



Land & Sea  
a shifter series

DOMINIC

*and the*

DOLPHIN

VINNI GEORGE

DOMINIC AND THE  
DOLPHIN



VINNI GEORGE

*Dominic and the Dolphin*

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# CONTENTS

About this Book

Chapter 1

*Dante*

Chapter 2

*Dominic*

Chapter 3

*Dante*

Chapter 4

*Dominic*

Chapter 5

*Dante*

Chapter 6

*Dominic*

Chapter 7

*Dominic*

Chapter 8

*Dante*

Chapter 9

*Dominic*

Chapter 10

*Dante*

Chapter 11

*Dominic*

Chapter 12

*Dante*

Chapter 13

*Dominic*

Chapter 14

*Dante*

Chapter 15

*Dante*

Chapter 16

*Dominic*

[Chapter 17](#)

*Dante*

[Chapter 18](#)

*Dominic*

[Chapter 19](#)

*Dante*

[Chapter 20](#)

*Dominic*

[Chapter 21](#)

*Dante*

[Chapter 22](#)

*Dominic*

[Chapter 23](#)

*Dante*

[Chapter 24](#)

*Dominic*

[Chapter 25](#)

*Dante*

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Vinni George](#)

[About the Author](#)

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

*What happens when fate intertwines shifters from land and sea?*

Dante Perez knows what it's like to be an omega in an alpha's world. He's fought to make his company one of the best, and when he gets the opportunity to sponsor the summer's air and water show circuit, he's not going to let anything stand in his way, especially not alpha flyboy Dominic Pavone. Or his inconvenient attraction to the irritating man.

For Dominic, being a stunt pilot for the summer is usually the best part of his year. Until Dante ruins everything by traveling with the show. Now Dom can't escape Dante no matter how hard he tries... and maybe he's not trying all that hard.

When a hotel mix-up leaves Dante and Dominic sharing a room, the sparks that normally fly between them turn into flames of a different kind—the type that set the sheets on fire, and both men realize there is more between them. A lot more.

As summer and their arrangement comes to an end, a surprise changes everything they thought they knew about each other, but maybe a new beginning—the kind that leads to forever—is exactly what Dom and Dante need.

*Dominic and the Dolphin* is book three in the Land and Sea shifter MPREG series featuring a dolphin shifter who refuses to back down from any challenge, an eagle shifter who can't stand being grounded, a whole heat season that's hotter than the summer sun, and some very unexpected nesting.

## CONTENT AND TRIGGER WARNINGS:

This book contains a scene depicting attempted sexual assault. The character is unharmed, and the scene does not progress past the aggressor making an unwanted advance.

Additionally, this book contains mentions of past emotional abuse that includes mention of infertility.

Please take care if these issues are triggering for you.



# CHAPTER 1



## DANTE

“*Y*ou’ve got to be fucking kidding me! Where is he?”

Dominic Pavone’s angry accented English hit my ears and sent a thrill down my spine that landed somewhere in my balls. I watched the now irate Italian stunt pilot pull off his helmet and march toward the observation deck, where I was standing with several members of the crew and the other summer air and water show circuit sponsors, watching practice before the season opener in two weeks. Riling Dom up was one of the highlights of my life. The man could go from sweet to fiery in a second, and pushing his buttons was one of my favorite pastimes.

And thinking about him turning all that fire and passion on me in a different way was one of my favorite fantasies.

Of course, consistently indulging my cheap little thrill of pissing him off meant he thought I was a colossal asshole, which I could be, mostly only to him, but to be fair, he’d started it when he’d accused me of knowingly endangering my crew when we’d had a bad outing at a regatta over a year ago.

Had I made mistakes that day? Yes. Had I been more reckless than normal? Perhaps. I had my reasons for taking the risks I had, and they had nothing to do with money like Dom assumed. And since then, I’d also done my level best to atone for my errors in judgment. But the stubborn dickhead refused to let me set the record straight, and after we’d bumped into each other a few times and he’d iced me out, I stopped trying.

Didn't mean I didn't appreciate his indignance on behalf of my crew. It was sort of sweet how mad at me he was on their behalf, even though they'd all forgiven my mistakes far easier than Dom probably ever would. But that made sense. He was part of a pack of eagle and wolf shifters in Italy that cared so much for one another that they had a yearly bonding ceremony. It was in his contract that the weeks of the bonding ceremony were nonnegotiable time off, and when I'd tried to remove that write-in from the document just to make him mad, he'd made it very clear he would be in Italy to spend time with his family and his pack, or he wouldn't be part of the summer's show circuit. I had to admire that kind of dedication.

I also appreciated the sexy-as-hell way his nostrils flared when he was angry and the delicious way his voice dropped half an octave when he cursed me out in Italian that was just close enough to my own native Spanish that I understood almost every word.

Both were happening as he stormed my way, and I had to think of the quarterly earnings reports for my liquor company to keep from getting hard. Well, harder than I already was after watching him fly.

Even I had to admit the cocky eagle shifter had skills. It was one of the reasons he was there in the first place. There were other reasons.

"You!" He was standing on the tarmac just below the observation deck now, right in my line of sight. "What do you mean it didn't look smooth? I've done that sequence three times today. It was textbook, brilliant, and that last pass was fucking perfection. I'm not going up again."

I shrugged, affecting the bored expression I knew drove him crazy. "Looked to me like you were holding back."

His eyes flashed. "Holding back? Holding back?" He muttered in Italian I couldn't quite hear over the rumble of engines around us and paced a few steps back and forth. Then he looked up at me, and to really get under his skin, I smirked. "That's it! I'll show you holding back." He charged toward the

stairs, but two members of the crew grabbed him before he could get farther than the first step.

“So you’re going up again, then? Practice does make perfect after all. And you do seem to need some extra practice.”

Dominic said nothing, but he made a rude Italian hand gesture and took off back to his plane, no doubt cursing me the whole way.

“Dante, the kids just arrived. Marvin and Sal have the families on golf carts and are headed this way,” Adriana, my personal assistant, said, poking her head out the terminal door.

“Perfect timing. Bring them up as soon as they get here.”

Unbeknownst to Dominic and only divulged to some of the staff and crew, I invited families with children who wanted to see the air show but couldn’t because large crowds posed a sensory or health risk to come see practices. Even though our show in Miami would be the second of the season after Key West, the response to my invitation inviting families to attend the preshow practices had been so overwhelming I’d needed to also open the preseason practices we were holding in Miami to accommodate everyone. Since we had more time and were stationed at a private airstrip during the preseason, I’d been able to accommodate almost every family who’d accepted my invitation. Sal and Adriana had asked the families for foods their kids enjoyed, and we had a spread laid out with allergen-free favorites as well as ear protection and plenty of space both inside and outside where the kids and their families could hang out if they needed space or time away.

Dominic was right. His stunt passes had been perfect, but there had been an accident on the highway that had delayed our special guests’ arrival, and I needed him back in the air because his flying was some of the best, and these kids deserved to see the best.

Could I have just told him what was going on? Sure. He would have gotten back into his plane, no questions asked, but I was nothing if not self-indulgent, and pissing Dom off admittedly made me a little happy.

And watching the eagle shifter fly in either his human or eagle forms—not that he knew that I’d seen the latter—turned me on. Which was probably going to be a problem this summer, especially since it was heat season for dolphin shifters. For me.

As I watched him climb into his jet, his flight suit stretching over his delicious ass, my dick twitched, which was definitely a problem given the guests that would be arriving on the observation deck in only a few minutes.

Maybe making sure Dominic Pavone was on this circuit was a bad idea.

His jet came to life and streaked down the runway.

A chorus of “Wows” echoed behind me before I could swoon as I watched his Aermacchi MB-339 take off. It was the exact same plane he’d flown as a member of Italy’s Freccie Tricolori, though it had been modified for a single pilot, and his comfort in the cockpit was obvious as he pulled the plane into its first maneuver. Buying that plane was some of the best money I’d ever spent.

“He’s reckless,” Sal said at my elbow, her blue eyes flashing as she calculated the insurance costs the event and I would incur if something happened to him. Where I tended to take risks, Sal was almost always more conservative. Her ability to assess a situation was one of the things that made her an amazing chief marketing and business development officer at Azucar, and her ability to assess a guy from twenty paces was what made her a good friend. She’d been by my side the entire time I’d spent building my business, and she was one of the reasons Azucar Rum had become one of the most exclusive liquor brands in the world. “He’s flying too close.”

Dominic was too low, and I knew he was pulling the stunt at the very bottom of the ceiling to make sure I saw him execute it perfectly. Despite our contentious relationship, I trusted Dom in the cockpit of a plane more than I trusted him anywhere else.

“He’s fine. He knows what he’s doing.”

“Are you sure?” Sal obviously wasn’t convinced.

“I am.” I glanced over my shoulder to see the group of children and their families watching the sky. “I should greet our guests.”

She nodded, her eyes still trained skyward as Dominic dove into another stunt and streaked across the wide expanse of blue overhead. I wanted to stop and watch, but my guests were more important than watching Dom do a pass I’d already seen him do three times in person and hundreds of times on YouTube, not that I’d ever confess to that particular vice. Or the amount of lube I’d gone through thinking about his sexy-as-sin smile when he climbed from the cockpit and waved at his fans.

Ten minutes later, I was kneeling down, talking to a little girl and her brother, when I heard Dom thundering up the stairs.

“There. Was that better, you pain in the fuc—” He abruptly cut himself off the second he saw the children, and I glanced over my shoulder to see his face go expressionless before he turned on his megawatt smile as several kids approached him. He immediately bent to their level and took the marker a boy handed to him so he could sign one of the programs I’d handed out.

While he dove headfirst into the impromptu meet and greet, I continued to circulate.

“Thank you so much for doing this,” a mother said, clasping my elbow and stopping my progress toward where the food was set up. “Riley is obsessed with planes. He can tell you everything about them, but he gets overwhelmed and melts down in crowds much bigger than this one, so we haven’t ever taken him to the airshow. Sometimes we go to the airport to watch the planes take off and land, but this”—she nodded to where a boy who was probably around nine or ten was talking to Dom—“is more than I had ever hoped he’d get to see.” Tears glimmered in her eyes, but she blinked them away. “Do you have children?”

Her question came out of nowhere, and I felt it slice into my heart. I shook my head. “No, I don’t.”

She gave me a soft smile and squeezed my arm where she still held it. “Maybe someday.”

I tried to keep my face neutral. “Maybe.” Though I knew the actual likelihood of that was next to zero as much as it killed me to think about.

The little boy in front of Dom turned around, looking for his mom, and she finally let go of my arm. He was beaming, his smile brighter than the midday Miami sunshine. “Seriously, thank you. Thank you so much.”

Seeing her son’s joy and her own caused a lump to form in my throat, and I could only smile and nod.

Across the deck, Dom shot me a look that clearly said he had questions and we’d be having a conversation, but I didn’t much care. He could be pissed about the ambush, but I didn’t regret a single thing. I’d deal with the pissed-off Italian later. For now, my guests needed my attention.

## CHAPTER 2





## DOMINIC

What the actual hell was going on?

After I'd landed the fourth perfect stunt pass I'd run that day, I'd hightailed it over to the observation deck to give Dante a piece of my goddamn mind, only to be surrounded by a bunch of cute kids who all wanted my autograph.

No one had said a damn thing about having an audience, but the kiddos reminded me so much of my nieces and nephews and the other kids in the pack that I'd immediately jumped into favorite-uncle mode.

"Did you know your plane has a wingspan of thirty-five feet eight inches?" The little boy in front of me had been rattling off facts about my plane since he'd walked over.

"I didn't know that," I said, even though I knew every technical specification for every inch of my plane down to every length of wire and every fuse.

"Yes, and the Aermacchi MB-339 is the preferred plane of the Italian Airforce's Frecce Tricolori. They are like the Blue Angels."

I bent down close to him and asked, "Can I tell you a secret?"

He nodded, his eyes wide.

"I used to fly with the Tricolori. And for your information, we are way cooler than the Blue Angels."

His eyes narrowed. “No way. The Blue Angels fly Boeing Super Hornets that have a maximum speed of Mach one point six. Your plane can’t even hit Mach one.”

He had me there. “Okay, okay, you’re right. The Blue Angels are very cool. How do you know so much about planes? Do you want to be a pilot?”

He shrugged. “Just love planes. Always have since I was a little kid.”

That made me smile because he couldn’t be more than ten. I clapped him on the shoulder. “Me too, amici, me too.”

Carlo’s plane, an Edge 540 that he used to fly with a stunt team, came to life on the runway, and I lost the boy’s attention as he looked over his shoulder and waved to a woman talking to Dante, then spun around to watch the plane take off and climb into the sky.

My eyes stayed glued on Dante—not because Carlo’s flying wasn’t impressive, because it was, even if he was a little bit of a show-off, but because Dante looked uncomfortable. I’d never seen him look like anything less than the cocky son of a bitch he was, and the look of unease on his face gave me pause. In a flash, the almost pained expression was gone, and his normal charming smile was back in full force, leaving me wondering if maybe the discomfort I’d seen in his features was nothing more than a trick of the light.

I watched him from the corner of my eye as several of the other pilots went up, and he continued to mingle with the gathered families. I signed programs and chatted with anyone, young or old, who approached, always keeping one eye on Dante, and before I knew it, the sun was starting to set.

“Who wants to see some of the planes up close?” Sal asked the now dwindling crowd, the families with the youngest kiddos having left earlier in the evening, and everyone who was still there cheered and then followed Sal and Adriana down to the hangars we were borrowing.

Which left Dante and me alone on the observation deck. His back was to me as he straightened up some of the catering

mess that had been left out, and I took a minute to appreciate him.

From behind, when he wasn't smirking at me, he was damn near perfect. He wasn't thin like a lot of the omegas I knew, and I couldn't help but notice the way his round ass filled out the designer linen pants he was wearing. And like most of the rest of the world, or anyone who read celebrity gossip magazines, I knew what he looked like under his clothes. He'd launched a new line for his liquor company in Ibiza with a huge-ass party on the beach last year. Everyone who was anyone had been there, from A-list celebrities to athletes, and in the center of it all had been Dante Perez in the tiniest gold Speedo I'd ever seen. I'd met him not long before the party, and while I hadn't been impressed, I'd almost swallowed my tongue when I saw the pictures. He wasn't ripped like the men around him, and the soft curve of his stomach and the thickness of his thighs stood out in the crowd. I'd be lying if I said I didn't pick up a copy of the magazine, even though gossip rags had never been my thing, and I'd take that secret to the grave.

Thinking he was alone, I watched as Dante snuck what had to be a disgustingly lukewarm french fry from a steam tray and bit into it.

"I don't really appreciate surprises," I said, smirking when Dante startled at the sound of my voice. Good, I hoped he felt as surprised as I had when I'd climbed the steps earlier.

His shock didn't last long, and he spun on an expensively loafered heel to glare at me. "Oh? Did I forget to tell you we were having guests at today's practice?"

"You did. And I don't like it."

Dante gave a fake laugh. "My apologies, Your Highness. I forgot for a second that the world revolves around you."

My molars ground together. I hated being accused of being selfish, especially when I was talking to one of the most self-centered people I knew. "That's rich coming from you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“You know damn well what it means.”

“No, I don’t, Dominic. Explain it to me.”

We’d had a version of this fight almost every time we’d met over the last year, and I was tired. Tired of the fact that Dante Perez got under my skin like no one else I’d ever known. Tired of the fact that since the first day we’d met, I hadn’t been able to get the damn dolphin shifter out of my head. And especially fucking tired of hating him and wanting him under me in equal measure.

He was the whole reason I’d agreed to do the circuit this year. AeroCA, the company I was a test pilot for, wanted me on the circuit, but they’d left the decision up to me. I could have opted out—at thirty-eight, I was getting up there, and my body felt the G-force a lot more than it used to—but the second I saw the gold dolphin logo and Azucar, the name of Dante’s liquor company, on the information packet and invitation, I’d signed on the dotted line for reasons I still couldn’t identify.

And I’d regretted it almost instantly. Even if I enjoyed squaring off with him and thought the way his cheeks went red when I struck a nerve was kind of hot.

“No response? Typical.” Dante brushed his hands off and took several steps toward me, his pace unhurried but determined. When he was close enough to reach out and touch, he looked up at me, the setting sun highlighting gold flecks I’d never noticed in his deep brown eyes. “Was I being selfish when I sent a private jet to pick up you and your friends in Rome? Was I an asshole then? Seems like you could remember I’ve done you a few favors, Dom.”

A scoff slipped past my lips. “You never wanted me to be in Rome anyway. You made it hell for me to get the time off to be there for my pack’s bonding celebration. My leaving early was a win for you because it meant I didn’t mess up your precious timeline, so don’t pretend you gave two shits about me or Everett and Merritt.”

“I di—”

He started to speak, but I cut him off. “And what the hell even was this? Some publicity stunt? Way to use a bunch of kids.”

His face went past the red I liked straight toward a dangerous purple color. “Did you see any press here, dickhead?”

His question brought me up short, and I mentally scanned through the people who’d been in attendance. I couldn’t place anyone I’d noticed as a member of the press, and I hadn’t seen him posing for pictures or giving interviews. I had only seen him talking with the families, helping the kids get snacks when they couldn’t reach, and making sure everyone who’d been there was having a good time. The realization was a kick to the head and so discordant with the image of Dante I had in my mind based on the handful of times we’d met that it made me rock back a step.

Dante countered the move, coming farther into my personal space so I was close enough to smell him. He smelled like the sea and sunshine, and an impulse deep in my gut made me want to lean in and take a deeper breath. My teeth dug into my cheek as I held myself in check, and when I said nothing, he poked my chest with a finger, sending sparks I tried like hell to ignore every time we faced off like this arcing between us. I had no idea why this bullshit with Dante turned me on, but it did, and I pressed into the touch. Dante met my gaze, his eyes blazing with annoyance and something that looked a lot like desire before he blinked it away, leaving only the annoyance behind. “Exactly. No press. No photo op. No whatever you’re thinking. I will tell you exactly what it was, though—a chance for kids who can’t attend the shows for any number of reasons to see you fly.”

I felt my mouth drop open, and it took a second for me to make it close. “Why didn’t you just tell me? I have pins and other stuff I could have given out. Made it really special. I could have gotten some of the other guys to come up. You could have asked any of us, all of us, to come meet the kids. Instead, I feel like I was blindsided. Why would I think this

was anything but a publicity stunt when I had no idea it was even happening?”

Dante’s color cooled to the pink I liked, but I knew I’d made a point. “A lot of the kids who were here today have issues in crowds or get overwhelmed easily. I didn’t want everyone to come up here and make a big fuss. You weren’t even supposed to know they were here.”

“I don’t think that’s fair. I enjoyed meeting the kids today. I always do. They remind me of my family and my pack, and it’s nice to feel that way since I don’t get to see them often.” The confession was too real and too much, and I didn’t know what had made the words slip past my lips. I needed to get away from Dante and his fire touches and sunshine scent before I made a goddamn fool of myself, so I cleared my throat and quickly added, “I know the other guys like meeting the kids too.” It would be better for me to keep seeing Dante as the stuck-up, selfish asshole who put himself and his bottom line over the safety of his crew instead of the man standing in front of me who cared about children and wanted them to be able to see the air show in a way that made them comfortable.

Eyes wide, Dante dropped his hand from my chest, making me miss the heat of his touch, and took a step back. He was clearly as confused by my confession as I was. “Fine. I have one of these scheduled before almost every show this summer. If you really want to be here, I can let you know when they are.”

“I’d like that. Thank you.” I hadn’t meant to concede so easily, but seeing Dante’s mouth drop open made it worth it, and giving up when he expected a bigger fight would put him on his heels. I liked keeping him as off-balance as he made me feel. When another beat passed and he still hadn’t shot off a response, I spun around and left, feeling oddly victorious but also completely thrown by whatever the hell had just happened. Not that I should have been surprised. Since I’d met Dante Perez, I’d felt like I couldn’t get my feet under me.

It was a damn good thing I could fly.

# CHAPTER 3



## DANTE

“*Y*ou look dead on your feet.” Sal’s observation wasn’t wrong. It had been a long damn day. A long damn two weeks if I was being honest. Since my conversation with Dom during the open practice in Miami, I’d felt off-kilter and like I was a step behind. I couldn’t seem to get my bearings, which was brutal heading into the first show of the year.

And I’d made the ill-advised decision to not only sponsor and essentially coordinate the entire show circuit but to participate as well. So I’d been out on the water showing off my F50 catamaran with the rest of my crew and flying the Azucar colors, going at almost one hundred kilometers an hour. It had been a perfect day for sailing in Key West, and I was at my happiest out on the water, but both before and after my time on the boat, I had admin tasks to complete, hands to shake, pictures to pose for, and interviews to give.

It didn’t help that with the dawn of June, like clockwork, my heat cycle had started. And while I was on a specific birth control designed for dolphin shifters that not only prevented pregnancy—not that that was really a concern for me—but also dampened my heats, I’d been fighting off waves of lust all week, and combined with the long day, it was taking a toll on my body. Usually, the pills worked better than they were now. Last year, I’d only felt slightly hornier than usual, but this year, even as exhausted as I was, my dick was half-hard, and I felt slick between my ass cheeks. I needed to get laid to take the edge off for a little while, but I also wanted to sleep, and



the two opposite feelings were warring within me, pulling me uncomfortably in two different directions.

More than anything, I wished there was a way to get what I needed without having to go out and find it. Unbidden, Dom's face flashed into my head, and I couldn't hold back a derisive laugh.

"Are you okay? Do you need me to call someone?"

I'd totally forgotten Sal was still there, but I shook my head. "No. I'm okay. Long day, and like you said, I'm dead on my feet."

"Let me call Adriana. She can order room service for you and make sure it's there when you get back to the hotel."

"That sounds wonderful. Thank you. How are you not exhausted?"

She shrugged. "I am, but I also didn't spend almost an hour hanging off the side of a boat. Don't get me wrong, though, my feet are killing me." She glanced down, and I followed her gaze, noticing for the first time that she was standing on the tarmac barefoot, her totally impractical for the day we'd had Jimmy Choos dangling from two fingers. "After I call Adriana and get everything squared away here, I'm taking myself to the beach for a swim."

Sal was a dolphin shifter too, but where my shifter form was that of a common bottlenose, she was part of a more elusive group of smaller spinner dolphins. She was lithe and agile in human and dolphin form, and luckily, spinner dolphin heat season was in the early spring, before the circuit started, so she'd been able to be at home with her mate, Marisol, during Marisol's heat season. As an alpha, it would have killed Sal to be away when Marisol needed her, not that I would have allowed that to happen. Sal was essentially my business partner, but she was also my best friend, and I'd never make her suffer that way.

Instead, I'd be the one suffering. All. Summer. Long.

Her hand on my arm brought me out of my thoughts again. "Is there anything *else* I can have Adriana get for you?"

The stress she'd put on the word *else* made it clear she was asking if there was anything I needed to help make my heat season more bearable, but I had that as well in hand as I could, not that I would ever ask my personal assistant to procure anything like that anyway—so I shook my head. “I’m probably going to rest for a while, then see about finding a friend for the night.”

She smiled. “Okay. You have fun and be safe.” She said something else, but my attention was pulled away as Dominic walked out of the hangar, the top half of his flight suit undone and tied around his waist, leaving his gorgeous olive-skinned arms and a hint of the tattoo on his back and shoulder on display in the tank top he wore under his suit. He was the live-action version of every single *Top Gun* fantasy I’d ever had, and I tried to hide the whimper that bubbled up out of my chest behind a cough.

Sal squeezed my arm. “Okay, I haven’t said anything because, well, I just haven’t, but... you could just hook up with the guy. He’s traveling with us all summer, and no offense, you drool over him every time you see him.”

“I do not.”

“You do. And just a little FYI, some of the crew has a pool going to see if the two of you are going to get into a fistfight or fuck first. You’re not as good at hiding whatever messed-up little flirtation you have going with Dom as you think.”

“There is nothing going on with Dominic. We don’t like each other. That’s it. We fight because he’s a stubborn asshole.”

As the words left my mouth, Sal, the traitor, lifted her hand in a wave. Dom slid his aviators up and waved back, his face screwing up in distaste when he spotted me standing next to her.

“See what I mean?”

“Eh, the only thing I see is a hot alpha who can’t take his eyes off you.”

“Only because he’s hoping one day his glare will either incinerate me or turn me to stone.”

Sal laughed, the sound almost completely swallowed up by the open space around us. She looked back at Dominic, who was still staring our way. “Hmm. You might be right.”

“I know. And while I will agree he’s hot, I don’t like him either.”

“But, Dante, you know what they say. Something about a thin line between love and hate.”

I choked on air. “Love? Are you kidding me right now?”

She stepped closer and put an arm around me, then rested her head on my shoulder. Dom was still staring. “I know Gilberto did a number on you, love. But that was over a year ago. It’s time to move on. There is someone else out there for you. Hell, he might even be standing across the tarmac.” I snorted, and she continued. “Hey, even if he’s not Mr. Forever, you could do worse for a Mr. Right Now. He’s a nice guy. The crew loves him, and he makes sure they are taken care of, even the team that works overnight. He makes sure they have snacks and drinks, and he took everyone out for dinner before we left Miami. I know you have issues, but he’s not the devil incarnate.”

I knew Dom wasn’t really a jerk, but it felt like being stabbed in the gut to learn he’d taken everyone out but I hadn’t been invited. “Maybe not, but he thinks I am, and he makes sure I know it.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing you don’t have to talk to fool around.” Sal pecked a kiss to my cheek. “I’m going to finish up, then I’m getting out of here. I need to call my wife, and the beach is calling my name. Think about what I said. You’re going to need some dick on call because you don’t have time to troll for hookups in every city to get you through the season.”

She was right, and I hated it.

“I’ll think about it, but it’s not going to happen.” Even if I wanted it to. Even if I felt better in his presence, more at home

and at peace, than I did anywhere else, even when Dom was cursing my name. But that was a level of screwed up I didn't need to explore.

One of the site coordinators called Sal over, and I looked across the tarmac again. Dom wasn't staring anymore, and his back was to me as he made a few adjustments to his plane. The muscles in his arms and shoulders flexed as he tightened something with a large wrench, and my dick twitched and ass clenched. There was no denying Dominic Pavone was fucking hot, but if I was going to get hard just watching him fix his damn plane, it was going to be a long damn summer. I'd packed as many dildos and toys as I reasonably could, and I'd made use of them over the last couple of weeks, but there was nothing quite like the real thing—an alpha filling me up and taking me hard. I had a relatively high sex drive year-round like most dolphin shifters, but during heat season, it was so, so much worse.

Unlike a lot of omegas from other shifter species, dolphin shifters didn't have a monthly or quarterly or annual heat that lasted a week or so at most. No, we had a full season—three whole months—marked by hundreds of mini heats, moments of overwhelming lust and need that could last a couple hours to a full day. Heat season amplified our already heightened sex drives, and it wasn't unusual for unmated dolphin shifters to have hundreds of partners in a single heat season.

When I was in college, my dolphin shifter friends and I would compete to see who could have the largest number of partners, and since STIs were virtually nonexistent among shifters, there was little risk as long as an omega was on birth control and/or the alpha used condoms. I'd been called a slut more than once, but I'd never felt any shame about my body or what I needed. And watching Dom across the tarmac, I wasn't ashamed now, even though my cock was more than half-hard and I could smell my own slick.

I closed my eyes and bit down hard on my lip, stumbling a little and hoping the moment of pain would be enough to stave off the wave of heat until I could get back to my room and my toys. When I opened my eyes, Dominic was staring at me,

concern evident in the dip of his brows. He set down the large wrench he'd still been holding and picked up a red towel, wiping his hands as he started my way.

And hell if that wasn't the last thing I needed. If Dom, with all his cocky alpha flyboy pheromones, invaded my personal space, it didn't matter how much we didn't like each other; I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep myself from climbing him like a goddamn tree and begging him to throw me down in the patch of grass I was standing on and fuck me until I couldn't remember why I hated him or my own damn name.

Raising a hand, I tried to wave him off, but the gesture did nothing. He was closing the distance between us quickly, his long strides eating up the space too fast for me to even run. But that's what I should have done. It's what I should have done the minute I realized I couldn't get the eagle shifter out of my head. And maybe I had run, but instead of away from him, I'd run toward him, finding excuses to be where I knew he'd be and making sure I—well, my company—was a title sponsor of this year's air and water show circuit.

And maybe Sal was right. Like the perfect summer thunderstorm, maybe Dom and I were two atmospheric fronts on a collision course. Maybe the resulting crash was inevitable.

"You feeling okay? Sample a little too much of your own rum today?" Dom asked, a smirk twisting his lips.

Then again, maybe not.

"I'm not drunk, asshole."

"Pretty sure I saw you almost fall over."

"And you assume the only reason that could be is because I'm drunk? While I'm working?"

He shrugged a shoulder, and I couldn't keep my eyes from tracing over the defined muscle under his bronze skin.

"Couldn't be because it's hot, right? Or because I'm not feeling well. Or because I'm fucking exhausted after being here for more than twelve hours."

“I guess it could, but I saw you hanging out in the sponsors’ tent with some VIPs, and you seemed to be knocking them back.”

I shook my head. There was no one on earth as infuriating as this stupid man. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I was drinking water. Just water. For once, maybe don’t make assumptions about things you know nothing about.” I turned to leave, but with an alpha so close, another wave of lust pulsed through my body, making my knees weak and causing me to stumble. Dom reached out a hand and caught me in one strong arm.

“Whoa. Seriously, Dante, are you okay?” When I felt steadier, I tried to shrug out of his hold, but he kept me pressed tight against his body, and I turned my head to glare at him, trying in vain to ignore the way my body was responding to him. My heart hammered in my chest, my pulse beating wildly in my throat. My palms started to sweat, my dick was fully hard now, and I felt slick starting to drip down my thighs. I was a second and a half away from really embarrassing myself in front of Dom, and I knew if I did, I’d never live it down.

But instead of disdain, I saw genuine concern and something feral in his eyes that almost made them seem like they were glowing. He’d scented my slick. I knew it. There was no way he could have missed it. I bit the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood and breathed in through my mouth, knowing if I scented him it would all be over.

“Shit, are you in he—”

Using every reserve of energy I had, I pushed out of his hold. “I’m fine.” Still feeling shaky, I took a step back, and miracle of miracles, my legs didn’t tremble, and I stayed upright. Confidence restored, I turned and walked away.

And I didn’t look back, even though I wanted to. I wanted to so damn bad.

But I also had my answer. If I was going to be in close contact with Dominic all summer and not succumb to the tension between us, I was going to need to channel the version

of myself that had kept literal tally marks on my bedpost during heat season and find as many hookups as I could.

Starting tonight.

By the time I hit the parking lot and climbed into the back of the black SUV I'd hired as transportation, I'd found a local shifter bar and saved the address on my phone.

Sleep could wait. I had other needs to take care of.

# CHAPTER 4





## DOMINIC

“*D*om! Over here!”

“Charlie! It’s been too long, man!” The bigger man wrapped me in a huge hug, and because he was a manatee shifter and a Florida native, I expected him to smell like Dante. But he didn’t. All I scented on Charlie was the tang of the sea, but he didn’t smell like sunshine and the seashore. Maybe it was because Charlie was an alpha. Who knew? My brain was already a chaotic mess over the damn dolphin, and now it seemed like my senses were fucking with me too.

Charlie let me out of the hug but held my shoulders. “It’s so good to see you. Hope you still like an IPA. I already ordered the first round.”

“Excellent.” Charlie settled in a chair next to a small table that had two pint glasses, one half-empty and the other full, condensation sliding down the side, and gestured for me to take a seat in the chair opposite. I picked up the beer and drank deeply, the hops on my tongue pushing away a little of my irritation after yet another confusing-as-fuck run-in with Dante. “Thanks for the beer. I needed it.” I took another long drink and glanced around the ice-themed bar that felt out of place at the tip of Florida. “Interesting spot.”

“Best shifter bar in the state. I know the owner, Magnus. He’s a walrus shifter. Former US Coast Guard out of Kodiak in Alaska. He did his twenty and got out and said he’d never move back. Guess the theme brings just enough of home here.”

“Guess so.” I watched the big man behind the bar, nodding when he tipped his head my way. Turning back to Charlie, I said, “I know it was short notice, and I’m glad you could meet up.”

“Ah, Dom, even if I had plans, I would have broken them for you. I owe you my life, brother. That and I never get to see you ’cause you never come down this far, which is something you should really fix, by the way.” I waved away his comment, but he shook his head. “No way. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be here. We both know it. You never let me say thank you. Buying you a couple beers is the least I could do.”

“I’ve told you a million times. No thanks necessary.”

Charlie nodded, and we both went quiet for a second, each of us remembering the day we’d become friends in Italy.

I shook my head, pulling myself out of the past, and asked, “So how are things going? You still feel like you’re living the dream?”

“Hell yes. Look around. This is as close to paradise as I can get.”

“And business is good?”

“Booming! Glass-bottomed boat tours are a big deal down here. I’ve got a waiting list going through the end of next month. I could easily hire another guy and buy another boat, and we’d still be busy. I already added three to the fleet this year.”

I smiled, seeing my friend so happy. “You’re a regular admiral.”

“Nah, just a skipper,” he said with a wink, referencing the hours we’d spent watching *Gilligan’s Island* while we’d been stationed together in Italy. The nickname was fitting since he resembled the skipper from the show. He was tall and wide with sandy-colored hair that, like mine, was starting to show a few hints of gray. He still carried the muscle he’d acquired during his time in the military, but any hard edges he’d had were softened and rounded out. His build reminded me a little

of Dante's, though Dante seemed like he was built more for speed, and Charlie was clearly built for comfort. I shook my head, trying to clear Dante from my mind. When that didn't work, I downed the rest of my beer.

Charlie had the decency to let me finish my drink before he called me on my shit. "Uh-oh, what's that look for? Stunt piloting not doing it for you anymore? Want to come down here and work for me? I'll buy you your own boat. We can name it the *Gilligan*."

I laughed, and it felt damn good. "No, man. It's nothing like that. I don't think glass-bottomed boat tours are enough of a thrill for me."

He held up a hand. "Hey, you never know. We see some pretty big sharks and a bunch of gators." I raised a brow, and he let out another of his deep laughs. "Fine, fine, but if it's not work stuff that's got you downing that IPA like a man dying of thirst, what is it?"

Looking at the dregs at the bottom of my glass, I said nothing. I wasn't sure how to explain Dante and whatever it was I was feeling or wasn't feeling for him, and I didn't want to talk about it. "Nothing, man. Really. It's just been a long day, a long month, and the circuit's just starting. I'm not as young as I used to be."

Charlie scoffed. "None of us are. But I hardly think thirty-eight puts you one foot in the grave."

"Feels like it some days."

"Truth." He held up his glass and clinked it against mine, even though we'd both already downed our pints. Charlie motioned to a server for another round.

"So what else is new?" I asked as we waited.

Charlie started to fill me in on some of the reserve work he was doing around the naval air station a couple miles up the coast, but I lost the thread halfway through. The door had opened, and without even looking, I knew Dante had walked into the bar. It wasn't like the crowd went quiet or trumpets announced his arrival, but I felt it in the air.

“Dom? You okay?”

The server had dropped off the second round, and I’d already polished off half the pint. I wanted to blame the strong beer for my reaction, but I knew in my gut it was something else. Rolling my shoulders a couple times, I tried to shrug off my awareness of Dante. “Yeah. It’s nothing. You were saying?”

Charlie didn’t look convinced, but he picked up where he’d left off. I adjusted in my seat so I could see more of the bar, and as I sipped my beer and listened to Charlie with one ear, I scanned the room for Dante.

He’d found a seat at the bar that put his back to me, but I could tell just from what he was wearing and how he was sitting that he was there trolling for dick. He was in a tight black T-shirt, which probably cost the same as a month of rent on my flat outside of Montreal, jeans that hugged every inch of his fine ass and gorgeous thighs, and leather boots I could tell were handmade Italian leather from across the room. He was definitely there looking for a hookup.

And that knowledge made the beer I’d drank sour in my stomach.

It took me a beat too long to realize the pint glass in my hand was empty and that Charlie had stopped talking. When I looked his way, he had his chin in his hand and was looking at me with an amused expression. He nodded toward Dante. “Who’s the guy?”

I groaned, but I’d backed myself into a corner and tried to deflect. “No one.”

“Not buying the shit you’re trying to sell, Pavone.”

I turned away from Dante and looked at Charlie dead-on. “You don’t recognize him?”

“Should I?”

“Maybe. That’s Dante Perez. Founder and CEO of Azucar, the rum company.”

Charlie considered him for a second. “Isn’t he, like, a billionaire? Why would he be slumming it here at the Ice House with us mere mortals?”

I shrugged. “Didn’t you say this is the best shifter bar in Florida?”

“I did, and it’s true. He’s a shifter?”

“Yeah. Dolphin. And a royal pain in my ass.”

Charlie sucked in a big breath and blew it out through his mouth. “Rough time for a dolphin shifter omega to be in a shifter bar.”

“What? Why?”

He shook his head. “Dude, are you serious? You don’t smell that?”

I sniffed the air and got the normal bar smells and something sweet that reminded me of Dante. Something that I wanted to taste. But I played dumb. “Smell what?” But I already knew. I’d scented Dante’s slick earlier.

“I think the jet fuel fumes have fried your sense of smell. Come on, man. It’s dolphin heat season, and I’d bet any money your guy’s in heat.”

“Not my guy.”

“You sure about that? Because you haven’t stopped watching him since he walked in.”

“I’m sure. I don’t like him, and he hates me.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, I guess. Since I’d bet every alpha in this place is going to be all over him in five minutes, and I’ll always have your back, but my bar-brawling days are in the past.”

My stomach lurched. I didn’t want Dante, but apparently, my inner alpha didn’t want anyone else to have him either. Fuck.

“I’m gonna hit the head. Why don’t you grab us another round,” Charlie said, pushing up from his chair.

“I haven’t seen the server.”

“They stop serving at the tables at nine before the rush starts. She’s behind the bar with Magnus now.” He nodded toward the bar, and I spotted our former server’s high brunette ponytail bouncing as she hustled from one end of the bar to the other. “You’ll have to go up to order. And I’ll be pissed if you don’t put it on my tab.”

I knew what he was doing, and I sent an unhappy glare his way. Charlie just smiled and started whistling the *Gilligan’s Island* theme song as he turned to head for the hallway that led to the bathrooms.

The bar door opened, letting in a huge group of patrons and a blast of humid air that said the real beginning of summer wasn’t far off. The group moved between where I sat and where Dante was perched at the bar, and once they’d all settled into spots to wait for one of the bartenders to take their orders, there was only one place left to stand.

Right next to Dante.

I rolled my eyes but stood and made my way to the bar. I could stand next to him and order a round of drinks. We didn’t have to speak, but of course, my luck wasn’t that good. The second I leaned on the bar to wait my turn, Dante turned my way and did a double take.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, clearly pissed to find me there.

“What are *you* doing here?” I shot back.

He pursed his lips, and I could tell he was grinding his molars together too. “I hate it when you answer a question with a question.”

I shrugged and turned away, watching Magnus, a tall, wide, bald man with a thick walrus mustache, pull a pint.

“You’d better not be hungover tomorrow. You have to fly, and people are paying good money to see you at your best.”

I pivoted so I could look at him full-on. He’d rotated on his barstool so he was facing me. “I’ve had two beers, not that it’s

any of your business. I've never missed a show or a scheduled flight. I'm the epitome of responsible. Plus, I'm Italian. I've been drinking homemade wine since I was old enough to hold my own cup. It'll take a hell of a lot more than three beers to give me a hangover."

The bartender who'd been our server stopped in front of us. "Another round?" she asked, and I nodded. "On Charlie's tab?" I nodded again, and she turned away to fill the glasses.

Dante made a noise that sounded like a growl, and I saw his eyes flash.

"What?"

He shrugged and rearranged his face into the bored expression he usually wore when he was talking to me. "I didn't say anything."

"I know you didn't, but what was that noise about?"

"What noise? Did I make a noise?"

I leveled a glare at him. "You know what I'm talking about."

"I think you're hearing things, Dominic."

At that moment, an alpha bear shifter in a tight tie-dyed T-shirt approached and wiggled his way between me and Dante like I wasn't even standing there, like we weren't in the middle of a conversation.

"Hi there, cutie," he said, turning on the charm as he leaned into Dante's personal space.

Dante's face softened, and he gave the bear a thorough once-over. "Hey, yourself."

"I've never seen you in here before. Just passing through?"

I couldn't hold back a groan, and both the bear and Dante turned to look at me. The bear took a deep breath and drew himself up to his full height. I wasn't one to back down from a fight, but as scrappy as I was, I didn't like my odds against a bear shifter, even if he was a little smaller than most of the bears I knew.

But I didn't need to worry that the encounter was going to turn into a bar brawl because he stepped out from between us and held out his hand to me. "Sorry, man. My bad. I didn't realize. You two have a good night." He turned to Dante and made a similar apology.

"What was that?" I asked.

Dante shook his head. "No clue."

"Hey, Dom," Charlie said, clapping me on the shoulder. "What's taking so long?"

"She's grabbing them now."

He looked around me and waved at Magnus, who slid a beer across the bar to the woman he was serving, wiped his hands on the bar towel he had slung over his shoulder, and walked our way.

"Hey, Charlie. It's good to see you," Magnus said, reaching out to shake Charlie's hand. His voice was deep and gravelly, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dante shift in his chair.

"Same, man, same." Charlie scanned the bar. "Busy night."

Magnus laughed, and I saw Dante close his eyes and make a face like he was tasting something delicious. No one else seemed to be paying attention, but it was weird, and I didn't like it. Especially if it was Magnus that was causing that reaction. I scented the air and caught a whiff of the same sweet honeysuckle smell I'd caught around Dante earlier, and my inner alpha immediately perked up. Fuck. Charlie was right. Dante was definitely in heat. And his slick smelled fucking delicious.

So what the fuck was he doing out at a bar, surrounded by alphas?

And why the hell did it piss me off that the big walrus shifter behind the bar was turning him on?

Also, if Dante really was in heat, how was he sitting here having a conversation like there was nothing wrong?

How had he been able to captain his damn boat?



I'd been with eagle and wolf shifters in heat before, and they'd been almost delirious with lust. They could barely string together a sentence that didn't involve begging to be filled and bred. Not to mention, in a bar full of shifters, including a large number of alphas, they would have been up on a table presenting for anyone and everyone. A wolf or eagle in heat wouldn't have been out in public. But Dante was sitting there without an issue, though I noticed his knuckles had gone white where he was gripping his glass.

"Mags, I want you to meet my friend Dominic." Charlie clapped me on the shoulder again, pulling my attention away from Dante. "Dom, this is Magnus."

I held out my hand, and the larger man shook it with a firm grip. "This is a great spot you've got here."

Magnus smiled, his mustache lifting. "Thanks. I think so. Charlie says you're visiting. What brings you to town?"

"The air and water show. I'm a pilot."

Magnus's bushy brows dipped into a vee. "A pilot?" He looked at Charlie, then back at me. "Wait a second. Are you the pilot that saved Charlie's life?"

Dante had just taken a sip of his drink and choked, the liquid shooting out of his nose. Magnus picked up a stack of paper cocktail napkins and passed them over, barely sparing Dante a glance.

"The very same," Charlie said.

The ponytailed bartender finally slid two pint glasses our way. "Sheila, those are on the house," Magnus said. "This is the guy that saved Charlie's life."

"You've got it," she said before she was pulled away by the same bear shifter that had interrupted Dante and me earlier, waving a twenty over the edge of the bar.

"You saved someone's life?" Dante asked, his tone skeptical, and three sets of eyes flashed his way.

