



AN  
ALPHA/BETA/OMEGA  
STORY

# FAKING

MARKED BY HIS ALPHA

# FOR REAL

SOPHIE O'DARE

FAKING FOR REAL  
AN ALPHA/BETA/OMEGA STORY

MARKED BY HIS ALPHA  
BOOK EIGHT

SOPHIE O'DARE

WITH  
LYN FORESTER



# CONTENTS

[Blurb](#)

[The Alpha/Beta/Omega World](#)

[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](#)

[Taming His Alpha](#)

[Also By](#)

[About the Author](#)

## **FAKING FOR REAL**

### **Marked by His Alpha Book 8**

**As a shy, artistic Omega, Basil's never been lucky in love, but he has a plan to land a date with his crush, a sexy Alpha model from his art class.**

Volunteering to teach an art class at the Omega Youth Center is supposed to be the first step to Basil putting himself out there. If he can master teaching a room full of strangers, then talking to Aster, the hot Alpha who models for his class, should be a walk in the park.

Too bad for Basil that he turns into a tongue-tied mess every time Aster even glances his way.

When a classmate gets a little too aggressive with Basil, though, and Aster comes to his rescue, Basil finds himself in a fake relationship that he wants to be real with every fiber of his being.

But is Aster the kind Alpha Basil thought him to be? Or is he a player just looking for a naïve Omega to toy with?

# THE ALPHA/BETA/OMEGA WORLD

**Alpha:** Can be male or female. Naturally charismatic with a dominant personality, they tend to be in positions of power. Can use Command to enforce their will on weaker Alphas and Omegas who are not protected by an Alpha. When near an Omega in Heat, Alpha's are driven to protect and mate with the Omega.

**Beta:** Can be male or female. Regular citizens without any atypical behavioral traits. Are not affected by an Alpha's Command or an Omega's Heat.

**Omega:** Can be male or female, and both genders are capable of becoming pregnant during their Heat. Omegas, up until recently, have struggled to hold onto regular jobs due to going into Heat every month. During Heat, they release a pheromone that attracts Alphas. The pheromone can now be subdued through the use of suppressants.

**Suppressants:** Pills Omegas take to help subdue their pheromones during their monthly Heat.

**Heat:** A three-day period every month in which Omegas release a pheromone to attract an Alpha and are overwhelmed with the need to mate. The effects can be reduced by the use of suppressants.

**Command:** An Alpha's ability to enforce their will on Alphas and Omegas who are weaker than they are.

**Mark:** During Heat, an Alpha is driven to Mark their partner by biting the back of their neck. The Mark stays in place for a month, claiming the breeding right of the Marked Omega. It also stops other Alphas from Commanding the Marked Omega. If the same Alpha Marks an Omega three times, it becomes permanent. If the Alpha does not Mark the Omega a second and third time, the Mark fades after their next Heat, leaving them available for other Alphas.



## CHAPTER ONE

I bring the brush down in a broad arc over the canvas, leaving a thick line of dark red before turning to the class. “And that’s how you paint a flower. Now you try, while I walk around the room. If you have any questions, raise your hand.”

Students ranging from ages five to nine duck behind their easels. The way they concentrate on their canvases makes me smile as I picture myself at their age, first discovering art.

When I signed up to teach classes at the Omega Youth Center several months ago, I envisioned a slightly older crowd. In my free time, I publish a serialized comic online that brings in a small income. I started doing it in high school and launched a spinoff last year that became popular. My vision for my lessons at the youth center was high schoolers with a passion for art like I had who I could foster into living their dreams.

What I got are kids from the daycare center, which is open to young Omega parents.

It doesn’t help that most of my volunteer time is during school hours, when the older omegas who frequent the youth center are also in class. But with my current schedule at university and my part-time job, my evening volunteer time is limited to Thursdays.

I’m only able to teach this class because I have a two-hour break between my morning and afternoon classes. It’s too long

to sit around campus and too short to pick up extra hours at the student store.

I stop next to one of the older kids and admire her work. “Excellent use of color variation, Tabby.”

She flushes at the compliment. “Thank you, Mr. Basil.”

A small hand shoots up from across the room, and I walk over. “Hello, Hazel, what can I help you with?”

Red paint smudges Hazel’s round cheek, and she gives me an adorable, gap-toothed smile. “I messed up.”

“Mess-ups are opportunities to create something new. Let’s see what we can do.” I step around to view the large red blob on her canvas. “Hmm, do you know what I see?”

She jiggles her shoulders.

“A what a day keeps the doctor away?” I whisper.

Her brown eyes widen. “An apple!”

I point to the green paint on her tray. “Give it a leaf and stem.”

She eagerly stabs her paintbrush into the green paint, turning it brown. Hazel is what I like to call an enthusiastic creative. She never follows the lesson plan, but she always walks away from class with *something* to show her mom.

We spend another thirty minutes on the painting before the class ends, and everyone walks their canvases to the drying area. Not all of them look like flowers, but that’s not really the point of these classes. It’s more to get them familiar with various art techniques and color theories. And to have fun.

Always to have fun.

“Thank you, Mr. Basil!” several of the students call out as they hurry out of the classroom, leaving me to take care of the supplies.

Luckily, the youth center has an entire room dedicated to art, so I don’t have to clean up too much. Moving the easels off to the side, I wash the paint trays, roll up the plastic that protects the floor from spills, and call it good.

I lock up the room, then turn to head for the staff room and almost run right into a guy who looks to be a few years younger than me, though his thin frame and baggy clothes make it hard to tell for sure.

He dances back a step and flips his black hair back with a practiced jerk of his head. “Wow, watch where you’re going, dude.”

“S-sorry.” Caught off guard, the stutter I worked so hard to get rid of slips back in. “I d-didn’t see you there.”

His annoyance vanishes, and he waves his hands in the air. “Sorry, didn’t mean it to sound like that. Carrie says I’m a rude asshole on the best of days. It was my bad.”

I nod and move to go around him at the same time he steps to the side, ending up back in my path.

He laughs and does a little four-step shuffle. “Are you the dance teacher here?”

I shake my head. “No, I teach art.”

“Wait, really?” He leans toward me for a better look. “But you’re, like, a high schooler.”

He’s one to talk. I’ll eat my pencil case if he’s a day over nineteen.

“Twenty-two, thank you very much.” I pull back my shoulders and lift my chin in a vain attempt to appear older. “I’m one of the volunteers.”

He looks past me to the room I just left. “That’s the art room?”

I jiggle the keys in my hand. “It is, but it’s closed for the day. If you want a tour, you’ll have to speak to Mr. Clarke.”

The kid turns his head and raises his voice, “Yo, Gael, can I see inside the art room?”

Surprised, I peer down the hall to see Mr. Clarke standing with an older man, who scowls at the kid in front of me and mimes zipping his lips.

“Where’s the love?” the kid shouts before turning back to me and thrusting out a hand. “I’m Joshua, and I’m in need of manners, or so Carries says.”

“Basil.” I shake his hand and wonder who this wise Carrie woman is and why she’s not here wrangling this kid. “If you want to attend the adult classes, we meet on Thursday nights. You can get all the information from Mr. Clarke.”

Joshua releases my hand and nods. “Sounds enlightening.”

Unsure what he means by that, I give him a nod before I hurry for the employee break room.

Once I collect my bag, I have just enough time to swing by the snack area to grab something before I need to catch the bus back to campus.

When I stop in front of the vending machine, a couple of women sit at one of the small tables in the break area, sipping coffees.

One of them is Mrs. Berry, who runs the greenhouse, and the other is El, the Mr. Clarke’s secretary. I turn with my back slightly to them so they don’t pull me in for a chat. Mrs. Berry can go on for hours, and I can never muster the courage to tell her I have somewhere else to be.

Lifting the teacher badge that hangs around my neck, I swipe it through the card reader, then study my options.

“Did you hear?” El’s voice carries despite her effort to whisper. “About little Hazel’s mom?”

“No, what’s going on?” Mrs. Berry asks.

“She’s found herself an Alpha.”

Warmth creeps up my neck, making the thick leather band around my throat feel tight. As an Omega, I wear it to protect my nape against the unwanted Mark of an Alpha, not that I’ve ever dated or gotten close enough to an Alpha to risk it in my Heat. I didn’t even wear one until I started at university, and the thing still chafes.

“Good for her,” Mrs. Berry says. “It’s about time. Poor woman lost her husband so young. It’s t time she auditions a

new one. “

“Well, I doubt this one is stepping up to be a dad.” A giggle sounds. “I heard he’s still a kid himself. He’s a student at the university.”

“Well, I suppose a spot of fun is never amiss,” Mrs. Berry murmurs.

“I recommend the peanuts,” a male voice says from behind me, making me jump.

Spinning, I find Doctor Avara from the clinic standing behind me.

The warmth in my neck increases, spreading up to my cheeks, and my eyes drop from his amused gaze. “H-hello, Doctor Avara.”

“Deep breaths and focus on staying calm.” He leans past me to press the buttons on the keypad, and a sleeve of peanuts drops into the slot. He grabs it and presses it into my hand. “Don’t worry, you’ll get there. And try not to listen to those two gossips. We don’t need rumors spreading about the people who come here.”

I take a deep breath as instructed and focus on steadying my nerves. “Thank you, Doctor Avara. Have a good day.”

Clutching the peanuts, I dip my head awkwardly before scurrying toward the entrance.

“Aww, you scared little Basil away,” Mrs. Berry teases. “I was going to set him up with El’s neighbor’s son.”

My blush returns full force. All the older women have been trying to set me up with Alphas now that the manager of the youth center, Mr. Clarke, is off the market.

“He doesn’t need you meddling. And are those empty sugar packets I see on the table?” Doctor Avara admonishes. “You know that’s bad for your diabetes.”

By the time I reach the front entrance, it feels like steam must be pouring off the top of my head from how hot my face is. I send a silent thank you back to Doctor Avara for helping me dodge that bullet.

Why am I like this?

It took all of my courage to muster up the nerve to volunteer here. It was part of my plan to dive into the deep end and overcome my shyness so I could finally talk to my crush of three years before we graduate and I lose my chance.

When I have enough prep work and can psych myself up, or when I get to know people well enough to become comfortable around them, I can hold a decent conversation. I rarely stutter around Doctor Avara, but he caught me off guard and it looked like I was eavesdropping. Which I was, but only because I couldn't plug my ears.

Maybe it's a blessing I got the kiddy class. Kids are easy to talk to. They don't hold the same risk of embarrassment that my peers do.

The bus pulls up just as I make it to the stop, and I swipe my bus pass before slipping into the first open seat I can find.

By the time the bus nears the university, the heat in my cheeks has faded. That was just a temporary setback. Thanks to working with Doctor Avara and my volunteer classes, I'm making progress.

I shove the empty peanut sleeve into my backpack and pull out my earbuds, popping them in. My favorite violinist, Intruka, mutes the sound of conversation coming from my fellow bus riders. It helps if I can drown out some of the chaos of the world, and the earbuds make me feel more secure. Like an invisible shield surrounds me.

When the bus stops, I shoulder my backpack and disembark onto the front sidewalk.

The university campus sprawls across a park-like area in the middle of downtown, with wide walkways surrounded by greenery. My freshman year was a complete nightmare, and I almost dropped out my first quarter. But I pushed through and figured out ways to function in the chaos.

I memorized maps of the campus, plotted out how long it took to get from one building to the next, and rented a small

apartment nearby that provided separation from the constant stimulation of university life.

By my senior year, I had everything down to a science.

It takes five minutes from the bus stop to the art building. I grip the straps of my backpack, keep my eyes on the path in front of me, and start walking.

Over the years, I've developed a fifth sense for distracted pedestrians and dodge out of their way without slowing my steps. It's almost a dance, moving around crowds of people so involved in each other that they can't see the world outside their bubble.

My destination comes into view. Besides fine art, the three-story building houses the drama and fashion classes. A large mural covers the long side leading to the entrance, adding beauty to the landscape. Every year, there's a competition at the art festival, where people can submit their ideas. Everyone votes for their favorite, and it gets added to the wall to commemorate the graduating class.

The contest is open to anyone, but the winners are usually part of the arts department. I have a packet at home with the rules, and a few ideas sketched out, but every time I think about entering, anxiety kicks in.

I'm used to having my artwork critiqued by my peers. It's all part of the process. By now, I've come to realize that art majors tend to fall into two categories. Those with minor talent who chose the arts field because they don't know what else to do, and those with skill and the ego to go with it. If not for my shyness, I'd probably be in the ego camp, but quaking fear of the unknown keeps me humble.

The festival is open to everyone, even people who don't attend the university, and being judged by complete strangers... I'm used to trolls on my comic, but in person? I don't think I can handle it.

I grab the handle to the front door at the same time that someone else pulls on it from the other side.

I stumble forward a step into the building. "Sorry."

Head down, I move to go around them, but a hand catches my arm.

A loud voice cuts through the soft strands of violin playing in my ear. “Hey, watch where you’re going.”

Dread pools in my stomach, and I look up at Jeremy Michele. He’s part of the theater group, and his good looks and Alpha charisma made him an instant heartthrob our freshman year. But I’ve seen the way he treats the Omegas on campus, like they’re conquests. As soon as he gets what he wants from them, he tosses them away to move on to his next prey.

A couple of his theater friends stand with him, giving me curious looks, probably wondering why he stopped me when I didn’t even run into him. But Jeremy always makes a point of harassing me every time our paths cross. Probably because I’m a challenge for him.

He grins down at me, displaying perfect white teeth, and plucks out one of my earbuds. “Little Basil, how have you been? I haven’t seen you at the student store lately.”

I pull my arm from his grasp. “I-I’m going to be late for class.” I hold out a hand. “Can I please have my earbud back?”

“I read an article about how to get over stutters.” He leans closer. “Want me to give you tongue exercises?”

Unable to handle his bullying, I turn away. “Forget it.”

“Hey, I’m just kidding.” He catches the back of my shirt to stop me and holds out the earbud. “Let me buy you a coffee to apologize.”

I tuck the earbud into my pocket. “No, t-thank you.”

“Come on, don’t make me look bad in front of my friends.” His hand drops to the small of my back. “You’ll be in the quad, anyway, filling up that notebook, right?”

Not anymore, I won’t. I usually get in thirty minutes of drawing as part of my homework before I start my shift at the student store. But if Jeremy will be there bothering me, I’ll go somewhere else.



I duck my head to avoid his gaze. “I need to get to class.”

“Sure.” He backs away. “But I’ll be waiting. Don’t leave me hanging.”

Should I feel guilty that I plan to do just that? It’s not like I agreed to anything. He decided things all on his own, and I refuse to be a notch on his belt just because I’m an Omega and he’s one of those Alphas who wants to Mark them all.

I turn away and run up to the second floor, reaching the classroom right before the teacher closes the door.

“You’re cutting it close, Basil,” Mr. Moore calls out.

“Sorry, sir.” Dismayed, I look at all the filled seats.

Wooden easels form a circle around a cloth-draped box. I usually get here early enough to grab a spot next to the door. But today, the only seat left is right in front of the window, where natural light floods into the room.

It’s a good spot, but the one I fear the most.

Reluctantly, I walk over and hang my bag on the back of the chair before taking the seat.

Mr. Moore stands to address the room. “Today we’re going to focus on how light and shadow define musculature, so I want to see that detail in your drawings. Get your pencils ready while the model comes in.”

My pulse quickens, and I busy myself with pulling out my pencil case, selecting the hardness level I prefer for the initial sketch.

Life drawing class is my least favorite. I far prefer the exaggeration allowed in cartooning. But learning realism is a mandatory class to graduate, so I’ll fill my sketchbooks and draw naked people to get the credit.

The door behind the teacher’s desk opens, and the model steps out from the changing room, slipping through the gap between easels to sit on the box.

I keep my eyes fixed on the large sketchbook propped on my easels to avoid looking. We’ve had two rotating models for

the semester, a man and a woman. But since we're focusing on muscles today, it will be the male model.

My pulse beats faster, and sweat trickles beneath my nape guard. I reach back to rub the thick metal plate that rests against the back of my neck. The skin beneath feels itchy, but I can't scratch it well without taking off the guard.

"You may begin drawing," Mr. Moore announces. "The first break will be in fifteen minutes, so make the best of your time."

Unable to put it off any longer, I lean to the side to see the model.

Aster Woods, Alpha and top of his class in the music department, sits facing me, his golden skin nearly gleaming in the sunlight. He wears his hair down, the thick, chestnut locks curling around his collarbones. He leans back on the box, propped up by his hands, and the pose leaves the ridges of muscle on his abdomen and his biceps in sharp relief. A small towel covers his waist, keeping him modest while outlining a clear bulge.

No music student deserves to have a body like that.

Instantly, my mouth goes dry. Over the semester, I've noticed Aster prefers to face the window, like a big cat laying out in the sun. Which is why I like to sit near the door. When I sit behind him, there's less risk of humiliating myself.

The itch in my nape worsens, and my throat clicks when I try to swallow. Unable to stop myself, I drag my eyes up to his face, lingering on his sculpted lips and high cheekbones before rising higher.

Cerulean blue eyes meet mine, filled with amusement, and I nearly drop my pencil in my panicked rush to duck back behind my easel.

I'm never going to survive today.

## CHAPTER TWO

“**L**ast five-minute break,” Mr. Moore calls out.

I set my pencil down and stretch my aching fingers.

How is it that I can draw for hours hunched over my sketchpad, but these classes leave me exhausted in less than thirty minutes?

Reaching back, I grab the water bottle stuffed into the side pocket of my backpack. As I lift it to my lips, movement draws my gaze to the center of the room, where Aster paces and stretches his muscles.

The light caresses his nearly naked body, illuminating every beautiful line. He looks like a statue of an ancient god, come to life and prowling around the room, the muscles in his powerful thighs flexing with every step.

Aster is the type of beauty people write poetry about. I know, since I’ve filled my art books with odes to his body in the form of hundreds of drawings.

“Psst, Basil,” a voice next to me hisses.

