



SOCIETY OF SHIFTERS SERIES

# STRONG AS A HORSE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# JARICA JAMES

# STRONG AS A HORSE

A SOCIETY OF SHIFTERS NOVEL

JARICA JAMES

Copyright © 2022 Jarica James

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations in book reviews.

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of a copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by fines and federal imprisonment.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in, or encourage, the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

**Edits by: Michelle's edits and Corrections by Quinn**

**Cover by: Jodielocks Designs**

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Want More?](#)

[Also by Jarica James](#)

CHAPTER  
**ONE**

*Nyla*

“**T**he groom is missing. I’m so sorry.”

My wedding planner’s words had my entire world collapsing around me. My pulse rushed in my ears and I had to take several measured breaths before I could even think.

Lance would never do this to me, right? It had to be a misunderstanding. This was something that happened in movies, not to real people.

My horse let out a sad huff that matched the sobs I was holding back as my heart fractured to pieces.

All the planning, money, thought, and love that went into this wedding was for nothing.

Did he ever even love me?

I didn’t bother to respond, instead shoving past my bridesmaids and her to make my way to the aisle that I should have been walking down very differently. I needed to see this for myself. Otherwise, there was no way I’d believe it.

Part of me hoped he’d be there when I walked to the chapel, waiting at the end and this was just some sick prank someone was trying to pull.

“Wait,” Mackenzie, my maid of honor, called out to stop me but I was on a mission now. She was flitting nervously around me like her chicken soul-bonded was panicking along with her.

“He left this.” The wedding planner wouldn’t even look me in the eyes as she handed over a hastily scrawled note on the wedding venue stationary. She was keeping pace with us now and from the frantic tone of her voice I knew it wasn’t going to be good.

“Thanks,” I choked out as I opened the small slip of paper to read. It was a hastily scrawled sentence on venue stationary. Not a single hint of emotion behind it.

Tears started to blur my vision as the words burned themselves into my brain.

*I’m so sorry, Nyla. I can’t do this.*

He’d even signed it formally, so I had no doubts about where we stood at this very moment. My heart wanted to protest, say it was forged, but it was the same signature I’d become familiar with.

There was no denying it now.

My horse let out a soft, sad whinny that had my heart fracturing further. This was not how fated mates were supposed to work. We knew what we meant to each other from the very first meeting. His smile, his scent, all of it burned into my brain. We’d formed a bond, how could he do this now?

How did he not hurt as much as I did?

Knowing I had to go face the music, I continued toward the guests who were waiting to have a wedding. In fact, it should be starting any moment. Classical piano music filled the air, getting louder as I approached.

The small banquet hall had been transformed from mundane to magical thanks to the wedding planner and her team. It was exactly what I’d dreamed up, brought to life.

Everything was dusted in glitter and twinkle lights with pops of yellow to match the sunflowers in my hand.

Though right now, they were being held upside down and small yellow petals lined the floor like I was leaving breadcrumbs for Lance to find me.

In my heart, I knew he wasn’t coming.

Instead of a runaway bride, I had a runaway groom who likely hadn't even bothered to look back.

"Fuck him, Nyla," Mackenzie said as she put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Don't waste tears on him."

I brushed my fingers over my cheek, not even realizing that I was crying. Two years I'd wasted on the bastard, twenty-four months of building a life, a home, a future. We'd talked about where we'd live, what we wanted out of our lives, hell, we'd even talked about growing old together and finding our own family.

And now, I was single.

Because there was no way I'd be taking his ass back. There was no excuse for this and I couldn't imagine what our family and friends would be saying when I managed to get the words out.

My heart broke all over again at the thought of his mom and dad. They'd been like my own from the moment we met. His mom and I would spend hours baking and talking. And now he'd taken that from me, too.

"He wasn't good enough for you, Ny," my other friend, Grace, said softly. "And he's a fucking fool." He'd caused a lot of pain today, but now he'd upset a lioness, and if anyone knew how to hold a grudge, it was Grace. If he changed his mind and tried to come crawling back, she'd make him regret it.

The music started as the door opened but I held up my hand to stop the pianist as my wedding planner rushed in behind me with a mic in hand, giving it to me and stepping aside. Even she wanted no part of this, not that I could blame her.

Everyone's eyes bored into me and there was concern and confusion on their faces. They likely thought it was a delay, an accident, anything but the truth. No one would expect this from Lance of all people. My former mate was responsible to a fault, punctual, but caring.



Or at least that was the lie I'd bought into. I guess I never really knew the real Lance if this is what he was capable of all along.

"I'm so sorry to tell you all that Lance has decided he doesn't want to get married today," I started, taking a shaky breath as more tears threatened to fall. The mic gave feedback and I winced, but continued on. "The wedding is off. I'll make sure your gifts are returned to you. I apologize for making you wait for nothing."

Whispers filled the space but I had already dropped the mic with a thud and turned to leave.

"Wait, this can't be right," Lance's dad protested as he rushed to my side. I wordlessly handed him the note and from the shock and defeat there, he recognized it as his son's writing as well. If I had any doubts, he'd just chased them away. "I'm so sorry, Nyla. You didn't deserve this from your mate. There has to be—"

"I'll be fine, Calvin, it's alright," I said in a hollow tone as I turned away. My flowers fell to the ground. It was me finally letting go of any dreams I had of spending my life with Lance. The final nail in the coffin that was our relationship.

Grace and Mackenzie caught up easily, not saying anything and I knew they were panicking on my behalf.

"I need vodka. So much vodka I forget who he even was," I growled as we got back to the dressing room. Angry tears were now falling and I was ready to curse every man who ever existed. Calvin was right, I didn't deserve this. He could have backed out any time before today. My heart was shattered, but so was my pride.

"I'll make sure the planners handle canceling everything they can. The caterers are already done setting up, so we'll have enough food to feed an army," Mackenzie said. She was a fixer by nature, so she was already in her element making sure this didn't have to turn even more stressful for me.

"Donate it, there's a homeless shelter down the street. Have them change locations and call the shelter to see if it's

okay,” I said absently but I was already heading for the front door. Once we set our mind to something, we horses didn’t look back. My mare was a stubborn and prideful creature and so was I; we wouldn’t be moping around because of this setback. We’d pick ourselves up and move on with our lives.

After enough shots to forget this ever happened.

And maybe a good, solid cry over some ice cream at some point.

“You can’t go to the bar like that. You’ll be explaining all night where your groom is,” Grace pointed out. I hated how delicate she was being with me. We weren’t the types to hold back and I didn’t want anyone’s pity.

“Well, I’m going regardless,” I said. “I’m as strong as a horse, remember.” My words were said through gritted teeth, but I continued to repeat my favorite mantra in my head, reminding myself that I couldn’t let this ordeal be a weakness.

“Then I have an idea.” My favorite lioness smirked and I knew it was going to be good. “Have you ever seen a ‘trash the dress’ photoshoot?”

“Yeah,” I hedged. Part of me hated the idea of ruining the gorgeous gown, but now it was tainted by what could have been if the stupid antelope shifter hadn’t have run from me. I knew they were known for their speed, but I never thought he’d use it to run as far as he could from what we’d built.

“Let’s do one. We’ll trash it with paint, cut it short and spicy, then go get blackout fucking drunk,” she said. “I’ll even call my brother to drive. He’s responsible.”

I snorted. “That’s an understatement.” My thoughts and emotions were so loud in my head it took several deep breaths before they calmed. My horse wasn’t happy and wasn’t afraid to let me know, but right now I needed to not think about it. “Let’s do it.”

Grace was already on the phone while I plotted my revenge, planning to post all over my social media why I was trashing my dress. He didn’t get to walk away from this unscathed.

An hour later, we were at the park, yellow paint and a giant pair of fabric scissors in hand. Bending over, I took the scissors to the countless layers of tulle and satin until it brushed just above my knees. Every tear and slice I gave it was satisfying and helped to dry the rogue tears that continuously threatened to fall.

There was something freeing about destroying the dress I'd spent far too much money on. It was cathartic and by the time I dropped the scissors, I was breathing hard but felt oddly light.

"Paint?" Grace asked as she held up the box containing the array of small cans of yellow in different sunny and pastel shades.

"Absofuckinglutely," I grinned. Not wanting to be coated in paint I started to slip out of it and laughed at the choking sound Grace made as I whipped it off my body. "Breathe. I'm covered."

She huffed at me but took my discarded dress and hung it from a low-hanging branch so we could decorate it.

"Good, because a public indecency fine is not how to make this day better," she growled.

She ignored my laughter and popped off all of the lids quickly and I grabbed a thick brush and snatched up the most vibrant shade, sticking the brush in before splattering it on the dress.

Traitorous tears started to fall again as I thought of Lance's face. I violently flung paint at the dress. Then I thought of his words, his false promises of having kids and a life. Another color flung angrily at the white dress.

It continued like that, Grace never stepping in. Instead, I heaved out my breaths as I attacked the wedding dress with all of the colors, letting out the heartache and hurt he'd forced me to face.

By the time it was a splatter painted piece of art, I dropped the brush in the box and collapsed on the grass.

I was exhausted, my chest ached, and I was all out of tears. What I needed was a large field and my horse running free for a few hours.

“Can I do anything?” Grace asked as he sat next to me.

“I’m strong, remember? And you already did, I needed that,” I admitted, knocking my shoulder against hers.

“I’m here!” Mackenzie yelled out as she ran across the grass toward us, bags in each hand. “I brought tacos!”

“My heroes,” I said as she sat next to us. She was out of breath and wide-eyed as she took in my destruction.

“I kind of like it better this way,” she joked.

“There’s more,” Grace admitted, pulling a can of glitter spray out of her pocket. “I know you well enough that you’d want to stand tall and proud, and this will have all eyes on you.”

“Oh my god, yes,” I laughed, snatching it from her hand and rushing over to coat the dress in iridescent glitter. It complimented the white and yellow, catching in the afternoon sun. “Alright. Did someone say tacos?”

“You have to eat or that blackout will happen way sooner than you want,” Mackenzie huffed out a laugh.

“She always has to mother hen us,” Grace complained. We liked to tease her about it but honestly, it was nice to have someone looking out for me. They’d been my only family since my parents died in high school and even having them here now made me feel a little less broken.

“Well, she is a hen shifter,” I snorted. We both earned a glare from our bestie. She hated when we teased her for it. “Don’t be upset, Kenzie, I’d be lost without you.” My words rang with sincerity and gratitude. She’d already handled one of the wedding cancellation jobs, so I didn’t have to suffer through hours of phone calls and pitying looks. Nothing cut a horse down more than fucking pity.

“You’re lucky, assholes, I’m the best,” she said playfully as she started opening boxes. “We’ve got black bean, spicy

tofu, and steak for our carnivore.”

My phone chimed and I tossed it over to Grace to hold. I didn't want to talk to anyone tonight. I wanted to lose myself in drinks and fun.

---

THE RUSTIC BAR was off of the beaten path. Nestled on the edge of downtown and surrounded by a law firm and a yoga studio, both of which are closed before the night really begins. Which meant that the sidewalk was currently packed with drunk patrons and the music spilled out of the open doors.

I wanted something out of the way so we didn't happen by any of the guests who expected a party and open bar that night. We had several people flying in from out of state and now they were stuck here with nothing to do. I wasn't taking any chances.

“This is... quaint,” Mackenzie noted as we flashed our IDs at the bouncer. But her criticism died the moment we stepped inside.

They'd kept an industrial look to everything with exposed ceilings painted black. The bar and tables were a mix of polished wood and rustic metal. The display behind the drinks was glass and the lights glowed behind them so they were like a beacon to lonely bitches like me.

I didn't bother to hesitate as I ran up to the bar and claimed a seat. It was busy enough the bartender couldn't make it to me for about ten minutes but when he did, I got the look I expected.

“Left at the altar today. What can you give me that will ensure that I don't have to think about him *ever* again?”

He let out a low whistle but turned around without any explanation. My eyes went wide as I watched him mix more than one liquor into the shaker. Part of me was afraid to try it but when he slid it over there was a fruity scent to it.

“Here, first one’s on the house,” he said, tapping the bar and giving me a wink before moving down the line.

“Man, I thought my ex was bad.” I turned to look at the guy next to me who was taking a swig of his beer. “She decided she liked my brother more and they hid it from me until they got pregnant. Guess I’m an uncle. Surprise.” He held up jazz hands and a fake smile that earned a laugh from me.

“That’s fucked up,” I said as I held up my glass. “Cheers to us for knowing how to pick them.”

His smile was at full force and he was definitely my type. In any other situation, I might have flirted, but this time, I just waited for him to tap his drink to mine before draining the entire thing.

The mix of fiery liquor was not at all covered by the juice he’d added and I choked as it burned its way into my body. Tears ran down my face for a very different reason and it took a few moments before I regained my composure. Grace came up and patted my back, not so subtly giving me a water that I knew Mackenzie forced her to bring me.

Already, my head was swimming pleasantly and I flagged down the bartender. “Give me something a little less strong this time since I’m starting off with a bang?”

“Will do,” he agreed, making another drink for me and starting a tab.

“Drink some water,” Mackenzie called over the music. Clearly, they didn’t understand the end goal here. Sure I didn’t want to get insanely drunk in minutes, but water was definitely not on the menu. “Then we can dance the night away.”

“I need a bit more alcohol before that happens.” I laughed, pointedly taking a long pull of the much less-toxic drink.

“The night is young,” she warned me and I knew at some point, I wouldn’t get away without dancing. Honestly, the thought of dancing at the moment only made me sad. Lance insisted on taking dance classes to prepare for our first dance. Something I wouldn’t get to experience now.

But I refused to let those thoughts have long in my mind tonight. Instead, I took another long drink and embraced the warmth it filled me with. The buzz was growing stronger by the minute and I'd never been more grateful for it.

"Grace promised she'd dance with you," I said to deflect for now. The lioness glared daggers as I shoved her toward Mackenzie. If her lioness could have bared fangs at me, she would have. I got one last parting look before they disappeared into the crowd, giving me a moment to nurse my drink in peace.

"There you are, Grayson." I turned, but the newcomer wasn't talking to me, he was talking to the guy next to me. "Oh, hello there, I'm Stephen." The new guy gave me an award-winning smile and held out his hand as he turned my way.

"Not today, pretty boy," I half-slurred, tipping my drink his way.

"At least you think I'm pretty." He laughed before taking the stool next to the man who I now knew was Grayson.

"Rugged," I said, pointing to Grayson. "And pretty. Kind of like this bar." I pointed at the mix of metal, wood, and lights. They both shared a look before cracking up. I didn't offer any more words of wisdom, I was too busy flagging down another drink despite my horse's protests. Tonight wasn't the night to rely on our bond and her wisdom.

"Give us a few appetizers," Stephen ordered quickly before the bartender could run off. "And a beer." He pointed at his friend's bottle.

"Fuck men," I grumbled to myself as I spotted my phone lying on the bar in front of me where Grace must have left it. The notifications were already piling in, of course, but not once did I see Lance's name pop up on my screen.

No calls, no texts, just that short note.

That's how little I meant to him.

"Left at the altar," I heard Grayson hiss at his friend. A lump rose in my throat. I'd lost my family young enough that

grief was a familiar friend. I could feel it creeping up and taking hold and I refused to let it. He didn't deserve my time or emotion.

"You know he didn't even want me to go after my dream?" I said to the men next to me. "Said it was undignified."

"Sounds like a twat," Stephen said with a shrug. "Now you've got nothing holding you back."

His words hung in the air between us and as I processed them, I felt my chest untighten a fraction.

"You're right!" I cheered. "Did you hear that..." I trailed off and squinted at the bartender's name as he approached, "Kyle? I can do what I want!"

"Except order another drink until you've had a soda or water," he countered with a laugh. "I don't like cleaning up puke."

"Oh, I'm not a puker," I promised him but he crossed his arms and glared down at me until I ordered a soda.

"Come on! Dance!" Mackenzie insisted, back again to torment me.

"I have to wait on my soda," I tried but she was already pulling me. So, I did the only thing I could think of and latched onto Grayson's wrist, pulling him with me. He stumbled out of his chair and called out to Stephen before following me semi-willingly.

"You're awfully bossy when you're drunk," he rumbled down at me as I pulled him close.

"You like it," I teased, shutting him up as I turned and started to move to the music, grinding into him. His hands fell to my hips and I smiled to myself.

This night was getting better by the minute. If I played my cards right, I could have two men in my bed before leaving all of this behind.



CHAPTER  
**TWO**

*Nyla*

*One Year Later*

A zebra, a horse, and a deer running alongside each other wasn't exactly a normal sight in nature. Yet, when it came to soul-bonded, it was as natural as breathing.

The afternoon sun beamed down on my horse as we ran through the fields. The outskirts of Willow Grove was reserved for prey soul-bonded animals like us to run and stretch without worrying about predators getting in the way.

It was secure, monitored, and clean. That was more than most of us get anywhere else.

The occasional wild stallions were out here but they knew to keep their distance. Animals were sensitive enough to sense the power within our soul-bonded forms and always gave us space.

I'd come a long way over the last year and my horse and I were stronger than ever. I had yet to hear a single word from the mate who rejected me and I was finally coming to terms with it. Life was too short to give him any more space in my mind but letting go was so much harder than I anticipated.

Now I had nothing holding me back and my horse and I had grown closer. Her emotions and presence were something I now relied on every day. We were a team. This was how soul-bonded were meant to be.

In a strange, twisted way, the breakup had led me to stop taking her for granted. My horse was strong and stubborn, but also graceful and caring. She'd reminded me how to be confident and happy, something I didn't think possible just a year ago.

Back home, I never made the time for us to stretch our legs like this, to run free like she craved to do. The town was old fashioned and full of predators. We'd been warned about being out at night and after a few smaller prey animals were attacked, I'd always listened. Here, we had freedom and land to use whenever we needed.

We raced past the deer who was pushing herself to the limits, trying to run past us. The competition had both of us standing tall and pushing as hard as we could. The zebra stayed behind, unaffected by our playful game.

It took a few minutes to notice that the deer running beside us had given up, heading for a copse of trees instead.

We slowed to a trot, enjoying the warm sun and cool breeze as we soaked in our afternoon of peace before work. The quiet moments were something I should have taken more time for in the past.

By the time we made it to the parking lot, I was relaxed and genuinely happy. Which was a far cry better than the crabbiness I'd felt all morning.

Starting my period and being out of coffee was definitely not the highlight of my week. But it was nothing a quick change of clothes and a trip to the coffee shop couldn't fix. Relying on myself was so much more rewarding. I was never disappointed and always knew what I needed.

When I reached the enclosure right outside the parking lot, I shifted and changed back into my clothes. The small building had barn doors big enough to fit our animals and changing stalls to give us modesty.

After changing I stepped back outside in time to see my earlier companions coming back in. I waved quickly and got a small bob of their heads in response. We weren't exactly

friends, but we'd run together a few times before. It made our runs much less lonely. My horse wasn't a solitary beast and neither was I.

Just looking out at the glowing forms of soul-bonded animals embracing their animal sides was enough to solidify my decision the first day I'd arrived. It was a sight I still couldn't help but smile about as I climbed back in my SUV.

As far as city life went, Willow Grove was one of the safer places to live. Watching *Soul Deep* 24/7 cover story after story of rising gang violence and predator attacks had me thankful I'd landed here when I did. At least we didn't have to worry about the infamous Snake Eyes Gang. Willow Grove wasn't exactly a hub for drug trades and trafficking.

My phone buzzed on my dashboard and I clicked the screen, smiling as Zathrian's name popped up. It was funny what some good coffee, a run, and my roommate and best friend could do for my mood.

"I'm on my way in, we got a bit carried away," I said as I navigated out of the lot. "You want me to grab us food on the way to the bar?"

"Is this a bad time to say my raven and I caught dinner on our flight?" He let out a throaty laugh at my noise of disgust. Being friends with predator animals was always an experience. The mere thought of eating meat had my stomach churning.

"That's disgusting, Zath," I groaned.

"We don't pick our soul-bonded, Ny, and I'm a happy raven," he said easily. "You're just jealous your choice is grass and oats."

My horse huffed in frustration and I swear it sounded like she was telling him off. She would happily have eaten either of those options. I may be vegetarian by extension but I had way better options than she did.

He laughed, already knowing he'd offended her.

"Tell your horse to calm down," he teased. "I know that comment riled her right up."

“You know her so well,” I laughed as I navigated into traffic. I’d stayed longer than expected which meant this was going to be a pain in the ass drive. At least I had Zath to talk to instead of letting road rage win.

For now at least.

Zath and I were complicated. He’d gone from a random hire after I opened up Soulful Brews, to my most trusted business associate and friend.

That and we were fated mates.

Yet, neither of us put much stock in mates, so we were mainly mates with benefits, no strings attached. My heart was broken and so was his. So, instead of a happy, fated meeting we simply decided to be friends and heal in our own way. Though he healed me more than he realized just by being there for me. The boundaries we had gave a safety net to help me not hate all mates quite so much.

Then it evolved from friends, to occasional lovers, to whatever combination we were. It was hard to let him in, but everyone wasn’t going to be Lance.

At least that’s what my therapist tried to convince me.

“Grab yourself some dinner. The shipment of beer came early so I’ve got enough to keep me busy,” he explained. “I got in early, thankfully, so it wasn’t sitting at the back door unattended again.”

The last thing we needed was a free for all of random people seeing it as fair game and running off with our inventory. This supplier was about to find out how angry this horse can get.

“I’m going to call them. This is two weeks in a row they’ve come hours earlier than planned.” I sighed.

“My vote is that the assholes running Bandit’s Taphouse fucked up their schedule again,” Zath said. There was a sharp tone to his voice he only got when talking about our rival bar. I couldn’t blame him, they’d been stealing our customers from the moment we opened.

If we threw a theme night, they'd do one the next month and go all out. If we found a great live band, they'd schedule one for the same nights. They were infuriating and cocky.

"Fuck them," I said as I fought against rush hour traffic. My extra twenty minutes in the outskirts had led me to end up right at the heart of traffic instead of beating it. "I'll order in, this is madness." A loud honk as I cut someone off had Zath laughing.

"Pay attention and stop talking to me," Zath ordered before hanging up. My raven was always on the logical side, and taking my attention away during bumper-to-bumper traffic wasn't a smart move.

Just as he hung up, someone cut me off, nearly taking off the front end of my SUV. Biting back a retort, my horse and I just huffed in annoyance and focused on getting to work in one piece.

"I'm back!" I called out as I let myself in the side door. Zath had already brought in the shipment and had a pizza box waiting on the bar. My chest warmed at the sight and even my horse was letting out an appreciative whinny. She loved that he took care of us. "You're amazing!"

"I know. The traffic sounded bad so I figured I'd handle it before the dinner crowd caused you to get hangry," he called back from the storage room. "But we really need to hire some muscle in this place. I'm far too delicate for manual labor." When he walked out, I nearly choked on the bite of cheesy goodness I was shoving in my face. He had a thick, silver necklace on that I'd never seen before.

"Did you steal something again?!" I demanded, walking over and pulling on the gaudy metal jewelry. Up close I could tell it was not high end, but the allure of something shiny was never lost on the greedy raven.

He scoffed and set down the empty crate so he could get away from me and my judgmental stare.

"No, I didn't," he groaned almost frantically. "I paid for it, it's mine. There was a sale at the corner shop." That antique

store was going to be the death of him and his budget. A sly fox ran it and knew just what to price the pieces Zath would come in for. He was his best customer after all. “Look, I got this, too!” He held up another object and I grinned.

The small figurine was a silver horse and I was almost flattered. Except I was fairly positive it wasn’t the horse that enticed him but the shiny silver.

“You better have,” I teased, handing it back. He glared at me before rushing over to his office and putting it on his shelf of shiny knick-knacks and objects he’d collected over the past year. The rest of his office was a chaotic mess of papers, books, and stuff. It was cozy and cluttered, and fit him.

“You’re just jealous; your office is boring,” he shot back, opening the door and flicking on the light to reveal my overly tidy office. I had nothing hanging on the walls except one cork board full of random licenses and important information I didn’t want to forget. Even my desktop was immaculate. My horse preened in my head, proud of how clean and organized it was.

“Some of us just aren’t hoarders, raven,” I laughed, yelping and running as he took off after me. He couldn’t just shift and fly after me so he ran, struggling to keep up with my speed. But as I rounded a corner he caught me, both of us laughing as he tickled my sides.

And neither one of us were about to admit how nice it felt to have his arms around me. Nope. Not happening. We were just friends... and mates. No big deal.

“Enough foreplay, you two!” Laura called out as she came in for her shift. For a petite, cat shifter, she wasn’t just cute and sweet; her claws were as sharp as her words, which came in handy when the patrons had a bit too much to drink and started getting handsy. Though having a burly bear for our bouncer meant that not too many of them acted out.

“Let’s get to work, we have thirty minutes until the doors open,” I ordered, ready to lose myself in our usual routine.

---

“GIVE ME ANOTHER BEER,” Vern demanded in his raspy voice. The old fox loved to come out and warm up the bar nearly every night. I guess that was his trade off for supplying Zath with all his gaudy knickknacks.

“Drink a soda,” I urged him gently. “You’ve knocked back three already and the night’s barely started.”

“Bullshit!” he argued with a laugh that ended in a wheeze. He smacked a fist to his chest as if to startle his lungs into working. “Knew I should have smoked another cigarette before coming in here.”

“Ew,” Laura said as she passed, sliding a beer his way with a grin. “And stop torturing my friend, here, boss.”

“See, she knows how to treat an old man.” He laughed, draining half the bottle in one go. She slyly slid over a bowl of pretzels and a soda without saying a word and I nearly died laughing as he started munching on them absently while she regaled him with a story about her dog.

“She’s good,” Zath noted as he leaned against the wall next to me. I nodded, watching as he reached for the soda and took a hearty swallow. This was why I trusted Laura with the bar when I couldn’t be here. She was amazing with our customers. I’d always wanted my place to be about gathering together, social but not shallow, and she helped keep our regulars coming back. If that included a few free sodas here and there, then I wasn’t about to complain.

“Is there some big event going on in the city tonight?” I asked as I glanced over the dwindling crowd. We’d never been this empty on a game day. Even the kitchen was getting bored and that *never* happened.

“It’s half-price wings over at Bandit’s Tap House,” Vern answered. I didn’t think he could hear us, the sly fox. He smirked and popped a pretzel in his mouth.

“Really?” Zath sighed. “I’m getting really fucking tired of them. It seems every time our numbers drop, here they are with something they’ve ripped off from us. Glad they have our expertise on their side.” The sarcasm was flowing like the beer tonight.

“They are hosting some huge game-day, half-priced bullshit,” he confirmed. “Had flyers down at the convenience store and everything.”

“Right around the corner?” I gasped. We’d danced around this rivalry of ours, but coming to the store only a few doors away? That felt like he was crossing a line. They knew damn well what they were doing and it was getting old.

“Wasn’t it last month right after we had that masquerade party, they threw a huge event? And after we had that big Valentine’s party, he did a super-cringy bachelor auction,” Laura added in. “You sure you didn’t piss him off?”

“Maybe in a past life,” I shrugged. “But no, we’ve never even met. I don’t even know what the owner looks like.” I could feel my horse’s annoyance as I mulled over everything the two of us had done over the past year.

The Tap House opened just a month after mine and it was like we were siblings in a feud. We’d do something, then they would try to show us up. It went on like that ever since and I had half a mind to stalk over there and demand to know why they couldn’t just find their own fucking ideas.

But I knew it was ridiculous. As obnoxious as it was, we didn’t own themed nights and events. Every business did them to bring in revenue. It just felt pointed after it happened time and time again.

It was even harder to ignore when my bar was empty. I hoped he was losing money tonight, giving away more wings than he had to offer and cutting it even.

“Maybe we should go in under cover?” Zath said. I thought he was joking but from the glint in his eye, I knew he was already making the plans in his mind. Raven’s were



known to be cunning and my friend here was almost scary when he had a plan.

“We’re above that,” I told him firmly. “We don’t need to stoop to his level. But with that said, the citywide parade is in three weeks, what should we do for it?”

“And you say you’re not just as petty as me.” Zath rolled his eyes but Laura was excitedly clapping her hands.

“We should find a new drink special. I love when we do the fun shots, we can make it Willow Grove themed or something,” she started. “Maybe have a photo booth?! Those will bring in the younger crowd faster than anything.”

My notebook was already out and I was jotting down ideas. Now I felt like it was personal and I had to put everything I had into bringing down Bandit’s Tap House. We’d continuously held the title of favorite local bar for a few months and they were desperately trying to take it from us. But I couldn’t let that happen. If they wanted to turn this into a war, then I’d gladly face it head on.

Challenge accepted.

---

## *THE NEXT MORNING*

“Hello? Nyla Stone?” a voice drifted in the open back door where I’d been lugging in another wave of deliveries. At least this one came when they were scheduled so I could meet them here.

“Yes, can I help you?” I called back as I made my way to the door. The man standing there had a grin on his face and a gaudy red suit. Everything from his twisted mustache to his knockoff wristwatch was over the top.

“I’m Stanley Evers, from the National Bar and Brewers Board. Our annual bartending competition is next month and we wanted to extend a personal invitation to the new establishments in the area.”

“Oh, wow,” I said, taking the envelope he was holding out. It wouldn’t be polite to mention I’d never even heard of his board or his competition, but at this point it would be stupid not to look into some exposure.

“It’s a great way to get your name on the board around here.” He was still trying to sell me on it and doing a damn fine job. My horse practically trotted around my brain, the sound of a competition too enticing to ignore. “We hope to see you there. Bandit’s Taphouse also agreed to go and said you’d be a good candidate.” My blood boiled that we were only offered because of them. Nothing like being a last minute addition.

“I’ll definitely consider it,” I promised with a friendly smile. “Thank you.” He tipped his nonexistent hat before leaving me in a sea of crates and supplies.

Patience wasn’t my strong suit so I ripped the envelope open and started reading, my excitement plummeting in seconds as I read the location information.

Madison.

The town I left behind along with my old life.

I sat so long staring at the invitation that I didn't even hear Zath coming in. He started to talk but the moment I didn't respond, he was in front of me, hands on my face and forcing me to look up.

"I know that look, Ny, and you're white as a ghost. What's going on?" he demanded. I simply held up the offending paper in my hand for him to read.

He read it over slowly, jaw clenching as he realized what was going on.

"So, we don't go," he reassured me. "It's not a big deal. They don't even usually have local bars. I always assumed they were just a stuffy group of old men judging bourbon."

"The guy already said Bandit's Tap House is going," I countered. "And that this could give us insane exposure."

"Come on, the event can't be that big," he laughed but he sounded unsure. Zath took a seat next to me and started pulling up the event on his phone, cursing at whatever he found. "Okay, I was dead wrong. But it still doesn't mean we have to do it."

"We do," I groaned in defeat. This was part of growing as a person, facing your fears and not letting the past dictate your future. "How do we sit here while they go and show us up? Plus, it's not like we'll see my ex there. Madison is big enough that if we stick to the location we won't encounter locals, right?"

"It's a decent-sized town," Zath agreed. "And you get a plus one, which is obviously me. I'll just fuck you every night so you won't have time to think about exes and memories." The wolfish grin he gave me had me clenching my thighs. If there was one thing Zath was an expert at, it was making me come, and I couldn't complain about the idea of spending every night sharing a bed.

"What would I do without you?" I joked, but in reality I meant every fucking word.

"Be sad and horny. So, come on, buck up, buttercup. Let's do some practice shots!" He pulled me out of my chair without

mercy and steered me to the bar after a slap on my ass for motivation.

“I don’t even know how to prepare for this,” I admitted. Saying it out loud had excitement bubbling in me. This was a way for us to prove ourselves to the public and I couldn’t pass that up. We knew we were better and now was a real chance to take those smug assholes down a peg or two.

Was I nervous?

Insanely.

Despite the excitement, a heavy feeling had settled in my chest at the thought of returning to Madison and every moment we talked about it, it grew stronger.

“Just know I’m here, whatever happens,” Zath finally said, leaving me to my thoughts. This wasn’t a final decision anyone else could make for me.

I just hope I make the right one.

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

*Nyla*

“How about we have a little game?” Zath asked as he walked into our apartment with more shopping bags than I could count. He’d texted me an hour ago to say it was final exam time, though I had no clue what that meant. “I’ve watched more videos than I can count on this competition and I’ve got a few things we’re going to do.”

