things and pulling on her windbreaker, enjoying the optimistic chatter that had replaced the early days of fear and dread.

Every day, more people added their voices to decry the war. Targets of the beta government who had once been too afraid to act were demanding the return of their rights, giving their time and talents to force change at all levels of society.

Things weren’t perfect—and Courtney suspected that they probably never would be—but for the first time in a very long time, there was a sense of optimism and hope in the air.

As for the country’s alpha population, some individuals and families had moved outside the former borders established by the defunct treaties. Some returned to the towns they’d left as teens. Others—like Wyatt, for instance, who’d taken a lecturer position at Mizzou—decided to pursue dreams they once thought were out of reach.

Troops of unmated alphas crossed the country, destroying holdout military bases one by one. There was even a group headed to the capital to meet with the leaders who were still in power, the ones who saw what the future held and expressed a willingness to engage in negotiations.

Just as importantly, change was rippling through the entire world, inspired by the events of what had been dubbed the Alpha Uprising. Together the citizens of dozens of nations were demanding a world where all three natures lived together in peace—and working together to make it happen.

It amused Courtney to think of her dad and brothers out there somewhere, shaken to the core by the knowledge that she’d been a part of this. It had to be killing them that despite all of their efforts to diminish her, she was thriving and stronger than ever.

“Your ride’s here, Courtney,” Destinee teased in her singsong drawl, and all eyes turned to see Hunter striding into the room with eyes only for her.

Courtney laughed with pure joy as he took her into his arms, swinging her in a circle before setting her down and kissing her. When she finally pulled back, Courtney caught a glimpse of the faint scar on his shoulder from her claiming bite just beneath his disheveled shirt.

It had happened the day Courtney emerged from her first heat, and deep in her soul she knew it was the best decision she’d ever make.

“You newlyweds are so tiresome,” Gabby said with a grin. “Go on, get outta here.”

“See you back here tomorrow,” Destinee said. “Better get some sleep.”

“She won’t be back tomorrow,” Hunter corrected. “She won’t be back for four days.”

Courtney could feel herself blushing. It was hard to believe that an entire month had passed since her first heat.

“More like five, with recovery time,” Gabby pointed out.

“Or maybe even six,” Courtney said, deciding to play along, “if I really want to be pampered.”

“Pampering, huh?” Hunter said, taking her hand.

“Got a problem with that, mister?” Courtney asked coyly, looking forward to Hunter discovering the scandalous lingerie she’d secretly worn under her gear today.

“Nope. No problem at all. Anything you want, all you gotta do is ask.”

“Anything...?”

“Absolutely anything.” Hunter picked her up and carried a breathless Courtney out of the room. “As far as I’m concerned, we have all the time in the world.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ever since she was little, Callie Rhodes' imagination has been landing her in trouble. From daydreaming about far off worlds in class, to escaping into the made up stories of her mind in the meeting room, she's been creating tales to take her away from the real world for as long as she can remember. Now she lives among the tall trees of Northern California, and has found a way to make a living off her fantasies.

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