My eyes jerk toward the girl next to me, Emma, and stare in confusion at the napkin she holds out.

She points at the front of my shirt. “You spilled.”

Glancing down, mortification floods my cheeks at the large wet spot on my chest. I’d been so entranced by watching Aster that I dumped water down my front.

“Thank you.” My hand shakes as I take the napkin and mop up the mess.

“It happens to the best of us.” She turns in her chair to face me and drops her voice. “I’d drool, too, if I had Aster Woods looking at me like that.”

Confused, I peek at Aster, but his attention is on the ceiling as he rubs the back of his neck.

I return my attention to Emma and raise one brow.

“Never mind.” She waves her hand as if erasing her previous statement. “Are you submitting an entry for the mural?”

I shrug as I pat my sweatshirt.

“You should,” she continues, undeterred by my silence. “You’re really good.”

Emma is one of the few people who has never seemed put off by my awkwardness, but her praise just makes me feel uncomfortable. Especially since I know it’s not true. At least where life drawing comes into play.

I look at my poor attempt to capture Aster’s beauty and cringe. It looks like a doodle a middle schooler might make of their crush. I *wish* it was a doodle, because at least then it would be *good*. I’m good at doodles. Doodles are my jam. I could doodle all damn day and be happy. Realism is the bane of my existence, and I’ll be lucky if I get a C in this class.

It won’t be my first C in university, but it will be the first of any art class I’ve taken. I’m used to excelling when it comes to pencil and paper, so this class is double the torture.

“How is your art book coming along?” Emma continues, doing all the work of carrying the conversation. “I’ve only filled mine up halfway. Do you want to go to the mall later and do some sketches?”

I’m so sick of the mall. I have three art books of nothing but the mall, which is why I’ve been going to the quad lately. It’s just as boring, but at least it doesn’t require an extra bus ride.

I open my mouth to tell her that, but all that comes out is an abrupt, “No.”

Emma shrugs and turns back to her easel. “Okay, let me know if you change your mind. A few of us are going.”

Without her attention on me, I study her work. She’s perfectly captured Aster’s image, the play of light and shadow defining each line of muscle on his gorgeous body.

I turn back to my own work, mumbling, “You should submit for the mural.”

Her pleased gaze burns into me, and my embarrassment deepens. Why can’t I say this kind of stuff to her face like a normal person?

“Time for the last round.” Mr. Moore gestures to the box. “Aster, if you would?”

“Sure thing.” Aster tugs the small towel off from around his waist.

He sets it aside before resuming his position, his knee spread wide and the entirety of his body on full display, directed right at me.

The clatter of my pencil hitting the floor elicits a round of laughs before Mr. Moore’s hard stare shushes everyone, and they get back to work.

Why can’t a hole open in the floor and swallow me?

Hot with embarrassment, I bend and pick up my pencil, then get back to work. This is one of the works we’ll be graded on, and I need to get my act together. This isn’t the first nude I’ve drawn. I’ve even practiced outside of class with the help of the internet to try to inoculate myself.

But sitting near the door, with only a view of Aster’s firm ass is way different from facing him head on. From behind, I can pretend our model is a random stranger, and not the man I’ve been crushing on since sophomore year.

It all started when I was passing through the arts building and heard the distant strands of a violin. The music room wasn’t on my map, and I didn’t plan a detour into my

schedule, but my feet had taken on a life of their own and carried me down the unfamiliar hall.

There, I saw Aster Wood for the first time. He'd been fully clothed, of course, standing straight and tall, his hair pulled back in a bun. The violin he cradled in his hands seemed to have a life of its own, floating beneath his chin, singing to the swish of bow across strings.

It had been the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, ever *heard*, and I fell head over heels in an instant.

Before I graduate, I *will* ask Aster out. Which means first overcoming my shyness. I can't ask Aster out if I can't even hold a conversation.

And working at the youth center *is* helping. Just not fast enough. If I can't muster my nerves before the semester ends, I'll have no way for our paths to cross naturally. I need to man up and take the plunge.

*Aster, please go on a date with me.*

Not that hard. It's not even ten words. I've even practiced so I won't fumble and stutter. And I *will* do it.

Next week.

That's plenty soon enough.

My pencil swishes over the paper, and I turn my focus back on what I'm doing only to die of mortification for the dozenth time today. While the rest of the drawing may look like a middle schooler drew it, the amount of detail I put into one specific area is nearly photographic.

Frantically, I fumble the eraser from my case and rub out the middle area, smearing more lead than I remove.

"Pencils down. That's it for today," Mr. Moore calls out. "Make sure you've signed your drawings and leave them on your easels."

Oh, no. No, no, no.

I rub faster, trying to obliterate the object of my fixation.

"Basil, I said pencils down," Mr. Moore admonishes.

I stare at the eraser in my hand. Definitely *not* a pencil, but I don't think he'll appreciate the distinction.

In dismay, I stare at the horror show of my assignment. Forget the C. I'm going to fail this class.

Emma gives me a sympathetic look as she packs up and heads out the door with the rest of the class.

I move more slowly, disappointment in myself weighing me down. I don't need to be to work for an hour. I'd usually spend this time filling in my art book and eating dinner, but right now, all I want to do is go home, crawl into bed, and wait for a reset of the day.

"Basil, a moment of your time?" Mr. Moore calls out as I finish loading my bag.

Miserable, I leave it on my chair and turn to face him as he joins me.

His critical eyes take in the mess on my easel, and he shakes his head in disappointment. "What's going on with you, Basil? I know you can do better than this."

I hang my head in shame, any excuse I could make sticking in my throat.

"I don't want to fail you." A note of sympathy fills his voice. "Is it the environment? Performance anxiety? What do you need to help you draw at the level I know you're capable of?"

My strict instructor being so nice makes me feel even worse. Now I'm not just failing myself. I'm failing *him*.

The changing room door opens, and Aster strides back out, fully clothed. His eyes settle on us, his brows furrowing, and his steps slow.

Mr. Moore pats my back. "I know this is hard for you. Why don't you do three extra drawings on your own as makeup work for today, okay? Just turn them in before the end of the month."

Nodding, I mumble, "Thank you, sir."

He sighs and walks back to his desk, calling out, “Thank you for your hard work today, Aster.”

Aster pauses to turn back to respond. “No problem, Mr. Moore. I appreciate the work.”

His low rumble strokes over my frayed nerves, and I grab my bag, my eyes fixed on the door. If I hurry, I can get out of here before Aster turns around, thus avoiding the awkwardness of leaving the room at the same time and having to make conversation before I’m ready.

I sling my bag over my shoulder as I step between the easels, and my elbow catches on the edge of my drawing pad.

In horror, I watch as the easel tips backward, crashing to the ground. The board with my drawing slides across the room, coming to a stop at Aster’s feet.

Kill. Me. Now.

I rush forward to grab it, but Aster gets there first, crouching to pick it up.

He holds it up, studying the rough lines and the smear of pencil across the middle. Turning, he grins down at me. “Hey, this is pretty good, Basil. I haven’t seen you draw from this angle yet.”

I gape up at him. He’s seen my other drawings? And he thinks they’re good? Did he not hear what Mr. Moore just said about it?

His smile softens, and he holds it out. “Here, you take this, and I’ll get your easel.”

I continue to stare at him, all the words I practiced jumbled together and pushing to get out all at once. But they can’t escape past the lump in my throat.

Biting his lip, he leans forward and takes my hand, bringing it into contact with the drawing board. “There we go. Just like that.”

My eyes drop to where his hand touches mine, my skin tingling and burning all at once.



He takes a step forward. “It’s okay, Basil. Take your time.”

The way he says my name sends shivers through me, and my mouth finally starts working. “Da-da-da. T-t-t. Me.”

“What?” He steps closer, and his thumb rubs over my racing pulse. “I didn’t catch that. Can you say it again?”

“G-g-go.” His fingers slip under my sleeve, derailing even that poor attempt at communication. “Eep.”

Every part of my body feels like I’m blushing, and I can’t breathe past the constriction of my nape guard. With no other choice, I bolt from the classroom, leaving Aster still holding my drawing board.

Could this day get any worse?

## CHAPTER THREE

I'm so flustered and embarrassed by what happened that I don't even remember my walk across campus, how much time it took, or how many groups of other students I avoided.

Or did they avoid me this time?

I don't recall moving out of anyone's way. But that can't be right. No one moves for me.

Despite the chilly spring day, I stumble into the quad sweaty and flushed. The long-sleeved shirt and hoodie that usually bring me comfort now feel stifling. I wobble over to one of the tables next to the food court to shrug free of my backpack and peel off my outer layer.

Around me, the mass of students presses in, some heading to the cafeteria, some lining up for the specialty stands, and the rest vying for a cup of coffee. Past the tables, couches and soft chairs offer more comfortable places to sit in front of the student store, where people can pick up their class books, school supplies, and various sundries.

I bury my face in my sweatshirt, my breaths harsh against the thick material, and focus on inhaling and exhaling until my pulse stops racing.

That wasn't as bad as it could have been. There's still a chance to bounce back from my humiliation and ask Aster out, right? Maybe he'll say yes out of pity, and I can win him over with my charm.

Yeah, like that will happen. My shot in the dark missed before I even pulled the trigger. Single life for the win. Maybe the online comic I've been working on will hit it big, and I can just become a hermit.

"Basil, you actually came," a male voice says from in front of me.

My pulse spikes again, and I drop the sweatshirt with a feeling of dread. In all the kerfuffle, I completely forgot about my plan to *not* come to the quad so I could avoid another encounter with Jeremy.

He stands in front of me, one large hand on my backpack as if he knows I'll bolt if he doesn't hold something of mine hostage.

And he's right. I have two weeks' worth of drawings in that bag that would be a pain to redo, not to mention my tablet. Most of my files are backed up, but was that yesterday? Or the day before? How much storyboard can I afford to lose if I misremember backing up?

Jeremy sees me eyeing the bag and drags it across the table, farther out of reach. "Don't get nervous now that you finally gave in."

My hands clench in my sweatshirt, and I force myself to stay calm so I don't stutter. "I didn't give in. I have work in an hour."

"Plenty of time for some fun." He slings my backpack over his shoulder and steps around the table to my side. "Come on. Let's find somewhere quieter."

"I'm not going with you." I straighten my spine. "Return my backpack and leave me alone."

"No." He grins like this is all a game and steps closer. "When did you last miss school. Three weeks ago?" He catches my arm, pulling me close enough to breathe him in. "Or was it nearly four?"

His Alpha pheromones slide over me, stroking down my spine and making my knees tremble with the desire to melt

against him. It presses on my instincts to bend to his will, to let myself be mated.

“Your Heat’s coming soon,” he whispers into my ear. “And little Omega bitches like you just can’t resist us Alphas, can you?”

I lift a hand to cover my nose, but his scent sneaks through the cracks, pressing down my will to resist.

“All your instincts are telling you to let me bend you over and put a baby in you, aren’t they Basil?” He half walks, half carries me toward the bathrooms. “I hear the quiet ones are always the best. Don’t disappoint me after how long you made me wait.”

Dropping my hand, I fumble in my pocket for my key ring. I have a spray that’s supposed to neutralize pheromones. If I’d known Jeremy was going to be this bold in public, I would have pulled it out the second he appeared in front of me.

My pocket is empty, though, and I remember shoving my keys into my backpack earlier.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Hey, Basil!” someone calls out.

I twist toward the voice, eyes landing on Aster. He looks out of breath, his long hair windblown.

Our eyes meet, mine silently pleading for help, and his expression turns stony.

“Stop paying attention to him,” Jeremy hisses, though he doesn’t quite use Command.

That would be crossing the line from morally gray in using his pheromones to downright illegal in taking complete control of my will. Not even Jeremy is that stupid. Not with so many witnesses.

Aster jogs after us, quickly closing the distance between us, and grabs my other arm. “Hey, let him go.”

“Stay out of this,” Jeremy snarls.

“How can I when you’re trying to walk off with my new boyfriend?” Aster demands, his expression serious.

“Bullshit. Basil doesn’t have a boyfriend. He doesn’t even have friends.” Jeremy tries to get us moving again. “If you guys were an item, he wouldn’t be in his current state. I’m just helping him out.”

“You did this to him to begin with.” Aster steps closer, and his pheromones push against Jeremy’s, the two Alphas clashing with me caught in the middle. “Let him go before I call campus security. Unless you’re confident enough that his story will match yours?”

Jeremy’s grip tightens painfully on my arm before he releases me and drops my backpack on the floor. “Whatever. I don’t mind sloppy seconds, and you’ll get bored fast. He’s a complete dud.”

Tears sting my eyes, and when I start to crouch to grab my bag, my legs give out.

“Whoa, there. I got you.” Aster loops an arm around my waist and grabs my bag. “Come on, I’ll get you somewhere private to calm down.”

“T-thank you.” Pheromones still leak from his body, and I can’t resist the urge to lean into him.

I bury my nose against his side, inhaling deeply, uncaring that I’m huffing him like a drug I’m desperate for my fix of. My dick hardens painfully in my pants, but I can’t even be embarrassed right now. Not when he smells so good, his clean scent obliterating every trace of Jeremy’s pheromones from my system.

A low rumble comes from him, and his arm tightens possessively.

We reach the bathrooms, but he walks us past them and into an empty study room.

As soon as he stops moving, I plaster myself against him, rubbing my aching dick against his hip.

“I-I’m sorry,” I gasp out, but I can’t stop, not when the friction feels so good.

Another rumble comes from him. He drops my bag to bury his nose against the side of my throat. “You smell so sweet, Basil. Just like I knew you would.”

A needy whine escapes me. Rutting against him won’t be enough.

He leans back to cup my cheeks. “Look at me.”

Panting, I meet his eyes.

“Are you in Heat?” he asks.

No, but it’s close enough that the combination of such strong pheromones have left me desperate to be touched.

When I shake my head, he presses his lips to my hot forehead before he gently peels me off his body, moving me to rest against the table in the center of the room. “Good. That’s good. Trying taking deep breaths.”

The sound of my desperate pants fills the air with how much I’m already breathing. I don’t need air, I need him to touch me.

But he pulls away, backing toward the door. “I’ll just leave you to—”

“No!” I grab his hands, pressing them against my straining erection. “Please. I need...” I grind into his hands. “Please, help me.”

Hunger flickers across his face, but he still holds back. “Are you sure? I don’t want to force you like Jeremy was trying to do.”

I nod eagerly. “I want.”

He pulls his hands from mine, but only long enough to grasp my hips and draw me down as he sits in one of the chairs with me straddling his lap.

He directs my face against his neck. “If at any time you want to stop, tell me, okay?”

Trembling, I wrap my arms around his neck and breathe him in deep.

His hands move between us, sliding beneath my shirt to finger the button on my jeans. With quick tugs, he opens my fly, and one long-fingered hand slips into my boxer briefs to curl around my erection.

A sob of relief escapes me, and I rock into his fist, desperate for relief.

His other hand slides into the back of my pants, squeezing my ass before he finds my entrance. "Here, too?"

"Please," I choke out.

He massages the tight ring of muscles, spreading my slick over his fingers before easing them inside me. It's not the stretch I crave, but it helps ease the desperate need to be filled. I push back on his fingers, taking them deeper.

A groan escapes him. "Is this your first time?"

"Don't stop," I beg, rocking my hips against his still hands.

An answering rumble vibrates in his chest, and his hands start moving, one stroking my hard dick while the other thrusts into my deepest parts.

From my position on his lap, I feel the hard swell of his cock against my balls. I roll my hips on top of him, wishing that was inside me instead of his fingers. I may have never had a partner for this kind of stuff, but I've experimented, and I know the difference size can make.

His hands move faster, hitting all the sweet spots. My fingers dig into his back, my toes straining for the floor just out of reach.

I want... I want...

Aster spreads his fingers wide, stretching my entrance, and I stiffen against him, the cry of pleasure sticking in my throat as I come.

My release leaves me exhausted, and I sag against him, too blissed out to move.

He pulls his hands from my pants and sets my clothes back to rights. “Feel better now?”

The question breaks through my euphoria, bringing on a tide of embarrassed shame.

Oh, god, what did I just do? What did I make Aster do? I’m no better than Jeremy. He was trying to leave, and I wouldn’t let him. I know as well as any Omega what my pheromones can do to an Alpha. I forced myself on my crush.

I scramble backward off his lap, but my legs refuse to function, and I fall.

Eyes wide in surprise, Aster tries to catch me, but the awkward position overextends his reach, and my weight pulls him down instead.

He lands on top of me on the floor, his hand behind my head cushioning the impact.

I stare up at him from inches away, and my heart starts racing even faster than it did during the heat of passion. Blood rushes to my cheeks until I’m sure my whole face is red.

He smiles down at me. “Hey, there.”

“Eep,” I squeak out.

His smile broadens. “I see we’re back to regular forms of communication.”

My mouth works but no sound comes out.

“Are you trying to run away now that you’ve had your wicked way with me?” he teases.

Panicked, I glance down the length of his body, knowing there will be evidence of how I used him.

He leans closer, his lips brushing my ear. “Is that any way to treat your new boyfriend?”

My heart lodges in my throat, and I squeeze past it, “Boyfriend?”

My scrambled brain struggles to process his words. Oh, right, that’s what he told Jeremy. If I run away from Aster



now, it will ruin all his hard work in pretending we're boyfriends.

Aster pushes upright, kneeling between my spread legs, and holds out a hand. "Aster Woods. It's a pleasure to date you, Basil..."

"Bark," I wheeze, and slide my trembling hand into his. "Basil Bark."

## CHAPTER FOUR

**M**y palms sweat as we exit the study room together, my bag over Aster's shoulder.

"I feel like we're meant to be," he muses. "Like those stories of finding your perfect match."

*Perfect match.* The words ring through my head. Didn't he just say we're faking dating? I mean, I'd be thrilled if this turned into more. Over the moon, in fact, but I've been crushing on him for years. He only noticed I existed today.

I gape up at him. "W-what? How?"

He grins and points to himself. "Aster Woods." He points to me. "Basil Bark. Our parents both clearly have an obsession with nature."