"He sure did." Charlie wrapped one arm around my shoulders and held the other out to Dante. "I'm Charlie. I

didn't catch your name."

Dante looked at his offered hand for a second before he took it to shake. "Dante."

"Well, Dante, you have time for a story?"

He nodded, and Charlie launched into the tale with all the panache of a mariner telling a fish tale, which I guessed wasn't actually that far off the mark. Magnus was leaning a hip against the bar, listening too, but since I'd been there and knew the story, I picked up my pint glass and took a drink.

"Dom and I were stationed at the same NATO base in Italy for some training. I was with the US Navy and Dom the Italian Air Force. I had the afternoon off, so I decided to go for a swim." He gestured to himself. "I'm a manatee shifter, in case you couldn't tell." Dante nodded like he'd already figured that out. "Anyway, I was out in the harbor when a speedboat that wasn't supposed to be near the base tore through. The propellor ripped my back to shreds."

Dante gasped, and his face lost a shade.

Charlie clapped him on the shoulder. "It's all good, man. Dom had been on a patrol and saw the blood in the water. He abandoned his post and ran down to the harbor. The trauma caused me to shift back into my human form, and when Dom pulled me from the water, I was unconscious and barely alive. Luckily, Dom had called for an ambulance on his way down, and they were able to get me to the hospital."

"Damn, man," Magnus said. "You're one lucky son of a bitch."

"Don't I know it. But that's not even all of it. I was in bad shape and in surgery for hours. After that, I was laid up for even longer. Had to lie on my stomach most of the time so I didn't pull out any of the stitches or screw up any of the grafts. Gets pretty lonely with only four infirmary walls to keep you company, and after the good drugs wore off, I was feeling pretty damn sorry for myself, but there was Dom. He brought board games and puzzles I could do on the floor while I was on my stomach, and he sat there on that white tile floor by my

side every free minute he could, watching Italian-dubbed reruns of old American sitcoms and translating for me until I was released. Not sure I would have made it through without him.”

Magnus didn't say anything, but he reached out and gave my shoulder a squeeze before moving on to serve some patrons who were getting restless farther down the bar.

I shook my head. “I did what anyone would have done.”

Charlie scoffed. “Maybe anyone who'd seen would have pulled me out of the water and called an ambulance, but not everyone would have stuck around like you did.”

I ducked my head, uncomfortable with the praise.

“Sounds like you're a hero,” Dante said, and shockingly, there was no hint of disdain or mockery in his voice. Raising my head to look at him, I saw his face had softened like when he'd looked at the bear from earlier, and my heart skipped a beat as I smelled more of his sweet honeysuckle slick.

He was an omega in heat. That look on his face was nothing more than an omega flirting with an alpha. But Dante and I weren't ever going to happen—as much as my inner alpha might disagree—and I needed some space.

I cleared my throat and said, “Sorry we interrupted your night. We'll let you get back to it.”

The softness in his expression disappeared. “Right, and you should get back to...” He gestured between me and Charlie.

Charlie laughed. “Oh, no, it's not like that. Dom and I are just friends, though if I were an alpha who was into other alphas, I would totally lock him down.” He clapped me on the shoulder again. “But I've got my eye on someone else.”

I'd apparently missed some subtext. Dante pursed his lips but nodded, the annoyed expression I was used to on his face. “Don't be late tomorrow,” he said. “I don't care what kind of big hero you are. You're getting paid to fly, and I expect you on your A-game.”

I gave him a mock salute, grabbed my pint glass, and shoved Charlie back toward the table we'd been sitting at earlier. Someone had stuck a reserved sign on it, and even though the bar was now packed, no one had stolen our seats.

“What the fuck was all that?” I asked once Charlie had settled himself in his seat and taken a long drink from his glass.

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “You’re a good man, Dominic Pavone, one of the best. And if that guy can’t see that, maybe he’s not looking hard enough.”

“That or maybe I’ve made it hard to be someone he could like.”

Charlie smiled. “Yeah, but that’s something you could fix if you wanted to.”

# CHAPTER 5



## DANTE

“*U* ngh!” The moan slipped past my lips, louder than I’d intended, and echoed around the hotel room as I shoved my largest dildo deeper into my ass, hitting my prostate.

I should have already hooked up with a handful of alphas and maybe a beta or two, but after that night in the bar in Key West when I’d run into Dominic—and found out he was some kind of hero—while I was trying to find a hookup, I hadn’t even tried.

And much to my eternal embarrassment and ultimate chagrin, I knew why.

My inner omega wanted Dominic Pavone.

And apparently, only Dominic Pavone.

Which just about fucking sucked since I had about as much chance of getting what I wanted as there was hell freezing over and Lucifer himself winning an ice-dancing medal.

So none at all.

Which left me exactly where I was—needy, almost desperate, with a dildo in my ass, slick dripping down my thighs, and Dom’s face flashing behind my closed eyelids as I worked myself over with the toy for the third time that day. The sloppy sounds of my slick against the fake dick ramped my need up higher and higher, but I didn’t reach for my cock. One of my favorite things about heat season was my increased

ability to come without touching my dick, and I thrust the dildo in and out harder and faster as another wave of heat flashed through my body and Dom's scowl lit up my mind's eye.

"Fuck! Dom!" I screamed as I came hard, a gush of slick pulsing from my ass while cum shot from my cock and covered my hand. Long minutes passed until I caught my breath, and for a second, I felt better. And then, like I could hear the words still ringing on the air, I realized I'd yelled Dominic's name as I'd come.

Which was obviously a problem.

I wished like hell I could figure out why I was so hung up on him when I didn't really like him and he sure as shit didn't like me. Though to be fair, hearing about how he'd saved his friend's life had made me reconsider a handful of my initial impressions, but just because he'd saved someone's life didn't mean he'd been all that nice to me. And maybe I'd gone a little too far in indulging my penchant for pissing him off.

If my inner omega was going to refuse to see any alpha besides Dom, maybe I'd have to make amends.

The question was how since our mutual antagonism was born from Dom's misconceptions about an event he wasn't even part of, and every time I'd tried to explain—not that I really thought I needed to explain myself to him or anyone except my crew—he'd shut me down.

Maybe it was time to be a grown-up and push for the conversation. If not, maybe I could convince him to at least indulge in a little hate sex.

For now, I needed to shower and get something to eat. Now that we were back in Miami, I knew exactly what I wanted and where to get it.

After a quick shower, I called the valet and had my car brought around. Usually I had an SUV and a driver, but since I'd been feeling antsy, I'd picked up my favorite car, a 1965 Shelby Cobra Roadster that I'd bought at an auction in terrible shape and had restored to all her factory glory with a custom

metallic seafoam-green paint job and silver interior. It was impossible to be in a bad mood cruising the streets of Miami in my baby, and that was exactly the vibe I needed to outrun my thoughts and feelings at the moment.

I also knew exactly where I was going to go.

The valet pulled the car to the curb and pushed open the door, holding it for me as I got in. “Damn, Mr. Perez. She’s a beauty.”

I grabbed his name from a quick glance at his name tag. “Thank you, James. I love her.”

“As you should.” James reverently ran a hand over the hood of the car. “Have a great day.”

I buckled my seat belt and put the car in gear, pulling out from under the portico and almost getting clipped by a black-and-chrome motorcycle tearing through the lot. I slammed down on the brake in time to avoid a collision, and the motorcyclist swerved around me and out into the street before I could say a damn thing.

“Fucking reckless idiot,” I said to no one as I eased off the brake and out into the street.

I was halfway to my destination, sunglasses and the radio on, and my stress melting away by degrees as I enjoyed the wind in my hair and the sun on my skin in my favorite city in the world, my home, until I noticed a familiar-looking motorcycle in my rearview. I couldn’t see who was driving because they were wearing a dark gray helmet with a tinted visor, but there was no denying it was the same jackass who had almost hit me in the parking lot. How the hell had he ended up behind me?

Signaling to change lanes, I noticed the motorcycle followed, staying a few cars back. Was this asshole following me?

Only one way to find out.

I took the next turn that led into Little Havana and smiled as the buildings got more colorful, the pinks and bright greens feeling like home and the smells coming from the restaurants



making my mouth water in anticipation. A glance in my mirrors said motorcycle guy was still tailing me from a distance.

“Could be a coincidence,” I said under my breath as I took the next turn, but I knew in my gut it wasn’t.

My destination was less than a block away, and I wondered if whoever was on the bike would follow me into the parking lot.

Sure enough, I caught the glint of sun on chrome as he turned.

“Shit.” Judging from the motorcyclist’s build, I could tell it was a guy, and even from a short distance ahead, I could tell he was an alpha. Had he caught scent of my heat? Was he following me because he thought I’d be some sort of easy target? It wouldn’t be the first time something like that had happened.

Yanking the steering wheel hard to the right, I swung into the lot behind the small aqua-and-pink building that housed Lita’s, home of the best and most authentic Cuban food in Miami. Whenever I was feeling low or needed a taste of home, it was where I came, and just being in the parking lot calmed my nerves.

The motorcycle slowed as he passed the small lot, and even though I couldn’t see the guy’s eyes behind his helmet, I knew he was looking at me. But he didn’t pull into the lot, and as he rolled on down the street, I let out a long breath and got out of the car.

Maybe it had been a coincidence after all.

A soft breeze blew, and I smelled ropa vieja on the air. My stomach growled, knowing the delights that waited for me inside the tiny building that was looking just a little worse for wear, some of the paint peeling and a few of the flowerpots untended as I approached the door.

As I was about to turn the corner, I heard the rumble of a motorcycle in the parking lot, then nothing as whoever was driving cut the engine.

Goddamn it. I was definitely being followed. And the way I looked at it, I had two choices. I could run inside and hide, or I could stay where I was and confront the asshole who'd been following me head-on.

I decided to stay and stand my ground.

The sound of boots on the cement of the path that led to the front door was loud in my ears, even over the Buena Vista Social Club track that was playing on the hidden speakers by the door near the patio, and I clenched my fists at my sides waiting for whoever had been on the bike to show themselves.

A shadow crossed in front of me, right before Dominic Pavone rounded the corner, holding a dark gray helmet.

“What the fuck?” I said, even if I was the tiniest little bit relieved it was him and not some alphahole who'd caught my scent leaving the hotel. “Why are you following me?”

Dominic's eyes were wide like he hadn't expected me to be waiting for him. “I, um, I...”

“Not good enough.” I crossed my arms over my chest, waiting for him to give me a better answer. The wind shifted a little, and I was hit full force with Dom's scent—pine, leather, and something earthy that reminded me of Spanish moss—mixed with the aromas of Lita's food and confusing my brain into thinking Dom somehow smelled like home. My ass clenched, and I felt slick drip from my hole. Goddamn it. Not fucking now.

I closed my eyes for a second and took a big breath in through my mouth, not needing to be tempted by Dom's scent again. When I opened my eyes to glare at him, his were molten and bright as he stared at me, his nostrils flaring and lips parting.

Fuck.

He took a step toward me, and I backed up, keeping my expression as bored and annoyed as I could manage with my dick half-hard and my hole slick.

“Dom, seriously, why were you following me?”

He took another step, and I countered again, trying to maintain the distance Dom seemed intent on closing between us and coming up hard against the stuccoed side of the building.

“Oof.” The breath pushed from my lungs as Dom succeeded in closing the gap because I was trapped. One of his hands came up to rest against the building, and he bent his head to lean close to my ear. “You want to know why I followed you?”

Swallowing hard, I nodded, my cock now so hard and my body so empty and needy that I wanted to whimper. I was also pissed as hell that it was the man in front of me my traitorous body had decided it needed, and I tried to lash out, bringing a hand up and pushing hard against Dom’s chest. He grabbed my wrist with his other hand. “Yes, I want to know why you followed me and why the hell you were driving like a reckless moron in the parking lot. You could have hurt someone. Hell, you could have scratched my car.” Maybe if I could distract him, I could slip away to get myself under control.

Dom scoffed. “Fuck your car.”

My mouth fell open. “I’m sorry. Fuck my car? Fuck my car? Do you know what kind of car that is? It’s a Shelb—” But before I could finish telling him off, his mouth came down on mine, and he used the grip he still had on my wrist to pull my arm over my head as he leaned in, his body covering me.

Goddamn, he felt good. The heat of him seeped into my core, and I moaned against his mouth, pushing my tongue against the seam of his lips, desperate to taste him. He smiled and pulled back a fraction of an inch.

“That’s better. I like it when you’re not talking.”

“Fuck y—” His lips crashed down on mine again, and since my mouth had been open, he deepened the kiss. My knees went weak as I got my first taste of Dominic Pavone, and I knew two things in a single second: I’d never tasted anything as sweet as him, and I was going to lose my shit if I didn’t get to feel him inside me. A whimper slid from between my lips as he nudged my legs apart with his knee, and I rocked

forward to find friction against his body as his mouth continued to plunder mine. I wanted to feel his lips everywhere, and my body let go, giving up the fight and giving in to the need that had been raging inside me that I knew only Dom could quench.

He slid his mouth from mine, and I drew in a deep breath as his teeth scraped over my earlobe. “You want to know why I followed you?” This time, he didn’t give me time to answer. He licked over the scent gland behind my ear, then nipped it with just the barest hint of teeth, stealing anything I might have said from my throat. Slick pulsed from my hole, and I was seconds away from turning around and begging him to take me right there. Then he spoke again. “I followed you because you smell so goddamn good, and I wanted to make sure you weren’t trying to find someone else. I don’t fucking understand it, and even though I don’t like you”—he punctuated the statement with another sharper bite to my neck that made precum leak from my dick—“my eagle wants you, and I’m sick of fighting it. If there’s something you need, I’m going to be the one to give it to you.” The last words were little more than a growl, and that was it.

“Yes, I need *you*.” I wasn’t proud of the words or the inflection I’d accidentally put on the last one, and I hated feeling vulnerable in front of Dom, but it was the truth, and I hoped he wasn’t enough of an asshole to get me all riled up, then leave me. With all the antagonism between us, I wouldn’t really have been surprised if that was exactly what he did.

But after hearing about how he’d saved his friend, I knew he wasn’t that kind of man. I knew he’d save me from the lust burning through me, and I desperately needed saving before I turned to ash.

He shifted his weight, keeping the hand holding my wrist over my head anchored against the building and lowering his other hand to the front of my pants. He kept me hidden with his body as he slid his thigh between my legs, putting pressure against my balls.

“Fuck, Dom,” I hissed as I felt more precum leak from my tip, and my head fell forward against his.

“Not here, but I’m going to get you off.”

“Mmm. Need to come.” His fingers tightened around my wrist, and I loved feeling like I was making him lose control. The pressure against my balls and taint felt amazing, but I wanted to feel full, and I needed more.

My lips parted to ask for what I wanted, but Dom slid his free hand down the back of my pants and gripped my ass.

“Fuck, you’re soaked. You’re leaking through your underwear.” His voice was all gravel, and I ground down against him, using my body to beg for more because I couldn’t form words. I was a ball of energy that needed to detonate to be free. I could barely feel Dom’s fingers through the fabric, but I wanted them inside me so badly. But he held back, bringing our bodies closer together instead and rutting against me through our clothes. It wasn’t enough, but it was better than nothing, and my head flew back, almost smacking against the concrete wall. I let out a moan that Dom swallowed, his lips on mine.

“Shh. We don’t want an audience. No one gets to see you come but me.”

His fingers pressed deeper into my crease, putting pressure on my hole, but there was no way he could give me what I really wanted with the barrier of my underwear and all his clothes between us.

“More.” The word tore from my throat on a gasp, but instead of keeping his promise to give me what I needed, Dom slid his hand away. “No!”

“I told you I’ve got you. You need to trust me.”

I wanted to, but a small voice in the far corner of my mind cleared the haze just enough to remind me that I wasn’t actually sure that was true. Before I could get my brain to cooperate, Dom pressed a hand against my cock, rubbing me through my pants. I would have preferred skin-on-skin contact, but the rush of sensation still made me gasp in pleasure, my cock jerking.

“One day, I’m going to finger your pretty little hole, then use your slick to jerk you off.”

“No! Fill me up. Breed me. I need it.”

Dom choked and cleared his throat, and I looked up at his face through my lashes. His eyes sparked with want. “Fuck. You can’t say shit like that. I’m barely hanging on over here.”

“Let go. Do it.”

Dom shook his head, his longer dark hair brushing against my forehead.

“Please.”

Dom huffed out a breath and lowered his head, but his other hand slid into the back of my pants again, still keeping a barrier between us. His fingers pressed at my hole, and I cried out, Dom covering my mouth with his before I could get too loud. He worked me over through my clothes, but it still wasn’t enough.

“More. Please.”

He nudged my head to the side and put his mouth right over my scent gland, sucking hard enough that I knew there would be a mark but not enough to break the skin. That small voice spoke up again, urging me to beg for his bite—how it had gone from not knowing if I could trust him to wanting him to bite me, I had no clue, but it didn’t matter because I was too far gone and couldn’t make my mouth form the words. When Dom scraped his teeth over the same spot, I came hard, my cock exploding in my underwear, the scent of my cum mixing with my slick, and my ass clenching hard around nothing.

For a long time, I didn’t move, and neither did Dom, other than small flutters of his fingers against my ass and the barest slide of his palm over my covered cock as I rode out the last of my orgasm. I felt better, less edgy, but as that feeling left, another replaced it as my brain came back online and I realized I’d just had sex with Dominic Pavone against the side of Lita’s in broad damn daylight.

Fighting the urge to run, I pulled my hands away from the wall and shoved at Dom’s chest. He took the hint, holding his

hands up in surrender. Turning away, my face flaming with embarrassment—had I really just begged Dominic to breed me in public?—I tried to pull my shit together.

“Dante?” His voice was still low and rough, and I chanced a glance his way. His cock was hard, the thick ridge outlined in his tight jeans, and I wanted to ride him so badly my body spasmed with another surge of lust, even though I’d just come. “You okay?”

“Fine,” I snapped.

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t need you.” I held his gaze, not willing to back down.

Dom raised an eyebrow. “Pretty sure you do.”

“I’m very sure I don’t.”

He leaned into my space, and since I was still against the wall, there was nowhere for me to run. “Too bad. And when we’re alone, I promise I’ll give you everything you asked for.”

I wasn’t sure why I was poking the bear—or eagle as it were—but I said, “Like what?”

His smile turned feral. “I’m going to breed your gorgeous ass until you’re so full of my cum you can’t take any more.”

Another flood of heat washed away my embarrassment until Dom kissed my nose, then pushed away from the wall and me and stepped back. What was the nose kiss about?

“That’s what you think.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I think.”

I made a noncommittal noise, even though my knees were shaking with the force of my lust. But Dom wasn’t really who I needed. Outside of a fantastic orgasm, he wasn’t the person for me. We barely tolerated each other. Adding sex—more sex—to the mix would be a recipe for disaster.

Dom held out his hand, but I ignored it, getting back onto the path by the restaurant under my own power.

“Fine.” He slid his hands into his front pockets. “I’m not going anywhere. You know where to find me if you change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

Dom took a few steps toward the front door, then looked back over his shoulder. “Coming?”

I was still a little out of it and struggling to keep up. “Where?”

“I’m buying you lunch.”

I shook my head. My underwear was wet, and I knew it would be uncomfortable to stay in them. I should go back to the hotel and get myself off again, thinking about what had just happened with Dom. “I can buy my own lunch. That’s what I was planning to do—all I was planning to do—until some asshole on a motorcycle started stalking me.”

Dom smiled. “I regret nothing.”

“Not yet,” I said, passing him on the way to the door, uncomfortable underwear be damned. I wouldn’t back down from any challenge Dominic Pavone issued.

For a second, I thought I saw his face fall, but in the next breath, the emotion was gone, and his normal cocky expression was back in place. I turned and walked into the restaurant, not sure Dom would follow, but he did.



# CHAPTER 6



## DOMINIC

What the actual fuck had just happened? I'd just had the hottest sex of my life with Dante freaking Perez against the side of a restaurant in Little Havana, and I hadn't even come. I hadn't even gotten naked, and neither had he. I'd barely even felt his skin against mine. But his lips...

Christ, I could kiss his damn lips forever.

And why the hell was I thinking about forever with someone I didn't even really like for now?

And why had I kissed his goddamn nose like he meant something to me, like he was pack, like he was family, like he was mine?

I'd been feeling out of sorts, and a friend in Miami had let me borrow his motorcycle. I was anxious to feel the power of the bike under me, so I was tearing out of the parking lot, going faster than I should have been, and I'd almost run into the sexiest car I'd ever seen—a car I'd seen before a couple weeks ago, leaving Everett and Merritt's hotel when I'd been arriving—only to look up and realize Dante was behind the wheel. Which made me wonder what the hell he'd been doing at Ev and Merritt's.

Now that I knew the scent of Dante's slick, I couldn't get it out of my nose, and I'd caught a strong whiff of it on the breeze as I'd passed him out of the parking lot. Some unknown instinct had made me turn my bike around and follow him wherever he was going. Honestly, I half expected him to be meeting a hookup, so when he'd pulled into the

parking lot behind a small pink-and-blue single-story building with Lita's Cuban Cuisine painted on the side, I thought he was just trying to throw me off, so I'd circled the block to make sure he was still there.

He had been, and after our hookup, we were now standing at the counter inside, the scent of his cum still fresh in my nose, ordering lunch like he hadn't just fallen apart in my arms, like I hadn't just told him if he needed anything I'd be the one to give it to him like some kind of alpha asshole, like I hadn't promised to breed him. My cock was still rock hard after everything that had happened against the building, and thinking about sinking into Dante's tight, hot body wasn't helping the situation at all.

Fuck.

I ran a hand through my hair, the overwhelming urge to run welling up in my gut.

"I'm just going to go," I said to the back of Dante's head, and he whipped around.

"What? Why?"

And wasn't that a loaded question...

"I, uh, have somewhere I need to be." It was technically a lie, but what the hell was I going to do? Sit down and have a meal with a guy I didn't think I liked who definitely didn't like me?

But was that true now? He hadn't seemed to mind when my hands were all over him.

My mind was spinning, which was exactly why I needed to get the hell out of there.

Dante met my eyes, then looked away. "Let me buy you lunch. Least I can do after..." He waved a hand, and his cheeks went dark. At least I wasn't the only one experiencing mixed emotions.

"You don't have to do that."

His eyes flicked to my crotch, then back to my face, his expression shuttering. "Shut up, Dominic. This is the best

Cuban food in Miami. You're going to eat. Go grab a table."

I opened my mouth to make another excuse, but he held up a hand. "Not taking no for an answer, so go sit."

There was something a little hot about Dante bossing me around, and I found myself complying before I'd even really decided to stay. Settling in a pink-painted booth across the room, I watched as Dante approached the counter and spoke in rapid Spanish to the lady taking orders, who lifted up on her toes and presented her cheek for Dante to kiss.

His voice in his native language was sexy as sin, a little deeper and more resonant around the vowels, and a shiver shimmied down my spine, landing in my balls. I wanted to run again, but I didn't move.

The lady behind the counter handed him two rolls of wrapped silverware and smiled as she handed his order off to another little old lady working in the kitchen.

"I didn't tell you what I wanted," I blurted when Dante slid into the booth.

He was still wearing the bored expression he usually wore around me, and for a split second, I wished I could see the face he made when he came again. In that moment, he'd been unguarded and unconcerned with anything but his pleasure. He'd been beautiful.

"I got a little bit of everything."

"Uh, okay."

Silence fell between us.

Dante glanced out the window by our table, then turned to look at me. "I want to clear the air between us."

I didn't know what he was talking about. "Regarding?"

"Your impression that I'm some kind of dick that willingly puts people in danger."

A scoff slipped past my lips.

"I didn't put anyone in harm's way that day, Dominic. Everyone on that boat wanted to be there."

I rolled my eyes. “Sure they did. With winds damn near hurricane level and five-to-six-foot waves. You should have called the race, but you didn’t want to be out the money, so you made them compete.”

He looked hurt. “Is that really what you think happened?”

Sitting back, I crossed my arms over my chest. “Yeah, that’s what I know happened. You forget I was there.”

“You don’t know a damn thing, Dominic.”

I lifted a shoulder in a shrug, and Dante let out a frustrated growl and clenched his fist on the table.

“I don’t owe you a goddamn explanation, but I’m going to give it to you anyway because you judge me for the mistakes—yes, Dom, I know I made mistakes, and you judge me for them every day.”

“I do not. That day just proved what I already thought about you.” I was sticking my foot in my mouth, but I couldn’t stop myself. “You care about money and your precious racing circuit more than you care about the lives of your crew.”

Dante’s eyes went wide like I’d slapped him, and then he leaned forward and spoke slowly and carefully so I’d hear every word.

“You know nothing about me. You’ve seen what you wanted to see. You’ve used what you think you know as a reason to be a dick, and I’ve used your animosity to be a dick right back.” He smirked. “I might have kind of enjoyed that part, but I’m sick of this shit between us.”

If he was going to lay it all out there like that, I could at least listen. “Fine. Say your piece.”

“Each member of my team owns as much of that boat and the race circuit as I do. It’s part of their compensation agreement and contracts. They get paid for being part of the team and for every regatta raced. We all made the choice to race that day.”

Another scoff slipped out.

“Really? You can honestly sit there and tell me, Mr. Big Dick Stunt Pilot, that you’ve never taken a risk just because you could, because you wanted to feel the rush? Because I don’t buy that for a goddamn second, Dom.”

He had me there. I had taken plenty of risks, flown when I shouldn’t have gone up, flown planes that could barely do what I pushed them to do just to see if I could. The rush was what made my job worth it.

And somewhere deep in my head, there was a little voice that reminded me I hadn’t thought Dante was an idiot for going out there when I’d been watching the three teams that had braved the conditions that day try to outrun the storm. I’d been captivated by the race, by the thrill, an adrenaline rush by proxy.

It had only been after, when a friend had introduced me to Dante, that I’d decided he’d been reckless and careless with his crew’s lives.

With *his* life.

My inner alpha stirred, disliking the thought of something happening to Dante, and I tried to swallow through the epiphany I was having. I’d thought I hated Dante for making his crew race in conditions that could have gotten them killed, but that small voice was whispering that it was Dante I was actually worried about, that I didn’t like that he’d put himself in danger.

Son of a bitch.

“Dom?”

Instead of giving Dante anything, I said, “How do you know I have a big dick? You’ve never seen it.”

He rolled his eyes. “Really?”

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I gathered my thoughts. “I get the adrenaline rush. You know I do. You don’t do what I do because you value safety.”

“Exactly. That’s the same reason I race. I like the rush. I guess that’s something we have in common.”

I hated to admit he had a point.

“I guess so.”

He sighed. “I was outrunning some shit that day, some hard truths that had been thrown in my face. I needed the high. The risk. But my team had already decided we were going to race while I had been talking to the other teams. I didn’t make them get on that boat. They made me. I could have said no, but I didn’t, and I didn’t regret the decision until we almost capsized, and I saw real fear in their eyes. I’ve done everything I can to make up for putting that fear there every time we’ve been out since. They deserve better, even if they would still have chosen to go out that day. I should have put them first.”

Shocked he’d admitted as much as he had, it took me a second to get my brain online to respond. He’d given me a truth, and I felt like I owed him one too, even if I didn’t know what it meant. “I, uh, didn’t like knowing you put yourself in danger.”

A deep vee formed between his brows. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, okay. One minute, I was cheering with the rest of the crowd. Then Alistair brought me over to meet you, and I dunno... Merda. I just got so mad you would risk yourself like that.”

“Wait. You were mad I put *myself* in danger? Not my crew?”

I ran a fingernail along a scratch in the tabletop. I didn’t like admitting that I felt anything for the damn dolphin, but the longer I spent in his orbit, the more I realized maybe I’d always felt more than I’d let on. “Yeah.”

“What do—”

“Here you go.” The lady who had taken Dante’s order at the counter set two trays overflowing with food down on the table. “Lita wants you to come say hello before you leave.”

“I will. Thank you, Elena.”

“Of course, mijo.” She reached out and pinched his cheek, then gave it an affectionate pat. Dante leaned into the touch, taking comfort in the older woman’s touch. It made me wonder about his family. Which I never would have done a week ago when I was determined to hate him.

Maybe Everett’s mate, Merritt, was right. Maybe I’d been protesting too much. God, this was screwing with my head.

Another silence fell between us as Dante passed me a Styrofoam plate and pushed one of the rolls of silverware my way.

He gestured at each plate. “Ropa vieja, tostones with shrimp ceviche, platano frito, lechon asado, and arroz y frijoles negros.”

“I’m going to pretend I know what any of that means.”

Dante unrolled his silverware and put his paper napkin on his lap. “It means try a little bit of everything. It’s all delicious.” The only things I recognized by sight were the rice and beans, so I started there but ended up putting a little of everything on my plate.

Dante did the same and let out a small moan as he took a bite of one of the meats. His eyes fluttered closed, and it was all I could do to keep from sweeping the plates of food off the table and laying him out across it to feast on him.

I was still staring when he opened his eyes. “What?”

“You can’t moan like that when we’re in public.”

Dante wiped the corner of his mouth, then said, “Didn’t stop you when we were outside.”

“Gesú.”

“Eat, Dominic.” He tucked back into his plate but thankfully kept the moaning to a minimum. I had to say I got his reaction when I took my first bites of everything. I’d never tasted anything so good. The flavors were totally different than the traditional Italian fare usually on my parents’ table when I visited, but somehow the food still reminded me of home. It



was clearly cooked with love, and before I knew it, I'd cleared my plate and was going back for seconds.

"Told you it was delicious."

I nodded, my mouth full.

"What's your favorite?"

"This," I said, pointing to the shredded beef. "I like the olives."

Dante smiled. "Ropa vieja is my favorite too. Lita's tastes just like my abuela's. Reminds me of home."

"Guess that's something else we have in common."

"Guess so."

We ate quietly for a few more minutes until there was next to nothing left on the trays. I was full and happy when my phone rang in my pocket.

I pulled it out to see a text from Everett.

Everett: Dom, are we still on for a video chat today? No rush. Just checking in.

"Shit."

"What?" Dante wiped his mouth again and put the crumpled napkin on his empty plate, then leaned back against the booth.

Looking out the window, since I was still a little embarrassed that I'd followed Dante, I said, "I was supposed to catch up with Everett and Merritt today."

"How is Theo?"

"What?"

"Baby Theo. They adopted him, right?"

"How do you know that?"

It was Dante's turn to look away. "I'm not the asshole you think I am."

"That doesn't answer the question."

He crossed his arms over his chest. “We’ll just say I appreciated that your friend was willing to drop everything to come and rescue the sea turtles.”

“No, we won’t just say that. How did you know Everett and Merritt were adopting one of the sea turtle babies?” I didn’t understand why he was avoiding the question and being difficult.

“I have my sources.”

“Just tell me.”

“It’s killing you not to know how I know what’s going on with your friends, isn’t it?”

I pointed a finger at him. “This is why I don’t like you.”

That goddamn smirk I hated tipped his lips. “I know.”

Taking a deep breath, I caught a hint of honeysuckle. “Wait. Pissing me off turns you on, doesn’t it?”

Dante’s smirk stayed firmly in place. “Maybe.”

“Shit.” Suddenly, his incessant need to antagonize me made sense.

“Yeah, well, we’d better head out before I tell you all my secrets. I think you’ve gotten enough for today.”

“Yeah, maybe.” After the mindfuck of a day, I was still reeling, but I also wanted to know more about the man I’d spent too long hating.

“Do you want to meet Lita? She’s the chef.”

“Definitely.” I stood, put my empty plate on one of the trays, and picked it up. Dante grabbed the other, and we dropped our trash in a neon green bin before he approached the counter and spoke in fast Spanish to Elena, who waved him through the swinging door that led to the kitchen. I grabbed my helmet from the booth and followed him.

A little old lady with dark, kind eyes greeted him, wiping her hands on her apron, then reaching out to cup his face between her wrinkled hands. “Ah, mijo.”

Dante wrapped her in his arms, and she slid her hands to his biceps and squeezed, then pushed back and looked past him to where I was standing.

He turned and glanced at me, then said something to her in Spanish. I heard my name, so I figured he was introducing us.

“I’m Dominic,” I said in English, not sure how well my Italian would translate. I usually only caught a handful of words when I heard Dante speaking. “The food was amazing. Thank you.”

She didn’t say anything, just reached up, cupped my face in her hands, and pulled me down to her height so she could look into my eyes. I wanted to look away, but she made it impossible, and I endured the weird staredown with the tiny Cuban woman until she gasped and dropped her hands, clasping them over her heart, a huge beaming smile stretching across her lined face and her eyes a little wet.

Lita turned to Dante and said, “Dante, gracias por permitirme conocer a tu compañero predestinado. Es tan guapo, y será tan bueno contigo.”

My Spanish was generally shit, but my mind snagged on the words *compañero predestina*. That sounded an awful lot like *compagno predestinato*, which... No. No freaking way was Dante Perez my fated mate. No freaking way.

“No, no, no,” I said. “He’s not... We’re not...”

Lita grabbed my hand as I took a step back, and my gaze swung to Dante, who looked shell-shocked. “Cálmate, mijo. Con el tiempo todo sera revelado.”

Elena hustled through the door, looked at each of us in turn, then, hands on her hips, leveled a glare at her mother. “Mama, que dijiste?”

Dante shook out of his stupor and spoke to the women. He was talking too quickly, and my head was spinning too fast for me to get any of what he was saying, so I just stared, watching Lita’s face as her smile slipped into a frown, and she pointed at me and then Dante.

After what felt like a short eternity, Elena touched my arm and spoke in English. “You’ll have to forgive my mother. She thinks she can sense fated mates, and she has wanted that for Dante for a long time. She wasn’t a fan of his ex.”

“Elena.” Dante’s voice was low, and the single word begged her not to say anything else.

“Disculpas, mijo.”

“Don’t you have something else to do?” Dante said to me without looking at my face.

“What?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be talking to Everett? Better get going.”

“Oh, right. Yeah.” I took a step toward the door. “Thank you again for a delicious lunch,” I said to the ladies, and then my back hit the swinging door, and I pushed through.

I didn’t take another deep breath until I’d walked through the restaurant and was standing a few feet from where I’d gotten Dante off against the side of the building. A string of curses spilled from my lips. I wanted to believe what Lita had said was the crazy rambling of an old lady, but that didn’t explain the possessiveness I’d felt over Dante recently, or why I’d followed him, or why I couldn’t keep myself from getting him off, or why I’d stayed and had lunch with him because I didn’t want to leave, even though that had been the first civilized conversation we’d ever had.

And it sure as fuck didn’t explain why I wanted to run back in there to be near him.

Shaking out my limbs, trying to also shake loose the thoughts Lita had put into my mind, I slid my helmet on and marched toward my bike.

Maybe the speed and the roar of the bike would finally be what drove Dante Perez out of my head.

Maybe not.

# CHAPTER 7



## DOMINIC

“*W*hat’s wrong with you?” Everett was studying me through his phone screen, and I could see Merritt and Theo playing in a baby pool in the background. I focused on them instead of Everett’s question. Theo kept shifting and wriggling out of Merritt’s arms to splash into the shallow water, his little sea turtle flippers moving fast, while Everett’s mate giggled and wiped water from his glasses. They’d gone back to Maine before I’d gotten back to Miami, but I wished they were still in town so I could have this conversation face-to-face.

“Nothing,” I said automatically.

“I love you, Dom, but I’m calling bullshit. Is the dolphin giving you a hard time?”

Of course the damn doctor had hit the nail on the head, and I felt my face slip into a scowl.

“Is it really that bad?” Ev asked.

“Worse.”

Behind Everett, Merritt stepped out of the pool, a wriggling Theo in his arms, reaching for the water with his chubby hands. I forgot sometimes how quickly baby shifters grew. He was only a month or so old, but he looked older. “Really? He’s so nice.”

I choked. “Nice?”

“Yeah, he stopped by to see Theo a few times before we left to come home.”

“What?” I glanced at Everett, who had a sheepish look on his face. “Dante visited you? Why? How?”

Merritt’s head swiveled between Everett and me. “You didn’t know?”

“Uh, no.”

Everett sighed. “When we got off the plane, Dante had paid for our rental car, left a note saying he wasn’t as big an asshole as you might have us believe, and left his number in case we needed anything.”

“Ev texted to thank him for the car, and he asked how things were going with the turtles, and the rest kind of went from there.”

That explained why I’d seen Dante’s car leaving their hotel’s parking lot. Didn’t mean I liked the fact that the damn dolphin was encroaching on my friend territory, though.

“So you’re, what, friends now?” I couldn’t help feeling a little betrayed, even though my feelings about Dante were complicated at best and a fucking mess at worst. I didn’t know where I stood with him. Especially after earlier.

“I’m not sure friends is the right word, but he seems like a good guy.”

“And he’s so cute with Theo.”

My heart skipped a beat as my mind conjured up a picture of Dante holding sweet little Theo. Shit. Why did I like the thought of him with a baby so much? The image in my head blurred, reconfiguring to a picture of a pregnant Dante, resting a hand on his belly as he watched the sunset, and my dick twitched. Earlier, I’d promised to breed him, but thinking about a pregnant Dante made me want to make it a reality.

Right now.

I stood from the park bench overlooking the Atlantic that I’d planted myself on. “I, uh, I’ve gotta go.”

Before I could take a step or hang up the video call, Everett glared. “No, you need to sit your ass down and tell us what’s going on.”

Merritt held Theo up to the camera, his chubby legs kicking, and I lowered back onto the bench. “Pretend you’re holding the baby. It’ll help.” I remembered the feeling of little Theo settled on my chest, his hand reaching for the aviator sunglasses tucked into my shirt collar and his sweet scent—kelp, the tang of the sea, a hint of pine, and a hint of something that reminded me of snow in my nose. The pine scent was all Merritt and the snowy scent all Everett, and I knew without a doubt that Theo had been meant for them—their fated baby.

“Seriously, Dom, what’s going on? I’ve never seen you this jumpy.” Everett looked over his glasses, studying me again, trying to see as much as he could through a phone screen. “I’m a little worried.”

Instead of trying to explain what was going on with Dante, I asked, “How did you know you were fated mates?”

Merritt clapped. “Do you think you’ve found your mate?”

Everett took his mate’s hand. “Easy, Mer.” He looked at me. “Why are you asking?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t know. I’m just feeling weird, and a lot of stuff and a lot of things aren’t quite adding up.”

“Like?”

I shrugged. “Can you just tell me how you knew? Maybe I’ll be able to explain it better after.”

Merritt and Everett shared a look, and then Merritt gestured for Everett to tell the story. “I felt drawn to Merritt since I met him. He was really sick, his wolf pulling him into shifts without warning and then making it really hard for him to shift back. The second I saw him, I wanted to protect him and make him well. At first, I thought it was just because I’d never heard of anything like what Merritt was going through, but the longer we spent together, the more I wanted to be near him. I didn’t think that meant we were fated, though.”

Merritt smiled at his mate. “I felt the same way. I felt better around you, almost like how I felt around Jonah, but it was different, deeper somehow. We were in Greece, on our way to Frascati, as you know, and the alpha of the eagle owl



shifter parliament there told Everett we were fated, but our bond was very faint. I guess things clicked into place after I joined the pack and my wolf and I were finally whole. The second I went into heat at the bonding ceremony, Everett was all I could see and smell, and when I looked at him, my heart said I was home.”

Everett nodded. “It was the same for me. I’d grown to love Merritt over the months we’d known each other, but the second he was bonded to the pack, I knew he was mine, and that love I felt blossomed into something so profound it felt like Merritt and I were bound together at an atomic level. He is my heart echo. I feel every beat of his heart like it’s my own.” Everett squeezed Merritt’s hand and looked at him like he’d hung the damn moon. In some dark, lonely part of my heart, I wanted the kind of connection they had, a fated love that would withstand anything. “Does that help?”

Was I stupid for thinking Dante was the one meant for me? All we’d done for more than a year was fight and snipe at each other every time we were in the same place. But when I really looked at why that was—why I’d been a jerk the first time we met and had never stopped casting him as the villain instead of looking at why I’d reacted so powerfully in the first place—I thought maybe that thin line between love and hate people were always talking about was real. That day, I’d hated that Dante had put himself, not his crew, in danger. I was angry he was willing to be so careless with himself, but I pretended I was upset he was a bad leader, that he’d knowingly put his crew at risk. Why would I have reacted like that if I didn’t care about him? That day, I’d only known him by reputation before we’d been introduced after the race. And I hadn’t really cared about what he was doing on his boat until the moment I’d looked into his eyes.

Goddamn it. Had that been fate giving us a shove together? Could my anger have been a form of love?

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.” I looked through the screen at my friend and my packmate, and I could almost see their connection glowing between them even over the

hundreds of miles separating us. “Did you really not know for all that time that you were meant for each other?”

Merritt shook his head, and I felt the truth of his words through our pack bond even across the distance. “No. I wanted Everett, but I thought there was something so irreparably wrong with me and my wolf that I’d never be able to find a mate, let alone the mate fate had chosen just for me.”

Everett pulled Merritt closer for a quick kiss, and then he looked at me. “I really didn’t know. I’ve traveled the world twice. I thought if I was meant to find my mate, I would have done it already. Honestly, I’d decided that even if Merritt wasn’t my fated mate that I’d like to try to be with him as a mate anyway after we got him healthy.”

“Really?” Tears were shining in Merritt’s eyes.

“Really, petit. I wanted you to be mine, even if fate hadn’t intervened.”

My heart stumbled over a beat, seeing their love and connection. I was so happy for my friend, and our pack had gained so much in Merritt, Everett, and Theo. Letting them have their moment, I focused on Theo, who’d fallen asleep in Merritt’s arms. His face was so peaceful and serene, and I brushed a thumb across my phone screen right over the soft skin of his cheek, wondering for a minute what my own child might look like. At thirty-eight, I thought I was past longing for a family and the connection Merritt and Everett so clearly had. I’d focused on my career and my pack as a way to fill the void, and after a while, it felt like not having a mate and babies wasn’t that big a deal.

So why was it almost all I could think about now? More so after I’d made Dante come apart against that wall.

What if Lita was right? Was that why I was looking at Theo and seeing a baby with dark hair and eyes that reminded me of Dante’s?

Clearing my throat, I waited until Merritt and Everett looked my way. “So what I’m hearing you say is that I can be around my fated mate and not know it?”

Merritt nodded, and Everett said, “Yes. Absolutely. Sometimes it takes a triggering event to solidify the connection and make you aware.”

I considered that. “Okay. And say the first time I met someone, I wanted to yell at them for putting themselves at risk?”

Everett hummed. “Yes, I think that could be a sign.”

“What about if I followed this person because I smelled them and felt like I had to be where they were?”

“Could very well be a sign.” Everett and Merritt both nodded.

“And if I, oh, say, saw this same person out at a bar and was pissed I thought they were there trolling for a hookup because they are in heat?”

Merritt gasped. “Someone in heat was at a bar?”

Everett’s lips twisted into a smirk. “Don’t worry, petit. You know as well as I do that not all shifters experience heats the same way. If I had to put money on it, I’d bet this particular someone is polyestrous and has a heat season made up of months of mini heats that don’t make him quite as lust-driven as other species get.”

Merritt was working on a dissertation on shifter species origins and proliferation, and I knew part of his research included a detailed understanding of shifter reproduction. His mind worked through everything he knew, and he gasped again. “Ev, are you saying Dom and Dante...”

“I’m not not saying that.”

Merritt leveled a glare my way. “Is that what you think? That Dante is your fated mate?”

“I don’t know what the fuck to think. Some little old lady said we were, but...”

“A little old lady said you were fated? I thought you hated each other.” Merritt looked almost as confused as I felt.

I rubbed a hand over my face. “I did. I do. I think.”

