



FATED TO THE ALPHA
BACHELOR

SKYE WILSON

FATED TO THE ALPHA BACHELOR

A REVENGE TO LOVERS SHIFTER ROMANCE

THE MATING GAME

BOOK 1

SKYE WILSON

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HOLDEN

“I’d like to propose a toast.”

Leaning back in the plush leather dining chair, I chuckled as my mother lifted her champagne flute in my direction. Her smile was full of love, as always, her brown eyes crinkling at the corners as she regarded me. “It’s not every day your only son becomes a man.”

“Kessa, he’s been a man for years,” my father interjected, raising an eyebrow in amusement, though his smile was full of adoration for his wife. They were the perfect example of what an alpha and his mate should be, and I had to admit, they’d set the bar pretty high. I’d consider myself lucky if my future mate and I got along half as well as my parents. Where some alphas’ marriages were made purely for political gain, my parents were truly in love.

“Yes, Bridger,” she said, indulging him, her dark eyes sparkling, “but you know what I mean. This is the year Holden will finally take his rightful place as alpha.”

And not just any alpha. My destiny was to be the leader of all the North American wolf packs, an alpha among alphas. To say it was humbling was an understatement. Even though I’d trained and prepared for this my whole life, the prospect of taking over for my father, who’d ruled with the perfect combination of fairness and force, was still daunting.

“I have six more months,” I reminded them. Pack law stated that the future alpha must take his rightful place within six months of turning thirty—but only after claiming a mate. Something I hadn’t spent much time considering until lately. My days were already full, especially with the recent bout of challenges raised by some of the North American packs. Choosing a

mate hadn't been top of my list. But all that was about to change.

"As I was saying," Mother continued, sweeping her long golden-brown hair—just a touch lighter than my own—over her shoulder. "I'd like to make a toast. To my baby boy, who has grown into a wise, brave man. The future will be bright under your leadership, and I couldn't be prouder of whom you've become."

"I'll drink to that," Garrett—my beta and best friend—chimed in, lifting his glass of Tennessee whiskey.

I followed suit, as did my father and the two other members of my inner circle, Callan and Jax, who had joined us for the intimate celebration in our estate's private family dining room.

I sipped my whiskey, savoring the sweet caramel notes as I glanced around the table at the people closest to me in the world. No matter what happened, these five gathered to celebrate my birthday and would always have my back.

My mother watched me, pride in her gaze, as she set her champagne flute down on the smooth black and gold dining table. This room was decorated in my mother's preferred style—elegant but understated luxury with the dark walls and furniture, the white marble floor, and the gilded chandelier hanging above. And of course, the bouquets of fresh flowers she always kept in every room of our estate.

She'd outdone herself for my birthday dinner, bringing out the best china and silver and doubling the normal amount of roses in crystal vases.

I reached for one of the dinner rolls, handmade by our chef, and spread the butter—molded in the shape of a wolf—before taking a bite. It had been a long day full of meetings with the council, and I was starving.

"How did your meetings go?" Mother asked as if she could read my mind.

Father and I exchanged glances. One pack, in particular, had been giving us trouble lately. While it wasn't uncommon for there to be challenges to a future alpha's ascension, the Southeastern Coastal pack had gone too far. They'd declined to send a representative to the council meetings only weeks after challenging me and my position—a challenge that had ended in a bloodbath.

I sipped my whiskey before replying. "While the council is mostly convinced that I'm ready for the job by this point, there are still a few packs questioning my abilities."

Garrett snorted. “Let them challenge you, then. They can find out the hard way just how capable you are.”

Jax, my most loyal enforcer, frowned. “We’ve already proven that point with the dozen challenges Holden has won in the past year.”

More than any other alpha had received in recent history. Something we were all well aware of. It was frustrating knowing some packs still weren’t convinced I should be their leader, despite my father having spent my whole life preparing me to take over. Yet I’d won every challenge. My chest tightened at the unwelcome memories—of those shifters who’d refused to submit when I gained the upper hand, who’d chosen death over submission.

“I never told you winning over the packs would be easy,” my father said, his lips curving upward in a tight smile as if he could read my thoughts as well. “But I agree with Jax. You’ve proven yourself worthy of the title.”

Unlike some Old World packs, the North American pack alphas weren’t guaranteed their position by birthright. Just because I was the heir apparent didn’t mean I was immune to challenges. I’d always known I’d have to prove myself. I just hadn’t expected quite so much resistance.

“It’s only because Bridger has done such a fine job of bringing the packs together,” Callan said quietly. While he was soft-spoken and introspective, the complete opposite of Garrett, Cal’s intellect and diplomacy had earned him a spot in my circle years ago. “Change can bring fear.”

I had large shoes to fill. Before my father became alpha over a quarter of a century ago, there had been dissent, lawlessness, and violence. Bridger Wilder had managed to create unity, removing short-sighted alphas who thought only of themselves and replacing them with shifters who worked toward the greater good of our society. He’d implemented laws that changed the dynamics of the packs, bringing an era of peace like we’d never known before. I was committed to continuing his legacy.

“Well, it’s all but settled now anyway,” my mother said, waving her hand in the air like she was done with that conversation. “Once the Contention begins in a few days, you’ll be one step closer.”

Ah, the Contention. I stood from the table and walked over to the bar, pouring myself another finger of whiskey as Mother spoke fondly of the traditional competition to find an alpha’s mate. It was the final requirement I had to satisfy to become alpha.

I looked out the fourth-floor window at the vast grounds of our family estate, unease settling in my chest. In a matter of days, twenty women would

arrive here, ready to do whatever it took to be the last one standing. Moonlight shone over the treetops that went on for miles to the west, reflecting off the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Waves crashed in their endless rhythm, nature oblivious to the chaos that would soon come our way.

“I remember the first time I laid eyes on you, Bridger,” Mother said, her voice full of warmth and fondness. “I knew I’d do anything it took to become your mate.”

Father chuckled. “It was a done deal the moment we met. The entire Contention was just for show. I knew you were the woman for me.”

I held in my sigh as I turned and walked back to the table, looking between my very much in-love parents. The Contention was an outdated tradition, something left over from centuries past. The sheer brutality of it should have been enough to put an end to the tradition. Women from each regional pack were to come and compete for my hand—but there were no rules against violence amongst the competitors, and I’d heard more than a few stories of them battling to the death. I was well aware that not all the women wanted to be my mate, but the allure of a council position as a consolation prize seemed enough for them to come anyway. I often wondered if my father would have done away with the competition if it hadn’t resulted in such a perfect match for him. Even more often, I worried about my Contention and who I would end up with.

While my parents had been a match and fallen in love at first sight—I’d heard the story countless times growing up—I wasn’t under any delusions. The likelihood of finding a woman that was both a suitable wife for the North American alpha and someone I could grow to love wasn’t high. Bridger and Kessa Wilder were an exception.

Especially with the Contention rules stating the winner couldn’t be the alpha’s fated mate. Again, outdated rules should no longer apply, but it had worked for my father, so he saw no reason for change. There had been an incident ages ago with an alpha who did choose his fated mate. He’d been a terrible leader, putting his mate above all else, allowing the packs to fall into a civil war that cut the shifter population by half.

Not that I thought I’d find my true fated mate, anyway. It was so rare that I knew only a handful of shifters who were fated. I’d resigned myself to choosing a mate in the Contention who would be an excellent political match. If we got along, great. But I certainly didn’t expect to find the love my parents had.

Garrett waggled his eyebrows and grinned when I sat back down. “So just what are you looking for in a mate, Holden? A tall, willowy beauty? Someone scrappy and tough?”

I rolled my eyes. Not my preferred topic of conversation for my birthday dinner, but the Contention began in just a few days. There was no escaping it.

“Someone who will support my efforts as alpha, whose strengths complement my weaknesses.” I knocked back the rest of my whiskey.

Garrett laughed. “Well, that’s the politically correct answer, I guess. But surely you have a preference.”

Mother leaned in, her effortless smile still in place, but concern lingered in her warm brown eyes. “Garrett’s right, you know. Of course you want a match who will help you lead. But you also need to follow your heart.”

I forced a smile. “Yes, Mother. So you’ve said about a thousand times,” I teased.

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “Only because I want you to be happy.”

“I’ll do what’s best for the packs.”

“Yes, but—”

“Kessa.” Father gave her a look like they’d had this conversation before.

“Someone with strong knowledge of pack politics would be ideal,” Jax mused. “Someone who can assist you with the council.”

“Maybe he wants someone who will just obey his commands,” Garrett joked.

“Someone who knows how to fight.” Even Cal was throwing in his two cents.

“Thank you all for your opinions,” I said wryly. “But can we talk about something else?”

Just then, the carved double doors swung open, and my mother’s best friend, Willow, entered the room, her brow furrowed. A tall, curvy redhead, she had been in the group of twenty women from my parents’ Contention and, like many of the finalists, had earned a high-ranking position within the North American pack. This year, Willow would be coordinating and overseeing my Contention.

“So sorry to interrupt your birthday dinner, Holden.” Willow gave me an apologetic smile. “But I thought you’d want to know right away.”

I sat up a bit straighter. “What news do you have for us?”

“As you know, invitations for the Contention were sent to all twenty

alphas weeks ago. By now, the alphas have selected the girls, and some have even begun the journey here.” Willow pressed her lips together, glancing between my father and me.

“What’s the problem?” My father got right to the point.

“One pack is refusing to participate. Refusing to send a contestant.”

“That’s simply not an option.” He was matter-of-fact, his tone indicating there was no room for argument.

“Yes, sir,” Willow said, nodding in agreement. “It is unprecedented. I’m not sure how you wish to proceed, which is why I’m bringing it to your attention now.”

He leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. “Which pack?”

I wasn’t surprised when Willow said, “The Southeastern Coastal pack.”

“Of course they’re refusing,” Garrett growled, his blue eyes narrowing. “What game is Branson playing here?”

Jax gripped his glass tighter, his knuckles going white. “We already took care of their challenge.”

Cal steepled his fingers under his chin. “Branson is an arrogant new alpha. He’s seeing how far he can push you, Holden. Testing limits.”

“He’s about to find out what those limits are.” Father glanced at me. “You need to nip this bullshit in the bud immediately. The packs are watching your every move right now.”

He didn’t have to tell me that. I’d worked my entire life to get to this point. Won every challenge thrown my way. I was now only six months away from claiming my title. I refused to let something like this stand in my way.

Instead of giving me orders, though, my father watched and waited. It was something he’d been doing more of this past year, allowing me to make my own decisions and letting me deal with the fallout.

“This is a challenge in its own right,” I said, mulling over the options of how to handle it. “The longer we wait to address it, the weaker we appear.” I glanced around the table at my parents and my inner circle. This was my birthday, and it was supposed to be a night of relaxation and celebration with those closest to me. But an alpha didn’t always have that luxury. “We leave tonight and confront Branson in person first thing in the morning.”

Father gave me a nod of approval. “Very well. Let’s enjoy our dinner first. Willow, would you like to join us?”

“Thank you, Bridger, but I have so much to take care of. The girls will

begin arriving over the next couple of days.” Willow smiled at me. “Happy birthday, Holden. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.”

“It’s all part of the job.” I gave her a tight smile, trying to keep the frustration from my voice.

Willow left, and the kitchen staff brought in our meal, but I couldn’t fully enjoy it. My mind was on the Southeastern Coastal pack and what might be waiting for us when we arrived. Most of the challenges I’d received were more like tests for me to prove myself, which I’d had. But when I’d been challenged by this pack several weeks back, it had been different than the others.

They weren’t interested in my ability to lead the packs, as if they were just out to serve their own interests. It had resulted in the death of several wolves, something that was always regrettable even if it came with the territory.

After dinner, I gathered with Garret, Jax, and Callan in my third-floor office suite that overlooked the vast grounds of my family estate. Behind me, the sun was beginning to set over the dense foliage of the forest surrounding our ancestral home, casting a golden glow on the ocean half a mile to the east.

I stared out the window, a plan formulating in my mind.

“This is an act of defiance,” Garrett said quietly, standing beside me.

“I know.” I’d reflected on it throughout the meal, despite trying to keep the conversation light for Mother’s sake. Not submitting a girl to the Contention clearly meant that the pack would not recognize me as alpha.

“You have options,” Cal said from behind us. “It’s your choice how to handle this.” As the most level-headed, strategic member of my inner circle, Cal’s advice was always considered.

“What would you suggest?”

“The simplest solution is to put Branson on probation, with one of us keeping an eye on him. You can also remove him from his position permanently and appoint another alpha in his place.” Cal paused. “And then, of course, there’s always the option of a challenge. You are within your rights to kill him for this defiance.”

That wasn’t the route I wanted to take. My father had earned the respect of nearly all the packs through fairness and justice. While I’d had to kill several wolves in my challenges, it wasn’t something I enjoyed. If there was a more peaceful way of handling this, that’s the option I’d take.

“I’ll start by putting him on probation. If he continues to defy pack law, I’ll consider removing him.”

“You may need to make an example of him,” Garrett warned. “If the other alphas still aren’t convinced of your ability to lead, this would be a way to prove you’re up to the task.”

“Perhaps it won’t come to that.” I stared at the darkening sky and the waves crashing on the distant shore. “Perhaps he will come around, and that will be example enough for anyone who isn’t yet convinced.”

I turned to my inner circle, my most trusted advisors. My friends who had my back no matter what. “Thank you. Your loyalty and support mean everything to me.”

Garrett grinned and spread his arms wide. “About time I got some recognition.”

I laughed, appreciating his ability to keep things light, even when faced with a rebellious young alpha who needed to be put in his place. “Why don’t you all take a few minutes to prepare? I’ll meet you at the forest’s edge in half an hour. In wolf form, we should be able to make it to Branson’s territory before midnight.”

They all nodded in agreement, then left me alone. I continued staring out at the ocean as twilight settled in, the weight of my future heavy on my shoulders. I wasn’t sure what we’d be walking into tomorrow, but one thing was certain...

I’d worked my ass off to become the North American alpha, to become the best version of myself I could be, the best man for the job. I wasn’t about to let some rebellious young wolf cause problems now. I’d take care of this and prove to the world that Holden Wilder was here to stay.

KAYDEN

My heart thundered in my chest, my lungs burning as I struggled to run faster. To push myself beyond my limit as I raced through the midnight forest. It was dark. So dark I could barely see where I was going—not in my human form.

But as hard as I tried to shift, to call upon the wolf within me, I remained upright on two human legs, my waist-length hair streaming out behind me like a silvery-white beacon in the moonlight, revealing my path to the beast that tore through the woods behind me.

My throat was raw as I sucked in a desperate breath. The giant brown wolf was getting closer every second. It would be on top of me before I knew it. I couldn't afford to stop, not if I didn't want to be caught.

A snarl and the ominous sound of gnashing teeth, too close for comfort, had me glancing back. Glowing eyes blazed through the dense trees, fixed on me as I pushed my human form to its limits. Why couldn't I shift?

I'd lost my way in these woods long ago, but I didn't dare stop. From the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of white. *Nico!* My brother was here, in wolf form. Hope rose. Nico was one of the strongest shifters I knew. He would save me.

Suddenly, the wolf giving chase behind me changed course, charging after Nico. I skidded to a halt, screaming out his name. But it was too late.

The brown wolf leaped through the air, his massive paws knocking Nico to the side. The two wolves went down, tumbling through the underbrush. Growls ripped through the night, and panic set in. Nico's wolf was big and strong, but he was no match for the giant beast.

I tried to call out to my brother, but my words were carried away by the wind, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get my legs to move fast enough. Out of thin air, my sister, Jenna, appeared next to me, also in human form. I tried to warn her and tell her to get the hell out of here, but it was as if everything were happening in slow motion. I couldn't make my body work right.

Then the brown wolf was on the move again.

I looked around frantically. Where was Nico? Before I could grab Jenna and haul her to safety, the wolf barreled towards us, knocking my sister to the ground and pinning her with its paws as it opened a mouth full of sharp, gleaming teeth and bent toward her exposed neck.

A scream ripped from my throat, raw and full of terror. No, no, no. This couldn't be happening. The wolf paused, swinging its head toward me. I held my palms out and backed up slowly.

The wolf's eyes narrowed, the glowing orbs fixed on me. Yes, maybe I could distract it, and Jenna could get away. Just when it looked like my plan was going to work, the wolf growled again, bent his head, and ripped Jenna's throat out.

My vision blurred as pain ripped through my chest. No. Not my baby sister. My knees buckled, and all I could do was cry out and squeeze my eyes shut as the hulking beast turned and dove toward me...

"Kayden!" The sound of Jenna's panicked voice had my eyes flying open. "Kayden, wake up. Please wake up."

I gasped for breath, disoriented and confused by the hands on my shoulders. Hands. Not paws.

"Jenna?" I rasped.

"Oh, thank the fates," she breathed, wrapping her arms around me and falling to the bed beside me. A sob racked her body. "I couldn't wake you up. Your screaming..." Jenna shuddered, and I instinctively wrapped my arms around my little sister. While she was twenty-three, only a couple of years younger than me, I was responsible for her, now more than ever.

I reached up to rub the tears from my cheeks and tried to steady my breathing. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

This wasn't the first time I'd woken up from a similar dream. I hadn't had a decent night's sleep since Nico was killed last month.

"Was it... the same dream again?" Jenna whispered, lifting her tear-stained face to look at my own. With our honey eyes and silvery-blond hair,

people often mistook us for twins, though Jenna's hair grazed her shoulders while mine nearly reached my waist.

I swallowed and nodded. "Only this time you were there, too." Taking another deep breath and blowing it out, I pushed to sit up, staring across the dark room. The sun wasn't even up yet, but I knew I wouldn't be going back to sleep.

"Oh, Kayden." Jenna wrapped her arms around me once more. "It's just a dream. I'm here. I'm safe. You're safe."

But Nico wasn't safe. Nico was dead. Murdered by the soon-to-be alpha of the North American wolf packs. Anger sparked in my chest, and I quickly hugged Jenna back before climbing out of bed.

I didn't look at her as I said, "Sometimes I think the worst part is not knowing exactly how or why he died."

Did he try to submit? Did that murderer even give him the chance? There'd been at least ten challenges—that I knew of—where the future alpha had brutally killed some of the strongest wolves throughout the territories. And for what? To prove his strength? He probably got some sick pleasure out of it, killing them rather than offering them a chance to submit.

"I worry about you, Jenna." Even more, now that it was just the two of us remaining. I'd always been her caretaker, ever since our parents died. Nico, ten years older than me, had provided for us while I'd tried to hold the family together.

"Kayden..."

"What?" My voice was dull and flat, devoid of emotion as I tried to compartmentalize the whirlwind of emotions thinking about Nico's death always stirred up. "You can't blame me for worrying about you." Not when Branson had such a chokehold on our pack. He'd sucked Nico, and countless others, into his corruption with promises of power and high-ranking positions. Anyone who spoke out against him was quickly silenced. It hadn't stopped me, though, even if it had put a giant target on my back.

Jenna sighed. "Nico was involved with Branson. He was in way too deep. I'm not playing those games, going around challenging alphas and being stupid," she said tersely. Her grief manifested in anger towards our brother for putting himself in that position in the first place. "I'm not an idiot. As long as we fly under Branson's radar, we'll be fine." She gave me a pointed look—one I'd seen many times. Jenna disapproved of how vocal I'd been about Branson.

It was probably for the best, though. I didn't trust our alpha any more than I trusted the one who'd murdered my brother. The less involved Jenna was, the better.

"Why don't you try to go back to bed and get some more rest?" I glanced out the window at the still-dark sky, dawn still an hour away, and gave my sister a tight smile. "I'm up for the day now, but that doesn't mean you have to be."

Jenna lifted her eyebrows. "Are you sure? I can hang out with you, distract you."

She wasn't plagued by the nightmares like I was, for which I was grateful. Still, she was suffering and processing in her own way. "No. Get some sleep. I'll be fine. I have chores to keep me busy."

"Kayden, this house is cleaner than I've ever seen—"

I cut her off with one sharp look. Cleaning had become my coping mechanism, but we didn't talk about it.

"Okay." Jenna sighed, her worried gaze searching my face. "If you're sure, I'll try to get some sleep."

"I'm sure." Leaning in, I wrapped my arms around my sister and squeezed her tight. "It's all going to be okay."

She nodded wordlessly as I jumped up and headed for my bathroom before my emotions got the better of me. Shutting the door behind me, I turned the shower on hot and waited. Our house wasn't the newest, and the old water heater took forever to get warm water through the pipes.

Glancing in the mirror, I grimaced and grabbed a brush. My long hair was a tangled mess, and I'd never get a brush through it after washing it if I didn't do some work on it first. Five minutes later, my hair in much better shape and steam finally billowing from the shower, I jumped in to wash away the lingering tension from my dream.

I'd dreamed of it every night the first week after Nico died, though I still didn't know exactly what happened. The dreams had tapered off somewhat but shaking off the heaviness hadn't become easier.

As I finished my shower, I made a mental list of what I could work on today to occupy myself. The restaurant I worked for—owned by shifters in the community who'd known my parents—had given me six weeks of bereavement leave, and I'd taken the opportunity to clean the house from top to bottom. There wasn't much cleaning left to do, but I had a list of projects that had been put off over the years.

Our family home had been big enough but a bit of a fixer-upper even when my parents were alive. Nico, Jenna, and I had done what we could to maintain it with the little savings we had, but it was pretty outdated. Maybe I would take on one of the cheaper projects on my list this week. Replacing some loose boards on the deck, or perhaps painting the kitchen. It could use a refresh.

After getting dressed in comfy sweatpants and a cropped tank, I walked from my room, averting my eyes from Nico's door. I hadn't been able to go in there yet. That was a project for another time. Debating whether I wanted to paint or get out the hammer and nails, I made myself some coffee. The sun still hadn't risen, but the faint light of predawn was lightening the sky.

Just as I took my first sip of coffee, a knock at the door made me jump. Hot liquid sloshed over the rim of the mug and my hand.

"Shit." I set the mug on the counter and grabbed a towel, drying my hand as I walked from the kitchen to the door, my heart pounding.

Who would be here this early? Flashbacks of the last time I'd had an unexpected visitor made my breath catch in my throat, and I had to force myself to relax.

It had been only a matter of weeks ago. One of the alpha's soldiers had come to give me the worst news of my life—that Nico had been killed fighting the future alpha of the North American packs. My hand shook as I reached for the doorknob.

Standing in the gray predawn light was another of Branson's henchmen, clad in the standard black battledress he liked all his soldiers to wear. Nico had dressed the same.

I furrowed my brow and opened my mouth to ask what he was doing here, but before I could get a word out, his arm darted forward, his beefy fingers encircling my forearm.

"You're coming with me."

I dug my heels in and tried to yank my arm back, but he held tight. "Excuse me," I huffed. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? Let go."

The soldier drew his brows together and bared his teeth. "Alpha's orders. Don't make this harder than it has to be. You're coming with me whether you like it or not."

Another cocky asshole. I wasn't surprised. But if he thought I would willingly follow him to who knew where on the alpha's orders, he had another thing coming.

Moving fast so he wouldn't see it coming, I twisted sideways and kicked my leg out, landing a perfect kick to his gut. He wheezed as he doubled over in surprise. Rushing back inside the house, I hurried to shut and lock the door, but the soldier managed to stick his foot in the doorframe before I could.

He looked up at me, eyes blazing. *Uh-oh.*

“Kayden?”

The sound of Jenna's voice had me spinning around, and the soldier took the opportunity to swing the door open and grab me by the wrist.

Jenna's eyes widened. “What's going on?”

My breath rushed out in a heavy sigh. I wasn't going to get into a fight with this guy with my sister around. It was stupid to try in the first place, but I hadn't planned on just hopping in his truck to go along for the ride.

“Branson needs to see me,” I told her.

Worry tightened her eyes and tensed her shoulders. “About what?”

I shook my head. “I don't know. I'm sure it's nothing. Probably some formality having to do with...” I pressed my lips together, still unable to talk about it. “Don't worry, Jenna. It's fine.”

I didn't know if any of that were true. In fact, Jenna had every right to be worried. Branson was unpredictable. Ever since he'd taken over as alpha, chaos had erupted. It seemed he'd rather incite fear than respect in his pack, and so far, it had worked to keep his dissenters in line.

I forced a smile. “Go back to bed, Jenna. I'll be back in a little bit.”

Turning, I dropped the smile and glared at the soldier, who smirked. Still, he felt the need to grip my arm a bit too tightly as he led me to his black truck. He opened the door and practically shoved me inside.

It wasn't until he'd shut the door that I realized there were no handles on the inside of the vehicle, and a metal barrier was in place between the front and back seats.

I sat back, the hair on my arms standing on end, and an uneasy feeling settled between my shoulder blades. The last time I'd been brought before the alpha, they hadn't treated me like a prisoner, though they hadn't treated me kindly or gently.

No, Branson had cemented my already negative feelings towards him by being not only angry but cruel—spitting out that my brother had died and speaking to me as if I were somehow to blame.

A lump formed in my throat as silent tears streamed down my face. I

couldn't prevent them, but I wouldn't give Branson or his thugs the satisfaction of seeing me break down. Not if I could help it.

Branson had a way of making people feel small and insignificant, and I'd been no exception that night weeks ago. I only hoped I could hold it together this time. But that all depended on why he was bringing me in.

The trees grew denser around the truck as it followed a familiar path through the private property where our pack was headquartered. My pulse quickened, trepidation settled over me, and I forced myself to breathe.

I could handle whatever he threw my way as long as Jenna was safe at home. She was all I had left, and I'd do whatever it took to keep her safe.

HOLDEN

The first hint of gray light cast a faint shadow on the trees marking the edge of my territory. The other side belonged to the Southeastern Coastal pack.

We'd camped out in wolf form all night, wanting to approach Branson first thing this morning.

All clear? I asked Garrett, communicating through the mental link an alpha and his closest packmates shared while in wolf form. He'd taken the last watch.

His wolf eyes shone in the darkness, a pale blue among the shadows. *No sign of anyone near the territory lines.*

Then let's go.

Moving as one, the four of us padded forward, crossing into territory that could very well be hostile. I raised my nose, scenting the air. Grass, leaves, and the still-fresh scents of late summer washed over me, but there was no trace of any shifters having been nearby recently. Hopefully, that meant they were unaware of our presence just yet.

Even though my father ranked higher than Branson, this was still his territory. As the future alpha, I ranked on par with Branson according to pack law. Protocol stated I should have alerted him ahead of my visit. Branson was just the type to use the flimsy excuse to rechallenge me—or put one of his wolves up to it. But being on official business at my father's request, I had a loophole on my side that I planned to take advantage of.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end a millisecond before I heard it. The crack of a branch echoed loudly in the otherwise still forest.

Ambush! Jax closed ranks, Garrett and Cal following suit.

I scanned the dim woods, my shifter senses on high alert for any movement, any sound. Instinct told me that wasn't just an old branch falling.

Stay in wolf form, I ordered. Then I turned my focus inward, the way I'd practiced my entire life until I'd mastered my wolf, letting my senses guide me.

A thud to my left had me pivoting. A black wolf nearly as large as Garrett's landed on the ground twenty feet away, teeth bared, eyes gleaming. While the sun still hadn't risen, my eyesight in wolf form cut through the darkness, and the shadows of half a dozen more wolves took shape behind the black one.

Jax was right. Somehow, we'd walked right into an ambush. How they'd managed to hide their scents was a question for another time. Right now, I had to think fast.

Fortunately, I had three decades of training under my belt.

I padded forward and cocked my head, listening for signs of other wolves, but there appeared to be just the seven of them. The black wolf who was apparently leading this crew growled menacingly. I bared my teeth.

Only seven, Garret huffed, a hint of arrogance in his tone. *How disappointing. And here I thought we might have a challenge today.*

Without warning, the wolves sprang forward, attacking all at once.

Now! I commanded, a jolt of adrenaline coursing through my system.

My three most trusted men and I moved in perfect sync, scattering out in four directions. Getting hemmed in was the worst move when outnumbered like we were.

Garrett and I took out the two on the ends, slamming into them and knocking them back hard enough to render them unconscious.

Nice one, Holden. It was our oldest trick in the book, eliminating the easy targets fast so we could focus on the real challenge.

Incoming, to your left, I warned Garrett as I circled back around to where the other four wolves descended on Jax and Cal.

This was not part of my plan, but I was always ready for the unexpected. From the corner of my eye, I saw Garrett pin a gray wolf to the ground, giving him the option of surrender. The wolf snarled and snapped at Garrett, who swiftly responded, bending and ripping out the challenger's throat.

That's the way it was going to be, then. These wolves had initiated a challenge, and they weren't backing down. While killing was often the last

resort, I wasn't afraid of it. It came with the territory. An alpha who couldn't kill to defend and protect his own was no alpha at all.

I dove into the fight, claws ripping, teeth snapping, and Garrett joined the fray as well. We were evenly matched, four on four now, but it really was no match. I had a dark red wolf pinned in no time, canines bared and ready to kill if he didn't submit.

Dark eyes full of anger and fear stared back at me. I pushed my paw into his throat and growled—my final warning.

He hesitated, then relaxed his body, whimpering and whining as a sign of submission before shifting into human form. The other wolves followed suit; their naked bodies curled up beneath our massive wolf forms.

Garrett, Jax, and Cal backed up, giving them space, but they didn't shift and remained alert.

I shifted back, hovering over the redheaded male on the ground. "Take me to your alpha."

His eyes widened as he stared at me, and I didn't wait for an answer. I grabbed his wrists and tied them behind his back with a strip of dried vines that Jax tossed my way. He was busy tying up the other three to the base of a tree. They wouldn't be going anywhere until we told someone where to find them.

"Don't give me any trouble," I told the kid—he couldn't be much more than eighteen, "and maybe I won't kill you."

"I won't," he said, panic flashing in his eyes. "We didn't know who you were." I wasn't entirely sure I believed him, but the kid started marching forward, leading the way. He wasn't a complete idiot then, even if he took orders from Branson.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to think this through. They might have been patrolling the border, protecting their territory. Perhaps they hadn't recognized us in wolf form, but there was no denying they'd attacked with the intent to kill first and ask questions later.

My advisors had been right. Branson was someone to watch out for. Instinct told me he was up to something. I just had to figure out what.



THE SUN HAD JUST FULLY APPEARED over the horizon when my men and I

padding out of the woods into a large clearing at the center of the territory's pack lands. Like most packs, the alpha's land comprised hundreds of private acres. There was a tiny town in the clearing, with several homes, some small shops, and a large central office building—the alpha's headquarters.

I'd returned to wolf form, wanting to be ready for anything. As we walked toward the office building, the doors swung open. Four men in black combat gear walked out, followed by a tall black-haired shifter I recognized as Branson's beta.

He walked down the stone steps and narrowed his eyes at the kid who'd led us here, his jaw ticking. "Sam? Where are the rest?"

"Tied up in the woods," the redhead—Sam—said.

"Alive?"

Sam shook his head. "Not all. Two are dead."

The beta turned toward us, his scent catching on the breeze. I could scent the beta bond on him, though it wasn't very strong, meaning he was relatively new to his position.

"Why are you here unannounced?" He narrowed his dark eyes.

I shifted back, ignoring his question. "Where's Branson?" I was tired of these games. Time to get to the point. "He owes me some answers."

"The way I see it, it's the other way around," a smooth voice drawled from the top of the stairs. I turned to see Branson walking slowly down the steps, his black hair slicked back, a look of distaste on his pale face. "In fact, I'd like to know why two of my wolves are dead. An unprovoked attack after sneaking into someone else's territory?" Branson studied his fingernails for a moment before meeting my eyes and sneering. "How will the other alphas feel about such unruly behavior? It's not becoming of a future alpha."

Turning my back on Branson, I walked toward Cal, who carried a pack of spare clothes tied around his neck.

I could feel the shift in the air, the tension that spread through the beta and soldiers at my dismissal. Taking my time, I pulled on a pair of combat pants and a t-shirt. I wouldn't be having this discussion naked.

When I turned back to Branson, I folded my arms over my chest. "I'm here on official business, so *your* attack was unprovoked. It was strikingly similar to the challenge you issued last month." I cocked my head. "Which you didn't have the balls to participate in either."

Branson narrowed his eyes. "Listen. This is my territory. You're here unannounced. Why?"

“I’m here for your submission to the Contention.”

Branson laughed. “Ah, the Contention. Tell me, Holden, are nineteen women not enough for you? You just have to have one more?”

“It’s mandatory—pack law. I don’t have time for your bullshit today. Can we just get this over with?” I’d stepped closer and closer with each word, and now I only stood a couple of feet from Branson. I arched a brow. “Unless you’d like to make another challenge, here and now?”

The tall beta stepped right in front of me. “Yes. I challenge you on behalf of my alpha. One on one. Right here.”

I spread my arms wide and grinned. “Another fight already? Must be my lucky day.”

Branson’s smirk dropped into a scowl at my response, but he didn’t step forward or offer to fight his own battles. He was starting to show a pattern.

I stepped back into the open road and eyed the beta. Behind me, I could feel my three wolves tense, standing at the ready if they were needed, but they wouldn’t be.

I’d been honing my battle skills my entire life. The challenges I’d received over the past year had more than prepared me for anything that could come my way. But as I readied to attack, I wondered what game Branson was playing. Did he have a long line of wolves to put forward? To wear me down so he could finally challenge me himself?

The beta shifted, staring me down, and I wondered if he really believed he could win this. It wasn’t me being cocky. I’d spent well over a decade honing my body and skills to get to where I was now, only months away from accepting the title of North American alpha. It was my life’s purpose, and I wasn’t going to let any number of challenges stand in my way.

I took my time removing my clothes—I hadn’t brought a backup—sensing Branson’s irritation ratchet up with every passing second. I was ready when I finally shifted and stood opposite the black wolf.

Following protocol, I waited for him to make the first move. He lunged forward, teeth bared, throwing the full force of his weight towards me—bad opening move.

I stood my ground, waiting until the last possible second before I darted forward, sliding down and under the wolf’s body as he leaped into the air. Lifting one paw skyward, I slashed at his underbelly with my claws, drawing blood. The wolf landed only a couple of yards away from me, his shock evident as he looked down at the blood dripping onto the dirt.

I hadn't cut deep, not ready for a fatal move if the beta decided he didn't want to lose his life. But the growl that shook the air proved he wasn't giving up that easily. He snarled, stalking toward me, and I waited for him to make the next move.

This time, he feinted left, then lunged right, jaws snapping as he got within inches of my neck. But I was ready for him, slamming my paw against his head and scraping my claws over his left eye. He fell to the side, blood pouring from the socket, and I approached him, placing a paw on his throat, compressing against his windpipe.

I growled and pushed harder, signaling for him to surrender.

"Fight back, you bastard," I heard faintly from the office building steps. Branson. "Don't let him win so easily. Have some pride!"

The wolf's eyes flickered, but he growled back and attempted to push me off. I'd given him a chance and he'd refused.

I wasn't going to drag this out. With a mighty roar, I sank my claws into the flesh, slicing his throat before bending and tearing it out with my teeth. His body went limp beneath me, and regret pierced my chest. The loss of life should never be taken lightly, even if it was the way of the pack.

I pushed the feeling aside ruthlessly. A shifter in my position didn't have a choice. If I wanted to keep the peace my father worked so hard to establish, I had to prove myself in every challenge. An alpha above reproach, who followed the laws and would lead with strength and fairness.

I shifted back, the metallic taste of blood still on my tongue as I dressed and strode toward Branson, whose jaw was jutting out like a petulant child.

"I *will* be leaving with a girl today," I told him, my tone leaving no room for argument. "I'll fight anyone you bring my way, but you will submit your contender."

Branson signaled to one of his black-clad thugs, his lip curled in disgust. "Get the girl."

I narrowed my eyes. So, he'd been planning on sending someone all along? At the very least, he had someone ready for today. Which meant he'd known we would come, and siccing his beta on us was likely another planned move.

His games were already growing old. As I was about to confront him over it, voices coming from the dark entryway of the building drew my attention.

"Let *go*," an outraged woman insisted. Feet shuffled over the floor, followed by a male grunt, then a sharp intake of breath. "I'm going, can't you

see that? You don't have to be so—”

The words died on the woman's lips as Branson's minion pushed her forward. She skidded to a stop at the top of the stairs, long strands of silvery-white blonde hair blowing in the early morning breeze, whipping around a face so beautiful that for a moment, all I could do was stare.

Almond-shaped honey-brown eyes widened in shock, her full mouth parting. She was of average height, her body toned and fit, but that face. The tilt of her eyes, heart-shaped jaw, and slightly upturned nose were a breathtaking combination, something an artist might spend a lifetime trying to capture.

I shook my head. Where the hell had that nonsense come from? But I didn't have time to dwell on it. Something wasn't right.

The woman's features twisted in horror as she stared past me at the blood and gore remaining on the ground, along with the black wolf's limp body.

“No,” she screamed, trying to pull away from Branson as he locked his fingers around her arm and dragged her down the steps. She hadn't even looked at me yet, her gaze fixed on the bloody scene.

“Here's my submission for the Contention.” Branson sneered. “Good luck with her.” She gasped and spun, jerking her arm away, which made her lose her balance and fall to the ground at my feet. Her knees hit hard, and she caught herself with her hands, staring in horror at the gore mere feet away.

That's when she lost it. Sobbing, she scrambled backward as fast as she could. “No,” she screamed, her voice raw, tears streaming down her face. “I won't go. I refuse. You can't make me.”

I glanced at Branson, confused why he'd choose someone so opposed to participating. Young women typically volunteered. Some even fought over the opportunity. Branson scoffed at the young woman in disgust.

I took a step toward her, holding my palms out. “I'm not a threat to you.”

She looked up at me, her eyes meeting mine for the first time, and it was like all the air was knocked out of me, leaving me stunned and disoriented. I couldn't say whether it was the pure hatred in her gaze or the fierce passion that emanated from her, but this woman was unlike anyone I'd ever met.

“I'm not afraid of you,” she hissed. “But I won't be part of your stupid competition.”

Her blatant refusal—in defiance of her future alpha—heated my blood, the primal instinct to subdue spreading through my veins. I took a deep, steadying breath, trying to figure out how to deal with this firecracker without

escalating the situation further.

I stuck with the truth. “That’s not an option. The Contention is mandatory. Pack law states that those selected must compete.”

“Refusing the future alpha is punishable by death, Kayden,” Branson chimed in, staring down his nose in disgust. “Why am I not surprised that yet another member of your family fails to fulfill their duties to their alpha?”

Kayden made a strangled sound, her chest heaving as a fresh round of tears streamed down her face. But even Branson’s claim didn’t quell her fire. She glared up at me.

“Then I choose death.”

Shock kept me rooted to the spot. She’d rather die than be entered into the Contention? It wasn’t punishable by death—the fact that Branson would insinuate I’d kill someone for not wanting to compete to marry me was insane. But as far as I could tell, she meant what she’d said. Did the girl have a death wish?

Was this more of Branson’s elaborate scheming? He didn’t want to submit a contender in the first place. If I chose the woman from his pack as my future wife, our packs would be tied together indefinitely. Perhaps he’d selected her because he knew she wouldn’t survive any challenges. However, her spirit and the fight inside her said differently.

I turned my back on them, putting aside my thoughts for another time. Time to wrap up here. “Restrain the woman, Garrett. No one else will be dying today.”

Garrett shifted and collected the enchanted manacles that would prevent Kayden from shifting.

Branson disappeared inside his office building, leaving his soldiers to watch over us as we waited. Jax and Cal shifted back, keeping an eye on Kayden as she sat sobbing on the bottom step, wrists bound.

I watched her, a strange feeling settling in the pit of my stomach. Unease and something else I couldn’t quite identify. This girl was bound to be trouble. I might be better off insisting Branson submit someone else.

But when she looked up, almost as if she sensed me watching her, something stirred inside me. My wolf perked up, taking notice of Kayden. I hated to admit it, but I was intrigued by this fiery beauty. Part of me wanted to see how she’d fare in the Contention.

“I want to see my sister and say goodbye,” she said, her voice strong as she addressed me. Determined.

“We don’t have time,” was my only reply. I wanted out of this territory as soon as possible in case Branson had other challengers waiting in the wings. There’d been enough bloodshed already. “Watch her,” I told my men before walking away to call for a helicopter to come pick us up. Then I called my father. I needed privacy to update him on everything that happened when we stepped foot in Branson’s territory.

“Hmm,” he said, and I could picture him rubbing his chin like he did when he was thinking. “I don’t know what Branson is up to, but I want to speak with that girl when you arrive.”

“I’ll have her taken to the confinement chamber. Just to be cautious.”

Father chuckled. “There’s one way to win a woman over.”

I snorted. “Pretty sure this one will be out of the Contention before it’s barely begun. She doesn’t want any part of it.”

But even as I said it, I wasn’t entirely convinced. I glanced back to where she stood, still shooting me a death glare. She might have been vehemently against coming with me, but I could see in her eyes that she wasn’t weak.

The Contention had always been a formality in my mind. A routine protocol that every alpha went through. Even though I was supposed to pick a bride—something I didn’t take lightly—it was still just one more step on my way to becoming alpha. I’d never gotten overly attached to the outcome of the competition, knowing I’d choose a wife who would best serve the pack.

Surprisingly, though, I now found myself more interested than expected.

KAYDEN

I stumbled over the iron threshold, banging my arm on the doorjamb in the process, but I barely felt the pain. The flight from my territory to the North American alpha's had been a blur, my mind consumed with one thing.

The Contention.

Rage burned through my veins at the way Branson callously tossed me away to another pack, submitting me as his contestant in the most ridiculous tradition in pack history.

No doubt he thought I'd die here. He wanted me silenced forever, so I couldn't speak out against him to the pack any longer. What better way to keep his hands clean than for me to die in the Contention? That sent my rage spiraling into genuine fear. I'd managed to keep it at bay the entire helicopter ride, but as one of Holden's men led me down a dark stairwell that opened into a long hallway lined with locked metal doors, panic set in. Was this where they would keep me?

I was already being treated like a prisoner. When the man opened one of the doors, gestured inside, and said, "Wait here," I almost lost my shit.

It was a square room with plain white walls and a single bed in the corner. That's it—definitely a prison cell. At least it wasn't tiny. In fact, I could probably fit comfortably in there while fully shifted. Which meant these cells were designed to contain a full-grown wolf. I stood no chance of escaping.

The man nudged me forward, then slid the door shut behind me, and I fought for control. One deep breath in, then out. Over and over until I slowed

the erratic beating of my heart so I could think past the instinctive fear. I couldn't fall apart, not yet. I needed to be prepared for whatever might happen next.

Pacing the cell, I rubbed my arms for warmth. How could this have happened? My brother's murderer had locked me up. The horror of it was enough to buckle my knees, but I forced myself to keep moving. Back and forth.

Who knew what kind of crooked, vile men these were? Holden hadn't looked like a cold-hearted murderer—I'd straight up told him I chose death over him, and he'd just stared at me—but that didn't change the fact he'd killed Nico, and countless others. He'd killed Branson's beta right there in front of the office.

Despite my best effort to stay strong, I sank to the bed and wrapped my arms around my legs, resting my head on my knees, tears tightening my throat once again. I hadn't even said goodbye to Jenna. Who knew what she was thinking, if she'd even been told. Holden must truly be a cruel man to not even let me see my only remaining family member when I might not make it out of this stupid Contention alive.

I didn't know much about how it worked, but I knew enough. Plenty of stories had been passed down over the years of how cutthroat and violent the competitors could be, and how some would even resort to killing to advance.

And it was allowed! That was the even crazier part. How nuts must these people be to continue such a tradition? Fighting to the death for the honor of marrying the future alpha?

I shuddered at the idea. It was the last thing I would possibly want. Yet here I was, stuck as a competitor. My options weren't great. While I didn't want to fight to marry Holden, I didn't want to die.

The sound of a door opening in the distance, followed by faint footsteps, had me jumping up, doing my best not to look as terrified as I was.

Distinct male voices were speaking as they drew near, the footsteps stopping outside my cell door. My heart jumped into my throat as the lock clicked and the door opened.

Four men stood in the hallway, all towering over me. I stepped back involuntarily, overwhelmed by their presence. These were strong shifters, all of them. Powerful, every one of them radiating a dominance Branson couldn't hope to command.

Holden stepped inside the cell first, followed by a sandy-haired man

about the same age. The two others were older men, one similar to Holden in stature and features. He had to be Bridger Wilder, the North American alpha.

My gaze settled on Holden, who held his hands up the same way he had when I'd fallen at his feet and screamed at him in defiance. Was he going to punish me for it now?

I studied his face, trying to get a read on him. But his deep-set eyes were unreadable beneath his golden-brown brows drawn tightly together. His square jaw, sharply defined by a close-trimmed beard, was clenched tight as he stared back at me.

A jolt of electricity raced over my skin as my wolf surged to the surface. The impulse to shift was strong, and I bristled, fighting it off. Not that I'd be able to shift with the cuffs still firmly in place, but I was ready to fight if I had to.

Holden's eyes narrowed on me, then dropped to my wrists. For a moment, his gaze flickered, his face softening slightly. He stretched a hand towards mine, and for one weird second, I thought he was going to brush his fingers over my wrist, but then he yanked it back abruptly, shaking his head.

"Kayden Johnson?" His voice was rougher than I remembered, though much of our first encounter was a blur.

I tipped my chin up, not willing to show weakness. I'd done enough of that already. "Yes?"

"You've been selected to compete in the Contention. Do you agree—"

"Do I have a choice?" I countered, anger rising once more. Who did these people think they were to dictate my life?

"Participation is mandatory," the older version of Holden said, moving to stand beside his son. Almost as if I didn't control my body, my head bent, and I dropped my eyes to the floor. Damn. The power of a true alpha was overwhelming, all-consuming. I found myself wanting to participate just to please the alpha of all alphas.

But that was ridiculous. I ground my teeth together and raised my eyes once more. "And if I refuse?"

The room went deathly silent. How many times had someone spoken so defiantly to this man? Probably not very often, and if they did, they might not live to tell the tale.

Holden cleared his throat and placed a hand on his father's shoulder. "Can we talk outside?"

The other two men hadn't spoken, but all four filed out of the cell,

shutting the door behind them.

Immediately, I could breathe easier, the tightness in my chest dissipating. But my wolf was still on edge, her presence in my mind growing oppressive with the instinctive need to shift. To protect.

I tiptoed to the door, listening to the muffled conversation beyond.

“I can’t believe she talked to you like that,” one man said. He sounded young—and amused. “I’ve never seen anyone—”

“Garrett…” Holden’s voice was full of warning.

“Holden, the girl must participate, or she’ll be exiled.” That was Bridger.

“Yes, I know.”

“We simply cannot have a wolf who won’t pledge her loyalty, not only to her alpha but to either of us,” Bridger continued.

“When we were there, with Branson…” Holden lowered his voice, and I pressed my ear against the door to hear better. “He threatened Kayden with death for refusing to participate.”

There was silence for a moment, and I wished I could see their faces. It was true. Branson said the penalty was death.

“That’s a bit extreme, even for him.” It was the fourth, older man speaking now. “I think we need to keep an eye on Branson.”

Understatement of the year.

“I won’t send her back if you think he’ll make good on that threat,” Holden said. “But I don’t want her exiled either. Let me speak to her and see if she might change her mind.”

I backed up quickly as the door slid open once more. Holden quirked a brow as if he knew I’d been listening. But they hadn’t tried to keep quiet, so I hadn’t done anything wrong. He slid the door shut, his warm brown eyes fixed on me, and I had to fight to steady my breathing.

His presence was overwhelming, and I felt exposed when he looked at me like that.

“Why are you so opposed to competing in the Contention, Kayden?” He said my name softly, kindly, and for a moment, I was confused by the man I was seeing and the man I knew him to be—a murderer.

“Today isn’t the first time I haven’t said goodbye to a sibling because of you,” I bit out, not willing to be fooled by his act.

“What do you mean?” He didn’t move any closer, but I somehow felt his voice wrap around me, smooth and inviting, making me feel as if I could trust him.

I shook my head. What the fuck?

“You killed my brother.” I bared my teeth. “And I refuse to compete to marry a murderer.”

Holden regarded me in silence for several heartbeats, his eyes lingering on my hair that was the same shade as Nico’s. “I was unaware. What was your brother’s name?”

“Nico.” I glared at him. “It was only a few weeks ago. Do you kill so frequently that you forget your victims?”

His eyes flickered. “I remember. Your brother was given an opportunity to submit, and he didn’t take it. He kept fighting, and the law called for him to be put down.”

“Put down?” I stepped forward and jabbed his chest with my finger, the chain of my manacles clanging. “My brother wasn’t a dog to be *put down*. Your laws are flawed.”

Holden’s jaw ticked, thick brows drawing together, but he didn’t say a word. Instead, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a metal key before gesturing to my wrists.

I held them up, knowing when to shut my mouth. If he was going to let me out of these, I wouldn’t argue.

Holden stepped closer, and the scent of pine and sea salt washed over me. My breath hitched as he bent his head inches from mine to unfasten the cuffs, and I hated myself when the brush of his fingers on my hand sent a shiver up my arm.

I stayed perfectly still, ignoring my body’s reaction to him. Even if I could admit he was attractive, I refused to let him know.

Attractive? He’s fucking gorgeous, a voice in my head whispered. I shut that down, too, because it was irrelevant.

“Here are your options.” The shackles fell away as Holden stepped back, lifting one finger. “You can continue with this refusal and be exiled, never to see your sister and never to belong to a pack. As I’m sure you know, that doesn’t bode well for most wolves.” He raised another finger. “Or you can agree to fully participate in the Contention, follow the rules, and give it your best—no faking your way through it.”

“Death at my hands is off the table, though,” he added. “If you have a death wish, you can sacrifice yourself in the competition during a challenge.”

My mouth dropped open in shock. A death wish? Is that what he thought? I supposed it made sense given the scene I’d caused when he showed up at

Branson's doorstep, but still...

My mind raced. I couldn't go home—Branson was willing to kill me over the disobedience. I'd known he had it out for me, especially after I attempted to turn my pack against him following Nico's death, but I hadn't realized my life was so disposable to my alpha.

Exile sounded even worse. I'd heard the stories. A lone wolf was usually a dead wolf. There was no choice to make.

"Fine," I said, all the fight going out of me. "I'll join your dumb mating pageant."

Then another thought struck me.

"What happens when I'm eliminated?"

Holden searched my face, and I wondered what he saw there because his hard expression softened, so slightly that I thought I might be imagining it. "It's not uncommon for contestants who make it to the top ten to be offered positions on the alpha's council. Because of your...unique circumstances, I can assure you this will be the case if you make it that far."

My mouth fell open. The message was clear—make it to the top ten if I wanted a chance at a life away from Branson. He didn't have to offer me that assurance, and I wasn't sure why he did, but I wasn't in the position to question him. Not when it meant I might still have a shot at a decent future.

I blew out a breath, my mind racing. There were worse things than working on the alpha's council. Every alpha had a small council that helped govern each pack, but the North American alpha's council was huge, working to shape the future of all the packs. They made decisions on education and laws, settled disputes, and oversaw human-shifter relations. While I still wasn't entirely on board with the Contention, or with working for Holden for that matter, I was out of options.

"Okay. I'll do it."

Holden regarded me for a moment, then nodded. "I'll send someone to show you to your room then and get you settled."

Then he was gone, slipping through the door and out of my cell, leaving me confused and breathless. It had all happened so fast.

I was competing in the Contention, of all things. This morning, I'd woken up lamenting the dreams and memories that plagued me in the wake of Nico's death. Now I knew there were worse things.

Competing to win the heart of his murderer topped the list. But there was no way around it. I had to make it to the top ten if I wanted a shot at a new

life. I simply couldn't go back to my pack.

If that meant I had to dig deep to charm and fight my way past ten other women, then so be it.

KAYDEN

Less than an hour later, I shot to my feet at the light rap on the unlocked door, I was wondering if I should have taken the opportunity to escape when I had it. I wasn't stupid, though. There had to be guards posted nearby, even if I hadn't seen anyone when I poked my head out the door after Holden and his entourage disappeared.

The door slid open, and a very tall, elegant woman who looked to be about my age smiled down at me. She had to be six feet tall. I narrowed my eyes and put my hand on my hip at her suspicious perky smile.

"Hi! I'm Faye!" More perky than anyone should be in this place, with long blonde hair pulled into a high ponytail, she reminded me of a cheerleader. *Or maybe a dancer*, I thought as she glided gracefully into my cell. "You must be Kayden."

"Um, yeah."

I wrinkled my nose at Faye's clipboard and the skin-toned earpiece with a mic attached to her head. Whoever she was, she looked super official.

"Aren't you a beauty." She beamed. "We're going to have so much fun together!"

"I'm sorry, what?" Faye wasn't the type I'd been friends with growing up. While she looked about my age, she was far more sophisticated and far too cheerful.

Faye cocked her head to the side, her perfectly shaped brows knitting in confusion. "During the Contention, of course. I'm your assistant."

"Oh," I said, "I didn't realize I'd have an...assistant."

Faye's laugh sounded like tinkling bells, and I was grateful I wasn't

competing against *her*. I was sure any man would fall for someone like that. Not that I wanted Holden to fall for me. But I at least had to make it to the top ten.

“Of course you do. There’s entirely too much for you to handle on your own.” Faye linked her arm through mine. “Now come on, let’s get you out of here and settled in.”

She led me down the hallway opposite where I’d come in, then up a staircase that opened into a wide hallway. The hallway turned left, then right, before opening into an expansive foyer that had to be twice as large as my house. I looked up, taking in the fine woodwork and molding, the crystal chandeliers and rich fabrics with my mouth agape. I’d never seen anything so luxurious in my entire life. This was an actual mansion, a regal estate.

“Your room is just this way, in the south wing.” Faye pointed toward the first landing of an opulent winding staircase that rose four stories high. As we climbed to the second floor, I glanced around, trying to get my bearings. There were multiple offshoots off the main hallways. I was certain I could get lost in here quite easily.

“Did you receive your packet with the rules and requirements for the Contention?” Faye asked, turning left at the top of the stairs and leading me down a vast hall lined with paintings that looked like they belonged in a museum. The wood-paneled walls were painted a warm white, the interspersed floor-to-ceiling windows casting bright light around the space, making it feel even larger. This was more like a hotel than a home.

“I... No, I was just selected this morning.” And had been held prisoner ever since.

“That’s all right.” At the next junction, Faye turned into a hall lined with ten doors and walked to the end. “I’ll have one brought up.” She touched a hand to her ear and said, “Please have a welcome kit sent up to Ms. Johnson’s room right away. Thank you.”

I blinked, then realized she was speaking into that earpiece. I drew in a breath, the enormity of what I’d gotten myself into fully hitting me. This was some serious shit. I was part of a highly anticipated competition that only came around once every generation. How many hundreds of young shifter women would love to be in my shoes? I couldn’t bring myself to be excited, though. Not even when Faye turned to me with a conspiratorial smile and said, “You have clothes waiting to be delivered as well. All we need are your measurements.”

She turned the knob on the last door at the end of the hallway and pushed it open. I wasn't prepared for what I saw. Luxurious was an understatement. While the decor was simple and tasteful, there was an elegance and style that screamed wealth. Pale grays and creams dominated the walls and surfaces, the heavy black wooden furniture a glamorous contrast. The king-sized bed was covered in plush white and pale pink blankets.

A large dressing table with gleaming mirrors was against the opposite wall from the bed where flowers and a tray of perfumes sat on its surface. A thick white robe was draped over the swiveling chair.

And then there was the carpet. So thick and soft, it felt like walking on a cloud. I'd never been in a room this beautiful before, and a part of me wanted to jump on the bed and sink in. I tempered that impulse quickly and strode through the room and into the en suite bath.

"This is all for me?" I turned to Faye with wide eyes. The white-and-black marble bathroom was nearly as large as the bedroom, with a giant clawfoot tub and separate steam shower. Golden and cream marbled clothing racks lined one wall, and I wondered what types of garments would fill them soon.

"All yours. Now, how about those measurements?"

I stood still as Faye quickly measured my body, calling out the numbers through her earpiece as she did. I wondered who was on the other end taking her directions. How many people were involved in running this thing?

"Here's what's going to happen," Faye chattered on as she measured, for which I was grateful. I didn't know if I could make conversation right now—my brain was still trying to process just what I'd gotten myself into.

"Contestants will arrive throughout the day. While the first real event is still days away, everyone knows the politics begin immediately. You'd be wise to remember that the game is always afoot. You never know when someone may be watching, evaluating your suitability as the alpha's wife. File that away if you want to stick around." She wrapped the tape around my hips, giving me a knowing look.

"Okay. Good to know."

"So," she continued, "once everyone has arrived, there will be a short reception, followed by an early dinner. It's more of an introduction where you ladies will get to know your competition and meet Holden for the first time."

I wasn't sure I should tell her we'd already met, so I held my tongue and

let her keep up her constant stream of chatter, trying to keep up with all the information she was throwing at me.

“Hair and makeup will be here soon. I’d like you to pick your outfit before they do, if possible, to coordinate. I’ll have you looking your very best; just wait.” Faye called out my final measurements through her earpiece, then turned to me with a smile. “You have the final say in your appearance, of course. But I’m here if you need me.”

It was a lot to take in. Faye’s energy made me wonder how many espresso shots she’d started her day with. “How long have you been an assistant? You seem very efficient.”

Faye laughed. “Actually, I’m one of the council members’ assistants. Many of the assistants helping with the Contention are as well. I’ve been working with the council for almost seven years.” She shook her head. “The council will have a rough couple of months without us.”

“Months?” Pressure formed behind my eyes. “What do you mean by months?” Surely the Contention wouldn’t take *that* long.

“The entire process will probably take one or two months. Holden is a man of action. However, by law, he has up to six months to decide, if he chooses to take that long.”

Six months? I tried not to panic, but the idea of being here that long, competing against other women who might be vicious and cutthroat... Then again, if I could stick it out and secure that council position, my life might turn out very differently than I’d ever dared to dream. I could make a difference in the world. Maybe even change the laws to prevent the violence that had cost my brother his life.

She must have seen the shock on my face because Faye reached out and rubbed my arm. “I know that sounds like forever, but with everything the game makers have planned for the Contention, it will fly by. You’ll be competing in events or spending time with Holden when you aren’t training or taking classes. Believe me... you won’t just be sitting around bored.”

Spending time with Holden. I closed my eyes, knowing I had to come to terms with this. I’d chosen the Contention over exile or going home and facing Branson’s punishment. With the opportunity of being on the council now dangling in front of me, it was time to commit. It was hard to reconcile the idea of winning the affection of a man who should be my enemy. But I had to do this if I wanted a future for myself, and hopefully for Jenna.

A knock on the door had Faye singsonging, “Oh, yay, our first delivery!”

She flitted to the door and flung it open, barely stepping out of the way as two clothing racks careened through the doorway. Faye squealed and clapped her hands.

