

CREA REITAN

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR



# Knot

## *Interested*

Knotty & Sweet Omegaverse



# KNOT INTERESTED

KNOTTY & SWEET OMEGERVERSE

# CREA REITAN

# DRAGON FIRE FANTASY

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Knot Interested

Knotty & Sweet Omegaverse

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This is an omegaverse *fictional* novel. Yes, you read that right. This is a work of fiction. That being said, I am the god of his world. My rules are what goes for my omegaverse. If you're looking for something hard and fast, ordinary, and with ABO dynamics, you can look elsewhere. Nothing I write will ever stay on trend as "normal" and expected. That doesn't make this story any less an omegaverse than others you've read. My rules are just different. There are dark corners, prejudices, stereotypes, cruelty, bigotry, and every other bit of ugliness that you will find in our world in my omegaverse world that are explored as the series expands. They may look different but the emotional, physical, and mental effects on characters are the same. Although this is a sweet omegaverse, there is trauma and ugliness that drive these stories of healing and power.

There are alphas, betas, and omegas in this world (and some others that will be introduced later). There is growling, whining, knotting, barking, biting/mating, and packs. This is NOT a paranormal romance. It is an alternate reality romance, meaning that aside from the animalistic biology, there is nothing paranormal about this world. No magic. No shifting. No demons, monsters, or pixies. These are humans with animal biology.

What you will find in this book is very large penises that sport knots from the alphas. You will find the "magic" of a mating bond that only an alpha can produce. You will find pheromones and perfumes by all designations, some more potent than others depending on designation. There is a bit of a hierarchical social structure as well as biases, designation-oriented jealousies, mistreatment based on designation, stereotypes based on designation, etc. You will not find slick because I hate the word and the concept is gross to me. Not sorry.

Alphas are the stronger designation - the leaders, the powerful, the only designation able to create a mate bond. They are few, less than 20% of the population. Their hunger is for an omega and a pack and often couldn't care less about betas.



Omeegas are the heart - soft, rare, extraordinary. They are not weak' their strength is different. Their need is for a pack to be kept safe from the darkness that dwells in the world and to get them through a heat with satisfaction. Omeegas make up 3% of the population.

Betas are the ordinary. The plentiful. The unwanted. They crave a true pack (which can only be accomplished with the mating bond of an alpha) but rarely get one because they're not important to an alpha, unable to provide them with the heart they seek from an omega. This is the world they are raised in and therefore tend to become jaded and nasty towards omegas from a young age out of jealousy while simultaneously chasing alphas like it's a sport.

This is Katiya's story. She is a beta and will remain a beta throughout her life. She comes from an abusive past where betas and omegas are basically kept within a city culture where they're nothing more than playthings, something to be owned and bred. There are memories of past abuse throughout this story, to Katiya and an alpha from different circumstances. These experiences caused lasting trauma that both deal with in their own ways.

Although this isn't paranormal any more than our world can be considered paranormal, there is the presence of a ghost in this story. A ghost like the spirits you might encounter in some of the most haunted places around our world. She has a story to tell and has finally found someone to listen to it. There is a bit of a mystery in this book that is begging to be solved. With this mystery comes drugs, immense fear, and blood. Are you ready to guess who's behind it?

This is a polyamoros romance, a whychoose reverse harem that isn't revolving around a single female who gets all the males' attention. There are other relationships that are just as important as those between the men and the single female.

If anything that you just read bothers you, it isn't what you're interested in, or you find might be triggering, please do not read this book. Otherwise, enjoy Katiya's story of growth from fear and accepting that a pack doesn't mean oppression and abuse! Nor does it make you a breeder.

# BOOKS BY CREA REITAN

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### Immortal Stream: Children of the Gods

*Mortal Souls*

*The God of Perfect Radiance*

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*Unsolicited*

*Stroking Pride*

*Terror* (2023)

*A Tale of Steam & Cinders* (2023)

# CHAPTER ONE

# KATIYA



I was closing in on the 2,000<sup>th</sup> mile and once again, I looked in my rearview mirror. My fingers were still shaking as I watched everything around me. Every car. Every face. I was pretty sure that if someone had followed me, they'd have already caught up. I'd already be in the backseat of an alpha's minion's car as they hauled me home. Or tied up in their trunk, depending on how they were feeling.

"Not home," I reminded myself. That could never be home. In a city full of ruthless alpha packs who made a hobby out of creating menagerie packs and 'gifting them' to their friends for whatever advantage they could buy, that could never be home.

And yet, leaving the city of Chaingate was unheard of. Not because anyone who was less than an alpha wanted to stay, but because the alphas made it impossible. As the name of the city suggests, there are gates that surround the city.

"I'm out," I reminded myself. My voice was the only sound in the car. I was alone. So why was I talking in just barely over a whisper, afraid of being overheard?

Lifelong habits die hard.

I was a lucky one. I have to think that they let me leave. After all, I was in my mid-twenties and had gone unnoticed through all their inspections. I was unwanted. Therefore, I was lucky enough to have been allowed to leave.

Yes, I was going with that.

Was it difficult leaving everyone I knew behind? A little. But in a city like Chaingate, every beta knows that you have to look out for yourself. Alphas rule the city. In a world with very few omegas, in that place, alphas have learned how to create packs that make them feel good.

If it was bad for a beta, it was worse for an omega. They were taken in infancy and given to one of the alpha packs to raise and eventually mate.

Sure, there hasn't been a record of an omega abduction in Chaingate. But that's because they had already been stolen and sold.

Okay, okay. Focus on the road. My horror story was over. I was driving into a new life. A life of choice and freedom.

And one free of alphas.

The town of Howling Cove is a hot tourist destination on the East Coast. With the temperature always pleasant and warm with relatively little humidity, it's an exotic, happy destination. I've done my research. There are a couple of alpha packs in the town, but not many. And from everything I've read, they leave the city alone. They leave the betas alone.

But the real telling information is the kind of crime that takes place. Aside from the minute teenage misdemeanors and a few traffic violations, there wasn't much reported. No violence to speak of. No true divide between the designations that are there, seemingly living happily side by side. No omega abductions. No alpha taxes.

With a population of 11,000, most of which are betas that live in Howling Cove year-round, I should be able to blend in as if I was just another face that has lived there my entire life. Right? Based on my research, this was one of the most promising places. Small without being tiny. And with the hundreds of thousands of tourists who come to see the cove every year, I would go completely unnoticed.

The house I pulled up to looked like a large, old colonial-style house. There were wings and floors that were clearly added on at a later time, made to look old. It was two stories

with gable dormers, three on each side. There were two big stone chimneys and in the middle was a tall widow's peak.

The house was white with black shutters. There were two columns on each side of the small front porch that led to the tall, black front door.

I pulled up next to a blue SUV and a man standing against it on his phone. As soon as I pulled up next to him, he smiled and pocketed it as if he wasn't really talking to anyone. Maybe they were on speaker in his pocket.

The paranoid part of me said that he was talking to one of the alpha packs. An informant who was here to let the alphas be here without having to be here.

But I shook that thought away. These weren't the same alphas. Not all alphas were that way. At least that's what I read. And I chose to believe it.

"Hello. Miss Chapel?"

I nodded, accepting his outstretched hand, thankful when it was the muted scent of thyme that met my nose. Beta. "Yes. Mr. Olison?"

"Hugo, please. How was your drive?"

"Long but uneventful. I found plenty of beta hotels along the way, just as you suggested."

Hugo smiled. "Good to hear. I'm so pleased you made it without hassle. Would you like help with your luggage?"

I shook my head. There were two suitcases and three boxes. A backpack, duffle bag, and some bedding. Otherwise, I walked away from everything with a purse filled with all the cash my parents could come up with. "I'm anxious to see this beautiful house. I can take my stuff in later."

"Great," Hugo said. "I love this house. It's been in my family for generations."

"Really?" I asked. "Why are you moving out?"

He chuckled. "My wife decided that she wanted something new. I can't bring myself to sell it so I hope that our kids will

want it one day. I'd really love to keep it in the family. That's why I've been so particular in vetting all the applicants."

"I'm very thankful that you chose me."

Hugo smiled. "Based on our conversations, I knew you'd be just right for this house." He looked up at it with a fond smile. "I grew up here. My parents adored it and treated it like a child in and of itself."

I smiled at his memory. After a minute in which he seemed to be lost in thought, he turned back to me and waved me forward. "Come on, then."

"Where are your parents now?" I asked as he led me up the front steps.

"Retired in the south." He chuckled. "Too many tourists here for them. Having lived their entire lives catering to vacationers, they wanted to get out and away."

He opened the door and I was let into a large, spacious foyer. To the left was an open room library, complete with walls filled with shelves of books. Some behind glass. There was a chair in there. The big, cushy kind that you could just get lost in. Next to the door was an amazing staircase that headed to the second floor, the wood in the railing remarkably detailed with carvings.

On the opposite side was a dining room. In the center was a thick oval table, and surrounded by eight chairs. On the far wall was a china cabinet, complete with fantastic old china.

"I'm relieved that you were okay with the house being fully furnished," Hugo said. "I can't even imagine where I'd store all this."

I ran my fingers over the smooth surface of a banquette in the foyer. "It's stunning. And I have no furniture, so this is actually really convenient."

"Okay, so, this is the library and the formal dining room." He gestured to each side before moving forward. "Closet on the left and half bath through this door." Hugo pushed it open and I was smiling at how even the bathroom was remarkable.



We walked into what was clearly the family room and then to the right was an enormous kitchen. At the back of the house was a breakfast area. There was a mudroom that led into a small hall with two closets, a door to the back and one to the garage, and then another set of stairs to the second floor.

“Obviously these two spaces on the side were additions. They were added in the early 1900s and the master bedroom suite was brought to the main floor,” Hugo explained. “Each addition shifted the floor plan, but they still kept the original features and details as much as they could.”

“The preservation of character is remarkable,” I said. It was everywhere. There was not so much as a corner that was forgotten.

Hugo led me through the master suite before we circled back through the library and into the foyer to reach the front stairs to the second floor. There were three more bedrooms, a large rec room over the garage, and a storage space over the master suite.

“And perhaps one of the most breathtaking features—the widow’s walk.” Hugo led me to the little door that opened to a spiral staircase. We climbed it and I soon found myself in a very small room high above the ground with a 360 degree view of Howling Cove.

“This is—” I truly had no words. Breathtaking didn’t even cover it. And yet, I wasn’t sure I was breathing as I took in the water beyond. And behind me was the town with its four small highrises and quaint shops.

“I’ll take you to the backyard,” Hugo said after a few minutes, and turned to head down the stairs. I had to wonder why he’d chosen me when I would never make as much money to pay in rent what the view alone was worth.

I followed him down and through the back doors in the family room that led to a porch. Beyond, he led me to the edge of the cliff where I found stairs carved into the stone, a railing at the edge the only thing to hang on to.

“This is one of only three properties that has private access to the cove,” Hugo explained. “One being the old stone meetinghouse that’s almost in ruins at the other side of the cove, which you’ll probably enjoy checking out. Another is still inhabited by a family. Not an ancestral home anymore, sadly.”

I peered down the stairs, excited to check it out. But Hugo turned to me. “I’m not putting the stairs off limits, but please be mindful. They’re incredibly slippery when wet because they’re stone. It’s a big liability allowing them to be used, but I didn’t want to put tape on them. It’s too tacky.”

“I’ll be careful,” I assured him.

Hugo smiled. “Good. And lastly, this way.”

Once more I followed him and he took me to the side of the yard, through the gate. “If you follow this trail, it’ll dump you straight into the parking lot of the souvenir shop you said you were working at.” He looked at me. “That’s still your plan?”

“Yes. I start in two days.”

He smiled. “It’s a great shop. Does a lot of business because of the location. The alphas who own it are really great to their employees too.”

It took a lot to keep my smile. I didn’t want anything to do with alphas.

“It’s only a mile walk this way, but if you choose to drive, it’s about three minutes.”

“I imagine I’ll be walking most often. With the view, I can’t imagine missing it just to get there sooner.”

Honestly, I couldn’t fathom why his wife didn’t want to live here. Where could his house possibly be that has views anywhere near as impressive as this? I bet both sunset and sunrise were stunning.

“I agree.” He turned to me, clasping his hands. “Is there anything else? Anything you need to know or would like help with?”

I shook my head. “No, I think you covered it all.”

Hugo nodded and handed me the keys. “I have another set, but will call you with plenty of advance notice if I need to get into the house for any reason. Are you sure you don’t want any help with your luggage?”

“I’ve got it, but thank you.”

He nodded again, and we walked back toward the house. “Then I’ll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything.”

I watched him back out of the drive before he drove down the road.

This was it. I was really alone. I’d done it. I’d left that place behind.

Shivering, I turned to look at the house. Narrowing my eyes, I swear there was someone somewhere watching me. But on the outskirts of Howling Cove, there wasn’t a house nearby that I could see from the ground. There were enough trees that they concealed my neighbors on three sides.

There was no one there. It was my nerves. I’d managed to move! I had my own place. And I was about to begin my new life.

No, I had already begun that life.

Taking a deep breath, I went to the car and opened the trunk. I pulled out both suitcases and set them on the ground before swinging the duffle bag over my shoulder. I began the arduous task of bringing my things inside and to my new bedroom.

I could definitely understand why he might not want to sleep in his parents’ room. They weren’t even my parents, and I was glad I brought my own bedding. It made the idea of sleeping in hotel rooms very disturbing.

Nope. Not going to think about that.

I didn’t unpack, instead heading back to the widow’s walk. It was late enough in the evening that I thought the sun would begin setting soon. It was already on its way down and I

wanted to see it set over the water. I wanted to study the cove and all it had to offer.

The windows opened sideways, and I pushed out one of the sashes. The air coming off the ocean was warm and salty, fluttering through the small space as if it were seeking out all the little nooks and crannies. Making itself at home. Bringing with it a new life.

My new life.

I smiled, remaining there for hours as I watched the sun go down and the stars shine.

# CHAPTER TWO

# KATIYA



The house was filled with windows. In the morning, the sun made the entire place glow. It was stunning.

It didn't take me long to truly confirm that this was far too much house for one person. And yet, Hugo had dropped the rent for me so that it was affordable on my single measly salary. The only explanation was that he didn't need the money, but he didn't want the house sitting unoccupied. For what I was paying, I should be living in a cardboard box.

I spent the morning systematically exploring the house with a mug of hot cocoa in my hands. Examining each room, admiring every ornate detail, and staring in awe at the view through each window.

This was almost too good to be true. Not just the freedom this house represented, but also the mere fact that I was here. I'd actually done it. I'd escaped Chaingate. This was my life.

Cocoa powder and flour were basically the only items in the house. That meant shopping was in order. It was the very first thing I needed to do once I'd taken my first solitary tour of my new home.

On my way to take a shower, I paused on the threshold to my bedroom suite. Chills raced down my spine. All the little hairs on my body stood on end. A trickle of fear moved through me.

I wasn't alone.

My breaths puffed out in quick, shallow beats as I waited for the footsteps. The growl. The bark. The demand that I—

*It's just Hugo, I reasoned. He forgot to tell me something. Maybe there was somewhere off limits. Every old place had a location that was forbidden.*

Or maybe he'd brought me something? It might be a neighbor, perhaps with a housewarming gift.

*It could be the town's alphas, a quiet voice whispered in the back of my mind. The alphas are here to sample the new beta.*

"No," I insisted out loud. My own voice startled me, and I jumped before laughing at myself. Ridiculous.

With my hand on the doorframe, I braced myself with a deep breath and turned around.

There was no one there. Nothing moved. Not even the curtains hanging loose on the windows. It was a moment of lull from the constant breeze. There was nothing here at all. Just me.

The feeling passed.

This was my first experience of being on my own. Of course, I was going to jump at every unknown sound. And this was an old house. It was filled with new noises. Another handful of steadying breaths and a whole lot of internal encouragement later, I turned my back on the room and moved into the suite, heading for the bathroom.

Although it was modern and built for luxury, the design was still in the colonial style. Simplistic in furnishings, detailed in design choices, and beautiful.

Still slightly uneasy, despite pretending I imagined the feeling entirely, I hurried through the shower.

I hadn't brought my phone with me when I ran from my old life. My parents had given me every last penny they could spare on a Visa card and in cash. As soon as I was three states away, I stopped at the local super center and purchased a pay as you go phone. As we'd planned, I sent my father a text, asking my 'husband' to bring home tomatoes. His acknowledgement came back as 'wrong number.' And that was the last contact I've had with my family. But with the

simple exchange, they knew I was alright, that I'd gotten away, and now they had my phone number. That brought the total of people with my phone number to three: my father, Hugo, and my new employer.

Even so, I made sure to bring my phone when I left the house. My father would only ever call me in an emergency now, but that was always a possibility. Our agreement was that I would always send a random message to my 'husband' about picking up produce every time I changed my number. And he would forewarn me when the alphas put a wanted notice out if my absence was ever noted.

Silence would mean that the alphas didn't know and/or didn't care. But we wouldn't tempt them by staying in touch too freely. The alphas had shown me no favor, for which I was grateful. But they also wanted complete control over everyone in their city. So me getting away, even if they didn't want me, would be unacceptable. There have been a lot of horror stories. There was an entire course in high school dedicated to the alphas' expectations and punishments for disobeying them.

With my phone in my pocket and keys in hand, I headed to my car. The house I rented was right on the edge of town, so I hadn't seen Howling Cove except through pictures. With 11,000 people, it was a large enough population that I was confident I could blend in and disappear. I'd go unnoticed. Yet, as I drove through town, people on the streets paused to look. There wasn't any hostility or even that feeling of me not belonging lingering in their expressions. Curiosity, Friendly smiles. One little girl even waved.

My money was limited. I hadn't stayed in many hotels as I drove as far away as I could get. Just enough to shower every few days. I was cautious about what I spent on food, knowing that fuel was not negotiable. And until my first paycheck in two weeks, I had very little money to live on.

I soon found that eating healthy was more expensive than buying junk. It took me a long time to purchase essentials that would take me through a week (hopefully, fingers crossed!). Shopping took up more time than I anticipated. It was nearing eleven by the time I got home. And though \$150 only bought



me four measly bags of groceries, it took me twenty minutes to put them away. With one precious, expensive apple in hand for lunch, I head outside to enjoy my exquisite view.

I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have found a place I could afford on my meager budget with such an amazing view. On this clear day, it looked like I could see for miles.

The cove curved around a paradisiacal inlet of water. There were amazing rock formations that rose taller than the cliffs bordering the cove on the west. The cliffs peaked right where my rented house sat and then gradually declined down to near sea level in either direction.

The rock formations rose in magnificent arches. One was more prominent and there were two smaller ones. But the whole area just made the clear blue waters feel exotic. As if I were in the tropics on an island paradise.

As I walked along the cliff (not too close to the edge), the path that would lead to the souvenir shop caught my attention. I headed in that direction, still admiring the sea. At the head of the path, I could see down to the shop and beyond it, the old stone meetinghouse Hugo had mentioned.

Today was a perfect day to explore!

After returning to the house to grab my phone and keys, I followed the path down the cliff, admiring the peace and beauty of my surroundings. As I got closer to the bottom of the cliff, people exploring the cove and visiting the shop became more and more abundant.

It wasn't the height of tourist season. We were nearing October, so the summer months had passed. Even so, there was a constant stream of visitors coming and going.

Tomorrow I would start my new job, so for today, I bypassed it all and headed beyond the crowds for the path that led to the meetinghouse. I wasn't expecting it to be as big as it was; I suppose perspective does that to you. I also wasn't expecting it to be in clear disuse.

The windows were dark, some boarded up. As I got closer, I saw that the doors were padlocked. There wasn't any caution

tape and yet it felt like there should be. Though it was basically abandoned, it was enchanting. Beautiful. It was like walking through a portal into the past. I didn't think I'd ever seen another building like this. I must have been there for half an hour and not once did another person join me. No one seemed to acknowledge that it was there. Which was crazy because it was almost as enchanting as the cove, especially up close.

Howling Cove was rich with history. The longer I was here alone, the more I was sure that there must be a reason nobody visited the meetinghouse. I was excited to learn about it.



MY FIRST SHIFT began at 9:30 the following morning. The city I left was huge. Hundreds of thousands of people. And yet, there had always been a familiarity everywhere I went. Even not knowing anyone, the oppression that we were all living in meant we all shared the same Hell. In that, we all knew each other.

There was something almost terrifying about walking into a new place where I knew no one. I had to psych myself up to even open the door.

“Come on, Katiya,” I murmured. “I can do this.”

With my worldclass pep talk complete, I forced my hand on the doorknob. I pulled. The door jarred, unmoving, and my hand jerked off it with a snap.

“Ow,” I muttered, shaking my hand. Did I get the day wrong?

I jumped when the door opened a second later. The girl was pretty, with a short, brown bob and big brown eyes to match. “Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you,” she said.

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. I thought I had the day wrong.”

“Katiya? Did I say it correctly?”

I nodded. Kuh-tie-yuh. Easy, but lots of people tried to add sounds that didn’t belong.

“I’m Lana. We spoke over the phone. Come in.” Lana was the manager. She seemed super nice when we spoke. “We keep the door locked until we open at ten or there would be customers in here right away,” Lana told me as I followed her in, locking the door again behind us. There were two others in there. A man with red hair and hazel green eyes. He was super tall but somewhat awkward looking. Maybe because of how he stood. The second person was a woman. She was a petite blonde with gray eyes and a very large bust which she dressed to emphasize.

All three of them were betas. Their muted herbal scents dominated the area over all the drifting foreign ones.

“This is Alec and Megan,” Lana introduced.

The betas waved; Alec awkwardly, Megan with a big smile. I waved back, closer to the awkward side than looking natural. “Hi,” I squeaked, then cleared my throat as my cheeks heated.

Lana moved us on. “There are two others that work here—Daxon and Linus. You’ll meet them over the next couple days. We work in shifts of three, regardless of the season. During heavy tourist months, I over hire; but there are always three of my permanent staff on the clock. We rotate through duties so that everyone remains comfortable no matter what they’re doing and so we can fill in when needed. Keeping up so far?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

Lana smiled. “Good. For today, I’m going to concentrate on getting you familiarized with the register and maintaining the tour schedule. When it’s slow, meander around the store to see what’s here. Once you’re comfortable with the store in general, we’ll look at stock, inventory, and ordering. Eventually, we will have you leading tours. At that, you’ll be

needing this.” Lana handed me a book titled **HOWLING COVE, A HISTORY**. She smiled when I looked back at her. “This job begins with homework. I hope you’re prepared to study.”

“I’m looking forward to learning about the town,” I said. And because I felt a little robotic, I added, “It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.”

“The cove never loses its beauty,” Megan said. “I’ve lived here my entire life. My parents took me all over the world growing up. But Howling Cove is still the most enchanting place I’ve ever been.”

Lana nodded in agreement. “Alright,” she said, clapping her hands together. “We can get to know each other throughout the day. Let’s get the shop ready to open.”

Alec and Megan turned and headed to their various tasks.

“Katiya, look around. Get to know what we stock,” Lana said.

“And if you have any cheeky, catchy ideas for something new, let us know,” Megan said. “We’re always looking for the next big sellers.”

I nodded, turning to the nearest rack where I saw the normal array of destination postcards, capitalizing on the stunning views. I spent a lot of time admiring them, learning the cove from the images captured. The tall rocky cliffs. The idyllic view of the water, the iconic arches. There was a lighthouse nearby that was afforded a few different cards. And one of the meetinghouse that somehow made it look even more ethereal. And then there was one of the house I was staying in. Apparently it was the oldest house in Howling Cove. No wonder Hugo was so proud of it.

There were snow globes, sunglasses, key chains, bottle openers, stickers, shirts, hats, and so many other things. I didn’t think I’d ever remember them all.

This wasn’t just a chintzy little shack, either. It was a spacious trinket shop filled with what had to be hundreds of items.

I glanced at the book Lana had handed me. There was a lot to learn. And I was excited to build this new life.

And I couldn't wait to start living.

# CHAPTER THREE

# KATIYA



I put together a pasta salad with cold cooked sausage, block cheese, diced tomatoes, green onions, cucumbers, black olives, and pasta. I tossed it with a mayonnaise and ranch seasoning mix. It would last me a few days. That's the secret to surviving on a tight budget. Meals that you can stretch.

With a bowl in hand, I took it into the dining room and sat at the table with the book from Lana. After a few bites, I was surprised that my salad turned out edible. Not only that, but it was actually good.

Pleased with my first success in the kitchen, I opened the book.

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*In 1668, the territory that makes up Howling Cove, Dennison's Beach to the north, and three-quarters of Mariot to the south was given to a beta by the name of Ranger Sandview by Pack Lancaster in the old country. With his wife Tilly, they built a sprawling homestead upon the cliffs overlooking the cove.*

*With the Sandviews came three other betas, each building their homes on the shore. They made their livelihoods by fishing, though tended to return to their homes by sundown because of the haunting howls that came from the cove once the sun went down.*

*This settlement was notable, not only because of the size and value of the land gifted to a beta, but it was the first in recorded history of its kind owned by a mock pack. Before the Sandview pack settled the land, it was primarily inhabited by the indigenous packs who traveled through the area. There are carvings and pictographs within the caves of the coves illustrating these illustrious packs and how they used the caves. Though the packs of old frequented the area, they never stayed longer than a season. There has been much speculation and hypothesizing as to why since the land is fertile and the weather temperate year-round. As the Sandview Pack became better known in the area, prospering and gaining wealth, the site has*

*been used as a fantastical background for meetings, negotiations, and treaties for neighboring territories.*

*By the late 1600s, the Sandview territory had grown into a booming village, attracting other mock packs and individual betas seeking a wealthy life of fishing within a strong community.*

*The fishing post expanded into a busy port just south of the cove and became a hot spot for trading merchants coming in from all around the world. The area's notoriety for its beauty and wealth attracted ships from all over, igniting a tourist industry beginning as soon as the early 1720s.*

*Including the shady company of pirates.*

*The pirate that truly put Howling Cove on the map was Alpha Gray Paw. Gray Paw was one of the most ruthless pirates to sail the Eastern Ocean, plundering towns, islands, and sailing vessels all over the world with the blessings of the Old Packs. He was feared as a vicious killer with no mercy who took care of the crew loyal to him as if they were his own pack.*

*In 1753, Alpha Gray Paw made a mistake. He spotted a large ship glittering in gold. Without hesitation, he commanded his crew to a routine plundering. They succeeded, looting a heavily laden ship of its load and killing everyone on board before sinking the ship. It wasn't until he was a day off that one of his crew noted the seal of the Old Packs on most of the chests, and Gray Paw realized he made a grave mistake.*

*Knowing it wouldn't be long before the Old Packs put out a letter for his head, Gray Paw set a course for the new world to scatter his treasure and disappear. He came upon Howling Cove, smitten by its beauty and enchanted by its howls in the night. He sought refuge and resources for himself and his crew. Though most of the village was hesitant to help the feared pirates, Matilda Sandview took in Alpha Gray Paw. Over the next several days, Matilda helped Gray Paw gather everything he needed while providing him with a roof and hot meals while in town.*

*Legend says that in gratitude, Alpha Gray Paw filled one of Matilda's wardrobe chests with gold and jewels before he left.*

*There are also stories that claim his crew hid a great portion of their treasure throughout the cove canes, believing that the haunting howls would discourage others from hunting for it before they had a chance to return and reclaim their treasure.*

*The cove is also known for its mysterious disappearances. From as early as 1683, the cove has claimed lives for its own, the bodies of the explorers never found. The darker side of the cove doesn't detract from its fascination. The cove attracts hundreds of thousands of travelers a year, seeking to bask in the exotic landscape and explore the otherworldly caves.*

*Today, the town of Howling Cove boasts a population of 11,000 year-round residents. At its peak, the town has seen more than a million travelers in a year; all seeking the peaceful, beautiful waters and exploration. The town itself flourishes with boutique shops and bakeries as well as million-dollar corporations. It is a quiet, small*



*town with a close community relationship among its residents. There are fairs and festivals celebrated throughout the year. The cove has also attracted the attention of celebrities who have booked the entire town for their wedding.*

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As soon as I finished the introduction, the curtain moving in the breeze caught my attention. Looking up, I stared at the window while the curtain continued to flutter.

As I experienced yesterday, a chill raced down my spine. The eerie feeling of being watched settled over me. I don't know why I was concentrating on the window. The sun was down. All I could see out the window was darkness.

An uneasy feeling settled over me at that thought. I was here alone.

For a moment I sat there frozen, petrified that someone was outside looking in. Then I stood up so fast my chair fell over. I dashed through the house, closing and securing every damn window I could find. Then double checking that all the doors were locked too.

As I picked my chair up again, I looked around. I was alone.

Of course, I was alone. That had been my goal. To get away. To live my own life without being under the alphas' thumbs.

Releasing a breath, I picked up my bowl and brought it to the kitchen to wash it out. Setting it in the strainer, I wiped my hands on a towel and flicked off the light. I stopped in the dining room long enough to grab the book and headed for my room without looking back.

Nothing here. Just me.

I lay in bed that night to read but found myself laying back and watching the ceiling. It was all hitting me again. I'd made it away; I had a gorgeous place to stay and a job that was going to be a lot of fun.

This was the only thing I ever dreamed about. Getting away. Freedom. But now that I had the start of it, my imagination couldn't help but want for more.

Friends.

Where do you go to find them? How do you make friends? What did you talk about? Friendship was an enigma. Something I wanted. Something magical. To have someone to bond with over the same interests. Shop with.

Gossip with?

That one might be a stretch. I didn't know anyone yet. Gossip would go right over my head.

I supposed things like football games, dances, and slumber parties weren't in my future. I was too old for that now.

But I could still have friends.

*Never make meaningful connections. It's harder to walk away if the opportunity presents itself. And you always take the opportunity.*

There were other things to yearn for now too. A lover. A pack.

*An alpha.*

No. Never an alpha. I don't want that kind of controlled life. Even knowing I could never truly have a pack without one. All of my life, I hungered for one thing. The freedom I never thought I'd live to see. I was sure I'd forever be trapped in the alphas' city like so many others before and after me. But I made it out. I managed to realize that dream.

Apparently, that freed up a lot in me. Now I had the capacity to feel the wants of other things. And I supposed that was a pack. It would have to be what society referred as a mock pack—a group of betas living together as a pack. It couldn't be considered a 'real' pack without an alpha's bite. No bonds equate to no recognizable pack by society.

Which was fine with me. I didn't want an alpha. But I did want a pack. Though, if I didn't know how to make a friend, how was I going to find a pack?



I AWOKE with my heart in my throat when my phone alarm went off the next morning. It was day two of my first three days at the souvenir shop. I'd be working with Alec and Linus today.

Alec was quiet. Nice and I supposed good-looking. Because I was scrunching my nose at the thought, I assumed that meant I wasn't actually interested in him.

Chuckling to myself, I threw the peelings of my orange in the trash as I walked out of the house and toward the path.

Something made me pause, and I turned back to the house from the head of the trail. For just a second, I thought I saw a person in the second-floor window. My heart raced. But then I blinked, and the vision was gone.

Just my imagination. It's an old house. With a lot of old furniture. Power of suggestion since I felt watched last night; it had to be.

I shook my head and carried on. No time for that. It was just a residual feeling from the many awful experiences while growing up. It had only been less than two weeks since I'd been out from under the oppressive, controlling strangle of the alphas. But that was the past. My old life. No more alphas. I wasn't being watched anymore. There was no one in that window.

Alec must have seen me coming. He was at the door, holding it open as he waited for me to reach the shop. "Good morning," I greeted.

He gave me the same slightly awkward smile he had yesterday. "Hi, Katiya." He shut the door behind us and flipped the lock. "Lana will be here later. She said to continue to get comfortable with the register and tour schedule. When

it's slow, you can explore the store some more. I'm on inventory and sticking with you. Linus will be conducting tours today."

I looked around, assuming that I missed the third person.

Alec grinned. "Linus has never been on time since the day he started. He's at least three minutes late on a good day."

I nodded and headed to the register. It was basically a computer screen attached to a card reader, and it triggered the cash drawer to open when we chose that tender. "Do you remember how to turn it on?" he asked. I hesitated a moment before taking a step closer to look at it. The power button was obvious, so I hit it and we waited for the home screen.

There was only one shortcut on the screen, so I tapped it. The program kicked up, and we waited for it to open. A minute later, a box popped into the middle of the screen, asking for the password.

"We don't have it written anywhere for security purposes," Alec said. "You'll have to memorize it over time." He recited it to me, and I typed it in.

As I hit enter and the software loaded, the door opened. I looked up and paused.

Alec was tall for a beta. Somewhat lanky. Though not unattractive, he wasn't particularly appealing to me.

But this man who I assumed had to be Linus was pretty. He was the typical average height for a male beta. Surfer blonde hair with warm brown eyes. He filled out his clothing in a way that showed how important working out was to him.

His smile was big and getting bigger as he got closer. A wide, beautiful smile. "Hey," he greeted, slapping Alec on the shoulder as he came to a stop at the register, his gaze never leaving mine.

"This is Linus," Alec said. "Our new employee, Katiya."

"Lovely name," Linus said, offering me his hand. I flushed, placing my hand in his.

His grip was firm, warm. He held it longer than was probably necessary. The subtle scent of basil and warm oil brushed my nose. Beta.

Alec slapped him on the arm, a light gesture as he rolled his eyes. “Come on. You can hit on her later. We have to get the shop open.” Linus squeezed my hand before letting it go. He flashed me another smile, turning to move around the counter.

I watched as he unplugged the tablet and opened it. We used that to track the tours. I could schedule them through the register, but the guide of the day used the tablet to check people in.

Since the register was ready and Alec was working on the till, I moved into the store to wander through the aisles, checking out the merchandise.

Hoodies. T-shirts, both short and long-sleeved. Zip-ups, fleeces, sweats, leggings, bathing suits. There was basically an entire corner dedicated to clothing, all with various graphic images and designs advertising Howling Cove.

“Ready, Katiya?” Alec called.

I nodded, returning to the front. He waited until I was behind the counter before opening the door. Already, there were people waiting outside since the first tour began in 15 minutes. Linus winked at me before heading outside, as Alec propped the door open.

“Good morning and welcome to Howling Cove,” Linus said in a big voice. I watched from my vantage point as he checked people in.

Alec joined me. “Between him and Megan, the rest of us are pretty lame at giving tours. He’s just got that larger-than-life personality and can make a rock blush with his flirting skills.”

I grinned, leaning on the counter to listen. He really did have that perfect personality to engage people. I was far too shy to match that energy.

A man came in and I froze. Alec greeted him as I stared rudely. Fortunately, neither seemed to notice before I got myself together. No loud pheromones; not an alpha. Taking a breath, I took a step back. I could not react like that every time someone walked in. That was unacceptable.

Linus dropped the tablet back inside, giving me a flirty smile, and returned to the waiting group. “Alright. As you know, this is Howling Cove. Founded in 1731 as a town, it was settled far before by a beta named—can anyone tell me?”

Maybe I needed to take a tour with Linus. It sounded like he could breathe life into the history I was just getting into.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# KATIYA



It didn't take me long to get into the lore of Howling Cove. It was fascinating how much history there was around this small town. There was something from nearly every period in antiquity covered in this one spot.

Just over a week in this big house and I was finally getting used to all the sounds. The feeling of being watched never truly left; but no matter how many times I looked in all the shadows and behind every door, there was no one there. I reasoned that it was an old house.

That reasoning came to an end when I walked into the family room one morning to find a woman sitting on the couch. Unsurprisingly, I screamed. And then she screamed. It was probably a good thing that I didn't have any close neighbors. Someone would have thought we were being murdered.

Speaking of being murdered, this woman who hadn't initially been covered in blood, was now saturated with it. The top of her dress was sopping. It dripped down her neck, over her hands, from the corner of her mouth.

Naturally, I screamed again.

"What?!" she said, voice shrill, as she turned to see what I was screaming at. When she turned around again, the blood was gone.

My heart raced. What the hell was this?

What it was, was a ghost. Her image faded as my fear settled around me. I could see through her completely with just



the suggestion of her shape for a solid three seconds. And then she was there, still transparent but more vivid.

A ghost. I was seeing a damned ghost. Nothing could have prepared me for that. They're simply not real.

"Is there something there?" she asked, her brows knit together as she looked over her shoulder again. Concern. Fear.

A waft of roses and sugar filled the air for just a second. Sweet and consuming. And then it faded as if it had never been there. No lingering scent.

But I knew what that meant—omega.

Since it was only me and this ghost, and I wasn't some surprise omega wearing a beta skin, I assumed that meant the ghost was an omega when she was alive.

"Who are you?" I asked, moving my back against the wall without realizing.

"Octavia," she answered, taking a tentative step near me. "And you live here now?"

I nodded.

"You're new to town, right?"

I nodded again.

"Are you afraid of me?" she asked, a smile touching her perfectly shaped lips. She was small, petite. Thin, but with curves. Her face was beautiful and from what I could tell of her hair, though that seemed to fade into nothing, it was silky, with curls that I was completely jealous of.

The perfect omega. The kind that would make an alpha purr.

A shiver raced over me. Hopefully, as a ghost, she wouldn't be attracting that kind of attention. I didn't want any alphas showing up on my door for a phantom perfume.

"First time seeing a ghost," I said.

Her smile faded. She looked so sad that I almost wanted to comfort her. I frowned, not appreciating that I was reacting

to the omega. The *dead* omega.

“You’ve been watching me,” I said.

Octavia nodded. “Yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. But I wasn’t sure if you were staying or investigating the Cove. But you’re here to stay, aren’t you?”

Something about that excited her. She liked me. “I hope to stay. Howling Cove is beautiful and so far, the people are kind and welcoming.”

“They are,” she said, sighing. “It’s always been that way. Even in my day.”

“Did you live in this house?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” she said, shaking her head. “Not yet, anyway.” A wistful smile settled on her lips. Her gaze went far away. I assumed that meant she had been being courted by the pack that lived here. Hugo’s ancestral family. Maybe there would be more on the pack that lived here in the book I was studying.

“Are you trapped here?”

Octavia turned her attention back to me. Her brows knit together. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I think you’ve probably been dead a while.” Based on her clothing, I thought at least a hundred years. “But you’re still here.”

She nodded, shrugging. “I don’t appreciate being dead,” she told me, sniffing. “It’s not fair. I’m young and beautiful. I should have had so much more. A pack! I deserve a pack!”

“Mm,” I said, crossing my arms. Entitled omegas. It’s why so many betas come to resent them.

Her sigh was wistful again as she stared out the window toward the cove. “I think that maybe when your life is cut short, you get stuck. You know? Unable to move from one place to the next?”

“Do you need help?”

Octavia smiled sadly. “I’ve been cleansed and banished and summoned.” She waved her hand. “Maybe I’m not ready

to go.”

“Can you leave the house?”

“Yes. I sometimes walk the cove. Especially at night. I always loved walking the cove at night. The way the stars play on the water makes the night sky look endless. And the breeze is so crisp and cool.” She looked at me, giving me a mischievous grin. “The perfect atmosphere for some romance, don’t you think?”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “Yea, sure. If that’s what you want.”

“I do.” She patted down the skirt of her dress. For a split second, I could see the blood all over her. The sight made bile rise in my throat. But it was gone before I could ask about it and she carried on. “I’ve always been a romantic. And the alphas courting me before I died were very romantic.”

“That’s nice,” I said, stepping away from the wall I’d backed myself into when first spotting her. “I have to get to work.”

“You work at the shop,” she said excitedly, getting to her feet.

“I do. It’s fun.” She followed me into the other room as I grabbed a banana and granola bar, my keys and phone, then headed for the door. “Are you joining me?”

“No, no, no. I don’t work.” She laughed.

I tried to contain my eye roll until I turned my back on her after closing and locking the door.

“Katiya,” she called, and I paused, wondering when she learned my name. It’s not like I say my own name often. I turned back and the look of concern on her face made me frown. “Please stay away from the cliff. It’s awfully dangerous. People fall all the time.”

Her bloody image danced before my eyes, and I swallowed. “I will,” I promised. I don’t think I was promising the ghost more than I was promising myself. But if she fell off the cliff, that would explain the incredible amount of blood

covering her. It would not be a clean fall, but one filled with crags and hard corners.

Following the path, I made sure to stay far away from the edge. I couldn't even enjoy the view this morning since the only thing I could think about was the possibility of falling to my death. Imagine finally gaining freedom and then dying from clumsiness! No thanks.

This morning I was working with Lana and Megan. I arrived at the door just as Megan did. She smiled, holding it door open for me.

“Morning,” she greeted.

I returned her smile. “Hey.”

There was a stack of boxes in front of the register that Lana was in the middle of moving to the back when we got in. After setting down my things under the counter, I went to help her.

“After the morning rush, I'll have you start on inventory. Price gun and then restock. Feeling confident you can do that?” Lana asked.

Nodding, I glanced at the three boxes that she'd stacked behind the counter. I actually thought inventory was one of my favorite parts thus far. I liked seeing all the new merchandise that came in. It not only helped me to know what was in the store, but where it was located. Still, a week later and with as much time as I spent just wandering, I found something new every day.

Lana took on the role of guide today. We ran tours four times a day: ten, one, three, and five. The last returned just as the shop closed at six. I really liked that even the manager conducted tours too.

My experience with employment wasn't extensive. We were assigned jobs in the city I left. But I found that those in any position over peon tended to find themselves self-important and therefore excluded themselves from tedious, strenuous, time-consuming, or otherwise unwanted tasks.

Anything that required thought or energy. Basically, they liked to sit around and dictate.

Lana dictated, but she did as much work as she relegated to others. I didn't think that there was a chore that she actively avoided. Not that I'd seen anyway.

I spent the morning stocking keychains. Because they were easily transportable without taking up a lot of room and they were relatively cheap, we sold a lot of keychains. People bought them as mementos for themselves and souvenirs for someone back home. We even had the cliché ones of 'someone went to Howling Cove and all I got was this keychain.' At least the image of the cove in the background was pretty.

The keychains were scattered through the shop. We had blatantly obvious cameras covering every corner of the store with signs that said 'smile, you're on camera' plastered by all the easily pocketed items, so theft wasn't a huge concern. There was an entire display of small, affordable keepsakes on either side of the door, and I spent much of the morning there. Enjoying the view as I stickered what felt like a thousand keychains.

At lunch, Megan stopped next to me, startling me from my mindless stickering as I stared at the cove with the sun playing off the water. Because of the temperature in the air that brushed the warmer water, there were wisps all over today. They looked like little ghosts.

I thought how fun that was, especially right as we went into October. The month of Halloween.

"Ready to eat?" she asked.

"Sure." I dropped the price gun into the box I was working on and closed it to bring with me.

We got breaks and there was a staff room out back, but whoever I was working with tended to eat behind the desk. We just took turns as to who dealt with the customers who came in.

Lana was already there, leaning against the back counter with a bowl of ramen. The girl lived off ramen. I grabbed my

granola bar and hopped up in the stool beside her.

“Is that all you eat?” Megan asked, pulling up her lunch box. “I never see you with something more than a bar of some kind for lunch.”

“They’re good. They’re cheap. They’re easily transportable,” I said, shrugging.

“Ramen is also all those things,” Lana said.

“Yours requires a bowl and silverware,” I pointed out. “I can’t stuff it into my pocket.”

“Not necessarily true,” she argued. “The noodles are good dry too. I snack on them all the time.”

“Not at all surprised,” Megan said.

We ate quietly for a while. I watched the tourists on the cove, my gaze catching on the box of Halloween decorations that was sitting on the floor under the window.

“Do we do anything for Halloween?” I asked.

“We decorate. And we can dress up,” Lana said. “Sometimes we take turns bringing in goodies to share too.”

“But I mean, touristy,” I said, gesturing to the cove. “We have the perfect backdrop.”

“The ocean?” Megan asked.

I laughed. “No. Well, yes. It’s not something that ever gets old. But no. I mean a haunted cove that howls. I mean, I know the first of October is in less than two weeks, but I just feel like it’s a missed opportunity. This place is filled with lore and legend that can be used to capitalize. It could increase Howling Cove’s tourist revenue for the month too.”

“What kinds of things are you thinking of?” Lana asked.

“Well. Play up the haunted aspect. Conduct night tours. You don’t even have to do anything else, but if you really wanted to go all out, you could decorate a little. Or make a ‘haunted’ path and hire scare actors. You could have festivals on the beach. Halloween games for specific nights of the week, always tying in a specific popular story of the cove. Or

even the lesser-known ones. Ones that aren't published, maybe? And on Halloween, you could have a ball or something. You know, costumes. It could even be themed." I shrugged again.

Both had stopped chewing as they stared at me. We were interrupted from discussing it for a minute while I dealt with a group of tourists that came in. When they left fifteen minutes later, I turned back to them.

Megan was beaming. Lana was looking at me with new consideration.

"You know, those are some brilliant ideas. We're really close to October, though. I could present this to the owners and see what they think; but first, I would need a more fleshed out plan. How about taking a break from the restocking for a while and start jotting down some ideas? Make us a mock schedule of events," Lana said.

"Okay. Someone else will have to fill in some things about the cove, though. To make it more personalized since I'm still learning the history."

"This will be so damn fun," Megan said. "Seriously, I bet they'll go for it. They're really good about this kind of stuff."

"Making money kind of stuff?" I asked.

"I mean, everyone is about making money. But the Jamesons love this cove. Cohen's pack has been here for ages. Everything you suggested, while both Halloween and revenue driven, amps up the historical aspect of this place. Hell, we could put together an entire town tour. A haunted tour of Howling Cove that's both fun and riddled with ghost stories, but also true and full of fascinating history. So much has happened in Howling Cove, but everyone just sees the breathtaking views and awesome caves," Megan said.

"There are some really good love stories here too," Lana mused. "Sweet stories and tragic ones. If this is successful, we could revisit this idea for Valentine's day."

"Oh. Em. Gee," Megan said, grinning from ear to ear. "Katiya, the Jamesons are going to adore you!"

I smiled uneasily. Not what I had been going for. I didn't want the attention or adoration of the alpha pack. I was already done with alphas in my life. I had absolutely no interest in them whatsoever.

But the more we talked about this as I jotted down ideas with Lana and Megan's periodic input, the more excited I became. As I headed home that evening, I was silently hoping that they'd agree. This could be a whole lot of fun.



# CHAPTER FIVE

## FELIX



It's just some touristy kids raising hell," Lester said into the receiver. I could hear that he truly believed that. I trusted the lieutenant, but it was an awful lot of ruckus for just some tourist teens.

My small town of Howling Cove was quiet. Not to be confused with sleepy. It wasn't at all. The community life and activities were plentiful. But crime was minimal.

To be fair, the incident in question is a bit of vandalism caused by some teens when they were drunk. It was easily repaired, but I was annoyed all the same.

"Keep them a night. Scare them a little. No plea. They will need to pay a fine and the cost of the damage. I'm not accepting anything else, Lester."

"Done, Chief. I'm on it."

The line went dead, and I pocketed the phone. I hated troublemakers. I worked hard to keep this town clean of everything. Law enforcement had the authority to deal with crime in this town. As such, the town was an ideal place to live. There were little drug sales, little vandalism, little bullying. Part of it was the police doing well on their routes. But the other part was that we were in proper cooperation with the other side of the law.

The courts didn't go lenient on those with charges. There was no getting out of it, regardless of what money was backing them, either.

But the police were also kind and involved in everything within Howling Cove. Even the mundane of raising funds for the library, or participating in the community gardens. Cleaning up the parks. I made damn sure that they didn't abuse their power.

My goal wasn't a utopia. That didn't exist. There was always something corrupt and decaying within the picture-perfect image. I just wanted safety and peace. Cooperation. Kindness. That wasn't a lot to ask for.

It was a legacy I carried on from chiefs before me. Yes, I was a young chief. I knew that. I worked my way up through dedication to the right avenues. Successful campaigns to keep Howling Cove clean and safe. Hard work and a whole lot of overtime. And I was named chief for it at forty-three.

A job I didn't take lightly.

I turned when the door opened to admit my omega carrying in a canvas. For a moment, I watched him. The way his ass flexed in his underwear and his leg muscles banded as he tried to stretch his leg to prop the door open. Over his underwear was an open collared shirt with a tie. Like he had begun getting dressed and then was sidetracked.

But that was as much as I could see him struggle. Not that he was truly struggling, but any strain was too much for me to allow. I crossed the room and took the canvas from him, shouldering the door.

Gideon smiled before reaching up on his toes to kiss my cheek. "Thanks, Alpha," he said, his voice low and gruff. Damn man was always tempting us. As he turned, his semi-hard cock in the restrictive pouch of his underwear made him look like he had a thick elephant trunk bunched up, the tip dripping wet.

I nipped at his ear when he backed away, letting the door close when he stepped into my office.

I tracked his progress as he padded across the room and climbed onto the couch to pull down the canvas that was there. An art piece that he'd only just hung last month. He set it

down and waved me over. I handed it to him, and he positioned it how he wanted it to hang.

Because Gideon didn't work, he spent a lot of his time fighting boredom. Generally speaking, that meant he dabbled in a lot of different hobbies. He particularly loved anything having to do with paint unless it was actually painting a scene. Currently, he liked spinning canvas pieces and pouring cups of paint.

But this was different. As if he read my mind, he said, "It's resin. A thin layer of different colors poured to look like granite." He looked around and then frowned. "I forgot your color pallet in here, though. This clashes."

Gideon reached for it, but I grabbed his hand before he could pull it down. "Leave it. It's interesting to look at."

"I'll make a different one."

"Fine, but leave this one for now."

He frowned at me before studying it again. "Felix, you have zero green in this room. I can't leave this on the wall."

"I'm wearing green," I said, pinching my dress shirt. "Speaking of what we're wearing—" I pulled on his shirt loosely, making him grin as he looked down.

"I got distracted when I put my shirt on. Painted my nails." He wagged his fingers at me to show me the matte black. "Then I saw that the counter of the bathroom sink was dirty; so when they were dry, I took cleaning wipes to the counter. Saw a drop of dried resin, scrubbed it clean, and remembered that this was dry."

I chuckled. Dropping his hand, I hooked mine on his hip and pulled him from the couch. He landed against me with an 'oomph' before smiling up at me.

"Why are you wearing a tie?"

"I was going to see if Anson would help me bring the canvases cluttering my room to the studio. Or maybe some shops. Hang them, see if I can't give them away or something," he answered.

“Alright, first off, you’re not giving them away. You can sell them. Second, why does that require a tie?”

Gideon shrugged. “Good impression?”

I chuckled and then pressed my lips against his. He smiled before surrendering himself to the kiss, opening his mouth and encouraging me to stroke his tongue with my own. A sweeping motion that he really got revved over.

“Are you still working?” he asked, his voice deep and husky. His heart already racing from the little kiss. His hips, though he fought the motion, pressing against mine.

“Yes, my precious. Where are your other alphas?”

His focus went far away for a minute, momentarily getting lost in the heat of being a horny omega. Then he shook his head to clear the fog. “I think they’re all out. I was going to call Anson home. You know, needy omega and all that.”

“Go get dressed. I’ll go out with you. We’ll stop at the station to check in and then get ice cream on the way home.”

Gideon grinned. He pecked my lips three times before heading for the door. There was a fifty-fifty chance that he was actually going to be back in short order or that he’d get sidetracked with something else. Either way, I wasn’t involved in anything at the moment, so either was fine.

As I sat at my desk, turning the chair to look out the window of the high-rise we lived in that overlooked the cove in the distance with the most stunning views ever, my cell phone rang again. Yawning, I reached back for it and glanced at the ID. ‘Howling Cove Trinkets & Treasures.’ The little souvenir shop down at the cove. One of my favorite businesses that Cohen owned.

Clicking the green button, I answered. “This is Felix.”

“Hi, Felix. It’s Lana. Manager at Trinkets & Treasures,” the voice said on the other end.

I smiled, shaking my head. Even when we walked into the shop, that’s how she introduced herself. Every single time. As

if we'd forget her from one visit to the next. There was a hint of nerves in her tone.

"Hello, Lana," I greeted.

"Hi," she repeated. Pause. "Uh. I wanted to run an idea past you."

"Go ahead."

"I tried Cohen, but he was busy and told me to try you. I can wait if I'm interrupting—"

"Tell me your idea, Lana," I said gently.

"Oh. Oh-okay. It's actually Katiya's idea. She's the new hire. Remember?"

I nodded. "Yes. I remember hiring her. We've yet to meet her, though. Is she doing well?"

"Very well," Lana said, her voice surer than it had been. She liked this subject. "She's quiet and a little shy, but she picks up on things quickly. And she's got a really brilliant idea for October."

"I'm listening."

"Okay, so this stems from the idea that the cove is filled with history." She went on to outline a rather lengthy and detailed calendar of events that ranged from new specialty souvenirs for this specific event to night tours within the caves to a big Halloween party at the beach. She was breathless by the time she finished describing the entire thing. "It's geared to bring in more tourists in this slower season by highlighting the cove's history and lore."

At her pause, I waited to see if there was more she wanted to add. The beta was nervous around us and occasionally stumbled over her words in an attempt to get them all out. But she was good at her job and the tourists loved her. The rest of the employees seemed to as well.

When she didn't continue, I said, "It sounds like a rather big list. You think you have enough time to pull it all off this year?"

Lana hesitated. “I don’t know. This is a little aggressive, but Katiya wasn’t sure which ideas would be more successful or which you might be interested in more than some of the others.”

“Email us what you have just described to me. I’ll talk to Cohen and Anson later. One of us will get back to you tomorrow,” I told her.

“Okay, great,” she said, relieved. “I’ll get it over to you right away.”

“Alright. Anything else?”

“No, I don’t think so. Except that maybe—” She paused again. “In talking to Katiya about the legends and stories that are widely published, she suggested that since there are families that have been here since the Sandviews time, that maybe we can ask for family stories. Maybe some specifically tied into places around Howling Cove.”

“How would you like to do that?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Bulletins. Emails? Maybe the newspaper or something? If it’s okay, we’ll find a way to make it happen.”

“Go ahead, Lana. I like the idea.”

The smile in her voice was evident when she next spoke. “Thank you so much. I really think Katiya is going to be a great addition to Howling Cove.”

I nodded again. “Good to hear. We’ll be in touch.”

She agreed and hung up the phone. By the time I spun my chair around a moment later, my sexy little omega was in a suit and tie. Not the full suit. Dark blue slacks that matched the thin tie. A collared shirt buttoned and tucked in with the sleeves rolled. No jacket. And he wore boots instead of dress shoes.

The whole thing fit his frame beautifully.

“Come here, beautiful,” I said, patting my lap.

He grinned, coming for me with quick strides and fell into my lap, wrapping his arms around my neck and immediately

placing his mouth against mine. He was sucking on a mint. I could taste it as he kissed me.

“Are you sure you want to go out?” I asked, teasing more than anything.

Unsurprisingly, Gideon hesitated. When sex was an option, hands down, he almost always chose sex. I could see it warring in his eyes as he stared at me.

Chuckling, I kissed his nose and pushed him from my lap by his hips. “Show me which canvases you want to take, and I’ll run them down while you decide where you’d like to propose having them hung.”

Gideon teetered, still unconvinced he wanted to go out when there was even a slight teasing hint of a possibility that I was willing to take the afternoon off and we could go hang out naked in his nest. But as I made my way to the door, he followed. Slowly. Waiting for me to change my mind.

I paused in the hall for him to lead me to his room. Gideon had three, not including his nest. One with a bed, one for painting and making a mess, and another for the cleaner hobbies. He led me to the hobby room where there was an entire wall lined with canvases of all shapes.

“Those,” he said, pointing. “They take up too much room.”

“You’re okay parting with them?”

“I don’t think they’ll sell. There’s nothing overly special about them. But yeah, I kept my favorites.” He looked at the larger stack with slight dismay. His art hung on the walls throughout the penthouse suite. Wherever he could fit a canvas, he did. However, he also frequently traded them out with something newer that he liked better. There were only a handful that seemed to be permanent features.

“They’ll sell,” I assured him as I carefully picked up a few. “I’ll grab a cart downstairs for the rest and then we can head out.”

He nodded, taking out his phone. I spied him opening the map and dropping pins as I left his room. The elevator dinged as it landed and I loaded the few pieces of art in. On the first



floor, my phone rang. It took me a minute to juggle the art and answer.

“Hello, sex on a stick,” I greeted my alpha.

Anson’s deep chuckle reverberated through me as if he were standing next to me. Pressed against me. I grinned. Good thing he wasn’t home, or Gideon might just get his wish. Nest for the rest of the day and to hell with responsibilities.

“Hey, baby. You got Gideon occupied? He called earlier, but I was in a meeting.”

“Yep. Taking him out to sell his art.”

“Is he?” Anson asked. “Good for him. We’ll celebrate tonight.”

I smiled, nodding. Gideon will love that.

“Where are Tris and Reed? They home?”

“Nope.” I paused, trying to balance the phone on my shoulder as I loaded the pieces of art. “Reed is at the shop and Tris is at the library. Last I knew anyway.”

“Researching a new technique to murder?” Anson asked, a chuckle in his voice. And yet, it was a serious question.

“I think so, actually. He mentioned something about archives of local homicides or something. A serial killer, maybe?”

“Is that research or one of his books?”

“Mm,” I answered as I grabbed one of the carts from the lobby. “Good question. I can’t remember what he was telling me about.”

Anson chuckled. “Cohen said something about the souvenir shop when I spoke to him for thirty seconds. Damn restaurant has me all over the place so I didn’t catch it.”

“I think you need to sell that place. You’re irritated more than anything these days.”

“Hm,” he answered and I knew he wasn’t in agreement. “We’ll see. I can’t just sell it as is. The only thing it’s good for

right now is being torn down.”

I frowned as I let myself back into our apartment. Gideon was still in his room looking at his phone. “Yes, I spoke to the shop. It’s all good. We can discuss it tonight.”

“Sounds good. Take care of our omega, love.”

“Always.”

The call ended and I loaded the rest of his art onto the cart.

“Who were you talking to?” Gideon asked, not looking away.

“Anson. Just checking on you.”

He grinned, his gaze flickering to mine.

“Ready, sweet cheeks?” I asked.

This time, his grin spread as his eyes filled with heat. “Yes, Alpha.”

# CHAPTER SIX

# KATIYA



For the past few days, we've been making a priority list of what needed to be done for our October 'Haunted Howling Cove' festivities. When we were sure of the top of the priority list, we set about tackling that.

Right now, what that consisted of was hiring three temps. Lana was busy with that. I was sitting with Alec on the computer as he taught me how to add schedules into the computer for the night tours. Megan, though not here, was doing some extra research on historical events that happened within the caves. She was planning to map out what I might add on and give Linus a new script to learn for his tours.

I hadn't met Daxon yet, but he was organizing some of the daily events. Gathering quotes and sourcing different items. He was also tackling fliers and advertising with Lana.

It was exciting that my idea had been supported by the alphas who owned the shop. They'd even given Lana a budget to start kicking it off and expressed that they understood that there might be a loss this year since we had a very late start. We were to concentrate on some of the smaller activities and then choose a couple of the much larger ones for the end of the month to try to really push.

"So, are we going with a ball? A gala? Just a party?" Alec asked as we waited for the software to accept the additions. We'd yet to hire enough people to cover all these shifts, but Lana planned to add Megan as a secondary temporary supervisor, and they would work opposite shifts. The new

hires were specifically for running the cash register and maybe stocking.

“I was thinking of a Halloween ball,” I said. “Give it a theme each year if we continue it.”

“That’s awesome. One year we could do historical Howling Cove figures as the theme. Cohen would go crazy over that,” he said.

I’ve been hearing the names of the alphas that own the shop periodically. From what I understood, there were three that were primarily involved. Felix and Cohen were the names I was familiar with, having heard them many times now.

“They don’t come here often,” I noted.

“Who?” Alec asked.

“The alphas.”

“Oh. They stop by monthly or so. I haven’t seen them in a couple, though. Their visits often fall on days I don’t work.”

Maybe I’d get lucky, and I wouldn’t see them at all. Thus far, besides a few tourist alphas, I hadn’t met any of the resident alphas of Howling Cove. There were five packs, according to Megan. At first, I thought that was an awfully small number; but then again, there weren’t that many permanent residents in the town.

And there were a few un-packed alphas. Solo alphas who weren’t in a pack yet. Further, there were the alphas in school. So, there were a bunch.

Still, fortunately, I hadn’t run into any of them. I kept myself to the shop and my house with the occasional trip to the store for groceries. Otherwise, alpha-free life. Just the way I wanted it.

“You’ll know them when you see them. They’re a cross between old mafia men and supermodels.” He chuckled, but my blood ran cold.

Taking a breath, I closed my eyes for a minute. The city I left was densely populated. We’re talking seven figures. And

the alphas there were little more than animals. I had three encounters with them growing up.

The first was when I was a child and made the mistake of staring at one of them. He grabbed me by my hair and tossed me to the side, making sure I understood that I was only allowed to look at him if he gave me permission. Just to make sure I had learned that lesson, he made me lick his shoes.

I vomited the rest of the afternoon. His shoes were disgusting.

The next meeting was in school. Although there are federal governing bodies that regulate the minimum of what we have to learn in school, the city made sure that their own curriculum was taught. They didn't give a fuck about what the feds wanted from kids. But to keep them out of their business, they made damned sure that we passed the national average on testing. And their methods to assure that were painful.

But one of the classes betas were required to attend was abouthow to please the alphas of the city. Basically, what it came down to was that we were owned. What *they* wanted was law. They were the gods we worshiped. One of the alphas came into class to really drive home their expectations. The videos put so much fear in me that I went home begging my parents that we leave.

It was then that I got a true rude awakening about that city. We weren't just owned. We were prisoners. We only left if the alphas allowed it.

The alphas never allowed it.

The third time was during inspection right before high school graduation. That's when all the betas of the graduating class line up for the alphas to shop. It was the single most terrifying week of my life. Being pawed at and examined as if I were a plaything. Not a human being, but merely a toy for their personal use.

I'll never forget the beta that had been next to me during one of their inspections being dragged away. She cried,

pleading that they leave her. She diminished her own worth to try to make them uninterested in her.

I was trembling when an alpha paused at me. A few did. One almost took me in the same way they'd taken the girl. This alpha was young. Maybe a couple years older than me. I wasn't sure what lucky star was shining down on me, but he ultimately passed me by.

Those were the only times I had had to endure the alphas en masse. But it was enough to give me nightmares for the rest of my life. Perhaps the only ones who had it worse than betas in the city were omegas. I've heard of families selling their omegas to the black market just to get them out of the city.

And I've heard that if one of the alpha packs bears an omega child, they use that child as a pawn to negotiate a trade. The omega for a higher place within the city.

It was the place of nightmares. Literally.

"Katiya." I blinked several times before looking at Alec. He was watching me with concern. "Are you okay?"

I smiled, shaking my head. "Sorry. Lost in thought."

"You looked like you saw a ghost," he said.

I glanced out the window where I could just barely see my house in the distance. "No. If I saw a ghost, I'd be screaming like a banshee."

He laughed. "No ghosts here."

"Don't say that. We're selling that it's haunted, remember?"

Alec chuckled. "Right. Sorry."

But that made me think. "Is it really not haunted? I mean, I know the scientific reason that the cove howls. But... in what I've read this far, I feel like it should be haunted. You haven't seen or heard anything at all?"

He chuckled. "I think Daxon is the true believer of it all. Linus and Megan have both seen and felt things, but it's

happened so infrequently that I don't know that they put much confidence in it."

"But do you?"

Alec tilted his head to the side, his brows puckering as he considered. "I don't know. I haven't seen, heard, or felt anything that has me hands-down convinced, you know? But I feel like, why not? There could be ghosts."

I nodded.

"You believe, don't you?" he asked.

I smiled, shrugging. "Sometimes you see a ghost and can't unsee them." It was true. I was living with a dead roommate.

"Where? Here?" He looked around the store as if the ghost would jump out and yell 'boo.' It didn't, of course. I wasn't sure if seeing Octavia meant I was magically now going to see all other ghosts but thus far, I've only seen her.

"No, not here. But there's been so much that has happened on the land surrounding the cove. I find it hard to believe that there aren't any. Maybe they just don't want to be seen."

Alec frowned. Then his eyes narrowed as he looked around suspiciously. "You're right. I bet they're hiding."

I laughed as the screen prompt popped up again.

We finished adding new blocks to the schedule just as Lana returned with the last tour. We stayed while they chose some trinkets and then closed the shop.

Alec followed me to the trail. "Mind if I walk you home?"

I raised a brow. "Alright. But I've made the trip several times now. I know where my house is."

He laughed. "I know. It's still best if you're not walking alone." When I looked at him sharply, he raised his hands. "Statistically, Howling Cove is one of the safest places in the country. But my mama raised a gentleman and I finally have enough courage to ask to walk you home."

A giggle escaped me as I bowed my head. "I see. Yes, you can walk me. As long as you don't expect hospitality at the



other end. I might have an apple that's slightly bruised and a pitcher of lemonade. I haven't gone shopping yet this week."

He nodded, smiling. His hand on my forearm urging me to pause made me look up from the trail I was following. As if our conversation about Howling Cove being safe had called upon something to challenge that assertion, there was a strange man on the path overlooking the cove and the beach as the sun went down.

Alec sighed as we approached. "This is private property, Sam."

The man turned to look at us, and I was relieved to find that he was a beta. A beta with a strange scent that made me fight not to cough.

"It's sacred land that you savages have destroyed," he snapped.

I raised a brow, looking at Alec again with wide eyes.

Alec shook his head. "Like it or not, this is what the town is now. You really ought to accept it because it's not going anywhere."

"It will," Sam said, his voice dark and ominous. "Just wait. The day is coming. Nature will take back what you've polluted."

He turned on his heel and traipsed through the thigh-high brush away from the cliff face. We watched him go, Alec shaking his head.

"I am pretty sure he's harmless. Just an angry man who thinks that modern society is devil magic," he said. "I'm glad my instincts pushed me to walk with you today. I'd have hated for you to run into him alone for the first time."

"He's an ancestor of one of the older indigenous peoples who lived in the area?" I asked.

"So he says. No one really knows for sure, but he claims that his blood is pure old world. It's difficult to accept really, since there hasn't been a group of people in all of modern history claiming indigenous status here."

“Huh. I wonder if he has any stories. If he’s really related to the first people who visited this land, I bet he has some good information that was passed down.”

“Don’t talk to him alone,” Alec said as we resumed walking toward my house. “I don’t think he’s dangerous, but he can be a bit angry and aggressive.”

“But the alphas tolerate him.”

He looked at me, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if he’s crazy and bad for the community and tourists, I would think that the alphas would force him to leave.”

The way he considered what I said me told me a few things. That’s not at all what his alphas would do. It’s not something that anyone would even consider. And where the hell did I come from?

“Uh, no,” he said slowly. “They don’t regulate who lives in Howling Cove. You’re free to come and go as you please. As long as you’re not breaking the law or disrupting the peace, you’re free to stay.”

“He’s not disrupting the peace?”

He grinned, shaking his head. “Not in any way that’s going to concern anyone. He’s a weird, somewhat creepy local. But that’s it.”

I pondered this as Alec walked me to my door. He paused, and I looked at him, hoping he wasn’t going to try to kiss me or something. Oh, gods, please don’t ask me out!

“See you tomorrow, Katiya.” He quickly turned and headed back for the trail.

Taking a breath, I unlocked my door and headed inside. Octavia was waiting, staring out the window. “He’s... new.”

In other words, she wasn’t interested in him. I chuckled. “He’s a co-worker who thought I needed to be escorted home. Which was rather serendipitous, since there was a creepy guy on the path.”

She looked at me as if I'd just been attacked. "Oh, honey." She rushed to me, placing her hands on my shoulders. Well, that's where they'd be if she was solid. But I didn't feel so much as a shiver of cold. "Are you okay? What happened?"

I laughed, shaking my head as I pulled away from her and made my way to the kitchen. "Nothing exciting. Just a guy that claims he's part of the indigenous people who worked and traveled the land before it was built up. He's angry that we've ruined the world, apparently."

"You didn't build this house. You just live here," she said. "Why is he mad at you?"

"He's angry in general. Not at me, specifically."

She made a quiet, gruff sound. Something that nearly made me giggle. A dainty little thing trying to growl. It was almost too cute.

Her attention turned to me scooping a few spoonfuls of potato salad into a bowl. She watched as I ate, cleaned my mess, and put things away.

"Now you'll read to me from that big book?" she asked.

Octavia was enjoying the history of Howling Cove as much as I was. Laughing, I turned toward my room. "Let me take a shower and get ready for bed. Then we'll read for the night, okay?"

Yes, I lived a thrilling life, ready for bed by 7:30.

She agreed and was perched on the edge of the bed next to the book I left there waiting for me when I finished my nighttime routine. I climbed in, dragging it into my lap. Octavia climbed up on the bed to sit beside me.

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*Through the centuries, there have been reports of beings described as monsters within the caves of Howling Cove. Although they range from winged to finned, reptilian to mammalian, there is one description that seems to be the most common.*

*With a wingspan of twelve feet, and two inch serrated teeth, the Howling Cove monster is reported to have a black body with bloodred wings. Its appearance is thought to be bat-like in nature, though it's said to howl like a wolf, especially at night.*

*Supposedly, the cave monster hibernates, reports of travelers and early settlers in the area say that when its lair is disturbed, it ravages all visitors until it finds the taste it desires.*

*A beta by the name of Henry Longfill was convicted of six murders in the mid-1800s during the height of mass monster reports of the beast harassing locals after visitors had disturbed its sleep. Longfill was trying to find the taste it wanted so the beast would go back to sleep. Five betas and an omega were sacrificed within the caves by Longfill.*

*Although the bloody devastation attributed to the monster stopped after Longfill's last sacrifice, speculation around town was that Longfill was actually to blame for the whole affair. There are skeptics that disagree, stating that there's far too much evidence supporting that the monster was responsible for the scourge the town.*

*"The howling stopped," a neighbor to the cliffs stated. "I'm not saying that it was or wasn't a monster, but whatever happened down there, that howl wasn't human. Henry Longfill did not make that sound."*

*A notable sighting of the cave monster appeared on a paranormal television show after some explorers were poking around the cave late at night. The video provided shows a very discernable wing within the shifting shadows. Even for the most skeptical, the howl caught on audio is chilling.*

*There have been numerous photographs disputed as fakes over the years as well. However, there are a few that scientists admittedly cannot identify what's within the images. From three different explorers more than a decade apart, the investigation is ongoing, though inactive.*

*As residents of Howling Cove will tell you, there's a very distinct boundary within the cave. And if you cross it, your life may be forfeit.*

*"It's a real cave back there," Addison Jentzen states. "Rocks and tunnels branching off in multiple directions. But beyond the line, everything changes. You can feel it in the air. Hear the stillness as you're surrounded by pitch blackness. Everything comes alive. And you're lucky if you make it back out. Locals do not visit that part of the cave. Ever."*

*Is there a monster within the caves of Howling Cove? Continued mysterious disappearances and howls late at night coming from within suggest there is. Are you brave enough to explore for yourself?*

---

No, I thought. I don't think I am.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# KATIYA



The internet was heavily monitored where I grew up. I thought I had been proficient at using it, knowing how to search and what kinds of things to search for. But as I watched Alec maneuver around, helping me find event boards that were specifically geared towards Halloween, I realized I knew next to nothing.

He didn't ask me why I was basically a newb at everything having to do with anything beyond the most fundamental features of technology. But I could see that he wanted to. Every time they showed me new features on something and I was impressed, I would get these looks like 'were you living under a rock?' Sometimes I wanted to tell them it was worse than that.

But I kept it to myself. And they kept their curiosity to looks and not questions.

