




PACK BOUND

A BLISSFUL
OMEGEVERSE
NOVEL

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHORS
KATE KING JESSA WILDER

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Pack Bound: A Blissful Omegaverse Prequel Novel

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To the readers who turn the page and ask “Oh...am I attracted to this? No...
Am I?”

Authors' Note

We understand that after reading Pack Origin, many of you already have high expectations for the kind of character that Bliss has become over the last four years. We are often asked if Bliss will be a strong, independent character. Is she going to give the boys hell? Is she anything like Raegan from the Gentlemen?

To this we say, Bliss is not strong yet.

The complexity of Bliss's character arc is the main reason that Pack Bound had to be split into two books. It is important to us that Bliss be a strong protagonist, but we also felt we needed to give her enough time to get there naturally.

We hope you will trust her and us enough to watch her grow. Bliss will never be Raegan, but she is on her own path.

Trigger Warning

If you are a seasoned dark romance reader, or even a casual dark romance reader, this book likely won't phase you. Much of the story is light in tone and would fall in the realm of sweet omegaverse. However, please be aware that the underlying world and themes of this story are dark. They will remain dark throughout, and the subject matter may be upsetting for some.

CW: Dub-con, Sex Trafficking, Non-Consensual Drug Use, Multiple references to violent sexual assault and physical abuse by a domestic partner (not within the harem), Kidnapping and Imprisonment, PTSD, Depression, Violence, Murder. One of the characters cuts their own arm. We are including this as a potential trigger for self harm.

Tags: Omegaverse, Reverse Harem, Rejected Mates, Childhood Friends, MMFMM, M/M, Knotting, DVP, Stretching, Heat shenanigans, Touch Her and Literally Die.

What is Omegaverse?

The Omegaverse (or A/B/O dynamics) is a speculative alternate reality where humans live in a wolf-like hierarchical social system, and take on some lycan traits such as scenting pheromones, mating for life and forming packs. People are unsure of their designation until they transition to either an alpha, beta, or omega.

The alphas tend to be larger, more athletic and more aggressive than regular humans. They have the most prominent animal instincts, and are the elite of society. Omegas are rare and physically delicate. They are the perfect biological mates to alphas, and the only ones who can have alpha or omega children. Betas are the most common designation and are essentially average humans.

There is no magic in this book. While the alphas, betas and omegas may have some animalistic instincts and practices, they are not shifters or werewolves.

Pack Bound

A BLISSFUL OMEGAVERSE NOVEL

KATE KING & JESSA WILDER

CHAPTER 1

Bliss

The omega let out a loud moan as her alpha wrapped his hand around her throat, driving into her from behind.

I ducked my head and let my blonde hair fall in a curtain against my desk, shielding me from the show. Still, it was impossible to ignore the noise and the heavy scent of pheromones. A heady mixture of honey and wool.

I picked up my pen and doodled a heart on the corner of my notebook. My notes were awful—rushed and unfinished. I'd scribbled "Omega Heat Cycle: Practical" at the top of the page next to the date and made a few rushed bullet points before giving up.

The omega mewed, and I scratched out a couple of uneven stars around the heart.

Flora leaned over from the desk next to me, digging her long, manicured nails into my forearm. "Oh my God," she hissed, half-excited, half-horrified. "Serious question. Do you think they get paid for this?"

"I doubt it," I said through my teeth, keeping a benign smile plastered on my face in case anyone was looking. "No alpha with a mate would need the money. I assume they're just into it."

As if on cue, the alpha growled his approval of whatever the omega had just done.

Flora tossed her long, dark hair over one shoulder and glanced down at my paper. She scanned over my notes and snorted a laugh. "I thought you, of all

people would be paying attention.”

I shifted slightly so my back was to the instructor standing in the corner and rolled my eyes at my friend. “What, are we supposed to draw a diagram?”

It was a semi-rhetorical question. A couple of months ago, we sat through a memorable class where we *were* supposed to draw diagrams. I’d lost points on that assignment because my knot picture came out looking more like an inverted lollipop, and I hadn’t been in the mood to fix it. Flora giggled, clearly thinking of the same incident.

In the corner, our instructor, Mrs. Charlemagne, coughed. *Shit*. I sat up straight again, shifting my gaze back to the couple in the center of the round lecture hall.

The alpha and omega stood in the middle of the coliseum-style classroom, lit by a single spotlight. He had her bent over a desk, her cheek pressed hard into the polished wooden surface. Even at this distance, the red bite marks on her neck stood out against her pale skin. Some new, some scarred and healed over.

The lecture hall could hold several hundred students, but there were only twenty of us here today. Every omega sitting spread out across the dim room was close to graduating and participating in the Agora Ceremony.

A girl in the row in front of us raised her hand. “Will we get pregnant every heat cycle?”

The couple didn’t stop—they either couldn’t hear or weren’t bothered by her question.

Our teacher smiled brightly, like she’d just won the grand prize at the annual student/faculty bake-off. All the teachers loved pregnancy questions. “Likely not during your first heat, but it’s possible.”

Beside me, Flora pretended to gag. I shot her a warning glance. She was going to get us in so much trouble.

The alpha groaned and moved faster, completely losing control and rutting against his omega. Some of the girls in the front row picked up their pens, scribbling quick notes with clear academic interest. I sighed, crossed out my

doodles, and wrote, “*Alpha rut. Brought on only by omega heat. Both parties are controlled by hormones and unable to use any cognitive reasoning until heat subsides,*” near the top of my paper. Just to look like I was doing something.

“Who do you think they are?” Flora whispered.

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t recognize her. She must have graduated before we got here, so she’s got to be at least four years older than us,” she mused. “He’s hot though.”

“Shhh,” I hissed nervously. “You’re not supposed to think that.”

“Right.” Flora ran a hand through her hair, glancing around to see if anyone had heard her mistake. “I knew that.”

The alpha pulled out of the omega, flipped her over on the desk, and thrust back in, locking inside her.

He licked her neck where some of the old bite marks were, and my chest seized. The sex didn’t bother me—we watched it all the time—but I hated this part.

“Mine,” he said against her neck, as though they were the only ones in the room. “You’re perfect. My good girl.”

Seeing mates happy together always reminded me of how I would never truly have that. *It’s not fair.*

Flora reached over and patted my thigh under the desk in a subtle show of solidarity. “Maybe it won’t go on that long this time,” she whispered.

I grunted, shaking my head. “When has an alpha ever knotted for less than half an hour? I bet we’re not getting out of here before 4:00.”

Flora muttered a noncommittal agreement as the omega moaned incoherently at her alpha. The girls in the front row hurried to copy down whatever nonsense the omega was saying. I groaned, not even bothering to hide my annoyance.

When the couple finally left and the lights turned back on, I let out a sigh of relief. At least we only had this class once a week.

Flora stood and tugged on the neck of her sweater. “God, it’s hot in here.”

It wasn’t, but I nodded, moving to follow her out of the lecture hall.

“Omegas Bliss and Flora,” Mrs. Charlemagne called after us. “Please stay.”

My heart sank. What now?

I didn’t dare look at Flora as we made our way to the front of the room. Mrs. Charlemagne’s eyes bored a hole in me as I walked, reminding me a little of the woman who ran the group home I grew up in. Even though I was an adult now, there were always some older adults who had a way of making you feel small.

“Chatty today?” Mrs. Charlemagne asked.

“No,” Flora said bluntly, at the same moment as I said, “Sorry.”

I glanced at Flora. She’d thrown hair over her shoulder and was making direct eye contact with the teacher—not very omega of her. My stomach churned like I’d eaten a live snake.

“Well, since you two don’t seem to need any more lessons.” The teacher clicked her tongue against her teeth. “You can help guide someone else. A new girl came in this morning. She’s fourteen, from Houston. She’s down at the headmistress’ office now.”

I pursed my lips. Fourteen was young. Not unheard of, but still young to arrive at the Institute. That poor girl probably knew nothing, and now she’d be here for seven years before she got out. Not that “out” was a great alternative.

“Was she a retrieval or a rescue?” Flora asked.

Mrs. Charlemagne raised an eyebrow at the directness of Flora’s question, but answered anyway. “I don’t know. The sooner you go down there, the sooner you’ll find out.”

I sucked on my tongue, holding in a response. Asking questions in this place never got you anywhere, anyway. At least she wasn't punishing us.

Flora and I shuffled down the long, dimly lit hall toward the main office. Our footsteps echoed off the wall and vaulted ceiling, and I hugged my bag to my chest like a shield. New girls entering the Institute always brought back terrible memories.

"So, what do you think?" Flora kept her voice low. "Rescue or retrieval?"

"No idea," I whispered back. "Mrs. Charlemagne is right, I guess. We'll find out in a minute."

"Imagine not telling us. What the hell? If she's a rescue, who knows what just happened?"

I swallowed thickly. This was why I didn't like it when new girls arrived at the Institute. I'd been a rescue. Flora was a retrieval. We'd had very different experiences on our first day at the Institute. "If she's a rescue, it's fine. We'll figure it out. We have before."

We stopped in front of an oak-paneled door, and I paused to make sure my sweater was buttoned correctly—all I needed was to get a lecture from the headmistress about appropriate appearance.

Flora did the same. "I need to order new skirts," she muttered, trying to smooth her uniform in the back. "I swear to God, my ass is growing by the day."

I snorted—I appreciated her light change of topic. I bent to look at her skirt. It was a little short, but it honestly looked better that way. "Don't let them hear you say 'ass.'"

She rolled her eyes. "Right. Bend over for your government-assigned alpha, but don't say 'ass.' Fucking hypocrites, I can't."

I choked, somewhere between a laugh and a cough. She was absolutely right, of course. The system, and the Institute as a whole, was messed up. My situation was different from all the other omegas, though. No matter how much I hated the Institute, I had no choice but to make the best of the way things were. Graduating from the Institute was the only way to get revenge

on the boys who'd put me here, and that was all that kept me going in the last four years.

"You can borrow my skirts if you want," I offered, bypassing Flora's comment. "I'm a twelve."

She scanned my hips, comparing us. "Yeah, alright. Thanks."

Muffled voices sounded from beyond the office door, and Flora and I glanced at each other. My stomach sank a fraction lower. "We should go, I guess."

Flora pushed her long chestnut hair behind her ears. "I'm getting too jaded for this shit." She raised her right hand and knocked softly.

"Come in."

The door creaked, brushing along the thick carpet, and we stepped inside. The room was already full. Headmistress Omega DuPont sat behind a large desk, her graying hair pulled into a severe bun. In front of her were two women.

No, I corrected myself as I leaned around Flora to get a better look. *A woman and a girl.* I'd sat in that girl's chair myself four years ago, right after my world had come crashing down around me. It felt like another life.

"Good afternoon, Omegas," said Headmistress Omega DuPont without looking up.

"Good afternoon," Flora and I replied in unison.

The headmistress was one of the few actual omegas working at the Omega Institute. Most of the staff and instructors were betas, partly because omegas were so rare, and partly because it was safer overall for unbonded Omegas to only come into contact with betas. Despite the cocktail of hormone and scent blocker we all took daily, the Institute wasn't taking any chances with our safety.

My eyes darted to the blonde beta woman sitting across from the desk. I knew her, or at least, I'd met her before. Every omega at the Institute had. Sarah Miller was in charge of rescues and retrievals.

For most omegas—the ones who had grown up with alpha and omega parents—that meant simply calling the Institute when the girl reached the age of sixteen. Sarah arrived on their doorstep and took the girl to live at the Institute until she was twenty-one, when she would be mated. For some omegas, like me, things were a little more complicated.

“Will that be all, Headmistress?” Sarah asked. “Or do you need me to stay?”

“No, Sarah, the ladies and I will take it from here.”

Sarah rose and took a step toward the door, only to realize Flora and I were blocking her way. She smiled at me. “It’s good to see you, Omega Bliss. It’s been a long time.”

“Four years,” I said flatly. Flora elbowed me. I’d sounded rude. I cleared my throat. “I mean, yes. Sorry. It has been a long time. How are you?”

Sarah smiled graciously, glossing over my mistake. Would the headmistress be as gracious?

“I remember your rescue so vividly. It’s one of our best success stories.”

My smile was brittle. “Thank you. I agree, of course.”

The new girl swiveled around in her chair, her head tilting to the side as she stared at me. She was tan, with dark curls and large, light blue eyes that made her look even younger than she already was. My heart broke for her, just like it did for all the new girls.

“We rescued Omega Bliss late in life,” Sarah explained to the girl.

“Rescued late in life” was a polite way to say, “was betrayed by the boys who were supposed to love me and was sent here against my will.” Granted, Sarah didn’t know that. She honestly believed in what she was doing; you could see it in the zealous gleam in her eye.

“I was seventeen when I came to live here,” I clarified, forcing a smile.

“Exactly, extremely late,” the headmistress said as though I weren’t here. “It was nearly a disaster. She didn’t know she was an omega. We rescued her just before four teenage criminals forced her to mate with them. Now, thanks to the Institute, she’ll have a wonderful future.”

My heart pounded, and my breath came faster. No matter how much I wished otherwise, I thought about my former pack constantly. *No. Not mine. Not anymore.*

“Isn’t that right, Omega Bliss?” Sarah asked.

It was impossible not to think of them, like white noise in the back of my mind at all times that occasionally got louder at times of stress. It had been that way since almost the second I was separated from them four years ago. But I could count on one hand the number of times anyone had brought them up to me. I wasn’t prepared for this.

My heart screamed. A physical, stabbing sensation, like an ice pick through my chest. “Yes.” I smiled through the lie. “That’s exactly what happened.”

Flora watched me out of the corner of her eye as we led the new girl around campus. Her wide brown eyes screamed, “*Are you okay? Do we need to ditch the kid and get out of here?*”

It was as though she was afraid I was going to crack and start crying right in the middle of the tour. She wasn’t far off.

Seeing Sarah and having her bring up my “rescue” wasn’t how I’d planned to spend my Tuesday morning. It was putting me on edge. Then again, everything was putting me on edge the closer we got to graduation.

Graduation meant taking part in the annual Agora and mating one of the country’s most influential alphas. I’d always known that was the endgame of my time here—I’d even relished it. The only thing that kept me sane sometimes was knowing that the pack who hadn’t wanted me would one day see me on TV or in the tabloids, mated to someone else. The closer we got though, the more real everything became.

I frowned, rubbing my chest where the incessant throbbing refused to leave me alone. It had been worse lately, like my body was turning on me. Staging a protest against my changing allegiance. *As though I have a choice.*

I ignored the throbbing and swallowed. The back of my throat tasted like lemon and pepper—a phantom sensation from across the country. That wasn't good.

“That’s the library.” I pointed to a large brick building surrounded by flowering trees. “And over there are some more dorms, but they’re empty right now. The Institute is only at twenty-five percent capacity because there are so few omegas left in the world.”

The new girl—Eden—nodded, keeping her eyes fixed on the ground. We’d started outside, showing her the dorm buildings, the pond, and the meditation gazebo. The grounds were usually less jarring for rescues. Inside, where everything was soft, dark, and silent, could be a lot.

“That’s the recreation field where we do morning yoga,” Flora said. “If you pretend to be sick to get out of yoga, they will make you drink this horrific root infusion, so I don’t recommend it.”

“They took my phone when I got here,” Eden said, clearly not paying attention to us at all. “How do I call my friends?”

Flora and I glanced at each other. This culture shock was a tricky one for the new girls, especially the rescues.

Everyone in the country—the world, even—grew up knowing about the Omega Institute. Ever since the omega population started dwindling, the government had stepped in, theoretically for the omegas’ protection. They brought girls to the Institute before their first heat, trained us to be good wives and mothers, then mated us to alphas who could protect us. I could see why the idea made sense to most people.

The retrievals—who knew they were likely omegas from birth—had been preparing to come to the Institute their whole lives. They had alpha and omega parents and knew what to expect. The rescues had no idea what they were until they began pre-transition. All they knew of the Institute was what they’d seen on TV, and the propaganda didn’t align with reality.

“You don’t,” I said, probably too bluntly. “Call your friends.”

Eden blinked at me with wide, horrified eyes. “What? But they won’t know where I went.”

“There’s a landline. You can call your parents on Sundays if you want. No cell phones, no internet, and mail is monitored.”

“What, is this jail or something?” Eden grumbled, pushing her hair behind her ears.

“Yes,” Flora snapped.

“No,” I said quickly, stepping on Flora’s foot. I tried to give the girl a soothing smile. “Eden, do you understand what’s happening?”

“I’m going to be an omega,” she said.

“You are an omega,” Flora corrected. She looked her over and amended, “Pre-transition, probably.”

Eden gave us a scathing look, like we were idiots. I almost smiled. I was just as angry my first day here, and it was surreal to see someone with normal, unsuppressed emotions. They probably hadn’t gotten her on blockers yet, either because there wasn’t time or because she was so young.

“Look.” Flora crossed her arms. “If you’d been left alone in the wild, you would have transitioned, but you’re here, so they’re going to put you on blockers.”

“I’m from Houston.” She glanced between us, clearly unsure if we knew where that was. “It’s not wild.”

I coughed on a laugh. She reminded me a little of...no one. My smile slipped. “Figuratively,” I said. “She means that if you hadn’t been picked up by the Institute, you would have transitioned into an omega around the age of seventeen when you went into your first heat. Maybe sooner if you knew any alphas.”

It was Flora’s turn to step on my foot. That wasn’t the kind of thing you just said out loud.

There were so few omegas left in the world that matings were hardly ever natural anymore. Back in the days when there were almost as many omegas as alphas, an omega’s transition would be triggered by her pack. Now, they kept us on blockers and artificially induced heat as soon as we were mated, to

ensure that packs didn't form and only wealthy alphas had children. Keep the rich, rich.

You couldn't just say that though, even if it was true. We weren't supposed to talk about teenage omegas triggering their heats with teenage alphas. That was a big no-no in the eyes of the Institute, and exactly what I'd been allegedly rescued from.

Unfortunately, Eden was clearly smart, and she was listening now. "Is what they said in the office true?"

My heartbeat sped up, and I clenched my fists in my jacket pockets. "Which part?"

"They found you about to go into heat and saved you from mating by force?"

I gritted my teeth, unable to answer. That part wasn't true. Well, I had been about to go into heat, but my mating wouldn't have been forced. They'd been my best friends.

They don't want you. They didn't want you. Don't think about them.

"All matings are forced," Flora said. "Just because the alpha is rich doesn't change the fact that you didn't choose him."

"Flora," I hissed. "You're going to freak her out. Er, sorry. *Upset her balance*. Let's go look at the vegetable garden."

I led the way past the huge brick school building and under an ivy-covered stone arch toward a vast, fenced-in garden. Eden wrinkled her nose, unimpressed. I couldn't blame her.

If she hadn't transitioned yet and wasn't on any hormone suppressants, she wasn't any different from a beta. A fourteen-year-old beta, who had just been ripped away from her family and told she couldn't see her friends anymore. The soothing style of the Omega Institute wouldn't have any effect on her yet.

It didn't have much effect on me either, but that was a separate problem.

I forced another smile, already annoyed with myself for playing along with this ridiculous charade, and gestured toward a patch of flowers. "Why don't

you try sitting in the sun? Most of the girls find it really soothing.”

If I heard the word “soothing” again today, I was going to scream.

Eden stared at me, clearly trying to decide if I was joking. Finally, she shrugged and wandered away to sit in the center of a patch of flowering clover. I watched her shredding the petals with a grim satisfaction.

“You’re better at this tour shit than me,” Flora muttered.

“Only because you’re tonguing your suppressants,” I muttered, too low for Eden to hear. “Don’t say ‘shit.’ Who knows who’s out here.”

Flora scoffed, pretending to be offended. She put on a high-pitched, fake Southern accent. “My word, Omega Bliss, you wound me. I would never. It is our duty to our country to stay pure and suppressed until mating.”

“Yeah, yeah. Keep your voice down, Scarlett O’Hara.”

Flora had been my roommate since the day I moved into the Institute. The headmistress thought it would be a good match since we were from the same town growing up. “A fortunate coincidence,” she’d said. We hadn’t been friends back home, but now I couldn’t imagine a day without her. I would never turn her in, but we both knew she hadn’t taken her hormone blockers regularly in months. Her comment about her ass growing wasn’t figurative, and her emotions had come back tenfold—the other day, she had nearly sworn in front of an instructor.

“I just wanted to know what it was like for you,” Flora muttered.

My blood ran cold, and I glanced around, suddenly panicked that someone would hear us. I smoothed my hands over my hips—wider than the rest of the girls here. “Mine still work, just not that well.”

“I know. I know what those guys did to you was shitty, but in a way, there’s a silver lining, right? At least you can think straight because you’re technically bonded—”

“Shut up! Don’t say that word out loud,” I snapped, panicked. I completely forgot not to swear. I took a deep breath. “Sorry.” I threw Flora an apologetic look. “I just mean, there’s nothing lucky about it. I’d rather be a mindless,

hormone-suppressed zombie than have to feel them with me all the time.”

“I know.” She shook her head. “That was a dumb thing to say.”

I grimaced. It was, but I wouldn’t rub it in. Partly because I wanted to change the subject. Two mentions of the guys in one day was practically my hell on earth.

I grew up on the other side of the country in a foster home specializing in difficult placements. My four best friends and I were a pack before we had any understanding of what that meant. Rafe, Ares, Killian, and Nox were alphas, but they took care of me even when they thought I was a beta. When I was seventeen, I began my transition into an omega, and everything changed.

For a moment when I’d started my transition, I believed we were going to become a real pack. It felt like they loved me as much as I loved them, but I should have known it wasn’t real. Nothing ever turned out that well in my life.

My pulse doubled, and I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth. They didn’t want me. A lifetime of friendship meant nothing when faced with real-life decisions, and they called the Institute and sent me away.

At least I could thank them for wiping away the naive girl I was. Back then, my entire life—my personality, my interests, all my time—had revolved around them.

They were the whole world, and I was a satellite. Until one day, the world stopped turning.

And then, somehow, I woke up the next day and kept going.

I still didn’t know why they called the Institute, but I could take a guess. It was illegal to mate an omega outside of a government-approved union. If we became a pack, we would have instantly become criminals. Our lives would have narrowed to the kind of future you have if you’re always on the run—gangs and violence. We never would have gotten out of the shitty town we grew up in.

My teeth pierced my lip, and the salty tang of blood filled my mouth. It hurt less than the constant pain in my chest that still refused to go away, even after all these years.

My boys had chosen their future over me, but they hadn't done it fast enough. By the time Sarah arrived to "rescue" me, it was already too late.

We weren't fully mated because none of them had bitten me and I never went into heat, but they'd triggered my transition. Just like the omegas and their packs a hundred years ago, we were bound. I could still feel them with me sometimes, even with an entire country between us.

I glanced over to where Eden was still shredding flowers and forced a practiced smile back onto my face. "Come on," I told Flora. "If we don't go inside soon, they'll think she escaped."

"Yeah, alright." Flora still looked wary, but she changed the subject. "Who do you think they'll make do tours after we're gone?"

I shrugged. I didn't really care. As far as graduation went, I was single-minded.

I would graduate. I'd allow myself to be mated to someone new, and I would integrate into omega society. The first time my former pack saw me after all these years, it would be when my mating was announced in the press.

I smiled grimly. Next week, for the first time, I would be glad of the weird bond that forced us to share feelings sometimes. Wherever they were, whatever they were doing, I hoped that when I mated a new alpha, my former pack would feel a fraction of the rejection I'd felt when they abandoned me.

CHAPTER 2

Rafe

Air rushed from my lungs on a sharp exhale when Ares' fist collided with my kidney. Motherfucker, he was fast.

“That all you got, boss?” He hissed the last word out like an insult as he pulled back and circled me.

Tension tightened my skin and a rumble formed low in my chest, echoing in the warehouse we'd been living in for the last four years. I was seconds away from losing control and pounding Ares into the red makeshift MMA mat. The problem was, the sick fuck would love that.

The fighting ring, if you could call a few mats thrown together on the floor a ring, was one of the first things we set up when the four of us moved here after... I rubbed the slice of pain from my chest, pushing the intrusive thoughts down. When everything happened, we knew we'd need to blow off steam without outright killing each other. What Ares wanted was different. He didn't want to burn off energy. No, Ares fought to forget.

I pivoted, keeping him in sight, taking deep, calming breaths. His moon-white hair stuck to his forehead, and a cut on his brow leaked red down into his pale blue eye and onto his tattooed chest. The shadows on his sharp jaw stood in stark contrast, giving him a look of being carved from stone. He'd become cold, *ruthless* over the past four years. The world we lived in and the constant ache of our missing bond had changed him beyond recognition.

I dodged Ares' next attack, and his narrowed gaze met mine head-on. He growled low in his throat as he came for me again. “Stop analyzing me,

asshole, and fucking fight me.”

I swung out of his way. “Stop making it so easy to read you. You aren’t looking for a fight.”

I felt the all-too-familiar tug buried deep in my gut and stumbled, leaving myself open. A hint of jasmine and spice filled my mind, and my heart burned in its cage. *Bliss.*

It was impossible not to worry when Bliss’ emotions were so high that we could feel her through our bond. Impossible not to worry what could be causing that.

Ares must have felt it too because he jerked back, eyes wide on mine, before shutting down any signs of emotion. His usually pale face reddened before he slammed a fist into my side, purposely aiming for the same kidney he’d just hit. “I’m going to fucking kill you.”

The ammonia scent of his lie burned my nose before pain rioted up my side and down my hip. Anger I’d been holding back boiled over, and I slammed my fist into his jaw. The loud crack split the open warehouse.

Ares’ head snapped back with the force, and he staggered a few feet before righting himself. The pupils of his cool blue eyes widened until only the very edges were rimmed with color. He grinned, teeth coated in blood. “That’s better.”

Fuck. This is what I get for engaging.

He lunged for my knees, trying to take me down, but I slammed my elbow into the side of his head instead. He collapsed on the mat, a red smile briefly splashed across his face, before coming at me again. He staggered to one side, unable to keep his balance as he took another throw at me.

I took a step back and held up my hands. “Enough. I’m not playing into your shit.”

Ares spit blood at my feet. “Fuck you.”

“Oi! Cut the shit.” Killian’s voice cut through the room. “Not really the time to be trying to kill each other.”

Killian leaned against the doorframe, looking like an urban lumberjack wearing his usual plaid shirt over a plain T-shirt and jeans. He had a hat pulled low over his light amber eyes, and his curly hair brushed against his collar.

Ares' eyes turned on Killian. "Stay out of it."

Kill grinned. "Are you trying to fight me, too?"

Kill showing up to stop us didn't surprise me. He'd been the peacekeeper of our pack since we were in the group home together. Four young alphas living in close quarters was a recipe for disaster, but between him and Bliss, they'd managed to keep us from outright killing each other. Without Bliss, it had all fallen to him. Judging from the blood pooling down Ares' face, he wasn't doing that well on his own.

Ares didn't hesitate to take advantage of my distraction. I dropped to my knees with the force of his blow, my head ringing like a bell.

Killian crossed the warehouse in three strides and jumped between us before Ares could do anything to push things further. "Alright, you're done. Take a shower."

"You act like it doesn't fucking bother you." Ares spit the words like a weapon.

The growl that emanated from Killian filled the space as he crowded Ares, his larger frame pushing him backward. His hat covered his eyes, hiding his darkening stare as he gestured around the warehouse filled with crates of illegal goods. "Are you kidding me? As if we haven't all sold our souls to get her back?"

We'd been working our way up the Alpha Lupi ranks, finally taking over a few years ago, with the sole purpose of getting Bliss back. The shit we had to do to get where we were now would haunt the fuck out of me. Enough blood coated my hands that they'd never be clean. But we'd all do it again in a heartbeat.

We'd been a pack. Promised each other we'd stay that way, and the second she presented as an omega, we'd sold her out to the Institute under the misguided bullshit assumption we were protecting her. Not before scent

binding though. No, we couldn't just leave her to live her life. We had to tie her to us forever.

Killian grabbed the back of Ares' neck and pulled his forehead to his own. The veins in his arms pulled taut, straining to keep Ares in place. "I've been on your side this entire fucking time. Regretted everything from the second the Institute car rolled up. Fuck you if you're trying to take your shit out on us when we're so close to getting her back."

Ares met Killian's gaze and then looked away, breaking his hold on him.

I cleared my throat and stepped closer. "We'll have her back in a few days."

Ares' sharp gaze bore into mine, and his lips tipped up in the corner in a sneer. "Then what? You think she's going to come running into your arms after what we've done?"

I stood silent, heart pounding against my ribs. The look of betrayal she wore as the Institute dragged her from us pierced my heart. Bond or not, Bliss had every reason not to trust us.

Ares skirted around Killian and stood so close, the toes of his black shoes touched mine. His pale blue eyes narrowed as he hissed, "And when she tells us to fuck off? Are we going to force her to stay with us?"

A growl rumbled through my chest as anger pulsed through my veins. Every instinct screamed at me that yes, that was exactly what'd we do.

We were boys when we'd let her get away. Unsure of who we were or what we could do, willing to give up the best thing to ever happen to us to keep her safe and happy. But that was all over now.

No, when we finally got her back, we'd lock her the fuck away. No chance of her escaping. She was ours to protect, possess, fucking devour.

Ares stilled, brows pinched as he scanned my face. "Maybe she's better off without us."

He grabbed his towel, wiping the blood off his face as he left, slamming the door behind him.

Killian watched Ares leave before he turned to me, lifting his hat and raking his fingers through his hair, tugging at the ends. He attempted a smile. "Ignore him. He'll get over it when Bliss gets back."

I grunted something like an agreement, but I couldn't help worrying that Ares had a point.

Bliss wasn't just going to come with us. That was why we couldn't give her a choice. Alphas weren't meant to be apart from their omegas. And no amount of money would change the fact that she was ours.

One more job and we'd have more than enough to win her back.

"Ow," I hissed at the sharp sting in my brow as Nox placed the last stitch where Ares had sucker punched me. "Hurry the fuck up."

Nox shifted the needle and thread he was holding to his other hand, tying off another stitch. "Calm down. I'm almost finished."

I sat at one of the kitchen stools, Nox hovering over me as he stitched up my face. The sleeves of his crisp white dress shirt were rolled above his elbows, and his black vest was folded on the nearby chair. His tailored appearance was offset by his shaved red hair and the black-and-silver piercings that ran up one ear.

My brows rose only to shoot more pain where the new stitches tugged. "Goddamnit!"

He pushed his thick black glasses up the bridge of his nose, rolling his eyes. "Don't be such a pussy."

"Fuck you."

Now I sounded like Ares.

I pushed Nox back and stood, steadying myself on the edge of our marble kitchen island. The warehouse had changed a lot since we took over Alpha Lupi. There was still a wide-open loading dock, where we stored and moved

our product, but we'd renovated a twenty-five by one-hundred-foot section of the east side to function as an apartment.

I crossed to our double-wide industrial-sized fridge and grabbed a bottle of water, finishing it in a few sips. With four alphas over two hundred pounds each living in close quarters, our grocery bills were massive.

I turned, leaning my back against the cabinets, and tried to picture what Bliss would think when she finally got here. We'd hired an architect to eliminate the icy feeling of the warehouse, instead changing it to a calm, welcoming home. Even though it had an open-concept kitchen and living room, the long narrow structure of the apartment had the entire place feeling like a cocoon.

We'd researched the shit out of omega living preferences and decorated with neutral tones and oversize furniture to create a cozy environment. There were floor-to-ceiling windows on one side dressed with different sheerness of drapery that could darken the room to varying degrees, the last being pitch-black. From where I stood in the kitchen, I could just make out the rooms located down the hall. My eyes stilled on the door between our rooms.

Nox's burnt-copper brows pulled together. "Do you think Bliss will like it?"

I huffed out a breath—sometimes Nox was like a damn mind reader. "I fucking hope so."

Nox had always been the smartest of us all, but his foundation was shaken after we'd realized our mistake in sending Bliss away. He'd agreed the Institute was the safest place for her based on basic facts. We were young, poor alphas with no influence and no contacts. On top of that, we were tangled more than we'd like in the gang world. We had no business taking care of an omega. Especially one as precious as Bliss.

When we lost her, something broke in Nox. The guilt he felt led him to being a shell of himself.

Within minutes of the Institute driving away with our girl, we'd erupted into a fight. The ache of the distancing bond felt like it would tear me apart. I blamed them; I blamed myself. Fuck, I blamed the world for losing her.

We'd taken off in different directions and put as much space between us, not wanting the support of our pack if Bliss wasn't with us.

In the end, our scent bond dragged us back together, each of us showing up back at the warehouse where we'd been with her last.

Ares was the last to show, several months after the rest of us, looking pissed that he was even there.

Nox's face lost any remaining color it had. "We may get her back, but she'll still despise us for what we did. You have to understand that."

My jaw clenched, and it took several moments before I could answer him. "I know."

CHAPTER 3

Bliss

The Omega Institute prided itself on providing a warm and comforting environment for omegas. Our dorm rooms, unironically called “nests,” were just as small, dark, and quiet as everywhere else in the Institute. It was an architectural marvel, really, to have such large buildings with such tiny rooms.

Flora and I shared a nest on the fourth floor of the only dorm building currently in use. At the moment, the Institute was home to 112 omegas from all over the United States. Now, 113 since Eden had arrived. It was a disturbingly small number when you considered that there was only one Institute in the country, and attendance was mandatory.

“You were right,” Flora said, twisting in front of the mirror in the corner of our room. “Your skirt does fit better.”

“Good,” I said, trying to force a note of enthusiasm into my voice. I didn’t want to get out of bed this morning, but as I’d learned several times over, pretending to be sick was worse than just going to class.

I rolled over on my plush bed and watched her modeling one of my sweaters. We wouldn’t have to wear the uniforms much longer, anyway.

“Ow!” My fingers spasmed, pain shooting through my hand, disembodied and unbidden.

“What?” Flora spun around, her eyebrows pulled together.

“Nothing.” I swung my legs out of my bed, ignoring my throbbing knuckles. I didn’t want to worry her.

I pinched my leg. Hard. I hoped someone felt it.

I used the edge of my fork to push my scrambled eggs into three tiny, even piles along the edge of my plate. Each pile had to be exactly the same size, with only the round lumps showing on the top. Then, I moved on to the sausage. How even could I make the slices? I cut each link into twelve first, and if the pieces weren’t even, I moved on to twenty-four.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Flora reached across the breakfast table and grabbed my fork out of my hand.

“Hey!”

“Here, eat this.” She shoved a piece of buttered toast into my hand.

I rolled my eyes at her but took a bite, washing it down with a gulp of orange juice. We weren’t allowed to have coffee. “I’m so sick of scrambled eggs and sausages,” I told her honestly.

All our food was carefully monitored to make sure we were getting exactly the right amount of nutrients. I would kill for a soda, or some ice cream, or hell, just anything other than eggs.

Flora assessed my plate with a raised brow. She reached for a sausage sliver and popped it into her mouth. “I feel you. Just imagine all the real food we can eat when we get out of here.”

I frowned. Flora had been oddly calm about our impending graduation lately—or calm for her. I was expecting more of a tantrum, especially since she’d stopped regularly taking her hormone suppressants.

I glanced around our table to make sure that none of the other girls seated near us were paying attention to our conversation. They weren’t.

The nearest girl, Omega Chelsea, wore a benign smile—an evident sign she'd just taken her morning blockers. Two tables over, Eden had a slack look on her face and was staring blankly into a full glass of milk. It was a jarring change from the girl we'd met yesterday.

I sighed. Some days I wished my blockers worked that well, but they never had.

I opened my mouth to ask Flora about her strange acceptance of our graduation but never got the chance.

The doors to the dining room opened, and Headmistress Omega DuPont entered, followed by three tall men in suits. My back stiffened. Beside me, Flora reached over and dug her nails into my thigh. The vinegar scent of her panic hit me like a freight train—I hadn't smelled any emotion so strong in years.

Men rarely entered the Institute. All the instructors were female, and we hadn't had a male omega student the entire time I'd been here. I privately thought all the male omegas were out in the world somewhere, either using blockers or illegally mated.

The only men who came to the Institute were alphas, either for classes, or—

“Excuse me, ladies,” the headmistress called, making a beeline toward where Flora and I sat with the other girls in our age group. “We have some visitors this morning.”

“Good morning,” we all intoned, keeping our eyes down.

I peeked up through my lashes. The two alphas in the back were nearly indistinguishable from each other. That wasn't to say they looked alike—not at all, really—but their scents were similar. Mid-level aggressive and unimpressive. The one in the front, however, made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

He was perhaps forty with sharp bone structure and slick blond hair. His expression was cool, and he smelled like cigars and whiskey. Everything about him said “danger, stay away.”

“These are the ladies who will be in New York at the end of the week for the Agora,” the headmistress explained. “Girls, we are giving a tour to some of the prospective alphas today. Please be on your best behavior.”

Again, there was a quick muttered response. I felt my mouth move, but no words came out. Out of the corner of my eye, the dangerous alpha stepped forward, taking in a deep breath. His eyes zeroed in on Flora and me and froze.

Alphas had an acute sense of smell, and it was geared specifically toward finding an omega. There was no chance this whole group didn't smell *something* off about us.

“They've all been here since before their transition?” the alpha asked, staring at us.

“Oh yes,” the headmistress said, a little coldly. “Some as long as seven years.”

“Hmmm,” he said, not taking his eyes off us.

It was almost an insult, but not quite. Everyone knew omegas had to stay on blockers from the moment they transitioned until they mated. Preferably before they transitioned, just in case. No alpha would want an omega who had been scented before.

Like me.

Flora shook, her nails digging painfully into my leg, her panic palpable. *How long has she been off suppressants?*

If any of them got too close, they would know. They could tell the headmistress, or worse, it could trigger her heat. She'd be scent bound, like me.

Her fear burned my nose. This whole thing was unbearably stupid, but I'd yell at her later.

The tall, dangerous alpha strode around the table, coming to a halt right beside us. My heart beat against my ribs, and I was sure the scent of vinegar was now heavy in the air.

I threw my arm out, knocking my half-full glass of orange juice off the table. Flora shrieked in surprise as it toppled, drenching the front of her sweater and landing in her lap.

“Sorry,” I said dully, keeping my eyes on the table.

The headmistress spluttered in indication. “Omega Bliss. Are you feeling alright?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, I didn’t see the glass.”

Flora jumped to her feet. “Excuse me.”

I didn’t dare watch her as she dashed from the dining hall. The scent of berries with a hint of sour citrus filled my mouth. The alpha had watched the whole scene without comment, and now he was staring at me.

I turned around in my chair to face the alpha, keeping my eyes on his shoes.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Bliss.”

“Do you know what you smell like, Omega Bliss?”

I swallowed, still not looking up from his shoes. “Orange juice.”

His large hand shot out, fingers stretching to wrap around my neck. I bit back a scream.

“Alpha Nero, please do not touch the girls,” the headmistress said quickly.

My muscles went weak with relief.

“If you want Omega Bliss, you can make a note on her auction card. I’m sure the cost will be no concern.”

Any relief I’d felt left me in a woosh, replaced with nausea. I couldn’t breathe. I needed to get outside.

The alpha let his hand drop back to his side. I didn’t have to look at him to know he was smiling. “Fine. Thank you, Headmistress Omega Dupont. I’ll do that.”

After dinner, I didn't return to my nest. Instead, I snuck out the side door and made my way out to the gardens and took a seat under a gnarled apple tree. The sky was clear, illuminated only by a fingernail moon and a thousand tiny stars. For the first time since breakfast, I let out a full breath.

The grounds of the Institute were beautiful, especially at night. No matter what I thought about everything else, I really did like the gardens. For a kid who had grown up in foster care in the city, a sprawling vegetable and flower garden was basically paradise.

I was almost one hundred percent sure I wasn't allowed to be outside on my own, but in four years, no one had ever expressly told me so, and I'd never asked. Even if someone had told me no, tonight I would have risked it.

In an abstract way, mating a new alpha had always seemed like the best revenge. Now, faced with the real thing, that idea came into stark perspective.

Bonding involved sharing your soul. That was the only way to describe what it felt like to constantly feel emotions that didn't belong to me, to know that I was probably projecting my own feelings right back. To constantly feel like a piece of myself was missing and fractured into four.

I had no idea what would happen if I tried to mate another alpha on top of all of that. It was absolutely possible, since my existing bond had never been sealed, but I didn't think it would erase the first bond entirely. In all likelihood, I'd simply become overwhelmed with another person sharing my soul.

I felt fractured now, but soon I'd be lost entirely.

As if triggered by my thoughts of them, pain and frustration trickled through the bond. I screwed my eyes shut, willing the feeling away. I didn't want to feel them. It hurt too much.

I dug my fingers into the grass at my sides, like holding on to the ground would somehow make me less lost. I hated them. I hated them for leaving me and forcing me to choose between impossible options. They'd sentenced me

to life without parole, and there was no way out.

My eyelids cracked open, and I found myself staring up at the Pleiades. It was always the easiest constellation to spot because it was so bright and grouped so close together. *And then, if you look just to the side of that...* My eyes found Orion's Belt, just like Nox and I used to.

Another stab of pain shot through my chest, but this time it wasn't coming from anyone else. This was all me.

As I did every day, I wished my blockers worked. That for just once, I could be numb like everyone else.

CHAPTER 4

Mex

“Hey!” Killian sat beside me on the old, tattered couch, his perpetual grin firmly in place. “I thought I’d find you here.”

He crossed one leg over the other, and one of his pristine white Vans covered the rip in his jeans. He’d let his curly honey-brown hair grow out, giving him a boyish look, only undermined by his enormous size.

I’d been sitting on the warehouse roof for the last hour, attempting to settle my racing mind. There was enough riding on our job tonight to send me over the edge into a verifiable panic attack. I didn’t have the time nor the energy for that shit tonight.

I side-eyed Killian and swallowed another sip of my beer, letting the bitterness linger in the back of my throat. “If you knew I’d be up here, you also know I’d prefer to be left alone.”

Killian ignored that statement. *Consider me shocked.*

“Not the same without her though, is it?”

It was my turn to ignore *him*. Killian already knew my answer. Nothing had ever been the same.

I kept coming up here because it was where I felt the closest to Bliss. If I stayed perfectly still, I could almost feel the ghost of her body wrapped around mine, almost smell her jasmine and chilies scent. It was a sick form of torment I couldn’t seem to resist.

“Do you think she still climbs on the roof when she’s trying to think?” Killian asked.

His question stung, and a low rumble formed in my chest at the memories of all the times we’d sat on the roof of the group home, me making up bullshit stories about the stars to make her laugh.