I stood rooted to the spot as a girl with blue hair and a gorgeous wolf tattoo on her arm walked straight towards me, circling me and fingering my long hair. “I’m Karena.” She smiled. “This is going to be fun.”

The next couple of hours were surreal, as if I’d stepped into some beauty pageant reality show where attendants fawned all over me, bringing me drinks as they curled and manipulated my hair into long flowing waves with tiny braids woven throughout. And the makeup. For a moment, I nearly forgot why I was here and tried to enjoy the pampering. This makeup artist was a genius, making my eyes more smoky and exotic than usual. If I wasn’t careful, I might fall for this game. But I was smarter than that. I couldn’t forget that this entire competition was carefully arranged.

All the while, Faye paraded dress after dress in front of me. “You must select a dress that will make a great impression. You know, really wow the crowd. Kessa is a bit of a fashionista herself. And then, of course, there’s Holden. You only have one chance to make a good first impression.”

I grimaced. Holden’s first impression of me wasn’t one he’d hold dear to his heart, of that I was certain. Still, he’d spared my life, then dangled the possibility of a council position if I could hold my own in the competitions and convince him to keep me around long enough.

Finally, Faye and the stylist seemed to be satisfied with my appearance. I’d chosen a simple but elegant black silk gown. The low neckline accentuated my curves, the straps rising in a halter around my neck, and the backless dress dipped low on my hips. My look wasn’t frilly or girly, but I still felt powerful. Glamorous. Ready to take on whatever was about to be thrown my way.



WE WALKED TOGETHER toward carved double doors at the end of a first-floor hallway. Faye called it the formal grand dining room. As if there were an informal grand dining room. With the number of rooms in this place and all the various entertaining, politicking, and networking that had to go on here, it might have been possible.

A line of women formed outside the doors, contestants in formalwear, being fussed over by their assistants. A ball of nerves knotted in my stomach as I couldn't believe I was about to do this. Faye stopped me a few yards away from the line, fluffing my hair and adjusting my dress.

"Spin for me." She whirled her finger in the air. Rolling my eyes, I did as she asked but only because I knew it would make things easier. Turning slowly, I used the opportunity to assess my competition. Of the five that were lined up, not one of them was similar in looks. Not that I thought Holden would make his choice based on looks—at least, I hoped not. Surely the future alpha had more sense than that.

"Okay, here we go." Faye gave me a wide smile and strode ahead. I started to follow when a strange tingle formed between my shoulder blades. Someone was watching me.

I turned slightly, only to glimpse a sudden movement to my right—a wolf, charging out of the shadows and straight towards me.

On instinct, I shifted, my wolf ripping free. Defending. Protecting.

I reared up on my hind legs, swiping at the gaping maw of the wolf that sprang at me. The clash of claws and teeth drew the attention of everyone in the hallway, gasps filling the air, but I ignored them all. I was being attacked and wouldn't go down without a fight.

Despite Holden's throwaway comment about me having a death wish, I very much wanted to stay alive. I knew enough of the Contention rules to understand what was happening here. This was a female wolf, likely one of the competitors trying to prove herself right out of the gate.

Already, I was being challenged. I had three options: win, submit, or die. So really, there was no option at all.

It had been a long time since I'd been in a wolf fight, but Nico had always made us train, even when Jenna and I protested that we didn't need to.

You're a shifter. Fighting isn't optional, he'd said.

I'd never been more thankful for those early morning drills than I was now. Crouching low, I snarled at my attacker, a brownish-gray wolf with bright blue eyes. Then I pounced, unfurling my muscles, springing forward and knocking the wolf back. We tumbled together, the wolf snapping at my neck, clawing at my body, doing anything to gain the upper hand. But she'd underestimated my strength. I gained the upper hand quickly, pinning her to the floor and snarling.

Submit. The order was clear in the pressure of my paws, the threat of my

fangs as I bared them.

The wolf growled, pulling her back legs up and scraping her claws along my side.

I roared in pain as she ripped through my fur and skin. Blood leaked onto the plush carpet, but all I could think was, *she wasn't going to submit.*

Panic crept in at the edges of my consciousness. I'd never killed another wolf before. I didn't want to. The thought made my stomach twist. Once again, I was left with no options. If she didn't submit, I'd have to kill her. There was no draw when it came to challenges. You submitted, or you died.

Holden had no problem taking lives. That thought brought fresh rage to the surface. I used it in my favor, pushing the wolf harder into the floor, then bending to sink my teeth into the wolf's throat. I paused, keeping myself in check before I made contact.

I nearly buckled in relief when the wolf whined and exposed its belly. Thank the fates.

I backed off, only shifting back to human form once my attacker had done so. A crowd had gathered, and I panted for breath, my heart racing as a team of men and women collected the girl and whisked her away. I frowned. Who were these people? What was going to happen now?

"Are you okay?" Faye's sky-blue eyes were full of worry as she draped a blanket around my naked body. "Let's get you to the infirmary."

"Do you need assistance?" a man dressed in the same uniform as those who'd taken my attacker away asked us. His eyes darted to my side. "Can you walk?"

It was only then that I realized blood was running down my hip and leg, leaking from my side where the wolf had sliced me with her claws. I glanced down. It wasn't terrible, and shifting was already speeding up the healing process.

"I think I'll be okay, but I might need stitches."

"The infirmary isn't far," Faye said, already escorting me away from the stares and whispers of the women who'd gathered in the hallway. "I'll get your hair and makeup team back up to the room, and we can get you ready in no time. No need to miss dinner over a few stitches."

Somehow, she still projected that cheery attitude. "No, I won't be missing dinner." And give the impression that the attack had me down for the count? No thanks. "And don't worry with hair and makeup. I'll take a quick shower and dress in something simple. No need to waste time."

I gave Faye a pointed look, and she seemed to get the message—I needed to get my ass back to the dining room as quickly as possible—but her smile still dropped in disappointment. It was back soon enough as she said, “Well, at least we know you’re still in the game. I’ll have plenty more opportunities to get you dressed up.”

“I’m counting on it,” I said.

I glanced out a floor-to-ceiling window on the way to the infirmary, noting the sun setting beyond the trees. Had it only been this morning when I was dragged from my home by Branson’s thug? My life had taken such a drastic turn. I could never have imagined this was where I’d end up.

I blew out a heavy sigh. This was only the beginning.

HOLDEN

The formal grand dining room was one of the rooms I rarely visited. It was reserved for large gatherings, more of a ballroom, really. But it was large enough for multiple tables and a reception area, perfect for meeting all the women participating in the Contention.

I adjusted my tux jacket as I walked toward the double doors, wishing dinner wasn't so formal. I was much more comfortable in jeans, but the Contention was all about tradition, so here I was.

The buzzing conversation stopped when I walked through the doors, every pair of eyes fixed on me. I smiled and nodded at some of the women closest to me but kept walking to the back of the room, where a bartender was busy making drinks.

"Hey there, buddy." Garrett clapped me on the shoulder as he joined me. He chuckled softly. "I don't know whether to be envious or grateful I'm not you right now."

"Whiskey, neat," I told the bartender, then arched an eye at my beta. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means these women are all vying for your attention, but some look like they might eat you alive."

I glanced around the room, noting that pretty much everyone was watching me, even my parents, who were chatting with a tall curvy brunette. "Has everyone met my parents?"

Garrett nodded and took a sip of his drink. "Just waiting on you to show up to get the party started."

I forced a smile. I wasn't into the prospect of meeting everyone in a

setting like this, but that was how the event was orchestrated. It was like group dating but magnified. I'd have to meet them all before dinner. Thankfully, I'd be at a table with my parents and inner circle, so I wouldn't have to make small talk over the meal. At least not tonight.

But until then, I had obligations to uphold. "You want to join me in making the rounds? I could use a wingman."

Garrett snorted. "I don't think you've ever needed a wingman in your life. Just look at them, staring you down like a school of hungry piranhas."

I grimaced. While I didn't think it was quite that bad, many of the women were openly staring, flashing smiles and winks my way. Each hoped they'd be the one to catch my eye—each wanted the chance to be the alpha's wife.

That was the problem with this thing. It was hard to know who was putting on an act and who wasn't. Ultimately, the training and competitions would whittle the numbers down. My job was to figure out which woman would be the best for the job. Sure, it would be great if we got along, even better if we hit it off like my parents. Of course, I wanted to find a good match for myself, but most important was finding someone who would help me lead the pack.

The pack came first. Always.

"Well, better get out there and start mingling," Garrett said with a wink.

I knocked back the rest of my drink, then got another before making the rounds. Scanning the crowd, I didn't realize I was looking for Kayden until I didn't see her. I frowned. Perhaps she was late? I'd verified that she was no longer in the cell, but I knew she still wasn't keen on the Contention. Had she found a way out already?

Disappointment settled over me, but only for a moment because the first woman brave enough to approach was making a beeline for me.

"That's my cue," Garrett said. "I'm out." He slipped away, joining Cal and Jax over in a dark corner—no doubt so they could entertain themselves by watching me.

"Hi, I'm Madison," a tiny woman with short brown hair said, her bright blue eyes twinkling. She was short for a shifter, but made up for it in confidence. She stood straight with her shoulders back, with no sign of intimidation on her pixie-like features. Her voice dropped lower as she leaned in close. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you, Holden."

I had a feeling plenty of the women would like to 'get to know' me. "Nice to meet you, Madison. What pack are you from?"

The next hour was filled with similar small talk, and while I got a general impression of each woman, I didn't get to know any of them on more than a surface level. I made a point of not making judgments upfront. There would be plenty of time to learn more about the contestants over the coming weeks.

By the time I'd talked to everyone, the staff was bringing in serving carts. I glanced around, looking for Kayden, but she still hadn't shown up. If my count was correct, another woman was missing as well.

I made my way to the head table, situated among the dozens of circular tables around the large room, and sat between Garrett and my mother, facing the door.

"Welcome, ladies, to the first night of what will be an extraordinary event, unlike anything you've experienced in your life," Willow, the head coordinator, began. She then dove into a lengthy explanation of what the women could expect and how the next few weeks would go. "Each day, you'll have classes and physical training to ensure you're up to speed on everything an alpha's wife should know and be capable of, unless it is a competition day."

I tuned out as she described the competition coming up in a few days. I already knew the gist of it, and I found my mind wandering back to Kayden. After all the trouble we'd gone through to get her here, what had happened?

Just as I was about to ask my mother, the door behind Willow swung open, and there she was.

Kayden walked in wearing a simple cream wrap dress that was far more understated than the other women. She was wearing no makeup, and her hair looked slightly damp as if she'd just showered.

Hushed whispers filled the silence, and Willow paused her speech, glancing over at Kayden with a slight frown. I had to hand it to Kayden, she didn't look fazed at all. She simply scanned the room, found a table with an empty chair, then headed toward it, not seeming to care that everyone was watching. Willow resumed speaking, but I focused on Kayden as she passed by my table.

She didn't look at me, but I noticed the edge of a bandage peeking out from her dress, and there was no mistaking the scent of blood. My wolf reared up in my mind, but I shoved him away.

"Why is she late?" I hissed to Garrett, who shrugged, too busy checking out the women to pay me any attention. I turned to my mother, wondering if she knew anything, but she gave me a sharp look that said *pay attention* and

tilted her head toward Willow. Apparently, being thirty didn't mean I was too old to be reprimanded.

As Willow continued talking about expectations for the Contention, the staff began serving dinner, slipping around the room silently and unobtrusively just as they'd been trained. I had to hand it to Willow and my mother. They kept this place running like a well-oiled machine.

I stabbed my salad with my fork, my gaze darting back to Kayden, seated a couple of tables to my left. Why did she smell like blood?

Eventually, Willow finished her speech and joined our table. As the dinner wore on, my curiosity got the best of me. Kayden had been nothing but trouble this morning, and I wanted to know what happened.

"Garrett, find out what happened to Kayden." I tilted my head in her direction.

Garrett looked over, then back at me, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"She smelled like blood as she passed by. I want to know what went down. Go ask her assistant—I think it's Faye."

"Sure thing, boss." He gave me a mock-salute and stood from the table, sauntering over to where the assistants were dining at a cluster of tables toward the rear of the room.

Noticing my mother watching me carefully, I cleared my throat and tried to better participate in the conversation. "Does this bring back memories?"

Father chuckled. "Honestly, I don't remember much of my interactions with the other girls in our Contention." He gave my mother a private smile. "I fell in love with your mother at first sight. I knew she was the one almost immediately. I tried to send all the other girls home at the beginning."

My mother's tinkling laugh rang bright. "Oh, Bridger, you did not."

"Sure did." He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. "My father wouldn't let me."

Mother's smile was wide as she lowered her voice conspiratorially. "He did favor me from the beginning, though."

"I did. But I wasn't allowed to change the entire competition just because I'd already found the woman I wanted to make mine." He gave me a knowing look. "You'll see."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but Garrett arrived at the table and slid into his seat, earning my full attention. "Well?"

Garrett lowered his voice and leaned in. "Apparently, another contestant attacked her before she even made it to the reception."

An unfamiliar feeling settled in my stomach. “What happened?”

Garrett shrugged. “Faye didn’t give me any details. Just that the other girl is already packing to go home.”

So, Kayden had won a challenge. She’d fought to stay.

“Did you get a chance to meet everyone, Holden?” Willow asked from across the table, her eyebrows arched.

“I believe so.” Almost of their own accord, my eyes darted to Kayden. “Other than the woman who came in late—Kayden. But I met her earlier.”

If you could call cuffing someone and dragging them away from their home *meeting*.

“Good. Then after we finish eating, I’d like to reconvene in Bridger’s office to give you a private rundown of the next few days, so you know what to expect.”

The rest of the dinner passed in a blur; then it was time for me to address the contestants as a group. I stood, tapping my knife on my water glass, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Thank you so much for joining me tonight.” I smiled as I cast my gaze around the room. “It was wonderful to meet each of you, and I’m looking forward to getting to know you better in the coming days and weeks. I have work to do this evening, but please, feel free to explore the grounds and get familiar with your home away from home for the duration of the Contention.”

The women were practically hanging on my every word—all but Kayden. She remained aloof, her eyes narrowing as she watched me.

“Enjoy the rest of your dinner—our pastry chef is exquisite.” With that, I strode from the room, my inner circle following me to my father’s fourth-floor office that provided a stunning eastern view of the beach.

I’d just poured a finger of whiskey when Mother, Father, and Willow came into the office. Mother’s face was alight with excitement. “Well, what did you think of all the lovely ladies?”

“They seem... eager.”

Garrett laughed. “That’s an understatement. One looked like a rabid dog ready to latch onto your leg and not let go.”

I shook my head. “It will be fine. Though I heard there was already a challenge?”

Willow nodded. “Yes, Kayden was attacked by the contender from the Central Plains pack.”

“What happened?” I wasn’t sure why I wanted to know so badly. Maybe

because I felt Kayden had already been through so much today.

“She was about to enter the reception when the other woman—in wolf form—charged her from behind. It was very unexpected. I don’t know of any Contentions where there have been attacks before the opening reception.”

“Yes,” Mother agreed, “it seems these ladies are quite eager, as Holden said.”

Willow made a sound of agreement. “But Kayden held her own, fighting until the other girl submitted. Though not before getting her side sliced. Margie had to give her stitches.”

I arched my brows. “I bet Grandmother wasn’t expecting to be called into action so soon.” She’d been our personal nurse my entire life and didn’t show any inclination toward retiring. Despite the fact that we employed other medics, she simply couldn’t *not* work, and she was particularly gifted when it came to healing.

“She took care of Kayden, and all is well now. The other girl is on her way home.” Willow nodded and clapped her hands together. “Now, let’s talk about how tomorrow will go for you, Holden.”

I sat on one of the plush leather sofas. “Let’s hear it.”

“There will be a large group date for lunch tomorrow. All the ladies will be in attendance, though we will divide the women into small groups so you can interact and get to know them a bit more. After visiting each small group, you are to select five women you’d like to spend more time with. The five will join you for a more intimate group date around the fire tomorrow night.”

“Okay, thanks.” I could handle that. A lunch date and an evening date. It would still allow me plenty of time to take care of business throughout the day. “And all nineteen remaining women will be there?”

“Of course,” Willow said, her brows drawn together in confusion. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

“Well, after tonight... one has already gone home.”

“You seem awfully concerned about this attack,” Father said, sitting opposite me.

“Honestly, I’m just surprised Kayden fought back. She had a perfect out, yet she didn’t take it.” If she didn’t want to be here in the first place, why hadn’t she just submitted? Then again, perhaps our conversation this morning had an impact on her. “You’re sure she wasn’t the one that started the fight?”

“Positive,” Willow said. “I saw it happen. Kayden was fighting to win.”

“Hmm.” I rubbed my chin. “I just didn’t think she would stay.”

Mother sat down next to me and patted my knee, a faint smile on her lips. “Perhaps you already have a favorite in mind? Just like your father.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “No. It’s not that. I don’t have any favorites. I’m just concerned about this girl who seemed so willing to die this morning being attacked right off the bat. Speaking of which,” I turned to my father, “we need to decide what to do about Branson.”

“What are you thinking?” He took a sip of his favorite Scotch.

“I believe he chose Kayden as his submission for the Contention because he thought she’d opt to die. I told you earlier how she behaved this morning.” I’d also told him what I learned about her brother, though I didn’t mention it in front of everyone. “It was Branson’s way of defying me without it being an outright refusal. He knew she’d either opt not to go or be out of the competition immediately. My opinion is he tried to find a workaround.” Most alphas sent the cream of the crop, wanting to have their submission chosen to create a tighter alliance with the North American alpha. Branson was most definitely an exception.

Father sighed. “I agree that he has some ulterior motive. He didn’t just change his tune because you showed up in person—especially when he seemed to anticipate exactly what you’d do and set up an ambush for you.”

“He’s testing our limits,” Cal said quietly from where he stood, looking out the window. “Seeing how far he can push.”

I grimaced, knowing he was right. Instinct and experience told me we hadn’t seen the last of Branson.

Father met my gaze. “I think we need to pay him another visit. Best to establish your dominance now.”

He was right. I already had enough on my plate with the Contention. I didn’t have time for this bullshit. Branson needed to be dealt with swiftly.

My mind drifted back to Kayden, an idea taking hold. I knocked back the rest of my drink, the liquid burning down my throat. Perhaps she could be useful in more ways than I’d anticipated.

KAYDEN

As soon as dinner ended, I left the dining hall, wanting to return to my room. My injuries throbbed, and I could feel myself flagging. The last thing I wanted was to show any weakness. It had been hard enough to walk in late, the women staring at me as I'd tried not to limp. Still, I'd held my head high, even if all I'd wanted was to leave the infirmary and crawl into bed. I didn't have a choice—not if I intended to make it to the top ten and change my and Jenna's lives. I couldn't go back to my pack and would do whatever it took to get my sister out of there.

More clothing had been delivered while I was gone, and now three racks lined my walls, as well as multiple boxes from upscale designers I'd only heard of but never been able to afford. The wealth and opulence of this place blew my mind. I still had trouble wrapping my head around how much had changed in twenty-four hours. If only I could talk to Jenna. Maybe I could ask Faye about checking in with her tomorrow.

We weren't supposed to have access to the outside world during the Contention due to the sensitive nature of everything. It must have been simpler to enforce that rule in the days before cell phones. What was I supposed to do all night? I'd also have to ask Faye if there was a library or something. If I had to sit alone in this room with nothing but my thoughts for company for weeks, I might go crazy.

I opened the clothing boxes, surprised to see luxurious lace lingerie in the first one. There had been no time for me to pack, so all I had was what had been delivered to my room. As I opened boxes, the garments became more and more exquisite.

Everything was beautiful, the height of luxury—even the workout clothes were designer brands—but it was too much for me. I was used to simple clothing. Would Faye think I was high maintenance if I requested other options than what had been provided? I'd already destroyed the black silk gown when I shifted. I'd hate to damage more things. Though with as much money as these people had to throw around, they probably wouldn't even notice.

When I'd finished putting everything away into my drawers and wardrobe, I flopped onto the bed, completely exhausted and fully clothed... and that's exactly how I woke up the next morning.

"Rise and shine, it's makeup time." A melodic voice drifted in through the haze of sleep, and I blinked my eyes, momentarily disoriented. Sunlight streamed through the open windows, shining onto a silk duvet cover.

"Good morning," Faye singsonged, rolling in yet another cart of dresses. "I'm so excited for today."

I sat up. "Morning already?" Confusion fogged my brain as I struggled to wake up. Yesterday felt like a dream. I'd slept so soundly that I could almost convince myself I'd imagined the craziness.

Being taken from my pack lands, the Contention, the challenge. *Holden*.

I groaned. "It wasn't all a dream."

Faye frowned. "What? Of course not. This is real life—and it *is* a dream, isn't it?" She presented the clothing cart with a flourish and thumbed through the dresses, smiling brightly when she plucked out a tea-length dress and held it up. "How about this?"

"For lunch?" I sat up, wrinkling my nose at the green silk sheath. "Don't you know the meaning of casual around here?"

"You can dress down for classes and training if you like." The expression on her porcelain face made it clear she didn't know why anyone would want to do such a thing. "But today is important. Holden will be dining with you in small groups. He will select one woman from each group to join him for a more intimate date this evening."

An intimate date was the last thing I wanted, but if I planned to make it to the top ten, I'd have to suck it up and put on a good front.

"So you want to look your best." Faye gave me a patient smile. "That's where I come in."

Another makeover. Fabulous. Was this how it was going to be here? I'd been joking when I called it a pageant, but that's how it was starting to feel.

It's not that I didn't like to look nice, and the pampering was something I could get used to. But being dressed up to parade in front of the man who killed my brother wasn't what I thought I'd signed on for.

I reminded myself of my options. I just needed to make it halfway through the Contention to avoid returning to Branson. Which meant I needed to play along. *Dress up it is.*

"Wonderful," I said, and Faye's smile brightened.

"That's the spirit. Now, if you don't like this dress, how about this one?" She pulled out another green dress with a full skirt and way too much lace.

I might have to play this game for now, but I would at least do it on my terms. I stood from the bed and flipped through the dresses. "Why are they all green?"

She leaned over my shoulder and whispered, "I have it from a good source that Holden's favorite color is green."

I almost refused on principle. Top ten. That's all I had to do.

Selecting a knee-length A-line dress cut from luxurious green fabric with a simple but classic sleeveless cut, I held it up to my body. I could still move, and it was comfortable. It would work.

"Beautiful choice." Faye clasped her hands together. "Your stylist will be here any moment. Maybe she can give you an updo?"

I ran my fingers through my long waves. Updos weren't my thing. "I'd prefer to leave it down if it's all the same to you. And maybe a simpler look with the makeup? I get that I must look good if I want to catch Holden's eye." Just saying the words made my stomach twist. "But I also want to feel like myself."

Faye gave me an indulgent smile. "We'll see what we can do."



I LET Karena arrange a few thin braids in my hair, leaving the rest down like I was used to wearing it. Faye led me down a different hallway on the first floor. It appeared we were on the opposite side of the estate now, but the place was so huge I was still getting my bearings.

"Ah, here we are," Faye said with a smile, pointing to a set of double doors. "Just check in with the luncheon hostess and she'll give you your seating arrangement. Come find me afterward and let me know how it goes."

Good luck—hopefully, you’ll be chosen for tonight’s date!”

I wasn’t counting on it—I hadn’t gone out of my way to make the best impression so far, and Holden knew I wasn’t here by choice. I walked into the room, about half the size of the dining room from last night and saw five tables with five chairs. Most of the women were already seated. I approached the hostess, a woman who looked just a few years older than me.

“Hi. I’m Kayden Johnson.”

She smiled widely. “I know. You’ll be seated at table four.”

I turned, noting that each table had a placard with a number. There were already two women seated at table four. A short, curvy golden blonde, and a taller, thin blonde. Both of their eyes locked on me as I approached, curious.

I offered them a friendly smile and sat. “Hello.”

“Oh, hi,” the taller one said. “I’m Brooklyn. This is Jessica.”

Jessica gave me a shy smile and wiggled her fingers. “Hi,” she said, so quietly I almost didn’t hear her.

“So,” Brooklyn said, resting her palms in her hands and looking at me with wide green eyes. “What do you think about all of this?” She gestured around, and I assumed she meant the Contention as a whole.

I shrugged, unsure how much I wanted to share with practical strangers. “I was a last-minute choice, so I’m still adjusting to the idea of it.” That was putting it mildly. I wasn’t sure I’d ever adjust to the idea of competing for the heart of my brother’s killer. “What about you?”

Jessica opened her mouth to speak, but Brooklyn charged ahead. “Oh, I think it’s just amazing. I’ve been hoping for this my entire life.”

I lifted my brows. Some girls in my pack had talked over the years about the idea of marrying the future alpha, so I knew some women were all about it. Apparently, I was the oddball here. “What about you?”

Jessica’s eyes widened. “Oh, um. I don’t know about my whole life... But it’s an exciting opportunity.”

I smiled at her. She seemed more down-to-earth, though I couldn’t find fault with Brooklyn. She was friendly, just a bit more enthusiastic.

“So exciting,” Brooklyn agreed. “I’m from the PNW pack. It’s the first time I’ve been across the country.” She looked around the room. “Isn’t everything just beautiful? I can’t wait to actually meet Holden. I didn’t get much chance to talk with him last night, though I was hoping we’d be able to after dinner. He just slipped out so quickly. But today, I’ll make up for it.”

I peeked at Jessica, whose lips pressed together, though her eyes danced

in amusement. I shared a small smile with her. Brooklyn was quite the chatterbox. I was certain she'd make up for it.

"Good afternoon, ladies," the woman who'd been talking when I walked in late last night said; Willow, I thought her name was. She beamed and clapped her hands, and the chatter in the room died down. "Today is very exciting. As your assistants should have told you, you'll be dining in groups of four with one table being only three due to one contender having left. Holden will be coming by each table to spend fifteen minutes with each group." She glanced toward the doorway, then smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Well, here he is now."

Holden walked through the doors, and the very air in the room seemed to shift. Every woman's eyes were on him as he stood next to Willow and scanned the tables, a pleasant smile on his full lips. It might have been my imagination, but I thought his gaze lingered on our table for a few seconds longer than the others.

I hated that he looked so handsome in a sports coat and khakis, though honestly, I preferred his look from yesterday morning. *Wait, what? You don't prefer him at all.*

Shaking my head, I focused on my empty plate. I had to keep my wits about me. Brooklyn's excited chatter must have rattled my brain.

"He was looking over here," Brooklyn whispered excitedly. "Maybe he'll come here first." As she said it, he moved to a table on the far end. She jutted out her lower lip but then shrugged. "Oh, well, maybe he's just saving the best for last. So, everyone's talking about it, but I want to hear it from you. Did you get challenged before the Contention even officially began?"

I stared, surprised everyone was talking about it. "What are they saying?"

"Just that you were attacked from behind and you fought like a champ. So, it's true?"

I smiled at that. Maybe some of the others would think twice before challenging me. "Yes, it's true."

I gave them a quick rundown of what happened while servers brought out a salad course. Was this lunch really going to be an hour and a half? Ugh.

"Honestly," I finished, "I didn't even know that was possible. My assistant told me to watch my back at all times, but as you said, the dinner was supposed to be the formal opening of the competition. But do the rules say challenges are allowed at any time?" I glanced between them and shrugged, hoping they were more informed than I was. "I don't know—I

haven't had time to read my welcome packet."

Jessica ducked her head. "I haven't read all of mine either," she said softly, her porcelain cheeks turning pink.

"Same." Brooklyn stabbed the last of her salad, her eyes glued on Holden, who was now only one table away. She set her fork down, then turned back to us and leaned in. "So, look. I strongly believe in forming alliances. Working together is the best option for us to make it to the end. I like you ladies, and who knows? We may end up working together one day. I think we should stick together."

"Well," I said carefully, not sure I wanted to ally with someone I'd only just met, but not wanting to alienate her either. "I agree that I'd rather make friends than enemies."

Jessica nodded, looking back and forth between Brooklyn and me.

"Great. It's settled." Brooklyn looked toward Holden once more and sighed, a dreamy expression in her green eyes. "Did you see how adorable the alpha and his wife were last night? Such a power couple. I hope that one day Holden and I can be just like them."

Jessica ducked her head again, but not before I saw her amused grin. I managed to catch her eye and gave her a wink. Brooklyn was nice, but she sure did talk a lot. Jessica, though, I could see us becoming friends. She seemed sweet.

The main course was delivered next, and it was almost time for Holden to join our table.

"Good afternoon, ladies." His deep baritone washed over me, my body reacting involuntarily to the sexy tone. Feeling a bit rattled, I shook it off, and when I glanced up, his warm brown eyes were boring into mine—studying me as he stood over our table.

"Oh, Holden!" Brooklyn squealed, then reached out and grabbed his arm, practically pulling him into the chair next to her, directly across from me. Not that there was anywhere else for him to sit with only four chairs. "It's so great to get to meet you, finally. I'm Brooklyn Avers, and so happy to be here again. It's been years since I've visited. Though I have to say, your estate is even lovelier than I remember. Have you redecorated?"

Holden blinked a few times, likely processing Brooklyn's mile-a-minute talking. "Ah, yes. I believe there have been some updates, though my mother would know more about that."

"Oh, your mother is just the most beautiful woman—such a graceful

creature. I hope to get to know her better while I'm here; she's such an inspiration."

Jessica and I exchanged glances again, and it was all I could do to keep my smile from morphing into a giggle.

Holden cleared his throat. "Well, welcome back to the estate. You as well, Jessica. It's nice to see some familiar faces."

Apparently, these two had enough connections to have visited here before. Or perhaps it was just my pack that kept their distance from the North American pack.

"Kayden." The way he said my name sent a shiver down my spine. Irritated, I sat up straighter and stared, not bothering to greet him. What was I supposed to say, anyway? *So happy to be forced into this?*

His brow furrowed. "How is your side?"

My hand moved to my side, where the stitches were starting to itch. Luckily, being a shifter meant I'd heal up within days. "I'm fine."

He held my gaze, though the look in his eyes was unreadable. "Glad to hear it," he murmured. "You're looking quite lovely today." He frowned, as if he hadn't meant to say it, then quickly added, "All of you do."

Brooklyn beamed, and Jessica spoke up. "Your dress is gorgeous, Kayden."

"Yes," Holden agreed. "Green is my new favorite color of late. Though I used to love blue."

I glanced around the room. So that was why nearly all the women were wearing various shades of blue—including Brooklyn.

"Thanks," I mumbled, then focused on my meal. I was so out of my element.

Brooklyn continued chattering away for most of the fifteen minutes. Jessica managed to get a few words in, but only when Holden addressed her specifically. I only spoke when spoken to as well but by choice. Sitting across from this man was a lot harder than I expected. Not only did I feel a strange, unfamiliar sensation race through my body every time our eyes met, but I was having difficulty reconciling that I was dining with the man who'd killed Nico.

Holden glanced at his watch. "Unfortunately, it looks like my time is up." He stood. "Kayden, would you walk with me for a moment?"

I frowned, but I couldn't exactly refuse, could I? Not if I still intended on making it to the top ten. If I was going to stick to that plan, I needed to

pretend like the very sight of Holden wasn't sending me into a tailspin. "Sure."

Holden rounded the table and placed his hand on my lower back as I stood. Heat radiated from him, and it was all I could do to keep my face blank. Why did the man who was my mortal enemy have to be so damn hot?

"How are you, really?" he asked softly, bending his head to my ear. The tickle of his breath was almost too much to bear.

"I said I'm fine." I clenched my jaw. "No real harm done."

He narrowed his eyes like he didn't believe me as we walked slowly toward the next table. He paused a few yards away, and I was acutely aware of every eye in the room zeroing in on the two of us—especially when he moved in close and whispered in my ear once more.

"I know it wasn't your choice to be here." His voice had lost the gentleness. "But at least you could pretend like you want to get to know me."

I jerked back, irritation rising quickly. "Sorry. I'm having a hard time playing nice with the man who murdered my brother," I hissed.

Holden's eyes widened, but he quickly schooled his expression into something unreadable. "Murder is a strong word, don't you think?"

I arched a brow. "Just calling it as I see it."

We stared at each other in silence; if it weren't for our audience, I might have said more.

"I was going to invite you to the group date this evening, Kayden." He gave me a meaningful look, but whatever he was trying to convey was lost on me in the confusing rush of emotions that followed his statement.

Irritation. Excitement. Anger. And an annoying flutter in my stomach.

"Why?" I managed to ask, then quickly shook my head. "I'm guessing you changed your mind?" I asked through gritted teeth that I hoped could pass as a smile.

He studied me, his eyes seeing much more than I wanted him to. It didn't help that his proximity was making my heart race.

"Far from it." Holden gave me a charming smile that was definitely for the benefit of the other women watching before dropping his hand from my back and continuing to the next table without another word.

I walked back to my table, a little unsteady on my heels, confusion warring with anger. Ultimately, the anger won out. I didn't *want* to go on a group date with him tonight. Seeing him once today was bad enough—alive and well while my brother had suffered a different fate at his hands. Now I

had to endure what Faye had called an *intimate* evening. Great.

I sat down with Brooklyn and Jessica, halfway listening to the one-sided conversation.

“Whoever Holden selects for the date tonight will set the tone for the competition. The initial favorites always tend to stick around for a while.” Brooklyn sighed. “Though one of the five will be sent home after.”

I tried my best not to glance at Holden, but I couldn't seem to help myself. I needed a better read on him, but the man was like a statue when it came to revealing his thoughts. He'd invited me to the date tonight. Again, I questioned why. If Brooklyn was correct, did that mean I was one of his favorites?

I hadn't given him any reason for that to be true. He may have brought up the possibility of serving on the council yesterday in my cell, but what if that was just a ploy to get me to go along with the whole Contention and not be a thorn in his side? If I hadn't agreed, he would have needed to return me to my pack and get Branson to send another girl. The rules stated he must have someone from each pack.

My fluttering stomach suddenly felt like a ball of lead as I considered another possibility. What if I wasn't a favorite, and he'd only invited me tonight so he could send me home?

HOLDEN

The sun was dipping below the horizon as Willow and I arrived at the fire pit on the eastern edge of the estate grounds. Normally, the stone seating area surrounding the fire pit was very private, but it was bustling at the moment. Staff fussed with last-minute preparations, bringing out food and drinks, and setting up the fire. Everything was decorated to be romantic, and the space was transformed from its typical rustic style.

Twinkling lights were strung above, and a table was piled with champagne and strawberries, hors d'oeuvres, and supplies to make s'mores. Flower arrangements completed the look. I turned to Willow, who was nodding in approval.

"They did well."

"Did you expect anything else?" I grinned. "They all have to report to you."

Willow laughed. "Very true." She glanced down at her clipboard. "The contestants will be here within the next half hour. You must spend at least a few minutes alone with each woman to get a feel for her. I realize it's early to be sending someone home, as you hardly know them, but choose wisely."

"No pressure or anything."

Willow smiled and patted my cheek, just as she'd done since I was a boy. "You'll do fine."

I gave her a wink. "I'm going to take a short walk while waiting for them to arrive." I needed a few minutes to clear my head before the evening ahead.

"Sure thing." She immediately began calling out orders to make things even more perfect, though I thought it looked just fine.

I walked down a cobbled path and around a bend until I reached an old fountain that had been here since the original estate was built in the eighteenth century. It had always been a favorite place to go when I needed to think.

Willow was right; I needed to choose wisely tonight. All five of the women I selected held some appeal, though each seemed quite different in the short time I'd spent with them at lunch today.

Sydnee had been an easy choice. She was smart, the daughter of an alpha, knowledgeable about politics, and would likely make a good leader. Her personality was a bit dry at lunch, but I wanted to see how she would be in a less formal setting.

Oakley hadn't spoken much but had been sweet and demure, her smile and demeanor seemingly kind. The opposite of Madison, whose fiery personality had been apparent even at our semi-formal lunch. I didn't exactly have a type, and it was interesting to realize now just how different each choice was.

There was Grey, who was smart as a whip and emanated a sense of determination. I liked that. Vivianna was quite athletic. She'd be one to watch in the physical competitions.

And then there was Kayden.

I stared into the ripples of the fountain, not knowing what to think about Kayden or why I'd been compelled to have her join me tonight. For whatever reason, I couldn't get her out of my mind. Her iron will and fierce personality were something to be reckoned with. She didn't want to be here, yet I hadn't wanted her to leave. When we'd stood in that tiny cell, something about her had drawn me in, made me want to know more about her.

While I didn't know her well enough to see if she'd be a good option for an alpha's wife, her unpredictability and lack of deference intrigued me. I'd never known anyone like her.

Looking up from the water, I scanned the grounds. The women would be heading to the fire pit soon. A flash of white caught my eye, and I turned slightly, my breath catching.

Kayden. She was walking down a path, lost in her thoughts, and hadn't noticed me. I took the opportunity to observe her, wondering what was going through her head as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Even though she was at least a hundred yards away, my enhanced shifter vision could read the tension in her body. It didn't take away anything from her

beauty.

It wasn't the first time I'd noticed that Kayden was beautiful, with her waist-length silvery-blond hair and large almond-shaped eyes. Her face was unique—striking—and I wondered if her skin was as soft and smooth as it looked.

“Kayden!” I found myself calling out, lifting my hand to catch her attention. Her head snapped up, her gaze locking on mine, and I felt that same unsettling sensation I'd had at lunch today. It wasn't easy to explain. It was more a feeling than a thought, an awareness of her that seemed to cut right through me.

I waved her over, taking a deep breath to shake it off. Checking my watch, I saw we had about twenty minutes before the fire pit date was scheduled to begin.

Last night, Father and I had discussed her pack at length. Maybe I could find an opportunity to gain a little insight tonight.

“Hey,” I said as she stopped a few feet away.

“Hey.” She stared at me, not even offering a smile, though the pure hatred I'd seen yesterday morning was absent.

I cleared my throat, unaccustomed to being met with such disinterest. Strangely, it was refreshing. “You're out early.”

Kayden shrugged. “Faye scheduled way too much time for hair and makeup.” Her lips curved in a wry smile. “My stylist is frustrated with my lack of interest in her abilities.”

“I think you look wonderful,” I said without thinking, though it was the truth. Kayden was dressed in casual jeans and a white off-the-shoulder sweater. It was perfect for the type of date scheduled, though I wouldn't be surprised if some other girls still came out dressed to the nines. I, for one, preferred dressing casually. All the formalities got a little suffocating sometimes.

Her stylist had done minimal, natural-toned makeup, and her hair was halfway pulled back, those tiny braids from earlier still there, winding through her waves.

Kayden raised her eyebrows. “Thanks.” She looked me over, raking her eyes from head to toe, then back again, and that awareness heightened. “You look okay too.”

“Okay?” I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing.

She smirked. “What? Big bad alpha isn't used to women not fawning

over him?” She stepped forward, and I caught a whiff of her scent—lavender and sage.

I shook my head. “You’re something else.” When she didn’t reply, I changed the subject. “How have things been so far? Are you adjusting to the Contention?”

“Honestly?” Kayden sighed and sat on the edge of the fountain. “I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

I took a chance and sat beside her. “I’m sure. It’s a lot to take in.” Curiosity about her life had me asking, “What were things like for you before you came here? Back on your pack lands.”

She shrugged. “It was a pretty simple life. It was just my siblings and me, and we were close. I worked most days and kept up with the house. Not much excitement, but Nico made sure we stayed in shape and trained with him every day.” She swallowed and looked down at her hands. “He always had my back.”

“Nico was your brother.”

She nodded and squared her shoulders, her face carefully blank when she looked back up at me. Perhaps her brother wasn’t the best topic of conversation.

“Where did you work?”

“At a restaurant, waiting tables.”

“And your sister?”

Suddenly, the mask she’d had in place slipped, revealing a deep sadness. And anger. “I just don’t understand it.”

“What do you mean?” The urge to comfort her was strong, but I kept my hands to myself.

Kayden let out a heavy sigh. “Why you wouldn’t even let me say goodbye. It’s bad enough that you took my brother from me. Now I might never see my sister again. She probably had no idea where I’d gone, why I just disappeared. She’s all alone, at the mercy of Branson’s whims.”

There was a hint of fear in her voice, and it made me wonder just how much of a threat Branson might be to Kayden’s only remaining family. But we were walking a thin line here with this conversation, one I knew could easily tip into dangerous territory. I didn’t want Kayden melting down, nor did I want her turning her anger on me again, so I maneuvered the conversation ever so slightly.

“Branson has only been alpha for a year,” I said, “but he’s managed to do

a lot of damage in that time.”

“Tell me about it,” Kayden growled.

“You don’t like him?”

“Are you serious? Ever since he came into power, things have been chaos at home. I know Branson put Nico up to challenging you.”

I’d assumed as much. He’d done the same with his ambush yesterday morning. He’d even sacrificed his beta, standing aside while someone else fought his battles. There seemed to be a pattern with him.

“Kayden, if I’m being honest, I’m concerned about your pack. Branson is unpredictable. He has no regard for others’ lives, that much is clear.”

She turned and looked at me, her honey eyes studying mine. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m considering my options,” I said carefully. “But I’m concerned he might start a rebellion and put even more lives in danger.”

“You’re right to be concerned.”

“Do you know something?” My tone was sharp as I watched her reaction, but there was no deceit there as she considered my words.

“Nothing specific. But I might be able to give you some insight into how he thinks and runs the pack. Nico didn’t often talk about what he did for Branson, but I got a clear picture of how he works.”

That was more than I could have hoped for. The fact she wasn’t hurling hate and blame my way was already a surprise, but an offer to help? I didn’t fully trust her motivations, but it was a start.

“Why would you do that?” I asked carefully.

Kayden shrugged. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend?”

I huffed out a wry laugh. “I appreciate that, Kayden,” I said, my voice low. “More than you know.”

Kayden just looked at me, her eyes sucking me in. But as suddenly as she’d opened up to me, she shut down, pushing off the fountain and walking a few steps away. I stood as well, just as one of Willow’s many assistants came jogging up.

“There you are,” the woman said. “Willow sent me to find you. It’s time to gather at the fire pit.”

Without a word, Kayden hurried off toward the pit, which was now blazing brightly in the night.

“Thank you,” I told the assistant, who rushed quickly away to complete her next task, no doubt. Going back the way I’d come, the sound of female

voices drifted on the air.

“She’s wearing *jeans*? Oh my god.”

“I know, right? Like, does she even care about how she looks?”

Laughter followed, and I grimaced. I wasn’t sure who had spoken, but it was clear who they were talking about when I arrived on the scene. Five of the women were gathered around the fire, sipping champagne. Kayden sat on a low stone wall behind the seats set up—the only one dressed casually except for me.

I’d chosen jeans, a Henley, and some boots. Most of these women were in short dresses and high-heeled sandals. I wondered how the walk along the cobbled path had been.

“Holden!” The first one to spot me was Madison, but right after, everyone echoed my name, turning with bright smiles on their faces.

“Good evening, ladies,” I said with a smile, looking at each in turn, including Kayden, even though she stayed seated. “Looks like you got started without me.”

Sydnee appeared by my side, her long black hair swept up into a bun, and extended an extra glass of champagne. “I waited. Cheers.” She clinked her glass to mine and smiled. “I’ve been waiting all day for this moment, actually.”

From the corner of my vision, I saw Kayden roll her eyes.

“So have I,” said Madison, coming up to my other side and linking her arm in mine. “Come look at the amazing food they’ve prepared for us.”

I let her lead me to the table. “Why don’t we all grab something to eat?” I said to everyone. “Then we can get to know each other better.”

Oakley smiled shyly at me, but unlike Sydnee, Madison, Vivianna, and Grey, she wasn’t hanging on my every word. Perhaps I’d spend some time with her first and see if she would come out of her shell.

I tried not to watch Kayden when she walked to grab a plate, but it was hard. Aside from Oakley, I didn’t miss the other girls sneering at her. Yeah, she seemed nice. I approached her a few minutes later.

“Would you like to make some s’mores?” I asked.

Oakley’s eyes lit up, and she played nervously with the tips of her light brown hair. “I’d love to.” She was soft-spoken, and I had a hard time engaging her in conversation as we toasted our marshmallows. Perhaps she was too reserved?

After multiple attempts to get her to talk about herself, I decided it was

time to talk to some other girls. Sydnee was watching me closely with a small smile, so I approached her next.

“Well, hello, Holden,” Sydnee said. Her short dress perfectly encased her hourglass figure, showcasing how toned and fit she was. She sidled up next to me. “Want to go for a walk?”

I smiled. “That sounds great.”

As we left the fire pit, I felt eyes on my back and turned my head, only to see Kayden jerking her gaze away. Maybe she wasn’t as disinterested as she seemed. More likely, though, she was thinking murderous thoughts about me roping her into this.

Sydnee was outgoing, intelligent, and cunning. That much was evident in the first few minutes of the conversation. We’d met a time or two before during formal council events when she’d accompanied her father to the estate, but this was the first real conversation we’d had alone. My initial assessment of her had been correct. She had the right connections and training to be a proper alpha’s wife. Plus, she was attractive with her big brown eyes that stood out against her pale skin.

When I found myself comparing her eyes to Kayden’s, I gave myself a mental shake. It was too soon to start favoring any one girl.

After Sydnee, I spent time with the remaining three girls, saving Kayden for last.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly. “I heard some of the girls giving you a hard time.”

“Whatever.” She waved her hand dismissively. “I can handle them.”

I fought back a grin. “Is that so?”

She shrugged. “They can say what they want. I truly don’t care.”

“You have a target on your back, you know.”

“You don’t say?” she deadpanned. “Maybe *that’s* why I was challenged last night.”

I laughed out loud at her sarcasm. “You’re different from the rest of the girls.”

“Yeah. They all want to be here. I wasn’t given a choice.”

My smile slipped at that. “Do you want to leave?”

It would be easy to eliminate her tonight if that’s what she wanted.

“That’s not up to me.” She gave me a curious look. “Is that why you invited me tonight?”

“What? No!” I said before I could think better of it. I shouldn’t be

revealing my hand. “What I mean is, I had no preconceived opinions before this date. I came in with an open mind.”

“Uh huh.”

“You don’t believe me.” I stopped walking and turned to her.

“Does it matter?”

We were a good distance from the fire now. No one could hear us. But I still surprised myself by saying, “Yes, actually. I’m not a liar, Kayden. I pride myself on my integrity.”

She looked up at me, and I could have sworn she was going to say something, but she only shrugged.

“I’d like to get to know you so I can make a decision. Why are you pushing me away?”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Isn’t it clear? I’m here against my will, competing to win the hand of the man who killed my brother. How am I supposed to reconcile that?”

She had a point, but... “I want you to give me a real chance, Kayden. If you’re going to participate in the Contention, then actually *do* it. You could have submitted last night when you were challenged. That tells me you aren’t ready to go home.”

She snorted. “Back to Branson? Hardly.”

So, she wanted to stick it out and take me up on my offer of a council position. “Then let me give you a word of advice. If you want to stick around, you’ll have to try. I won’t just carry you to the top ten out of pity.”

Her cheeks reddened, and she gritted her teeth. “I don’t want you to.”

There was some of that fire. “Good. Then show me that.”

I turned and walked back to the fire pit, leaving her staring after me with her mouth agape.



AFTER THE DATE WRAPPED UP, with all of us drinking more champagne and toasting s’mores, I made my way to my apartment on the fourth floor. I wasn’t surprised to find Garrett waiting for me, his legs propped up on my dining table while he reclined back in a chair.

“Well? How did it go with all the lovely ladies?” He wiggled his eyebrows. “If you want me to stand in for you on a couple of dates, all you

have to do is ask...”

I rolled my eyes. Garrett... always the ladies’ man.

“Seriously, do you know who you’re sending home?”

I sighed and pulled out a chair opposite him. “Yeah. I think it will be Oakley.”

He raised his brows in surprise. “Interesting. She seemed like one of the saner contestants.”

“I thought so, too. But we just didn’t connect like I thought we might. It felt like a one-sided conversation all night.” Most of the conversations had felt pretty superficial, other than with Kayden, but at least the other women had talked.

“What’s that look?” Garrett asked. Sometimes my beta being my best friend could be a bad thing. He knew me too well.

“I’m not sure how to explain it. There’s something about Kayden that draws me in.” I shook my head, not wanting to get into the way I couldn’t stop looking at her tonight and how despite her attitude, I still wanted to get to know her better. “But she frustrates the hell out of me. I don’t know.” I shrugged. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Hmm.” Garrett rubbed his chin in thought, surprising me when he let my comment slide. “Well, Oakley is probably a good choice then. An alpha’s wife can’t be too afraid to speak.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“An alpha’s wife also can’t constantly be in defiance.” He was talking about Kayden now. And I agreed. She had no qualms about speaking her mind. Not necessarily a bad thing, but she’d stood up to me, questioned, and challenged me on more than one occasion.

Based on what I’d seen tonight, some of the other women were much better choices for an alpha’s wife. Of course, it was too early to know, but Sydnee fit the bill quite well.

Why then could I not stop thinking about Kayden?

KAYDEN

“**B**reakfast is served!”

I groaned and pulled my blankets over my head, snuggling deeper into the soft down mattress. How could it be morning already? It felt like my head had just hit the pillow.

“Kayden, dear, you must wake up,” Faye continued. “You have quite the full day ahead of you.”

I pulled the blankets down just enough to peek at her with one eye. “Another date already?”

She laughed. “No, of course not. There won’t be another official date until after the first competition, three days from now.”

“Three days?” I sat straight up in the bed at that. I don’t know why, but I’d thought we’d have more time to prepare. “What kind of competition?”

Faye shrugged, walking to the small table and chairs by my window. She was carrying a tray piled high with food, and the smell of bacon had me salivating. I tossed the covers off and grabbed my robe, following behind Faye.

“They won’t announce the details until tonight, but you can bet on it being a physical competition. The game makers like to weed out contestants who can’t hold their own pretty early.” Faye turned and winked. “But I think you can hold your own.”

I was less concerned about the competition and more concerned with filling my belly now that I’d seen the decadent display she’d brought me. French toast, bacon, eggs, a bowl of fruit, yogurt, three kinds of juice, and an assortment of bagels and cream cheese to choose from. I sat down and dug in

while Faye opened my wardrobe and discussed the day ahead.

“First, you’ll have PT—physical training—all morning in the gym with trainers. Then after lunch, you’ll spend the rest of the day in classes, learning the fundamentals of pack law.” She turned with a bright pink athletic dress in her hands. “What do you think about this?”

I wrinkled my nose and shook my head since my mouth was full of food.

Faye sighed. “I like you a lot, Kayden, don’t get me wrong. But you certainly are opinionated about your clothes. This one?”

Another athletic dress. Were we playing tennis? “Can I just wear pants or shorts?”

She looked personally affronted by my suggestion. “But why would you want to?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Dresses aren’t something I typically wear in my everyday life.”

Faye was always dressed to the nines in a dress, heels, full makeup, and hair. At least, she had been since I’d first arrived. I assumed this was her usual look. “I love dresses.”

She said it was as if she couldn’t understand why I didn’t, which made me smile. “Look, Faye, I appreciate everything you’re doing for me, but I need to be honest. Having a stylist and all these clothes at my disposal is great, but I’m not a fancy dress kind of girl. Jeans are my go-to.”

“Noted,” she replied, sitting opposite me and plucking a strawberry from my fruit bowl. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not. There’s enough here to feed at least four people.”

“Great. So, here’s the deal. It’s my job to help you shine. To be the best version of yourself you can be. I can work with the fact that you aren’t into all the frills, but I need you to trust me in return. I know what I’m doing and want to help you go as far as possible in the Contention.” She smiled softly, and for the first time, I felt like maybe there was someone here on my side.

I piled my plate full with a second helping of food and returned her smile. “It’s a deal.”

After breakfast, I dressed in a pair of dark purple leggings in a buttery soft fabric with cutouts along the legs, a gray and purple athletic tank, and tied my hair back in a braid. I thought I looked pretty cute, and as I made my way down to the first floor, there was a pep in my step.

I was looking forward to PT. It would be good to move my body and work out some of the stress and tension I’d felt for three days. I hadn’t been

keeping up with training like when Nico was alive, and I was ready to push my body to its limits.

When I walked into the massive gym—as large as any commercial fitness center but with a spectacular view of the beach through the floor-to-ceiling windows—I scanned the room and made a beeline toward Jessica. She'd been the nicest person I'd met so far aside from Faye, and I wasn't in the mood to deal with the catty bitch club. Last night had been more than enough for me.

Not that I cared what the other women thought of me, but I wasn't in the mood for their snide comments. I'd heard enough after returning from walking with Holden on the date.

“Hey,” I said, offering a smile to Jessica. “How are you this morning?”

She smiled back, tucking a stray strand of blonde hair back into her bun. “Other than dreading PT, you mean?”

I laughed. “Oh, it can't be that bad. I'm looking forward to it.”

Jessica gestured at her body, her hands resting on her curvy hips. “Yes, but I'm not nearly as fit as you are. This will likely be pretty miserable.”

While Jessica wasn't what I would call overweight, she was pretty short and a little soft around the middle. That was totally fine, but it looked like working out wasn't something she did very often.

The sound of sharp clapping was followed by a deep male voice. “Hello, ladies. I'm Dalton, and I'll be your trainer this morning.”

I turned, and Jessica gripped my arm. “He looks tough,” she whispered, blue eyes wide. “This is going to be even worse than I imagined.”

It was true. While Dalton was smiling, he did look like the type of trainer who would push us to our limits. That's exactly what I needed to clear my head and get some perspective here. I'd barely had time to wrap my head around everything happening—it was overwhelming like I'd told Holden last night. Exercise had a calming effect on my mind.

“It will be okay,” I told her softly. “Just stick with me. You can always modify the exercises if you need to.”

“Okay, first things first,” Dalton called out. “Time to warm up. Please select a treadmill.”

Jessica and I chose two right in front of the window, and the view was majestic, the sun sparkling on the dark blue ocean, the waves crashing and receding. This workout might give me the peace I needed so badly.

But I hadn't planned on the leaders of the bitch squad joining us. Sydnee

took the treadmill next to me, with Madison on her far side. I glanced at Jessica, rolled my eyes, then started my treadmill at an easy jog to warm up. Jessica put hers on a lower setting and started walking, a grimace on her pretty face.

Sydnee turned her treadmill up to a faster pace than mine was, giving Jessica and me a saccharine smile. “Are we taking leisurely strolls today, ladies?”

“It’s called a warm-up. You should try it, or you might pull a muscle,” I tossed back. “On the other hand, just jump right in. Maybe you’ll pull a muscle and be unable to participate in our first physical challenge.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That’s how it’s going to be, then?”

I arched a brow but didn’t say anything, focusing my attention on the waves crashing in the distance, keeping my rhythm steady and pacing my breaths. Jessica looked around the room, her forehead furrowed, then turned up the pace on her treadmill to a slow jog.

“Look, Sydnee,” Madison said in a mock-whisper, “she’s trying to jog. Isn’t that cute?”

Sydnee smiled wickedly. “You’ll have to try harder than that if you want to be in shape for the competitions.”

“Don’t listen to them, Jessica,” I told her. “You do what’s right for you.”

Jessica pressed her lips together and turned her treadmill up a bit faster. She was already breaking a sweat. “I should have been better prepared,” she muttered.

I frowned. “Just go at your own pace.”

“I’m fine,” she said with a too-bright smile. Her cheeks were pink, and she was breathing hard as she broke into a run. “I was just warming up. I can keep up.”

But not five minutes later, Sydnee and Madison hadn’t let up, Jessica had pushed herself even harder, and I was starting to worry about how pale she was looking and how labored her breathing was.

“Jessica, do you—”

Suddenly she jumped off the treadmill and ran to the nearest trash can. The sounds of her getting sick filled the room, and white-hot anger had me turning off my treadmill and whirling on Sydnee.

“What the fuck is your problem? Since when is it cool to be a bully? Aren’t you too old for that shit?”

She blinked, clearly shocked at my outburst, but then she scoffed and

waved her hand. “Whatever. The alpha’s wife needs to be the best of the best. Not only does Jessica need to get in shape and be ready, but she needs to realize this competition isn’t for the weak.”

“Or the chubby,” Madison added with a snorted laugh.

I clenched my fists, ready to haul Sydnee off her treadmill and show her what was up, but who knows where that would lead. I wasn’t about to challenge someone when I didn’t know what they were capable of.

“An alpha’s wife,” I retorted, my voice shaking with anger, “wouldn’t be a bully who tears down the people around her. The alpha and his mate certainly aren’t bullies.”

I gave her a scathing glare, then hurried over to Jessica. “Hey, are you okay? Let me get you some water.”

Jessica nodded, her cheeks still flushed as she struggled to catch her breath. I grabbed a water bottle from the gym fridge and brought it back just as the nurse—Margie, I believe she’d said her name was when she stitched me up that first night—came in and rushed over to Jessica.

“Here, hon, have a seat right here,” the elderly woman said, her voice soft and kind. “I just want to check your vitals and ensure this isn’t anything more than overexertion.”

“Jessica, you shouldn’t have done that.” I kept my voice low in case anyone was listening. “You can’t worry about what those bitches think. Sorry,” I added quickly to Margie. She simply smiled as she took Jessica’s blood pressure.

“I know. But I just couldn’t stand the way they were making me feel. I wanted to prove that I was good enough.” Jessica looked up at me, her lower lip trembling. “Do you think I’m too weak or unfit to be an alpha’s wife?”

God, I wanted to punch Sydnee in the face for making this sweet girl feel so bad about herself. “I think weakness comes in many forms, just like strengths. It’s how you use both that defines you. Don’t allow someone else to make you feel small. You’re just as worthy as anyone else here.”

“You should listen to your friend,” Margie said as she put away the blood pressure cuff. “She’s right. Now, I think you’ll be just fine. Drink some water and take it easy. Don’t push past your limits.”

Jessica nodded. “Thank you, Margie. You’re just as kind as ever.”

Margie patted her shoulder. “Hang in there.” She turned to me with a smile. “How are your stitches?”

“Fine. I think the wound is mostly healed now.”

She nodded. “Should be. But if you want to stop by and have me take a look, you know where to find me.”

Margie left, and Jessica sighed heavily. “Now what?”

I glanced around. Some women had moved on to other training activities while Jessica got checked out. “Let’s check out the free weights. Some light toning should be doable.”

The rest of PT was uneventful, though after my outburst with Sydnee, I felt many eyes on me as I continued working out, pushing myself hard in search of that inner peace that was so tough to find these days.

As I worked, my thoughts drifted back to last night, to my conversations with Holden by the fountain and on the walk. I didn’t know what to make of it. He seemed like a decent person. The fact remained that he killed my brother, but how long could I continue blaming him? Even I knew he’d followed the laws and traditions that governed our species. Challenges were part of shifter life.

It was possible I might have to kill someone myself during this wretched competition. If it came down to it, would I be able to? If it meant not having to go back to Branson, could I do it?