"That makes a dozen," Alec said, sitting back. It was my day off. Linus was manning the store while Megan conducted tours. I had come in on a volunteer basis because I didn't know how to find what I was looking for and getting frustrated. "Not a bad afternoon's work, hm?"

I nodded. "I think I understand the way it works. Less is more sometimes."

"Yes, and keywords are important. 'Halloween events' produce better results than 'where can I post about a new Halloween event?' You just need the keywords for anything you want to find."

“Good to know.”

“Also, be wary of what you search for, or you’ll get a surprise on your screen,” he warned. “There’s a decent firewall here because we’re using a company computer and internet. When you have no safety features on, your results could end up dirty and suggestive.”

My face flushed, cheeks burning as I remembered what I kept getting in my results before I just sucked it up and walked down here. “Yep. I learned that.” Apparently, there was an entire market for ‘night time Halloween parties’ that looked more like orgies than what I had intended.

Megan popped her head in, grinning. “Felix called. He said the website should be updated. He also said to track your hours, Katiya. You’re going to be paid for what you’re working on today.”

“That’s unnecessary,” I argued. “I was going to do this on my own time if I could figure out how.”

She grinned. “Would you like to call him back?”

“No!” Clearly, I spoke too sharply and too quickly. Or maybe it was the alarm in my voice while my eyes went wide with terror. I cleared my throat, trying to ignore their concerned looks. “No. It’s fine. That’s very kind of him.”

Megan nodded. “Yeah, okay.” She watched me for another minute as if I was going to self-combust. When I didn’t, she smiled and turned away, heading back into the store.

But Alec was still watching me.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Have you had a bad experience with Felix? He’s always quite nice, if not a little formal. He’s the Chief of Police and sometimes he forgets to turn that off,” Alec said.

I stared at him again, horrified. “The Chief owns this shop?”

“No. Technically, I think it’s Cohen that owns it. But he, Felix, and Anson are the ones we deal with interchangeably.”

Trying to suppress a shiver and the way my heart began racing, I looked at the screen. It was still sitting on the page with the last event calendar we filled out events in.

“Katiya? Did something happen with Felix?”

I shook my head, looking at him with a smile. Hopefully it looked genuine. “No. Not at all. I don’t think I’ve even spoken to him before.”

Alec nodded, waiting for me to connect the pieces for him. My little outburst was going to have to be explained a little, I supposed.

Taking a breath, I sighed. “Just wary of alphas is all.”

“Ah,” he answered, and just like that, he relaxed. “The alphas in Howling Cove are super nice. Courteous. Mindful.” When I remained unconvinced, he chuckled. “You’ll see. You have nothing to be worried about here.”

“Are there many?”

He shrugged. “There are five permanent packs that reside here year round. Felix, Cohen, Anson, and two more alphas belong to Pack Jameson. Then there’s Pack Barrett, three alphas make up their entire pack. Pack Olean is a menagerie pack, one alpha and six betas. Pack Seneca has four alphas and a single beta. And then there’s Pack Rowlandi, two alphas and three betas.”

“None of them have an omega?”

“Jameson has an omega. You’ll see him around from time to time. He’s a really nice guy. Super hot too.”

I grinned, tilting my head as I considered this. It took me literally biting my tongue to keep from asking ‘they let their omega out in public?’ but I anticipated that I was going to get another look from him if I did. So I refused to speak the words out loud.

It’s not that I didn’t know that the entire world wasn’t like the city I grew up in. That was evident from television. But I hadn’t realized it was so very different. So far, there wasn’t a



single thing that Howling Cove had in common with the city I fled.

“I’m talking supermodel gorgeous,” Alec said a second later.

I smiled, shaking my head. That’s fine with me. I didn’t need to be anywhere near the omega or any of the alphas. They shouldn’t be too difficult to avoid.

“Ready?” Megan asked, sticking her head into the office again.

“For what?” I asked.

She laughed, rolling her eyes. “You agreed to come out with me this evening when I bribed you by allowing Alec to assist you.”

“Oh, right.” I looked at Alec, catching his grin. He shrugged. “You’re not coming?”

“No, silly. Girls night!” Megan grabbed my hand and dragged me to my feet. “You two share a shift tomorrow. You can be apart for the evening.”

“Oh. No, no.” I shook my head, cheeks heating again. “There’s nothing—”

Megan laughed as she pulled me through the door and into the warm evening air. The sun was close to the horizon though not quite ready to set yet. The breeze was beautiful and refreshing against my rosy cheeks.

“I know, Kat. I’m just teasing. Though, between you and me, I don’t think he’d say no to a date.”

“I wouldn’t.”

We turned, but it wasn’t Alec behind us. Linus had followed us out. He grinned. Unlike my ambivalent reaction to Alec, I was attracted to Linus. At least on the surface. I hadn’t actually talked to him a whole lot. It was more of him flirting and me bumbling like an idiot.

I’ve never had to flirt before!

“We’re not talking about you,” Megan said. She linked her arm with mine. “Go away. Girls night. No dicks allowed.”

“I’m going to choose to believe you’re referencing the appendage in my pants and not calling me that,” Linus said, crossing his arms. There was still a smile on his perfect lips, even as he glared at Megan.

“Yes, sure,” Megan said, turning us back around and away from the cove. “See you later.”

“Are we walking?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yea. The diner is right down the road. It’s got some great food and I think there’s a band tonight.”

It was my first trip into town for something other than groceries. Since I always drove for food, I hadn’t had a chance to really look around. I was glad I did now. Walking gave me time to admire the small town, and its cottage-looking buildings. All the flower boxes and manicured grass patches. There were little parks and gazebos all over the place.

“It’s so pretty here,” I said as the sun painted the sky, its first rays of pink as it touched the horizon. “Almost like a fairy tale.”

She smiled, nodding. “Honestly, I’ve been a lot of places and as much fun as traveling, visiting exotic locations, and experiencing different cultures is, I always get homesick. There’s just nothing like it.”

“If it’s such a pristine place to live, how does the population remain so small?” I wondered.

“The zoning board has put a cap on infrastructure. If you want to build a new building, be it commercial or residential, you need to put in an application. They’re drawn by lottery every year, and the local government only allows two new buildings a year. We’re not interested in expanding.”

“I can see why,” I said.

We stepped up to the door and she pushed it open. I stopped, searching the door’s glass and the outside windows. “This isn’t a beta only establishment,” I said.

Megan shook her head. “There aren’t any in Howling Cove. They’re really not needed.”

I hesitated as she stepped inside. Turning to look at me, she offered me her hand. “I promise. Even if there’s an alpha here, no one will bother you, Katiya. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

I’d have to be naïve to believe that they hadn’t picked up on the fact that I was terrified to the point where I was ready to wet myself when it came to alphas. And that was just talking about them. But everyone I’ve met so far has assured me that the alphas here were like nothing I’ve ever experienced. They were different. I just needed to find the strength in me to believe that.

Taking her hand, I nodded, allowing her to pull me inside.

“Meggie!”

We stopped as Megan scanned the crowd. The back of the building opened into a large grassy area that was lined with tables and covered hay bales. Many of them were occupied, as were the seats inside.

“This way,” Megan said, weaving us through the crowd. She led me to a woman that was leaning over a table outside, waving her hand. I could tell by looking at her that she was the kind of person that Megan would definitely be friends with. They dressed alike, making sure their clothing showed off ample cleavage. This girl had the addition of wearing super short jean shorts, frayed at the end and barely covering her ass cheeks.

“I almost couldn’t hold the table,” the girl said. “I can’t believe it’s this busy on a Thursday!”

“The food is that good,” Megan told me. “This is Taran, my roommate. And Katiya, the new girl at work. She’s super sweet, so don’t scare her, Tar.”

Taran smiled. “No promises.” She winked at me. Settling back in her seat, she handed me a menu. “So, you’ve been here a couple weeks? How you liking it?”

“Loving it,” I said. “Everyone is so nice. I’m surrounded by breathtaking views. What’s not to love?”

“Property taxes,” she said.

Megan laughed, shaking her head. “We’re trying to buy the house we rent. But I think we’re going to need a third roommate for that.”

“Or live-in lovers,” Taran said.

“Have you tried Linus?” I asked.

“Yes,” Taran said as she studied the menus. “He knows what he’s doing in the sack. Definitely worth a lay.”

I stared with wide eyes, making Megan crack up laughing. She tossed a napkin at Taran. “I think she was referring to a romantic thing. Not sexual. You’re such a little slut.”

Taran blinked several times before looking at me. “Oh. So sorry. I am totally a slut.”

Once more, rosy red cheeks. I shook my head. “It’s alright.”

“For the record, I meant what I said. Also, for the record, I was joking about having a live-in lover. I’m a free spirit.”

“She likes to sleep with who she wants to, when she wants to,” Megan translated. “A permanent lover would hinder that.”

Taran sighed, a breathy, wistful sound. I looked at her, finding her staring beyond me. Shifting in my seat, I looked back.

“Unless it’s Brooklyn,” she said, deep and in her voice.

It wasn’t hard to determine who she was looking at. Almost as soon as my gaze fell on him, I almost choked. Alpha.

Megan’s hand landed on my wrist, squeezing it reassuringly.

“Brooklyn is one of the few unattached alphas in Howling Cove,” she told me. “As you can see by looking around, most of the population drools over him.”

Forcing my gaze to sweep the room, I found she wasn't at all wrong. *Everyone* watched as he walked in. Glassy eyes. Spikes of sweet herby scents filling the air as betas became aroused just looking at this man. The obsessive desire that followed him was almost sickening.

"But you don't?" I whispered. It had gotten awfully quiet as Brooklyn stopped to chat with those he knew as he made his way through the main part of the restaurant.

"Oh, I wouldn't say no if he wanted to invite me to his pack," Megan said.

"He can bite me all day long," Taran said, almost moaning.

I frowned at her while keenly keeping the alpha in the corner of my eye, tracking his movements. My body coiled and ready to run. I gripped the table with white knuckles to keep myself still.

"I'm also realistic. He's never looked our way before. Not in more than acknowledging that we're here," Megan said.

As if her words were scripture, Brooklyn's attention landed on our table. His eyes swept over Megan and Taran before landing on me. I almost jumped out of my skin as they remained there for several heartbeats. Finally, he looked away.

Even so, it took everything in me to keep myself where I was when all I really wanted to do was run the fuck away. Far away. I wasn't even sure my house would be far enough.

"Hello, ladies."

I jumped at the voice, looking to the waitress with wide eyes. She didn't seem to notice my unease.

"What can I get you to start?"

"Iced tea," Megan said. "Drooly over there would like lemonade. How about you, Kat?"

"Tea too," I said, my voice shaky.

"Coming right up, dolls. Any appetizers to start with?"

"Just that fresh bread and butter if you're not out," Megan said. "A couple extra rolls so I can toss them at my friend."

The waitress grinned. “Sure thing. I’ll be right back with your drinks and to take your order.”

She walked away. Megan sighed and reached across the table, pulling on Taran’s hair until she turned with an “Ow, Megs. What?!”

“Stop being a dog. Focus on the menu.”

Taran sighed. “One day, I will have an alpha. An entire pack. Even if it means I have to leave Howling Cove.”

“Mhm,” Megan said as she scanned the menu.

“Are the packs here full? Is that what they call it?” I asked.

Megan shrugged. “I’m not sure if there’s a specific word. Aside from Orean, I don’t think the packs are looking to add anyone.”

“You never know, though. You could be the lucky one when they meet you,” Taran said.

I nodded, choosing to internally trade out ‘lucky’ for ‘unfortunate’ in my head. “And the single alphas?”

“There’s a handful here,” Megan said. “I’m not sure if they’re actively looking to build a pack. But it could happen. It probably will. It’s not often that we only have five packs.”

I shivered at her words. “Can more move in?” I asked.

“Oh, of course. If they can find somewhere to live. There’s rarely any real estate available in Howling Cove. We just talked about the limited expansion.”

At least there was that. Maybe that meant Howling Cove was capped at the amount of alphas already here. I was going to have to do some digging and learn who they were, where they worked, and where they frequented, so I knew where to stay away from. This little restaurant just made the list.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## COHEN



The morning always came far too early. I wasn't exactly a night owl, but I was far from a morning person. Basically, I liked my sleep. Fortunately, with a pack, it was difficult not to wake up in a good mood. At least, not with a pack like mine.

Saturday meant there wasn't an alarm and yet, I was awake before noon. I didn't roll to look at the clock, knowing it would be far earlier than I wanted to be up. So why was I awake? I could smell breakfast cooking and it was making my stomach growl. Breakfast meant it was, at the latest, nine.

The bed dipped. I knew before he reached me that it was Anson. He smelled like trees, rich cedarwood. So good I wanted to lick him, which was saying something since I have never been so inclined to lick trees.

I rolled to face him, and he collapsed on top of me. Letting out an 'oof' and chuckling, I wrapped my arms around him.

"Morning, snuggle butt," I murmured.

Anson grunted. He didn't like mornings either. Add on that the new restaurant was creating a whole lot more stress on him and he *really* didn't like mornings.

I ran a hand through his dark hair, trying to soothe his stress away. He had the same cut as Gideon, but his was slightly longer on top and usually styled, where Gideon tended to let his lay however it fell. I wasn't sure he even brushed it more than to run his fingers through it.



“Glad to be doing something other than tending to the restaurant today?” I asked.

He huffed, a sound that was reminiscent of a bull. I grinned.

“Yesterday, we found that above the rafters—that were broken—was an enormous hole in the roof. It was patched with a tarp, and then shingles were basically laid right over it,” Anson said.

I winced. “Ouch.”

“In all honesty, it would be cheaper to level the damn building and begin again,” Anson said. “But the fucking building is on the historic registry, so I can’t do that. Know anyone I can plead with?”

Chuckling again, I dug my fingers into him.

The historic registry was enacted by my ancestors a hundred years ago. I could never recall if they were my great or my great-great-grandparents. It was easier to say ancestors. As the first official pack in Howling Cove, my family has always strived to keep it charming and authentic. There were ordinances on what styles of buildings could be added. How big, what color, how close to other buildings they could be placed, etc. In some areas, there was even one that specified how tall your grass could be.

Since I was in command of the registry now, I maintained what my grandparents were going for without the ridiculousness of regulating grass growth. Who had time for that?

“You know where I stand. If you can salvage the original structure and keep its integrity, then do so. If it’s hazardous and unable to be occupied without major infrastructure changes, then we’ll talk seriously about it.”

“The floors are rotted. There’s mold in almost every wall. I’m not even going to tell you what poor shape the windows are in, or that the electrical is not only ancient and dangerous but also cobbled together with a whole lot of electrical tape. And the doors? There’s not a solid one in the building.

They've been beaten and patched so many times, it's painted over duct tape keeping them together. Entire ceiling joists are busted, as if someone took a wrecking ball to them. I'd like to find out who did it just so I can marvel at what they did to accomplish that. I just told you about the roof. I'm afraid to open anything else up," Anson said.

I knew when he purchased the building that it was going to be a rough go. Though, I don't think anyone was prepared for all that he's found. What's most unsettling was that it was running as an operational restaurant right before he bought it. Anson's intent was just to firm up some of the walls. Level the ceiling where there was clear water damage and make sure that what was causing it had been properly taken care of (it hadn't been—there was a maze of waterspouts in the ceiling to divert the water to a hole in the wall). And then there was a soft spot on the floor that he wanted to shore up. Otherwise, it was supposed to be cosmetic.

"I'm inclined to believe it wasn't the couple I bought it from. Sounds like it's always been a little weak since they've owned it," Anson continued. "They never had the funds to fix it up."

The couple he purchased it from was from out of town. The betas had three kids that they put through college with their profits. And now that the children were adults and out of their parents' house, the couple decided to move on and sell.

I mean, I understood their priorities to an extent. But they were serving people in a place with mold behind every single wall! There was a spot in the floor where the register had been that was like three days away from someone falling through it!

"I could just level it and sell the land. As commercial property without anything on it, I could still make my money back," Anson said.

"We'll stop by after the souvenir shop. I don't doubt that it's as bad as you say it is, but if you're ready to throw in the towel and think this is the best option for what's left of the building, we'll talk about it."

He sighed. Inching himself up my body, Anson crossed his arms over my chest and rested his chin on them. Looking at me with gorgeous gunmetal eyes. “I don’t know what I want to do with it. I hate tearing down buildings, but I don’t know what’s going to be worth keeping at this point.”

I tangled my fingers into his hair and pulled his face forward. His lips were pouty as I covered them with mine, but it wasn’t long before he kissed me hard. Deeply. And then came the roll of his hips against mine.

When Anson was irritated, Anson liked to be soothed with sex.

His fingers clawed down my chest as he rocked his hips again. Digging into my stomach. Breaking his mouth from mine, he dragged his teeth down my neck. I shivered at the touch. The rough catch of his teeth on my skin. A few nips along the way, he trailed down my chest to suck on his bite over my left nipple.

One of his favorite things to get me going, Anson dug his teeth in again and sucked. Immediately, I groaned at the heat that flared through me. Burning like a wildfire as it seared into my nerves. My hips bucked; my cock hardening in earnest.

“Anson,” I grunted as he pulled his mouth away, moving his lips down my stomach. “I was already down to fuck.”

He laughed, a low, dark sound that made my cock weep. “Just getting you ready.”

“So fucking impatient.”

And yet, outside of the bedroom, he was an insanely patient man. However, when he wanted sex, he was a lot like Gideon. Not ever in the mood to wait.

Being hard wasn’t enough as far as Anson was concerned. He bit my cockhead through my underwear, eliciting a growl as I flinched, digging my hands into his hair to force his head away. He grinned, all toothy and wild.

His fingers dug into the elastic of my briefs as he yanked them down. But he wasn’t in the mood to get rid of them. That

would pull him away from me, and he wasn't about to let me go. As if I'd go anywhere.

As soon as they were around my thighs, Anson wrapped both his hands around the base of my cock, right where my knot was beginning to swell. Not caring in the least that I had a tight grip on his hair, he lowered his head and took me in his mouth. Hollowing his cheeks, there was no lead up. He sucked hard, making everything in me nearly burst apart.

Between his mouth circling the head of my cock and his hand strangling my growing knot, I was seeing stars. My entire body stiffened as he set my arousal ablaze. He didn't stop until I was grinding my teeth, shaking without pause.

Then he let my dick go with a *pop* and grinned up at me.

"Bitch," I muttered.

He hadn't let go of my knot. The grip he held me with was only slightly less than when I was balls deep in Gideon. That relentless stranglehold that made an orgasm feel like it lasted days and took years off my life. Years well spent and lost.

Finally letting me go, Anson crawled up my body, pushing his underwear off on the way, and swinging a leg over my hips. He was already swollen, dripping with stringy need as he trapped our cocks between his hands and rubbed them together. His blue eyes looked almost monochrome in the dim room as he stared down at me.

Anson didn't truly care if he topped or bottomed. For him, it was more about the connection. I called it torture, but he called it foreplay. I wasn't sure he understood the difference. We always say Tristen is our sadistic packmate, but sometimes I wasn't so sure.

Not that I'd ever really pushed him off me. My love for this man was so fucking deep, I didn't care if he skinned me alive as a means to show his affection. Whatever his love language was, I was here for it. Because I knew that's what this was. It wasn't about pain or forced arousal—both of which came frequently in foreplay with Anson—it was all

about being together. Connecting. Sharing the pleasure that always comes in the end.

Anson broke eye contact long enough to spit on my cock. Dropping a long line of saliva and coating me. Obviously, he wasn't even in the mood to back away long enough to reach for the lube three feet away. Or he was craving the feel of bareback.

Another string of spit and he shifted on top of me, bringing my dick to his ass. Reaching behind him, he used his thumb on my head to push me into place as he slowly sank down. I crunched up to run my hand over his stomach and chest, down his hip. I caught my breath as my dick broke through the tight ring of his ass muscles.

He groaned, closing his eyes. Still holding me in place, he worked himself lower. Quicker than I'd have been without lube, but still more slowly than if we were using it. Finally, he pulled his hands forward and splayed them across my chest. With slow bounces, he worked to bury my cock inside him. I remained still, letting him have control, though I wasn't sure he truly wanted it right now. Whether he wanted the reins while he rode, or wanted me to piston into him.

Anson didn't stop until he was sitting on my knot. When he didn't push further, I was nearly relieved he wasn't going to take it. He'd already squeezed the life out of me this morning and his body wasn't exactly made for a knot, so that was an intense experience for both of us when he decided he wanted all of it.

A handful of deep breaths later, he looked at me. His beautiful lips parted. His hair was already damp with sweat. I rubbed my hands up his arms, framing his face and bringing him down to me.

"Love you," I murmured before our lips met. He hummed against me, while remaining still. When I released him, he remained there. His mouth hovering over mine. Eyes staring deeply into mine.

"Love you too," he answered, voice low. Deep. Husky. "Fuck me hard, Cohen."

I grinned. Shifting so that his legs were spread wider, putting him slightly off balance, I took hold of his shoulders, dug my feet into the bed, and snapped my hips up hard. Anson gasped. A second time had his eyes rolling. I grinned and used every abdominal and thigh muscle in me to hammer into him until his head was thrown back and he was spraying my stomach with his release, filling my room with his roar.



I SLID into the booth beside Tristen, who was nearly cradling Gideon in his arms. The man spent as much time lifting as he did writing. Which was to say, a lot. Already tall at six-foot-four, he was literally a wall of hard muscle. And our omega was nothing but a doll in his arms.

Something Gideon loved to no end. He peeked up at me with a grin before tucking his face back into Tristen's chest. Tristen's purr filled the room with a quiet, relaxing tenor that I think lulled us all. I wasn't sure what it was about it, but no one could purr quite like him.

Felix and Reed brought what was left of breakfast to Anson and I before retaking their seats at the table with us. We'd apparently spent too long in bed and missed eating as a pack.

"What's the plan for the day?" Tristen asked.

"I assume you're writing this morning?" Anson asked.

Tristen nodded. He made a habit of writing for a few hours every day. Usually he concentrated on a main project, but there were side projects that he dabbled in from time to time when his muse wasn't cooperating.

He also read each night. Something that he said kept his creative juices flowing. Oddly enough, though he was a murder mystery writer, he read fantasy and romance primarily.

When I asked him why, he said it's because there's always someone in those books he wants to kill off. He uses that for inspiration.

“Gideon?” Anson asked.

Our omega shrugged. “I think I might want a movie day. You want to join me?” He turned his steel eyes on Anson.

Anson grinned. “Absolutely. I have a couple errands to run this morning but when we get back, I'm definitely in.”

Gideon smiled. He turned his attention to Reed. “Want to cuddle with me, Reed?”

“Always,” he answered. “My only plans were lounging around today. I'm glad I'll have someone to lounge with.”

“That means Cohen and Felix are going on errands too?” Tristen asked.

I nodded, as did Felix and Anson. Tristen mimicked the motion.

“Where to?” Gideon asked, sitting up with interest.

“Checking on Trinkets and Treasures. We want to see how they're faring for the start of their big month in two days. Then heading over to Anson's restaurant,” I said.

“Bring me home a trinket?” Gideon asked, batting his lashes.

I shook my head, smiling into my plate. Damn man. We'd hand him the sun if he asked for it. And he knew it. There was never a better omega than ours. He loved what he was. Embraced it. Never hid that he was an omega. And had no problem telling us what he wanted. Be it ice cream, hoodies, or knots, Gideon was ready to ask for it.

We tried to anticipate what he wanted and deliver it beforehand. There was nothing like that look of pleasure that covered his face, especially when we got it right. He was happy with any gift, but when it was what he'd been wanting, he was extra excited.

And really, there wasn't a thing he could ask for that we wouldn't deliver. There's been times where we'd all brought him home a variation of the same thing. Our omega might as well have been in heat that night for how relentless he was in demanding knots. So incredibly pleased that we all brought him home exactly what he wanted.

I leaned past Tristen's chest and kissed his lips. "Of course. See you in a bit."

He grinned, nodding.

Anson, Felix, and I headed out. The high rise we lived in was one of four in the town. Even then, it was only eight stories. I wasn't sure why my grandparents allowed them to be built since they were in no way keeping with the small town atmosphere.

Secretly, I think it was because they wanted the view. They wanted to be able to see the cove from their family room and the rest of the town from every single window in their house. That's why we enjoyed our penthouse too. So it wasn't a far stretch of possibility.

There weren't many places in Howling Cove that weren't within walking distance. Unless we had more than a bag to carry, we typically walked to our destination. Since the weather was almost always perfect, the only time we took our vehicles out was to make sure they were running smoothly and didn't get hiccups from being left sitting for too long. As it was, we only had three cars because we just couldn't keep them all running.

The shop was covered in spider webs and these horrifying spiders all over. We stopped when we got close to admire it. The only thing that changed about the front, aside from some custom window clings that directly correlated into the cove, was that they'd put up a vinyl banner under the sign advertising the month-long Halloween festival down at the cove.

"I'll be honest, I thought this was going to look tacky," Felix said. "I was bracing myself to hate it."



I laughed, nodding. “Same. Come on.”

We headed for the door and stepped inside. Right away, we were hit with the new merchandise for the events coming up. There was a little booklet that outlined the festivities. Each page also showed a historic image of somewhere in town as well as a fact to go with it. There were ‘Must see’ places. ‘Must try’ foods. And all sorts of things to bring the tourists throughout the town instead of remaining right here in the cove.

There were keychains, bumper stickers, t-shirts. And then slightly different things like headbands with monster eyes. Beanie hats and headlamps for the night tours. There was even a custom bathing suit for the sandcastle-building contest coming up.

“They thought of everything,” Felix said, impressed.

The first thing I heard was her voice. I stilled as I heard her speaking to a customer. Asking if they were looking for something specific. Suggesting a couple different souvenirs when the customer answered.

I looked up, and my gaze locked on this magnificent creature as if she were an omega. She wasn’t. I didn’t smell her perfume. I didn’t smell anything strong outside of my alphas’ pheromones, which, like mine, had spiked. I would have looked their way to confirm they were seeing the same thing I was, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

Then she looked our way. Her eyes widened and I suddenly got a whiff of her scent. Acerbic hints of raspberries. Wilted gardenias. As if they were on their way to decay. She was frozen in fear. Terrified.

Of us. Of alphas.

The shop was suddenly filled with a growl. I thought it might be mine, but Anson’s filled the air before mine could. It cut off abruptly. He blinked a few times and looked at me, startled. I chuckled, grabbing his wrist to pull him forward.

We stopped a few feet from the counter when the woman took a step backwards, her scent almost suffocating now with

her fear. Linus was behind her. He touched her, wrapping his arm around her waist in comfort.

My gaze dropped to where his hand rested on her hip. This time, it wasn't only Anson's growl that filled the air. Felix was right along with him. I only barely kept mine from bursting forward as I grabbed both of their wrists to tug them away from the counter.

Their growls cut off immediately as soon as Linus took several steps backward, his hands in the air. Showing that he was no longer touching the woman.

I swallowed the angry possessiveness I felt. Glancing at my alphas, I took a tentative step forward, concentrating on the woman's pretty brown eyes. So expressive, filled with terror. If I ever found the alpha that put that there, I would tear him apart. The world would read about him in one of Tristen's books.

"Hi," I said, keeping my voice gentle and easy. Forcing the growl as deep down as I could. "I'm Cohen. This is Anson and Felix." I gestured to each of them.

For a second, I didn't think she'd answer. Linus took a daring step forward. Keeping much of his focus on us, he gently rested his hand on her forearm. "It's okay," he assured her. "They won't hurt you."

That my instincts were right, knowing that an alpha hurt her had my hackles rising until I was nearly rabid. Anson's growl was low on the air. No one spoke until he got it under control.

A minute passed before she answered. "I'm Katiya," she offered, her voice only barely above a whisper.

This was our new employee. The one who was behind all the fun festivities starting. "You've done a remarkable job on these events. We're excited to see them unfold," I told her.

She flushed, bowing her head. Her hands were trembling as she tried to hold them in front of her, locked in a white-knuckled hold. "It's a team effort," she said quietly.

“Kat’s the mastermind,” Linus corrected, squeezing her arm before letting her go. Good that he did. I was barely holding Anson back without moving to physical restraint.

“Is Lana in the office?” I asked.

Linus nodded.

Giving both my alphas one more warning squeeze, I made my way behind the counter. Katiya’s scent spiked with so much fear that I almost turned and pulled her to my chest. My steps faltered. It was a damn struggle to keep moving. Somehow, I managed.

Opening the office door, I quickly stepped inside and shut it behind me, locking her scent out. Fuck, it was potent. Her distress ran deep.

Lana looked up, startled. Then she jumped to her feet with a wide smile. “Hi. I didn’t know you were stopping in today. I’d have had—”

I cut her off, shaking my head. “We were just checking on the new events. How’s it looking?”

The beta grinned. “I hesitate in saying this too loudly, but I think it’s going to be a success. Some events are already gathering a bit of traction online. We’ve got a fully booked first night tour. I dare say we might actually turn a profit on the first time doing this. Katiya is freaking amazing. Did you meet her?”

That Katiya’s scent hadn’t infiltrated the office said that the air filtration system in the shop was damned good. I nodded. “Yes. She’s a little—”

Lana’s smile dropped. Her eyes darted from me to the door as concern covered her face. “Is she okay? Is Linus out there?” She checked her watch.

“She’s terrified of us. What happened to her?”

She sighed, shaking her head. “We noticed right away her fear of alphas. She tries to hide it and push it aside, but her dread is impossible to miss. She hasn’t offered any explanation and we don’t want to push her. We make accommodations

instead and handle the alphas when they come in so she doesn't have to. She's getting better..." Her voice trailed off as she looked at me.

"You don't know what happened to her? Why she's scared of alphas? Is it all alphas?"

Lana nodded. "All alphas. Meg said that she didn't even want to go into the restaurant the other night when she learned it wasn't a beta-only establishment. And then Brooklyn came in, I guess, Meg said Katiya almost ran. You know Brooklyn. I doubt he even looked at her."

Brooklyn was a nice guy. An alpha sampling the betas in town. Trying to woo one of the single omegas, but Liddea was enjoying being single. I won't say he's harmless because alphas just aren't. We're too high-strung to truly be harmless.

"Alright."

"Please, give her a chance. She's so good with the customers and she's a quick learner. And her ideas are brilliant."

Clearly, Lana misunderstood my mood, thinking it was towards Katiya. I smiled, shaking my head. "Easy, Lana. Katiya is safe here. I have no intention of firing her."

She relaxed, nodding.

Lana followed me out. Linus was doing the talking as Katiya nearly hid behind him. I could tell that the beta was struggling to offer Katiya the protection she craved while also trying not to further set off my alphas. Felix had a hold of Anson now since he was ready to bolt over the counter and pull Katiya to him. Smother her until she was no longer afraid.

"We've got so many great things coming," Linus said as I joined my alphas. "Meg and Daxon have been interviewing locals, asking about their family stories and any of their own. We're incorporating them into the town tours. I think you're really going to like them. Will you join one?"

"We will," Felix said. "Absolutely. We're incredibly proud of what you've pulled together in such a short time. I'm sure

this will only grow in the coming years to be one of the best places to be in October.”

“It will be,” Linus said, grinning over his shoulder at Katiya. “Kat’s already got a list of things to do next year for improvements.”

Our attention immediately dropped to Katiya. Her face blanched. She was still trembling, though trying valiantly to keep it under control.

“Keep up the good work, Katiya,” I said, gently pushing my alphas toward the door. It took both Felix and I to move Anson. “We’ll check in again later.”

We didn’t speak as we walked away from the shop. Letting the warm sea breeze fill our lungs and wash away the terrified scent of the new beta.

We stopped at the corner, and Anson looked back, perplexed. “What the fuck just happened? I haven’t felt that way since we met Gideon.”

Felix and I nodded, staring back at the shop with him.

“I think that if we want her to warm up to alphas, we’re going to have to see if we can’t get her to trust one with just as many reservations about them as she has. And someone who’s not all up in your face with growls and suffocating pheromones.”

Anson flinched. “Sorry. I just couldn’t—”

“Don’t be,” Felix said. “I think we all lost it when we realized her fear isn’t of us specifically, but alphas as a whole.”

“Someone did that to her,” Anson said, growling again.

“Come on,” I said, pulling them away from the shop. Ignoring my need to go back and bring her with us. Build her a nest and bathe her in treasures. Worship her like she deserves to be. I shivered, shaking my head. All of that would have to wait. It simply wouldn’t work if she was so scared she couldn’t look at us. “Let’s check out your restaurant so we can go cuddle with our omega.”

Anson's growl was for a different reason now.

# CHAPTER NINE

# KATIYA



I remained jumpy for the rest of Saturday. Every time the door opened, I was expecting the three alphas to walk back in. I was waiting for them to drag me off and use me for whatever they wanted.

No matter how many times I tried to convince myself that it wasn't going to happen here, that these alphas appeared to be different, I wasn't able to successfully convince myself.

When they were out of the shop, Linus pulled me to his chest and held me for a long time. Until I stopped shaking. I felt so foolish. Ready to burst into tears, not just from how humiliated I was, but also because it felt like that old fear was never going to leave me. How was I going to live a successful life if I couldn't even be in the same room with an alpha?

The answer was simple and yet, I wasn't sure it existed. I needed a beta-only town. I should be working at a beta-only company. Why I thought I could pull this off, I wasn't so sure.

"I'm not going to tell you that you have nothing to fear from an alpha," Linus said quietly after I'd regained my composure. He hadn't let me go, even when Lana came out to deal with the customers. "Everyone is entitled to their own particular brand of panic. But I can promise you that you're safe here, Katiya. Those three will never harm you."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Felix is the Chief of Police," he answered.

I was sure that was supposed to be a comfort. But it only filled me with more dread. That didn't read security to me. It



translated to ‘above the law.’

He chuckled. I probably stiffened instead of relaxed as he intended. “Okay. Then all I can tell you is that time will show you that I’m right about them in particular. And furthermore, in Howling Cove, no alpha will ever bother you.”

I wasn’t that trusting. Even knowing that he’s grown up here. He knew these alphas. I just wasn’t confident that when an alpha is faced with something they want, that they wouldn’t take it, no matter the cost. I’ve seen it happen far too many times.

And it always starts with how they looked at me.

Leaving the city, having been of no interest to the alphas there for more than a whim, I thought I was free and clear of an alpha’s appetite. There was what felt like an endless number of alphas in the city, and when they showed no true attention to me, I was sure that it was across the board.

Apparently, that wasn’t the case. And now I was faced with a dilemma. I *can’t* act like that in front of my bosses. That was simply unacceptable. Unprofessional.

Lana stopped at our side, resting a hand on my head. She looked at me with concern but also sympathy. “Don’t make any rash decisions, Kat. Take a breath. I know we haven’t known each other long, but please trust us on this. They won’t hurt you.”

I managed to pull myself together for the rest of the day. Linus walked me home. A note to how concerned he was for me was his lack of flirting. He went so far as to check out my house, assure me that no one was there, and then remained outside until I locked the door. Only then did he leave. I watched him through the front door window as he headed back to the path.

Octavia stepped up next to me.

“You’ve never let him in before,” she noted. “He’s super cute for a beta.”

A hint of roses and sugar trickled through the air before fading. I wondered if she knew she was able to do that. Maybe

she did it on purpose.

When I didn't answer, she moved closer. "Are you okay, Katiya?"

Taking a breath, I nodded. "The alphas who own the shop came in today and I almost wet myself."

She wasn't good about reading tone. She broke into a smile, clapping her hands together. "Oh, tell me all about them!" Nearly jumping, she turned giddy. "I bet they're wonderful."

I looked at her, and her expression fell. She looked confused for a minute before her brows knit together. "Are they nasty mean? Did they treat you horribly? I've heard of alphas being like that."

Sighing, I turned away from the door, shaking my head. "No. They were perfectly fine. Kind. But certainly growly." A shudder raced through me as I remembered their growls filling the air. Had I not already been scared, that would have done it. Growls were not a good thing. They meant bad news no matter when they let the sound out. On the streets. In the classroom. While they were trapping you in a closet.

Octavia didn't answer. She followed me into the kitchen as I went through the motions of making myself a sandwich with some left-over roasted chicken. For my first time roasting chicken, it was pretty good. It probably needed some seasoning, but that would come down the road.



SUNDAY I HAD OFF. It was September 30, the day before our festivities began. I woke up feeling better. Still foolish about the reaction I couldn't control nor take back, but I wasn't feeling quite so dismal today.

“Where are you going?” Octavia asked, pouting as she followed me to the door.

“I haven’t taken the tour yet. Alec, Megan, and I all have today off. So we’ve signed up for the tour that Daxon is leading.”

“Is he an alpha?” she asked, leaning forward with excitement.

“No. He’s a beta. There aren’t any alphas that work at the store.” They just own it.

Octavia sighed. She caught up again as I opened the door. “Can I come with you?”

I paused and looked at her. “I don’t know. Can you?”

Grinning, she stepped outside. “Of course. I’m not bound to the house. I just like it here now that you live in it. But I wasn’t sure that you’d want my company when you go with your friends.”

“Well, I don’t mind that you come. But I don’t think I should talk to you. Unless they all see you, I don’t want them to think I’m crazy and just talking to myself.”

She laughed. “No problem. I’m used to not being answered.”

Ignoring the guilt her words sparked in me, I waited until she was outside and locked the door behind us. She followed in silence as I took the path down to the shop. There was already a crowd gathering in the lot as they waited for it to begin. Alec and Megan were among them, waiting. As I approached, I realized Megan was flirting with who I guessed was a visitor. She batted her lashes and leaned in such a way that the man’s eyes constantly dropped to her amply exposed cleavage.

I stopped at Alec’s side, and he looked at me with amusement. “Sometimes I feel like we need to put her on a leash. Down Megs, down.”

Megan glanced back at him, glaring. Alec grinned, winking in return. She flashed me a smile before turning her

attention back to the beta drooling over her. Seriously, I was sure there was drool gathering in the corner of his mouth.

“There aren’t any alphas here,” Octavia said wistfully. I chanced a glance at her while also trying to determine if anyone else heard or saw her. Hell, I could barely see her. She was washed out nearly completely in the bright sun. Her voice was clear and strong, though.

A man stopped beside us, making Alec grin. Actually, making Alec blush madly. “Alright, I’m adding in a few more stories, just to try them out. Linus is trying a couple new ones later too. We want to gauge reaction. Tell me what you think.”

Alec nodded. “Yep. Have you met Kat yet?”

The man looked at me. He studied my face for a minute before his gaze dropped along my body and landed back at my eyes. Then he smiled. “No. I can see why you’re always talking about her, though.”

Sighing, Alec shook his head. “This is Daxon, Kat. He’s kind of a pain in the ass.”

Daxon’s smile changed as he looked slyly at Alec. “Am I?”

I’ve never seen Alec turn as red as he did just then.

Daxon turned his grin back to me. “My tours don’t live up to Linus or Megan, but I think I do alright. At least you haven’t been on one of theirs, so I won’t disappoint.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I said. “I’m excited to go into the caves.”

He clapped Alec on the arm and turned. On the way by Megan, he swung his hip into hers, flashing her a smile. With a clipboard in his hand, he began making sure everyone was accounted for and paid. I watched as he disappeared inside to drop off the tablet.

While he was gone, I turned my attention to Alec, raising a brow.

He rolled his eyes, a blush still bright on his cheeks. Crossing his arms, he said, “I’ve had a crush on Dax since I

started here. We've recently started messing around."

I grinned.

"Now ask him how long he's worked here," Megan said, tuning into the conversation.

Alec scowled at her. But when I turned to look at him again, he sighed in defeat. "Six years. Yes, it took me that long to grow balls big enough to kind of, poorly, tell him I was interested."

"Aww," I said.

He swatted at me. But at least he was laughing.

"Thankfully for him, Dax knew about Alec's crush and was just waiting it out. He'd flirt relentlessly with Alec, so when Alec finally hinted that he was interested, Daxon took over," Megan said.

"That's cute," I said.

"Oh, good," Alec said. He gripped my shoulders and turned me around as Daxon began gathering the group's attention. "Let's stop talking about this, hm?"

"Yes. Instead, let's all stare at Dax so we can't see Alec ogling him."

I heard the playful slap behind me, and Megan's subsequent laughter followed.

"Alright, are we ready?" Daxon asked. There was a chorus of affirmation. "Great. Welcome to Howling Cove. I don't need to tell you that what draws attention here year round is the phenomenal view. What makes it truly unlike any other place is that there are no less than a hundred different vantage points all around the town, giving you no shortage of breathtaking views. And no two are alike. There's a book inside with all those points and images to wet your whistle that you can check out on when we get back. But for now, let's head on down."

Daxon starts by telling everyone about Ranger Sandview, the beta who was given this massive tract of land by a pack

from the old country. He emphasized how remarkable it was for the time since betas weren't often given land all their own.

“Ranger and his wife, Tilly, loved the cove so much that they named their firstborn Cove. All while the Sandviews were in the area, each generation had a child named Cove,” Daxon said as he brought us to the sand. As soon as everyone was gathered, he turned to face us. “Let’s backtrack a little. Before the Sandview pack was here, there were other peoples that passed through the land. None ever inhabited the area fulltime before what we consider modern society, but one of the earliest cultures that used this land was a people called the Pacsas. There’s a lot of evidence of their hundreds of years of visiting the cove.” He pointed to one of the arches. “See the lines that cross and intersect each other? They make almost the shape of the sun. Can you see it?”

It took me a minute, but with Alec’s help, I made it out. And now that I could see that, I found lots of other carvings within the arch.

“They’re so high up,” someone said. “How did they do that?”

“One of the many questions we’re left with,” Daxon answered. “We know through geology and carbon dating that it wasn’t a matter of the water or sands being higher. That means we’re left with something like ladders. And they’d have used advanced tools for their time of stone carving tools and stone hammers. They’re quite remarkable because of how precise and recognizable they are. What shapes do you see?”

People began calling out their answers. Sun. Stars. Birds. And a whole array of sea life.

“Good,” Daxon said. “Now, what do you think they were noting? What was their purpose behind these carvings?”

Someone suggested that they were just picture taking. Making note of what was here in anticipation of it corroding away. Another said it was ceremonial. Or maybe a map, denoting what resources were in the area.

“All good thoughts. And your ideas are on the lists of scientists and historians as they try to find evidence supporting any one of their theories. But for now, we admire their work and acknowledge that they were the first ones here.”

He led us along the shore, talking about the water and what time of year you could see dolphins and even sharks. I realized it was filler information while we made our way to the next stop. He stood on a flat rock sticking out of the sand by a foot or so.

“Who knows why this spot is significant?” he asked.

“Pirates!” someone yelled.

Daxon grinned, nodding. “Yes. You’ve all read the tale of Alpha Gray Paw, correct?” At the many affirmations in the group, he nodded with them. “Good. But that’s not one I’m going to tell you. Long before Gray Paw, there was a crew who sailed the seas on the Omega’s Perth. The captain is most remarkable, a female alpha known by the name Alpha Pink Dawn. Records suggest she was more ruthless than many other captains. She had to be to keep her crew in line. Yes, she was an alpha, but even back in the day, female alphas were rare and because they were, there was some stigma against them. That didn’t stop Dawn from being a successful pirate. Some sources claim that she led the era with most in quantity and in goods campaigns against towns and other ships. Who can guess why this spot is significant?”

“This is the new piece. Alpha Pink Dawn,” Megan whispered. “It’s good stuff.”

Many guesses filled the air, Daxon affirming and denying them as they went. But no one hit on the full story.

“Okay, okay. I’ll just tell you. It’s said that a massive storm beached Dawn’s flagship right here. This rock was the one responsible for tearing a massive hole into it. The crew was stranded at Howling Cove for more than a month as they waited for more ships to come get them. In that time, they tore apart the ship, unloaded its valuables, and hid them in the caves. We know all of this to be true. Every piece. Because we’ve found evidence of each. Much of the debris of Dawn’s

ship is found just offshore here, the alpha having ordered it all dragged out to sea so that the water would destroy its secrets. Nevertheless, pieces of the wreckage are still there, including three of her cannons, an anchor, and several still intact bits of mast. You can rent scuba gear and check them out at your leisure. There's also places within town that have Dawn's mark. She was known to leave a signature behind at the places she liked. And to set those on fire that she didn't. But perhaps one of the most extraordinary things supporting Dawn's short-lived residence in Howling Cove is one of the coffers that was found eighty years ago. The box had Dawn's signature and was filled to the brim with ill-gotten gains."

There was a moment of excitement that passed through the group. Beside Alec, Megan, and I, an older couple was pretty upset that they hadn't known about this treasure. And when Daxon suggested that the stories say there are at least six other coffers somewhere, the couple took out their phones and frantically began typing away.

I looked at Alec. He watched them with a brow raised.

Daxon stopped a couple more times, telling more stories of things I hadn't known yet. Things that the book hadn't hinted at to this point. The stories were fascinating.

But perhaps not quite as intriguing as the caves. We went past several places that were barred. Each time I noted the couple spending extra time studying the bars that prevented us from going in.

"They're suspicious," Octavia said. "I'm not sure of what, but something."

She was once again mostly visible as she frowned at the old couple. Eventually, Daxon noticed them poking around the bars.

"Does anyone know why there are sections of these caves unavailable to the public?" he asked.

The couple immediately stepped away from the bars.

"They're unsafe?" Megan asked, all innocent-like.



“Yes. Most of the caves that are blocked off have sections that have collapsed in recent years. This one in particular is responsible for a death because of one such collapse. The town now takes extra care of the caves, conducting inspections monthly to make sure that it’s safe enough for us to walk through without getting hurt.”

He moved us along. Alec, Megan, and I hung back, watching the couple. They looked suspiciously down the dark, barred crevice until they saw us watching. The woman smiled.

“We’re treasure hunters,” she said. “We travel the world for adventures and usually the barred places are where we find things.”

“That’s all well and good,” Megan said, “but you should know that this isn’t actually public property. It’s privately owned and if you’re seen snooping where you shouldn’t, the owners are not afraid to press hefty charges.”

The couple attempted to look all innocent, excusing their previous trespassing as they hurried after the group.

“We’ll report them to Lana when we get back,” Megan said.

“The caves are really privately owned?” I asked as we began moving again.

“Yes,” Alec said. I expected him to say that the big pack, Jameson, owned it. The ones who owned the shop. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I waited for the words. “The descendants of Pack Sandview still own the cove and the caves.”

That surprised me. “Seriously? As in, the owner of the house I live in? Hugo?”

He laughed, wrapping an arm around me. “Yes. Most of the pack has since moved away. Only Hugo and one of his cousins, a more direct line to the pack, remain in Howling Cove.”

“Huh,” I said. I took another glance into the barred path as Alec led me away. And my heart stopped cold as a figure stood behind the bars watching me. Another ghost. There was

something about this one that didn't look harmless like Octavia. I was chilled to the bone as we passed him.

# CHAPTER TEN

# KATIYA



Today's event was a scavenger hunt around the town. There was an entry fee to receive the card with the clues. And there were two dozen clues! Everyone who finished received a t-shirt and an entry into the grand-prize event, which was 50% of the proceeds of the event. I wasn't working the morning shift, but I still hung around the shop just to see how it was going.

The alphas hadn't been back, though I'd heard through Lana that they were allowing me whatever overtime I wanted. But there was also a strong warning not to overdo it. They understood that I worked hard on it and wanted to be there for the entire thing, but they didn't want me burned out.

I could tell when Lana was telling me about the conversation that there was a smile she was trying to cover. I had no idea why or what she was getting at. So, I chose which days had the events that I felt that I really wanted to be a part of. The scavenger hunt wasn't one of them. It basically ran itself. However, I wanted to go on the first nighttime tour with Linus.

Tomorrow would be the first day I was going to take advantage of overtime. It was the first real big event—sand sculptures. But it wasn't just any sandcastle building contest. Everything had to have a story and tie directly in with the cove.

I was particularly proud of this because I managed to book some real sandcastle judges for minimal fees and somehow stumbled upon some big marketing outlets for sandcastle

competitions. We had almost forty teams signed up. For the first time, that seemed pretty incredible to me.

There was also a food truck tour stopping by for lunch. And if that wasn't enough, we hired a drinks girl to sell alcohol beginning at noon. Since the event began at noon, this was perfect timing. I guess the owners of the shop held a contract for the entire cove and a liquor license. Who knew?!

We were also gaining a lot of attention as far as gathering crowds to watch. Already today, Alec said that many people who joined the scavenger hunt were here for the competition tomorrow. And since they were in the area, they thought they'd try their luck with the hunt.

I was glad that we alternated the bigger, more catchy events with some of the smaller ones. Since lodging was quickly booked, people were staying for longer periods of time and the hotels were shipping them our way. It was a symbiotic relationship—our events were earning them business, and so whatever business that wasn't due to our events they were putting a bug in their ear for us.

So, while everyone was doing their thing, I took up residence in one of the comfortable chairs outside and studied next week's lineup of events. Towards the end of the week, there were a few things that I wanted to expand on that wouldn't cause any major hold up in what we already had. Nor cost much more money.

Next week we had an enormous screen being strung across one of the arches and we were holding a kind of drive-in event. No cars, but you could pay to take up a spot on the beach to watch the movie.

We booked catering from nearby restaurants, too. \$10 was the cost for the movie only. \$25 was the movie, a charcuterie board, and some wine. \$30-65 included the movie and a full-blown meal. Depending on the price point per person, dictated what level of meals you had the option to choose from.

Although \$10 was the price point for just the movie, we had a pre-purchase 'upgraded' lounge option. Wicker chairs, cushions, little tables to eat with, etc. Otherwise, it was bring

your own seating. We also made sure our towels and blankets were well stocked within the store for any last-minute purchases.

The reception to this was huge, and I had kind of considered this a lower end thing. But it was attracting many locals too. There was talk around the store that maybe we should do this on a regular basis if it went over well. It cost us relatively little, considering what we'd bring in.

One of the events I was incredibly excited about was the pumpkin carving challenge. What Halloween event could you really have without this challenge? And the carved pumpkins would be littered around town too.

We had a hay bale maze that was being set up around the old meetinghouse. We also had a water obstacle course coming up in a couple weeks. All of these were geared towards both Halloween and the cove in various ways. Even if they weren't evident at first glance.

There were costume contests. Trunk decorating contests. Historic haunts. We had boatloads of pumpkins coming in from a nearby farm, and we were dressing the beach up like a pumpkin patch. There was a haunted house tour, both with actors and actual hauntings in the area.

And the first big benefit was a murder mystery dinner. We spent a lot of time putting it together. It was scheduled for halfway through October and the story was based on historical events that took place right here in town. I think I was the most excited about this. We had so much fun researching the characters and putting the entire thing together.

When I didn't find anywhere that I could add anything more without really restructuring things, I made a few notes but put my list away. I could probably spend days building this event. There was just so much fun to expand on. Things I've only seen on television, read in books, or glimpsed online. I now had my chance to live it.

But expanding on the incredible things that I had lined up in my mind vying for attention would need to wait for another time. I stuffed the notebook into my bag and pulled out the

book that Lana had given me about the history of the cove. I still hadn't made it through the book.

That's not to say I wasn't still learning. We've spent a lot of time researching different aspects of the cove and the town to build up a lot of our events. It was all so fascinating that I wanted to read everything I could get my hands on. I was beginning to think I needed a roommate to share some expenses so I could afford things like ebooks and stuff.

Thankfully, the library was close, and I was prepared to utilize it a lot once I made it through the books at the store. I spread the pages to where I'd last left off.

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*The cove has been inhabited by our early ancestors for several hundred years. But before that, the indigenous people passed through often, choosing to never build a settlement in the area. That doesn't mean they were never here.*

*One of the early groups passed through every calendar year on the summer solstice. It was a tradition, a custom in their culture passed down through generations. As Howling Cove was occupied, this group continued to visit, disapproving that man was disturbing the land.*

*They would step inside the caves and locals claimed they simply vanished after that.*

*For years, the group refused to speak about their visits and why they made the trip from the country's interior. Why they would never inhabit the land.*

*After Howling Cove had been established in the 1700s, one young man relayed their ancestry, though locals believed it wasn't the whole story.*

*He reported that there are spirits in the cave. Old, powerful water spirits. Deep within the caves in areas difficult to reach are blessed pools and springs where the great spirits once bathed. Every year, the group would pay their respects to the spirits, making offerings and giving thanks.*

*In return, the spirits would bless the tribe with bountiful harvests and protections from beyond the veil of life and death. But only with the agreement that they did not sully the land. It was to remain fresh, healthy, clean, and unbroken.*

*Increasingly, as the years passed, the indigenous group became more and more irritable about the settlement and tried to warn them away. Warn them that nature was unhappy. That the spirits were getting angry that the new settlers were polluting the land.*

*One year, the indigenous people stopped visiting altogether. There are rumors that state that it is because the great spirits stopped being appreciated, that their messengers now roam within*

*the cave. And thus, they howl a warning when they are particularly agitated.*

*But there are other stories associated with the spirits. Different peoples that used to frequent the area would tell of tales where the great spirits returned to their own realm. In thanks to the groups that watched over their springs, they'd be given the gifts of many fine gems and jewels.*

*Most of the stories of treasure gifted from the spirits could never be backed up with any kind of evidence. Except one piece of jewelry found within the cave more than a hundred years ago. The work of the metal cast has been dated back to more than 800 years. But the jewel set within has not been identified as something having been formed within the earth.*

*Unfortunately, the item was stolen from the museum and has never been recovered.*

---

I looked up when someone tapped my foot on their way by. Daxon grinned. "You coming, Kit Kat?"

"Is it time?" I asked, stuffing my bookmark back in and closing the book.

"Yep. You ready for the night tour?"

"I'm soooo excited about it. I hope we see some ghosts!"

He chuckled. Holding open the door, Daxon waited for me to go inside before following me. It was the busiest I've ever seen it. There was always a steady stream of customers in the souvenir shop, but it was rare that there were this many at once. Business was hopping. I was thrilled to know that it had something to do with me. My ideas were partially responsible for this.

I moved behind the counter. Between customers, the temporary employee Henry saluted me. It was the end of his shift and one of the other temps would be in to take over the register soon. Tonight, it was Lana, Linus, me, Eliza, and Jessica. Eliza and Jessica were on customer duty within the store. Their sole function was booking tours, cashing out, and restocking when there was time.

Lana was remaining there to supervise and help where need be. I would be doing the same, but I was anxious to see the night tour. We had headlamps and flashlights to explore the caves with! We had even added the cemetery, three of the



nearby haunted locations—including the meetinghouse!—and I was beside myself with excitement for this.

Who would have thought that hauntings would be right up my alley? Probably due to the fact that there was a resident ghost in my rented house.

We would be running three night tours four nights a week. Thursday through Sunday, there would be seven, nine, and eleven o'clock tours added to the docket. And for our very first go-round, Linus, our expert guide, was leading the way. I think Megan was stopping by for the first tour too, just so she could see what he was adding. They seemed to try to one-up each other but they also played off each other really well. Learning from each other and perfecting their facts.

There were more than three dozen people in the store and though I probably should have been doing something useful, I stared in awe at all the activity. Linus was by the door with his tablet, booking tours and answering questions about the area.

Eliza and Jessica were manning both registers. There were two but the second was only ever active when it was busy. Lana was trying to keep things on the shelves. She mumbled here and there about needing to hire someone strictly for stock.

I meant to help her but there was a group of three teenagers hanging by the window whispering. Inching closer, I tried to listen to what they were saying. Just to be nosey. Gossip wasn't something that I had ever been privy to growing up. All I wanted then was to stay off of everyone's radar. Alphas, betas, and omegas alike.

"My cousin said she saw something in one of the locked tunnels," one of them said. I busied myself wiping off the counter as I listened.

"Like a ghost?"

My heart thundered at the question. I hadn't mentioned the ghost I'd seen. Not even to Octavia, though I was dying to know if she'd seen him. Did she see other ghosts? I just realized that perhaps I had overlooked one of the most

valuable resources at my disposal by not asking the ghost who'd lived and died here about the history she knew.

“No, it wasn't a ghost. He said the thing was solid. It wasn't human, though.”

One of them scoffed. “Don't tell me they're trying to convince you that the monster is real.”

“Real,” the one confirmed. “He saw it with his own eyes.”

“He's just trying to scare you into wetting the bed.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “I don't really care if you believe it or not. I've lived here my entire life, unlike you transplants. The stories here are real.”

“Sure. Real and exaggerated. Come on, Sage. There's no proof or evidence of monsters existing in the world. Those are for romance novels and scary movies.”

The one named Sage shrugged. “Whatever. I'm going on the tour tonight and I sure as fuck hope that there's something there. I don't care about proving shit to you. But I'd love to see it. That's our heritage.”

I jumped when the phone rang, knocking over the broom leaning against the wall behind me. The girls looked at me, giggling. I smiled back, waving at my clumsiness.

Since everyone else was busy, I reached for the phone.

“Howling Cove Trinkets and Treasures. This is Katiya.”

“Hello, Katiya.”

The voice on the other end sent chills down my spine. I'd literally only heard this man speak once. The day he came in with the other two alphas and nearly made me quit on the spot because I was so childishly afraid of them. But I didn't need him to tell me who was calling. Even the single time he spoke, I would never forget the voice.

But he was over the phone. Not here. I took a breath and straightened my shoulders, walking out back to try to reduce the background noise. “Hello, Mr. Jameson.”

He chuckled, a sound that definitely did not make my knees shake. I narrowed my eyes as I leaned against the wall.

“Anson. There are far too many of us to stick with Mr. Jameson.”

I nearly asked how many. But I was already told that, right? Pack Jameson had five alphas and an omega. I nodded, though he didn't see it.

“Did you need Lana? She'll be happy for the break from stocking,” I volunteered.

“No. Actually, I'm calling for you.” His pause made me shiver again. Fuck.

Every fear I've ever had concerning alphas spiked through me something fierce. This was it. He was going to demand that I present myself to him. For his pleasure. His use. His disposal. “Okay,” I whispered, my voice shaking.

“Tomorrow is the sand sculpting contest. Correct?” he asked.

I nodded again. “Yes,” I whispered.

“Good. Are all the details set? Vendors? Contestants? Prizes? Is there anything outstanding?”

Taking a breath and trying not to swallow my tongue, I answered. “This is the first one I've ever put together, but with everything I found online, I think we're all set. I confirmed everything yesterday, speaking to someone in person when I was able. Everything arrived on time too. We have official buckets and shovels and sculpting tools that the judges suggested us stocking for backup, ready to go. Towels, bathing suits, sunscreen. Lana is planning to get out all the specific souvenirs for this event later tonight, so they're ready for tomorrow.”

“And I assume you'll be working all day?”

I hesitated, unsure what answer he wanted. “Yes. Is that okay?”

“Of course. But, Katiya. I don't want you doing anything off the clock. You will be compensated for all your hard work.

Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Including the time you spend outside on the patio outside of your scheduled work time pouring over plans for upcoming events?”

I blinked several times. How had he known that? I turned around, waiting to see him around the corner. My heart raced dramatically as every shadow in the back room came alive.

He chuckled. “Lana is keeping me apprised of how dedicated you are.”

Relaxing, I took a breath. I don’t need to be so dramatic. He’s not here stalking me.

“Okay, not those times. But to be fair, I was just looking at the schedule. I didn’t actually do anything to it.”

“Because you don’t think you have enough time or resources to add to an upcoming event?”

My mouth opened, ready to argue. Then to accuse him of reading my mind. “How did you—”

“You’re exactly the kind of person we adore, Katiya. Dedicated, hard-working, and excited about what they’re doing. I know because I’m the same way. When I’m not working, I’m still working.”

I sighed. “This is the first job I’ve had that I’m enjoying,” I admitted.

“I’m very pleased to hear that. We’d like to keep it that way, so I’m demanding that you take a minimum of two complete days off each week. Am I clear? This is for your own mental health and wellbeing. And you will clock every minute that you put in so that I can make sure you’re properly compensated. These are non-negotiable points, Kat.”

I smiled, despite myself. My heart jumped. Did he just call me Kat? Did I like the way it sounded in his voice?

“Katiya?”

“Yes, Mr. Jameson.”

“Anson. No more Mr. Jameson, either.”

“Okay, Anson.”

“I’ll accept alpha too, I suppose. But I much prefer my name. Can you do that for me?”

His voice had dropped to something sweet and sugary. Smooth. Hypnotic. Sexy. I shivered for an entirely different reason. “Yes, alpha,” I whispered. “Anson.”

I could hear his purr through the receiver. “Good girl.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## REED



I wasn't totally convinced that I wanted to go to the sand castle building thing today. But they were pretty insistent on wanting me to go. It wasn't often that Anson tried to get me out to do something other than clothing things. The only reason I didn't put up more of a fuss was because it was in support of his business.

The thing that had me truly curious as to why he wanted me to go with him, Felix, and Cohen was because Tristen and Gideon were staying behind. I was sure they were invited, but both opted to stay in. When I tried to stay behind, Anson went into 'need to convince Reed' mode and promised me a whole slew of things.

I narrowed my eyes on the three of them as we climbed into the elevator without Gideon and Tristen. All three offered me their charming smiles.

Once, I'd have been all over these alphas. But life has a way of changing things. It's a cruel bitch that even an alpha can't always run away from.

But I can admit that I've come a long way. I mean, shortly after my disposal, being anywhere near an alpha made me hysterical. And now, I was in a pack with four. And there was nothing soft about them. They were all alpha.

Felix offered me his hand. Frowning, I took it, and he pulled me to his side. "I swear, there's a reason, but I don't want to make it overly obvious. I want you to be natural."

"That's real reassuring."

“The town knows to leave you alone. I promise that we’ll make sure everyone who isn’t part of Howling Cove knows to as well.”

“Discretely, of course,” Cohen added.

I sighed, leaning into Felix’s side. See? I’d come a long way. I could take comfort in these alphas. Could trust them. I *did* trust them.

Per usual, we walked down to the shore. The high rise we lived in was less than two miles away from it. But even this far away, I could feel the difference in the air. The excitement. The streets were crowded with people. The storefronts and parks were filled with Halloween decorations. I’d be wary if this wasn’t my town. I’ve lived here a long time, so it was hard not to know it. To feel it as home.

That is to say, until we came into view of the shoreline. Parking was banned anywhere near the shore unless it was a delivery to one of the few businesses that were permitted there. The only exception today was the line of food trucks.

Even with them, they weren’t obstructing the view. They parked in a ring lining the sunken parking lot of their shop. Their shop that was both comically and tactfully covered in cottony spiderwebs.

“That’s cute,” I said.

“It is,” Anson agreed.

I studied the shop for several minutes before the vast amount of people nearly took my breath away. There were huddles and throngs and all sorts of words describing a lot of bodies. I hesitated, my feet dragging all on their own.

Felix wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “It’s really important that you join us, Reed.”

“I think you’re manipulating me into something and not telling me,” I told him.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

I glared at him, crossing my arms. Cohen moved behind me, resting his forehead against the back of my hair. “Really,



really important,” he said. “I swear to you, if it wasn’t, we wouldn’t be going to such lengths to get you here.”

“But you don’t want me to know what it is,” I confirmed.

“We don’t want your judgment and reaction skewed, correct,” I said.

“We want your natural response. Regardless of the outcome, we’ll come clean when we leave today,” Anson said.

Sighing, I let them move me forward again. It’s not that crowds bothered me. It’s that crowds of unknown people that were likely lined with stranger alphas bothered me. They made me nervous. And sometimes, when I felt threatened, my response was not pleasant.

I haven’t had to suffer through that in years. Howling Cove got to know me and I it. We were a family. I could even stand to be around the handful of lone alphas as well as the other packs from time to time.

Because everyone knew Reed Jameson was to be left alone. There are dire consequences that my pack enforced if I wasn’t. I wasn’t even sorry about it.

It took a lot of internal pep talks to get my feet to move forward. Especially as we got closer. Thankfully, outside, the many, many scents wafting around were mostly washed away on the breeze.

My alphas brought me through the masses to a vantage point off to the side where we could hear Linus call the shots and see the crowds. It was almost time for the next event to begin. People were gathered around the beach, herded behind caution tape that the police maintained and supervised. I think part of the reason Felix was here wasn’t just to support Cohen’s shop, but to make sure that there wasn’t an incident that his officers couldn’t handle.

I remained tucked within my three alphas and watched as the teams, complete with marathon numbers pinned to them, gathered in front of Linus on a podium with a microphone. I didn’t think the man needed a microphone. He had one of

those voices that could carry without yelling. But then, there was an enormous crowd here.

“This is impressive,” I said. “And organized.”

I didn’t miss the way all three of them smiled, pride shining through their eyes. Not as if I were complimenting them, but Gideon. Proud of their omega.

Curious.

“Alright, alright. Everyone settle,” Linus said into the microphone. Unsurprisingly, the voices quieted. They didn’t turn silent because people aren’t that perfect. “Welcome to the first annual Haunted Howling Cove October Fest, official name pending.”

There were cheers. I found myself smiling, clapping with the crowd. The excitement was palpable. Contagious.

“Here are the rules: the teams have the rules, so I won’t bother everyone else about them. However, we’re adding something special to this event. Because the brains behind it is ever-thinking of ways to improve what is already perfect, including her cute little self, we’ve decided to add the purchase of tickets by the crowd. These tickets will allow you an escorted tour from within the competition arena to get a closer look at the sculptures while they’re being made. You’ll be able to see the masters at work. Are you excited?”

I hadn’t missed any of my alphas’ quiet growls in the middle of his announcement. Felix and Cohen were quick to swallow theirs. Anson took a second longer. I eyed them all, curious about which part of that set them off. I received grins in return.

Huh.

“There are a handful of employees that you’ll find stationed throughout the property. They’re wearing orange shirts that say Howling Cove Event Staff. They have tablets. They can take your payment, book a whole variety of tours, including the sandcastle escort, and give you as much information as your little heart desires. Also, for the next several hours, there’s a host of food trucks stationed in the

parking lot. There will also be beverage ladies and gents wandering around, able to offer you a drink. Don't forget to visit the Howling Cove Trinkets and Treasures for a list of events you're not going to want to miss this month and a whole array of unique souvenirs. Lastly, the path heading up the cliff is off-limits. Be mindful of the 'no trespassing signs. Much of this area down here is historic, private property. Now, for the moment we've been waiting for. Are you ready to see the masters at work?"

I jumped with the loud cheering, not at all expecting that level of enthusiasm. I looked around, amazed. How many people had turned up for this?

"Builders, prepare your buckets and shovels. You will have six hours to create your Howling Cove historic sculpture. The competition begins in ten. Nine. Eight." The crowd began counting down with him. After one, he hit a horn on his phone, pressing it to the mic. And the competitors were off.

"I'm not even sure 'impressive' covers this," I said as I watched two groups of competitors moving to their designated sandy areas and frantically begin moving sand around. "This is seriously something."

"Isn't it?" Cohen almost cooed.

I watched them for a while before turning back to the podium. Beside Linus was a beautiful beta with chocolate hair and a big smile. She was stunning, her hair sweeping about her in the beach breeze. Her lips were perfectly rosy as she spoke to Linus. She was animated, holding a clipboard to her chest.

But when he touched her, his fingers brushing her jaw, I nearly jumped out of my shoes to get to her and rip his hand off. I was so focused on my own reaction, surprised by the sudden possessiveness that rose in me, that I missed that of my alphas around me.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Katiya," Cohen answered. "My newest full-time employee."

The answer didn't seem to satisfy anything in me. I was still filled with questions. Questions that the only acceptable answer to would be 'mine.'

I watched her almost obsessively while she spoke to Linus. And every time Linus touched her, the urge to bury him in the sand or drown him in the ocean was strong. So strong that Felix's hand was almost permanently around mine, keeping me in place.

What felt like days later, Linus left Katiya at the podium as he headed to talk to someone else. Actually, I didn't know what he was doing. I didn't even care. She was alone.

Without thought, I was moving toward her. The closer I got, the more enamored I was. How had this girl escaped my attention? How was the entire town not buzzing about her? She was beautiful, with long lashes and big eyes. A shapely body. My hands itched to bring her to me.

She looked up when I stepped onto the platform. Katiya stilled, her breath catching. I could see her smelling the air, studying me. I waited for her to relax. For her to see that I wasn't threatening. That she was mine.

Okay, maybe she wouldn't see that last part yet. But I wouldn't be leaving here today until she did.

"Hello," she said, her shoulders relaxing marginally. "Can I help you?"

"Yes." But then I had nothing to follow that up with. "You planned this."

Katiya smiled shyly. "I had a lot of help. Are you from Howling Cove?"

She didn't know who I was. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Nodding, I chanced taking a step closer. The breeze rushed by, and I caught the scent of raspberries and gardenia. Two very different flavors but they lit me up so thoroughly I was almost humming.

Not to be confused with purring. I rarely did that.

“Yes,” I answered, deciding that I was going to let the question come first. Volunteering who I was didn’t seem like it was going to get me anywhere. Not with her initial reaction upon seeing me. “I’m Reed.”

She nodded. “Katiya. Are you supposed to be behind the barriers, Reed?”

Did I imagine the teasing in her voice? Or the hint of a smile on her lips? I didn’t care if I did. I wanted to see it. “Yes. I assure you, the owners do not care if I’m back here.”

“Pack Jameson, you mean?” she asked.

I nodded. “The very one.”

This time, she smiled. The disarming, enchanting movement of the corner of her lips. My eyes were drawn to them, and I found myself licking mine. When I managed to drag my gaze back to hers, I found her cheeks tinted pink. I almost groaned.

Fuck, where has this girl been all my life?

“I suppose if you’re allowed to be back here, would you like to accompany me on a walk-through?” she asked.

My gods, I wanted a whole lot more than that. I could now think of several other uses for these caves. Blinking away my unwarranted thoughts (there would be time for them later), I nodded, offering her a bright smile. “Yes. I’d love that.”

I’m not at all ashamed to say that I followed Katiya around through much of the day. It didn’t take me long to note that she was afraid of alphas. When there was an alpha on one of the teams, she kept herself as far removed from them as she possibly could. Likewise, she avoided my alphas like the plague.

I was right in my instinct not to offer that I was part of Pack Jameson. It was a risk, but it wasn’t hard to see that she would completely disregard me if I were to be completely upfront right away. I would be. This girl was mine. I just needed to earn her trust first.

My alphas and I remained throughout the competition. I brought Katiya food from the trucks and kept her stocked with water throughout the day. She even allowed me to spread sunscreen on her nose and shoulders.

Only as I left her while everyone was clearing out, securing myself a date with the beautiful beta, did I start to feel a little guilty. If she knew what I was, she wouldn't have agreed.

Absently, I rested my hand over the ring on my upper arm, hidden by the sleeve of my shirt. The miraculous little device that tamed my scent until it was nearly that of a beta's. Subtle. Muted. It didn't change my particular scent, but made it pack not quite a punch in the gut as an alpha's tends to, so I could pass as a beta.

It helped that I kept my physique as unimpressive as I could convince myself. Boring. Unnoticeable. Uninteresting. Not attractive, though not unattractive.

"She's going to be mad," I said as we stepped inside the elevator.

"Good news," Cohen said, and I turned my attention to him, wondering what that had to do with what I just said. He was smiling, though. They all were. "Your reaction to the beta is the same as ours."

"Katiya is why you wanted me there?" I asked, astonished.

All three of them nodded.

"I'm sure you picked up on her fear of alphas," Felix said.

I nodded. It was hard to miss.

"We weren't going to get anywhere near her, but you, sweet alpha, can," Felix said. "And you don't even have to pretend to be anything you're not."

Stuffing my hands in my pockets, I turned my back on them to face the door. "I pretend I'm something I'm not daily. It's a constant lie I present to the world."

"Not true," Anson said. He gently wrapped his arms around me and rested the side of his head against mine.

