

A muscular man's torso is the central focus, showing his chest, abdominal muscles, and arms. He has a short beard and is looking slightly to the left. The background is a surreal, dark scene with a large, glowing purple and pink nebula or sunset on the left, and a dark, classical-style building with columns on the right. The overall mood is mysterious and sensual.

ILLICIT

THE WRONG ALPHA BOOK #3

ALESSANDRA HAZARD

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ILLICIT

THE WRONG ALPHA BOOK #3

Alessandra Hazard

Other books in the series:

Book 1: [Unnatural](#) (Royce & Haydn)

Book 2: [Feral](#) (Devlin & Jules)

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*These feelings are utterly wrong. He's an impostor. But if he isn't?
They're even more wrong.*

The last time Liam Blake saw Anthony, Liam was five and Anthony was sixteen. Liam barely remembers him. He remembers adoring him and remembers missing him, but his childhood memories faded as he grew up.

Fifteen years later, a man who calls himself Anthony Blake finally comes home after the war ends. He has documents that prove his identity, and he has Anthony's dark hair, blue eyes, and broad shoulders. There's no reason to think he isn't who he says he is—except for Liam's strange, inexplicable attraction to the man who claims to be Anthony.

Liam refuses to believe he's that sick: related alphas and omegas can't be drawn to each other or get fixated on their sibling's scent. It's unnatural. It's perverse.

Could he be an impostor?

But if he is, who is he—and why is he pretending to be Anthony Blake?

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Chapter 1

“Your brother is alive.”

Liam Blake stared at the man, wondering if he was hearing things.

“What?” Eric and Jules said together, voicing his confusion.

Peter Cerrigan, their family solicitor, smiled at the three Blake brothers, his smile kind and understanding. “Your eldest brother, Anthony Blake, is not dead. We’ve received word that he’s alive. It seems he was heavily wounded and it took him a long time to recover, which was why he was mistakenly declared dead. He’ll return home any day now.”

Liam sat down heavily on the couch, feeling... he didn’t know what. Happiness didn’t seem to be the right word. He hadn’t seen his eldest brother in fifteen years. He had been just five when Anthony had left to join the war after a huge row with their alpha mother. He’d been gone ever since. He’d never contacted them, not even once. Liam hadn’t understood why when he had been a child, but as an adult, he could understand that their mother’s overbearingness might have been the reason. Alphas preferred independence and had trouble getting along with other alphas even when they were related. Their mother had been kind of... stifling, to be honest.

Except their mother had died last year, but Anthony had still failed to return home and assume his responsibilities. Liam couldn’t deny that he had resented that—resented Anthony—for not giving a damn about them. But when a few months ago they’d received word that Anthony was presumably killed in one of the last battles of the war, all his resentment was gone, and

there was only the ever-growing desperation: with their mother and eldest brother dead, their home was no longer their home. The Blake properties were entailed to alphas, so their mother's younger brother, Uncle Wayne, inherited everything, leaving Liam and his younger brothers completely dependent on his kindness. And Liam would rather not depend on that—Uncle Wayne wasn't a kind man.

"He's really alive?" Jules said, gripping Liam's arm in his excitement.

The old solicitor nodded. "He is. We were told the viscount will return home as soon as he passes the identity verification in the Inheritance Department." He winced. "Could you boys inform your uncle that the Blake accounts will be frozen until your brother's return?"

Liam nodded, though he wasn't looking forward to delivering that piece of news to their uncle. Uncle Wayne wasn't going to be happy. Putting it mildly.

"Sure we will," Jules said, smirking.

Liam shook his head in fond exasperation. Unlike his younger brother, he didn't relish conflict. He'd learned a long time ago that it was more effective not to contradict alphas openly—and then subtly make them change their opinions. Liam found that strategy far more efficient than pointless confrontation. Alphas hated being wrong, hated being humiliated and mocked. People were correct to say that one would catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

When the solicitor left, Liam laid a hand on Jules's shoulder. "Don't antagonize Uncle, Jules."

Jules blinked and gave him a very innocent look, as if to say, *Who, me?*

Liam chuckled. "I'm serious, you dolt. Until Anthony returns, Uncle Wayne is still our family alpha and he can create plenty of problems for us. You aren't married to Westcliff yet."

As always, Jules's expression turned nauseatingly soft and lovesick at the mere mention of his fiancé.

Liam smiled faintly. He had to admit he had felt more than a little humiliated when the Duke of Westcliff had publicly declared his intention to marry Jules even though he'd been courting him, Liam. It had stung. It had. But he loved his brothers and he was happy for Jules—he'd never seen Jules so happy.

But truth be told, sometimes he felt a pang of wistfulness and envy when he saw Jules so happy and in love. He'd like that. He'd like to fall in love and marry for love. But after the past social season, his hopes were at an all-time low. He'd met thousands of perfectly eligible alphas, many of whom were handsome, titled, and rich—and yet Liam had felt *nothing*. Not even a flicker of attraction. He couldn't help but wonder if there was something wrong with him. It was possible. He wasn't on suppressants, but his heats were very weak, which was pretty unusual even for Vos omegas.

Maybe he was just defective.

Liam tried to push the dreaded thought away, but once again, it kept coming back. Defective omegas were very rare, but sometimes it happened. They were spoken about only in whispers, their existence denied by their families. They were considered abominations. Defective omegas were neither fertile nor nurturing nor passionate—things omegas were known for. Liam couldn't be sure whether he was fertile or not, though his very weak heats were worrying, but he was definitely bad at being nurturing and passionate. He always felt awkward when he had to comfort his little brothers, always felt awkward when he hugged them, as if giving comfort was something unnatural for him. As for passionate... well, after the past social season, he had no delusions about that, either. There was something wrong with him. He wasn't like other omegas.

The ironic part was, he looked like a picture-perfect omega. He'd been widely called the diamond of the social season, universally praised for his golden hair, lovely face, and grace. *A flawless, quintessential omega*, people said. Liam always wanted to laugh when he heard that.

If only they knew how very far from perfect he actually was. But then again, Liam hadn't shared his doubts even with his brothers, so it was hardly surprising that the rest of the world had no idea. People saw only

what they wanted to see, and Liam had always been good at smiling even when he wanted to cry.

Last month, as he stood in the crowded royal ballroom, watching his baby brother smile radiantly in the arms of the Duke of Westcliff, Liam had to employ all the tricks in his arsenal to keep the smile on his face while everyone stared at him, expecting him to break down. He had been happy for Jules, truly. He didn't resent him for falling in love with Liam's suitor. But he couldn't deny that he had felt painfully envious watching his brother with his duke. Jules might not seem like a perfect omega, but he *was* one, for all intents and purposes. Jules was nurturing, passionate, and likely fertile, if his strong heats were any indication. Jules was capable of being in love.

Liam wasn't sure he was. He had been wooed by hundreds of alphas and betas, and he had been courted by the most handsome alpha on the planet, and while he could appreciate Westcliff's gorgeous face and physique aesthetically, they had affected neither his heart nor his body. Liam smiled, Liam flirted, Liam danced and charmed people, but on the inside, he felt... nothing. Empty. Cold. By the end of the season, he had started feeling like a fraud, and the thought "defective" kept rearing its ugly head, no matter how hard he tried to push it away. Not that it mattered. Liam would still have to marry someone to secure his and Eric's future. He refused to depend on Westcliff's generosity.

But now... if Anthony was alive, he wouldn't have to. Their eldest brother would be their alpha and would take care of them. Liam wouldn't have to marry anyone and his possible defectiveness wouldn't be an issue.

Unless... unless Anthony didn't care for them. He'd been gone for fifteen years, after all. How much could he really care for his younger brothers?

That was the question.

Chapter 2

Liam was sitting on the bench outside the house, browsing the Internet, when he heard the helicopter. He lifted his gaze from his tablet and watched an unfamiliar helicopter land on their front lawn. Could it be...?

Clearly sharing his thoughts, his younger brothers emerged out of the house, excitement on their faces. Uncle Wayne followed them, but his mood couldn't be more different: his expression was stony, his eyes hard and grim.

Liam barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes. Uncle could have at least pretended to be pleased that his nephew was alive.

The helicopter's door opened.

Liam watched curiously as a dark-haired man jumped out of it onto the ground. He was dressed in a blue military uniform, the arm bands on it denoting his rank of colonel. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and well muscled but not too beefy, his body exuding strength and grace.

The man turned to them.

Liam bit the inside of his cheek, eyeing him uncertainly. His memories of his brother were hazy at best. He remembered that Anthony had been handsome. He was still handsome, but something about his face surprised Liam. He didn't remember his brother being this... striking. There was something captivating about the harsh lines of Anthony's eyebrows, high cheekbones, and chiseled jaw. But then again, Anthony had been just sixteen when Liam had last seen him, not fully grown into his features yet.

It was entirely possible that his appearance had changed and improved with physical maturity. Or maybe his five-year-old self's memories were too unreliable. Either way, Anthony was strikingly handsome now.

“Anthony?” Jules said, stepping forward. As usual, he was the bravest of them. Or the most curious.

Anthony's blue eyes settled on Jules.

And then, he smiled.

“Jules?” Anthony said, looking at Jules with something like wonder. “Look at you, you're all grown.”

Liam frowned, trying to decipher the niggling feeling that appeared in his gut. Something about Anthony's words seemed off, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Jules didn't seem to share his reservations. He grinned and threw himself at the alpha, hugging him tightly. “You're really alive!”

After a moment, Anthony returned the hug, before letting go of Jules and turning to Eric. “And you must be the little Eric.”

“Not so little anymore,” Eric said with an awkward smile. He was more reserved than Jules, so he didn't go for a hug. Anthony was the one to do it, hugging him once tightly before letting go.

His blue eyes finally shifted to Liam.

Some unidentifiable emotion flickered in them before Anthony smiled again. “Li,” he said, his voice quiet and low.

And suddenly Liam's vision was a little blurry.

This was his brother. His big brother he used to adore as a little boy. He was alive. He was back.

His tablet dropping onto the bench, Liam got to his feet. The next thing he knew, he was striding toward his brother and then Anthony's arms were around him, Liam's face pressing against Anthony's neck.

It felt like coming home. Until now, Liam wouldn't have claimed to remember what Anthony smelled like, but as he breathed in his fresh, masculine scent, he felt curiously like he had been missing this all his life. Anthony smelled so nice. So wonderful. Toe-curlingly right. Liam felt so safe in his arms. So very good.

A small sound slipped out of his mouth before he could stop it.

He felt Anthony's firm body stiffen against him, and then Anthony pulled back.

Liam barely stopped the groan of disappointment from escaping his lips, his fingers clutching Anthony's shirt.

"Hey," Anthony said, his voice low and kind, but his eyes difficult to read as he gazed at Liam. His thumb brushed against Liam's cheek, wiping away the wetness. "None of that."

Liam gave him a weak smile, feeling embarrassed and confused by his uncharacteristically emotional behavior. He was normally good at hiding his emotions. He wasn't one to cry.

Maybe it was just the relief—the relief that he no longer had to be his siblings' eldest brother, no longer had to take care of them. Yes, it must have been the relief.

"I'm just glad you're back," Liam said with a crooked smile, trying to unclench his fingers from Anthony's shirt. His fingers didn't listen to the commands of his brain at all. Fuck, what was wrong with him?

Anthony smiled back and laid his hands over Liam's. His thumbs stroked his wrists, gently coaxing Liam's hands to release his shirt.

Flushing, Liam did just that, but Anthony didn't drop his hands.

"I'm glad to be back, too," Anthony said, stroking the scent glands on Liam's wrists gently. Scent-marking him.

It felt...

Liam inhaled unsteadily, unsure why the gesture had shaken him so much. It was normal for the family alpha to scent-mark his siblings or children. It was the most non-invasive form of scent-marking. Perfectly

acceptable. And yet it felt nothing like their mother's scent-marking had felt like: it was comforting, yes, but it was also... *satisfying* on a completely different level. It made Liam feel like purring and rubbing his cheek against Anthony's.

"Nephew."

The cold voice startled him so badly that Liam flinched.

Right. They weren't alone. Uncle Wayne, Jules and Eric were there, too.

Feeling oddly off-balance, Liam stepped away and turned.

Uncle Wayne had a slight sneer on his face as he gazed at Anthony. "You have changed," he said, boring a hole in his nephew with his eyes. "You look different."

"I'm not sixteen anymore," Anthony said, holding Uncle Wayne's gaze steadily. "It's good to see you, Uncle."

Uncle Wayne looked at him for a long moment before finally extending a hand for a handshake.

Anthony shook his hand as they stared each other down.

Liam exchanged a look with Jules and they both rolled their eyes. Alpha posturing was so ridiculous.

"No offense, but I require proof of your identity," Uncle Wayne said in a tone that was frankly quite offensive.

"None taken," Anthony said, reaching into his pocket and retrieving his ID and a document with the seal of the Inheritance Department.

Uncle Wayne studied them for an embarrassingly long time, his lips becoming thinner. Finally, he smiled. "Welcome home, son."

The smile that stretched Anthony's lips was about as sincere as Uncle Wayne's. "It's good to be home," he said. "I understand that this situation is rather awkward for you, Uncle. I'm not offended that you aren't happy to have me back."

“Nonsense,” Uncle Wayne said, smiling wider. This time his smile looked less forced. “You’re my nephew. Of course I’m happy that you’re alive. As you said, it’s just a little awkward.”

Anthony nodded genially, but his gaze remained sharp and assessing. “Let’s go inside,” he said, stepping forward and somehow managing to lead them into the house he hadn’t lived in for the past fifteen years. Everything about his presence screamed *alpha*. It made Liam both extremely comfortable and extremely self-conscious. It was so bizarre. He wanted to be closer to Anthony and very far away from him at the same time. He wanted to be wrapped up in his arms again—but the prospect of it made his stomach squirm. It truly was bizarre. He didn’t understand himself.

As if sensing his confusion, Anthony looked back at him, his expression inscrutable. “Everything okay?” he said, glancing down at Liam’s hands before shoving his own into the pockets of his jacket.

Liam nodded with a faint smile, and Anthony cleared his throat a little and looked at Jules.

“What is it I hear about you marrying the Duke of Westcliff?” he said with a playful frown, laying a hand on Jules’s shoulder.

Jules grinned, his face lighting up. “That’s what you get for being away for fifteen years!”

“You’re still a midget,” Anthony said with a teasing smile. “It’s weird.”

“No, I’m not! And it’s not!”

Liam listened to their easy banter and felt... something not unlike envy. He envied the ease between them, envied how relaxed Jules looked. Jules didn’t look torn or confused. He was talking to Anthony as if the fifteen years of separation hadn’t happened. It was kind of baffling. And annoying.

Liam looked at Eric, hoping he shared his confusion, but Eric looked relaxed, too. He already seemed to have lost interest in their eldest brother, his gaze fixed on his phone. Nothing new there: Eric preferred electronics to people.

Suppressing a sigh, Liam followed his brothers into the house.

However, he was detained by Uncle Wayne in the hall. “Liam.”

“What is it, Uncle?” Liam said.

Uncle Wayne watched his brothers disappear into the living room before turning to him. “Don’t you think he looks very different from how he looked at sixteen? You’re the oldest—you remember him better than Jules and Eric do. Look at his photograph here.”

Uncle shoved the photograph in front of him.

It was a picture of a teenage Anthony holding a blond toddler—Liam—in his arms.

Liam wrinkled his forehead. “Uncle, I understand that you’re upset, but please stop entertaining such thoughts. You saw the documents Anthony provided. Is it not enough?”

Uncle Wayne scowled. “Yes, but he looks different—”

“You can’t expect a man of thirty-one to look like he did as a teenager,” Liam said in his most patient voice. “Some people change a lot as they mature, especially alphas.” Although in Pelugia alphas were considered of age after their first rut, everyone knew that they reached their physical maturity closer to the age of twenty-five. After that, they looked pretty much the same until the age of fifty before slowly starting to age.

“Perhaps,” Uncle Wayne said, still frowning at the photograph. “Except I’m sure he smells different, too.”

Gods give him patience.

“Uncle,” Liam said gently. “You didn’t live with us back then. Anthony left right after his first rut, so you have never had the chance to smell him after he presented as an alpha, correct?”

“Yes,” Uncle Wayne conceded with obvious reluctance.

“See? You simply have no point of reference. You can’t expect a grown alpha to smell like his prepubescent self.”

Uncle Wayne frowned. “Are you saying you recognize his scent?”

Liam hesitated. “Yes,” he said at last, though he wasn’t being entirely truthful. Anthony just smelled *right*. That had to mean he recognized his scent, right?

He was still mulling it over as he left Uncle and joined his brothers in the living room.

Jules was talking Anthony’s ear off, chattering non-stop about his fiancé.

Anthony seemed to be listening to him attentively enough, but his eyes shifted to Liam the moment he walked into the room. It was oddly gratifying.

The urge to be closer to his brother was back, but the feelings of disquiet and confusion were back, too. Liam wasn’t even sure why he felt so on edge, why Anthony unsettled him so much.

He sat down next to Jules on the couch and tried to listen to what Jules was saying, but it didn’t seem to be working. His attention kept straying to the older man seated in the armchair. Anthony’s blue eyes caught his again, before the alpha quickly looked back at Jules.

Liam frowned.

Chapter 3

A week later, Liam came to a startling conclusion: Anthony was avoiding him.

It hadn't been obvious at first, but after a few days, Liam started to notice that Anthony suddenly had some urgent business to attend to every time Liam entered the room. During meals, he barely spoke to Liam, giving all his attention to Jules and Eric—heck, even to Uncle, if he was around.

It was confusing. And it hurt. Liam couldn't help but wonder if there was something disagreeable about him. Maybe he didn't live up to Anthony's memories of him. Maybe Anthony had expected him to grow up into a different person.

Liam was aware that he wasn't very... interesting. He wasn't bubbly and snarky like Jules. He wasn't geeky and endearingly awkward like Eric. Liam was mild-tempered and more reserved than his brothers. People would probably find him boring and uninteresting if it weren't for his physical appearance—it was the only thing people seemed to notice about him. And truth be told, sometimes Liam thought it *was* the only interesting thing about him. He was used to people always commenting on his appearance and nothing else: it had been that way since his early childhood. When he had been a small kid, people always cooed and remarked that he looked like a little angel, and Liam had grown up used to it. Jules sometimes jokingly called him vain, but Liam didn't consider it vanity. It was the simple truth: people liked looking at him—even if it was the only thing they liked about him.

Maybe that was why the fact that his newfound brother avoided looking at him and avoided him in general bothered Liam more than it should have. Maybe it was his vanity again. Maybe he should just get over it. He didn't have to be the center of attention all the time.

Still, this was his brother. If even his own brother didn't like him or didn't want to spend time around him, what did it say about him?

Finally, after a week of Anthony barely glancing his way, Liam had had enough.

He might be a relatively mild-tempered person, but even he had his limits.

"I want to speak to you," Liam said, entering Anthony's office.

Anthony's shoulders stiffened slightly, his eyes remaining on the documents in front of him.

"I'm rather busy at the moment," he said without looking at him. "Perhaps later?"

"Later," Liam repeated flatly, shutting the door behind him. "I have a feeling you'll be busy with something else later."

At long last, Anthony lifted his gaze, his eyes inscrutable. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Liam smiled humorlessly. "Don't you? You've been avoiding me ever since your arrival, Anthony. Have I... have I done something that displeased you?" He hated how small his voice sounded. Uncertain. It wasn't him.

Anthony looked away for a moment before looking back at him. "You have done nothing wrong," he said in an even voice.

Liam stretched his senses, trying to gauge Anthony's emotions by his scent, but it was difficult: his sense of smell wasn't that good. He needed to get closer.

So he did.

He walked closer to the desk.

Anthony seemed to become more grim with every step he took.

“What are you doing?” Anthony said, his gaze fixed on him warily.

He stopped by Anthony’s desk and inhaled carefully, allowing his scent to fill his senses. The scent of man—the scent of alpha. Liam inhaled it deeper, feeling inexplicably better. How peculiar.

“You don’t smell angry,” Liam noted.

A muscle jumped in Anthony’s lean cheek. “Scenting an alpha without permission is pretty rude, Li.”

Liam’s brows knitted together. “You’re my brother. I wouldn’t do it with other alphas. And you smell nice.”

If possible, Anthony seemed to become even more tense. His scent lessened, as though he reined it in.

Liam looked at him in puzzlement—and not a small amount of disappointment. Why did he do that?

“Why do you avoid me?” he said, rounding the desk and stopping next to Anthony. He tried to tell himself that it had nothing to do with wanting to smell him better, but he was honest enough with himself to know that was a lie.

Anthony turned in his chair and just looked at him in silence, his expression impossible to read.

“You don’t like me,” Liam said quietly, dropping his gaze.

Anthony let out a grunt that could be interpreted either way. It wasn’t a denial.

To his mortification, Liam felt his chin—his lips—start to tremble.

Anthony cursed under his breath and got to his feet. His hands made an aborted move, as if he intended to touch Liam but thought better of it. “Don’t be silly,” he said, stepping closer. His tone was rough but his gaze was significantly softer. “Why would I dislike you?”

“Why are you avoiding me, then?” Liam said, breathing deeper, his nostrils flaring as he tried to scent his brother. It was difficult—Anthony seemed to be reining in his pheromones and scent. They were barely noticeable; his self-control must have been immense.

“I’m not avoiding you,” Anthony said, watching him with a strange expression.

“You are.” Liam glared at him, hoping he looked stern and not like he was pouting. Jules always made fun of him for his tendency to pout and make puppy eyes. It was embarrassing, Liam knew it—a childhood habit he hadn’t yet managed to outgrow. As a child, his cuteness had allowed him to get away with pretty much anything, and old habits died hard. Unfortunately, as a side effect, Liam rarely managed to look properly angry. It always seemed like he was pouting or sulking, not pissed-off.

“Don’t be a child,” Anthony said, glancing at Liam’s lips.

“Wanting an explanation for your avoidance hardly makes me childish,” Liam said in his most biting tone. “You’re my brother. My alpha.”

A shade of emotion crossed Anthony’s stony face, but it was gone so quickly Liam couldn’t identify it. His eyes were half-lidded and he stared off into space, a tiny furrow between his brows the only sign of tension in his expression.

“I’m just very busy, Liam,” he said.

“You aren’t too busy to joke with Jules or listen to Eric geeking out over some video game,” Liam said. To his embarrassment and annoyance, his voice sounded upset rather than angry. “But you barely look at me.”

“I’m looking at you now,” Anthony said, finally looking him in the eyes. His expression softened.

Liam gave him a small, uncertain smile.

Anthony smiled back, and at last, he touched him. His knuckles stroked Liam’s cheek, the touch barely there.

Shivering, Liam couldn't help but lean into the touch, his eyelids becoming heavy.

Anthony's expression became a little tight. He withdrew his hand.

Liam's heart dropped again. He chuckled bitterly. "This is what I'm talking about. You avoid touching and scent-marking me like the family alpha should. You do it all the time with Jules and Eric, but not me. Never me. Not since the first time you did it."

Anthony's throat moved. His jaw locking, he remained silent.

"Nothing to say, huh?" Liam whispered. He'd never felt so wretched in his life. Unwanted. Rejected. He knew it wasn't logical. He didn't really know this man, shared blood notwithstanding.

But it didn't matter. Feelings weren't rational. Instincts weren't, either. This man *felt* like his alpha, and the fact that he wasn't accepting him as part of his pack felt... felt... there were no words for how it felt. He was this close to crying. Or punching something. The messed-up part was, part of him wanted to drop to his knees and beg Anthony for crumbs of his attention, promise him that he'd do better, promise him anything to make him like him.

Fuck, sometimes being an omega sucked. Royally.

Disgusted with himself, Liam turned away before he could humiliate himself further. No alpha was worth groveling to, not even his brother.

"Liam." Anthony grabbed his arm.

Liam bit his lip, barely stopping himself from turning around. "Let go. You made yourself clear," he said, with as much dignity as he could muster.

Anthony laid the other hand on his other arm. "I'm sorry," he said into Liam's nape. "You're right. I'm sorry for neglecting you. I'll do better. I promise it won't happen again."

Liam stared at the door unseeingly. "Prove it."

"How?"

“Stop hiding your scent in my presence. Mark me with it.”

He felt Anthony stiffen behind him. “Mark you?”

“I want to stop smelling like an outsider in my own home. Jules and Eric smell of you, but I don’t. You’re my alpha. I want to smell of you.”

Anthony made a strange sound, his hands on Liam’s shoulders flexing.

Seconds ticked by.

Liam waited, bracing himself for another rejection.

At long last, the alpha said in a clipped voice, “Fine.”

Then, Liam felt it: he felt Anthony’s scent become stronger, his pheromones filling the air between them.

Oh.

Liam’s eyelids grew heavier. He found himself sagging back against Anthony’s firm body, breathing deeply. It felt so nice. So good.

But it still wasn’t enough.

“More,” he breathed out, his head rolling back on Anthony’s wide shoulder.

Anthony cursed under his breath and then his hands moved. He stroked Liam’s arms, up and down, the touch overwhelming even through his long-sleeved shirt, before moving to his throat. When Anthony’s fingers stroked his scent gland, over and over, Liam whined, his mind going foggy from the pleasure. He’d never felt better in his life. He hadn’t known a brother’s pheromones could have such an effect. His mother’s alpha pheromones had only comforted Liam and made him feel safe. While he did feel that now too, being scent-marked by Anthony felt far more pleasurable, the satisfaction higher, sharper, with a desperate edge that demanded more.

Something niggled at the back of his mind, but it was unable to penetrate the pleasant fog in it.

Alpha. His alpha.

He wanted more.