I wasn’t sure. Holden had killed more shifters than I was even aware of. But could I really call him a murderer? There’d been hurt in his eyes when I’d said it yesterday. Not that I wanted to be his new best friend or anything, but a tiny part of me could understand why he’d done it, even if I hated to admit it to myself. Last night, he’d been different than I expected. Not nearly as hard and callous as I’d made him out to be in my mind. And I couldn’t deny that when he looked at me with those smoldering brown eyes, I felt things I’d never felt before.

I finished my workout, then headed back to my room to shower, not happy with where my thoughts had gone. Lunch was waiting on my table when I came out of the bathroom in a silk robe, but Faye was nowhere to be seen. I ate quickly, then dressed in some jeans and a flowing white blouse, unsure of the dress code for a classroom environment. It was casual but still put together, and I thought Faye would approve.

Finding the classroom took me a while, and I had to turn around twice and ask a staff member for directions. By the time I made it, everyone else was there.

Jessica waved me over, and I smiled at the sight of her. She’d saved me a seat. At least there was one person here that was honest and kind.

“Good afternoon,” the tall redheaded woman at the front of the classroom greeted us once I’d been seated. “My name is Sarah, and I serve on the alpha’s council as a historian. Today I’ll teach you about the hierarchy and politics within the shifter council, including an overview of the various council positions.”

I perked up at that. So far, I hadn’t heard anything else about the top ten being eligible for those jobs, and I hoped I would learn more today.

“But first, a lesson on the ranks within the North American pack. Many of these formalities are observed at a regional level, so most of you should be familiar with some of what I’ll say. But there are a few differences regarding leadership within the alpha’s council.”

I took notes, particularly the council positions, which drew the unwelcome attention of the bitch squad.

“Do you not know how this works, Kayden?” Sydnee hissed from two tables behind me when the instructor stepped out for a short break. She giggled. “I thought everyone was aware of pack laws.”

I sighed and tried to ignore her, but she wasn’t finished.

“Where are you even from? Some backwoods pack lands, no doubt. I’ve known all of this since I was a child.” She gave me a pitying look, though I knew it was fake. “Poor thing, totally out of your league. But I guess that’s what happens sometimes.”

I might not have had a strong grasp on all of the politics, but it had never interested me. Unlike most of these women, who seemed to have spent their entire lives preparing for the Contention, I was a waitress who lived a simple life. And I’d been happy with it, up until Nico died.

But at least I was learning now. Maybe it would come in handy if I did have to go home and deal with Branson. Not that he followed the rules...

By the end of the lessons, I had a raging headache, and all I wanted was to take a nap.

“Do you have any idea what’s planned for tonight?” I asked Jessica as we quickly walked out of the classroom, putting as much distance between us and the mean girls as possible.

“Another dinner, I suppose. Probably not as formal as the first night, though.” She glanced up at me, a spark of hope in her eyes. “Do you want to sit together?”

I smiled. “I’d love that.”

I’d been too busy to feel lonely, but I missed my sister desperately and

wondered what she'd been told about me leaving. If only I could have told her goodbye... But there was nothing I could do about that. For now, Jessica was quickly becoming the closest thing I had to a friend here. And I had a feeling we would need to stick together in the coming days.

KAYDEN

Faye was waiting in my room when I returned, already sifting through my wardrobe again. She was becoming a regular fixture in my private quarters.

“How did classes go?”

I shrugged. “I learned some things.”

“Fabulous,” she trilled. “Now, I was just informed that Holden and the others will be absent from diner tonight due to an important council meeting. It will just be the girls dining together tonight.”

“Fabulous,” I echoed, much less enthusiastically. “Can I just have dinner in my room then? I’m not really up for socializing.”

“While it technically isn’t against the rules, it’s quite discouraged. You wouldn’t want anyone to think you were hiding out up here, would you?”

Faye had a point. Sydnee might get the wrong idea and think she’d intimidated me.

“And,” she continued, “as an apology from Holden for missing dinner, he’s arranged a little surprise for all of you.”

I groaned and walked toward the bathroom. “I’m not sure I’m really in the mood for a surprise right now.”

Faye smiled, her blue eyes twinkling. “You’re going to love this one, trust me. You and all the other contestants have the opportunity to make a call home before dinner.”

I spun, staring at her, almost afraid I hadn’t heard correctly. “What did you say?”

She nodded, her smile widening. “You heard me. You can call your

family, friends, whoever you'd like. But you only have a few minutes. This is quite unusual, truth be told."

For a moment, I wondered if Holden had done this for me since I hadn't even had a chance to tell my sister goodbye. I dismissed the idea immediately, though. Why would he bother doing something just for me? He'd been the one to bring me here against my will in the first place—and hadn't let me see Jenna before leaving.

"Here's a phone." Faye set the device down on the table. "I'll give you some privacy, but I'll be back in ten minutes to help you select a dress."

I was too excited about calling Jenna to even protest how unnecessary a dress was tonight. "Thank you so much." I picked the phone up and dialed Jenna's number before Faye had made it out the door.

"Hello?" came my sister's familiar voice after a few rings. My heart swelled with emotion, and I couldn't speak for a moment as tears tightened my throat.

"Jenna," I finally managed, "it's me."

"Kayden? Oh my god. Are you okay? I can't believe you're calling me. I mean, someone contacted me and told me you would, but I didn't want to get my hopes up." She sniffed, and I knew my sister well enough to know she was crying. "What's going on there? Are you okay?" she repeated.

"Yes, I'm fine," I assured her, though I wasn't sure how true that was. "Did someone tell you what happened? With the Contention, I mean."

"One of Branson's goons came to let me know." Her voice cracked. "They told me to keep my mouth shut, or they'd ship me off as well." Rage welled in my chest that Jenna had been threatened. "I've been so worried, Kayden. How in the world did this happen?"

As quickly as possible, I gave her a rundown of what happened that morning outside Branson's office, followed by an abbreviated overview of how things were going with the Contention.

"I can't believe this," she said quietly. "Can they really force you to be there against your will? How are you holding up?"

"Well, I suppose it really isn't against my will since I chose to be here when Holden gave me the option."

"The other option was exile. That's no choice," she insisted.

I'd felt the same, but none of that mattered now. I relayed what Holden had said about earning a spot on the council. "Look, I'm going to do my best to make it to the top ten. Jenna, if I can do that, then I can find a way to get

you out of there, too. We can make new lives for ourselves. That's what matters now."

"Just be careful, Kayden," she whispered. "You never know how cutthroat those women could be."

I did, but I wasn't going to tell her I'd already been challenged. What use would that do other than worrying her even more.

"How are you doing?" I asked, changing the subject.

"I'm lonely." Her tone was sad, and guilt washed over me. Jenna was the last remaining member of our family on our pack lands. She had some friends, but it wasn't the same.

"It won't be long, Jenna. You can hang in there. Just stay away from Branson as much as possible. I don't want him retaliating against you for the things I said to the pack. Promise me you'll keep your distance and stay safe." I simply didn't trust him not to make an example of my family by showing what happened to those who spoke out against him.

"You don't have to tell me twice." She bit out a bitter laugh. "Are you making any friends?"

"Yeah, one or two girls have seemed genuine. I might have made a few enemies too."

"Why am I not surprised? Let me guess, you're speaking your mind and calling it like you see it, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. Would you expect anything else?" I laughed, and we talked a few minutes longer before Faye came back in. I regretted telling my sister goodbye but hearing her voice had me feeling better than I had all week.

Faye helped me dress in a short nude and black dress that was sophisticated without being too frilly; then, I made my way to the dining room. Jessica and Brooklyn were already sitting together when I walked through the doors, so I made a beeline to join them. Fortunately, Sydnee was seated at the opposite end of the long table. Unfortunately, that didn't stop her from speaking loudly enough to ensure we all heard her.

"I had just gone out for a run," she told Madison, though I was sure her words were directed to everyone else. "Right before I shifted, I saw Holden standing there. He said hello, and before I knew it, we were deep in conversation. He was just so sweet and romantic," she gushed, a dreamy look on her face. But I swore that when she looked my way, there was smugness in her smile. "He wanted to know all about me, and we discussed the future

we could have together if I were to become his mate.”

I glanced around the table, not surprised to see that about half the women were glaring daggers at her while the other half were hanging on her every word, eating it all up like it was the juiciest gossip they’d ever heard.

I rolled my eyes and turned to Jessica. “I like your dress.”

She’d chosen a flowing pale pink maxi dress with tiny white flowers, and I thought it suited her perfectly. Sweet, feminine, and classic.

Her cheeks turned pink, but her smile was pleased. “Thanks, Kayden. That’s kind of you to say. You look beautiful, of course. As always.”

I didn’t know about that, but before I could say anything else, Willow came into the dining room to discuss what the next few days would look like. Two more days of PT and classes, and on the third day would be our first competition.

“It would be wise for you to learn everything you can in these next days. Really soak it in,” she advised. “You never know what may be of value in the competition.”

So far, I’d managed not to think too much about the first competition, throwing myself fully into training and classes, but now my stomach flip-flopped with nerves. The first competition would truly set the tone for who could make the cut. I had to be prepared for anything.



PT WAS first thing the next morning, just as the day before, only this time we were gathered around a giant sparring ring as Dalton explained the objective of today’s exercise.

“You will pair up, two on two, fighting hand to hand with no weapons. Only clean hits to the designated areas.” Dalton indicated the torso, arms, and legs. “Nothing above the neck, no cheap shots. The goal isn’t to injure but to subdue your opponent as efficiently as possible. You fight until one pins the other, and the other submits.”

Dalton walked around, assessing us all. “Am I clear on the rules?”

Everyone nodded, and we began. Jessica and I paired up together, but we hadn’t been working long before Dalton came over to split us up. “You’re going too easy on each other and then we have these two.” He gestured toward Sydnee and short, redhaired Aubrey, who had been relatively off my

radar until now. “They’re getting too competitive, and I don’t trust they won’t break the rules and injure each other. I’m going to switch you ladies out with them.”

I held back a groan, and Jessica glanced at me with a hint of panic in her eyes. But Dalton was right; we hadn’t been giving it our all, not wanting to hurt each other. Perhaps it was best if we switched things up, especially if I wanted to use this time to prepare for the competition two days from now.

Unfortunately, it looked as if I was going to be stuck with Sydnee. I wouldn’t subject Jessica to dealing with her.

“Well, look who we have here,” Sydnee taunted me after Dalton spoke to her and Aubrey, and she moved over to stand opposite me. She gave me a malicious grin. “Let’s see what they teach you in that backwoods pack of yours.”

I grimaced but shifted my weight into a fighting stance, ready to take whatever she could dish out. She came at me fast.

Two quick jabs and a kick to my stomach had me gasping for breath. Sydnee took that opportunity to come at me, trying to knock me to the ground. But I was prepared this time. I fought back, landing several hits of my own until we circled each other with narrowed eyes, out of breath and looking for the right opening.

I made the first move this time, feinting left before hurtling my body to her right side, wrapping my arms around Sydnee’s waist and sending us flying to the ground. We grappled for a hold on each other, both of us trying to gain the advantage. For a moment, I thought I had her pinned as I straddled her legs.

But Sydnee didn’t care about the rules. She shot her fist up in a throat punch that sent me onto my back, and I just lay there, trying to get air into my lungs as my throat felt like it was collapsing. Sydnee climbed on top of me, pinning me easily, and bared her teeth in an evil grin.

“Submit,” she hissed.

Did I even have a choice at this point? I could barely move, barely breathe. I nodded faintly, and she smiled and fist-pumped the air in victory. Dalton hadn’t seen her illegal hit, and it was my word against hers. It was worth taking the loss this time, even if it hadn’t been fair.

I jumped up from the mat as soon as she let me go, anger burning through my veins. I could have taken her if she hadn’t played dirty. I grabbed a bottle of water, ignoring Sydnee gloating to her friends as I struggled to get a deep

breath. It was bullshit, but I'd learned a valuable lesson—don't trust that anyone will play by the rules. We continued sparring for the next few hours, taking turns switching off partners between recovery breaks where Dalton taught us various techniques.

By the end of class, I knew I'd be better prepared the next time.

"Do you want to have lunch together?" Jessica asked as we left the gym. "My assistant said we can do what we want for lunch today—have it in our rooms, in the dining hall, wherever we prefer."

"I'd love to, and the privacy sounds great. I might lose my appetite if I have to hear Sydnee gloating." I rolled my eyes, and Jessica giggled.

We went to her room on the opposite side of the hallway and four doors down from mine. It was decorated in shades of cream, white, and gray, similar to mine, though with a softer, more feminine look.

After we let our assistants know where we'd be dining, we settled in to wait for our meals to be delivered. If I had one good thing to say about this situation, it was that the food service was impeccable.

"I can't believe Sydnee did that," Jessica said when I told her how our sparring went down.

"I can. I swear she will take every opportunity to make the Contention as miserable for us as possible." I grimaced. "I can already tell she's the ringleader of the bitch squad."

Jessica giggled. "Bitch squad?"

I grinned. "That's what I've dubbed them in my mind. Anyone who isn't one of her little minions is her enemy— at least that's how I see it."

Our food was delivered, a delicious steak salad that was perfect after the workout we'd just had, and we got to know each other a little better. It was nice not having to worry about anyone else around to give us grief.

"Honestly," Jessica admitted, "I didn't want to participate in the Contention. I definitely don't love the idea of competing, but I don't really have a choice."

"Same, though probably for different reasons. Why don't you have a choice?"

"My father is an alpha. I don't know if you know that." She paused, and I shook my head. I hadn't. "He has these totally unrealistic expectations for me. He thinks I have a chance at winning—which I think is ridiculous—but at the very least, he expects me to earn a spot on the alpha's council. If I don't..." She glanced down at her food and took a deep breath. "I don't know

how I could face him and his disappointment.”

My heart went out to her. “I can’t imagine what it must be like to have that burden on your shoulders, of living up to your family’s expectations, but I understand the need to earn a council spot.”

She furrowed her brow. “Is that your goal?”

“I’d like a shot at a new life. My alpha, Branson, is a wildcard. He’s vicious, ruthless, and doesn’t care who he has to hurt to get what he wants. The whole pack is afraid of him, except for his misguided followers. It’s only me and my sister Jenna left in my family. So, if I could get on the council, it would be my ticket out of my pack—and I’d find a way to bring Jenna with me.”

“I’ve heard my father speak of Branson,” Jessica admitted. “He has nothing good to say about him.”

“Neither do I.”

We finished our lunch and then returned to the classroom, where our instructor informed us we’d be learning about the history of pack wars before going onto the grounds for a short, tactical training exercise. Many decades ago, there had been much infighting among the regional packs within the North American pack, and many lives had been lost.

Ultimately, the alpha at the time had stepped in and acted as judge and jury, taking it upon himself to dole out punishments, removing and replacing alphas, and punishing those who broke pack law. It had been before the council was formed, but the tradition of the North American alpha’s word being final had never changed. He was literally the most powerful man in our world.

After a couple of hours of history lessons, everything started to sound the same, so I was thrilled when we moved outside for the training exercise.

A tall man I hadn’t seen before was waiting for us out in an open field, so far from the large buildings of the estate that all we could see were trees surrounding the vast clearing.

“Good evening, lovely ladies of the Contention,” he greeted us with a smile. “My name is Kyle. I’m going to teach you how to set up a defensive perimeter.”

Oh, interesting. This could be fun. I recalled Willow’s words from dinner last night and wondered if this could be something we needed for the first competition. I made a point of paying attention to everything Kyle taught us.

Even better, we got a chance to put the lessons into action.

“Okay,” Kyle said, clapping his hands. “We’re going to split everyone into four teams. Two teams at a time. Each team will create, then attempt to breach the other team’s perimeter within the woods behind me. First team to get tagged by the other is out.” He handed each of us a whistle. “If you tag someone, blow your whistle, and the round ends. Two other teams will go, then the winners will take on each other.”

“Oh, and one more thing,” he added. “The team that shows the best efforts will earn a dinner with Kessa tonight, since Holden is still meeting with the council.”

That actually intrigued me. I’d like to learn a little more about the alpha’s wife.

I was teamed up with Aubrey, Adriana, and Katie—who was one of Sydnee’s devoted followers. This time, I took the lead, not wanting to leave my fate in the hands of others, and I wanted that dinner.

Nico had worked with me on similar techniques to set up a defensive perimeter, so I felt confident I could handle this. Using his advice and the strategies Kyle taught us, my team headed into the woods and quickly set up our perimeter to the south of our opponents. We then started working our way through the woods, carefully clearing each area as a unit before moving forward.

We were paired against Sydnee’s team and were making good progress when I spotted Sydnee up ahead—alone. Had she not been paying attention?

Silently, I gestured to get my teammates’ attention, then pointed toward the area Sydnee was attempting to navigate on her own. It was almost too easy to sneak up behind her and tap her on the shoulder.

She spun around, rage in her eyes, especially when she saw who had gotten the best of her. I only grinned as I blew my whistle and could practically see the steam coming from Sydnee’s ears as she marched back toward the clearing without a word.

My team and I also made our way back, then participated in another round, which we also won easily. I sent up a silent prayer of thanks to my brother, who had prepared me for this more than I realized.

Sydnee stood pouting the rest of the time. Clearly, she had quite a fragile ego.

“Congratulations to Kayden, Adriana, Aubrey, and Katie—you’ve earned a dinner with the alpha’s mate,” Kyle said with a broad grin. “Excellent job, all of you.” He gave us a few more tips and tricks, though they were nothing I

hadn't already learned from my brother, then dismissed us for the day.

Sydnee stomped off and gathered her posse to head back to the estate, and Jessica and I walked together. Sydnee was ahead of us, whispering to Grey, though we couldn't hear what she said. As we made our way into the building and up the stairs toward our rooms, Sydnee's whispering became more intense, and Grey was nodding along. It almost looked like Sydnee was trying to hype her up for something.

I found out why when we rounded the corner from the main hallway. A sudden snarl erupted as Grey randomly shifted, charging toward Adriana. The tiny brunette barely managed to shift before Grey was on top of her with an aggressive attack.

Adriana struggled to keep Grey at bay, barely avoiding the sharp fangs that snapped dangerously close to her throat. The wolves tumbled and fought, and a crowd gathered around them, all of us stunned but still intrigued over what might happen.

However, it was a short show. Petite Adriana was no match for Grey's larger wolf, and she submitted with a whine.

I started to turn and head for my room, but a hand darted out and wrapped tightly around my arm. Someone spun me around and shoved me into a wall before I could react, then got right in my face.

Sydnee. I should have known. She shoved me again, pressing my back against the wall. "If you dare make me look bad again, I will take you down. Mark my word. I'll have you submitting and begging for mercy just like in class yesterday." Her dark eyes glittered with malice.

My pulse ratcheted up, adrenaline pumping through my veins as I realized I might have to fight her right now. Would she attack just like Grey had? My stress response kicked into high gear, and I struggled to take a deep breath.

"Just because I didn't play dirty in class doesn't mean I can't kick your ass," I snarled. Sydnee's face turned red, sparks of anger flashing in her eyes.

Just when I thought she might actually go for it and challenge me right here and now, more commotion in the hallway had her releasing me and stepping back. I moved away quickly, shocked to see that Grey had challenged someone else after defeating Adriana.

While the first fight had been over almost before it began, Elana was more of a fighter than Adriana, and things were quickly escalating as the two wolves snapped their jaws and clawed at each other. Blood soaked the carpet,

and my heart dropped. Would this one be a fight to the death?

We'd been here less than a week, and there had already been three challenges. Contestants were dropping like flies.

I saw Jessica moving toward me, and I hurried to meet her. "Should we do something? Get somebody? They look like they're going to kill each other."

"No, we can't interfere in a challenge." Then she leaned in and whispered, "What did Sydnee say to you?"

I shook my head, not wanting to get into it right now. Just when I thought someone was surely going to die, Grey finally submitted to Elana. I glanced at Sydnee, who was fuming. So, her little buddy was now out of the Contention. I'd bet my last dollar that she was the one who'd put Grey up to the challenges in the first place. That seemed about right—Sydnee having someone else do her dirty work.

The wolves both shifted back, and staff was already rushing in to assist them. Elana was losing blood fast from a bite on her thigh, and she was carried off to the infirmary.

"Okay, show's over." That was Willow. "Back to your rooms."

A flood of assistants filled the hallway, ushering the rest of us back into our rooms.

"Are you okay?" Faye asked, giving me a once-over when she found me.

"Yeah, I'm fine." A little shaken up, but physically I wasn't hurt.

"Good. Let's get you cleaned up for your dinner with Kessa."

In the chaos, I'd nearly forgotten my hard-won victory. It may have been a shitty day on most counts, but at least I could say I'd won this fair and square—and Sydnee had won nothing at all.

"Yes, that sounds great." I smiled at Faye, surprising her when I said, "And you know what? I'll even let you pick my dress."

HOLDEN

For two nights in a row, I hadn't dined with the contestants. Last night's council meeting was to be a standard affair, discussing the technicalities of what needed happen over the coming months as I took over as alpha. Instead, it had turned into hours of discussion about Kayden's pack.

Not only was Branson not completing his monthly check-ins with my father, as all regional alphas were required to do, but he had stopped responding to any messages or calls. Last night this all came to light when I brought up how Branson had behaved when we'd visited.

According to some members of the council who were our liaisons to all the packs, Branson had been poaching other packs' members and bringing them into his fold. The real question was, *why*? What was he playing at? I couldn't be sure, but instinct told me Branson was a troublemaker who was gearing up to create even more problems.

I sighed as I walked into the largest of our meeting rooms, where we would hopefully take care of the business we hadn't gotten to last night. It held at least a hundred people, though only a quarter of that was present tonight. It was frustrating that I needed to spend so much time dealing with Branson when I was also supposed to be finding my future mate.

"Holden," Garrett called, waving me over to where he was standing at the front of the room with my father and his beta, David.

I joined them, and Garrett grinned. "How's lover boy today?"

Father chuckled and clapped me on the back. "Yes, son, any favorites yet?"

"Still getting to know everyone." Even though I shook my head, my mind

drifted to Kayden. She wasn't a *favorite*, per se, but I felt more connected to her than anyone else—which was strange since she didn't like me and clearly didn't want to be here.

“Garrett and I were just discussing some of the upcoming changes that will need to be made as you take over,” David said, steering the subject away from the Contention and getting right to business. He handed me a sheet of paper. “This is a list of the retiring members of the council. You'll need to fill these seats quickly.”

I glanced down at the paper realizing there would be more vacancies than I'd thought. “Many members are retiring.” I looked up at my father. “Is this typical?”

He nodded. “Yes, it was the same when I took over. Many of these council members have served with me from the very beginning. Thirty-five years is a long time. Besides, it will be good to establish a new guard. You want a team that can work well with your style of leadership. A fresh start is often the best.”

We'd discussed the intricacies of this before, but now that I saw which positions coming open, I could start thinking about who I wanted to work with.

“So, what's on the agenda tonight?” I asked, folding the paper and tucking it into my pocket for closer review later.

“We're discussing the passing of the guard with the returning council members, along with the details of your ascension ceremony.”

“That's where I'll come in,” said Willow, appearing beside us with her ever-present tablet in hand.

The meeting got underway, and while I would rather focus on getting to know the women, at least this meeting was more productive than last night.

When we wrapped up a few hours later, Garrett followed me into the hall. “Want to come up for a drink? Since you sent Oakley home, you've been tight-lipped about your thoughts.” He gave me a mischievous grin. “Maybe some whiskey will loosen your tongue.”

I laughed. “I've been too busy politicking to have time to think. I'm going for a walk and to do just that, but maybe I'll stop by later tonight?” Garrett was a night owl, always up pretty late.

“Sounds good.” He clapped me on the back. “You know where to find me.”

I quickly headed for the nearest exit, a door that led out to the northern

courtyard. Stepping out into the moonlit night, I breathed in the salty sea breeze and chose a path that wove through the vast gardens. Summer was quickly coming to an end, and the nights were getting cooler.

Settling into an easy gait, I tried to let go of the stress that always weighed heavy on my shoulders. There was so much riding on my ability to fill my father's shoes; sometimes it was overwhelming. Other times, I knew I'd excel. I'd been training for this my whole life.

Perhaps the biggest stress was the Contention itself. Going into it, it had been like a rite of passage, something I'd always accepted as part of becoming alpha. I hadn't counted on what it felt like in the moment, though. Knowing that every little choice I made—from who I sat next to at dinner to who I chose for more private dates, and ultimately who I would choose as my mate—impacted my future.

I'd worried that I might unknowingly send the perfect choice home too early. The challenges were another matter. Willow had informed me at the end of the meeting that two other women were going home tonight—Adriana and Grey.

The rush of relief I'd felt when she hadn't mentioned Kayden's name had given me pause. What was it about her that I found so interesting? Was it how she stood up to me and said whatever she wanted without worrying about trying to impress me? Or perhaps she didn't fawn all over me like almost every other woman I'd ever known. It was refreshing, ironically.

My mind drifted back to our conversation two nights ago. She'd given me some insight into Branson and had offered to provide information on her pack. While she didn't exhibit loyalty to her alpha—which would normally be a giant red flag—I could understand why she didn't. She didn't trust Branson any more than I did, and for good reason.

Maybe taking her up on her offer was a good idea. While she wasn't on board with the Contention, she might jump at helping us overthrow Branson—an option that had been brought up more than once last night, though it was definitely a last resort. It would allow Kayden the option of returning home to her pack lands.

I frowned at the thought. I'd already come up with various positions on the council for which Kayden would be suitable. As I thought it over, I found I'd made my way along a winding trail to the south side of the estate. The fountain where we'd sat and talked was just off the path, so I stopped to stare into the rippling water, hoping to gain some clarity on the various decisions

resting on my shoulders.

A few moments later, the sound of feet hitting the dirt drew my attention, and I lifted my eyes, only to see Kayden jogging along another trail that passed by the fountain. From where I stood on the opposite side, she couldn't see me. I took the opportunity to study her, and I liked what I saw. In her running shorts and sports bra, I could see just how fit she was, her muscles taut and toned. She moved with grace, comfortable in her own body. She wore no makeup, her hair was tied back in a braid, and sweat beaded on her lightly tanned skin. She was absolutely beautiful.

Almost as if she felt my eyes on her, she looked up from where her eyes were focused on the trail ahead of her, locking with my own, and she came to a sudden halt, just staring back at me from ten yards away.

“Out for an evening run?” I asked, then fought not to cringe. Obviously, but I didn't know what to say to her for a moment. I was thrown off guard by my thoughts about her beauty and the strange pull towards her that I didn't quite understand.

“Um, yeah.” She arched a brow, then hesitated, unsure if she should stay or go.

“Come have a seat?” I offered quickly, not wanting her to leave.

She narrowed her eyes as she regarded me, then shrugged and walked my way. A thrill of excitement rushed through me, the air between us almost electric as she neared.

“How was your night?” I sat on the edge of the fountain, then patted the stone next to me in invitation.

She looked a little unsure, reminding me of a bird ready to take flight at a moment's notice, but ultimately sat on the fountain's edge a few feet away. “It was great, actually. I had dinner with your mother.”

I smiled. “I heard. Congratulations on your performance in the training exercise this afternoon.”

Kayden's eyes widened in surprise, but then she pursed her lips. “I suppose you get regular updates about everything we do.”

“Not everything.” But I was sent several memos throughout the day giving objective details of how all the women were faring in training. “How are you enjoying the classes and PT?”

“The perimeter training today was fun. It's also interesting to learn how the North American pack works.”

“Fun?” I arched an eyebrow and gave her a crooked grin. “Interesting? Is

this the same woman who's made it clear she doesn't want to be here?"

"Ha-ha," Kayden said dryly. "I didn't say I was in love with the Contention. But I've always wanted to learn. My pack never prioritized education when it came to politics. Plus, classes and training are better than the dates."

"Wow, really?" I mock-stabbed myself in the heart. "You're vicious."

That drew a smile out of her, a real one, something I wasn't sure I'd seen before, and for a few seconds, I could only stare at how it magnified her beauty.

"Don't take it personally. It's more the other women than you."

Well, that was something. She didn't seem to hate me as completely as she had at first sight.

"How was your day?" she asked, surprising me even more.

"As you probably know, I had to miss dinner due to another council meeting. Some council members believe Branson is gearing up for a fight."

Kayden's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"It appears an influx of wolves from other packs have defected to the Southeastern Coastal pack. Mostly those in the roles of soldiers and enforcers." I held my breath, waiting to see how she'd respond.

Kayden snorted. "That sounds about right. I wasn't aware he was adding to his ranks, but I can't say I'm surprised. Branson doesn't like to fight alone."

"From what I've seen, he doesn't like to fight at all."

She angled her head, the moonlight bouncing off the strands of silvery-white hair. "You'd be right about that, too. The thing with Branson is that he doesn't like to fight his own battles. He surrounds himself with a large inner circle of devotees willing to die in service to him." She shook her head. "I don't know how he manages to inspire that kind of loyalty."

She paused, going somewhere in her mind as she stared off into the distance. After a few seconds, she blinked and shook her head. "That's how it was with Nico—my brother. He had climbed the ranks to just below the beta. He joined the inner circle almost as soon as Branson became alpha. I never understood it. But I'd tend to agree with you that Branson is building a small army. It would be dangerous to let this go unchecked."

My thoughts exactly. Kayden's opinions fell in line with mine when it came to dealing with Branson. We simply couldn't ignore the threat. Knowing she wouldn't oppose me was an immense relief.

At some point during the conversation, we'd managed to move closer to each other, though I don't think either of us was aware of it until now. Without thinking, I reached out and rested my hand on hers.

Kayden glanced at me in surprise, but she didn't remove her hand. For a moment, we simply stared at each other, and I couldn't remember ever feeling such a pull toward someone. The desire to kiss her came out of nowhere. I nearly gave in to the urge to lean in, test the waters and see how she'd react, but reason took hold. We were making progress. She didn't seem to hate me as much. The last thing I wanted was to go back to that, so I quickly changed the subject.

"It sounds like you and your brother were pretty close?"

Immediately, she jerked her hand away from mine, crossed her arms over her chest, and pursed her lips. *Shit.*

Just when I was making progress, I brought up the one thing that reminded her of why she didn't want to be here.

Kayden stood and turned away. "I need to get back to my room."

On instinct, my hand darted out to grab her arm. "Wait."

That electricity I'd felt in the air returned full force at the contact, shooting up my arm and warming my blood.

Kayden spun around, glaring first at my hand and then at me before jerking her arm free. "I'll be fine." Her voice was strained, and her throat bobbed as she swallowed.

"Kayden, I'm sorry—"

"I'm *fine*," she repeated, turning away once more. "Goodnight, Holden."

I watched as she jogged back up to the estate, wanting to kick myself. Usually, I didn't have to work that hard around women. With Kayden, it was a different story. If I wanted her to give me a chance, she would make me work for it.

The challenge had my wolf coming to life inside me, clearly excited at the prospect of the chase.

Easy, I told him. What was I even thinking? Something about this woman got under my skin.

Garrett's question from earlier about me having any favorites floated through my mind. There was no denying it. I felt drawn to Kayden in a way I didn't with the other girls. But things were simply too complicated with her. I needed a mate who could hold her own in my world. Kayden was a wildcard.

With a sigh, I headed back inside and made my way up to the fourth

floor, where all the private quarters of the alpha's family and inner circle were housed.

Garrett's suite of rooms was in a separate hallway from mine. I rapped three times on his door before checking the knob. It was unlocked, so I made my way inside. If he'd had company, it would be locked.

"Hey there," he called out with a grin as I shut the door behind me. He was seated on a large leather sectional, his feet propped up on some pillows, a glass of whiskey in his hands. "I was wondering if you were stopping by. It's pretty late."

"Yeah, I ran into Kayden on the grounds."

Garrett's eyebrows flew up, and he sat up straight. "And?"

I knew he wanted juicy details, but I didn't have them. I walked around the sectional and then sat opposite him. "We talked about Branson and her pack. She seems to be on the same page as we are—he's gearing up to start something, and it needs to be nipped in the bud."

"Hmm." He took a sip of whiskey. "Good that she agrees. Anything else? Did she give you any insight?"

Garrett often came off as not taking his role seriously enough; he just had an easygoing, laid-back air about him. But I'd chosen my beta wisely. Underneath the smiles, charm, and jokes, he was one of the most intelligent people I knew. He was already thinking about how we could use Kayden to get the inside scoop.

"Not yet. Just confirming what we already assumed about his cruelty and ruthlessness."

He narrowed his eyes. "You think she's playing you?"

I shook my head. "I considered that, but I truly believe she means what she says about Branson. She's worried about her sister remaining in his territory."

Garrett sat back. "We need to feel her out, be certain we can trust her. Maybe she can help us figure out the best way to handle him. We should meet with Bridger and David about it first, though."

"I agree. Kayden could be the key to helping us neutralize this threat. I'd like to get a few other alphas together as well and invite Branson to a meeting. Perhaps it will be less threatening if other alphas are present who he doesn't consider a threat. Then we can get a better handle on what we're dealing with and figure out how to move forward."

"We'll have to call another council meeting if we decide to overthrow

him. Just so we have a plan going in.” Garrett rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “We should also already have someone in mind for a replacement.”

“See?” I said, pouring myself a finger of whiskey. “That’s why you’re my beta. Always two steps ahead.”

“Gotta keep you on your toes, especially when you’re distracted by pretty girls.”

“I’m not distracted,” I told him. He just smiled, knowing me well enough to be aware there were things about Kayden I hadn’t told him yet.

But I wasn’t ready to talk about it. Hell, I didn’t even understand it myself. All I knew was that I wasn’t ready to send Kayden home. And that I wanted to spend more time with her.

KAYDEN

I pulled my hair into two sections, braiding each one quickly and efficiently before pulling on some athletic shorts and a sports bra. This was the last day of training before our first competition. I was determined to do my best and stay focused on what the instructors might say.

The only problem was that I couldn't seem to keep my head in the game. I grabbed a light sweatshirt, pulled it on, then headed outside for a quick jog before PT started. I needed to clear my head.

Without thinking about it, I found myself along the same trail I'd run last night. The fountain where I'd sat with Holden wasn't far. What surprised me the most was how easy it had been to talk with him. I hadn't meant to tell him all about Branson, but I'd found myself giving him insight into his enemy.

The irony of it wasn't lost on me. Yet I couldn't bring myself to say I hated Holden. Not when he was proving himself to be so different than I'd expected.

Was that a betrayal to my brother, my flesh and blood?

I shook the thought away, focusing on my breathing and the pace of my feet as they hit the dirt. It was too much, and I had a competition to prepare for.

I arrived at the gym before everyone. When I stepped inside, the lights were still dim. Neither Dalton nor Kyle were anywhere to be seen. I flipped the light switch, then gasped.

Racks upon racks of gleaming metal weapons lined the walls in previously locked cabinets. I crept closer, both intrigued and terrified about what was on today's training agenda. These were no ordinary weapons.

Nico had trained me with small knives and hand-to-hand combat, but I'd never seen, much less wielded, any of the deadly weapons decorating the shelves. I slid my finger along the polished wooden handle of a thin dagger, barely breathing. Would I have to defend myself against armed contestants in this first challenge?

Voices in the hall had me ducking behind a stack of mats in the corner. I didn't want to be caught alone in a room full of sharp steel.

"Here we are...." A pause. "Hey, Kyle?" That was Dalton's voice.

"Yeah?" I could barely see Kyle as he stepped into the room. "What are these weapon cases doing open?"

"That's just what I was going to say." Footsteps moved further into the room. "Let's get them shut before the women arrive."

I held my breath as the trainers closed the cabinets, then returned to wheeling in two carts of wooden practice weapons. I felt a little relief that we wouldn't be working with actual blades, but my anxiety had me wondering how soon we'd move up to the real deal. I swallowed hard, then reminded myself I wasn't the only one who'd never trained with these kinds of weapons. Surely, the game makers took that into consideration.

A moment later, female voices filled the air, and the gym was soon full of other contestants. I slipped in among the crowd, and no one was the wiser that I hadn't come in with the rest.

"Good morning, ladies," Kyle began when everyone arrived. "Today, Dalton and I will be working with you on basic weapons maneuvers."

A murmur ran through the room. They were trying to predict tomorrow's competition as well. My stomach twisted as I glanced at the shut and locked cabinets.

Better pay attention.

We spent the first hour learning the weapons, getting comfortable holding them and learning basic body positions for armed combat, even though I was slightly nauseous every time I thought of the sharp blades hidden within this very room. I managed to get a good handle on things, feeling more comfortable by the time we moved on to actual training, working the same maneuvers over and over until my muscles ached.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sydnee moving her body with skill and grace, spinning and arcing her wooden spear through the air. She clearly had much more experience than anyone else in the room. Most of the women were on par with my skills. A few were better, a few truly struggling.

But Sydnee... I narrowed my eyes at her. As the daughter of an alpha, she'd been trained since birth for this very occasion. She was ambitious, strong, skilled, and ruthless. Out of everyone here, she'd be the one I had to watch out for tomorrow, especially since she seemed to have it out for me.

Thankfully, training and the afternoon classes were uneventful. The tone was subdued, everyone seemingly focusing on themselves. However, Sydnee didn't miss a chance to insult me on my lack of knowledge about the history of pack wars throughout the class.

When there were less than thirty minutes of classes left, a knock at the door drew everyone's attention.

David, Bridger's beta, stepped inside. "Sorry to interrupt, but I need to speak with Miss Johnson."

"Yes, of course." The instructor didn't bat an eye, though the rest of the class turned to stare at me.

I nervously stood from my seat, feeling every eye follow my path to the door, their irritation and curiosity nearly palpable. What did the beta want with me? Had I done something to break the rules?

Panic set in when I stepped into the hallway and saw Holden, Garrett, and Bridger waiting. It reminded me of when they'd all crowded into my little cell. My first thought was of Jenna. Had something happened to her? Had Branson pulled another crazy stunt?

"Hey, Kayden," Holden spoke first, his eyes soft and his smile reassuring. "Everything is okay, we just wanted to get your opinion on a few things. Is that all right?"

I nodded. It wasn't like I could say no.

"Good. Let's go somewhere a little more private." Holden gestured to a room across the hall.

I didn't like the idea of being all alone with these four men. Not that I thought they'd hurt me—at least, I hoped they wouldn't—but I still didn't completely trust them. Yes, Holden appeared to be more reasonable than I'd first given him credit. But these were the four most powerful men in the entire North American pack. I might need to get my head checked if I wasn't nervous around them.

"What is it you'd like to ask me?" I began when we were all seated around a circular table in what appeared to be a conference room. Holden sat to my left, Bridger directly across from me.

Bridger folded his hands on the table. "We plan to revisit your pack soon.

The last time my son entered your pack lands, he was ambushed.” He grimaced.

“Not that they were a match for us, even outnumbered two to one,” Garrett said with a smug grin. “Isn’t that right, Holden?”

I whipped my head toward Holden. He’d been attacked that day? He’d looked perfectly fine as he stood next to the dead beta. Like he’d barely broken a sweat. And that hadn’t even been his first fight of the day. I hated that I found that sexy. But it was. Holden wasn’t some pampered prince. He’d worked hard to earn his position and was in the trenches with his men.

“The point is,” Holden said, evading the question, “we want to get some insight into what tactics he’d be most likely to use. As well as what you think his goal is here. Would he lead a rebellion? Would he attempt to take the alpha spot himself?”

His spot in a challenge. I laughed out loud, my gaze raking over Holden’s wide shoulders and broad chest. The man was huge. Anyone who took him on in a challenge had to know what they were up against. There was a reason Holden hadn’t lost a single one.

His eyebrows furrowed, and I shook my head, still grinning. “Sorry. No. He would absolutely never challenge you himself for the role. There’s a reason why he…” My grin dropped, and I swallowed, forcing myself to continue. “Why he has other wolves challenge you. He knows he could never beat you.”

The look in Holden’s eyes softened as if he knew where my mind had gone. But it was Garrett who spoke up next.

“Then what’s his plan?” he asked, leaning forward.

I cleared my throat. “I really don’t know. He’s unpredictable. What I know of him is based on what my brother told me and the actions I’ve seen him take. But you mentioned a rebellion?”

The men all exchanged glances but didn’t say anything. Is that what they thought he was up to?

“Honestly, I wouldn’t put it past him to pull something like that. He has a history of using his soldiers to do his bidding. They’re almost disposable to him. That’s much more likely than him planning to challenge Holden directly.”

Garrett clapped his hands together and sat back. “I say we just kill him and install someone from our inner circle in his position. Strike fast and make an example of him—this is what happens when you mess with the alpha.”

Holden shook his head. “You know we can’t do that. At the moment, he hasn’t broken any laws. And we can’t just kill him for expanding his numbers.”

What did that mean? Was Branson adding to his devoted soldiers? There had been a regular new arrival from time to time, but I hadn’t paid that much attention to it.

“He ambushed you,” I said quickly, worried over the likelihood of a rebellion. I certainly didn’t want Jenna to get caught in the crossfire. “Isn’t that breaking a law?”

Bridger frowned. “It’s too late to act on that. Too much time has passed. It would be better for Holden to look forgiving on that since we didn’t act swiftly—and since there was no actual proof they knew who they were attacking. We just need to observe and be ready for anything now.”

“We can begin preparing for a visit.” Holden looked around the table, his gaze settling on me. “But as long as the Contention is going on, I’d like to remain here. Perhaps we can postpone the visit that long.”

A murmur of agreement went around the table, and I lost myself in Holden’s warm brown eyes. Watching him take charge of the situation and handle it in such a way that was above reproach had me questioning everything I thought I knew about him.

He cocked his head, curiosity on his face, and I wondered what I must look like. Quickly, I looked away, remembering the other three men in the room. But they were already standing. Apparently, the impromptu meeting was adjourned.

“Thank you for your insight,” Bridger said, coming around and resting a hand on my shoulder.

I nodded, a bit overwhelmed once more by the sheer size of these men. I’d grown up around shifters, but these leaders were larger, somehow. Power radiated from them as they left the room, and they were a force to be reckoned with. Branson had messed with the wrong alpha.

The class across the hall was empty when we stepped out. I’d missed the end of the lesson. Hopefully, it wouldn’t put me at a disadvantage tomorrow. It would be just my luck to miss a key nugget that would help me out.

“Can I walk you back to your room?” Holden turned to me.

“Um, yeah. That’s fine,” I stammered, suddenly feeling on uneven footing around him.

“I really appreciate your help,” Holden said as we walked. “The more we

know about Branson, the better informed our decisions will be.”

“Do you ever stop carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders and just relax?” I asked.

He stopped and looked at me, a faint smile pulling at his lips. “No. It’s my job.”

“So, what do you do for fun?” I didn’t know why I was asking him this. But all we ever talked about was Branson and the Contention. Maybe I was just tired of all of it and wanted a distraction.

“Do you want to have dinner with me?” he asked abruptly, throwing me off guard.

“Yes,” I found myself saying before I had time to think it through. There was no formal dinner tonight, as we had the first competition tomorrow.

The curve of his lips turned into a full-fledged smile, something I’d never seen before, and the sight of it had my heart doubling in speed. God, he really was attractive. It almost wasn’t fair.

Not only did he have the perfect life, but he also suited it perfectly. He was a good alpha—a good man from what he’d displayed since I’d been here. Hell, Branson had been willing to kill me for refusing to participate in the Contention, yet Holden had shown mercy.

While I still struggled to accept that he’d killed my brother, the rational side of me knew it was as good as standard procedure in my world. Holden was strong, powerful, not just an alpha by birth because he’d clearly earned the title. His power drew me in, even as I knew I should maintain a healthy fear of it.

Still, as Holden led me up to the fourth floor, fear wasn’t what made me nervous about being alone with him. My stomach tightened as he rested a hand on my lower back and led me toward large wooden double doors at the end of a hallway.

“I’ll call to have dinner delivered,” he said, opening the door and stepping aside so I could go in first. “Would you like to eat on the terrace?”

I’d been so distracted as we walked through the cavernous mansion that I hadn’t even thought to ask where we were dining. As I walked through the doorway, I gasped.

Definitely not a dining room. It was a massive penthouse-style apartment — Holden’s quarters. I could smell his scent in the air, sea salt and pine. I swallowed as I took it all in.

Straight ahead was a wall of windows so wide I could see the ocean to my

left as well as the edges of the forest to my right. I didn't know what I'd expected Holden's private space to look like, but the white walls with hints of dark green and rich wood tones suited him perfectly—sophisticated and timeless, with a touch of rugged masculinity.

Two long hallways ran the length of the entire wing, with the center of the space being open to accommodate multiple living areas. There was a full kitchen and dining room, a cozy den with a fireplace and bar, as well as a formal living room. I realized the wall of windows included doors that led out onto a large terrace.

Turning back to Holden, I couldn't help but gape. "This is insane."

He shrugged. "It's a lot of space for just me, but it's nice to have some privacy."

That made sense. Lots of shifters lived here on the estate. I bet this was his refuge from the pressures of his life. I looked at him, almost as if I were seeing him for the first time.

"Do you want to check out the terrace?" Holden gestured to the doors. "It feels nice out there this time of day with the ocean breeze."

We stepped out, and I walked to the edge, resting my hands on the smooth railing and taking it all in. The terrace spread almost the full length of the building, with a dining area, a private fire pit, and a hot tub.

"Nice," I commented. "Do you entertain many people out here?"

Holden chuckled and came to stand beside me. "Actually, it's lonelier than you might think growing up here, despite people coming and going all the time."

I turned and leaned against the rail to face Holden. "How so?"

"Well, when I was growing up and training to be an alpha, that was the focus of my life. I had a private tutor, trainers—you name it. Yet I had no siblings. Kids would come and go as regional alphas visited. But that's just it." He gave me a rueful grin. "They'd always go. I always wondered what life would have been like if my parents had more kids."

I laughed. "Never a moment's peace. Sharing your space even when you don't want to."

"Doesn't sound so bad," he said with a wistful smile.

"I guess not. I love my siblings more than anything, even if they made my life hard at times. We lost our parents when I was only eight. Nico raised us, so the three of us were always close." Not wanting to go down that path, I changed the subject back to him. "It seems like you have a good relationship

with your parents.”

Holden nodded. “Yeah. They’re pretty great. And I do have Garrett. He wasn’t always here growing up. But he’s like a brother to me now.”

Just then, a knock on the door had Holden grabbing my hand and leading me back inside. “Dinner’s here.”

I didn’t pull my hand away, even when a jolt of electricity shot up my arm, surprising me. The pull of desire low in my belly had me drawing in a deep breath. My body was definitely reacting to Holden, but I didn’t know what I thought about that.

Two staff members dressed in white chef’s jackets wheeled in carts with at least a dozen covered dishes spread between them.

“Are more people joining us?” I teased Holden when the staff had set everything up and left.

He shrugged one shoulder and gave me that half-grin I’d seen a few times. A tingle of awareness raced through me. “You have a competition tomorrow. I wanted you to have your choice of meals.”

“Because it might be my last?” I joked. He winced, but I just shrugged. “Better to make light of it than dwell on it.”

“Maybe. But tomorrow’s competition won’t put your life on the line.”

Maybe not. But an unexpected challenge at any moment could.

“So,” Holden said, filling his plate with steak, shrimp, potatoes, and roasted vegetables, “did you leave anyone special behind back home?”

I arched a brow and speared a piece of shrimp. “Other than my sister? No. I didn’t exactly have time for dating.” I didn’t mention that there had never been anyone who caught my eye.

“I understand that,” he muttered.

“What do you mean?” I asked, surprised. “Surely the great Holden Wilder has had his pick of women to date.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Seriously?” I continued. “You’re kidding, right? As attractive as you are, I’m sure women constantly throw themselves at you.”

He leaned in with a teasing grin on his lips. “You think I’m attractive?”

“I, uh...well...” Shit. I pursed my lips together. “You know you are.”

“I didn’t know you thought so, though,” he said softly, his eyes locked on mine.

I couldn’t help it. My gaze dropped to his mouth. “Now you do,” I whispered, my words embarrassingly breathy.

“Indeed,” he murmured, closing the distance between us. I stayed frozen as his soft, full lips brushed over my own, an internal battle waging in my mind.

My body was all in, though, when he did again, teasing my lips apart.

I moaned softly, giving in to the feeling. The moment I did, something in me sprang to life, and the desire—no, the raw *need*—to intertwine my body with this man’s nearly overwhelmed me.

I jerked back, eyes wide as my fingers flew to my mouth. We simply stared at each other for several heartbeats.

Until a solid knock sounded at the door. “Kayden, are you in there?”

Faye.

“That’s my assistant,” I said, jumping up quickly. “What time is it?”

I ran inside to Holden’s front door and flung it open, unsure if I was grateful or disappointed in her interrupting us. Because what the hell had that been? My lips still felt like they were on fire.

“There you are,” Faye said, glancing behind me to where Holden was coming in off the terrace. She grinned, her eyes shining with curiosity. “Hmm. Well, I’m so sorry, Holden, but Kayden needs to come with me now. She has a big day tomorrow and needs her sleep.”

I glanced back at Holden, who was watching me with an intensity I’d never seen before. It unsettled me enough that I didn’t bother arguing with Faye.

I simply shrugged and said, “Got to go!” then hurried down the hall after Faye, my body still tingling from Holden’s kiss.

KAYDEN

I woke up with a ball of lead in my stomach. Not because I'd compete in the first physical challenge of the Contention less than an hour from now.

I'd barely slept last night, tossing and turning as I replayed that kiss in my mind over and over. I was torn between wanting to relive it a million times and in shock that the thought even crossed my mind.

As I got up, washed my face, and brushed my hair, one thing was certain—my role in the Contention was shifting.

I was no longer the victim who'd been brought here against her will. Who'd been given exile as an alternative. I wasn't even that same woman who needed to make the top ten to secure a better life for myself.

No, I was suddenly invested in the Contention in a whole new way. A kiss shouldn't have changed my perspective so much. Perhaps it wasn't even the kiss itself, other than bringing attention to the change in me over the last few days.

I wanted to win today. I didn't want to be sent home. Because I wanted more time with Holden, to figure out what this was between us, this magnetic draw I couldn't begin to explain. When his lips brushed over mine, something awakened within me. I wanted him like I'd never wanted any man in my life.

As I'd lain in bed last night, I wondered what would have happened if Faye hadn't come looking for me. She'd asked a million questions as we'd left Holden's private quarters, but I'd kept my mouth shut, not wanting to discuss what happened when I wasn't even sure how I felt about it.

"I don't know who designed this," she said, wrinkling her nose.

“Everyone is wearing tan combat gear? Where’s the flair?”

I, for one, was glad for the easy-to-maneuver-in pants and the moisture-wicking shirt. I began my habitual braiding as Faye continued to fuss over me.

“Have you had enough to eat? Do you need me to help you with your hair? What else can I do for you?”

I stopped and turned from the mirror, facing her head on. “Faye. I’m fine.”

She shook her head silently, her brow furrowing, and I realized she was worried about me. Afraid I might get hurt today.

“I really am okay,” I told her with a smile. “I feel confident I can handle whatever they throw my way today.”

“Okay.” She reached up and squeezed my arm lightly. “Just be safe. I’ll be watching in the viewing room.”

Viewing room? If there was a place to view what was happening, cameras must be in the arena. They’d told us nothing of what to expect other than to be at the north arena by eight in the morning. I hadn’t seen that part of the property, so I wasn’t sure what their definition of an arena was, but I was about to find out.

I told Faye goodbye, finished my braids, then gave myself a firm look in the mirror, squaring my jaw. “You’ve got this, Kayden.”

I repeated the mantra as I made my way along the trail, now marked with arrows showing the way. It was quite a hike, and I saw some other girls along the way, but none of us spoke to each other. Focus. That’s what I needed to get me through this.

As I topped a small, grassy rise, the arena appeared below me. It wasn’t an arena in the traditional sense. Rather, there were about fifty acres of woods that had been sectioned off. One side was designated in red, the other blue.

I glanced around, not seeing anything that would pass as a viewing room. Nor did I see Holden anywhere along the side of the hill where coordinators roamed around talking into their headsets and organizing boxes of equipment set up on tables.

I tried to ignore the flash of disappointment. Holden wasn’t what I needed to be worried about right now. Not when fifteen other women would be looking for their chance to take me out.

Before long, all the women were gathered, and Willow began speaking.

“Good morning, ladies. I hope you all got plenty of rest last night.”

Nope.

Willow glanced around at all of us. “If you haven’t gathered by the arena behind us, you will be competing in two teams for your first competition.”

A murmur sounded among the sixteen of us. So, it wasn’t every woman for herself. I wasn’t sure if that was a relief or if it would make this even harder.

“You’ll be playing the shifter version of capture the flag.” As Willow said it, a staff member approached each of us with a large golden ring. “These collars will be your flags.”

Collars again? It had been miserable when Holden’s enforcer put the enchanted band around my neck, preventing me from shifting.

“Unlike other enchanted collars,” Willow continued, “these won’t prevent you from shifting. In fact, they will shift with you. You may choose whichever form you prefer. They will also break away when pulled—the crux of the competition. You’re automatically disqualified if your collar comes off at any time during the competition.”

I glanced around as the staff member in front of me held out the breakaway collar. Everyone else was taking them and putting them around their necks as if it was no big deal. Perhaps none of them had ever been prevented from shifting.

I squared my shoulders and snapped the collar on, giving it a slight tug to test for resistance. It wouldn’t come off too easily. Good to know that I’d need to get in close and have a good grip when I ripped off my opponents’ collars.

Willow read off the rest of the rules. Each team would have a small base hidden somewhere within enemy territory. We were to hide a flag within the base, and two team members were to remain within the base at all times. The other six were to venture out into enemy territory in search of their flag. Opponents could be eliminated by ripping off their collars. Still, the competition would not end until one team captured the other’s flag and brought it back to their base without being eliminated.

“The flag must be hidden within the base, not in someone’s physical possession. Once you’ve left your home base, you may not return unless you are in possession of the enemy flag. Any questions?” Willow arched her brows as she looked around.

No one said a word.

“Okay then.” She clapped twice. “Here are the teams. Sydnee, Jessica,

Abbigail, Brooklyn, Cora, Claudia, Riley, and Kayden. You're on the blue team. The rest, you're red."

While I was glad Jessica and Brooklyn were there, and I knew I could trust them, I couldn't believe my luck that Sydnee was on our team. But of course she was. She gave me a menacing smile as Willow directed us to gather with our teammates. Nope, definitely not trusting this one.

Recalling some of the finer points of politics and history that I'd taken notes on this week, I immediately took charge. If I wanted a chance at winning, I had to take action. We couldn't rely on shoddy leadership.

"Jessica, Cora. You two stay in the home base and defend the flag," I said, low enough that the other team couldn't hear us. "Sydnee, you can hide the flag."

"Who put you in charge?" she sneered, crossing her arms and jutting out her hip as she glared at me.

I stared back with ice in my eyes. "I did."

She didn't have time to argue as an assistant blared a horn, signaling the start of the competition without warning. With no time to strategize, I gestured for the other seven girls to follow me.

"Let's get into the trees, then shift." Just a few yards in, we all shifted into our wolf forms, some taking a bit longer than others. With adrenaline pumping through my veins, I shifted faster than I could remember, ready to get going. We ran together through the woods, watching closely for markings on the trees to designate where our base could be found. For a moment, it almost felt like we were a team, a little pack of our own working towards a common goal.

But then Sydnee came up beside me and rammed into my side with a growl, knocking me off balance. I didn't lose my footing, but she took the lead. I huffed a breath and dug my claws into the earth, running to catch up with her, the rest of the wolves trailing behind.

Within minutes, we'd found our base and Sydnee shifted back to human form, where she immediately climbed a tree to hide the flag high up in the branches. As much as I hated to, I had to admit it was a good strategy. If our opponents found the flag, they'd still have to shift first before climbing the tree to collect it. In the meantime, they'd be exposed to our teammates remaining at the base.

Jessica and Cora were smart. They'd use that to our advantage. They took up positions to guard the base as Sydnee jumped out of the tree, landing

gracefully, and walked toward where the rest of us stood waiting.

“Ready to capture the flag?” Her jaw was set, full of determination. Maybe having her on my team wasn’t bad after all, at least for this competition. She shifted, then took off into the woods.

I just stared after her. So much for teamwork. I huffed and stomped the ground to get the attention of Brooklyn, Claudia, and Riley. I walked in a circle, pointing to each of them with my nose at even junctures, trying to indicate that we create a perimeter, just like we’d learned two days ago in class.

That would be the most efficient way to clear the area through enemy territory, keeping as many of our teammates as possible from being eliminated. They seemed to get the picture, and we began working our way through the woods.

The scents of the sea and the forest were strong out here, especially in wolf form, and it reminded me of Holden. How his entire apartment held his scent.

A flash of movement to my left jolted me out of my thoughts. I berated myself for losing focus, then signaled to my teammates before padding silently through the underbrush to get a better look. Sure enough, it was the red team.

I sank back on my haunches, training my eyes on the shapes of two wolves that crept through the woods. Suddenly, I launched myself toward them, taking them off guard so thoroughly that I managed to snap my jaws around one’s collar before she even realized what was happening. I ripped it off with a jerk of my muzzle, then turned on the other wolf.

Her ice blue eyes went wide, and she froze at the sight of four wolves and her eliminated team member. Taking advantage of her hesitation, I charged toward her, ripping her collar off as well.

The two downed opponents grumbled and growled at their defeat, but they didn’t look like they would give us any trouble, so we began working our way deeper through the woods in search of our opponents’ base. A few minutes later, I caught the scent of several wolves having passed this way and knew we were on the right track.

A blur of movement to my left had me turning. But it wasn’t the red team. *Sydney*.

What was she doing? She padded up to us, and I wondered where she’d been and why she’d charged off without us. But now wasn’t the time to

worry about it. She was here now, and we had a flag to find.

Surprisingly, Sydnee joined our maneuverings, helping us to clear sections of the woods quickly as we made our way deeper into enemy territory, following the scents I'd picked up earlier. We were onto them, but we should be good as long as none of the red team's wolves came across our scents.

Before long, we found the red team's home base clearly marked among the trees. What was the best option? We could all charge in at once and take them unawares. Or a couple of us could sneak in and leave some teammates behind just in case it was an ambush.

I opted for the latter, signaling Sydnee to come along with me and the others to stay behind. Together, Sydnee and I crept closer. I couldn't see any movement ahead, but the scents were getting stronger. They'd likely be able to scent us soon, so I paused to think through the plan's next step.

Suddenly, a wolf came barreling toward us from behind, teeth bared, eyes fixed on Sydnee. Without thinking, I pushed her to the side and stood to face off against the charging wolf. I knew what to expect with these collars.

Standing my ground, I waited until the last minute, then sank low and darted to the right, snapping my teeth around the collar and ripping it off before the other wolf could do anything.

Sydnee stared at me, body heaving, then shook her head and padded ahead. I glanced up among the tree limbs once we were further into the base, wondering if they'd had the same idea we did. But no luck. Eventually, we found the flag hidden inside an old rotting tree.