Everett leaned forward until his face almost filled the frame. “Summer is probably pretty rough on Dante. If you’re saying he’s in heat now, he’ll probably be fighting through it until September. Unless he gets pregnant.”

I growled. I didn’t want to think about that unless it was me who knocked him up.

“Easy. I’m just saying, and you know how this goes. Until then, he’s probably going to be cranky and maybe a little more irritable than normal.”

“He’s always been irritating.”

“Didn’t you meet him in the summer?”

I hated it when Everett employed logic. “Yes.”

He raised a brow, and I got what he was saying, so I motioned for him to continue. “Given the way you both like to antagonize each other, and given it’s Dante’s heat season, it might be hard to be around each other. If you are fated mates, none of that is going to matter.” An image of Dante coming apart under my touch flashed behind my eyes. “You’re going to want to be near each other, even if you drive each other crazy. If you try to fight it, it’s just going to get worse.”

“And you’re sure none of this could be because I’m an alpha and I’m around an omega in heat?”

Everett considered the question. “I want to say no, but the alpha response to an omega in heat is different for everyone and depends on a lot of factors. You’ve been around omegas in heat before in the pack. Does this feel the same?”

I thought about that for a minute. When I’d been around packmates in heat, it had been mostly my dick that had been interested, my alpha only interested in continuing our shifter species, but this, being around Dante, felt like someone had put a hook through my gut and was pulling me toward him. My alpha wanted to make Dante mine, not to just get in, get off, and get out. My eagle, my wolf, and my inner alpha all agreed—Dante was ours. It was just taking me a hell of a lot longer to get on the same page.

Everett pursed his lips. “I think you have your answer.”

I did. And I wasn't sure how to feel about it.

# CHAPTER 8



## DANTE

“*Y*ou want to do what?” I asked, glaring at Dom, trying to see if he was giving me shit.

He rolled his eyes. “Why is it so hard to believe I’m a good guy?”

Dom was good. Good as hell at getting me off against the side of buildings. But I stowed that knowledge away for later when I was alone in my hotel room again.

Shaking my head, I said, “It’s not that I don’t think you’re a good guy. I’m just surprised you want to be part of the special audience events when you were so pissed about the last one.”

“I wasn’t pissed about the last one. I was pissed about the way I found out about it. I don’t understand why it’s so damn difficult for you to just communicate.”

I wanted to communicate all right. If communication meant begging Dom to fuck me and put me out of my heat-season-induced misery. I felt strung out and desperate sixty percent of the damn day, which, combined with the rising June temperatures and the stress of running my worldwide business remotely while also managing the air and water show logistics, was making me crabby.

The last thing I needed was for any of the VIPs I’d invited to the show in various cities—most of them alphas I did business with—to see me losing my shit. And I was standing on the precipice.

“Fine. If you want to be notified about the special audience sessions at practice, I’ll let you know.”

He shook his head. “I think you might have sea water in your ears, delfino, because that is not what I said. What I said was that I want to be part of the special audience sessions. I have all sorts of Freccce Tricolori swag I had Santo FedEx to me, and I want to give it to the kids. They deserve it.” He pulled something from his back pocket, and before I knew what he was doing, he’d stepped into my personal space and slid something on my nose—sunglasses of some sort. “They look good on you.”

Stepping back, I ripped the child-size glasses off and looked down at them. They were plastic mirrored aviators in savoy blue with the Italian flag striped on both arms. With the exception of the size and color, they looked just like the ones hanging from the neck of Dom’s heathered blue T-shirt. Shoving the glasses back into his chest, I said, “Hope your schedule is clear this afternoon because the special audience session begins at four.”

“Just so happens my practice runs aren’t scheduled until tomorrow morning. So I’m free.”

I, of course, already knew that. I had tweaked the schedule on purpose because I didn’t think I could handle watching Dom charm another group of kids without begging him to breed me again. “Excellent,” I said, though I didn’t feel that way. My body felt more out of control when Dom was around, and that wasn’t good, especially not today. “And also, as an FYI, several sponsors will also be at this practice.”

Dom gave me a mock salute. “Understood. Best behavior.”

He turned on his heel and walked away back toward the hangar where the planes were being held. His jeans looked like they were made for his ass, not so tight they looked painted on, but they hugged his butt just right. I’d always been a sucker for a nice ass, and Dom’s put most others to shame.

My cock jumped, and I moaned. Shit. If I didn’t get off before practice started, I’d be in bad shape.



Good thing I had a few hours to get myself together.

\* \* \*

I LIKED to consider myself the kind of person who was generally prepared for pretty much anything. I wasn't paranoid or overly anxious; I just liked to plan for all contingencies. Just in case.

But there was no way on God's green earth I could have planned for what seeing Dominic Pavone holding a toddler on his hip and flipping a pair of those goddamn blue plastic sunglasses on and off her eyes while she squealed with delight would do to me.

The picture was so sweet I was sure he could get me pregnant from here. If that were even possible.

While I watched, the sweet little imp with the cherub cheeks grabbed Dom's real aviators from where they still hung on his shirt, wriggled enough that Dom had to set her down, and made a beeline for the dessert table, which was right behind where I was standing. I scooped her up just in time, though she reached out a chubby hand. "Cookie!"

Her mother had been talking to Sal while her father and older sister were inside the hangar we'd set up as a safe, quiet space for anyone who needed a break.

"I don't know if you can have a cookie, cutie. We'll have to ask your mom."

She looked around, switched Dom's glasses to her other hand, and pointed to a red-haired woman across from where we were. "Mamama."

"Should we go get her?" I asked, taking a step that way.

"No, no, no." She leaned back in my hold, and I squeezed her a little tighter so she wouldn't fall. She accidentally smacked me in the cheek with a tiny elbow as she unfolded Dom's glasses and perched them on her nose upside down.

“Aha! There’s the little thief,” Dom said, coming up beside us. “Young lady, I think you have something that belongs to me.”

She giggled and squirmed. “No, no, no.”

“Oh, well. Guess I’ll have to wear yours.” Dom put on the too-small glasses, complete with sticky toddler fingerprints. “Dante, do I look cool? I think I look super cool.” Dom made a couple silly faces and did a couple funny poses, which made the little one in my arms cackle.

“You’re really good with kids.”

Dom shrugged. “I have a herd of nieces and nephews. Plus all the kids that are part of the pack.” He pretended to buff his knuckles on his shirt. “I don’t mean to brag, but I’m pretty much everyone’s favorite uncle.”

“You do mean to brag.”

He held up his thumb and forefinger a tiny bit apart. “Maybe just a little.” When he winked, my knees went weak, and I set the little girl down so I wouldn’t drop her. She immediately ran over to her mother and grabbed her around the knees.

With nothing to do with my hands, I turned to the dessert table and picked up a cookie from the tray. Breaking it in half, I offered a piece to Dom, who shook his head. We both surveyed the area, observing the families as they watched the planes taxi and take off for their practice stunt passes from the front of the hangar.

“It’s pretty amazing, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?” I asked around a bite of the cookie.

“The wonder kids have. Seeing things through their eyes is kind of magical.”

I completely agreed, and I nodded. “You obviously like being the fun uncle, but do you want kids of your own someday?” The question slipped out without me stopping to consider it or how Dom would no doubt turn it back around to

me, and the words hung in the air between us for a long second.

Dom lifted a shoulder. “Yeah, I think it would be pretty cool to be a dad. What about you?”

Being a father was one of the things I wanted most in the world and one of the things that felt the least attainable. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell Dom that I wanted to be a father more than anything, but instead, I just nodded again. “Same.”

I stuffed another quarter of the cookie into my mouth before Dom asked another question.

“Do you have a lot of kids in your family?”

His question felt strange, but I shook my head, swallowing the cookie before answering. “No. I’m the youngest in my pod by a lot. My brother and sister both have grown kids who are closer to having babies of their own than being kids. My first nephew was born when I was fourteen, and my youngest niece was born when I was twenty-six.”

“That’s wild to me. The pack always has a ton of new babies. There is zero chance I’ll ever forget how to change a diaper because there are always new diapers that need changing.”

I studied him for a second, then shook my head. “Nope, I can’t see it.”

“What?” He raised a brow.

“It’s hard to picture you on diaper duty.”

“I’ll have you know it’s one of the many things I excel at.”

“I’m sure.”

“Besides, if I do get lucky enough to have my own kids, I plan to be very involved. I want to be a partner to my omega in all things, including taking care of our babies.”

My mind replaced Dom’s eventual mate with me, and my heart tripped over itself at the image. A lifetime of banter and sass and babies? I could get on board with that pretty damn fast. But that was a pipe dream and completely unrealistic for

so many reasons. My heat season was making me think crazy thoughts and want crazy things.

“If I didn’t say it before, I think it’s really cool that you do this. And if I did say it, it bears repeating. This is special. I know it means a lot to the families.”

“It means a lot to me too.”

Dom laid a hand on my shoulder, and I felt the heat of his touch all the way to my dick. He was being sweet and sincere, but all I could think about was how close the nearest bathroom was so I could beg Dom to slip into a stall with me and get me off. Instead, I bit the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood.

His brows furrowed, the crease between the two dark slashes going deep. “Dante, are you okay?”

No, I was not, in fact, okay. I was a mess. I needed to take a break from Dom and pull myself together. “Yeah, just, uh, bathroom.”

“Oh, okay. Sure.”

I stepped around him and headed deeper into the hangar, toward the back corner where the bathrooms were. The walk through the cavernous space helped me clear some of the heat fog from my head, but as the haze cleared, Lita’s words played on a loop. Dominic as my fated mate. Fate choosing Dominic just for me.

Between wanting to climb him like a tree and wondering if we were fated, this was turning out to be a long damn summer.

The bathroom was empty when I walked in, and I just stood at the sink for a second, looking into the mirror. My skin was flushed, my eyes were bright, but there were dark circles under them. “Dante Perez, you need to pull it together. You’re a mess.”

A gruff, accented voice in the doorway said, “I don’t think you’re a mess.”

Argent Marsh, an alligator shifter and a professional acquaintance who owned a string of mini golf courses throughout Florida and up the East Coast, stood framed in the

doorway. He'd kindly donated certificates for free games to the families attending the practice, so I'd invited him to attend the event as a VIP as a gesture of goodwill. I'd always found the man to be a little slimy, and as he ran his tongue over his teeth and stepped farther into the room, that impression increased.

“Argent, are you enjoying the practice?”

He made a noncommittal noise and took another step closer. I didn't like the look in his eyes, but when I'd founded my company, and as I'd worked every single year to make it successful, I vowed to never let the alphas see me sweat. I took enough shit as an omega in an alpha's world as it was. They didn't need another reason to think I was less capable than they were.

So I pulled from deep within myself, straightened my spine, and plastered on my best professional CEO face. “The planes are pretty amazing. And I know you'll appreciate the boats during the water portion of the show tomorrow. I heard you recently bought a new boat yourself.”

“It's not a boat, cher. It's a yacht. Spent over three mill on 'er.”

Argent was originally from Louisiana, and despite his success and the fact that he rubbed elbows with the Florida elite, his accent was still more bayou than boardroom. Even though I didn't particularly like the man, I usually thought he was harmless, but the way he'd said *cher* sent a ripple of unease sliding down my spine.

He took another step closer, and I turned, coming up against the sink instead of moving farther from the door.

“I'll take you out on her as soon as she's delivered. Just you and me.” His nostrils flared as he scented me, and for the first time in a long damn time, I hated being a dolphin shifter.

I also hated that he was technically still between me and the door.

“You smell so damn delicious.” He leaned in close enough that his nose brushed against my neck.

I wasn't even experiencing a heat wave, but I hated that he could scent it on me anyway. This is why omegas with typical heats didn't go out in public during their heat cycles. It was too dangerous. Most alphas could control themselves, but some couldn't.

"How's your wife?" I asked. I'd met Arabella Marsh once before at a charity dinner. She'd been a lovely counterpoint—all Southern charm—to her husband's less refined demeanor.

He shook his head. "Not here."

Argent brushed the backs of his rough knuckles against my cheek, and I shuddered. This was getting out of control fast, and I didn't know what to do.

# CHAPTER 9



## DOMINIC

“Sal, have you seen Dante? He went to the bathroom a while ago, but I never saw him come back. A few of the families wanted to say thank you before they left.”

She shook her head. “No, I haven’t seen him since you two were cooing over the little ginger cutie.”

That made two of us. “I’m going to go look for him.”

Sal nodded. “Sounds good. I can handle things out here.”

Something was wrong. I could feel it in my gut. And I moved at speed toward the bathrooms. Dante wasn’t anywhere between where I’d started and the short hall leading to the restrooms, and I said a silent prayer that I was overreacting, for reasons I couldn’t explain, and I’d just missed him in the crowd.

But I knew that wasn’t true. Since Miami, I’d been painfully aware of Dante, and I could almost sense it when he was nearby. He wasn’t out in the hangar with the crowd. I hadn’t missed him.

The yelp I heard from the men’s room made my blood run cold.

The door slammed against the wall as I charged through, and Dante glanced my way, his eyes wide and full of fear.

“What the fuck is going on here?”

A slightly older man was running his fingers over Dante’s cheek, his intentions clear in his posture and the glare he sent



my way.

My nostrils flared, and I caught a whiff of the waxy, mushroomy smell of a reptile shifter. Looking at the guy's long face, pointed features, and beady eyes, coupled with our current location, I guessed he was a gator shifter.

“Get your hands off what's mine, or I'll remove them for you,” I said, my tone steely as I shoved the alligator away from Dante.

“Yours? I don't see no mark.” The alligator had stumbled back when I'd pushed him, but he stepped forward and moved his hand up to pull Dante's collar aside to show the bare spot where a mate mark would be, but I slapped it away.

“Touch him again and I promise I'll break every bone in your goddamn hand.” I positioned myself between Dante and the other man and crossed my arms. I wasn't the biggest or buffest guy, but roughhousing with full-blooded wolf shifters in the pack had made me scrappy as hell. If this came to a fight, I'd kick his ass.

My presence seemed to pull Dante out of the stunned state he'd been in, and he pushed away from the sink and stood to my side, arms crossed defiantly. “Go back to your wife, Argent.”

When Argent took another step toward Dante, I shoved him back again. It was like this guy wanted me to lay him out cold. He stumbled and bumped into the metal divider between the bathroom's two stalls. He stood there for a moment, his gaze ping-ponging back and forth between us. “Weren't you just leaving, you piece of shit?”

He sneered in Dante's direction. “This is why omegas shouldn't be in charge of shit all. You runnin' around here in heat makes people lose their heads.”

“I'm giving you ten seconds to get out of here before I'm no longer responsible for my actions. How does that sound since it seems you can't or won't take responsibility for yours.” I hurled the words like knives, and the big bad gator took another step back, coming up against the divider again. It

was taking everything in me not to throw a punch. I was itching to do it. The only reason I hadn't was because I didn't want to embarrass Dante.

Dante was shaking next to me, but his voice was rock steady when he said, "I rescind your invitation to this event. Leave, or I will have security escort you off the premises. You and any delegates from your company have been banned from attending this weekend's shows. Word will be left with security, and you will be removed from the property if you show up. Forcibly if necessary. Consider your contracts with Azucar null and void. My general counsel will be in touch."

"You can't do that. I own this state. Do you know who I am?"

"Not anymore." Dante turned his back on the now fuming gator.

"You're out here practically begging for it, but I'm the asshole? Ri-goddamn-diculous. Fuck that."

My hands balled into fists. "No, what's ridiculous is what your face is going to look like when I get done rearranging it for you if you don't get the fuck out of here right now." I took a menacing step forward, fist cocked, and the coward retreated like I knew he would.

The door slammed shut behind him as he tucked tail and ran. Dante had turned back to the mirror and looked like he was on the verge of a well-deserved breakdown. I put a hand over his where it rested on the gray Formica countertop surrounding the sinks. I didn't want to scare him with too much contact. I didn't know if what I'd walked in on was the worst of it. He was trembling, and every vibration felt like an earthquake. "Are you okay?"

He nodded but didn't look up to meet my gaze. "I'm fine. All he did was touch my face, but if you hadn't gotten here..."

I gave his fingers a squeeze. "But I did, and you're okay."

"Thank you."

"Nothing to thank me for. You would have been fine without me. I just showed up to save you the trouble of having

to kick his ass on your own.”

He turned then and leaned into me, wrapping his arms around my waist. I held him back the same way, gently, not wanting him to feel trapped if he decided he needed to run after what had just happened.

I kept my breathing steady and a little exaggerated, encouraging Dante to match my breaths, which he did, but the deep breathing also pulled Dante’s sunshine and sweet scent into my nose, and even though he was now relaxed, I wasn’t. He smelled so damn good, and I knew how sweet he tasted. Having him in my arms like this was a test of my restraint.

I’d made a promise to myself on my motorcycle ride in Miami. I would keep my distance from Dante unless he came to me. I wouldn’t take what wasn’t offered. I’d been dangerously close to that line outside Lita’s.

But if he came to me, if he asked for what he needed, then all bets were off.

But after what had just happened, this wasn’t the time to be thinking about that.

“What time is it?” Dante mumbled.

Looking over his head at my watch, I said, “Just after five.”

He let out a breath. “Good, everyone will be heading out.”

“What else do you need to do here?”

“Tear down. I have a whole list on my tablet.”

“Why don’t you give me the tablet, and you head back to the hotel with Sal and Adriana. Grab some dinner. Get some rest.”

“How will I get my tablet back? It has the schedule for the whole weekend.” It was a dumb question since we were staying in the same hotel, and I could easily bring it to his room. Or Sal’s. I could definitely drop it off with Sal.

Instead of explaining that, I fell back on snark, hoping a little verbal sparring might help him feel better. “I’m not going

to steal it.”

Dante took a step back from me and looked me square in the eyes. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Do I?”

“Stop it. I’m fine. I can stay until everything is done.”

“I’ll help.”

Dante shook his head. “You have the early practice before the show tomorrow. You need the sleep. Can’t have you fucking up or crashing.”

“I can’t believe you just put that shit out in the universe. And what about you? You’re sailing tomorrow. Can’t you just let Sal handle the cleanup?”

Dante scoffed. “Typical alpha bullshit. Pass the shitty tasks off to someone else. For your information, I don’t ask my employees to do anything I wouldn’t do.”

I had to respect that. “Fine. Then I’ll ask.” I stormed toward the door, frustrated with Dante for not letting anyone take anything off his plate, but maybe he needed to work in order to feel like he was back in the game.

A hand slammed the door closed just as I pulled it open, and I spun to face an angry Dante Perez. Good. Anger was better than the fear and panic I’d seen in his eyes earlier. And maybe it was fucked up, but I patted myself on the back a little for putting the spark back in his eyes.

“Let’s get one thing straight, flyboy. You are here because I want you to be and only because I want you to be. You only got a contract for this season because I allowed it. I appreciate what you did for me tonight, but this is my circuit, my company’s name on the banners, my company’s money being spent, so you take orders from me. I do not take them from you.”

An image of Dante on his knees as I gave him the kind of orders that would have both of us coming fast and hard flashed through my mind. My thoughts must have been pretty transparent because Dante’s cheeks picked up a hint of color.

“Fine.” I felt whatever connection I’d thought we had earlier with the cute redheaded toddler evaporating, but maybe that was for the best. “You do what you do, and I’ll just stick to flying my plane.”

“Good.”

“Excellent.” He pushed away from the door and let me out, but I waited for him to pass me first and watched his six the entire time he stormed his way to the front of the hangar where the event was winding down.

Dante might drive me absolutely bonkers, but something deep inside me said he was mine to protect, and I was compelled to honor that urge, even if it meant pissing him off.

# CHAPTER 10



## DANTE

*I*'d never been as exhausted as I was when we arrived in Savannah.

The Jacksonville weekend had been, to put it bluntly, a shitshow, and by the time we'd packed up, I was more than happy to put Florida in my rearview for the rest of the summer. I wanted to forget the incident with Argent and the sort of fight with Dom. I was doing a decent job of the latter. Mostly because I'd been avoiding him for the last three days.

Which was obviously for the best, even if a slideshow of memories of the way he'd been with the little girl with the sunglasses played through my mind and made me smile. I wondered if he'd ever gotten his real sunglasses back from her.

I'd opted to drive up with Sal and Adriana while the crew had sailed up the coast. I needed the break. But the boats and planes had all made it before us since we'd gotten stuck in horrible traffic behind an accident.

When we pulled up to the hotel, it was almost like I could hear my room and the bed calling me, and I barely remembered being handed a key card or getting into the elevator. But somehow, I'd made it into the room and out onto the balcony overlooking the pool, which was a minor miracle in and of itself since I typically hated heights—if a second-floor balcony could be considered a height—and usually asked Adriana to book me a room without a view.

But today, I was grateful for the balcony, even if I wasn't standing all that close to the edge or the railing—I was barely

a step beyond the door—because it meant I could grab some fresh air without needing to go all the way back through the lobby, especially since the waves of my heat had been worse today, and I knew I smelled like slick.

Letting out a long sigh, I took in the glow cast by the setting sun as it dipped behind the buildings of Savannah. The pool lights clicked on, making the water glow an almost fluorescent aqua, inviting me to slip into the cool depths.

Another wave of lust and need started low in my belly and rushed through me, and I gripped the door handle behind me as my knees trembled. I was so sick of this. The meds should have been dulling the waves of heat to a more tolerable level, but it was time to admit they just weren't working. I'd called my doctor from Jacksonville, and he'd told me that the effectiveness of the heat-dampening aspect of the pills could be waning since I was over thirty-five and had been on them for a long time, but I didn't want to hear that—or believe it—since I still had years of heat seasons to endure.

When my knees stopped shaking, I made a decision and stepped back into the hotel room, the air conditioning cooling my overheated skin, and changed into my bathing suit. The pool was empty, and I knew the water would feel amazing. Going for a swim always calmed me down, and I needed it.

Five minutes later, I was back in the elevator, Speedo on and towel in hand.

Toeing off my flip-flops, I looked around again, noting I was still alone. Perfect. I slid into the pool, letting the water slide over my skin as I lowered myself to the bottom and knelt there for a long minute, surrounded by silence.

Even in my human form, I could see underwater without goggles and hold my breath for around five minutes, and I stayed under for every second of that time, then rose to the surface and swam to the other end of the pool. I'd only been in the water for a handful of minutes, but I was already feeling more relaxed. If I could have gone out to the ocean, it would have been better. I hadn't been in the Atlantic in my dolphin form since Key West, but this was good enough.



Lap after lap, more and more tension eased away until I felt like myself again. The threat of another wave of heat still sat heavily at the base of my spine, but I felt more in control of my body and my emotions than I had in days.

When I made it to the end of the pool farthest from the hotel, I stopped and turned around to look up at the building. It felt like someone was watching me, but almost all the rooms were in shadow, and those that had lights on had empty balconies as far as I could see. Ignoring the sensation, I dove under the water again and swam for a little while longer until every last vestige of the sun had slipped below the horizon and the sky was an inky indigo dotted with stars.

Sighing and content, I pulled myself out of the pool and dried off. I'd had Adriana book us into the hotel with the best in-room dining menu because I knew the days were long, and sometimes the crew didn't want to go out after. A juicy steak, a baked potato, and a glass of the hotel's best red wine were the last items I needed to banish the stress of the day.

The elevator dinged on my floor, and I scanned the key card in front of the reader on the door, pushing it wide and stepping into the air conditioning I'd set to almost freezing before I left.

Only the room didn't feel like an ice box, and the balcony door was open.

Someone was standing out there.

The door slammed shut behind me, and the person on the balcony turned. After Jacksonville, the hair on the back of my neck stood up until I recognized the form.

"What the hell are you doing in my room?" I said at the same time Dominic said, "What the fuck?"

Then I realized he was shirtless, and the heat I thought I'd banked in the pool flashed through me.

"Dante? Hey." He waved his hand in front of my face, making it clear he'd said my name several times before, and I pushed down the surge of lust enough to focus on him. "Seriously, how did you get into my room?" He crossed his

arms over his chest, waiting for my answer and tapping his fingers against his arm impatiently.

Raising my eyebrows, I said, “Excuse me? You’re in my room.”

“No, you’re in mine.”

“Then how did my key work on the door?”

Dom turned his back to me, looking for something on the long dresser with the TV. He had a gorgeous back, and the large tattoo of the Frascati pack crest that took up his whole left shoulder was maybe the hottest thing I’d seen. I’d caught glimpses of it before, but to see the ink on full display, the words *Por familia aeterna* rippling under the crest as he moved his arm, had my cock twitching.

“Room 819.” He held out the little paper key card holder from the front desk. Sure enough, 819 was written in on the room number line.

I still held my own little sleeve and held it out. “Mine says 819 too.”

“Merda.”

“It’s fine. Just a misunderstanding I’m sure. I’ll call the front desk and get this figured out.”

“Good. I’m going to shower.”

I started to protest since my skin was starting to feel tight after the chlorine, but I could take my own shower after we got this room debacle straightened out.

Dom slipped into the bathroom and shut the door, and I started to lower onto the bed, then remembered my wet bathing suit and sat down anyway. Despite the way he’d gotten me off in Miami and come to my rescue in Jacksonville, I still didn’t really know where we stood after our fight. It felt like we’d both been avoiding the other, which could have been construed as an unsteady truce.

Undoubtedly, it would annoy the shit out of Dom to have to sleep in the wet spot left behind from my suit. I just prayed it was only water I’d leave behind. Since the second I’d

realized it was him on the balcony, my heat had been stirring, and my ass was clenching, desperate to be filled.

Yet another thing I could take care of the second I took care of the most pressing problem.

And if Dom had his usual starring role in the fantasies I called to mind while I got myself off, that was my business.

Taking a deep breath, I looked around the room. How had I not noticed the open suitcase on the luggage rack by the balcony or the handful of pocket detritus on the dresser? Surely Dom had checked in before me and his stuff had been there the whole time. Had I really been that out of it? If so, maybe I needed to really consider if I was in any shape to lead my crew on the water on Sunday. Despite what Dom thought, I refused to put them in danger. Sergio could captain in my place if I couldn't get it together.

But that was a problem for tomorrow. Putting the room phone to my ear, I dialed.

“Front desk. This is Mindy. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Mindy. There's been a bit of a mix-up. It seems my room has been double-booked.”

She made a humming sound, then said, “Double-booked? I don't understand.”

“Well, I got back from the pool, and there was someone else in my room. I'd like to be moved to another room or suite, please.”

“Um...”

“Yes,” I prompted when she didn't say anything else, but there was something in that *um* that felt foreboding.

“My sincerest apologies, sir. I am really, really sorry for the mix-up and the obvious inconvenience, but we are fully booked. I have no available rooms. It's a really busy weekend.”

“No rooms? How about a suite?”

“No, sir. Those are all completely booked too. There are several conventions in town, plus the air and water show, and tomorrow is SCAD’s commencement ceremony.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I-I’m not sure, sir. I’m happy to refund the cost of your room. I just can’t rebook you here.”

“I understand.” I really didn’t understand what had happened at all.

“I truly am sorry. Please come down anytime, and I will refund your stay.”

“Thank you.” I hung up the receiver, letting it crash into the cradle a little harder than necessary. Shit. There was no way in hell I could stay in the same room as Dom all night. My heat cravings were worse at night when I was relaxed, and I usually woke up a handful of times to jerk off or use one of my toys.

Standing, and smirking a little at the wet ass print I’d left behind on the bed, I rummaged through my bag and pulled out my phone, pulling up Sal’s contact and hitting Call.

“What’s wrong?” she said in lieu of a greeting.

“Somehow, Dominic and I were booked into the same room.”

Sal snorted. “So? Call the front desk and get a different room. I think you can handle that.”

“I did. They are all booked. No more rooms at this inn.”

“Damn. Well, call Adriana and ask her to find you another room in town.”

“Can’t. I gave her the night off after dealing with the shitshow in Jacksonville. She deserves it.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“Yeah, so I need your help.”

She was quiet for a beat, then said, “Or, you could ride this out and see where it goes. If you think we haven’t noticed the

increased tension—of a sexual nature—between you two since Miami, you'd be wrong. I think this is a good idea to fuck out any lingering frustrations you might be having.”

“Salima.”

Sal laughed, the sound low over the line. “I'm just saying this might be fate sending you exactly what you need.”

Fate. I'd been trying to think of anything but since Lita had thanked me for bringing my fated mate to meet her. After Dom had lit out of there like his ass was on fire, Elena had tried to explain that Lita thought she had some sort of sixth sense when it came to recognizing fated mates, but she wasn't always right. When I'd asked about the statistics on her predictions, Elena had said she'd technically only been wrong once, and that was only because the woman who had come in was actually mated to her date's twin brother.

I didn't like those odds. Yes, Dom and I had come to a tentative sort of truce, but we hadn't spoken to each other directly since Jacksonville, preferring to pass messages through Adriana or other crew members, and despite wanting to seek him out, especially at night when I was reaching for my own dick in the dark again, I had been able to quell the urge. If we were really fated, I shouldn't have been able to push those feelings away, right?

Every scenario I could think of involving me and Dom as fated mates seemed more ridiculous than the last, the least of which being that I still wasn't sure I really even liked the guy. Thought he was a decent or even good man? Yes. Wanted him to fuck me until I didn't know my name? Of course. But did I like him? Currently unsure.

I'd tried not to think about it, but that had been a losing battle. And now Sal was throwing around words like *fate* all willy-nilly while I was in the middle of a crisis that had Dominic Pavone, the man who may or may not be my fated mate, at the center.

The groan I let out echoed around the room, and Sal sighed.

“Fine. I’ll make a few calls. But you owe me for this.”

“Anything. Thank you.”

“I’ll call you back when I have something.” She hung up without saying goodbye.

Instead of making another damp spot on the bed, I paced and tried not to think of Dom naked and wet in the shower, water running over his firm pecs and down the ridges between his ab muscles. In my head, a reel of me kneeling on the floor of the shower and licking up the water as more fell played through my mind, followed by filthier images of him jerking off, then making me catch his cum on my tongue.

My phone buzzing in my hand pulled me sharply from the fantasy, and thank God it had, because I had no idea how I’d ended up on the bed with my ass in the air. My hole was leaking, and my cock was rock hard, and I needed to get the fuck out of there. Right. Now.

“Sal!” I said, answering the phone, the word almost a sob.

“I’ve got nothing. Every single place is booked. Apparently, Savannah is a hot spot this weekend. There isn’t even an available Airbnb.”

“Fuck.” That was definitely a whimper.

“Dante? Are you okay?” Sal’s tone was full of concern.

The bathroom door opened, and a billow of steam preceded Dom out. His hair was still wet, and water dripped from the ends onto his shoulders, then rolled down his chest. My eyes tracked the movement, ending at the towel slung low on his hips, the fabric tented by an impressive erection.

“No. Not even a little.”

# CHAPTER 11



## DOMINIC

“*D*ante?”

The honeysuckle-sweet smell of his slick was thick in the room, and my inner alpha was begging me to take him and make him my mate.

All my thoughts about whether we were fated faded away as I looked at Dante, almost vibrating with need and almost completely naked except for the tiny scrap of a bathing suit he was wearing. His body was beautiful with no sharp angles or harsh planes, each corner rounded out and soft. His chest and belly were hairless and smooth, and my hands itched to run over every inch.

Dante whimpered, his phone dropping onto the floor with a clatter.

“Are you okay?”

He set his jaw and clenched his fists, holding himself together with immense effort. “I wish people would stop asking me that.” Then his resolve broke, and all the strength he’d been using to hold back slid away. When his gaze met mine, there was little of the antagonistic man I knew in the caramel-colored depths. Whatever I usually saw in his eyes had been replaced by a need so profound it stole my breath. “Dominic, please.”

I’d jerked off in the shower, coming in my fist after seeing Dante in the barely there bathing suit. I’d almost gotten off just watching his sleek body cut through the water in the pool, but it hadn’t been enough. Knowing he was still in the room



had been enough to get me to chub up again as I'd dried off, and now his plea had me so hard it was almost painful. I wanted him, but I thought he was leaving.

“Aren't you going to another room?”

“Can't. None available.”

He walked the two steps to the bed and climbed onto it, his ass in the air as he crawled to the center. Was he presenting for me? If he was, would I be able to hold back?

“Dante, is this really what you want?”

He shook his head, his eyes shut tight as he rocked on his knees. The tiny red swimsuit was soaked, and I knew it wasn't water. “Dominic!” My name was a broken cry full of lust and longing. “Please. It's what I need.”

Since I was a teenager and had presented as an alpha, I'd been taught that it was rude and irresponsible to leave an omega in heat if there was anything I could do to help them through it while being safe and not taking advantage of the situation, and those lessons sprang to mind again as I looked at Dante's perfect ass and listened to his moans. He was in need, and I could help. As long as he really wanted me to.

“Dante, do you want me to fuck you? To help you through your heat? I need the words. I need to know that's what you want, or I'll leave right now and give you space.” It might kill me, but I'd do it if that's what he really wanted.

“Yes! Yes, please. Please, Dom. I need you. I need...” He broke off on a sob, and I watched slick trickle down his inner thigh.

Goddamn it. I had no idea how we'd gotten to this moment, but I wouldn't—couldn't—let him suffer. I understood what I needed to do, and I'd been with eagle and wolf omegas in heat before. Those experiences had been weeklong fuck fests that left both of us sated and sore and covered in used condoms and foil wrappers...

Fuck.

“Dante, you're in heat.”

“I know!” he moaned, his frustration clear.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t want to get you pregnant. Do you have condoms?” The lie was the right thing to say, but in my heart, I wanted to knock Dante up so badly it hurt.

He shook his head as he slid his hand under his bathing suit to stroke his dick. “On birth control.”

The breath whooshed from my lungs, and when there was nothing else I could think of to give Dante time to ride out the wave and come to his senses, I dropped the towel from around my waist and climbed onto the mattress, coming up behind him and covering his body with mine. He smelled so damn good, and I wanted to taste him everywhere and keep him forever.

Swallowing back that last thought, I ran my hand over his ass and up his side, making him tremble. “Then let me give you what you need.”

He whimpered in response and rocked back against me. Sitting back just enough to slide my fingers under his tiny swimsuit, I slowly lowered the fabric until it got caught on his legs. Dante was already writhing and mumbling about needing to be filled, and when I tried to position him so I could slide the suit off, he took it as an invitation to rub himself against me, coating my thigh in his sweet-smelling slick.

Calling my eagle forward, I extended a finger, now tipped with a wickedly sharp talon, and sliced through the suit, letting it fall to the bed. I tried not to wince when I saw the tag said Versace. I had no doubt Dante was going to be pissed as fuck that I’d sliced his bathing suit off, but before I could worry about it too much, he adjusted his position, and I was distracted by his glistening hole.

“Merda. Sei bellissima, delfino,” I muttered against his skin as I leaned in to taste him for the first time.

The second my tongue connected with his skin, he arced off the bed, crying out in pleasure with a sound so sweet I wasn’t sure I would last until I was inside him. So I did it

again, and Dante made the most beautiful sounds as I lapped at his hole, probing with my tongue and licking away the sweetness that spilled from him.

His hand was still around his cock, but I grabbed his wrist and moved it away, replacing it with my own. He was hard as steel and leaking, and I wanted to taste him there too, but I was too desperate to be inside him, and with how he was rocking against me, he needed to be filled soon.

Without warning, I lined my cock up and slid deep on the first thrust. I expected some sort of chorus of angels or some other flowery feeling of love to overwhelm me, but when it didn't come, I faltered, wondering if maybe everything I'd been thinking about since Lita had claimed we were fated mates wasn't true. At this point, I would know, right?

But I only still saw Dante, just as he'd always been, granted from a slightly more intimate angle, and as his ass clenched around me, it did feel amazing, but that could have just been because I was bare inside him.

He thrust back hard against me, setting his own rhythm and taking what he needed, his skin covered in a sheen of sweat, his ass smacking against me, the sound echoing around the room so it felt like all I could hear was the connection of our bodies, our panted breathing, and the sweet sounds of pleasure falling from Dante's lips.

"That's it. Use me how you need me, delfino." On his next thrust, I held his hips hard, staying deep and circling my hips. He cried out, and I moved my hands to his belly to pull him up onto his knees as I knelt back on mine. "Want you to feel me deep so you remember I was inside you."

I wrapped my fist around his cock again and thrust up into him, pegging his prostate. Dante's scent was everywhere, and I let my mouth slide over his shoulder and along his neck, nosing at the scent gland behind his ear, then sucking on it with just a hint of teeth. He cried out as I thrust deep and stroked over the head of his cock, and I watched over his shoulder as he came, his cum seeping out from between my fingers.

Even though he'd come, he was still hard. Since dolphin heats weren't like wolf or eagle heats, I hadn't been sure what to expect, but it seemed there were more similarities than differences, and I let him fall back to his hands and knees as I thrust into him hard and fast.

Most eagle shifters didn't knot in the traditional sense, their cocks expanding to fill their mates instead, but since I was part wolf, I did both. It could be overwhelming, but it was too late to warn Dante. I could feel myself starting to swell within him.

"Do you want my knot? I need to know now."

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes. Knot me, Dominic. Knot me."

As my name fell from his lips, I let go, my cum painting his channel as my dick swelled and my knot popped at the base. A possessive growl ripped from my chest as I folded over Dante's back and bit down hard on his shoulder.

He collapsed beneath my weight, his arms and legs starfishing out to the sides while I tried to catch my breath. When oxygen was once again flowing to my brain, I rolled us to our sides.

"Sorry I crushed you," I said.

"Was perfect. You're perfect." Dante shifted his hips, and I noticed his cock was spent. "So big. So good." His eyes were closed, and I'd never seen him look more at peace, even though there were dark smudges under his eyes and lines at the corners that showed the stress he'd been under. His breathing had evened out, and I was surprised he was able to sleep. The omegas I'd been with before usually succumbed to multiple waves of heat-driven lust before their bodies were so wrung out they had to rest, but Dante was out before my knot had even gone down.

In the quiet of the room, I studied him. "What am I going to do with you?" After taking his heat, I knew even if we weren't fated mates, I wasn't going to be able to let Dante go. And that realization made me feel like I'd been punched in the heart.

Tomorrow, I'd have to ask Everett if he thought that meant we might be fated.

For tonight, I'd sleep with Dante in my arms.

\* \* \*

I'D ALSO APPARENTLY FUCK him three more times when his lust and need became unbearable.

When my alarm went off at six, I'd barely fallen back asleep after our most recent round.

I had to be at the airfield to prep my plane and do preshow checks by seven, but I wasn't sure what Dante's schedule was like. Did he even have to be there if he wasn't schmoozing? He hadn't bothered to come down with his catamaran crew, so I doubted he had to be at the harbor early.

Sitting up and flinging my legs over the edge of the bed, I reflected on everything that had happened last night. My stubble felt rough under my palm as I scrubbed a hand over my face. I should have known I was in too deep after that afternoon in Miami, but now in the clear light of day, I had no idea what to do with the situation. No one had ever coached me on what to do when you had heat sex with the guy you hated—or used to hate. Strongly disliked? Disliked in general?—slept with him in your arms, and woke up next to him while you were accidentally sharing a hotel room.

Dante stirred behind me, and I pulled the sheet over my lap, unsure why I didn't want him to see my cock after he'd had it in his hands, mouth, and ass the night before.

“Wha' time is it?” His voice was rough from sleep... or screaming my name as he came over and over last night.

“Six.”

“Shit.” He sat bolt upright and looked around, then scrambled to pull the sheet over his naked body just like I had.

“Got a hot breakfast date?”

“No. Sal, Adriana, and I usually meet to go over the plans for the day at five forty-five before we head to the venue.”

“Really? You make your PA get up before the sun for meetings? Harsh.”

Dante scowled. “You don’t get to comment on how I run my business.”

I held up my hands in surrender. “Not saying anything about how you run your business. Just saying I think it’s a little harsh to make your minion get up at the ass crack of dawn to do your bidding.”

“Adriana is not my minion.”

“I was talking about Sal.”

Dante made a frustrated noise. “Sal is Azucar’s chief marketing and business development officer. She has more degrees than I do, and ninety percent of the time, I’m not sure if she works for me or if I work for her.”

“Heaven forbid you just work together.”

“Didn’t we spend the whole night fucking?” He shifted in the bed and winced a little. “Sure feels like we did. So why the hell are you in such a pissy mood?”

“Because this”—I gestured around the room—“is fucking with my head.”

“The hotel room is fucking with your head?”

A growl rumbled from my chest, and I watched Dante’s eyes go wide, his pupils dilating, and then I smelled the honeysuckle-sweet scent of his slick. This was turning him on. I stood, trying to put space between us, but I pulled the sheet with me and ended up putting his body on display instead.

This time, he made no move to cover himself at all, rolling onto his side and propping himself on an elbow. “Dominic, what’s fucking with your head?”

I gestured at him, sprawled out and naked. “This! You! Last night. That old lady who said we were fated fucking mates. What is this, Dante? Because it feels like a damn

disaster. We don't even like each other. How can we be fated mates?"

Even in the low light of the room, I saw his face lose a shade of color, but he shook his head. "I don't know about any of that, but what I do know is I really appreciate what you did for me last night. I needed it."

"I know. You told me over and over."

"Fuck you, flyboy." He rolled onto his back, made an exasperated sound, then stood and turned to face me, his cock half-hard between his legs. "I was trying to be serious, but apparently, all alphas really are the same. Arrogant assholes who have no idea what it's like to lose themselves to crazy lust that makes them do stupid shit." Dante gestured wide, encompassing the room and me. "Like this."

Actually, I knew exactly what he meant, and it was my own shit making me act like a jerk. My nonna and my mamma and every omega in my pack had taught me a hell of a lot better than how I was acting, and that pulled me up short. "I'm sorry." The apology slipped from my lips before I even knew what I was going to say.

Dante's head snapped up from his phone, which he'd retrieved from where I'd plugged it in on the desk last night, and he glared at me. "You're sorry?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I was being an ass. It's just... this is a lot to process."

He scoffed. "Tell me about it." Dante flopped back down onto the bed, and I dropped down next to him, holding out some of the sheet so he could cover up if it made him feel better. He took it and draped the corner over his junk.

A heavy silence fell around us as we both worked through our thoughts. When I couldn't take it anymore, I said, "Are you really going to be in heat all summer?"

He blew out a breath. "Yep. It's not as bad as it is for other shifter species. I can still mostly function. Until I can't. But it takes a lot out of me, and sometimes I think one week of being sex-crazed and out of it would be better than this. It's better

after I have sex with an alpha. The toys just aren't the same. The alpha pheromones ease the craving."

My mind snagged on the idea of him working himself over with toys, but another thought pushed the mental image away. Thinking about anyone else seeing him like he'd been last night made my pulse hammer in my chest and my blood feel like it was boiling, and when I looked down at my lap, my hands were fisted in the sheet, my knuckles white. Whatever Dante was to me, my inner alpha felt like we had some sort of claim.

Relaxing my fingers one by one until I no longer held the crisp white fabric in a death grip, I looked at Dante. "I don't know what this is, but I can give you what you need, and I... I don't like the idea of you getting it from anyone else."

"That's obvious."

"Excuse me?"

"You were all over me at that bar in Key West."

I had no clue what he was talking about. I'd tried to avoid him that night. "I was not."

"Trust me, I know a cockblock when I see it. Even if that cute friend of yours was trying to get us together."

"You think Charlie's cute?"

Dante made another frustrated sound. "Of course that's the only thing you heard."

"What do you want me to say? That I didn't like seeing you trolling for dick? Fine. I didn't like seeing you trolling for dick."

He shot me that damn smirk that made me crazy. "Was that so hard to admit?"