Anthony gave him more. Now that he had finally given in, it seemed his reservations were gone—his strong hands were moving, rubbing his scent all over Liam: his arms, his neck, his chest, his stomach. His eyes rolling to the back of his head, Liam let out a small moan.

Anthony abruptly released him and stepped back. “You smell of me now,” he said. His voice sounded odd. Rough. “Now go. I still have a lot of work.”

Liam blinked a few times, feeling a little dazed, as if he was waking up from a dream. He turned, but Anthony didn’t look at him. He had returned to his desk and seemed immersed in his paperwork.

It was fine. With Anthony’s scent still clinging to him, Liam felt certain his alpha had accepted him.

Leaving the room, he grinned as he closed the door.

Perhaps Jules was right about something after all: sometimes direct confrontation brought better results.

Chapter 4

Liam could barely contain his excitement the next morning. He'd slept like a baby and woken up with Anthony's scent still lingering on him. But after he'd taken a shower, the scent was gone.

He wanted it back.

Part of him was surprised by his own eagerness. He couldn't remember being as eager to be scent-marked by his mother, but then again, it had been something Liam had taken for granted when his mother had been alive. Perhaps his eagerness had something to do with the fact that he'd lived more than a year without an alpha—Uncle Wayne didn't count, because neither Liam nor his brothers had really accepted him as the family alpha. He had missed it, missed this pack dynamic, this feeling of belonging, of someone strong and dependable being there for him and taking care of everything. Part of him cringed because that need was so stereotypically omega. It was scientifically proven why an alpha brought the feeling of security and well-being to an omega—it had something to do with pheromones and brain chemistry—but Liam had always thought the *need* for an alpha all omegas supposedly felt was exaggerated. Now he knew it wasn't. He felt it.

Liam smiled a little when he saw Anthony already seated at the head of the table. Neither of his other brothers had arrived yet.

Anthony went still with his cup against his lips when he saw Liam. Slowly, he set the cup down.

“Good morning,” he said.

Liam smiled wider at him, his relief almost overwhelming. He had been half-afraid that Anthony would forget his promise and revert back to ignoring him. Clearly that wasn't the case.

Anthony's expression became a little pinched for a moment before it smoothed over. He got to his feet and pulled out a chair for Liam.

Beaming at him, Liam took the offered seat. Only after being seated did he realize that it was a little strange. It was the custom for alpha noblemen to behave this politely toward omegas—it was expected—but they normally didn't do it for omegas related to them.

But then again, Anthony had been at war half of his life. He might be Viscount Blake now, but he hadn't been in polite company for over a decade. It wasn't surprising that his manners were a little rusty and he'd mixed up some customs.

Liam didn't mind. He relished his brother's presence and attention, soaking it up. True to his promise, Anthony wasn't attempting to hide his scent anymore, letting it thicken and brush against Liam. Fuck, that scent. It was dark and rich, with a hint of citrus and a woody base. It made Liam's mouth water. He wished his own scent were that good.

"Good morning," Liam said belatedly, and laid his hand on the table, with his bare wrist up. It was a subtle invitation to scent-mark him. Anthony could ignore it if he wanted; Liam wouldn't take offense—even though he would be disappointed.

Anthony glanced down at his hand. A muscle jumped by his temple, his eyes flashing. He looked... frustrated? But his hand was already moving. He stroked his thumb over Liam's wrist, his scent becoming richer.

Liam shivered, his eyelids growing heavier. He stared at Anthony's large hand around his slimmer wrist and felt... he wasn't sure what. His stomach was so very warm, and he felt good and oddly agitated at the same time.

All he knew was that he wanted to turn his hand and entangle their fingers together, which was... okay, a little weird.

Anthony's nostrils flared, the scent of *alpha* becoming so overwhelming it was all Liam could breathe.

He found himself leaning forward, across the table separating them. He stared at Anthony's tanned neck above the collar of his white shirt and had the inane thought that he'd like to press his face against it.

"Good morning!"

Jules's cheerful voice snapped him out of that weird, trance-like state.

Blinking, Liam tore his gaze away from Anthony and gave Jules a faint smile. "Morning."

Breakfast was weird.

Although Anthony no longer ignored him, giving the three omegas under his care equal attention, Liam still felt dissatisfied. He felt a twinge of something *odd* whenever Anthony turned to look at Jules and Eric and smiled at them.

"It's a K-230," Liam cut in when Jules dragged Anthony's attention away again. "Mother bought it five years ago on Calluvia. It's not the fastest model out there, but it's amazing! So much better than the helicopters."

Anthony's blue eyes were back on him. "You know how to pilot the aircar?"

"Mother offered to teach us," Liam said. "So Jules and I learned."

Jules snorted. "You did. I can make it fly, but I haven't crashed it only by a fucking miracle." He looked at Anthony. "Li is a lot better than me at piloting it. If you're curious about the aircar, I'm sure Li can take you for a spin and teach you if you want."

"Sure," Liam said, smiling a little, though he wasn't sure why—and wasn't sure why he couldn't seem to *stop* smiling.

Anthony seemed to hesitate before nodding. "It could be useful."

That was how Liam ended up in the small cabin of their mother's aircar with only Anthony for company.

He explained all the buttons and systems to the best of his ability, but he was incredibly distracted by how good his brother smelled. The scent seemed ten times more potent in such a small space and it was making Liam a little light-headed, which wasn't exactly ideal when he was piloting an aircraft that was flying at a speed of five hundred miles an hour.

“Do you want to try?” he managed, a little bewildered by his own state.

Anthony was clearly curious about the alien tech, but he shook his head. “It would be irresponsible of me to put your life at risk. I'll try later on my own.”

Liam frowned. “And what, putting your life at risk is okay? Bullshit.”

Anthony laughed.

“What?” Liam said, bewildered.

Anthony was still smiling. “It's just strange to hear you swear.”

Liam glared at him, but he couldn't really be mad when Anthony was smiling at him. “Jules swears all the time and you didn't comment on it. I'm older than him.”

Anthony's brows drew together. “I know,” he said. “But Jules isn't your stereotypical well-bred omega.”

Okay, now Liam was getting pretty offended. “And I'm what? I'm stereotypical?”

A grimace crossed Anthony's face. “That's not what I meant—all right, maybe a little. You're very...” He looked away. “You're very omega,” he said, looking out the window at the clouds. “Very graceful, gentle in manner and appearance, soft-spoken. Being a 'stereotypical' omega isn't bad, Li. Omegas like you push the buttons of any alpha, bring out the instinct to take care of and —” He cleared his throat a little, still not looking at him. “It's hard to explain. But I didn't mean it as an insult.”

Feeling warm with pleasure, Liam smiled. Leaning forward, he kissed Anthony on his stubbled cheek. “All right,” he said softly. “I'm not offended.”

Anthony was very stiff, still looking out the window. But after a moment, he turned his head and looked at Liam, their faces so close Liam could see every little imperfection on Anthony's face. He had a scar by his left cheekbone. He hadn't noticed it until now.

"Where is this from?" Liam said, touching the barely visible scar with his fingertips. Thanks to modern medicine and technology, scars were a rarity. The wound must have been terrible if it left a scar at all.

"A knife," Anthony said. "Shouldn't you be piloting the aircar?"

"I put it on autopilot," Liam said, distracted. He breathed deeply, getting a lungful of alpha scent. "The AI is pretty good. Don't change the subject. How did you get a knife through your face?"

"War," Anthony said, his lips twitching.

Liam gave him an unimpressed look. "I wasn't aware the Kadarians fought the war with knives like barbarians." He stroked the scar, his chest warming as the alpha leaned into his touch subconsciously. "That looks like it was a very deep wound."

Anthony made a noncommittal sound. "It was a long time ago. I lived."

"You did," Liam said softly, his throat becoming tight. He had been relatively calm when they had gotten word that his eldest brother was likely dead, but now that he had actually come to know him, even thinking about it made his stomach knot up. "I'm glad you're not dead."

Anthony's blue eyes smiled at him. He covered Liam's hand with his and squeezed it before letting their hands drop.

It felt like the most natural thing in the world to turn his hand and thread his fingers with Anthony's.

His brother's throat bobbed up and down. "You're so lovely," he murmured, stroking Liam's hand with his thumb. "How are you still unmated?"

Liam smiled at him weakly and shrugged. He didn't really feel like talking about Westcliff and their failed courtship. Anthony probably knew

anyway. He would have had to be living under a rock not to have heard about the scandal caused by the heir to the throne dumping him in favor of Liam's own brother.

"All shiny surface and no substance, I guess," Liam said with a crooked smile. He'd actually overheard people saying that after Westcliff had ditched him.

Anthony frowned, studying him intently.

"Hey," he said, squeezing his fingers with such gentleness it made a lump form in Liam's throat. "That's not true. You know that, right? When I said you're lovely I didn't even mean your looks—though that's obviously accurate, too. You're lovely. A lovely person."

Liam's eyes stung. "You're my brother," he whispered. "Of course you'd say that. But thank you. I'm so very glad you're back." Leaning forward, Liam hugged him, not caring that their positions were awkward, that the arm of the seat was digging into his stomach; he didn't care about anything but this alpha. *His* alpha.

Anthony hugged him back, the air becoming thick with protective alpha pheromones. Liam sighed in bliss, closing his eyes. He had never felt better in his life. But he still wanted more. He pulled back a little and bared his throat, wanting—needing—to be scent-marked.

Anthony's heavy gaze moved from Liam's face to his neck. He moistened his lips with his tongue. "I don't think..."

Liam could understand why he was hesitating. Traditionally, family alphas scent-marked their siblings or kids with their hands. Scent-marking face-to-neck was considered more intimate, usually reserved for couples, not siblings. But Liam still wanted it. He wanted to *stink* of this alpha. Anthony was so wonderful. Liam wanted to wear his scent on his skin for hours. For days.

"Come on," Liam said, baring his throat to the side. "Please."

Exhaling sharply, Anthony gave in. He buried his face against Liam's neck, nuzzling against his scent gland aggressively and pumping out his pheromones.

Liam closed his eyes, his body going boneless against his brother's firm chest. Fuck, he'd never felt better. A whimper tore out of his throat, his hand burying in Anthony's hair and pressing his face closer, tighter, wanting more. There was warmth and need building inside him, rushing south.

He clenched his thighs together instinctively.

He felt strange... He was... he was getting slick.

Slick.

Liam scrambled away so fast his vision swam with dark spots. He dropped himself back into the pilot's seat and set his trembling hands on the steering wheel.

"We should get back," Liam said, taking the aircar off autopilot. His voice didn't sound like his own. He didn't look at Anthony. Couldn't.

He had no idea how they made it home. He thought he said something to Anthony, but he wasn't sure.

He didn't even remember getting to his room.

The next thing Liam knew, he was hugging the toilet in the ensuite bathroom, throwing up what little there was in his stomach.

Still dry heaving, Liam pressed his face against the cold tile and wondered if he was the most disgusting omega in existence or the most defective.

He *wished* he were passionless now.

Chapter 5

Liam emerged from his room in the evening. Partly because he couldn't keep hiding in it, and partly because he was determined to prove that what had happened was a one-off. A very unfortunate one-off and *nothing* more. Just because he'd gotten aroused in his brother's presence didn't mean that his brother was the cause. Liam would prove it. He would prove that he wasn't—that he wasn't a degenerate.

“Your brother is in the gym, Master Liam,” a maid told him when he asked.

Your brother.

Brother.

Swallowing another surge of nausea, Liam thanked her absentmindedly and headed to the gym. He would see Anthony and feel nothing. Nothing besides what a normal person would feel for a brother.

Liam entered the gym and came to an abrupt halt.

Anthony didn't notice him, too busy hitting a punching bag. He was wearing just a pair of loose gym pants. And nothing else.

Liam wet his lips, his eyes helplessly tracing the muscular lines of Anthony's strong back. It was gleaming with perspiration, highlighting each individual muscle, beads of sweat running down his spine. Dark brown hair curled at Anthony's nape, also damp with sweat. Anthony punched the bag hard, again and again, his biceps flexing and making the veins on his strong

forearms stand out. He exuded male aggressiveness and raw, lethal strength.

Liam swallowed thickly, heat pulling to his crotch.

Fuck.

Liam took a step back.

But it was too late.

As if sensing him, Anthony turned his head, panting, his gloved hand resting on the bag, his thick bicep bulging. Blue eyes framed with dark lashes burned a hole in him, full of frustration.

Slick dribbled down Liam's inner thigh, his cock so hard it hurt.

Anthony's nostrils flared.

Surely... surely he couldn't smell his arousal from across the room, right?

Still looking at Liam, Anthony took his gloves off. Dropping them on the floor, he headed toward him.

Liam should have left. He should have *run*.

He didn't.

He stood still, like an idiot, as incriminating evidence of his sickness dribbled down his leg. If Anthony hadn't smelled that across the room, he surely would now.

Anthony stopped in front of him and just looked at him, his face like stone. He should have smelled gross, all sweat, testosterone, and alpha musk, but he smelled fucking *divine*.

Gods, he really must be sick. The most perverted person in existence. Not only did his own brother arouse him, the smell of his sweat turned him on even more.

"Are you feeling better?" Anthony said, breaking the silence. "Jules said you had a headache."

Liam blinked, stunned. What? Was Anthony just... going to pretend that he couldn't smell anything, that he didn't know what a sick person Liam was? Why would he do that? For what reason? Not that Liam wasn't relieved—of course he was—but it was strange. Very strange.

“Li?”

Utterly confused, Liam forced a weak smile. “I feel better now,” he lied, fixing his gaze on Anthony's face and refusing to look at his half-naked body. Not that looking at his face was any easier.

“I...” he said, feeling ridiculously tongue-tied. He, Liam Blake, who had never gotten tongue-tied around alphas, felt painfully awkward and off-balance. The sticky, pulsing situation between his legs didn't help, either.

He didn't know what to say.

He didn't know what to *do*.

To Liam's mortification, his eyes started watering. He tried to stop, but he couldn't hold back the tears of frustration, horror, and confusion. He was attracted to his brother. He could no longer deny it. The evidence was currently running down his leg.

Anthony's expression became tight, almost pained. “Please don't,” he said tersely, shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants.

Liam wasn't even sure what he meant. Don't cry? Don't smell aroused? Both?

Liam could only look at him, at a loss, trying to blink the tears away. It didn't work. The full horror of the situation finally sank in. He was attracted to his brother. *Brother*. There was no denying it. He was a degenerate. A sick, disgusting pervert. Attraction to one's brother was beyond unnatural. Why did he have to be such a freak? This was sickness.

The worst part was, despite his internal freak-out, he paradoxically wanted to bury his face against Anthony's wide shoulder and seek comfort from him. *This is your alpha*, his hindbrain said. *He will take care of everything if you confide in him. Let him take care of it. Let him take care of you.*

Fighting that instinct was like fighting against the gravitational pull of a star. Maybe it would have been possible if he weren't also fighting the sickening desire pulsing between his legs. He had to give in to one of those urges, so Liam chose the lesser evil. The less perverse one. He sagged forward, burying his face against Anthony's neck—against his scent gland—whimpering quietly as Anthony's heady pheromones enveloped him. *Alpha-safe-good.*

"Liam," Anthony ground out, his large hands touching Liam's shoulders and applying slight pressure. It seemed like an attempt to push him away, but it was half-hearted at best. An alpha was much stronger than an omega. He could have pushed him away easily if he really wanted.

He didn't want to.

The thought was like a powerful drug.

Squeezing his stinging eyes shut, Liam wrapped his arms around his brother tightly, and after a moment, Anthony hugged him back. It was both bliss and agony. Liam had never in his life felt so terrible and so good at the same time. The guilt and the shame were still there, but he felt so very safe and protected. Like nothing bad could possibly happen. Anthony's strong, firm body felt like a shield against the rest of the world. *Alpha.*

"Sweetheart," Anthony said softly, kissing the top of his head.

Liam rubbed his nose against Anthony's scent gland, inhaling his pheromones greedily. He felt drunk on them. Intoxicated. But he wanted more. He wanted his brother's—

Brother. Brother.

Nausea rose to his throat, the shame poisoning the blissed-out state he was in. This was his brother. He shouldn't want to feel him up. He shouldn't want to run his hands over his muscular back. He shouldn't want to grind his body against his. He shouldn't be still dribbling slick like the worst kind of slag.

Fuck, he was going to be sick.

But even his self-loathing and nausea weren't enough to make him pull away. There was no point. Anthony would have had to not possess a

nose to miss the scent of his arousal. Anthony knew. He *knew*. He knew Liam was a deviant who got wet for his own brother.

And yet he wasn't pushing him away.

In fact, his hands were moving lower, rubbing Liam's back in a way that was probably supposed to be comforting but that only made his perverted body crave his touch lower, between his legs: on his cock, on his aching hole.

Stop, a voice at the back of his mind tried, but it was weak.

More, his body demanded. He wanted Anthony's hand between his legs, stroking him where he ached the most, and then he wanted to be pushed down under Anthony's heavy body and stuffed full of his—

Liam jumped away as if burned, disgust and arousal creating a sickening wave of vertigo.

He couldn't even remember what he said before he ran out of the room.

He staggered into his bedroom as if drunk and locked the door with trembling hands.

Falling against the door, he yanked his pants down and shoved two fingers inside his hole.

He moaned, his self-loathing not strong enough to drown out the lust. He fucked himself with his fingers, unable to stop, uncaring about the awkward angle and completely ignoring his hard cock. He didn't want to touch his cock right now. He wanted to be filled. He wanted something inside him. He wanted...

He wanted Anthony's cock in him.

The wave of shame and disgust didn't make his orgasm any less mind-blowing. He came, clenching around his fingers and trying not to imagine Anthony's face.

Chapter 6

Liam felt like death warmed over the next morning. He'd barely slept, imagining his mother's repulsed, horrified face if she were alive. Or Jules's. Or Eric's. Heck, all the people that had proclaimed him the diamond of the season a few months ago would spurn him if they ever found out that he wanted his own brother.

To make things more confusing, there was a question that constantly plagued his mind: why had Anthony pretended that he didn't sense anything? Why hadn't he been visibly repulsed? It made no sense.

Liam paced his room, trying to think of any plausible explanation. He couldn't. Any brother would be disgusted and horrified if he found out that his sibling had less than platonic urges around him. Any brother would be

Any brother.

Liam stopped mid-step, his heart starting to beat wildly as Uncle Wayne's voice sounded in his head.

Don't you think he looks very different from how he looked at sixteen?

No.

It was ridiculous.

He was jumping to conclusions. He was just looking for excuses, to justify his monstrous perversion.

But what if he *wasn't*?

What if Uncle Wayne was right and Anthony wasn't actually Anthony?

It would certainly explain this unthinkable attraction and Anthony's strange non-reaction to it.

Something niggled at the back of his mind, a vague memory he couldn't quite recall. Liam focused and strained his mind, trying to catch the elusive thought. When he finally managed it and remembered the half-forgotten biology lesson in school, his eyes went wide.

Closely related alphas and omegas don't get affected by each other's heats and ruts because their pheromones repel each other. It's a biological mechanism to prevent genetic flaws that have a high chance of occurring in children born from incestuous relations. Nature is smart. It protects itself.

How could he have forgotten that? All right, it was better late than never.

What now?

He needed to talk to someone.

For a moment, he considered telling his suspicions to Uncle Wayne, but he immediately discarded that option. Liam could only cringe as he imagined explaining to Uncle Wayne why he was suddenly suspicious after dismissing his concerns ten days ago.

Someone else, then.

Jules or Eric.

Liam considered it. Both had pros and cons. Eric was practically a walking encyclopedia. He was freakishly intelligent. He wouldn't judge him. The problem was, Eric was socially inept and completely inexperienced when it came to alphas and attraction to them.

Jules was different. He was... normal. He wasn't as smart as Eric, but he definitely had experience with alphas and attraction.

The thought made Liam chuckle. If the way Jules stank of certain bodily fluids after Westcliff's visits was any indication, Jules had *too* much

experience than was proper. Yes, Jules would probably be more useful in this situation.

Liam found Jules in his room.

“I need to talk to you,” he said, closing the door.

Jules lifted his eyebrows, looking up from his phone. Liam would bet anything that he was texting his fiancé.

“Talk to me?” Jules sat up, eyeing him curiously. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you, actually. You’ve been acting weird for days.”

No shit.

Liam paced the room, unsure how to start. How did one tell one’s brother that he was attracted to their other brother and he suspected that said brother might not be their brother after all? Liam nearly laughed at how convoluted his thoughts had gotten.

“What’s wrong?” Jules said. “I thought you’d be happy now that Anthony is back and you don’t have to marry anyone—”

“He’s not Anthony.”

“Uh, what?”

Liam stopped pacing and looked at Jules. “That person who is claiming to be our brother is an impostor.”

Jules let out a laugh, looking at him as though he were crazy. “Come on, don’t be ridiculous! He looks like Anthony—”

“Does he?” Liam said. “We haven’t seen Anthony since he was a teenager and we were little older than toddlers! Do you honestly remember what Anthony looked like? Besides the blue eyes and brown hair?”

Jules’s brows drew together. “Come on. He has an ID! His *face* is on his ID.”

Liam pursed his lips. “I know. That’s the part that baffles me. The Inheritance Department confirmed his identity—”

“See? You must be wrong,” Jules said.

“I’m not wrong,” Liam snapped, starting to pace the room again.

“Then maybe *tell* me why you think he’s not Anthony?”

It was easier said than done.

Liam clenched his jaw, too embarrassed to tell the truth.

“What is it?” Jules said, sitting up straighter.

Liam was unable to meet his eyes. “He makes me wet, Jules.”

The silence was deafening.

Liam couldn’t look at Jules, but he had a good idea what his reaction was. Disgust. Horror. Revulsion.

“I refuse to believe that I’m that sick,” Liam said in a hushed whisper. “He must be an impostor. He must be.”

There was another long silence.

“Then who is he?” Jules finally said.

Liam breathed out, relieved that Jules was actually taking him seriously.

“I don’t know,” Liam said. “But I’ll find out.”

“How?”

Liam sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t know yet,” he admitted, looking at Jules at last. “Thanks for believing me.”

Jules pulled a face. “I’m not sure what I believe. I like Antho—him. I have trouble believing that he might be lying to us. How would he even fool the Inheritance Department if he were an impostor? They run all kinds of tests to confirm the identity of a new lord or lady. A DNA test is one of those tests.”

Liam’s heart dropped. “So you don’t believe me.”

Sighing, Jules got to his feet and walked over. He took Liam’s hands into his own and squeezed them, looking him in the eyes earnestly. “I’m not saying I don’t believe you. I’m just saying that it seems impossible for an

impostor to fool the authorities. It's extremely unlikely, Li. I'm sure Uncle Wayne checked Anthony's documents ten times over. He would have found out if there was even the slightest chance that they were fake."

Liam couldn't deny that. Jules was correct that their uncle would have triple-checked Anthony's identity. But...

"It shouldn't be possible," Liam insisted. "If he's my brother, our pheromones should repel each other."

Jules frowned, his expression becoming thoughtful. "Have you considered that there might be another explanation for your attraction to Anthony? A simpler explanation?"

"What explanation?" Liam said with a bitter laugh.

There was something like hesitation on Jules's face.

"Just say it, Jules," Liam said, his tone shorter than it normally was.

"Anthony is our half-brother," Jules said, the look in his eyes almost pitying. "You do remember that, right?"

Of course Liam remembered that, even though it was something barely spoken about in the family. Their father—Liam, Jules, and Eric's father—had always insisted that Anthony was his son, too, and Liam remembered Anthony being genuinely fond of his step-father. Anthony's real parent—an omega their mother was married to—had died from complications after giving birth to him. It had taken their mother nearly a decade to recover from her grief before she married again, this time a beta, and gave birth to her youngest children. Liam's memories of his childhood were rather hazy, but even as a child, he remembered Mother being sterner and harsher with Anthony than she ever was toward them. Liam wondered sometimes if she had subconsciously blamed Anthony for her first spouse's death. Or maybe their alpha designations were to blame for them constantly butting heads. Either way, Mother and Anthony's relationship had always been strained, and Father had been the peacekeeper of the family, his mild beta temper good to calm them both down. Liam had sometimes wondered whether Anthony would have stayed home if their father didn't leave for the war. Probably. When a few months after being drafted, Father was declared

MIA, Anthony had a huge row with their mother and enlisted, too. And that had been that.

“I’m not sure what that has to do with anything,” Liam said.

Sighing, Jules ran a hand through his hair. “It’s true that closely related alphas and omegas’ pheromones aren’t supposed to be attractive to each other, but what if your relation to Anthony isn’t considered *close*? We’re related to Anthony only through our mother—our mother who didn’t even carry Anthony—his omega mother did. Genetics are fickle. Maybe you inherited most of your genes from our father and actually share very few genes with Anthony—so few that your pheromones don’t repel each other.”

Liam stared at him.

Jules’s explanation did make sense. It wasn’t as far-fetched as Liam’s, considering that Anthony had passed all the identification tests.

Fuck.

He had been so certain that the impostor explanation was the only possible one—that it proved that he wasn’t a pervert—but if Jules was right, he was back to square one: still lusting after his own brother.

Liam’s face crumpled.

“Oh, Li,” Jules said, pulling him into a hug, the air filling with his sweet, soothing pheromones. “I’m sure you’re just confused. He’s a handsome alpha and you barely remember him, so it’s probably natural that you find it hard to see him as a brother. It’ll pass, you’ll see.”

Comforting always came so much more naturally to Jules than it ever did to him. Liam had never felt like a bigger failure. He was older than Jules. He shouldn’t need comfort from him, especially not for this reason.

“I still might be right,” Liam mumbled half-heartedly.

“You might be,” Jules said, but Liam knew he was just humoring him.

Jules didn’t really believe him.

Liam didn't believe it, either.