“Okay,” I said nervously as he filled my entire kitchen table with bottle after bottle of liquor and ingredients. It looked like we were about to host a sorority party at this rate. My horse huffed in annoyance at my nerves and I did my best to push them away for now.

“Let’s up the stakes. For every one you get right, you get an orgasm,” he grinned excitedly. My chest burned with lust and excitement at the prospect and I grabbed my apron and threw my long, brown hair into a bun.

Leave it to Zath to find the best way to motivate me.

“Alright, let’s do this,” I said, clapping my hands and facing the table. The amount of bottles in front of me was overwhelming but I couldn’t let anything get to me. Their supplies at the competition would likely be twice this. “What’s my challenge?”

“Oh, no, you have to be naked for this,” he said with a dark laugh. “How can I reward you through the jeans you have glued to those curves?” Zath leaned back and ran his heated gaze over my body slowly. Desire thrummed through my veins

at just his attention alone. I couldn't get the image of him fucking me while I mixed drinks out of my head. Sure, it wouldn't be easy to concentrate, but it'd be hot as hell.

"You want me to make shots and mixed drinks with my tits out?" I clarified, crossing my arms and staring him down.

"You can wear the apron," he said with a shrug. "What man doesn't have that fantasy?"

"Oh, thanks," I snorted. "You're so giving, Zathrian."

"Shit, my full name?" he gasped, clutching his chest like I'd mortally wounded him. "And here I was planning some work and play."

"Fine," I said, stepping back and taking off my apron and slipping out of my clothes. Each piece that came off I made sure to turn and put on a show as I exposed my skin to him. His tongue darted out as he watched, his icy blue eyes locked on me. He even shoved his shaggy blonde hair out of his eyes so he had a better view.

My mate's gaze was still fixated on me as I tied the apron back on, turning around so he was forced to watch me tie the strings over my naked back. He didn't snap out of it as I turned toward him and I had to let out a shrill whistle to snap him back to reality.

"What? Oh. Yes." He cleared his throat and forced himself to step away. For two people who acknowledged we were mates but were keeping it casual, moments like this kept happening. I had a feeling whatever this was between us was going to come to an explosive conclusion eventually.

"Challenges," I reminded him. My nipples were already getting hard from how cold it was and now that our little moment was over, I was right back to nervous.

"Yes, exactly," he said like that was what he was focused on the whole time. He stood up straight and cleared his throat again. "A lot of the competition is precision, so I've come up with a few challenges. "We're going to try three different phases. The first and probably most common I saw is a layer challenge. Then a consistency round on twelve or more shots

in under a minute. And finally, I'll give you ingredients and you figure out what to make.”

He'd clearly gone down an entire rabbit hole of research and I appreciated my mate for that. He was ready to win this as much as I was.

*We make one hell of a team.*

“Damn, Zath. I'm kind of impressed.”

He rolled his eyes, knowing damn well I was being sarcastic. It was like a second language for me, he should be used to it by now.

“Don't thank me yet, you'll be the one crying if you don't get any of these right,” he said with an evil grin.

Apparently, he was already prepared to torture me. This might be the ultimate edging session of my life and I didn't know if I was really ready.

“You know I'm going to mess with you. It may not be the same intensity of being in front of an audience and judges, but I'll give you something to up the stakes.” My mate was evil.

“This is going to go great,” I deadpanned. “Now, what am I making first?” His grin shifted to a serious expression as he studied his notes. The fact he was taking this so seriously gave me even more confidence we'd do amazing in this competition.

“Remember last Independence Day? We made those red, white, and blue shots for our first themed night. You're going to do those,” he said as he hopped on the counter to watch this disaster unfold.

“That's easy,” I said with every ounce of confidence I could muster. If not for my horse in my head hyping me up with a series of whinnies, I might not have sounded so sure of myself. “So, I just make one shot?”

Zath let out a dark laugh, meaning that was definitely not it. He was enjoying his moment of power far too much. Just having him sit there, playing with his silver rings as his eyes focused on me... was intense. But one set of eyes was nothing

compared to the huge crowd I'd face. Just the small pieces of the videos I'd caught Zath watching showed a full house. Generally, my horse loved the attention, but for once, we were at odds with each other.

This was way bigger than simply showing off. That I could do.

Potentially facing Lance was a different story.

Then there was the unknown element of facing our rivals in person. I'd met enough terrible people to worry that the competition might get ugly.

Zath was oblivious to my struggle and continued on with our little lesson unfazed.

"Every single layer has to be the same, no exceptions, and you're going to do twelve of them in a row. Any deviations from that, no orgasm for you," he taunted. Zath was enjoying this far too much. The maniacal laugh he let out could rival a cartoon villain.

My eyes narrowed at him. "I'm not scared, Zath."

"I wasn't trying to scare you sweetheart," he said. It wasn't at all convincing.

Ignoring the obvious attempts to throw me off my game, I pulled out the ingredients I needed and lined them up on the kitchen island, along with all twelve of the shot glasses he'd brought over from the bar. I side eyed him at the sight of our logo etched in the glass but he just shrugged, completely unapologetic.

Zath was incredibly smart and calculating, and it didn't surprise me in the least he'd just used the resources easiest to grab...ours.

He finally picked up an egg timer he'd apparently found at the antique store. It was clearly aged with time and looked older than both of us combined.

The moment it was set, the loud ticking started. I definitely didn't anticipate how much that sound would get to me, but it had me half-frantic and spilling the first bottle a bit as I



unscrewed it. My horse let out a huff that essentially meant she was telling me to get my shit together. The poor creature was forever having to remind me to fix my crown and face things.

*I've got this*, I promised her, taking a breath and diving in before I could overthink it further.

Starting with the glasses, I lined them all up in front of me and started opening the rest of the bottles. Prepwork was half the job and I might have been extra messy this time, but I couldn't care about that now.

"Your timer is already ticking down, hurry up!" Zath barked out, startling me. He went from quiet and mischievous mate to drill sergeant with no warning.

"Fuck you, Zath," I growled as I poured the shots. To add fuel to the fire, he hopped down thirty seconds in, taunting me with a time update and coming up behind me. His hands trailed down my body causing me to shudder and I forced myself not to over pour the layer.

This was definitely not the type of distraction I'd get on competition day.

He continued the teasing with his hand skimming down my hips and around to the front of my thighs. A trail of hot kisses down my spine were nearly my undoing. But I wasn't the type to lose a direct challenge. Hell, my horse wouldn't let me if I wanted to. She was far more stubborn than I was.

Finishing the shots with Zath's fingers circling my clit was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do. The timer went off just as I was about to climax and he pulled his hand away, stepping back and leaving me hanging completely.

"You fucking asshole," I groaned, leaning on the island next to my shots, ignoring the liquid spilling onto the floor. I'd have to be a whole lot cleaner in the competition but there I wouldn't have a mate trying to make me come.

Zathrian checked the shots with a shrewd gaze, not letting a single imperfection go unnoticed. From here, the layers looked even and I was fairly proud that I'd managed to come

out at the end of the longest minute of my life with actual layers.

“I’ll give you a slide this time,” he said. My mate moved back in place behind me and I let my head fall back as his fingers worked me right back to the edge again. “I’m actually kind of impressed you kept your head during that,” he teased.

All I could do was moan as he picked up the pace. Zath thrust two fingers inside of me and teased my clit with his thumb. My legs were shaking and pleasure coiled in me. The way he played my body had always impressed me. Some partners could barely figure out what to do with their hands and here he was getting me worked up in literal minutes.

My orgasm slammed into me and my knees nearly buckled, hands gripping the counter to keep me upright. He groaned in my ear as my pussy clenched around his fingers. I wanted more than that and he knew it, laughing softly at my frustrated sigh.

“No more for you, greedy girl,” he teased as he stepped away. “What do you think of your first round?”

I glanced down at the shots, trying to keep an objective eye as I took in the different layers of red, white, and blue. But it was the large puddle of mixed liquors that had me wincing.

“Do you think we get points taken off for how sloppy we are? There’s no way to pour these shots perfectly in just a minute.”

“You’ll have me to help clean up after you, and we place them on a tray for the judges,” he admitted. “So, you’d do the work, I’d clean it up and place them on top, grab your ingredients, be the support. Teamwork sweetheart. We’ve got this.”

“Oh good,” I said. Honestly, having someone do the small stuff would make it ten times easier.

“But,” he started, stopping me before I could get too confident. “Every time the cameras panned over the contestants, their stations always looked clean in the cuts.”

“Okay, so let’s try it again. The same one. And keep your hands off me,” I ordered, giving him a fake glare. He put the island between us and reset the time, waiting for me to give the all clear before hitting the button.

This time, I was much more focused, once again knocking them out just as the timer went off. The fact I ended without a puddle underneath meant I was already improving.

Zath came around to inspect. Just like last time, his brows furrowed as he studied them and I held my breath, waiting for the verdict.

“I think you got a bit overzealous on this shot,” he said, tapping it. My shoulders sagged at the sight of more red than any of the others.

“I guess I don’t get anything for this round, huh?” I cursed. It was a simple mistake but one that could cost me the competition. I’d have to find a ritual to get out of my head before each round if I wanted any hope of kicking Bandit’s Taphouse’s ass.

“Nope,” he sang out. “We’ll just move on to the next round. But first, I think we need a bit of liquid motivation.” He picked up one of the shots and handed me the other. We clinked them together before knocking them back. The sweet and fruity taste was perfect, even if I’d messed one up. That made me feel a whole lot better. From the smirk on my raven mate’s face, this was intentional.

Even if I was going in prepared and confident, the competition was a whole different world. Staying out of my head would be the biggest hurdle. Having a whole panel of judges and an audience watching my every move would be insanely unnerving. And that’s not considering the rest of the world as well, since they’d be live streaming parts of it.

I’ve always been a private person, and someone who was trying to keep a low profile after Lance ghosted me, in case he tried to reach out. Now, I was, evidently, throwing it all away for this competition. There would definitely be interviews and cameos, our information splattered all over the coverage from the event.

*It's for the business.*

That would be my personal mantra, otherwise I'd likely chicken out and stay home.

My horse grunted in annoyance at the mere thought of it. Hiding was beneath her... and, apparently, me. A twinge of guilt hit me. I'd put my poor mare through hell the last year as I tried to get my shit together. Before the failed wedding I'd never let anyone make me feel like less. Even Lance's protests of running a bar fell on deaf ears. I knew it wasn't something to be looked down on and I loved the idea of late nights and the lifestyle.

Though, I was seriously reconsidering it at the moment.

"Okay," Zath said as he rubbed his hands together. "Let's do the rainbow shots. You might have to practice this one but out of the last five years of competition videos, it popped up three times. You definitely need to know it. It's a 'layer in the shaker' one that changes color as you pour it over the glasses." He pulled up a video on his phone to show me so there was no confusion. The entire thing was a work of art but at least it was something I was familiar with.

"Oh, I've done this one before. Remember that bachelorette party last month?! They asked Laura, so we figured it out for them," I said. That was one thing I loved about Soulful Brews. We made the effort to give our patrons an experience, even if that meant learning something new on the fly.

Zath let me gather the ingredients I needed before he bothered with hitting the timer. The first time I poured the ingredients after shaking it, then I realized my mistake and groaned in exasperation.

*Rookie move, Nyla.*

"Take two," I said as I poured the failed drink in the sink and rinsed the shaker. He didn't say anything as I went back to try again. Zath just leaned against the counter and watched me work. In fact, the second time he forgot to set the timer and I didn't remind him.

This time, it went off without a hitch. I pushed the glasses close together and slowly poured out the shots so I didn't fuck it up. The colors shifted perfectly, giving the exact rainbow effect I needed. It's one of my favorites to do and the fact it went off seamlessly after not doing it for months was definitely a win.

"I'll hand it to you. These are damn near perfect and you already knew it which makes this easier," he praised me as he pushed off of the counter and went behind me again. "I guess you earn another."

"Or you could just fuck me," I challenged him, done with these games. The moment he added sex into this equation it cut our attention in half. If he wanted me to truly perfect these then we had to get this part out of the way. Refusing to let him keep pushing me to practice, I went to the table and pulled off the apron before bending over it, wiggling my bare ass at him.

"You play dirty," he said in a low voice. When he didn't move I turned around to see him stripping his clothes off. Zath was gorgeous. He was tall and lean, his body lined in perfectly honed muscles without the added bulk. His skin was unblemished and pale, with a small strip of blond hair leading down to his thick cock. I could stare at this man every day and never tire of it.

He walked forward gracefully, skimming his fingertips over my exposed back as he moved in behind me. A shiver ran through me at the soft touch, goosebumps erupting on my skin. Having sex with your mate was unlike any other sex. Every touch was amplified and each emotion was easy to read as we bared our body and souls to one another.

"Fuck me now, Zath," I growled. All playfulness was gone. I wanted... no, needed, to come now. "Foreplay is fun and all, but a girl needs a grand finale!"

"Be a mate with a horse they said, it'd be fun they said. Yet, no one ever warns you about how damn stubborn and demanding horses are," he teased. There was no real heat in it. Zath was far too laid back to care if I was bossy sometimes.

Our banter fell away as he lined himself up and slammed forward, filling me completely. My fingers clung to the table so I wouldn't slide, the cool surface keeping me grounded as he fucked me hard and fast. He was just as worked up as I was even if he didn't want to admit it.

Zath's fingers dug into my hips and his grunts filled the air. There was no holding back on me, he knew I could take a quick, rough fuck. We'd done far more than this in our time together.

Of course, he hadn't forgotten about my reward, reaching between us and teasing my clit in time with the thrusts. He shifted so each time he slammed home a shockwave of pleasure thrummed through my veins. Even though I'd come once, a few strokes of his fingers had me slamming into another orgasm, my screams filling the room as my pussy clenched around him. He continued to tease me until one orgasm was starting to turn to two. Then he backed off right as I was getting ready to fall over the edge, leaving me dangling there.

*I swear this man gets off on edging.*

"You might need to work on patience there, sweetheart," he laughed at my misery. Zath never could ignore an opportunity to playfully torment me.

"I don't do patience," I countered with a huff, the sound cutting off as he slammed back into me. His hand moved back into place, picking up the pace until I had no choice but to come. Right as I was shattering, he grabbed my hips and slammed into me over and over. Zath was strong and I swear it felt like he was trying to break me in half.

He finally cursed as he came, filling me with his cum. His body draped over mine as our breathing evened out, not pulling away until we'd both regained our composure.

I expected him to let me clean myself up so we could continue but instead, he picked me up and put me back on the table, spreading my legs wide, then latched his mouth to my clit. Again he found the perfect mix of teasing licks and forceful, demanding movements until I was coming again.

This time, I couldn't help but scream until I was hoarse, the orgasm painful from being overly sensitive.

“Told you I'd give you your prize.” He was so smug I could only glare. Not that I could move right then if I wanted to. Zath reached forward and helped me to my feet, steadying me until he deemed me safe to walk. “Now, go wash up so we can keep going. I'll clean up here.” He slapped me hard on the ass to punctuate his demand.

“Fine, but I'm putting real clothes on now,” I threw over my shoulder as I walked away. “Game over, lover boy.”

By the time I was showered and dressed, he already had a box waiting on the table, covering whatever surprise ingredients he had in store for me.

“Honestly, I'm impressed by how extra you are every time. I should be used to it by now.” I laughed. He'd even cleared everything else away so it was the only thing I could focus on.

“You ready?” he asked with a serious face. Zathrian was, apparently, in coach mode now, timer in his hand like a stopwatch.

“As I'll ever be,” I said honestly. He gave a flourish and pulled the box away, revealing a lime-cherry liquor, and a strange mix of random ingredients.

My mind blanked at the sight of it all. I was already in trouble.

“You have five minutes,” he said, hitting the timer again without mercy. I knew I would need every minute as I stared at the items in front of me, trying to find a way to go.

The moment it hit me, I was moving, mixing, slicing, and pouring until I slid a dark-red shot in front of him with a grin on my face. He took a sip and let out a laugh.

“This is incredible, Nyla.”

*I've got this competition in the bag.*

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

*Riven*

Tonight had been one of the most successful nights we've had in a long time at Bandit's Taphouse. We'd taken a leaf out of our best rival's book and started doing theme nights and they were an absolute game changer.

Maybe taking their idea and making it our own wasn't the best practice for keeping the peace. But it sure as fuck helped turn the business around. One night of football saved the month in sales and paid our bills. At least I always tried to make sure that it wasn't on the same night they already had something planned because I'm not *that* big of an asshole.

"I'm fucking tired," Eldon complained as he flopped on our worn-out leather couch. He looked run down, his auburn hair disheveled and sticking up at odd angles. The circles under his eyes were even more pronounced as if he were trying to become his soul-bonded animal. Raccoon eyes weren't a good look on a human and I was genuinely a bit worried about my mate.

But I could also sympathize.

I was at the same level of exhaustion. We'd worked our asses off for a good year to get this place where it was now. We had staff, sure, but it was an 'all hands on deck' kind of year.



“But can you believe we’re on the radar like this?” he asked with a grin. His smile was the reason I’d walked up to him when we first met. The fact we were mates only sweetened the deal. We’d never looked back.

There was a bit more to the ‘rivals’ thing than just us taking ideas. Soulful Brews showed up six months after we opened, right as we were gaining traffic, and took the city by storm. This was just our way of taking back our city...one football game celebration at a time.

But now we had something else to deal with thanks to the random meeting I’d had today. When Stanley had come to me and explained who he was, I was all in. Of course, I couldn’t resist name dropping our biggest competition. It wouldn’t be a true win if we couldn’t kick their asses, too.

“I need to talk to you about something.”

El sat up and narrowed his eyes at me, studying me as if he could pull the answers out with a glare alone. I swear my partner was adorable when he had his sharp claws at the ready. Which was at the drop of a fucking hat most days.

“What did you do, Riven? I swear to all that’s holy if you fucked someone else I’m going to cut your dick off and feed it to you.”

I let out an exasperated sigh at his assumptions. Why was me cheating the first thing he went to? Even if I found a mate I’d tell him before anything went down. I could tell he was trying to joke but was also genuinely worried.

“Calm down. Of fucking course, I didn’t fuck anyone. Even if we found mates, we’d talk about it first,” I argued, a bit offended that’s something he even thought I would do. My bear was just as loyal as I was and we’d never hurt our mate. “Just listen. Someone stopped by the bar today before you came in. Things were so crazy tonight I never got a chance to talk about it. We got an invite to the National Bar and Brewers Board Annual Bartending Competition.”

“Seriously?” he gasped. All thoughts of cheating were gone now. He sat up straight and was practically bouncing in

anticipation. “Riven. This is fucking huge! They never invite small bars to these.”

“I know,” I grinned. It was nice that he already saw the importance before I’d even finished. “They opened it up this year. The exposure will be amazing. And more than that, I made sure they headed over to Soulful Brews for us, too.”

A wicked smile spread across his face at that. If there was one thing El thrived on more than sex, it was pettiness.

“I figured what’s the point of a competition if we can’t prove that we can take down our biggest rival.” Something in my voice had him narrowing his eyes.

“And you call me the petty one,” he snorted. “You’re no teddy bear, but I can’t believe you’re letting these people get to you so much.” When his features softened, I knew what was coming.

“It’s not about my past,” I groaned, flopping back against the couch. “I’m over it. I don’t care if I was the odd bear out anymore. We’ve got a good life here.” He raised an eyebrow and I let out a long sigh.

I couldn’t lie and say that it didn’t hurt that the moment my parents and older sisters found out I was a bear, they were terrified of me. It wasn’t long before I was the teenage loner that wasn’t invited out to family events like I could snap at any moment and maul them or something. That mentality was outdated to everyone but them, apparently. Predator animals didn’t just go around eating people. We were soul-bonded just as much as they were.

The moment I turned eighteen, I was gone. Moving here wasn’t easy and I spent far too many hours working shitty jobs and scraping by.

Was there resentment?

Of course, there was.

But I wasn’t going to take that out on the rest of the world.

“You sure about that?” he challenged. “You aren’t putting all your focus into this competition to prove something?”

“Why would you think that?” I asked, genuinely confused at this point. “I barely said anything other than I made sure they were included.”

“Because you bring them up a lot and now sending the board over so you can face off with them personally?” he pointed out bluntly. “It just seems a bit extreme. They’re getting by just like we are. What are you hoping the outcome is?” It was a pot-kettle situation. I wasn’t the only one involved in studying their success and coming up with plans.

“A little healthy competition never hurt anybody,” I argued. “The only aggression my bear has is how intent I am on winning things. Including them was just the icing on the cake, a chance for us to prove to the city we’re the bar they should frequent.” My bear growled out his approval in my head. I couldn’t even hide the grin on my face at his outburst.

El rolled his eyes at me. “You two are impossible.”

“Says the man who just offered to cut my dick off and feed it to me,” I pointed out. “And you think I’m the one with issues.”

“I grew up alone,” El said evenly. “I’m fairly sure we all have issues here.”

“Comrades in our crazy, there’s a reason we’re mates,” I agreed, pulling him into my side. “We can go over the rest of the details for this competition later but we only have a little bit of time to prepare before we have to be there. The prize money alone could change our business but the exposure we’re going to get is going to be phenomenal.”

“I’m loaded, and our business is fine,” El pointed out. There was a bitter edge to his voice. His family’s money was something he used out of necessity but tried to not touch and I respected that.

“This would mean we won’t need that money,” I said. The relief in his eyes meant I hit that issue right on the head.

“This is honestly amazing. Do you have to go alone or do you get a backup person? AKA me?”

“You know I’m taking you with me. Like anyone else could handle me anyway,” I snorted. “We both know I’m a pain in the ass.”

“Literally,” my mate joked with a heated grin. “And I’d hate to have to stalk you there.” He would definitely be the type to show up and literally fight off anyone who dared to talk to me a bit too flirtatiously.

“You and your jealousy.” The one time someone tried to come onto me at the bar he’d walked up and practically shoved his tongue down my throat in warning to her. It did good for a bear’s ego. And with my past, it was nice to have someone who would burn the world down for me. And I’d do the same for him in a heartbeat. El was my world and part of the reason I wanted our business to thrive.

My bear growled in agreement. In fact, he demanded I claim my mate now to prove the point. That he was mine and no one else’s.

Without further words, I pulled him closer to me and breathed in his scent. He always smelled earthy, like a forest after the rain. Every time I was surrounded by it, I was instantly in my happy place. After a long day, I just wanted to wrap myself around him and just exist in peace together.

“Who are you going to leave in charge of the bar?” Apparently, he had other ideas.

“I think Ben can handle it. He’s already our lead manager for a reason and we have plenty of waitresses. Honestly, if we get enough exposure their tips will just increase, so I doubt they’ll complain about having to work a few extra shifts just for a week,” I said as I nuzzled into his neck, trailing kisses over his skin.

“Well, except for Mya. She’s not exactly the biggest team player,” he said with a laugh. He wasn’t wrong. If I didn’t know she was a wolf, I’d have guessed honey badger. She took no shit from anyone and wasn’t afraid to put a handsy patron in his place. We had to quickly move her from waitress to security. But in the end, our staff was happy, our patrons knew to respect them, plus, she had a good head on her shoulders

and kept our bouncers in line, too. I couldn't deny she helped keep the entire place safe.

“She'll be fine. And I'm glad you want to go because I already told them yes on the spot,” I said. He shoved me playfully at that.

“Well, I can think of a few ways that you can make it up to me.” He stood, staring down at me pointedly. If there was one way to make my man happy, it was for me to get on my knees for him. I didn't hesitate to do just that. His breath caught as I moved in front of him, my fingers pulling at the button of his jeans before yanking them and his boxers out of my way.

He was already hard, precum glistening on the tip as I licked a stripe from root to tip, humming as his saltiness hit my tongue. I loved that he was turned on so easily by me, but we might need to find a mate or two in our lives, otherwise he might exhaust me. Eldon was insatiable. But in truth, I loved every fucking second of it.

Gripping the base of his cock, I squeezed as I wrapped my mouth around him, taking him in until he hit the back of my throat. Eldon's moans had my cock pressing against my own jeans but I ignored it as I bobbed my head over him again and again.

El wasn't shy and took over as his hands tightened in my hair, fucking my face and taking exactly what he wanted from me. I hollowed my cheeks and sucked hard, not letting him have complete control. Just to drive him crazy, I let my hands trail up and down his bare legs, teasing until I felt goosebumps form on his skin. But it was me squeezing his ass that broke his control. I couldn't help but tip my head back and watch him as he fell apart.

El was gorgeous. He was shorter than me at only 5'8" and slender. But he was stronger than he looked. Despite his love for lazing around, he was a runner and had the lean muscles and toned calves to show for it.

He finally pulled back, breathing hard but refusing to come. “Not yet,” he said to my questioning gaze. His voice was raspy with lust and he was taking heaving breaths as he

grasped at his own control. “Come on, my grizzly bear,” he teased, pulling off his shirt before backing away. “Catch me if you can.”

He knew the challenge would have me moving. I was on my feet and ripping my clothes off as I ran after him, thundering through the place until I found him in our room.

El was sprawled out on the bed by the time I got there and I didn’t hesitate to jump right on the bed behind him, snatching the lube off of the side table.

“Roll over. On your knees,” I ordered him gruffly. My bear roared in approval as he shifted, ready to listen to our demands.

He chuckled at my order but complied. Despite his usual confrontational behavior, he was submissive to me here. I loved that he gave that part of himself to me and I always wondered how that dynamic would change when we found the rest of our mates.

Eldon bowed before me, face on the mattress and fingers gripping the sheets as his ass was on display for me. He was practically begging me to take what I wanted from him and I wasn’t going to deny him.

Opening the lube, I coated my fingers generously before trailing it over his ass and between his rounded cheeks.

His breath hitched as I teased around his entrance, not quite giving him what he desired. But the moment I slid a finger inside, past the tight ring of muscle, he was begging me.

“Please, Riven. I need you,” he whined, writhing against my hand as I pumped in and out of him. He was always impatient, demanding more than I was ready to give. Making him wait was a simple pleasure of mine.

I kept my movements languid, pulling my finger free and teasing slowly around the outside before shoving two digits back inside of him. Even as I added fingers, stretching and scissoring them inside of him so he was ready for me, I kept the pace slow and steady.

Eldon growled in annoyance but didn't protest, knowing he'd get what I gave him until I decided he was ready. When I finally added a fourth finger, his moans and pants were desperate, fingers holding onto the sheet so tight his knuckles were white. Satisfaction flared in me at just how far I could take him into the zone.

And the best was yet to come.

When I was finally satisfied, I poured a little more lube on my fingers and wrapped it around my cock, spreading the lube on it before teasing him with the tip.

“Fuck, Riven. Please just fuck me already!” he demanded, wiggling his ass at me like that would make me give in. Instead, I continued to slide my cock between his cheeks, spreading the lube and driving him wild.

His hand started to snake over to his cock but I landed a sharp smack on his ass to stop him.

At that point, I couldn't take it any longer and finally slid into him. He was tight and warm around me, squeezing my cock to the point my eyes were rolling back in my head.

When I was fully seated inside of him I finally rested, giving his body a moment to recover. He was patient for once as he breathed through the intrusion. Then he was shifting, grinding into me, and all bets were off.

There was no gentleness now as I fucked him into the mattress. Eldon gave up on bossing me around and was instead just gasping for air as I pounded into his ass, clinging to the bed for dear life as I set a bruising pace. His moans and the sound of flesh hitting flesh had me so turned on I was the one fighting for control now.

I'd never get tired of fucking him over and over for the rest of our lives. He was damn near perfect.

Pleasure started to coil in my belly. My muscles were tense and I knew my fingers were digging into his flesh. I was relentless in my demand for his release.

“Riven,” Eldon shuddered out as he came. His gasps of pleasure were followed quickly by my own, slamming home

one last time before filling him with my seed.

It was several minutes before I pulled out of him. Eldon gave me a second to collapse on the bed before he was dragging me to the shower.

We were quiet as the steam filled the bathroom and the hot water ran over us. The double-headed shower was the best idea that he'd had yet. In fact, we hadn't showered alone in over a year.

"Do you think we can win this?" he asked. I didn't have to ask for clarification, I knew the competition was still in his mind. El was quick to act and ready to snark in an instant, but he was also an overthinker. He wanted to consider all possible outcomes before going all in.

"I think we have as good a chance as any. Most of the contestants are people just like us, so I'd say we've got a big chance as long as we take it seriously."

"Good, because I don't like to lose," he joked. His grin was back in place but it didn't reach his eyes. There was more to this than he was saying.

"What else is on your mind, El?" I demanded. Dragging things out of him was never easy but I knew better than to dismiss it. He'd bottle it up without hesitation. A byproduct of being raised by narcissists who didn't give a shit about their kid.

He gave me a side eye but didn't deny it. "How do you do that? You always know when I'm holding something back."

"Because I know you," I said simply. "We're mates and I can feel it. Now... what is it?"

"Do you think we'll find another mate there?" The question didn't surprise me. We talked about it a few times a week. We were happy and content in our own relationship. But we were also both bisexual and craved having a woman in our circle. Not to mention monogamy was seen as rare, so we were always left wondering just who else was out there for us.

"I don't know if she'd be safe with your jealousy," I teased.



“Stop, you know it wouldn’t be the same as a stranger getting close to you,” he argued. “Mates are different. There’s no jealousy, or at least I hope not. And I’m serious. What if this is the trip that changes our lives?”

“Then it changes our lives. There’s a possibility it could happen. Are you ready for it, though?” My eyes locked onto his and I wished I could hear his thoughts.

He was quiet for a moment, chewing on his bottom lip until I tugged it free of his teeth and brushed my lips over his before pulling away.

“I am. It’s been really great having just us but I still feel like there’s more out there,” he explained. “I just don’t want you to think that means you’re not enough. You’re amazing. It’s just... there’s something missing.”

“I know what you mean,” I reassured him. It was strange to feel it, but there was a small empty space in our lives we couldn’t quite pinpoint at first. Now we both recognized the space for a mate and craved it like we needed air. “We’ll find our missing piece eventually. And until then, I’ll keep claiming this ass.” I gave his ass another light smack for good measure.

El let out a carefree laugh this time and I knew he was no longer stuck in his head. My bear purred in satisfaction. He was just as pleased as I was that we could be there for our mate, providing him with comfort.

For Eldon, we were both enough.

CHAPTER  
FIVE

*Nyla*

They say you can't go home again and in this moment, I felt that in my fucking soul. To me, it held awful memories. Ones I couldn't shake. Even the best friends I'd had here had slowly pulled away when I refused to come visit or even talk about the wedding.

I think that was my biggest regret about leaving, not Lance. It wasn't fair of me to completely cut out the two people in my life who had always been there. They'd seen me through the death of my parents and the wedding disaster. It was all on me and I knew it was likely never going to be fixed.

Everything had changed in a year, including the city around me.

Madison had always seemed like such a small city to me, but I realized now that it wasn't as tiny as I thought. In the last year, they'd really built the area up and it showed. In fact, the hotel was brand new and likely bringing in even more revenue to the new businesses popping up on the main road.

A man sat out in front on the corner, playing a guitar. He stopped every so often to swipe the drool from his chin, panting against the hot sun beaming down at him. Yet he was a whole level of unbothered I wished I could achieve. Sometimes it was easy to pinpoint someone's soul-bonded animal, and between the drool and lazy way he played his guitar, I knew he was a dog. A hound if I had to guess from the droop to his eyes and the languid behavior.

He wasn't the only character on the block. Somebody on the other side of the building was playing a violin. The sound reverberated beautifully off of the buildings closing in around it.

It was a far cry different from the town I left behind. But maybe that was more my feelings than the actual truth, something I shoved away before they could truly take hold and make me question everything. The past was better left in the past where it belonged.

My horse snorted in agreement and urged me to start moving.

I'd love to get time to explore, but right then, I needed to brave up and go inside. The thought of it sent a fresh wave of anxiety through me, but I had a hunch that was more the location than anything.

Zathrian's fingers found mine and he held me tight. I gave him a squeeze before finally forcing myself to walk inside. It was a whole lot easier with him by my side.

The lobby was beautiful. They'd definitely put money into the hotel. The floors were marble and shining brightly in the fluorescent lighting. A crystal chandelier hung down in the middle glowing softly as it caught the natural and artificial lights. It gave the entire lobby a classy air to it that made it seem high end even in a town like Madison.