Yes. It had been, but I ignored Dante's obvious attempt to get a rise out of me. "Let's stow the verbal foreplay for now, though I'll happily take care of that for you before we leave." I nodded toward his cock, which was now fully erect and tenting the sheet impressively. "Where do we stand?"



He heaved a sigh, and I appreciated how weird this must be for him. It was weird as fuck for me too. A month ago, we could barely have a conversation that didn't involve expletives or name-calling, and now we'd had a crap ton of sex and were sharing a hotel room. Granted, not by choice. But still.

"If I can't get off with an alpha all summer, it's going to be a long heat season. I feel better this morning than I have since the end of May. I'm obviously still horny as hell, but it feels like a simmer, not a full-blown boil. Not that that makes sense to you."

I shook my head. "I get it. You do seem less..." I searched for the right word. "Tense."

"Yeah."

"So what are you proposing?"

Dante cleared his throat. "I need to fuck. You don't want anyone else to fuck me. So unless you're going to take care of me on the regular until my heat season is over, it seems we are at an impasse."

"Okay."

He frowned. "Okay, what?"

"Okay. I'll give you what you need for the rest of the summer. Whenever you need it."

"Really?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. There's obviously something between us. I feel it, but I don't know what it is. Maybe hooking up with you all summer will help both of us figure it out."

"And if it's nothing?"

"Then we shake hands and part as... I don't want to say friends, but how about people who used to know each other intimately?"

Dante laughed, the deep, rich sound sliding down my spine and landing in my balls. "Deal."

"Deal." I held out my hand, and Dante shook it while I tried to ignore the sparks dancing over my skin. When he let

go, it took me a second to catch my breath.

He stood again, letting the sheet fall and revealing his still-hard dick. He put a hand on his hip. “Come on. I think you promised me a blow job.”

# CHAPTER 12



## DANTE

**D**espite the awkward morning after I'd begged Dominic to take my heat, things were actually going really... well.

He'd kept his promise about fucking me anywhere, any time I needed it, and the constant stream of alpha pheromones had massively taken the edge off. According to Sal, I'd been positively delightful since Savannah.

"Are you sure I can't send him an edible arrangement?" Adriana asked during one of our early morning meetings before the show in Wilmington.

"Or imported Belgian chocolates." I shot a glare at Sal, who grinned.

"Oh! I know! Dom is Italian, right? And Italians, like Cubans"—she nodded at me—"love their coffee. Let's get some of the good espresso sent from Rome. Who do we know in Italy that could send it express?" Adriana punctuated her statement by picking up her phone and scrolling through the contacts.

"Ha, ha. Very funny."

"I'm serious," both women said at the same time before high-fiving over the table.

"Was I really that bad?"

Sal lifted a hand, palm flat, and rocked it side to side.

Adriana shrugged. "Kinda depended on the day."

“But now that you and Dom are doing the horizontal tango every night, things are definitely better.” Sal clinked her coffee cup to Adriana’s as they both broke into a fit of giggles.

“I’d be okay if you never said that again.”

“What? Horizontal tango?” Sal giggle-snorted, which set Adriana off again.

“Enough, you two. We have things to do.” They both pulled it together as much as they could and grabbed their tablets as we went over the agenda for the day and the important sponsors and VIPs that would be in attendance.

“What is this block of time you have marked off for this evening? Do you need me to arrange something?” Adriana asked.

I looked down at my own tablet and silently cursed our shared calendar for the first time ever. Not looking up to meet their eyes—which I could feel boring into me—I shook my head. “Uh, no. Personal event. Nothing you need to do. Now regarding today’s VIPs...” I did look up then to see two very smug women staring at me. “What?”

“Is it a date?” Sal asked, bouncing her brows.

“Ooooh,” Adriana added.

“Not a date. Something better than a fruit basket or coffee to say, uh, thank you.”

Sal clapped. “So a date, then.”

“Not. A. Date.”

“Will there be dinner?” Adriana asked.

I sighed. “Possibly.”

“Will there be music?” Sal looked like the cat that ate the damn canary, and I wanted to kick her.

“Maybe.”

Adriana cleared her throat. “Will you be alone?”

“Yes. Now can we drop it?”

Sal crossed her arms and sat back in her chair, grin still firmly in place. “We’ll drop it when you admit it’s a date.”

“But it’s not. Not that it’s any of your business.”

Adriana raised a brow.

“It’s not. It’s just a sunset sail on a boat I’m thinking about buying. Maybe some snacks. I figured I’d take Dom with me because I know he appreciates a decent vessel.”

Both women laughed. “I bet he does,” Sal muttered under her breath, and Adriana held out a fist to bump. Christ, how did I end up with these two as my best friends?

“Stop. It’s not like that.”

“But it could be.” Sal smirked.

“Just because you met your fated mate in high school and got married the second you graduated from college doesn’t mean we all want that.”

Adriana raised her hand. “I do!”

If I were honest with myself, that was exactly what I wanted too, but I didn’t think, despite Lita’s insistence we were fated for each other, I was going to find forever with Dominic Pavone. For now would have to do. And that was okay.

“Moving on.” This time, they let me change the subject.

And if I privately let myself think that taking Dom out on the sailboat I’d actually already bought was a date, that was my prerogative.

\* \* \*

“HELLO?” I heard Dom’s voice from where I was down in the galley, putting some wine in the fridge and the finishing touches on a fruit and cheese plate.

Wine and cheese? Yep, this was definitely a fucking date.

“Down here.” Wiping my hands off, I climbed the teak stairs to the fiberglass deck. I may have told Adriana and Sal I was just thinking about buying the boat, but I’d signed the contract and passed over the check that afternoon. The luxury custom J/109 was officially mine. I had been in the market for a vessel that could stay in the Northeast for a while, and I couldn’t have made a better choice. She would be registered out of Wilmington, but I planned to take her up to Cape Cod for part of the fall after the air and water show season was over.

And there was something kind of special about sharing her maiden voyage with Dom. Who had no right to look so damn good standing on the dock in a white linen shirt, khaki shorts, and leather boat shoes. He looked like he belonged on a sailboat, and that made my heart skip a beat because there was nowhere I would rather be than on the water.

“Uh, I know nothing about boats, but this is nice, right?”

“It is. Very nice. Perfect for short-handing.”

“I’ll pretend I know what that means.” He took a step closer. “Permission to come aboard?”

“Granted.” I held out a hand to help him onto the deck, but Dom didn’t take it, and I tried not to feel shitty about that.

He stumbled a little as the boat rocked, and I reached out to steady him. He didn’t let me.

“Not sure I really have sea legs anymore,” he said as he found his footing. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been on a boat, and I don’t think I’ve ever been on one this small.”

“Really? I thought you grew up near the coast in Italy.”

Dom shrugged, and the fabric of his shirt pulled over his chest. I felt my heart rate kick up, a wave of lust pulsing through me. But I pushed it down. I wanted to do something nice for Dom that didn’t involve fucking. At least not right that second. Later might be a different story.

“Not really. I grew up in Frascati pack territory south of Rome. It was kind of landlocked. I mean, we were only about

fifty kilometers from the Mare Tirreno, but we didn't go often."

"But you could fly there."

Dom frowned. "I guess, but for such a short distance, it would be impractical in a plane unless you had money to throw away."

I shook my head. "No, I meant in your shifted form. Your eagle could cover that distance easily."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "True. But what about when I shift back and I'm naked on the beach with a bunch of prudish American tourists who act like they've never seen a naked man before?"

The thought of Dom naked on the beach made my cock jump, but I played it off like I was unaffected. "Touché."

"Yeah, so again, not practical unless I wanted to start some sort of international incident."

I scoffed. "Your dick isn't that great."

He smirked, showing a hint of his straight white teeth, which sparkled in the sun. "Not what you said last night."

He was right. Last night, I'd been ready to build an effigy of his cock and kneel to worship it as I rode his knot and held on to the headboard for dear life. My hole clenched just thinking about it, and Dom took a step closer, uncrossing his arms and reaching for me.

I took a step back, just out of range.

"I know you're turned on. I can smell it." A small growl rumbled from his chest. "That's why you called me here, right? So I could fuck you on this fancy boat?"

That hadn't been the reason, but it was sounding like a damn good idea the longer we stood there. Taking a breath, I pulled myself together and tried to remember the real reason I'd asked him to meet me. "No. I wanted to take you out for a sail. To say, uh, thank you."

"For what?"



“For everything you’re doing for me this summer.”

A small crease appeared between Dom’s brows. “It’s not like fucking you is a hardship.”

“Well, thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome.” He smirked, and my stomach dipped. There was no denying Dominic Pavone was hot as hell.

“But seriously, I thought you might like to head out with me on this vessel’s maiden voyage.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

He considered me for a moment. “Is this a date?”

I ground my teeth together. “Not a date. Just two guys who fuck out for a sail on a perfect night.”

“At sunset.”

“Yes, fine, at sunset because we both had stuff to do earlier.” I looked away, out over the harbor. “And I might have brought some snacks and wine.”

Dom gave me a pointed once-over, then nodded. “I agree to your date.”

“Not a date.”

“It is if I want to think of it that way. You can think of it however you choose.”

His words hit the center of my chest, even if their meaning didn’t penetrate right away. When I replayed what he said, I tried to keep the smile off my face. “Are you ready to go?”

“Sure, as long as you don’t expect me to help you pilot this thing.”

“Not at all. I can manage her by myself. That’s what short-handing means.”

“Okay, good. I do planes, not boats.”

“Noted.” I slid behind the wheel and flipped on the motor so we could get out of the slip. I could do it under sail power

only, but I really wasn't trying to show off, and using the motor would be faster. "You don't get seasick, do you?"

"I don't think so. I didn't before. Granted, the last boat I was on was an aircraft carrier."

"I guess we'll have to hope for the best." I wanted this to be fun for Dom, and him hurling over the side of the boat wouldn't be anyone's definition of fun.

"I think if I can invert in the air, I can handle this."

"Good." We were approaching the mouth of the harbor, and I couldn't wait to get my new baby under sail.

"Where do you want me?"

Ignoring the innuendo in his voice, I pointed to seating molded into the fiberglass near where I would be controlling our course.

Dom sat, folding a leg up and turning his body so he could watch where we were heading. His dark hair blew in the breeze as the setting sun lit his skin up in golds and shining bronze. In that moment, I could see his ancestors, the men who'd made up phalanxes of Roman legionnaires. They were all right there in the slant of his nose and set of his shoulders.

As we entered into the open water, I used the wind vane at the top of the mast to adjust our course and bring us right into the direction of the wind, even though I already knew which way the wind was coming from because I could feel it on my skin. I wasn't sure if it was a dolphin shifter thing or just a me thing, but my bearings on the water were almost always perfect, and I could sense changes in the wind and current like they were part of my body. Killing the engine, I let go of the wheel to grab the main halyard and open the main sail.

"Whoa! Hands on the wheel there."

I smiled over my shoulder. "No need. We aren't going anywhere yet." The sail unfurled, and I looked up at the blue-and-gold sheeting. The gold was brilliant in the sun, and the color choice made me so happy. The sail caught, and I returned to the wheel. "Now we sail."

The boat cut through the water, responding to my slightest command, the North Carolina coast sliding by at almost seven knots. On a boat was where I felt at peace, and while being on the racing catamaran with my crew during the air and water shows was an adrenaline rush, this type of sailing restored my soul. The deep blue of the Atlantic was spread out before us, the fiery glow of the sunset casting the buildings along the coast in shadow, and I felt better than I had since we'd left Miami the first time that summer.

Dom sat quietly, taking everything in. I'd brought men out on my boats before, but they usually didn't appreciate the serenity of the open water and wanted to chat or wanted me to teach them how to sail. Dom wasn't like that. He watched me trim the sail and turn us so we kept up a steady pace, appreciating my efforts without wanting to jump in. If I'd needed him for anything, I knew he would have helped, but I didn't need it, and he didn't ask.

In the distance, there was a pier on a rocky stretch of coastline that I'd picked specifically for that night's sail, but as we approached, I was suddenly nervous. Did Dom really think this was a date? If so, what did that mean? The lines between us had gotten so blurred so fast, and my head felt like it was spinning. Heat season wasn't making that any better, and I couldn't help but wonder if we'd still be at each other's throats if it hadn't been for my summer-long predicament.

Trimming the sail a little, I slowed us down until we were almost still.

"Are we stopping?" Dom asked.

"Is that okay?"

"Uh, sure."

I dropped the anchor over the side with a splash, then turned to face him. He was standing, his fingers working at the buttons of his shirt, revealing more and more of his chest. "What are you doing?"

He looked down, almost like he didn't realize he'd been unbuttoning his shirt. "I feel really, really good right now, and

if it's okay with you, I'd love to take off for a little while."

"Take off?"

"Yeah. I'd love to shift and fly. It's been a while, and I feel like I need it."

"Are you coming back?"

He smirked. "Like I could stay away." His tone was teasing, but my heart took his words at face value and skipped a beat.

His shirt dropped to the seat he'd vacated, his gorgeous torso now on display, and he slipped off his shoes.

"A swim actually sounds really good." The spot I'd picked was deep enough to still be cool this far into the summer, and I hadn't gone for a swim in my dolphin form in weeks. The water would feel amazing.

"Cool. I know some shifters are weird about people who aren't their pack or mates seeing them in their shifted forms. Eagles and the Frascati wolves aren't like that."

"We aren't either."

My eyes tracked Dom's fingers to his waistband as he undid the button and lowered the zipper. His shorts pooled at his feet, leaving him standing on the deck of my brand-new boat in nothing but a pair of short blue boxer briefs. The blue was nearly a perfect match to the boat's sail and the color of my company's logo—my favorite shade of blue that reminded me of the water off the Miami coast, and for a second, I lost the ability to speak.

"You okay, Dante? I figured it was okay to strip down out here since there's no one around, and we've seen each other naked plenty."

Shaking my head, I said, "No. It's not that... No, it's fine." To cover for the emotions swirling through me at what was an obvious coincidence and not something Dom had planned specifically with me in mind, I pulled my polo over my head and dropped it onto the pile of Dom's clothes and stripped my shoes and shorts off after.

Dom's gaze fell heavily on my nearly naked body, and I lit up like a firework on the Fourth of July. I needed him badly, and I felt my cock harden and slick begin to gather at my entrance. He moved closer to me, sliding his boxers down his hips as he went and letting them drop to the deck when he was right next to me. Leaning in, he whispered against my ear, "I'm going to take care of this"—he palmed my hard length—"as soon as we get back, but for now, I want to see your dolphin." He kissed my nose like he had that day at Lita's and stepped back.

That was maybe the sexiest thing anyone had ever said to me, and a whimper crawled up my throat. I didn't even look at his naked body as I stripped off my own underwear and dove off the side of the boat. Underwater, I called my dolphin forward and leaned into the shift. When I resurfaced, I was fully in my dolphin form. Dom still stood on the deck, and I made a chirping sound meant to encourage him to hurry up. I had seen him fly in his feathers once before, but I'd never seen him shift, and I dove under the water before popping up again to watch. He didn't jump and shift in midair, though I was certain he could. Instead, the change washed over him in stages until a proud golden eagle stood on the starboard side of my boat. His plumage was dark, the same color as his hair, and streaked with gold and amber. He was gorgeous, and as I watched, Dom stretched his wings impressively wide, flapping until he was airborne and gliding over me in the sky.

And that was the moment, fated mates or not, that I fell in love with Dominic Pavone.

# CHAPTER 13



## DOMINIC

If I thought Dante was beautiful swimming in his human form, it was nothing to how he looked swimming in his dolphin form. His sleek, gray body cut through the water so fast it was almost hard to track him. He undulated through the water, rising over waves and diving back into the sea. He jumped higher and higher each time he surfaced, and I wondered for a second if he was showing off for me.

His body still held all the soft curves I loved when he was in his human body.

And when had hating everything about Dante turned into loving anything about him?

How had it happened?

The thought made me falter, and I pretended I had planned to dive low to cover for my airborne fumble. I let one of my talons skim over the water before arcing back into the air.

Time was harder to gauge as an eagle, but I followed Dante back and forth along the coast for what felt like a long time. It felt good to stretch my wings, and I could have watched Dante swim all day. The sun was more than halfway below the horizon when I noticed Dante circling closer to the boat, and I swooped low to land on the small swim platform at the back of the vessel and shifted back into my human form. Dante swam up a minute after and dove deep. When he came back to the surface, he was in his human form too, and he climbed up the ladder to join me on the platform.

He was a little out of breath, and so was I, though my breathlessness had less to do with the physical exertion of flying or shifting and more to do with the man who was sitting next to me. Dante was breathtaking as both a man and a dolphin, and I did my best not to stare at him, water droplets cast in gold by the sun sliding down his chest and drawing my eye over every inch of his skin.

Somewhere along the line, I had stopped looking for the bad in Dante and started only noticing the good, and everything about him was good. I turned my attention away, not wanting to get caught staring. What we'd just done was incredibly intimate, probably more so than any of the sex we'd had.

Dante sat near the edge of the platform, his feet in the water. He looked more relaxed than I'd ever seen him. And something about that made me happy.

"What's your favorite part about being in your shifted form?" he asked, still looking at the water and not at me.

"Which one?"

His gaze swung my way.

"I can take both eagle and wolf forms. Though I don't shift into my wolf often outside of pack runs. Even then I usually do them as an eagle."

Dante's eyes were wide with surprise. "Okay then, what do you love most about taking your eagle form?"

The answer to that question was easy. "The view. The world looks different from the sky. Quieter. Less chaotic. Everything is the same but different. It's easier to see the beauty when you don't have to contend with the noise."

"I'm not a fan of heights."

I smirked, but I kept my gaze out on the water too, and I didn't feel him move to look at me. "I noticed that."

He shrugged. "I guess it's an occupational hazard of living life at sea level."



“I guess so. I’ve always lived higher up. The Frascati pack grounds are on a high hill outside Rome. When I look out from the Villa Falconieri, I can see all of Rome laid out below me.”

“Do you miss it?”

It took me a beat to catch up with what he was asking, especially since he made it so hard for me to take time off to visit my family. “Sometimes. But I have to go back every year, so that keeps the missing from being too much.”

“I’m sorry I was an ass about that. I didn’t understand. Dolphins are not pack animals, so I’m not sure I’ll ever really get it, but I do understand better now.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

He nodded. “I thought it would annoy you. I didn’t know it could cause you harm. And I was never not going to let you go. I just wanted to piss you off a little.”

“Oh, you did. Ask Everett. I spent a whole morning cursing your name.”

“I deserve that.”

But I didn’t really feel that way anymore. We’d hurt each other in a million little ways, but I didn’t want that to be who we were to each other. I wanted more. A lot more.

We’d fucked around, and I’d gone and caught feelings.

“What’s your favorite part of your dolphin?”

His answer was instant. “The freedom. The open water. Nothing holding me back.”

“You are one of the top forty under forty in the whole country. Does anything hold you back?”

He looked down at his feet and kicked up some water, watching the drops land and ripple across the surface. “Do you know how many omega CEOs there are in the country?”

I didn’t, and I shook my head.

“I don’t know the exact number, but it’s not a lot. Things have gotten better, but I still had to claw my way up from

nothing. When I go to certain corporate events, it feels like the alphas in the room are patting me on the head like it's cute that I'm trying to run the largest liquor company on the East Coast—third largest in the country, sixth largest in the world—and not something I'm succeeding at.”

“Really? I had no idea you felt that way.”

He finally looked at me, and when I met his gaze, he raised an eyebrow. “Like I wanted a guy who already hated me on principle to see me struggling. What was I supposed to do? Cry on your shoulder and tell you how hard it is to be an omega in an alpha's world? You would have laughed in my face.”

That day with the alligator shifter in Jacksonville had shown me how hard he had it, but before then, I wouldn't have believed it.

“Only because I would have thought you were pulling my leg.” I squeezed his thigh. “You're a badass. That's all I've ever seen. Even when I thought you were an asshole, I still thought you were pretty damn amazing. And not because you're an omega in an alpha's world. Because of who you are.” I relaxed my hold. “I'll even tell you a secret I swore to take to my grave.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I took a deep breath, drawing out the tension of the big reveal. “That stunt in Ibiza? With the gold Speedo? I thought that was ballsy as hell. I bought two copies of the magazine with you on the cover.”

“Shut up. Now who's pulling whose leg?”

I held up a hand, palm out. “I swear. No bullshit. You looked like a god, and it was hot.”

I let my eyes rake over his naked body, noticing he was half-hard.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked, running a hand through his drying hair and smoothing it back off his face.

“How am I looking at you?”

“Like you’re a man starving, and I’m a snack.”

A laugh spilled from my lips. “You are a snack.”

Dante rolled his eyes.

“I could use another taste.”

He ignored my comment and rose to his feet, his dick swinging right in my line of sight, and I licked my lips, causing his cock to twitch and a moan to rumble up from his chest. Apparently, Dante had had enough talking. Instead of telling me he needed to fuck, he asked, “Are you hungry? I can go get the snacks.”

I was hungry but not for food.

But it didn’t seem Dante needed me like that right at that moment. I knew he would later, though. Over the past couple of weeks, I’d learned Dante’s heat cravings were hardest for him to ignore in the evening and overnight, and he’d reach for me and beg me to take him a handful of times every night. During the day, he managed better and had only called me once or twice, begging me to meet him somewhere to make him come.

Without waiting for an answer, he climbed back up onto the main deck of the boat, and I shamelessly watched his ass.

When he was out of sight, I turned around and looked out over the water trying to get my heart rate and dick under control. It wasn’t just Dante’s body that turned me on, and his confession about feeling less than in his world had lodged in a soft spot between my ribs. What had started as helping Dante out during his heat season had turned into more for me, and I wanted him with an almost insatiable desire. If Dante would let me, I would have spent every waking moment inside him. He’d gotten under my skin and wormed his way into my heart, and I wasn’t sure how it had happened or why, but I feared the end of the summer. I wasn’t sure I could let Dante go.

I knew damn well I didn’t want to.

Returning to the main deck, I slipped back into my underwear and shorts but left my chest bare. I liked feeling the warm ocean breeze on my skin, and I was grateful Dante had invited me out.

“Dom?”

Dante’s voice echoed up from below the deck, and I moved to the small opening to peer down into the galley kitchen. “I’m here.”

“Would you mind giving me a hand?”

“Of course not.” Dante appeared at the bottom of the stairs, also wearing just his shorts and ducking a little in the doorway, and handed me a tray laden with fruit and cheese.

“Thanks. I’m going to grab the wine, then I’ll be up.”

“Okay.”

Looking at the back of the boat where the seats were from this angle, I noticed the part of the boat that held the wheel seemed to function as a table between the two benches molded into the deck, so I set the food down there. Dante returned to the deck a second later, carrying another tray, this one full of charcuterie meats and veggies, and a bottle of white wine that was already starting to condensate in the humidity and two plastic wineglasses.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m always hungry after a shift. Do you mind if we eat before we head back?” He handed me a wineglass as I took the tray from him and set it next to mine.

“That’s fine.” The truth was I enjoyed spending time with him like this. Maybe a little too much, given the terms of our arrangement. Regardless, I wasn’t going to cut our time short.

He’d uncorked the wine downstairs and tilted the bottle my way. I held out my glass, and he filled it, then filled his and sat down next to me, one leg tucked up underneath him. He reached out and plucked up a piece of cheese and popped it into his mouth, so I did the same. For several long moments, we snacked and sipped our wine, not saying anything.

And then I remembered there was something I'd been meaning to ask him, but I'd never found the right time. Dante might have been done talking, but I wasn't. I wouldn't be until I'd unlocked every secret he held.

“Can I ask you something?”

Dante nodded, took a sip of wine, then said, “Sure.”

“That day we were at Lita's, before all the fated mates stuff, you said you were outrunning some hard truths the day we met. What did you mean?”

Dante looked away, and I wondered if I'd accidentally hit a nerve, if I'd pushed too hard after his earlier confession. He was quiet for so long I thought he wasn't going to answer.

“Never mind. You don't have to—” He raised a hand, cutting me off.

“Two weeks before that regatta, my long-term boyfriend left me.”

He said it so matter-of-factly it took me a second to catch up, and when I did, I was both irrationally angry and irrationally jealous. Maybe I shouldn't have asked.

But Dante went on before I could say anything or get my fucking feelings in check. “I'd been trying to get pregnant, even though we weren't officially mated, and he was frustrated because it wasn't happening. Right before he left me, I'd gotten a call from my doctor saying there might be something wrong. When I called back, he said everything in my tests looked good, but sometimes some omegas just couldn't have babies. Apparently, that was a deal breaker for my ex, and after practice with the team one day, I came back and all his stuff was gone. All he'd left behind was a piece of torn notebook paper that said a bunch of gaslighting bullshit all amounting to the fact that I was broken and couldn't be what he needed.” Dante took a long drink of his wine. “So like I said, I was outrunning some harsh truths that day. But like I told you, if my crew had said they didn't want to race, I wouldn't have. I know you think I'm selfish, but I would never have put them in danger.”

I was seeing red, furious that anyone would treat him so badly, but I couldn't address any of that, so instead, I said, "I don't think you're selfish."

He raised a brow. "You did."

I shook my head. "You're right, I did. And then I found out you invite all those kids to watch practices without making it a photo op or a cover story, and I dunno, I guess I started seeing you differently."

Dante gave me a sad half smile. "I've told you, I love kids. I wanted to be a dad more than anything."

"You still can be. My friend Everett and his mate and my packmate, Merritt, adopted a baby."

"I know. Baby Theo is so sweet."

I'd forgotten for a second that Everett had said Dante had been by to visit with them and the baby. "He is."

Dante shook his head. "I really wanted to be pregnant. To give birth."

"And you're sure it's a you problem?"

Dante's eyes went wide. "Excuse me?"

"Are you sure you not getting pregnant was a you problem and not your ex-alpha's problem?"

"Um..."

"I assume if you were having tests done, so was he, right?"

Dante shook his head. "No. He refused. Said it had to be me."

"Well, that sounds like bullshit. And I've known alphas who've done some crazy shit so they can have heat sex without a condom and without risking a pregnancy."

"What do you mean?"

"When I was in the military, I knew a bunch of alphas, real toxic assholes you wouldn't have wanted procreating anyway, who had vasectomies just so they could have a different omega in every city without a bunch of kids running around. I

mean, I guess in some ways, that might be sort of responsible, but I could see a few of them using it as a way to manipulate an omega.” If his asshole ex had left him via a note, he sounded like exactly the type of motherfucker to pull a stunt like that.

Dante went quiet for a second, and I could almost see him turning my words over in his head again and again and again. “After we started talking about having a baby, he went away for a long weekend. Said it was a boys’ weekend with some friends, but there were never any pictures, and he was cagey about what they did.” He went quiet again. “And then that bill.” Another moment of silence. “Do you think there are a lot of alphas who do that kind of thing?”

I shrugged. “I want to say no, but I know at least five different guys who’ve done it, so I think it’s a possibility. Especially if he straight up refused to have any tests done, even when you both agreed you wanted a baby.”

“Maybe I was pushing for it harder than he was.”

“Did he ever tell you that wasn’t what he wanted?” My teeth were starting to ache from how hard I was clenching my jaw. Dante’s ex sounded like a total fuckwad.

“No, but he used it as an excuse to break up.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

He shook his head. “His note said if I couldn’t have a baby, it wasn’t worth it for him to stick around. He said his family needed a next generation, and he was glad we hadn’t mated.”

“What’s this asshole’s name?”

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m going to fucking kill him.”

Dante put a hand on my chest, and the gentle touch helped pull me back from the edge of rage. “He’s not worth it.”

“I’m glad you see that. And I’m sorry he put you through that shit. You should get a second opinion. Ask Ev. You know that’s what he does, right?”

“I know he’s a doctor.”

“He’s a shifter OBGYN. He’s traveled all over the world to take care of pregnant shifters and to teach them about sexual health and wellness. I’m sure he’d be happy to talk to you. If you don’t feel comfortable with him, I’m sure he knows other people he could refer you to.”

Dante’s smile was still a little sad, but there was a new light in his eyes like he’d lost hope and a tiny glimmer had been restored. Being able to give him that felt better than anything I’d ever done before.

He reached for a strawberry from the fruit board, and I saw his fingers tighten around his glass as he sat back and took a deep breath, his eyes tightly closed. The breeze blew his scent around me, honeysuckle and the sea, and I knew what was happening.

“Are you okay?”

He opened his eyes and nodded. “Just a little heat surge. But I’m good.” He shifted in his seat, and his scent got stronger until it was the only thing I could smell despite being out in the open.

“Come here.”

He hesitated for a second, then set his glass down and stood. His cock was tenting his shorts, and I wanted to taste him.

“Closer,” I said, grabbing two of his belt loops and pulling him toward me. “I need you closer.”

“Mmm.”

“Can I taste you, Dante?”

“Yesss.” The word was little more than a hiss of breath that only cut off when I dipped my fingers under the waistband of his pants and popped open the button.

“You didn’t put your underwear back on?” My eyes tracked the path of the zipper as I lowered it to reveal nothing but smooth skin. “I approve. It’s almost like you knew where this was going to end up.”



Dante smirked. “Maybe I did, but please, Dom, don’t tease me. I want you so bad.”

My fingers faltered for a second. In all the times we’d been together since the beginning of our arrangement, Dante had told me how much he needed me like he would tell any alpha he needed them during his heat, but to hear him say he wanted me felt like a bigger deal. Like he’d chosen me specifically. Like I was more than someone he needed to scratch an itch or help him through his heat.

I let the word settle into my heart as I lowered his pants, letting them fall to the deck with a soft whoosh. He had a pretty dick, thick but shorter than mine and uncut. He was so hard the foreskin was already rolled back, the head flushed a deep purple.

“Please, Dom. I want to feel your mouth. Please.”

Because I wanted to taste him as much as he wanted me to, I leaned forward and licked over the head. He shuddered and tried to thrust against my mouth. “I’ve got you. Let me take care of you, delfino.”

“Please.”

Leaning forward again, I took him deep into my mouth, letting his girth stretch my lips until he was as deep as I could take him. I let the weight of his length rest against my tongue as I worked it over the spot underneath the head that I knew would make his knees weak. Sure enough, he trembled under my fingers, and I moved my hands to the round globes of his ass to hold him steady.

“Yes, Dom. Yes, yes, yes.”

I sucked hard and pulled off slowly, then set a rhythm where I sucked him in deep, then pulled back and teased the tip.

Dante’s words turned into moans as I collected every drop of precum he let go, but it wasn’t enough. This close to his body, the honey-sweet scent of him was too much, and it was making my inner alpha want to take and claim and own every inch of Dante inside and out. It made me want to mark him

and wear his mark so everyone knew we belonged to each other. But I swallowed down the urge like I swallowed Dante's cock and tried to focus on what would bring him pleasure.

He was thrusting into my mouth, and for a second, I let him. Then I realized there was something off about his rhythm, and I opened my eyes to see he had reached between his ass cheeks and was massaging his hole, but the angle was wrong, and I could tell he couldn't get deep enough.

"Is that where you need me?" I asked, my voice low and rough.

"Yes. Dom, fill me up."

"I will, baby, but I'm not done tasting you yet." I stood, letting my body slide against Dante's, and then I turned him around. "Kneel on the bench, and put your elbows on the back. Let me see that pretty hole." He did as I asked, and before I even spread his cheeks, I could see his slick glistening in the low light. "Goddamn it, that's pretty. You're so fucking wet for me. And I'm going to lick up every drop."

"What—" But his question was cut off when I licked a stripe from his balls to the base of his spine. "Dom! Oh God."

He rocked back, seeking more, and I gave him what he wanted, noisily lapping up his slick, the taste honey on my tongue, until he was writhing and so wet I thought I might drown in him.

"Make me come, Dom. Make me come. Please, please, please."

Biting an ass cheek and making him whimper, I pulled back. "Is this how you want to come? With my tongue in your ass?"

His response was a groan. He might not know what he wanted or needed, but I did. Sitting down next to where he was up on his knees, his ass in the air for me, I positioned him so he could straddle my lap. "You want a baby, tesoro? I'll put a baby in you." While I'd meant it to just be dirty talk, I actually fucking loved the idea of knocking Dante up and watching him get round with my child. I wanted to breed him.

To fill him with all my babies. To keep him pregnant until he told me he couldn't take any more.

My cock had never been harder than when I thought about my cum inside Dante, giving him what he wanted more than anything.

“Fuck, Dom. Please. Breed me. I want to have your babies. Oh fuck, please.”

A single tear rolled down his cheek, and I licked it away. Then I did something I hadn't done since the day I'd gotten him off in Miami.

# CHAPTER 14



## DANTE

Dominic's lips met mine, and I wanted to weep. By mutual unspoken agreement, we hadn't kissed at all in the time we'd been fucking, and I hadn't realized how much I'd missed his flavor after only the single taste I'd gotten in Little Havana.

Now, though, he tasted like my slick, and there was something so hot about that I felt my cock jump against my stomach as I leaned into the kiss.

Or maybe it was Dom saying he was going to put a baby in me that was hot as fuck. Either way, I wanted everything he could give me.

He nipped my lower lip, then sucked it into his mouth before releasing it with a pop. "Ride me. I want to see your face when you come. Then I'm going to knot you and keep my cum inside you so deep. If any drips out, I'll push it back in."

"Fuck." The word was a whisper against his lips.

He reached behind me and positioned his dick at my entrance, then moved his hands to my hips, encouraging me to sink down on him.

Dom didn't try to control the pace, though, and as soon as he'd slid a little bit inside, he let me take him how I wanted to, which was hard and fast. I sank down on his length until I felt like he was splitting me in two, and then I went even farther until my ass rested on his thighs. He was so deep and pressed tight against my prostate, and my body released a gush of slick.

“Fuck, Dante, that’s so hot. God yes. Drip all over me. Cover me in your slick.”

I rolled my hips, smearing some of the wetness between us, and then I lifted up and crashed my lips against Dom’s and sank back down. I set a slow pace, taking what I wanted inch by inch and letting my tongue explore Dom’s mouth until another wave of lust plowed through me, and I had to have more. Dom gripped my ass as I rode him hard, and I hoped I’d be able to see his fingerprints on my skin the next day.

His pine-and-leather scent filled my nose and mixed with my own scent, reminding me of a storm at sea. Which is exactly what we were—volatile, unpredictable, and beautifully dangerous, a tempest.

“I’m gonna come,” I panted, needing the release.

“Let me see it. Come for me, tesoro, then I’ll fill you up and give you what you want.”

“A baby?”

“Yes, a baby.”

“Fuck!” My orgasm washed over me in a second, cum spilling in ribbons from my dick and my ass contracting hard as more slick slid from my channel. I couldn’t remember ever being this wet before. And my cock was still hard, even though I’d just painted Dom’s chest with my release.

“So dirty. So beautiful,” Dom murmured against my neck, his teeth grazing over my scent gland. I wanted to tell him to claim me, that I wanted to carry his babies and be his forever, to wear his mark and mark him as mine, but I couldn’t make the words come out. “I know what you need.”

Holding my hips in his strong grip, he thrust up into me. “Going to paint you with my seed. Then I’m going to watch my baby grow inside you.” He rubbed his hand over my stomach, which was already round and soft, and my dick spasmed, releasing more cum as my channel contracted again, pulling him deeper. He was inside me so deep it almost hurt, and I loved it.

“Fuck, Dante. Are you ready for my knot?” He grunted, and I felt him start to swell all over, getting wider at the base until I thought I couldn’t take any more. “Fuck,” he yelled as I felt the hot rush of his cum filling me. I squeezed around him, making sure none escaped as I rocked on his dick. I was so close to coming again, and like he could read my mind, Dom wrapped a hand around my cock and stroked twice before I shot over his palm. He brought his cum-soaked hand to his lips and licked it away, then grabbed my hips and pulled me forward so he could kiss me. But he’d held my cum in his mouth and fed it back to me instead until I couldn’t figure out where my flavor ended and his began.

Dom and I had had some amazing sex since Savannah, but that night was beyond anything I’d ever thought I could or would experience, and as I sat on his lap, sticky with slick and cum and so full of his knot I thought I could feel it in my heart, I felt better than I ever had. Even if Dom never loved me like I loved him, even if we weren’t really fated, I would have this.

I would always have this.

Letting my head rest against Dom’s shoulder, I closed my eyes and breathed him in, letting myself drift. It would be another ten minutes until his knot went down and he could slip free, and I tried not to let that thought make me sad. I loved feeling connected to him like this. If I could, I’d keep him inside me always.

He wrapped me in his arms, and I dozed off, feeling safer than I ever had as Dom’s arms held me tight and the boat rocked gently on the water.

Dom was whispering in Italian, and I picked up a few words here and there, but I was too blissed-out to really pay too much attention until he whispered, “Per favore lascia che ti tenga, tesoro.” He’d said the word *tesoro* more than once, and it felt important. I tried to log it away so I’d remember to ask him what it meant before I drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

I was too hot, and the bed was rocking.

Why was the bed rocking?

I cracked open an eye and looked around at unfamiliar surroundings.

Where the hell was I?

Rolling over, I tried to get my bearings, but I came up against a firm chest dusted with dark hair.

Ah, I recognized that chest. And it was right where it was supposed to be, which was next to me.

“Good morning,” Dom said, his voice a sexy, sleep-rough rumble.

“Good morning.”

He reached up a hand and grabbed my hip to pull me closer. His lips landed on mine, and in a rush, everything from yesterday came back to me—taking Dom out on my new boat, shifting and swimming, talking, eating, and the hottest sex of my life. If we weren't in the hotel room, we had to still be on the boat. As much as I wanted to stay wrapped up in Dom's embrace and under the spell his lips were working against mine, I hadn't planned to stay out on the boat overnight, and if I knew Sal, she was probably freaking out.

I shoved Dom away, even though it killed me to do it.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“We stayed on the boat. No one knows where we are. Sal is likely losing her damn mind.”

“It's okay. We can explain.”

“What time is it?” I was already up and looking for my phone.

“Ten after seven.”



“Shit.” I ran through the galley and up onto the deck, where my pants were still in a heap on the floor. My phone wasn’t in the pocket, and it took me an extra second to remember I’d put it in the cup holder by the wheel. When I retrieved it, it was dead. “Dom? Do you have your phone?”

“Yeah.” He stood gloriously naked at the bottom of the stairs, his skin a gleaming bronze in the early morning light. He held up the phone. “No service, though.”

“Damn it. We’ve gotta get back.”

Dom glanced away for a second, but when he looked back, there was a hint of sadness in his eyes. “I know, but I don’t want to. This, last night, it was... uh, perfect.” He straightened up and took a breath. “Okay, honestly, I really like spending time with you. I know we didn’t get off to a great start when we first met, but after the last couple weeks, and especially after last night, I”—he rubbed a hand over the back of his neck like he was nervous—“I think I’m falling for you.”

My mouth dropped open because in a million lifetimes, I never expected Dom to say anything like that, and even though I felt the same way, I couldn’t make my brain tell my mouth to make words. It was too busy reminding my heart to beat.

“Look, I know it’s crazy to go from hating each other, to liking to piss each other off, to fucking, to whatever the fuck it is I’m feeling right now, but relationships have been built on less, right?”

I shook my head, and Dom’s face fell.

“No, no. That’s not what I meant. I just can’t believe it. I don’t know how it happened either, but I’m falling for you too.”

Dom’s answering smile was brighter than the rising sun. “Really?”

“Yes.”

In a second, he’d climbed the stairs and pulled me into his arms, and despite the shitstorm I knew would be waiting for me when we got back to the hotel, I let him. I also didn’t

protest when he picked me up and wrapped my legs around his waist as he lowered to the seat we'd christened last night.

For the first time since the beginning of summer, I wasn't super horny, though with my cock pressed between our bodies and his dick hard against my ass, I was getting there fast, even if Dom seemed content to hold me and kiss me without taking things farther.

And I had to admit I didn't mind.

A long time later, after we'd made out and frothed until we'd both come, I reluctantly climbed off Dom's lap.

"We have to get back."

He nodded. "It's going to be different being back after last night and this morning."

"I know, but I promise we'll still be together at night."

He nodded again. "Will you let me take you out?"

I slipped my feet into my shorts and shimmied them up my legs. "Like on a date?"

"Yes, very much like on a date."

Pulling my polo shirt on over my head, I said, "I'll see if I can pencil you in."

"It's shit like that that makes it hard to love you," Dom said with a smirk.

My heart had tripped over itself and skipped a beat. "You love me?"

"I'm getting there." He grabbed my wrist and pulled me in again, but instead of kissing my lips, he nuzzled against my scent gland, breathing me in deep. "You smell so fucking good. Like the sea and sunshine and my nonna's pignoli cookies."

"Mmm." I leaned into his touch a little but only let myself indulge for a second. "We really have to go, but I promise we can pick up where we left off later." I took a step back, and Dom let me. "Get dressed." I picked up his shorts and tossed them on his lap.

As he put his clothes on, I got us under sail, and in less than fifteen minutes, we were on our way back to the harbor.

Unsurprisingly, Sal was waiting on the dock. Her black hair was pulled back into a tight bun, her suit was starched and wrinkle-free, and her patent leather Louboutins shone in the sun. And of course, she looked pissed, even if I couldn't see her icy-blue eyes behind her designer sunglasses. She caught the line I tossed and started lecturing me before she'd even finished tying it off.

"I was five minutes away from calling the Coast Guard. Neither of you could be bothered to charge your phones?" When I started to protest, she held up a hand. "Don't you dare give me any excuses. I read the specs on your new boat a hundred times. I know there are plenty of outlets."

"I didn't bring a charger," Dom said, and I had to applaud his bravery. Sal was not someone I ever wanted to cross, and she was already mad at both of us.

She folded her arms again and shook her head. "Unacceptable."

"In my defense, I didn't think Dante was going to kidnap me and hold me hostage all night."

"Hey," I said. "I didn't hear you complaining."

"Well, that was then. When I wasn't face-to-face with your pissed-off second-in-command. Even so, still no complaints." He absently pecked a kiss to my nose, and Sal's eyes went wide.

"Oh?" she said, lowering her sunglasses on her nose and peering at me over the top. It felt like her assessing gaze was cutting me to the bone. "It's like that, huh?"

Despite sleeping together for weeks, Dom and I usually kept our distance, and he'd never been casually affectionate in public. Sal knew we'd been fucking, but that one little kiss told her more than any verbal confession about what happened last night ever would.

"I'll meet you at the airfield," she said, turning on her heel and striding toward the parking lot. Honestly, I was surprised

she let it go that easily.

Dom and I watched her go.

“What was all that about?” he asked as I finished securing the boat.

“That’s Sal’s patented ‘I need to talk to you, but I can’t do it right now’ move. I’ll be getting an earful later, I’m sure.”

“Interesting. She doesn’t seem like the kind of person who holds much back.”

I laughed. “No, she’s not.” But she also wasn’t the kind of person who would embarrass me because she had things she wanted to say. And I had a feeling she knew things between Dominic and me had crossed a line. I had no doubt I’d be getting the grilling of a lifetime the next time we were alone. To be honest, I was glad she hadn’t commenced with her questioning the second she saw us. For as much as I knew Dom and I were on the same page, I wasn’t sure how he’d feel about other people knowing what was going on.

Though he had kissed me in front of Sal. So maybe he didn’t care. At any rate, things were tenuous and new, and it wasn’t anyone else’s business until we decided it was.

If we ever decided it was.

# CHAPTER 15



## DANTE

Avoiding Sal and our inevitable conversation was surprisingly easy over the next week. Her mate, Marisol, showed up in Virginia Beach, and they'd spent most of the week together. Sal deserved a break, and as a treat, I'd canceled our early morning meetings. And if that was because I was dodging her, so be it. I refused to be mad about it when it meant extra time in bed with Dom in the mornings.