I huffed out a breath and took another sip, the cool taste refreshing on the humid night. “After what we did to her, she probably cusses me out when she sees my favorite constellation.”

Killian leaned back and took a long sip of his bottle. “Yeah, well, we were fucking idiots.”

There was no arguing with that. We’d done the unthinkable. We’d rejected our bond. At least, that’s what we made her believe.

“You know, there’s a distinct possibility she’d prefer to be with one of the rich and famous alphas, regardless of the scent bond.” I voiced something I’d been mulling over for a while.

I didn’t know what would be worse: Bliss hating us for leaving or her being grateful we’d let her go. It was a choice between Scylla and Charybdis—both options equally likely to kill me.

“You’re listening to Ares again.” Killian tossed his empty bottle in the bin and cracked open a new one. “You’re just getting nervous because we’re so close. Once we have Bliss, you better believe I’ll be fighting tooth and nail to show her what she means to me. She belonged in our pack long before we knew she was an omega, and she’s never stopped being ours. All the bond did was reinforce that.”

I nodded, pushing my glasses back into place on my nose. I envied Killian for his eternal optimism.

Once I pulled my head out of my ass four years ago, it didn’t take long for me to realize just how badly we’d fucked up by sending our girl to the Institute. Since then, we’d been driven by the single-minded focus of getting her back.

Tomorrow was Bliss' ceremony. The details of the annual Agora Gala were a well-guarded secret, and even with all the influence we now held, we couldn't figure out exactly how it worked. The only thing we knew for sure was that it required money. A lot of money.

I'd been sick for days when we found out we should expect to pay over a million to walk out of there with our omega. Apparently, the money went to the Institution to keep the program afloat and to prove you could take care of an omega. I couldn't stop the feeling something didn't add up.

It didn't matter though. We were willing to do whatever it took to get her back.

To make the money for the Agora, we took over Alpha Lupi and saved every cent from every job, stretching a dollar into hundreds of thousands by the time we were twenty. We'd taken contracts we had no business getting involved in and worked with people I wished I'd never met.

We started working with the Institute on the side, providing them with discounts on their blockers for a seat at the table. It damn near killed me not to demand answers about Bliss, but the less they knew about our connection, the better.

Anything and everything, for her.

Still, even after everything, we didn't have enough. That was why it all came down to tonight.

We'd tripled down on our usual amount of product. Once we made the switch, we'd have enough to get Bliss back.

The rooftop door slammed open, and we spun toward it, guns out. Ares glared at us from the entry, moonlight making his already white hair glow, giving him an ethereal look. He was wearing his standard uniform of black leather jacket, white T-shirt, and worn black jeans. "Good fucking God, there you are. We're headed out."

I lowered my gun and rolled my eyes as I pushed up to my feet. The idiot nearly got himself shot. Hell, that could've been his plan—it was hard to tell what he was thinking anymore.

A deep ache formed in my chest. Kill was right—Ares had been getting to me. Did he really believe that Bliss would reject us? Honestly, I believed that half the time. *Not that we ever discuss it.*

I took one more glance at the stars, then brushed by Ares in the doorway. His sleeve skimmed my arm, and I did my best to ignore the shiver sent down my back. No matter how hard we all fought it, we were just as bound to each other as we were to Bliss, both in our history and the scent bond. It just didn't feel right without her here. She was a crack through our foundation, and without her, our fall was inevitable.

All that would end soon. We'd get her back, then spend the rest of our lives proving to her we were meant for each other. That all the shit we'd said in the parking lot to get her to go with the Institute was absolute bullshit.

I took the stairs two at a time, Ares close behind me. Rafe was already in the kitchen, guns and ammunition spread out on the island. His midnight-black hair fell over his face, covering his intense dark eyes. Where I was tall and lean, Rafe had filled out in both height and muscle. His forest-green henley shirt stretched over his shoulders as he pushed his hair back. His sharp gaze met mine. "Where the hell were you?"

"Lay off." Ares snapped his ammunition clip into his gun, making a loud click sound. "We don't have fucking time for this."

I rolled my eyes. It couldn't have been more apparent that Ares didn't care; he just liked arguing with Rafe. I also didn't need his help, but that was beside the point. What we really didn't have time for was another power struggle, but pointing that out would only extend the animosity.

Rafe's brows pulled together before he ran us through the plan. "Forget the amount. Tonight's just another job."

Ares laughed under his breath, setting my teeth on edge.

Rafe placed both his hands on the island and leaned into Ares' space. "You have something to say?"

Ares just lifted one white-blond brow and went back to working on his weapons.

“That’s what I thought.” Rafe stood straight and holstered his guns. “The product is already at the dock. All we have to do is show up, make the exchange, and get the fuck out of there.”

That didn’t mean we weren’t going in armed to the teeth. We couldn’t trust anyone in this business. We didn’t have many friends after the shit we’d done to take over, but people were forced to work with us because we had a monopoly on the hormone blocker and scent markets.

None of it mattered. It was a means to an end. If selling drugs was what it took to get Bliss back, I’d happily do it for the rest of my life. I had no problem selling my soul for her. She already owned it.

Rafe ran his hand through his hair. “In and out, just like normal. After this, we go get our girl.” He looked at Ares. “Don’t fuck this up.”

Ares glared at Rafe. He was unpredictable on a good day, and we all knew it. “You think I don’t want this as much as—”

The front door crashed open, and Wes rushed through. My stomach lurched with dread.

The beta was the only person allowed in our home aside from us, but he shouldn’t be here now. He’d gone to help move the product with the rest of the crew.

The sadness on his face, mixed with the blood splattered on his clothes, stopped my heart and sent my stomach through the floor.

Ares growled and stepped around the kitchen island, pinning Wes to the wall with his forearm. “What the fuck happened?”

When he didn’t immediately respond, Ares slammed him against the wall again as if to pound the information out.

Killian grabbed Ares’ shoulder, pulling him off. “He can’t breathe.”

Ares cut him a sharp look but let the beta slump to the ground, gasping for breath.

Rafe dropped to his haunches to get on eye level with Wes. “Tell me.” Rafe’s bark split through the heavy air, raising goose bumps on my arms.

“We were attacked. They’re clearing the warehouse.” Wes dropped his eyes, voice missing its usual cockiness. He knew what this meant for us.

Oh, fuck no. Not when we’re so close.

Before Rafe could say anything, I ran out the door and swung into our navy blue delivery van’s driver’s side. Three other doors slammed simultaneously, and I took off down the road to the drop point. *Like fucking hell they’d rob us.*

The drive to the dock was a blur. All that mattered was getting there before the product was gone. We did our trade from an old, abandoned fish market located on a long-deserted strip of the dock. Row upon row of deserted market stalls left the perfect location to discreetly move less than legal products.

I’d barely parked before the guys threw their back doors open. *Shit.* “Fuck, wait!” Tension filled the air, the iron smell of their rage burning my nose. “Just fucking wait a second. We can’t rush in there. They’ll kill us instantly.”

Three growls rumbled through the van, their instinctive nature taking over, but no one got out.

I pointed toward the fish market blocking the view of the dock. “They aren’t guarding the entrance, which means we can expect a battle once we’re in. We’ll have to split up and come at them from both sides.”

Rafe seemed to snap out of his haze of anger first and started shooting off orders. “Nox and Ares go through the east, Killian and I will take the west. Our first prerogative is stopping the boat from taking off at the back. Clear?”

“Clear.” Our voices merged as one.

Gun raised, I jumped from the van and rushed toward the east side of the market. I raced past the first few stalls and stepped in the path of a large man ten feet in front of me, gun pointed at my chest. The man’s lips tipped up in a sneer before he cocked the gun. *Fuck.*

Ares’ giant body crashed into mine, forcing me behind a line of crates just as the ringing sound of a shotgun filled the air. The scent of dead flowers filled my nose as Ares checked me for wounds.

“I’m fine. Get off me.”

He sprung off me like he was burned and looked sharply away, a muscle ticking in his jaw. “Don’t be a fucking idiot.” He left me there, not glancing back, and easily shot my would-be killer.

We moved toward the back of the dock, using the old crates for coverage. A group of our men lay unconscious on the floor in the middle of the market, their hands and ankles bound together. They were all alphas. It would’ve taken a powerful bark to put them in this state.

A boat was tied to the back of the dock, sitting deep in the water with the weight of all our product. The driver turned and spotted us. “Hurry the fuck up,” he shouted at his men.

Two men loaded a crate onto the back. We stepped out from our cover, and they took off before they could finish loading the last one, and it bobbed in the water before going under.

I fired off round after round at the thieves, managing to hit one in the chest. His hand went to his heart and came away coated in red before he collapsed overboard.

Killian rounded the corner. He would’ve jumped off the dock after them if it wasn’t for Rafe’s arms bound around him. “It’s gone.”

My breath stuttered at the sight. There were crushed and broken crates but no vials in sight.

I dug my fingers into my hair and pulled at the ends until the pain took over my thoughts. I couldn’t process what had happened. We’d been so close, and some petty fucking gang retaliation was going to stop us from getting her back.

Fuck no. I couldn’t accept that. Not after everything. Not when my every breath counted on hers.

Killian dropped to his knees, oblivious to the blood soaking through his pants. His gaze was blank as he looked over the water where the boat sped off into the night, taking any hope of the money we needed with it.

The scent of helplessness was thick in the air. Ares broke the silence, his words barely above a whisper. “No.” His voice cracked around the word. “It can’t end like this. Not when we were so close.”

A deep rumble emanated from Rafe’s chest, and when I turned to look at him, a darkness took over his face, pulling his features taut.

“We aren’t fucking accepting it. If we can’t play by their rules. We’ll just have to steal her back.”

I swallowed. We’d thought of that before, but it meant being hunted by the Institute. They had a special ops team specifically created for missing omegas. We hadn’t entertained it then, but now...

I met each of their stares, knowing damn well this could get us all killed.

“Whatever it takes. We can pray she forgives us after.”

CHAPTER 5

Bliss

The Omega Institute didn't fly commercial, but our private plane was still housed at the nearest major airport. I suspected it was intentional. The Institute liked to show the omegas out and about every once in a while, and there were only so many opportunities to do so. Traveling as a group, all in uniform, appropriately drugged and docile, was about as good press as they were going to get.

Well, most of us were drugged and docile. As usual, I was more alert than I should be.

I walked beside Flora, my arm looped tightly through hers. The chemical smell of the airport mixed with the scents of thousands of strangers burned at my nose and made my head swim.

"I'm excited to see New York City," she commented pleasantly.

"You've seen the city a hundred times." I grimaced. "You're from New Jersey."

"Oh." She laughed. "That's right. Where are you from?"

I rolled my eyes. "*Jersey.*"

There was no point in this conversation; I was going to make myself crazy.

Flora had taken twice the recommended dose of blockers today, for fear of discovery or accidental bonding while we were in public. The incident in the dining hall had stunned her into temporary submission. She, like all of us,

would be coming off the blockers in a matter of hours anyway, but I missed talking to her in the meantime. I'd forgotten how lonely I was before she stopped taking them.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention," a redheaded flight attendant working one of the major airline check-in desks spoke into a microphone, her voice projecting over the loudspeaker. "We have the honor of having Omega Donnelley flying with us today. Is there anyone who would be willing to give up their seat—"

The flight attendant didn't get a chance to finish her sentence before several people rushed forward, clambering to give up their seats. As though the omega was a valiant war hero returning from battle.

I craned my neck as we passed, trying to get a look at the omega. I wasn't the only one looking, but it was impossible to see her beyond her wall of security.

There was a fair amount of people staring at us too. I caught the eye of a beta child, holding her mother's hand, and smiled. Her mouth dropped open, and she tugged on her mom's hand, pointing at me.

"Eyes down, Bliss," one of our handlers scolded from the back of the group. I nodded, returning my gaze to my black patent-leather shoes, marching in line behind the identical black shoes in front of me.

The headmistress called for us to follow her toward the boarding queue, and I steered Flora in the right direction. She made no objection, shuffling her feet along the scratchy industrial carpet of the waiting area.

The flight was five hours from gate to gate, and I spent most of it pretending to sleep. In reality, I was listening to the frantic beating of my own heart in my ears.

My body seemed to know I was on my way back to the East Coast—far closer to the site of my worst memories than I'd ever wanted to be again.

I had no way of knowing if my guys—*the guys*—lived anywhere near there anymore, but I had a feeling they did. The closer the plane got to New York, the easier I could breathe. It was like I'd spent the last four years wearing an iron corset, and it was loosening by the hour.

I refused to be grateful for that. The lack of pain was only a reminder that my pack had cursed me, and the pain was bound to be worse when it returned.

When we landed, night had fallen. It was impossible to see much beyond the window of the plane except the lights from the airport and the headlights of the vehicles on the tarmac.

“Are we going to a hotel first or something?” I asked one of the handlers as we taxied to our gate.

She narrowed her eyes, suspicious of my question. I smiled, trying to look innocent. What did it matter if I slipped up a little now anyway? They were almost done with me.

“No, we are going right to the venue.”

I raised my eyebrows. I hadn’t been expecting that. “Oh.”

Wherever they were taking us, it wasn’t far from the airport. Our limousine had no windows, and I busied myself counting to sixty over and over to try and guess the time. It was a stupid and pointless game, but it was better than nothing.

“It was thirty-seven minutes,” I told Flora when our car came to a halt. “Maybe thirty-eight.”

She pressed her knee against mine and smiled. “You’re so good at math.”

It would be a bad time to scream.

I shivered violently as I stepped out of the car and onto the pavement. The wind was biting and cut into the exposed skin of my face and forearms like a thousand tiny needles. I’d gotten so used to the California climate, the weather was shocking.

They’d parked us in a deserted alleyway with tall, nondescript buildings on either side. I turned to the headmistress, confused. I assumed the event would be held somewhere grand.

The headmistress pointed to an unmarked, black service door. “Let’s go, ladies.”

My confusion spiked. Where the hell were we?

The door opened to a basement maintenance hallway, lit by flickering fluorescent lights. My heart rate kicked up a notch. Neither the headmistress nor the instructors seemed concerned.

They led our whole group down the hall and into an elevator. I craned my neck to read the buttons. All I could see from where I stood pressed into the back corner were the buttons marked L, B, and P1-4, probably for parking. *Help.*

“Um,” I started. We weren’t supposed to ask questions, but this was crazy. If Flora were lucid, she would be apoplectic. At least ten swears, probably half of which I’d never heard, would have been out of her mouth by now. I had to ask for both our sakes. “Where are we?”

If the instructors heard me, they ignored me. I’d seen a scary movie or ten as a kid. This was how we died.

The elevator dinged, and we filed out into another long hallway—this one at least was better lit. The architecture up here was more impressive—huge windows, crown molding, and stone walls. Like a college, or a museum. I itched to go over to one of the windows and try to figure out where we were, but the headmistress was already on the move again, rushing down the hall.

“In here, ladies.” She swung open a door and ushered us inside.

I paused, trying to decide if I could reasonably refuse to enter. Maybe I could say I needed to go to the bathroom?

“Bliss.” Flora tugged my hand. “In here.”

Well, there goes that plan.

It was a conference room. Or it had been. It now looked more like a pop-up beauty parlor. At least a dozen people were crammed into the room, all moving around the various mirrors, salon chairs, and racks of clothing.

A beta woman in a black apron strode toward us, a brush in one hand and a water bottle in the other. “Hi!” she said brightly. “We’re ready for you.”

I stood stock-still, overwhelmed by the smell of the chemical hair products and the bright-colored clothing, salt, and bitter cranberries. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t smelled it in the hall.

“Are you Bliss?” A different beta approached me.

I took a breath, tasting her resignation. “Yes.”

“I’m Clarissa. Your stylist.”

I tried to smile but caught my reflection in one of the many mirrors. I looked like I’d just been to the dentist and was frozen with my mouth open. “Great.”

“Do you want to come over to the chair?”

Not at all. “Absolutely.”

I must have blacked out while Clarissa worked, because before I knew it, she was finished. “Okay, what do you think?” she said as she spun my chair around.

I gasped. The woman looking back at me in the brightly lit mirror wasn’t me. For four years, I’d worn the same clothes every day. We weren’t allowed to wear makeup, and our hair had to be kept its natural color. I barely looked in the mirror, so while I knew I’d aged, my perception of it was skewed.

Anxiety bubbled in my throat, forming a lump, almost like tears. She’d lightened my hair by several shades. I was already blonde, but now it was practically white. That was the least jarring change. Whatever they’d done to my face was extreme, and not in a good way.

The stylist frowned, looking nervous. “You don’t like it?”

“Er, no,” I said too-fast. “It’s fine.”

It wasn’t. I’d worn makeup before the Institute, but this was less makeup and more of a mask. I lifted one eyebrow, and my false lash hit the top of my brow bone. That was going to make me crazy.

“Oh, well, it’s for the lights,” she explained. “There will be bright lights on your face, and it reflects off the glass, so your features need to stand out. It will look normal from outside the box, I promise.”

“Right,” I agreed, not really listening as I tried to get used to my face.

I swallowed and nodded, hoping she was right. Not that it really mattered. We would all get auctioned off regardless of what we looked like, and any buyer would be just as bad as the next.

“Wait.” I looked up at the stylist in the mirror, meeting her eyes fully as I processed what she had said. “What do you mean ‘from outside the box’? What ‘glass’?”

The stylist’s eyes widened. “For the event?” Her inflection implied it was a question—like she was asking if I was sure I didn’t know. “Wait here. I’m going to go get your dress.”

She darted away before I could protest, disappearing into the crowd of stylists and airborne hair products.

I tipped my head back, and my curls crunched against the black plastic cape they’d thrown around my shoulders. To protect my uniform, I supposed—from what, I wasn’t sure. I doubted I’d ever wear it again.

“It’s going to be windows,” a voice to my left said.

I turned only my neck to see who had spoken, still lying back in my chair. Something about the awkward angle was cathartic after sitting perfectly straight for four years.

My neighbor’s name was Omega Blair, and we’d never really spoken outside of class. She was a retrieval who had arrived before me and therefore had never been fully lucid during my time at the Institute.

“Windows,” Omega Blair hissed, the curlers in her hair bobbing as she leaned forward. “I think they’re putting us behind glass.”

I sat up straight again to look her in the eye. “Why? How do you know?”

“One of the handlers just mentioned it.” She shook her head and reached for a half-full glass of water on the vanity in front of her, sucking down the rest of

it in one gulp.

“And you remember that?” I blurted out, shocked.

“Yeah.” She seemed as surprised as I was.

I turned away from Blair for a minute, searching the room for Flora. All around us, girls were blinking wide eyes and turning to talk to each other. My eyes darted to my own vanity and untouched water glass. I reached for it and sniffed. Nothing.

“Bliss!” Flora’s urgent voice shrieked from somewhere across the room.

I swiveled, scanning the crowd for her shiny, dark hair. She was no where, lost in the sudden uptick in voices and activity.

“Okay, I have your dress!” The stylist appeared behind me, blocking my view with a garment bag in hand. Her eyes immediately darted to the glass in my hand. “Oh, make sure you drink that before you go put this on, hon. You want to stay hydrated.”

CHAPTER 6

Killian

Ares, Nox, Rafe, and I sat in silence as our hired car inched toward the front of the gala. The museum where they held the Agora Ceremony each year had eight tall columns holding up the stone arches that worked as gateways inside. It looked like something that belonged in Ancient Greece instead of being twenty minutes outside of the city.

An opaque film covered all the windows, protecting our country's most exclusive event. It was damn close to a secret society for how under wraps they kept everything. Even with our connections, we didn't know the details of what went down on the other side of those doors. The blatant display of money grated on my nerves. We'd spent years working toward being invited into this circle, but that didn't mean we liked any of the stuck-up rich dicks.

The weight of the next few hours sat heavy in the air like a stifling blanket. Our plan to participate legally was blown to shit, and the new one was reckless at best.

"Get ready." Rafe straightened his suit jacket and adjusted his watch.

Between our size and clothing, we almost fit in, but there would always be something "other" about us. We were wolves dressed in designer clothing, and we'd come to steal our girl back.

The car came to a halt, and I followed Rafe out. The sound of paparazzi shouting hit my ears, drowning out everything else. They were desperately trying to catch the celebrities' attention to get the best shots of them.

The mix of fame, fortune, and secrecy made it the most talked about event of the year. Everyone wanted to see behind the curtain and find out what went down at these events. How exactly the beautiful omegas got mated off to the rich and famous men.

Nox and Ares came up beside me. They scanned the surrounding space with predatory gazes. Someone here was going home with our girl, and we had to let him. The thought sent anger riding up my chest, and a low growl pierced the air.

“Calm down.” Nox’s hand landed on my shoulder, giving it a tight squeeze. “Follow the plan, and we’ll get her back. Once she’s committed to an alpha, we won’t have long before he mates her and we lose her for good.”

Ares glared at Nox and took a step toward us. “Was that supposed to be reassuring?”

“We don’t have time for this. Shut up and pay attention,” Rafe bit out. His alpha bark tinged his voice. Not that it mattered—we were too evenly matched in strength for him to command now. In high school he could get away with it, but we’d all grown into our power over the last several years.

“Fuck. Okay.” I straightened to my full height, and we walked up the stairs four abreast—Rafe and Ares to my left and Nox to my right.

People visibly shifted away from us. Our power was undeniable, and we weren’t trying to dampen it. In this world, money made things happen, but that didn’t stop the fact that biologically we were higher on the food chain. By the time we made it to the entrance, all eyes had turned toward us, and whispers followed in our wake. Who were we? Where did we come from?

A smirk tipped my lips. We didn’t belong in their small circle, and I was sure it was killing them to not know who we were.

We got to the top of the stairs, and my eyes widened as the large iron doors opened. They had medieval designs carved into them and had to be fourteen feet tall. Nox took a deep breath beside me, the slight scent of dead flowers drifting off him. I let my fingers brush his, resisting the urge to entwine our fingers.

Nox stiffened and jerked his hand away.

I ignored the sting of rejection. There was no point if Bliss wasn't with us. The idea of being happy without her made me sick to my stomach.

Ares grabbed my left wrist in a nearly painful grip but didn't let go as we stepped through the doors into the dimly lit hall. The room opened up into a wide-open space, a clear path delineated with ribbon and art displays on either side. They were lit with deep blue lights, blanketing the room in a mythical feel.

I shifted closer to Ares, sucking in deep breaths of his calming scent as we followed the path, proceeding to where the event was happening. We'd be seeing Bliss for the first time in four years, and my heart was trying to jump out of its cage with anticipation.

The closer we got to her, the clearer her emotions were, and the edge of desperation had me holding my breath. There was something distinctly wrong about the feelings she was projecting.

We stalled in front of our assigned table. It had a perfect view of the stage. What we didn't expect were the levels of glass display cases filled with omegas, lit like the statues in blue light so we could just make out their silhouettes. *Jesus*. There was something almost inhumane about how everything was set up. Like they were displaying products instead of our most precious designations. The weight of the need to protect them hit me like a punch, and I sucked in a breath of the distinct taste of fear.

What the fuck. Three growls matched mine as rage tumbled out of me.

A hand landed on my shoulder, shoving me to the side. "Move out of the way." The hair on my arms stood as the alpha barked rolled over me. I turned to be met with a man in his forties with slick blond hair. Ares' grip tightened painfully on my arm, but I was too distracted by the alpha in front of me to care.

He raised a brow when we didn't budge, clearly unused to not being the most powerful man in the room. Rafe, Ares, and Nox closed ranks around me. Their very presence should've been enough to have the guy scurrying. He looked between us, sucking on his teeth before saying, "Excuse me. I'm seated there." His words were lined with anger, as if he was barely holding it in. The table he pointed toward was only two away from ours. A rumble

formed in my chest. “Go around.”

A muscle twitched in the man’s jaw, his entire body stiff. Probably never been told what to do a day in his life. He turned away and walked the long way to his table, speaking in a low voice to the man beside him.

Ares let go of my arm, and his hands shook at his sides. I leaned in close. “We can pick them off one by one later.”

Ares’ gaze shot to mine, not letting up for several moments as he took in deep breaths until he finally nodded and took his seat. The rest of us followed his lead.

Our table was matte black with a tray of lit votive candles in the middle. There were no names, just corresponding numbers to our tickets. Within seconds of being seated, a server brought us glasses of champagne. I sniffed mine, the bubbles making me want to sneeze while Nox took his back in one swallow. *That’s one way to start the night.*

“Good evening, Alphas, and welcome to the fifty-sixth annual Agora.” A woman with graying hair pulled back into a tight bun stepped out on stage. She wore a feminine-cut dress, covering her soft curves. *Omega*. “My name is Headmistress Omega DuPont, and I will be leading tonight’s events. We are so happy to have you all here to help match with your very own omega.” She gestured her hands outward. “As with every year, you have all signed NDA agreements. Everything from this moment on will be held at the utmost of secrecy. Please look at the center of your table. You will find a digital pad with your information as well as the profile of each omega available tonight.”

The way she said that made me uneasy. As if we were online shopping for them.

“From that device, you will input your donation amount upon the start of each girl’s presentation. Once the highest donation is reached, the omega will be brought to the back for you to bring home with you.” She smiled wide, clapping her hands in front of herself. “It brings the Institution the greatest joy to find the perfect match between our omegas and their alphas. We will begin momentarily, so make sure you are ready. You’ll find the process moves quickly.”

Rafe's growl pulled my attention to where he was staring down at the screen, the glow illuminating the snarl on his face.

The alphas at the surrounding tables flipped through their screens, eyes widening with each flick. The smell of wool and honey was thick in the air. My skin burned at the idea that they were looking at images of Bliss with lust.

Before I could do anything stupid, like smash everyone's electronic devices, an orchestra started playing from the corner of the stage, and the lights dimmed further, tipping us into near blackness. The glass cages provided the only light. The music picked up, drawing out the moment before one of the glass cases lit up with clear white light.

Holy shit. I thought this event was so the omegas could mingle with the alphas. At a minimum have some kind of veto power over who could bid on them. That was fucked-up enough, but this was so much worse.

A young omega stood inside, now fully visible. She looked familiar. I squinted and tried to make out her features. She had long dark hair and a full body, and her eyes searched the crowd. There was no way she could see us with the way the lighting was set up, but she tried.

"Holy shit. It's Flora." Rafe's hands were shaking as they held the device.

Fuck. Flora had been the only potential omega I'd ever met. She'd gone to our high school and had been relocated to the Omega Institute before she turned seventeen. I couldn't say we were friends, but my stomach still dropped seeing her up there.

Rafe flinched, then paled when tablet beeped. He dropped it on the table as if it burned him before searching the other glass cases. Noise from the alphas around us rose rapidly. Sounds of excitement, disappointment, and anger almost overpowered the music.

I watched the screen as the dollar amount climbed over two million dollars. It flashed three times before the light in Flora's case went dark, and I could see a sliver of light as a small door cracked open at the back as they escorted her out. That was it. They'd sold her.

Four tables away, an alpha who looked to be at least sixty stood from his table, a wide, tooth-filled grin on his face. He looked punchable. The only thing that stopped me from starting a riot was knowing that Bliss was in one of those cases.

The next three omegas went fast, the rumble of the crowd growing louder as the odds shifted out of their favor. My fine-cuisine supper sat untouched in front of me. Even the idea of taking a bite made me want to puke. The last hour had been a horror fest of young omegas being sold off to sneering men, none of whom looked a day under fifty.

The electronic pad beeped and flashed with the image of the next girl. My stomach dropped through the floor at the sight of her. Her hair was lighter, and she'd grown more curvaceous and lost the softness of adolescence, but there was no denying she was our Bliss.

Ares' growl rumbled the table. "I can't fucking do this—"

Nox glared, cutting him off. "You better learn how because this is how we're getting her back. I didn't hear any better ideas."

Power surged between them, and my gut twisted. Nox never confronted Ares. They had their own fucked-up codependent relationship that neither would own up to. Tonight, Nox's eyes were narrowed in challenge, daring Ares to say anything.

Ares broke away first. I couldn't blame him. My instincts wanted to riot at the idea we were letting Bliss go through this. We should be the ones bidding, not some fucking rich asshole. My neck ached and my muscles tensed in anticipation of seeing her. I almost wish we wouldn't. Not like this, not in some fucked-up glass cage.

Bliss' white light flipped on, and I sucked in a breath. No matter how many times I dreamed of her, nothing could prepare me for this moment. The picture on the screen didn't do her justice. She was all curves, big doe eyes, and long blonde hair. The quintessential omega.

My heart bounded against my chest as blood flooded my ears. She was everything I remembered but so much more. *Please, babe, look at me.*

A craving rose in me, so strong I couldn't swallow it down. She was ours, and the alpha side of me was taking over all rational thinking. I tugged on the bond between us, and her face snapped toward our table. I knew she couldn't see us with the light so bright in her room, but she fucking knew we were there. I tugged again, and the guys around me all jerked as a tangle of her emotions slammed into my chest.

I couldn't tell if she was happy or not, but she damn well knew we were here. I was so fixated on her, I didn't notice the bidding had begun and ended until the crowd erupted in a roar. It looked like every remaining alpha had his eyes on her.

Of course, it was the asshole from earlier who stood up two tables in front of us wearing a familiar smile. There was nothing soft in his eyes. He'd gone hunting and caught the kill he'd wanted.

A growl climbed up my throat, and I stood, shaking with the effort to hold myself back.

The asshole smiled at me. "Sorry, did you want that one?"

"She's ours." Ares jumped from his seat, and Nox barely caught him around the waist before he managed to reach this rich dick.

The man looked at him, taking in his suit and watch. "We aren't on the same level. There was no world you were walking out of here with her on your arm. You have power, but I have both money and power."

Rafe walked up to us and shook the man's hand and placed his hand on his shoulder in a reassuring pat. "Ignore him. He can't handle his hormones."

Ares practically roared, and Nox looked like he would turn purple from the force it took to hold him back. Ares was damn near feral at this point. What the hell was Rafe doing?

The asshole gave him a curt nod and followed a guide around backstage.

We all spun on Rafe the second he was out of hearing distance. "What the fuck."

A smile slowly grew on his face as he ignored us, looking down at his phone.

Nox, as always, was the first to catch on. “Did you get the trace?”

Rafe held up his phone. There was a map with a small red circle that was moving slowly away from us.

I smiled. *Let's go hunting.*

CHAPTER 7

Bliss

“**D**o you remember me?”

I swallowed the lump rising in my throat as I practically jogged to keep up with the alpha walking two paces ahead of me, wobbling on my too-tall heels. His legs were nearly twice as long as mine, and the evening gown the stylist had squeezed me into made every movement difficult. My thighs rubbed together with every step, and the train kept getting caught underfoot, forcing me to pause and detangle myself.

The alpha stopped short, whirling to face me. “I said, do you remember me?” he barked, pushing power into his voice.

My head snapped up, and I dropped the train of my dress. “Yes.”

He was, if possible, even taller than I remembered him from that day at the Institute. His blond hair was slicked back in the same perfect coif, and he wore a tailored tuxedo, but other than that, he looked a bit like the bust of a Roman emperor come to life. His piercing, black eyes assessed me. They held no warmth, only triumph. That, I supposed, made sense. He’d just secured his place as one of the most powerful men on earth. Having an omega was the ultimate status symbol, and after tonight, no one could take that away from him.

Well, almost no one, but he didn’t know that.

He started walking again. “Answer me when I speak to you, and we’ll get along fine.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

I hoped he was right and we would get along fine. The Omega Institute promised all omegas that once mated, we would love our alphas no matter who they were. It was biology. The same chemical response that put us into a mindless heat would make us love them, honor them, and obey them for the rest of our lives.

A small voice at the back of my head screamed that there might be something off about that idea. Maybe it was propaganda, just like everything else I’d come across so far.

Or maybe it was true, just not for me.

We reached a door to a staircase, and he pushed it open, taking the stairs two at a time. Finally, we stepped out onto an open-air roof. I gasped. The city lights were mesmerizing, almost like stars. The noise of traffic and the wind engulfed me, and I spun, wanting to see everything at once.

The alpha stepped into me until he was mere inches away, blocking my view. He breathed in deeply. “I can’t smell you yet, but no matter. Your blockers must not have worn off. That’s fine—they will by the time we get to my home. We’ll be taking my helicopter. I want to make this as fast as possible.”

I nodded, noting the use of “my home,” as opposed to “home.” It didn’t matter. Once I went into heat, hopefully that would be enough of a bond that he wouldn’t notice.

“What’s your name?” I asked, trying to make conversation.

He looked down his nose at me and waited a full beat before answering. “Nero,” he said finally. “But you may call me Alpha or sir.”

I stared at him. Oh, he was expecting a response. “Yes, sir.”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Alpha Nero had several homes—or so he told me over the deafening noise of the helicopter. We were going to his summer residence, where we were least likely to be disturbed.

“Thank you,” I said. That seemed like the right response.

My mind drifted to Flora. It was too much to hope Flora and I would end up in the same city, but maybe we would both be in the country and could see each other at social events. This couldn’t be all bad. It had been hard to hear or see anything going on in the other booths from where I sat on the stage, but I hoped she had ended up with someone who would be kind to her.

The smell in that room was one I’d never forget. The testosterone and excitement, mingled with the panic of the omegas—now clearheaded for the first time since we’d entered the Institute. And somewhere, under every other smell in the room, lemon, coffee, peppers, and rain. My boys were in that room, and for a second time, they’d let me be taken away.

I forced the thought down. Soon, my former pack would see my mating announcements in the press, and I wouldn’t care. This was the last time I would ever dwell on it. The last time I could ever dwell on it.

In a shorter time than I would have expected, the helicopter landed in the center of a huge lawn. The only lights came from a house as large as the Institute. It was surrounded by a wraparound porch to the right and an expansive garden to the left that, from what I could see, probably hid a pool. The house had several balconies and a tower on either side that really said “castle” more than “house.” I glanced around for any other houses in the area, wondering if this was common.

“Do you have neighbors?” I asked.

Alpha Nero ignored me. Instead, he opened his door and leapt out onto the lawn, tugging me along after him.

The front door opened onto a vast entrance hall with a double staircase that led to the upper floors. I had no time to take in much of the house before Alpha Nero was ushering me up one of those staircases.

“Take them off,” he said as I stumbled over my dress and shoes.

I looked up at him quizzically, unsure if he meant the shoes or everything. The scent of his frustration was evident—like bitter dandelions—and I ducked my head, kicking off my shoes.

He practically shoved me along an upstairs hall. There was no art on the walls, no personal touches or distinguishing features to be seen.

Like what little I'd seen of the house so far, the bedroom was large but without personal touches. The room had high ceilings and large windows without curtains. There was a king-size bed with a white comforter and an empty bedside table on either side. I wrapped my arms around myself the moment we entered, feeling a chill.

“Is there a nesting room?” I asked tentatively.

“Next week, you can decorate your own room however you like.”

My mouth became a thin line. *Oh.*

“Sit.” He pointed to the bed.

I sat on my hands, watching him. He crossed the room, opened the drawer of his bedside table, and pulled something out, his back to me. “I was assured you would be cleared of blockers by now. Who the fuck do they think they are?”

I reached up, twirling a tendril of hair around my finger. I was sure he could smell my worry and hoped he would take that for concern that we hadn't yet bonded and not guilt over the knowledge that we never would.

He spun around, and my gaze zeroed in on what he was holding. My pulse sped up. “What is that?”

It was a rhetorical question—it was a syringe. A more appropriate question would have been “What's in that?” or “What are you doing with that?”

“Shhh,” he said in what might have been a soothing voice. “Speeding things up a bit. If your blockers had worn off, this might not be necessary, but it doesn't matter. Some alphas do this regardless.”

My eyes widened, my heart hammering against my chest. Of course.

I suddenly saw a gaping hole in my survival strategy—I wouldn't go into heat naturally without the bond. We wouldn't mate without my heat. If we never mated...well, that wasn't really an option, so it wasn't worth thinking about.

Conveniently, Alpha Nero was right. Many alphas did artificially induce heat—it made it last longer and hit harder, apparently—but if he did that, I had no idea how lucid I would be. A normal heat took away all cognitive reasoning. This was—

“Come here,” he barked.

I stood, unable to resist the pull of an alpha bark, and stood in front of him, tilting my neck to the side. The top of my head barely reached the middle of his chest. “Shhh.”

Nero held the needle to my neck. Every muscle in my body screamed, fully aware that I was actively going against my existing bond. My heart constricted painfully, like it was trying to stop itself rather than let this happen.

“Relax.”

The needle pricked my skin, and the effect was immediate. My eyes rolled into my head as boiling water filled my veins.

I stumbled backward, the backs of my knees hitting the bed again as I struggled to stay upright. Every smell was suddenly too much. Too heightened. Not only emotions, but everything—the fibers in the bedspread, the plants outside, the sweat of the beta helicopter driver smoking a cigarette in the driveway.

“I'm told it takes a few minutes to kick in,” Nero said casually. He tossed the syringe on the nightstand and shrugged off his jacket.

I looked this way and that, feeling like I had just gotten off the Tilt-A-Whirl at the county fair and landed in a pool of lava. I took a few deep breaths, then regretted it as Nero's scent filled my nose.

I covered my face with my hands. I needed to lie down, but the bed hurt and smelled like whiskey and cigars. I took another deep breath, willing myself

not to cry.

A new smell filled my mouth, wrapping around me. It was indescribable and better than anything—like lemon tart and freshly brewed coffee on a rainy morning. It was the scent of a hot bath and an old book and stargazing in the summer. I turned, looking for the source. It was essential—like breathing. I needed it. Now.

My heart swelled as I faced the door, and then confusion hit me.

Oh my God, I'm hallucinating.

I had to be hallucinating, because what I was seeing wasn't possible. My former pack could not be standing in the doorway.

I let out a hysterical laugh, unable to hold it in, and all eyes turned to me. My body burned under their gaze, and a wave of mind-numbing heat and arousal hit me, as painful as it was exciting.

Come to me. I need you.

They aren't really here, I tried to remind myself, fighting to keep the haze out of my brain. This was just my mind unable to reconcile the pack bond with my new mate. That was it.

Fire burned through me, and my head was too heavy, like it had been weighed down with sand. That smell got stronger. I wanted it everywhere—to bathe in it. I wanted to know what that smell tasted like.

The last time I'd seen my boys, we'd been barely seventeen, but my brain had conjured how they'd look now. My brain was very generous.

Rafe stood in front, black hair longer than it had been, but his black eyes were the same. Like all of them, he'd gained about a foot of height and fifty pounds of muscle, but I knew it was a hallucination because Rafe would never lead the group. That was Ares' job.

My eyes found Ares, and I laughed again. Still bleach blond, tattooed, and wearing that stupid leather jacket—although it fit him now—but he would never stand in the back behind Nox like that.

Nox was the most obvious change. He'd shaved his bright red hair close to the scalp and no longer resembled the slightly nerdy kid he'd been.

And Killian, whose curls and smile used to make him look boyish, now looked menacing as he glared at something over my shoulder.

I tried to look at what he was seeing, and my eyes rolled into the back of my head. The bed bounced under me, a disembodied crash sounding from somewhere to the right.

“What the fuck?” someone growled. “What are you doing here?”

“What the fuck are *you* doing? What's wrong with her?”

The fire burning through my body was too hot, physically eating me from the inside out. I couldn't focus—couldn't make out the cacophony of voices suddenly filling the room.

That smell got stronger. Closer. I wanted to reach out and grab it. Run my tongue all over whatever it was and mark it as mine.

“Bliss.”

I blinked down, and tattooed arms were reaching for me. Where was I?

I laughed, maybe. I might have moaned. Needles pricked every part of my body like one million poisonous stings. I reached out blindly. “Help me.”

CHAPTER 8

Ares

“Alpha,” her voice came out on a whine.

Rage pumped through my veins as I ran over the threshold and out of the mansion. Bliss was deadweight in my arms, her eyes rolling back into her head. Something was wrong. Her heat shouldn't have hit her this fast.

My blood roared. We'd almost been too late. We were dangerously close to losing her forever.

I stumbled over the bottom porch step and clutched Bliss tighter to my chest. She keened in pain and lifted her head slightly, burying her face in my shoulder. “It's so hot, Alpha. I'm so hot.”

A growl pushed itself out of my chest as instinct tried to take over. *Protect, fuck, claim.* I couldn't fucking think straight. My body screamed at me to go back inside and kill that fucker for touching our omega, but that was in direct conflict with the overwhelming need to stop right here and claim her against a wall.

Not safe here.

Her pupils nearly drowned out the violet in her eyes as she looked at me pleadingly. Jasmine, chili, and the seductive smell of honey overtook my senses, and a wave of lust slammed into me. She wiggled in my arms, and her grasp twisted my shirt. I shook my head and kept running, trying to force myself to stay alert. This wasn't just any omega—it was Bliss. *This is Bliss.*

I reached the van, and Nox threw the back door open violently. His eyes were near black, and his breath came in heavy pants as he ran a hand over his shaved head. I smirked at the blood on his knuckles. Good. I hoped he killed the bastard.

He held his arms out, his jaw tight. “Give her to me.”

Mine. Mine. Mine, my head chanted at me, and I couldn’t differentiate how much was instinct and how much was me. “I got it. Fucking move.”

Bliss moaned, and the smell of vinegar filled my nose. He stepped out of the way. “Fine.”

Nothing else mattered but our omega.

I clambered into the van and laid Bliss across the back seats. She whined, reaching for me the moment I let her go. She pulled at her dress, but she couldn’t reach the zipper. “Help me, Alpha.”

A pulse of lust pounded against my brain, and I grunted with the effort to rip off her dress and claim her. My hands shook as I held her face in my palms and traced her cheekbones with my thumbs. “You’re okay. You’re okay. We’ll figure it out together.”

Her head snapped back, and she truly looked at me for the first time. Her eyes were clear, shocked—like she was seeing a ghost. Tears pooled in her lashes. “Ares?”

Fuck. The realization she’d been calling me alpha this entire time ripped at my chest, pulling me out of the drugging haze her heat held me under. She hadn’t known—*didn’t know*—who I was. She just needed to be touched by her alpha. I dropped my forehead to hers, taking deep breaths. I was a fucking asshole for touching her. “I’m sorry. Bliss. I’m so sorry.”

Another wave of her scent hit me, and all recognition vanished from her face. She pushed up on her knees and dug her fingers into my chest, chasing my mouth with hers. “Alpha...”

Shit. No.

She whimpered in pain when I shifted back toward the van doors before she could touch me. This was wrong. So fucking wrong. I didn't deserve her.