“You’re not hiding from anyone. You’re making yourself comfortable in your own skin. No one questions that you’re alpha.”

“Except Katiya,” I said. “You understand how this is going to backfire, right?”

“It doesn’t have to,” Cohen said, nuzzling the other side of my face. “You just have to be yourself and be honest. I’m sure it will come up soon and you can explain, in as much or as little detail as you like, why you suppress your scent.”

“I think you’ll be able to win her over with your mutual distrust of alphas,” Felix said.

I took a breath. Today was instinct. I couldn’t leave there without a guarantee that I’ll see her again. But I wasn’t going to lie to myself and pretend this was going to be a happily ever after.

# CHAPTER TWELVE



# KATIYA



I knew Reed was not what he was pretending to be. There was something about his scent. It wasn't beta. The tenor of flavors was all wrong for that. Besides, I could smell the suppressor on him.

Once, I met an omega in the city who had managed to come across one. They had a slightly metallic tang mixed in with their natural scent. However, she went unnoticed for a long time using it. The way it stomped down her perfume, and the fact that everyone was always filled with such fear, resentment, and desperate sorrow, no one noticed her.

Until her heat came on. Then she disappeared.

In the city, omegas were auctioned like livestock to packs there when they weren't readily traded amongst themselves. I had the misfortune of witnessing one. It was something I'll never forget. And it reinforced that I was lucky that I wasn't an omega. They were guaranteed to be owned by an alpha in the city.

That meant I was fairly confident that Reed was an omega. I caught the whiff of that metallic tang coming off him from time to time. However, his natural perfume was a little odd for omegas. They were usually in the sweet range. Reed's was robust, but quiet because of the suppression.

He was certainly taller than an average omega. Even a male one, I thought. I was fairly certain that their average height was somewhere just over five and a half feet. But Reed was taller than that. Maybe close to a male beta's height.

I had to remind myself that average meant that there were going to be exceptions. It wasn't a rule.

Reed was sweet. Genuinely kind. And he knew all about Howling Cove. He answered questions with me when someone would ask. The way he looked at me was almost with reverence.

I've never been looked at that way. By anyone. It was the sweetest thing I'd ever seen. The way he took care of me, making sure I ate and stayed hydrated. Assuring that I didn't get sunburnt. He even came back with a flower for me at one point that he stuck in my hair.

When the night ended and he asked me on a date for later in the week, my stomach was filled with butterflies. It wasn't long ago that I thought perhaps I wanted someone to be interested in me. But then I got so caught up with this October festivities excitement that it was all pushed aside. I'd forgotten about it.

The friends I gained were enough to satisfy the itch for comradery. People to talk to. To hang out with. To gossip with, though I still wasn't in on all the gossip. I didn't know enough people yet to truly enjoy what that meant.

And now, maybe I had a romance.

"You're smiling again," Octavia said.

I was. I could feel it in my cheeks. It felt as if one was permanently plastered on my face since I met Reed. I hadn't seen him again, but there were no less than three sweet little gifts each day from him, telling me he was thinking about me.

Taking a breath, I tried to wipe the silly expression from my face. "We're doing a movie on the beach tonight. You coming?"

Octavia lit up. "Yes!"

"Good. Everyone will begin to gather an hour before sundown. You should head down then. Okay?"

"Is that man you're smiling about going to be there?" she asked, batting her lashes.

I rolled my eyes. At least she couldn't see the way my stomach turned. God, I hoped so. "I doubt it. But we have a date tomorrow night."

Octavia screeched in excitement. "You're going to be courting!? Oh, Katiya, I'm so, so, so excited. I simply can't wait."

The way she carried on made it seem like she was the one getting ready for a date. I let her talk, listening to her reminisce about her own courting and the alphas who had tried for her.

"I was too late to tell them yes before I tragically died," she said, her voice filling with sorrow. "They were so heartbroken too. I know I shouldn't be happy, but they never did find another omega to replace me."

"People aren't replaceable, Octavia," I told her. "Even if they had found an omega for their pack, they wouldn't have been someone to take your place."

"That's sweet of you to say."

"So, I'll see you later?" I asked as I stepped out the door.

"Yes. I will be down at the beach right before nightfall to watch the movie."

Nodding, I headed out. Locking my ghost inside. On the way down the path, I reflected on how she was both grief stricken and bitter about her death. Being the only ghost I've ever known, I wasn't sure if that was normal. It seemed like it should be. Right?

"Hey, Kat," Alec called, standing within the bed of a truck. "You're just in time to start setting up the beach."

As it turned out, the upgraded seating went over with popularity. And thus, we rented furniture as promised. Daxon was there as well, with a map of how we were setting up the beach. We had a professional company in town setting up our enormous screen within the dome of the largest stone arch. And then another company that was setting up the projector and sound system so everyone could hear it clearly.

After the first few events on the beach, my legs ached with muscles I hadn't known I had. It takes a particular muscle group to be able to maneuver on the constantly sifting sand. I could still feel the echo of aches and pains within my body as we began moving furniture. If nothing else, October's activities were going to make me buff.

I nearly giggled at myself as the three of us moved furniture down to the sand and began arranging based on the diagram we made yesterday.

The afternoon went by quickly as we set lanterns down all around, staking specially designed blankets into the sand and adding a battery operated lantern on them. We were also dropping reservation tags so there was no question where everyone was sitting. This would also make it easier for the wait staff to deliver the proper meal where it needed to be.

This had initially been intended for a cheap, no hassle thing. Easy to pull off and not requiring a lot of effort. Something to fill the day with. I think in my mind I saw a big white sheet stretched taut across the stone and everyone sitting on the beach with folding chairs, beach blankets, and popcorn.

What we had set up was phenomenal.

"This is remarkable."

I froze at the words. As if I needed the assurance, the alpha's earthy lemongrass scent filled my lungs. Though taking a deep breath only brought his particular fragrance deeper into me, I tried to let the sea air clear my head before I turned to face him.

Cohen was a rockstar in a suit. His hair was sandy blond on the long side. His eyes were a light grassy green. For some reason, their shade reminded me of the lemongrass he smelled like. But it wasn't just lemongrass. He had the unique touch of iris mixed in. Flowers weren't normal within an alpha's scent range, but there was something enchanting about the pairing.

"Thank you," I said. "We're pleased with how it turned out."

Cohen was still taking in everything we were having set up. Daxon and Alec were still fiddling with the right placing of furniture, making sure no one's view was obstructed. It wouldn't be, even if they were right on top of each other. The screen was enormous. But their fussing with the details made me really appreciate them.

"You've done amazing, Katiya," he said, his warm voice turned on me.

I shivered, taking a subtle step backwards. "Thanks. I really can't take all the credit."

"Not for the details, I agree. You've had some remarkable help. But for the overall event, you can take the credit. We wouldn't have done this if you hadn't suggested it."

A smile touched my lips. "I always wanted to be a part of something like this."

"Event planning? As much as I'd hate to lose you at the shop, I know some people that can make that happen."

This time I smiled outright and earned one in return. "No, Mr. Jameson. I like working at the shop. I just mean—I don't know. A place with so much teamwork. Where everyone is passionate about their job. Where we have fun and work, and are supported by management to do something new and different."

"Cohen," he corrected. "No Mr. Jameson. And I'm relieved that you don't want to leave the shop. You're an asset beyond measure. I count my blessings daily and can't help but wonder what fool let you go."

My job was assigned in the city. I was nothing more than a convenience store clerk. If I was missed for anything when I ran, it was because my position wasn't filled at work.

"Are you staying for the movie?" I asked.

"Of course. Felix and Anson will be here later. I wish I could have arranged for my entire pack to come out, but I didn't want to overwhelm you."

My wince was internal, but I felt that like a slap. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

I was startled when his fingers brushed my chin, directing my attention to his. A quick burst of fear raced through me at his touch, despite how gentle and warm it was. In spite of my trembling, he didn’t let me go. I tried desperately to catch my breath and hear whatever he was going to demand of me over the rush of blood in my ear.

He didn’t speak at first. His thumb gently brushed my skin until I calmed down enough to hear him. “Why are you sorry?” he asked.

“Be-because you don’t feel l-like you can bring your pack to your shop,” I whispered.

“I know I can bring my pack here. It’s my shop, isn’t it?” I tried to nod with my face still loosely in his hold. “I don’t bring them here because your comfort is important to me.”

“It is?” I whispered.

“It is,” Cohen confirmed. “I’d really like for you to grow accustomed to my alphas and me. Then I will work on introducing you to the rest of my pack. But for now, while Felix, Anson, and I earn your trust, the rest of my pack will stay home.”

I was speechless. Staring at this man—this alpha—who was so... kind. Thoughtful. For a minute, I couldn’t form words. The only thing that came out eventually was a stuttered ‘thank you.’

Cohen smiled. “I’ll let you get back to work, Kat. Check in with me later, would you?”

He released me, and I nodded. This time when I took a deep breath that was laced with lemongrass and iris, it didn’t make me uncomfortable. I was awed. I watched as he moved away and saw in the distance his two alphas that he was heading for. Their attention moved between Cohen and me, and continued to do so when Cohen joined them.

Remaining where I was, I further watched as Megan showed them to their seats. I was surprised to find that they’d

opted for just a blanket on the sand. However, they'd ordered the highest tier of meals. And they seemed perfectly comfortable lounging right where they were throughout the show.

I eyed them throughout the night, refusing to admit that they were more than just a set of alphas that I didn't want to know. They weren't attractive. Not at all.

At intermission, I headed toward the vendors to make sure everyone had what they needed. "Katiya!" I turned to find my landlord there with the strange couple from the caves when I toured.

"Hi, Hugo," I greeted when I approached. "I didn't realize you were here."

"Are you kidding? Girl, this kind of thing is exactly what the cove has needed all along!" He turned to the couple. "We have Katiya to thank for this stroke of brilliance."

"We met briefly on a tour," the man said, smiling at me. "I'm Charles. This is my wife, Ruby. It's a pleasure to meet you. We'd never heard of Howling Cove until stumbling on an ad for this. We keep extending our stay based on the events!"

I smiled, excitement filling me. "I cannot tell you how happy it makes me to hear that. This has been a lot of fun to plan and give the world a true introduction to this amazing town. So filled with history."

"It is," Hugo agreed. "I was just telling them about my tie here."

"Imagine our luck that we ran into a true descendant of the first family here," Ruby said. "And that it was a beta pack just has me so incredibly proud."

"Mr. Olison has offered us a personal interview tomorrow. We're enthusiastic to learn about all the lore," Charles said.

"We've learned about the pirates. But I keep hearing more and more," Ruby said. She turned to her husband with a wide smile. "Oh, the treasures here! I have to believe that some are real."

“They are,” Hugo said, causing Ruby to light up. “I even know where some are.”

I excused myself, leaving them to talk about treasure. Absently, I wondered if there really were some. It almost wouldn't matter. This was private property. I would imagine that any treasure found would rightfully belong to the owner.

Because I promised that I'd check in, I put on my big girl pants five minutes before the movie was about to start back up. Giving me a built-in excuse to leave them quickly, I made my way to the three Jameson alphas. I had their attention almost immediately.

Their rapt attention. It never wavered. Both intent and warm at the same time.

“Hello, alphas.” I nearly choked on the word. But all three of them smiled, clearly pleased with me having used it. I couldn't have said Mr. Jamesons because two had told me not to call them that. I didn't want to make them angry.

Angry alphas were terrifying.

“Good evening, Katiya,” Felix said.

“Are you enjoying yourselves? Is there anything I can get you?” I asked.

“This has been incredible,” Anson said, staring at me as if he was unable to look away.

“The food was hot and mouth-watering. And your servers have kept our drinks filled,” Felix said.

“You should be very proud of this,” Cohen said.

I smiled, bowing my head slightly. “Thank you. The turnout and support is more than I ever could have asked for.”

“You deserve it,” Cohen said. “As well as a day off. I checked your time card.”

I smiled. “Don't worry. I am leaving the trunk contest to others and sleeping in tomorrow.”

“Good girl,” he purred, and my insides nearly turned to fire.



Thankfully, we were interrupted when Lana called for everyone to hush. I excused myself, cheeks hot, and escaped inside the shop. Goddamn.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# KATIYA



Which of those guys is coming to get you?” Octavia asked as I stared at my meager options for clothing. I had no idea where Reed was taking me. It was something I should have asked.

I glanced behind me at the bouquet of flowers sitting on my dresser. They were irises. Simply stunning, and filled the room with such a refreshing, beautiful aroma that I kind of wanted to rub them all over me.

It wasn’t right that someone could feel so strongly about another when they’d only met once. All these little gestures shouldn’t color my feelings for him. And yet, they did. I have never known someone so sweet.

“His name is Reed. He was at the sandcastle contest.” I looked at her. It took me a while to train myself not to look through her but at her. “Were you there?”

She sighed. “No! Why do all the good things happen when I’m not around?”

“All the good things?” I laughed.

“You have those boys walk you home and now you can’t stop looking all goofy over this new boy. What about the others?!”

I settled on a pair of leggings and a comfortable yet dressier top. It was unfamiliar, so I assumed my mother had somehow snuck it into my suitcase before I left. But it was pretty, and I liked the way it hung off my shoulders.

“Nothing happened to them. They’re friends. That’s all.”

“Uh, huh. Do they know that?” Before I could answer, she squealed. I turned on my heel, alarmed. But her outburst was apparently an enthusiastic thing. “Oh, my gosh, Katiya! You’re building your very own pack!”

I released a breath and turned back around to examine myself in the mirror again. Why did my hair always look so messy?

“No,” I assured her. “The two men that walk me home do so for safety reasons. There are a lot of tourists in town, so they like to make sure I’m not harassed. It’s really kind of them.”

I could tell by her expression she didn’t believe me. But with the knock on the door and my heart lodging in my throat, I had no time to try to convince her otherwise. We both spun around, frozen for entirely different reasons.

My very first date. Holy fucking hell, what was I supposed to do? I should have done some research. Was something expected of me today?

“He’s here,” Octavia said, her voice low and breathy. “Come on, Katiya. I want to see this guy you’re blowing off the others with.”

That was what I needed to put my nerves back into place. I glared at Octavia, though she was oblivious to it. Sighing, I made my way through the house until I stood in front of the door. There was no turning back. Especially since he could see through the glass.

Reed was even more gorgeous than I remembered. Tall. Light brown hair and hazel eyes. He looked somewhat bed frazzled and I was so liking it. His clothes were fit and still loose. Like he’d recently lost weight, but at one time they had been form-fitting.

He was currently smiling at me through the door.

“Oh, my. Katiya, look what you brought home!”

Ignoring my deprived ghost, I swung the door open. Reed's quiet scent of musk and incense tickled my nose. Such a strange scent for an omega. Even in hiding. It was like nothing I've ever smelled before.

"Katiya, he's so pretty. So perfect," Octavia said, her voice quiet and almost cooing. "Can I touch him?"

"Hi," Reed said, rocking back on his heels. "Am I too early?"

I shook my head. "Not at all. Am I dressed alright?" Only after I said it did I realize that I just instructed him to check me out. I flushed, of course, as he did just that.

But his gaze didn't linger, even as his smile grew. When he looked at my flushed face again, he was smiling widely. "You're stunning, Katiya. It's perfect."

I released a breath as he lifted a small box and offered it to me. "You really didn't have to get me anything. You've been sending me gifts all week."

"I have," he said, smiling and urging me to take it. "Because I enjoy sending you things when I'm thinking of you. I've been finding it difficult not to send you little trinkets multiple times a day."

Taking the box, I opened it to find a candy necklace. I grinned, looking up at him.

"Okay, sometimes they're just silly things. But this one is because I thought we'd go do something silly. You know, take the pressure off our first date."

"That's great," I said, relaxing.

His smile was charming as he pulled the necklace from the box. He stretched it wide and slid it over my head, so it settled around my neck. "Beautiful," he said, his voice low and close to my face.

"You are, you know," Octavia said. "I should have told you that earlier."

I smiled, setting the empty box on the table by the door. With my phone and keys stuffed into my leggings pocket, I

followed Reed out.

“Nothing is far from here, which is nice,” Reed said as he shut my door behind me and offered me his arm. Heart still racing, I settled my hand in the crook of his arm. “I drove here, but I thought we’d walk if you’re okay with that?”

“Yes, walking is fine.”

“Have you been to the arcade yet?” he asked.

“I didn’t know there was one.”

Reed grinned. “Excellent. It’s gotten busy with all the tourists, but I think the trunk competition today will have a lot of people down here and free up some real estate within the arcade. When we get tired of games, we’ll see where the day finds us.”

“That sounds great,” I said.

The arcade was close, and we spent more than three hours playing the different games. I was understandably atrocious at everything, having never played a single one of these games. I wasn’t even sure the city had an arcade.

My cheeks hurt from laughing so much, but I was having a great time. Though it was still too early for dinner, Reed took us to a pizza shop that overlooked the water. Not the cove, but closer to the meetinghouse.

That’s when my luck ended. An alpha and others were leaving at the same time we were walking in. I froze, petrified, as we nearly got stuck in the door together. The world closed in around me as I almost hyperventilated, trying to scramble away.

Through my terror, the alpha was kind and gave me plenty of room. He looked at me with concern, but thankfully, Reed fielded all the questions. The alpha departed and Reed led me inside, back into the corner booth with a large window.

I closed my eyes, more and more horrified as I sat there, hands covering my face. More than anything, I’d like to have just fallen into a hole and disappear. I listened, face burning, as Reed spoke to a waitress.

Then it was quiet. I dared to peek at him through my fingers. He was watching me, a sympathetic smile on his lips. But it wasn't just sympathy. Not pity. There was something else.

He held his hand out to me and I convinced myself to place mine in his. He pulled me close. "You okay?" he asked gently.

I nodded. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

Reed cupped the side of my face, guiding my attention to his. "I'm not embarrassed at all. Katiya, you're not alone in your fear of alphas. And it's not as uncommon as you think."

"I—really?"

He smiled, resting his forehead against mine. I closed my eyes to breathe him in. "Really. Alphas can be some of the best individuals you ever meet. But they can also be the cruelest."

I nodded, tears stinging my eyes.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I ran away," I whispered.

"From alphas?"

In a broad sense, yes. I nodded. "In Chaingate, they're all cruel. And if they don't start out that way, it isn't long before they succumb to that lifestyle."

"I don't know where that is," he said. "Close?"

"No. Not at all," I said, hiccupping through my laughter. "Opposite side of the country."

"You traveled a long way for your freedom," he noted.

I nodded. "Yes."

"I did too," he said. "Though I didn't exactly run from alphas in the same sense. I ran as far away from a past that I never truly escaped in an effort to forget it."

This man couldn't be any more perfect. He completely understood.

"I wear a concealing band," he confided, his voice low. "For anonymity. Not because someone is looking for me, but because I like to pretend I can blend in. I don't want the first thing everyone sees when they look at me, when they *smell me* to be my designation. Being a beta means I can blend in."

Easy laughter bubbled up. "I know. I've always been thankful to be a beta."

"You're lucky," he said quietly. "I'd give anything to change my designation."

The rest of the early evening went by quietly as we talked of lighter topics and watched the sunset. Since it was quiet in the pizza shop, we remained there until more and more people began piling in.

"Looks like the competition is over," Reed said as he stood. He offered me his hand. "We should give them their table. They've been gracious and let us hang out for a long time."

I nodded. "They're really nice here."

"That's the best thing about Howling Cove. The residents are all super kind. And respectful. It's no secret that I don't like alphas and those who live here, whether packed or not, give me lots of space. Not because of any threat, but out of courtesy."

"I think the people I work with do much the same with me," I confessed as he led me leisurely down the sidewalk, hand in hand. "As much as I try to hide the fact that I'm innately terrified of alphas, they always step in and make an excuse so they can deal with them when they come into the store. I know they're waiting on a reason, but I haven't been able to bring myself around to tell them."

"I'm sure there's no judgment there, Kat. Everyone who works there are all genuinely kind people."

I agreed. They were.



“But you know, it’s taken me a long time to accept that not all alphas are like the ones we ran from. Years. It’s taken me years.” He chuckled. “But I assure you, they’re not.”

“But you still keep your distance,” I pointed out.

“I do. Once in a while, one will say or do something that’s triggering for me. I don’t always recognize it for what it is, even when I begin to panic. But that doesn’t change that they’re not all the same. You know that, right?”

“Logically, yes. I’ve met the owners of the shop. They’ve never given me a reason to run from them with my tail between my legs. And yet, I cannot help myself as I immediately begin to panic.”

“You’re doing better with them, though, aren’t you? I heard you even checked on them last night.”

I looked at him curiously, narrowing my eyes. He laughed, bringing me closer so our shoulders knocked together. “You could say I’m close with them.”

“So you told them you’re taking the new to town skittish beta out and they offered that tidbit?” I asked.

Reed laughed again. “Something like that, but not quite.”

“They’re not bad,” I admitted. “Don’t tell them that. I don’t think my heart can take more frequent visits from them.”

“Not yet.”

“What are you trying to do to me?”

This time, when he laughed, he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me to his side. I relaxed into him, letting his unique scent surround me.

“I’m trying to tell you that if I can stand to be around them daily, then so can you. Trust me, whatever you went through, I’ve been there.”

I looked at him. His expression gave nothing away as he smiled at me with kind eyes. “Every day?” I asked.

His smile only grew, though he didn’t elaborate further. A single bob of his head was the only agreement I received.

As we walked in quiet, I absently wondered if he was Pack Jameson's omega. Megan had said there were five alphas and an omega. Here I had an omega wearing a suppressant to conceal his designation, who sees the pack daily.

"They know you're with me?" I asked, testing out my theory.

"Yes. And they're happy on both of our accounts."

"Why would they care about me? I get that I'm Cohen's employee and doing a decent job of earning some extra money in the cove, but what am I to them but the hired help?" I asked, shaking my head.

"Some people are connected in ways that no one can explain," he said.

I raised a brow. "Cryptic and mysterious. Nice."

He chuckled. We arrived back at my house. I could already see Octavia's faint outline in the window waiting for me.

Reed pulled me around and against his chest. "Do me a favor," he said.

"What's that?"

"Be open-minded to the unexpected."

"Like ghosts?" I asked.

He pulled back to look at me, brows knit together and an amused smile on his face. "No. But sure, ghosts too."

I grinned, shrugging. It seemed a legitimate question. I was selling Haunted Howling Cove, after all. Never mind the ghost staring at us from my house right now.

My thoughts slowed as he brought his hand up to the side of my face. Once more, he gently cupped my cheek, his fingers tangling in my hair. It took a lot of effort not to just rest my head in his touch. I wasn't convinced I was completely successful in holding my head up on my own accord.

"Open-minded to what might not be evident right away. Maybe there are details that are being held back because talking about them is difficult."

“I get that,” I said. I didn’t like to talk about my life at all. A part of me thought that maybe I just haven’t come to terms with it. Or maybe talking about it so soon would be like putting out a beacon, calling them to come and find me. ‘Here she is. The one who tried to run.’

“I know you do. I’m hoping you remember that when enough courage is found to share with you the entire truth.”

I nodded.

That was the end of the conversation. He pressed his lips against mine. My eyes fluttered closed as I breathed in his deep scent. This close, it was a lot more overwhelming. Almost gripping. But that didn’t stop me from kissing him.

I swear I could hear Octavia screaming in excitement from inside the house.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# KATIYA



This is going to be the best thing that has ever hit Howling Cove,” Daxon said. “I can’t believe how quickly it sold out.”

In just a few days, the next big event was taking place. Murder mystery dinner. Before we put the tickets up for sale, we had a street team, so to speak, getting the word out. Alec and I made some digital and paper flyers and were posting them everywhere.

The reason it took us so long to commit wasn’t because we didn’t have the basics. We knew where we wanted to hold it. We knew which restaurant we wanted to cook for it. We even had the decorations and such.

So what was the issue? Every resource we found for a murder mystery was for a small crowd of people. We’re talking like forty at the most. Sure, making it selective like that meant we could increase the ticket price, but that wasn’t what we wanted to do.

When we got on a conference call with the three alphas and told them our dilemma, they said they’d call us back after they thought it through.

It had only been an hour later.

“Most of the guests you’ve listed are just common folk from Howling Cove that will only have bare basic details about them, correct?” Anson asked.

“Yes,” Lana confirmed.

“And you were wavering between a few murders?” Anson asked.

“Yes. The one of Sampson Lindon, Clive Wonder, and Honey Kinns,” Daxon said. “All of which are actually unsolved, even though there is substantial evidence.”

Lana shook her head, a smile on her lips. Daxon was actually really well versed in Howling Cove history. To the point where he’d get argumentative if he believed you had a fact wrong.

“And you want to use the old meetinghouse, correct?” Anson asked.

“Yes, that’s what we’re hoping,” Daxon said.

“Though it would be really cool to host one in the caves themselves,” Lana said.

“That would be cool,” Cohen agreed. “Let’s table that idea. We’ll come back to it. There would be a lot of logistics to work out to make that happen. Such as lighting and/or electricity. The meetinghouse we just need to turn the power back on.”

“First, it needs to be inspected before we turn the power on,” Felix said. “No one has been in the meetinghouse in more than a decade. We don’t want an actual death to happen during our murder mystery.”

“Fair enough,” Cohen agreed.

“Okay, back to the point,” Anson said. “Assuming that the meetinghouse is still able to be used—and I think it’ll be fine—we have four spaces in there. One is much larger than the other three. We could use the entirety of the meetinghouse and host several mysteries at the same time. One larger, and a couple smaller. That still leaves us with some rooms for prep, storage, staff, whatever we need.”

“We could hold all three,” Daxon said with awe.

I giggled at the look on his face, covering my mouth with my hand to keep the sound in. Really, after I suggested a murder mystery using some of Howling Cove’s real history for

the story, Daxon took over. He had already been studying the unsolved murders of betas Sampson Lindon and Clive Wonder, more than sixty years apart. While he was researching those for us, he stumbled across the murder of alpha Honey Kinns and became fascinated with the female alpha. It was in large part to him that we had the clues and scripts that we did. Since they were all left unsolved, that let us choose the murderer at random for the dinner.

Anson chuckled. “If, for some reason, the meetinghouse isn’t habitable, we’ll look at a few other locations that will work perfectly. There are a ton of old buildings here that date back to those residents’ lives.”

“That would be epically cool!” Daxon said. “I’d almost rather do that.”

“No. Let’s check the meetinghouse out first,” Lana said. “There have been campaigns in the area without much traction, wanting to get that building used so it doesn’t fall into disrepair. I think this would be a great way to put the focus on it.”

“It would be,” Anson agreed. “We can designate a portion of the proceeds towards the meetinghouse too. Perhaps if the town sees that we’re making an effort to save this piece of history, more will be inspired to join us.”

And several days later, during which Daxon had all the clues and characters and whatever else goes with a murder mystery all worked out, Anson gave us the go ahead to use the meetinghouse.

Now we were gathered around the small table in the back while our temps ran the store, putting the finishing touches on the clues. Written clues. Object clues. Sound clues.

We booked the three rooms as Anson suggested, named our stories, and then listed them all. It was less than a day before all three murder mysteries were sold out. We had fancy invitations on foil stock mailed that not only served as their ticket but also held instructions on what to wear. We assigned them roles already, though they didn’t know that. We didn’t want any research ahead of time.

The day before, we would be going to set up. Anson already had people in the meetinghouse cleaning it and getting the space ready for us. He had furniture that we requested being delivered, including place settings. All we had to do was decorate the tables.

“I’m so nervous,” Daxon said as he stared at the cards again.

Previously, every time I saw him, he was the epitome of confidence and nonchalance. But I supposed, before this, not everything was based on his research.

“Relax,” Lana said, setting a hand on his shoulder. “The beauty of this is that there isn’t a correct answer. You know that.”

“But what if I missed something?”

“Nobody will be any wiser,” Lana said. “This is our town.”

One of the temps popped their head into the office. He looked a little frazzled. “Would you mind coming out here, please? Sam is giving us a hard time.”

“Why is he in the store?” Lana asked as she got to her feet. Daxon and I followed.

Sam was standing at the register where Eliza had her arms crossed over her chest as he ranted about the festivities we’ve been doing.

“You’re making a mockery of this place,” he said, pointing a craggy finger at her. “Just you wait. You’ll all get what you deserve.”

“You do realize that we have the Chief on speed dial, right, Sam?” Lana asked, phone in her hand.

“Are you not serving the public?” Sam asked. “I am the public.”

“I am serving customers who want to purchase something. I am not a shelter for troubled men who want to yell at my employees. This is private property, and we will have you removed and press charges, Sam. As we have in the past,” Lana said.



Sam glowered at her. “You’re giving this town a bad name. Making a showpiece of sacred land. Making a mockery of tragic deaths.”

That was all Daxon could take. “Tragic? Clive had recently confessed to murdering thirteen men and women. His murder wasn’t at all tragic but just, even if it wasn’t carried out by law.”

It was clear Sam didn’t have an answer for that. He stared at Daxon blankly before his gaze turned to me. Obviously, Sam didn’t have any idea what cases our murder mystery dinners were covering.

“More tourist dollars mean that the town has the money to preserve and restore places that have been here for generations, such as the meetinghouse,” Lana said. “We’ve always been very careful not to deface the cove in any way. Something you would know if you weren’t so determined to make us bad people.”

“It’s not just you,” Sam said. “This land is sacred. My ancestors wouldn’t even settle the land because of all the spirits that used it. And now you’re suffocating it with roads and buildings and polluting it with people who just want to exploit its beauty.” Once more, he held up a craggy finger. “One day, the spirits will take revenge on you people. And I will be glad about it.”

He turned and headed for the door. There was something almost ethereal about him as he stepped into the sun. His long hair danced in the breeze, the ends disappearing in the sunlight as if caught on fire.

“What a miserable old man,” Eliza said, shaking her head.

“Are you okay?” Lana asked. “Both of you?”

Beck nodded. “Yes. But it was clear he saw us as having no authority, so I thought I’d get you to come out.”

“He knows better than to come in here. I think your assumption is right. You’re new here and he knows that. I apologize for you having to deal with him,” Lana said.

Eliza and Beck shrugged, giving her a smile. “It’s really no big deal. He just wasn’t leaving when we asked him to.”

Lana turned to Daxon and me. “Why don’t you head down to the meetinghouse and get a feel for the layout? Decide where you want each mystery to take place. See if we have enough ambiance settings or if we need more.”

I nodded, turning for the door. Daxon wrapped an arm around my waist as we headed outside. There was the confident man I’d known thus far. He talked animatedly about the cove and little things we went by. Such as a lone wooden marker in the ground that he said was placed in memory of where there’d been a mysterious skeleton dug up more than a century ago.

“I’d have used that, but we didn’t even have a name. The time period the skeleton is from was only determined by dating the bones. It wasn’t enough to go by for anything useful,” he told me.

“You should be a historian. Or archaeologist,” I said.

Daxon laughed. “Nah. I love Howling Cove’s history. It’s so rich with stories and culture that I can’t help but fall into the black hole that researching it takes me down. But I’m not nearly as fascinated with anything outside of Howling Cove.”

He paused as we stopped outside the meetinghouse. It was still dark and foreboding, but there was no doubt it was beautiful. “There are murders that happened here,” he told me. “A lot of them. Some of the goriest recorded in Howling Cove. I thought using them might make it a little too real and could possibly upset any spirits still lingering.”

“Are there spirits lingering?” I asked, chills racing down my arms and making the little hairs stand on end. I suddenly felt watched in the same way Octavia had been watching me.

Daxon shrugged. “Dunno. I’ve only been in here once and just inside the first room. It’s spooky for sure.”

He wasn’t wrong. We walked into an entrance hall that ran the length of the building. Each end was dark, filled with shadows, the light not reaching to the ends. Through the tall

double doors was the primary meeting place. A large empty room that was breathtaking in its stone architecture. It was almost medieval, but I didn't think it was quite that old.

We walked around in quiet, the only sound being the tapping of our shoes against the stone floors. The windows from the inside were still dark but, the boards were being removed so that the light could come in. I was surprised to see that the windows weren't broken so I wasn't sure why some of them were boarded.

"To protect them from storms," Daxon said as if reading my mind. "Howling Cove is in a pocket where most of the big storms bypass us completely but once in a while, we get hit pretty good. The meetinghouse is in a perfect location to get slammed. Some of the oldest windows get boarded to prevent damage."

"You're like a walking internet search," I said, making him laugh. It echoed through the space, and he immediately stopped.

"Haunting for sure," he said, eyeing a spot in particular. I didn't see anything of interest about it, but I avoided it all the same.

There were two doors in the back, flanking what was likely the spot for a raised dais or something at one point. Walking through one, I found an open room that once again spanned the length of the building. It wasn't very deep, likely having been used for storage or access to the stairs right in the middle. On either wall was a door to the outside.

The wooden stairs looked to be in remarkably good shape. The wood was worn, smooth and shiny from use. At the top of the stairs, there were more doors. We poked our heads into a couple, finding small rooms. But the bulk of the space was split into three more meeting rooms.

"Wow," I said as we stepped inside one. The ceilings weren't as tall as the first floor. Actually, they felt a little lower than was normal in a building. Maybe people were shorter 100 or more years ago. I could touch the ceiling, placing my hand flat if I stood on my toes.

“I think we use the two on the ends. They have the most windows to let in the night sky and we can use this center room for a kind of middle ground for staff,” Daxon said.

I nodded. “Whatever you want. This place is remarkable.”

“No ghosts so far,” he said.

I grinned, though I tried not to look too closely. “What do you think about decorations?”

He sighed. “I like what we have picked out, but until we get everything in the spaces, I’m not sure if we need more or less.”

“Downstairs is enormous,” I said. “I know all three murders are from slightly different time periods, but I think it’ll be okay if we need to spread some things out. This is our first time doing this. It’s going to be a learning curve.”

He sighed. “Yeah. It’s going to be amazing.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and brought me in for a hug. “I don’t know where you’ve been, but damn, girl, I wish you’d have gotten here sooner.”

I grinned, closing my eyes. Me too.

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*Like most early settlements, Howling Cove didn't have any true structure and law when the Sandviews began to grow their new town. It was peaceful while they remained small, but the beautiful land quickly drew the attention of others.*

*In the early days of Howling Cove, the Sandviews acted as the governing body, since they owned the land. It was easy in the early days when the town remained small groups of betas, but it wasn't long before the area began to attract alphas as well.*

*The first alpha to move into the area outside of the occasional pirate visits was in 1754. An alpha by the name of Bayard Smythland. By this time, the village of Howling Cove boasted almost 2,000 people who lived there year-round.*

*Smythland was a big man with a loud bark. Though he moved into the area as unpacked, he managed to create a lot of revolt and chaos. His presence appeared to attract other alphas, and within two months' time, there was a handful attempting to take over Howling Cove and unseat the Sandviews. This included endeavoring to take over their land.*

*The resident betas put up a struggle. There were times when large fights broke out, resulting in bodies. The first notable disturbance was when eighteen betas were killed happened four months after Smythland arrived.*

*As history states, Smythland realized that this wasn't the way to warm the town to him. He had a bid in to take over as mayor but if the locals were going to revolt constantly, owning the town was going to be a challenge. He had grand views of growing the piers, and therefore the village into a booming city, supported by their fishing industry.*

*But without the cooperation and support of the betas, and with constant fights breaking out among them and the other alphas in town, his dreams were not going to come to fruition.*

*Knowing that the village greatly trusted and respected the Sandviews, Smythland took his operation straight to the single daughter, Matilda. He invaded her home and her life, forcing his bite and offspring on her. Thinking that if he built a pack around the beloved ancestors of the founding family of the village, his place as mayor would be undisputed.*

*His efforts were misguided. The town viewed him as nothing but an interloper who held Matilda hostage, forcing her to have his children and be at his beck and call.*

*Upon Smythland's death in 1763, he had put six offspring on Matilda. The unrest in the town exploded and for the next four decades, Howling Cove fell into hard times. The fishing industry collapsed as the resident men didn't dare leave their homes long enough to fish in fear that the alphas would move in on their families, raping their wives and daughters. Maiming their sons. Stealing their belongings and homes. Burning down their property.*

*By 1801, the once prosperous and beautiful Howling Cove was now desolate, filled with lawless men and constant crime. The population dropped to just over 150 as devastation took over the polluted, burnt land.*

*This was the state when the first pack moved into Howling Cove. Unlike the alphas before Pack Jameson, the pack of three alphas, a beta, and an omega didn't come in like a wrecking ball and attempt to mold the town to what they wanted.*

*The pack first saw the problem that the two unpacked alphas that resided there were causing and wrangled them in. The most belligerent of the two ended up dead in Jacob Jameson's attempt to disarm the alpha, who had drunkenly attacked a local beta woman. Unable to do so peacefully with the raging alpha insistent on dragging the unwilling woman off with him, the altercation turned physical, ending with the alpha dead.*

*It wasn't long before Pack Jameson earned the trust of the citizens of Howling Cove. The pack dedicated all their efforts into rebuilding what had once been there, including the fishing industry. With their promise to protect the fishermen's wives while they were away, within a decade, the village prospered.*

*Throughout the years, Pack Jameson has dedicated their time, energy, and money into building Howling Cove into a serene, safe place for all who choose to live and visit there. The once quaint village is now a stable small town, still boasting many of the original structures that the original Pack Jameson restored and built for the residents.*

*Although fishing is not the town's primary revenue anymore, the oldest docks south of the cove are still operational, providing the town's restaurants with fresh seafood. These days, the town is known for its tranquil beauty and adventure, as well as promising tourists the ability to take a walk through its many historic streets.*

*However, what the residents will tell you keeps them in the city isn't just the views and cleanliness. It's the safety that Pack Jameson has built. Not only are their fire and police forces well trained and supported, but crime, in general, is low. It is one of the few places in the world where unpacked omegas work and live in the open alongside betas and unpacked alphas.*

*The darkness of other towns and larger neighboring cities hasn't tainted Howling Cove yet. And although Pack Jameson still resides there and continues to be the pillar of good that assures the town continues to be wealthy and safe, they are no longer in governing roles. Instead, they support the town by being upstanding citizens and advisors.*

*Today, you can find one of the most stunning landscapes and cozy towns on the east coast. It promises to be a trip you'll want to repeat annually to enjoy the small-town feel and adventure within the caves on the beach.*

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# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# KATIYA



He's here. He's here, he's here, he's here," Octavia chanted as she skipped through the house. At one point, she missed the door and danced through the wall. I had no idea living with a ghost would be like having a roommate that I couldn't actually lock out.

Today was the last day off I had before the murder mystery dinner in two days. Tomorrow I will be spending most of the day getting the meetinghouse ready. The next day, which was the big event, would be spent freaking out and finalizing everything as they came up. Directing vendors and then the guests.

Linus was heading up one room, Daxon the main room downstairs, and then Megan in the third room. I was just going to move like a ghost through the area and see how it was going. Make notes, help where needed. All that good stuff.

I already had jitters. My stomach has been fluttering for the last two days. At least today it was partially due to Reed coming over.

He continued to send me thoughtful little gifts since our date, but now he came over after my shifts. Even if they're late. Octavia enjoys watching him sit on the porch to wait for me when I work the second shift.

He's even spent the night once. Because I was nervous, he slept in another room upstairs, but it was so fun waking up to him. It was hard to believe a week has passed since our first date. Only a week. It felt like he's been here so much longer.



Except that I loved learning about him, proving that he was in fact, new to me.

I opened the door to see his smiling face. This man was so good looking. I had no idea anyone could be so adorably gorgeous until meeting Reed.

“Hi,” I said, backing up so he could come in.

Reed stepped inside, his hand going straight to my hip to pull me against his chest for a hug. I sighed, closing my eyes and breathing in his curious scent. I still couldn't understand how it fit within the normal biology of an omega. All the omegas I've known have had almost nauseating sweet scents. Octavia included.

Not Reed. It was musk and incense. Something deep and arousing that I loved to get lost in.

“Hey,” he said, kissing my head. “Am I too early?”

It was just hitting ten this morning. I shook my head. “Nope. Despite saying I was going to sleep in, I was up before eight.”

“Nerves?”

I laughed, nodding. “Yeah. It's exciting, but I get nervous for every new event.”

“Are you going to be able to stay away today?” he teased.

“It's just trivia,” I said. “I had almost nothing to do with it after I suggested it. I just don't know enough about the town to be truly helpful.”

“You'll be an expert in no time.”

I appreciated his confidence. I didn't need to be an expert, but with all the things I was reading, I would at least like to be knowledgeable and proficient. Learning about Howling Cove was easy because I was enjoying the history of it. And finding that I was retaining such knowledge when asked a question had its own sense of accomplishment with it.

Reed released me and shut the door before handing me the single iris. I tilted my head as I looked at it, having the

strangest thoughts of Cohen as I took it from his hand. Even as I brought it to my nose, I swear I caught a hint of lemongrass with it.

He watched me with a smile. “What do you want to do today?”

Releasing a breath, I turned to the kitchen so I could put this in some water. “Nothing,” I said. “The next couple days are going to be so busy, I just want to lounge today away. Unless there’s something you want to do?”

“The only thing I want to do is spend the day with you. It doesn’t matter what we’re doing.”

His words were so sweet I found myself smiling as I pulled down a vase to fill with water. I bit my lip, wondering if there was this kind of romance found in the city I left. Something told me there couldn’t be. Not with the alphas that ran it.

“He’s so handsome,” Octavia said with a wistful sigh. “I’m so jealous that you’re being courted and I’m dead.”

I bit my tongue so I wouldn’t laugh at the absurdity of her statement.

“What is it?” Reed asked.

I glanced at Octavia to find her grinning like a devil before I met Reed’s eyes. “What would you say if I told you that I think this house is haunted?”

Reed looked around. “I suppose that explains the odd scents I pick up on from time to time.”

“Oh?” I asked.

He nodded. “Sweet rose tea is the most frequent.”

“That’s me!” Octavia said, jumping up and down. “That’s my perfume.”

“I think that’s the perfume that belongs to the omega that haunts my house.”

“I’m not haunting your house,” she said, crossing her arms in disapproval. “I’m just... living here.”

“Omega,” Reed said, nodding. “Yep, I would have guessed omega. But I didn’t know there had been an omega here before.”

“She didn’t live here. But she was being courted by the pack that was here before she died,” I told him.

“They didn’t live here,” Octavia corrected me.

“Then why are you here?” I asked before I realized what I did.

Reed raised a brow, turning to look in the direction I was speaking. I cringed.

“So, I have a ghost. Her name is Octavia, and I thought that she had been being courted by the pack that used to live in this house, which is why she’s stuck here.”

“No, silly,” Octavia said as Reed nodded. He probably thought I’d lost my mind. “This house has never held a *true* pack. Only mock packs.”

I glared at her before looking at Reed. Reed chuckled. “I’m guessing she said something about the people who’ve lived in this house previously.”

“Yes.”

“That there’s never been an alpha here,” Reed supplied.

“And therefore, only mock packs. Because they can’t be true packs.” I wasn’t actually bitter about it. I understood what a bite did and how the magic worked. The principle of how the bonds tied people together. It’s why betas all over the world craved a pack and therefore alphas so much.

Except me.

I didn’t want an alpha. I was perfectly fine with a pack full of betas. Or even a single beta. Looking at Reed, I thought I’d be fine with an omega, too.

Reed chuckled. “What keeps your ghost here?”

To my surprise, Octavia turned away, crossing her arms over her chest. As with the first day I met her, I caught a

glimpse of blood smeared all over her. She sniffed, and it was gone. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I don’t know. She’s a little quirky.”

“I am not!” Octavia said, looking back at me.

“Just an omega being an omega,” I said to see what kind of rise I’d get from her.

She snorted, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “So what?!”

Reed laughed. “I get that completely. An omega is what an omega is. They can’t help themselves.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Just as an alpha can’t help being what they are,” he said.

“Mm,” I answered, hooding my eyes. “So you say.”

I wasn’t surprised my omega boyfriend (yes, I said it, even if only internally) was trying to get me to come around to the idea of accepting alphas. I mean, what was an omega to do without a pack? Without an alpha?

It wasn’t unheard of that omegas fell for betas, but usually that happened within a pack already established. At least, that’s what the stories say. What did I know?

Reed took my hand and pulled me through the house, out to the back patio overlooking the cove that ran north up the coast. I didn’t often see this view, but it was just as gorgeous as every other one.

There was a hammock spread between a couple trees that we had a time getting into. We lay in the quiet for a while, listening to the birds and the breeze. When it was particularly quiet, I could hear the waves on the shore below.

“Tell me about your life before Howling Cove,” Reed said.

I scrunched my nose. “There’s nothing to tell. It was a bad place.”

“I know. I did a little research after you told me the city’s name. There are a lot of stories out there about the abuse that

goes on within Chaingate.”

Nodding, I shifted so I was cuddled into his chest. “Honestly, I got out pretty much unscathed.” I paused, remembering being dragged into a closet by an alpha. “Relatively unscathed,” I corrected.

“But you got out. From what I can tell, that’s not common.”

I shook my head. “The short of it is that Chaingate is basically its own world run by alphas. All of the alphas are the top of the food chain, and they form a pyramid of hierarchy. The top pack has three omegas all their own. I’m not even sure about the number of betas they’ve taken.” Reed shuddered, his grip on me tightening. His unease at what I was saying gave me the courage to continue.

“There are inspections throughout our childhood when the alphas come in to examine us. Betas. To see the goods that their precious city is producing. If you’re one of the lucky ones, you go unwanted, like I was. That doesn’t mean your life is free of them. They dictate everything right down to whether you’re allowed within a mock pack for breeding, or to be coupled off to someone of their choosing. Always their choosing. They also tell you how far you’re allowed in your education and where you can work.”

“And your assignment?”

I took a breath, closing my eyes. For a minute, I let the sounds of the beach fill my head, reminding me where I was.

“I was slated for a breeding pack,” I whispered. “I was cute but not quite hot enough to be of interest to the alphas for long periods of time. There were three packs they were choosing between. Three packs that they formed based on their looks, intelligence, and whatever else they took into consideration. Genetics, maybe? I don’t know if they were that sophisticated. I think they also looked into our ancestry—whether or not there was a chance we would produce omegas.”

“You were earmarked for one of these,” he said. “What does that mean?”

“It means my sole worth in life would be my womb. I was to bear no less than ten children in my lifetime. From what I can tell, most betas put into these breeding packs were always pregnant. Ten was a minimum but usually, there were at least twelve offspring.”

“That’s... barbaric.”

I snorted. “Yes.”

“Your parents? Were they in one of these packs?”

I shook my head. “No. They were just an assigned couple. Free to breed or not. I’m pretty sure I was an accident. They didn’t want to bring a new life into that world.”

“So they helped you escape,” he said.

“Yes. I never understood why we lived so bare minimum until they laid out their plan to me. My path to freedom. Some days, I’m still surprised I made it and am left alone.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Reed said. It was the first time I heard a slight growl in his voice. Not deep like an alpha. Not filled with the sound that made me shake in terror. It was almost sweet. His desire to protect me.

“Thanks. I really think they won’t waste their time on me. The alphas haven’t looked my way in several years.”

“Good. I’m not a very violent man but there are circumstances that could change that.”

I smiled, shifting so I could look at him. “What about you?”

Only because I was looking at him did I see the storm clouds gather in his hazel eyes. “I realize that I just sort of coaxed you into telling me about your past, but I’d rather leave mine to a later date.”

“Really?” I asked.

Whatever face I gave him made him laugh. “Yeah. I’ll tell you one day soon. I promise. Just not today.”

I sighed dramatically. “Fine.”

He chuckled.

We remained in the hammock until lunch. Then we moved into the kitchen and prepared a meal together. There was a screened porch on the side of the house that we ate in. After lunch, we lounged around the house, roaming from room to room and just cuddling and talking about whatever came up.

By the time evening came around, we'd somehow made it into my room and were hunkered down on the bed, snuggled under the covers with the windows open, letting an unusually cool draft fill the house with fresh air and chills.

The television was on, but we weren't watching it. Instead, we were wrapped around each other, kissing.

He didn't even taste sweet, except for the sweet touches that were added by his arousal. Still a strange incense scent that I've never smelled on an omega. It was so out of place that somewhere in my mind I was convinced it was because he was from somewhere exotic. Somewhere that omegas were just different.

Taller. Built a little bulkier, but not overly so. There wasn't a softness to him as all omegas had. Even the male omega I passed once. He was softer in a way that betas and alphas aren't.

Then again, it might just have been his circumstances. He was literally being led around on a leash, after all.

Pushing those memories aside, I turned my focus back to kissing this enigma of a man who was curled with me in bed. His arms around me. The one I laid on was tangled in my hair. The other roamed my back, sliding under my shirt. Over my hip, gliding down my thigh. Over my ass cheek, squeezing gently.

He pulled his lips from mine as if he were going to say something, but traced them with his tongue instead of speaking. "You taste like raspberry ice cream," he murmured. "So goddamn good, I just want to devour you."

I shivered, heat pooling everywhere inside me.

“I know we’ve only been seeing each other for a short time. I’m not going to be upset if you want to push me away. Or tell me to stop. I will always listen to ‘no.’”

“Okay,” I whispered, brushing my fingers along his face. The short day’s growth was somewhat rough under my touch. “You don’t need to stop yet.” I thought maybe I’d worked myself up to saying it that I wouldn’t blush. Not the case. My cheeks turned hot.

Reed smiled. Thankfully, he went back to kissing me, so I wasn’t so embarrassed about him staring at my red cheeks.

We rolled slightly, so I was mostly on my back. Reed’s hand was on my hip as he pressed into me. Then his knee pressed between my legs. He didn’t move again until he was sure I was comfortable.

The few times I’ve been with someone willingly, it was random betas in Chaingate. Wanting to feel the rush and excitement that I read about in digital books that I snuck through an out of city account at a library. I wanted to feel the release. A touch that made me feel like I was precious.

It hadn’t happened like that. The first time I’d gone in a little terrified, not knowing what to expect. That was after the first time an alpha trapped me in a closet. The whole thing with the beta was a little awkward.

But I soon learned that betas weren’t built like alphas. They were much smaller, not nearly as hard, and there was a distinct lack of a knot. All of which made me relax in and of itself. But aside from it being uncoordinated and a bit clumsy, it was *not* worthy of a romance book.

Nor were any of the other times I was with a beta. And certainly not the forced times with an alpha.

Part of me said that what happened in books just wasn’t real. Fiction to pique interest. To keep readers coming back for more. Dreaming about life outside of our own realities.

But already, everything about Reed was different. His touch actually sparked need in me. Though his scent was a chaotic mystery that my mind never let go of, it was one I



craved when he wasn't around. Wanting to bury my face where I knew he'd been, just to catch a whiff. And his kiss made my body respond. Wanting more. So much more.

He rolled us a little more, so that I was flush on my back, his hand gliding up my shirt to massage my breast. He slowly, still giving me all the time I needed to push him away, rocked his hips against me. Letting me feel his arousal.

I shivered at the impression of his erection on my thigh.

Trailing his mouth over my jaw, he murmured, "Still okay, Kat?"

Nodding, I gripped his shirt tightly in my hands. "Yes. More than okay."

I felt his smile as he hummed, kissing along my neck. His mouth traveled even further down, his hand moving south in conjunction until he was gently coaxing my leg up so he could rub the inside of my thigh. I almost jumped out of my skin when he brushed his thumb over my sex. For fuck's sake, I was still wearing my panties and leggings. It shouldn't feel like a live wire just stroked me, should it?

"All you have to do is tell me to stop," Reed reminded me as he continued kissing down my body through my shirt. When he got to my stomach, he shifted my shirt up and his hot mouth touched my bare skin. His thumb once more brushing between my legs.

It was definitely getting closer to a romance novel at this point. Maybe betas were just bland. Maybe I needed an omega in my life.

Reed didn't concentrate on my stomach for long. He kissed my skin, leaving nips and little mouthfuls of suction behind as he pushed my pants down with his chin, allowing his mouth access to the soft flesh above my pelvis.

"This okay?" he asked.

"Just undress me," I said.

He chuckled, raising his eyes to look at me. His grin was too fucking cute. "Yeah?"

I nodded.

“You can tell me to stop at any time,” he said as he curled his fingers into the elastic of my leggings. “Don’t ever feel like you have to do this. Or anything.”

“I know.”

He nodded. Bringing his attention back to my body, he slowly took off my clothes. Examining each inch of flesh as if it were all made of something precious. When I was bare before him, he hovered over me, looking as if I were the omega.

“Your turn,” I whispered.

His smile grew. He leaned back on his knees and pulled his shirt over his head. Undoing his pants, I wasn’t at all surprised to see the bulk he had going on down there. I’d felt it. However, when he’d pulled his briefs down, I stared.

Again, I’ve seen a handful of beta cocks. And I’ve felt a couple alpha cocks. But what was presented to me didn’t at all match what a textbook says belongs to an omega. With a distinct lack of knot, I had to be looking at a beta dick at the very least.

I looked at Reed again. Perplexed.

He was watching me. Waiting. There was unconcealed anxiety there as he waited for my response. Or a question? I wasn’t sure. Maybe he was self-conscious.

Unsure of what I could say to put him at ease since I wasn’t sure what he was actually worried about, I reached for him. His relief was almost palpable as he fell to his hands on either side of me before lowering himself down.

Naked flesh to naked flesh. There was something so erotic about it. Feeling the way he slid smoothly against me.

“Kat—”

“I’m okay,” I murmured, kissing his cheek as he lowered his face to my neck. “You’re just bigger than I expected.”

He didn’t speak. His arms tightened around me.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Really.”

He just held me for another minute, but then he rocked his hips. The way he was laying between my legs, it took almost nothing for him to slide over my clit and send a shockwave of teasing pleasure shuttering through me. I wasn’t sure that’s even what he was aiming for. But our bodies just lined up like they were always meant to go together.

“Oh,” I gasped as he did it again. Maybe they taught omegas sex tips in their classes. The betas I’ve been with didn’t know to do something even this simple.

“I want your first orgasm with me to be on my dick,” he whispered. “If you’re okay with that.”

Fuck yes. Right this moment I wanted nothing more. I nodded.

Since I was expecting him to waste no time in pushing his cock inside me, when a couple of his fingers slid in instead, I almost choked. Reed chuckled. “Just getting you ready, Kitty Kat,” he murmured, brushing his lips over mine. “Want to make sure you’re nice and wet for me.”

“You better not take too long,” I warned. “I think I’m close.”

He smiled, covering my mouth with his. I wasn’t sure if he was looking to distract me or encourage my arousal, but I think he managed both. So lost in the sensation of his fingers working inside me and his tongue demanding mine to dance for him, I made some ridiculous sound of protest when he removed his fingers.

Chuckling, he quickly replaced that touch with the head of his cock.

I experienced a brief moment of fear as he began to push inside me. A short-lived memory of one of the alphas—nameless and faceless—as he shoved his way in. It quickly vanished and was replaced by Reed’s quiet voice of praise and encouragement, his exotic scent filling my lungs and head, the moment of panic faded to less than a memory as it was replaced with something else.

Something new and sweet and filled with pleasure.

“That’s it,” Reed said, his voice almost a purr. “You feel so good. So small and tight. And oh, so wet.”

My eyes rolled as he worked his way inside me, filling me so full that I was nearly cross-eyed. And he got his wish. The first orgasm he gave me was all over his cock as I lived my first romance novel climax in real life.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## REED



The sun was bright and warm. Already the cool breeze from last night had been replaced by an early morning heat that promised today was going to be hotter than normal. I didn't mind at all.

Nothing could bother me today. Not having woken up to this beautiful woman in my arms. So damn beautiful.

Watching her sleep, I studied every curve of her body. The smooth contours. Her silky hair. The way her long lashes lay against her porcelain skin. She was small, but strong.

Her fingers flexed in her sleep, gripping my hand tightly for a moment. I wrapped her more snugly, hoping to ward off any unpleasant dreams she might be having.

She came from a place of nightmares. Places like Chaingate lived outside of normal society. And somehow, they managed to stay that way. We continued to talk about her childhood from time to time throughout the day yesterday and the thing that truly spoke of the kind of life that omegas and betas were forced to live in had families bearing omega children were trying to sell them to the crime rings, believing the life they'd endure there would be preferable to one within the city.

If that wasn't frightening enough, I don't know what could be worse.

It was as if every nasty corner in my mind could be channeled into that city. Echoes of my every scream. The phantom pains that wracked my body from time to time.

I took a breath to clear my head and stop from almost falling into my own horrific past. It's not that I didn't want to tell Katiya. I did. Desperately. Because in doing so, I had an opening to tell her that I'm not what she believes me to be. I'm that which we both fear.

But I wasn't brave enough last night. Too afraid that she'd look at me with fear and demand me to leave. Already I'd let this go on far too long without being honest. Every time I convinced myself that perhaps she knew, *she had to know*, it was made clear that she most certainly didn't.

I needed a way to tell her the truth without this blowing up. And I knew that the only way that might excuse my omitting of a vital truth would be to tell her my own horror story.

"What has you so tense this early?" Katiya asked, her voice slurring with sleep.

Pulling her tightly to me, I rolled so that I was mostly on top of her. She giggled, burying her face in my neck. Maybe a little hint that I'm not an omega. I rubbed my cheek against her, scent marking her. Something only an alpha truly does. Yes, without her permission, but right now, it was probably the least of my transgressions.

Katiya sighed, snuggling more fully underneath me.

"What time do you have to work?" I murmured in her ear, kissing along her neck and hairline.

She shrugged. "I was planning to go down around lunch. Why?"

"So we have time to play in the shower?" I hinted.

She grinned, peeking at me through her lashes. "Sure."

I scooped her up quickly, earning myself a shriek and giggle as she wrapped her arms around my neck. Setting her on the counter, I turned to the shower and flicked the water on. Though it was a modern fixture, whoever remodeled it used the old penny tiles to keep the same feel. There was also a freestanding clawfoot tub beside a large picture window.

As soon as it was hot, I picked up my beautiful beta. Wrapping her legs around my waist, pressing my hard length between us, I covered her mouth with mine as I brought her to the shower.

This could also be an opening, but certainly not. Knots were something I was terrified of more than anything. After listening to Katiya, I knew she was too.

Not that hiding my knot was strictly a conscious decision. It wasn't. After being released, discarded, after coming down from that feral place only an abused animal recedes to in times of severe duress, everything that was alpha inside me retreated. As if it were hibernating. No growls. No purrs. No bark. And no knot. The only thing that hadn't faded was my scent, which I helped that along by other means.

What an alpha was innately programmed to do, I had somehow subconsciously turned off due to my own lingering traumatic fear. Imagine being constantly triggered by yourself, just living. Most of my instincts had been easily swallowed because of it.

The only thing that pulled them out of me was Gideon. An omega needing his alpha. But with Gideon, being an alpha was different. There weren't rough edges. It was simply responding to the perfect creature with exactly what he needed from me.

Heats were a little intense. They were easier to get through these days, but they could still set me off if I wasn't mentally prepared. Four other alphas with their knots out was enough to make me revert into a terrified trapped animal.

But I was a very fortunate man with a pack that loved me. They went to great lengths to make sure I was always comfortable.

That being said, I wasn't entirely sure my knot would stay away if I was turned on so fiercely. It had been part of what made me hesitate last night. It was one thing to lie to her. A lie by omission that I wasn't the omega she thought I was. But to have her find out by feeling a knot at her sex—fuck, that would be beyond unforgivable.



It didn't happen. Thankfully. And feeling her warmth as I slipped inside her again was a paradise so sweet, I could barely stand to keep myself upright. The way her body squeezed me. How I barely fit between her tight, wet walls. The way her mouth hung open as I continued to push myself in until I had nowhere left to go.

"So good," I murmured, kissing her open mouth. Taking her bottom lip between my teeth. "Ride me."

She shuddered, her eyes fluttering under the water before she focused on me. Giving me a shy smile, she wrapped her legs around me, locking her ankles behind my back, and used her muscles to glide herself up and down my length. Not far. We weren't at an angle for that.

I watched her face. Watched the way her pleasure made her cheeks color as if I was lighting a fire under her skin. So hot. So beautiful.

"I can't," she groaned, her body falling against mine.

Grinning, I pressed her more firmly against the wall and used my weight to thrust into her. Slowly. Taking myself almost entirely outside her body and burying myself so deeply, my sight darkened. Though it's not possible, it felt like I was piercing her womb.

"Reed," she moaned.

"Want to come, Kitty?" I asked, a hint of a purr in my voice. "Want to come on my cock for me?"

I loved the little sounds she made. Unintelligible. Throaty. Whiney. I was so ready to fill her. Something that she seemed to really enjoy.

"Yes," she breathed. "Please."

"Hmm," I said, pulling her off the wall and setting her on her feet. Because she was so much shorter than me, my dick slipped out of her.

She glared, then pouted in such a way that I was reminded of my omega.

Chuckling, I bent to kiss her lips slowly. “Turn around. Give me that beautiful ass in the air.”

Katiya’s eyes widened. She didn’t move for a moment but then she nearly slipped doing as I requested. When her back was towards me, she bent down. I waited, stroking my cock, to see how far she could go.

Basically bent in two. Fuck.

“Spread your legs,” I told her, hands on her hips as she did. “Brace yourself against the lip of the shower.”

I lined myself up with her pussy as I watched her do as I said. When I was sure she was good and ready, I slid myself back inside her. A single long thrust until I was buried to my balls.

Katiya cried out. Her body jerking and shuddering. Her knees almost giving out under her. Keeping her ass to my hips, I held her still with my cock buried until she could catch her breath. Only when I thought she was ready, I started to thrust again. Slowly. Steady. Enjoying the way her entire body shook and trembled. The cries and sounds she made were music to my ears.

“Reed,” she screeched. That was the only warning I had before she was coming all over me. Squeezing my cock so tightly, I grunted. Picking up my pace, my hips shoved into her harder, more rapidly.

Her cries continued, high pitched as she tried to catch her breath. One of her hands reached up, landing on mine. I flipped it around, so I could grip hers tightly, trapping it between her hip and my hand.

“Almost,” I grunted. “Want me to fill you, Pussy Kat?”

“Yes!”

The demand. The enthusiasm. And then, as I was bringing my dick back into her, she pushed her ass back against me, using her body to bury me. Fuck, that was it. Three more of those and I lost my mind. And my seed.

I spilled so much that it squirted out. Ran down her legs. Over my balls. Like a man possessed, I continued slamming into her perfect little body until I came down from the slightly crazed haze my mind had retreated to.

Shivering, I stilled. Pulled out of her. Waiting a second to catch my breath and make sure I didn't scare her when she faced me. Then I pulled her back up, caught her in my arms when she violently swayed from all the displaced blood. We stumbled until I was sitting on the tiled floor with this perfect girl cradled in my arms, staring at her adoringly.

“Too bad I have to go to work today,” she said, her voice so breathless I barely caught the words. “You're pretty good at that.”

Pretty sure I was grinning like a lunatic.



I HATED BEING AWAY from her. Was it too much to ask that she stop working and let me take care of her instead? That way, I'd never have to wait to see her. Besides, she's been through far more than she should have in her life. She deserves to be pampered.

These thoughts I kept to myself as I walked her down the path toward the shop. Honestly, I found it hard to believe that one of the employees hadn't outed me for what I am yet. They knew. Everyone knew.

But not this beta who has lived a forced sheltered life. A naivety I was very clearly taking advantage of.

“You're coming tonight, right?” Katiya asked as we continued the trek down.

I nodded. “Yes.” A new dread filled me. She was going to figure it out tonight. I should have already told her. I had the chance yesterday and I didn't take it.

“You look like you don’t want to,” she said.

Smiling, I pulled us to a stop and hugged her to me. “Remember when I asked you to trust me? That not everything is what it seems?”

There was humor in her tone when she answered with, “Mhm.”

“Please remember that.”

Katiya pulled away to look at me. “Alright. Does that mean you’re not coming tonight?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I told her, pressing my lips to hers. “You’ve worked so hard on this, I would never miss an opportunity to support you.”

“Did you sign up for one of the dinners?” she asked as we continued along the path once more.

“No. I’ll be there for you to use in whatever way you want.” When she looked at me, I winked. Katiya giggled, her cheeks pinking. “And then I’ll bring you home and massage you until you’re goo. I have a feeling you’re going to need it.”

I dropped her at the door, kissing her soundly and watching her walk inside. Despite the pit of dread within me, I headed home with a skip in my step.

The house was quiet when I stepped inside. I paused a moment to listen. Someone must be home. There was always someone here.

Dropping my keys in the tray, I shut the door behind me and headed down the hall. Tristen’s door was ajar so I poked my head in. Once, I had spent a lot of time trying to sneak up on him. Just because startling him was so damn difficult. This wasn’t any different. As soon as I popped my head in his room, Tristen shifted in his chair to look at me.

“Reed,” he greeted, his voice deep. One of those voices that you could feel all throughout your body. It reached in and stroked your cock from the inside.

“Hi. Just seeing if someone’s home.”

His lips twitched upwards. “Gideon is painting. I think Felix is home too.”

I nodded, getting ready to back out.

“Did you have fun?”

Sighing, I stepped inside and leaned against his doorframe. “Yeah. Tris, she’s amazing. I can’t wait for you to meet her.”

“I’ll apparently meet her tonight.”

I grinned. “You got suckered into going too?”

“Worse. Somehow, Anson thought I should participate in the mystery. I’ll be downstairs.”

I don’t know why, but I laughed heartily. “I can’t wait to see what you’re wearing. If I’d have known, I would have made you something specifically for this.”

“If *I’d* have known, I’d have made plans to be unavailable.”

The grin wouldn’t drop from my face. “You wouldn’t. I know that deep down you’re just a big teddy bear.”

His growl followed me from the room as I darted out of the way of the pillow he tossed at me. I still shivered at an alpha’s growl, and it was not in anticipation. All these years later, a trickle of fear crawled up my back. Even when it was one of my alphas growling. Even though I *knew* that they would never hurt me.

We had a unique house. One side was full of bedrooms and the opposite side mirrored the room configuration, but they were office spaces and studios. Down the center of the penthouse was our living area. The only reason we had enough room for what we needed was because we occupied the entire top floor.

Down the hall, Gideon’s studio door was shut. There was music behind it, so I assumed that meant he was busy painting. His hobby room was still wide open, though. Besides Tristen’s writing den, there was Felix’s office, an office Cohen and Anson shared, and then my workroom.

The opposite side of the house was made up of four bedrooms and Gideon's nest. Tristen had his own, I had my own, Gideon had his own, and the other three alphas shared a room. I think all of our favorites was Gideon's nest, though. Not just because of his heats—those were no joke fun. But because it's the one place that nothing else penetrates but the importance of our pack.

I pushed Felix's door wide. Since it was mostly open anyway, I figured I wouldn't be bothering him. Unlike Tristen, he didn't look up right away. Tristen didn't like anyone looking over his shoulder while he wrote. He didn't care if we read his books, but only after they were published. He had a habit of minimizing everything on his screen when we came in.

It's not that he was hiding something. If we wanted to see what he was doing, he'd show us. But he liked the privacy of writing. As if he was an anonymous narrator reporting someone else's death.

Felix smiled as I dropped onto his couch. When he was done typing, he looked up. Sitting back in his chair, he crossed his hands. "I didn't expect you home until it was time to change."

"Kat has to work," I said, shrugging. "I don't think she really needs me hanging around the shop, distracting her. Which I absolutely would do."

He chuckled. "I don't doubt that in the least."

Sighing, I leaned my head back. "She's perfect, Felix. I can see why you wanted me to meet her."

"She is. I see she doesn't have an issue with you."

I flinched. Looking at him through squinting eyes, I could already tell that he read my expression correctly before I said anything. "She thinks I'm an omega," I said, sighing.

"You're walking a dangerous road, Reed."

"She doesn't fear me. And she has every reason to fear alphas."

“Did she tell you?”

I nodded and repeated the basics of what went down in Chaingate. I watched as Felix became more and more angry until he was a constant low rumble of a growl. “And Katiya?”

“Those idiots thankfully weren’t interested in her,” I said. “But her fate was nasty, Felix. I can’t even.” I shook my head. “I’m so relieved that she got out. We have to protect her. What if they come after her?”

“Is that your fear or hers?” he asked.

“I think she fears it, but she’s not sure whether to take it as a serious possibility or not.”

Felix nodded. Part of the reason I told him and didn’t wait for Katiya to do so was because I was scared for her. There’s no telling what nasty alphas would do to get what they want. But I know. And I was not about to let her live a fate anywhere near mine.

“I’ll look into it.”

I sighed, nodding. “Thanks. She’s too good for that life.” I paused, shaking my head. “Actually, no one deserves that life. Not betas and sure as fuck not omegas. She says their futures are worse than a beta’s.”

“I can only imagine.”

We sat in silence for a minute. A door down the hall opened. It wasn’t long before Gideon stepped in. He had a paint smudge across his cheek, otherwise he was clean. Clothing aside, he was a remarkably clean painter.

He smiled, coming into the room and dropping into my lap. Burying his face in my neck, he immediately sought my scent, so I rubbed my cheek against him.

“You smell so good,” he said. I could hear the tease in his voice. “Good and full of sexy juices.”

“I showered,” I said, gripping his side and making him squirm.

“Showering with her doesn’t erase her smell, Reed. I want to lick you all over.”

I laughed, hugging him tightly to me. He relaxed. “It’s my turn to meet her,” he announced. “Can I meet her tonight?”

“Don’t interrupt what she’s doing,” Felix said. “She’s working very hard on this and I don’t want anyone to overwhelm her.”

“So you’re staying home, then?” Gideon asked, raising a brow.

Felix grinned. “Not a damned chance. I think we’re in agreement that we all want this beta. And a beta terrified of alphas needs time to get to know them.”

Gideon looked at me. “She thinks you’re a beta?” he asked, brows knit together. “You hid your knot, didn’t you?!”

I chuckled. “I only ever bring myself to being an alpha for you in heat,” I said, nipping at his chin. “You know that.”

“It still amazes me that you can have sex without it. I didn’t think it was a conscious choice,” Gideon said, shaking his head as he looked down at my crotch. He stared as if he could see through my pants.

Shrugging, I brought his attention to me again. “Maybe it’s not a conscious thought. But I’ve gotten pretty good at being anything but an alpha, no?”

He nodded. “You’re still my alpha,” he said quietly. “But you can be whatever kind of alpha you want to be.”

My omega was perfect. He really was. Perfect and sweet and kind. I couldn’t wait for him to hold our beta.

As if he read my mind, he said, “So, I do get to meet her tonight, right?”

Sighing, I hugged him tightly and filled him in on all my half-truths. By the time I was finished, he sat back to look at me, appalled. “Reed, what are you thinking?”

Felix chuckled. “He’s hoping for a miracle.”



“I am,” I admitted. “I’m hoping that when I can bring myself to tell her why, that she’ll forgive me and still want me.”

“What if she can’t?” he asked. When I cringed at his question, he leaned into me and rubbed his face over my chest like a cat. “I’m just saying. You know her trauma now. It’s a lifetime of learned fear. She trusted you with that information and you still haven’t told her you’re an alpha.”

“Yes, I know,” I almost whined. It was close enough to a whine that both of them laughed. “Maybe we can distract everyone by making Tristen wear a skirt. No one will have time for me and what I am if we do that.”

Gideon laughed, glancing down the hall. “Oh my god, he’ll be so angry. We should do that.”

Felix chuckled, shaking his head. “He already got his assignment. Anson is picking up his costume on the way home.”

My omega sighed dramatically. “Fine. But we should still convince him to wear a dress for us. He’s got sexy legs.”

“There’s not much he’ll tell you no on. Ask,” Felix said.