Dom's hand traced over the curve of my hip and came to rest on my belly, stroking over the soft skin there. He nosed along my neck and licked over my scent gland, then tugged my earlobe into his mouth, making me shiver before he whispered, "You think we made a baby that time?"

My heart was still beating too fast after our most recent round, even though it had been slow and sweet—Dom sliding into me from behind while we lay next to each other. He'd still whispered the filthiest things in my ear about how he was dying to knock me up and how we could do it every day until it happened. His words turned me on, but they also gave me hope, and I made a mental note to send Everett a text. We had talked to him and Merritt a few days ago, and they had finalized as much of the adoption process as they could since they'd returned to Portland. Hopefully, he'd have some time to see me when we were in town.

"Maybe," I said, finally answering Dom's question. "I guess we'll see."

We both knew I was on birth control, but it was fun to pretend. I had no idea the thought of Dom actually getting me

pregnant would be so hot for both of us.

“If not, we’ll just keep trying. I like knowing you’re full of my cum.” He rustled around behind me for a second, but I didn’t turn to see what he was up to. “In fact, I think I’d like to know you’re full of me all day.” Something smooth and cool pressed against my hole, then slipped in. Dom pressed the plug in until it was fully seated, then nudged it a little farther so it grazed my prostate. My dick, which a second ago was ready to wave the white flag, twitched.

“Fuck,” I moaned. “You really want me to wear this all day?”

“I do.” He twisted it a little. “But if it’s too much, you can take it out.”

“I love it. It’s not too much.”

“Good.” He kissed my shoulder. “I hate leaving you, but I’ve gotta get to the airfield. I was having trouble with one of the gages yesterday, and I need to make sure everything is set for today’s show.”

“What?” One minute, I was happily dozing on the edge of pleasure; the next, I was sitting bolt upright, panic welling in my chest. “Dominic, if your plane isn’t in perfect condition, you’re not going up.”

“Shh, tesoro. It’s fine. Just a short. Not a big deal. I think I fixed it yesterday, but I just want to double-check.”

I sat up straighter, pulling the sheet with me. The change in position made the plug hit my gland, and I closed my eyes against the sensation.

“Ah, that is all I want you to think about today, delfino. Think of me and my cum inside you every time you sit down. I promise I’ll be fine.”

“Dom—”

He leaned in and kissed me, cutting off any protest. “I promise, Dante. Everything is fine.”

As he walked to the shower and I watched him go, I wanted to believe him, but my gut was telling me something

was wrong.

But like Dom didn't know boats, I didn't know planes other than the make and models of the few private jets I had at my disposal.

So I had to trust him.

I just didn't know why it was easier to trust him with my heat and heart than it was to trust him with his own body.

\* \* \*

SAL WAS ALREADY WAITING in the VIP tent at the airfield when I arrived, and Marisol was nowhere to be seen.

Which meant my luck had run out.

I looked around, hoping there was something else for me to do or someone else who needed my attention, but the tent was empty save for the bartenders setting up at either end. Surely, they could use my help as it was my liquor they were stocking, but Sal raised an eyebrow, pushed out the chair next to her with her foot, and patted the seat.

Trapped, I had no choice but to take it.

“So,” she said, barely waiting for my ass to hit the chair, “you caught feelings.”

Her comment was more statement than question, so I didn't say anything.

“I'm proud of you.”

That brought me up short. “What?”

She patted my hand. “I'm proud of you, though let's face it, I didn't think for a second that you two sleeping together would lead to anything less. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm the one who told you there was a thin line between love and hate.”

“Who said anything about love?”

She scoffed. “Oh, puh-lease. I saw your face when he gave you that sweet kiss on the dock in Wilmington. You're one



smitten kitten. And after the bullshit Gilberto put you through, I didn't think I'd see the day you let your walls down again."

Sal was right. Gil had put my heart through the wringer, but there was no doubt I was falling hard and fast for Dominic. Hell, I'd probably already fallen ass over teakettle.

"So when's the wedding?" Her lips were tipped up in a smirk, but there was real curiosity in her tone.

"Funny. Our arrangement hasn't changed. It's still a summer fling, which makes this marginally more complicated."

"How so?"

I let out a sigh. "He lives in Canada. I live in Miami. He's got work to get back to, and so do I. This isn't something that can last long-term."

"God, I hate when people say that kind of shit. Marisol and I heard that for years. 'No one really marries their high school sweetheart.' 'You're too different. Eventually, you'll want different things.' 'It won't last.' And look at us now. Together for twenty-two years, married for fifteen, expecting our first baby."

I choked on air. "What? Marisol is pregnant? Since when?"

Sal gave me a shit-eating grin. "Apparently, it happened just before I left. That's why she flew into town. She wanted to give me the good news in person. God, Dante, I'm so excited."

I slid closer and grabbed her in a hug. "I'm so happy for you two. That's amazing news."

"We didn't think it would happen, but I'm so glad it did." She gave me a tight squeeze and pulled back, studying my face. "Oh, Dante, I'm so sorry. I didn't think."

Grabbing her hand, I gave it a squeeze. "It's okay. Dom and I talked, and he—"

"You told Dominic you can't have babies?"

Nodding, I said, “Yes, but he thinks Gil was manipulating me.” I told her what Dom had told me and watched as her face turned redder and redder with every word.

“I swear to God, I’ll kill him myself if he did that to you.”

“I won’t know until I get a second opinion.”

“Then do it.”

“Already done. Dom’s friend Everett said he’d see me when we get to Portland at the end of the circuit.”

“That’s great.”

“It doesn’t mean anything, but there’s hope.”

“And in the meantime, I’m putting Marisol on the case.”

“What? Why?”

“What good is it having a hacker for a wife if I can’t use her to get information? If Gil had any sort of operation, there would be some record of it or at least of the payment. She’ll track it down. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

“Marisol works in IT.”

She smiled. “That’s what we tell people.”

I knew for a fact Marisol was in charge of the IT department for, of all things, a computer company, but if this would make Sal happy, I’d let her pry. Though the more I thought about the end of my relationship with Gil, the more Dom’s theory made sense. I didn’t need Marisol to confirm my ex was a lying asshole. In my heart and head, I already knew the truth.

Sal gave me a serious look. “You guys could make things work. I know you could.”

“We’ll see,” I said, and then I thought of something else. “How did you know Marisol was your fated mate?”

“Why? Do you think you and Dom are fated?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. Lita said something, and I haven’t been able to get it out of my head.” I told her everything about the encounter Dom and I had with Lita on

what I'd come to think of as the day that changed everything between us.

Sal punched me in the arm. "Why the fuck am I just hearing about this now? We were in Miami weeks ago!"

"I didn't think it was important."

She crossed her arms over her chest and gave me the look she'd been giving me since high school, the one that said she was wholly unimpressed with my shit. "You didn't think it was worth mentioning that the woman who is basically your surrogate grandmother and someone who has been rumored to be able to spot fated mates at one hundred paces said you and Dom were fated for each other was relevant information?"

"Well, when you put it like that..."

"You're an idiot. How have we been friends for so long?" She waved away her comment. "No, what's actually the most disturbing thing about this is that you're asking me if it could be true."

"How is that the most disturbing thing?"

"Because, Dante, when you meet your true mate, you just know. It's like a bolt of lightning to the chest. When Marisol walked into biology that day, she was all I could see. All I could smell. All I wanted. All I needed. And when her eyes met mine, I saw all the same things reflected there. We've been inseparable ever since."

"But we'd known Marisol since middle school. Why did you recognize her as your mate years after you met her?"

Sal nodded. "That's a good question. I think we do a really shitty job teaching kids about meeting their true mates. It's all some giant fairy tale the way we explain it, and we never really talk about the practicalities. The truth is we can know our fated mates for years before we recognize them as our destiny. For me, Marisol was just going into her first heat season. I'd already presented as an alpha and Marisol as an omega, but that first heat season triggered some sort of reaction between us."

“So you’re saying Dom and I could start off hating each other and still end up as mates?”

“Definitely. There are intense feelings there, and there have been since the beginning, but maybe the right circumstances haven’t happened to show that you’re really fated to one another yet.”

“So you think Lita was right? Dom and I are true mates?”

It was her turn to shrug. “I don’t have her sight, but I know there is something between you, so I wouldn’t discount it yet.”

I let her words roll around in my head. The first time I’d met Dominic Pavone, it had felt like I’d stuck my finger in an electrical socket, the shock of his anger throwing me back on my heels, but maybe even then, there had been more between us. I guessed we’d have to wait it out.

“Let’s go grab our seats,” Sal said, and I nodded as I followed her out to the front of the tent. Spectators were just starting to arrive, and the first aviation exhibitions would start in an hour. Sal and I would hardly get to sit down, so it was nice to have a minute to rest before we were required to mingle with VIPs and regional sponsors. The Virginia Beach show was the only one of the circuit that was divided into two days, with the air show on the first day and the water show on the second day instead of a mix of both over the weekend. I was glad for the break since my regatta team wouldn’t be out today, and I’d taken the weekend off anyway, letting some of the team and alternates cross-train in different positions. Summer was a great time to put everyone through their paces before the Caribbean racing season started in November.

As we watched the crowd filter in and greeted a few early arriving VIPs, then watched the opening practice passes, I thought about what Dom had said about his malfunctioning gauge yesterday, and my heart tripped in my chest.

We hadn’t heard anything about anyone in the lineup needing to drop for technical difficulties, so everything must be okay, but there was still this feeling in the pit of my stomach I couldn’t shake.

Instead of dwelling on it, and because I was trying to trust Dominic to know his limits and his plane, I focused my attention on my future with the regatta team. Maybe it was time to take a break? Sponsoring and essentially running the air and water show circuit already pulled me out of the office, and while Azucar ran like a well-oiled machine, leaving for almost three months in the summer and multiple times in the fall wasn't practical. Plus, if I stepped away from racing, I could make more time to visit Dom in Canada; even though the thought of visiting the Great White North during the winter made me want to cry, being able to spend time with Dom would be worth it. If that's what he wanted after all this was over.

"I'm thinking about stepping away from the helm."

Sal's head swung my way. "Helm? Which helm? What are you talking about?"

Laughing, I realized I'd started in the middle of my thought. "The regatta team. I'm not giving up Azucar for anything."

She dramatically put a hand to her chest over her heart. "Thank God. I mean, could I run the company with my eyes closed? Yes, but with a new baby on the way, do I want to? Not really."

"Fair enough. Also, it's cute you think you'd be the next in line to be in charge."

Pursing her lips in a disgruntled moue, she said, "It's funny you forget I own almost thirty percent of the company."

"Touché."

She stood. "Time to get this party started. Let's mingle." I nodded and followed her back into the tent, which was now almost full.

I lost track of time, talking to business acquaintances and friends of the circuit, and wasn't sure how much time had passed when Sal appeared at my elbow. "Dom's up next. Did you want to watch?"

She knew I did, and I extricated myself from my conversation by asking the couple I was talking with to join us. They declined, opting to hit the bar while the lines were short to grab another cocktail. Sal was waiting for me when I made it back to our seats, and Dom rumbled down the runway.

I knew the second his plane took off with a slight wobble that something wasn't right, and my heart plummeted to my toes.

"Dante?" Sal's voice was insistent. "Dante? You're squeezing the life out of my hand. What's wrong?"

Shaking my head, I said, "I don't know, but his plane never does that. Did you see the way it bounced? He said there was something wrong with one of the gauges."

Sal pried my fingers from her arm and held my hand. "It's okay, Dante. Just a little blip. I'm sure everything is fine. Dom's a professional, and he knows that plane better than anyone."

When I looked at her face, she did look sure that all was well, but I wasn't convinced, and my trepidation grew when Dom streaked past again, a slim trail of smoke fanning out behind him.

I pointed to the sky. "Does that look okay to you?"

Before she could respond, I was running toward the control point. And I wasn't the only one. Several firefighters that served as ground support were running toward the runway and the fire chief to the control point with me.

I took the stairs up to the temporary tower two at a time with the fire chief hot on my heels.

"Is that smoke? What's wrong?" I was out of breath, but George, the inspector in charge, still heard me and turned my way for a split second. He was very tall, close to seven feet, and I was grateful I'd hired the giraffe shifter as part of the team. He had a height advantage that made him irreplaceable, even on the elevated platform.

"We don't know. Lieutenant Pavone's plane was in perfect condition during the safety inspection this morning—"

“Does that look like perfect condition to you?” I pointed to the sky where the trail of smoke was thicker, and Dom was losing altitude while still going too fast.

George said something into his headset that I assumed was a direct line to Dom, then swore.

“What? What is it?”

“He’s lost complete control of the plane. He has no altimeter readings, no fuel indication, nothing.”

“Get him out of there.”

George went back to his headset and gave the order for Dom to eject, but I didn’t need to hear Dom’s side to know the stubborn bastard I’d fucking fallen in love with had refused to let his beloved plane hit the ground.

“I swear to God, if you die, I’ll kill you myself.” One of the assistant inspectors chuckled softly, and I shot him a glare. “You,” I said, pointing at him, “I want to know who did the inspection on that plane. I want their name by the end of the day.”

He looked around, unsure what to do, and George nodded. “We’re going to need to talk to him as soon as we get Dom back on the ground.” He looked at me, then added. “Safely.”

George was back on his headset, talking to Dom, but I stopped listening, saying silent prayer after silent prayer that he wasn’t going to crash.

“Mr. Perez?” George’s voice directed my way pulled me from my spiraling thoughts. “Dom is going to try to set down on the back runway. That gives him the most space to try to get her down without incident.” He turned to the fire chief, who’d said nothing, standing near the stairs. “Pat, get a crew over there. Fire and EMS. We don’t know how this is going to go.” The other man nodded and left, already shouting orders into the radio at his shoulder.

“Can he do this?” I asked no one in particular.

George’s face was grim, but he said, “If anyone can get that plane on the ground safely with no instrument panel, it’s

Dominic Pavone.”

George turned his attention to the runway behind us. I saw Dom’s plane in the distance, flying low but too fast to land safely, but I couldn’t look away. I felt paralyzed, rooted to the spot. A firetruck and an ambulance peeled across the tarmac between where we stood and the back runway, and I hoped we wouldn’t need them. I could tell the attention of the crowd had shifted too, and more people were watching what was happening behind them than the parade of vintage planes that was happening in front of them.

Dom was nearing the runway, but I heard George say he was still going too fast. He brought the plane down, and it bounced, heading back into the air. Dom tried again, and the front wheel caught the ground, smoke wafting up from the blacktop as the landing gear struggled under the speed of the plane. With a sickening crunch, the front wheel broke off, sending the nose of the plane to the pavement with a deafening screech of metal.

“Shit,” one of the assistant inspectors said before radioing Pat and his team to make sure they were in place.

The plane was slowing, which was good, but I also knew jet fuel was highly flammable, and there was a ton of friction happening to the body as it scraped along the concrete and finally stopped less than ten yards from the end of the runway. Several people in the control area cheered, and so did all the spectators who had turned to watch, but George wasn’t one of them.

“Dominic, get out. Now.”

But the hatch didn’t open. And my heart stopped for at least the hundredth time that day.

“Why isn’t he getting out?”

“Hatch is stuck. The lock relies on the electrical system.”

“What if he ejects?” I asked, grasping at straws and unsure how dangerous it would be to try something like that on land.

“He’s already tried.”



“But it’s okay. He’s safe. It’s okay.” I was mostly reassuring myself.

George just pointed to the rear of the plane, where small flames were present at the tail, and jet fuel was leaking from the fuselage.

The fire crew brought their truck over, and one of the guys climbed the ladder, a giant pry bar in hand. He and another firefighter levered the bar under the hatch and pushed down. For a long second, nothing happened, but then the hatch flew open, and they helped Dom out of the cockpit. From where I was standing, he looked okay, but the EMTs rushed over anyway and pulled him away from the plane while the fire team turned their hose on the rear of the plane and the puddle of jet fuel.

“It’s a damn good thing jet fuel isn’t as volatile as gasoline, or the whole damn thing would have gone up,” one of the other inspectors said, but I wasn’t paying attention anymore.

Dom was safe.

Or as safe as he would be until I got my hands on him.

# CHAPTER 16



## DOMINIC

“*W* here the fuck is he?”

I knew that voice, and the words reminded me of something I’d said to him earlier in the summer as the sound echoed around the hangar, where I was currently sitting, licking my wounds. I’d never had to come down like that before, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t still a little shaken, even after talking to George and a representative from the FAA. If I had to give one more statement about the incident, I might scream. I had no idea what happened. Everything was fine until it wasn’t, and then it went from bad to worse.

“He’s back there,” I heard Carlo say.

“Clear the space, please.” Dante sounded pissed as hell. Of course he was. I’d put his precious air and water show in the news for all the wrong reasons. He had every right to be angry.

But it wasn’t anger I saw in his eyes when he came around the last plane in the line, the backup for my plane, the one I should have taken up today instead of rolling the dice.

The hangar door slid closed on squeaky hinges before Dante rounded on me. “What the actual hell were you thinking?” Tears glimmered in his eyes, and I wanted to reach for him—I almost needed to—but his closed-off posture told me that kind of contact wouldn’t be welcome.

“I—”

“No, I don’t want to hear it.” Dante turned on his heel and paced away, then pivoted toward me again. “You scared the

ever-loving fuck out of me.”

This time, I stepped into his path and put my hands on his shoulders, stopping his progress. “I’m so sorry, tesoro. I swear I didn’t mean to.”

“You have a goddamn backup plane for a fucking reason, Dom! Why didn’t you take this one?” He nodded behind him at the savoy blue Aermacchi with the Italian flag painted on the tail.

“Everything was fine. It looked fine to me, and Carlo checked everything over. She flew like a dream during practice, and George and another inspector cleared her during the safety check. I don’t know what happened.”

“You could have died!” The last word came out on a sob, and I wrapped him in my arms, marveling at how far we’d come. A few months ago, I was certain Dante would have relished my demise, but today, he was grieving while I was still standing right in front of him, shaken up but unharmed.

“Shh.” I held him to me, breathing in his scent that seemed stronger than usual, but maybe that was because of my brush with death. Maybe from here on out, I would appreciate everything a little bit more. “I’m okay. I’m right here. I’m safe.”

He lifted his head from my chest and wiped at his tears. I swiped away one he missed with my thumb. “I hate you for making me feel that way, like there was nothing I could do, like I was out of control. Like I was going to lose you. If you ever do that again, I swear to God, I will bring you back to life so I can kill you with my bare hands.”

“I know. I promise it won’t happen again.” I rubbed my fingers over his cheeks again and again, even though his tears had stopped falling. I needed to touch him to remind myself I was still alive. That I’d done what needed to be done and survived.

Dante bit his lip, and I used my thumb to pull it away, and then I lowered my mouth to his, tasting the desperation of his emotions and the touch of fear that still lingered unchecked. I

gave him every reassurance I could with every press of my lips, and I took my own comfort in the moments of connection.

His hands slid under the thin cotton tank top I wore under my flight suit, questing fingers exploring my flesh. I let his hands wander, needing the touch as much as he did. The adrenaline rush was starting to fade, leaving me shaking, but Dante's touch held me grounded. When his fingers grazed over my nipples, teasing them to hard peaks, I trembled from a combination of the crash and the pleasure of his touch.

"Dom, I need you," he whispered against my lips as his hands slid out from under my shirt and fumbled to untie the top of my flight suit where I had it knotted around my waist. Then he shoved past the barrier, wrapping his cool fingers around my hardening shaft.

"God yes," I moaned, the sound echoing around us in the large empty space. I had no idea if everyone had really cleared out, but in that second, I didn't care.

Dante used his other hand to unbutton his dress pants and push them and his underwear down in one move. His cock was hard and leaking, and the smell of his slick was everywhere. It made me crazy, made me want to take him like a starving man, and that's exactly what I did.

Picking him up, I backed him against the body of the plane, positioned myself against him, but paused when my cock brushed across something hard at his entrance. I'd forgotten about the plug and reached between us to pull it out, dropping it to the floor with an echoing metallic clang, and then I drove into him deeply on one thrust. This wasn't meant to be slow and sensual torture. This was the kind of sex we needed to remind us we were alive.

"Fuck, Dom," Dante cried out, adjusting to my length and rocking his body to take more.

I was becoming addicted to being inside him. I wished there was a way I could just stay there always. Fucking into him hard and fast, I whispered, "This is it, tesoro. I'm going to knock you up and watch you get all round and glowy with my

baby. God, you'd be so beautiful pregnant. So perfect. And all mine."

I meant every word, and Dante threw his head back, coming untouched, his cum splashing against my T-shirt.

"You want to have my babies, delfino? Want to be mine forever?"

"God yes, Dom. Forever."

At his words, my cock swelled, the knot popping at the base and locking us together as I came deep inside him, half praying what I'd said would come true.

Since we were locked together for at least a few minutes, I lifted him again and stumbled back into a folding chair. When we settled and Dante stopped protesting me carrying him around since he wasn't some tiny little guy, he looked up and met my eyes, and it felt like I'd been punched in the gut. I saw Dante, beautiful and sitting on my lap, but I also saw our whole future laid out in front of us—claiming him, watching him grow round with our babies, living together in a large, brightly colored house, growing old together. It was everything I wanted. Everything I wanted with the man sitting on my lap. His scent was the only thing I could smell—the sea, the sun, and the almond-sweet scent of something I recognized now for what it was: home. And it was as though a key fit into the lock of my heart, opening me up to more beauty than I ever thought I would find in the world.

I knew in that moment I would move heaven, earth, and everything in between to make sure Dante was happy and safe.

To make sure he was mine.

"Dom? What the hell just happened? It's like I'm seeing you for the first time, and I never want to let you go. I'm looking at you, and all I can think is—"

"Mine," we said together.

Tears gathered at the corners of Dante's eyes and spilled over, tracking down his cheeks, but this time, he was smiling, and it was like seeing a rainbow while the rain was still falling—magnificent and unique.

Lita was right. Dante was my fated mate. Regardless of the way we'd come together, we'd found each other, and I would never let him go.

“We're fated. True mates. You feel it too, right?”

I nodded, a lump I couldn't swallow down taking up all the space in my throat.

“I feel so full. Like my heart is going to explode.”

“Me too.”

Leaning in, I scraped my teeth over Dante's scent gland at the base of his neck behind his ear, and he shuddered in my arms. “I want to claim you, tesoro.”

He shuddered again. “I want that too, but not here. I want to take our time. I'm not sure how this works for eagle shifters, but dolphin shifters like to leave more than just the claiming bite on their mates. I want to scrape my teeth over your body so everyone who sees you will know a dolphin shifter loves you.”

“You love me?”

Dante's eyes went wide. “Of course. You're my true mate.” He looked away but then back again. “But I think I started to fall in love with you that day in Miami before the season started when you rolled effortlessly into meeting the kids who'd come to watch practice, and I never stopped falling.”

I let out a breath I'd been holding. “I feel the same. I think I started falling for you that day too, which was weird as hell because I wanted to hate you.”

“But we're here now.”

I nodded.

“Doesn't mean I'm not going to hold a grudge about today and the way you put yourself at risk. You should have ejected when George suggested it, not played the hero and tried to land the plane.”

Smirking, I said, “I didn’t try. I did land the plane. And I’m right here, baby. Perfectly fine.”

“So was I after that regatta, but you still treated me like shit.”

“And you did the same. Don’t tell me you didn’t get off on riling me up. I remember what you were like the first few times we fucked. We almost had to come to blows before you’d let me make you come, the scent of your slick so thick in the air I had to breathe through my mouth just to keep it together enough to square off with you. But it just made me want to taste you more.” I licked over Dante’s scent gland again, and he nuzzled into mine, scraping his teeth over the skin just like he promised. I couldn’t wait until we could claim each other.

But there was time.

For now, my fated mate was safe in my arms, and if he wanted to hold a grudge, I’d let him as long as it meant he’d continue to hold on to me.



# CHAPTER 17



## DANTE

“*I*’m sorry. What?” Adriana looked at me like I’d sprouted a second head.

“I’d like a room on a higher floor.”

“I heard you, but I don’t understand the words you’re saying because you are the one saying them.”

Sighing, I started again, but she held up a hand, and I snapped my mouth shut while she pulled out her phone and connected a call. “I need you in the lobby. Now.” She didn’t wait for a response, just tapped the screen and shoved the phone back into the pocket of her shorts.

Sal came sprinting into the lobby, wearing workout clothes that were a little sweaty. I’d come up to Atlantic City on the team catamaran because I’d been missing the water a little, so almost everyone else had beaten us to the hotel.

Once Sal made it over to us, Adriana gestured at me. “Something is very wrong here.”

Sal scrunched her brow and pursed her lips. “What do you mean?”

My assistant gestured at me again. “Tell her.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not a big deal. I just asked if I could be moved to a room on a higher floor.”

Adriana shook her head. “No, he specifically asked if he could be booked into a room on the thirty-fifth floor or higher.”

Sal's eyes went wide, and her jaw dropped open before she pulled her features into a look of concern as she studied me. "Are you okay?"

To be honest, I'd been feeling a little off since Virginia Beach, but I was chalking it up to Dom's near-death experience and the resulting stress as I spoke to representatives from the FAA and members of the press regarding the incident while trying to spin the story to make sure everyone knew the show was safe and fun for everyone.

Well, that and the fact that Dom and I were true mates, which simultaneously made my heart soar and my stomach dip, which had the unfortunate side effect of making me feel just a touch nauseous. It was wonderful but also a little terrifying. I'd been thinking a lot about my conversation with Sal before Dom's almost crash, and I wondered if it was almost losing him that had caused our fated mate bond to finally emerge.

But I didn't tell Sal and Adriana any of that. Instead, I smiled and said, "I'm fine. I just want a change of scenery."

"You hate heights," the two women said together, causing a few other patrons in the lobby to look our way.

Sal shook her head. "You won't go to a rooftop party. You'll barely climb a ladder. You consistently ask for a hotel room on a lower floor and freak out if there is a balcony or more than five floors below yours. The only time you can tolerate being up high is in a plane, and that's only if no one talks about the physics keeping the jet in the air, you're sitting in a seat where you can't see out, and you've got Cher on repeat playing through your headphones." She narrowed her eyes at me again, then said to Adriana, "You were right to call me."

"I swear, I'm fine. Just craving something different."

They both looked at me like I'd said something totally insane.

"Fine. If you won't see about changing the reservation, I will." I took a step toward the reservation desk, then stopped.

“Actually, what room do you have Dom in?”

Adriana made an annoyed sound, then pulled something up on her tablet. “I have no idea why we keep paying for two rooms since you two have been staying together, but Dom is registered to room 3610. It has an ocean view.

“Perfect. I’ll just call him and tell him I’ll meet him up there.”

Slipping my phone out of my pocket, I hit Dom’s number.

“Pronto.” I loved the way he answered the phone.

“Hey. It’s me. Where are you?”

I heard rustling, and then he said, “In my room. Are you here? Want me to come down? What room are you in?”

“No. I’ll come to you. 3610, right?”

“Uh, yeah. But you hate staying on a high floor. I don’t mind coming down.”

“I want to come up.”

“Uh, okay. I’ll be waiting.”

I ended the call and waltzed toward the elevators, leaving Sal and Adriana standing in the lobby, staring after me.

The elevator ride up to the thirty-sixth floor made my stomach drop and my ears pop, but a few seconds later, I was standing in front of Dom’s door. He opened it the second I knocked and pulled me into his arms, kissing me soundly before pushing me away and urging me back into the hall. He caught me when I almost tripped over my suitcase, which sat on the floor behind me. He glanced at me, then at my luggage. “Tesoro, I should have warned you. My room is on the corner, and there are two big sets of windows. Let’s go downstairs.”

Shouldering past him, rolling my bag behind me, I pushed into the room. It was lovely, all modern décor, white linens, light wood finishes, and bold teal and navy accents that pulled in hues from the ocean visible from the windows. Leaving my bag behind, I crossed to the glass that looked out over the ocean instead of the boardwalk and took in the view.

“Dante? Are you all right?”

I nodded. “I just felt like being up high. It’s weird, but it’s like my fear of heights evaporated overnight.” I glanced over my shoulder to see Dom staring at me, much like Adriana and Sal had in the lobby. “I swear I’m fine. Being up high like this just feels right, and God, look at this view.”

Dom walked up behind me and pressed his nose to my scent gland, then followed with kisses. “It is a beautiful view.”

The line was cheesy as hell, but it still made my knees wobble. “I meant out there.”

“Hmm.” Dom hummed against my skin, lighting me up from the inside.

Turning in his arms, I rested my head against his shoulder and breathed him in too, letting his scent soothe me. Since discovering we were fated to one another, we’d tried very hard to make it seem like everything was normal, but I hated being away from him, and the longer I went without his scent, the more tense I became. The trip up from Virginia Beach had felt especially long because I had to stay focused on captaining the boat, and that was harder to do while missing my mate than I thought it would be.

“This is where I want you to claim me,” I whispered against his neck.

Dom squeezed me tight. “This is the perfect place. Eagle shifters usually claim each other in the trees. In Frascati, we have tree houses built into the trees on pack lands so eagles can claim their mates there. They fly up, shift, claim each other, then shift and fly down. It’s one of the most important aspects of our culture.”

“Where do you bite to seal the claiming bond?” I could have read about this or asked Merritt, who was studying shifter origins and mating customs, but it felt important to hear it from Dominic. If my true mate had been another dolphin, we wouldn’t need to have this conversation. Somehow, talking about mating traditions and customs felt intimate. I would

have a lot to learn about pack life with Dom as my mate, but I was excited to learn and grow in that knowledge.

“We do a partial shift, just our beaks, and make two V-shaped bites that form a sort of upside-down heart shape at the base of the neck.” He trailed his fingers over my skin, raising goose bumps. “Here.” He pressed his fingertips over the pulse point between my shoulder and clavicle.

“What about the wolves? How would the wolf part of you claim me?”

“For them, it’s much easier, just a simple exchange of claiming bites in the same spot”—he smoothed his fingers over my skin again until it almost felt like the heat of his touch was branding a mark into place—“wherever and whenever they want. Do dolphin shifters have special claiming traditions I should know about? I admit I’m a bit out of my depth in terms of what I know about your shifter species.”

I snickered at Dom’s accidental water metaphor. “I see what you did there.”

It took him a second, and then he laughed.

“We usually claim each other in the water. In Cuba, where my family is from, there is a special lagoon, Laguna de los Amantes, where only fated mates can go to swim together the first time they want to see each other in their shifted forms and to claim each other.”

Dom pulled back and looked down at me. “Did we break a rule? Was I not supposed to see your dolphin until after we were mated?”

Smiling up at him, I said, “My family isn’t very traditional, so I’m sure they wouldn’t care, though I don’t think they would have expected me to find my true mate in an eagle shifter. The way I see it, we are making our own rules.”

“I agree. I’m not sure what my family, what the pack, will say when I tell them a dolphin is joining our number. Though they did accept Everett’s beluga whale with open arms.”

“The Frascati pack is pretty unique.”

“True. We are the oldest interspecies pack in the world. I’m sure you’re not the first dolphin we’ve accepted.”

“And if we have babies, I won’t be the last.”

His hand drifted down to my stomach and slid under my shirt, rubbing over my belly. “Mmm. I love the sound of that.”

I leaned into his touch and the fantasy of carrying his children, the next generation of the Frascati pack.

“What does your mating mark look like? You said dolphin shifters scrape their teeth over each other, but is that it?”

“No, those marks just show the strength and trust in our bond, but they are not permanent. The permanent claiming bite is in the same place you mark, and we also do a partial shift, just our teeth, to make two circular marks. In our dolphin forms, the marks show up as notches in our dorsal fins. I can’t wait to see what your beak mark looks like on my dolphin.” My inner omega stirred just thinking about it. I wanted Dom to claim me so badly.

“So how do you want me to put my mark on you? Because I’m desperate for everyone to know you’re mine. The last few days have been agony, knowing you are mine but being unable to show it.”

“Well, we’re already up high, so that takes care of one eagle tradition, even though I can’t fly. Hold on.” I wiggled out of his hold and crossed to the bathroom. The room was surprisingly large, modern like the rest of the suite, and there was a huge rectangular tub to the right of the shower. Perfect. Returning to the bedroom, I gestured over my shoulder. “There’s a tub in there big enough for both of us.”

“Excellent.”

“It’s perfect.” I stepped back into the circle of his arms, where I felt the most at home I’d ever felt outside of Miami, and reveled in the moment.

Before the week was over, Dom and I would be mated for life. The summer had been a whirlwind, and I had a feeling there was still more adventure left to come.

A huge yawn cracked my jaw, and Dom gave me a squeeze. “Are you tired, tesoro?”

I was tired, exhausted in fact, and it hit me like a ton of bricks. Taking a step back, I lowered myself onto the end of the bed. “What does that mean?”

“Tesoro?”

I nodded, and Dom smiled. “What do you think it means?”

“I want to say it means molten-hot sex god, but it doesn’t feel like enough syllables.”

Dom chuckled, the sound echoing around the sparsely furnished space and settling around me like a weighted blanket. I loved the sound of his laugh. “You are very close.” He slid a hand around my waist and encouraged me to rest my head against his shoulder, then pressed a kiss to my hair. “It means treasure. Because you are the thing I treasure most.”

My head popped up off his shoulder. “But wait. You started calling me that before you knew we were mates.”

He shrugged. “So I did.”

That made me smile, even as I closed my eyes.

“Ah, tesoro, you need to sleep. Let me tuck you in.” Dom stood, then offered me a hand. I took it, and he helped me to my feet, folded the soft white comforter down on the bed, and pushed me down again so he could help me slip my shoes off. “Lie down.” I did, and he pulled the cover up over me. It had been a long summer, and the circuit was almost over, but I’d never been this tired. My eyes were closed, and I felt myself drifting even before Dom had finished tucking me in.

When he kissed my cheek and whispered something in Italian, then started to leave, I grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “Stay.”

“Always.”

\* \* \*



THE ROOM WAS CAST in shadows, and I was alone when I woke up. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, my head swimming a little and making me feel like I might be sick. A few long, steady breaths shoved the feeling away enough for me to realize there was water running somewhere and faint flickering light was coming from the bathroom.

“Dom?” I said, rising on slightly unsteady legs. What the hell was wrong with me? Maybe it was the end of my heat? I hadn’t been as horny as often since Virginia Beach, but I still wanted Dom all the time. Maybe since we’d finally learned we were mates, my heat would dull. Maybe being around Dom all summer was what had made this particular heat season so unbearable.

I filed all my questions away to ask Everett when I spoke to him when we got to Maine. I was also looking forward to meeting Merritt’s best friend, Jonah, who was mated to Everett’s good friend Edwin, who was a narwhal. We were turning into quite the little pod of sea shifters who’d found their fated mates in land shifters.

“In here.” Dom’s voice sounded from the bathroom, and I headed that way.

When I saw him, my mouth dropped open. The whole room was awash in gentle candlelight and smelled faintly of lavender. He’d filled the huge tub, and there were rose petals floating on the water. My man was wearing a fluffy white robe, and as I crossed the threshold, mouth still agape, he reached over to the vanity and gestured to another one. “I had these brought up.”

I took another look around. The whole scene was breathtaking. “What’s all this for?”

Dom shrugged. “I realized talking about our claiming rituals earlier wasn’t the sexiest or most romantic thing, and I wanted to make it up to you.” He closed the distance between us and pressed his lips to mine. “I’m done waiting, Dante. I want everyone who sees you or scents you to know you belong to me.”

A shudder rippled through me. I wanted that too. Maybe for longer than I'd even known. I pressed my lips to Dom's again, and he deepened the kiss, sliding his hands under my shirt. He let his fingers trace over my skin for a long moment before he pushed the shirt up and over my head, then let it fall to the floor.

He continued to touch me, lighting up my nerve endings with gentle caresses that raised goose bumps on my skin while making me feel like I was on fire. Tracing down my chest, his fingers slid beneath the waistband of my pants, and he pushed them and my underwear to the ground. I was glad I'd showered and changed into Azucar sailing team sweats before I'd left the marina.

I stepped out of my pants and underwear and stood completely naked in front of Dom. His gaze raked over me, and if his touch had felt like fire, the heat of his gaze felt like a branding, like even if he didn't claim me that night, I would still wear his marks. But I wanted more, so I stepped forward and untied the belt of the robe, then slipped my hands under the lapels and pushed the plush white fabric off his shoulders. When he was naked, the robe crumpled at his feet, I brought us together skin to skin. We were both hard, and I felt every ridge of his erection against my abdomen. Even though I was leaking slick for him and wanted him inside me, the need felt different, more subtle and indulgent.

Dom stepped back and turned to swing a leg over the tub. Once he was in the water, resting against the back, he held out a hand, and I took it, letting him help me into the tub. Nestled between his legs, I felt safe and at home, and I knew those feelings would intensify once we laid claim to one another and made our mating official. His lips traced from my ear to the edge of my shoulder, running across the sensitive skin over my scent gland. The room was silent except for our breathing and the gentle lap of water against our skin when one of us moved.

“Do you want me to be inside you when I claim you?” Dom asked, his voice as much a caress against my skin as his lips.

“Yes. Please.” I let my head drop back against his chest as he continued his soft assault on my senses. Beyond the lavender-and-rose-scented water, I smelled him, his leather, pine, and moss scent surrounding me. I understood now why he’d smelled like home that day outside Lita’s. He was my home. And as his fingers mapped the skin of my chest and abdomen and teased at my nipples, I was ready to take the next step into our future. “Now, Dom. I’m ready.”

Strong hands gripped my hips and lifted me just enough that he could notch himself against my opening. I squirmed in his grasp as my slickness eased the way and he slid inside me. If his scent made me feel like I was home, having him inside me made me feel whole, complete in a way I’d never missed because I’d never known I was missing it. Now that I knew, I didn’t want to ever be without the feeling. Without Dom.

Settling against him with him fully seated inside me, I leaned back against him again, and he resumed his teasing torture with questing fingers and his hot mouth. By the time he started whispering Italian words into my skin, I was dying to feel his bite and to give him my own.

“Sei mia per sempre, tesoro. Il mio inizio e la mia fine.” The next pass of his mouth over the skin of my shoulder felt different, the touch hard and smooth with a sharp edge. His hand traced down my chest and over my stomach, which I hoped would one day swell with his babies, and wrapped around my dick at the same moment his beak bit into my shoulder. There was a momentary flash of pain, then the most exquisite sensation of pleasure, like I was being filled but also doing the filling. The second bite brought no pain at all, and as Dom’s tongue licked over the marks, I came, unable to hold back the pleasure that rushed through every atom of my body.

Dom had switched back to English, and as I came down from the high of my orgasm, I could finally make out his words. “You are mine forever, my treasure. My beginning and my end.”

“Dom,” I said, the words choked off with emotion.

“Shh, delfino. It’s your turn to mark me. Turn around. I want to be inside you when you claim me too.”

Water splashed over the edge of the tub as I lifted off Dominic’s lap and turned around. When I was straddling him, I reached behind me and lined him up, then sank back down onto him. That same feeling of being filled and doing the filling washed over me, and I had to bite my lip to hold back my pleasure. I ran my hands over Dom’s shoulders and my fingers along his neck, looking for the spot where his pulse beat the strongest. When I found it, I licked and sucked at the spot until Dom was thrusting up into me, his head tipped to the side, giving me full access.

I whispered the same words he’d said in Italian in my own native tongue. “Eres mía para siempre, mi amor. Mi principio y mi fin.” Then I called forth my dolphin, allowing just enough of a shift that my teeth would be sharp enough to mark Dom’s skin. The second my teeth pierced him, I felt his dick swell, his knot growing at the base and locking us together a second before I felt the hot rush of his cum inside me. I rode his knot until I came again. We stayed in the tub until the water got cold, and then Dom helped me out and wrapped me in one of the fluffy robes.

He’d thought ahead, and at some point, food had been delivered, charcuterie and fruit like what we’d eaten on my boat that day in North Carolina, and we took turns feeding each other until we were too tired and sated to keep our eyes open.

As I was drifting off, I realized I’d never given Dominic the claiming words that transcended the differences in our shifter species and belonged only to us.

“You’re mine forever, Dominic Pavone. My beginning and my end.”

# CHAPTER 18



## DOMINIC

*K*nocking on the door pulled me from sleep, and with a kiss to his shoulder, right over the bite I'd given him last night, I reluctantly rolled away from the heat of my mate's body to answer it before whoever was on the other side woke him up. I grabbed the robe I'd worn last night and threw it on, haphazardly tying the belt so the asshole forcing me out of bed wouldn't get an eyeful of my morning wood.

"What?" I said, flinging the door open to reveal an annoyed-looking Sal, who was already dressed for the day in a navy-blue shirt suit and red patent-leather pumps.

Her face softened as she sniffed the air, and then her eyebrows rose. "I think that's my line. Followed by a *the hell*. As in what the hell? Why do you smell like Dante? And what the hell is that?" She pointed a perfectly manicured finger at my shoulder where the robe wasn't covering Dante's claiming bite.

My inner alpha wasn't impressed with her intrusion or her questions, but I was pleased she'd recognized the mark. "Dante and I are mates."

Her eyes went wide again, and then she smiled. I was sure I'd seen Sal smile at some point, but I couldn't remember when, and the expression caught me off guard. "Congratulations. I'm sorry to have interrupted, but when Dante didn't make our meeting or return my calls, I got worried. You two take all the time you need. Adriana and I will hold down the fort until you get to the airfield." She turned on her heel, then called back over her shoulder, "If you

make it to the airfield. Just give me a heads-up if you aren't going to fly today so I can have George tweak the schedule."

I nodded and watched her walk away. For reasons I couldn't explain, I expected that to go a whole lot worse.

"Who was that?" Dante asked from the bed, and his voice sounded off. When I looked at him, he was smiling, his face glowing with happiness.

"Sal. She was worried when you missed your meeting, so she came to check on you." Dante leaped out of bed, then fell back. "Tesoro, are you all right?"

He waved me away. "Just got a little dizzy. I'm okay." I wasn't sure I believed him. He looked a little pale.

Dante stood again, but I saw the slight wobble in his legs. Something was wrong, but if Dante wouldn't tell me what he was feeling, I couldn't help.

"Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

Dante shook his head, his face losing another shade of color, and I wondered if he was going to be sick. He didn't say anything, but he walked to the window and looked out over the water. I watched the steady rise and fall of his shoulders as he took a few deep breaths. Yesterday, I was too excited about the prospect of getting to claim him that I didn't really question his sudden about-face regarding heights. Now he was standing next to the window, looking down, and it seemed to be calming him. A couple weeks ago, he would have panicked just being in a room this high up, let alone looking down from such a height. I remembered how tentative he'd been at the hotel in Savannah. We'd had a balcony off our second-floor hotel room, and he'd barely been able to take two steps over the threshold to tell me room service had arrived.

Something was definitely up.

"Do you think it's the height? We can go down to your room. I want you to be hap—"

"No!" Dante's yell echoed around the room, and he closed his eyes and took a breath before starting again. "No. I need to be up here. I need to be able to see any threats."

Threats? What threats was he worried about?

“What do you mean, threats?”

He shook his head. I was pleased to see his color looked normal again. “I don’t know. Being up high just feels... safe, you know?”

I raised a brow but said nothing, and he didn’t continue.

“I need to get ready and get over to the airfield. We have another group of families and children coming to watch practice later this morning.”

What I really wanted was to stay in bed and make love to my mate until we were both too tired to get it up, but apparently, that wasn’t in the cards for us. Instead, I settled for a quick shower together, where I got to watch water and soap slide over Dante’s body, but neither of us got off. After, while I was getting dressed, I wondered if it was a good sign or not that Dante’s heat symptoms seemed to be tapering off. He hadn’t woken up once after we’d fallen asleep last night, and over the past month, a joint shower would definitely have resulted in orgasms.