The check-in desk was against the back wall. A water feature constantly poured water behind them steadily, giving the space even more of a pleasing ambiance.

If not for the noise levels it would likely be calming, but right now, the place was full of chaos. Lines of people were waiting to check in and others milled around, bags in hand and talking loudly.

"If you're here for the competition, please go to the end of the desk where you will register." The lady barely gave us a glance as she pointed the way, already moving on to the next person.

Since they took care of everything when we joined the competition, we hadn't even had to make the reservations for ourselves. Everything was paid for which only sweetened the deal.

Zath pulled me with him toward the line she indicated. My mind was elsewhere as I moved with him. It felt like Lance could be lurking around every corner, waiting to pounce on me. But my ex wasn't exactly the crazy stalker type. Then again, I didn't think he was the ghosting type, either.

I had this awful feeling that the work I'd put into being untraceable the last year was down the drain now. I'd moved towns, blocked old numbers and emails, and even had my phone through Zathrian's name now. Lance would have no reason to come find me here and he would never stoop to be part of a lowly bartending competition, anyway.

My horse stamped her hooves proudly in my head, glad that I was finally pulling my head out of my ass. Leave it to her to be blunt and never hold back on me.

But at the end of the day, I had to admit I'd created a new life that I was proud of. It was ironic that the dream Lance had always said was beneath us was the one thing that truly held me together when I was trying to start my new life.

That was why I initially agreed to the competition. This was my way of giving him a final fuck you, telling the universe that I was worthy and this was something to be proud of. Sure, I didn't owe him anything. The competition and eventual win was for me, the rest was just icing on the cake.

"You with me?" Zath asked as we joined the line. It was already queued up at least twenty strong, but they were apparently prepared, handing out keys with efficiency. We were checked in and had our keys in under fifteen minutes, which was far better than I anticipated.

"Welcome to the Verity Hotel and Suites, we're glad to have you. Here is your key card and the itinerary for the competition along with rules and regulations to follow. They ask you to read over them meticulously and reach out if you have any questions."

“Thank you,” I said quickly, plucking the keycard and the packet out of her hand. I was more than ready to get out of the lobby and up to our room.

“Come on, let’s go check out what kind of room we got,” I said as I pulled him away. “They didn’t even offer us two rooms. Good thing we aren’t afraid to share. I mean... I was promised lots of steamy sex to keep me sane.”

“I doubt they have enough rooms to spare. They have to fit the crew, judges, sponsors, all of us, and probably leave enough for a solid audience,” Zath countered. “And I definitely plan to follow through on my promise, sweetheart.” He turned to me and gave me a cocky half smile. On anyone else I would have rolled my eyes, but Zathrian made it look downright delicious.

“I should be afraid to share, you might take advantage of me,” I teased.

“Oh, I definitely will,” he agreed.

“Nyla?” I froze in terror at the sound of that voice. Zathrian immediately looked around for the source of my panic. It took everything in me to turn around and face my former friends.

“Grace. Mackenzie.” I acknowledged them with a strained smile. They both looked good, though angry. The amount of disgust, pain, and heartbreak in their eyes was enough to break me but I held my head high.

“We haven’t been able to contact you for a year, Ny,” Grace accused. Her lioness never did pull any punches. “How could you do this to us? After everything we went through?”

“I’m sorry... I couldn’t handle it,” I admitted. “I needed space from everything in my life. Being rejected by a mate isn’t a pain I can describe.”

“From us, too?” Mackenzie said bitterly. “We helped you through it. We’d have been there to support you.”

“And I appreciate that,” I reassured her desperately. “I’m so sorry. I was a mess and space was the only thing I could do to take back control of my life.”

“And who is this?” Grace asked sharply. Their anger was expected, but I didn’t quite think there’d be no forgiveness in them.

“My mate, Zathrian,” I introduced. He didn’t bother to say anything, his eyes narrowed at them both. Right now they were being almost aggressive and he wasn’t taking kindly to it.

“So, you have a whole new life that we aren’t a part of,” Mackenzie said with finality that felt like a knife to the chest. “We heard you’d be here, so we thought we’d show up. But I can’t do this. Bye, Nyla. At least we’re giving you more of an exit than you gave us.”

Grace gave me one last glare before following Mackenzie. I knew I’d likely fractured that friendship forever. Seeing it unravel in person was rough. They deserved so much better than I gave them.

“You alright?” Zathrian asked. He’d let me handle my own battles yet likely would have stepped in if I needed help. But truthfully, I deserved all of the anger they held for me. I’d thrown away a friendship, escaped in the dead of night, and ghosted them all, never looking back.

Because no matter how I looked at it, Mackenzie was right, I had an entirely new life now.

One they weren’t a part of. A life that kept me busy enough to not think about them often.

There was no coming back from this and we both knew it. That friendship had ended the moment I’d left without a word.

My horse whinnied softly in my head but didn’t pressure me for once. She valued those she loved as much as I did, but clearly I had a shitty way of showing it. I hoped, one day, I could reach out to them, fix things, but it wasn’t a guarantee.

“Let’s go,” he urged gently, guiding me to the elevators. I glanced around to see a few onlookers but ignored them as he pulled me on the elevator as soon as it opened.

He gave me space to process what just happened. There wasn’t enough money in the world to force me to face this

right now, though. Instead, I opened my own packet of papers and scanned the pages.

“You weren’t kidding about the sponsors,” I said, showing him the last two pages that were loaded with logos.

“They said there’s an information table somewhere that has free gifts from the sponsors. But we can check it out later, I’m starving.”

“I agree,” I said absently as I flipped to the contestant pages. “Ew, where did they find these pictures?” Zath was one of the most attractive people I’d met and even his headshot looked awkward and weird. They had to have chosen the worst of the worst they could find.

Honestly, they did us dirty.

Zath snatched it out of my hand in horror.

“Oh my God, they did. Maybe this is their way of putting us all on equal footing...pick the most awkward pictures around,” he scoffed. “They deserve to be fired for this, though.” His lips twisted into a grimace as he stared down at our photos. Mine was odd, as if it were taken in passing. My mouth was hanging open like I was talking, my wavy hair was frizzy and a mess, and it was slightly blurry.

Then something hit me.

“Oh shit, that means Bandit’s Taphouse is here, too,” I squeaked, flipping the pages and scanning the information until I found them.

“They’re younger than I expected,” Zath said as he looked over my shoulder. “But honestly, they’re hot as hell.” I’d also expected them to be some surly, old men for some reason.

“They’re not attractive,” I grumbled. He snorted, knowing it was me just being stubborn. They were every bit as good looking as he said. Riven was the main competitor and had the whole dark and brooding thing going for him. His brown hair was perfectly styled, short and swooped to the side as he glared at the camera. There was nothing awkward about this headshot at all.

His partner, Eldon Hayes, was also handsome. Instead of glaring, he had a cocky smile and his arms crossed, like he was daring someone to challenge them. He had auburn hair and was slender whereas Riven was bulky.

“You know lying doesn’t suddenly make it not true,” Zath said sarcastically. “No more looking for you.” He plucked the papers out of my hand and tucked them under his arm, giving me a petulant stare.

I sighed, realizing that I probably had been the biggest pain in the ass to be around. Even before we ran into my old friends, the drive was tense and I was moody. Zath was a fucking saint for putting up with me.

“I’m so sorry about being a brat. It’s just hard being back here. I thought I was over this bullshit, moved on, but every moment that we’ve been in the city, he’s just been in the back of my mind like an old wound that doesn’t want to close. Now this confrontation...gah, I’m a mess.” I groaned and leaned against the wall.

“That’s because heartbreak doesn’t just cure overnight. It’s been a year but you and I have one thing in common, the ability to push things down and never process them. And if you don’t process it, the trauma just comes back to bite you in the ass. This is an enormous pot-kettle situation but this might be your opportunity to take a second and let it hurt, then move on finally.”

Before I could say anything the elevator opened on the fourth floor.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said when it opened, blurting the words out despite not meaning to.

Riven and Eldon were staring back at us. From the indignant stare on Riven’s face, they knew exactly who we were.

“Don’t let us stop you,” Riven said sarcastically, waving his hand like he was going out of his way to be kind. The attitude was enough to have me gritting my teeth. I brushed past him, not caring that I was knocking into him.



The moment we brushed against each other, I knew I'd found another mate. His scent was strong and my horse was practically bursting out of my skin to get to him. The instant connection locked into place and even the annoyance I had lessened in the face of my mate.

Riven cursed as he came to the same conclusion. Eldon just breathed in and barked out a laugh, clearly finding fate a lot more amusing than I did as his presence did the exact same thing to me.

My horse was prancing excitedly in my head letting out excited huffs. She was acting like this wasn't the worst possible scenario.

Our rivals were my mates... *both* of them.

"Nope. No. Absolutely not," I burst out. My horse was ready to shift and claim them because I wasn't. She'd reacted similarly when I found Zathrian, but we came together in much less ridiculous circumstances. She was out of her mind and so was I.

Seriously. What did I do to the universe to deserve this shit?!

There was some absurd irony in the fact that the town that I had been broken in, is the town where I found two more mates.

Mates that felt the same way about me as I did them, and it was *anything* but romantic.

I managed to push past them both and make it to our room before Zathrian stopped me.

"Nyla! What the fuck happened back there?!" he demanded. I'd never said out loud what was happening and neither did they, leaving poor Zath in the dark. Which also meant he wasn't their mate. Only me.

Fuck, he wasn't going to take this well. He'd been rejected by a former lover when he found new mates. Even if I wouldn't do that, his wounds were about to be as fresh as mine were.

“They’re my mates.” His face paled at my words. Zathrian and I already had a complicated dynamic that we’d grown comfortable in. I figured with Lance in my past that he was it for me. And now the universe was cruel enough to throw these two at us.

This was not what I needed right now.

---

### *Zathrian*

THE MOMENT THE WORD ‘MATE’ came out of her mouth I felt my world crumble around me. We’d been dancing around this complicated, awkward relationship of ours for way too long for shit to change now.

And honestly, I loved Nyla and had—for the last four months—been trying to figure out how to tell her.

It was inevitable. Even if we lied to ourselves and said this was just a casual connection, the moment we’d solidified our bond was the moment that we were stuck together for life. We’d accepted it then and had formed this deep-rooted friendship that went beyond the realm of casual. But neither one of us was brave enough to rock the boat.

Now she had found two more mates. And they weren’t mine.

Was I going to be left behind?

*Again?*

“I need some air,” was all I choked out, handing over the paperwork to her and dropping my bags right there in the hallway before rushing for the stairwell. She’d have to lug it all inside alone and I knew she’d panic at my reaction, but I had to look out for myself now and it was all I could do to not break down.

I took the stairs two at a time until I managed to find my way outside to the courtyard. Two huge pools took up half the

space, but to the left was a sprawling garden. I managed to make it to the bench before losing my composure completely. I was bent over, elbows on my knees and hands covering my face as I fought to keep my breathing normal and my thoughts from spiraling. The fact tears hadn't broken free yet was a damn miracle.

Here I was, trying to give Nyla some comfort and wisdom and it was biting me in the ass. How could I look at her and tell her that she'd have to face her feelings when I had yet to do the same? It had been three years since the breakup I went through. If you could even call it that. And within one moment, it was all right there at the surface again.

My chest ached like someone had cracked open my rib cage and torn my heart from my chest, squeezing it between their fingers until there was nothing left.

Back then I was young and stupid. I should have never agreed to be someone's *chosen* mate, not when fated mates were a thing. But I naively thought that we had a deep connection and it wouldn't matter if we found mates in the future, we were meant to be together, just in a different way.

Sawyer said he loved me, and I loved him.

But then it was gone in an instant.

I could still hear his words in my head as he sat me down. From the way he stared at me with guilt in his eyes, I should have known it would be serious. Finding mates was an inevitability we both knew we'd have to face one day. Hell, I'd never heard of a soul-bonded who didn't have one. But he always promised it wouldn't matter.

It was a lie.

"I'm so sorry, Zathrian. I found my mates." He had said it with true feeling, but not enough to keep him there. I was expendable to him and he was ready to walk away without a look back. Our past meant nothing to him and even worse, neither did I.

"What does that mean for us?" His sadness was palpable but had nothing on the pain spearing through my soul.

“I’m leaving with them today. I’ve already packed. They won’t accept you as part of our pack, you’re not a wolf and you aren’t my mate. I’m sorry...but this is goodbye.”

In that moment, I cried, begged, and yelled. I went through every stage of grief all in a five-minute span. He finished packing his stuff and refused to look at me. Then he was walking out of our apartment and throwing our lives together away. In fact, I never saw or heard from him again. That alone should have made me more sympathetic to what Nyla was facing, but I thought I’d healed enough to be there for her. Clearly I was wrong.

We knew everything about each other and yet, I was expendable to him. Thrown away the same moment he found his mates. They were strangers but he was okay with that. Willing to give it all up for them and not look back.

That same day, I vowed that if I ever found my mate, I would never commit. Sure, Ny and I were mates, but we’d never gone past our ‘no strings attached’ phase. This wasn’t your typical pairing.

When I met Nyla, we were both broken, not wanting to put all of our cards on the table, and it seemed like the perfect fit. We had our connection without the commitment, a glorified friends with benefits situation. It was perfect.

And now in a matter of minutes, it was all going to come crashing down around me. Fate could be cruel. I’d learned that once before, but the pain I felt now was so much more intense. In my heart, I knew that Nyla wasn’t just going to toss me aside like trash, but tell that to my broken heart and twisted mind.

“God, we both needed therapy in the worst way,” I muttered.

The sound of footsteps had me looking up. Nyla was approaching and she looked worried. Guilt panged in my chest at the sight of her crestfallen expression. I knew damn well what mates meant to her, how traumatic it could be, and I’d ditched her to run down here and have my own pity party.

Fuck.

“Hey, are you okay? You know this doesn’t change things for us, right? I don’t know what the fuck kind of joke this is but I’m not going to just jump into bed with our rivals. Not only is that likely frowned upon, but I also have no desire to give someone with no morals a chance with me.”

“You don’t even know them,” I said weakly. “What if it’s all just a huge misunderstanding and in reality you can’t resist each other? I’ve seen the pull mates can have.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Yeah and *we* are mates, too, you dumbass.”

“Sure...we definitely are, Nyla. But they’re not my mates.”

“Again, that changes nothing,” she argued. “You’re mine and we’re a package deal. I’m not saying that I’m going to give them a chance, but even if I was, I would never do it at your expense. I’m not Sawyer.” She was in fight mode, ready to kick my ass to make me see this wasn’t the same situation. That alone had some of my pain slithering back to the hole it came from.

“No, you’re not,” I agreed. But apparently, trauma had a way of hitting you like a tidal wave, putting you right back where you started. Even if it was temporary, it felt just as fucking terrible as it did then.

Nyla wasn’t having it, though.

“Would you push me away for a mate?” Her words were fierce and I winced at the idea.

“Of course not,” I said without hesitation. She’d been thrown away once and I hated the man who left her at the empty altar to fix all of his mistakes. She deserved better.

Fuck. So did I.

“Dammit,” I groaned. “Why do you have to come in with all the logic?”

“That’s what I do,” she joked. We both fell silent for a moment as I mulled over the change that was without a doubt

coming our way.

“You know they’re not going to just let this go, right?” I pointed out. She chewed on her bottom lip, something she did when she was nervous. I never considered Nyla as anything but the strong, independent woman she was. Most days. But as I stared up at her right now she was vulnerable. I hated that today brought that out of her, just like she’d feared. We’d only been here thirty minutes and already the world felt like it was imploding.

This was definitely going to be an interesting week.

CHAPTER  
**SIX**

*Nyla*

**M**y only mission the next day, beside kicking ass, was to avoid my two new mates. It was a chaotic mix of looking around corners and sneaking away anytime they came into view. To the rest of the hotel, I likely looked psychotic but desperate times called for desperate measures.

In their minds, I was probably the worst possible scenario to be paired with. They probably had enough frustration to fuel today's competition. But I couldn't find it in me to care. I was in way over my head here.

"It says we need to report to ballroom three. How many ballrooms does this hotel have? Do they actually throw balls in Madison?" Zath snarked as he flipped through the information we were given. This hotel was more of a maze than I expected.

I snorted at that. "I've never been to a ball and I grew up here...wait there's a sign." A gaudy black-and-gold plaque was hanging on the corner. Zath pulled me down the hallway and we realized that we didn't actually need directions. There was a line leading into one of the rooms. Thankfully, it was moving quickly as the staff got everyone to their designated areas.

When we got to the front, the girl took one look at our lanyard and gestured in the opposite direction of the audience.

They had everything set up like the set of a TV show, with the audience off to one side and our stations on the other. In the middle was the judge's table.

The crowd was already huge and growing by the second. There were no less than a hundred people ready to watch us. This whole event was surreal. We were just a small bar from Willow Grove and I felt like such an imposter. The only real reassurance was that the other contestants looked just as freaked out as I did.

Our station was essentially just a narrow, tall table with a shelf behind it. Apparently, that was our full pantry since it was lined with rows of booze and ingredients. It took some of my worries away seeing how well stocked they were. Anything we could possibly need, we'd have.

Cameramen walked around with their equipment, getting shots of the audience and us as they panned the room. It took everything in my power to not look like a deer in headlights.

"This is so fucking cool!" Zath hissed. This level of enthusiasm was rare for him. I didn't think I'd ever seen him this open and giddy.

After yesterday's scare, I expected him to be closed off. Honestly, he seemed to be taking it a whole lot better than I was at the moment. Then again, my tactic of 'pretend it's not a thing until it smacks me in the face' was both of our 'tried and true' method to handle shit we weren't happy about.

Zath had been slow to warm up since I met him. After his ex put him through hell, he didn't live life the same way. We were a different case since mates were involved, but that almost made it harder. If not for us both taking a chance we'd have missed out on an amazing friendship. He was my best friend now and I couldn't imagine him not in my life.

Right now, it was like watching a different person. His happiness reflected in his expression and even though his hair was tousled with nerves, he was eager to get started. Neither of us had been the type to do things for ourselves and we'd vowed that we'd change. It seemed like I had some catching up to do. I wondered if my reassurances yesterday that he was my mate first helped ease a part of him he'd been holding back.



I forced myself to look away from my adorable mate as we settled behind our station. No matter how many people filed in, I couldn't make myself look out at the crowd. I needed to pretend like they weren't there for my own sanity. Even my horse was nervous but she was also prancing around, reminding me that it was time to be strong and proud. We could feel whatever we wanted on the inside, but showing it to the world was not something she'd let me do.

"We're going to kick ass," I told her in my mind. Just saying it had my chest loosening enough I could take in a normal breath again. I held onto the confidence she was building as I watched Stanley come in. He stood strong and smiling, waving out at the crowd like a celebrity. He reminded me of a horse in the way he showboated around, but I knew he wasn't by the way he walked and talked. He was a cat through and through.

Stanley led in the group of judges behind him. Two men and two women, all of whom seemed happier to just sit down and not cause a scene. I guess there was a reason Stanley was in charge of the competition.

I didn't recognize a single one of the judges, but then again, I wasn't exactly big in the competitive-bartending world. My usual style was to keep my head down, treat my suppliers like friends, and do my job.

Despite how much work we put into the bar, Zath and I were truly living our best lives, even if his raven got distracted often by shiny objects. I swear our joint apartment was half silver and gold.

The only thing we had to deal with was our ridiculous rivals from Bandit's Taphouse.

*My mates.*

I really didn't know what the hell I was going to do about that.

The crowd went quiet as Stanley Evers walked between us and the crowd, microphone in hand, and a gameshow-host

smile on his face. The mic gave out a sharp squeal before evening out and he finally started the event.

“Welcome to the Fifth Annual National Bar and Brewers Board Competition. Quite the mouthful, that one,” he chuckled and the crowd joined in. “But we’ve got some amazing bartenders here to compete this year. Team one from Lola’s Bar and Grill, in Gallaway. They’ve been in business for over twenty years and counting. Team two is from Bandit’s Taphouse, a fairly new bar in Willow Grove that has garnered a lot of attention!” I glared over at them as they were introduced. Riven had on his best customer-service smile, waving out at the crowd as they clapped.

“Kiss ass,” Zath muttered under his breath and I had to bite back a laugh. I’d never been more grateful for his snarky disposition, and I knew I never would have gotten through this insanity without him.

Then Stanley’s attention was on us. “Team three is also from Willow Grove, Soulful Brews. Another up and coming bar!”

After we were announced, I tuned out the other introductions. Between the attention on me and the glaring heat of the spotlights over our heads, it was all a bit overwhelming.

My horse neighed indignantly at my inner meltdown until I calmed my ass back down. I swear having a soul-bonded with this much sass was like having a snarky life coach watching your every move and reminding you to keep on track.

“Now, usually we like to kick off the competition with a classic, giving everyone a chance to make a timeless drink. However, we thought maybe one of our favorite rounds would be a much better way to start this year’s festivities off with a bang!”

As if on cue, workers started pushing covered carts toward each table. A black cloth was draped over each one so it was impossible to see what was underneath. Stanley waited until they were all in place before he turned back to us contestants to explain.

“Each group will be given four ingredients. Whatever you’re given is what you *must* use for this round. No exceptions or you’ll be automatically disqualified from this round. You can make a cocktail, shot, or however you want to go, as long as it is done in the ten-minute time frame. When you finish, give your tray to your support staff and they will carry them to the judges.”

That had both Zath and I letting out a relieved breath. If it was up to me to carry them, I’d fall flat on my face and embarrass myself out of the industry. With it being televised I would definitely turn into the next viral sensation.

“We prepared for this,” Zath said, poking me in the side. He was practically bouncing on his feet as he waited for the competition to fully start. Stanley ran through more rules, mostly a huge reiteration of the ones they gave us in our information packets. My attention span right now was too short to listen to it all over again.

“Alright, teams! Are you ready?” He gave us all a moment but he didn’t really wait long enough for anyone to protest. “Three. Two. One!”

The black drapes were pulled off of our carts and I stared down at the strange combination. White rum, lime, passion fruit, and seltzer.

It could be worse...right?

“Okay, what the fuck?” Zath breathed out as he looked them over. For the first time since we walked into this room his composure slipped and panic took its place. Apparently, we were switching roles. “I sure as fuck hope you have an idea.”

My mind was already whirring at the possibilities. Then clarity hit me and the chaos of the room faded away. Once my mind was set on something the rest was easier to ignore.

“You know what, I think I’ve got this. Help me find mint, raw sugar, and mojito glasses,” I said as I started moving everything to the table.

“With passion fruit?” he questioned like I was crazy, but he was already moving to gather everything I asked for.

Zath turned out to be the best sidekick in the world. I barely had to utter something I needed before he was pressing it into my hands.

We had to make five identical copies of our drink, so I made quick work of cutting, mixing, and pouring the passion fruit mojitos over ice. I threw on two extra glasses so we had a chance to try it out. I wasn't about to serve something that tasted awful. My reputation and name were both on the line. And I'd seen enough cooking show disasters to know that was a necessary step.

The first taste had me wincing and adding a dash more of seltzer before trying again. This time, it needed more lime and a splash of simple syrup. Finally, I ended up with a crisp, refreshing drink. After I made Zath try it and he deemed it perfect, I served up the five glasses for the judges.

With a garnish of mint on top it looked gorgeous. The drink was a slight yellow and the pop of green on top gave it a clean, fresh look.

"Thirty seconds, get your drinks to the judges table!" Stanley called out. That had everyone in a panic, the noise level rising all over again, but Zath and I kept our cool, putting our drinks on the tray before handing it off to our support staff.

The man walked with careful steps to the front of the judges table, placing them on the section labeled table three.

It was interesting to see the differences in not only drinks, but presentations. Someone had gone for a margarita while someone else had a martini. Overall it looked like everyone played it fairly safe this round.

"Time's up!" Stanley announced to the crowd. The following applause was deafening and effectively raised the tension enough that I was bouncing from foot to foot. Even though I'd tested our drinks my mind was coming up with every scenario that could go wrong.

Stanley approached the judges' table to take in the drinks, describing them to the audience despite the fact they were projected on a huge screen above the judges.

It was nerve-racking as the judges went through each tray, announcing the drink and the group before tasting. They whispered back and forth, jotting notes on papers in front of them and talking. Their faces were stoic masks that gave nothing away to us. Not a single twitch, grimace, or hum of appreciation could be seen. These were true professionals.

“Jesus, I feel like I’m about to be called to the principal’s office,” Zath mumbled under his breath.

I nodded in agreement. “No shit, this is much worse than I anticipated. And honestly, I imagined it would be fucking horrible.” We both had to stifle our laughter for a second before I managed to get my businesslike mask back in place. I didn’t want anyone to think that we weren’t taking this competition seriously.

Though, I also didn’t think we’d win against twenty-year bartending veterans. I was just proud that we’d shown up and were putting our best effort in. This, at the very least, was exposure we needed to succeed. Though, beating Bandit’s Taphouse would be a level of petty excitement that would be unmatched.

“And the judges have their answers!” Stanley called out as he took their papers and flipped through them. “Now, as we said before, the entire week is going to be judged on a points system. So, you can follow your favorites on the scoreboard or the app! But for now, we are going to award points for three categories. Presentation. Taste. And creativity.”

The crowd started murmuring enough that Stanley had to pause and wait for a few beats before continuing. Those pauses felt like they took years and I was half ready to scream at the crowd to be quiet.

“For taste, we are going with team three! A passionfruit mojito is one of, and I quote, the best drinks they’ve tasted in five years of the competition,” he called out. “Pat yourselves on the back, group three!”

Zath and I both gasped and let out a low squeal.

“We fucking did it!” Zath hissed out.

“Yes! Take that!” I agreed, doing a little dance as the scoreboard changed to reflect our newfound points. It was even more exciting since we somehow managed to get the first points of the competition.

Honestly, after that, I couldn’t even focus on Stanley anymore.

By the time we stopped freaking out, we were neck and neck with Bandit’s Taphouse and team one.

“You have a forty-five minute break between this round and the next,” Stanley called out.

“Come on, we need to go somewhere quiet so I can properly freak the fuck out,” Zathrian said. “How cool was that? We killed it! You, my friend, are a genius.”

I tried to open my mouth and say something but as I glanced over his shoulder, everything seemed to come to a standstill. Right behind Zathrian was the man that I never thought I’d see again. If not for his dad standing right next to him, I might have thought he really was a ghost.

Zath stopped moving and looked down at me, opening his mouth to ask what was wrong but he didn’t get the chance.

“Nyla,” Lance said my name like it was a fragile thing. Or maybe he thought I was. But I was no longer the girl he left at the altar. She was left behind when I moved away from this godforsaken city.

“Coming back was a bad idea,” I said to Zathrian, not even bothering to sugarcoat my words. This was the one thing I feared and we’d made it through one round of the competition. Even the excitement of winning a point felt obsolete.

Just the sight of my former fiancé had blood rushing through my ears and my vision tunneling. Taking in a breath wasn’t just hard, it was damn near impossible. All that pain I’d tucked away when I left was right back at the surface. Rejection, anger, embarrassment, heartbreak, grief. Not the things I should be experiencing during one of the biggest events of my life. Then again, the same could be said for my failed wedding day.

“Lance.” That was all Zathrian needed to jump into action, pulling me into his side and wrapping an arm protectively around me. He tried to turn me around and lead me away but Lance moved forward and wrapped his fingers around my wrist to stop us.

The touch alone felt like it seared right through my flesh. Our bond threatened to snap back into place and I was ready to run on instinct.

This couldn't be fucking happening. Not here, not now.

Even my horse was frozen, unsure, and she was never quiet.

“Please,” Lance begged me. “It's not what you think and I've never had a chance to tell you that.” His voice was sad, broken, and vulnerable. All things that I never really associated with him.

In fact, as I looked at my former fiancé, the one who shattered my world and left me behind like trash, even I could tell that he was different now. I shouldn't have been surprised; of course he'd changed, too. It had been a year.

“Oh, so you didn't leave her at the altar? Break her heart?” Zath bit out and continued to pull me away.

Lance let go but followed now. I couldn't stop staring at him, my brain fractured by the utter mindfuck this day had turned into.

Lance always had dirty-blond hair that he wore longer and combed back. Right now it was just pulled up into a bun with one piece hanging down the side of his head. For the wealthy son of a high-profile lawyer, it was downright unkempt. Especially with how big of a perfectionist he was.

He was skinnier now and lacked the definition of muscles he used to have. For a second, I wondered what had happened to create this strange version of his former self. Did he realize just how shitty what he did was? Was it drugs? Alcohol? Depression?

I wanted the answers, but I couldn't make the words fall from my lips.

“Nyla, please, let me explain,” he started again when I offered nothing. I wanted so much to scream every bit of hate in my heart at him. Between the competition, more still to come today, finding my mates, and just...everything, I couldn't do it.

“I'm sorry, Lance, I can't do this right now,” I managed to choke out as Zath pulled me outside into the crowd.

Tears were already falling down my cheeks. I was someone who hated crying in public, yet here I was sobbing my heart out.

Hell, I was practically hyperventilating.

Letting go of Zathrian, I pushed myself into the crowd before ducking into the stairwell. I needed to be alone and the elevators would be packed.

As I reached the landing I had to stop and catch my breath. If I tried to climb the stairs in front of me I'd probably hurt myself, my vision too blurred from tears to have decent depth perception. Instead, I stopped and stood there, processing what just transpired.

My mate had left me, rejected me, and here he was to rub it in all over again. I'd known this could happen the moment we chose to accept the invitation. But having it play out was so much fucking harder.

The only thing I could do was collapse in the corner, tucking my knees into my chest and wrapping my arms around myself. My face rested on my raised knees in a protective circle. Letting myself have five minutes to feel would be the only way I could tuck it away and continue on.

*How dare he come back!*

The audacity and selfishness to come here and approach me, mid-competition, when he knew it would break me, was bullshit. He had to know how heartbroken he left me. Yet he had no regard for my feelings just now, only his.

Did he have no decency? No heart?



“Nyla, are you okay?” I looked up to see Riven looking down at me with concern. The last thing I wanted was his fucking pity.

“Of course, you’re here to see this,” I said bitterly. “Please just go away, I don’t need an audience.”

Riven didn’t say anything else but he also didn’t walk away. He stood by the door, hand on the knob, not leaving and not approaching until I was calmed down.

Honestly, it was nice to have somebody here. I felt a little less alone and it gave me a reason to get my shit together faster.

After a few long beats of companionable silence it felt like my erratic heart was no longer trying to escape my chest. My horse was letting out pathetic, little whines that would have broken me further if I allowed it to. Her pain was my pain.

For the first time since finding each other it was my turn to find my strength for the both of us. Enough was enough and I refused to let him take this from me, too.

I finally stood and so did she, her mood rising with my composure until she was letting out snorts of agreement. She likely wanted to show him that we were worthy, but I wanted to prove that he didn’t break us.

We were strong and stubborn and wouldn’t back down. We’d prove ourselves every fucking day of this competition. He no longer meant anything to me. I couldn’t let him if I ever wanted to truly move on.

Riven still stood by the door and I turned to him, not meeting his eyes. “Thank you,” I whispered before rushing up the stairs to our floor, refusing to look back.

I’d had my breakdown, now it was time to stand strong and get back down there.

*We weren’t going to lose now.*

CHAPTER  
SEVEN

*Nyla*

“So, who is he?” At the masculine voice, I glanced over to see Eldon standing next to me at the vending machine. He didn’t quite look like the golden retriever I’d pegged him as from his headshot. His hair was stark black with a few streaks of gray and his eyes were full of calm curiosity as he studied me.

“Who?” I asked. There was no fight in my voice this time and he almost looked relieved that I wasn’t immediately running away.

At this point I was too numb to run. The fact I got through the second and third phase of today’s events was impressive in itself. We weren’t awarded any new points, but neither were they, so that was at least somewhat of a win.

He rolled his eyes at my avoidance. “Don’t play dumb with me. Look. I get that you, apparently, have some reservations about being mates, and obviously knowing who we are doesn’t make you excited to get to know us further, but we can talk about that later. Right now, I want to know who this man is that made you cry so I can go beat his ass.”

I snorted at that. Eldon looked pleased with himself for making me smile.

“Why would you go kick someone’s ass that you don’t even know?” I questioned. My head tilted to the side and I felt my horse do the same. We were waiting for our mate to

surprise us but there was a caution in it. He'd have to show amazing character to get past our walls now.