She cried out, and her fingers wrapped around my neck, trying to pull me forward, her back arching in an attempt to erase the space I'd put between us.

Mine.

Fuck. No.

This whole fucking thing was my fault. I'd set everything off years ago. It was me that had dared Rafe to kiss Bliss and set off her initial transition. It was me that pushed her over the edge and created the bond before she got sent away, and it was me that was supposed to be in charge but didn't stop her from being sent to the Institute.

Maybe we shouldn't have come back for her. This wasn't how this was supposed to go—any of it. For all we fucking knew, she was happy with that asshole in the mansion, and now we'd never know because she wasn't lucid to tell us. I wanted her to be happy. I locked down any visible emotion and untangled her hands, leaning out of her reach.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Rafe's alpha bark rumbled from the front seat of the van.

My head snapped up. I hadn't registered Rafe or Killian arriving. Killian scrambled into the seat behind us while Nox came down next to me.

Rafe turned the key in the ignition. “She's in pain. Touch her, or get the hell out of the way.”

“You want to trade places?” I barked back as Bliss reached for me again.

Rafe's expression in the rearview mirror was conflicted. He did, that was obvious, but he knew what I was getting at. Bliss was lost to her omega instincts and would hate us when this was over.

“Alpha, please.” Bliss' voice breaking around her words was my undoing.

I'd never been able to say no to her. Ever. Not when I was sixteen and thought she was a beta, and sure as fuck not now when I was barely in control

of my own body. I'd loved Bliss since before I could remember, long before any hormonal bonding or fucking biological mind control.

I hated that she'd turned out to be an omega. I hated what we did to her. I hated the fucking Institute. I hated myself, but I'd always love her.

I leaned over her small frame and covered her mouth with mine. She opened for me, and her sweet taste of chilies and honey coated my tongue. Lust filled my veins, taking over every coherent thought. I growled and pushed my body against hers. "Yes, Omega."

My cock hardened painfully with the need to bury deep inside her. I rocked against her, but her dress kept me from giving her the pressure she desperately craved. She whimpered, writhing against me, practically begging me to ease her pain.

She keened, and her kiss turned desperate. Lust pulsed in the air, and three alpha roars returned her call. Omegas were perfectly designed to please their alphas, and we were perfectly designed to give her everything she needed in return.

I growled, tearing at the skirt of her dress. "Get it off."

Nox pulled out a knife and cut the beautiful fabric from the hem up to her bust. He took meticulous care not to nick our omega. I peeled it to the side, exposing her black lace matching bra and panties. Her slick had soaked through her dress and covered her thighs. A deep roar rumbled up my chest. "Mine."

The sentiment echoed from my pack.

Killian reached over the seat and slid his hands down her neck and chest. She moaned when his fingers dipped into the see-through cups of her bra. I watched, mesmerized, as she responded to his touch. He rolled her nipples between his fingers, and her hips ground against my painfully hard cock.

Nox crowded my back and caught her mouth in his, eating her delicious cries. Another wave of lust plowed into me. The overwhelming scent of jasmine, peppers, wool, and honey overtook every sense.

The van swerved as Rafe growled. “Fuck.” His gaze snapped away from the rearview mirror and focused to the front. *Hold it together, Rafe.*

I drove my jeans-clad cock against her slick core, and she made a pleased sound. The world swirled around me as every instinct I had screamed at me to take her. To knot her and make her mine. She was already mine. Or ours. All I had to do was sink my teeth into her smooth neck and she’d be mine forever.

She’ll hate you. She already hates you.

I was losing what little grip I still had on rational thought. She was everything to us, and when her heat finally lifted, she’d hate me even more for forcing her while she was in this state.

I met Nox’s gaze. There was no way we were knotting Bliss in the van no matter how desperately she called for it, but there were other ways to lessen the heat for our omega.

I slid off the seat and dropped to my knees on the floor. Bliss cried out, fingers clawing to bring me back. I worked the thin black lace down her thighs and calves, exposing her perfect pink core.

I slid my fingers up her legs, marveling at how her soft skin felt against my calloused hands. Her muscles twitched under my touch, and she moaned into Nox’s neck. Her tongue stroked over his mating glands, marking herself all over him. His chest rumbled, and his head tipped back, eyes closed, giving her better access.

Killian rose from the back seat and crashed his mouth against Nox’s. My eyes widened in interest. It had been years since they’d touched each other with any kind of affection, but Bliss’ heat broke down the walls we’d built between us. She hummed and licked up Killian’s neck, marking him too.

Fuck. They look good.

I licked up Bliss’ inner thigh and groaned when her hips jerked up. My eyes rolled back as I ran my tongue through her core. Her sweet slick ran over my face and down my throat. Omegas were practically drenched for the duration of their heat, and it was the hottest thing I’d ever seen.

I sucked, licked, and stroked my tongue over her, grunting as my dick ached against my pants. Her whimper drew my attention. As she watched Nox put his cock in Kill's mouth, her eyes were wide with interest. Her hips ground against my mouth. She liked that. *So do I.*

I slid three fingers into her, and I grunted as her core sucked them deeper. My brain splintered at the thought of burying myself in her. I worked her with my fingers and ran my teeth over her clit. The honey scent of her lust slammed into us, driving us into a rut. I slid my cock out of my pants, cum already leaking from the tip, and covered it in her slick before pumping it mercilessly. Nox grunted, holding Killian's head still as he emptied himself. *Fuck, I'm close.*

Bliss made a needy, keening sound that drove everything higher. Killian tilted her head up and dripped Nox's cum into her mouth. She cried out as she sucked his tongue and clamped down around my fingers. Her orgasm rippled through the air, and Killian and I both groaned with our releases.

I laid my head on her thigh, still breathing in her sweet slick, and ran my cum-soaked fingers over her sensitive core. My chest thrummed as our scents mixed, and I had to clamp down on my jaw to stop myself from biting her. *Fuck.*

The heat broke enough to think again, and I glanced around, disoriented. Rafe's tan knuckles were white on the steering wheel. I yanked my shirt off and pulled it over Bliss' head, taking care to pull her hair from the collar.

She reached her arms around my neck, and I lifted her, switching our positions until I sat on the bench and she folded herself up over my chest. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused. She probably still had no idea what was going on—heats lasted days, and omegas were often out of it for the majority of the time.

Killian reached around the seat to take her from me, and I growled deep in my throat. "Fuck off."

"Bro—"

"I'm not going to stay for the rest. You can have her then."

Killian furrowed his brow but didn't argue. It physically hurt to say, but I wouldn't let myself take part in the rest of her heat, not knowing what she must think of me. I tightened my arms around her as she drifted off against my chest.

My Bliss curled into me, wearing my clothes as I stroked her back. These would be the seconds that I'd take out and remember. They'd have to last me, because her heat was the only reason she wanted this, and I wouldn't force myself on her again.

We pulled up to the warehouse, and Nox and Killian jumped out, yelling something I didn't care to listen to. I placed a soft kiss against her hair. "Please, don't hate me. Fucking please, Bliss."

She mumbled and rubbed her face against my chest, her skin heating again as the next wave of her heat came on. It was time for me to let go.

CHAPTER 9

Bliss

An all-consuming gnawing pain radiated every inch of me, like I was on the verge of being incinerated from within.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the world spinning around me. Deep breaths of the soothing scent of peppers and coffee beans were the only thing anchoring me to this world. I snuggled into the hot chest pressed against my cheek, and thick arms banded across my back and under my thighs hard enough it felt like we would meld together. It wasn't enough.

My fingers dug into strong shoulders as I pulled myself closer, burying my face in a warm neck as he carried me. I licked up the column of taut muscle, finding his mating glands. A sense of rightness solidified in my center as our scents combined.

His chest reverberated with a growl, and we jerked as he stumbled.

“Don't fucking drop her.” The rough timber of another alpha's voice sang to me.

I whimpered as scalding heat pooled between my legs. I wanted to touch him, feel him, please him.

“I've got you. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay.”

The chest under mine rumbled with each promise, and my heart slowed. Alphas. They would take care of me. They'd make this stop.

“Please.” I sucked on the tender spot.

“Fuck. Nox, get the door.”

Lights burned my eyes as my alpha carried me across the threshold, and I tucked my face deeper into his neck.

“Turn off the lights.” A new voice to my right eased over me, and we were instantly plunged into darkness. There were three alphas. A trickle of a memory tightened my chest. Something was off. Where was my other alpha?

Strong hands tightened on my waist as we jostled up stairs. The friction of my clothes tore at my sensitive skin as he rushed. I didn’t know or care where he was taking me, so long as he made this stop. “It’s so hot. It hurts. *Please,*” I begged, praying they could fix it.

A door opened, and the mix of sandalwood, coffee, lemons, and fresh night air flooded me. A different kind of warmth filled my chest. I knew these scents. *Bonded.*

Their scents burned my lungs and coursed through my veins, stoking the fire that ignited inside of me. My skin itched, my core ached—everything was too much and not enough. “Please.”

My alpha lowered me to the mattress and groaned into my neck. “Breathe. We’re going to make it better. Breathe, Bliss.”

Three sets of hands roamed over me, digging into my hair, gliding over my breasts, and dragging up my legs. I couldn’t tell their touches apart, and I didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was the small voice whispering in my mind: *Mine.*

A smooth tongue licked my lips and explored my mouth. He grunted when I sucked on it. *Yes.*

I worked to pull off his shirt but refused to let go of his mouth for it to be removed. His lips smiled against mine. “I missed you, Little Wolf.”

The name danced around my head, and a swirl of giddiness bubbled through my chest. I liked that nickname. Hot lips ran up the other side of my neck, grazing my ear. “It’s my turn to taste that sweet mouth of yours.”

Lips broke away from mine, only to be replaced with hungry kisses as I gripped his hair at the base of his head. A wave of heat rolled through me, sending sparks down my arms into my fingers.

It wasn't enough. I felt so empty. I needed to be full. I needed them.

Hands grazed my sides, over my hips, and rested on my thighs. An alpha's large body moved between my feet and gripped my knees, spreading them wide for him. My scent flooded the room.

Teeth clashed with mine as the kiss turned bruising. The room filled with need, want, lust. He bit my lip, and the coppery taste of blood hit my senses. Then he sucked it into his mouth, groaning his approval. That groan had my body on fire. This was what I needed.

The alpha between my legs kissed a trail up my sensitive skin on the inside of my thigh. "We're going to take care of you, baby."

Large shoulders pushed my legs wider as if to prove his point. My hips bucked, and my back arched as he ran his tongue through my wetness. He groaned and licked and sucked until my toes were curling. My core grasped around nothing, and I cried out. I was so empty. "Please."

He pushed thick fingers into me, making an indecent sound. I rocked against his hand, core clutching him as he brought them in harder. *Please, yes, yes, please.*

Lips trailed over my chest, and a hot, flat tongue ran over my nipple and stroked it in time with my other alpha's fingers. An alpha pulled my hair back, tilting my head, and devoured my mouth. The three of them consumed my senses, and tension built, tightening, heating, burning until it exploded through my veins with the force of my orgasm.

Before I could collapse back, I was pulled over a large, naked chest. I licked across his nipple, running my teeth over the edge. His chuckle vibrated under me. "Careful, it's sensitive."

His voice was soft, soothing, a deep familiarity to it. I peeled my eyes open, and pitch-black eyes met mine. *Rafe.*

His eyes searched mine, the corners rimming red. “Bliss.” His voice was reverent as he cupped my face, thumbs drawing soothing circles.

“You’re here.” My breath hitched, throat closing around my next inhale. “How are you here?”

Fingers slid my hair back from my face and cupped my chin, turning it to the side. My gaze broke from startling black to honey brown, and a cry broke free. “Killian.”

I didn’t look away from him as soft lips kissed up my spine and marked my neck with his scent. “Little Wolf.”

My heart clenched, and tears burned my eyes. *Nox*.

I’d missed them so much. A voice cried from far within me. I wasn’t supposed to want them here. I should tell them to leave. But that didn’t make any sense. They’d take care of me. My heat seemed to agree because the room became stifling. I shifted over Rafe, needing the friction my body craved and pried to his belt off.

The heat became painful with each second my alphas weren’t inside me. Tears pooled in my eyes as I met *Nox*’s gaze. “I need you.”

“We’re here.” Rafe stroked his thumb over my cheek and took a deep breath. His eyes searched mine tentatively. “We can make it stop, but you need to be knotted.” He clenched his jaw and let out an unsteady breath. “This wasn’t supposed to happen like this, but let us take care of you.”

“Please.” Fire burned away my coherent thought, and my slick soaked between my legs. Yes, that’s exactly what I needed. “Yes, Alpha, please.”

He flipped me over to lie beneath him, and he positioned himself at my entrance. Black eyes pierced mine. He hesitated, brows pinched together as they searched mine, a flash of panic visible.

I used my heel to force him forward, and my mouth opened as he slid inside me. I stretched around him inch by inch. I whimpered as he moved deeper. So full. Too full.

My slick drenched us, and my alpha slid to his hilt, dropping his lips to my ear. “That’s a good girl. You were made to take us.”

He sat back on his knees, only to have another mouth capture mine. Fingers dug into my jaw, holding it open as he thrust his tongue deep, nearly choking me. I rolled my hips, and bruising fingers dug into my skin. Soothing words turned to growls as each touch turned sharper, uncontrolled.

Wet open-mouth kisses trailed from my breast to my stomach. “Let me taste her.”

He lifted my hips high off the bed, my eyes rolling back as my alpha pounded into me while a soft mouth captured my clit. Three alphas claimed me. I moaned into the mouth still covering mine. They thrust, licked, sucked until I was a writhing mess, my slick a pool under me.

Mine, mine, mine, chanted through my brain as he moved again, washing away everything else but the feel of them.

He grunted, becoming painfully bigger, pushing deeper within me. His knot locked on as he lost himself to the rut. My orgasm came on hard, detonating as my alpha’s hot liquid filled me.

I floated in and out of myself, sometimes aware, sometimes seeing only in scent and color. Hands and teeth and tongues covered my body, and I focused on that—trying desperately to cling to anything tactile.

My blood boiled until everything that was me burned away and only instinct remained. I rocked my hips as my core stretched around my alpha. *Yes, please, yes.*

They were the only thing that gave me any peace.

I tilted my head, exposing my neck as a tongue lapped my mating glands. I wanted his teeth to break my skin, to own me in all ways. Something held back my plea, fighting the fog of heat to stop me from begging him for it.

As if sensing what I craved, he sucked hard on my flesh. A knot stretched me wide, and pleasure pulsed through my core, ricocheting up my body with my release. The tension seeped out of me, and I went limp against the mattress. A soft hum of satisfaction settled in. Brilliant green eyes met mine, and he brushed damp hair off my face, his cock still twitching inside me. Some of the haze lifted, and my eyes widened.

Was I hallucinating? If I was, I didn't want to stop. Nox laid his chest against mine, holding most of his weight on his forearms, and I hummed at the contact.

"She's more lucid than last time."

I turned my head, and Killian's lips tipped up, drawing my own smile. His brows furrowed, a sadness taking the place of joy. Why was he sad? We were together.

He kissed my forehead and lifted from beside me. I reached out for him but settled when he came back with a glass of water. Nox sat up, carefully positioning me so I straddled him, and moaned as he sank in further. It would take time for his knot to go down enough for him to let go.

I took a sip from the glass, blinking away the fog. "Is this the second time?" Confusion pushed forward. Something was missing. "Was Rafe here?"

Nox kissed up my neck. "He had to leave, but he'll be back. It's been days, Little Wolf."

Days? That couldn't be. How could any of this be real? My boys, my pack. How was this possible? I pressed my face into Nox's chest. "Are you real?" My breath caught. "I need you to be real."

A growl rippled through him, and his hands bound around my waist. "We're real. Please remember this. Please don't hate us."

That didn't make sense. Why would I hate them?

Heat rose in my chest in a wave, and I shifted on him. I was so warm.

Fingers smoothed up my back. "Don't worry, babe. We'll take care of you. For as long as you need." He kissed my neck. "For as long as you want us."

CHAPTER 10

Rafe

I shut the door to the nest and leaned against it, closing my eyes. My skin crawled as I tried to breathe through my mouth to lessen the scent still coming from the room. Bliss was still in her heat, and it was torture to walk away from her—even temporarily.

Wes walked backward down the hall, a cocky smile spread wide across his face. He wore his usual black biker T-shirt and ripped jeans, with his long dirty-blond hair pulled back in a man bun we never ceased to give him shit about. With his leather vest on, he looked like that guy from *Sons of Anarchy*. “That good, huh?”

A growl ripped from my chest, and red seeped through my vision. The haze of Bliss’ heat still clung to me. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Wes’ smile dropped as I took a step forward. He raised his hands in front of him and muttered, as if trying to calm a charging animal. “Easy there, killer. I was just joking around.”

I stilled, taking deep breaths. I knew damn well I was out of control, but this fucker should’ve known better. He had called my cell enough times in the last few hours that eventually the ring broke through to me. The functioning part of my brain knew whatever he wanted, it must be important, because the guy wasn’t suicidal. “Well, don’t. What are you doing here?”

Wes moved his fingers over his mouth in a zipper motion, but he couldn’t hide the smirk from his eyes. I reminded myself that he was nearly family, and therefore I shouldn’t kill him. Although, at the moment, I couldn’t think

of a single reason we let him hang around.

Wes cleared his throat. “Calm down. We got another order, and after the shit that went down at the dock, we don’t have enough supply.”

The muscles in my back tensed, every instinct screaming at me to go back to Bliss. “Can’t. I’m not done taking care of something.”

Wes let out a breath, and his brows pinched in the middle. “Fuck, man. You think I’d be asking you if it wasn’t an emergency?” He raked his fingers through his hair and cradled the back of his head, arms winged out at the sides as he looked at the roof. “Listen, if I could do it myself, I would, but we both know my beta blood is useless. So you’re going to have to break the heat spell and leave your girl in the very capable hands of your pack.” Wes met my gaze and bit his lip as he looked me over. He must’ve been able to see the “fuck off” written on my face, because his next word sealed the deal for him. “Please.”

I huffed out a breath and glanced back at the closed door. Bliss was in there, and it went against everything in my nature to walk away, but Wes wouldn’t be asking if he thought there was any way around it. Our position and our jobs were precarious. The Institute didn’t fuck around—if we didn’t come through, they’d find someone else, and then where would we be? Back to not being able to take care of our omega? Not a chance.

I cracked my neck from side to side. “Let’s get Ares and go.”

Wes’ eyes widened. “He’s not in there?”

The smell of decaying flowers filled my nose. You didn’t need to be an alpha to know one didn’t just leave their omega in heat unless they absolutely had to. Ares had his own demons that he had to work through. “No, but if you want to keep that pretty face of yours, I wouldn’t mention anything to him about it.”

Wes grimaced. He knew I wasn’t joking.

The hall opened up to the kitchen and living room. Ares sat in the corner armchair with a half-drunk bottle of vodka in his hand. Strands of white hair fell into his eyes as he completely ignored us. It was a good thing blood alcohol levels didn’t affect the product. “Get up. We’ve got another order.”

Ares' ice-blue eyes narrowed on me before he looked away and took another swig of the bottle. A muscle ticked in his jaw, and his knuckles were white where he clenched his hand in a fist. Any other day, I'd leave him alone, but the sooner we got this done, the sooner I got back to Bliss.

"Listen, you can wallow in your bullshit another time. The others have to stay with Bliss. Which leaves you and me."

Wes looked between us, his fingers drumming on the counter. "I don't get it, guys. I thought you'd be ecstatic getting her back. You know, because it's the only thing you've cared about for the last four fucking years."

Ares stood and crowded Wes. "Yeah, we're selfish bastards. I'm just seeing that clearly now."

Anger radiated off Ares, and I stepped between them in case he took out his anger on our favorite beta. "Let's go."

Ares glared at me before grabbing his leather jacket from the back of the lounge chair and walking out the door.

I shook my head. "Well, that went well."

Twenty minutes later, Wes pulled into an old research labs parking lot we'd rented out as soon as we could afford it. The building looked completely on the up and up, with the name MediLife Research Lab glowing in big letters on the sign overhead. The main reason we'd chosen this lab over the other ones was the lack of windows. We couldn't have average people seeing what we were up to. The Institute might buy from us, but if shit went down, they wouldn't do shit. We were on our own.

The development and sale of hormonal enhancements was completely illegal. You weren't supposed to fuck around with nature, which was exactly why it was such a lucrative business.

Ares trailed behind me as I walked through the doors. We'd been here every week like clockwork for the last couple of years. The Alpha Lupi had always dealt hormones, but it wasn't until we'd figured out how to use our own blood that the game really changed. Prior to that, everything was synthetic, but we had the genuine stuff. We could make a regular beta irresistible at a club or completely neutralize an omega. We had the top product in the

market, and how we did it was under lock and key. There were only two people that knew the secret outside of our pack: Wes and Dr. Lewinsky.

Wes got to work, disabling the alarm and unlocking the door, holding it open for Ares and me. A chime rang as we walked in, announcing our presence. The doctor came around the corner, a hand tucked behind his back. He placed his gun on the counter and huffed out a breath. “Jesus Christ, I wasn’t expecting you.”

He was an older man in his late fifties with dyed brown hair and a fake tan to hide his age. Not that it mattered. All we cared about was he was the best at what he did. When we found him, he’d just been busted for making synthetic blockers for one of our rival gangs. He was a disgrace in the medical field, and losing both his lab and practice had crippled him. Which made him perfect for us. At the time, he was making a more potent product and was desperate enough to switch sides. Once he was in, we gave him a cut and knew he’d be loyal to us from that point on.

Lewinsky straightened, pulling his shit together. “Last-minute order? I thought what you had would last you a month.”

It fucking should have.

Ares strode through the reception area into the back, where the lab was located. “You asking questions now? I thought you worked for us.”

The doctor paled, chasing after him. I rolled my eyes. I wondered if Wes and the doctor could smell the vodka leaking out of his pores or if that was just me.

The lab was small but well-kept. We set four gurneys up with blood donation stations on each side. Not that we were in the business of giving away blood. Ares laid out on his gurney, his jacket off and his eyes closed. He gave off a *don’t fucking talk to me* vibe that was backed up by the scent of ginger wafting off him. I collapsed in my usual spot, kicking my feet up. Anxiety was riding high with the overwhelming need to get back to our girl. She was close to the end of her heat, and I didn’t want to miss the last of it.

“Just make it quick,” I grumbled. “We’ve got shit to do.”

Dr. Lewinsky slid a needle into one of the large veins in my arm. He was practiced, and within seconds, the bag to my right was filling with blood. If we weren't alphas, our veins would've collapsed like drug addicts by now, but luckily, we healed fast.

Lewinsky switched out the bag on my arm and brought the full one to his steel worktable. We'd set him up with every high-tech piece of equipment he needed. The key to our success was quality product fast, and enormous quantities. That was how we undercut the market and ran everyone else out of town. The doctor used a syringe to place a few drops into each vial before setting it on a device that spun them at rapid speed. I didn't know how it all worked, but I knew we had the best.

Blockers convinced an omega's body that they'd just come out of a heat cycle. Their body stopped producing scent for the following couple of days, making it possible for them to recover without their alpha being all over them. Which made it the perfect solution for unmated omegas.

We'd been selling the Institute a steady stream of product for years now. They weren't who we were selling to the other night. In our attempt to make enough money to get Bliss back, we tried a new client, and that shit blew up in our faces.

The doctor's magnifying glasses dropped to the table, and a smile widened on his face. "Well, this was unexpected."

Ares sat up. "What are you going on about?"

The doctor looked at us. "What aren't you telling me? Your blood has four times the pheromones it normally does. You could put an omega to sleep for a week with this blend."

Wes cleared his throat but wisely stayed quiet. There was no need to inform Dr. Lewinsky about Bliss.

Ares must have thought the same because he yanked the needle from his arm without flinching. "We're out."

The doctor looked up from where he was typing on his laptop. He was a beta, so he couldn't scent the shift in mood, but he was smart enough to feel it. "Alright, with this higher potency, I can clear your quota for the month."

“We’ll check in later. This product needs to move tomorrow.”

I pulled my needle out with significantly more care than Ares had. My skin itched with the need to get back home because, for the first time in four years, Bliss was waiting for me there. If she would forgive us was still up for debate.

“I’m gonna drop you guys here,” Wes said, stopping the van a good hundred yards from the warehouse. “Don’t want to get too close to your girl’s nest again.”

Ares grunted something that sounded like “catchya” and jumped out, seeming to not notice or care that Wes hadn’t driven all the way up to our front door. I shook my head, staring after him as he disappeared into the darkness. “I need to do something about that. He’s gonna end up killing someone.”

Wes let out a low whistle. “Good luck with that.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I barked, pushing more power into my voice than I’d intended.

Wes’ hair blew back, and he looked a bit shell-shocked. “Easy, man.”

“Sorry.” I meant it. “I’m on edge.”

“Clearly.” He shook his head. “I just meant I wouldn’t want to deal with Ares on a good day.”

I grumbled in agreement. To his credit, Wes hadn’t been around when Ares had good days. I’d expected that Bliss being back would make a difference, but so far, not so much. Stubborn prick.

“I gotta go.” I reached for the door handle. “There better not be any more emergencies. If anything else happens, don’t call.”

Wes laughed. “Right. Thanks for doing this.”

“I’m not kidding. If you call again, someone better be fucking dead.” I hopped out of the van and slammed the door.

Re-entering the warehouse was almost painful. Bliss' scent overwhelmed me—fucking captivating after being away from it, even for an hour. I tore down the hall toward the nest with single-minded focus. Easing the door open, I scanned the darkened room.

Nox lifted his head and squinted hard at me over where Bliss lay draped across his chest. It was dark enough that without his glasses, he probably couldn't see me that well, and the smell in here was probably muddling my scent.

“All set,” I said, more to identify my voice than anything else.

He relaxed. “Shut the door. They're asleep.”

I nodded, glancing at Killian passed out on Nox's right side, using his tattooed arm as a pillow. I raised an eyebrow. “You're not?”

“Course not.”

It didn't actually surprise me all that much. Nox was a perpetual insomniac—an overthinker by nature. Still, if there was ever a time to sleep, this was it.

I stepped up to the bed and pulled off my T-shirt with one hand, then paused before taking off my jeans too—trying to decide if that was weird since Bliss was currently resting.

Nox snorted and shifted Bliss slightly, rearranging her hair. “Fuck, man, don't get modest on us now.”

I rolled my eyes and kicked off my jeans too. “Shut up.” Crawling into the nest on Nox's other side, I stared up at the ceiling. “Do you think it's almost over?”

He glanced down at her. “Yeah. She was mostly lucid the last time, I think.”

My chest ached at the knowledge that I'd missed that, but there was nothing I could do about it now. “She recognized you?”

“Yeah. You have no idea how hard it was not to claim her.” He didn't sound happy about it, mostly just resigned.

A growl ripped from my chest, and my eyes flew to her neck. “You didn't.”

“No.”

We fell silent. We didn't need to finish the conversation; I could smell his anxiety. Even though it went against every instinct we all possessed, none of us were going to just claim Bliss while she probably had no agency. At least not before we'd spoken to her. She was already going to be livid, and a mating couldn't be taken back. Neither could bonding, but that had been completely out of our control.

“Do you think that all her heats will be like this, or is it the drugs?” I said after a long beat.

He shook his head. “I don't know. Little column a, little column b, probably.”

The problem was that information about omegas was kept very secret and passed down mostly in families. There were rumors, sure, but it was impossible to tell what was real. It wasn't like any of us had ever spent any time with omegas or even knew any other alphas who were mated to one. There was only one in our state that we knew of, and she was well into her forties. Her daughter, Flora, had gone to school with us.

“What if she's never fully lucid during it?” I voiced a concern that had been rattling around my head for the last few hours. “Then what?”

Nox barked a sarcastic laugh. “I'm not even thinking that far ahead. I want to get through a conversation first. One step at a time.”

“Fair enough.”

He shifted Bliss again, and she stirred, mumbling something in her sleep. We both froze, watching her.

As if alerted by Bliss' voice, Killian cracked an eye open and sat up. “What's going on?”

“Shhh,” I hissed, knowing I sounded like a goddamn hypocrite. “Don't wake her up.”

Killian sniffed the air and glanced down at my arm. It had healed over, but dried blood still stuck to the skin. No doubt, that was what he was smelling.

“When did you get back?”

“Ten minutes ago.”

“Did you take Ares with you?”

I nodded but didn't answer, not wanting to get into it again. “There's enough product to keep the Institute off our asses for a few weeks, which is good timing...”

I trailed off, and they both watched me, eyes resigned. We'd handled this badly. I wouldn't change anything about what we'd done, but we'd still fucked up. We now had an angry alpha on our hands who thought he had a claim to our girl. We'd protect her regardless, but it was going to be a lot more difficult while she remained unmated, and our pack was fractured.

“We need a plan,” I said unnecessarily.

“A stratagem,” Nox muttered.

“Sure.” I wasn't really listening.

We needed to talk—all five of us—but that couldn't happen until Bliss woke up. A lot had changed in the last four years, but in other ways, nothing had. Every single one of us was still in love with her, and every decision still started and ended with Bliss.

CHAPTER 11

Bliss

I drifted in that warm place between sleep and waking, cozy and unwilling to open my eyes. My cheek pressed into something warm and solid, and fingers tangled in the back of my hair, stroking lightly. Who was that?

Whoever it was, I never wanted them to stop. I sighed, pressing my nose deeper into the scent of lemon and sandalwood, and shifted, giving better access to the nape of my neck. It had been years since anyone had touched me like that. Not since...

My eyes popped open and met warm brown ones, and I reeled back, confusion crashing over me in waves.

I choked, a noise somewhere between a laugh and a scream coming out of the back of my throat as Killian and I stared at each other. His hand hung in the air, as though he'd forgotten what to do with it. He seemed to realize at the same moment I did, and he put it back down on the bed.

"Bliss? It's okay."

Killian's voice didn't sound exactly the same as I remembered. It was deeper and warmer now. He gave me a nervous smile, like I was a wild animal he was afraid was about to bite him.

"I—" I peeled my face off the chest of my former friend and jumped to my feet, becoming all too aware that I wasn't wearing anything. My heart started to pound out of control in my ears. "I—where am I?"

Nest, my muddled brain chanted. Nest. Mine. Safe. You remember this. Put the pieces back together.

I was standing on a bed in the middle of a small, dimly lit room. There were no windows, and the bed took up almost all the limited floor space. The room smelled of sex—so strong that it was incredible that I hadn't immediately noticed. I wobbled on legs that felt like Jell-O, toppling sideways on the unsteady mattress.

A second set of strong arms circled me, the scent of sandalwood suddenly filling my nose. "Little Wolf? Take a second. Don't panic."

I swiveled around and almost laughed as I came face-to-face with another old friend—the comedy of errors was too much. "You shaved your hair," I blurted out, sounding idiotic.

The corner of Nox's lip twitched as he nudged me back to standing on my own. "Yeah. A few years ago."

He ran his hand over the back of his shaved head, looking sheepish, and my anxiety spiked. It was a familiar expression on a face that was far older and more angular than I remembered. Like trying to trace back the plot of a book you read as a child or the words to a song you only heard once.

"I'm not panicking," I said bluntly, as much for my benefit as theirs. "I'm..."

Confused wasn't really the right word. Fuzzy.

"Disoriented," Nox supplied.

"Sure."

I made awkward eye contact with him—I didn't have to see his expression to know he was disappointed and nervous. I could smell it. Like dead flowers. Scrambling off the bed, I scanned the floor for something to wear.

"Here."

I looked up into dark eyes, and my brain detonated. "Not you too."

I winced as I heard the words pop out of my mouth. That hadn't come out right.

Rafe's face fell as he held out a black T-shirt to me. He looked the most similar to how he had four years ago, at least compared to Nox and Killian, who had both clearly undergone some kind of second puberty, but he was still older, taller, and more angular. His tan was more pronounced, like he was spending the majority of his time outside these days, and there was a fresh cut above his right eye. That must have been deep to not have healed over yet, even with alpha genes.

I straightened, taking the T-shirt and slipping it over my head. The spicy scent of chili peppers surrounded me as the fabric fell to my mid-thigh. I spun on my heel, searching for a door.

"B, wait," Killian called. "Where are you trying to go?"

"Uh..." I blanched at the sound of my familiar childhood nickname. I wasn't sure where I was going; I just needed to get out of this room.

"Let's just take this slow." Nox put his hands up like he was under arrest. "We'll explain everything, I promise."

My mouth opened and shut. What was wrong with me? It was like my brain was moving, but my voice couldn't keep up. The tension ticked up a notch in the room. The scent of their collective anxiety mingled with my own, making the air smell salty and oppressive.

"Shower," Rafe said after a long moment. It wasn't a question.

I stared at him and huffed a laugh—a real one. "Okay, bossy."

His eyebrows shot up in clear alarm, and for some reason, that made me laugh harder.

If seventeen-year-old me could see me now.

I spent over an hour in the shower, and slowly the fog clouding my brain cleared.

It was like coming out of sleep paralysis, or waking up after a very high fever. Which, I suppose, made sense. I'd never experienced heat, but I knew first heats were always the most intense. Combine that with the drugs I'd been given, and no wonder I was addled.

I remembered getting into Alpha Nero's helicopter. Arriving at his house. Then things got a little hazy, but they picked up again a few days later. I remembered parts of my heat, sort of, but it was like everything was covered in a film. Maybe this was how the girls had felt on blockers.

As the memory of Alpha Nero stabbing the needle into my neck resurfaced, rage pooled in my stomach, and I dug my nails into my palms.

I willed myself not to scream—undoubtedly the guys were feeling the full effects of my anger right now, wherever they were. If I started yelling someone would come barging in here. I doubted they would have a choice—alphas, like omegas, had little control over their instincts. Alpha Nero had a choice, though. I wasn't his mate yet—he knew what he was doing.

In every revenge fantasy, and pain fueled fever dream I'd had over the last four years, I'd never imagined this possibility. Maybe if I'd had a better understanding of the Agora... but no, not even then.

I was grateful not to be mated to Alpha Nero right now. I needed to focus on that, and not how potentially messed up my situation was about to become.

When I was done in the shower, I stood in front of the mirror and tilted my head to the side, examining my unblemished skin. None of my mating glands had been so much as bruised. No bite marks. No claiming. No mates.

I was lucky, if not a little confused. It was almost impossible for an alpha to go through an entire heat cycle and not claim an omega, especially when bonded. I'd never even heard of it.

So, why? Why would they do that?

My stomach flipped. Had they not wanted to be there with me? Oh, God.

I'd thought for the briefest second when I smelled them at The Agora that they were going to take me home right then. It would have been stupid and weak of me to forgive them so quickly, but I might have—instincts were hard

to ignore.

Regardless, I'd have to manage it somehow if I was going to face my former friends and hold on to the shreds of dignity I had left.

Easier said than done.

I found a set of pajama pants and a T-shirt left for me. I held them up to my nose, breathing in the scent—hot and delicious. I frowned. My brain and my instincts didn't seem to be aligned. I opened the bathroom door and found the upstairs hall empty. I paused, unsure where to go. Was I supposed to go back to the nest? Or was I allowed to leave?

Voices drifted up from the main floor. "Call Lewinski. There's something wrong."

"I can't. You think the Institute will just ignore it if they know we have her here?"

"Fuck it, I don't care," Killian said.

"You should. Maybe there's nothing wrong. Maybe this is normal. How would we know?"

My stomach sank. They were talking about me. Typical.

The last thing I wanted was to go down there and face them—I wasn't sure what would be worse; if they tried to apologize, or if they wanted nothing to do with me.

Actually, that was a lie—I knew what would be worse. If they'd brought me here just to abandon me again, it would be far worse. I might as well rip that industrial strength band aid off now.

I crept down the hallway toward the voices and stepped into a dimly lit living room. Rafe, Killian and Nox all jumped up from their seats around a dark wood coffee table as I entered. My eyes narrowed slightly, noticing that once again, Ares wasn't with them. He was around here somewhere, though. I could smell him everywhere. Like an oncoming thunderstorm. His absence felt like further proof that they probably hadn't wanted to participate in my heat.

Not that I should care—did care. *I didn't care.*

“How are you feeling?” Rafe asked, quickly stepping forward into the forefront of the group.

“Um, better.” I crossed my arms over my stomach. “I know where I am now...well, kind of.”

His expression split into apparent relief as I trailed off, unsure how to finish my sentence. “You’re at our house. We brought you here, because...” It was his turn to trail off.

“Yeah. I get the idea.”

I bit my lip. This was painfully uncomfortable. My eyes darted to Nox and Killian, who both looked like they were in physical pain. Relatable.

“Do you need anything?” Killian asked, running both hands over his head. “Food, or are you cold, or...” He looked around, nervous.

“Water?” Nox offered.

“I’m fine.”

Silence stretched.

Killian swung his arms in a wide arc, blowing out a breath. “Please let me just get you something. I feel like a fucking idiot just standing here.”

I snorted a laugh despite myself. “I’ll take some water.”

Killian grinned and darted over to the kitchen.

Another small smile crossed my face. The interaction was sort of nostalgic. Some things had remained the same over the years.

A hopeful scent rose in the air and I gritted my teeth, a shadow falling over the warm glow in my mind. Some things might have remained the same, but most things hadn’t and the most important thing to remember was this wasn’t my pack. These guys weren’t even my friends anymore.

Nox adjusted his glasses. “Bliss, do you want to sit?”

Rafe crossed his arms. “We should talk.”

Yes. We probably should.

God knew I didn’t prefer alpha Nero, but they didn’t know that when they’d barged into his house to stop my mating. They’d showed up at the Agora, after four years of complete silence, and what? Was it some biological bond instinct that made them follow me out of the Agora? They felt my fear and couldn’t stop themselves? Maybe.

I’d spent enough time in classes about alphas and omegas over the years to know that was more than possible. God, I knew from experience that we’d felt each other’s emotions from opposite ends of the country. I braced myself. Even putting aside the awkwardness of my heat, I deserved an explanation.

“Fine.” I tried to channel Flora’s bluntness, wishing she were here with me to bounce opinions off of. She’d have so much to say about this. “Let’s hear it.”

Maybe that’s too blunt. Too blasé. What did you say to someone after four years of abandonment and a week of sex? *How’ve you been?*

I sat gingerly on the edge of the couch, facing them. Killian strode back over and pressed a full glass of water into my hand, his dark eyes meeting mine with an intensity that didn’t match the benign action. I took the glass and averted my gaze, my neck heating.

“That didn’t play out like we thought it would.” Nox shifted on his feet, where he stood behind the couch. “Are you okay? What we did. Are you okay with that? You know, helping you through your heat?”

I swallowed. “It’s not like you had any choice. I’m sorry, I know you guys weren’t expecting me to practically beg you for it after all this time, but I promise that was a one off. Not something you’ll have to worry about happening again.”

Three growls ripped through the air and I reeled back, nearly sloshing water over my lap in surprise.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Rafe barked.

“Back off, you’ll scare her,” Killian snapped at Rafe, though he didn’t seem to be much less angry himself. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

The growling didn’t even phase me, which was something I didn’t want to think too hard about right now. I should have been terrified. My eyes darted back and forth, confused by the intensity of their reaction. “I just meant that it was probably mostly the drugs, but I’ll get out of your hair before my next heat anyway, so…”

Nox’s eyes flashed black, his jaw tightening. “No.”

“Where are you going?” Rafe bit out in a strained voice, clearly trying his best to stay calm.

“I’m not exactly sure,” I said honestly.

The plan brewing in my mind was half-formed, and maybe twenty percent likely to work, but that was far better than no plan at all. The top of my list so far was to find Flora, and then regroup from there. Maybe I could sleep in the nest room for a night and start trying to find her tomorrow? The guys probably owed me that much—

“You can’t leave. We just got you back,” Killian blurted out.

My eyes widened, half in surprise, half in confusion. I glanced around the group of virtual strangers, and my pulse quickened. “What are you talking about?”

The scent of guilt and misery rose in the room, blocking out all other smells. I coughed, gagging as it invaded my mouth and nose, crushing me.

“Bliss, we’re so sorry.” Rafe said, dejected. “I should have led with that. I should always say that to you, every day. This wasn’t the way we wanted to do things,”

Which part? I could think of several things they should apologize for, most of which I’d had quite a few years to dwell on.

I hadn’t heard a word from them the entire time I was at the Institute. They’d abandoned me and given up any chance we had of being a normal pack.

Then, in the heat, they hadn't wanted to mate.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked, frustrated.

"What do you mean?" Killian asked, the sour scent of confusion mingling with his guilt.

"Why come find me? Is it just because you have to?"

Nox pushed his sleeves further up his muscled arms and crossed them over his chest. "What do you mean, we have to?"

I widened my eyes. I felt like we were speaking different languages—just on totally different planes of existence. "Why would you bring me back here after all this time? Is it because of the bond? Because I can live with a little pain."

A deluge of scent hit me all at once. I couldn't sort it. Couldn't figure out which emotions were coming from where, but as we all stood there, the tornado of misery surrounding us seemed to pick up steam.

"Bliss," Rafe said finally. "We've always regretted leaving you. Always. We wanted you back for years." He frowned, clearly frustrated. "Nothing went the way we all planned, but now Nero and the Institute will be after you. You need to lie low for a while so we can keep you safe while we figure it out, but there's no way we're letting you go again. We can't."

I licked my lips, tasting the emotions in the air as I took it all in.

Guilt, anger, protection, love, sadness, guilt again.

"Right," I sighed, resigned. "I understand."

I did understand.

It wasn't their fault, really. Well, being dicks who made selfish decisions was their fault, but there were some parts of this that were just biological. They literally could not let me leave.

They did regret leaving me and in some way they loved me—it was like a shard of glass to the heart. After four years of lessons in how these bonds worked, I couldn't even lie to myself and believe that they had any choice.

They probably didn't even realize it was an instinct more than a real emotion.

"How about this?" I said, rubbing my tense eyebrows. "Can you guys help me get some blockers? I'll go back on them, and that will make it at least bearable for me to leave again. As long as I have them before my next heat, we'll probably be okay to separate."

"You want to go on blockers and leave?" Killian asked, slowly.

I raised my eyebrows. I'd admit it wasn't a perfect plan, but it sounded to me like their issue was that they couldn't keep themselves from trying to protect me. The institute had been very clear about how that instinct worked. Still, four years ago as soon as I took blockers they seemed able to let me go, and maybe I still had some in my system over the last week, because they hadn't bit me. Ares hadn't even been in the room. That was supposed to be impossible.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "I think that would be better for everyone."