While the other team hadn't used the limbs high above, the only way to get the flag was to shift back to human form. The opening in the tree trunk was just too small. Sydnee shifted, and I wondered how she hadn't tired from multiple shifts so close together. I stood guard while she retrieved it.

As soon as she had it in hand, another wolf came charging at us. I squared off against it, buying Sydnee time to shift back, but we'd been fighting only moments before Sydnee joined the fray in wolf form.

I fell back to catch my breath, noticing Sydnee had dropped the flag on the ground in her haste to shift. Quickly, I scooped it up in my mouth.

I looked back at Sydnee in time to see her rip the other wolf's collar off. The other team was dwindling fast in numbers. If we could get back to our base quickly enough, victory was ours.

I turned to run, but Sydnee blocked my way. Before I realized what was

happening, she lunged, ripping off my collar before snatching the flag from me and running into the woods.

I stared after her, shellshocked. My own teammate disqualified me.

Anger flared inside me. I had no idea how this would affect my standing in the Contention or what the criteria for elimination would be.

Running through the woods, I made my way as quickly as possible out of the arena. When I saw one of Willow's assistants standing there with a robe, I shifted back and pulled the robe around me.

"Follow me," is all she said.

I did, fuming that I'd trusted Sydnee. I should have known better than to think I could work with her, even when we were teammates. Really, the only person I had to blame was myself.

The assistant led me down a path that wound around a hilltop, revealing a door built into the earth. She went inside, and I followed behind. I was surprised to see a room full of screens showing everything that was going on in the arena. I grimaced as one screen showed Sydnee running through the woods with the red team flag clenched in her teeth.

I couldn't believe I'd fallen for Sydnee's deception.

"Is what she did allowed?" I asked anyone in the room who was listening. "Can I be disqualified by my own teammate?"

Assistants and contestants alike shrugged.

"I have no idea," the woman who'd led me here said, "but I can radio for Willow."

She appeared a few moments later and pulled me aside. "You had a question?"

"Should I be disqualified or still in there playing?" I gestured to the screens. "Did you see what happened?"

She nodded and pursed her lips. "I did. That falls in a gray area within the rules. It isn't specifically stated that eliminations must come from opponents. Normally, I would let Holden make the call."

My pulse leaped at the mention of his name, but I kept my face carefully blank. "Well, where is he? I didn't see him in the viewing room."

"No, he was pulled away again with alpha business," Willow said. "In this instance, I'll make the call and let it pass since individual rankings are based on how each woman has played."

"There are gray areas? No one told us this."

Willow smiled. "Then let this be a good lesson for you. No matter what

you're doing in classes or competitions, you are constantly being watched and judged by various parties. After all, whoever wins will be the alpha's mate. We don't take that lightly."

It made sense and fell in line with what Faye had hinted at.

"Remember," she continued, "despite the group nature of many dates and competitions, only one woman can win. You are always working alone to win Holden's heart."

I took a moment to let that settle in. Then I wasn't likely to get eliminated. Still, anything could happen.

"So, where is Holden?" Would he be reviewing the video feeds to make an elimination?

Willow smiled. "Something came up. Don't worry about it."

But of course, I did. Even as I watched Sydnee on the screen, carrying the flag to almost certain victory, I worried about the situation with my pack. Had Branson gone and done something else crazy? What was the situation back home, and was Jenna safe?

In a shocking turn of events, Sydnee was cornered by two wolves just before making it to the base. Jessica was still standing, defending our base and fighting off a different wolf, but Sydnee simply couldn't find a way to get past. The other team took the red flag from Sydnee while one teammate managed to get the flag and dart back to their home base.

I was distracted by thoughts of Jenna, Branson, and Holden as Willow concluded the competition, congratulating the winning team.

"Each team had a VIP—Jessica for the blue team and Rosely for the red team," she said, leading a round of applause.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Sydnee cross her arms and scoff. Then she trained that contemptuous gaze on me. "Let me guess," she said loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Kayden will be the one getting eliminated today. Her attempt at leadership was a massive failure."

I rounded on her, ready to tell her exactly what I thought of her lying, tricks, and deceptive tactics, but Willow interjected.

"Kayden protected her team, then was betrayed. She walked away a good sport." The look in Willow's eyes was scathing as she met Sydnee's gaze. "You might want to rethink making enemies so early on."

Willow was typically pretty even-keeled in how she spoke to all of us, never showing preference to anyone, so that was a pretty big statement coming from her. Sydnee's cheeks turned red as she scowled, her death glare

beating into me.

“Maybe Kayden should learn to be more careful who she trusts,” Sydnee muttered.

I didn’t bother responding, but she was right. It had been a lesson learned the hard way. A mistake I didn’t plan on repeating.

HOLDEN

I stared across the conference table at Branson, beyond irritated he was the reason I was missing the first competition of the Contention. After speaking with Kayden yesterday, my father and I agreed that we couldn't let this go on until the Contention had ended, as much as I wished we could.

So far, I hadn't had nearly as much time to get to know the women as I'd hoped. But my role as alpha came above everything, including my future mate. So, I'd gathered several regional alphas to meet with Garrett and me under the guise of establishing relationships under my leadership.

Honestly, I was surprised Branson showed up at all. He'd made a habit of ignoring my authority. After touching on some mundane pack check-ins, where I didn't learn anything I didn't already know, I moved on to the topic I mainly wanted to discuss.

"So, Branson," I began. "It's come to my attention that you've been adding to your pack numbers lately."

He gave me a bland stare, not responding, not even changing his expression. He wasn't going to recognize my authority without some hard work on my part.

"It seems you've been recruiting them from other packs." I arched a brow and glanced around the table, making eye contact with Raoul, one of the alphas who'd come to us with the information. "Raoul mentioned you even reached out to him about joining you."

He wasn't the only one. It seemed that Branson was not only adding to his numbers but was approaching various alphas to "join him" in what I was quickly viewing as the beginnings of a rebellion. One that needed to be

quelled and fast.

Branson narrowed his eyes as he flicked his gaze to Raoul, seated two chairs down on the other side of Garrett. We weren't throwing him under the bus—we'd spoken to Raoul before the meeting, and he'd given permission to bring it up.

"What are you playing at, Branson?" Garrett asked.

Branson chuckled and held his hands up. "Not sure where you're going with this, but the last time I checked, it's not illegal to make friends with other alphas. Nor is there anything wrong with me accepting shifters that want to leave their packs and request to join mine."

I leaned forward, the intensity of my posture unmistakable. He needed to know who was in charge here, and what I wouldn't tolerate.

"It appears you're gathering people to you, increasing your numbers in preparation for something." Garrett and I had previously discussed showing those cards in our hands would cause no harm. It was open knowledge at this point. Garrett had been in talks with various alphas and betas for days to get a handle on the situation.

"If you are, in fact, poaching other packs' members for some ultimate gain, you realize it would be treason," I said carefully. The man was unpredictable, but he needed to know where I stood on this. I wouldn't sit around while he attempted a coup.

"Are you serious right now?" Branson leaned forward, his face twisted in anger. "Just because I'm making alliances with other alphas does not make me a traitor. Alliances between regions have existed for centuries."

"Perhaps," I allowed, "but only up to a certain extent. I want to be crystal clear here. Mark my words. If you raise an army in rebellion, we will swiftly kill you and your wolves."

Branson sat up straighter, his eyes glittering with hatred, but I wasn't done.

"You are only alive and in your position because I continue to allow it. Never forget that, Branson. At any point, I could eliminate you. So, tread carefully. My eyes are on you."

Branson didn't say anything else for the rest of the meeting, which was just a formality at this point. Garrett wrapped up a few business items, then I adjourned the meeting.

"Have you heard anything about how the competition went this morning?" I asked Garrett quietly as everyone began to get up and gather

their things.

“Ah, yes, the Contention,” Branson drawled as he stood. He sidled over to my side of the table. “How’s that going, by the way?”

“I’m not sure that’s any of your business.”

Branson’s mouth dropped open in mock surprise. “What? You don’t trust me?” He grinned. “Look, I gave you Kayden. I did my part, even if she’s probably already dead. The least you could do is give me an update.”

“Kayden is very much alive,” I growled, standing at my full height as I glowered at him. “Did you send her here hoping she wouldn’t make it? Perhaps you underestimated her.”

Branson held his hands up, palms facing outward, but his eyes were narrowed as he said, “I didn’t mean anything by it. Take it easy.”

I didn’t bother replying, just turned and strode out of the room with Garrett on my heels, aggravated I’d let Branson get under my skin. Hopefully, he hadn’t noticed how defensive I became at his mentioning Kayden. Not that I cared what he thought, but the less he knew, the fewer opportunities he’d have to hold something against me.

“Dude,” Garrett said, jogging to keep up as I moved down the hallway. “What was that? You don’t typically lose your cool like that. What did he say that had you all riled up?”

“He made a snide remark about Kayden, and it pissed me off,” I told him.

Garrett gave me a curious look. “What’s going on there between the two of you?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. I was definitely attracted to her—way more than any of the other girls. But I didn’t know how she felt. She’d run off after that kiss last night, and I hadn’t seen her since.

“Let’s go for a run,” Garrett suggested. “Burn off some of this tension.”

“That sounds like a great idea.”

The two of us headed out to the western woods, where we could run for miles without distraction. It had been a long day, and the sun was already descending. The meetings had taken much longer than I’d anticipated. Perhaps a run was just what I needed.

Once we were within the trees, we both undressed and shifted quickly. The sensations of my bones breaking and reforming, the fur sprouting along my spine then spreading out to cover my canine form, and my shifter senses heightening as the transformation completed sent a wave of peace washing over me.

We should do this more often, I told Garrett. The last few days had been so stressful, and this was the release I needed.

Ready?

In answer, I sprang into a run, Garrett right beside me, and we darted into the depths of the woods, weaving through trees and leaping over small streams and fallen branches. It was exhilarating, a rush like nothing else.

I regretted missing the competition today, as it would have been the first time I got to see all the contestants in wolf form. There was something about seeing a person in their other form that was revealing. It reflected their interior in a way that was so easily masked in human form. Garrett, for one, was a perfect example. He often came off as cocky, a jokester who never took things seriously. But in reality, he was strong, cunning, and highly intelligent, something anyone who saw him in wolf form would immediately recognize.

As we ran, the tension slowly began to seep from my body, but I pushed myself harder for the exercise and to escape from the stresses of becoming alpha. Branson had to be dealt with efficiently if I wanted my transition to alpha to go smoothly. Best to nip it all in the bud now.

Almost two hours later, Garrett and I returned to the estate, tired but refreshed.

“I’m glad we did that,” I told him as I got dressed. “I’m going to sleep much better now.”

“Agreed.” Garrett pulled his shirt over his head and grinned. “Though you can’t go to bed just yet. You have a competition to watch.”

“There you are,” my father said as we left the woods. He was waiting for us. “I figured you might have gone for a run. The women are getting ready for dinner. Would you like to join me in watching the recordings from today?”

“I’d like to watch them alone, actually,” I told him. “I don’t want anything to influence my opinion.”

Father nodded. “Sounds like a plan. It will take you a while to review everything. I’ll have dinner sent to your quarters if you’d like to watch them there. I’m sure Garrett won’t mind keeping the ladies occupied at dinner.”

Garrett, ever the ladies’ man, agreed enthusiastically. “I just might charm them to decide they’d rather take me over you, Holden.”

I laughed. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Half an hour later, I was showered and settled in front of the large screen in my den with a steak and potato dinner, riveted at what was happening.

Kayden had taken charge immediately, and her strategy was on point. More than that, though, I watched her wolf more than the others. Silvery white, just like her hair, her beast was beautiful. Strong and determined, smart—capable.

The wolf form often magnified a personality. It held true in Kayden's case. Despite the ferociousness of her wolf, I could still sense her compassion and kindness, even as she made difficult decisions and fought to win.

I sat up and yelled at the screen towards the end when Sydnee ripped off Kayden's collar, disqualifying her. Well, shit... that complicated matters.

Honestly, I didn't want to eliminate Sydnee, even though her poor sportsmanship was appalling. While I wasn't attracted to her, she was the most qualified of all the women to be an alpha's wife. I knew she'd do well in the position, so I wanted to keep her around a little longer to get to know her better.

Even if my gut reaction to seeing her best Kayden was irritation and anger. It might have been a stupid move, but it wasn't enough to eliminate her. By the time I made it to the end of the videos, I had a few women in mind, but I needed a bit more time to think. Maybe a walk would be helpful.

A few minutes later, I found myself on the third floor, walking toward Kayden's hallway. The hall was deserted, and I stopped in front of her door, my fist hovering inches away as I debated if this was a good idea. In the end, I knew I wouldn't walk away.

I rapped three times on the door, and a muffled reply came in return. My pulse ratcheted up as I waited impatiently, the need to see her stronger than ever before. When Kayden pulled the door open, it was worth the wait. She was in pajamas, more of her tan skin on display than I'd ever seen before. Instantly, my wolf stood at attention, and a deep need stirred to life. What was it about her that had me so entranced?

I raked my gaze over her body, desire flaring to life. Everything in me screamed to reach out and touch her, pull her into my arms and pick up where we'd left off last night. I managed to refrain, not wanting to scare her but also not wanting to get in even deeper with her just yet. There were fifteen other women, and I needed to give them a fair chance.

"Holden?" Her voice was breathy, her tongue darting out to lick her lips, and I realized I hadn't said a word. I was just staring into those honey eyes, captivated, wondering what it would feel like to run my fingers through that long, silky hair. Wanting to taste those lips for myself.

I shook my head, hoping to shake myself out of my trance. "Hey,

Kayden. Do you have a few minutes?” I looked beyond her into her dark room, realizing she’d been asleep. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Does this have something to do with my pack?” The panic in her eyes made it an easy choice not to tell her Branson was here. Why stress her out even more?

“No, I wanted to tell you that you won’t be eliminated.”

She frowned and tilted her head. “You don’t usually deliver that news in person.”

“Maybe I just wanted to see you.” I glanced down the hallway. No sign of anyone else, but that might not last long. “Can I come in?”

She swallowed nervously, the motion drawing my attention to the smooth skin of her neck. Did I make her nervous? Was she remembering our kiss—just as I was? I had to remind myself that wasn’t why I was here. As much as I wanted a repeat of last night, I didn’t want her to feel pressured.

Kayden stepped back and held the door open. “Sure.”

I walked into the dim room, and Kayden quickly flipped on a few lamps. I took in her personal space, her lavender and sage scent nearly overpowering my resolve not to pull her into my arms. The cream, black and pink were elegant, sophisticated, and sexy. “Are your accommodations suiting you?”

“What?” She glanced around. “Oh, yeah, they’re fine. However, I have enough clothing now to dress an entire army. Or at least to supply a fashion show.”

My gaze fell to her silky shorts and low-cut cami, and she quickly crossed her arms. Okay, hint taken. I found a chair by the window and settled in, giving her space to choose where she wanted to be.

She sat on the edge of her bed. “I’m pretty sure you didn’t come to check out how my room was suiting me. Is everything okay?” Worry creased her forehead. “Have you heard from my sister?”

I shook my head. “As far as I know, your sister is fine.” I’d be making sure of it, though, as soon as I got back to my apartment. “How are *you*? Today was the first competition, after all.”

She sighed, her shoulders slumping in relief that I wasn’t bringing bad news. She looked tired.

“I’m sorry I missed it, by the way.” I sighed. “I really wanted to watch firsthand, but that’s one of the things about my position. Sometimes I have to drop everything when important business comes up at a moment’s notice.”

Kayden gave me a curious smile. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.

Knowing you were watching might have made me nervous anyway.”

I couldn't help but grin. “I make you nervous?”

She met my gaze, shivered, and jumped up to get a sweatshirt. “No,” she said as she pulled the shirt on, contradicting herself. “Is everything okay with you? With whatever came up, I mean.”

“Yeah...” I stretched my legs out and clasped my hands behind my head. “Nothing I can discuss, but there are days when I feel more like a figurehead with a title, following the protocol, the pomp and circumstance, and less like a person figuring out the biggest decisions of my life.”

“You're more than just a title, Holden,” she said softly, offering me another smile that made me feel alive and awake different than the run with Garrett had. “And the decisions you make have meaning. Like choosing to save my life when you could have let Branson kill me.”

Our eyes locked for several heartbeats, and I felt this hum of energy pass between us, lighting me up from the inside out. I didn't know what to make of it.

“Thank you for that,” I managed to say. “So, you're okay then?”

She shrugged. “Why wouldn't I be?”

“Well, I watched the videos from today. Your disqualification had to have upset you.” It had been clear on her face just how much.

Kayden let out a huff. “More than anything, it taught me a valuable lesson.”

“What's that?”

“That I'm the only one who has my own back, and I'd be wise to remember that.”

Interesting. She wasn't blaming Sydnee, which was very big of her. She hadn't fought the decision, either. She played fair and square but expected the same of others. Perhaps it would be a good lesson for her. In our world, building trust takes time. She shouldn't give it away so easily.

“I'll let you get some sleep. I didn't mean to wake you.” I stood and walked toward the door. If I remained there alone with Kayden for too much longer, surrounded by her captivating scent and natural beauty, I might not be able to control myself.

She followed me to the door. “I wasn't actually asleep yet. Replaying the day, you know. But I am pretty tired.”

I stopped at the doorway and turned to face her once more. “I'm glad you're okay. And Kayden?”

“Yes?” She looked up at me with those big eyes, and something twisted in my chest.

“Sleep well,” I said quickly, then hurried from the room.

On the way back to my quarters, I tried to figure out what had me acting so differently towards her than the other women, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Sure, her personality was strong and fierce, which I admired alongside her desire to be a good person. But it was more than that.

I settled back in front of my screen and rewatched the tapes, trying to pay more attention to the others than I did to Kayden this time. I had an elimination to make, after all.

In the end, I chose Cora. She’d eliminated herself by going up to Jessica and allowing her to rip her collar right off towards the end as if she wanted to go home. I wasn’t going to keep women here against their will. If this wasn’t for them, or they didn’t want to be my mate, better to know it now than later.

But as I tried to fall asleep, I could only think about Kayden. She *hadn’t* wanted to be here, though she was giving it her all now, something that had been clear in the videos. Had she changed her mind? Was she considering the idea of being my mate?

I wouldn’t have thought it possible at the beginning of the week. But now, I couldn’t help but hope that her renewed efforts had less to do with getting away from Branson by earning a spot in the top ten and more to do with the idea of a future—with me.

KAYDEN

Two days had passed since the first competition, and Holden had been at every meal. No more breakfast in bed or lunches with Jessica for me. No private dinners with him.

As the Contention got into full swing and we all settled into the rhythms of PT and classes, Holden was making a point of spending lots of time with everyone. Which meant he'd spent much less time with me.

I didn't like that I was upset over it. And I wasn't pleased with my reaction when he sat next to Sydnee at dinner last night. My stomach had twisted, my chest tightened, and a wave of jealousy had washed over me. The fact that I wanted his attention on me said more than anything. My recent fears that I wasn't just interested in securing a top ten position came pouring out.

As I sat eating breakfast in the large dining hall, I didn't know what to make of it. It would change everything if I admitted to myself that I was interested in Holden.

"May I join you for breakfast?"

The familiar deep voice had me jerking my head up. Brooklyn, who'd been chattering away to Jessica, stopped talking, her mouth open as Holden pulled out the chair next to me. He looked at me, warm brown eyes sparkling as he smiled, waiting for my answer.

My stomach somersaulted. "You can sit with whomever you like."

I didn't mean to sound so snippy, but both Holden and Jessica gave me funny looks. I cleared my throat and tried a softer tone. "I mean, that's the purpose of these group meals, right?"

“Right.” Holden sat down with his gaze still fixed on me. When I glanced across the table, Jessica and Brooklyn were watching us. I honestly didn’t know how to act around Holden now. Maybe I could use them as a buffer.

“Brooklyn was just telling us about...” *Shit*. I hadn’t been listening.

“...her sister,” Jessica interjected. I shot her a grateful look, then got back to my breakfast. The bacon was on point this morning.

As hard as I tried to mind my own business, though, Holden kept dragging me into the conversation. “What about your sister, Kayden? You haven’t spoken much about her.”

I pursed my lips, irritated that he was bringing this up now. But when I met his eyes, I couldn’t seem to find any words. Instead, all I could think about was what those lips had felt like against mine.

I cleared my throat. “Actually, I think I’ve mentioned her a few times now,” I said, my tone clipped. I arched an eyebrow, then shoved another piece of bacon in my mouth, hoping to avoid further conversation. But Holden wasn’t giving up, asking me more questions about my life before coming here.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to talk to him, far from it. But with my newfound discovery that I might be attracted to Holden and considering him in a new light, I wasn’t sure I could have a normal conversation with him.

Thankfully, Brooklyn kept the conversation rolling enough for all of us, going into great detail about her life back home, and soon enough, it was time for us to get to class. Holden reached under the table and squeezed my hand.

The jolt of electricity that raced up my arm left me feeling breathless, and I could only stare at him as he stood and excused himself. “I’ll be seeing you all again at lunch.”

Then he winked at me as he turned. My face flushed, my heart sped up, and when I turned back to Brooklyn and Jessica, they watched me with open curiosity.

“Well,” I said brusquely, “time for training.”

Those three hours flew by as we continued more combat training in preparation for the second competition scheduled for tomorrow. I hoped we wouldn’t be having competitions every three days. Then again, that would make the Contention go by faster. I ground my teeth at the thought, not wanting my time with Holden to go too quickly.

I found myself truly enjoying the afternoon classes as well. We’d moved on from pack war history and political structure to discuss the intricacies of

the shifter council, particularly the various divisions and positions within it. As the instructor spoke about the education division that ensured pack children received adequate schooling and college preparation opportunities, my ears perked up.

I'd never considered teaching in my old pack but working within the administration might be interesting.

Usually, when class ended, I went back to my room for some alone time before dinner. I didn't have much time to myself, something I was really missing. Plus, I didn't like putting myself at risk of a surprise challenge by one of the bitch squad. Sydnee had them all firmly under her thumb by now. I was honestly surprised no one had been challenged over the last few days, but I was wise enough always to be prepared.

As I walked along the carefully groomed trails, my mind wandered to Jenna, as it often had since I'd spoken to her on the phone. She hadn't been aware of Branson's maneuverings then, and I hoped that was still the case.

But with the news that Branson was likely building an army to raise a rebellion, I couldn't help but worry. Would Holden bring her here if I asked him? It seemed like a huge favor. Then again, he knew how dangerous Branson could be. What if he chose to punish Jenna for some perceived shortcoming of Nico's or my own?

I rounded the corner, the fountain I'd sat at with Holden coming into view, and I was surprised to see a lone figure perched on its edge.

Holden.

I'd know those broad shoulders anywhere. My heart picked up the pace as I continued toward him, and I found myself smiling. It took me a second to realize this was happiness. It had been so long since anything made me feel truly happy and truly alive.

While I wasn't sure how I felt about it being Holden that inspired this feeling, I wasn't going to run away from it.

"Hey," I said softly.

He turned, his eyes sucking me in. For a moment, he simply stared at me. Then, "Would you like to join me?"

I nodded and walked toward him, trying to read the look on his face. It was one I didn't recognize.

"What's wrong?" I asked, concerned as I sat next to him. His body heat radiated, distracting me, but I tried to refocus on the pinched lines around his eyes—the uncertain set of his mouth.

Holden sighed. "I'm struggling with how to handle your pack," he admitted, eyes searching mine as if I held the answers.

"What in particular? Has something happened?" My mind went to Jenna once more.

"No, not really. At least, nothing new." He gritted his teeth. "He's continuing to find support, though. In addition to adding to his ranks, he's managed to sway a few alphas."

"What?" I gasped. "Other alphas have turned on you?"

"Not quite." Holden shook his head. "But a few are questioning me and my capabilities as alpha now. I'm not sure which route to take. I need to take some type of action; that much is clear. But the rest..."

This was eating at him. He'd opened up the night after the competition, expressing the weight that he carried on his shoulders. It was visible now. I could see the struggle in his eyes, in his body language.

"What are your options?" I asked, wanting to help him work through this, to perhaps relieve some of the pressure.

"Basically, I'm torn over killing Branson," he said bluntly. "Do I want my first major public move as I transition into the North American alpha role to be killing a regional alpha and restructuring the pack?"

"If that's what needs to be done."

He furrowed his brows. "You sound so matter-of-fact. Yet I know you, of all people, don't believe it's that simple."

He was right, and I thought it over, trying to reconcile how it wasn't okay for him to kill my brother, yet the same was fine for Branson.

My chest was too tight, and I looked away, fresh pain rising as memories of Nico flashed through my mind. I blinked back tears, defaulting to the anger that was so much easier to bear than the pain as I turned back to Holden.

"No, it's not that simple. I lost my brother—because of you."

Holden flinched, but if he wanted to have this conversation now, maybe it was for the best. He needed to know how I felt.

My voice shook as I said, "Do you have any idea what that feels like? To lose someone so close to you that it feels like you're walking around with a piece of your heart missing? I'll never get the chance to tell my brother how much he meant to me, how much I loved him. I'll never see him again—because of you," I repeated.

Holden watched me wordlessly, shadows in his eyes as some internal

battle warred in his mind, but he didn't press me. And he didn't argue the point, something I appreciated. At least he recognized the pain he'd caused me.

"But here's the thing," I said slowly, taking a deep breath to keep myself collected. "I've given this a lot of thought. I've blamed you for his death all along. Told myself that you callously took his life with no concern for anything but maintaining your power. I thought you were cold and cruel. But I'm learning that it's not that simple. Not so black and white." I couldn't keep believing that now, not when I'd seen firsthand that Holden wasn't anything like I'd made him out to be in my mind.

"When Nico challenged you," I continued, "he knew going into it that his life was on the line. He was following orders. Just as you were following the law."

Holden didn't say anything, even though I could see the surprise in his eyes.

I blew out a breath, hardly believing I was about to say this, but also knowing it was time to let go of the anger. I shook my head. "What I'm trying to say, Holden, is that I don't blame you for Nico's death. You did what you thought you had to do—and Nico did the same."

Saying it aloud made me feel lighter, somehow. Something else shifted as well as Holden took that in. His expression softened as if he saw something in me he hadn't seen before. And as I recognized the truth of my words, it changed things between us.

Moving on quickly, afraid of what that meant, I added, "But this situation with Branson is totally different. Branson isn't a good wolf leading the pack in a healthy way. He has no aspirations of helping the pack within, only his own power-hungry ambitions. If you don't remove him from his position—permanently—I don't know what will happen. He doesn't value any life except his own, and he's gathering the strongest wolves to him to fight his battles. He's dangerous, Holden."

He studied me for several long, drawn-out moments, and I wondered what he was thinking. "You'd really suggest killing him?"

"Believe me, if there was any other way... But Branson would never accept you simply stating he was no longer alpha. It would get ugly. He's wild—unpredictable. He'll do whatever the hell he wants, regardless of pack laws and tradition."

Holden scratched at his chin. "Even more reason to believe he's planning

a rebellion.”

I shook my head. “You simply have to put a stop to it.”

“I want to find a way to handle this as safely and nonviolently as possible, Kayden. I’m not just going in and murdering people.” He said it like it was imperative I believe it.

I nodded. “I know, Holden. You’re a gentle and kind leader, a good man, and a good alpha. You aren’t who I painted you to be in my mind. Not at all.”

Holden stared into my eyes, his own unreadable. I was suddenly aware of how close he was. Somehow, we’d managed to move closer as we spoke, though I was only now noticing.

All it took was me tilting my head up for us to be sharing the same space, breathing the same air. My breath hitched audibly, and Holden’s warm brown eyes darkened. Neither of us moved. I barely dared to breathe.

Because the longing I felt deep inside was more intense than anything I’d ever felt in my life, I didn’t understand it fully. I’d kissed plenty of boys and men before and done more than that a few times.

But never had I felt such an all-consuming desire burn through my body, leaving my veins on fire and my core throbbing.

“Kayden,” he breathed, lifting his hand. He rubbed the back of his knuckles along my cheek, and I shivered at his touch, leaning into it—wanting more.

Our gazes were locked on each other. I was afraid to look away, afraid to move in case this was all a dream, and I might spoil it. I didn’t stop to question if it was a good idea. I didn’t stop to think about what was happening between us.

All I knew was that if he didn’t kiss me, I would take charge and do it myself.

When he bent his head—*thank the fates*—pressing his lips lightly to mine, it was as if fireworks ignited in my body, the fuse burning fast and bright.

I moaned against his mouth, my lips parting, my arms coming up to wrap around his neck. He responded instantly, slipping his tongue between my lips to caress my own with a teasing stroke. It drove me mad. My fingers clenched, digging into his shoulders, and he brought both hands to my cheeks, kissing me again and again.

This was nothing like the kiss we’d shared in his apartment. This kiss consumed me, and I lost myself to the sensation of being wrapped in

Holden's arms. I deepened the kiss, and Holden groaned. The ache between my legs became intense as I throbbed with need.

No, never in my life had I experienced a kiss like this before. Just as I was about to lose all hold on my sanity, Holden pulled back suddenly.

I stared up at him, confused and blinking. He glanced behind me. "Someone's coming."

He gave me a slow half-smile as I kept my arms around his neck, trying to process his words when my brain was addled with lust, and it was just about the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

Then I realized what he'd said. The sound of footsteps approached, and I quickly dropped my arms and scooted away from him, just as Faye popped around the corner of a hedge.

"Oh, hi," she said cheerfully, her smile growing as she looked back and forth between us. "So sorry for interrupting."

Her twinkling eyes clearly showed that even though she hadn't quite caught us, she knew we'd been up to something. I stood quickly. "What are you doing here?"

Faye adjusted her headset. "It's almost time for dinner. When you weren't in your room, I radioed to find out if anyone had seen you. Someone said you'd headed out this way."

"Not to worry," Holden said smoothly, standing as well. "Here she is. If you lovely ladies will excuse me, I must also change for dinner."

Holden turned to me and took my hand, bringing it to his lips, his eyes watching me the entire time. They sparkled with lingering desire. "Until next time."

Then he was gone, leaving me to face Faye's knowing grin all on my own.

"Not a word," I said as I marched back toward the estate, "and I'll let you pick my dress again this time—but don't get used to it!"

Faye simply laughed.

HOLDEN

“**Y**ou ready to make your next elimination?”

I sat next to Garrett in the family dining room for a late breakfast, choosing not to dine with the contestants this morning. I’d likely be a distraction from the competition they were preparing for, and most had probably chosen to eat in their rooms anyway.

I glanced over at Garrett. “You say it like I’m not making decisions that impact my entire life.”

Garrett snorted as he speared a waffle with his fork. “You’re being dramatic. We haven’t even reached the hard part yet. Surely at this point, you have a short list of women you’re seriously considering. That makes it easier to send home the others.”

In theory, yeah. But there were so many intricacies to consider, like how my future mate would handle a life of leading the pack by my side. My thoughts drifted back to that kiss yesterday afternoon. It had blown my mind. All I’d wanted was to whisk Kayden away to my room and forget everything else except the raging desire she sparked in me.

Desire wasn’t even enough to describe it. There was a longing, a yearning for her. I didn’t understand it at all.

“I might have a few in mind.” I drained my coffee and poured another mug. I wasn’t ready to discuss my strange pull toward Kayden yet. “Who do you think I should send home?”

“No, no, no. Hold up.” Garrett slammed his mug down, coffee sloshing over the rim. “You can’t just say you have a few in mind then change the subject. Who?”

“I’m not changing the subject.” He gave me an *oh-come-on* look. “Seriously. I’d like your opinion. But if you must know, I think Sydnee, Kayden and Brooklyn are my current top contenders. That could change at any minute, though.”

That’s what was so stressful. What if I sent home the perfect woman before I even got a chance to know her? An image of Kayden’s face flashed in my mind. She was the perfect woman, my subconscious seemed to be telling me.

The only problem was that I wasn’t sure she was. Her experience and knowledge of leading a pack, things an alpha’s mate must do, were limited. She could learn, of course. But I’d told myself long ago that choosing my mate was about her ability to stand by my side as a leader—the right leader, who my pack would support and respect.

I simply couldn’t let feelings get involved, especially complex, confusing ones like I had for Kayden.

“Don’t forget the council positions,” Garrett said, not commenting on my choices. “If there are some women you know you don’t want to take to the end, but who you think would make good council members, you need to consider that ahead of time. Keeping them on through the top ten is forward thinking.”

All things I knew, but it was a good reminder. I’d already determined to take the three I named that far but thinking who I might want on my council would help me narrow down the choices for elimination even further. I’d as good as promised Kayden a top ten position that day I brought her here. And now, I simply wouldn’t send her back to an unhinged alpha.

“Aubrey seems intelligent, and I know she loves children. The education position is coming up,” I mused.

“You’ll need an event coordinator,” Garrett added. “Quite a few positions, actually.”

It wasn’t required that I fill positions with Contention competitors. Still they often fit the bill, many having been groomed to work within the upper ranks of our society since birth—particularly the daughters of other alphas.

“You ready to head to the competition?” I asked as I finished up breakfast. “This one should be interesting.”

“Yeah.” Garrett wiggled his brows and grinned. “Fourteen armed women pitted against each other. What’s not to like?”

We walked down to the south clearing together. It had been completely

transformed. In the center of the flat grassy field, a giant maze had been erected with opaque tarp walls between steel frames that stood twice the height of any of the women.

We could see down into the maze from where Garrett and I stood on a rise overlooking the clearing. Dozens of pathways twisted and intersected throughout the maze, creating a complex pattern. It would be easy to get disoriented in there, especially since the competition was taking place at high noon, so there would be no help from shadows.

“I see your parents.” Garrett pointed to the large temporary platform erected at the exit of the maze, standing high enough so they’d have a bird’s eye view of the maze as the women worked their way through it. At the base of the stairs, my parents stood speaking with some of their council members.

On the opposite side of the maze, the contestants were gathered with Willow and a slew of assistants, getting fitted for vests and helmets.

“Looks like we haven’t missed anything yet,” I said, descending the rise to join my parents. As I did, Sydnee caught sight of me and began waving her paintball gun. I lifted my hand to wave in return, scanning the group, hoping to catch Kayden’s eye. But she was busy examining her paintball gun and adjusting her gear.

At least this competition wouldn’t inflict much harm. Some women had been pretty scraped up after the last one in the woods.

“Good day, son,” Father said, smiling broadly as we joined him. “You looking forward to the competition?”

“I’m looking forward to watching in person this time.”

“Let’s find a good seat,” Mother said, linking arms with me. “How about up top? There’s some shade.”

Bleachers had been set up on the platform, and a temporary awning over the uppermost seats, which also happened to give the best view. “Perfect.”

As we were seated, many of the assistants came to join us as well. Willow spoke into a microphone across the way, her voice booming through the entire clearing.

“Hello, everyone, and welcome to the second competition.” She turned to the women. “Congratulations, ladies, for making it this far. Now that everyone is fitted with gear, I will explain the rules for today’s event.”

I watched the girls as they interacted, some only halfway paying attention to Willow, some focused as if their life depended on it. Kayden stood with Jessica and Brooklyn, quietly listening. Sydnee was off to the side, almost

like a lone wolf, and I wondered why she wasn't with her regular group of girls.

"You will each be paired up, two partners to a team. The greatest reward will be given to those who show they can work together," Willow continued. "If you and your partner make it through the maze without receiving hits, you will each earn an hour-long solo date with Holden."

A murmur went through the group, but Willow held her hand up.

"If you come out alone, you'll only earn a half-hour. If you receive hits while in the maze, you're disqualified."

How anyone was supposed to make it through a maze of fourteen armed women without sustaining a hit was beyond me, but the women looked up to the challenge as Willow instructed them to pair off.

Kayden and Jessica chose to be a team. Sydnee and Elana paired up, strangely. I'd have expected her to choose Madison since they seemed to spend all their time together. And so on until each pair was selected and guided to their team starting points along the back side of the maze.

My mother squeezed my hand. "This is so exciting. I'm so glad you get to be here for this one."

"So am I." There was something about watching in person. The energy was different. I could practically feel the women's anticipation and anxiety in the air.

My gaze slid to Kayden as she checked her gear one more time, then checked Jessica's for her as well. Her face was intense, her brows drawn as she spoke quickly to Jessica, gesturing and drawing lines in the air. Strategizing. Jessica nodded along, taking Kayden very seriously. Interesting.

Sydnee and Elana stood at their start gate, though they didn't speak, Elana eyed Sydnee carefully as she lowered the mirrored visor of her helmet. When I found Rosely, who'd paired with Riley, she shifted her weight, looking around nervously and nodding to whatever Riley told her.

This was why I wanted to be here in person. Watching the women interact, as well as seeing how they handled the pressure of the competition, was very telling about how they'd handle other situations in their lives.

I was pleased to see Kayden so determined, and I couldn't help but grin as she gave one last bit of advice to Jessica before nodding swiftly and snapping her visor down. Jessica followed suit. Kayden clearly had a plan, and I was excited to see how it played out.

When one of Willow's assistants fired the starting signal, the women

burst through their entrances. Immediately, their paths sent them out in seven different directions, but it was easy to see the bisecting paths from above and anticipate where the first clashes might occur.

Garrett turned to look back at me from where he sat on the bench below me with Kayden's assistant, Faye. He grinned and gave me two thumbs-up. "Here we go!"

I chuckled at his enthusiasm as I watched the women weave through the pathways, paintball guns at the ready.

Sydnee had darted off, leaving Elana behind to find her own way. She looked swift and stealthy on her feet, moving with grace as she carefully checked corners and intersections on approach, readying herself for an opponent to pop out at any moment.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to find Kayden. Where had she gone off to? I spotted her and Jessica on the opposite side of the maze from lone wolf Sydnee, gesturing to each other with hand signals, working well as a team to clear corners and advance through the maze.

Many of the women came upon dead ends, and before long, the first shots were being fired. The sound of unloading paint guns filled the air, and half the teams were out in a matter of minutes.

Game staff dressed in black with matching headsets darted into the maze and retrieved the six disqualified competitors. All that remained were Kayden and Jessica, Sydnee and Elana—though they were both flying solo—Claudia and Aubrey, and Rosely and Riley.

Despite the first eliminations happening so quickly, there was more room to maneuver along the pathways and spread out within the maze. Kayden and Jessica moved quickly through the twists and turns, making good progress. I could see their path to the exit, though there were a few pitfalls they might encounter if they took a wrong turn—like the giant pit of mud in the center or the stone wall blocking the path near the end.

As I watched, I realized that Jessica and Kayden had worked out a system. It seemed as if Jessica was giving the directions—perhaps she had a good sense of where she was within the maze—while Kayden took out any opponents they came across. She was a good shot, fast enough to get a hit before her opponents even realized she was there.

My mother leaned in. "What do you think of Kayden?"

I kept my eyes on the maze as I replied, "She's doing quite well."

"She is," Mother agreed. "What else do you think of her?"

I glanced over quickly. Mother had a carefully blank expression on her face, and her eyes were sharp as a hawk. I knew that look, so I simply smiled and shrugged.

She sniffed but wasn't truly offended. She should know better than to try to get me to spill the beans while I was distracted.

"Nice try, Mother," I murmured.

When I glanced back at the maze, Claudia and Aubrey ran up against Rosely and Riley near the mud pit in the center, each team on opposite sides. Claudia and Aubrey both quickly took cover, and the pop, pop, pop of the guns filled the air, effectively eliminating Rosely and Riley.

I sat forward on the edge of my seat, already able to see the next confrontation before it played out in real time. Elana had found the rock wall. Instead of turning around, she'd chosen to scale the twelve-foot-high structure. But coming around the corner were Kayden and Jessica, armed and ready while Elana's gun was tucked into her holster. It was a fatal mistake, as Kayden eliminated her before she could even reach for her paint gun.

Garrett turned around to look at me with round eyes, his grin so wide it took up half his face. He was loving this. He gave me a knowing look, and I shook my head.

Jessica and Kayden regrouped, Jessica using her gun to draw something in the dirt. Kayden nodded, then scraped the sketch away with her boot before moving ahead of Jessica. It looked as if they'd figured out the path to the end, and they were jogging now, Kayden's head swiveling quickly, searching for enemies.

She was good; I had to hand it to her. Even better than I expected her to be at something like this. It had me curious about what kind of training she'd had.

Mother gasped and clutched my arm, drawing my gaze from Kayden.

"What is it?"

She pointed, and I looked to the left. Sydnee was also approaching the exit from a different path that would intersect Kayden and Jessica's within seconds.

The audience watched with bated breath as Kayden slowed, holding her hand up to Jessica as she paused at a corner, cocking her head like she was listening for something.

Sydnee appeared light on her feet as she ran, but it wasn't quite enough because Kayden was ready for her as she rounded the corner and picked up

speed, hurtling along the path toward the exit. She caught sight of Kayden just as Kayden leveled her gun and aimed. But Sydnee was fast. She charged ahead, ignoring Kayden in favor of getting to the exit first.

It was a mistake. She'd underestimated Kayden's ability with a gun. All it took was one shot for Kayden to land a hit dead center of Sydnee's back.

Sydnee spun, outrage clear on her face, even from this distance, and her roar of anger sliced through the air. She raised her paintball gun and fucking *unloaded* it into Kayden, knocking her back with shot after shot until she was out of ammo.

Kayden was out, but she looked confident as she stood from where she'd been knocked down on top of Jessica. I was certain she was smiling beneath that visor because Jessica hadn't taken a single hit.

Kayden said something, quickly gesturing to Jessica, who hesitated a moment before finally nodding and jogging toward the exit, where she crossed the finish line alone, totally unscathed.

Cheers and applause radiated through the crowd as assistants swarmed to gather the women together. The competition had been full of surprises, and I was pleased with how it went. Sydnee was cutthroat, but she was fierce and determined to win at all costs, which would definitely be an asset as an alpha's mate.

Kayden had shown skill, stealth, and a mind for strategizing that had nearly won her a victory. And Jessica had used her brain to get her to the end. They should all be commended for a job well done.

Willow joined us on the platform a moment later as her assistants took care of everything else. "Well, it appears you have a date with Miss Martin."

I nodded. "Do you have something planned already? Or do I have a say in it?"

Willow smiled. "We can provide you with whatever you'd like, Holden. All you have to do is say the word."

Garrett made sure I saw him roll his eyes, but then he grinned. The guy liked to give me a hard time whenever he got the chance.

"Perfect. I know what I'd like to do. I've been on a date with Jessica before and know what she likes."

"I forgot you two dated," Garrett said. "Blast from the past."

It had been years.

"I'll need your choice for elimination by sundown, Holden," Willow said, glancing down at the fourteen women now gathered back by the entrance,

removing their gear.

Yet another difficult choice, though based on this competition, I had a pretty good idea of who would be going. I only hoped she wasn't too disappointed.

KAYDEN

“Can you believe Sydnee did that?” Claudia exclaimed as a small group of us walked from the clearing back to the estate.

I wasn't *that* pissed at Sydnee. After all, Jessica had won instead of her. Now I didn't have to worry about what Sydnee would be up to on a date with Holden. A huge relief.

A small twinge of disappointment tightened my chest. But I wouldn't be going on a solo date with him either, when I'd been so close.

“That was just so rude of her,” Elana agreed, walking alongside Claudia, who was right behind Jessica and me. “Completely unloading all her shots on you like that. Ugh.”

Claudia giggled. “Just look how many paint splatters are on you.”

I glanced down with a wry grin. She'd gotten me good. “It's a good thing I had my visor down, or I would have gotten a face full as well.”

I turned to Faye, who was walking to my right and smiled, but she wasn't being her usual chipper self. I'd expected her to have something to say about Sydnee too, but she was uncharacteristically silent, though her eyes did dart from me to Jessica a few times as Jessica chatted with her assistant.

It could be worse, I kept telling myself I could have been disqualified early on. I'd done a good job and didn't feel at risk for elimination later tonight. As the group of us made it to our hallways, we broke off and headed to our rooms.

I touched Faye's shoulder and whispered, “Is everything okay?”

She glanced around furtively and shook her head, but when we got to my room, she shut the door behind me and looked at me with dread in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded, walking up to her and gripping her hands. Faye pressed her lips together, then blew out a breath. “I didn’t want to say anything where the others could overhear.”

A knot formed in my stomach. What was she talking about?

“Remember when I told you to be careful about who you trust?”

“Yeah.” She’d said it at least a dozen times those first few days.

“I mean it now more than ever, Kayden.” Her face was grave. “Jessica and Holden have dated previously.”

I blinked a few times, not sure I’d heard her correctly. *Jessica?* “I’m sorry, who?”

Faye nodded. “Yes, Jessica. You didn’t know, did you?”

I shook my head slowly, trying to process what she was saying. Holden, the man who I was falling for, despite my best intentions coming into this competition, had dated Jessica, the only other contestant I trusted here.

I struggled to breathe, feeling like I’d been punched in the gut. Neither had lied to me, but it sure as hell felt like it.

“I didn’t know,” I said quietly, hardly able to believe it. “Jessica mentioned that she’d been here several times with her parents for official business. But she never mentioned that...” *Why not?*

“Several of the women have been here before and knew Holden prior to the Contention,” I added. “Do the others know they dated? Is it public knowledge, and I look like an idiot?”

Faye quickly shook her head. “No, no. It’s nothing like that. No one else seems to know. It must have been before I started working here, but Garrett brought it up to Holden when he—” She broke off, her eyes widening.

“What is it, Faye?” My heart was racing, and my face was hot.

Her brow furrowed as she said, “Holden told Willow he wanted to plan their date. He said he knows what Jessica likes.”

A lump formed in my throat as a million thoughts whirled through my head. I turned and paced the room, unable to stay still as my mind played out various scenarios. Had they tricked us all? What if they were secretly working together? I couldn’t imagine Jessica being so deceptive, but crazier things had happened.

“Jessica has never acted too competitive,” I said, thinking out loud. “She doesn’t seem that worried about the competitions, either. What if she and Holden have made some kind of agreement?”

“I don’t know,” Faye said, “Jessica seems so shy and innocent.” My

thoughts exactly. “But I supposed it could be an act to keep her safe. Maybe she wants people to underestimate her.”

I glanced sharply at Faye, my stomach twisting. “What if she’s been using me all this time? What if I thought she was my friend, but she wants me to help take her to the end, to watch her back...?”

It sounded crazy, but again, this was the Contention we were talking about. Where women randomly challenged each other, sometimes to the death.

“Kayden.” Faye came up to me and stopped my pacing, putting her hands on my shoulders. “Don’t jump to any conclusions. That wasn’t my intention in telling you. I want you to be aware of the facts and that people aren’t always what they seem.”

I nodded mutely, afraid I might cry if I said anything. I wasn’t usually overly emotional, but this felt like a betrayal.

“Do you want some time to yourself?” Faye glanced at the clock. “We still have a few hours before dinner if you want to be alone.”

“That would be great,” I managed to say, and thankfully, she left right away.

The minute she was gone, I sank onto the bed, my legs suddenly weak.

Was Faye right? Was I jumping to conclusions?

Honestly, I didn’t know. I’d only been here a week, and a lot had happened. I barely knew these women—barely knew Holden. Yet the idea of him and Jessica working together—being together—made my chest ache and my stomach twist. I didn’t have any right for it to, though.

I sat there lost in my thoughts, unaware of how much time had passed until I realized I still hadn’t washed off from the competition. I rose from the bed and headed toward my bathroom. As I passed my desk, I noticed an envelope that hadn’t been there this morning.

Apprehension washed over me as I took in the expensive oversized cream envelope and the script on the front.

I snatched up the envelope and stared at it, almost afraid to see what it said. My heart pounded, and blood roared in my ears as I flipped it over and opened the unsealed flap. My hand shook as I unfolded it, my eyes scanning the words:

My dearest Kayden,

I regret to inform you that after today’s competition, you have been selected for elimination—

I dropped the letter as if I'd been burned, unable to see through the blur of tears. It didn't matter, though. I'd seen enough.

Dismissed.

A single sob escaped before I clapped my hand over my mouth. No. I wouldn't lose it. Not here where the other women could hear me fall apart. I glanced at the doors that led to my small covered patio. Only two stories up, I could make my way down from the outside and not have to risk running into anyone. The woods were just beyond, beckoning me with the promise of solitude.

Quickly, I made my way out and down to the ground, then practically sprinted to the edge of the woods, shedding my clothing as soon as possible once I was safely beyond sight.

The shift came over me quickly, powerfully, my heightened emotions calling my wolf forth at record speed. My internal pain was amplified as my bones broke and reformed. I let out a fierce roar as my muzzle elongated, sharp teeth ripping from my gums.

Then I ran blindly through the woods, barely aware of anything other than the sound of my paws pounding the ground and my own ragged breathing.

I ran and ran, needing to escape my thoughts. Escape my heart. But when I returned a couple of hours later, I was exhausted. I shifted back, my shoulders slumped as I dressed.

The run had prevented a total meltdown, but it hadn't changed my situation. Or the heartache I felt. Why was I so upset?

Was it the idea of being sent back to Branson? That had been my original reason for staying. Yet Holden hadn't kept his word on bringing me to the top ten.

That wasn't why I was so upset, though. Somewhere along the way over the course of this week, my reason for being here had changed, and I was only fully accepting that now. I'd come to care for Holden. Deep down, I recognized it, but I'd been afraid of it.

For a good reason, apparently. Holden didn't care for me. He'd only been using me to get information on Branson. The knife twisted in my chest once more as that hit home. That was why he'd brought me here in the first place.

Vowing not to fall apart again, too tired to deal with the fallout of giving in to my emotions, I went back to the estate through the back doors. Luckily, there was no one I recognized roaming the halls.

Back in my room, I shut and locked the door behind me. Instantly, it hit

me. The smell of gas. Was there a leak?

My gaze flew to the little hot plate in the kitchenette I'd never used. No, it was electric. So, where was the gas coming from?

Panic hit me, and I spun to open the door again, only to find it locked.

"How the hell?" I jerked and pulled and twisted the knob, but to no avail. The door was stuck, even though I'd just come through it. I ran to my patio door, confused when I found it shut. I thought I'd left it open when I left. Regardless, I gave it a yank, but it was also stuck. Sealed shut, practically.

My breathing became ragged as I realized I had no way out. I had to find the source quickly before I passed out and died before anyone could find me. I ran to the bathroom, but before I could open the door, a powerful boom rocketed through the room, reverberating in my body as the force of it threw me backward onto the floor.

I stared at the ceiling in shock, checking to make sure there had been no damage. Then I realized whatever had caused that explosion had started a rapidly spreading fire. Flames quickly licked their way toward me, growing larger and larger. The heat was enough to drive me back to the far wall. I had to get out of here.

In a frenzy, I looked around for a way to escape, my gaze landing on the carved iron chairs at my little table. I rushed forward to grab one, but the fire moved faster, creating a barrier between me and the chair.

Tears streamed down my face as I sobbed in earnest. No! I wouldn't go like this. I'd rather die in a challenge from Sydnee herself than burn to death. Smoke filled the room, choking me. There was only one way out.

Gathering my resolve, I charged forward through the flames, only a glimmer of light through the windows now visible as the room became thick with dark smoke. My fingers landed on the iron chair, burning hot like coals as the flames licked closer and closer.

I screamed in pain, doing everything in my power to force my hands to remain on the burning metal, despite every instinct telling me to let go. My energy was fading fast as I lifted the chair high in the air, then slammed it against the sliding glass door.

It shattered, and I flung myself forward, sucking in lungfuls of fresh air as black smoke billowed out behind me. Not stopping, I hurtled over the railing, dropping to a heap on the ground.

Voices sounded, yells of warning, screams of panic. Then one I recognized immediately, full of terror. "*Kayden!*"

I couldn't see very well; my eyes blurred with tears and stinging from the smoke, but I knew that voice and that scent anywhere.

"Kayden, are you okay?" Holden asked urgently, running his hands over my face, my body. "What happened?"

I winced in pain, and the next thing I knew, Holden was lifting me into his arms, cradling me gently against his chest. I reached up to rub my eyes, but cried out in pain at the first touch. Blinking rapidly, I saw that my hands were covered in burns from the chair.

"You're covered in blood," Holden hissed, his voice strained as he peered at me. I swear it looked like genuine concern in his eyes, but I didn't know what was true or wasn't at this point.

Holden called out orders to the streams of people that had flocked around the scene before he was rushing away with me.

Faye's voice carried after us. "Holden, wait!" She must have jogged to catch up. "Is Kayden okay?"

"How the hell did this happen?" he growled, the force behind his words shocking me enough to distract me from my pain temporarily. "Where were you?"

"I—I don't know. I left her in her room to rest. I know as much as you do."

"It's your job to look after Kayden. *I don't know* isn't good enough." His voice was loud, scathing, as he ripped into Faye. "Find my grandmother at once. I'm taking Kayden to the infirmary."

Faye squeaked out a reply, then ran ahead, radioing for Margie to come to the infirmary.

Holden carried me inside, his touch gentle despite his grip on me. He set me gently on the first table he could find. "Grandmother," he roared. "Where are you?"

Margie rushed out of a back room, took one look at me, then got to work assessing my injuries. Faye trailed behind her, eyes wide as she took me in. I had no idea how bad it was, but it hurt like hell.

"How dare you?" I hissed at him, managing to gather my wits about me enough to let him have it. "Faye hasn't done anything wrong. What are you even doing here? Don't you have other things to take care of?"

"What?" Holden frowned, reaching his hand out to me, but he pulled it back quickly when I glared at him, the fire in me suddenly burning as hot as the flames in my room.

“Don’t touch me! You may be sending me home, but that doesn’t mean you can just dismiss Faye like she doesn’t matter.” I opened my mouth to take a deep breath, but a coughing fit took hold, my lungs burning from the smoke I’d inhaled.

“Send you home? What the hell are you talking about, Kayden?” Holden’s eyes were full of concern now. “Grandmother, she isn’t making sense. Could it be from smoke inhalation?”

“Just go away, Holden,” I yelled, my voice breaking into another fit of coughs. “At least let me get patched up in peace before you kick me out.”

Holden shook his head, eyes glittering. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I found the letter,” I snapped. “Earlier, before I got trapped in my room.”

“Trapped?” His gaze roved over me. “Letter?” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Kayden, but you need to explain.”

I clenched my fists, then immediately cried out in pain.

“Out of my way, boy.” Margie elbowed Holden in the ribs and grabbed my wrists, flipping my hands over to examine my palms. She made a *tsking* sound.

Margie sighed. “These burns are pretty bad. Let me get a special salve. I’ll be right back,” she promised before heading to the back again.

“Kayden,” Holden said, moving in front of me once more, his voice quieter but just as intense. “Talk to me. What do you mean—a letter and being kicked out?”

I narrowed my eyes, glaring daggers at him. In my fury, the sharp pain faded a bit. “I know all about it, Holden. How you and Jessica dated, that you kept it a secret from me—Jessica was my only friend, so thanks for that extra stab in the back. Then you have the nerve to kiss me like you did last night and send me home today.”

He opened his mouth, but I wasn’t done. “As if that wasn’t enough, I was trapped in my room and nearly died from a gas leak explosion.” I was shaking now as I held my hands up, putting red burn marks right in his face. He flinched but didn’t step away. “I almost *died*, Holden. So don’t hold it against me if I’m a little pissed I’ve been deceived by you all along.”

I struggled to take a deep breath, all the hurt and anger rising until it felt as if my chest were caving in. “What was the point of it all? Tell me. I didn’t want to come here in the first place. Why didn’t you just leave me to die with Branson? Is it not enough that you killed my brother? Are you so sick and

twisted that you wanted to toy with me until you broke me?” Another coughing fit took hold, and I could barely breathe. Barely think beyond the pain.

“If you don’t stop upsetting my patient,” Margie said as she came back in with a jar and a tray of medical supplies, “I’ll kick you out, Holden Wilder. Alpha or not, I’m the one in charge here.” Her voice softened as she looked at me. “I need to cut away your shirt, Kayden, to check for potential damage. But first, can I put this on your palms?”

I nodded, sucking in a deep breath and holding it as Margie opened the salve and spread it over my burning palms. Immediately, a cooling sensation washed over me, and I slumped slightly in relief. Margie got to work cutting away my shirt, which was covered in blood and soot.

Holden had stepped back and crossed his arms, but his gaze was unwavering, boring a hole right through me even as Margie stripped my clothes away. I should have been embarrassed, but I was too angry. Too hurt.

“Everybody out. I need to speak with Kayden alone.” The command in his voice made me sit up straighter despite myself.

“Like hell I will,” Margie said, not bothering to look up from her work as she checked my body. “What in the world is wrong with you?”

I winced as she applied an antiseptic to the few cuts on my arms and torso. “I’m not leaving her like this, not even for you, Holden. I won’t risk infection or scarring on the girl.”

Holden clamped his mouth shut, still staring at me.

“She needs stitches on her arm.” Margie continued berating her grandson. “And the minor burns need to be taken care of as well. As soon as I’m done here, I’ll leave and let you two talk. But until then, I suggest you sit down and shut up.”

I grinned despite myself. I couldn’t have said it better.

HOLDEN

The wild, fierce need to protect was all-consuming. Logically, I knew Grandmother was helping Kayden, but seeing her in pain made me want to howl in rage, to find out what happened and rip apart the person responsible.

“Fine,” I snarled through gritted teeth. “Just help her. And quickly.”

Grandmother glanced at me, her eyes narrowed, a glint of curiosity there. But she didn’t say anything else, just got back to work. She cleaned out Kayden’s cuts, picking out shards of glass from her arms and irrigating the wounds while Faye and I silently looked on.

Kayden flinched, and I darted to her side, resting my hand lightly on her back. She scowled, but I didn’t care. She was hurting, and I wanted to do what I could to help.

When she whimpered and squeezed her eyes shut, I couldn’t help myself.

“Be gentler,” I hissed at my grandmother.

Kayden’s eyes snapped open, and she pursed her lips, pulling away from me. “I’m fine, Holden. You need to get out or sit down and stay out of the way.”

My grandmother smirked faintly, but I chose to ignore it, just like I refused to move from Kayden’s side. “Do you have some pain medicine, at least? Something you could give her, so she won’t hurt?”

“I don’t need anything,” Kayden said, shaking her head in refusal.

“You do,” I insisted, this uncontrollable urge welling up inside me to do something, *anything*, to take away her pain. Even my wolf was going crazy, clawing at my subconscious, insisting I protect what was ours.

This possessive feeling, matched with utter helplessness at being unable to do anything, was driving me mad. I didn't understand it—none of it. Why did Kayden spark such intense emotions? Why did seeing her in pain make me want to tear the world apart to make it better?

Things had been different with her, almost from the very beginning. She'd initially intrigued me, but over the past week, it had escalated into something I simply couldn't name.

Rationally, I should accept that Kayden could be injured at any point during the Contention—all of the women could be. That was part of it, and I'd known it going in but it hadn't mattered.

Seeing Kayden in pain like this, unable to do anything but watch—made me feel helpless in a way I never had.

