



PACK
RIVALRY
PART ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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PACK RIVALS PART ONE

AN OMEGAVERSE ROMANCE

HANNAH HAZE


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FOREWORD

Sometimes the idea for a story drops out of nowhere. Two packs? Fighting over the same girl? I had to write this! After all, double the number of men means quadruple the fun. Enjoy!

If you do spot any typos in this book, please drop me a line so I can make it right: hannahhazewrites@gmail.com (Or just drop me an email anyway. I love to chat!).

You can find a guide to my omegaverse at the end of this book. If you're new to omegaverse, you may want to take a look.

This book is a sweeter 'why choose' (reverse harem) omegaverse with one female omega character and two packs of alpha males. The characters will not find their happy ending until Part Two. There is a long standing rivalry between the two packs in this book which causes tensions and poor decisions. The female main character has been in an emotionally abusive relationship in the past. For more detailed content warnings, please visit [my website](#).

B^{ea}

MY EYES FLICK from the empty road and back down to the tank meter. The needle hovers dangerously close to the red zone. How long until I run out of gas completely and this getaway grinds to a pathetic halt? I must be riding on actual fumes at this point, but there hasn't been a gas station on this lonely road for miles.

Lie. There was one sixty miles back, but I recognized old Mr. Whiterman's car lined up outside the pumps and I didn't want anyone spotting me as I made my escape.

I switch off the radio, hoping that will somehow make the gas last longer. The only radio station I could pick up was pumping out back-to-back love songs anyway, each one making me feel progressively sicker. If I listen to one more man wail about how much he loves the woman in his life, how devoted he is to her, how he'd give his life for her, I'll probably drive my car straight off the road and into the nearest ditch.

I've already cut the air con, resorting to opening all the windows down low and letting the warm breeze waft through the car. It's not working. I'm hot.

I drum my fingernails on the steering wheel and try to concentrate on the road ahead. I'm not going to think about

love and heartbreak and everything I'm escaping. But even my nails are freaking distracting. Still displaying the beautiful pearly manicure I'd chosen for the wedding.

I should have ripped these stupid nails off my fingers and dumped them in the nearest rubbish dumpster along with the dress, veil and ring.

Ahh, shit. I really loved that dress.

I really loved that stupid man too.

But I'm not – I AM NOT – thinking about that right now.

Nor all the money that damn dress cost me. Plus the wedding too. Scrimping and saving for the last two years.

Yeah, that should have been my first clue. It was me doing all the scrimping; my ex, he didn't even do any saving.

No. I'm not thinking about it.

Eyes on the road. Keep driving.

I'm leaving all that behind. New city. New start. New life.

Fingers crossed, new me too.

My gaze flicks back to the gas dial. The needle is well and truly submerged in the red zone now.

I should have just risked old Mr. Whiterman. I should have packed a spare can of gas in the trunk.

Should have. Should have.

There's been too many of those lately.

What am I going to do if I don't find a gas station and my car breaks down? Who would I call? I don't even have AAA anymore.

Just frigging brilliant.

Bea Carsen, they'll say back home, even her getaway stalled.

'Did you hear she tried to run away?' they'll whisper. 'But she fucked up and had to come home. Didn't even make it 12 hours.'

That's the problem with small towns like mine. Everybody knows everybody, and everybody knows everybody else's business.

Which is fine and dandy until your life falls spectacularly apart, and you are the number one source of entertainment for the couple of hundred people that live in your town.

Yep, I'd rather starve to death at the side of the road than head back.

Luckily – so luckily, I lean forward and kiss Missy's steering wheel – we glide around the next bend in the road and I spy the glint of a gas station in the distance.

“Come on Missy, old girl,” I tell her, stroking her dashboard. “You can do this. Just that little bit further. Don't let me down.”

She doesn't. Practically the only one in my life who hasn't. It's why I love her. Why I'd never trade her in. Even if she guzzles more gas than she should and only tunes in that one stupid radio station.

No other cars sit parked up by the pumps as I pull into the station. Good, no Mr. Whitermans here.

I cut the engine, climb out of the car and slide my sunglasses down onto my nose.

It's midday. I've been driving since breakfast time and now the sun shines high in the sky, its rays dazzling.

Unscrewing the cap from Missy's behind, I unhook the pump from its stand and line her up.

The station looks as if it were built before motor cars were actually invented. One of those rickety old places where you're still required to go inside and pay for your gas. I can see from here there's a selection of snacks inside. My stomach rumbles with the idea that it too may soon be filled.

I stare down at my middle.

“Fat chance, buster.” I need to save my pennies.

The gas chugs noisily into the car and I watch as something glints on the horizon, speeding along the road so quickly that before I know it, a fancy sports car is pulling up alongside me on the other side of the pump. Then, its silvery-blue doors lift like some strange mythical bird. Or maybe a spaceship. I half expect a short green man in a biohazard suit to step out onto the hot tarmac.

But nope. The man who steps out isn't green. Definitely not short. And his suit is so sharply cut, I'm pretty sure it could slice open my finger.

I stare at him from behind my shades.

He must be from the city. There's no other explanation for it. Nobody drives a car like that around these parts. Nobody wears a suit like that either.

What is he doing out here? It's still a half day's drive away from Rockview.

He pays me no attention at all as he examines the ancient pump, squinting, his brow descending into a frown.

"It's one of those ones where you have to pay at the counter," I say, unable to resist helping a fellow traveler in need.

He mutters something about passing through the backass of nowhere, then lifts a pair of deeply gray eyes my way.

You know how in books they're always describing eyes as beautiful? But most of the time out here in the real world, the eyes I encounter are nice and all, but nothing to write a sonnet about.

This man's eyes deserve volumes of poetry. They remind me of storm clouds. Full of movement and passion, and colors that shouldn't be colors.

"Thanks," he says in more of a growl than a human man's voice.

A growl that makes my knees wobble for just a fraction of a millisecond. He makes my knees wobble in a way Karl – in all our years together – never did.

“No problem,” I reply, my voice sounding squeaky in my own ears.

Internally, I roll my own eyes. I don't do wobbly knees and squeaky voices. Especially not because a man in a flashy car with pretty eyes just made my heart pause beating in my chest.

Men – all men – are no longer of interest to me. I'm no fool. Once bitten, twice shy.

The pump in my hand clicks loudly and I jolt, nearly losing my grip on the pump. I place it back in its cradle as the man on the other side pumps gas into his hideously expensive vehicle, and I walk towards the shop.

My stomach rumbles even louder than before as I step inside, and the smell of overly cheesy snacks and sweet candy greets my nose.

Damn it.

I ate one lousy piece of toast before I grabbed the last of my bags, flung it with the others into Missy's trunk and got the hell out of Naw Creek.

That was more than six hours ago. I'm famished.

I stroll the long row of colorful snacks like a connoisseur perusing fine jewelry.

I know exactly how many dollars I have in my purse and after I've paid for the gas, I will have five dollars and sixty-two cents to my name.

Four dollars and sixty-two cents if I buy a candy bar.

Three dollars if I pick up one of those big bags of chips too.

I pull out my purse and let it jangle in my hand. As I do, my eyes stray to the man outside. He's tall and his shoulders broad. He looks more like a tree than a man – all hard and brown and strong. How does he even fit inside that car?

I'm still staring when he hangs up the pump and his gaze flips towards the shop. I have to dart my own away, pretending

to be interested in a chili-flavored packet of chips. Which I am.

I take them to a till, where an elderly man takes so long ringing it up, that the man from the pump is standing behind me waiting before I'm done.

He's a foot behind me, but I swear to God I can feel the warmth from his body radiating towards mine and his aftershave tickles my nose. It doesn't have that dense artificial taint that so often offends my nose. No, this smells more natural – probably some expensive aftershave they're selling in the city, capturing the aroma of ... spring rain.

The man takes a step closer as I count out my coins on the countertop and his breath sounds emphasized in my ears.

When finally, the potato chips belong to me, I spin around, clutching them to my chest like a bouquet of flowers and come face to face with the man.

He sidesteps to the left, making room for me, just as I sidestep to the right.

I laugh and he smiles.

And oh, holy smoke. If his eyes are dazzling, his smile is even more so. My knees do that thing.

“Where are you headed?” he asks me.

“The city.”

“Race you there,” he says with a wink, and I snort.

“I think we both know who's going to win.”

“Yeah,” he says, his voice all growly and deep again. “Me. I always win.”

I don't doubt it for one minute.

Back on the road, I balance the open packet of chips between my knees, stuffing them into my mouth as Missy and I cruise along. We're all gassed up now with enough to make it to my cousin's place in the city. I wind up the windows, let the cool air blow, and finally find a rock station on the radio.

Five minutes later, the sleek silvery-blue sports car comes racing past us, kicking up a trail of dust in its path. The man beeps his horn as he passes us, giving me a friendly salute, and I laugh for a second time today.

Shit, it feels good to laugh. It feels good to escape. It feels even better to leave everything behind.



I'VE NEVER BEEN to Courtney's apartment before, or the city for that matter. I pull over at the outskirts of Rockview and type her address in my sat nav before Missy and I set off for our first drive across the city. It's chaos. The roads are a million times busier, far more aggressive and a hell of a lot ruder than home. Other drivers lean on their horns as I swerve between lanes, miss my turnings and drive in never-ending circles. After an hour, the stupid gas meter is taunting me once more, and I'm desperately trying to stifle the tears bubbling in the corners of my eyes. I can't cry because then my vision will blur, and this darn fiasco will be ten times worse.

As the sun sets, I finally reach the right road – albeit from completely the wrong direction – and squeeze into a spot right outside Courtney's door. I cut Missy's engine and take five minutes to catch my breath and allow my hands to stop shaking. I always thought I was a good driver, but country-bumpkin driving and city cruising are two totally different ball games. Sorry Missy, but I'm never driving in this city ever again.

After checking the address one final time, I grab my overnight bag from the passenger seat and slink up to the door, yawning and stretching as I go.

The rest of the boxes can wait until the morning.

Courtney meets me on the doorstep with a big hug, squeezing me so tight I think my ribs might snap, then grabs my wrist and drags me up the stairs to her apartment.

Once we're inside, she surveys me.

“You’re looking skinny. Are you eating?”

“You sound like my mom,” I mutter.

Courtney holds both hands up and takes a step back. “Woah, sorry dude. You don’t want to talk about it?”

“Nope, nope and nope again.”

I’m sick to death of talking about it. There’s nothing to say.

Courtney shrugs one shoulder. “I never liked the guy anyway.” I glare daggers at her. “That’s all I’m saying, I promise. Want me to show you your room?”

“Yes, please.”

“It’s small – I warned you it was small.”

“I know.” It’s why she’s insisting I pay no rent. The room is supposedly too tiny to rent, so she’s not losing out. I will have to contribute to the bills though. A problem when I own only three dollars.

The open kitchen-living space has three doors. Courtney points to the first. “Bathroom.” Then the second. “Mine.” And finally, the third. She turns the door handle and pushes back the door. Halfway. She can’t open it any further because the wood hits the small bed behind. I peek my head inside and see the single bed, a tall chest of drawers, and one window. The floor space is non-existent.

“It’s perfect,” I say with genuine emotion.

Courtney wrinkles up her nose. “You really were desperate to leave Naw Creek, huh?”

“You bet.”

She throws her arms around me for a second hug, before marching over to the kitchen as I throw my bag onto my new, titchy bed.

“Tea?” she asks. “Coffee?”

“Do you have anything stronger?”

“Do I have anything stronger?” She rolls her eyes and disappears under the counter, returning a moment later with a

bottle of tequila in one hand and a bottle of white wine in another. “What’s your poison?”

I don’t have a poison. Karl never liked me drinking. I only ever had an occasional bottle of beer at a barbecue or Joe’s Bar. However, tonight I’m thinking that might change.

“The tequila.”

“Good choice.” Courtney disappears, popping up with two glasses and pouring out two large measures. I go to reach for mine and she slaps away my hand. “You can’t drink on an empty stomach.”

Disappearing for a third time, she reemerges with another bag of chips.

I’ve been on a strict diet for the last year in order to fit into that stupid dress. Before midday, it had been twelve months since I’d tasted the salty goodness of a potato chip. Now I’m having a hit twice in one day.

“Come,” Courtney says, patting the seat of the stool at the breakfast bar. I hop up and she slides me my drink and the bowl. I take a swig of the tequila, the liquor stinging my throat and making me sneeze. Then I dive my hand into the bowl of chips and start munching. “I made you a list of possible jobs.”

She swivels around a pad of paper, scribbled notes written across the top page.

“I can’t read this,” I tell her, twisting the pad around.

“I know you’re heart broken and everything, but the city is expensive and—”

“I mean, I can’t read your writing. I want to find a job. Pronto.”

I don’t want to be a burden to Courtney, not when she’s the only member of my family actually proving useful in all this mess. I also need money, not simply for the bills, but to fund my new lifestyle of tequila and chips.

“Ahh,” she says, “my bad. Let me see.” She peers up at me with a somewhat sheepish expression. “Sorry hun, but you don’t exactly possess the best qualifications in the world.”

True. That wasn't the plan. Leave high school. Save up. Marry childhood sweetheart. Have a baby. Life sorted.

Stupid, stupid plan, considering the resulting circumstances.

"I'm going to fix that. Go to night school or something. I was always good at math, remember? I could do bookkeeping."

Courtney nods, then drops her gaze back to the list.

"You have a really nice pair of tits, so I was thinking, waitress at Hooters?"

My nice pair of tits was what started all this mess.

"Nope on a rope."

"Are you sure? The tips are meant to be good."

I raise an eyebrow at her, and she peers down at her list. "Mrs. Malowny downstairs needs someone to walk her chihuahuas."

"How many?"

"Five."

"Five?! Jeez. No, Besides, I'm allergic."

"You're being fussy."

"Am not. What's next?"

"Oh, now this one is perfect." She taps her fingertip over job number three. "My friend Josie's aunt is looking for waitresses for her catering company. They do big corporate bashes and that kind of thing. She actually needs someone for tomorrow night."

"Does this waitressing also involve flashing my cleavage?" I ask.

"No, it's all high-end events. Classy. Expensive. The tips might even be better and no need to flash even a little of your fabulous titties."

"All right."

Courtney grins. “Honestly?”

“Yeah, why not? I do know how to waitress.”

One skill I have picked up. Hard not to when your parents own the diner in your hometown. I was expected to help out most evenings after school. I can balance six plates in my teeny tiny hands, can lay a table with my eyes closed, and tot up a bill in my head.

This may be a more glamorous gig – this may be the city and not little ole Naw Creek – but I can smash this.

“Here’s the number, then,” Courtney says, pushing the paper back my way. “Give her a call.”

Axel

I SMILE at the man sitting opposite me. I've got him exactly where I want him.

He knows it. I know it. Everyone sitting around this table damn well knows it.

"The offer is a good one, Malcolm," I tell him, drumming my fingers against the tabletop as if I have all the time in the world.

"You know I don't want to sell."

I shrug, lifting my palms to the air. That's the other thing we all know: what he wants doesn't matter. My pack wants that piece of land, has done for the last 18 months. Prime real estate out by the seafront. It's perfect for development and we haven't been the only ones circling it like a swarm of sharks.

I want my hands on that land before anyone else grabs it. And when I say anyone else, I mean Pack Boston.

"I know you don't," I tell him. "But you haven't got a choice."

Connor went snooping on old Malcolm boy, something he loves to do. There's always dirt if you search hard enough, and Connor is particularly good at sniffing it out.

Turns out old Malcom had more than one skeleton in his closet. He might look like the upstanding citizen on the outside, refusing to sell out to the big boys, church every Sunday, modest donations to local charities, but we've discovered his dark side.

Let's just say, I'm more than happy to be handing out some retribution and screwing Malcolm hard.

The offer isn't good. It's awful, just enough for him to leave the city and never return. The rest of the money that should have been his, Nate will be handing out to Malcolm's soon-to-be ex-wife.

"I could go to one of the other companies interested in—" Malcolm starts.

He's cut off by a sinister growl from the seat next to me. Nate's dying to pound this man into the dirt. It's written all over his angry face. Malcolm gulps and drags the contract towards him.

He flips through the pages. "Where do I sign?"

"Right at the bottom." I roll a pen over towards him. "And you need to initial each page. We'll leave you to it."

I jerk my head and my two packmates, Connor and Nate, follow me out of the boardroom.

As the door shuts behind us, Nate snarls. "Can I beat him up afterwards?"

I shake my head, resting my palm on his shoulder. "We're so close. Let's not fuck things up. He's getting his punishment."

"Just one little punch. I want to give him a shiner so bad. A parting present from Pack York."

"He deserves more than one," Connor says. "You know how many times he put his old lady in the hospital? How many times the authorities turned a blind eye?"

"How many times? I'll give him one hit for every visit. Only seems fair."

“Trust me,” I tell them both, “I want to, too. But I also want this deal wrapped up before Pack Boston gets wind of it.”

And I know both the mayor and the police chief are waiting for us to put a foot wrong too. Have done ever since we started to make a name for ourselves. No one likes a pack running half the city like we do. Well, the betas don’t anyway.

Connor peers through the glass partition. “Looks like he’s done. Shall we wrap things up?”

I shake my head. “Let’s make him sweat for a while.” I wink and walk down the corridor to my office, the others following after. My secretary, Mrs. Finch, is busy pounding keys on her laptop. She’s been with us from the start. A tough old bird who keeps us in line.

“Mrs. Finch.” She looks up from her typing, peering over her halfmoon glasses perched on her beak-like nose. Her hair is pinned up in a severe bun and a chain runs from the arms of her glasses and loops around her neck. As usual, she’s dressed in black. “Could you turn the heat up in the boardroom, please? Right up.”

The corner of Mrs. Finch’s mouth lifts in a crooked smile. “I’ll get right on it, Mr. York.”

I beckon the others into my office. We’re based in one of the most luxurious office blocks in the city. A block we built five years ago overlooking the city harbor. We have an apartment that occupies the entire penthouse floor, and our offices sit on the floor below. Mine resides in the corner office with views out towards the blue sea and overlooking the rows of fancy boats moored up in the harbor.

I flip open a cabinet and pull out the bottle of bourbon I’ve been saving for an occasion like this. Pouring the amber liquid into three crystal tumblers, I hand one to each of my packmates, keeping the third for myself.

“We doing this then?” I ask, lifting the liquor to my lips, the smell of strong alcohol burning my nose.

“You fucking bet we are,” Nate says, grinning widely like a shark that’s cornered its prey.

“It’ll start a war,” I warn with a smile of my own. “They’re going to go fucking livid when they hear we signed this deal.”

“Bring it on,” Nate says. “This way, we own more than half the property in this city. About time we showed those fuckers they can’t mess with Pack York.” He takes a swig of his drink. “Those sons of bitches have been nipping at our heels for too long, threatening to take what’s ours. Not any longer.”

I drop into an armchair opposite my packmates, staring around at each one of them in turn.

Nate looks uncomfortable squeezed into his suit. In fact, he looks uncomfortable squeezed into his chair and this room as well. If he had his way, he’d be living wild in some jungle somewhere, killing prey with his bare hands and grilling it over a fire he’d built himself. He’s never liked the corporate world. The politics, the intricate dealings, the careful calculations. The only bit he’s ever enjoyed is the moments like this, squeezing some other fucker’s balls in a vise. Especially when those balls belong to a fucker like Malcolm, and especially when we’ll be screwing over our long-term rivals, Pack Boston.

“Pack Boston can go lick my asshole for all I care,” Nate adds.

Connor chuckles. “I didn’t think that was your thing, man.”

Nate shrugs. “If it’s some sweet little omega, then I’m not saying no.”

“Talking of sweet little omegas...” I scowl at Nate as he knocks back his bourbon. You don’t chug \$500 bourbon like it’s orange juice. “We have the Skipton Foundation Gala Dinner tonight.”

Nate groans, running his finger around the collar of his shirt like it just grew ten times tighter. “Not that bullshit.”

“Yeah, that bullshit,” I confirm. “We have to make an appearance, show our faces. Every other pack, every other alpha of prominence, will be there. If we’re not, questions will be asked, rumors will start—”

“Your mother will spank your ass,” Nate mutters.

“Nothing to do with my mother,” I say, although avoiding my mother whining at me down the line of a telephone has become one of my most frequent pastimes. She’s becoming weaker by the day and every phone call is more painful. “We don’t want anything derailing this deal. And if people start asking where we are, other people might start checking up on us and then ...” I sweep my hand through the air. “We’ve worked fucking hard to keep this deal quiet. I’m not having everything blow up in our face at the final checkpoint.”

“Fine,” Nate mutters, tapping his fingernail against the rim of his glass. “But, Axel, don’t pretend with the whole omega crap. We all know there’ll be no one of interest there tonight.”

That’s because we know all the omegas in the city – hell, we’ve slept with most of them – helped half of them through their heats; something that was fucking fun when we first formed our pack and started making a name for ourselves in this city. We’d been the new boys in town. Every omega had wanted to snag us. But, fuck me, that got tired real quick. I’m sick to death of whiny little omegas who expect to be waited on hand and foot. Something I wouldn’t mind if they weren’t a bunch of self-centered princesses, more worried about ruining their blow dry when you take them to bed, than blowing their minds.

There’s no passion, no spontaneity, no hunger.

It’s all selfies, expensive handbags and browsing for engagement rings.

Nate nods. “I’d sooner go blow a grand in a strip club.”

That’s been his way of dealing with things. A pack is meant to have an omega. Someone as passionate and animalistic as we are. Someone who wants us to pull her hair and rut her hard. Someone who wants our heads lost between

her thighs. Someone who wants to be knotted firmly to our cocks.

My way of dealing with things? Bury myself in our work. This deal – the calculation and implementation of it – was all mine.

I can't wait to wipe the smile off Angel Boston's face. I can't wait to tell him: we win, you lose. Tough luck, you wannabe fucker.

I take the last sip of my bourbon.

“We just have to show our faces,” I promise them both, “shake a few hands. Pretend to be interested in a few daughters. Then you can fuck off to some strip joint and roll in whenever you like tomorrow morning.”

Nate doesn't grin this time. He hates shaking hands and polite conversations. The man was born several millennia too late.

I push back my chair, the legs squeaking against the polished floor. “I'm going to freshen up. We leave in fifteen.”

In the private bathroom off my office, I splash water over my face and try not to notice the dark rings under my gray eyes. Rings caused partly by the long drive I made earlier to secure this fucking deal, and partly because it's not just sex we need an omega for. It's other crap too. Crap none of us would ever admit to out loud. Crap we need, nonetheless.

No matter what bullshit circulates on the internet, an alpha's only need isn't to bury his knot. An alpha needs someone to hold, to protect, to cherish. And not in the way those precious princesses want. It's more fundamental than that; more base, more primal.

We haven't found the right woman yet. It feels like we never will.

Maybe we ought to give up on pampered omegas all together. Maybe we'd be better off with a beta.

A beta like that pretty thing at the gas station yesterday. A tiny little thing, with curves in all the right places, a flirtatious

smile and eyes the color of amber.

She may have been a beta, but I'd caught a whiff of something standing behind her in the gas station. Her perfume, I presume. Yet, sweet and delicious, like burned sugar on my tongue.

I close my eyes, tasting that flavor again. Shit, it tasted good. I wonder if the rest of her tastes like that. I wonder if I can lay my hands on whatever that perfume was. I'll have to ask Mrs. Finch to investigate for me. Not that she'll be happy. She seems as keen as my mother to see our pack settled down.

A set of knuckles tap against the door. "You ready Axel? I think our man's been cooking in there long enough."

"Sure," I say, tightening my tie around my neck and shrugging on my suit jacket.

When the three of us step inside the boardroom a minute later, it's sweltering and old Malcolm is melting in his chair, sweat pouring down his tomato-red face.

"All done here?" I ask.

"Yeah," Malcolm says, sliding the contract my way and running the back of his hand over his brow. "Could I have a glass of water?"

"No." I flip through the pages, making sure he's signed properly. Then I slam it shut and hold out my hand. "Nice doing business with you, Malcolm."

Malcolm slumps to his feet and shuffles around the table. I can tell he wants to say something bitter to me, but he's too hot to make his tongue work.

He takes my hand weakly, and I squeeze tight, my face neutral as I say, "I never ever want to see your face in this city again, understood?" I squeeze tighter, feeling his bones crunch under my fingers. He winces and squeals. "And don't contact Anne. I'll know if you do, and then I'll send Nate here after you."

Nate smiles at him sinisterly.

“Understood,” Malcolm squeals, attempting to pull his hand free from my grip. I only squeeze it harder, until the man is moaning in pain, his knees faltering underneath him.

“Good,” I say, when I’m convinced I’ve broken at least two fingers in his right hand. The one he used to hit his wife. He won’t be hitting anyone with that fist ever again.

I release his hand and stroll from the room towards the elevator.

Nate bounces along next to me, a frown on his face.

“Why’d you do that? You know I wanted to fuck the bastard up.”

“Because,” I say, pointing to my perfectly unruffled suit, “look at me. I did it without staining my suit with blood.”

Nate pouts at me like a puppy whose bone just got confiscated. “The blood’s the best bit,” he mumbles. Some days I wonder if Nate is a psychopath. Other days I’m convinced he’s more puppy dog than human.

Our car’s waiting out front for us and we climb into the back together.

“Omegas don’t like blood,” I remind him.

“There’s not going to be any omegas of interest there,” Nate reminds me.

I lean back against the seat.

Yeah, no omegas.

Maybe I should have Connor track that cute little beta down instead.

B^{ea}

I TURN up to the Hotel Alfresco an hour before the event starts to pick up my uniform and receive a quick training session from Alicia.

She's a tall older woman with an elegant short hair do and a cellphone glued to her ear. As she runs through instructions, she takes call after call from suppliers and decorators and the organizers. She also peers over her shoulder at the catering staff, shouting out orders and reminding them how long they have until the event starts.

"Tonight, it's a black-tie dinner dance in aid of the Skipton Foundation. The Foundation raises funds for abused omegas in developing countries, so expect this place to be full to the brim with alphas and omegas." She removes the napkin I'm folding from my hand, unfolds it and shows me again. "You don't have a sensitive sense of smell do you, honey, because this place is going to reek."

"Really?" I ask.

There weren't any alphas or omegas living in our hometown. And those that had presented as anything but betas back in high school had promptly disappeared. They said Joe Sample, a guy who started blasting out an alpha scent in gym class a couple of years ago, packed his bag that night and left

for the city. Whitney Hughes fell into a preheat after making out with her boyfriend in his truck. They sent her off to stay with her grandma and she never came back.

I know there have been others, but I've never paid attention.

Why would I? I'm a beta. And I was head-over-heels in love with Karl anyway.

"Oh yeah. I have a few members of staff who shove cotton wool balls up their noses before the event. But if you're going to do that, honey, be discreet. These alphas and omegas are sensitive types. Especially the darn omegas." She rolls her eyes. "They claim to have superior taste buds and if the flavors aren't to their liking, it causes all sorts of dramas. I had one little princess send every single dish back last year and demand I have one of the chefs cook her something from scratch right to her liking."

"Wow, we hardly ever had anyone send food back at the diner." Alicia glares at me like I just insulted her food. "Folk were too polite I'm guessing."

"One thing you'll learn. The more money people have, the more entitled they become. You'll have to work your best smile and bestest manners tonight."

I flash her my customer-smile.

"Very good," she says, twisting a piece of hair behind my ear. "You have a pretty smile and a nice figure." Her gaze flicks down my body. I'm wearing a short black skirt, dark stockings and a white shirt buttoned up to my chin. "Beware of wandering hands, though. Especially from the older gentlemen."

"Eww," I mutter.

Alicia shrugs. "Part and parcel. Now go lay these napkins out on the tables. Guests arrive in half an hour."

I spend the next thirty minutes helping the other waiting staff to prepare the tables, laying out countless knives, forks and spoons at each place setting as well as an array of different-shaped glasses.

“Jeez,” I mutter, “how much food are these people planning on eating?”

“The depressing thing is,” a girl my age answers, as she buffs a wine glass, “most of it gets wasted.”

I think of the empty cupboards back in Courtney’s apartment and wonder if Alicia might allow me to take home a doggy bag or two.

At seven o’clock, Alicia hurries into the ballroom and shoos us all out. The lights dim and I watch from the wings as the guests filter in, admiring the beautiful ballgowns floating into the cavernous space, all of which probably cost ten times as much as the white dress I dumped back home.

Alicia spots me lurking in the shadows and points to a tray of champagne glasses. I grab it and start circulating. It’s a strange feeling weaving in and out of all the glamorous people, jewels dangling from their ears and littered around their necks. They reach for drinks, hardly noticing me, not one offering up a word of thanks.

I also understand what Alicia meant by the scents. It’s like strolling through the perfume section of a department store. Flavors and aromas swirl in the air, tickling my nose. But it isn’t offensive. I don’t screw up my nose like the other waiters or collapse into sneezing fits as soon as I’m safely inside the kitchen.

No, although not every scent is pleasant, I find I like the majority. Plus, they seem to reveal how their owners are feeling. The older woman accompanying her daughter is nervous, while her daughter is excited. Two men heavy in conversation are hiding their anger and a couple strolling hand in hand clearly can’t wait to ditch this party.

When I return to the kitchen with yet another empty tray, I find the girl from earlier perched on a stall, her eyes watering, her nose buried in a tissue.

“Are you all right?” I ask her.

She lifts up her hand before blowing into the tissue. “I just need a minute. Those scents are sending my sinuses haywire.”

She blinks away tears and peers up at me. “You seem fine though.”

“I like the scents,” I tell her with a shrug as she screws up her face. “It’s helpful to know how people are feeling, don’t you think? For instance, stay away from that tall dude in the corner. He looks all respectable, but his scent is giving me dirty vibes.”

The other waitress stares at me blankly as if I’m speaking Russian. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Maybe it’s because her sinuses are all blocked.

While the guests take their seats around the circular finely dressed tables, I manage to grab her name — Ellie. Then Alicia sends us out again. This time to pour wine.

I make my way around the first table without a problem. There’s a mixture of older couples and a few younger people. One wrinkles her nose slightly at me as I lean down to pour wine into her glass, and I expect her to complain about the variety. But she seems to forget me in the next minute, and I move on.

The next table, however, is a different story altogether. As I approach, I can see it’s mostly made up of men a few years older than me. All dressed smartly in expensive suits, all built in a way that has those suits straining. Alphas. I’ve barely seen one in my life and here there are at least six.

For some reason, I find them intimidating. I’ve served tables of men before, back at the diner. Oftentimes, they’d come in straight after a game and were drunk on beer. I could handle them fine. Even the ones whose mouths ran wild or whose hands strayed a little.

These men seem like a different kettle of fish. Am I intimidated by them? Yes, they’re huge. More giants than men.

I take a steadying breath, their combined scents rushing down my throat, and step towards the table.

Ellie brushes past me as I do and leans in to whisper in my ear. “That’s Pack York.”

The words mean nothing to me, so I keep walking, tiptoeing around the men deep in conversation and pouring wine into their glasses.

I'm at the last man when it happens.

I lean around him and let the last of the blood-red wine trickle down the neck of the bottle and splash into the belly of the empty glass.

I'm concentrating on my job, not wanting to spill wine on the glistening white tablecloth or his expensive suit. I don't see his face. But I breathe. Of course I do. His scent winds up my nose and into my mouth and I freeze inadvertently.

It's that scent from the gas station. That same aroma. Spring rain.

I turn my head, just as he does the same and our eyes collide.

"You," he whispers.

Me? I snap up straight, almost knocking over his glass, and spin away. My cheeks are burning, and I don't know why.

Maybe it's those deeply mesmerizing eyes of his, or the way his voice had my knees buckling yet again. Or maybe it was something in his scent I couldn't read this time. Something complex.

In the kitchen, I drop the empty wine bottle with the others and go to fetch another.

I'm hot, sweat pooling at the base of my spine. I waft my hand in front of my face.

There is no need to feel flustered like this.

So what, some dude here tonight saw me at the gas station yesterday? It wasn't like I was in my underwear or stripping for money. I was filling up my car. Now I'm here serving him his dinner. No big deal.

Ellie taps me on the shoulder. "The scents finally getting to you too?"

"What?"

“You aren’t looking so good.” She leans closer. “Or did that pack say something inappropriate to you? You know what their reputation’s like.”

“No, I don’t.”

She raises her eyebrow and opens her mouth about to spill the tea, but Alicia spies us and points to more wine bottles.

I grab one and stroll out towards the next dinner table. I keep my eyes fixed ahead and refuse to look over to the man. I don’t want him to catch me looking. Although I have the strangest feeling he’s looking at me. My skin creeps with awareness, hot with his attention.

As I pass around the table, it’s as if someone has whipped off my invisibility cloak. The men and women turn their heads to look at me. Noses twitch. People whisper. My cheeks glow with embarrassment, and, when the bottle’s empty, I head straight for the staff toilets to check I don’t have lipstick on my teeth, or my skirt tucked inside my panties.

I look fine, hot and flustered, but fine.

I run the cold tap and let the water flow over my wrists, hoping to cool my blood. Then I dry my hands on a napkin and step back out, walking back to the kitchen for my next task.

I find the waiting staff huddling in a corner as a woman in a velvet ballgown talks tersely with Alicia.

“What’s going on?” I whisper to Ellie, as the woman in velvet jabs an unhappy finger at Alicia’s face.

“That’s Mrs. Skipton. The owner of the foundation. She came marching in here, shouting about some unmated omega who isn’t on blockers. Then started accusing Alicia of trying to sabotage her event.”

“What the hell?” I gasp.

“Exactly!” Ellie says, sneezing into her sleeve.

“No unmated omega would be stupid enough to be walking around without blockers. Their unmuted scent would send all those alphas out there into a frenzy.” I nod along,

although I don't know what she's talking about. "Even if it was some ploy to snag one of those rich, hot dudes out there, it would be suicidal."

"It would?" I peer at the door. I know so little about omegas and alphas. But those big burly men out there did look a hell of a lot scary. Apart from the one with gray eyes. No, he was ...

Alicia comes striding across the kitchen, her arms folded across her chest and the woman in velvet by her side.

"Mrs. Skipton is convinced there is an unmated and unblocked omega in our midst. Does anyone have anything to say?"

Everyone peers at each other suspiciously. A few pairs of eyes land on me.

Alicia turns back to the woman. "I think I would be—"

"It's her!" the woman looks straight at my face and points a finger like a dagger directly at my heart.

"Me?" I squeal for the second time this evening. "I'm not an omega!"

The woman beckons me closer and goddamn it my feet carry me towards her without my permission. The other waiting staff step aside, parting like the red sea, as if I'm a leper and it's catching.

The woman leans towards me and sniffs. Her lips curl in disgust and her pale blue eyes flash with anger. Up close, I can see how beautiful she is, although the Botox and fillers have taken a toll on her face. Her own scent is minty and pissed off.

"This is she!"

My eyes jump to Alicia in shock.

Alicia returns my desperate look with a hard one. "Bea, are you an omega?"

"No," I yelp. "I'm a beta."

I've always been a beta. I've never shown any of the signs of being an omega. I don't have a scent. Or an especially

sensitive sense of smell. And I've certainly never had a heat or felt the need to seek out a knot.

Although, thinking about that now – a knot, the knot belonging to the alpha with the gray eyes – has butterflies fluttering in my stomach. What the hell?!

I stare down at my stomach. I haven't experienced that sensation in years. Not since the very first time Karl pressed his lips to mine all those years ago.

"You most certainly are an omega, young lady." The woman scowls at me. "What are you playing at? Did you hope to disrupt my dinner? Send the alphas wild with your—"

"No, I ..." I hold my hands to my chest. It's so damn hot in here and I can't think straight with everyone staring at me like I'm some kind of deviant freak.

"I'm calling my security," the woman says.

"That won't be necessary," Alicia says, gripping the top of my arm, "we'll have her removed immediately."

"Removed? I haven't done anything!"

But Alicia's already marching me through the kitchen to the storage cupboard out back. "Stay here!" she barks, pointing to an overturned crate. Then turns to one of the combi chefs. A big lad twice my size. "Make sure she doesn't go anywhere." The combi chef examines me with curiosity, his nose twitches.

"I'm not an omega!" I mumble.

Am I about to be sacked? Arrested?

What's so wrong about being an omega anyway? There's plenty of them out there.

I undo the buttons of my shirt, hoping to circulate some cool air onto my skin, and shake out my fancy hair do. The pins were digging into my scalp anyway. Then I switch on my phone and text Courtney a long explanation of the weird shit going down here tonight.

I'm just pressing send when Alicia returns with a tall, broad man by her side. He's about my age, his eyes mahogany brown and his dark hair long about his square jaw.

"Bea, this is Silver. He's going to escort you home."

"What?" I blink up at them both from my perch. The man is an alpha, something I can tell by his build and the scent curling my way, earthy and edible. Does that mean I really am an omega? "I have to leave?"

My eyes burn, tears threatening to well in the corners.

The man seems to notice, he steps closer, his voice gentle. "I think it would be best for your safety if you were to leave. Immediately. There are plenty of alphas out there and your scent could trigger a frenzy."

"A frenzy?" I ask, my gaze captured by his so I'm hardly aware tears are rolling down my cheeks.

"It can happen. Alphas driven into a competitive rut will turn violent in order to secure the omega in demand."

"I'm not an omega."

He smiles at me and nods his head, offering his hand. "How about I take you home anyway? Wouldn't you like to climb into your warm, comfy bed with all your pillows and blankets, snuggle down and go to sleep?"

I close my eyes. My bed isn't half as enticing as he makes it sound, yet right now that is the place I'd like to be. How did he know?

Gently, he pulls me to my feet, his hand warm and safe. Then he leads me through the kitchen. We're halfway through, when Ellie blocks our path, her hands planted firmly on her hips. Her gaze swings angrily from the alpha to Alicia.

"You're just handing her over to some alpha?"

"Silver is head of security for Pack Boston. We've worked together many times. I trust him to take care of Bea."

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure he'll take 'care' of her all right."

The alpha growls, the noise making me shake and whimper. He turns his head to look at me with distress, curling an arm around my side.

“She is safe with me. I wouldn’t do anything to an omega without her permission.”

Ellie scoffs. “As if an omega can give you her permission. You’ll take advantage of her.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Alicia sighs, “if you’re so concerned for Bea’s welfare why don’t you accompany her home.”

“But I’ll miss out—”

“Then Mr. Boston can bring you back to the party when he returns.”

Ellie looks up at the alpha with nervousness, but nods her head, taking hold of my hand and yanking me away from where I was enjoying his warm embrace. I mewl a little, looking back at him longingly, and the alpha swallows hard.

Then his face turns all business-like. “We’ll go out the back way. Come on, we need to leave quickly before news of your existence sweeps through that ballroom and this party descends into chaos.”

I don’t understand what’s going on or why everyone is so panicked, but when he beckons me his way, I’m more than willing to follow.

Silver

RUNNING security for the city's great and good means I've encountered some fucked-up shit over the years. Rescuing abducted cats, tracking down runaway teenagers and escorting senile grandparents.

However, if I'm honest, most of the assignments are plain and simple. Nothing to write home about. Nothing to challenge me intellectually or physically. Besides, I handle hardly any of them myself these days.

Tonight, though? Well, fuck me, this is testing all right.

I've babysat omegas before. I've been assigned to protect them from trouble. Although, most of the time, I find those omegas are damn keen to land themselves right in the lap of trouble. Most of the time my lap.

But they've all been the overly pampered, overly spoiled types, idolized by their daddies, worshiped by their mommies, expecting every alpha in the goddamn city to shower them with gifts and praise. It's what they're accustomed to.

Never have I been handed an omega who argues all the way out to the car; argues that she is not in fact an omega but a beta. Like I don't own a nose. Like she doesn't smell wet as fuck. Like her sugary scent hasn't got me half-hard.

Then there's the way she's acting. Despite her friend's attempt to prise her away from me, she takes every opportunity to cling to my arm and rub her soft little body against mine.

I'm a professional. I take the suppressants the doctor prescribes, and I tamper down all those urges to fuck and screw and rut and knot. Instead, I take all that pent-up energy and use it at the gym, or on some dude's face if the occasion requires it. When I first started in this line of work, I can't pretend that it was easy. Cute little omegas purring in my ears were hard to resist. But their daddies were paying the bills, so I learned how.

Anyway, I got bored with those omegas pretty quick.

This girl is different. She's working as a fucking waitress for starters, and she must be in her mid-twenties. Most of the omegas in the city are mated and bonded long before they reach that grand old age.

Where the hell did she come from?

"What's your name, sweetheart?" I ask her as I lead her and her friend through the back passages of the hotel. I have my hand poised to hook my gun out of my jacket if I need to. I don't know who this woman belongs to, but they've left her vulnerable and unprotected. I'm not letting some alpha swoop in and snatch her. She's in no fit state to make any decisions right now.

"Bea," she purrs. Her amber eyes are all liquid. Her pink lips are wet and parted. And oh fuck, I want to scoop her up myself and carry her home.

I scrunch and flex my fingers and try my best to breathe through my mouth. Not that it makes any difference. All I end up with is a mouthful of her flavor. My imagination runs wild.

Fuck, it's been a long time since I swept my tongue through an omega's sweet lips and tasted her slick.

Far too long, and here one is all ripe and wet and ready and ...

I cough, pushing the thought from my mind. Her friend side-eyes me with suspicion. I was annoyed at first when she insisted on coming too. Now I'm thinking it was for the best. My will power isn't usually tested like this.

“And where do you live?”

“Naw Creek.”

“Naw Creek?” I repeat. Where the hell is that?

“Isn't that outside the city?” her friend asks, confused.

“Oh yeah.” The little thing glides her fingers through long waves of hair, and I imagine doing the same. “I don't live there anymore.” She sways on her feet, and I reach out to grab her elbow and stop her falling. Her friend scowls at me but I don't let go, hurrying them both along the hallways. This omega's scent is all screwed up. She doesn't smell like she's in heat, but she sure as hell is acting like she's nearing one. Unless she's drunk.

“Did you drink?” I ask, my tone angry.

Her eyes go all wide and doe-like and she peers up at me. “No, but I feel really out of it. Maybe I'm sick.”

I shake my head. I don't understand why she's keeping up the pretense that she is a beta, or why she came to this party on the verge of a heat. Was she hoping to find an alpha? Because, sweet thing, all you had to do was ask.

“Where do you live? We need to get you home.”

She reels off an address near the city center – the run-down side of town, which both surprises me and doesn't. Omegas don't live in places like that. Most omegas belong to the rich families in the penthouses and the mansions. Those that don't come from money, get snapped up by wealthy packs pretty quick and live the rest of their lives in the lap of luxury. It's why so many betas are desperate to become omegas. Why there's some shady science shit going on to find out if you can turn a beta into an omega. Is that what happened to this girl?

I'm going to need to talk to her. Once she's capable of it.

My black SUV with the bullet-proof windows is parked near the back entrance. I wasn't going to let some concierge park it miles away from the hotel. In my line of work, you can't help but form a getaway plan. Even when it's just a charity event in a ballroom.

I open the back door and help the little thing up and into the back seat. Then I reach over her to buckle her in, and she makes some ridiculously adorable mewling sound and strokes her palms down my chest. I don't think she even knows what she's doing. Her friend climbs into the seat beside her and glares at me as I take the omega's hands in mine and return them to her lap – her lap where I would kill to rest my head right now.

“Did your alphas know you were so close to your heat?” I can't understand why the fuck the men would let their omega out smelling like this, acting like this.

She shakes her head and blinks. “I don't have an alpha.”

My stomach does a somersault and my heart pounds against my ribcage. She doesn't have an alpha. How can a sweet little omega like this not have an alpha? How can she be available?

“And I'm not an omega.”

I scoff and slam the door. She's either delusional or lying for some reason I cannot fathom.

Sliding into the front seat, I rev the engine and set off across the dark city. Ten minutes into our ride, I peer at the two women in the rear-view mirror. The omega has curled up on her seat and has fallen asleep, her arms tucked around a sweater of mine I threw in the back earlier today.

I catch the eye of the omega's friend.

“You know her well?”

She shakes her head. “We only met tonight.”

“Hmmm.”

“But I don't think she's lying, you know.”

“About which bit?”

“The omega bit, I guess. She didn’t smell like this when she first arrived this evening. And she seemed pretty clueless in general about omegas and alphas.”

“It could be an act. And she could have been using blockers that wore off as the night progressed.”

The other woman shrugs and looks out the window. “Alicia’s going to cut my pay for the hours I’ve missed.”

“No, she won’t. I’ll talk to her.” I flick the indicator on and swing us around a left turning. “It was a nice thing to do.”

“She seems nice. And there aren’t that many nice people in this city.”

Amen to that.

She smooths her hand along the omega’s face. “She’s boiling hot.”

“Her heat’s coming.”

“Have you ever heard of an omega discovering their designation this late on?”

“No, never.” That’s why I’m convinced there is more to this story.

Perhaps she was sent in by some low life with the motive of causing chaos at the benefit tonight. There’re plenty of individuals who’d like the alphas in this city to run amok. It would give them the proof they need to lock us up. They don’t like the fact we’re becoming more and more powerful every day. Shit, I mean, between Pack York and mine, we own most of this city. There are people that don’t like that.

I flick my gaze to the omega’s reflection again. The girl is unbelievably cute, with long lashes that brush against her soft cheeks. How could anyone use her like that? She’d have been ripped apart if she’d fallen into her full heat among all those jacked-up alphas. It would’ve been a blood bath.

It’s why omegas need to be mated and bonded and under the control of a responsible pack of alphas. People who will

ensure they're not running loose with a heat blowing.

The air in the car grows thick with her sweet, musky scent and I wind down the windows and blast fresh air through the car.

Ten minutes later, I'm pulling up outside the address she'd given me, praying she actually had it right. As I expected, this side of city is the shit side. The buildings are run down, the garbage uncollected from the edge of the road and the sidewalks so cracked it looks like someone took a hammer to them.

I don't like it. Don't like that I'm delivering this omega to this place. If it's a dump inside, I don't give a shit what Alicia or this other girl says, I'm taking her home.

For a moment, my hands hesitate on the steering wheel. I could take her home anyway. Tuck her up in my bed and take care of her until she's thinking straight and can deliver me some sensible answers.

But, hey, I'm a lot of things, not always walking the straight and narrow, but I'm not that kind of man.

I cut the engine.

"Should I wake her up?" the friend asks.

"No, I'll carry her in."

She goes to argue, but I'm around the side of the car and opening the door before she has a word out.

I know I'm being a dick, only carrying her because it gives me the excuse to hold the sweet little thing in my arms and breathe in her scent. Fuck it, I'm only human.

Gently, I reach over her again and unbuckle her belt. She murmurs, seeming to react to the proximity of my scent and my body. She wraps her arms around my neck without opening her eyes.

I can't help smirking at her friend as I slide my arms under her body and lift her out of the car.

She leans her head against my shoulder and wriggles against me, as if she's trying to fit her body as snug up against mine as she can.

I grind my teeth and close my eyes.

Will power, Silver. Fucking will power.

I cling to it as I place one foot in front of the other.

"Where are we?" she whispers into my neck, her breath tickling my skin.

"You're home safe and sound now, baby girl."

"It isn't really my home."

I don't know what that means so I press the buzzer and hope for the best. A young woman answers and after I've explained the situation, she tells me she's the omega's cousin and that the girl just moved here from Naw Creek.

I carry her up the flight of stairs, her friend still hovering at my heels.

"You can wait in the car," I tell her.

"Uh uh, I want to make sure you're delivering her to the right place."

At the top of the stairs, a woman with the same caramel hair as the omega greets us.

"What happened?" she asks, anxiously.

The omega murmurs something incomprehensible.

"Where's her room?"

Her cousin's cheeks color a little as she points to a door at the other side of the room.

I stride over there, noting the unpacked boxes on the floor, and kick open the door. It flings back and hits something behind. I try to force it open with my foot, but it won't budge.

I peer around the door and find a room smaller than a closet.

This is her room? Jesus Christ! The woman should be living in a palace not a shoe box. If she were mine, she'd have a room fit for a queen.