No one stopped me as I stood to leave the room, the scent of wilted dandelions following after me like a dark cloud.



I jogged up a set of concrete stairs at the end of the hall, not really paying attention to where I was going. I just needed to get some air. I wished I could talk to Flora. She would have something just on the edge of mean to say about all the guys that would undoubtedly make me feel better.

There was a time when the guys themselves were my only friends. When they would have been the only people I would have talked to about anything, but that was a long time ago. We weren't those kids anymore. The men in the living room were almost strangers, and the parts of them that were familiar were haunting and disorienting. Like switching out a favorite actor for a new cast member in the middle of a season without explanation.

I shoved at a heavy door at the top of the stairs marked "EXIT" and stepped out onto the roof.

I tipped my head back and stared at the sky. It was too cloudy to see a single star. I sighed. Of course. Instead, I turned toward the skyline, and my heart squeezed.

I knew that skyline.

For some reason, I'd assumed we were still in New York. Brooklyn, or maybe Long Island, but we weren't. This was Stratford, New Jersey, where we'd grown up. And that meant that this warehouse was probably—

Movement to my left caught my eye. I stopped short.

A man's white-blond head rose over the back of a beat up old couch ten yards away, his face turned from me. His arm was slung over the armrest, a bottle clutched in his hand.

Ares.

My heart pounded against my ribs as the fresh scent of night wafted toward me.

Every muscle in my body tensed.

Even if I didn't recognize his scent, the hair would have been a dead giveaway. I'd never seen anyone else so naturally devoid of color in real life.

I didn't speak, unsure if I should make my presence known or turn around and go back inside. I shifted on my feet, indecisive, my curiosity warring with my anxiety.

"Hello, Bliss." He put too much emphasis on the S at the end of my name, like "Blisssssss."

My breath caught. "How did you know it was me?"

I hadn't expected anyone to be up here, and I wasn't prepared for another confrontation with my past so soon. Or at all.

I should have said something more scathing. In a perfect world, I would rewind time and march back down the stairs. Or better, throw something at the back of his head before he said my name.

I was braver in my head.

Ares snorted and took a sip of the bottle. “I can smell you from here.”

He didn’t turn around, but I didn’t have to see his face to know he was smirking. I frowned, affronted. I’d just showered and I was wearing someone else’s clothes. “Yeah, well, you’re not the only one and you smell awful.”

Better. Sort of.

“Pft. Liar.”

I narrowed my eyes, almost shaking with annoyance at being called out.

I was lying, and I’d forgotten for a moment he would know. I could have kicked myself—it had really been too long since I’d been around anyone not on blockers.

He smelled like rain and leather, but it was muted by burnt sugar and... something. This was stupid. I didn’t know why I was still standing here.

I sniffed the air and frowned again. “Wait, are you drunk?”

Ares laughed bitterly. “Do you care?”

“I guess not...” I narrowed my eyes, annoyed for no one specific reason, but why wasn’t he turning around? “Are you really not going to look at me?”

“No one is stopping you from coming over here.”

My eye twitched. God, at least the others had made some kind of fumbling effort to apologize. This was—well, very Ares.

I moved without conscious thought. The couch was grouped around a beat up coffee table, with a few chairs scattered around it. None of the furniture matched, or had the same high-end appearance of the decor inside. In fact, from what I could see, this stuff looked second-hand at best.

I came to a halt directly in front of where Ares sat, feet up on the coffee table. He met my gaze, head on, expression unreadable. I faltered, hit suddenly with painful *déjà vu*. It was probably that I actually had seen him at some point during the transport out of Alpha Nero’s mansion, I reasoned, or maybe just that Ares had always had very distinctive pale blue eyes.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and looked me straight in the eye. A shiver traveled down my neck. “Hello, Bliss.”

“You already said that.”

“And you didn’t respond.”

I cocked an eyebrow, unsure what to make of this. With the metabolism of an adult alpha, getting legitimately drunk for any length of time would take enough alcohol to kill a horse. “Hello, Ares.”

At the sound of my words, my chest seized with alien emotions. I could feel more than smell everything that ran through his head.

Pain, lust, resentment, protectiveness, loathing. Some feelings were the same as the rest of the guys, but most were sharper. Darker. It was impossible to tell how much of that was a conscious thought, and how much was a biological instinct.

I stepped back. “Sorry,” I muttered, shaken by the intensity of his emotions. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Well, I live here,” he said lazily, but his posture was rigid. “Did you want me to leave?”

There was something loaded in that question, but I couldn’t quite place it. “No. I’ll go.”

He blew air out his nose, resigned. “Don’t.”

“No—”

“Fuck, just sit down.” He shoved the bottle he’d been drinking out of into my hand. “Here, drink this. You look like you need it.”

I grimaced. That was probably true.

I turned around, trying to convince myself I had no choice. I didn’t even believe my own lies. He hadn’t barked at me—I didn’t have to stay.

The liquid burnt the back of my mouth and traveled down my throat, warming me from the inside. I coughed, choking on the familiar sting. It had been years since I’d drank anything stronger than orange juice. “What is

this?”

“Nothing good.”

“Perfect.” I took another sip and passed it back.

We sat in silence for a while, passing the bottle back and forth. I wondered if we had nothing to say to each other, or too much.

Both.

I leaned back on my elbows, looking up at the sky. The constellations were just a tiny bit fuzzy at the edges, the smallest stars hard to make out. I glanced over at him, but instead my eyes fixed on what he was sitting on. My heart stopped. “Oh my god.”

“What?”

I gestured to the beat up burgundy sofa. “You kept our couch from our spot?”

“Oh.” He glanced down as though expecting to see a different sofa. “Yeah.”

When we were kids, we’d lived in a shitty foster home where we weren’t allowed to hang out because of rules about fraternization between foster siblings of different genders. Outside of school, we spent most of our time at a clearing in the woods filled with a firepit and a bunch of stolen or dumpster dived furniture.

The couch was gross then, so it had to be a biohazard now. It had been through all sorts of weather, and it was far from new when we got it. Still, the fact that they kept it thawed my heart slightly. “Why would you guys keep this? It’s got to be disgusting. “

I smelled his sudden nervousness and registered vaguely that it didn’t correspond at all to his bored expression. “Don’t know. We didn’t have any shit when we moved in here and started working. It’s nothing.”

Lie.

His blatant lie tasted like acid and we both winced. God, if I’d had the ability to scent emotions as a teenager the way they did, things would have been so different.

Then again, maybe not. I still would have gotten carted off to the Institute. Not that it mattered right now.

“Why are you still here, anyway?” I swished the alcohol around in my mouth.

“I just told you, I live here,” he said sardonically.

“No.” I passed the bottle back again. “In this city. Why are you guys still hanging around?”

“We work here.”

I wrinkled my nose. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth. His words smelled like Windex—I wasn't sure I cared enough to push it.

“Well, I'll try not to get in the way of your work while I'm staying here for however long it takes to get blockers,” I said, as casually as possible. My voice came out a little higher pitched than I meant it. My head was nice and buzzy now.

“What?” He whipped his head over to look at me, eyes narrowing. Almost too alert. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm going to get blockers so I can leave. I just talked to the others about it.”

He ground his teeth, the waves of anger in the air almost palpable as he stared at me for a full beat. “Fucking idiots.” He pulled an iPhone out of his pocket, tapping something very fast onto the screen.

My gaze zeroed in on the phone. It was thinner, but larger than the kind that had been around before I'd entered the Institute. I assumed it still worked, more or less the same—maybe I could use it to find Flora. “What are you doing?”

“Texting Nox. Mother fucking...”

He trailed off and shoved the phone back into the pocket of his jacket and I watched it disappear. It was stupid. Before everything, I never would have hesitated to ask Ares for anything. I would have just taken that phone, but I had no idea where I stood anymore. I wasn't sure I should mention Flora—at least, not until I got some clarification on what they wanted from me.

“Why Nox?” I asked instead. I didn’t want to deal with whatever he was upset about. Ares was always upset when we were kids. He probably just didn’t want me here—he hadn’t been in the nest. My brow furrowed.

He took another sip from the bottle he had clutched in his tattooed fingers. “Because someone needs to talk to you and it shouldn’t be me.”

Okay. That was good, I guess, but that wasn’t what I meant. “No, I meant, why Nox? Why not Rafe?”

Rafe was Ares’ best friend. We’d all been one group, but whenever things split off, it was always Rafe and Ares and Killian and Nox. That was just how things were. The way Ares was looking at me right now, though, I was clearly missing something.

He snorted a derisive laugh. “You’ve been gone a long time, Love.”

We both heard the term of endearment and froze. I coughed. “Well, whose fault is that?”

CHAPTER 12

Bliss

I stood in the center of my childhood bedroom at the foster home.

Sun shone through the thin blanket I'd tacked up as a curtain, warming my face. I turned in a circle, my eyes traveling over mine and Flora's beds up against the wall. Our nightstand stood in the center, my Institute textbooks piled on top.

No, that's not right.

My brain buzzed with distant confusion, but I let the thought wash away.

"Bliss."

Warmth pressed in on me from all sides, and hands fanned over my stomach, arms, and waist.

"Baby, come here."

I leaned my head back onto the nearest shoulder, and heat pooled in my core. I blinked as awareness filled me. "Where did you all come from?"

No one answered directly. I reached out, pulling them closer to me. Their skin was like fire, burning under my fingers.

I whimpered, arching my neck. Stretching, presenting my throat—

My eyes popped open.

My heart pounded with adrenaline as I blinked up at the off-white ceiling, the spots fading from my vision.

Just a dream.

I hadn't had a dream like that in a while. It was almost every night we'd first been separated, but after the first year or so at the Institute, it had dulled to every few months. This was probably due to my heat. *Or the smell.* I grimaced as I plucked at the T-shirt I wore, which definitely didn't smell like me.

I'd spent the night in the nesting room. It was obvious both from the smell and the decor that no one slept in here full-time, so I felt it was the safest place to hide.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stretched. In some ways, I was feeling more alive this morning than I had in years. I wasn't in pain. I'd actually slept alright, and the cloud of gloom that had covered my every thought since I was seventeen seemed to have cleared somewhat.

I didn't want to think about that too hard. It would make it all the harder to stay firm about what I needed to do and leave once I got the blockers. In the meantime, I would channel all my temporary energy into finding Flora.

I got out of bed and crossed to the closet. The guys had apparently planned this to some extent because there were some clothes in there. I flipped through the hangers, frowning.

I snorted, holding up a sundress I would have definitely worn four years ago but now barely covered my boobs. They seemed to think I would look exactly the same as I had at seventeen, pre-transition. I shrugged and tried it on anyway. It was a snug fit, and a little shorter than I'd like, but it was better than a T-shirt and no pants.

The kitchen of the warehouse was teeming with activity.

Rafe stood at the island, his black hair covering his eyes as he typed something out on his phone. He was actively ignoring Ares, who was talking to him—or, more accurately, *at* him—as he loaded bullets into the chamber of a handgun. I raised my eyes at the gun. That was new.

Nox crossed in front of me, carrying several large wooden crates stacked on top of each other, and passed them to Killian, who leaned against the doorway, looking relaxed in his unbuttoned blue-and-green flannel shirt, showing off his abs under his fitted white shirt.

When I appeared, all movement paused. All four of them stopped what they were doing to turn and look at me. Silence hung in the air as none of us knew what to say.

“Morning, B,” Killian broke the tension. He dropped the crates, which looked heavy even for him. “Hungry?”

I shook my head, even as my stomach growled. I was famished, actually.

“Here, let me make you something before we go,” Nox said quickly, crossing back over to the refrigerator. He wore a crisp white shirt, black vest, and pants, juxtaposed by his pierced ear and shaved head.

“Where are we going?”

Ares grabbed his gun off the counter and stalked out of the room without so much as a glance in my direction. After a long pause where the scent of guilt rose in the room, practically choking me, Rafe followed.

Killian ran a hand over the back of his head, watching the door where his two friends had left. “We’ve gotta work. You can stay here, of course. It’s safe, and there’s stuff to do.” He glanced around. “Uh, here,” He grabbed a remote control off the coffee table in the open-concept living room. “This works the TV and the sound system. You can use whatever. I think everything’s logged in on the TV, but if you need a password, text me.”

“Text you with what?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Oi!” Killian reached into his pocket and pressed a cell phone into my hand. “Use this if you need us.”

My heart leapt as I took the sleek black iPhone and turned it over in my palm. Technology had definitely jumped a few generations, but I just needed to google Flora—that couldn’t be that difficult.

Nox reappeared at my side, now holding a plate of toaster waffles I recognized as a childhood favorite of mine. “There’s a ton of other stuff in the kitchen if you don’t still like these,” he said quickly. “And you can order whatever you want. There’s money on the counter.”

I blinked a couple of times, a little overwhelmed. “Where are you going?”

“Nowhere important.” Nox backed up, scooping up the abandoned crates. “I’ll see you—” He broke off, backing out of the room, and left his sentence hanging.

I laughed bitterly.

“What?” Killian asked, now the only guy left standing.

“I don’t know, it’s just funny. Even after all this time, you’re still running with that stupid gang. Or, I don’t know, maybe you guys have upped your game now.” I glanced around at the expensive warehouse home, which must have cost a fortune. “And you guys are still lying to me about it. Like as though I didn’t know.”

It wasn’t really funny, but it just felt so representative of all our issues. Back when we were teenagers, the guys were heavily involved in a local gang that dealt in alpha and omega party drugs. They always tried to keep me out of it and acted like I had no idea what was going on. Even then, their insistence on protecting me from everything was really keeping me at arm’s length.

Killian tilted his head. “We’re not lying, B. It’s just not important. Taking over Alpha Lupi was how we found you in the first place, but the details are boring.”

I could smell that he was telling the truth; I just didn’t agree. Still, it wasn’t really the time to get into it. The sooner they left, the sooner I could start trying to find Flora.

“Kill!”

Killian spun around in the direction of his name, then back to me. He took two steps forward, like he wasn’t sure if he should give me a hug or something. He didn’t. “Look, I know this is all messed up, but we’re going to find a way to fix it. I promise.”

“Right.” I smiled awkwardly.

That was exactly what I was trying to do. Fix this. By finding Flora and getting out of here.

“Good.” He smiled. “Please stay in the house.”

I crossed the room and sat down on the stools near the large kitchen island to eat my waffles. “Um, have a good day?”

“You too, B. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

The moment the door slammed, I powered on the phone and tapped the Safari icon. Thankfully, that hadn’t changed since the last time I’d used one of these. I typed “Flora Cabot” into the search bar

Nothing came up.

This was pointless, she’d have a new last name. *Ummmm.*

“Agora Ceremony. Mating announcements.”

Several news articles appeared. Omega Blair from the Institute had been mated to a reality TV star. It was an upset—omegas never went to C-list celebrities. Politicians, tech moguls, and A-listers only.

I glanced around the warehouse. Good thing the media hadn’t gotten wind of me yet.

I scrolled through several more articles speculating on the Agora Ceremony and stopped short at a picture of Flora. My heart pounded in my chest. In the photo, she was wearing her sparkling evening gown, her expression dazed. The man standing beside her was beaming in triumph. The caption of the photo read: *Former Congressmen, Judge Allen Raymond “Chip” Bishop III of Virginia, and his new mate, Omega Bishop.*

I ground my teeth. It didn’t even mention Flora’s name, but “Chip” got more names than a phonebook.

It did detail that Alpha Bishop lived in Brooks, Virginia, was a former congressman from the Sigma majority party, and was rumored to be on the short list for a Supreme Court seat in the next ten years.

Blood rushed in my ears when I came across a picture of Alpha Bishop shaking hands with Alpha Nero at some fundraiser. Nero's words came back to me, ringing in my head. "Speeding things up a bit... Some alphas do this, regardless."

I had to find her.

The only person I could think of who might know where Flora was and might be willing to help was her mother. Mrs. Cabot was an omega, and with any luck, she'd be something like Flora. When we were growing up, Flora had lived in one of the few nice houses in town. If I remembered right, it wasn't that far from the warehouse. I pulled up Google Maps on my phone, trying to remember what street she lived on.

I gave up, deciding that I would wing it.

When I reached the door to the warehouse, I paused. The guys told me not to go out—then again, they were saying that because they were afraid I'd be attacked. Years at the Institute taught me that I was currently about as safe as I was going to get without a mate.

The exterior of the warehouse looked nothing like I remembered. Years ago, this area was dirty, abandoned, and dilapidated—the kind of place five kids on the run could go unnoticed for a night because no one was around to see. Now, there were cars on the street, people on the sidewalks, and respectable storefronts surrounding the area. It was shocking how fast things had shifted. Practically impossible.

I set off down the street, drawing a few looks from passers-by. I wondered if they were staring because of my omega status or because of my too-short dress. Probably the latter. I hoped no one realized who or what I was, particularly since, as far as I could tell, the only people nearby were betas. The dress, though, was definitely eye-catching.

I turned a corner at the end of the street—noting the newly painted crosswalks and installed stoplights—and passed a little strip mall that absolutely hadn't been there before. There was a dry cleaner, bank, and a

CVS. I wished they had a Starbucks or something. It had been years since I'd had a coffee.

I stared up at the CVS sign. They sold Starbucks coffee in bottles in their refrigerator sections—at least they used to. I hesitated only briefly before ducking into the store. The guys had left me money for a reason, right?

The familiar and distinctive smell of the drugstore hit me like a long-lost memory—floor cleaner, stale gum, and Herbal Essences shampoo. I grabbed a red plastic basket from a small, haphazard stack by the door and strolled down the center aisle, making a beeline for the food.

There were too many types of coffee to choose from—lattes and frappes and coffee-flavored energy drinks. I selected a normal-ish caramel-colored bottle and dropped it into my basket.

“Is that all?” the woman at the checkout said.

I paused. “Um, actually, hang on.”

I turned around, scanning the items placed by the register. They were all just there, begging me to take them. It had been years since I'd had anything for myself.

A package of stale marshmallow Easter candy landed on the counter, followed by a gossip magazine with a famous alpha movie star and his omega mate on the front, a box of purple hair dye, and a black eyeliner pencil as thick as my pinky finger. I held up two colorful plastic cases for my new phone. “Which do you like?”

The checkout woman gave me an odd look. “That one?” She pointed at the sparkly pink one on the right.

I frowned and handed her the black one with the stars instead, smiling. “Okay. I'm all set now.”

I knocked lightly on the navy blue-painted door of Flora's parents' house and stepped back to wait. I shuffled my feet against the welcome mat, swinging

my heavy CVS bag against my leg.

Flora's house was a white, two-story colonial with a huge, well-kept yard and a wraparound porch. There was blue wicker furniture on the porch that looked as though it had never been used.

Footsteps sounded on the other side of the door, and a boy appeared, staring at me with big brown eyes. I frowned, trying to decide how old he was. Alphas were weird like that—he was the size of the average fourteen-year-old beta, but he was probably only ten.

“Hi. Is your mom home?”

“Yeah. Who are you?”

“I'm friends with your sister.”

It was the kid's turn to frown, seeming confused. “Flora doesn't live here.”

“Charlie, who is it?”

Flora's mother appeared in the doorway behind her son, and her eyebrows rose ever so slightly as she took me in.

Flora's mother looked just like her—or rather, the other way around. She had long dark hair pulled back in a knot and wore minimal makeup. Her navy-blue sheath dress looked like it was chosen to match the house, and her heels clicked on the waxed wooden floor.

“Omega Nero.” Her eyes traveled over my bare legs, tight dress, and visible cleavage. They lingered on my neck for half a second before she smiled. “To what do we owe the visit?”

I choked, both at the use of the name, and at the fact that Flora's mother knew who my mate was supposed to be. Maybe she read the Agora announcements? I crossed my arms over my ill-fitting sundress. “Omega Cabot. I was hoping to speak with you. It's about Flora.”

Flora's mother smiled, her joy clearly genuine. “Come in. I'm so happy about Flora's mating. We're going to be attending the wedding at the end of the month. Of course, I'm beside myself.”

My smile was brittle as I stepped into the bright white-painted foyer. That wasn't the reaction I'd been hoping for.

I didn't know Flora's mother, but I'd hoped that given how her daughter had turned out, they might have similar views on mating and bonding. I'd hoped maybe Omega Cabot was a secret ally. Then again, she still could be—her son was in the room.

As though thinking the same thing, Omega Cabot put her hand on her son's shoulder. "Charlie, go play upstairs."

"Fine." He went with very little argument, and I raised an eyebrow.

Omega Cabot laughed. "Wait till you have little ones of your own. They're fine at this age, but as soon as they learn to bark, it's duck and cover for us. That's when I let my mate step in."

I did the mental math, trying to remember the ages of Flora's siblings. "How many do you have?"

Flora's mother led me into her gleaming dining room and gestured for me to sit at the cherrywood table. "Only five, I'm afraid," she said a little sadly, as though five children was nothing. "Two omegas though." She perked up. "Well, we hope. Flora, of course, and then Lily is far too young to tell yet, but she has all the signs." She sat. "Did you want tea? Orange juice?"

"No, I'm fine." I wrung my hands. "What are the signs?" I asked, unable to hold in my curiosity.

The Institute had never talked much about how to tell if a kid was an omega. Had I shown the signs? If anyone who'd been around to notice had been paying attention, would I have been monitored?

"Oh, well." She looked surprised but not upset by the question. "She's fourteen, and she's already making nests in her room and collecting practice packmates at school. I'm just thrilled, obviously."

I nodded. It seemed like everything thrilled Omega Cabot.

"You said you wanted to talk about Flora?"

“Um, yes.” Now that I was here, I was nervous. I didn’t know how to bring this up. “We were roommates.”

“Oh, that’s nice. I’m still in touch with my nestmate.”

I noted the soft correction of my terminology, and my heart sank. “I was wondering if you could tell me where she is exactly?”

Her eyes widened. “With her alpha, of course.”

“Um, yes, right. I meant do you have an address?”

“Oh!” She looked relieved. “For a mating gift?”

I smiled. “Exactly. I’m so sorry, I should have led with that.”

She laughed. “Not at all, dear. I’m thrilled you’re still in touch. I’ll get her address. Wait here.”

She stood and left the room, and I let out a long breath. So, Omega Cabot wasn’t going to help. At least not on purpose, but she would give me the address. That was something.

I drummed my fingers on the table as I waited for her to return. How Flora came from a mother like this was anyone’s guess. In an odd way, I wondered if this was the promise the Institute gave in action. Flora’s mom looked happy enough. Or maybe she was brainwashed? I did some quick math—she’d been with her assigned alpha for at least twenty years. Maybe she’d just acclimated.

Or she’s drugged, a little voice in my head whispered.

I hoped when I saw Flora again, she would be the same person I left.

“Got it!” Omega Cabot returned. “I’m sorry to leave you waiting so long.”

“No problem.” I smiled.

She placed a piece of paper in front of me with an address scribbled on it. I grabbed it quickly and shoved it into my plastic CVS bag.

“Thank you.”

“Of course.” She sat back down, looking at me shrewdly. A shiver traveled up my neck. That wasn’t the expression of someone drugged. “Darling, where’s your alpha?” Her eyes darted to my neck, for what I now realized was not the first time.

My blood ran cold. *Damn.*

I warred with myself, unsure if I should move my hair to cover my unbitten neck or if that was more suspicious. Mated omegas always showed off their marks.

“Um, not with me. I—”

“What?” She sounded genuinely alarmed. “Then your security?”

I closed my eyes, horrified. What was I thinking?

I stood abruptly from the table, reaching for my CVS bag. “You know what, yes. I need to get back to my security. I’m sure they’re wondering what’s taking so long.”

Flora’s mom stood, her expression kind. “Darling, I reached out to Headmistress Omega DuPont. Something is clearly wrong, but we can help.”

I took two large steps toward the door. “No!”

She looked scandalized. “Bliss.”

“I really need to go.” I was fully aware that if she thought I was strange before, now she had to know something was going on. “Thank you for everything.”

I bolted out the door and down the front walk, ignoring Flora’s mother’s voice calling after me. “If there’s something wrong, Headmistress Omega DuPont is the best person to help.”

My vision blurred with frustrated tears as I ran down the sidewalk. I had to go back to the warehouse. Now. The guys were right; I should have stayed inside.

At the end of the road, I turned the corner, catching sight of a black limo driving straight toward me. My instincts screamed to turn around and go back

the other way, but it was too late. The car came to a smooth stop against the curb next to where I stood.

The back window of the car rolled down to reveal the passenger. My knees shook, blood pounding in my ears.

“Hello, Bliss.”

CHAPTER 13

Mex

Ares burst out of the back door of the warehouse into the bright light of the parking lot. “This is fucking bullshit.”

We followed him to the other end of the lot in silence. I couldn’t say I disagreed with that sentiment.

We’d all been tense since last night when Bliss brought up blockers, but there had been no opportunity to talk without the risk of her overhearing.

Ares punched the side of one of the crates. “I’m not fucking doing this again.”

I glanced at Rafe, surprised he hadn’t commented on the splintered wood. He wasn’t looking at any of us.

“What? You’re suggesting we just hand her over blockers and let her go?” Killian choked on the words. His curly brown hair, still wet from his shower, dampened the collar of his plaid shirt.

Ares’ pale blue eyes flashed up to him, his jaw muscle ticking in his cheek. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m saying. She told us flat out that she didn’t want to stay.”

“Did she though? Or have you decided that for her?” Killian pushed his fist into his pants pockets and rocked back on his heels. “She’s freaked-out. She’s barely out of her heat, and the last time she’s seen any of us was four years ago.”

Ares snorted a derisive laugh. “Yeah, when we fucking abandoned her.”

“And we’re not making that mistake again,” I barked, putting more power into my words than I would usually bother exerting.

Killian stepped between us, hands raised at our chest. “Chill. We’ve got her now, and she’s better with us than that rich asshole, right?”

Ares glared at me, evidently deciding if he felt like getting into it. I doubted he would. Sure enough, he collapsed onto the curb and dropped his head into his hands, his white-blond hair tumbling over his face. He looked wrecked. “Is she though? If we’re just going to lie to her?” He snapped his gaze up to Rafe. “You’re the leader now, right? So, fucking lead. What do you think?”

Rafe rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know...”

A low rumble poured from my chest. *Of all the moments to fall behind the eight ball.* “What the hell is that supposed to mean? We’re not letting her go.”

Rafe’s black eyes met mine before looking back at Ares. His voice was firm, almost a command. “I’m not saying we let her go. I’m saying we need to make her want to stay. Prove we love her and want her here.”

“Well, leave me the hell out of it.” Ares unfolded himself from the sidewalk and stormed back toward the warehouse.

“Where the hell are you going?” I shouted, incredulous. This whole thing was lunacy.

Ares didn’t bother glancing back, instead flipping me off.

I rubbed my hand over my hair. “Kill, can you?”

Killian ran backward after Ares. “Yup. I’ll get him. Meet you there.”

I let out a breath, turning to Rafe, who was staring up at the sky, still avoiding eye contact.

“Fuck,” he barked at nothing in particular.

I tugged on my earring. “If you’re about to lose it too, I need a warning.”

Rafe didn't respond to that, but he did look at me, which I took as a positive sign. "We don't have time for this. Harrison is going to lose his shit."

"Since when did we care about Harrison? Bliss is the top priority, always."

"Since we don't need the Institute sniffing around when we don't supply their shipment." Rafe hit out a message on his phone, and within moments, our van pulled up to the curb. "This is about Bliss, I'm trying to protect her and that starts with doing our job like normal."

I nodded. He was right, but I didn't have to like it.

Wes rolled down his window and winked at us. "What happened? Your boyfriends leave you?"

Rafe narrowed his eyes as the beta pulled his coat closed to the gusts of wind pouring off the water into the abandoned fish market. Harrison had been our contact for the Institute for years now. He was alright, but that didn't make us friends.

"Aren't you guys fucking cold?"

Rafe raised a brow. He was only dressed in a thin henley shirt and jeans. I rolled up my sleeve that had slipped. We didn't get cold; our bodies naturally ran at a higher temperature. "You know better than that."

Harrison shifted from foot to foot, glancing away before speaking to Rafe. "You're late on the shipment."

Rafe sat down on one of the product-filled crates. A low growl of warning not to ask for clarification reverberated through his words. "We were preoccupied. Do you want the product or not?"

I ran my knuckles over the small, tattooed stars on my arm visible below my rolled shirtsleeve. It had been hours since we'd left Bliss. I tugged on the bond lightly, and a hint of apprehension traveled back. I could only make out the strongest of her emotions. What was she up to?

Memories of her smooth skin in my hands, sweet slick in my mouth, and pleading moans in my ears had me leaning my weight into the stall's post. Never in a million fucking fantasies did I foresee how earth-shattering it would be to finally be with her. The bond that connected us all hummed as we took her. The only thing stopping it from being completely satisfied was we didn't mark her. Fuck, I wanted to. I even let my teeth graze over her neck a few times. Not when she was lost to her heat like that.

I could barely look at her while we were leaving. She was going to stay until we found her blockers? *Life's a fucking joke.*

Harrison threw up his arms, looking entirely too comfortable considering who he was speaking to. "Of course I fucking do, but I have to answer to why it's late."

Rafe crowded him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You'd think the take you skim off the top would make that worth it."

Harrison's face drained of color, and he shook for an entirely new reason.

I rubbed my chest as the bond tugged, and I tried to make out the sensation. The feeling of her was stronger now. I wasn't sure if that was because of our proximity or the heat. All I knew was I wanted to get home to see what the little wolf was up to.

Rafe's fingers dug into the beta's arm, and he visibly flinched. "I wouldn't suggest underestimating our intelligence again."

"No, never. I just didn't think...I just..."

I gave him a break. "The shipment's here. Pay up and get the fuck out."

Harrison pulled out his phone and hit a few buttons. Mine beeped, showing the transfer complete.

I nodded toward Rafe. "It's all here."

Harrison made a nondescript sound, drawing our attention. He looked between us, his fingers wringing in front of him. He spent extra time on Rafe before taking a step further. "You asked about one of the omegas before."

I stiffened, and the air filled with the scent of ginger. The beta couldn't smell emotion, but his instincts had him taking another step at the shift in atmosphere.

I relaxed my shoulders and forced myself into a casual stance. "We asked about a lot of omegas."

"I know... This one...this one...you asked about more than once."

I clenched my teeth as fear trickled down my spine. I thought we'd hidden our interest in Bliss.

A growl rippled from Rafe as he stalked toward Harrison. His muscles strained in his back and up the tendons in his neck. He looked like he wanted to murder the guy.

I ran my tongue over my teeth. Actually, might not be a bad idea.

"We wanted to know how the product worked on *every* omega for research." Rafe's words held a sharp edge of warning.

The beta nodded emphatically. "Yeah, of course, I know that, but..." He shifted again, and his throat bobbed with his swallow. "Even if you aren't interested in her...specifically. I thought you'd be interested to know an omega was kidnapped from her mate."

"He's not her mate." I grabbed the guy by his jacket and debated the merits of throwing him in the frigid water.

Harrison's pleading eyes shot to Rafe. "Of course, yeah, of course not. What I meant was that she was taken from the guy that won her auction."

Rafe took his time studying the beta. It was a risk to let him go after seeing our reactions to news about Bliss. He took a deep breath. "Nox, let him go."

My grip loosened on the beta, who took several more steps away from us and held his hands up. "Let's say you knew who took her. The guy. Nero. He's on a warpath to get her back." His eyes danced between us, and he paused a moment. "Whoever...whoever is responsible is at serious risk...and so is the omega."

My chest tightened at the thought of putting Bliss in danger, but leaving her there wasn't an option. "I'm sure whoever it was can handle it."

"Nero's not taking it lightly since he technically owns the omega." His face paled further as a growl pulled from my chest. I was normally the smart, rational one, but this guy was on thin fucking ice. Harrison's brows pinched in the middle, and his shoulders slumped. "I just don't want to see anything happen to her."

Rafe shook his head. "If someone wanted to hide her, she wouldn't be found."

"You'd be surprised what resources a guy like Nero has." Harrison pointed toward a city security camera that we'd had turned away from the market. "He's got eyes everywhere."

Wes was waiting for us, propped on the hood of the van. He had a black wool beanie pulled low over his ears, and his dirty-blond hair curled from below it. He was as close to the size of an alpha that any beta could hope to be. He tossed the keys in the air and caught them with a smile. "'Bout fucking time. I'm freezing my ass off."

"Fucking beta. Get in the car." I slipped into the back while Rafe took the front passenger seat. It was late afternoon, and I was buzzing with anticipation to get back to Bliss. Even if she only let me stare from a distance. The corner of my mouth rose. We were a long way from being back to normal, but we were a hell of a lot closer than we had been. When the fog of heat broke, she'd been curled against Killian's chest. He'd looked at her with soft eyes as he trailed his fingers over her arm and took a shuddering breath as he kissed her hair. I thought I'd stop breathing just to keep her there. It had been too fucking long since I'd seen him like that.

The idea that we would hand over some blockers and she'd disappear on us was laughable. Maybe it made me an asshole, but I'd have no issue destroying every last bit of our supply to keep it away from her. Was it forced confinement? Yes. Did I give a shit? Not in the slightest.

My stomach lurched as Bliss' fear pierced the bond gripping my thoughts. Rafe made an incoherent sound from the front seat as I whipped around, trying to get a grip of what I was feeling. My heart felt like I was running for my life.

Ice filled my veins as I clicked the pieces together. "Bliss."

Rafe spun in his seat, black gaze on mine. "Where is she?"

She was at home. We'd left her at the warehouse. She was safe. Bliss' rising panic mixed with mine, belittling that idea. I whipped out my phone and pulled up the tracker that I'd put on hers. My knuckles paled as I gripped the screen. "She's in that neighborhood over off of Park Street."

The tires screeched on pavement as Wes cut the wheel hard to take the off-ramp.

Endless ringing filled the air as Rafe tried to call her. "Come on. Pick up. Pick up. Pick up."

My hands shook as I watched the blinking dot of her location on my phone. She was moving down a residential street and then took a sharp turn into someone's yard.

What are you doing, Little Wolf?

Killian's and Ares' voices shouted through the van's speakers as I looked at the intersections and the grayed-out boxes denoting buildings in the app. We were close. A few streets away.

The pain from the bond increased as we got closer. It was a live wire of panic on the other end.

We're coming. We're coming.

CHAPTER 14

Bliss

“**H**ello, Bliss.”

Alpha Nero and I stared at each other through the window of his black limousine. His lip curled into a smile as his piercing deep blue eyes raked over my body, lingering on my neck.

“How did you find me?” My voice came out surprisingly steady, considering my heart hammered so hard it was like it was trying to escape my chest.

He cocked his head to the side, as though mildly amused. “Come get in the car. We’ll talk about it.”

His voice was smooth like silk—more pleasant and persuasive than I remembered. Maybe he was making some effort not to scare me. It didn’t matter; I wasn’t falling for it.

I took a large step back and to the left, feet scraping against the pavement as I fumbled to find my footing. The car inched forward, making it clear that wherever I went, it would follow.

Alpha Nero smiled pleasantly. “Bliss. Don’t make this more difficult than it already is.” He said it like he was speaking to a misbehaving toddler.

A cold calm fell over my entire body. He was going to take me. He was going to put me in that car, and I’d never see my guys, or Flora, or the light of day again.

Or, I could run.

I stumbled backward, tripping over my first step as I tore down the sidewalk. The car followed. I couldn't stay on the street if I wanted to have any chance of losing them.

I dove right, crashing through someone's front hedge and onto a well-manicured lawn. The bushes tore at the skin of my bare legs and the hem of my sundress, but the pain barely registered. There was no world where I was stopping because of a minor scratch.

My sandal caught around my foot and tugged, pitching me forward. "Damn!"

I panted, reaching down and throwing my shoes off as I dashed through the yard and down a driveway, coming out the opposite side on another suburban street. I had somewhat of an advantage having grown up in this town, but I wasn't so naïve to assume that Nero wouldn't have some kind of high-tech GPS. He was probably swinging around the block right now, about to catch up.

The houses on this street were shabbier than the ones where Flora lived but still bigger than the one I'd grown up in with the guys. I ducked under the fence of a triple-decker home on the corner and paused to catch my breath.

I doubled over, my lungs burning with the effort of running, fear licking up my skin. I put my twisted CVS bag on the ground and pressed my palms to my eyes, willing myself to calm down.

Without warning, a surge of rage that didn't belong to me shot through my system. My eyes shot open, and I straightened, letting the adrenaline course through my body.

They knew. They knew, and they were coming.

Bolstered by that idea, I allowed myself to borrow their adrenaline. My body was exhausted, traumatized, and not built for this, but alphas had endless stores of energy. Whether they realized it or not, four alphas were currently shoving massive amounts of life-saving adrenaline at me down our bond.

I stepped out from behind the fence again and turned, trying to find my bearings. I needed to get back to the warehouse.

I ran toward what I hoped was the main road, breathing in time to my own feet hitting the pavement. I could do this. I could get back.

A van pulled out in front of me, and I screamed, dropping my bag.

The van doors opened, and Nox leapt out. I nearly choked on my relief. Or it might have been tears.

“Bliss?” Our bond hummed, we were so close.

“He—” My voice cracked. “He tried...tried to take me.”

I hadn’t realized I’d fallen to the ground until Nox landed on the ground next to me and pulled me into his lap. “Shhh, shh, it’s okay. We’ve got you.”

I shivered, digging my fingers into Nox’s black vest. I was so cold.

A growl ripped through the air, and I felt Nox speak to someone out of my line of sight. “You’re going to scare her, asshole.”

He was wrong.

I looked up at Rafe as he sat down beside us, putting a phone to his ear. I opened my mouth to tell him I actually wasn’t afraid of the growling—it was biologically impossible—but it got caught in my throat somewhere.

“You left us,” Nox muttered against my hair.

“I know,” I said, feeling only slightly guilty.

“Why?” Rafe asked. The phone was still against his ear, and I guessed it was Killian and Ares listening on the other end.

“There was something I had to do.”

“Can you hurry the fuck up?” Ares barked at Wes as we rolled to a complete halt at a stop sign and sat there for a full three seconds before continuing on. In the distance, the warehouse loomed on the horizon.

“And risk getting in an accident with her in the back and you four breathing down my neck?” The beta shivered. “No fucking way, man. You can threaten me all you want. I like my throat attached to my neck.”

Ares went back to grinding his teeth, obviously undecided where to direct his aggression.

It had barely been over an hour since the guys had picked me up, but the tension was still so high in the van it felt like five minutes. Torn between wanting to get me right home and wanting everyone there to protect me, Rafe had decided to make Wes pick up Killian and Ares. The van now felt tight.

“What’s in the bag?” Killian asked me with a smirk, seeming to want to break the tension.

I glanced down at my bedraggled white-and-red plastic bag. “Oh. Nothing really.”

I pulled out my forgotten coffee and unscrewed the cap. I sniffed it as we pulled back into the warehouse parking lot. The sugary beverage was almost too sweet—beyond anything I’d had in years. I wrinkled my nose in distaste and took one tentative sip. My stomach immediately woke up, growling loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Did you eat anything since breakfast?” Rafe asked a little too intensely for such a benign question.

I shook my head, suddenly realizing how hungry I was.

“Fuck that. Come inside,” Nox barked. “We’ll make you something.”

Wes raised his eyebrows at me in the rearview mirror, and I shrugged sheepishly. I didn’t know what to say—they couldn’t help it. I wasn’t sure they knew they were doing anything strange.

The scent inside of the warehouse hit me like an oncoming train as we traipsed back inside. Oh God.

I pressed my thighs together, willing my heart rate to slow down. The pull to mate shouldn’t be coming back this quickly, and certainly not after I’d just used all my energy and then some. If it was going to be like this every time I

left and came back, I needed to stay inside until I left for good. I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to stewing in the scent of all four guys in such a concentrated area, but the cognitive dissonance of wanting nothing to do with them while my body was happier than it had been in years was infuriating.

“Why did you guys keep this place?” I asked, mostly to distract myself.

Killian reached out to take my bag and drink from me. “Would you believe we just liked it?”

I let half a smile cross my face. “Probably not. I remember what it looked like before.”

Killian opened his mouth to answer, and Nox cut him off. “What if we tell you after you tell us where you went today?”

“Can I eat before the third degree?”

They all glanced at each other, now caught between the two sides of the most important alpha trait—protectiveness. I sighed, knowing I'd just trapped them in what could be their own personal trolley problem.

“Food first, then we talk,” Rafe declared for everyone.

I waved a resigned hand. “Fine.”

Nox opened the refrigerator and pulled out a package of steaks. “Do you eat meat?”

I nodded. “I didn't really have a choice about what I ate.”

He furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Uh.” I wished I hadn't spoken. “Omega diets are very controlled.”

“Is there a reason for that?” Rafe questioned, rubbing the back of his neck. Like he was afraid they were going to poison me with a steak. He probably was worried about that—literally.

“If you need something else, tell us.” His voice was a command, not quite a bark.

I sighed. “No. Steak is fine, I promise.”

Rafe didn't look convinced, but he wisely dropped it. He crossed the room and grabbed the steaks from Nox, lightly brushing my arm with his as he went. I ignored the jolt of electricity that traveled through me. It wasn't anything—just our bond and instincts trying to force us together and the stress of the day. Probably.

After dinner, they all sat in the living room, staring at their respective phones. No one spoke. Not even Killian, who bounced his knee with anxiety, looking like he was struggling to contain himself.

“Are you usually this quiet?” I asked finally.

Nox looked up at me. “No.”

I nodded. I suspected as much.

“Quiet seething?” I asked, trying and failing to make a joke. It was like I'd forgotten how to be funny—or maybe this just wasn't funny to begin with.

“Where did you go today?” Killian glanced up from his phone. “That's all we're trying to know, B.”

I froze, and my heart beat a little faster. He hadn't barked at me, but it was hard to ignore any alpha when questioned, and ignoring my own alphas was almost physically impossible.

“It's really not that important,” I tried.

Rafe growled in frustration but made no command. “It's fucking killing me that you don't trust us.”

“I didn't say I don't trust you.”

Nox rolled his eyes and for a second looked a lot like the kid I remembered growing up with. “Like we can't smell it.”

“Maybe you're smelling how you don't trust each other anymore?”

There was a long silence. That touched a nerve.

In all honesty, I wasn't trying to goad them. Whatever was going on here had piqued my interest. They'd trusted each other implicitly as children, but you'd have to be blind not to see the cracks in the foundation now.

Killian massaged his temples, clearly upset by this whole interaction. "All we wanted to do is protect you, B."

"I know. I know you want that."