The devilish grin that Gideon directed down the hall almost had me sympathetic towards Tristen. Then again, I kinda wanted to see him in a dress too. Gideon wasn’t wrong. He did have sexy legs.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# KATIYA



The east room had the story of Honey Kinns. She was an alpha from the early 1800s who had a menagerie pack. A pack filled with betas that she collected like they were pets. But from what the records said, she loved her beta pack. And she treated them well.

History says that she was found in the bottom of a well. Many tried to say that she fell in, but the crack in her skull suggested that she was dead before being tossed into the well. Her entire pack was put on trial, as were her neighbors. The evidence was minimal though, so no one was ever convicted for her death.

That mystery was set for twenty-five guests, eight of which were cast as her beta pack.

The west room had Sampson Lindon, a beta who was new to town in the 1840s. Accounts say that he was very nice, had come from the far western border, and was escaping a hard life. Secretly, I wondered if he was from Chaingate.

He was a little quirky, often found digging in random areas throughout town. But then he'd fill in his holes as if he were burying something. Many times, people followed behind him to see if he was burying anything. There was never anything there.

Sampson fell in love with a local beta named Eveline Dryght. They had been seeing each other for a couple months when Sampson was found dead, half buried in one of his holes. There was a pickaxe close by with blood on it and he

had three axe wounds on his back, one having punctured a lung.

With no witnesses and circumstantial evidence at best, no one was convicted of the crime. This room would have twenty-one guests.

The primary room on the main floor would be the mystery of Clive Wonder, a serial killer from the 1860s. He'd been tried and convicted of thirteen murders that he proudly confessed to. However, he was not in jail. For reasons unknown, he was still at large in Howling Cove.

His murder was pretty gruesome. His body was found on the pikes of a local house's wrought-iron fence, one of which went straight through his gut. The house belonged to the family of one of Wonder's victims. But there was no shortage of suspects since his crimes were so heinous. It was one of the only truly black marks on Howling Cove's history.

There were forty-nine characters in this story. Daxon said he could have probably done a dozen more, but we didn't want to crowd the space. Especially since people were encouraged to mingle and 'interview' each other in an attempt to solve the mystery. And there were other clues hidden throughout the room too.

We did our best to, in some way, represent the crime scene for investigation. In Kinns's and Lindon's cases, there were small dioramas that the school had made up for us with as historically accurate features and clues as they could come up with.

Wonder's murder was interesting. There was a whiteboard we put up and staged the actual fence where he was found and recreated the evidence that was there. We even tried to correctly display the blood spatter as described. Then we took lots of pictures and hung them on the whiteboard.

Daxon chose who the murderer was in each case based on his own research and opinion. At least for this round of dinners, we thought it would be fun that way.

Now I was standing in the door, looking into the Wonder room. There was a crowd outside as people gathered, waiting to come in. I could hear them. Their excitement. My heart pounding in my ears.

Everyone was stationed where they were assigned. Daxon, Linus, and Megan were in their rooms, dressed and ready to play host. Lana was upstairs in the spare room, directing the staff who would be helping. And then there were four more, one at the front door, one at the eastern side door, one at the top and bottom of the stairs, ready to check people in, give them their assignments, and direct them to where they needed to go.

Me? I was nearly hyperventilating.

“Katiya.”

And now I was ready to wet myself. Anson’s cedarwood scent surrounded me, stroking me like a strange caress as he came closer. Slowly. Cautiously. With his hands in his pockets so as not to spook me.

Hate to break it to him. I was always going to be spooked. Freaked the fuck out. Especially since I was essentially alone with this alpha right now.

*Just breathe. I’m okay. He won’t hurt me.*

Anson stopped half a dozen feet from me. His smile was kind. But in my mind, I could still hear his growls from the day we met. A shiver raced down my back.

“Hi,” I said, impressed with myself when my voice didn’t squeak.

“Are you ready? Do you need anything?” he asked.

I’ll admit. As far as alphas went, he was always very kind to me. Probably because he saw that I was always frozen like a deer in headlights but also ready to run wild like a squirrel trying to cross the road.

Taking a breath, I nodded. “Yes. I think we’re ready.”

“But are you? Do *you* need anything?”

I almost said a Valium. Something to relax my frayed nerves. Especially since I was sure there were a whole slew of alphas going to be here tonight. Instead, I shook my head. “I’m okay. Just excited, nervous.” A quick glance at his attire and I said, “You’re not participating in the event.”

Anson smiled. For the first time in my life, my stomach fluttered in the presence of an alpha for an entirely different reason than fear. His smile was stunning.

“No. As tempted as I was, and I assure you, I had six tickets in my cart, I thought that maybe I’d give others the chance to enjoy this first. Our goal is to bring more attention to Howling Cove. I’m already deeply invested. However, I assure you that I will be participating in the next.”

I nodded. “There’s going to be a next?”

His smile was no less charming this time. But now my knees were shaking too. Goddamn. I had no idea alphas could be so gorgeous.

“As long as something horrific doesn’t happen here tonight, yes. This could be a great tradition you’ve started, Kat.”

“I hope you didn’t just jinx it,” I said, pressing my lips together.

And then his laugh. Jeezus fuck, I felt that in my groin. Are alphas capable of spells? Because what the hell was happening right now?

“There are police all over, monitoring everything. The building has been thoroughly inspected. Everything will be fine. It was more of a caveat since, try as we may, we cannot predict everything.”

“I hope nothing dire happens. This is going to be so fun.” If I don’t vomit first. At this point, I wasn’t sure if it was from nerves about the upcoming event or because this alpha was doing strange things to me with nothing but his damn voice and smile.

“I’m sure it won’t. I apologize for adding to your stress.”

I smiled, glancing into the room once more. When I looked back at him, Anson had taken a couple steps closer. My heart raced, of course. But I wasn't ready to bolt anymore than I'd already been.

"You're always beautiful, Kat, but tonight you're simply breathtaking," he murmured, his voice low and smooth. His fingers barely touched my cheek, but I swear, I could feel that touch all over.

"Th-thank you," I whispered.

He smiled, taking a step backward. "I'll be around. Watching it all unfold. It should be thrilling."

I nodded as he turned and walked back down the length of the entry hall. Apparently, there were doors at either end and he disappeared inside one. I almost followed, just out of curiosity.

But then the door opened, and Beck stuck his head in. "Are you ready, Kat?"

Taking a breath and patting down the front of my dress, I nodded. "Yes. Let's start." I picked up the radio and relayed the message to the others. Jessica at the side door responded an affirmation. Lana, Megan, Daxon, Alec, and Linus followed.

Beck opened the doors wide, and I stepped back to watch as he began checking people in with his tablet and then handing them their character cards. I directed them to the station just inside the door where they were to lock up their phones and keys and then welcomed them inside.

Listening to their awe of the place helped to settle me. It really was a remarkable old building. The stone was stunning, and the tall, curved glass windows were equally beautiful. The furniture was gathered from all over the town, brought together to set the atmosphere for the time period we were setting up.

Because the meetinghouse was so old, there weren't any traditional bulb lights anywhere. From the tall ceilings hung

chandeliers with dim lights. On the walls were sconces. And we covered the tables throughout the room with oil lamps.

Each place setting had a single clue card, all of which were slightly different. It wasn't a detail told to anyone, so we were wondering how long it would take for them to figure that out.

So far, the costumes people wore were remarkable. Thick, full skirts and long, dashing suit jackets with top hats. Bonnets. Ankle boots with heels. The guests went all out.

I watched from the side as they piled in, finding their place setting and sitting down while their tablemates slowly joined them.

Our plan was a cocktail hour first, with hand-passed hors d'oeuvres and wine. We tried to keep even the food period authentic, however, we allowed the chefs to add seasoning and whatever to make it more enjoyable.

When all the Wonder Room guests were checked in, sitting at their tables and mingling, I decided to explore the door at the end of the entrance hall. Sure enough, there was a thin hall that ran the length. It appeared empty, so I stepped inside.

Every dozen feet or so was a slit in the wall that looked into the meeting room. Not at all creepy. However, it made checking in from any angle convenient. I made my way through the hall and into the back room.

I checked with the door attendant who was just closing it up and headed upstairs to peek into the other rooms. Megan and Linus were upstairs, already working the rooms like the pros they were. I couldn't remember who their characters were, but they both looked born for the role.

A hand on my hip made me turn. I had just enough time to recognize Reed before his lips covered mine. I grinned, wrapping my arms around his neck to enjoy my surprise kiss.

"You're exquisite," he murmured.

"I've been told," I said, cheekily.

"Oh really? Who needs an ass kicking?"

Grinning, I shrugged. "Anson. Think you can take him?"



“Yes. I can.”

I laughed, resting my forehead against his chin. “I’m glad you’re here. Thanks for coming.”

“I wouldn’t miss it. You’ve made this place more striking than it normally is. I can’t believe what a perfect backdrop this building is for this type of event.”

Pulling away, I glanced in at Linus again. “Honestly. I suppose it can’t be all that surprising, though, can it? Daxon said the primary structure of the meetinghouse was built in the 1800s.”

“It was. Very true. But I don’t think it’s ever looked like this. The way you’ve transformed these spaces is remarkable.”

I smiled at him again. “I really can’t take any of the credit on this. It was all Daxon and Lana. I know nothing about what this should look like to resemble over 200 years ago. Megan even picked out my dress.”

He chuckled. When Lana called to me, Reed kissed my cheek, and I headed into the middle room.

“The waiters with the hors d’oeuvres have arrived. Time to signal the welcomes. Want to head back down to Daxon?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yep.” Turning back into the hall, Reed was gone. I headed downstairs and stopped in the back door to the meeting room. It was filled with people, but it wasn’t crowded.

Spotting Daxon, I took a breath and headed in. Sidling up to his side, I relayed the message. He kissed my cheek and then made a show of kissing my knuckles. Laughing, I brushed him off and backed away, my eyes catching the men standing in the main doors watching.

I recognized one right away. Cohen. He stared at Daxon intensely. But the other man I hadn’t seen before. He grinned at me, bringing his hand up to wave.

I frowned. Was I supposed to recognize him? Backing away, I ran into a solid body and froze. Not because I hit

someone, but because the scent that enveloped me was strong. Arresting. Robust and suffocating.

Alpha.

My shoulders tensed as I turned to face him. A smile touched his lips. "Hello."

Somehow managing to give him a little curtsy, I dodged to the door. Safely away, I released a breath.

"You okay?" Alec asked as he stopped beside me. Daxon's voice filled the meeting room as I nodded.

"Yep. I ran into a man."

Alec chuckled. "There are many here."

I swatted at him, laughing. With my heart still racing and the orange chai scent of the alpha still filling my nose, I placed a hand over my chest.

"An alpha," Alec said gently. I nodded, letting my gaze flicker over the room. "I thought you were getting better with alphas."

Giving him a demure smile, I shrugged. "I didn't exactly run. And I didn't scream or pee myself. I feel like that deserves a few points."

He laughed quietly. "No. I mean, aren't you seeing Reed Jameson?"

"Ah. So that's not a secret."

Alec grinned, shaking his head. "Hardly."

"Yes," I confirmed. "But I'm not sure what one has to do with the other."

Alec's silence had me looking at him. His confusion made me frown. "What?"

"You know he's part of the Jameson pack, right?"

"I've gathered that from various conversations, though we haven't come right out to talk about it. So, yes, I know."

"And you know that there are no betas in that pack."

I laughed. “Five alphas and an omega.”

He nodded. I glanced into the room. In the double doors, Cohen and the man still stood there. Reed had joined them. He smiled when I spotted him. I smiled in return, but I had a feeling Alec was about to drop a bombshell on me.

The world closed in, narrowed so that I was staring at Reed’s smiling face. And then I saw it. Before Alec could finish his revelation, I saw the difference. Reed’s odd scent isn’t an omega’s scent at all. And he’s taller than an omega. Everything about him is a little much for an omega.

Because the man I didn’t know standing with them was the Jameson omega. That meant Reed was an alpha.

“No,” I said, quietly, watching Reed’s smile fall. I shook my head. “That’s not—why would he lie to me? After I told him—”

“Okay. I see I just fucked up,” Alec said. “It’s not what you think.”

I turned on him, feeling tears sting my eyes. “No? Then what is it?”

But he couldn’t come up with words. His mouth opened, but he was helpless to respond. When I looked back at the door, all three of the men were gone.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# GIDEON



I honestly couldn't believe how dazzling she was. I'd always been partial to alphas. It was just what I was. Alphas were the epitome of attractive. Male or female didn't matter in the least. It was just the alpha that I needed.

But for the first time, a beta caught my attention. I mean, how could she not? When four of my five alphas were already smitten with her. I knew it was a matter of time before Tristen was too. Especially when I watched her back into him. The way he smiled at her. Watched her as she scrambled from the room.

When he looked up at us, we knew. That beta, there was something about her that was made exactly for our pack. She belonged here. She was meant to be here.

I felt Reed next to me as the three of us watched her in the doorway opposite. Her smile. The way she stared at Reed. And then her smile shifted. Her entire expression changed, slowly began melting into something else.

"Oh no," Reed said.

It was like a storm cloud hovered over us.

"No, no, no," Reed said. When Katiya looked away into the darkness of the back room, Reed left my side. Cohen grabbed my hand and pulled me along after him.

"Reed," Cohen warned, but Reed was already nearly sprinting down the small passage.

“Katiya,” Reed said as he came out the other side. Cohen and I were on his heels, stepping out right after him.

The look on her face as she turned to him. Tears bright in her eyes. “You lied to me,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Alec said, shaking his head. “I had no idea you didn’t know.”

“I didn’t,” Reed said, going toward her. But Katiya backed away, shaking her head, putting her hands up to stop him.

“You let me think you’re an omega,” she accused.

That surprised me. I looked at Reed, trying to see how he could possibly pass as an omega. I mean, seriously, the man could only ever be an alpha. There was no way he could truly pass as anything else.

“I’m sorry, Kat. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Alec as he looked desperately between the two of them.

“How could you do that?!”

“I didn’t know how to tell you. The timing was never right,” Reed pleaded.

Her voice went high. “Really? You mean after I told you why I can’t be around alphas, wasn’t the right time? Or maybe before you climbed in bed with me? Was that not the right time, Reed?”

“Please,” Reed said, his voice dropping to just above a whisper. In the room beside us, the crowd cheered. Reed and Kat didn’t even hear it. “I promise, I have as much reason to fear alphas as you do.”

“Do you?” she asked, a tear trickling down her cheek. Lana came down the stairs then and paused as she looked between us. This was really not a good place for this conversation. “Do you, alpha?”

Reed flinched, turning his face away. He released a breath and nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I really do.”

“You know what? It doesn’t matter. I have an event to manage.” With that, she turned and headed to the stairs. She passed Lana and disappeared up them.

When Reed tried to follow, Cohen grabbed his arm to hold him back. “She’s right,” he said gently. “This is not the time or place.”

“Letting her resentment grow the rest of the evening is not going to end well for anyone,” Reed said, trying halfheartedly to pull free.

Cohen brought him back, resting Reed’s back against his chest, wrapping an arm up around his shoulder. Reed dropped his head back in defeat, tears falling down his face. “I know this is hard,” Cohen murmured, “but you need to let her go right now. We’ll see what we can do when this is over.”

Reed didn’t answer. I glanced up the stairs. Maybe I could talk to her. Maybe Lana knew what I was thinking. She shifted so she was blocking my path. Though she didn’t cross her arms over her chest, she did remain there, watching us.

I smiled at her, turning my attention to Alec. The man looked beyond distressed. “I’m sorry,” he said when he caught me watching. “I had no idea; I thought she knew.”

“It’s not your fault,” Cohen said. “Why don’t you see if you can calm her down, though. You’re friends, aren’t you?”

Alec nodded. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing. Just be her friend,” Cohen said. “You’re on her side. Okay?”

He nodded again and turned towards the stairs. Lana moved aside, patting his arm as he went by her.

“Come on,” Cohen said. “Let’s head home.”

“No,” Reed said. “I can’t leave. Not until this is over and I can talk to her.”

“You really think that’s a good idea?” he asked.

Reed’s entire body tensed. “Cohen, you don’t understand.”

“I do understand. Remember, I brought you to the sandcastle event for the sole purpose of meeting her.” I eyed Lana to see what she was doing with this information. She raised a brow at Cohen’s words. “Because our reaction to her was so strong, we wanted to see what you thought of her. This is our fault. Not even yours. We set this up.”

Reed really didn’t care whose fault it was. But he wasn’t going to leave. However, that was as long as Lana could remain a passive bystander.

“You set this up?” she asked, incredulous.

Cohen looked at her, sighing. “Not in the way you’re thinking, Lana. You know we would never hurt anyone, which includes intentionally lying to them.”

She narrowed her eyes, but she very clearly didn’t understand it all. Which was fine. This was an internal affair. I wondered how internal it was going to be after this was over.

Lana shook her head disapprovingly. This time, she crossed her arms and leaned against the wall, still blocking the stairs. She was *not* going to let us up. But did she know there are other sets of stairs?

“Let’s go back to the front,” I suggested.

Neither of them argued. They followed me back through the small passage until we reached the other end. I poked my head around the door to catch a glimpse of Tristen. He looked strangely hot in the getup Cohen had brought home for him. It’s a good thing there wasn’t a lot of time, or I’d probably have humped him.

He looked up and winked at me. I grinned in return before turning back. Reed was sitting on the bench with Cohen standing over him. A hand on his shoulder, the other running through his hair. While they were occupied, I headed down the hall and pushed open the panel that revealed the servant’s stairs.

Letting it shut behind me, I pulled out my phone to turn on the flashlight. Hopefully I wasn’t going to fall through them or anything. I doubted the inspection had covered the hidden



stairs. I only knew about them because Tristen had taken me here when I first came to Howling Cove. Pretty sure he stole the keys, but either way, he led me around.

I crept up the stairs, and as quietly as I could, pushed open the door. It emptied into one of the small rooms not being used for the event. Shutting it again, I moved through the dark space until I was looking into the hall.

Alec was still with her but he was almost dancing around on his feet, not knowing what to do. I shook my head. Should have at least sent Lana after her. Or maybe pulled Megan from the room she was supervising.

Katiya shook her head at whatever Alec said and wiped at her eyes. The way the sight pulled at my heart had me moving toward her without any further thought. I had no idea what I was going to say. None at all.

They both looked at me when they heard my footsteps. Alec's eyes widened as he glanced at the stairs, nowhere near the direction I was heading to them from. I grinned at him and then ignored him as I made my way to my beta. She may not know she's mine, but she is.

I knelt before her. Her initial reaction was to back away. But I think when she caught a whiff of my perfume, the confirmation that *I* was the omega settled her a little.

She looked at me, eyes and cheeks red. "I promise that his omission was not meant to be malicious, Katiya."

"That doesn't change that he lied to me knowing how I felt about—"

"I agree," I said, interrupting her. I covered her hand with mine. She looked down before meeting my eyes again. "It doesn't change that he lied. But I want you to ask yourself this: why would an alpha hide what he is? Why would he pretend to be anything other than an alpha so thoroughly that he never purrs? Never growls or barks. He doesn't even knot."

Her lips parted as she looked at me. I could see that her thoughts were spinning now. Warring with the curiosity of what I was saying and the sting of Reed's betrayal.

“Reed’s one transgression, his single omission of truth, is that he’s an alpha. But I can assure you that nothing else he has ever said was a lie.”

“How do you know that?” she whispered.

“Because Reed is my alpha. I know his character. That man is just as terrified of alphas as you are. So much so that he can’t stand being one himself.”

Katiya took a breath. She turned her face and peered into the Lindon room. For a minute, she stared inside, watching the activities. Listening to the chatter, the laughter, the clink of china and crystal.

But I watched her. Watched as her breathing slowly regulated. Her pulse calmed. Her tears dried. Her hands stopped shaking.

Then she looked at me. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but she carefully pulled her hands from mine and got to her feet. I followed. My hands itched to take her to me. To kiss her and pat her head, tell her it was going to be alright.

Somehow, I managed. Remarkable since I have absolutely no impulse control.

“I need to get back to work,” she said.

“Okay. We’ll see you after,” I told her.

Katiya stopped. Her shoulders stiffened. “Actually, I’d rather not,” she said quietly.

For an omega not to throw a tantrum when they want something bad enough can only mean one thing. I was so stunned that I just stared at her.

She looked at me over her shoulder. “I’d really rather not see him after.”

“But... You don’t forgive him?” I asked, shocked.

Katiya frowned at me. “No. I don’t even know who you are.”

“Gideon,” I said. “I’m the omega.”

“Ah. I suppose I could have surmised that. Process of elimination and all.” She looked away. “At least you smell like an omega,” she muttered.

I might have laughed under different circumstances. But this beta was trying like hell to walk away from me. I couldn't let that happen. Moving toward her again, I thought maybe I needed to start over. Start somewhere else. Maybe it wasn't my place, but she needed to know—

Alec stepped in my path. Again, I was so startled that I stopped. Stared at him like an idiot. “She said no,” he said, his hands in front of him to stop me. “You should go. And your pack.”

My eyes widened. Did he really just tell me to take my pack and leave?! When his expression didn't falter, my mouth dropped. He did. This fucking beta just told us to leave. Holy hell. The balls on this man.

There was no other explanation for me turning around and heading down the stairs, than that I was completely flabbergasted at this turn of events. I passed Lana, who stared at me with irritation that I'd gone around her. But I didn't give her the satisfaction of being angry.

Instead, I ignored her (rude, I know; I'll apologize later) and headed back down the little path between the walls. Reed and Cohen were where I left them, but now they were joined by Anson and Felix. Felix looking yummy in his uniform.

“Where were you?” Anson demanded.

“We need to leave,” I said, shocked.

All four of them looked at me, various states of confusion and surprise.

“She wants us to leave. I suppose more specifically, me and Reed, but...” I looked at them, still completely confused by what was happening. “She wants us to leave,” I repeated.

Reed flinched, curling in on himself. The other three alphas exchanged looks. In some weird alpha silent communication, there was a single nod that passed between them.

Cohen helped Reed to his feet. “Come on. We’ll go home.” With an arm around Reed’s waist, he took my hand and pulled me along. Anson and Felix followed long enough to see us into the car before heading back to the meetinghouse.

“They’re staying,” I said. I sounded like a fumbling idiot.

“This is our business,” Cohen said. “And Tristen is here. Yes, they’re staying.”

I nodded. Maybe one of them will have luck with Katiya.

“They will stay away from her,” Cohen said quietly. Proving once again that my damn alphas can read minds. Stupid, silent communication that I wasn’t privy to.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen,” Reed said, letting his head fall against the glass. He stared out the window. I could see the reflection in the mirror. “What am I going to do?”

“I tried to fix it,” I said, and felt them both flinch and tried not to take offense. “I thought I did. But then she—she told us to leave. And Alec told us to leave. It was all very...”

Cohen chuckled. He placed his hand on my leg and squeezed it gently. “My poor, sweet, spoiled omega. You have no idea how to act when someone tells you no.”

“I’m never told no,” I said in defense.

“You’re not. And we’re going to keep it that way,” Cohen said, smiling at me. He took a breath and faced the road. The car really was unnecessary. We lived so close. Cohen hadn’t thought Tristen would appreciate walking in the shoes, though. “As for Katiya, right now, we’re going to have to play it by ear. The next move is in her hands.”

I sagged. This wasn’t going to work at all. If it was up to Katiya, I think she’d like to write us off. She was like a character in one of Tristen’s books. And we were now written off the page.

Cohen was right. No one tells me no. I was not about to let Katiya do so. We all wanted her in our pack. There was no way in hell I was accepting defeat. Crossing my arms, I stared out the window as I tried to think of a game plan.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

# KATIYA



I didn't talk to Octavia at all when I got home from the dinner. It was well past one, so I could brush off her questions about why Reed didn't come home with me. I felt bad that I was kind of ignoring her, but I just couldn't bring myself to talk about it.

When I climbed into bed that night, I wrapped the blankets around me and cried for hours. At some point, I finally fell asleep and woke with a headache to end all headaches.

It was a good enough reason to once more avoid Octavia's questions when I could finally pull myself from bed. I swallowed some ibuprofen, grabbed a banana, and headed down to the shop. It was early, but I didn't care. I didn't want the constant questions from Octavia.

I hoped I was all cried out. Nothing like having my first true romance end in a heartache. Welcome to adult life, Katiya.

When I reached the shop, I remained outside for several minutes trying to collect myself. If there was one thing I wasn't going to do, it was cry in front of my coworkers. That was unacceptable. I had my cry last night with poor Alec not knowing what to do. That was enough.

After several cleansing breaths and the internal assurance that I wasn't going to fall apart again, I slapped on a smile and marched myself up the stairs.

The door opened with its usual chime, announcing someone was walking in. It felt absurdly loud. Telling

everyone to look at me, and they all obliged.

But I was smiling. I could feel it. “Good morning,” I called.

“What are you doing here?” Linus asked. “Didn’t you leave last?”

I had. Alec was his usual gentlemanly self and walked me home. But last night, we had the addition of Daxon. I had a feeling they went out after. Or at least, they went home together after. Whatever, I appreciated the company on the dark trail up the cliff.

“Yes,” I said, shrugging. “There’s work to do.”

“You’re scheduled for the day off,” Lana said.

“Cohen said that I only needed to take two days off each week. I could work whatever I wanted outside of that.” I could hear the defensiveness in my voice. Taking a breath, I smiled. “I was bored.” And my ghost was harassing me.

“Today starts a new week,” Linus said, frowning. “Technically, she is within the rules.”

Lana sighed. “Alright, alright. What’s your plan today?”

Oh, right. If I was going to be working, I needed a plan of attack. “Actually, I just want to do something mundane for a while and give my creative juices a break. Can I stock?”

I didn’t miss the way Lana watched me. Studying me. Waiting for me to fall apart. But that smile I plastered on was still intact. There wasn’t even a crack.

*Not yet,* a quiet voice said.

“Go ahead. You know what needs to be out as much as I do,” Lana conceded.

I headed into the back room and took a minute to make sure my mask was in place and there weren’t any errant tears ready to slip out when I least expected it. Once I was assured that I could be a grownup, I picked up the box of stickers and headed to the front.

Because I was in the front, I was there when the delivery man came in with an enormous bouquet. I blanched as he stopped in front of me.

“Miss Katiya. Delivery for you, sweet one,” he said with a huge smile.

I tried. I really tried to keep the smile on my face. Standing up, I stared at the bouquet. I swear, there were more than three dozen different kinds of flowers.

“Over here,” Linus said. “That’s bigger than she is. She can’t possibly carry it.”

The guy—I think his name was Tom—headed further into the shop and set them on the counter. Linus signed for them, and Tom left. I scowled at his back, making sure he didn’t see the expression. It wasn’t at all his fault. He was simply doing his job.

“Kat, do you want to read the card?” I shook my head and went back to the stickers.

“Can I?” Linus asked. “Ow.”

I glanced back in time to see Lana pulling her hand back from slapping his arm. I laughed, shaking my head. “Go for it.”

The silence felt heavy. Every movement I made with the stickers echoed in my head.

“It’s from Cohen,” Linus said. “Stop hitting me.” I looked back as he trapped Lana’s arms at her sides. “He’s congratulating you on a successful event. He said it was stunning, and you did a remarkable job. He’s very proud of you.”

Lana relaxed, but I frowned further. Not only had Cohen left right after it started, but I had made it pretty clear that aside from the initial idea, I had very little to do with the details.

“Then those flowers aren’t for me. They’re for Daxon, primarily. It was a success, mostly thanks to his research and coordination. Just cross my name off.”



Lana and Linus exchanged a look.

But don't worry. That wasn't my only delivery. Before noon, I also received a little stuffed bear that was actually rather cute. It was wrapped in gauze to look like a mummy. I received an ice cream sundae that I gave to Linus. And I also received a single iris.

It was probably the iris that had me fighting back the tears more than anything else. I wasn't sure why. It was just a flower. Since it was plucked from the ground with its roots savagely cut, it was already sentenced to death. He gave me a dying piece of foliage.

Thankfully, we were provided a distraction from all the many deliveries. A frantic woman came in just as Eliza and Henry clocked in for register duty.

"There's something out there," she babbled, her face white as a sheet.

"Out where?" Lana asked, moving to the door to look outside.

"In the cave. There's something there!"

We looked at each other, confusion and surprise passing between us.

"What did you see?" Linus asked.

"I—I don't know. It was big. Its shadow reaching up the wall. Its feet grinding stones on the floor. There was a nasty sound. Like a growl and a... a... I don't know. Howl? Maybe it howled?"

"Which part of the cave were you in?" Linus asked as he moved to the front of the store. He grabbed a flashlight from the counter.

As the woman told him in no uncertain terms, I grabbed a flashlight too and ran after him as he headed down to the caves.

"Kat—"

"Hush. You're not going alone."

The guided tours were what we encouraged. But anyone was allowed to explore the caves on their own at their own risk. There was a very elaborate plaque outside the mouth of the cave putting all blame on those who enter should anything befall them.

But that was just constituting injuries. Sure, the sign encompasses ghosts and whatnot, but that part was to be cheeky. It wasn't meant to be real.

For a second, I remembered the apparition I saw behind the bars, blocking the way down one of the passages. Could it be that someone was down here?

Our footsteps slowed once we hit solid ground in the cave. The quiet taps echoed, and we both clicked on our flashlights. They were big, like spotlights, giving off large beams of bright white light.

We took our time, listening as we walked. When I heard the tiniest of scrapes, I grabbed Linus's hand. His grip on me was as tight as mine on him.

"There's nothing in here," he said, his voice hushed. I wasn't sure if he was assuring me or trying to convince himself.

"I feel like the one surety we should take is that there's no such thing as monsters," I said.

He snorted. "There are plenty of monsters in the world, but they're human. Which, if there's a monster down here, that's what we'll find is behind the specter."

"What do you think it is?" I asked. "Do you think someone is down here playing games?"

"It wouldn't be the first time. But I'll admit, I haven't heard a report quite like that one. However, I'm going to reaffirm that there's no such thing as monsters."

"Good. Let's keep saying that."

His hand tightened around mine as he chuckled.

We walked slowly, looking at every place that was shrouded in shadow and darkness. We checked all the barred

passages both beyond and before the area that the woman had claimed she saw something.

The caves went on and on. But we reached the point where even the guides stopped. There were signs warning of dangers beyond. People have gotten lost. Trapped. They have died beyond that point. It's not blocked off because it's not been due to any fragile infrastructure.

Some say that beyond this location, the cave is cursed. It takes as many lives as it lets out. That the cave is alive beyond this spot.

The night tours didn't even go down there.

Linus turned his back on the darkness to look at me. "There's nothing here."

"Then what did she see?" I asked, easing to the side to stare into the darkness.

"Probably someone messing around that ran off when she did. Let's get back."

I nodded, allowing him to turn me around. He held my hand for a while as we walked in the chilling peace of the cave. It was both slightly frightening and soothing. Linus wrapped his arm around my waist.

"Kat—"

"Don't. I really don't want to talk about it."

He didn't respond. We walked a while longer in the quiet before he kissed the side of my head. "We don't have to talk about it. But you know that I'm here if you want to talk, right? If you want someone to vent to. To be angry with you. I joke around a lot, but I'm actually a really good listener."

I grinned. "It sounds like you're flirting with me."

"After a fresh breakup? Not a damned chance, Kitty Kat!" he said, appalled.

The slight sting of 'break up' was reduced with laughter from the tone he took. I giggled, shaking my head.

“Look. I know I was... blinded by what I wanted to see, even though all of my senses told me that he wasn’t an omega. I didn’t even question it. He was so... nice.”

“Reed is nice, Katiya. One of the nicest men you’re ever going to meet.”

“I thought you were going to be angry with me.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” he added. “He’s a nice guy who is a piece of shit. Just your run of the mill, Howling Cove alpha!”

I laughed and yet somehow, I was sure that even most of that wasn’t an insult at all. Everyone I’d met in Howling Cove, those who lived there permanently, they all talked rather highly of all the alphas who reside there. Whether they were packed or unpacked. So I knew damn well Linus didn’t think he was a piece of shit.

“I’ll say this one last thing. He comes from a very, very dark past. But he’s come a long way. The same reasons you don’t want to tell us why you’re scared of all alphas are probably a lot like the reason why he is.”

“I hear your reason,” I said. “And while his designation is certainly a sore spot with me, it’s beyond that. He lied to me. I told him everything. I shared my reason. And yet he *still* continued to let me think he was an omega. It’s more than that. He—he—” *spent the night!*

I couldn’t bring myself to finish the sentence. It lodged in my throat and I had to work through the tears that were fighting their way out.

Linus pulled me to a stop, and against his chest, his fingers tangling in my hair. “Alright, shh. I’m sorry. We’re done talking about it. Promise.”

That’s what I needed. I just wanted to put it behind me. It was over. Because even if I could look past the fact that he was exactly everything I feared, I couldn’t get over the lie. That I let him touch me, believing he was something else entirely.

We walked on the beach back to the shop. The woman was gone.

Linus shook his head. “There’s nothing there. No one. And we didn’t see any evidence that someone was messing around down there.”

“Didn’t go beyond the spooky spot, though,” I said.

Lana laughed. “I hope not. I’d hate to have either of you disappear.”

“That really happens?” I asked. Not that I didn’t believe Linus, but it seemed so farfetched.

“More than a dozen disappearances each month,” Lana said. “Only half their bodies are ever recovered.”

“And people still go in there,” I said, shocked.

“Glory seekers,” Linus said. “Nonbelievers. Explorers convinced that there’s gold back there and are willing to put their lives on the line to find it.”

“I feel like that’s within the job description of an explorer,” I said.

“Yes. Probably. But we’re not talking about disappearances that happened in the past and are no more. We’re talking about it still happening today. Not since you arrived, but two weeks prior was the last missing person report,” Linus said. “And after a two-day search with massive flood lights into the bowels of the cave, the police did not come out with a body.”

If I ever gathered enough courage to have a casual conversation with Felix, I was going to ask him about it. The whole thing was captivating. The idea that there *had* to be something back there. Or else, where are these people going?

More than their disappearances, the fact that there were no recovered bodies. How were people still allowed in the caves at all?

I spent the rest of the day mulling this over with Linus and Lana. We threw out hypotheses and ideas. Once in a while, Eliza or Henry would add something new for us to think about. But at the end of the day, I was only more intrigued.

So when I got home that night, I went straight to my room. Stripping my clothes and trying to ignore Octavia's many questions about the dinner, I pulled the book up.

"Story time?" I asked.

She flopped onto the bed in frustration. I didn't actually feel it. It was just how she threw herself. A smile fought to get out as I watched her pout. "Why won't you tell me about the dinner?"

"I will. But right now, I want to read a bit. A woman came out of the caves today saying that something's in there. Something that casts a big shadow and howls or growls. We talked about the disappearances all day and I'm being slightly obsessive right now and want to read about them. Then we can talk about the dinner."

Octavia enjoyed being read to which is the only reason she agreed. The news about the caves wasn't anything new to her. It was to me. So I wanted to know.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

# KATIYA



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*One of the oldest sites in Howling Cove sits on the shore. A large stone structure, the meetinghouse was once a very important hub for the town. It was the site of marriages, court hearings, balls, and town meetings.*

*For more than 200 years, the meetinghouse was the center of society in the town. Many families attended events there three, four, five times a week. It was not only a rite of passage, but a true emphasis on being accepted into the community when you were invited to be a part of such events.*

*In the late 1900s, the use of the meetinghouse came to a sudden end. The doors were locked, the windows covered, and residents were no longer allowed to use it. It wasn't long before it was forgotten about, and major events were moved into prominent homes and other professional buildings.*

*Although the meetinghouse was always a part of Howling Cove, one spoken of in reverence and referred to when discussing the town's history. The town has always been very good at keeping detailed records of all events, which makes it very clear that it was the center of life within the town.*

*For years, there was a lot of speculation as to why the meetinghouse's use was suddenly discontinued. None of the records state why it was abruptly closed and never reopened. There have been many times that a resident of Howling Cove has suggested reopening the meetinghouse for use again. Revitalizing it. Even investigating why it was closed down to begin with.*

*Each time, it has been denied by town officials. There has rarely been any solid reason given.*

*1978, a beta by the name of Isariah Huntington, refused to accept the rejection of his request to study the old meetinghouse. For months, Huntington snuck into the meetinghouse during the late night hours, digging through the old rooms and searching for anything that might unravel the mystery as to why it was closed.*

*One night, Huntington burst out of the meetinghouse terrified. Screaming for the police, he went barreling into the street.*



*When the authorities arrived, they found that Huntington had been trespassing on the property. Sifting through rooms and removing artifacts. But what had Huntington leaving the building in such terror was the uncovering of a brutal murder site.*

*It appeared that Huntington didn't come into the meetinghouse through one of the doors, but through a cave tunnel that emptied into the basement. He worked his way up and into the primary room. There, he found bodies littering the floor, now nothing more than skeletons in clothing. Blood spattered the room, reaching all the way to the vaulted ceiling. Covering the stained-glass windows.*

*An investigation was inevitable at that point, but as of the time of this publication, there has not been any information released on this cold case. It is unclear whether the murders happened before or after the meetinghouse's sudden closure. And with such a long period between the murders and when the bodies were found, any evidence has been subject to time.*

---

I paused at the end of the passage. Only because I was reading the book in order was I disappointed. Not because the story wasn't good. It was. I thought that stopping by the museum where the artifacts were held would have to go on my list.

"That's not what I was hoping for," I said.

"The meetinghouse was still in use when I was alive," Octavia said. "I didn't know about the murders. I must have already been dead."

"You don't remember anyone talking about them?"

She shook her head. "No. Weird, though, right? I would think that if it was that gruesome, someone should have said something."

Unless they were guilty and didn't want to talk about it at all. "Did you know the Sandview pack?"

Octavia immediately bristled. "The ones who were alive in my time were awfully snotty. Pack Jameson tried to tame them a little, make sure they knew that everyone was equal in Howling Cove. But they had a chip on their shoulders. Convinced that because they were the founding pack of Howling Cove, they were royalty."

"Were they violent?"

She tilted her head to the side as she considered this. “I don’t recall them being violent. Just obnoxious. Of course, there’s always a bad egg in every family.”

I rubbed my finger along the edge of the pages as I considered this new information. They were unbearable, but not overly vicious people. I’m not sure that discounted them from being the perpetrators of the murders that took place at the meetinghouse. But I don’t suppose that put them on the suspect list at all, either.

“What do *you* think is in the caves?” I asked.

Octavia shrugged. “Probably another ghost.”

“That reminds me. I think I saw one down there. A dark figure. A man, I think. He was within one of the barred tunnels. I got a really bad vibe from him. Do you know who it is?”

“Do you think because I’m a ghost I know all the ghosts around here?” she asked, bemused.

“Actually, yes.”

Octavia snorted. “No. I don’t. There are a few in town that I visit from time to time when I’m bored. And I *never* go to the cove. Except that one time with you on the tour. That was interesting.”

I sighed, shutting the book. Time for dinner and then maybe another story. But when I got up, Octavia reminded me of the topic I hoped she forgot. The dead woman was not to be diverted from what she wanted to know. I imagined her a gossip when she was alive.

I think I had myself together at any rate. “Reed is an alpha,” I said simply.

“Yes. And?” she prompted.

Frowning, I looked at her. “What do you mean, yes?”

“What did you think he was?” she asked, perplexed.

I suddenly felt really stupid. “I guess I had convinced myself that he was an omega.”

She blinked at me several times before laughing. “Seriously, Katiya. How can you have ever mistaken that man for anything other than an alpha?”

“He wasn’t like any other alpha I’ve ever known,” I said defensively. “And I guess... I really liked him, so I allowed myself to be naïve in thinking that he was something else. I was naïve and stupid.”

“Oh, honey,” she said, moving next to me to brush her shoulder against mine. “I was outside when you were telling him about the place you came from. I am not surprised that you would have tried to convince yourself he wasn’t an alpha. Even when all the signs said he was.”

“What kind of alpha wears a suppressant?” I asked indignantly. “He’s lying to the world!”

“The kind that’s running from his own past, probably,” she answered.

I scowled at her. Yes, I get it. As everyone is very keen to remind me, Reed has his own dark history. And maybe I should cut him some slack. But it wasn’t that he was an alpha. It was that I had explicitly told him all about what alphas did to me, how they raised everyone, what they did to the ones that they wanted, what they did to the ones they didn’t want. And he *still* kept his designation from me.

Maybe I should have known better. The entire time I’ve known him, I was mentally commenting on the fact that he had a strange scent for an omega. And thinking back on it, his inclination to send me gifts was right in line with what an alpha is supposed to be compelled to do to their omega.

Not the alphas in the city I left, of course. They simply took what they wanted.

I sighed again and turned my back on the ghost. “It doesn’t matter. It’s over and I’m going to make dinner and go back to reading.”

“Over?” she asked. “But why?”

“You obviously don’t understand. And you won’t. Because you didn’t live the life I did. You didn’t barely escape a

horrible future.”

Octavia didn't speak about Reed again. In fact, she vanished entirely after that. I ate in silence. Instead of going to bed and reading as I intended, I curled up again and went to sleep. The tears still came. I suppose there's something to be said about falling hard and getting burned.

My ghost didn't return the next morning. I took the day off, though I wasn't sure that was going to do anything for my mental state. Especially not if I stayed home where I had nothing better to do than dwell.

After a quick bowl of cereal, I left the house and walked into town. There were cute cafes that I peeked through the window into. Catching the heavenly aromas made my stomach growl. After passing the third one, I decided that I was going to have to treat myself.

The shop was filled with the most heavenly aromas. They were so strong that they overpowered everyone's scents. There was a line in front of me, which was fine because even by the time I got to the register, I was still completely undecided.

“What's your favorite thing?” I asked the cashier.

“Oh, no. You can't make me choose,” she said, laughing. “Tell me your tastes and I'll pick something out.”

How do you tell someone you've never been somewhere like this before? “Chocolate,” I answered.

“Just chocolate?”

“For now.”

She nodded. “How about a double gooey brownie and an extra creamy hot chocolate with whipped cream and a dusting of cocoa powder?”

“That sounds divine,” I answered, my mouth already salivating.

\$7.36 later, I was sitting at a small round table with my purchase, almost moaning in pleasure. In fact, I was pretty

sure I did moan. After devouring every crumb and making sure I got every drip of hot cocoa, I headed out, making an internal promise that I would be treating myself to this on a somewhat regular basis. I could afford \$7 on occasion.

I wandered through downtown, window shopping and people watching. Everything was so incredibly different here than in the city. Friendly. Bright. Clean. There was chatter and laughter. People actually shopped. People *had money* to shop. It felt like I lived in a completely different world.

The first store I went in was a clothing shop called RJ's Muse: Boutique Clothing Shop. As seemed custom in every place I've been in Howling Cove, there was a set of little tinkling bells that went off when I opened the door, announcing my arrival.

There were three women inside, all betas. I was greeted as if I had hundreds of dollars to spend instead of someone just browsing. It was incredibly unlikely that I would actually be purchasing anything today. With all the overtime I was putting in, I had a little extra. But that overtime wouldn't last forever. So I was saving up while I was able.

Each garment was so unique. There were very few items that were actually multiples. Was it possible that every piece was one of a kind?

The textures of the clothes were so soft too. I couldn't help but run my fingers over them. Smooth silk. Soft velvet. You know, I had no idea what either of those fabrics actually felt like, but I could pretend I was sophisticated.

I turned to a different rack and pushed hangers as I admired each shirt. No, these were dresses. Some short. Some long. Some that barely covered anything while others were elegant. One caught my eye, and I took it off the rack, running my fingers down the stitching. The way it curved. It was such beautiful shades of purples and blues, like a night sky.

Since I was close to the register, I heard the girls as they addressed me. "That dress is perfect for you. Just holding it there, it brings out your eyes so clearly. You'll look absolutely

stunning with those colors against your fair skin. Would you like to try it on?" one of them asked.

I meant to say no, but found myself nodding. She showed me to a dressing room, and I slipped into it. Since the mirror was outside, I stepped out to admire it. I couldn't believe how well it fit.

"I swear, that was made for you," the girl said. "Look at her."

"Seriously, the way it hugs you exactly right. I agree."

I smiled, shifting so I could see my profile.

"Reed was right. That dress was going to go quickly."

I froze. For a second, I stared at my reflection before turning to look at the girls. "Reed?"

"Reed Jameson. Have you met him?"

Nodding, it felt like the world narrowed and darkened. "Yeah. We've met."

"He's an amazing designer. He works for some big labels from time to time, but he prefers just to make what his muse is pushing. Hence the name of the shop."

"RJ," I muttered, shaking my head. "He owns the shop."

"He does," she said, grinning. "The Jamesons own half of Howling Cove."

"Well, Anson and Cohen, anyway. The others don't. This is the only shop Reed owns."

"You can tell their shops because their initials are on the signs. AJ and CJ. Not always in the name, but they make sure that the town knows that they are the proprietors."

"Is it good for a single pack to own so much of the town?" I asked. It felt like the city all over again.

"They actually don't buy much to keep anymore," one of the girls said. "They've moved their investments up and down the east coast."

“But they pour all that money right back into the town. Buying falling homes or dying businesses, rebuilding them, and reselling them.”

“Not usually for much profit. Their only real goal is to make Howling Cove as pristine as they can. Keep the history intact.”

“You should see the building Anson is struggling with right now.” She shook her head. “He’s got it stripped to the rafters and I hear even those need to be replaced. But he’s not giving up.”

“A house?” I asked.

“No, this one was a restaurant, but who knows what he’ll do with it. Since he had to gut it and basically start over, he could make it into anything.”

“I hear he even has the original blueprints so he can bring it back to the original design.”

“He sounds like a saint,” I murmured. “What about their omega? Does he own anything?”

“Nah. Gideon is an artist. You’ll see his art hanging all around town.” She pointed to a few pieces on the walls. “He tries to give them away, but his alphas refuse to let that happen. He unloads them in shops just so he has more room in his studio.”

“They’re really nice. So pretty,” I said. “Why doesn’t he try to sell them?”

“Gideon calls himself a hobbyist. He just dabbles in everything. Much like Reed, he is self-taught and does whatever his muse is directing him to. He thinks that makes him an amateur that no one would want to buy. But they sell constantly.”

“And the other alpha?”

“Felix? He’s the Chief of Police.”

I shook my head. “There are five alphas, aren’t there?”

“Oh, you must mean Tristen. He’s a bestselling murder mystery author.” The woman pulled a book from under the counter and handed it to me. Ransom Ripper was the name of the author. The title of the book was *Death Tells No Lies*.

“An author,” I said, smiling slightly as I flipped through the pages. “That sounds like a fun job.”

“It takes a lot of work. I dabble here and there. But getting a publisher to take a chance on you is like finding gold.”

I smiled, nodding. “Yeah, I can imagine.” Handing the book back, I excused myself to take off the dress. I was surprised to be reluctant to put it back on the hanger. It fit me exactly right. Hugged everywhere it should. Perfectly. Showing the shape of my body in a tasteful yet attractive way.

Stepping out, I handed it to one of the girls.

“Want to keep looking, or are you ready to check out?” she asked as she brought it to the register.

Shaking my head, I started for the door. “I’m going to pass.” My words made them all pause to look at me. “I shouldn’t have tried it on. I need to be conservative with my money.” Not that I had even looked at the price tag.

“We understand. It’ll be here if you change your mind.”

I smiled, thanking them as I left. When I stood outside, I took a better look at the signs. Yep, nearly every other to every third had one of the two initials on it when I looked more closely. I didn’t think it was a bragging thing so much as a branding thing.

They weren’t shoving it in your face that they owned the town. It was about keeping a consistency in their brand. All of their signs were of similar design and font. And their initials were inconspicuous. Not screaming at you.

I headed down the street, deciding that I would only window shop from here on. Besides, I’d only gone to town to get a feel for it. The people and the atmosphere. It was beautiful. Smelled like grass and the sea.



Everyone was happy, friendly. Nearly everyone said hi to me as I passed. So many pedestrians stopped to talk, frequently seeing someone they knew.

I'd somehow picked the perfect town. So incredibly opposed to the hellish place I left. Despite the recent events, I was glad I'd chosen Howling Cove. It was an amazing place to be.

Besides, Reed was in the past. I would not be making that mistake again. No more alphas, hidden or otherwise. In hindsight, I should have questioned more. What kind of omega shows that much interest in a beta, anyway?

I wasn't anything special.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# TRISTEN



No one had truly caught on to the main pattern in my writing. I took old cold cases and rewrote them into fiction using all the evidence, facts, and characters I could get my hands on. Generally speaking, I focus on Howling Cove and small towns like it.

I've always kept this theme to myself. Thus far, in my eleven year career, no one has caught on. It was a big source of pride for me.

However, after learning about Chaingate and what goes on there, I thought that maybe I needed to change up my tactic of silence. Since Reed had shared a couple tidbits about Katiya's past without saying enough to break her confidentiality, I've become obsessed.

The amount of unsolved, brutal cases was both overwhelming and completely lacking any kind of investigation at all. After spending a few days researching, I had concocted an entire series that I could base off this stuff.

And I would. I would break my silence about how I come up with the murder cases I write. There was even an entire game I could create out of it. Name which case belongs to which book. It could become this whole big thing that doubled as built-in promo.

All in anticipation and build up of uncovering the nasty bullshit happening in Chaingate. First, I'd have to make sure my identity is well and truly hidden. I wouldn't put Katiya at risk. If someone came looking for me, they'd find her.

Since I never make any public appearances and there's not a single picture of me anywhere linking me to my name, it shouldn't be too difficult. There was the little issue that everyone in Howling Cove knew that I was Ransom Ripper.

Okay, so the idea needed to be fleshed out a little more. I had plenty of time. I wanted to get everything I could from the internet before I began releasing. Once it was out what I was doing, I could only imagine that there would be some massive cover up and public documents disappearing.

Another constant theme I used when writing was making one of my packmates the main character. Not in name, but sometimes appearances. Quirks. Traits. There's an old saying for authors: write what you know. I know my pack.

Imagine my surprise when they picked themselves out of my books. Up to that point, I hadn't realized that they read my novels. Yes, they each received a signed copy upon their insistence. But I hadn't thought they actually read them.

The little buzzer went off. I glanced at the clock on reflex. One o'clock. Time for a lunch break. Hitting save once again, even though it auto-saves every three minutes, I got to my feet and stretched.

Everything was quiet in the house. I stepped into the hall and listened. Gideon's doors were both wide open, which was odd for a weekday. Much like me, he typically locked himself in one of his rooms and occupied himself until the rest of our pack found their way home in the evening.

I stopped in front of his studio. Empty. His hobby room was the same. Further down the hall, I found Reed in his room. I thought, like the last couple days, that I'd have to pull him from bed for lunch and keep him out of it for the rest of the day. He was up today. But sitting at his desk with his hands in his lap as he stared absently out the window.

Our hidden alpha wasn't doing so well.

I was both furious on his behalf for the little beta treating him so harshly, and yet sympathetic to the girl he misled. That he knew he was wrong was good and all. But he continued

with his guise after she'd shared a whole lot that should have resulted in him coming clean.

But then again, he was my alpha. My packmate. Seeing him hurt was awful. The only one that would feel worse was if it was our omega.

Because I tended to be a solitary man, I paid a lot of attention to the bonds we shared. For the most part, we were all secondary bonds, feeling each other through Gideon. He held all five of our bites. The only alphas that shared bites were Anson and Cohen.

Still, I learned them all very well. I could pinpoint when there was the slightest mood change in any of them. Since meeting Katiya, Anson, Cohen, and Felix have been wound right tight. Hungry for her. I swear, sometimes I can feel their growl through the bonds.

And then came Reed. His cloud nine obsession was like a drug for all of us. Likewise, his misery was a lead ball.

Then there was Gideon. Besides his undertone of constant arousal and his otherwise butterfly happiness, there was a silence that lingered. Meaning he'd closed much of his bond, whether intentionally or not, was still to be determined.

That meant one thing—Gideon was plotting something.

For right now, I was going to leave it alone. Instead, I was going to make lunch and force Reed to eat before tracking down our omega. I settled on soup for the three of us. I figured that would be something I could likely insist Reed eat since he wouldn't have to take much effort in chewing. I'd also make him hot chocolate.

I worked my way around the kitchen, only pausing when I heard movement in the den. I left what I was doing to peek in and found Gideon sitting on a chair with a notepad. Grinning in triumph, I turned away, Gideon none the wiser. He was plotting. I couldn't wait to see what he was up to. He had a mischievous streak that only I seemed to encourage. Which meant he'd tell me soon enough.

Twenty minutes later, I brought a steaming mug of cocoa and a hot bowl of soup back to the work wing and into Reed's room. He didn't look up. I don't think he even saw my reflection as I approached.

He didn't startle when I set the two items down. His movements were too sluggish for that. Turning his head, his blinking was slow. Drawn out. Like he was partially asleep.

Sighing, I pulled over one of his extra chairs and sat next to him. "Eat or I'm going to feed you."

Reed looked at the bowl without interest, but he picked up the mug and took a sip. I watched him take a few more before he set it down. "How am I supposed to fix this?" he whispered.

I thought about Gideon, and something in me *knew* that's what he was plotting. Something having to do with Katiya.

I'll admit, when she backed into me at the murder mystery dinner, her scent instantly wrapped around me. She was mine, right then and there, before I'd even heard her voice. The fear in her eyes hadn't been a deterrent for me in the least.

But then all Hell broke loose in the bonds as Katiya found out that Reed was actually an alpha. To me, to most people, that was obvious. But after looking closer into Chaingate, I wasn't at all surprised she hadn't figured that out. It was a place out of the dark ages, treating all betas little better than indentured servants. Owned objects.

Everything about that place was sick.

"Patience," I told him, rubbing his hair down. "Let her get over her hurt for a bit. And we need to find a way to work on her fear of alphas. *Then* we'll see what we can do to patch things up between the two of you."

He shook his head. "She's not going to forgive me. She's right not to. Katiya trusted me with her nightmares, and I didn't trust her in return."

I cupped both sides of his face, forcing him to look at me. "You are a remarkable man, Reed. Just be patient. Trust me. Can you do that?"

The corner of his lips lifted slightly in a half smile. “Yes.”

“Good. Now eat before I feed you.”

This time, my words earned me a slight smile. I didn’t leave until he ate the entire bowl and finished off his cocoa. Before I prepared bowls for Gideon and myself, I brought him a bottle of water, telling him it better be finished by the time I check on him next.

With two more water bottles tucked under my arms and two more bowls of soup, I headed back to the den where Gideon was still scheming. This time, he looked up, giving me a wide, sexy smile. Seeing the food in my hands, he tucked his notebook between the cushion and the side and reached up. I placed his soup in his waiting hands before setting the water on the table.

Then I sat across from him to watch him eat while I ate mine.

He wasn’t in a hurry. Even while slurping his soup, his gaze was far away as he continued to think about what he was up to. By the time he focused on me, he knew I’d found him out. His smile widened, and he shrugged.

“I have an idea,” he said, his eyes darting to the door. His voice was low.

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least. Why don’t you come sit on my lap while you tell me?”

Instantly, I was filled with his hunger. Heat rushed me through our bond, making my cock hard as cement. Gideon basically fell over everything between us as he dove for my lap. His mouth found mine before he was fully in my arms, kissing me hotly.

I chuckled, a gentle purr filling the air as I pushed him back. “I did say tell me your idea, right?”

“Can’t we after your knot?” he whined. Not a true whine. Not one which would command my soul to do whatever it took to take his unhappiness away. Just the whine of a spoiled man being denied what he wanted.

Chuckling, I trapped his hands between us so he couldn't tug at my shirt. He jutted his bottom lip out, giving me puppy eyes to go with it. "Please, Tris?"

"Hush or you're just getting dick and no knot."

The horror on his face had me laughing. I kissed his lips quickly. "Tell me what your devious mind has been up to, my sexy little hornball."

"I was going to tell you later anyway," he said at last. "I want you to take me to Katiya's. Hopefully she's home today. Otherwise, we're going to wait till the end of her shift and then go to her house."

"So you can...?"

"Talk to her," he said. The inflection in his voice said that there was more to it than that. But I let it go because I wanted to see what he planned to do. How he thought he was going to fix this mountain that burst up between our pack and the elusive beta we were all strangely obsessed with. Even after very little contact and absolutely no conversation on my part.

"I guess you best present for me then. There are only so many hours in the day and we're going to have to wait for my knot to relax before we go."

Gideon was already scrambling off my lap before I finished speaking.

I watched him try to strip quickly and present simultaneously. Such a pretty omega, trying to please me all at once. He ripped at his clothing, frustrated when it didn't immediately fall away. Three times he nearly did a faceplant and I had to catch him. But finally, he was bent over in front of me, his hands on the coffee table as he looked at me over his shoulder.

From my angle, I was staring at his gorgeous ass. Cheeks slightly parted because of his angle and stance. Cum dripping from his hard cock.

"So pretty," I purred.



He wiggled his ass for me, a whine creeping into the room as he waited for me to touch him. I leaned forward, placing my hands on his ass, rubbing at the soft skin there. Smooth as the day he was born. I ran my finger over his hole, just barely adding more pressure. It earned me another whine.

“Please, alpha,” Gideon whimpered.

“Do you want to watch, Gideon? Watch me slide into that perfect ass?”

He gasped, nodding madly.

There were a few things we kept stashed in each room of the house. Lube because living with an omega meant that there was an opportunity for knotting anytime, anywhere. And mirrors of all sizes. Wherever we could fit them without getting questions when we had guests. Because our omega got off on watching us knot him.

“Stay just like that, omega. I want to see what’s waiting for me.”

“Yes, alpha,” he said, wiggling again as he watched me over his shoulder.

As I moved through the room, gathering the half a dozen mirrors we had hidden here and there, and the tube of lubricant, I stripped my clothing. One piece at a time. Enjoying the little noises of anticipation coming from Gideon.

Since we’ve been playing with mirrors for quite some time, I had a decent idea on where to set them so he could see from every angle. He watched, shifting his head under him to look between his legs as I arranged two there. One on the couch to catch my balls slapping his ass and one on the floor so he could see my dick slide in and out.

We also had a hand mirror. The kind with a handle. I handed it to him as I stood behind him. He gave me a smile, his pupils dilated with a dreamy haze of arousal brightly shining through.

“How about a little cum first, omega?” I reached around to wrap my hand around his cock. His body jerked.

“Y-yes.”

An omega’s dick was somewhere around six and a half inches. Somewhat on the thicker side, but there was a strange softness to it. Yes, it hardened. I could ride that thing if we chose. But wrapping my hand around it, it wasn’t nearly as hard as when I grabbed my own rockhard dick. Try as I may, I could never akin it to something.

Textbooks state that it’s a different density. I like to call it fluffy. I’ve heard others say cloud-like. Whatever it was, I loved to grip it and listen to my omega purr as I coaxed his first orgasm from him.

He coated the floor. In the mirror below us, I stared at his reflection as he watched his cum drip out. His stomach muscles fluttering. His cock bobbing with his release.

“More,” he insisted. “More, alpha.”

I leaned over him, kissing his back. Keeping my hand around his cock, I pressed the head of mine against the tight ring of muscles in his ass. He moaned, jutting his hips against me. His gaze flickered between mirrors as he watched. Eyes wide, cheeks red from the angle he was bent over.

Though I was leaning into him, I wasn’t doing so with enough force to push inside. Essentially, I was teasing him. Though teasing wasn’t his favorite pastime, he was staring with wide eyes. Lips parted. Dick weeping. Hunger shining out of him like a lighthouse.

When I finally broke the seal and my head slipped inside, he came again with a gasping cry. Cock jumping in my hand as he spurted everywhere.

“Feel good, baby?”

He nodded, forcing his eyes to remain open.

“I love how tight your little ass is.” I pushed in a little more, feeling how his body fluttered around me. “You always feel like this is your first time. Do you do that on purpose, baby?”

Gideon nodded madly. I wasn't sure he was listening at all right now. I rocked on him, bringing myself deeper and deeper until I was fully seated before my knot. The hand I didn't have still gripping his cock I moved between his legs, covering my bite with my hand.

He groaned, his eyes fluttering shut for a moment. Unable to help himself. I'd once asked him what he felt when we messed with our bites again. He said it was a hypersensitive sensation that streamed through him. Heightening whatever was happening. Whatever we were sharing through our bond.

I almost regretted where I bit him, since it was impossible for me to bite him in the same spot and knot him at the same time. I was sure that it would deliver an orgasm that was so good, he'd be glimpsing death.

“Two more before my knot, omega. What are you going to do for that?”

He didn't answer in words. Instead, he braced his hands on the table and started bucking himself backward. Each complete impale that landed his fluttering ass against my knot had him gasping.

What I appreciated about omegas was that their orgasms were ready and plentiful. Seeing him spray all over was a high I could never explain. One might think it should feel insulting. Such little game to get to the end. But one orgasm was never enough. It only made him hunger for the next all the more.

It took him a solid three minutes to work the next orgasm from his body. This time he lost the battle to keep his eyes open. Squeezing them closed, he moaned through it. He stilled in his movements, but I didn't let my thrusting end. I kept the momentum he had going, prolonging his release as much as I could.

I always intend to let him rest, but he'd no sooner opened his eyes when he was ready for another. I smiled down at him, stroking his sensitive cock gently as his hunger blazed through his eyes.

“Another, Tris,” he whispered. “Please, alpha. Hard.”

Not wanting to disappoint my omega, I let go of his cock and curled my hands over his shoulders, pounding him roughly. Making him grunt and holler as his pleasure surged inside him. I could feel it ricochet inside me through our bond.

Only when he released again did I pick him up and turn us around. The folding mirror I had propped on the couch went on the table and I fell backwards with him in my arm.

“Take my knot, Gideon,” I growled. “Show me how good an omega you are. Take my knot.”

His pupils were so dilated, they swallowed all the blue. I gentled his movements as he tried to shove his body down. Gasping, grunting, whimpering as he tried to bring my knot inside his body. When he was too wild to do so on his own, I wrapped my arms around his chest, pinning his hands so he had to still, and eased him down.

Gideon whined loudly as his body gave way to my knot. Slowly loosening to let me in, making my mind spin with intense pleasure. He jerked in my arms, gasping and begging for more. When I was finally seated, completely locked inside as he shook around me, already lost in the pleasure of it, I held my breath. Staring at him in the mirror as cum continuously leaked from his dick.

In a heat, his knotted orgasms were long shots. When he wasn't in heat, it was a faucet left on. A steady stream. Never ending until his body finally had enough. I watched his face in the mirror. The pleasure painted there as he continued to vocalize in sounds more than syllables how good he was feeling.

His eyes were slits, and I was pretty sure he was staring at the way my knot was lodged inside him. His cock, his balls, our legs, the couch, the floor—all continuously being coated in cum.

But that was all I could take. My resolve finally faded as I gave way to the pleasure I could no longer ignore. The way his body crushed me brought my own orgasm out. I gripped him tightly, digging my teeth into his shoulder with enough

pressure that I just barely didn't break skin, and jerked my hips up into him madly.

Wildly.

With no thought or decision.

Just short of a rut, I fucked my sweet omega until he was hoarse and limp in my arms.



THREE HOURS LATER, we were driving to the Sandview house on top of the cliff overlooking the cove. I parked at the end of her driveway and let Gideon walk up alone.

He knocked three times, leaving a few minutes between, before Katiya opened the door. She didn't open it far, just enough to speak to him. Then crossed her arms defensively over her chest.

Though I couldn't hear their interaction, I could almost imagine what Gideon was saying. It's not that he was charming or even very convincing with his words. It's that he's a spoiled omega who always gets what he wants. There's never been anything we've denied him.

No regrets and we certainly don't plan to start disappointing him now. An omega should be overindulged. That's just the way the world works.

But that also means that this beta has no idea that her best course of action is to hear him out because he was *not* going to go away easily. I sat back, careful not to move too much and call attention to myself. She didn't need to see that there was an alpha here. I had a feeling everything she understood about alpha-omega relationships was very, very wrong. She wouldn't see my presence as protecting my omega in the wide world. She'd see it as a threat to her.

The thought made me pulse with anger. That an alpha did that to her was unacceptable. That many more than we could likely know instilled that fear in her until it was a part of who she was that made me see red.

The idea was frustrating when my alphas returned from meeting her for the first time. But seeing the instant terror in her eyes when she looked at me the other night was infuriating. I'd been expecting the instantaneous draw to her since that had been the reaction of my entire pack. Though I'd been prepared for her fear directed at me, I hadn't expected to be quite so livid over it. I knew it was coming; but that didn't tamp the rage that consumed me as she nearly ran away.

I glanced at the clock the moment Katiya gave in to Gideon and let him inside. It had only taken him eighteen minutes. Now the game was on to see how long before she kicked him out.

Making myself comfortable, I pulled out my phone and tapped into the search history from my laptop to pick up where I left off on researching Chaingate. I would put that city on the map and not for the reasons those alphas would appreciate.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# KATIYA



I sat bolt upright when Octavia came screaming around the corner, nearly snarling that there was an omega here.

“He’s coming to the door. An omega. Here! An omega is coming here!”

I’d heard that omegas could be territorial. Seeing it was another thing entirely. I caught another glimpse of her covered in blood. I shivered just as the first knock came. Should I remind Octavia that she’s dead? Would that help the situation?

I studied her for several minutes, wondering if it was her mood that brought the hint of her death visible for only flashes of seconds. Or maybe it was the time of day?

The knock came again, pulling me from my thoughts. I frowned toward the door. I got up and headed for the hall to peek out.

Gideon? I frowned. Why would he be here?

“Are you going to answer it?” Octavia asked. “Send him away. He doesn’t belong here.”

When Gideon knocked again, I had a feeling he wasn’t going to believe that I wasn’t home. Octavia was right. I needed to answer it. If he was going to be sent away, I was going to have to do it. Besides, he was an omega. Not an alpha. Nothing to be scared about.

He smiled when he saw me through the glass pane. That damned door was in no way private. Maybe I could add some curtains. Would Hugo mind?



I opened it slightly, just enough that I could speak to him. “Hello.”

“Hi,” he said, smiling widely. “Do you remember me?”

“You know him?” Octavia asked.

“Yes,” I answered both of them.

“Good,” Gideon said, pleased with my answer. His sweet honey scent filled my nose. Rushing in behind it was something that reminded me of peace. Incense. Myrrh maybe? Or was it the one that started with a p that I could never remember, never mind pronounce?

“Can I come in?” Gideon asked.

I crossed my arms protectively, staring at him. “I’m not up for visitors,” I told him. Besides, now that the wind had caught him, it wasn’t just his perfume I smelled. There was a yummy chai orange that mingled with it. Something that screamed alpha. Something that nearly curled my toes in pleasure and fear.

For fuck’s sake. My body couldn’t even make up its mind on which reaction it wanted today.

“I won’t be a hassle. I just wanted to talk for a while.”

Talk about Reed. I’m good. Definitely going to pass on that. “I would really rather be alone.”

Gideon sighed. “Katiya, no one likes to be alone. We can keep it light and fluffy.” He pulled a bag off his shoulder and held it out to me. For one horrified minute, I thought he was playing delivery from his alpha. “I brought things to make cookies. It’s the kind that comes in a bag that only needs certain ingredients—all of which I brought. I just need the utensils to cook them.”

“What’s wrong with your kitchen?” I asked.

“I’m not really allowed in it,” he said, pouting. I’ll admit, it was kind of cute the way his bottom lip jutted out. “Just because I nearly burned it down on three separate occasions doesn’t mean I should be banned from it. I just need better supervision. It’s their fault, really.”

His argument made me smile, despite trying to keep it in. Even Octavia snorted in amusement.

“It’ll be fun. I promise.”

I sighed. Obviously, I wasn’t going to get out of this, though I tried for many more minutes. After he promised that I could boss him around and he wouldn’t complain, I gave in. Without another word, I stepped back and opened the door. He grinned hugely and walked in.

As I shut the door, he looked all around with interest. “I’ve always wanted to see this house,” he said. “Hugo isn’t big on omegas, so he’s never let me inside, even when I outright asked.”

“I thought everyone was friendly here,” I said.

“He’s not rude about it. In the nicest way possible, and also making sure he spoke words that couldn’t be interpreted in any other way, he told me to ‘go the fuck away’ several times.”

“He really doesn’t like omegas,” Octavia agreed behind me.

I frowned at both of them. Hugo seemed really nice. I wouldn’t have guessed. Then again, you really don’t know how people act around other designations until you actually see it. That’s their true response. Not the things they tell you.

“This way,” I said, turning and leading him to the kitchen. If it was going to take baking to get him to go away, so be it.

Gideon followed, entirely too cheery as far as I was concerned. I turned to face him once we stood behind the counter. Not only too cheery, but I hadn’t realized that omegas could be so good looking. I glanced at Octavia and decided she was pretty too. Of course, Gideon was a different kind of pretty.

Pretty hot.

He set his bag on the counter and pulled out one of the pouches of cookie mix and a few other little containers. Then he stood back and looked at me. “I can read the directions just fine, but I still fuck up. I thought maybe you can just tell me

what to do and we can see if it's direct command that makes me figure this out."

I raised a brow. He was serious as he waited for me to tell him the first step. Releasing a breath again, I reached for the bag. "Preheat the oven to 350°."

Gideon turned to the stove and stopped. I watched in amusement as he studied all the handles. The stove was pretty new, so there were three different options for the oven. I wasn't at all surprised to see him hesitate.

"Press bake. Then start. If you were choosing a different temperature, you'd use the up or down arrow to get there before pressing start."

He nodded and did as I said. Turning to me with a smile, he nodded.

"I haven't baked yet, so I don't know where all the bowls are. I guess we can just search the cabinets until we find what we need."

Liking this idea, Gideon searched them thoroughly as he explored. Even after finding what he was in search of, he didn't stop poking around. Since I found it kind of adorable, I watched him as I leaned back against the counter.

When he had his fill, I handed him back the pouch. "Dump this in first."

Careful not to tear the instructions on the back, Gideon opened the bag and poured the contents into the bowl.

"Now add the butter, egg, and milk."

"Together?"

"One after another."

"In a particular order?"

His continued questions showed his nervousness more than what he'd already told me. I smiled, nodding. "Any order."

He took a breath and reached for his little container of butter. It had been melted before and was still in a partially liquid state. Then he cracked the egg in the container he

brought, fished out the little shell he dropped in, and dumped that into the bowl. Next came the milk.

Although mixing should have been the obvious next step, I told him to do so when he looked at me for his next instructions.

“It doesn’t smell awful,” he noted as he mixed.

“It shouldn’t,” I told him. “It’s mostly sugar and flour at this point.”

“Am I doing this right? Is there a wrong way to mix because that’s probably what I’m doing.”

I grinned as Octavia looked into the bowl. “You’re doing well, Gideon.” When he looked up at me, unsure, I said, “Really, you’re doing perfectly.”

He smiled in relief before bringing his attention down to the bowl. There was a chance that he was playing this up. What did I really know about him? But I’d heard on more than one occasion that omegas couldn’t do the basics of living. Cooking being one of them. Because alphas were naturally inclined to take care of them. Including the pack they were born into.

“Do you think it’s done?” he asked.

Moving closer, he held the bowl out to me. It wasn’t bad. “See this all around the edge?” I pointed with my finger. “Use your spatula and wipe it off and give it another quick mix to incorporate those remnants.”

I watched as he struggled with the spatula. Trying to keep my giggle in, I placed my hand over his and adjusted the spatula before dragging it around the perimeter. “Like that.”

He smiled at me, his shoulders relaxing. “Thanks, Kat.”

Nodding, I moved back as he set the bowl down. Behind us, the oven beeped. Gideon immediately went into panic mode. “I’m not ready yet.” He stared in dismay at the oven before looking at the just mixed batter.