The comment surprises a giggle out of me. "Oh, yeah."

"So, boyfriend..." Aster catches my hand. "Where to now?"

Horrified, I stare at our entwined fingers as my palms turn into moist sponges of nervousness. Oh, god, no. Stop sweating. *Please* stop sweating.

He squeezes my squishy hand. "Do you have a shift at the unie today?"

My head jerks up. "Huh?"

"You work at the student store, right?" He lifts my sweaty hand and rubs the back against his cheek. "I've seen you stocking shelves."

“Y-yeah,” I stutter out.

He moves my fingers to his mouth and nibbles on them. “What time?”

The feel of his teeth against my skin reminds me of where else his hands were just seconds ago, and all the blood in my head drains south, leaving me light-headed.

He drops my hand to wrap an arm around my waist. “Maybe you should call in sick today. You probably shouldn’t go in to work in your current condition, anyway.”

Condition? What condition? Did I actually go into Heat? Usually, it arrives like a fever, but I’ve felt ready to explode since Aster first came to my rescue, so maybe I missed the symptoms?

I lift the collar of my shirt to sniff, but I can’t smell my own pheromones.

We stop at the table where I dropped my sweatshirt. Thankfully, no one walked off with it while we were gone.

Aster grabs the bulky black material and presses it against my stomach before leaning down to whisper, “You have cum drying on your shirt that the apron won’t hide.”

His breath against my ear and his concern do crazy things to my heart. I sway within his arms and nearly pass out on the spot. This can’t be real.

No, it’s not real. It’s pretend.

“Whoa, don’t faint on me.” He wraps his arm tighter around my waist, lifting me onto my toes and taking all of my weight. “I’ve got you. Just take deep breaths.”

Deep breathing is what got us into this mess to begin with. And I can’t do it anyway. My lungs refuse to work.

“Hey, seriously, don’t pass out.” Aster cups my cheek, his head dropping toward mine. “Your lips are turning blue. Do you need mouth-to-mouth?”

I suck in a startled breath.

“Ah, too bad.” He sets me back on my feet. “I’ve never used my CPR training before, and you’d make an adorable practice partner.”

Adorable?

“P-p-practice.” My eyes drop to his lips, and I wheeze, “Please.”

“We never did kiss.” He bites his bottom lip. “We’ve really gone out of order on all this. Would you like to get dinner?” He glances toward the crowded cafeteria. “Maybe not there. It’s pretty packed, and I get the impression you don’t like crowds.”

He glances around the quad, which has filled even more since I first arrived.

Concern fills his gaze when he looks back at me. “Do you need your earbuds in? Is this too much for you?”

I continue to stare at him, too shocked for my brain to make sense of any of this.

He noticed I wear earbuds? When? And how does he know so much about me? Up until an hour ago, I wouldn’t have thought he even knew my name.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. Raise your hand if you disagree.” Aster leads me toward the opposite entrance from the side I came in on. “My place is close by. We can go there, and I can loan you a shirt. You can shower, too, if you want. I have a private bathroom. And then you can decide if you still want to go to work, or if you’d rather call out sick. Sound like a plan?”

I clutch my sweatshirt. No hand raising here. I want to do all of that and more.

“Good.” He gives me a relieved grin. “Really good.”



Aster wasn’t lying when he said he lives close by. He somehow managed to get one of the coveted on-campus

apartments that are assigned by lottery. I apply every year, but haven't been as fortunate.

We enter a small studio that holds a loveseat, narrow coffee table, and a TV that sits on top of a short bookshelf. A cube shelf next to the door blocks off the side of the room set up as a bedroom, and a tiny kitchen takes up half of the back wall. A microwave sits on top of the small fridge, and the counter is just long enough for a toaster oven to perch next to the sink.

Maybe I was lucky not to win this lottery. My place is farther away, but I have three times the amount of room.

“Sorry the place is so small.” He leads me to the door at the back. “The bathroom is right through here. I’ll grab you a shirt. Do you want pants, too?” Without waiting for an answer, he leans forward to check the front of my pants. “I’ll get you some sweats.”

I look down, spotting the dried speckles near my zipper, and let out a strangled noise before bolting into the bathroom.

Once inside, I have space alone to process what happened.

I jumped Aster Woods. And he didn't turn me down. Far from it. We're now boyfriends. Well, pretend boyfriends. Can't get ahead of myself. But pretend is halfway to real, right? How does the saying go? Fake it until you make it? So, I just need to fake this relationship until it's real.

A knock sounds on the door, startling me, and I realize I've just been standing in the middle of the bathroom this whole time.

I crack the door open and peer out.

Aster offers me a stack of clothes, with a towel at the bottom. “Here you go. They're going to be a bit big on you. I hope that's okay.”

Nodding, I take the clothes and shut the door again.

Okay, Basil, time to man up and go after what you want. But first...

I lock the bathroom door, then dig out my cell phone to text my manager that I can't come in tonight. This was my last day to work this week, and I already have next week off for when my Heat comes, so it shouldn't get me in trouble.

My manager responds back right away with a thumbs up. He's super nice and accommodating. Since most of the people who work there are students, he's used to things coming up and usually has more staff available than work to cover.

With that taken care of, I strip out of my stained clothes and step into the small standing shower wedged into the corner of the bathroom. It's a tight fit for me, and I struggle to imagine Aster's larger body fitting.

While the water rushes over my head, I dig through the modest collection of soaps found in a caddy that hangs over the shower head. I don't need to do a full wash, but when given the opportunity... I slather myself in every available body product in the caddy, drenching my body in Aster's scents.

If I somehow blow this, I'll at least go home tonight smelling like my crush. Does that make me a pervert? Who cares? I already humped him like a rabbit in heat, and he didn't run away.

The reminder sends a feverish rush through me, and I reach out to crank the water to cold.

The blast of icy water does the trick, and I shiver through rinsing the soap away before hopping out of the shower and drying off.

Goose bumps rise all over my body, and I hurry to pull on the clothes Aster loaned me. I have to use the tie on the sweats to keep them on my hips, and the cuffs cover my feet. When I pull on the t-shirt, it slips off one shoulder, and the sleeves fall past my elbows.

I use the towel to wipe the condensation off the mirror and finger-comb my brown hair. My bangs fall into my eyes, reminding me I need a trim, and I fuss with them for a minute, convincing them to sweep off to the side.

A quiet raid of the medicine cabinet behind the mirror uncovers the toothpaste, and I squirt some out onto my finger to give myself a quick freshen-up. Aster *did* mention practicing CPR and kissing. Not that I think we'll be doing that today. But one can hope.

The thought of kissing vanishes the last of the chill from my body as a flush spreads up my neck from beneath the black nape guard that circles my throat.

I tug on it to give myself room to take deep, calming breaths. My parents should have named me Tomato for how easily my face turns red. I splash cold water over my hot cheeks. I can do this.

*Aster, would you like to go out this weekend?* I mouth the words, then repeat them for good measure.

We're fake boyfriends, so it's not out of line to ask, right? To help sell that we're dating?

With one final deep breath, I shuffle to the door and open it.

Immediately, my eyes fix on Aster's bedroom, now fully visible from this angle, as is Aster himself. He stands at the foot of a queen size bed in only a pair of yellow boxer briefs that hug his thighs and perfectly outline the way his cock hangs to the right.

He grins. "All done? I was just changing into something more comfy—"

Retreating, I slam the door shut. My pulse races so fast I fear I'm having a heart attack. Who was I kidding? I *cannot* do this.

A light tap comes on the door. "Basil? I'm sorry if I startled you. I'm dressed now, if you want to come out."

I rest my forehead against the cool surface of the door. Why did I freak out? It's not like I haven't already seen his *everything*. But that was in class. And this is just us alone in his very small apartment.

“Should I make dinner?” he asks when I remain locked in the bathroom. “How does pasta sound? Knock once if you object.”

My hands hang limply at my sides.

“Okay, pasta it is,” he says. “Take your time, and come out when you’re ready, okay?”

The sound of him in the kitchen drifts through the door, and I take several deep breaths before opening it once more and shuffling out.

Aster stands in the kitchen, filling a saucepan with water at the sink. He positioned himself with his back to the bathroom, which is an awkward pose considering the sink is on the same wall as the bathroom door.

“You can sit on the couch, if you want,” he says without looking at me. “Sorry I don’t have a dining table. I’ve never had guests over.”

I shuffle farther out of the bathroom, then stop and fidget with uncertainty. My mom didn’t raise me to sit around while other people do all the work. “Do you— “ I stop and take a steadying breath to calm my nerves like Doctor Avara has been helping me do. “Can I help?”

Aster pauses in the act of setting the pan on an electric, countertop burner, but he still avoids looking at me, like I’m a wild animal he’s afraid to spook. “Can you make the garlic bread? The butter and garlic are in the fridge, and the bread is in top cabinet next to it. Silverware is in the drawer right below.”

I open the small fridge and pull out the spreadable butter and jar of minced garlic. The bread he has is meant for sandwiches, but it will do in a jiffy. As I work behind him, my nervousness slips away. It’s easier when I’m focused on doing something.

After a couple minutes of silence, he asks, “Did you call your work?”

“Texted.” I scoop garlic onto the buttered bread. “I have the night off.”



“It’s amazing that you can work and still get all your homework done.” He fusses with the saucepan and opens a box of spiral noodles. “I don’t think I could do it and keep up on my practice.”

“It’s not hard.” I open the toaster oven and pull out the little pan inside. “When it’s slow, I can work on my art book.”

He starts to turn toward me before changing his mind. “I’m sorry Mr. Moore was yelling at you earlier. I thought your drawing was really nice.”

That’s kind of him to say, but he’s not an art major. And should he be saying that about a drawing of himself? The question trips down my tongue, but I bite it back, afraid I’ll offend him.

“So, you need to do three new drawings?” he ventures hesitantly. “To make up for today?”

It’s so embarrassing that he heard me getting reprimanded.

“Yes,” I whisper as I slide the tray back into the toaster oven.

“I can help you with that,” he offers.

Surprised, I look at his broad back. “How?”

He peeks at me over his shoulder, and I catch the amusement in his eyes. “I’m a model, remember?”

The image of him in yellow underwear flashes through my mind. Then my horny brain subtracts the underwear, and oh my god, why is my brain so helpful?

Suddenly Aster stands in front of me, his hands on my elbows. “Or not? You have someone else you want to use?”

I shake my head and stutter, “P-pay...?”

He purses his lips. “Boyfriends don’t accept payment for this kind of thing.”

My face heats again, and I raise my hands to cover it, but I can’t help peeking through my fingers at him.

His nostrils flare, and he bites his bottom lip before releasing me to pour noodles into the boiling water. “Why don’t you get your sketchbook out while I finish up dinner?”

“Sure.” In a daze, I return to the bathroom to grab my bag from where I left it, then shuffle over to the couch and collapse onto it.

If this is a dream, please never let me wake up.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Since I don't have the motivation right now to work on another life drawing, I pull out my art book to work on a few pages of sketches.

Watching Aster in the kitchen is something new to draw, and the easy movements lend a sense of comfort to the unfamiliar space.

"What kind of music do you like?" he asks without turning around.

I don't usually like this question, because people who have seen my comics don't think classical music fits me, but Aster is a musician, so I feel safe that he won't make fun of me. "String instruments, mostly, with some piano if it's the right kind."

He half turns toward me before remembering he's very consciously pretending that I'm not here. "Can I hear some? I'm always looking for new inspiration."

I spot a speaker docking station next to the TV and pull up my favorite playlist before setting my phone in the cradle.

*Intruka's Winter Ballad* fills the apartment, and Aster visibly relaxes. "Ah, I love this song."

His movements become more fluid, almost like he's directing a symphony instead of making pasta. I catch the motions in my drawings, the fluid arcs of his arm as he pulls down bowls, and the graceful bend of his spine when he leans to the side to turn on the toaster oven.

Two pages quickly fill up, and I flip to a new one. Unconsciously, I section off the fresh pages into comic panels, creating a mini spread of Aster making dinner. I draw a thick line separating the right third of the page and sketch out what his expression might look like. Concentration as he assembles the pieces of dinner. Happiness as he listens to the music. Consternation when he grabs a container of Parmesan cheese only to find it empty.

He holds it up to the light. “How dare you be empty? You’re ruining pasta night.”

A laugh escapes me. “Aren’t you the one who put it away like that?”

“So I am.” He sighs and tosses it into the trash can under the sink. “Cheeseless pasta it is.”

The toaster oven dings, and he uses tongs to transfer the garlic bread to a plate. Grabbing the pasta bowls in his other hand, he turns and carries them toward me.

As he approaches, I scoot over to one side of the couch, quickly sketching out the image of him easily balancing everything in two hands.

When he sets the bowls on the table, I draw the squiggly noodles, too, filling in the last panel.

His knee nudges against mine. “Eat before it gets cold.”

I set my art book aside and grab my bowl, then take the pillow Aster offers me to use as a lap table.

“Sorry I’m not set up for guests.” A light flush blooms in his cheeks, making me want to grab my sketchbook again.

“I like this.” I grip my bowl. “It’s cozy.”

His knee touches mine again. “I like it, too. And I like your music. I always wondered what you were listening to all the time. You have good taste.”

I focus on my pasta. “You play beautifully.”

His head snaps toward me, and surprise fills his voice. “You’ve heard me play?”

Immediate embarrassment fills me. Does that make me sound like a stalker? As far as I know, Aster doesn't play in public.

"Y-yeah, once or twice." I furiously stab at the noodles to give myself something to focus on. The conversation was going so smoothly until I let that slip out. "In the a-art building."

I feel his eyes on me, but I can't bring myself to look up.

He leans over to press his shoulder against mine. "Maybe someday I'll be good enough to make it onto your playlist."

My head jerks up, noodles falling off my fork. "You're already good enough. I'd love to listen to you all day."

Heat immediately rushes to my face, and I duck my head once more.

"You're as red as the spaghetti sauce." The throaty rumble of approval mingling with the words weakens my legs. "I could just eat you up."

A shiver goes through me, and my heart pounds so hard it hurts. *Be brave, Basil. Ask to be eaten.*

But the moment passes before I build up the nerve, and Aster leans forward to grab a remote from the coffee table. "Do you want to watch a movie? There are a few I've been dying to see."

Kicking myself for not leaping at the opening, I nod jerkily.

Aster turns off the music and scrolls through a list of options. "Are you okay with a romantic comedy?"

My whole life feels like a comedy, so why not?

I nod again, and he turns on the movie.

The sound of laughter and flirting fills the apartment, making up for the lack of conversation between us.

Slowly, I relax as my belly fills with warm food. Before I realize it, my empty bowl vanishes from my lap, and a blanket wraps around me. I find myself leaning against Aster's side,

his arm draped over the couch, not quite touching but close enough that I can pretend it's around me.

When the first movie ends, he lets the next one play automatically, and I relax further against him, surrounded by his scent. Eyes closing, I rub my face against him, breathing him in, and a quiet rumble vibrates in his chest.

It pleases me that the Alpha in him wants to comfort me as an Omega, even if it *is* all based on instincts. It means we're a good match—maybe even a perfect match?—and it gives me hope that our fake relationship can become real.

I must doze off, because when I open my eyes again, shadows fill the apartment, and I'm alone. I lay on the couch, my head on a pillow and the blanket around me.

The clock on the cable box says it's past two in the morning, and I missed my chance to catch the bus back to my place.

Groggily, I sit up and rub the sleep from my eyes. Enough ambient light comes from the electronics in the apartment for me to make out the shadowed shapes of furniture.

I stand and stumble to the bathroom, then cup my hand under the faucet to quell my thirst.

When I step back out, my gaze falls on the shadowed alcove of Aster's bedroom.

I shouldn't go in there. I wasn't invited. But every instinct in my body demands I crawl into that big bed and snuggle in next to him. Now that I know the warmth of his body, I crave it like nothing else.

“Basil?” he asks sleepily. “Do you need something?”

My feet carry me to the foot of his bed, where I make out the shadowed planes of his bare chest.

He sits up, pushing back his long hair. “Is the couch not comfortable?”

The darkness emboldens me, and I bend to touch the foot of his bed. “I don't want to sleep on the couch.”

A hungry rumble comes from him. “I’m trying hard to be a gentleman, Basil.”

I put a knee on the mattress.

“I’m not dressed,” he warns. “If you come in here, I won’t be able to hold back.”

Pulse racing, I crawl onto his bed.

He reaches for me, pulling me up to lay next to him and rolling me beneath his body in one move. His head dips toward mine, our lips almost touching. “Are you sure about this?”

In answer, I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him down.

I may struggle with communication, but my body knows what it desires, and even if this relationship is fake, my desire for Aster is real.

His lips cover mine, his kiss gentle. I awkwardly mimic his actions, my mouth moving against his. If he guesses it’s my first time kissing someone, he doesn’t say anything. He caresses my temple and cheek before touching my chin, urging my mouth open.

When his tongue slips past my lips, I moan at the slick heat of him filling me. No amount of imagining could have prepared me for the reality of my first kiss, for the sense of connection and the desire that floods through me.

Hands moving down my body, he peels my pants off before he pulls back to remove my shirt. Then he settles on top of me again, bare skin to bare skin, and I melt beneath him. His hard cock rubs against mine, drawing more moans from me. I never knew something like this could feel so good.

His breathing turns ragged against my lips, and I feel his heart pounding just as hard as mine.

Whining with the need for more, I wrap my legs around him.

He reaches out and fumbles on the shelf next to the bed. A small box tips over, scattering condoms, and he grabs one,

ripping it open. He reaches between our bodies, and cool latex touches the tip of my dick, followed by tight pressure as he rolls the condom down my length.

When I flinch with confusion, he kisses me again, hot tongues tangling together. A moment later, he rolls another condom over his cock before he fists himself and positions his tip against my entrance. I'm still loose from our earlier foray in the study room, and my body produces enough slick that we don't need lube.

Breaths unsteady, he pulls back from our kiss. "Are you sure?"

I don't know why I'm wearing a condom, too, but I nod, wanting him inside me.