"Then what's the problem?" He looked so sad for a minute I felt guilty.

"It's that we have to want that," Ares said bitterly. "Right?"

I opened my mouth to disagree and closed it. He'd sort of hit the nail on the head.

Them just wanting to protect me wasn't enough to repair our broken friendship, because of course they wanted that. That was like saying they wanted to keep breathing. Still, maybe I wasn't putting enough value in the bond.

I wasn't doing myself any favors trying to do everything alone. If today had proved anything, an unmated omega working independently wasn't going to get far. That was just the way of the world.

They had saved me twice now, and we did have a shared history, even if it had been overshadowed by their abandonment. Maybe I could give them an inch, if only because I wasn't going to be able to find Flora alone. If it didn't work out, I'd be no worse off than I was now.

I took a deep breath. "Do you remember Flora Cabot? From high school?"

All four guys looked up at me in surprise.

"Yeah. We saw her at the gala." Killian leaned over the chair, his curls flopping in his face. "Why?"

I swallowed thickly. So, they'd seen her.

If I'd brought this up sooner, would they have known where she was? Could we have found her already? "She's my best friend."

Nox gave me an incredulous look. "No."

“What?” I snapped indignantly. I clamped my mouth shut. “Sorry.”

Killian’s grin was mischievous. “Why are you sorry?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.” They didn’t need an explanation about how I wasn’t allowed to raise my voice for the last four years.

Killian tilted his head to the side. “You hated Flora.”

I grinned in spite of myself. It was so childish, I’d completely forgotten.

Flora was the only potential omega at our school growing up, which had felt very important to me, with four alpha best friends I was not-so-secretly in love with. If I’d realized at the time that she could never go near them anyway and that being an omega wasn’t exactly winning the lottery, she wouldn’t have bothered me so much.

Pain lanced through my chest at the thought of sitting in our room, laughing over the whole thing. We might never laugh like that again. The smile slid off my face. “Oh. Right, well, not anymore.”

It was impossible that they didn’t see my inconsistent reactions or at least smell them, but no one commented. Rafe crossed his arms over his broad chest. “What about her?”

“I went to see her mom today.”

The collective feeling in the room shifted, becoming more tense. “Why?” Killian asked, leaning forward in his chair as though to hear me better.

“I need to find her. I got her address and the name of her mate.”

Nox ran a hand over the back of his neck. “Find her for what?”

I blinked incredulously. How were they not getting this? “Because she’s my friend, and she’s been forced to mate with some perverted old alpha. I need to help her.”

They glanced at each other, and once again, silence stretched in the room.

“What do you mean ‘forced’?” Killian asked.

I stared at him blankly. “All matings are forced...I feel like we’re not on the same page, and I don’t know why.”

“Do the omegas not get some say in who they end up with?” Nox asked incredulously.

“What? No. Of course not. We’re all drugged—when would we have a say?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Ares ground out.

“Weren’t you guys all at the Agora? I assumed you knew.”

My mind spun. This was too confusing—I didn’t know how to go about explaining an entire subculture from scratch. What did they know? What were they missing?

“The Institute’s designed to create perfect omegas. They controlled what we ate, said, did. All to make our alphas happy. The Institute teaches omegas exist to please their alphas. Not the other way around.”

“Bliss,” Rafe said slowly. “That’s awful, and I’m so sorry, but if Flora’s mated now, she might not want help.”

My heart sank. Maybe. That was something that hadn’t occurred to me, but they didn’t know Flora like I did. They didn’t know how against the system she was or how she hated the Institute. They didn’t know how she’d refused her blockers for months and would have never allowed herself to be drugged before her heat. At least, not willingly.

“No,” I said firmly. “I need to check. I just have to.”

Rafe didn’t react. He was the leader now, and Nox and Killian seemed to be waiting for his opinion. I didn’t have the patience to wait.

Instead, my eyes found Ares’ intense stare. He hovered several feet from everyone else toward the back of the room. To my surprise, he hadn’t said much. Of the four of them, Ares had clearly become the wild card over the years. He raised an eyebrow at me. “I’m in.”

“You’re in for what?” Rafe barked, his posture going rigid.

Ares ran a thumb over his bottom lip, not taking his eyes off me. “Fuck it. Let’s go get Flora.”

My stomach leapt with excitement, and it must have shown on my face because Rafe growled at Ares.

“You can’t do that. You can’t suddenly decide you want to be a real part of this again. “

I narrowed my eyes, confused. I had no idea what he meant by “a real part of this,” but the tension in the room was suffocating.

“And you’re talking about her like she isn’t here.” Ares smirked at me. “You like when he does that, Love?”

“Alright, enough,” Killian barked. “You two, cut the shit.”

“Of course, you want to go after Flora,” Nox muttered, obviously not fully listening to the argument. “At least say what you mean, Ares.”

Ares grinned at Nox, running his tongue over his teeth like this whole thing was a joke to him. “Yeah? What do I mean?”

“This is too dangerous, and you know it. You don’t care about Bliss’ friend. This is just another suicide mission.”

“Or maybe I’m just not interested in pretending everything’s fine like you three assholes.” His statement sounded casual, but his posture and vibes were anything but.

Rafe stood, hands balled into fists. “Meaning what?”

Ares gave a derisive laugh and raised his arms and gestured around the room. “Is this how you pictured your happy family reunion? Get your head out of your ass.” Sarcasm laced his words as he turned around, walking in the direction of what I now knew to be the roof. “I’m done with this. Come find me if we’re going after Flora or something interesting happens. I won’t hold my breath.”

The door slammed, and I took a few labored breaths. I felt like I’d just run a mile when I hadn’t moved an inch.

When we were kids, Ares was always the de facto leader. He was the oldest by a few months, and as children, that had meant something—especially when he could use his alpha bark before anyone else and spent most of his time compelling the others to stand on one leg or other stupid shit. The Ares I remembered would have insisted I stay safe. He would have taken charge of the situation. This was not the same man. “What happened to him?”

Rafe ran one hand through his coal-black hair. “You happened.”

My eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

“He’s never been normal again after what...” He seemed to struggle for words. “What we did. I’m not sure if it’s possible to go back to before.”

I sighed. Wasn’t that the truth. There was no way to erase the last four years, for any of us.



I sat behind tempered glass.

The bright lights of the stage blinded me, the heat of them beating down on my face and scorching my skin. My hair clung to the back of my neck, sweat pooling at my nape and trickling down the back of my too-tight sequined dress.

I squinted out into the crowd, searching for a familiar face amongst the sea of strangers. The scent of all the alphas was overwhelming—musky and sharp inside my nose and on my tongue.

“And now,” the announcer said, “lot number fourteen.”

My breath came faster, and my gown pinched, holding me too tight. I couldn’t breathe. I needed to get out of here.

“Omega Bliss is twenty-one years old from Stratford, New Jersey. She received top marks in all her etiquette and carnal lessons and enjoys gardening in her spare time. Her measurements are...”

I sucked in a deep breath and choked on the scent of testosterone as I tried to tune the announcer out. I couldn't listen to this. I couldn't be here.

I had to get out.

I looked down at the floor, and it swam, my head spinning. The glass walls of the box appeared seamless, like it was somehow one solid piece. There was no door. No exit. How was that possible? Someone had brought me in here. But when?

A familiar scent fought its way through the melee, finding me. Like home—coffee, peppers, lemon, and the fresh scent of the night sky. I whipped my head up, searching for it.

“Let's begin the bidding at one million dollars. Do I hear—”

“One million.”

“Thank you, one million.”

“One point five.”

“I hear one point five, do I hear two—”

“Three million.”

“Thank you, gentlemen. I hear three million, do I hear five?”

I ignored the voices, searching the room desperately for the smell. My body tipped forward, practically of its own accord, until my nose was almost pressed to the glass.

“Looks like someone is eager to meet her alpha! We've got a live one, gentlemen—you don't want to miss out on that heat. Do I hear twenty million?”

“Bliss! Wake up!”

I scanned the crowd, trying to focus on every face.

My heart pounded wildly when I saw them—they were there, all of them, dressed in tuxedos, laughing together.

“I’m here!” I waved. “Hey!”

They didn’t look at me.

“Do I hear fifty million?”

“One hundred million,” a voice spoke loudly from the table in the front.

My gaze snapped to Alpha Nero, now somehow clearly visible, while everyone else was still hard to see against the lights. He leaned over and spoke to a man next to him.

My foster father, Mr. Ward, shook hands with Alpha Nero and smiled up at me. “We’re going to share her.”

Someone shook my shoulder. “Bliss!”

I cracked open an eyelid and stared up into a familiar face.

Rafe leaned over me, hands on either side of my head. My face, sleepy and confused, was reflected back in his black, pupilless eyes. “You screamed.”

“Huh?”

Tremors rocked my body, and I shook my head as if to clear it. The last fragments of the dream fell away. I had no idea what I was afraid of, but my heart wouldn’t slow down. My breathing wouldn’t slow.

“You still have nightmares,” Rafe stated.

I shook my head again, then realized that was dumb given the circumstances. “Sometimes,” I amended.

I’d had nightmares my entire childhood and well into my high school years. It was impossible to go a single night without waking up trapped in my own body or feeling stuck in some imagined hellscape.

Since we lived at the foster home, screaming all night wasn’t exactly making me any friends. My roommates were rightly annoyed, and our foster parents had no time for “troublemakers.” Eventually, the guys started sleeping in my room in shifts, and the nightmares went away.

After I moved to the Institute, they'd stopped for the most part. I'd privately wondered if it was because no matter how much I wished otherwise, I was never really alone. One small silver lining.

My brain quickly caught up with the situation. "I'm fine. It was nothing."

The scent of ammonia hit us both at once, and he wrinkled his nose.

"You always did that, you know," he muttered. "Lied about how it was nothing."

I snorted a laugh, and a tiny bit of the residual fear floated from my body. "Someone should have told me what it smelled like."

"And clue you in on our best superpower? No fucking way."

He smiled, and for half a second, everything was normal. This wasn't my alpha, and I wasn't an omega. It was just Rafe. We were seventeen again, and he was sneaking into my room because I'd had a nightmare. Perfect.

Heat coated my skin, and my stomach clenched. I squirmed. Despite the absurdity of the situation, my body was still very aware of the alpha—my alpha—on top of me. Maybe this was a dream too.

Rafe jerked and leaned back, clearly realizing he was still hovering over me, trapping me against the mattress with both arms. "What was it about?"

I felt my cheeks heat—this time from embarrassment rather than arousal. I was ninety-nine percent sure that he'd only realized the implication of his position after scenting my arousal. "I don't really remember."

"Okay..." He stood up, now looming over me next to the bed.

I tilted my head back to keep him in view. "Well, thanks, I guess. For waking me up."

"Yeah." He ran a hand over the back of his neck. "Is this about Flora? Your dream?"

"Oh. I don't know, maybe a bit."

In actuality, my nightmares rarely made much sense, but I supposed it was possible I was thinking of Flora generally. The stress could be compounding.

He took a breath through his nose, as if steeling himself. “Okay. Fine.”

I narrowed my eyes in confusion, squinting against the semi-darkness. “‘Okay, fine,’ what? What does that mean?”

He crossed the room, putting his hand on the doorknob. “We can go try to find her. I still think it’s dangerous, and we have an order coming in the next few days we need to hang around town and finish first, but if you know where she is, we can at least go check it out.”

My chest swelled, genuine gratitude filling me for the first time in living memory. I smiled. “Thank you.”

A few days wasn’t perfect, but it wasn’t that long. Flora was strong—I had to believe she could hold on that long.

He coughed. “Sure. Well, good night.”

My heart beat faster, my brain warring with my body. “Wait,” I blurted out. “Please.”

Rafe stopped short in the doorway and turned back to me. The light from the hall caught the edge of his sharp jaw and reflected off his hair, giving him the look of a bronze statue. “What’s up?”

“Stay.”

CHAPTER 15

Killian

I cracked my neck as I made my way down to the kitchen. Still exhausted, I didn't bother throwing anything on besides a pair of gym shorts. I swore I'd never been as tense as I was last night. I woke up in panic when Bliss' nightmare kicked in. Fuck. I would've killed to crawl up next to her like I used to, but God knew she'd hate that.

There were a few times in the last four years her fear had me bouncing from bed in the middle of the night, pacing at the fucking helplessness of not being able to be there for her. Knowing goddamn well how bad her dreams were. Which just made last night a million times worse because I *could* go to her, but I was terrified.

I'd just given up on all hope of controlling myself when her fear stopped. Relief flooded through me when I met calmness at the end of our bond. I should've been jealous that one of the guys must've grown the pair that I couldn't and gone to her, but all I could do was be grateful that someone did.

I couldn't stand another second of her feeling that way, and if the only way to stop it was for us to go lie with her like we did as kids, then so fucking be it. She'd just have to accept that.

I rubbed my hands over my face and tried not to walk into anything as the light from early morning barely lit the kitchen and living room areas. It was late for the others to still be asleep, but there was no way the others could've slept through her nightmares.

Even the idea of sleeping made me twitch. I put a pod into Nox's fancy-as-fuck coffee maker and hit the Start button. I grabbed a bowl bigger than my head and a spoon before sitting down on one of the island stalls to dig into my cereal.

I'd just finished tipping the bowl to get the last of the now cereal-flavored milk when Rafe walked in. His workout shorts hung low, and his black hair dripped in strands where he'd pushed it off his face. My gaze followed a drip down his shoulder, along his pec, and down his abs. The bowl clicked on the table when I absentmindedly put it down too hard, but *damn*.

Rafe's gaze met mine, his black eyes shadowed by thick lashes. The intensity sucked the air from the room before he cleared his throat and turned his back to me, grabbing a sports drink from the fridge.

I took advantage of his distraction to adjust myself in my seat. I hadn't been so much as horny since we'd lost Bliss. There was something that always felt like I would betray her if I looked at anyone else. Clearly, that'd changed since her heat, because if Rafe had looked at me much longer, I'd have been on my knees convincing him of all the reasons acting like a real pack was a good fucking idea.

I choked on a cough as realization hit me: we were the only ones up. He...

Defined lines formed on Rafe's back as he tensed. He let out a breath, and his fist clenched at his sides as he turned to face me. "Just ask."

"So, you're the lucky bastard who went to Bliss last night?" I tilted my head to the side and took in his features. He looked rested, a pink tinge to his face that I doubted was from his workout. A million questions flew through my head. Did she touch him? Did they cuddle? Did she still do that thing where she nuzzled into your chest while gripping you so tight, you'd never be able to let go?

He brushed the strands of his black hair off his face. "Yes."

My mouth dried as I pictured them together, and then the tip of my lips tipped up. "Was she everything you remembered?"

He stared at the floor before his own sheepish grin tilted his mouth. "More."

“Wait, you didn’t do anything, did you, right?”

“I’m choosing to ignore that.” Rafe took another sip of his drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “She was scared.”

An eagerness bubbled up my chest at the idea of it being my turn to comfort her. I wasn’t ashamed to say I’d spent more than my share of nights trying damn hard to imagine her beside me. Sometimes, when I was just waking up, I would swear she was there. All that came of it was a bone-deep ache that she wasn’t really there. I didn’t give a shit what she needed me to do to earn her back her trust. I’d do anything.

Crawl through glass? Done.

Apologize every day for the rest of my life? No problem.

Buy her anything she wanted? A pleasure.

Spend every second reminding her how precious she was to me? A fucking honor.

Now I just had to do all that without scaring her off.

Rafe tossed his bottle in the recycling bin. “You’ll be the first to stay home with Bliss. We’re going to meet up with Harrison. See if he can get us any information on Flora.”

I was up and out of my chair with such speed, my empty bowl tipped over. Spending the day *alone* with Bliss. Well, fuck. “The guys are going to be pissed.”

“Don’t rub it in their faces, and you’ll be fine.”

I huffed out a breath. “Wasn’t worried.”

“Out of all of us, you’re the least...intimidating. We need her to settle in. We can’t have a repeat of yesterday, and that requires her to trust us with finding her friend.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep her happy.” My tone didn’t match my words as thoughts of yesterday crept in. I hadn’t been there when the guys found Bliss, but I’d felt her through the bond. She’d been terrified. The only thing that

stopped Ares and me from going after the asshole was the overriding instinct to take care of Bliss. She needed us with her, even if she didn't know it.

The absolute need in her voice when she asked us to get Flora had me dying to help. Even though I didn't understand. Mated omegas were happy omegas. There was something she wasn't telling us about the Institute. Didn't matter—I didn't need to understand. She'd asked, so we'd do it.

She was stuck with me now, and I wasn't leaving her for any bullshit excuse.

I pulled my hand from my pocket and hesitated before knocking on Bliss' bedroom door. I'd been in the hall the last five minutes but hadn't built up the courage to actually knock. I didn't know what I would do if she shut it in my face. It'd pissed me off when she'd told us about Flora, imagining the same thing happening to Bliss. We'd been damn close to that asshole, Nero, mating her.

I dropped my forehead to her door and took a deep breath.

Keep it together, Kill.

The guys had left more than an hour ago, and Bliss still hadn't woken up. The need to check her room for threats had been riding me all morning. Protectiveness was a part of being an alpha, but I didn't think Bliss would appreciate me going in there and doing a security check. Plus, the warehouse was on complete lockdown after her taking off yesterday. We'd installed systems that were hooked up to our phones. If one of her windows even cracked open, we'd know about it.

Which left her not wanting to come out.

My ribs tightened over my chest. In theory, I knew she was just getting used to the idea of being here, but I'd been picturing her here for the last four years. Everything finally felt like it was clicking into place. Sure, we had our issues, but I knew deep down she'd forgive us. She had to. Right?

Then why can't you knock on the damn door, Killian?

Shit. I sucked in a deep breath and was caught off guard by her sweet and spicy scent. Distracted, I nearly crashed forward when her door swung open.

“Hi.” Bliss stood in front of me, brow raised over violet doe eyes. She didn’t seem at all surprised to see me.

I froze. Her head tilted all the way back, exposing the soft column of her neck, and my teeth ached to graze over her mating glands. She looked perfect, fresh-faced, rosy like she’d just washed it, and she pulled her hair over her opposite shoulder.

I reached out and slid a strand of pastel purple through my fingers, careful not to touch her skin, and smirked at her gasp. I met her gaze, stunned. “You dyed it back?”

Her eyes darted around the space, anywhere but on me. “Yeah, I thought... I wanted to feel more like me.”

My fingers itched at my sides, wanting nothing more than to slide my hand up her neck and bring her gaze back to mine. As if sensing me, she raised her face until she met my eyes, and I locked down the urge to growl when she exposed her neck more. “You look perfect. Fucking perfect, Bliss.”

Her cheeks pinkened, and I followed the flush down her chest and over the swell of her pale breast. I swallowed hard at the curve of her hips and the softness of her stomach. Fuck.

Flashes from the heat had me gripping the doorframe to stay standing. The way her hips filled my large hands like she was fucking meant for me, or how they gripped the side of my head as I tasted—

A soft whine had my eyes darting back to hers, and a sheepish smile lifted my lips. The further away we got from her heat, the more her instincts were driving her to be with her mates. Her blush had taken over her face. She was practically crimson she was so red.

Her eyes narrowed, catching on my mouth. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s just you and me, babe.” The nickname slipped out of my mouth so easily it had me reaching to take it back, but fuck it. I’d been dying to call her that.

She shifted closer to me before pulling herself back, eyes flashing. “And where is everyone else?”

“Hunting for your friend, of course.”

She sucked in a breath, eyes round, and I had to reach out a hand to steady her. The only thing distracting me from her touch was the shock on her face.

“We’ll always do whatever will make you happy. We have a long time to make up for.”

The air grew thick around us as we stared, trying to figure each other out. She wasn’t the same Bliss we’d lost. There was something almost broken in her eyes that had me crowing to kill whoever put it there. The fact that it was us just made the need to fight all the stronger.

I stepped back into the hall, making space for her before I could do something stupid like get on the floor and beg her to forgive us. Although, I would if I thought for a second it would work.

“You hungry? Rafe made you pancakes before he left.” Her stomach made a small rumble, and I smirked. “It’ll be cold now, but I can warm it up for you. We even have that Quebec maple syrup we used to steal for you.”

“You never told me you stole it.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Well, we sure weren’t buying it.”

“I thought you were trading for it or something.”

“It’s like twenty bucks a bottle.”

“Are you kidding me, Kill? I used to drench my pancakes.” I felt a warm hum through the bond, and a sweet fruity scent tickled my nose. “We could’ve bought so many things with that. You guys are crazy.”

My grin widened to a full smile, splitting my face. I didn’t think she even noticed the use of my nickname. “We coulda, but I think I can speak for all of us when I say that the joy it brought you made it totally worth it. Plus, it always dripped down your lip and had my cock—”

The back of her hand smacked against my stomach, and I blew out a breath. “What? We were teenage boys.”

“And I was practically your sister.”

“No, you weren’t, and you knew it.”

“Whatever.” She walked past me down the hall toward the kitchen. “Where is this pancakes you promised?”

Watching Bliss eat had my alpha instincts humming. I was naturally programmed to want to take care of my omega, but everything was more intense because it was her. I’d set her up on the island and leaned across from her, both hands planted on the counter. She didn’t notice she preened under my full attention.

I laughed as Bliss shoved a fourth piece of pancake in her mouth in the last 2.5 seconds. She hummed around her food. “I freaking missed these.”

She hadn’t spoken about her time there, but whenever we brought it up, her scent soured. Right now, she was happily distracted by her maple syrup. She’d tied her long, now fully purple hair back and leaned over her plate, giving me a perfect view down her blue dress. It was made of a stretchy soft fabric that molded to each of her curves. The last time we’d seen her, she’d been rail thin, bones practically sticking out. The Bliss sitting in front of me looked like a siren, soft, supple. I wanted to mark every inch of her pretty pale skin.

I smelled a hint of jasmine, honey, and spice and looked over her flushed face. The three freckles to the left of her right eye, the natural pink tint to her lips, and the subtle violet color of her eyes had me sucked into the past. I pushed down a growl when her tongue cleaned syrup off her bottom lip. “You don’t have to worry about that anymore. Rafe will make them for you every morning, noon, and night. All you have to do is ask.”

She hummed as she took the last bite. “I’ll be taking him up on that.”

I knew he’d fucking love it.

She got up and reached for her dirty plate. I swiped it from her hands, tucking it into the dishwasher. The instinct to take care of her was still riding me

hard.

Her eyes warmed as I handed her a freshly made coffee. “I left it black. You made a face when you drank the last one. I can make you a new one if you don’t like it.”

She took a sip, and I swore she purred as she took another. It took effort not to wrap her in my arms and taste the liquid on her lips. I cleared my throat. “So... I was thinking about giving you a tour of the warehouse, right?”

“It’s about time.”

I gestured to the door that led downstairs. “Well, you’ve seen the entire upstairs. Not much to go over up here.”

Bliss passed me, and the bottom of her skirt skimmed my arm, and my skin broke out in goose bumps. I didn’t want her to think I thought of her as an object, but damn did my body react to her, unable to resist touching her. She startled but didn’t move away when I placed my hand on the small of her back, guiding her. Warmth flooded through me at her acceptance of my touch. I was going to wear down her walls one at a time. I wasn’t great at patience, but I’d do whatever she needed. It helped that I was cocky enough now that we knew she wouldn’t just take off, that she’d eventually forgive me for my part in letting her go to the Institute.

It helped that I had absolutely no shame in groveling and admitting how fucking wrong we were. Our instant regret, mixed with the inability to get her back, took a toll on all of us.

The warehouse was large, but there wasn’t a whole lot to show. Her nose had scrunched up when I pointed out the boxing mats, and she didn’t seem at all interested in the gym.

I brought her to the back of the building. The tall bay door was already open, letting in a soft breeze, and pointed to the small attached building. “Wes lives here. He can be a lot, but he means well.”

A grin spread over her face. “*He* can be a lot to take in?”

“Hey now. I’m the epitome of calm and collected.”

She laughed and spun around in the open space. “So, what’s in the crates?”

My stomach dropped, and I looked away from her, not quite ready to fess up to what we’d done to get her back. “We aren’t good people, Bliss.”

“Don’t keep secrets from me. I don’t think I could take it.”

I nodded, still looking at the ground. “What if I promise to tell you, just not yet?” I met her gaze, eyes pleading.

She took a deep breath, body relaxing, and tilted her head. “You aren’t hiding bodies in there?”

I smirked back, grateful that she was willing to give me this reprieve. “I promise, we aren’t hurting anyone.”

“Okay, but you will need to tell me. I can’t wait forever.”

I swallowed and sucked in my bottom lip. “I know.”



I flipped on an old movie, not that I paid any attention to it. She’d curled her legs under her, revealing a few more inches of her thighs. The girl would be the death of me.

Rafe, Nox, and Ares walked through the front door, and a small part of me ached knowing our time alone was ending. Only offset by the smile, she tried to hide from them.

She didn’t know it yet, but she was already hooked.

Ares froze when his gaze locked on her, but he stumbled forward as if an invisible rope was pulling him. Bliss tugged on her hair, and I could feel her anxiety through the bond. I wanted to scream at Ares for making her doubt him. He needed to get over himself. We were all afraid we weren’t good enough, but you didn’t see the rest of us acting like assholes. If he didn’t smarten the fuck up soon, I would make him.

My brows raised as he grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and tucked himself into the corner, away from Rafe and Nox. Ares watched Bliss with

soft eyes while she pummeled Rafe and Nox with questions about Flora.

A part of me wished she'd turn to Ares, that she could see the way he watched her like she was everything he needed. He wasn't as immune to the pull as he wanted us all to believe. Ares' gaze flashed to mine, and his jaw clenched. "I'm out of here."

The hurt I felt through the bond had me pushing down the urge to tackle him, but even I knew he had to come to terms with this on his own. I just hoped he wasn't too late when he did.

We only had one shot at winning her back, and he was royally fucking his up.

CHAPTER 16

Ares

I growled in frustration as I scrubbed the eraser over the page for the millionth time. I had locked myself in my room and was working on old drawings since I realized I didn't capture her right. There were countless drawings that needed work; the lines were too angular. They didn't have the soft feminine curves they needed. I sat at my small worktable, which was covered in an assortment of pencils and pens.

It had been over a week since we'd taken Bliss from her designated alpha, and it felt like I was going to go insane. When she asked us to get Flora back—a mated fucking omega—I realized just how wrong I'd been. The idea that a mated omega would choose to be away from her mate went against every instinct I had. Were there others out there confined by the alphas who fucking bet on them? Acid burned the back of my throat at the very idea of what that meant.

Now that we'd taken Bliss, were we any better than them? She didn't choose this. She wasn't asking us to mate. No, she was adamant about getting her friend back, then planned to leave.

My breath came out on a shudder, and my hand twitched on the page, ruining the lines I'd just perfected. Bliss was an unmated omega; she'd be naturally drawn to any alpha in any situation. *But we're different. We're bonded.*

We had days, maybe hours before her instincts kicked in and she started craving us again, but it wouldn't be real. I'd betrayed her and didn't deserve to mate her in the first place, and I wouldn't do it now that she was being

coerced by her own instincts. She told us flat out that it was best for Flora to be separated from her mate even if she wouldn't be able to understand that now that he'd bitten her.

Rafe, Nox, and Killian looked at Bliss with eagerness, like if they just waited her out, she'd come back to them. The truth was, she would come back, but it would be because of the bond and her instincts. Not because she accepted the reasons behind the bullshit we'd pulled when she transitioned.

I'd spent every second since the Institute drove her away wishing I'd listened to my gut and told the guys to screw off when they'd suggested it. Now it was too late, and the only thing I cared about was her happiness. Even if that meant helping her get away from us.

I fought down the growl that wanted to work its way out of my throat. It damn well may kill us to lose her again. Hell, the guys would definitely kill me for my part in it, but it wasn't up to us to make this decision for her.

It wasn't safe for an unmated omega to be on her own, especially accompanied by another omega, but we'd taken away her choice the last time. We'd decided what was best for her, and we'd been wrong. Unbelievably wrong.

We may have spent the time pining for her, but the glimpses she'd given us of the Institute made me want to vomit. Bliss had been a splash of joy in our lives growing up, completely oblivious to the fact that we were all madly in love with her. She was a free spirit none of us would ever try to control. At least that's what I had thought—turned out we'd been more than willing to control her. The Institute controlled every minute of her life, trying to snuff out all the things that made her *her*.

We'd done that to her.

I threw my pencil across the room, and it splintered against the wall.

I had to convince Rafe to get back into the ring before I broke something. Fighting was the only place I could get this roiling energy out of me.

Someone knocked on my door, and the knob shifted as they tried to open it. "Let us in, Ares." The force of Rafe's alpha bark bounced off me. He may be our pseudo leader, but he wasn't stronger than the rest of us.

“Fuck off, Rafe.” I turned the music up, drowning them out, but the poor door didn’t stand a chance.

Within seconds, Killian had the door off its hinges, placing it to the side of Nox. The three of them entered my room, eyes darting over my walls.

Rafe’s fingers grazed over a drawing I’d done of Bliss last year. “Jesus, Ares. If you care for her this much, why the hell do you push her away?”

A growl pushed up my chest. “It’s because of that, idiot.”

I looked over my once best friends. There was a rift between us so wide, we’d never be able to cross it. There were a few times over the years when Killian and Nox would worm their way back in, but I could never forget that they’d played their part in that night too. At least they’d regretted it just as much as me. Killian still held the weight of being the one to command her to leave.

Rafe though. I’d never forgive him for the part he’d played in convincing me to go along with it. I knew I made my own decisions and couldn’t blame it all on him, but that didn’t stop me from hating him. “What do you want?”

Rafe’s eyes narrowed at my tone, but he straightened, his black gaze boring into mine, a command in his tone. “You’ll be staying with Bliss today.”

A jolt ran through me, and my hands fisted the table. “Who the fuck’s idea was that?”

Rafe ignored my question. “The Institute has called us in for a meeting.”

I raised a brow. “So? They want more supply?”

Nox stepped forward into my line of sight. His voice was low, and the air was coated with the smell of dead flowers. “A meeting about a missing omega.”

“Fuck.” I raked the loose strands of my hair from my face, looking between them. “That doesn’t stop *you* from staying.”

“They want to see all of us.” Killian’s smirk grew. “Well, except you. They see you as a wild card.”

I rubbed my palms over my face and tried to calm my raging heart.

“You don’t have to hang out with her. We just needed someone home. You know, in case someone breaks in or, more likely, she tries to take off again.”

My chest vibrated with my suppressed growl. “She’s smarter than that.”

“Then you won’t have any problems watching her.”

My hands shook as I pictured someone breaking into the warehouse and Bliss calling out to us when we weren’t here.

“Fine.”

The three of them looked at me in surprise, clearly expecting a bigger fight. No matter what I projected, Bliss was the only thing that mattered. If that meant a day of being uncomfortable, so be it. I’d just have to hide out.



Sweat dripped into my eyes. I grabbed the white towel off the mat and ran it over my face. I’d been at this for hours. The ache in my arms and back helped mask the bond between us. I’d felt her curiosity as she explored the warehouse by herself. Over the last hour, there was a loneliness that traveled through it, damn near close to sadness. I had to tamp down my instincts that screamed at me to go to her. It wasn’t me she wanted to see though. They’d be back soon enough; a few more hours and we’d go back to normal.

I slammed my unwrapped fist into the beat-up black punching bag. We had to replace them every other month—they weren’t designed to take the abuse four alphas would put on it. I smirked as the sting of pain traveled up my fist into my forearm. Pain had been an addiction for me the past years. A way to distract me from everything else.

“What are you doing to yourself?” My head swirled, and I placed my hand on the bag to help steady myself as I breathed in the full force of Bliss’ scent. It was coming in stronger the more time that passed since her heat. Her eyes were round, and she bit her bottom lip as her gaze traveled over me, catching on the blood covering my knuckles. She sucked in a breath, and her eyes turned glassy.

The bond screamed with her worry for me, and I tried to calm myself to send it to her. I wrapped the damp towel around my fist, hiding the evidence. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Hurt flashed through the bond, and it pained me not to take it back.

“I could feel your pain.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll stop.”

Her head tilted to the side. “It was more than just physical pain. You’re hurting.”

A cynical smile curved my mouth. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep it to myself.”

“No.”

My eyes flashed to hers. She looked worried as she walked onto the mat and stood directly in front of me. “What’s wrong?”

I huffed out a laugh and pinched the bridge of my nose between two fingers. “Nothing you can help with.”

She visibly flinched, building that wall between us. That’s a good girl. I didn’t deserve a second of her pity. “Well, if I’m going to feel it, the least you could do is let me help.”

I let out a breath, my shoulder slumping forward as I met her eyes. “You can’t help with this, Bliss. It’s not your problem to fix.”

Anger flashed through the bond, and it mixed with the scent of dead flowers as she struggled to sort me out. I didn’t want her to figure it out. I had too many secrets.

That I wanted her more than the others, that it physically killed me to stay away from her. That I’d give her absolutely anything to make her happy. Which was exactly why I was staying the fuck away, because no matter how much I wanted to be the one for her, I could never make up for what we did. The trust we broke. She deserved the absolute best, and in the last four years, I’d just become worse. Bliss watched me, her face hardening. “I hope you aren’t making decisions for me again. That didn’t work out too well for us the last time.”

The difference was this time, I knew her staying away from me was the best thing for her. I wasn't the alpha she'd known growing up. I'd turned myself into something I'd never ask her to love. Something damaged.

I picked up my water and took a long sip.

"I don't want you here." *Lie.*

Her nose scrunched up.

"You shouldn't be here." *Truth.*

She placed her hands on her hips, reminding me of the Bliss I used to know. "It's a good thing you don't control where I can and can't be."

Giving up, I softened my tone. "Have you eaten yet?"

"Yes. The alpha obsession with feeding me is getting old."

I clenched my jaw against arguing with her. There was no turning off our instincts to care for her. It was only made stronger by her near miss the other day. Even the thought of Nero getting to her had my blood boiling.

She crossed her arms in front of her. "I need to know how to defend myself if I'm caught."

"Didn't they teach you anything useful?"

"An omega's job is to be docile and listen to their alpha."

"Fuck that place."

Her violet eyes searched mine. "I need your help."

I tipped my head back, looking at the roof. An alpha couldn't just turn down a request from their omega, and even if I couldn't have her, she was still mine. "Ask one of the other guys."

She wrung her hands in front of her, staring at the floor before meeting my gaze head-on. "I'm asking you."

A growl rumbled through my chest, cutting off when she took a step back. Fuck. She had to know no matter what, I'd never hurt her.

She swallowed, highlighting her delicate neck. “Please.”

Any willpower I had crumbled with that word. “You can’t fight off an alpha. You just can’t.”

She bit her lip, nodding as she looked around the warehouse, disappointment trickling through the bond.

“I’ll teach you how to break a hold. You can run, Bliss. Just get away and run.”

Her posture straightened. “I can do that.”

“I’m going to have to touch you.” I didn’t know which one of us I was warning more.

One side of her mouth quirked up with her smirk. “I know.”

I placed my water bottle a few feet away and stepped up behind her. “If they’re trying to take you, they’ll most likely come from the back.” Her chest rose and fell a mile a minute, and her anticipation colored the air. “Ready?”

“Yes.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

I placed my arm around her chest, pressing mine against her back. “You won’t be able to overpower them, so your defense needs to take advantage of your opponent’s weak spots. The key here is to get them to release you and run. Do not try to fight them. Okay?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Every guy is going to protect their groin. So you’re not going to go there. You’re going to attack their eyes.” She flinched in my arms. I never said it would be pretty. “I want you to reach back and act like you’re going to dig your nails through my eyes. I’d prefer to keep mine, but if this was real, I want you to think about putting your nails through the back of their head with as much force as you can.”

She shook in my hold but brought her hands back, grasping the sides of my head and placing her thumbs exactly where they needed to be.

“Good, now squeeze my head between your hands to give you leverage. He’s going to let you go to stop you from taking out his eyes. When I go to break your hold, I want you to run. You understand me?”

She nodded.

I shot my hands up in an attempt to catch her off guard. The second they released her, she took off.

Her cheeks were flushed, a wide smile across her face. “Did I do it right?”

“You’re perfect.”

The sweet scent of jasmine, spice, and honey wrapped around me, and a groan traveled up my throat. Her eyes darkened, and she took a step forward.

Fuck. The way she looked at me, combined with her scent, had me aching to have her. Her gaze turned pleading, and my stomach clenched. Her body was demanding to be mated the only way it could—lust. Each passing day just made it harder for her to control, and it wouldn’t stop until one of us claimed her.

I dropped my forehead to hers, unable to stop myself, and she grazed her lips against mine. Our scents were thick in the air, and my hands shook as they held her face.

“I can’t. It can’t be me.”

She sucked in a breath, fingers digging into my shirt. “What if I want it to be you?”

Heat flooded me, and every muscle tightened with the force to hold myself back. “It’s the bond talking. I won’t be able to live with myself after.”

She jerked away, eyes wide, and her scent turned sour. Hurt and embarrassment flooded the bond as she practically ran from me.

I desperately wanted to go to her and explain that I did want her, more than she could ever understand, but I stayed planted where I was. Her thinking I didn’t was for the best. Even if her pain would kill me.

CHAPTER 17

Bliss

The ghost of Ares' fingers trailing down my face had me groaning into my pillow. A quick glance at the clock told me it was 2:00 a.m. I kicked at the blankets tangled between my legs, pushing them off me, and rolled over for the millionth time. It had been days since my heat finally broke, and my body didn't understand how my bonded were so close, but I still wasn't mated. Training with Ares was physical torture. Every touch felt like it ignited a fire from within. My cheeks and neck heated.

It can't be me.

Ares' words stung, but they were nothing compared to the embarrassment I felt after telling him I wanted it to be him and him replying he wouldn't be able to live with himself after. I felt like my chest was going to cave in, and the back of my eyes burned as I struggled not to cry in front of him. He'd accused me of being driven by the bond, and that wasn't completely wrong. If that were the case, I would have been happy he stopped me.

Against my better judgment, no matter what they did, a part of me still cared for them. I had learned years ago that time and anger didn't cancel out the feelings I had for them completely, even if it was what I wanted. Being back with them had only made everything that much more complicated, which was why Ares' rejection hurt so much more.

I flipped my pillow over to the cold side and squished it into the shape I liked. I was disappointed in myself for thinking maybe they felt the same. It sure felt like Killian wanted me back in their lives, that the only thing

stopping us was me.

All the more motivation to find Flora and leave before I became more attached. It was going to hurt, though. It felt like they were tearing my heart out the first time we were separated, and I didn't think that would change with it being my choice.

Knowing they'd betrayed me didn't override everything else I was feeling, no matter how much I wanted it to.

A part of me buried deep down wanted *them* to claim me. Wanted them to take that decision from me. It would be so simple. Pain radiated up my chest. I couldn't forget what they'd done. They were my childhood loves, my bonded, and if it wasn't for their betrayal, they'd be mine. Anger burned through the pain, and I climbed out of bed, trying to escape my thoughts. I threw on a pair of pajama shorts and a large sweater one of the guys left me. I lifted the collar higher and breathed in the scent. It was freshly washed, but I could still smell Rafe's pepper-and-coffee scent. My body heated, and I rubbed my thighs together against the building ache. For how much I didn't want to take blockers, it was quickly becoming the only option to survive being an unmated omega.

Frustrated, I left my room and took the stairs two at a time to get to the roof. It had always been my safe space, where I could let everything go. I sighed as the cool night air lifted the ends of my hair off my heated neck, and I closed my eyes, taking a few calming breaths.

"Do you want me to leave, Little Wolf?" I startled as Nox's voice cut through the moment.

He was curled onto the couch, his normally crisp shirt mostly unbuttoned and a book in his hands. He'd brought a small lamp, surrounding him in a soft glow, and his cross earring flashed in the dark. I couldn't make out his expression, but his body was stiff, waiting for my reply.

Did he want me to tell him to leave or stay?

If he was Ares, I'd know the answer to that, but not Nox. He was different. A part of me desperately wanted to forget everything tonight. I could remember it tomorrow. My voice cracked around the word "Stay."

He let out a breath, and his posture softened as he dropped his legs to the floor to make space for me. I swallowed hard, taking the spot on the couch beside him, focusing on the familiar pattern. He shifted on his seat, and I felt a desperate need to end the awkwardness. We'd been friends once. Still not ready to meet his eyes, I gestured to his book with my chin. "What are you reading?"

I couldn't miss his soft smirk in my peripheral vision. "It's nothing." I looked at the title and sucked in a short breath. The entire time I'd known him, he'd been buried in textbooks. He tilted his head to the right, his smile growing, and held my gaze. "Wasn't what you were expecting? Schoolwork?"

I huffed out a laugh. "You could say that." His choice of books wasn't the only thing that had changed. I searched his face as he searched mine. He was more angular, harsher than I remembered, the youth I'd known washed away by time. What did he see when he looked at me?

My body had changed. Gone was the scrawny girl we'd all thought was a beta. I'd taken on all the soft curves and tempting femininity of an omega. His eyes darkened as they traveled over me, his teeth grazing over his bottom lip. "You're beautiful."

Warmth pooled in my stomach, falling dangerously lower, and I had to fight the urge to climb onto him. "It's the bond. You have to feel that way."

He choked on a laugh, his pale face turning bright red, and looked away from me. An ache passed through the bond as his lips tilted in a sad smile. I hated the uncertainty he exuded. Hated that I couldn't take it away without admitting that maybe, just maybe, I could forgive him. His gaze was warm when it met mine, and he reached over to a pile of books, shuffling through them until he found the one he was looking for. "Here." He held it out to me.

Our fingers grazed, and sparks flew up my arm. His hand opened and closed into a fist as if he felt the shock. The pull between us doubled like eternal magnets destined to be together. I focused on the book, desperate to ignore the feelings threatening to overwhelm me.

The description was a friends to enemies to lovers romance. I traced the edge of the book and read the first few pages until I couldn't ignore the weight of Nox's gaze on me. He watched me, green eyes shadowed black, with so

much reverence I couldn't breathe. He used to look at me like this. I never knew what it meant, but I did now.

I took a shaky breath in and finally asked what I was dying to know. "Why did you do it?"

I felt his sadness before I could smell it. The feeling only grew stronger with each moment it took to answer. "It's the biggest mistake I've ever made. I regretted it the second it happened, but there is absolutely no reason I could give you that would make up for it. You trusted us, and we hurt you. *I hurt you.*"

My breath caught in my chest as I forced myself not to cry. I wanted to trust them, but the four years that stood between us felt like a canyon to cross. His glasses hid his eyes as he turned through his pages too fast to be reading them, and something clicked in place. I may not trust them now, but I could give them a chance to earn it. We get Flora back and go from there. I lifted my legs onto the couch, pulling them up in front of me so I could rest my book on them. Nox stiffened but relaxed into his spot. After a few minutes, he settled into his book, and I let myself get lost in the words.