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Chapter 7

At the other end of the Blake family mansion, the man who called himself Anthony Blake cursed under his breath, rolling his chair away from the computer. He got to his feet, his skin crawling with frustration and the beginnings of a headache thumping at his temples.

Nothing.

Ten days of searching for it, and he still couldn't find the trigger that would release the lock on his memories.

If that lock even existed.

Frowning, he paced the room. No, he did have the classic signs of memory tampering. They were very subtle, but he recognized them after years of undercover work. He was here on a mission. The memory lock had most likely been put in place to fool the Inheritance Department's advanced lie detectors. He'd passed the DNA test too, but there was a way around it. A very illegal, highly classified way, but entirely viable if one had access to certain technology that could temporarily modify a person's genetic markers to show a false positive.

He sighed, raking a hand through his hair in frustration. Everything would have been simpler if he could trust his own memories.

There were only a few things he was certain of. He was military. He was an operative of the Division. He had been doing classified, undercover work for his country for a decade. Those memories were very sharp. Natural.

The rest was... murky.

He didn't think he was Anthony Blake. For one thing, his childhood memories felt too disjointed when he focused on them—an almost sure sign of implanted memories. He was used to that feeling from deep undercover missions—except during those missions there was normally a trigger word that would release his real memories. It was standard protocol during such missions to mail or deliver the trigger to the operative after he passed the security checks.

But there had been nothing so far.

Anthony Blake. The name didn't exactly feel wrong. It was familiar and comfortable, but there was still the niggling feeling of *not quite right*. All his memories of his life as Anthony Blake felt authentic enough but not quite right.

And then there were his instincts.

While he felt brotherly protectiveness for Jules and Eric, Liam... Liam was another matter entirely. He had vague memories of a blond little boy he'd adored as a teenager, but when he had actually met Liam, his instincts immediately rejected the notion that he was his little brother. The first time Liam pressed his lithe, graceful body against his and hugged him, his body reacted like it would react to an insanely attractive omega, not a brother.

It wasn't that he didn't feel protective of Liam. He did. But his instincts were all over the place when it came to Liam—the urge to protect and take care of him constantly warred with the urge to lay him down and stuff him full of his cock.

Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to focus on the more important matter—on what should have been more important.

Regardless of whether he was Anthony Blake or not, he knew why he was here. Mission parameters were always the clearest and it wasn't hard to separate them from the rest of his disjointed memories.

He was here to find the murderer. The sooner he did, the sooner he could go back to the Division and have the memory lock lifted—if the

damn thing even existed and wasn't just a product of his imagination.

He was reasonably sure he knew who the murderer was.

He just needed proof.

The late viscountess (the fact that he couldn't think of her as Mother wasn't really proof that he wasn't her son—his memories indicated that they'd had a very strained relationship and hadn't seen each other in fifteen years) had died in a freak accident: she fell down the stairs and broke her neck. Really unlucky, but not unheard of. It wouldn't be remarkable if a year later her heir hadn't been shot on the battlefield. On its own the incident wouldn't have been noteworthy, either: it was war, after all, and officers were killed in action all the time—except the forensic evaluation of the extracted bullet indicated that Anthony had been shot with a sniper rifle from very far away. It was very unlike the Kadarians to use snipers to shoot down enemy officers; it wasn't a tactic they normally employed.

Coupled with the viscountess's strange death, everything pointed to neither incident being an accident. Wayne Blake seemed like the obvious suspect. He was the one who benefited from his sister and nephew's deaths. Except the man was squeaky clean: he had a meeting with his doctor, Dr. Navarra, at the time of his sister's death, and there was no proof he was the one who had hired the sniper to kill his nephew.

But if Wayne Blake really was the culprit, he would almost certainly try again now that his previous attempt to kill his nephew had failed.

Or had it? If he wasn't Anthony Blake, where was the real Anthony? Was he dead?

So many damn questions.

He heaved a sigh.

He normally didn't lack patience—he was used to long-term assignments—but these weren't normal circumstances. He couldn't wait long, not with the way his instincts had been acting up around Liam. He could barely control himself around him and act like a brother, his base instincts slowly eroding his self-control.

He needed to wrap this mission up, as soon as possible.

He needed to know for sure that Liam wasn't his brother.

And what if he is?

His hand clenching into a fist, he walked to the window and stared out of it unseeingly.

He knew it was a possibility. Even if his memories really had been tampered with, there was no guarantee that it was his identity that was falsified. It could be something else. There could be hundreds of possible reasons why the Division had messed with his memories.

No. He wasn't Anthony. His gut instinct told him he wasn't, and he trusted it.

You just want to think that because you can't accept that you're a fucking pervert who wants to knot his own little brother.

“Shut up.”

The sound of his own voice made him wince.

Great.

He was now talking to himself like a madman.

Chapter 8

Liam felt absolutely dejected after his conversation with Jules, but at some point late in the evening it occurred to him that he was overcomplicating it. He really was. The solution to the issue was simple enough: he needed to get married. As soon as he was married to another alpha, Anthony wouldn't be his alpha anymore, and Liam would barely see him. Out of sight, out of mind.

Ignoring the way his stomach squirmed unpleasantly at the idea, Liam went looking for Anthony.

He didn't have to search for long. His senses were so attuned to Anthony's scent that he could easily follow it around the house. Liam wasn't sure what it meant, because his sense of smell had never been all that good, but he tried not to dwell on it too much.

The scent led him to the library. The hour was late enough that the faint light coming from the windows was a poor source of illumination in the cavernous room. Anthony was sprawled on the couch in the darkest corner, his long body relaxed.

Liam squinted. Anthony's eyes were closed, but Liam could sense he wasn't asleep.

"What are you doing here in the dark?" Liam said. He felt painfully self-conscious. He was actually glad he couldn't see much. He didn't want to see Anthony and feel things no good person would feel around his brother.

“Have a hell of a headache,” Anthony said, his low voice sending a tingle down Liam’s spine. Apparently seeing him wasn’t required for his body to react like a perverted thing.

“I can give you a massage if you want.” Liam bit his tongue as soon as he’d said that, but it was too late. Fuck, why did he suddenly have to acquire the omega instinct to take care of someone in pain when he normally didn’t have a nurturing bone in his body? But try as he might, he couldn’t fight the instinct to help his alpha—the urge to please him. All the confusing, sickening desires he felt around Anthony didn’t change his overall feelings toward him: he liked him very much. His brother was wonderful.

“I should probably say no,” Anthony murmured before sighing. “But I’d really appreciate it.”

Liam was already moving. He sat down in the small space between Anthony’s head and the arm of the couch, trying to get comfortable.

Anthony lifted his head before dropping it in Liam’s lap.

Right.

Wetting his lips with his tongue, Liam buried his fingers in Anthony’s hair. It was thick but soft. Pleasant to touch. Liam ran the fingers of both hands through it, applying medium pressure to Anthony’s scalp, moving in small circles. He’d done this for his mother when she’d requested it, so he was relatively confident he knew what he was doing.

Anthony hummed in appreciation. “Feels good.”

Trying to ignore the warm feeling in his chest, Liam redoubled his efforts.

Seconds ticked by.

He had never thought touching someone’s hair could feel sensual, but it was. It absolutely was. The texture made his fingers tingle, and the urge to touch Anthony’s ears, his lean cheeks, his jawline, his finely shaped lips — that urge was growing with every moment, becoming irresistible. He had to make a conscious effort to stop his hands from wandering.

Night was falling, the room nearly dark now. It made everything ten times more intimate. Ten times more improper. Liam could hear Anthony's breathing. He could hear his own. Neither sounded entirely steady. Or was it just his imagination?

And was it his imagination or was Anthony's scent really becoming deeper, sharper? He wasn't sure. But he was inhaling it greedily, unable to get enough, his fingers raking over his brother's scalp, pressing, stroking—

Anthony groaned, the sound harsh and obscene in the silence of the room.

Liam flushed, suddenly painfully aware of how hard his cock was, of how slick and achy he was between his thighs. He could *smell* his own arousal, and Anthony could undoubtedly smell it better than him, considering how close to his crotch his head was. Inches away.

For one wild moment, Liam imagined Anthony turning his head and licking his crotch through the fabric, sucking on the head of his cock, and then lower where he was hot and achy—licking him there, between his thighs, pressing his tongue in—

Liam bit his bottom lip to stop himself from moaning. Seriously, what was wrong with him?

“Do you have these headaches often?” he said, trying to banish those filthy thoughts from his head. His brother. This was his brother.

“Sometimes,” Anthony replied. “Not often. I think I just strained my eyes too much. The paperwork is never-ending.”

“It wouldn't be never-ending if you returned home a year ago.”

Silence.

“I suppose it wouldn't be,” Anthony said at last, his voice very neutral.

And suddenly, Liam was *angry*, all his frustration and self-loathing mixing with his pent-up resentment and turning into something horrible and ugly.

“Did you even think of us?” he said tightly. “Would you have returned if the war didn’t end?”

Anthony sighed. “Look, I get that you’re annoyed—”

“Annoyed?” Liam let out a laugh. “Do you have any idea what it felt like to live in such uncertainty for the past year? You have no idea what it’s like. You’re an alpha! The moment you were declared dead, Uncle could have kicked us out of our own home. He *would* have, if he didn’t hope to fetch a high omega price for us when he married us off! But of course you didn’t give a shit—”

“Liam,” Anthony said, grabbing his hands and squeezing them in his large hands.

It startled Liam so badly he stopped talking.

“I’m sorry,” Anthony said. There was something strange in his voice, as if he was choosing his words carefully. “I’m really sorry you had to go through this. You have to understand that there were circumstances beyond my control.”

“What circumstances?” Liam said, trying to sound stern. But his anger was melting away just because Anthony was holding his hands. He was disgusted with himself.

“I can’t tell you everything,” Anthony said. “It’s confidential. But I wasn’t just in the military. I was part of—special ops. We specialized in covert operations in enemy territory—”

“You were a spy?” Liam said, his mouth falling open.

Anthony chuckled. “It’s not the word I would choose, but it’s not incorrect.”

Liam fell silent, thinking of the implications of that.

“So you see, me and my team were actually in Kadar when she died,” Anthony said, playing with Liam’s fingers absentmindedly. “I didn’t find out about her death until months later. And then there was another mission that needed to be wrapped up before I could leave the base, but then we got dragged into the battle of Vandرسال, and I got injured.”

“Oh,” Liam said, feeling awkward and unsure. “Sorry for yelling at you. I didn’t know.”

“You couldn’t know. It’s fine. But... let’s keep this between us, all right? It’s confidential. I shouldn’t have told you anything. Don’t tell Uncle and the boys.”

“All right,” Liam said. He couldn’t deny that he felt pleased that Anthony had told him something he hadn’t told the others. A secret. Something theirs.

Anthony squeezed his fingers. “Thank you,” he said, his low, warm voice wrapping around Liam’s senses like a physical thing.

Liam found himself smiling stupidly, and he was suddenly very glad for the darkness in the room.

“Now tell me why you were looking for me.”

Right. The reason he was here.

“I want to go back to the city,” Liam said.

“Why? The season is over.”

“There will still be smaller entertainments,” Liam said.

“That doesn’t answer my question. Why do you want to go back?”

Liam stared at the opposite wall. “I want to find a mate. The sooner the better.”

Anthony stopped playing with his fingers.

“What’s the rush?” he said, his voice even. “You’re just twenty.”

“Jules is nineteen, but he’s getting married soon.”

“I wasn’t aware it was a competition.”

“It’s not,” Liam said softly. “I just...” He hesitated, before settling on a half-truth. “You know that Westcliff publicly jilted me for Jules, right? The gossip has been... pretty bad.” Liam pursed his lips. He didn’t want to talk about it, but it was better than the alternative. He could hardly tell

Anthony why he needed to get married fast. Anthony smelling his inappropriate arousal was one thing; actually acknowledging it was another matter entirely.

“How bad?” Anthony said. There was something strange in his voice, but Liam couldn’t put his finger on it. “Tell me.”

Liam pulled a face. He really didn’t want to talk about it. He had his pride. Even Jules didn’t know the extent of it.

“Liam,” Anthony said.

Liam sighed. “They laugh at me,” he admitted quietly. “They fake politeness when Westcliff and Jules are around, but when I’m alone, it’s snide remark after snide remark. They barely even bother to pretend that they’re laughing with me rather than at me. It’s—it’s unbearable, to be honest.” He chuckled a little. “Not that I don’t understand. It’s probably funny from the outside: the so-called diamond of the season publicly jilted by the most handsome alpha on the planet in favor of his little brother. It’s kind of hilarious, isn’t it?”

He hated that his voice broke slightly, but he could do nothing about it. He might not have loved Westcliff, but he had thought they were going to be married. He had spent hours dressing for that ball, thinking that Westcliff would finally propose—only to be humiliated in front of everyone. No, he didn’t begrudge his baby brother his happiness—he was happy for Jules; he truly was—but it didn’t mean he hadn’t been humiliated in the worst possible way. It had hurt. It had hurt that the Duke of Westcliff had spent weeks courting him but didn’t see anything worth loving in him; instead, he fell for Liam’s brother.

Was there nothing lovable about him besides his looks?

“Hey.” Anthony sat up and put his hands on Liam’s shoulders. “Stop that,” he said, his voice rough but somehow gentle too.

“Stop what?”

“Stop feeling upset.”

“I’m not upset,” Liam lied with a small laugh. “It’s fine. Maybe my ego deserved some beating. Maybe I needed that. All the compliments went

to my head, to be honest, and this debacle taught me valuable lessons. Now I know who my real friends are.” He laughed again. “Oh, wait, I don’t have them.”

“Sweetheart,” Anthony said with a sigh before pulling him into a hug.

It was probably embarrassing how quickly he melted into the embrace.

He didn’t care.

He buried his face in Anthony’s neck, closed his eyes, and *breathed*, shivering from how good it felt when Anthony’s arms around him tightened. Anthony was so wonderfully firm and strong without being ridiculously bulky like some alphas were. Liam couldn’t get enough, squirming closer until he was practically in Anthony’s lap.

“You’re not alone,” Anthony whispered, pulling him impossibly tighter, his strong hand running up and down Liam’s back.

Liam made a small sound that might have been a moan, hating himself for the way his perverted body was reacting to a gesture of comfort. His nipples were suddenly oversensitive and hard, rubbing against Anthony’s firm chest through the thin layers separating their skin.

Fuck, it was unbearable. He’d never loathed himself more, but he couldn’t make himself pull away, couldn’t stop himself from guiltily enjoying his brother’s embrace, couldn’t stop the slick from rapidly dampening his underwear.

He was surprised that Anthony wasn’t pushing him away in disgust. Was it possible his sense of smell was impaired? Surely he was reeking of want?

But Anthony still wasn’t pushing him away. Anthony shifted them slightly, arranging Liam across his lap, so that Liam was straddling his hips. Something rigid rubbed right between Liam’s legs, where he ached the most.

Liam’s eyes flew open. Wait. Was that…?

It was.

Anthony was hard. *Hard.*

That was why he wasn't disgusted with him: he shared Liam's perverse desires.

The realization was both frightening and exhilarating. This was sick, yes, but it was such a relief to know he wasn't alone in this. His brother suffered from the same affliction. There was no need to hide this. They could deal with the problem like adults, talk about it and find a solution—

Anthony's cock pushed right against his soaked hole, and Liam moaned into his neck, shuddering. They needed—they needed to talk about the issue and—

The cock ground against his hole again, making Liam lose his train of thought. Fuck, so good. But not enough. He couldn't stand this fabric separating them.

As if hearing his dazed thoughts, Anthony slipped his hands lower, under the waistband of Liam's pants, and cupped his bare cheeks.

Liam whined, all his senses focused on those hands, so close to where he wanted them, where he ached for them. *We shouldn't*, he wanted to say, but all that left his mouth was, "Anthony."

Anthony went rigid, as if he only then realized what he was doing. His scent soured with something—guilt?—and his hands stilled.

Liam made a frustrated sound, his reservations forgotten. "Please," he said, squirming against the hard bulge under him. He would be ashamed later. Right now he felt like he would die if Anthony didn't touch him where he wanted it the most.

"Li," Anthony ground out, sounding pained.

"Please. I need..."

Anthony's hands started moving again. They kneaded his cheeks before a finger pushed against the oversensitive hole between them.

Liam muffled his moan against Anthony's neck. Part of him couldn't believe it was really happening. How had they gone from brotherly comfort to Anthony stroking his wet hole? Fuck, they both were sick. They needed help. It was disgusting.

But it felt so good.

His eyes squeezed shut, Liam writhed against Anthony's hand, practically riding it. His hole was pulsing hungrily, wanting something inside it.

Screw it, they were going to hell for this anyway.

Liam jerked at Anthony's belt and scrambled for his zipper, pulling out the thick, hard length. He squeezed it, making Anthony groan. Fuck, the cock felt so good in his hand. Liam stroked it greedily while Anthony stroked his hole, both of them gasping and grunting, the sounds obscene in the dark, silent room. Part of him still couldn't believe it was happening. He was a virgin. He'd never even been kissed. But there was a cock in his hand now. An alpha's cock. *Anthony's* cock.

He wanted it. Badly.

The darkness was what gave him the courage to do what he did. Liam lifted himself and aligned his aching hole against Anthony's cock.

"Li," Anthony gritted out, gripping his hips.

We shouldn't.

The unsaid words hung heavy in the air.

"I know," Liam mumbled, moaning as the cockhead rubbed against his oversensitive, needy hole. "Just once? No one will know. Give it to me."

Cursing under his breath, Anthony jerked his hips up and Liam let out a long moan as he was impaled on the thick cock in one hard thrust.

So good. So fucking good.

Anthony gave him a moment to adjust before lifting him and dropping him back on his cock, then again and again. His strength was an

enormous turn-on. Liam could only hold on, trying to muffle his moans into the alpha's neck as Anthony fucked up into him—and fucked him up.

He had no idea how long it lasted.

At some point, Liam found himself coming, clenching hard around the cock in him, but Anthony didn't stop. He continued fucking him until Liam wanted more again, moaning and meeting each thrust, greedy for it, needing more of that cock, harder, deeper, his nipples aching to be touched and sucked on. But Anthony didn't touch them. In fact, the only place they were connected was the cock moving in his hole. They were fully dressed otherwise, their arms wrapped around each other in a mockery of a brotherly embrace as they tried to sate their perverse, sickening desires.

At last, Liam felt Anthony groan, and then he was pumping him full of his come.

The sensation was unbearably good and Liam found himself coming for the second time, his hole clenching around the cock in him. Oh gods. So fucking good. So good, but there was some vague sense of dissatisfaction too. He wanted more—he wanted Anthony to knot him.

But it still felt so good.

So wonderful.

He didn't know how long he'd floated on the cloud of pleasure, his face tucked against Anthony's throat, when the sound of Eric's voice calling his name snapped him out of it.

Panic nearly making him sick, Liam scrambled off Anthony's lap, wincing when the half-hard cock slipped out of him. Ignoring his discomfort, he yanked his pants up and ran out of the library.

Breathing hard, Liam stopped in the corridor outside it, his eyes trying to adjust to the sudden brightness.

"Li, where the hell were you?" Eric said, striding toward him.

"I was in the library," Liam croaked out. "Reading a—a book."

Eric made a noncommittal noise, his eyes on his phone. He didn't even seem to notice Liam's disheveled appearance or flushed face. But that

was Eric. He was totally clueless and unobservant when it came to reading people.

“You smell weird,” Eric said, his nostrils flaring.

Or maybe not so unobservant.

“I know I need a shower, there’s no need to be so rude,” Liam said quickly, heading toward his bedroom. Walking normally was a struggle. “Did you want something?”

“I wanted advice,” Eric said.

“Hm?” Liam said distractedly, trying to ignore the trickle of come running down his thigh. His brother’s come.

Fuck, *what had he done?*

Was he insane? How could he have done it?

His stomach tied up in knots, Liam could barely hear what Eric was saying. He hummed noncommittally and hopefully made appropriate noises, but he wouldn’t be able to say what they were talking about even if his life depended on it.

“Thanks, Li!” Eric said brightly and ran off.

Liam blinked at his back, hoping whatever they had been talking about was trivial.

Shaking his head, Liam entered his bedroom. He went still, staring at his pristine bed, then at the rest of his room. It felt surreal that it looked the same, as if his room had no business looking this way after what had happened.

He walked to the mirror and stared at his reflection.

He looked no different, either. The same golden hair, the same light-brown eyes with flecks of gold. His cheeks were still a little flushed, but other than that, nothing in his appearance betrayed that he was no longer a virgin. That he’d had a cock in him. A cock that belonged to his—

Liam groaned, covering his flaming cheeks with his hands. His hands felt ice cold against them.

What had they done?

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Chapter 9

The next morning Liam considered feigning a headache or some other ailment and staying in his room. But he knew it was pointless. He couldn't avoid Anthony forever. (Part of him didn't want to avoid Anthony at all.)

He had no idea how he was supposed to act around him now. He had no idea how Anthony would act. Fuck, it was such a mess. A mess of disastrous proportions. Or just a disaster, period.

Because he was a coward, Liam fetched Jules on the way to the dining room, so that he didn't have to enter it alone.

Jules was being his cheerful, besotted self, talking about Devlin this, and Devlin that. Liam could barely hear him, his heart beating somewhere in his throat. He could barely look Jules in the eyes, irrationally afraid that it was written all over his face that he'd had Anthony's cock in him last evening.

He'd had Anthony's cock in him last evening.

They reached the dining room all too soon.

Liam followed Jules into the room, his legs unsteady and his pulse hammering.

"Morning," he said, looking at Eric, who was seated to the left from Anthony. He didn't look at Anthony, but in his peripheral vision he could see his hand on the table go still.

"Morning," Eric mumbled into his coffee.

“Good morning,” Anthony’s deeper voice said.

Liam’s insides quivered, and for a moment he wasn’t sure he wouldn’t throw up.

Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to look at Anthony—it would seem strange if he didn’t.

Blue eyes met his, absolutely unreadable.

Liam wished he could be as composed. He felt his cheeks become warm.

Moistening his dry lips with his tongue, he gave a small nod and took the seat to Anthony’s right because Jules had taken the one next to Eric.

Jules said something. Eric said something. Jules said something back. They bantered.

Liam couldn’t hear any of it. He stared at his empty plate, all his senses painfully attuned to the man beside him.

“You should eat,” Anthony murmured, using his fork to put sausages on Liam’s plate.

Liam did as he was told, hating himself for his inability to string two words together. Part of him couldn’t believe this was really him. He was never so tongue-tied around alphas. Never.

But Anthony’s scent seemed to destroy what little composure he had left. Liam tried not to breathe it in, but it didn’t work: he found himself taking deep lungfuls of it. *Alpha*, his instincts said. *Alpha*, his body said, growing hot and eager. It didn’t matter what his rational side said—that it was his *brother*—his instincts didn’t give a damn anymore. They didn’t see this man as his brother. All they saw was an alpha. An alpha who had been inside his body. Who had fucked him so good Liam could still feel it faintly, the phantom stretch making his hole ache and twitch around nothing, hungry for more. It was fucking unbearable.

It was lucky that the smell of the food largely masked other scents, or Jules would have undoubtedly smelled his arousal. Eric might be innocent and oblivious, but Jules wasn’t.

Avoiding meeting everyone's eyes, Liam stabbed a sausage with his fork and brought it to his mouth. He bit on the tip carefully.

Anthony made a small noise. When Liam glanced at him, Anthony wasn't looking at him, boring a hole in his food with his eyes. Bringing his drink to his lips, the alpha downed it in a few long gulps, his tanned throat working.

Liam wrenched his eyes away and dug his fingernails into his thighs. The pain was welcome, clearing the fog in his head. For a while.

Breakfast seemed to last forever.

By the time it was over, Liam had managed to finish his sausage, but he still felt ravenous. Only it was a different kind of hunger. A hunger he had no business feeling. He practically ran out of the room, unable to meet his brothers' eyes. He could feel Jules's gaze on him, but Liam didn't even want to think about whether Jules had sensed his arousal. It was bad enough that Jules knew about his sickening attraction to Anthony; if Jules could actually smell it, it was... fuck, it was beyond mortifying.

"Li!" Jules's voice behind him nearly made Liam groan. He didn't want to talk about it. He was in no state to talk about it. All he wanted was to get into his room and stuff his fingers inside himself, his shame and guilt be damned.

"I don't want to talk about it," Liam said, walking faster.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about, silly," Jules said, grabbing his arm. "You're in heat, it happens."

Liam came to a halt, blinking in confusion. It took him a moment to remember that it really was a Vos full moon tonight. His heats were normally so mild that Liam didn't even keep track of his moon's cycle. Vos omegas' heats were not as overwhelming as Dainiri omegas' heats: they were simply periods of very heightened arousal every two weeks on the full moon. Liam's previous heats had been weak even by Vos omega standards—they were little more than minor spikes of libido. They'd never made him aroused enough to actually be an inconvenience.

Until now.

It was a relief to know that he could blame last evening's... *lapse of judgment* on his approaching heat, even if it was very uncharacteristic for him.

"Right," Liam said and resumed walking.

"Though I gotta admit it was weird as heck watching you get all flustered every time you looked at Anthony. Gross."

"Shut up," Liam said, unable to look at him.

Jules chuckled, wrapping an arm around him. "Sorry," he said, pecking Liam on his cheek. "I know it's not funny for you. But you should be less obvious about it. I'm pretty sure Anthony noticed."

Liam almost snorted. Oh, he had noticed all right.

"Thanks for the heads-up," Liam said, walking away from Jules. He tried not to imagine Jules's disgusted face if Liam told him about what had happened yesterday.

Returning to his bedroom, he flopped down onto his bed.