“Okay, dear,” Margie said. “If you'd like some pain meds, I can get them for you before I start stitching you up.”

She shook her head. “I'll be fine. Really. I don't want anything interfering with my ability to stay alert.”

A million questions flooded my mind at that—the explosion. I had to get to the bottom of it immediately, but I wasn't willing to leave Kayden.

I turned to Faye, who still hadn't left, her concern for Kayden clear in her worried expression. “Go see if you can find out what happened, and report to me personally as soon as you know.”

Faye nodded and quickly rushed from the room. When I looked back at Kayden, she was watching me, her face pinched as Grandmother began stitching her up.

Seeing the sharp needle weave in and out of Kayden's skin made me want to roar, and I nearly ripped the tools from my grandmother's hands. She must have sensed something in my demeanor because she looked up and gave me another of her sharp, no-nonsense glares.

“I swear to the fates, Holden Wilder. If you interfere in my work...”

I held my hands up. “I'm not.” But inside, I was losing my mind as I watched Kayden grit her teeth, enduring the pain. It couldn't be over soon enough.

A few minutes later, Grandmother sat back. “Okay. I think I've done everything I can for now.” She reached for a bandage kit. “Let me just get this covered up, and then you should be all set, Kayden. I'm going to send this salve with you. Make sure you reapply every few hours. If you feel up to it, a shift will speed up your healing process. I want to see you back in the

morning, so that I can check your progress.”

“Thank you, Margie,” Kayden said with a soft smile for my grandmother.

“Of course, my dear.” She patted Kayden’s cheek and gave her a kind smile in return. “I’ll let Faye know to bring you some fresh clothes as well.”

I’d been so distracted by Kayden’s injuries, so worried about her, that I’d barely noticed she was only wearing a bra. Now, as my eyes drifted over her, I could think of nothing else.

The smooth expanse of her tanned skin beckoned for me to reach out and run my fingers along her back, to know what the curve of her spine felt like beneath my touch. But I didn’t dare, not with the way she was still glaring at me. She might break my arm, even injured as she was.

Grandmother stood from her stool and collected some cleansing wipes from a drawer, pressing them into my hand. “Here you go, Holden. You can help clean the blood with these, but avoid any damaged skin.” She fixed a hard gaze on me. “No upsetting my patient. Do you understand?”

I nodded, my eyes on Kayden. “Got it.”

Then she walked from the room, leaving me alone with Kayden. I moved to stand directly in front of her, leaning in and resting my hands on either side of her thighs.

“What the hell happened today, Kayden?” My voice was a low rumble, my anger at the situation barely checked. Seeing her like this, covered in blood and burns, was almost too much. I glanced at her chest, noticing the beginning of purple bruises forming there. I frowned. “What are those bruises from?”

She sucked in a breath and stared at me for a moment, then glanced down, her features twisting in a grimace. “From Sydnee unloading her gun on me earlier.”

I gritted my teeth and tried to steady my breathing and control my anger. In sharp contrast, the need to touch her was overpowering, and I couldn’t help but lean in closer. I felt on edge in a way I couldn’t explain.

Ripping open the cleansing wipes, I began carefully wiping away the blood, starting with her face. She watched me in silence, her expression devoid of any emotion. My heart thundered as the reality of what happened set in. She was lucky to be alive—lucky her injuries weren’t any worse.

When her face was cleaned of blood, I paused, cupping her cheeks with my hands and rubbing gently with my thumbs, just thankful she was going to be okay.

She blinked, her brows drawing together. “What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry.” I wasn’t, though. And I didn’t move back, staying in her space as her breath hitched.

“I just need to touch you, make sure you’re okay.” I smoothed her hair back from her face, then traced my fingers along her jaw. I tried to soften my tone as I repeated, “Will you tell me what happened?”

Kayden let out a breath, her gaze wary as she met my eyes. Then she relayed in detail everything that happened from the minute she returned to her room after the maze competition.

She glared accusingly as she revealed what Faye told her about Jessica and me dating previously—she’d clearly jumped to conclusions there. When she mentioned the letter she’d found, I had to interrupt.

“I didn’t send that letter to you, Kayden. I don’t know how it ended up in your room, but I have no intention of sending you home.” It was the first time I’d admitted it to myself, but I felt the truth of it. “That was for another woman.”

She paused, some of the anger fading, but she didn’t look entirely convinced.

“I swear to you.” I leaned in closer, getting right in her face and gently gripping her chin. “I have no desire to send you away,” I told her, finally letting myself acknowledge what I’d been feeling these past days, even if I didn’t say it aloud. I wanted Kayden more than any other woman here. In fact, I’d barely been able to imagine myself with any of the other contestants. She might not have been groomed to be an alpha’s wife, but right now, I couldn’t care less.

Kayden swallowed, a glimmer of suspicion still in her eyes, but she didn’t pull away, didn’t tell me to leave. I’d count it as a win. Finally, she nodded, looking at her hands folded in her lap. “When I got back to my room after going for a run, I smelled the gas immediately.”

How had there been a gas leak? I’d have my people investigating this until they found an answer. As Kayden told me the rest, including how she’d had to grip a burning-hot chair to break the glass and escape, I felt my wolf again clawing his way to the surface, his rage equal to mine. When it came to Kayden, he seemed extra protective. I pushed him away, trying to remain calm for Kayden’s sake.

“Kayden,” I breathed, lowering my forehead to hers and cupping her cheek. “I don’t know what I would have done if something happened to you.”

She pulled back, staring at me in confusion. “And here I thought just a few minutes ago that you wanted me gone.” She shook her head and bit her lip. “You have no idea all the things that went through my mind.”

I couldn’t help it—I needed to be closer to her and prove that I spoke the truth. Slowly, I reached up and ran my fingers through her hair, pushing it away from her face, then I traced her jaw, her nose, and her lips.

Her eyes slid closed, her lips parting slightly as her breath came in shallow pants. My heart thundered as I stared at her, drawn by her beauty. I closed the distance between us, capturing her mouth with mine. She didn’t resist. Instead, she melted into the kiss with a quiet moan, her rigid body finally softening and giving in to what we both wanted.

Pure relief washed over me that she wasn’t pushing me away, that she believed what I said—and that she was here in my arms where she belonged.

A rush of desire rocketed through me, but I forced myself to be gentle, aware of the trauma she’d just been through. I teased her lips with my tongue before dipping inside, tasting her. Like our other kisses, this one was swiftly accompanied by desire more intense than I’d ever felt for a woman. It was different this time, though. Out of nowhere, an aching need, a longing that went far beyond the physical plane, roared to life inside me, burning me up with its power.

My wolf rose to the surface with a solitary thought.

Mate.

Stunned, I broke the kiss and pulled back, staring deeply into Kayden’s honey brown eyes. And that’s when I recognized it.

This draw I’d felt toward her, almost from the very beginning, became almost painful in its intensity.

Mate. Mine.

It should have been impossible. True fated mates were so rare that I only knew a handful. But there was no other way to explain it. No other reason why I suddenly felt as if I needed this woman more than the very air I breathed....

Kayden was my fated mate.

With my instincts taking over, I thrust my hands into her hair, pressing my lips to hers once again with a fiery passion that left us both breathless.

When I pulled back again, simply staring at her in awe, I knew in my bones it was the truth. Kayden was the only one for me, and I wanted her more than anything.

“What is it?” she asked, her face pinching in confusion. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I blew out a breath, still in shock. “Don’t you feel it? This... connection between us.”

She sat perfectly still, swallowed, but didn’t say a word.

“Kayden, that’s the mate bond. You’re my fated mate.”

She jerked back, her eyes widening as my words sank in. “What?” she breathed, as shocked as I was.

My chest felt too tight as the reality of it truly hit me. “Don’t tell me you don’t feel this. There’s no way you don’t.”

Every moment we’d spent together played back in my mind as the pieces all fell into place, everything making sense for the first time.

She didn’t speak for a long time as we stared into each other’s eyes. “You’re my one true mate,” I repeated, the certainty of it growing with each passing second.

Finally, she nodded, her words barely a whisper as she said, “Yes, I feel it too.” Then she sucked in a sharp breath, panic flashing on her face. “But Holden, I *can’t* be your mate.”

My stomach twisted, my wolf whimpering inside, and my heart pounded furiously as what she was saying sank in. Raw, unfiltered fear worked its way through me. It wasn’t that she was denying we were mates. Rather, she recognized what I’d failed to, being so caught up in the realization that I’d forgotten one of our most important laws.

An alpha was expressly forbidden to have a fated mate.

I stared at her, my panic rising fast, and I shook my head, taking a step back. Uncertainty flooded my mind, all the reasons we couldn’t be together clashing with the instinctive desire to claim her as my own.

“Holden, don’t,” she said in a rush, reaching for me, but I took another step back. Her breathing became ragged, her face contorting in pain as I retreated further, at war with myself over what I should do.

“It’s a lot to take in. I get it,” she whispered, still reaching out to me. “Believe me, I’m just as shocked as you are.”

I blinked in confusion. My wolf urged me to go back to her, to take her in my arms. To never let her go. But the weight of my duty was stronger. “No,” I said abruptly. “You’re right. We can’t be mates. I’m just... mistaken.” But my words were hollow. An obvious lie. Because there was no mistaking it now that I’d recognized the mate bond for what it truly was. I was more

certain of this than anything in my life.

“Holden,” she said, her voice shaking now. “That’s not what I meant. It’s okay. Just... sit down, and we can figure this out.”

But it wasn’t okay. Kayden being my mate changed everything.

“I have to go.”

“What?” Her voice cracked, the pain of my rejection palpable, and it pierced my heart as sharply as an arrow. I didn’t want to hurt her—far from it. But I didn’t know how to process this. Didn’t know how to deal with it. All I wanted was her, but she was the one person I couldn’t have—not if I wanted to take my place as alpha.

I needed to think. I had to get out of here before I did something stupid.

“I have to go,” I said, spinning on my heel.

Just then, the door to the infirmary swung open, Faye walking in with fresh clothes. She froze, looking between us, clearly aware she’d interrupted something.

Kayden hopped down from the table. “Take me to my room, please, Faye.” Her voice was tight, strained, and she wouldn’t look at me.

“Kayden.” I reached my hand out to her, the instinct to comfort her strong even though I knew it was a mistake. A risk I couldn’t take.

She only shook her head, pulling on the shirt Faye brought. Knowing I’d hurt her made me want to backtrack on everything I’d said. I was being torn in two, pulled between my duty to the packs and the primal need to be with my mate. But Faye was watching us with wide eyes. I wouldn’t have this conversation in front of her.

So I stood there wordlessly, my heart feeling like it might implode on itself as my mate walked out of the room and away from me without a backward glance.



GO AFTER HER, my wolf seemed to say, the urge so strong I almost couldn’t think rationally.

I turned, catching a glance of myself in the mirrored wall. I looked wild. Unhinged.

Like my wolf might burst out at any moment.

I had to get out of here.

I left the infirmary and the building as quickly as possible, jogging along a trail down to the beach. The moon was covered by clouds tonight, suiting my mood perfectly. I let the rhythmic roar of the ocean crashing steady my thoughts as I tried to process everything that just happened.

Kayden and I were mates.

I sank onto the sand and stared out into the dark sky. Perhaps I should have recognized it sooner. But the only fated mates I'd ever been around were a few of my parents' friends or council members. It wasn't something many people understood. Still, as I reflected on everything that happened from the moment I first saw her, I recognized that all the signs had been there. I was drawn to her in a way I hadn't previously been able to understand. Now, though, it all made sense. There was no denying it.

But what was I supposed to do with this? North American alphas weren't allowed to have fated mates. The law didn't apply to any other alphas, but when it came to the one who looked out for them all, there was no higher expectation. My responsibility was to my pack, and nothing could ever put that at risk. Fated mates were wildcards, a threat to the packs. It was a very real possibility that if I let myself be with Kayden, I'd lose all sense of reason—potentially choosing the fate of my mate over the fate of the packs, and that simply wasn't something I could do.

There was one North American alpha, centuries ago, who'd betrayed the packs for his fated mate, instigating a civil war that had taken decades to recover from. Even now, the number of shifters had never returned to what it was before. Since then, it has been outlawed. The law had always made sense to me before. I could never put my mate before my duties, and a mate bond could make a man vulnerable and weak in ways I could now easily imagine.

Even now, rage that she'd been harmed still burned through me. I would do anything for Kayden—and that was extremely dangerous.

Going into the Contention, I'd never once thought my loyalty to the pack would be questioned. My choice of mate was to be based on who was best equipped to work by my side and lead. It was all that mattered.

Sure, my parents had lucked out. They were perfect for each other, and there truly was no other woman who could fill the shoes of alpha's mate as my mother had. But they weren't fated.

I'd hoped to find someone I could grow to love, at the very best. I'd never counted on finding my fated mate.

I ran my hands through my hair and scraped them down my face,

growling in frustration. I couldn't tell my father. He'd have Kayden sent home immediately—or exiled. He wouldn't mess around when it came to this—not when the pack's future was on the line.

The idea of him sending her back to Branson had me standing up, adrenaline pumping through my veins. No, I wouldn't tell him.

How I was going to handle the Contention now, though, I didn't know. I didn't want anyone else—couldn't imagine myself with anyone else. But what choice did I have? It was clear now more than ever that I had to choose someone other than Kayden, even if the idea of not being with my mate made me physically sick.

I jogged back toward the estate, anxious to be closer to my mate. I would give her space, but I needed to talk to my father and Garrett, and find out what happened with the gas leak.

“Holden!”

I stopped on the trail, peering into the night. Sydnee stepped out from a path winding through a little garden and cocked her head. “Hey, are you okay?”

No, but I couldn't tell her that. “I'll be fine.”

She walked closer. “Are you sure? You look pretty upset. If you need someone to talk to, I'm here.”

I eyed her. While I certainly couldn't talk to her about what was happening, she might be able to help me with something else...

“Actually, yes,” I told her, gesturing to the path that led back to the house. “I don't have long, but I'd like to ask you something.”

She smiled broadly and came right up to my side. “Of course. What's bothering you?”

I sighed. “You're aware of the trouble with the Southeastern Coastal pack, particularly with their alpha?”

“Branson?” Sydnee nodded. “My father has kept me up to date on everything throughout the North American pack for years. He poached one of our own just a month back.”

“He's been doing more than that lately.” My father trusted Sydnee's father, so I found no reason not to get her thoughts on the matter. “I'm afraid he might be gearing up for a rebellion, and I want to act sooner than later. However, the best course of action is still unclear.”

“The simplest solution is to remove him from his position, and the sooner, the better.” Sydnee echoed my thoughts, saying the same thing

Kayden had been insistent on. “Why wait around to see what he’s going to do when you can eliminate the threat now?”

I glanced at her, wondering if that’s how she viewed her competitors in the Contention as well.

“Thanks, Sydnee,” I said as we approached the front path of the estate. “I really appreciate it.”

“Of course.” She beamed up at me. Normally, I would have kissed her, but it felt like a betrayal now that I knew Kayden was my mate. I settled for a kiss on the cheek, then left her standing there, striding into the house and making my way to the fourth floor.

Removing Branson from power was the clear solution. On some level, I knew Kayden blamed me for her brother’s death, even if she’d said just the other day that she understood. But understanding was a far cry from being mated to the man who’d actually done the killing.

Ultimately, Branson was to blame. Nico hadn’t been the first or the last shifter to die following Branson’s ambitions.

I knocked on Garrett’s door, determination settling in. He opened it and gaped. “What the hell happened to you?”

I had no idea what I looked like, but I refused to tell anyone about Kayden just yet, not even my best friend. “We need to move on Branson. Tonight.”

His brows flew up. “Are you serious? Why tonight?”

I’d just decided it. The sooner I could eliminate him as a problem, the sooner I could deal with my own issues—primarily, figuring out how to get through this Contention.

“Because he won’t expect it so soon after visiting and because I’m over his bullshit.”

Garrett’s teeth flashed in a smile of dark anticipation, and he rubbed his hands together. “You know I’m in.”

“I’ll find my father and let him know. You get Cal and Jax. Meet me in my office to make a plan—then we’ll head out.”

“What are you thinking? Kill him?”

I shook my head. I wanted to show Kayden that I could handle conflicts without resorting to killing, even if I had every right. It would never make up for what happened to Nico, but it was a start.

“Let’s replace him with someone from the inner circle—start thinking about that too. We’ll leave a few soldiers in town to oversee the transition.”

Garrett nodded. “Sounds like a plan. If he tries anything, then he can be exiled. Or sentenced to death.”

I’d avoid it if possible, but Kayden’s pack needed to be out from under Branson’s control. They’d suffered enough. However, if that’s what it came to, I wouldn’t hesitate to act.

KAYDEN

It was the first day we hadn't had classes or a competition since we'd arrived, and I needed the break more than ever.

Last night I hadn't been able to sleep after Faye brought me to this temporary room on the north wing of the second floor. The image of Holden's face as he'd stared in awe, his whispered words—*fated mate*—cycled on an endless loop, keeping me tossing and turning.

Even now, as the first gray light of dawn lighted my new room, my mind wouldn't give in to my body's fatigue. Finding my fated mate was the last thing I expected that could have happened. I wanted to deny it, to tell Holden he was crazy, imagining something that wasn't there. But I couldn't.

Because I knew it was true.

The moment those fateful words had left his lips, I'd felt the truth of them in my bones and soul.

It had been too much. I'd needed to get away, especially after his words cut deeper than I ever would have expected. I needed time and space to process what this meant.

Faye had begged me to tell her what was wrong after bringing me to this room, but how could I begin to express it in words? I didn't even know how I felt about it. I certainly didn't want anyone else to know until I'd figured that much out.

She'd left me alone, but only after I'd insisted I was fine, just emotionally drained from the day—understatement of the year.

I let out a deep sigh, my body heavy as I tossed off the blankets and sat up. As much as I needed to sleep, my mind wasn't going to shut up long

enough for me to get any.

“Time for a run,” I muttered, thumbing through the new rack of clothing Faye had delivered after she’d left me last night. I swallowed, thinking of all my other things that had likely burned up in the fire. None of them had been mine, but it brought home the gravity of what I’d been through.

I’d nearly died.

I hastily grabbed some sweats and a jacket. I’d be shifting anyway, so it didn’t matter what I wore. All that mattered was getting out of my head for a while.

Spending time in wolf form, running in the woods, and experiencing nature as one of its creatures had a calming effect on my body and mind. I couldn’t think of a time I’d needed that more.

Opening the door to the bedroom that was similar to my other room in size but styled in a more masculine theme of browns, greens, and rich wood, I peeked into the hallway. Even though I’d never been this way before last night, I’d gotten my bearings in the massive estate enough that I easily found my way downstairs and out a side door.

I breathed in the crisp morning air, the scent of dew on the grass and flowers, before making a beeline for the woods. I wasted no time shedding my sweats and dropping to the ground, letting my shift take over.

It was more painful than normal as my burns and cuts seared as if another fire were ripping through me. My body reformed, and as it did, healing energy surged forth, sealing wounds from the inside out. I wouldn’t be entirely perfect—my burns were likely to still be a bit pink and tender—but my recovery would be weeks ahead of what a human could expect.

I stretched into my wolf form, just to appreciate the calmness that settled over me. I breathed in, the scent of leaves, damp earth and traces of woodland creatures filling my nose. In the dim predawn light, I could make out the various trails that wove through the woods, paths run by North American pack wolves for centuries now.

With one more stretch, I settled into my new form, then took off into the woods. I bounded through the underbrush, darted between stands of trees, and leaped over fallen branches. The further I ran, the harder I pushed myself, the emptier my mind became until all there was, was my wolf, my human consciousness receding to the background.

Scents, sounds, and sights were magnified, the beauty of nature bringing my calm to another level. Still, I ran. After about an hour, my legs growing

tired, my breath coming in pants, I came across a small stream.

Padding over the rocks along the side of the shallow water, I dipped my muzzle and took a drink. Cool, fresh liquid soothed my throat. When I drank my fill, I picked my way across the stream to a tiny clearing where dappled sunlight reached a patch of thick grass. It looked soft and inviting. Scenting the area, detecting no signs that other creatures might be lurking nearby, I settled down and rested.

Finally at peace, my wolf dozed off, but even in sleep, dreams of Holden haunted me. In wolf form, my dreams were full of impressions, sensations, and images rather than thoughts. My wolf knew full well Holden was our mate and was frustrated with me running from it when I should have been overjoyed to find something so rare.

Along with frustration, my wolf projected sadness. But all mixed in was a yearning, a longing for something that might never be. I couldn't shake that feeling when I awoke and shifted back to human form. Despite all the reasons we shouldn't be together, the truth was I wanted him—desperately. I'd tried to ignore it, tried to fight and deny it.

But there had been something about him that drew me in, almost from the start. Now I knew what it was. What I didn't know was what I should do about it.

I knew enough of pack history to know fated mates weren't allowed when it came to the North American alpha. So, where did that leave us?

Holden had shown himself to be a true leader, loyal to his pack above all. He would choose his duty over anything, I was certain. Which meant he couldn't choose me.

So, what was I supposed to do? Stick around and compete, only for him to choose someone else? Or even worse, earn a position on the council and have to watch my mate with another woman for the rest of my life. Would he try to keep me as his mistress? My stomach twisted. Hell no.

But could I really expect any other outcome? Was there a way for Holden and me to be together, for him to choose me in the Contention? The idea made my heart leap and my pulse race, even though I knew it wasn't an option. I'd learned enough about the man since I'd been here to know he would do what he thought best for his pack.

Feeling sick over the thoughts, I shifted back to wolf form and made my way back toward the estate, though at a much slower pace. It was nearly lunchtime when I got back, but I wasn't hungry, so I shifted, dressed, and

headed out along the winding garden path.

Almost of their own accord, I found my feet following a familiar route, one that passed by the fountain Holden and I had met at several times. My heart skipped a beat when I saw a familiar golden-brown head sitting on the edge of the stone.

Even from far away, it was as if he sensed me, his head lifting and turning in my direction. His dark eyes flared, smoldering with an intensity I could feel from hundreds of feet away.

My gaze snapped to his left as movement drew my attention.

Sydney.

She was sitting next to him on the fountain, chattering away. Heat spread over my chest, up my neck to my face, unfamiliar jealousy ripping through me so fast I staggered back a step.

Holden looked like he was about to stand, to call out my name, but I quickly shook my head and spun, racing back to the estate and up to my room.

What had that been about? One more reason why this Contention wasn't going to work—now that I'd recognized what this was between us and was no longer denying that I wanted him in a way I refused to admit before—how was I supposed to watch him with these other women?

I ran a bath, the water extra hot, needing to soak my sore muscles now that the shift had healed my wounds enough to allow, though I kept my hands out of the water just to be safe. I soaked until my body was utterly waterlogged, then I dragged myself from the bath and wrapped myself in a robe.

It seemed that the shifting, the run, and the bath did the trick because once I sank onto my bed, I fell asleep immediately. It was a deep, dreamless sleep this time, and when I awoke, I felt much more like myself.

The golden glow of the setting sun shone through my windows, and I stared at the forest, the heaviness of the day still weighing on me.

Now what?

One glance at the clock told me dinner would be soon. My stomach rumbled—I hadn't eaten all day. I could dress and go to dinner with the other girls, but that sounded like a terrible idea. Since it was an off day and we got to choose how to spend it, I'd be having dinner in my room.

My thoughts drifted to Jessica as I pulled on a pair of soft jeans and an oversized sweater. Had it only been yesterday that I urged her to victory in

the maze, earning her a date with Holden?

That date had been scheduled for tonight. So far, I'd gone about my day without having to see or speak to anyone, but I couldn't help feeling a bit lonely as I got dressed.

Jessica was the only person here who I'd consider a friend. Now I didn't know if I could trust her at all. Jealousy reared up once more, and I growled in frustration. I certainly couldn't be feeling like this all the time. Yet I feared it's exactly what the Contention was going to be for me now. One big struggle with controlling my emotions—and my wolf—where Holden was concerned.

I glanced at the clock again. Most of the evening dates had begun promptly at seven. Jessica was probably getting ready for her date right now.

Before I had time to reconsider, I slipped my shoes on and headed out into the hallway, crossing to the east wing where Jessica's room was located.

When she opened the door after I knocked, her eyes went wide, and she flung her arms around me, pulling me into a tight hug.

"Oh my god, Kayden." Her gaze was full of concern. "Are you okay? I mean, they said you were, but I haven't seen you all day, and Faye wouldn't tell me where your new room is, just saying you needed to rest."

She carefully touched my arm and pulled me into her room. I took a deep breath, so conflicted now. This was exactly why I didn't want to fall for Holden. It was just one big mess.

"You look nice," I managed to say, eyeing her warily. She had on a knee-length A-line dress in white that highlighted her curves in a sexy, feminine way. She looked beautiful, actually, and I fought hard to keep the jealousy at bay.

Jessica offered me a small smile and shrugged. "Thanks. I have my date with Holden tonight."

I took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about?"

She furrowed her brow. "Oh, yeah?"

I cleared my throat and sat down on the edge of Jessica's bed. No reason to beat around the bush. "I heard you two used to date. Is that true?"

Jessica blinked, her lips parting slightly. "Well, yes. It's true." She came to sit next to me on the bed, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as she studied my expression. I didn't know what I looked like, but her eyes widened slightly.

“Are you angry I didn’t tell you?”

I sat with that question for a moment, wanting to be truthful. “Yes,” I finally admitted. “It feels like something you should have told me, though. I feel like you lied, even if by omission. I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

“Oh, Kayden.” Her blue eyes glistened as she shook her head. “I’m so sorry. Maybe I should have told you. But I didn’t know who to trust here at first. And then I thought it might look bad, so I kept my mouth shut. If you want to know the truth, though, I’ll tell you everything—because there isn’t much to tell.”

“What do you mean?” I tried to keep my face blank, afraid my emotions might be written all over it. Since acknowledging Holden as my mate—even if only secretly in my mind—my feelings had been all over the place. I still hadn’t worked out exactly how I felt and had no idea when or if I would.

“We were very young. Teenagers, still. Holden was seventeen, and I was fourteen. I wouldn’t even call it dating. Our parents paired us for some events that year, probably hoping we’d hit it off. We never went out on a real date. Never even kissed.”

I looked at her sharply, but she looked like she was being perfectly honest. I was pretty good at reading people. Jessica was either a master of deception, or I’d blown this way out of proportion.

Maybe I could blame it on the crazy day I’d had yesterday—the turmoil of what Faye said about their dating, combined with thinking Holden had sent me a dismissal letter. But I knew the truth of it.

My reaction had been pure jealousy. Some part of me already knew Holden belonged to me—even if I hadn’t been able to understand. The mate bond was strong, looking back in hindsight. Every moment we’d shared, every reaction I’d had to him, now made so much more sense in light of us being mates.

“Kayden?”

I glanced up, realizing I’d gotten lost in my thoughts. “Sorry.” I shook my head. “I believe you.”

Jessica’s shoulders slumped with relief. “Good. Because I would never trick you like that on purpose.”

I nodded, standing, and Jessica followed suit, wrapping her arms around me and pulling me into a gentle hug. It was all I could do not to break down in tears at the much-needed comfort. I’d thought I’d lost my only friend here,

and after everything I'd been through, it felt good to know I wasn't alone.

"I'll let you finish getting ready," I told her. "We can talk later." I wasn't sure I wanted to stick around and watch her get all dolled up for my mate.

Clenching my jaw at the unwelcome thought—I wasn't sure how I felt about this new barrage of feelings concerning Holden—I walked toward the door. "I hope you have a nice time."

"Thanks," she called after me. "And Kayden?"

I turned, forcing a smile. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry again for not telling you. I hope I haven't ruined your trust."

"No," I replied with a shake of my head. "You haven't."

I found that I meant the words, but as I left Jessica's room, I decided maybe I'd join the others for dinner after all. Otherwise, I might be spending the next few hours wondering just what Holden and Jessica were up to on their date. The more I could quench this jealousy that had to be coming from my wolf's attachment to our mate, the better.

Luckily, Sydnee was absent from the dining hall. Brooklyn and Aubrey were sitting together, so I joined them, hoping Brooklyn's incessant chatter would at least keep my mind occupied. Afterward, I walked in one of the many gardens I'd yet to explore.

Now that I'd cleared things up with Jessica, the problem of what to do about Holden weighed heavy on my mind. I'd have to see him again soon and talk to him. But what would I say?

What did I want?

Honestly, I didn't have an answer for that. My wolf insisted we wanted Holden, but the more I thought about it, the more impossible it seemed. Was I setting myself up for heartbreak? Probably.

The thought didn't sit well, and I wandered the gardens for a while, trying to come to terms with the fact that we were mates without the pressure of what I should do about it. Perhaps the best thing to do right now was nothing at all, to wait until Holden and I had a chance to talk.

Once I'd made peace with that course of action, I felt better. I could put it all aside for the rest of the night. When I got back to my room, Jessica was waiting inside. I jumped in surprise at the sight of her sitting at my table.

"Sorry," she said quickly, jumping to her feet. "Faye finally told me where I could find you."

I cleared my throat and made my way inside. "How was your date?"

Jessica shrugged. "It was nice. We had dinner, then a walk on the beach."

Holden remembered how much I loved the beach.”

My chest felt tight, my stomach twisting at her words, but I forced myself to smile and act rationally. Unless I planned on telling her about the mate bond, which I didn't, then I didn't need to act like a crazy woman, jealous at the slightest thing.

“Honestly,” she continued, “it felt more like old friends hanging out and catching up than a date. Holden was polite but didn't seem very interested in me. And to be perfectly honest, I didn't feel that spark either.” She shrugged. “Not that I'd know what that felt like, but hopefully, it's more exciting than my date.”

She laughed, and I cracked a genuine smile at that. “I'm pretty sure when you know, you know.”

“Maybe. I'm not here for love, though. I just want a council position,” she admitted.

That had been my plan too. Until fate had come along and turned everything completely upside down.

HOLDEN

“Some of the women’s families will be arriving tonight,” Willow said, referencing her tablet, “and some in the morning. But all should be here well before the ball begins tomorrow.”

I nodded, then took a sip of coffee. Willow was in my suite, updating me on everything that would happen over the next few days.

She looked up to make sure I was paying attention, and honestly, I couldn’t blame her. My mind had been full of thoughts of Kayden ever since she’d left the infirmary the night before last.

“Remember, Holden, whatever happens at the ball, just go with it.”

“And you can’t tell me anything other than that?” I asked, even though we’d been over this before.

“I can’t disclose too much information, or it could affect the outcome of events. Just trust me here.” She swiped her finger over her tablet. “Now, as for your role at the ball. You should be sure to spend time with each contestant and meet their families. This is one of the highlights of the Contention. You have an appointment with the tailor this afternoon to make sure your tux fits perfectly, then—” Willow paused, glancing up from her tablet.

“What is it?”

“Your mother has arranged a private date for you tonight—with Kayden.” Curiosity was written all over her face.

My pulse kicked into high gear, excitement warring with fear that I wouldn’t be able to do the right thing if I was alone with her. That I couldn’t think past the longing to be clearheaded. “Is that allowed?”

Willow shrugged. "I don't see why not. You're searching for your future mate, after all. Spending extra time with some of the women to get to know them better can only be a good thing, right?"

"Perhaps," I said simply, not ready to give anything away. Kayden was my mate, but why was my mother getting involved? Did she suspect something? Still, the idea of having more time with Kayden was too appealing. She'd avoided me yesterday, running off the one time I'd caught a glance of her. We definitely needed to talk. "Did Mother make arrangements for the date as well?"

"No, I can set up whatever you want," Willow replied. "Just let me know, and I'll take care of it."

"Great. I'll let you know what I need later today. Let's schedule it for after classes. Dinner, actually," I said, an idea forming in my mind.

While I knew I was playing with fire, part of me craved the opportunity to be alone with Kayden to discuss what was happening between us. And to figure out how to handle it.

"Is there more information on what caused the explosion in Kayden's room?" I asked. Willow's lips twitched, but it was the only tell that she already knew who I wanted a private date with.

"Nothing substantial." She sighed. "Though your father had a team investigating. There's no evidence of anything being tampered with, though."

I didn't buy it. Someone had put a forged dismissal letter in Kayden's room. These women could be vicious, and I didn't put it past many of them to want to eliminate threats, which Kayden was to many of them. I needed to make sure Father wasn't giving up on the investigation.

"Okay, thanks, Willow. Is there anything else?" I drained the last of my coffee and stood.

"I think that's it. Make sure you're at the appointment with the tailor at four o'clock."

"Got it." I offered her a smile and walked her to the door. "Thanks again for all your hard work."

She smiled broadly, pleased by the compliment. "There's nothing I'd rather be doing than helping my best friend's son find the love of his life."

Little did she know...

After Willow left, I headed down the hall to my father's office. We had some financial work to do for next year's budget. I knocked on the door before entering and was greeted with a warm smile.

“Good morning, son. How are you today?” He leaned back in his leather desk chair.

Aside from finding my fated mate and knowing I could never have her?

“Great,” I said, forcing a tight smile and taking a seat across from him. Kayden might be off limits, but the part of me that wanted her—the part that was drawn to my mate wasn’t willing to accept my fate so easily. My mind was already racing with things I wanted to say on our date. And my heart held out an irrational hope that I could find a way to be with her, even if my head knew it was impossible.

“How are you holding up with the Contention? Any favorites yet?” His smile widened. “By this time in my Contention, I was already head over heels for your mother.”

I didn’t want to lie to my father. I loved and respected him. But how could I tell him Kayden was my fated mate? I’d rolled this over and over in my mind, trying to find a solution, but so far, I was coming up blank. He’d exile her immediately, and I refused to allow that.

I shrugged. “I need more time to get to know them all.” It was a safe, easy answer, all I could give him for now.

His smile dropped slightly, but he nodded. “You’ll figure it out. There are a lot of fine women that would make a good wife.”

“Agreed. So, about this budget...”

We worked all morning, and at lunchtime, I found Willow and gave her the details of how I wanted the date my mother arranged to go.

She smiled excitedly. “I’ll make it happen.” Reaching up and patting me on the cheek like I was still a child, she added, “You can pick Kayden up from her room at six. I’ll communicate with her assistant and ensure she’s ready for you.”

The rest of the afternoon went by in a blur, and soon enough, I was standing outside the door of Kayden’s temporary room, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves.

Being nervous about a date with a woman was a strange feeling. I’d never lacked for women throwing themselves my way. But Kayden had been different from the start in every way. My stomach was in knots as I lifted my hand to knock. If this didn’t go well, I didn’t know what I’d do.

I knocked, and Faye answered the door. “Good evening, Faye. I’m here to pick up Kayden for our date.”

Is this what it was like for regular guys who dated? Were these nerves

typical? Or was it the knowledge that Kayden was my mate and I wanted her more than anything?

“Right on time,” Faye said with a huge smile, opening the door wide and gesturing for me to come in.

I stepped inside, and my heart leaped up into my chest. Kayden was dressed in a long, flowing white dress that grazed the floor, the thin straps exposing her toned shoulders and arms. She wore sandals and carried a lightweight wrap—perfect for what I had planned. Willow and Faye did well.

Kayden’s hair was half up, a braid crossing her head like a headband at the top, long silky waves falling to her waist.

“You look beautiful,” I said earnestly, never having meant the words more.

Kayden cleared her throat and glanced down, swallowing. “Thanks.”

I reached out my hand. “Shall we?”

Kayden’s chest rose and fell as she took a breath, and she didn’t quite meet my eyes as she walked to my side and took my hand.

I could feel her reaction, though, when we touched. She jerked, almost as if she’d been burned, and it confirmed she felt the same electric spark that I did.

“Have a good time,” Faye called after us.

We didn’t speak the entire way through the house and down the grand staircase, though I felt Kayden’s eyes on me from time to time. Nerves danced in my stomach, but hope flickered in my chest. This could be going so much worse.

When we walked through the front doors, the crisp early autumn air carrying the scent of the sea, she finally spoke. “Where are we going? Faye wouldn’t tell me anything.”

I laced my fingers through hers, and she tensed. I paused, glancing down at her. She was worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

“Kayden,” I said softly. “Come here.”

I pulled her over to a small bench along the path I’d chosen that led down to the beach and sat, patting the seat beside me. She sat but stared straight ahead.

“I know this is a lot for you to take in,” I began, “but I’m not going to pressure you. We have a lot to talk about, sure. But just for tonight, can we put everything aside and just be us? Let’s forget the Contention, forget about being mates, all of it. I just want to spend some time alone with you.”

Slowly, she turned her gorgeous gaze to mine and let out a breath. “I guess I can agree to that.”

Relief like I’d never known washed over me, the tension I didn’t realize I’d been carrying seeping from my body. I squeezed her hand. “Thank you.”

She didn’t know what else to say, so I stood and continued along the path. A few moments later, we were at the shore.

Kayden stopped, her mouth dropping open as she took in the setup that went above and beyond what I’d asked for.

Straight ahead, only yards from the crashing waves, was a small tent. The gauzy curtains were currently held open by silky ties, and tiny sparkling lights hung from the tent top, giving it a magical look. Hundreds of flowers decorated the space, including a trail of rose petals leading from where we stood at the edge of the sand to the tent.

Inside was a small table just a foot high, and piles of thick, plush pillows covered the ground. It was beautiful, secluded, and romantic.

“This is...amazing,” Kayden breathed, looking at me once more. Her eyes were full of unspoken emotion, and I desperately wanted to ask her what she was thinking and feeling. But I wasn’t going to push. She was here with me, and that’s all that mattered.

I squeezed her hand gently, then bent to take off my shoes. She slipped out of her sandals, and we walked toward the tent. The scent of the flowers mingled with the salty sea breeze. I’d have to make sure Willow was properly recognized for putting this together.

When we entered the tent, Kayden breathed in deeply, walking toward the table full of covered silver platters. “This smells delicious.”

I smiled. “One of my mother’s friends, Helen, owns a restaurant not too far from here. We prefer to use her for catering when possible because her food is just so damn good.”

Kayden nodded, her eyes lighting up. “Your mother mentioned Helen when I dined with her. I’m excited now.”

That was a good start. “Would you like to eat or take a walk on the beach?”

“Honestly, I’m starving,” she admitted. “Training was particularly brutal today.”

In prep for the ball, no doubt, though I didn’t mention that. Not that I knew what would happen, but our trainers were the very best.

“Perfect,” I said, helping her sit on one of the overstuffed pillows before

sitting at the side of the table next to her. “I hope you like Italian food?”

“Mmm,” Kayden moaned, the sound awakening desire within me. “One of my favorites.”

I grinned as I lifted the lids from the platters and served Kayden a generous helping of each item—salad, garlic knots made from scratch, shrimp risotto, and mushroom Alfredo. “Helen’s cooking was my favorite growing up. She was always around, kind of like an aunt—she was actually a contestant in my parents’ Contention. She taught me a thing or two.”

Kayden lifted her brows as I set the heaping plate in front of her. “So you can cook?”

I nodded, filling my own. “Learned from the best.”

“I never really learned how to cook,” Kayden admitted, spearing her salad with a fork. “My parents died when I was young, so I never had the chance.”

“Who cooked for you then?” I asked.

“My brother,” she said quietly, then shoved her mouth full of food.

My heart ached for her. She’d lost her parents and her brother. I couldn’t imagine losing the people I cared for the most. The worst part was, I was responsible for her brother’s death.

“Kayden,” I began, my throat tight. I hadn’t wanted to discuss this on our date, but it was the elephant in the room. “I’m so sorry about your brother. Truly. Yes, it comes with the territory of being an alpha, but had I known you then...” I shook my head. “I don’t enjoy killing. It’s the worst part of my job.”

Kayden set her fork down and stared at her lap for a moment that felt like forever. This was the reason she didn’t want me, and I’d do anything to change it, but there was no way to undo the past.

“I told you before,” she finally said, “that I understand why you had to. I’m not saying I’m *okay* with it. Not exactly. But I do get it. The person to blame here is Branson.”

Her eyes ignited with fire as she spoke his name, but Kayden soon resumed eating her meal, making little sounds of pleasure that had my cock standing up and taking notice, but I tried my best to ignore the raging desire I always felt around her.

“I can teach you to cook, if you’d like,” I told her, wanting to return to a more pleasant topic of conversation.

“If you can teach me to make this,” she said, pointing at the shrimp risotto, “I’m all in.”

We finished our meal, and I asked question after question, wanting to know everything about her, what she liked, what she didn't. Her hopes and dreams. I wanted to know it all.

Soon, the sun began to dip below the horizon behind us, lighting the eastern sky in shades of pink, purple, and blue. Kayden watched the waves crash in their endless rhythm, looking more relaxed and at peace than I'd seen her since we'd met. I hadn't brought up being mates—and I wasn't going to, not tonight—but this was huge progress. After what she said, I didn't believe her brother was the only reason she'd pushed me away, but I wouldn't push her for more than she was ready to give.

Wanting a bit more privacy, I stood and pulled at the ties holding the curtains back, ensconcing us in a magical wonderland where it felt like we were the only two in the world.

I moved the table over, then sank close to Kayden on the pillows. She didn't move away, a good sign, and I rolled to my side, propping myself up on my elbow as I studied her beautiful face. She truly was gorgeous. I'd never seen a hair color quite like hers before. With her almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones and full lips, she looked like a goddess in the flowing white dress.

"What is it?" she asked, turning to look at me.

"What?"

"You're staring." A tiny smile played at her lips.

"Because you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Kayden laughed. "I'm sure you say that to all the girls."

"Kayden." My voice was serious. "There are no other girls. Not for me."

She didn't say anything for a moment, and I was afraid I'd pushed too hard, said too much. But to my surprise, she moved closer, leaning back on the pillows beside me.

White-hot desire burned through me, but I forced myself to remain in control. I'd lost all sense of myself two nights ago in the infirmary, driven only by the knowledge she was my mate. I was willing to take my time if that's what she needed.

"Are you ready for dessert?" I grabbed a small container from the table and opened it, revealing tiramisu, cannoli, and tiny chocolates.

Kayden's eyes widened. "Always."

I picked up one of the chocolates and held it to her lips. Her eyes locked on mine as she sank her teeth into it, her lips brushing my fingertips. It was

all I could do not to kiss her right then and there.

Restraint, Holden, I reminded myself. *There's no hurry.*

But my body didn't get the message. I ate the other half of the chocolate, then reached for the tiramisu. Not bothering with a fork, I dipped my finger into it, then held the creamy goodness to her lips.

She arched a brow but didn't say anything. When she opened her mouth and licked the custard from my finger, I couldn't help but groan.

Her breath came faster, her eyes fixed on my mouth. She wanted me, that much was clear. Just as I wanted her. The pull of the mate bond was strong, but was she willing to give in to her desires?

"Your turn," she murmured, her voice husky as she sat up, reached for a cannoli and brought it to my mouth.

I didn't try to hide my longing as I stared at her while taking a bite, then took the decadent dessert to feed her again. My heart pounded as her mouth wrapped around the cannoli, her eyes fluttering as she moaned again.

Fuck, she was driving me wild.

There was a little bit of cream on the corner of her mouth, but instead of reaching up to wipe it away, I leaned in, unable to resist. I'd told myself I had no expectations for this date and wouldn't push her for anything other than her time and company.

But she showed no resistance as I bent my head close to hers until we shared the same air. Then I darted my tongue out to lick away the sweet cream.

Her breath hitched as she remained perfectly still, her eyes closed. Waiting.

I certainly wouldn't refuse that invitation.

Ever so slowly, I closed the distance, brushing my lips against hers. The reaction was instant for both of us. The same indescribable yearning I'd felt for her each time we'd kissed rose once more, only this time I recognized it for what it was.

Mate.

The thought flitted through my mind as Kayden responded, lifting her arms to wrap around my neck and pulling me closer as she arched up into me, kissing me back with a passion that took me by surprise.

I growled, plunging my fingers into her silky hair, angling her head up so I could deepen the kiss. Our tongues tangled in a fervent dance, and everything felt right with the world for the first time in days.

I rolled over, pressing her into the pillows, hooking a leg over hers. There was no mistaking the hardness of my cock pressed against her hip, and a delicious moan escaped her lips.

“Holden...”

I trailed my tongue along her jaw, down her neck, breathing in her scent. I scraped my teeth over the sensitive flesh, and she arched her body, her breasts tantalizingly close. With a glance at her face, to make sure she was on board, I reached up and cupped her breast, kneading softly. She squirmed on the pillows, rocking her hips, and I was done for.

Having Kayden in my arms, beneath my body, was heaven...pure ecstasy. Dipping my finger beneath the low neckline of her dress, I groaned at the feel of her soft skin, her pebbled nipple that begged for attention.

“I want you so bad,” I breathed, pulling back enough to glimpse her rosy bud before lowering my head and taking it into my mouth.

Kayden cried out, her body bucking beneath mine as I teased her sensitive flesh with my tongue, sucking and licking before gently rolling her nipple between my teeth. My hand trailed down to her hip, and I gathered her dress, pulling it up until I felt the smooth skin of her thigh.

Kayden’s hands tightened on my shoulders, and I brought my mouth back to hers, forcing myself to kiss her slower despite the raw, unhinged need coursing through me.

Stroking my fingers up and down her thigh, my cock ached, begging to be set free. But I wouldn’t make this about me. No, I wanted this to be about my mate, making her feel good, showing her just how amazing we could be together.

When she parted her legs, opening herself for me, it was everything. I pulled my head back, breaking the kiss, wanting to watch her beautiful face as I touched her for the first time.

Her lips parted, her chest heaved, and her gaze locked on mine as I slowly traced the curve of her hip before moving my fingers to her inner thigh. I could feel the heat of her pulsing, and I could barely breathe as I finally brushed the tips of my fingers over her center. Her panties were soaked, and I dropped my forehead to hers with a groan.

“Fuck, Kayden. If you want me to stop, tell me now.”

She shook her head ever so slightly, then arched her hips against my palm. Hell, yes.

Watching her the entire time, wanting to learn what she liked and what

made her feel good, I dipped my thumb inside her panties and found her soft, swollen bud.

She whimpered as I stroked her, circling her clit and teasing her pussy lips while she writhed beneath me. She was so wet...so warm, and when I slipped a finger inside, her velvety-soft walls clenched around me. My cock twitched, throbbing and aching with want.

I added a finger, teasing her clit with my thumb while I thrust in and out of her, and only moments later, Kayden was panting, her head dropping back on the pillows as she gave in to pleasure. Her orgasm ripped through her as she cried out in ecstasy, her pussy pulsing and clamping around my fingers.

I kissed her through her pleasure until her body went limp beneath mine. She stared up at me in shock and awe.

“That was...” She shook her head, seemingly at a loss for words.

“I know,” I murmured against her mouth. “You’re fucking incredible, Kayden. Don’t you feel this? We’re meant to be.”

She froze, her eyes widening, and the next thing I knew, she was sitting up, adjusting her dress and covering her glorious body, not looking at me once again.

“Kayden, it’s okay,” I said. “We don’t have to fight this. I’ll find a way around the rules. We just need to wait until I’m alpha—it’s quite common for alphas to have a lover on the side, especially when a marriage is made for political reasons. You’re my mate—I won’t let you go—I won’t let a stupid law keep us apart when there are ways around it.”

Her face shut down, her expression blank and her voice flat as she said, “I need to get back. I have a long day tomorrow.”

I pressed my lips together. Fuck. I’d gone too far, pushed for too much, even after telling myself I wouldn’t bring up being mates at all. “Okay, if that’s what you want.”

She stood quickly. “That’s what I want.”

We walked in silence to her room, but I needed to kiss her once more before saying goodnight. She didn’t resist, but it was short and sweet, and far too soon she was on the other side of the door.

I blew out a breath and ran my hands through my hair, my body still on fire and aching for my mate as I went up to my private quarters.

Before I made it there, though, I ran into Garrett, who looked furious, his eyes glittering and his body tense. I immediately went on high alert. “What happened?”

“Something is going down with Kayden’s pack.”

“Tell me.”

“Our men that we put in place have gone silent. I’ve spoken with Bridger and David, and they’re looking into it.”

My chest felt tight. “Let’s go.”

Together, we made our way to the fourth floor and my father’s office. His face was grim as we entered.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

Father steepled his fingers as he sat back in his chair. It was late for him to be in his office. This had to be serious. “Our enforcer you installed as alpha has been challenged and killed by another within the pack. He’s passed the title of alpha back to Branson.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I hissed, staring at him in shock.

“Unfortunately not,” David chimed in.

“I’m so fucking tired of this. This isn’t how I wanted to handle it, but it’s time to kill him.”

Garrett sighed. “While I agree with you, Branson hasn’t broken any rules. He didn’t perform the challenge. He didn’t take his position back by force. If you move now, it might be just what he’s waiting for to start a war.”

I shoved my hands into my hair. “What are we supposed to do then?”

Father watched me carefully. “WE need to wait it out. Wait for him to do something that justifies us making a move against him. But we can’t take him out for this specific act. Not yet, at least.”

Not yet. Frustration swept through me. I needed him gone to ensure both Kayden and her sister would be safe no matter what happened. Branson was a threat to everyone, and things were quickly getting out of hand. I was ready to move *now*, but I reminded myself that the time would come—and soon—when he would get what was coming to him.

KAYDEN

The minute the door shut, I leaned against it and let out the breath I'd been holding.

Holy shit. Had that really just happened? Holden Wilder, future North American alpha and my mate, had made me come harder than I ever had in my life. It was incredible, and my body still hummed from the pleasure he'd given me.

I couldn't lie to myself—I was already falling for him. And it wasn't just the mate bond between us. Holden was intelligent, kind, strong, loyal... and an incredible kisser. I was having a hard time finding reasons not to care for him other than being his mate.

Under any other circumstances, I would have been overjoyed. But the fact remained that there were a dozen other women here vying for his heart. Women who would make a much better match for an alpha than I would.

Sharp jealousy roiled in my gut, and I pushed off the wall to pace my room. My chest ached as his suggestion of being his mistress replayed in my head. How could he think I'd be okay with something like that? But what options did we have? He wasn't willing to break with tradition. But I wasn't willing to be his secret lover.

Suddenly, the four walls felt as if they were closing in on me, my thoughts swirling as I tried to make sense of my thoughts and emotions that were all over the place.

A run. That's what I needed. To shift and burn some of this excess energy off. I stripped out of my dress, pulled on some leggings and a sports bra, grabbed a sweater, and turned to head out.

When I opened the door, I found Faye standing there, her hand lifted, poised to knock. Her mouth opened in surprise. “Kayden, hi. I was just coming to tell you that your new room is ready. We can move you back into the wing with the others.”

“Oh, okay. Can we do it tomorrow, though? I was about to go on a run.”

Faye frowned. “In the woods? Alone?”

I nodded. “I need to burn off some energy.”

She cocked her head. “How was your date?”

“Fine.” Holden had gone all out to make it romantic, but the details were just for the two of us. “So is that okay? Can we move tomorrow?”

“I supposed so, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be alone in the woods at night, Kayden. You never know.”

My mind drifted to Sydnee and how she’d put her friends up to surprise challenges. That wasn’t what I needed tonight.

“How about the gym instead?” Faye suggested. “Sometimes, you can find the trainers hanging out. I bet they’d spar with you if you’d like.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. Thanks.”

I made my way down to the gym, and sure enough, the lights were on. When I peeked through the doorway, I saw Kyle lifting weights. He stopped and turned. “Hey. What’s up, Kayden?”

I cleared my throat and stepped fully into the gym. “Faye said you might be willing to spar with me?”

He smiled and set the weights down, then walked toward me. “Yeah, I’m up for that. Anything in particular you’d like to work on?”

Today, we’d paired off for more hand-to-hand combat training. While I felt fairly confident in my abilities, it was my favorite. I could always improve my skills. “Maybe a little booster lesson on what we learned today?”

Kyle chuckled. “Sure thing. Want to warm up with some punches?”

“Throwing punches sounds fabulous.”

He arched a brow, his lips twitching. “Let me grab some padding then.”

While Kyle went to get the equipment, I hopped in place to get my blood pumping, then stretched my tight muscles. Hopefully, the extra workout would loosen some of the tension that had set in.

“Okay, give me your best.” Kyle moved into the sparring ring, two foam pads strapped to his forearms. He held them up in front of him, taking a fighting stance, making the perfect target. “Just pound away as much as you like.”

“You aren’t going to spar with me?”

“I will. But for now, just warm up with some practice hits.”

For the first few minutes, I was just getting my bearings, getting a feel for how Kyle moved. I landed punch after punch into the soft padding, and he began to make things more difficult, dodging out of my way and making me work for it.

Fifteen minutes in, I was already sweaty and out of breath, but each time I landed a hit, some of my tension released. I rolled my shoulders as I took a step back, staying light on my feet as I decided where to strike next.

Kyle grinned. “You look like you’re just getting started. What has you wound so tight this evening?”

From the corner of my eye, I caught a movement in the doorway. Turning, I froze at the sight of Holden standing there, eyes blazing.

“Get out,” he growled.

My chest tightened, making it harder to breathe as he strode into the room, gaze trained on me, but I straightened my spine. Holden might be one of the most intimidating men I’d ever met when he wanted to be, but that didn’t mean he could act like an ass.

“Excuse me?” I narrowed my eyes, even as my body reacted to him, my wolf responding to the alpha. To my mate.

“Not you.” He whirled on Kyle, who stood, eyes wide. “I’ve got it from here.”

What I saw on Holden’s face as he stared down one of his best trainers shook me. Jealousy. Raw and unfiltered, as if he couldn’t control the primal reaction. At least I wasn’t alone in that, even if I despised the emotion.

Kyle immediately took off the sparring pads and nodded to his alpha. “Yes, sir.” Then he was gone, leaving the two of us alone.

“What the hell was that? I’m trying to burn off some steam here.”

Holden took a step closer. “I can help you with that.”

Heat flooded my core, images of what we’d done on the beach flashing through my mind. He must have seen it in my face because the fire in his eyes began to smolder.

“I mean by training,” I clarified, my voice breathy from my exertion. At least, that’s what I told myself. I certainly didn’t want to give him the idea that I was willing to go along with being his mistress.

“Like I said.” He pulled his shirt off, muscles rippling, cracking his neck and rolling his shoulders. “I can help.”

I watched him move back to the door, his movements graceful as a predator. He shut it and flipped the lock before walking back to the sparring mat.

He settled his weight back into a fighting stance, arms up. I just stared, my heart racing. He wanted to spar with me? My gaze roved over his broad shoulders, thick biceps, carved chest, and chiseled abs. Holy shit, the man was ripped. I knew it before, but now, alone, here, knowing he was my mate...

He held his palm up, then curled his fingers back twice. "Come on. Show me what you've got."

An invitation. And a challenge.

I settled into my heels, my core engaged as I gave him a sharp smile and began circling, looking for the best opening. He wanted to see what I could do? Great.

Without warning, I lunged forward, curling my fingers into a fist as I went for his stomach. He saw it coming, though, and blocked the hit with one arm, ensnaring my wrist with his other hand and spinning me around, so my back was to his chest, his arm holding me tight.

He chuckled a low sound that sent a shiver through me. "I know you can do better than th—"

His breath wheezed out as I jabbed my elbow into his gut, straightening the other arm so fast it broke his grasp. I whirled away quickly, gathering my focus, sinking into that state of being where nothing existed but the fight. It had been far too long since I'd sparred like this, and excitement flooded through me.

Holden's mouth curved up, but I tried to ignore the sensation that smile sent through me. *Focus.*

He moved swiftly, darting forward with a right hook. I barely managed to get my arm up in time to block him. I gasped at the force of impact and glared at him indignantly. "That's against the rules."

"What rules?"

"Kyle's rules." I gestured at the door the trainer had disappeared through, noting his flare of jealousy.

"In real life, there are no rules. You think one of these women here will care about rules when she challenges you?" Holden shook his head. "Think again."

That's how he wanted to play? Fine.

Before he saw it coming, I pivoted to the side and flung my leg out, kicking him hard in the stomach. He grinned. “That’s more like it.”

I was already winded from sparring with Kyle, and Holden was infinitely stronger than me, but I was willing to give it my all. We fell silent as we circled each other once more, then began fighting in earnest. Fists flew, more hits blocked than not, but both of us managed to get a few good ones in. Triumph at holding my own gave me a renewed sense of energy.

In the zone now, Holden and I fell into a dance of sorts, our bodies moving and flowing in response to each other.

“I messed up,” he said out of nowhere, his words startling me enough that he got past my defenses and landed a hit to my shoulder that sent me stumbling backward.

“Messed up how?” I lifted my fists, trying to ignore the wild thoughts that ran through my head, the jealousy that sprang up at many of them.

“In the tent. On the beach.”

I stilled, taking a step back before circling again, anger and hurt making my chest tight. Did he regret what we did? “You just have to play by the rules, don’t you?”

Holden stopped moving, dropping his arms to his sides. “What else do you expect me to do, Kayden? There are reasons for the laws we have in place. Good ones—I simply can’t ignore the risks I’d be taking by choosing you as my mate.”

Pain radiated through me at that. He wanted me. But not enough.

I took the opportunity of his lowered defenses and went in for the hit, landing a hard uppercut to his jaw. He grimaced. “I guess I deserve that.”

I laughed humorlessly. “Hell, yes, you do.” I kicked my foot out again, putting all my frustration into it, but Holden didn’t make the same mistake twice. He caught my foot and twisted it, knocking me off my feet and onto my back.

I stared at him in surprise, the breath knocked out of me.

He let out a heavy sigh, reaching a hand down to help me up. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want you.” He raked a hand through his hair, his face twisting in frustration.

I took his hand, but instead of standing, I jerked hard, knocking him off balance and pulling him to the floor, getting in another kick as he fell to the side. I scrambled up.

“Yeah, but only as your mistress.” I glared at him. “Why the fuck would

you think I'd be okay with something like that?"

His eyes narrowed as he got to his feet. "Because there's no other way, and I'm not willing to give you up."

I scoffed. "Then you're even more of an idiot than I thought you were."

Holden glowered. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I shook my head, incredulous. "I won't degrade myself like that. Not even for you."

We began circling once more. "It's one thing to know I'm your mate," I continued. "It's something else entirely for you to think I'd be okay with watching you live your life with another woman by your side—in your bed. Tell me, Holden, how would you feel if the situation was reversed?"

His jaw ticked, his eyes blazing as he considered my words. I feinted left, then went for another jab to the stomach. Holden blocked the hit, then kicked my legs out from under me. I fell to the floor with a thud, gritting my teeth, but I wasn't done. I flipped over, managing to wrap my legs around his, knocking him off balance.

He grunted as he fell on top of me, his hands landing on either side of my head to catch himself from falling on me. "You think I haven't thought of that? Do you think it's easy for me to consider being with anyone else but you?"

My gut twisted at the thought, and I responded with the only emotion stronger than that heart-wrenching pain. Anger.

With a growl, I knocked his arms out from under him, rolling to the side just in time to keep from being crushed under the bulk of his weight. But he was fast. His hand snaked out to wrap around my waist, pulling me back towards him. I allowed my body to roll with the motion, using the momentum to keep us going until he was on his back with me straddling him.