I lay her down carefully on the bed. She's still clutching my sweater and I decide I'm going to let her keep it.

"Can I see you again, baby girl?" I whisper into her ear, pulling myself back from nuzzling the soft skin of her neck.

"Aren't you staying?" She takes a handful of my shirt and tries to tug me on top of her.

I repress a groan of agony and once again yank her small hands away.

"Sleep tight, baby girl. I'll be in touch."

Reluctantly, I squeeze out of the room and shut the door behind me.

The friend and the cousin are both hovering behind me when I turn around, looking up anxiously into my face.

"Is she okay?" the cousin says.

"Seems to be," I answer, stepping towards the door.

The thought of her laid out on the bed like that, all sleepy and dreamy and smelling so sweet is too much to bear. It has my cock hardening. I need to get the fuck out of this apartment.

"But I'd keep an eye on her," I add.

"Thank you for bringing her home," the cousin says, her gaze trailing down my body. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

The friend leans in. "He's Pack Boston."

The cousin's mouth drops open wide enough for me to see her tonsils. Definitely time to leave.

"Here," I say, reaching into my jacket pocket and pulling out one of my business cards. "She can call me if she has any trouble. Or just if she'd ..."

The cousin and the friend exchange looks, and I spin on my toes and march towards the door.

“Did you want a lift back to the party?”

“Yes, please,” the friend says, racing to follow me down the stairs. “I hope Bea’s okay,” she calls over her shoulder to the cousin.

Bea.

It’s a name I’m not going to forget.

Bea

I WAKE up in my tiny bed, my head pounding and my body stiff. I creak open one eyelid, wondering if the strange circumstances of last night were all a dream.

I find Courtney sitting cross-legged at the end of my bed, a book in her lap.

“I’ve been waiting for you to wake up all day.”

“All day? What time is it?” I moan.

She glances at her watch. “Noon.”

“And the day?”

“Saturday.”

I’ve been asleep for over twelve hours. The most I’ve slept in one go since the whole mess with Karl.

“What happened?”

Courtney tosses her book aside, and crawls over the bed, snuggling down beside me. “What happened is you sent me this long rambling text message last night that made no sense. I tried to call you back and you didn’t pick up. Then some big burly man and a small waitress dropped you off at home. He put you straight into bed and you haven’t moved since.”

“He put me to bed?” I peer down, relieved to find I’m fully dressed, although apparently clutching a sweater that isn’t mine. A sweater that smells really good.

“What did the man and the girl say?”

“Nothing much. I tried to interrogate them but they hot-legged it out of here pronto. Although the big burly, super-hot dude did leave his card and said if you needed his help to call him.” She scrubs her hand against her nose. “You also stink by the way, like someone dropped you into a vat of perfume. What happened? Did you get drunk?”

“Drunk? No, I was working!”

“Hmmm.” Courtney doesn’t sound convinced. “You sure seemed drunk. You could hardly string two words together last night.”

“I ... I don’t know what happened.” I sniff my skin. I do smell like caramel dessert. “There was all this talk about me being an omega. Even though I told them I wasn’t. And then they said I couldn’t stay there and ... what?” Courtney stares at me wide-eyed and open-mouthed. I pinch her arm. “What?”

“They said you were an omega?” She rests the back of her hand against my forehead. “You do feel warm.”

I push her hand away. “I’m probably sick. That would account for the weird behavior last night. And the way my sense of smell went all haywire.”

“It did? How?”

I pinch her again. “I’m not an omega.”

“You sure smell like one. Now I come to think about it, you were all mewling and whimpering like one last night too. That man – that alpha!” her eyes grow even wider, “had to practically peel you off him.”

I bury my face in my hands. “Oh god, that is embarrassing.”

“Have you ever had any other signs that you might be an omega?”

“No,” I say firmly. “It’s impossible. You don’t get to 26 believing you are a beta all your life, only to find out you’re actually an omega.”

“It happens.”

“It does not. Besides, it doesn’t run in our family. We’re all betas.”

“Aunt Julia is an omega. So were both Grandma’s sisters.”

“Aunt Julia is an omega? What the hell! No one ever told me that.”

“Really?” Courtney frowns. “I think she and your mom had a falling out.”

We’re both silent, staring at each other.

“Do you really think I could be an omega?” I ask, the words sounding crazy as they fall from my lips.

Courtney takes my hands in hers. “Bea, I think so, yes.” The blind panic that swims through my gut must register on my face, because, my cousin adds quickly, “We’ll give Aunt Julia a call. She’ll know what to do.”

I hope so, because I sure as hell don’t.

If I thought my life was a failure before, a complete and utter mess, I have a feeling I had no flipping clue.



AUNT JULIA RINGS the buzzer exactly an hour later and Courtney lets her into the apartment. I can hear them whispering out in the kitchen diner, and then an older lady with salt and pepper curls and a string of beads around her neck sticks her head around my door.

“Can I come in?” she asks.

I shuffle up against my cushions, another one clutched to my belly and nod. I’m now wearing the sweater the alpha left behind, much to Courtney’s amusement.

Aunt Julia tiptoes inside like I'm some frightened wild animal. She examines my face and my eyes as she does, her nostrils flaring.

"How do you feel?"

"Hot, cranky, confused," I swallow, "scared."

"Nothing to be scared of, my dear. We'll get you all sorted." She smiles at me kindly. She looks just like my mum, except less up tight, no worry lines crisscrossing her face. I can't remember now why the two of them fell out. "How about we start by coming into the living room? Hiding in this grubby little room is no good for an omega. Besides, when was the last time you ate or drank?"

"Courtney made me tea a half hour ago."

"And I've brought you some soup. Come on, out you come, you can bring your comforter with you."

I wrap it around my shoulders and hobble into the living room. Courtney's cooking something on the stove and I sink onto one side of the sofa, Aunt Julia claiming the other.

"You think I'm an omega too?" I ask her.

"No doubt about it, my darling."

My lip trembles. I know very little about the lives of omegas and alphas, but what I've heard sounds pretty horrific. Painful, humiliating heats lasting days. A life ruled by hormones and alphas. No free will. No choices. No freedom.

Basically, omegas are treated like property. Slaves to their alphas' commands and wants.

"Now let's not panic," my aunt says, wiping tears from my cheeks. "It all feels new and unfamiliar now, but that's probably just because your hormones are all a tumble. I think we'd better get the doctor here quick. We'll get everything confirmed and she'll soon have you sorted."

"You know a doctor who will come?" Courtney asks from the stove.

"Yes, Dr Hannah. She's an omega herself."

“She’s an omega and a doctor.” That doesn’t sound likely.

“Yes dear. Best in the city.”

“Then I doubt she’ll come out to see me,” I mumble. “I don’t have any money.”

“Or a job,” Courtney calls over. “Alicia left you a message. She’s fired you. Says she can’t afford to have an omega on her staff.”

I burst into tears. “My life is ruined. Even more ruined.” I hiccup, a snot bubble forming in my nostril.

Aunt Julia hands me a tissue from her purse. “Your life is not over. It’s only just beginning.” I blow loudly into the tissue and throw her a skeptical look. “Well, it is. You’re young, beautiful and about to have the city’s alphas falling at your feet. Seems you caused quite a stir last night. There’s been non-stop chatter about the mysterious new omega. I had no idea, of course, that the mysterious new omega was my niece.”

“I don’t want the city’s alphas falling at my feet. I want them as far away from me as is physically possible. I’ve sworn off men. They’re all jerks.” Including the man with the beautiful gray eyes and the owner of this sweater. I bet they are both jerks too. You can be as pretty as you like on the outside, can smell like something divine, doesn’t mean you’re any better than the rest.

“How about women?”

“I came to the city to start afresh. To find myself. I want a job. I want to study. I want ...” I start sobbing into my tissue again.

“You heard what happened, right?” Courtney says to my aunt as she carries over a large bowl of steaming chicken soup and places it on the coffee table in front of me, before dropping down to sit cross-legged on the floor. She lowers her voice, “with the ex-fiancé?”

Aunt Julia nods her head. “He was indeed a jerk. And if you’re not interested in men or women right now, my dear, then you don’t have to be. Although we will have to talk to Dr Hannah about how to handle your heats.”

“Heats!” I wail.

Courtney pats my knee. “Come on, Bea. I don’t think it will be that bad.”

“Easy for you to say!”

“True, but Aunt Julia here is one of the coolest people I know. And the happiest.”

I peer up at her from my tissue. “Are you mated?” I ask.

“I am,” she says.

“And they let you out?” I got the impression all omegas were chained either to their alphas’ sides or in their bedrooms.

Aunt Julia chuckles. “Let me? Oh no, dear. I never had to ask permission.” She hands me my soup. “My pack passed ten years ago in an accident.”

“I had no ... I’m so sorry.”

She smiles at me. “I know your mother probably filled your head with all sorts of nonsense. But I can tell you now. There’s lots of fun to be had being an omega.”

“Do you have a job?”

“Yes, I’m an art teacher. I’m independent. I have an active social life with plenty of friends. I am indeed very happy.”

I stare at her. She’s at least fifty. With a happy life?

I’m twenty-six and my life used to be okay. Not exactly earth shattering. Perfectly adequate. At least I thought it was. Perhaps my ex-fiancé wouldn’t be enjoying our honeymoon with my ex-best friend right now if it *had* been earth shattering.

I sigh.

I don’t want to think of that right now.

I want to feel normal. I want to find another job.

“When can Dr Hannah get here?”



THE DOCTOR ARRIVES mid-afternoon dressed in a turtle neck top and smart skirt and armed with a medical bag as large as my suitcase. She lifts it up onto the counter, unzips the lid and pulls out all sorts of medical-looking equipment.

“Now don’t be alarmed,” she says. Too late because I already am. “None of this is going to hurt. But we need to determine what’s going on here.”

“I really don’t think I’m an omega,” I say, sitting in my oversized sweater, wrapped in a comforter and clutching three pillows to my body.

“Well, there’s one very quick and easy way to find this out.” She comes to sit on the sofa with me, some object hidden in her hands.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“I just need a drop of blood.”

“Blood?” I gulp, not knowing why. I was a high-schooler first aider. I set broken bones and stemmed nose bleeds. I even stitched up a wound at camp once. Today though, I feel faint.

Before I can protest though, the doctor has grabbed my hand and stabbed a needle into the pad of my thumb.

“Ow,” I screech as she squeezes a drop of my blood into a test tube, then shakes it with a clear liquid already encased inside.

“Pink indicates you are an omega. Green, a beta. Blue, an alpha.”

I snort. “Pink for omegas. You have to be kidding?”

“It’s just how the biology works. Did you ever have this test before? It’s routine in schools here now.” She opens a pad and starts to make scribbles in a script I can’t read. She smells similar to my aunt, floral and muted; her aroma no where near as overwhelming as mine.

“Nope, no test.”

“She comes from Hicksville,” Courtney explains from the floor. “You’re lucky to get a driving test, let alone one like this.”

The doctor continues to shake the test tube, glancing at her watch and then examining my face.

“And you never exhibited any signs that you were an omega before?”

“None.”

“Are you sure, sometimes in hindsight we realize—”

“No, never. I’d have to be pretty dumb to miss them.”

“I don’t know,” the doctor says with a smile. “I had two patients last year who had no idea they were pregnant until they went into labor. It can be easy to miss the signs if you’re not looking.”

“Or you’re in denial,” Courtney adds helpfully. Aunt Julia glares at her and she goes silent.

“I wasn’t in denial. I promise I never had any signs before.”

“Never felt drawn to an alpha? Never felt turned on by their scent?” Aunt Julia asks me.

“I never met an alpha until yesterday.”

“That might explain it – your delayed presentation.”

I stare at the liquid in the test tube. They’ve all made up their minds I’m an omega. I’m still convinced that liquid is going to turn green.

“How about your sex life?” the doctor asks with a completely straight face.

I cringe.

“She’s only ever been with one guy – her high school sweetheart.”

“And is the sex satisfactory?”

“Was,” I correct with a frown. Then add, “I guess so.”

“Did you ever feel the need for more? Were you ever left feeling unfulfilled?”

“Did you crave a knot?” Courtney pipes up.

“I don’t ... I mean I never ...”

The doctor lifts the test tube and I watch as the clear liquid morphs a pale pink, turning brighter and brighter until it’s practically neon.

“Huh,” Aunt Julia says.

“It’s confirmed,” the doctor announces.

“Oh shit,” I mumble. “Is there any chance it could be wrong?”

“A very slim one. I’d like you to come along to the clinic for a full blood test. I’d like to see what your hormones are doing. It’s very unusual for an omega to present so late and it might mean we need to experiment a bit with your medication until we get you all nice and settled. We want your heats to fall into a predictable pattern so you can manage them.”

Medication? Hormones? Heats? I stare at her.

“Am I falling into a heat now?”

“Hard to tell,” she says, resting her palm against my forehead and peering into my pupils. “It could be a bit of a pre-heat or even a mock one before the real one strikes. Best we get you on suppressants to regulate everything and some blockers to mask your scent. We don’t want every alpha in the city threatening to break down the door.”

The doctor stands and returns to her bag. “I’ll start you off on a mild dose until we have a better understanding of what’s going on.”

As she pulls packets out of her bag, there’s a knock on the door.

“Are we expecting company?” Aunt Julia asks.

Courtney shakes her head and pads over to the door. She raises up onto her tiptoes, then peers through the spyhole.

Satisfied with whatever stands beyond, she flings open the door to reveal a huge bouquet of roses, a pair of human legs poking out of the bottom.

“Bouquet for a Bea?” the roses say.

“Me?”

“Yep. You want them or not?”

“Of course she does.” Courtney grabs the roses into her arms and closes the door.

“Sheesh,” Aunt Julia mumbles, “looks like you’ve already attracted the attention of an admirer.”

The doctor opens a packet of pills. “I’m sure there’ll be a lot more where those came from. Although, I’m amazed the courier made it past the guards on the door. They gave me such an interrogation.”

“Guards?” Courtney and I say together.

The doctor looks up from the pills. “Yes, there are a couple of guards at the door downstairs. I assumed you arranged them given your predicament.”

“We didn’t arrange any guards,” Courtney says in confusion, diving into the flowers to search for a card.

I don’t wait to hear who the flowers are from. I jump to my feet and march straight out of the apartment.

I’ve been an omega for precisely two seconds and some dude is already trying to imprison me? No freaking way. I was pushed around before. I won’t let that happen again, even if I am an omega now.

I stomp down the stairs and fling open the front door. The doctor is correct. There are a pair of tough-looking men, both dressed in dark suits, their eyes hidden behind dark shades, flanking the doorway.

“Who the hell are you?” I yell, hands on my hips. From within the stairway, I hear the clatter of feet down the

staircase.

“Boston Security, Miss. We were sent by Silver to guard the premises and offer the omega inside any assistance.”

Me. I’m the omega.

“I don’t know who Silver is, and I don’t care to find out. You can tell him, I don’t need his help, thank you very much.”

Courtney leans into me and whispers in my ear. “He’s the man who brought you home last night.”

“Who is?”

“The Silver dude.”

My cheeks burn. “Yes ... well ... I’m grateful for Silver’s help last night but I am fine now. You can go.”

The two men don’t move.

“Why aren’t you going?”

“Can’t without Silver’s permission.”

“Then call him and ask him for it.”

“He told us not to disturb him unless it was an emergency.”

“It is an emergency!” I stamp my foot.

“Are you hurt, Miss?”

“No.”

“In immediate danger?”

“No.”

“Is anyone threatening your safety?”

“No, but—”

“Then we can’t disturb him.”

“Then let me have his number so I can call him.”

“We aren’t permitted to give out Silver’s personal information.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I have his number,” Courtney whispers.

“What? How?”

She smiles. “He gave it to me last night.”

An uncontrollable growl gurgles in my throat.

Courtney stares at me in shock. “Jeez, Bea.”

I grasp my throat with my hands. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.” Fat tears well in my eyes.

The two guards eye me behind their glasses like I’m some kind of freak.

Courtney wraps an arm around my shoulder and guides me inside.

“He only gave me his number for your sake. He said to call him if you needed anything.”

“He probably meant his knot,” I say, feeling both nauseated and turned on.

Oh God, what is happening to me?

I shake off Courtney’s arm and race upstairs. In the apartment, I make a beeline for the doctor.

“Give me the drugs. Please give me the drugs.”

Axel

I CHECK my phone for the tenth time this morning. Full signal, full battery. No messages.

I drum my fingers across the surface of my desk, then slam my thumb down hard on the intercom that connects me to Mrs. Finch.

“Any messages?”

“No.”

“Any phone calls?”

“Not since you last asked twenty minutes ago.”

“And the flowers were delivered?”

“Yes, Mr. York.”

“To the correct address? You’ve checked that with the courier?”

“I have and yes they were delivered to the address Connor supplied.”

Connor’s information is never wrong. It was the right address, just not the right damn decision. “I shouldn’t have sent fucking flowers,” I mumble.

Mrs. Finch tuts down the line at me. “Language!”

“Sorry,” I say sheepishly, releasing the intercom button.

I sent her the biggest, most expensive flowers the shop had. I dictated a note down the line indicating my intentions to woo her and asking her to make contact.

Maybe she likes games. Maybe she wants to make me wait.

Fuck it, I can't wait.

That cute little amber-eyed thing in the gas station was an omega all along. The sweetest goddamn smelling omega I've ever had the pleasure of encountering.

Now I'm stuck behind my desk, rock hard and daydreaming about her. Daydreaming about all the things I'd like to do to her.

The rumor that swept through the ballroom last night was that the pretty little thing had fallen into heat and security had whisked her away. It had caused a stir among the alphas. Everyone wanted to know who she was and how they could reach her.

Luckily, I have the best tracker in the city in my pack. It wasn't hard for him to break into the caterer's employment files and locate the omega's address.

What if the rumors were right? What if she is in heat? What if there's already a pack of alphas there taking care of her?

I bunch my hand into a fist and slam it onto the tabletop. Not going to happen. I want this one. She's going to be mine.

Fuck flowers. Fuck coming on too strong. I'm going to go see her.

I grab my jacket, and stride from my office.

“Cancel the rest of my meetings for today,” I tell Mrs. Finch as I march to the elevator and punch the call button.

“Everything all right?” she asks, peering over her spectacles at me.

“Fine and dandy.” I manage a smile, which disappears as soon as I’m in the elevator and the doors close.

I pace the enclosed space and snarl when the doors open and someone from a floor below attempts to join me. His face drains white, and he steps straight out again, letting me descend the rest of the way alone.

My car’s waiting in the underground car park and I jump in and speed out, leaning down hard on the horn when a pedestrian attempts to block my path.

The trip to her apartment in the shitty side of the city is a blur, over far too quickly which means I’m probably due a ticket. I don’t give a shit. I screech into a space and leap out of the car, adjusting my suit and sweeping my hands through my hair. I scan the sidewalk looking for the right apartment building and my heart falters.

There are two men flanking the entrance looking every bit like the security guards they most definitely are.

I undo the buttons of my jacket and stroll their way, ignoring them both as I reach for the door handle.

“Excuse me, Sir,” the one on the left says, resting his hand on my forearm. “Can I ask what your business is here?”

I repress an angry growl, and spit out through my teeth, “I’m here to see the om-Bea.”

“Is she expecting you?”

I hesitate. “Not exactly.”

“Then we’re going to have to ask you to—”

I shake the man’s hand from my arm, and skid my palm over my sleeve, wiping away imaginary dirt. “Who do you work for?” The guard goes to speak. I hold up my hand to silence him. “No, let me guess. Pack Fucking Boston.”

The man says nothing which tells me that I’m correct.

“Is he up there with her?” I lift my eyes to the apartment above, my stomach churning with nausea.

“We’re not permitted to allow any men or women to enter without the permission of the omega.”

He’s not answering my question.

“I’d like to talk to her please,” I say, folding my arms. I’ll try doing this the civilized way. If that doesn’t work, then I’ll be knocking these two bozo’s heads together.

They look at each other like they don’t know what to do next. No surprise there. God knows why the rich and famous of this city hire Pack Boston to run their security. They couldn’t run a fucking tap.

“Go ask her,” I bark.

They may be built like brick houses, but both these men are betas, and they can’t help but react to my authority despite their years of supposed training. The first man nods to the second.

“Who should we say is calling?”

“Axel York, Head of Pack York.”

The pair of them actually gulp and I have to suppress a self-satisfied smirk. Our two packs have been in enough altercations over the years that they know I won’t be averse to using my fists if it comes to it.

The second man disappears inside and ten minutes later returns. Alone.

“She thanks you for the flowers, but she is with the doctor right now and can’t see you.”

I take a menacing step forward. Despite this man’s size, I tower above him and he has to tip his head back to look into my murderous eyes. Did that pack of dipshits think a pair of pussies would stop me? Did they really think that?

“Are you stopping me from seeing the omega?”

“No,” the man says, and I can hear the fear in his voice. “I’m relaying the message from the omega.”

There is no way in hell an omega would refuse to see an alpha, especially an alpha like me from the wealthiest pack in

the city. They are queuing up to catch my attention.

“You’re lying.”

The guard shakes his head and then the voice of the other man catches my attention. He’s speaking into a radio.

“We have a situation here, Sir.”

“Who the hell are you speaking to?” I shout, snatching the radio from his hand and holding it up to my face. “Is that you Angel?”

“Silver,” the voice snarls back.

I should have known. He’s the one that runs the security operation for his pack. Angel, he’s too busy making real estate deals that piss me off.

“Silver.” I growl. “Want to tell me why the hell you have this girl prisoner in her own home?”

I hear Silver scoff down the line, the noise making my blood boil. “She’s not a prisoner, Axel. They are there for her protection. To save her from lowlife pond scum like you.” I crunch the radio in my hand.

“What? So, she can end up in the hands of a bunch of shitheads like *you*?”

The guards shuffle on the spot, exchanging worried glances, their hands hovering over their weapons.

I’d like to see them try to use them. I’ll have them flat out and cold before they’ve left their holsters.

“You can’t get away with this, Silver,” I snarl.

“I’m not trying to get away with anything. Get your head out of your own ass, Axel. If the girl doesn’t want to see you, that’s not my problem.”

Oh, she is going to want to see me. Because telling me I can’t have the thing I want is one sure fire way to make me want it more.

This girl just became a million times more attractive. Especially now I know Pack Boston’s sniffing around too.

It makes me all the more determined.

I am going to go all out and woo the fucking panties off this girl. They think they can steal her from under my nose? No fucking way.

“Let me tell you something, motherfucker,” I growl down the radio, “this girl is going to be mine. She’s going to be Pack York’s before the month’s out. In fact, we’ll have her laid out in our nest, rutting her hard through her heat as she moans our names in a matter of days.”

“No fucking way, Axel. This one’s ours. I had to peel the little thing off me last night.”

I crunch the radio so hard in my hand it splinters and sparks and fizzles dead.

Yeah, we’ll see about that.

Forget screwing Pack Boston over with our real estate deal. This time I’m going to show them there’s only one real pack in town. Only one pack every omega is desperate to join. They think they can win her over? Good luck to them.

I smile.

I always win my battles.

B ea

“YOU KNOW WHO HE IS, RIGHT?” Courtney says, as she closes the door behind the slightly bewildered security guard.

I shrug, examining the packets of drugs the doctor has handed to me. “I told you. I’m not interested in men right now.” Certainly, not super-hot ones with eyes that make my knees shake. “I need to concentrate on pulling myself together. And now I have this added complication I need to navigate.” I hold up all the pills, wondering how I’m ever going to remember to take them all.

“But he’s Axel York. Head of Pack York!”

I shrug a second time. But when I look up from the pills, Courtney, Aunt Julia and the doctor are all staring at me.

“What?”

“He’s a very, very eligible bachelor,” Aunt Julia says.

“I’m not in the market for a bachelor right now,” I remind them.

“His pack owns half the city. They’re like super rich. I’m talking private jets, yachts, villas – the lot.” Courtney disappears into her bedroom and returns with an armful of gossip magazines that she dumps on the sofa beside me. “How do you not know who they are?”

“Because the only magazine I’ve read for the last 26 years has been the *Naw Creek Mercury*.” And some wedding magazines but I don’t want to think about that.

“Every unattached omega in the city – and some mated ones too probably – wants to lay their hands on those men.”

“And yet they’re single.” I roll my eyes.

“What?” Courtney asks.

“If they are that hot and that in demand then they are also obviously players.”

Aunt Julia and Courtney look at each other. “Are they?” Courtney asks our aunt. I’m guessing Aunt Julia is the font of all knowledge when it comes to alphas and omegas in the city.

“I only met them a handful of times and they were always very polite young men.” Courtney sticks her tongue out in disgust like that’s the last thing I’d want. “But they do have a bit of a reputation.”

“Ha, exactly!” I glance down at the magazines. “For what?”

“Sleeping around.”

“And the other one?” I ask, pointing my finger to the floor. “The one who brought me home and placed the goons on my door?”

“Ahhh.” Aunt Julia, fiddles with the beads around her neck. “Pack Boston.”

“Also hot and also super rich!” Courtney says, bouncing on her toes and clapping her hands together. “Oh my god, Bea. You’re set! Snag one of those packs and you’ll be living the life of luxury for the rest of your days.” She squeals. “We could finally go on that trip to the Caribbean that we’ve always wanted to ... on their private jet!”

“One,” I say, flicking through the magazine pages and trying to ignore the pictures of the man with gray eyes and the man who carried me home last night, because, well, damnit, they are both smoking hot. “Private jets are bad for the

environment. Two, I don't want to end up a notch on some stuck-up dude's bedpost and three—"

"Why are you assuming you'd be a notch? Maybe they are looking for a mate," Aunt Julia says, pinching one of the magazines and dragging it onto her lap. "You may think alphas are simply interested in rutting and knotting," I gulp when she says that word, realizing I have some questions I need to ask the doctor in private, "but their instincts are just as strong to find a mate and settle down."

I snort. "Sure."

"I have more experience with alphas than you do, missy," Aunt Julia says sharply. "I wouldn't dismiss them out of hand. You have no idea what their intentions are."

My shoulders sag. "Look, even if they were interested in settling down, they aren't going to be interested in settling down with me."

"Why not?" Courtney asks.

Because I'm not the one people want to end their happily ever afters with. I've learned that the hard and humiliating way.

I stand up and walk to the window, wrapping my arms around my middle. Those two men remain outside the front door and further down the street I spy that silver-blue sports car from the gas station. Oh crap.

"We can try to stave off your heat for as long as possible," the doctor says gently, "but it will come eventually."

"And being with an alpha will make the whole experience much more comfortable," my aunt adds.

I turn around to look at her. "Is there a way of going through a heat without an alpha?"

My aunt mutters something under her breath. But the doctor nods. "Yes, there is. At my clinic—"

"I wouldn't recommend it. It's extremely painful even with painkillers and all the other fancy drugs," my aunt says.

I glance back to the window, to the clear blue sky, a flock of birds dancing across the expanse.

I've had my heart broken. Nothing is more painful than that.



THE DOCTOR LEAVES me with a pile of pamphlets and a long list of instructions for pills I need to take. She also tells me to watch out for certain signs, hints that my heat is approaching.

Aunt Julia jumps on her phone and starts ordering special blankets and pillows she says I'll need for a nest. Then she calls her friends about other eligible alphas they think I should meet. I protest at this latter course of action, but she waves me off, saying I'll thank her when my heat comes.

Courtney curls on the floor again and surfs the internet, relaying nuggets of information she discovers about Pack Boston and Pack York.

I escape to the bathroom, where I strip off my clothes and stand in front of the mirror.

My skin is flushed pink and covered in a fine coat of sweat. Yet, I don't smell bad, if anything I smell really damn good.

I roll my neck.

Omega? Me?

I can't wrap my head around it. My world already tipped upside down the day Karl left me standing at the altar. Alone. Now I realize that was a minor earthquake. Nothing but a tremble. Because now I feel like someone grabbed hold of my world, flipped it upside down and shook it hard, shook it hard so all the loose parts broke free.

What I thought I knew about myself, who I thought I was, it's all wrong. It's always been wrong.

Six months ago, I assumed my destiny was to be a housewife back home in quiet Naw Creek. Just a beta like

everyone else. Happy with my quiet life.

Today I have a man who owns a yacht knocking on my door wanting to ... what? Get to know me? Knot me?

I stare down between my legs. A knot. I mean, I know what one is but I've never seen one before. Some of the girls at school used to google them and giggle about it. I never looked. The idea grossed me out.

It still does, but it also has my insides tingling with curiosity and temptation.

Oh god!

I slam on the shower and stand underneath the cool water.

When I emerge fifteen minutes later, I feel more like my old self.

People receive new medical diagnoses every day. I'm nothing special. This doesn't have to change me or my life if I don't want it to.

Back to the plan.

Find a job.

But first get rid of the two brick-houses guarding my front door.

I march to the counter and pick up the business card the alpha who carried me home last night left behind.

Silver Boston.

The card smells like the sweater I was wearing earlier and I have to resist really hard not to lift it to my nose and take a super deep inhale.

Because damn, it smells like the earth.

I shake my head and concentrate on the numbers running below his name. I punch them into my phone, disappearing into my tiny bedroom so I can't see Aunt Julia and Courtney's faces while I make this call.

"Silver Boston" a deep voice answers after three rings. A voice that has my skin tingling in a ridiculous way.

Is this what being an omega is going to be like? My body ruled by all these involuntary reactions.

“Oh, hi.” I clear my throat. “This is Bea. You, errr ... you helped me home last night.”

“Bea,” he says, my name seeming to purr around his mouth. I swallow a whimper. Where the hell did that noise come from? If I can’t even talk to an alpha on the phone without turning into mush, how will I handle coming across one face to face? “How are you feeling today, baby girl?”

Baby girl! What the hell? Did we ... did we do something last night? I rack my memory. Everything is a hazy blur. But Courtney said my new friend Ellie had been glued to my side and looking out for me. I think I’m safe.

Then again, if he called me baby girl to my face, in my hormone-drunk state last night, I’m not sure I would have been able to help myself from ... what exactly? Humping his leg?

I rub the back of my hand along my brow. Jeez, it’s hot in here.

“I’m fine, thank you,” I reply in my best customer voice. Thank goodness all those years working in the diner proved good for something. “Except not very happy about the two men you’ve placed outside my door. I’d like you to remove them.”

“They’re there for your protection.”

“That’s very kind of you. But I don’t need any protection.”

“Yes, you do.”

I huff. “No, I don’t.”

“Omega.” I yelp-moan. I thought the baby girl was bad enough. But omega? The name has my spine straightening, my ears alert, waiting for his command, order, who knows what. There’s none of that though. Instead he whispers, “From what I understand, this situation is all new to you.”

“It is,” I confirm, feeling the weight of that deep in my gut. Navigating this world is going to be harder than I thought. It’s all topsy-turvy, upside down, and back to front.

“You had no idea you were an omega until last night?”

“No, I didn’t. The doctor says exposure to alphas last night, triggered my presentation in a way that had never happened to me before.” Although, in all honesty, I don’t think I was triggered last night. I’d already felt strange before then, light headed and a little hot, as if I’d been coming down with a cold. What sparked it wasn’t the black-tie event. It was my encounter with the man with gray eyes out there at the gas station. I’m pretty sure of that.

“Then you’re unfamiliar with how our world works.” I like his tone. It’s soothing in my ear. He could have been patronizing and a bit of an asshole. Instead, he sounds kind. “Omegas need to be protected.”

“From what? From whom?”

The alpha coughs as if he’s a tad embarrassed to answer my question. “Alphas who would do you harm.”

I frown. Funny how Aunt Julia didn’t mention this bit. Is this alpha talking bullshit? “How will they harm me?”

“Omegas are in demand.” Yeah, as sex slaves. “There are alphas who will snatch an omega and make them theirs against their will.” He hesitates. “There are also alphas that will kidnap omegas and sell or breed them on the black market.”

I sit on the bed. “So tell me, Mr. Boston, how exactly am I meant to tell the good alphas from the bad?”

I hear him open his mouth as if he’s going to speak, but there’s only silence on the other end of the phone. Finally, he says, “You’d be safe with me and my pack.”

“Problem is Mr. Boston, isn’t that exactly what a bad guy would say too?”

“Yes,” he answers.

“Then how do I know which one is telling the truth?”

“Your instincts.”

“Huh.” My instincts are about as reliable as a rat in a larder of cheese. Didn’t my instincts tell me Karl was the one? Didn’t

they fail to spot the truth? Yep, I'm screwed if instincts are all I have to rely on.

"Mr. Boston, as I don't know you from Adam, I'd like you to remove the men from my door. For all I know you are a bad guy, stopping good guys from finding me."

His tone is petulant when he answers. "If I was a bad guy, I wouldn't have told you about bad guys."

"Double bluff."

He snorts and I can't help giggling.

"I brought you home safe and sound last night, didn't I?"

"You did."

"You can trust me. I just ... I just want to keep you safe."

My stomach somersaults. Is that another omega thing? Because wanting to keep me safe sounds tantalizingly good, especially if it involves wrapping me in his arms and ...

I shake my head. Shit, these omega instincts are mind fuckers.

"But," he adds, "if the guards are making you feel uncomfortable I'll have them removed."

"Thank you."

"Perhaps we could discuss some alternative security arrangements over dinner." I can't help but smile to myself. Where is my will power? I'm not interested in any man right now. "I'm not particularly happy with the idea of you working for that catering company—"

"Oh, they fired me."

A growl sounds out down the phone. "Why?"

"Can't have an omega working for them."

He mutters some choice curse words down the receiver. "It wasn't safe for you anyway. If you need money—"

"I will earn it."

"So, dinner?"

“I’m not so sure.”

“I’ll pick you up at 8pm.”

“I really don’t know—” He hangs up before I can finish the sentence. I stare at the dead phone and jump when my bedroom door flings open.

“What did he say?” Courtney asks, Aunt Julia right behind her.

“He’s going to remove the men.”

“And?”

“He wants to take me out to dinner.”

“This is so exciting!” Courtney spins around like a crazy child. “We need to find you a dress. And you need to let me tame your hair—”

“It isn’t a date,” I insist.

I am not dating. I. Am. Not. Dating.

I am fixing my head and my heart and finding a job.

“He just wants to discuss security arrangements,” I explain.

“Awww,” Courtney grips her hands together, “he cares about your safety.” She grabs my hand. “Come on. You can borrow one of my dresses.”

I shake her hand away. “I need to find a job.” I think of the list Courtney showed me yesterday. Most of the jobs were unsuitable before my designation became clear, now I’m not sure I’d get hired to do a single one.

I sigh. “There must be jobs for omegas.” Courtney smirks. “That don’t involve stripping and sex work,” I clarify.

“Well, if you really don’t want to be taken care of by a super wealthy and pantie-melting hot pack of alphas, that line of work can make you a lot of money if you’re an omega.”

“You’ve never seen me try to be sexy,” I say, shuddering when I remember the one time I’d attempted to strip for Karl,

had ended up tangled in my panties and had to be taken to the emergency room with a concussion.

“There’s a recruitment agency that specializes in finding positions for omegas. I used them to find my teaching job all those years ago,” Aunt Julia says.

Finally, some useful information.

I hit the phone again. The woman at the agency sounds skeptical. She points out my lack of qualifications and drops several hints that I’d be better off hunting down a pack.

“You’re quite old for an unmated omega,” she says casually, “but your kind are in demand, so I’m sure you’d find someone willing to take you.”

I scowl at my cellphone. “I’d really like to find a job,” I emphasize, and she promises to take a look.

“Don’t get your hopes up though,” she insists. “I’ll call you next week if I find anything.”

I feel better after that. As if I’ve wrestled back some control over this crazy situation.

Now, all I have to do is find the will power to send that alpha away when he shows up to take me to dinner.

I study the packet of suppressants the doctor left me and take double the dose she instructed.

Remember Karl.

Remember the heartbreak.

The pain.

The humiliation.

Remember all that and resisting will be a piece of cake.

Silver

IT'S EARLY FRIDAY EVENING, so there's only one place my packmates will be.

The gym.

I trot down the stairs to the basement with a bounce in my step and a lightness in my chest.

I find Hardy lifting weights on the bench and Angel doing chin ups. They see me enter with a giant grin on my face and Angel drops down, landing on the toes of his feet.

"What?" he says, eyeing me suspiciously as he grabs his towel and scrubs it over his face. "Why do you look like that? Did the Rockers sign Dale Champ?"

I keep grinning and flop down onto one of the benches.

With a grunt, Hardy lowers his weight and lifts his head to gaze at me.

"You look like you just escaped a mental asylum."

Angel throws his towel at my head. "Out with it, asshole. What tickled your balls?"

"The omega I escorted home last night."

Hardy sits bolt upright. "Fuck, you got her into bed already? When?"

I shake my head. “No, asshole. But—”

“She sucked your dick?”

“No,” I say, my smile crashing down into a frown. “She’s gone nowhere near my balls, my cock or my knot. And,” I add, raising my hand to silence Hardy, “I’ve been nowhere near her panties.”

Hardy slumps back down onto the bench. “Then what the hell with the I-just-got-laid grin?”

“Do I usually look this way when I get laid?” Because as enjoyable as getting laid is – scratching an itch, fulfilling a need – it’s never made me smile this inanely before.

“No,” Angel says with suspicion. “What are you trying to tell us here, Silver?”

“I like her.”

“You’ve known her all of five minutes,” Hardy scoffs as he reaches for his weight again, “and you told us she was completely spaced out the entire time.”

“How is she different from all the other omegas?” Angel asks, wiping the sweat from his chest and his shoulders with a second towel. He means different from all the other omegas we’ve been seeing all these years. All these years and not one has sparked our interest. Sparked our interest enough to do anything more than fuck and rut with anyway.

I rub my hands together.

“She smells like the heavens,” Hardy sings, all high-pitched voice, “she has eyes like stars, an ass as round as—”

“Pack York wants her too.”

Angel lowers the towel from his body. “Pack York wants her?” he says slowly.

I nod, my grin returning.

“How do you know?” Hardy asks, flipping up to sit again.

“I spoke to Axel. He wants her for his pack. I want her for *our* pack. Looks like we’ve got a bit of a rivalry going on,

boys.”

“Rivalry or war?” Angel spits out through gritted teeth. He hates Pack York about a million times more than the rest of us. Can barely speak their name without punching a hole in the nearest wall.

“Rivalry, war, same same but different.” Hardy grins. “Sounds fun.”

“Especially when the prize is a sweet little omega who smells like the sweetest caramel.”

“How does Axel know about her?”

I shrug. “Same way every other alpha fucker in the city does, I presume.”

“Yeah, a new omega in town – that news travels like lightning,” Hardy adds.

“But why would that have sparked his interest?”

Pack York seems as uninterested as we do in settling down with a pack omega. It’s the one thing we seem to actually agree on.

“Did he meet her?” Angel asks.

“I don’t know.” I scratch my fingers across the stubble on my chin. I need to shave before this date tonight. Make myself all soft and smooth for the omega, for when I bury my face between her thighs and lick her out and ...

“Silver!” Angel snaps. I blink. “Could he have met her?”

“She was waitressing at the gala. He may have laid eyes on her—”

“Or sniffed her out.” Hardy jumps to his feet. “You got a picture?”

I tug my phone from my pocket and open the email my team sent me this morning. Angel and Hardy stroll to the bench and lean over to peer at my phone.

“Shit man, you’ve got fuck loads of photos there.”

“I had my boys do some digging,” I explain. “I wasn’t sure I bought the whole I’ve-only-just-found-out-I’m-an-omega act. I was concerned it indicated something shady.”

“And?” Angel grunts, taking the phone from my hand and examining a close-up photo of Bea. It was obviously taken a few years back, at a friend’s party. She wore her caramel hair shorter back then, but her big amber eyes are the same.

“Nothing shady as far as I can tell. And it seems her story sticks. As far as anyone else in her hometown was concerned, the girl was a beta and always has been.”

“She could have been keeping it hidden.”

“No reason to.” I take my phone back and gaze down at the photo. She’s pretty in that wholesome home-baked apple pie kind of way. But I’ve held the woman in my arms and I know there’s nothing wholesome at all about all her damn curves. “Besides, look at her. She’d have been snapped up long ago if she were a city omega.” We all stare at her photo some more. “One strange thing about her though.”

“Yeah?” Angel asks.

“No social media. All deleted.”

Hardy waves his hand through the air. “No big deal. Chicks are always doing crap like that. Decide they don’t like their old haircut and delete all their photos.”

“Yeah,” I say, “maybe.” Although, I can’t help feeling there’s more to it than that. I’ll get my team to do some more digging when they’re back in the office on Monday.

Angel cracks his knuckles. “Axel’s going to go all out. You know that, right? Whether he wants this girl for real, or he’s simply messing with us, he won’t want to lose this battle. Not when losing will end in real humiliation.” A smile creeps across Angel’s features. Alphas hate being rejected. They especially hate being rejected by omegas. They hate it even more when the omega rejects them for another pack. It dents their pride. If Axel and his pack are rejected in favor of us, it will do more than dent his pride, it’ll bulldoze straight through it.

“So what’s our game plan?” Hardy asks, swinging his gaze from me to Axel. Hardy is the muscle of our pack. The enforcer. I’m the brains. And Angel? Well, he is a bit of both.

“We use our best card. One Axel doesn’t have in his pack.”

“What’s that?” Hardy asks.

Angel slaps me on the shoulder. “Silver here.”

“Me?” I say, surprised.

“You’ve always been the charmer, Silver. And you already have one up on every other alpha in this city. You escorted her home. Rescued her from a potential shitshow. You’re her knight in shining armor. We need to play that shit to our advantage.”

Didn’t seem to be working to my advantage when she called me earlier. In fact, she turned down my offer of a dinner date. Not that that will stop me. I’m still rocking up on her doorstep at eight tonight.

“Angel,” I say, gripping his arm. “We’re going to win this little game. But more importantly we’re going to win the girl.”

Because, hell, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her.



AS PROMISED, I’m on her doorstep, pressing the buzzer at 8pm. The guards I stationed there are now gone and I half-expect to find Axel in a monkey suit with a bunch of posies. There’s no one there though – although it’ll only be a matter of time until the other alphas in this city learn her name and where she’s living. Then there’ll be a fucking great line outside her door.

It’s why my two guards have moved from the doorstep to the house across the street. I’m not taking any chances with my girl.

It’s the cousin who answers the buzzer.

“Hello?”

“Hi, It’s Silver, Silver Boston. I’ve come to pick up Bea and take her out for dinner.”

I look down at my hands. Empty. Damn it, I should have brought flowers. Omegas like flowers. All women like flowers, don’t they?

I try to remember all the things my mom told me growing up. It was one of her favorite stories; how my dad had gone about chasing her and persuading her to join his pack. I’m sure there were flowers involved. I’m going to need to give her a call. Subtly. If I give too much away the woman will be ordering her outfit for my wedding.

There’s some muffled discussion on the other end of the line and then Bea’s voice.

As promised, she refuses my offer.

“Bea,” I say sweetly, “at least let me up so we can talk about this.”

It’s near impossible for an omega to resist an alpha. Not when he’s right there in front of them.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” she murmurs.

I think it’s a very good idea. I want to soak that little thing up again. See if she really is as sweet as I remember.

“I’ve come all this way ...” I sound disappointed and hurt. Truth is, I am. I’d hoped she’d have changed her mind already and would be racing down those stairs to greet me.

I imagine her chewing her lip. There’s some more muffled chattering and then she says, “Just for a minute.”

Bingo.

I race up the stairs two at a time and come to a halt outside her apartment door. I can smell her scent from out here. All sweet and sugary. I close my eyes and breathe her in.

The door opens, and she’s there, wearing leggings and my sweater, her hair tied back in a messy bun.

She looks like she spent the afternoon rolling around in my bed and then put on my clothes.

I like that. I like it a lot.

“Hey,” I say.

Her eyes are clearer today. They’ve lost that shimmery haze from yesterday and I can smell, under her caramel scent, the traces of suppressant.

It means she’s more in control of her emotions and her instincts. Although, only just. Her pupils blow wide as her gaze tumbles down my form.

“Hi,” she squeaks back.

“Do you remember me from last night, or is it a bit hazy?”

“I remember you.”

“So, can I come in?”

She bites her lip, wobbling in indecision.

I don’t wait for an answer. Gently I turn her around, and with my hand on the small of her back, guide her inside.

The cousin is there, pretending to read a magazine on the sofa, plus an older woman with the scent of a mated omega, also with her face buried in a magazine. A magazine she is holding upside down.

“Good evening ladies,” I say to them both.

They both glance up from their magazines as if they’re surprised to find me standing before them.

I flash them my most charming smile. The ones the gossip magazines have announced would be worthy of Prince Charming.

“Silver Boston,” the older woman says. “I do believe we’ve met before.”

I don’t recognize her but I nod nonetheless. “Of course, errr ...”

“Julia Robinson.”

“Julia Robinson.”

“I’m Bea’s aunt.”

I glance at Bea, who’s hovering by the kitchen counter. “Seems omegas run in our family after all,” she pouts, “not that anyone told me.”

“Have you come—” her aunt starts.

“To take Bea out to dinner? Yes.”

“I’ve said no,” Bea tells us all.

“Shame,” I say, fiddling with the cuffs of my jacket. “I have a table booked at Sin Sky.”

“Sin Sky!” Courtney shrieks, glaring at Bea. Bea glares back, then turns to me. Her nose twitches and she rubs at it.

“I’m really flattered that you asked me, and that you booked a table at—”

“The most exclusive restaurant in the city,” her cousin says.

“But I’m not dating right now so ...”

“Does it have to be a date?”

She raises an eyebrow at me. “Are you saying it isn’t a date?”

“Not if you don’t want it to be. We can go as friends.”

“Friends,” she repeats suspiciously, narrowing her eyes. “Then you wouldn’t mind it if my aunt and my cousin tag along.”

It isn’t exactly what I had in mind. But if it means I’m allowed to spend time in her company, then I’m not going to turn this down.

“No, not at all.”

She looks a little taken back at my easy capitulation.

Her cousin on the other hand bounces up and down. “Really?”

Hey, if it meant I could spend time in her company, I'd invite her entire extended family along, Great Uncle Joe and second cousin Cindy alike.

"Really," I confirm.

"Then give us five," the cousin says, jumping from her seat and grabbing Bea's hand before she has a chance to protest.

They disappear inside a bedroom and I'm left with the aunt while they mutter and squeal behind the closed door.

The aunt closes her magazine and slides it onto the top of the coffee table. The apartment seems even smaller and shittier than last night, especially with the setting sun streaming through the streaky windows.

"This is all very new for Bea," her aunt says.

"I can imagine," I say, holding my hands behind my back and lifting my chin as if I'm under inspection at the military academy all over again. I have a feeling that if I want to win Bea over, I'm going to need to win her family over too.

"She doesn't understand how things work between omegas and alphas. Goodness gracious, she doesn't really know what it's like to be an omega."

"I'm prepared to be patient," I assure her.

"I'm more interested to know if your intentions are honorable. I don't want you screwing with my niece."

What can I tell her? My intentions are not honorable. Anything but. The thoughts swirling through my mind all day have been dirty as hell. Nothing I'd be prepared to share with the girl's aunt. And as for screwing around? That's exactly what I want to do.

I go for a diplomatic answer.

"As I told Bea, I want to get to know her."

The aunt screws up her shrewd eyes as if she's attempting to peer inside my head.

Luckily, the bedroom door swings open and Bea and her cousin come to my rescue.

She looked good in my sweater. She looks even more delicious in what she's wearing now. A pale blue dress with spaghetti straps and a flared skirt that finishes above her knees.

If she were any other omega, I'd be ordering the family members out, and marching her to the bedroom.

But I'm in this for the long game. I'm in this for the win.

"You look beautiful," I tell her. Then remember I have to win the rest of the family over too. "Both of you," I add, peering at her cousin in a tight black dress.

Bea fiddles with the hem of her skirt and I'm going to have a hard time not playing with it myself.

"Are we ready to go then, ladies?"

"Sure are," the cousin says, giving the omega a little push.