He would wait out his heat in his room. Hopefully once it passed, he would stop thinking with his cock and start thinking with his brain.

That was his only hope at this point.

Chapter 10

It was the worst heat of Liam's life.

He remembered feeling a little superior and glad that he wasn't a Dainiri omega when he'd seen what a wreck Jules became during his heats, but now "superior" wasn't the adjective he would have picked to describe himself. He was miserable. Unsatisfied. Hungry for something that wasn't there.

He didn't know why it was so much worse this time around.

No matter how many fingers he stuffed into himself, it wasn't enough. He wanted a cock. He wanted a real cock inside him, he wanted a heavy alpha grunting on top of him, taking him, knotting him and filling him up with his seed.

He wanted Anthony.

Liam moaned, shoving a fourth finger into his hole and trying to banish the thought.

It didn't work.

It was Anthony's unreadable blue eyes that he saw in his mind as he screwed himself on his fingers. It was Anthony's broad shoulders he imagined gripping as Anthony fucked him hard and fast.

Liam writhed, trying to fuck himself faster with his fingers, but his wrist ached already after hours of this torture. It probably would have been easier if he had a dildo, but because of his low libido he had never even

bothered with the toys unmated omegas used during their heats and he was too embarrassed to ask to borrow one from Jules or Eric.

Besides, he had a feeling a toy wouldn't be enough anyway. No matter how many times he came, it didn't really satisfy the ravenous feeling inside him. On some deep, primitive level Liam knew only an alpha's knot—an alpha's seed—would sate him.

It was past midnight when Liam couldn't stand it anymore.

Reaching out to his nightstand, he picked up his phone. Finding Anthony's name, he typed a quick message.

In heat. Need you.

He stared at the message with blurry, dazed vision, his trembling thumb hovering over Send.

He shouldn't. A mistake made in the heat of the moment was one thing. Making it on purpose, inviting that mistake into his bedroom... it seemed too enormous to contemplate. It was a sin. The worst kind of sin. Anthony was his brother.

With a strangled sob, Liam dropped the phone on the floor and shoved his hand under the pillow to stop himself from reaching for it again.

Brother. Brother, brother, brother. He shouldn't want his older brother's cock in him. *Anyone's* but his.

But his body didn't care. It ached. It hungered.

By two in the morning, Liam was literally crying, tears of frustration streaming down his cheeks. The worst part was, he was completely aware of everything going on—he didn't fall into a heat daze like Dainiri omegas did, his mind still clear and wide awake as his body trembled, ached, and burned for something that wasn't there. It was torture. He couldn't stand it anymore. He couldn't.

Liam grabbed his phone blindly and sent the message.

And then he waited, hating himself for being so weak and giving in. He could only hope Anthony wouldn't come (he hoped desperately that he would).

Time stretched.

Maybe Anthony was asleep. Maybe he was doing the smart thing and staying away.

A quiet knock on the door made him freeze.

He turned his head toward it, his nostrils flaring. That familiar, exquisite alpha scent hit his senses and Liam whimpered, a gush of slick running down his leg.

He should have told him to go away.

Instead, he murmured through parched lips, "Enter."

Liam closed his eyes when he heard the door open.

If he couldn't see it, it wasn't real.

It could be any alpha. Any virile alpha with a hard, thick cock would do. Maybe it was a total stranger. Maybe it was a total stranger pushing his bare thighs open and settling between them, breathing as unsteadily as Liam was.

Their harsh breathing was the only sound in the room.

Something hard pressed against his slick hole, teasing his entrance.

Liam whined, needing it inside so badly he was shaking with it. Please, please, please.

A push, and Liam groaned, his back arching as a thick cock shoved inside him. Gosh, *finally*.

The alpha on top of him cursed through gritted teeth, his heavy hips pinning Liam to the mattress, his hard cock the only thing connecting them. Fuck, it felt so thick, so wonderful inside him, huge, hot and so damn right. Liam was gasping from sheer relief, his body finally getting what it had been craving for hours.

"Liam," the alpha ground out. "I—"

"Shut up," Liam cut him off, wrapping his legs around him as tightly as he could. He was half-afraid Anthony would change his mind and leave.

Besides, he didn't want to talk. If they didn't talk, he could pretend this alpha was a stranger, not his—his—

“Fuck me,” Liam demanded, squeezing the cock inside him. “Give me your knot.”

Growling, the alpha buried his face in Liam's pillow, their cheeks brushing, and snapped his hips forward.

Liam cried out, all his senses full of alpha pheromones and his body full of alpha cock. Another hard thrust, and Liam thought he might expire from pleasure. He'd never felt better in his life, satisfied on such a base, primitive level, as if this was what he'd been born for. It felt terrifying and terrifyingly good, and Liam couldn't get enough, whimpering and groaning at every thrust of that cock. The smell of him, that scent that was trapped in his head, brought Liam to the brink of release in just a dozen thrusts. He came with a weak cry, and it felt like his orgasm lasted forever.

He lay there, basking in pleasure as the alpha on top of him took his own, slamming hard into him, using him, a virile alpha using a bitch in heat. The thought made Liam moan and spread his legs wider, his need awakening again. He wanted his alpha to come. He wanted his knot. He wanted his seed, more than anything.

He wanted to be bred.

When the alpha groaned by his ear and his knot started expanding, Liam purred in approval, pleasure like no other washing over him as he was filled with hot come and stuffed full of alpha knot.

So damn good.

So perfect.

“Fuck,” Anthony cursed, shuddering on top of him, his clothed body a stark contrast against Liam's overheated naked flesh.

Liam turned his head, his nose rubbing against the alpha's stubbled cheek. He felt *wonderful*. Distantly, he was aware he should feel bad about what had happened, but it seemed irrelevant. Unimportant. He felt so good. Like nothing bad could possibly happen. The world was a wonderful place. Everything was perfect. And wonderful. And perfect.

“What have I done,” Anthony muttered under his breath.

Mmm.

Liam kissed him on the cheek, nuzzling into it.

“Right,” the alpha said in a strange voice. “You don’t even hear me, do you? You’re high.”

Liam frowned a little, trying to understand. The words registered, but he felt too good to bother deciphering them. He didn’t want to use words. He wanted to cuddle up to his alpha and then he wanted to be stuffed full of his seed again.

The alpha chuckled, but it didn’t sound very amused. “Someone up there must be laughing at me now.”

Liam kissed his cheek again, making a pleased sound as another trickle of seed spilled into him.

The alpha groaned quietly. “Not even a condom,” he muttered. “Great job. Like a green knothed who smelled his first omega. Fucking unbelievable.”

The knot in him softened, and the alpha withdrew his cock gently before sitting up.

Liam made a distressed sound, confused. “Stay?”

The alpha’s back stiffened.

“I can’t,” he said. “I shouldn’t have been here at all.” He sighed, getting to his feet and fixing his clothes. He looked back at Liam and paused. Leaning down, he kissed Liam on the forehead gently, nuzzling his cheek, his thumb stroking Liam’s scent gland. “I’m sorry, darling. Don’t look at me like that or I won’t leave.” He kissed his cheek and straightened up. “Hopefully you’ll think it was just a heat-induced dream.” He gave a harsh chuckle. “It can’t be anything else.”

And then he was gone.

Liam frowned into the darkness of his bedroom, bewildered. But he was physically satisfied, thoroughly scent-marked, and sleepy, and he soon

found himself drifting off to sleep.

He dreamed of something wonderful.

But he didn't know what it was.

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Chapter 11

Liam wondered if he was losing his mind.

Anthony's face betrayed nothing when Liam entered the dining room. His expression was neutral, and he barely looked at Liam as he conversed with Jules and Eric in a casual, amicable tone, as if he wasn't the same man who had fucked and knotted him last night.

Had it been just a dream?

But no, it couldn't be. He wasn't insane. He remembered *everything*—up until the point Anthony had knotted him. After that, his memories were rather vague and hazy. That part was puzzling.

Or maybe it wasn't that puzzling. People said omegas got into a euphoric state similar to a drug-induced high after being knotted by a compatible alpha.

Liam's stomach clenched at the thought. A compatible alpha. What kind of twisted joke of fate was that?

His brother. Anthony was his brother.

Hiding under the cover of darkness didn't change the ugly truth: he'd had his brother's cock in him. Twice.

It couldn't keep happening. He must stop it from happening again. This was depravity at its worst level. Sickness. And if he didn't know the cure, he must at least remove the cause.

"I want to go back to Faris," Liam said.

All the conversations came to a halt. Everyone turned to look at him: Jules and Eric with varying degrees of surprise, and Anthony with the same maddeningly unreadable expression on his face.

I had your knot in me, Liam wanted to say, just to wipe away that infuriatingly blank look.

“At this time of the year?” Jules said. “Why?”

Because I need to stop myself from jumping on our brother’s cock. Liam nearly laughed as he imagined saying it.

“Because we need to buy you stuff for your honeymoon,” he said instead. “And we need to monitor wedding preparations—”

“The wedding is still three months away, Li,” Jules grumbled. He’d wanted a shorter engagement, but the royal press officers had vetoed it.

“*Just* three months away,” Liam corrected him. “You have no idea how long it takes to plan a wedding! Much less a royal wedding.”

Jules lifted his hands in defeat. “Fine, whatever! Eric, you’re coming, too. We’ll leave tomorrow morning.” His face brightened. “Maybe Devlin will actually be in town.”

“I know you are not used to asking for permission, but you have to do it now,” Anthony said. He sipped his coffee. “You’re all under my care.”

“Under your care,” Liam repeated. He was aware that his voice was snider than it should have been. He could feel Jules’s confused gaze, but he didn’t look his way. He stared at Anthony until the alpha finally deigned to look at him.

Blue eyes *seared* him.

Liam shivered, his mouth going dry. He had a strange urge to reach out and grab Anthony’s hand on the table. Or crawl into his lap and press himself against him.

He’d never experienced the post-heat neediness he’d heard of from other omegas, but now he wondered if this was what they had meant.

“Yes, under my care,” Anthony said.

Under your care or under you? Liam had to bite his tongue to stop himself from saying it. The thing was, he was mild-tempered ninety percent of the time, but if something pissed him off, he tended to be vicious. And Anthony's inscrutable expression *infuriated* him. What was he playing at? Why did he act this way, as if they hadn't had sex—twice?

Liam tried to put himself in Anthony's shoes. Maybe he felt as guilty and sickened as Liam felt, and pretending it had never happened was just his way of dealing with it. It was possible. Except Liam couldn't sense even a hint of revulsion from the alpha. As a Vos omega, Liam's senses were duller than most, but they were still sharp enough to pick up strong negative emotions like revulsion. Negative feelings like that had a distinct scent—and he couldn't smell it on Anthony.

Granted, Anthony had very tight control over his scent. Liam had never met an alpha who controlled his scent to such a degree. But still. Disgust and guilt weren't emotions one could easily suppress.

"What objections can you possibly have?" Liam said, trying to keep his voice calm for the sake of their audience.

"You're young, unmated omegas," Anthony said, staring him down with his blue, blue eyes. "You can't go to Faris on your own. But I can't accompany you—business is keeping me here."

Liam glared back at him. Despite his anger, the urge to grab Anthony's hand wasn't weakening at all. It was maddening. "Then tell Uncle to go with us—"

"Out of the question," Anthony said, his scent thickening.

Liam sucked a breath in, feeling a little light-headed. The urge to touch Anthony, to crawl into his lap and feel him close, was becoming irresistible. He gripped his tea cup tighter. "You're being unreasonable," he said. "Uncle accompanied us to the capital last season. He's perfectly capable of looking after us. Not that we need to be looked after."

"Li is right," Jules cut in.

Anthony didn't even glance his way, his eyes still on Liam. "I said no. You're not going anywhere. You will stay here, where I can—" He went

silent, something shifting in his eyes. Wrenching his gaze away, he fixed it on his cup, his jaw working. “Fine,” he said at last. His voice sound strange. Tight. “Go to Faris. But not with Uncle. I’ll hire a chaperone for you. And bodyguards. At least four bodyguards.”

“That’s a bit overkill, but thanks,” Jules said.

Liam opened his mouth and closed it, not knowing what to say. He hated that part of him was disappointed that Anthony had acquiesced. Part of him didn’t want to leave—and that was exactly why he needed to get as far from here as possible. If he stayed, he’d end up taking his brother’s cock every night. He needed to get away from this man and the horrible, sickening effect he had on him.

“All right,” Liam said quietly, dropping his gaze.

It was going to be all right. He would go to Faris and finally come to his senses once he was away from Anthony. If he was lucky, he would find an alpha.

An alpha he was actually allowed to want.

Chapter 12

Liam had been in Faris for three days, and it already felt like it had been three months. Three excruciatingly long months. He felt so alone. Although Eric had come with them to the city, he barely left his room, lost in his computer and online friends. Jules was never around, either—he spent most of his time with his fiancé—and on the rare occasion they saw each other, Jules was distracted by the wedding planning. If he hadn't been so distracted, he probably would have noticed how on edge Liam was feeling.

Only after arriving at Faris had Liam realized that there was a real possibility that there might be consequences of his heat.

Fuck, the mere thought... He didn't want to think about it, but he couldn't entirely dismiss the possibility. He'd had unprotected sex with an alpha during his heat. He'd been knotted. Pumped full of an alpha's seed. Anthony's seed.

To his shame, the thought wasn't entirely disgusting. There was a part of him—a sick, base part—that liked the idea very much, and it freaked him out. How could he find it appealing?

He'd been worried sick for days and only relaxed when the pregnancy test showed a negative result.

But it hadn't been the only thing bothering him.

Every social function had been as much of a chore as he'd expected. In fact, it was worse. Since Liam didn't have any relatives by his side,

people didn't even bother hiding their sneers and condescending remarks. Oh, he still had plenty of suitors, but even they treated him differently. There was something in their eyes, something like wariness. Liam didn't need to be a mind reader to know what they must have been thinking: *If Westcliff rejected him, he could be lacking something. He could be defective.*

And they weren't exactly wrong, were they? He was defective. An omega who was only capable of feeling attraction to the alpha he had no business feeling attraction for. An abomination.

Liam still tried. He smiled, he laughed, he flirted. By the end of each day he felt mentally and physically exhausted, his facial muscles aching from all the forced smiles. But it was working. He could tell it was working. Even if the rest of society wasn't treating him any more kindly, most of his suitors thawed out and started treating him like they had before.

Liam tried not to dwell on why he didn't feel any relief. He'd given up on waiting to feel attraction to any of those alphas. It wasn't happening; he'd accepted it. But he didn't need attraction. All he needed was to secure a good, kind husband—or wife, though he preferred males—who would get him away from the Blake house. Away from *him*. Away from the temptation and sin.

He got three offers of marriage by the end of the week.

Liam settled on the Earl of Terlaine, who was considered one of the most eligible bachelors in the country. Besides being titled and wealthy, he was also startlingly handsome. Tall, blond, and gorgeous, Terlaine turned heads when he entered the room. Objectively, Liam could appreciate his strong, flawless features and piercing dark eyes, too. His golden hair was just a few shades darker than Liam's, but that was where any similarities between them ended. Terlaine was built like a powerful alpha, almost half a head taller than Liam—Anthony's height.

Anyway. Liam knew they looked good together. Lord Terlaine was perfect.

Lord Terlaine would be his husband.

“I’m honored,” Terlaine said when Liam accepted his suit. “I’ll speak to your brother, and then we’ll announce the engagement.”

Liam smiled wanly, his heartbeat picking up. He’d forgotten that Terlaine would have to ask Anthony’s permission first. Although Liam was of age, all unmated omegas were under their family alpha’s legal guardianship until they married. But it shouldn’t be a problem, right? Anthony would probably be relieved to be rid of Liam and this sickening *thing* between them.

“Are you sure about it, Li?” Jules said that evening when Liam told him that he had accepted Terlaine’s suit. “Don’t get me wrong: Lord Terlaine is very handsome, almost as handsome as my Devlin, but there’s more to picking a husband than just good looks. Do you love him?”

Liam fixed his gaze on his tablet. “You know my views on this, Jules. I like him as a person. I’m sure love will come with time. I doubt he loves me right now, either. That’s how society matches work.”

“Not always,” Jules said. “I love Devlin.”

Liam smiled, hoping it didn’t look too bitter. “Not everyone is lucky enough to fall in love with a suitable alpha.”

“Do you at least want him?”

When Liam didn’t say anything, Jules sat down on the couch beside him and grabbed his hand. “Li, tell me you aren’t doing this because you’re scared of your attraction to Anthony. Tell me that’s not why you—”

Liam snapped, “Of course it is!”

The silence that followed his outburst was deafening.

He buried his face in his hands. “I want him, Jules,” he whispered, barely audibly. “I want my brother. It’s monstrous.” He lifted his head and looked at Jules. “You think that doesn’t justify my decision?”

His brother sighed, his eyes full of conflict. “I still don’t think it’s a good reason to marry a man you don’t love or want—”

“I had sex with him.”

Jules's eyes went so comically wide Liam would have laughed in any other circumstances.

"You had sex with Terlainé?" he said faintly, with something like hope in his voice.

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in Liam's throat. "Not with Terlainé."

Jules shook his head, staring at him in disbelief. "Li..."

His ears hot, Liam forced himself to hold his gaze. "I know," he whispered hoarsely. "I couldn't help myself, Jules. I can't *think* when he's close."

Jules shook his head again, still looking stunned. "I can't—I can't believe Anthony would do it!"

"Anthony? That's what you're surprised about?" Frankly, Liam was pretty damn offended. "I didn't force him to put his cock in me."

Jules pulled a face. "Too much information, Li. Fuck, I don't even want to imagine the two of you doing... that. He's my brother! He's *your* brother!"

"I'm glad you're just realizing the horror of the situation," Liam said flatly, though he couldn't deny that hearing it said aloud made his stomach clench in revulsion. He turned his face away and crossed his arms over his chest. Gods, what had he been thinking? But then again, he hadn't been thinking. When Anthony was close, it was like all his common sense died very quickly.

He was a sick person. A freak. An abomination.

"Li," Jules said softly, wrapping an arm around his stiff shoulders. "Stop that—stop beating yourself up over it. So it happened once—it was a mistake—"

"Not once," Liam said with a humorless laugh.

Jules was rendered speechless again. "Okay," he said at last, his voice a little strangled. "I'm going to have a talk with Anthony. That's—that's on him. How could he? He's older, more experienced—he should have known better!"

“Please don’t talk to him,” Liam said, wincing. “It doesn’t matter. It’s in the past. I’m marrying the Earl of Terlaine.”

“If Anthony gives his permission.”

Liam gave a laugh. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“I don’t know,” Jules said, his voice practically dripping with sarcasm. “But I would have never guessed that Anthony would be irresponsible and crazy enough to fuck you—more than once—so it appears I don’t know him at all. I have no idea what to expect from him.”

Fair enough.

Neither did Liam.

Liam was helping Jules choose the venue for the wedding reception—there were twelve palaces to choose from—when the door to the drawing room opened and Anthony stalked in.

Liam tensed up, his heart starting to beat faster. Beside him, Jules stiffened too, eyeing Anthony as if seeing him for the first time. Dropping his gaze to the tablet in his hands, Liam stared at the venue’s pictures with great interest, maybe more interest than they warranted.

“Anthony,” Jules said, his voice colder than it normally was.

Unable to help himself, Liam looked up.

He found Anthony’s eyes fixed on him.

Liam swallowed, his mouth going dry.

“Jules, leave us,” Anthony said, without even glancing Jules’s way.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Jules said, folding his arms on his chest—Liam could see it in his peripheral vision. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from Anthony’s, feeling like prey caught in a trap, ready to be eaten alive.

“Out,” Anthony said, in such an uncompromising tone that Jules flinched. “Please,” he added after a moment, in a marginally softer voice.

After a moment’s hesitation, Jules turned to Liam. “Li?”

Part of Liam wanted to grab Jules’s hand and beg him to stay. He didn’t trust himself.

“It’s fine,” Liam heard himself say. “Go.”

“All right,” Jules grumbled, looking from Anthony to Liam. “You have five minutes. I’ll be back soon, Li.”

Liam nodded.

As Jules’s footsteps receded, silence fell over the room, so thick it was suffocating.

It suddenly occurred to Liam that it was the first time since the whole thing had started that they were alone during daylight. Everything they had done was done under the cover of darkness—illicit, urgent fucks that they had never really acknowledged the next day. Would Anthony once again pretend it had never happened? Would *Liam* do the same? Did he have the courage to talk about it?

The silence stretched.

Anthony’s eyes were as unreadable as they were intense. “I had a visit from the Earl of Terlaine,” he finally said.

Oh.

Liam hadn’t expected Terlaine to act this fast. He must have departed for the Blake country estate immediately after Liam had accepted his suit.

Clearing his throat a little, Liam set his tablet aside and got to his feet. He crossed his arms over his chest and lifted his chin. “I trust it was a productive meeting,” he said, his voice carefully neutral.

Anthony’s eyes narrowed. He took a few steps closer until they were toe to toe.

Liam held his breath, trying to breathe as little as possible. It wasn't fair. Why did this alpha smell so intoxicating when other alphas didn't smell a fraction as good?

"It was," Anthony said. "Granted, Terlaine might think differently."

Frowning, Liam shot him a suspicious look. "What did you tell him?"

Anthony's lips curled slightly. "I told him what any good alpha would: that I'm not going to accept his proposal until I'm convinced you actually want it—and I'm not."

"I already accepted his proposal! You had no right!"

"Don't I?" Anthony said, his eyes glinting.

Liam flushed. "You don't."

"I'm your alpha," Anthony said, his scent so thick in the air it was all Liam could breathe. Gods, he wanted to shove his face against Anthony's muscular neck, latch onto his scent gland, and *suck*.

"Not for much longer," Liam said shakily, despising himself for those thoughts.

Anthony's eyes hardened. "I'm your alpha," he repeated. "You're my responsibility."

"I don't want to be your responsibility."

"That's where you're wrong," Anthony said. "Pelugia's constitution. Look it up. You're mine—to take care of."

"We live in the modern world," Liam ground out, hating the urge to give in, bare his throat, and agree with everything Anthony said. It was taking everything in him to fight that instinct. "Most omegas choose their mates themselves, and the family alpha's agreement is just a formality, nothing more."

Anthony's gaze burned him. "It's a formality only if the omega actually wants to marry the suitor."

"Are you actually claiming to know my mind better than I do?"

Anthony's lips curled into a sardonic smile. "Are you saying you want Terlainé? We both know it's not true."

A dropped pin could have been heard in the deafening silence that settled over the room.

So they *were* actually talking about it.

His heart beating like crazy, Liam moistened his lips with his tongue.

Anthony's gaze flicked down to them and just— looked, his blue eyes intense. Hungry.

Fuck, Liam couldn't breathe. "Stop that," he said, licking his lips again and trying not to look at Anthony's firm, sensual mouth. Why was it so close all of a sudden?

"I'm not doing anything," Anthony said, his velvety voice wrapping around Liam's senses. Liam wondered if this was how moths felt as they unwittingly flew into the flame, unable to resist the pull. Liam couldn't—he couldn't—

With a moan of defeat, he crushed his lips against Anthony's, so very hungry for him he felt like he could swallow him whole, take him inside and never, ever let him out. Growling, Anthony yanked him tightly against his chest, taking over the kiss immediately, his hunger rivaling Liam's own. It was a messy, needy, forceful kiss, all spit and teeth and tongue, like a dam had broken between them and the water had rushed forth to greet the body of water it'd been denied meeting for so long. Liam couldn't get enough, aching for this man so badly he could only squirm, slick dribbling down his thigh. Fuck, it felt so good. Anthony's *mouth*—Liam wanted more. He wanted to consume him. He wanted—he wanted... He ran his hand down Anthony's firm chest and pawed at the bulge under his pants greedily—

"Li—the fuck!"

They sprang apart, breathing hard. Liam felt hot, disoriented, and so unsatisfied he nearly wept. It took him a moment to focus his gaze on Jules.

Fuck, Jules.

His younger brother was standing in the doorway, his eyes wide and his jaw slack. “This is something I never wanted to see. Fuck, I need to bleach my brain.”

Anthony swore and turned away, raking a hand through his hair and taking a few deep breaths.

Liam blushed when he realized why: he was attempting to calm himself and will his erection away. Not that Liam was in any better state. He was suddenly acutely aware of the sticky wetness in his underwear. Thankfully, his shirt was long enough to cover his erection and it wasn't as obvious as Anthony's.

Jules was visibly uncomfortable, his face red. He glowered at Anthony's back and then looked at Liam, clearly torn about whom he should be yelling at.

“Come with me,” he finally said, grabbing Liam's arm and all but dragging him out of the room.

“I can walk myself,” Liam said uncomfortably as Jules pulled him toward his room.

Jules snorted. “After what I've just seen, I don't trust you not to walk right onto his cock.”

“Shut up,” Liam said, his voice painfully awkward.

“I left you for five damn minutes,” Jules said, shutting the door of Liam's bedroom. “Five minutes, Li! But I find you with Anthony's tongue down your throat and your hand on his cock!”

Liam didn't know what to say to that. There was nothing to say. Jules was right.

He dropped his gaze, wrapping his arms around himself. “You're right, okay? I know that! I know I have no excuse.”

Jules huffed and started pacing the room. “Fuck, it's so wrong on so many levels I don't even know where to start,” he said, his expression pinched. “I got scarred for life, seriously!”

“I get it.”

“Do you?” Jules said with a laugh. “Imagine coming across me sucking Anthony’s face and groping his cock.”

Liam’s stomach turned, squeezing into an uncomfortable knot.

“Fucking hell,” Jules said, shooting him an incredulous look. “I didn’t tell you that to make you feel *jealous*! What’s wrong with you?”

Looking away, Liam scowled. “I’m not jealous.”