The pressure builds at my entrance before the tip of his cock pushes past the tight ring of muscle. My body instinctively clenches around him, and I let out a cry of discomfort. He's way bigger than the toys I've experimented with, and even my slick isn't enough to make it easy to take him.

He stays frozen at my entrance, and I feel the pulse of our bodies with every frantic breath we take.

He smooths my hair back from my sweaty face. "Push against me."

When I do, he slides in deeper, the burn of his cock stretching me open, uncomfortable but welcome. The pain means we're becoming one, and I know it won't last long.

He reaches between our bodies, his large hand wrapping around my dick. As he strokes me, the desire returns, and warmth pools in my hips.

"There you go." He pulls back, then thrusts forward, surging deeper. "Can you hear how wet you are for me?"

I can, the sound of our bodies coming together both exhilarating and embarrassing.

He kisses my slack lips, stealing my gasps, then licks down my jaw to my ear. "You feel so good, Basil. I want to be



all the way inside you.”

I nod frantically, my hips moving on their own to meet his thrusts.

With a groan, he sinks all the way into me, his cock making room for himself inside my body. The discomfort barely registers, the desire inside subduing everything but the pleasure of our joining. His hips grind against my ass, then he pulls out and surges back into my body with a wet smack that rips a cry of pleasure from me.

He repeats the motion, his cock driving against that small bundle of nerves deep within my body. His hand leaves my dick to grip my hip, and I cling to him, desperate pleas falling from my lips for him not to stop.

My hard dick rubs against the ridges of muscles on his stomach with every thrust, adding another layer of pleasure with the friction. He slams home, as deep as he can go, and rolls his hips, his cock stirring inside me.

I come with a shout, my nails scraping across his back.

He groans against my neck, his cock jumping and pulsing inside me.

Slowly, our breathing evens out, and Aster pushes up onto his elbows to look down at me. “You okay?”

Unable to form all the words for how okay I am, I nod.

He leans in and kisses me gently, then reaches between us. His fingers brush where we join before he eases out of me. Sitting up, he pulls off his condom and ties it, then does the same for mine.

“Less clean up this way.” He tosses the spent condoms into the trash and lies back down, tugging me against him. “Now we don’t have to get up. We can go straight to cuddling.”

Understanding dawns. Making a dash for the bathroom covered in cum would have been a horrible way to end such a sweet moment. I gratefully snuggle against him

“I’ve been wanting to do that all night.” He strokes my back, pressing me closer. “Do you regret it?”

I shake my head.

“Good.” He pulls the blanket up around my shoulders.  
“Really good.”

## CHAPTER SIX

The next morning, Aster wakes me with breakfast in bed, another new experience for me.

When I blush and pull my borrowed t-shirt back on, he just smiles and kisses my temple. “Eat up, and then I’ll take you home.”

Surprised and a little flustered to be kicked out first thing, I shake my head. “I can just catch the bus.”

Amusement fills his cerulean eyes, and he taps the tip of my nose. “Let your boyfriend take you home, Basil.”

Nodding, I hunch over my bacon and eggs.

I was hoping I could spend more time here, but my sleepover was unexpected, and Aster probably already has plans for the day. Taking care of me kept him from his evening practice yesterday, too. I don’t want to interfere with his music.

Aster putters around the apartment while I eat, giving me space, but I catch him glancing at me every so often with a soft expression that sends my heart fluttering.

He obviously doesn’t object to me being in his bed. Dare I hope I might be here again soon? Is that too presumptuous? How long will we fake date for? I don’t want to ask, because I don’t want him to put a time limit on playing pretend.

If we do this all the way to graduation, I could live on the memories for the rest of my life.

Just as I finish the last of my breakfast, Aster returns with a stack of clothes. “I don’t have a washing machine in my apartment, but I got most of the stain out of your pants and dried them with my blow dryer. Your sweatshirt escaped the damage, so you should be safe enough until we get to your place and you can change into new clothes.”

My eyes widen. I should have thought to rinse my pants yesterday after I showered, but it never even crossed my mind. “T-thank you.”

He leans across the bed to take my empty plate. “That’s what boyfriends are for.”

I swallow hard. “What can I do for you?”

His brow creases. “You don’t need to do anything.”

“But I’m your b-boyfriend, too.” I flush as I stutter. “I want to reciprocate.”

He searches my face for a moment. “Will you show me your drawings?”

Surprised, I nod. “Yeah, you can look at my art book.”

“Not the drawings you do for homework,” he says. “The ones you’re proud of.”

“Oh.” That’s way more personal, but I listened in on his private practice, so it’s only fair. “Okay.”

He holds out a hand. “Come on. Let’s get going.”

I crawl to the edge of the mattress and take his hand, then stumble when I step out of the bed and the ache in my lower back makes itself known.

Aster catches me against his chest. “Sorry, was I too rough on you last night?”

Focusing on his chest, I shake my head.

His hand drops to my hip, fisting in the loose fabric of the t-shirt and raising it a couple inches. Air brushes my bare ass, and my breath catches. It would be an easy thing to pull it back off. And this time, I could be the one who strips him.

Maybe he doesn't have somewhere to be?

But then he drops the shirt, and he grips my arms until I stand on my own. "You okay if I let go?"

I'm not, but I can't come up with an excuse to linger longer, so I nod.

He steps away and turns his back, giving me privacy to change into my own clothes. I regret giving up the T-shirt that smells like him, but I can't steal it. Not with him standing right there.

Regretfully, I drop it into the laundry basket tucked between the foot of his bed and the dresser against the wall. "I'm ready."

He turns, and his gaze sweeps over me.

I tug on the sweatshirt, making sure it covers my fly. While he did a good job rinsing off the evidence of our escapade in the study room, *I* still know the stain was there, and it won't go away until I properly wash my pants.

Walking over to me, he adjusts my hood, then hands me my cell phone and earbuds. "Don't forget these."

"Thank you." I tuck them into my pocket, somewhat sad that his efficiency isn't leaving room to *accidentally* stop by to pick up something I *forgot*.

He grabs my backpack from the couch, then holds the door open for me to go out first.

Self-consciousness fills me as I step out to the exterior walkway. While unrealistic, my mind paints pictures of his neighbors popping out of their apartments to point and yell, *They had sex!*

But the walkway is blessedly empty, and we reach his car without running into anyone. I'm surprised when he stops next to a sleek black sports car.

"I know it's a little flashy." Aster opens the door for me. "It was my older sister's car. She handed it down to me when she upgraded to an SUV."

I slide into the seat. While the car is a hand-me-down, it was kept in perfect condition. If he hadn't said it was used, I never would have guessed.

Aster closes my door and hurries around to the driver's side to slide behind the wheel. "Where to?"

Hugging my backpack, I give him directions to my small apartment building not too far from campus. We don't talk much, but the quiet is comfortable. It feels nice to be with someone who doesn't expect me to chatter to fill the silence.

"Slow a little," I tell him as we near my apartment, and I look for a place to park.

The five-story building blends in with the older buildings around it, a little dingy but free of graffiti. There's a small grocery store within walking distance and a bus stop right down the street with a direct route to the university. It's also within walking distance of the Omega Youth Center, which makes volunteering there easy.

I point to an open spot at the curb as a car pulls away. "Park there."

Aster glances in his rearview mirror, breaks hard, and swoops into the spot.

Signs along the sidewalk warn of tow-away hours starting at five at night, but that's only during the week.

Before I can thank him for the ride, he jumps out and comes around to my side to open my door.

When he extends a hand to help me out, I wipe my sweaty palm on my pant leg before taking it.

He smiles as he pulls me up to stand beside him. "Will I be okay here for a bit?" At my surprised look, his smile falters. "Unless you didn't want to show me your artwork today. I can come another time. You probably have something already planned for your weekend. I shouldn't have presumed."

His flustered words ease my anxiety. "No. No plans."

He squints at me. "Why are you smiling like that?"

I duck my head. “I’m not.”

He dips down to look at my face. “You totally are.”

My cheeks heat. “I was thinking the same thing while I was getting ready to leave. That you had plans, and I should get out of your hair.”

“So, what you’re saying, is that if I wasn’t so focused on making sure you didn’t feel trapped with me, that we could have still been lounging around in pajamas?” Aster throws his head back with a groan. “My sister warned me this would happen.”

Wide-eyed, I stare up at him. “This specific thing?”

“Well, no.” He reaches past me to shut the car door, then takes my backpack from me and gestures toward the entrance to my apartment. “She says I get too stuck in my head about what could go wrong, and I need to learn to go with the flow and let things happen.”

I stare at him in amazement. He comes off as so smooth and in control. But he’s as anxious about things as I am. He’s just better at hiding it.

My pulse starts racing with excitement. “What did you think could go wrong?”

“Just ask me to lay my soul bare, why don’t you?” He jogs forward a few steps to open the front door. “If you must know, I started to feel guilty about basically kidnapping you. That led to wondering if I pressured you into staying, which then made me afraid of pressuring you even more. So I was playing it cool to show I wasn’t a threat.”

“It worked.” I duck my head to hide my pleased smile as I pass him and lead the way. “You were super cool.”

At the elevator, he leans against the wall next to me and gives me puppy eyes. “And now I’m not?”

His expression makes me want to laugh, and I look away again. “You’re still cool.”

A finger under my chin brings my head back up. “Go ahead. Laugh at me. I deserve it.”

Unable to stop myself, I giggle.

He smiles. "Worth it."

The elevator arrives, and I start to step on when a clatter comes from the entrance, drawing my attention.

I glance over and spot Mrs. Boone struggling to get through the door with her shopping cart. It's made of canvas cubes attached to a hand dolly, which isn't sturdy under the best conditions, and certainly not up for holding the weight of the door while she tries to drag it through.

"Mrs. Boone." I hurry to help her. "Let me get that for you."

"Oh, Basil, thank you." She releases the small cart and steps back, pressing a hand over her heart. "I may have gotten too excited with the sales at the market this morning."

"It's no problem." I grab the handle, but the cart's tiny wheels are stuck in the track of the door.

"Here." Aster reaches around me and easily lifts the cart with all four bags of groceries it holds. He sets it on the floor in front of me before offering Mrs. Boone his arm. "May I escort you to the elevator, ma'am?"

"Oh, my, aren't you a big one?" Mrs. Boone tucks her hand into his elbow. "Are you here to call on Basil?"

"I am." He sends me a wink over his shoulder.

"I'll make sure to turn on my shows extra loud then." She pats his arm. "Don't worry about disturbing me."

"M-Mrs. Boone," I protest, my face catching on fire.

"I'm Basil's neighbor," she explains, ignoring me. "But don't worry. Our bedrooms don't share a wall, and Mr. Webster on the other side is completely deaf."

Reaching for my hood, I pull it over my head to hide my face. This is the worst possible thing that could happen. Now all I'll think about while Aster's in my apartment is Mrs. Boone next door, imagining us getting up to who knows what.



And the knowing look she'll give me every time I pass her in the hall from now on.

And what if she tells our neighbors?

While Mrs. Boone chatters away on the ride up to our floor, my anxiety increases until I turn into a shaky mess. All I want to do is hide in my apartment, but with Aster here, there's no place to run to escape my mortification.

If Mrs. Boone tells my neighbors, then everyone will be talking about me. It will be grade school all over again, and I'll have to move. But I spent so long getting to know my neighbors so this would be a safe environment for me. Starting that process all over in a new place will kill me.

When the elevator stops, we walk with Mrs. Boone to her door, and I silently return her cart.

"Thank you, dear. Now, you two, don't let me slow you down any more." She shoos us toward my door. "Remember, I'll be watching my shows for the next several hours!"

"It was a pleasure meeting you," Aster tells her.

Too embarrassed for words, I scurry to my door, only to come up short when I realize my keys are in my backpack.

A moment later, Aster joins me and looks at my closed door in confusion. "Are we not going inside?"

"M-my key..." I gesture to the bag he holds.

"Ah." He shrugs it off and extends it to me.

I almost drop it in the handoff, then do drop my keys when I pull them out of the front pocket.

Aster quickly kneels to grab them, and when he stands, he's closer than before.

He reaches for my hand. "Everything okay?"

My whole body trembles, and I nearly drop the keys again. "F-f-f-fine."

"Hey, it's okay. She was nice and meant well." He unlocks the door and maneuvers me inside.

Shutting the door, he drops my bag next to it before drawing me to the couch, where he sits and pulls me onto the cushion with him. Without asking, he reaches into my sweatshirt pocket and pulls out my earbuds, slipping them into my ears before pressing my phone into my hands.

The trembling makes it hard, but I open my playlist, and the soft strands of a violin fill my ears, soothing my anxiety.

Aster tugs me down onto his chest, and a rumble drifts from him, his Alpha instinct kicking into gear to soothe an Omega. The vibrations do more for me than the music does, and I melt against him, filling my lungs with his unique scent.

How did I ever get so lucky as to catch this man's attention? And how do I keep it?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**E** ventually, I force myself away from Aster, because if I stay longer, I'll climb right on top of him, and I don't have condoms.

I'm clean, but I don't know if Aster is. We haven't gotten to *that* fun conversation yet. And by the way my heart palpitates at the very idea, I won't be the one to bring it up.

Once on my feet, though, I shuffle in front of Aster, uncertain of what to do next.

He grins up at me and hooks his feet behind mine, asking loudly, "Are you trying to run away?"

Afraid that will give Mrs. Boone the wrong idea, I hurriedly pull my earbuds out. "No, I just... Thank you for... that. You're not the only one who overthinks things."

He sits forward to grasp my hips. "It's okay. There's nothing to be embarrassed by. My younger sister has anxiety issues, so any time you're spiraling, I'm here if you need help."

That sounds entirely too close to my dreams coming true to be real.

I look around at my apartment. "Do you want a tour?"

He springs to his feet. "I'd love one."

"So..." I take a step back and gesture to my couch and TV area. "This is the living room, which you've already seen. The bathroom is next to the front door. I have a washer and dryer in there, too. And behind the living room is my office space." I

hunch my shoulders. “I don’t have guests over, aside from my mom, so I didn’t see a need for a dining table.”

“No judgment here. I don’t have one, either, remember?” He walks over to the u-shaped desk that takes up more space than my living room furniture.

Stacks of sketchbooks cover it, along with multiple jars of pens. A monitor bigger than my TV is mounted on the corner, and multiple drawing tablets sit next to a split keyboard. Two office chairs scoot up to the desk, one of them fresh out of the box and the other an old beast I have yet to figure out how to get rid of.

Aster glances over his shoulder at me with an eager look on his face. “So, this is where the magic happens?”

“If you say so.” Embarrassed by his enthusiasm, I point toward the kitchen. “Water?”

“Sure, thank you.” He pushes some things around, then lifts a piece of paper. “Hey, are you submitting a piece for the mural contest?”

Anxiety shoots through me. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“You should. I’m sure you’d win.” He picks up one of the pads of paper off the corner of my desk near a stack of acrylic paints. “I didn’t know you were a painter, too.”

I walk into the kitchen, which forms an L-shape against the back wall and is open to the rest of the apartment

“Those are practice pieces for the classes I teach at the Omega Youth Center.” I open the cabinet next to the fridge and rise onto my toes to reach the nicer water glasses my mom insisted I would need when I first moved out. “I thought I’d be teaching older students, but they’re all kids.”

“My niece loves painting.” The sound of pages flipping fills the air. “It drives my sister nuts.”

“Why?” I fill the glass from the container of filtered water in the fridge.

“My sister had a designer style her place. All white and pale gray.” He chuckles. “Paint is the last thing she wants in

the house. She set up a studio in the shed.”

Poor kid. I can't imagine living in a place where the furniture is more important than my art. “How many siblings do you have? You mentioned a younger one, too. Are there more?”

“There are four in total. Three older and one younger.” Amusement fills his voice. “I also have an older brother.”

I try to picture what that would be like and can't wrap my mind around it. That must have been so noisy, with so many people in one house. All the bickering and fighting, but also the warmth of never being alone.

“What about you?” he asks.

“No siblings.” I rejoin him in my workspace and hold out the glass. “I'm an only child.”

“That sounds peaceful.” As he takes the water, his fingers slip over mine. “Music was my escape from the chaos.”

“Art was my escape from...” I shake my head. “Never mind.”

“No, don't stop.” He sets the glass on the desk and takes my hands. “I want to know.”

“I'm not sure...” His intense gaze makes my throat lock up, and I look at my desk for a solution. “Do you mind if I draw you?”

“Sure.” Shoulders drooping with disappointment, he grabs his water and heads back to the couch. “Do you want me to strip?”

My heart slams into my ribs. “No!”

“I'm not *that* bad of a model,” he teases as he sits on the couch. “I get regular callbacks, I'll have you know.”

I grab one of my larger drawing pads meant for pencil work and a couple of pencils. “No, but it would be... distracting.”

“Well, that makes me feel a little better.” He lies back on the couch, drops one leg to the floor, and tucks his arm behind

his head. “Is this a warm-up to the real deal, then?”

I wheel my chair over to sit in front of him. “Yeah, something like that.”

His eyes twinkle at me. “Will you show me your bedroom as a reward once you’re done?”

I duck my head. “If you want.”

“Oh, I want,” he purrs.

In my fumbling to open the sketchbook, I nearly rip the cover off and have to take a few deep, calming breaths to settle my nerves before I can begin to draw.

Once I settle into the flow of pencil on paper, my nervousness eases enough to talk. “My dad died when I was one, and my mom never remarried.”

Aster sucks in a breath but remains silent.

“My mom worked two jobs, so I spent a lot of time in daycare. But I’ve always been a runt, and I had a bad stutter, so the kids picked on me a lot. Art was one of the safe places. I could skip going outside with everyone else if I was drawing, and people didn’t expect me to talk.” I focus on the drawing. “It got worse once I started grade school, and there were a couple guys who really went after me. I got beat up pretty bad, and my mom pulled me out of public school. She took on data entry jobs that she could do from home, and she home-schooled me.”

Aster shifts on the couch but still doesn’t speak, which makes it easier for me.