“You know us raccoons. We're scrappy.” He shrugged like it was just a fact of life. I guess the black and grey made sense. In fact, the more I looked at him, the more his animal fit. The slight shadow around his eyes, the way he studied everything around him, the random mischievous smiles. Eldon definitely came off as sly, smart, playful, and calculating.

The words seemed to tumble from my mouth, I couldn't even stop them if I tried. Maybe it was the mate connection or I was just too exhausted to fight it. Either way, I took a chance on trusting him. It could be a need for outside confirmation that I wasn't overreacting and this man seemed like the ‘honest, even if it hurt your feelings,’ type.

“About a year ago I was in my wedding dress, getting ready to walk down the aisle. He was supposed to be waiting for me at the end in a tux. But that never happened. He was gone. Left a note and a whole heap of mess that I got the pleasure of cleaning up. In fact, that was the first time I've seen him since that time.”

Eldon's face went from open to angry in seconds. “Oh, I'm definitely going to kick his ass. He fucking left *you* at the altar? Like he could do any fucking better. You're fucking perfect.” It was strangely comforting to hear him say that. When the angry raccoon turned around to go show my former mate his claws, I reached out to stop him. I wasn't going to doubt that he was scrappy, and he seemed to truly be ready to go find a fight, but beating Lance's ass was not the right move.

“Hold on, his dad is a lawyer. A very rich one. Plus, you can't compete in a competition if you're in jail,” I reminded him in a rush. His eyes flickered down to my hand on his arm then to my face. I let go and bit my lip, waiting to see what he'd do.

Eldon made me uneasy but not in a bad way. My stomach danced with nerves and excitement at how close we were. It was as if the rivalry was unimportant now. My horse and my body were both already on board with this mate.

“Fine, I’m not going because you’re asking,” he huffed out. “That is the *only* reason.” He stretched out his neck like he was using everything in him not to go do exactly as he promised. It was so strange to have someone ready to go to bat for me. Lance never was confrontational enough to defend me, I defended myself. Zathrian was more the petty revenge type. But here was this man who I’d never met until this competition and he barely knew me, yet he was ready to kick Lance’s ass over a few sentences.

“So, this was a surprise,” I finally said as I stepped back and dropped to the bench behind me. I was waiting for Zathrian who had to make a quick call. But the longer time went on, I suspected he saw Eldon and I together and ducked away.

Only he would force me to confront this head on while hiding his fears behind a supportive mask. That was going to be a whole other shitshow of its own, but if he thought I was going to be like his ex, then he was dead wrong. He couldn’t get rid of me that easily. The man saw me at my worst and helped build me back up. I’d never hurt him.

“That’s an understatement,” El laughed as he sat down next to me. His leg shook incessantly like he had too much anxiety to handle but as I studied him, I realized it was just pent-up energy. There wasn’t a single hint of tension in his body as he sat there next to me.

“Man, the food here sucks, doesn’t it?” His words were punctuated by a loud rumble from his stomach. My first instinct was to invite him to dinner, but I stopped myself. I had to remember this wasn’t a chance meeting. He was a rival competitor and I was a hot mess right now. Complicating things would not be wise.

My horse disagreed and she was so loud with her indignation I had to forcibly ignore her.

“It does,” I agreed quietly. “Look... not to run—”

He cut me off with an unamused look. “Oh, so you weren’t avoiding us this whole time like a plague?”

“Oh I have,” I agreed, not willing to lie. “But now at least you know why I’m not into this whole mate thing. I’ll catch up with you later.” I was already up and backing away and he grinned at me like I was the funniest person he’d met.

“We don’t give up that easily, you know,” he mused. “We’ll keep trying. I’m not a dumbass like your former mate. And my offer to kick his ass? Still on the table.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I called over my shoulder as I ducked around the corner. Thankfully, no one was inside as I stepped in the elevator. I leaned against the wall and took a few breaths, calming my racing heart and wishing my protesting horse would calm the fuck down.

Of course, before the doors could fully close, a hand popped inside, stopping it. I nearly bolted right past him when I saw Lance’s dad step inside. His face was somber and I knew this was absolutely intentional. He was the type to face his problems head on, and apparently, right now, I was his problem. It was sheer panic and the fact I didn’t hate Calvin that kept me here.

Moving around him, I hit the button for the fourth floor and silently wished he wouldn’t launch into some defensive tirade for his son.

The awful part was I loved Lance’s family. His mom was a sweet lady who loved to take care of everyone. She was always cooking and baking. The type of person you loved to be around just to absorb some of her happiness.

Which also meant that I felt horrible for leaving the way I did, but their son gave me no choice. It was the only way I could heal.

Calvin cleared his throat. “You’ve done well for yourself, Nyla.” I glanced over at his words. There was a kindness in his eyes that I remembered well. He was like a father to me and my heart shattered a little more that I had to miss out on having him in my life.

“Thanks.” It was all I could give him without breaking down all over again. Why couldn’t they just keep their space?

“It’s not what you think, though,” he started. “By the time I managed to track you down, you had a whole business established and a new life. I’d have approached, had this conversation, but you were happy and I was afraid to ruin it.”

“So instead, you did it here, mid-competition. Is me failing also on your agenda?” He looked horrified at the thought and cursed.

“Of course not! I told Lance it was bad timing.”

“Why would you even look for me?” I questioned, redirecting the conversation back to his original point. The admission had shaken me. I never considered that they would have tried to find me. Maybe it was silly for me to assume no one would come after me or care. Knowing that he tried... well, I didn’t know how to really feel about it.

“Let’s just say that Lance needed a whole lot of help getting back on his feet,” Calvin admitted. The question was on the tip of my tongue. Every fiber of my being wanted to ask what happened, how he could be okay with all of this, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I didn’t want to know. The last thing I needed was someone to tell me that I was expendable and never really mattered. Or even worse, that something or someone else mattered more than me.

“I’m not going to tell you his details, nor am I going to beg on his behalf, but I am going to ask if you could show me enough respect to have *one* conversation with him before you leave. Just hear him out then make your decision on how to proceed.”

What the fuck was I supposed to say to that? Sure, I respected him, but this wasn’t an easy request.

As soon as the elevator opened, he walked out without another word. Calvin wasn’t the type to press me or argue. He didn’t need my answer, he’d said what he came to say.

My feet felt like they were made of lead as I trudged my way to my room, wishing I had a bottle of whiskey and some chocolate to handle the insanity that was my life.

CHAPTER  
**EIGHT**

*Riven*

The moment that my mate stepped in front of me, I knew something was up. El was always full of energy but right now, he was practically twitching with it.

“I talked to our mate,” he burst out, not needing any prompting to launch into his story. “Remember how you said you found Nyla crying? Well, now I know why.” He gripped his black and gray hair as he paced around, making it stick up at crazy angles. I will admit, he’d effectively piqued my curiosity.

Nyla was a puzzle to me and completely unexpected.

I simply sat on the edge of the bed waiting for more of an explanation. It was impossible to get answers from him when he was like this. Good thing I had the patience of a fucking saint when it came to my mate.

“That piece of shit left her at the altar. Like, wedding dress on, getting ready to walk down the aisle, and he didn’t fucking show up.” He finally stopped walking then and stared me down, gauging my reaction.

Anger slammed into me with a force that I couldn’t even understand. I barely knew this woman. Hell, I knew we were going to have issues the moment I realized who she was and that we were mates, but yet I was ready to tear this building down to find this asshole and force him to grovel at her feet, beg for her forgiveness, then toss him out on his ass.

El let out a chuckle as he took in my face, pointing at me before continuing his pacing.

“See, that’s exactly how I felt. But Nyla made me stay and told me I didn’t need to go to jail for him. His dad is apparently some rich-ass lawyer, like that fucking matters to me.” He cracked his knuckles as he walked, looking every bit his animal in that movement. El was a force to be reckoned with.

This asshole’s dad may be a high-end lawyer but El also came from money and he wasn’t afraid to throw it around when he had to. But it was rare that something prompted him to use it. In general, my mate lived like any average man. We were together for months before he even revealed it to me. And that revelation changed nothing between us, much to his surprise.

We were both closed off in our own ways, me by my own past and shitty family. But El took even longer to truly let me in. He gave only what he wanted to give and sometimes, it was like pulling teeth to get real answers out of him. After a lifetime of being used by people, you learned to keep your personal life to yourself.

“I guess that explains why she keeps running away and avoiding us.” I genuinely thought it was because of the competition or this rivalry between us. What was all in good fun and for the business for us, could definitely be interpreted differently by her. “This rivalry...I don’t think she’s as cool about it as we assumed. This is going to be complicated.”

El laughed. “That’s an understatement.”

Even in the brief interaction we’d had, I noticed that she’s got a bit of a fiery temper and she’s fiercely independent. Ever since we realized we were mates, I’d done as much research on her as possible. She kept herself hidden from social media well, so all we had to go off of was the interviews we did here and the interactions we observed in that ballroom.

Jealousy slammed into me as I thought of her and her friend every time I looked over. He was freely given her



smiles and made her laugh. Something I wasn't sure I'd even get the chance to do.

“How the hell are we even going to convince her to give us a chance with her ex walking around? She's going to have all that pain coming back. There was no way something like that doesn't leave emotional scarring,” I said. It was infuriating that some bastard was not only fucking up our chances, but hurting her in the process.

“I'm fairly sure the guy that's with her is her mate, but not ours as well. I've seen the way they act together, there's no way that's just platonic,” El added in.

That was always a difficult place to be in. Soul-bonded mates worked in strange ways and sometimes, it wasn't polyamorous, it centered around the woman. It seemed our group was going to be a mix of both and to top it off, she had been rejected by mates before.

“Have you seen those two interact? They might be mates but they're dancing around it. Not a single speck of PDA or touching like you see with most soul-bonded fated mates,” El continued on. “Even we can't keep our hands to ourselves most days, it's instinctual.” Seeing him this worked up had my mind already mulling over all of the information he'd just given me.

*How was I going to fix this?*

“The way you study people creeps me out,” I joked. He gave me a fake glare but stumbled back as I stood abruptly.

“Wait, where are you going?” he demanded, knowing the way I strode for the door was with too much purpose to be innocent.

“I'm going to go talk to our mate. She's not going to hide from us. There's too much at stake to just let her shut us out and walk out of our lives forever. We have a week to convince her to give us a chance and I'm not going to waste it,” I said in a rush, barely pausing to answer.

El let out a grin that rivaled the Joker. “I knew fate chose you for me for a reason.” He was already falling into line

behind me. “Let’s go.”

I was so distracted talking to El that I didn’t notice someone on the other side when I opened the door and started rushing out. A girl faltered back and I reached out a hand to steady her. Her hand moved to the top of mine, nails biting into my skin as she gasped in shock.

“I’m so sorry, we didn’t know you were out here,” I said. The ginger woman looked me up and down before her red tinted lips tipped up into a smile that instantly felt fake, like a well rehearsed act.

I recognized her from the competition. She was on team one with another woman as her partner. The ones who’d been in the business for over twenty years, though she couldn’t be older than thirty-five. *Interesting*. Maybe a family business.

“It’s all right,” she practically purred, running her hand up my arm. My skin crawled at the contact and my bear let out a warning growl. Something about her just seemed off.

I may be polite, but El had no trouble shoving himself between us.

“Don’t touch my mate.” He unceremoniously lifted her hand off of me and let it drop back to her side.

She let out a scowl and adjusted her boobs in her shirt like that was enough to distract us. El rolled his eyes and I barely kept my grimace at bay. I already had a mate, and one more if I could fucking get to her. I didn’t have time for this drama right now.

“Well, when you decide that you want a *real* woman on your side, come see me. I’m in room 416,” she said with an arch of her perfectly stenciled eyebrow.

“Don’t wait up,” El deadpanned. I wrapped my arm around his waist and turned him in the other direction. Mostly so he didn’t go after the woman who clearly lacked boundaries and respect for fated mates.

We didn’t let go or talk again until we were standing in front of Nyla’s room. I could hear their voices on the other side so I knocked loud enough for them to hear. The voices

turned into frantic hisses but it was cut off as Zathrian opened the door.

He looked frustrated but it didn't feel like he was directing it at us.

“She doesn't want to talk to you,” he said bluntly. I could appreciate the honesty but that wasn't going to work for me.

Nope, she wasn't hiding. This wasn't the time for beating around the bush and letting her lock herself in a tower. I'd fight for my mate but we had one week before the distance would be even wider. That was a chance I couldn't take.

“Well, that's not going to work for me. We just want to talk. I know there's a lot going on here but we're obviously mates, so we have to figure this shit out together.”

“Just left them in, Zath,” Nyla called out in frustration. I was just glad she was giving us a chance, even if it was out of exasperation or exhaustion.

As we stepped around him to get to her, Zath started to leave, but I stopped him with a gentle hand on his bicep.

“You should stay. You're a part of this group, too.” The man's entire body relaxed at my words and he nodded once before turning and walking back in, closing the door behind him. There was a hint of relief in his eyes and the shadows had me curious what his skeletons were. We all had them around here, it seemed.

Nyla was wearing a fluffy, white robe and was tucked under her covers. She sat against the headboard as trash TV played across from her.

All I could think about was what she had on under the robe, if anything. My cock stirred but it all fell away as I took in the look of exhaustion and defeat on her face. She had dark circles under her eyes and looked like she was ready to fall over.

“Have you eaten?” I asked. It came out much harsher than I intended, and she raised her eyebrows at me.

“Want to rephrase that?”

My hands went up in defense and I blew out a breath as if that would cut the rising tension. She was more than a little fiery and my bear growled in approval at his strong mate.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for it to come out so rude. Have you eaten yet?”

She shook her head. “No, I wasn’t really up for it.” The honesty was refreshing. Especially in comparison to El who made me fight for every answer when we met.

“I’ve been trying to get her to eat for the last forty-five minutes,” her mate said as he sat down next to her. I tracked the movement as he reached over, resting a hand on her knee. Even if it was innocent and over the covers I expected my jealous side to react, but there was nothing. The only real thought I had was I wished we had that easy of a relationship. Even my bear was content, relieved even, to see her relax at his touch. If that wasn’t a sign that we were meant to be together, even Zathrian, then I didn’t know what was.

“Look, I’m just going to be blunt here because that’s my style, and then we can get some food,” I said as I met her gaze. She raised both eyebrows this time and waited for me to continue. “We’ve got some animosity to contend with and I’m not saying we won’t have to address that at some point.”

She held up a hand to stop me. “Hold on, I have a question before we even have this conversation. Why the fuck did you guys steal all of our ideas?”

*Or we could talk about it now.*

“That was me,” El admitted. He was slightly apologetic and a bit unrepentant. “But to be fair, we didn’t steal your ideas. You don’t own the rights to celebrating sports events in the city and themed nights are kind of universal. Those things happen all over the country. I guarantee you could go up to any single bar owner in this competition and they would tell you the same. Now... were we inspired by your events? Yes.”

She gaped at him in shock. El was nothing if not bold and blunt.

“You guys cost us business and you put your flyers in the convenience store that is literally on the same block as my bar, that’s hardly innocent,” she argued, crossing her arms. Apparently, her anger at us had chased away her previous exhaustion.

Her words had both of us stopping.

“We never did that; we don’t even hang out flyers,” I said.

El winced. “I may or may not have paid a newspaper boy to pass out as many of our flyers as he could. I’d planned on passing them out myself and trying something new but then the opportunity came by and I couldn’t resist. He took fifty bucks and I called it a win.”

“You know, I’m going to go out on a limb here and say this almost seems like a miscommunication,” Zath hedged.

“Miscommunication? Don’t act like you weren’t just as frustrated with their bullshit as I was,” she argued.

He shrugged. “I was. But they’re your mates and honestly, business is business.”

“You started up a bar six months after us and immediately drew in all the customers that we had fought tooth-and-nail to get,” I added on. It wasn’t accusatory, it was a fact.

“And then you stole them right back,” she fired at me.

The argument felt more charged than angry and I let out a low chuckle. “You don’t hold back, do you?” I was too anxious to sit, so it was my turn to start pacing.

Even as I walked, my gaze flickered from one of them to the next. Nyla was gorgeous with her long, wavy dark hair that shined in the harsh lighting of the room. Her features were pretty, yet strong, and her blue eyes were expressive.

Zathrian was tall and lean, with an angular face that could have landed him any modeling job without much effort. He seemed calm and attentive, his eyes bouncing from her to us, always on high alert. Even as he focused on the room, his fingers toyed with a silver coin, passing it from one finger to the next absently.

El was bulkier than Zathrian and his energy was more apparent than both of them combined. He was always moving and doing something. He had a soft dusting of freckles over his face and entire body and his auburn hair was shaggy, hanging just in front of his green eyes.

Honestly, I found all of them intriguing. Everyone in our group had a strong personality and stood out perfectly against the others, like the contrast of night and day.

“Maybe we can work something out when we get back, but for now, we’re in the middle of the competition and I don’t think we’re going to solve anything sitting here hungry,” Zathrian said.

I nodded thoughtfully. “I can agree to that. Maybe we can figure out schedules or something so we don’t end up with stuff on the same nights or too close together.”

Nyla threw up her hands in frustration. “No, that’s too easy,” she bit out bitterly. “I’ve spent the last six months hating your fucking guts, getting angry every time you stole ideas or threw a theme night when we were planning one. Hell, every time you threw one right after us, I was ready to march down there and confront you. Now you’re telling me that you didn’t vindictively put out flyers or try to step on our toes. Oh, but it’s okay, because my ideas weren’t original ideas, right?”

“To be fair,” El said quickly. He didn’t hold back and it might just save us tonight. “I didn’t say they weren’t original ideas. I just said that you didn’t *own* theme nights. We already planned on doing some of them, we were just waiting to get established a bit. But it seemed that this hot bartender across town had other plans for us. I mean, we didn’t know you were hot at the time, you’re like a ghost online.”

She snorted at that and I was glad to see her relax again. “Yeah, I was trying to keep a low profile. When I left, I literally walked away from everything and everyone, and I didn’t want anyone to find me until I was ready.”

I hadn’t realized she’d left friends and family behind as well. That took guts to just up and move and start over again.

And strength.

My bear let out a loud grunt of approval. The more time we spent with her, the more he approved of her.

“You don’t do anything by halves,” I noted.

“Sometimes, you have to put yourself first. That’s what I did and that’s what I’ve kept doing,” she explained. “Zath and I both owed it to ourselves to stand up for ourselves and go after our dreams.”

“So do we,” I said evenly. There was no anger or annoyance in my voice, just honesty. Did we get frustrated by the competition? Yeah, we did. We were a new, struggling business. It didn’t matter how much money El had in his bank, profits were profits and we had bills to pay. Our business needed to be successful enough to pay those bills and make enough to pad our own accounts. That wasn’t happening until the last few months.

“It seems we’re at an impasse,” El said. “So, what do you say we solve it by going to get some damn food because I’m starving.”

“Don’t let him fool you, he’s always starving,” I said. “But we would love for you two to join us for some dinner. My treat.”

Zath grinned and stood up. “Free food? Count me in.

She gasped and threw a pillow at him. “You’d change your loyalty over some food?”

“Right now?” he asked drily. “Yes. So, get your ass up.”

“Where are we going?” I asked, hoping that would motivate her before El got truly hangry.

“You pick,” El said. He was grinning and already heading for the door. The brat knew we’d already won this particular fight and wasn’t even trying to hide his pleasure.

Nyla narrowed her eyes at his retreating form but got up and grabbed her suitcase, heading for the bathroom.

“I’ll be out in ten.”

CHAPTER  
**NINE**

*Nyla*

Just two days ago, the men in front of me were simply rivals I wanted to take down in this competition. I didn't want to know them or even speak to them, simply show them we're the true winners. A bit of petty satisfaction, nothing more.

Yet, here they were, sharing a table at an Italian restaurant, winning over Zathrian, and slowly chipping away at my armor.

Eldon was laughing, his eyes sparkling with humor as he told a story I couldn't quite focus on. Riven watched him with genuine love in his eyes and I realized in that moment, that I wanted the same thing. Someone to look at me that way.

Zathrian and I had danced around this mate thing for so long, I wasn't sure how to get out from under it.

And with them we had the whole rivalry hanging over our heads. Despite the pretty picture Riven had painted, the issue was still very much there.

But there was no rush with our relationship and Riven and El weren't pressuring me into anything. They simply wanted me to give them a genuine chance.

When I tuned back in, the conversation had started to quiet down. Zath looked at me with concern but I gave him a quick smile. It was sweet that he kept tabs on me like that but I was genuinely okay at the moment. Thoughts of Lance were no longer painful, just a minor annoyance at the back of my mind.



“You don’t need to pay for us,” Zath said. We always looked out for ourselves and paying for each other was one thing, but someone else paying for us was a sure way to stress us out.

Riven’s eyes narrowed slightly. It wasn’t angry, more curious. “I’ve already offered to pay. Don’t make me walk up there and pay the tab now.”

“You can’t pay the tab, we haven’t even ordered,” I protested. “It’s really alright. We can pay for ourselves, we’re not broke.”

El shook his head. “This is a fight you won’t win. I get it, money’s always been a strange thing for me. But he won’t relent.”

“It’s not about being broke, it’s about the fact that I invited you. Me paying was part of the agreement.”

“Are you a horse by chance? Because I didn’t think I’d meet anyone more stubborn than Nyla, yet here we are.” Zath waved his ring-lined fingers at Riven like his point was proven.

“I’m a bear,” Riven said with a low, rumbling laugh.

“That explains so much,” Zathrain said. “I couldn’t decide if you were a horse, a bear, or an elephant.”

“An elephant?” he laughed.

“They’re relentless,” Zath said with a shrug.

“A bear makes sense. Especially the need to protect and boss us around,” I added. We both laughed and El raised his eyes at our easy banter. I could tell he was about to say something from the way he started to lean forward and let his curiosity win.

“Okay I feel like we’re at this point where shit’s going to get awkward real fast, so I’m just going to get the weird questions out of the way,” he said as he set his menu aside and fixed his pale blue eyes on me and Zath. “What exactly is going on with you two?”

Zathrian looked at me, almost as if asking for permission.

“Go for it,” I told him. “They already know my dirty laundry. Share what you want or just explain.” My voice was low enough that only he could hear me. He took a deep, fortifying breath before answering.

“Let’s just say that when we met, we were both not just a little broken, but *really* fucking broken. She was left at the altar. My chosen mate—who I spent several years with, and who promised even if we found fated mates we wouldn’t leave each other—found some fated mates. He gave me no notice, just decided that I no longer mattered when he found a pack. Nyla and I decided to move on and try to pick up the pieces when we found each other. We couldn’t deny that we were mates, and needed that connection. But we also didn’t want strings. It was a failsafe to protect ourselves. But obviously bonds aren’t that easy and we’re more than friends but never actually moved into a full mate relationship.”

“Mates with benefits?” El mused. “I get it. Is that still where you stand?”

Riven pinched the bridge of his nose like he couldn’t take his partner’s bluntness.

“El, you can’t just ask shit like that,” he said pointedly. El barely even gave him a second glance. Clearly, this was an ongoing battle between them.

I fully expected to get the usual commentary from them, about how we were throwing away the bond and not giving it the respect it deserved. I’d heard it so many times that I wondered if I missed the class in school where they taught you to put bonds above yourself. It was ridiculous, honestly.

“Sorry,” El finally said. “I didn’t want to walk up and be like, ‘hey are you fucking,?’ ya know?”

“We are, in fact,” Zath said. “Is that going to be a problem?” It wasn’t a challenge but I could tell the answer mattered.

El looked confused at the question. “You don’t need my permission to fuck your mate, man.” I choked on my water enough that he had to reach over and pat my back.

“The real question is, are we going to be a problem for you?” Riven’s question quieted us all down. I reached under the table and squeezed Zath’s thigh. He knew my feelings on it and I hoped he knew I’d never just walk away from him. He was just as much my mate as they were.

“No. I want Nyla to be happy and if she chooses you, then that’s how our lives are turning,” Zath finally answered.

“And I’m not the dick that he was with. I’m not going anywhere, we’re a package deal,” I added on.

Riven nodded sagely. “I never thought otherwise. You may not be my mate, but you are part of this group and we respect that.”

We all stopped talking as the waiter finally came up to us. Thanks to the competition, the place was busy enough that we hadn’t even ordered drinks yet.

Before I could open my mouth, El pulled open the wine list. “Are you guys white wine, red wine, or champagne people?”

“Champagne,” I said without skipping a beat. Call it a test, but I wanted to see how they’d react to us ordering our usual favorites. I didn’t doubt they’d uphold their intention to pay but I also had been on enough dates to have guys comment on what I ate or drank and I was curious if they would. I didn’t think so, but you never really knew a person until you spent time with them.

Having someone like Riven in our group could be a nice change of pace. The no-nonsense plan maker, someone to be in charge in situations that warranted it. It got exhausting always trying to be fiercely independent. There was that part of me that wanted to be taken care of sometimes. Sure, Zath and I took care of each other, but we also didn’t rock the boat of our current dynamic. It was a full-time balancing act I was ready to stop.

When the waiter came and filled our champagne glasses, we gave him our pasta order before he was off again.

I took a sip of the cold champagne, the bubbles and tartness of the drink refreshing. Everything about the quaint, little restaurant was a nice change of pace from the hotel. We'd only been there a few days and I was already getting tired of it. Or maybe it was the pressure of the competition that was getting to me.

Zath gripped my leg and I set my drink down to see what was going on, my words never forming at the sight of his pale face and wide eyes. I followed his gaze to see my ex walking in the door with his father and a few other men.

“Are they stalking us?” El ground out. He started to stand, but Riven put his hand on his mate's shoulder, stopping him. Apparently, keeping El from kicking people's asses would also be a full-time job.

“You're not going over there,” he warned El before turning to me. His eyes were just as fierce as he studied me, the same protectiveness he had for his mate there, though a bit more subdued. “Do you want me to order this to go and have you guys meet us back at the hotel?”

Every part of me wanted to say yes, to run and hide like I had been but my horse stamped her feet angrily, refusing to let me choose that option. She was stubborn and strong, and hiding was not in her nature. Having her mates around her had her even more bold. And she was right. I wasn't the weak one here and he didn't get to push me from public spaces.

“No. We're staying,” I said firmly. A small grin ghosted across Riven's lips and he nodded once.

“Good choice,” he praised. There was respect there, and I couldn't help the pride that warmed in my chest at his words. There was so much more to these two men than I expected.

“Oh, good... this is the night that keeps giving,” El groaned. “That bitch from the hallway is here, too.” Riven cursed under his breath and both Zath and I glanced around the room, trying to figure out who they were referring to.

“What happened? Who?” Zathrian hissed. He wasn't one to shy away from gossip and it seemed there was a story

attached to this. Both Riven and El were shrinking down in their seats like they were hiding from something. It was almost comical to see the big, burly bear hiding.

“She’s on team one. She was right outside our door earlier. It almost felt like she was listening in or something sketchy,” El admitted, pointing as subtly as possible. I recognized her immediately from the copious amounts of cleavage and tight-fitting clothes and makeup.

I’d wondered how she was making drinks in heels and was slightly impressed by it. Now I wanted to knock her out for crossing my mates.

Damn. Where did that feeling come from?

My horse let out a low huff and I no longer had to wonder. She was more jealous than I was. Apparently, she’d fully embraced our mates while I teetered on the edge of acceptance.

El seemed to notice and a wicked grin spread across his face. “She offered to give Riven, here, a good time.” He was not afraid to cause chaos and watch everything burn afterward.

Now was my turn to stand and be forced back into my seat by an exasperated Zathrian.

“Sit down, Nyla,” he groaned. “We can’t win if you’re in jail.”

“Remind me why jail is bad?” I said dryly.

“No coffee, shared showers, and all women,” he said without skipping a beat. “You’d miss my dick.”

“Good point,” I sighed. “And your tongue.”

Riven and El both looked smug at my obvious jealousy and I refused to look back. I may be giving them more of a chance now but I still wasn’t diving headfirst into this, instincts aside.

As if my gaze were magnetized to my former mate, I spotted Lance sitting in the back of the restaurant. His chair was turned where he could watch me and it was impossible to miss the longing and sadness on his face. I hated how much it

hurt to see him like that because at the bottom of all my pain was that girl who still loved him. Lance and I spent years together, planned a future and talked about a whole lifetime that he threw away in a second. It was hard to convince my heart that it wasn't my job to fix that look on his face.

He didn't look away from me, either. Even as one of the guys touched my hand I couldn't pull my gaze away. Hell, I couldn't even focus on their voices.

"Nyla." Riven's harsh words had me finally blinking and looking away, breaking the moment. He reached over and brushed my cheek. I hadn't even realized that tears were falling. My horse let out a soft, sad whine that broke my heart. She was hurting just as much as I was and I hated it.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"No," El said. "We don't apologize for existing and feeling things. You have every right to face what you're feeling, whether it's anger, frustration, or hurt. Don't hide yourself from us, Nyla."

I didn't have any words to offer in response, so I just nodded.

"So, what do you guys think is coming our way tomorrow?" Zath was obviously changing the subject and I could have kissed him for it.

"They don't exactly tell us what's coming. I have no good guess, but as long as they don't stick me next to Boobs McGee I'll be fine," I joked.

El snorted. "I can second that one."

Zath nodded. "I think we're pretty well prepared. I watched all of the previous competitions and we did some practice rounds at home." We shared a smirk at that memory. It was less practice and more play, but it still paid off.

"So did we," Riven said. "I'm not the type to go in completely unprepared. I think that's why yesterday's big challenge was so easy. Though, the mojito was impressive." He raised his glass to me.

My cheeks warmed at the compliment. I wasn't used to this kind of sweet talk and they weren't afraid to throw them around.

"Thanks. I think we both did pretty well that first round."

"Not so great the second and third rounds," El joked. "We both got our asses kicked."

"On the bright side, team one didn't get any points, either," I added. "Four and five are the ones to watch now."

"I'm glad we're all petty here," El laughed.

Zath cackled at that. "Oh, petty is our middle name. Just ask Nyla about Candy." He was already fitting in so well with them, it honestly made me like them more.

"Candy?" Riven asked as he leaned back, waiting to hear this story. I was saved by our food getting dropped off. Everyone dug in a bit before he prompted again. "I'm still waiting on that story."

"So, Candy was the first waitress we hired," I started reluctantly. "She was this bubbly, but admittedly *very* ditzy, woman. Every Friday she wanted to come in later because she had a call from her mother. It was a tradition or something and we didn't mind adjusting her hours to be a bit later and we'd already started some new girls by then."

"Until I overheard her talking out back one day," Zath jumped in. "I'm not exactly the best person for family norms, but even I wouldn't be talking dirty to my mom."

"Oh, shit," El said, cracking up.

"So, of course, he comes in and tells me. I figured, it was fine as long as it wasn't on the clock," I picked it back up. "But then she told us her mother suddenly died the next day and she needed a week off to go out of town."

At this point, both men had put their forks down and were hanging onto every detail.

"So, we give her the time off because I'm not about making employees prove their grief," I continued.

El cut in on that. “We do the same. Fuck that micromanaging bullshit.”

“So, did the mom die?” Riven asked.

Zath let out a chuckle and I answered. “No. She happened to be in town and stopped in to see her at work. She was this sweet, older woman and proudly said she was Candy’s mom. I could have just played it off, like oh no, she’s on vacation.”

“But you didn’t,” El accused playfully.

“No, she gave her condolences on dying to this woman,” Zath answered. He lost it already, barely getting the words out.

“She was appalled, then angry, and called her right on the spot,” I finished out. “Candy even quit before she was scheduled to come back. I guess she didn’t want to face us.”

“Oh, man. Why not just tell the truth?” El said.

“That’s what we said. We’d have still given her later Friday hours and vacation time,” Zath said, shaking his head.

“That—” Riven’s words were cut off by my phone buzzing loudly against the table, then his following at the same time. We glanced at each other before picking them up. I read the message quickly and felt my face pale.

“What is it?” Zath prompted.

““Due to recent information, I ask that both Nyla Stone and Riven Greene come in before the competition to discuss conduct. While talking to your competitors is not forbidden, we do ask for a certain level of decorum from our teams. Please make time to speak with me before festivities start tomorrow morning. Best regards, Stanley’,” I read out.

“Wait, they can’t disqualify us for this, can they?” Zath asked. My stomach churned as I shrugged at him. We weren’t even doing anything wrong.

“No,” Riven said. “I read the rules extensively. There’s nothing in there about this.”