I offer out my arm, not to Bea, but to her aunt, which has the desired effect, all of them sighing under their breaths.

I suppress a smile.

The majority of omegas in the city are spoiled little princesses. They have everything they want. Most alphas have a hard time wooing them with gifts and presents because they have everything they want and need. Most alphas aren't me and my pack though. We're one thing those omegas don't have and, oh, does it drive them wild.

It means I haven't had to do the whole charm attack for a long time. Women are willing to drop their panties for very little effort.

This omega isn't so easily dazzled by our name and our reputation it seems. That's fine though, because this is where our wealth and connections will come into play.

I'm going to knock the little omega's socks off – and her dress and panties too.

B ea

WHY DIDN'T I say no?

Why can't I be stronger?

But when one of the people I love most in the world is pleading with me to go to the hottest restaurant in the city, it's hard to say no.

It was how half the problems with Karl started. Maybe if I'd said no more often. Hadn't been so eager to let him go out for all those beers with his 'friends', we wouldn't have ended up in the mess we did.

Maybe I'd be sitting on my couch in our little house in Naw Creek watching TV with my husband.

Instead, I'm following my estranged aunt and an extremely hot alpha down the stairs in an apartment block in the city.

An alpha whose pure proximity to my body seems to be doing crazy things to it.

Like my toes for instance. My toes are tingling. I don't think my toes have ever tingled. They certainly never curled from a simple smile thrown over a shoulder.

Karl could hardly make my nether regions tingle, let alone the most sexless part of my body.

Is it because I'm an – I swallow finding it hard to comprehend this still – omega?

Or is it just because this man is incredibly attractive and incredibly smooth?

He's wearing a suit. But not one of those baggy loose things that make the wearer look no more attractive than a coat hanger. No, this suit glides over his body, showing me just how hard and rigid and powerful it is.

Then there's his scent. It tickles my nose and my tongue and, as I take secretive gulps of his aroma, it sits in my belly and warms my whole body.

Oh god.

He smells of the earth and grass and rain ...

Wait! Rain!

I halt.

So does my aunt and the alpha in front of us.

"Axel," Silver growls. "What are you doing here?" His voice is not friendly. It's all dominance and aggression. Something that two days ago would have had me tutting my tongue and rolling my eyes.

Not today, though. Today, it sends sensations spinning in my stomach and spiraling over my skin. Yep, it turns me on.

I peer around Silver and, as I expected, it's the man with gray eyes.

Axel.

My heart does a little flutter to match the ones in my stomach.

Axel's gaze flicks to me, then back to Silver. His shoulders square and his jaw flexes.

"I've come to talk to Bea," he says.

"Axel York?" my aunt says, stepping forwards. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

His eyes flick to the older woman standing at Silver's side and his forehead creases in puzzlement.

"This is my Aunt Julia," I explain.

"And I'm her cousin, Courtney." Courtney pushes me forward so I'm standing somewhere in between the two alphas.

Their scents intermingle in the air and oh god, the smell is something I'd like to eat, to lick, to roll around in. Those flutters descend from my stomach to between my legs and for the twenty millionth time today I wonder what the hell is going on with my body.

"Nice to meet you both," he says. Those gray eyes of his, almost silver under the bare bulb in the entrance hall, remain locked on my face.

"We're on our way out to dinner," Silver says.

"Perhaps, I could take you for lunch tomorrow," Axel says to me, ignoring Silver.

"I'm not dating right now," I blurt out, trying not to let my gaze stray down his form. Damn it, he's in one of those magical suits too. I can actually see the shape of his biceps through the taut fabric of his jacket.

They didn't make men like this back home in Naw Creek.

"You're going on a date now," he says frowning. A frown that has me wanting to drop to my knees and beg for forgiveness.

Tomorrow, I'm tripling the dose of those suppressants.

"It's not a date," I say, although I'm pretty sure Silver is smirking at the other alpha.

"Then perhaps I could join you." He makes a big show of looking at his watch. "I haven't eaten yet."

"The booking was for two," Silver says, stepping towards me. "It's going to be hard enough for them to stretch to four. Five, no way."

"I can head home," my aunt offers.

“No,” both Silver and I say together.

“We’ll all go together then. Where are we going?” Axel asks with a grin on his face.

“Sin Sky,” Courtney tells him.

“Great. I’ll follow behind.”

He turns and we all watch him go, Silver glaring so hard at his back I’m surprised his jacket doesn’t combust into flames.

“Do you two have history, or something?” Courtney asks Silver as we climb into his SUV.

“You could say that,” he mutters. He wanted me in the front with him but I insisted my aunt took the front passenger seat. Besides, I need to talk to Courtney.

As we join the heavy city traffic, I lean over and whisper in her ear.

“I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Are you serious?” she hisses back. “Two of the hottest alphas in the city are fighting to take you out. You are some lucky bitch, Bea.”

Me, lucky?

I don’t think so.

It’s been poor Bea for the last fortnight.

So many poor Beas, I packed up my car and fled for the city.

I am not lucky.

I am not the girl men fight over.

That’s Serena.

I am the girl who was lucky to have had Karl in my life.

Until I wasn’t so lucky anymore.

Until he chose her too.

“When they get to know me,” I mutter, “then they’ll lose interest.”

I twist my head to peer out at the city. It's so much brighter and busier than Naw Creek ever was. The sidewalks jammed with people bustling this way and that, the shops all lit up like a runway, and the roads logged with traffic. I always thought I'd hate the city, exactly for these reasons. Now I can't help feeling that being somewhere with a vibrant pulse, rather than a sluggish one, might be what I need.

"What do you mean?" Courtney says, knocking me on the shoulder. "Get to know you better and learn how sweet and clever and funny you are?"

"Those weren't exactly the words Karl used." I hold up my hand and list them on my fingers. "Cold, dull, boring, frigid."

Yep, those were his words.

"What's that?" the alpha asks from the front, catching my gaze in the rear-view mirror.

I clamp my mouth shut and feel my cheeks sizzle. I may not want to date, but for some (probably omega-related) reason I don't want to advertise all my faults to him either.

"Nothing," I mutter.

"Just discussing her dick-wad ex-boyfriend."

"Ex-boyfriend, huh?" Silver says, in a tone that almost sounds murderous, his eyes flicking over my face. "Want to tell me about him?"

"Most definitely not," my aunt says, coming to my rescue.

"Where is he now?" the alpha asks. "Not causing you bother?"

"Nope." I turn my gaze back to the window. "Barbados probably."

"How about your boyfriends?" Courtney asks, leaning forward in her seat.

"My boyfriends?" the alpha asks. "I don't have any boyfriends."

"But you have packmates?"

I swing my gaze back to the man in the front seat.

Packs. Another thing we never had back in Naw Creek. Another thing I know nothing about.

“Yes, two packmates. Angel and Hardy.”

“How long have you been a pack?” I ask him.

“Ten years,” he says, leaning on his horn as Axel cuts in front of us in his flashy sports car. “Motherfucker,” he mutters as Axel waves at us.

“Ten years ...” Longer than Karl and I were together and that felt like forever. I thought these men had reputations as flounders. But they’re obviously committed to one another. “Are you romantically involved?”

“She means, are you sleeping with each other?” my aunt says. Silver glances at my aunt who shrugs. “You think I haven’t heard,” she leans closer to him, “and seen it all before.”

“We aren’t sleeping with each other but we do ...” he hesitates again, peering over at my aunt.

“We get the picture,” Courtney says, falling back in her seat.

Although, I don’t. I don’t get the picture. And now my curiosity is seriously piqued and I won’t be able to ask Courtney about it until later, because we’re pulling up outside a sleek tower in the middle of the city.

“Sin Sky is right up there at the top,” Courtney tells me, leaning across to peer out of my window and point to the heavens. I peer up too, the sky a blanket of darkness and the stars all hidden. Then the door opens and Axel is there holding out his hand.

“May I?”

His gray eyes capture all my attention and his scent swoops in and seems to caress all the way down my throat. I almost melt forward against his body.

“Thanks,” I mutter, letting him take my hand in his and guide me out of the car. Silver glares at us both as he hands his keys reluctantly over to a concierge. He glares even harder when Axel doesn’t release my hand but walks me forward to the tower foyer.

“I’m glad we finally get to meet properly,” he whispers into my ear in a voice that frankly should be illegal. “Although I’d prefer it if we were alone.”

“We already met,” I remind him.

“But not *properly*.”

I wonder if things would have been different back at the gas station if he’d known I was an omega. Would he have whisked me away?

I remember Silver’s warning about bad alphas and what they are capable of. But Axel doesn’t seem bad.

Then again, Karl never seemed like a cheater.

Silver flanks my other side and gives his name to the concierge. We’re pointed the way of an elevator which seems exceedingly small with two large alphas inside, especially when I’m sandwiched between them both, neither wanting to relinquish their place beside me.

I catch Courtney’s eyes in the mirror as the elevator climbs up the numerous floors, and she grins at me in amusement.

At the very top floor, the elevator doors part and we step through into the most glamorous looking restaurant I’ve ever laid eyes on. Not that I’ve ever laid eyes on a place like this in person – but I’ve seen plenty in movies and on TV. This place has floor-to-ceiling windows that look out across the city and down towards the water’s edge. We’re so high up it all looks miniscule; like a child’s model rather than an actual living breathing metropolis. I stroll right over to the glass, and my fingers resting on the pane, stare down at the blinking lights.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe, as the two alphas join me, my gaze meandering out to the water, dark and endless and leading far far away. “The sea.”

“You never saw it before?” Silver asks.

I shake my head, and feel one alpha’s hand stroke back the hair from my face as the other alpha rests his on the small of my back. Both lean towards me.

Packs have omegas. One omega who is shared between several alphas. That much I know. But the other stuff – the more intimate workings – that I am ignorant about.

However, as I stand between these two alphas, breathing in both their scents, feeling both their warm touches, my imagination has a very good go at filling in the blanks in my knowledge.

Or perhaps all these omega hormones and pheromones and instincts and what-nots are turning my mind dirty. I’ve certainly never – never ever – thought about being with more than one man. More than one man at the same time. Heck, two weeks ago, I’d never even considered being with any other man but Karl. I thought he was my one and only. My forever.

“I’ll take you out on my boat,” Axel says, as Silver whispers, “I want to show you the ocean.”

And I take a stubborn step backwards leaving the two of them staring at each other. The stares brim with hatred, and for the second time tonight I’m left with the distinct feeling these two men have history.

“I’m starving,” I blurt out, wanting to avert whatever is brewing here.

“Let’s go sit down,” Silver says as Axel sets off in hunt of nibbles.

Aunt Julia and Courtney are already sitting at a table in the corner of the restaurant right where one side of the building meets the other. It means we have views in two directions and, even though I am hungry, I spend the next few moments studying the view and not the dinner options.

Courtney ignores her menu in favor of snapping photos on her cell phone and Aunt Julia gives me her opinion on the best things to eat given my ‘current state’.

“What state?” Axel and Silver ask together as Axel returns to the table with a bowl of olives, a selection of nuts and what looks like a loaf of artisan bread.

“Oh god, it’s not that,” I say glaring at my aunt. “It’s just ... you know ... this is new and ...”

“She’s a horny mess,” Courtney finishes helpfully.

“I am not,” I hiss. Although, that’s not strictly true.

I am horny.

Is it that obvious? My skin is tingling, a beat pulses between my legs and for the first time in my life I can declare that I’m wet and it not be a lie.

The alphas now sitting either side of me, study me with interest as I duck my head and stare down at the menu. Not that I can read the words. They are swimming across the page and my temperature is creeping up like it did last night. Both these men smell so delicious and all I want to do is reach out and touch one. Just one tiny little touch. Perhaps one tiny little taste.

I grab the nearest glass of water and chug it down, everyone staring at me like I’m unhinged.

A waitress approaches. Young, beautiful and wearing a flirtatious smile that she directs at both the alphas.

“Can I take your order?” she asks, chewing the end of her pencil seductively.

And oh lord, murderous rage spikes in my stomach. I hold my hand to my middle as if I can hold it back. I close my eyes. I’m not the murderous type. I don’t yell at people, yet alone dive across tables to wrap my fingers around their throats.

“We’re going to have the lobster,” Silver declares, reeling off a selection of sides to accompany the main dish. “Thank you.” He leans in to whisper in my ear. “She’s gone. Want me to ask for a different waiter?”

I open my eyes and find him smirking at me.

“No, it’s just ...” I snap my hands away. “Hunger pangs.”

Axel thrusts a slice of the buttered bread my way. “Eat,” he commands and on instinct I open my mouth. Like a dog. Like a trained flipping dog.

This is too much. But Courtney is wittering on about how beautiful the place is and, oh look, there’s so and so soap star sitting over there, and there’s that basketball player by the bar. And I can’t put an abrupt end to things.

I lean back in my chair and try to concentrate on my cousin’s words and not the rhythmic breathing of the alphas either side of me. I try to focus on the aromas of the food drifting through the restaurant and not the two scents clamoring for my attention.

I’m doing a pretty pathetic job on both fronts, but luckily our food arrives promptly.

The two alphas tussle over who is going to serve me my lobster. Both grip the handle of the silver spoon. It swings backwards and forward between them both. I stare at the huge lobster in panic, its little beady eyes staring right back at me, and wonder if any minute it’s going to land in my lap.

“Actually,” I say, “I’m perfectly capable of serving myself.” I rest my hand over the spoon handle and their grips relax. “Please,” I add and the two alphas drop their hands away, both looking exceedingly sheepish.

I end up serving everyone, thinking that will be the best way to avert any more disagreements and we all tuck in.

The first bite is divine, possibly the best thing I have ever eaten in my entire life, the white meat melting into my mouth and flavor bursting across my tongue. I moan in satisfaction.

Big, big, big, big mistake.

The noise sounds orgasmic and it has both alphas’ scents spiking.

The sudden assault on my nose causes fire to race across my skin and my hands to shake.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I snap, as a leg grazes my thigh and an arm my shoulder.

I leap up from my seat and scuttle through the restaurant, trying to find the safety of a cubicle.

Once the door is shut, I close the toilet lid and slump down. I try to breathe. My heart is racing like a runaway train and the beat between my legs is turning darn needy.

Could I lessen the ache? A little bit of self-care before I return to the table?

I groan. Probably not. It's always taken an age to get myself off. They'll send a search party looking for me and then they'll know what I was up to in this bathroom. I have a feeling things like that are a red flag to a bull when it comes to alphas.

Reluctantly, I emerge from the cubicle and splash yet more cold water on my scorching skin. At this rate I'm going to need to invest in an ice dispenser.

I stare at my bewildered reflection.

I can do this. Didn't I attend my own flipping wedding reception without my groom? Dinner with two alphas is nothing in comparison to that.

I'm confident in this assertion until I walk out of the bathroom and straight into the solid wall of muscle that is Silver Boston.

B^{ea}

I TEETER ON MY HEELS, and Silver grabs my waist and stops me from taking a tumble.

“Are you all right, Bea? I came to check on you.”

“Fine,” I say gulping, noticing the way his strong fingers pinch the skin of my waist ever so slightly. “I’m fine.”

The corridor is poorly lit, dark and hidden from the rest of the restaurant. It’s just us two here. Just us two, the distant clink of cutlery and glasses, and the loud beat of his heart right in front of my face.

He exhales one long continual breath, his hands not leaving my waist.

“Shit, Bea.”

“Uh huh,” I whisper, slowly lifting my face. I take in the broad cut of his shoulders, the flash of a solid black tattoo at the collar of his shirt, his neck, his jaw, and then his mouth.

Have I been avoiding looking at this man’s mouth? Because why is it that only now do I notice how plush and tender his lips look? A deep red color that reminds me of strawberries and redcurrants and all the things sweet in the world.

I hardly know this man and yet right now all I want is for him to kiss me with those lips.

As if reading my mind, he asks me, “Have you ever been kissed by an alpha before?”

I think he knows the answer to that but I mumble a no, anyway.

“Would you like to be kissed by an alpha, Bea?”

Here in this restaurant, where anyone could spot us making out?

Yes. Yes, I would.

I can't manage to move my mouth to say the words though, not when I'm entranced by his scent, and his mouth, and his grip on my waist. Not when my body is tingling all over like an electric shock brought it into life.

“I want to kiss you. I wanted to kiss you last night. So fucking badly.”

He leans down and I close my eyes. I know it's coming and yet the press of his lips against mine stills my heart and freezes the breath in my chest. Because, oh, ooooooh, his lips are a million times softer, a million times plumper, a million times more ... skilled, than they looked.

He kisses me and somehow I find the ability to respond. My mouth moves in tandem with his. Gentle careful touches at first. Testing, tasting, feeling each other, but then firmer and stronger, until one of his hands cradles the back of my head and his fingers tangle in my hair. He kisses me so hard, I lift up onto my toes and little explosions of ecstasy erupt in my belly.

Did he ... did he just make me come?

He pulls away gently and I open my eyes. His pupils are black as midnight yet fire seems to dance in them.

Never, never in our eight years together did Karl ever look at me this way, and I realize in this moment how addictive this game could become, how dangerous for a heart like mine.

I don't care. I want to play it anyway. Screw everything else. Screw all those promises I made about steering clear of men. If a man can make me feel this way, I'm all in.

"I'm reconsidering my options here," I say.

"What do you mean?" He traces his thumb down the back of my neck.

"I think I might actually be open to dating after all."

"Really?" The corner of his mouth lifts in a half smile that dimples his damn cheek.

"Uh huh."

"Then I'd like to take you out tomorrow, Bea." He ducks so our eyes come level. "Just me, you and my packmates. How about I take you out for breakfast?"

"I'd like that."

He leans in and kisses a surprisingly tender spot beneath my ear, then whispers, "Me too."

Gently, he slides his hand from my hair and, remarkably, even that gesture skims fire across my skin. He steps away.

"We'd better get back to the table before your family sends out a search party."

I laugh and bite my lip.

"Okay."

We stroll back to the table, his hand lingering on the small of my back, reminding me he's right there.

If the others were wondering why we were delayed, I'm sure my flushed face is a dead giveaway. Axel picks up his knife and fork and stabs at his lobster, sawing at it so hard I'm surprised he doesn't cut right through the table.

Silver wears a smug look on his face which doesn't help.

I can't help feeling guilty, like I betrayed Axel or hurt his feelings. In an effort to make it up to him, I turn his way and offer him my undivided attention.

"You're in a pack too?"

“Nearly all alphas are, sweetheart.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Three. Me, Connor and Nate. We’ve been together since school. Always knew we’d be a pack. Always knew we belonged together.”

I nod, a strange sadness falling on my head like snowflakes.

“I used to feel the same way about someone,” I confess as he watches me intently with those eyes. I think he could make me say anything he wanted, get me to tell him anything he wanted, with those goddamn eyes. “It doesn’t always last.”

He lowers his knife and his fork. “It does with the right people, with the right bond.”

My gaze strays to his neck. A pair of faint scars mark the point where his shoulder meets his throat. Bite marks. It’s what packs do. Their way of claiming one another. Snapping their jaws right through skin, hard enough to leave an everlasting scar.

I wait for bile to ride up my throat. But desire shimmies down my spine instead. Am I turned on by that too?

And just as that thought enters my mind, along with a picture of three hot sweaty men tangled together, their fangs buried into each other’s necks, it happens.

I get a hell of a lot wetter.

So, so wet.

A gush of liquid flooding my underwear.

I freeze.

At first I think it’s my period, or perhaps I ...

Except, a sweet smell fills the air and Axel’s nostrils flare wide.

“I need to use the bathroom again,” I squeak, slamming back my chair and scurrying towards the rear of the restaurant.

Back in my cubicle, I lower my underwear and investigate.

Slick.

The doctor had given me a 101 on omega biology. Rather a lot of it had revolved around this.

Slick, slick, slick.

That special ability of an omega to make copious amounts of it, especially in heat. Making sex easier, more comfortable, more pleasurable. Making knotting a possibility. Making breeding more likely.

And fucking ruining my underwear. I try my best to mop everything up, ignoring the way everything between my legs is throbbing. Then I go to splash a second round of water on my face.

This time I draw the door to the bathroom back carefully before I step out.

This time I find not Silver but Axel waiting for me, leaning against the wall, his face bathed in shadow.

I swallow hard, his scent tingling on my tongue.

“You ran off rather suddenly.”

“I’m sorry. I ...”

His nose twitches again and he steps towards me, closing the distance between us in one powerful stride.

My heart stops beating. He’s so close and his eyes are like moonlight, like magic. He bends close and breathes me in, his nose – his mouth – hovering right by my neck, air rushing past my skin and caressing it like fingertips.

“You smell like everything sweet and good in this world, Omega.”

My knees buckle.

Omega.

When he calls me that ...

“Wanna kiss you so bad. Wanna taste you and lick you and do all sorts of bad things to you too.”

Dirty talk? I always hated dirty talk, didn’t I?

“Like what?” I murmur, drunk on his scent and his eyes and his damn growly voice.

His hands creep nearer, and he traces his knuckles down my arms. “I’d like to taste that sweet slick you’re making. I’d like to lay you out on that table back there, flip up your skirt, rip off your panties and devour you with my mouth.”

“Oh god,” I gasp and feeling all my good work in the bathroom go to waste.

“Christ, Bea, that smells so damn good. Do you know how hard you are making me?”

His knuckles creep higher, to my shoulder, where he traces the outline of my collar bones with the pads of his fingers.

Me? Make him hard? I don’t see how someone like me could turn on someone like him. But, oh lord, right now, I don’t care if it’s all fakery and trickery because his words are dizzying.

His fingertips climb higher, up the column of my neck, over my chin and to my mouth. He sweeps his thumb along my lower lip. One way, and then the other.

“Close your eyes, sweetheart,” he tells me. “I’m going to make you even wetter.”

He captures my lips between his and he wasn’t lying. I lean into his body and he draws me closer. I dissolve into his strong arms and his kiss like sugar in warm water.

My entire body is taken over by feeling and sensation, and I forget completely that I only kissed another man mere moments ago. I forget I’ve kissed more men in the last hour than I have in my entire life before.

I whimper against his mouth as his tongue darts between my lips, tasting me. Then he pulls away, forcing an even louder whimper from my throat.

“I’m taking you on a proper date, Omega.”

“Yes.”

“Tomorrow. I’ll take you out for breakfast.”

My eyes half closed in a daze, snap open. “No,” I cry.

“No?” He leans in as if to kiss me again, as if doing so will help to change my mind. If my mind needed changing, his kiss would certainly do the trick.

“Lunch,” I say, “lunch would be better.”

He chuckles. “All right, lunch it is. Come on, your food will be getting cold.”

He takes my hand and leads me to the table and I try to avoid everyone’s eyes.

What the hell am I doing? What the hell did I just do?

I’m guessing once again, it’s pretty obvious, because the smile Silver was wearing earlier disappears and the tension around the table notches up several degrees.

Luckily, my aunt is obviously a pro at handling surly alphas because she takes over the reins of the conversation, leaving me free to mop up my food and listen to what they have to say.

Both packs have strong interests in real estate, although Pack Boston also deals in security while York stocks and shares.

It’s clear their business dealings must cross. Is this the source of their animosity then? Business deals gone sour. I look from one to the other.

I don’t think so. Every time their eyes lock, pure hatred crackles in the air and my omega heart squeaks.

Whatever it is, their dislike for one another runs deep.



AS SOON AS I’m back in our apartment, I make a dash for my bedroom. Courtney, however, blocks my way.

“Uh uh,” she says, wagging her finger at me. “Oh no, you don’t. Time to spill the tea.”

“Tea?” I say, as innocently as I can muster.

Courtney scowls at me. “You were always rubbish at lying, Bea. That’s why me and the other cousins stopped telling you whenever we were getting up to naughty shit. Your face was always enough to give us away.”

I lift my hands to my cheeks. “Not true.”

“So true. And it’s written all over your face right now.”

I try my best to stare her out but in the end it’s me who caves first.

“Fine.” My shoulders slump in defeat. “Fine.”

“So ...”

“So, I may, accidentally, have kissed them.”

“Them?”

“Yes.”

“Who is them?”

“Silver.” I swallow. “And Axel.”

Courtney’s face lights up like this is the best news she’s ever heard, and I didn’t somehow lose my mind and my manners tonight.

“At the same time?” she asks eagerly.

“No, not at the same time ... I mean, how would that even be possible?” Courtney opens her lips to answer that question and I slam my hand over her mouth. “No, wait, I don’t want to know.” Courtney waggles her eyebrows at me. “Did you not see how much those two men hate each other, Court?”

I lower my hand from Courtney’s mouth. “Hate sex. Even better.”

“Sex? I am not ready for any sex yet!”

Courtney jumps up onto a stool. “Are you sure? Because I think that might be what you need, Bea.”

“Need? If one more person tells me I ‘need’ an alpha—”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” She motions for me to take a seat. “Look, the I’m-going-to-become-a-nun plan was a bad one. Sure to have you moping around for months. The date-lots-of-alphas-and-have-lots-of-wild-sex is a much better plan. In fact, it’s scientifically proven to be the best way to get over heartbreak.”

“Scientifically proven by who?”

“Me! And most other women on the planet.”

“I’m not sure that is what a therapist would recommend.”

“Yeah, but this way is more fun, on account of all the wild sex.”

“I’m not sure I can do wild sex.”

“Oh, trust me, sweetie, you can. And you might actually enjoy it. It might bring a smile back to your face.”

Enjoy it? I chew on my lip, reliving the way both those alphas made me feel. Their hands, their mouths, their scents. I’m not sure my body has ever felt so electric.

Kissing is one thing though; getting down and dirty with one of them, I’m not sure I’m ready for that.

I’m not sure I’m ready for any of it.

These last few days have felt like a rollercoaster ride with no safety harness. Any moment I’m sure I’m going to be flung from the carriage and end up nothing but a splat on the ground.

I shudder.

“Is that a good I’m-thinking-about-all-the-wild-sex shudder? Or a bad one?” Courtney asks.

“It’s a what-the-hell-am-I-doing-here shudder.”

“You’re enjoying yourself, that’s all.”

I nod, then peer up at her sheepishly.

“Hmmm, there’s more isn’t there?” she says.

“Yes,” I squeak. “I agreed to go on a date. With both of them. Not at the same time. Separately. Tomorrow. Two dates in one day! This isn’t me.” I bury my face in my hands.

“Bea,” Courtney shrieks. “This is unreal! You’re living every woman in this city’s fantasy.” She lifts her hand for a high five and I slap it with a giggle.

“I’m going to mess this up,” I tell her.

“No, you’re not. You’re a grown woman, Bea. And ignore what I said about the sex. You’re in the driving seat here. Take this as fast or as slow as you want.”

“Slow,” I confirm. “I need to take it slow. I need to slam on the brakes and tell them no dating.”

Slow.

I wonder if slow is a word either Silver Boston or Axel York understand.

A ngel

I HEAR Silver's car pull up sometime before midnight and I flip back the blind in my office and over the distance try to read his body language. He's not as easy to read as Hardy. All that training and drilling in the military means the man's ability to keep a neutral face is renowned. If he doesn't want you to know he's pissed, if he doesn't want you to know he's elated, you're going to have a tough time working it out.

He's my packmate though. I knew him before that stint in the force and I know his tells. The slight drop in his shoulders when he's disappointed. The way his fingers twitch when he's angry. The slight bounce in his stride when he's happy.

Tonight, the signals are all mixed. Plus, he's making no attempts to hide it. I can feel it all buzzing in the bond between us.

I flick off my desk lamp and close my laptop. I meet Hardy in the hallway, both of us heading to meet our packmate.

"What you thinking?" Hardy asks me, feeling exactly what I'm feeling in our bonds.

"No fucking idea," I say, smoothing my hand through my beard.

We wait for Silver by the garage door. He comes stomping through, flinging his keys onto the counter and heading for the

fridge.

He tugs out a bottle of beer, then hesitates and ducks back into the mellow light and fetches out two more. He chucks one to me and one to Hardy.

“Fuck,” Hardy mumbles, “did you screw up?”

But I know Silver. Screwing up isn't a phrase that exists in his vocabulary. It's why he's so damn good at his job. It's why our pack runs the best security company in the city.

“I didn't screw up, dickhead,” Silver snaps, trudging through to the lounge, Hardy and I trailing after him. He drops down onto a couch and we both follow his example.

“It didn't go well, though,” I ask carefully.

“It was going just fine – managed to convince the little thing to come to dinner with me – but then Axel showed up.”

Fucking, Axel. That man shows up everywhere, like a bad smell you can never be rid of.

“Did you send him on his way?” Hardy asks with a growl.

Silver sinks further into his chair. For a fleeting moment, I'm reminded of the boy he used to be – the sulky teenager we had to bully to come out with us.

“Couldn't. Not with the omega there all wide-eyed and doe-like. I'm not going to worm my way into her good books if I pound another man silly on our first date.”

“I don't know,” Hardy says with a grin, “some omegas like that stuff.”

“Not this one.” Silver rips the label off his beer bottle and crushes it in his fist. “It's all new to her. You can see it in her eyes how lost she is, how confused. And fuck me, her scent, is like a frigging fairground ride. Up and down, forward and backward. She has no fucking control.”

Hardy whistles. “A newly presented omega. I'm not surprised. Fuck, that ride is going to be wild.”

“What happened?” I ask, not wanting to be diverted onto that track when there's Axel to consider. “With Axel.”

“He ended up tagging along for dinner.”

Hardy bursts into laughter, slapping his thigh and sinking back into the couch cushions. “The two of you and the omega? Sounds cozy as hell.”

“Not just us. Her aunt and cousin too.”

This makes Hardy laugh all the harder. “Some smooth operator you turned out to be. Dinner with her extended family and another alpha too.”

“Trust me, this one needs to be pulled along slowly and gently. Otherwise, she’ll bolt like a colt slapped on its rear.”

Hardy’s not buying that. He swipes at tears rolling down his cheeks and clutches his belly.

“Cut it out,” I tell him, knowing it’s ruffling Silver’s feathers. Besides, something in Silver’s bond tells me there’s more to this story. That and the sweet scent of omega I can smell on his skin.

I take a hold of my packmate’s wrist and bring his hand to my nose. I inhale and, holy crap, that shit is so sweet it sets my tongue tingling.

“Did you finger her?” I ask, tempted to lick his fingers for a taste.

Silver sighs. “I fucking wish. She smelled so good. All I wanted to do was dive under the table and eat her out.”

“I would have,” Hardy says, coming closer for a sniff of his own.

“It was Sin Sky,” Silver frowns.

“Wouldn’t have stopped me.”

“And this,” Silver says, addressing me but pointing at Hardy, “is why we can’t let the asshole anywhere near the omega until we’ve won her over.”

Hardy scowls at our packmate. “Fuck off, you know I can behave when I have to.”

Ignoring them both again, I ask Silver, “Why do you have her scent all over you then?”

Now he smiles, a huge grin that erupts right across his face. “I kissed her. Kissed her good and proper like I think she’s never been kissed before. Kissed her until she rescinded her claim she’s not dating, and agreed to go to breakfast tomorrow.”

His eyes go all dreamy in a manner I’ve not seen in years. Not since he made out with Kerry Masters back in high school.

I drum my fingers against my thigh, taking a swig of my beer. “That’s good then, isn’t it?” I ask. Except if it is, why the signals of dissatisfaction humming in his bond?

“I think Axel kissed her too,” he says, that dreamy look draining from his eyes and filling with hatred instead.

“Why the hell did you let that happen?” Hardy asks.

“She disappeared to the bathroom, and he ambushed her before I could put a stop to it.” He drains his beer. “Not that I could see a way to put a stop to it anyway. Not without dropping the mask that we’re all civilized members of society leading perfectly respectable lives,” he mumbles.

“It’s fine,” I tell him, scratching my fingers through my beard as I consider our situation. “We always knew Axel wouldn’t back off. He’s not going to make this battle easy for us. Doesn’t matter. You’ve already charmed her into a date. We’ll just have to up that charm. Soon as we have that omega screaming our names, dancing from one mind-shattering orgasm to the next, the sooner she’ll be forgetting Axel York ever existed. We just have to get there first.”

“Starting with breakfast tomorrow,” Hardy says, slamming his bottle onto the floor. “When we picking her up?”

“Nine,” Silver says, eyes darting to me.

I nod. “You’ll meet her, Silver, and take her down to that little place by the harbor’s edge.”

“Julio’s?”

“Yep, that one. We’ll be there waiting and you can introduce us.”

Silver throws Hardy his most deadly drill sergeant glare. “You better be on your best behavior.”

Hardy lifts his middle finger at Silver. “Scout’s honor.”

“You were thrown out of the scouts.”

“Yep,” Hardy says with pride. “For my dalliances with the girl scouts.”

I jump to my feet, resting my palm on Hardy’s shoulder. Hardy pretends to be this hard nut, this clown with deadly fists, but underneath it all he’s soft as melted butter.

That’s why he managed to collect so many pairs of girl scout panties. Well, that and the fact he was twice the size of all the other boys our age.

“This means a lot to me,” I say. Although, I don’t need to. Crushing Axel York is an obsession of mine, one my packmates are more than willing to indulge.

“Me too,” Silver says, staring at the bottle in his hands. “This girl is special.”

I blink.

I don’t remember the last time Silver said something like that. Shit, I’m not sure he ever has. Sure he’s declared girls – omegas especially – hot or cute or sexy, but special?

“Let’s hit the sack then, make sure we’re on our best game for tomorrow.”



THE NEXT DAY is one of those beautiful ones where the sun shimmers above the water, and the sea lies calm and clear as a mirror. Salt hangs fresh in the air and the sunlight warms my skin.

I sit back in my chair, sunglasses shading my eyes, and soak up the rays.

Next to me, Hardy's not quite as relaxed. His eyes keep darting back towards the end of the jetty, searching for signs of Silver and the girl.

I don't understand what's rattled his chain.

"Sit still, will you?" I tell him. I don't want my peace ruined.

"What if she said she didn't want to meet us?"

"Then Silver would have messaged us already to let us know." I crack open an eyelid and peer his way. Hardy's dressed in actual slacks today with a light blue shirt that makes his crystal blue eyes shine like the ocean. "What's up?"

"That scent man. Couldn't get it out of my nose last night. Couldn't get it out of my head last night either. Silver said she was special right? What if he's right?"

See, softie.

He believes in all that crap about soul mates and 'the one'.

Me, I gave up believing that bullshit long ago. Ten years of searching. Endless girls. Numerous dates. Countless arrangements.

No fated mate.

I'm convinced all those people – all those alphas and omegas who insist they've found their one, their other half – are lying through their damn teeth.

It's the emperor's new clothes on steroids.

Say you want to be with a girl and she tells you she feels it. The special bond, that elusive connection that means you are her fated mate, but you don't feel it back. What you gonna do? Tell her the truth? Like hell you are. But what if she didn't feel it in the first place? All she had was a case of the stomach flu. Now she can't own up and tell you she doesn't feel it after all. You're caught in the lie.

Yeah, bullshit.

Hardy though, he believes it one hundred percent. Was fed that diet of fairytale make-believe from his grandma who

raised him from a young age.

She wants nothing better than to see the three of us settled down. In fact, I think she wants it even more so than my mom – which is saying something.

“Relax, man,” I tell Hardy. “We aren’t going to have any trouble wooing this girl.” He knows that because we never do. “Especially with you looking the way you do.”

“You don’t look half bad yourself, Angel.”

I spent an hour trimming my beard, grooming it with the expensive beard oil my mom bought me a few Christmases ago. Plus I’m wearing the white shirt she got me back then too.

We could afford our own stylists these days but I’ve never believed in that shit.

“Here’s Silver,” Hardy says, jumping up on his feet.

I crane my head away from the ocean and turn to watch my packmate strolling down the promenade, his right hand wrapped around the hand of a small woman with long wavy caramel hair, bright amber eyes and a figure that jiggles when she walks. I stand too, entranced by that jiggle, my mind heading places it shouldn’t. Not on a first date. Not when Silver insists we take it cautiously with this one.

The photos Silver showed us of this woman did not do her justice. That was a flat two-dimensional thing that gave her no life, no movement, no spark. In the flesh, she’s mesmerizing. All eyes drag in the direction of the handsome couple walking our way. Because, damn, she looks good on the end of my packmate’s arm.

“Hello,” I say when they finally reach the table we’ve secured – best in the place – right out front with an unobstructed view of the ocean.

Her eyes are locked on the water, shimmering with radiance as they soak up that view.

“Wow,” she mutters.

“Told you this place was magical,” Silver tells her, leaning in and taking a sneaky gulp of her scent. Lucky fucking bastard.

Not that I need to be that close to grab my fix. Even in the still air, it finds its way to my nostrils. Sweet and sticky and sinful.

Oh hell.

“This is Hardy,” Silver says, gesturing to our packmate. She has to tip her head right back to take him in and he offers her one of his smoldering looks, taking her free hand in his and kissing her knuckles.

She squeaks in response, her scent spinning cartwheels and I understand what Silver was telling us last night.

“Nice to meet you, sweetheart,” Hardy growls, pulling out a chair for her to sit.

“Nice to meet you too.”

“And this is Angel,” Silver continues, pointing my way and dropping into the seat beside her.

Smiling, her head turns, and her gaze swings my way. Her eyes lock with mine and she starts, recognition flashing through her eyes, then a crease forming between her eyebrows.

I frown too.

“Hello,” I say a second time, lowering into my chair.

Confusion flickers across her features for barely a second and then the smile returns to her face. Whatever thought had meandered through her mind, has been dismissed.

“Hi.” She takes the napkin from the table top in front of her and spreads it across her knees. Then she seems to decide this is unnecessary, folds it in two and returns it to the table.

She’s nervous. It’s clear in her body language and in her scent. Not surprising. Any omega, newly presented or not, would find the presence of three alphas together daunting. But there’s something else in her scent too. Excitement. And that gives me encouragement.

Does she like what she sees?

“So you’re the packmates?” she says.

I smile. “And you are the omega.”

Her pupils dilate at the sound of that word on my alpha tongue and it’s clear she has little ability to control her omega instincts. It’s tantalizing. Everyone is well practiced, well trained these days. All of us keeping a lid on our baser instincts and desires. This girl is practically feral. If we wanted, I’m sure we could have her spread out on the table begging us to take her.

Jesus fucking Christ. The idea has me hard in my pants. But I’m not that type of alpha, not one to take advantage. There are other instincts churning in my gut, just as strong as the one that wants to claim and rut and knot. The instinct to protect, to care, to worship.

“It’s really hard to wrap my head around it,” she says, fiddling with the edges of the napkin. “I can’t quite contemplate the idea that I’m an omega.”

“Silver here says you were pretty insistent that you weren’t the first time you met.”

“Yep,” she glances at him with a sheepish look, “and I woke up again this morning convinced this was all some weird-assed dream.”

“I remember presenting,” I say, pouring her a glass of water from the bottle I ordered earlier, “back in high school. I knew it was coming. My brother was an alpha. My dad and all my uncles. It was still a shock. The first time I breathed in other scents and my body came alive, the first time I realized I could read people’s emotions through their scents, it seemed so incredible, like it couldn’t be real.” She nods her head. “It must be a million times harder when you weren’t expecting it, when you believed you were something else.”

She stares at me and then takes a long gulp of water.

“What would you like for breakfast, sweetheart?” Hardy asks her, studying the menu.

“I should be stuffed silly after yesterday’s meal,” she says, “but I’m ravenous.”

I exchange glances with my packmates, something she catches us doing.

“What? I’m not pregnant, okay? Why does everyone keep insinuating that?”

“No, not pregnant,” I say, my voice low, my nostrils flaring as I breathe her in.

“Then what?”

“Nearing heat,” Hardy growls.

A red color sweeps immediately over her cheeks. “Possibly not. The doctor says my hormones are all over the show. I have to go to the clinic tomorrow. They’re going to run some more tests.”

“I’ll drive you there,” Silver tells her.

“No, it’s okay. My cousin’s going to come with me.” She lifts her menu, then lowers it again. “She’s promised to answer some of my questions. It feels as if there is so much I don’t know.”

“Really?” I motion to a waiter. “Then ask us.”

Her cheeks sizzle some more. “I’m not sure they’re the kind of questions I should be asking you guys.”

Hardy chuckles and leans in closer to her. “Those kinds of questions, huh? They sound fun. Ask away.”

She hesitates, her tongue working behind her teeth as if she’s tempted, but then the waiter is there with his iPad. “Four eggs benedict and mimosas all round,” I order.

“I think I’m going to eat better in this twenty-four hours than I ever have before,” she mutters, handing her untouched menu to the waiter.

“The ex-boyfriend never took you anywhere nice to eat?” Silver says. She shakes her head.

“There’s an ex-boyfriend?” I ask.

“One I don’t want to talk about.”

“Then let’s answer those questions of yours, sweetheart,” Hardy says, with a wicked smile.

She fidgets on her seat, then stills as a wicked smile of her own dawns across her face.

“Why don’t you have an omega? Your pack’s been together ten years, right?”

“Does every pack have to have an omega?” I ask her.

“You tell me. I’m the novice. But I thought an omega slave was what every alpha desired.”

I almost spit out the water I’m sipping. Even Hardy turns green, the usual humor lost from his face.

“An omega *slave*? What the hell?”

“Oh, come on,” she says, not backing down. “Isn’t that what alphas want? A little omega pet to keep at home, under their control and answering their commands.”

I press my napkin against my mouth, then meet her gaze with my own, serious. “Is that what you think we want? Or is that what you want, Omega?”

The little thing shivers at my tone and at that word.

Her mouth opens and closes again.

She’s lost to her omega instincts. She has no fucking clue what she wants. Although I’m pretty sure she wants us, given all the wet little signals in her scent.

“We do want an omega for our pack. And we spent a long time looking for one. We never found the right woman.”

“We gave up looking,” Silver says.

“Speak for yourself,” Hardy mutters.

“But,” I say, ignoring my packmates and keeping my attention locked on the little omega sitting opposite me, “there’s a difference, you know, between what you can want in the bedroom and what you can want everywhere else.”

Her pupils blow even wider and I've caught her interest now. "What do you mean?" she asks.

"I can't lie, sweetheart. I want an omega who does what I say in the bedroom." I lean forward, lowering my voice. "Who'll part her thighs and slick all over my face when I ask her to." A tiny, hardly discernible moan drifts from her lips. "But I don't want no slave. None of us do. We want someone we can make happy and who'll make us happy in return. If letting her turn circles on a trapeze every night warms her heart, or bubbling test tubes in a lab, then so be it."

She doesn't look like she quite believes me, shaking her head as if trying to drag herself from a trance. She takes another sip of water, condensation sliding down the outside of her glass and dripping onto the table cloth.

"What makes you happy, Bea?"

She lowers her glass. "Honestly, I don't know anymore. My life got turned upside down – and that was before this whole omega revelation. And now I have no idea. What I thought made me happy," she chews on her lip, "was all an illusion, a big-ass lie. I guess I need to figure things out again."

"I think we could make you happy," Hardy says with a smirk and mischief dancing in his eyes. He leans in to whisper in her ear, "I'd certainly have fun trying."

The little thing looks like she might melt in her chair, but then with clear determination, she straightens her spine and exhales through her mouth.

"I've been hurt – fooled," she says, glaring at Hardy, "before. I'm not prepared to be some pack's plaything."

This girl. She has no idea. Plaything? I think conceding to be our plaything is exactly what she needs.

"Not our intention," Silver says, smoothing his hand down her arm as our eggs are delivered to the table and changing the conversation to talk about the boats sailing across the ocean. Casually, he mentions our boat and suggests we take her out next weekend.

It seems an eternity away.

B ea

SLOW, I promised myself, slow.

I promised myself that this time I would not be swayed by some smooth talking and sharp suits. Fat chance.

I'm a sucker, a sucker for it all. The view, the food, the smell of the ocean. It's all dazzling. Throw in the three hot alphas crowding around this table, each struggling to fit their huge bodies into the tiny restaurant – throw in their scents too like the most potent of aphrodisiacs messing with my mind – and I am toast.

Done. Cooked. Burned to a crisp.

I try to hang on to my reason and my good sense. These are three rich men with looks that could charm the habit off a nun. They've been single and living the good life for a decade. They've no intention of settling down. No intention of making me anything but a plaything. A distraction for a short period of time. Before they discard me to one side.

It's hard to remember all that though, especially when I find myself relaxing easily in their company, listening as they talk light heartedly among themselves, telling me about a disastrous trip they took to Vegas last month.

“Have you ever been to Vegas, sweetheart?” Angel asks me, his eyes landing on mine.

Eyes the color of silver, of moonlight, of the stars. Eyes the color of Axel's.

The similarity is uncanny, but then maybe that's yet another piece of information about omegas and alphas I'm yet to learn. All these alphas possess eyes that seem to have a power of their own. A power to capture your attention, to draw you in and never let you go.

Perhaps it isn't so unusual for two alphas to have eyes such a vivid and unusual color. Maybe it's a common occurrence among alphas.

"Vegas? No. Until this week, the only place I'd been beside Naw Creek was the nearest town, and then I'd only been there twice."

"You never went to LA or New York? To Hawaii or the Caribbean?"

"Nope, never."

"Shit, we need to rectify that, sweetheart. Where would you like us to take you?"

I shake my head. They've already offered to take me out on their yacht, to purchase me front row tickets at the next Rockers game and now they're offering to take me away.

Karl could barely be bothered to open the fridge door and pass me a can of coke.

"Come on," Silver says, tossing a wad of cash on the table that has my eyes popping from their sockets. "Let's go for a stroll along the waterfront."

The three alphas lumber out of their seats and wait for me on the sidewalk.

As I climb out of my seat, my gaze sweeps over the three of them. I can see what Courtney means. It would be hard not to enjoy sex with men like these. Men who, despite everything I've heard about alphas, seem determined to please me.

My own hot appraisal is matched by their own; three pairs of eyes sailing down my figure and heating every inch of my skin. I have to stop and pinch myself because it seems pretty

incredible that men like these – three men who have every female and several male gazes trained their way – would find someone like me attractive.

As if he's reading my mind, Silver takes my hand in his and shakes his head.

“Jesus, Bea but you are fucking beautiful.”

And I'm tempted, severely tempted, to throw caution to the wind and follow all these omega wants and desires. To tell this alpha here and now to take me to bed. To have some fun and forget all about Karl.

But I know deep down in my battered heart that I can't do it. This heart of mine is too fragile. And as much as I wish I could, I can't separate the physical from the emotional. Take me to bed, shower me in kisses, tell me I'm beautiful and my heart will be yours.

I've always been that way and it landed me with heartbreak and humiliation.

I need to be more careful. I need to take this slowly.

“This has been lovely,” I say as we stroll along the jetty and to the promenade that traces the curve of the beach, “but I have to be honest with you. I just got out of a horrible break up and then landed plum in all this omega chaos. I'm not ready to rush into anything new.”

To my surprise, Angel plunges his hands into his pockets and says, “That's fine, sweetheart. You need time and space, we can give that to you. But,” I peer up at him and those uncanny eyes, “I'm telling you now that this pack is interested in you.” The others nod. “That isn't going to change.”

“You hardly know me,” I laugh.

“Doesn't matter. We know enough.”

“Hmmm ...” I peer out towards the horizon. Out there the sea isn't calm, it's alive and crashing with waves. “I might never want to date. I might decide I'm happy on my own.”

Angel shakes his head. “No, it's not in an omega's nature to be alone. They crave company, touch and sex.”

All three words have my stomach growling as if my body agrees and I'm hungry for all those things.

I shrug. "I guess we'll find out."

I halt and turn to watch the waves some more. There is something mesmerizing about it. The calm waters leading to the choppy.

"I understand now why people talk about the sea luring people to their deaths. It looks so inviting, doesn't it? But that riptide out there is lethal."

"It is," Hardy says. "You know about the ocean?"

"Today's the first time I've seen the ocean. Up close."

"You never swam in it before?"

"No."

"How do you know about riptides then, sweetheart?"

"Geography was my favorite subject at school. It would have been my major if I'd gone to college."

"Why didn't you go to college?"

My hair dances in the slight breeze that's blown up as we've walked further around the beach. I sigh and smooth my hands over it.