“It stopped the bullying, but being inside all the time, away from people, made it harder when we *did* leave the house.” I work on shading in the folds of his t-shirt. “The world is overwhelming. It’s hard to handle, but I’m working on it.”

“How did you overcome your stutter?” he asks softly.

“I haven’t. Not completely.” I risk meeting his gaze. “I don’t think you missed that.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You know what I mean.”

“I watched videos and worked with a speech therapist online. And there’s a doctor I’m working with in person a few days a week. But when I get overwhelmed or startled, it comes back.” I risk looking at him again. “You overwhelm me.”

“You overwhelm me, too.” When I frown, he lifts a hand. “I’m serious. You think I’d take just anyone to the study room after only a handful of words exchanged?”

“I don’t know.” I duck behind my sketchpad. “Maybe.”

“Well, I wouldn’t,” he says softly. “Yesterday wasn’t the first day I noticed you, Basil.”

“I know that.” I peek back at him. “You’ve been modeling for my class all semester.”

“I noticed you way before that.” He reaches down to grasp the hem of his shirt and pulls it off, then tugs the band from his hair so it falls in soft, warm curls around his bare shoulders. “It was our sophomore year, wasn’t it? When we had Accounting together?”

My breath catches. “You remember me from that class?”

There had been a hundred students in the auditorium, and I had always sat at the back. His hair was shorter back then, his shoulders narrower. He filled out a lot in his junior year, becoming even more beautiful.

Aster holds my gaze. “When someone stares at you with such intensity all the time, it’s hard not to take notice and start looking back.”

Heat rushes to my face, and I duck back behind my drawing pad. Turning to a new page, I start over.

“At first, I waited for you to approach me, but you never did. After that, I tried to approach you a few times.” The low rumble in his voice makes me tremble with the desire to go closer. “You were skittish, though, and always bolted before I got close. And you always had your earbuds in, so catching your attention outside of class was impossible.”

Is he saying he wanted to get to know me all the way back when we were sophomores, and I was too oblivious to notice?

That can't be possible. Can it?

“Signing up to be a model in your class was my last resort,” he says softly. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to stand completely naked in a room of strangers just so I could finally talk to you?”

Swallowing hard, I peek around my sketchpad once more.

Aside from taking his shirt off, he hasn't changed position, and the pose leaves his bare torso on perfect display. A light dusting of hair circles his belly button before vanishing into his pants. Another light strip of hair forms a narrow diamond between his pecs. I had felt their light tickle against me last night, felt the powerful ripple of his muscles as he moved over me.

The drawing pad tumbles from my hands, the pages fanning out.

Gaze on me, that rumble comes again. “You can touch me. You weren't shy about that last night. Your body said exactly what it wanted.”

My hand shakes when I reach out to skim my fingers over his abdomen, and his stomach muscles contract, hard ridges forming. I trace the new play of light and shadows, mesmerized by what a difference the simple change makes. This is what I've been missing from my drawings.

I move higher to trail my fingers through the hair on his chest, noticing the way the coarse strands shimmer in the light. Pockets of darkness carve out his collarbone, and his Adam's apple casts a shadow all of its own. His mouth intrigues me, too, with a dimple beneath his bottom lip before his strong chin juts out.

Breaths quickening, I trace his cheekbone and the graceful sweep of his eyebrows. Without consciously realizing it, I straddle his body, my knees sinking into the cushions on either side of his hips.

He drops his arm from behind his head and cups my ass, drawing my attention to the hard cock nudging my balls.

My eyes jerk to his. “I don't have condoms.”



His lashes sweep down as he looks at my lips. “I do.”

At his words, my stomach clenches with desire, my dick hardening painfully within the tight confines of my pants.

He leans up to kiss the underside of my chin. “Do you want to show me your bedroom now?”

“But I haven’t finished the drawing,” I breathe, my eyes fluttering closed.

“Would you rather we stay on the couch where Mrs. Boone can overhear us?” His tongue sweeps up my jaw. “Because I don’t know about you, but I can’t hear a peep of those shows she promised to play at top volume.”

I moan when he sucks on my ear, then clamp a hand over my mouth in horror. Frantically, I point to the door nearest the kitchen.

Aster chuckles as he stands, lifting me in his arms, and I clamp my legs and arms around him. “She’s a dirty old lady, isn’t she?”

I bury my face against his neck. “Stop talking about Mrs. Boone.”

He strides into my bedroom. “You’ll have to be quieter than you were last night, or you’ll give her a heart attack.”

I tug on his hair. “Shut up.”

“Oh, nice, you have a queen size.” He carries me to my bed and knee walks to the center before setting me down. “I was worried, with how small you are, that you’d have a twin.”

I sprawl out in front of him, painfully hard, but no longer certain I want to do this if there’s a chance Mrs. Boone is listening.

Aster dips a hand into his back pocket and pulls out a strip of condoms. “Now, are you putting the condom on me, or am I?”

Who am I kidding? Of course, I want this.

In answer, I take the condoms from him.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Aster stays until mid-day on Sunday and, somehow, I manage to complete my three drawings.

When I'm not drawing him naked, which keeps leading to jumping him, I show him the comic I publish online. He instantly downloads the app and promises to catch up before I return to university after my Heat.

The more time we spend together, the less his presence overwhelms me, and the more comfortable I become.

When he double-checks that I have my pheromone candles ready and kisses me goodbye at the door, I ache at being left alone in a way I never have before.

I hover at the entrance, watching until he steps onto the elevator and waves goodbye.

“Having sleepovers, are you Basil?” Mr. Webster shouts from behind me.

“Shut up, Mr. Webster,” I mutter before turning to smile at him. “Did you have a good weekend, Mr. Webster?”

“Eh?” He cups a hand over his ear. “What was that?”

“Happy Sunday, Mr. Webster!” I yell before scurrying back inside and locking the door.

I pick up my apartment in an attempt to distract myself from the lingering scent of Aster's pheromones in the living room and kitchen. The dirty bedding stays, though. I should be ashamed of my plans to roll around in it during my Heat, but I'm not even a little sorry.

The only thing that would have helped this Heat more than an Alpha's lingering pheromones is the Alpha himself, and I wasn't bold enough to demand that.

I can only ask so much from my fake boyfriend, after all.

A *ping* comes from the desk, and I drop the pillow I was fluffing to rush over and grab my phone.

Aster: I'm home and already miss you.

A smile spreads over my lips.

Basil: Then you should have taken me with you.

Aster: Or I could have just stayed. Your place is bigger than mine.

My breath catches.

Basil: Oh, I see. You're just tired of your tiny apartment.

Aster: You've caught me. I'm not even allowed to practice at home.

Basil: One of my neighbors is deaf, and the other listens to her TV at high volume.

Aster: Lies. Mrs. Boone never once turned on her TV.

A laugh escapes me. She really hadn't, and I *know* she usually watches her dramas until she goes to bed at eight. Unless I listen to music, I can hear the voices while I work at my desk.

Aster: Did you stock up on food for the week?

His concern wraps around me like one of his hugs. He knows I have food. He double-checked that, too, before he left. I wander over to the kitchen and grab a bag of chips before settling at my desk.

Basil: Not sure. Might starve.

Aster: Should I come back with groceries?

I pause with a chip halfway to my lips. If he comes back, I'll want him to stay. If he stays, then...

Heat rushes through me, and my eyes shift to the drawings of Aster. The real thing would be so much better.

Aster: I can hear you considering it.

His next text comes with a picture of his hand holding his car keys, followed by a question mark.

Breath quickening, I hook my finger under my nape guard and tug it away from the front of my throat.

Aster: If you don't say no, I'm coming back.

I reach for my bottled water and wet my suddenly parched throat. Considering how many times I jumped him, he shouldn't be this tempting. And my body shouldn't be this eager to have him back inside me. But every time we came together, it just made me want him more. It's like a desperate, hungry beast has woken inside me.

Knowing I'll hate myself when my Heat hits, I text him back.

Basil: Practice lots this week so you can play me something pretty when I return to school.

He sends back a sad face.

Aster: Will you be thinking of me?

The nape guard is suddenly too tight, and I fumble with the lock, then pull off the thick band. I drop it onto the drawing of him and send him a picture of it.

Aster: You're making it hard for me. I wanted to take that off you so many times.

And I wanted him to take it off. Every Omega instinct in me wants his teeth in my nape.

Aster: I left something for you. It's under your pillow.

I trip in my rush to reach my bedroom and fling the pillows off the bed. There, I find Aster's undershirt neatly folded and waiting.

I snatch it up and bring it to my nose, inhaling deeply. Aster's pheromones fill my senses, and heat rushes through

me. I moan as I collapse face-first onto my bed, my ass in the air. I should have told him to come back. It was such a bad idea to tell him to stay away.

My phone dings in my hand, and I turn my head far enough to read the new message.

Aster: Are you already enjoying it?

It takes a couple of tries to respond with just one hand.

Basil: Now you're the one making it hard for me.

Aster: That was kind of the point.

Aster: Send me a pic.

My thumb hesitates over the camera button. I've never done something like this, but it's not like I'm naked.

Licking my lips, I send a pic of my face half covered by his shirt.

Aster: Look at you all flushed and needy.

I can practically hear the words spoken in his throaty rumble.

Aster: Roll onto your back for—

An incoming call disrupts the message, and my mom's number appears on the screen.

The sight acts like a bucket of ice water, and I sit up abruptly. I totally forgot about our Sunday night dinner chat.

I quickly text Aster that I have a call before answering. "Hey, Mom."

"What took you so long?" she demands.

I scramble off the bed. "Oh, I was just in the bathroom."

"Is everything okay?" Concern fills her voice. "Did you eat something that didn't agree with you?"

"Nothing like that." I rub my hand over my face as I head back out to my desk. "I just got distracted with work and lost track of time. I'm sorry I wasn't ready when you called."

“I worry about you living all by yourself,” she frets. “Are you sure you don’t want to move back home? I still have your room set up.”

She asks the same thing every time she calls. While I know she means well, it also leaves me feeling like she thinks I’m incapable of taking care of myself. I’ve been doing it for nearly four years now, and between my job on campus and my comic, I cover my own bills. But she still thinks of me as that bullied kid she changed her entire life to protect. I can’t even be mad about it. She loves me, even if it sometimes feels stifling.

“How was your week, Mom?” I ask to steer her in a different direction. “Are you still having trouble with the owner of the massage bar?”

She groans. “Don’t even get me started.”

And then she gets started and continues for over an hour.

I interject in the right places, knowing from experience that she just wants to grumble and doesn’t want suggestions on ways to meet her clients halfway. Not that my suggestions hold weight. I’m not exactly good at communication myself, though I have years of advice from therapy to offer.

Maybe my shyness and anxiety are hereditary.

“Basil, are you listening?” she asks, breaking me out of the trance I fell into.

My mind replays the last few words I heard. “Yes, I already have the days off next week. You don’t have to worry. I know how to track my Heat cycles.”

“And you have your candle on the hot plate?” she asks.

“Yes,” I sigh. “And the backups. And I have plenty of food and water.”

“I wish you’d come home at least during this time of month,” she says. “I worry about you all alone in that apartment. What if something were to happen to you?”

“You’ve met Mrs. Boone and Mr. Webster,” I remind her. “They’re not going to attack me if they catch a little whiff of

my pheromones.”

“You’re making sure to greet all your neighbors, right?” she asks, switching gears. “It’s important to be kind and helpful to those around you, so if you’re ever in need, they’ll be there.”

“Yes, I even helped Mrs. Boone with her grocery cart yesterday,” I tell her, leaving out how Aster helped more than I did. “I know everyone by name.”

It took a lot for me to get there, but it was worth the effort. Knowing the people around me helped me feel safer when I first moved in.

“I’m sorry, I just worry,” she says.

“I know, and I love you,” I assure her.

“How are you doing otherwise?” she asks. “Meet anyone at school? Maybe a nice Beta?”

My gaze shifts to the drawings on my desk. “No, not yet.”

Her sigh fills my ear. “Are you still wearing your earbuds everywhere?”

“No,” I lie.

“Basil—” she begins.

“I need to go, Mom,” I interrupt. “I have a chapter to finish for my comic before next week.”

“Yes, it’s getting late,” she agrees. “I’m so proud of how dedicated you are, Basil. Not many people your age know what they want to do with their lives, but you’re already living your dream.”

My throat tightens. “Thanks, Mom. You always believed in me.”

“Stay safe,” she says. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. Goodnight.”

We disconnect, and I reach for my tablet. I wasn’t lying when I said I have a page to finish for my comic.

My phone pings, and I pick it up to check the new message.

Aster: Still on the phone?

I set my tablet back down. I don't have school or work all week.

The page can wait.



When my Heat hits full force, I light my candle on the hot plate next to the door to muddle my pheromones and stumble back to my room to dig out my dildo and huff Aster's shirt through the worst of it.

During the times that it settles, I force myself out of bed to drink water and eat. I've read stories about how Alphas make Heats easier, seeing to their Omega's needs through the entire three days. Articles say Alphas make Heats safer. There's no risk of getting sick from dehydration and becoming too weak to seek help once the burn of lust fades.

Sometimes, the fever leaves my mind enough for me to work or check my phone, exchanging texts with Aster when he's not in class or busy with practice. And when the fever worsens, I hear his voice in my ear, coaxing me through what to do to ease the need.

On Wednesday, I wake free of the burn of desire.

My body aches as I strip the sheets from my bed to throw them into the wash. My phone tumbles onto the floor, and when I bend to grab it, I find the battery dead.

Shuffling from my bedroom, I plug my phone in at my desk, then shove my bedding into the small washer. While it gets to work, I chug a protein shake and open the windows to air out my apartment.

By the time I shower and dress in fresh clothes, my cell phone has turned back on, and I notice a couple of missed calls from Aster.



I go to check the time on them and discover several outgoing calls that connected over the last three days, several of them lasting for over an hour.

What the fuck?

I scroll down the list, my heart pounding faster as the memory of his voice talking me through my Heat floods back. Was that real? The call log says yes, it most definitely was, and embarrassment fills me that he heard me like that.

Some of the calls happened when he would have been in class. Did he skip just to talk to me?

I check the time, but it's not yet late enough in the day to reach out. I've already disrupted his days enough, and I need a few hours to compose myself.

Distraction is in order, and I pick up my tablet to work on the page I owe my subscribers on Friday.

I'm working on the shading when my phone pings.

Aster: How's it going?

Basil: Clear-headed and fever free.

I hesitate before following it up with a second text

Basil: Thank you for your help.

Aster: I wish I could have helped you more.

I release a shaky breath and take the plunge.

Basil: Maybe next time?

As soon as I hit send, I start to worry I'll scare him off. An Omega asking an Alpha for help during Heat isn't uncommon, but it's new for me and feels like a big deal. Bigger than fake boyfriends.

I frantically type out another message.

Basil: Do you want to get together for dinner?

Aster: Yes.

The speed of the reply leaves me wondering if he sent it before or after my second message went out. Is it yes to

dinner? Or yes to being here next month?

Aster: I have a practice room checked out until six. Late dinner?

Aster: We can meet at a restaurant.

Aster: Or you can come here to draw while I practice, and we can plan from there.

I clutch my phone tight. Aster wants me to come listen to him practice? Dreams really do come true.

Basil: Which practice room? I'll catch the next bus.

## CHAPTER NINE

The university campus in the early evening is a completely different environment than it is during the day.

Instead of students rushing from one class building to another, they lounge on the grass between the walkways in friend clusters or toss balls back and forth. When I work at the student store, I'm here until after night falls, so I don't usually see this side of campus life.

A soccer ball flies toward my head. I duck quickly and walk faster, my eyes fixed on the art building. This time of day is dangerous.

"Hey, Basil!" a familiar voice calls out.

Ignoring Jeremy, I hunch my shoulders and break into a jog. I was so eager to meet up with Aster that I forgot my earbuds at home, and I suddenly feel vulnerable. While I can pretend I didn't hear Jeremy, I'm not great at acting.

"Where's the fire, Basil?" Jeremy yells, and laughter fills the air.

Thankfully, it doesn't sound like he cares enough to come after me, and I make it to the art building out of breath but unaccosted.

I wipe my palms on my sweatshirt and focus on slowing my heart rate as I hurry to the music wing.

Soft strands of a violin pull me down the practice hall, and I stop in front of one of the doors to peer through the narrow

glass pane that runs down the center.

Aster stands in profile, his long hair pulled back in a bun to leave his beautiful features on display. His violin seems to float beneath his chin as he sways to the music, his bow dancing over the strings.

My breath catches just like it did the first time I saw him like this, and I fall in love all over again.

How can I make him mine? And do I even deserve to? He's an amazing musician, with the skill to become a classical stage performer or to join an orchestra. I'm just a comic artist afraid of the public. In what world do we belong together? Am I Icarus, chasing the sun and destined to burn?

Aster glances toward the door, beautiful cerulean eyes meeting mine, and the smile he gives me erases all my doubts.

I don't care if I burn. I'm going to make Aster mine.

He lowers his violin and beckons me into the room with a wave of his bow.

One hand clenched on the strap of my bag for courage, I hustle into the room and right up to him before my bravery wavers.

A faint whiff of his pheromones brings memories flooding back of the last three days, with little flashes of me on the phone, his voice in my ear. Conscious that I rushed here without fully thinking things through, I freeze in front of him with no clue what to do next.

Aster doesn't hesitate and leans down to kiss my cheek. "I have another thirty minutes of practice. Are you okay waiting that long?"

I nod and back away quickly, stumbling over a chair in the process. Catching my balance, I flush and move to the wall in front of Aster to sit on the floor and pull out my art book.

If he noticed my stumble, he doesn't comment as he raises his violin back into place, and *Intruka's Winter Ballad* sings from his strings.

My head jerks up, and I catch his smile before his eyes close, and he focuses on the music.

For a minute, I sit completely captivated by him before I remember I'm supposed to also be working and pull out my pencil case.