“Easy. That’s just telling you it reached the preset temperature. It’s fine to wait.”

“Oh,” he said, still tense. “If I don’t put something in the oven, it’s not going to start smoking?”

I raised a brow, shaking my head. “Someone’s having you on if they told you that.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m going to kick some alpha ass when I get home,” he grumbled.

Laughing, I covered my mouth with my hand. “They told you that?”

Gideon met my eyes. “I suspect they told me a lot of not-truths in an effort to keep me out of the kitchen.”

“They didn’t want it burned down,” Octavia said in their defense.

“It’s nice to be cooked for,” I noted.

“Yeah, sure.” He shrugged and turned back to the batter. “Sometimes, I’d like to bring them something I baked as opposed to something I bought. You know?”

I nodded.

“I enjoy gifts and being taken care of,” he said, looking at me while he chose his words. “I like what I am. I’d be a shit alpha and a poor beta. But sometimes, I like to break out of the stereotype and make someone look at me with surprise. ‘*You did that?*’ is one of my favorite questions.”

“I get it,” I said. “Freedom to do things for yourself is a luxury sometimes. Not everyone can afford it.”

“Yes!” He sighed, pulling the bowl closer. “I’m glad you understand. Alphas... they don’t understand. Everything in them says to put me in my nest and wait on me. Sometimes I want to walk around in the sun, though.”

I watched him as he spoke. So animated. The words were both spoiled and spoken with frustration. Sometimes, just having someone understand how you’re feeling is enough.

“What next?” He eyed the oven, just to be sure it didn’t start smoking.

“Put the rubber mats on the cookie trays.” He did and waited. “The bowl of cinnamon and sugar, open it and get it ready.” Once more, he did as I said. “You’re going to make a station. Roll the dough between your hands until it’s a little ball. Then gently roll that ball in the coating. Lastly, you’ll place it on the cookie sheet. Wash your hands first since you’re going to be touching raw food.”

Gideon did and returned. He stared into the batter. “Okay. How much?”

“Estimate the size of a ping-pong ball.”

I watched as he carefully chose how much he wanted. He didn’t have the rolling motion of the dough between his palms smooth. He kept trying to use his fingers to shape it.

Once more, I placed my hands over his and gave him the general idea of how to roll cookie dough. When I pulled back, he had his tongue sticking out as he concentrated on rolling it. When it was damn near perfect, he held it up to me as if it were made of glass. “Like this?”

“That’s amazing, Gideon. Nice job.”

He beamed at me. Almost preening like a proud bird.

“Now roll it gently in the cinnamon and sugar until it’s completely covered.” When he was done, I told him to place it on the sheet. “Eleven more times for this tray.”

I watched as he continued, taking far too long to make the balls. “These are a favorite in my house, though admittedly, Reed usually makes them from scratch. I convinced Tristen to take me to the store. I wouldn’t survive all the meticulous measuring.”

“Baking can be a challenge. It’s very precise.”

“That’s what Reed says. Anson says that’s why he prefers cooking. Far fewer limitations and ways to fuck up.”

“Unless you’re an omega,” Octavia said. “Fucking up cooking is in our DNA, I’m pretty sure. I’m not going to say how often something as simple as a plate of eggs could go so wrong.”

I grinned, bowing my head to hide the expression.

When Gideon was done, I had him place it in the oven and set the timer. While they baked, he worked on the second tray. There was just enough batter for the two trays. With as long as he took rolling the dough, the first tray of cookies was done by the time he'd gotten to the last ball.

He swapped out trays and stared at the perfect cookies.

"They look edible," he announced.

I laughed. "Clean the dishes you used. By then, we can take them from the tray and let them cool further before trying one."

"You better let me try it first. In case they're gross."

Shaking my head, I continued to watch as he did what I said. Using a spatula, he pulled the cookies from the tray and onto a rack before pulling the second tray out.

"Make sure you turn off the oven." He found the off switch easy enough. Then he stared at the cookies, so hot there was steam rising.

"Want to try a hot one?"

He looked at me with wide eyes. "Is that allowed?"

Laughing, I picked up two, handing him one. "Just don't burn your tongue." I sank my teeth in and mmm'd as it melted on my tongue. Gideon tried to protest my bite, but watched me expectantly while I didn't explode or gag. "Real good," I said. "Eat it."

His first bite was tiny. More of a taste than anything. Then he took a bigger bite. His smile was wide as he looked at me. "These are amazing. So, so good."

I nodded. "You did a great job. They're fantastic."

He was nearly giddy as he ate the cookie and then a second.

After he unloaded the rest of the cookies onto the rack and loaded his Tupperware back up, he turned to me. "Thanks for doing this. I appreciate it."

I nodded again. “You weren’t taking no for an answer. “

He grinned again. “I’m not used to hearing that word. So I generally argue until it’s changed.” He shrugged sheepishly. “Sorry.”

I waved him off. “Ready to go now?”

Gideon hesitated. “On one condition.” I raised a brow, waiting for him to continue. “Let me see you again.”

Sighing, I closed my eyes.

“Katiya, I know you’re angry and feel betrayed because he lied by omission. I understand as much as I can, having never been in that position. But, beautiful, Reed is like a damn puppy who you kicked. He hides what he is because he came from a place where alphas are hunted. He survives the scars of the past by pretending to be a beta. Nothing that man has ever done is malicious. Whatever you’ve been through, Reed’s past is just as dark. Please, please don’t write him off.”

“Is that why you’re here?” I asked. “So you could say your argument on his behalf?”

Gideon took a handful of cookies and headed for the door with his bag over his shoulder. He paused until I followed, turning to me with a smile. “Yes, and no. I really need you to understand that he’s not the bad guy, despite how you feel right now. But really, I’ve been obsessed with you since I first laid eyes on you and couldn’t wait any longer to spend time with you. As I said, I don’t hear no often, and in order to avoid receiving a no from you, I just showed up at your door instead.”

My lips were parted as I stared at him. Did he just say... obsessed with me? Did he misread my scent? I’m not an alpha. Not anywhere close.

He liked my silence, if the smile on his face was any indication. He surprised me again, rendering me speechless further when he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. It wasn’t long or invading. Just a soft kiss before he opened the door.

“See you soon, my pretty beta.”



With that, he walked out of my house.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# KATIYA



For the next few days, Gideon turned up at the shop and hung around. Yesterday and the day before, I was an extra, so I could begin shadowing the cave tours. Lana wanted me to focus on the October events, but most of the smaller things basically ran themselves. It was handing things out and entering winners. Even the extra hires could handle that.

Next week we were adding a town tour to the schedule. Just for one week, to see how it goes. We'd begin at the cove and then go on a two-hour walking tour of the town. The base was historic events and people, but also hauntings. I had no idea when I suggested the tours that there were so many hauntings in Howling Cove.

There would be two walking tours a day, one that left around noon and stopped at a deli for lunch, and then one that went at eight that night when the sun had completely set. They would walk around by lantern light.

I was going to attend one of each. And I still needed to attend the abridged version of the cave tours that we had set up specifically for the month. There was talk of keeping the new stories within the tours since the scripts hadn't been changed in forever.

"You should talk to Cohen," Gideon said after we finished discussing the tours. He always listened, but never interfered. He'd wait until we were done and had gone our separate ways before saying something to me.

“Why?”

“His family is the first pack that resided in Howling Cove. It’s because of them that this town got cleaned up, has reputable law enforcement, and is a wealthy place to live,” he said.

I frowned at him but, it was Alec who beat me to the punch. “His pack wasn’t the first pack. The Sandviews were the first pack.”

We understood the legal and ‘accepted’ view of a pack. It requires an alpha’s bite that produced subsequent bonds and filled the pack with the magic that all betas crave to be a part of. There was a bigger movement among betas to nullify an alpha’s bite as being the defining factor of a ‘true’ pack.

Gideon shrugged. “You know what I mean.”

Alec bristled. “Yes. You mean that on a whole, betas aren’t good enough to form a pack. We don’t whine or heat and we don’t have a bite or purr.”

This time Gideon frowned. “No. I’m referring to the legislative definition of a pack. You’re the one passing judgment right now, assuming that’s what I think.”

I patted Alec’s hand to assure him when my focus should have remained on Gideon. Then I might have seen his next comment coming and could have cut him off.

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m very smitten with a beta. Would it not be hypocritical of me if I thought those things about her?”

My cheeks reddened as I looked at him. But it did the trick to cool Alec down. He smirked at me. Flipping my hair between his fingers, he turned to head for the front of the store, where he could focus on inventory.

That left me alone with Gideon. He was smiling at me, pleased with his announcement. “Really, though. Cohen has an endless trove of stories both from his childhood and passed down from his parents, grandparents, and so on. There’s an old house on Tasker Lane that’s his. He keeps it maintained and in livable condition, but also keeps it empty. It’s filled with

antique furniture, books, newspapers, and whatever from his family.”

“Why does he keep it if he doesn’t use it?” I asked.

“It’s an heirloom of sorts, I guess. Not just the stuff in it, but the house itself. It’s always been in his family. The primary part of the house is the original structure that his ancestors built when they moved to Howling Cove.” Gideon leaned forward. “I didn’t mean it insultingly when I called them the first pack in the area. It’s what all the books say, even after acknowledging that the Sandviews initially owned this land.”

I hadn’t come from a childhood where I’d grown up with the kind of resentment and obsession that is so deeply bred into a beta. No resentment of omegas from me. The omegas I knew would have done anything to get away from the alphas in Chaingate. They didn’t find themselves lucky at all. In fact, they were sure their designation was a curse.

And I sure as hell wasn’t obsessed with alphas and wanting their bite or to be chosen for their pack. I understood everything their bonds symbolized and provided. There was even a part of me that recognized how that could be appealing. But absolutely everything I’ve ever seen and known about alphas was exactly the opposite of what the rest of the world saw.

Until I moved to Howling Cove. I can admit that on appearance, the alphas weren’t like those in Chaingate. I’ve seen many instances where that is apparent. Then there were all the betas here who swore that the alphas in Howling Cove were basically saints. Not a single beta I’ve met has anything but starry eyes for these alphas.

“What are the stories?” I asked.

“You would have to ask him.”

“You said he’s told them to you,” I countered.

“He has and will any time I ask,” Gideon agreed. “But the stories you seek are not necessarily the ones I’ve asked for. Besides, I bet he’ll have a story for any specific thing where

you're lacking one. And if he doesn't, he will put in a call to his parents for one."

That I was certainly not wanting to speak to this alpha was the only thing holding me back. I spent hours a couple weeks ago talking to Hugo and listening to all his stories. It was a good thing that I had Daxon and Megan with me, though. It felt as if I had already forgotten everything as soon as Hugo left us.

"I'll suggest Dax or Linus call Cohen," I said.

"No. I said you should," Gideon countered.

"I heard what you said, but I'm not going to."

"He's not—"

I waved a hand to stop his argument. "In this specific instance, I've learned while attending other interviews that I'm shit at remembering or understanding details like Daxon, Linus, and Megan are. It would be a waste of his time to tell me anything."

"I promise you, it won't be." Gideon crossed his arms, his lips pressed into a thin line. Thus far in his borderline stalking behavior, he'd kept everything light. He'd show up during my shift, hang out until the end, and walk me home. He hasn't even pushed his way into my house again, either. Of course, he did often come with gifts from Reed. "Cohen isn't one of the monsters you left behind. None of my alphas are."

"I'm glad for you," I said, giving him my back as I headed behind the counter. "I can't imagine how the omegas live in the city."

It was enough of a change in subject that Gideon moved in a different direction. Slightly, anyway. "I don't understand how alphas can stand to treat an omega poorly," he said, shaking his head. "Every instinct in them should be nothing but nurture, pleasure, and affection."

"Maybe alphas are bred differently in cities," I said.

"Not in cities," Gideon argued. "In *that* city. I've traveled to a lot of places with my parents. I'm lucky in that I was born

into a large pack of strong alphas. They were confident enough in their strength that they knew they could protect me, so I was given the freedom to travel and see so much of the world that most omegas don't get to see when they're young. And I can promise you, I've never been anywhere like that. I've never met a single alpha as cruel as you describe."

"I think you've still managed to be sheltered," I said. "I know that Chaingate might be the worst of the worst, but it's for sure not the only bad place in the world."

"Oh, of course not. All over the world, omegas are abducted and sold. I'm willing to bet that purchased omegas don't have a good life either."

I nodded.

Gideon leaned over the counter, putting his face closer to mine. Only because we had the counter between us did I remain where I was. "I've recently heard that even alphas are being abducted," he murmured, brows furrowing. "What would they want with alphas? Who is going to buy an alpha?" The incredulity in his voice made me roll my eyes.

"A beta who is obsessed?" I suggested.

He shook his head. "I get that. But once they bring that alpha home, what do they plan to do to him to keep him from leaving? To keep his bark silent?" He shook his head again. "I think about this a lot. Omegas are weak and helpless. We're the perfect target because we're so rare. A commodity that can be sold and never loses its value because we're always going to be few. But we're also easily controlled. Easily subdued. Easily turned into... slaves. But *what* are they going to do with an out-of-control alpha who can't be any of those things?"

Our conversation was interrupted by screams outside. It was so uncommon that everyone inside the store froze. Loud shouts and screams continued as we all remained frozen, looking at each other.

And then we were bolting to the door. I'd barely gotten outside when I spotted people streaming up the beach. A whole group of them, terrified, as they ran from the caves.

For one frightening minute, I had the oddest sensation that I wasn't in Howling Cove. I was back in the city as people tried to hide from the alphas coming our way. Hiding was always the best option. If they couldn't find you, you might get away without their cruel touch.

The section of the city I had lived in was known for frequent alpha visits. I learned real quick that even though alphas might not have an interest in you, that wouldn't stop them from taking you when they wanted. When they were bored with the omegas and betas they possessed, they'd visit their favorite neighborhoods—all alphas had a favorite—and take whichever beta looked good at the moment.

I was only caught once. Once was enough for my fear of alphas to truly sink its claws in. I learned a lot during that single visit. Primarily, alphas don't hear the word no. Betas are not built for knots. Alphas don't give a fuck that betas aren't built for knots when they force you to take one anyway.

A hand on my back made me jump. The memories of the city melted away, and I was looking at the chaotic scene of the cove. And scared people running up the sand from the beach.

They reached us a moment later, blabbering incoherently. I recognized the look in their eyes. Vacant and only seeing their nightmares. True terror etched into every line of their face. Their skin was pale and somewhat moist with a thin sheen of sweat.

“What happened?” Lana asked.

“Th—there—there's m-m-monsters,” the beta said.

It was the only intelligible thing that came out of any of their mouths. Otherwise, it was a lot of recounting things like shadows, nails, mist. Sounds that dug right into your bones.

“Felix is on the way,” Gideon told Lana. “He's got some officers with him.”

“Is anyone missing from your group?” Lana asked. It took her several times to get one of them to focus on her question. Though I wasn't sure that they were comprehending what she



was asking, it was a consistent no. They were all accounted for.

The rest of the afternoon went by in a whirlwind. The caves were closed as the police scouted around inside. The three o'clock tour was canceled but the five went on, though it left a little late. Since we squeezed many of the three o'clock tour guests into the five, Lana went with Alec. It was probably best given what had happened today.

I waited with Beck and Eliza until they returned before going home for the night. As he'd been doing, Gideon followed me home. Walking me along the path and talking. The man could talk for hours with little input.

Octavia was standing at the front door with her arms crossed, not at all happy to see Gideon. The sight of her disgruntled face was enough to make me smile slightly. I turned to face Gideon as I stood in front of my door.

Usually, he just left once I said goodbye and stepped inside. I had no reason to think today would be any different. But the omega stepped closer to me, all humor and excitement gone. He brushed my cheek with his hand as he stared into my eyes. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. "Fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

He didn't answer right away. "When they were screaming, their panic was echoed in your expression for a minute. As if you were there with them."

I closed my eyes, a smile touching my lips. "It was a different fear brought on by their screaming. I'm fine. Thanks, though."

He nodded, but his gaze didn't fall as he stared at me. I was too busy wondering what he was seeing and whether I should be trying to hide it that I missed when he stepped in closer. This time, when he pressed his lips against mine, it was intended as something different.

Not the experimental peck. This was a kiss. The hand that had gently brushed my cheek moved along my face until he could cup the back of my head. Despite everything in me

screaming that I needed this to stop, or he'd get the wrong idea, I found that my hands landed on his stomach. Instead of pushing him away, I gripped his shirt tightly, keeping him close.

He kissed me softly at first but when I didn't shove him off me, his kiss went deeper. I wasn't sure what I was expecting. I'd never once thought about what kissing an omega might be like. Even when I thought Reed was an omega, something inside me had always known that he was extra. Kissing Gideon though, it was heady and intense. Something that kind of took over while you got lost in it. Just like their chatty personality. Their presence.

I almost protested when he pulled his lips from mine, but the moment carried on even after the kiss stopped. He leaned his head against mine. "I'll see you tomorrow, my pretty beta."

My mind even stopped arguing about the 'my pretty beta' comments. It was turning to mush. All I could do was nod.

"Go inside and don't open the door. Okay?"

They didn't find anything in the cave, of course. But that didn't stop the locals from being a little on edge. I nodded.

Gideon let me go and I stepped inside. He watched me through the glass as I locked the door. Then he turned, hands in his pockets.

I hadn't realized that we'd been followed until Gideon made his way to the police cruiser. I wasn't in the least bit surprised that his alpha wasn't going to let him walk home. I was surprised that I actually appreciated that tonight.

Octavia was irritated all evening and insisted that I read several passages to her. The one that stuck with me the most was that of the spirit of the caves. Probably because there were a lot of parallels between the story and what these last terrified customers came out rambling about.

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*Although there are many accounts of the so-called 'monsters' of the caves, there are several different origin stories for them. There are*

*those who believe they've always been there. That they are entities that have dwelled within the caves since the beginning of time.*

*There are also those who believe that the creatures who are described as monsters are actually the 'divine' beings that the old tribes used to worship on their way through the area.*

*But there is also another group of explorers who claim that the monsters originate from an entirely different place. They haven't been there since the beginning of time but were conjured based on how man has defaced the area.*

*What was once pristine, unpolluted land has become more and more scarred from being settled. The caves in particular have been molested in countless ways. Not only have they been continuously invaded by those who have upturned the land to build their houses, but there has been much disruption in the cave's environment as well.*

*Known history has placed pirates using the cave to hide their ill-gotten gains. There have also been murders in the dark past of those both hunting the hidden treasure but also using the cave as a natural hiding place to hide bodies.*

*Because of all the negative energy that has built up within the cave system over the centuries, there are those that believe the cave itself has produced its own defense mechanism, creating a monster to keep people out.*

*The most common report of the dubbed 'spirit of the cave' is said to be bear-like in size and shape, with a tiger's stripes. Its eyes glow an unnatural orange and it possesses a growl that you can feel in the depths of your soul. It has large teeth and enormous paws, tipped with deadly claws.*

*There have been numerous accounts of this specific monster more so than others. It is not the 'monster' who harasses guests who get too close to places they shouldn't be, simply there to haunt and maim. Nor is it that of the old 'gods' and spirits that the ancient peoples worshiped.*

*This monster is best known to walk out of the shadows on two legs when someone has entered the cave for nefarious purposes. And often when it's seen, it leaves only a single soul behind to tell the tale. And often that person is said to have gone mad from a fear so dark and cold, they are unable to find their way out of those dark places.*

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# KATIYA



The next two days, we were slammed. The entire town was overbooked and overrun with tourists here to see the ‘real’ haunted caves of Howling Cove.

“There’s nothing like word of mouth to really put you on the map,” Anson said as he watched out the window with a frown. Not only were there excess people in town, but Anson, Cohen, and Felix have been at the shop frequently.

I suspected Felix was there to watch the cove. I wasn’t surprised that the cops felt like someone was playing a prank to scare tourists. The reason as to why, we weren’t sure. Maybe this was the desired effect—more people.

“I hear even the neighboring towns as far as Becket Knolls are overrun. All their hotels and rental homes sold out,” Lana said.

It wasn’t quite ten yet when Anson showed up at the door with Gideon. I suspected that they weren’t going to be as keen to let Gideon wander around on his own with this many strange people in town. If I thought that would keep him home, I was sorely mistaken.

I’d spend all night convincing myself that I needed to discourage Gideon. Push him away. I didn’t want to get tangled up in his pack. That meant not with him either. I simply was not interested.

But all that resolve faded as soon as I saw him. After he really kissed me the other night, he threw caution to the wind and truly began making sure I knew he was interested in me

and wasn't going away. He showed up at my door to walk me to work and stayed there all day. Then he'd walk me home and kiss me thoroughly, leaving me breathless and wanting.

A damn omega! What was happening in my life right now?

Anson sighed. Have I mentioned that this man was hot as all hell? The way he wore a suit was enough to make even me drool, and I was decidedly *not* interested in him.

"We have never been able to assure safety, but we don't generally have this many accounts of something going on in the caves," Anson said. "It's a recipe for disaster with this many people here."

"Should we try to limit the amount of people going into the caves at a time?" Lana asked.

Anson shook his head. "We can't do that. It's not our property."

"Surely Hugo will agree. Don't you think?" Lana asked.

"Hugo really owns the caves?" I asked. Sure, Alec had said the descendants of the Sandview Pack but I found that to be more abstract since they weren't here. There was now a name attached. A name I knew.

I shouldn't have asked. My question turned both of their attention to me. Being the person an alpha's attention is on always fills me with anxiety.

"Yes. Hugo owns the entire beach and the cliffs. His family has maintained ownership since it was gifted to them generations ago," Anson said. "Much like the rest of the town, he's proud of his family history and will tell anyone willing to listen."

I snorted. Yep, he did do that.

"I think Felix plans to examine all the barred entrances every night for a while," Gideon said. "He is talking to Hugo about barring the darkness where people frequently disappear. At least until this mad interest dies down a little."

Gideon was standing next to me, his arm wrapped around my waist as he held me to his side. I tried to inch away a few times, but I really liked the way he felt against me. And probably more shocking, I enjoyed his scent. That it was mixed with a whole slew of alpha scents played tricks on my mind. As much as I tried to convince myself I was ignoring them and just concentrating on that which was Gideon, I wasn't naïve enough to think I could convince myself of that.

He smelled good. And so did his alphas on him.

The doors opened at ten and the shop flooded. Anson made sure Gideon was well behind the counter, barely sticking out of the office door. Gideon didn't seem to mind much, especially as his attention split between watching me and staring at Anson.

I knew that his alphas were hanging around because he was here. There weren't just betas flocking to the area. There were alphas as well. And despite his many bites, Gideon was still an omega. His perfume was unmistakable.

Lana had dragged out a third cash register that they usually kept in the back. It was rarely used and took two hours to update before it was operable. But I manned that one in the back corner of the store by the office door. I had a clear view of the main counter where Jessica, Beck, and Lana were.

Anson hung close by Gideon and me. Answering questions. Steering people toward something specific. I was getting antsy as a threesome of alphas in line neared the counter. Their strongscents made it hard for me to breathe. They weren't looking at me at all, but the dread of their proximity began to make my hands tremble.

As they stepped up to the counter, Anson slid me to the side. His hand on my hip, he gently guided me behind him. I was both startled and relieved when he took over the register. And surprised further when he knew how to run it.

"It's his shop, remember?" Gideon asked as he came up behind me. He rested his chin on my shoulder as we watched Anson deal with the alphas in line. They weren't a threat at all, I could see that as my fear eased away. They were smiling.

Happy. Laughing with Anson. “Of course, he knows how to run the register.”

I smiled, wrapping my arms around myself. If I was going to work with the public, I had to be able to control myself. I couldn't break down in front of every alpha that stepped inside.

*But three at once is definitely something to be afraid of.*

There was a lull when Megan took the tour out, Lana going with her. We were buddying up on tours now. Just to be safe.

With the calm settling on the shop for a minute, I closed down my register and stretched. Turning, I found Anson and Gideon watching me. My cheeks heated.

“Thank you,” I said. I hadn't had a chance to say anything as I took the register over again once the alphas had left.

Anson nodded, watching me with his gunmetal blue eyes. They were so unique and entrancing that for a moment, I did nothing but stare. “Need some fresh air?”

I took a breath, but the air in the shop was so muddled with scents that I couldn't make out many distinct ones. Those of the alphas were long gone, dissipated with the overwhelming amount of beta scents that came after and the filters that were really quite good.

“No. Thanks. It's okay.”

My eyes dropped as he licked his lips. I swallowed as I watched his tongue moisten them before dragging my eyes back to his. The smallest hint of a smile touched them.

“Are you staying here all day?” Gideon asked as he came out of the shadowed door to the office.

“No. Cohen will be down later so I can pull my hair out as I continue to deal with the damn restaurant.”

He was still watching me, so he didn't miss my smile at his words. He smiled in return.



“It’s going to be stunning,” Gideon said, leaning against Anson’s side. Anson wrapped an arm around him, nodding. Both men were staring at me with similar looks.

I was caught between my instincts to turn away from an alpha’s attention to get somewhere he couldn’t see me and getting lost in it.

A crash made me jump, and I spun. There was a little kid standing over a display that he’d knocked over. His parents came rushing over, both laughing and scolding him. I glared, irritated.

I moved to set it back up not realizing that both alpha and omega were on my heels. The parents of the kid smiled at me, excusing their neglect of watching their child by giving me half-assed apologies.

“If there’s anything broken, you will be charged for it,” Anson said as I crouched down.

Silence followed his words. I glanced up to see a formidable alpha as he gave the couple a hard look.

“It was an accident,” the father said.

“It wouldn’t have happened if you’d have been supervising your child. This isn’t a daycare. If your neglect at being a responsible parent means that I now have broken inventory, you will be held responsible. Am I clear?”

Hearing them stumble over their words was enough that my shaking hands steadied. He wasn’t yelling. And even if he was, he wasn’t yelling at me. It wasn’t directed at me. And honestly, I actually liked his response to the situation. If you’re going to let your kid wander around unsupervised and they break something, the parents should be held responsible for that loss.

Luckily for them, the kid didn’t knock over anything with glass on it. But Anson had them all sitting by the door while I sorted through it. Gideon was on the floor with me, grinning at the way the would-be customers looked uncomfortable.

Anson set the display upright again. Gideon and I handed him the items and he replaced them based on the tags. Then he

pulled his omega up before offering me a hand.

It took everything in me to place mine in his. I hadn't intended to let him pull me up, but the next thing I knew, I was on my feet. Standing face to face with Anson. He was tall, broad. So damn good looking.

Standing this close, I didn't have a choice but to breathe him in. Rich cedarwood. The scent went straight to my core, making my mouth salivate.

The fuck is this?!

My breath caught as his free hand—the one not *still* holding mine—brushed my hair back. “Thank you,” he murmured.

“It's my job,” I whispered back.

He chuckled, a rumble that stroked a fire inside me. Shivers streaked down my body as I looked at him.

“Alpha,” Gideon said, coming up beside us. The corner of Anson's lips curled in the sexiest way. “Are you going to deal with the irresponsible family, or should I?”

The rumble in Anson's throat made me swallow. It wasn't quite a growl, but it dropped deep and reverberated like one. Except I wasn't sure my heart was beating wildly for the reason I thought it should. Why is it that I spent my entire life running from alphas, and here they were, paying attention to me? I wanted to get away. Not be consumed by them.

My heart thundered as his thumb traced my bottom lip. Then he took a step back, releasing me. I watched through several blinks as he straightened himself and headed for the family.

“Makes you need to catch your breath, right?” Gideon asked.

I glanced at him. “What does?”

“When he touches your lip like that. I swear, it's an instant hard-on for me.” He shook his head, bemused. “Hell, he wasn't even doing it to me, and I'm still half-cocked.”

A giggle escaped my mouth before I could slap my hand over it to keep the sound in. He grinned before pulling me against him. His hands on my hips brought them right to his. His smile was mischievous and seductive. He raised a brow as if saying ‘See?’ proving his point that he was half-cocked.

The bell over the doors made me turn my head. The family left with Anson holding the door for them. I had a feeling they were not welcome here again. I didn’t consider myself a spiteful person, but I almost wished something would have broken. It was one thing to be scolded by the owner of a store, but they weren’t really held responsible for their actions since they got away with no real punishment.

For me, being spoken to by an alpha like that would have had me peeing my pants. That was all the punishment I needed. Although their distress was clearly on display as Anson reprimanded them, they were lucky.

Anson let the door shut but remained there. When he turned back, he looked around the store. “I have a feeling that the next rush is coming soon. There’s a large group coming from the direction of the meetinghouse and another meandering their way up from the beach. Catch your breaths while you can. Get a drink. Take a seat.”

“Time to go back to creeping in the dark,” I told Gideon, teasing him as I made my way back to the register.

“That’s fine. I can stare at your ass the entire time, and no one is any wiser.”

I spun around on him, my mouth open in surprise. But his grin was smug. His hand caught my chin and brought my mouth to his, covering it as his tongue swept across mine. “I love when your mouth is ready for me,” he murmured into the kiss before taking my breath away.

“As much as I’m enjoying seeing my omega enjoy our beta, the workplace is not appropriate for this kind of kiss,” Anson said.

Gideon’s mouth left mine as Anson’s hand found his ass, giving him a light slap, making Gideon’s grin even more

wicked. He winked at me before dragging his tongue across my bottom lip. Releasing my face, he licked his lips as he headed into the dark recess of the office door.

I watched him go, wide-eyed. Jeezus fuck, my entire body was jittery.

It took me several minutes to get myself composed before I could convince my feet to move. Knowing that he was looking at my butt behind me had me very self-conscious as I stood at the register. Anson had moved to the front, watching out the window. I eyed him warily, knowing that half of his attention was back here all the time because that's where Gideon was.

An alpha always keeps his omega safe and happy.

As long as that alpha isn't from Chaingate, anyway. I shuddered at the thought.

No more, I vowed. I was past that now. Being one of the few fortunate souls that made it out of the city. I was free of those alphas. I was free from worrying about my survival every day. From constantly looking over my shoulder. From the abuse that an alpha posed.

As the bell over the door chimed, I looked at the front again. Anson smiled as he greeted the group of people who walked in. He answered a question and pointed him further into the store. His gaze caught mine before he turned back and there was something else in his gaze. Something that made my stomach flutter.

As he opened the door for the next group that came up and our gaze broke, my eyes widened. Did he call me 'our' beta? Turning around, I looked into the dark doorway where I knew Gideon was lurking. I could barely make out his chuckle.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# GIDEON



I felt a little stalkery as I trailed Katiya everywhere she went. The real struggle was keeping myself from pushing into her house when we got back every evening. In reality, I didn't care in the least if I was semi-stalking this woman. She was mine. I'd do whatever it took to make her understand and accept that.

Perhaps my presence was helping her ease a little around my alphas. Since the recent incident of the freaked out people and the crazy influx of tourists, my alphas were not going to be far from me when I was out of the house.

Part of me felt guilty about it. Knowing that I was taking them away from their work when I could be holed up at home where they would be assured of my safety. But then again, I internally argued that they'd be checking the shop often anyway. Katiya was here. And we all wanted this pretty beta for our own.

It was probably just because I was stubborn and demanding that I was succeeding as much as I was with her. There wasn't a charming bone in my body. I was filled with low-simmer constant arousal and the need for frequent praise and attention. That was my personality.

Charismatic flirting? Not a chance. If she found me attractive, that was the only thing I had going for me in that department. I wasn't even a good seducer. As soon as I was turned on, I got demanding and whiny until I got a knot.

Then again, I'd only ever been with my alphas. And never a woman. Maybe it would be different with Katiya.

October was winding down. With it came the big Halloween party that Katiya had planned. Today she was in the office of the shop while she pored over more and more details. Because most of my alphas were tied up today, Tristen was here instead of one of the others.

Having been around him least of all, Katiya's scent had a constant acerbic undertone as her fear clung to her. He was a stranger. Dark. Big. Deep, sexy, growly voice. But all the things that frightened my beta in one gorgeous package.

I kept myself between them as much as I could, trying to block her view and maybe let her pretend he wasn't there. I was partially responsible for her distress, since Tristen was only here because I was.

Though I was probably being more obnoxious than helpful, I tried doubly hard to distract her from Tristen. He was perhaps the only one of my alphas who hadn't paid much attention to Katiya, though that might be due to lack of opportunity more than anything. I kept my focus trained on her, but I could feel my alpha's attention on us both.

"The party is a masquerade, right?" I asked for probably the dozenth time. The way she looked at me with a slight smile said that yes, I'd asked it at least eight times already. I had plenty of questions, but that seemed to be the only one I could get out.

"Yes. Masks. It's fine to dress in costumes other than ball gowns as long as you wear a mask," she answered.

"Are you wearing a gown or a costume?" I asked.

She hesitated. Apparently, I hadn't asked that question yet. "I don't know."

"Why? It's only a week away."

"I don't really have anything and haven't had time to shop."

It was both the truth and a lie. I could nearly taste both. Speaking of taste... I leaned across the desk and cupped her face, making her turn to look at me when I guided her in my direction. Before she could speak, I covered her mouth with mine for perhaps the dozenth time that day.

I couldn't help myself. She tasted like *mine*. Ripe raspberries with a bit of a bite but that sweet, summer goodness. Even the strange taste of gardenia that chased it was a thrill.

She pulled away, a smile on her lips. "Cohen already told you that's not in my job description and I'm on the clock."

That she brought up my alphas without tension in her voice was nearly as thrilling as kissing her outright.

"He's not here," I said, leaning in to kiss her again. She let me, the smile on her face growing. But then Tristen turned a page in his book, and she immediately stiffened.

Nothing like the taste of fear. I backed away, licking my lips. Actually, it wasn't bad. Maybe she'd let me kiss her fear away.

Her brown eyes darted to Tristen before looking back at the desk and the papers she had spread out. Sighing, I sat back to look at her. Was there ever a woman so beautiful? So perfect? I couldn't wait to see her in a ball gown.

Oh, that's what we were talking about. "Would you prefer a dress or a costume?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Don't know. I'll figure something out. I still have a week."

"But if you were going to choose, which would you choose?" I pressed.

"He's going to keep asking until you give him an answer," Tristen said. His voice was always dark and smokey. It sent a thrill through me.

I wasn't sure Katiya's shiver was the same as mine.

"Dress," she answered, her voice hushed. "Then I could wear it for other things."



“Practical,” I said, already mentally going through the inventory in Reed’s collection and dressing her in my head. And also undressing her. “Do you have a mask yet?”

Katiya shook her head. “I’ve spent so much time planning that I haven’t actually thought much about dressing for it.”

That was the truth, anyway.

We left the office during a rush that lasted well through lunch. I wasn’t good at registers, but I could direct people to where things were in the store and be Katiya’s mascot. Her source of amusement. I loved that my presence kept a smile on her face, even if she was internally giggling at how I fumbled for answers.

Between the customers and watching me, Katiya nearly forgot about Tristen, which I thought was impressive since he sat in view of everyone behind her. An imposing figure that said one thing—these two are mine and I’ll fuck you up if you so much as make a teasing pass at either of them.

I was including Katiya in that because he watched her at least as much as he watched me. Tristen could feel me in our bonds. He didn’t have to have eyes on me at all times to monitor my safety when he was this close.

That all five of my alphas were as fixated on Katiya as I was meant that acquiring her was the only thing on my agenda these days. Of course, there was the hurdle to get over concerning Reed. After talking to Anson, we decided that I wouldn’t bring up Reed and what happened between them again. I wouldn’t *not* talk about him just as I wouldn’t the rest of my pack. But not in relation to what went down.

She needed time to process on her own. To come to her own terms with it and perhaps find a place where she could look past it. I knew that if she truly understood why Reed kept it from her, she’d cut him some slack. I was so sure of this that it was literal torture keeping it to myself because I just wanted to take her home with me.

I wanted to bury myself in her while my alpha knotted me. I wanted to see my alphas please her as she abandoned her fear

of them. As she called out, ‘alpha’ in a completely different tone than she ever has before.

Shaking my head, I glanced behind me. Tristen was watching me, an amused smile just barely touching his lips. Yep, I bet he just felt the influx of arousal course through me while I pictured my beta with us.

Sighing, I turned back and returned to entertaining Katiya and helping customers choose souvenirs.

I somehow managed to convince Tristen to go get us food and leave Katiya and me locked in the office. He did just that—locked the door with us inside. Katiya frowned at it.

“He could have at least let me out. I’m working,” she said. “You’re the omega.”

“Precious is precious. Designation has nothing to do with that.”

She frowned at me, which was fine. I pulled her around and pressed her against the wall. She laughed, but I cut off the sound as I kissed her hard. She moaned, and I swallowed the sound, my hips moving of their own accord and rocking against her. Letting her feel what she does to me.

I trailed my hands down her arms until I found her hands. Not having any true conscious plan, I brought them over her head and held them there while I kissed her breathless. My hips slowly, sensually moved against hers until she was shaking in my arms.

Being omega meant I wasn’t an overly large man. I’ve always thought my hands were small. But somehow I managed to trap both her wrists in one hand, keeping them pinned above us so I could use my other.

I’d like to say that I wasn’t completely inappropriate. Softly trailing my fingers down her ribs, I only barely skimmed the side of her breast before continuing my examination. At her hip, I gripped her, just to feel how well she fit in my hand. The perfect feel made me groan and press my hips harder to hers.

Her whimper in my mouth was beautiful. Filled with need. I could taste the sweet desire in her mouth, in her scent.

Although I wanted to keep her hip in my hand, I circled it to her ass, cupping it. Just to feel the shape. The firmness. How well my fingers dug into the perfect globe.

I shimmied down her body slightly so I could grip behind her leg and pull it up over my hip. Breaking the kiss just long enough to tell her to wrap her legs around me, I devoured her again as she did.

Probably not the best idea. My perfume saturated the air as I jerked my hips against her over and over. Rubbing my hard cock against her hidden pussy. My hand tightened around her wrists, the other holding firmly to her perfectly firm ass.

Tristen swearing was the only thing that alerted us that he was back.

“Fucking omega,” he hissed, shutting the door behind him.

I hadn’t backed away from Katiya. It was still my weight against her that held her in place. But I broke my mouth from hers, letting us both breathe. The chill of the room made me shiver.

“What happened to this being an inappropriate place?” Tristen asked. I could hear the struggle in his voice as he tried to keep the growl and purr inside. Both of which might upset my fearful beta.

“That’s not my rule,” I said. “And Cohen isn’t here. I think I can file this under lunch break for both of us.”

Tristen shook his head as he crossed the room to open the window. He threw the sash up, letting a gust of air rush into the room. Reluctantly, I let Katiya down. She kept her eyes downcast until I pulled her attention back to me. Searching her eyes.

No, she wasn’t upset about my kiss. And possible groping. It was just a residual fear due to Tristen’s presence. I kissed her nose, her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead, all over her face until she smiled. Only then did I let her take her seat and reach for the bags.

It took me no time to fill the desk with takeout cartons filled with amazing authentic Thai food. Cohen had been working on bringing more cultural food to the area. Real food. Not the Americanized versions. This one was the best in my opinion.

My arousal was only barely calm as we worked our way silently through the food when a knock came on the door. I swear, we were constantly interrupted. I didn't care that we were at her place of work.

Katiya started to get up, but Tristen beat her to the door. I loved the dark presence in Tristen. Somewhere inside me, I was sure he was part killer, like the ones he wrote about. Just as he poured his pack into the protagonists, he dabbed a little piece of himself in the killers.

“You should see this,” Alec said.

I knew before Alec finished his sentence that Tristen would try to lock us in the room. I surged to my feet and flung the door wide open. He frowned at me, wrapping his hand firmly around my wrist. Over my shoulder, I grinned at Katiya and offered her my hand.

Her smile was slower, as was getting to her feet. She wasn't any less curious than I was. She just didn't want to get real close to Tristen.

We followed Alec outside, where there were already a couple cops. I heard the distant sound of sirens in the air too. There were three tourists on the sidewalk in front of the shop, staring blankly at nothing. The look in their eyes was almost haunting because it was vacant. No one home.

There was no comprehension of what we were saying. No indication that they even heard a word of it. They stood there as if their brains had been shut off. Not so much as blinking.

“They were found outside the caves like this,” Alec said. He nodded in the direction of another small group of tourists. These were young, late teens maybe. “They pulled them up here for help.”

Tristen stared at them for a long time, his hand tightening around my wrist. My grip on Katiya mimicked his.

“We’re going home,” Tristen said, pulling me toward the parking lot. I could feel his anxiety pulse through me. Everything in him said that he needed to put his omega somewhere safe. Out in the open was not safe. Not when there was someone rendering people into... this. Whatever this was.

“No,” I said, digging my heels in so he couldn’t pull me along. Tristen was much larger than me. Built of muscle and nothing else. I didn’t actually stop his efforts, but he paused long enough to frown at me. “Katiya’s shift isn’t over. She can’t just leave, and I’m not leaving her here.”

“Of course not. She’s coming home too,” Tristen said as if that settled everything. Completely ignoring that she was still working. And disregarding that she doesn’t actually go home with us.

“Tris,” I said, this time trying to pull my hand free until he paid attention. “We can’t just leave. That’s not how life works.”

“The fuck it doesn’t,” he growled. He got in my face, gripping my hair. Katiya tensed beside me. “Omega, you’re going home.”

I glared at him. At the bark in his voice. “Call Felix.”

“Gideon—”

“Call him!” I demanded louder.

He didn’t need to. Felix was already there. I could feel his hand over Tristen’s, gently untangling it from my hair and then moving his efforts to loosen Tristen’s grip on my wrist.

“Shh,” Felix purred to both of us. He rubbed the back of my head, kissed my temple, and placed his other hand on the side of Tristen’s head. “Easy, alpha. He’s safe. He hasn’t stepped foot inside the cave, has he?”

Tristen’s growl made Katiya tremble. His intense gaze snapped to her, making her jump and try to back away. It was her fear that made Tristen get himself together. He closed his

eyes, taking a breath to break his growl. I pulled Katiya to my side, hugging her to me while my alpha regained his control. Pushing his instincts down so he could fully function again.

“Sorry,” he grumped to me. Very slowly, he reached for Katiya. She flinched, leaning heavily into my side. But she didn’t pull away. Didn’t close her eyes. She let him brush a hand over the loose strands of her hair. “I’m not growling at you, beta. Your safety is just as important as his. I was taking you both home. You understand that, right?”

Her eyes darted to me. I bit my lip to keep my smile as small as possible. Felix didn’t feel the need to hide his amusement. He chuckled.

“Tris, she’s not upset that you were leaving her behind and disregarding her as unimportant. You scare her when you act like a rabid animal, throwing barks all over the place,” Felix said.

Tristen blinked a few times, still staring at Katiya. He closed his eyes, his face scrunching. “In that case, I’m so fucking sorry, Kat. I’ll never hurt you. I’ll set this place on fire to protect you, little beta. I will tear apart anyone who ever tries to lay a hand on you.”

Katiya’s breath caught as she stared at him with wide eyes. Tristen looked at her and I was sure, like me, she could see that bit of darkness that promised he meant just what he said. My crazy, murder writing alpha.

“That’s better,” Felix said. “Stay here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

I watched between the two as Katiya and Tristen locked themselves in a staring match. My smile only grew when Katiya began to relax in my arms as she watched my dark, wild alpha whose entire life was researching killers. I had no doubt in my mind that he would get away with murder if someone played their cards wrong and hurt someone he cared about. Including my Katiya.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# KATIYA



The look in Tristen's eyes was nothing I hadn't seen before. There was anger, a beast that was waiting to break out. Unmistakable strength and power behind his voice and hands. I wasn't at all naïve enough to think that was just for show.

This alpha was dangerous.

So why was I settling the longer he looked at me, all feral and threatening? Because he offered something I was never allowed to have before—safety? Or was it just that I was in Gideon's arms and he was in no way afraid of Tristen?

The alpha even barked, and Gideon didn't flinch. He stilled because that's what a bark does to a person, but he wasn't afraid.

Much to Tristen's displeasure, we didn't leave the shop. And once again, the police shut down tours and public visits to the cave while they investigated.

"Something is going on down there," Alec said from where he sat next to me. "There's always been odd reports and missing people, but this is all very new."

"It is," Gideon agreed. "I've never seen anyone look like those people did outside of movies." He turned to Tristen. "You? Have you heard of it?"

Tristen shook his head. "I'm guessing drugs." His voice was quiet. I thought that he was probably trying to keep it non-threatening, so I didn't freak out again. "There's a whole lot of strange drugs in the world. I've heard that there's some



excrement from pufferfish that can render a person basically a zombie. Mindless. But also gives them strength that you only read about. It's actually really freaky."

"That's real?" Gideon asked, eyes wide.

Tristen nodded. "There is a pufferfish chemical, tetrodotoxin, that some say can create zombies. Others believe that you need some kind of voodoo mixed in to make it happen, but I have no idea. There were a ton of investigations regarding these zombies in the 1980s. Supposedly, it can only work when a body is somewhere between life and death."

"You're fascinating. The things you know," Alec said, staring at Tristen.

Tristen grinned. "Thanks." He winked at Alec. It must have snapped Alec out of his trance because he flushed and looked away.

I hid a smile while Gideon laughed, nodding. "You should hear when he finds out about another fascinating cold case that he's focused on. I've learned so many ways to embalm someone, *I* could probably write a book."

Alec smiled, shaking his head. "I can't believe you just write about murder for a living," he said to Tristen. "How does it not give you nightmares?"

"I learned a long time ago that the only true nightmares have to do with being helpless in regards to your loved ones. Nothing scares me beyond that."

"Being helpless to save them from something out of your control," Alec said, nodding. He stared absently out the window. The store had gathered a crowd while the cops continued to investigate. We were shut down but not allowed to go anywhere. We might be needed for questioning. "I get that."

Tristen nodded, a smile lingering on his face. He leaned forward, touching Gideon's face in a tender gesture that drew a smile to my lips as I turned away to give them their moment of privacy. "I'll do anything to protect my pack," he said, his voice dropping to that deep, dark growl of a tone he generally

seemed to speak in. “Unfortunately for the world, I think I’ve researched enough killing methods and how people get away with it that I’d make a pretty fabulous serial killer.”

Gideon grinned. “There’s something thrilling about knowing your alpha will kill someone on your behalf.”

His hand on me tightened, and I knew he was including me in that. But he was right. To be on the other side of the threat, where it’s not behind you but in front of you. Not the shadow hunting you, but the wall protecting you.

I hadn’t realized how much I wanted something like that until the moment on the porch when Tristen declared that he’d burn everything down to protect us. Us. Because he might not have said it out loud right then, but I knew when he stared into my eyes that he was including me. It left me breathless and completely unsure.

Felix stood over us a moment later. It was well past seven now, my shift having ended an hour ago. “You already give your statements?” he asked. The four of us nodded. “Good. Time to get home then. I’m keeping the store closed tonight. Pending a discussion with Anson and Cohen, we’ll talk about reopening tomorrow.”

“There’s a chance we won’t?” Alec asked, appalled.

Felix nodded. “Don’t worry. You’ll be paid your normal shifts.”

Alec shook his head. “Sorry, alpha. That wasn’t what I meant. I just—I can’t remember a time we’ve ever closed for anything other than a holiday. Is it really that serious?”

Felix pulled up another chair and sat next to Tristen, facing us. He rested his hand on Tristen’s leg for a minute, maybe assuring him that everything was okay. “We’re used to the occasional accident, disappearances, deaths that happen in the caves. They are always traced back to negligence on the shoulders of those involved. Disregarding warnings. Ignoring safety. Basically, thinking that it’s all a myth and won’t happen to them. Those who choose to go beyond the boundaries where we know it is safe are taking their lives into their own hands

and many don't make it out." Alec and Gideon nodded in agreement. "But from what we're seeing is that these past few incidents haven't been happening beyond that point. They're within the set boundaries, no one having so much as meddled with a barred location. These people have been cautious and are still falling victim to something."

"What is it?" Alec asked.

Felix shook his head. "My guess is someone playing pranks. Having a good time. I don't see any true malicious intent in these events."

"That includes the three that were just sent to the hospital?" Tristen asked.

"This isn't going to be one of your murder stories, Tris," Felix said, narrowing his eyes on the other alpha. Tristen grinned, shrugging. Felix sighed, shaking his head. "We've scoured the caves before the boundary line. The items they brought in and dropped are well before that point, suggesting that they hadn't even made it there yet. Indicating that whoever/whatever happened was before." He glanced around the shop for a minute before continuing. Maybe making sure no one else was listening as he told us more details. Were cops supposed to share this stuff with civilians? "We searched their person and their belongings. The cops have already been allowed in their room at the inn. Whatever is ailing them—" ("Drugs," Tristen muttered in the middle of Felix's explanation.) "—was not something self-inflicted."

"Then they were attacked in some way?" Gideon asked.

"It appears that way. But again, we have zero evidence of that."

"A mystery," Alec said, frowning.

"You're not staying alone tonight," Gideon said as he turned to me. "You're far too close to the caves and all alone. I'm not allowing it."

I raised a brow. "I've never been bothered."

"No, and there's a first time for everything. I'd rather you not be alone for that first time."

Frowning at him, I asked, “And what do you suggest? A hotel?”

Probably shouldn’t have asked. The mischievous grin turned sexy as he smiled. “I think you should let me spend the night.”

“You opened yourself up for that,” Tristen said.

“Even I saw that coming,” Alec agreed.

“I’d like to point out the flaw in your plan,” I said.

“No alpha bark in me?” he asked sweetly. Goddamn man. I nodded. “Don’t worry. I have five alphas who are never far away. The first hint of me being uneasy and they’ll be here in less than five minutes.”

“I’m impressed you didn’t suggest that one of them sleep upstairs,” Alec murmured.

“That’s for a later slumber party,” Gideon said without missing a beat. “When she’s not quite so uneasy around alphas.”

I looked at Felix and Tristen, waiting for one of them to argue. Expecting Tristen to outright refuse this when he’d been so intent on getting Gideon out of there earlier. But it didn’t come. He smirked at me instead. And Felix! He was nodding in agreement, thoughtful as he considered this.

I sighed. “Fine. You’re going to upset my ghost, I’ll have you know.”

Yes, I totally forgot that not a single person in this room knew about Octavia. I caused the four of them to look at me, perplexed. Laughing, I shook my head. “There’s an omega that haunts my house. She takes great offense to Gideon’s presence.”

“Roses!” Gideon said, grinning. “I kept trying to figure out where the smell was coming from. I knew it was a perfume, but for the life of me, I couldn’t find another omega anywhere. The three in town do not smell like roses!”

Nodding, I got to my feet. “Well, let’s go then. I’m ready to get home and relax where there aren’t mindless people

coming out of the caves.”

We had a whole escort up to my house, neither Tristen nor Felix leaving until we were well locked inside. As predicted, Octavia was very unimpressed that Gideon was spending the night.

I took him through the house, showing him each room and letting him explore. It was so adorable to see him admire everything as a child might on Christmas, that I forgot about the incident at the shop for a while. Then I brought him to the kitchen and prepared us food.

When I'd tidied up, I turned to him.

“What do you typically do now?” he asked.

“Read to Octavia for a while before going to sleep.”

That impish smile returned as he looked at me. Taking my hand, he pulled me to his chest. “How about we skip the story and go straight to bed? There are other activities that we can do.”

I narrowed my eyes on him. “How do you expect this to go?” I asked.

Confusion marred his features as he stared at me. It was funny watching him trying to figure it out. “I think I need a more specific question because I'm positive you know how sex works, beautiful.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “You're an omega. I'm a beta with no knot or lock. I don't even have anything to simulate that with.”

This time Gideon burst out laughing. “Oddly enough, I was wondering about that myself. I guess we'll just have to find out, don't you think? But I should tell you, I've never touched a woman before.”

“You haven't?” I asked, surprised.

He swept my legs out from under me and turned us around as I laughed at the surprise change in direction. “Nope. When would I have done that? I've only ever been with my pack.”

“Pack of men,” I said, finding myself smiling at the idea.

“Mm. Glorious men, Kat. You should see them in all their glory. I assure you, they’re like nothing you’ve ever seen before.”

And yet, I have seen enough alphas to have an idea. I shivered at the memory until he crawled onto the bed with me. Gideon laid me down and hovered over me on his hands and knees. “Omegas tend to be surrounded all the time. I was fortunate not to grow up where my designation instantly caused bitterness in the betas around me. I wasn’t their favorite person, but they weren’t mean. I was kind of like a sibling to them—they could pick on me, but they’d also fuck someone up who didn’t live in our town and tried to bother me. It was a good place to be. But in that, I was too aware of what I was. Too self-conscious of my sexuality to really just play around with anyone. There were opportunities, but I shied away, embarrassed about what my biology does to me when aroused.”

“What does it do?” I asked, curious.

He grinned. “I’m softer than a beta and nearly a cloud compared to an alpha,” he said, smirking. Though he didn’t come out and say it, I was sure he wasn’t talking about his body in general. He was talking about a single appendage more specifically. “Still hard, but it’s different somehow. I orgasm easily and often. All of which is fine, but I also produce copious amounts of cum.”

My eyes widened as he watched me. “Really?”

Gideon nodded, shrugging. “You can see why I might be embarrassed about it growing up. Especially with a beta who didn’t have to deal with any of that and definitely didn’t get off on it like an alpha would.”

Part of me wanted to argue, but I realized he was likely right. I wasn’t sure what I’d have done if I’d encountered an omega when I was younger. I mean, in different circumstances.

“You think it will bother you?” he asked.

I shrugged, shaking my head. “No?”

He laughed. “Care to find out, my pretty beta?”

To say I wasn’t intrigued would have been a lie. But I also couldn’t bring myself to tell him so. Thankfully, Gideon didn’t need much encouragement outside of me not telling him no.

“I’m going to enjoy exploring your body,” he murmured as he lowered his face to mine, his lips brushing mine. “I hope you’re not too tired. Because I intend to keep you awake all night.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I don’t work tomorrow,” I said, already breathless.

He snorted, his smile filled with hunger. “Yes, I agree. I should probably warn you in no uncertain words—this is going to be messy. And I am never satisfied with a single orgasm.”

“You might be when I can’t give you what you want,” I said. The idea made me nervous. What if I couldn’t please him? What if being with me wasn’t enough for him? How horrifying would that be?

How heartbreaking too. Because even though he had basically barged into my life and refused to leave, I really liked him. A lot. I liked the way he looked at me, how he talked to me, how he treated me. Like I was his omega and, he was the alpha—without all the pesky alpha-ness.

To lose him over something like this, or at all, would be devastating. Like Reed all over again.

“You’re not an alpha,” he said, licking his way down my neck. “I think most of my need for a knot comes from the presence of alphas. My heat aside, of course. I have a hypothesis that without the presence of an alpha, that painful need for a knot won’t surface and I can just enjoy you.”

I could barely listen to his words as his voice dropped to something that made everything in me heat up. His lips on my skin made me shiver. His tongue and teeth had me panting.

I hoped he was right. That I'd be enough for this man because I wasn't ready to be without him. For right now, I could ignore the implications that laid out. Especially since his mouth on me was maddening.

Kissing wasn't something that changed between genders. There were no opposite mechanics involved. So his mouth on my neck, kissing me in a very practiced way, had my heart racing until I could barely breathe.

He spent a lot of time on my neck, licking all over my skin. Nipping in different places, learning what action resulted in which reaction. It almost felt like I was a case study. Sometimes he'd go back to a previous spot and experiment between kisses, licks, bites, and sucks. Just to see what would happen.

When he was satisfied that he'd explored my neck thoroughly, he moved to my shirt. I sat up so he could pull it over my head. It took him a minute to figure out the bra, to which he stared with fascination as my boobs dropped from their cage.

I laid back, trying to keep the smile from my lips as he stared. Fascinated.

"Do you just want to look?" I asked.

His gaze flicked up to mine, a smile climbing his face. "I was debating what to do first. Any requests?"

I shook my head. "Whatever you like."

"I should have made a point to study this more," he said as he climbed onto my hips, straddling me. His eyes dropped back to my chest.

He must have settled on touch first. Both hands came up, gently cupping my breasts. His eyes flicked between the two as he softly massaged. His lips parted. I thought he was going to ask a question. Instead, he dipped his head and took my nipple in his mouth.

I sucked in a breath, my back arching unexpectedly as he took it between his teeth, his tongue stroking the tip. My hands



went into his hair as his mouth clamped down, his teeth gently sinking into me, and he gave an experimental suck.

A sound like the cross between a whine and a groan left my mouth. He must have appreciated it since he set out to pull it from me again. Over and over, he played with my nipples, his hands always squeezing, rubbing, and pulling at my breasts.

“These are like pillows,” he said when he came up to take a deep breath. “Your nipples are different than a man’s. Better. But your reaction is oddly the same as Cohen’s.”

I laughed, flushing. “You often play with nipples?”

Gideon grinned. His hands still twisting and pinching my breasts. “No. I’m pretty much a single outcome driven man.” Sighing, he shook his head. “When an alpha is around, I need a knot. There’s honestly not much else I manage outside of that. I’m too exhausted after to play around.”

“Then how do you know my reaction is the same as Cohen’s?”

This time, his grin was mischievous. “Because Cohen and Anson go at it all the time. If I’m occupied, usually with Felix when they’re in the room, they’ll happily turn on each other while I take Felix’s knot.”

This seemed like a highly inappropriate conversation. We were speaking about my employer! And yet, the idea of them together—I had a very clear image in my mind that made me flush.

If Gideon knew where my head had gone, he ignored it. Instead, he pulled his shirt over his head. “I’m kind of soft,” he said, looking sheepish for a second. Then he shrugged. “I’m supposed to be soft.”

I looked at his chest and stomach. There was nothing soft about him. He might not be bulging muscles, but he wasn’t flabby or even pudgy.

“Where?” I asked.

That earned me another grin. “Want me to take your pants off first or mine?”

Honestly, I wasn't sure which I was more looking forward to. Seeing what made an omega different or letting him touch me in his stimulating, exploratory manner.

“Okay, I think I'll take longer when playing with you, so I'll strip first and you can touch me if you want to.” He hadn't finished speaking before he went to the button on his pants. He had them shimmied from his hips before too long. His briefs were already wet where the head of his cock was leaking.

“See?” he said, rolling his eyes even as he grinned. “Copious amounts of cum.”

I giggled as he slid them off and tossed them to the floor. Before he came toward me, he looked at the bed. “Do you have extra bedding? This will get messy. I did warn you of that, right?”

Laughing again, I nodded. “Yes, you warned me. Yes, there's more bedding.”

“Okay, good. Do you want to touch me?”

Suddenly I had an image in my mind of little kids. An ‘I'll show you mine if you show me yours’ situation jumped into my head and I almost laughed. Biting my lip, I got on my knees in front of him.

“I guess I've never really explored either,” I said. Nerves filled me as I stared.

“Want me to help you?”

I raised a brow, wondering how he intended that. He offered me his hand. Placing mine in his, he guided it to his cock and wrapped it around. Then slowly stroked down the length. After a few passes, he let me go and I continued on my own. Feeling his length. The strange softness with a hard core. The way little beads of precum dribbled every time I brought my hand to his head.

“Kat?” he asked, voice low and husky. I looked up. “Can I cum on your chest?”

I shivered at his words. Biting my lip, I nodded.

Gideon moved, gently pushing me back, so I was once more laying, and moved to straddle over me. He stared at my face, jerking his cock. It was no time at all that he sprayed my chest. I gasped, surprised at how he covered me. I know he warned me that there would be a lot, but seriously, this was *a lot*.

Enough so that I almost laughed. As it was, I grinned while he moved his cockhead through it. Dragging it over my chest, around my nipple. Like a paintbrush, he moved his cum over me.

“Open your mouth,” he murmured.

I did without thinking. He moved up my body and lay his cock on my tongue. I licked him clean, making the hunger in his eyes flare brighter. I swear, there was a light within him that was glowing brighter.

Then he backed away, sliding off the bed entirely. He took a deep breath and turned for the bathroom. “Gonna clean you up before I take your pants off.”

He returned a minute later with a warm, wet cloth and meticulously cleaned my chest. When he crawled back on the bed, he lay on top of me, kissing me deeply. I ended up turning my face away so I could catch my breath.

“I admit, I didn’t realize how hot it would be to be the one giving you my cum instead of being covered in it,” he said.

“You have that done to you often?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’d like to say yes, but as I said, I’m pretty knot-focused most of the time. It’s hard to look beyond that when everything in me demands the one need.”

“Do you get frustrated with that? Tired of it?”

Gideon grinned. “No.” He laughed, kissing my lips lightly. “It’s the most amazing feeling, Kat. I suppose the need itself can get tiresome, but I’m never left regretting that I took their knots. It’s a satisfaction that...” He trailed off for a minute. “I can’t really explain it. It’s not just a physical satisfaction, but it

makes everything in me just melt with fulfillment. With pleasure, serenity, contentment.”

“Hm,” I answered. Definitely an omega thing. That was not my experience.

“Okay, now I’m taking your pants off,” he announced as he moved down the bed. The look on his face was as if he were unwrapping a present. And the way he tossed my pants aside and stared at the thin fabric left covering my sex, I blushed.

He spread my legs and traced the fabric. But he quickly got rid of them too, and went back to gently touching. Running his fingers over my skin. Over the lips of my pussy. Between the folds.

“Is it going to be awkward if I just... poke around a bit?” he asked, looking at me with dark eyes.

I laughed, shrugging. “Go for it.”

He grinned, dropping down to his elbows and staring closely. Whatever he’d intended to do changed when he got close. The next thing I knew, his mouth was covering my pussy. His tongue easing through my lips. I jerked as if he had touched me with a charged wire when his tongue slid over my clit.

In an effort to figure out what he’d done, he dragged his tongue down further and found where my heat dripped. When he couldn’t get his tongue in deep, he pushed a finger inside while bringing his tongue back up to the apex. Hitting my clit again.

And there, he concentrated in earnest, finding by accident what most men never find. He added a finger and then a third, trying to feel all around inside me. All the while, playing with my clit and making my body shake uncontrollably.

“Oh,” he said, pulling his face away. It glistened with my juices. “I found your clit, right?”

I laughed, covering my face with my hands. Nodding.

I could almost feel his grin as he went back and continued to lick me. I was sure it was in experimentation when he sucked. But I jerked so violently under him, crying out and grabbing his head, digging his face between my legs, that he continued until I came.

By the time he hovered over me while I was catching my breath, he looked so thrilled and proud of himself. “I honestly don’t know why that is supposedly so hard to find. I managed by accident, having no fucking idea what I was looking for.”

Laughing with my cheeks red, he moved between my legs. “Also, I totally came twice when I was sucking on you. Just so you know. The sounds you make go straight to my balls.”

I covered my face again. Gideon pulled my hands away, smiling hugely. The head of his cock already pressing into my pussy. “Ready, my pretty beta?”

Nodding, I watched him. He began with his eyes on me, but they quickly dropped to watch his cock disappear inside. Little by little. Watching his face, I saw as his eyes widened. His mouth opened. I don’t think he was halfway in before he let go of my hands and gripped my hips, his eyes suddenly closing as he swore.

His cum dribbled out of me and I almost giggled again. When he said he came easily, I hadn’t realized he really meant that. With an unsteady breath, he brought his eyes to mine again.

“Probably going to happen a dozen more times. Katiya, you feel like a fucking furnace sucking the life out of me. It feels so goddamn good.” His last words were a groan as he started pushing inside me with purpose.

After another orgasm, he came down on top of me, staring into my eyes. “Okay, I think I get what I’m supposed to be doing here, but I gotta tell you, I think I’m going to be giving myself a whole lot more orgasms than I manage to give you. I hope you don’t hold it against me.”

I grinned again, shaking my head. “Nope. You still feel really good, omega.”

He groaned, dropping his forehead to mine. “I do?”

“Yes. You’re a perfect size. Perfect hardness.” I realized as I complimented him that he enjoyed it. A little voice reminded me that omegas liked praise. It was further emphasized when his thrusts picked up, his hips snapping into me harder and harder. “The perfect amount of stretch. You reach all the right places without being painful.” He gasped. Slamming into me and pausing. “And the way you orgasm is sexy as all Hell.”

Gideon grunted, his cock pulsing inside me as he emptied himself for... the third time? Or were we on the fifth? I already lost count.

“I’m never letting you go, princess,” he muttered, covering my mouth with his. He wrapped his arms around me, kissing me deeply. Sloppily. “Also, I’m going to keep you up all night. I’m nowhere near ready to stop this, and I’m determined to make you orgasm at least once more.”

He went back to kissing me before I could answer.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

# KATIYA



Gideon hadn't been wrong. He kept me up all night. The sun had completely risen over the horizon by the time we collapsed on the bed and slept for a while. But it was too bright for me to sleep for more than a handful of hours.

So I crept out of bed and showered. When I returned and Gideon was still fast asleep, I took my book and headed into the family room to read for a while.

My body ached in the best way. It was both obvious and not at all that Gideon had never been with a woman. He touched every single inch of my body before tasting it. Spending a ton of time on my pussy.

He also wasn't lying about requiring many orgasms before he was even remotely satisfied and the ample amount of cum he produced. That didn't make him a selfish lover like it might have implied, though. Gideon was borderline obsessed with learning every bit of me and how to bring me pleasure.

To sum it up, I ached from the roots of my hair straight down to my toes. Every single muscle was protesting at me moving this morning.

Smiling like a sex fiend, I curled up on the couch and opened the book to read.

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*One of the biggest draws that bring adventurers to Howling Cove is the caves. With all the events throughout history that have taken place within the town, it's a hotspot for exploration.*



*Over the years, there have been artifacts recovered from various parts of the cave. Because the cave is private property, no one has been allowed to truly dig and map the caves, but they are open to the public for minor excavation.*

*In 1923, a tourist found a compass that was dated back to the time of Alpha Gray Paw. There is no evidence that confirms that it was a part of Gray Paw's treasure or crew, but it is speculated that it is from a pirate crew because of the type of compass.*

*Although Alpha Gray Paw's visit to Howling Cove is the most well-known pirate association with the town, it is not nearly the only one. There have been no less than two dozen other reported pirate visits, including Alpha Cap Dan. Cap Dan was a notorious pirate before Gray Paw's time and he attempted to use Howling Cove as a pirate den.*

*However, the town fought back, and Cap Dan was never able to keep it under his control. He was killed at sea when his ship was attacked by another pirate crew, sinking it thirty miles from the coast.*

*A wax seal that has been identified as belonging to that of the Old Packs was discovered in 1910. It is in remarkably good shape, its details easily identifiable. But it was found by itself, not attached to anything. It is currently in a private collection, so no one has been able to study it to determine where it might have come from and when.*

*In 1943, a handful of square-head nails were found deep within the cave, right before the boundary that breaks the commonly visited portion of the cave from the dangerous depths. They are remarkable not just for their condition, but that so many were found in one area.*

*Speculation is that they were once part of a wooden chest, though there was nothing else in the area worth note. The nails can be found in the local museum of Howling Cove.*

*Perhaps what keeps excited attention so well trained on the caves throughout the years is the periodic discovery of coins. One, in particular, was confirmed to have been part of the loot that Alpha Gray Paw had brought ashore when he stopped in Howling Cove. Though a notorious pirate, he was generous when treated kindly. He spent a great deal of his coin in Howling Cove.*

*The coin that was found in the cave matched those that had been retained within the town, coming from the same mint and year, and originating with the Old Country Packs.*

*Other coins have been recovered, many currently residing in Howling Cove's museum, but others are still kept privately.*

*Though there is no shortage of treasure recovered, the bulk of the rumored loot has never been found. Though many continue to explore and hunt for it.*

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Gideon sinking down next to me startled me out of the book. With a quiet grumble, he pulled the blanket that I'd draped around my shoulders so he could hunker down inside it with me. It wasn't until he was basically in my lap that he stopped fussing and settled.

"Why did you get out of bed?" he slurred, his voice thick with sleep.

Resting my hand on his head, I gently brushed his hair. It was stiff with dry sweat. I smiled, despite how gross that was. But I knew why he'd been sweating so I could look past it. "It's too bright to sleep."

He grunted. "True words," he muttered. "I just realized there's no nest here."

"You told me that they've never had an omega here. Why would they build a nest?"

"The Sandviews refused to allow omegas here," Octavia said. She was perched on the chair, glaring at Gideon. "That's also why they swore off alphas. An alpha would bring an omega here and sully their home and land."

Gideon grunted in response to me, since I was the only one privy to hearing Octavia's explanation. I hadn't realized Hugo was one of the betas who resented omegas. But then, maybe they also resented alphas.

We remained lounging for a while before I convinced Gideon to get up and shower. He did but returned to me naked. When I raised a brow, he shrugged. "I'm not putting those clothes back on. I've made a complete mess of them."

I laughed as he pulled me down so we were laying on the couch together. "I regret nothing, but I'm not wearing them again."

"That means you're walking around naked for the day?"

"Do you have objections?"

Grinning, I shook my head. "But how will you go home?"

"One of my alphas will have to bring me clothes." He shrugged. "It's not like they were going to let me walk home

alone right now without one of them anyway.”

Fair enough. I absently wondered which alpha it would be. Did I have a preference?

“Talk to me,” he said.

“I wasn’t not talking to you.”

He scraped his teeth across my shoulder, making me laugh and squirm. “Tell me something. We tend to keep our conversations neutral, but I want to know everything.”

Last time I told someone my secrets, I found out he’d been keeping a bigger one. And my world crumbled for a time.

As if Gideon read my mind, he said gently, “I have literally nothing to hide. You’ve already seen my body. All the bites. I’m going to tell you everything you want to know until the only thing you want from me is for me to shut up and stop talking.”

I laughed.

“Please tell me. What do you want to do with your life? How about that?”

“I am doing what I want to do,” I said. “Living. Without my life being controlled. Not living in fear.”

Gideon nodded, his arms around me tightening. “But now that you’re free, you don’t want more than that?”

“All the time. But slowly, those things are coming to fruition too.”

“Don’t make me fight for everything. Tell me!” There was a whine in his voice. Not a true omega whine, but close enough. I grinned before rolling in his arms to look at him. His hair was ruffled, a little messier than usual. His facial hair was the same, slightly longer than he kept it, obviously missing his morning trim. But he smelled sweet and divine.

I sighed. “Once I got here and the freedom I so desperately dreamed about was all around me, I found that it wasn’t just that I wanted. I wanted friends. Though I haven’t outright

asked, I think I have that now. Alec. Megan and Linus. Maybe Daxon, though our schedules don't really coincide."

"Friendship isn't something you really have to ask if it's there. If you feel they're your friends and you're both sharing information freely, trustingly, you're friends."

"I haven't told them everything," I admitted. "Some things I just don't like to talk about."

"Like Chaingate."

"Did he tell you?"

Gideon traced my lips with his tongue before shaking his head. "No. He told Felix very little. Just enough to rile up my alphas on your behalf. I was in the other room listening." He grinned before it faded. "You don't have to tell me, Kat. You're entitled to your own demons. Just know that I'll fight them with you if you'd like."

"You're sweet," I said.

He shrugged. "No, I think I'm pretty lame at courting. I just keep trying to do the things that I like for you, hoping I'm getting something right."

"Are you trying to court me?" I whispered.

Gideon smiled, sweet and beautiful. "Told you I was lame at it."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "The only thing I've known is fear and cruelty. I don't really understand what courting consists of."

He sighed, resting his forehead against mine. He considered it for a minute before answering. "I guess it can be anything as long as the intent behind it is clear. I think you know what I want."

"Let's just say for argument's sake that I don't."

Gideon chuckled. "You," he murmured, brushing my lips with his. "I want you."

"Tell me," I whispered because that could mean different things.