I landed a punch to his cheek, my breath heaving from exertion and the wild emotions racing through me. I shook my head in frustration. "Then why the fuck are you still playing by the rules? You said it yourself—in real life, there are no rules. Are you the future alpha or not? Do you want your mate or not?"

My hair had come loose from my braid, cascading around us like a curtain as I glared down at him.

Holden's eyes glittered with anger, but something else was burning behind it. Suddenly, I was all too aware of our positions. Of the way his gaze roved over me. Hungry.

Heat pulsed in my core. I swallowed, my heart racing as Holden reached up and ran a hand along my cheekbone where he'd gotten in a good hit. I froze, barely moving, even as my body ached and throbbed with need. I broke his gaze, glancing between us to his sweat-beaded chest. Lower, to the bulge in his pants.

My breath rushed out, my arms and legs trembling. Holden brought his hands to my waist, my upper body barely covered by my sports bra. They were hot, leaving a trail of fire in their wake as he ran them up my sides, his palms grazing the sides of my breasts, then back down, coming to rest on my hips.

"Kayden," he breathed.

I should have left. But I stayed perfectly still, staring down at the man driving me wild with desire. In that moment, I forgot all about Branson and my pack, the Contention, and even my fears of what it meant to be Holden's mate. All that mattered was the two of us, right here and now, and the deep-rooted need that demanded to be sated.

I moved on instinct, my body knowing exactly what to do, even as my mind went blank. I rolled my hips, gasping as Holden's rock-hard cock grazed my thin athletic pants.

The fire in his eyes before was nothing compared to what blazed now. He gripped my hips tighter, grinding against me as liquid heat pooled in my core.

I moaned, leaning into the sensation and wanting more. I rubbed myself shamelessly against him, lowering my upper body. My pebbled nipples brushed against his bare chest, sending sparks throughout me.

Then his hands were in my hair, pulling me closer, crushing my mouth to his. All my pent-up longing broke through the thin hold I had on my restraint. Like a dam bursting, there was no stopping it. I gave myself over to the fierce demands of my mate, responding with fervor as his tongue delved into my mouth.

It was a clash of lips, tongues, and teeth as we devoured each other. Holden brought his hands to my chest, circling his thumbs around my sensitive nipples, and I moaned into his mouth.

"Fuck, Kayden," he growled, pulling at the band of my bra. "I need you." I sat up and lifted my arms as he pulled it over my head and tossed it away, rolling my hips against his hard length as he looked up at me and cupped my breasts.

Then he pulled me back down, crushing me to his chest as he rolled us

over. He grabbed my wrists and pinned me to the floor, kissing me hard before working his way down my neck, licking a hot trail between my breasts to just below my navel, where my pants began. I writhed beneath him, aching for more.

“Please.” I was beyond caring about begging.

He looked up at me, a glint in his eyes. “What do you want?”

“Everything,” I breathed.

A low growl rumbled in his chest, and he let go of my wrists and hooked his fingers in the waistband of my pants, pausing briefly for my go-ahead. I shoved my hands into his thick hair and rocked my hips up. “Yes.”

His eyes darkened, and he peeled my pants from my body. I watched his reaction, discovering I wore nothing under them. In a matter of moments, I’d gone from fighting this man to being naked beneath him.

Holden traced his nose along my hip, breathing in my scent. My legs fell open, and his eyes met mine. With a quick flash of teeth, a wicked grin, he settled between my legs, his breath a warm caress on my pussy.

“Holden.” I arched up my hips, needing him more than I’d ever needed anything. When he finally ran his tongue along my seam, I shuddered, crying out in pure pleasure. I’d thought he was good with his fingers on the beach, but that was nothing compared to the skill of his tongue.

He licked, sucked, and lapped at me. My heart thundered, my body pulsed, and sensations ripped through me like wildfire. My orgasm hit me hard and fast, lifting my hips from the floor. Holden gripped them, keeping me in place as he continued to devour me. He slid two fingers into my slick folds, and the orgasm only intensified, taking me to heights I didn’t know existed.

Holden watched me as I rode out my release, and I had to bite down on my lip to keep from screaming his name. The door might be locked, but anyone walking down the hall would easily hear.

As I came down from the most incredible orgasm of my life, Holden made his way back up to kiss me softly. The taste of my juices on his lips only turned me on more. I couldn’t get enough of him.

Reaching down, I cupped his length in my hand, only then realizing how big he was. I glanced up at him, and he smirked, but I quickly wiped that grin away when I slipped my hand inside his pants and wrapped my fingers around his thick, throbbing cock, squeezing.

He groaned in pleasure as I stroked him, wanting to make him feel as

good as I had. Pushing at his chest, I rolled him to his back, making quick work of discarding his pants.

Holden watched as I wrapped my hand around him again, bringing his hand to my face. “You’re incredible,” he murmured, stroking my cheek with his thumb and brushing it over my lips.

My breath hitched as a fresh wave of desire washed over me. I’d told him I wanted everything, and as I swung a leg over to straddle him once more, I felt the truth of that statement. I had no idea how we would work out being mates in light of the laws and the Contention. But it didn’t matter. Right now, no matter what the future held, this man was mine.

Locking my eyes on his, I slowly sank down on his cock, holding my breath as I took him inside me, inch by inch. His jaw ticked as he brought his hands to my ass and squeezed, tension mingling with his desire. It was as if his instinct was to take control, but he was letting me guide us.

My breath rushed out in a whoosh when he bottomed out, his guttural groan sending shivers through me.

He shook his head. “How did I get so lucky?”

Instead of responding, I kissed him, then began rolling my hips, shuddering with the sensation of his thick cock sliding in and out of me. Before long, our movements became more urgent, fueled by our mutual desire. I rode him hard, giving myself over to him completely, reveling in the moment as our bodies were one. It felt right. It felt perfect. Like I had finally found what I’d been missing, even though I hadn’t known I was missing it until now.

Holden’s body tensed, his cock swelling inside me. My pussy clamped down around him, milking him as he throbbed. And then we were falling over the edge, wrapped up in each other as sweet release took us both.

I collapsed on his chest, and we lay there for a long time, our heavy pants the only sound in the empty gym. Holden stroked his fingers up and down my back. Eventually, though, I came to my senses. We couldn’t just stay here forever.

“I should probably get back to my room,” I whispered, hating to shatter the moment.

“I’ll walk you there.”

Once we made it back to my room, I glimpsed myself in the mirror, startled at how sultry I looked with my hair mussed, my cheeks still pink from my pleasure. Holden came up behind me and wrapped his arms around

my waist, kissing my neck.

“You’re beautiful.”

I stared at the two of us in the mirror, afraid of how much I liked what I saw. Unease settled over me as reality sank in. There was only one way I could see to make this work—I’d have to win the Contention if I wanted to be his mate. And somehow hide that we were fated. What would happen if anyone found out? I frowned, my brow furrowing.

“Come on,” he said softly, taking my hand and leading me to the bed. We climbed in together, and I curled against him, my thoughts going a mile a minute.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, kissing the top of my head, and wrapping his arms tightly around me. “We’re going to figure this out, Kayden.”

“But the laws...” I didn’t want to talk about it, but it was unavoidable.

Holden shook his head. “I’m not willing to let you go. Not now. Not ever. We’ll keep being mates a secret—I’ll do whatever it takes if it means I can keep you by my side.”

Even if that meant breaking the rules. My chest filled with hope. Maybe there was a way after all. Holden sounded determined. But the fact remained that I still had to win the Contention.

As I drifted off, I clung to him, relishing the moment, sending up a prayer that somehow, someday, I could do just that.

KAYDEN

A knock, followed by Faye's overly cheerful voice calling, "Rise and shine!" had me bolting upright in the bed, looking frantically to my left before I realized Holden was no longer in my room. A flash of disappointment rushed over me, but I shoved it away. I should be relieved Faye didn't catch us in bed together. When had he left?

"Just a second," I called, reaching for my robe. Faye only gave me that one second until she flung the door open, her ever-present bright smile pasted on.

"Good morning, Kayden." She swept through the room on a mission, heading straight to my dresser and pulling out clothes. "How was your time in the gym last night?"

Her back was to me, so I couldn't see her face. Mine burned bright red, and I was equally glad she couldn't see mine. Surely she didn't know what happened between Holden and me.

"Um, great," I murmured, my thoughts drifting back to everything that happened. I almost couldn't believe it. It felt like a dream. But the sensitivity between my legs said otherwise. I cleared my throat. "What are the plans for today?"

She spun around, eyes gleaming. "This morning, you'll have light PT for about an hour, then the rest of the day will be spent in preparation for tonight."

"Tonight?"

Faye's smile widened. "Tonight, there will be a grand ball, one of the highlights of the Contention. At least, it's one of my favorite parts."

“A ball,” I repeated. With how hard the trainers had been working us lately and the physical competitions we’d had, it felt weird to think of participating in something so formal and elegant. “Like dresses with music and dancing?”

“Exactly.” Faye clasped her hands together by her cheeks and sighed. “Your class time will be spent working in committees to get things ready for the event. And a team of designers are coming in with dresses for you to choose from. It’s like a dream come true.”

I arched a brow. Perhaps for her. I’d never been to a formal event, and dancing wasn’t my strongest suit, though I had some semblance of rhythm. As much as Faye loved pretty dresses, I could only imagine her excitement.

She followed me around the room as I got dressed and brushed my hair, tying it back into a fresh braid, chattering away about how wonderful today would be.

“I’ll meet you back here after PT,” she said as I pulled on my shoes. “You can shower, and then we’ll meet everyone in the conference room to assign you all your tasks.”

“Sounds good.” I hurried down to the gym, where training was easier than usual, just some cardio and strength training, but I could barely focus on it. My eyes kept drifting back to the mat where Holden and I had sparred last night, my body tingling and hot as I remembered in great detail just what we’d done there on the floor.

I didn’t want to feel hope or set myself up for disappointment, but his words echoed in my mind as my feet pounded the treadmill. We’ll find a way to make this work.

I only hoped he was right.

After I showered and changed into a simple, formfitting tea-length dress Faye selected—elegant and professional, as she’d described it—she escorted me to a conference room on the third floor swarming with assistants and coordinators. They bustled around, talking to each other and through their headsets. It was clear this ball was a big deal.

Spotting Jessica and Brooklyn sitting together at a table to my right, I headed over to join them.

“Isn’t this exciting?” Brooklyn gushed. “It will be the first ball I’ve ever attended. I can’t wait. Did your assistants tell you we get to choose our designer dresses?” She sighed dreamily. “It’s like a fairy tale come true.”

I arched a brow and glanced at Jessica, who was smiling and appeared

excited, though not nearly as much as Brooklyn.

“Have you been to a ball before, Jess?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Several, actually. Part of being my father’s daughter.” She smiled. “But I do enjoy event planning. If I make it onto the council, I’d love to have a chance at a job similar to Willow’s.”

I looked toward the front of the room where Willow was giving directions like a queen presiding over her court. She was in her element for sure. While I couldn’t see Jessica being as firm and commanding as Willow, her kind and gentle nature could go a long way toward winning people over.

A few moments later, once all the remaining contestants had gathered in the conference room, Willow clapped her hands and greeted us, the room falling silent as she did so.

“Today will be quite a special day for each of you. You will each be allowed to choose your partners to work with on the preparations, as well as have your choice of which committees you’d like to work with. First come, first served, of course.”

Willow went on to list, in detail, the various event-planning committees that would be required to pull together an event in such a short amount of time. “And ten of my assistants are at your disposal to help you procure anything you might need.”

“Do you guys want to work together?” I asked Brooklyn and Jessica.

“Yeah, for sure,” Brooklyn said excitedly.

Jessica nodded. “Let’s go for the decoration committee.”

“Perfect.” When Willow gave us the go-ahead to select our committees, I hurried up to her primary assistant and requested our preferred committee.

“Sure thing,” she said with a smile.

“I’d like to be in charge of catering,” Sydnee said loudly as I walked away. “Everyone knows the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

I rolled my eyes and rejoined my friends, ready to make a game plan. “Okay, so here’s the deal. Willow said we have five hours to get everything taken care of before the dress designers arrive, so we need to get organized and stay on task. Let’s brainstorm some ideas, and then we can divide them among ourselves, as well as use the assistants. That’s the most efficient way to get as much done in such a short time.”

As we talked and strategized, Kessa, Willow, and some other ladies that looked to be around the same age wound their way through the groups, watching and observing. No doubt to form their own opinions about who

would make Holden a good wife.

“I don’t think the flower arrangements are a one-person job,” Brooklyn said when Jessica volunteered to oversee it.

“One manager is all that’s needed,” Jessica countered. “That’s what the assistants are for—to help fulfill our visions.”

“But that’s what I wanted to do.” Brooklyn crossed her arms and pursed her lips.

“I think we should go with roses,” Jessica said.

“No, roses are overdone,” Brooklyn insisted. “We need lilies.”

I looked between the two of them. We were getting nowhere. “We need a color scheme—then we can determine what flowers will work best.”

Jessica and Brooklyn nodded in agreement. I perked up when Kessa smiled at me as she passed by our table, watching as she continued to where Sydnee was sitting with her committee comprised of her bitch squad. Sydnee raised her voice, clearly wanting everyone to hear her.

“I want to make sure we have all of Holden’s favorite foods available for him tonight,” she said. “And I know just what he likes.”

Unable to help myself, irritated that she thought she knew him so well, I leaned back in my chair and said, “I have a suggestion for you then. Holden’s favorite restaurant is owned by one of Kessa’s dear friends. You should check with her on catering.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Kessa smile and nod slightly, but Sydnee leveled a glare at me. “Perhaps you should mind your own business and stick to your own committee.” She turned back to her team. “We’ll be using the kitchen staff tonight.”

“Whatever,” I muttered, and Jessica snorted softly.

“She thinks she knows him so well,” she whispered, “but I agree with you.”

It seemed Kessa did as well, judging by the way she frowned at Sydnee. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride that Holden’s mother agreed with me.

We worked tirelessly for hours, only stopping for a brief lunch break. Jessica was full of excellent ideas, so while I took a more managerial role assigning tasks and ensuring everything was taken care of, she headed up the creative side of things. Brooklyn worked hard as well, and by the time we wrapped it up, we’d ensured the decorations were complete or were waiting on an assistant to fulfill the remaining items needed.

“We have an hour to spare,” Brooklyn said excitedly. “Does that mean

we can get started with our designers early?”

“I’m just going to check in with the decorators in the ballroom to make sure they have everything they need,” I told her, “but otherwise, I don’t see why not. I’ll check with Willow.”

Sure enough, we were excused early, and I took a few minutes to observe the results of our hard work. The ballroom was a massive three-story circular room on the far north end of the estate, made of intricately carved woodwork, its walls covered in elegant gilded wallpaper.

As I stepped inside, I saw that the team of decorators we’d been assigned to fulfill our vision had already done most of the work, and it was beautiful. Beautiful flower arrangements of burgundy and white sat on every white-linen-covered table, with large matching centerpieces on the grand buffet table. Twinkling lights hung suspended over the dance floor, and candelabras of varying heights lined the walls. The sun hadn’t set yet, but I imagined the place would be transformed into something truly magical when it did.

I checked in with the decorators and assistants, ensuring they had everything they needed, before I made my way back to my room.

Faye was waiting for me in my new room with a short older woman with bolts of fabric spread out everywhere, lining the walls, covering the bed, and stacked on the table. In the center of the back wall, a three-way mirror and pedestal had been brought in. Next to it stood a clothing rack with a dozen dresses.

“Up here, girl,” the woman said in a commanding voice. “Let’s get your measurements.”

I blinked at her abruptness and glanced at Faye, who gave me a small shrug and tiny smile. “This is Opal, one of Kessa’s favored designers. We’re lucky to have her assigned to you.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kayden.”

Opal simply clapped her hands sharply. “Do you think we have all day? I don’t know what Willow was thinking, wanting us to alter a ballgown in a matter of hours.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I rushed to the pedestal, not wanting to get on this woman’s bad side, if I hadn’t already.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Opal demanded. “Strip down, girl.”

“Oh, um, okay.” Quickly, I took my dress off, standing only in my bra and underwear. This tiny woman had some fire in her, and I was wise enough to know not to cross her. This had to be done, and my cooperation would get

it done faster, even if being poked and prodded by pins as Opal took measurements and fitted me wasn't my idea of a fun time.

Faye made small talk with her as she worked, admiring all the dresses Opal had brought along. "What color are you thinking, Kayden? Perhaps something that coordinates nicely with the decor? You don't want to clash, after all."

"Green," I said immediately, remembering it was Holden's favorite color.

"A good choice," Opal muttered, one of the first nice things she'd said. "It will go well with your hair."

I smiled, imagining the look in Holden's eyes when he saw me tonight.

"Okay," Opal continued, finally stepping away from me. "I've got the gist of what will work best on your body type." She reached for one of the dresses on the rack. "Put this on, and we can make some adjustments, then I'll have a custom design whipped up for you in a matter of hours."

I did as she said, and soon enough, Opal was departing the room, leaving Faye and me with nothing to do but hair and makeup while the dress was made.

"Your stylist will be here shortly," Faye said. "What are you thinking for your hair?"

Usually, I liked to wear it down, but the backless dress dipped low on my hips, and I didn't want it covering anything. "How about an updo?"

Faye squealed. "Who even are you today? I love it."

I laughed. The pageantry of the Contention definitely wasn't my favorite part, but tonight was different. I wanted to feel beautiful and Holden to only have eyes for me. Because despite the things he'd said and the intimacy we'd shared, I was no fool. This competition was far from over. And I had more than one reason to give it my all now.

Several hours later, I stood on the pedestal in my freshly sewn dress, turning in slow circles as I admired myself.

"You're absolutely gorgeous, Kayden," Faye breathed, and from the way she looked at me, her eyes sparkling with pleasure, I knew she wasn't just saying that.

"I agree," Opal said as she made one last adjustment to the hem, surprising me with a kind remark. "You'll be hard-pressed to find a more beautiful dress at the ball, if I do say so myself."

The dress was perfect, a slim-strapped halter design in a shimmering silk that hugged my form to my knees, where it flared out slightly, and a small

train cascaded behind me. Hundreds of tiny beads made it somewhat heavy, but the effect was dramatic and elegant, and I'd never felt prettier in my entire life.

My hair was twisted up in intricate braids, and curls piled on top. I felt like a princess from a storybook, something I'd never once thought about myself. Anticipation unfurled in my belly, nervous energy skating over my skin.

"Is it time?" I asked.

Faye nodded, looking for all the world like a proud mother on her daughter's wedding day. My heart clenched, wishing I had family here with me, but Faye had become the closest thing to a sister since I arrived, and I wrapped my arms around her in a hug.

"Thank you for everything," I whispered. "I'm glad you're my assistant."

She sniffed and pulled back, blinking rapidly. "You're going to make me cry."

I laughed. "Don't do that because I might, too, and my makeup looks so good."

"You're right." Faye gave a slight shake of her head and quickly composed herself. "Now, let's get you downstairs. You have a ball to attend."

When we entered the ballroom, it was even more beautiful than I'd hoped. The sun had set, the lights were dim, and the thousands of candles gave the entire room a magical glow.

I stopped just inside the doorway, taking it all in. There were over a hundred people already here, more than I'd expected. I cast my gaze around the room, my jaw dropped when it landed on my assigned table. Because sitting there, a huge grin on her face, was Jenna.

I gasped, picking up my skirts and rushing toward her as quickly as I could in the four-inch heels I was wearing. Jenna stood as I approached, and I flung my arms around her, trying as hard as I could to keep myself from crying.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, pulling back and studying her face, unable to believe she was here.

Jenna laughed. "Surprise!"

"No kidding." I shook my head and looked around, realizing for the first time that many of the men and women gathered here were having similar interactions with the other contestants. "Who set this up?"

Jenna shrugged. "I received a call from someone named Amanda, who

said she was an assistant here. It looks like this was part of the deal for everyone.”

I didn't know if this was a normal part of the ball or not, but I certainly wasn't complaining. I wrapped my arms around my sister once more, relishing the feeling of having her here, knowing she was safe and sound. That Branson hadn't taken anything out on her.

“Okay,” Jenna said when I released her again, pulling out a chair and sitting down. “I've been on pins and needles for two weeks now, wondering what was going on. Spill the beans, sis. I want to hear *everything*.”

HOLDEN

“**W**hat did you think of it?”

I glanced down at the woman in my arms, my feet moving automatically around the dance floor, then flicked my gaze back to Kayden.

She was standing with a cluster of people at a high-top table, her head thrown back in laughter, gripping her sister’s arm while Jenna regaled the group with some humorous tale. I’d never seen Kayden like this, and it was fascinating.

“Think of what?” I murmured.

“*Holden*. Are you listening to anything I’m saying?” Sydnee’s sharp tone had me forcing my eyes from my mate once more. From the way her lips were pursed, she already knew the answer.

I gave her an apologetic smile. “Sorry. I just noticed an old friend I haven’t spoken to tonight.”

Kayden and Jenna were standing with Jessica and her parents, and while I wouldn’t exactly call her father a friend, it was a great excuse to get back to Kayden’s side. Fate was on my side, the song ending as I spoke.

“Thank you for this dance.” I took Sydnee’s hand and brought it to my lips, just as I had with every other woman I’d danced with tonight.

She smiled, though it didn’t reach her eyes. When I turned, my gaze snagged with Kayden’s. Her mouth was a flat line as she looked between Sydnee and me before turning back to her sister.

I walked toward her, hating this facade. If it were up to me, I would jump on stage, take the mic, and announce to the entire room that I was calling the

Contention, and Kayden was my mate. But it wasn't so simple. And it wasn't up to me—not yet.

Still, it was hard to keep from showing my feelings. Kayden was stunning. Could anyone blame me for watching her all night? I'd been careful to dance with each contestant, but I'd spun Kayden around the dance floor more than any other. I soaked her in from head to toe as I approached.

As if she could feel my presence, she glanced over her shoulder. A magnetic pull drew me to her, and it was all I could do to keep my hands to myself when I stopped in front of the group, Kayden to my right.

"Everyone been having a nice time?" I asked, giving them an easy smile. Jenna's smile dropped, not for the first time since I'd met her earlier tonight. Even though I'd made a point to be friendly and non-threatening, she hadn't warmed up to me. I couldn't blame her, her only prior experience with me being her brother's death, then taking away her sister.

I chatted with Jessica's father for a few minutes, but my attention was mainly on Kayden. When the next song shifted to a slower beat, I excused myself from the conversation and extended my hand to Kayden.

"Would you like to dance?"

She nodded, giving her sister a reassuring smile, and I led her to the dance floor, sweeping her into my arms and pulling her closer than I had before, though not nearly as close as I wanted. My hand splayed across her bare back, my fingers itching to roam lower.

"You seem to be enjoying your time with Jenna," I murmured in her ear.

Her breath caught, and I felt her shiver slightly. "I am. It's been wonderful." She tipped her head to look at me, her honey eyes sparkling. "I don't know who to thank, but seeing her means everything to me."

I grazed my fingers lightly over her back, a movement so small no one else would notice, but even that intimate touch was better than nothing. Being this close to Kayden was hard without my desire showing on my face—or in my pants, so I had to be careful.

"I only wish she didn't have to go back." Kayden sighed.

"Why does she?"

Kayden's brow furrowed. "Our pack, and life on the pack lands, is all we've ever known. Everything we own is there, even if it isn't much. We wouldn't even know where to begin trying to start a new life somewhere else."

I couldn't imagine sending someone I cared about back to live under

Branson's rule, and I was angry that I hadn't considered this sooner. "She can stay here. I can have a room made up for her. It's not like we don't have the space."

Kayden blinked a couple of times. "Isn't that against the rules? I don't want people to suspect you're giving me preferential treatment because—" She broke off, but I knew what she meant. Because we were mates.

I leaned in closer, rubbing her back lightly again, allowing my lips to brush her ear as I whispered, "For you, I'll make anything possible."

She pulled back and looked at me, a smile curving her lips that I longed to kiss. "You're serious."

I spun her in circles until we reached the edge of the dance floor, where some assistants were gathered, ready to attend to any need. "Get a bedroom suite ready for Ms. Johnson's sister. She'll need clothing and other necessities."

Whirling Kayden back into the midst of other dancers, her jaw open, I chuckled. "See? I'm happy to provide a place for her, but you know she can't interfere with the competition. You won't be allowed much contact with her, as that's against the rules."

Kayden went up on her tiptoes, brushing her lips over mine so softly and quickly it was barely a touch, but it left me smiling.

The song ended way too soon. Knowing I couldn't dance another with Kayden, I walked her back to Jenna. From the corner of my eye, I saw my parents walking out a side door, followed by several enforcers. What was that about?

Quickly, I left Kayden with her sister and strode toward the side door, only to be intercepted by Willow placing a hand on my chest.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

She gave me a pointed look. "Remember what I told you yesterday. Go along with it. Return to the women."

Right. While I didn't know what was planned, I knew *something* would happen before the night was over that would test the contestants. It looked like I was about to find out what that might be.

Just as I reached Kayden's side, a soldier came running through the main doors of the ballroom, yelling, "Rebels! We're under attack!"

Kayden gasped and gripped my hand. A second later, the lights flickered once, then the lights went out, only the flames from the candles lighting the room. We could see, but not as well as in wolf form. Outside the ballroom,

the estate was pitch black.

The urge to shift was strong, despite knowing this was a test, a simulation to see how the women would react under pressure. Trying to keep up the charade, I whispered to Kayden, “The soldiers have all left the room.”

“Jenna,” Kayden hissed, grabbing her sister and pushing her towards the back wall. “Just hide. Whatever you do, don’t come out.”

Jenna complied, Kayden immediately jumping into action as she began calling the names of the contestants nearest her as she scanned the dim room. There was a hint of fear on her face, but more prominent was the determination. Pride swelled in my chest. I’d underestimated Kayden when she first arrived, but I knew better now. She was strong—a fighter.

Something she proved as she effortlessly took the lead, calling out commands and directing the others. I was surprised to see her working closely with Sydnee, though perhaps I shouldn’t have been. Sydnee was a strong contender, making her a wise choice to team up with. As far as the women knew, we were actually under attack.

“First, we need to secure the room,” Kayden said. “Use what we’ve learned to create a perimeter and protect our guests.”

I stepped back to let her do her thing, impressed with her plan of securing the estate, section by section, clearing it in strategic moves. Then everyone was shifting, just as wolves came out of nowhere, four of them rushing through the door. I shifted as well, following behind, waiting for an opportunity to jump into the fray myself and make this more believable.

As we made our way to the front grand foyer in the center of the estate, more wolves burst through the front doors—time to fight.

The largest wolf at the front of the pack was Garrett, his wolf’s size only second to mine. Kayden charged at my mother, though I was certain she had no idea who she was fighting from the way she went into full-on attack mode. Distracted by the way Kayden’s wolf moved, swiftly and gracefully, the silver-white fur gleaming in the moonlight that streamed through the back wall of windows, I nearly got bowled over by Garrett when he leaped toward me.

I met him head-on, pushing off with a powerful leap to collide with him in mid-air. We fell in a heap, quickly regaining our footing. He snarled and shook his massive head, and I growled, snapping my teeth twice in return. A friendly challenge. We might as well have fun with this and get our own training session in.

It turned into a game, Garrett and I circling and attacking each other, seeing who could get the other to submit first. Wolves were fighting each other all around, and the atrium was full of snarls and growls, the sounds of a battle all around us. One by one, wolves began to submit as others bested them.

A flash of white caught my eye, and I turned in time to see Kayden pin my mother to the ground, her massive golden wolf submitting before Kayden could take it too far. Her silvery wolf swung its head toward me as if sensing me watching, but in the time I'd allowed her to distract me, I'd given Garrett an opening.

I sensed him before I saw him, hurtling through the air, ready to knock me to the floor and deliver a winning blow. But before I could react, Kayden's wolf was diving over me, throwing herself in front of me. There was no time to stop her, no time to intervene.

Garrett smashed into her so hard that they went tumbling across the marble floor, landing in a heap with Garrett's giant wolf on top of Kayden's. A deafening roar of fury ripped through the room as pure rage consumed me. I ran to them, knocking Garrett to the side before shifting back to human form.

"What the fuck?" I yelled at him as I dropped to my knees by Kayden, running my hands along her heaving sides, checking for broken bones.

Around me, applause broke out as the final wolf was pinned, and the guests from the party who knew what was happening came out to see. I barely noticed, my only concern for Kayden, even as anger boiled in me that she'd been hurt.

"Can you shift back?" The other wolves were shifting back, assistants running out with clothes. Kayden shifted, her face pinched in pain as she lay motionless on the floor.

"Somebody get a medic," I roared, panic setting in as I hovered over her. "Kayden, what hurts? What can I do?"

She blinked, staring at the ceiling for a moment before shaking her head slightly. "I'm okay. I just got the wind knocked out of me."

I wasn't settling for that until she'd been thoroughly examined. Faye rushed to my side with clothes for Kayden, and I helped her put them on once she'd caught her breath. I lifted my head to see Grandmother approaching.

"Out of my way, boy," she said.

"I want to help," I told her, worry for my mate too strong for me to leave

her side. If Garrett had caused real damage, he'd have me to answer to.

Grandmother gave me an exasperated look. "You'll be more help by stepping aside." She shook her head. "What's come over you lately?"

I met Kayden's eyes, and she shook her head slightly. A warning that I was showing my hand again. "Just let her work, Holden. Please."

I gritted my teeth, not liking it one bit but knowing it was what was best for her. I moved out of the way and let her check Kayden. The foyer began to clear as everyone dressed, the assistants and coordinators ushering them back to the ballroom.

"She's going to be sore, that's for sure," Grandmother said. "Some bruised ribs, perhaps. But nothing a couple of shifts and some rest won't fix."

She rose to her feet, narrowing her eyes at me, a question there that I wasn't ready to answer, so I looked away and held my hands out to Kayden. "Can I help you up?"

But Grandmother wasn't one to be so easily dismissed. She pointed her finger in my face. "You need to go back into the ballroom. *Alone.*" The way she said it—as if she was on to Kayden and me—made my stomach drop. But even if it revealed too much, I wasn't going to leave Kayden out here.

"No," I said. "She's hurt, and I'm going to help her."

Grandmother huffed out an irritated breath, grumbling about me being an idiot, but I ignored her as I helped Kayden to her feet.

"I should have known this wasn't actually an attack," Kayden said, "but when I heard them say rebels, all I could think was Branson..."

I grimaced, hating that was even a possibility. But what she'd done, throwing herself in front of Garrett like that. She was lucky bruised ribs were the only problem. "Kayden, you can't—"

I was cut off by the sound of my father's voice coming through the speakers in the ballroom and another resounding round of applause.

"We need to get back in there," she said, and it was only then that I realized we were the only two remaining in the foyer.

"I'll carry you," I said, starting to lift her in my arms, but she batted my hands away.

"I can walk, Holden."

The urge to do it anyway was strong, that protective instinct was hard to resist, but I thought better of it. I'd already let too much show tonight. There was no way people wouldn't notice how much I'd favored Kayden. I'd have to be more careful until I found a way around these forsaken laws, I simply

couldn't let anyone know what she was to me.

KAYDEN

I winced as I walked down the hall by Holden's side, my whole torso aching with each breath. Still, I was proud of how well I'd done—Kessa submitting was a huge deal, and I hoped I'd proven that I deserved to be here. So many of these women had prepared their whole lives for the Contention, yet I was holding my own having been tossed right into the fray.

Holden led me into the ballroom, where Bridger was up on stage, speaking to the crowd about what had just happened and how proud he was of the contestants.

"Here, have a seat," Holden whispered, gesturing to a row of chairs lining the wall inside the doorway.

"I'm fine standing," I replied with a slight shake of my head.

Holden's jaw ticked, his brows drawn together as he sat anyway and pulled on my hand, giving me no choice but to sit next to him unless I wanted to cause a scene. He'd already done enough fussing over me as he did. Not that I was complaining about his attention, but someone was bound to notice how much more I received than the others.

"What you did back there was incredibly stupid," he hissed, his voice pitched low so no one would hear.

I cut my eyes to him. "Excuse me?"

"Never, and I mean *never*, throw yourself in front of a wolf like that again." His gaze was hard—angry.

"I was trying to *save* you," I whispered incredulously. Was he serious? "I didn't know it wasn't real. I thought you were in danger."

"You risked yourself for me."

“Yeah. And I’d do it a hundred times over.” I stared at him as he ground his teeth together. His eyes softened at my words, but he still shook his head.

“Never again, Kayden. I mean it. I never want you to put yourself in danger for me. You must understand that.” His tone remained firm. Insistent.

What I understood was the raw and very real fear I’d felt when I’d seen that wolf attacking Holden. It was pure instinct to move to protect him. It must have something to do with being mates, that all-consuming urge to keep him safe at all costs. Surely, he felt the same.

“I won’t agree to that,” I said, knowing I couldn’t guarantee I wouldn’t do the same thing again.

Giving me a once-over, his face a mix of worry and frustration, he shook his head. “I need to go check on some things.”

“You can’t just leave,” I hissed. “You’ll cause a scene, and that’s exactly what we need to avoid.”

Abruptly he stood and stalked from the room, despite my warning. Bridger’s eyes tracked his son as he left, his gaze drifting to me next, and my stomach dropped. If we weren’t careful, everyone would realize what Holden and I were. Bridger spoke louder, more exuberantly, going on about how proud he was of the women in the Contention this year, clearly trying to keep all eyes on him instead of his son.

“You should all be proud of yourselves as well,” he concluded with a broad smile. “A big thank you to everyone for coming out tonight. The music, food, and drinks shall continue as long as you’d like, so please, enjoy yourselves.”

He exited the stage, and I made my way back to where Jenna was sitting with Jessica and her family. They were all deep in an excited conversation about everything that happened.

“I can’t believe that,” Jenna said, wide-eyed. “Are things always this crazy?”

I wrinkled my nose. “This was a bit more intense than usual, but yes. I’ve learned to expect anything at this point.”

“You did an amazing job leading us, Kayden.” Jessica smiled, her eyes shining. “You should be so proud.”

I was, but Holden’s comments had stung. “Thanks. I don’t know how I feel about putting myself on the line for such an ungrateful man, though.”

Jessica’s father glanced between us, his brows lifting high. “You sacrificed yourself for an alpha. I can think of nothing more noble.”

I offered him a small smile, though I didn't feel noble at the moment. In fact, I was more than a little frustrated. Holden had been angry with me for intervening in his fight, but what did he expect? That I just let my mate take a hit that would have been disastrous if it were real?

We discussed the trial a bit longer, but soon Faye appeared by my side and bent down to whisper, "Jenna's room is ready if you'd like to come with me."

I was relieved for the opportunity to leave the ball. Exhaustion was weighing on me.

"I think you'll find this room to your liking," Faye said to Jenna as we made our way to the second floor and down the hallway. "Your sister spent a few nights here recently."

Jenna quirked a brow, and I shook my head. "I'll have to catch you up another time." Turning to Faye, I asked, "How much time do I have with my sister? Holden said I couldn't interact with her much, that it's against the rules."

Faye gave me a regretful look. "I'm afraid he's right. We have to follow the rules."

That's what he'd said, which made my gut twist with anxiety. Holden was a rule follower. He said he'd find a way around the laws that kept us apart but worry nagged me. When it came down to it, would he be able to ignore the laws that had governed the pack for centuries? Nausea welled in my stomach.

As Faye led us to the guest suite I'd stayed in the last couple nights, I hugged Jenna. "There's so much I want to talk to you about, but I'm afraid it will have to wait. Holden said you could stay as long as you like. You needn't worry about going back to Branson."

Jenna's shoulders slumped with relief. "You seem to trust Holden. Like him, even." There was a question in her voice, but I didn't dare respond to that, not with Faye right here.

I gave her a look that I hope conveyed that message well enough, then turned to Faye. "Will you look after her? Since I'm not supposed to."

"Of course." Faye waved her hand like it wasn't even a question. "And all of our resources are at your disposal, Jenna. If there's anything you want or need, all you have to do is ask."

"Thank you so much. I don't know what to say."

I gave her another hug, told her goodnight, then followed Faye back to

my room, my mind occupied with thoughts of how Holden had spoken to me. How mad he'd been. An idea struck.

"Can I request time with Holden the way he requests it with the contestants?" I asked when we'd gone into my room and shut the door.

Faye clucked her tongue. "It doesn't really work that way, unfortunately." She must have seen the disappointment on my face because she quickly added, "I can try, of course. But there's no guarantee, so don't get your hopes up."

Faye spoke into her headset while I tried to get a brush through my hair. The elegant updo had been destroyed in the fight. A few minutes later, Faye received a response.

"Holden said he can meet you by the fountain in twenty minutes," she relayed.

My heart sped up, excitement at seeing him flooding me, even as worry nagged me. "Thank you so much, Faye. I'm just going to shower, so I don't think I need anything else tonight."

"You know how to reach me if that changes," she said before disappearing out the door.

I took a quick shower and pulled on some pajamas and a jacket before rushing outside to the fountain. Holden was already waiting there when I arrived.

The look in his eyes was unreadable; an irrational fear struck me as I sat beside him. "You're angry."

He arched a brow. "You know why."

I swallowed. "Are you going to send me home for sacrificing myself like that?"

He reeled back, his face twisting in shock. "Are you serious, Kayden? I would never send you home for something like that." He reached out and grabbed both my hands, holding them tightly. "I want you. I want us to be together. You're my mate. I don't know how to make it any clearer how much I want this to work."

Relief flooded me, and I felt silly for jumping to conclusions. "I'm sorry. I just didn't know what to think. You were so upset."

"And I'm sorry for that." He reached up and brushed a damp strand of hair back from my face. "We need to get better at hiding that we're mates, though. For the rest of the competition. Our behavior tonight will get us found out if we aren't careful."

I nodded. He was right.

“Kayden.” He gently gripped my chin and tilted my face up to his. “I have no intention of sending you home. Ever. You’re mine, and I want you here with me. I thought keeping Jenna here was enough to show you that, but I’ll repeat it just in case. We will find a way to be together.”

I released a deep breath—the heaviness washed away by his words.

“I need to select a woman to go home now, though.”

“Who will you choose?” It was too much to hope he’d send Sydnee packing.

“I think Abbigail this time around. She hasn’t expressed much interest in politics, classes, or PT. She hasn’t done anything to stand out, and sometimes I wonder if she even really wants to be here,” he said.

I nodded. It made sense. “How do you make such difficult decisions?”

He sighed. “It isn’t easy, I can assure you. But at this point, I’m observing the women to see who might be a good fit for the council. Several council positions are coming available with the transfer of power from my father to me. I already have a rough idea of who I might want to keep as an asset to my administration.”

It was so much to balance, yet he handled it all with such grace and ease. He’d been born for this role.

“You’re a good leader, Holden,” I told him. “A good man. I didn’t want to recognize that at first because I wanted to hate you for everything. For all the pain and suffering you’d caused my family—or rather, that was my perception then.”

“Not anymore?” he asked, a hint of hope in his tone.

“I see you for who you are now. The kind of alpha who inspires loyalty. Who looks out for others and puts the pack above all else.”

He nodded, swallowing, and fell silent. My words hovered between us, an echo of my fears from before. He must have sensed where my thoughts were heading because he cupped my face in his hands and lowered his forehead to mine.

“I will figure this out. Honestly, I’ve had my eyes on you from the very beginning. Even if we weren’t mates, I would still have kept you around. But you have nothing to worry about, Kayden. Your place is here, with me, and I’ll find a way for us to be together. I swear to you.”

His voice was full of passion, and I leaned into him, unable to resist the pull. When our lips met, it wasn’t the same wild desperation as usual. This

time it was soft, sweet... tender.

And I poured myself into it, hoping I could show him with my body what I couldn't yet put to words—that I was falling for him, hard. And that I was just as determined to find a way for this to work as he was.

He pulled me close when we finally broke apart, cradling me to his chest. We sat like that for a long time, just enjoying the quiet moment alone, away from the craziness that had become our lives.

“I should get back,” I finally said, knowing I needed all the rest I could get if I wanted to feel well enough for PT in the morning. My sides still ached, and my bed was calling. “Too bad you can't spend the night again.”

Holden groaned. “You have no idea how tempting that is. Unfortunately, I have a meeting with my father tonight, plus a dismissal letter to write.”

I nodded, threading my fingers through his as we stood from the fountain. “I understand.” I hated it, but he was the future alpha. If we were to have a future together, I'd have to give him plenty of space to do the things that came along with his role.

Even if parting tonight was even harder than before, I longed to bring him to my room and spend the night curled up next to him.

He caught me around the waist as we stopped in front of my door, holding me tightly and pressing a soft kiss to my cheek. “I'll see you in the morning.”

I watched his back as he retreated down the hall, my heart full of emotion. Somehow, I'd gone and done the one thing I'd told myself I couldn't do. I wasn't just starting to fall for Holden. I'd already taken the tumble. But for the first time, the fear about what that meant began to recede.

And in its place, a new hope of what the future held for me. For us.

HOLDEN

“It looks like we’re all here. Who’s ready to get started?” I looked at the ten remaining contestants standing in a line on the beach, offering them a smile. Today, I was running PT alongside Kyle and Dalton. Leading it, actually, to get a better idea of what they were capable of.

The women before me were all eligible for council positions. My eliminations must be chosen strategically from here on out, as I’d be offering the positions to each woman I let go if they proved themselves.

Ten pairs of eyes stared at me, some in excitement, some in trepidation. “This training will be a physical challenge, unlike anything you’ve done up to this point, as we’ll be incorporating the water.” I gestured behind me to the open sea, the waves crashing rhythmically.

It was a warm day, and the ocean was calm, so I wasn’t too worried, but a couple of the ladies shifted uneasily. Being comfortable swimming was one thing, but I could understand how facing the ocean if you hadn’t before, might be intimidating.

“We’ll start on the beach for our warmup.” I bounced on the balls of my feet, ready to get my blood pumping. My regular exercise routine had been thrown off with the Contention and dealing with Branson. It would feel good to challenge myself.

“First,” I walked down the line of women, “we’ll go for a jog, then up the ante with a series of suicides.” Groans lifted in the air, but I simply grinned, gesturing to my left. “Dalton will be demonstrating.”

Dalton moved to the first in a series of lines marked in the sand, beginning at the far side and sprinting toward the second line before doubling

back and darting to the third and back, then the fourth. The drill was hard enough on a regular surface, but the beach massively increased the difficulty.

“Ready? Let’s go!”

I jogged alongside them, warming my body up, and enjoying the feel of the sea breeze on my face. I observed the contestants as they ran, my gaze drifting to Kayden’s toned form more than any other. I had to be more careful with her until I figured out a plan.

Once we’d completed the warm-up drills, we moved on to an obstacle course we’d erected on the beach, demonstrating how to maneuver with each challenge. There were ropes, climbing walls, and tire runs interspersed, the course leading to a section of water marked by buoys.

“Let’s practice a few laps before we start running the course,” I directed, then dove into the water. It was cold but refreshing, the feeling of propelling my body through the water one of my favorite forms of exercise. I led the way around the buoy a hundred yards out, frequently stopping to check on the girls. Kyle and Dalton were there for assistance as well, but most of them seemed fairly confident in the water.

Kayden, Sydnee, and Madison held the lead, their swimming skills not lacking in the least, while the rest of the group were on par with each other. Jessica managed to make it through the course, but not without struggle. She came in last, waterlogged and a bit on edge when she finally made it back to shore, looking like the water was her mortal enemy.

We ran the course a few times, timing the girls for the added challenge and motivation. As expected, the three strongest proved their skills once again. After they’d been worked to the point of exhaustion, I called them all back to me on the beach.

“You all worked incredibly hard today. I appreciate and notice your efforts. As a reward, I’m giving you the afternoon off to relax, followed by a group date on a yacht docked at a nearby harbor.”

A murmur of excitement ran through the group. “Your assistants know what to do. Enjoy your afternoon, and I’ll see you at the harbor at five o’clock.”

I made my way back toward the estate and took a quick shower, washing off the salt from the ocean. When I exited my bathroom, I found Garrett sitting in the chair in my bedroom, his legs propped up on the table.

“I’m coming on the boat tonight,” he said by way of greeting.

“Hello to you, too. Glad you just made yourself at home,” I replied, my

voice colored with sarcasm as I walked naked across the room toward my closet. “Maybe you should just come on into the bathroom next time?”

Garrett laughed. “Maybe I will.”

I pulled on a pair of pants. “And why do you think you’re coming on my group date tonight?”

He shrugged, a rakish grin curving his lips. “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

I rolled my eyes. “Seriously, Garrett?”

“I’m teasing.” He put his feet back on the floor and leaned forward, propping his arms on his thighs. “I actually wanted to talk to you about the situation with Branson. I’ve been in conversation with some other alphas, gathering some opinions, and I have an idea of how to proceed.”

“Why can’t you just tell me now?”

He blinked, then chuckled. “You got me. I just want to go out on your fancy boat.”

I waved my hand. “That’s fine. But what about Branson?”

“The idea I find most promising is to completely dissolve the pack, strip them of their name, then split the pack into two new packs within the same territory. It will reduce their numbers and make rebellion more difficult, but that shouldn’t even be an issue if we exile Branson permanently—and anyone involved with him.”

I nodded my head slowly. The idea had merit. I wondered what Kayden would think of it? She’d hated my first attempt at dealing with Branson, but this sounded promising.

“I’ll need to think about it. Come along tonight, and we can talk more—but no sweet talking the contestants until after they’re eliminated,” I added with a smirk, knowing my best friend too well.



“TO THE TOP TEN,” I toasted, raising my champagne flute in the air as everyone was served on the aft deck bar of my family yacht. The ladies all lifted their glasses, smiling. “You’ve all done something to prove yourselves to make it this far. You should be proud. I hope you enjoy this evening cruise as a respite from all the challenges you’ve faced.”

I gestured around the deck at the grand buffet spread out, the plush seats

offering brilliant views of the land, and the dance floor that had been erected under the open sky. “There are hot tubs on the bow if anyone is interested. Your assistants made sure there was a swimsuit for each of you.”

I then let them know the order of our private dates, randomized by Willow, and that we’d each have thirty minutes together. It wasn’t much, but it was imperative that I spend some time really understanding these women, so I’d know who to place in which council position.

Sydney was up first, and we spent most of the time discussing the ball and her thoughts on the Contention so far. She would be a difficult one to place. Her knowledge and skills made her an excellent contender for an alpha’s wife—but how could that best serve me on my council?

I didn’t see Kayden until over halfway through the night, and I took her to a lower level where the private aft deck allowed us to watch the last rays of the sunset with no prying eyes.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her, running my hands gently over her sides.

“Better. I’ve shifted a couple of times and am almost back to normal.” She leaned into my touch, resting her hands on my chest.

Unable to resist, I bent my head and caught her lips in a soft, lingering kiss. I wanted so much more, but I wouldn’t risk it. Not here. As I broke the kiss, I remembered my conversation with Garrett and how I’d wanted to get Kayden’s opinion.

“I know this is supposed to be a date,” I began, scrubbing a hand over my jaw, “but I have something I’d like to talk to you about.”

She went still, clearly on edge about what it might be.

“Don’t worry, nothing has happened. But we’ve been working on a new plan to deal with Branson.” I briefly gave her a rundown of what Garrett had suggested earlier, but she was shaking her head before I even finished.

“Nothing short of death will take care of him, Holden. How many times do I have to tell you that?” She huffed out a breath. “Branson will always find a way back to his position. He’s shrewd. Cunning. And something about him draws people in, crazy as that seems. It’s how he rose to power in the first place. If you think exile will keep him in line, think again.”

I opened my mouth to explain the rest of my plan, but she wasn’t finished. “If you send him into exile, it will only give him another reason to build a rebel army. There will be no one to keep him in check then. Who knows what he could be capable of? Unless you want a war on your doorstep,

he must be put down.”

I shook my head, stunned at how adamant she was. And more than a little irritated that she hadn't at least heard me out. “It isn't your decision to make, Kayden. I'm the alpha, and I call the shots. I've prepared for this my entire life.”

I raked my hand through my hair, making it stand on end. “I'm trying to do the right thing. Don't you see that? I can't just break the law on a whim to solve my problems.”

Unlike Kayden, who didn't seem to give a damn about the rules. Frustration coursed through me. Why couldn't she understand that it wasn't so simple for me? I simply couldn't throw caution to the wind and do whatever the hell I wanted. At the end of the day, I was responsible for everyone, every pack. It was my duty.

Yet Kayden continually asked me to break the rules—believing I shouldn't have killed her brother. Wanting me to kill Branson without a justified cause. Wanting me to take her as my mate even though the law expressly forbids it.

That's when it hit me. My feelings for Kayden were already clouding my judgment. I was making choices based on what she'd think, not necessarily because they were the best choices for the pack.

“This is *exactly* why the law about mates exists,” I muttered, cursing in frustration.

Kayden's mouth fell open, her eyes widening in shock. *Shit*. I hadn't meant to say it aloud.

I shook my head, reaching for her hand as she backed up. “Kayden, that's not what I meant.”

She pulled her hand away, stepping out of my reach as she swallowed hard. “Isn't it? You think I'm affecting your ability to act as alpha.”

“That's not what I said.”

“But it's what you thought,” she said, her voice rising as she blinked rapidly. “I can see it all over your face.”

Before I could stop her, she'd turned and fled back through the deck's living quarters, disappearing into the yacht.

“Way to go, asshole,” I berated myself, gripping the ship's railing as I stared out to sea. That wasn't the way I wanted our date to go *at all*.

But a feeling persisted that this was a problem. One that wouldn't be going away. I'd done the one thing I swore I never would—put someone

before the good of the pack. And it had been so easy.

I wanted Kayden more than anything—precisely why the law existed. If I was doing this now, making major decisions about threats to the pack based on what I wanted Kayden to think of me, how much worse would it be once I'd fully claimed her as my mate, and she was truly mine?

I shook my head, shoving the unpleasant thoughts away. I had several more dates to get through, and I didn't need to give anyone a reason to suspect anything was off. Each time I went to the main deck to retrieve my next date, I searched for Kayden, but she was nowhere to be seen. By the time my last date with Jessica rolled around, I was irritable and angry, though I couldn't be sure whether it was with myself or Kayden.

Jessica and I walked toward the front of the ship, watching the now-dark sky as the stars came out. I'd already determined I would offer her a council position—her choice of whatever she wanted—and let her off the hook of competing for the rest of the time. But she whirled on me before I could even get a word in.

“You're screwing it all up, Holden.” Her voice was angrier than I'd ever heard.

“I'm sorry, what?”

She huffed in frustration. “I saw Kayden after your date. She wouldn't tell me what was wrong, but she was pissed. What are you thinking?”

I narrowed my eyes, not sure where she was going with this. “Sorry, you're going to have to be a little clearer.”

“Cut the bullshit, Holden,” she said. It was the first time I'd ever heard her swear in all the years I'd known her. “I know you and Kayden are fated mates.”

I clamped my jaw shut, grinding my teeth. Fuck.

Jessica sighed, her shoulders slumping. “At least, I'm ninety-nine percent certain. My parents are fated mates, so I know the signs. I know that look you get in your eyes when she's around. And how you two practically gravitate toward each other, without even realizing it. Like there's no one else around, even in a room full of people. I saw it countless times the night of the ball.”

I blew out a breath. “You can't tell anyone.”

She lifted her brows, surprised. “Does Kayden know?”

I nodded. “But no one else can find out. You know the laws as well as I do. I don't know what my father would do if he found out. I won't risk it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, Jessica.”

“Well, you better figure it out fast. I can’t imagine what it must be like for her, having to watch you date all these other women. It would drive me crazy, that’s for sure.”

I paused, taking that in. “I hadn’t thought of it that way before. Is she jealous?”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Guys are so thickheaded sometimes. Just do a better job of letting her know how you feel, okay? I don’t think you could go wrong with that. But for fate’s sake, stop letting the world see it plain on your face.”

“Thank you. I mean it.”

She gave me a soft smile. She was a good person and would make someone an excellent wife one day. That man just wasn’t me. I offered her my arm. “You ready to finish up this night? Poor Garrett’s been alone all evening. Maybe you can keep him entertained.”

Jessica gave me an amused glance as we strolled back down the deck to rejoin the others. “I don’t think Garrett needs any help from me.”

Sure enough, he was laughing and joking with the women near the bar.

It was only once I’d moved on to my next date that I realized I hadn’t mentioned the position on the council.

KAYDEN

My knuckles were white as I gripped the ship's aft railing, my stomach in knots. Holden's words echoed in my mind as I stared out at the dark waters. *This is why the law exists.* And he was right.

The mate bond was stronger than anything I'd imagined, and I was only beginning to realize its power. How many choices had I made since I'd been here based on my feelings for Holden? Many of them completely irrational.

Holden had the weight of the world on his shoulders; responsibility for his pack was what would always come first for him. That loyalty was something I admired and respected, and I was affecting his ability to make the right decision.

The most frustrating thing was that his reasons were honorable. But Branson wasn't someone to be trifled with. I knew what Holden needed to do, and if he were thinking straight, he'd know it too.

My jaw ached from grinding my teeth. I turned from the railing just as Holden brought Jessica out from the back of the ship. The sight of him sent a pang of longing through me. I'd let myself hope he'd find a way past the laws, but now I questioned if that was even the right thing. Could I be so selfish as to compromise his ability to act as alpha?

I kept to the back of the group, in the shadows. My chest tightened as Holden came forward with a smile for everyone.

"Thank you, ladies, for a wonderful evening," Holden said. "Garrett and I will be retiring for the evening. The boat has docked, but feel free to stay for one last drink if you wish." He smiled again, then gestured to his beta to follow, disappearing below deck without even looking at me.

Everyone seemed thrilled to take Holden up on his offer of another drink, but I certainly wasn't in the mood. I stood back watching, my breath shallow as I realized that despite what Holden said, it was a very real possibility that he could choose another one of these women. He was already seeing the danger of us being together.

"Are you okay?" Jessica asked, coming over to me, also declining another drink. She'd seen how upset I'd been when I came from my date with Holden, but she hadn't pushed me to know why. Something I was grateful for.

I gave her a small smile. "Just ready to get back to my room."

Laughter caught my attention as Sydnee and Madison stood in the center of the deck, smirks on their faces.

"Has anyone ever taken their wolf swimming?" Sydnee asked, her eyebrows arched as she looked innocently around the group.

Most of the women chimed in with a yes, and I nodded my head. Part of my pack lands were on the coast.

"What about you, Jessica?" Sydnee's voice was saccharine sweet, just like her fake smile. Jessica hadn't said anything before, and as I looked at her, I knew why.

Her face was pink as she looked down at the deck. "I never have. I don't get in the water much if I can help it."

"Ah, yes. I noticed. You certainly struggled during training, didn't you?" Sydnee clucked her tongue. "That's too bad. You're really missing out."

I rolled my eyes as she turned back to Madison. "What do you say we get out of here?" I whispered, not interested in sticking around while the other women finished their drinks.

Jessica nodded, and we made our way to the port side of the yacht and the long dock beyond. "I yelled at Holden when I was on my date with him."

"You did?" I turned to her, surprised. "About what?"

"About how he—" Her voice cut off with a shriek as she stumbled to the side, flying off the edge of the dock into the dark water.

"Jessica!" Almost as soon as her body hit the water, a second splash followed, much bigger. I gasped as I realized she hadn't fallen at all. She'd been pushed by Madison, who'd shifted and jumped in after her.

I glanced around in a panic as it dawned on me what was happening. Madison was challenging Jessica—in the water. My heart raced, my pulse thundering in my ears as some of the other women who had come onto the

dock after us began crowding around to see what was happening.

“She’s attacking her,” Brooklyn cried, her hand flying up to her lips. “Why isn’t she shifting?”

“Jessica,” I yelled, my heart in my throat. “Shift! *Shift*, damn it!”

But she wasn’t doing anything, just flailing around. Madison raked her paw through the water, her claws tearing four giant gashes through Jessica’s shoulder. Blood poured out, and still, Jessica didn’t shift.

Madison was unrelenting, apparently not caring if her victim fought back or not. Her wolf swam swiftly, effortlessly through the water, jaws wide open as she flung herself towards Jessica. Madison knocked her backward, pushing her under the water, then yanking her up again by her arm, sharp canines sunk deep into Jessica’s flesh. Madison shook her head, tossing Jessica’s body around like a rag doll.

Why isn’t she shifting?

Instinct took over. I shifted in the span of a heartbeat, leaping from the dock in a massive push and propelling my wolf’s body into the water. I landed on top of Madison, clamping my teeth into the scruff of her neck. She arched back, growling, but I had the advantage. Using all the strength I could muster, I pulled her away from my friend and snarled.

The water appeared to be only neck deep, but Jessica struggled to keep her head above water, her body flailing, even as blood gushed from her wounds.

Madison was on me in the next second, taking advantage of the opportunity. She snapped her vicious jaws at me, and I reared back just in time to keep them from sinking into my neck. Madison wasn’t messing around, and adrenaline dumped into my veins as I realized this had become a challenge between the two of us.

We tumbled and turned in the water, each trying to get the best of the other, but it wasn’t until we made our way to shore that I could truly fight.

This was different from any fight I’d been in before. It became immediately apparent when Madison’s wolf eyes stared me down as she charged. There was a dangerous gleam there that told me she would be relentless—that she wasn’t willing to lose.

Soaking wet and already tiring, I barely had time to pivot before Madison was upon me, knocking me on my back, trying to pin me. I snarled, sinking my teeth into her leg. She wanted a fight? I’d give her one. Because what she didn’t know was that I had a lot more riding on this challenge than she did. If

I lost, I had no choice but to be eliminated.

The mere thought gave me enough strength to heave the wolf off me and regain my footing. I immediately went on the attack, swiping my claws across her exposed flank. She howled in pain, then bared her teeth. Not wanting to lose my advantage, I dove, tumbling head over foot with Madison until I pinned her.

She snarled and struggled, but I had her good. I pushed a paw into her throat, urging her to surrender. But she managed to fling me off, her strength and determination more than I'd expected.

We were fighting to remain here, and it suddenly hit me that Madison might not be willing to surrender. After gaining the upper hand one more time, having her in a position of submission yet again, she still refused to give up.

My breathing was ragged as I stared down at her, the choice in front of me clear. But it wasn't one I was willing to make. I wouldn't kill her. Not if she would submit.

Fucking submit already, I silently urged her. But I hesitated too long, giving Madison the chance to get free of my hold. She came at me again, harder this time. Making it clear she was going to fight to the death if that's what it took.

My pulse roared in my ears as I gave it my all, digging deep to find some reserves of energy, but it was a losing battle. My energy was waning, especially when Madison's sharp teeth hit home, sinking into my back leg. I howled, the pain searing as it ripped through me. I couldn't give up. There was too much at stake.

Limping, I backed away, trying to find an advantage that could end this now.