"Karl," I say.

"The ex-boyfriend?" Silver asks.

"Yes. He had a job straight out of school working for his dad's firm. If I'd gone to college, it would've meant moving away. I didn't want to leave him. He didn't want me to go. Stupid decision now in hindsight."

"Hindsight sucks." Hardy grins. "We all make stupid decisions, no use beating ourselves up about it."

"He was definitely my most stupid decision – so far anyway."

I glance back out to the dancing waves, wondering if these men are just like the water. Tempting yet dangerous.

They all wait expecting me to say more. But I don't feel like divulging the story about Karl, with all its hurt and humiliation. I don't exactly come out looking great.

My gaze lifts higher, to the horizon, marveling at the way the sky merges with the water so it's hard to tell where liquid ends and air begins. Then something catches my attention. Dark shapes skipping up through the surface before diving back down.

"What's that?" I ask, shading my eyes and pointing out to the horizon.

Angel follows my gaze. "Looks like a pod of dolphins."

"What?" I grin, my mouth pulling into a wide smile. "Dolphins."

"Looks like it," Silver agrees. "They like following our boat when we sail out there."

"Really?" I ask, wondering if I was too quick to dismiss that boat trip after all. "Can you swim with them?"

"Yeah, they're pretty friendly. One has a crush on Angel. It won't leave him alone every time he jumps in the water."

I laugh. "That sounds so cute."

"If you're a good girl, I'll introduce you," he says and I quickly avert my eyes back to the dolphins skimming across the water.

"So if it's not safe to swim here," I ask, "where is it safe?"

"Further up the coast at North Beach. We'll take you there now if you want."

"I didn't bring my swimsuit."

"You don't need a swimsuit." Hardy smirks.

I roll my eyes with a smile. "Space," I remind him.

"Sorry, just fucking eager to get you out of your clothes, Omega."

Angel smacks his packmate around the back of his head and I laugh again.

Skinny dipping with three alphas. Maybe the new Bea, when she's ready, when she finally emerges from her cocoon, will be up for that.

C onnor

AXEL WANTS to take the omega to some fancy restaurant in the center of town. But I know that's exactly the kind of thing that Pack Boston would do. Besides, I hate those dead-awful formal dates. Sitting in the middle of a restaurant like you're on display, watched as you attempt to make small talk with an omega who only really wants to be bonded and given a nest in a big fuck-off house.

No, if she needs to be wooed with fast cars and pricey menus then I don't care about the stupid competition with Pack Boston; I'm not interested in pursuing this omega. I'm tired of all the pampered princesses and glittery gold-diggers.

Axel says this girl is different. Well, let's see if she is.

Let's see if she'll balk at a picnic up here in Cedar Park. No fancy menu. No laid-out table. No waiters. Just us and the view down to the ocean.

The girl insisted on meeting us up here, which is a good sign. No demands to pick her up. Not that Axel's pleased about it. He tried to convince her it wasn't safe and when she wouldn't relent, spent the entire morning muttering under his breath.

"You're not seeing this the right way," he tells us. "New omega in town, only just presented. She's going to have every

lowlife alpha pursuing her. I don't like the idea of her wandering about on her own."

But the girl wants to bring herself and she's not ours to command. He's going to have to suck it up.

Yeah, I already like her.

We arrive a half hour early for our date, spreading out the picnic blanket in a sheltered spot and arranging the dishes we had Mrs. Finch order for us this morning.

Nate unscrews a lid off a jar and gives it a sniff.

"Some kind of pickle. Do omegas even like pickles?"

"Omegas are people like everyone else, asshole," I say. "Some like pickles, some don't."

He leans back on his elbows, kicks out his long legs and flicks at his lip ring with his tongue. "The way omegas taste all sweet and fruity I thought they survived on candy floss and sugar canes." He's quiet for a moment as I unpack the last few containers. "I wonder what this one tastes like."

"The pickle?" Axel asks, his brow crinkling. Nate has a mind like a puppy on a trampoline, bouncing from one thing to the next. It can be hard to keep up.

"No, the omega."

Axel groans. He's tried to explain her scent to us, but every time he's failed miserably. He's never been the poetic type, but I remember it from the fundraising dinner anyway. I'd only caught a whiff of her there, but I understand why she's captured Axel's attention. The aroma of her was different, less sharp, less refined. I also struggle for the words to describe it. Messy? Chaotic? The difference between a gateaux baked in a patisserie and a trifle made at home – the type which makes your mouth and fingers all dirty with cream.

"Her scent must be pretty damn good," I say to Axel, "if your obsession is anything to go by. Don't remember you being this obsessed with anything outside work for a long time."

He nods.

“Except Pack Boston,” Nate points out.

“Yeah,” I concede, “but that’s different.” That obsession isn’t a healthy one. Not that I can talk. I’m just as determined as he is to see those alphas lose. Fail. Leave town. Any and all of those things.

I lie back and gaze out at the view. The stretch of land we’ve just secured in that deal lies to the west of the city, a strip of pure white sand with a hotchpotch of run-down condos lying behind. It’s ripe for development. And from up here it’s clear as day why every business person with any sense has been determined to lay their hands on it. For a long time, it looked like we were out of the game. Pack Boston, through their dubious connections, had managed to buy up the strip of land to the east and some of the land to the north, circling our spot like a shoal of sharks. They hadn’t managed to buy up the main plot though. That fucker Malcolm had held out. Until we persuaded him otherwise. Now it’s ours.

Ha. I can’t wait for Pack Boston to find out.

“You know sharks never stop moving?” Nate murmurs, obviously catching my mental image through our bond.

“What?” I say.

“Sharks. They never stop swimming. Even when they’re sleeping. If they stop swimming they die.”

“Why?”

Nate snaps a piece of grass from the ground and winds it around his fingers. “No fucking clue.”

Axel peers over my shoulder in the direction of the car park. She should be here by now. I can see and feel that he’s anxious.

“You think something happened to her?” I ask.

“No,” he answers, scrambling to his feet. “Here she is.”

I stand too and watch as a curvy little thing with caramel hair and big amber eyes makes her way towards us.

“She’s cute,” Nate says, coming to join us.

“She’s fucking beautiful,” Axel says in a wistful way that surprises me. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him talk that way.

I turn to look at him, his face completely transfixed. But then his forehead descends into an angry frown.

“What—” I start, gaze swinging the girl’s way.

Two men have closed in around her, one coming to flank her side, the other blocking her path. Where the hell did the fuckers come from? They’re talking to her, edging closer and I don’t like the look of this anymore than Axel does.

We’re both sprinting her way, Nate on our heels, without a word passing between us.

As we draw closer, it’s clear the men are drunk and probably high too, the air around them thick with alcohol, their words slurring from their lips, their eyes dazed. It makes them both less and more dangerous. Easier to take out; harder to predict.

The omega’s eyes are wide with alarm, her scent buzzing with panic. The man in front reaches as if to grab her chin and she ducks away.

“Sweetheart,” Axel says, barging the man standing at her side out of the way. “You’re here.” He wraps his arm around her shoulder and kisses her soft cheek. Relief floods her face.

“You know these dudes?” the man blocking her way asks. His voice squeaky like an unoiled wheel.

“Yes,” I tell him, glaring and cracking my knuckles. “We’re her date.”

For a moment tension hangs in the air, while we wait to see what this pair of losers are going to do next. Fight or flee?

They’re obviously more sensible than they look because they choose the latter.

“Enjoy yourselves,” the first says, bowing slightly like we’re royalty and then without another word, they’re slinking away.

Bea lets out a long puff of air. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Axel says, “but this is why I wanted to pick you up. Too many creeps around, sweetheart.”

“Yeah.” Her gaze flicks the way of the two men, now distant figures. “I’m not used to it, I guess. Back home, I knew everyone.”

“City’s too big for that,” Nate says, “and full of assholes.” He grins and holds out his hand. “I’m Nate.”

“Bea.” She shakes his hand and peers my way.

“He’s Connor. Bit of a quiet one,” Nate tells her. I scowl at him and shake her hand. “Until you get to know him, that is, then he won’t shut up.”

“You can talk,” I say.

“I do know him,” she says, staring at my face, her small hand still in mine.

“No,” I confirm, “we’ve never met before.”

“Connor Doyle.”

I stare back at her, examining her face. “Yes, I was. I’m Connor York now, since we formed this pack.” There’s something familiar about her, nudging at the back of my consciousness, but I can’t place it. I can’t place her.

“You don’t remember ...”

I shake my head. The gesture causes another of those frowns to mark her pretty face and I want to remember. Shit, I want to remember.

“How?” I say. “How do we ...”

Her cheeks flush and she shakes her head in embarrassment. “Oh it was such a long time ago, and we never knew each other.” Her scent’s reading all kinds of uncomfortable.

“You’re from Taleswest?” She shakes her head. “Jamesport?” We moved around a lot when I was a kid. I barely remember all those places. But her face, her face is familiar.

“No.”

“Come on,” Axel says, registering the omega’s discomfort, “over here.”

He guides her over to the rug.

She stares down at the picnic all laid out. I think we did a pretty good job and I wait with bated breath for her reaction.

Will she stomp her sandalled foot and storm away? Will she fix a false smile to her face and lower herself gingerly to the ground? Or will she—

Frown?

“This looks incredible.” Her words sound genuine – to my utter surprise – so why the frown? “And, oh god, you went to all this effort.”

“You’re worth it,” Axel says, pulling her down to sit.

She raises her hands, her cheeks pink with embarrassment. “Nobody ever made me a picnic before.” Her gaze skips over all the breads and meats and cheeses, the salads and fruits and the little jars of pickles. “I have to be upfront with you all, though.”

“About what?” Axel’s frown matches her own.

“Last night,” her cheeks turn a shade redder, “I was all lost in these new omega emotions and what I said about dating, well, on reflection, my first plan was a better one. I’m not ready for that yet.”

I have no idea what the hell she’s going on about. Partly because I’m transfixed by her pretty pink lips and partly by her scent. So much better than I remember. Plus, she recognized me, right? And there is something familiar about her, if only I could place it.

“What do you mean?” Axel asks, clearly as confused as I am.

“I’ve decided I’m definitely not dating. Right now, I mean. Maybe in the future I will. But I can’t say how long in the future because I need to mend my heart after my horrible

break up and get my head around all this crazy stuff that's happened and concentrate on me. Find a job (if anyone will give me one) because I lost mine. Although, you know, this morning I realized I could go to college (if I could save enough money) and study like I always wanted to."

We all stare at her, trying to make sense of the stream of consciousness that shot from her mouth.

"Do omegas go to college?" Nate asks.

"No idea," she replies, pinching a piece of bread between her finger and thumb, "I'm still sort of finding out about this whole omega thing." Her eyes flick up to ours. "Which is why dating is going on hold."

Axel looks crushed, utterly crushed. More so than the time we missed out on the Kanship deal to Pack Boston.

"But it's not a no to dating forever?" Nate says, squashing a grape between his finger and thumb until it squelches and makes him smile.

"No ... I don't think so."

"And you're looking for friends, right?"

"Friends?"

"You just moved to the city. You have no friends."

She swallows. "I have one friend. Plus my cousin and my aunt."

"You need more friends than that."

"I guess."

"Then no dates, but we can hang out as friends." Nate looks up from his squashed grape and smiles. His smiles are pretty spectacular; all sparkling green eyes and dimpled cheeks. They don't call him the baby-faced killer for nothing. The omega shivers. She tries to hide it but she does. And my spirits lift. She says she doesn't want to date. She says she needs time to herself. I wonder how long that idea will last. In fact, I'm pretty certain we can have her spinning a 180 again by the end of this picnic.

Axel remains quiet and brooding on his side of the picnic rug, as Nate and I help the omega to pile up her plate with all the goodies we have spread out. That's fine. Lots of girls like the brooding act. There's a reason Mr. damn Darcy is so freaking popular.

"Did you make all this food?" Bea asks as she takes a bite of bread spread with pate.

"No," I say, "Nate's the only one who can cook."

"I don't cook fiddly crap like this," he says.

"But we thought a picnic would be nice," I add quickly.

"It is. The city can be overwhelming. It's nice to get away. Up here is beautiful."

"It was Axel's idea," I say, jerking my head his way.

"It was?" she asks. Her eyes go sort of transfixed when she looks at him, a bit the way his do when he's looking at her.

"I ..." He glances my way and I wink. "Yeah, it was."

She smiles at him.

"I think I'd find it very hard to be just friends," he tells her gruffly.

"Oh."

I groan inwardly. Nate just found us a way in and now Axel's going to ruin it all in one fell swoop.

"I think I've made my intentions clear, Bea. I want to make you mine. To make you ours."

"You don't know me."

"This ex-boyfriend of yours—"

"Ex-fiance," she corrects.

"How long did you know him?"

"I've known him all my life. We were together eight years."

"And it still ended badly?"

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“So what difference does it make? Sometimes you know.”

“But you see it does matter,” she insists, and this is interesting. Omegas can be spoiled and demanding, but they rarely ever contradict an alpha or go against his command. They’re programmed to obey; to do as they’re told. Sure, sometimes they’ll try to fight it, grit their teeth and pull against their instincts. 99% of the time they relent to it.

Bea, she’s different. Here she is sucking on a strawberry and arguing with our pack leader, despite his dominance, despite the way he stares down at her. Was it all those years spent as a beta?

“For example, you might absolutely despise strawberries,” she says, lifting up the strawberry she’s bitten in half for us all to see. “The smell might make you vomit. The idea of being around them might be enough to bring you out in hives. Yet, I love strawberries and I couldn’t go my entire life without eating one again.”

“I love strawberries,” Nate says, leaning forward and taking a bite out of the strawberry Bea holds in her hand.

“Me too,” Axel says, holding her gaze as he reaches to take her hand in his and lifts the remains of the strawberry to his face. He places the strawberry in his mouth, closing his lips and capturing her fingers too. Her eyes widen as he sucks the strawberry from her grip then releases her fingers.

She stares at his strawberry-stained mouth for one long second, then shakes herself.

“Strawberries were a metaphor.” She picks up another and spins it in her fingers, keeping her gaze away from Axel. “What I’m trying to say is that we might not be compatible. You might hate the things I love, and I might despise the things you adore.”

“What do you hate?” Nate asks, offering her a jar of cream to dip her strawberry into.

“Lots of things,” she says darkly.

“Yeah, like what?”

She pauses to think. “Bananas.”

“Everybody hates bananas. What else?”

“Erm ... jazz.”

“Yeah. Nobody likes that either. They just pretend to. What do you love?”

“Strawberries.” She grins and swallows the one she’s holding whole. “And I’m beginning to fall in love with the ocean.” She points out towards the view. “How about you?” she says to Axel, “what do you hate?”

“Angel Boston,” Nate responds before Axel even opens his mouth.

Bea fidgets on the blanket. “Do you?” she asks Axel.

“Yes.” His jaw tightens and it’s clear he couldn’t have lied even if he’d wanted to.

“Why?”

“It’s a long story.”

“You said you want to make me yours and you can’t even tell me that,” she says with irritation. “That’s why it went wrong between me and the demon ex, by the way.” I raise my eyebrows. Demon? I’m going to need to look this guy up. “Secrets.”

“I didn’t say it was a secret. I said it was a long story.”

“Do you hate your ex?” Nate asks.

She hesitates, then replies, “Yes,” with as much venom as Axel.

“Want to tell us that story?” Nate asks, throwing another grape into the air and catching it in his mouth.

“No.”

“Want me to rearrange his face?” Nate throws a second grape into the air, ducking his head to catch it this time.

Bea laughs, her face softens. She has no idea that Nate is serious.

It's as she's laughing – her cheeks rounding, her eyes crinkling, the sunlight catching in her caramel hair and transforming it golden – that it hits me again. This familiarity.

I know her. I know her from somewhere.

B^{ea}

THE NEXT DAY I wake feeling like a bus slammed into me. My body aches all over and my heart, well, I'm not sure what the hell that's doing.

The bed squeaks as I turn over, groaning. It's like I'm hungover; my brain thumping violently against the insides of my skull and my stomach sloshing with acid. I didn't touch a drop of alcohol yesterday, not even the mimosa Silver ordered. I sipped water and did everything I promised myself I would. Yep, I told those men I'm not ready for dating, I kept my hands off them and I sidestepped every advance they made.

But oh dear lord, it wasn't easy – even without all the crazy hormones crashing around my body it wouldn't have been easy – and now I suspect my body is paying the price. It seems I can't sit pretty sucking in all those delicious scents, keeping my body buzzing, and not suffer the crashing comedown the next day.

It makes me even more determined to keep my distance.

I don't think that will be hard. I'm sure I'm simply the latest new shiny thing to cross their paths. I'll hold their interest for a moment, then they'll be on their way. Besides, I'm not even that shiny. Karl would look at my drab clothes and dull hair and remind me of that frequently.

“Breakfast!” Courtney calls from the kitchen and the smell of coffee brewing somehow provides the motivation I need to roll out of bed and stumble to the kitchen.

“Woah,” my cousin says, as I flop down onto a chair. “Rough night? Did you sleep badly?”

“I slept like a log.” Have done since I got here. It’s strange. I thought I’d miss the presence of Karl in my bed. I haven’t slept alone in years and yet having the bed to myself, no matter how small, has been a luxury. “I think it’s all the hormones.”

Courtney throws me a sympathetic look and slides a mug of the blackest coffee my way. “Drink this. It’ll help.”

I lift it to my lips and blow across the surface as Courtney plops two toasted bagels in front of us. “I’m not going to feel too sorry for you.”

“You’re not?” I ask, lathering a ton of butter onto my bagel followed by a heap of peanut butter. No more wedding diet for me.

“Nope. Do you know the last time I was asked out on a date?” I shake my head. “Never. I’ve never been asked on a date.”

“Bullshit,” I say. Courtney is gorgeous with shiny caramel hair and dark eyes. I wouldn’t be surprised to hear she gets stopped regularly on the street and asked for her number.

“Okay, it is bullshit. But it was so long ago, I’m pretty sure it no longer counts. And here you are with two dates in one day with six different men.”

I swallow a bite of my bagel. “Oh god, I sound like a ...” I pause, “you know what.”

“You sound like a woman rocking her independence and her options. Go Bea.”

I cringe and take a large gulp of my coffee, the liquid burning my throat. “Nope, Bea isn’t going anywhere. Bea is stopping with the dating and reverting back to the original plan.”

“Urgh.” Courtney sticks out her tongue, stained purple from the blackcurrant jelly she’s spread on her bagel. “I hate the original plan. It’s so dull.”

“But it’s sensible,” I say, the coffee and food soothing my body. “And after all the shit that’s happened, I need sensible and a chance to adapt to my new circumstances.”

“Well, you have more self control than me, girl. If I had six hot dudes pursuing me, I’d milk that for all it was worth.”

I shuffle on my seat, picking at my bagel.

“Unless ...” she squints at me, “you didn’t have as much self control as you’re making out yesterday.”

“I had plenty of self control,” I snap. “It just wasn’t easy.”

“I bet.” Courtney jumps up from her seat, licking the remains of jelly from her fingertips.

I decide to divert the topic of conversation before Courtney convinces me to do something I’ll regret. “But how about you, Courtney? I can’t believe there isn’t anyone on the horizon.”

Courtney sighs and rests her chin in her hand. “There is. But I may as well be invisible. I can’t seem to catch his attention.”

“Who is he?”

“A guy at work. I’ve tried everything. My short skirt. My flirtiest smile. Bending over to pick something imaginary up from the floor—”

“Wait. But have you tried talking to him?”

Courtney lunges for her keys. “I gotta get to my shift. I’ll be back after lunch.” She bends down to kiss my cheek. “Jeez Louise, you do smell good, Bea. Hope you feel better.”

I kiss her back and watch as the apartment door slams shut behind her.

It’s the first time I’ve been alone in my new home since I arrived in the city. I wait for some sort of sadness and panic to set in. This cramped, little place in the scruffy side of the city

is where I belong now. No neat little house with its white picket fence and flowers in the yard.

I should feel sad, right? I should feel like life took a serious detour somewhere along the journey. Yet I don't feel that way at all.

The food in my stomach soothes away the pain in my head and my limbs, and all I feel is relief.

I'm not on edge waiting for an accusation or an angry word. I'm not jumping up to tidy away all the breakfast things. In fact, I'm pretty sure Courtney won't even notice if they're all still laid out across the table when she comes home.

It's quiet and calm and my morning is all my own.

I go for another of those long cold showers and when I emerge a half hour later, I find the phone ringing. I scurry across the apartment, dripping water across the carpet and not caring, and reach for the receiver.

"Hello," I answer, a tad breathless.

"Hello, Bea Carsen?"

"Speaking?"

"This is Diane from the recruitment agency."

I stand up straight. "Hi."

"I'm pleased to say, a position has come up that I think you might be interested in."

"It has?" She seemed so certain last time we spoke that no one would hire me.

"Yes, you can type, right?"

"I can."

"Great. It's an assistant job at a firm in the city. Pays pretty well. I'll email you over the details and you can tell me if you're interested."

"I'll take it," I snap. Right now, I'd take a job dressed as a banana in the grocery store. I'm never going to be independent and move on with my life if I have no job and no money.

“You sure you don’t want to take a look at the—”

“Does it involve taking my clothes off?”

“Certainly not.”

“Exposure to toxic chemicals?”

“Why, no.”

“Anything illegal or morally reprehensible?”

“No!”

“Then I’ll take it. When do I start?”

“They want someone as soon as possible. Could you start tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

“Great. Well, I’ll let them know and send you over the contract and all the details.”

A smile tugs across my face. “Thank you so much.”

After I hang up, I switch on the radio, fling the towel onto the sofa and dance around the living room.

There’s no one to see. No one to tut at me and tell me I can’t dance for shit. I don’t care that I have no rhythm. I fling my arms about and yell along to the words until the old man in the apartment below starts banging on the ceiling.



I SPEND the rest of my morning going through my unpacked suitcases, pulling out blouses and skirts I think will be suitable for my new office job. I only have a couple that will do, but perhaps Courtney will have some I can borrow and as soon as I land my hands on that first paycheck, I can go shopping.

There’s one thing I need to solve first though if I ever hope to earn that paycheck. I need to get a handle on my body. I’m hoping Doctor Hannah can help with that.

In the afternoon, Courtney rides with me on the subway to the center of the city and walks me up to the clinic.

“Call me when you’re done,” she says, giving me a hug.

“You didn’t have to accompany me here,” I say, “and you don’t have to take me home.”

“Bea, your sense of direction is horrific and this morning you put the cups in the oven instead of the dishwasher.”

“I’m still getting to grips with the layout of your kitchen.”

“Your cheeks are flushed; your eyes all squiffy—”

“They are not!”

“And you’re baking hot. I didn’t trust you to make it here on your own. I don’t trust you to make it back either. And I don’t want some unsavory alpha to make a grab for you.” She eyes the few smartly dressed business people passing us on the street.

“Fine,” I say, “I’ll call.”

The clinic is based somewhere inside the city hospital, all silver and shiny and sparkling new. Nothing like the clinic back in Naw Creek with its 1970s decor and ancient equipment.

A lady at the front desk tells me to ride the elevator to the fifteenth floor and when the doors open I wonder if I’ve stepped out into a spa rather than a clinic waiting room.

Plush carpet runs across the floors and on the walls, the lights glow dimly, and the windows are shuttered. Instead of the hardback chairs downstairs, cozy armchairs are positioned around the room; blankets slung over their arms and cushions on their seats.

I want to run across the room, sink into a chair and draw one of the teddy-bear blankets around my shoulders. Maybe take a nap.

The only thing unattractive about the place is the aroma. Someone tried to mask it under the scent of the numerous candles burning around the room, but under the floral smell are the stale scents of other omegas. It tickles my nose in an unpleasant manner and I hope I’m not actually going to bump into any of those omegas while I’m here.

Before I can sink into a chair, a woman greets me with a clipboard and a kindly smile.

“Miss Carsen.”

“That’s me.”

“Doctor Hannah is waiting for you.” She leads me along a corridor and I glance back longingly at the waiting room. I’m going to need to invest in some of those blankets.

Several doors fan off the corridor but the lady takes me to the one right at the end with Doctor Hannah’s name emblazoned across the woodwork.

The lady knocks and when the doctor says to enter, she pushes down on the handle, opening the door and ushering me inside.

Doctor Hannah’s clinic room is like hell compared to the heaven of the waiting room. Not a soft surface in sight. The lights are bright and glaring and the stench of disinfectant scorching. I wonder how an omega like Doctor Hannah can work all day long in a place like this.

“Hello, Bea,” she says, dressed in her signature dark turtle neck and skirt, “up on the bed for me today.”

“Oh,” I say, a little taken back. I was expecting some small talk first before all the pokey pokey started. But I suppose Doctor Hannah is a busy woman. A busy and beautiful woman. I hadn’t really noticed that the other day.

I climb up onto the hard bed and Doctor Hannah squirts two dollops of antibacterial gel into her hands, rubbing them over her skin. The smell is pungent and acidic and makes my head ache.

“I didn’t get a chance to inspect you thoroughly the other day.”

“Inspect?” I say, alarmed.

“Examine,” she says with a smile. It’s the same smile from her visit a few days ago, except now I notice it doesn’t touch her eyes. A business smile designed for her patients.

She asks me to undo my pants and lift up my shirt. Then she prods at my belly, pressing her heel hard into the pit of my abdomen until I yelp.

“Hmmm,” she murmurs, not apologizing. Her hands are cold on my skin.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Checking,” she says with irritation. “Your hormone readings are a mess.”

“Sorry,” I say, because the way she says it makes me feel like I let her down.

She mutters something under her breath and takes my arms in her hands. She runs her eyes up and down the insides, tracing her thumbs over my veins.

“No needle marks,” she comments.

“What? Of course, not,” I say, snatching my arms away.

“Just trying to determine if someone injected you with something.”

“Oh god,” I squeak, “why would someone do that?”

She doesn't answer, turning and strolling across the room to a computer screen perched on top of a trolley. She wheels it over to the bed.

“I'm going to hitch you up to the machine and take some more readings, see if we can understand what's going on here.”

I nod and stare up at the bright lights overhead as she fixes wires to my stomach, chest and forearms.

“Just relax,” she mutters, which is hard when the machine starts to beep frantically and chaotic lines stream across the screen.

“Is everything all right?”

She takes a look. “I'll be right back.”

I don't like the sound of that. I consider messaging Courtney, or even Aunt Julia, but my phone is in my jacket

pocket which is hanging on the back of the door.

I peer down at the wires wondering if they'll stretch that far, then decide it's better I don't risk destroying the machine.

Out in the corridor, I hear muffled voices and footsteps and then the door opens. Doctor Hannah strides into the room, and a tall older man follows her. His scent hits me immediately. An alpha? In a clinic for omegas? That doesn't seem right. Especially smelling so potent; his scent like nutmeg.

I hold my breath as he comes closer, alarmed to see the lines on the machine becoming ever more erratic.

Doctor Hannah doesn't introduce the man and he doesn't introduce himself, instead they study the screen.

"Her estrogen levels are extremely elevated. And her heart rate is on the fast side."

I swallow. That doesn't sound good.

"How long since she presented?" the man asks.

"Estimated to be about three days."

"Interesting. You've submitted the blood work for analysis."

"I will do that now." He nods, reading more of the numbers and graphs flashing up on the screen. He presses some more buttons, then lifts his gaze to me. His eyes are a pale blue color, cold like a winter sky.

"Doctor Hannah will take good care of you," he tells me before swiftly exiting the room.

What the hell was all that?

"Is he your—"

"Colleague," Doctor Hannah says, still not offering me his name.

"These readings show your hormones are in a state of flux. You're going to experience what we call false heats. They're a bit like false labor or practice contractions. Your body will feel as if it's in heat for short periods of time, making you believe

you're entering a heat proper, before returning to normal. We see it all the time in young teenage omegas."

"But I'm 26."

"And you've only just presented. However, given what we're seeing, I think it unlikely you'll fall into a full heat for at least three months. That tends to be the pattern with new omegas."

I let out a long sigh of relief. The idea of falling into heat at any moment had scared me senseless. At least it seems like I'll have some time to adapt to my new circumstances before that happens.

"You understand though, that in some circumstances, omegas find this pre-heat stage worse."

"They do?"

"Yes, you'll find yourself much less," Doctor Hannah rips a printout from the machine, "resistant to the attraction of alphas. This is why many parents take their daughters out of school at this point and keep them home until everything settles down and they fall into a more regular pattern of heats."

"Oh god," I mutter. Then shake my head. It makes sense why my body has been going haywire whenever I'm in the company of alphas. "You know what, it's fine. I'm not a teenage girl. I'm in my twenties. I can control my emotions. I'll be fine."

"I'll prescribe you some more medication that should help."

"Thank you." I hesitate, then decide to ask the doctor my next question. "My aunt thinks I should find an alpha to help me out over this rocky period. Someone who can, erm, see to my needs, as well as keep me safe."

The doctor folds up the printouts and walks over to her desk, adding them to the pile. "It is certainly one of the options open to you."

"I hope you don't mind me asking — I've met so few omegas and am still trying to work out how these things tick

— but are you bonded?”

“No,” the doctor says, her mouth twitching. I’m guessing that’s a sore point. Aunt Julia isn’t right about everything. Not every omega finds their pack. We’re obviously not as in demand as she thinks. Not if a beautiful and intelligent woman like Dr. Hannah can’t land one. Or maybe these alphas are a bunch of prehistoric dinosaurs after all and don’t like the idea of an omega owning a career.

“What do you think you should do?” The doctor asks, not looking my way but adding some scribbles to her notes; that same unreadable script.

“To be honest, I was hoping to steer clear of men and romantic involvements for a while. My cousin says it doesn’t have to be like that, that it’s only sex. But I’m not good at separating those two things.” I’m already thinking fondly of the men I met yesterday. Dangerous.

The doctor lowers her pen and strolls over to a cupboard. She opens the doors and pulls out a plastic package, tearing it open and holding up one giant needle. I gulp as she strides towards me with it.

With her free hand she gestures towards my arm and I lift it, yelping as she plunges the sharp tip into the vein in the crook of my elbow. Red blood flows through the needle into the vial and my head spins.

“You should stay away from alphas,” the doctor says, yanking the needle from my arm. “And I would certainly discourage any kind of relationship at this stage. You’re unstable and you may form a connection you regret.” She untwists the vial full of my ruby blood from the needle and drops it with her notes on the desk. I peer down at my arm. A trail of blood seeps towards my wrist. I press my thumb to the puncture wound. “In fact,” she adds, “I would recommend that you come into the clinic and spend your first heat here where you can be monitored and helped.”

“Sounds expensive,” I mutter.

She smiles in that same manner. “Yes, but your safety and your future are priceless.”

Angel

CITY HALL always irritates the hell out of me. It's full of people swanning around with self-importance and inflated egos. People who smile nicely and tell me everything they think I want to hear, then stab me right between the ribs as soon as I turn my back.

You can't trust anyone here. My father taught us that from a young age. As soon as we were old enough, he'd drag us along to his various meetings, wanting us to know how business was done.

"Remember an alligator will smile at you right before he snaps you in two," he'd say, leaning in to whisper in our ears as we waited to meet with various committee members and politicians.

Yeah, the memories are what I hate about this place too.

And the way it stinks of corruption and cynicism. It's not something the betas can smell. But us alphas, we can. It hangs in the air and clings to the furniture. It makes me sick.

But business is business and I'm used to dealing with people who hate my guts, who'd like nothing more than to see me sinking to the bottom of the ocean, a slab of concrete tied to my feet. The betas, they can't stand the fact that we alphas are back on top. Wealthier, smarter, better at what we do than

all the rest. It makes them all the more determined to see us fall. I can see it in their eyes as they smile and shake my hand.

Crocodiles, the lot of them.

Today, I have a meeting with the head of the planning committee. Some jumped-up little pipsqueak who loves the fact he has a slither of power to lord over us. He's in his early forties, graying hair and bad breath. The only reason he landed this position was his mom – a much more efficient official than he'll ever be.

I wait outside his office on the stupidly little chair I'm sure he ordered in simply to make us alphas suffer. Any sudden movement on my part will have the thing snapping in two.

He's late for our meeting and another minute and I'll be up and prowling the corridor.

He likes making our lives difficult, finding obstacles to our plans, blocking our proposals, insisting on some large backhanders to ensure decisions go our way. I've been searching for a way to remove him from his position for six months. But Silver insists it's a case of better the devil you know. Wattson is a coward after all and usually we find a way to manipulate him.

I jiggle my leg, the noise making the PA across the room nervous.

"I'm sure Mr. Wattson won't be that much longer," he says.

I grunt with irritation and glance down at my phone.

Silver has his watchers monitoring the omega's movements, ensuring she's safe. Apparently she spent this morning in her apartment, but now she's at the omega clinic. I hate that place. I went there once with Mom. When she first got sick. They never worked out what was wrong with her. All those fucking experts and not one had a clue. Too busy pandering to the pharmaceutical companies and their omega-scent research, than actually bothering to help an older woman.

My heart aches thinking about it. My mom and my dad. I rub my knuckles against my chest.

As if fate is fucking with me, it's then that Wattson's door opens and he comes scuttling out, Axel York right behind him.

I see him before he sees me.

It's been a while. Three months since we've been face to face like this. He looks just the same. Just as fucking infuriating.

"Mr. Boston," Wattson says in his oily voice, and Axel's eyes swing down to mine.

For a moment, we stare at each other and then the thunder I feel brewing in my belly is reflected across his face.

Lazily, like I don't give a shit, I lumber to my feet.

Wattson can't keep the satisfied grin from his face as he looks from me to the other alpha. He's loving this. Probably planned it. He's been playing us off against each other for a long time now.

Definitely time for him to go. Screw what Silver thinks.

Axel's scent is 100% aggression and his hands form tightly balled fists by his sides.

"I was just meeting with Mr. York to discuss the new piece of land they've secured and their plans for it."

I knew that. I'm not dumb. It's why I'm here. That land was meant to be ours. We've been lining it up for over a year now. Buying up the surrounding land, putting some gentle pressure on the fucker who owns it. We were close. So close. And then Pack York swoops in out of nowhere and beats us to it. I'm not even sure how they managed it. But no way am I letting it stand.

"Yes, It's what I've come to talk to you about, Wattson. I have some objections."

The deep frown on Axel's face lifts to a smile. A smile I'd like to wipe away with my fist.

"Good luck with that, Angel."

I growl. Luck has nothing to do with it.

“Gentlemen,” Wattson warns, his eyes sparkling with excitement. He’s probably one of those freaky betas who gets off on alphas pounding each other like meat.

I take a step towards Axel so our noses are almost touching. I glare into those silver eyes of his, so like my own.

“Whatever he did to land his hands on that land, it wasn’t legal, Wattson.”

“Mr. York has all the paperwork. It’s perfectly—”

“You know I’ll always beat you, Angel. Always have, always will. You may think you can one up me, but you can’t.”

“We’ll see,” I say, thinking of the omega, and winking. I know exactly why she appeals to him, because she appeals to me too.

All sweet and innocent and totally clueless.

She had my heart pounding and my cock hardening all through that date yesterday, and if she affects me that way, you can bet your bottom dollar she’s driving him mad too. Especially with this insistence that she’s not going to date. The word no is like a red flag to a bull when it comes to Axel York.

The two of us are too alike. It’s one of the reasons I loathe him. One of many.

He reaches out and grips my shirt.

“What does that mean?”

“Means, I’m going to find a way to block whatever you have planned for that land, if it means hiring every damn lawyer in the country. I’m going to ensure all the pretty pennies you paid buying up that land, are never made back. It’ll sit there untouched and undeveloped. And your bank account will have a massive hole.”

He smiles again. It’s not one of those crocodile smiles. Alphas aren’t slippery like that – the majority of us anyway. We’re all emotion, all instinct, everything we feel comes

crashing across our face and there is no hiding it. No, his smile is one of a tiger.

I return his smile with my own.

“Sounds like you’ll be creating a hole in your own bank account, bozo. Lawyers don’t come cheap.” Don’t we know it. The number of times we’ve faced each other in the courtroom is only slightly fewer than the times we’ve faced each other with our fists.

My fists twitch now. I’ve fought him enough times to know where his weaknesses lie. Never defends his ribs like he should. Always a prime spot for a hit.

I could hit him right now. Except Wattson or his assistant would call security and I’d end up in some cell.

Wattson is obviously enjoying the show and has no intention of intervening to end this, but his assistant seems less comfortable. I can see the man sweating from the corner of my eyes.

“Mr. Boston.”

“What?” I snap.

“Mr. Wattson has another meeting in fifteen minutes so if you want to—”

Axel releases my shirt. All crumpled now. The fucker.

“It won’t be necessary,” Axel says. “It’s a waste of your time, Wattson.”

“Now, now, Mr. York. I have to follow the rules and hear what Mr. Boston has to say.”

I force myself not to scoff. Follow the rules? All those backhanders obviously don’t count.

“Just sell us the land, York,” I spit. “You know we’re going to make things as difficult for you as possible. You know we own the land around yours. You think I’m going to let you move all your machinery and materials across it?” His jaw works in a circle like he’s grinding his molars. “We’ll give you a good price.”

“Or you could sell us yours.”

“Not going to happen.”

Axel’s shoulders rise like the anger is soaring through him, then they fall and he lets out a puff of air directly into my face. I refuse to flinch.

He shakes his head and steps away, striding with irritation to the door. “You’re a spoiled fucker, Boston.”

“And you’re a misguided one,” I taunt back.

As he reaches the door, Wattson shakes his head too, the grin still fixed to his face, and says to his assistant, “These alphas. They can’t control their emotions.” He tries to sound disgusted but I can hear the hint of lust in his tone. The guy really is a sicko. “Probably need some nice, little omega to settle down with and calm their tempers. I hear there’s a new one in town.”

Axel freezes in the doorway at exactly the moment my blood freezes in my veins.

“What did you say?” Axel whispers, his back to us.

Wattson’s an idiot because he doesn’t register the menace in Axel’s tone; doesn’t spy it in my eyes either.

“Oh, I heard there’s some new omega who’s shown up out of nowhere. I’m surprised you haven’t heard. Seems we betas know more than you realize.” He chuckles and slowly Axel turns.

“How?” he says slowly as the blood pounds in my ears. “How did you hear about her?”

With the two of us prowling his way, Wattson finally registers that our anger is now directed at him. He takes tentative steps backwards.

“I don’t know. Around. Everyone’s talking about her. They say she went into heat at the Skipton benefit and started slicking all over the place.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, shaking my head. “That’s utter bullshit, Wattson.” I point my index finger in front of his nose

like it's a loaded gun. "And if I ever hear you speaking of her like that—"

"I'll rip your throat out," Axel finishes for me.

I glance in his direction. Yeah, he's as smitten over her as I am. But this is one prize he won't be snatching from my hands.

"You tell your friends and all your cronies that too," I say quietly but deadly, his eyes almost bugging out of their sockets in terror. Yeah, it's one thing to watch all that alpha aggression from the sidelines, another when it's directed at you. And it never has been before with Wattson. We've always played nicely. "You don't get to talk disrespectfully about omegas and you certainly don't get to spread rumors about this one."

"Understood?" Axel asks.

"Y-y-yes," Wattson replies, running his index finger around his collar and tugging on his tie.

"Good," Axel says, turning his head to me, "because she's going to be ours."

I stare back at him, into the cold depths of his eyes, and, as I do, inspiration hits me.

I see a way to fix both our problems with one stone.

"York," I say. "A word in private."

Bea

“YOU LOOK GREAT,” Courtney says, as I open my mouth to ask that exact question.

“Really?” I stare down at my outfit, smoothing my hands over my skirt and chewing my lip. The buttons of my blouse are straining a little. Did my tits get bigger? Is that another omega side effect? Or maybe it just shrunk in the wash.

“Yes, really. You’re gorgeous, Bea. You could wear a trash bag and you’d still look stunning.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. Now I know she’s lying.

She puts down her spoon and comes strolling over to me, bopping me on the nose with her forefinger.

“Hey,” I protest.

“Cut it out.”

“Cut what out?”

“I can see those tiny wheels in your head, spinning like crazy, telling you I’m being dishonest.”

“Well, are you? Are you just saying it to make me feel better?” I’m not fishing for compliments here. I have no freaking idea. Karl was always the one to scrutinize my

outfits. To tell me if I looked good or not. Most of the time I didn't.

Courtney cocks her head to one side and tucks a piece of hair that's fallen from my bun behind my ear.

“Why don't you believe me, Bea?”

I sigh and lean to hover on the back of the sofa.

“Karl.”

“Don't call him that.” I furrow my brow. “We only ever refer to that asshole as shitty McShithead from now on.”

I laugh. “I like it.”

“It's just a shame I can't call it him to his face,” Courtney says darkly. Then takes my hands in hers. “I don't know what shitty McShithead was telling you all those years, Bea, but you are truly beautiful, inside and out. God, I feel like a mortal walking alongside a goddess whenever we go out together. Don't you notice the way everyone looks at you?”

I blink. “Yes, but ...”

“But ...”

“Kar—” Courtney glares at me. “Shitty McShithead always said it was because my hair looked bad or my outfit was all wrong. He said I was embarrassing.”

“Jeez Bea, why did you stay with that creep? Why were you going to marry him?”

I peer out towards the window. The sun pours through the window as if beckoning me outside to face the day.

Why did I stay with him? Because he was nice at first. Really nice. We were only kids and yet he treated me like a queen. He told me he loved me, said we were meant to be together, looked at me like I was the only girl in the world. The bad stuff started later, gradually and slowly, building over time, so I hardly noticed it happening.

“He boiled me like a frog,” I tell Courtney.

“Okay,” she laughs. “But he’s old business now. So stop listening to those stupid voices in your head and start believing in yourself.”

I nod. Right. Starting with this new job.

“Are you nervous?” Courtney asks me as I chug down a coffee and stuff a piece of toast down my throat.

“Nope,” I say. The new pills the doctor gave me seem to be working. I feel more myself today. Myself and excited.

Courtney can’t walk me to the office this morning because she has work of her own. She’s armed me with a rape alarm, though. Plus she’s shown me how to take a dude’s eye out with my door key if I need to.

“Don’t go for the balls,” she reminds me as I gather up my purse, “they expect you to do that. Go for the throat or gouge his eyes.”

I pull a face. “Courtney! I just ate!”

“I’m serious, Bea. I like having a roomie.”

I wave her goodbye and stride out into the sunshine. The rays are warm on the crown of my head and I dip my face up to the sky, basking in its glow. I’ll probably end up with sunburn. I spent the month running up to the wedding cowering at home, paranoid I’d end up with a peeling nose on my big day. Now I don’t care. Even if it will mean I look like a beetroot at my new place of work.

On the walk to the subway, on the ride into the city and on the final few blocks to the office tower, I notice that Courtney is right. People peer at me, through their sunglasses, over the top of newspapers and out of the corners of their eyes. Some are less subtle about it and stare. Are they really admiring me? Or is my omega scent sparking interest? I take a discreet sniff down my shirt as I stand outside the entrance of the office block.

“Something smell good?”

I jump and spin around, recognizing that voice.

Axel.

His eyes are so silver in today's sun they are almost translucent.

"I ... it ... what are you doing here?"

He points with his elbow to the spinning doors behind me, his hands full of coffee cups. "This is where I work."

"Oh, me too."

His eyes brighten. "You got a job?"

"I did," I say proudly, unable to help from smiling. "One step on the path to independence."

"One step closer to dating." He holds my gaze.

And oh lordy, those eyes, that voice. That voice whispering dirty things in my ear.

My skin warms and all that calmness I'd been enjoying on the way here evaporates like water on the boil.

I frown, but he simply spins me around and nudges me towards the door.

"Do you start at nine? You don't want to be late on your first day."

I glance at my watch. I have three minutes until I start. "Oh, shit."

"Come on," he guides me into the foyer and towards the bank of elevators lining the wall. He presses the call button and with a ping the doors open.

I stare at the empty box and then glance over my shoulder at the alpha hovering at my back. Do I really want to enter a confined space with him right before I start my new job? No. But he nudges me again and my legs move without my permission and then the metal doors are sliding closed.

"What floor?" he asks me, and in a trance I answer 20, too lost in his scent to pay attention to the buttons he's pressing. The elevator swoops upwards and with it my stomach and, although the alpha is standing a pace away from me, it's as if he's right next to me; the heat of his skin warming mine and the pound of his heart in my ear.

And why – *why?* – are these men so intoxicating?

The elevator grinds to an abrupt stop and I teeter so much so that he reaches out to grip my elbow and steady me.

“Stupid elevator always does that,” he says with a disarming smile, “you get used to it.” He releases my arm. “This is your floor.”

“Right,” I mumble, stepping out. He steps out too. I freeze. He freezes. “What are you doing?”

“This is my floor too.”

I glare at him with suspicion but he returns a perfectly innocent expression.

It’s a large building. There is probably more than one company based on each floor.

I glance up at the signage and follow it to a Mrs. Finch’s desk where I’ve been told to report.

The alpha strides a pace behind me.

I stop a second time.

“Are you following me?”

“No.”

“You are.”

“I’m not. I’m walking to my office.”

He steps around me and walks around the corner. Muttering under my breath, I scuttle after him, watching as he strides right past the desk marked ‘Mrs. Finch’ and into what looks like an impressively large office behind.

“Good morning, Mrs. Finch,” he says as he passes by the older woman poised at the desk, closing the door behind him.

“Morning, Mr. York.”

She glances up from her keyboard and catches sight of me.

“Miss Carsen?”

Somehow I manage a nod.

The older woman lowers the glasses from her nose and lets them fall, catching on the chain around her neck. “Are you okay?”

“Is this Mr. York’s office?”

“Yes, I am his personal assistant.”

“Assistant to the CEO,” I mumble.

“Yes,” she says slowly as if I don’t have the right number of brain cells. “Mr. York is CEO of Rock Developments.”

My eyes flick to the closed door and I frown. “Could I speak with Mr. York, please?”

Mrs. Finch taps her pen on the surface of her desk. “Miss Carsen, Mr. York is a very busy man,” she says with obvious outrage.

“It won’t take a minute.”

Before she can stop me, I stroll right past and through his office door. I slam it shut and find myself in an office larger than Courtney’s apartment. It houses a large round conference table, several armchairs and cabinets and at the far end a wide desk that dominates the space. Two of the walls are made entirely of glass, but the blinds are drawn against the bright sunlight and the view blocked.

Axel sits in shadow, behind his desk.

When I enter, he leans right back in his chair and lifts his gaze to me.

“You set me up,” I snap with a pout.

“I beg your pardon,” he says.

“You set me up,” I say louder.

“I haven’t set you up,” he replies with irritation.

“I said no dating.”

“Is this a date?” he says with no hint of a smirk.

“No.” I roll my eyes. “This is meant to be a job. A job that will allow me to pay the bills.”

“It is. It will.”

I stalk closer to his desk, trying with all my might to hold my breath. “Is there even a job or is this some ploy to ...” I wave my hand through the air unable to find the words.

“Yes, there is a job. Mrs. Finch has been asking me for some time to find her an assistant. So I have.”

“I knew this was too good to be true.” I should have known when there was no interview involved. Who hires someone without meeting them first? Someone as stupid as the person who accepts a job without meeting their employer first.

“It’s a real job,” he says seriously, leaning forward and dragging his keyboard towards him, “and it pays real wages. You’ll be working for Mrs. Finch, not me.”

“You’re not playing fair,” I say with frustration.

“Sweetheart,” he says, his silver eyes meeting mine, “I never do.” When I glare at him, he rubs his hand across his chin. “Look, you said you needed a job. You said you were finding it difficult to find one. I’m only trying to help. I have no other motivations here.”

I stare into his eyes and search for the truth. He meets my gaze without flinching and the intensity of it has me glancing down at my toes.

“Honestly?” I whisper, tired. I really need a job.

“Bea, honestly.”

I peer up at him. “Any funny business and I walk.”

He smiles. “I’m wondering what you mean by funny business, sweetheart.”

“That! That is what I mean by funny business,” I cry, wagging my finger at him.