“Right.”

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, you know. There’s no need for that tone.”

“There is, when I come across my brothers snogging each other.”

Liam pulled a face and turned away. He touched his puffy lips and suppressed a shiver, still tasting Anthony on them. It should have been impossible—it wasn’t as though Anthony’s mouth tasted of anything—and yet. And yet. Stupid pheromones.

“Seriously, Li. What were you thinking?”

Liam hugged himself, staring out the window at the cloudy sky. Just then, it started raining, fat drops beginning to fall against the window. Liam hugged himself tighter. “Clearly I wasn’t,” he said quietly. “What do you want me to say?”

After a moment, Jules heaved a sigh. “I don’t know. I’m just freaking out, I guess.”

Liam laughed without much mirth, watching the skies cry. *You and me.*

“What happens now? Are you still marrying Terlaine?”

Ignoring the way his insides tightened with unease, Liam closed his eyes and said, “Of course I am.”

“Really?” Jules sounded stunned.

Liam smiled bitterly. “What just happened only makes it clear that I need to do it as soon as possible. Can you do me a favor? Don’t let me be

alone with Anthony.”

There was a long silence.

“Sure,” Jules said at last. “Though you know I can’t really be with you when Devlin is in town. I miss him.”

“I know,” Liam said, feeling a pang of guilt for making Jules worried at a time he should have been the happiest. “I’m sorry—I know you’re busy. I shouldn’t have asked this of you.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Jules said with a huff, walking over and hugging him. “That’s what brothers are for, isn’t it?”

That’s what brothers should be for, Liam thought. He forced a weak smile and said, “Right.”

“So, when is the wedding?” Jules said, in an unnaturally upbeat voice, as if he had also had the same thought. “To Terlaine, I mean?”

“It’s not that simple. Apparently, Anthony didn’t give him permission to marry me.”

“He did what?” Jules spluttered. “All right, I’m definitely having a talk with him now—”

“Don’t,” Liam said. “It’s none of your business. I’ll handle it.”

“But—”

“I’ll handle it, Jules. I have it under control. It won’t happen again.”

“You sure?”

“Yes,” Liam said, not meeting his gaze.

Lord Terlaine called on Liam later that evening.

“You have to talk to your brother, Liam,” he said, frustration plain on his handsome face. “He didn’t even give me any reason why he rejected my

proposal. In fact, he was extremely rude.”

Unable to meet his eyes, Liam agreed to speak to Anthony and talk him into changing his mind.

He felt terrible after Lord Terlaine had left. Was he deceiving him? Although Terlaine had never said that he had feelings for him—Liam strongly suspected that his family was pressuring him into marrying because he needed an heir—Terlaine probably still felt some sort of... admiration for him if he had proposed. What would he say if he knew Liam had had sex with the very same man Terlaine had asked Liam’s hand in marriage from?

But on the other hand, it shouldn’t be Terlaine’s business who Liam had slept with in the past. As long as Liam was faithful to Terlaine after their marriage, it shouldn’t matter, right? And he obviously would be faithful to him.

Are you so sure of it? said a snide voice at the back of his mind.

Liam tried to ignore it. He would never cheat on his spouse. He would never.

Intense blue eyes flashed to the forefront of his mind.

Sighing, Liam dropped his face into his hands.

Goddammit, how had he ended up in this situation? How was he supposed to convince Anthony to give his permission for this marriage if he couldn’t even convince himself that he wanted it? If he couldn’t even think of Anthony as a brother?

Liam touched his lips with his fingers—and then yanked his hand away guiltily.

Brother, he told himself. Your brother, you sick fuck.

He was still repeating that to himself as he literally ran into Anthony on the second floor.

Anthony’s arms came up to steady him.

Liam froze, wide-eyed, his heart hammering in his chest.

Anthony looked back at him.

Liam had no idea who moved first. The next moment, they were kissing desperately—and the rest of the world fell away. They stumbled into the closet, tearing at each other's clothes and trying to find skin.

Yanking his pants down, Anthony slammed him against the wall and hitched Liam's leg up. There was the sound of a zipper, and—

Gods, yes. Liam cried out as a thick cock pushed into him. He was so wet for him already, so ready, that it didn't hurt; it felt so good. Liam could only moan into Anthony's mouth as the alpha snapped his hips forward, pumping his cock into him again, and again, and again.

So good. So damn good.

The closet was small and dusty and he could barely see anything, but Liam didn't care. He could only feel, muffling his whimpers against Anthony's neck as he was fucked within an inch of his life.

Nothing should feel this good. Nothing.

When it was over, Liam stumbled into his room, half-drunk on endorphins, reeking of Anthony just the way he liked it, feeling so wonderful he felt like he could fly. He smiled at nothing, feeling stupidly giddy as he stroked his lips swollen from Anthony's kisses, and cuddled his pillow with a dreamy smile on his face.

Then the high passed and reality came crashing in.

Brother.

He rushed to the toilet to throw up the contents of his stomach.

Then he curled up into a ball and wept.

Chapter 13

He never felt guilty when it was happening; the guilt came much later.

Each time, Liam told himself it was the last time.

Each time, it never was.

Once they started doing it, they couldn't seem to stop. Liam learned what Anthony's cock tasted like, what noises he made when Anthony fucked his throat raw. He learned the shape of Anthony's knot as he licked it under Anthony's desk. He learned how to use his tongue to make Anthony snap, throw him on the desk, and absolutely *wreck* him. He loved making Anthony lose control, loved making him shudder and come inside him, filling him up with his seed. He couldn't get enough of it. One look at Anthony, and he seemed to lose all common sense.

He just wanted him, so much.

So much.

If it were just lust, it would have been easier to fight it.

But it was so much worse.

Liam wanted to be around Anthony, always. He was drawn to him, wanted to be close to him, wanted to look at him, wanted to share the same air with him. He craved his closeness even in situations where sex was impossible.

Like during their pack bonding nights.

The thing was, no matter how far their society had progressed, there were certain things that remained the same. Although packs didn't exist officially anymore, all families still had some pack dynamics; some families took it seriously but for some of them it was just a casual tradition.

The Blake family had always been somewhere in the middle. They didn't refer to their family as pack, but they still had pack bonding nights. Every few days, they gathered together in the evening, just to spend time in the same room, sometimes watching a movie together, casually scenting each other and allowing the family alpha to scent-mark them. Mother had been pretty strict about enforcing the pack bonding nights—she had been of the opinion that pack bonding was necessary for the family to be strong and for omegas to thrive, and she didn't tolerate it if her children skipped them on occasion.

Anthony was different. He didn't enforce the pack bonding, only casually letting them know that he'd be available that evening if they wanted. Liam always wanted. He had tried to stay away at first, knowing that spending time with Anthony while their brothers were present would just make him feel guilty, ashamed, and unsatisfied, but he *couldn't* stay away.

He wanted Anthony close.

He wanted to see him. To look at him. Smell him.

At first he had tried to keep his distance from Anthony during pack nights, sitting the farthest from him as they all watched a movie together. But he hated seeing Eric curled up against Anthony's shoulder. Hated it. He wanted to be the one there so badly he finally caved in on the third pack night and took that spot, curling up next to Anthony and putting his head on his shoulder.

He felt Anthony's muscles stiffen, his scent becoming deliciously thick. Blue eyes stared at him for a moment, Anthony's nostrils flaring. "I don't think it's a good idea, Li," he murmured, glancing at the door their brothers were supposed to arrive through any moment now.

"Don't care," Liam said, wrapping an arm around Anthony's waist and feeling his hard abdominal muscles flex. "I want cuddles too."

Anthony looked almost pained before he brushed his lips against Liam's cheek. "All right."

Eric didn't even blink when he saw Liam in his usual spot next to Anthony on the couch. He sat down on the floor and pulled out his phone. "What are we watching?" he said distractedly.

Jules was different. He looked at them with deep suspicion the moment he walked into the room, but strictly speaking, they weren't doing anything wrong, so he didn't say anything as he sat down on the floor next to Eric. The movie started, and soon Jules seemed immersed in the movie and stopped glancing their way.

It was a relief, because Liam couldn't even pretend to be watching the movie. His head shifted lower, to Anthony's chest, his eyelids becoming heavy as Anthony started running his fingers through his hair. It felt so nice, their pheromones mixing and the air starting to smell like them, together. It was a heady scent, incredibly comforting and so very right. Liam felt like he was floating on a cloud of pleasure, all but purring.

"Li, are you going to keep hogging Anthony all night?"

He opened his eyes.

Jules was looking at him very pointedly.

Liam didn't move. "Pack bonding is important for omegas' mental health," he quoted their mother.

Jules gave him a flat look. "I think you've done plenty of bonding tonight," he said dryly. "Give us a turn with our *brother*, too."

Liam's arm tightened around Anthony's waist. *No*, he wanted to say. But he didn't have a good reason to say no. All omegas were entitled to the family alpha's attention equally—besides the alpha's mate.

And he wasn't one.

Biting his bottom lip hard, Liam moved, but Anthony's hand on his nape stopped him. "Liam doesn't need to move," he said, dropping a kiss on top of his head. "Come here, Jules."

Smiling a little, Liam snuggled back against Anthony. Jules perched on the arm of the couch and let Anthony brush his fingers against his scent gland, run his fingers through his hair. Liam watched, squirming closer to Anthony the longer he touched Jules.

Jules shot him an exasperated look and muttered something under his breath before walking back to his spot next to Eric.

Liam relaxed and made a pleased sound as Anthony returned his hands to him. *Where they belonged.*

At some point Eric came over to get some attention from Anthony too, but it was gratifyingly short and Liam was the one Anthony touched and cuddled all evening.

“Not here, Li,” Anthony suddenly ground out.

Liam paused, realizing that he was sucking on the skin at the base of Anthony’s throat.

Flushing, he shot a guilty look at his younger brothers, but they seemed not to have noticed anything, their gazes on the movie.

Looking up, he met Anthony’s eyes and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry,” he mouthed.

Anthony’s expression softened. Stroking Liam’s cheek, he leaned in and kissed him on the nose.

Liam about melted, feeling a jolt of unbearable affection. Unable to help himself, he stole a quick kiss. Just a short one.

Anthony inhaled sharply, his gaze darkening. “Darling, don’t do it,” he said in a strained voice.

Yeah. He was right. He only wanted more kisses now.

Smiling sheepishly again, Liam put his head back on Anthony’s chest.

Anthony stroked his arm up and down, sending goosebumps all over Liam’s flesh and causing a dull throb to start between his legs.

Liam breathed deeply and fixed his gaze on the screen, pretending that he didn't want to climb into his brother's lap and ride his cock right there, their audience be damned.

Later, he would be horrified by his thoughts.

But that would be later.

As fucked-up as the situation was, it was the happiest Liam had ever felt.

His heart *leapt* whenever he entered a room and met Anthony's warm blue eyes. He could barely stop himself from giving Anthony smiles and smitten looks—in fact, Liam strongly suspected that he failed at that, judging by the pinched expression he sometimes saw on Jules's face. But thankfully, Jules didn't comment, because Jules thought Liam had at least stopped having sex with Anthony.

Liam wished he could stop.

He couldn't.

In fact, the more they had sex, the worse it seemed to get. Liam felt fucking insatiable, always starved for Anthony's touch, for his hands, for his mouth on him—heck, even his gaze. He wanted Anthony to look at him always.

Liam wasn't sure if it was good or bad that Anthony seemed to fully share his affliction: the moment they were alone, Anthony was pressing him against the nearest wall and kissing him as if he were starved and Liam was the sustenance he needed to survive. It was wonderful. It was heady. Liam adored him.

He still felt guilty, of course. He felt guilty and ashamed and disgusted with himself, but all of it seemed to fade away around Anthony, becoming insignificant. Meaningless. He couldn't get enough, soaking up Anthony's kisses like a parched desert soaked up rain.

They didn't always fuck. It wasn't always possible, considering that they lived with two brothers and a full staff of servants. Even a stolen kiss was sometimes enough to quench the thirst in him for a little while.

So they kissed, and kissed, and kissed.

Liam knew they were being reckless, kissing in the hallways of the house and stumbling into empty rooms for quick, urgent fucks, but he couldn't seem to stop. He *wanted* him. That want was so powerful, so encompassing, it felt like necessity. He needed Anthony. He needed his kisses, his arms around him, his scent in his lungs, his cock inside him. He burned for him.

Most of the time, they didn't even bother to undress, too impatient to have each other. It didn't matter; Liam didn't need foreplay. One heated look from Anthony and he was ready, aching for him, slick and eager.

On one memorable occasion, Liam found himself riding Anthony's cock in the dining room, hard and fast, both of them fully clothed, their mouths panting against each other, their breaths mixing and hearts beating equally fast. Anyone could walk in on them; Liam knew that. He still couldn't stop. He wanted him.

Afterward, they kissed for what felt like hours.

It still wasn't enough.

It terrified him.

Anthony started coming to his room at night.

They hadn't discussed it. Anthony just showed up one night and shrugged somewhat sheepishly at Liam's look. "I wanted to kiss you good night," he murmured against his lips.

Smiling, Liam looped his arms around Anthony's neck and spread his legs, welcoming the alpha's weight on top of him, moaning from how good

it felt. How right.

It always felt so right.

One night, as they lay wrapped in each other after sex, Liam voiced the thought aloud.

“This shouldn’t feel so good,” he murmured, his face buried against the side of Anthony’s chest.

Anthony’s arm around him tensed a little, but his hand didn’t stop stroking Liam’s bare back.

Fuck, it felt achingly wonderful: being in this man’s arms, feeling him breathe, just being close to him. Yet at the same time, it failed to fill the longing in his heart, because he knew their time together was limited and come morning he would have to pretend that this man wasn’t the only thing he could see as he walked into the room.

“If sex felt bad, people wouldn’t have it,” Anthony said, a hint of amusement in his voice.

“I’m not talking about sex.”

Anthony’s arm tightened around him. “I know,” he said, his tone a little strange.

Silence fell, thick with all the unsaid words, things they didn’t talk about. There was no point in talking about those things and ruining the moment.

Sighing, Liam squirmed even closer to Anthony, nuzzling into his armpit. Even the faint scent of Anthony’s fresh sweat was appealing to him, somehow. He breathed in deeply.

“Are you sniffing my armpit?” Anthony said.

Liam blushed, shooting him a look from under his eyelashes. “It smells good,” he said defensively when he saw that Anthony was smiling.

Chuckling, Anthony pulled him up and kissed him softly. “I’m not judging, kitten,” he murmured, rubbing their noses together. “You smell so

good to me, too.” He smiled crookedly. “That’s what has gotten us into this mess, isn’t it?”

This mess.

Liam swallowed the sudden tightness in his throat.

As a rule, they didn’t talk about what they had been doing—about how wrong it was. They both knew it was wrong, and they did it anyway; there was no use stating the obvious.

Yet somehow, hearing Anthony acknowledge what a mess their relationship was *hurt*. It was illogical, but it hurt all the same.

“I guess,” Liam said with a faint smile, hoping it wasn’t obvious how upset he was.

But of course Anthony noticed. He always did. His blue eyes seemed to see through him, read him like an open book. Although Liam didn’t like feeling transparent, perversely he kind of loved it too, loved how attuned to him Anthony was. Most people didn’t notice anything, buying his smiles and nonchalant act. Not this man. He seemed to see all of his insecurities, all the ugly, conflicting emotions that lay behind the bland smiles.

“It is a mess,” Anthony said, his expression grim but his eyes unbearably soft as he gazed at Liam. He took Liam’s hand and kissed his fingertips, one by one. “I know I should stay away from you—I have no right, not when I’m—” He grimaced. “I don’t even know if I can offer you anything. This is irresponsible as fuck.”

Liam frowned, a little confused by his words. He didn’t expect Anthony to offer him anything—they both knew it wasn’t possible. They could never be anything, not in the eyes of society. If people found out about this unnatural attraction between them, they’d be ostracized; their entire family would be.

Do you care? whispered a voice at the back of his mind, a voice that had been becoming increasingly loud lately.

But before Liam could ask what he meant by that, Anthony pressed his lips against his, effectively killing his train of thought.

Liam moaned, parting his lips eagerly. Fuck, he could never get enough of this man.

“You’re so sweet I could eat you,” Anthony whispered hoarsely, their breaths mixing. “Baby.”

And then he was kissing him deeply, and there were no more thoughts.

Only this man.

Of course, with the way they were carrying on, they were bound to get caught, sooner or later.

But their luck ran out in the worst way possible.

Jules was the one to come across them again—but this time they weren’t just kissing.

Liam was bent over Anthony’s desk, with Anthony taking him from behind. Liam was facing the door, so he could clearly see Jules’s wide-eyed face. Liam cried out, half in horror, half in pleasure, as Anthony’s cock hit something in him just so.

Jules slammed the door shut, but even the horror and mortification of being caught didn’t lessen Liam’s need. He couldn’t stop himself from pushing back on Anthony’s cock, couldn’t stop craving his knot.

When he finally got it, thick and perfect and stretching him to the limit, Liam groaned in relief, grabbing Anthony’s hand and intertwining their fingers.

It felt so good. So perfect.

How could something so wrong feel so good, so right?

Jules was furious. “How could you? You lied to my face!”

Liam swallowed, his stomach churning with guilt and shame.

What could he say in his defense, really? His actions were indefensible. Sickening.

“I didn’t lie,” he whispered, looking at his pale hands. “It’s just stronger than me.”

Jules scoffed.

“I’m serious,” Liam said quietly, without looking up. “I know it’s wrong, but sometimes I feel like—like I can’t *function* without him. His eyes, his scent, his hands on me—it’s—I need him. I can’t give it up. He’s all I want, Jules. Fuck, it terrifies me how little I care about the wrongness of it when he’s close.” His eyes were burning. “He feels like mine. I *know* he isn’t, but he feels like mine.”

There was a long, stunned silence.

“I’m going to talk to him,” Jules finally said.

He left the room before Liam could stop him.

Chapter 14

Jules had never been shy about speaking his mind.

But he'd never expected that he'd have to confront his eldest brother—his family alpha—about something like this.

Fuck, how did one even talk about something like this? It seemed unthinkable. Something that was never supposed to happen.

But it had happened. Not just once. Many, many times. And if Jules didn't do something, it seemed neither Liam nor Anthony were going to stop that madness. The way they had been fucking when he'd walked in on them... Jules flushed, his discomfort increasing. He was very far from being prudish, but what he had seen looked so obscene, pure animal need. It seemed as though Anthony had been trying to hammer himself into Liam's body, and Liam had been no better.

Goddammit. Jules wished there was a suitable older relative who could speak on Liam's behalf, who could protect him. In any other circumstances, it would be *Anthony* doing that. Uncle Wayne wasn't an option. He didn't give a shit about any of them. So Jules it was. There was no one else.

Jules reached Anthony's office and pushed the door open without knocking.

Anthony was seated behind his desk, but he didn't seem to be working. He was staring at the flames crackling merrily in the fireplace while the rain drummed against the window. It should have been a cozy

picture. It wasn't. There was darkness in the general mood of the room, something Jules could almost taste.

He eyed Anthony, trying to see him as a man, not a brother—tried to see what would make Liam commit such a sin, repeatedly.

All right, he was a strikingly handsome man, that was undeniable, but Jules still couldn't see him that way. All he saw was a brother. A brother he'd come to really like. It was hard to believe Anthony was capable of seducing his own little brother. If Jules hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he would have never believed it. Anthony just seemed so *good*. Jules usually trusted his instincts, and they insisted that Anthony was a good person.

"I don't want to have this conversation, Jules," his brother said, not even glancing at him.

Jules pursed his lips and stepped into the room, ignoring his own discomfort. He determinedly didn't think about what Anthony and Liam had been doing in this very office an hour ago.

"Neither do I, but we're having it," he said, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at Anthony's hard profile. "How can you do it? It's—it's so wrong I don't even have words for how wrong it is."

A muscle flexed in Anthony's jaw. "This conversation is pointless," he said in a clipped tone. "You can't say anything I don't already know."

Jules shook his head, scoffing. "If you understand how wrong it is, why are you doing it?"

Anthony finally turned to him and stared him down, his face impassive. "Don't be a hypocrite, Jules. You stole your brother's fiancé, despite knowing perfectly well how wrong it was."

"It wasn't like that," Jules said, flushing. "And Devlin wasn't Liam's fiancé!"

"They still had an understanding," Anthony stated, his voice flat and hard. "Everyone expected Westcliff to propose to Liam. He was publicly humiliated when Westcliff ended up switching his choice to you."

Jules opened his mouth and closed it, unable to speak. Anthony was right. Of course he was right. Although Jules had never wanted to hurt Liam, he'd ended up hurting him nonetheless, however inadvertently. He had hurt Liam's pride and made him a target for gossip. It was hypocritical of him to judge Anthony for hurting Liam when he'd done exactly the same.

"The difference is, I love Devlin," Jules said quietly. "I couldn't help falling in love with him. This—thing between you and Liam seems... very base. Can't you get your dick wet in someone who isn't your own brother?"

Anthony's cheekbones colored a little. He looked at the fireplace again. "It's not that simple."

Jules sighed. Was it ever? "I just—I guess I just expected better from you. I was so happy when you turned out to be alive, but now I wish..."

"You wish I were dead?"

Wincing, Jules shook his head. "No—of course not. I just..." He ran a hand over his face. "I don't know."

Silence fell between them, strained and uneasy.

Jules was the one to break it. "You should have agreed to Lord Terlaine's proposal. He's practically perfect for Liam. He was the best catch of the season—after my Devlin, obviously."

Anthony's face closed off. "That's for me to decide."

Jules huffed. "You're being an ass. A dog in the manger." He chuckled a little. "Though that's not very accurate, either, huh? A dog doesn't eat the hay. You sure do, even though you know perfectly well that you shouldn't."

"Enough," Anthony said. Although he didn't use his Voice and his tone remained quiet, his pheromones spiked. *Alpha*, they said. *Obey*.

Jules barely resisted the urge to take a step back. Fuck, sometimes he hated being an omega. "Just promise me you'll stay away from Liam—that it won't happen again."

Leaning back in his chair, Anthony smiled without much humor. “I’ve already made that promise—to myself. And I already broke it, again and again.”

Jules didn’t even know what to say to that. “You’re better than that.”

Anthony laughed, a harsh, jarring sound that sent a chill down Jules’s spine.

“I thought I was,” the alpha said, his gaze on the fire.

Jules looked at him for a moment. “Liam deserves better,” he said softly. “You can’t offer him anything but shame and scandal. If you care for him at all, stop.”

Anthony’s throat bobbed up and down.

He said nothing.

Jules turned and left, feeling more unsettled than he had been before the conversation.

Fuck. This situation was beyond hopeless. Even in the best-case scenario, Liam would marry someone like Terlaine, someone he didn’t love, and he would likely be miserable for the rest of his life. In the worst-case scenario... Liam would marry Terlaine but he and Anthony would still be unable to resist the sickening, twisted attraction between them and would carry on fucking behind Terlaine’s back until they inevitably got caught. Holy shit, the scandal would be unimaginable. It would make the scandal of Devlin choosing Jules over Liam look like nothing in comparison.

Come to think of it, maybe it would be better if Liam didn’t marry at all—it would be less risky.

And then what? a snide voice said at the back of his mind. *They’ll keep living together in the Blake mansion and carry on with their illicit affair until Liam inevitably gets with child?*

Jules made a face, his stomach churning. Fuck, what a mess. He had no idea how to fix this situation—if there was even a magical fix. He suddenly longed to tell Devlin about it and ask for his advice, but it seemed

like such a massive breach of privacy—it would absolutely humiliate Liam. No, he couldn't do it.

But what could he do, then?

Jules racked his mind, gradually getting desperate. Maybe he was looking at it wrong. Maybe it wasn't Liam who needed to marry someone else. It was Anthony who needed to get his attention transferred elsewhere—to another omega—so he could forget about his twisted obsession with his own younger brother. If Anthony started liking another omega, he would hopefully forget about Liam and stop pursuing him, which should solve the problem.

After all, it wasn't like Liam would throw himself at Anthony. Liam was too timid and proper for that.

Chapter 15

Liam wanted to plant his fist in Jules's face when Jules suggested his brilliant plan to find Anthony a mate.

He didn't, of course. He knew Jules had his best interests at heart. He knew Jules was just trying to find a solution.

So Liam forced himself to cooperate. It was bad enough that Jules was already watching like a hawk for any signs of jealousy. Liam was determined to look like a better—saner—person. Like a normal omega going through a list of prospective mates for his eldest brother. Like he didn't want to take that stupid list off Jules's hands and throw it into the fireplace.

Brother, his rational side said.

Mine, his instincts screamed viciously. *Mine, mine, mine.*

"How about Payton Denvers?" Jules said. "He's beautiful. He's the only son of that tycoon, so he'll be inheriting a fortune, since his family's wealth isn't entailed and can be inherited by an omega—"

"Our family hardly needs money," Liam said in a perfectly even voice. "And no Viscount Blake has ever married someone without a drop of noble blood in them."

Jules raised his brows. "I don't think Anthony cares about such things," he said, his voice full of skepticism.

“He should,” Liam said. “The title of Viscount Blake may not be the most high-ranking, but our family is very old—we’re descendants of the former royal family.”

Jules rolled his eyes. “Oh come on! Not you too. Mother never let us forget that. It happened almost two thousand years ago, Li.”

“Precisely.”

“Fine,” Jules said with a sigh, looking down at his list. “What about Patrick Coldahen? A son of a duke—you’d struggle to find bluer blood.”

“He’s not good-looking enough. He’d be miserable, because he’d disappear into the background next to Anthony.”

Jules gave him a pinched look. “I’m hardly miserable with Devlin, even though he’s the most handsome alpha on the planet and I’m... me.”