He tangled our fingers together before burying his face in my neck, rubbing his cheek against mine. Giving me his scent. “I want you to be my beta. To be my pack’s beta.” My heart caught. “Before you argue, my pack wants that too. They’re giving you space while you get used to having alphas around you before they get too close.”

“Gideon, I’ve never wanted a pack.” The words that came out of my mouth weren’t a lie. I hadn’t ever wanted a pack. At least, not until I moved here and realized that there was life outside of the city and it looked very, very different than what I was used to. What a pack meant in Chaingate was *not* what a pack in Howling Cove meant. Though I supposed the bites were the same. Everything beyond that wasn’t.

“Let me tell you how I came here,” he said when I didn’t answer. He was likely reading my tension more than anything. “I think I already said that my family took me all over the place. Showing me the world. I was born into a large pack. My mother is an alpha. I had six other alpha fathers and an omega father too. Because of the sheer number of incomes streaming into our home, we lived comfortably and could afford to travel the world. I was their only child, the second omega in their house that they showered attention on. I suppose because of my homelife, I never grew up hating my designation. I enjoy being an omega. And I swore that I’d find a pack just like my family.”

He concentrated on kissing my neck for a minute before he continued. “Anyway, so one of the places we traveled to was Howling Cove. I was seventeen when I visited here for the first time. As you can imagine, I was enchanted by this place. My parents took me back here three more times after the first visit. It was on the second visit when I met the Jamesons. We were in a restaurant when Cohen walked by me. He paused in the same moment that his earthy lemongrass and iris scent filled my head, drawing a whine out of me before I could stop it. We stared at each other for a solid minute before he smiled, bowing politely to my family. He introduced himself and before I realized what was happening, his pack joined mine for dinner. It was... surreal. They were kind to me. Sweet and respectful. Outside of the first instance between Cohen and

me, it was quiet. There was no mistaking that I was drawn to all five of these men. Their scents were like nothing I'd ever smelled. After dinner, they walked us around Howling Cove, giving us a personal tour. Over the next four days, I was visiting the town, I saw at least one of them."

He shifted on the couch so he could look at me instead of talking into my neck. His gaze was unfocused though as he remembered his past. His fingers absently played with my hair.

"We kept in touch when I went home and the next two visits—the third of the year and one following my eighteenth birthday—the pack was always around. But there was no courting. No little gifts or gestures or even hints that they were interested. Just kindness. Attentiveness. I had their attention from the moment I stepped into Howling Cove until we drove away.

"Over the next few years, I visited often. And during that time, our friendship expanded. I learned all about them. There was no shortage of sharing. But there also *still* wasn't any courting interest that I could tell. Reluctantly, I began to poke around the Pack Listing site and even had a couple visits with other packs. Reed and I were always in contact. We texted daily. Long conversations. So I told him all about my visits. Hoping that one day he'd let something slip that they wanted me."

He sighed as he stared at nothing. For a second, his focus settled on me and he smiled, kissing my lips before going back to his story.

"My heat came early. I was only twenty when the first spike hit me. Barely twenty. It freaked me right out. Outside of being kidnapped and put up for sale, there's nothing that scares an omega worse than their heat coming on without finding their pack."

"Why?" I asked.

"Heats are barbaric," he said, smiling wanly. "Honestly, they should have evolved out of us. History books state that they're part of our biology in an effort to assure that there are babies in the world." Gideon rolled his eyes. "Obviously,

population isn't an issue. Our species is suffocating the planet. But my point is, the reason there's such a draw, a need, between an omega and an alpha that no other body can physically fit our needs. And those needs aren't mental. They're not pseudo-needs. Last night you were worried you wouldn't be enough for me because, as you pointed out, you don't have a knot or a lock. I briefly touched upon my idea that those needs in me are only emphasized when an alpha is present."

"Was it?" I asked.

He grinned. "Yes, and no. I still felt the stab of needing more. But it was nowhere near as painful or consuming as it typically is. I *was* pleased. A lot." I flushed at his words. "I think that last night, the little twinges of needing a knot were simply muscle memory. I've never *not* had a knot and its absence was noted. But during a heat, it's not muscle memory. It's a need so fierce that it's literally painful if we're denied it. I've never actually experienced that denial, but the classes omegas go through growing up truly emphasize this. And because I've had plenty of heats, I understand that it's not a suggestion that influences that reaction in me. It's a physical demand so consuming that ignoring it would drive me mad."

"That sounds awful," I said.

He laughed. "And thus why most omegas will tell betas who dream of having what we do to really rethink that wish. Heats are no joke. They're not a choice. And we're completely helpless, mindless animals until it's over. Another aspect of our fear is knowing that if an alpha purchases us, when we go in heat, we *will* beg for a knot. Worse, we'll beg for a bite. Because we're not present in those moments. The only part acting is the hindbrain, and it will do whatever it can to stop the maddening pain and satisfy the need for release in a heat."

"That's terrifying," I whispered. I was overcome with a new horror for the omegas trapped in Chaingate.

Gideon nodded. "Anyway, back to my point. When that first heat spike hit, I nearly panicked. The first ones are basically fevers that last twenty minutes or so. With them is

the tiniest twinge of the need and ache we're going to experience for the rest of our lives each time we approach our heat. Over the next year, they come more frequently, last longer, and the needy pain intensifies. It's still nothing like a heat, mind you. Not something we fully understand until we succumb to our first heat. But after that first spike, I lost my mind. I called Reed and—well, to be honest, I have no idea what words came out of my mouth.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “All I remember is that the pack stayed on the phone with me as they dropped everything they were doing and drove the seven hours to my house. When a phone would die, they'd change phones so they could continue to reassure me that everything would be okay. In those seven hours, I went through another spike and freaked out all over again.”

I hugged him tightly, not really able to grasp his fear. But I could see it in his face as he relived the memory.

“They pulled in and I pushed my way through my parental pack, sprinted down the driveway, and threw myself in their arms. All five alphas, with their intoxicating scents, surrounded me. Cooped to me. Told me how perfect an omega I was until I caught my breath and my sanity. When I was me again, they let me go and my heart sank. Silly, really. They just drove seven hours. They weren't going to hug me and drive away. But Anson took my face in his hands, my eyes filled with tears as I waited for him to say I wasn't their omega. He didn't. He said, ‘You don't have to choose us because we're kind to you, Gideon. There are other packs in the world who will treat you just as good as we would.’ ‘But I don't want another pack,’ I told them. ‘I want you. I've always wanted you. I keep waiting for you to want me too.’”

He blinked a couple times, phantom tears stinging his eyes. After a breath, a smile touched his lips.

“‘Silly, omega,’ Anson said. ‘We've been waiting for you to set up a meeting since you started looking at packs.’ Obviously, I was a little dense. Naïve and too young to recognize that these alphas wanted me too. Anyway, after my family made it clear that they would hunt down this pack if



they hurt me in any way, the Jamesons took me home. I've been here ever since and come to love them more every day. Especially when I see the other omegas in town."

"I thought omegas were territorial," I said.

"We are," Gideon and Octavia said at the same time. Gideon chuckled, though not in response to having spoken at the same time as my ghost. I didn't think he could see her yet. "I'd be livid if any of them came near my alphas. But remember my fear, Kat? The first one, of being abducted and sold? My pack assures that Howling Cove is so safe that even unpacked omegas aren't afraid to be in public alone. Knowing that there are other alphas here. Unpacked alphas at that."

"But what about their heats?" I asked.

"Neve and Liddea use Heat Hideaway. I think Liddea has an arrangement with the unpacked alpha Reese for cuddles and heat spikes. Deyana visits Pack Barrett for heats."

"Really? I didn't know that... was a thing, I guess. I've never heard of Heat Hideaway."

"It's revolutionary for omegas. A lot are still afraid to be packless, mind you. But some enjoy the freedom that Heat Hideaway offers. They have a lot of programs too. Not just for heats but for cuddles and stuff too."

We sat there in silence while I marveled at all this new information. Then he sat up, pulling me with him. "You should meet the other omegas."

"Are they all women?" I asked.

He laughed. "Yep. Male omegas are rare among the rare." He rolled his eyes. "Lucky me, right?"

"I think you're a rare find for sure," I said, sitting up. "But it has nothing to do with being an omega."

Gideon must have liked what I said, because I found myself pressed into the couch cushions again while he kissed me until my thoughts turned to mush. When he let me up and pulled me to the door, I pointed out that he was still naked.

We waited while he made a call to his pack for clothing. It was fortunate, I guess, since Cohen was very unhappy that Gideon had intended to walk us around the town unescorted. Until they figured out what was going on at the caves, neither of us were to be alone again.

I'd have to argue that later.

For the afternoon, we wandered around town as Gideon introduced me to the other three omegas. Cohen trailed behind us. Keeping close but not interfering. He was right in that they were all happy and felt safe. Even in the aftermath of what was happening at the cove. They had the utmost faith in the law enforcement that they'd continue to keep Howling Cove the haven it was.

As we walked away from the third omega, Gideon leaned in. "What you might not have noticed, and the omegas didn't point out, was that there were resident alphas close by all three of them. Alphas can't help themselves." He glanced at Cohen, smirking. "The threat is heightened right now, and it's unknown. Until it's eliminated or deemed harmless, the omegas will likely be trailed by whatever alpha sees them around."

"You think the betas are helpless and won't do something to protect them?" I asked.

"They will. In Howling Cove, they will. But like I said, alphas can't help themselves. Even if they didn't like the omega, they would make sure they're safe. You can't always fight or ignore your instincts."

He paused, looking up at the tall building we were now standing under. There weren't many tall buildings in Howling Cove. This was probably one of a handful, and the tallest to boot.

"So," Gideon said, his voice turning casual. I raised a brow. "Will you come up?"

My brows knit together in confusion. I glanced up at the building again before frowning at him.

He smiled and waved at it with a hand. “We live on the top floor. And before you get it in your head that I planned to drag you here, this *is* happenstance. I didn’t know that Neve would be hanging at the café across the street.”

I looked up at the building again as Cohen came to stand next to us.

“You know all my alphas,” Gideon said, placing both his hands on either side of my face, just as Anson did in his story. “None of them will ever hurt you. I promise. You can trust me. Trust us.”

Although the old fear crawled up my spine, I *knew* he was right. These alphas were safe. They weren’t going to hurt me. My throat constricted and wouldn’t let me agree. So I nodded instead.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# ANSON



The only warning we received that Gideon was bringing Katiya home was a text from Cohen as they climbed into the elevator. Half a minute later, I heard Reed's door close as he shut himself inside. I sighed, looking at Felix with a frown.

Oh, we wanted her here. But there was still a chasm between her and Reed that wasn't anywhere near closing yet. This was going to be stressful for both Reed and Katiya.

"I got him," Felix said as he headed down the hall, passing Tristen as he joined me in the main area.

We weren't intending to watch the door, but that's where our attention locked. Any second, the beta we were all highly infatuated with would be stepping into our home for the first time. Along with our omega, who had been sending us unrelenting pleasure through our bonds all. Damn. Night.

Unsurprisingly, Katiya was filled with nerves as Gideon gently pulled her inside. "Wait till you see the view," he said, guiding her immediately to look out the windows. Distracting her from the alphas that surrounded her in a closed space.

Cohen joined Tristen and me, brow raised. "She agreed with minimal convincing on his part," he said quietly. "She's trying."

Tristen glanced down the hall. "I can only imagine how this is going to go."

"A lot is going to come out tonight, I suspect," I said. "And either she's going to realize that Reed isn't a bad guy or

we're going to have an impossible gulch to try to maneuver around."

Reed had already almost entirely closed his bond to Gideon. He couldn't handle how all of Gideon's feelings were directly stemming from Katiya right now. Not that he disagreed or disapproved of their budding relationship. They had a long heart-to-heart after Gideon's first visit to Katiya and decided on this course of action together. Reed supported Gideon, hoping that maybe he could be the bridge to begin restoring her relationship with him.

Gideon was very open about what was happening between them. Not that we could ignore it through the bonds. Our omega was always very loud within our chests.

But Reed was barely there at all these days because Gideon was so loudly with Katiya in the bonds. He was already far away anyway because we felt him secondhand through his bond with our shared omega. But his quiet presence was less than an echo these days.

We might not be bonded with Reed in the traditional sense, but he was very thoroughly our pack. And regardless of how much we all had quickly become fanatical about this beta, our packmate would always come first.

Felix joined us a minute later, his gaze locked on Gideon and Katiya at the window as he approached. "He's alright. Let's do dinner and he'll join us for that. But he's choosing to stay in his studio until then so his presence won't upset Kat."

I sighed, hating that my alpha was locking himself away within his own home. And yet, a very strong part of me was out of my mind, thrilled that she was here.

This was going to be rough.

Tristen and Felix attended to dinner preparations. With six men in the house, dinner was always tackled by two of us if we could help it. There was a lot of food to prepare. Four big ass, grown, active alphas and an omega who was always on; we needed protein and carbs. The only one who tended to eat more conservatively was Reed, simply because he liked to

remain as uninteresting as possible. Unimposing if he could help it.

Even his eating habits were dictated by what he was. The whole thing sickened me.

Tristen had made those responsible for hurting Reed the stars in one of his bestselling series. Though he changed every name to a fictional one and made the entire world fictional, there was no doubt that the real alphas were very distinguishable within the stories. Right down to words they said and their scents. So much so that Tristen's personal assistant, who was public knowledge, was receiving a lot of angry threats from the unnamed alphas.

The attention had the opposite effect than the alphas had intended. Tristen and his PA used it as promotional material. Again, changing the names, places, etc. within the copy of the original threats and posting them in ads for the world to see as a reason to read the series. They let the suggestion that they were fake threats by the alphas within the series as a means to promote. But unofficially, the world knew the truth.

Since then, the threats have gone silent. The ads still run strong, though.

I kept an eye on Gideon as he showed Katiya around. Cohen went back and forth between the kitchen and Reed.

When I began setting the table, Katiya asked if she could help. Quietly. Shyly. But it was enough that I was grinning far too much. I handed her the plates and told her to set them around the table while I got the silverware and glasses.

Gideon leaned against the counter, watching her with a grin. "Do you see how perfectly she fits in here?" he asked.

I wrapped my hand around his neck, pulling his attention to me. The fire in his eyes made the three of us groan as an echo of his arousal spiked within us. Our good omega enjoyed being manhandled.

"You need to keep Reed in mind. It's not just Katiya's comfort we need to accommodate, omega," I murmured quietly.

My words sobered him immediately as he glanced at the hallway. “I swear, I’m—”

“We know,” I said. “He knows too. But that doesn’t mean dinner is going to be easy for either of them. Your alpha needs your assurance as much as Kat does.”

He nodded. I released him as Katiya returned to the kitchen, her gaze nervously taking us in. Gideon smiled, bringing her against him to kiss her. “I like being choked as much as you do, my pretty beta.”

Tristen’s choked off purr was only muffled by my inability to control my growl in response to Gideon’s words. Fortunately, both Cohen and Felix coughed to cover up their own responses. It wasn’t just Gideon’s heat that surged through us right then. We had it from every angle of the bonds.

Gideon grinned hugely, knowing exactly what he’d done. He kissed Katiya’s nose and handed her glasses on a tray. “I’ll be right back. Okay? The big pussy cats won’t bother you. Promise.”

Katiya nodded and headed back for the table.

We wouldn’t bother her. Because our glares were following our smug omega as he disappeared down the hall.

“I’m going to throttle him,” Cohen muttered. “Make him choke on my fucking knot.”

I laughed under my breath, pulling the silverware out as I had intended. I’m glad that he went to Reed. Reed needed Gideon right now. Needed the assurance that Gideon was still fully his. We weren’t sure how, but Reed’s trauma manifested in many ways, one of which being a fear of abandonment.

Gideon would never leave his alpha. Ever. But right now, with Reed’s guilt and grief over Katiya and the haunting past that never left him, he needed Gideon’s reassurance.

Being as visible as possible, I joined Katiya around the table, following her path as she set glasses down. She looked up at me shyly.



“Is it really a good idea that I’m here?” she asked, her voice low. “I don’t want—” She glanced down the hall where Gideon disappeared, knowing exactly where he went and why. “I don’t want Reed to be upset that I’m here.”

“That depends on you, kitten.”

Katiya tensed, dropping her gaze to the table as she stopped moving. I continued to place my settings until I caught up with her.

I touched her hair lightly, watching as she took a deep breath. Breathing me in. Letting my scent fill her as she learned it. The muscles of her neck constricted as she swallowed, trying to calm her nerves.

When I thought she was alright, I brought my fingers more fully into her hair, threading them into the long, silky locks until I cupped the back of her head. Her lips parted as she sucked in a nervous breath. Her eyes shot up to mine as I very gently turned her attention to me.

“That’s it,” I said quietly as she swallowed another deep breath. I nodded, soft minute bobs of my head as I watched her taking deep breaths. Both to pacify her fear and learn my scent. The acerbic undertone to her raspberry very slowly dissipated. “Good girl, kitten,” I cooed. Fuck, I shivered at the pleasure of saying the words. And the way her breath caught. “Get familiar with my scent. Know that I’m your safety.”

Katiya nodded as I flexed my fingers ever so slightly in her hair, a soothing gesture. She took another deep breath. “Safe,” she whispered. “You won’t hurt me.”

It took a lot of willpower to keep my instant growl from escaping. And to keep the anger locked deep within me so it wouldn’t fill the air. When I succeeded, Katiya not tensing further at all, I nodded.

“Never will I hurt you, Katiya. None of us will hurt you. Nor will we allow anyone else to hurt you again. Do you understand?”

She swallowed and I swear, for just a second, there was a glimmer of tears in her eyes before she rapidly blinked them

away. “Yes,” she whispered. “Cedarwood means safe.”

I grinned. I couldn’t help myself. “Yes,” I purred. She twitched in response, so I kept the purr very quiet and gentle. “I am safety. Everyone in this house is safety. Right?”

Katiya nodded again, her eyes flashing toward the hallway.

“Including Reed, baby. Especially Reed.”

She took another deep breath before nodding. “What does he smell like?” she whispered, her head tilting a little as she tried to remember. But her head tilted in the direction of my hand, making me smile. “I could never name it.”

Ah, not remembering. Just not knowing. “Dragon’s blood musk,” I told her. “He’s our little dragon in hiding. Ready to come out with a blaze if someone he loved was being hurt.”

She smiled a little, closing her eyes. “Dragon’s blood. I knew it was familiar. It’s one of my favorite incense scents.”

Yep, this girl was ours. She twitched again, and I realized my purr got stronger in response to her statement.

I leaned forward, encouraging her to breathe, and laid a kiss on her forehead. “Safe,” I whispered. “Home.”

I was positively beaming when I pulled back to see a smile touching the perfect curve of her lips. “Home?” she asked.

“Home should always be safe, shouldn’t it?” Reluctantly, I let her go. But I could hear Felix and Tristen trying to stall in the kitchen, letting us have the moment without interruption. Dinner was done.

“Mm,” she agreed. “It should be.”

I let it drop. Following her as she set the last few glasses on the table. By then, Gideon had joined us and was bringing in the pitcher of water to fill the glasses behind us.

“This is the only task they allow me,” he said. “I can’t burn the house down with a pitcher of water.”

Katiya grinned. “You did well baking cookies. Didn’t you bring some home?”

“I did, but they didn’t believe that I baked them!” He glared at me, his bottom lip jutting out.

“He baked them all on his own,” Katiya said. “I did nothing but tell him what to do and he did everything himself.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

They both nodded. “See?!” Gideon said. “Why isn’t everyone else in here to hear her?!”

I laughed, pulling his back to my chest and kissing his neck over my bite. My purr made him shiver. I rewarded his earlier stunt by sucking on my bite, earning myself a choked moan from his throat.

“Be good,” I growled in his ear.

“Yes, alpha,” he breathed.

I glanced up at Katiya, trying to gauge how she was reacting. There was no mistaking the tension in her shoulders or the trepidation in her eyes. But as when I was right in front of her, she was taking deep breaths. Tasting the air. Our scents.

*Yes, I thought. Learn them together. Understand that I’m in no way hurting my omega.*

She looked away after a minute and I released Gideon. As I walked away, I heard him mutter, “That’s not fair.” Then he explained to Katiya why I was being a little bitch.

“I’ll get Reed,” I said as Tristen, Felix, and Cohen started loading the table with food.

I found him right where I expected. In his studio, staring at nothing. The same thing he’s been doing since his fallout with Katiya. It broke my heart. If anyone in this house deserved a happy ending, it should be Reed. Hell, if anyone at all deserved it, it was Reed.

Stopping at his side, I pulled his head gently to rest on my hip. He relaxed, turning his face into me and taking a breath. He chuckled. “How is it that you smell like her already?” he asked quietly.

“I was standing close, trying to associate my scent with safety.”

He sighed. “Is she going to associate me with safety? Or as a liar?”

Patting his shoulder, I pulled him to his feet. He was shorter than me by a few inches, hovering just under six feet. His height was probably one of the reasons he could pass as a beta with his suppressant bracelet on. That and he kept himself thin but not toned in the least.

Tall and scrawny. Beta material.

“She’s here. And she’s battling her ingrained fear with every breath she takes. Just like you.” Reed smiled, closing his eyes. “You two have a lot in common. Despite Gideon not bringing you up in relation to recent events, he talks about you often. You know that. She knows you’re not a bad guy. She knows that you’re safe. Now you just need to give her a little time to come to terms with why you hide.”

“Did you tell her?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

“No, I wouldn’t do that without your permission.”

“You have my permission,” he said. “I sure as hell don’t want to talk about it. Knowing I needed to tell her with the threat lingering over me that she was going to be furious at me for lying, I still couldn’t bring myself to tell her.”

“You misread her reaction, Reed,” I said, taking his hand and pulling him towards the door. “Her anger was a cover for how hurt she was.”

He flinched in my grip. “I know,” he whispered. “But I’d rather focus on her anger. I deserve both.”

“No, sweet boy. You deserve to have everything your heart desires. Including the angel in the other room.” We paused at the entrance to the living area, watching from afar as Gideon teased Katiya, causing her laughter to fill our home. As our alphas stared in awe, entranced by her presence.

“You deserve her as much as Gideon,” I whispered.

“As much as Gideon deserves her?” he asked.

“Yes. And as much as you deserve Gideon.”

He released a breath. When I glanced back, his eyes were closed. A broken alpha doesn't believe they deserve an omega. But they deserved them the most. Only an omega can heal a shattered alpha soul.

Then again, as I watched my pack visibly fall for this beta before my eyes, I was beginning to think that even a beta—the *right* beta—can chase away the shadows as well. Yes, Reed deserved both. And we wouldn't stop trying to fix this until he had Katiya too.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

# KATIYA



Wait until you try this,” Gideon said. I was keenly aware of the three alphas staring. “Tris makes the best spaghetti ever. And Felix’s meatballs are divine.”

“I love spaghetti,” I answered.

His grin widened. He leaned in, pressing his lips against my jaw. My cheeks flush, still fully aware of our audience. “You going to let me feed you, my pretty beta?”

I laughed nervously. I’d be lying if the sweetness of the idea didn’t sound appealing. It was certainly tempting. Maybe I could suggest it for another time.

“Just a couple bites. Then I’ll lick you clean of any sauce that I miss getting in your perfect mouth.” Omegas can’t purr but damn his voice was almost a low purr.

“Sit back, Gideon. Let her breathe,” Cohen said.

I glanced at him. His gaze wasn’t on Gideon. It was trained on me. All of their stares were. Including Reed and Anson’s from the hallway entrance. They had an omega right here in front of them, filling the room with his perfume, and they were staring at me!

Once I spotted Reed, I couldn’t look away. I’d spent so short a time with him, but it had been a whirlwind of perfection. How could he have been someone that feared alphas as much as I did and hadn’t even come from the same city? It seemed serendipitous.

My breath caught when he looked away, eyes downcast. Anson pulled him in, setting him in the chair on Gideon's other side. I watched from the corner of my eyes as Gideon leaned into him, nuzzling into his neck.

Reed smiled, resting his head against Gideon's.

"Love you, alpha," Gideon whispered.

His smile widened as he looked at Gideon. "Love you too," he whispered back.

Satisfied, Gideon sat up again and settled in his seat. He looked around the table as the food was passed around. His smile fell when Reed was handed the bowl of spaghetti.

"What is this?" Gideon said, pushing Reed's plate toward Anson, his following.

Anson chuckled, taking the bowl back. His eyes landed on me. "Whoever is closest usually serves our omega and Reed," he told me. "I wasn't sure if they'd like that right now, though."

Reed sighed.

"Of course, we do," Gideon said. He shifted in his chair and pulled my plate from in front of me. "Here. Kat too, please."

Anson looked at me, waiting for my consent to the same treatment. I nodded. "Thank you."

His smile was small and so damn sexy. Safe, I reminded myself. Anson is safe. I watched as he loaded four plates. His and Gideon's had nearly twice as much as they gave Reed and me. Gideon brought my plate back when all the dishes had made it around to Anson. I thanked him again and looked at the food in front of me.

I hadn't eaten this much since I left home.

"I should have asked," Tristen said, and I looked up at him. "Do you like spaghetti?"

I tried to smile with assurance. "Yes," I said. "It's one of my favorite foods." I was pretty sure I already said that. "I just



—this is a lot.”

“Don’t feel pressured into eating it all,” Anson said. “I wasn’t sure how much you would eat, so I cautioned on a little more so you weren’t left hungry.”

I glanced at Gideon’s plate before peeking down at Reed’s. My gaze continued around the table, seeing that the other alphas’ plates were piled high, too.

“I need all the carbs,” Gideon said. “As you know, my hunger knows no bounds.” He grinned at me before digging in.

Shaking my head, I picked up my fork and took a bite, very conscious of the eyes on me. Or, more accurately, trying not to stare at me.

Safe. They’re all safe. Cedarwood. Cohen is lemongrass. Tristen is chai orange. He smells like a damn chocolate bar that I want to melt in my mouth. No, safety. He smells like safety. Felix is a zen garden, just like his personality. Refreshing green tea. Soothing soft bamboo.

And Reed’s dragon’s blood. Incense was always a treat when one of my parents would bring it home. Dragon’s blood was my scent of choice. I could bathe in it.

I swallowed a bite without realizing I’d chewed it. This wasn’t awkward at all. Not in the least.

Except that my heart wasn’t pounding in fear as I sat surrounded by alphas. I’d never been in the presence of so many at once. One or two at a time had been enough for me. This was... unreal.

We ate in silence, the quiet tinkling of silverware on the porcelain plates and setting the glass down on the wood table being the only sounds. Halfway through my plate, I realized how good this spaghetti was and really began enjoying it.

Dinner ended. I watched as Reed quietly excused himself from the table, bringing his plate to the kitchen and then disappearing down the hall. I watched him go before looking at Gideon.

“I should go,” I said quietly.

His distress turned outward as he looked to his alphas for help. He didn't understand. He couldn't fix it. He couldn't take back that Reed had pretended to be something in order to hide what he was from me. Knowing how deeply I feared it.

I shouldn't have agreed to come here.

“Excuse me,” I said when no one moved, pushing my chair back.

Gideon jumped up, taking my hand and freezing. Not knowing what to do. I smiled at him. Too adorable. Anson came up behind him, gently loosening his fingers from my hand and guiding him away. I thought he was going to let me leave. Instead, he held his hand out to me.

I stared at it for a minute as the world closed in around me. Touch him? He already touched me. And he didn't hurt me. He was waiting for me to react.

“I'll never hurt you,” he said, his voice low. A steadfast promise.

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head. Holding my breath, I placed my trembling hand in his. Very gently, loosely, he closed his fingers around my hand.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting to happen. The monster to jump out at me. To be shoved to the ground or against the wall. For the ceiling to fall.

But nothing happened. Just the feel of his warm skin in his strong hand, holding mine like I was fragile. In no way keeping me there. I stared at the spot where our hands connected, still waiting for something to present itself and reaffirm that alphas were only to be feared.

The only thing that happened is I got a strong whiff of his scent. Cedarwood.

Safe.

A smile spread across my lips as I looked up at him. He couldn't possibly understand the relief that flooded through

me right now. But he understood something had happened. He smiled, no less relieved than I felt.

“Can I bring you to my office?” he asked. “Down the hall.”

I glanced beyond him where Reed had gone before looking at the others.

“They will follow.”

Taking another breath, forcing my fear away, and digging my fingers into anything that resembled bravery at all, I nodded.

Anson’s smile turned pleased. Proud. That little bit of pride that shined in his eyes made my heart stutter. Then he made my stomach dance when he said, “That’s it, kitten. Trust that I’m safe.”

I nodded, trapped in his eyes as he walked backwards, bringing me with him. I felt more than saw everyone fall into step behind me. Even as the walls closed in to frame the narrower hallway, I focused on staring into his eyes. Keeping my breaths calm. Reminding myself that everyone here is *not* from Chaingate. They weren’t beasts.

The office was dim but filled with light, clean lines. There were two desks at opposite ends of the room. When I looked between them a couple times, Anson explained. “Cohen and I share an office since much of our work is similar and the same. We’re rarely using it at the same time, so it seems to work fine for us.”

I nodded, glancing toward the door where everyone was crowded. “There are a lot of doors in the hall.”

“I wasn’t sure you noticed.”

Bowing my head, I smiled. “I was busy concentrating on convincing the voices in my head that you weren’t leading me to a closet. But I noticed the doors.”

Tension filled the air, and I stiffened. Anson hadn’t let go of my hand, so I looked up as my own fear burst through me.

A growl behind me made me quickly intake a breath. It was happening. Something I said—

“Shh,” Anson said, his hand at the side of my face again. His thumb gently stroking my cheek under my eye. I took a deep breath, only smelling him. “I think first, I need to explain our anger. It isn’t towards you, kitten. Not at all. It’s on your behalf. It makes my blood boil to know that another alpha, several, made you this fearful of every other alpha in the world. Those men, they’re not alphas, Katiya. They deserve to be buried alive six feet under for what they’ve done to you and everyone else.”

“You’re not angry at me,” I repeated, more for myself than him. The alphas were never angry at me. I didn’t do anything that would warrant their anger. Except not be what they wanted. Despite that I wasn’t the cause of their anger, I had still been a target for taking it out. “Not at me.”

“What do I smell like, sweetheart?” he asked.

“Cedarwood,” I said, bringing my eyes up to his. “Safety.” The word made me smile. Treating me with kid gloves because my fear made me regress into a frightened child.

“Good girl,” he purred.

I shivered at his praise, everything in me clenching in anticipation. Maybe he knew that. His smile widened a little.

“Come over here,” he said, releasing my face but keeping my hand in his. He led me to a desk and opened a drawer. He didn’t pull anything out but moved me to be in front of him so I could look inside.

There were dozens of suppressant products. Pills, bands, charms, patches. Even a couple experimental things that I didn’t recognize as on the market. I looked up at him in confusion. No one else was wearing them. Only Reed.

“Reed is from a city on the west coast too. A city that runs rampant with gangs and clubs and all sorts of nasty people. In a very different way, the city lives in fear as you have. These gangs of men brutalize the citizens, victimize them. There are so many deaths of innocent people who simply were in the

wrong place at the wrong time when gang wars break out. You won't be surprised to learn that most of these gangs are run by alphas. Unlike your city, there are many betas involved in them too."

"Why?" I asked.

"For a lot of people, they'll take power at whatever cost. And to be in an alpha's favor, a beta will do a lot."

I scowled, shaking my head. There was no shortage of stories like that. Since being in Howling Cove, I've seen that alpha-worship by betas firsthand. I just didn't understand it.

"Reed should have been safe. He's an alpha and a strong one. I've only heard his bark once and let me tell you, it nearly put me on my knees."

My eyes widened in surprise.

"But before he had a chance to establish himself, the gangs went about recruiting. However, recruiting new members for their shit wasn't handing out pamphlets and coming to informational seminars. It was by force. Their primary targets were alphas. Their goal was to have the most, the strongest alphas. That gave them unmatched power in the city.

"Reed is a teddy bear. A strong alpha, yes, but he was never cruel. He'd made a stance against several gangs more than a handful of times in his young life, which left him with false confidence that they'd understand him and leave him be. He wanted to do good in the city. He wanted to turn it around.

"The gang that caught him wasn't really a gang at all. It was a motorcycle club that had recently moved to town and was working on establishing their territory. They were among the most active for stealing alphas. Hunting them and bringing them in. Their methods of convincing those they abducted were brutal. Bloody and painful. Their goal was to break the alpha until there was nothing left and then remake them how they saw fit.

"Reed wasn't easily broken. And when they realized his resolve couldn't be crushed, they kept him for other reasons.

They should have just cut their losses and let him go. Instead, they used him as a sex doll.”

My eyes widened in horror as I took a step backward.

Anson nodded. “He was kept in a small room, cuffed, and raped by other alphas all day and night. Forced to take their knots. Forced to do... more than I’d rather say right now. He was brutalized. And then one day, they decided they were done with him. They tied him to the back of a bike and after days of a violent ride, they dropped him on the side of the road and drove off.”

Tears stung my eyes as I stared at Anson in horror. My mouth opened, mortified. How could people treat others that way? These were living beings. Even animals treat their brethren better than we treat people.

“In those three years, Reed learned the same fear you did. Alphas weren’t safety to him. They weren’t protection and peace and promise. They weren’t pack. They were cruelty. Inhumane. Vile. Evil. The motorcycle club put him off people in general. Although it was alphas who abused him, there were plenty of betas there. Watching. Laughing. Catcalling. Katiya, he really, really likes you or he wouldn’t have gone anywhere near you. As much as you distrust alphas, his fear and hatred of them matches yours. But the one difference between the two of you is that he can’t get away from alphas entirely. He is one.”

A tear trickled down my cheek as I closed my eyes. He told me many times that things weren’t as they appeared. And he told me that he hated alphas too. But I couldn’t get past my own fear. Being tricked by an alpha seemed like something that would happen in the city.

And yet, it wasn’t. They didn’t go through the effort. They took what they wanted, regardless of whether you agreed or not. Reed was nothing like that at all.

I covered my face with a hand and let my tears fall for a second. For the first time ever, my fear wasn’t for myself. It was for someone else.

# CHAPTER THIRTY

# KATIYA



My heart ached. My stomach clenched, threatening to regurgitate everything I'd just put in it. How could I have been so awful to a man that had already been through so much? What was wrong with me? Am I any better than the alphas we fear so deeply?

Anson brought my hand away from my face and softly wiped my tears with his fingers.

“Reed gave me permission to tell you because he couldn't bring himself to do it. He hates what he is so thoroughly that he tries to drown it out with whatever new thing is on the market. And we indulge him in our effort to make him comfortable. He doesn't want sympathy. He just wants you to know that he understands why you're angry with him and accepts the fault in that,” Anson said.

“Can I see him? Will he talk to me?”

He nodded. “He'd give anything to talk to you.” Once more, I let him take my hand and he brought me down the hall. Anson tapped quietly on the door before opening it.

The room was filled with mannequins and rolls of fabric. There were sketches and swatches pinned to corkboards. Three different stations with articles of clothing in various stages of completion. And then there were shelves upon shelves of folded clothes. Drawers. A closet that ran the length of the room with no doors, more clothes hanging from the bar.

At the end of the room, sitting at one of the tables and staring outside, was Reed. He looked up at the door when



Anson opened it, but his eyes quickly fell on me.

Anson backed away, closing the door softly behind him. For a moment, neither of us moved. We remained staring at each other, both likely thinking of the same thing. What he'd gone through.

Taking a breath, I moved over to him and crouched down so that I was more level with his eyes. Reed shook his head.

“Please, don't,” he whispered.

“I'm sorry,” I said, my voice hiccupping as I said it. Tears stung my eyes. “I'm so sorry I was being stubborn and continued to be mad when you didn't deserve it.”

Reed closed his eyes, shaking his head. He reached for me and I fell into his arms, hugging him as tightly as he clung to me.

“I tried to tell you a dozen times,” he whispered. “But I can't bring myself to repeat it again. It's like I'm afraid that my life now is just a façade and if I speak it out loud, it'll come back.”

I laughed, nodding. Sniffling. “I understand that all too well.”

“I should have told you,” he said.

“Yes, you should have. But I get why you didn't.”

“Can you forgive me? What do you need—?”

I shook my head, sitting back to look at him. “I think you should forgive me, Reed. You kept telling me that there was something dark, a past that we shared and yet so different, but I could only see my own fear. When yours was right in front of me.”

He brushed my hair back with his hands, framing the sides of my face. “Can we start over then?”

“Yes. I'd like that.”

Reed sighed, resting his forehead against mine.

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked.

“Anything.”

“How is it that you can live so closely with alphas? Be in a pack with them? Be with them?”

He chuckled. “First, let me clarify that yes, I’m in this pack wholeheartedly. I’m very thoroughly committed to my pack. I’ve never known better men than these alphas and our sweet omega. But Kat, I *do not* sleep with them. Only my omega.”

“Oh,” I said, flushing. “I didn’t realize—”

Reed laughed. “Anson, Cohen, and Felix have a triad together with Gideon in the middle. Cohen and Anson share bites. Tristen is also with our omega and completely within our pack, but also doesn’t have any physical interaction with other alphas.”

“Gideon is your link.”

“Yes, and no. We were together before him.”

“But, how did you—?”

Reed nodded. “I wandered along the highway I was dropped on. Probably looked like something resurrected from the dead. The cops were called on me and I was brought to the hospital, delirious from dehydration and belligerent out of fear.” He paused. I almost told him he didn’t have to continue because I was sure it was hard to talk about. But Reed smiled. “Oddly enough, this isn’t as difficult to recall as what came before. I know this results in a happy ending. Anyway, the police, the nurses and doctors couldn’t get near me because I was basically feral at that point. So lost in my terror, surrounded by unknown scents and trapped in another little room again, that I was snarling and snapping. Barking at everyone, stopping them in their tracks.” He chuckled. “It’s the only time anyone in Howling Cove has heard me bark. So Felix came in. He wasn’t the chief then, but he was one of the few strong alphas on the force. When I snapped at him to leave, he remained standing at my door. When my command wore off, he stepped just over the threshold and shut the door behind him. Mind you, this only sent me into more panic, but

he didn't move. We had this standoff for days until I was too worn out to fight anymore. My adrenaline having finally dissipated. I collapsed on the bed, submitting to whatever they wanted to do to me."

His voice softened as he glanced out the window. "I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up, I was still in bed, just how I had fallen. Felix was still in the room, but he was sitting beside the bed, running his fingers through my hair. When I tensed at his touch, he added his purr. It took me a long time to realize that he wasn't going to hurt me. And during that time, he never left my room. Well, he probably did at some point, but it must have been while I was asleep. I don't know how long I was kept at the hospital. I wouldn't tell them what had happened to me, but they got the idea when I finally consented to being examined and treated. When I was released, I had nowhere to go. Felix offered a room in his house but warned me that there were three other alphas there. None of them would ever touch me."

His words stopped as he stared into the dimming light outside. After a quiet minute passed, he turned his eyes back to mine. It had been so long since I'd looked into them; I forgot how beautiful they were.

"It was probably miserable with me here for a while. I began to trust Felix, but Tristen was kind of terrifying. Anson can appear hard and cold. And Cohen, at first look, reminded me of the president of the dicks who hunted me. It took me a long time, but I eventually came to realize that these alphas were nothing like the ones I left behind. One morning I woke up and went out to find my breakfast waiting for me, as usual. There were little things all over for me. Things that helped me cope with being in a house with alphas. And an entire basket of different suppressant items. Even though I could close myself away from them, I could never escape me. That morning, I realized that they were treating me like their pack. More than that, like an omega. Thankfully, my breakdown was when no one was home." He gave me a demure smile. "It was easier to settle in after that. I moved my room closer to theirs and eventually figured out how to make a life again. Some

days are still hard for me. But I know I'm safe here. Not just here with my pack, but here in Howling Cove."

"I'm glad you got a happy ending," I said.

He smiled, leaning his head to the side. "I did. I do. As long as you forgive me too."

"We're starting over, remember?"

Reed nodded, his smile lingering. I studied him for a minute before asking, "I have one more question."

"Only one?"

Grinning, I shrugged. "For now."

"Ask."

"You don't growl. You don't purr. You... no knot? How did you hide all that?"

"Mm," Reed said, agreeing. "It's not a conscious choice for the most part, if you can believe that. After my freak out at the hospital, it all kind of retreated and went inward. I half suspected that my pheromones would fade after a while. They didn't, hence the suppressant band."

"Does it really make a difference for you?"

"Yes, but more with outside people than internally. It does mute my scent, even to myself, which helps because alpha scents are potent. I can hide from theirs when they get overwhelming, but I can't turn mine off. The suppressant helps it fade away and allows the air filters to work their magic. But it's easier to keep people's attention from immediately looking at the alpha if the alpha isn't always visible. It's likely not all that necessary now, since everyone in Howling Cove knows who I am and to leave me alone. But someone is overrunning Howling Cove with tourists these days."

I grinned. "Sorry."

He leaned his forehead on mine again and sighed. "Don't be. It's excellent for the town. Really good. And the things you've done in such a short time are remarkable."

“It’s not just me,” I said for what felt like the hundredth time. “I’ve had so much help. Some things I haven’t had any hand in.”

“Except that without you, none of this would be happening.”

“Anyway... back to you hiding your knot.”

Reed chuckled. “Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t think my trauma is just conscious but subconscious too. I don’t have to remind myself not to growl; I just don’t. It’s not my reaction anymore. When Gideon wants me to purr, I really have to focus on trying to bring back that muscle memory. And the only time I manage to knot is when he’s in heat, at which point, it’s primarily biology running the show, anyway.”

“That’s kind of amazing,” I said. “Not the reason behind it, but that you’ve basically changed your designation.”

“I haven’t. Trust me.”

I smiled, shaking my head. “But think of that more scientifically. You’re an alpha that can suppress his knot!”

“I guess being a victim of knot raping does that to you,” he said quietly.

Hugging him tightly, I apologized. “Sorry. I’m not at all making light of it.”

“I know, Kat. I don’t disagree. Now if only I could turn my scent off.”

“For your sake, I hope you figure that out. But I love your scent. It’s one of the best in the entire world.”

I felt his wide smile against the side of my head. “Yeah?”

“The one thing I always asked for Christmas was dragon’s blood incense. There was nothing I wanted more than to surround myself with it. It was my happy place. My peace in Hell.”

His grip on me strengthened. Moving his arms, he brought me more firmly to his chest. “I missed you so much,” he whispered.

I nodded, letting his words sink in a little. “Gideon is a good distraction, but I missed you too.”

Reed laughed. “He can be. But that distraction has been with you.” I flinched, making him laugh again. “It’s alright. We were in complete agreement that he was seeing you. We hoped that his presence and exuberance would bring you around to speaking to me again.”

“It should have,” I admitted. “But as it turns out, I’m pretty stubborn.”

“No, Kat. You were afraid of exactly what I am, and I hid that from you, even knowing that. I’m not upset that you were mad. I don’t begrudge you that at all. You were entitled to it. That didn’t stop me from begging whatever holy power there is in the world that you’d find it in you to talk to me again. I’m selfish enough to want you, even knowing that I scare you.”

“You don’t scare me. You’ve never scared me.”

“Because I pretended to be something I’m not.”

“Doesn’t that prove that my fear is learned? I know that alphas are bad—as long as I know they’re alphas. But you were something different. That meant I didn’t have to fear you.”

“Learned, huh?”

“Case in point. Look around you. Betas who have not lived in fear are actually quite obsessed with alphas. My fear wasn’t born into me. It was taught to me by my environment.”

“Yep, I get that. And my fear was also learned, but by... muscle memory?” He narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like that analogy and yet, I think it’s correct.”

“We left that life behind,” I said, kissing his cheek lightly. He sighed, leaning his head further against mine. His fingers rubbing gentle doodles along my back. “No more looking back. Alright?”

Reed nodded. “How are you doing with that?”

“I’m still in this house filled with alphas,” I pointed out. “So far, I think I’m doing okay. I even let Anson hold my

hand!”

He laughed. “Did you?”

I nodded like I had just lost my first tooth. “And didn’t pee myself.”

His laugh was louder this time. “We should celebrate.”

“Yes. What do you have in mind?”

“Ice cream. We’ll make Anson take us for ice cream. If we get Gideon on board, there’s no way he’ll say no.”

I grinned, climbing from his lap. “For the record, I don’t think he’d say no to you if you asked on your own.”

He stood, standing at my side. As Anson had earlier, he brushed my hair to the side. “He wouldn’t. He’s a good man like that. Takes care of me as if he has two omegas.”

I nodded. He was a good man. It was a mantra I was beginning to pick up to combat the little voice of terror that popped up every time one of them was around. These alphas were good. They were safe. Kind. Thoughtful.

They would never hurt me or anyone. Unless in our defense. I could live like that.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



# TRISTEN



I wasn't sure what any of us were expecting. We watched Anson close the door with Katiya inside Reed's studio and then waited. For a solid minute, Anson remained there, hand on the knob, ready to rescue whichever of them needed it.

Gideon was biting his lip as he stared at the door. I didn't realize I was holding my breath until I struggled for air.

"I feel like I'm waiting for a volcano to erupt," Cohen whispered.

His voice pulled Anson out of his trance. He gave the door another cursory look before turning to us. He nodded down the hall, indicating we shouldn't be here waiting like a bunch of stalkers. Who was he kidding? I *was* a fucking stalker, but only to my packmates. Then again, with another glance at the door, I suspected I was going to be dusting off my stalker skills when this girl demanded to go home.

Not demanded. Asked. She would ask to go home. She wasn't running away.

Her fear was painful. That beautiful raspberry scent mixed with gardenia flowers was subtle and smooth. So tranquil. To smell it with a constant acerbic edge had us all ready to break out of our skin as if we were animals.

We trudged down the hall, every last one of us dragging our feet. It's not just that we wanted to be close in case one of them started yelling, though neither were the kind of people to

yell. But if they were upset. If they needed something. We wanted to be close.

“It’s alright,” Felix said. “Everything is alright.”

I thought he made the effort to direct that at Gideon, but he was talking to himself as much as anyone. Though I didn’t disagree. It would be alright. We all witnessed her devastation and horror at the events that Anson recalled for her. If I remember correctly—and I wrote the damned book, so I *did* remember correctly—he had given her the PG-13 version of events. The recollection Reed had finally admitted to Felix was anything but.

We busied ourselves by cleaning up the table. There was enough spaghetti left for a single meal. Unless that meal was for Reed, then he’d get two out of it.

Unfortunately, it took the five of us no time to clear and clean. It was quick work when we were all waiting for the same thing.

I still couldn’t feel Reed. There was no indication whether anything was wrong or if it was going okay. I could tell by how quiet and still Gideon was that he had turned his attention completely internal as he tried to examine the nearly absent bond.

When he sighed in frustration a few minutes later and looked up, I snorted laughter that we’d all been staring at him, waiting for any kind of indication that he was feeling something.

“You know, I get it. I even agreed at the time. But fuck, I hate that his bond is barely there. It hurts,” Gideon said.

In reflex, we all reached for our omega. He was not allowed to hurt over anything!

“They deserve privacy,” Anson said. “Let’s go sit.”

“And what? Stare down the hall?” Gideon asked, pouting as he looked behind him.

Cohen chuckled, picking him up and tossing Gideon over his shoulder. A loud smack rang in the air as he slapped our

omega's ass. Gideon laughed, squirmed, and yelped as Cohen brought him to the couch at the far end of the open area. He dropped Gideon into my lap, and I immediately sank my teeth into his shoulder.

As I knew it would, my bite caused our omega to groan. His hips reflexively bucked. I didn't bite him hard, but our sex hound enjoyed being bitten.

"Be good," I growled at him. "Stop pouting. You've been monopolizing her for more than a week."

"Humph," Gideon said, rolling into me and burying his face in my neck. I rubbed my cheek against his, my gaze drifting to the hall. I wasn't at all pretending I wasn't anxious for them to come out. My skin itched I was so restless.

"TV?" Felix asked.

"I'm not sure that's going to distract us at all," Anson said as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "Was it this unnerving when we brought Gideon home?"

"No," Gideon snorted. "All of my apprehension was in relation to my impending first heat. That shit is terrifying."

"It wasn't so bad," I said. "I'm pretty sure you enjoyed it."

He smiled up at me, sighing happily. "I did. But it was still a little scary. Hearing the stories. Reading books. Learning what that ache feels like." He shook his head. "I don't know who thought this biological makeup was a good idea, but I think they should suffer through it."

Felix chuckled. "I would wager that you're not the only one that feels that way."

"I think we should have a switch day. I don't think I could pull off alpha, but I'd love to be a beta for a day," Gideon said, picking his head up. "No perfume to announce my arrival. My whining would just sound like I'm the pathetic adult I am instead of a spoiled omega."

"You're a perfect omega," I corrected, tapping his nose.

He grinned. "Yeah, yeah. I know. But betas all think I'm spoiled. I'd really kind of like a minute in their minds. Just to

see how deeply that resentment runs.”

“It’s pretty peaceful here,” Felix said.

Gideon looked at him, grinning proudly. “Because we have a wonderful government here. Amazing law enforcement. And the community is unreal. But we’re relatively small. And not at all common. I want to walk a mile in a common beta’s shoes.”

“That’s really big of you. Noble,” Cohen said. “But I think it would just make you more upset. Their reasons for resenting any designation have nothing to do with any single person. It’s a stereotype of that makeup that they’re jealous of. Nothing in your control. Nothing in my control.”

“Mm,” Gideon agreed. “Still. I want to feel it.”

“Feel what?” Reed asked, making us all turn.

The relief that washed through me at seeing them come out hand-in-hand was fierce. I tightened my grip on Gideon just to keep myself from jumping up and wrapping my arms around them both.

“A beta’s resentment towards an omega,” Gideon said.

Katiya’s eyes widened. “I don’t have any resentment. In fact, I wouldn’t want to be an omega for anything.”

Gideon laughed. “You’re so one of the few, pretty girl.”

“Interesting debate,” Reed said, brow raised in consideration. “But I think our alpha needs to take us to get ice cream.” He looked at Anson.

“Yesss,” Gideon said, leaning forward to get in on the demand. “Please?”

“We have ice cream here,” Anson said, already getting to his feet. Sucker.

“Yes, true. But we want to go out,” Reed said.

Anson nodded, heading for them. He placed his hand gently on Reed’s chest for a second as he walked by. “Then get your shoes on.”

As soon as I let Gideon up, he stormed them, wrapping both alpha and beta in his arms. His relief washed through us. “Bond,” he murmured to Reed. “Please.”

And there he was, the quiet, still presence of Reed. Back where it belonged. Felix sighed, smiling as he walked by.

“Thanks, alpha,” Gideon said, leaning his head against Reed’s as he looked at Katiya with a content smile. “They’re the best alphas, Kat.”

Katiya nodded, her gaze shifting to each of us for a minute. Cohen and I passed their little huddle too, leaving them to their cuddle. I could barely hear their quiet murmurs as I slipped into my sneakers.

“I have a feeling she’s going to want to be alone tonight,” Felix said.

“Not happening,” Anson replied immediately. Then he paused, narrowing his eyes. I chuckled as he shook his head.

“I’ll bring her. When I drop Gideon back home, I’ll keep an eye on her house,” I volunteered.

“You’d already anticipated this, hm?” Felix asked.

“Yes.” I knew that was in direct conflict with everything in him. He certainly didn’t want Katiya alone in that house, especially not as close as she was to the caves. But he was also a man of the law and sitting outside her house was not acceptable to him, either. “You didn’t hear that.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Don’t be seen, Tris.”

I grinned. “Don’t worry. I know how to bury a body and make sure it isn’t found until it’s well decayed in the ground.”

“Why do you do that?” Felix asked, irritation making him glare at me.

“I like to poke the bear,” I answered.

“Are you teasing him about all the ways you know how to kill someone?” Gideon asked as the three of them joined us.

I glanced at Katiya. Although her brows puckered adorably, she didn’t react in any other way.

“Nope. This time I was reminding him of how many ways I know of to hide a body that even he couldn’t find.”

“That’s one of my favorite subjects,” Gideon said.

Reed shook his head. “It gets morbid here,” he told Katiya. “Gideon is fascinated by the gory things Tristen writes about.”

“I’ve been meaning to read one of your books since the shop told me you’re a writer,” Katiya said.

“Which shop is that?” I asked.

She glanced at Reed. “Reed’s shop. I didn’t know it was his when I went in, though.”

“You’ve been to my boutique?” Reed asked.

Katiya smiled shyly. “And tried on a dress.”

“I know which one. It’s exactly perfect for you,” he said, smiling. She’d be receiving a dress within the next twenty-four hours. There was no doubt in my mind.

“That’s what they said, but I was just browsing.” She turned her slightly flushed attention back to me. “They showed me your book.”

“I’m curious how that came up while you were trying on dresses,” Cohen said.

“Oh, well. They were explaining to me that you owned half of Howling Cove. And so you didn’t buy out the whole town, you moved your investments outward, but use the money to keep Howling Cove beautiful. I asked if you all owned shops and that’s when I was told about Gideon’s art and your books.”

“Art,” Gideon scoffed. “I literally just pour paint on canvas. There’s zero skill in it.”

Anson herded us to the door as he argued. “Your art sells.”

“Sure, because I’m a precious omega making art!”

Although I wasn’t looking directly at them, I could feel Anson’s response before I looked up. His teeth trapped Gideon’s lower lip as our omega looked at him wide-eyed.

One of his hands circled Gideon's throat. Behind Gideon, Felix growled, "You *are* a precious omega."

"Mhm," Gideon agreed, squirming between them. I could smell that he was trying to keep his hormones under control. His honey was turning sugary sweet, but he was attempting to breathe through it. "I am," he mumbled, his lip still held firmly in Anson's teeth.

"Mock my precious omega again, and you're not going to be happy," Felix warned.

A whine slipped out, causing the little hairs on my neck to stand on end. Fuck, the way that whine gripped me by my soul. Even Reed reacted, except he turned away and took a deep breath. The only thing Gideon did that he couldn't stop a reaction to was a whine. Or his heat, but that was a different situation.

Felix backed away as Anson let him go. I think we were all surprised when Katiya spoke.

"What's his punishment if he does that?" she asked.

Gideon pressed his lips together.

"Go on. Tell her," Anson said, straightening his shirt as the elevator door opened.

Our omega glared before looking at Katiya. "I get spanked," he said, sniffing. Katiya bit her lip, trying not to smile.

"You don't like that?"

"No, I do. But they don't stop until I'm basically a rag doll, all drained and everything. Without a knot!" I laughed at the pout in his voice. "It's really rather barbaric and unfair."

Katiya giggled. "Yes, I agree."

Gideon smiled, pulling her to his chest and beaming at us. But I saw the amused smile that lingered on her lips. Her agreement was for him, not actually agreeing.

We lingered around the ice cream parlor for a while and we were all happy to see Reed out and smiling again. Katiya,

out in the open, was more relaxed. Likely surrounded by fresh air and not so many alpha scents. Gideon was simply blissful. A bright shining ball of happy glowing brightly inside my chest.

The group of us walked Katiya home. Although I was sure my alphas shared my desire to tuck her back in the middle with us and bring her back. Lock her in the nest so we were assured she was safe. Or at the very least, touch her before we left.

We didn't. Instead, we watched Gideon kiss her hungrily and then a shier, soft peck from Reed before she locked herself inside.

Gideon was quiet on the way home until we reached our building. He turned to me, wrapping his arms around my neck. "What do I have to do to convince you to go back to Kat's house and watch over her?"

I considered playing it up, but he could be reckless at times, so I thought a different strategy was best. "Promise me you'll stay in tonight with our pack."

"Done. I promise."

Kissing his lips, I pushed him back into the waiting arms of our pack before turning around. He didn't need to know that this was already my intent. Only now I didn't need to hide it from him.

The walk from our high-rise to the house Katiya was staying in was less than ten minutes. And already, I found a shadow creeping around the side of her house. I'm glad my instincts were to come back. Not leave her alone.

I wasn't lying when I said I was a damned stalker. Not because I had practice, but because it was in my personality to be obsessive. Between that and all the cold cases I've read and the murders I've written, I'd basically programmed myself to be a psychopath when needed. How else do you write a convincing psycho if you couldn't be a psycho from time to time?



Unfortunately for the poor soul creeping around my beta's house, he was not part psycho. Just a disturbed beta. And quite easy to sneak up on. I grabbed him by the back of his head with a firm fistful of hair and covered his mouth and nose with my free hand.

Dragging him backward, I brought him far out of view of Kat's windows, deep into the dark shadows. Switching up my hands, I gripped his throat in a choke hold and spun him to face me, not at all surprised to see the angry expression on Hugo Olson's face.

"What are you doing snooping around?" I demanded.

"It's my house," he snapped.

"Be that as it may, you have rented it out. That means, right now, you're trespassing. Imagine all the charges that I could have placed on you."

The reality of my threat rendered him silent. Fuming, but silent. "What are you doing here, ten at night?"

"I could ask you the same."

"You could. But which of us do you think your tenant is going to believe?" He wasn't expecting me to throw that question at him. There was enough confidence in my tone that he paused. "More to the point, who do you think Felix will believe?"

Oh, that really angered him. I could almost smell the smoke.

"As a landlord, you are required to afford your tenants ample warning before you show up. And you are *not* allowed to snoop around outside in the dead of night. That's being a stalker, Hugo."

He'd have given anything to be able to growl. Before he could speak, I continued. "Stay away from Katiya if you know what's good for you. Howling Cove is known for its missing persons."

I let him go, and he stumbled. "Did you just threaten me?" he hissed.

“Yes. And I’m well prepared and equipped to make good on that threat. Do you think you can outrun me?”

Hugo stared in defiance. But his scent didn’t lie. I smelled his fear. He turned without another word and left the house. I watched in satisfaction for several minutes before glancing up at the house. I was surprised to find someone looking back at me.

Not Katiya, but a transparent young woman. Ah yes. Our beta was being haunted. And the ghost was watching.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

## FELIX



The reports revealed that there was an unknown drug within the petrified tourists' blood. It was currently being studied. They were examined and no needle pricks or drug patches were found on their bodies. Nor was there any evidence that they'd smoked it.

However, because it lined their lungs, it was clear that they had inhaled it. Based on the toxicology, it wasn't inhaled as one might find when they smoked something into their system. It came in with the air they breathed.

That didn't spell out a positive scenario for the cove at all.

We spoke to Hugo and together decided that only guided tours would be allowed until we could get to the bottom of who was behind this sudden spike in events. Only after news spread about the zombified visitors did more information come up.

Notably, the kooky native Sam was down there ranting shortly after they were being dragged up to the beach. No one could recall where he came from or when he arrived. He was just there, lamenting his warnings.

And then there was the couple on an apparent extended stay, Ruby and Charles, amateur treasure hunters. They'd been apprehended while trying to sneak into the cave after the police had blocked it off.

When I spoke to Hugo, he shook his head. "This is getting ridiculous. Should we just close the caves until after Halloween?"

I sighed, rubbing a hand over my face. “I thought about that too.”

“It’ll cost the shop some money to cancel the tours,” he said, frowning. “But I’m not sure what else to do at this point.”

“We’re not worried about losing money. None of us want Howling Cove to be broadcast as too dangerous to visit because some crazy ass is playing tricks in the cave.”

“That would suck.” He gazed out the window at the beach. “My ancestors would hate that. They worked so hard to keep the caves and beach as authentic as possible.”

“I know. And they did a fantastic job.”

He smiled lightly. “I appreciate your acknowledgment of that.”

“Hugo, we’ve never disagreed that the Pack Sandview did good for this town. You know that. We make sure everything tells the truth when we come across something inaccurate.”

“Yes, I know,” he said, sighing. “I just get frustrated that it’s the Jameson pack that gets all the credit for settling this town. We were here first. We owned this entire town and then some. But they get the glory.”

“We’re trying to correct that. Have you been on the extended tour that the shop is putting on?” When he shook his head, I smiled. “Do so. The one that brings everyone around town. I think you’ll be pleased with what we’ve added.”

Hugo wasn’t a bad man. Like so many betas who viewed their worth as being overlooked, he could turn a little bitter. Especially when his family legacy was being overshadowed by Cohen’s.

“So, what do you think, Chief? Do we close it for safety reasons?”

“How about if we close it to unguided tours?” I suggested. “It really isn’t about the money, but I think if whoever is behind it is left to their own devices within the cave, whatever they’re trying to do might end up worse than what’s already

happened. By sending in trained individuals under the pretense of work, they can keep an eye on the cave.”

Hugo nodded. “Alright. I like that idea. How are you going to keep the public out?”

“I’ll station some officers there throughout the day. Tape it off at night. If someone wants to ignore the warnings at night, that’s on them.”

“Sounds good. I like this solution. Thanks for keeping me in the loop, Chief.”

“Of course, Hugo. Let me know if you hear anything.”

He nodded.

I left his house and relayed the agreement to Cohen and Anson, letting them make arrangements at the shop while I called in a couple extra shifts for the daylight hours.

That was four days ago. Halloween was right around the corner. That meant more and more visitors were piling into Howling Cove and the surrounding towns as our masked party neared. My pack and I were spending a lot of time at the shop. Not just because Gideon continued to insist on being there with Katiya, but because Katiya was there. Gideon’s presence just gave us an excuse that she wouldn’t immediately argue.

It thrilled me to see that she was warming up to us more and more. She didn’t flinch away when we stood close. She didn’t shy away from small touches. She’d even let me kiss her on her porch last night. Just a soft, slow, light kiss, but she hadn’t stopped me. *And* she smiled as she went inside.

We were willing to take it slow, though I was sure that we all had a small amassing of little gifts for her holed up in our rooms. The only ones who continued to shower her with presents were Reed and Gideon. She was used to that, but we could all see that it was overwhelming her a little.

Knowing what was coming today from the two of them, I once more held back my growing need to spoil this beta.

I hung close to the back of the store where I could make out most of the shop. I’d upped my police count at the cove,

kept two stationed outside and one on standby undercover to accompany the tours in the cave. The guides knew who the officer was since they lived here. But no one else did.

I'd spent a lot of time trying to determine what someone was after in the caves. From monsters to drugs in a matter of weeks.

My phone rang, and I answered it as I watched my omega flirting with my beta. I could feel his exuberance as if he were a comet soaring through my chest. Bright and burning.

"Jameson," I answered.

"Hi, Chief," one of my officers said. "The drugs are finally filtering out of their systems, but it's leaving them kind of blank. They don't even know where they are, never mind what they saw. Honestly, it's the most bizarre thing I've ever seen."

That was not the answer I wanted. "Can't tell us if they saw anything," I noted.

"They can't even tell us their names, Chief."

"Let's hope their memories come back."

He promised to report again later if something comes up. I really prayed that their memories would return. Not only for themselves, but because if they saw someone or something, it could potentially blow this case wide open.

We've always known that there were other entrances to the cave, but they were well hidden around town. One was accessed through a cellar in one of the houses Anson owns. Another was through the sewer that even fewer people knew about. There were a few others, but they were even less accessible.

Though I was beginning to think that we needed to check them out. Make sure they aren't being used.

Gideon looked up at me, grinning wickedly. I could only imagine what he was up to. My omega was a mischievous man. Deciding I'd spent enough time observing, I headed for them. Ready to slap that ass if he needed it. Hell, maybe I'd do it for my own enjoyment.

The thought made me smile. “What are you doing, Chief?” Gideon asked. “Find anything in the corner?”

I glanced behind me. Guess I had been standing in the corner. “Just observing. Working out details in my mind. Trying to make connections that I might have missed.”

“You’re not even on the clock right now,” Gideon said, huffing.

I pulled him towards me, kissing his pouty lips as I held his chin. “With you out of the house, I’m always working, precious.”

Gideon smiled. “I’m sorry,” he whispered in a rare moment of sympathy. “I don’t want her here alone.”

“I’m not alone,” Katiya said.

“I also want to spend every possible minute with her,” he continued, ignoring Katiya’s argument. “You understand that, don’t you?”

I nipped at his lip, making him laugh as I let him go. Looking at Katiya watching us, I smiled. “Yes, I understand perfectly.”

Her cheeks flushed. But the true reward of this entire conversation was the tentative sweetness within her quiet scent. I licked my lips, enjoying the smell of her arousal and the blush on her cheeks.

Screams outside had me turning around and rushing for the door. There was an officer waving up at me from the beach. I couldn’t make out his words over the chaos of everyone else running from the beach.

“What’s going on?” Cohen asked, a large box in his hand.

“Thank fuck you’re here. Keep Gideon and Kat safe, alpha.”

“Of course. Come home.”

I nodded as I jumped off the side of the deck and made my way through the crowd. My only thought was to get to my officer with the panic on his face.



“What is it?” I asked, grabbing the beta’s shoulder. “What happened?”

His eyes were wide, fear made his scent stronger. “You just—come here, Chief.”

I followed, unsure of what else to do. We continued to fight through the throng of people, and there was an even thicker crowd at the cave opening than usual. My officer pushed our way through until the scene that awaited me was revealed.

A man, bloody and mangled, was on the ground outside the cave with my second officer kneeling beside him. The victim didn’t appear to be breathing, his eyes wide as he stared up at nothing. There were what clearly looked like animal gouge wounds. Claw marks ripping through his torso. Something bit into his leg. I wasn’t sure what had happened to his face and head, but he was covered in blood.

“Ambulance has already been called for,” the officer I followed told me.

I almost missed the second person there. He was standing a few feet away, also bloodied but not nearly as attacked as the first.

“Come here, beta,” I said.

He didn’t appear to hear me as he stared at his friend. Leaving the injured, I approached him. He looked up at me with terror in his eyes.

“There’s a monster in the caves,” he murmured. “Attacked us.”

“How did you get into the caves?” I demanded. I had to repeat the question three times before I received a coherent response that didn’t have to do with a monster.

“There’s another entrance that we learned about online.”

I swore. Turning around, more of my men were coming down as the ambulance siren filled the air. “Question this man. He said there’s another entrance that’s being advertised online.”

The officer scowled, but then when he looked at the surrounding scene, his eyes widened slightly. “Was it a monster?” he asked.

“That’s the story.”

He nodded. “What’s the plan?”

I looked into the mouth of the dark cave. Someone was in there. Someone taking tourists by surprise. And this time, it was very clearly an act of violence intended to kill. This entire situation has moved from a somewhat harmless prank into being dangerous.

“Give me your flashlight and radio. I’m going in,” I told him.

He handed over both. After checking that they were in good working order with ample battery life, I stepped toward the cave.

Only to find my path blocked when Katiya darted in front of me with wide eyes. “You can’t go in there,” she demanded. “You have an omega. An entire pack. You can’t—”

Without thinking, I pulled her to me and kissed her. She was right. This might be a foolish thing to do. I didn’t know what I was facing. But fuck, this was my goddam town and no ‘monster’ was going to terrorize it.

Besides, I’ve been waiting for a chance to really kiss this woman. Waiting patiently for an opportunity. This seemed like a good one.

I hadn’t expected a response. She kissed like an angel, divine and consuming. Her hands on my chest, her fingers digging into my shirt. I clutched her to me for a minute longer before letting her go.

“Go back to Gideon. Stay with my pack.”

“No,” she said hotly. “You can’t just make me care about you and then feed yourself to a monster.”

“All monsters wear masks.”

My assertion confounded her for a minute as she stared at me, trying to determine what I was saying. It didn't matter. She shook her head. First to clear the confusion and then more furiously to insist that I not go into the cave.

“Kat, there's a chance that whoever is behind this is still in there. That's fresh blood. I cannot wait for a task force to get set up. I need to go now.”

“Then I'm going with you.”

“Hell no, you're not.”

“You can't stop me.”

I can. I can if I—

Oh, for fuck's sake. She was absolutely terrified when we growled. How was she going to react if I barked at her? She would hate me for scaring her intentionally.

Swearing again, I shoved my flashlight in her hand before turning to grab another from one of my other officers. Katiya looked at me with wide eyes. “This isn't the outcome I was going for.”

“I need to go into the cave right now. So I'm being reckless because I refuse to give you a reason to be afraid of me. That means you let me go alone or you're coming with me.”

I saw the tremble in her lips. The shake in her hands. She was afraid. But for the first time since I met her, her fear wasn't directed at an alpha. It was the unknown. The threat inside the cave that was damn near murdering people.

She took a breath and looked into the darkness. “There's a dark ghost in there,” she told me.

It was my turn to be confused. “What?”

“A ghost.” She turned back to look at me. “Maybe he can tell us something.”

I nodded, taking her hand and pulling her into the darkness. “The blood trail should be fresh. We'll find where

the attack happened easily. Then we can search the area. Whatever it is, monster in a mask or... a ghost, we'll find it."

She snorted. "The ghost didn't do this," she said. "I'm just telling you that he's here."

"What makes you think the ghost didn't do this?" I was having this conversation. A fucking ghost. Seriously?!

"Because he's not a monster. He doesn't have claws. He was a man when he was alive."

"And you think he'll help?" I asked.

Katiya shook her head. "No. But I think he'll tell us if he knows something for other reasons."

I eyed this girl again, keeping my hand firmly wrapped around hers. Fuck, what was I thinking, bringing her into this cave with me? "Kat, listen to me." She looked up, her beautiful face obscured by darkness. "I will never let something happen to you. No one will hurt you. But if we face something, someone, I need you to listen to me without question. Even if you're scared. I'm guessing I'll likely yell for you to do something. Can you do that?"

"You won't hurt me," she repeated, nodding. "And you won't let someone else hurt me. That's why I agreed to come in here with you. Home isn't safety. It's whoever cares enough about you that your life is their priority. Then you're safe."

Goddamn, this woman. She was going to make me get on my knees and beg her to be our beta. Our packmate. Fuck, if she didn't let me bite her and make her mine, I would lose my ever loving mind.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

# KATIYA



It was dark and chilly. Though the flashlight was bright and the beam carried on for a while, the cavern was deep, tall, and held nothing but shadows.

As we left the opening far behind, only our footsteps filled the quiet.

“I’m going to get reamed when we get back,” Felix said. Looking up at his profile, the details of his handsome face were lost in shadow. “I should have forced you to stay behind. It’s too dangerous.”

It was. I was fighting my fear of the unknown. Of the monster waiting for us in the dark. “You can’t go alone,” I said into the darkness. *You can’t be one of the missing that no one ever finds.*

But then, what good will I be against anyone? Just a witness. Or maybe a second victim.

“Don’t think darkly,” Felix said, pointing his flashlight at the ground again. The drips of blood were scattered. As if the flow had been slowed. “It’ll be fine.”

“Where do you think the other entrance is?” I asked, just to keep some conversation and not let my mind play tricks on me.

“There are several throughout the town. I would be naïve to think that we know about them all. I’m wagering a guess that someone is using one we aren’t aware of.”

“Does that mean they’re luring people down here?”

He glanced at me in the dark. I could just make out his frown when I looked up at him. “I really hope not, but now that you suggest it, I think there’s a possibility.”

“Why?”

“There’s a cold case that happened almost a century ago now. A woman was said to have died in an accident while she was with a group of friends in the cave. She was found on the beach covered in blood, reported by a tourist early one morning. It became glaringly obvious that she hadn’t fallen and died. And that she was dragged to the beach when it’s very obvious that she hadn’t died there made the situation all the more suspicious.”

“What happened?” I asked.

Felix shook his head. “So much of the story is missing from records, which is maddeningly frustrating. The file is so obviously missing pages that we all get a little mad when we talk about it. But from what we know, the beta who discovered her was in town and had an alibi for the previous night. The department searched the area and found that there was no evidence of her dying on the beach. The records we have left suggest that a room within the caves was found. They also found a bloodied knife, copious amounts of blood that, after testing, appeared to match the victim. And there was an outline of blood where her body had been that was all very deliberate.