My fingers tightened on the book with each chapter. It had been hours, and the sky started to shift from black to blue. The pain the characters were feeling was a little too close to my own. Nox shifted, and his fingers grazed my bare calf, and goose bumps covered my skin.

"You're cold?" He pulled my legs over his lap, under his arms. The casualness of the action only made it more intense. There wasn't an inch of me that was cold. Being wrapped up in him had my blood humming, and my skin started to burn. The bond wanted us to be mated and to solidify our pack. It didn't care about secrets or broken promises. Heat pooled between my legs, and my core grew slick. A barely there whine escaped my lips and was met by Nox's purr.

He ran his thumb over my calf, and a shiver ran down my spine as my legs opened a few inches. Ignoring the pull became physically painful.

"How long have you hurt?" Nox's voice was a low possessive growl.

Too long. I wasn't thinking of the neediness between my legs. He seemed to know that, and his fingers tightened on my ankle.

"Let me take care of this." His gaze was so hot it practically burned. He'd removed his glasses, leaving a clear view of his crisp green eyes, barely visible with the sunrise.

I hesitated. There was nothing I wanted more in this minute than to have him over me, touching me, *inside* of me. I wasn't ready for what that could mean.

His eyes went soft, reading my face. "It doesn't have to mean anything more than what it is." His words were undermined by the sadness through the bond.

He trailed his fingers higher up my calves until they were just over my knees, thumbs touching the sensitive skin on the inside. "Let me take care of you, Little Wolf."

Heat ignited under my skin, and I keened with the need to feel him. I could do this. I wanted to do this. It didn't have to mean I forgave him. I ignored the quiet voice deep within me, whispered that there was no going back, and nodded, biting my bottom lip.

Nox growled and tugged on my ankles until I was laid out on the couch and slid his hands up my legs, resting them on the sides of my apex. "We'll take it slow. This is all about you. Just tell me if it's too much. Okay?"

His green eyes were practically molten, but he didn't move, waiting for my response. Need poured through me, and I barely stopped myself from begging. "Yes."

My pulse pounded in my ears, and I whimpered when Nox crawled over me, resting his chest against mine. His purr vibrated through me until my scent enveloped us as my slick soaked through my shorts. Nox buried his face into the curve of my neck and snarled as I shifted, exposing it to him. He ran his nose along the column of my neck and licked over the mating glands, marking me as his. The sensation shot to my core, and I arched to press myself harder into him.

He grasped my jaw in one hand, holding my gaze while his other traveled down between us. "I've got you. Let go."

I cried out when his hot hand cupped my core, pressing his palm down on my clit and rotating it in small, torturing circles.

His grip tightened on my jaw as he slid his hand under my shorts and groaned. “You’re so wet, so fucking perfect.” His fingers circled my entrance before dragging over my clit and repeating the process until I was writhing under him. He held me down to the couch without letting my face go. He watched as I took gasping breaths, every other word an incoherent plea. I’d turned into a needy, writhing mess, completely at his mercy. His long fingers pushed inside my entrance, and a low growl formed in the back of his throat. His gaze darkened, the intensity almost too hard to watch, but he didn’t let me turn my face, holding me in place as he pumped his fingers harder, circling my clit.

“I can’t, I can’t take it. Please.”

His growl rocked through me, and he dragged his fingers over my inner wall, hitting a spot that had me combusting. Shards of pleasure spilt up my back through my limbs until I was panting with my release.

He dropped his forehead to mine, lips nearly millimeters away. “So fucking stunning.”

My body turned to liquid, unable to move after the force of my orgasm. Nox moved me until I was tucked beside him on the couch, gently running his fingers from my temple through my hair, lulling me to sleep.



A car horn woke me up. It took me a moment to realize where I was, and then everything crashed into me. Nox’s arm was still wrapped around me, gripping my waist.

Lust, fear, love, and pain all flashed through me, overwhelming my senses.

Careful not to wake him, I lifted his arm and slid out from underneath it. When I glanced down, my heart tightened. He looked peaceful, eyes closed, mouth slightly open. Would he miss me when he woke or be happy he didn’t have to deal with the awkwardness of the morning?

I leaned over and grazed my lips over his temple, taking in his sandalwood scent. It hurt to be this close but not be able to stay. I sniffed and blinked away the burn behind my eyes. Four years was just too much hurt to let go of in one night. *What had I done?*

I shut the rooftop door silently behind me and made my way to my room in the quiet hall. A door swung open, and Ares propped himself on the frame, watching me. I couldn't smell him from this far, but he was sending a mix of lust and longing that had me taking a breath.

I stepped toward him, but his eyes narrowed, and he slammed his bedroom door, cutting him off from me.

The rejection felt like a stab, but I straightened my shoulders. I couldn't let him have that kind of power over me. I thought he'd loved me once, and the embarrassment of my naivety stung.

CHAPTER 18

Bliss

The delicious smell of fresh coffee with a hint of hazelnut washed over me, warming me from the inside out. I rolled over and pressed my face into my pillow, refusing to open my eyes. I wasn't ready to wake up and face the day.

My brain had allowed me a brief vacation from crazy dreams, but that hardly mattered as last night may as well have been a dream.

I wasn't sure what was worse—how I was losing control of my body and hormones or how I wasn't fighting it hard enough.

When I was alone, my drive to complete our pack bond was still manageable, but it was growing worse the more time we all spent together. I wasn't due to go into heat again for another three months, but the way things were going, everything seemed accelerated. I had no way to know if that was normal.

Realistically, none of this was normal.

I dragged myself out of bed and stripped off one of the guys' shirts. I didn't dare think about why I kept wearing them. Careful not to get my hair wet, I stepped under the shower, sighing as the hot water beat at my muscles. My cheeks heated for all the reasons I was currently sore.

I opened a purple bottle of body wash, and a hint of lemon and vanilla coated the room and the corner of my lips tipped up at the familiar smell. Making quick work of washing, I turned off the shower and wrapped myself in a large white fluffy towel. Fully prepared to squeeze into another too-tight sundress,

I gasped at the handful of new dresses hanging at the front of the closet. The first one was a deep green, and I ran my fingers along the delicate soft sleeve. A little thrill went through me. It was gorgeous.

Up close, I could make out a subtle monotone pattern of a small wolf print—each design couldn't have been much larger than a quarter. It was fun and flirty. Something I would have worn before.

Excitement skittered across my skin, and I pulled the dress over my head and instantly felt lighter. It was cut in a wrap pattern so that all the fabric pulled together at the side of my waist doing wonders to show off my omega figure. It fit perfectly over every inch of me. If I didn't know it was impossible, I'd have guessed it was custom made. I let out a little squeal and spun in a circle. It had felt like forever since I wore anything I really liked.

I followed the scent of the coffee and I fumbled with the ends of my hair, walking slower than was necessary. Who would be on babysitting duty today? It made no difference, really. I wanted them all equally—that was the problem.

I stopped short in the doorway to the kitchen, quirking an eyebrow. “Hey.”

Wes looked up at me from where he sat at the kitchen counter. “Morning.”

Relief and disappointment flooded me in equal measure, and I shook my head as if to clear it. I needed to get a grip, if only so the guys wouldn't feel my confusion down our bond and think it meant something.

“What's up?” Wes said jovially, spinning on his stool to face me.

“I feel like I should be asking you that.”

No less than four guns were laid out in front of him, and two more were strapped to his legs. He looked like the hero of a low-budget action movie.

I crossed the room to the coffee maker and helped myself. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, why?” he asked.

I raised a brow at the guns. “Planning a bank heist?”

Wes looked like the kind of beta guy I was supposed to like in high school. He was good-looking in a nonthreatening way. He was probably around six feet. Tall for a beta, but at least a head shorter than a small alpha. He had dirty-blond hair tied back in a messy bun and a square jaw, currently lifted in a grin. “Nope, but I’m glad you’re feeling better than the last time I saw you. Things going better with the pack?”

“Oh my God.” I rolled my eyes. “Don’t change the subject. What’s with the guns?”

“The guys had to run down to the dock really quick, and no one could stay back. They’re still worried about that guy who’s after you, obviously.” He gestured to the guns. “They’ll be home soon.”

I took a sip of my coffee and savored it, thinking. “This is the job that they had to stick around in town to finish?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess so.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “We do a lot of jobs, but this one was pretty big.”

“What exactly are you guys doing?”

He held up both hands but kept his friendly smile. “Hey, don’t get me in trouble, okay? I don’t know what you’re supposed to know. It’s not my business.”

“Fine.” I sighed. “So, you’re the watchdog today?”

“Something like that. Just for a couple hours.”

I turned to the refrigerator and swung the door open “Want something to eat?”

He nodded happily. “Please.”

I went through the motions of making breakfast, taking out the toaster waffles twice and putting them back in the freezer, as my mind was elsewhere. If whatever big job the guys had to do was done—or almost done—did that mean we could go find Flora?

Finally, I placed a plate and a ceramic coffee mug in front of Wes and backed out of the room down the hallway. “I’ll be right back.”

I'd left my phone in my room as I wasn't used to carrying it around with me anymore. I dashed back to my nest and scanned around for where I'd left the thing—ah, bedside table.

Powering on the iPhone, I checked Google—no new articles about Flora or her mate as of this morning—then opened the notes app to where I'd copied down her address.

Flora now lived one state over from us. Thank God, since she could have ended up anywhere. Her mate was a judge and former congressman who was known to have extremely polarizing views. According to Reddit, last year he'd made sizable donations to multiple pro-alpha extremist groups, but I couldn't find any paper trail to back it up.

I glanced at the calendar. Flora had now been with that nutjob for more than a week. I had a strong feeling that the longer we left her there, the harder it would be to get her back. The more likely it would become that she would acclimate to her new situation and become brainwashed like her mom, but that was just a hunch. I had no real way to test the theory and no one to ask.

“Do you know anything about Judge Chip Bishop?” I asked Wes as I walked back into the main part of the warehouse.

“Nope,” Wes said with a smile. “Who's that?”

“Former congressman from Virginia. He's an alpha, maybe fortyish.”

He laughed. “Darling, I don't follow politics.”

“Fair. Worth a shot though.”

“Who are you calling ‘darling’?”

I glanced up as Rafe strode in, Killian right behind him. My skin immediately flushed, my pulse picking up. “Hey. I didn't hear you guys come in.”

I took an involuntary step forward toward them and then halted. What was I doing?

Rafe faltered, his focus now stuck between me and Wes. I took that to mean it wasn't all that serious.

“Calm down.” Wes hopped down off his stool and adjusted the guns at his hips. “I was just teasing your girl. She’s fine.”

“Well, don’t,” Rafe grumbled, tossing his jacket on the couch, revealing a deep blue henley shirt underneath.

“I make no promises. Where’s Nox and the Antichrist?”

Killian barked a laugh. “On their way up.”

“How did it go?” Wes asked.

Rafe tossed me a wary look before answering. “Good. Better than I expected.”

I rolled my eyes. In addition to their normal scents, they were carrying salt air and the metallic tang of blood, but no one seemed hurt. “This was the big job you mentioned, right?”

Killian shot Rafe an alarmed look, and he stiffened. “Bliss...”

I barreled on. “Now that you’re finished, we can go get Flora, right?”

Rafe rubbed the back of his neck. “Wait for Ares and Nox to get back, and we can talk about it, okay?”

I didn’t have to wait long as the sound of the bay door opening announced Nox and Ares’ arrival.

“The word of the day is ‘paucity,’” Nox was saying as they walked in. “It means there’s a scarcity of something.”

Ares was actually smiling for once, and my heart squeezed—it had been so long since I’d seen that, it was almost eerie. “Take this how I mean it, which is offensively: I have a paucity of fucks to give about your words of the day.”

They stopped short at the sight of us all standing in the kitchen, waiting for them. “What’s up?” Nox asked, tugging on his cross earring.

He looked at me, a tentative smile crossing his face. A wave of lust and admiration hit me, for once without any of the usual accompanying guilt and pain. I blinked, surprised.

Ares made a noise in the back of his throat somewhere between a growl and a snort, and my eyes darted to him, my mood immediately souring as last night's rejection washed over me again. Had he and Nox talked to each other about what happened? What were they thinking?

No, I need to focus.

I turned to face the group. Wes hadn't moved from his spot sitting at the counter, while Killian was at the end of the island, helping himself to the rest of my forgotten breakfast. It was still early, and the sun shone through the large windows, giving everything a warm glow. I felt a little like a general directing troops. Which, I supposed, I was—kind of. “Alright, so you said we could go check on Flora when you were done with your job. When are we leaving?”

I expected immediate protest, but it didn't come. I tried to meet everyone's eyes, picking out individual emotions, but it was impossible when there were so many feelings in one room.

Killian threw me a smile, but there was an edge to it. Like he was trying to soften whatever he was about to say, but there wasn't room for argument. “We'll go check it out, but you're not going anywhere, B.”

“Someone will have to stay with her,” Nox said, more to the others than to me.

There was a general murmur of consent, and I frowned.

“Wait.” I put my hands on my hips. “I'm going. I have to go.”

“You can't.” Nox set his jaw in a hard line. “You can't be seen in public.”

There was a big part of me that loved the protectiveness, but it was also getting inconvenient. I groaned. “Then we'll be careful.”

Ares kicked off his shoes by the door and strode over to the nearest armchair, throwing himself into it with a little too much force. “Fuck no. You know you can't be around other alphas.”

He didn't say that as though he actually cared, more like just as a fact. It was the same condescending tone someone might say, “Santa Claus isn't real.”

“Then we’ll figure something out.” I balled my hands into fists, my throat tightening. “Flora isn’t just going to leave with you even if she wants to go. She doesn’t know you.”

“That’s not the point. You smell unmated,” Rafe said, stepping closer to me. He gestured vaguely at my neck, but I got the idea. It was confirmation of what I already knew—my scent was coming back too fast. “It’s too dangerous. Remember what happened last time an alpha was around you like this?”

I blanched, a chill settling over me. “That was different.”

“It wasn’t,” Killian said, more gently than I would have expected.

“What am I missing?” Wes asked, turning his head back and forth between the five of us like he was watching a very awkward Ping-Pong match. “I thought she was safe-ish to go out right now.”

“They’re not talking about the alpha from the other day. They’re talking about our foster dad,” I muttered. “It’s a long story.”

“It’s not a long story,” Ares drawled. “He attacked her, so we killed him. That’s it.”

My stomach constricted painfully, and my breath caught as my skin burned hot. *Rage, love, possessiveness.*

I met Ares’ bored, ice-blue eyes for half a second before looking away, shocked by the emotions that didn’t belong to me now coursing through my body. “Yeah, I guess that’s more or less how it was.”

“Shit,” Wes laughed. “And you were only seventeen.”

I nodded. I’d only known I was an omega for twenty-four hours when our foster father tried to claim me. Killian and Nox had held me while Rafe and Ares beat him to death right in front of us. In retrospect, I should have been scared of them—teenagers shouldn’t do things like that—but I wasn’t. I still wasn’t. Who knew what that said about me, or them, but I was glad he was dead.

“He had a fucking death wish, anyway,” Ares continued. “You always smelled claimed, even then.”

My eyebrows rose. “What does that mean?”

“Wait.” Rafe stood up a little straighter, his eyes flashing. “That’s a good point.”

Killian coughed, choking on a bite of breakfast. “Sorry. I’m fine. What’s a good point.”

Rafe ignored Killian and scanned me, his gaze intense. “Right now. You don’t smell mated.” Rafe glanced at Nox. “But you don’t smell available either.”

My hand flew to my neck. “I don’t understand.”

Rafe took three steps closer to me, and I had to tilt my head back to keep him in view. The scent of coffee beans and sea salt wafted toward me, wrapping around my senses and muddling everything.

“I have an idea, and I just want to test something.” His eyes darted to my neck, and his tongue darted out to wet his lower lip. “Can I?”

Is he saying what I think he’s saying? I trembled slightly, my heart leaping into my throat. I nodded.

Rafe wrapped his fingers around my upper arms and pulled me in. He lowered his face to the crook of my neck, and his breath was hot on my skin for a moment before he ran his tongue up the smooth column of my neck, scenting himself over my glands.

Pleasure shot through me, and I melted, my entire body buzzing with need. A mewling sound erupted from the back of my throat. “Alpha.”

I pressed closer, suddenly desperate to remove any space between us. Rafe wrenched his face away from my neck; his fingers collared my throat, and he held me back. “Fuck.”

I stared up into completely black eyes, my brow furrowing in confusion. *Why did he stop?*

“Killian!” Rafe barked, his voice strained. “Come smell her.”

“Maybe I should go,” Wes muttered from somewhere to my left.

“Yeah, maybe,” Killian said in a low voice as he made his way over to me.

He pressed his nose into my neck, inhaling deeply. I shivered as his fingers trailed absently up my back and his breath tickled my skin. *Mine, mine, mine*, my brain chanted.

Killian grunted, pulling back from me with what seemed like great effort. He took a full step back. “Alright. I get what you’re saying.”

I shook my head, feeling a bit high. “What’s going on?”

“If you smell like us, it might be enough of a deterrent to keep other alphas from noticing you, as long as we don’t go anywhere really public,” Rafe explained.

A jolt of excitement traveled through me, breaking through my haze of lust. “Great. Problem solved.”

Nox shook his head. “No, it wears off too fast, Otherwise, we wouldn’t have had the problem with that asshole Nero the other day.”

A wicked smile pulled up Killian’s lips. “I feel like the obvious answer is if it wears off too fast, we just need to do it better. Right?”

My pulse picked up, and I could practically feel my pupils dilate. If I could see myself in a mirror at that moment, I was sure my eyes had gone fully black. I pressed my thighs together in an attempt to remain casual, but it was pointless. Everyone—the beta excluded—could smell how much I liked that idea.

“Alright, now I’m definitely out,” Wes said jovially. I spun around, surprised he was still here. He picked up his pile of guns off the counter, paused, and put one back down. “I think that one’s yours. Give me a call when we’re ready to go. I’m all for rescuing damsels in distress.”

I pursed my lips, cocking my head to the side. “I’m not sure he has a good understanding of Flora if he thinks he’s about to meet a damsel. She swears more than you guys, and she’s pretty intense.”

No one seemed wholly focused on my statement, and I didn't blame them. They were clearly still thinking about our travel plans.

"We'll leave tomorrow," Rafe said.

"And until then?" I hedged, trying not to sound too eager.

It was becoming almost impossible to ignore my growing instincts pushing me to complete my mating bond, and my nature loved the idea of being scented—whatever the reason. Keeping me safe and letting me travel was starting to feel like gravy.

"Killian's right. We'll just have to make sure it sticks."

CHAPTER 19

Rafe

Bliss' intoxicating scent swirled around me, filling my nose, mouth, lungs, until all I could think about was her. After tonight our scents would meld together until all she smelled like was ours. The thought had my cock hardening in my pants and my teeth aching to mate her.

Ares moved away from us but didn't leave the kitchen, eyes trained on Bliss. She trembled in Killian's arms as he gripped an arm around her waist from behind and licked up her neck, scenting himself all over her.

Mated omegas didn't smell all that interesting—like unsweetened oatmeal. Having our scent all over Bliss would be the closest possible thing to actually claiming her as our mate and hopefully confuse other alphas into not looking at her too long.

A groan rumbled at the back of my throat and my chest vibrated with a silent purr. I was close enough I could practically feel the heat rolling off them, their scent mixing together. Fuck, it was hot watching him possess her. My tongue wet my bottom lip, picturing it was Killian's. The overwhelming need to lay mine against his, claiming her together, had my dick pressing painfully hard against my zipper.

She was ours, and after tonight, no one would doubt it. Our little omega had no idea just how badly we wanted this, how many dreams she'd starred in.

I shifted, making room for Nox, and Bliss made soft, needy cries when Nox captured her mouth, pushing her harder into Killian. Kill's fingers traveled up her thighs, grazing the sensitive skin under the hem of her dress.

I stepped behind Killian, breathing against the shell of his ear. “Take it off.”

He grunted and pushed his hips back into my cock. Nox broke from Bliss’ lips as she arched between them, and Killian lifted her dress over her head. Her purple hair wound around one shoulder. We all groaned as her perky, pale breasts and rose-colored nipples were exposed. She was nearly bare between us. All soft curves, every inch of her skin flushed. My hot gaze trailed over her. She wore translucent pink panties, and my teeth clenched, knowing I would rip them off her.

I looked over Killian’s shoulder, and Nox’s gaze met mine, waiting for my command. “Touch her.”

He growled, doing as he was told. I could just see over Killian’s shoulder and was grateful for the few inches I had on him. Bliss’ full breast pooled over Nox’s hands as he gripped and massaged them, running his tongue over the peak of one while pressing his thumb on the other. He lifted her, pushing his legs between hers, and she rubbed herself over him, making sweet whimpering sounds.

Fuck. I unzipped my pants to relieve the pressure of my cock growing against my zipper and ground it against Killian’s ass. I loved watching them take care of our girl.

Killian gripped Bliss’ legs, and she wrapped them around Nox’s hips like the good little omega she was.

“Such a good girl.” I pushed my cock against Killian. Her scent threatened to throw us into a rut as her slick dripped down her legs. I backed us up until a wall supported us. “Eat that sweet pussy of hers.”

She whimpered as her nipple popped out of Nox’s mouth, and he sank down on his knees, lifting her legs over his shoulders.

I reached around Killian, yanking Nox’s hair back. “Leave her panties on. They’re mine.”

His eyes turned black, biting his lip, and nodded. I let him go, and Bliss’ skin pebbled under my hands as I ran them up her round stomach and lifted her heavy breast in my palms. I licked up Killian’s neck and groaned when he exposed it for me. They were fucking mine.

Ares watched us from across the room, his eyes pitch-black as he pumped his cock slowly in his fist. The scent of his arousal mixed with ours, but his brows furrowed as he fought the need to join us. He was a fucking idiot.

Bliss jerked when Nox pulled her panties to the side and flattened his tongue over her clit. I sank my teeth into Killian's shoulder and rocked against his ass as he ground between Bliss and me, searching for his release. I gripped his hips hard, holding him still. "You're going to wait, Killian, and fill our girl up with your cum."

He growled, resting his head back on my shoulders, and his fingers gripped my thighs as he searched for control.

Bliss keened at the loss of friction, desperately moving against Nox's mouth. He groaned, his mouth making wet sucking sounds as he worked her over.

I gripped her breast, licking where I left teeth marks on Killian. "Finish her."

Bliss cried out as Nox thrust his fingers into her and slid them in and out until she stretched over three of them.

She made whimpering, needy sounds. "Please, Nox, please."

I rolled her nipples between my thumbs and nodded at Nox. "Since you asked so nicely."

Nox burried his face against her needy core, and I pinched her nipples hard. She cried out with her release, mewling, and her hips rocked between us. Killian's grip tightened where they held my thighs, fighting his own release.

Nox lowered her legs slowly from his shoulders and caught her before she could collapse.

Killian ran his tongue over her mating glands in repeated slow licks. "Baby girl, just wait until we knot you."

Nox lifted her, one hand under her back and the other under her legs. She clung to his shoulders and burrowed into his chest. He moved away from us, letting me and Killian move away from the wall.

The spot Ares had been was empty. Disappointment flooded through me, and Bliss' glazed eyes met mine.

I ran my fingers over her cheek. “It’s not you.”

She searched my face and went back to resting on Nox.

I circled Killian’s neck in my hand and bit the bottom of his ear. “I’m going to make you come so hard, you’ll never forget you’re mine.”

Killian growled, attempting to turn in my arms, but I walked around him, following Nox into the nest.

Nox lowered Bliss onto her knees on the nest cushions. She swayed, unable to hold herself up. I dropped behind her, pushing her panties down her legs. My chest vibrated with my groan as I licked up her neck, scenting myself over her while I tasted her sweet-as-fuck sweat. She trembled in my arms, and I slowly lowered her backward and laid her on the pillows, fully exposing her sweet pussy to us.

Nox held her hands against the cushions above her head, and I shifted down between her thighs. Her core was swollen, pink, and wet, already ready for us. I licked her slick off her thighs, cleaning her with my mouth, holding her hips steady as I slid my tongue through her slit. “Such a good omega, so fucking delicious.”

She whined when I licked her again, and Killian captured the sound in his mouth. He dug his hands into her hair, tilting her head back and exposing her neck, and licked, sucked, and nipped until he left soft bruising, marking she was ours.

My dick twitched as he crushed his mouth against Nox’s, sucking on his tongue like he would a cock. Nox’s eyes rolled back, and he stripped, fisting his pierced cock. Steel bars ran up the length of him, and two round balls went through the tip. Bliss whimpered as I bit her thigh a little too hard, fucking my cock into the mattress.

Killian replaced Nox’s hand and stroked him from base to tip, thumb grazing Nox’s jewelry.

“Fuck.” Nox groaned the word into Killian’s mouth, thrusting his cock into his hand.

“Don’t you dare come.” I barked the words, and Nox jerked back, gaze meeting mine where I watched over Bliss’ sweet cunt. “Killian, come here. You’re going to take this sweet pussy.”

Bliss cried out, hips lifting against my mouth, and I sucked her clit hard before moving out of the way.

Killian removed his clothes and moved between her wide-open legs, lifting her so she could straighten them around him. She didn’t waste time, digging her heels into his ass, pulling him closer. Killian’s skin broke out in goose bumps. It hadn’t been that long since her heat, but there was nothing like sliding into Bliss, and Kill knew it.

He thrust himself until he bottomed out and paused so she could adjust for him. She bit her lip, circling her hips. He didn’t have to worry. She was made to fit us.

Nox moved to the side of Bliss and leaned over them, capturing Killian’s mouth, sucking his lip between his teeth and biting hard. Killian’s hips bucked faster as he lost himself in the rut.

I stripped naked and stroked my cock, gripping it in my fist. Fuck, his loss of control was hot.

Bliss captured the tip of Nox’s cock in her mouth and ran her tongue over his piercing. He bucked hard, choking her with his cock. He went to pull back, but Bliss’ cheeks hollowed as she sucked him harder.

Nox growled into Killian’s mouth, thrusting his dick harder into Bliss, and a low, claiming growl started in Kill’s chest. His hips rocked into her, pressing his knot further with each thrust. He shivered as I grazed my fingers down his back until I wrapped my fingers around his knot where he pumped into Bliss. Killian snarled and rocked harder. My hand dripping with Bliss’ slick, I brought it up to Killian’s ass, pushing two fingers over his entrance. He stilled momentarily but moved faster, pushing into her and back against my fingers with each thrust.

I pushed them slowly into Killian and groaned as he gripped around them. I couldn’t fucking wait to feel it around my cock, but tonight was all about Bliss. I increased my pace, stroking the sensitive spot inside Killian, firmer

each time.

Killian thrust hard, and Bliss cried out as she took his knot. Without moving my hand, I dropped myself closer to Bliss, where she was still devouring Nox's cock. "That's a good omega. You take them so well."

She moaned around Nox's cock, and he yanked himself out of her mouth with a growl. His hands fisted her head, preventing her from recapturing it. His dark gaze followed where my fingers, soaked with Bliss' slick, stroked inside Killian's ass, and he crashed his mouth against mine in a brutal, needy kiss. His voice came out on a groan. "I've wanted you to fuck me for so long."

My eyes rolled back, and my dick seeped precum, nearly losing control. He was going to pay for that. Nox's dark gaze met mine. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Bliss mewed, and Nox and I shifted to each lick up her neck, scent marking her thoroughly.

Killian's growl broke on a groan as his knot grew, locking him in place, and he moved in short demanding movements as he filled our girl with his cum. Her nails bit into my shoulder as her release broke over her.

I licked along her neck until I could catch my breath, then kissed her temple and headed to the bathroom. After quickly washing my hands, I grabbed a bottle of water from the minifridge we set up for her heats.

I found Killian still knotted in Bliss, but he'd rolled onto his back, with Bliss laid out over him in a puddle. Nox helped her lift up on her arms as I brought the bottle of water to her lips, holding back a groan as it dripped down her chin. Nox licked it off her face, and she shifted on Killian's cock. He grunted and gripped her hips, holding her still.

After a few sips, Bliss looked between us. "Are we just going to hang out until he can let go?"

My lips tipped in a mischievous grin, and Nox bit down hard on his fist.

"Little Wolf, we're going to keep making you come until you've taken all of us."

Her breath came out on a whimper, her eyes wide, half-scared, half-delighted.

Killian ran his thumb along her jaw, drawing her attention. “We have you, baby girl.”

This would be torture for him, his knot too sensitive to have her grind all over him, but he didn’t try to stop us. I moved around the front of Bliss, holding her chin until she raised herself onto her hands, her mouth wrapped around the tip of my cock. The ripple of pleasure that sang through the bond as she tasted me on her tongue was nearly my undoing. I needed to hold off. The only place I was coming was her sweet pussy.

I waited for Nox to position himself behind her, running his hand from her core over her ass, making her nice and wet. He slid his cock between her crack but didn’t push in. Her mouth opened on a gasp as he rocked against her.

I filled Bliss’ mouth with my cock until it hit the back of her throat. Her violet eyes met mine as she swallowed me further, tears trailing down her face as she choked on me. She sucked me harder, and I let her set the rhythm, Nox following her pace. “You’re stunning with your mouth around my cock.”

Killian grunted and groaned as her hips shifted, and he slid his hand between them to circle his fingers over her clit. She cried out, hips held in place by Killian’s knot, unable to chase the friction she craved.

Nox, Killian, and I worked together until she was mewling around my cock. Killian reached up and pinched her nipple as she took me deeper, and her body trembled around us as she came apart.

Killian came free, his cock already hardening even as his knot deflated.

Nox’s hands grazed up her front and gently pulled her onto her knees into his chest. He licked up her neck, whispering into her skin. “You’re so perfect. You take us so well. You’re everything we need.”

She relaxed into him, her head falling back against his shoulder. Nox lifted her so Killian could get out of the way and collapsed on the mattress at their other side. Nox turned her and took Killian’s place with Bliss over him. Her

eyes widened as she stretched around his pierced cock, and her cry filled the room.

“That’s it, Little Wolf.” Nox guided her all the way down, gritting his teeth at the edge of his control. “You feel so good.”

Bliss pressed her palms on his chest and rode him, increasing her tempo with each thrust. She trembled as I ran my tongue up her spine, over her shoulder, and grazed my teeth over her mating glands. “Lie forward.”

She followed my command immediately, even without the alpha bark, laying her chest flat over Nox. She writhed over him, and he slowly guided her back and forth on his cock. He captured her mouth with his, sucking her tongue at the same pace as he entered her. Her slick puddled under them, running over his base and balls. I tilted over and took one into my mouth, tasting her all over him. He bucked into her, a grunt tumbling from his throat as I sucked in the second one until he was clean of her.

I ran my finger where her opening stretched around him, and his piercing appeared every time he pulled back. “You look so pretty stretched around him.”

I trailed one finger with his cock, and she sucked in a breath as I pressed against her pussy until she stretched enough to fit me. She rocked against Nox’s cock and my hand, and I added a second finger.

She was lost between us, body trembling, laid flush with Nox’s chest. I met his gaze, silently communicating like we used to. He palmed her face. “Can you take both of us, beautiful?”

Her body stiffened when I lined my cock against them both, waiting for her answer. She dropped her cheek against his chest and nodded.

Fuck yes. I leaned over her back and pushed in slowly, and the feeling of her tight walls clamping me down against Nox’s pierced cock had my eyes rolling back. She was too fucking tight. I kissed up her neck, licking her softly. “You have to relax, Bliss.”

It took a few moments before she let out a breath and relaxed fully, letting me sink all the way in. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

When she squirmed around us, I took that as my cue to move. Nox's gaze met mine as my dick ran over his pierced cock. I could feel each bar as her pussy clamped us together. He sucked in a shaky breath after I pulled back, tilting my hips, and pressed forward. I was fucking him as much as I was fucking her.

Bliss' fingers dug into Nox's chest, leaving perfect crescents as she held herself perfectly still for us to take her.

Nox lifted his hips, angling her so we could go deeper, and they both cried out as he pressed his knot inside.

Bliss whimpered and took deep breaths. Nox and I stilled.

Killian lay beside her, sliding her wet hair off her face. "You're doing so well." He placed a soft kiss on her lips, and she keened painfully, sucking his tongue into her mouth. He smiled, licking her lips. "What do you want, baby? Do you want more?"

"Yes, Alpha."

Fuck. I shifted deeper, giving her my knot. I growled at the pressure, growing almost too intense as she stretched to fit both of our knots. "You're so perfect. I love the way you fit both of us."

Nox's knot swelled, locking mine in place, and it felt so good I damn near died. I thrust hard against him, only controlling the rut long enough to confirm with Killian that she was okay before losing myself to it. Fucking Bliss, fucking Nox, them fucking me. Bliss ground her clit against Nox until she came, moaning out our names. Nox followed, and hot liquid surrounded my cock as he filled her. I slammed in harder, overflowing her with my release.

I sank forward, careful to hold my weight off Bliss. My heart felt like it was going to break out of my chest as I sucked in calming breaths. Bliss' own breathing filled my ears, and I smiled as an overwhelming feeling of satisfaction came through the bond.

I kissed her back, and Nox and I delicately switched our positions so she lay on the bed between us. We'd be like this for at least another twenty minutes. I lifted Bliss' damp hair from her neck and nuzzled up her throat. Killian lay

on the bed above us, fingers playing with her hair as his breathing evened out.

My heart clenched in my chest, and I held her sleeping form tight. She was stunning tonight, but the idea that this was all she would give us damn near ripped me apart. I kissed along her shoulder blade, wishing things had gone down differently. I said the things to her I couldn't say if she was awake.

“I'm so sorry we ruined this.”

She snuggled into Nox's chest, voice barely above a whisper. “I forgive you.”

Nox met my gaze, and it felt like my heart would explode. She wouldn't remember that in the morning, but it meant everything to us. I rested my head against hers and closed my eyes, taking deep breaths of her jasmine scent.

CHAPTER 20

Bliss

We sped west on the I-80, all six of us crammed tightly inside an inconspicuous silver Chevy Tahoe.

“We should have taken the van,” Killian grumbled next to me, rolling his neck. His hand landed on my thigh as he shifted, trying to get more comfortable. I didn’t correct him.

Since last night, my whole body hummed with energy. Like I was a battery that had been sputtering along at 1% without ever knowing it. I’d be lying to myself to say this wasn’t making me question leaving them, if only a bit. If this was just a taste—a half charge—what would it be like to run on full power?

“I told you, the van is too obvious,” Rafe snapped, glancing at Killian in the rearview mirror. “The Tahoe blends in with traffic.”

“It won’t matter if we blend in if we’re driving to Virginia to start a shootout anyway.”

I hoped we weren’t driving to Flora’s to start a shootout, but the guys had loaded enough guns into the back of the car—just in case—that it was definitely possible. “Well, I like it,” I announced, lying back against my seat with a smile and closing my eyes. “The van smells like chemicals. This is way better.”

“I wouldn’t mind if Rafe ever let someone else drive.” Killian kicked the back of Rafe’s seat so hard the whole car shook and laughed. I laughed along

with him.

“You’re cheerful this morning,” Wes observed with a Cheshire cat grin. I turned around in my seat just in time to see Nox punch him in the arm, hard enough that the beta visibly winced. “Ow. Chill, man.”

“It’s nothing.” I shook my head, still smiling a bit. He was right—I was cheerful and trying to pretend we didn’t all know why. “He just reminded me of when we used to drive to school like this.”

Ares’ head popped up from where he sat in the passenger seat, ignoring all of us. He had a pen cap in his mouth and one leg crossed over the other, with his pant leg rolled up to the knee.

“One of these days, someone is going to have to tell me about you all as kids.” Wes raised his arms in the air, stretching, and hit his hands on the ceiling.

“There’s not much to tell,” I lied, ignoring the unpleasant taste on my tongue. “What happened to the old Impala, Ares?” I craned my neck to see he was sketching something on one of his few remaining un-tattooed patches of skin.

Ares spit his pen cap into his hand and put his leg down, hiding his drawing from me. “Crashed it.” He shrugged, but the scent of pain lingered in the air and reverberated through my chest.

Well, alright then.

According to the GPS, Flora’s house was about six hours away, giving us ample time to come up with a plan. I tried and failed not to roll my eyes as Rafe suggested I stay in the car while they checked on Flora—again.

“I told you,” I said as patiently as possible, my teeth slightly bared. “She’s not going to go anywhere with you. She doesn’t know you.”

Killian’s hand squeezed my leg. “What if someone sees you? How are we going to explain why you’re out in public without Nero?”

“Omegas don’t always travel with their alphas,” I insisted. “Sometimes they travel with security.”

I thought back to the omega we'd seen briefly at the airport on the way to the Agora. Omega...what was her name? Donnelley. I pulled my phone out of my sundress pocket and quickly typed her name into Google.

"What are you looking at?" Nox asked, more curious than demanding.

"I've got an idea." I tapped on the first listing that came up without even reading the source and scanned the new article. "Here, look. Omega Donnelley. Her mate is a tech guy from Europe. Now lives in Silicon Valley and invests in start-ups..." I scanned further down the article, twisting my hair with my other hand. "She has four children. Three girls."

Nox tugged on his earring. "And?"

"I saw her at the airport on the way to the Agora, and she wasn't traveling with her alpha. She was just with her security.

"Who's her security? Betas?" Wes asked.

"Other alphas," I explained, still reading. "Since she's mated, it doesn't matter anymore."

"Wait, so instead of her alpha being with her, he's hiring other alphas to hang around her and keep her safe. And this is normal. Is that what you're saying?" Rafe said incredulously.

"Yes."

Rafe and Ares glanced at each other, both clearly thinking, *What the fuck*, and for half a second, it was like they were best friends again. Until they both looked away.

"That's fucking idiotic," Ares grumbled. "I'm not saying I give a shit, but this is the problem with the system. They've sanitized the mating process and created a dystopian hellscape where omegas are only with one alpha, so now they need a whole group of security to protect them. That's what a goddamn pack is. If I reached a point where I had to hire other alphas to do the job I was literally born to do, I'd pray to be put out of my misery right then and there. Fucking Institute ruining everything."

My eyebrows had crept so far up my forehead I probably looked like I'd been electrocuted. That was the longest statement I'd heard him make since being back. "Right. Well, in this case, it might work to our advantage."

Ares ducked his head and went back to drawing. Killian turned to me, a shit-eating smile on his face. "What's your plan?"

"So, what if we just go to her house and knock on the front door?" My voice rose with tentative excitement, and I sat up a little straighter. "Flora and I are friends, and her mating ceremony is this weekend. I'll say I got to town early and wanted to drop by and say hello but lost her phone number or something. You guys can be my security."

"Wait, slow down." Killian put his palm flat on my thigh again.

"What? Do you guys have a better idea?"

Killian grinned, probably getting blasted with the full force of my excitement. "No, but there are some issues. Didn't you say Nero knows this guy? Do you think he told him you disappeared?"

"That prick won't tell anyone." I could almost hear the wheels turning in Nox's head. "This looks bad for him. He'll be pretending you're just locked in his basement for the rest of his life."

I shuddered. That was probably true.

Rafe kept his eyes firmly on the road. "What about the fact that she has no claiming mark?"

"I'll wear a high-collared dress. Men don't really notice clothes."

Ares scoffed. "Clothes, no, but your neck? Yes, we do. An alpha will notice if you're hiding your mating glands."

"Okay, but would they ask me about it directly? Probably not."

There was a general murmur of agreement, and my stomach jumped, my excitement building again.

"You still don't smell mated though," Rafe pointed out. "You're fine to walk down the street or roll down the window, but we'd be pushing it to have a

long conversation with another alpha.”

I tugged on a loose bit of my hair, thinking. “Her mate is a judge, right? So, he probably goes to work. We’ll try to time it for when he’s gone and only talk to her. Worst-case scenario, we run into security.”

“There’s no way for us to know for sure if the mate is home,” Nox pointed out. “We should go to the house first and make sure.”

“Alright,” Rafe said, as though everything was settled. “We’ll go. Bliss will stay in the car while we check it out, and if the mate isn’t home, we can do this security plan thing, but if anything goes wrong—” He turned around to look at me directly. “—you leave right away, no questions.”

“Fine. I can live with that.”



Fifteen minutes from the state line, we stopped at a dingy strip mall so I could find something to wear that looked more like Flora’s mom and less like teenage me wearing the wrong size. My options were pretty limited, but I finally found a cream turtleneck sweater and a navy-blue flared skirt, neither of which clashed too badly with my hair. Then we swung into a relatively nice rest stop so I could change.

“May as well just stick around here while you guys go see if the mate is home.” Wes shrugged. “I’ll hang out with Bliss. We can get pretzels.” He gestured to one of the rest stop food stands with a smile.

The pack looked at each other, and dead flowers scented in the air.

“Not the worst idea.” Nox ran a hand over his shaved head. “But maybe one of us should stay.”

I sighed, grabbing my shopping bag out of the back seat. “You guys decide who’s staying, and I’ll see the rest of you in an hour. I’m going to change.”

I kept my head down as I crossed the parking lot, trying not to draw any attention to myself. I’d had a lot of practice with walking while keeping my eyes on the floor rather than on where I was going, but it was harder when I

wasn't following the black patent leather shoes of the girl in front of me.

My heart beat with misplaced anxiety, and I took deep breaths through my nose. The last time we'd visited a rest stop, I'd come out to find the Institute waiting for me. Not that I thought something was going to happen again, but my body felt like it was in fight-or-flight mode.

A group of three men stood outside the rest stop, chain-smoking. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as I passed them, and their scent wafted toward me over the strong odor of Marlboro Reds. At least one was an alpha.

"Alright, honey?" one yelled, and his friends laughed.

I muttered something noncommittal and gave half a wave before ducking inside and making a beeline for the restrooms.

The rest stop smelled of fast food, gasoline, and the lingering imprint of hundreds of travelers. I walked quickly past the racks of brochures and Pepsi-brand vending machines and a closed Auntie Annie's pretzel stand—looked like Wes was out of luck on the snack front. The whole building was surprisingly empty, given that it was a main road and barely midafternoon, but I almost preferred it that way.