“In fact, there’s no rules against fucking each other if we wanted to,” El added. “I’m particular about reading rules



before I break them. Oh, and just for the record, I actually do want to fuck you... when you're ready, of course."

"El!" Riven growled as he ran a hand over his face in exasperation. "You don't just say that shit to people. Get a filter, please."

"It's good information to know," I said. "Trust me, I'm not offended. And they can't just kick us out. Not only would it be bad exposure, but it would be asking for a lawsuit and I promise that the board does not want one of those."

"You do know a big-time lawyer," Zath reminded me playfully. I wasn't even surprised by his level of humor but both of my mates looked a bit shocked.

"Look, if we can't laugh at our own expense, then we're going to spend life miserable," I said. "I'm not going to worry about this meeting. The worst they're going to do is try to kick us out and I have a feeling that El would fight them for us all."

"She knows me so well already," he said, giving me a wink before refilling everyone's champagne glasses. "Come on, let's not worry about that shit tonight. This dinner is to get to know each other and leaving the rest of the bullshit behind."

"I'll toast to that," I said, holding up my now full glass.

He was right. I'd let tomorrow's problems be tomorrow's problems. For tonight, I was going to pretend there was no competition, no exes, no past; it was just us enjoying a meal and drinks. At the end of the day, they were my mates, and that idea no longer scared me.

CHAPTER  
TEN

*Nyla*

Stanley, apparently, didn't want to wait until right before the competition to chat. I was woken up at six in the morning by a competition alert, saying that we had a meeting at seven-thirty. He wanted Riven and I to come alone, which meant I had to leave Zath behind and actually be alone with this man. Things were getting way too complicated. I was more than ready to get out of the city and back home so we could figure things out away from this insanity.

Even though I was dead tired after being up far too late last night, I forced myself to keep up appearances. The competition would come right after the meeting and I didn't have time to come back and change. I'd much rather go find some espresso instead of coming back here, anyway.

At seven-fifteen a sharp knock on my door had me rushing forward. Despite how quickly I answered, Zath groaned from his bed. He was not a very nice person in the morning, something we had in common, so I was going to respect him enough to not be loud.

Riven was standing outside when I cracked open the door. I held up one finger before closing it back in his face. At that point, I was dressed and ready, so I gathered my keycard, phone, and purse and hurried out as quietly as possible.

Riven looked amused as I tiptoed out and closed the door quietly.

“You may be the bear, but Zath will turn into one if we wake him up,” I told Riven quickly.

“And here I thought you just didn’t like me anymore by slamming the door in my face,” he teased.

I rolled my eyes at the dramatics. “That was not a slam. Plus, I’m not really the subtle type. I’d have straight up told you I didn’t like you, especially for waking me up this early.”

“Well, you look pretty awake to me,” he chuckled.

“Watch yourself, bear. I haven’t even had my coffee yet,” I shot back with mock annoyance, which he just ignored. “Any clue why Stanley moved this meeting up? It’s not like we weren’t already coming down in a few hours.”

“I don’t know unless someone who saw us last night came up with some lies about us. I wouldn’t put it past a jealous ex or the lady who didn’t like getting turned down,” he pointed out as gently as possible.

“I’d like to say he wouldn’t do that, but I, clearly, don’t even know him,” I sighed. It was so frustrating that something else was piling on us after everything we were already dealing with. If I found out it was that lady then all bets were off. My horse huffed in agreement, ready to trample anyone who stood in our way.

“She was fake when she was hitting on me. It was obviously a show, maybe in hopes we’d get with her and quit? Who knows,” he said.

“She better watch it. I’m not afraid to cut a bitch,” I said, my horse huffing in agreement. She was just as ready as I was to charge into a fight to protect our mates.

“For touching your mates?” Riven was obviously teasing but I frowned at the word. It wasn’t my favorite after what happened, and the idea of ‘mates’ was ruined for me. But I couldn’t exactly blame or punish El and Riven for what Lance did.

“Look, I’m not saying that we’re not going to have any chance to become bonded mates but I will tell you now that

the word ‘mate’ is really hard to use, and not just for me it’s an issue for Zathrian as well.”

Riven sighed. “I thought we talked about this. We’ve all got baggage, but we’ll figure it out. It’s not like we don’t live in the same city, Nyla. We aren’t restricted to just this week to get things in order. It’s going to be fine.”

It was odd but I kind of believed what Riven was saying. He wasn’t just going to disappear into obscurity after this and we didn’t have to push everything into one week. There was no timeline or right or wrong way to handle finding your mates. Ours might be more complicated than most, but we’d find a way to make it work. Already, I was comfortable with them and that was a huge thing for me. I didn’t trust easily.

When we reached the ground floor, we dropped the conversation. Stanley’s message said to meet him in the same ballroom where they held the competition. The halls were still quiet this time of day outside of a few members of the cleaning staff and people heading to breakfast.

Stanley was already waiting for us when we walked into the room. He was sitting front and center but stood when he saw us. My stomach was in knots, even more so when I saw the stern expression on his face. Someone had definitely told him something. That wasn’t a normal expression to have toward innocent people.

“Thank you for joining me. It’s unfortunate that we have to have a talk like this so soon into the competition. In fact, it’s a first in this competition at all,” he said solemnly. “I’m not pleased and we are going to address it now before it becomes an even bigger issue.” We both bristled at the reprimand in his voice.

“Okay, I’m a bit confused as to why we’re even here,” I said bluntly. Seven-thirty was not the time for filters.

“Oh, really?” he said, pursing his lips in disapproval. “Well, let’s refresh your memory then. I was given some evidence last night of fraternization and the intent to sway the competition in your favor. I had hoped we could own up to our transgressions instead of doing this dance.”

“Sway the competition?” Riven asked. “That’s absurd.”

“We just met, why would I want him to win over myself? You invited us here personally, it’s not like we were business partners,” I pointed out in a frustrated tone. “And I don’t appreciate the condescending tone here.”

Stanley was taken aback by our intense words. Neither of us were rude but we also weren’t going to stand here and be accused of this bullshit. Whatever evidence he thought he had was obviously staged or fake. There was no other explanation.

“Now there’s no need to jump into the defensive, we are just here to address and remind you of the rules,” he countered as if that was simply his plan and not a full switch of tactics. He’d literally just said he wanted us to admit our guilt.

“Fate has no rules,” Riven chimed in with a slight growl to his voice. “I didn’t expect to come here and find my mate, nor did my partner El. Or Zathrian and Nyla, for that matter, and yet, here we are. Not to mention, we read the rules, Stanley. We can get to know each other if we want to, there’s nothing against it.”

Stanley’s eyes widened. “Mates?” he questioned.

A soft laugh escaped me. “Believe me, Stanley, I had no intention of meeting anyone here, especially the biggest rival we had. Our businesses are in *direct* competition, and this is completely out of left field, but we can’t exactly argue against fate.”

“I’d still like to know what evidence you were sent because not once have we had a single conversation about conspiring. In fact, we don’t even have access to what the day’s challenges are going to be so it would be impossible. How could we sabotage each other, even if we wanted to?” Riven challenged. Stanley had poked the bear and he was in defensive mode now.

Instead of explaining, Stanley pulled out his phone and clicked around before pulling open a voice clip and hitting play.

Someone tried really hard to sound like us, but from the first fake giggle, I was rolling my eyes. It was very clear that this was not me. Not only was the woman's deeper voice comically raised to imitate mine, it sounded rehearsed. Then the man spoke and I couldn't hide my laughter at his expense. The deep baritone didn't match River's smokey voice at all.

The clip continued on until they were conspiring for one of the teams to throw the competition to lose on purpose.

As it concluded, he looked at us like the cat that caught the canary, confident we'd been caught red-handed.

"That doesn't even sound like us." I said around a laugh. "This is absolutely absurd. Play it again, then listen to our voices." He narrowed his eyes at my demands but hit play again. He gave nothing away as he listened through a second time.

"Well?" Riven asked, looking absolutely livid now. "Do you still think this is real?"

"Well...I...until you were in front of me I couldn't confirm or deny. I told you that this was just to remind you of the rules," he stuttered out, flustered now that he'd been caught. Something told me the man standing here accusing us was hiding something, if not working with the same people who brought this to him.

"Rules that we have not broken. I've read through them as has every member of my team," Riven said then glanced at me pointedly. My horse neighed in agreement with our mate, loving having him on our side.

"We have as well. We are allowed to speak to each other and that has nothing to do with throwing the competition, nor is what we speak to our mates about, any of your business. Frankly, I'm insulted and disgusted this conversation is even happening," I agreed. "I understand that you have to investigate allegations but the fact that that didn't even sound like us and you boldly assumed it was, is very disappointing. It in fact, hardly feels unbiased."

Stanley's face changed from pale to red and his eyes narrowed slightly. It seemed we'd struck him right in the pride by questioning his integrity. The claws would be coming out now.

"There was no intention of disrespect here, however, I have standards to uphold," he blustered out.

"Then don't let us stop you. Are we free to go?" Riven asked, still just as angry.

Stanley waved towards the door. "You're dismissed." There was the arrogance again. Bastard.

There was no apology from him and not even an ounce of remorse or embarrassment. He went straight to anger when we told him that he was wrong.

If he decided to try and use it against us then he'd be laughed right off the board. I knew nothing else would come from this but I was just as angry as my bear mate at this point.

When we left the room both El and Zath were sitting on a bench, waiting for us to come out. My raven mate looked tired as hell but he was shifting his silver coin between his fingers nervously until he saw us. This competition meant a lot to him as well, and I didn't hesitate to offer reassurance so he didn't have to keep guessing.

"Hey, no worries, we're in the clear. But I have no desire to be here for breakfast and I need good coffee if anyone wants to join me." I glanced down at my phone to check the time. "That wrapped quick enough we have time."

"You had me at food," El joked as he stood up, offering me his arm. I hooked mine through his and we started off, Zath and Riven following behind us like it was the most natural thing in the world. Maybe there was something to this 'fated-mates' bullshit after all. It shouldn't have been this easy with the whole fucking world against us, but even without trying, they soothed parts of me that I didn't realize were stills damaged.

They didn't bother to ask questions until we found a diner and walked in. El headed straight for the large corner booth,

sliding in and pulling me with him. Zath went right to my other side, leaving Riven to slide in next to El.

The old waitress walked up with a bright smile. “We don’t get many young people in here this early,” she teased. “My name is Jill, what can I get started for you?”

One glance around told me that she was telling the truth. Every single booth was filled with silver-haired patrons nursing their coffee and chatting with each other like old friends. If that many people made this diner their usual morning destination, then you knew it had good food.

“I need coffee in the worst way,” I said. “The stronger, the better.”

“IV of coffee. Got it. You want any pancakes to go with those jitters?” she teased. Even though she was in her late sixties she was bouncing with energy. She reminded me of a golden retriever, her blonde hair only adding to the image.

“That actually sounds good. Hit me with bacon and pancakes.” I slid over the menu and she tucked it under her arm before looking at the others.

Between the three of them they ordered enough food for an army. Shockingly, Zathrian was the only one who joined me in my coffee.

“Neither one of you are morning people, are you?” Riven joked as he studied us. Poor Zath had his arms folded on the table and his head rested on top, eyes closed while he waited for his caffeine. I knew that he wasn’t asleep, he was just listening as he tried to force himself to gain some energy. Even if he woke up at noon, he’d be the same way. We were night owls through and through.

“There’s no way you’re a morning person,” I said, turning to El. “I mean, you’re a raccoon, right? They’re known for being creatures of the night. Which, I could totally see you sneaking into the fridge for midnight snacks.”

“I’m more of a ‘sleep whenever I can’ type. I’ll sleep during the day, sleep at night, eat late night snacks, then



sometimes, I eat a second breakfast. Sleeping and eating are pretty much my life.”

“I can get behind that,” Zath mumbled. “Naps are the best. But you might have to convince her to nap once in a while.”

“It’ll never happen,” I laughed. “I could get up at five in the morning and still not be able to nap. I’m an insomniac, so late nights and sleeping in a bit are my usual style. Good thing I work in a bar.”

Jill returned with our drinks and I doctored my coffee before taking a sip. It was pretty good and I let myself absorb the warmth for a moment.

“I really need to know what was said in that meeting,” El said, suddenly serious.

The reminder had my blood boiling.

“Just a bunch of made-up bullshit. I’m assuming the same lady you guys ran into was behind it. The voice on the audio clip he played sounded a bit like hers. But someone pretended to be Riven and I discussing your team purposefully failing the competition to give us a leg up.”

“When he played it, we called him out. He got mad instead of even apologizing. I’ll be honest, that disrespect alone makes me not want to come back for this next time,” Riven said. “He literally told us he wished we’d confess and save us all time, then tried to backtrack and convince us it was all a way to simply discuss it and find out if it were true or not.”

“I’ve had that thought about leaving more than once,” I admitted. “The fact that they just let anyone approach the competitors between rounds is a problem in itself.”

“It doesn’t help that the person you’re talking about is literally a sponsor’s son. After you mentioned him last night, I saw his name on the sponsor’s board in the ballroom,” Riven said.

“I’ve wondered why he was here in the first place. When I told him I wanted to open a bar, he acted like it was a huge insult. He never even bothered to find out why I wanted to do it.”

“Why did you?” El asked, not missing my bitter comment.

“My dad,” I sighed. “My parents were really close. Mom got sick and when she died, dad wasn’t the same. He followed her. There’s merit to mates dying of broken hearts.”

“That’s so sad,” Riven said gently. “I’m sorry.”

“It was really hard. I was barely out of high school when it happened,” I said. Something else Mackenzie and Grace had helped me get through, which made me even worse for allowing the rift between us to form. When this was all over, I owed it to them to try again.

“Did your dad have plans to open a bar?” El prompted gently.

“He had this show he always watched. It was an antique show but related to old pubs and speakeasies. The man was a gentle rabbit and could never have handled the rough patrons we see all the time, but he wanted that hole in the wall bar that the old regulars gather round and swap stories over a bottle of whiskey. We had very different visions on what we wanted to do with the bar, but it became our thing. We’d spend our nights after mom fell asleep making plans. When he was gone, I decided that was what I really wanted to do, too, now. To honor his memory.”

“Plus you were too stubborn for a nine to five,” Zath said. It broke the heavy moment and we both laughed.

“You two are a mess,” Riven muttered. “But that’s definitely a reason I can respect. I’m sorry you lost them so young.”

“Me, too,” I said softly. “But he’d be proud of Soulful Brews.”

“Back to my original point, I still don’t understand why he hated the idea of my dream, yet found his way to this competition,” I said, needing a break from the past.

“He probably found you and set it up on purpose. The whole thing could easily be played off as innocent,” El said.

It was like the curtains were pulled away and I could see everything clearly now. The fact that they were sitting right in the front row of the audience, hell, the fact that they were here *at all* when it didn't make sense for them to be coming to something like this together, was a huge red flag.

Lance himself was shocked when we first ran into each other, but now that I was replaying it in my mind, Calvin wasn't surprised in the least. He mentioned in the elevator he found me but held the information back from Lance. Did he decide now was the right time?

I let out a heavy sigh, rubbing at my temples. "I'm not even surprised. His dad was really great but he cares about his son. I never really found the answer as to why Lance was stupid enough to leave me at the altar, but I don't want to know, either. That ship has sailed."

"You can't be stubborn forever. You'll regret it if you don't hear him out," Zath said softly. I couldn't even argue. It had been eating me up but there was a part of me that was also afraid to hear it. He might have just changed his mind and the idea of being rejected all over again had my stomach churning.

"Watch me," I muttered, thankfully saved by the waitress as she came over, passing out our order so I could stuff my face and avoid the hard questions. It was going to be another long day of competitions and avoiding Lance, I'd need to save my energy.

CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

*Nyla*

After Stanley's meeting I was angry and done with the whole competition, but now that I stood in the ballroom with all the other teams around me, I wanted nothing more than to win.

Even if Zath and I didn't win, then maybe Riven and El would kick her ass in our stead. At this point, it was no longer us or them, it was us against the bitch who was trying to get us kicked from the competition.

Honestly, I just wanted to know why.

The entire time Stanley was introducing the next round, which was a precision challenge, all I could do was glare at him. The fucking audacity of this board to attack us and single us out was insane, especially because I'd seen the other teams going to get drinks after the last round. Nothing we did outside of this room mattered. Hell, we could all practice together every night and it still wouldn't matter. The entire encounter almost made me wonder what exactly she had on Stanley for him to act that way and risk his reputation.

"Alright, teams, you have exactly five minutes to pick your drinks, find your ingredients, prep, and then at the one minute mark is when you start to pour. Do not pour before then or you will be disqualified. There is a giant buzzer that will go off when it is time to continue," he said.

"Okay, that gives us four minutes," Zath said immediately. He was rubbing his hands together and turning around to face

the shelf of ingredients. “Do you know where you want to go from here?”

I didn’t answer right away as I joined him. My gaze roamed over the ingredients. They wanted layers, which was the exact competition we started with during our practice, but I doubted that red, white, and blue was a good choice for this setting. It was just about as basic as they come.

Then I had an idea and knew Zath would love it.

“Do you remember when we first opened and we did a Christmas party? We made those layered Christmas shots. They were a bitch to not accidentally blend, but super vibrant. Let’s do those.”

“I do. They were such a pain and Laura whined the whole time, but by the end of the night we were professionals. Do you think you could pull it off?”

“Yes, but is it worthy of this?” I waved around us. “Is it any better than red, white, and blue?”

“Hell, yeah, let’s do it. They’ll stand out from the precision alone and it has more layers than just three. We can at least earn some points for creativity, right?” I loved that Zathrian was as petty as I was and was willing to take risks just to win. We immediately got to work, pulling out everything we needed and prepping side by side.

By the time the buzzer went off and they called the one minute countdown, I had my shot glasses lined up and all the ingredients on the table. My focus was perfect, drowning out everything else to concentrate on pouring. Not a single one had too much or too little or mixed colors; they were all perfectly layered. As long as our little courier didn’t jostle the drinks too much on the way, they’d be fine.

“We’re done,” I said to our support staff. He grabbed the tray and walked over to the judges’ table. I watched on bated breath as he took each step, then took a turn to step around the table as if he just wanted to raise my anxiety. When he finally put our drinks in place and stepped back, I finally breathed.

“Did you really need to go the extra mile?” Zathrian complained loudly. The guy ducked his head and refused to look at us. I’d report it to Stanley if I thought it would even matter. At this point, we were lucky he didn’t just throw them on the ground.

My horse, who was usually calm, was letting out little anxious snorts. I could practically see her pawing nervously at the ground, waiting to hear the results. Pride and spite were definitely fueling the rest of this competition.

It felt like the judges took their time deliberating on the first team’s drinks and then El and Riven’s. Finally it was our turn, and Zath and I both gripped each others’ hand as we waited. This felt so much more monumental than all the other rounds. Having Stanley likely badmouthing us didn’t bode well for good results.

One of the judges held their drink to the light, whispering back and forth. I swear they were giving ours extra time but it was likely nerves giving me that thought. I was so tightly wound at this point, I could be overreacting.

Then, they finally took the shots and that was when everything went to chaos.

Out of nowhere, one of the judges started choking and grasping at his throat. A medical team rushed out and soon one of the medics slammed an EpiPen into his thigh. He was rushed away a moment later while the room was left in shock.

“Why would they have an ingredient here he’s allergic to?” Zath hissed in alarm. “That should be bare minimum for their own protection.”

“We’re going to be kicked out for this. Watch,” I said bitterly. The judge getting sick was sad, but it also felt a bit too much like a setup with everything else that had already happened.

That fiasco officially ended the round, disqualifying it completely since two teams never got the chance to present their own drinks. The results would be skewed and couldn’t be counted.

After that somber announcement, everyone was dismissed for the day. The audience was not happy and neither were the other competitors.

The moment we started to leave however, one of the workers held us back. He led us to the front to wait and only when the room was empty did Stanley and the remaining judges approach.

“I cannot believe that someone in this establishment would risk the life of a judge,” Stanley started to rage but I cut him off.

“I’m going to stop you right there,” I said angrily. “You can’t tell me that *you* carelessly allowed ingredients that one of your judges is allergic to into this competition, yet plan to blame us.”

“We *don’t*, which is why we’re bringing in the police to investigate. This is obviously a criminal attack,” he countered. The smug look on his face was enough to make me want to fight and bring this whole fucking competition to its knees.

“How would I know what he’s allergic to?” I argued. “This is absurd and it’s the second time you’re singling us out. Not only is that a problem since, clearly, we are not given unbiased judgment, it questions the validity of your entire event. I just want you to know I will not stay quiet about this.” My horse was letting out indignant whinnies of approval at my tirade.

“We’ll see what the police say,” one of the other judges answered in a snotty tone. I glared over at the woman, her nose twitching like a mouse. The moment the full brunt of attention was on her she seemed to cower in her seat.

The amount of judgmental stares and disgusted looks had me ready to walk out of the room. But that would just make us look guilty.

Within ten minutes, the cops were walking in. Zath and I were immediately separated and put in makeshift interrogation rooms. Not a single other competitor was in question at all, which was suspicious as hell. This turned from a petty attempt to show our skills, to a full blown nightmare.

This entire investigation was over the top and the fact that the police were even going through this meant that someone with deep pockets had an in with the police.

A real investigator would be questioning every contestant and staff member involved, not just us. The case should be cut and dry yet they were entertaining this whole thing. If I wound up in jail, I'd sue the shit out of the board and Stanley specifically.

The cop sat down across from me and leveled me with a stony glare. "I'm officer Martinez. I just have a few questions for you," he said. The fact he was already being rude didn't bode well for me. "What exactly did you put in the drink?"

"Only things I found on the shelf." I listed them off one by one and he scribbled something in his notebook as I talked.

"And when was it that you slipped pistachios into the drink?"

"Pistachios? There hasn't been a single pistachio on that shelf, nor does the drink I make require that," I pointed out. My voice was a show of calm but inside, I was ready to fight. Zath was the angel on my shoulder reminding me that jail didn't have coffee.

The officer leaned back and crossed his arms. "Well, it seems he had a reaction the moment he put *your* drink in his mouth. We have video evidence of that and every step of this competition." His shifter animal wasn't obvious, but from the aggressive pride I'd pin him as a wolf. I'd met enough of them in my life and they all held themselves over everyone else, only content if they were the top of the chain.

"Good, then this can be resolved quickly," I said. "I've literally done nothing. We used the ingredients we were presented with. I prepared a tray of drinks that had nothing with pistachio in them. If he ingested some, it was not from me."

He shifted again in his seat and gave me a smug smile. Not only was he a douchebag, he was enjoying every second of this.



“What exactly do you have against Judge Orson Graves? Was this your ploy to win? Knock one out and give yourself a leg up?”

“If someone was trying to poison him, they wouldn’t be this obvious,” I countered. “And I don’t need a leg up.”

“We all heard that you had some issues with Stanley,” he continued on, ignoring my logic.

And there it was, the comment I was waiting for.

“Oh, you mean in regards to the false accusations?” I challenged. “That was already resolved since it was completely absurd. Honestly, I’m questioning the validity of this entire competition and board.”

The way his face reddened meant that he very much knew someone on the board or had ties in this competition somewhere.

“Maybe *you* are the biased one. You don’t like when I question the board. Should I request a new officer?” A vein bulged dangerously in his neck but he simply let out a huff of air and closed his notebook.

“I think we’re done here, anyway,” he growled as he grabbed his notebook and left. Or rather, stomped angrily out of the room. What was with Madison and all these men acting like children? The fact they were predator shifters made it even more comical.

My anger and frustration only grew as hours ticked by. They were obviously trying their best to throw me off my game or intimidate me. I wasn’t sure what they were trying to accomplish but it didn’t matter. At this point, my horse was stomping around my mind while I fumed in my chair.

This wasn’t going to just be pushed under the rug. I fucking refused to allow it.

I’d take Stanley, the board, the judges, and the asshole interrogating officer down with me if it came to that.

It was a different officer that came in at the three-and-a-half hour mark. I was tired, hungry, and seven shades of pissed

off.

“You’re free to go,” was all she said before walking away again but I literally laughed at her, which had her turning around. The woman shifted uncomfortably on her feet as she faced me.

“You’re kidding, right?” I demanded. “You left me in this room for hours. Before you say anything, yes, I watched the clock. All of that just to say I’m free and give me nothing else? No answers on why I was singled out here? No apology for the rude behavior of the previous officer?”

She didn’t meet my eyes but started to wring her hands. “Reviewing the footage, we found that one of the staff members was responsible. They are being prosecuted accordingly, that’s all I can give you.” This officer wasn’t annoyed but I could see the frustration on her face and I knew it wasn’t aimed at me. She glanced behind her to ensure the hall was clear. “Look, you should leave. I’m sorry this happened to you, but this is not a fight you want to take.”

She scurried away after that, letting me make my own choice. I was livid but I took her advice and left the small office I’d been trapped in. The other officers and staff were still walking around and it took everything in me not to flip them all off as I passed.

Instead, I kept my head held high as I walked out of the main doors. I had so much nervous energy and anger in my body that I almost didn’t know what to do. If I was home I would go for a run but I couldn’t exactly shift here, not to mention I never truly felt safe in Madison. And today was yet another example of that.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Riven’s voice echoed out just as I reached the gold-plated elevators in the lobby. “I’ve been panicking out here for hours. I just finally sent El and Zathrian after food.”

“Get in the elevator,” was all I said as the doors opened, grabbing his wrist and pulling him in with me. He made a startled noise but thankfully, didn’t argue. Until the doors closed, at least.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on? What the fuck happened in there? Why did it take so long?”

“Look. I’ll explain it to you all later but right now, if I don’t get this energy out I’m going to scream or tear into someone. So, do you want to help me get the energy out or should I figure it out myself?”

“How am I going to...?” he trailed off as it dawned on him, his eyes widening at the prospect. “Oh, I’m definitely helping.”

“Good,” I bit out as I dragged him with me to my room. The moment the door was closed and locked behind me I flipped the latch and started pulling off my clothes. This was not going to be one of those ‘mates finding each other’ moments; it was definitely more of an ‘I need an angry fuck right now and he’s the target’ kind of moment.

To his credit, Riven wasn’t complaining. He started pulling off his own clothes just as fast as I did. I took about thirty seconds to appreciate the well-toned muscles and dusting of dark hair on his chest. I’ve never been one who enjoyed overly hairy men, but it was the perfect amount to fit my bear mate perfectly.

“Are you always going to be this bossy?” he teased as he walked toward me. I didn’t answer him; instead I slanted my lips over his, fingers digging into his shoulders as I held him close to me. He met me with just as much fire. I had a feeling this was about to be explosive and exactly what I needed.

Riven swept his tongue into my mouth, tasting me and fighting for dominance. We were a clash of groping hands and teeth. If he wanted a fight, then he was going to lose. I had righteous indignation on my side today and the last thing I was going to do was take it easy on him.

Riven hardly seemed like the submissive type, hell, I knew he wasn’t, but for right now, he was giving his mate exactly what she needed. I appreciated him for that.

He suddenly pulled away and kept me at arms’ length. I tried to protest but he was definitely stronger than me. “Wait.

We have to talk about what this means.”

“I don’t want to talk about anything,” I breathed out as I tried to pull him back in, but he resisted. “I know what fucking means.”

“Nyla, we’re mates. If we do this, no matter what the intentions of this sex is, we’re going to solidify the bond. There won’t be any turning back.”

“Look, I’m not promising you a happy-ever-after. Fuck, I’m not even promising you that this is going to be a normal relationship, but I’m giving in. I want this and I want you. The rest we can figure out later.” I met his eyes, showing him how serious I was. “Please?”

He studied me for a moment before finally relenting. “That works for me. As long as you aren’t going to just try to cast us aside.”

“No, but sometimes, you might have to fight for it. I’m stubborn, even I can admit that.”

He grinned at that. “Don’t worry, I don’t mind the chase and El thrives on it.”

“Then can we stop talking and start fucking?” I demanded. His answer was to grab me and throw me on the bed. Before I could do anything he had his hands hooked under my knees, pulling my legs apart and baring my pussy for him.

He dove in like he was trying to beat the world record for quickest orgasm, sucking hard on my clit before thrusting his tongue into my core. He tasted and teased every part of my slick pussy like he was trying to learn my body. I didn’t hold back my own screams as he slammed one orgasm into me, then another.

Riven was relentless and unyielding as he tongue fucked me through them both. As I shattered for him the second time, he pushed two fingers into my core so he could only focus on my clit. It wasn’t until I came again that he finally pulled back.

If I wasn’t so dazed, I would have been annoyed by that smug look on his face. My body was coated in a sheen of sweat, chest heaving as I tried to gasp for breath. I didn’t think

I could move if I wanted to. But I also wasn't angry anymore, he'd definitely accomplished our goal.

“Come on now, Nyla, you wanted to work out this energy. So, get up and work for it.” He not-so-subtly nudged me out of the way and took my spot, laying out and resting his hands behind his head.

He damn well knew that I wasn't about to back down from a challenge, but also the way that cock was jutting out for me had me more than ready to sink down on him.

He didn't keep his hands behind his head for long. The moment that I straddled his legs and lined him up, he was there, skating his fingers over my skin, touching and teasing me as he stretched me out. I sank down slowly, not looking for pain right now. Riven was a lot to take.

“Fuck,” I cursed out as I finally reached my limit, closing my eyes as my body adjusted. But it didn't take long before my sensitive body was ready for more and I started rocking my hips.

Shockwaves of pleasure coursed through me until it was hard to keep up the pace. Riven's fingers dug into my hips as he bucked into me from below. He had said I was going to work for it, but it seemed like he couldn't help himself.

Every time I ground my clit over him, my next orgasm would inch closer. Stars danced behind my eyelids and with the way my stomach clenched, I knew I was close. Forgoing any real rhythm, I simply rolled my hips over him until it finally broke, his name falling from my lips as I came.

It was cathartic to fuck him so relentlessly. Honestly, thoughts of the investigation were far behind me. In fact, it was the first time in days I wasn't so tense I wanted to scream.

“That's it, baby, take it from me,” my bear mate rasped out. His eyes glowed as if he were fighting his soul-bonded off, trying to keep control.

With a low, deep growl, he leaned forward, sinking his teeth into my neck and that was it for me, my pussy clenching around him as my orgasm tore through me like a freaking

tsunami. My cries were matched with a roar as he climaxed, too, slamming up into me one last time before he filled me with his cum.

As we came down I half expected reality to slam into me, to be freaked out that I just had sex with my mate, that I accepted him so easily. But it was far easier than I anticipated. I was almost relieved that I'd taken the step. Without all of the overthinking it was much easier to let instinct and my heart guide me.

“Shit, is El going to be okay with this?” I asked, eyes widening as I crawled off of him finally.

“We've already talked about it, he's fine and there's no real rules when it comes to mates. We always knew there'd be someone joining us eventually. Our relationship doesn't affect mine and El's. What about Zathrian?”

“He knows it's inevitable,” I agreed.

A loud knock on the door had us both glancing at each other.

*Well, I guess we're about to find out.*

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

*Nyla*

We cleaned up and threw our clothes on in record time. When we finally opened the door, both Zathrian and El watched us with raised eyebrows.

“Well, it seems to me bonds were formed,” El said with zero care in the world. Clearly, he wasn’t bothered by it, just amused. I appreciated how easygoing he was, especially in an awkward moment like this.

Zath, on the other hand, looked conflicted. I had a feeling he was still waiting for that moment to come when I’d leave him behind.

“Are you okay, Zath?” I whispered. He nodded, his face smoothing out as he let go of whatever was bothering him. He had something in his hand and I laughed as he spun the shiny badge around in his fingers. “Tell me you didn’t grab that from one of the cops.”

“Of course, I didn’t,” he said but was already cracking up. “That would have been hilarious though.”

El cut in before I could interrogate him. “It’s not real, I promise. We just thought it was funny. There was this little shop and they had their share of toys and seeing as how today was such a shitshow, we figured we needed something to remember it by. Especially if we’re getting kicked out now.”

“Yeah, are we still part of this?” Zath demanded. “They let me go within thirty minutes. Whatever Stanley’s grudge with you is, apparently didn’t extend to me.”

“Lucky you. My interrogation was short because I pissed off the cop. I’d bet my favorite coffee mug that he has an in with the board or Stanley.” I sighed. “I was in that room after talking to the cop for three-and-a-half hours, just sitting by myself. The wait was insane.”