He chuckles, and the door opens behind me.

“Mr. York,” Mrs. Finch begins. “I’m sorry if Miss Carsen—”

“It doesn’t matter, Mrs. Finch. Just a misunderstanding. Miss Carsen’s keen to start, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I say with determination. “I am.”



I SUSPECT Mrs. Finch believes this arrangement is as fishy as I do. As a consequence, she sets me through my paces, throwing a string of instructions at me like rapid fire and giving me no time at all to write notes or take account of what she’s telling me. When she’s finished with her instructions, she sets me to work, asking me to file a stack of paperwork and type up a load of notes within the next two hours. I do it in one and her mouth twitches with what I hope is admiration. We continue in this fashion through lunch and into the afternoon, she setting me more and more challenging tasks and me meeting each one.

It’s good for the ego and the soul. My job at the diner was never stretching and Karl would never let me do anything else. He was the breadwinner, and he said there was no use in me finding another job as I’d be staying home to raise our kids eventually. It’s good to know I can do this stuff.

The only spanner in the works comes in the very large shape of Axel York. Every now and then he wanders out of his office to talk with Mrs. Finch or he’ll pass through on his way to a meeting.

Although he takes no notice of me, I’m pretty certain his eyes fall my way each time and his gaze automatically warms my skin. Then there’s his scent too. It lingers in the air the whole time, but whenever he’s near it intensifies, setting tingles racing across my skin. I shuffle on my seat uncomfortably each time, trying to ignore the way my body feels and the way he speaks so confidently and assertively, issuing orders like a general on a battlefield. It’s insanely hot.

Mrs. Finch eyes me each time this happens and I wonder if I’m one of many omega assistants Axel York has enjoyed torturing in this way.

At five o'clock, Mrs. Finch approaches my desk, where I'm tidying up a spreadsheet for her.

"Time to go home."

I glance at the large clock ticking on the wall above her desk.

"Already?" On the whole, the day has rushed past. All except the moments Axel has been present, then time seems to stretch out and warp entirely.

"Yes, already."

"Are you leaving too?" I ask, noting she hasn't packed up her desk. (Mrs. Finch doesn't strike me as the type who would leave her desk untidied at the end of the day.)

"I have a few more things to catch up on. Besides, I won't leave until Mr. York does."

"Then should I stay too?"

"No, that isn't the job."

I save the spreadsheet and shut down the computer. "So, I can come back tomorrow, then?" I ask her, as she drops back down behind her computer.

"Most definitely. I think you will be a big help here." I try not to grin at her like a Cheshire cat. She taps her fingers across the keyboard, then adds, "I don't usually like the omegas he dates."

"We're not dating."

"I'd recommend keeping it that way."

"You would?" I blurt out before I can stop myself.

She peers up from her screen, staring at me over the top of her glasses. "Yes, work and relationships don't mix."

"I agree," I say, closing my laptop lid and dropping my phone into my purse.

At least one person is on my side.

B^{ea}

COURTNEY ISN'T HOME when I walk into our apartment a half hour later. I tidy up a bit, check my messages, and hunt through the fridge for food options.

I should be tired after my first day at work. I'm not. I'm buzzing with energy. I can't sit still and I can't concentrate on anything. I don't know if it's all these stupid hormones or the excitement of completing my first day of work. Or maybe it's my insanely hot boss. I can't stop thinking about him and the way he'd rolled his shirt sleeves up, his forearms strong and marked with a crisscross of inks. I can't stop thinking about those rain-cloud eyes of his or the deep timbre of his voice.

I contemplate yet another cold shower. I contemplate rummaging through my still-unpacked bag for my vibrator.

None of those options seem satisfactory. I decide I'll go for a run instead.

At school I was on the track team. I loved running. I loved the way it made me feel. I loved the escape of it and how I could push my body until every part of it burned. It was an exhilaration better than sex.

Of course, I once made the mistake of telling Karl that and then he found reasons why I shouldn't run anymore. It was too dark out, too cold, too hot, too icy, too wet. I was becoming

too skinny. I was becoming too muscular. And did I know how revolting I looked all hot and sweaty?

In the end, I stopped.

How long has it been?

I dig out my trainers and find a sports bra, shorts and t-shirt in Courtney's closet.

She would probably tell me this isn't safe either, but I tuck the rape alarm into my waist band along with my key and my phone, and leave her a note.

I'm not letting other people tell me what I can do anymore.

It's going to hurt. It's going to hurt really badly. But I think that may be a good thing. All the pain has been emotional, welling in my heart and my head. A bit of physical pain might help to lessen it all.

I lock the apartment door behind me and trot down the steps, already feeling rejuvenated from that little action.

Out on the street, it's not yet dark although the sun hovers low over the horizon, the sky gray above me but tainted pink behind all the houses and buildings.

I start to run, the old movement coming back to me naturally. I run to the end of the block and then the next and the next. My feet thud on the ground, my arms swing, and the rush of air in my lungs stings. It feels just the same as I remember. Just as good, even if my feet are heavier than they once were.

I run down two more blocks, then swing around a corner, coming face to chest with Silver Boston.

I screech to a stop before I collide right into the man. His SUV is parked up behind him, and his keys are in his hand.

"What are you doing?" he asks, frowning at me.

"What am *I* doing?" I ask, in confusion, swiping sweat from my already damp brow. "What are *you* doing?"

"Come to check you are okay."

I stare up at him, panting, bending over to rest my hands on my thighs. “One, I’m perfectly fine. Two, what the hell?”

“You can’t be out running on your own, Omega.”

I snap upright. “Don’t tell me what to do!” I say with such force, he takes a startled pace backwards.

“I’m not telling you what to do. I’m telling you it’s not safe.”

I shrug my shoulders. “I’m not living my life locked inside because a bunch of shitheads can’t—”

“I’m not telling you to lock yourself away either.” He crosses his arms.

“Then what exactly are you telling me?” I cross my arms too. My legs cramp and I have to resist the urge to shake them. That and the urge to swallow down lungfuls of this man’s scent. Plus the urge to peek at those crossed arms, his biceps bulging and straining the fabric of his t-shirt.

I blink. T-shirt?

“Wait!” I hold my hand up, my heart pounding in my chest. “Wait, wait, wait. How did you know I was out running? How did you know where I was?” I lift my left foot up and check the bottom of my sneaker. Then do the same with my right.

“What are you doing?”

“Searching for a tracker.”

He snorts. “If I wanted to place a tracker on you, I’d do it on your phone.”

I stamp down my foot. Yeah, of course. “Have you put a tracker on my phone?”

“No.”

“Then—”

“I’ve had my men watching your house.”

“Jesus Christ! That’s That’s ...” Kind of creepy and yet sort of ... sweet?

“I know you didn’t want anyone stationed at your door, but I couldn’t in all good conscience leave you unguarded, Bea. If anything happened to you ...” He shifts his weight from one foot to the other looking suitably sheepish. “I’m sorry. I should have been upfront about it.”

“You should.” I chew on my lip, considering whether to start running again and leave him here.

“You like running?” he says at last.

“Yes.”

“And I suppose I’m not going to be able to convince you to come and run on the treadmill at our place?”

He has a treadmill in his house? I try not to think about how big that probably makes it.

“No, I like running outside.”

I had no idea how much I’d missed it until my feet had pounded the sidewalk.

“Then you need a running partner. Someone who can protect you.”

“Let me guess,” I say, eyeing that t-shirt and the accompanying pair of sweatpants, “that person should be you.”

“Correct.”

“And what if I plan to run every day? Heck, there might be days I feel like going out for a run twice.”

“That’s fine. If I can’t make it fit my schedule, one of my packmates will be able to.”

I roll my shoulders and my neck. “I don’t know ... this was meant to be my alone time.”

“I’ll run five paces behind you then.” He gestures to the streetlights flicking on one at a time above our heads. “Bea, it’s not safe for you to be running out alone. I’m not saying that’s fair or right. But it is a fact and I don’t want anything to happen to you.” His eyes are full of sincerity and it makes my

stomach swoop. He's not telling me no. He's finding a way for me to do this.

"All right," I say nodding my head. A smile begins to form across his face and I lift a finger, "but five paces behind, no dictating the route, and no comments on my running style."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"And you can carry my water bottle for me." His eyes swim over my form. I don't have a water bottle on me. I forgot to bring one and my throat is parched. "Next time."

"Got it." He gestures towards the sidewalk. "Shall we then?"

I nod and, throwing him one last shrewd look, set off again.

He's true to his word, staying several strides behind me, not interrupting my pace or distracting me from my run. Apart from the hint of his scent on the breeze and the sound of his loud footfall on the sidewalk, I almost forget he's there. I lose myself in the run again. Completely ignoring the inquisitive looks we receive as we race past doorways and people meandering along the street. We even overtake two other joggers and a cyclist.

A half hour later, we round a bend and end up outside my apartment door. I hunch over my knees, catching my breath. My legs scream in agony and sweat races down my face and into my eyes. But damn it feels so good.

When I glance up at Silver, I expect to find he's hardly broken sweat. But he's panting, the hair around his brow damp and the front of his t-shirt wet.

The man looks even hotter than he did before. I think about standing up on my tiptoes and licking away the sweat trailing down his throat with my tongue.

I gulp and stare down at my toes instead.

"You're pretty fast," he says.

"No commenting on my running, remember?"

“Sorry,” he says, and he lifts up his palms as I glance at him.

“I used to be faster,” I tell him with a little pride. He lifts an eyebrow like he’s impressed. “But I haven’t run for a while.”

I wipe the back of my hand around my brow and stand up. I must look like a hot, sweaty mess. My cheeks are burning and I’m probably the color of a tomato. Yet this man looks as if he’s as keen to lick me as I am him.

I remember Courtney’s advice from this morning. And kick the critical voice out of my head.

“How did it feel?” he asks me.

I close my eyes and let out a long exhale, enjoying the burn and the buzz. “So good.”

“Same time tomorrow then.”

“Yeah,” I mutter without thinking.

“Good night, Bea,” he says and when I open my eyes, he’s right beside me, bending down to kiss my cheek. My eyes flutter shut again, savoring the feel of those soft lips on my skin.

I part my lips, wait for him to kiss me, but he steps away.

He groans and mutters a curse under his breath, and then before I can work out what has happened here, he’s spun and jogged away.

“Tomorrow,” he tells me, waving at me above his head.



MY AUNT and cousin are both waiting for me in the apartment when I slump back in.

They let out a collective sigh as I walk through the door and head straight for the sink.

“Thank goodness,” Aunt Julia says, her hand to her chest. “We were on the verge of calling the police.”

“Really?” I say, filling a glass with cold water and spinning to face them. I lean back against the counter and sip the water.

“You weren’t answering your phone!” Courtney says.

“I had it on silent.”

“Do you know how dangerous it is to go out jogging in the city alone?” my aunt says.

“There were other people jogging.”

“Were they women?” my aunt asks. “Were they omegas?”

I think about this. “No, both men.”

My aunt’s face pales and I decide to put them out of their misery.

“I wasn’t alone. Silver came with me. On my run.”

“Jesus Christ,” Courtney says, looking like she might strangle me, “you might have included that bit of information in the note you left me.”

I cross the apartment and drop down on a chair beside her. “It wasn’t planned. He showed up. Seems he’s had those guards watching the house.” I frown, my emotion still all tangled when it comes to that fresh piece of news.

“At least someone’s thinking with some sense,” my aunt says.

I look at them both over the rim of my glass. “Is it really that dangerous for omegas?” I ask. In all truth, I don’t want to know the answer. It’s been easier to pretend everyone is overreacting than to live up to the reality. It’s clear to me now that my life with Karl was a grotesque sort of cage, one I hoped I’d escaped. But being an omega seems like it might be a cage of its own.

“Yes,” my aunt says truthfully, meeting my eye.

“But you wander about on your own. You’re here now without an alpha. You teach and—”

“I’m bonded, Bea. My pack may no longer be with me but I still have my scars.” She points to her neck. “My scent still says I’m bonded. Mating gives me some protection. Besides, as you may have noticed, I’m old.” She smiles. “Long past my breeding prime.”

The water in my mouth slides down my throat with difficulty. Breeding? Oh lord. Even Karl didn’t talk like that.

“So you’re saying if I want to have any chance of living normally, I have to keep taking a truckload of pills and either shack up with a pack or get old quickly?”

“No, you just need to be careful with your safety.”

“I took my rape alarm. Courtney showed me how to gouge out eyes with my house keys.”

My aunt twists her head to stare at Courtney with disapproval.

“What?” Courtney says. “She has to walk to work on her own.”

My aunt rolls her eyes and fiddles with the necklaces around her neck.

“Maybe Silver could arrange—”

“No way,” I jump up from my seat. “I’m not some superstar. I don’t need a bodyguard or a babysitter.” I thump my glass down on the table. “God, being an omega really, really sucks. All these restrictions, these dangers. All these stupid feelings and hormones and desires crashing through my body.” I dig my fingernails into the palms of my hands and try not to scream; all the soothing effects from my run quickly unraveling. “Are you sure there isn’t a way they can turn me back into a beta?”

Courtney snorts. “No one wants to be a beta, Bea. Everyone wants to be an omega.”

“Well, I don’t!” I shout.

I never shout, and the noise bounces off the walls and the ceiling. It shocks even me. The other two stare at me with concern and none of us speak.

Outside a horn toots and a dog barks. The curtains flutter against the dark window and I swear I can smell the scent of Silver Boston on my skin. Is that why I'm losing my mind?

"It isn't so bad. It simply requires some adjustment, Bea. Once your cycle calms down, once you find a pattern and a routine, once you become used to all these new ..." my aunt pauses, watching the way I'm stroking at my darn cheek – the place that alpha kissed me, "you'll be just fine."

"I don't know ..." I whisper, my eyes swimming with water. "I don't know."

Courtney trots to my side and wraps her arms around me, resting her head against mine. "Aunt Julia is right, it'll all be fine, sweetie. You're away from shitty McShithead now. You have a new job. You'll find your way."

I sniff, the tears spilling down my cheeks.

"I'll tell you what," my aunt says. "Why don't you come with me to one of the omega social events?"

"Omega social events?" I say, thinking that sounds like one of the circles of hell.

"Yes, talking with other omegas, finding out about their lives, might really help you. You've only met me and Doctor Hannah so far and I'm old and she's ..." She shrugs.

"Maybe that would help," I say, leaning into Courtney's comforting embrace.

"Great." Aunt Julia picks up her phone and the screen lights up. "Let me see ... There's one over at the Divinity Hotel tomorrow night. I'll take you."

"After my run," I say.

"After your run with Silver," my aunt says sternly.

Courtney squeezes me. "It'll be okay, Bea. I mean, jeez," she sniffs, "you know you still smell delicious even after your

run. Lucky bitch.”

I manage a watery smile, hoping she’s right.



DESPITE MY FIRST horrific driving experience in the city, I decide I’ve been neglecting Missy long enough, and will grit my teeth and drive my aunt and me to the omega social event. My aunt seems to consider my city driving skills about as poorly as I do. She hisses and squeals her way through the journey, closing her eyes at every opportunity.

Halfway there, she casually drops into the conversation that the social event is a class on flower arranging. I consider swinging Missy right around and heading straight back home.

“That sounds so stereotypically omega,” I moan, wondering how I can turn the car around without causing a stack-up. “Like all an omega wants is skills to make their home pretty for their alpha.”

I know I’m being hypocritical. Two weeks ago, I would have leaped at such a class, wanting to make our little house the perfect place for me and Karl (hmm, maybe there were omega signs there after all). Now, anything like that has me recoiling in revulsion.

“It’s just an excuse for wine and gossip. I doubt there’ll be much actual arranging.”

I’m not sure if that will be worse. Since I’ve arrived in the city, I’ve managed to avoid telling the story of my life. Now I bet I’ll be asked.

I grip the steering wheel more tightly and try to come up with an alternative story. One where I don’t come out looking like such a pathetic loser.

I peer at my aunt. In all this time we’ve been spending together I realize I’ve failed to ask her more about the story of her life.

“What happened between you and my mom?”

“Ahhh,” my aunt says, wincing as I cut across lanes and another car honks at me angrily, “siblings. You don’t have one so you don’t know what it can be like.”

“You weren’t close then?”

“No, when we were younger, we were very close. I think that was half the problem.” My aunt sinks further into her seat. “We grew up together with this idea of how the future would be. We’d run the Naw Creek Diner together. We’d buy houses next door to one another. We’d help raise each other’s kids.”

Sounds so damn similar to my dream, I wonder if it was ever really my own or had always been my mom’s.

“But it didn’t work out that way,” I prompt.

“No. When I hit sixteen, I presented as an omega. And your mom, well she never did. It was clear she was a beta. It created this impassable chasm between us. Set me on a different path. And she never forgave me for it.”

“But it wasn’t your fault.”

“Your mom didn’t see it that way. She wanted me to stay in Naw Creek regardless. She didn’t understand the need I had inside me to find my alphas – one I’m sure you feel too.” She glances at me.

I shrug, my cheeks heating. “I don’t know about that.”

My aunt smiles and focuses back on the road. “Your mom assumed I’d grown ‘ideas above my station’. That I considered myself ‘too good for Naw Creek’.” My aunt makes quotation marks with her fingers, but I already know that sounds exactly like my mom. I haven’t told her about my situation yet. She’s not going to take the news particularly well.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Yes, well, I said things I shouldn’t have too. We were both to blame.”

“Have you ever considered—”

“Making up? The water is too far gone under that bridge now.”

I glance at her. “I don’t think it’s ever too late. Not when it’s your family.”

The hotel is another elegant one with a collection of expensive cars hovering outside to deliver rich-looking ladies to the entrance. I gulp. Missy and I are going to look out of place here. In fact, so is my aunt. From what I’ve learned so far, most omegas belong to rich families or are bonded to rich men. My aunt and Doctor Hannah seem to be two rare exceptions.

I guess I’m joining that fun exclusive club.

I park up and we walk into the hotel lobby, my nose immediately assaulted by the concoction of scores of omega scents. They are nothing like the scents of alphas. Too sweet. Too floral. Too sickening. They make my nose itch and my stomach lurch.

My aunt spots the look of displeasure on my face.

“It’s always worse when you first step in – and when you aren’t bonded.” Another reason to add to the list of why-an-omega-ought-to-be-bonded-to-an-alpha. Inwardly I groan.

“Great,” I murmur. “Guess I’ll be holding my breath all night then.”

“Or breathe through your mouth,” my aunt says, not registering my sarcasm.

We reach a large room already decorated with floral arrangements, the flowers masking the omega scents a little, and my aunt stops to talk to another older lady by the door. I peek around the room while she does. This is a million miles away from the diner back home, or Joe’s Bar. There it was all scruffy jeans and baseball caps. Here it’s designer handbags and matching shoes.

Nearly all the tables are already full; flowers laid out across the tabletops ready for the class. The omegas chat to one another, showing off those handbags, their manicures and outfits.

“Let’s go in,” my aunt says.

As we step through the doorway, every pair of eyes snap my way and I'm scrutinized like I'm here to try out for cheerleaders.

"Hi," I mumble, my cheeks warming. Do I have spinach in my teeth? Mascara on my cheek?

"This is Bea, everyone," my aunt announces, pushing me through the door. The faces stare back and nobody says a word. Except I spot one woman lean in to her friend and watch as her lips whisper, "That's the new girl in town."

Well, it's a lot better than being labeled the girl-who-got-dumped-at-the-altar. I'll take it.

My aunt swings her gaze around the room as everyone continues to glare at us, then, spotting a group of women my age, marches me in their direction.

"Hello ladies," she says, her hand gripping my wrist as if she knows I want to bolt. "This is my niece. She is new to the city," someone snorts like that was obvious, "and only recently presented."

If these women found my appearance shocking, they find that snippet of juicy information even more so. Their mouths drop open and their eyes bulge like insects.

"Only just presented?" one asks in dismay, leaning away from me like I might have something that's catching. My aunt pushes me down into an empty chair. "How is that even possible?"

My aunt doesn't respond, weaving her way through the tables towards a group of less wealthy-looking omegas her own age.

"I don't know," I say.

"What do the doctors think?" the one closest to me asks, her golden hair styled in perfect waves down her back and her eyes a dreamy blue. "I mean, are you actually an omega? It's not some kind of malfunction." She waves her manicured hand in my direction. Then her eyes narrow. "Or did you take something you shouldn't have taken?"

The other omegas around the table look utterly scandalized.

“They say there’re all sorts of experimental drugs you can buy from unreputable clinics these days,” one whispers.

“No,” I sigh, “I’m definitely an omega.”

The blonde looks at me, my outfit and the pony I drew my hair up into after my shower, and turns to her friend to resume their conversation.

Rude.

But I’m saved the indignation of having to try to worm my way into the chatter, by the class instructor who walks to the front of the room, clapping her hands.

Voices hush and for the next 45 minutes we follow a step-by-step run through on how to arrange roses in a vase. The instructor speaks at the pace of a snail and talks us through every single thing in great detail. She’s a beta and I have a sinking feeling she considers us all incapable of fast talk and complex instructions.

I follow along anyway, trying not to think of the bouquet of pink roses that ended up in the dumpster along with my dress. Also trying not to think of the white rose buttonhole Karl left me along with his note.

Not many words.

Don’t want to marry you. Gone to Barbados with Serena.

The thought of it has me snapping a stem right in half so violently, half the omegas around my table jump in their seats.

“Never mind,” the instructor says at the front, clearly concerned I might burst into tears. “Accidents happen. Just pick another.”

I select another rose from the pile in the center and glance around at everyone else’s creations. They are flawless and professional looking. My arrangement, on the other hand, looks like a three-year-old dumped a handful of flowers into a vase.

“I’m guessing you’ve all done this before,” I say to the others.

“Of course,” the blonde says, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

“So you spend a lot of your time flower arranging?” I ask struggling to maintain this conversation.

The blonde laughs. “No, not at all. We have our own florist.”

Right. Yep. Makes sense.

“So you’re new to the city and newly presented?” the blond says, shuffling white roses around her vase.

“Yes.”

“So tell me, Bea? Have you met any alphas yet?”

She asks me the question with an air of innocence, but I’m not blind to the way everyone at the table seems to stiffen, waiting for my answer.

“One or two,” I say with caution. “How about you? Are you all bonded?”

The blonde points to a redhead on the other side of the table. “Lara is. She got engaged last month.” Lara waves her fingers at me, a rock the size of a small country glinting on her finger. “And Corrine and Lydia have both been bonded about a year.”

“How about you?” I ask. I find it hard to believe she hasn’t been snapped up by a pack. She’s by far the most beautiful woman in this room and everyone keeps telling me how much alphas want omegas; how better off omegas are with a pack.

The woman shakes her head, her golden hair shimmering like threads of gold.

“Melody is holding out for the top prize,” Lara squeals.

“And she’s super close to snaring it too,” the one called Lydia adds.

Melody giggles, obviously delighted. “I am not.”

“What’s the top prize?” I ask.

“Actually,” Lydia continues, plucking leaves from the base of a flower, “there are two. Pack York and Pack Boston.” I freeze. Every muscle in my body stiffens. Lydia turns to Melody. “Do you have a preference, Mel?”

“I’m keeping my options open.” She smiles to herself and my stomach twists.

“You’re ... you’re dating Pack York and Pack Boston?”

“Well,” Melody says, tugging one rose out of the vase and then shoving it back in with force, “those boys don’t really do dating.”

“They’re such rogues,” Corrine says with a delight that Melody clearly doesn’t share. “They are hard to pin down.”

“But if anyone’s going to do it, Mel’s our girl,” Lydia adds quickly.

“Why are they considered the top prize?” I ask, my words sounding strangled in my ears.

“Oh, darling,” Melody giggles, “you really are clueless, aren’t you?” She pats my hand, her fingers cold. “Pack York and Pack Boston are the wealthiest packs in the city with considerable power and influence.”

I shouldn’t be surprised that’s the reason these omegas find the packs so desirable.

“And they’re hot,” Lara adds, fanning herself. “All six of those men are so damn fine.”

I wonder how her packmates would feel hearing her talk about other alphas that way.

Melody pushes her vase away, finally satisfied with her work. She glances at my creation and frowns. “You ought to start meeting packs yourself, you know,” she tells me. “You’ll want one lined up for your heat.” She peers over to my aunt and frowns harder. “I’m sure your aunt can find you a suitable pack. There are lots of up-and-coming ones who I’m sure would love to get to know a new omega.”

“Up and coming?” I ask.

“I assume,” she leans in to whisper to me as if she’s being discreet, even though she’s talking loud enough for everyone around the table to hear, “you’d feel uncomfortable with the more wealthy packs in the city, given your background and inexperience.”

“Why? Why would my background matter?” I snap, the icy blood in my veins turning hot.

“The wealthy packs expect their omega to behave in a certain way,” Melody says, in a tone so patronizing my blood begins to boil.

Lydia nods. “They need us to dress a certain way, act a certain way. It’s why we’ve all been coming to classes like these since we were girls. The packs need to maintain a reputation and appearance. We can’t be letting down the side.”

I look at the four women all staring back at me; their friendly smiles clearly fake. I see those handbags again, the clothes I’m sure are designer and exclusive, the jewels that cost more than most people in the city earn in a year. I see all the makeup on their faces. I smell the sickly sweet scents.

That’s what alphas want? Then why are Pack York and Pack Boston pursuing me?

I should probably cut my losses and end this conversation. It’s clear I’m never going to be friends with these women. But my blood demands I speak up. I’ve spent too many of the last few years biting my lip and holding my tongue.

“Actually, I’ve met Pack Boston and Pack York. Both packs took me out for a date.”

All four omegas stare at me again the same way they did when my aunt revealed I’d only just presented.

Then Melody rolls her eyes and swings her hair over her shoulder. “Oh darling,” she chuckles hollowly, “no need to make up stories. It’s not us you need to impress.”

She turns her back on me and starts to ask Lara about her up-coming wedding. The others turn their backs on me too,

excluding me from the conversation for a second time.

It's clear I've upset their queen bee and I'm relieved when my aunt taps me on the shoulder a moment later.

"Are you done?" she asks, examining my flowers with a critical look.

They really are a mess.

"Yep," I tell her. "Can we go?"

"Don't you want me to introduce you to some of the other omegas here?"

"Nope," I hiss, standing and scooping up my vase.

I thank the instructor, whose hands hover over my flowers as if she's dying to fix them, and then I march from the room.

At the door, something makes me pause, and when I glance back into the room, Melody is glowering at me as if she'd like to wrap a rose around my neck.

So much for making new friends.

Silver

I POSITION my feet hip width apart, lock my arms and raise my gun. In the distance, I can spy the target. I line up the barrel of my gun and fire once, twice, three times. The bullets race through the air, hitting the target with three loud thuds. All in the head. I lower my gun and peer over to Hardy in the neighboring range. I grin.

“Lucky hit,” he mutters, raising his own gun and firing four times. One of his bullets hits the dummy’s shoulder, one grazes its cheek and the other two whizz over its head. “Shit!”

“Keep telling you man, you need your eyes tested.”

Hardy scowls at me. There’s no way in a million years he would concede to wearing glasses, even though his aim’s been growing worse over the last couple of years.

“You could get contacts,” I tell him.

He shakes his head, frowning. “No way. I’m not poking myself in the eye.” For such a tough man, he is pretty squeamish when it comes to some things. Eyes being one. He once got a splinter in his eyeball and it took me and Angel together to wrestle him to the ground and hook it out.

“It’s lucky I don’t need you on gun duty these days.”

“I can still hit the target when I need to,” Hardy growls, lifting his gun and slamming a bullet right into the center of the dummy’s head. “Ha.”

“Want to go again?”

“Why not,” he says and I pull open the magazine of my gun and load it up with a fresh round.

“What did you make of our meeting today?” I ask him. We came straight from some rich beta’s house to the shooting range and we haven’t had a chance to discuss it yet.

“You know I hate meetings like that,” Hardy says, slipping a handful of bullets into place. He hates them because he knows these days I only take him along for effect; to impress the new clients with the sheer size of the man. It’s not the tech and all the whizzy gadgets that convince a client to take us on. It’s always the size of Hardy’s muscles. “Besides, I don’t know why the man needs us. Sounds like he should talk to his daughter. Playing with your biology like that – taking fucked-up drugs to try to turn yourself into an omega – that’s messed up.”

“If it were my daughter, I’d want to make sure the low-life supplying her with the drugs never walked the planet again. She’s fifteen! That’s fucked up, man.”

“Yeah, when you put it like that then I see your point. So are we?” His eyes flick to mine. “Going to make sure he never walks the planet again?”

I smile. Hardy knows perfectly well there is a limit to what we can do. The city authorities watch us like hawks. Any rumors of assassinations and they’d have us behind bars before you could say ‘bullet in the head’. As a consequence, I’ve always ensured we stay on the right side of the law.

“Once we find the dealer, we can certainly make sure they never *walk* again,” I say with a knowing smile. Of course, there are ways around the law.

Hardy laughs and lines up his shot, his broad shoulders rising and falling as he takes a steady breath before the shot. His forefinger twitches. He squeezes the trigger.

And my phone blasts out.

Hardy's shots sail high above the target.

"Jesus Christ, Silver!"

I raise my palm with a grin. "Sorry."

I reach for my jacket hanging on the hook and fetch out my phone. It's Trent, one of the men I've assigned to watch Bea.

I raise a finger to Hardy, telling him to be quiet, then connect the call. "Trent, what's up? Is everything okay with the omega?"

"Mr. Boston. I thought you'd want to know she's gone out to a bar with her cousin and some friends. The place looks pretty sketchy. There's a load of bikers inside."

"Are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm outside."

I consider this for a minute, meeting Hardy's eye through the perspex partition. Trent is perfectly capable of watching the omega for me, but more and more I find I want to do it myself, especially when she's wound up in some biker haunt. "Where's this bar and what's it called?"

"It's called Curfew, over on West Side."

"West Side." I pull a face. I don't like the idea of the omega living in that part of the city. I like the idea of her going out drinking in that part of the city even less. "Stay there, Trent. I'm coming down."

"Yes, Sir."

I hang up and grab my jacket from the hook. "Fancy a beer?" I ask Hardy.

"Now? We only just got started."

"The omega's gone out for a drink in some dive bar."

"Right," Hardy says, flicking the safety back on his gun. "Let's go then." We're halfway across the parking lot when he asks me, "Have you got a change of clothes in your car?"

“My running gear,” I say. We’ve been taking it in turns to accompany the omega running for a week now. Same time every night. But I have a spare set of sports clothes in the car on the off chance she calls wanting to run at some other time. “Why?” I ask Hardy.

He snorts. “You can’t go dressed to the bar like that.”

I look down at my suit, then up at Hardy in his jeans and t-shirt. He may have a point. “I’m not wasting time heading home to change.”

“At least lose the jacket,” Hardy says, “and the tie.”

I tug them both off as we reach the car and fling them in the back. Then I race us across the city, ignoring several red lights and the speed limit. Trent is waiting for us outside the bar. The front has a sign with several letters missing, the paint is peeling from the walls and the door has cracked panes of glass.

Hardy frowns as he takes in the place. “What the hell is she doing in a dive like this?”

“Two for one on pitchers of cocktails for ladies on a Wednesday night,” Trent says, pointing to a sign on the door.

“Jesus Christ,” Hardy mutters. “That woman does not need to be drinking pitchers of cocktails.”

I nod at Trent. “Thanks. We’ll take it from here.”

“She’s in the corner,” he says. “Good night, Sir.”

Hardy peers through the dirty glass. “Game of pool?”

“If you want your ass whipped twice in one night.”

“No chance, shithead.” He leans his shoulder against the door and paces inside. We both pretend to ignore the omega, although we’re both watching her from the corner of our eyes, as we reach the bar and lean casually against it. Bea’s perched on a stool, sitting around a table with her cousin, the friend who accompanied her home that night from the Skipton Gala, and three other women. No men. I can’t decide if this makes her little adventure more or less stupid.

“Four bottles of Bud,” Hardy tells the barman.

“I’m driving, remember?” I say.

“I know,” he says, taking all four bottles in one of his hands, and striding towards the pool tables. They’re all in use but as we draw closer, two skinny dudes who look like they probably still live at her home with their moms, drop their cues and scam.

Hardy balances the beer bottles along the table, then lines up the colored balls as I rub chalk onto the end of both cues.

Hardy’s just finished forming his triangle of balls when we sense the omega walking our way, her scent all sweet and sugary as usual.

I blow across the end of my cue, sending a puff of chalk into the air.

“Hello, sweetheart,” I say, without looking her way.

“Really?” she says, and when I peer down at her, she’s standing with both her hands on her hips – hips encased in skintight denim.

“What?”

“You can’t follow me everywhere.”

“We simply fancied a game of pool,” Hardy says, taking a pool cue from my out-stretched hand and leaning over the table. He hits the white ball with a hard smack and the triangle of balls ping across the table, bouncing off the sides.

“In the bar where I happen to be hanging with my cousin and our friends.”

“Didn’t know you were in here,” Hardy says. “Lining up the next shot.”

“Oh come on.”

“Would you like me to buy you a drink?” I ask her. “A sparkling water perhaps.”

“I have a drink,” she says. “A whole pitcher.”

“What is it?” I ask, eyeing up the sludgy looking shit in the jugs.

“It’s a tequila sunrise.”

“How many have you had?”

She huffs through her teeth and switches her weight from one foot to the other, the swaying motion of those hips of hers making me giddy.

“Are you keeping a count of my drinks as well as where I am?”

“Yes,” I say, twisting the cue in my fingers.

Hardy peers up from the table. “You want to join us for a game, Omega?”

“I wouldn’t want to embarrass you,” she says, arms still crossed.

“That sounds like a challenge,” Hardy says with a glint in his eye.

For a moment, she looks severely tempted, and this is what I’m coming to love about this girl. It may be stupid to rock up to a bar like this smelling like she does, but how many other omegas do I know who would even consider a game of pool? Most wouldn’t know how to hold a cue.

“Not tonight. I’m here with my friends. And you,” she points at us both, “are not allowed to interfere.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I say.

“I can’t believe you followed me again.”

“You know I have my men watching you, Omega. Which, given the choices you keep making, seems entirely reasonable.”

“What’s wrong with coming out for a drink? I’m not alone.”

I step towards her, lowering my voice. “This bar is a dive, Bea.” My gaze flicks around the other patrons. There are a few groups of women taking advantage of the drinks deal, but

mostly it's men here. I recognize several from the MC in this part of the city and I'm not loving the way most of them are eyeing up our omega. Not surprising; her scent, despite her attempt to disguise it with blockers, is like catnip and even in her dressed-down outfit, her curves are impossible to miss.

"I tried doing the whole omega event thing last week," she says, "and it wasn't for me. This is me." She sweeps her arm around the bar.

For a moment, I feel sorry for her. As shitty as this place is, I have to admit I'd rather hang here too than any of the stuck up alpha and omega events we're forced to attend. But I'm not sorry for caring about her safety.

"You're here without an alpha to protect you. I'm not prepared to take a risk with your safety."

"You need to start asking. I'm not your property."

"Fine." I bend over the table to take a shot of my own. "Next time you tell us where you're going and we'll be there." I close one eye, squinting down the cue at the white ball.

"You should aim for the other pocket," she tells me, but when I glance up at her, she's already storming back to her gaggle of women. Women who are all glancing our way with interest.

I hit the ball, missing my shot.

Hardy laughs. "She was right."

"About which bit?"

Hardy shakes his head and pockets three balls in a row before missing the next and allowing me to clear the table.

"Book that eye test," I tell him as I smack the black ball into the corner pocket.

"Best of five?" he says, already scooping out the balls to set them up. "And let's make it interesting. \$100 to the winner."

"One thousand," I say.

After the second game, I order several large bottles of water and bowls of french fries and send them over to the omega's table. She scowls our way but her friends seem pretty pleased.

We're on our third game of pool when we notice her leave the table and walk towards the bathrooms. She's a tad unsteady on her feet, the pitchers she's sharing with her friends almost empty.

We both stand, leaning on our pool cues as she passes us, rolling her eyes.

"You really don't need to babysit me," she mutters.

We don't bother arguing, pausing our game to wait for her to return. Hardy takes a swig of his beer and chalks up his cue. We're tied one game all and he wants that one grand just as much as I do. Neither of us like to lose.

After five minutes, Hardy glances at his watch. "How long does it take to pee?"

"Women always take a fucking long time in the bathroom, you know that."

"Should have gone with her," he says.

"Yeah, she'd love that."

"The woman needs to understand the dangers."

I lean against the pool table, eyes flicking around the bar. This place stinks of stale beer and even staler scents. It insults my nose, and if it weren't for the omega's sweet scent permeating the air, my head would be aching.

"That's ten minutes now," Hardy says, drumming his fingers behind him.

I sweep the bar again. The three men who've been hunched in the corner all evening are gone. The ones with the snake tattoos. Snakebites. A notorious crime gang. Jesus Christ, how did she find the most dubious fucking bar in the city?

I nudge my head in the direction of the bathrooms. “Let’s go check.”

Hardy barrels through to the back and swings open the ladies’ bathroom door, ignoring the squeals from within. I’m right behind him.

“Bea, you in here?” he asks. “Bea!”

We find her applying lipstick in front of the bathroom mirror, mid-conversation with some girl she’s obviously just met.

She lowers her lipstick.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“You were gone for over ten minutes and—”

She snaps the lid back on the tube of lipstick and throws an embarrassed look at the other woman. “I’m sorry,” she says.

“Protective boyfriends?” the woman asks.

“Something like that,” she answers, pushing past us both and stomping through the door.

We both follow after her and half way down the hallway, she spins to face us. It’s clear she’s about to give us a talking to, but then those three Snakebite members wander out of the men’s bathroom, and she crooks her finger and beckons to us. Together, we walk further down the corridor.

“I was peeing,” she says with exasperation. “This is becoming too much.”

“Did you see those three men, back there?” I say, hooking my thumb over my shoulder. “Did you see the snake tattoos on their necks? Snakebites. Crime gang. You know how much money they could make selling you on the black market?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“It could. It does,” Hardy says, his brow heavy.

Perhaps the weight of his expression gets to her – it’s not often Hardy looks so damn serious – because the annoyed expression on her face falters.

“I can’t live like this,” she whispers, “always looking over my shoulder, worried any minute that someone might—”

“You don’t have to,” I say, “we’ll be here to protect you.”

“I don’t know,” she says, shaking her head. “You can’t come barging into the Ladies’ bathroom like that.”

“I’d do a hell of a lot worse if it meant keeping you safe,” I tell her, stalking forward.

Her scent swirls in the air.

She swallows. Her lips part. Her eyes swerve down my body and then up Hardy’s.

Hardy takes a step nearer.

“We want to look after you, baby,” Hardy whispers, capturing her fingers with his and tugging her towards him. “To keep you safe.”

I come closer too, embracing her from behind, holding her between us. “You’re safe now, sweetheart. We’ve got you.”

I kiss the crown of her head, then her shoulder and her neck, purring gently against her skin.

Her angry breathing begins to settle and her stiff spine relaxes against our bodies.

“You’re okay,” Hardy whispers, nuzzling into her ear, his hands moving to her hips. She leans against his mouth, gasping when he sweeps his tongue around the shell of her ear.

Her breaths morph into needy pants. For all her talk about not wanting this, not wanting us, her body can’t help but respond to us, and, oh fuck, if it isn’t addictive. I could waste many happy hours of my life stirring this woman up.

I nip at her shoulder, raking my teeth along towards her throat. “You feel good?” I ask her, “when you’re here and safe with us?”

“Hmmm,” she murmurs and I know her eyes are drifting shut.

I take a pace forward, walking the three of us into the shadows of the corridor and up against a wall. It's stupid. Who knows if those scumbags are still loitering around? Who knows who else might be lurking about in this bar? But when little moans come tumbling from her lips, it's damn hard to think straight. My alpha hindbrain takes over and all it wants to do right now is soothe away all her discomfort and make her feel good.

Her soft little body is sandwiched between the two of ours, her hands pressed to Hardy's chest, her head tilted backwards and resting on my shoulder as my packmate trails kisses up her throat and along her jaw. I take his place, running the tip of my tongue over the pulse point on her neck. Her round ass presses against my cock and when she squirms with pleasure, the sensation is enough to make me hard.

Hardy's hands move from her hips to her waist, circling it completely, and I take my opportunity to run my palms over her curves and down to her backside. I squeeze the round globes of her ass and trace my fingers along the seam of her jeans, reaching between her legs. She bucks against my fingers and I curse the stiff material, wishing for an easy way inside.

To my surprise, it's Hardy who comes to his senses first. When the omega whimpers into his mouth. He leans back and peers down at us both.

"Shit," he whispers, as I nibble the point where her neck meets her shoulder. "Silver." I look up at my packmate. His eyes are full of lust but I can see how he's pulling on his restraint. "We can't do this here."

I growl a little.

We could. We could take her right here and now in this bar. She wants it. I can smell it in her scent. We could take her now and show Pack York that she belongs to us. She is ours.

I drag my teeth against her skin. I could sink my jaw into her flesh and claim her.

"Silver," Hardy warns, and I stumble backwards away from the heat of the omega and the intoxicating aroma of her

scent.

I nod. He's right. We need to take her home.

But the distance, the coolness of the air, seems to pull the omega out of whatever trance we'd dragged her into.

She steps backwards too, away from Hardy, blinking rapidly.

"I ... I ..."

"We'll take you home to our place," Hardy says, reaching for her hand again.

She shakes it away. "No, I need to find Courtney and Ellie and ..."

"No?" Hardy grins and tilts his head to one side. "It seemed like we were just getting started here, sweetheart."

"I know and I'm sorry—"

"You don't have to apologize, Bea. Ever," I say, scowling at Hardy.

"I don't know if this is what I want ... well, maybe I know I want it, but do I need it? I can't keep my head straight when I'm around you and I'm worried that everything will fall apart, even more than it already has. Some days I feel like I'm barely keeping it all together, like it's hanging on by the thinnest of threads and any moment it's going to snap and—"

"Shhh," I say, "Bea, it's all right. We shouldn't have done this."

I drag my hand through my hair, feeling like a giant asshole.

It's her scent, her body, her fucking smile. She's not the only one who can't think straight.

I take her hand in mine and lead her back inside the bar.

Her friends are hugging and kissing each other goodbye when we return to the table, all of them pausing to scrutinize us as we wait for Bea to gather up her belongings. Maybe they

all suspect we were doing exactly what I wanted to be doing out there.

“I’ll drive you home,” I tell Bea and her cousin, and when we arrive at their apartment, Hardy and I insist on delivering them right to their door.

“You sure we can’t come in?” Hardy asks, leaning against the doorframe.

“Good night,” she says, rising up on her toes to kiss us both on the cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow for our run.”

When she’s gone, Hardy sighs long and loud.

“Shit, this is harder than I thought it would be, Silver.”

“Yeah.”

And I wonder for about the one millionth time whether letting her walk away is the right thing to do.

N ate

“HERE AGAIN?” Mrs. Finch asks, peering over her glasses at me.

“Yep,” I say with a grin, sauntering past her desk and kicking open the door to my office.

I’ve been in the office more days this last fortnight than I usually am in an entire year. Usually wild horses and all the king’s fucking men couldn’t drag me into this place. Too many walls. Don’t like it.

But now this place has one key attraction. One I’m finding hard to resist.

The omega.

I have my own office on the floor. Axel insisted on it. If I sit with the door open, I have a direct view of the little thing, perched on a chair tapping away on her keyboard.

She’s like a small bird. All tiny, breakable bones; soft and strokeable. Plus she makes these chirpy noises as she types. Noises I don’t think she’s aware she’s making.

Wonder if she makes those in bed.

Shit, I’d like to find out.

But Axel and Connor have made it clear. Can’t touch.

Nope, I can't play with this one. She's special.

I've never seen an omega work.

Usually, they want you to wait on them. Fetch them shit. Feed them shit. Talk to them and shit.

Axel and Connor are good at that crap.

Me, I'm good at the rutting.

Not a lot else.

I swing my feet up onto my desk and tug my switchblade from my pocket. I flick the blade up and down, watching her through the gap in the door.

She's captivating in the way a sunrise is. Different colors, different textures. Never the same. Always catching me by surprise.

Plus I love the way she's fighting. I can see it from here as I watch her. Fighting all the time. Her body, her reactions, her emotions.

I like a fighter.

It's not visible but I can see she's battered and bruised. On the inside. Like me.

Yet, just like me, she's back on her feet. Ready for another day. Another sunrise.

I balance my knife on the table, resting the blade on its tip and spinning it around in my hand. The metal catches the light, sending beams cascading across the office.

I bet it was that ex-boyfriend.

I told Connor he should do some digging.

He's told me to keep out of it.

Probably for the best. If I learn anything bad, I'll be wanting to sink this blade between the man's ribs.

Axel emerges from his office, a bundle of papers in his hands. His eyes dart to the omega, lingering there as he soaks her up, then goes to speak to Mrs. Finch.

He's been doing that a lot. Finding reasons to leave his office and go stare at the omega.

It's driving Mrs. Finch mad.

I laugh and the noise catches his attention. He frowns, then strides over to my office, closing the door behind him.

I huff.

"You're blocking my view, asshole."

Axel peers behind him. "You're a pervert, you know that."

"Can't help it. She's captivating."

Axel lets out a strangled sigh like he knows exactly what I'm talking about.

"Did you go talk to those squatters on the Rio site?"

I grin at him, spinning my blade and letting it clatter onto the desk.

"Yep, I spoke to them."

"And?" Axel asks, plunging his hands into his suit pockets.

"They're packing up today. They'll be gone by tonight."

"Good. Good job, man."

The corners of my mouth twitch in a genuine smile. I'm a sucker for praise from the head of our pack.

It's been that way forever. Ever since he picked me out in the school yard, the scrawny kid with an empty lunchbox, and gave me half his peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

He's a good guy, Axel. Even if he's a grumpy asshole most of the time.

"You wanna get lunch?" he asks me.

"Is lunch the omega?"

"Fuck, I wish," he mutters. "Her scent is driving me insane. My balls are the size of freaking basketballs at this stage."

"So what you gonna do about it?" I ask.

It was a genius move getting her to come work for us. But since then progress has stalled. The little thing hasn't fallen into our arms (or our bed) and taking it slow isn't getting us anywhere.

I hate slow.

Slow sucks.

Slow allows your enemies to catch up with you.

Slow allows them to beat the crap out of you.

Axel shrugs and drops down into a chair. "She's not acting like omegas usually do."

"What? You mean fawning the crap all over you? You mean flinging themselves at your feet?"

"Yeah," he says seriously.

"Ask her to the Macaby dinner."

Axel stares at me. "I don't think she'll come."

I pocket my knife and swing my feet from the desk. Then I slam my thumb on the intercom.

"Yes?" Mrs. Finch answers hesitantly. I've never, not once, used the intercom.

"Can you come in here, Mrs. Finch?" She mutters something incomprehensible. "Please," I add. A moment later she's standing in my office.

"What?" she says, hands on her hips.

She knows we're up to no good.

"We need a date. For the Macaby dinner."

"Are you asking me?" she asks with a frown.

"You wanna come?"

"With you clowns? No."

"Soooo," I say, jiggling my seat from side to side, "any ideas?"

"I assume you want to take Bea."

“Yep.”

She glares at me and then at Axel, before wagging her finger at us like we’re a pair of naughty school boys. “She’s a nice girl and she’s doing a good job for me. I don’t need you boys messing her around and—”

“We have no plans to mess her around,” Axel growls. She stares at him like she doesn’t believe him for a minute.

Fair enough.

Mrs. Finch has had to strong-arm omegas out of our apartment in the past. She’s had others she’s had to escort away when they’ve rocked up at the office. She’s well aware of our previous woman drama.

“It’s true, Mrs. Finch. This one’s different.”

“She is.” She crosses her arms. “Then what’s stopping you asking her out?”

“She’s not dating,” I say.

“Smart girl. Maybe you should respect her wishes.”

“It’s just a dinner dance,” Axel mumbles.

It always warms my damn cockles how that giant of a man can be cut down to size by Mrs. Finch.