I risked looking away from Madison for a heartbeat, needing to make sure Jessica was okay. To my horror, all the women were just standing on the dock, watching the battle unfold. I looked to the water but could no longer see Jessica. Where was she?

Raw fear coursed through my veins. I had to get to her.

But Madison was charging once more. I had one choice. Kill her and end this, so that I could save Jessica. Or go for Jessica and risk Madison killing us both. There was no choice.

Bracing myself and bending low, I waited for Madison to leap. As she did, I darted forward, throwing myself under her and raking my paws down

the center of her exposed belly, my claws digging in deep and ripping the flesh away.

Madison fell in a heap, rolling to the side. Her head lolled as her innards spilled onto the ground, but I didn't have time to let that sink in.

Jessica.

I shifted back, running toward the shore at full speed, even as blood trickled down my thigh. I had a better chance of saving her in human form if I could find her.

"Someone call for help," I screamed as I flung myself back into the water. I had no idea if anyone even heard me or if they cared since they'd all just stood watching, but I refused to lose Jessica. I pulled myself through the water with strong, sure strokes, heading for the spot I'd seen her last. Relief coursed through me when I saw Garrett dive from the pier into the water. Someone must have finally alerted the men of what was going on.

He effortlessly plucked her from the water, swimming back to the shore. My energy was flagging, but I managed to make it to her. Garrett laid her flat on the sand, and a sob escaped me when I realized she wasn't moving. Shoving Garrett out of the way, I hovered over her still body.

"Come on, Jess," I urged, angling her head to perform CPR. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I breathed life into her, then pumped her chest. Over and over.

Finally, her body jerked, ocean water pouring from her mouth. I turned her head. "Easy," I choked out. "You're going to be okay."

I'd been so focused on saving her that I hadn't noticed the arrival of assistants and others running toward the shore. Garrett moved between Jessica and me, lifting her in his arms. "I've got it from here."

I stumbled back, falling on my ass in the sand as he carried her away, assistants rushing after them.

"Kayden!" Holden's voice cut through the chaos of dozens of voices talking, and I glanced up to see him rushing toward me. "What happened? Are you okay? Fuck, you're covered in blood. Someone get a medic over here," he yelled.

I didn't say anything, unable to put the horrors into words as my gaze went back to Jessica, who was being wrapped in blankets and placed on a flat surface while her wounds were tended to. Blood was everywhere.

"Holy shit," Holden murmured, his voice full of shock, his eyes wide as he followed my gaze to Jessica, then further up the beach to where the lifeless

body of Madison's wolf lay gutted. He looked back at me. "Kayden..."

"Kayden has broken one of the fundamental rules of the Contention," Sydnee declared, stomping towards us. She pointed an accusing finger at me. "She interfered in a duel. She must be sent home."

I barely noticed the hint of a smile on her lips as someone came and wrapped a blanket around me. My whole body began to shake violently, and I couldn't focus on what was happening around me. All I saw was blood and gore. My vision blurred, and Holden began whispering in my ear, but I couldn't register what he was saying, my gaze fixed on the dead wolf.

"Take Jessica and Kayden to the infirmary. Everyone else, return to your rooms immediately. We need to sort this out without a crowd." Holden scooped me up in his arms. "I'm taking you myself."

Everything was a blur as I was brought into the infirmary. Several medics worked on Jessica while Margie started stitching up my thigh, muttering about how I was lucky she hadn't bitten an artery. Holden paced the floor, back and forth, his shoulders tense as he talked to himself.

Finally, he stopped in front of me, and I forced myself to snap out of this daze. "Kayden," he said urgently, "you have to tell me what happened."

Haltingly, I gave him a play-by-play, my voice breaking as I told him about killing Madison. He didn't say a word the entire time, and when I looked up at his face, his expression was grim.

"You intervened in a duel, Kayden. That is against the rules." His jaw ticked, and Margie's hands paused on my arm for a moment before she resumed the stitches.

"Jessica never shifted," I said, my voice stronger than I expected. "The duel was over the minute she chose not to. Don't you see—she had already submitted. What Madison did was just ruthlessly killing her for no reason."

Holden didn't say anything for a moment, but he exchanged a long glance with his grandmother that I didn't understand. She gave him a single nod, and he looked back at me. "I need to go. Stay here with Jessica. I have to go take care of this."

I sat in silence as Margie finished stitching me up, my eyes fixed on Jessica, who was lying on another bed. She'd been sedated and was now covered in bandages. My chest ached for her, but I had to remind myself she was alive, and that was what mattered.

"She inhaled water," Margie said softly, kindly. "She needs to be observed overnight, but she's going to be okay. Is there anything I can get

you?” Her kind smile nearly did me in. I couldn’t speak through the lump in my throat, so I just nodded.

“I’ll be back to check on you in a bit.” Then she was gone, leaving me alone with Jessica and my thoughts.

My chest felt like it was caving in on itself as the dam I’d kept in place broke, my emotions pouring out. A high-pitched keening filled the air as I fell apart, everything that happened truly hitting me for the first time.

Jessica had nearly died. I’d knelt there over her limp body, trying to bring her back. She was okay, but the same couldn’t be said of Madison.

My chest felt too tight, and I couldn’t breathe. I’d killed her. The image of a lifeless wolf played on repeat in my mind. I’d done that. I’d taken a life.

I don’t know how long I cried, but after a time, I was able to catch my breath. Was this how it had been with Holden and Nico? I’d never wanted to know the details. At first, I’d only wanted to blame Holden for taking my brother’s life. For taking him away from me.

But what if Nico had been just as persistent as Madison? If it was a kill or be killed situation. When a wolf refused to submit to an alpha, the penalty was death. I took a shuddering breath, squeezing my eyes shut. It was so much more complicated than I’d ever imagined.

My heart was heavy, thinking about how many times Holden had faced this choice. It was an inescapable part of who he was, and it made me see him in a whole new light. It hit me then that what I’d been asking him to do all this time—to kill Branson—wasn’t as easy as I made it out to be. As much as I knew it needed to be done, it wasn’t fair of me to put that on him.

All along, I’d thought I understood his choices on an intellectual level, but I’d never been able to reconcile them emotionally. It was just too close, too personal. Nico was my brother. But now, I had firsthand experience of the difficult choices required of an alpha. It made me understand Holden in a completely new way.

I didn’t envy him and the life he led, but despite it all, I wanted to be the woman to comfort him. To hold him when he faced all the difficulties of being an alpha. And right now, more than anything, I just wanted him to take me in his arms and tell me it would all be okay.

HOLDEN

My father's head snapped up as I strode into the office, his mouth flattening into a grim line. David and the Northeastern pack alpha were there as well, and they were all deep in conversation until I arrived.

"I take it you're aware of what's happened," I began.

"We were getting ready to make a call to Madison's alpha." Bridger Wilder wasn't one to show his emotions regarding business, but he looked quite bothered over tonight's events. Understandably.

Adrenaline was still pumping through my veins. Seeing Kayden covered in blood like that, her body shivering from shock... It had done something to me. Things were getting real, and it was time I fully stepped into my role.

"I'll make the call," I told him, my tone leaving no room for argument. "This is my Contention, the women are my responsibility. I want to be the one to handle this."

Pride shown in my father's eyes as he nodded once. "As you wish, son. I trust you fully."

His words were meant to encourage me, but they only underscored the fact that I'd been withholding vital information from him about my mate—and that it was affecting my judgment. On this, I was clear, though.

"Can you tell us what happened?" David asked, concern written all over his weathered face. "We've heard mixed stories."

I nodded. "Madison broke the rules. She challenged Jessica, who didn't shift, yet she continued her attack. Based on the wounds I saw in the infirmary, she crossed the line. Another strike, and she would have

committed murder.”

Father flinched, and I clenched my teeth. Yes, that was something that happened in our world. I knew it all too well. But if one submitted, there were strict rules in place. Never under any circumstances were to you kill a shifter who chose submission.

“Jessica never shifting was a sign of her submission,” I told the group, needing them to fully understand what happened because what I said next would make things a bit murkier. “Kayden only jumped in to save Jessica’s life.”

David and my father exchanged glances. “So she did interfere in a duel.”

“Madison broke the rules of engagement,” I reiterated. “And while the rules state that interference is not allowed, if Kayden hadn’t, Jessica would be dead as well. There were no officials from the Contention present other than myself. Ultimately, the women’s safety falls on us to ensure the rules are followed. How do you think Jessica’s father will feel knowing his daughter was nearly murdered?”

Father steepled his fingers under his chin. “The rules would have Kayden going home. Are you suggesting something else?”

His eyes were too shrewd, seeing too much. Just as I knew I was giving away too much by pleading her case. But I didn’t have a choice. I refused to send my mate home, giving me no chance of truly claiming her as mine.

“Kayden will not be punished because we failed to provide proper supervision. The other contestants were witnesses to what happened. But not a single official could state what happened. Jessica will be eliminated for losing a duel. From this moment forward, I want new rules in place. No contestant is allowed to roam anywhere without a Contention official present.”

Father nodded. “I think that’s a wise choice, given what happened here tonight.” He paused, his eyes narrowing, and for a moment, I thought he was going to say something about Kayden, but he shook his head, almost imperceptibly. “At this point, I think it best when you call Madison’s alpha that you keep to the simple facts. She chose not to submit during a duel, and that’s the end of it. No need to bring the dishonor of her initial attack to the attention of her pack.”

I agreed. We were already pushing some limits here when Sydnee was making calls for Kayden to go home. We didn’t need to create unnecessary distress. Not wanting to put off the inevitable, I moved to a side antechamber

of my father's office suite and made the call.

As I spoke to Madison's alpha, Garrett, Willow, and several other officials filed in, speaking with my father and his men. The alpha took the news as well as could be expected when I told him Madison chose not to submit in a duel, knowing that this was indeed the nature of challenges. When I ended the call with a heavy sigh, I turned to find my father standing in the archway of the antechamber.

"Making an exception for Kayden is setting a bad precedent." He stood perfectly still, his face unreadable. I shifted uneasily, wondering just how much he saw through me.

"Was she supposed to just stand there and watch her friend get killed?" My voice was low and dangerous. My father narrowed his eyes in scrutiny.

"Holden. You know the rules." I had the feeling his words held more than one meaning.

I held his gaze unwavering. His words could just as easily have been meant for me. "What I know is that Kayden was being loyal to her friend and to the pack. She protected someone who *followed the rules*. Went after someone who *broke* them. I won't punish her for doing the right thing—even if, on the surface, it's against the rules. It's not so cut and dry."

He studied me for a long, uncomfortable moment, and I had the distinct impression he saw too much. Hell, it wasn't like I was doing a good job of hiding my feelings. Finally, he sighed, shaking his head. "In this instance, I happen to agree with you. Sometimes the choices you'll be required to make as alpha aren't black and white. You'll have to decide where you stand when faced with the gray areas. I'm going to ask you to do that now."

"How?" Unease settled over me.

"If Kayden is to stay on in the Contention, she has to prove herself worthy of being your mate. She must show that she won't go rogue. An alpha's wife must always be loyal. She must follow the correct path in doing what is best for her mate and their pack."

"What are you suggesting?"

Father glanced back to the main room, where everyone was talking softly, waiting for us. "She will need to complete some type of challenge to prove she has what it takes to remain in the Contention—that she's a true contender to be your mate. Take some time and think about it. I know you'll make the right choice."

I nodded, not having a clue what that might be but willing to do whatever

it took to give Kayden that chance to prove herself. Perhaps this would be my way to show everyone how valuable she would be as an alpha's wife—and how that was infinitely more important than outdated laws preventing me from being with my true mate.

“Willow,” I said, striding over to rejoin the group, “we’re going to be making changes to the Contention rules, effective immediately. None of the women are to leave their rooms without an assistant, not under any circumstances. Be sure to reiterate to every single contestant that the rules clearly state murder is unacceptable. Not shifting is a sign of submission.”

Willow nodded, tapping away on her tablet. “Anything else?”

“Yes. Make sure a contingent of soldiers are present whenever the women are gathered together. They should be prepared to interfere if necessary if the rules are broken.”

Willow's eyes widened, and for a moment, I wondered if I was being too heavy-handed. We were shifters, after all. Challenges to the death were things we were all familiar with. But then an image of Kayden covered in blood flashed through my mind. I couldn't trust that some of the women wouldn't resort to extreme measures to eliminate her, especially now that she was becoming a clear favorite.

“Make sure it happens,” I said, and Willow nodded quickly.

I excused myself, willing to let my father take it from here if anyone had further questions. Garrett caught up to me as I left the office.

“Is Jessica okay?” he asked in concern.

“I was headed back to the infirmary to check on her. She's going to make it, but it was a close call.”

Garrett's eyes flashed. “You're doing the right thing changing the rules.”

“At least you have my back.” My father wasn't arguing the point with me, but I could tell he was questioning my motivations.

I left him there, hurrying back to the infirmary. The minute I stepped through the door, Kayden pushed off the table and limped toward me.

“Whoa, there.” I caught her in my arms, and she clung to me, holding tight. “You need to be careful, or you're going to rip your stitches open before they can do their job.”

“I'm sorry,” she said, strained and choked with emotion.

Panic immediately set in, and I glanced around the room, worried for a moment that something had happened to Jessica while I was gone. But no, she was in a bed, her heartbeat steady and strong on the monitor.

I looked down and lifted Kayden's chin gently, staring into her eyes. "What do you have to be sorry about? This wasn't your fault." I lifted her, cradling her in my arms to carry her back to the table, but I didn't get far when she dug her fingers into my shirt.

"No, that's not what I mean. Holden, listen. I need to say this." Kayden's eyes were full of sorrow as she stared at me, lifting her hands to my cheeks. "I told you before that I understood about my brother. About why you had to kill him."

"Kayden—"

She shook her head adamantly. "Please, I need you to know." She paused and swallowed hard, and I nodded, keeping silent.

"Tonight, when I was fighting Madison, there was a point when I realized she wasn't going to back down. She was in it to the death. Committed. I could see it in her eyes." She stopped and took a deep, shuddering breath.

"It's okay, Kayden. We don't have to talk about this right now."

But she pressed on. "More than once, I had her and gave her a chance to submit, but she wouldn't take it. I knew it would be me or her, and I wasn't willing to submit. I refused to go home now after everything that's happened. I made the conscious choice to kill her, Holden." Her voice broke, but still, she wasn't finished.

"I can't begin to imagine what it must be like for you to have to make the same choice over and over again." She shook her head. "So now I can say, I truly understand why you had to make that choice with Nico. And I forgive you for it."

I held her tighter, and she buried her face in my chest, her body shaking as she cried. I let out a slow breath, bittersweet relief flooding me. I hated that she'd had to experience this tonight. I'd never wish that choice on anyone. But at the same time, I could tell something had shifted in her. Something had changed when it came to me, to us. And I knew now that no matter what we faced, we could figure it out as long as we faced it together.

My father's insistence on a challenge would be one of them, but I wasn't ready to deal with that tonight. Setting Kayden back on her exam table, I whispered, "Wait here, and I'll be right back."

I went to find my grandmother in the back rooms of the infirmary, making sure Jessica had someone to watch over her if I took Kayden.

"I'll be here all night," she assured me.

"Thank you," I told her, bending to kiss her cheek. "For everything."

The knowing look in her eye reminded me too much of my father's, and I wondered just how much of the truth they saw. Grandmother had witnessed my irrational behavior when it came to Kayden multiple times. But she didn't say anything, so I made my way back and scooped Kayden into my arms.

"You're spending the night with me tonight." I walked out of the infirmary and headed up a back stairwell to the fourth floor.

Kayden simply nodded, her body relaxing against mine as I carried her. There was no way I was letting her out of my sight tonight. It had been too close of a call. I didn't want to think of what would have happened had she not been able to handle Madison's attack. Pride swelled in my chest, though. My mate was strong... fierce. And she likely wouldn't appreciate me thinking of her otherwise.

"I was so afraid tonight," I finally admitted when we were within the privacy of my apartment. I carried her straight to my bedroom, laid her down on the large soft mattress covered in a plush blanket, then lowered myself beside her, being careful of her injured leg.

"When I came back on the deck and smelled the blood..." I shook my head, recalling the sheer panic that set in. "I came for you as fast as I could." Lifting my hand, I ran it gently over her hair, then traced her beautiful features with my fingers.

Her eyes fluttered as I brushed my thumb over her full lower lip, and she smiled. "Thank you. For being there for me. I think I may have been in mild shock."

"I was worried," I admitted. "You have no idea how relieved I am that you're okay." I had to stop and swallow against the tightness in my throat. I cupped her cheek and stared deeply into her eyes, wanting her to understand how much I meant it. "If anything happened to you, Kayden, I would be devastated. Destroyed. I know it's all happened so fast, but I can't even begin to explain how much I care."

She leaned into my touch. "You don't have to explain. I know what you mean because I feel it too. Even if I don't know how we're going to—"

I pressed a finger to her lips. "Shh. We don't have to worry about that right now. For now, we have this night."

I pulled her close, the restlessness inside me finally settling as we lay there, our bodies entwined. I breathed her in, nuzzling her neck, and when she tilted her head to give me better access, I couldn't help myself. Being careful of her injury, I shifted slightly, trailing soft kisses down her

collarbone and then back up to her neck until our lips met in the sweetest of kisses.

It was gentle, tender, and my heart was in my throat as I realized just how precious this woman was to me. I wanted to give her everything—all of me. I couldn't yet, but I could give her this.

“Just relax,” I murmured, stroking my fingers up and down her arm. “I want to make you feel good.”

“Mmm.” Her sound of agreement sent a spark of desire racing through me, but this was about her this time, so I set my own needs aside to pleasure my mate.

Kissing my way down her body, I slowly peeled her shirt away. Grandmother had cleaned her up pretty well, but there were scrapes and bruises on her sides. I gently pressed my lips to each spot, barely more than a caress of my breath on her warm skin, and she sighed in contentment.

Even more carefully, I peeled her pants away, avoiding the bandage over the deep gash in her thigh. Taking my time, I continued to run my fingers over her body, and she relaxed more with each passing second.

When I looked up at her, naked and gorgeous in my bed, my gaze snagged on her pebbled nipples. She arched a brow and quirked up the corners of her lips, and I took that as my invitation. Kissing my way back up her body, I captured one nipple in my mouth, sucking gently while I kneaded her other breast. A soft moan escaped her lips, and I moved up to give her a long, lingering kiss.

Our tongues grazed each other's, a slow dance of desire that had my cock aching and Kayden arching up into me. She wrapped her arms around my neck, holding me close.

“I want you,” she breathed.

“You have me.” I stared into her honey eyes. “I'm yours.”

She swallowed, her eyes swimming with emotion. “Then touch me.”

She took my hand and guided it between her legs, then slid her hand inside the waist of my pants, wrapping her fingers around my length and squeezing.

I groaned. “I don't want to hurt you. But fuck, I want you too.”

She stroked me once up and down, arching her hips into my hand. “You aren't going to hurt me.” The way she said it, like she trusted me implicitly, sent an unfamiliar feeling through my chest, and my heart thundered as I slid my fingers into her slick folds. I groaned again. She felt so damn good. So

wet. So tight. I imagined my cock sliding inside her as I stroked her inner walls, relishing the moans of pleasure coming from my mate.

I took my time, drawing out her orgasm, wanting her to enjoy every moment, and it was pure satisfaction to watch as her body tensed, waves of pure bliss rolling over her as she gave herself to me. Her pussy clamped down on my fingers, and I kissed her softly as her body shuddered.

Kayden's fingers were still wrapped around my cock, tightening as she came when she said the words I longed to hear. "I want you inside of me, Holden."

I wanted that, too—more than anything. I glanced down at her thigh, and she caught my face, shaking her head. "I'll be fine—unless you make me keep begging for what I want, that is."

I grinned at the feisty tone I knew so well. "There's my girl," I murmured, but I didn't hesitate in ridding myself of my clothing. Carefully, I shifted our bodies, settling between her legs, the tip of my cock grazing her opening. She was soaking wet, and as I slid inside, she felt so perfect that it was all I could do not to come then and there.

Again, that unfamiliar feeling rose in my chest, an expansive swelling that felt like it might consume me whole. I captured Kayden's lips again as I made love to her, slowly and sweetly. It was an entirely new experience for me. One that reached down into my very soul, binding me with my mate in a way more powerful than anything I'd ever known.

I knew without a doubt that I'd do anything for this woman. She was mine, and I refused to let her go.

KAYDEN

“Stop it,” I said with a laugh, batting at Holden with a soapy hand. I’d spent the night in his room, wrapped in his arms, and waking up together was something I could easily get used to.

“I can’t help myself,” he growled, scraping his teeth along my shoulder as he fondled my breast from behind. We’d already had one round in the shower, unable to keep our hands off each other.

“I know,” I whimpered as he brushed his fingers over my inner thighs. “But we’re going to be late for breakfast if we don’t hurry.”

Reluctantly, Holden let me finish washing my hair, then gave me a robe to wear as I stepped out of the shower. I went up on tiptoes to kiss him, grinning.

“What?” he asked, his hands resting on my waist.

I shook my head and turned to start brushing out my hair, not sure I wanted to voice my feelings. But as we stood together in his bathroom getting ready, I kept glancing at him in the mirror, checking out his carved body and the sexy vee of his lower abdomen where a towel was slung low around his hips.

I could definitely get used to this.

I finished braiding my hair and put on some clothes Holden had called Faye to have delivered. So much for keeping our night together a secret. As we left his apartment to go to the dining hall, he took my hand and squeezed it.

“Jessica will be going home today.” He gave me a sad smile. “I know you two had become friends, so I wanted to give you a chance to go to the

infirmary after breakfast to say goodbye.”

My shoulders dropped. I knew she’d be leaving, but that didn’t mean I’d come to terms with it. She was the only person I truly trusted here, aside from Jenna, who I never got to see. At least I’d be able to tell her goodbye.

“Thank you.”

When we reached the dining hall, Holden led me inside just as Willow was making the daily announcements. We quickly took a seat together, but our entrance didn’t go unnoticed.

“Excuse me.” Sydnee’s snotty voice echoed through the hall, interrupting Willow. “But what’s going to be done about all the rules being broken? It seems like every time I turn around, someone is getting away with murder.”

My shoulders stiffened at her words, and Holden’s hand went to my knee under the table, giving it a reassuring squeeze before standing up and directing his attention to Sydnee.

“I’d like to ask you to refrain from commenting until we can speak in private later.”

Sydnee opened her mouth, then thought better of it and smiled sweetly. “I look forward to it.”

I bet you do.

The rest of breakfast was mercifully uneventful. Holden leaned in and brushed a kiss over my ear as he said, “Faye will escort you to the infirmary to visit Jessica. I have business to attend to, but I’ll see you at dinner.”

I nodded, watching him turn and go, already feeling alone without Jessica to attend PT with. Faye appeared at my shoulder a moment later, and we made our way to the infirmary. The minute I stepped inside, I rushed to Jessica’s side, taking her hand and holding it in both of mine.

“You’re awake,” I choked out, my emotions getting the better of me.

She smiled, her kindness shining even through her obvious pain. “Only thanks to you, from what I hear.”

I blinked back hot tears. “Any friend would have done the same.”

“They wouldn’t have,” she said softly, her eyes filling with tears. “Which is why I know you’re a true friend. I’m going to miss you, Kayden.”

I sniffed and squeezed her hand. “I’ll miss you too. What am I going to do now?”

“You’re going to win the Contention, that’s what. And besides, I know we’ll see each other again soon once all this is over. Holden offered me a position on the council.”

“That’s wonderful.” She was getting exactly what she wanted. After giving her a careful hug and saying a tearful goodbye, I had to leave her and get to PT.

I barely made it there in time. Dalton set me up with a weight machine that focused on my arms since my leg would be healing for another day or so. As I began my fifth circuit of exercises, Sydnee walked in, pitching her voice to be heard throughout the gym.

“So sorry I’m late. Holden took me on a walk—a morning date just after breakfast.” Her eyes found mine in the mirrored wall, her eyes full of triumph.

Jealousy flared in my gut. I clenched my jaw and looked away, not wanting her to see my reaction, but as I caught sight of my face in the mirror, I knew that was wishful thinking. My brows were pinched, my lips twisted in a scowl, and my eyes blazed with anger.

I took a breath, focusing on my reps, already missing Jessica. Lunch was just as lonely. I sat by myself, picking at my food, feeling as if all eyes were on me, whispering about what I’d done or why I shouldn’t be here.

Still, I sat tall. Just because they saw me as a threat and wanted me gone didn’t mean I was going to roll over and die. If anything, I had even more reason now to prove myself. There were only eight of us remaining. It was time to step up my game and show everyone I deserved to win.

Class was fairly interesting, the history of pack territories through the centuries. Maps were pulled out as we studied the progression and development of the North American packs. About halfway through class, Brooklyn moved to join me once the lecture portion was finished.

“It’s got to be hard for you without Jessica,” she observed with a sympathetic smile. “I’m going to miss her too.”

I nodded. “Yeah, we made it far with our little alliance, didn’t we?” I offered her a small smile, remembering her suggestion from our first day here. Had that really only been a couple of weeks ago? It felt like so much longer. So much had happened.

Brooklyn ended up sitting with me at dinner, too, which was better than sitting alone since Holden was too busy to dine with us. She carried the conversation, and for once, I was grateful for her constant chatter. She wasn’t Jessica, but she was kind and wasn’t treating me like an outcast. Unlike Sydnee, who, after breakfast had begun pretending I didn’t even exist.

Midway through dinner, Holden appeared in the doorway. His gaze

locked on mine, and he gestured for me to come to him. I excused myself from the table and hurried over.

“Hey,” he said, taking me by the elbow, leading me out, and striding down the hallway.

“What’s going on?” His mouth was a flat line, his jaw ticking, a clear sign something was up. His pace was clipped as he led me up the stairs. “Where are we going?”

“Up to the offices. We’ve received word that Branson has set up a meeting with two other alphas. He’s gathering those to him who might not be completely on board with me taking over. While most of the alphas are on my side, a few have expressed concern with me in the past and have issued more challenges than others. These he’s meeting with are two of them.”

“What’s this meeting about?”

“We don’t know for sure,” he said. “But our source and my previous experience with them makes me believe they’re unsure of my ability to maintain peace between the packs.”

I shook my head as we reached the fourth floor. “That’s exactly what Branson is instigating, though.”

“I know,” he said grimly. “This is why we have to intervene.” He led me to an intricate double door and opened it, gesturing for me to go first.

“I don’t understand what this has to do with me.”

Bridger stepped up to me as I walked through the door. “We want you to negotiate peace with Branson.”

I halted, blinking in confusion at the older version of Holden. *Negotiate with Branson? Me?*

Holden swept in behind me, placing his hand on my lower back and ushering me further into the office and toward a set of rich leather couches surrounding an antique coffee table. Garrett and David were there too, and I was reminded of the day I was brought here and how intimidating their presence in my cell was.

Now they were bringing me into their midst, wanting me to work with them. It didn’t make sense.

“Here, have a seat,” Holden said. “We think the best shot of getting Branson to listen to us is having it come from you. So far, he’s shut down any talks without hearing us out. But you, Kayden. You come from the pack, know their politics, and have witnessed firsthand how Branson operates.”

I shook my head, already seeing the flaw in his plan, but he wasn’t

finished.

“You’re intelligent and rational, a natural leader. I’ve seen it myself how you’re able to get others to rally around you, even those you wouldn’t call your friends. This is the perfect opportunity for you to attest to Branson about my abilities as a leader and alpha. Even you are an example—of how I can show mercy and strength when making difficult decisions.”

Was he serious? He really thought Branson would listen to me, of all people?

“Holden, I—”

“This will also be the perfect opportunity to prove yourself, Ms. Johnson,” Bridger broke in smoothly, his gaze trained on me. “After what happened with your interference in a duel, people are questioning your ability to listen and follow orders.”

People? What people was he referring to? I jerked my gaze to Holden, who was watching me with an unreadable expression.

“An alpha’s wife must be level-headed,” Bridger continued. “You acted rashly and without forethought when jumping into that duel, even if Madison was breaking the rules. If you wish to continue to the end of the Contention and have a real chance of standing at my son’s side, you’ll have to show us you can behave accordingly. This is your chance to prove you aren’t a poor choice for a wife.”

I sucked in a breath, his sharp words stinging. I glanced at Holden again, but he didn’t say anything. Is that what he thought, too? Did I need to prove my worth to him as well?

Anger flooded my veins. After the tender night and morning we’d shared, this felt like it was coming out of nowhere for him to challenge me like this.

“What’s a poor choice is going along with this ridiculous plan,” I retorted. Holden closed his eyes, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to go along with this without letting them know exactly what I thought.

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. A million times more if that’s what it takes to get through to you all.” I looked from Holden to Bridger to David to Garrett, who were all watching me—judging me.

Fine. They wanted to know what kind of alpha’s wife I’d be? I’d show them. One who wasn’t afraid to speak her mind and point out the flaws in the alpha’s plan.

“Branson has no desire to negotiate peace. It isn’t even on his radar. It’s simply not what he wants. He wants to maintain control and keep a firm

grasp on his power so he can gather strength and numbers. Anything you do that makes him appear weak will only come back to bite you in the ass. You think he will happily agree when I suggest he accept Holden as alpha?" I laughed in disbelief. "You're deluding yourselves. He will never settle for seeing Holden as alpha. I can promise you this. He won't stop coming for Holden until he's put down."

The four men sat in stunned silence for a moment before exchanging glances.

"At this point," Bridger finally said, "unless we plan on killing one of our alphas, we have no choice but to negotiate peace with Branson. Unfortunately, he hasn't broken any laws."

I scowled at the group, not caring that they were judging my actions and words even now, testing me to see what kind of mate I'd be for Holden. It was beyond frustrating, yet I had no choice but to go along with their plan. They wanted me to prove myself?

Fine. I only hoped they were ready for me.

HOLDEN

Two large black vehicles sat parked in the long driveway near the garage on the far side of the estate property. Ten of my men, including Garret, Cal, and Jax, were already loaded up, waiting for Kayden and me to join them before we made the trek to Branson's territory.

We should arrive about an hour after sunset. Our intel told us the meeting between Branson and the two other alphas was set to begin in an hour and a half. We'd be late since we were taking vehicles instead of going in wolf form, but we needed to reserve our energy in case things went sour, which I fully expected they could.

"I still think this is a piss-poor plan, Holden." Kayden had made herself abundantly clear, to my father's frustration. Unfortunately, his mind was made up that this was the way she could prove herself. I had a sinking feeling that Kayden wouldn't follow anyone's plan but her own if it came down to it.

I rested my hand on her lower back as we crossed the lawn. "This isn't the plan I want, but it's the only one available to us right now."

I'd spoken with him multiple times today, but my father insisted that Kayden prove herself. If I wanted him to accept me choosing Kayden as my mate, she needed to show she could follow directions and listen to her future alpha. I ground my teeth, knowing I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"What are you planning, then?" she asked.

"The one we spoke about last. Garrett agrees that dismantling the pack entirely and forming two new ones is the way to go."

Kayden shook her head and huffed out a frustrated breath. "Seriously?"

Even after I told you it wouldn't work? That's an even worse plan than what we're doing now."

I wanted to question her further, but we'd arrived at the vehicles and it was time to go. Kayden and I climbed into the vehicle that Garrett was driving, sitting in the middle row.

"Ready?" Garrett asked, arching his eyebrows as he looked between us. Kayden's mouth was set in a grim line, but I subtly shook my head at him. Not the time for questions.

"Let's do this," I said, pulling the door shut.

As the vehicles rumbled down the driveway and onto the main road, I took Kayden's hand and laced my fingers with hers, my thoughts preoccupied with what we might find when we arrived. If we were lucky, Branson and his minions would have no idea we were coming, and we'd have the element of surprise on our side.

Despite my father and David seeming to think this could work, I highly doubted it. My experience with Branson so far led me to believe Kayden might be right about death being the only way to take care of him. But if I wanted Kayden as my mate, I was willing to try things Father's way.

The closer we got to Branson's territory, the more uneasy I became. Who knew what might go down? The idea of putting my mate in harm's way didn't sit well with me. Every recent visit I'd made to these lands had ended in bloodshed. What was to say this wouldn't be the same?

I held her hand tighter, telling myself it would be okay but also knowing that if it came down to it, I'd be willing to bend the rules if it meant keeping Kayden safe. Once again, I was reminded of how being mates affected my judgment, but I didn't see much of a choice in this case.

Kayden tensed as our vehicles made their way through the woods surrounding the small shifter town at the center of her old pack lands. If it weren't for the car full of my men, I would have taken her in my arms and comforted her, but now wasn't the time or place.

Her shoulders were drawn up as we pulled to a stop before breaking through the trees.

"We'll go on foot from here," Garrett said, killing the engine. We all poured out of the two vehicles, twelve of us, Kayden, the only female.

I'd told them all that under no circumstances was Kayden to be harmed, but I was still on edge, knowing that anything could happen. Before we headed into town, I pulled Kayden aside behind the vehicle, gesturing to

Garrett to talk to the others while we had a private moment.

Out of sight of the others, I pulled her close, wrapping my arms around her. “Just stick with the plan, and everything should be fine,” I whispered, then pressed a kiss to her cheek.

She pulled back and shook her head. “This is crazy, Holden. I seriously don’t see this ending well.”

My stomach churned, but I gave her a reassuring smile in spite of it. “It will be fine. Just don’t act rashly. Stick to the plan,” I repeated.

Kayden pursed her lips and rolled her eyes, but she didn’t push me away when I bent my head and softly kissed her lips. My chest tightened, my wolf rumbling at the edge of my subconscious, our protective instincts going into overdrive. There was so much I wanted to say, so much I needed to tell her about how much she’d come to mean to me, but it would have to wait.

“Be careful,” I told her, looking earnestly into her eyes. “Don’t do anything stupid. Remember why we’re here.”

“Right. For me to *prove* myself.” Her tone was laced with sarcasm that I chose to ignore.

“You just need to show everyone you can follow instructions, Kayden. That way, when I choose you as—”

“Are you coming or what?” Garret said, interrupting us as he peered around the corner of the vehicle.

I didn’t even look at him, my eyes trained on Kayden. “You ready for this?”

“Might as well get it over with.” She turned and followed Garrett, ending our private moment before I was ready, but she was right. The sooner we started, the sooner we’d be back home, safe and sound.

I gathered my men for one final review of how this was to be handled, insisting that violence was to be avoided unless there was no other choice. “If it appears that Branson and his men are hostile, we may have to pivot our plan. Be ready for my signal.”

Garrett led the way, Cal and Jax flanking Kayden and me as we trailed behind him, our contingent of soldiers bringing up the rear as we walked down the street where I’d first met Kayden only weeks ago.

I could feel the tension coming off her in waves as we climbed the steps, and I squeezed her hand one last time before entering the building. The meeting was still underway, with two guards standing outside the open double doors. They didn’t move to stop us as we walked through, but the

tension was high as we stopped just inside.

I glanced around the room, surprised to see a couple dozen men inside. We were outnumbered at least two to one. I subtly moved in front of Kayden, instinct urging me to protect my mate at all costs.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” Branson drawled from where he sat at a table on a raised dais. He leaned back, crossing his legs and lacing his fingers behind his head. A casual stance, as if we were no threat at all. His eyes glittered with malice even as he gave me a cocky grin. “Little alpha coming to play with the big dogs?”

I ignored his barb, taking a step forward. Jax and Cal moved closer to Kayden, as I’d instructed them to do. “We’re here to speak with you and the alphas you’ve gathered here tonight. We come to negotiate peace.”

There was a long pause, and Branson smirked. From the corner of my eye, I noted the two alphas that he’d managed to get here. I wondered just how loyal they were to him yet, and if our plan might at least succeed in bringing them back to my side.

“We’d like to present you with our proposal and get your input on the matter as well,” I added before turning to Kayden.

Branson’s eyebrows flew up in surprise as she stepped forward, but a wicked grin quickly replaced it. “Ah, yes. The little wolf who lasted longer than anyone expected. Tell me, Holden, how did she win you over? Was it that sharp tongue?” He laughed. “I wouldn’t have taken you as a man to cave so easily to her... talents.”

Anger reared up at his disrespect, but I managed to hang on to my temper by a thread as Kayden stepped forward, her gaze cool and assessing.

“We are here to present an opportunity to you,” she began, and I tensed as Branson’s gaze sharpened, focusing on her now. The need to protect was roaring through my veins, and I was ready to shift at a moment’s notice.

Around the room, all of Branson’s men watched us carefully. The tension in the room was so thick I could practically taste it. I glanced at my men, making sure they were ready for anything.

“And what might that be?” Branson’s tone was degrading as he smirked at Kayden.

She wasn’t ruffled, though, taking another step forward, her voice ringing out strong and clear. “We’d like to extend the opportunity for you to work with us, Branson. To hear your concerns and perhaps give you a bigger say than you currently have as a pack alpha.”

My gaze flew back to her; her words taking me by surprise. This wasn't what we'd talked about at all. She was supposed to be the liaison between the packs—showing Branson that her experiences with the North American pack had been good. That we could work together and weren't a threat. That there was no reason to rebel. Instead, she was going off script and going rogue.

I grimaced, catching Garrett's confused gaze, but shook my head almost imperceptibly. We had to present a united front.

Branson chuckled. "Oh, this is rich. Yes, let's hear just what you have in mind?"

Kayden stood tall, her gaze unwavering as she advanced another step forward. "What if you could take a position that gave you more influence than you have now? Rather than your policies affecting just your pack, you could make decisions that concern all the North American packs. A position on the council, or perhaps even within the inner circle."

Yeah, definitely not what we'd discussed.

Branson threw his head back, his laughter echoing through the otherwise silent room. I glanced around, taking note of the eyes all focused on us—watching and waiting.

"You're as much a fool as your pathetic brother, aren't you?" Branson spat, the smile vanishing from his face as he stood slowly. "Your entire family is *weak*. Perhaps I made the wrong choice in sending you to the Contention—you've already fallen under this idiot's spell, haven't you?"

Branson shook his head in disgust. "Sucking up to the man who murdered your brother in cold blood. And for what? To move up in status? You're as much of a traitor as your good-for-nothing brother."

Rage flared, and it took everything I had not to intervene, but we'd come here for a reason, and I had to let Kayden fulfill her purpose.

She took another step forward. "At least I don't use other people to do my dirty work," she snarled. "Tell me, Branson, will you not challenge Holden yourself because you know he's the stronger wolf? Are you that much of a coward?"

The tension in the room ratcheted up a notch, instinct urging me to grab Kayden and pull her back into the safety of my circle of men. What was she doing? It was almost like she *wanted* to start a fight.

Realization dawned. She'd never intended to follow our plan. Quickly, I stepped forward, ready to grab my mate before she pushed Branson too far. But she was faster than me, already moving toward Branson.

There was no warning before Branson shifted, and the next thing I knew, he was leaping from the dais, directly toward Kayden.

I shifted in under a second, my only thought of protecting Kayden as the room erupted into chaos all around us. Growls filled the air as everyone shifted, and I charged forward, ready to take Branson on.

Before I could throw myself between him and Kayden, I was blindsided by a giant wolf coming from the side and knocking me to the floor. I caught a glimpse of Kayden in wolf form as I went down, going head to head with Branson, and I let out a roar of fury.

I'd waited a second too long, and now the wolf—Branson's beta—was upon me, sharp teeth flashing as he opened his muzzle wide and lunged toward my exposed throat, going for the kill.

Despite my fear for my mate, a strange sense of calm settled over me as my lifelong training kicked in, all my years of experience overriding my emotions. The only way to save Kayden was to fight my way free of the attack.

I reared up, regaining my footing in time to avoid the beta's vicious bite, lunging forward to tear into the wolf's exposed underbelly. I got in one good hit, but the wolf was strong. Branson had chosen well.

All around me, the sounds of battle filled the room—growls, snarls, and whimpers. The sound of flesh ripping open, the metallic scent of blood filling my nose. Panic crept in as I caught a flash of white fur tinged with bright crimson blood. Kayden.

I turned with a roar, ready to run to her defense, to kill the bastard who had harmed my mate, but the beta was on me again. I saw Branson's wolf tumble head over foot with Kayden as I fought off the attack, fear coursing through my veins. If anything happened to her, I didn't know how I would live with myself.

Forcing my attention back to my fight, I gave it my all. I would be no good to Kayden if I lost focus and died before I could get to her. My men and I were outnumbered, but it wasn't the first time, and I'd brought my most skilled warriors.

As I fought the beta, another of Branson's wolves joined the fray, sinking his teeth into my front leg. Ignoring the pain, I saw red as my wolf's instincts took over. I allowed all the rage to pour through, not holding back as I fought, giving it my all. The beta wasn't wearing down, but I delivered a killing bite to my other attacker, ripping his throat out in one go.

Backing up, I circled with the beta amidst the carnage. Blood was everywhere, the floor slick with it. Already, more than half the wolves were down, some of them my own.

As I moved, keeping my attention on the beta, I tried to catch sight of Kayden once more, needing to make sure she was okay. But there was too much happening, and I couldn't see her among the chaos of battle. I had to get to her. I didn't have time to fuck around with this wolf.

Determination settled over me, a refusal to let this end in anything but victory, and I launched myself at the beta. We tumbled, snapping and clawing at each other as we struggled to gain the advantage. He was strong, but I was stronger, driven by the primal need to *protect, protect, protect*.

It was like a mantra in my mind as I grappled with the wolf, and when the opening presented itself, his neck exposed, I went in for the kill. There would be no submission today, of that I was certain. Branson had trained his men to fight to the death.

Without hesitation, I ripped the beta's throat out, his body collapsing to the floor among the many other wolves now littering the floor. A quick assessment showed that even though we'd been outnumbered two to one, my men managed to take out the majority of Branson's wolves. A few men still stood in human form, watching the bloodbath unfold.

Through the chaos, I caught sight of Kayden, her brilliant silver-white fur now covered in deep crimson. But she was still standing. I ran toward her, ready to come to her aid. But a black wolf lunged through the air, teeth bared as he aimed for her throat—Branson.

With a mighty roar, I flung myself forward, knowing I wouldn't get to her in time. Panic seized my chest, and I couldn't breathe for a moment as the wolves met in midair. Teeth and claws clashed in a battle for dominance, and I charged, singularly focused on protecting my mate.

But the next instant, Kayden opened her jaws wide, sinking her sharp teeth into Branson's neck. A fatal bite. He collapsed to the floor, and relief like I'd never known swept through me. It was done. She'd killed him.

Pride mixed with fear at the sight of it. She'd taken him on, one on one. She could have died. Instead, she'd come out victorious.

As I reached her side, I shifted back, my men subduing the last of the wolves, who were starting to submit as they realized it was that, or death.

"Kayden," I gasped, "are you hurt?"

She shifted back, and I gathered her in my arms as she began to shake.

“I’m okay,” she managed.

I gave her a quick once-over and turned to face the carnage. It happened so quickly, but there had been so much destruction and loss of life.

My gaze was hard and ruthless as it settled on the few remaining men, none of whom were the alphas. We’d killed three alphas today, I realized. The gravity of it weighed heavily on me even as I spoke to the handful of would-be rebels.

“Take what you’ve witnessed today back to your friends and family. Let them know this is how things will go under my authority as North American alpha. We do not tolerate rebellion.”

The remaining rebels fled the room, and I turned to Garrett. “Start making calls. Get a clean-up crew here right away.”

There would be consequences to what happened here tonight, ones I wasn’t fully prepared to address just yet. I held Kayden close as my eyes fell on Branson’s dead wolf once again, closing my eyes as I sighed heavily.

While Branson’s behavior was unacceptable, Kayden had incited this fight with him. There would indeed be consequences.

KAYDEN

I sat on the steps of the building, wrapped in a blanket, but I couldn't stop shaking even though one of Holden's men had brought me warm pants and a sweatshirt. In front of me, Holden paced as he spoke to his father on the phone. He hadn't let me leave his side since the fight, which was fine with me.

"We're going to need a clean-up crew, but Garrett has that handled," he said, scrubbing a hand over his face. He glanced down at me, his face pinched as he continued. "Three alphas died tonight."

He didn't say anything for a few moments, and I assumed Bridger was talking. What would he say when he found out what I'd done? I hadn't gone in set on killing Branson, but it had been a distinct possibility in my mind. I'd prepared myself for that eventuality.

As much as I was for saving lives when possible, I had no regrets over what I'd done. Since he'd come into power, Branson had cost many dozens of shifters their lives. In a way, it felt like I'd finally set things right by ending the life of the man responsible for my brother's death. Branson couldn't cause any more destruction and was no longer a threat to Holden and the North American pack.

"No," Holden said adamantly. "I'll leave the soldiers who killed the other two alphas. But Kayden is coming back with me."

I glanced up at him, confused, and found his expression hard, his jaw ticking as he spoke to his father. When he ended the call and sat beside me, his head in his hands, I reached out a tentative hand to rest on his shoulder.

"What did he say?"

Holden turned to me. “It doesn’t matter right now. We’ll have an emergency meeting as soon as we get home, and the council will convene tomorrow. For now, I don’t want you to worry about it.”

I frowned. “But it’s okay for you to worry?”

“That’s part of my job, Kayden.”

And if he chose me as his mate, it would be mine as well. How often had he dealt with the fallout of things like this, shouldering the burden alone? I wanted to be there for him, to provide support in some small way, but he was shutting me out.

“We can go whenever you’re ready,” he said. “Garrett will stay behind and ensure everything is taken care of.”

“Can we visit my home first?” The idea just came to me. It would be nice to collect some of my things since I hadn’t had a chance when Holden first took me away.

I marveled at how much had changed. If anyone had told me before that fateful day Holden had shown up here that I would be willingly leaving with him, abandoning my home for a new life at his side, I would have laughed in their face. My enemy had become my lover—my mate—and nothing would ever be the same.

“Of course,” he said, rising to his feet and extending his hand. “I’d love to see where you grew up.”

“It’s not much,” I warned him. “Barely large enough to house my family. But it was home.”

Was. How could I already be thinking of the only home I’d ever known as something that was part of my past now? But that was the fact of the matter. My future wasn’t here. None of my family remained except for Jenna, who was safely ensconced in Holden’s estate.

Following my directions, he drove me to the little family house, and I led him inside. At least it was clean if a little dusty. I shivered, imagining how Jenna must have felt to be here alone, stuck under Branson’s rule.

Not anymore. Never again would any shifter be subjected to his cruelty. I walked around with a bag, gathering some personal items I wanted, including a family picture of the five of us, taken well over a decade ago.

Holden came up behind me, looking at the photo. “You guys look happy,” he commented.

I shoved the picture in the bag. “It was a long time ago.” I looked around, surprised that the place I’d always known as home no longer felt like it. “I

think I want to sell the house,” I said suddenly, turning to face Holden. “There’s no reason for me to hang onto it any longer. Not with Jenna at the estate.”

Holden cleared his throat and glanced away. “We can worry about that after the Contention.”

We. I smiled, a rush of hopeful anticipation filling me at his words. He was talking about the future. About our future together.

He gave me a tiny smile, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You should visit Jenna when we get back while I sort things out with my father. It’s going to be a long night.”

“I thought that was against the rules.”

“Looks like I’m breaking them again.” *For me.* He didn’t have to say it for me to know what he meant.

I searched his face, looking for some clue of what he was thinking, and if this was going to be a problem, but he gave me a reassuring smile and a quick kiss. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

I gathered a few more things that Jenna might want but was surprised to find I didn’t want to take much with me from my old life. I was ready to start fresh.

Holden didn’t speak much on the ride back, whether because of the three soldiers that rode back with us or because he was lost in thought. I’d expected to feel some kind of angst over killing Branson, but all I felt now was relief. It was over. Now the only thing I had to worry about was beating out the final contestants.

I mulled over that for a while, wondering what might be in store for us next and how much longer this might go on. In a matter of weeks, the playing field had been narrowed from twenty women to only eight. It would be no time until the next competition that would cut our number in half.

Once we arrived back at the estate, Holden walked me to Jenna’s room, leaving me outside her door with nothing but a kiss on the cheek before he disappeared down the hallway. I entered quietly, not wanting to disturb her. Sure enough, she was dead to the world, snoring as she always did when in a deep sleep.

Feeling immense relief that Branson could no longer harm or threaten all that remained of my family, I crawled into bed next to my sister. The weight of the day pressed down on me, and I fell asleep almost instantly.

I awoke to Jenna’s voice as she shook my shoulder. “Kayden? Kayden,

what are you doing in here?”

I turned to my sister, opening my eyes, groggy from not getting enough sleep. “Trying to sleep. Can’t you see that?” Drained from last night, I groaned, rolled over, and pulled a pillow over my head.

Jenna immediately ripped it off. “You’re going to get in trouble if someone finds you here,” she hissed.

“Jenna,” I whined, “let me sleep.” But it was too late. I was fully awake now. I rolled back over to face her. “Holden knows I’m here. It’s okay.”

“What’s going on?” Her brows drew together in suspicion.

With a sigh, I tossed the covers off and grabbed the bag I’d brought from our home. “We made a surprise visit to the pack lands last night.” One by one, I pulled out the items I’d brought, mostly pictures, but I remembered the special blanket our mother had knitted for us when we were young.

Jenna’s eyes widened as she brought it to her face, inhaling deeply. “Why did you go? Surely not just to get things from our house.”

“No,” I said slowly, taking a deep breath. Then I told her everything, from the threat Branson had posed, to Holden and I being fated mates, to the attack and Branson’s subsequent death last night.

Jenna gaped. “You killed him?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Yes, and I’d do it again without a second thought.”

She blinked, seeming to see me for the first time as she shook her head. “I don’t even know you anymore.”

I laughed, though there wasn’t much humor to it. In a few short weeks, I had changed. Sometimes I didn’t recognize myself either. “It’s all going to be okay, Jenna. I promise.”

We talked a bit longer, mostly to satisfy her curiosity with the million questions she had about Holden being my fated mate, but all too soon Faye was knocking on the door. She waltzed in with fresh clothes, telling me I’d better hurry if I didn’t want to be late for breakfast.

After the quickest shower, I tied my wet hair back, threw on clothes, and hurried to the dining hall with Faye accompanying me the entire way, thanks to Holden’s new rules.

Every eye was on me as I found a place to sit next to Brooklyn, who turned to me with a curious smile. “What’s the story?”

I blinked. “What do you mean?” Surely word hadn’t gotten around about Branson already.

“Last night,” Brooklyn whispered. “When Holden pulled you from

dinner? Everyone's been speculating about you going on a date and how they think you're his favorite."

If they only knew half of it. "Honestly, I can't say anything," I told her.

"Sydnee was pissed," she said, grinning.

I smiled back. Of course she was. "Good."

Brooklyn and I walked to PT together after Willow announced that today's training would take place on the beach. The weather was chillier than usual, the sky covered with gray clouds, the cold wind whipping off the choppy waves. A storm was rolling in.

Ignoring Sydnee's death glare, I took a spot on the sand as far from her as possible and began stretching.

"...breaking all the rules, like she thinks she's better than the rest of us." Sydnee's voice drifted to me on the breeze, and I took a deep breath to keep my cool. It wouldn't serve anyone for me to snap back. I wasn't here for her, I was here for Holden, and I would do well to remember that and keep my focus. Letting her drag me into her bullshit was a waste of energy.

Glancing behind me, I counted three soldiers standing at the edge of the beach, watching us all intently. Holden hadn't been joking around with the rules he'd established after the incident on the dock.

"Good morning, ladies," Kyle said, stepping forward from where he'd been conversing with Dalton. "Today's training will be a little different than usual." Taking a piece of driftwood, he drew a large circle in the sand, approximately thirty feet in diameter.

"Instead of pairing off to spar, I want everyone in the ring at once. You will fight until only one of you remains in the ring. Our normal sparring rules will remain in place—no illegal hits, no shifting. Everyone understand?"

I nodded, raking my gaze over the other women as we all stepped forward into the circle. My muscles ached, still sore from the battle last night, and my leg wasn't fully healed from where Madison tore into me, but I shoved the pain to the side, finding that place of calm inside that had served me well in previous fights.

Sydnee gave me a vicious grin, staring me down as she stepped into the ring before speaking to Katie, one of the few remaining members of her bitch squad.

"This is a waste of our time," she hissed. "Why are we sparring when we ought to be challenging each other? Is this the Contention, or is this some stupid game?"

Katie didn't say anything, her eyes wide as Sydnee got everyone's attention. "What do you say, ladies?"

We all glanced around, not sure what she was implying. She didn't actually want us to challenge each other here and now. Or did she?

Kyle was calling out directions from where he'd returned to stand by Dalton to watch our sparring, but no one was listening to him. Brooklyn shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, her eyes darting between Sydnee and me.

"This is nonsense," she continued. "Why are we going along with this? It's not like the rules seem to matter anyway." A barb clearly aimed at me. "This entire thing has become a joke. What happened to the strongest wolf coming out on top? Holden doesn't want someone weak by his side. So come on, ladies, let's see who has what it takes to be his mate."

She must have been planning this all along, because suddenly, Elana shifted, charging straight towards Brooklyn.

Sydnee's grin was triumphant as the other women began to shift, whether they were in on her plan or were doing so out of necessity. Shit was getting real. When her gaze turned on me, there was nothing but pure hatred shining in her eyes, and I suddenly realized that she intended this to be it. The final challenge, with only one victor remaining. Whoever survived this fight would be the last one standing—becoming Holden's mate by default, not by his choice. She must have realized where things were headed, that he was going to choose me. This was her last resort.

The instant that realization dawned, Sydnee shifted, running at me full speed, teeth bared and murder in her eyes.

HOLDEN

“Holden, sir, you have to come.”

I spun in my chair at the urgency in the assistant's voice. Garrett and I were meeting with my father in his office, discussing what Kayden had done last night. My nerves were frayed, and I was exhausted from lack of sleep.

“What's going on?” I stood when I saw her panicked face.

“The contestants, on the beach,” she said, eyes bulging. “Things got out of control in PT.”

I cursed, already running out the door, Garrett rising to his feet.

“What happened?” I heard him ask, but I wasn't sticking around to hear the answer. I tore down the flights of stairs and raced at full speed toward the beach.

There, in the center of a circle drawn in the sand, stood four wolves staring each other down, teeth bared. Outside the ring, four women stood naked, their bodies covered in scratches as assistants ran toward them with blankets.

“What the fuck is going on?” I thundered, my temper getting the best of me.

Three of my soldiers, along with the trainers and a handful of assistants, were staring wide-eyed, glancing between me and the makeshift sparring ring.

“*Somebody answer me,*” I roared. The nearest assistant yelped, then rushed toward me.

“It looks like they're in some type of group duel, sir,” she whispered, her

voice shaking.

“Why are you just standing there?” I yelled at the three soldiers I’d assigned to follow the women around today. Then I turned on the trainers, who looked to be at a complete loss. “You’re the ones in charge here.”

“We weren’t sure of the proper protocol, sir,” the soldier said, coming to my side. “This has never happened before; there’s no precedent. We all told them to stop, but any time we get near the circle, all of them lunge for us.” He shook his head. “I didn’t think you’d appreciate us hurting them to put a stop to it.”

I growled in frustration and stormed toward the edge of the ring, opening my mouth to give them a piece of my mind. But as soon as I got within feet of the circle, one of the wolves lunged and snapped, growling in warning.

What the hell was going on? I stepped back, trying to figure out the best course of action as my gaze scoured over the four wolves in the ring—Kayden, Sydnee, Elana, and Riley.

The words “challenge” and “eliminated” drifted toward me, and I turned to where the contestants in human form were huddled with their assistants, some with tears streaming down their faces.

Shit. Someone had decided to take matters into their own hands. But who?

As I looked on, Garrett catching up and stopping next to me, the four wolves moved at once, two fights breaking out in the ring. Sydnee against Riley, Kayden against Elana.

“Are you going to intervene?” Garrett asked, taking in the scene before us. “It’s like the pressure finally got to them.”

I didn’t answer, not sure what I should do. Without any proper sanctioning, four women had been eliminated from the Contention. While challenges were allowed, something of this magnitude had no precedent. It was as if they’d decided to end it on their own terms.

I flinched as Elana swiped her claws across Kayden’s muzzle, tearing into her flesh. Kayden’s wolf roared in anger, redoubling her efforts. The next minute, she had Elana pinned, offering her a chance at submission.

Elana took it, to my relief, then stumbled out of the ring. I debated putting an end to it then but interfering in a duel was against the rules.

These fucking rules were controlling everything in my life. The weight of my duty was heavier by the day, upholding rules in one area and breaking them in the next. There was no rhyme or reason other than how they affected

Kayden.

Sydnee and Riley were locked in battle, equally matched. I silently willed Kayden to walk away. She didn't have to engage. But based on how her wolf was circling the fighting pair, stalking them, she had no intention of stopping until the last wolf was standing.

If she didn't win, she'd have no choice but to submit or fight to the death, eliminating herself from the Contention.

My stomach roiled, nausea accompanying the thought. *Not like this.* We were so close to the end. So close to me being able to claim her as my mate. I couldn't lose her now.

Sydnee wrestled Riley into submission a moment later, leaving only Kayden and herself in the ring. My jaw creaked I was clenching it so hard. I felt Garrett's gaze shift to me, waiting to see if I'd give the order for them to stop.

Sydnee's dark wolf snarled at Kayden's light one as the two circled. Both were already breathing hard, three challenges in, yet neither looked willing to walk away. My chest tightened as what they intended hit home.

They were officially the only two still standing—the final contestants remaining in the Contention—which had the entire crowd going silent as the wolves continued to circle.

Kayden lunged first, going for a maiming bite, but Sydnee was fast. They appeared evenly matched, and Sydnee effortlessly evaded Kayden's attack, light on her feet as she moved out of reach.

Kayden redoubled her efforts, snapping her jaws and snarling each time Sydnee darted away. Kayden managed to sideswipe her on the last attempt, and Sydnee growled menacingly, hunching low before springing forward.

My body tensed as she knocked Kayden to the ground, and for one terrifying moment, I thought she had her pinned. But my mate wouldn't give up so easily. She flung Sydnee's wolf from her and pushed back to her feet.

My heart swelled with pride, even as adrenaline coursed through me, driving me to take action. I'd seen what Kayden was capable of in both strength and mind. She was back on her feet in no time, and I forced myself to stay put.

After the conversation I'd just had with my father, I knew I had to let her fight her own battle. She'd gone rogue with Branson, and he still wanted her to prove herself. If I stepped in now—interfering with how the Contention played out, I had no idea what might happen. I would be showing my hand in

truth, and I simply couldn't risk it. Kayden had to do this on her own.

Both wolves lunged, clashing in midair and falling to the ground, where it became a bloody battle for dominance. I felt sick, my wolf telling me to intervene.

Claws and teeth scraped and bit until the sand was covered in blood, and both wolves were staggering on their feet. Kayden backed up, putting distance between them, but her back leg buckled, and she stumbled. Fear shot through me. Her thigh hadn't fully healed, and she'd sustained more injuries last night.