Liam suppressed an exasperated sigh. “You’re very lovely,” he said, for what felt like the hundredth time, but he knew it was useless. Jules never seemed to believe him when he told him how lovely he was. Jules had the sort of looks that grew on you: the better you knew him, the lovelier he appeared. “More importantly, your fiancé thinks you’re very lovely. Have you seen how he looks at you?”

Jules smiled dreamily.

It was nauseatingly adorable, really.

“I know Devlin loves me, but you’re just proving my point: Anthony doesn’t need his mate to possess flawless beauty in order to fall in love with them.”

“I never said that he needed it,” Liam said. “All I’m saying is that alphas are very visual creatures and the first thing they notice is looks. You can’t fall in love with someone’s soul if you haven’t spoken to that person first.” Liam smiled crookedly. “I’m perfectly aware that physical appearance isn’t enough to make an alpha fall in love. He must actually like you as a person.”

Jules shifted uncomfortably. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be silly,” Liam said with a faint smile. “It’s not your fault Westcliff didn’t fall in love with me.”

After a moment of awkward silence, Jules cleared his throat a little, and looked back at the list in his hands. “What about Elena Wickham? She is a daughter of an earl, perfectly eligible, and rather ridiculously good-looking. Actually, you kind of look alike.” Jules made a funny face. “That’s probably good, considering...”

Liam pursed his lips. Elena Wickham. She really was gorgeous. Liam had met her last season, and her manner was perfectly pleasant, too. Liam honestly couldn’t find a single flaw in her.

He hated that he *wanted* to find one.

“It’s all well and good for us to pick an omega for Anthony, but he must agree to the choice too,” Liam said. “Did he give his permission for this?”

Surely he hadn’t?

“Well, not really...” Jules shrugged. “But I’m sure I can guilt-trip him into considering it.”

Quashing the urge to bare his teeth like an animal, Liam said bitingly, “And you think he’ll be happy in a marriage he was guilt-tripped into?”

Jules’s face crumpled. “I’m just trying to help,” he whispered, his eyes watering. “At least I’m trying, Li!”

His heart aching, Liam sat down next to his baby brother and hugged him awkwardly. “I’m sorry,” he croaked out. “I’m sorry for putting you in this position.”

Someone cleared his throat behind him. “Could you leave us, Jules?”

Liam’s heart attempted to escape through his throat. Taking a deep breath, Liam lifted his eyes.

Anthony’s gaze was on Jules. “Please,” he said, his voice very serious and steady. “I need to talk to Liam.”

Jules opened his mouth to protest but then closed it as his eyes locked with Anthony's. Slowly, he nodded and left.

At long last, Anthony turned to Liam, clasped his hands behind his back, and looked somewhere to the left of Liam's eyes. "First of all, I would like to apologize," he said, his voice unnaturally stiff and proper. "The way I've been behaving is unacceptable—reprehensible and irresponsible. I should have never touched you that way, much less... From now on, I will do my best to act like the family alpha and brother you deserve."

Liam stared at him, feeling like the ground was moving under his feet.

He couldn't speak. What... What had brought this on? Had the conversation with Jules really affected Anthony that much? What had Jules told him?

In the meantime, Anthony continued, still not quite looking at Liam. "I will even agree to Terlainé's suit. But only if you really want it. Don't marry him to escape from me—you'll ruin your life. You deserve better, Li."

Feeling his throat tighten, Liam tried to swallow the painful lump in it and the shameful, embarrassing words that threatened to leave his lips. *I deserve you. I want only you. Please don't do this.*

"He's probably the best option," Liam heard himself say, as if he didn't yearn to close the distance between them, bury his face in the hollow of Anthony's throat, and beg him not to do it.

"The best option is—someone who'll make you happy," Anthony said, his voice as rigid as his posture. "If you're worried about me, you don't have to. I'll control myself."

Liam nearly laughed. *Who said I can?*

"All right," he said with a forced smile. If Anthony could "control himself," so would he, dammit. He wasn't going to beg him. He had his pride. Besides, it *was* the right thing to do; he understood it rationally. "I understand."

Anthony gave a stiff nod before finally looking him in the eye. “Just promise me something. Don’t accept Terlainé’s suit yet. Don’t rush into marriage. Promise me.”

Liam pressed his lips together, frustrated and more than a little confused why it mattered to Anthony so much. If he couldn’t have Anthony, why did it matter when he married Terlainé? Wouldn’t it be better to just— jump? Prolonging the inevitable wouldn’t change the situation. Prolonging the inevitable would only make it more difficult the longer he stayed around the man he couldn’t have. It was just cruel.

But fuck, he was weak. He couldn’t say no to this man. Despite everything, he still wanted to please him.

“All right,” Liam said.

Some of the tension bled out of Anthony’s shoulders, but his eyes remained grim, glinting with strange determination. He turned on his heel and strode out of the room, as if he couldn’t bear being in the same room with him a moment longer.

The door closed with a soft click.

Liam buried his face in his hands and *breathed*, trying to control himself.

He wasn’t going to cry, dammit.

He wasn’t.

How could he grieve losing something he never had?

Chapter 16

It would be a lie to say that Liam wasn't relieved as he put off accepting Terlaine's proposal. He was.

He had an honest conversation with Terlaine—or at least as honest as it could be, given the circumstances—and told him that he wasn't sure that they suited and that he needed more time.

To his credit, Terlaine took it gracefully, or at least was well mannered enough to pretend not to be bothered by his indecision. Terlaine—or Michael, as he insisted that Liam should call him—was honestly perfect: ridiculously handsome without being too intimidating, confident without being too arrogant, nice enough without being a pushover. And he had a gorgeous smile. Liam should have been attracted to him; any unmated omega under the age of a hundred seemed to be. Liam wasn't. He *tried*. He tried so hard. He stared at Michael's chiseled features, at his beautiful facial structure, and tried to will his stupid body and heart into feeling something.

It didn't work.

His stupid body remained cold, as if he wasn't the same person who turned into the worst kind of slag the moment he caught a whiff of his eldest brother's scent.

Liam still tried. He did.

A week after the horrible “let's be brothers” conversation, he allowed Michael to kiss him. Michael's lips were warm and he kissed with confidence that spoke of his experience and skill. It should have felt good.

It was... bland. Just skin against skin. Liam might as well have been shaking his hand.

When the kiss ended, Michael peered at him with a clear question in his eyes.

Liam could only manage a weak smile and suggest that they return to the ballroom before their unchaperoned absence could be noted.

And that was that.

As they rejoined the other guests, the first thing Liam saw was Jules, dancing with his duke. His little brother was smiling radiantly at Westcliff, his eyes bright with amusement, want, and so much love. Westcliff was smiling back, his green eyes full of fierce affection and warmth. They looked at each other like they were the only people in the ballroom, completely ignoring people's eyes on them.

Liam turned away, his chest tight. Although he was on the arm of a very handsome alpha, he suddenly felt more alone than he ever had.

Was this what his life was going to be like? Tolerating kisses that made him feel nothing and putting on a smile that felt like a mask—a mask that was about to crack and fall away, revealing to everyone that there was nothing underneath it.

He felt like an empty doll.

Fake to the bone.

He had barely seen Anthony over the two weeks since their conversation. He always seemed to be out of the house, coming back at odd hours. On the rare occasion that they saw each other, it was during meals, with Jules and Eric always there. Every time, it felt like the most delicious, horrible torture. He was so close, yet it seemed like he was oceans away. Liam felt like he was coming apart at the seams, unable to even look at him

under Jules's watchful eye. Jules kept his word, preventing them from ever being alone. Liam was both grateful to him and irrationally resentful.

He missed him.

Not just the kisses and the sex—he missed looking at Anthony and catching his eyes and seeing the expression in them soften. He missed his low, warm voice wrapping around him like the softest blanket. He missed feeling his gaze on him, missed having his attention. He missed being *seen* by him. He missed his scent, craved having it on his skin.

He missed him, desperately. He found himself wandering the house randomly and breathing in Anthony's scent that still lingered on the furniture—yes, it was that bad.

Liam knew he was only making it worse, knew that such behavior wasn't conducive to moving on and forgetting him, but he couldn't help himself.

He missed him.

His heat came and went, as agonizing as the one before it.

He woke up the next evening, having slept for most of the day and yet still feeling mentally and physically drained.

Liam stared at the ceiling of his bedroom blankly and tried to find the motivation to get up.

There was a ball in a few hours.

He should get up.

He should...

His vision was suddenly blurry, hot tears running down his cheeks.

They didn't bring any relief.

It was well past two in the morning when a very tired Liam trudged toward his bedroom. He returned home alone—Jules had sneaked into the royal palace again to spend the night with his fiancé.

Liam knew his way around the house even in the dark, so he didn't bother turning on the lights. Toeing off his rather uncomfortable shoes, he padded toward his room.

He wasn't sure what attracted his attention. A faint noise? A suggestion of a noise? It was unusual for the hour, since all the rooms were soundproof and everyone was supposed to be asleep.

Bewildered, Liam turned toward the noise. It was coming from a nondescript guest room no one usually used.

His curiosity piqued, Liam walked toward it. When he got close, it became obvious that the door wasn't fully closed.

“—I'm trying! I am!”

It was a male voice. It was vaguely familiar, but Liam couldn't quite place it. It seemed he was speaking on the phone, because Liam couldn't hear the other person's response.

“The head maid is too controlling and watches like a hawk when the meals are served. It's hard to slip it into his food.”

Liam frowned, unease twisting his gut.

“Unless you want me to put that stuff into everyone's food and kill the entire family, you'll have to be patient, sir. I'm trying!”

A chill ran down Liam's spine. He stood frozen, his eyes wide. Surely he wasn't... surely that person wasn't talking about *poisoning* someone?

“I nearly managed it a few days ago, but he lifted his eyes as I was about to slip it into his glass of whiskey. I was lucky he seemed distracted and didn't notice it in my hand.”

Suppressing the urge to open the door and find out who the speaker was, Liam walked away as quietly as he could, his heart thundering

somewhere in his throat and his hands trembling from the rush of adrenaline and fear.

Glass of whiskey.

Only Anthony drank whiskey in the family. That person, whoever he was, intended to poison Anthony. To kill him in cold blood. It seemed unthinkable. Ridiculous. And yet. Liam knew what he'd heard, no matter how outlandish the idea seemed.

Someone wanted to kill Anthony.

Trying to control the panic making the air clog in his lungs, Liam headed to Anthony's room. He had to warn him. He needed to warn him, as soon as possible.

He rushed into Anthony's bedroom without bothering to knock.

The dark form on the bed sprang into a seated position so fast Liam was startled.

"Who is here—Liam?" Anthony's voice was a little hoarse from sleep, but he sounded remarkably alert for someone who'd been rudely woken up at two o'clock.

Liam shut the door carefully, his fingers still trembling.

"What are you doing here?" Anthony said. "You shouldn't be in my room."

Liam swallowed. In his panic he'd forgotten that coming to Anthony's bedroom at night wasn't exactly a wise thing to do. Since their "let's be brothers" conversation weeks ago, they hadn't been alone at all, much less alone in Anthony's bedroom.

"It's important," he croaked out. *I wouldn't risk it if it weren't important.* "I've just overheard someone talking about killing you."

There was a beat of silence before Anthony reached out and switched the bedside lamp on. Warm yellow light filled the room.

When Liam's eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness, Anthony was already by his side. "Come here, sit," he said, his hand jerking toward

Liam, as if he had intended to touch him but thought better of it. He gestured to the chair by his desk.

Liam did as he was told, carefully not looking at Anthony's bare chest. But looking at his face was no better. His chiseled features were even more attractive than usual in the warm, intimate light, and the bed hair he sported made Liam's fingers itch with the urge to run them through it. It was so hard not to touch him after weeks of not being allowed to. His fingers were literally twitching.

Fuck, maybe he should have waited until the morning. But how could he, after hearing that someone intended to kill Anthony? Another wave of panic rose at the thought, and Liam tried to push it away. Anthony was all right. He was fine. He was right here. He was—

He was kneeling in front of Liam and taking his trembling hands into his own. "Calm down," Anthony said, his voice gentle but somehow comfortingly firm, too, his blue eyes holding Liam's firmly. "Breathe with me, darling. In and out."

Liam breathed. In and out. The familiar scent hit his lungs and Liam's eyelids grew heavy. *Alpha-safe-protected* filled his senses, but it still wasn't enough. He wanted him closer. He wanted to drop himself into Anthony's lap, press his face against his throat, and be held. Just imagining it made his insides ache with yearning. It was normal for an omega to want comfort from his alpha brother, right? It didn't have to mean anything inappropriate.

As if reading his thoughts, Anthony said, "No, Liam."

"Just a hug?" Liam said, his voice smaller than he would have liked.

Anthony's expression became rather tight, but at last he gave a clipped nod, his body language becoming more inviting.

Part of Liam was mortified by how quickly he dropped himself into Anthony's lap, but as soon as his face buried in Anthony's neck, he stopped giving a damn. A moan left his lips as he nuzzled against Anthony's scent gland. It felt like heaven. Like everything wonderful in the world. Like breathing air after suffocating for weeks. He couldn't get enough. He didn't

care how wrong it was to feel this. It felt so *right*, like this man had been created for him.

Anthony was very stiff against him for a moment before his arms—his very bare, muscular arms—came up around him in a bone-crushing hug. “Now tell me, kitten,” he whispered hoarsely against Liam’s ear.

Liam shivered, struggling to focus and remember what they had been talking about. Right. The overheard conversation. The poison.

Fear sliced through the fog of pheromones again, and Liam’s arms tightened around Anthony’s back. He couldn’t let anyone hurt him. Not him. Never him.

“I’ve just overheard a man arguing with someone on the phone. He said he almost succeeded in slipping some poison into your glass of whiskey a few days ago and that he’d try again.”

Anthony hummed thoughtfully. “Nothing else?”

Frowning, Liam pulled back a little to look him in the face. “How can you be so calm about it?” he said, his arms still wrapped tightly around Anthony’s back. “Why are you not freaking out?”

Some emotion flickered across Anthony’s face. At last, he sighed. “I’m not surprised because it wouldn’t be the first attempt on my life.”

Liam’s heart jumped to his throat. “What? Why didn’t you tell us?”

Anthony seemed to hesitate before saying, “I didn’t want to worry you. And there are some things even I am not completely sure of. I can only tell you that my near-mortal wound wasn’t received in the battle. Someone shot me with a sniper rifle after the battle was over.”

Liam had never felt such a mix of impotent anger and fear. “How—
who?”

Anthony shrugged. “The sniper wasn’t caught, so we can’t know for sure. But that’s why I was half-prepared for another attempt on my life.” His brows drew together, his thumb tracing absentminded patterns on Liam’s lower back. “Poison wasn’t something I expected, though.”

“Do you think... Do you think it’s Uncle?” Liam said.

Anthony gave him a piercing look. “What makes you think that?”

Liam’s lips twisted into a crooked smile. “Well, it’s pretty obvious who benefits from your death, isn’t it?” Losing the fight with himself, he buried his fingers in Anthony’s tousled hair and threaded them through it. It was oddly therapeutic. It calmed him, drove it home that Anthony was there, that he was all right. For now.

“Is that... Is that the only reason you suspect him?” Anthony said, his gaze becoming heavy-lidded as Liam stroked his hair. It looked kind of endearing, the way he was leaning into Liam’s touch like a big, wild cat that was enjoying itself against its will.

Feeling a rush of overwhelming affection, Liam leaned in to peck him on his stubbled cheek. Just a little peck. Surely it was innocent enough? He’d seen Jules doing the same, and it wasn’t weird at all. It was totally brotherly.

Except it didn’t feel very brotherly. His lips trembled as soon as they touched Anthony’s skin, wanting to linger. Wanting to taste. Wanting to suck. Gods, he smelled divine. It didn’t help that Anthony’s arm around him didn’t feel brotherly, either, holding him indecently close, Liam’s oversensitive nipples rubbing against Anthony’s firm chest on every inhale.

Trying to distract himself, Liam said, “It’s not the only reason. I know Uncle can be very ruthless when he wants something.” The debacle with Jules’s first mate was proof enough of it.

“What do you mean?” Anthony said, his lips pressing against Liam’s cheek.

Shivering, Liam rubbed his cheek against Anthony’s and closed his eyes. “It happened a few months ago,” he said, and proceeded to tell him about the feral Xeus that Uncle Wayne had kept in the basement and experimented on. Liam knew the story sounded unbelievable even in the best circumstances, but it probably sounded like a disjointed mess when he could barely string two thoughts together, the air so full of their pheromones it felt like being wrapped in a thick, comfortable blanket on a very cold night. He never wanted to emerge.

Liam became distantly aware that he was squirming, rubbing his chest—his nipples—against Anthony’s pecs like a cat. Like a very shameless cat in heat. But he couldn’t seem to stop. His nipples were so very sensitive. Fuck, he wanted to rub them against Anthony’s chest, skin to skin. He *needed* to.

Before he could think twice, Liam unbuttoned his shirt and did just that, whimpering as his hard nipples pressed against Anthony’s bare chest. It felt like heaven. But he still wanted more.

“Li,” Anthony ground out, his voice tight, almost pained. “We can’t. Don’t you remember what we agreed on?”

“Brothers touch each other all the time,” Liam mumbled incoherently, taking Anthony’s hand and putting it on his left pec. Anthony’s fingers immediately found the nipple and rolled it between them, making Liam moan. He was so hard and so slick his underwear was drenched. He would give fucking *anything* to have Anthony’s cock in him now. Anything.

“Fuck,” Anthony said, his other hand cupping Liam’s chest, too and then squeezing the other teat. “I want...” He leaned down and swallowed Liam’s left nipple in his mouth.

Liam groaned, pleasure washing over his body. It felt amazing, each suck on his nipple making his cock and his hole ache. “Ah,” he gasped breathlessly as Anthony alternated between sucking on his nipples and sucking bruises all over his chest. “Please...” He wasn’t even sure what he was asking for: please stop? Please don’t stop?

Anthony stopped sucking long enough to look at Liam’s chest. “Fuck,” he said, staring at it with a glazed, dark gaze. He thumbed the nipples, making Liam shudder. “Look at you.”

Liam looked down at his chest and blushed, seeing his erect nipples. They looked big and dark pink against his pale skin, shiny with saliva. It looked obscene. It looked incredibly filthy and arousing, considering whose saliva it was.

Groaning, Anthony took the right nipple back into his mouth and sucked hard. Liam keened, grabbing a fistful of Anthony’s hair and trying

to pull him closer, though it wasn't possible. He wanted—he wanted—

“Please,” he gasped.

Anthony growled and got to his feet with Liam in his arms. Liam instinctively wrapped his legs around Anthony's waist, his head spinning from pleasure and gut-wrenching want. He was vaguely aware of Anthony depositing him on the desk, then there was the sound of fabric tearing, and then Anthony was dropping to his knees in front of him and—

Liam moaned as he felt a hot, soft tongue against his hole. *Brother*, he tried to tell himself, but it didn't work. He didn't care. He pulled at Anthony's hair, trying to get that tongue deeper—gods, it felt so good, so fucking good—

He cried out when the tongue finally pushed inside him, delving deeper against his sensitive walls. But it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough. He wanted more. He wanted to get fucked. With a cock.

“Fuck me,” Liam ground out, pushing back onto that tongue. “Want your cock.”

Anthony stopped eating him out and got to his feet in one fluid motion. His eyes glazed with lust, he fished his cock out of his dark pajama bottoms. Liam nearly moaned, staring at it hungrily. It was so hard, red, and gloriously thick that his inner walls clenched around nothing in anticipation. He spread his thighs and they both watched as Anthony's large cock pressed against his soaked hole, teasing it. Liam's own cock looked laughably small in comparison, and the difference in their sizes shouldn't have aroused Liam so much.

Unable to bear it any longer, Liam moved his hips, impaling himself on Anthony's cock, and let out a long moan, his eyes rolling to the back of his head. So fucking good.

“Fuck,” Anthony said, sucking along Liam's jawline and neck. “You feel so good.” His hips were moving hard and fast, as urgent as Liam felt.

Liam could only cling to his strong body and take the brutal fucking his brother was giving him, moaning non-stop. He couldn't get enough.

Gods, he felt like he could happily stay like this all his life and die on Anthony's cock.

Within minutes, he was half-sobbing as he came violently, clenching around Anthony's length, wave after wave of pleasure washing through him.

But Anthony didn't stop. He kept fucking his boneless body, the wet sounds Liam's hole made utterly obscene on every thrust. Liam couldn't bring himself to care. He forced his eyes open and stared dazedly at his alpha. There was a bead of sweat running down Anthony's forehead, his blue eyes glassy with want, his chiseled jaw locked with tension.

He was beautiful.

Liam pulled himself up and kissed him, trying to sate the hunger inside him that didn't seem to have been sated even after his orgasm.

Anthony kissed back, hard and demanding, his fingers burying in Liam's hair as his cock pistoned into him. He started kissing Liam's face, down his neck, and then his teeth grazed against Liam's mating gland.

Liam shivered, wanting him to bite so badly it hurt. "Please."

Anthony shuddered and went still, his knot growing inside him. Liam all but purred. He'd almost forgotten how thick it was, how good it felt to be stretched on it. Liam's hole was contracting around the knot in him, again and again, until another wave of pleasure washed over him. He nearly sobbed from the intensity of it.

Gods.

"So good," he mumbled, his eyes slipping shut.

Anthony was very still for a moment before hauling Liam up and carrying him to the bed.

Liam wasn't sure how Anthony managed to lay him down without toppling them both, but the next thing he knew, he was sprawled on top of Anthony, his head nestled against his chest. He listened to Anthony's steady heartbeat beneath his ear. It should have been uncomfortable or awkward,

being stuck like this after the sex they weren't supposed to have. It felt anything but.

Liam knew he would regret this later—that there were reasons why they shouldn't have done this again—but right now their inability to act like brothers seemed more amusing than tragic.

“We're so terrible at being brothers,” he said with a chuckle. His voice sounded strange, almost slurred, as if he were drunk.

“We are,” Anthony said with a sigh.

Frowning, Liam forced his eyes open and peered up at him.

Anthony was staring at the ceiling, his handsome face closed off. Almost grim.

“What's wrong?” Liam mumbled.

Anthony looked back at him, his expression softening as he gazed at Liam's face. He brushed his thumb against Liam's cheek and his jaw seemed to tighten when Liam leaned into the touch. “I don't want you to hate me.”

Liam turned his head and nuzzled into Anthony's hand.

The look on Anthony's face was strange: there was something almost greedy in his eyes but there was something like regret, too. It was odd.

“It's odd,” Liam murmured.

“What is, sweetheart?”

Liam smiled at him, feeling warm. He liked the endearment. He liked all the endearments Anthony used on him sometimes. Sweetheart. Baby. Kitten. Darling. He liked being Anthony's *darling* the most. Being dear to him.

“You. You're odd. I'm not sure what to make of you sometimes.”

Anthony snorted, but he seemed to be laughing with Liam rather than at him. “You're practically high right now. I'm not sure you can be the judge of my oddness.”

“Am not high,” Liam said.

The amused smile Anthony gave him made Liam want to kiss him. Badly. Unfortunately, he'd have to move to do it and he didn't really feel like moving.

Huh. Come to think of it, maybe Anthony was right.

“I like when you smile at me,” Liam said, looking at Anthony's lips. “You don't smile at me often lately.”

Anthony's lips stopped smiling. His throat moved.

As their eyes met, a pang of sadness penetrated the *happy-right-wonderful* fog in Liam's mind.

Anthony's hand stroked his bare back, strong but achingly gentle.

It made Liam's eyes sting.

He murmured, barely audibly, “I miss you so much.”

Anthony's hand went still.

“It's so unfair,” Liam whispered, closing his eyes. “I wish you weren't my brother. I wish... I wish I could stop loving you.”

Anthony didn't say anything. But was there anything to say, really? It was what it was.

Liam didn't even noticing drifting off.

Chapter 17

He tucked the covers carefully around Liam and eased off the edge of the bed.

Then he stood there, watching Liam's dark gold eyelashes flutter slightly against his pale skin as he slept. There was some color to Liam's cheeks after the sex, but it did little to hide how tired and small he looked. He was such a dainty little thing, all eyes, full pink lips, and soft graceful hands.

Fuck, he was so... Liam pushed his protective buttons like nothing ever had, making him want to kiss him gently from head to toe. He calmed something deep inside of him, gave him peace. But at the same time, Liam made him itch to dirty him up, ruin that perfection with his greedy hands, leave bruises and marks all over him, sink his teeth into his mating gland—

Cutting off that train of thought, he stepped back.

As if sensing it, Liam shifted in his sleep, his brows furrowing endearingly.

I miss you so much, Liam's soft voice sounded in his ears again. *I wish I could stop loving you.*

The words had been like a blow to his gut. He had never wanted to hurt Liam, but selfishly, he *had* wanted Liam to miss him; he couldn't deny it. The conversation with Jules might have made him remember about things like decency and shame and forced him to do the right thing and avoid Liam in the past few weeks, but it had done nothing to quash his

instincts. To quash the want, the pull he felt toward Liam. It didn't stop him from wanting to kill the Earl of Terlainé as he courted *his* omega. He might have agreed to Terlainé's suit, but the truth was, he hadn't wanted Liam to accept it. He was glad Liam missed him. He was glad Liam loved *him*. He was fucking delighted. And it made him feel like a right asshole.

Liam made an unhappy sound in his sleep, his scent tinging with discontent.

It was a struggle to stay still, to rein in his protective instincts. He wanted nothing more than to get into the bed and wrap his arms around his omega. Hold him, soothe him, promise him that everything would be all right.

No.