“Oh, sure sure,” she says with a coating of sarcasm.

However, she’s always had a soft spot for me.

“We need your help Mrs. Finch. I like her.”

“Hmmm.” I give her the puppy dog eyes. Works on women all the time. “Fine, but if you hurt this girl, God help me, I’m going to skin the lot of you alive. One at a time. Slowly.” She jerks her head towards the door. “Come on then, let’s see what we can do.”

I leap to my feet and trot behind her.

“I’m sorry Mr. York but they’re insisting. No packs at the dinner dance unless they are accompanied by an omega,” Mrs. Finch says, as we stroll towards her desk.

This isn't the first time she's had to put on an act for us. She's a damn good liar with a poker face. I should know. She's beaten my ass at cards multiple times.

She gives a little nod to Axel, encouraging him to continue the ruse.

"This dinner dance is extremely important to our business interests, Mrs. Finch. If we don't show up, the French deal will fall through."

There's no French deal. I grin and peek at Bea. I can tell she's listening to this conversation.

"Did you explain the circumstances? Did you tell them our pack doesn't have an omega?" Axel continues.

Mrs. Finch tucks herself behind her desk. "I did, and I stressed how displeased you'd be if you were barred from the event. But I couldn't get them to budge."

"Well, find us a date then, Mrs. Finch. If this deal collapses, it's going to cost our business millions. I'm talking cuts. People are going to lose their jobs."

"Good lord, Mr. York. I'm not sure what to advise. I called Miss Jeena and Miss Taylor. They are both unavailable that night."

Bea looks up from her work.

Yeah, she's interested now.

I snigger silently. There ain't no French deal and there sure as hell isn't a Miss Jeena or a Miss Taylor.

"Miss Graham? Miss Long?"

"No, busy I'm afraid."

Bea chews on her lip.

"You told them it was important."

"I did."

"Shit!" Axel says, rubbing at his forehead.

"What we going to do, man?" I ask.

“I don’t know.” He sags onto the corner of Mrs. Finch’s desk as if he’s defeated.

“Wh ... what’s wrong?” Bea asks. All twitchy on her seat.

“Gotta take an omega date to the Macaby dinner dance otherwise we can’t go,” I tell her. “And if we can’t go, the French deal is ...” I drag my finger across my throat.

Her forehead wrinkles. “Why are they insisting you take an omega?”

“Prejudice,” Mrs. Finch says, tapping away on her keyboard. “They believe a pack of alphas can’t be trusted in civilized company unless they have an omega with them to calm their instincts.”

“Oh my goodness,” Bea says, her hands flying to her pretty mouth. Pink lips, all parted. Caramel eyes wide. Shit, this girl. “That’s awful.”

And bullshit. Complete cowpat. Like I said, Mrs. Finch can lie with the best of them.

“Usually, I’d say screw them,” Axel lies, “but the Martins will be there and this is our chance to seal the deal. If we’re not there, someone else will make a move and all our hard work ... well ... it’s going to cost this company millions.”

“People will lose their jobs?” she asks.

She’s waning. I’d almost feel bad. But I’ve been watching her. My little bird may be fighting it, but she wants us. Wants us badly.

“Several. It breaks my heart,” Axel holds his palm to his chest, “but—”

“I’ll go,” Bea blurts out.

“What?” Axel asks all innocent like.

“You can take me as your date.”

“But you’re not dating right now, Bea.”

“Very sensible girl,” Mrs. Finch mutters.

Bea chews that plump lip of hers. A lip I want to drag through my teeth.

“I know, but this would be business, right? Not a real date. And I can’t stand back and let you lose the deal.”

“You’d do that for us?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“Then we need to buy you a dress,” I say, marching towards her and pulling her to her feet. “Come on.” I pull her along behind me, taking her into the elevator.

“Where are we going?”

“Dress shopping.”

“You can’t buy me a dress!”

“Yes, I can.”

“I can borrow a dress. From my cousin.”

“Nope. Buying you a new one.”

I hit the button on the elevator and smile at her as we descend to the ground.

“Haven’t you got work to do?” she asks me. My little bird’s all flustered, her feathers all ruffled. I fucking love it. Going to love it even more when I’ve dressed her up.

“Nope. I’m done for the day.”

Her eyes dart upwards towards the ceiling. “I’m not sure Mrs. Finch is going to be happy about me disappearing.”

“She won’t mind.” She looks at me skeptically. “What’s your favorite color?”

“My favorite color?”

“Yeah.”

“Erm, blue, I guess. Why?”

“Wanted to know what color dress we’re looking for.”

“Maybe I ought to go back up to my desk.”

I shake my head. “Aren’t you going to ask me mine?”

“Your what?”

“Favorite color.”

“What is it?”

“Black.”

She laughs. “Black’s not a color.”

“Yeah,” I shrug. “It’s still my favorite. But I’m beginning to really like amber too.”

I stare straight into her eyes and the little thing blushes.

I like that too. Wonder if she blushes like that when she comes. Wonder if she’s bare down there or whether she has cute little curls. Wonder if she’s the same shade of caramel or darker.

“Stop it,” she says.

“What? What did I do?”

“Looking at me like you want to ... I don’t know ... eat me or something.”

“But I do want to eat you.”

“Oh jeez,” she says, wilting against the elevator wall. “You have really dirty eyes.”

“I have an even dirtier mouth,” I say, flicking my tongue against my lip ring.

The elevator doors swing open. Lucky. A moment later and I’d have her pushed up against the wall.

Slow be damned.

We step out into the shiny foyer. It’s crowded with people on the way to lunch.

“Look,” I say, swinging her around to face me. “It’s not me buying the dress. It’s the company. You need to look the part.”

The corners of her mouth fall down and her eyes dim.

Never been any good at words. Always been better with my hands.

Hopefully, I'll get a chance to show her that soon enough.

"Mrs. Finch knows you're doing this to save our asses. She won't mind you taking a few hours off to find the right dress."

She chews on her lip and I pinch her chin and force her to look up into my eyes. "Okay?"

"Yes," she says, "as long as I get a say on the dress."

"Of course, little one, your dress, your choice." That surprises her. Ex-boyfriend was a control freak, that's my guess.

I take her hand in mine and she doesn't pull it away. Bingo.

It's small and warm but as I stroke the pad of my thumb over her fingers, I feel a scar. My heart pounds. Ex-boyfriend again?

"What's this?" I ask.

"Oh that?" She lifts our joined hands to look at the dark mark on her skin. "I burned it on the pan at the diner."

"You worked in a diner?"

"Yep, my parents own a diner back home. I used to do a few shifts."

I squeeze her hand and pull her along the sun-soaked sidewalk.

Never met an omega with burns on her hands.

"Does that mean you can cook?" I ask. Omegas can cook. But they never do.

"Depends what you want. Scrambled eggs, french fries or apple pie? Yes. Gourmet meal? No."

"Scrambled eggs, french fries and apple pie sounds like my kind of meal."

She laughs. "I didn't mean all together. Anyway, don't you have a chef?"

"Why'd you say that?"

She leans in closer. “Rumor has it you boys are kind of wealthy and I thought all wealthy people had private chefs and personal maids.”

“Only the dickwads. I cook mostly.”

“You cook?”

“Yeah, I’m mean as fuck with a frying pan.” And a knife. “I’ll cook for you sometime.”

“Do *you* do gourmet dishes?”

“I’m more of a meatloaf kind of guy.”

“Wow,” she says, impressed.

Shouldn’t be. Anyone will tell you, kids that don’t get fed grow up into adults with food obsessions. The others let me get on with it. They know fuck all about food and cooking. They’re happy to eat whatever monstrosity I dump in front of their faces, just like they’re happy for me to skip off and do my thing.

We continue down the sidewalk, passing Hetty’s department store.

“Shouldn’t we try there?” she asks, eyeing up all the mannequins displayed in the window.

“Nope, their stuff won’t fit you.”

We walk further along the sidewalk, the stores thinning and then I swing her around the corner to a little boutique I’ve been eyeing up since I met her.

The dresses in the window are all slinky, silky things I want to dress this girl up in.

“Here?” she asks, stepping towards the windows. “Those dresses look a bit ...”

“Sexy as hell.” I grin.

“Risqué and ... expensive.”

“Told you. Company’s paying.”

“Is this where other omegas—”

I drag her through the door.

The shop is empty.

I spin around, irritated. Then thrust my fingers in my mouth and whistle hard. A young shop assistant comes scurrying out, tucking his shirt into his pants and patting down his hair.

“Hi there,” he says, his cheeks all red.

He’s followed a moment later by another shop assistant, his shirt all buttoned up wrong. This one hurries to start straightening piles of panties.

Bea’s gaze flicks between the two men.

“Were we interrupting?” I ask.

“No, Sir,” the first dude says, his cheeks flaming. Bea jabs me with her elbow.

“I need a dress,” I tell him.

“Short? Long? Strapless? Halter neck?”

“Short,” I say. “Strapless.”

“Long,” Bea corrects, “maybe strapless.”

“But blue,” I say. “It has to be blue. Dark blue, almost black.” I grin and she rolls her eyes. “Both our favorite colors,” I explain.

“Freddie?” the man serving us says to the other. “Did you hear that?”

The second man nods and together they start searching through the racks of dresses. Bea stands in the middle of the shop, eyes swooping around all the clothes on display, thumbs twiddling.

She wants to touch.

I leave her and stroll around, trailing my hands over silk and gauze and cotton. Her eyes follow my fingers and I can see the pulse jumping in her throat.

It’s like foreplay.

I reach the pile of panties and lift a pair of tiny things into the air. Black. Lacy. I glance from the underwear straight at her.

She stares at me with her mouth hanging open, pulse leaping like crazy.

Little thing is half-crazed. I like whipping her into a frenzy. Watching her fight all those feelings of hers.

The assistants return, arms laden with dresses. I dismiss half a dozen right off.

“I’m taking her somewhere fancy.”

“You are?” the first one asks. He glances at the cheap blouse and skirt she’s wearing, lip curling.

I think about the knife in my pants.

“Where else would Pack York take their omega?”

The man jolts like I whipped his ass.

“Pack York?” he says, eyes swimming between us.

“Yep, Pack York.”

I don’t look the part. I’m no Axel. No Connor. I’m dressed in my dark jeans, black t-shirt, chain around my neck. But I bet he recognizes my face.

“She’s going to be the most fucking beautiful woman at the party,” I tell them. “I want her to have the most beautiful dress too.”

The two assistants exchange glances, then drop their dresses onto a chair and head for the back.

“I think we have something that’ll do the job, Sir.”

“You always name drop?” she asks me when they disappear behind the curtain.

“Only when I have to, little one.” I usually just use my knife.

“I liked one of those dresses actually, it would have done just fine.”

“Nope, weren’t good enough.”

“You said I could choose.”

“Yeah, but you have to choose right.”

She doesn’t return my smile, and I drop the panties and walk her way. I stroke my hands down her arms. Her breath hitches.

“I’m teasing. See what they bring out. You don’t like it, fine.”

“Okay.” I don’t move away. “Can you please stop it?” she whines.

My hands freeze. “Stop what?”

“Looking at me with those eyes.”

“Better?” I ask, closing my eyes. “Want me to keep them shut?”

She pinches my bicep. Sparks flutter across my skin. “You’re the bad boy of the pack, aren’t you?”

I wouldn’t exactly say any of us are good. But I’ll let her believe what she likes.

I crack open one eye. “I don’t always play fair,” I confess.

The two shop assistants sweep back the curtain and emerge carrying a dress between them.

It’s pastel blue. Not black.

It’s also not silky. Or slinky. The skirt is all puffy and the top half has sparkly shit pinned all over it.

But if she likes it ...

She walks closer, reaching out to stroke her hand down the material. I examine her face. I think she’ll be all gooey-eyed the way girls go over dresses like these. Instead, my little bird looks like someone snapped her heart in two.

What the fuck?

I growl.

Bea, shop assistant number one and shop assistant number two turn to look at me.

“What’s wrong with it?” I grind out through my teeth. “Are they fucking with you, little one?”

“Oh, no,” she snatches her hand away and shakes her head. “It reminds me of another dress, that’s all.” Her shoulders rise and fall in a long sigh.

“We don’t want it,” I tell the assistants.

“It’s a limited edition, Valentino,” the assistant gasps, like we’ve committed a sin.

“Don’t care. It reminds her of another dress. It’s making her sad. Take it away, before I rip the thing to shreds.”

The second assistant bundles it into his arm and sprints behind the curtain.

Reckon he’s well aware of my reputation. Knows I don’t make empty threats.

“Let’s start again, shall we?” I say, taking my little bird’s hand in mine. “Midnight blue and slinky. This girl is stunning. She doesn’t need all those fancy crystals and shit.”

The first assistant is starting to sweat. But he taps his fingers against his mouth and then disappears out the back.

He emerges with dark silk draped over his arm that flows like water.

“It’s vintage. From the ’90s. It belongs to the owner. She collects pieces like these but I’m sure I could—”

“Let her try it on. We’ll work out the rest later.” I cup Bea’s chin in my hand and turn her face to mine. “You like this one?” I ask gently.

“I don’t know. It’s revealing.”

“You don’t like revealing?”

“Maybe.” I can see all the wheels in her head spinning.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Her eyes lock with mine. She chews her lip.

“It’s okay,” I whisper.

“It wouldn’t look ... slutty?” she asks.

Slutty? I frown. “Did someone call you that?” I ask. “In the past?”

She chews that lip, then nods.

Yeah, I can see it now. This bird’s been locked up in a cage. Bet she loves dresses like this. Bet there was a time she wore them. Then someone came along and stole that joy away.

Bet I can guess who.

Maybe I’ll do my own digging.

I turn to the assistant. “Go hang it in the changing room. We’ll be there in a minute.” Then I give Bea my attention. “I had someone,” I tell her, “used to call me names too. Long time ago now. Sometimes I hear their voice in my head. But people like that, they’re all hollow inside, all cold and empty. They know it. They feel it. And they put people like you down – all beautiful sunshine and golden light – to make themselves feel better.” I stroke her cheek as she listens to me intently. “You could never look,” my mouth curls in disgust, “slutty, Bea. And that word? It’s fucked up. Don’t use it again. Okay?”

“Okay,” she murmurs, body drifting towards mine. It would be so easy to kiss her now. So damn easy. But it’s not what she needs.

“Come on.” I lead her to the changing room. “Give it a try. If it’s no good, we’ll keep trying.”

She smiles at me and ducks behind the curtain.

I pace, hearing the ruffle of material as she strips out of her clothes.

Hell, it’s hard to stay on the other side of the curtain.

I’ve fucked plenty of girls in changing rooms, up against the wall, or the mirror, or bent over the chair.

I could do the same to Bea. I know she’d cave like a tower made of sand.

But I can't do that. Not to her. Not to the pack.

So I pace, fiddling with the knife in my pocket.

Finally, the curtain parts and she steps out.

My heart stops.

It fucking stops. One minute it's beating like a drum in a rock band.

Next, silent.

The woman is breathtaking. Sex and beauty and all the things that are good wrapped up into one goddamn woman.

I'm probably drooling, all down my front. I'm certainly growling like a beast.

Can't fucking help it.

I swallow down the noise. Don't want to scare the woman.

"What do you think?" Her dress, her choice.

She smoothes her palms over the silk clinging around her hips. The action has my heart jumpstarting and my brain short wiring.

"I ... I like it. It's beautiful and classy."

"You look a million dollars," the first shop assistant says, the second coming to stand next to him and nodding enthusiastically.

She smiles, her cheeks flushed. She loves it, I can tell.

"She looks priceless," I correct.

"Better than the model who wore it originally," the second assistant says.

"So you want it, sweetheart?" I ask her.

"Oh," she says, burying her face in her hands. She can't bring herself to say yes.

"You better talk to your boss," I tell both the assistants, "because we're not leaving without it."

I grin at her.

Job done.

C onnor

NATE and the crap he manages to pull off never ceases to amaze me. Tonight though, I think he blows all previous miracles out of the water.

The omega steps into the ballroom on Axel's arm and my mind short circuits. She looks incredible, damn beautiful. And, fuck me, that dress! How the hell did Nate convince her to wear something like that?

The silky material clings to every inch of her body, highlighting every curve, every sweep, every rounded edge. How Axel has the self control not to glide his hands all over her, I have no fucking idea.

Axel guides her towards us and I hear Nate curse in my ear.

"That dress," I growl.

"I know," he says. "Criminal, right?"

I groan. I might end up doing something criminal tonight, that's for sure.

"Hi there," she says, as she reaches us and I bend down to kiss her cheek, resting my hand like a goddamn pervert on her waist and sucking in her sweet, caramel scent. I wasn't hungry

before, but now my stomach growls for something sweet on the end of my tongue.

“You look amazing,” I tell her.

“Hopefully I look the part,” she says.

“You certainly make Axel look a damn sight prettier.”

She giggles. “I think he looks very handsome, actually,” she says, brushing her fingers down Axel’s front and making my stomach pang with jealousy. “You all do.”

Her hot gaze sweeps over our forms and I swear there’s a hunger of her own in those amber eyes. Why the hell does she keep fighting this?

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Nate asks, whispering into her ear.

His warm breath tickles her skin and she shivers in that delicious way she does. Hell, I’d happily spend all evening making her shiver like that.

I like the way her body responds to ours without even trying. It’s so damn obvious this girl should be ours.

I suppress a little moan of satisfaction.

Then remind myself once again that this is business, not pleasure.

She’s not dating. And we didn’t ask her here on a date.

We’re here so the pack can secure the ‘French deal’ and nobody loses their job – that’s what she thinks anyway. But we’re all hoping that by the end of the evening we’ll have seduced her out of this dress and she’ll be rolling in our bed.

“I’m fine,” she says, her eyes falling to Axel’s fingers curled around her waist. The sight takes my mind straight to the bedroom, wondering if that is how he would hold her while we ...

“Where are the Martins?” she asks, snatching her lust-soaked gaze from her waist and scanning all the wealthy-looking men and women at the party tonight, every single one elegantly dressed.

Nate blinks. “The Martins?”

“Don’t you need to talk to them about the French deal?”

“Oh, yeah,” he says, swiping two glasses of champagne from a passing waitress in one large hand. “The Martins. We’ll find them later.” He offers her one of the champagnes and she takes it from him and gulps it down.

“Easy, sweetheart,” Axel says, his brow creasing.

“Sorry.” She hiccups, covering her mouth with her fingers. “Nervous.”

“No need to be nervous,” I say. “The three of us are here to take care of you tonight.” Hopefully, we’ll be taking care of her in all manner of ways.

“That’s easy for you to say,” she mumbles. “My last encounter with the other omegas in this city didn’t exactly go according to plan. And while I may look the part tonight, I’m still Bea from Naw Creek. I’m not going to have a clue which fork to use and I won’t be able to talk about art or ballet or politics or whatever rich, powerful people at parties like this discuss.”

She spots a tray rushing past us and plonks her empty champagne glass on top. The waitress stops to offer another full one and their eyes lock on one another.

“Bea!” the waitress squeals, her face a picture of amazement.

“Ellie!” the omega squeals back, grabbing the other girl’s wrist.

“Wow.” The waitress’s eyes dart down our girl’s dress, and then over her face. “Wow! You look—”

“Incredible,” Nate says. His head tilts to take the waitress in. “You know each other?”

“This is my friend Ellie. We worked together,” Bea says, frowning, “briefly. Until they fired me for being an omega.”

“I can’t believe they can get away with that bullshit,” Ellie whispers.

“They can’t,” Nate says, his voice growing two octaves lower. He winks at me and disappears into the throng of people and I have a fair idea he’s gone to talk to the caterers.

“He wouldn’t ...” Ellie asks with concern, glancing in the direction Nate went.

“No idea,” Bea says.

“Probably just going to have a word,” Axel says, towering above Bea, as I stand by his other side. “Axel York,” Axel says, holding out his hand to shake Ellie’s. The waitress shakes his bear-like paw.

“I know who you are,” she says, somewhat stunned as if she’s meeting royalty. Ellie’s gaze tips back to take both of us in. “Is this your new pack, Bea?” she blurts out.

“No,” Bea says.

“Not yet,” I say.

She stares at me and I stare right back.

Ellie’s gaze flicks between the three of us. “I think I’d better leave you to it,” she mumbles, scurrying away.

“You scared my friend off,” she says with a hiss, once the friend is out of earshot.

“Did not,” I say, coming to stand on her other side.

Flanked like this, I don’t think anyone else is going to be brave enough to approach and talk to her. Considering the hungry glares from all the other alphas in this room, I decide that is a good thing.

“Well, thank you anyway,” she says.

“For what?”

“You actually talked to my friend – a waitress – most people at events like these hardly notice the waiting staff’s existence or stubbornly ignore it.”

“Most people in this city are jerks,” Axel says darkly, his eyes roaming the room.

“Manners in the city are definitely different to how they are back home.”

I watch her gaze follow Axel’s around the room. I still haven’t worked out how she knows me. It’s been driving me mad. Usually, I would have done some digging on the girl. However, in this case, I’m worried I’ll discover something about that dickwad ex of hers and I won’t be able to help but pay him a visit. I’ve been waiting for my chance to ask her instead.

“Want to dance, Bea?” I ask her as a man engages Axel in conversation.

“Don’t we need to find the Martins?”

“Later,” I say. “Right now, I’d like to dance with you.”

She peers up at me with those familiar amber eyes. How could I forget a pair of eyes like hers?

“And,” I add, leaning in to whisper in her ear, “I can’t stand that man.” I motion with my head towards the older man chewing Axel’s ear off.

“Who is he?” she whispers back.

“Don Cleaver. He owns Cleaver Pharmaceuticals. They’ll be at it for the next hour. Cleaver wants Axel to back him in his bid to be senator. Axel wants him to stop investing in anti-wrinkle shit and focus his business on finding cures for real illnesses.”

The omega watches the two of them talk.

“Axel’s right. He should be focusing on proper medicines.”

“I know, but he’ll never convince a man like Cleaver.” The man gives me the creeps.

“Okay then, let’s dance,” she says and allows me to lead her onto the dance floor where several couples are swaying to a slow song.

She wraps her arms around my neck and I rest mine on her hips. For a moment, we move silently to the music — some

old melody about falling in love.

“Your eyes are the color of the ocean,” she says, staring up at me. “I never noticed before.”

“So they tell me,” I say, fingers pressed against the base of her spine. “Bea,” I say, eyes tracing across her face, “did we know each other?”

“No,” she says, pausing and smiling. “I don’t think you ever noticed me.”

“I’m sure I did. How could I not?”

“I’m younger than you. You were this older and mysterious and ...” Her cheeks warm.

I go to press her, needing to know more, wanting to assure her she’s familiar to me – but then someone falls into us and we’re forced to break apart or land on the floor.

“Oh my goodness,” the someone gasps, leaning against me as if I just saved her.

Melody Grande.

She’s a single omega, queen bee of omega society and no is not a word she seems to understand. She’s been trying to dig her claws into my pack for as long as I can remember.

The older man she was dancing with reaches for her arm. “Are you okay there, darling?” he says.

I know him from City Hall. His pack is involved in politics. They’ve been courting Melody for months but so far she’s refused to make things permanent. She brushes him away.

“Just fine. Connor York here saved me.” She looks up at me, addressing only me as if her dance partner and Bea do not exist. “I got a little dizzy there.”

Inwardly, I groan.

“Too much champagne probably,” I say politely, although I hear the annoyance in my tone.

“Maybe you could help me fetch some water and see me to a seat, Connor.”

“I’m sure Max would be more than happy to help you, Melody,” I say, referring to her dance partner whose frown is so deep you could float a boat in it.

“Oh,” Melody beams at her partner, “Max has been dying to meet Bess all evening.” She points to my dance partner. “Why don’t we let the two of them get better acquainted and have a dance?”

“It’s Bea,” the omega corrects.

“Of course, sweetie,” she says, like Bea may be confused about her own name. She leans into me, her grip tight on my bicep. “I know she’s keen to meet all the new alphas in the city. She was telling us all about it the other day.” Melody giggles. I frown. Melody is full of bullshit, she can’t help stirring, but is this true? “I suppose there aren’t many alphas back in ... now which little town did you say you were from, Bea? Some adorable little place, I’m sure.” She smiles at her patronizingly.

Bea glances up at me, her cheeks flushing darker, her amber eyes almost golden under the ballroom lights and full of something I can’t read. “Naw Creek,” she says, “I’m from Naw Creek.”

My mouth falls open in surprise. “Naw Creek?” I repeat, “You’re from Naw Creek?”

She nods.

Naw Creek. I was there for six months. I was fifteen. It was right before I had presented. And there had been this girl ...

Melody’s gaze flicks between us and she laughs, gripping my arm in her hands.

“It sounds so quaint. Have you actually heard of it, Connor?”

I open my mouth to answer, but then Melody swoons, collapsing towards the ground. Automatically, I catch her in

my arms.

“Oh,” she says, fluttering her eyelashes, “I feel all faint again. Max, would you fetch me some water?”

“Of course,” he says, almost sprinting away.

“And Connor could you help me to a seat?”

I peer at Bea anxiously, but she shrugs her shoulders and smiles.

“I think you’d better help her.”

Melody squeezes my arm and nudges me towards the seats.

“I feel so dizzy.”

All eyes are on us and I can’t leave her like this, faint and weak.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere,” I tell Bea and march Melody towards the rows of chairs.

“I hoped I’d see you tonight, Alpha,” Melody murmurs to me. “It’s been such a long time since we’ve seen each other.”

“A very long time,” I say. We helped her through a heat years back but we’ve avoided this girl ever since. Not that she’s taken the hint. Like I said, no isn’t a word she comprehends.

She lowers herself down into the seat, but doesn’t let go of my wrist.

“Gosh,” she says, “I don’t know what happened.” Her fingernails pinch my skin and she leans forward, giving me an eyeful of her cleavage.

“Take a rest. I’m sure you’ll feel better when Max arrives with your water.” I attempt to shake off her grip.

“Perhaps it was that scent.” She pulls a face. “It’s so sickly. Bess needs to sort out her medication. She can’t be walking around getting up everyone’s noses like that, especially when she smells so bad.”

Melody smells like roses. I've heard others describe it as the most sophisticated of aromas. I've never been able to stand it. I remember how it irritated my nose all the way through her heat, how her taste was too floral for my liking.

I like tart. I like burned. I like caramel.

“Actually,” I say, “I like her scent. I like her scent a lot.”

Melody laughs, the sound one she's perfected, all high-pitched and cute. “You can't be serious, Connor? You can't be serious about her?”

I scowl at her. “I'm deadly serious about her.”

Her smile turns cold. “That's not what I've heard.”

I snap her hand from my arm and grip her elbow, pulling her towards me. “What do you mean by that, Melody?”

The smile remains on her perfectly made-up lips. “Word has it she's just a game, a game between your pack and Pack Boston. Everyone's saying that once the first pack's rutted and knotted her, the game will be over and she'll be cast aside like the piece of trash she is.”

I always knew this woman was a bitch. Underneath all the feigned sweetness and practiced manners, her heart always seemed cold. I never knew she was so vindictive and bitter though.

“Not true, Melody.” I drop her arm, letting her fall back in her chair. “But you know what is? This. You're running out of time. Your looks are fading and people are beginning to see the real you. Better find your pack soon, better mate them quick, or you're going to end up all alone.”

She opens her mouth to snap back at me, but I turn around and stroll back onto the dance floor.

I scan through the people, searching for Bea.

She's gone.

B^{ea}

GOD, all the times I dreamed of slow dancing with Connor Doyle. All the times I lay in my bed dreaming of just that; imagining him crossing the room to ask me; imagining him taking my hand in his; imagining him spinning me around to face him; curling his arm around my waist and pulling me close.

A silly school-girl crush and yet moments ago I was living out that fantasy.

My life has been a whirlwind, a crazy dream since the day of my wedding, since I rocked up in the city. But everything I've been through, all the topsy-turvy discoveries, have been nothing, nothing at all, to that dance. Because that had to be a dream, right?

I didn't really dance with Connor Doyle. He didn't really hold me.

It wasn't real.

And yet his scent lingers on my skin and in my hair. It is the same as it was back then. All smoky wood. I could smell it all those years ago. Clear as day and mouth-watering to my senses. It should have been a clue I guess. I should have known.

Would things have ended up differently if Connor Doyle had noticed me like I'd noticed him?

The quiet, beautiful boy who sat on his own in the cafeteria, reading his books, occasionally glancing around with those dazzlingly dark blue eyes of his.

Could things be different now?

I don't think so, because he's gone, stolen away by a more beautiful omega.

And I'm alone.

Is that always how it's destined to go down?

I sigh and tap my hands against my thighs.

Now what?

It felt strange arriving at the dinner dance as a guest and not as a waitress. It feels even stranger wearing a dress which costs more money than I can wrap my head around.

Not that I'm complaining. It feels divine against my skin and the alphas accompanying me tonight haven't been able to keep those mesmerizing eyes of theirs off me. In fact, everyone has been looking and staring my way. But with Axel's arm around my waist, guiding me through the ballroom, I hadn't felt awkward or afraid.

I felt like a princess. I felt like a goddess. I felt exactly how I expected to feel on my wedding day – before everything went to shit.

Now, I feel alone and awkward.

I glance around seeing if I can find Nate or Axel. Even Ellie. I catch several alphas' eyes plus the hard stares of omegas. And then I catch a pair I know.

Angel.

He comes striding toward me, pushing people to the side and then he's towering in front of me.

“Bea,” he says, those silver eyes swimming all over my body.

“Hi,” I say, my own eyes doing the same to him. He’s dressed in a gray fitted suit that complements the color of his eyes and emphasizes his well-built stature.

“What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean?” I ask. I know I’m not rich like most of the other guests but I’m sure that doesn’t preclude me being here.

“You came to an event like this unaccompanied? You know, we’ve talked about this.” We have. True to their word, a member of the Boston pack has met me after work each evening to accompany me on my run. I’ve tried to persuade them there is no need, but all three have been insistent, reminding me of the dangers that exist for lone omegas like me.

“I’m not unaccompanied. I came with Pack York.”

His face, all soft and full of concern one second before, darkens with storm clouds. “You came with Pack York,” he snaps, so loudly the people around us stop dancing and several more peer our way with interest. He huffs through his nostrils and grabs my wrist, dragging me off the dance floor and to the edge of the ballroom where we can speak in private. “You came with Pack York,” he repeats. “What happened to not dating?” The darkness fades and real hurt seems to shine in his eyes. He takes my hands in his, brushing his thumb pads across my knuckles with such tenderness I feel my knees buckle. “I thought we had something going here, Bea. I thought we were getting to know you better and you us.”

“It’s not a date. It’s business.”

“What?” His thumbs pause.

“I’m ...” I haven’t confessed this next piece of information to Angel and his pack yet. Mostly because I thought it would go down like a lead balloon. My opinion on that hasn’t changed one bit. But I can’t let him believe I’ve broken my word on the no-dating thing, especially when he looks so darn hurt. “I’m working for Pack York’s company as an admin

assistant. It's not like the most complicated job in the world but I'm making my own money and that is important to me."

"I know," he says.

"You know! How do you know?" I sigh. "Silver."

"Silver," he confirms. "But I don't see—"

"They needed a date to this event for business reasons and I agreed to help."

Angel snorts. "Business reasons my ass."

"No really, it's true."

"So why exactly did they need you to come?"

"Because of the stupid no-pack-without-an-omega rule."

"What rule?"

"The rule that said packs weren't allowed to this event without an omega." I tilt my head, a pang of jealousy flashing in my stomach out of nowhere. "Who did you bring?"

"No one," he says firmly. "Because that 'rule' is bullshit."

"I know," I shake my head with feeling. "It's prejudice and—"

"No, it's bullshit as in non-existent. Not real. Fake."

"Wh-what?"

"Bea," he sighs, "I'm guessing they made up that shit to get you to come to this party with them. And, shit," he keeps shaking his head as if trying to dislodge a thought from his mind, "I can't blame them. Do you know how incredible you look?"

"You don't look so bad yourself," I mumble, then frown, remembering what he's just told me. "Those sneaky bastards." Then I can't help but giggle. How stupid was I for falling for that?

"I told you they were." He smiles, his face lighting up and my knees do that thing again, my heart thumping in my chest. It's so difficult to be this close to these men and not succumb to their charms, to the way they make my body feel. To the

way they make my heart feel – the crazed thing beating like it's trying to break free. “Shit, I wish I'd come up with that play, then you'd be here with me.” He tugs me close and rests his fingertips on my hips. “How about you switch packs and become our date? Let me drive you home.”

“I couldn't–” I begin, but before I finish what I'm saying, he's tugging me behind the curtain that runs around the ballroom and up against the wall.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I ask.

“Finding us some privacy. Nearly all the alphas in that ballroom are looking at you like they want to eat every last piece of you up.”

I swallow. “You're teasing me.”

“I'm not.” His tongue sweeps along his bottom lip. “You're the one teasing me in this dress. Coming to this dance with another pack. Infiltrating my dreams.”

“Infiltrating your dreams?” I giggle.

“I'm serious,” he says with a smile. “I've been waking up hard and fucking frustrated every damn morning.”

I chew on my lips. I know the feeling. I've had a few of those dreams myself.

He examines my face, perhaps reading my thoughts. “Want to know what we've been doing in my dreams together?”

“Knitting? Crosswords?”

He throws back his head and laughs, his chest rumbling in a way that makes me want to rest my hands there.

“Yeah, that's right, knitting and crosswords.” His eyes flick down my body. “Only, neither of us are wearing any clothes.”

“Sounds dangerous,” I say, his hands dancing lower from my waist to my hips. “Knitting needles can be pretty sharp.”

“I have to confess, in my dreams, we don't get much knitting completed. You're pretty damn distracting.” He blows

out air through his teeth. “You’re pretty damn distracting in real life too.”

“Angel,” I say, and he drags his gaze back to mine. When our eyes connect, it’s like electricity spits into life, my body jolting as I sink into those eyes, inky black dissolving into silvery gray.

“Bea,” he groans, “let me take you home.” He leans down to whisper to me, his beard tickling the shell of my ear, his fingertips drawing circles on my skin. “Let me take you home, sweetheart, and help you out of this dress.”

“You don’t like this dress?” I whisper, my words all a tangle in my head as his mouth moves from my ear to press against my throat, to the point where my pulse jumps.

“I like this dress more than you could ever imagine. I’d like it even better on my bedroom floor.”

He licks a sudden wet strip up the column of my throat, and my eyes roll around in their sockets and my belly swoops low.

“Oh lord,” I murmur.

“You like that, little one?” he growls, nibbling on the lobe of my ear, nipping it between his strong teeth and making me moan.

“Y-y-yes,” I say, eyes fluttering shut as I dissolve into the sensations he’s conjuring from my body.

A body that lay dormant and subdued for all this time. A body now responding to the caress of his lips and the play of his fingers.

I bet I’m not unique. I bet he seduces all his women this way. I bet I’m going to be used all over again. Only this time the men are better at their con, better at fooling me.

Because, oh good god, when he kisses my neck like that I could believe he does want me. Truly and honestly.

He growls some more and tugs me even closer so I can feel him hot and hard against my belly.

“Going to kiss you now, little one.”

“Okay,” I murmur, parting my lips for him.

He chuckles and his hands trail down to squeeze my ass. My lips part further on an extended ‘oh’ and he captures the sound with his mouth.

My first kiss with Karl all those years ago was sloppy and unpleasant and not very satisfactory. We got better with practice and then gradually he stopped kissing me. I never really missed it. Kissing had never been all that good to begin with.

Now, I see what I was truly missing. Kissing this man – kissing those other alphas too – is like being caught up in a tornado. My head spins. My heart races. My thoughts knock around in my head. I don’t know which way is up and which way is down. Who I am or what I’m doing.

All I know is that I never want him to stop kissing me, never want him to stop pressing me against his hard cock, never want him to stop gripping my backside.

It’s pretty shocking if I were to think about it. But I’m far too busy feeling. Feeling everything as my blood thrums and my body sings.

One of his hands comes to cradle the back of my neck and somehow he kisses me even deeper, his lips working against mine, his tongue exploring my mouth, our breaths tangled together.

He presses me harder against his cock, bending his knees so he’s right against my core. I can tell he is large, large and long. What would that be like? What would it feel like to have him inside me, thrusting and rutting me as hard as he is kissing me now? How would it feel to have his cock knotted deep inside me?

These thoughts combined with the friction he’s giving me at the apex of my legs has a pulse pounding there.

“Hmmm,” I moan as if I’m eating the most delicious dessert on the planet.

He pulls back, hand still cradling my head. “All right, sweetheart?” He looks down at me. I must be a mess. My lips swollen from his kisses, my cheeks flushed, my hair tumbling loose from the pin securing it to my head. However, whatever he sees, he must like. I watch as the swirling mist of his irises are swallowed up by the midnight black of his pupils.

He purrs in satisfaction, a noise that has my body melting and slick rushing into my panties. His nose twitches. He chuckles. “I guess that’s a yes. Can I take you home now?”

And all of a sudden it’s too much – the way my body responds without my permission, the way it responds ten times faster and harder than it ever used to, the way I want him so very badly.

I’m out of control.

I’m not even on a date with this man.

“N-n-n-no. I ... I can’t.”

“Can’t?” He dips his head so our eyes are level, sinking me even deeper into those swirls of mist.

I rest my hand on his arm, tugging at it gently. “I can’t just leave Axel and the others.” The flicker of passion in his eyes leaves so quickly it’s as if I’ve doused it with water. I squeeze his arm, not wanting to hurt him, if a man like Angel can even be hurt. “I can’t just walk out on my dates.”

“Even though they tricked you into it?”

“Even if they tricked me into it.” He slides his hand from my neck, and immediately I miss the warm feel of it there. “Besides, this is ... this is moving too fast for me.”

“Really?” he growls, “because it’s moving at just the right speed for me.”

I wish he’d stop growling and purring and making all those crazy animalistic noises that dive straight to my core and have everything buzzing.

I open my mouth to argue and once again, he stops my mouth with his own. This time kissing me slowly, teasing me

with his lips and his teeth, dragging my bottom lip between the rows of his teeth.

“Angel,” I plead, begging for mercy.

“Yes, Omega?”

“Please, give me more time.”

“I will,” I sigh with relief against his lips, “if you tell me why. Why do you need it, little one?”

I open my eyes. “I told you everything is new and different since I presented as –”

“No, that’s not it. That’s not the reason. Why do you need time? Why are you resisting this?”

“My heart,” I confess. “It’s slowly mending. I can’t risk it being shattered again so soon after.”

“What happened to your heart?” he whispers, pressing his hand against my chest, at the point where my heart pounds against my ribs.

“He broke it,” I confess, hoping he won’t ask me to tell him more.

He seems to sense my reluctance, searching my eyes then kissing me gently on my forehead. “Okay, sweetheart, you need more time. I’ll give it to you.”

We stand there catching our breaths, his lips still pressed to my forehead and my racing heart calming.

Finally, he says, “It’s very hard not to kiss you again, sweetheart, so I think it best we get back to the party.”

I nod and he peeks his head around the corner.

“Coast is clear. You first.”

I step back out into the ballroom, my emotions all a tumble. I miss the feel of his arms already. I want more of those kisses. But I also feel relief. Relief that I have more time to sort through my emotions. Because it’s not only my body that’s falling for these men, my heart is too, and eventually I’m going to have to choose between them.

Axel

“WHERE’S BEA?” I ask Connor as he strolls towards me. The last time I saw her, Connor was leading her onto the dancefloor. Now, he’s returning alone.

“I was hoping she was with you,” he says, eyes scanning the room.

Nate thumps our packmate on the shoulder. “You let her out of your sight. In that dress. Are you insane, man?”

“It was complicated,” Connor says, squaring up to Nate. I don’t need them squabbling right now. Not when our omega is missing in a room full of alphas, looking and smelling like sex on legs. Fuck, whose bright idea was it to bring her here in the first place and advertise to every other alpha in town what a fucking catch she is? Yeah, Nate’s.

“Quit it,” I snap at Nate. “What do you mean?” I say to Connor.

“Melody,” Connor explains. We all sigh. That explains it. “Only just managed to shake her off.”

Nate mutters something under his breath but I ignore him.

“We’d better find Bea, before some creep does,” I say. “Let’s split up. Connor bathrooms, Nate hallways, and I’ll search the ballroom.”

We set off in opposite directions, me sweeping the ballroom methodically, circulating clockwise and then through the middle, checking the dance floor, the bar and all the tables. No sign of her anywhere.

Nausea sloshes in my stomach and visions of some shithead dragging her away flashes in my mind.

If anyone lays a finger on her, they are going to wish they were never born. I'll fucking pluck their eyes from their sockets simply for looking at her.

The others haven't returned so with nothing better to do, I search the ballroom again, ignoring all the people who try to stop me to talk, ignoring all the flirty eyes of the numerous omegas. She's still not here. Gone. Vanished.

And then all of a sudden, as if she's been conjured out of thin air, she is. Standing near a table, her eyes searching the room.

I sprint her way, knocking against people as I do, not caring about the drinks that get spilled or the curse words that get yelled.

"Bea." I skid to a halt by her side, resting my hands on her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"Erm, yes," she says, her cheeks all flustered, her pupils blown wide, her scent ... her scent wet.

"What happened? I couldn't find you anywhere."

"Oh, nothing, I just needed some air, so I stepped outside."

"I've told you numerous times, that it isn't—"

"Safe, yes, I know, I know." She musters up a smile, then it falters on her lips. "You brought me here under false pretenses."

"Huh?" I mutter. Sometimes being with this woman results in whiplash the way she darts from one topic of conversation to the next. She's worse than Nate.

"There's no French deal is there? No Martins, either."

“I ... Bea ... I ...” I stroke my hands down her arms and decide I’m better off confessing to the truth. “No, there isn’t.”

Creases line her forehead. “You lied.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to spend time with you and I knew you wouldn’t agree.” Damn, that came out sounding really bad.

“So you tricked me?”

“Not tricked. I was liberal with the truth.”

The corners of her mouth turn down. “I don’t like liars. I was lied to before. By the people I loved and ...” She swallows hard and looks away.

I rest my forefinger under her chin and guide her face back towards mine.

“You’re right and I’m sorry. I fucked up. I ignored what you asked of me and lied to get what I wanted. My only defense is that I like you – god, Bea you must know that by now – and I wanted to spend more time with you.” I hold her gaze, give her my most contrite and genuine look. “I fucked up. Can you forgive me?”

She blinks, five times in a row. “You’re admitting it? Admitting that you messed up?”

“Yes, that’s what grown ups do when they make mistakes and hurt the people they care about. It doesn’t mean you have to accept my apology.”

“He never apologized. Ever,” she murmurs.

“Who didn’t, baby?” I ask, my voice hard.

She shakes her head, not wanting to give me that piece of information. But it’s that ex-boyfriend. Nate’s been dying to visit the man. I’m starting to think we all should.

I don’t like the way this beautiful woman questions herself. I don’t like the way she’s scared to open her heart to us. I’m certain it’s all down to the dickhead ex-boyfriend.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, stroking my thumb along her chin. God, she’s so soft. I want to touch every part of her. One part in particular. I bet it’s infinitely soft. Soft and warm. Wet and tight.

“I forgive you,” she says, leaning into my touch without realizing what she is doing.

“Really?” The corner of my mouth twitches. “That easily? You don’t want to make me work for that apology?”

“How?” she asks.

“Up to you, sweetheart. You want me to kiss your feet?” We both glance down at the killer pair of heels she’s wearing. I lean in to whisper right in her ear. “Or I can kiss anywhere else you’d like? Although, trust me, that wouldn’t be a punishment for me. It would be a treat.”

She laughs. “Even my ass?”

“Especially your ass,” I growl.

“Oh lord,” she mutters.

For a flicker of a moment, it looks as if she might finally cave and let me sweep her up into my arms and carry her to the nearest horizontal surface. But as quickly as that weakness seems to enter her eyes, it sinks away. She shakes her head, coming out of her trance.

“I think your punishment should be to take me home.”

“Gladly,” I say.

“No,” she says firmly, her hand resting on my pec, sending my heart bouncing in my chest as if it wants to leap straight out of my ribcage and into her palm. “Home, home. To my place, where I intend to take a long bath and watch a movie.”

“You don’t want to stay at the party?” Most omegas I’ve been with love parties. They love the dressing up, the admiration and the attention.

She screws up her nose adorably and shakes her head a second time. “It’s not really my thing. I’m more of a beer at the bar kind of girl.”

“Are you sure it’s that and not that you feel ...” I search for the word, not wanting to blow my luck by upsetting her twice in one evening, “intimidated? I know these people can be assholes. But you belong here, Bea, just as much as the next person. You’re smart and—”

“How do you know I’m smart?” she asks, with a look of cynicism.

“Because I’ve talked to you.” She lifts an eyebrow not buying that answer. “And also Mrs. Finch said so, said you tidied up some numbers for her that have been bugging her for weeks.”

“She said that?”

“Yes. You sound surprised. You want to go to college, right?”

“Eventually, yes.”

“Then you’re no airhead, Bea.”

She grins. “You’re right, I’m not. Although I still can’t believe I fell for this stupid con to get me here.”

“That wasn’t because you were dumb. It’s because you have a kind heart.” I want her to stay. I want to wine and dine her this evening and slow dance with her and kiss her.

But she’s asked me to take her home and I’m going to respect that wish. Especially after fucking up. “Let’s take you home then. If you’re sure it’s what you want.”

“It is.”

Outside, the night has turned cool and I shrug off my jacket and hang it around her shoulders. She snuggles into the fabric taking little gulps of my scent as we wait for the concierge to grab the car. The others will be pissed I left. But the others can go to hell. I’m not giving up this moment with her. Not when she’s almost drunk on my scent.

In the car, I let her flick through the music stations until she finds something she likes and nestles into her seat.

I like her in my car. I like her close by. I like talking to her.

I decide it's time to be honest and tell her.

"Bea," I say.

"Uh huh," she says, turning her head towards me.

"You know I'm crazy about you, right? Really damn crazy."

"Axel," she says, "we hardly know each other."

"You said that already."

"It's true!"

"So get to know me better. What do you want to know? Ask me anything."

She taps her fingers against her lips. "That is difficult, there's so much I want to ask you."

I smile to myself. Maybe she's not as disinterested as she claims to be. "Ask away. There are no restrictions. Ask me as many questions as you want."

"How did you become a pack? You, Nate and Connor."

"We met in high school. We've been friends for as long as I can remember. Nate, he was this crazy kid whose clothes didn't fit and who came to school without any lunch most days. He used to make me laugh with the stupid things he'd say. We probably looked freaking strange hanging out together." I chuckle. "I was this big football kid. He was this scrawny thing."

"He's not scrawny anymore," she says.

"No, he ended up pretty much living at my place. My mom was on a mission to fatten him up and then he just started to grow up and out."

"And Connor?"

"He was this new kid. Joined our school late. Quiet. Spent all his time reading. But we got talking once. It was raining and I was walking home. He stopped and offered me a lift. We realized we liked the same music, same books. None of my football friends read books. We became friends after that."

“You’re a good man, Axel York,” she says, and I flick my gaze from the road to look at her.

I don’t know about that. Maybe I was back then, when I was a kid. Maybe I still am in some respects – my packmates, I’d do anything for them. But the rest of it. The deals? Our business? Her?

“There’s no such thing as good and bad men, Bea. It’s always more complicated than that.”

“Maybe,” she says. “So, football, huh?”

“Yep, football.”

“What position?”

I cringe. “Quarterback.”

“Oh my god,” she says, sitting up straight in her seat. “You were the school stud.”

I don’t answer that. “I was on track to play professionally.”

“Oh.” She sinks back into her seat, face swimming with compassion. “What happened?”

“Injured ... in an accident.” My fingers tighten on the steering wheel, my knuckles turning white.

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.” I force my shoulders to relax. “And life didn’t turn out half bad. Hey, if I’d gone down that route, maybe I’d have been addicted to steroids by now and a washed-out has-been.”

“You? No,” she says seriously. “But I think you have a pretty good life. You seem to care about each other, the three of you.”