Sydnee charged toward her, and an alarm sounded in my mind when Kayden didn't stand again. Sydnee's sharp teeth glinted, and a collective gasp sounded around me. Without thinking, I dove forward, shifting in midair as I flung myself between the wolves.

Sydnee's jaws locked around my front leg, and I roared, more in anger than pain. That bite had been intended for my mate.

Landing hard, I shoved Sydnee away, then shifted back to human form, holding my hands up between the wolves.

"Enough!"

My roar reverberated through the air, everyone falling completely silent. "What is the meaning of this behavior?" No one spoke, the only sound the crashing of the waves and labored breathing. I turned to face the crowd.

"Everyone, back to the estate. *Now.*" The pure alpha command in my voice couldn't have been matched by Bridger Wilder himself.

Everyone sprang into action at that, hustling to follow my orders. Only Garrett hesitated, but I bared my teeth at him. "Get them all back inside." Then I turned to Sydnee and Kayden.

"You two, stay," I demanded. "Shift back. You aren't going anywhere."

As soon as everyone had cleared the area except Kayden, Sydnee, and their two assistants who hung back at the edge of the sand, I turned on them.

"Whose idea was this?" My voice was quiet with barely contained rage. I looked back and forth between them, but neither said a word. Kayden stared back at me with an unreadable expression. "I could send you both home for this, you know. A duel between the last two standing is expressly forbidden."

Sydnee scoffed. "You won't send either of us home. Everyone knows we're your favorites." She shot a disgusted glance at Kayden. "Though why you'd want *her* is beyond me."

"Don't try me," I said, my voice clipped and dangerous, but Sydnee

seemed beyond caring.

“If you can bend and break all the rules, then so can we,” she said, lifting her chin high. “This entire thing has been a joke. Just wait until my father hears about this.”

“Watch yourself.”

She narrowed her eyes at the warning but didn’t reply. With a flip of her hair, she stalked away, her assistant scurrying after her with a blanket and clothing.

I whirled on Kayden. “What the hell were you thinking?” I snarled, my fear and worry morphing to anger that she’d risk everything like that.

“It’s kill or be killed here, Holden. You know that.” She pushed to her feet, staring at me defiantly. “What do you expect me to do? Roll over and submit?” She scoffed. “I think you know me better than that. Just like you should know I refuse to go home for losing a challenge. A challenge I could have won if you hadn’t interfered!”

There was fire in her eyes, her rage matching my own. “This could have been over,” she hissed.

“You were down, Kayden.” I got right in her face, gripping her shoulders and letting her see just how afraid I’d been. “You can’t expect me not to do anything.”

She jerked away from me. “I expect you to trust me. But why would you listen and think I’m capable? You didn’t listen to a damn thing I told you about Branson, and now look where we are.”

Indeed, and she didn’t know half of it.

“Whose idea was this?” I demanded again.

“Does it matter? Sydnee was right this time.” Her sour expression told me how much she hated to admit it. “You aren’t going to send either of us home. You want this to be on your terms. You want to draw it out. I bet you’re pissed we took out the other six, aren’t you?”

I took a deep breath, trying to regain control of my temper. Kayden was safe; she was still here and hadn’t been eliminated. I had to remember that. I chose my words carefully as I said, “Sydnee is still here because everyone sees that she has what it takes to be an alpha’s wife.”

Her rage was replaced by shock, and she stared at me with her mouth open. I rushed ahead, needing her to understand. “I’ve had to keep up appearances, Kayden. You know that. It wouldn’t have been believable for me to send Sydnee home at any point. What did you expect me to do? With

Sydnee's upbringing and preparation for the role, it wouldn't have made sense for me to send her home. She understands tradition and how to follow the rules."

Kayden's voice shook as she whispered, "Why don't you just marry her then?"

I sighed, exasperated. Were we really doing this?

"I can't, Kayden," I said out of patience. "Not when I'm fated to you."

Kayden stepped back, the breath whooshing from her lungs as she gaped at me, shaking her head. She looked like I'd just punched her in the gut.

"What?" She backed up, and I stopped, thinking about what I'd said. "Kayden, that's not what I—"

"You're bleeding, Holden. You need to go to the infirmary and see about stitches." Her voice was cold, as was the look in her eyes.

I glanced down at the gash on my upper arm from Sydnee's bite. The bite that had been meant for Kayden. "Better me than you."

But Kayden was already walking away. I ran after her, grabbing her wrist and pulling her back into my arms. "Kayden, wait."

"Don't," she yelled, putting her hands on my chest and shoving hard. "There's nothing you have to say that I want to hear."

I took a deep breath. This had gotten out of control, and I didn't know how to fix it. The blood on her thigh caught my attention. "Are you hurt? Did you reopen your wound?"

She backed up, shaking her head. "The only thing hurting is my heart."

Then she spun on her heel and walked away, Faye following behind. Her shoulders rose and fell several times as she breathed deeply, and it was all I could do to stand there and watch her go. I needed to make this right, but I didn't know how to make her see things from my perspective. Instinct told me that going after her right now would only make things worse.

As I watched her walk away, I felt real, physical pain that had nothing to do with my wounded arm. I'd hurt my mate, and she'd pushed me away.

My chest tightened as I thought about the discussion with my father. About how I'd lost control of my Contention. How there were whispers among his peers about how I'd handled Branson.

It was true what I'd told her—that I couldn't choose another woman because she was my mate. The connection I felt with Kayden was every bit as powerful as I'd feared. So powerful I'd compromised everything.

The most terrifying part was that I'd do it all again if I thought it would

make her happy. And that put everything at risk.

KAYDEN

My entire body was shaking as Faye wrapped the blanket around me. I felt Holden's eyes boring into my back as we walked away, but I didn't turn around. I didn't know whether to rage in anger or cry in despair.

Faye didn't say a word the entire way to my room, and I marveled over how she was able to continue unaffected by the chaos surrounding her. All I wanted to do was sink into bed and sleep for five years. Every time I turned around, something crazy was happening. I'd lost count of how many times I'd had to fight for my life since I'd arrived at the Contention.

My stomach churned, recalling Holden's words. In the end, after everything we'd been through, he was still keeping Sydnee in the competition. I didn't know what to think. He wanted me to prove myself, to show I could follow orders.

Hadn't he learned by now that I wouldn't follow anyone blindly? And if not, was there really a way for us to make this work?

"I'll run a bath for you," Faye said as she led me to my room. "Your injuries aren't so bad. You had me worried for a minute there with your leg."

Right. When I'd pretended my leg gave out so I could take Sydnee by surprise and put an end to everything. When Holden jumped in to save the day, instead saving *Sydnee* from being eliminated.

"I just want to collapse in bed," I told her, not even caring about the bath. "Maybe I'll stay here all day."

"You can at least stay until dinner," Faye said. "They've canceled classes for the day and temporarily suspended the next competition until further

notice.” She made a face. “Holden and the game makers were pretty angry.”

I bet they were, I seethed. How had I forgotten that this was a competition? “Why can’t I stay in my room for dinner?”

Faye cleared her throat. “Bridger and Kessa have requested a private dinner with you.” She suddenly looked everywhere but at me, and I wondered what she heard through her headset. “Get some rest, Kayden.”

I briefly considered wandering out to find Jenna, but with the way everyone was acting, I thought better of it. I was exhausted anyway. The minute my head hit the pillow I was out.



I STOOD next to Faye in front of the large wooden doors, the mirror opposite of Holden’s entrance to his private quarters on the other side of the estate. I’d tried not to think about this dinner with the alpha and his mate all through hair and makeup, but as I stood there, my stomach was tied in knots.

What did they want to talk to me about? Honestly, it could have been any number of the infractions I’d made.

But you know what? You’re still here—I hyped myself up.

And it was true. I’d survived a lot to get to this point. I wasn’t going to be intimidated by Holden’s parents, even if they were the most powerful couple in our world.

Faye lifted her hand to knock before I was ready, and the door swung open immediately by a tall butler in a tuxedo. He smiled and gestured for us to enter. I looked up as I walked through the doorway, taking in the high, domed ceiling of the foyer. An intricate mural adorned it, and beyond, an enormous archway led into a massive sitting room. Okay, so it wasn’t the *exact* mirror opposite of Holden’s quarters.

I took in all the beautiful art and expertly crafted furniture, trying to imagine living here with Holden, being his mate in every sense of the word. Honestly, the space was probably better suited to Sydnee, who’d grown up with privilege. My stomach soured.

Holden all but told me Sydnee would make a better match, and the only reason he kept me around was the mate bond.

“Good evening, dear,” Kessa said, coming into the foyer to greet us. “Faye, lovely as always. Will you be joining us for dinner?”

She was so poised, so perfect. She was made to be the alpha's wife. Even in my silk evening gown that was just as nice as Kessa's champagne dress, I couldn't compare. She had a natural grace that made me feel even more like I didn't belong.

I pushed my shoulders back. *You deserve to be here. You've earned that right.*

"Actually, I have other dinner plans, but thank you," Faye said. She gave me a quick smile. "I'll see you later."

"Hello, Kessa," I said, forcing a smile. "How are you?"

She came forward and hugged me. "You can relax. I'm really not as intimidating as people think."

I couldn't help but laugh, feeling a bit more at ease. She linked her arm with mine. "Bridger, on the other hand, can be just as tough as he looks."

I tensed. Great. That's just what I wanted to hear.

"Don't worry, dear." She patted my hand. "I've seen you with my son. You can handle it."

I didn't know what to make of that, but I didn't have time to think about it because we were in the dining room, and Bridger was sitting at the head of an ornate black table with gilded edges.

"Hello, Kayden." When he smiled, he looked even more like Holden.

"Sir." I dipped my head in respect. If he was smiling, it couldn't be that bad, right?

"Have a seat." He gestured to his left, and Kessa took the seat to his right. "First, you must know that Holden isn't aware of this dinner."

I paused halfway to the chair. "He isn't?"

"No, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention it for now. Not until after the Contention."

I frowned as I settled into my seat, unsure I liked where this was going. "What is this about?"

Kessa gave me an encouraging smile but didn't say anything, instead looking at Bridger.

"We might as well get the unpleasant part over with. I'm not pleased with the way you handled Branson. Your job was to play peacemaker. From the reports I've received from my men, your attempt was halfhearted at best." He watched me closely, and I realized my response held weight. I'd not done what he asked, yet he was giving me a chance to explain myself.

"You're right," I said, owning it. Kessa smiled into her cup as she took a

drink. “It was the wrong decision. Going in as we did was bound to end in bloodshed. I’ve been telling Holden all along that the only way to deal with Branson is to eliminate him. So, I did.”

Bridger blinked, his gaze darting to Kessa, who looked far more amused than she should at this conversation. “She reminds me far too much of you,” he muttered.

I bit back a shocked laugh, hardly believing what he was saying. “I’m sorry, but am I in trouble?” I was baffled.

Bridger sighed. “You didn’t solve the problem the way I told you to, but you solved it nonetheless. Despite your unconventional approach, I must admit, you did something that Holden could not. You goaded Branson into attacking you, something he would never have done if it were Holden.”

I sat back, relief washing over me that I wasn’t going to be sent home for this.

“The position an alpha’s wife holds is unlike any other, you see,” Kessa said, leaning forward, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she smiled. “She alone is given the right and the responsibility to question her mate if she feels he’s making the wrong decision. You demonstrated that last night. And even though I wouldn’t necessarily agree with your tactics, you took action where Holden did not.”

I wanted to tell them why, that Holden was only doing it for me, but that would be foolish. I’d come this far, and I’d even earned Kessa’s respect from the sound of it. Bridger, less so, but miraculously, I wasn’t in trouble.

Bridger cleared his throat and nodded at his wife. She gave him a tight smile and nodded in return. “There is another thing, Kayden.”

My heart sank. Of course there was.

“You killed Branson. This presents a whole new problem.” Kessa looked back at her husband. “A wolf who kills an alpha, by right, *becomes* the alpha.”

She paused, and I took a minute to let that sink in, my stomach roiling with nausea. I knew that...I’d studied that, but I hadn’t considered it once since last night.

I shook my head quickly. “No, I don’t want to be alpha.” That was the last thing I wanted. Cleaning up the mess Branson made? No, thank you.

Kessa seemed to relax slightly, though it could have been my imagination.

“As I expected,” Bridger said, “but we had to make sure. I’ll give you

time to think it over. It's not something you need to decide this minute."

Nope, pretty sure I'd decided.

"But you will need to go back and appoint a new alpha before you can continue in the Contention," Kessa added.

"What?"

"The rules state that alphas aren't allowed to compete. An alpha cannot marry an alpha." Bridger gave me a pointed look, and for a moment, I felt like he saw right through me. Like he just as easily might have replaced the word *alpha* with *mate*. But surely, they didn't know. I wouldn't still be here if they did.

"The next competition has been suspended indefinitely. We can postpone the final phase of the Contention another couple of days to give you time to get things in order." He gave me another meaningful glance. "And remember, Holden isn't to hear of this conversation."

Were they bending the rules for me? I couldn't be sure because the rules had become so murky anyway.

"Can I leave tonight?" I asked, not wanting to be gone any longer than I had to be. No one would even know if I could go now and be back before morning. I had another thought. "And can I take my sister with me?"

"I don't see why not," Kessa said. "We'll get a car ready and have your sister waiting for you as soon as we finish dinner."

I wanted to decline and leave immediately, but I needed the fuel. I hadn't eaten since breakfast. Resigning myself to waiting, I sat back in my chair and tried to fully process everything. I was an alpha? I shook my head. Just when I thought things couldn't get any crazier.

"Okay, now that that's over with," Kessa leaned forward, her eyes shining, "I want to hear about the fight last night."

"Kessa!" Bridger sounded disgruntled.

She simply shrugged. "She's a good fighter—she took me down the night of the ball. I want to learn her strategy."

I stared at her, not sure I'd heard correctly. That wolf had been powerful, relentless, and even a little bit scrappy. Perhaps Kessa and I weren't so different after all.



BRIDGER HAD GIVEN me access to a phone, only the second time since I'd come to the estate. I'd called ahead and let the elders know I was on my way to formally address the pack—my pack.

"I still can't believe you're alpha," Jenna said in awe for what felt like the hundredth time. During the car ride over, I brought her up to speed on everything. "Do you know what you're going to say to them?"

"Not really," I admitted. This is where I definitely differed from Holden. He'd have all the right words planned well in advance. "But I have to remind myself that these are people we grew up with, who've known us all our lives. Branson changed things, but he was only around a couple of years. Not everyone liked him."

His contingent of supporters that had aided him in his rise to power was a shockingly small percentage of our pack numbers, but no one had ever dared stand against Branson. Until now.

We arrived in town, the car pulling up to the front steps of the administrative building. So unlike yesterday. It was hard to believe that only twenty-four hours had passed. As we walked inside, I marveled at how there was no trace of what had happened here. Holden's clean-up crew had done a thorough job.

With a pang, I realized how much I wished he was here with me. He'd know exactly what to say, what to do. Perhaps that was why his parents hadn't told him what I had to do. One more test for me to prove myself.

I'd been alpha for less than a day, and already the burden was too much to bear. How did Holden do it? My respect for him increased ten-fold as I walked through the meeting room, all eyes on me as I stepped up on the dais—the same one Branson had stood on last night.

"Hello, everyone," I began. "This isn't how I expected to address you all the next time I saw you." I glanced around at the people I'd known for so long, who'd lived in fear of their alpha. "Branson is gone, no longer a threat to any of you, something I saw to myself."

As did the cheers and smiles, a round of applause broke out, surprising me. I swallowed against the lump in my throat, not expecting this kind of response.

"Thank you," I managed to say, then glanced at the back of the room where Jenna was smiling encouragingly. "While my actions make me your alpha by right, I'm simply not fit to be your leader. It's not something I aspired to, and I don't have the training to do you justice. However, I will

help you find another.”

I explained to those gathered how I'd like to handle my nomination. “For too long, you lived under a tyrant who did whatever he pleased and was only concerned with advancing himself. I would love to see you, my friends and packmates, have a say in who your leader is going forward. So as my first and only act as alpha, I will hold a vote.”

Murmurs went through the crowd, and a soldier, one Holden had temporarily installed to ensure none of Branson's followers took control, approached me.

“That isn't how it's supposed to be done,” he whispered, his eyes wide even as he bent his head in respect. “You must name a replacement.”

“Are you alpha of this pack, or am I?” I asked with an arched brow. His eyes flared even bigger, and he stepped back.

“As I was saying...”

It took hours, but by the time Jenna and I were ready to leave, we'd successfully held the first democratic election in the history of all the North American packs. I hoped it wouldn't be the last. It was good to see some familiar faces, my parents' friends and my old bosses, but overall, I wasn't sorry to leave my pack lands. There was nothing left for me there now that Jenna was with me.

It was past midnight when the car pulled up in front of Holden's estate. He was there waiting, opening the door as soon as we came to a stop.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me to him, wrapping me tightly in his arms. Then he pulled back and gave me a hard look. “Never leave the estate again without speaking to me first.”

“That's what you have to say to me?” I wriggled out of his grasp and glared right back. “You don't own me, Holden Wilder.”

He gritted his teeth together. “That's not what I meant, Kayden.”

“That again.” We were going in circles with this already, and I simply didn't have the energy. As much as I wanted to lean into his embrace and tell him everything, I couldn't.

So instead of getting into what was sure to be another fight, I took my sister's hand and said, “Come on, Jenna. Let's get some sleep.”

HOLDEN

I woke early, unable to sleep despite having pushed my wolf to its limits last night on a run after Kayden returned. Even now, I couldn't shake the frustration and unease that followed in the wake of yesterday's events.

My father told me where Kayden had gone, but only after she was already on her way back. The fact they didn't think I should know what Kayden had to face still had my blood simmering. I should have been with her, by her side as she went back into what could have been dangerous territory.

To make matters worse, she wasn't coming around after our argument on the beach yesterday morning. How could she possibly think I wanted Sydnee instead of her? She was being stubborn, not listening to what I was trying to tell her. But the fact of the matter was, I loved her.

She was the woman I wanted to spend my life with, and I wasn't willing to give her up. I finished my list of the council positions I wanted to offer the six contestants who'd been eliminated, ready to hand it off to Willow at breakfast. It was a small relief to know we were so close to the end of the Contention, and Kayden was still here. We just had to get through the final phase without her and Sydnee going for each other's throats—literally.

When I walked into the dining hall, I was surprised to see my parents there with Kayden and Sydnee. It was strange not to have any of the other women here now.

"There you are," Willow said. She was seated at the table with the others, and I pulled out a chair next to her, sliding my list discreetly into her hands. "I was just telling everyone else that since there are only two remaining contestants, there's no sense in holding any of the remaining competitions.

We should just skip straight to the home visits.”

Ah, yes. Home visits. Where I was to meet and spend time with the families of my potential mate.

“You’ll be going home with Sydnee tomorrow to learn more about her life and where she came from, to get to know her family and packmates. This will be your chance to learn anything else you need to know about her.”

She spoke about it as if they weren’t both sitting right there. My gaze shifted to Kayden, who was sitting stiffly, her focus trained on the plate in front of her. “And when will we have Kayden’s home visit?”

“The following day,” Willow said, referencing her tablet.

“How is that even going to work?” Sydnee said, arching a brow. “Kayden’s only family is here. Why bother going back to her pack lands?”

She was unaware of everything that had transpired over the last couple days. Visiting Kayden’s pack would take care of two matters—our final date of the Contention and ensuring the alpha she’d appointed when she visited last night was doing as he should.

“Worry about your visit, Sydnee,” I told her. “Kayden’s visit doesn’t concern you.”

Sydnee huffed a breath, picking up her fork and stabbing her eggs, but she didn’t say anything else.

Mother cleared her throat. “Now that we’re all here,” she began, gracefully changing the subject, “I want to congratulate both of you. Kayden, Sydnee, you’ve worked hard to make it this far, outlasting eighteen other women who would love to be in your shoes. You’re both quite deserving of this.”

Sydnee beamed at my mother, but I didn’t miss the side-eye she gave Kayden. To her credit, Kayden just ignored the other woman and said a polite thank you.

“What are you most excited about for your home visits?” she asked, engaging both of them in easy conversation throughout the rest of breakfast. I was supremely grateful because it would have been quite awkward without my mother there to keep the conversation rolling.

Once we’d finished breakfast, Willow was telling the women they were free to spend the day however they pleased, as long as an official accompanied them. Once she finished, I pulled her to the side.

“I’d like to arrange another date with Kayden today since the competitions have been canceled.” I kept my voice low, so neither of them

would hear. No reason to upset Sydnee anymore, and I wanted it to be a surprise for Kayden.

“Do you have something in mind?” She glanced at her tablet. “I have another appointment in ten minutes. Walk with me.”

I nodded, glancing behind me as I left the room with Willow. Kayden was watching us, her eyes sad. We’d barely interacted at breakfast, but what was I supposed to do? I couldn’t have a conversation with her lately that didn’t end in a fight, and I certainly had no desire to do that in front of an audience.

“Can you get Helen to come out and give Kayden and me a cooking lesson?”

Willow smiled. “That sounds like fun. But I’m pretty sure you’ve had enough lessons from her to know how to cook, right?”

“Yes, but I think Kayden would enjoy the experience.” I remembered her saying that she never really learned much about cooking, and she’d loved the food we’d had on the beach.

“I’ll get it taken care of. Does dinnertime work? Anything sooner might be hard to arrange at the last minute.”

“That’s fine. Thank you, Willow.”

I returned to the dining room, only to find that Kayden had slipped out. Disappointment sat heavy, tension wearing me thin. I’d be so glad when all of this was over so Kayden and I could just be together without all the bullshit of this Contention.

She obviously wasn’t in the mood to spend time with me, so I headed to the gym to burn some energy, hoping I’d be able to get a nap in before our date. It was strange not having the estate full of contestants. It felt emptier than it had in a while, and I found myself wandering around aimlessly.

Things had been so chaotic for the last few weeks with both the Contention and dealing with Branson that I almost didn’t know what to do with the free time. By the time evening rolled around, I was anxious with anticipation at seeing Kayden.

I stood in front of her door, my hand poised to knock when it swung open to reveal Faye standing there with a smile. Kayden, standing just beyond her, looked less thrilled to see me.

I smiled broadly in spite of her lack of enthusiasm and held my hand out. “Shall we?”

Kayden blew out a breath and took my hand, saying goodbye to Faye. As we walked down the hall, she finally spoke. “What are we doing?”

“It’s a surprise.” I squeezed her hand. “I’ve missed you, Kayden. I’ve hardly seen you the last few days.”

She didn’t respond as I led her upstairs to my apartment, and once we were inside, I couldn’t let it go. “Kayden, what’s going on with you? Why are you being so distant?”

She looked down at the floor for a moment, and when she looked back up at me, tears were shining in her eyes. “I just don’t know what to believe anymore.”

“About what?” I rested my hands on her shoulders, wanting to pull her close but afraid she’d just push me away.

She huffed and shook her head. “Nothing. Just forget it.”

“No. Talk to me. Please.” I stared into her honey eyes, imploring her to open up to me. To trust me.

But there was a knock at the door, interrupting us before I could get her to tell me anything. I opened it to find Helen standing there with an apron on, her graying hair pulled into an elegant bun. She had a large cart with her, loaded with ingredients.

“Helen,” I greeted her, smiling and pulling her in for a hug. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

“For you?” She pinched my cheek like she had since I was a little boy as she stepped inside. “Anything. Now, who do we have here?”

“This is Kayden, my…” I cleared my throat, catching myself before I called her my mate. “One of the finalists in the Contention.”

I glanced at Kayden, seeing her eyes flash, but she smiled at Helen. “I think we met at your restaurant a couple weeks back.”

“Ah, yes. So we did.” Helen retrieved her cart and pushed it inside, heading toward the kitchen. “Well, today, I’m going to take you behind the curtain and show you how things are done. I hope you like lasagna.”

Kayden’s eyes widened. “You’re cooking for us?”

Helen chuckled. “You’ll be the one doing the cooking,” she said. “I’m just here to teach you.”

Kayden turned to me as Helen continued toward my kitchen. “A cooking lesson?” Some of the irritation had drained from her face, and I thought there was a hint of a sparkle in her eyes.

“I thought you might like it. You enjoyed her food and said you don’t have much experience cooking. What better way to learn than from the best?” I offered her a smile, reaching out to snag her hand in mine. When she didn’t

pull away, I counted it as a win.

“That was very thoughtful, Holden,” she murmured.

I led her to the kitchen, where Helen was already unloading ingredients onto my countertops. “Have you ever made lasagna before?” she asked Kayden.

Kayden shook her head, her cheeks turning pink. “Only putting a frozen one in the oven. I’m afraid I don’t have much experience with food beyond the basics.”

Helen chuckled. “Okay, let’s start with boiling some water. I know you can handle that.”

Kayden smiled, the first one I’d seen in days, and the tightness in my chest eased somewhat. Perhaps it was just the stress of everything that happened. She’d killed Branson, fought in a duel with seven other wolves, and had to deal with the fallout of nominating a new leader for her pack. All that on top of the stress of the Contention. We would be okay. We were so close now.

“Here’s where I keep my pots.” I showed Kayden around my kitchen, familiarizing her with where everything was. Not too long from now, I hoped to share this kitchen, this home, with her.

We set the water to boiling, then Helen showed us how to make her secret sauce, threatening to permanently maim us if we ever told a soul. Kayden focused intently on the lesson, her smile growing as she became more talkative throughout our time with Helen. By the end of the cooking lesson, her mood had improved drastically, and I was antsy for Helen to wrap it up and leave us alone.

There was something intimate about cooking together, and it made me look forward to all the evenings ahead. I was ready to share my life with this woman, and this was just a hint of what was to come.

“Would you like some wine?” I offered Kayden as she followed Helen’s instructions to create the layers of lasagna.

“That sounds wonderful.” She smiled at me, and my heart swelled in response. It was amazing how much happiness a simple smile could bring, but when it came from my mate, it was everything.

I poured the wine, offering one to Helen as well.

“Oh, no, dear. Thank you, though.” She patted my cheek. “I’ll be heading out now. I think the two of you can handle it from here. Just pop that in the oven for an hour, and you’re all set. Oh, I’ve put some tiramisu in the

refrigerator for later.”

After giving Kayden and me a big hug, she wheeled her cart out, leaving us alone. I lifted my glass, tilting it toward Kayden. “To many more meals with my mate,” I said softly.

Kayden clinked her glass to mine, her lips curving as she took a sip. As soon as she had, I took her glass and set it aside. I placed my hands on her hips and lifted her onto my counter, so we were at eye level.

Cupping her cheeks, I stared into her eyes. “You know how much I care about you, Kayden,” I began.

She didn’t say anything, didn’t even move, just watched me.

I wanted so badly to tell her exactly how I felt. To say those three words I’d never spoken to another woman. But I didn’t want to scare her with too much too soon. Even though we were mates, we were still in the early stages of our relationship. We had our whole lives ahead of us, and I couldn’t wait for it to get started.

But I forced myself to keep my emotions in check. Once the Contention was behind us, we could truly explore what we had together. Still, I couldn’t resist bending my head, and brushing my lips over hers.

She didn’t pull away, kissing me back, softly and sweetly, and it was all I could do not to strip her naked and take her right here in the kitchen. She broke away all too soon, though.

“We have to put the lasagna in the oven,” she reminded me.

“Right.” I moved around the counter and grabbed the pan, putting it in the hot oven and returning to where I belonged. “So, how would you like to spend the next hour?”

I had lots of thoughts of how we could spend it, but Kayden had her own idea. “We could watch the sunset on your terrace.”

“Whatever you wish.” I kissed her cheek, helped her off the counter and led her outside. The air was crisp but not too cold, perfect for lighting my fire pit, which I made quick work of. Then we settled onto a soft loveseat, sipping our wine as we watched the flickering flames.

“I could get used to this,” I murmured, turning to bury my face in her neck and breathe her in. “A night of relaxing, just the two of us. Nothing to worry about except each other.”

She sighed, cuddling up to me, and I wrapped my arms around her, feeling more content than I had in a while. It was just a matter of days now. We were as good as done with the Contention. Kayden didn’t have much to

say, her mind seemingly occupied as we sat together, but I was okay with that. I didn't need words. Just being together was enough for me. All too soon, though, the evening came to an end.

"I should get back to my room," Kayden said as we finished dinner.

More than anything, I wanted her to stay with me tonight, sleep in my bed and be by my side. But I had to leave early in the morning for Sydnee's home visit, and I knew if Kayden stayed, I might not get any sleep for the second night in a row.

"I'll walk you back," I said reluctantly. "But first..." I rounded the table and took her hand, pulling her to her feet before bringing her close. Brushing her hair back, I traced the curves and angles of her face, struck once again by her beauty.

"I hope you know how much I care about you," I whispered, then I leaned forward and captured her lips. Kayden lifted her arms and wrapped them around my neck, kissing me back with more passion than she'd shown all night, making me question my resolve to take her back to her room. I ran my gaze over her beautiful face as she pulled back, aching to be even closer. "Are you sure you don't want to stay here?"

"Tempting," she murmured. "But not tonight."

I nodded. Soon enough, it wouldn't matter. We'd have all the nights ahead of us together. I escorted her back to her room, leaving her with one final, lingering kiss before walking backward, a smile on my face. "I'll see you at breakfast in the morning."

But when breakfast time came, it was as if last night had never happened. Like Kayden and I hadn't reconnected and had a special moment. She studiously sat at the table with Sydnee and me—just the three of us were there today—her eyes on her plate, practically ignoring both of us.

Sydnee wasn't going to let that opportunity pass her by. She chatted enthusiastically about everything she wanted to show me today, gushing about how much I'd love her family and how much they'd love me. "I can't wait for you to see where I grew up."

She went on and on, seemingly oblivious to Kayden's glowering expression. As soon as Kayden finished her food, she stood abruptly and left without a word.

I glanced at Sydnee, who had a smirk of satisfaction on her face. "I'll be right back."

Sydnee huffed. "What? Holden. It's almost time to go."

I was already halfway out the door and didn't bother looking back. "I'll meet you at the car."

I caught up with Kayden on the stairs leading to the second floor, wrapping my fingers around her wrist. "Kayden, stop."

She turned to me, her eyes glassy and her lips trembling. "Why? So I can watch you and Sydnee drive off together, laughing and having a great time? No thanks."

"Kayden..."

"No." She jerked her arm out of my grip. "Don't say my name like that."

"Like what?" I asked carefully.

"Like you think I'm being unreasonable." She crossed her arms over her chest. "After last night, I finally thought we were okay. That we were a sure thing, Holden."

"We are." I stepped toward her, but she backed away. "What are you talking about?"

She scoffed. "I felt like a third wheel at breakfast just now. Do you have any idea how it feels to hear her talk about the day you're going to have together? To not know if everything you've told me is even true?"

"Of course it is," I said, flabbergasted. "You really think I want Sydnee? I want you, Kayden. You're my mate."

She shook her head, and a tear spilled down her cheek. "I thought everything was okay, but now I see nothing has changed. You chose to keep her here, and you've flat out admitted how good she'd be as your wife. What am I supposed to think about that, Holden?"

"Kayden." My voice was low in case anyone was milling about, but she simply had to see the truth. "You're my *mate*. I couldn't possibly want anyone other than you."

"That's what I mean, Holden." She threw her arms up in the air. "I don't want to be yours because of some stupid bond telling us we must be together. If you don't want me for me—and not just because of this fucking mate bond—then maybe you would be better off with Sydnee."

She turned on her heel and darted up the stairs and down the hall, leaving me staring after her. More than anything, I wanted to go after her, to assure her that she was the only person I wanted. Once again, the damn Contention was putting a rift between us. The last thing I wanted was to visit Sydnee's family, but I didn't have a choice.

I'd just have to trust that in the end, Kayden would see the truth—that I

would love her no matter what, and being mates was just icing on the cake.

KAYDEN

“**Y**ou can’t just stay in bed all day,” Faye said, opening the curtains to let sunlight in my room.

I pulled my blankets up over my head. I’d crawled right back into bed once Holden left with Sydnee. “Why not?”

“Because moping isn’t becoming to you.” I peeked out from under the covers to see her staring at me with her hands on her hips. “You’re above that, Kayden.”

I frowned, wondering just how much she knew. “What else am I supposed to do today? There’s no one here but me.”

“Maybe I can arrange for you to spend some time with your sister.”

“I thought it was against the rules,” I said, my tone acrid. I was being petulant but couldn’t seem to stop it.

Faye gave me a look that made it clear how aware she was of all the rule breaking that had been going on. “You’ll be fine. Why don’t you do some PT then take a shower? You’ll feel much better after you’ve worked off some of this nervous energy.”

“I’m not nervous,” I muttered. “I’m pissed.”

Faye arched a brow. “PT works for both. So unless you want to spend the day fretting over Holden and Sydnee’s home visit, I suggest you get your ass out of bed and get moving.”

My mouth dropped open. In all the time we’d spent together, it was the first time I’d heard her speak like that. Maybe she was over this as much as I was. I was so shocked I didn’t even argue, climbing from the bed once more and changing into workout clothes.

Faye was right, though. After an hour in the gym, I felt much more like myself. I headed back to my room for a shower, surprised to find Jenna sitting on my bed waiting for me.

“Hey,” I said, running to her and throwing my arms around her.

“Do we really get to spend the day together?”

“That’s what Faye said,” I told her with a shrug. “I’m not going to argue.”

Jenna grinned. “So, what should we do?”

“I don’t know, honestly. I’ve been so busy with everything that I don’t have much free time. What have you been doing to keep yourself occupied since you’ve been here?”

“A lot of walks on the beach,” she laughed. “I wouldn’t mind a change of pace.”

“We can explore the estate,” I suggested. There were no other contestants here for the first time since I’d arrived. No one to jump out from behind a bookshelf and attack me. No one to watch my every move. It was freeing in a way I hadn’t experienced, and I wanted to check out the areas I hadn’t seen yet in this massive mansion.

“Sounds good to me.”

We spent the rest of the morning checking out the architecture and the art, even coming upon an art gallery I hadn’t known was here. We had lunch together in a small private dining room, then ended up walking on the beach anyway.

“I can’t believe it’s almost over,” I admitted to Jenna as we looked for seashells.

“How do you feel about that?” she asked.

Shrugging, I stared out at the open sea. “Happy, I guess. It all seems surreal. If I’m being honest, I never thought I’d make it to the end.”

Jenna smiled, coming to stand beside me and looping an arm around my waist. “I did.”

“Really?” I glanced at her in surprise.

She nodded. “I’ve never known anyone more hard-headed than my big sister,” she teased. “You aren’t the type to let others edge you out of the running.”

I laughed. “I guess.” My smile faltered in the next second. “But I don’t know what to think now. What if I’ve made it all this way just for him to choose Sydnee in the end?”

“I don’t truly know Holden or Sydnee, but do you think he would deceive

you all this time? You guys are mates, after all.”

I blew out a deep breath. “I don’t know. I’m just so confused, and this mate bond doesn’t help. I want Holden more than I’ve ever wanted anyone in my life, and I think he feels the same. But I can’t help but wonder if he’s only kept me around because of the mate bond. What if he realizes what a bad idea it is? I mean, it’s not even allowed.”

I’d made Jenna swear never to breathe a word to anyone about Holden and me being mates. She was fully aware of the consequences.

I kicked at the sand in frustration. “I just don’t get it. Out of all the people he could have kept around, why her? She’s vile and manipulative. How Holden could think she’d be a good wife is beyond me.”

I sighed and sank to the sand, pulling my knees up to my chin. Jenna sat beside me. “Why can’t you just accept the reasons he gave you as the truth?”

I stared at the crashing waves, letting her question sink in. Holden told me from the beginning why Sydnee was a top contender. But he’d never shown any type of affection or interest in her. That had to count for something.

“Maybe I’m just afraid,” I admitted.

“Of what, exactly?” she pressed.

“I don’t know, everything? That Holden won’t choose me, that he’ll break my heart. Or if he does choose me, that I won’t be everything he needs me to be. Maybe I’m not cut out to be an alpha’s mate.” The thought had been nagging at my mind, though I was only giving voice to it now.

“Kayden,” Jenna said softly, “you don’t actually believe that, do you?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. Part of me thinks I’d be great at it. Holden carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, and I don’t think anyone else sees that.” I thought back to all the times he’d confided in me, as well as the times he’d sought me out for advice.

“I think I’m educated enough to provide a good counter to him, to help him work through the problems and struggles that come with his position.” I glanced at Jenna. “But maybe that’s just wishful thinking.”

Jenna shook her head. “Based on everything you’ve told me, I think you’re the perfect choice, and that doesn’t even have anything to do with you being mates. You challenge him when you think he’s making the wrong call and stand up for what you believe in. An alpha doesn’t need someone who’s going to go along with everything he says. What he needs is someone who can love and support him, *and* question him when it needs to be done.”

Her words reminded me of what Kessa had said at dinner the other night.

“But what if I’m not the best person to do that?”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “Well, you’re certainly a better option than Sydnee. Look, Kayden. You’re overthinking all of this. I’ve seen the way Holden looks at you. Hell, everyone here has seen it. He adores you, and I don’t think that’s entirely due to the mate bond. You’re discounting his feelings for you without even giving him a chance to show you what you could be together.”

“I’m afraid of getting hurt,” I whispered. “I think I’m in love with him.”

I hadn’t even let myself think those words before this moment, but as I said them, I knew they were true. It was a feeling deep in my bones, something even stronger than the mate bond.

Jenna smiled. “Then it’s worth the risk. If you love him, fight for him. Fight for what you want. Tell him how you feel.”

The idea sent a shot of terror through me, but I also knew she was right. This was it. The end of the Contention. If I didn’t put everything on the line, then what had it been for?

“Thank you,” I told my sister, giving her a big hug. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Overthink everything.”

I laughed, feeling much lighter than I had this morning. Jenna always had a way of helping me get out of my head and see things more clearly. I pushed to my feet, feeling renewed confidence in what I wanted. Now I just had to go out and get it.



HOLDEN WAS UNUSUALLY quiet the entire ride from the estate to my pack lands the next morning. I didn’t see him the night before, and we’d set out early, so I had no context for his behavior.

Of course, my mind went straight to the only thing I could think of—something had changed yesterday when he’d visited Sydnee’s pack. He pulled the black vehicle up in front of my family home, climbing out and leading me to the door. As soon as we stepped inside, he turned to face me.

“We need to talk.”

My chest tightened, making it hard to breathe as I stared at his serious face. Part of me wanted to run right back out the door, but the other part had to ask.

“Are you breaking up with me?” I felt like I might be sick, my stomach clenching, my breath coming in shallow pants. “I knew it. Going home with Sydnee sealed the deal for you, didn’t it? You want someone fit for the job, not someone who—”

“Kayden.” His voice was calm, quiet as he rested his hands on my shoulders. “Breathe. That’s the furthest thing from the truth.” He sighed heavily and shook his head, thrusting his fingers into his hair. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what? For making believe we could actually be together?”

“Kayden,” he said, sharper this time. “What do I have to do to show you that you’re the one I want? You’re the only one I’ve wanted since the very beginning. Maybe even from the moment I first laid eyes on you. There was something I recognized in you, even then. Something special.”

He wasn’t breaking up with me. I fought to control my panicked breathing, immediately feeling like an idiot. “Then what else could it possibly be that’s had you acting so strange all morning?”

He came close, framing my face with his hands as he stared down into my eyes. I’d never seen him so serious, so intense, and that was saying something.

“I need to know that you’re all in on this with me. That you aren’t going to change your mind. That you aren’t still harboring resentment for me killing your brother, and a million other things that have me wondering if you’re going to just walk away.” His gaze searched mine as if he were looking for the answers deep within my soul. “I need to know you want me as much as I want you and that you want to spend your life by my side.”

I stared, having difficulty comprehending that this man—this strong leader, an alpha above all alphas—was doubting himself. Or rather, doubting my feelings for him. But when had I told him how I really felt? Jenna’s words from yesterday came back to me. Was I willing to lay my heart bare, to put everything on the line for Holden?

As I looked up into his eyes, I knew without a doubt that the answer was yes. “Holden,” I began, my voice shaking. “There’s nothing I want more than to be your mate. If I haven’t shown you that, then I’m the one who needs to apologize.”

I reached up and wrapped my hands around his neck, speaking from the heart. “Holden, I’ve been scared. Scared of falling for you, scared of getting my heart broken... scared of what it means to be your mate. But now I know my feelings go far beyond the bond we share. I admire and respect you. I see

you for the man you are, and most importantly, I love you.”

Holden stared, his lips parting as he let that sink in. “You love me?”

I nodded, tears welling in my eyes. “I do. And yes, I’ve been worried about Sydnee, but only because I don’t know what I would do without you. I want to be yours in every way. To spend the rest of my life by your side. As your wife and as your mate.”

He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe it. “And here I was worried you didn’t truly care.” He wrapped me up in his arms, crushing my body against his. His heart thundered where my head rested on his chest, and I clung to him as he lifted my chin and smiled softly at me. “I love you, Kayden. There’s nothing I want more than to spend the rest of my days showing you just how much. As your husband and as your mate.”

My breath whooshed from my lungs, and all I could do was stare at him. This gorgeous, strong, and honorable man *loved* me. At that moment, I knew what we shared truly did go beyond our mate bond. We belonged together, and my heart soared as he lowered his mouth to mine.

“I’m yours, Kayden,” he murmured against my lips. “Always. You have my heart, body, and soul. I’m so sorry I ever gave you a reason to doubt it.”

I laughed through the tears that were slipping down my cheeks. “Kind of hard not to when you were dating nineteen other women.”

He dropped his forehead against mine. “There’s only ever been you.”



AFTER LEAVING my childhood home for what could be the last time, feeling lighter than I had in weeks, we went to visit the pack. I introduced Holden to the new alpha and beta, who appeared to be quickly getting things in order.

“You have our support with anything you might need,” Holden told them, keeping one hand on my waist throughout our visit. He didn’t seem to care if the entire world knew we were together now, something I could get used to. I was certainly tired of hiding.

He chuckled when I brought it up in the car on our way back. “I’m ready to shout from the rooftops that you’re the one, Kayden. The rest of the Contention is just a formality.”

“What happens next?” I asked.

“Tomorrow, there will be a ceremony where I officially choose you.” He

smiled, his eyes full of love, and I didn't think I'd ever been happier than I was at that moment.

A minute later, he glanced at me. "So, I didn't want to say anything in front of the new pack leaders, but it seems you held an election to make your choices?" He arched a brow. "You just had to go do it your way, didn't you?"

But he didn't look upset. If anything, he seemed amused.

"Would you have preferred I handled another way?" I challenged him. "Your way, perhaps?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "Actually, I'm impressed. And I never want you to do things my way if you disagree. That's one thing that stood out to me from the beginning—you've never been afraid to question me if you think I'm in the wrong."

I smirked. "Are you sure you can handle such an unconventional mate?"

"Darling, I look forward to a lifetime of you bucking tradition and breaking the mold." He lifted my hand to his mouth, and a thrill raced through me at his words. This was really happening. After everything, I'd somehow managed to not only make it to the end of the Contention but to find the love of my life.

"That's one thing I can guarantee," I said with a wink.

We pulled up to the estate, spotting a group of assistants waiting for us, Faye at the front of the crowd. She darted toward me as soon as I opened my door, taking my hand and dragging me away.

"Hey," I protested. "I haven't even said goodnight."

"No time for that now," she said, "we have a huge day tomorrow, and we have to start preparing now."

"Now?" It was after dark. I glanced back at Holden, but he was being pulled away in the opposite direction by other assistants. Our eyes met over the distance, and he flashed me a big smile. "What's so important that it has to be done now?"

"Choosing your dress, of course," she said.

"For what?"

"For tomorrow's proposal ceremony."

I stopped in my tracks. "Proposal ceremony?"

"What, you didn't know?" Faye asked. She smiled. "Lucky for you, you've got me for an assistant, and I know *exactly* what Holden likes."

I turned again to find Holden watching me across the lawn, smiling broadly. He'd known and hadn't told me. I smiled back, hardly able to

believe a dream that had felt so out of reach was actually coming true.

HOLDEN

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Garrett held my grandmother’s ring up between his fingers. Afternoon sunlight filtered through the old window of the antechamber where we stood.

I’d never been more certain of anything. In just a few moments, the final ceremony of the Contention would begin.

Going into it, I’d dismissed the Contention as nothing more than the final step to take my place as alpha. Taking a mate was simply a requirement for the role. I’d never counted on meeting my one true mate.

Garrett adjusted the lapels of my tuxedo, then patted my cheek, grinning. “Don’t choose wrong.”

I snorted. As if there were even a choice to be made. Garrett poked his head out the door. “Looks like they’ve all cleared out. It’s time.”

I took a deep breath, feeling more relaxed than I had in a long time. Finally, Kayden would be mine, and the whole world would know it. I walked toward Garrett, holding my hand out. He dropped the ring in my palm, and I stepped into the hallway.

“See you when it’s done.” Garrett winked as he disappeared around a corner and up the stairs to a balcony where everyone else was gathered to watch. A white floor runner led from the hallway into the room beyond, one I’d chosen for its spectacular view.

The room was a domed conservatory on the top of the building that was rarely used and difficult to access, making it all the more special. The glass walls that encircled it gave a panoramic view of the ocean and the woods, making it feel as if I were floating on top of the world.

Glancing around, I took in the gauzy curtains, the vines climbing toward the ceiling, and the hundreds of flowers arranged artfully—and strategically—around the conservatory. I couldn't see either of the girls thanks to a large potted plant, but I had a feeling Willow wanted it that way.

Stepping onto the runner, I walked forward, following its path as I held tightly to my grandmother's ring. Above, I could see my family sitting on the front row of the balcony. Mother and Father smiled at me, and Grandmother winked and jerked her head toward Garrett next to her, wiggling her eyebrows.

I wrinkled my nose. *Seriously, Grandmother?* To Garrett's left sat Jessica and Jenna, with Sydnee's family seated on the other end of mine. The rest of the rows were filled with my inner circle, council members, alphas, and assistants. A medic was standing by, and a handful of soldiers were around the room as always.

As I stepped fully into the conservatory, the runner scattered with red and white rose petals, I caught my first glimpse of Kayden. She stood at the end of the runner, the sunlight glinting off her silvery-white hair that she'd left down and flowing. Tiny flowers were braided into it, and for a moment, I couldn't breathe.

Our eyes locked, and she smiled, her feelings for me shining through. I wished nothing else existed at that moment but the two of us, but we had an audience, so I turned my gaze on Sydnee. She wore a white dress like Kayden, but she was nowhere near as radiant as my mate.

Her smile was for appearances only, and there was no emotion in her eyes. I continued toward them, the words I'd rehearsed so many times running through my mind.

"Good afternoon, ladies." I stopped between them and inclined my head. "You both look stunning." The stylists had outdone themselves with both women, but Kayden radiated an energy that went beyond style. Her spirit, her soul, called to me, as it had from the very beginning, though it had taken me a while to figure out why. "I've made my choice."

I looked between my one true mate and the woman I'd be sending home, ready to make my decision known.

Before I could open my mouth to speak the words that would end this for good, Sydnee lunged forward, wrapping her hands around Kayden's throat and knocking her to the floor.

The crowd gasped, and I darted towards the women, ready to pull Sydnee

off and give her a piece of my mind. The only thing that stopped me was my father's voice booming through the room.

"Stop, son! You cannot interfere."

I jerked my gaze to the balcony, where Father stood, his face a hard mask. Mother held onto his arm, her brow furrowed in worry. Kayden had wrested free of Sydnee's grasp, but her neck was covered in cuts. Instinct had me surging forward, but Garrett grabbed my arm and held me back.

Kayden had barely gained her footing when Sydnee lunged again, already shifting. The room seemed to go eerily silent, everything moving too slow. My ears were ringing, and my chest felt like it was going to burst. How could this be happening.

Suddenly, Kayden's wolf burst forth with a mighty roar, knocking Sydnee back.

"What am I supposed to do?" I roared. Surely, there was some precedent or rule for this.

"This is still part of the Contention," Father called out, his voice grim. "You didn't make your choice. They can duel."

My gut twisted, which meant that whoever won would be my wife. I had made my choice, though. Long ago. This was just a formality, a technicality. My wolf raged inside me, demanding I do something. My mate was under attack. The only thing to do was save her.

I looked around, my horror reflected on the faces of everyone gathered—everyone except Sydnee's father, who watched with a perfectly calm expression. As if he knew this would happen. I'd been an idiot to keep her around this long. Kayden had told me how ruthless Sydnee was, that she'd be willing to go to any lengths to get what she wanted.

The two wolves circled each other, snarling and baring their teeth. We'd been here before. Just as it had been on the beach, neither woman was willing to step down from this challenge. It was a fight to the death, and everyone in the room knew it.

Sydnee lunged first. Kayden crouched, ready for the attack. But at the last minute, Sydnee flung to the side, scraping her claws along Kayden's flank. Kayden roared in pain. Sydnee rolled, getting back on her paws in no time. While Kayden, taken by surprise, shook her head and tried to get back in the game.

She barely moved in time to avoid Sydnee's next attack. "Come on, *Kayden*," I bit out through bared teeth. "You've got this."

Garrett still held me back. I wasn't sure what I might have done if he hadn't. My heart thundered, adrenaline coursing through my veins. The primal urge to intervene, to maim—to *kill* anyone who threatened my mate, was all-consuming.

Kayden skittered back out of Sydnee's reach, and I breathed a sigh of relief when she seemed to settle into her body more, moving with lethal grace as she watched her opponent.

Sydnee had the element of surprise at first, but now Kayden had evened the playing field. The determination in her eyes was enough to let everyone know she wasn't going down so easily. Just two weeks ago, I wouldn't have been sure she was capable of seeing this through to the end—of delivering a killing bite.

But now, she was a different woman. She was stronger, more sure of herself. She'd been through hell and was still standing—still fighting. My mate wasn't one to give up.

Kayden lunged, hurtling herself forward with power and speed that knocked Sydnee flat on her back. Kayden pinned her instantly, pressing a paw to her throat; offering her the chance to submit, even now.

Sydnee snarled, and Kayden's claws pierced her flesh. A final warning. Then Kayden went for the kill, replacing her claws with her teeth. Sharp canines sank in, and Kayden gave a jerk of her head. But even as she ripped out her throat, Sydnee scraped her claws down Kayden's belly, a final attempt to save herself.

She was too late.

Sydnee's body lay limp as Kayden fell to the floor, her sides heaving. I ran to her, screaming for a medic.

"Kayden," I breathed, my stomach knotting when I saw the deep gashes along her wolf belly. She was losing blood fast. "You have to shift. Now. You can't wait."

One large honey eye rolled toward me, and my heart stuck in my throat. She wasn't moving.

"Kayden." My voice was raw, ragged as it echoed through the conservatory. "*Shift.*" The command was from an alpha, not to be disobeyed.

Her body shuddered. Once, twice. *Come on.* She would bleed out if she didn't shift soon. Even if the pain would be enormous, shifting would begin some of the healing process. Hopefully enough to save her life.

"Please," I begged, even as I wanted to rail and rage against fate for being

so cruel.

Her body shuddered once more, then morphed, her wolf form fading away to leave her lying on the floor. She blinked up at me, her entire body shaking. She looked pale. Too pale. Glancing at her stomach, the eight deep gashes still bled, though not as profusely as before.

“Hang on.” I took her hand and held it tight. “You’re going to be okay.”

Grandmother and a team of medics rushed forward, and for once, she didn’t tell me to get out of her way.

“You have to save her.” All I could do was stare into Kayden’s eyes, utterly helpless. I brushed her hair back from her forehead and cupped her cheek.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Grandmother and a medic exchange glances.

“What?” I demanded. “What is it?”

“Her injuries are too bad. She’s lost too much blood.”

The breath whooshed from my lungs, my chest ripping in two. “No.”

“There’s one way, Holden.” She pressed her lips into a firm line and glanced at her medics. “The mate bite.”

I blinked. The mate bite was a powerful thing, that people whispered held magical properties from ancient times. It magnified a shifter’s power to heal and bound the two wolves for all eternity, through lifetimes and ages as the stories went.

And it only worked with true mates.

“How did you know?”

Grandmother shook her head. “It doesn’t matter, boy. If you want to save her, you’ll do it now and ask questions later.”

I bent low, cradling Kayden’s head in my hands, gazing into her eyes to make sure she was aware enough to accept what I was doing. Binding yourself to someone for all eternity wasn’t something to take lightly.

“Kayden,” I whispered. “Did you hear that?”

She attempted a nod, moving her lips, though nothing came out.

“Is that what you want?”

Another slight tilt of her head. That was enough for me. Bringing my lips to her neck, I opened my mouth without hesitation and sank my canines into her flesh. Her body arched, but I didn’t let go as blood filled my mouth.

Slowly, a strange sensation filled my chest. An expansion... and an awareness. As if I were connected to Kayden’s spirit in some way. I felt her

wolf as if its essence were intertwined with my own, a recognition of each other that was primal and true.

Beneath me, I felt Kayden begin to breathe deeper, and her body instantly felt warmer. I pulled back, staring down at her as she blinked up at me, her body more revitalized by the moment.

Then she was flinging her arms around my neck, sobbing in relief. I pressed my forehead to hers. "You're okay," I breathed.

Kayden lifted one hand to my chest, placing the other over her heart. "I can feel you... in here."

"I feel it too."

"It's the mate bond," Grandmother said. I'd almost forgotten we had an audience.

"So much for keeping it a secret," Kayden murmured.

I glanced at Grandmother, stunned, but she shrugged. "I knew the day you brought her to the infirmary. Acting like a lovesick fool."

Kayden laughed, and I turned back to her, pulling her and holding her in my arms. "Damn right I am."

Then I kissed her in front of everyone, claiming my lover and my mate for all to see.

KAYDEN

“**Y**ou look lovely tonight, dear.” Kessa smiled as Holden and I walked into the family’s private dining room, hand in hand. “That dress is to die for.”

Holden bent his head and whispered in my ear. “It makes me want to take you back to our apartment and get you out of it the first chance I get.”

My face heated. “Holden,” I hissed, aware that everyone in the room could hear him.

Garrett laughed loudly, clapping his alpha on the back as he handed him a glass of whiskey, then pulled him into a conversation with Bridger, the three men already talking business, even if tonight wasn’t about that.

“Thank you, Kessa.” I moved to join her at the bar, where she was pouring two glasses of champagne. “You look beautiful, as always.”

Kessa gave me a quick hug before handing me a glass and clinking hers to mine. “To my future daughter-in-law. I knew all along you’d be perfect for my son.”

It was hard to believe that a month had passed since that fateful final day of the Contention. Life had been a dream, everything falling into place in a way I hadn’t dared to dream. I’d moved into Holden’s private quarters, Jenna was set up with a suite on the same floor, and Faye had been appointed as assistant to the future alpha’s mate.

Kessa and Bridger welcomed me into the family with exuberance—especially Kessa, who didn’t seem to care that Holden and I were bucking tradition by being fated mates.

“Are you ready for tonight?” she asked.

A nervous laugh bubbled up. “Do I have a choice?”

“No.” She grinned. “But I don’t think that’s much of a problem for you. You’ve adapted to everything that’s come your way.”

“Thank you,” I replied, taking a sip of champagne and smoothing the front of my emerald green cocktail dress. I hadn’t even argued with Faye about the extravagance of it, trusting that she knew best how I needed to look tonight. “But I must admit, it’s a little nerve-racking, especially considering what everyone is saying.”

Tonight, all the alphas in the land would gather here for our engagement party. It would be our first public appearance as a couple since the Contention ended, and I wasn’t under any illusions. Not everyone was pleased that we were mates.

In fact, there had been rumblings among the alphas that the entire thing had been unfair—that none of the other women had a chance from the start. Bridger and Holden had managed to smooth things over, at least to the point that no one was questioning my right to stand at my mate’s side. They’d even gotten the council to overturn the law after demonstrating I wouldn’t be a threat to the packs—that I was, in fact, an asset to them all.

It had seemed almost too good to be true. But that didn’t mean everyone was happy with it. I was particularly uneasy about facing Sydnee’s father, who had been the most vocal about how the Contention had gone down. Understandably, since he’d lost his daughter, but that didn’t make it any easier.

“What they say doesn’t matter now. The council voted. We’ll all present a united front. In time, everyone will come to see just how perfect you are for my son.” She smiled warmly, and my anxiety eased. Kessa always had that effect on me. In the short time I’d gotten to know her, I’d come to think of her as a mother figure, something that meant more to me than she’d ever know.

“That’s a fact,” Holden said, moving away from his father and Garrett to stand at my side. He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me in for a kiss. The sharp taste of whiskey lingered on his lips, and for a moment, I forgot we had an audience until someone cleared their throat.

I pulled away, biting my lip in embarrassment, but everyone was smiling at us. Those closest to us couldn’t be happier that we’d found each other.

“I’d like to make a toast to my future bride,” Holden said, lifting his glass. “To true love, and the woman who made me see that rules are made to

be broken.”

Garrett laughed, even as Bridger leveled an exasperated look at his son.

Holden grinned. “Kidding, Father. Though you have to admit, some of our laws were long overdue for an update. Seriously, though, this is just the beginning of all the good to come. We have a bright future ahead of us.”

He looked down at me, his eyes full of adoration. Not for the first time, I wanted to pinch myself just to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. So much had changed for me in such a short amount of time. But I wouldn’t have it any other way. I felt it deep in my bones—this was where I was meant to be. And if I had to do it all again to get to this point, I would.

The conversation shifted to what fun the night would be, and my nerves settled a bit. As long as I had Holden by my side, I could face anything that came my way.

Just before it was time for us to go down to the ballroom, Holden pulled me into a private room. “You seem to be holding up okay. You know you have nothing to fear from these alphas, right?”

I nodded. “I do. But I just worry sometimes because I fear it’s going to be an uphill battle for everyone to truly accept us.”

“I don’t need everyone to accept us, Kayden. I have you, and that’s all that truly matters. Besides, how boring would it be not to have any more battles to fight?”

It was true. There would always be things we had to face. The difference now was that we would face them together.

“And we can always make our own rules as we go,” he said, pulling me close, brushing his lips over mine. “It’s all part of the adventure.”

I leaned into his embrace, ready for that adventure to begin. “I love you,” I murmured, kissing him again.

“And I love you.” He laced his fingers through mine as we walked toward the door. “Now, let’s show everyone exactly why we’re better together.”

“Together,” I repeated, my heart full of love for my mate. Tonight was only the first step. Our future was bright, and it began now.

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When he's not busy being annoyed at me, Garrett is flirting with me. With my professional reputation at stake, I beg him to take the competition seriously.

No matter how intense the spark is between us, we can never be together. Soon he'll be choosing a mate, and it won't be me. And if he keeps this up, it won't just be my job on the line, but my heart as well...

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FATED TO THE ALPHA BACHELOR

THE MATING GAME: BOOK 1

Skye Wilson

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