It would bring just fleeting comfort. It might put gauze on the wound, but it wouldn't stop the bleeding. Liam was unhappy. Their supposedly incestuous relationship was tearing him apart. Jules was right: Liam deserved better. He deserved to know the truth.

He just needed to find out what that truth was.

When Liam had said that he wished they weren't brothers, he barely stopped himself from telling him that they weren't actually related. But how could he, when he wasn't absolutely certain of that himself? He couldn't get Liam's hopes up only for them to be crushed if he was wrong. Besides, even if he was correct and he wasn't Anthony Blake, there was no guarantee that he could offer Liam anything. He didn't know who he was. He could be no one, a common soldier, without a drop of blue blood.

Or worse—he could be married.

Everything in him rebelled at the idea, but it was a possibility he couldn't completely discard. While he didn't feel a mating bond, it wasn't proof of anything. There were plenty of married couples that weren't naturally compatible enough to form a bond. Arranged marriages were still common, especially among high society.

Fuck, if he was married...

He stared at Liam, his chest tight.

In any case, telling Liam that he wasn't his brother would be premature. He needed to know for sure. He needed to learn his own name first—and whether he was even able to offer Liam anything.

Besides, the Division didn't take kindly to revealing the existence of top-secret tech to civilians. If it were to leak that there was technology that could forge memories and fool a DNA test, the uproar would be enormous. The public still had trouble accepting NDA-tech, and NDA-tech was far less invasive and disturbing in comparison.

So no, he couldn't risk revealing anything to Liam yet. If the Division found out, they might mess with Liam's memories. Make him forget him.

The possibility turned his stomach, but it was a valid concern. That was why he wasn't in a hurry to go to the Division and request that they remove the memory lock—that would look strange, because it would be a breach of mission protocol. An operative wasn't supposed to return to headquarters before his mission was complete. His superiors would be suspicious if he did. So no; it wasn't an option. He couldn't risk attracting their attention to Liam.

There was something else that made him wary of approaching the Division: this mission wasn't the type they usually got involved in. State secrets, scientific and political espionage were more up their alley. A murder of some viscountess and an attempted murder of one of their operatives should have been too insignificant for the Division to bother with. The fact that they hadn't sent a trigger to lift the memory lock was another alarm bell. He was missing something, something crucial. And it made him wary.

Not that it mattered at this point.

There was only one thing he could do. He needed to finally wrap up the damn mission and then get the memory lock lifted—if it wasn't just a product of his imagination.

Liam mumbled something sleepily, his hand stroking the mattress, searching for him.

His heart clenched. Fuck, what he wouldn't do to be able to hold Liam in his arms while he slept—and actually be there in the morning when

Liam woke up.

But Anthony Blake couldn't do it.

He didn't want to be Anthony a moment longer, not if he could help it.

Turning around, he left.

The helicopter ride to the Blake country estate seemed unbearably long. If the pilot was surprised by his desire to return to the countryside in the middle of the night, he didn't show it.

It was barely dawn by the time he arrived.

He strode toward the house. It was long past time for subtlety. He'd wasted the past month trying to provoke Wayne Blake into acting rashly and making a mistake, but so far he hadn't taken the bait. It almost made him doubt that the unpleasant man was the culprit. No; everything pointed to him. In the past few weeks, he'd learned that Wayne had debts, overwhelming debts accumulated thanks to numerous credit card bills, medical bills, poor investments and outrageous expenses. The man needed the Blake money; the motive was there.

All he needed was proof.

What Liam had told him had given him options. Two options. He could choose to pursue the option of investigating Wayne's illegal experiments on the feral Xeus. Since it had happened relatively recently, unlike the viscountess's death, the chances of finding loose ends and gradually unraveling the man's other criminal activities were pretty good. It was the smart option. But that would take time. Time he didn't have. Liam missed him. Liam was miserable. Liam needed him to fix it. *Liam needed him.*

The thought was like an injection of adrenaline into his mind.

No, he couldn't wait.

You're acting rashly, a voice at the back of his mind tried to warn him. You're letting your alpha instincts affect your judgment. Think with your head, agent.

He grimaced, running a hand through his hair. He was well aware that he was acting rashly. He knew he was compromised. But he couldn't wait any longer. He had been this close to sinking his teeth into Liam's mating gland tonight—and that would have been a disaster of epic proportions while everyone thought he was Liam's brother.

No, he couldn't wait.

So that left only the second option: direct confrontation. He would confront Wayne and bluff that he'd caught his man red-handed when he attempted to poison him. This plan wasn't ideal and depended on variables he couldn't control.

But it was all he had, given the time constraints.

It would have to be enough.

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Chapter 18

Anthony wasn't home when Liam went downstairs for breakfast.

"The viscount left in the middle of the night for the country estate, Master Liam," the butler said.

Thanking him absentmindedly, Liam focused on his breakfast. But he didn't have an appetite. There was an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, as if something bad was about to happen. Why would Anthony leave in a hurry for the country estate?

Uncle Wayne was there. He had moved back into the house to oversee the estate while Anthony was in the city.

Dread churned in Liam's gut and slowly crawled its way up his throat.

"What's with the long face?" Jules said, plopping down in the seat across from him.

"I'm worried."

"What about?"

"Anthony."

Jules shot him a sharp look.

Liam couldn't help it: he averted his gaze.

Jules's eyes widened. He sat up straighter. "Tell me you didn't."

Beyond uncomfortable, Liam looked anywhere but at him. He couldn't lie.

"Liam!" Jules choked out.

Dropping his gaze to his tea, Liam stirred it with his spoon.

His brother let out an exasperated sigh.

After a long, awkward silence, Jules said, "Is he that good?" There was something like morbid curiosity in his voice.

Liam glared at him, his face very warm. He didn't know what to say.

He glanced around the room, to make sure none of the servants were present. "Last night I overheard someone plotting to kill Anthony."

Jules chuckled. "It's not funny. Don't try to change the subject."

"I'm not trying to be funny." Liam took a deep breath before he started talking.

He told Jules what he'd overheard and his conversation with Anthony. By the time Liam finished, he felt frustrated and anxious all over again. Being reminded of the attempt on Anthony's life and another attempt that might happen at any time—might be happening right now, for all he knew—made a ball of anxiety knot together in the back of his throat.

"You really think it's Uncle?" Jules said, frowning.

Liam scoffed. "Who else? Sometimes the obvious answer is the correct one."

Jules sighed, rubbing his forehead with his fingers. "I don't know... I can't deny I want him to rot in jail for the rest of his life, but I'm not exactly unbiased on the issue, so I'm not sure I can be objective about it." His face darkened. "Even if it's really him, he's good at hiding his crimes. I went to the basement—after, you know... and there's nothing there anymore. I doubt Anthony will find proof of his guilt even if he is guilty."

"That's why I'm worried," Liam said. "Uncle is good at not getting caught. What if he tries to kill Anthony while they're alone in the country house?"

“Anthony is a war veteran. He’s a fit, strong alpha. I’m sure he can handle himself.”

“You don’t understand,” Liam said, frustrated by Jules’s lack of concern. He got to his feet and started pacing the room. “Uncle isn’t going to play fair—you know that, Jules! He had some goons helping him lock up and guard your Xeus. Even being a war veteran wouldn’t help Anthony if he’s ambushed by a bunch of goons. We need to go back!”

Jules shot him a long, penetrating look. “You’re very worried for him. I’ve never seen you like this.”

Glowering at him, Liam ground out, “Concern for a brother’s safety is completely normal. I would be as concerned if it were you or Eric.”

Jules raised his eyebrows, his skepticism obvious, but thankfully, he didn’t actually say anything to voice his disbelief. Liam wasn’t sure he could handle it right now.

“Fine,” Jules said. “Let’s say Anthony is in danger. How can we help him, exactly? We’re omegas. I hate to agree with stereotypes, but we really are kind of useless against a bunch of alphas if there’s a physical altercation. We’d be just a minor inconvenience at most. There’s bravery, and then there’s stupidity.”

“We would be possible witnesses,” Liam said. “Our presence won’t allow Uncle to act.”

“Li,” Jules said in an uncharacteristically patient tone. “I hate Uncle more than you can imagine—he’s a piece of shit that only cares about his own interests and will walk over anyone to get what he wants—but even I don’t think he’d be stupid enough to attack Anthony in broad daylight in Anthony’s own home. He’d try to be more subtle about it.”

“Maybe he’s running out of time,” Liam said, starting to pace again. “I don’t know! Poisoning someone isn’t very subtle, either.”

A wrinkle formed between Jules’s brows. “I guess.”

“Come on, we need to go to the country house! As soon as possible. I have a bad feeling.” Catching the strange, measuring look Jules was giving him, Liam snapped, “What?”

“You have a bad feeling,” Jules said, his tone uncomfortable. “As in, just a bad feeling or about Anthony? That’s—that’s the behavior of a mate.” He looked at Liam’s covered throat. “You didn’t let him bite you, right? Right?”

Liam flushed, his hands balling into fists. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he managed, blushing. And never mind that it had nearly happened last night. “Come on, Jules. It’s really important! Aren’t you worried for him at all? He’s your brother.”

“Yes,” Jules said in a mild voice. “He’s your brother, too. But you seem to keep forgetting that.” Jules’s expression was a mix of curiosity, revulsion, and fascination. “I’ve never seen you like this before.”

Liam scowled, pursing his lips and turning away. “Fine. I’ll go by myself if you don’t care.”

“Wait, I’m coming with you,” Jules said with a sigh. “What about Eric? Should we take him with us? I think he’s still asleep.”

“Let him sleep,” Liam said, barely suppressing the urge to snap at him to stop wasting precious time.

During the helicopter ride home, he closed his eyes and tried to analyze whether he really was acting strange. Was he? He wasn’t this snappish normally; that was true. He was usually a lot more sensible and even-tempered than that. Could Jules be correct and it was just some kind of mate-related separation anxiety? Was it possible? Anthony hadn’t bitten him. He’d just grazed his teeth against his mating gland. They’d always been very attuned to each other.

Whatever this bad feeling was, it wasn’t going away.

Please let him be okay.

It was the only thought he had for the rest of the ride.

The ride home felt excruciatingly long.

It didn’t help that Liam had to spend most of it pretending to be asleep to avoid Jules’s probing questions he had no answers for.

He didn't want to talk about it. All he wanted was to see Anthony and make sure he was all right. He *wanted* to be wrong about Anthony being in danger. He would gladly bear Jules's *I told you so* if it meant Anthony was perfectly safe and healthy.

Finally, they were there.

Liam jumped out of the helicopter before it even finished landing.

The sound of a gunshot made Liam freeze.

Then, he was sprinting toward to the house, ignoring Jules's calling his name.

He yanked the front door open and went still at the sight.

The first thing he saw was blood.

Lots and lots of blood.

It looked very red against the white wood floor. The blood was coming from the wound in Uncle Wayne's thigh.

There was a tall, dark-haired man standing over Uncle Wayne with his back to Liam. For a moment, Liam thought it was Anthony, but in the next, he instinctively knew it wasn't: the slope of his shoulders was different, and this man seemed a little wider.

The man had a gun in his hand.

Liam swallowed, looking around frantically. Where was Anthony? Who was this man? Why had he shot Uncle?

Jules collided with his back. "Ouch!" he said, snapping him out of his disjointed thoughts.

The man didn't turn. "You're under arrest," he said, putting electromagnetic cuffs on Uncle Wayne's wrists.

Uncle Wayne looked deathly pale, and it might not have been just from the loss of blood. "You can't prove anything," he croaked out.

"Oh, I very much can, Uncle," the man said.

Liam frowned. *Uncle?*

“Uncle?” Jules said, voicing Liam’s confusion.

At long last, the man turned toward them.

Liam gasped, hit with a wave of familiarity. He knew this man. He knew him.

But—but—

The man smiled, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. (*Liam knew him.*)

“Li,” he said.

Liam shook his head dazedly, unable to grasp the most logical explanation for this.

“You’ve grown,” the man said softly. “I can’t believe you’re twenty already.”

“Who the hell are you?” Jules said, moving forward. “What’s going on here?”

The man’s eyes shifted to Jules and he smiled crookedly. “Juli,” he said.

Liam felt faint. A memory flashed to the forefront of his mind. The niggling feeling of wrongness that he got the first time he heard Anthony call Julian Jules. The teenage Anthony had never called Jules that. It had always been Juli. Jules was the nickname Julian had insisted on since he was six or seven, long after Anthony had left for the war.

Anthony shouldn’t have used the new nickname. It should have been Juli.

It should have been Juli.

Which meant...

Which meant...

“Ant?” he breathed out. Ant. That was what he’d called the teenage boy with bright blue eyes who carried Liam on his broad shoulders. The boy—the boy was this man. Liam remembered him. He *remembered* him.

Holstering his gun, the man walked toward him. He paused in front of Liam and visibly hesitated, a deep furrow appearing between his brows. “Why do you stink of...” He trailed off and shook his head before pulling Liam into a hug.

Liam stood still and stiff in his embrace as his heart tried to grasp what his brain had already understood. This was Anthony. Ant. This was his real brother. Which meant...

“What the fuck is going on?” Jules said. “I don’t understand. Where’s Anthony?”

Liam’s heart dropped before *soaring*. They weren’t brothers.

He wasn’t his brother.

“I was right, Jules,” he said, his lips barely moving. He pulled back and looked at the man—Ant. “Where is he? The—the man who pretended to be you?”

Ant looked at Liam oddly, but before he could say anything, there was the distinct sound of police sirens and helicopter blades.

“Your ride has arrived, Uncle,” Ant said, walking over to Uncle Wayne and hauling him to his feet with one hand.

Uncle Wayne cursed and nearly passed out, but Ant ignored it, dragging him unceremoniously toward the front door.

“Will someone explain to me what the hell is going on?” Jules said.

His mind still reeling, Liam whispered, “This is the real Anthony, Jules. Don’t you recognize him?” Although his face had matured a lot, Liam could still easily see the teenage Ant’s features in that man’s face.

“But—” Jules said. “Then who the hell was the other Anthony? And where is he?”

Liam's heart clenched. He wasn't even sure what he was feeling. There was indignation and fury—that fucking *liar*—but there was elation too. He wasn't a pervert. He wasn't sick and twisted. He was—maybe they could—

Shaking those thoughts off—now wasn't the time—Liam turned and followed Ant out of the house. He needed to find out what was going on.

It seemed Ant had handed Uncle Wayne off to the authorities; the police helicopter was leaving already.

“I think we deserve an explanation,” Liam said.

Ant's shoulders tensed. He gave a clipped nod and returned to the house.

Liam and Jules followed him into the office.

“It's a long story,” Ant said, taking the seat behind the desk.

Liam felt his insides tighten in discomfort when he saw him in the seat Anthony—the *impostor*—usually occupied.

“We have time,” Jules said, plopping down in the chair opposite him. Liam took the other one.

Ant looked from Liam to Jules, his lips pursed. “First of all, I'm sorry for not returning home sooner.”

“It doesn't matter now,” Liam cut him off impatiently. He wanted to know where *he* was. And who he was. “Why was there someone else impersonating you? And where is he now?”

“He told us he—you were seriously injured,” Jules said. “Was that a lie?”

“It wasn't,” Ant said. “I was really injured—shot with a sniper rifle. Shot in the head.”

Liam's eyes widened. “How did you survive?”

Ant shrugged. “I was lucky. It was a great, professional shot. I should have died on the spot—I would have if the bullet hit a hair's breadth to the

left. But I managed to stay alive long enough for my team to get me to the hospital. Even after I was stabilized, the doctors still didn't think I would wake up—I had minimal brain activity, close to brain dead. I was in a coma for a long time. Months.”

“But what about A—the impostor?” Liam said, trying to sound casual. “Who is he? Why was he impersonating you?”

Frowning, Ant sighed. “I can't tell you his identity. We both were part of an elite secret intelligence squad, and the identities of its members are classified. I can't tell you his name.”

“There has to be something you can tell us,” Liam pressed. “Come on! You can't expect us to accept this lousy non-explanation.”

Ant pressed his lips together. At last, he said, his words slow, as if he was measuring them, “I can tell you that he was my partner. We have been friends for a decade, brothers in all but blood.” He grimaced. “Obviously I wasn't awake at the time, but apparently he was angered by our superiors' inaction and decided to find out himself who was responsible for my state. It seems he decided that being the bait was the best way to draw the killer out.”

“His mission wasn't authorized?” Jules said before Liam could say anything.

“Of course not,” Ant said with a shake of his head. “We're intelligence officers, not detectives. And we're not allowed to act on home soil. But he's always been a bit of a maverick. He went behind our superiors' backs.”

“Then how did he fool the Inheritance Department?” Liam said, utterly confused.

Ant shrugged. “He knows me better than anyone. Over the years, I've told him a lot about my family, so I imagine it was easy for him to impersonate me. It helps that at a passing glance we look similar enough that we can use each other's IDs without any problem.” Ant chuckled. “Other members of our squad called us twins for a reason.”

Liam stared at him in skepticism. “There are advanced lie detectors in the Inheritance Department. He shouldn’t have been able to pass them no matter how well he knew you.”

Ant averted his gaze. “Let’s just say there are ways around it. And before you ask, I can’t tell you.”

“Come on, they checked his *DNA!*”

Ant pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, his discomfort obvious. He looked around the room, and after a long moment, said, “What I’m about to tell you is highly classified. It can’t leave this room, get it?”

When both of them nodded, he continued in a quiet, measured voice, “There is a way to fool the test. I can’t tell you any particulars because I’m under NDA-tech. Even talking about it vaguely is—hard. The method’s existence isn’t known to the Inheritance Department yet. Only a select few in the government know about it.” He smiled humorlessly. “You can probably imagine how furious our superiors are right now for its unsanctioned use. Not only did he use the tech unsanctioned, but he used it on home soil, increasing the risk of exposure exponentially. It’s a good thing he didn’t attend society functions as me and his contact with other people was minimal—so it’s not bad as it could have been. Our superiors are still pissed. He was supposed to be on leave, not prancing around pretending to be me.”

Liam shifted in his seat. “Is he in trouble? Is that why he isn’t here?”

Ant heaved a sigh. “Partially. He was also heavily wounded. He was taken to the hospital just prior to your arrival.”

Liam’s vision swam a little.

“Wounded?” he managed through a dry throat.

“Yes,” Ant said, drumming his fingers over the armrest. His fingers were thicker than *his*, not as long and elegant.

“How?” Liam whispered. It wasn’t really the question he wanted to ask, but he couldn’t ask what he really wanted to know. *How badly is he injured? Is he okay?*

Ant pursed his lips. “Apparently he confronted Uncle this morning and told him he caught his man red-handed when he attempted to poison him and that his man confessed everything. It was a gamble, but it did work. Uncle bought the bluff, got nervous, and gave himself away. He shot him point blank.”

“Point blank?” Liam said faintly, his heart dropping somewhere to his feet.

“Yes,” Ant said, his gaze darkening. “Arrogant idiot. He’s one of the best intelligence agents out there, but he’s always been too damn overconfident for his own good. He shouldn’t have underestimated Uncle. He was lucky I arrived when I did or he would have bled out.”

Liam swallowed, gripping his own fingers so hard it was painful.

“What happened after that?” Jules said.

Ant shrugged. “Uncle had no idea their conversation was being recorded and transmitted to our servers—at least the arrogant ass had taken that precaution. Him accessing the server alerted our superiors, and our handler alerted me and the police. It was a lucky coincidence that I was on the way home already and arrived before Uncle could finish him.” Anthony snorted. “If Uncle didn’t indulge in some gloating, I wouldn’t have made it in time. And it was a good thing that he did. He confessed everything, thinking that his nephew was dying anyway.” His lips thinned. “Apparently, Mother didn’t just fall down the stairs, either.”

Jules sucked in a breath. “What? He arranged her death too?”

Ant gave a clipped nod, his face expressionless.

Liam stared at him blankly, feeling curiously devoid of emotion. Or maybe he’d just lost his capacity to be surprised.

“So is he all right?” he whispered at last.

His brows knitting, Ant shot him a sharp look.

Liam hoped he wasn’t blushing. “What?” he said, trying not to sound defensive. “We thought he was you. We got a little attached to him over the past month.”

Jules made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort and quickly started coughing to cover it.

Liam glared at him.

“I’m not sure,” Ant said, brushing a hand through his hair in a frustrated gesture that sent a pang of familiarity through Liam’s chest. He really was his brother. “I asked our former handler to contact me if his condition changes, but there’s been nothing so far.” He pulled a face. “Strictly speaking, they aren’t obligated to tell me anything. I don’t have the clearance anymore.”

“You mean you left the service?” Jules said.

Ant nodded. “I was about to resign and return home anyway, but my wound makes me unfit for service in any case.”

“You look fine,” Jules said.

Ant smiled without much humor. “I’m fine by regular people’s standards. My squad had only the fittest and most capable.”

Literally biting his tongue to stop himself from asking more questions about *him*, Liam tried to focus on the conversation between Ant and Jules, but his brain only comprehended snatches of it.

“...did Uncle try to escape?” Jules said. “Is that why you shot him?”

“No,” Ant said. “I shot him because I could.”

The coldness of that statement finally managed to catch Liam’s attention. He stared at Anthony’s expressionless face and didn’t know what to think.

“He killed Mother,” Ant said, as if that justified shooting a man who was about to be taken into custody anyway. “He nearly killed my best friend—and it’s possible Uncle did kill him if he doesn’t pull through.”

Liam looked down, his fingernails digging into his thighs hard. He knew his face was blank. He was good at hiding his emotions. No one in the room probably had any idea that anger and animal fear were eating him alive.

“Tell us his name,” Liam heard himself say. *Tell me his name. I need to know his name.*

Ant leaned back in his chair and shook his head, looking tired. “I really can’t,” he said with a tight expression on his face. “We’re put under NDA after leaving the service. I can talk about my former job only in general terms. As soon as I attempt to talk about something concrete, like the names of my former teammates or superiors or the tech specifics, I’ll get distracted and forget what I’m talking about.”

Liam frowned, dissatisfied.

“Can’t you even write down his name?” Jules said, shooting Liam a quick look.

Ant chuckled bitterly. “You do know how the NDA-tech works, right? If it weren’t so effective, it wouldn’t piss off so many people.”

Right.

“Can’t you take us to him?” Liam said.

Ant shot him a curious, somewhat puzzled glance.

Hurriedly, Liam tried to look only mildly interested.

“No,” Ant said at last. “He was taken by the medical personnel of—my former place of employment. I don’t have access anymore. And I definitely won’t be able to show the location to civilians without getting all of us into a ridiculous amount of trouble.” He grimaced. “Depending on how pissed-off my former superiors are, they might consider you a security risk anyway. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re put under NDA too.”

“No offense, but your former place of employment sounds like a shitty place to work for,” Jules said.

Ant snorted. “I’m not going to argue with that. But it does have its perks.”

“Like what?” Jules said.

“The lifetime benefits actually exceed the income of this estate,” Ant said, shrugging.

Jules whistled and said something.

Ant chuckled and said something.

It was all white noise to Liam. Unimportant. Background.

“I’m tired after our trip,” he said abruptly, getting to his feet. “I’ll go to my room.” And he left, before either of his brothers could say anything.

His brothers.

They were his brothers.

He—he...

Liam sat down on his bed and dropped his face into his hands, not even sure which of the emotions he was feeling was the strongest: relief, anger, or fear.

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Chapter 19

Next morning when Liam left his room, there were people in dark suits all over the house.

It took him a moment to realize what they were doing: they were using NDA-tech on the staff.

His insides tightening in dread, Liam took a step back, but one of those people had already noticed him and headed toward him.

But before she could reach him, Jules rounded the corner and practically collided with him. “They’re putting everyone under NDA, Li,” he blurted out, looking a little wide-eyed. “Should we—”

“Hello,” the woman said pleasantly upon reaching them. “I’ll need just a moment of your time, please.”

Warily eyeing the innocuous-looking silver device in her hand, Liam took another step back, but stopped, realizing the futility of it. What was he going to do, try to outrun all of these people?

Jules grabbed his hand—in warning or seeking reassurance?—and Liam took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down and think rationally.

He gave Jules’s hand a firm squeeze and stepped forward. He was the elder brother. It was his job to take care of it.

“Look, there’s no need for that,” Liam said with his best smile. The woman smelled like an alpha, and he wasn’t above using his designation to get out of this situation. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

The alpha hesitated but shook her head. “I’m sorry, Mr. Blake, but I have my orders.” Her voice was considerably gentler. “It won’t hurt, I promise. Only the relevant subjects will be affected.”

“The relevant subjects?” Liam said.

“Yes,” she said patiently. “Any classified information you have learned, as well as the fact that someone else was impersonating your brother—you won’t be able to talk about it.”

Liam swallowed. “Not even with the people who know of it, too?”

She gave him an apologetic look. “I’m afraid not. Every time you get the urge to communicate about those subjects, your thoughts will stray to something else.” She smiled encouragingly. “I know it sounds scary, but it’s very safe, I promise. We get our tech straight from Calluvia. It’s of the highest quality. Your other memories will not be affected.”

Licking his lips, Liam shook his head. He didn’t care how supposedly safe it was; it seemed like brainwashing to him. Liam knew people didn’t really forget anything—NDA-tech affected the person only during the conversation if they attempted to reveal something that was NDA-locked. But he couldn’t agree to it. He needed to find out if A—if the impostor had survived. How could he ask about it if they took his ability to talk about it?

“I decline,” he said, staring her down. “It’s called a non-disclosure *agreement*. I don’t agree to my brain being messed with like that.”

She grimaced. “I’m sorry, Mr. Blake, but it’s non-negotiable. My orders come from very high places.”

Lifting his chin, Liam gave her his most confident look. “I don’t know what high places your orders come from, but my future brother-in-law is the heir apparent to the throne and your future sovereign. Do I really need to involve him to resolve this misunderstanding?” Never mind that he would rather punch himself than ask anything of Westcliff. She didn’t know that.