“What did they find, why’d they finally release you?” El asked.

“They had nothing on me,” I said bluntly. “Apparently, one of the judges is allergic to pistachios and they were claiming that we used them in our drink. But none of the alcohol we used for that shot had any nuts in it whatsoever. Not to mention, apparently, they don’t even have them on the shelves anywhere. When they finally said I could leave it was because they said they had footage of a staff member but gave me nothing else about the whole incident.”

“That’s so fucked up,” El said angrily. “Holding you without evidence, then giving you no apology. They need to be called out for this.”

“I don’t know what to do here, honestly. We can’t spend every day being attacked,” I said quietly. “We had to put ourselves first at some point.”

“Let’s not cause a scene yet. Something is clearly going on here, and if we play our cards too early then we’re going to just look like dropouts and risk our businesses and reputations. We may not like it but they’re literally the local board. They have knowledge and connections in every aspect of owning a bar. Do we really want to burn those bridges?”

Riven’s words were full of logic and I hated it. What I wanted to do was burn the whole event down and dance on the ashes. Maybe that wasn’t the most noble of me, but they’d crossed us too many times already.

But I also knew he was right.

“I don’t want to risk it, either. I worked too fucking hard for this. We’ve come too far in this competition to just drop out because of some stupid bullshit. But if someone doesn’t feed me soon, then we’re going to have real problems.”



“Well, I think you need to get out of this building, so let’s head downstairs,” Zathrian insisted as he grabbed a hoodie for both of us, tossing mine over. I pulled it on, grabbed my wallet, and followed them out. We stopped at El and Riven’s room long enough for them to grab what they needed and lock up.

“How are you not in jail?” The icy tone had me stopping. We all turned slowly to take in the bitch who obviously caused all of this trouble. Or at least some of it. The fact she said those words specifically likely meant she had a hand in what happened. At this point, I wasn’t going to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“Oh look, it’s Lacey,” I deadpanned. “How are you not kicked out of this competition for all of these false accusations? You know, if you minded your own fucking business more often, then maybe you wouldn’t have to throw yourself at my men. And if you touch them again, I’ll fucking end you.”

Her red-painted lips formed into a shocked circle as she listened to my tirade. At my threat, she finally snapped out of it. I could tell she was definitely one of those people that used her looks to her advantage; even now she was dressed up to accentuate every curve and bit of cleavage she had. Her makeup and hair were done to perfection.

“I’m not the one who tried to poison a judge,” she said snarkily. “You should be rotting in a cell for that. It was on camera, the whole world saw it.”

“And yet I’m not, because I haven’t broken any laws. So, if you’d kindly move, we’re going to go get some food since, you know, I actually have mates to go with.”

She let out a growl of frustration, but we all turned our backs on her. Though, Riven did fall in step behind the group, protecting his mates in case she tried something.

We made it all the way to the elevators, the door closing as she made a beeline for the stairs. I had a feeling this wasn’t over yet.

Sure enough, the moment the doors opened she was standing there like a Barbie avenging angel ready to strike, hands on her hips and sneer on her face.

As if that would stop us from getting around her.

“Do I need to call security to remove you?” Zathrian asked coldly. She looked him up and down before dismissing him. That had my blood boiling.

“Why are you so obsessed with me?” I questioned, making a joke of it. My voice was so loud that we were getting attention from everyone in the lobby. She glanced around nervously and took a few steps back. “My mates and I were going to get some lunch. You need to back off and stop trying to get between bonded mates. That’s the lowest form of desperation.” My tone was as judgmental as I could make it and whispers soon followed. Her face was now as red as her lipstick and she stomped off, heels clicking loudly as she made her exit.

“Damn, somebody is on the possessive side,” El joked. His hand was on my lower back as he led me through the lobby and that was the only thing grounding me. All eyes were on us but I ignored the hushed murmurs completely.

Of course, it seemed that chaos was just going to follow us wherever we went. Stepping outside the front doors, we were met with Lance again. His father hung back, looking worried as his son approached.

Lance held up his hands. “Look, I’m not necessarily here to talk about you and me, though if you ever give me the chance to, I would love to talk about that. But this is about my safety and your safety. Can we please talk?”

Something in his voice was so serious that I couldn’t just step away from it. But I was also at my capacity for bullshit today. I was frustrated and hungry and ready to snap. One horse could only take so fucking much. This one week already felt as if it were two months long with all the insanity I’d endured.

My eyes went to Zathrian on instinct. He had been my rock and since I didn't know what to do, I hoped he'd have a solution.

The moment he took over, my body sagged with relief. Riven must have noticed because he moved in behind me and massaged my shoulders. Lance didn't miss the movement and I saw him tense, but he didn't say anything else.

"We're going to get lunch. Why don't you come with us? We reserve the right to kick your ass out if you decide to be a douchebag, but if you're serious, you can come with us."

Zath glanced at the other two men and they both nodded in agreement before he turned back to Lance.

"So, what'll it be?"

"I'm coming. We'll follow behind you, I can't let my security fall too far behind."

Security? What the hell had he gotten into since we'd parted ways? Sure enough, as soon as he moved toward the car, two men in suits joined him, obvious weapons tucked in their belts.

Maybe it was time to hear him out after all. There was, apparently, far more to the story than I could imagine.

"Hey, are you okay?" El asked, stopping me before I had a chance to climb in the car. I shook my head but didn't offer him any words. He simply gave my hand a squeeze before helping me in. He even reached over and buckled me in when I couldn't do it for myself. It was strange having someone take such meticulous care of me. It had my emotions even more on edge and I was having to do everything I could to keep them at bay.

Lance and I were amazing before the wedding. We were compatible on almost every level. He was sweet and caring outside of the fact that he had some snobby tendencies. He only wanted what was best for us, but 'best' in his mind was not the same thing as mine. Even with those differences we were both committed to making it work.

“We don’t have to go in,” Riven offered as we pulled up to the restaurant.

In the end the decision was mine, but this wasn’t necessarily about reconciling. Zath had been right before, I’d regret not getting closure. I wasn’t doing this for my ex, I was doing it for myself.

Lance and his security team were climbing out of their car at the same time we were. He gave a strange look at the diner we’d discovered previously, but didn’t complain.

We walked inside and claimed the same corner booth from before. El, Riven, and Zath sandwiched me between them, so Lance was stuck sitting right next to Zathrian, who had more than a little hostility toward him. He’d seen me break down enough in the beginning to know every dirty, little detail.

Zath started the conversation off right away. “What safety issues do you have that concern us?”

His words were so harsh that Lance blinked for several moments but was saved by our waitress coming up. We threw out a quick lunch and drink order before she hustled back to the kitchen. No one bothered to speak until the drinks were in front of us. The tension was rising by the second and I could barely make myself look at my former mate.

“None of this is going to make sense unless I start from the beginning. Can I please get it out? If you don’t want to hear from me after this, fine, but you should know everything.”

So, he was going to talk about leaving me after all. I guess it was time to just listen. My horse whinnied in agreement. She had every right to demand answers and I couldn’t deny her that peace of mind.

“Fine,” I said. It wasn’t the guys who reached out to touch me this time, but me reaching out for them. One hand landed on El, and the other on Zathrian.

“About three months before we were supposed to get married, my dad was doing this huge trial. You might remember it because we spent some late nights there while I helped him out.” I nodded, remembering the time baking with

his mom while they worked well into the night. Everything had felt normal, like I had a family. I was happy then, even if I was exhausted.

“Yes, I remember,” I said, waving him on to continue.

“The case was against a local member of the Snake Eyes gang. I’m sure you’ve heard of them on the news before now. This isn’t their usual area but you’d be surprised how many small pockets they have in the country.”

“Damn,” El said. “I wasn’t expecting this turn.”

Lance glanced at him but continued on. “Well, the trial was successful. It closed about a month before we got married and dad put away the local leader and a few of his best men.”

A few less gang members on the street didn’t exactly sound like a bad thing, so I had no clue where he was going with this. How could his father’s trial have anything to do with us and our relationship? My first reaction was anger. This felt like he was feeding me random excuses.

“Okay, how does that relate to you leaving her at the altar?” Riven asked. If I could have given him a high five I would have. He was saying exactly what I was thinking.

Lance gave him a quick glance before looking back at me. Every time he spoke, his gaze was locked on mine, eyes pleading with me to actually listen.

Just hearing his voice again was hard, but I was breathing through it, not letting go of my mates as I forced myself to finally look at him. He was a mess, even more so now than the last time I saw him. His dirty-blond hair was longer, thrown in a messy bun on his head. There were still dark circles under his eyes like our first encounter a few days ago, but now it was accompanied by stubble and wrinkled clothes. Seeing me must have been difficult for him, though I felt no sympathy for his pain.

“They didn’t take kindly to my dad’s involvement,” he said. His voice broke and I knew this was the part that would get me. “On the way to the chapel that day, I got in a car accident. It wasn’t bad but when I got out of the car to talk to

the other driver, they shoved me in their car. We made it to the chapel long enough for someone to run in a hastily scrawled note that I wrote at gunpoint. I never knew what happened to you other than the fact that you had to be hurt. You thought I just left but I spent the next three months in literal hell before my dad and his connections found us. I won't go into the details, but let's just say I have scars that are not only on the surface."

The shadows in his eyes alone was proof that he wasn't lying. I was stunned and of all the scenarios I'd come up with over the past year, none of it was this bad. What had they done to him while he was in their clutches? Abuse? Torture? Something more?

"Three months?" I choked out. He nodded and even his eyes were glistening a little bit at the reminder of what he'd been through. My heart fractured a little more for him. Not only did he spend months of torture wondering if I hated him, he spent the other nine months of the year that we'd been apart recovering on his own.

He and his family and, knowing them, he had everything he could need. But he also likely had the realization that he'd lost me forever.

Calvin didn't let it go. He found me, and I didn't discount his involvement bringing Lance here on purpose. It felt so crazy, almost too wild to believe, but how could I deny it? Lance was not a liar and the pain in his voice was very real.

"It took me a lot of therapy to be okay again and I wasn't going to try to find you until I could function. I was afraid to go out, but I was afraid to be alone; paranoia took over and I thought I could see them at every turn. Those first few weeks were just as bad as being held captive."

"So, what happened when you were rescued?" Zathrian asked gently. Everyone had lost their aggression now. He looked relieved but not quite relaxed.

"A ton more people were arrested and I've had security ever since," he admitted. "It was not a pretty situation and I've been terrified. The only reason they kept me alive was because

I was promised as a mate to one of the leader's daughters. She's been stalking me ever since."

"For revenge?" I asked. That was a huge risk to take.

"No, she has all female mates and wanted me to be the key to having babies. I would have lived as their sex slave, essentially. Helping breed them as much as they wanted. When they had what they needed then it would have likely meant my death."

Bile rose in my throat. They'd not only taken our lives from us and tortured him, they were going to dehumanize him as well.

"God, I'm so sorry, Lance," I breathed out on a broken sob. He didn't deserve any of this but I was glad that he got out when he did. That was no life for anyone.

It was hard to be so angry on his behalf when I'd been furious *at* him for so long. I had never been more conflicted in my life but I also couldn't just erase a year of pain. The heartbreak was and is real. I needed to process this and I couldn't do that here and now. Instead, I focused on the safer part of the conversation.

Or safer emotionally at least.

"So, she's stalking you? Trying to get you back?" I questioned. "Did she follow you here?"

He nodded. "We think so. She wasn't arrested that night and she had this obsession with all things red. I keep finding red things out of nowhere. I got in my car one day and there was a red rose on the seat. I went to work with my father and a client came in, leaving behind a red business card when he was gone. The only words on it were 'private investigation.' She never outright said anything but I knew she was following me. He wasn't truly a client and he never came back, confirming our fears. Dad upped the security then, afraid he'd lose me again, and this time, I wouldn't make it out alive."

"That's terrifying," El said solemnly. "That's a lot to deal with. I don't know how you're so calm."

“It’s my reality, what else can I do?” Lance said. “I haven’t heard anything in about two months. I wouldn’t have risked coming here otherwise. But after we spoke that first night, someone sent me a cocktail at the bar. It was bright red. I haven’t seen her specifically here, but I haven’t met her mates and I would be just as valuable to them.”

“That’s wild,” I breathed out. “I wonder if that’s why we’re being targeted. Today, I was almost framed for nearly killing a judge and we never did anything. I didn’t even know the man was allergic to pistachios and my drink didn’t have anything nutty in it. Yet somehow, I spent hours being interrogated and held. Before that, Riven and I were accused of throwing the competition and there was falsified audio. Stanley, the guy running the whole event, seems to be in on whatever it is going on.”

“Look, maybe I have more paranoia on my side after what happened to me, but I’m just saying this doesn’t sound like a coincidence,” Lance said. “You might be in danger. I’m so fucking sorry if I brought this on you. We had hoped it was over finally and I was ready to move on. I couldn’t do that without at least telling you what happened. I couldn’t let you go on thinking I’d just throw you away. I loved you with my entire soul, Nyla.”

Riven let out a low growl that brought all attention to him. At first I thought he was pissed off for Lance’s apology but his words cleared that up. “Lacey is always wearing red. Have you noticed it? She has red lips, red hair, and she was wearing a red dress the night she tried to throw herself at us. There’s always red on her somewhere.”

“And she clearly has it out for us,” Zath agreed, buying right into the theory. Their train of thought perfectly steered the conversation to safer grounds and I knew it was intentional. I seriously had the best mates.

“Is she in the competition?” Lance questioned.

“She’s on team one,” I answered. “They said they have twenty years, but she’s young, maybe thirty-five, tops.”

“I’ll have dad look into her,” he promised.



The guys threw theories back and forth while I stared at the table. I felt like my whole world had suddenly shifted all over again and I didn't know what to do to fix it.

Lance stood up abruptly. "Look, I'm going to excuse myself now. I'm not hungry. Here's some money to cover your guys' lunch and for hearing me out. I'm going to give you time, Nyla. You thought that I was betraying you this whole time and that's going to take some space to work through, but I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me. I miss you."

That was the man I knew. The one who took my feelings into consideration, who was so caring that he was going to let me process before pushing me.

But could I truly move past this?

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

*Nyla*

“Ignore it,” Zath said as I glared up at the judges’ table, waiting for Stanley to start his daily, long-winded explanation of what was to come.

Being in the ballroom among the crowd again left me uneasy. There were whispers and gossip running rampant through the room to the point I was ready to walk out. That was a common thought every single round we’d been in from that first incident. But I held my head high and ignored all the looks the best I could.

The moment Stanley walked into the room he was all smiles. In fact, one of those smiles was thrown directly at me. If I wasn’t worried before, I sure as fuck was now. He should be groveling, apologizing, doing everything he could to salvage his reputation. Yet this felt like a direct threat.

“This is going to be great,” Zath said drily as we watched Stanley walk up to the judges’ table. They spoke for a moment as if he were just trying to raise tensions, but he finally stepped away, sweeping his arm out toward us contestants as he addressed the audience.

“Well, we certainly had a bad day yesterday. We have to readjust the scoring to fit the lack of trials, however we’re going to start today with a bang!” The crowd cheered at his enthusiasm.

“Oh, God,” I breathed out, knowing this was going to be painful.

“Something we’ve never tried before during our competition, but after some deliberation, we think it would really show the character of our contestants.” Again, another look was sent my way.

My fingers were gripping the edge of the bar so hard in front of me that they started to ache as they turned white. I was waiting for the other ball to drop. Competition staff wheeled out a projector and put it in front of the judges’ table, adjusting everything until a blank screen popped up with their logo on it.

“If our secondary team members could step to the front please,” Stanley said, gesturing to the bars. Zathrian gave me a panicked look but didn’t hesitate to join the others as they went to the front of the room.

Someone was using a remote behind the scenes somewhere, the screen coming to life with a random generator of all their names going in a pot. There were five numbers to the side which I assumed represented our teams. They were mixing teams and I had a feeling mine was rigged.

“We’re going to switch up teams today. Whichever number you land on is your temporary team,” he explained before looking back to the screen.

The remote was handed over and he clicked a button, announcing each name as it fell into place. By the time it finished sorting, I watched Stanley tense. When he turned to the crowd, his face was livid. Somehow, I’d gotten El, and neither Zathrian nor Riven were stuck with team one. Overall, we came out on top and he was *not* happy.

It took him several deep breaths to get his face to go from tomato red to its normal shade and the game show host mask to fall back into place.

“Let’s keep in mind that intentionally sabotaging the round is against the rules. If your drink is very clearly made to fail, for example inedible or poorly made, then we will disqualify *both* teams involved. The judges know your abilities by now.”

*Well, that ups the stakes a bit.*

“Each group will be given a theme to follow and you will have thirty minutes to deliberate in a private room, there will be no cameras, no audio, that way it is completely your choice without outside influence. In that time, you will need to come up with an array of drinks; four is the minimum, but with no more than six to fit your theme. Remember, we judge on precision, creativity, and taste.”

Isolation? He was definitely hoping I would have ended up with the wrong person for this. Anything could have happened behind closed doors and I felt queasy just thinking about it. No one could have paid me enough to allow my mates or I to go into a room alone with Lacey.

I had a new support staff member since our original one was likely in jail. The new guy stepped closer to El and I before ordering us to follow. He turned and led us out of the room with no further instruction. At least he was professional and not creepy.

We ended up in a small conference room that was only big enough for a table, two chairs, and a huge white board that took up one wall. There was a stack of markers, pens, and paper waiting on the table as well. They'd given us everything we could need to plan out the challenge.

On the whiteboard the word Halloween. I guess we now had our theme.

At least it was an easy one to work with.

“We will let you know when the time is up, until then get to work,” our support staff told us quickly before he left. El walked over to the door and locked it behind him. He turned and walked back toward me.

Suddenly, I was very aware of the man standing before me. There was a heated look in his eyes that said he had a plan already and I had to squeeze my thighs together as desire slammed into me. Attraction between mates was tenfold and this man had me ready to combust.

“We have thirty minutes. I have two drink ideas for this theme, a vampire's kiss martini and a witch's brew cocktail.

Any ideas?" I hadn't expected El to just jump right into ideas and it threw me off for a second, helping me fight the lust fogging my brain.

"Well, my first thought was a blackberry mule. We could call it black magic. We came up with it last Halloween and everyone loved it. In fact it outsold all of our regular drinks by double. We kept it on the menu for a month after that and it stayed a top seller."

He nodded. "Okay that's three, we need at least one more, maybe two. We can always throw in like a candy-corn layered shot or something since they seem to like layers here." El's easy sarcasm had me chuckling. It was nice to have him around to lighten the mood. That and I just liked being around him. The more time we spent together the more I dreaded going home. I was getting used to being surrounded by strong men who didn't let the world kick me while I was down. A girl could get used to that.

And the sex. That was definitely a plus to finding your mates. Sure, El and I hadn't fucked yet, but I had a strong feeling that was about to change.

El quickly wrote down everything we talked about and I just breathed freely. It was nice to be in a private space for a few minutes. Stanley hadn't even done anything over the top today, but his subtle smiles were getting to me. Just existing in the ballroom lately had been a chore. There were too many bad memories associated with it and honestly, I couldn't wait for the entire competition to just be over so we could go home, winners or not.

My horse huffed angrily in my head, annoyed at the fact I wanted to just give up and go. She was stubborn enough that she wanted to win and make Stanley watch as our names were called. But I knew damn well that was not going to happen now.

"What is that small smile about?" El questioned me.

"My horse is annoyed because I was just thinking that I just wanted this competition to be over. She doesn't like that

idea. She wants to win to prove to all of them that they can't break our spirit."

"What does she think if we win?" he asked with a grin. His mischievous, curious smiles were quickly becoming something I craved. The energy and attitude El possessed was full of life and a humor I needed more of in my life.

At first, my mare was quiet, then I felt reluctant acceptance. That had me cracking up and eventually, he couldn't help but laugh, too.

"My raccoon doesn't like the idea of dropping out either; he wants to win this," El said as he interpreted what my laughter meant.

"She feels the exact same. She's willing to lose if it's to you but that's like... a consolation prize at best. We're not exactly quitters over here. Speaking of, we still need another drink."

"How about a neon-green one? Just call it monster slime or something," he mused. "A bit of a fuck you to the judges since your last green drink was accused of attempted murder."

"Oh, that's good," I said, adding it to our list. "I have a green-apple shot we can do for it. The candy apple vibe is perfect for the theme."

"Then, that's one," he said easily. His blind trust was a bit insane since he didn't truly know me, but I found it nice all the same.

Without warning El started pulling off his shirt. I didn't move as I watched him expose every inch of himself to me.

"We have our ideas, that means we can fit in a quickie to get us through the next phase, right?" My horse was practically trotting to her mate, forcing me to finally move.

Again it wasn't the normal coming together of mates, but the last thing I wanted was a slow and sweet fuck. We needed stress relief and this was a perfect way to do it. Plus, El didn't strike me as the slow and sweet type. He had more energy than the rest of us combined.

“You’d better set a timer,” I said as I started stripping my own clothes. He turned his back and set the timer so he wouldn’t get distracted which had me cracking up. I found myself laughing way more since I’d met him than I had in months.

I would definitely take having sex with El over giving this competition too much of my attention. Even if it was the last day to prove ourselves before the banquet and a networking event. They’d invited distributors, sponsors, and just about anything a bar could possibly need to be successful. We had to be on our best behavior until then at least.

“You know, I’m standing here naked and your mind is on other things. Should I put it all back on?” El’s voice was teasing but he also looked a bit hurt. My horse gave a grunt of annoyance at me and I didn’t hesitate to close the distance between us. Needing him to know how I felt, I pressed my lips to his, curled my fingers in his hair. He moved close enough his hard cock pressed into me and I was glad my own issues hadn’t turned him off.

El gave me a moment to kiss him before he was pulling away and dropping to his knees. I yelped as he hooked one leg over his shoulder and dove right for my pussy. I steadied myself with hands on his shoulders as he swirled his tongue around my clit. He gave a hum of approval at the taste of me and a blush rose on my cheeks.

They had a way of making me feel gorgeous and sexy and even when he was in a hurry, my mate made sure I knew I was the center of his attention.

With a low growl, he slid two fingers inside of my core and I moaned loud enough that I had to bite my lip so we weren’t heard. If anyone interrupted us now they’d be waiting outside of that locked door until we finished. His mouth felt far too good.

It took everything I had, including biting my lip hard enough I could taste blood, to keep from screaming as he sucked and licked his way over my pussy while finger fucking

me furiously. He curled the digits slightly, giving me what I needed to explode.

I didn't even finish coming before he pulled his fingers free and put me back on my feet. Moving faster than should be possible he turned me and bent me over the table, kicking my legs apart. I'd pegged Riven as the dominant one but my raccoon mate was just as demanding. But for him, I didn't fight it, I gave in.

“Are you ready for me, baby girl?”

“Yes,” I answered and that was all it took for him to slam his hips forward. It was a good thing I held on tight to the table because he was wasting no time fucking me hard and fast. That energy paid off in spades as he set a rhythm that shouldn't be humanly possible.

“God, you feel amazing,” he breathed out. “Fuck, being with a mate makes everything feel so much better.” As our bond snapped into place I could feel his emotions mixing with mine. The lust and pleasure were so strong that my entire body shook with the force of it. My orgasm seemed to be always on the edge, one turning quickly into another without much coaxing.

He was, apparently, a master of multitasking, never once slowing down or letting his hands fall away from my body as the bond formed. It was more than a little impressive.

The moment he reached around to tease my clit I knew that he wasn't far behind. His rhythm faltered and his breathing turned erratic. He teased me until I was clenching around him, biting down on my arm to keep myself from screaming out as I fell apart.

El came with me, his low groan stifled as he buried his face in my neck. We didn't move for a second, just soaking in the moment the best we could.

His timer went off then, telling us that our moment was over just in time. As El pulled out of me, I already missed him, wishing that we had more time. It was definitely a quickie but it would, hopefully, get me through the rest of the day.



For the first time today, I felt relaxed and ready. Maybe I should have been having sex before each round of this godforsaken competition. Though the downside was that I was sweaty and disheveled and had cum dripping down my thighs. At least he was a gentleman enough to clean me with my own panties before tucking them in his pocket. Brat.

“Alright, so how do we want to do this?” he asked like we weren’t pulling on clothes again. “We’re definitely kicking their asses.”

He sat down with his pen at the ready, taking notes as I offered up ideas. I was growing to adore the smile spreading across his face.

We definitely had this round in the bag.

CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**

*Nyla*

“Okay, hear me out.” Not exactly the most promising way to start the afternoon, but after yesterday’s disastrous judging where neither of us were awarded a single point, I was ready for anything El was about to offer us.

“I’m listening,” Zathrian said, sitting up and dropping a handful of silver trinkets in his pocket so that the raccoon had his full attention.

“This whole thing is a shitshow and I have no desire to give that bitch the attention of causing a scene. So, I vote we skip this bullshit ceremony and head for the closest forest. Give our soul-bonded a chance to meet.”

We’d been so cooped up here in the hotel and dealing with one mess after another that we hadn’t even had the chance to really get to know each other. But the moment he mentioned it, my horse was whinnying excitedly and pressuring me to answer.

“I’m in,” I said.

“Definitely,” Riven growled with a gravelly laugh. He shook out his limbs as he tried to fight the creature back for just a little longer. “Let’s take the SUV.”

“Wait,” Zathrian said, giving me a pointed look. “Are we just going to pretend the elephant in the room doesn’t exist or are you going to invite Lance along? It’s been days.”

I closed my eyes in defeat. Leave it to Zathrian to call my ass right out. He didn't hold back on me. That wasn't his style.

"Do you think I should?" I asked the others.

"That's not up to us," El said as gently as possible. I couldn't blame him for not wanting to step in, but I still needed them on this one.

"It's not, but if you were me?" There was empathy on their faces and I was afraid they'd try and spare my feelings. "Guys, I can take it."

"If I were in your place, and just learned what I learned, I think I'd take a chance and see if being around him helped to let go of the baggage or made it worse," Riven said.

"He went through hell, but so did you," Zath said evenly. "Give it a shot but don't force yourself to move too quickly. It's okay for things to take time. He acknowledged that it wouldn't be easy for you to move on, but an olive branch goes a long way."

The more they spoke, the more I knew they were right. Even as I thought of my ex there was no more fury. The pain was still there, it couldn't be erased that easily. I'd lived with it for so long it was going to take longer than a day to fix, but they were right, this could help me start to heal.

Lance's dad had given me a business card a while ago, so I pulled it out of my pocket. I texted the number on there. It was less than thirty seconds of waiting before an unknown number was calling.

"Hey, Lance," I said quietly. "Do you have a second?"

"Of course," he responded without hesitation. "Is everything alright?"

I wanted to say no. Just hearing him talk so sweetly to me was bringing back so many memories. The ones I thought I'd never get a chance to truly feel again. They had once been tainted but right now, it felt a little easier to hear. Maybe the guys were onto something.

“My mates and I are going for a run. Do you want to join us? We’re giving our soul-bonded animals a chance to meet. Just to be clear, I’m not making promises, but I’m willing to see how we get along now that the truth is out there,” I said in a long ramble, barely taking a breath.

“I’d love to join you. The fact that you thought of me is enough.” I wasn’t trying to take credit for the idea but I wasn’t about to correct him at this point. He hadn’t been far from my mind in the last few days, despite not bringing it up to the others. It was hard to put into words. I was feeling so many conflicting things at once and it wasn’t entirely Lance that caused it.

The entire competition had turned into this huge dumpster fire but it brought me my mates, so I couldn’t think too poorly of it. More than that, it somehow brought Lance back into my life. It was the one thing I dreaded but now that I knew the truth, part of me was glad we came, and that I’d heard him out.

We both deserved to give it a second chance.

“Meet us in the parking lot?” I questioned.

“I’ll be there,” he promised. The determination in his voice hit me with nostalgia. It was one I heard often. For an antelope, he was more strong willed than expected.

We gathered everything we needed and headed back down to the lobby. This time, no whispers followed us as we made our way outside. Apparently, people were starting to move onto other things or were too busy talking about the upcoming banquet. I wasn’t a bit sad about not being in heels and a formal dress like the other women right now. Though it would have been fun to tease my mates a bit.

When we stepped outside, Lance was already waiting for us with his security guys flanking him. It was a stark reminder of everything he’d handled. I couldn’t imagine being in his shoes; kidnapped, tortured, and not able to tell the person you cared about what was going on. Especially knowing that it broke their heart. Now that I was forced to face it, I couldn’t hide from the reality anymore.

I missed him, too.

“Is there room for me? They can just follow behind us and keep their distance out there.” I had a feeling he wasn’t asking for permission to allow them to come, but after all we knew, we weren’t going to play around with his safety, either. This was going to be a private moment for our group, especially being a fledgling group of mates, but we weren’t going to lose out on anything by having some protection on stand by.

“Of course,” Riven said. “Why don’t you pick your seat first, Nyla.” He was giving me a chance to call shotgun but that would just drive this damn wedge in even further. It was the opposite of what we needed to accomplish.

Instead, I climbed into the back of the SUV, sliding right in the middle. Zath slid in on one side, looking relieved to not have to leave my side. Lance took the opposite side. The moment our skin touched, I had to stifle a sob as our bond flared back to life. It was never truly broken; in fact, I’d never given it much thought after I left. Now I was glad for my awful habit of avoidance.

Again he was in my head, his feelings of hesitation floating through but also relief. He had so much pain and heartbreak that I couldn’t help but reach out, my fingers wrapping around his. This was happening and I no longer wanted to shy away from it. Lance needed me and I wasn’t going to be the one to truly fail this relationship.

Under the shared emotions was all that love that we had before. It was just as strong as always. If nothing else could convince me to give him a second chance, that right there would. He’d never stopped loving me. In fact, he’d held onto hope while I was forcing myself to forget him.

He squeezed my hand back and took a shuddering breath. It was good to know he was feeling just as much as I was, and knew how conflicted I felt. The bond was sometimes easier to understand than our words.

“So, you opened a bar?” It was such an absurd question that I started laughing to the point that tears were streaming

down my face. Even Lance and the others joined in. “Okay, so I may have failed at Small Talk 101.”

Showing him mercy, I answered the question. “Yes. I know we had a lot of conversations about it before the wedding and you thought it wasn’t good enough for me. But I’ve worked my ass off for this place. I’m damn proud of what I’ve accomplished. What Zath and I have done.”

“I’m proud of you, too, Nyla. If you’re happy then that’s all I could ever ask for. I’m sorry I was a dick. I know it’s not an excuse but I was a pampered, rich boy who had skewed views on life. I have a feeling if my mom knew what I said to you about that she would slap me upside the head.”

I laughed at the image. “She definitely would, but then she would bake you a pie to make you feel better.”

“Hold on. Is that a perk of being in this group? Do I get pie, too?” El asked from the front seat, turning all the way around so he could see us. His enthusiasm had the awkwardness fading completely.

“Absolutely,” he said. “She bakes a whole lot more than pie.”

“You mention a favorite one time and she’ll never forget it,” I agreed. “She always made me the best chocolate eclairs.”

Zath wasn’t quite done with the earlier conversation though and cut in. “You should be proud of Nyla. I’ve known and worked with her since it opened. She treats every employee like family and pays us all better than most, even if it cuts into her own profits. We even share an apartment to make it easier, not that we wouldn’t, anyway, being mates. She’s put her heart and soul into that place.” When he finished he turned and looked out of the window. His frustration and conflict were so strong that I reached out for him as well.

Everyone fell silent after that. Lance didn’t have the words to say anything and I didn’t expect him to. He was processing just as much as I was. It was a glaring reminder of just how little we all knew of each other. Somehow, we were going to take two new mates, the mate who’s been by my side and

helped me heal, and the mate who had been through hell and back again.

We'd need a miracle to make this work.

My horse whinnied in my head. It was a vote of confidence for her mates. At least one of us had some optimism.

“So, I've done a little research on this just in case,” Riven said to break the silence. “I found this perfect spot and took my bear here a few nights ago. There's a clearing out here, so if you guys can just trust me and go into the woods with a stranger, that'd be great.”

“I'm pretty sure I could take you,” Zath joked and El and I started laughing. A raven was no match for a bear.

It was a beautiful evening for our gathering. The sun was getting that warm glow it does just before sunset. The weather was perfect and there was no one in sight as he pulled into the parking spot. It was some kind of local bike trail but he led us right past that into the woods. Lance was nervous, but everyone else was content as we walked in silence. It took about ten minutes through the trees before we found the clearing.