“I love you, Dante,” I whispered into his ear as the elevator took us down to the lobby.

“I love you, Dom. Be careful today.” He’d taken to telling me to be careful anytime I went near my plane since the almost incident in Virginia Beach.

“Always.”

“I know, but I need you to come home to me in one piece.” There was real fear that something would happen in his voice, and I grabbed his hand and wove our fingers together.

“I will be fine, tesoro. Just fine.” I pressed a quick but hot kiss to his lips, then tugged him across the lobby. A dark SUV was already waiting to take us to the airfield, and I opened the door and helped him in.

When we arrived at the private airstrip we were using as our takeoff and landing spot, we parted ways with another kiss. I hated the shows where the airfield was located a



distance from where the spectators were. Once the show started, Dante would be with the spectators on the beach and boardwalk, where the control point for the show and all the VIP and sponsors' tents were. I'd be here with all the other pilots.

I hadn't liked being away from him for a long time, and I hated it even more now, though I did take comfort in the fact that Juan, Dante's driver, had scented our bond that morning. He was another dolphin shifter, and when I slid my collar aside to show him the mark, he said congratulations and gave me a fist bump.

I was definitely going to be that guy. My sisters had been the same way when they'd met their mates, showing off their bites like human women showed off their diamond engagement rings. One of my sisters wore only tank tops for the whole summer so everyone could see she was mated. A lot of other members of the pack were the same way, and I wondered if it had anything to do with proving we were growing the pack with new mates and babies.

As if I'd summoned her by thinking of the pack, my phone rang, and I pulled it from my pocket to see my nonna's wrinkled face on the screen.

"Pronto," I said, connecting the call and answering in Italian.

"Finally, you answer the phone."

I laughed. "Finally, you call."

"Funny, bello, very funny."

"How are you, Nonna?"

"I had a dream last night." My nonna's dreams were legendary among the pack. She'd been wife of the pack alpha before my grandfather died and my uncle took over. She was still a pack elder and a member of the council that advised the alpha. There was a rumor that her position of power within the pack gave her special gifts to help its members. It was largely believed her dreams could predict the future. She'd never had any dreams about me, but she'd allegedly had a dream that

Everett would bring us a new packmate and join the pack himself, and she wasn't surprised at all when I'd called my uncle and asked him to make time to meet with my friend.

There were a bunch of similar instances documented throughout her life, and I'd never been able to tell if she was just really good at reading people or if she really did have some sort of sight.

"What was your dream about? Is Rosa going to have another baby?"

"Bah. No, bello, this one was about you."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I dreamed you met your fated mate and you claimed him. That you made him part of our pack, though he is the first of his kind to join us."

Her words left me speechless.

"Dominic? Are you still there?"

"I'm here, Nonna."

"It is true, isn't it? You have claimed your true mate."

A lump lodged in my throat, thinking about Dante and how beautiful it had been to make him mine last night. "Si."

"And you will bring him and your babies to Frascati to see us, yes?"

My brain snagged on one word, and my throat went dry, the world tilting a little on its axis as a vision of Dante round with my babies flashed through my head. God, I wanted that future so badly. "Babies, Nonna?"

"Si. Two beautiful babies."

"This was all in your dream?"

"Si. Within the year."

"This year?" It was already almost August.

"Yes. You will bring your new family to the bonding ceremony so they can be made official members of the pack."

As much as I wanted to believe her prophecy, I wasn't sure I could. "Nonna, my mate may not be able to have children."

"Bah. He will. I have seen it."

"Nonna..."

"This will happen, bello."

I appreciated her optimism, but for now, I wouldn't say anything to Dante. He didn't need false hope offered by another old woman's supposed vision, even if I did believe his ex was just an asshole who'd lied and manipulated him. After Everett examined him and gave us the real story, then I could decide if he needed to know what she'd seen in her dream. Changing the subject, I asked, "What is happening with the pack? Is Zio Nicolo doing okay?"

She filled me in on what was happening back home, and I ached to see my family. The knot eased when Dante's face, complete with the smirk I'd once hated but now loved, swam through my thoughts. He was my home now, my family, and wherever he was, I would be happy.

By the time we hung up, the safety checks were already underway, and I hustled to my plane, wondering what any children we'd have would look like.

I didn't see Dante until we were back in the hotel room later that night, but I could swear I felt his eyes on me the whole time I was in my plane and flying with the stunt team.

"I got dinner. I thought maybe we could just lie low tonight and watch a movie or something," he said the second I stepped through the door.

"That sounds amazing. Can I grab a shower first?"

"It's just pizza, so if you're good eating it cold, that's fine."

I crossed the room and dropped a kiss on his nose. The small action made him blush because he now knew what that kind of kiss meant—home, family, unconditional love. "Considering that most American pizza is a crime against real

Neapolitan or even Sicilian pizza, warm, cold, it doesn't matter."

"You are such a snob."

I pecked another kiss to his nose because I couldn't stop myself. "That is true. It's part of my charm."

He scoffed. "Do me a favor and charm me less."

I stood and took a step toward the bathroom, pulling aside my collar as I walked backward. "You see this? Looks like you're already stuck with me, delfino."

"Yeah, yeah. Guess it's a good thing I love your snobby ass."

"Very much so." To punctuate my point, I dropped my pants, showing off the ass in question.

I tried not to worry when Dante didn't follow me into the bathroom. Last week, a stunt like that would have led to shower sex. That night, nothing except a deep laugh followed.

When I returned to the room, wrapped in the fluffy white robe I was beginning to love as much as I loved the man laid out on the bed wearing its mate, I saw he'd laid down a towel, and the open pizza box sat on top of it, a slice already missing.

"Sorry. I was starving and couldn't wait," Dante said around a bite.

"No problem." I flopped down on the bed and scooted up so I could lean against the headboard. The home screen for one of the streaming services was pulled up on the TV, but Dante had muted the sound.

"Also, I demand to know how this"—he brandished his slice of pizza, the cheese greasy and thick, at me—"is a crime against pizza. This is goddamn delicious is what it is."

I grabbed my own slice and bit into it. Over the years I'd spent living in North America, I'd gotten used to eating pizza with my hands, but I still didn't like it. "This is part of it." I transferred the greasy slice to my other hand and held it up. "Civilized people eat pizza with a fork and knife the way God intended."

Dante scoffed. “Puh-lease.”

“It’s true, tesoro. I will show you when you come to Italy.” My mate went quiet, chewing on the bite of pizza he’d taken and my words, and I wondered if I’d said something wrong. I couldn’t think of anything that would have upset him, so I changed the subject. “I spoke to my nonna today.”

“Who?”

“My grandmother.”

“Is she well?”

“She is. She had a dream about me. That I’d met my mate. She’s looking forward to meeting you.”

Dante ripped off a bite of chewy pizza crust with his teeth and didn’t say anything while he chewed. There was definitely something wrong, though. Now that we were bonded, I could feel his emotions. It was easy to sense his joy and worry—I’d felt both that day while I’d been in the air—but this was something deeper, more complicated and complex, and I didn’t understand.

Setting my pizza back in the box and wiping my hand on the towel, I reached for Dante’s hand where it rested on the bed between us. “What’s wrong?”

“You know, dolphins aren’t really pack animals, right?”

Was that what was bothering him? “So?”

“Well, what if I’m not cut out to be part of your pack? I’m not a wolf or an eagle.”

“I know. Neither is Everett.”

Dante’s eyes went wide. “He’s a member of your pack?”

I shrugged and picked up my slice of pizza again, if only because I was starving. “Of course. He is Merritt’s mate.”

“I don’t get it.”

“A lot of this is Merritt’s story to tell, but when he was accepted to the pack, we didn’t know Everett was his fated mate. Nonna had a feeling, but they hadn’t recognized it or

claimed each other. If they had been mated, then Everett would have automatically been accepted into the pack when Merritt was.”

“Okay, but you’ve been a member of the Frascati pack since birth. We weren’t mated when you were accepted either.”

“True. Which means you’ll probably need to fill out the paperwork like Ev had to.”

“And that’s the part that worries me. What if they say I’m not welcome?”

“Really? You do know my uncle is the alpha, yes? If my zio Nicolo says no, my grandmother will bring him around. Besides, it’s not just his decision. The whole council decides. There’s no way in hell my nonna will let them not accept my mate.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Don’t let this worry you. I would say it’s all a formality at this point. You’ll fill out the paperwork, go to the bonding ceremony, and then you’ll be one of us.”

Dante snickered, then said in a creepy monotone, “One of us. One of us.”

“Very funny.”

Dante grabbed another piece of pizza, took a few bites, then swallowed and said, “What’s it like?”

I swiped more grease from my hand. “What’s what like?”

“Being part of a pack. I mean, my pod is my pod, but they are just my family. We aren’t tied into a larger group of people. And nothing bad happens to me when I’m away from them. I mean, I miss them, but it doesn’t make me sick or anything.”

His question was a good one. I’d never not been part of the pack, so I wasn’t sure how to answer. “Merritt might be the better person to ask, though his reaction might have been different because he is a wolf. And he was already really sick, at least his wolf was, before he got to us.” Dante was picking

at the cheese on his pizza, and I reached over to tip his chin up so he was looking at me. “Do you remember what it was like the moment you knew we were true mates?”

“I’ll never forget it. It was like I could feel you inside me.” Now I snickered, and Dante hit my shoulder. “Not like that.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Go ahead.”

“It was like I could feel what you were feeling. You were all I could see and smell. It felt like I saw every moment of our future and what it would feel like to grow old with you. I knew until our last breaths that you would be mine and I would be yours, and we would keep each other safe.”

“It was the same for me. And that’s sort of how it feels to be part of the pack. It’s hundreds of people all over the world all looking out for you and each other. That’s the best part of being a member of the Frascati pack. We can be far away, but the pack magic means that bonded feeling never goes away.”

He finished his pizza and stared out the huge windows overlooking the city. Lights dotted along the coast. “I think I get why you like flying. There is something kind of magical about the view.”

But I wasn’t looking at the skyline; I was looking at him. And maybe it was as cheesy as the pizza, but he was more beautiful than anything I’d ever seen from the air. “Yeah, it really is.”

He turned to look over his shoulder, expecting to find my focus on the view, but his robe had slid down, and my gaze caught on the V-shaped bite in the bend between his shoulder and neck. My mark on his skin was perfection. Pushing up to my knees, I moved up behind him and pressed a sucking kiss to the bite. Dante shivered and tipped his head to the side to give me better access. I tortured his neck with licks and nips and kisses until the scent of his slick was strong in the air. Then I moved the pizza box away and laid him out on the big bed. We made love until the lights of the city started winking out below us, and I woke up with him in my arms, the rising sun painting Dante’s skin in a wash of rose gold that reminded me of the buildings I’d seen in Little Havana.

And I knew in that moment, I'd never get tired of waking up next to him.

It was a good thing we had forever.



# CHAPTER 19



## DANTE

“*Y*ou have five seconds to spill the deets on your own before I start the full court, best friend press.” Sal sat on the couch in her suite with one leg tucked up underneath her. How she managed that in a skintight pencil skirt would always remain a mystery. Her heels were kicked off under the coffee table.

Adriana was making a cup of tea at the coffee station.

They’d let me have space in Atlantic City and hadn’t come banging down the door, asking questions about how long Dominic and I had known we were fated or when we were going to tell everyone we were mates. But in New Haven, once again, my luck had run out.

Honestly, I was too damn tired to care.

The dizziness I’d been feeling off and on was worse in the morning, and in general, it had been getting worse all around. Dom was worried, even though I kept telling him I was okay, but I knew since he could feel at least some of what I was feeling now that we were bonded, he knew I wasn’t telling the whole truth.

“Dom and I are fated mates.”

Adriana dropped her teacup. The splash of tea onto the counter and floor almost covered the short string of curses she let out. “Are you kidding me?” she asked, wiping some of the spill into the sink.

I nodded. “We figured it out in Virginia Beach after the almost crash. And we claimed each other in Atlantic City.” I pulled my collar aside to show them the claiming bite. Adriana abandoned the tea mess, and Sal leaned forward to get a closer look. Both women made cooing noises of pleasure. “Any other questions?”

“I have so many I don’t even know where to start,” Adriana said, “so I’ll hold them until I can sort it all out.”

Sal just smiled. “The near crash must have been the kind of event you needed to bring the connection out. Maybe almost losing him made your inner omega realize you were meant for each other.”

I shrugged and yawned wide. God, I was exhausted. Resting my head back against the couch cushion, I said, “Seems like it.”

“Are you sure it’s not something else?” Adriana had a new cup of tea and had settled into a wingback chair across from where Sal and I were on the sofa.

“Like what?” I still had my eyes closed, but I could almost feel the women exchanging a meaningful glance.

“I don’t know exactly, but you’ve been off since Virginia. The high hotel rooms, the dizzy spells—”

I opened my eyes and sat up, looking between them. “What dizzy spells?” I thought I’d been covering them up pretty well.

Sal pursed her lips. “Are you sick?”

Maybe I was. I’d almost thrown up that morning when I woke up and felt like the room was spinning. The only thing that stopped me from hurling over the side of the bed was Dom’s scent in my nose.

“I don’t think so.”

Both women studied me intently, then sniffed at the air. Adriana was a Florida panther shifter, and I knew she had an incredible sense of smell. During the winter, she could smell

when I was getting a cold and started pumping me full of vitamin C and chicken soup before I even felt sick.

Her nose wrinkled, and I worried she'd scented something serious, but then she shook her head. "You smell different since Virginia Beach. Like Dom and something else, but I can't figure out what it is. It's almost"—she stood, walked over, and took another big whiff while I tried not to flinch—"chalky. I don't know how else to describe it."

Sal leaned in for a better smell too, though her nose wasn't nearly as good as Adriana's. "Yeah, I can see that."

"So I smell like Dom and chalk?"

They nodded.

"Okay, well, that's totally unexciting. Can I take a nap now?" My eyes slid closed again.

A jolt of worry that wasn't mine pulled me out of a deep sleep, and I blinked awake, looking around. I was lying on a couch, and someone had covered me with a blanket. The sun shining through the window was bright, but I could tell it was late. Maybe even afternoon.

Sitting up, I rubbed at my eyes, trying to keep the room from spinning as my brain came back online. The last thing I remembered was being in Sal's suite, which was where I had to be now—the couch in the room I was sharing with Dom was pale blue, and the one I was on was blue-and-white striped. When I stretched a hand out toward the coffee table, reaching for my phone, my stomach twisted uncomfortably, and I bent over, breathing deeply so I wouldn't puke on the hotel's faux antique rug.

There was definitely something wrong. I sat still and breathed slowly, and in a few minutes, I felt better. A plane buzzed past the building, and from my vantage point on the nineteenth floor, the highest floor offered in all of New Haven—Atlantic City had spoiled me—I saw a savoy blue plane.

Dominic.

Which meant it was at least two o'clock in the afternoon. Which meant I'd slept all damn day.

And I'd happily close my eyes and go right back to sleep.

Finally feeling steady, I reached for my phone again and turned it over. I had a screen full of missed calls and texts.

Adriana, obviously still worried, had sent me several links to online articles that detailed my symptoms. According to the internet and self-taught Dr. Adriana Garras, I was anemic, had mono, was experiencing motion sickness, or I was pregnant.

The last one brought me up short, but I shoved any hope that bloomed behind my surprise away. I wanted to believe Dom when he said he thought my ex had been a bastard who'd manipulated me, but I had no facts to prove that was true.

Plus, I'd been on birth control all summer. So even with the amount of heat sex Dom and I had been having, the likelihood of a pregnancy was slim to none.

Mono felt like the more likely choice.

We'd been on the road for months and had been meeting new people all over. It wouldn't surprise me, but as I read farther down the list of symptoms, I was missing a lot of them.

My phone vibrated, Sal's picture lighting up the screen and displacing the symptom checker.

"Hello?"

"Hey, you're up? Feeling any better?"

"A little." The lie was easy to tell since she wasn't looking at me. I didn't want her to worry.

She made an unconvinced noise. "You are going to see Dominic's doctor friend when we get to Portland, right?"

"Yes, but if I've got mono, I'm not sure there's much he's going to be able to do. Everett is an obstetrician."

"Mono? Who said you've got mono?"

"Adriana sent me a symptom checker, and that was one of the top hits."

"I'd believe that if Dom was sick too. With the amount of time you guys have spent sucking face, he'd definitely have

picked up anything contagious.”

Sal’s logic, as usual, was unparalleled. “Yeah. It’s probably just exhaustion. It’s been a long summer, and my heat season was brutal.”

“Yeah...” She trailed off. “How have you been doing with that? You still have a few weeks left to go.”

I took stock of my body. I felt... normal. Like nine months out of the year normal. “I actually think it’s over.”

She made another considering noise. “I think it’s a good thing you’re going to see Dom’s doctor friend. Why don’t you take the rest of the day off and rest. Adriana and I have things covered here.”

The thought of getting up, getting to the waterfront, and hobnobbing with folks made me want to crawl out of my skin. I knew people would ask questions, and some of the alpha VIPs I rubbed shoulders with in the corporate world would blame my absence on my inability to handle the stress, but Sal would put them in their place, and since she was an alpha too, they’d probably barely call her a bitch. “That actually sounds great. Thank you.”

“Of course, Dante. Please take care of yourself.”

I nodded, though she couldn’t see me. “I’m going to head to my room. Thanks for letting me sleep.”

“Anytime.” She hung up, and I stood, breathed through a wave of dizziness, pocketed my phone, and left the room, letting the door close and lock behind me. The suite I was sharing with Dom was just across the hall, but the minute distance felt like a yawning chasm. By the time I crossed the threshold into our room, I was dead on my feet again and flopped facedown onto the bed.

Which was where Dom found me hours later.

# CHAPTER 20



## DOMINIC

“**S**top hovering. I swear I’m feeling better.”

Dante still looked worn-out—dark circles under his eyes, complexion a shade lighter than normal, and posture a little hunched. To say I was worried was an understatement.

What was more concerning was that he hadn’t wanted to have sex at all. It was pretty clear his heat season had ended earlier than expected, but it was like he’d quit sex cold turkey. He still wanted to cuddle and spoon, which I was more than happy with, but it was still strange.

“Tesoro, you don’t look better. And you’re still sleeping, like, ten hours a day.”

A huge yawn cracked his jaw. It was barely five in the evening, and he already looked like he was going to pass out. Granted, it had been a busy day with the final show in Boston wrapping up earlier in the afternoon.

I just needed him to stay awake a little longer. “Do you think you’re up for a surprise?”

His eyebrows rose. “What kind of surprise?”

“The kind that involves getting a little dressed up and going out for a bit.”

Excitement showed in his eyes, and it was the most life I’d seen in them in what felt like too long. “I could definitely be down for that. At least for a little while.”



“Perfect. We have a car coming at six thirty. Does that give you enough time to get ready?”

Dante glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “Yes. Barely, but yes.” He jumped off the bed with more energy than I’d seen him expend in more than a week, and I wondered if maybe he was really feeling better. Clothes flew from his suitcase, and hangers slid across the metal bar in the closet as he rummaged for something to wear. I sat on the chaise by the window, wrapped in the robe I’d taken from the hotel in Atlantic City, and watched the show.

At one point, Dante was strutting around in a pair of seafoam-green briefs that fit him like a second skin, and I couldn’t help getting hard as he bent over his suitcase over and over, putting that gorgeous ass on display.

“What?” Dante asked, and I refocused my attention on his face and the glare he was giving me. “Why’d you growl?”

I hadn’t realized I’d made a sound. “Because you are goddamn gorgeous. Bring that ass over here.”

He smiled and strutted my way, stopping halfway to turn and look over his shoulder at me. “Why, Mr. Pavone, you mean this ass?” He ran a hand over one cheek and winked before continuing my way.

When he was close enough, I pulled him down so he was on my lap, and he wiggled to get comfortable. Tonguing over my mark on his neck, I whispered words of adoration into his skin until his eyelids closed in pleasure.

“Dom, if you want me to be ready, we don’t have time.”

“We have time for this.” Turning him in my arms, I brought my lips down to his. He answered back with equal pressure, and I was lost. Kissing Dante was the most exquisite simple pleasure. If I could kiss Dante while I was flying, I’d make sure my lips never left his.

Our kisses were slow and sensual. There wasn’t time for them to lead to more. And too soon, Dante brought a hand up between us and pushed at my chest. “I love you,” he whispered into the small space left between our mouths.

“I love you too. Forever.”

He slid off my lap and stood, his body on display, and I gave him a thorough once-over, lingering on the swell of his stomach. Dante hadn't been eating well the past week, but I was glad to see he hadn't lost any weight.

My grandmother's words echoed through my head, but until we talked to Everett next week, I couldn't give them space to roam free and nestle into my brain. If Dante could have my babies, I'd make sure my grandmother's dream became a reality.

“I think I've picked an outfit. Just need to shower and do something about my hair.” He sashayed across the room, giving me a show, before slipping into the bathroom and closing the door.

We only kept the driver waiting for five minutes because it took Dante forever to get his hair exactly how he wanted it. I wasn't complaining, and I'd left plenty of time for us to make our reservation because I wasn't sure how bad Boston traffic would be.

We drove along the water for a while as the sun started its slow descent. The longest days of summer were behind us, and evening was creeping in. Fall would be upon us soon, and I wondered if Dante still planned to stay in Maine for a while before heading back to Miami. I'd already started talking to the Fort Lauderdale office about a transfer, but I had time. I wasn't due back to work until October.

“It's crazy how different it is here.”

Dante's quiet statement took me off guard. “In Boston?”

“Yes.” He shook his head. “Sorry. I think I started in the middle there. I was thinking about the ocean. How it's all the Atlantic, but the water here is so different than the water in Miami.”

“I guess I've never really thought about it.”

“Does the sky seem like it would be different?”

“Than Miami? Sure. But I also live fairly close to here, so for me, this feels closer to home.”

Dante’s face fell. “How are we going to make this work? I love you, and my heart hurts thinking about being away from you, but I can’t live where it snows.”

I grabbed his hand and wove our fingers together. “Already working on that, delfino.”

“Really?”

“Really. AeroCA has offices and test facilities in Fort Lauderdale. I know it will be a little bit of a commute, but it’s a hell of a lot better than being in another country. I’ve put in transfer paperwork and should have an answer soon.”

“Dom!” Dante’s eyes swam with tears.

“When I said forever and claimed you, that was real, tesoro. I go where you go.”

A tear slipped down his cheek, sparkling in the evening sunlight. “How did I get so lucky?”

“Nah, tesoro, I’m the lucky one.” I squeezed his hand in the way that had become custom for us. “Let me show you tonight.”

The car pulled to the curb in front of one of the tallest buildings in Boston. One of my packmates, an eagle shifter named Giancarlo Ribissi, had been lucky enough to secure part of the top floor for a restaurant and rooftop bar sixty-two stories above the city. I’d been lucky enough to use my pack connection to secure a reservation despite a waiting list that was months long.

“What are we doing here?”

“You’ll see.” Much of the building was dark, the setting sun and city lights reflected on the windows, but the lobby was still brightly lit, and as we stepped into the ultramodern space, we were greeted by a tuxedoed doorman. “Reservation for two at L’Albero.”

The doorman smiled and nodded, then gestured for us to follow him to a private elevator. Once inside, he swiped a clear

plastic card over a panel in the wall that lit up. He punched in a code, then stepped back. “Enjoy your evening.”

The doors whooshed closed, and the elevator started its ascent fast enough that my ears popped. Dante tangled his fingers with mine. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” I said again with a wink and kiss to his temple.

The elevator ride was fast, and when the doors opened on the sixty-second floor, another tuxedoed individual greeted us.

“Good evening. Welcome to L’Albero. My name is Dimitri, and I will be your host this evening. If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to your table.”

Dante’s eyes were wide, and his mouth hung open a little. I could understand why. L’Albero, which meant *the tree* in Italian, was decorated like a million-dollar tree house at the top of a very expensive tree. Lush leaves hung from the ceiling, and faux branches that went from floor to ceiling divided the space into smaller sections and nooks. The furniture in the room was all dark wood and deep shades of green. Low lighting made the space feel intimate, but the effect was broken up by hidden fairy lights that blinked on and off at random intervals, meant to simulate lightning bugs. I also knew the lighting in the space changed based on the time of day. Hints of sunset color peeked through the leaves at the ceiling. The floors were all wide slices of wood that had been sanded and polished so it felt like you were walking along a cross section of a giant tree. The building was square, but Giancarlo had rounded out his space, which just added to the overall ambiance.

“This is beautiful,” Dante whispered as we followed Dimitri deeper into the restaurant.

“It really is.” I’d only seen the concept art and read through the proposals when Giancarlo had been looking for funding from the pack. I’d worried the concept would come off as cheesy, like some sort of tree-house-themed Rainforest Café, but the space was anything but. It was classy and sophisticated in a playful and intentional way. Without the

tables, chairs, bars, and other diners, it felt like what it was like to sit high in a tree in my eagle form. The colors, the diffusion of light, the feeling of being surrounded and hidden from all sides. He'd captured the essence beautifully.

"Here we are." Dimitri pulled out Dante's chair and waited for him to sink into it before sliding it in closer to the table and unfolding the forest-green napkin from his place setting for him. I seated myself.

"I understand you haven't dined with us before. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that is correct."

Dimitri gave us a megawatt smile. "Excellent. It's my pleasure to be the host that gets to work with you this evening." Dante sent me a significant look over the table, but I honestly had no idea what that meant. "At L'Albero, every evening is different. The menu changes nightly and is always a four-course experience." He set down a small tablet. "You'll find tonight's menu here. If you have any allergies or restrictions that are not accommodated by the menu, please let me know. I'll let you look at tonight's offerings while I procure some water for the table. Would you prefer still or sparkling?"

Dante's eyes were still huge, but I nodded at him to make the choice.

"Sparkling, please."

Dimitri nodded and walked away.

Dante slid the tablet closer to himself so he could read it. "Oh my God, Dom. This all sounds amazing."

"I'm sure it is. This restaurant is owned by a packmate, and my uncle and grandmother got to taste some of the food since the pack provided a portion of the initial funding. My nonna, who is a powerhouse in the kitchen in her own right and maybe just a little critical of everyone else's cooking, said she'd never eaten better food. Trust me when I say that's incredibly high praise."

“Noted.” His eyes still raced over the menu. “I’m starving. The last time I went to a restaurant like this was a fundraising event at a new hot spot in Miami.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, why?”

I shrugged. “I kind of assumed since you have a shit ton of money that you dine out like this often.”

Dante smiled and shook his head. “I mean, I could, but I live near some of the best food in Miami, and none of it is served this way.”

“Lita’s?”

Dante beamed. “Exactly. My abuela taught me how to cook when I was young. Like a lot of Cuban grandmothers, food is her love language. I usually cook for myself, boring stuff like grilled chicken, pasta, salads, stuff like that, but if I go out, I’d rather eat off a Styrofoam plate at Lita’s than somewhere fancy. Don’t get me wrong, when I entertain new business associates, I opt for upscale restaurants because that’s what they expect. It’s just not what I prefer.”

That surprised me and contradicted a lot of my assumptions about Dante based on how he liked to dress and the general way he presented himself. Even though we were bonded, it seemed I still had a lot to learn about my mate. And that felt exciting. I hoped it took me the rest of our lives to learn all his secrets.

Dimitri returned and set a deep blue bottle on the table. He opened the bottle and poured water for each of us. The liquid was so cold the glass immediately began to condensate despite the cool temperature of the room.

“Did you have any questions about anything on the menu or any allergies or dietary accommodations you’d like us to make?”

“No, everything sounds wonderful to me,” Dante said.

Dimitri turned my way, and I nodded. “I agree.”

“Excellent.” He slid the tablet off the table and tucked it against his chest. “We offer our menu with paired wine selections or paired cocktails for each course. Do either of those options interest you this evening?”

I assumed Dante, being in the liquor business, would be all over cocktail pairings, but he declined. “Not for me tonight, but thank you.”

Both he and Dimitri glanced my way, and I also declined.

“Very well. If you change your mind or decide you’d like something to drink besides water, please do not hesitate to let me know. I will be back shortly with your first course, the smoked tomato soup and arancini with red Leicester cheese, olive oil, and chives.”

When Dimitri had left us alone again, I reached across the table with my palm upturned, offering Dante my hand. He rested his over mine and smiled at me.

“I feel like I have so much left to learn about you.”

Dante’s head tipped to one side. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve surprised me twice tonight. First, with your preference for comfort food over gourmet dining.”

He held up a hand. “Who said Lita’s isn’t gourmet? You’ve had her food. Tell me it wasn’t at least a little bit of a religious experience.”

I shook my head. “I stand corrected. That *ropa vieja* was out of this world.”

Dante’s smug smirk stretched his lips, and internally, I swooned. I’d fallen for that damn smirk hook, line, and sinker.

“What was the second thing?”

“Hmm?”

“The second thing that surprised you. What was it?”

“Oh. I thought for sure you’d go for the cocktail pairings, you know, being that liquor is kind of your business and all.”

His cheeks went a little pink, and he looked away.

“What? What is it?” I asked, squeezing his fingers between mine.

“I don’t want you to worry.”

Which of course meant I did the exact opposite. “About what?”

Dante kept his face turned away from mine. “I know I said I was feeling better, and I am. For the most part.”

“For the most part?”

“Yes. I’m much less tired.”

“Uh-huh, but?”

He looked down at the tablecloth and picked at an imaginary snag. “But... I’ve still been getting really dizzy in the mornings. Sometimes during the day. I figured it probably wasn’t a good idea to drink while I was still feeling that way.”

I was definitely worried. Dante had been feeling off for weeks with little change in his symptoms. “That was smart.”

“I thought so.”

Dimitri returned carrying two small platters. He set one in front of each of us, then told us to enjoy before walking away again. The soup was served in a dark brown stoneware crock that looked like it had been cut from a tree despite being made of ceramic. Next to the crock were three small arancini. I picked up my spoon to take my first taste of soup and looked at Dante. Two of his arancini were already gone, and he had his eyes closed in pleasure as he chewed.

“Oh my God, that’s good.” He moaned around the bite, and I had to adjust in my seat, the sounds of his pleasure over the food going straight to my dick.

It didn’t get better from there.

The sounds Dante made over each bite of soup, zucchini, yellow squash, and honeyed goat cheese tart, and citrus and soy-glazed duck breast with a sesame roasted root vegetable medley made me harder and harder until I feared getting up from the table.



But that was nothing compared to the near orgasm he had as he took his first bite of Black Forest gâteau. A tiny bit of Chantilly cream clung to his lip, and when his tongue darted out to lick it away, I lost it.

“You have to stop, or I’m going to embarrass myself.”

His eyes popped open, and he looked at me blankly, clearly lost in a haze of food lust. “What?”

“You’ve literally been moaning through four courses. I’m so damn hard I don’t think I can get up.”

Dante chuckled, the sound doing absolutely nothing to help the situation in my pants since his laugh, deep and rich, had always turned me on, even when I didn’t want to want him.

His smile turned wicked as he forked up another bite of chocolate cake and adjusted in his seat. Watching his lips wrap around the tines of the fork, I was distracted and didn’t notice the pressure on my cock until it was almost too late.

“What are you doing?” I hissed, pushing back a little out of his reach and looking down to see his toes against my thigh.

“Just making sure you were telling me the truth.” He smirked. “You really are hard, aren’t you?”

“I’d never lie to you about what you do to me.”

His face went serious. “I know.”

“Good, because I love everything about you, Dante. Every inch of your body. Every new thing I learn. Every assumption I’ve made that you overturn. Every snarky word that passes through your lips. Everything.”

Dante’s eyes went glassy in the low light. “You don’t know how much that means to me.”

I felt his joy through our bond and said, “I think I do.”

Dante put his foot back where it belonged. “Do you suppose we could take our cake to go? I’m suddenly very hungry for a different kind of dessert.”

As though he'd been summoned, Dimitri arrived at the table. "Is everything to your liking?"

Dante nodded. "It's perfect, but I just don't think I can eat another bite. Is it possible to take the rest of our dessert to go?"

"Absolutely. Why don't you go take in the view on the terrace while I box these up for you."

"That sounds wonderful." Dante stood and held out his hand. "Shall we head out to the terrace, Dom?" he asked, wicked smirk on full display. Dimitri, completely ignorant of the interplay going on between us, hustled off toward the kitchen.

"I hate you," I hissed under my breath.

"I know. So much that you love me." He looked around. "No one's paying any attention to us. I'll stand in front of you."

"Not sure that's going to help."

Dante's lower lip jutted out in a faux pout. "Come on, Dom. Please. I really want to see the view."

I stood, and Dante pointedly looked at my dick. "Not helping," I said through gritted teeth.

He smirked again and raised an eyebrow, then turned to head toward the large glass doors that led out onto the terrace.

True to his word, Dante walked slowly enough that my situation was mostly hidden. And when we got out onto the terrace and Dante found a spot near the high glass walls around the edge, he pulled me behind him so I was nestled up against his back.

No matter where we were—Miami, Italy, any number of cities the world over—I knew as long as I had Dante in my arms, I would be home.

"God, this view is gorgeous." Below us, Boston Harbor and the city were lit up. "You can really see the mix of old and new from up here."

But I wasn't looking out over Boston. I was looking at my mate and breathing him in. Since we'd claimed each other, his scent had changed, and I wanted to keep my nose buried in his neck all the time. I kissed over his jaw and tugged on his earlobe with my teeth, eliciting a sweet shudder, and I was about to turn him around and kiss him when a throat cleared nearby.

"I have your desserts here," Dimitri said, offering a dark green paper bag with L'Albero printed in gold on the side.

"Thank you so much, Dimitri," Dante said, taking the bag.

"Also, Mr. Ribissi asked me to tell you that dinner was on him. He offers his congratulations to you and your mate and looks forward to meeting him properly in Frascati next year. He was sorry he was unable to visit with you this evening, but we are short-staffed in the kitchen."

"Thank you. Please tell Giancarlo the food was superb and thank him for his generosity."

Dimitri nodded. "You are welcome to stay as long as you like. The bar out here offers a full menu of after-dinner drinks and wine."

"Thank you, but I think I'm ready to head back to the hotel." Dante turned my way. "Dom, are you ready to go?"

I nodded, and Dimitri said, "Allow me to escort you back to the elevator."

Once the elevator doors slid open, Dimitri used another clear plastic card to light up the panel in the wall and punched in a code.

"Enjoy the rest of your evening," he said as the doors slid closed and the elevator began its descent.

"That was amazing, Dom. Thank you so much."

I pulled Dante into my arms and kissed his nose. "Anything for you, tesoro. Always."

# CHAPTER 21



## DANTE

“Oh shit.” I covered my mouth and made a beeline for the bathroom, kicking the door closed behind me. I had no doubt the slamming door would wake Dom, but I didn’t care as I knelt in front of the toilet and heaved.

I hadn’t been lying when I’d told Dom I was feeling better yesterday, but today, it was like everything caught up with me all at once, worse than before. The dizziness was overwhelming the second I opened my eyes, and I knew I was going to be sick. I couldn’t stop it this time.

Dom’s knock at the door was barely audible over my retching as I expelled everything that was left in my stomach and the room continued to spin.

“Dante? Are you okay?”

“No. Don’t come in here,” I said, my voice weak.

But of course, my stubborn mate didn’t listen, so he was present as I heaved yet again, my stomach contracting painfully.

“Oh, sweet delfino.” I heard the water in the sink run as I laid my head on my arm over the toilet. I felt a little better after puking up my guts, but the room still felt like it was tipping, and I couldn’t guarantee I was done vomiting. I closed my eyes against the tilting room and felt a cool cloth hit my forehead. Dom flushed the toilet and settled on the floor beside me, gently stroking my back. My stomach was still contracting, but the contact was nice, and I focused on his touch instead of the urge to be sick again.

“Dante,” Dom whispered, “I think we need to go see Everett. Today.” He stroked a hand over my hair, and I leaned up into the touch a little. “It’s only a two-hour drive. I’m going to call him now and tell him we’re on our way.”

I wanted to say no, to protest that I was fine, but I sure as shit didn’t feel fine, and if I were being honest with myself, I was a little scared.

“Okay.”

“Good.” Dom started to get up, but I stopped him. “Don’t leave. Having you next to me feels nice.”

He kissed my nose. “I’m just going to get my phone.”

“Kay.”

Dom was back by my side in a flash, and I listened with half an ear as he spoke to Everett, telling him how I’d been exhausted, dizzy, and now sick for the last couple of weeks. I couldn’t hear Ev’s end of the conversation, but I could hear and feel Dom’s worry through our bond. I hated that I was the cause. When Dom hung up and said, “He’s setting up his travel clinic at Edwin and Jonah’s so we have a place to stay. He’ll be waiting for us,” I finally cracked open one eye.

The room stayed still, so I lifted my head. It felt too heavy, and I wanted to crawl back into bed and sleep, but I knew Dom wouldn’t allow it. He stood and helped me to my feet. I still felt shaky but, on the whole, a little better.

“Want to brush my teeth,” I said, and Dom walked me to the sink, grabbed my toothbrush, and put on just the right amount of toothpaste.

The first taste of the mint made me gag a little, but I breathed through it, Dom rubbing my back until I finished brushing and spit into the sink. He took my arm and helped me back to the room, making me sit on the bed while he bustled around, repacking our belongings in record time. Through the whole thing, I felt his rising panic and worry almost like it was my own, and I also felt him struggling to keep it under control.

As he passed by me, taking another stack of clothes to my suitcase, I grabbed his arm. “Dom, I promise I’m okay. I’m

already feeling better. It's all right." It was only half a lie. I was feeling better—if going from feeling like hot dog shit to total crap could be considered an improvement.

"Doesn't matter. We're still going to see Everett. We have to." He bit his lip, and I could tell there was something he wasn't telling me, but I was too tired to press. I let go of his wrist, and he continued to the suitcase, stuffing the pile of clothes in haphazardly.

A knock on the door brought Dom up short, and he glanced back at me before going to open it. I wondered what he'd done before closing my eyes against another wave of nausea.

Sal sailed into the room, her face pinched with concern. "Are you okay? Dom made it sound like you were on your deathbed—oh."

I tried to smile, but a yawn came out instead. "I'm fine."

"Okay, no. Now I believe your mate. Something is definitely wrong." She turned to Dom. "Get him to your doctor friend, and don't let him leave until they figure out what's up. Adriana and I can handle the show setup. There's no practice event in Portland, and it's only one show, so no problem."

I should care about dropping the ball on the show. I should care that I was putting too much on Sal when the circuit was my baby, but I didn't have the energy to put up even a token protest.

Sal gave me one more thorough once-over, made an unhappy face, and pulled Dom aside. They whispered together, talking about me like I wasn't there, but again, I couldn't drum up the energy to care. I just wanted to sleep.

"You take care of him, and so help me God, Dominic, you'd better keep me posted." I had my eyes closed, so I didn't see Sal leave, but I heard the door close behind her.

"Tesoro, are you ready to go? Sal has a car waiting downstairs. Do you want me to help you get dressed?" Cracking my eyes open, I saw Dom's face right in front of

mine. “I’m sure you won’t like what I left out for you to wear, but I want you to be comfortable on the drive.”

Opening my eyes a little more, I looked at where Dom was pointing on the other side of the bed. He’d laid out a pair of seafoam-green sweatpants and a pale pink T-shirt. It didn’t match, but the colors reminded me of home, and that made me feel better.

Dom pulled the clothes closer, and I let him help me put them on.

“Feels like something’s wrong here,” I said.

His eyes went wide. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

My brain had tried to make a joke, but it had obviously fallen flat, and I touched Dom’s arm as he searched my face for signs of distress. Summoning up enough energy for a half smile, I said, “I’m fine. I just meant you’re usually helping me get out of my clothes instead of into them.”

He blew out a big breath. “Phew. Okay.”

When I was dressed and had slipped on a pair of white Adidas slides, Dom grabbed our bags and helped me out of the room, into the elevator, and through the lobby. It was still early, and the scent of the hotel’s complimentary breakfast buffet made my stomach turn over. I refused to vomit on the lobby carpet, though, so I breathed through my mouth until we’d made it outside, then bent over a bush outside the door and puked again.

I heard our bags hit the ground as Dom rushed over. “Oh shit, Dante.” He rubbed soothing circles over my back and whispered calm words until I was done hurling; then, moving super slowly, he helped me into the front seat of the SUV that was waiting and buckled my seat belt.

Pressing a kiss to my nose, he said, “I’ll be right back.”

By the time he got back, I was asleep, and I didn’t wake up again until we pulled to a stop in a circular driveway in front of a large stone house.



Blinking in the sunlight, I turned and found Dom staring at me with concern. “Hey.”

“Hey. Where are we?”

“Edwin and Jonah’s. Everett is waiting for us.”

“What?” I’d slept for the entire ride?

“Yeah, I went in to get these”—he pointed at a couple trash bags folded on the center console—“but when I got back, you were asleep, so I let you rest.”

“Thank you.”

He reached out and grabbed my hand, twining our fingers together. “Anything for you, Dante. Anything.” I gave him the best smile I could and squeezed his hand back. He leaned in and kissed my cheek, then my nose. “Let’s go see what Everett and Edwin can tell us.”

Dom slowly released my hand like he didn’t want to let me go, then got out of the SUV and came around to my side. When my feet hit the ground, I was a little shaky, but I was okay.

Before we made it to the door, a tall, broad man with the most beautiful bronze skin opened it. His salt-and-pepper hair was neatly styled, and his mouth was stretched in a wide smile as he came out to greet us.

He extended a hand to me first, and I took it, shaking weakly. “You must be Dominic and Dante. I’m Edwin Pictou. Everett said you were on your way.”

He shook Dom’s hand next and turned to lead us into the house. Everett must have been on his way out because he was just inside the door. The second he saw me, his eyes widened behind his glasses, and he looked over my shoulder to Dom. I couldn’t tell what their significant glances meant, but the next thing I knew, we were being rushed upstairs. Everett opened the door to a large bedroom that had been turned into a makeshift clinic. A white leather chaise had been positioned to the right of the door between the bed and the wall and appeared to be serving as an examination table. Everett helped me sit down.

“Is it all right if Dom stays for the examination?” he asked as he settled onto a rolling stool.

“I’m not leaving,” Dom said, his voice brooking no argument.

“You will if that’s what Dante wants,” Everett said.

“No, please, I want him to stay.” I reached for his hand, and Dom took it.

“Okay. Now tell me what’s been going on.”

I explained about the worse-than-normal heat season despite the birth control pills that were supposed to dampen it and how my doctor had said it was normal to experience fewer effects after age thirty-five.

Everett crossed one leg over the other and set his elbow on his knee and his chin between his thumb and forefinger. “That can be true, but I think the more likely problem was the presence of your true mate. Your body was ready for him, even if you weren’t. Sometimes it doesn’t matter what a pill is supposed to do. When your true mate is near, all bets are off. What else have you been experiencing?”

I told him about the dizziness, nausea, and exhaustion, and he nodded, mentally making notes.

“With your permission, I’d like to do an exam.”

“That’s why we’re here, Ev.”

Everett shot Dom a glare. “It’s not your body, though, Dom. If Dante doesn’t consent to an examination, I won’t do it, even if you beg me to.”

“But he’s my mate, and he’s sick.” I could feel Dom’s possessiveness and worry pulsing through our bond.

“It’s okay, Dom.” I squeezed his fingers. “Yes, Everett, I consent. But there is another reason I wanted you to see me when we got to town.” I took a deep breath before continuing. “My previous partner”—Dom growled low in his chest, and I sent a wave of reassurance through our bond—“and I were sort of trying for a baby. We weren’t successful, and the testing I had done was inconclusive.”

Ev looked at both of us. “So what is it you want to know?”

“Um, am I able to have babies?”

Everett’s face split into an enigmatic smile. “Let’s find out.”