“Most of the images that belonged to the case are likewise missing. But what evidence there is suggests that an accident didn’t take her life. She was murdered intentionally. There is a single image of the woman and it’s... grotesque.”

I shivered, leaning in closer to Felix. My skin prickled with chills as I glanced around me in the dark. “That sounds horrible.”

“It is. Not only has the case been tampered with, but there is so much missing that we can no longer identify the victim. There were three murders within the town during the time period that we’ve kind of been trying together, thinking that maybe one might link what is missing. An omega and two

betas, all three vanishing on the same night, bodies all discovered around Howling Cove.”

“I knew that this place sounded too good to be true,” I muttered.

Felix laughed. “Honey, it’s incredibly safe and peaceful. We haven’t had a big disruption since that incident.”

“Until now.”

Sighing, Felix nodded. “Yes. Until now. I’m not sure what’s triggered it, but I’m not willing to let this taint our town. We are safe. And I will do whatever is necessary to keep it that way.”

“You said her murder was intentional,” I said. “What do you think? A lover’s dispute?”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “No, likely not. I obviously can’t look at the body myself and the single remaining photo isn’t very telling. Not only was the picture quality lower and in black and white, but it also wasn’t very clear. There are also no autopsy notes in the file. All we have to go on are periodic lines in various documents to piece together details we can only speculate about. But, to me, it’s the makeshift altar covered in a pattern of blood that makes the murder sound sacrificial.”

“A sacrifice?” I asked, surprised. “To what?”

“There are a lot of different stories that mention sacrifices, but there’s absolutely nothing that we can tell based on what little we have in the tampered file. Even the mentioned knife is missing.”

“That’s... gruesome,” I said.

Felix nodded. “The murder devastated the town for decades. It’s the only true murder we know about that has happened within the caves.”

“Maybe Tristen knows of others,” I suggested.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Tris has done a lot of research on Howling Cove murders. Murders in general, but especially any that are local. It’s easier for him to explore



specific locations in person. And when he finds something new about Howling Cove, he tells me. We have an entire archive of unsolved murders. We'd love to lay some of them to rest."

"He's kind of a cool guy," I said, glad that the darkness hid my blush.

Felix smiled widely. "He'll be thrilled to know you think that."

"I mean, you all are. I just meant, it's really cool what he does. Not letting old murders die. Giving them new life."

"There's a rumor that his research has led to the resolution of a dozen cases," he said, making my eyes widen. I caught another glimpse of blood on the floor, indicating we were going in the right direction. "No one has outright given him due credit for the things he's revealed, but he also has a number of homicide detectives sending him old cases from time to time."

"Okay, that's really cool."

Felix nodded. "He looks intimidating, and I suppose, like anyone, he can be a bit of a wild card. But with all that knowledge, his entire toolbox of recipes for murder, he'd risk everything if it meant protecting someone he loves. Something he and I don't talk too freely about, because while I agree with the sentiment, I obviously have a professional responsibility."

"Conflict of interest."

"Kind of. Anyone with a pack will tell you that everything else in life is secondary. Your pack is your number one priority."

"Especially with an omega," I added.

"No, Kat. Well, I suppose. But everyone within my pack is equally important. There's not much I wouldn't do to protect them. Even if that meant risking my career."

I smiled. "How did you meet them? How long have you been together?"

“Cohen, Anson, and I met in college. Once upon a time, we all wanted very different careers. Cohen came home and took up his family responsibility to the town. He doesn't at all regret it. I actually think attending college was his act of rebellion. But he uses that business degree all the time, so it wasn't a waste. Anson switched his major at least a dozen times. I'm still not sure what he ended with. And I wanted to be a veterinarian.”

“No way!” I said, laughing. “You're so far removed from that.”

He chuckled. “I am. The three of us built an easy camaraderie that quickly grew to more. We unofficially formed a pack long before we graduated. There was no question that we'd be following Cohen home. He talked nonstop about Howling Cove. So, here we are. I got a traffic violation the first week here and, I don't know, I just dove head first into law. I moved up the ranks quickly, which is probably not at all proper, but I do my best to do good in this place.”

“I think you do. Willingness to put your life at risk in a cave that knowingly eats people is above and beyond the call of duty. *And* you're not even on the clock!”

Felix laughed, flashing his light on the ground again. The blood was getting a little more frequent now. Bigger drops. His hand squeezed mine lightly.

“I'm not just protecting my town by coming in here. I'm protecting my pack. You and Gideon were only a hundred feet away from the cave. If there's a murderer in here, I sure as fuck am not letting them get out if I can help it.”

He included me in his pack. I wasn't sure if he realized that. It wasn't lost on me that I didn't mentally shy away from the idea this time. Not just of a pack in and of itself. But a pack with alphas; these alphas.

“What about Anson?” I asked. “How did he get into buying buildings?”

“Using Cohen’s degree and his background coming from a family of builders, it came naturally to him. By using Cohen’s degree, I mean I can often hear their conversations where Anson asks endless business questions. They used to keep me up at night until I was a bear and forced them to shut up.” He chuckled. “Less these days, but it still happens from time to time.”

“And Tristen?”

Felix nodded. “Tris is a strange case. He pulled into town one day and took up house with one of the betas for a while. He seemed a little rough around the edges to me. Just barely not off his rocker. But he and Anson got to talking one day at a café, and I don’t know. The next thing I knew, he was here. Taking up residence in one of our rooms.”

“See? He’s a cool guy! Drops into town and picks himself up a pack. What’s cooler than that?”

He laughed. “Then came Reed.”

I nodded. “Yes, he told me how you found him at the hospital.”

“I did. He broke my heart. I’ve never seen a feral alpha. Knowing that someone put him in that condition infuriated me. Sickened me. But more than anything, he needed someone on his side. He needed a place where he was assured safety. Where someone would go to the ends of the earth for him. I’m not sure what he was looking for, but he got me instead.”

“He breaks my heart too,” I said quietly. “I feel so stupid.”

“Don’t,” Felix said, bringing my hand to his lips. “Reed made a mistake, Kat. He knows that.”

“But I should have listened to everyone when they told me he didn’t deserve to be treated the way I was treating him.”

“Honey, you weren’t treating him in any way. You were living your life, trying to come to terms with everything new around you and a man who didn’t tell you he is an alpha—the thing you feared the most. We’re very aware of the darkness in the world, much thanks to Reed. Just because he was hurt doesn’t mean he should keep that from you after you told him

about your darkness. One injury doesn't justify causing someone else an injury to keep yours from opening."

"He doesn't like to speak it," I said in defense.

"No. But one of us could have. All he had to do was ask. He knew the risks, Kat. He just made the wrong decision. It's okay to admit a mistake."

I sighed. I couldn't help but feel guilty. My past was bad enough and, I wasn't even a beta that the alphas in Chaingate wanted. Reed's past was worse. And I was a jerk.

"I know how Gideon found you," I volunteered, so we'd move away from Reed for a bit.

Felix chuckled. "Silly omega thought we didn't want him when all we were doing was making sure he didn't feel any obligation to choose our pack while still trying to show interest in him."

"I think you feigned no interest a little too well."

"Yes. Hindsight. But it all worked out. We got our sweet, sassy, perfect omega."

"I never knew any male omegas," I said.

"They're rarer than rare. I don't know that I've met any others, either. We're just lucky."

I smiled. "Do you ever think that you want a female omega?"

"Not a chance. We only registered on Pack Listing in hopes that Gideon would see that we were there. Otherwise, we'd have been perfectly content without one."

Our conversation stalled as the blood on the floor, shining as if it were just shed, came into view. Felix kept me close as we maneuvered around it, trying to keep our feet from touching it and obscuring the evidence.

We moved more slowly now. Felix often crouched down to study the pattern of blood. Take pictures with his phone. Hunt around for anything else.

It became clear as we paused where the boundary to the unknown warned us away that the attack happened beyond. I glanced behind us, noting that I hadn't seen the ghost from before. Maybe he wandered through the whole cave system.

Felix pulled me closer to his side. "I've only been a dozen feet beyond here. The cave is spooky enough on its own, but it's an entirely different world moving forward." He trained the light on the blood that puddled further into the dark. "The question is, do we want to go farther or not?"

"I'm game," I volunteered, making him look at me. I shrugged. "Maybe we'll find the other entrance."

"Hm," he answered. "Stay close. The surface is not flat for much longer. Pay careful attention to *everything* around you. Do not get too far away from me."

"I won't," I promised.

Felix nodded. He pulled me around to the front of him and placed a hand on my hip before moving me forward.

He wasn't wrong. I don't think I took more than a dozen steps before the ground became uneven. It descended on loose stone that crumbled and moved under our feet. We followed close to the path of blood, mindful not to touch it.

We tracked it through a narrow part where the ceiling and floor almost met. Avoiding the blood as we crawled through it was difficult. The metallic scent of it filled my nose, making me gag several times. It's probably a good thing I hadn't eaten in a while.

The cavern opened wide on the other side, and we had to ascend this time. Surprisingly, the blood trail continued.

A falling rock in the distance made us pause. Felix pulled his gun, which I hadn't even known he had on him, and held it up to his flashlight. Aiming it out and away as he swept the beam of light through the endless cavern.

Dripping water. Cold, stale air. But no other sounds.

Felix frowned, bringing his weapon back to the holster and wrapping his arm around my lower back as we slowly dragged

our lights throughout the surfaces of the cave.

“There are at least six different offshoots,” Felix said quietly.

I looked down at my feet where the blood continued to lead us. “Do you think there’s a chance that this blood belongs to more than one person? It seems like an awful lot.”

“The man back there was in bad shape. Though his injuries were rough, he probably would have survived them if he hadn’t had to drag himself through a cave for over an hour. That’s a lot of exertion on a body that is already very damaged.”

“Do you think he died?”

Felix looked at the blood that highlighted our path deeper still into the cave system. “It’s a possibility. Come on.”

It wasn’t much further before we found the place where these two explorers had been attacked. There was another body there. One who hadn’t made it out alive. I stood against the wall, watching as Felix took pictures and studied the scene of the attack. Noting evidence of movement and all the marks on the stone.

When he was done, he stood. I was shivering, but I wasn’t sure if it was from fear or cold anymore. I should have worn more clothing. Felix pulled me to his chest. I could feel his frown as he rubbed my back to create friction.

“We’re going to have to stay here,” he said quietly.

I stilled, a familiar fear creeping up in me as I pulled away to look at him.

He smiled demurely before pointing his flashlight to the rock ledge we’d made our way down. It took me a minute to figure out what he wanted me to look at.

“The tunnel is gone,” I whispered.

Felix nodded. “There are a lot of stories circling these caves. One of them states that after a certain hour, if we’re not back within the limits that the spirits have set, they will keep us here until they decide to let us go.”

I shivered, hugging my arms to me. “What do we do?”

“Find a small space. Somewhere confined so we can watch a single entrance. Then hunker down for the night and hope we haven’t angered something.”

“I didn’t take you for superstitious,” I whispered, looking into the darkness. But then again, I talk to ghosts.

“Superstition has nothing to do with it. You respect what’s here and hopefully they leave you alone. Let’s go, Kat.”

We continued on, following a path Felix chose until we stopped to rest in a smaller chamber with only a single opening. The air was musty. My eyes were tired. Felix took out his phone to check the time. Unsurprisingly, he had no service.

“No wonder we’re trapped,” he said as he pulled me closer to his side. I was almost shivering at this point. “It’s almost midnight.”

“How late was it when we went in?” I asked. How had that much time passed?

“Time moves strangely when you’re sensory deprived. Come here. It’s going to get colder now that the sun has gone down.”

I moved into him, allowing him to wrap around me as I lay curled in his lap. Laying my head on his chest, I listened to his soft purr as we sat quietly. Remarkably, I fell asleep.

I don’t think I slept long, though. It was the cold that woke me up. My teeth were chattering as I shivered uncontrollably in the dark.

Felix was still wrapped around me, holding me tightly in his arms. There was soft fabric over me. Only as I shivered into him did I realize he’d taken off his shirt to use as a blanket over me. I was too cold to even think about the fact that I was in the arms of a partially naked alpha.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I should have thought this through before coming in here.”

I shook my head, trying to stop my teeth from rattling. “I’m fine.”

He chuckled. “You’re freezing, Kat.” He hugged me tighter, rubbing his hand on my arm to try to stimulate some heat through friction.

“It’s not like you turned off the heat intentionally,” I pointed out.

“No. But I didn’t pay attention to the time when I dragged you in here.” His hold on me became so stiff that it was almost painful. “I’ll do everything I can to keep you warm. I promise.”

I nodded, laying my head on his chest. He began purring again. I meant to close my eyes, but I was suddenly wide awake. Felix slipped a hand under my shirt, rubbing my back with a bare hand.

Skin to skin is warmer. I shivered at the thought. If there was more skin....

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes, concentrating on the little point of contact where his hand skimmed across my flesh. Warm. Heat. My body was covered in chills, but I wasn’t entirely sure it was because of the cold. I was shivering because of the cold, but I was sure that the gooseflesh was due to something else entirely.

“Kat?” he asked, his voice low.

“Yes?”

He hesitated. “Let me take off your shirt. We can use it as an extra layer, but I can warm you better if my body heat is directly against you.”

Maybe I was too cold to be afraid. The fear I expected to take over was only a dull warning in the back of my mind. As if it, too, was in the process of freezing.

“I swear, I only want to keep you warm,” he said.

I nodded. I was going to agree, anyway.



Felix shifted me in his lap so that he could reach the hem of my shirt. It was difficult to convince myself to move my hands further away from my body long enough for him to pull it over my head. As soon as it was off, I burrowed back against his chest. He pressed both garments against me before placing his warm hands and arms securely around me.

His purr was quiet and soothing, even over my own chilled thoughts. The quiet scent of green tea with cool refreshing bamboo followed it. Lulling. Relaxing. So beautifully sweet.

No, wait. It was the sweetness of raspberries I was smelling. My eyes snapped open. Oh, that was me! I nearly snorted with laughter at the surprise of my own reaction to this man.

Mistaking my internal laughter for trembling, Felix murmured, “Shh. It’s okay. I won’t hurt you.”

This time, I couldn’t contain my giggle. “Sorry. You smell good. Apparently, that’s enough to change my reaction to you, that I hadn’t expected. I’m not afraid.”

Tension I didn’t know he was holding relaxed away. He dropped his face to my hair and took a breath. When he released it, it was filled with relief. “Good. I don’t want you afraid of me. For any reason.”

I couldn’t see him in the pitch dark, but I shifted in his lap as if I could see his face. Still shivering when more of the cold air touched my skin, I reached up to touch his face. The dark helped ease some of my anxiety. I *knew* he was an alpha. Everything about him screamed alpha. But he was gentle. Kind. Respectful.

I smelled the sweetness in my scent spike at the same moment I felt the familiar burn of heat in my body. It wasn’t more than half a breath when his own scent filled the cave with thick sweetness. As if he’d poured sugar into his tea and flambéed the bamboo in caramel.

“There are other ways to generate body heat,” Felix murmured before I had to find my tongue and speak.

“Yes!” I said before covering my face with a hand in embarrassment at my enthusiasm. He chuckled. “Just... no knot.”

“No knot,” he said. “Promise.”

I nodded. I thought maybe he'd just strip us and get right to the heating up, but his mouth found mine in the dark, connected like magnets in perfect sync. It was my first kiss knowing that this man was an alpha and I was welcoming it. Not a surprise kiss. He'd always been an alpha. There was never any confusion regarding his designation on my part.

As I parted my lips, inviting him in, his hand slipped between my legs. He was slow, giving me plenty of time to tell him to stop. When I didn't, he rubbed his thumb along the inside of my thigh, causing me to rock gently against him. And then after being encouraged by my participation, his hand rubbed against my sex.

Just a soft brush. Reminiscent of Gideon touching me for the first time. But then he got bolder, pressing his hand to me harder, rubbing in intense passes.

Heat burned through me, chasing away the chill. He pulled his hand away long enough to slip it into my pants. His finger brushed over my clit as he split my folds, dragging down further until he could slip it inside. I moaned into his mouth, eliciting a quiet growl from him.

I shivered at the growl, oddly more turned on by the sound and his arousal hanging thick in the air. How he touched me with expert fingers. Getting me wet and ready.

My head rested on his shoulder as I panted, my hips rocking gently against his hand as he worked me. Fingering me as deeply as he could in the position we were in. Teasing my clit, sending jolts through me.

“Is this enough?” he asked, his lips brushing my temple. “We don't have to do anything more.”

I grinned, shaking my head. I couldn't put into words why I was suddenly so desperate to feel him inside me. The first alpha with a knot that he couldn't hide, and I wasn't terrified

of in this kind of position. Was it just because I was cold and I wanted body heat? I didn't think that was the case. But one thing I was sure of.

Somewhere inside me, I was convinced that I could replace my long ingrained fear of alphas a little more if I trusted someone I was vulnerable with. If this was my choice. If I never lost control.

“No knot,” I reminded him.

“No. Never.”

My reminder must have been convincing to him. He slowly removed his hand. In the silence of the cave, I could hear quiet slurping. I flushed, imagining him licking his fingers. And then he was moving us, pulling my pants off and pushing his away. Shimming us both out of our clothes within this tight space.

Somehow, I wasn't kneeling on cold, hard stone. An article of clothing was under my knees as I straddled him. His hands moved up and down my back and arms. Continuously creating friction and keeping me warm. Always keeping me warm.

“You're in complete control, Katiya,” he murmured. “Anything you want.”

It was the last piece of assurance I needed to relax. I moved my body on his erection, feeling the way it glided against me. Shyly, feeling how my skin burned, I reached between us to feel his length. His girth.

He was big. Just as I remembered an alpha to be. I burned, closing my eyes against the threatening rush of fear. The reminders of how an alpha handled me before. When I wasn't in control. When I didn't have a voice.

This wasn't the same thing.

Taking a breath, I reached down his dick to feel the length. Learn how thick he was. My fingers stopped right at his knot, trembling. But I brushed them over the mound, feeling how big and hard it was. The thought that it actually went inside a body—that it's what it was made for!—had me shaking my hand.

But it didn't matter. Not right now. I shifted higher onto my knees so I could line up his fat head with my entrance. I swear, it felt like I was dripping. Lowering my body a little bit, I waited for more memories to start screaming in my head.

"Kat?" Felix said. His voice made me flinch, and I stilled. I was breathing heavily. Almost shaking. "We don't have to do this."

"I want to," I whispered.

"Are you sure?"

I leaned into him, pressing my face into his neck. Felix responded by wrapping his arms around me. His purr was soft, soothing. A gentle reminder that he wasn't a bad person. He wasn't a monster. He was a good man. A good alpha.

"Yes," I whispered, breathing in his scent. Zen. Zen meant safe.

As I slowly let myself sink onto him, my body burned from his size alone, Felix couldn't remain as passive as he was trying to. He groaned, his hand going up into my hair and gently gripping me to him. Holding me tight.

"Kat. You're perfect."

I smiled as I concentrated on bringing that thick beast of his into my body.

"So small," he grunted. His hips rocked gently. "You feel so good, sweetheart. Take your time. You're doing so well."

Now I understood why Gideon responded so positively to me when I was praising him without initially meaning to. Alphas couldn't help themselves. They innately wanted to praise whoever they were with. When it felt good, they wanted to make sure their partner knew it.

"So brave, Kat. So strong. Look at you riding an alpha," Felix murmured, spreading gentle kisses along my face and neck. "There you go, baby. Right there."

I gasped when I hit just the right spot on his cock. I hadn't quite reached his knot yet. Though I didn't examine where I was, I thought that there was another inch or two left. But I

didn't need to go further. I found the place where he fit perfectly.

“There it is, sweetheart. You like that, don't you?” I nodded, letting my body move as it would on top of him. “That's it. Want me to help?”

I nodded, gripping him tightly. Waiting for the moment he decided I needed his knot. That he didn't want sex without his knot being strangled.

The hand not still in my hair went under my ass. And then he moved me. It was like he knew exactly where my pleasure spot was. As if he could feel it like a button. He hit it over and over again until my eyes rolled back and my cries of pleasure filled the cave. I was shuddering, my body convulsing around his massive cock as he worked me with expertise.

I collapsed on top of him, my body somehow managing to take the rest of his length as I sank down and I sat right on his knot now. But still, even as I caught my breath and the chill of the cave began to catch up again, he didn't try to push his knot in me.

“You're amazing, Katiya,” Felix murmured, bringing my face up with his hand under my chin. I couldn't see him, but I opened my eyes anyway. His lips brushed mine. “So very perfect. Stay right there. When you start to get cold, I'll warm you again.”

And he did. Until the cold was nothing but a memory.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

# KATIYA



I was still shivering when I woke, even with the furnace of the man wrapped around me. It's like he dialed up his body temperature to keep me warm. Since I hadn't frozen to death last night, I supposed that he succeeded.

My teeth weren't rattling at least.

What really took me unaware was how comfortable it was to wake up with him. I knew exactly who I was with by his scent. And I wasn't afraid. Not even knowing that he was an alpha.

I wasn't even going to touch that I'd actually had sex with him last night. No panic attacks. Nothing. It was completely enjoyable.

Okay, it was fan-fucking-tastic.

For something that had been so awful in the past, this turn of events was appreciated. It was one thing to feel the heat and need. Maybe that's what was different. The only thing I felt before was fear and pain. Crying out. Begging to be let go. To stop.

"What's wrong?" Felix asked quietly. Everything about him seemed to still.

"Just memories," I whispered.

"Do you need me to let you go?"

I shook my head, burying my face in his chest. "No. Just chase them away."

His purr was gentle as he held me to him. His hot hands rubbing over my back, creating friction to keep me warm.

“Do you think it’s daylight?” I asked.

“I looked a while ago. Phone said it was almost seven. Probably close to eight now.”

“You could have woken me.”

He huffed quiet laughter. “Not a chance. I’m enjoying having you in my arms.”

Smiling, I closed my eyes and relaxed for a while longer. Listening to the water drip in the distance. “We didn’t find the other opening.”

“No. And I’m not willing to keep looking. We found the scene of the attack. I took pictures. That’s all I’m doing.”

“No monster,” I said. “Did you find evidence of a monster?”

“I found... curious markings. We’ll have them analyzed when we get back.”

“So, maybe a monster.”

Felix smiled. “There’s no doubt in my mind that someone has been here. On the way back, we’ll look beyond just the blood and see what else we can find.”

On that note, I sat up and we dressed. It was awkward and amusing as we laughed, trying to shift ourselves around the small area and not elbow each other in the jaw.

Finally, we got out of the little hole we’d camped in. It was colder out here and I shivered, wrapping my arms around my middle. Seriously, no more cave exploring unless I’m wearing more clothes.

Felix handed me my flashlight and took my hand as we slowly made our way back into the endless tunnels. I didn’t recognize anything as we walked and silently prayed that his sense of direction was a lot better than mine.

He stopped, hand on the wall. I peered closer, looking at the gouge there. It wasn’t made by a human hand. I didn’t



think nails were strong enough to dig into the stone. Felix took a picture, and we moved on.

I almost whooped in triumph as we came back across the body and the scene of the attack. Not because I wanted to see the site again, but because that meant he'd been bringing us the way we came. It was reassuring.

Climbing back through the tunnels felt like it went quicker, even though we stopped more frequently as Felix examined something other than the blood. Before too long, we were staring into the sun of Howling Cove beach.

I almost cried from relief.

"The spirits let us out," I said, grinning up at Felix as we stepped outside.

He sighed, pulling me to his chest again. "Yes. Hopefully, they understand that we're trying to make something right."

"I think they do."

"Chief," one of the uniformed men outside said as he spotted us. He came across the sand, lifting the line of caution tape for us to come through. "You're safe. We panicked when you didn't return. Had someone here all night."

Felix clapped him on the shoulder. Then handed him his phone. "Take this to the office and pull the pictures I've taken. Send them to the investigation team. Return the phone to my house when you're done. We're going home."

"Yes, Chief."

"Any word on the victims?" Felix asked as we made our way up the beach.

"They're both alive. The one—I don't think he's going to make it. He lost a lot of blood."

"That he did," Felix agreed. "There's another body at the scene of the attack. Far beyond the boundary."

"You went—"

Felix nodded. "We didn't, however, find another entrance. If there is one, it's even further than the distance we walked."

Or down another passage.”

“The one guy is pretty out of it right now, but we’re going to see if we can’t get him to show us the site where he got the coordinates. Then we can track it from the other end.”

“I’ll call in later. I want all the other entrances to the caves checked. All of them. Get warrants if needed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I’m heading home.”

“Yes, sir.”

With my hand in his, Felix pulled me down the road. The sun was warm, but I was still cold. The chill having sunk straight to my bones.

“Be prepared for me to get yelled at when we get inside,” Felix said.

“I could have gone home,” I said, looking over my shoulder.

“No. I have a hot tub. And right now, I think they’d serve my head on a platter if I left you home.”

I smiled, bowing my head as he hauled me into the building and then further into the elevator. I sighed, closing my eyes at the quiet of the motor and gears moving. At Felix’s soft breaths. The way his zen scent filled me with calm.

As soon as the elevator opened, Anson was there. Furious.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” he hollered. The sheer force with which he yelled had me taking several steps backward. “Going in there and bringing Katiya with you?! Are you out of your mind?!”

“He’s not mad at you,” Felix said quietly.

It took me a minute to realize he was talking to me. I could smell my own fear fill the room, which was impressive, since beta’s scents are weak at best.

Anson’s voice alerted the rest of the pack, and they were all there. Cohen offered me his hand, and I took it, just to get

out of Anson's line of fire. He continued to yell at Felix and the Chief of Police stood there stoically and let him.

"You're freezing," Cohen said, his hands rubbing my arms.

"It's a cold cave," I murmured. "No heaters."

He grinned, despite the trepidation and anger in his eyes. "Gideon, why don't you take our beta to the hot tub?"

Gideon nodded, wrapping his arms around me and holding me tightly. "I was so scared," he whispered.

"I'm sorry. I just didn't want him to go in there alone," I answered.

Silence followed my words as everyone looked at me. I flushed.

"So brave," Cohen said, leaning his forehead against the back of my hair. "Go get warm, baby."

I nodded, letting Gideon lead me to the end of the house. I hadn't been down this length of hallway. Peering through the open doors, I realized this was where their bedrooms were. He didn't take me into any of them, but out a door at the end. It led to the roof, where there was a large hot tub waiting.

Gideon let me go, rolling the cover back until it fell off. Then he turned the bubbles on. I almost sighed in relief as I watched the steam rise.

"Clothes off, pretty girl," he said.

I flushed, looking around.

"No one can see us up here," he said, smiling. "Promise. It's private."

Glancing behind me, there were more people to see than just strangers.

"They won't be upset at all. Maybe it'll be enough of a distraction and stop their yelling."

"It wasn't smart," I said. "I told him that."

Gideon grinned. "I don't doubt that at all. Come on. Can I take your clothes off?"

I smiled, nodding.

He bent for my shoes first, sliding my feet out. And then my socks, which made me cringe. I've been wearing them for almost two days. They must reek now. Sliding his hands up my legs, he lifted my shirt over my head, dropping it behind me. Then my bra, but paused when he found it was inside out.

I flushed. "It was cold in the cave," I whispered.

Gideon beamed but didn't say anything as he fumbled with the clasp. "These should be snaps, for the record. This is ridiculous."

Laughing, I shook my head. "They're torture devices. A true hell is forcing a woman to wear a bra for eternity."

"Noted," he said, dropping his hand down my stomach, though his gaze had settled on my breasts. He licked his lips before slipping his fingers inside my pants and shoving them past my hips. He took my underwear with them, letting the fabric pool at my feet. "In the water, my pretty beta," he murmured.

I climbed in with his help. I settled and then watched Gideon as he quickly stripped from his clothing and joined me. He stilled for a second, turning his attention to the door.

"Oh, Reed is mad. He's all fiery."

My eyes widened as I looked at the door too.

"Hiding dragon. That's my alpha," Gideon said, grinning at me.

"We're back and safe," I said. "That should count for something."

"It does. But we spent all night petrified that you wouldn't come home. Since I would likely just burst into tears, it's best that I am assigned to tend to you while the alphas yell and make up."

"They won't stay mad?"

Gideon shook his head, bringing me into his lap. "No. We were scared, Kat. Now that you're here and safe, it's easier to

be mad than to allow that fear to take over.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.”

“It kind of is. I wasn’t going to let him go alone. I’ve been reading the stories.”

“Fault doesn’t matter,” Anson said as he stepped outside. The rest of the alphas were behind him. Felix didn’t waste any time taking his clothes off and climbing in. He sat beside Gideon, wrapping an arm around him and bringing us both close. “You shouldn’t have gone in there alone. End of discussion.”

I nodded. It’s not that I didn’t agree. I did. Wholeheartedly.

“You made her get in here naked?” Cohen asked, frowning at Gideon.

Gideon smiled. “I’m not sure which of you parades around in a bikini or even a ladies one-piece, but I don’t have one.”

“Reed probably has something,” Felix said.

Gideon paused and looked up. “You’re right. I didn’t think of that. Where did he go?”

“To calm down.”

“I felt him,” Gideon said, smiling quietly as he leaned against Felix.

“We all did,” Tristen said. “Are you going to be okay if we join you?”

I nodded. Though I meant to close my eyes, I was still watching as they dropped their clothing and stood before me in nothing but their underwear. The kind where their trunks were in front of them, bounding in the breeze.

I flushed, closing my eyes as Anson, Cohen, and Tristen climbed into the tub.

“It’s Halloween eve,” Gideon said. “Tomorrow is the big ball.”

“Oh!” I sat up. “I need to get to work.”

Anson shook his head. "I called you out. Relax. You've been through a lot." He glared at Felix.

Felix smiled. His fingers dropped to my head, massaging my scalp. I sighed and closed my eyes. Maybe I could take a nap right here. Would anyone be upset?

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

## REED



I watched them through the window for a while. Seeing my pack and the woman I was sure I was in love with sitting in the hot tub. My alphas remained angry with Felix, even as they gave into their instincts and made sure he was alright. No injuries.

Cohen ordered food. A whole lot of it. He was on the phone for more than twenty minutes placing the order.

Katiya was relaxed, watching the alphas shyly through her lashes. Relaxing into Gideon's embrace and further into Felix's. None of us missed Felix's scent all over her. All over. Deeply. Thoroughly. The kind of scent marking that only comes from sex.

Was I jealous? More than I'd ever been in my life.

So why was I inside watching? Because I was still angry. I could feel it vibrate through my chest, getting the alpha I locked away within a mile-thick concrete bunker all riled up and ready to break free. There was a growl just under my skin, simmering in my throat. And it terrified me.

The hate of my designation ran deep. So deep that I was even afraid of myself. It was both complicated and basic at the same time. The two emotions ran so thoroughly intertwined that I never knew what I was feeling. But it could become so blindingly overwhelming that I reverted into something more animal than human.

I wanted to be there with them. At least on the roof, if not in the hot tub. I wanted to be assured that they were both okay,



if not starving and thirsty. I wanted to hear their voices because what little sleep I had last night was filled with nightmares that they'd never return.

But I was still shaking. Angry. Afraid. Made all the worse because the sleeping alpha inside me was awake and thrashing. Trying to break through the bars. Being such a raging monster that the bars were buckling.

Maybe I wasn't looking out the window anymore. Anson's presence in the room startled me. It shouldn't have. It was his room. But it was the one with the window to the roof.

"Hey."

I jumped, spinning around, my teeth bared as I barely held back the growl.

Anson lifted his hands but remained where he stood in the doorway. I shuddered and stood straight, staring at him with wide eyes. Being afraid immediately brings me back to the days I was always afraid.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. It's fine. I'm fine. This is home.

My breath released in a rush as I looked at him. "Sorry."

Anson shook his head, dropping his hands into his pockets. "Don't be."

"I forget how fear can sneak up on me," I whispered.

He nodded, offering me his hand. That I hesitated said that my mental state was still threatening to deteriorate a little. After another couple deep breaths, I moved into his side and let him wrap me in his arms.

I breathed him in, reminding myself that Anson was my alpha. *Mine. My* alpha. He wasn't going to hurt me. He wasn't going to tie me up. He accepted when I needed space.

"What do you need?" Anson asked.

Shaking my head, I continued to breathe in his cedarwood scent. "Nothing. Just a few more minutes."

“Don’t rush it, Reed. It’s alright to be afraid for those you love.”

“But that fear triggers every other fear,” I muttered, frustrated.

He nodded. “Want to take a minute with our omega? Or maybe Gideon and Katiya?”

Yes. That’s what I wanted. I think that’s what I needed. “And Felix,” I whispered. Despite the anger directed at him, my fear of losing him ran deep.

Anson kissed the top of my head. “Hang on a minute, okay?”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

Gently and slowly, he framed my face and directed my eyes to his. “We always do whatever our packmates need. That’s what it means to be an alpha, sweet boy.”

Anson always tried to rewrite the definition of alpha that had ingrained itself inside me. Alphas take care of their pack. Their entire pack was their priority. They put other alphas first: their happiness, their safety, their needs.

The men who hurt me may have alpha genetics, but they weren’t alphas.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s what my alphas do.” It was the only concession I could bring myself to make.

His smile said he knew exactly what I was thinking, and he expected my response. I closed my eyes as he kissed my forehead and left me alone in his room to watch out the window. I could hear his voice as he stood in the door to the roof, asking Cohen and Tristen for their assistance in getting the food prepared and brought out.

It wasn’t here, something they all knew. But they also knew why he was asking without having to say. They could all feel me through my bond with Gideon. An echo. In the same way I could feel them.

And because they knew that Anson had asked them for space on my behalf, I was filled with their affection and

support. Their big masses swirling around me, reminding me that they were my armor. My protection.

I smiled, though they couldn't see it.

The three of them didn't say anything to me on the way by, and I waited until they were well into the kitchen before I ventured into my room to change. Sure, they all stripped to their underwear, but I'd rather put on swim trunks.

Felix, Gideon, and Katiya were quiet as I joined them. They watched without staring as I climbed in and sat on Gideon's other side, opposite Felix. After a minute, Gideon adjusted so that he was leaning his back more heavily into Felix and facing me with Katiya.

She reached for me, catching my hand underwater, and I leaned into them both. Through the hot, bubbly steam, I barely caught Katiya's scent. It was subtle anyway, light and airy. But there was no mistaking the crisp raspberries and gardenia mingled into Gideon's honey-sweet perfume.

And through both, I caught the zen of Felix. I closed my eyes and let their mingling smells settle me. My alpha was okay. My omega was here to soothe me just by existing. And the beta who held my heart in her hands was whole.

"Reed?" Katiya asked, her voice soft and melodic. I opened my eyes to look at her. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I answered. "Too many people are overwhelming. Even when they're my people."

She smiled. "I get that."

I knew she did. Even with different experiences, I knew she understood. We shared much of the same fear. It manifested in trauma that was similar.

Brushing her hair aside, I stared into her eyes. "Are you okay?"

Her smile widened a little, though it remained soft. "I am. The cave is frightening because it's so dark and silent. Makes it disorienting. But I've lived through worse fears."

I wasn't sure where we stood. Whether she'd fully forgiven me. But I needed to taste her. To feel her tongue against mine. Swallow her breath as the air I needed to breathe.

Tentatively, I pressed my lips to hers. Lightly. With no demand at all.

"Just kiss her," Gideon said, pushing Katiya further into me, making our lips collide.

She giggled, bringing a hand to my hair and tangling her fingers. Her lips worked against mine and I took that to mean she approved. So I kissed her in earnest. Tasting her thoroughly and letting it soothe every unrest inside me.

When she somehow ended up in my lap, straddling me with her arms around my neck, I sighed in relief to be holding her again.

"You know what I think?" Gideon asked.

I didn't have to ask. I could already feel his spike in arousal. Smell the honey myrrh turning sweeter by the second.

"Gideon," Felix warned but when I looked over, I could tell that he was rubbing our omega's hardening cock. Actually, based on the expression lighting Gideon's beautiful face, he wasn't getting hard. He was already there.

Gideon tried not to squirm. Attempted to keep his eyes open and looked at Katiya and me imploringly. Calmly. Not like he was ready to beg for a knot or anything.

A note of his whimper jumped through the air before he bit his lip to keep it in. Felix's growl was low as he traced the length of Gideon's neck. "Be good, omega."

Gideon shivered, blinking several times.

"What do you think?" Katiya asked.

I looked at her, wondering if she really didn't know what he was trying to suggest that Felix was attempting to prevent. Her smile was shy but sexy. Her gaze said she already knew and was waiting for it.

Technically speaking, she's already been with the three of us. The knowledge spurred the heat inside me hotter, making my cock harden beneath her. She wasn't shying away. She was already sure of where we were headed.

"I think that body heat is a much better way to warm up," Gideon said.

"Do you?" Felix asked, a purr in his voice as he toyed with our boy.

Gideon shivered. "Yes, alpha."

"Aren't you angry with me?" Felix asked.

Gideon nodded before shaking his head. "Maybe a little. That's why you should give me your knot, so I forgive you."

Felix chuckled. Katiya and I grinned. She might not know a lot about omegas, at least, not much *correct* information regarding omegas, but ours was going to give her a crash course.

For instance, when an omega is horny, their mood rarely matters. It's only the orgasms waiting at the other end that has their attention. And when there's an alpha involved, their only goal is to be knotted.

"Do you think Kat wants to see me knot you, precious?"

Gideon paused his squirming and dropped his face down to look at Katiya. Eyes wide. Almost pleading. "Will it bother you, Kat?"

"That's not the right question," Felix corrected.

His brows knit together. "Is it okay?" he tried again.

Felix shook his head. "Try again."

He whined, glancing at me for help. But I wasn't sure what Felix was looking for.

"Do you want to see my alphas knot me, Kat?" he asked and was rewarded with a purr from Felix. Meanwhile, I stilled. Alphas meant plural. He was including me in that question.

A detail that Katiya caught. She looked at me, the softest, most beautiful smile on her face. “Yes. If you’ll let me.”

“Yes, yes,” Gideon said, his voice turning low and breathy. “Please.”

“She’s not asking you, precious omega,” Felix murmured. “Shh. Quiet for a minute.”

Gideon nearly choked on his tongue, trying to do as Felix told him. He really was a good omega. I had no idea why he wanted me.

But I couldn’t focus on that. Not with the only woman I’ve ever wanted sitting on my lap asking if she can see me knot my omega.

“If it—”

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “I don’t want your agreement in any way directed at me. It’s okay if you’re not comfortable with it. I’m quite sure Felix will manage to knot him all on his own.”

I smiled, closing my eyes. “But my answer does depend on you.” Looking at her again, I hoped she could see that being with her was important. I could keep my knot to myself, especially around her.

“Why?”

“Because—“ I took a breath as I tried to prepare myself to get the words out. “Because I know how terrifying it is to have a knot close. Knowing what’s going to happen.”

She leaned forward, brushing her lips across mine. “But your knot is for Gideon.”

“Yes!” Gideon sang before he could stop himself.

I laughed, shaking my head.

“Do you know what I learned in the caves?” she asked. I shook my head, and she continued. “That an alpha doesn’t worry about themselves first. They worry about whoever is with them. If they’re cold. Or afraid. Lost. They’re not at all concerned with themselves. I think you’re a good alpha,

Reed,” she whispered. “And I know you’ll never do something to me if I tell you no.”

“Never,” I said, my ears ringing. *Good alpha.*

“So, I’ve also never watched others have sex,” she said, smirking. “And I kinda want to see how differently you two take your omega.”

Gideon groaned. In the corner of my eye, I could see as he stared with pleading eyes, biting his lip so he’d not speak.

“And with me, no knot,” Katiya added. “But you already know that.”

“You can ride me, pretty beta,” Gideon said. “I have no knot at all.”

Felix laughed while I rolled my eyes.

“Also, I’ve never had group sex either. For the record.”

“Fuck, Kat,” Gideon grunted. “We have to give her all these firsts. Please.”

“You don’t have to,” she whispered to me. “No pressure, Reed.”

“No, no. No pressure,” Gideon agreed. But his eyes were dilated as he stared at me. As if I could deny him anything.

I nodded, bringing my hands up to take her face and bring it closer. “Yes,” I said against her lips. “I’ll do anything for you.”

“And me?” Gideon asked. “For the record.”

Katiya giggled. “Silly omega,” she murmured. “That’s a given. Good alphas give their omegas everything.”

“And their betas,” Felix said.

“And our betas,” I agreed.

I’ll never forget the smile on her face as she looked at me. Or the way she spoke the next words. They will forever be what combats any storms I face ahead.

“And their betas,” she agreed. “I like that.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



# KATIYA



It was still scary. Two alphas. And they both had knots. But this time, I could see them in the daylight.

“Will you really watch?” Gideon asked, his hips jumping in the water as Felix rubbed him. “You’ll watch them knot me?”

“Do you want me to?” I asked curiously.

Gideon’s groan turned into a whine. “Yes. I don’t know that I’ve ever wanted anything more.”

Felix chuckled, dragging his teeth across Gideon’s neck. He arched his back, the sunlight catching on the marks around his nipple where Gideon had told me Felix had bitten him, the twin crescent scars framing his nipple.

“He’s a sexy man,” Reed said quietly.

I looked at him, nodding. “He is.”

“Princess,” Gideon grunted, gaining my attention again. “I—will you ride me while I’m knotted? Please? I desperately want to feel that.”

I grinned, my cheeks flushing as I stared at the way he was panting. Through the bubbly water, I could see that he’d somehow lost his underwear and Felix was now stroking him. No more teasing rubs over wet fabric. How many orgasms has he already had, I wondered.

“Yes. But I want to watch first.”

“That means you ought to present for me, precious,” Felix purred. “Show Katiya how well you listen. How good you are at pleasing your alpha.”

Gideon basically sprang from the water. He climbed onto the bench seat next to me with his ass out. He looked over his shoulder at Felix before spinning his head to look at me. Giving me a grin. So excited.

Felix chuckled. He slid Gideon away slightly, giving us all a little room to move. Then he moved away and opened a little cabinet within the top of the hot tub, where he pulled out a tube.

“When you have an omega, there’s lube everywhere,” Reed said.

“Or when you have a house full of men,” Felix said. “We were stashing lube before our omega. Although, the amount has considerably increased since our perfect boy joined us.”

Gideon shivered as he watched Felix.

Although I heard the conversation, I was busy staring at Felix. Now that he was out of the water, standing with his cock well on display, I couldn’t stop staring. Big was what I was expecting. All alphas were big as far as I knew. But I wasn’t even sure what to compare this to. And then there was a tennis ball at the base. His knot.

“Gorgeous, right?” Gideon asked.

Blinking a few times, I looked at him with my eyes still wide. He grinned. “I told you they were glorious. Didn’t I?”

All I could do was nod. I’d had that thing inside me. Before I could stop myself, I looked down into the water.

Reed laughed. Not only was he wearing swim trunks, but I couldn’t actually see through the water with all the bubbles. He kissed my cheek, his mouth moving softly to my neck. “I’ll show you. In a bit. I promise.”

I nodded, looking up into his pretty hazel eyes. “I’m glad you trust me to see all of you.”

His smile fell a little, but didn't disappear. "I swear to you, Kat. It had nothing to do with my trust in you. Nothing I kept from you had anything to do with you at all. Just me."

"I know. But I think you only let Gideon truly see your alpha."

He understood what I was saying now. He smiled a little further, nodding. "Yes. Only my omega when he needs me."

"And you trust me to see you or you wouldn't have agreed to knot him."

"I trust my pack," he said quietly. "I trust you with everything in me. But I'm afraid of what I am. I'm afraid of something scaring me and somehow I get shoved back into a place where I'm not fully present."

Felix's hand came down on his head, gently ruffling his hair. "And if that happens, your pack is right here to help you through it, Reed. You'll always be safe with us. Even if you lose your battle and fear wins for a time. You will never fight alone."

Reed closed his eyes, emotion taking over for a minute. He nodded. "I know," he whispered. "Thank you."

Gideon leaned in, pressing his face into Reed's cheek. Reed smiled, rubbing his cheek against Gideon. Before he knew it, Reed was purring gently as Gideon loved on him.

"Love you, alpha," Gideon murmured. "So deeply."

Reed opened his eyes, staring into mine. He smiled before turning his face into Gideon's. "I love you too, Gideon. My omega."

Gideon pulled away and readjusted himself so that he was presenting for Felix. Once again, my gaze was drawn to his cock and the way he was rubbing it. The entire thing glistened with a layer of lube. I dragged my eyes up to meet his, only to find he was watching me.

"Ready to see our boy beg?" he asked.

I nodded, looking at Gideon.

He grinned at me. "I will. A lot."

Reed chuckled, shaking his head.

Felix moved closer, rubbing his thumb over Gideon's hole. I watched, transfixed, as Felix replaced his thumb with the head of his cock. It looked like he had to use a lot of pressure to push inside even a little bit. But finally, as he angled his hips in, his head slipped inside.

Gideon moaned, dropping his head, his hips jerking slightly.

"Orgasm number one," Reed murmured.

"Not even close," Gideon grunted. "I think I had three already."

Reed laughed.

Though I giggled, I was still staring at the way Felix began working his way into Gideon. His hands on Gideon's hips. Rubbing his ass. Along his spine. And then he began praising him.

"Such a good omega," Felix purred. "Spread your cheeks, beautiful. Let me inside that tight ass."

Gideon dropped his head on the side of the hot tub and reached back. Gripping both his ass cheeks, he spread them, gasping as Felix slid in deeper.

"That's it. You going to cum again? Show Katiya how good you feel."

He turned his head to look at me. It was clear that he was trying to keep his presence of mind. His eyes went in and out of focus. "Good," he muttered, the only coherent word I understood.

"That's my good boy. Stroke your dick for us, baby. Show us how you listen like a good little omega while I get my cock inside you."

"So big," Gideon murmured, dropping one hand to grab his cock. He didn't stroke himself so much as grip it tightly.

Another stream of cum came out, disappearing into the bubbles.

I leaned into Reed, rocking my hips against him without realizing I was doing so. He kissed my jaw, down my neck, before sucking on my earlobe. “Want to feel good while we watch?” he whispered.

I nodded. Though I didn’t think they’d heard, Gideon murmured, “Yes. Take Katiya so I can see.”

“How about the same position?” Reed asked.

The question made Gideon snap out of his stupor for a minute and grin. He looked at me, nodding. “You want to, Kat?”

The idea sent a thrill through me. I nodded shyly and stood. Felix never stopped working his way in. Slowly, little bits at a time, he entered his omega. I turned away long enough to look at Reed. He reached for my hips, kissing my stomach. His hands cupped my butt, squeezing in the most enticing way.

Standing, he pulled me against him. “Present,” he murmured. There was a hint of a purr in his voice. An allusion to alpha.

I moved around him, getting on my knees on the bench with Gideon. He reached for me, taking my hand and bringing it to his face. I looked over my shoulder as Reed slipped out of his swim trunks and hung them over the side.

His cock was just how I remembered it. And I felt doubly foolish that I had thought he was an omega. Especially now having felt an omega’s. Reed was alpha, through and through. Even without his knot.

But that wasn’t the case right now. It must have been Gideon’s presence. His perfume saturating the air. His knot was definitely swelling.

Reed watched me as he moved behind me. Gently, he placed a hand on my hip, and I looked up at him. “No knot,” he promised.

I nodded. There was a lot of trust floating around in the hot tub right now.

His fingers dipped into my pussy for just a second, long enough to make Felix growl as he watched, and Gideon whined. I shivered, enjoying all their reactions. And then he was getting lined up, seemingly satisfied that I was ready for him.

My grip on Gideon tightened as he pushed his way in. I gasped, squirming my hips to try to relieve some of the overwhelming pressure. He wasn't as big as Felix, but he was still an impressive size. Big enough to feel like he had to make room.

I locked eyes with Gideon. He grunted, his mouth falling open and his gaze going vague as he came again. I grinned before I closed mine to enjoy the feel of Reed brushing every good place in me.

"Knot," Gideon choked, and I opened my eyes. "Please. I need your knot, alpha."

I smiled, shifting so I could look at Felix behind him. Apparently, he'd made his way inside and was slowly fucking our omega. Long, slow thrusts that Reed was matching. Knowing that he was, seeing and feeling it, made heat blaze brightly through me. My body clenched around Reed, making him growl quietly.

"Knot," Gideon whined. "I need your knot. Alpha, please."

Felix nodded. "Anything you want, precious." He leaned over Gideon, wrapping an arm around his torso and then his neck. Gideon whined. "Ready?"

"Yes. Yes, yes."

I wasn't sure if his thrusts became harder or quicker. I couldn't determine his movement at all with the way Gideon howled with pleasure. His body shook and jerked and convulsed as his eyes went wide. He gripped my hand fiercely, his other holding onto Felix's arm.

Felix groaned, dropping his head. He stilled while Gideon continued to thrash wildly, and I assumed he was completely

inside.

I was surprised by how much the entire thing turned me on. Watching Gideon lose himself in his pleasure, so uncontained that he couldn't stop moving. His cum never stopped flowing as his stomach muscles spasmed with every new pump.

Behind me, Reed's thrusts picked up too. There was nothing for him to match, but still, his rhythm somehow took up cadence with Gideon's pleasure filling the air. My own orgasm snuck up on me, having been building this entire time but too overstimulated to truly feel it. It snuck out, and I gave a sudden scream as it burst forth. Stars lit my eyes as I shook.

Felix pulled Gideon up when he started to slow. Gideon gasped and whined while Felix murmured praise in his ear that even had me squirming in appreciation.

"Katiya," Gideon said, his hands reaching for me.

Reed chuckled. "Even lost in oblivion, our omega calls for you," he murmured. We'd sunk to the bench on our sides at a weird angle while he slowly rocked in and out of me. I think we were just enjoying the feel of one another again.

Felix sat on the bench, Gideon still locked around him. His arms fell away at the new angle. At the pressure and pleasure. He bucked again. This time, his movements had Felix growling louder as he gripped Gideon tightly. Though I couldn't see it through the water, I had a feeling his orgasms had reached a new level.

"Kat," Gideon whined as he bucked. "Please, Kat. I need you."

I flushed as Reed pulled out of me. He kissed my shoulder. "He'll understand if you don't want to."

But I did. I moved through the water. Gideon didn't see me as he continued to ask for me. Reaching for me. But Felix watched me with a predatory gaze. With strong, gentle hands, he helped me climb on top of them.

Once I was somewhat situated, Felix's hands landed on Gideon's hips to force him still. Gideon howled again and this

time, despite all the water jets and bubbles, I felt his release against my skin. I laughed, shaking my head.

It was hard not to just slide right down his length. Somehow, I managed to ease my way. Felix couldn't keep him all that still. With every bit of him I got inside me, he bucked harder.

"If you're comfortable with the idea, I think it might be easiest on him if you just let your weight fall and let Gideon work himself out using us," Felix said.

"It won't hurt him?" I asked.

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Honey, he was made for this. There aren't any words for this feeling, but trust me when I tell you, everything about him was made for an alpha. There's nothing that I could do right now that would hurt him except trying to forcefully pull myself out of him. That includes putting your weight on him. I think he's going to go wild."

"You'll get a taste of Gideon in heat," Reed said.

He was standing behind me, a hand in my hair, offering me support.

I nodded and eased myself down. Letting my weight rest solely on Gideon. Sinking his cock as deep as it could get.

That was it. Felix moved his hands to my ass to hold me still as Gideon lost his mind. I could feel how he released. His cries of pleasure filled my ears. But more than that, the way his hips jerked upward into me, over and over and over again, had me climaxing with him. I was sure it was more than once. More than twice. But I had no idea as I sank into it.

His body burned. His hands clutched me tightly as he released all his control and let out the feral part of him. Giving himself over to every omega instinct.





I FOUND myself cradled in Reed's arms, with no memory of how I got there. We were still in the hot tub, but everything was quiet. Opening my eyes, blinking several times to get the water droplets loose from my lashes, I looked around.

Gideon was still on Felix's lap, but he was watching me. Flushed. Certainly, feeling good. But staring at me.

"Is it too soon to tell you that I'm pretty sure I'm in love with you?" Gideon asked.

My eyes went wide as I stared at him.

"Okay, too soon. I didn't say it."

I laughed, closing my eyes and turning my face into Reed's chest. He was purring, his hand moving softly through my wet hair.

"My alpha is almost ready to let me go," Gideon announced. I glanced at him. "And then I have another alpha to take me. Will you still watch, Princess?"

I nodded. "Yes."

He grinned. I expected movement, but he remained perfectly still. I've never seen him sit so still. Narrowing my eyes, I watched him, making him grin.

"Knots don't relax with a lot of movement," Reed said. "Gideon has some single-minded determination right now, so he's basically been still as a statue for the past ten minutes."

"Impressive," I noted.

"Very," Felix agreed.

Our conversation was light as we sat in the tub. I knew when Felix's knot was released because Gideon's grin turned wicked. He stretched, arching his back, and stood. Crossing

the tub, he held his hand out to me. I let him pull me up and into his chest, where he kissed me slowly.

“I don’t want to scare you away, but I’m pretty sure I do,” he murmured. I swallowed, staring into his eyes. “Also, I really, really love knots, but having you on top of me while I’m being knotted is probably the most orgasmic feeling I’ve ever experienced. I can’t wait to feel you while I’m in heat.”

“Alright,” Felix said, taking my hand and pulling me away from Gideon. “Stop saying things.”

I laughed as he pulled me to his side. Gideon winked at me before sinking into Reed’s side. He looked at his alpha, kissing his jaw and dropping his lips to Reed’s shoulder.

Reed looked at me. “You really want to see?” His voice was quiet. Unsure. A little afraid. But I didn’t think it was because he was going to be the alpha his omega needed. He was afraid to show me that he was an alpha. To let me see him in that way.

“Yes, alpha.”

His eyes widened. Nostrils flared. A low growl filled the air, and he shivered.

Reaching for Gideon, he moved the omega around so that he was somehow laying on his back on the little shelf of the hot tub. Reed stared at me for a minute before giving Gideon his full attention. Kissing him. Rubbing him.

His voice turned rougher. Huskier. Alpha. As he spoke. Telling Gideon how special and perfect he was.

I was so caught up in the way he treated Gideon with such adoration that I missed when he started to make his way into our omega. I thought Reed had forgotten about me, but he pulled Gideon’s hand that was blocking my view over Gideon’s head and held it with his opposite. Then he hooked Gideon’s knee on his elbow, affording me a perfect shot of his cock sliding into Gideon’s tight ass.

The view was... hot. My breathing was heavy as I watched. My heart raced as his knot met the threshold. I leaned into Felix and thankfully, he took pity on me. Instead of

letting me fumble with trying to please myself, he dropped his hand into the water between my legs.

And as Reed worked his knot into Gideon, Felix pushed his fingers into me.

Once more, Gideon's pleasure cries filled the air as he shook and wriggled under Reed. All the while, Reed remained a perfect alpha. Gentle. Strong. Giving Gideon every ounce of pleasure that the omega demanded, as he made sure Gideon knew that he was doing everything exactly right. A perfect omega.

Perfect alphas.

Another orgasm washed through me as I stared at alpha and omega locked together in the most blissful state and I realized in that moment that this was something I always wanted to be a part of.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

# KATIYA



I waited for the moment that panic would take me. Alphas. Two alphas. My heart was racing wildly, afraid it would all come crashing down. For my terror to overtake me.

It didn't come. No matter how long I waited as we curled together in the hot, bubbling water. Reed and Felix were both purring with Gideon and I curled together in their arms.

There was something humbling about seeing Reed let all his fear fall away and be the alpha Gideon needed. Watching it was like seeing a flower bloom. One whose petals were torn and wrinkled, battered and bent. But that flower was stunning anyway. The way his scent filled the air, strong and sweet, had made me stare in awe.

I supposed it took an alpha who hated what he was to show me that not all alphas are cut from the same cloth. There was something deeper in that realization than just meeting a few kind alphas.

“Kat?” Gideon asked, his voice soft as if he were afraid I might spook and run. I opened my eyes to see him staring at me, less than a foot away. “Are you okay?”

Behind me, Reed's purring hiccupped. Remembering that he was an alpha. Coming down from the sex high and letting his inhibitions overtake him again.

I nodded. “Yes. Wonderful.”

Felix smiled, gray eyes watching me with approval.

Reaching under the water, I found Reed's hand on my thigh and tangled our fingers together. He released a breath. Though he didn't stop purring, it became quieter. Getting ready to go out.

I'd never seen anyone get knotted before. Not even forcefully in Chaingate. Those activities were kept behind closed doors. Such as closet doors. Meaning, we could hear it but not see it.

I remembered the closet well.

The idea of seeing anyone take a knot had given me nightmares for years. But watching Felix and then Reed please Gideon... to hear Gideon beg for it, seeing the bliss on his face. It was a very heady sensation. More erotic than I ever could have imagined.

“Hungry?”

I looked up to find the other three alphas in the door, each with trays in their hands and only wearing their underwear. Cohen and Anson wore boxer briefs, outlining every curve of their dicks perfectly. They were both half hard.

Tristen's were more of a brief-style, with a pouch in the front where his junk was cradled within a hammock. There was something erotic about it. Something that made everything in me hot and wet again.

Tearing my eyes from inappropriate places, I stared at the trays of food, my stomach growling as the aromas hit me. I didn't even remember what they ordered but not having eaten since before Felix and I went into the cave last night, I was suddenly reminded how starving I was.

“Yes,” Gideon said, shifting in the water. “Can we eat here?”

Felix moved away. I was surprised to be saddened by the loss of his touch, so I curled further into Reed's lap. Once more, his purr hiccupped, but this time it didn't threaten to go out. It strengthened. I smiled, looking up at him.

Reed kissed my nose, touching my cheek with such careful caresses. Like I might disappear. Might back away and remind

myself to be angry again.

Part of me wanted to apologize again. I managed to refrain. We were both to blame for what now felt like a lot of unnecessary drama.

Felix turned the jets off to let the water settle. I wondered how we were going to eat in the hot tub. It wasn't really conducive to eating. However, it became clear that this wasn't something new that Gideon just sprung on them. They'd eaten in the hot tub before. Trays with floating bases were set in the water and one at a time, the alphas set the plates of food on them before joining us in the water again.

I tried to move off Reed's lap, but his grip on my waist tightened before dropping away to let me go. Instead, I turned so I was facing the center, slipping down between his legs to sit on the seat. He kissed my neck when I settled.

"Thanks," he whispered, wrapping his arm around my waist again.

Smiling, I nodded, leaning back into his chest to feel his purr reverberate through my body like a soft, soothing massage.

Silence consumed the tub as we ate, the only sounds being the movement of water and the scrape of silverware on the plates. Plus the town beyond; though it was faint because we were seven stories up.

"Well," Anson said as eating wound down. "What happened?"

Felix looked up, chewing his food as he studied his alpha. Gauging whether he was ready to talk, as opposed to yell. After swallowing, he took a sip of water and sat back, resting his arm around Gideon's shoulders as their omega got comfy for storytime.

"Did you see the body?" Felix asked.

Cohen nodded. "I'm surprised he's still alive. I think they're performing blood transfusions in an attempt to replace what he lost."

“I’m surprised he had any blood left,” I said. Reed’s arms flexed around me.

“We didn’t find the other entrance. The one the second victim mentioned. I don’t doubt that there is another entrance that they accessed because my men haven’t left the cave front. However, we stopped pushing deeper once we found the scene of the attack.”

“And?” Gideon said, leaning forward.

Felix smiled, kissing his cheek. “It was really gruesome. There’s a third body, torn apart. Blood everywhere. There are marks within the walls that certainly appear to originate from claws. Large claws.”

“Did you take pictures?” Tristen asked.

He nodded. “Yes. I left my phone with one of my officers to bring to the station so I could get home and be yelled at.”

“You deserve more,” Cohen said.

Felix nodded again. “I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you, and we certainly didn’t mean to get stuck there.”

“The cave wall just closed the path entirely,” I said, remembering looking up to find that the tunnel we’d come through had vanished altogether.

“You went beyond the boundary line!” Gideon said, angry all over again.

Felix sighed, brushing Gideon’s hair back. “Yes. I was hoping that we’d find the entrance being used so we could close it down. I also didn’t anticipate how deep within the caves they’d come from.”

“How far?” Cohen asked.

Felix shook his head. “At least a couple miles beyond the boundary. We were concentrating on the bloody trail more than paying attention to how far we were going.”

“You got out!” Gideon said. “They let you out!”

He shivered. Felix wrapped him up in his arms and hugged him tightly. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gone into the cave.



Part of me thought that I could catch who was behind it. That I could end this. His blood was fresh, and he had made it out. I didn't take into account how his adrenaline played into that. He'd come a long way when he probably should have collapsed far before he even reached the boundary line."

"Do you think it was a monster like everyone is saying?" Gideon asked.

I was surprised when Felix hesitated. Frowning, he shook his head. But it wasn't in disagreement. It was in bewilderment. "I don't believe in monsters. I understand that throughout history there have been countless stories depicting many different monsters, but there's been nothing but circumstantial evidence to back them up. And around the world, monsters have been unmasked as men playing up lore to find something."

"And there's plenty to find," Tristen said.

"Supposedly," Felix agreed.

"Treasure?" I asked. "From the pirates?"

"Or the Sandview beta. Or any other number of legends that have placed valuables within the caves," Felix said. "There's been enough uncovered through the years—a coin here, a piece of jewelry there—to keep the intrigue alive."

"Maybe it's Sam," Reed said. "Trying to get people to leave."

"I'm not sure Sam has the gumption to pull something like this off." Anson shrugged. "He's an old coot but relatively harmless."

"Most serial killers live right next door without anyone having any idea that the kind teacher next door has very bloody hands," Tristen said.

I grinned, popping another piece of bread into my mouth.

"Don't underestimate him," Felix said, nodding. "Thanks for the reminder."

"What about that couple that your officers have caught twice trying to sneak into the cave after you've made it off

limits?” Cohen asked.

“Charles and Ruby?” I asked.

“Yes. They’ve been here since the first visitor came running from the caves crying monster,” Cohen said.

“And they’re very quick to tell you that they’re amateur treasure hunters. I wouldn’t be surprised at all that they found another entrance when they couldn’t get into the obvious one,” I said. “The day I went on my first tour, they were trying to get into one of the barred tunnels, but quickly backtracked when Alec called them out.”

“I’ll look into them. I think they’re already being watched, though,” Felix said.

“If there’s a person behind it, I would think that it would have to be someone familiar with the caves. Someone who’s been in town for a while,” Reed said.

“*If* there’s a person behind it?” I asked, shifting so I could look over my shoulder at him.

Reed smiled, shrugging. “I’m not superstitious, but on the off chance that these spirits or monsters or whatever else is said to live in the caves are real, I don’t want to piss them off.”

I laughed, sinking into his arms again.

“I know you felt the otherness once we crossed the boundary line,” Felix said to me.

“And saw that the tunnel disappeared,” I said, nodding. “Now that we’re out of there, it’s hard to process that I didn’t just imagine it.”

“I get that,” Felix said. “I think everyone is skeptical until they experience it a few times.”

“Once is probably fine for me,” I said.

The pack chuckled.

“Reed is probably right,” Tristen said. “A local seems a more reasonable suspect. So that’s Sam?”

“In your research, do you find it’s more often someone from out of town or someone local behind these kinds of events?” Felix asked.

Tristen shrugged. “I haven’t made a tally but...” He paused to think about it. “Actually, I think it could go either way. I could navigate the tunnels of the Great Pyramid like I built it, and I’ve never been there. Or tell you exactly where the old bank is in the underground city of Paloma from both the modern city built on top of it and if you dropped me anywhere underground. I could likely navigate the forest in Jenineeya. I’ve never been to any of these places, but I’ve done extensive research.”

“We should test that skill one day,” Gideon said.

I couldn’t help but nod.

“Maybe Hugo,” Tristen said. I looked up at him, startled by the suggestion.

“Why?” Anson asked, frowning.

Tristen shrugged. “A feeling.”

“You just don’t like him because he doesn’t like omegas,” Gideon said, grinning.

Again, Tristen shrugged. “Maybe.”

Felix frowned. “I’ve spoken to him several times since this has started. He was proposing we shut the caves down until we can flush out who’s behind the violence so no one else gets hurt.”

Tristen shrugged in response.

“Is there a reason you’re not saying?” Cohen asked.

“He’s weird and creepy,” Tristen said, crossing his arms.

I didn’t know him well, but even I could see that he probably had more to add but wasn’t going to. Maybe because I was there. “Is there a restroom I can use?” I asked. Maybe if I excused myself from their conversation, he’d share whatever his thoughts were.

“You don’t have to go,” Tristen said, a smile saying that I was caught lingering on his lips.

Grinning, I pushed away the floating tray. “Well, do you want me to use the hot tub or a bathroom?”

Laughing, Tristen offered me his hand and helped me up the slippery stairs. Only as I was standing on the lip did I remember I was completely naked. And now giving my bare ass to this pack of alphas. Swallowing as I continued down the stairs, I tried to ignore the way my skin burned. And I couldn’t stop myself from wrapping my arms around my chest shyly.

“First door on the right is my room. Bathroom just beyond. You can grab a towel from the closet if you’d like,” Anson said.

“Thanks.”

Trying not to run, I turned and hurried inside. The hot water made the warm air feel unusually cool against my wet skin. The floors were wood, so although I tried not to drip anywhere, I left watery footprints behind me.

Felix, Cohen, and Anson’s room was sleek and modern, with dark furniture against a light gray-green wall. There was a plush carpet under his large bed that I was dying to walk through and let the fibers reach through my toes.

His room was in the same style and smelled like man. Aftershave. Men’s body wash. And of course, their scents all mingled together. Through them, I could just barely pick out the cedarwood.

Safe. Always safe.

I smiled as I opened the linen closet and pulled out a towel to wrap around me. Though it felt like I just got out of the shower, I turned to a clear mirror.

Physically, I didn’t feel any different than when I left Chaingate. With perhaps the exception of training my muscles to walk on sand, I didn’t do anything that could equate to exercise. And yet, I barely recognized myself in my reflection.

Maybe because my hair was sopping wet. As was my skin. But I looked brighter. Like there was more color and definition in my skin. My shoulders were straight. My eyes clearer. And a smile was barely tugging at my mouth.

My parents wouldn't recognize me. I was pretty sure there was even more weight on my face. I wasn't even mad about it.

A voice in my head said that if the alphas of Chaingate had seen this woman, they wouldn't have passed me by. The girls I'd seen taken... I could believe that. I'd always had a hypothesis that if you show any strength at all, if you present as anything other than a meek, weak beta, the alphas were drawn to you. Wanting to dominate and control. To strip you of your will to live.

I always remained a shell. No interest. No personality. As bland as possible.

That's not the woman staring back at me from the mirror. Not at all.

I experienced another first while standing alone, wrapped in a towel in Anson's room. The fear that brushed through me wasn't of the alphas outside. Nor that I was in an alpha's bathroom, where he could find me and trap me and overpower me to do as he wanted. I wasn't afraid of the alpha that smelled of cedarwood.

My fear was for the unknown. For the new woman in the mirror who was ready to completely bury the past behind her and live a new and sometimes scary life. Because letting alphas close was terrifying.

But as I was quickly learning, if they're the *right* alphas, scary was also exhilarating.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

## COHEN



Katiya didn't fight us when we asked her to spend the night. And although Anson, Felix, Tristen, and I watched with hunger in our eyes as Reed and Gideon brought her into Gideon's room, we left the door shut. And stared at it.

I bit my lip, trying like hell to keep my growl in.

"Fucking hell," Anson muttered, not nearly as successful at keeping his growl contained. It was light on the air, but it was there. He was coiled to spring. "Nothing in life could have prepared me for reacting to a beta in the same way I do our omega."

Tristen laughed, turning away and disappearing inside his room. I swear that man must have sex dolls or some shit. Since the five of us shared a single omega, no one ever had exclusivity to him. We tried not to be selfish or greedy, but sometimes it was difficult to remember that there were others in the house.

It wasn't so bad between Anson, Felix, and me since we've been together for years anyway. When we were feeling hungry and our omega was in with either Tristen or Reed, we had each other to turn to. Reed was a special case. He wasn't exactly turned off by sex, but he seemed to lack the feral hunger that an alpha typically feels.

Unless our omega is in heat. Then all bets were off.

But Tristen was alpha through and through. Always hungry. Always on in response to our omega constantly

simmering just under the surface. So how he walked away so easily and so nonchalantly always floored me. I would never understand that man.

Sighing, I followed Anson into his room, and we all paused. The light scent of Katiya was there since she'd used his bathroom earlier. It wasn't strong. Just a tease in the air tickling our noses. Stroking featherlight touches along our dicks.

Anson's growl picked up again. I smirked, enjoying his reaction and using it as a distraction from my own. He was right, of course. We knew an omega, especially *our* omega, would drive us wild. But from the moment we saw Katiya, it felt much the same way.

Everything inside me said one thing—*mine!* Going at her pace was incredibly taxing. So I welcomed it when Anson grabbed me and threw me on the bed. It would be a long night knowing that our beta was in the other room. And that Felix had been lucky enough to have her. Not once, but fucking twice.

It was both relieving and maddening that the hot tub water had washed it all away.



HALLOWEEN. Katiya wasn't going into the shop today. She was heading straight for the venue to set up with Linus. Gideon, Reed, and I were joining her.

The initial plan had been to have the costume party on the beach. Using the mouth of the cave as a natural haunting backdrop. But given recent events, we decided to take all temptation away from trying to slip inside for some drunken laughs that could lead to accidents and rent out the ground floor of one of the period homes close to shore.



This one was owned by my family too. So, we weren't exactly renting it. But it was run as a Bed & Breakfast so I was kind of shutting it down for the night and using it as an event venue instead. The rooms were all rented, so it wasn't interrupting much since all eight guests were here for the party, anyway.

There wasn't a lot to set up. Primarily, we were moving around furniture. Opening floors. Storing all the little tchotchkes that might get lost or broken during the night. Deciding where the hors d'oeuvres and beverage tables would be. Where the DJ would be and how we'd wire the speakers so they could be heard in every room.

"What do you think, Kitty Kat?" Linus asked as they stood back to look at one of the rooms. He slung his arm over Katiya's shoulders and I felt myself bristle with possessive irritation.

"I know we agreed to keep it authentic and that the costumes would bring it all together... but there's nothing here that says Halloween except the invitation," she said.

Gideon pulled her from Linus's touch and against his chest. He cooed to Katiya for a minute before glaring at Linus. I grinned, thankful that my omega had a possessive streak, and I wasn't going to be further tempted to break Linus in two.

Linus didn't seem to notice anything as he considered the room. "Okay, I can see your point. I'm thinking about classy decorations. Nothing over the top. Subtle but obvious."

"Yes, good. But we didn't plan for that. We planned a beach party," Katiya said. She twisted in Gideon's arms so she was facing Linus, but was content enough to be trapped there.

"Then let's go shopping," Gideon said. He took Katiya's hand and headed for the door. I exchanged looks with Reed. He nodded and followed the two out.

Linus watched them go, amused. He looked up at me, shrugging. "Next room, boss?"

I nodded. He was a good kid. I was fairly certain he wasn't actually trying to get me to kill him by absentmindedly

touching my beta with a familiarity that made me want to skin him alive.

We continued moving from room to room, rearranging and moving out furniture where we could. There were only so many places to store furniture, though. Felix came in while we were debating on the large dining room table.

“Wander the house, Linus. See if you can find anywhere safe that’s not a safety hazard,” I told him as I turned my attention to Felix.

“Got it,” Linus said, leaving us in the dining room.

“What did you find?” I asked.

Felix nodded. “The site that was giving coordinates for an alternative entrance to the cave has been shut down. It was up for such a short period that there’s very little within search engine archive history.”