The sun filtered through the trees giving it a deep, rich ambiance. The greens were vibrant, the air was fresh, and I felt like I could breathe deeply for the first time in about a week.

Even my horse was on the edge, begging me to let her come out. She got so insistent that I had to strip quickly so my clothes weren't ruined in the change. It was the quickest shift of our lives together and her excitement was so strong she started prancing around.

She circled the clearing while the others started to transform. It was as if she were showing off her gorgeous form. I'd always thought she was beautiful, from that very first moment in the field we met. She was white and black, graceful, and confident.

My mare was the epitome of being carefree and strong, a constant reminder to me that I couldn't let life weigh me

down. Though that was easier said than done. There was a reason we were put together. She was what I strived to be and always encouraged me to be my best self.

It was so strange watching the guys from her eyes. They shifted into their animals one by one. This was the first time I was seeing El and Riven. We were all bonded now, but it was still an early connection and this would only strengthen it.

El was just as crazy in his raccoon form as his human and he rushed across the clearing on small feet, scurrying until he was by my side then launching himself up onto my back. Shockingly, my horse didn't protest, instead picking up speed and giving him a ride. If I could have laughed in that moment I would have. Every shitty thing we'd dealt with just fell away. Nothing else mattered but us, our soul-bonded, and the life we were building.

Riven's bear was magnificent. He was huge and bulky, radiating strength and protective power as he walked. Each movement was made with purpose, muscles shifting as he approached us. He stopped in front of me and my horse stopped, giving him the lead. She dipped her head down and he nuzzled his muzzle into her neck.

Above us, the raven let out a caw. He was strong and sleek as he flew overhead, dive bombing through the air to tease the bear. Riven gave chase as Zath dipped up and down, taunting but never getting too close.

Lance just stood there taking us all in. Instead of some sort of melancholy or hesitation, there was a peace on his face.

I stopped running and slowly approached him. We'd met before in our animal forms and he was beautiful in his own right. An antelope was built for running, so he kept up with me easily. His curling horns were unique, shifting from dark and light browns as they rose from his head, and his soft fur formed a swirling pattern over his body.

"I missed you, beautiful girl," he whispered as he ran his hands over our neck and buried his face in our mane. "I never thought I would see you again. But I'm grateful we're here now." Life had taken us on more than one curve but somehow



we did come back together in the end. Even as bad memories tried to come back, one thought overshadowed them all.

*He didn't betray me.*

That one line was like a mantra, chasing away all the inner demons that I had formed over the past year. She finally stepped back and let out a demanding whinny. That was all he needed to step back and start stripping, changing into his form. Riven let out a growl of greeting followed by El's strange chattering noises.

Any other time, it would make me laugh, but right now, it felt like the best offer of camaraderie a girl could ask for. Zath swooped down and landed on the antelope's horns for a moment before flying off to land on my back. They were welcoming Lance to the group and it meant everything to me. And to him. For the first time since we'd reconnected, I could feel only happiness in the bond.

Juggling four different bonds was hard. I was used to Zath's emotions randomly coming through and when Lance and I were together we were happy enough that ours was open wide. But now I had four layers of emotions to untangle. Yet I could easily feel which emotion belonged to which mate. We were made for this and it just felt right.

It was strange to be at peace with the thought of mates. Now that I had all four of them, there was no chance in hell I was going to let Lacey, Stanley, the competition, or all the time we lost, tear us apart. We still had a day to go and I had a feeling that us skipping the banquet was not going to go unnoticed.

Most likely we'd come back to a million notifications on our phones. But at this point, they couldn't disqualify us for missing something. The competition was done and they'd effectively shut us out from winning anything for days. We had the worst scores for whatever reason Stanley had for hating us, but I didn't care.

Even my horse no longer cared about winning. She had her mates by her side. She was ready to protect them and what

we'd formed, and so was I. I knew it was going to be a fresh battle the moment we stepped back into that hotel.

And we were ready for it.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTEEN**

*Nyla*

It was so strange to wake up surrounded by all of my mates. I'd been so used to my independence that it almost sent me into a panic until I woke up fully. Zath and I might have snuck into each other's beds, but in the morning, we'd always go back to our own spaces. But after meeting our soul-bonded animals, it was almost as if something settled between us, a bridge was formed and we could finally stop holding ourselves back.

Riven and El were touching me almost constantly, Zath was relaxed and happy, and even Lance joined us. Nothing escalated beyond passing out when we got back to the room. We spent the evening together, running in the field then grabbing food and eating at the park. It was as if we were subconsciously refusing to go back to the hotel until we absolutely had to.

It was our pocket of peace, mates finding a balance of sorts, and none of us were eager to break that moment.

But now that we'd eaten breakfast and gone our separate ways to get ready, the need to be with them was almost unbearable.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. Today, we'd be networking, so I'd gone for a pantsuit with a pop of color. It was professional but stood out among the others. I wasn't going for the all-black boring professionalism too many follow. Not only were we bar owners, but this was not the

corporate world. I needed that happy medium. The connections we made here could potentially boost our business and I wasn't going to pass that up just to avoid confrontation from Lacey or Stanley.

“Hey, I brought coffee. I wasn't sure if you were feeling mocha or caramel but I got them both.” Zath walked up holding out the two coffee cups for me. But the moment the scent hit my nose my stomach rolled fiercely. I put my hand over my mouth and turned, running to the bathroom and slamming the door shut. My stomach was empty since I'd just woken up, so I could only dry heave. Out of nowhere, I felt like garbage. This did not bode well for the day ahead.

A knock on the door had me groaning. “Um... what the fuck just happened?” Zath called out but I didn't have an answer for him. “Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to answer then snapped it shut as reality hit me.

No. I was not okay.

Fuck, I should have started my period four weeks ago! With life and the preparations for the competition, I didn't even realize it had passed.

It wasn't like I went into this bonding thing without backup, I had an implant, it should have handled anything, right?

There's always a chance. That was the one thing that women proved time and time again.

“Oh, God, not now, not when everything is settling into place, there's no way,” I babbled out before calling for my mate. He pushed open the door as panic started to claw its way up my throat, making it hard to breathe or speak.

How would we raise a baby? Our hours, shifts, everything was joined.

But Zath and I weren't alone anymore.

Would they stick around, though?

We were barely a bonded group. Nothing would make someone run quite like a baby.

“Oh, God, what the fuck are we going to do?” I couldn’t help it, the words fell out, repeating them over and over to the point of insanity. I was so lost to it that I didn’t even hear him come closer until he was crouched down in front of me, putting his hands on the side of my face, forcing me to look up.

“Nyla, sweetheart, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

I looked up into my best friend and lover’s eyes. In there, was all the reassurance I needed to push the panic down enough to speak.

“I need a pregnancy test.”

His eyes widened and his face paled. He looked like it was his turn to throw up. He knew as well as I did that we weren’t prepared to be parents, hell, we barely had our own shit together. I still ate Pop-Tarts for breakfast.

“No, it’s probably stress,” he tried to reassure me. “I thought you were on birth control.” Thankfully, it wasn’t accusatory, just confused. Otherwise my horse and I might have karate chopped him for the audacity.

“There’s always a chance that it could just be the stress of everything. But we have to know, Zath. Go get me one, please?” He pushed a bottle of water in my hand before getting up and leaving. It took me about two seconds after he left, stirring the air in the room, to realize he’d sat the coffee cups on the counter. The smell lingered and it was enough for me to turn back to the toilet and curse the coffee gods for failing me.

I’d always enjoyed the smell of coffee roasting, scented candles, anything related to coffee, but right now, it was my nemesis.

The next twenty minutes were a bitter war between me and my stomach, taking sips of water but not taking too much. I was fighting the urge to puke with every second that passed.

A soft knock on the bathroom door had me glancing up but I didn’t move, my cheek pressed to the porcelain tub, and I

couldn't bear to take it away from the cool surface. For some reason, it was making the entire thing seem a bit more bearable.

El was the one who pushed open the door this time. He took one look at me and panicked. "What's wrong?"

Riven was right behind him. "Hey, talk to us."

"Is she okay?" Lance's voice joined in next.

I felt so miserable and conflicted that tears started rolling down my face. Lance didn't hesitate to rush forward, scooping me into his arms and settling down on the floor so he could hold me. He didn't pry, instead rocking me gently as he smoothed my hair down. It felt too easy to be in his arms again and breathe in his familiar scent. At least the spice and pine didn't make me want to vomit again.

"Whatever it is, we can help," Riven said gently. "Zath said you were sick and freaking out but not the details."

"I don't know if you can," I whispered. "I'm scared."

Everyone always acted like finding out that you are pregnant was a huge celebration. But to me, it was just all these realistic fears slamming into my face.

Not only would I have to grow this tiny human, I would have to push it out, be in an enormous amount of pain, then I would have to raise it and try not to fuck it up along the way. How? I wasn't even capable of doing that for my own self.

"What are you scared of, angel?" The familiar nickname had my chest warming. I'd forgotten how much I depended on hearing it when I was struggling.

"I'm going to lose everyone all over again. I can't go through that a second time." My voice was a whisper but they heard me.

"You won't have to, I'm not leaving you again," Lance said emphatically, and the raw conviction in his voice had me fighting tears again.

"I'm not, either, you're stuck with us," El promised.

“Whatever it is, we’ve got you,” Riven added in.

“I think I’m pregnant.” The words hung in the air as they all fell silent. I refused to look at them. It wasn’t until Lance gently pulled me out of his lap, putting me in front of him, that I was able to glance up. Part of me thought he was about to stand up and walk away, leaving me. Instead, he waited for me to meet his gaze. His expression was full of hope and excitement... and more than a little patience. After everything, especially with his stalker, how could he want this?

“Why do you think this is bad news? Do you not want to be pregnant? I mean we can talk about whatever options we have, but I thought you wanted kids?” Lance questioned me.

“I do,” I admitted. “Or I did, but after...” I trailed off.

“You were afraid to give it much thought?” he guessed.

“Exactly. I just found you again, as well as my other mates all within a week and now I find out I’m pregnant. What sane man is going to hear that and not run for the hills?”

“The kind that are bonded to you,” Riven said. His voice was thick as he spoke. “Don’t you dare try to push us away before we’ve even had a chance to settle in. I told you I wasn’t just going to disappear. You may have said ‘no strings attached,’ but I sure as fuck didn’t.”

“What kind of deadbeat guys do you think we are?” El asked with a raised eyebrow. I had a feeling if I didn’t have tear-stained cheeks he probably would have said it a bit more harshly. I’d let my own insecurities hurt them and only felt worse now.

If it weren’t for the understanding there as well, I’d have started babbling out apologies. That likely wouldn’t have gone over, either. El and Riven were huge on letting yourself feel things and this was me feeling it all at once. That and a little help from pregnancy hormones I would guess. Because the more I thought about it, the more I believed it.

“Are you sure that you’re pregnant?” Riven asked. I shook my head quickly.

“No, Zathrian went to go get a test for me, he’s not back yet.”

“Whatever it says, just know, I’m not going anywhere,” Lance said again. I looked up at him and he brushed a kiss over my forehead. He knew I was a sucker for that and this time my chest clenched in a good way, the warmth calming the tidal wave of emotions.

“*We’re* not going anywhere,” Riven corrected him.

“My apologies. I wasn’t trying to exclude you, I just have a lot to make up for,” he said softly.

“No, you don’t,” I argued. That wasn’t how we were going to move on. He had to forgive himself, too. “You didn’t do that to me, Lance, not on purpose. What choice did you have? I would rather you alive and here now. We both have some shit to work through, but I don’t blame you anymore.” As I said the words, I knew that I believed them. He was a victim in all this and blaming him would not only have been wrong, it would have been heartless. I had never stopped loving this man and now I wanted to do everything I could to help him heal.

After the last few days, and all the revelations, I couldn’t deny there was a reason we were put together. We just had a really shitty road to get here. Although I knew he had trauma and I could only guess how deeply that trauma would affect us, I didn’t think we’d be falling into bed anytime soon and that was okay. I wanted to do this right, to rebuild it stronger than before.

I wanted all of us to do that.

My ‘no strings attached’ attitude would have to be a thing of the past. Babies came with a whole new set of strings, but knowing they would stay made the prospect a whole lot less terrifying to think about.

Zath might be the true hurdle in this, but I think he was as over our previous arrangement as I was. We’d danced right over those strings for a year and now we couldn’t ignore them.



The hotel door opened with a creak before closing firmly. Speak of the devil.

Zath rounded the corner and looked relieved. “Oh good, you guys made it. I was afraid to leave her for long. I’d apologize, sweetheart, but I figured you’d want everyone here for this.” He looked at me, waiting to see if he was in trouble or not. I gave him a small smile and reached out for the bag he had. He handed it over and I peeked inside, laughing. There were no less than five different boxes of tests. This man must have dropped some good money to get one of each kind.

I laughed lightly as I pushed myself to get up off the ground. Of course, the nausea was there again as I stood but Riven moved forward, steadying me.

“Thanks,” I told him as I pushed my hair out of my face. “Now, everyone out.”

They didn’t look happy to leave but I was not about to start peeing in front of them. That was not ‘first week of dating’ behavior, but then again, neither was finding out you’re pregnant.

When the bathroom door closed behind them, I started opening boxes and reading instructions, laying the tests out. Call me crazy but I was definitely about to do more than one test at a time. Thankfully, there were disposable cups in here.

For a brief moment, I wondered if I should walk out there and wait with them or if I should find out first and tell them, but I couldn’t bring myself to walk away once I took the tests.

Instead, I took my time cleaning up, pulling off my blazer, washing my hands, then pacing until finally I assumed it was enough time. I purposely kept my eyes from straying to the counter where the display screens were waiting for me.

Apparently, I didn’t even have to wait that long. Every single one had a very obvious positive marking. Even the digital test had the word ‘pregnant’ on the display.

I stared at them, stunned. Thinking I was pregnant and seeing that I definitely was, were two very different things. It

took a second for it all to process, but then I felt relieved that it wasn't negative and excited to tell my mates.

“Sweetheart, I'm dying out here,” Zathrian called out. The desperation in his voice had me biting back a laugh. This morning was one hell of a rollercoaster but now that I was on the upswing, I felt incredible.

Putting on a calm mask, I opened the door. All four of my mates were standing there, staring at me. I kept my expression carefully blank before I let a small smile spread across my lips. Their faces went through the exact same thing I did. The moment that there was a grin on every single one, I knew that my reaction was right, that *this* was right.

“So, you're pregnant?” Zathrian breathed out. I held up the digital test to show them. “Holy shit, I can't believe this. You know, I was a terrified mess the entire time I was shopping but now that we know for sure you are? It's so fucking cool. I'm going to be the best dad. Oh, my God, guys, did you hear that? We're going to be dads!”

“The best fucking dads ever,” Riven managed to choke out before locking me in a bear hug. “You're going to be an amazing mom.”

“I don't promise not to teach the baby to be a badass,” El said. “Or how to cause trouble. But it'll be loved.”

“My mom's going to flip,” Lance breathed out. This was the future we had wanted together at one point and it may not look the same as we had pictured back then, but it was still incredible. I really needed to thank Calvin for pushing us back together, for giving me my fiancé back.

“What do we do? Lance lives here, we all live in Willow Grove, plus we own two separate bars,” El pointed out, waving around at each of us. “Traveling back and forth would be crazy and we can't just leave Nyla and Zath with the baby alone. I want to be there every fucking day.”

“Well, the lease is up on our bar in two months,” Riven said, giving me a strange look. I wasn't sure what he was

hinting at or what he was asking, he was simply leaving it open.

“Would now be a weird time to say that my dad’s been a bit more involved than I thought?” Lance asked sheepishly. He scratched at the back of his neck, a nervous habit he had when fighting with himself over something. “After we talked and agreed to give us a shot, I told him. He, apparently, had been planning for that outcome. Dad knew I wanted out of Madison and then this property just outside of Willow Grove popped up. So, we bought it. He promised to take care of the building so there’s already a house in progress. At the time I agreed to it, I didn’t know you were there.”

“Are you asking us all to move in with you, Lance?” I clarified, shocked that he not only wanted the baby, but the group as a whole.

He nodded. “It would make the most sense,” he said like there was no question in his mind. “If you’re truly letting me back in your life, then that means accepting your mates and our entire dynamic. We’re a family now and there’s plenty of room for all of us and our babies.”

“Baby,” I groaned. “Singular. Don’t curse me.”

“There’s always future kids,” he countered with a grin.

“This is a lot to process. Maybe we should find some books on pregnancy or something, because I, for one, have no fucking clue what to do,” El said in a sudden panic. “There’s breastfeeding and formula, cribs and bassinets, things to plan, things to figure out. Oh god.”

“Breathe, babe,” Riven ordered his mate. El took measured breaths with wide eyes.

“Do any parents know what they’re doing?” Zath asked. “We’ll figure it out. Get all the right books, take the classes. And we’ve got time to find a new normal before that happens. She’s not even a fourth of the way there, guys.” He always was a problem solver and, apparently, he’d said the right words.

“As long as we get the fuck out of Madison, I’m ready for anything,” I said. “But no one mention food yet.”

“Deal,” Riven said as he led me out of the bathroom. They all talked around me, planning the various things we needed to do before the baby came.

I wasn’t sure how I ended up in this situation, but I’d never stop being grateful. I’d come into this competition ready to take down my rivals. Now I had three more mates and a baby on the way.

Life was strange.

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

*Nyla*

Being alone with Lance was strange, yet so easy at the same time. The other guys asked to sit this one out, giving us a chance to talk to Lance's dad alone. Lance confirmed he was involved in bringing us here but I couldn't fault him. He knew the truth and my character, and was only looking out for his son.

At the church that day, Calvin was just as heartbroken as I was. He told me then that it wasn't Lance, that something was wrong, but I was too heartbroken to see it.

"What if he hates me now?" I said as we exited the elevator and walked to Calvin's door. It felt like the hallway was closing in on me and if Lance hadn't gripped my hand, grounding me, I might have gone into a full panic. My emotions were always amping up at the smallest things, these pregnancy hormones were wild and I wasn't that far along yet.

"Don't be silly, he wouldn't have brought me here if he hated you. Hell, he blames himself for all this. My parents have always considered you a daughter. They loved you as much as I did from the start," he said.

Lance knocked sharply on the door. Calvin looked fairly casual today, wearing a tee and sweats when he opened the door. It was out of character and made this a bit easier, he seemed more approachable this way.

The moment he saw our hands clasped together, he rushed over and crushed me in a hug. I'd always thought lions were

supposed to be aggressive, but Calvin took family seriously. It was like we hadn't even missed a day.

"I'm relieved to see you together, I've been worried."

Lance snorted, "I can see that. You look like a mess." He let his eyes pointedly flicker up to the man's hair that looked like he'd been pulling it through his fingers.

"Aw, leave him alone," I protested. "I think he looks comfortable and like a normal dad."

"See, exactly," Calvin said before waving us to the balcony. "I was just getting some fresh air and had some breakfast pastries delivered. If you want any, help yourself." The mention of coffee still made me cringe but my stomach rumbled at the idea of food.

He chuckled and took a seat. I didn't hesitate to snatch a danish and take my own seat, glancing out over the city. It wasn't the prettiest of views but it beat our own view of the parking lot.

"Are you guys starving this poor girl?" Calvin questioned as I finished my last bite.

"Of course not," Lance said. "It's just been a bit crazy this morning."

He hummed. "I take it you have some good news for me?" We both glanced up at him, surprised. "You guys were holding hands when you walked in, that's a bit of a giveaway that things are going in the right direction."

"Oh yes, that," I stuttered out.

"Thank you for hearing him out. I always knew you had a big heart," he said with a soft smile. "That's why it hurt so much when he left. I never blamed you for leaving how you did. But we sure as hell missed you, Nyla."

"Thanks," I said, relieved to hear that. "It was hard. But so was Lance's experience. I couldn't really blame him for that. We just figured it'd take time to fix what was broken in the process."

“That’s understandable. There’s no sense in rushing, you have forever.”

“Well, we also have a pretty big distraction,” Lance muttered. Calvin raised an eyebrow. “Did something else happen? If it’s this fucking competition, I’ll withdraw every single coin I’ve given them and any future competitions will be done for. The way they treated you was absurd. I guarantee that you and Riven’s team are going to lose and I will be having words with the board when this is over.”

His anger on my behalf was appreciated. It was nice to have an outside perspective on the bullshit we’d endured. I felt a bit less crazy with him coming to the same conclusion we had.

“Watch Lacey’s team take the top spot. I don’t know what she has on the judges but it seems she can do no wrong. She even gave false evidence and was not even reprimanded as far as I know.” I launched into the full story, from Riven and El’s encounter, to the audio clip, to the confrontation and poisoning. By the time we finished, he was livid. Lance was, too, although he’d heard it before, but hearing it all at once was harder to reason away.

“I’m not certain why they would bring you here just to treat you that way. That’s insane,” Lance said. “There has to be something we can do. Report them? I don’t know.” He looked at his dad, hoping he’d have an answer.

“When he invited me here he wasn’t like this. Something changed,” I said. “But I don’t claim to understand his crazy motivations.”

“There definitely has to be more to this story. I think I’m going to do my own digging once this is all said and done. Will you be going to the ceremony later? You already missed the networking event, or the bulk of it, but they are announcing winners tonight and giving out prizes.”

“Oh, we’re going,” I said. “I want to see this through.”

“Good for you,” he said as he sipped his coffee. “I trust everything is alright?”

The secret was on the tip of my tongue and I needed to get it out. I wanted Calvin to know what was happening. I glanced at Lance and he gave me an encouraging smile, reading me like a book.

“Okay, now I’m a bit worried,” Calvin joked as he glanced uneasily from me to his son and back again.

“I’m pregnant.” The words burst out of me far more forcefully than I intended. What I wasn’t expecting was the bark of laughter that Calvin gave, before standing up and pulling me into a hug. It was surprisingly gentle for how excited he was. Then he was letting go and pulling his son in for one, clapping him on the back.

“That’s wonderful news,” he said.

“But,” I started to protest until he held up a finger.

“I’m not an idiot, I know it’s not technically Lance’s. But once you’re in a group, that baby is *everyone’s* baby and I know my son is a respectful and responsible man and would think no differently.” The pride in his voice was just a reminder of how close this family was. I wanted the same thing for our group. Calvin would have had every right to say this baby meant nothing to them but he wasn’t that type of man.

“You know I’m excited,” Lance said. “Just wait until I tell mom the news.” Both men laughed and I couldn’t feel anything but grateful. My baby was already surrounded by love. My hands went to my stomach and I couldn’t help but already feel attached to the tiny baby already growing inside of me.

When I let out a long yawn, his dad looked concerned. “You might need to rest up before this award ceremony. I’ll send the team to come get you guys when it’s time.”

“That doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” I agreed. Lance took my hand and led me from the apartment. I had a feeling that his dad was going to call his mom right away but I wasn’t upset. Our baby didn’t need to be a secret; we’d both had enough of those in our lives.



Neither of us talked as we headed back for the room. Lance was looking equally as tired.

The moment we pushed open the door to the room, a sick feeling settled back in my stomach. It was cold, the balcony open, and the pastry I'd eaten was not settling well; overall I just felt worse by the second. If this was morning sickness I wanted no part of this every day. Once was enough.

Lance seemed to sense how I felt and took my hand, gently leading me to the bed when the latch clicked behind us. I turned, expecting one of the guys but was met with the barrel of a gun instead.

The unfamiliar woman cocked it before pointing it down at my stomach. My hands dropped to protect it, as if that would stop the psychopath from shooting me. I'd just found out yet I was terrified for my baby.

“Who are you, what are you doing in my room?”

Lacey stepped out of the bathroom with a deviant grin on her face, holding up one of my pregnancy tests. Why anyone would touch another person's pee stick was beyond me.

I felt it best not to mention it with the gun still pointed at me.

“How did you get through?” Lance demanded. He was angry now, moving forward until he was shielding me with his own body. But he sounded scared, not surprised. “Why are you doing all this?”

“You know why,” she said with a glare. The disgust and anger there held no hint of care for the man who meant the world to me. She wanted him simply for his perceived worth. He was right, he'd be disposed of when his luck ran out. No matter what happened, she couldn't leave here with my mate.

I needed a distraction. Maybe that would be enough time for someone to come rescue us. The gun directed at us left us with little options for escape.

“Let me guess, Lacey is your mate?” I asked, giving the woman in question a glare.

“Of course, she is,” the mystery woman laughed, turning her head to look at Lacey but not letting the gun drop. Lacey stepped forward and pressed a kiss to her mate’s lips, leaving red lipstick behind.

That was when all of the pieces fell together.

I knew exactly who these women truly were. It took one glance to see that she was a snake. Lacey I’d never paid attention to, but she was as well. She was far too conniving and vile to be anything else. That might be a generalization, but thanks to the gang, they’d ruined the reputation of every snake in the country.

And their presence here only meant one thing.

The Snake Eyes had come to collect their lost captive.

“You piece of shit!” I screamed out. “You’re responsible for all of his pain and you want to come back here and try to force him back into that life? All this sabotage, the attacks, it was all to get to Lance?”

“Aww, you’ve heard of us.” Lacey’s red-painted lips twisted into a smile. The stranger did the same, letting out a hollow laugh. It was creepy how much they looked alike. Even though Lacey had copper hair and her mate was blonde, they were both petite, curvy, and had a penchant for expensive clothes and red. Matching lipstick and dresses aside, their mannerisms were the same. Shrewd gazes and emotionless eyes... It was more than a little disturbing.

“You lost all claim to your mate the moment that we took him away from your wedding,” the woman bit out. “Or rather, the moment his father decided and put mine in prison.”

“And now he’s going to spend the rest of his life paying back that debt by providing me as many babies as I want,” Lacey said excitedly. She eyed my mate with possessive heat.

“You won’t fucking touch my mate!” I yelled, lunging forward again only to be pulled back by Lance. The way he held me tight and looked defeated had my heart sinking. The PTSD this would leave behind if we got out would be nothing

less than crippling. My poor man deserved better than these bitches gave him.

Just as anger boiled in me to the point of lashing out, Lacey's attention shifted to me and she pulled out a knife, brandishing it toward me. "After I cut that baby out of your body, of course. You don't have a right to his children, only we do."

"You have no right having kids in general. You're already psychopaths. The last thing you need is to create more," I growled. Snark was probably the wrong route but I had no filter now as panic, dread, and determination filled me.

My words had her face turning more red and angry, distorting her features until she looked like a monster. She was definitely on the list of people who should not procreate. They both were.

My horse was snorting in fury, wanting to take over and protect her mate. I had half a mind to shift and let her protect us but the thought of her getting hurt kept that from happening. She wasn't happy at my refusal, huffing indignantly, letting out angry little puffs of air. It was harder to focus with her raging in my mind but I couldn't let them get the upper hand.

Lance couldn't get hurt, not again. He needed me and this was my chance to protect him.

"So, who is Stanley to you? I'm assuming you're responsible for it all?" I said, trying to distract her from focusing on me or my baby. I was still clinging to hope help would come.

"Yes, you're welcome," she said with a malicious grin spreading across her lips. "You see, we've been watching Lance since he was rescued. For months, we've been watching and listening in. When they talked about trying to reconnect with his old mate, I knew we had to intervene. It just so happens an old family friend was running this competition. It was the perfect way to handle this mess. You see, we Snake Eyes have connections all over."

“Then go find you a fucking snake!” I screamed loud enough I knew people would hear. Neither of them seemed concerned. They were too busy bragging about their accomplishments. “Leave my mate out of this.”

The pounding of fists on the door had them jumping and losing their attention on the gun. It wavered slightly. Lance saw the opportunity and started to move but she snapped it right back in place.

“Don’t fucking move!” She was unhinged now and that didn’t bode well.

“Nyla, is everything okay in there? Who is that with you?”

“Riven, it’s the stalker, she’s got a gun on Nyla!” Lance yelled. There was a low, warning growl before someone was slamming their body into the door. Quick footsteps receded from the door before it slammed again. I prayed that meant they were calling for backup. Hotel security? Police? I’d take the fucking Pope at this point.

Without them, I had no clue how we were going to get out of this. I wasn’t ready to put my mate or my baby at risk. She’d already taken a year from us, she wasn’t taking this, too.

Lacey lunged forward while we focused on the door, shoving Lance aside and pulling me towards her. It was stupid to let hope put my guard down.

She backed us into the wall and kept the knife pointed at my stomach as I frantically searched for anything to use against her, but nothing was within reach. My hands simply flailed around as she laughed cruelly. She was no stranger to taking risks and knew her power. The woman would gleefully stab me and that alone had panic clawing at my throat. With nothing to use but my fists, I curled my hands and cocked my arm back but she slammed me into the wall. Her reflexes were insane. Likely honed from years of fucked-up abuse and training.

“Don’t even fucking try it. If you hit me, I will gut you.” Every bit of false charm that she’d had for the last several days was gone, there was only a bitter, vile woman left behind.

A streak of black slammed into her and I didn't bother to find out what it was. Moving on pure instinct, I managed to snatch the knife from her hand while simultaneously cocking my fist back. The satisfying crunch was her nose shattering on impact.

When she moved again, I struck a second time, landing a hit on her temple and watching as she crumpled to the ground. It was satisfying and disgusting at the same time.

My stomach rolled again and it wasn't like I could make a beeline for the bathroom. Instead I just took measured breaths and kept to the corner, knife held in front of me.

Riven was still pounding at the door and I could hear more and more voices joining him. Lance was trying to fight his way to me as Lacey's mate tried pulling her up and away from me, pointing a gun at me before snapping it back at Lance, switching between us as he made it back by my side. She was now in full panic mode.

Desperation had 'fight or flight' kicking in and desperate people did stupid things. The risk was even higher now.

The black streak moved and I recognized it immediately.

Zathrian's raven dive-bombed her again, but this time she was quick, slamming her fist with her gun in it. The impact threw his small body against the wall before a gunshot went off. Panic surged inside of me, but I was blocked and couldn't see who it hit.

I had a feeling I was about to lose one of my mates. The anguish-filled screams were drowned by the door splintering open, announcing our rescue team.

But I was fairly certain they were too late.

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

*Nyla*

Riven, El, and security burst into the room. The moment he saw the gun pointed at us, Riven reacted. The mountain of a man lunged for the snake, slamming her to the floor. It might have been satisfying if I wasn't focused on Lacey who was starting to wake up. El reached her next, forcing her on her stomach with her hands pinned behind her back.

The sight of them both held in place was the only reason I was able to breathe. Riven struggled with the snake yet no one was stepping in to help.

I was terrified of hurting the baby by intervening, but also afraid they'd get hurt, too. Losing any of my mates would be equally as painful.

El quickly had Lacey up and pinned to a wall while Riven had her mate's face pushed into the carpet, arms pinned in his large hand.

I still didn't even know her name, and here she was trying to take everything from me, including an unborn baby. These women were psychos.

It was only seconds before a swarm of officers were running into the room. They moved right for the two women as Calvin barked out orders to the same officers who only days before had tried to get a confession out of me.

Part of me was surprised they didn't take us in, too, but, apparently, security had been outside of the room listening in

with Lance's dad. With his word, they managed to not fuck up this situation.

“Search their room as well, I bet you find more than enough evidence to put their asses in jail for just as long as their shitty father,” Lance bit out. His voice had the vice around my chest loosening. He was alright.

I couldn't even make out what the two women were saying in response to his words. Their screams were so high-pitched that I was pressing my hands to my ears to block it out.

Zathrian shifted then, confirming he hadn't been hit by the stray bullet, either. Somehow, we'd all managed to make it out of this awful encounter alive.

We were forced to endure over an hour giving our statements before the guys were finally able to drag me away and get me to the hospital. I was still reeling from the entire ordeal and fighting back my own emotions that they were safe, that Lance and Zath were alive. That bullet could have taken one or both of my mates, breaking me forever.

“I'm fine,” I insisted for the seventeenth time but they weren't listening. She never even got to the point of hurting me thanks to Lance, but the stress was what they were focused on now. El had looked up some facts about pregnancy and was convinced the traumatic ordeal could hurt the baby.

It had me needing the same reassurance.

I was just glad we were able to escape the hotel while the officers handled the rest of the situation. By the time we got back I wanted nothing more than to pack up our stuff and get the fuck out of Madison. It already held so many bad memories and there were plenty more piling on the list.