I changed and used the bathroom as fast as possible, then examined myself in the long mirror as I washed my hands. While the fabric of the sweater and skirt was cheap, the tags on the inside nothing that would impress anyone, from the outside, I still looked the part of a traditional omega—mostly. The sweater clung to my curves in all the right places and, aside from the turtleneck, resembled something that I'd seen headmistress Omega DuPont wear to dinner on Sundays. Except for my hair, which had faded to a lighter lavender after only a few washes.

I dried my hands and gathered up my rumpled sundress, turning toward the door just as it swung open. The scent of an unfamiliar alpha wafted inside the small four-stall women's bathroom, along with a plume of cigarette smoke. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

Three men stepped inside. They each wore some variation of beat-up jeans and a graphic T-shirt emblazoned with the logo for a sports team I neither recognized nor cared about. A jolt of panic shot through me as I recognized

them from outside the rest stop.

Of the two in the back, one was a short but muscular beta. The other was tall and broad enough that he was probably an alpha, though his smell wasn't very dominant. The one in the front was the real problem.

The alpha in the front stepped closer to me, smiling. "Hi, honey. What are you doing here by yourself?"

He was probably late twenties or early thirties, with black hair and mean eyes. Clearly dominant enough that he was used to getting his way and probably had these other two to back him up one hundred percent of the time.

"I would have thought that was obvious," I laughed, trying and failing for bravado.

The cranberry scent of my fear permeated the room, and the mean-looking alpha took a long breath through his nose, his smile growing broader. "Are you in town long?"

"No," I stammered. "Actually, I need to go."

"Why?" They laughed, nudging each other as though this was all some big joke.

My heartbeat pounded against my ribs as I realized they were moving further into the bathroom. I took an involuntary step back. There was nowhere to go. Just a tile wall behind me and three men between me and the door.

"I have people waiting for me." I fought to keep my voice steady. "My alphas will—"

The alpha in the front jerked his head up, his eyes widening. "Say again? Who's waiting for you, honey?"

A cold chill fell over my body as my eyes darted between them, taking in their similar looks of confused delight. The alpha in the back laughed incredulously. "No shit, an omega? I knew you smelled good, baby. I've never seen one'a you in real life."

"Fuck off," the dominant alpha spat at his friend. "She's mine."

“Come on, Scott. We can share. I heard omegas are freaks. She’ll love it.”

My heartbeat reached dangerous levels as I caught fingers out of the corner of my eye reaching for my arm. I’d never be able to fight off an alpha—it was impossible. God, it was pretty unlikely I’d be able to fight off most betas if they wanted to hurt me. That just wasn’t how omegas were built. I might be able to break his hold, though, and run back into the rest stop. Where the hell were—

“Bliss!”

The door banged open again, and hot relief flooded my body.

Ares strode inside, his expression murderous as he whipped his head from me to the three men cornering me against the wall. “Back away from her,” Ares barked. “Now.”

The force of his bark reverberated off the tile and had the two men in the back immediately dropping their eyes and stepping away toward the door.

The tall, loud one in the front faltered, surprised, but gritted his teeth, fighting to ignore the command. He watched the door slam as his buddies took off and set his jaw in stubborn resolve. “Nah, fuck off. I found her, she’s mine.”

I gasped in mingled surprise and fear. The alpha was more dominant than he looked. He reached out again and ran one finger down my right cheek. Ares snarled.

Judging by his smug grin, the other alpha thought he had this one in the bag. He was older and dominant enough that he probably wasn’t used to losing. But he couldn’t feel Ares pounding adrenaline down our bond and hadn’t seen Ares kill our foster dad with his bare hands when he was only seventeen.

The alpha, while large and naturally strong, gave the impression he was used to fighting outside bars and at sporting events. The kind of fights where no one really knew what they were doing, everyone was most of the way to blackout anyway, and the guy who stayed upright the longest was declared the winner. Ares was not that kind of fighter.

“You should walk away before you get hurt,” I blurted out.

The alpha laughed. “Aw, that’s sweet. She don’t want you to ruin your pretty-boy face, kid. Listen to the girl and walk away.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I wasn’t talking to him. You need to leave before he kills you.”

The alpha gaped at me for a second, then guffawed. He reached out and pinched my nipple through my sweater, still grinning. “Mouthy bitch. I’ll enjoy breaking you in.”

I yanked backward out of the alpha’s grip, and Ares growled in rage. “Bliss, get the fuck out of here.”

The tug of the command pulled at my middle, but now Ares blocked the door as he advanced on the grinning alpha, and my survival instinct warred with my desire to obey. I shrunk back into the stall at the end of the row and closed the door halfway, trying to satisfy both urges at once.

The alpha tried to throw a punch, and Ares sidestepped him easily, turned, and drove his elbow into the man’s neck. The alpha made a noise somewhere between a scream and a wheeze.

Miraculously, the alpha stumbled back to standing, going for a tackle this time. Ares grabbed him by the hair, slamming his face into the edge of the long row of sinks. I winced, closing my eyes as bones crunched, and I heard a wet thunk as the alpha’s head hit the sink again.

The metallic scent of blood filled the air, washing over everything

“Hey,” I called through the crack in the stall door. I eased the door open. “You can stop now.”

Ares dropped the bleeding alpha on the previously white tile floor and turned to look at me. My heart pounded in time to my erratic breathing as he held me transfixed by his completely black gaze. It was almost as eerie as it was beautiful, only because it was so opposite to his normal eye color.

“Did they touch you?” he growled, his voice shaking with barely contained anger.

I trembled, but I was half-ashamed with myself that it wasn't from fear. Ares had already made it perfectly clear several times over that he wasn't interested in me, but still, this level of dominance had my omega side practically begging to be claimed. "No. They didn't touch me. They tried, but —" I gestured toward the floor, trailing off.

I gasped as each wave crested, crashing right into me. *Rage, possession, fear.*

My gut instinct was to fix it. *Your alpha is angry with you. Make it better.*

"I'm not hurt." I grabbed his hands and held them tightly in mine, bringing them up to my face. "See?"

He held my face gently between his palms. "I should have come in here sooner."

"Why did you stay?" I asked.

He shook his head, eyes still black and wild, not seeming to understand the question. "Why wouldn't I stay?"

Because you rejected me. Because you didn't want to scent me last night, even for my protection. Because you don't want to be a part of the pack. "Because I thought you would think it was more important to go check out Flora's house."

"Nothing is more important than you."

I whimpered as a wave of lust and something more, stronger, ineffable, crested over me. His palms shook against my burning cheeks. He took half a step closer, inhaling deeply through his nose. "You should back up, Love."

"W-what? Why?" My voice came out breathy and foreign as I tried to remember what I was doing here in the first place. My head spun, drunk on a cocktail of over-potent pheromones and adrenaline.

His hands fell from my cheeks to my hips, and he tugged me to him, growling low in the back of his throat. "You need to give me some space, because I want you so bad, I can't think straight. I'm going to fuck you up against that wall and make you come all over my knot so no one ever questions that you're mine again."

Every nerve ending in my body hummed with need. The sharpness of his words and the strong scent of our combined arousal made me desperate to close the remaining distance between us. “Please.”

Ares growled, the remainder of his self-control snapping as he backed me into the sinks behind us. He pushed aside the fabric of my skirt to cup me between my legs. I whimpered as his fingers brushed me over my panties, and the honey scent of my slick hit both of us. “Fuck, Love.”

I shifted, wanting more. I wanted him to touch me. Own me.

There was a tiny part of me that wondered if it was me or the bond pushing me to complete the pack. As long as Ares rejected me, and by extension, the pack, the bond would never feel right.

As he stroked up and down my entrance over my panties and finally pushed them aside to sink two fingers into me, I keened, surrendering to the sensation. Maybe it didn’t matter why I wanted it. Maybe all that mattered was that I did.

He withdrew his fingers and brought them to his mouth, sucking them clean. “Perfect. I can’t wait to taste you again.”

My eyes widened. *Again? When—*

He wrapped both hands around my thighs, lifting me onto the sink, distracting me from my thoughts as he slammed his lips down on mine, punishing me with his kiss. He thrust his tongue past my lips forcefully, demanding my submission.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and held on, grinding myself down on his cock through his jeans as I grew drunk on greedy kisses.

His hands dug into my ass, pressing me, if possible, closer. I whined, writhing against Ares’ hard body. I wanted more—to be full. I needed more.

“Mine.” He pulled his mouth from mine to look me in the eye. “You’re mine, Love.”

I moaned. “Yes, Alpha.”

He pressed his face into my neck, speaking against my skin. “That’s my good girl.”

“I want...” I couldn’t find the words as he rocked into me, and his mouth moved to the sensitive skin of my neck. “I want...”

Ares scraped his teeth up the column of my neck, and I cried out in unexpected pleasure as one of his sharp incisors nicked my skin. Everything narrowed to a point, and my heart beat a crescendo in my ears, roaring its approval.

I craned my neck further, pressing against his mouth as though I could somehow impale myself on his teeth. “Do it,” I gasped. “Please.”

Ares didn’t move.

For a full beat, I waited, the only sound now my own ragged breathing. I pulled my head back to look at him. His eyes were shifting back to blue right in front of me. I frowned—I’d never seen that. It was quick, like a cat walking from a dark room into sunlight.

His gaze darted from my face to my neck, a look of sheer horror on his face. A chill settled over me, my heartbeat in my ears becoming a roar as embarrassment and rejection sunk in.

“Bliss, I’m so fucking sorry,” he blurted out. “Fuck. I can’t do this.”

CHAPTER 21

Bliss

The bathroom door slammed, and I stared dumbstruck at the empty space where Ares had just been. My chest heaved as I fought to catch my breath, a cold chill washing over me.

“Wait!” I slid off the counter, nearly tripping over the beaten and bloody alpha still lying on the floor.

I tore across the slippery tile floor, trying to straighten my skirt as I went, and threw open the door. Expecting to find the lobby of the rest stop deserted again, I skidded to a halt, shocked, when Ares was standing right in front of me.

Aside from the blood in his white hair and covering his T-shirt, you wouldn’t know anything had just happened. His expression had returned to completely neutral. “Let’s go.”

My brain spluttered, short-circuiting. “Is this a joke? Are you serious right now?”

“The guys will be back any second, and we don’t want to hang around near that.” He jerked his head toward the bathroom door. “We’ll wait outside.”

He set off across the lobby toward the front doors, and I had to jog to keep up. Hurt, confusion, and indignation bubbled in my stomach, quickly morphing into anger. “Are you really going to pretend nothing just happened?”

He turned back to me, one hand on the door to the parking lot. “Don’t worry. I don’t think that will do anything.” His eyes darted to my neck. “It’s more of a scratch. I didn’t really bite you. We’re not any more connected now than —”

“Than we already are,” I finished for him acidly. “Except, according to you, there’s nothing between us anyway.”

“I never said that.”

We stepped outside and turned to face each other on the sidewalk in front of the rest stop. I crossed my arms over my chest, as though somehow that would shield me. “You didn’t have to. You’re making it very clear you want nothing to do with me, or the rest of the pack for that matter.”

He made a noise in the back of his throat that might have been a growl, or maybe a scoff, it was hard to tell. “There is no pack, Bliss. And don’t tell me now you want to stay and make one.”

I looked down, suddenly unsure. “I don’t know. Maybe I would if I had that option, but it’s not like you guys are offering me that. No one is asking to mate with me.”

“Because we know you only think you want that because of the bond,” he said bitterly. “You’re not thinking clearly.”

I laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Don’t tell me how I feel. I loved you all before any of this. I would have stayed with you no matter what and just hoped being a beta was enough. It was you guys who changed and abandoned me, and you’re the ones who still won’t be with me now.”

His eyes widened, staring at me in obvious shock. “Love...”

The SUV pulled up outside the rest stop and skidded to a halt, brakes screeching. Ares and I turned in unison to look as the doors flew open and everyone leapt out.

“Are you okay, baby?” Killian rushed to me, his hands trailing over my hair.

“Fine,” I breathed—struggling for a moment to remember what they were talking about.

“What happened?” Rafe demanded, more to Ares than me.

My eyes landed on Ares’ bloodied knuckles. A hot flush rushed up my neck. Had they felt *everything* through the bond? From the way Nox was now eyeing my neck, a curious look on his face, the answer was a resounding “yes.” Perfect.

I took a large step toward the car, willing myself to get it together. What was I doing? I was supposed to be focused on my best friend—nothing else should matter right now. “Everything is fine now. Was Flora’s mate home?”

“No, wait, tell us what happened. Is she hurt?” Rafe snapped his fingers at Ares, who was still staring at me, an unreadable expression on his face.

Ares seemed to wake up. “Later.” He glanced up at the security cameras mounted above the door. “We should get the fuck out of here, anyway.”

My stomach did a nervous flip. The law protected alphas defending their omegas—it was understood that they couldn’t help it, and therefore, even if Ares had killed that man, nothing would happen. Except that, technically, I didn’t belong to the guys. I belonged to Nero. I nearly gagged thinking about it.

“Let’s leave,” I said urgently. “Please.”

We piled back into the car, my shaking hands and the scent of blood the only indication that anything unusual had gone on in the last hour.

“Looks like her mate is at work,” Wes said from his seat in the back row. “They have a security gate around the whole house, and the guard keeps a log of arrivals and departures.”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know how they got their hands on the arrivals and departures log in the span of forty minutes. Some things were better left to the imagination.

Alpha Bishop lived in a six-bedroom, eight-bathroom mini-mansion with an Olympic-sized pool and a nine-hole golf course. We knew this because the house was renovated last year and was featured in an issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* alongside the homes of several other political figures. In the photos, the house was decked out in flags and bunting, as though it were the

bicentennial. When we arrived, it looked far less festive.

It was painted a pale gray, with wide stone columns in the front. It reminded me a little of a prison with its high walls and stone arches—more austere than impressive. We pulled up to the iron front gate, finding it already open. I supposed that confirmed my suspicions about the fate of the security guard.

I reached up, twirling a strand of my hair. That brought our body count for the day up to two, and we weren't even inside the house yet. That couldn't be a good omen.

The gravel of the long driveway crunched under our tires, kicking tiny pebbles up against the windshield. I sat up a little straighter, trying to channel a good omega. The kind of omega that would travel with security. "Remember." I smoothed my hair as the car came to a halt near the front door. "I am nothing to you."

Growls tore through the car, and Wes winced. "Cut that shit out. It's unnerving as fuck."

I ignored him. "Seriously. You can't talk for me or do anything unless I'm seriously threatened. Security wouldn't do that because you wouldn't have the urge to. You're just there because you're getting paid."

"I don't like this." Killian reached over and squeezed my thigh.

I shivered at the casual touch. Had we moved on to that? Was he just nervous? Never knowing where things stood was, as Wes put it, unnerving as fuck. I nudged Killian away, climbing out of the car. "I can't think of anything else, and we're already here, so let's just get it over with."

The guys stood slightly behind me as I knocked on Flora's front door. My heart beat a violent rhythm against my breastbone, seeming to count out the seconds while we waited for someone to answer.

Would Flora answer the door, or did she have staff? I imagined in a house this large, there would be a butler or something, but I was also basing my opinion off movies.

"Maybe no one's home." Killian shifted behind me.

I knocked again, louder. They didn't seem to have a doorbell—maybe there was a side entrance? Footsteps sounded on the other side of the door, and my stomach jumped with nervous anticipation. The door creaked open.

A brunette beta woman in her mid-twenties poked her head around the door and stared at me. “Hello?”

My skin went clammy as panic washed over me. I didn't know if I was supposed to look at her directly. I'd had a thousand etiquette classes on interacting with alphas and other omegas, but no one had ever told me how to talk to betas in this sort of social situation. I settled on staring at her right shoulder. “Um, hi. I'm Omega Nero. Is Omega Bishop taking visitors this afternoon?”

I internally cringed. That sounded painful. If I were this woman, I would immediately assume something was going on from the awkwardness of that statement alone.

The beta woman shuffled her feet, a salty scent rising around her. “She's not here, ma'am.”

I wrinkled my nose, swallowing against the sour taste of the lie. I looked up, staring into the woman's warm brown eyes—etiquette be damned. “Really?”

“Yes. She left with Judge Bishop.”

Lie.

Behind me, the guys shifted, obviously also bothered by the lies. I frowned, confused. This woman worked in an alpha's household—why wouldn't she realize she couldn't lie without us knowing?

“Your boss never told you that alphas and omegas can smell lies, did he?” Nox said flatly from behind me. “Probably helps keep his staff in line.”

The maid gasped. “I'm sorry, ma'am. Miss Flora is very ill.”

Lie.

I raised my eyebrows. “Are you sure?”

Her eyes widened. “I mean, she’s too tired from the planning for the mating ceremony.”

Lie.

I rubbed my temples—the smell was starting to make my head spin. “Please stop lying.”

She slapped her hand over her mouth, clearly struggling with this new realization. She shifted, now trying to shut the door. “I think you should leave.”

That, at least, was true.

“Look, I get it,” I said, trying to give the woman a reassuring smile, even as sweat beaded on the back of my neck. “I’m sure you were told not to say anything, but I really need to see my friend. Please let us in. This doesn’t need to have anything to do with you.”

The maid ducked her head, staring at my shoes. The scent of cranberries and salt overwhelmed my senses, lingering on my tongue. “If he can tell I’m lying like you said, he’ll know I let you in.”

I closed my eyes against the deluge of emotions hitting me from all sides. If she was so afraid of her boss, I couldn’t imagine what state Flora was in. I didn’t want us to turn into the kind of people who bulldozed over innocent bystanders, but at what point did we have to escalate this? We were wasting time, and I didn’t see any other security. It was just one maid standing between me and finding Flora. “Look—”

The maid looked over my shoulder, an idea sparking behind her eyes. “You can do that thing, right? Just tell me to let you in, then it’s not my fault.”

“Let us in,” Nox barked immediately, the strength of his voice raising goose bumps on my arms.

The maid stepped aside immediately, and I let out a sigh of relief, following her inside the house. The foyer was almost exactly what I would have guessed from looking at the outside—white, clean, and devoid of personality. “Can you show us where Flora is?” I asked quickly.

The maid gave a pointed look at the guys, waiting for the command.

“I don’t like the idea of a staff being familiar with getting barked at,” Killian said under his breath once we were being led down a long, wide hallway and up a flight of stairs dotted with crystal sconces along the walls.

“Me neither,” I whispered back. I kept my back rigid, expecting to come across other staff or security, but no one appeared. “Is there anyone else here?”

“Miss Flora, me, the cook, and the gardener,” the maid said, her tone robotic.

“No alphas?”

“No.”

I glanced back at the guys as we climbed a second flight of stairs to the third floor, wondering if they found that as odd as I did. Flora should have security.

The maid came to a halt outside a heavy oak-paneled door and wiped her sweating palms on the skirt of her black uniform. “This is Miss Flora’s room,”

I glanced at the knob, immediately zeroing in on a large, old-fashioned brass key sticking out of the lock. “Is she locked in?”

The maid nodded, stepping back to let me take a closer look. A shiver traveled down my spine as a combined feeling of dread and anger settled over me. I reached for the knob, then paused, glancing back at the guys. “Maybe you should all step back.”

Rafe growled, reaching for my hand to stop me. “No. We don’t know what’s in there.”

“Exactly.” I jutted my lip out. “We don’t know what state she’s in. We’re not all going to rush in there together and scare her.”

In almost all situations, I was happy to defer to the guys. It was my nature to let them protect me, but not this time. My instincts screamed not to let them in that room, and my instincts hadn’t been wrong yet.

“There’s no one else on this level, ma’am,” the maid said. “Just us and Miss Flora.”

“Fine,” Rafe muttered, stepping back. “We’ll wait here while you go in.”

I faced the door again and took a deep breath, shaking out my shoulders. Raising my knuckles, I knocked softly. “Flora? It’s Bliss. I’m coming in.”

My heart beat so loudly it drowned out all other sound as I turned the key and hesitantly eased the door open on a darkened bedroom. The scent of sweat, sex, and rotting food came at me in a rush, and I choked as I tried to identify the source of everything—to pick apart the emotions from the physical scents. I blinked and stumbled back as something moved abruptly in the darkness, and a bedside light flicked on. My hand flew to my mouth, stifling a cry.

Flora sat up in the center of the bed, a tangled sheet wrapped around her naked and bruised body. Her hair fell in crumpled and battered curls, and she had glitter smeared across her face, like she hadn’t bathed since the Agora Ceremony. She squinted at me, leaning forward into the light, and I nearly gagged at the dried blood stuck to her neck near half-healed bite marks. “Bliss? Is that you?”

CHAPTER 22

Wes

Bliss unlocked the door and stepped inside, and Rafe stiffened next to me. “What the fuck is going on in there?” he growled at the maid.

The rest of the guys shifted behind me, and the maid backed up, looking half-scared, half-guilty. I frowned. “Leave her alone. We can’t even see inside.”

The guys didn’t understand what it was like to have someone barking at you and not be able to control your own body. Fucking weird was what it was, and that maid was a tiny woman. I shuddered. I couldn’t imagine.

Somehow, I’d ended up near the front of the group, and I peered into the room. It was dark in there, and unless they had some kind of Superman X-ray vision I didn’t know about, they couldn’t see shit either.

“You can’t smell it,” Killian muttered, his voice relatively even. He wasn’t trying to be an asshole, just stating a fact. “It’s a shitshow.”

I grimaced. He was right; I couldn’t smell what was going on, but I’d have to be a fucking moron not to notice the way the guys had stiffened behind me like they were about to attack the moment the door opened and Bliss stepped into the room. I wasn’t totally useless at reading people—alphas in particular. I’d been hanging around Alpha Lupi since I was fourteen and was tight with the pack for the better part of three years. I loved the guys, but they weren’t what I’d call subtle.

A light flicked on in the room, and I leaned forward further, trying to get a glimpse of the so-called shitshow. My stomach rolled.

Bliss knelt on a king-sized bed, her back to the door. Her shoulders shook slightly, like she was crying as she spoke to her friend. I warred with myself, half-transfixed by the woman on the bed, half-horrified by what I was seeing.

“How long has she been like this?” Rafe bit out, echoing my thoughts.

“I—I—” The maid was struggling, wringing her hands. “A little over a week? Since Miss Flora arrived, sirs.”

Flora. Pretty name. I hadn’t paid much attention until now, but suddenly, I couldn’t focus on anything else.

“And you didn’t do shit about it?” Ares jostled my arm as he tried to sidestep me to get to the door.

I kept my feet firmly planted on the floor, more out of spite than anything else. Sure, he could knock me out of the way if he wanted to, and we both knew it, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to just bow out of the way and make it easier for him.

“I can’t.” The maid set her jaw, her face reddening with anger. “I’m ordered not to.”

I balled my hands into fists, hot rage pounding through me for the sake of both women. That was fucked. “When does her...” I trailed off, unsure if I should say husband or mate. “When does your boss get back?”

“Tonight,” the maid replied. “Unless Miss Flora is seriously hurt, then he’ll come back right away.”

I swallowed thickly, not liking the implication of why the maid knew that.

Bliss stood, walking back toward the open door on wobbling legs. Her face was set in as serious an expression as I’d ever seen her wear, her mouth a thin line. “Can someone help me carry her?”

“Where, baby?” Killian’s voice was soft.

Bliss looked lost. “The car, I guess? I don’t know what to do, but she’s not staying here. All I can think of right now is to go to her parents.”

“What happened?” I asked, already sure I knew the answer.

A flash of unbridled rage crossed Bliss' face. "I explained how the Institute works and the point of the Agora. This shouldn't come as a surprise."

Nox leaned around my shoulder to get a better look into the room, and I stepped to the side to let him see. This was fucking ridiculous with so many of us crammed up here. Fuck, the hallway was as tightly packed as a strip club on half-price wings night. "We can't take her out of here and have her abandon her mate while in that condition."

Bliss shook her head, dejected. "I know, but we can't leave her here."

They'd lost me. I gritted my teeth in frustration at not understanding what was going on, my skin crawling with nervous energy. "Can someone explain to me what the hell you all are talking about?"

Rafe growled, his voice barely under control. "Flora is mated and clearly in bad shape. Separating mates is incredibly painful. We don't know if she'd survive it."

Bliss pulled at the ends of her lavender hair. "That's why I'm thinking we should go to her parents. Like a visit? I don't really know how this kind of thing works, but that's all I've got right now."

It nagged at the back of my mind that we were talking about this woman without her input, making even more decisions for her. Bliss was clearly doing her best, but what the hell did Flora want to do?

"I'll carry her downstairs," Killian offered before I could voice that opinion.

Something hot and protective rose in my chest, and I straightened, intending to say no, I could help instead.

I blinked, leaning back against the wall as I swallowed the insane urge back down.

What the fuck am I thinking.

Killian followed Bliss into the room, and I suddenly remembered they'd all gone to high school together. They at least all knew each other; this had absolutely nothing to do with me. Inserting my opinion was not only unnecessary, but it would probably make things harder for everyone.

My spine straightened as a high-pitched scream shattered my eardrums. “No! Don’t touch me.”

“Flora. It’s Killian,” Bliss panicked. “You remember Killian, right?”

Flora screamed again, her terror evident. “Fucking alphas. Stay away from me.”

Killian darted back out of the bedroom, his eyes wide, expression somewhere between sad and horrified. I almost felt bad for the big guy. Of all of them, he was by far the least naturally violent. I could see being scared of Ares or Rafe, who both gave off kind of an “I kill people and like it” energy. Maybe even Nox with all the piercings and shaved head, but Killian? Nah.

“Wes,” Bliss called from out of sight. She sounded like she was on the verge of crying again. “Can you come here?”

My stomach seized with something like anxiety, but I pushed off the wall, not making eye contact with anyone as I stepped into the bedroom.

My eyes landed on Flora, and I regretted it instantly. If the situation had looked bad from my position in the hall, it was nothing to how she looked up close. She was probably around Bliss’ age, so several years younger than my twenty-five, but the look in her eyes made her seem far older. She had bruises all along her face and neck, like someone had grabbed her or smacked her around, dried blood stuck to her collarbones. I squinted at her neck, my stomach rolling. It looked almost like an animal attack. I knew that alphas and omegas bit each other, but I’d never seen anything like that.

Flora didn’t look at me. Her hollow eyes were fixed on Bliss, who stood on the opposite side of the bed now, holding up a sparkly evening gown. “Do you have any other clothes?”

Her voice came out soft, compared to the scream I’d just heard. Like a different person. “No.”

Without thinking, I shrugged off my sweatshirt and held it out to Flora. She didn’t take it. Instead, Bliss darted around the bed and grabbed it and helped to push the neck of the rumpled garment over her friend’s head. She was so small, the material practically drowned her. Flora didn’t seem to care.

“Can you please just take her out of here?” Bliss implored, her voice shaking.

“Sure. Of course.” My breath caught in the back of my throat as I bent to lift the woman off the bed. She was too frail. Too delicate—like a wounded bird. I paused. “Hey there, Buttercup. My name is Wes,” I told her, not sure if she was paying attention to me. “I promise not to hurt you. We’re going to take you somewhere safe.”

Where that somewhere was, I had no fucking idea, but I’d be damned if we were going to leave her here. I couldn’t live with myself.

Flora shifted her gaze and stared up at me with surprising clarity. “My name is Flora, not Buttercup.”

“Alright then. Do you mind if I pick you up?”

She nodded, and I lifted her carefully, and an unfamiliar feeling of protectiveness washed over me as I looked down at the shaking woman in my arms. She was beautiful, despite the bruising along her face and under her eyes. Rage boiled in my veins. What kind of sick, twisted asshole would do this to a woman like this? Any woman. I couldn’t wrap my mind around it.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Bliss said quickly.

I nodded, turning toward the door. Flora shifted in my arms, raising her head enough to press her face into the crook of my neck. She took a deep breath, and her ragged breathing slowed. I froze, unsure what to do. Was this normal omega behavior?

I felt the eyes of the pack and the maid on us as they parted to let me pass, pressing themselves as flat as possible to the walls of the tight hallway. Flora kept her face hidden against my arm. How the fuck could a system be so broken that this was the outcome? Weren’t omegas supposed to be meant for alphas? But now, here was evidence that the system didn’t always work.

I paused at the top of the first flight of stairs, adjusting my arm under Flora’s knees. I internally cursed whoever the fuck her mate was. He was already going to hell, and I hoped to help him get there, but putting her room on the third floor was an extra fuck-you I didn’t need right now. I looked down at her apologetically. “I promise not to drop you. Let me know if I’m jostling

you around too much and I'll stop."

She stiffened in my arms, clearly not listening. Her huge brown eyes widened in fear. "He's coming."

I frowned. "Who's coming?"

I should've known what she meant. This was part of their thing, right? Alphas and omegas had freaky telepathy almost, so they knew when their mates were in danger. It didn't seem like an issue when the pack did it with Bliss, but a whole new hellish world suddenly opened up for me. Did they have control over it? Could they hide certain emotions, or did they have to broadcast everything? That sounded like my worst fucking nightmare.

"Guys!" I bellowed over my shoulder.

I didn't really need to yell, since they were still assembled outside the room waiting for Bliss. Ares turned at the back of the group to face me, brow furrowed in confusion. "What?"

Flora whimpered, struggling to get down from my hold. Her whole body quivered, though it was impossible to tell if it was from her fear of alphas or her fear of her mate coming home. Both, probably. Fuck.

"Please, just go!" she insisted.

I jerked my head for the guys to hurry up and jogged down the stairs, hoping they got the message. "Do you know how long until—"

I didn't get a chance to finish my sentence.

The front door banged open. The hollow sound rocketed through the house, making my hair stand on end and Flora stiffen in my arms. She let out a strangled noise of panic that shot straight to my heart. My eyes darted left, then right, but we were standing in the middle of the narrow staircase with nowhere to go but up or down. This was so fucked.

"Where do I go?" I hissed over the roar of my own racing pulse.

"Fuck if I know!" she whispered back. "All I've seen of this house is that bedroom."

A flash of anger shined behind her eyes and I drew back a fraction. Even through her panic, that wasn't what I would've expected her—or any omega—to say. I liked it.

Making a split decision, I dashed down the three remaining steps onto the second-floor landing and turned right into another long, white-painted hallway. There was no decor—no rugs, no giant vases to hide behind like in a movie. I tried the nearest door—locked.

Footsteps thundered up the stairs below us, as I could only guess her mate ran up to the third-floor.

“I'm going to put you down,” I whispered.

Flora grabbed onto my shirt, eyes wide. “No!”

My chest squeezed. “Just for a minute. Stand flat up against the wall and don't move.”

Her expression was a mask of fear, but she let me lower her to the floor, even as the footsteps drew nearer. “Wait here.”

I hoped the bastard would be too single-minded to look where he was going and just run right past us and straight into the pack. Still, if he didn't, I wanted to be between him and Flora. I reached down and pulled the gun out of my waistband and ran my finger over the trigger. I couldn't fight an alpha physically, but a shot to the head would stop anyone.

I stepped carefully back down the hall, aiming the gun at the landing. Labored breathing joined the pounding footsteps, and then a bluish blur darted past the illuminated doorway on its way up to the third-floor. My breath caught, my heartbeat jumping as I waited to see if Flora's mate would turn back around, realizing he'd blown past us.

He didn't.

“He's going to realize I'm not up there and go berserk,” Flora called, her voice losing its fire again. “Wait, is Bliss still up there?”

My gaze flew from her beautiful tear-stained face to the mouth of the hallway where the footsteps were only getting louder. She was probably

right, her mate would lose his shit, but the pack could hold their own. Somehow, I didn't think Flora needed to hear that.

"Bliss is fine. Don't move," I hissed over my shoulder at Flora, already sprinting back down the hall toward the stairs.

I burst back out of the hallway, skidding to a halt. I raised my gun again, my blood pumping with adrenaline. Above, footsteps, shouts, and muffled voices rang through the house—the mate must have found the pack. I started back up the stairs again, just as the group came into view on the landing above.

Flora's mate was huge—nearly seven feet tall. He had brownish hair and was dressed like a weekend anchor on a cable news show. Maybe it was just because I'd seen her bruises, but he looked like a fucking asshole to me.

The asshole pushed forward, as though he intended to go through the pack blocking his way. Literally.

Rafe snapped his teeth, seeming more feral than I'd seen him before, and shoved the man back away from Flora's room. He said something, but I couldn't make it out.

I hovered my finger over the trigger of my gun, sighting my shot, but they kept fucking moving. Flora's mate growled, darting backwards out of the way as Killian swiped at him. His foot landed on the edge of the stairs.

Time seemed to slow as the gigantic alpha teetered on the top step, arms windmilling. My stomach leapt, like I'd missed a stair myself, as I watched him tip backwards. Over his shoulder, Bliss's violet eyes had turned to saucers. Killian was in front of her, hand still hanging in the air like he'd forgotten they were there.

The large alpha tumbled backward, and collided with the steps. Crash after sickening crash reverberated down the stairs, like a gigantic bass drum.

"Move!" Nox screamed from somewhere too far away.

Fuck.

I dove out of the way, back into the mouth of the second-floor hallway. My heart pounded with mingled shock and adrenaline, and I whipped my head up

to see Flora's reaction.

No.

I was running again before my brain had connected cause to action. I fell to my knees next to Flora's limp body on the floor at the end of the hallway, and scanned her face for signs of what was happening. She was fine a minute ago. She'd been fine.

Flora was limp in my arms, her eyes rolling back in her head and in that moment the room seemed to tilt. Nausea swept through my body and my arms went numb, my throat suddenly tight and swollen. I heard myself yell something, but the words didn't make sense.

Footsteps thundered down the stairs and more shouts joined the cacophony of noise. I couldn't focus. That didn't matter.

"Let me see her." Bliss suddenly appeared next to me. Where the hell had she come from?

"No," I said harshly, pulling Flora's frail body away from Bliss. Then, my brain caught up with my mouth, and I had no idea why I'd refused. "What's wrong with her?"

"Her mate is dead. Wes, let me see."

"Dead? What the fuck just—"

"Let me see!"

I held Flora out to Bliss, refusing to let go completely. Bliss gave me an odd look, but didn't say anything. Her purple hair stuck to her face as she bent over her friend, pressing her fingers to Flora's pulse.

"I think she's fine. We need water, and to get her in the car."

"What the hell does that mean?" I said angrily.

She glared at me, clearly unwilling to give an inch when it came to her friend's safety. "Exactly what I said."

Killian appeared behind Bliss, putting a hand on her back as she got in my face. I raised an eyebrow. Incidentally, this level of intensity was more how

I'd pictured Bliss, after three years of hearing stories about her from the guys day in and day out. Interesting.

Fortunately, if it was about Flora's safety, Bliss and I were in total agreement. I adjusted Flora in my arms and turned back toward the door. Her chest rose and fell, but she was still too limp, her eyes closed and lifeless.

She stirred as I laid her across the back seat of the Tahoe and my heart leapt with relief. Thank fucking God. "Be right back, Buttercup. I'm going to grab you some water."

I stepped back into the front hall of the house and into the center of the group, now staring at the crumpled body on the first-floor landing I nearly gagged. With his neck twisted 'round like the goddamn exorcist, the asshole didn't look that intimidating,

"Oh my God," the maid muttered. "Shit."

"You can just leave," Bliss told her. "What's your name?"

"Clary."

"Okay, Clary. If you want, one of them can make it so you have to lie if anyone asks you about this. Otherwise you can just go."

I raised my eyebrows, more impressed than anything else. I supposed that's what you got for treating your staff like shit. I should be a cautionary tale, except that it would probably be best for the maid if no one ever heard about it.

Clary danced back and forth between her feet, clearly unsure what to do. I didn't blame her.

"No, wait."

I whipped my head up, my heart suddenly beating double time.

Flora stood in the doorway again. My sweatshirt covered the worst of her bruising but only emphasized the cuts and bruises on her bare legs and feet. Her hair was a mess, and she swayed slightly where she stood, but her expression was hard. Alert.

“Flora!” Bliss exclaimed. “Go back to the car. We—”

“No. You’re making a plan, right? I want to help.”

Bliss wrung her hands, obviously torn. “But you’re hurt and...”

“I’m fine.”

She clearly wasn’t fine, but no one seemed to want to argue with that.

“Okay,” Rafe said, clearly struggling to keep his voice even. Bliss reached out and grabbed his hand, seemingly without conscious thought. “So her mate is dead.”

“No shit,” Killian kicked the body with the toe of his boot, his voice half-awed, half-disgusted.

“I mean, we can’t just take her to her parents now. There will be questions. This asshole was important, no matter what other twisted shit he got up to.”

“We hide the body,” Flora said flatly. She met Bliss’ eyes across the group. “That’s what I want. I want to hide the body and leave. I don’t want to tell my parents.”

Bliss bit her lip. “Okay. That’s what we’re doing, then. I hope no one has any moral objections ’cause you can leave.”

I noticed her eyes lingering on me for half a second, and it didn’t take a genius to know why. For every man in this house, the sun rose and set because of Bliss. Everyone but me. The pack wouldn’t give two fucks what she wanted them to do or what they had to do to help her friend. They had no morals; their code of ethics was Bliss’ happiness.

Except all of a sudden, I’d come up with my own code of ethics, and she was standing in the doorway, wearing a shitty, beat-up sweatshirt.

“I’ll help,” Clary said finally in a quiet voice from the furthest corner of the foyer. “Tell me I have to go to the police and lie. Or whatever you want to say.” She looked up at Flora, and tears rose in her eyes. “I’ll say whatever you want.”

I didn't have to be able to smell anyone's emotions to know the mood in the room was heavy.

"There's only one thing," Nox said quietly, speaking only to Bliss. "If they both disappear, the Institute will come looking for them."

"What if it looks like I'm dead?" Flora asked, her voice rising in strength.

"Sure," Nox said. "But how?"

"Can I borrow that?" Flora stepped toward me, nodding at the pocketknife clipped on my belt.

I swallowed, nodding mutely, and handed her the knife handle-first.

Again, time seemed to slow. My blood ran cold the moment the cool metal left my hand and I spotted the conviction in her eyes.

"Wait!" Bliss yelled, darting forward.

Flora flipped the blade open, pushed up the sleeve of my sweatshirt, and ran it hard and fast over the skin of her forearm. Shouts and growls erupted as blood sprayed across the white tile floor, smattering the walls. She raised the knife again, and I reached her this time, grabbing her hand before it connected with anything major. "Stop."

"No." She met my eyes, jutting her lip out. "It has to look real."

"What are you trying to do?"

"Let go of my fucking arm and find out."

Behind us, Bliss choked on a sob, and I could hear the muffled sounds of someone trying to comfort her, but my focus was totally on the woman in front of me. I let go of her arm. "As you wish."

Flora grabbed a chunk of her long dark hair and hacked it off, tossing it across the floor. "For the scent," she said as though that explained everything. "Let's go."

CHAPTER 23

Bliss

The scent of Flora's emotions soured the air. She'd grown frail in the few weeks since the ceremony and looked tiny in Wes' arms. Her tan skin had turned a grayish white, made worse by the deep hollows under her eyes.

My heart clenched as she twitched in his arms and her hands tightened into fists. Wes whispered calming sounds too low for me to hear. He hadn't taken his eyes away from her from the second she'd let him pick her up.

She'd been restless for the first hour of the drive. She shrank away from my guys, eyes round. The only person who seemed to calm her was Wes. He tucked her into his chest and stroked a large hand up and down her back until her breathing evened out with sleep.

Nox ran his hand over his reddish-brown shaved hair. The earrings that lined his right ear caught the light from the lamppost, and their reflection danced around the car. His eyes searched mine. "Are you alright, Little Wolf?"

Am I? I glanced at Flora, who'd wrapped her hand with Wes' shirt as if she was holding on to a lifeline. I knew it would be bad, but this was somehow worse.

The guys had been on edge the entire ride. Flora's pain overwhelmed the smell of their emotions, but I could make them out through the bond.

Shock.

Fear.

Anguish.

Relief.

Possession.

Each one of them took the time to check in on me every few minutes, as if the need to confirm I was here was driving them insane.

“I think so,” I murmured. Not quite a lie and not quite the truth.

Staring at my best friend, there was nothing alright about this situation. The only comfort was in knowing we got her out of there. That we’d protect her.

The thought pulled on my mind. *We.*

The doubt that gripped me over the last four years loosened, leaving behind the inkling of everything that *we* could mean.

At least, most of us.

My chest tightened as I glanced at Ares in the passenger seat. His brows furrowed as he drew an intricate design over his calf. His face snapped up, and I studied my fingers before he could catch me staring. I held my breath as his gaze heated my skin like a brand. A chill passed through me as he looked away.

Killian slid his hand over my thigh and gently squeezed. “Ignore him.”

If only it was that easy.

I could barely keep my eyes open as the heavy weight of tonight’s events took over. As I drifted off, images of Alpha Bishop tumbling down the stairs and the way his neck landed at such a disturbing angle had my stomach turning. Nox’s warm hands pulled me over his lap to rest between him and Killian.

“We’ve got you. Go to sleep.” Nox’s soft lips touched my forehead, and I burrowed deeper into his chest while Killian ran his hands soothingly over my legs.

It was early dawn, the sky still too dark to see as we pulled up to the warehouse. We'd driven through the night, unwilling to risk stopping. The more distance we put between us and that house, the better.

Rafe jumped out of the driver's seat, slamming his door, and Flora startled awake. I glared at him, and he lifted his shoulders and hands in a "sorry" motion, backing up slowly. Flora turned out of Wes' arms, and his jaw clenched as he gently led her out of the car before releasing her completely.

Everyone jumped out of the Tahoe. Nox, Killian, Rafe, and Ares moved toward the warehouse, but Wes still hovered around Flora. I gestured my head toward where the guys stood twenty feet away. "Can I have a minute with Flora?"

Wes' eyes darted to me, then to Flora, where she stared at the ground. He paused for a moment before folding his arms over his chest, making it clear he wasn't leaving.

I was about to become way less polite to get him to leave, but Flora took a small step in his direction, her shoulders dropping slightly.

Whatever was happening, she was more comfortable with the beta than my alphas.

"Hey, girl, you're okay now." I lifted a hand to push back a long piece of her ebony hair but dropped it away when she flinched. I swallowed hard and took a step back.

Flora was slightly crouched in on herself, arms crossed tight over her middle as she looked around. "Where are we?"

My eyes burned at the break in her voice. "We..." I let my breath out in a huff. I didn't know how exactly to answer that. I settled for the bare minimum. "We're with the guys I told you about."

Flora's gaze snapped to mine, a hint of the sparkle they used to hold. "*The* guys?"

I could feel my cheeks grow hot, and the glow of amusement trickled through the bond. "The same."