I sighed, shaking my head. “It has to be someone local,” I said.

“Or someone stumbled upon it and, realizing what they had, quickly got something up. Maybe someone else shut it down once they realized. I haven’t been overly quiet with what’s going on. Howling Cove hasn’t had a case where details needed to be kept from the public in my history with law enforcement. It wouldn’t take much to know that the focus of our investigation has turned to the other entrances into the cave.”

“Back to figuring out what they want. You think the suspects are who we were discussing last night?”

Felix nodded again. Then shrugged. “There are likely others. Hell, we could add Daxon to the list if we were so inclined. The man is obsessed with Howling Cove history and relics. Just like his parents.”

“You could add me, if you wanted. By all means, my family has been here a long time. I’d wager that we know some secrets and shit that one might be tempted to hunt down.”

He chuckled. "I know where you sleep. And you're awful at sneaking around."

Smirking, I crossed my arms. "You don't know everything about me, alpha."

"I know you're not snooping in the caves. But if it'll make you feel better, I'll add you to my suspect list."

Linus returned then. He thumbed over his shoulder, pointing to the hall he just came through. "You think this table can stand leaning on its side for a while? I think it'll fit in the back hallway, blocking the basement door."

"See how sturdy it is. It's old, but they built things to last back in the day," I told him.

He dropped to his knees and crawled under the table, twisting his torso to inspect the joints.

"The bloodied victim died," Felix said after a minute. "Not surprisingly, but disappointingly. He never regained consciousness long enough to talk."

"The second beta?"

Felix shook his head, frowning as he watched Linus inspect the table. "He has moments of clarity, but the fear in his eyes is like a permanent veil. He'll be talking in what I believe are coherent logical sentences and then revert to mumbling about the monster. Shaking. Rocking back and forth." He sighed. "Whatever's happening in there, someone has gone to great lengths to make a 'real' monster."

"You said the marks you saw carved into the wall were real and not made by man."

"Yes. Not by a man's hand." He flexed his hand, making a claw with his fingers. "Even if the size and shape match, there's no way a man could have dug those into that stone with bare hands."

I looked at Linus on the floor, tapping on the braces with a screwdriver and wiggling the table to watch how the joints reacted.

"What are you thinking?" Felix asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Something on the edge of thought. Not quite there yet.”

Felix left after he helped Linus and me move the enormous dining room table. Gideon, Reed, and Katiya returned a couple hours later, and we spent the rest of the afternoon stringing spiderwebs into corners. Setting skulls around. Battery operated black candles of all shapes and sizes. Little touches of gruesome figurines and tombstones. Draped the sconces with black lace.

Standing back to admire our work, it didn’t overly scream Halloween, but I thought it definitely gave the spaces a more spooky feel. Even with the fake cobwebs, they were laid thinly enough (and without the tacky plastic spiders) that they had the desired effect.

“This looks great,” Linus said. “Nice shopping, guys.”

“Yes,” Gideon agreed. He grinned cheekily before grabbing Katiya’s hand. “Come on, princess. Time to change.”

Katiya let him lead her from the house, waving at Linus as she went. Reed and I followed at a more leisurely pace. She only dug her heels in when Gideon began pulling her toward the door to our house.

“I don’t have anything to wear here,” she said. “I need to go home to change.”

“Do you have something picked out at home?” Gideon asked, eyes narrowed.

Katiya hesitated before shrugging. “I’ll find something.”

“Actually, you ought to come upstairs with us first,” I said, taking her other hand and gently pulling her along. I was nearly panting when she came willingly. She was turning me into a damned dog.

She watched me curiously as we rode the elevator. Any excuse to stare at this woman was fine with me. I couldn’t wait to memorize her features. Her curves. The exact feel of her skin. The taste of her lips.

The ding of the doors opening drew her attention to our suite. I followed my packmates out of the elevator and Gideon disappeared down the hall to retrieve the box I'd been bringing to Katiya yesterday as Felix went rushing out. I still wasn't entirely sure how Katiya had gotten by me in the fray. When I turned for her, having taken my attention from her for less than a minute, the girl was gone and I was nearly a roaring menace.

Both thankfully and maddeningly, she was accounted for. The officers on the beach had seen her all right. And they knew where she was.

In the caves with Felix, armed with nothing but a couple flashlights. Felix always wore a weapon, even when off duty. Not because there had ever been a cause. Just because he was rarely ever completely off duty. As Chief, he could be called at any moment, so he was prepared for any eventuality at all times.

Gideon returned with the box and handed it to Katiya. "Here. It's not really from me, but I am going to take credit for helping."

Reed grinned, clasping his hands behind him.

"Who is it from?" she asked, looking at the box but not touching it.

"Just open it," he urged. "Before I get whiny."

Laughing, Katiya pulled the cover off and set it against her leg. I picked it up, moving it away as she carefully pushed aside the tissue paper. She paused at the hint of blue fabric and then reached in to bring out the garment.

Reed had retrieved the dress from the shop and modified it in the most exquisite way to both be period convincing, but also elegant and sexy. Katiya stared at it for a minute, running her fingers along the smooth fabric, before turning to Reed with wide eyes.

"This is from your boutique. I tried it on."

Reed nodded. "Yes. I made it for you."

She shook her head. "You made it before we met."

“That doesn’t mean I didn’t make it for you. I just hadn’t known at the time.”

“I can’t—”

“You can,” Gideon said, turning her around and taking her shoulders. “Let me help you dress.”

“If you help her dress, we’ll be late,” I said, catching his hand on the way by. “You are genetically unable to keep your hands to yourself. Reed can help her dress and I’ll entertain you.”

Gideon pouted, though he fought a smile. “Okay. Don’t forget the mask. That I can take credit for!”

Katiya still tried to argue as Reed talked her into following him. I had no doubt that he’d be able to convince her to put it on.

“I can keep her, right?” Gideon asked as we watched them disappear down the hall.

“No. We will all keep her if she agrees to stay. She’s not yours.”

“Of course, she is, alpha,” he said, batting his lashes at me. “You’re all mine. I don’t share you at all.”

Pulling him against me, I picked him up. Digging my fingers into his ass so he’d wrap his legs around my waist. I licked my bite on his neck, making him shudder. “Let’s get you dressed, omega. We have a party to attend.”



THE PARTY, while a huge success and maybe a little too crowded, was blissfully uneventful. The room was filled with gossip about the caves and the men who had last come out of them. Of the monster.

Like Felix, I wandered through the throngs of bodies, listening to everyone talk. Hoping to catch even a hint of something that was worth repeating. But either I was in the wrong spot all the time or everyone there was wary of my presence. I got nothing but intrigue.

The best thing about the night was seeing Katiya wrapped in a luxurious blue fabric that accentuated everything about her, making her shine like the fucking moon. I wasn't quite as much of a growly, possessive mess as Anson was, but I was damn close.

It was nearing three in the morning when we finally got everyone out. Reed was nearly passed out on his feet, leaning heavily against Tristen by the door. Gideon was curled at Felix's side, almost dozing.

Somehow, I was lucky enough to have my hands on Katiya. An arm around her waist as she sank her weight into my side. Was she going to argue if I took her home with us? I thought by the way her eyes continued to flutter closed that she wouldn't.

Still, Anson encouraged Felix to bring our omega home and Tris to get Reed home. Anson was going to close up the B & B tightly. That left me and this precious beta.

I swept her into my arms and stepped into the cool night with her tucked tightly against me. She sighed, laying her head on my shoulder.

"Kat," I whispered.

She answered with a quiet, "Mm."

"Do you want me to bring you home? Or will you spend the night with us again?"

Katiya sighed contentedly. "With you. If that's okay."

I couldn't have stopped the purr if I wanted to. "Yes. Always, sweetheart."

A touch of a smile drifted over her beautiful lips. I'm lucky I know the town like the back of my hand because I watched her pretty face the entire time I walked back to our

place instead of where I was walking. Holding her against me was the best feeling in the world. Knowing that I'd gained this girl's trust when all she knew of alphas was fear and pain.

She now understood that I was neither of those things. I was trust and safety. Hopefully, one day, we could convince her that I was also affection and pack. Home. Truly home.

I stepped into the apartment and headed down the hall toward the bedrooms before pausing. "Where do you want to sleep?" I asked, mentally taking a guess between Gideon and Reed. Hell, maybe even Felix.

My purr spiked like a damn tiger when she murmured, "Where's your bed?"

It was fucking impossible to keep my scent from flooding the air at her question. Kissing her forehead, I moved slowly into my room and paused when I stood inside. Waiting. Watching in the shadows, the space only illuminated by the glow of the moon, as her nose twitched. Smelling me. My room, saturated with me.

Well, me, Cohen, and Felix.

Katiya nodded. "Are you going to hold me all night?"

In the dark, her eyes opened to look up at me. I could barely make out the movement of her lashes caught in the light of the hall from this angle.

"Yes," I answered. "Unless you want to sleep alone."

She shook her head. "No. I don't actually like being alone." Her lips curved in amusement. "Imagine that."

A shadow stood in the door. I didn't have to look up to know it was Anson. Katiya turned her head to take him in.

"Are you joining us?" she asked.

The sound he made was strangled as he tried not to growl. Katiya giggled, letting her head fall back on my shoulder as Anson walked into the room, shutting the door behind him.

He stilled for just a moment in front of the closed door, being completely swallowed in shadow. The moon was



actually very bright, so as the seconds ticked by, my eyesight acclimated to the light of deep night.

Anson moved in silence, closing the distance between us and pressing his chest to Katiya. Boxing her between us. He kissed her forehead, ran his hand down her arms, her thighs, over her knee, and around her ankle before removing her shoe. He tossed it behind him, adding the other to it a moment later.

Katiya's eyes remained closed, the softest smile on her lips as she breathed contently. I paid careful attention to her scent, making sure at no time was she uncomfortable. Overwhelmed or afraid.

It remained fresh raspberry muffins. The tone changed completely when Anson buried his fingers in the hair at the back of her neck, turned her head gently, and kissed her. Those muffins quickly turned into a sweet raspberry jam.

My nostrils flared at the sweetness of her arousal filling the air. Anson pressed more tightly against her. The hand not in her hair moved to my chest and over my shoulder.

“Katiya,” he said, his voice a low growl.

“Yes,” she answered.

My heart hammered, sending a whole lot of blood rushing to my cock.

“No knots. Okay?”

I wasn't sure which growl was louder—Anson's or mine. We probably should have calmly and slowly brought her to my bed, but we did neither. Our arms tangled together as we awkwardly moved to my bed and even more awkwardly crawled on it.

Katiya giggled as we lay her down. Not wanting to take our hands from her.

“No knots,” I agreed. I needed to make sure she knew we heard her. That she could trust us to listen to her wants. Keeping with that idea, I added, “Anything you want, sweetheart. Just say so.”

“You’re in complete control,” Anson added. “Tell us what you want and that’s exactly what we’ll do.”

In the moonlight, we watched as Katiya tilted her head. She slid backward, leaning against my pillows so she was somewhat reclined to view us. Biting her lip, she considered our declaration.

“Anything,” I said.

“Take your clothes off?” she whispered, her fingers digging into the blanket. “Can I... Can I look at you?”

Anson nodded, pushing himself up onto his knees, and immediately began shedding layers. Chuckling, I shook my head at his impatience. Katiya’s gaze was glued to him. I wasn’t sure if she was watching his hands or the skin he was revealing.

I moved more slowly, watching them. By the time Anson was bare before her, I was just getting to my pants, but Katiya was staring at his cock. Eyes wide. Her gaze turned to me as I pulled my briefs down, freeing my own aching erection.

We knelt before her, staring. Her brows knit together.

“You can touch,” I said quietly.

Her eyes darted to mine and I swear, in the glow of the moon, it looked like her cheeks were painted silver. She looked ethereal. Like a goddess.

Her gaze darted between the two of us and while she seemed impressed, perplexed, aroused, and even slightly intimidated, she didn’t keep her eyes locked on our dicks. They trailed all over our bodies, drinking us in. Anson and I remained still, letting her have her fill, uninterrupted.

She sat up, getting a little closer. I almost offered to turn the light on for her, but she seemed content to examine by the light of the moon. Leaning further still, she reached out a tentative hand, letting her finger catch on the bead of precum hanging on the rim of Anson’s dick. Her lips parted. I wasn’t sure if I was hearing her heart beat quickly or mine. Maybe Anson’s.

No, mine for sure. But it was Anson's low growl covering it.

For the first time, I didn't think Katiya minded the growl at all. I wasn't sure she actually heard it. She examined the drop of cum on her finger, bringing it dangerously close to her mouth. Anson and I were frozen, watching as her finger touched her lip. Her tongue cleaning off the bit of Anson.

My growl joined Anson's as hunger raced through me. An undeniable need to take this woman. Make her mine. Mark her in every way I could think of and others that I'd think of later. She hummed as she licked her lips, her gaze drawn once more to our leaking dicks.

Scooching forward on her knees, she sat before us. Looking. I wasn't sure if I was the lucky or unfortunate one when she chose my cock to touch first. Following a vein with her finger. Beginning in the middle of my dick and tracing it to the head before dropping back down to my knot. She paused, her chest rising with heavy breaths.

And then she wrapped both her hands around it. I shivered, somehow managing to restrain the urge to buck into her hands. Her touch was soft. Examining. She gave me the slightest experimental squeeze before looking at me with wide eyes.

"It's like a rock," she said.

Anson snorted.

Licking my lips, I nodded. "Being hard like that assures that we're locked in where we need to be until our bodies are finished," I told her. "It's an evolutionary breeding tool. Not only does the knot lock our bodies together, the pressure on it from doing so provides a longer, harsher orgasm. Spreading more seed than normal. Being secured in such a way assures that conception has a better chance of happening."

Katiya raised a brow. "I suppose there's no logic in evolution."

"What do you mean?"

"Population control is a bigger problem than lack of conception. I suppose the even more ironic part to that is those

who are made for a knot are the smallest part of the population,” she said. “Maybe it doesn’t work as it should.”

I laughed quietly, touching her face. She smiled up at me. “I think it probably works fine when contraception isn’t in the mix.”

“Still. It’s a weird evolutionary add-on. A small portion of men have knots. An even smaller portion of humanity can take one as it was meant to be.” She shrugged. “Sorry. Weird time to be talking about it.”

I rubbed my thumb over her cheek, shaking my head. “This night is yours, sweetheart. We can talk about anything.”

She smiled again, dropping her attention back to my knot as she cupped it with her hands. “Does... are there things that can simulate... I don’t know the right word for this. Being an omega for you?”

“Squeeze,” Anson said. “Your hands do a good job of it.”

As if he’d given her an instruction, her hands tightened around me. Stronger than I was expecting. I grunted, my hips jerking up into her hands unexpectedly before I leaned closer to her. “Fuck,” I groaned, closing my eyes to try to keep myself under control.

But I couldn’t keep them closed for long. I was drawn to watching her. She focused on my knot for a minute before looking at my face. Studying me.

“Like this?” she whispered.

“You want me to paint that pretty dress?” I growled.

To my surprise, Katiya grinned. “No. I’m not sure that would be good for the material.”

I almost choked when she let me go. And then nearly swallowed my tongue as she started peeling off her dress. She wore nothing but a pair of small panties under it. Smaller than should have been appropriate. My cock dripped as I stared.

Then she came back for me, wrapping her hands around my knot in a grip that had me grinding my teeth as I stared.

Seeing nothing but this beautiful creature before me. The way she smiled, both wicked and shy.

Anson moved around her, sliding his hand over her back, down around her ass cheeks. I knew when he touched her pussy because her mouth opened. The hold on my knot twitched, her fingers digging in. I growled, my hips jerking on their own again.

He leaned over her back, pressing his lips to her shoulder. “Want to get him off, Kitten?” Katiya nodded. “Keep that grip you have. Put just the head of his cock in your mouth and suck him. But be prepared for a hard release.”

Katiya’s grin was filled with sexy mischief. She nodded, dropping her head to my dick. Anson smirked at me too. But he was at just the right angle that I could see where his hand was going. He used his fingers to tease her in the same way she explored my dick. Just the tip of her tongue running along my slit, cleaning the juices that had gathered.

Swirling it around my head. Taking it in her mouth and pressing the flat of her tongue against me. I released a harsh breath, trying to prepare myself for what was coming. It was fucking insane trying to hold myself still while she gripped my knot as she was. But as soon as she started sucking, I was going to lose my shit.

Actually, I was going to lose my load.

Anson’s fingers disappeared inside her pussy, making her hum against me. Sending the thrill of the vibration through my dick. I was too busy watching Anson touch her in time to the movement of her tongue that I bit my own tongue when she began sucking. The tang of blood filled my mouth as I suddenly jerked up. My growl filled the air.

I gripped her hair, gathering it in a hand so her pretty face wasn’t obscured. She moaned again, taking a breath to give me another long suck. I swear, she was sucking my balls into my body. My vision danced as my orgasm raced through me. With a third suck, I bucked into her, filling her mouth.

She didn't stop. Somehow, those small hands tightened further, and I pumped another stream into her throat. The perfect girl on her knees in front of me swallowed it all.

When she released my dick with her mouth, looking up at me with a satisfied grin, it took all I had not to flip her over. But apparently, Anson didn't share my restraint. Hands on her hips, he pulled her off me and spun her onto her back. She let out a yelp of laughter that was quickly muffled as Anson kissed her deeply. Searching for a taste of me on her tongue.

"No knot," she reminded him as his mouth went to her neck.

"We don't have to have sex, Kitten," he murmured. "Just touching you, you touching us, that's enough. It doesn't have to be more."

Her arms circled his neck, and he drew his mouth back to hers. "I know. But it's not so scary anymore."

Anson shivered, staring into her eyes. "I'm even more growly when my dick is in someone."

Katiya burst out laughing. She pet his face. "That's okay. It sounds different now."

"Does it?"

She nodded. "It's still a little frightening, but not in the same way. I know that in this pack, growls aren't a threat to me. They're a threat to everyone else when they're a threat at all."

Anson rested his forehead against hers. "Yes, Kat. I'm confident that I speak on my pack's behalf when I tell you that only those who need to fear our growls are those who mean harm to our pack. Those who mean harm to you."

Seeing her kiss him made me smile.

And I focused on their kiss instead of anything else, or I was not going to be able to let them have their moment without joining in. I closed my eyes to listen as he took her. Filling the room with their scents laced with sex. Covering my

bed in their fluids. I was fucking salivating when Anson picked her up and set her in my arms.

He kissed me, deep and hard, filling me with our shared excitement. Possessive obsession for this girl. Bright affection. Then he left the bed and disappeared into my bathroom.

There was not a chance in this world that he'd be able to sit back and watch like I did. That's simply not the kind of man he is. He wouldn't be able to keep his hands to himself. But he also wanted me to have my own time with her, as I'd given him.

Her hand moved into my hair, pulling my face to hers. But she didn't kiss me. She waited for me to make the move. I did. Slow. Sweet. Thorough. Feeling the way her tongue brushed mine, how she melted into my touch. How perfectly her body moved around me. Stradling me without losing connection with her mouth.

Maybe I should have offered more foreplay, but I knew she was already slicked up. Not only by her own juices, but because I could still feel Anson's release trickling out of her, covering my cock. It was always a fucking turn on, having his cum coat my dick.

With my hands on her hips, I shifted her body until I could feel her heat hallowing my cockhead. Her mouth stilled against mine as I lowered her body slowly, easing my way in. Our breaths caught together as we shared the same air. Feeling the same sensations in a very different way.

Her body was hot and tight around me, muscles fluttering and relaxing as I stretched her to accommodate my size.

"Cohen," she breathed into my mouth, her hands tightening where they held on. One in my hair, the other on my shoulder. "So good."

I groaned. Locking our mouths together again, I wrapped my arms around her and used our embrace to move inside her. Shallow thrusts that elicited moans from us both. But the smaller movements assured a more drawn-out pleasure that we could share together.

Because I didn't want this to be quick. I was sure that this wouldn't be the only time. Even knowing that, I needed this to be filled with nothing but passion. Let it settle and simmer. Build into a web around us until we were sweating.

Maybe we shared orgasms. There might have been several. But I kept her in my arms, in my lap, until Anson had lost his patience and came back into bed. Then we spent the rest of the morning enjoying her all over again.



# CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

# KATIYA



They were purring. The sound permeated my dreams, as did their scents. I didn't understand how something inside me recognized them. Instead of the dark little voice warning me away because they're alphas, a quiet whisper was telling me I belonged to them.

It was a faint sound. A distant feeling that grew stronger the longer I remained in their presence. It was only frightening because it was unfamiliar. A new kind of vulnerability. Not born from being the weaker designation and being owned like cattle, but from the fragility of giving your heart to someone to do with as they pleased.

Their growls sounded different to me now. Hearing them last night and knowing that they came from arousal and not meant for intimidation. That I did that to them. I brought out that carnal sound. It was intoxicating. And with that came a sense of power I'd never felt before.

And a sense of comfort. Contentment.

"You're awake," Anson said.

I hadn't opened my eyes yet. Too comfortable to let this feeling pass yet. "No," I answered. "I'm trying very hard not to be awake."

He chuckled, and I swear I felt it between my legs. Stoking a fire that hadn't truly gone out since Reed lit it weeks ago.

"You don't have to hang on to the moment," Cohen said. "This doesn't have to be fleeting. It can happen as often as you want."

I couldn't keep the smile from my lips. Nor could I keep my eyes closed. I was sandwiched between them, both somehow managing to cocoon me with their bodies without actually being suffocating. Their heads were on mine as they looked at me in the dim morning light that fought its way through the drawn curtains.

"You think so?" I asked.

"Katiya, we've wanted you since the moment we laid eyes on you," Anson said.

I shivered, holding my breath. Waiting for the familiar fear to creep in. I'd gathered an alpha's attention. Many alphas' attention. Something I took great pains at avoiding.

There was no fear this morning. Just a bubbling giddiness in my stomach. And a smile that almost hurt my cheeks; it was so wide and foolish.

"We were up late, so if you want to sleep longer, then sleep," Cohen said.

"I think the sun was rising when I finally closed my eyes," I said through a yawn.

"It was," both alphas said, and I received twin smiles that looked nothing alike. Twinning in their pride that they'd kept me up until the morning hours.

"What time is it?" I asked, closing my eyes and wiggling between them, snuggling down further into their body heat.

"Not even eleven. You have the entire day to sleep," Cohen said.

I'd purposefully asked for the day off following the party, knowing I'd be exhausted. However, when I requested the day off, it wasn't in anticipation of spending the night with Pack Jameson. Or with anyone. This was never the life I imagined for myself. Once I'd have said I didn't want it. But now, I was second guessing everything I've ever wanted.

"What are you thinking?" Anson asked, his lips moving to my ear.

“Just how differently my life is turning out to be from what I thought I wanted. Or didn’t want.”

“I hope that’s a good direction.”

“It is. I think.” I didn’t have enough confidence in myself to agree completely. Not yet. Learning to rely on new knowledge in a new world was challenging. When all my instincts cultivated over more than twenty years are screaming at me to move in a single direction, it’s hard to remind myself that what I had known was far behind me. A different life. A different time.

“We’ll work towards your assurance that it is,” Cohen said. “Little steps. Though I think you’ve taken massive strides in a short time.”

“You’re fiercer than you ever gave yourself credit for,” Anson said. “Filled with strength and bravery that you locked away deeply in favor of self-preservation. Watching you grow, even from afar, has filled us with such pride.”

“You’re both very sweet in thinking I’m more than I am,” I said, keeping my eyes closed. “But I think you’re overlooking something that might actually be the reason I have been able to move through my fears relatively quickly.”

“What’s that?” Cohen asked.

“Well, for starters, I wasn’t actually chosen by the alphas of Chaingate. So, on the whole, my life was comparatively mundane, even if I was living in oppressive terror every day.”

“I don’t like that you’re diminishing your trauma,” Anson said, a frown in his voice.

I grinned. “But aside from that,” I continued, “I’ve been subject to the mandatory classes that all betas are required to take growing up. We always scoffed, internally, of course, when we were learning over and over that betas have an intrinsic hunger for a pack. A craving that drives us to bitter omega jealousy and embarrassing alpha chasing. Maybe now that my life is at peace, that need for a pack has caught up.”

They were quiet as they thought about this. I thought they were thinking about what I said, anyway. But when I opened

my eyes, they were both frowning at me.

“Is that what you think?” Cohen asked. “You think you’re here with us because of a biological need and not something *you*, Katiya, want.”

“No. I think I’m here because I want to be. I was actually addressing the idea that I’ve maybe learned to work through my fear of alphas in a silly quick time because maybe my innate craving for a pack overpowered that fear when I saw that there weren’t actually alphas to fear in Howling Cove.”

“I see,” Cohen said, still not appreciating my answer.

“I suppose you could be right,” Anson conceded.

I shrugged. “I wasn’t trying to argue. Just thinking out loud, you know?”

They nodded, and I wondered if maybe an omega might work themselves out in the same manner. What if they left a bad situation and then surrounded themselves with an environment that was completely opposite? Would their need for a pack rise and help them through their fear quickly?

I thought about what Gideon told me about heats, and I decided that it simply wasn’t the same thing. Working through fear and being a mindless puppet to their heat, and fear of the environment I left, are two very different things.

Without truly knowing what it was that made the connection, I suddenly sat up, throwing both alphas off me as I stared wide-eyed. “Oh!”

“What?” they both asked in concern.

“What’s wrong?” Anson asked.

“I think... I think we should go see Octavia.” I scrambled from the bed and hunted around the room for my clothes. It didn’t take me long to find that I only had the dress in Cohen’s room. And while it was stunning, I didn’t think it was appropriate for everyday wear.

I stood up with the dress in hand to find that both alphas had followed me out of bed. Cohen handed me a pair of gym

pants and a shirt. He was easily twice my size, but without other options, I dressed quickly and pushed the door open.

The house was quiet, but everyone was already awake and milling about. Gideon grinned hugely when he saw me. I smiled in return as I headed for the door, barely catching the alarm in his eyes as I bent to slip into my shoes.

“Wait. Where are you going?” he asked as he slid across the floor to me.

“I need to speak to Octavia.”

“The omega ghost?” he asked, perplexed.

I nodded.

“Your ghost?” Felix asked as he joined us. They were all putting their shoes on with the intent of coming with me.

I nodded again. “I think she can answer some questions.”

“Alright,” Felix said as we piled into the elevator. It was clear no one was following my train of thought. How could they when I hadn’t said much of anything?

As we walked to my house, I explained. “You told me about the omega that was murdered within the caves. Remember?”

Felix nodded.

“I think that omega is haunting my house. I keep catching glimpses of her covered in blood, but it vanishes before I can ask about it.”

“You think she knows who killed her?” Tristen asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know what she knows. But I think she at least has ideas about her death. She’s kind of bitter about it.”

Gideon snorted. “Why wouldn’t she be? She was murdered.”

Nodding, I threw open my door. “Octavia. Where are you?” When I didn’t receive an answer, I added, “I brought home some alphas.”

She poked her head out of the bedroom, interest in her eyes as she peered at me. “And an omega.”

“Yes, well. They’re kind of a package deal.”

“Humph,” she answered, but she came out of the room to examine who I had brought home.

“I want you to tell me about how you died,” I said when she paused.

Octavia narrowed her eyes before she stuck her bottom lip out in a pout. “I don’t want to talk about it.” Crossing her arms over her chest, she looked away.

“I know you don’t. But I think you should tell me. I’d really like to know.”

She swallowed, her jaw trembling. I couldn’t actually feel her. She wasn’t there, after all. But I stepped closer and offered her my hand.

Meanwhile, behind me, I was sure I looked like I’d lost my mind. Talking to thin air as if it could respond.

After a minute, Octavia placed her hand in mine. “Please? It might be relevant to what’s happening down there now.”

Sighing, she nodded. “I was being courted by a pack of strong, sweet alphas.” She looked at the men behind me. “We used to walk the cove all the time. Ryan would pick up shells and make me things from them.” Absently, she touched a piece of ghostly jewelry hanging around her neck. I wondered if it had always been there and I just never noticed it before.

“The caves were always a little scary. I never went into them, but Ryan and Jason used to tell me stories of them. The spirits and monsters and people that disappear when they go in too deep. One day, I received a letter that I thought was from Ryan, asking me to meet him on the stairs that lead down the side of the cliffs to the beach. The stairs that were technically on the Sandview property.” She pointed outside. “He had something to show me. I went, but he wasn’t there. Thinking he was at the bottom and I just misread the letter, I began to climb down. About halfway, I heard my name. Admittedly, it didn’t sound like Ryan, but it did sound like Becket, another of

the alphas courting me. So I crept around the wall until I found a little crevice where I thought his voice was coming from. There was a lantern there. I convinced myself that this was some romantic gesture. So I turned it on and crept inside. He continued to call to me and I followed, asking him to stop teasing and come get me. I was scared.

“The next thing I know, I’m tied down on my back with Trevor Olsen standing over me with a bloody knife. My head hurt. I could barely see. There was a fierce heat that brushed against my skin, but the air was cold at the same time. My entire body was filled with pain. As he brought the knife down to me again, carving into my chest and neck, I realized he was chanting something. Right before he killed me, I knew that he was offering me to the spirits and monsters in exchange for revealing where their treasure is.”

“Who’s Trevor Olsen?” I asked.

“Hugo’s great-great-etc. grandfather,” Tristen answered. He swore, and I turned to him. “That’s why you’re haunting this house, isn’t it?” he asked.

Octavia stared at him for a minute. “You can see me?”

Tristen nodded. “Yes. But your answer is important. You stay here to keep an eye on the family that is responsible for your death. Don’t you?”

“Olsen... That’s not Hugo’s name,” I noted, even as I realized that his surname was probably changed slightly and could easily be a spinoff.

She nodded. “They’re not convinced that their sacrifice didn’t work. They just think they did something wrong. I’m sure they will try again. I’ve been here to listen to them pass down the story from generation to generation.”

“Where’s the entrance?” Felix asked.

“On the stairs.” She pointed toward the cliff again.

Felix looked at Gideon. “Stay here.” And he turned to head out.



“No way,” Gideon said, immediately wrapping his arms around Tristen’s. “You cannot leave me here!”

Felix paused as he looked at his pack, Anson and Reed on his heels as he headed for the door. With an aggravated growl, he said, “That’s not a reported entrance. I need to see what’s there.”

“Then we’re going together. Whatever is down there can’t take us all,” Tristen said.

“You don’t know that,” I whispered. “You didn’t see.”

“Stay here,” Felix tried again, looking at me this time.

But as Gideon did, I shook my head. “No.” Glancing at Octavia, I moved within the center of them. “I’m not staying behind either.”

“He’s already been snooping around here,” Tristen said, making me catch my breath. “She’s right. She can’t stay.”

My eyes widened. I didn’t need to ask who. I already knew. Hugo.

Felix shook his head. “Then stay close.”

We trailed Felix to the stairs, and I clung to the wall. There was no railing in this spot. No skids to keep from slipping. It was literally one wrong move and like a domino effect, we’d all be falling down the stairs.

“There,” Octavia said, and I pointed where she was indicating. “I’m not going in there. I realize I can only die once, but I prefer to stay outside this time.”

“I understand,” I said, voice breathless. I’d been listening to Tristen repeat her story for the others. It was a relatively short story, so by the time we got to the crevice, he had the pack all caught up.

We slipped inside, one by one, using cell phone flashlights to light our way. The path was narrow. Empty. It wasn’t long before the only sounds were our footsteps. No light ahead or behind us. We were already deep within the dark cave and only minutes had passed.

It also wasn't long before the ground became uneven and progress slowed as we tried to move gingerly through the single file passage.

We stopped suddenly as Felix stilled, studying the silence. I could hear my heart in my throat. I stared wide-eyed. Waiting for a monster to jump out. A monster or a ghost. I should have asked Octavia how she was found if no one knew about this entrance.

Or maybe they had known at one time and that knowledge was lost. Maybe someone had seen her on the stairs and watched her disappear inside. Or maybe Hugo's ancestor had brought her body out for some reason.

We began moving again, this time slower. Listening to the spooky silence.

I wasn't sure what happened. All of a sudden, there was a commotion. Rocks shifting. I fell, slamming my knee into a jagged edge. The pain made me see stars. Shifting as close to the wall so I wouldn't be trampled by the shadows moving about me, I closed my eyes.

The cave filled with voices, growls. Sounds that were like someone had some kind of weapon. And then it all stopped.

Tristen picked me up off the floor, his eyes wild as he stared at his alphas behind me.

"What happened?" I asked, fear making my voice tremble.

"They have Gideon," Tristen said, his voice low. A snarl like I'd never heard a human make leaving his throat. Echoed by the alphas surrounding me. "Things are about to get bloody."

# CHAPTER FORTY

# KATIYA



I've experienced fear my entire life. But up until recently, I hadn't known that there were different kinds of fear. The only thing I had known was fear for myself. Fear of alphas and what kind of life their presence threatened.

But there were other fears. Fears of personal unknown. Fear of making yourself vulnerable with another person. Fear of trusting someone. Fear of a new experience—what it feels like, what it means, the kind of state it can leave you in.

Today I learned a new fear. The fear of someone you care about with your whole being in hostile danger. Tears stung my eyes as Tristen clutched me to his chest. I gripped him tightly, squeezing my eyes closed as I prayed to whatever was listening that we find Gideon in time.

“Where did they take him?” I asked.

“I don't know,” Anson answered, his voice more growl than words. “The walls all look solid.”

We fumbled in the dark, but Tristen never let me go. Placing our hands on walls and feeling along the way. Looking for something we couldn't see. But something that had to be there.

I almost screamed when an unfamiliar figure caught the beam of my phone light. He was tall, with dark hair. Handsome and dangerous. A scream lodged in my throat as I stared at the stranger. It was only because no one else saw him did I realize he was a ghost.

And once I made the connection, I recognized him as the ghost I'd seen weeks ago in the barred tunnel.

He nodded and pointed to a section of wall I was sure we'd already examined.

"This way," I said, pulling Tristen with me.

Movement stopped as they turned their lights on me. With all the beams of bright light facing the same direction, the ghost was almost gone.

"Can you put your lights to our feet?" I asked. "I can't see."

Immediately, everyone's but mine dropped to light our path. The ghost smirked, nodding in approval. I caught a hint of fir trees in the air and knew that I was smelling the ghost's scent. He was an alpha. The smoke that mingled with it could only be alpha.

Still, I followed as he led us through a small crack that we'd managed to overlook. Felix swore behind us as we squeezed through it. The ghost continued to lead the way. Sounds began picking up in the distance. Growls. Scratches. The movement of rocks.

The ghost stopped, raising his hand for us to as well.

"There are many," he said. "They have weapons. And a machine that is... alive."

"Kat," Tristen said.

"You don't see?" I asked, looking at him over my shoulder.

He shook his head. "No."

"Apparently, seeing Octavia didn't give you that privilege. There's another ghost," I told them and repeated what he said.

"You must hurry," the ghost said. "But be mindful. Be careful and quick."

Once more, I repeated what the ghost said.

And that was all the time we took. Ahead, a cry that could only be Gideon's echoed off the stone walls, and we were

moving. We probably should have heeded the ghost's warning a little more, but adrenaline made us act quicker than we could process.

I dropped my phone as Cohen shoved a rock the size of a softball in my hand. "Stay close and behind one of us," he said.

And then we were in an open chamber. With less than half a minute to take in my surroundings before I was shoved to the ground as a bullet was shot at us, I noted several things. There was a dead body on the ground. There was a couple chained like we were in a medieval dungeon against a wall. Their feet barely touching the ground.

The walls were covered in scratches. The same kind Felix and I saw in the other part of the cave. There were torches in the wall, lit to give off light, making the entire room hot. And at the far end was a stone dais where Gideon was tied.

That was all I was able to take in before I was shoved to the ground. I rolled, every bit of my body scraped and banged against the rough surface. Shouts and growls filled the air. There was a fight that I tried to avoid as bodies came together. Then another gunshot.

I figured the way I could be most helpful would be to get to Gideon. It took me a minute to get to my hands and knees with a rock in my hand again. When I finally oriented myself, I found that there were enough people in the cavern room that Hugo was still standing over Gideon, his purpose not at all stanchied because of the fight behind him.

They were a distraction while Hugo finished what he set out to do.

My heart raced as I rushed forward. Gideon's scream filled my head as Hugo drew the knife through his chest again.

*No. No, no, no. You can't kill him. Please.*

I wasn't sure what good I'd do with nothing but a bit of stone in my hand, but I surged to my feet and lunged for that side of the cave. My progress was delayed when I slammed

into a body made of stone. I hit so hard that I was thrown backward, slamming into the ground again.

The thing that stood over me was every bit the monster that visitors were reporting. Glowing eyes. Fur. Large with claws.

When it moved closer to me, I screamed. Trying to scramble backward.

I was suddenly hauled to my feet and thrown behind several bodies as Anson and Felix took on the monster. I screamed again when the monster moved with quick grace, managing to snag its claws on Felix's bicep. Ripping through the shirt and skin. He was instantly covered in blood. It didn't slow him down as he brought his gun up.

He shot the thing in the head twice. I was mortified to see that it wasn't even slowed down.

My ears were ringing at this point, muffling every other sound. A different ghost stood in front of me this time. A woman with beautiful eyes and red hair. Her mouth was moving, but I couldn't hear her. The gunshots in this small space had deafened me.

But the urgency with which she gestured made me pull myself up. Once more, I sprinted for Gideon. This time I made it and tackled Hugo to the ground. His knife was flung across the room as we landed in a painful heap.

I was not used to physical confrontation. Already all the little bangs and bruises had me aching in a very unpleasant way. My reflexes were slower. As was my response time. Hugo was already on his feet before I even managed to get on my hands and knees.

He hauled me up by my hair and then paused as he stared at me in surprise. "Katiya?" Clearly, I'd confused him. Also, I heard him. It was a little distorted, but watching his mouth also helped to discern what he was saying.

"Hi," I answered, trying to pull myself free.

Hugo might have been shocked to see me, but it hadn't made him release me. "What are you doing here?"

“You have my omega,” I said, wrapping my hand around his arm and digging in my nails. Trying to dislodge him. He still managed to look at me, perplexed. “I’d really like him back.”

My words finally pulled him out of his surprise. He scoffed. “I’m sorry you got involved in this. You need to stay out of it so you don’t get hurt.”

Obviously, he didn’t view me as a threat because he let me go as he went for his knife. I looked at Gideon, staring at me with fear bright in his eyes.

“Please,” he whispered. “Help me.”

Tears stung my eyes. I didn’t know what to do. When Hugo walked by me again, knife in hand once more, I leapt at him. Gripping his arm with the knife. Not knowing what else to do.

“No,” I said. “Please. Choose a different one.”

He looked at me with annoyance this time. “He’s the only male omega around, Kat.” Hugo shoved me off him. “I really don’t want to hurt you. Please stay out of it.”

I turned, looking around frantically. There were now bodies everywhere. Only a few of Hugo’s men were left. Which seemed to be plenty since the damned monster was occupying most of my alphas’ attention.

The female ghost was in front of me again, just as Gideon’s screams filled the air. A sob lodged in my throat.

“Kick him,” she told me. “Between the legs.” I watched as she turned and demonstrated with the male ghost who had led me there. The male ghost frowned, brow raised, as he shook his head at the girl.

I would have laughed. It was kind of funny. But I was too scared. Gideon was covered in blood.

Once again, I threw myself at Hugo. He turned on me, knife in hand. Angry. “I warned you—”

“Don’t give him time to process your actions. Just do it,” the female ghost said.



Having never kicked someone between their legs, I leapt forward without thinking the logistics through. This close, I knew I couldn't actually get my foot up. Instead, I grabbed his shoulders to steady me and shoved my knee into his groin as hard as I could, screaming with effort and frustration.

Not just once. Two more times until he fell to the ground, bent over as he cursed at me.

“Good job,” the ghost said. “Now hit him in the head with a rock.”

Without thinking, I picked up the closet rock and slammed it on his head. Hugo reached for me, angry.

“It needs to be bigger than a penny,” the ghost chided. “And use every ounce of strength you can, woman. Your lives depend on it.”

Hugo managed to grab my ankle, and I went down. Slamming my face into the stone hard enough that I momentarily was disoriented. Confused and dazed while my vision blurred, there was a moment of panic when I felt hands and body weight start bearing me down.

I screamed, thrashed. Seeing nothing but the Chaingate alphas who had cornered me in closets. I kicked out, threw my hands everywhere. Only when Hugo was dislodged did the world come back. I'd apparently managed to land at least one more accidental kick to his crotch. He was on his back, his hands over his dick as he groaned.

“Rock!” the woman demanded.

With everything in me protesting, I scrambled to my hands and knees. Searching around as if I were blind, I grabbed the biggest thing I could manage and heaved it over. I could barely lift it, but managed to drop it over Hugo's head.

I looked at him long enough to make sure he wasn't getting up before climbing over him to get at Gideon.

He looked at me with wild panic. I tore at the ropes around his wrists, struggling as I shook. Behind me, more shots filled the room. One grazed my shoulder making me drop on top of Gideon. We both cried out.

“I’m sorry,” I said, picking myself up. My shoulder throbbed. Stung. I tore at his ropes and paused when my hands were slipping all over the place.

Because he was covered in blood. That arm had the most, having been the location of a set of symbols carved into his skin. In some places deeply.

I stopped with the rope to search for something to stop the bleeding. When I found nothing, I tore my shirt off and wrapped it around his arm before going back to the rope. It finally came loose and he could pull his arm down.

Another bullet embedded in the wall beyond, right where my head had been a second ago.

“Fuck,” I hissed and backed away. If we waited for my rope skills, we’d both be dead. I searched for the knife Hugo had and used that to saw through the ropes.

Finally free, I dragged him off the dais on the far side, using it as a shield against everything. I tried to curl around him. To protect him. But found that he’d wrapped me in his arms instead.

We clung to each other as the room continued to fill with sounds. Growls. Screams. Blows. Rocks being dislodged. Gunshots. And the monster.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I imagined that one of my alphas was hurt. They’d be one of the bodies on the ground. Gideon shook violently around me. He needed to get clean. He might need more blood.

The ghost sat over me. The girl smiled, rubbing her hand through my hair. Sometimes, I could even feel it. The big male stood protectively over her, watching into the cavern as the fight carried on.

If it weren’t for that monster, it would have been over. But that thing was... impossible.

I could barely see their legs through a crack in the dais. Through the glitter of sparks or lights that flashed before my eyes. I didn’t dare look for too long, afraid I’d actually see one of my alphas fall.

“It’s okay,” the ghost said quietly. “It’s all going to be okay.”

How could it be okay if the pack that I never knew I wanted might die?

# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

# ANSON



It was ridiculously difficult to concentrate on anything with my omega's fear filling my chest. With that fear came dark spots of crippling pain. My chest heaved.

I lost track of Katiya in the fray as we fought with some stupid thing that shouldn't exist. But it was here. In front of me. Managing to keep five fucking alphas busy who were so pumped with adrenaline and blind fury that I couldn't think clearly enough to figure out how to take it down.

The thing wasn't real. Felix had shot it in the head twice. Anything living wouldn't have survived that. The real perplexing thing was how it responded to how we moved. It wasn't robotic but learning. Reacting.

Sparing any attention for Gideon and Katiya was dangerous and yet, I kept trying to find either of them. But they were nowhere. The bloody dais where Gideon had been strapped was empty, with Hugo's body lying in front of it.

It took us far longer than it should have to put the betas down. I wasn't sure how many we actually killed, though it wasn't enough as far as I was concerned. They stole my omega. They'd hurt him. I was going to bring this fucking cave to the ground.

I'll be honest. I'm not sure how we actually stopped the thing. Reed had somehow managed to jump on its back, all cartoon style. It slammed itself against the wall, attempting to dislodge him. They both went down.

Reed pulled himself out of the way as Felix and Tristen began unloading guns into it. Peppering the entire thing with bullet holes. It had started to get up but eventually, something hit right and it froze. When one of their weapons ran out, they pulled another off the ground and emptied it, too.

They didn't stop until they were completely out of ammunition. Then we stared, trying to catch our breath, and waited for our hearing to return. I felt like an animal. Out of control. Not nearly satisfied with the destruction and needing more.

My omega was terrified. He was in agony. I could feel him floating around, sometimes losing consciousness. Afraid.

And none of his alphas were with him.

The only thing that took our attention from the fucked up 'monster' was movement at the dais. We turned as Hugo tried to move.

Tristen got there first, his hand wrapped around Hugo's throat as he slammed the beta on the dais. I could see his mouth moving. See that he was yelling. See the terror on Hugo's face. But then Tristen froze, looking at something beyond them.

With the discarded knife at the top of the raised stone dais, he slammed the length of it through Hugo's shoulder and into the stone, anchoring him there. It was in such a position that Hugo couldn't move. Couldn't reach over himself to pull it out.

Tristen dropped to the other side, and I knew that he found our omega when relief flared through us. Lighting up the bonds like fireworks.

We raced over to them, finding Gideon curled around Katiya as they both shook. For a minute, we did nothing but stare. Processing that they were alive. That they were both bloody and hurt. Unsure whether moving them right now was good for their injuries.

Dropping to my knees, I placed a hand on top of Gideon. He flinched, his eyes snapping open as he curled around

Katiya more tightly. His relief came out in a sob, fresh tears tracking through the blood and dirt on his face.

That was it. We scooped up our omega and beta, hugging them to us. Letting their life soothe the animal inside. They were alive. They were breathing. Everything would be okay.



WE SHOULD HAVE TAKEN them to the hospital. But I don't think any of us could manage to be separated from them as we'd be required to do. We left the cave room as it was, except that we dragged Hugo out with us. It was music to my ears when the first thing I heard was Hugo's screams of pain. Begging.

He was quick to talk since Tristen made it clear that if he didn't, he was going to kill him and let the cave do with his body as it would. It's a good thing Hugo believed him. We were all ready to let Tristen murder this man.

It was an unsurprising story.

He was after Matilda Sandview's hidden treasure that Alpha Gray Paw had gifted her for helping him.

"She's my ancestor," he demanded. "That gold belongs to my family! I have a right to it."

"We wouldn't argue that," Felix said. "It's everything else we have a problem with."

"It would have worked," Hugo insisted. "We had the texts wrong. Matilda promised that if we gave her the blood of an omega, she'd reveal where she hid the gold. But Trevor misunderstood. It couldn't just be an omega. It needed to be a male omega—the rarest of designations. To show that we were committed to the family. To swear off all alphas and omegas because we *are* a real pack without them.

“Alpha Bayard forced his way into her home. Into her bed. Forced her to bear his children. That’s the kind of people alphas are. We’ve never allowed an alpha in our family again. We keep our blood pure!”

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t sure if he understood genetics at all. Everyone has alpha genes. But the combination of genes decides what becomes prominent and what remains dormant, ready to be passed on. Beta genes are simply more common because more pairs of genes equates a beta. It’s the default.

An alpha takes work. It takes one of three combinations.

An omega takes more than work and only a single combination of genes produces an omega. And because that gene is more commonly found on a female marker, there are more female omegas. Similarly, the alpha gene is more commonly found on a male marker, making them more often male.

But you can’t breed one out of the other. Keeping a family strictly betas doesn’t mean that there aren’t alpha and omega markers within their genes. It means that there are too many beta markers in the pool and it keeps the more recessive genes from coming through.

But it’s not impossible. It happens from time to time.

“You do realize that, regardless of the means in which Matilda bore Bayard’s offspring, that blood is still in your veins, right?” Reed asked. “I can’t actually change the fact that I’m an alpha. Muting it makes me feel better, but there’s never a day that goes by where I’m actually convinced that I’m not one. You can’t actually be that naïve to think you can drown it out.”

Hugo huffed. “We don’t acknowledge his genetics in our family tree. We’ve removed him.”

“You’re an idiot,” Tristen growled. “So fucking stupid, I should kill you anyway.”

And now the beta was back to pleading. Promising that he’ll share the treasure. Not that he knows where it is.



I tuned him out for the rest of the trip except for the one piece of valuable information. The ‘monster.’

“It’s a brilliant piece of high-tech AI,” Hugo said excitedly. “It understands its directive and carries it out flawlessly. And it’s learning software! That’s why it was so difficult to take out.” He frowned. “It also cost me a lot of money and you destroyed it.”

He screamed for a while after that. I wasn’t sure what Tristen was doing, but whatever it was, I found it completely justified.

As soon as we reached the mouth of the cave, Felix called the police. We waited just long enough for the officers at the mouth of the cave to climb the stairs. Felix briefed them and sent them into the cave, making sure they were armed in case the tech monster managed to revive himself. Reboot his system or some shit.

Then we headed home. Felix called the ambulance to meet us there. Only because he was the Chief of Police were we able to avoid their demands to take our injured to the hospital.

To be fair, we were all injured in one way or another. Between the metal claws and the bullets flying, no one was able to come out of it untouched.

Though we knew the scent of blood was going to be difficult to get out of the room, we placed our omega and beta in Gideon’s bed because we knew he’d feel best there. We let the doctor work on them, cleaning them and bandaging their wounds. Giving them antibiotics and sutures where needed.

Only when we were assured that they would both recover completely did we allow them to tend to whatever we had going on. Felix took a bullet through his shoulder and a claw through his arm. He was probably the worst of the alphas.

Most of my injuries were going to be deep bruises and some lacerations from the tech monster. Cohen suffered the same. Reed had two bullet grazes, one on the side of his head and another on his forearm. And then there was Tristen, who

seemed to be riddled with holes and deep scratches. Not to mention a few broken ribs.

It was late in the night when the doctor left and we curled in Gideon's bed together. A big cuddle pile where we surrounded the two completely. I thought they were asleep by the way they didn't respond at all to us moving them.

But Katiya yawned and opened her eyes. "I think that the Sandview descendants wrote their own history depending on how the new generation interpreted and felt about the past."

"Why do you say that?" Tristen asked, running his fingers lightly through her hair. She was leaning more fully against his chest in the current position we were in. We kept shifting so we could feel each other at some point. Needing to have enough body surface to feel the entire pack but unable to.

"It was Alpha Gray Paw that showed me the tunnel to find Gideon. And Matilda was there, watching over Gideon," she answered. "She told me to kick Hugo in the balls."

I snorted. Tristen laughed.

"There are also parts that no one knew," she added, yawning.

"You can tell us tomorrow," I said.

Katiya shook her head. "I'm tired, but I'm too tired to sleep."

Gideon nodded. He snuggled deeper into my chest, reaching his hand under my shirt to touch my skin. He was still shaking, covered in sutures. But he was emotionally calm again.

"You can tell us," Tristen said.

"Most of the books I've read of Matilda aren't inaccurate. They're just incomplete. Alpha Gray Paw came to Howling Cove to restock and Matilda helped him. And he was only there for a short time. But during that time they had a relationship. Quickly falling in love. Alpha Gray Paw promised that he'd be back, but he was killed before he had a chance. He didn't know that he'd left Matilda pregnant.

“The baby was just born when Bayard overtook her home. Those stories weren’t inaccurate either, but they were also incomplete. At first, she was afraid that he’d hurt her baby, so she secreted him into town and got another family to raise him as their own. She thought that Bayard would eventually leave. He didn’t. And though her first child by him was not welcome, she actually grew to care about him. And Bayard settled down in his nastiness. He loved Matilda very much, to the point where he had killed many others who had even looked at her.

“She feared that he’d harm her son by Gray Paw because he represented a different part of her life. That she’d given herself to a different man. A different alpha. So she never retrieved him. Also, the treasure from Gray Paw that he left her with was in gratitude for helping, but also as a means to take care of her. He loved her deeply and intended to give her the world. He loaded her with goods so that she could have a life outside of hard, manual labor until he could get back to her.

“And the rumors were true that his crew also hid the treasure in the caves. She told me where it was but asked that I keep it a secret.”

“Figures. What good is it to them?” Cohen asked, chuckling.

“It’s not. But it doesn’t actually belong to Hugo or the children born of her relationship with Bayard. It belongs to her son sired from Gray Paw.”

“Did they tell you who that was?” I asked.

Her big grin said she knew. “Yes. But it’s up to that family to figure it out. Until then, the treasure will stay hidden.”

“Ugh,” I teased. “But you know. We could all be very, very rich!”

Katiya cracked her eyes open. “Though I haven’t seen your bank accounts, I think you’re doing pretty well for yourselves.”

“She definitely called you out,” Reed said.

We shifted again until I ended up with Katiya in my arms. She opened her eyes, smiling.

“How much of a fight are you going to put up if I ask that you move in here?” I asked.

Her eyelids hooded as she looked at me, an indiscernible soft smile on her lips. “Depends. Why do you want me here? The threat is gone now.”

“Because you belong here,” I told her. “You are our beta. You always have been.”

“I’ll give up one of my rooms for you,” Gideon said, his hand reaching through our bodies so he could tangle his hand in Katiya’s hair. “You can even choose which one you want.”

She smiled, closing her eyes. “We can talk about it tomorrow. I’m ready to sleep. I think some purring would help me fall asleep.”

Gideon nodded and the room filled with purrs. There was nothing either of them could ask for that we wouldn’t give them.

# CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

# KATIYA



See you on Monday,” Megan called, waving from where she sat on the counter. She was playing third wheel to Daxon and Alec’s date. Although I was curious as to why she invited herself along, I didn’t stay long enough to find out.

The bell chimed above the door as I opened it, flicking the lock on the knob behind me to keep patrons out. We were back to regular hours for the moment, though we were talking about doing something for Valentine’s Day.

Haunted love stories. What I’d learned from Matilda alone was enough to convince me that there were other Romeo and Juliet histories in Howling Cove that deserved to have their tales written correctly. Or told at all.

That being said, I wasn’t going to go around hunting down ghosts. But I was glad to know that not all histories had bitter undertones to them. The Sandview Pack didn’t dislike alphas. And Matilda hadn’t spent her life being Bayard’s plaything. Well, not completely anyway. He certainly wasn’t going to let her go. Even if she had wanted to leave him.

And that’s the story that the town saw and ran with. That’s the history that was written and passed from generation to generation.

Tristen was sitting on the deck outside the souvenir shop, waiting for me. He smiled, standing when I stepped outside. The man was a giant, dark and intimidating. Except that I knew he was mine and that he’d use whatever bank of ways to kill people he had to keep me from harm. He was a little bit

crazy, but it was a crazy that wasn't directed at me. Just on my behalf.

“Hi,” he greeted, bending down to kiss me.

I spent a lot of time with Tristen. We talked about Chaingate and what I knew, if anything, from cases he found online. We also talked about events in Howling Cove, especially if they circulated around Octavia's time or Matilda's.

Octavia showed up at the penthouse from time to time, just to check in with me. But she still stayed at the Sandview house, which was going to be occupied by new tenants. They hadn't moved in yet, but they would soon, from what I understood.

“Need to stop home first,” he said, taking my hand.

I nodded. We were headed to the nearby town of Morning Hill to check out a field that was said to be where a beta by the name of Alexandria Chambers had buried many husbands in. She'd lure alphas with her omega-like beauty and smile, and then kill them. She only confessed to three, but based on accounts of how many men she was seen with, there was rumored to be more than a dozen.

Though it wasn't a thing often discussed in her day, Tristen suspected she was designation fluid. Technically a beta, but her ability to attract alphas suggested that she could reel them in as easily as an omega. Which, on their own, betas don't typically do.

“What did you forget?” I asked as he laced our fingers together.

“Everything. I was only thinking about getting to see you. That was a very long shift.”

I laughed. “It was a typical shift. Eight hours. That's normal.” But really, his answer melted my heart. This man was so ridiculously sweet I couldn't stand it. Actually, I could. I loved how romantic and thoughtful he was.

“Too long. You should quit. I can speak to the owner for you.”

I grinned as we stopped at the curb to wait for the walk signal. “I see you even forgot your car.”

Tristen shrugged. “Single minded focus.”

“I don’t want to quit. I love my job,” I said as the light turned white.

He sighed. “He at least needs to give you a raise.”

“No special treatment. I’m positive sleeping with the owner is against some big moral code. Or work ethics, at the very least.”

“It’s not like you don’t deserve it. You thought up the entire Halloween month events.”

It was a playful argument we had often. I was sure that he would rather I quit and just stay home. It was a goal even Gideon had jumped on board with. I heard a reason for it no less than once a day. He had a running tally, and I was pretty sure we were up to reason number 189.

Something I’ve learned about omegas since living with one, they’re relentless when they want something that they’re being denied.

It wasn’t extreme. No guilt or even real pouting. He wanted that outcome, but he accepted my answer. Until the next day, when he tried again. But as with Tristen, it was coming from a place of affection.

And concern. Though no other incidents had happened at the cave since we foiled Hugo trying to sacrifice our omega, they really hated that I still worked so close.

“Should I wait down here?” I asked.

Tristen didn’t let my hand go when he stepped inside. “Don’t be silly.”

“But you’re coming right back down, aren’t you?”

“Yes, *we* are.”

I laughed as we stepped into the elevator. He pressed his key against the screen and off we went to the top floor while he pulled me into his chest. My crazy man looked down at me



with soft affection shining in those dark eyes. The entire thirty-eight second ride was spent like that. He kissed my nose when the elevator pinged, and the doors opened.

He was acting suspiciously enough that I thought there was something waiting for me here. But I saw nothing when the door opened.

“Be right back,” he said, heading down the hall.

I raised a brow and turned into the living room. My heart jumped into my throat when a pair of ghosts stood from the couch. Breaking out in chills, I placed my hand over my racing heart.

“Hi,” I greeted Matilda and Alpha Gray Paw quietly. “Is everything okay?” I hadn’t seen them in three months. My anxiety rocketed.

Matilda nodded. She crossed the room to me and lay her hand on my cheek, smiling. It felt like a cold breeze kissed my skin.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Me? We would have been too late—” Tears stung my eyes. The one thing we never spoke of was the knowledge that without the ghosts, Gideon might have died. Not only could we not find the break in the wall, concealed because of the shadows and disoriented sensory deprivation, but the alphas were too well occupied with the small crowd of betas and the metal monster.

She didn’t answer as she leaned in to kiss my cheek. Then she turned, walking back to her alpha’s side. He hugged her, kissing her forehead, and they walked by me. I turned to follow their progress. They paused as they passed the dining room table and Alpha Gray Paw placed his hand on it for a second.

Matilda smiled at me over her shoulder before they continued their path to the door. Stepping through it, the two of them disappeared. I watched the door for a minute, wondering what she was really thanking me for.

As I turned back around, a glimmer on the table caught my attention. Something was there. Right where Alpha Gray Paw had placed his hand. I stepped into the room and to the table, my eyes widening.

There was a single gold coin and a red gemstone the size of the rock I initially tried to hit Hugo with. I picked them up, studying them. Amazed by what they were. They were real, weren't they? Was I just gifted pirate treasure?

That's where Tristen found me when he returned. "Watcha got?" he asked as he stopped at my side.

"Did you know they were stopping in?"

He looked at me, frowning. "Who?"

"Matilda and Alpha Gray Paw."

"Baby, I've never seen them. How would I—?" He didn't finish his question as he spotted what was in my hands. "Where did those come from?"

"The ghosts visited to say thank you. But I'm not sure what she's thanking me for."

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and hugged me to him, kissing the top of my head. "Bring them with. We can study them later."

I nodded, slipping them into my pocket as he led me to the door, slinging a backpack over his shoulder fluffy the way.

The drive to Morning Hill was forty minutes, we arrived at a grassy hill just before sunset. Tristen grabbed his pack and slung it over his shoulder before taking my hand. The grass was to my hips. I brushed my fingers over the feathery tops. Not typical grass. It was soft, thin strands of green with fluffy ends.

At the top of the hill, I turned to look in the distance. There was a quiet little town on the coast overlooking the water. Much like Howling Cove, but I could already tell it wasn't nearly as pretty. It didn't have haunted caves, so how could it be?

When I turned back around, my breath caught. There was a blanket spread on the ground among the tall grass surrounded by battery operated lanterns. Tristen was just tossing his backpack down as he smiled at me.

“I know that didn’t all come from your pack,” I said, narrowing my eyes.

He grinned further. “Come here, baby.” My stomach danced every time he used that low, sexy voice with me. With anyone, actually, but when directed at me, my knees went weak.

I went around the blanket to meet him on the other side. Tristen bent to kiss my lips before crouching on his knees. He untied my shoes, slipping each one off and backing me onto the blanket. He joined me a minute later once he kicked his off too.

We sat together, Tristen pulling me into his arms. His long fingers tangled in my hair, massaging my scalp.

Again, he stared into my eyes with soft affection. Sweet. Romantic. “You know what today is?”

I shook my head.

“You’ve been in our home for exactly three months.”

Smiling, I shifted in his lap so I could wrap my arms around his neck. “Are you the kind to celebrate anniversaries?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Celebrate, no. Acknowledge milestones, yes. It’s also been a solid month since you’ve shown any hints of fear towards one of us.”

Only when I was startled by their presence, having not heard them, did I get afraid. Little glimpses of being snuck up on in Chaingate surfaced before I could shove it away. I didn’t think it was an accomplishment on my part that I’d gone a month without tasting that fear. I think my alphas were paying more attention to not inadvertently sneaking up on me.

“Do you remember what else we were talking about revisiting in three months?” he asked.

My heart raced as the conversation immediately surfaced. Bite. They wanted me to be an official member of their pack. A bite wasn't necessary, but it had been a short conversation mixed in with the one where we discussed me moving in with them.

I wasn't sure why, but when it was proposed to me, I looked right at Tristen. There was no doubt in my mind that they were all mine. All five alphas and one omega, all of them were mine. But something inside me wanted Tristen's bite first.

They all knew. As soon as I looked at him at the mention of a bite, the entire pack knew that Tristen would be first. I agreed, but wasn't ready. I said we could discuss it again in three months. Obliging, no one brought it up since.

"Okay," I said. "We can talk about it."

His smile spread as he leaned his forehead against mine. His arms around me, soothingly stroking my back.

"Tell me your concerns," he said.

But... I didn't have any. I was sure about this pack. About Tristen. I shook my head.

"Questions," he said when I didn't answer.

I didn't have any questions either. I shook my head again.

"Katiya, there's no pressure at all. I didn't bring you here to try to convince you to let me bite you."

"Why did you bring me here?" We could have this conversation anywhere.

"Because I need to study the stars. There's a weird limerick about the stars in the Morning Hill story and I want to be right here, where the rumor states I should be. Granted, there's debate about the exact hill, so I figured I'd check them all out, eventually. But personally, I think this one matches the descriptions best. I brought you because I missed you all day and didn't want to spend any more time away. I'm asking about making you mine because I love you with everything in

me and want to see where you're at while I have you to myself."

I nearly forgot to breathe. He'd never said he loved me before. I didn't think it was because they didn't. Like everything else, I was pretty sure they were waiting on me. Not wanting to freak me out.

His smile softened as he kissed me, his lips pressed to mine. I threw my weight into him, knocking him backward. Tristen chuckled into my mouth as I splayed across him. We continued to kiss, my hands gripping his hair tightly while his gently ran up and down my back.

"I love you too," I whispered.

"You can tell me you're not ready," he said, kissing my lips again. "That's perfectly fine. I'm not going anywhere."

"You're just very punctual, remembering every single date for everything."

"I have an internal datebook." He grinned. "But I'm serious. No pressure, Kat."

Except that I was sure. There would never be anything I was more sure of than this pack. That my heart belonged to them. Everything in me belonged to them.

I nodded, his image getting blurry for a second as tears filled my eyes. A life I never thought I'd want but now I couldn't ever be without.

"Where are you going to bite me?" I asked.

"Katiya—"

"I'm ready. Make me yours, Tris."

His smile was beautiful. "My sweet beta, you were already mine. The moment you stepped into Howling Cove, you were mine. We were just waiting for our paths to cross. We don't need a bond for that."

"But you want one."

"Yes, of course, I do. Because I want to feel you every single day. Every breath you take. Every single emotion. I

want to tie my life to yours for eternity.”

“I think you need to write romance.”

Tristen laughed. He cupped the side of my cheek, pressing our faces together.

“Where are you going to bite me?” I asked again.

“Is there somewhere you want specifically?”

I shook my head, shrugging. “Just wanted to know what you were thinking.”

“I don’t plan to decide beforehand. When you tell me I can bite you, I’m going to make love to you until you’re cross-eyed and bite you while you’re in the middle of an orgasm.”

“Is here a good spot for this? Or is your date with the stars going to interfere—oh!” I shrieked, laughing as he flipped us around, so he was lying on top of me, his mouth at my neck as he sucked my collarbone.

“Fuck the stars. You’re always going to be first,” he growled.

His mouth covered mine as he kissed me deeply. Drawing my life into him and giving me his in return. For a minute, he didn’t move. Just held me to him, kissing me hungrily.

*Then* he lost his patience. Our clothes came off in no time as he shoved them away. I laughed as I heard a seam tear, though I couldn’t be sure whose clothing it was. Before I was laying flat again, his face was between my legs as he lapped at my pussy.

My back arched as I boxed his head in with my legs. The man was not in the mood for his long, thorough teasing tonight. He was on a mission.

Heat spiraled through me as if he were dragging a torch through my veins. He added his fingers to the magic he performed between my legs, and I briefly wondered if he was going to bite me on my thigh like he had Gideon.

Almost as soon as the thought surfaced, his mouth left my pussy as he dragged his tongue up my stomach. He stopped at

my breasts, biting each but backing away just before he broke the skin. He gave the same treatment to my neck before his mouth landed on mine.

“You’re going to come all over my cock,” he told me. “Understand, baby?”

I nodded as he pulled his fingers from me and replaced them with the head of his dick. In my experience, all alpha dicks were big. Somehow, no matter how many times I was with these men, I was still surprised. The way he stretched me felt like the first time all over again.

“Breathe, baby,” he murmured, a grin on his sexy lips.

He wasn’t wrong. I forgot to breathe when they first began to push their way inside me. Every time. Even if I took them one after the other, which happened on occasion. It was pure magic.

Magic that left me feeling boneless the next day, but still magic.

Tristen kissed along my neck, sucking every few kisses and making me writhe underneath him. All the while, his slow and steady rocking notched his cock in further and further. Filling me so deeply I thought I’d lose my mind.

He caught my tongue in his mouth, sucking on it like it was my neck. Making my hips jerk against him. The movement made his cock hit the exact spot that made my eyes roll.

“So sweet,” he murmured. “Feel how your body molds to mine. Stretches and makes room for me. Like a good little girl. A perfect beta for your alpha.”

“Tristen,” I groaned, making him smile and catch my tongue again.

“Wrap your long legs around me, baby,” he said.

I did. His hand followed, reaching under me to grip my ass. I grunted, my hips jerking up again as he began to thrust in earnest now.

His other hand tangled in my hair as he chased my tongue again. Every time I pulled away to take a breath, Tristen commanded my mouth a second later.

My orgasm rose. Every muscle in my body moved and writhed against him. Begging for more. Pleading for release. Whining for the stars he was going to shoot me to.

He never disappointed. I came with a cry that was only amplified as he caught my tongue again. He gave a quick suck, which I was sure I felt all the way in my pussy by the way my walls spasmed around him. And then his teeth sank into my tongue.

I cried out as my vision blacked and all I saw were the stars overhead winking at me. My climax amplified before becoming confused with different feelings that I couldn't place. Excitement. Serenity. Joy.

So much love coming at me from all over the place. Hitting me from a half dozen different directions.

Tristen released my tongue. "Breathe, baby. Take a breath."

I did. Letting the fresh air outside clear my head. "Oh," I said, as I blinked him back into focus. I wasn't losing my mind. I was feeling our pack through our new bond.

And above it all was Tristen, wrapping me in his bonds of crazy love.

"There you go," he whispered. "That's better. You okay?"

I nodded. "I think you broke my orgasm in a weird way," I said, making him laugh.

"Only because you were caught up in feeling everyone so loudly. Your next one, which will happen in approximately twenty-four minutes, will be very different."

"Why?"

"Because you'll feel my arousal too. And the rest of the pack's since they're going to love to feel you this way. It's too bad they don't know exactly where we are. It's going to drive



them crazy not being able to touch you the first time they feel your arousal through our bond.”

“That’s sadistic,” I chided.

His grin was wicked. “Yep. Now give me your tongue so I can tend to my bite.”

I realized as soon as I stuck my tongue out and he started sucking on it again, that this was now going to be a one-way switch that went straight to my libido, always turning it on. I moaned as Tristen began to rock his hips again.

My alpha. *Mine.*

I couldn’t wait to have the rest of them.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First let me just say that writing omegaverse is totally my zen. My happy place. These stories just flow. I planned this story months ago. Many, many months. It was supposed to begin as a short within an anthology but the anthology was canceled. That worked out in my favor because I LOVE Katiya and her guys. They have fast become one of my favorite casts of all time.

Ever since I read a certain Kathryn Moon book that starred a traumatized beta, I have been completely obsessed with betas getting the love they deserve. Don't get me wrong, I love a good omega-centered story, too. But in a world where betas make up the majority of the population and certainly don't get the love and treatment they deserve, I've been *dying* to write my own story where the beta is just as cherished as the omega. Spoiled. Possessively protected. Obsessed over.

And here we are!

I hope the 'Scooby Doo' mystery wasn't too obvious. Scooby is one of my favorite cartoons of all time. I even had a dog named Scooby who lived to be almost fifteen years old. He was my grumpy man and I miss him dearly so I was totally excited to pay both Scooby's some homage.

A couple notes to follow up this books:

- The pufferfish zombies are a thing in Haiti. Look it up! It's a wild read.
- I think we're totally going to have to take a deeper look into Chaingate. But from which perspective? An omega's? A beta's? An alpha's?
- I also think Howling Cove is a good tourist drop-in location for future books. What do you think?

Did you know that I have a patreon? Check out my website (or the back of my ebook) for a link. Why should you check it out? Well... there are exclusive patreon stories, including one from The Harem Project world and one from my Knotty & Sweet Omegaverse. There are bonus scenes from current books as well as snippets from other projects. You get first looks at upcoming projects, the first three chapters (minimum) of works-in-progress, *and* swag/merch, depending on the tier you sign up for. With the addition of my House of Savage member guaranteeing quarterly character commissions, there will even start to be art!

To call out some of these lovely ladies who tirelessly support me, I'd like to tell Jennifer Colleen, Lauren, Sarah Jane, Shyla, Chelsi, Kylee, Miriam, Jen M, and Fawn among others just how spoiled you make me every single month you cheer by my side. I *adore* you. Look forward to our chats and plotting which peen-shaped items I can send you each month!

Outside of my patreon, I have the best group of ninjas a writer could ask for. Two beastly PAs whose comments I simply LIVE for. A beta team who never stops encouraging my mad plots and are excited no matter how frequently I'm loading them with more books than any of us can handle some days. My sweet, dedicated ARC team who tirelessly reads what I throw at them. And my readers who make my world go round. Thank you to everyone who always has my back. I appreciate you all from the bottom of my heart.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crea lives in upstate New York with her dog and husband. She has been writing since grade school, when her second grade teacher had her class keep writing journals. She has a habit of creating secondary, and often time tertiary, characters that take over her stories. When she can't fall asleep at night, she thinks up new scenes for her characters to act out. This, of course, is how most of her meant-to-be-thrown-away characters tend to end up front and center - and utterly swoon-worthy! Don't ask her how many book boyfriends she has...

When not writing, Crea is an avid reader. Her TBR pile is several hundred books high (don't even look at her kindle wish list or the unread books on her tablet). Sometimes, she enjoys crafting; sometimes, exploring nature; sometimes, traveling. Mostly, she enjoys putting her characters on paper and breathing life into them. Oh, and sleeping. Crea *loves* to sleep!

# THANK YOU

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Crea Reitan

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