Awful situations aside, I would always be glad that I came back. If I had stayed home, who knows if Lance would have ever made his way back to me. Hell, these women might have found him again.

Right now, though, I wanted nothing more than for this competition to burn to the ground and from the expletives that Lance's dad was barking into a phone, I had a feeling he was

going to make that wish happen. Once I gave him the details, he was all lion, ready to tear them down to protect us. That included anyone involved with the women that caused all this pain and trauma.

It took another hour of waiting before I was seen by a doctor. He tried to insist that the guys wait behind, saying only the baby's father could join, but I spoke up before the guys could panic.

Once I explained we were a bonded group and they were all the baby's potential father, he let them slide. It was either that or the fact I was about to hyperventilate in the panic of being separated from them.

After our night, I needed them all by my side. It was the only thing that could convince me that no one was hurt.

I expected the doctor to disappear for hours at a time but instead, he stood there as the ultrasound tech lifted my shirt and smeared gel over my belly. It was silent as he used the transducer to scan me. My eyes stayed glued to the screen until he found the baby. I was shocked to see the smallest of babies moving around already.

"You thought you were only four weeks?" the doctor questioned. Now that I was looking at the baby on the screen I was second-guessing myself as well. It wasn't exactly a tiny little bean like I'd expected.

"It's been a really long year. I thought it was only a month but it could have very well been two or three," I admitted.

He nodded. "It must have been, this baby is measuring twelve weeks," he informed me. "And since I'm assuming this is the first time you're finding out about the baby, I'm going to prescribe you some prenatal vitamins and get you information. While I do that, why don't you sit tight while he shows you the heartbeat."

Zathrian gripped my fingers in his until the whooshing of a heartbeat filled the air. It was quick, but honestly, the best sound I've ever heard.



“That’s a strong heartbeat,” the ultrasound tech reassured me. He kicked up the volume so it was easier to hear and when I looked around my guys were all staring at the screen in wonder.

“Are they both okay? No complications?” Lance asked. He was desperate to hear it from the tech, for him to say the words out loud.

The tech smiled indulgently at him. “Both mom and baby look healthy to me,” he confirmed. “But, of course, the doctor will give you more information after I send him the rest of these images.”

“Thank you,” I told him.

“Of course,” he said warmly before handing over a rag to clean the gel off my stomach. Lance was there before I could, wiping it away for me and handing it back to the nurse to dispose of. He packed up his machine and wheeled it out as I pulled my shirt back down and sat up.

It was so wild to think that I had a baby growing in me right now. That Zath and I had created something together and these men, who simultaneously barely knew me yet knew me on a soul-deep level, were going to help raise it.

How could life be so perfect and so screwed up, all at the same fucking time?

“The baby’s healthy,” El said, his voice was full of excitement. Then he gasped. “Holy shit, and we just survived a gunfight. I didn’t know Madison was going to be so dangerous.”

“Neither did I,” I agreed. “A poisoning, a gun fight, it’s wild here.”

“I can’t blame you for wanting to get out,” Lance said. “Honestly, I want to go now while she’s locked up. The sooner I get out of this city, the better. She should have no way to find us once we leave, all the documents are under a fake name. It helps to have a dad with connections.”

“The sooner we leave, the better,” Riven agreed.

“It’s like you read my mind.”

---

*Three months later*

LANCE’S DAD had always been the type for power and influence, but seeing the way that he single-handedly took down an entire organization, brought light to the corruption in the competition, and managed to get our house completed was downright impressive.

Once they cleared Lacey and her mate’s room, they found conversations implicating two of the judges and Stanley himself. The board was disgraced and it hit the news before they’d even come up with a plan to handle the press.

Pretty soon, the entire world heard about the horrors we’d endured there. We refused to speak to the media which only led to more speculation.

We left town that same night. Everyone crashed at my place for the time being. The next few days we spent together, watching the chaos unfold and helping me pack my things. Watching Stanley be led off by the police was satisfying on so many levels.

Several of the other contestants were on several news programs and talk shows, talking about the poisoning, corruption, and the investigation. I was glad someone was speaking up.

After that, we were more than ready to put the whole competition behind us. We’d survived, escaped, and we’re thriving.

Already, the five of us had fallen into a tentative life together. Zath and I had gone back to work as did Riven and El. They were on a month-by-month lease, refusing to sign anything more than that while our lease ran out

We still hadn’t figured out what to do. Our entire group was at a crossroads and it seemed none of us had a real, viable option for how to proceed.

Except Lance. He'd asked us to meet him out at the new house. We were waiting on final inspections, but he had news.

As Riven steered the SUV down the long drive, I couldn't help but marvel at how beautiful our future home was. I was used to living in apartments, barely scraping by and surviving. Even when Zath and I shared a place we kept things simple and modest.

Now we had a whole house together, a gift for us, and Calvin had spared no expenses.

Once Lance's dad found out about the baby and our group, he'd altered the plans for the house to work for us. Even I didn't know what it looked like inside. Lance insisted on keeping it a secret and I trusted him to handle it. Setting up and decorating was definitely not my forte. I was not that type of woman, but his mother was, and I had a feeling she had a strong hand in this.

Charlotte knew me better than I knew myself half the time. I swear she could always read me like a book, knowing when something was wrong and she was always the best at giving advice. We had a lot of time to make up for, and I knew she wouldn't hesitate to fall back into our old friendship.

Knowing everything I did now, I felt bad for cutting them out of my life. It wasn't fair to them but I knew if I'd kept that connection it would be a constant reminder of what I lost. Maybe if I'd stayed I would have known about Lance. But we wouldn't be in the same place we were now. We'd both been through our own forms of hell and had come out changed, this was our second chance and we were already stronger than before.

Lance was already waiting for us on the front steps when Riven pulled in front of the house.

The large stone mansion was gorgeous. The gray façade was accented with black shutters and a shiny, black door. There were flowers and bushes outside and trees sprinkled across the large property.

His dad had installed a full security system to the point I'd wager we were more secure than the White House. With Lance, and now our group, on the Snake Eyes' radar, I wasn't going to take any chances, especially with a baby on the way. I never wanted to feel the same level of fear again. That one incident in the hotel room was enough to make me cautious.

"Home, sweet home," El sang out as we approached. Lance came over to us looking happier than he had since we'd met again. He pulled me into a hug and I held him tight, breathing him in.

"Come see the inside, it looks amazing," he said excitedly as he pulled away. I had my own news sitting in an envelope in my pocket but I wanted him to have this moment first.

He waited long enough for Riven and Zathrian to walk around the car before he was dragging me through the front door.

The entire place was completely furnished and beautifully decorated. They'd designed it with high ceilings and large windows so it was open and airy. Everything was a combination of light grays, blues, and whites, making it all seem so much brighter. The hardwood floors were shined to perfection, the only dark thing in the space.

Every bit of furniture was large, from giant bookshelves to fluffy couches. The open plan gave a view of the kitchen that was a sea of stainless steel. We could all make a feast in there together without getting in each others' way.

A winding staircase led upstairs to a loft that was wrapped by a bannister. I was grateful he thought of the extra safety measures, knowing that we would eventually have curious toddlers walking around.

"It's done?" I questioned as I gazed around. "I thought the inspectors had to come still?"

"They came earlier this week," he grinned. "Everything is good to go. It's ours."

"Holy shit," Riven breathed out. I wasn't the only one taken by surprise with all the work Lance and his dad had put

in here. They'd taken a house and made it a home, giving it touches that fit us perfectly. I could see raising a child here and we hadn't even seen the full house yet.

"You know my dad and his connections," Lance joked. "He called in some favors and got the inspectors out here. All of our names are on the mortgage so no one's left out." He pulled out a stack of papers and spread them across the table. "We just have to sign here and it'll be done and my lawyer will file it. He'll be here to pick it up in a few hours."

It was strange to not have to worry about how we were going to make rent or kill ourselves working late nights every night so the bar was profitable enough. We'd truly get to enjoy our lives together and our child as they grew up.

He bounced on his feet as we all took turns adding our own signatures to the contracts. When the last signature was in place, he stacked it up and sat it aside.

"I have something else," he admitted.

"You have our attention," Zath drew out nervously. We were both the type to not know how to handle so much generosity. At least I had a past with Calvin and Lance to know how to take them.

"After everything, my parents were also ready to get out of Madison. And another property down the road was available, so my dad asked me if they could buy it," he explained. My heart warmed at the idea.

"They asked permission?" El asked, clearly as confused as I was by that aspect.

"Well, they didn't want to overstep. But there would be plenty of acres between us so we don't lose our minds," he said, glancing around at each of us to gauge our reaction.

"You said yes already, didn't you?" Zath snorted. "You're way too excited."

"Kind of," Lance admitted with a nervous laugh.

"Having backup with the baby and having family close? I don't mind at all. Your parents are fantastic," I reassured him.

We'd truly have a solid family, and close by, what more could a mom ask for?

Riven nodded in agreement. "At this point, we all know that not many of us had the best parents growing up. They're refreshing and it'll be nice to have them here. I've always wanted a big family."

"And since they already raised a kid, it'll be smart to have someone nearby who knows what the fuck they're doing because we sure as hell don't," El added in. I couldn't argue that point. Even after reading all the baby books we could find, I felt unprepared.

Parenthood was one of those things you just got thrown into and did your best. With what seemed like an entire village on our side, I knew this baby was going to be loved, cared for, and protected.

That was what really mattered.

"Then I have one more thing to show you," Lance said.

He turned and walked upstairs. The rest of us followed close behind. This was a part of the house he outright refused to show us the plans for. Having this project had truly brought him out of the pit that he was in after the abduction.

"So, I tried to keep in mind that we are all grown adults who need their own space. but we also need a shared one as well. The master bedroom is the biggest obviously, but it's set up for our entire group. However, the closet space and bathroom are completely for Nyla."

"Which means our closets are..." Zath dragged out as he looked at the doors in the hallway. He was likely worried about his extensive shiny collection and where he'd put it all. That and my mate took his appearance seriously.

"In your rooms," Lance grinned. "One for each of us plus several more for our future kids."

He pushed open the door and I froze. It was gorgeous. Everything was accented in silvers but the walls and bedding were a classy ivory. Then they had mixed in pops of vibrant colors which tied the room together. But the focal point was

the bed. It had to be two king beds pushed together, the thing was so massive. Throw pillows were artfully arranged in a rainbow of colors.

Off to the side was a crib and bassinet, on the other were two doors. Riven pushed in one to reveal a huge bathroom with an oversized walk-in shower. It looked like it was meant for a locker room but, of course, was way too fancy for that. The floor was lined in smooth stone and it had several big shower heads. The glass walls and floor-length mirror on the room were polished to perfection. Honestly, it was the bathroom of my dreams.

Lance pushed the second door open to reveal a large walk-in closet big enough for all of us if we wanted. But, apparently, it was all mine. I'd have to do weeks of shopping to fill this space.

El was already heading for the hallway again, so we followed him out as he pushed open the other four doors on this wall to reveal standard bedrooms. Unlike the rest they were bare.

“You can fill them with whatever furniture and personal things you wanted, that was the one thing I didn't want to overstep on,” Lance said.

“This is all so nice, Lance,” I breathed out. “It feels like too much.”

He grinned and walked to the door next to mine. “This one is for our baby. And it's never too much. Our group deserves this.”

My heart warmed at him calling the baby ours. They all had embraced the baby as their own and the guys were like brothers... well, except for El and Riven who were definitely lovers.

The nursery was adorable. Someone had painted a mural of a forest on the wall. There was a horse that matched my soul-bonded horse perfectly. She whinnied softly, loving that she was represented as well.

El stepped up beside me and laughed. “There I am.” The raccoon was peeking out from the trees.

In fact, we were all there. The raven flying overhead, the bear stomping along the forest floor, and the antelope grazing nearby.

They had continued on with the forest theme for the rest of the nursery as well. The crib and rocking chair were made of wood. Stuffed animals lined the bookshelf and crib, all forest creatures of course.

The closet was open and waiting to be filled with baby clothes. Lance’s mom had done just enough to start, giving us the freedom to fill it with whatever else we wanted.

Everything was perfect.

“I guess it’s time to share my news,” I said, pulling out the envelope and looking at the guys.



CHAPTER  
EIGHTEEN

*Nyla*

*Three months later*

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Zathrian asked. I rolled my eyes at his question; it was one I’d gotten way too much since finding out I was pregnant. Apparently, my mates thought I was delicate now that I was this far along.

“Is it because I’m a woman?” I questioned with fake innocence. “You’d better get that misogynistic stuff out of your head before our little girl comes along.”

He grinned. “I have a feeling she’ll be just as stubborn as you are. And it’s not that you’re delicate or a woman,” he deadpanned. “It’s because you are too independent.”

Now that I was in my third trimester, walking endlessly looking at properties was starting to swell my feet. Though, I wasn’t about to tell them that. At least not yet.

Lance had already figured it out. He rubbed my feet almost every night now and it was my favorite part of the day. Sometimes, he seemed to know what I needed before I did.

“What are we doing here? I thought that we were looking at a bar?” I questioned as I looked up at the old warehouse. The building itself had some fantastic architecture, from the carved stone columns and detailing to the old stained glass windows. Two metal garage doors were the only thing that gave away what the building was.

“I think it is. El chose this location, I think,” Lance said like that explained everything. At least this one was only a fifteen minute drive from our house, but it wasn’t a bar in any shape or form, which meant it was going to take a hell of a lot of work to make happen.

The door opened and Riven stepped outside. He was beaming. Apparently, he had already fallen in love with the property. He waved us inside.

“Just wait until you see. I know what you’re thinking, but keep an open mind,” he said.

The interior was exactly like I expected; a large open warehouse with cement floors and metal-lined walls. All except for one wall which had been ripped away, exposing the brick laying underneath.

Riven turned back to me. “This used to be a mechanic distribution warehouse. They supplied the shops in the city. It shut down about ten years ago and ownership has been tossed around a few times since, but nothing ever happened.”

“But look at this,” El cut in then, rushing forward and holding out a tablet. There was a 3D blueprint on the screen and a play button right in the middle. El hit play before I could even reach out. They had obviously put a lot of work in the presentation, to the point it felt like El and Riven were the ones selling it to me.

The video started with an empty warehouse before adding on walls and showcasing the exposed ceiling. It colored everything in as it went along. It felt as if I was watching this building be constructed before my eyes.

A large bar was built on one wall and then the bottles and shelves popped up behind it. Tables were sprinkled throughout the room and a DJ stand was built in the back along with a stage for live performances. A stairwell in the back led up where it showed a large office before the video traveled back down to the basement to show multiple store rooms. We never discussed offering food but they’d even added on a kitchen and an order window next to the bar, meaning it would up our game immensely. Most of the remaining bars in the city were

either clubs or holes in the wall now that we'd all closed ours. This would take our group's establishment to the next level.

The video panned out to show the front of the building with a fresh coat of paint and new doors. But it was the logo that got me.

Soulful Spirits.

"You kept part of our old name," I said with a soft smile. We talked about combining but neither one of us truly wanted to just join the other's business. We'd all worked so hard that those were already set in stone.

Our only other option was to create a hybrid bar that we ran together. We'd mix the vibes we wanted, using all of our skills combined with Lance's business sense. This was going to be yet another way for us to meld our lives together.

Lance was also going to be working for his dad on the side. They had bought the property next to ours and built their house, but he'd also brought his business. He'd opened a new office and Lance loved working there. Thanks to their contributions to the house, we didn't have a ton of bills and could pour all of our assets into this now.

Word had already spread on social media about us. So many had seen the drama that followed the competition and were dying to come check out the new place. I knew it was just them hoping to get a glimpse of us and maybe hear the story from our point of view, which we had yet to give anyone.

"Of course we did, a tribute to your dad," Zath said with a gentle smile. I blinked away the tears as I continued watching, wanting to see it all.

"So, what do you think?" Riven asked eagerly. When I glanced up, all four men were looking at me.

It felt like they'd already made their decision and were just waiting for me to finalize the vote. I handed back the tablet and glanced around the old building before finally giving them an answer.

"We should do it."

At this point, we hadn't done anything by halves, so why not dive headfirst into this new adventure? It was the perfect way to combine our bars and I couldn't wait to see these blueprints come to life.

“Good, because the realtor will be here in five minutes and we can get this process started.” I laughed at El's enthusiasm. I wasn't even surprised that they were already this far ahead. We'd barely been at a standstill for months while we were searching, slowly shutting our businesses down behind the scenes and waiting to pull the plug until we had something to move into. Another reason to be thankful for Lance, as shifting our assets around was more than a little complicated.

To me, this was the ultimate fresh start. A new home, a new business, a baby, and our lives exactly where we wanted them. For the first time, all of us were living for ourselves, with nothing holding any of us back.

A fluttering in my stomach was followed by a pretty powerful kick and I laughed.

“It seems Avery is quite happy with the choice as well.” That had all four of the men coming over to place their hands on my stomach. She happily kicked back at them.

The realtor came and Lance walked us through everything. It was wrapped up in thirty minutes and she was handling everything else for now.

“Okay, can we go home now?” I groaned as she left. “My horse is more than ready to stretch her legs.”

It was safe for us to shift all the way up until the final days of pregnancy. I could feel her anxiety and since I wouldn't be able to shift until I fully healed, I was trying to give her as much time to run as possible.

“Come on, let's go,” Zath agreed, leading me out of the door with a hand on the small of my back.

---

THE SUN BEAMED off of my back as we ran through the forest, searching for our mates. El loved to hide from us and my horse thought it was hilarious. She was seeking him out now with her nose to the ground as if she could sniff him out like a hound dog. It was hard to hide from your mates when feelings were intertwined.

Just as she rounded the trees something launched out and landed on her back. She let out a shocked whinny and bucked into the air, nearly launching El into the air. He clung on as she landed back on all four hooves.

Their game gave our location away and Riven's bear tore through the forest, coming out with a growl of greeting before he joined us. He nuzzled his nose along her belly and let out a soft purr just for the baby.

It was so funny to consider the group of animals that came together, and—not for the first time—I couldn't help but wonder what hers could possibly be. We still had a lot of years before we would find that out, though.

As she took off again with a raccoon on her back, a raven soared overhead. We were flanked by a bear and an antelope, keeping pace with her as she tore through the trees and out in the field beyond.

When we ran together like this, all I could feel was the love and the safety of being surrounded by mates who cared about me. Lance was slowly healing from his trauma, Zath and I were learning how to be mates, and Riven and El were navigating the new phase of their own relationship.

Tension rose in the bond as we ran back home. I could feel Lance's need rising and it spiraled through our connections. I had a feeling that there was going to be no going out to dinner tonight. Now they definitely had other ideas in mind and I was not opposed.

Just as we reached the backyard, Riven shifted.

"I know I wasn't the only one feeling that, so get your asses in the house. I think we have a mate to please tonight."

His gaze shifted to the antelope whose steps faltered at his words. "Are you ready?"

It had to be his decision, his move. We'd never push him into something he wasn't ready for.

I shifted so abruptly that El started to fall off of our back, shifting himself before he hit the ground and rolling, laying on the ground naked and staring up at the stars. Zath shifted next, laughing at our fallen comrade.

Goosebumps erupted on my skin as Zathrian walked closer, teasing his fingertips over my skin just enough to work me up even more.

As usual, Lance was the last to shift. Instead of worry this time, there was determination in his eyes. He was at the point that if he didn't come, I knew he would regret it.

He didn't say anything as he stepped towards me. I didn't move, not until his hands went to my hips. I could feel them shake but he didn't dwell on it, pulling me down for a kiss. It wouldn't be our first time, that ship sailed years ago, but it would be our first time after everything happened.

"I'm all in," he finally said. "I'm not going to let this hold me back anymore. I'm ready."

"If you're not, it's okay," I promised. He gave me a smug smile.

"Are you saying you're afraid?" he teased. I narrowed my eyes at him but he was already turning and running. I was not about to run after him since all I could really do was waddle at this point. There was a giant, basketball-shaped baby bump on my front.

We all followed him upstairs and to our room. We'd been spending almost every night together here. It was strange to be so inseparable, but it felt right, and that's what we focused on.

Though when the baby arrived, things would likely change. We'd be sleeping in shifts and our whole world would shift again.

For now, we were taking the time to get to know each other. I hoped that after tonight we would spend even more time exploring this. Not just sleeping like we had been.

“Are you coming or not?” Lance called down. I flipped him off as I dragged my heavily-pregnant self up the stairs. Of course, I had mates in front and behind me like they were afraid that I would topple over at any moment.

“You better be on that bed waiting for me by the time I get there,” I warned Lance. His eyes widened but they filled with heat. It took less than three seconds before he turned and ran off.

CHAPTER  
**NINETEEN**

*Nyla*

Lance was waiting for me just where I told him to be. I could see the worry lines on his face but the moment he saw me it fell away and a smirk took its place. Riven stepped up behind me while El moved to the other side.

Lance's eyes darkened with lust as I crawled up the end of the bed and settled between his legs.

"Are you good?" I asked quietly. He nodded once and that was all I needed. My fingers wrapped around the base of his cock, tongue darting out to lick a stripe over him before swirling my tongue around the head. Remembering something that always drove him wild, I teased over the underside of the head, laughing softly as he groaned deeply in response.

I'd always loved a man that could make noise during sex. It was a huge turn on, but even if he didn't, the emotions coming through our bond were strong. He felt safe and happy and that was a huge win for us.

Now that I was positive he was all in, I wrapped my lips around him and took his cock until he hit the back of my throat.

Lance was gentle and sweet, letting me take my time as he let himself have this moment. Even if the reservations and demons he still fought were there, he was pushing through and I was so proud of him for that.

The guys weren't just content to watch. Hands teased over my hips and squeezed my ass as I sucked Lance's dick. From



the amusement coming from the bond I knew it was El moving in. I could have guessed it anyway; he was a true ass man.

It was a lot harder to focus on giving Lance my all when El teased a hand over my wet pussy, pushing two fingers into my core as he placed kisses down my spine.

But I refused to lose focus and instead used it as motivation to give him as good as I was receiving, sucking harder and hollowing my cheeks. Lance's moans were no longer small indications he felt good but strong convictions, filling the air and making me even wetter.

"She likes that, brother," El encouraged him as he finger fucked me, stretching me out for the cocks I'd be taking. Even after months of being with them, Riven and Lance were both thick enough to stretch me to my limits. And I fucking loved it.

"So do I," Lance rasped out. His voice was strained and I knew he was moments away so I doubled my efforts, sucking harder and giving him everything I had until he was tugging at my hair, my scalp protesting, but that only turned me on more.

Lance came with a feral groan and I swallowed it down, licking every drop off of his cock as I pulled away. I finally took a deep breath that morphed into a moan as El sank into me.

Now that I was no longer sucking off Lance, he didn't have to hold back. El had never been one for the sweet and slow sessions. He wanted to fuck me hard and fast and I loved it. The beauty of having four mates meant that I had a variety of lovers. They knew me as well as I knew them.

My fingers tightened into the sheets as he fucked me, my body already so sensitive. Lance alone had me so turned on I felt like I'd combust at any moment. I wasn't sure if it was his hand or someone else's on my clit but with my head buried on Lance's chest, I couldn't see. It didn't take long before my orgasm was building and eventually pushing me over the edge. My pussy clenched around El as I came, my eyes closing as I tugged at the mattress. I'd had sex before, but I swore my mates took me to new fucking dimensions every time I came.

“Fuck, you feel so good, Nyla,” El told me as he continued to fuck me. He wasn’t far from release; his telltale sign was leaning over me, as if he could breathe me in. The moment he did that, I knew it was over.

His fingers dug into my flesh as he called out my name, his hot seed filling me. Despite all the hangups they had with being overbearing dads-to-be, I was just glad they didn’t hold back in here. Once the doctor said sex was safe as long as we didn’t get too rough, they stopped being quite so gentle. I would have gone crazy if they only delicately made love to me for the entire pregnancy.

As he pulled out, I rolled off of Lance and onto my back, chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath.

Riven settled in between my legs, lifting them and spreading me apart so he could watch as he slowly lined his cock up to me. My eyes rolled back in my head as he slid in languidly, drawing it out purposefully so he could drive me crazy.

He continued to stare as his cock pulled out before moving forward again. He loved watching and I could feel him getting harder with every movement.

Zath, who had very few boundaries in the bedroom, took it to the next level by moving between our bodies until his mouth could find my clit. He flicked his tongue over it rapidly, teasing me until I was screaming out and bucking into his mouth, which forced Riven to finally start moving like he meant it. Though he couldn’t fuck me as hard as he probably wanted to in the moment thanks to Zath being in the way.

Nonsensical words fell from my lips as he teased me, not through one orgasm, but two. My body was overly sensitive and I could feel the fire surging through my veins. I don’t think I’d ever been so turned on in my life but we’d also never done something like this. We’d grown closer as a group and this was the next step. Apparently, instead of talking about it we just dove right in. Honestly, it was fitting for us.

“Fuck, if you make her come again I’m not going to be able to stop myself,” Riven gritted out through clenched teeth.

Zathrian let out a low laugh as he nibbled over my clit. That was enough to send me over the edge for the third time. Riven cursed out as he came, knowing Zath did it on purpose.

I knew I'd be a mess by the end of this but I'd never been more satisfied in my fucking life and it wasn't over yet.

Zathrian pulled away with a smirk, wiping the glistening juices off of his face.

"You're welcome," he said. "And thanks for getting her ready for me."

"Anytime," Riven deadpanned as Zathrian took his place. He didn't give me any warning before he was sliding into me.

The man would barely let me walk for too long but he sure wasn't afraid of fucking me until I couldn't move.

Lance moved in then, latching his mouth to my hard nipple while his fingers danced over my skin. The soft touches always drove me crazy and it was something he always remembered.

El took the other side, sucking hard on my breast and nibbling his way down my torso. I could barely breathe or think as the three overwhelmed my senses. But when I looked up to see Riven stroking himself again, I was a goner. I came so many times at that point that it was almost painful, a strangled cry escaping me as I came.

"Come on, I know you're not tired already," Zath taunted as he fucked me, shifting enough so he hit me deeper with each thrust. With a wicked gleam in his eyes his fingers teased over my clit again, forcing me to come with him. He called out my name as he came, drowning out my own babbled cries.

Zath backed away slowly, watching the cum drip for my swollen pussy. Riven joined him, groaning as he stared down at me with a mix of reverence and pure, raw lust.

"My turn," Lance said, moving into place. There was no hesitation even as he saw the mess we'd already made. El blew me a kiss as he urged Zath and Riven out of the room, giving the two of us a moment alone.

Instead of settling right in like the others had, he laid down next to me, pulling me in for a kiss. Lance slanted his lips over mine, but this time it wasn't sweet but dominating. He was claiming me in his own way. Even though I had been thoroughly satisfied, I was still ready for him, wanting him just as much. My hands explored his body, trailing over his muscled chest and down to his powerful thighs, using my nails to scratch trails on his skin and drive him crazy.

He finally broke the kiss before rolling back onto his back, and encouraged me to climb up. I almost hesitated. I felt so much heavier growing this baby but he let out a soft growl and yanked me over him, forcing me to straddle his hips. I laughed softly as I lined myself up, sinking down on him. It was satisfying to watch his eyes roll back in his head, hands gripping my hips as if he had lost himself purely just by feeling me around him.

The moment I started to move, all bets were off. Even though I'd come so many times already, I felt needy again, rocking my hips over him. My body shook and I whimpered as my orgasm built.

"Give it to me, Nyla. I've missed this. I want to hear you call out my name as you come undone for me." He never had been one for dirty talk and it caught me by surprise.

I doubled my efforts, grinding down even more each time, digging my fingers into his chest until finally I couldn't hold back. I called out his name as I came, body tensing around him. That was enough to yank him over the edge with me, his low moans filling the air.

Now that we were alone, he wasn't quick to force me off of him. Once I felt like I could move again, I rolled off of him but he held on, refusing to let go of me just yet.

"I never thought that I'd get to be with you again like this, to feel you unravel around me, to watch you as you lose yourself." His voice was choked with emotion and that was all it took to get my pregnancy hormones worked up as well.

"I'm glad that you made it through everything. Finding you again changed our lives," I said softly. "I love you, Lance.

I always have.”

“I love you, too,” he said back.

“Aww, are we getting deep in here?” El called out as they came back in, bottles of water and snacks in their hands. Apparently, they weren’t ready to be apart just yet, either.

“Come on, let’s clean you up,” Zath offered, holding out his hands to help me heave my pregnant self off the bed.

We behaved in the shower, cleaning up then rejoining the others. They’d already changed the sheets and had a movie ready. It was the perfect end to an amazing night.

I wouldn’t change a thing about the life we created here. It was a mix of sweet, chaotic, hilarious, and downright perfect. Who knew that the worst day of my life could lead to the very best? It may have been a long road but we all found each other and there was no turning back now.

# WANT MORE?

Want more in the Society of Shifters world? Check out the other books, here:

<https://geni.us/societyofshifters>

---

For updates and info on my work, make sure you join my reader group and stalk...  
I mean follow, me on social media!

[The Reaper Realm:](#)

[Bookbub:](#)

[Instagram:](#)

[Website/Newsletter:](#)

# ALSO BY JARICA JAMES

## *Omegaverse*

PNR (*The Knottyverse*)

Origins (Standalone)

<https://geni.us/kvorigins>

Embers and Magic (Fated Dragons Duet) - Complete

<https://geni.us/embersandmagic>

## *Contemporary*

Safe Haven:

<https://geni.us/safehavenov>

## ***Fantasy RH - Complete 4 book series***

Fractured Fae - complete fantasy RH

<https://geni.us/fracturedfaeseries>

## ***Paranormal Reads***

### **Obsidian Cove Supernatural Academy series: (completed 6 book series)**

Call of the Siren: <http://geni.us/cots>

Path of the Bear: <http://geni.us/potb>

Trial of the Vampire: <http://geni.us/totv>

Mark of the Psychic: <https://geni.us/motp>

Power of the Mage: <https://geni.us/POTM>

Vigil of the Gargoyle: <http://geni.us/votg>

### **The Blood and Moonlight Series (Complete Wolf Trilogy)**

Pack Forsaken: <mybook.to/packforsaken>

Pack Evaded: <mybook.to/packevaded>

Pack Reclaimed: <mybook.to/packreclaimed>

### **The Spirit Vlog series: (Ghost hunters, each book is a new case) (completed)**

Haunts and Hotels: <http://geni.us/handh>

Parks and Poltergeists: <http://geni.us/pandp>

Haunt Sweet Home: <https://geni.us/hauntsweethome>

Mines and Manifestations: <https://geni.us/mandm>

\*\*\*

### **The Forgotten: (Co-write with Suki Williams) (Dystopian PNR Demigods) (Completed)**

Nexus: <https://geni.us/fpnexus>

Broken: <https://geni.us/fpbroken>

Memory: <https://geni.us/fpmemory>

Reset: <https://geni.us/fpreset>

\*\*\*

**Not Your Basic Witch series cowrite with A.J. Macey: (completed)**

Witch, Please: <http://geni.us/NYBW1>

Resting Witch Face: <http://geni.us/NYBW2>

Witches be Crazy: <http://geni.us/NYBW3>

Born to be Witchy: <http://geni.us/NYBWnovella>

\*\*\*

**Academy of the Elite series cowrite with Rowan Thalia: (3 Book Series)**

Juniper's Sight: <http://geni.us/juniper>

Juniper's Peril: <http://geni.us/juniper2>

Juniper's Trial: <https://geni.us/juniper3>

\*\*\*

**Pinch of Sass cowrite with Chloe Gunter:**

<http://geni.us/pinch> (Standalone)

***SciFi Reads***

**Chosen by the Stars:** <https://geni.us/SOSChosen>

\*\*\*

Check out Saved by the Stars and Healed by the Stars here:

<https://geni.us/sosshareduniverse>

***Contemporary Romance Under Jarica Riley***

**Arranged:** <http://geni.us/arranged>

---

Once Upon A Pineapple: <https://geni.us/ouap> (Standalone MF)

---

Broken Silence: <http://geni.us/brokens> (YA)

Battered Voices: <https://geni.us/batteredv> (NA)

---

**Cruel Crimes: (Dark Mafia RH Romance Duet)**

Damaged goods: <https://geni.us/Damaged>

Wicked Games: <https://geni.us/ccwicked>



**Twisted: (Bully BDSM Standalone)**

<https://geni.us/twistedmmf>