“We do. They’re my brothers,” the words sticks in my throat, “I love them.”

“And now you’re the studs of the city. All three of you.”

“I’m not a stud,” I mutter.

She giggles, pinching my bicep. “You know you are.”

I reach over and tickle her back. “I am not.”

She wiggles against my touch, giggling even harder, then swipes for me, reaching over to launch her own attack.

“Woah, now,” I yelp, swinging us off the road and into a side alley. I bring the car to a stop. Flicking off my belt to reach right round and tickle her belly.

She screams, bringing her knees up to her chest and trying to bat away my hands.

“Surrender?” I ask.

“Okay,” she laughs, “okay, I surrender.”

I flop back on my seat and grin at her. She grins right back, then before I know it, she flicks off her own buckle and sets in for another attack. Her fingers stroke against my ribs and my belly, heading for my armpits.

“You’re in for it now, Omega,” I chuckle, reaching over to grab her by the hips and lifting her straight onto my lap.

We’re nose to nose, the skirt of her dress pulled high, a flash of her thigh visible. I pin her arms to her sides.

“Surrender now?” I ask. She looks me in the eye and shrugs. “Don’t make me tickle you again, Omega.”

Her eyes twinkle with mischief and holy fuck if that doesn’t have my half-hard cock stiffening like steel. She feels it beneath her and, her eyes glinting even more, she bites her lip and rubs against me.

I groan, long and hard.

“Omega,” I warn.

“If you’re going to play dirty, then so am I,” she says.

“Two can play dirty.”

She rocks her hips, moving her core along my shaft, a core that smells obscenely and temptingly wet.

“I don’t think so, Alpha. I think you are the one who’ll have to surrender here.”

“I’m not surrendering, little one. Not if it means you’ll keep rubbing that pussy of yours against my dick.”

Her cheeks flush and I remember how much my dirty words turned her on in the restaurant. Not that she’d ever admit to it, but she’s an omega. I can read her body like a book.

Also to my delight she doesn’t stop. Maybe I’m finally getting somewhere. Or maybe all that pent-up omega frustration and desire is boiling over. My cock is making her feel good; I can tell by her scent and the little murmurs of pleasure tumbling from her lips.

I lean in closer and hover my lips above her soft skin. Her soft skin that smells like—

My nose twitches.

Angel fucking Boston!

I snap upright.

“Angel,” I growl.

“Huh?” she says, her eyes all dazed and swimming with lust.

“You have Angel Boston’s scent all over your skin.”

“He kissed me,” she says simply.

I growl again. “And did you kiss him back?”

“Yes.” She tilts her head to one side, considering me.

“I thought you weren’t doing that right now.”

“What? You mean dating?”

I shrink back against my seat and to my utter surprise, she kisses me, leaning forward to close the space between us and pressing her mouth to mine.

Her lips are soft and wet and she tastes of champagne and minty toothpaste.

I capture her lips and kiss her back, softly, reverently.

She leans away, meeting my eyes; hers that strange amber color, sometimes nut brown, sometimes golden.

“You can kiss me too, Alpha,” she whispers.

“Oh, I’m going to, little one. I’m going to kiss you so damn hard, I wipe any trace of Angel fucking Boston from your memory.”

She frowns but then my hands are on her waist, encouraging her to move over my cock again and I’m kissing her hard, showing her exactly how a woman like her ought to be kissed. Showing her how it can be soft and gentle, barely touching her, teasing her one moment, then the next, sinking my tongue deep in her mouth, caressing her lips with mine, nipping and biting at her mouth.

Her arms wrap around my neck and her fingers tangle in my hair at the back of my neck, stroking, tickling, scratching against my scalp. I love that, love her little hands on me.

Those delicious noises issue from her mouth again and I can smell her getting wetter and wetter for me. I move her faster along me, feeling how she’s soaking through her panties and my suit pants, warming my cock.

Fuck, I want to sink into her so badly, fuck her until she’s screaming my name and my name only. But we agreed we’d take this slow. She’s skittish and we’re in this for the long game.

I break our kiss and nuzzle her ear.

“That feel good, sunshine? You like that?”

She’s too lost in the feeling to respond with any sense. Instead, long drawn out vowels rush from her lips, and then she’s tipping her head back, her beautiful neck elongated in the interior light of the car. Her legs shake across my lap. And then she comes.

“Ohhhh,” she cries, “ohhhhh,” as her body jerks and jolts and more of that deliciously sweet-smelling slick comes gushing from her cunt.

I can't help myself, I reach between us, dipping my finger inside her panties, swimming it through her juices and bringing it up to my mouth and sucking.

Flavor explodes like fireworks across my tongue and my eyes roll right back in their sockets.

Because, Christ Almighty, she tastes like the sweetest caramel I've ever tasted.

I groan as I lick every molecule of her slick from my digits and when I open my eyes she's all flushed, breathless and staring right at me.

I stroke my hands down her arms and purr for her.

"Are you okay, sunshine? Was that okay?"

She manages a lazy smile for me, one full of satisfaction that has alpha pride swelling in my chest.

"More than okay, actually."

I kiss her nose.

"I'd better get you home then, to that bath and to that movie."

Her fingers reach down to my fly. "But shouldn't I return the favor?"

I take her wrists in my hands. "Sunshine, that's not how it works. It's not a *quid pro quo* arrangement here."

"But aren't—"

"I liked getting you off," I growl. "I liked watching you come."

"And that's enough for you?" she asks, clearly surprised.

I don't tell her I'll be tucking away that memory in my mind. Yeah, I'll be reliving that over and over again. She looks so fucking fine when she falls apart. Especially falling apart as she sits on my cock like it's a fucking throne.

I lift her up and return her to her own seat.

"Maybe I want to touch you," she says with a pout, "make you come."

“And maybe you’ve told me enough times how messed up these omega hormones are making you feel. That you need time and space to work things out.”

“I’m regretting those words.”

“Hey baby, you can’t have your way every time.”

Although, I’m lying. Once she’s ours, she can have it her way every time she fucking wants.

B^{ea}

THE DRIVE back after our little encounter in the back alley should be awkward and tense. I should be a bundle of messed up emotions.

But I'm not. I feel more content than I have done in weeks. Maybe it's the recent orgasm still buzzing in my blood, calming that frantic need that's been driving me crazy. Maybe it's the presence of the big, strong, and darn right sexy alpha sitting next to me in the car. His scent tastes satisfying and every now and then he purrs. The noise is like a sedative, relaxing every one of my muscles and making me sleepy. I wrap his jacket around my shoulders and sink into the material, into his scent and into the warmth, and before I know it I'm asleep.

"Too much excitement for one day," a voice whispers later and when I open my eyes, Axel is scooping me up into his arms and carrying me to the door of my apartment.

"I can walk," I say half-heartedly, resting my head upon his shoulders and sucking in his scent. I love doing that, love the way it makes my blood sing.

"My lady, you couldn't possibly," Axel says, as I type in the entrance code and he shoulders open the door and carries me up the staircase.

At the top he halts, and I open my eyes, ready to dig out my key from my purse. But the door to our apartment is hanging open.

Axel's body stiffens and a cold shudder scoots down my body. Immediately, I sense something is wrong. The smells aren't right. Not the familiar aromas of Courtney's apartment. Strange scents. One of them alpha.

Axel lowers me gently to my feet.

"Wait here, sweetheart," he whispers.

I grab his arm. "They might still be in there. There might be more than one."

Axel's face becomes murderous. Far more lethal than it did in the car when he'd learned Angel had kissed me. "That isn't a problem," he tells me and shaking off my grip, he disappears inside the apartment.

I wait on the threshold, bouncing on my toes, unsure what to do. I peer behind me down the dark staircase.

Where's Courtney? She was going out tonight. Was she in when this happened? Is she okay?

"Bea!" Axel calls, opening the door wide. "There's no one here. It's safe to come in."

The place is a mess. The cupboards have been ransacked, the contents spilled all over the floor and the countertops.

"Looks like a burglary," Axel says, coming to wrap his arm around my shoulder. "I'm sorry Bea."

"I need to call Courtney, check if she's okay. And the cops, I guess too."

"I'll handle the cops. You call your cousin."

I dial her and explain what's happened, relieved to hear her voice and know she's safe. She's out with her work colleagues but I can hear her leaving immediately, exiting the noisy bar and walking out onto the traffic-filled street. I tell her I'll see her at home soon and then hang up, gazing around the apartment in despair.

Axel hangs up a moment later.

“I don’t know where to even start clearing up this mess.”

“What have they taken?” Axel asks me.

I peer around again. “I ... I don’t know.” The TV is still hanging on the wall and Courtney’s laptop stands charging on the table where she left it. “Maybe my jewelry.” I walk through into my bedroom and gasp. It’s far worse in here than out in the kitchen-diner. All my belongings are scattered across the floor and the bed. The sheets have been stripped, the mattress overturned, my makeup and cosmetics thrown about.

I spot my small jewelry box straight away, though. Under a pile of my underwear. I pick it up and flip open the lid. It’s all still there. My necklaces and bracelets, rings and earrings.

I carry it back out to the living area and show it to Axel.

“Nothing’s gone I don’t understand it. I mean, maybe they took something from Courtney’s room but—”

“I don’t think they came to steal your possessions, Bea.”

“Then what were they doing?” I ask, surveying our ruined apartment. “Just trashing our home for fun. Is that how people get their kicks in the city?”

“I think they were here to steal you.”

I stare at Axel open-mouthed. He can’t be serious. I know it’s been a running theme ever since I arrived here and learned I was an omega. I know everyone is concerned about my safety. But to break into my apartment to – what? – abduct me?

I laugh. “That would be insane.” He goes to argue, but I cut him off. “Besides, Silver Boston has two of his men watching my apartment.”

“Does he now?” Axel says in a low voice. “Fine job they’re doing.”

I walk towards the sink.

“What are you doing?” Axel asks me as I duck down to pull out a dustpan and brush and cleaning products from the

cupboards.

“Clearing up this mess.”

“Don’t,” he says. “I’ll have someone come round and do it for you.”

I stand up, a dishcloth in one hand, the brush in the other, and, placing both hands on my hips, glare at him.

“I don’t need someone to clean for me.”

He sweeps his hand around the apartment. “It’s more than a one-man job, Bea.”

“Exactly.” I toss the dishcloth towards him and he snatches it from the air.

“Omega,” he says, prowling towards me.

“What?” I say, raising an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me. Alphas don’t clean.” I roll my eyes hard.

“No,” he says, taking the brush from my hand and placing it on the counter. “We clean.” I snort. “But you can’t clean yet. Not until the cops have been and looked for evidence.”

“Oh,” I say. “Oh yeah.” I lean back against the counter and peer down at my watch. “When will they be here?”

“Some time tomorrow afternoon.”

“What?!” I gasp. “They’re not coming now?”

“Bea, this is probably one of a dozen breaks-in across the city just tonight. Then there’s all the other things they need to respond to and investigate. It’s Friday night. They’ll be working their asses off.”

“Right.” I hadn’t thought of that. The most that would happen in Naw Creek on a Friday night is a fight at Joe’s Bar and those happened once a year on Mick Foot’s birthday.

I chew on my lip. I’m out of place once again. A tiny fish swimming in a huge, unfamiliar ocean. Out of place in my glitzy dress, standing in the middle of a trashed kitchen.

Cinderella has left the ball and landed slap bang in reality.

“Where’s Courtney?” he asks me.

“On her way home.”

“Right, good. I’m taking you both back to my place. You can’t stay here tonight. It isn’t safe.”

“And my bed is trashed,” I agree. “But it’s fine. We’ll go stay in a motel for the night until we can get this place cleared up.”

“There aren’t any motels in the city, Bea.”

“Hotel, then.”

“Not safe. You’re coming to stay at mine.”

“That really isn’t necessary.”

He stalks closer, bending low to meet my eye. “Omega,” he says in that tone which means I won’t win this argument. “It’s very necessary. Do you think I’m going to sleep one wink if I’m worrying about you? I need to know you are safe.”

“You really think they were after me?”

“Bea, you live in a crappy apartment on the wrong side of town. You have no family, no alpha to protect you. You’re easy prey.”

“Who ... who do you think it is? Who do you think broke in?”

He sniffs the air, eyes brushing from side to side as he inhales deeply. Finally, he says, “I don’t recognize the scent. It isn’t anyone I know. And that makes me more concerned.”

“Why?”

“Because I know most of the scumbags in this city, Bea – the alpha ones anyway. This means there is one I don’t know out there and that makes them harder to deal with.”

“Axel,” I say, taking his hand in mine and drawing his attention back to me. I should probably be feeling shaken up and petrified right now. But again the presence of this alpha changes everything. “Tell me the truth, is this another game? Another play?”

His brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“It isn’t ...” I gaze down at a packet of pasta, its contents trailing across the floor, “a trick to get me to stay at your house? Like the stupid French deal.”

“Bea,” he says earnestly, “no. You need to start taking this threat seriously.”

“I am!” I notice the way some of the pasta shells have been crushed under foot. “But coming to this city was a chance to break free, to start over. No more baggage, no more restrictions. I can’t go back to living that way.”

He pinches my chin. “One day, Bea. You’re going to tell me all about what that bastard did. But right now, you’re going to pack a bag for you and Courtney.”



UNLIKE ME, Courtney is over the moon at the prospect of staying at the York Penthouse overnight. Most likely because, unlike me, she knows it’s better than any five-star hotel the city has to offer; certainly more luxurious than any hotel the two of us could afford.

The place is gigantic, perched right at the top of the tower they own with views out over the harbor and the city and more rooms than most hotels.

We’re greeted by Nate and Connor who crowd round me, cooing and fussing like I was actually abducted. Courtney watches the show with a huge knowing grin and the only way I eventually shake them off is to request a guided tour.

Nate immediately leaps at the chance and offering an elbow to me and one to Courtney, leads us into the apartment. It’s expensively decorated with dark wood and brass accents. A huge living room has one giant L-shaped sofa and two love seats, the kitchen has more state-of-the-art gadgets than I’ve ever seen and both rooms own the view of the city.

Courtney explores every inch, opening cupboards, stroking furniture and admiring the numerous pieces of priceless art hanging on the wall.

“Shit,” she says, after quizzing Nate about a particularly bright painting occupying the whole of one wall. “Do you have the *Mona Lisa* here somewhere too?”

Nate laughs. “Been trying to get my hands on it but have not worked out how it can be done yet.”

“How what can be done?” I ask, distracted by the dark ocean on the horizon.

“Robbing the Louvre.”

Courtney laughs, but Nate’s crazy enough that I think he might be serious.

“You ever seen it?” he whispers into my ear as Courtney starts picking up a collection of artifacts from a table and turning them over in her hands. “The *Mona Lisa*?”

“Two weeks ago, I’d only been out of Naw Creek a handful of times. I’ve never been out of the country before.”

“I’ll take you,” he says. “To Paris.” I screw up my nose. “You don’t like the idea of Paris?” he asks with amusement.

“At first I was so excited to be here in the city, now I’m beginning to miss the countryside. The big skies and the big open spaces.”

“Ahhh in that case, I’ll take you to the Grand Canyon.” I twist my head to peek at him. “That idea you like?”

“Maybe.”

He grins. “Going to book us a private jet tomorrow, baby.”

I screw up my nose again.

“What?” he asks.

“She doesn’t believe in them,” Courtney says.

“They’re not good for the environment.”

“You worried about the environment, little bird?”

“Yes, I mean, I’m not an eco warrior or anything but I try to do my bit. Walk when I can, recycle, that kind of thing.”

“Okay,” Nate says slowly. “I’ll find an eco-friendly way for us to visit the Grand Canyon.”

I laugh. “Good luck with that.”

“Baby,” he says with those dirty eyes of his that make me all hot and bothered, “I like a challenge.”

“Can we see the bathroom next?” Courtney asks and I give her a quizzical look. “What? Rich people always have an incredible bathroom.”

“Bathrooms,” Nate corrects. “Later. Going to show you outside first.”

“Outside?” I ask, but he just winks and takes my hand, leading us up a flight of stairs and then out onto the rooftop. I stand stunned for several moments until Nate nudges me forward.

It’s more than just a roof-top garden. It’s an oasis of flowers and plants and trees growing up pergolas and twining round trestles, draped over low walls, and spilling across the ground. There are several secret areas with chairs and loungers, tables and benches, some under the canopy of leaves and blooms, some allowing you to gaze up at the sky. Then at the very edge is an infinity pool, all lit up and glittering blue, the water disappearing off the edge of the building. It’s been constructed to blend in with the rest of the garden, rocks forming its walls and water cascading down into the pool.

“Is the sky big enough up here for you, little bird?” Nate asks me and as I tip my head back I see how clear the heavens are away from all the city lights below. Stars litter the dark blanket above us and it reminds me of home.

“Yes,” I gasp. “I think if I owned this place I’d spend all my time up here.”

“We do spend most of our time up here. It isn’t the countryside, but it’s the closest you’re gonna get in the middle of the city.” He presses his lips to my shoulder. “You wanna go for a swim?”

“Is it warm?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

I stare down at my dress. Then back at the pool, glittering and tempting. I want nothing more than to wash away the feel of our apartment from my skin; the stale scent of whoever entered our home lingers on my fingertips and in my nose.

I want to lie back in the water and stare up at the stars and forget about all the bad things in the world and relive my kiss with Angel and my kiss with Axel.

“I don’t have a swimsuit,” I say with a sigh.

Nate scoffs. Then before I know what’s happening, he’s tugging me along after him, stopping at the edge of the pool.

“You don’t need a swimsuit,” he tells me, those dirty eyes darting down my body and a smirk crawling across his mouth.

“I’m not skinny dipping.”

“Fine.” Nate shrugs, then pushes me towards the water.

For a moment, I hang suspended, arms flailing, eyes wide in shock and then I crash into the warm water, sinking right to the bottom before darting back to the top.

“The dress!” I yelp.

“It’s only a dress,” Nate says before diving in to join me, suit jacket, shirt, pants and all.

He bobs up a moment later, shaking his head, water droplets spraying into the air.

“You’re crazy.” I laugh. Then glance over to Courtney who’s watching us both. “Are you coming in, Court?”

“I think I’ll leave you to it,” she says with another of those annoyingly knowing smiles of hers.

I turn back to Nate who grins at me. “This dress cost thousands and thousands of dollars.”

“Can I take it off you?”

“No,” I yelp.

“Okay.” He keeps grinning, his eyes darting down to my chest. When I follow his gaze, I find the silky material is

clinging to my breasts, my nipples two stiff bullets.

Oh lord.

His smile widens and then he's ducking under the water again, his hands coming to claim my ribs and his mouth my nipples.

I should push him away. But oh lord. That feels good.

He nips one nipple, then the other, the cool metal of his lip ring hard against the tender flesh. Then he crashes back through the surface.

"Sorry, little bird. Couldn't resist. They were just begging for me to bite them."

I peer at him, the dancing water morphing his skin an alien blue, his own white shirt tight to his chest, emphasizing every ridge of muscle and, yes, his own nipples, both pierced like his lip.

I motion him forward with the crook of my finger and he wades towards me, dragging his wet jacket off as he does. When he's close enough, I duck down and bite his left nipple.

"Shit," he yelps.

"Retaliation," I say as I stand up straight.

"I like it. Wanna do the other one?"

I laugh. "You are incorrigible."

"Crazy. Incorrigible." The smile dies on his lips. "You don't like those things."

I stare at him. His eyes are sadder and I think about what Axel told me in the car. "No, I like them." I stroke his cheek and he closes his eyes and leans into my touch.

It's like stroking a wild cat. He's unpredictable and powerful and yet he'll let me touch him like this.

"I like you, little bird. Hoping you're going to stay and never leave."

My omega heart beats a little faster.

It would be so easy to say yes, I'll be yours, you can have me.

But fairytales are just that: fiction, not real. Happy endings never last. I learned that the hard way. My perfect love story didn't end with mine. This won't either.

I have to focus on myself. I have to rebuild my life.

I withdraw my hand and lean back into the water, lifting my feet from the surface and gazing up at the sky.

After a minute, Nate does the same and we float side by side watching stars dart through the darkness in silence.

"Never got to dance with you tonight, little bird," he says after a while.

"I don't think parties like that are really my thing."

"Yeah, same. Still, I want to dance with you."

I sink my feet back to the bottom of the pool. "My dress is all ruined now and ..."

He lowers his feet too and sinks down into the water so only his eyes are hovering above the rippling surface.

"I prefer it this way," he breathes. "Come here." He reaches through the water and takes my hand, pulling me towards him.

"I'm a really bad dancer," I say, "and we don't have any music."

He twists his head. "Computer, play 'Always' by Bon Jovi."

The notes from a guitar float through the air and the lights dim further.

"Problem solved." He stands and tugs me nearer, winding my arms around his neck so my body is flush against his warm one. Then he moves us through the water, swaying us gently in time to the music so that the water ripples around us.

"Did you go to your prom?" he asks me.

"My prom? Why'd you ask me that?"

“You said you didn’t like parties like the one tonight.”

“True, but I still went to my prom.”

He squeezes me tighter. “Tell me about your prom dress.”

I laugh. “It wasn’t anything like this one. My mom would never have let me wear a dress like this!”

“Sensible.”

I cock my head. “Why?”

“Every dickhead is trying to lose his v-card on prom night. You wearing a dress like this ...” He peers down at me and whistles. “Did you,” he leans closer, “did you lose your v-card on prom night, little bird?”

“Is this your way of trying to discover if I’m a virgin, because I’m 26 and there’s an ex-boyfriend, remember?”

“You did, didn’t you? With him?” His eyes glide over my face. “Was it good?”

“It was ...” I chew my lip, thinking back. We’d only been together a few months. I was still so dazzled he wanted to be with me, amazed it was me he wanted to take to prom, that I couldn’t have refused him that night, even if I’d wanted to. “Okay. Special in a way but—”

“Awkward.”

Yep, awkward. I’m not sure it ever got any better – for me, anyway.

I nod, then pinch his neck. “How about you? How did you lose yours? Was it at prom?”

“Nah, I never went to prom.” He grins. “It was with an older woman. I met her at a bar.”

“Was it good?”

He shakes his head. “No, awkward. I didn’t know what the hell I was doing.” He leans in and licks his tongue around the lobe of my ear. “I’ve learned a lot since then.”

I shiver, thinking of all the wicked things I bet that tongue could do.

“You want to know one of the things I learned?”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea—”

He scoops me up into his arms and wades through the pool, climbing the steps and lowering me back on dry land. “You want to be good at sex, you’ve got to be able to dance.”

“What?” I giggle. “That is not a thing.”

“Is.” He positions one of my arms on his shoulders and takes my other hand in his. “Do you know how to dance? Properly?”

“No. Do you?”

“Yeah.” He knocks his knee against mine, nudging my leg backward, then takes a step to the side. He goes slowly, encouraging me to follow his lead.

“How did you learn this?” I ask with suspicion. “Was it that older woman?”

“It was *an* older woman.” He spins me around slowly, then draws me back into his body. “It was Axel’s mom.”

“Oh my god,” I gasp, my feet halting.

He chuckles, nudging me to move again. “It wasn’t like that. She taught us all to dance. Said we needed to know how. Turns out she was right.”

I remember what Axel told me earlier about his mom, how she’d taken Nate in.

“Was she at the party tonight?”

“No.” He’s quiet for a moment, the song playing over the speakers and our wet feet against the ground the only sound up here on the roof. “She isn’t well. She can’t leave the house much these days. He doesn’t talk about it much but it eats him up.”

“Axel?”

He nods.

The man seems so tough and indestructible. I find it hard to believe inside he’s hurting.

“You’re a good dancer, little bird,” he tells me and I rest my head against his shoulder, gazing down at the city lights.



WRAPPED up in a soft toweling gown an hour later, I knock on Courtney’s door, hoping she’s still awake.

“Courtney?” I ask.

“Come in,” she replies.

I find her dressed in her pajamas, sprawled out across the huge bed, scrolling through her phone.

“Hey,” she says, placing her phone down on the mattress and patting a spot next to her. “How was your, ahem, swim?” She waggles her eyebrows at me.

“Lovely and,” I place my finger on her lip before she can speak, “it was just a swim.”

“No funny business?”

“No funny business,” I reply, neglecting to mention the nipple biting and the slow dance.

“Oh man, Bea, you have some self-control. If that man had looked at me the way he was looking at you, I would have burst into flames then and there.”

“Oh, he gets me all hot and bothered, don’t worry about that. I’m just...”

“You’re just ...”

“Taking my time.”

“Really? Bea, sweetie, what’s there to take your time about? These men live in a palace. They’re drooling all over you and practically falling over themselves to make your life better.”

I frown at her.

“Let’s look at the evidence.” She holds up her thumb. “You’re in desperate need of a job. They give you a job. A

good one that pays well too.” She holds up her forefinger. “Our apartment gets trashed and we need somewhere to stay, they bring us back to their palace.” She holds up her middle finger and I grab at her hand, crushing her fingers in my fist.

“They also lied about tonight’s dance to get me to go with them.”

Courtney frowns too. “Oh, that’s not good.”

“No, and I have had my fill of liars to last a whole lifetime.” I flop down on Courtney’s bed and she lies down beside me. “If I’m giving my heart away, I want to be sure this time. Certain. No more assholes. No more liars and deceivers.”

“For what it’s worth, I think they’re good guys.”

“Yeah, and everyone thought that about Karl too. He was our high school golden boy, remember?”

Popular, handsome, good at sports. Always the center of attention. It was dazzling when he picked me and then never let me go.

I think of Connor again, laid out on the grass, notebook in hand. Quiet, reserved. No interest in being liked or popular. So different to Karl.

“Bea?” Courtney asks, waving her hand in front of my face. “You still with me?”

“Sorry,” I say, the image of Connor fading from my mind. I twist my face around to peer at Courtney. “Anyway, how about you? How was your night out? Any luck with that dude from men’s wear?”

“I don’t know.” She chews on her thumb. “Sometimes he looks at me and I’m positive he’s straight and wants me. Then other times I catch him glancing at Pete from Arts and Crafts.”

“Maybe he’s bisexual.”

“Or maybe I’m deluded and he’s not interested.”

“Well, have you talked to him yet?”

She nibbles on her nail. “Nooooo.”

“Urgh,” I reach for a pillow and drop it on her head. “You are all talk and no action, woman.”

“I know. I’m very good at handing out advice, doesn’t mean I follow it myself.”

I laugh and kiss her cheek and we talk some more, Courtney dishing out all the gossip on her colleagues and me telling her the story of Melody at the dance.

“Seems like you have some competition,” she says.

“I get the impression that all the omegas want Pack York and Pack Boston.”

“You get the impression?” Courtney laughs. “There’s no doubt about it. They do. Everyone in the city does, Bea. Yet, you’re the one they both want.”

It’s what everyone keeps telling me.

But a part of me, deep down in my gut, is finding it hard to believe.

H ardy

AS INSTRUCTED, I'm outside the omega's apartment block at 10am. It's Saturday and that's the time she wants to run. It's baking outside, the sun blazing down on the sidewalk, but if it's what she wants, so be it. I've come armed with several bottles of water though and I'm going to insist she run in the shade.

That's if she ever answers the damn buzzer. I lean on it a second time. Has she slept in? Perhaps after that party last night she has a thumping headache. Angel delighted in telling us how he'd seduced her behind the curtain, but then she'd left early. With Axel York. Is that where she is? His bed?

I press the buzzer one more time, then snap out my phone and call her.

"Hello?" she says sleepily.

"Bea," I say, "where are you?"

"Where am I?" I hear her roll over, the springs of a mattress creaking. So she is in bed. Her own or someone else's?

My jaw tightens.

"Yes, where are you?" I say. "I'm outside your apartment block ready for our run."

“Oh crap,” she says. “Oh, Hardy. I completely forgot.”

My stomach plunges. She forgot about me.

“Right,” I say stiffly. “I’m guessing you’re not at home then?”

“No, I’m not.”

I swallow down a sickly bitter taste in my mouth.

I didn’t think we’d lose this time. I thought we’d win this girl. I thought we’d make her ours.

“I’m at the Pack York apartment.” I screw up my eyes. She says it so casually like she wasn’t swapping saliva with my packmate last night, like this news won’t gut me senseless. “Someone broke into our apartment last night and Axel insisted we couldn’t stay there, although it’s such a mess anyway and we aren’t allowed to touch anything until the police—”

I stop listening. I’m still hung up on the words ‘break-in’.

“What did you say?” I ask, my jaw tight for a completely different reason now.

“Huh? About the police?”

“No, someone broke into your apartment?” I take a step back and peer up towards her window. “What happened? Are you hurt?” I swallow down more bile.

“No, I’m fine. They were gone by the time we got back but the place was completely trashed.”

“What did they take?”

“Nothing as far as we can tell.”

“They were coming for you.” I rub my knuckles across my forehead. I need to call Silver here now, before the cops rock up for whatever pathetic, half-assed investigation they’re going to do (if they show up at all). Before that, we need to take a look around and see if we can find anything.

The omega lets out a frustrated sigh. “That’s what Axel said too.”

“For once, he’s right. Doesn’t happen very often but ... You can’t come back to this apartment, Bea.”

“I know, Axel also said that. He’s offered to let me stay here.”

No. No fucking way. That isn’t happening.

“I imagine you want your own space though, right?”

“It’s very nice of him to have us—”

“But, yes, you would. It’s sorted then. We’re going to find you your own apartment. Somewhere secure and safe. Leave it with me, sweetheart.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure, sweetheart. I don’t mess around about serious matters like this.”

“Okay then.” I picture her chewing on her lip in that way she does when she’s unsure. “But nowhere fancy. It needs to be affordable.”

I snort. “We’re not setting you up in some shithole.”

“I’m serious, Hardy.”

“So am I.” I sense she’s going to argue with me on this one, so I decide it’s time to end the call. Besides, I want to get Silver here as soon as possible. “We’ll get on it,” I tell her. “We’ll have something sorted by the end of the day.” I don’t want her spending another night at the York place. “I’ll be in touch. Keep safe, Bea.”

I hang up and call Silver immediately.

He arrives fifteen minutes later.

“Have you been in?” he asks me, glancing up at Bea’s apartment.

“No, I thought you’d want me to wait.”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding and rubbing his chin.

“What did the two goons say?”

There were meant to be two of Silver's men watching Bea's apartment around the clock, ensuring her safety. Neither of them reported a break-in. Silver's been roasting their asses all the way over here.

"The omega left the apartment at about six last night."

"York Pack picked her up?"

"Yeah," Silver growls. "Trent followed her to the party and back to her apartment later. Johnson stayed to watch the apartment. He claims no one suspicious came in or out of the apartment during that time. No one who would have alerted him to a break-in."

I shake my head. "Shit, your men are crap, Silver."

"They're both suspended," Silver tells me, looking mightily pissed off. He prides himself on delivering the most comprehensive security service in the city. He doesn't like fuck ups. Especially when they affect our omega.

"I'd fire their asses," I tell him.

"Let's go up and look." We don't have a key or a code but that doesn't stop Silver. I stand back and wait for him to do his stuff. A couple of minutes later we're inside the omega's apartment.

It's just as she described it – trashed. Objects and belongings strewn across the floor.

"Almost looks like they were searching for something," Silver muses, stepping through the mess.

"Yeah, Bea," I say darkly.

"Hmmm," Silver says. "You recognize the scents?"

I inhale closing my eyes. I've always had the most sensitive sense of smell in our pack, an attribute Silver has often taken advantage of. There're two scents, although both are difficult to understand because of too much chemical interference. "Blockers," I mumble, "they're on blockers."

"Interesting."

Most of the less scrupulous alphas and their packs in this city aren't bothered about curbing their scents or their instincts. They don't use the chemical blockers as some macho matter of principle.

I hone in on the stronger scent, mostly because the second one is confusing, almost ... sweet. The dominant one ... there's something there ... if I can just reach it ...

"Nutmeg."

"You recognize it?"

"No."

"I'll check our database."

We pick our way through the trash, searching for anything else. But there's nothing. Not even a fingerprint.

"They were wearing gloves," Silver tells me. "Which means these weren't hired thugs. These were professionals."

"Why trash the place though? If they'd left it untouched, they could have come back another time to grab our girl."

Silver's eyes dart around the apartment and then he strides back to Bea's room. "I don't know, man, but I don't like it."

He scratches at his chin.

It smells less violated in her room, the aroma of her sugary scent in the air and in the fabrics. It smells so damn good and neither of us move until Silver's phone chirps in his pocket. He answers it and I listen to him grunt along to some information relayed to him down the receiver.

"Send it over. I want to take a look."

"What is it?" I ask, when he hangs up.

"Surveillance footage of the front of the apartment."

I grin. "You've been filming her too? She's going to go livid when she finds out."

"I wanted to keep her safe." Which considering the circumstances was not a bad call.

He flicks his thumb against his phone screen, then beckons me over.

“One of my men took another look at the footage this morning. Confirmed what Johnson said. No one suspicious.”

We watch the video on his screen. We see Bea arrive home from work and then leave an hour later with Axel York. That bit of footage makes us both growl but we suppress it and focus back on the film. The old man from the apartment below Bea’s leaves and returns three quarters of an hour later. A delivery man is beeped in but leaves his parcel by the door. A couple let themselves in and a while later leave again. And the mom on the top floor pops out for pizza.

Other than that, nothing.

No men in ski masks and leather gloves. Hell, not even men.

“Could they have broken in around the back?”

We lock up the omega’s apartment and go to check it out. No signs of a broken entrance and the door is heavy duty.

“This doesn’t make sense,” I mutter, kicking a can down the alley. I thought we’d solve this easily – or at least Silver would. Then I’d head down there with a baseball bat and send a message to whatever scumbag has their eye on our girl.

“It does. It means we’re dealing with someone smart and we’re going to have to up our vigilance.”



WE HEAD BACK to our Pack house and Silver locks himself in his office, making enquiries and looking up shit. I call our real estate manager and insist she drop the job she’s working on and send me pictures and details of all the suitable apartments in the city. The closer to us better.

Then I lie out on a couch and scroll through them all. I dismiss half of them right off the bat. Far too soulless for an omega. All sharp edges and hard surface. She needs soft,

warm comfort – thick carpet rugs, wide sofas and sinkable beds. Plenty of places to be rutted.

I stare at several photos of living rooms and bedrooms imagining just what I'd like to do with the little omega in those rooms.

I never knew what they meant by house porn. Now I do.

Finally, I narrow it down to three and walk through the house in search of Angel. He's in front of his laptop, looking through numbers.

"It's Saturday," I remind him. Not that that's ever made a difference with Angel.

"I needed distraction."

"From what?"

"From the thought of her in his bed."

"She's not in his bed, man. I told you, she's just staying there."

His face darkens. "You don't know Axel like I do."

"I know him well enough." I lean against his desk. "Anyway, I think I've found a solution to that particular problem. Somewhere else for her to live."

I pass him over the phone and let him flick through the details of the three apartments.

"You know she'll never consent to let us pay for one of these places," Angel mutters.

"Thought you could come up with one of your clever stories, though. A way to convince her it isn't costing us a small fortune." His thumb hovers over a stylized photo of one of the bedrooms. King-sized bed. Layers of cushions and blankets. Perfect place for nesting down. "Imagine rutting her there, man," I whisper. His scent spikes. He's imagining it all right.

"We'll tell her it's a family property. One that belonged to your great aunt – the one who passed recently." I smile. "We haven't gotten around to selling it yet and it's just sitting there

empty. She'd be doing us a favor moving in. Prevent squatters."

I laugh. "You're a genius, man. I'm going to drive over there now."

"Axel will never let you see her."

"Let him try to stop me." I wink at him and hop in my jeep.

Our place is based out on the outskirts of the city. We wanted land and space.

Axel's pack live up the top of some tower, like a bunch of frightened lords surveying their people, scared any moment someone's going to topple them from their perch.

Ha. That is going to be us.

The day's a scorcher, haze hovering over the sidewalks, sun high and hot.

I call the omega as I drive through the sweltering city.

"How's your day going, sweetheart?" I ask her, when she answers. "Missing our run?"

"Yes," she admits. "Axel won't let me go on my own and I haven't been able to convince any of his pack to come out with me."

I smile to myself. One point in our favor.

"I'll take you out running as soon as I've moved you into your new place. I'm heading over now. Going to show you all the details. You're going to love it."

"You're coming over here?" she says, clearly unsure about that idea.

"Yeah, that's not a problem is it? Pack York won't mind, I'm sure."

Her voice drops a tone and when she speaks it's like she's a school teacher telling off her naughty student. Fuck, seems I like that. "I think you know they will."

“Why? They keeping you a prisoner up there in their tower? Do I need to come rescue you, princess?”

I practically hear her eyes roll. But she doesn't like the idea of us alphas curtailing her freedoms. I have a feeling someone tried that gig before and she doesn't want it to happen again. Fine by me. I'm not one of these dudes who's interested in locking up their omega.

“I'll come meet you at the coffee shop at the bottom of the building,” she says.

“I don't want you walking around on your own,” I tell her, as I stop at a red light, drumming my fingers on my open window. A woman in the car next to me catches my eye and smiles. I look away.

“I can catch the elevator to the bottom of the building on my own without any harm befalling me,” she says.

“Silver thinks whoever broke into your apartment was a professional. Someone smart. Someone devious.”

“What?”

“We're going to need you to be extra vigilant until we get this sorted for you.” She's quiet for a moment and I let her soak up that information. “I'll call you when I'm there, okay? *Then* you can come down in the elevator.”

She agrees and ten minutes later I'm waiting for her in the lobby building. I tap my foot. I don't know how long it's going to be before some security guard tries to throw me out. I'm not exactly welcome in Pack York's building.

Luckily, the doors slide open a minute later and she comes skipping out. The sun streams through the lobby doors and frames her in a golden light, her amber eyes ethereal. She looks otherworldly. Something I'd find it hard to capture with my hand. Something I'm doubly sure I'd never want to chain up or pin down.

“Hi there, sweetheart. Looking beautiful.”

She's wearing a summer's dress. All light and floaty and flimsy as hell. The thing wouldn't last two seconds in my

hands. I lean down to kiss her cheek, sucking in her sweet scent.

“Hi,” she says back.

I take her hand in mine. “I was thinking it’s too nice a day for coffee. How about milkshakes?”

There’s a place around the corner, somewhere I won’t be frogmarched out of.

“Sounds good. I haven’t had a milkshake in forever.”

“They’re the proper ones.” I swing our arms as we walk together. “Made with real ice cream. Not that gloopy shit you get in the fast-food restaurants.”

“We made all our milkshakes with real ice cream back at the diner.”

“Glad to hear it. I wouldn’t have been able to see you again otherwise.”

She giggles, the sun catching the strands of her hair. “You have high standards.”

She better believe it, I do. “I like my food genuine. Real. Tasty.” Just like my women. “Here,” I say, gesturing to the place, and holding open the door for her. Inside it’s cool and decked out like a French cafe. I take her up to the counter to order.

“Paris,” she murmurs.

“Yeah, I think that’s what they’re going for.” I point to the board. “What you going to try then?”

I watch as her eyes skate down the list. “How am I ever meant to choose?”

“Order as many as you like.”

“Seriously?”

“Why not?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Then what do you prefer, sweetheart? Chocolate or fruit?”

I hope she says chocolate. I've always been told that is what my scent smells most like. Dark chocolate.

“Hmmm, maybe something chocolaty.”

I lean into her, noticing the way she drifts my way, towards my scent and my body.

How soon can I relocate her into that bedroom?

“In that case, we're going for the most chocolate shit they have to offer.”

I beckon the server over and order the one with all the chocolate chips, toppings and sauce, then I lead her over to a table by the window, scooting my chair in close to hers.

“Right, let me show you this place.” I flick up the pictures on my phone. I've already removed all the real estate garbage.

She sighs as she takes my phone in her hands. That's because the first photo is the one of that bedroom. Seems it has the same effect on her as it did Angel, as it did me. I wonder if she's imagining all the things I'm going to do to her in that bedroom.

“Beautiful, huh?”

“And totally out of my price range. You do know I'm an administrator, right? And Courtney works in a department store. We can't afford somewhere like this.” She hands back my phone.

The only thing they could afford in this city is a shoebox which is what they were living in before. The thought of her cupboard-sized room makes me sick just thinking about it. This woman is a queen. She should be living like one.

I rest my phone down on the table and swivel the picture around in her direction.

“You don't need to worry about that.”

“I can't accept your charity, Hardy.”

“Hey,” I tap my finger against the table, “I never mentioned charity.” She starts to argue and I shake my head. “Hear me out, will you?”

“One chocolate deluxe and one caramel,” the server says from behind us and when I nod, he places two long glasses on the table top.

Bea leans forward, catching the straw between her lips and sucks.

I stare at her. It’s pornographic. She has no idea.

I pick up my drink and tip the cold liquid into my mouth.

She stops sucking and bounces her straw in her drink.

“Okay, I’ll hear you out.”

I nod, lowering my glass. Her eyes flick down to my mouth.

“Oh ...” she says, “you have ...”

“What?” I ask.

“A bit of shake.”

I hold her gaze. “Where?” I ask, “show me.”

She leans over and swipes the pad of her thumb over my lower lip, her touch electric. When she reaches the corner, I snap my head forward and capture her thumb between my lips, sucking.

“Too good to waste,” I whisper, watching her own lips open on a sigh and her pupils swim large. I take a hold of her chair and drag her closer. “I brought you something.”

“What?”

I dig into my pocket and tug out the parcel wrapped in tissue paper.

She frowns as I place it on the table. “I can’t accept this.”

“Open it,” I tell her.

Her hands hesitate, but I just gave her a command. It’s difficult for her to refuse it. She unfolds the layers of paper, finding a keyring inside.

She holds it up, letting the wooden dolphin dangle from the chain. “This is beautiful,” she says, capturing the creature

in her palm.

“I made it,” I tell her.

“You did?” She leans forward, squinting at the detailing I’ve carved onto the tiny dolphin. Then she reaches over and grabs my wrist, lifting up my hand. “You made this with these?”

I chuckle. “Yeah, it’s sort of a hobby. I like to carve shit.” It keeps my hands busy. Keeps me out of trouble. But I don’t think I’ll tell her that bit. “I noticed how you always tuck your key into your pants when we run and it gives me a freaking heart attack every time. Now you have a chain for your key and you seemed to like dolphins, so ...” Her eyes lock on my face as I talk and then drop back to the gift.

“No one has ever made me anything before,” she whispers.

“Omega,” I growl, “I’d like to spend my days spoiling you. I’d make you whatever the hell you want.”

She shivers, stroking her finger along the dolphin’s back. “I’m going to accept this key chain because it’s the darn cutest thing I’ve ever seen. But I can’t accept the apartment, Hardy.”

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Look, the house belonged to my great aunt. She passed a few months ago—”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

I nod. “We haven’t had a chance to sell it or rent it out yet. It’s not costing us anything, but it’s not being used. You moving in there would help us out. Prevent any squatters from invading.”

She peers up into my eyes. “Really?” she asks.

“Course,” I lie, guilt suddenly swirling through my gut. I push my milkshake away. I’ve never cared about lying before. Definitely not to a girl. But when she looks at me with those eyes full of trust, full of vulnerability, I feel like an asshole. I consider telling her the truth. Then remember it’s for her own

good and if I don't do this, she'll be staying at Pack York's place. Right in their laps.

I'm not handing her over to them like that. Not without a good goddamn fight and yes perhaps a few lies here and there.

"We'll move you in today," I tell her.

B^{ea}

I'M HALFWAY through packing up my bag for the second time in twenty four hours when it happens. A sudden cramp in my gut that has me bent double and sucking in air through my teeth.

I screw up my eyes and clutch my belly. Colors spike against my eyelids and a drone pierces my ears.

I keep breathing and breathing.

When it finally passes and I manage to uncurl my body, I find I'm drenched in a layer of sweat, my skin piping hot.

I sniff. The air is thick with my scent. I stride over to the door, slam and bolt it shut, and march back to the bed, dialing Doctor Hannah as I fan my face.

It this it? My heat? Except I don't feel that incessant need I've read about. No ache between my thighs, no slick, no desire to run and jump the first alpha in sight. Am I sick instead?

The receptionist answers and promises the doctor will call me back as soon as possible.

I lie down on the bed and wait as a second cramp rips through my gut.

However, by the time my phone rings beside me, the pain has passed and the temperature of my skin has cooled.

“Bea?” the doctor asks as I answer.

“Hi Doctor. I’m sorry for disturbing you—”

“You’ve gone into heat?” she asks a little panicked, her voice punctuated with pants. “It’s early but we can make this work if—”

I frown, unsure what she’s talking about. “No, No. I thought it was my heat but now I’m not so sure. I had stomach cramps and my temperature spiked but it’s all passed over now.”

The doctor breathes into the receiver with relief. “Any intense feeling of need? Any slick?”

“Nope and nope.” I massage my belly. Perhaps it feels a tad swollen but there’s no pain. “What does it mean?”

“It means, as suspected, you’re drawing closer to your heat proper. You’re probably going to have your heat sooner than we first believed.”

“Urgh,” I moan.

“I would seriously consider making arrangements. We can help with that here in the clinic—”

“Arrangements?” I say in a daze, thinking of the two men I kissed last night. Thinking of Nate in the pool and Hardy in the cafe. I can almost taste their scents on my tongue. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad, would it? Sharing a heat might even be ... satisfactory if those darn kisses are anything to judge by. “You think it’s really necessary?”

“I think perhaps for your first heat you would be better off at the clinic where we can monitor and check on you.”

“At the clinic? With an alpha?”

“No. We wouldn’t be able to admit any alphas but we have new ways, new advances, that can help see you through a heat.”

“I haven’t really heard much about that.” Most people have been pushing me to consider hooking up with alphas when the time comes.

“Like I said, these are new advances. Not widely known about at present. But in your case they might be preferable.”

“I don’t know ...” I say, massaging my belly as I think of Axel’s mouth against mine and Angel’s lips on my throat.

The doctor sighs again, this time with frustration. “I would strongly advise you to come into the clinic. But whatever your choice, you need to start making arrangements. It’s what I, and everyone else, has been telling you for the last fortnight.”

Yeah, and maybe it’s about time I started listening.



PACK YORK ISN’T happy that I’m moving out. They’re even less happy when I explain who organized my new apartment.

“No,” Axel says simply, folding his arms across his broad chest. Nate and Connor flank him, looking equally dissatisfied. “No way.”

“It was very kind of you letting us stay last night,” I begin, “but we can’t impose on your hospitality indefinitely. We need our own place.”

“So you’re not happy to accept my hospitality, but you are happy to accept Pack Boston’s?”

“It’s not like that,” I explain. “It’s their aunt’s place and it won’t be costing them anything. In fact, I’ll be sort of house sitting the place for them.”

Axel snorts. “Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m saying that’s all bullshit. A story to get you to move into their apartment.”

“They won’t be living there.”

“It’ll still be theirs,” he says, those gray eyes turning dark like storm clouds.

“They said it used to belong to their aunt.”

“They’re lying to get you to move in,” Nate repeats.

I scowl at him. “Like you lied to get me to that party last night.”

He opens and shuts his mouth; his biceps flex against his chest.

“If you want your own place. *We’ll* rent you somewhere,” Connor intervenes. “Somewhere close by in case you need us.”

“I don’t need babysitters. I don’t need ...” I can feel my temperature creeping upwards again and I peer at Courtney in alarm. “Maybe we should just go back to our own apartment.”

“Nope,” all three men say in unison and I stare at them in dismay.

“Then what am I meant to do here?”

“I might have an idea,” Courtney says, eyes flicking around the four of us in amusement.

“Really?” I ask hopefully. I need to work out what I’m going to do about this coming heat and I can’t do that when they’re lined up in front of me like some sex-god Buffet.

“Uh huh. Aunt Julia has a beach condo she said I could use if I ever needed to—”

“A beach condo,” I murmur, the idea already appealing to me.

“I never took her up on the offer because it’s a drag into the city. But I’m sure we could manage.”

“It doesn’t sound safe,” Axel says, shutting it down.