The first few pages catch Aster's movements in swooping lines and graceful dips that lead into more detailed, full-figure drawings. Without planning to, I section off my next page into a comic spread. Aster's tall figure fills up the entire left third, followed by a series of panels catching the dip of his head, the sway of his body, and the arc of his bow, with a swirl of musical notes threading throughout.

"I caught up to the current episode of your comic."

The words drift out so softly that, at first, they sound like part of the music.

"I like the bard." The song changes to something I've never heard before that speaks of adventure. "The idea that music is magic. Did you have someone as an inspiration for the character?"

My pencil stills on the drawing, and warmth creeps up my neck. I launched the new comic in my junior year at university. It's a spin-off from the one I started in high school, but the inspiration for it came the year before.

I tried hard not to give in to my desire to make the bardic love interest look exactly like Aster, but as I stare at the page I just drew, I realize I was only fooling myself.

The bard is just Aster in fantasy clothes and even longer hair, with a roguish scar from all his battles.

A violin bow nudges under my chin, tipping up my head.

Aster stands in front of me, his gaze intent. "Are you the little elf who runs away?"

My pulse leaps, and I lick my lips. "I'm trying to be better."

"The cave scene after the thunderstorm was especially good." The bow moves down my chest. "Where do you get

your inspiration from? I know it wasn't from real life."

Heat sweeps through me at the mention of one of my more risqué scenes. A lot of it was implied because the platform has rules, but there are fully detailed pages on my website. Did Aster become a subscriber while I was fuzzed out by my Heat?

The idea of him studying those erotic images sends fire sizzling through me.

Heart pounding, I set the art book aside and rise up onto my knees in front of him. "My imagination is good, but real-life experience would make it better."

His nostrils flare, and the faint scent of his pheromones thickens in the confined space of the music room.

My mouth waters and my hands tremble as I reach for the front of his pants. I've imagined so many times what it would feel like to take him into my mouth and feel his silky weight on my tongue. We're far enough away from the door that we're hidden from anyone passing by, and this late in the day, it's doubtful anyone checked out the room after him.

When I fumble with his button, though, Aster's hand on mine stops me.

Surprised and a little shocked at the rejection, I look up at him. "Y-you don't want..."

"Oh, no, honey, don't lose your confidence." Aster crouches in front of me. "I'm so incredibly turned on that you want to do that despite where we are." Leaning in, he inhales deeply. "But your Heat is barely over, and if you start that now, I'm going to want to go further, and that's not something we should risk."

I glance at my bag. "I brought the c-condoms."

"Condoms can break, and we're too young to risk starting a family." He leans in to kiss me gently, but pulls back before it can turn into more. "We can wait until Friday, right? It's only a couple of days away."

Logically, I know he's right. I shouldn't even be out of the house today, in case this was a false lull and my Heat returns.

But my body is primed for an Alpha right now. With the one I want standing in front of me, it's hard to listen to reason and not feel like this is a rejection.

“Look at you.” His hands slip down my throat, stroking the bare skin beneath my hoodie. “You didn't even put your nape guard on before coming here.”

My hand lifts to my neck to discover he's right. I must have left it on the desk at my apartment. In my rush to meet up with Aster, it never crossed my mind to grab it.

Worry pinches his brows. “I shouldn't have been so selfish and asked you to come out tonight. I'll take you back.”

I grip his hands, pressing them against my neck. “What about dinner?”

Uncertainty darkens his eyes. “I should get you home.”

“We can eat there,” I suggest.

His lips quirk. “Are you trying to test my resolve? Do you have any idea how hard it was not to come to your place that first night you called?”

I blush and look down. “We can just stop by to get my nape guard. There's a pizza parlor nearby.”

He hesitates a moment longer before he nods. “Okay, but I'm staying in the car. If I walk into your apartment right after your Heat, there's no way I'll leave again, and I want to go on a date with you.”

I peek up at him through my lashes. “You do?”

“Of course, I do.” His fingers slip under my jaw and tip my face up to him. “We've gone about things a little backward. I'm not playing the roll of boyfriend very well.”

Instead of feeling cherished, my stomach falls at the reminder that he's just pretending to be my boyfriend. I thought faking it until it was real was a good idea, but the more time I spend with Aster, the more I realize this will hurt when it ends. ?>

And it *will* end. As much as I want to think otherwise, there's no way someone like him would choose someone like me long-term.

"Hey, are you okay?" He cups my chin and presses the back of his hand against my forehead. "You don't feel feverish, but maybe this was too much for you today?"

"No, I'm good." I move away from his touch to gather my art book and stow it back in my bag. "I haven't eaten much since the weekend, and I'm starving."

His hand brushes my back. "Okay, just don't push yourself."

When I stand, he cups my elbow and doesn't move back to his violin case until he's sure I'm steady. His concern gives me hope but also makes the plummeting sensation in my stomach worse.

It was so much easier to just love him from a distance. I never had any expectations when he was a dream.

But now that I'm getting to know him on a level that's not just my imagination, it's making me greedy to have more and more.

I'm falling even harder for Aster Woods, and I'm not sure where I'll land.



## CHAPTER TEN

Aster stops at the curb in front of my apartment and leaves the engine running, his hands gripping the steering wheel in a clear sign that he plans to stick to his guns on the *No Visiting Basil's Abode* idea.

I'm just glad he doesn't plan to stuff me back in my apartment until tomorrow, so I hustle up to my place, ditch my school bag, grab my nape guard, and race back downstairs.

When I burst back outside, part of me expects him to be gone, but he still idles a few cars down from the entrance, with his lights flashing since he's in the tow-away zone.

I fall into the passenger seat, out of breath and overly warm from exertion.

Aster laughs and flicks on his blinker. "Where to?"

Wheezing, I point down the street the way we're already pointed. If not for the towing law, we could have walked from here. But the pizza parlor shares a parking garage with the small neighborhood grocery store.

While he drives, I struggle out of my oversized sweatshirt and direct the vent at my hot face.

"You didn't have to run, you know." Aster spots the pizza parlor sign and slows, flicking on his blinker for the parking garage. "I wasn't going to leave without you."

"The thought never crossed my mind," I lie.

He casts me a suspicious look from the corner of his eye, then does a double take. "Didn't you go up to grab your nape

guard?”

I lift the hand still buried in my sweatshirt to wave the strap of black leather in the air.

He pulls into an open parking spot at the back of the garage and shuts off the engine before turning in his seat and taking the nape guard from me. “You really did think I was going to leave.”

“You were in the tow-away zone,” I protest, not wanting to lie again.

He purses his lips, unconvinced but willing to let it go. “Lean closer.”

I shove my sweatshirt onto the floor and unbuckle my seatbelt, then kneel up on my seat to lean over the center console. The new position brings me into Aster’s personal space, a place I’m happy to occupy.

His pupils dilate, and his nostrils flair as he breathes me in. “Damn, you smell good. Did you not even shower before coming out?”

“I showered.” He smells good, too. Intoxicating, even. My eyes drop to his full lips, and I grip his shoulder for balance as I lean even closer.

“Basil...” His sigh caresses my lips. “We’re in a public parking lot.”

“We’re in the back.” I close the distance, my lips brushing his. “And kissing isn’t illegal.”

With a groan, he cups the back of my head and pulls me in, his mouth opening under mine. A gasp escapes me at the sudden aggression, and he swallows my breath before his tongue sweeps past my lips.

A hungry rumble comes from him, and he grabs the back of my pants, hauling me over the center divide and planting me in his lap. The tight space barely fits me, and the steering wheel digs into my back. I don’t care about the discomfort, though, as I wrap my arms around his neck, finally getting a taste of what I missed out on during my Heat.

Aster pulls back long before I want him to, his heavy breaths fogging the windows. “You’re really testing my resolve, aren’t you?”

I shift and the hard length of his cock against my thigh lends me courage. “You said I could touch you when I want to.”

“That I did.” He reaches behind me, and the cool band of my nape guard encircles my neck. “But I also said I want to take you on a date, and I have bigger aspirations than a parking lot.”

“Parking lots are sexy.” I lean forward to nibble his bottom lip, then let out a whine of protest when the nape guard cinches tight.

“No fussing. This keeps you safe.” He slips two fingers beneath to make sure it’s not choking me before snapping the lock in place. “There we go. All protected again.”

But I don’t want to be protected from Aster. How soon is too soon to ask for more from him? To ask to date for real? To ask for his Mark? If he puts his Mark on me, I won’t have to worry about people like Jeremy. I’ll be off the market to all Alphas except for Aster.

His thumb sweeps over the lock. “I should get you a better one of these? One with a combination at least.”

“Takes too long to take off.” I reach up, press the button under his fingers, and the nape guard loosens. “See? Easy peasy.”

“Too easy peasy.” Frowning, he clicks it back together. “Definitely getting you a better one.”

One that says his name on it? I’ve seen some Omegas with those. It’s like a promise to future Marking. I’d wear one with Aster’s name on it. Hell, I’d change my whole wardrobe and ditch my bulky sweatshirts just to make sure everyone could *see* that my nape guard had his name on it.

Aster glances around at the fogged-up windows. “Let’s get out of here before a security guard comes to see what we’re up to.”

I don't want to move from his lap, but the grumble of my stomach reminds me I need food for fuel, so I reluctantly agree.

When Aster opens his door, I half-fall, half-climb out on his side of the car, and a cold blast of air cuts through my thermal shirt. Wrapped in Aster's arms and surrounded by his increased body heat, I forgot what a blustery day it is.

I hug my arms around myself as I wait for Aster to join me. He rummages around in the car for a second before sliding out, my sweatshirt in his hands.

He shakes it out and pops it over my head. "Here we go. Need to keep you warm. You get cold easily, right? You're always bundled up, even in summer."

His action warms me more than my sweatshirt, and I concentrate on threading my arms through the sleeves to stop them from wrapping around him again.

He locks up the car and catches my hand. "Ready, my timid elf?"

I pause mid-step to gape up at him. "No, please don't start that."

He grins down at me. "Your comic character even looks like you."

I glare. "It's a cartoon elf."

"A very cute cartoon elf." He reaches out to caress the shell of my ear. "You'd look adorable with pointy ears."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him I have a pair, but I swallow the urge. I only bought them for drawing reference, and I'm not going to wear them for him. Unless he's into that sort of thing? Maybe I should tell him? Or just show him?

My stomach growls, and Aster leans down to press his ear against my belly. "What was that? Fill you with cheese pizza?"

I giggle, then duck my head when his antics draw the attention of an elderly couple on the way to their car.

"Stop it," I hiss.

Without rising, he turns his head to grin up at me. “What was that? You prefer pepperoni?”

I bite my lip for a second before I shake my head.

Curiosity lights his eyes. “Veggie?”

I shake my head again.

He straightens with a gasp. “Say it ain’t so. Pineapple?”

I point to the parking lot exit. “Should I just walk home from here?”

He widens his eyes at me. “At least say you like Canadian bacon on it.”

“Just the fruit.” I walk backward toward the exit. “I’ll just see myself out.”

He throws back his head and sighs before he jogs to catch up to me. “I will overlook this atrocity.”

“How magnanimous of you,” I say drily.

A startled laugh bursts from him, and he leans over to see my face. “Was that sarcasm? Did Basil Bark just mock me?”

I hunch my shoulders. “Maybe?”

“Oh, no, you don’t. No turtling up.” He takes a step backward to wrap his arms around me, lifting me from my feet in a big hug. “Hit me again. I’ve seen how snarky your comics are. I can take it.”

But can I dish it? It’s easy when it’s just me and the drawings. Quite another thing when it’s Aster, who I already struggle to speak in full sentences around.

It’s getting easier, though.

He nuzzles my cheek from behind. “Not ready yet?”

I shake my head.

His lips move to my ear. “Soon, then. You can be quite bossy, too. Did you know?”

Bossy? Me?

I've never bossed anyone around in my life. Unless he's referring to... What the hell did I say to him during my Heat?

"Hey, is that Aster?" a loud voice calls out.

At the sound of Jeremy's voice, I stiffen at the same time Aster does. What's he doing here? I've never seen him outside of campus before. This neighborhood is my safe place.

Aster sets me down before moving to stand in front of me. "What do you want?"

"Don't be so cold." Jeremy's voice nears. "Is that little Basil with you? Aren't you tired of him yet?"

Chuckles echo through the parking garage. He must be with those two guys he always hangs out with.

"We're in the middle of something." Aster nudges me to start walking toward the entrance to the pizza parlor. "If you don't have anything to say, we'll be leaving."

"Why not ditch the dud and come with us instead?" Jeremy says. "With the new Omega Youth Center nearby, this has turned into a prime pick-up place."

My hands curl into fists, and I lurch out from behind Aster's broad back. "Stay away from them, Jeremy."

Glee fills the gaze that lands on me. "There he is, pretending he has a backbone."

Aster shoves me behind his back once more.

"What's wrong with you, dude?" Jeremy asks. "Haven't you already nailed him? There are way too many fish in the sea to stick with your first catch. Time to cast him free."

"I have nothing to say to you." Turning, Aster's hand on my back urges me into motion. "Let's go."

"You'll get tired of fucking him soon!" Jeremy yells after us. "Someone like Basil can't hold anyone's interest for long!"

The back of my neck heats with shameful embarrassment.

"Don't listen to him." Aster opens the door to the pizza parlor for me. "Let's just enjoy our evening, okay?"

I nod, but Jeremy's voice still rings in my ears. How *can* someone like me hope to hold the interest of someone like *Aster*? It feels impossible.

Didn't he already turn me down twice today? I was a virgin, so I know I'm nothing special in bed.

What if he's already bored, and this whole date thing is just his excuse not to have to sleep with me again?

Is our fake relationship already ending before I had a chance to make it real?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I nside the pizza parlor, Aster directs me to a table in the corner and pulls out a chair for me to sit on before taking the one across from me.

The smile he gives me doesn't reach his eyes as he grabs the paper menus wedged between the Parmesan cheese and red pepper flakes. "Do we even need to see what the options are? Or do you already know what you want?"

I reach across the table to take one. "Looking is still good."

"What's your favorite appetizer? Salad or more bread?" His eyes flick to the door behind me, and the menu crinkles in his hands.

When I twist to look, Jeremy and his friends didn't follow us inside, and I turn back to Aster. "If I have to ignore him, so do you."

He rubs the back of his neck. "Sorry, that guy just really gets to me."

"Me, too." I stare down at the menu without seeing it. "He's been picking on me since we were freshmen."

"He's a user and a bully."

The anger behind the words draws my gaze back up. "What did he do to you?"

Aster shrugs. "Just the same thing that always happens."

I set down my menu. "Yeah?"



The muscle in Aster's jaw jumps as he clenches and unclenches his teeth before he finally sets his menu down. "You don't know who my family is, do you?"

Confused, I shake my head. "Should I?"

"Most people do. It's usually the reason people approach me," he says.

I remember how he said he kept waiting for me to approach him. At the time, I thought it was because of all the lusty stares I was throwing his way, but it sounds like there's more to it.

"Are they famous?" I ask, confused why he would be at our university if they are.

"My brother is Linden Woods." At my blank stare, he adds, "The famous pianist."

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I don't recognize the name."

A smile spreads over his face. "Don't let him hear you say that. It would crush his ego."

"Maybe his ego needs some crushing," I say, then slap a hand over my mouth. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. It's true." Aster sits back and laughs. "But most people in my department knew who my brother was before I started my freshman year, and they thought if they got in good with me, it would lead to them getting in good with my famous brother. It doesn't hurt that my family is well off, either. Growing up, I had to figure out pretty fast how to tell if people were there because they wanted handouts or because they cared. Turns out more people want handouts than real friendship."

"I'm so sorry, Aster." I reach out to touch his hand. "No one should have to learn that lesson."

His thumb sweeps out to cover my fingers. "Thank you."

"Jeremy is one of those who came around looking for handouts?" I guess.

“Yeah.” His thumb absently rubs back and forth over my knuckles. “He approached me like there was this whole club for Alphas, with the goal of looking out for each other. Really, they just wanted to party and have me pick up the bill.”

Anger rises on his behalf. “Assholes.”

His expression softens. “That’s adorable. Say it again.”

I blush. “Shut up.”

“No. Really.” He leans across the table. “It’s cute when you swear.”

I pick up my menu and flap it at him. “How about chicken wings?”

“That’s an odd way of saying asshole.” When I flap my menu at him again, he leans back and grabs his menu. “Chicken wings, huh? Are you a buffalo wing kind of guy?”

This feels like a trap, especially with my love of fruit on pizza already counting against me, and I hide behind my menu. “Actually, let’s get breadsticks.”

Breadsticks are safe.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Aster plucks the menu from my hands. “You brought up wings. There’s no take backs.”

I scoot low in my chair, and my shoes bump against his under the table. Before I can pull back, he hooks his feet around mine, and he lifts a challenging eyebrow.

Over the weekend we spent together, we ate pasta, mac and cheese, and French toast, none of which are spicy. Is Aster someone who likes spice?

“Yes, to buffalo?” I venture, then when his expression doesn’t change, I rush to add, “But I like plain, too.”

His other eyebrow lifts. “What about blue cheese?”

A whine of protest catches in my throat. This is too much. Why can’t he just say what he likes, and I can go along with it?

Anxiety builds, and my voice cracks when I say, “Ranch?”

He slides the menus back where they belong. “One order of buffalo wings with ranch sauce and a pineapple pizza coming up. You want lemon-lime soda, right?”

I melt a little that he remembered and nod.

“Be right back.” He stands and walks to the counter to place our order.

He pays, then takes the plastic triangle and our drink glasses from the cashier and walks to the soda station to fill our cups.

His tall figure and the confident way he carries himself draw my gaze, and I’m not the only one watching. A pair of girls at a table near the soda station giggle and sigh as they stare. By the nape guards they wear, they’re both Omegas. They nudge each other before the darker-haired one chugs her drink and rises to approach Aster under the pretense of getting a refill.

He turns, full glasses in hand, and comes up short to find her right behind him. He lifts our sodas to prevent them from knocking into her and moves to step around just as she shuffles in the same direction.

Her giggle carries across the pizza parlor, and she cocks one hip to the side, sweeping her hair to the side to make her nape guard more apparent.