He pulled a stethoscope from the top drawer of a rolling cart and went through all the standard physical examination steps. He had me lie down, and he felt around my belly.

“Hmm. Any pain here?” He pressed on a spot on my abdomen between my hips.

“No.”

“How about here?” He pressed on another spot, and I shook my head. He laid the stethoscope over the two spots and listened, that same small smile on his lips.

“I’d like to do a few more things.” He sat on the rolling stool and pushed toward a small case, withdrawing a clear container with an orange plastic lid. “I’d like a urine sample.”

I took the offered container and swung my legs off the chaise. The room tilted a little, and Dom and Ev both reached out to steady me as I tried to hold on to my stomach. I couldn’t possibly have anything left to throw up, but I still felt sick.

“Easy. The bathroom is through there.” Everett pointed at an open door across the room. “Take your time, and leave the sample on the sink.”

“Do you want help?” Dom asked as I stood and started that way.

“I’m okay.” The wave of dizziness had passed, and for the moment, I did feel all right.

When I’d done what Everett had asked and washed my hands, I returned to the room. Once I was settled on the chaise again—Dom’s fingers wrapped tightly around mine—Everett stood, rummaged through another drawer in the rolling cart until he found what he was looking for, and went into the bathroom.

“What’s he doing?” Dom whispered.

“No clue.” Exhaustion was starting to pull my lids down again, and the chaise was really comfortable, so I closed my eyes.

A few minutes later, Everett was back. “Well, I have some excellent news.”

“What?” Dom and I said together.

“I had my suspicions, given your symptoms, and the urine test proved it. Turns out I can answer both your questions. Congratulations, Dante, you’re pregnant.”

“What?” Dom and I said together again.

“You’re pregnant. All of your symptoms are morning sickness. And yes, you can definitely get pregnant.”

The room swam, but this time, it wasn’t from dizziness but from the happy tears pooling in my eyes. I was going to have a baby. Dom and I were going to be fathers. My heart felt so full I thought it might burst, and Dom was squeezing my fingers so tight I thought he might pull me off the chaise.

“Holy fucking shit. She was right. I can’t believe she was fucking right.” Dom was muttering more to himself than anyone else.

“Who was right?” Everett asked.

“Nonna. She said she had a dream I’d found my true mate, and we would have babies before the next bonding ceremony.”

Ev shook his head. “Never doubt Frascati pack magic.”

But my mind had caught on something else. “Did you say babies? As in plural?”

“I didn’t. That’s what she said.”

I swung my gaze to Everett, who shrugged. “Pregnancy tests can’t tell me a number, but an ultrasound could. Would you like me to set it up?”

“Yes!” My shout was choked out on a happy sob.

“I’m guessing based on the timeline you laid out that you’re about four weeks along.”

I did some mental math.

“Oh my God!” I said, realizing something that felt very important. “It wasn’t the crash.”

“You’re not making any sense, tesoro. What wasn’t the crash?”

I shook my head, unable to believe it. “Sal said that sometimes there has to be an event that makes you realize someone right in front of you is your fated mate. For her, it was her mate going into heat for the first time. Since we realized we were mates after you almost crashed, I thought it was because I’d almost lost you that the connection became clear, but if Everett’s right, it wasn’t the crash. It was because I got pregnant when we had sex against the plane.”

Instead of saying anything, Dom brought his lips to mine, and I felt his joy mingling and twining with mine while we kissed.

Everett cleared his throat, and we pulled apart just in time for me to remember I hadn’t brushed my teeth since I’d thrown up outside the hotel.

“Don’t worry, tesoro. I love you, bad breath and all.”

“Ugh. That’s disgusting.”

He kissed my nose, then kissed my nose again. “One for you and one for the baby,” he said.

“Do you two want a minute? I can step out. I know this is big news.”

“No,” I said, stopping Everett’s retreat. “I want to see my baby.”

“Okay. As I started to say, I estimate you are about four weeks pregnant. In some shifter species, that’s far enough along to be able to use the external transducer, but in some species, it’s not. The way to get the best images and to see if we’re looking at multiples would be to do a transrectal ultrasound.”

“What does that entail?” Dom asked before I could. I was still a little dumbstruck that I was actually pregnant.

Everett opened another drawer in his rolling cart and pulled out a long cylindrical wand. “This inserted rectally so we can get a good look at the uterus.”

“Okay,” I said. “No problem.” Dom’s dick and almost all my dildos were bigger than the probe.

“Are you sure, tesoro?”

“One hundred percent.”

“All right.” Everett bent low and pulled a set of stirrups out from the foot end of the chaise. “I installed these while I was here during Jonah’s pregnancy. Looks like they are going to come in handy yet again. Why don’t you take off your pants and underwear.” He pulled a hospital gown from a case behind him and handed it to me. “Put this on with the opening in the back. I’ll get the ultrasound machine set up while you change.”

I ducked into the bathroom and stripped out of my pants. The gown was a little scratchy, but I was too damn excited to care. I was pregnant. I was pregnant, and I was going to see my baby for the first time.

Back in the main room, Dom was pacing, his agitation clear.

“What’s wrong, flyboy?” I asked, resettling on the chaise.

“I don’t like that Everett is going to see what’s mine.”

“He’s a doctor, Dom, and your friend. And he’s helping us see our baby.”

His face softened, and he smiled, then pecked a kiss on my nose. “I can’t believe it.”

“Me either.”

For a long moment, we just looked at each other in awe, and then Dom dropped his hand to my belly, which was definitely a little rounder than it had been a month ago. I’d thought it was bloating due to all the eating out we’d been doing on the circuit.

“God, you’re going to be so fucking hot all round with my babies. I’m not going to be able to stand it.”

I felt my cheeks go hot as Everett came back into the room and said, “I’m all set if you’re ready.”

We both nodded, and I swung my legs up onto the chaise.

“I’m sure you know the drill. Feet up and scoot down.” Everett turned down the lights.

I did as instructed, and Everett covered my knees with a sheet for the sake of modesty I didn’t much care about. Dominic had watched me puke more than once. It couldn’t get much more embarrassing than that.

“You’ll feel a little pressure, but it shouldn’t be painful. I’m going to take some measurements, then I’ll show you what I see.”

The lube on the probe was warm, and it slid in easily. I did my best not to look smug about that as Everett moved the transducer around inside me and tapped at the keyboard attached to the ultrasound machine.

“Oh,” Everett said what felt like forever later. “Interesting. Very interesting.”

“What’s interesting?” Dom asked, a little panic creeping into his voice.

“Take a look.” He rotated the screen.

“What am I looking at?” The image on the screen looked like a set of black, white, and gray blobs.

Everett used the pointer on the machine to outline one of the more whitish blobs. “You are pregnant with twins. This is baby one.” He outlined the other whitish blob. “And this is baby two.”

“Twins,” Dom breathed, and new tears welled in my eyes, this time spilling over and tracking down my cheeks.

“Dante, you don’t have any avian shifter blood, correct?”

I swiped at my cheeks, then sniffled and said, “No. Full dolphin. Very few other species in my family, and none of

them are bird shifters.”

“Interesting.”

“You keep saying that,” Dom said, a touch of impatience now in his tone.

Everett chuckled. “Sorry. You have to understand it’s difficult to predict how a pregnancy will go with interspecies mated pairs. For example, Jonah carried Lia, who was born in her narwhal form—her alpha father’s shifter species. On the other hand, my friend Greg’s harbor seal mate gave birth to a seal pup, even though Greg is an alpha grizzly bear. Dante’s pregnancy is a very obvious example of the possible variation within interspecies couples.”

“I don’t understand.”

Everett smiled reassuringly. “You’re carrying... eggs.”

“I’m what?” Surely he hadn’t just said what I thought I heard.

“Your twins are two... eggs. The white you see”—he traced along the edges of the two white blobs again—“are eggshells.”

What the fuck? I turned as much as I could to look at my mate, who was staring at the ultrasound on the screen with a dopey expression on his face. “You! You did this! I’m not a goddamn chicken, Dominic Pavone. I’m a dolphin. I’m not meant to lay fucking eggs.”

“Tesoro—”

“No, don’t you tesoro me! Eggs, Dominic. Fucking eggs. How am I going to give birth to fucking eggs?”

I crossed my arms.

Dom reached out to brush the hair back from my face, but I moved away as much as I could with my feet in stirrups and an ultrasound wand still up my ass. “No, don’t you touch me. That’s how we got into this mess. Eggs. For fuck’s sake.”

Everett worked quickly, removing the probe and helping me sit up.



“But, delfino, look at the big picture. You’re pregnant with twins. We are going to have babies.”

I was still over-the-moon happy about that, but I was also pissed as hell about the fact that instead of having a sweet little dolphin baby and an easy water birth, like all the generations of dolphin shifters before me, I was going to have to figure out how to lay an egg. Could I even do that?

Everett answered the unspoken question. “Your body will know what to do with the lives inside you. If your body couldn’t sustain them, you wouldn’t be this far along.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and looked at the notes he’d made. “I work a lot with owl shifter omegas, and from the measurements I’m seeing here, I’d say you’re already a third through your pregnancy.”

“A third?”

“Yep. Avian shifter pregnancies usually run between three and four months with a three-to-four-week external incubation period. I’ll have to do some more research on eagle shifter pregnancies to give you a more definitive answer, but I’m confident in my estimate.”

“Wow. That’s a hell of a lot better than dolphin shifters. We’re usually pregnant for ten to eleven months.”

Everett nodded. “Narwhals are the same, and Jonah was similarly happy to find out his pregnancy was paced to lynx gestation, not narwhal gestation, despite the fact that Lia was born in her narwhal form.”

I hadn’t met Jonah yet, but I was looking forward to talking to him about what to expect now that I was expecting.

All of a sudden, panic set in. We only had a few months to get ready to welcome our babies. Dom had barely decided he was going to move to Miami. We’d only been mated for a few weeks, and while there was no doubt I wanted forever with Dom and he wanted the same with me, there was still a load of logistics to work out as one of us upended our lives to move.

And now we’d added twins to the mix. Eggs I was going to lay. Eggs that would need a soft, perfect nest.

I felt my breathing go shallow, and Dom grabbed my hand.

“Dante, what’s wrong?”

“There aren’t any good trees in Miami.”

Dom had the audacity to laugh. “There are plenty of trees in Miami. Lots of beautiful palm trees.”

“No, Dominic, you don’t understand. There. Are. No. Good. Trees. I need a good tree to build a good nest for our babies.”

Dom looked at Everett, who was smiling.

“In interspecies mated pairs, it is common to see the omega take on characteristics of the shifter species they are carrying. Besides this conversation about trees, have you noticed any other odd changes in Dante’s behavior?”

“Fuck.” Dom shook his head. “Dante hates heights. Then right after Virginia Beach, he suddenly wants to stay in hotel rooms that are as high up as he can get, and he didn’t bat an eye when I took him to a restaurant with an outdoor terrace on the sixty-second floor. Before he got pregnant, he could barely walk out onto a second-floor balcony.”

Everett nodded. “It seems he is definitely taking on some eagle shifter traits.”

“And it’s too hot in Miami. There are no good trees, and it’s too hot.”

Everett smiled and patted my leg. “I’m going to give you both some time. Feel free to stay up here as long as you like. I’m happy to talk through any questions you have at any time.”

Dom stood and let go of my hand just long enough to shake Everett’s. “Thanks, Ev.”

The older man nodded, then quietly slipped out of the room.

Dom shoved my legs over and sat on the chaise, facing me. “If it’s too hot in Miami and there are no good trees, where do

you want to go to have our babies? I'll take you anywhere, tesoro. Just say the words."

"I'm not sure. I have to find the right place for our nest, Dom. I have to." Now that the thought had crossed my mind, it was all I could think about. Our nest. Our babies.

"We have time. Everett said you have at least two more months to go."

"Only two more months. That's only eight weeks. There is so much to do. Too much to do."

"Shh, delfino. We'll tackle it all together. For now, just focus on you." His other hand came up to rest on the tiny bump I now knew was our babies. "The only thing you need to do for our babies right this second is to rest."

"Okay." I covered his hand on my stomach with mine. "You're right." A yawn crept up out of nowhere, even though I'd already slept for two hours in the car. "Would I be a horrible guest if I took a nap?"

"Nah. Edwin and Jonah will understand. You sleep." He pecked a kiss on my lips and three quick kisses on my nose—one for me and one for each of our babies.

I let my head fall back against the chaise, closed my eyes, and let visions of my future pull me under.

## CHAPTER 22



## DOMINIC

“Edwin, have you seen Dante?” I asked, walking into the kitchen on day three of our stay at the narwhal shifter’s house. He and Jonah had generously offered us Merritt’s old apartment over the garage, and Dante had been more than happy to move in. That morning, I’d had to take a call with AeroCA about my transfer, and Dante had slipped out.

My eagle wasn’t a fan of not knowing where our mate was, and I’d been a little agitated since I realized he wasn’t in the apartment. When he was nearby, I could keep him safe.

“He and Jonah took Lia for a walk.” He glanced at the clock on the microwave. “They’ve been gone for about half an hour.”

Dante had still been experiencing pretty bad morning sickness, which Everett and Edwin had both assured us was normal in all pregnancies and even more so with multiples, and both of the doctors had said a little bit of exercise and some fresh air would help.

“Oh, okay. Do you know where they went?”

Edwin shrugged. “I’m not one hundred percent sure, but I think they’re still on the property. I can feel Jonah nearby. There is a nice path that overlooks the ocean along the cliff. Jonah and Lia usually walk that way.” He glanced up from the crossword puzzle he was doing and caught my expression. “If you were going to go looking for them, I’d start there. Go out past the pool and take the path on the right.”

“Thanks.”

“Wait, before you go, do you follow soccer?”

I chuckled. “Edwin, I’m Italian. That’s like asking if the pope is Catholic.”

Edwin smiled. “I didn’t want to assume. I’m stuck on this clue.”

“What is it?”

“Golden Boot winner at the 1982 World Cup. Five letters. Third letter is S.”

“Paolo Rossi. One of the greatest Italian footballers of all time and a national treasure.”

He spelled out Rossi in the boxes and looked up triumphantly. “Excellent. Thank you.”

I nodded and headed out the back door.

When we’d toured Edwin and Jonah’s house on our first day in Maine, Dante had been captivated by the giant pool in the backyard. It looked like it had been cut out of the cliff, like it both naturally belonged there and was somehow out of place. He’d been halfway to stripping out of his clothes and taking a swim before Jonah warned him that the water was freezing. Edwin kept it icy so he could shift and swim in his narwhal form year-round. After sticking one toe in the water, Dante had decided not to go for a swim, and Jonah had shown him the swim spa they kept at a more reasonable temperature for the non-Arctic shifters.

I was halfway along the path when I saw Jonah and Dante standing a little farther down and looking up. Little Lia was fast asleep in her baby wrap against Jonah’s chest.

Dante must have sensed my presence because he waved me over. “Hurry, Dom. You need to see this.”

When I reached the little group, I kissed Dante on the cheek. “Okay, what am I looking at?”

“This.” Dante gestured to the tree in front of us. “This is the perfect tree. From the top, I’ll be able to see the ocean.

This is the tree where I need to build our nest.”

It was typical for pregnant omega eagle shifters to shift and fly to their preferred nesting tree while the alphas followed in their human forms below and marked the tree as a nesting tree. Since Dante couldn't fly to his tree, he'd apparently walked.

“Okay, tesoro, if this is the tree you want, this is the tree you shall have.” I called forth my eagle just enough to elongate the nails on my right hand into sharp talons and made the mating tree mark—a single-line bird that looked a little like the letter *V* with an *A*, standing for accoppiamento, through the center—in the bark.

My mate was beaming as he stepped forward and ran his fingers over the mark. “Our tree,” he said on a sigh, and I could feel his happiness through our bond.

“Our tree.” I considered the towering pine. My mate had chosen well. The tree was old and strong, the trunk wide and sturdy, and since it was an evergreen, the leaves would provide cover even into the fall. Dante was due to lay in either October or November, when the leaves on the deciduous trees were already gone, and the branches would be bare, leaving the nest exposed. “Though I think we are going to have to make some adjustments.”

“What kind of adjustments?” Jonah asked.

“Well, since Dante can't fly, we're going to have to build some sort of platform in the tree that he can get to.”

“A tree house! Yes!” Jonah fist pumped the air, jostling Lia and making her whimper before closing her eyes again. “I've been begging Edwin to build Lia a tree house forever.”

“She's only nine months old,” I said, glancing at the sleeping bundle.

He waved my comment away. “Doesn't matter. The point is, I've been researching, and I have plans.”

Dante's smile got impossibly wider. “Plans? I like plans. Let me see.”

“They’re back at the house.” Jonah started that way, and Dante followed, but I stayed behind, looking up at the tree where our babies would be born. Even if their nest was going to be slightly unconventional.

By the time I made it back to the house, Everett and Merritt had arrived, and they, along with Jonah, Edwin, and Dante, were standing around the kitchen table, looking at the blueprints for an elaborate tree house.

“See? It’s perfect because you’re not going to want to climb some rickety ladder when your belly is making you all off-balance.” Jonah gestured at Dante’s bump, which was already a smidge more pronounced than it had been when we’d first arrived. “These platforms are great because they connect to stairs. No ladder required.”

“Oh, I like that,” Dante said, leaning in to look at the design a little closer. “I like that a lot.”

“Without seeing the exact tree, I can’t say for certain, but we might be able to get electricity and water out there,” Edwin added.

“I love it,” Dante declared. “It’s perfect and exactly what I want. When can we get started?” He looked around and found my face in the small crowd.

“This is going to cost a lot of money, tesoro.”

“I’ve got it,” both Dante and Edwin said.

Dante considered him for a moment, and for a second, the baby haze he’d been in since we’d found out about the twins lifted, and I saw the shrewd businessman who’d built his company from the ground up. “I’m willing to negotiate a deal since I’ll be using the tree house for nesting, then your daughter will use it as a playhouse. How do you feel about going seventy-thirty. I’ll cover seventy percent. You cover thirty.”

“I think it should be more fifty-fifty, don’t you? Lia is going to use it for a lot longer than you will.”

Dante considered the counteroffer. “Sixty-forty. And that’s my final offer. Dominic and I are imposing on your hospitality,



and since I've found the place where I want to nest, we won't be leaving until after the eggs are laid."

Everett cleared his throat. "Technically, it is in the best interest of the eggs to stay put until they hatch. If you remove them from the nest, you risk damaging the air cell and affecting the pressure inside the egg."

Dante's face went pale, and then he pulled himself together and looked back at Edwin. "We'll be staying until the eggs hatch."

Edwin nodded. "I can agree to those terms, and I will also agree to let you use the nest, should you choose to, during any future pregnancies. You are part of our family now. Our house is yours."

Tears glimmered in Dante's eyes as he and Edwin shook hands.

\* \* \*

IF THE FIRST month of Dante's pregnancy was marked by exhaustion and morning sickness, the second month was marked by damn near insatiable horniness.

Not that I was complaining.

But it was hard as fuck to build my mate his dream tree house when he kept texting me to come home and fill him up.

Luckily, Edwin and Everett had both proven themselves more than worthy when it came to wielding power tools, and they'd both done more than their fair share of labor, telling me their kids would be the ones using the tree house as a playhouse when Dante was done nesting. I still felt like they'd gone above and beyond for me, and it felt nice to have a sort of makeshift pack rallying around us as we got ready to welcome our babies.

Dante, Jonah, and Merritt were damn near inseparable. Now that he was over puking up his guts whenever he was near food, Dante was teaching Merritt and Jonah how to cook since both of the other omegas said they were kind of terrible

at it. Everett, Edwin, and I had come back from the tree house more than once to hear the smoke detector and see the windows open and our mates fanning at smoke after one botched attempt or another. Merritt was allegedly worse than Jonah, having managed to burn a pot of water he was boiling for pasta because he'd had a great idea for part of his dissertation and had ended up working on his laptop for an hour before he remembered the water on the stove.

We'd ordered takeout that night.

Jonah had been on dinner duty tonight, and he'd made pretty decent grilled chicken and a salad. The chicken was much less rubbery than his previous attempt, so he was definitely improving.

After dinner, I went back out to the tree house to get a few more things done while Everett and Merritt had gone home with a very sleepy baby Theo and Edwin and Jonah put Lia down for the night.

The tree house was only about thirty feet up in the air, which wasn't quite as high as Dante wanted it, but he'd had to compromise, and when Merritt had pointed out that there was a break in the trees that looked right out to the ocean right at that height, he'd agreed. We'd had an engineering and construction firm specializing in tree houses come out to build the steps and the platforms first so we knew the structure would be stable and it would be easier to work on the main tree house. Edwin, Everett, and I had tackled the framing, and the walls were up and the roof on. We'd left a porch that wrapped around the whole little house. Dante had decided on shiplap siding for the interior and exterior walls, and I'd just picked it up from the big-box store that morning along with a rented nail gun.

I'd hit a stride, measuring, cutting, and hanging the shiplap, when I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye.

"Hello?" I called out.

"Hey, flyboy," Dante said, walking out onto the porch, his round, perfect belly preceding him. "This looks great."

“Thanks. It’s actually pretty easy to do once I got the hang of it.” For mid-September, it was still pretty warm, and I used my sleeve to wipe some sweat from my forehead. “What are you doing out here? I thought you and Jonah were going to watch a movie.”

Dante smiled. “We were... until Jonah got a better offer.”

“A better offer?”

“Yeah... of the sexy variety.”

“Oh. Oh!”

“And hearing them kinda made me horny, not that it takes much these days, so I figured I’d come find you. See if maybe you wanted to take a break.” He bounced his eyebrows and gave me his best come-hither stare.

I was off the ladder in two seconds flat.

Dante, pregnant with my babies, was maybe the hottest thing I’d ever seen, and almost before he’d even finished his statement, I was already half-hard. If I’d fantasized about knocking him up before, it was nothing to how I felt sliding into him from behind and wrapping my hands around his bump.

“I could definitely be persuaded to take a break.” I pulled him into my arms and planted a smacking, playful kiss on his lips. “Let’s head back to the apartment.”

“Uh, I was actually thinking we could maybe do it up here.”

I looked around. The floor was unfinished plywood. “I don’t think that will be very comfortable.”

“I might have brought a solution for that.” He held out a hand, and I took it, letting him lead me into the tree house. In the center of the space was a thick camping mattress covered by a sleeping bag.

“You shouldn’t have carried that by yourself.”

He shrugged. “It’s not heavy at all, and both the mattress and the sleeping bag roll up into a clever little carrying case

with backpack straps.”

“Where did you even find this?”

“Everett gave it to me earlier. He said we might need it.”

I made a mental note to figure out a way to thank Everett for everything—his help and the very thoughtful gift.

“Guess you have everything we need, then.”

“Except one thing.” He stepped closer, letting his belly bump into mine, and wrapped his arms around my neck, bringing me to him for a kiss that stole my breath.

His tongue slid between my lips, and I instantly opened for him. His grip tightened as he deepened the kiss, and he pressed against me, forcing me back a step.

“Easy, baby. I’ve got you.”

“Dom, I want you.”

“I know.” I brought our lips back together as I slid my hands under his shirt and ran my fingers over the smooth skin of his bump until I’d traced every inch. Rucking his shirt up higher and folding the fabric so just his belly was exposed, I broke our kiss and dropped to my knees, repeating the path my fingers had taken with my lips.

“God, I fucking love your body like this,” I whispered against his skin. “You’re so damn hot all round with my babies.”

“Dom,” Dante whined, and I knew he was getting impatient. I could smell his slick, and I loved that he was already dripping for me.

I stood again and pushed his shirt up and off, bringing my mouth to his nipples. They’d become sensitive during his pregnancy, and for a while, I’d been wondering if I could make him come just by teasing them.

Wrapping my lips around one peak, I sucked hard and tongued the tip. Dante cried out in pleasure, so I kept up the torture, bringing my hand up to roll his other nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

“Oh shit, Dom. That’s so good.” He was already breathing hard, the scent of his precum and slick heavy on the air as I kept up the exquisite torture. Listening to Dante take his pleasure had me hard as steel and almost desperate to slide into him, but he deserved every second of bliss because he was doing such an amazing job carrying our babies.

Pulling off the first nipple with a loud pop, I blew a gentle stream of air over the wet peak, and Dante shuddered in my arms. When I switched to the other side, he grabbed my head and held it in place as I laved the hard bud with my tongue and teased the other side with my fingers.

“Fuck, fuck, oh fuck, I’m going to come. So close. So close.” His words were barely audible on panted breaths.

Not wanting him to have to walk back to the house in cum-soaked underwear and pants, I used my other hand to push them down around his ankles and wrapped my hand around his cock just in time to catch his cum as it erupted from his dick.

“Dom!” He screamed my name as his dick pulsed in my fist, and I couldn’t help the smug smile that spread across my lips. If I lived to be a thousand, I would never get tired of making Dante Perez come apart under my touch.

“That’s it, tesoro. You’re so good for me. So damn beautiful when you come.”

“Dom.” This time, my name on his lips was a plea for more.

I placed one last kiss on his belly and pulled away. Bringing my hand to my mouth, I licked away every drop of Dante’s release, watching his eyes as he tracked the progress of my tongue over every digit.

He whimpered, and I noticed he was still hard. His pregnancy hormones had made multiple orgasms a necessity, and I was more than happy to oblige.

“Get on your hands and knees for me.”

Dante moved quickly to do as I’d said, kicking out of his pants and underwear and dropping onto the camping mat and

sleeping bag while I stripped out of my clothes.

His thighs were glistening with slick under the glow of the work lights we had set up around the tree house, and my mouth watered, wanting to taste him. Getting into position behind him, I spread his cheeks, lowered my head, and licked over his wet hole. His taste exploded on my tongue, and I had to grab my cock to keep from coming. Before Dante, I'd never almost come from rimming a partner, but every time I tasted him, I found myself on the edge.

My mate pressed back into me, looking for more, and I teased his hole, licking, sucking, and spearing my tongue inside him until he was rocking back into me, chasing what he needed.

“Dom, please. I need your cock.”

If there were sweeter words, I didn't know what they were. After one more lick, I lined my dick up with his wet hole and slid home on one thrust.

“Yes. God yes,” Dante moaned as he pushed back, trying to take me farther inside him than I could go.

Wrapping my arms around him, I supported his belly, loving the feel of his bump in my hands as I began to move.

“Harder, Dom. Fuck me harder,” Dante begged, and I happily gave in to the request.

“God, Dante, your body. Fuck. I'm going to fill you up. Keep you full of my babies always.” His ass clenched around me, and I saw stars as I felt my dick start to thicken. “I'm so close. Going to knot you.”

“Yes. I need it. I need it. Please.” A sheen of sweat coated Dante's skin as he rocked back to meet every thrust. It felt like I'd never been so deep inside him, and I never wanted to leave.

Just as my cock swelled and my knot started to pop, Dante yelled my name again and came, untouched. His body clenched around me, and I shot my load deep inside him as we locked together.

Panting, Dante said, “I needed that,” then pushed back against me.

Everett had told us both at Dante’s last checkup that laying eggs would be different than a live dolphin shifter birth, and to better prepare for the process, Dante should take my knot as deep as he could, and I should try to pull out so my knot stretched his rim and he got used to the sensation. Dante had no problem following those instructions, taking matters into his own hands when I’d hesitated the first time.

Now watching Dante work himself on my knot was almost enough to make me come again. When my mate was sufficiently tired and felt like he’d done the best he could stretching himself out to more easily lay our eggs, he stilled, and I knew that was my cue to lay him down and cuddle until my knot went down enough that I could slip free.

I positioned us so we could face the window, the work lights at our backs, the last of the sunset fading and giving way to the lavender and cobalt of twilight. From where we were lying, we couldn’t see the ocean, but we could hear it, and for a few long moments, we listened to the sounds of our breathing and the rushing roar of waves hitting the shore.

“This is the perfect place to have our babies, don’t you think?” Dante said, his voice a little wistful.

“I do. I’m glad we stayed.”

“Me too.”

# CHAPTER 23





## DANTE

“*Y*ou know what I miss most about being pregnant?” Jonah asked one day in October when he, Merritt, and I were spread out around his living room, each working on our laptops. I’d taken a leave of absence from my company, leaving Azucar in Sal’s more than capable hands. Since my nest was in Maine, I couldn’t very well be on-site to run the day-to-day operations in Miami. Luckily, I had an amazing HR team in place that had written a maternity policy that was inclusive of nesting shifter species who might need to nest somewhere that wasn’t within a commutable distance to the corporate office or a local satellite office. When I’d approved the policy, I never thought I’d be the one who’d have to use it, but now I was grateful to have it as it kept the board from displacing me as the head of my own company. Not that they’d do that—I trusted everyone on my board of directors—but it was nice to have the protection anyway.

“Resting your laptop against your belly?” I said, answering Jonah’s question and gesturing at where I had my computer propped against my bump.

“No, but that was helpful.”

“Not being able to see your feet?” Merritt tried.

“Hell no!” I said. “Do you know how hard it is to put on shoes when you can’t see them?” I was now solidly into my third month of pregnancy, and since I was carrying twins, I felt like I was huge. I definitely couldn’t see my feet. And forget about my dick. Good thing Dom didn’t have the same issue and loved to suck my cock while he rubbed my giant belly. My

cock twitched in my sweats, and I couldn't help but think that the thing I'd miss most about being pregnant was the hot-as-fuck sex.

“God, it's the worst. It's like playing one of those claw games at the arcade blindfolded.” Jonah mock shuddered. “I suck at those games.”

Merritt just shrugged and kept typing, occasionally looking at the pile of papers he had spread out next to him on the couch.

“Well, don't keep us in suspense. What do you miss most?” I prodded.

“Getting to eat whatever I want and not feel bad about it,” Jonah said. “I'm working on a new logo for an ice cream company, and I've been checking out their website. My God, I want to try one of everything on their menu.”

“Oh, ice cream,” Merritt and I both said dreamily. Suddenly, I had a craving for something cold and sweet. With something salty. And maybe something sour. Definitely something sour.

“Listen to this. The Blondie sundae. A treat made for Debbie Harry. This sundae starts with a warm maple walnut blondie, topped with two scoops of our house-made salted caramel ice cream and finished with our homemade maple walnut sauce and caramelized bananas, plus whipped cream and a Bordeaux cherry.”

“I was with you until the bananas,” Merritt said.

“I'm in! How fast can we get to this place? You had me at salted caramel.” I was already trying to lever myself off the couch.

“Not fast, unless we had a private plane.” Jonah shook his head and looked longingly at his computer screen. “Icons in Ice Cream is in Omaha, Nebraska.”

“Nebraska?” Merritt asked at the same time I said, “I have a private plane. Let me make a call.”

Which was, of course, when Dominic, Everett, and Edwin walked in with the two kids.

“Where are you going, tesoro?”

“For ice cream in Omaha.”

“We have a bunch of ice cream shops here.” Edwin was giving Jonah a look that clearly said he knew who’d instigated thoughts of an impromptu trip.

“Plus, I’d advise against flying,” Everett said. “I don’t think you’ll lay for another month, but that’s just my best guess. It could literally be any time now.”

Letting my head flop back against the couch cushion, I said, “Fine, but I want a Blondie sundae when I’m free to travel again.”

“What’s in it? Maybe we could make one here.” Dom pecked a kiss on my nose while Jonah read the description again.

“Okay, that does sound really good, but did you see the Bon Jovi?” Edwin was reading over Jonah’s shoulder. “A warm homemade brownie bowl, two scoops of chocolate cookies-and-cream ice cream, hot fudge, and salted pecans with whipped cream and a cherry.”

“That’s a lot of chocolate,” Dom said, wrinkling his nose.

“I like what I like,” Edwin said.

“So what I’m hearing is we’re making sundaes tonight?” Merritt asked.

“Definitely,” the rest of us agreed.

Everett glanced around the room. Merritt still had his computer on his lap and his papers spread out. Jonah was looking at his computer again, but I could tell he was back to work, no longer ogling ice cream options. “Guess we’re taking the kids to the grocery store.”

“I’ll drive.” Edwin pulled his car keys from his pocket. “We’ve got the van.”

Almost as quickly as our mates had come in, they filed back out. When they were gone and we heard the van pull out of the driveway, Merritt looked up from his dissertation. “You know, fate did a really great job picking our mates.”

“Damn right,” I said, and Jonah nodded in agreement.

“Hey, Mer.” Jonah chucked a pillow at his best friend when he didn’t look up right away. Merritt scowled when the projectile landed on his notes, and he picked up the offending cushion and threw it on the ground.

“What?” the wolf shifter said, turning back to his work.

“How are you feeling?”

“How am I feeling about what?”

“No, how are you feeling after your procedure. You haven’t said much.” Jonah looked a little concerned.

“I’m fine. No more pain at all. And the sex has been great since.” Merritt didn’t look up from his laptop.

“It’s none of my business, but what procedure?” I was definitely missing something.

“Oh, I thought I told you when we were in Miami. I had my oviducts fused.”

“What does that mean?”

“No babies for me unless Everett and I decide to adopt again.” He looked up and met my eyes. “No offense to you and Jonah, but after living life as a beta for twenty-six years, I couldn’t see myself carrying a baby, even now that it’s clear I’m an omega. It’s just not something I want to do. I love being Theo’s dad, but I have no desire to be pregnant. I know that’s probably weird, but...” He shrugged.

“It’s not weird. It’s your body. But I think you’re right about our mates. Everett’s a good man. I’m glad he was supportive of your decision.”

“He was. One hundred percent.” That made me irrationally happy. I knew a lot of omegas who wouldn’t have been so lucky.

“Now that we’re on the topic of babies,” I said, directing my attention Jonah’s way. “Are you and Edwin thinking about having any more?”

Jonah smiled. “I would have thought the fact that we bought a van made that obvious.”

Merritt’s head whipped up. “Are you pregnant again?”

The lynx shifter shook his head. “No, not yet. We want to wait until Lia’s two-ish before we have another one. Plus”—he looked at me—“fun fact about post-pregnancy that they don’t tell you in the books: your heat cycles might be off for a little while, which makes planning a little difficult. We’ve agreed we want the next pregnancy to be planned and not a surprise.”

I laughed. “Fine by me. Dolphin shifters spend the whole summer in heat.”

“Oh,” Merritt said, his cheeks a little red. “I like the sound of that.”

Jonah held up a hand. “Don’t mind him. He’s like a heat-sex addict now that he’s an omega.”

The pillow Jonah had thrown earlier sailed across the room and smacked Jonah in the head. “I was always an omega. I was just a super-late bloomer.”

“Well, you’re making up for lost time now.” Jonah smiled at his friend, the teasing obviously good-natured.

Merritt shrugged. “This is true, but seriously, is there anything better than heat sex?”

Jonah and I shared a look, then said, “Pregnancy sex.”

Merritt made a face. “I’ll have to take your word for it.”

After that, we all returned to our respective work. Even though I wasn’t officially running the company while I was on leave, Sal had questions and things she needed to know, and she had delegated a few of her normal tasks to me since they didn’t require much more than crunching some numbers, which I could easily do sitting on the sofa.

Even absorbed in our own tasks, it felt nice to be in the company of two other omegas. I didn't have many omega friends back home, and hardly any of my business acquaintances and colleagues were omegas. It was nice to be around people who understood what I was going through and who were both focused on their careers—Merritt working on his shifter species origins and proliferation dissertation and Jonah building his graphic design business—and focused on their families. It would be like that when Marisol and Sal had their calf too, but since I was closer to Sal than I'd ever been to Marisol, it would be different.

“How do you feel about Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs?” Jonah asked a while later.

“Uh, original Grimms' or Disney version?” Merritt looked perplexed.

“Either. The specifics of the story aren't important. I'm more concerned about the one girl and seven guys thing.”

“Forgive me for asking the obvious question,” I said, “but why?”

“Our group Halloween costume. It makes sense since there are eight of us. Lia is the only girl, so my little princess is totally Snow, and then the seven of us can be the dwarfs.”

“Since when are we doing a group costume?” Merritt asked.

“Since always, Mer. You and I always used to do a duo thing. Besides, this is only Lia's second Halloween. It needs to be special, especially since she was so young for her first Halloween that we did little more than put her in a jack-o'-lantern onesie.”

“She's only one. I'm not sure she'll remember.” It wasn't that I was opposed to dressing up, but I wasn't sure my feet could handle trick-or-treating. Maybe Dom and I could stay and pass out candy while the others took the kids out.

“But I will. And I'll also remember if her uncle Merritt and her uncle Dante are big jerks who refuse to participate.” Jonah stuck out his lip and pretend pouted at both of us.

His words made my heart pinch and my eyes go blurry. I'd met Jonah only two months ago, and he and Edwin had so effortlessly allowed us into their lives. We'd even been there earlier in the month with Jonah's dads and Edwin's mom to celebrate Lia's first birthday. I loved the little lady and baby Theo too, and it made me feel all warm and gooey inside to know Dom and I were really part of the little found family that had sprung up around Jonah and his narwhal mate.

"I'll do it," I said, the words coming out a little choked as I pushed them past the lump of emotion stuck in my throat. "Dom will too."

"Mer?" Jonah asked.

"I guess so, but you've gotta make our costumes. I'm about as bad at creative stuff as I am at cooking."

"No problem. I say we go low-budget Disney aesthetic. Colored T-shirts and hats. Maybe a fake beard or two. Nothing too over-the-top."

"Do you want to do the trick-or-treat fest in town?" Merritt asked.

"Definitely."

"How much walking does this trick-or-treat fest entail?" I asked.

"Not much. To be honest, you could just find a bench and camp out. There's a little costume parade for all the kids, and all the businesses do trick-or-treating. There might be a face painter, and the city council arranges food trucks."

"I thought you hadn't been to this thing before."

"No," Merritt said, "we've never been to it with children. We used to live downtown, and Jonah would drag me out to this thing every year. Hence the duo costumes."

Jonah shrugged. "I like Halloween."

And that was how six grown men ended up squabbling over who got to be which dwarf while we made sundaes for dinner.

\* \* \*

“I NEED YOUR SHIRTS,” I said, holding out my arms. The trick-or-treat thing in town had been fun, but now I realized I needed to get out to the tree house, but I needed their shirts before I could go.

Everett complied immediately, stripping it off and dislodging his fake beard.

“Why?” Jonah whispered, careful not to wake Lia, who was asleep in his arms.

I didn’t understand Jonah’s question. The answer was pretty obvious. I needed things from my family to fill my nest so the eggs would know they were loved by more people than just Dominic and me. The T-shirts from our family Halloween costume were perfect because they were soft. “For my nest.”

“You want my shirt for your nest?” Merritt asked, and I nodded. “Fascinating.” Turning to Everett, he passed Theo over. “This is the kind of thing I missed out on learning because you wouldn’t let me go back to Greece for nesting season.” He pulled his shirt off and draped it over my arms with Everett’s.

“I’m sorry, petit. But at least you’re getting to see what nesting is like now.” Everett smiled at his mate, who beamed back at him.

“This is true.” While Everett held Theo, Merritt took off his tiny T-shirt and handed it over after blowing a raspberry on his tummy and making him squeal.

Edwin was the next to strip and pass over his shirt. “Lia’s dress too?” he asked, an eyebrow raised.

“Yes, please.”

“Oh, man,” Jonah said, carefully passing their little girl over to his mate as he pulled off his shirt. “I really don’t want to wake her up.”

“It’s not like she can sleep in the dress, love,” Edwin said.



Lia, as if on cue, lifted her head from Edwin's shoulder and rubbed her eyes with two chubby fists.

"There, she's awake now." Edwin smiled at Jonah's scowl as Jonah pulled the little dress over her head and handed it to me.

"Let me take those," Dom said, placing his shirt on top and reaching for the pile, but I pulled them away before he could take them.

"No, I need to do it." My mate held up his hands and backed away as he and Everett shared a glance. Everett had told us that once I started nesting, it could be any time before the babies came. He was still estimating that it would be closer to Thanksgiving.

"It's okay, Dom," Everett said. "He needs to do this his way. It's his nest. Dante, do you need anything else from us?"

I considered his question and shook my head. "No, not right now. Just need to get these to the nest."

"Okay, you go do that." Everett smiled at me, and I waddled through the house to the back door. I had the slider open before I realized Dom wasn't with me.

"Dom, you need to come too."

He came around the corner a few seconds later. "Sorry. I wasn't sure if you wanted to be alone."

I shook my head and slipped out the door into the clear fall night. "I want you with me always." Dom took my hand as we passed the pool and headed out onto the path.

Edwin had insisted we put lights along the path out to the tree house so I could see regardless of when I went out to the nest. Since the days had gotten shorter and the nights out on the cliff were dark, I was grateful for the light as I hustled as fast as I could out to the tree house. So far, I hadn't felt compelled to add much to the space except for the camp roll and sleeping bag Dom and I had used the first night we had sex in the tree house before it was even done.

And it was perfect. The white shiplap had been painted the same shade of seafoam green as my car back in Miami. We couldn't get metallic paint, so it didn't sparkle, but it was close enough. Inside, the alphas had laid wide-plank wood flooring and added a small woodburning stove since it was likely to get cold the further we got into the fall. Windows and a set of French doors had been installed, and there was even a tiny bathroom. The rest of the space was one big room with some bench seating and a queen-size bed built into the perimeter and a folding table that dropped down from the wall in one corner. Edwin and Dom had hauled a mattress we'd bought at one of the big box stores up for the bed. The space was cozy and comfortable, and I could see the ocean from the porch around the outside and if I stood at the wide window over the little sink and two-burner propane stove.

My tree, the tree I'd picked to build my nest, ran through the middle of the room.

The stairs up to the tree house were getting harder to climb, but as long as I took it slow, it wasn't too bad, though I had found myself dreaming about flying. Everett said that was normal, given I was carrying babies of a different shifter species, and that had put my mind at ease.

I was only a little winded when we walked into the space, and Dom flicked on the lights. Apparently, there had been a guesthouse on Edwin's property not too far from where the tree house was, so the contractors who had done the initial work setting up the platforms and building the stairs had been able to tie in to all the utilities.

The tree house smelled like home—like me and Dom and wood and pine and the sea, and now, with the addition of the shirts and dress from everyone else, it would smell like our family.

Originally, I hadn't thought I'd like the bed, but now I could see the appeal. It would be a soft place for the eggs to rest, and I walked over to drop the shirts on top.

But that wasn't right, so I scooped them up again. "Dom, I need you to hold these."

He came over and took the pile of clothes from me as I started to crouch down to pick up the sleeping bag.

“Tesoro, let me help you with that. You know how hard it is for you to get back up.” He was right. My giant belly made me feel totally off-balance, and despite the fact that I hated asking for help, grabbing something off the ground was almost impossible at this point.

He handed me the edge of the sleeping bag, and I pulled it up onto the bed, then unzipped it and folded it so I could use it to make a ring in the center of the mattress.

That was perfect.

Turning back to Dom, I grabbed the pile of shirts and set them on the bed. Then I laid each one over the sleeping bag ring, rearranging until I was happy with where everyone’s scent was in the circle.

Stepping back, I surveyed my work. “It’s too small.”

Dom wrapped his arms around me from behind and rested his hands on the top of my belly. “You’ll add to it over the next couple of weeks. If you’re anything like the eagle shifters in Frascati, there will be so much stuff in your nest by the time you’re done, there will barely be room for you.”

“I just want it to be perfect for our eggs, Dom. I’ve never seen anyone nest before. How will I know if I’m doing it right?”

He pressed a kiss to the spot where my mating mark was. “It’s your nest. It will be perfect because you fill it with the things that mean the most to you. There is no right or wrong way to nest, and when you’re done, you’ll know.”

I leaned back against him, my head finding his shoulder. “I’m scared. I’ve wanted to be a dad for so long, but what if I’m terrible at it? What if I can’t bond with our babies? What if something goes wrong?”