Killian walked up to us, placing a hand on my shoulder, and all traces of improvement dropped from Flora's face. Her chin touched her chest, and the distinct scent of cranberries coated my nose. Killian stiffened behind me, then immediately put distance between himself and Flora.

Wes uncrossed his arms, allowing Flora to step back without him touching her. He kept his hands at his sides but didn't increase the bare inch that was between them.

She didn't seem to mind his proximity.

Wes' brows pulled together, his gaze focused on Flora, all traces of his playful expression wiped off his face. I glanced between him and the guys. They weren't throwing off a hint of their emotions, like they were doing everything possible to tone down their scents. Meanwhile, Wes was a powder keg of worry mixed with anger.

I rubbed my hands over my face. This was going to be harder than I thought. I walked up to where Ares, Rafe, Killian, and Nox stood, all equally exhausted. "She's not going to go anywhere near you."

"Fuck." Rafe put his hands on the back of his head and looked at the quickly lightening sky. "Okay. Get her in your room, then we'll come in once she's settled."

Flora was still staring at her bare feet, completely shut in on herself. Her hair tumbled over her shoulder, covering her mating marks, and Wes' hoodie practically swallowed her up.

I bit my thumb, unsure if this was a good idea or not. "What if she doesn't..."

All four guys watched me, no doubt feeling my anxiousness through the bond. Nox closed the distance between us and gently lowered my hand from my mouth. "What if what?"

"Maybe we should bring her to her parents?"

"No."

All heads turned to Wes, including the small omega inches away from him.

"Well, if she won't come upstairs, where would you like her to go?"

“She can stay with me.” Wes blurted the words before stiffening, slowly meeting Flora’s eyes. “I mean, you can stay with me if that’s what you want.”

Flora let her gaze roam over Wes, his hands, his chest, his neck. He may not be an alpha, but he was still more than capable of overpowering her. I was just about to say forget about it when she spoke. “I’d like that.”

Wes seemed to try to shrink his size so as not to overwhelm her as he gestured toward his small home. He wasn’t trying to loom over her like some protective alpha. He was using his betaness to help her feel comfortable.

I smiled widely at Wes. He won some brownie points for that one.

Growls rumbled from behind me, and I sent back a quick glare. The growling stopped as all four of them were suddenly interested in their shoes.

I hooked my arm into Flora’s and spoke low enough that only she could hear me. “You okay with this?”

She leaned her exhausted body against me and looked between Wes and the guys. “I can’t go in there with them.” She squeezed my hand.

“Okay, you heard her. Show us your home.”

A hint of a smirk tipped up Wes’ mouth, the first sign of the man I’d grown to know since he first laid eyes on Flora. “It’s not much, but I have the perfect spot for you.”

Wes’ keys jingled in his hand as he worked at getting the large steel door unlocked. It was a small industrial building, probably an old office of some sort converted into his living space. He swung the door wide and held it open for Flora and me.

Wes looked between us, bottom lip tucked under his teeth as he waited for Flora’s reaction. She came around me, wide brown eyes scanning the open space. We’d stepped into a small kitchen with old slatted wood cabinets and vinyl flooring. Unlike the warehouse, Wes’ place was closed off into individual rooms instead of an open concept. The coziness eased some of my anxiety. Flora moved through the space, toward the hallway, and turned toward Wes.

Her eyes didn't lift from the ground, and her hands twisted in Wes' sweater. "Can I look around?"

Wes looked green, and the scent of sour milk wafted off him as he stared at her dejected form. "You can do whatever you want, Buttercup." The corner of his mouth kicked up when she met his gaze. "My place is yours."

Flora huffed out a breath, nearly a laugh, before entering the room across the hall. It was a living area with a couch and two matching love seats that looked like they were from the 1970s. A lemon scent lingered, leaving the room smelling clean and well cared for. There was wall-to-wall wood paneling, driving home the warm cocoon-like tones. Flora dragged her hand over the back of a long mahogany table covered in cards and poker chips. A few mostly empty glasses at each chair. She raised a brow at Wes, and he cleared his throat.

"Don't worry. No one will be in here if you're here."

She nodded, looking at her toes, then me. "It's nice."

"'Nice' as in you want to stay here?"

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, then took a deep breath. "Yeah, I think it's a good idea."

I wasn't sure if I agreed this was the best idea. She was an omega who'd just lost her mate, and no matter how much of an asshole he was, that wouldn't stop the devastating physiological response she was having. I strangled the part of me that wanted to insist she'd be better off with me. She'd had enough people telling her what to do for a lifetime. What she needed was a shower, a snack, and a nice long nap.

I locked our arms together and let her rest her head on my shoulder. "Okay. Wes, where's your guest room?"

Wes' brows raised, and his eyes went round, giving him an almost boyish look. "I don't have one. She'll stay in my room."

My mouth dropped open and closed a few times before I recovered from my shock. "Absolutely not."

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ll stay on the pullout couch.”

Flora’s hand squeezed mine. “It’s fine. We can figure something else out tomorrow.”

I let out a sweeping breath. “Tomorrow, then.” I raised a brow in Wes’ direction. “How about a shower?”

Wes made short work of showing us the bathroom that was next door to the only bedroom in this dwelling. It was a simple design: small wood vanity, toilet, and shower, only large enough to fit one person. Steam drifted from around the curtain, filling the small space.

Flora winced as she tried to take her sweater off, the sleeve catching on her makeshift bandage. I tamped down the cold shudder threatening to overcome me after last night.

“Here.” I held my hand out to her. “Let me help.”

She stiffened, eyes lost for a moment before coming back to mine, and held out her arm. I carefully shifted the fabric over her cut and guided the sweater above her head. My breath caught when her hair lifted with the garment, revealing a row of partially healed bites along her neck, still rimmed with dried blood. Finger-sized bruises covered her from being held too hard.

“Flora...” The words caught on my tongue. “I’m sorry this happened to you.”

Flora turned her back to me and shielded herself from my gaze with the shower curtain. The room quickly filled with the scent of male bodywash. The smell was something you’d expect from the college football team. It kept getting stronger, but she didn’t make a sound except for the occasional pained hisses.

I slowly pushed the curtain back, leaving plenty of time for her to stop me. “Let me smell.”

Flora’s eyes rounded on me with a flare of fear, but she leaned her neck toward me. “You don’t smell like him anymore. The bond is broken. He’s dead. Now you smell like a teenage boy trying to get laid.”

She choked on her laugh, eyes welling with tears, and nodded. “I smell better than you. My nose is burning with your alphas’ claiming scents.” She wrapped the towel I handed her around her body, taking extra care with her arm.

“They aren’t really my alphas. They scent marked me so I could leave the house without everyone freaking out about meeting an unmated omega.”

Her head tilted to the side, scanning over my face. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Wes had dropped off a change of clothes, a hairbrush, and a fresh bandage for her cut. By the time she was ready, Wes was waiting outside the bathroom door. He took one look at Flora, lifted her from her feet, and carried her to her bed, taking extra care to pull the covers over her.

Wes closed the door behind him, and my nose singed with the scent of iron.

“He’s fucking lucky he’s already dead.”

CHAPTER 24

Mex

“Can you stop?” Ares barked at Killian, who’d been pacing the length of the roof for the last hour. “Fuck! Sit down.”

Killian gestured to where Ares had covered every last inch of available skin with a black Sharpie. “Like you’re any better.”

Ares sat on the rooftop chair to the right of the sofa, his foot crossed over his ankle, giving him ample access to his calf. His pale blond hair was pushed off his face, and his brows were pulled tight as he drew intricate lines.

The cascade of emotions Bliss was sending down the bond was driving us all insane. The steady stream of deep-seated sadness for her friend had my heart tearing in two. The spikes of her guilt had me practically doubled over on the couch. I’d do anything to take this away from her.

I pulled my glasses off, letting them drop to my lap, and rubbed both hands over my head. “Maybe we should check on her?”

Rafe handed me a beer from the cooler from across the couch. He leaned into the shadows, and his dark hair and eyes made it hard to read his expression. “We’re staying here. We can’t stress Flora any more than we already have.”

Flora. The once lively, if annoying, girl we’d known in high school was a shadow of what she once was. My blood boiled, thinking of the bruises along her face and jaw. Her hair, which looked like it hadn’t been washed in weeks, and the leftover blood from her mating marks.

That girl had gone through hell.

Killian pulled off his black-and-red flannel button-up, leaving him in a fitted gray T-shirt. “I don’t fucking get it. Alphas are programmed to protect their mate. To love and care for them. How did he let her get like that?”

My stomach roiled at the notion of hurting Bliss. “Clearly, there’s more to it than we thought.” I sucked on my teeth, racking my brain for any possible conclusion. “The bond isn’t a sentient thing. It doesn’t give a shit about love or caring; it’s about possessing the omega.” The words felt like acid on my tongue. “He locked her in a fucking room.”

Rafe took a long sip of his beer. “That doesn’t make sense. That would mean hundreds, if not thousands, of omegas would be in the same situation.”

I stared at him, my eyes narrowed. “And what makes you think that isn’t the case?”

Ares laughed, harsh and cold. “I’d believe it. Fuck the Institute.”

“Hang on,” I cut him off, “that’s not what I said.”

“It should’ve been. What makes you think the Institute doesn’t know? They get paid. Why give a shit about the omegas afterward?” Ares’ laugh ran a chill down my spine. “They fucking orchestrated this. Making the Agora Ceremony seem like a good thing, not letting the omegas mate on their own, only being sold to the highest bidder.”

I clamped my mouth shut. He was right. It sounded like a damn conspiracy theory, but it made sense, and after everything Bliss said, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t believe it.

Killian held his hands up. “But why?”

“You can’t be that naïve. It’s fucking money. It’s always about fucking money and power,” Ares hissed. “We aided and abetted them with fucking blockers this whole time.”

My stomach plummeted to the floor, thinking of the role we played in this disgusting industry. “Fuck that. I don’t give a shit if we lose everything. We’re done.” I narrowed my gaze, and a soft rumble formed in my chest, daring them to disagree, but they all nodded like it was a given we’d give up our livelihood after this. Maybe there was hope for us after all.

Ares lifted his head, gaze darting around us, and capped his Sharpie. “There’s something else we need to talk about.”

Killian threw his hands up. “Well, don’t try and hold us in suspense.”

“Bliss thinks we don’t want to mate with her.”

My breath left me like he’d punched me in the stomach. Out of everything, I thought he’d say that wasn’t even on the radar. How could she be so wrong? “How do you know?”

“She told me,” he said acidly.

Rafe leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, eyeing Ares. “Why the hell would she think that?”

Growls blocked out every other sound as Ares’ words sank in.

His pale eyes met mine. He clenched his jaw, his expression tormented. “She said she loved us. She still believes all that bullshit Rafe spouted four years ago. That we didn’t want her with us because she’d get us killed.” He huffed out a laugh. “Meanwhile, we spent all that time killing and nearly dying to fucking get her back.”

Killian collapsed into the chair to the left of the sofa. “What the hell do we do now?”

A calmness settled over Rafe. “We convince her we want to be a pack.”

I watched him with dark eyes. “You think it’s that simple?”

“Yeah, it’s that simple. And we start right fucking now.”

I hopped up from my spot on the sofa and headed for the exit door, running my hands over my head as I went. I didn’t need our bond to know our girl was hurting, and I wasn’t going to sit around and wait anymore.

“Where are you going, Nox?”

“Where the hell do you think I’m going? I’m going to find her.”

Ares’ gaze bored into mine. “When she’s done at Wes’, bring her here. We’ll comfort her as a pack.”

The muddle of emotions filled the air with scent. To be a pack, and for Ares of all of us to suggest it. A slow, warm feeling filled my limbs and sank into my chest. *A pack.*

“So that’s it, then?” Rafe crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re just all in—you’re going to act like you haven’t been a fucking nightmare for four straight years?”

“Yeah.” Ares gave him a hard look. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. Do you think I was doing this for my fucking health? You think I like being miserable?”

“I don’t get it,” Rafe snapped.

“Yeah, you never fucking got it. You were always happy to move forward. I wasn’t.”

“Okay, let’s all try and calm down.” Killian grinned nervously. “Take a breath, man.”

“No,” Rafe barked. “What did I do to offend you other than hold everything together?”

“I didn’t ask you to do that. It’s not my problem that you decided to play daddy and then resented it. We’re all adults.”

Rafe growled, his face turning red, as Ares’ eyes flashed dark. I rubbed my hand over my head. This was some toxic shit that no one needed, and worst of all, it was going to keep us from Bliss. “Alright, stop. No one wants to listen to you two fight it out.”

“Then don’t listen,” Rafe barked.

I ignored him. “Ares, if you’re really all in, why? What happened?”

He met my eyes, and I shivered at the intensity. “Because that’s what Bliss said she wants, and this has always been about her.”

I waited for half a second to see if there would be any hint of deception in that statement, or even confusion, but there wasn’t. Killian and I glanced at each other across the circle. He shrugged as if to say, “Good enough for me.”

The waves of frustration rolling off Rafe were still enough to make his opinion perfectly clear, but I doubted he'd be able to stay that way for long. It was the same reason that, despite everything, we'd never been able to separate.

Bliss had bonded us all together. Not just to her, but to each other as well, and I had a feeling that the moment all five of us got on the same page, there would be no turning back.



Bliss was opening her bedroom door by the time I caught up to her. She looked exhausted, and a part of me wanted to just let her rest and figure it out in the morning, but that was overshadowed by a raging, swirling need to show her how fucking wrong she was. How much we cared, craved, loved her.

Red rimmed her violet eyes, and she crossed her arms over her middle as she radiated desolation down the bond. I stepped closer, sliding a strand of her hair behind her shoulder. I dropped my forehead to hers. "Come sit with us."

I held my breath. This felt like a test. It made more sense for her to tell me it was late, but love didn't care about making sense. My body hummed with the want to care for her. To lift some of her sadness and carry it for her.

She paused for a minute before nodding. "Okay, but only for a bit."

A small smirk formed on my lips. She'd soon learn it would be forever.

I guided her up the stairs to the roof and tugged her along with me to sit between Rafe and me on the couch. He made quick work of handing her a beer. "How is she?"

Bliss took a deep sip from the bottle. Her scent of burnt sugar and dead flowers had my heart aching in my chest. Bliss sucked in her breath, and her voice cracked around her words. "I don't know. The things she's lived through.... She's so scared."

I stroked a hand over her chin, encouraging her to face me. "We'll take care of her, Little Wolf. She'll have a safe place here with us."

Bliss' lips wobbled as she looked between all of us, eyes landing on Ares. "As in stay?"

Ares was completely still, all of his attention pinpointed on Bliss. His voice was devoid of its usual snark. "We want you to stay."

Bliss sucked in a breath and pulled her feet up on the couch. Her emotions swirled in a mix of confusion, desperation, and guilt.

I wrapped my arms under hers and pulled her sideways over my lap, placing delicate kisses along her temple and jaw as Rafe pulled her legs over his thighs. She leaned into my touch, and her distress lifted a fraction.

"You don't have to agree now." I kissed along her jaw, and her sweet jasmine, honey, and chillies scent met my tongue. "Let us take care of you. We can make you forget, and we can deal with it *together* tomorrow."

She stiffened, teeth biting into her lower lip. She was fighting against this, guilt still coming through the bond.

Ares' took two steps across the circle, closing the space between us, and kneeled in front of the couch. The top of Ares head just reached Bliss' middle, with her sitting on my lap. His chest purred low as he slipped her hair behind her ear. "This is what we're here for, Love. You want your alphas to comfort you, don't you?"

She licked her lips and nodded. "Yes."

CHAPTER 25

Bliss

My mind swirled, tipping to the side, and I felt like I would topple over. Ares knelt on the ground beside me, trailing biting kisses up my neck. “That’s my good girl.”

Ares.

Ares watched me like I hung the moon— like everything had somehow changed. His ice-blue eyes begged me not to question it. Every emotion threatened to overtake me as he trailed up my skin.

Rafe ran a hand up my calf, his fingers grazing the sensitive skin behind my knees.

Nox’s growl rumbled against my side. “I want you to let yourself go, Little Wolf. We’ll catch you.” I squirmed on his lap when his tongue stroked over my mating gland, and my legs tried to squeeze together. “Can you trust us, Bliss? Even for just tonight?”

After everything that happened and the years that stood between us, the answer was still simple: I’d always trusted them entirely too much, and I still did. “Yes.”

Ares leaned in closer, and his fingers grazed the hem of my sweater, brushing the bare skin above the waistband of my skirt. He pulled my sweater over my head, revealing my black bra. “You’re so good, Love.”

I didn’t know what had happened to change his mind, and right now, I didn’t care. I’d think about it later. Tomorrow. Right now, I was done pretending I

didn't need him.

"Fuck, babe," Killian said hoarsely from his seat across the circle.

A thrill ran through me as I looked up, meeting his darkening gaze. Growls erupted as I reached back and undid the clasp, letting it slip off my arms and onto the couch.

The pupils of Ares' eyes expanded until they were almost completely black, with only the barest hint of blueish silver showing, like a lunar eclipse. He leaned even closer, his hands sliding further up my thighs until they were so close to where I needed them I was practically shaking. He bit down on his lip. "Fuck, I've dreamed of this."

Heat burned down my stomach into my core. Nox against my side, Rafe holding my legs across his lap, and Killian's hungry gaze made me bold. I tilted my chin up in a very un-omega gesture and forced my voice not to shake. "Yeah? What did we do in your dreams?"

Ares' gaze danced up to Nox, curling his lip. Nox shifted under me and ran his hands up the sides of my bare waist and cupped my breasts. His voice practically dripped with lust. "You sure you want to know?"

My body hummed with anticipation as I looked around at all four of them. All of my boys were here, and I wanted to play. I'd never been more sure of anything before. "Show me."

Ares growled and lifted me off Nox's lap. As soon as my feet hit the ground, he made quick work of my skirt and underwear, leaving me bare in front of them. Standing there naked, I should've felt exposed, but I felt empowered.

They were watching me like I was the only thing that mattered.

Ares smiled and pulled his shirt over his head. Nox and Rafe quickly followed suit. They removed the rest of their clothes, standing proudly while my heated gaze traveled over every naked inch of them.

Nox placed his hands on my hips, guiding me onto his lap, my back pressed against his chest. I gasped as his hard cock slid through my folds but didn't enter. His piercing rolled over me, sending a shiver down my legs.

Rafe kneeled on the couch to my right. Strands of his near-black hair covered his dark gaze. The deep olive tan of his skin made each hill and valley of muscle stand out in sharp contrast. I was losing my mind following the deep v-cut abs down—

“We’re going to play a game.” Ares’ words stole my attention, and he stared at me with heat in his gaze.

“What game?” My voice wavered.

Killian stood from his chair and crossed to stand in front of me, shedding his clothes as he went. His honey-brown curls wrapped around his ears, and my eyes traveled down his chest. His cock bobbed when my gaze caught on it.

He leaned down, capturing my mouth in a long, slow kiss. He smirked against my lips. “Keep looking at my cock like that and I won’t last long.”

“Don’t distract her,” Ares barked, more playful than angry.

Killian grinned and sank onto the couch on my left, mirroring Rafe’s position on my right side. “I think I’m going to like this game.”

Ares gripped my knees and pulled them to the outside of Nox’s, leaving me completely exposed. A low growl rumbled from his throat as he stared at my exposed core, now perfectly aligned with his face. I tried to close my legs, but Nox just held me open wider.

Ares ran his nose along my thigh, inches away from my apex. “We’re going to see if we can make you come without touching this sweet pussy of yours.”

I whined, and Killian and Rafe simultaneously sucked on my mating glands on my neck, bruising the skin there. The intensity had my eyes rolling back as heat flooded me, washing away every thought with it until they reduced me to a writhing mess.

Ares searched my face, and a wicked smile lifted his lips. Without looking away, he ran his tongue along my inner thigh, and a jolt went through me as he grazed his teeth over the mating gland there. “You want us to bite you, don’t you, Love?”

My hips bucked up, and Nox's held on to my knees, spreading them wider. "Yes."

Ares bit my skin millimeters from the gland, and I cried out at the torture of it. My body rioted, knowing it was so close to being mated.

Ares bit again, his teeth bruising the skin all around my gland. I gasped, my chest rising, only to have Killian and Rafe sink their teeth into my breasts.

The mix of pain and anticipation had me rocking against Nox. His cock slid easily between my crack, soaked with my slick. I pushed back against him, and he groaned, mouth brushing my neck. "Hold still, Little Wolf."

I froze, every molecule pinpointed on where his teeth grazed over me. He let his tongue trace my mating gland before sinking his teeth in the curve of my neck an inch below it. I bucked up, pressure building with each touch. They were so close to what my body craved.

I grasped Ares' hair and tried to force him against my clit, but Killian and Rafe caught my hands and placed them around Nox's neck behind me.

My fingers dug into his soft, shaved hair as my breaths came out in harsh pants. I craved their teeth to sink into the gland. To crack it open and complete our bond.

This was too much.

Killian nipped the bottom of my breast, then licked over the spot to soothe it. My thoughts had turned to flames as each of their bites stoked the fire until I thought I would combust.

The sweetest ache formed in my core, throbbing as the intensity of their touches grew. They alternated between licking and sucking, and my core throbbed with their tempo.

"Please, Alpha." I didn't know who I was calling to, but I didn't care. I needed them. Needed them to take care of me. Needed my alphas to push me over the edge.

Nox's hands gripped my hips and moved me until he was fucking against my ass, leaving my core empty.

“Please.”

Four sets of teeth broke my skin simultaneously just outside of my mating glands. The constant buildup of pleasure detonated around me as I came. I shook in their arms and continued to spasm as more orgasms passed through me.

Rafe placed a soft kiss on my temple. “Fucking perfect.”

I took a deep breath, and my lungs burned as I took in their scents. Lemon vanilla, smooth sandalwood, coffee beans, and the fresh scent of a new night. Heat swirled in my chest, down my stomach, until it pulsed in my core.

I needed, wanted, craved to touch them. I lifted until Nox’s cock slipped over my core. His jewelry hit my clit perfectly, and I rocked myself against it, purring when his breath hitched.

I reached for Killian’s and Rafe’s cocks and stroked them from bottom to top. Their precum coated my fingers, letting me slide over their smooth, hard skin with ease. Killian groaned, his teeth catching my nipple, and I rolled my hips with the tempo, chasing my second release. They gasped when I squeezed over their tips, so I did it harder, faster, the next time, until they were both pumping into my hands.

Killian pulled out of my hand and lifted until his cock was positioned beside Nox’s mouth. I shifted to the side and leaned back so I could see the exact moment Killian’s head breached Nox’s lips. They both groaned low, and the vibration traveled directly between my thighs. Killian started to pump harder, holding the back of Nox’s head as he made him force it down. Nox’s cock jerked against me, moving faster with each of Killian’s thrusts.

I stroked Rafe’s cock, and he licked up the side of my neck. “You’re perfect. See how they watch you as they fuck each other? They’ve been denying themselves this for *years*.” Rafe ran his thumb over my bottom lip and pushed between my teeth. “I want to take this sweet mouth of yours.”

I hummed and tugged on him until he lifted his hips to my mouth. I licked his tip, purring at his salty taste, and I sucked his cock down my throat.

Ares groaned from between my legs, finally sucking on my clit. I lost control and started to suck Rafe harder, pumping him with my fist at the same time.

Rafe's hips stuttered as he filled my mouth with his release, and I worked to swallow it all. He sat back and licked the cum that dripped from the corner of my mouth. "Fucking perfect."

Nox groaned, and his hot cum dripped down my thighs as Killian burst in his mouth.

Ares growled, and his tongue ran over his bottom lip as he looked at the mess Nox made of me. Ares' nearly black eyes burned into mine as he licked Nox's cum, cleaning me.

My chest heaved as my body chased its own orgasm. I needed to feel it rip through me so I could pour myself out.

Ares moved until his chest met mine, and his fingers dug into my jaw as his gaze bored into mine. He ran his tongue over my lips, and I opened for him, the taste of Nox filling my mouth. "Fuck," Ares growled. "We'll torture you later."

He slammed his cock hilt-deep into my needy core, and my orgasm burst like a million stars, shattering my world around me.

Ares lifted me from Nox and rolled us to the ground so his back was to the rooftop and I straddled him. Killian and Rafe watched from the couch, their chests rising and falling with their panting breaths.

Ares groaned as I took him all the way in, and his fingers dug into my hips as he guided me up and down in slow, languid motions. "That's it, Love. You take me so well."

My lungs burned as I sucked in a breath, and fire singed through my damp skin.

Nox knelt at our heads and cupped my jaw in his hand, tilting my head back, and read my mind. "Do you need more, Little Wolf?"

"Yes," I keened.

Ares' rhythm increased as he pushed more of himself into me with each thrust until his knot pressed against my entrance. I shifted, trying to take it in, but his hands stilled me. "Patience, Love."

I growled, and he smiled. The air sucked out of my lungs at how much he looked like the Ares I remembered.

My eyes burned. “I missed you.”

He choked on his breath. “Fuck, Bliss. We missed you too.” He slammed into me, driving his point home. I arched back, and Nox caught my moan with his mouth.

Rafe dropped from the couch and caught my ear between his teeth. “You’re meant for us. Our mate.”

“What?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. Everyone stilled. Warmth flooded my chest that had nothing to do with sex. *Our mate.*

I met Rafe’s gaze. “Say it again.”

“Our mate.”

I shook my head. “But you didn’t want me.”

“I fucking lied.” He pushed a strand of damp hair behind my shoulder. “We’ve always loved you. You’re our mate, and it has nothing to do with the fucking scent bond.”

“That’s if you’ll have us.” Killian’s voice broke around the words.

Happiness bubbled in my stomach as I met each of their eager eyes. “A pack?”

Nox kissed me, smiling against my mouth. “Yes, Little Wolf. A pack.”

Rafe let his teeth graze where my gland throbbed. “A few more months until your next heat, then we’ll claim you as ours.”

My body shook under his touch, and the air smelled sweet and fruity as their pleasure tumbled through the bond. I shifted, and Ares’ cock moved deeper inside me, drawing a groan from the back of his throat. Honey filled my nose as lust coated my skin, taking over the moment. They were my pack, and I wanted all of them.

I gasped as fingers trailed up my back, and goose bumps erupted in their wake. Killian’s growl rumbled through me as he kissed up my spine. “You

ready for me, B?”

His hand trailed down my ass and wrapped around where Ares was pumping into my core. I clenched around him, anticipating taking them both.

Killian chuckled, his hand sliding back, stroking over my second hole. His fingers swirled around it, coating it in my slick. “I want to take you here. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I nodded, and shivers broke out over my skin. *Yes, please.*

He kissed along my shoulder blades, and I gasped when he pushed a finger into my ass. He swirled it before pulling it back and pushing in a second one.

Ares groaned. “Fuck. She’s clamped down on me. Killian, do it again.”

Killian’s hand pulled away from me, and Ares growled.

I kissed Ares, sucking in his bottom lip. “Who’s impatient now?”

He purred and nipped at me, and I laughed.

Killian lined himself up, and I stilled completely. He started working himself into my ass. I sucked in a breath. It was too much.

“Look at me, Little Wolf.” My gaze obeyed, and Nox’s face was so close he ran his nose along mine, our lips brushing. “Breathe. You’re made for them. Just breathe.”

I followed his breathing pattern and relaxed into their touch. Killian pushed deeper, drawing a moan from both me and Ares.

My head tipped back as Killian sank to his hilt, pulling out before slamming back in, and I cried out between them. “Alpha.”

“My turn.” Rafe kissed up my neck, swirling his tongue over my mating gland.

I hummed, having no idea where I’d take him but more than willing to try.

I had to contort my body to see him move behind Killian. Rafe raked his fingers into Killian’s hair, pulling it back to expose his neck, and licked up the column of muscle. “Do you want me to bite you here?”

Killian shivered against my back. “Yes.”

Rafe leaned over, his hand turning me back toward Ares. “Bliss, I need you to take his knot so I can take Killian’s ass. You want that, don’t you?”

“Yes, please.”

Ares growled, and his hips slammed into mine until I adjusted to fit all of him. His chest rumbled as his knot grew, locking me in place. I whined and ground against him as he rutted his hips up.

Rafe growled, and Killian moaned as Rafe sank into his ass. Killian’s cock slammed into me with each of Rafe’s thrusts, causing me to squirm, but Ares’ knot still locked me firmly in place.

Nox’s usually green gaze was pitch-black as he watched his friends take me. “That’s it, Little Wolf. You’re so fucking stunning.”

Ares’ hand slipped between us, and his thumb circled my clit with the perfect amount of pressure.

I closed my eyes, mouth falling open, and a smooth head touched my lips, coating them in salt. My gaze snapped to Nox’s as he slowly pushed his cock into my mouth.

His eyes rolled back as my tongue slid over each piercing, and I hummed around him.

“That’s it, Love,” Ares encouraged me as they all slammed into me until it felt like I was going to lose my mind. His thumb circled my clit with steady motions until I came apart around him, my muscles clenching with my release. He grunted, his hips shuddering as he filled me with cum.

Killian leaned over and bit my shoulder as he rutted against my ass, grunting with his orgasm.

Rafe came while telling Killian how good he felt. I hollowed out my cheeks and sucked hard on Nox, determined to drive him just as far over the edge as I was. He choked back a groan, and bitter salt painted the back of my throat as he lost himself to the sensation.

Killian rolled off my back, and we collapsed around each other, doing our best to suck in air. I lay motionless over Ares as his heart pounded against my ear. There was no world where I could lift myself from this position.

“You’re such a perfect omega.” Rafe’s hands ran up and down my back in a soothing pattern until my breaths evened out and my eyes grew heavy.

They must have let me sleep because Ares was no longer knotted inside me. We descended the stairs, and panic started to set in as we moved down the hall. The bond ached at the idea of being apart from any of them. “I don’t want to go to sleep. I need all of you.”

Ares ran his fingers along my jaw and opened a door. “Shh, Love. We’re just going to the nest. No one’s going anywhere.”

I snuggled into Killian, breathing in his scent, basking in the feeling of satisfaction.

They were finally *mine*.

CHAPTER 26

Bliss

My nightmares stayed just on the edge of my consciousness all night, never breaking through the warm cocoon of familiar scents I'd wrapped myself in. Citrus, coffee, warm spices, and midnight sky.

I snuggled deeper into the warmth of the arms circling my waist and pressed my face against someone's hard bicep. I never wanted to leave this place—between dream and reality.

Still, that wasn't realistic.

Sighing, I cracked an eye open and rolled over. I looked over at the bodies surrounding me on all sides, and a small smile crossed my face. My body ached in all the right places, reminding me in the most perfect way of last night. For the first time, we felt like a pack. I'd let them comfort me and put aside all our past trauma. Maybe, for once, I could let myself have this. I could believe that I was home.

Yet, with the morning sunlight streaming across the bed, the doubt started to creep back in.

I sat up and gingerly slithered out of the tangle of limbs, trying not to wake anyone. I grabbed a shirt off the floor, not bothering to check who it belonged to, and tossed it over my head. *Thank God they're all the size of a house.*

The air of the hallway was cold compared with that of the nest. It was like our combined body heat and breath had warmed the room—that was probably literally what it was, since there were no windows and barely any

ventilation. When I'd been at the Institute, I'd never understood what they meant about omegas liking small and dark places. Now, I realized that I actually did. I just hadn't liked the Institute. There was a difference.

My nest at the warehouse was—I almost hated myself for using the Institute's favorite word—soothing.

It was things like how the guys had made me a nest. They'd bought me clothes—even if they weren't quite right. They'd fought for Flora, and last night, they said they loved me. Things like that made it seem like maybe I should stay.

And that wasn't even taking into account all the emotions I was getting blasted with on a daily basis.

Maybe I wasn't putting enough stock into that. I'd dismissed a lot of their feelings of lust and affection as part of the bond. Something they couldn't help. Was that hypocritical when I'd just yelled at Ares for ignoring my feelings from before the bond came into effect?

I sighed as I padded down the hallway to the living room and sank onto the nearest armchair. I could argue both sides of this dilemma. Rationalize my way into leaving or staying, based on love or pride, and I had no idea what to do. There was no rule book for this kind of thing. No one way to forgive a betrayal or move on from trauma. Just like there was no rule book to love.

“Hey.”

I glanced up at the sound of footsteps in time to see Rafe wander into the room. He wore only wrinkled sweatpants and no shirt and was rubbing sleep from his face. My eyes immediately darted to the V of his abs, and heat rose up the back of my neck.

“Did I wake you?” I asked, pushing my hair behind my ears.

I wasn't sure if it was his expression or our bond letting me know he was anxious. Maybe both. Maybe it was that I'd known him for so long, I could read him without having to dig into his feelings or hope he was projecting them. When I first arrived, it had seemed to me like all the guys were completely different, but they weren't. Not really. Only in the same way that I was. Lost but not forgotten.

“Yes, but I’m glad you did.” Rafe sat down on the edge of the couch facing me. “What are you doing out here?”

“Just getting coffee, I guess.” He gave me a look to tell me without words he knew I was lying. “Fine. I just wanted a second to think about everything. I thought I might go see how Flora is doing. Maybe go for a walk.”

“Do you want someone to come with you?”

I frowned, skeptical. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Always.”

My heart panged at that. I twirled my hair around my fingers, trying to find the right words for what I meant. “I think we all need to talk.”

He snorted a laugh, and my eyes narrowed slightly. He stopped immediately, seeing my face. “No, don’t take that the wrong way. You’re right—we definitely need to talk. It’s just, this is such a fucking mess.”

I pulled my hair over my shoulders like a security blanket, smiling to myself now. “You think? I don’t know what the hell is going on anymore.”

I heard myself swear, and I almost apologized, then forced myself not to. No one was going to tell me what I could and couldn’t say anymore. There was no headmistress Omega DuPont hanging over my shoulder. No Alpha Nero. Rafe didn’t give two fucks. I grinned.

“What now?” he asked, matching my smile.

My stomach jolted at his smile, and it was odd. We kept having sex. We were already bonded, but a rare smile had the potential to give me butterflies. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“You guys say ‘fuck’ all the time, but you have no idea. The Institute didn’t even let us talk about being angry. We had to say ‘upsetting our balance.’” I grimaced. “I’m just getting used to no one policing what I can say anymore.”

His eyes widened. “Bliss. Holy fuck. I don’t…”

“Don’t say anything,” I said quickly, shrugging. “That’s not what I want to talk about. That’s just what I was thinking.”

He ran his hands through his hair, tilting his head up to the ceiling. “Bliss, we meant everything last night. I know we fucked up. Years ago, but also basically every moment since you got here. Every time you mention something else about what you’ve gone through, it kills me.”

“Wait,” I blurted out.

“No.” He leaned toward me, black eyes wide and earnest. “I am so sorry. We handled this all wrong, and that’s a lot on me. I should have controlled the situation better.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but my words were drowned by a knock on the door. Rafe turned toward the door and then back to me, smiling awkwardly. “Think Flora is sick of Wes already?”

I frowned. I hoped not because I didn’t know what else to do if she was.

Rafe rose from the couch and crossed the room, swinging open the front door with more enthusiasm than I’d seen him show in a while. Then, he froze.

“Hello. Are you Rafe Farral?”

“Yes,” Rafe said. “Why?”

I leaned forward on the couch at the sound of the unfamiliar female voice and caught the scent of leather, metal, and polyester.

“I’m Officer Sanderson.”

“Yeah? Who are they?”

The woman outside laughed without humor. “Don’t worry about them. Just some extra security. Does the rest of your pack also live here?”

I leaned forward further, trying to see what Rafe was talking about and how many people were on our doorstep.

“Why?” Rafe asked, putting far too much power in his voice.

A sickly sweet smell filled the room, wafting toward me as the wind shifted outside. “You don’t want to bark at me, kid. That’s not going to look good for you in court.”

I jumped up, half-confused, half-scared as Ares and Nox came skidding into the living room, Killian two steps behind them.

“No,” I whispered, “Go back.” They didn’t seem to hear me.

“Who the hell is here?” Ares barked.

Down the bond, I could feel more than smell Rafe’s mingled exasperation and, to my surprise, fear. Why fear?

Instinctively, I backed up toward the kitchen, out of view of the front door. Nox and I made eye contact across the room, and he nodded slightly at me, telling me, yes, I was doing the right thing.

“Roof,” he mouthed.

My eyes darted toward the staircase. I could get there, but I’d have to pass in front of the windows, where my reflection would be completely visible from the doorway. Would anyone notice?

“What is this regarding?” Nox said loudly, stepping up beside Rafe.

“Could we come inside?” the officer asked. “We’d love to discuss it.”

“Only if you tell us what this is regarding,” Nox snapped.

I edged toward the stairs to the roof, half-doubled-over as I tried to make myself as small as possible.

“Is there any chance you boys have been harboring an unclaimed omega?”

Silence stretched in the room.

Rafe shuffled to the side, further blocking any view of the warehouse. “Excuse me?”

“What about any recent trips out of state?” the officer asked. “Do any of you know a Mr. Scott Carver?”

The room filled with the mingled scent of vinegar and lemons.

“Sorry,” the officer said cheerfully. “I’ll rephrase. Did anyone here kidnap an omega, bring her to a rest stop near the Virginia border, and slaughter an innocent alpha who just happened to get too close?”

In a rush of memory, the scent of Marlboro Reds, the wet crack of Ares slamming that alpha’s face into the sink, and the crimson trail of blood across a slippery bathroom floor came back to me in a rush, garbled and from a distance, as though through the crack in a door.

Ares and I stared at each other across the room, and my blood ran cold as I caught the determination down our bond.

“I did it,” Ares said, his jaw tense.

“No!” Rafe barked at the same time as I took an unconscious step forward

Rafe tried to put himself between Ares and the officer, but Ares shoved him out of the way, hard enough that he lost his balance and hit the opposite wall. “I did it. I killed that asshole. The rest of these guys weren’t even there.”

“Alright,” the officer said, and it was clear from her tone that she was skeptical. “And what about the missing omega? Bliss Nero.”

“She’s gone,” Ares said.

The layered scents of bitter citrus annoyance and sour confusion mingled with the ammonia of the lie. The officer didn’t believe him.

If I had to guess, the officer had seen the security footage, and they already knew that Ares was the only one in the bathroom with me. They suspected the entire pack, but they couldn’t prove it.

I pulled on the ends of my hair, my anxiety rising. Next, they’d search the warehouse and then probably the outbuildings. They’d find Flora and Wes and realize Flora wasn’t dead. They’d arrest everyone anyway. *No, I can’t let that happen.*

I tripped over my own feet, stumbling into view. “Wait!”

I stared at the wall of the drab, gray holding station, tapping my nails in time to the incessant ticking of the clock on the wall. My thighs stuck to the beige plastic chair I'd been confined to for the last several hours, and the metal of the table dug into my arms. Still, I couldn't be bothered to get up and stretch my legs. Pacing felt too cliché.

It seemed to me that the clock was slow, but maybe that was only because I'd had no updates on where they'd taken Ares or if they had arrested the other three guys. I wasn't under arrest, as the officers had reminded me several times upon arrival, but I was being held until they figured out "next steps." When those next steps were going to happen, I had no idea.

Every so often, a flash of anger or anxiety would reach me down the bond, but it was impossible to tell whose emotion it was. My own anxiety rose to the surface, and I was sure I was projecting it back. I closed my eyes, trying to think happy thoughts, more for their sake than my own.

A knock sounded on the door for the first time in hours, and my eyes flew open, and I whipped my head around so fast I cricked my neck. Ow.

"Omega Nero."

"My last name is Davis," I said automatically.

The same officer who arrived at the warehouse gave me a patronizing smile. She was in her mid-forties, with red hair and lines around her eyes. She didn't look like she was a bad person, but the sour fruit scent in the air made me wonder if she just didn't like omegas. I sighed. *One problem at a time, Bliss.*

"Your mate is here to pick you up."

"Which one?" My heartbeat kicked up a notch. "I can go home?"

She gave me an odd look and stepped aside to let another figure step into the room. My heart sank, and fear washed over me, cooling my blood. Of course. I should have realized.

Nero smiled down at me, his gaze taking in everything from my pajama top and disheveled appearance to my now shaking hands. His gaze lingered for half a second on my neck before I pushed my hair over it. His lip curled. “Having fun, are we, Pet?”

“Don’t call me that,” I muttered.

“Leave us,” Nero barked at the officer.

She stepped out of the room, closing the door, and I narrowed my eyes. She didn’t seem to mind when he barked at her, only my guys.

“You have caused me such a fucking headache,” Nero hissed at me, his smile never wavering. “Consider yourself lucky I can’t punish you the way you deserve right here and now.”

I shuddered, unnerved by the unmoving grin, then followed his gaze up to the camera in the corner. So, we weren’t completely alone.

“I’m not sorry,” I whispered.

“You will be.” He reached out and pushed the hair off my neck. “Looks like after all this, they didn’t even mate you. I hear that’s nearly impossible. They must have wanted to protect their own asses more than they wanted you.”

If he’d said that to me even a day ago, it would have cut me, but I knew better now. I angled my chair, making sure my back was to the camera. I let a benign smile fall over my face, refusing to react. “Bullshit.”

Nero’s face twisted, his smile slipping. He raised a hand and brought it down across my cheek. “You’ve forgotten your place, Omega. I own you. You do not speak to me like an equal.”

Pain burst across my cheek as my head jerked to the side with the force of the blow, and I clenched my teeth together, forcing myself not to cry out. “You’ve never owned me. My place is with them.”

Sounds of footsteps sounded outside the door, and there were voices in the hall. Nero forced his smile back into place, probably realizing at the same time someone saw what happened on the cameras. He leaned close to me to hide what he was saying from view, his voice growing low.

“You stupid bitch. You’re trying to embarrass me over a group of fucking barely adult criminals who won’t mate you and have been lying to you since the moment they took you from my bed.”

I narrowed my eyes, confused. “You don’t know them—”

“Of course I do. The whole industry knows them. Where do you think the blockers come from?” Alpha looked down at me, his expression almost pitying.

I wrinkled my brow in confusion. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Your boyfriends have been responsible for drugging you for years. Everyone is saying that the most recent batch circulating through the Institute is making the omegas practically comatose. It’s so strong. You wouldn’t know how that happened, would you?”

I waited for the ammonia scent of his lie to tear through the room. Nothing happened.

My heart pounded out of control.

The pain of betrayal, like a physical wound, burned through the center of my chest, and I gasped, staggering at the weight of it. I pressed my fingers to my chest, willing it to stop, but it was as though I was being torn in half.

Not again.



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