Possessiveness shoots through me. That’s *my* Alpha.

Leaping to my feet, I cross the restaurant, use my people-dodging skills to smoothly maneuver around the girl and slide between them.

I put my back to her and look up at Aster. “Hey, let me help you carry those.”

The girl takes a step back. “Excuse me? We were talking.”

Ignoring her, Aster passes me the cup with clear soda and leans down to kiss my cheek. “Thank you, darling.”

Cheeks heating, I nod and scurry back to the table, setting my soda down before I spill it.

Aster comes up behind me, placing his cup beside mine before he draws me closer. “Jealousy looks good on you.”

Mortified, I slap my hands over my face. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“I love that you did that.” He rubs his cheek on top of my head. “Do that anytime you want.”

“People are staring.” I reach up to grip his arms, though I don’t try to push them away.

“Does it bother you? I’m sorry.” He hugs me for a second longer before releasing me.

“It’s not that it bothers me.” I sit in my chair and glance around the crowded restaurant. The girls are whispering while they look our way. “It can just be overwhelming.”

He reaches across the table to grasp my hand. “Do you want to get our order to go?”

I perk up. “Can we take it back to my place?”

He gives me a stern look. “Nice try.”

Dejected, I slump in my chair. “It’s better to eat our food hot in the restaurant.”

I glance around again and notice that he placed me in the seat that faces the wall. It almost feels like we’re here alone. Now if only everyone else would shut up.

He squeezes my hand. “Just focus on me.”

I meet his soft gaze, and the voices around us fade into the background.

His thumb strokes the back of my hand. “There we go. You’re doing good.”

“I…” I glance down at our clasped hands. “This isn’t something I’ve done before.”

“What? Eat in a pizza parlor?” he teases.

“Yes.” I look back up. “My mom and I are a lot alike. We always had takeout or delivery.”

His smile slips away. “Coming to university must have been a huge culture shock for you.”

“It was, but it’s a shock I needed, and art classes aren’t easy to take online. You probably know about that.” A server comes with our wings, and I pull back from Aster to make room on the table, waiting until he leaves. “How did you get into playing the violin? Was it because of your brother?”

“Yes, and no.” Aster sets one of the small serving plates in front of me. “I’d love to say I was a prodigy just like him, or that I found the passion on my own. That’s what people expect, and it’s far more exciting than the reality.”

I move a couple of saucy wings onto my plate and spoon on a dollop of ranch dressing. “Being passionate about something is enough. You don’t need a grand story to go along with it.”

Aster pauses with a wing over his plate before he sets it down and grins at me. “You really mean that.”

Confused, I frown. “Why wouldn’t I?”

He shakes his head. “My parents wanted all of us to be well-rounded. And Linden just made it worse. Everyone had to pick an instrument to learn. We also took dance and art classes. And before you ask, no, you cannot see my sketchbooks, Oh Master of Art.”

I struggle to imagine Aster failing at drawing. “They can’t be that bad.”

“Don’t try reverse psychology on me.” He lifts one of the wings and pops the whole thing into his mouth, pulling clean bones back out. “I won’t show them to you just to prove they *are* that bad.”

I stare in fascinated horror at the bones he tosses onto his plate. How in the world... Picking up a wing, I turn it one way, then the other, trying to figure out the trick.

“It takes practice,” Aster tells me. “Just eat like you normally do, and we can get some wings to go this weekend for you to practice on.”

That brings all sorts of images to my mind. It takes some effort to lift the wing to my mouth and nibble on one side.

“The first instrument I picked was a trumpet. You see, I really didn’t want to learn to play music. I already knew I didn’t have Linden’s gift, and neither did my three older sisters.” He widens his eyes at me. “Do you have any idea how many recitals I had to sit through?”

Laughing, I drop my food back to the plate. “That must have been horrible.”

“You have no idea.” He cleans off another wing. “Now, my parents wanted me to learn an instrument, but they’d already been through a tuba disaster, so they chose the violin for me instead. And I *hated* it.”

I lean forward, only half paying attention as I eat my half of the appetizer. Having seen the passion with which Aster plays, it’s hard to imagine a time he hated the violin.

“I resisted learning the music, but my teacher was persistent, and despite my best effort, the lessons sunk in.” He shakes his head with a look of resignation. “It was a downward slide from there. Within the year, I was skipping classes to practice, and my parents threatened to take away my violin if I didn’t keep my grades up.”

“My mom took my tablet away once.” I lick the sauce off my fingers. “I was so mad.”

He laughs with appreciation. “Yeah, I wasn’t thrilled, either, but I figured out a schedule. Luckily, they didn’t actually take my violin away, and the rest is history.”

“How did you end up here?” I grab a napkin. “Surely you could have gone to a place that specialized in music.”

“I wanted to study under T. Hendrick Christiansen.” Aster stacks our plates into the appetizer basket just as the server returns with a half-pineapple and half-sausage pizza. “He doesn’t teach private classes.”

Aster lifts the empty appetizer plate to clear the spot, then passes it to the server once his hands are empty. “I had to

audition twice before I got in, but it's been worth it. He's an amazing teacher."

I slide a piece of pineapple pizza onto my new plate. "Tell me about it?"

We finish the pizza and order cinnamon sticks, staying at the restaurant until close to nine o'clock, and the more I learn about Aster, the harder I fall for him.

When we leave, Aster walks me home.

At my apartment door, he pulls me into a hug. "I want to kiss you so bad."

"You can," I say against his chest, yearning for a continuation of what we started in the car before Jeremy made me doubt my desirability.

"Not this close to your bed." Aster rubs his cheek against the top of my head, something I'm coming to associate with him resisting doing other things. "Get a good night's sleep."

"I will," I lie, knowing I'll be up all night thinking of him.

With a final squeeze, he releases me and steps back. "Lock your door."

"I will," I say, being truthful this time.

He makes a shooing motion, so I unlock my door and step inside, shutting it behind me.

For the first time since moving in, my apartment feels too big.

I kick off my shoes and brush my teeth before heading to my bedroom, where I burrow under the comforter. I should change into pajamas, but Aster's scent still lingers on my clothes, and I'm loathe to give it up.

Grabbing my pillow, I hug it against my chest.

Tonight I went on my first date and learned that the man I've crushed on since our sophomore year is even more wonderful than I knew. He's amazing and apparently rich. Or at least from a family who can afford to give six children the

best education possible. And he seems genuinely interested in me.

My phone vibrates, and I dig beneath the pillow to pull it out of my pocket, the screen blinding me in the darkness under my blanket.

Aster: Made it home. Miss you already.

I lift my phone and type out a quick response.

Basil: You should have stayed.

Aster: You know why I couldn't.

Basil: I'm cold.

Aster: I'll warm you up on Friday, sweet Basil.

Basil: Fine, I'll be patient. Sweet dreams.

Aster: Dream of me.

When I close the chat, I see a dozen missed calls from my mom.

Ugh, I forgot to call her when my Heat ended. At what age do I get to stop checking in with her every month to let her know I passed yet another uneventful Heat cycle?

It's late, but my mom is a night owl like me, so I call her. Otherwise, she'll stay up worrying.

"Basil!" she answers on the first ring. "I was just about to drive over to check on you! Is everything okay?"

"Yes, Mom, everything's fine, just like always." I push the blanket off my head to stare up at the ceiling. "Sorry I didn't call earlier. I went out with a friend for dinner."

"Tonight?" Her voice rises an octave. "What were you thinking? You could have been attacked by an Alpha!"

"My Heat was over," I assure her. "I was perfectly safe."

"Who's this friend?" she demands. "Last time we talked, you said you hadn't made any yet."

"Just someone from my life drawing class," I hedge.

It's not a complete lie. Aster is a model in my class.



“Not an Alpha, right?” she presses.

“What if it was?” I demand, annoyed.

“Don’t take that tone with me, young man,” she snaps.

“Sorry, ma’am,” I mumble.

She sighs. “You know what can happen if you’re around an Alpha during this sensitive time. They’re only after one thing when it comes to Omegas. If you could just find yourself a nice Beta, I’d feel so much better about you living on your own.”

“I’m fine, Mom,” I whisper, tired of having this conversation again. “I’ve been living on my own for nearly four years. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can.” She sighs again. “But you’ll always be my little boy, and I’ll always worry about you.”

“Worry, but also try to have some faith in me, too.” I rub a hand over my eyes. “I’m trying so hard to build confidence, but it’s hard when—” I cut off before I say something that will hurt her. “It’s just hard, but I’m going to keep trying, so you try to have confidence in me, too, okay?”

“I will,” she promises. “Love you, Basil.”

“Love you, Mom.” I hang up, and Aster’s last message pops back up.

Aster: Dream of me.

I pat around under the comforter to find his shirt and hug it along with the pillow.

If I sleep, I hope I’ll see him there.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**O**n Thursday, I linger after class, packing my bag slowly so I can speak to Mr. Moore without my classmates listening in.

I was both disappointed and relieved that Aster wasn't our model today, since I didn't know how to face him in class after everything we've done and the promises we made about tomorrow night.

As I slip my pencil case into my bag, I discreetly check my phone.

I texted Aster between classes earlier, but he hasn't responded yet. I was hoping to see him before I reported to the Youth Center for my one evening lesson a week. I hope nothing's wrong.

The last student leaves, and I grab the tube with my makeup pieces off the floor before heading to Mr. Moore's desk.

He looks up at me in surprise. "What can I do for you, Basil?"

I hold out the tube. "My three drawings, sir."

His lips purse. "You were able to find a model and complete them during your monthly leave from classes?"

I shuffle from foot to foot, my tube still outstretched. "Aster Woods was able to help me last weekend."

"Ah." He takes the tube from me and opens it to pull out the three drawings inside. As he spreads them out over his

desk, his eyebrows climb. “I see.”

I glance down at Aster’s nude body, reclined on my sofa, and heat creeps up my neck. When I drew them, I hadn’t considered what story they might convey to my teacher, but now realize they’re rather telling, since I also included some rough sketching of my apartment around him.

“H-he... I...”

Mr. Moore raises a hand. “I’m not judging what you do outside of class. University is a time for exploration in all aspects of life, and I’m glad to see you connecting with your peers.”

He turns to the next drawing, one of Aster leaning against my kitchen counter, his head bowed. At the time, I was proud of how I caught the play of shadows over his face and how his hair held dimension, but now all I see is the hungry look in his gaze as he stares up from the paper.

“This is a good use of light and shadow, as well as an excellent display of emotion.” Mr. Moore turns to the last drawing of Aster lounging half asleep in my bed, the sheets ruffled around him and his body fully relaxed. “Good display of varying levels of light and shadow. And your anatomy has improved significantly since the beginning of the semester. Do you have your art book with you?”

I fumble to pull it from my school bag and nearly drop it on his desk in my rush to hand it over.

He takes it and opens to the front, where sketches from the mall and the quad fills the pages. He flips through it quickly, pausing at random. “Do you know why we make you do these?”

“Practice?” I say.

“There’s that, but it’s also building muscle memory for different poses at different angles.” He pauses on one of the pages that I paneled out into a comic spread and looks up at me. “I’ve been a fan of your comic since you launched the new series, and went back to read the original.”

I stare at him with wide eyes. “You are?”

“I enjoy your art style and method of storytelling. It’s been a pleasure to watch your skill evolve over the years.” He flips back to the beginning of the art book, which is only a month old. “Here, you’ve gotten bored with head-on drawings and started playing with different angles and heights.”

He flips forward another dozen pages. “And here, you’ve started to understand how angles and heights work proportionately.”

He flips forward to the panels I drew of Aster playing the violin while I sat on the floor. “And here you’ve displayed a wonderful use of angle and the play of light and shadow to add depth and drama. We see a passionate musician, immersed in his work, drawn at an angle of worship.”

I blush at his blunt assessment of how I look at Aster.

“This is why we make all students take Life Drawing, even when it’s not what you ultimately want to do. Cartoons are imitations of life. Once you understand how to draw what’s real, you can bend it in whatever way you desire and still make it believable to your audience.” He closes the book and passes it back to me. “Do a review of your comic from three months ago to today. I bet you’ll see a big improvement.”

“I will.” I tuck the art book back into my bag. “Thank you, sir.”

He smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “It’s a pleasure to have you in class, Basil, even if you hate the subject. Not every student who comes through my door has a passion for art, but you do, and I can’t wait to see where it takes you.”

“Thank you, sir.” I clutch the strap on my bag. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“You, too, Basil,” he says as I head for the door. “And if you haven’t already, send in a submission for the art festival. I’d love to see what idea you come up with!”

In a daze, I leave the art building and drift across campus to the bus stop, his words circling in my mind the entire way.

Only after I find a seat on the bus do I realize I didn't need my earbuds, and I didn't time how long it took to get from one location to the next.

I stare out the window at the city whizzing by. All of this is thanks to Aster.

Digging out my phone, I open our text thread.

The message I sent early still sits unread, and I worry about sending another and looking too clingy. But one more can't hurt, right?

Basil: Mr. Moore accepted the makeup pieces and praised me. Thank you for your help.

As soon as I hit send, I lock the screen and stow the phone back in my bag before I'm tempted to send more. I want to tell him how the panels I drew of him playing received compliments, and how Mr. Moore reads my comic.

But all that can wait until I see him in person.

When the bus stops next to the youth center, I hustle off and jog through the front doors to stow my stuff in a staff locker before heading for the art room.

A couple of students are already there, setting up easels, and they call out greetings when I enter.

I join them, lining the wooden frames up in a circle. There are fewer students in my evening class than kids in my afternoon class, but the ones who come on Thursdays have a genuine interest in drawing. After Mr. Moore's words, I'm eager to help grow their passion.

"You don't have to come in with me," a voice hisses from the open doorway.

Curious, I walk over to peer out into the hall. The kid I met last time, Joshua, stands near the door, his back to me as he talks to the older man I remember being with him before.

The man's eyes flick to me, giving me a brief once over. I've seen that assessing look from cops, but the smile he offers softens his stern expression.

Joshua spins on his heel, his face scrunched up with displeasure.

Nerves flutter in my stomach, but I force a welcoming smile. “I’m glad you decided to join us. Come on in.”

“You heard the teach.” He makes a shooping motion at the older man. “Off you go. I’ll be done in an hour.”

The man crosses his arms over his chest and stares down at the kid.

Joshua huffs. “Come on. I don’t need that look from you *here* of all places.”

Uncertain of what’s going on, I venture farther out into the hall. “If your dad wants to join, he’s welcome. There are more than enough seats.”

“Dad?” Joshua barks out a laugh. “See what happens when you hover, Sean? If you’re so eager to hang around, find a cooking class so you can impress Carrie with your skills.”

“Go on inside,” he says gruffly. “I’ll be waiting right outside the door if you need me.”

Joshua’s shoulders hunch, but he doesn’t insist the older man leave, making me think there’s a reason that Sean insists on staying. “Fine, but don’t whine on the way home about how bored you were.”

Sean reaches out and ruffles his dark hair. “Be good, kiddo.”

“Eighteen.” Joshua grinds out through clenched teeth. “I’m eighteen. Not a kid anymore.”

Sean makes a noncommittal sound before nudging Joshua into the room.

Suddenly alone with the man, I drop my eyes. “There’s a break room down the hall within shouting distance, if you want somewhere more comfortable to sit.”

“I appreciate that. Thanks.” A hand appears in my line of sight. “My name’s Sean. I’m a Beta and a security guard. I work with the Omega Outreach Program.”

“Basil Bark. Omega and a volunteer.” Intimidated now, I slowly reach out to shake and find his grip firm but not dominating. “Should I know why Joshua needs a security guard?”

After three perfunctory pumps, Sean releases my hand. “Joshua is one of our special cases. Kid needs socializing in the worst way, but it takes a crowbar to get him out of the foster home. This place is a godsend.”

Understanding dawns. The OOP is one of those places whispered about among Omegas, a safe haven to go to if the place we grew up becomes dangerous or unwelcoming after our second genders come out. Thankfully, I’ve never had to use their services. Their involvement in the youth center weighed heavily into my decision to volunteer here.

“I promise I’ll keep an eye on him,” I reassure Sean. “The class is small, and everyone is nice.”

“I appreciate it.” He glances down the hall. “Does this break room have snacks?”

“There’s a vending machine.” I point toward it. “Just past the free clinic.”

Sean rubs his stomach. “I think I’ll just meander down that way.”

With a nod, he heads off, and I return to the classroom.

Joshua perches in front of the easel closest to the door, his knees drawn up and his arms wrapped around his legs.

He peeks up at me as I near. “Did he tell you to babysit me?”

I shake my head. “Nope. He asked where the snacks were.”

“Really?” Joshua uncurls and leaps off his seat to go peer out into the hall. “Well, I’ll be damned. He really left.”

“He didn’t go far,” I tell him.

“Baby steps.” Joshua returns to his seat and fiddles with the tray of paints. “So, how does this work?”

“The first fifteen minutes are a lesson, then the rest of the hour is for you to practice.” A few more students trickle in and take their seats. “I’ll move through the class, answering any questions that come up.”

He picks up one of the brushes. “Can I ask a question now?”

I check the clock. “Sure, if it’s a fast one.”

He points the paintbrush at the tray of paints. “How do these work? They’re all dried up.”

Ah, so we have a beginner. “Stick around, and I’ll show you.”



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Friday rolls around and there's still no response from Aster to either of my texts, the doubt starts to creep back in.

I try to ignore it, but focusing on my morning classes is impossible. The bad thing about having a creative mind is that it can come up with hundreds of reasons for him to suddenly drop out of contact, ranging from a deadly car accident to him already being bored and ghosting me.

It takes the other students moving around me to jar me out of the hellscape of my thoughts. The notebook on my desk holds a few squiggled notes I can't read, and none of today's lesson penetrated the wall of negativity building inside of me.

Stuffing my notebook into my bag, I toss the strap over my shoulder and head out. If I didn't feel guilty canceling last minute, I'd call in sick at the youth center. But I already missed classes due to my Heat, and those kids don't deserve me crapping out on them just because Aster maybe-probably crapped out on me.