“Shh, delfino. It is normal to be nervous. My sisters were all a wreck before their first babies, and I know you’ve spoken to Jonah about how he felt before Lia was born. I know it’s harder for you because this is so different from what you

expected, but I promise, no matter what, I will be there, and we will do this together.”

A sob bubbled up from my throat and slipped out. “What if our babies don’t love me because I can’t fly?”

Dom squeezed me a little tighter. “You don’t know what forms our babies will be able to take. Yes, they will be born in their bird forms and stay that way for the first month, but they won’t be learning to fly then, and after they shift into human form, it will be at least two years before they shift again.”

“That is so weird. Dolphin shifter babies are usually born in their human form and shift for the first time when they hit the water, which is pretty much right away because we usually opt for water births. Like Lia and Theo. When they are in the water, they automatically shift into their narwhal and sea turtle forms. It will be weird to see my babies as eaglets for a month and then as human babies for years.”

“Who said they won’t be able to take other forms? I’m only a quarter wolf shifter, and I can take my wolf form. It’s harder for me to do, but I can do it. Maybe our babies will be the same. Jonah and Edwin don’t know if Lia will be able to shift into a lynx like Jonah yet, and they won’t find out for another year.”

“That’s true. It would be pretty amazing if our babies could shift into both eagles and dolphins. It would be the best of sea and sky.”

“I don’t care what they can shift into as long as they are happy and healthy.”

“Me either.”

“Then let’s focus on that,” Dom said, placing a kiss against my temple and cupping my bump in one hand. “Is there anything else you want to do while we’re here?”

I’d wanted to ask for a long time, and this conversation opened the door. “I want to see your wolf. And I want to cuddle with you in wolf form in our nest.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Our babies will be part of the Frascati pack, and I want them to be able to smell all elements of the pack when they hatch. I need your wolf in the nest. Just for a little while.”

“Okay.” He pressed another kiss to my cheek, then let go of my bump and stepped back, and I turned to watch. “Good thing I’m already half-undressed,” he said with a wink as he unfastened his pants and let them drop. Like always, my mouth watered when Dom was naked in front of me, but this wasn’t about sex. This was about sharing something intimate that I knew Dom didn’t share often outside the pack. His agreement to show me his wolf was a big damn deal, and as he started the shift, his body hair growing thicker and his face elongating, I kept my gaze on him, refusing to look away.

When his shift was over, a beautiful, majestic gray wolf stood before me. The deep hazel of Dom’s human eyes were present in his wolf, and in a move more appropriate for a pet dog, Dom moved forward and licked my cheek.

“Gross,” I said, wiping at the spot, but when I was done, Dom did it again, licking an even longer stripe. “You are a pain in the ass in this form, aren’t you?”

Dom jumped up on the bed, circled the nest, then settled down, curving his body around the sleeping bag and T-shirt ring I’d made. He gave me a wolfy grin—that I knew would be a smirk if he was in his human form—and pawed at the spot in front of him.

“I’m coming. But don’t lick me again. Do not make me regret this, Dominic Pavone.”

He opened his mouth and made a sound that was probably meant to be a laugh, and I climbed onto the bed as gracefully as I could while smuggling a giant bowling ball around my abdomen and rested back against him.

His fur was warm and soft, and his scent was stronger as a wolf. This close to him, I felt surrounded by him, and through our bond, I felt a pulse of love and contentment.

I ran my fingers through his thick fur, relishing the way he pressed into the touch. “You’re right, Dom. As long as we’re

together, we can do anything.”

He responded with another giant, wet lick to my cheek.

# CHAPTER 24



## DOMINIC

The closer we got to Thanksgiving, the more stuff Dante had moved out to his nest in the tree house. Now joining the sleeping bag and our T-shirts from Halloween were the full DVD boxed set of *Miami Vice*, a metal replica of his car that he'd painstakingly painted to match his baby at home, one of my flight suits, all the linen shirts Dante owned that had been sent by his housekeeper in two large boxes, two full-size fake palm trees, two mason jars full of ocean water—one from the Atlantic here and the other from Miami, again sent to us by Dante's very confused housekeeper, an oversized Cuban flag, an Italian silk scarf, framed photos of his family, his Gucci slides, one of Sal's blazers that he'd made her FedEx to him after she wore it at the office all day, a key lime pie-scented candle, and a beach towel he'd found at a home goods store that had a picture of a sunset on it. He'd spent hours arranging and rearranging the nest until it was exactly the way he wanted it, only to change his mind and start again the next day. But for the last two days, nothing had changed or been added.

Honestly, I wasn't sure how much more we could fit in the tree house and still have room for Dante and the eggs. For the past few nights, Dante had insisted on sleeping out in the nest, which meant I'd been trying to sleep with my mate and everything he'd collected. When I'd expressed my concerns to Everett, he'd said that was a good sign, and he expected Dante to lay our eggs at any time.



But according to Dante, the nest wasn't yet complete, which was why I was sitting in our nest on my laptop—thankful Edwin and Jonah's Wi-Fi signal stretched out this far—while Dante slept fitfully next to me. I'd been emailing with Elena to figure out if she could send some of Lita's ropa vieja. Needless to say, she was struggling to understand why Dante couldn't just come in and eat there. Which meant having to explain to her about the nest in Maine and the eggs. And even though it was hard to tell tone over email, Elena's shock came through loud and clear.

“Oww,” Dante moaned beside me and rolled over, trying to find a comfortable position and wrapping his arms around the *Miami Vice* DVDs. It had been harder and harder for him to sleep, and it was a miracle if he got more than a handful of hours a night. I reached over and rubbed his back, and he pressed into my touch. The crazy sex we'd been having all through September and October was a thing of the past. Now if I even looked at Dante like I wanted to get frisky, he winced. And I understood, but I missed that connection between us. Dante did too, even if having sex so hugely pregnant was the last thing he wanted.

“Shit, Dom.” Dante's eyes sprang open. “Something's wrong.”

I slammed my laptop shut and more or less tossed it over the edge of the bed and onto the floor. “What? What's wrong?”

“I'm wet. I shouldn't be wet. And”—his face screwed up in pain—“my back. God, my back is killing me.”

Swinging my legs over the bed and running around to his side, I threw the covers back, attempting to disturb as little of the stuff around my mate as possible, expecting to find a puddle, but there was nothing. A honeysuckle-sweet scent I recognized wafted through the air as I moved the blanket, though.

Dante rolled to his other side, clutching his belly and putting his back to me, and I saw then what he meant. His boxers were wet with slick. Everett had said something like

this might happen shortly before Dante was ready to lay the eggs. Which meant our babies were almost here.

Holy fuck.

For weeks, I'd thought I was ready.

Spoiler alert: I was not fucking ready.

Not at all.

"Dante, what do you need? What can I do?"

His eyes were wide. "Dom, I think our babies are coming."

"I know, tesoro. I think so too."

"Help me up." He rolled to his other side again and held out his hand. As carefully as I could, I helped him sit up.

"Fuck," he said again, doubling over a little. "Goddamn, that hurts."

"What can I do? Do you want me to call Everett?"

Dante shook his head. "No, it's Thanksgiving. Merritt was telling me all about how they get up early to watch the parade. I don't want to bother them." He doubled over again, breathing hard. "I need to stand up, I think."

"Okay, yeah, I can help you with that." I held both of my arms out and let Dante use them to pull himself up. His hair, which was normally perfectly styled, stuck out at odd angles, and his clothes were ill-fitting and rumpled, but he was still the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. "You are so fucking gorgeous."

He looked down at the T-shirt stretched tight over only three-quarters of his belly and shook his head.

I lifted his chin and made him look me in the eyes. "You are so beautiful it hurts me to look at you sometimes, and I know you are going to do an amazing job bringing our eggs into this world. I've got you, delfino, and I'm never going to let you go."

Tears swam in his eyes as he gripped my arms so tight I knew I'd have bruises, and I wasn't sure if they were from my

words, pain, or a combination of both. When he loosened his hold, I pressed a kiss to his lips. “I love you, Dante Perez.”

“I love you too,” he gritted out around another wave of pain as he took a step back from me and squatted down, his belly resting on his bent knees. “Oh, that feels good. Much better.” His face relaxed as he took a few deep breaths, then returned to standing. Almost immediately, he bent over in pain.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t call Everett?” My gut was telling me these eggs were on their way, like, now.

Dante shook his head. “Help me get my clothes off and get back into the nest.”

I sprang into action, sliding his boxers down his legs and kissing his belly. “I’m going to miss this,” I said, rubbing a hand over the tight skin. “I like knowing my babies are inside you.”

“Fuck,” Dante moaned, but this time, it wasn’t a cry of pain.

I helped him get his shirt off and climb up into the nest. He spent a few minutes rearranging things around him before he settled on his knees and started rocking back and forth, clutching his belly.

Feeling helpless, I paced while Dante moaned.

“Dom! Oh my God! Dom, I think one of the eggs is coming.”

I was at his side in an instant, and he grabbed my hand, squeezing tight. “Remember what Everett said. The eggs are solid, so when you feel the need to push, push. Listen to your body.”

Dante motioned for my other arm, and I held it out as a support as he stood up on the mattress, then got back into a squat. Slick was leaking from his hole and dripping onto the mattress. According to everything I knew about eagle shifter births, that was a very, very good sign.

“Dom!” Dante screamed, squeezing my arms hard and bearing down until his face was red.

“Breathe, baby. You need to keep breathing. You’ve got this.” I exaggerated my own breaths until he was breathing with me.

He squeezed my arms again and bore down, but this time, he kept breathing as much as he could.

“Dom,” he panted, “I think it’s stuck. What if it’s stuck?”

Totally out of my depth, I shook my head. “It’s not stuck, tesoro. You can do this.”

“You need to check. See if you can tell if it’s stuck. It feels stuck. Fuck!” He latched onto my arms again, and as he pushed this time, he forgot to breathe. “The egg is stuck, Dom!”

“Okay, okay. Breathe.”

“Dominic Pavone, do. Not. Tell. Me. To. Breathe. This is all your fault. All your fucking fault I’m laying goddamn eggs. Oh God!” Another contraction hit, and he put all his strength into laying our egg. But no egg fell into the nest. Maybe he was right and something was wrong.

“Do you still feel like it’s stuck?” I asked, and the glare I got in return would have turned a lesser man to stone. “What can I do?”

“Keep your fucking alpha dick away from me!” He screamed in pain again and pushed, but still no egg.

“I think we should call Everett.”

He shook his head. “Just tell me if it’s stuck.”

“How do you want me to do that? I’m not a doctor.”

“I don’t know. Stick your hand up there or something.”

I wasn’t completely sure that was safe, but I didn’t know what else to do. Leaning forward, I transferred Dante’s grip to my shoulders so my hands would be free and reached between his legs. His thighs and ass cheeks were drenched with slick, and when I found his hole, it was stretched wide. Another

really good sign. I easily slid three fingers inside him, and before I could get much deeper than I would go if I were aiming for his prostate, I hit something smooth and hard. Our egg.

“Dante, tesoro, you’re so, so close. I can feel our egg. One more good push and it will be out. You can do this. You’re doing so well.”

“One will be out, Dominic. One. I still have to do this again

—” He cut off on another scream and pushed hard, his nails digging into my shoulders as I whispered words of encouragement. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Oh!”

The *oh* gave me pause, and I looked down into the nest to see a beautiful white-and-gray speckled egg. Golden eagle eggs were usually speckled with brown, and I couldn’t help but wonder if the gray was a nod to Dante’s dolphin. What would that mean for our little eaglets? Would they be able to take dolphin forms too? As I looked at the egg, a slideshow of images played through my mind, showing me our little one’s future in a blur—first steps, first shifts, first swim, learning to ride a bike, first days of school, graduation, and on and on and on. A beautiful life.

Tears tracked down my face as I brushed Dante’s sweaty hair back from his forehead. “You did it, delfino. You laid a beautiful egg. Our beautiful egg.” Anything else I was going to say was choked off on a sob, and Dante flung himself into my arms, crying against my shoulder.

I hated that he’d been in pain—it broke my heart—but the result, our baby, was worth it. His lips found mine, and we kissed until I felt his stomach contract under my fingers. Our second little one was anxious to make their appearance.

“Dom!” Dante’s eyes were wide.

“I know, tesoro. It’s time to bring our second baby into the world. You did such an amazing job with the first I know you can do this.”

With a kiss to his nose, he slid out of my arms and back to his knees, rocking back and forth again just like last time. “I

need to move the other egg so nothing happens to it. Wrap it in your T-shirt.” I nodded and moved to take my shirt from the nest, but Dante slapped my hand. “Not that one. The one you’re wearing.”

I stripped it off in a flash and picked up our egg, cradling it gently in my arms as I tucked my shirt around it. It was warm and heavier than I expected it to be, not that I’d ever held an egg before. In Frascati, eagle shifter omegas gave birth in their nests and stayed there with the eggs until they hatched. The time between laying and hatching was private and reserved for only the closest family. I had a feeling our unique eggs were going to have a very different experience.

“It’s beautiful,” Dante said as I held the egg out to him. “So beautiful.” Fresh tears, happy tears, ran down his face, and I cradled the egg in one arm so I could brush them away.

“Where do you want me to put our first egg?”

Dante looked around him at the nest and pointed to the corner farthest away from where he was. “There. Between the DVDs and the ocean water. Wrap the sunset towel around it too.”

I did as he instructed, pressing a kiss to the warm shell before I set it down.

When I returned to my spot in front of Dante, his face was contorted in pain again, and he made a gimme motion until I held out my arms so he could use them to brace himself. Birthing the second egg seemed to go a lot smoother than the first, and it only took three big pushes before the second egg dropped into the nest.

Dante collapsed against my chest, and I held him tight, whispering words of praise and adoration into his hair as I rubbed his back.

“I’m in awe of you, tesoro. You are so strong and so brave. I know this wasn’t what you wanted, but you were amazing.”

“Dom...” Dante’s voice shook.

“Yes, my love?”

“I need you to get me out of this fucking tree house. Why are we up so goddamn high?” A shudder rippled through Dante’s body, and I realized from where we were, he could see out the window, but he couldn’t see the ground. Now that the eggs were out, Dante’s fear of heights had returned, and his arms wrapped tight around my neck in panic instead of pain.

“What do you want to do about the nest?”

“We need to take it with us back to the apartment.”

“Before we do that, I think we need to talk to Everett. He said we shouldn’t move the nest.” Though, honestly, if we could safely move the eggs, that would be better than trying to weather the next month and the fast-approaching Northeastern winter in the tree house with only a woodburning stove for heat. Nesting season in Frascati was right before the bonding ceremony, starting in March and running through late April. Usually, there was a soar of new eaglets, who had shifted into their human forms for the first time, initiated into the pack at the bonding ceremony. In Italy, in the spring, the weather was usually pretty mild, so the cold wasn’t an issue. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t been concerned about spending the late fall and beginning of winter in the tree house.

This time, instead of fighting me, Dante nodded.

“Why don’t you get comfortable and cuddle with our babies while we wait for him.”

“Okay.” His voice was still a little shaky, and I felt his fear through our bond. Most of it was because of how high up we were, but there was another part of his fear that worried about moving the nest and our babies. Dante slowly released his hold on my neck and sank back into the middle of the nest. “Can you wrap up the second egg for me?” Exhaustion was etched on his face and present in the dark circles under his eyes. The recent lack of sleep and the hard work he’d done bringing our eggs into the world was catching up to him.

I picked up the second egg, placed a kiss on the smooth, warm shell, and grabbed my other T-shirt from the nest to wrap around our other egg. I placed the bundle in Dante’s arms and reached for the first egg, placing it in Dante’s other

arm. He cuddled the eggs close and kissed them both, whispering in Spanish as fresh tears poured down his cheeks. My heart squeezed in my chest, looking at my mate holding our babies.

Dante shivered, and for the first time, I noticed how chilly it was in the tree house. Risking Dante's wrath for disturbing the nest, I unearthed the sleeping bag that had been the first item he'd added and pulled it up to cover him and the eggs.

"You see what I mean? Your alpha daddy is the best. He's going to take such good care of us." Dante smiled at me and cuddled our eggs closer. I couldn't wait to see what he would be like with our eaglets when the eggs hatched.

Everett picked up on the second ring. "What's up? You guys okay out there?"

"Uh, well, we have two beautiful eggs."

In the background, I heard Merritt say, "You what?"

"Dante laid our eggs this morning, but we have a little bit of a problem."

"I'm listening. Is Dante okay?" Everett's concern was evident, and he had lapsed seamlessly into doctor mode.

"He's fine. Tired and probably a little sore, but he's okay. Ish."

"What's going on?"

"Dante is afraid of heights."

There was silence for a second, and then Everett said, "But we built him a tree house because that's where he wanted to nest."

"Yes, true, but now that the eggs are out, he's, um, a little unhappy being up this high."

"Fascinating," Merritt said, and I was positive he was grabbing something to write with so he could take notes.

"We definitely don't want him in distress. The eggs will feel it, and that could cause problems. We're going to have to move the nest, which could also be traumatic for Dante, and



get Dante out of the tree house. All right, let me talk to Edwin and see if he has any ideas. I'll call you right back."

"Okay."

"Keep Dante calm and comfortable until we come up with a plan."

"Will do."

He hung up, and I returned to Dante's side. His eyes were drooping, and I knew he wanted to rest. "Everett and Edwin are coming up with a plan to safely move the eggs and the nest. Let's get you dressed so you'll be ready when they get here."

"That's good. I don't like it up here," he said as I helped him stand on shaky legs and held the eggs as he slipped on the fluffy white robe I'd taken from the hotel in Atlantic City.

"I know. I'm so sorry."

Dante opened his eyes wide and stared at me as he settled back onto the bed. "You should be! A tree house, Dom. In a tree. A tree. And eggs." He looked down at the bundles in his arms. "Beautiful, sweet, wonderful eggs."

"I promise next time you get pregnant, I'll make sure you nest on the ground."

"Next time? What makes you think I'm ever going through this again?"

I just smiled and pressed a kiss to his nose, then his lips, and crawled up beside him, curling around him as much as I could.

# CHAPTER 25



## DANTE

I knew Dom, Everett, Edwin, Jonah, and Merritt had moved the nest and the eggs from the tree house to our apartment over Edwin's garage, but I didn't remember a lot of the specifics. After I'd laid the eggs, I was pretty out of it and had spent most of Thanksgiving napping with my sweet eggs in my arms.

For all I could remember, Dom could have carried me and the babies down from the tree. Maybe he had.

All I knew was that my nest was now safely in the living room of the little apartment we were borrowing over Edwin's garage. Would I have preferred to be on the ground floor? Hell yes. Was I grateful to not be up in a godforsaken tree? Also hell yes. But at this point, beggars couldn't be choosers.

After Thanksgiving, Jonah and I had had a long conversation about how weird carrying babies of different species was. He was a lynx shifter who had given birth to a narwhal in what amounted to a giant bathtub. And I, a dolphin shifter who was afraid of heights, had given birth in a tree.

It was still hard to wrap my head around even a month later.

The winter holidays were approaching, and Dom had bought some Christmas lights to hang in the palm trees that were part of the nest. It added a festive little touch. Merritt had also made Dom and I what we affectionately referred to as egg koozies. They were crocheted pouches with straps that we could put the eggs in to keep them close to us and warm while

we did tasks. Apparently, Merritt sucked at cooking and making costumes, but he'd learned to crochet because he'd read an article that said doing handwork like knitting or crochet helped the mind process information. When he'd given us the crocheted koozies, Jonah was shocked. He'd had no idea Merritt had been crocheting for years.

After the first week, we could move the eggs out of the nest as often as we wanted to as long as we kept them close. At first, Dom was hesitant to take them out of the apartment because he'd never seen eggs outside of a nest before, but like everything else about our relationship, our situation was unique, and the koozies were actually super helpful.

Everett stopped by every other day to check on the eggs and to feel for cool spots that might indicate a problem. Our eggs were healthy and should hatch before the end of the year.

"Hey, delfino," Dom said as he breezed into the apartment, snow on his shoulders. He'd been out doing some last-minute holiday shopping with Everett and Edwin, and the bag in his hands, filled to overflowing with gift-wrapped packages, was proof he'd been successful.

"Hi. Good shopping trip?" I asked, nodding at the bag.

"Very. I'm officially done."

"Good, since it's Christmas Eve."

"I know, I know, but we've been busy."

"True."

"What are you making? It smells amazing."

"Lechon asado. It's roast pork. My family always eats this on Noche Buena." I was making the traditional Cuban dish for Dom and me because we'd decided as a group to do our own things for Christmas Eve and to get together for Christmas Day at Edwin's.

"Do you usually see your family at Christmas?" Dom asked, leaving his packages by the door and coming into the apartment's small kitchen.

I shook my head. “Traveling back to Cuba isn’t always easy. It’s easier because I have a private jet, but there is still a lot of red tape, even when it comes to family visits, especially now that Azucar is a success.”

“Why did you leave?” Dom filled a glass of water, took a drink, and leaned back against the small kitchen counter.

“I didn’t. My family came to the US in the late 1940s, and my mom is a US citizen like me and my sisters. My abuelo had land that was being disputed by the government when I was in high school, and he moved back. My grandmother had already passed. My grandfather got sick when I was a senior in college, and my mom, brother, sister, and their families moved back to Cuba. I didn’t.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, it’s not ideal, but it is what it is. What about you? Do you go back to Italy for the holidays?”

“My mother would love that, but no, I don’t usually visit Italy then. The bonding ceremony ensures I see my family at least once a year, but I don’t go back much more than that unless it’s for a wedding or funeral.”

“Why?”

Dom shrugged. “I’m not sure. It’s hard to explain, but the magic of the pack bond makes me feel connected to everyone, so I never feel homesick. I never really miss my family or the pack because they feel like part of me.”

“That makes more sense than you think. It’s how I feel about you.”

Dom pulled me into a hug. “Same, tesoro.”

A strange cracking sound came from the other side of the open-plan apartment, and Dom and I looked at each other. “What was that?”

“You don’t think—”

“Our babies are hatching? Yes, that’s exactly what I think.” Without another word, we took off toward the nest and

skidded to a halt. One of the eggs had a crack down the side and was rocking back and forth.

“Oh my God, Dom!” My eyes were already swimming with tears as the crack widened, and a tiny beak poked out. I reached blindly for my mate’s hand and held it tight as we watched our baby break out of their shell. A few minutes later, a fluffy ball of light gray, downy feathers sat where the egg had been, and I scooped the little eaglet into my hand, bringing them close and kissing their beak. We wouldn’t be able to tell gender until the eaglets shifted into human form in a month, so we’d held off on picking names. Until then, we planned to call one pequeño and the other piccolo. The little bird in my hand hopped up my arm and settled in the crook of my elbow. “Yes, pequeño, I know how hard you worked to break free. Rest, my little love.” I stroked my hand over their soft down, totally transfixed by the sweet little eaglet in my arms.

I’d been afraid I wouldn’t know how to bond with a baby that wasn’t a dolphin, but the tiny eaglet had stolen my heart, and like I could feel Dom’s emotions through the bond between us, I felt similarly connected to the baby asleep on my arm.

A sniffle pulled my gaze away from my sweet baby. I turned to see tears flowing unchecked down Dom’s face, and something about seeing my alpha mate cry made me love him just a little more.

He wiped at his tears. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m crying when I’m so damn happy it feels like I could burst.”

“I know the feeling.”

Dom’s lips crashed into mine, and he held me tight as we both cried and kissed and celebrated our new little one.

Until another crack tore us apart.

Our second eaglet was on their way.

The egg rocked, and the crack widened, but no little beak appeared. We watched, but nothing happened for a few long minutes.

“Come on, piccolo,” Dom whispered. “You can do it. Forza. Forza, piccolo.”

We held our breaths, and the egg began to rock again. This time, a little beak poked through the uncracked side of the egg and kept pecking until a new crack formed.

“Doing things the hard way, I see,” Dom said, “Just like your papi. Always making things difficult.”

“I do not, flyboy,” I said, none of the previous venom I used to put behind the nickname present.

“Really? Didn’t you ask for a tree house and then freak out that you were up too high?”

“Shut up. You can’t hold things that happened during my pregnancy against me.” I shoved Dom’s shoulder as much as I could without disturbing our sleeping pequeño.

“I know, but we wouldn’t be us if we didn’t give each other at least a little shit.” He winked at me, and my heart melted a little.

“This is true.”

Our piccolo finally broke through, a piece of the eggshell still stuck on their head, and Dom reached out to move it away. This eaglet was a little darker gray with a swoop of even darker gray along one side. Their coloring reminded me a little of a dolphin calf, and I wondered if they would eventually be able to take their dolphin form.

The tiny eaglet let out a little squawk as Dom scooped them up. “Lippy just like your papi too.”

“You love it.”

“You know I do.” He cupped our second tiny baby in his hands and brought the eaglet up to kiss his nose. The bird hopped to his shoulder instead. “Whoa. Slow down there,” Dom said, catching the tiny bird before they fell off his shoulder.

We sat side by side on the floor, staring at our babies, completely content.

My phone rang a little while later, and I passed our pequeño off to Dom so I could answer it.

“Dante? It’s Jonah. Do you by any chance have an onion I could borrow? I thought I bought one, but I can’t find it.”

“Of course. Come by and grab it.” I added a pause for effect, then said, “You can meet the babies.”

“The babies? Oh my God! Edwin! The eggs hatched! The babies are here!” A clattering sound came over the line, and there was a second before I heard Jonah’s voice again. “Sorry. I dropped the phone. This is so exciting!”

“It really is. They are beautiful, Jonah.”

“Oh, I’m sure they are. The eggs were gorgeous. Are you sure it’s okay if we come to see them?”

“Please do.”

“Okay! Yay!” Edwin said something in the background. “Everett and Merritt are here. Everett came to swim in the pool.” I shivered involuntarily, thinking of the ice-cold water in Edwin’s pool. The only thing I had in common with the narwhal and beluga whale shifters in our little group was the fact that we all swam and couldn’t shift on land. How Edwin and Everett could swim in that cold damn water was beyond me.

“Bring them too.” I couldn’t wait for our family here to meet the newest additions.

Jonah hung up without saying goodbye, and half an hour later, the rest of our family showed up on our doorstep with presents and food.

Merritt immediately started cooing over our piccolo and blowing raspberries on Theo’s palms when he reached for the little bird. “Theo, we need to use gentle hands when we touch our cousin.” He put out one of Theo’s little fingers and stroked it over the baby bird’s fur. Theo’s face lit up, and he clapped.

Jonah dumped a few baby toys onto the floor and set Lia down to play. “Let me hold one of those babies.” He held out



his hands, and I passed our pequeño over. “Oh, you are just the sweetest little thing, aren’t you?”

Edwin wrapped an arm around his mate and gently rubbed the baby’s feathers. “You look healthy and happy, little one,” he said, putting one finger against our baby’s rib cage and counting their breaths. “Good, strong lungs.”

Everett was doing the same to the eaglet Dom held. “Their sibling too.” Dom held the baby out to Everett, who smiled and brought the baby to eye level. They cocked their head and met Everett’s gaze. “Ah, sassy already. I approve. Someone needs to keep your dads on their toes.”

Instead of spending the evening alone like we’d intended, our night turned into a birthday party and Christmas celebration.

“Uh, I think I need to ask a dumb question,” Jonah said, raising his hand.

“Go for it,” Dom said.

“So the twins’ birthday. Is that the day the eggs were laid or the day they hatched?”

It was a good question, and one I’d had to ask myself.

Dom laughed. “Not a stupid question at all.” Merritt had slipped his phone out of his pocket and was taking notes. “Technically, eagle shifters celebrate two days, laying day and hatching day.”

“But, like, on which day will your kids take birthday treats into school?” Jonah still looked confused.

“Their official recorded birthday is the day they hatch, so their birthday is today.”

Jonah nodded. “Totally makes sense.”

Edwin smirked, then said, “Given that it’s Christmas, I feel like there is some joke to be made about our merry little band of shifters only needing a partridge in a pear tree to become a Christmas carol.”

“Pretty sure there was no ‘one narwhal a-swimming’ in the original song,” Jonah fired back.

We all laughed, which made Lia and Theo stir where they’d fallen asleep cuddled to Edwin’s and Everett’s chests.

“I think it’s time for us to go,” Merritt said. “We need to get Theo to bed because I have a very special Christmas surprise for my mate.” He gave an exaggerated wink, and it was a side of Merritt I’d only rarely seen. Usually, it was Jonah who was all about the innuendo.

“That’s my cue,” Everett said, standing slowly. “Merry Christmas.”

Jonah stood as well. “I think we’d better leave the new dads alone.”

“What? No special Christmas surprise for me?” Edwin said, faking disappointment.

“You never know.” Jonah gave his mate a significant look.

More merry Christmases were exchanged, and as quickly as they had come in, our little family was gone. In their absence, the apartment felt empty, but my heart had never been so full.

Both of our eaglets were asleep on Dom’s lap. “What should we do with the babies?” I asked.

“Let’s put them to bed in the nest. They will be comfortable there, and once we get home to Miami, we can figure out what to do about cribs.”

“I know exactly which rooms I want to use for them.” I could already picture the nurseries in my head, and I was suddenly ready to be back home so we could settle into our new life. Everything had happened so fast, my life changing in a summer, but as Dom and I sat on the sofa, wrapped up in one another, with *It’s a Wonderful Life* playing on the apartment’s little TV, our eaglets asleep in their nest, I couldn’t help but think that yeah, it was a wonderful life.

And it was only going to get better.

# EPILOGUE



## DOMINIC

### *Five Months Later*

“Give me that baby,” Nonna said, reaching to take Corina out of my arms. For her part, my sassy little girl reached back, and I relinquished my hold on her. She was still dressed in the tiny wine-colored robe she’d worn during the initiation ceremony. “You and your mate deserve time together now that you are bound together as not only mates but pack.”

I couldn’t deny that my bond with Dante had increased the second he’d been initiated and welcomed with open arms into the pack. My inner alpha had wanted to lay him out right there on the dais where the initiates stood and let everyone know he was mine, but I’d held back the urge. Now, looking across the gathered crowd to where he stood with my mother, Camilo, our sweet, sleepy little boy, zonked out on his shoulder, my body ached with longing.

He must have felt my emotions through our bond because he turned and searched the crowd, our eyes meeting in a second. He smiled, and I felt the bottom drop out of my stomach. He was so beautiful dressed in the wine and gold of the pack.

“You know I hate to say it, but I told you so.” Nonna’s smile was radiant. She only wore her long silver-white hair down for the bonding ceremony, and it shone almost as brilliantly as her smile in the moonlight. Corina had grabbed a handful of it, tangling the white strands in her chubby little hands, but my grandmother didn’t seem to care.

“I know. I should never have doubted you.”

She bumped my shoulder. “Damn straight. You won’t do it again.”

“No, Nonna, I won’t.”

“Good. Now go give that other baby to your mother and get out of here.”

“Si. I’m going.”

My mother was already reaching out to take Cam from Dante’s shoulder, and my mate was protesting. “I don’t want to impose, Lucia. He’s asleep now, but he’ll be up in an hour. Two at most.”

“Impose? How do you impose on family? I want to take him for the night. We won’t see him again until next year. Maybe you’ll get Dominic to visit us more often on your fancy private plane.”

“Mamma...” I said a note of warning in my voice.

“What?” she said, holding her hands out. “I want to see my babies more than once a year.” Dante let her take Cam, and he didn’t even open his eyes.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Dante said, giving my mom a wink. Letting them spend the previous day in the kitchen together had clearly been a mistake. It appeared they were as thick as thieves.

“I’m going to steal my mate for a while, but call us if you need anything,” I said to my mother.

“We’ll be just fine, won’t we, piccolo?” Cam didn’t so much as stir in response. My mother had two cribs set up in the spare room at her house. Even though my sisters’ children were too old to need them, she’d kept them around and had my father put them together before we arrived. I had a feeling she’d hoped we’d stay with them so she could get more baby time, but instead, we’d rented a small house not too far from where my parents lived.

“This is your first bonding ceremony, so if you want to stay, we can, but I’d love to take you back to the house,” I

whispered in Dante's ear.

“What's left of the ceremony?”

“My uncle will call for the pack run, and everyone will take their animal forms and run or fly.”

“Hmm, well, can't do that, so I guess I'm all yours, flyboy.”

A quick look around told me that Everett, Merritt, and Theo had already left. Which made sense because Everett and Theo couldn't do the run either. Now that we had a few more sea shifters, I'd have to talk to my uncle about possibly moving the run to somewhere everyone in the pack could participate.

But that was a problem for another day.

“Good.” I bit his earlobe and relished the shudder that rippled through him.

“Do not make me get a hard-on in this robe, Dominic.”

I loved it when he used my full first name. It reminded me of when we'd first met when we used to think we hated everything about each other. Turns out we were both wrong.

“Not trying to,” I said, pressing a sucking kiss to the spot just above his scent gland that I knew drove him crazy.

“Yes, you are. At least wait until we get back to the house.”

“Does that mean we're leaving?”

“Lead the way.” Grabbing Dante's hand, I led us through the crowd and out onto the road that led to the center of town.

“I don't know why you don't come back here more often. It's beautiful,” Dante said as we passed through a piazza with a marble fountain in the center, water bubbling from the mouths of several fish while some sort of mythical water god waved a trident.

“You're on team Lucia now I see.”

“I’m on team us, but I do see your mom’s point. And we do have access to a private plane.”

“Fine, we can plan another trip.”

Dante pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. “I bet it’s beautiful here at Christmas.”

“Fine,” I said through gritted teeth. “We can come back at Christmas.”

Dante clapped. “Excellent! I knew you’d see things my way.”

“Yeah, it’s almost like I love you or something. Like you’re the other half of my soul. Like I’d do damn near anything to make you happy. Go figure.”

Dante tugged my hand, hauling me to a stop in the middle of the deserted street while everyone was still at the pack ceremony, and kissed me hard under the crystal-clear sky and twinkling stars.

“I thought we were waiting until we got back to the house?”

He looked around and squeezed my hand. “I love you so damn much, and it was too perfect a moment to pass up.”

My heart was lodged somewhere around my throat, so I didn’t say anything, just pulled Dante down the street, past my parents’, to the little house we’d rented.

I tried to unlock the door as Dante wrapped his arms around me from behind and let his sneaky fingers wander down to my dick, which was already hard under my pack robes.

With the door finally open, I crossed the threshold just as Dante said, “Don’t forget about the pack and plays!”

But it was too late. The house was dark, and I hit one of the portable cribs and tripped, sprawling onto my back and taking Dante with me. He landed on my chest with an *oomph*.

For a second, we just lay there, trying to catch our breaths, and then Dante said, “Well, Mr. Pavone, it appears you’re

happy to see me.”

“Very.” I pulled him close for a kiss, melding my mouth to his and slipping my tongue inside to tease along his. This close to his heat season, it didn’t take much to take Dante from zero to rock hard, and our deep hungry kisses had done it, his cock now hard between us and rubbing against mine through the fabric of our pack robes.

Like every time Dante and I were together like this, it felt like kerosene dumped on the flame of my lust and love, and I wanted to be inside him until it was impossible to tell where he ended and I began. It had been that way since the first time, a passion that was all-consuming on a cellular level. It was still one of the great mysteries of the world how I hadn’t known then that Dante was the one fate had chosen just for me.

When I look back on last year now, it was so obvious. We were both so stupid, trying to resist a bond that was unbreakable.

“Dom,” Dante whined, rocking his dick against mine with greater urgency. “I need to come.”

With our new pack bond enhancing our mating connection, I could feel his need, and it leveled up my own.

Reaching blindly in the dark, I found the gold epaulets that held the robe together at his shoulders and unclasped them. The material fell, revealing his chest, and I brought my lips to his nipples, which were still sensitive months after pregnancy. His fingers tangled in my hair as I laved my tongue over the tight buds until I could smell his slick and precum on the air.

“You’re so fucking perfect for me, delfino.” My fingers found the gold cord at his waist and tugged, releasing the rest of the robe. The burgundy fabric fell away from his skin, and I rolled us so I could look at him spread out underneath me.

But again, I forgot about the folding cribs, and Dante smacked his head against one of the feet.

“As much as I want you inside me right here on the floor, I’m not sure either of us would survive without serious regrets.



Call me high-maintenance, but if I'm going to throw my back out, I'd rather it be because you fucked me so damn good instead of because I'm on the hard floor."

"You are high-maintenance. And a pain in the ass."

"And yet, you love me anyway, flyboy."

"That I do." I stood and held out my hand to help Dante up. The second he was vertical, I picked him up, leaving the robe behind on the floor, and flung him over my shoulder. He squealed for me to put him down because he was too heavy, but I didn't listen, making a beeline for the king-sized bed in our room and avoiding another takedown by baby equipment.

Dante continued to protest, and I smacked his ass hard. "If I can carry you down three sets of stairs from a tree house three stories up, down a hiking path, and through Edwin's giant house to his garage, I can carry you across a tiny house."

He stopped squirming. "Is that how I got down from there?"

"You don't remember?"

"Not really. I remember laying the eggs, freaking out about the height, then not much else about the day until you woke me up to feed me turkey and cranberry relish that Edwin and Jonah had brought over."

I tossed Dante onto the bed, and he bounced before settling, completely spread out. "Yes, I carried you. And I'd do it again and again and again."

Dante's smile was a little watery as he stared up at me, and my heart pinched with emotions too big to have a name. I removed my own robe, letting the fabric fall to the ground before I joined Dante on the bed and picked up where we'd left off on the floor—his mouth under my lips and his body under mine, now skin to skin. My hands wandered to his nipples again as I worked him back up to where we'd been. In the smaller space, the honey-sweet scent of Dante's slick and the saltiness of his precum wrapped around me, enveloping me in an endless loop that started and ended with him.

I was so lost in loving my mate that it took me a second to realize his fingers were wrapped around my shaft, stroking hard. Dante used my momentary distraction to flip our positions again, and in a single move, he had me on my back and my cock in his mouth.

“Fuck, Dante,” I said as he took me deeper, the head of my cock hitting the back of his throat, the wet heat of his mouth wrapped around me from root to tip. He took my words as encouragement and sucked hard as he slid his tongue over the underside of my shaft, then teased the crown with the tip of his tongue, licking away the precum spilling from the slit before sliding back down.

Dante’s mouth was one of my favorite things about him, and not just because he sucked dick like he was born to do it. I loved to banter with him, and argue with him, and whisper sweet words in the dark with him. It was Dante’s smart mouth and the way he bossed me around that had made me fall for him, even if I hadn’t known it at the time. And it was his goddamn talented tongue and wicked lips that were going to make me come.

“Stop,” I said, the word panted out on a harsh breath as I tried to walk myself back from the edge of my orgasm. “I don’t want to come unless it’s inside you, breeding you, and filling you up with more of my babies.”

“God, Dom. Yes. I want you.”

Rolling us over again, I kissed over every inch of Dante’s skin as his fingers tangled in my hair. I paid extra attention to the loose skin over his soft belly, whispering how much I loved his body, how strong it was, how amazing he’d been carrying our babies, until I felt the sob he’d tried to hold back break free. He was his own worst critic, and more than anything, I wanted him to see himself through my eyes. If I had to worship every inch of him every day for as long as we both lived for him to see how perfect he was, I would do it, but now, I wanted him to know only pleasure.

My lips teased over the head of his cock, lapping up his taste just enough to make him moan and writhe on the bed,

looking for more.

“Dom, please,” my mate begged, but I wasn’t done yet.

Bending his knees up toward his chest, I licked from his balls to his hole, tasting his slick. His body was made for me, and as I speared my tongue inside him, he screamed my name, right on the verge of ecstasy. Before he could take another breath, I lined my cock up with his hole and shoved in deep.

“Fuck, Dante, I’m not going to last. You feel so damn good.” I pulled back and thrust in hard, hitting the spot that made his eyes roll back and his ass clench around me so hard it almost hurt. “I’m going to knot you and fill you so full.”

“Yes, Dom, breed me. I want to have more of your babies.”

“You will. You were fucking gorgeous pregnant.”

I kept up a hard pace, thrusting deep as Dante did his best to meet each thrust. I held his legs open so I could watch his hard cock bounce between us, precum still leaking from the tip and striping his stomach.

“Dom, God. So good. So good.”

I was too close, but I wanted Dante to come first. Reaching down, I wrapped my fingers around his thick cock and stroked hard, twisting my fist over the head.

“Dominic!” My name on my mate’s lips as he came and his cum leaking from between my fingers made my dick swell.

“Are you ready for my knot, tesoro?”

“I need it.”

I thrust hard one more time, shoving Dante until he almost hit the headboard, and came deep inside him. His ass tightened around my thickened shaft and knot, and the pleasure was so intense I thought I was seeing stars, but it was Dante’s pleasure echoing back to me along our bond, making my orgasm last until I thought I’d be completely wrung out.

When I could see straight and breathe again, I rolled us over so we could lie side by side, Dante’s leg thrown over my

hip, as we shared the same oxygen and looked into each other's eyes.

"That was amazing," Dante said, the words still coming out on panted breaths.

"We have to practice."

"For what?"

"Your heat season in a couple weeks. If we want more babies by the end of the year, we're going to have a lot of work to do." I kissed Dante's nose as he rolled his eyes.

"We talked about this."

"I know. I'm joking. Mostly. Though I would totally keep you pregnant all the time if I could."

"Next year. You can knock me up again next year. Corina and Camilo will be almost two. It will be time for another baby. Only one this time."

I laughed. "I can't make any promises." I pecked another kiss to his nose. "Okay, that's a lie."

Dante cocked a brow.

"I promise I will love you until the day I die, and I will do everything in my power to make sure you and our babies, however many that may be, know how much you are loved every day." A fat tear rolled down Dante's cheek, and I swept it away with my thumb. "I'll love you forever, Dante Perez."

"You are mine always, Dominic Pavone. My beginning and my end. My forever."

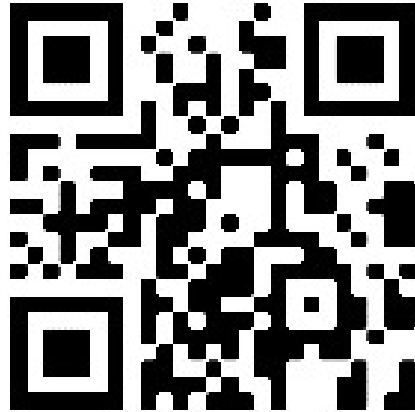
The End

\* \* \*

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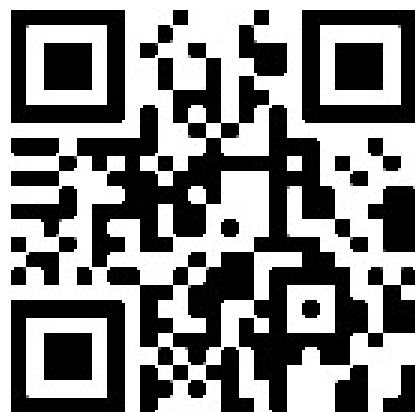
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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vinni George has been a lover of romance novels (of all shapes, sizes, and colors) since she first got her hands on one of her grandmother's Harlequins and has never looked back. She lives in Ohio with her two favorite guys (her husband and son) and, hopefully—one day—a dog. When not writing her own stories, she can be found helping to polish other people's novels. In her spare time, Vinni dabbles in performance art, quilting, and various culinary pursuits and enjoys traveling.

Vinni's debut novel, *Hold the Door*, was a finalist and runner-up in Contemporary Gay Romance in the 2020-2021 Rainbow Awards.

Connect with Vinni:

Sign up for Vinni's newsletter at [vinnigeorge.com](http://vinnigeorge.com).

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