Courtney grins at me. “It is. Aunt Julia’s an omega. It’s set up with an alarm system, security cameras, the lot.”

“I don’t like it,” Axel growls.

Which pretty much makes up my mind. I don't belong to these men. I don't belong to anyone and I sure as hell don't want to give them the impression that I do.

Besides, it's on the beach!

I could run along the shore every morning.

"Well, I do," I say, ignoring three sharp scowls, "will you ask her, Court?"



AN HOUR later we're riding out to the beach, Aunt Julia driving us all in Missy. It seems Pack Boston were also unhappy about our move out to the beach. And, though both packs offered to drive us when I made it clear I wasn't backing down, Courtney and I decided Aunt Julia would be a more rational choice of transport.

Which, given the way my stomach keeps cramping and my temperature spiking, has turned out to be a sensible decision.

It also gives me a chance to work out what I'm going to do next. And when I say what, I mean who.

"Doctor Hannah says my heat's approaching quickly now," I tell both my aunt and cousin as we leave the city's metropolis and join the freeway out towards the coast.

"Obviously," Courtney says. "You reek, Bea. No wonder those men weren't keen to let you go."

Although they had, hadn't they? An act I thought alphas were meant to be incapable of? I thought they were all contained arrogance, dominance and violence. I thought they were meant to rule their omegas with a fist. I thought their word was law.

Not these men though. They've been respectful, kind and patient – if you don't count the little lies.

So much nicer than Karl ever was to me – and a billion times sexier too.

“Doctor Hannah also says I need to make arrangements.”

My aunt tuts her tongue. “I’ve been telling you that for weeks, Bea.”

“She hasn’t been ready,” Courtney says, resting her hand on my shoulder. “But are you now, Bea?”

Am I? I’ve been reeling off this long list of reasons why I can’t date, why I shouldn’t see these men, why I should endure my heat alone. Now I’m wondering if the real reason – the one deep down that’s been holding me back – is fear.

I’m frightened. Frightened of being hurt again. Frightened my life will come toppling down all over again. Frightened my heart can’t take a second battering.

“I think,” I say, wishing I sounded more confident, “it’s time I threw caution to the wind and embraced this whole situation.”

Maybe it’s about time I let the wind carry me where it wants, too. About time I let the omega inside me have her way. About time I follow my heart. Because I’m falling for these men. I’ve tried my darn hardest not to. It’s happened anyway.

Is it any wonder? These men are like gods stepped down from Mount Olympus to sweep me off my feet.

I’m only human, only mortal, and their scents, their charm, their dazzling eyes, are all too much for me to handle.

Every moment I’m with them I’m weakening further, finding it harder and harder to resist their powers.

“Brilliant,” Aunt Julia says. “That is a relief. I really couldn’t stomach the idea of you going through your first heat alone and especially at such an old age.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, then peer from my aunt to my cousin. “But ...”

“But what?” Courtney asks me with suspicion as Missy rumbles down a track and stops outside a small bungalow with a view of the beach and the sea.

For a moment all three of us stare transfixed as the foamy water tosses against the white sand, sending spray high into the sunlit sky.

Then I swallow.

“There’s still a problem.”

A very big problem. A two-pack shaped problem.

“Let’s discuss it once we’ve unpacked,” my aunt suggests, and together we grab the bags and carry them inside. We have two full shopping bags with us too because Nate insisted on donating half the contents of their fridge to us. He didn’t want us to ‘starve’. Despite my aunt’s reassurances, he wouldn’t believe there was a market all the way out here.

There isn’t much to see in the cozily decorated condo, so when we’re done unloading, Aunt Julia insists on taking us down to the beach with a bottle of wine and a packet of chips.

“It’s so beautiful out here,” I murmur, entranced by the pull of the sea and the sun low in the sky, painting the crests of the distant waves golden. The breeze smells of salt – no gasoline and drains out here – and tastes fresh and untainted. “I don’t understand why you don’t live here permanently.”

“I’ve been tempted,” my aunt says. “But I’d miss my friends and city life too much.”

“I don’t think I would,” I confess.

Courtney knocks her shoulder against mine. “I thought you were all for the city life. I thought you were loving it.”

“In small doses, I think,” I say, as I drop down onto the warm sand and snap open the packet of chips.

“Well, unfortunately, this lovely view won’t be here forever so enjoy it while it lasts.”

“What?” I say, dragging my eyes from the ocean.

“The man who owns this strip of the beach has finally capitulated and is selling up. There’ll be some huge hotel resort here with casinos and high-rise towers,” my aunt swings her arm through the air, “before you know it.”

“They can’t do that,” I say, swinging my gaze down the unspoiled beach, green dunes hiding the houses and roads from view. “This is like a slice of heaven, of paradise. Surely, there must be rules to protect places like this.”

“Rules like that don’t count when it comes to big corporations,” Courtney says.

“Rules should apply to everyone, no matter how big they are or how much money they have.”

“I love you, Bea,” Courtney says, “but you’ve lived in a small town for too long. It’s not how it works here in the city.”

“There must be something we can do to stop a development here?”

Courtney shrugs and my aunt looks unsure.

“We’ve started a petition,” Aunt Julia says.

“Well, that’s a start.” I peer back to the shoreline where two tiny sea birds chase the waves backwards and forwards. “I’m going to help.”

I watch the sun sink lower.

The beach is empty, only the three of us.

“Both Axel and Angel would have a fit if they knew I was out here without an escort,” I mumble.

“We’re safe,” my aunt says, holding up her arm and showing me an alarm dangling from her wrist. “Connects straight to Boston Securities.”

“York won’t be pleased,” Courtney mutters.

“Which takes me back to my problem,” I say, diving my hand into the cheesy chips and pulling out a dozen.

“Ahhh, yes, your problem,” my aunt says, unscrewing the wine and pouring the red liquid into three plastic tumblers.

I swallow a large gulp, the wine warming my gullet all the way down to my belly.

“Am I a Suzy Floozy?”

Courtney snorts. “A what now?”

“A Suzy Floozy?”

“What on Earth is a Suzy Floozy?” my aunt asks.

“Someone who messes men about, who dates more than one man at a time.”

“Are you dating more than one man at a time?” Courtney asks, pinching the packet of chips from my lap. “I thought you weren’t dating at all.”

“Well, technically I’m not.”

“And not-technically?”

I take another long sip of my wine.

“Bea, sweetie. What is the problem here?”

“I can’t choose!” I blurt out.

“You can’t choose what to do or—”

“I can’t choose between them.” I peek over the rim of my cup at my aunt and cousin trying to read their expressions.

“Rewind. Who exactly are we talking about here? Because you know with a pack, you get to keep all of them, you lucky bitch.”

“No,” I chew my lip, “I can’t choose between the packs.”

Courtney collapses back against the sand. “That’s such a nice problem to have.”

“No, it’s not,” I shriek. “I don’t want to be a Suzy Floozy.”

“Why not? Being a Suzy Floozy sounds a lot of fun.”

“Courtney! Help me. What am I going to do?”

“Hang on,” my aunt says, “you’ve decided that you would like one of these packs?”

“Maybe ... possibly ... at least for my heat. Then I could see where things go next. But if I spend a heat with one pack that will pretty much blow my chances of ever getting together with the other.”

“Why?” my cousin says. “Couldn’t they all be persuaded to get along?” My aunt nods as if that could actually be a

possibility.

“Courtney, you were there when Axel found out who had organized our new apartment, right? Do you seriously think they’d ever get along?”

“No.” Courtney shudders. “Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

We’re all quiet for a moment. I wiggle my toes into the white sand until they’re completely buried under the cool grains. Is it possible that I already miss the presence of those men? Their company, their comforting presence and their mouth-watering scents.

“You must have a preference?” my aunt finally says.

“No, not really.”

At breakfast I’m convinced Pack York is the sexiest bunch of men alive. By lunchtime, I know it’s Pack Boston. But when tea time rocks up, I’m back to Pack York all over again.

This isn’t me. I’m not a heartbreaker. I’m not a man-eater.

I’ve been with one man and one man only all my life.

Yet, here I am dreaming about six.

“How did you choose?” I ask my aunt.

She lowers her wine glass, balancing it on her thigh.

“I didn’t.”

“Oh my god,” Courtney gasps.

“No,” my aunt shakes her head and waves her hand. “That’s not what I meant. I meant, it wasn’t a choice in that I met my pack and boom.”

We’re quiet again. Then Courtney repeats slowly, “Boom.”

“Yes, boom. And that was that.”

“You ...” I hesitate. “You never wanted to find another pack after you lost them?”

“No,” my aunt says resolutely. “They were my one and onlys, my forevers, my soul mates. It was them and only

them.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say, as Courtney crawls across the sand and wraps her arms around our aunt.

“No need to be, darling. We had fifteen very happy years together. More than most people find in a lifetime.”

I kick the sand off my feet, and straighten out my legs, sipping on my wine and thinking.

“Have you felt the boom?” Courtney asks me, tossing me the packet of chips.

The boom? Oh, I’ve felt it. It’s just until my aunt described it like that, I hadn’t known what it was. I’ve felt that boom plenty, over and over again.

“Yes,” I admit.

“With whom?”

“All of them,” I mutter.

“Ahh crap,” Courtney chuckles, but my aunt doesn’t laugh.

“This could be a problem, Bea.”

She’s telling me. Maybe I’m better off at the clinic after all.

A_{xel}

I CAN'T SLEEP. I toss and turn in my goddamn bed but sleep doesn't come.

I'd sleep if my omega was here. I'd sleep if she were in my bed and in my arms.

Instead, she's however many miles away, out in the middle of nowhere.

I don't like it. Not one bit.

It doesn't matter how many times her aunt insists it is safe, how many times Bea tells me this is what she wants, I don't like it.

I need to know she's safe.

More than that, I need her here.

Fuck.

I throw back the sheet and pad through the apartment, heading for the gym. Moonlight streams in through the window and for a moment I hover in the doorway, watching wispy clouds pass over the ghostly disc's face. Thinking of her, wondering if she's also awake, if she's staring up into the sky too.

I could call her, but it's three in the morning.

I scrub my hand through my hair and stomp to the machine. I drop down onto the seat and start lifting weights.

The pain and the strain, the physical effort required to drive the weight up over my head, helps.

But the omega creeps into my mind after a while anyway, and I drop the weights with a clank and slump over my knees.

I knew I liked this girl. I knew she'd caught my attention in a way no girl ever has.

This is different. This is more. This is an obsession.

It's as if she's burrowed under my skin and entered my bloodstream. As if my heart is beating to the rhythm of her name and her name only.

I can't stop thinking about her. I can't stop tasting her scent on my tongue and hearing her voice in my ear.

Is this fucking insanity? Is this what it's like?

Or is this what it's like to fall, to fall for someone completely? So that you feel like you might carve up your own skin, just to see them, just to touch them.

The light flicks on and I blink against the dazzling light, seeing Connor leaning against the doorframe.

"What are you doing in here in the dark?"

"Couldn't sleep," I mumble like that's an explanation.

"No, me neither." His eyes roam over my face. "You thinking about her too?"

"Bea?"

"Who else?" He pads into the gym, dressed only in gray sweatpants, and sinks down onto one of the benches.

"Do you think it was the right thing to do, letting her go like that?"

"No," I say, scratching my fingernails through the stubble on my chin. "No, I think it was a mistake. I need her here—"

"Where we can ensure she's safe."

I shake my head. “No, not just that. I need her near.” I massage my palm across my left pec. “Do you feel it, man? This pull towards her. I never felt it before.”

“Never?” Connor says, leaning back to look at my face again.

“Never.”

“But—”

“I never felt anything for that girl.” I pause. “Not like he did. And he was young and stupid. I’m telling you. It’s different this time.”

“It is,” my packmate confirms, and I lift my face to examine his eyes now. “Because I feel it. I want her, Axel, for me, for you, for our pack.” He slides the sole of his foot against the smooth gym floor. “There’s something familiar about her. Like I should always have known her.”

“Fuck, man, that’s deep.”

“Says the man clutching his heart.”

We stare at each other.

“Did you smell how sweet she smelled when she left?” I ask him.

He closes his eyes and moans. “You have no idea. Took every thread of my restraint not to bundle her into the nearest bedroom.”

“You think she’s nearing her heat?”

“Could be. She told Nate her hormones are all messed up at the moment.”

“She needs to have her heat with us,” I say firmly.

“Damn sure.”

“I can’t leave her in that shack on the beach. She needs to be here in our home. In *her* home. Somewhere she can build a nest. I’m tired of waiting. I’m tired of this dance.”

Connor nods. “What are we going to do about it?”

I stare down at my hands, at the tattoos scribbled over my knuckles and up the tendons of my forearm.

What I'd give to have her in these hands again? Holding her, touching her. Making her feel good.

"I don't know," I tell him.

But by the time the sun has risen over the horizon and chased away all the lingering shadows in our apartment, I've made up my mind.

I'm going to see her. I'm going to speak with her. I'm going to make her understand that my pack is exactly where she belongs.

By seven o'clock, I'm on the highway speeding away from the city and out towards the coastland. The buildings, the billboards and gas stations, thin quickly away and soon it's scrubland and the occasional condo. Eventually, I turn down a track and there it is, the ocean. So blue it looks almost unreal.

I bounce in my seat as I drive down the track that leads to her bungalow, nestled between sand dunes, her old, busted-up car parked outside. Dust kicks up around me and swirls in the air.

I think of that road. That empty barren one where I first met her. I think of how I'd tasted the slightest hint of her scent then and not known what it meant. But I had understood her smile, the way she rocked on her toes, the way she watched me from the corner of those amber eyes.

I wish I could turn back time. I wish I had made my move then. Before she'd discovered her true designation, before Pack Boston ever knew of her existence.

I skid the car to a halt outside the condo. It's early, seagulls whistling in the sky above me, and all the blinds on the condo are drawn.

Idiot. It's too early.

Now what?

I meander towards the door. Should I leave, come back at a more reasonable time? Maybe with breakfast? Shit, I'm here

once again, rocking up at her doorstep without even a goddamn cup of coffee for her, let alone flowers.

“Axel?”

I turn my head and squint against the rising sun.

“Bea.” The smile spreads across my face without my control. I’m so pleased to see her.

She stands at the top of one of the sand dunes, a robe tied around her body and her feet bare.

“I was watching the sunrise,” she says. I take a step towards her.

“The sun rose an hour ago, sweetheart.”

“I know,” she shrugs, “but it was so beautiful, I lost track of time watching it.” I take another step towards her and as I walk out of the sunlight and into the shadow, I see her face more clearly. Her cheeks are all flushed. “Do you know some asshole’s planning to build a development on this land?” Her brow furrows.

“What?” I say, noticing the damp curls around her brow and her neck, noticing the slight glaze to her eyes.

I lick my lips. So sweet, so, so, so sweet. It nearly brings me to my knees.

“Bea, sweetheart,” I say gently, venturing closer to her still, “are you going into heat?”

She lifts a wrist to her brow and bites on her lip. “I ... I don’t know.”

“Sweetheart,” I hold out my hand to her.

She’s going to take it. She’s going to take it and I’m going to carry her home to my pack, where we’re going to rut her until she’s no voice left to scream. “Come with me.”

She nibbles on that lip. Eyes skating down my form like she’s fucking devouring me.

I growl and she shivers so hard her knees knock together.

Yeah, that's it, baby girl. Responding just like a good little omega should.

I inhale, letting that scent curl through my nostrils and my mouth and light every nerve along the way. Making me so hard so quickly, I'm surprised it doesn't give me a nosebleed.

So wet. So sweet and so wet.

So perfect!

"Come on, sweetheart."

She lifts out her hand, her fingertips mere inches from my own, and then something on the horizon catches her eye, distracting her.

I smother an annoyed grunt and turn around, the faint roar of an engine reaching my ears.

A red car.

A red sports car.

I know exactly whose car that is.

I snap back around to Bea.

"Come on, sweetheart. It's not safe out here. Let me take you home."

But her eyes are still locked on the shiny car as it motors down the track.

"Bea," I try again, losing my patience. She's mine, not his. I'm not letting him snatch her from me. I'm not letting him ruin this for me. I'm not letting him ruin things like he did before. All those years ago.

She's going into heat. She needs me and my pack. She is mine.

Ignoring my hand, she scampers down the dune, the robe rushing back in the breeze and revealing her long bare legs, acres of creamy thigh. Her scent intensifies as she moves closer, and the blood in my body thrums.

I'm going to plunge into rut any moment.

Her scent is just too—

The car slams into the drive and I swing around to face it. The tires skid across the sand and stop inches from my toes.

I don't stagger back. I don't even flinch. I hold my ground and glare at the man driving the car.

Angel Boston.

He scowls right back, his eyes murderous through the dusty windscreen.

Then his eyes flip from me to Bea. He's out of the car a second later, his nostrils flaring, his pupils blowing wide as he sucks in a lungful of her scent.

"Go home, asshole," I tell him, blocking his path to the omega.

He takes two steps towards me so we're nose to nose.

Back here again. As always.

"Why?" he hisses, "has she made her decision?" The muscle below my eye twitches and he nods his head slowly. "Didn't think she had."

I rest my fingertips on his chest. He's wearing a cotton t-shirt and I can feel his heart thumping beneath his skin. Thumping just as hard as mine, straining for the omega behind me.

Tough shit. He's not having her. She's mine.

I push him, hard enough that he stumbles back.

"Go away," I tell him, my voice more of a growl than anything else. "Turn around, get back in your car and drive away."

Angel cackles in that way that's always sounded like nails scraping down a blackboard to me, setting every nerve in my body on edge. "No way, asshole. The days where you get to tell me what to do are long past."

My hands form tight fists and I take a menacing step toward him. "Am I going to have to make you leave?"

“Let’s see you try,” Angel says, cracking his knuckles and rolling his shoulders.

Asshole thinks he’s some boxing champion.

I’m not playing here. I’m not messing around. I’m serious. I’ll throw him into the back of his car and push it all the way back to the city if I have to.

But before I can take a swing at him, a mewling whimper has mine and Angel’s heads snapping to the left.

The omega stands there, wrapped in her silk robe, shaking uncontrollably.

“Bea,” Angel says, attempting to step towards her. I block him again and this time he knocks the full force of his shoulder into my gut. On instinct, I grab for him, coiling my arms around his neck and squeezing as he attempts to wrestle me to the ground, thumping my gut with his right hook.

“Stop!” Bea calls out. “Please stop.”

I catch a glimpse of her as we swerve around in the dust, clouds of it hovering around us like eager spectators. Her hands are clutched to her belly and tears form in her eyes.

“She needs help, asshole,” Angel sneers, swiping his knuckles up into my jaw. The impact startles me for one second, before I blink the stars away, and land my own right hook in his ribs. He groans and the omega whimpers again.

“I am going to help her,” I tell him as he snaps free of my grasp and we circle each other. “I’m taking her home to my pack and we’re going to see her through this heat.”

“No fucking way, shithead. No fucking way.”

He swings for me and I duck, landing a barrage of knocks against his shoulder and his cheek.

“Oh god!” Bea screams. “Please, please stop.”

Deep in my gut, I feel a pull, a pull to go to her, to comfort her, but her and Angel’s scents are swirling in my brain and this anger, this need to send him on his way, won’t abate.

She is mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.

He can't have her. He won't have her.

He lands a punch on my kidney and a kick to my foot. I smack his head and knee his shin. We grapple at each other, each trying to drag the other to the ground.

I can hear the omega in the background, but her noises are confusing the hell out of me. One second screeches of fear and shock, the next moans and whimpers of desire. The air is rich with the aroma of her slick.

Our display, the aggression, it's turning her on, appealing to all her omega instincts, the ones fighting to take control now she's in heat.

A voice of reason calls to me from far away.

Stop this. Go to her. Ask her to choose.

But it's drowned out by the labored breath of the other alpha, the noises running from the omega's throat and the pound of my own heart.

Mine. Mine.

Need to get her to my pack. Need to mate and rut and knot her.

Need to fill her belly.

Need to claim her.

I bare my teeth at Angel and snarl.

And then another noise. Clear above all others.

The barrel of a shotgun rolling into place.

We both freeze.

"That is enough," yells a high-pitched voice. "Get up."

Pushing Angel away from me, I stagger upright. Sweat pours down my face, my cheek bone throbs and I can taste blood in my mouth. I swipe away liquid from my eyes and peer into the barrel of a gun. At the other end stands the omega's cousin.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asks, gaze flicking between me and Angel and my omega.

“She’s going into heat,” I say.

“Bea?” she asks.

The omega clutches her belly and nods, great fat teardrops rolling down her cheeks.

Crap. Crap, crap, crap.

“I need to take her somewhere safe,” I say.

“Like hell you do,” Angel snaps. “I’m taking her with me.”

Courtney’s eyes flick around nervously, taking in the dazed appearance of her cousin and the disheveled state of me and Angel.

“Now, hang on here a minute, what exactly does Bea want to do? Bea?”

Bea bites down hard on her lip, muffling a moan and shaking her head.

She’s clearly in pain, something I could ease so easily with the flick of my tongue or the play of my fingers.

I want to touch her so badly.

But I also want to pound this asshole hovering at my shoulder to the far side of the moon.

My instincts are breaking me in half.

“She needs a pack,” I tell her cousin, “alphas to help her through her heat.” My words elicit a little cry from her lips, and slick glides down her legs.

Slick I want to feast on.

“She needs my pack. Don’t you, baby?” Angel calls out, “You want me to fetch Silver and Hardy?”

“You need to get away,” the cousin says, brandishing the shotgun. “She can’t think straight with you two bozos around.”

I don’t like the insult but I let it slide. After all, she did find us scrabbling about in the dirt, ignoring our omega’s pleas.

“She can’t have her heat alone,” I tell the cousin, trying to remain calm, when all I want to do is snap that gun in half and bury my head between my omega’s thighs.

“It would be suicide,” Angel adds.

From the corner of my eye, I can see how every one of his muscles twitch. He’s as driven as I am to lay his hands on the little quivering omega.

“I need to talk to my cousin,” Courtney says, “without you lot around. Let me find out what she wants and then I’ll be in t—”

“No,” I say, spinning on my heels. “You talk to her. You’ll discover what she wants is my pack and by then I’ll be back with the others to take care of our omega.”

“She’s not going to choose you, shithead.” Angel cackles and I’m tempted to swing at him all over again.

Instead, I grit my teeth so hard I’m sure I split a molar and dive into my car. Angel’s right on my heel, riding right up my asshole all away along the track. When we reach the freeway, we both floor it, weaving our way in and out of traffic, nipping and cutting and swerving in front of each other and not giving a shit about the blaring horns and the angry gestures.

I’m grabbing my pack and we’re heading back to the omega. She’s going to make her choice, and Angel and his pack are going to be going home with their tails between their legs while we fuck our omega for three days straight.

I taste her scent on my lips, suck on it hard.

I can’t fucking wait.

B ea

AS SOON AS the alphas leave, I collapse into a heap on the sand dunes and Courtney lowers the gun and drops down beside me.

“Are you all right?” she asks me, clutching my shoulder and shaking me a little.

I close my eyes and breathe. Their scents still cling to the air, but it’s not as oppressive and overwhelming as it was when they were here. My head starts to clear and my thoughts rearrange more sensibly in my head.

“I’m okay,” I say. “At least, I think I’m okay. Where the hell did you get that gun?”

“Aunt Julia told me where to find it yesterday. I thought she was being paranoid, but it seems to have come in handy.”

“Do you actually know how to fire it?”

“Not a clue. But I looked badass, right?” I manage a chuckle that morphs into a flurry of groans. “What happened? Is it your heat?”

“I think so. It’s coming. I can tell it’s coming.”

“And what about Rambo and Arnold?”

“They arrived unannounced and then they went crazy, started fighting. I told them to stop.”

“It’s your scent,” Courtney says, squeezing her nose. “It’s so damn strong this morning. I bet it drove them wild.”

“I think so.” I squeeze her arm. “Thank you for intervening.”

She grins proudly. “What were they fighting about?”

My eyes drop to the sand.

“You?” Courtney asks. “Oh jeez, Bea, that is hot!”

I manage a crooked smile. “I have to admit, it was sort of hot. I think that’s why my body went haywire there for a minute.”

“Do you feel better now? Can you think straight?”

“Hmmm, I still feel like I drank ten shots of vodka in a row.” My vision swoops in and out of focus and my head is dizzy as hell. Plus I’m horny, very very, horny. Probably not information Courtney needs to know. “I can think a little straighter now, though.”

“Good, because they’re coming back and you’re going to have to make a decision. I’m not sure I can hold six alphas off with a shotgun, especially when I don’t know how to fire it.”

I let my head flop against Courtney’s shoulder. “I can’t choose.” I peek up at her. “What am I going to do?”

“You’re going to have to make a decision, Bea. Either that or we’re going to have to hot-tail it out of here, pretty darn quick.”

“I don’t know how to choose. Just when I think I’ve made up my mind, it flip flops again or my heart aches so fiercely I think I might vomit.”

“We could flip a coin?”

I think about that. It seems as good a way as any. “Okay, let’s try that.”

Courtney digs into the pocket of her jean shorts she's slung on and pulls out a quarter.

"Heads York, tails Boston, okay?"

I nod. She tosses the coin high up into the air and we watch it spin, catching the light as it does and hanging suspended, before landing in the sand with a whack.

"What is it?" I say, unable to look.

"Tails," Courtney tells me.

Right. Tails. Boston. Okay. Good, we have a decision.

"Are you happy with that?" my cousin asks.

"Yes." I try not to think of Axel, standing on the sand, his shirt ripped open, his lip all bloody. I try not to think of Connor and Nate too.

I fail.

They all come crashing into my mind and my heart pangs.

"No, no, I can't reject York. I can't." I bury my face in my hands. "I just can't do it."

"Maybe," Courtney picks up the penny and pulls my hands from my face, "maybe if you experienced such a visceral reaction to the idea of rejecting Pack York, it means they are the ones you should choose."

"Maybe?" I rake my fingers through the sand.

"Good, right, so you're going with Pack York." I frown at her. "Oh no, Bea, what?"

"I can't reject Pack Boston." I screw up my eyes trying to imagine sending Angel and the others away. I imagine their disappointed faces; I imagine how strained my heart would feel. "I can't."

"Are you sure you're not worrying about their feelings instead of your own?" Courtney asks, swiping damp hair from my wet cheeks. "You know *you* get to decide. It's what *you* want. And what anyone else wants or thinks or says doesn't matter."

I smile at her. “I know, Courtney, and I know I spent too much of my life pandering to that man—”

“That shithead!”

“But I’m not going back to that. I want to choose what is right for me. I’m just not sure what the hell is right for me.”

“Then do you want to get out of here before they get back?”

I shake my head. “No, maybe when I’m faced with the decision, I’ll be able to make it.” I struggle to my feet. “I’m going to have to.”



“THEY’RE COMING,” Courtney calls a half hour later. I’m standing under another ice-cold shower. I have been since Axel and Angel left.

I’m hoping if my body is calmer, my head will be clearer and I’ll be able to come to some kind of rational decision.

But as I switch off the flow and step out into the bedroom, I realize any reprieve the shower may have brought is short lived. My temperature climbs and all the slick I’d washed away comes flooding back.

I slip a dress over my head, and pull on some panties.

Oh well, there’s not a lot I can do about it.

I meet Courtney out in the hallway and together we go and wait on the front porch, watching the two cars race down the driveway again.

“They are going far too fast,” I mutter, screwing up my face as their brakes screech and they swing up in front of us. More dust swirls into the air and I cough and splutter and waft it away with my hand.

Axel climbs out of his car first, followed quickly afterwards by Angel from his, then Silver and Connor, Nate and Hardy.

They line up in a row, a wall of alpha muscle and bone, and even Courtney can't help a gasp. My eyes trail automatically over each one of them. They're all different. Their skin, their hair and their eyes, all different colors and shades, the shape and sculpture of their bodies each unique. Everything except those two pairs of gray eyes – almost identical in hue.

It would be impossible to say which one of these men was the most beautiful. Utterly impossible.

My stomach growls as if it wants to feast on them all, and the rest of my body seems to agree, a pulse beating between my legs and my skin tingling.

Courtney's clutching the gun again, just in case. She leans in to whisper in my ear, "Any ideas?"

"Nope." None at all.

Nobody speaks and six pairs of alpha eyes with all their mesmerizing power are fixed on me. My knees shake, my body wilts and sweat pools at the base of my neck. The breeze ruffles through the dunes and a gull screeches above us.

It's Nate who finally breaks the silence.

"Hey, little bird, are you coming with us?" His eyes are a million times dirtier than usual as if he can somehow communicate with one look all the dirty things he has planned for me.

Oh lord. I swallow down a moan.

"Of course, she's not, asshole," Hardy says, drawing my attention to him. He's wearing a tight black t-shirt today and I can see a line of tattoos reaching up from the collar and along his neck. He winks at me. "Come on, sweetheart. Let's go."

"Just a minute here," Courtney says, waving the gun along the line of alphas.

"You're holding that wrong," Nate calls to her.

"Could probably still do some damage though, couldn't I?" she snaps back.

Nate lifts his hands in surrender and grins.

“Bea’s going to choose what’s going to happen here,” she tells the alphas. “None of you.”

“Of course.”

“Whatever she wants.”

“Just say the word.”

Courtney glances at me.

“This is such a hard decision,” I start to say, my eyes swimming with water and the alphas’ faces blurring. “You’ve all been so sweet to me, and patient. And to be honest, I didn’t even think I’d want to spend this heat with alphas. But you’ve made me see it could be good.”

“Damn sure it will be with us, sweetheart,” Nate calls out.

“Nah, not with them,” Hardy shakes his head. “Those assholes couldn’t find a clit if you gave them GPS, a map and a compass.”

“I’ve made more pussies squirt than you’ve had hot dinners, Hardy.”

“And what would you know about hot dinners, Nate?” Hardy chuckles.

All the men stiffen.

The noise dies in Hardy’s throat and in the next second: chaos.

Pure and simple chaos.

Fists fly, feet stamp, jaws snap and legs kick.

Courtney lifts her gun into the air and fires, the blast sending her tumbling right backwards into the sand. The gunshot does nothing to break up the alphas.

I watch, shocked as they pummel each other, names and insults flying, half of which I don’t understand.

“You’d talk to Nate, like that? You’d say that? You piece of shit!”

“He’s a fucking psycho always has been.”

“If your dad could see you now, Dickwad.”

“I’m not letting you take another girl from me.”

“You need to know your place. We run this city, not you.”

I stand there frozen, eyes darting from one alpha to the next, ears catching one snippet of conversation and then the next. All jumbled and tangled together like their limbs.

Until it’s not.

Until there’s one sentence I hear as clearly as if it were being whispered into my ear.

“We’re going to get the girl. We’re going to have her first. We’re going to win this bet.”

“Bet?” I say. “Bet?”

Courtney scrambles up from the ground, rubbing at her shoulder. “What, Sweetie? What’s that?”

“Bet,” I repeat quietly. Then I yell, “What bet?”

Unlike earlier, my voice has some sort of power over them. They all freeze, peering at me, their clothes torn, their faces and bodies covered in dust, their brows damp with sweat and blood.

“What bet?” I say one more time.

If I hoped I’d misheard or misunderstood, if I hoped this intuition swimming in my gut was wrong, well tough luck, Bea. Things don’t work out that way for you. Because the way they exchange glances, guilty glances, I know that intuition is correct.

Hell, I ignored it all those years with Karl. I should know by now it doesn’t let me down.

“You made a bet, didn’t you?” The tears are tumbling from my eyes, only this time for different reasons all together. “You made a bet about which pack would sleep with me first.” As I say the words, I feel my fragile heart rip right in two.

What a fool I’ve been. What a stupid pathetic fool.

Of course they wouldn't want me. No money, no qualifications, no job, no connections. I'm not even anything special to look at in the mirror and as for my personality? Isn't that what Karl told me, over and over again? He was right.

"Bea, sweetheart," Silver says softly, "it wasn't like that--"

"Honestly?" I snap. "Honestly? Can you stand there with your hand on your heart and tell me I'm wrong?" His gaze falls to his feet. "No, I didn't think so."

"Bea," Axel says, "it may have started out as a bet but--"

"Please," I lift my hand up, "please, I don't want to hear it. Just go, please." They don't move. "Please, please go," I plead, growing more hysterical as my body burns, my skin throbs and my heart breaks. "Go!"

Courtney scrabbles for the gun, pointing it at their faces with more determination this time. "You heard the woman. Get out of here you pieces of trash, before I ensure you're never able to father children – which would be one very big favor for humanity." She shakes her head and tears stream from her eyes, making me cry all the harder. "How could you do this to her? How?"

"I'm sorry, Bea, so sorry, but don't do this," Angel pleads. "A heat on your own--"

"I'm not saying this twice!" Courtney yells. "Get out of here now!!"

They hesitate, but Courtney takes a determined pace towards them and I spin on my heels and dash away to the house.

I can't stand to look at them a minute longer.

I collapse onto the couch, sobbing harder than I ever have before, harder than the day of my wedding, harder than when I left my home and all I loved behind. I cry as I hear the engines of their cars start up, and their vehicles rumble down the track. I cry when the noise of the two engines fade away. I cry when Courtney wraps me in her arms and holds me tight.

"I'm so sorry, Bea. I'm so sorry."

I cry until there are no more tears, until my body is tired and done, and then I wipe my face with the hem of my dress and I force myself to sit up straight.

I didn't let the last asshole break me. I won't let these six either.

"It's okay. I'm okay." Courtney's face is full of sympathy. "Oh no, don't look at me that way, Court, otherwise you'll set me off again."

"I encouraged you to pursue them. I didn't think ..."

"It's okay," I say again, hoping the words will eventually sink in and I'll believe them. Because really, am I okay?

I'm tipping into heat. Soon, if all those pamphlets are to be believed, I'll be a blubbing bundle of hormones with no sense of time or place, my flesh riddled with pain, agony searing through every nerve, my body begging to be rutted.

I need a new plan, and a new plan quick.

As if reading my mind, Courtney asks, "Do you want me to call Aunt Julia, see if she could arrange an alpha or a pack for you?"

"No, no way," I say firmly. "I'm done with alphas and I'm done with men in general. I'm going to the clinic."

A_{xel}

WE FILE into our apartment like a pack of defeated dogs, our tails hanging between our legs. I certainly feel like a beaten one. My jaw throbs, my ribs are bruised and my knuckles raw. It's my heart that's aching the most though. I thought last night was bad. I thought that was painful.

No, this is agony. The look on her face. The way it cracked right in front of us like a pebble hitting glass, fissures racing across the surface.

And all that pain, all that heartache she's been keeping hidden, buried deep down in her soul, came flooding up at that moment.

Shit, we did that. We did that to her. We hurt her.

"Man," Nate says, pacing the room at such speed, he's making me cross-eyed. "Man, we fucked up. We fucked up big time. Goddamn."

"Who the fuck let it slip in the first place?" I growl. "She was never meant to find out about the bet."

Nate stops in his tracks and spins towards me. His face is murderous, that special shade of white it turns before he unleashes the hounds of hell. "That stupid bet was your idea," he growls out between his teeth.

“It was Angel’s.”

“You agreed to the dumbass idea.”

“I don’t remember you complaining about it when I told you, Nate. In fact,” I draw myself up to my full height, squaring my shoulders, “I seem to remember you rubbing your hands together and claiming it would be fun.”

It was a stupid idea, Nate’s right. At the time, it seemed like the perfect way to solve our land issue and the omega conundrum in one easy stroke.

The first pack to rut and knot the little omega, would win her and all the land out by the beach.

Now I realize the entire thing was childish. However, I’m not about to admit my mistakes to Nate.

“It was fucking stupid,” Connor says, sounding tired and exasperated. A shiner’s forming around his right eye. It’ll be black by nightfall.

“It’s that feud. That fucking feud,” Nate says, pacing again, throwing me murderous looks as he does. “I don’t give a shit about it. Never have. But I’ve always had your back, Axel. Always been dragged into your bullshit regardless.” He halts and thrusts his finger in my face, making me growl. “I couldn’t give a shit about Angel Boston and his pack.”

I grab Nate’s finger squeezing it in my fist and the next thing I know we’re wrestling on the floor.

Nate lands two hooks on my already bruised cheek before Connor grabs him by the nape of his shirt and hauls him off me.

“What?” Connor barks. “Now we’re fighting each other?”

“Looks that way,” Nate spits bloody saliva onto the floor, onto my fucking Persian rug.

I launch for him again, but Connor yanks me away.

“I’m leaving,” Nate announces.

“What? Nate, no. What are you doing?” Connor says.

“Need some space, man. Need some space.”

And he’s out the door before Connor can stop him.

“Shit,” Connor mutters.

He’s undecided whether to stay with me or follow after Nate. Fuck knows where the dude is headed, but he’s likely to leave a path of destruction wherever he goes. Usually, Connor’s the one that clears up his messes and scoops him out of whatever hole he lands himself in.

“Go after him,” I tell Connor.

“No,” Connor drags his hand down his face and collapses into the nearest chair. “No, I haven’t got the energy, man, I’m ...”

I understand. I feel the same way.

Defeated.

Crushed.

Empty.

It’s not meant to feel this way, is it?

We’re alphas. We fall for a girl, we have our fun, we move on.

She shouldn’t hold us under a spell. She shouldn’t drain us like this.

I didn’t even know her that well.

“She’s never going to want to see us again,” Connor says.

Yeah, she won’t and I’m never going to get the chance to know her like I want to.

Except, even as I think that, I smell bullshit. I do know her. I see her. I understand her.

I don’t comprehend how that’s possible. But it is. She is meant to be mine.

And, goddamn it, I am meant to be hers.

“I don’t know how to fix this.” I lean over my knees and stare down at my hands. The hands that held her only two days

ago. Now they're skinned and raw, dried blood on my knuckles and someone else's blood on my palms.

These hands aren't worthy of her. These hands don't deserve to touch her.

"No, me neither," Connor says, sighing.

"Not good enough," I snap. "We have to fix it." I jump to my feet and take Nate's place, stalking up and down the room. Connor's eyes follow my movement. "We have to fix it. I'm not giving up on her."

"You think Pack Boston will?"

I consider this for a moment. "No," I say.

"Didn't think so, which means we're in a worse position than before. Because now, not only are we in competition for this girl, she hates us too."

"There has to be a way to make it right."

"Axel," Connor says, and I stop pacing at his tone, "if someone did that to you –played with your feelings, made a bet about you – would you forgive them?"

"Shit." I thump my fist against the wall making the plaster shake. "Shit, shit, shit."

We spend the next few hours going over it. Back and forth. Searching for a way to fix the mess we've made. We come up with no solutions whatsoever.

Nothing.

We can send all the flowers and chocolates we like. We can gift her diamonds and dedicate every song on the radio to her. We can spend the next eternity saying sorry. That won't cut it, I saw the hurt in her eyes. There's no way we're winning her back like that.

When we've exhausted all our redundant ideas, Connor checks his phone and tries calling Nate. It goes straight through to voicemail and he sends Mrs. Finch a message, warning her the youngest member of our pack is on the warpath.

“She wants to know why?” Connor says, reading his message.

“Oh crap. She’s going to kill us.”

“No,” Connor says. “That would be going easy on us. She’s going to torture and then kill us.”

It’s probably less than we deserve.

“Tell her it’s complicated,” I say.

“We’re only delaying the inevitable. Mrs. Finch knows everything. She’ll find out what we did soon enough.”

“Yeah, but I can’t handle her ire right now.” Connor starts typing away on his phone and I stare down at my clothes. I stink of Angel and his pack. I need to go get showered. It’s not helping me think straight with their scents in my nose. It’s not helping my mood either.

Neither is the omega’s sweet perfume still lingering on my skin. But, as much as I’d like for it to remain on my body forever, I’m only torturing myself with it, the scent conjuring up images of her writhing in my bed in my mind. There’s no way we can fix this mess before her heat is over. However she chooses to spend it, she’s not spending it with us.

I’m halfway to the bathroom, shirt and pants already on the floor, when my phone buzzes.

I consider ignoring it. Connor probably confessed to Mrs. Finch. This is probably my lecture. Then again, it could be Nate.

I scramble through my pants’ pockets and tug out my phone, frowning when I don’t recognize the number. I stare at it, then slam my thumb down on accept.

“Hello,” I bark.

“Hi ... is that Axel? Axel York?” It’s the omega’s cousin. After she stuck a gun in my face (twice), I’d recognize her voice anywhere.

“Courtney? Yes, this is Axel. What’s wrong?”

I didn't ever expect to hear from this woman again. Certainly not hours after we crushed her cousin's heart right in front of her eyes. Something must be wrong and my blood runs cold with the knowledge.

"It's Bea."

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

Oh fuck.

Oh no.

No, no, no, no.

I swallow, my tongue heavy in my mouth, my throat restricting. "What's happened? What's happened to Bea?"

"I-I-I-I checked her into the omega clinic, for her heat, like she wanted."

"Yes?"

"But she forgot her phone."

"Right?" I'm trying to be patient here, but my heart has stopped beating and the oxygen won't filter to my brain. She needs to move to the important bit. The reason she's calling.

"I found it—"

"What?"

"Found her phone when I got back to the condo. I don't think she knew she'd forgotten it, you know, in our rush. So I took it back to the clinic for her and then ..."

"Then what? Then what, Courtney?" I bark, my patience running thin. If something has happened to my omega, I need to know about it now.

"They wouldn't let me in, which I thought was funny because they were all lovely and friendly when I dropped her off and—"

"She's in heat. They probably thought it was inappropriate—"

"Axel," she says, "no one's stopping me from seeing my cousin." I smile. I like this girl. "I barged my way in there and

...”

“And ...” My blood runs so cold I shudder.

“She wasn’t there. She was gone. No one could tell me where she was.” A sob breaks free from Courtney’s throat.
“Axel, Bea’s missing.”

Angel

I STARE DOWN at the ringing mobile in my hand. It's a long time since he's called me. Years in fact.

Is it to gloat about the fundamental screw up today?

Then again, maybe he doesn't consider it a screw up. Maybe he doesn't feel the way I do about this omega. Maybe it was always about taking something I wanted from me. Hasn't it always been that way between us?

I stare at his name as the phone continues to ring, the electronic bells chirping loudly, the thing vibrating against my palm.

What does he want?

Nothing good.

But there's only one way to find out.

"Axel," I say, venom leaking into my voice as I answer.

Did he see her face? Did he see how much we hurt her?

I should have known it would end this way. Those who end up caught between our packs have always been crushed.

"Angel," he responds, and in that one word I can hear the lisp, know I fucked up his lip good and proper.

I smile to myself. Good. I'm fucking nursing a bleeding nose here myself.

"What do you want? Is this some kind of victory call? Because you didn't win the bet, York. I'm not backing down. That land and that omega are going to be mine."

"I don't give a fuck about the bet or the land, Angel."

I snort. "All you ever care about is winning, Axel. All you've ever cared about is winning. You don't care who gets hurt in the process."

"Are you serious?" He chuckles ironically. "That's you, Angel. It's never been me. You always wanted to be me. Always wanted to emulate me."

"And you always wanted to take everything from me. Anything that was mine."

We're silent. Both thinking back to that time. When the cracks that had always been there severed us apart once and forever. Celia. The accident.

"I can't steal something from you, if it was never yours in the first place," he says.

I close my eyes. All those years ago. I still feel it like a fresh wound. Still so painful. My girl. With him.

I won't let it happen again. Celia was a schoolboy infatuation. Bea could be the love of my life. Because, goddamnit, I've never felt this way before. Never spent every waking minute of my day, and every dreaming minute of my sleep, thinking of her. Wanting her.

I'm going to make it up to her. I'm going to fix this mess. She is going to be mine. She is going to be a part of my pack.

Not his. Not ever his.

"What do you want, Axel?"

There's a long pause down his end of the line. I can hear traffic passing and the tick of a clock.

I wait.

“It’s the omega.”

“What about the omega?” I ask slowly. If he’s calling to ask me to back off, he can go straight to hell without passing go.

“She’s missing.”

For several long minutes those words spin around and around in my head and don’t compute. Then slowly, slowly, the meaning filters through, my body understanding before my mind does. My heart pounds in my ears and the phone shifts in my damp palm.

“Missing? How?” I ask finally.

“Her cousin took her to the omega clinic for her heat. But she’s no longer there.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s gone.”

“Someone’s taken her!” Every single muscle in my body tenses and the world swims in front of my eyes.

Someone has taken her. Has taken my omega.

This won’t stand. I won’t let this happen.

“It’s not clear. All I know is she’s missing.”

Axel swallows and my ears seem to sharpen waiting on his next words.

“Little brother,” he says, “we have to find her.”

END OF PART ONE

Pack Rivals Part Two - coming May 2023

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a British romance author who loves writing soft and steamy omegaverse romances, sure to get your pulse racing and your heart fluttering. My couples are destined to find each other - and when they do, oh boy!

My other loves include long romantic walks in the countryside, undisturbed soaks in a hot bath and even hotter stories. I have one husband, three children and a very naughty cat. When I'm not writing stories, I'm thinking about stories, listening to stories, reading stories or dreaming about them. Come follow me!

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ABOUT HANNAH'S OMEGAVERSE

I write soft and steamy omegaverse romances — stories that are on the sweeter side — mixing the sauciness of omegaverse dynamics with contemporary plots.

My omegaverse stories are set in a modern world just like ours, except people can be one of three kinds — Alphas, Betas and Omegas. Betas are just like you and I, but Alphas and Omegas are slightly different biologically. In my stories, the characters are often battling with their biological urges, needs and instincts, and trying to fit into a modern world which can be judgemental and sometimes prejudiced.

ALPHAS

Alphas are generally larger, stronger and more aggressive. Their instincts can make them domineering and controlling. Alpha males are also a little anatomically different where it counts the most. Yep, I'm talking the peen — at the base there is a knot which expands when an Alpha comes, locking him into his partner where they remain stuck together for a period of time. Biologically, this increases the chance of pregnancy. Some Alphas can control the expansion of their knot, others can't.

OMEGAS

Omegas are smaller and their instincts can make them more submissive — especially towards an Alpha. Only an

Omega can ‘take’ an Alpha’s knot. An Omega has regular heat cycles where they are especially fertile. During this period they become hot and horny and very uncomfortable unless they are fucked and knotted frequently by an Alpha.

HEATS, RUTS AND BITES

Similarly to menstrual cycles, the Omegas in my world have differing heat cycles. Some have very regular heats, some have them less often, and others control or suppress them with medication. A heat typically lasts three or four days. When an Omega falls into a heat, their scent alters and they become especially alluring to any Alpha close by.

An Omega in heat can drive an Alpha into rut. An Alpha in rut isn’t hindered by the usual biological restraints that your average guy is. I’m talking about permanent erections, no recovery, and the ability to come multiple times! (Sounds like fun, huh?)

Both Omegas and Alphas have glands at the back of their necks, the source of their scents. These glands are especially sensitive when the Omega or Alpha is turned on. Biting this gland is known as claiming and binds the pair together, often irreversibly. It also leaves a scar and changes the Alpha or Omega’s scent which signals to others that they are ‘taken’. During a heat, when an Omega is at the mercy of their biological urges, an Omega can often beg for an Alpha to ‘claim’ or bite them.

SCENTS, BLOCKERS AND SUPPRESSANTS

Both Omegas and Alphas have heightened senses of smells and distinctive scents. An Alpha and Omega can recognise another Alpha or Omega by their scent alone, often over great distances. Their scents can also signal how they’re feeling — especially when they are aroused or aggravated. Omegas and Alphas can mask their scents using blockers. They can also try to quell their Alpha and Omega instincts with the use of suppressants — for example an Alpha might take an

emergency suppressant to stop themselves responding to an Omega in heat.

SOFT AND STEAMY OMEGAVERSE

In my world, Alphas and Omegas are rare and viewed as a source of fascination by Betas. Alphas are often struggling to fit into a society where aggression and violence isn't tolerated, and Omegas are torn between their desire to be independent and their instinct to be controlled. It is often true love and the perfect partner that allows them to find the balance, acceptance and happiness they need and deserve. Happily ever afters guaranteed!