I'm the last person to run out of the classroom, and the stairwell echoes as I pound down toward the ground floor. There's a small wait before the bus arrives, but I like to be there early just in case they run ahead of schedule.

As I reach the bottom, eyes on the door, a large figure steps into my path.

I stumble, barely avoiding slamming right into Jeremy, and move to go around him. "I don't have time for you."

“You never have time for me.” He catches my hood, and my sweatshirt nearly chokes me. “You can spare a few minutes.”

“No.” Grasping my collar, I twist out of his hold. “Just leave me alone.”

His lips curl into an ugly snarl. “You know, any Omega at this school would be begging for my attention.”

“Then go let them beg.” I back toward the door. “I’m not interested.”

Jeremy’s face turns red, and he takes a step toward me. “You’ve gotten mouthy since Aster started paying attention to you, but do you really think that’s going to last?”

My stomach tightens, Jeremy’s comments validating all the doubts I have for why Aster is ghosting me.

Refusing to engage, I turn toward the door.

“All the Alpha’s in school have an Omega ranking system.” His voice comes from right behind me. “We keep a scoreboard to see who can bang the most Omegas.”

My steps falter, my head turning toward him.

He smirks as he comes up next to me, ugly words dripping from his lips. “Virgins like you are worth the most points, and since you’re a senior, you’re worth even more for being difficult. Guess who just shot straight to the top of our year this week?”

Bile rises up my throat. “Aster wouldn’t do that.”

“No?” He pulls out his phone and shows me a picture of a board.

My stomach drops when I see a number of Alpha names running down one side, and the names of Omegas written across the top. Aster’s name is there, with Xs marking the Omegas he’s slept with, and my name is right there with a bright red X under it.

I shake my head. “You put his name on that board without his permission.”

Jeremy leans in to whisper, “He says you’re good. *Really good.*”

I can hear those words in Aster’s voice, and the blood drains from my face.

Eyes wide, Jeremy looks around. “Where is Aster, by the way? I haven’t seen him since the pizza parlor. Don’t tell me the honeymoon is already over.”

“If you come near me again, I’ll report you for harassment.” Pain tightens in my chest, and I push past him, racing out of the building.

“If you ask nicely, I’ll still fuck you, Basil!” Jeremy calls after me, drawing the attention of students who didn’t have classes to get to. “You’re not worth much anymore, but every point counts!”

I don’t remember running across campus or the bus ride, but I somehow make it to the Omega Youth Center. I stand in front of the lockers, feeling dizzy and ready to throw up.

Do I believe what Jeremy said? Not really. But that negative voice inside my head whispers that there’s no other reason for Aster to be interested in me. My mom’s voice layers over the top, warning me Alphas only want one thing from Omegas. And I threw that one thing at Aster without hesitation, so I can’t even blame him for accepting.

“Basil?” A hand waves in front of my face, and I startle to find Doctor Avara standing next to me, concern in his eyes. “Hey, are you okay? I saw you come in looking white as a sheet. You didn’t even respond when Mrs. Berry greeted you.”

“Sorry, I...” I scrub a hand over my sweaty face. “I’m not feeling very well.”

His gaze turns assessing, and he draws me over to a bench. “Sit. Let me check your vitals.”

“I don’t think...” I trail off at his stern stare.

He fits his stethoscope to his ears, and I hold still while he listens to my heart and tells me to breathe.

After waving a flashlight in my eyes, he steps back. “Your pulse is erratic and your face is warm. How do you feel?”

“Horrible,” I say truthfully.

“You just had your Heat a few days ago? Have you been any strong Alphas lately?” At my nod, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a sleeve of blue and red pills. “Take a suppressant and head home for the day. You could be having residual flashes, but if it worsens, call me, and I’ll make a home visit.”

I take the pills from him and slip them into my pocket. “What about my class?”

“El can teach it today.” He smiles. “It will give her something to do besides gossip.”

Worry fills me at offloading my class onto someone who already has work of their own to do. “Won’t Mr. Clarke need his secretary?”

“He took a long weekend,” Doctor Avara informs me. “If we don’t give her something to keep her busy, she’ll start making up rumors. Trust me.”

Disappointed in myself but also wanting to go home, I give in to his gentle urging and head out of the employee locker room. Maybe the chilly air on the walk home will help me cool my head.

Approaching the main entrance, I spot Hazel and her mom getting out of a fancy SUV, and I pull up my hood to avoid Hazel spotting me. It’s bad enough to leave my class to El, but even worse if the students themselves catch me ditching.

As I head for the sidewalk, another figure steps out from behind the SUV, a duffle bag in hand, and Hazel latches onto him. Long musician’s fingers ruffle through her hair before Aster bends to scoop her up into his arms and pepper her face with kisses.

My stomach somersaults. It’s clear this is why Aster hasn’t been returning my texts. He was with Hazel’s mom. The widow with the new university-age boy toy, if Mrs. Berry and El are to be believed.

Before Aster sees me, I turn and hurry down the sidewalk, running away.



Pounding on my door jars me from a fitful sleep, and I push back my comforter.

I had crawled right into bed when I got home and pulled the blanket over my head. Now, I feel feverish. Was Doctor Avara right about the residual flashes of Heat? I took a suppressant before I left the youth center, but I should take another. I feel my pockets, but the sleeve of pills must have fallen out during my fitful tossing. I reach up to rub my neck and find it bare.

A vague memory surfaces feeling like I couldn't breathe and taking off the nape guard in my sleep. It's not an uncommon occurrence, and why I rarely go to bed with it on.

The pounding comes again, reminding me of what first dragged me from sleep.

I stumble out of bed and to the front door to open it.

Aster stands on the other side, his hair coming loose from his bun and his eyes wide with worry.

"Aster?" I lick my dry lips and step back, leaving the door open. "What are you doing here?"

"We had plans today, but you weren't in Life Drawing class or answering your phone." He walks inside and shuts the door. "I got worried."

"Oh, I..." Words fail me, and I turn to shuffle to the kitchen.

His footsteps follow me. "I heard you missed your class at the youth center, too."

I open the fridge to pull out the water. "Did you hear that from Hazel's mom?"

Aster comes up behind me. “From my *sister*, Willow, yes. The one who handed down her car.”

His quick clarification leaves no room to question the nature of their relationship. I had actually figured it out on my own, once the initial panic wore off.

“I thought that might be who she was, on account of Hazel’s name.” When I try to fill a glass, my hand shakes, and water sloshes all over the place. I set it back down and grab one of the towels to throw over the spill.

Aster tentatively touches my back. “I’m sorry I missed your texts. My sister had an emergency come up, and I left my phone at my dorm. Then my fancy car broke down, and she had to give me a ride back.”

All perfectly reasonable, so why was I so quick to doubt him?

“You should go,” I whisper. “I’m no good. You can do better.”

“What are you talking about?” He moves to the side, trying to get a look at my face. “What’s going on, Basil?”

“I ran into Jeremy today.” Aster sucks in a sharp breath, but I keep talking. “He showed me this scoreboard with a bunch of Omega names on it for Alphas to bang and gain points. Your name was on it.”

“Basil.” Pain fills his voice. “I would never do something like that.”

“I know.” I tap my temple. “Up here I know, but here...” I turn to him and touch my chest. “I doubted, and I keep doubting. No matter how I look at it, I can’t think of a single good reason why you’d want to be with me just for me.”

His lips part on a protest.

“But that’s not your fault,” I continue. “It’s all in my head, and it’s not your fault. Not even a little. But you also don’t need to put up with it. I appreciate that you were willing to fake being my boyfriend, but you can be done now. You’re free to go find a real boyfriend.”

His eyes narrow. “What?”

Squaring my shoulders with determination, I stride toward the door. “You don’t have to pretend to date me anymore. I release you from any obligation you feel toward me.” My hand trembles when I reach for the handle. “I’d like to stay friends, but if that’s not an option, I’ll accept that.”

Aster’s hand slams against the door next to my head, his larger body bending over mine. “What do you mean by fake boyfriend, Basil?”

“In the quad, when you came to my rescue in front of Jeremy. You pretended we were dating.” I tug on the handle, but the door doesn’t budge. “But you don’t have to do that anymore.”

He leans in, a dangerous note in his voice. “When did I ever say we were fake dating? Is that how you’ve been treating this?”

“I... You...” My mind scrambles to remember exactly what happened that day Aster came to my aid.

His lips graze my ear. “Didn’t you ask me out in the art room before you ran off? And didn’t I accept in the quad? Because that’s how I remember it.”

Had my stammered confession actually gotten through? Had Aster really accepted?

“For someone who can write such wonderful plots, you’re a bit dense, Basil.” His lips move to my neck, sending shivers through me. “So, let me be clear. We are dating. For *real*. I am head over heels for you and falling harder with every new nuance I discover.”

He shifts, his lips moving to the other side of my neck. “You are endlessly fascinating. I want to know every thought that goes through your mind, even the doubts. Especially the doubts.”

His teeth scrape against my skin, drawing a moan from me.

“Never doubt that I want you for just you.” His lips move to the back of my neck.

Pleasure sizzles down my spine, and my hips thrust back against him in response. The hard ridge of his cock grinds against me, a rumble rising from his chest.

“You left your nape guard off again.” He cups my throat, holding me still for his teeth to play with the delicate flesh of my nape. “Do you still want me to leave?”

I shake my head frantically.

He reaches around me to cup my hard dick. “Do you understand that we’re real boyfriends now?”

I nod.

“I need you to say it so I know you understand.” He pops open the button on my pants and reaches inside to fist me while pushing my zipper down.

“We’re da—” The word turns into a moan, and I thrust my ass against him, desire slicking my thighs.

“We’re da...? That’s what got us into this situation before. I need whole words this time.” He pushes my pants and underwear down to my ankles. “Put your hands on the door, sweet Basil.”

My arms shake as I lift them and plant my hands and forearms against the door. His pheromones surround me, making it hard to think.

“We’re dat—” I cut off with a needy whine at the sound of his zipper lowering.

His lips return to my ear. “Say the words, Basil.”

The hot tip of his cock slips between my ass cheeks, nudging at my slick entrance, and my stomach clenches with need.

“We’re dating,” I sob out, desperate for him to be inside me.

His arm curls across my body from the front and grips my shoulder. “Again.”



“We’re dating.” I rock back against him. “We’re boyfriends. I don’t want you to leave me.”

“Good, Basil. Really good.” His hold on me tightens, and he thrusts in hard enough to lift me onto my toes.

A cry of pleasure rips from me, and cum dribbles from my dick. He pulls out until his tip rests at my entrance, then thrusts in again just as hard as the first time, ripping another cry from me.

“Listen to you moan,” he whispers against my ear, his cock slamming in and out of my body. “Your neighbors will hear.”

My inner muscles clench around him in response.

He groans. “Do you like that idea?”

“N-no,” I gasp out.

“Liar. During your Heat, you said you wanted me to fuck you so hard that everyone knew you were mine.” He presses me against the door, making it rattle with every rock of his hips. “So, let them listen.”

I moan at the sensation of the cold door against my front and Aster’s hot body behind me. The idea that someone could walk by and hear us sends a thrill through me, along with a rush of embarrassment for the next time I pass my neighbors in the hall. But the more I try to hold back my voice, the greater the pleasure builds.

Aster’s mouth returns to my neck, licking and sucking that turns into sharp nips as his pace increases. Every stinging kiss sends a new rush of sensation through me, and I stiffen as my orgasm nears.

A possessive growl vibrates against my back a moment before his teeth sink into my nape. Pleasure blazes through me, and I come against the door, spasms rocking through my body.

In the next heartbeat, Aster drives deep into my body, his cock pulsing and hot cum flooding into me.

Slowly, his teeth unlock from my nape, and his tongue sweeps over the wound, making sure to fill the Mark with his

DNA.

The licks turn to kisses before he buries his nose in the collar of my sweatshirt. “You always smell so good. Sorry, I bit you. I didn’t mean to get that rough.”

“Felt good,” I slur, still lost in the aftershocks.

Something tells me that’s not right, that it should have hurt. Getting bitten that hard only feels good when my body is primed to be Marked and bred by an Alpha. But I can’t focus on that when *my* Alpha is right here, still buried inside me.

He nuzzles me, and his semi-hard cock thickens. “*Why* do you smell so good?”

I rest my flushed face against the door. It feels like my whole body is melting. “You smell good, too.”

He pulls out, his thick cock dragging against nerves made sensitive by my release, then sinks back into me with a groan. “I think we need some condoms. You’re Heat returned.”

“Okay.” I reach back to grasp his pant leg. “Just don’t pull out.”

He makes a pained sound and rolls his hips, his cock stirring inside me. “Hard to put on a condom like that.”

I push my ass against him. “Put it on next time.”

Another pained sound leaves him before he pulls from my body, lifts me, and tosses me over his shoulder.

Before I can protest, his fingers fill my ass, easing the ache of emptiness as he strides toward my bedroom.

It doesn’t take long for his talented fingers to draw another orgasm from me. I come gasping against his broad back, my hands clenched in his shirt.

By the time I come down from that release, he’s stripped us both and found the condoms.

His body covers mine on the bed, his cock nestling between my legs. “I’m buying you a better nape guard. One you can’t take off so easily.”

I lean up to kiss his chin. “Engrave your name on it.”

A possessive rumble comes from him, and he claims my mouth, followed by my body, and neither of us talk again for a long time.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**A**fter my Heat subsides again, Aster and I have time to talk. Then we have to wait for two weeks to find out if my relapse landed us in the baby department.

When the test comes back negative, we celebrate by buying an economy-size box of condoms, and Aster presents me with a new nape guard to protect the Mark that settled into my skin.

I start seeing my therapist more often to help with my bouts of anxiety and negative thoughts, and work up the courage to submit a piece of art for the festival.

I return to teaching classes at the youth center and force myself out of my comfort zone by joining Emma the next time she invites me to hang out with her and her friends. It's hard at first, especially when I'd rather just be with Aster, but it becomes easier with time.

Aster introduces me to his sister, Willow, who lays the rumor mill to rest about her dating life.

A week later, I invite my mom over to my place to have dinner and meet Aster. Despite his Alpha status, he melts all her reservations, and by the time she leaves, they're already planning our next get-together.

Someone—I suspect Aster—reports Jeremy and his pals to the dean of the university for behavior unbecoming. The speed with which the rumor spreads through campus would do Mrs. Berry and El proud. Once their scoreboard is uncovered,

everyone gets suspended, which forces them to fail the semester and puts them behind their friends.

When the day of the festival arrives, it brings with it a sense of anxiety and excitement.

Aster's department tapped him to perform at the evening ceremony, which means he can't go with me to the art exhibition.

He apologizes multiple times, but there's nothing to be done short of telling his music professor no, and that's not something I'd ever ask of him. He'll get to see the pieces submitted before the ceremony, anyway, and he's already seen mine in multiple iterations.

With Aster busy, my mom comes to walk through the festival with me. She studies all of the exhibition pieces with a critical eye before announcing that I'll take first place. I hug her for her loyal support, then show her around the campus when the festival activity gets to be too much for both of us.

She has to leave shortly before the start of the ceremony but makes me promise to text her as soon as the results are in, whether or not I win.

On the way back from walking her to the parking lot, a flower vendor from the agricultural department catches my eye. I stop to buy a bouquet of blue flowers that remind me of Aster before heading to the auditorium.

Slipping through the back door, I weave through the chaos of students preparing for the ceremony, drawn by the soft strains of a violin.

I find Aster in a small room near the stage, warming up for the piece he'll play on stage soon. Just like every time before, the sight of him makes my breath catch.

And just like always, he senses my stare and turns toward me.

A smile breaks over his face. "Hey, how'd you get back here?"

“Stealthily.” I step into the room. “I wanted to see you before the ceremony.”

He sets down his violin and looks at the bouquet I hold. “Are those for me?”

My heart begins to race as I extend them. “Aster Woods, will you please go out with me?”

It doesn't matter that we're already dating. We started all out of order, so it only feels right that I finally ask him out as I planned to for so many years.

A blinding smile breaks over his face, and he steps closer to me. “I would be honored, Basil Bark.”

A laugh escapes me, and I step forward into his embrace. “If and when we have children, let's not name them after plants.”

“And break the tradition of two families?” he gasps. “Never.”

I tip my head back to gaze up at him. “Sometimes, I still can't believe you're really mine.”

“Same.” He brushes a hand over my face. “But now that I finally have you, I'm not letting you ever run away.”

“You'll have to pry me off with a crowbar.” I tighten my arms around him. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Bending, he kisses me, his lips holding the promise of what our future will hold, and all of my anxieties melt away.

Whether or not I win the art competition doesn't really matter. The real prize was finding the courage to take a step forward, and I hold the reward in my arms.

Whatever comes after this, all the setbacks and joy, the hardest battle is already won.

The End



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# TAMING HIS ALPHA



**When an Omega with zero social filters and an Alpha too full of himself clash, sparks fly in a heated battle that will end with at least one of them broken.**

Joshua has no patience for people, which makes finding a job hard. His mouth runs off before his brain can caution restraint, which has gotten him fired more than once.

When he's offered a job as a web designer for a friend's company, he leaps at the chance to work for someone who's already used to his special brand of bad behavior. But his dream job is put in jeopardy when he's forced to work with a new client, none other than Austin Knight, a photographer who's famous for being infamous.

Austin is exactly the type of person Joshua hates. Bossy, aggressive, and a know-it-all. The fact he's an Alpha only adds to Joshua's eagerness to get the job done and move on. But when a mix-up forces a face-to-face meeting, the two men clash, and sparks fly.

Will Austin change his bad habits to keep Joshua by his side? Can Joshua overcome his childhood trauma and open up to the one Alpha who could very well be his match? Or will both play it safe and walk away?

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Sophie O'Dare is the alter ego of paranormal and sci-fi author Lyn Forester.

She loves writing stories about guys falling in love with each other and all the shenanigans that go along with romance! Keep up to date with her releases by joining her [newsletter](#) or following her on social media.

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