A flash of annoyance and discomfort appeared in her eyes. She glanced at Jules, her jaw clenching. “I apologize for the misunderstanding,”

she finally said. “There’s no need to involve the royal family.” With a slight bow, she walked away, pulling out her phone.

Liam breathed out.

“Phew,” Jules said. “That was quick thinking, though I don’t like using Devlin’s status this way.”

Liam smiled crookedly. For all Jules’s outspokenness, his sense of self-worth wasn’t high, and he was actually rather shy in social situations. It would have never even occurred to him to use his position as the future king’s mate to get out of this situation.

“Get used to it,” he said, squeezing Jules’s hand before letting go. “As the king’s mate, you will be constantly under public scrutiny, so you should use the few perks you get.”

Jules pulled a funny face. “Sometimes I wish I could kidnap Devlin and move with him to another planet.”

Liam chuckled and then cleared his throat. “Is there news?”

“I haven’t heard anything. But I haven’t seen Anthony. The real Anthony. Fuck, it’s still so weird. I still can’t believe the other Anthony was an impostor. But I guess, that’s good, right? That means you’re not brothers.”

Liam shrugged, avoiding Jules’s gaze. “He lied to me. He lied, Jules. He knew how torn up I was about the whole thing, but he kept lying. Fuck that asshole.”

“Uh-huh. You look like you didn’t sleep last night.”

Because he hadn’t.

“I couldn’t sleep because I was angry.”

“Right,” Jules said. “You aren’t worried for him at all.”

Glaring at him, Liam said nothing. There was nothing to say. Nothing Jules would believe.

“I need to talk to Ant,” he said, just to escape Jules’s knowing, pitying eyes.

Gods, it was so humiliating. How pathetic must he look to be so very obviously worried about the lying asshole who’d made a fool out of him?

He walked away before Jules could say anything.

Liam hadn’t lied to Jules: he was furious. After the long, sleepless night, anger was the prevailing emotion. The *impostor* had been lying to him. He’d let Liam think he was a disgusting pervert for wanting his own brother. It was infuriating. And it hurt so much—it was proof of how little he cared for Liam’s mental state. For Liam, period.

And yet Jules wasn’t wrong, either. Liam still wanted to know that he was all right. He was angry—he was furious—but he wanted the asshole to be alive to be able to be furious at him, to be able to punch his face, dig his fingernails into it, and then—

Liam cut off that train of thought, not liking where it was going.

He found Ant in the office.

Once again, the sight of him seated behind that desk took him aback. It seemed... so wrong.

“Is there any news?”

Ant lifted his eyes from the paperwork. “Uncle has confessed that he hired the sniper. It appears he’s been deep in debt for years, which is why he was desperate to get access to the Blake accounts. He said Mother refused to give him money anymore, even for his medicine—she didn’t believe he wouldn’t just waste the money—and he shoved her off the stairs in his anger. He says it was an accident. He denies that he killed her in cold blood. We’ll see what the lie detector shows when the court authorizes its use.”

“Is he still sick?” Liam said without any interest, desperate to get to the subject that really interested him, but knowing that changing the subject abruptly would look weird.

“No,” Ant said. “It seems his experiments have borne fruit and he was cured of his terminal disease. They’ve already arrested one Doctor

Navarra who conducted the illegal experiments and invented the cure.”

Liam tried to look like it all meant something to him. He nodded. “What about the—the man who impersonated you?”

Ant raised his eyebrows. “I thought they’d put you under NDA.”

“They tried,” Liam said with a shrug. “So what’s his status? Did he—he survive?”

Ant rubbed his forehead with his fingers, his expression becoming tight. “As I said, my access has been revoked. I don’t know where he’s being treated. But I’m listed as his next-of-kin, so I would have been notified if he died.”

Liam let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

All right. That was enough. That was all he needed to know.

Liar, a voice said at the back of his mind. *Liar liar liar*. He wanted to know *everything*, the need nearly choking him.

The implication of Ant’s words didn’t help, either. If Ant was named his teammate’s next-of-kin, that meant fake-Anthony didn’t have a family—or a mate.

But that piece of knowledge only made him greedier for more. Liam wanted to know more.

He wanted everything. Every piece of information about him.

Every piece of him.

Chapter 20

Days passed.

Then weeks.

Then months.

Liam had been angry in the first few days, but that anger had been mixed with relief that they weren't actually brothers—and hope. For the first time since he'd realized that he had inappropriate feelings for his brother, he'd actually had hope that their relationship could be anything but a disaster. But as the days turned into weeks and then months, that hope had gradually faded, and another emotion, something hollow and achy, found its way to his chest and settled there, poisoning his thoughts.

You never meant anything to him.

He never cared for you.

He isn't coming back.

The latter part was getting harder and harder to deny. It had been nearly two months. Ant had said his friend had been shot in the stomach. Considering the level of modern medicine, if he had survived long enough to get medical treatment, that kind of wound should have been healed within weeks.

So if he wasn't back, that meant he'd chosen not to come back.

He never really cared for you.

He isn't coming back.

Despair soon turned back into anger.

Fuck him, Liam thought viciously, ignoring the ache in his heart.

He refused to mope because of that asshole. He had his pride, dammit.

So he threw himself into his social life. He danced, he smiled, he laughed. He accepted compliments. Life was good. He was having lots of fun.

“Li, do you want to talk about it?” Jules said carefully. He was always so careful around him these days, as if Liam was something fragile.

Liam smiled. “What about?”

Jules gave him a long look and sighed. “Never mind. Just... you can always talk to me, you know?”

Turning away, Liam grabbed the invitations on the table. “We’re invited to the Duchess of Embery’s ball tomorrow. Are you going?”

“Do you... do you want me to ask Devlin if he can find out something about him? He has been incredibly busy lately, but...”

Liam froze, his back to Jules. It stood to reason that as the crown prince, the Duke of Westcliff would have the clearance to know about a top-secret intelligence organization of his country. He could maybe make inquiries about an injured agent of that organization. Find out his name. Find out why he hadn’t returned.

But everything in Liam hated the idea of asking such a favor of Westcliff—not after the way he’d treated Liam like an empty-headed thing not worthy of respect. Liam tolerated Westcliff for Jules’s sake, because the

arrogant prick clearly loved Jules and made Jules happy. It didn't mean Liam liked him. Or wanted to owe him anything.

No. He'd rather die than owe anything to Westcliff.

Besides, Liam shouldn't have to go looking for him. If fake-Anthony really cared for Liam, he'd return to him without being bullied by the crown prince.

"No," Liam said flatly, walking away.

And that was that.

Later that night, as he lay in his cold, empty bed, his eyes wide open, Liam wondered if his pride was worth it.

But if he forwent his pride, what did he even have?

He had never felt so alone. Jules clearly pitied him, and being around his happy, besotted self was unbearable. At least Jules wasn't around often because of his approaching wedding. Eric was Eric, lost in his computers and video games. Anthony was—Liam didn't like being around him.

Not that he disliked Ant, per se. He just didn't like looking at his face. He really looked a lot like *him*: at a glance, it was easy to mistake them, and then Liam's traitorous, stupid heart would start beating faster only to drop somewhere to his feet again when he realized that it was the wrong alpha.

The right alpha, Liam corrected himself, beyond frustrated. The only consolation was the fact that he didn't feel even a flicker of attraction toward the real Anthony, no matter how similar he looked. In fact, the mere idea turned his stomach. It was just gross. Revolting. Now he understood Jules's disgust at the idea.

He didn't even like being scent-marked by Ant. The first time his brother had attempted to do it, Liam had jerked away and pretended that he didn't see it. He knew he hurt his brother by not accepting him as his alpha, but he could do nothing about it. He *hated* his brother's scent—hated it for stinking up the entire house and slowly erasing... erasing all other scents.

Liam seemed to be the only one having an aversion to Ant, though. The staff acted as though it was totally normal that another man now called himself Anthony Blake and had become the master of the house. None of the staff had even vaguely mentioned the strangeness of it, which made Liam extremely uneasy. He didn't think NDA worked that way, but what did he know about it, really? Maybe it truly didn't bother anyone that a different man replaced the one they had called the master of the house for more than a month. Even Jules and Eric seemed to just roll with it, and acted all brotherly and shit toward Anthony 2.0. Liam felt like the only sane person in the entire house.

Or maybe he was the only insane one.

It surely felt like he was losing his mind, torn apart by two completely opposite desires and emotions. *Is he all right? I hate him so much. I need to see him. I never want to see that lying asshole again. I need him. I hate him—hate him for not caring for me even a little bit. Fuck him, screw him.*

I miss him.

Liam wasn't sure if he hated the country estate's quietness or the bustling social life of the city more.

A social life was a pretty good distraction, but it was exhausting to smile and laugh when he felt nothing like it. He remembered enjoying attending parties and balls all those months ago, but it felt like it was in another life. Now they all seemed as fake and superficial as his own smiles. But he kept smiling anyway. He was good at it. He'd always been good at it. Everyone probably thought he was having a grand time.

Liam wasn't sure if he was that good an actor or just no one cared enough to look and see. He suspected it was the latter.

Jules's wedding was fast approaching and their presence was required more often by the wedding planners. Jules was pretty hopeless at all the

customs and traditions, so most of the planning fell to Liam while Jules preferred spending his days—and nights—with his fiancé. Liam generally wouldn't have minded, but considering how mentally exhausted he felt, he wasn't exactly at his best and probably wasn't very helpful.

The Earl of Terlaine's—Michael's—visits didn't help matters. It seemed the earl was at the limits of his patience, and wanted to officially seal their courtship. He was pushier now. It didn't take Liam long to realize why when he saw Michael speaking to Ant. His brother was perfectly amicable toward Michael and clearly approved of him. Part of Liam wondered what Michael thought of the hostility the impostor had displayed toward him, but like all people under NDA, Michael didn't speak of it. It was terribly convenient, Liam had to admit, but he couldn't deny that he almost wanted that confrontation. Almost wanted someone to acknowledge that what had happened wasn't just some hallucination. That *he* had existed.

“For fuck's sake, Li,” Ant said after they returned from yet another ball. “Stop stringing the man along. He's a catch, and he's not secretly a creep. What's stopping you from accepting his suit? He's the best option.”

The best option is someone who'll make you happy.

Looking away, Liam wrapped his arms around himself and shrugged. “I'm just not certain we suit,” he said. “By the way, Uncle Wayne's trial is soon. Do you think he'll get a life sentence?”

Ant's blue eyes hardened. They were lighter blue than... Not as striking and deep, but intense in a different way. “I think he will, considering the illegal experiments he conducted on Westcliff.”

“I thought Westcliff didn't want to make it public,” Liam said, somewhat surprised. When Jules had told him a few days ago that Westcliff had turned out to be his first mate, the feral Xeus Uncle Wayne had experimented on all those months ago, it had been something of a shock. It was hard to believe the royal family had managed to keep it quiet, but then again, they had probably used the NDA-tech to prevent any leaks.

“He doesn't want to make it public,” Ant confirmed, his lips twisting. “Politics. But it doesn't mean that wouldn't influence the judge.”

“You're very cynical,” Liam said.

Ant gave a short laugh. “Maybe. But you’ll see that I’m right soon enough. For once, politics will be good for something. Now stop avoiding the subject. Do you want Terlainé or not? If you don’t, why are you stringing him along?”

Liam looked away. How could he tell his brother that he had been just trying to make himself fall in love with Michael—trying and failing? He could only laugh now as he remembered confidently telling Jules months ago that love would come with time. Gods, he had been so foolish. Foolish and naive. It was impossible to make himself fall in love with someone—just as it was impossible to stop loving someone.

His stomach clenched at the thought.

“He’s the best option,” Liam repeated. “And I’m not stringing him along. I made it clear to him that there is no understanding between us and I’m not yet certain that we suit. If he chooses to stick around regardless, that’s his choice.”

The piercing look Ant gave him made him uncomfortable. “And there’s no other reason?”

“There isn’t.”

He walked away, feeling... feeling like shit, to be honest.

It had been two months. Two months since he’d last seen him. Any attempts to get some information about him from Ant had been fruitless because of the NDA Anthony was under. Liam hadn’t tried very hard. He didn’t want Ant to suspect anything. It would be beyond mortifying if his brother found out that Liam had had sex with the man Liam had thought was Ant. Nope, he wasn’t talking about that with Ant. Like, ever.

Liam didn’t know yet how wrong he was.

Chapter 21

Liam was woken up by a loud pounding on his door.

“What is it?” he said, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes.

“Master Liam, Master Anthony wants you to come to his office.”

“Now?” Liam said, glancing at the pink sky outside the window. It was ridiculously early, especially considering that they had returned from the ball at one in the morning.

“Yes, Master Liam. He said it was very urgent.”

There was something in the maid’s voice that made Liam wary. He got dressed as quickly as possible and headed to his brother’s office.

When he arrived, all his brothers were already in the room. Ant stood by the window, his back tense and his hand gripping the windowsill hard. Eric was curled up in the armchair by the fireplace, his eyes red and wet. Jules was pacing the room, his face flushed. Even though Liam’s nose wasn’t very sensitive, the room stank of anger, frustration, and something like embarrassment.

“What’s going on?” Liam said.

His lips pursed, Jules silently handed him his tablet.

Liam looked at it—and stared.

For a moment, he couldn’t comprehend what he was seeing.

Eric. A picture of a half-naked Eric.

On the screen, Eric was wearing only an unbuttoned shirt. He was seated on his bed, his expression a little unsure, which was an obscene contradiction to his bare, spread legs and the very obvious bulge barely covered by his shirt.

Liam's heart dropped when he realized that the picture was published on some gossip website. The headline proclaimed in huge letters: *The Crown Prince's Brother-in-Law Mired in Scandal*.

Fuck.

Liam shifted his gaze to his youngest brother.

Eric wouldn't meet his eyes.

"What—how?" Liam said.

Running a hand over his face, Jules sighed. "Long story short, apparently Eric has been talking online with some man for a while. They met through a video game and became friends." Jules scoffed, making clear what he thought of it. "One thing led to another, and the asshole eventually talked Eric into sending him this picture." Jules scowled. "He sold it to the paparazzi."

Shaking his head, Liam stared at Eric. "How—how could you fall for it? You should have told us. Why didn't you tell any of us about that man?"

"I told you!" Eric said, his face red. "I asked for your advice! And you told me to go ahead."

"What? I didn't—" Liam cut himself off, his stomach churning as he vaguely remembered the conversation that happened right after... after the library incident. He'd been too wrapped up in what had happened—in *him*—and too distracted to pay attention to what Eric had been telling him.

And now Eric was paying for his lack of attention.

"What are we going to do?" Jules said. "This shit is everywhere."

Ant heaved a sigh, his shoulders stiff with tension. "There's nothing we can do. We can only hope people won't care about it and will move on."

Liam nearly laughed. "They won't," he said bitterly.

Unfortunately, over the following week, he was proven correct. The scandal followed them everywhere they went—not just Eric but their entire family. Even Westcliff’s political standing had taken a beating for having a fiancé who came from such a scandalous family. People didn’t give them the cut direct—they didn’t dare because of Westcliff—but it was close sometimes.

By the end of the week, Eric refused to leave their home.

“It can’t go on like this,” Jules said as they reconvened for another family meeting; this time Westcliff was there too. “Can’t you just order them all to shut up?”

Westcliff chuckled humorlessly. “I wish,” he said. “I can’t order people to respect him, Julian. Even the king doesn’t have such power. Respect is earned, not given. Even if I actually spoke out, people would treat him well only in my presence, but they would treat him with disdain as soon as I leave.”

Liam bit the inside of his cheek hard.

It was all his fault. He should have listened to Eric when he’d asked for his advice. But he had been too absorbed in *him*, and had failed to be a better brother. As usual.

“What can we do?” he said, hating himself for even now yearning for a *certain* someone’s arms around him. He would have fixed this. He would have made it better.

He was a fraud. A professional liar. Stop thinking about him, damn you.

“It’s so bloody unfair,” Jules said. “If Eric were an alpha, it wouldn’t matter! It’d only cause a few salacious jokes—an alpha would never be ostracized for a suggestive picture like that!”

Sighing, Westcliff pulled Jules into his arms. “I know, sweetheart. I know.”

Liam looked away.

“I’m sorry,” Eric muttered, without lifting his eyes from the floor.

“It’s not your fault,” Ant said roughly, his jaw working.

Liam could tell he wasn’t dealing with the situation well, his protective alpha instincts making it hard for him to accept that he couldn’t do anything, but Liam couldn’t bring himself to offer him sympathy and comfort. What had come so easily to him with the impostor felt unnatural and forced with his real brother.

Pushing the thought away, Liam stepped closer to Eric and wrapped an arm around him awkwardly. His brother didn’t lean into the touch, making Liam feel even more useless and inadequate than he already felt.

It’s your fault. Maybe Eric blames you.

His throat tight, Liam let his hand fall.

He felt even worse when Jules hugged Eric, and Eric leaned into his embrace easily enough.

Hugging his own arms, Liam looked away.

“I’ll live at the country estate,” Eric said, clearly trying to sound brave. “I didn’t want to go to those stupid balls anyway. Maybe it’s for the best.”

“You can’t hide for the rest of your life,” Liam said.

Eric shrugged, smiling crookedly. “It’s not like there’s much of a choice, is there? I made my bed.”

“There may be another option,” Westcliff said.

“Really?”

“You could leave for Kadar,” Westcliff said, his green eyes on Eric. “Haydn will take you under his wing until the scandal blows over.”

“You think it’ll help?” Jules said, touching Westcliff’s bicep.

Westcliff nodded, laying his hand over Jules’s and squeezing his fingers. “Kadarian society is less concerned about propriety. They don’t have a social season like we do. There are still social gatherings and parties, but they’re more informal. Omegas are generally given more freedom. They

even work beside alphas. Kadarian society shouldn't care much about a salacious picture like that."

Liam nodded slowly. It did make sense. The Republic of Kadar was said to be more progressive than Pelugia, at least when it came to omega rights.

"I don't want to be a burden to Prince Haydn," Eric said.

Westcliff looked at him steadily. "You won't be a burden. My brother has a bleeding heart. He'll take good care of you, I promise."

"Unless you don't want to go?" Liam said, touching Eric's arm and then removing his hand quickly. "It's fine if you don't want to go. You can stay here with us."

There was indecision written all over Eric's face for a moment before he looked at Jules, then at Liam, and his expression became resolute. "I'd like to go to Kadar."

Westcliff gave him an approving smile. "It's settled, then. I'll call Haydn immediately."

As Westcliff pulled out his phone and turned away to call his brother, Liam tried to smile, too. He should have felt relieved that they'd found an acceptable solution. This way Eric wouldn't be confined to their country estate for years.

But he couldn't deny that all he felt was a sense of profound loss and failure. Jules was getting married soon and moving in with Westcliff, and now Eric was leaving the country for an indefinite time—because of Liam's mistake.

Liam was alone now.

Painfully, achingly alone.

Chapter 22

Eric left for Kadar, but it did nothing to quell the gossip, just moved its focus to Liam and Jules—mostly Liam, because no one really dared to bad-mouth their future king's mate. Anthony, as an alpha, was obviously impervious to the scandal. Liam normally wasn't one to complain about being an omega—he wasn't Jules—but he had to admit that being an omega really fucking sucked sometimes. The double standards were staggering. And sickening.

It was incredibly frustrating that the social standing Liam had barely fixed after Westcliff had dumped him for Jules was in tatters once again. It was almost funny. Or would have been if Liam didn't constantly feel like getting into his bed and not getting out, ever. But he didn't have the luxury of doing it. If he hid at home, there would be no one to show that the gossip was inconsequential and that their family wouldn't be so easily destroyed by it.

The only person that stuck by him despite the scandal was the Earl of Terlaine. Michael didn't seem to care about the gossip and continued accompanying him and inviting him to dance when everyone else treated Liam as if he had the plague. Michael had become a genuine friend. Liam was grateful to him.

Gratitude wasn't love. But it could be as strong a motivation.

A week after Eric left for Kadar, Liam decided to accept Michael's suit. It would be good for the family. It would make people forget the

scandal—or at least make it old news if he married a highly respected aristocrat like Lord Terlainé.

And never mind that the idea made his heart ache and a ball of dread settle in the pit of his stomach.

Enough, he told himself angrily. Stop being so pathetic. You aren't going to waste away pining after an asshole who doesn't give a shit about you. Enough. If he wanted you, he would have returned ages ago. If he cared for you, he wouldn't have kept lying to you.

He doesn't care.

He never cared.

He never loved you.

Liam had decided to tell Michael about his decision after Jules's wedding. A wedding was supposed to symbolize new beginnings, after all. A new chapter in life, and all that.

“Are you sure about it, Li?” Ant said quietly, as they ascended the stairs leading to the ballroom where the wedding reception was being held. Jules and Westcliff had already said their vows in the royal chapel with only the closest friends and family present—even Eric had arrived for the ceremony though he was departing for Kadar again soon. Jules had been a little upset about that, but he still seemed blissfully, ridiculously happy as he and his duke said their vows. The wedding was obviously just a formality: Jules and Westcliff were already mated in every possible way. In fact, judging by the glow to Jules's skin lately, Liam strongly suspected the royal couple was already expecting a new addition to their family.

“Why, you're the one who kept telling me how perfect Terlainé is,” Liam said, without looking at his brother. “Why are you suddenly trying to convince me otherwise?”

“You smell unhappy,” Ant said.

Liam smiled blandly. “It’s hard to be happy when both of my brothers have left our home. It feels like the end of an era.”

“And that’s the only reason you’re unhappy?”

Liam fidgeted with his tie. He didn’t know why Ant was suddenly asking these questions. “You haven’t said anything about my ‘unhappy’ scent until now. I don’t understand the sudden interest.”

Ant sighed as they entered the ballroom. “It’s not sudden. I’ve noticed it for months. But I thought…”

“You thought what?” Liam said, looking around the crowded room.

“I thought you had feelings for Devlin.”

Liam laughed. “What? You thought I was jealous of Jules?”

“It made sense. He was your suitor first.”

“I don’t have feelings for Westcliff, Ant.”

“I know that now,” Ant said. “You didn’t seem heartbroken during the wedding. Your general level of unhappiness stayed about the same.”

“Thanks for sharing your observations,” Liam said dryly.

“I’m just worried for you, Li,” his brother said testily. “It’s not exactly encouraging that you still smell unhappy when you tell me you intend to accept Terlaine’s suit tonight. Are you sure?”

Liam gave a clipped nod, trying not to betray his unease. It was time. The scandal with Eric was a good reminder that an unmated omega was incredibly vulnerable to the slightest gossip. There was no point in waiting and hoping for—

For *nothing*. He had stopped hoping for stupid things that were never going to happen. He was done being a fool. It was time to be a mature adult who made mature, rational choices.

“Lord Blake,” a security guard said, materializing out of nowhere.

“Yes?” Anthony said, turning toward him.

“There’s a man requesting to talk to you. We tried to tell him it’s not a good time, but he’s very insistent. He says it’s urgent.”

Anthony frowned. “It really isn’t a good time. What’s his name?”

“Selwyn.”

Anthony’s face went utterly blank.

Then he was moving.

Liam stared at his retreating back, a little confused, before shrugging mentally and wandering in search of Jules. He hadn’t had the opportunity to offer his congratulations properly.

Eyeing the crowd of well-wishers around the new prince-consort, Liam hesitated.

But upon noticing his approach, Jules extricated himself from the crowd and made a beeline for Liam, his relief obvious. “Thank fuck,” he said, tucking his hand around Liam’s arm. “I needed someone to save me from them ages ago.”

Liam smiled. “Smile, Your Highness,” he said. “People are watching. Where’s your husband?”

Jules practically glowed at the word. “He’s over there discussing politics with those Kadarian senators.” He wrinkled his nose. “It’s very boring. I don’t know how Devlin manages not to fall asleep on his feet. He’s really good at politics.”

“Devlin is very good at everything,” Liam said with a wry smile. “I’m sensing a pattern. You couldn’t sound more besotted if you tried.”

“But he is good at everyth—” Jules cut himself off, staring at something behind Liam’s back. “Oh.”

Curious, Liam turned and followed his gaze.

He went still when he saw two tall men heading their way. They were identical in height and they looked so similar they could have been twins. But Liam’s gaze zeroed in on the man to the right. His heart jumped to his

throat when his eyes locked with the familiar blue eyes (*just the right shade, the perfect shade*).

Liam's vision swam a little, the rest of the world blurring, *his* face the only thing in focus. He was coming closer, and he was suddenly right there, within reach.

Liam stared at him hungrily, noting the leanness of his cheeks, the way his dark suit hugged his tall, muscular frame, the color of his blue, blue eyes. He'd clearly lost some weight, but he looked so familiar, so right, so damn perfect, it felt like Liam was breathing for the first time in months.

It took him a moment to notice that Ant was there, too, his hand on the other alpha's shoulder.

"Boys, this is..." Ant started saying, before trailing off and grimacing, his expression becoming rather tight. The NDA was probably still preventing him from telling them his former teammate's name.

But the other alpha didn't have such a problem.

"Jonathan Marsden, the Earl of Selwyn," he said.

Liam didn't say anything. He just stared at—at Jonathan—and tried to summon the anger he should have been feeling. Anger was there, but it was muted.

Fuck, he missed him. So much. So much that his fingers were tingling with the urge to touch him, to make sure he was real, that he really was there.

But he couldn't touch him. People were staring at them. Anthony—*Jonathan* wasn't his brother. He was no one to him. An unfamiliar alpha. He had no business touching strange alphas.

"Jonathan," Jules said flatly, giving fake-Anthony an unimpressed look.

"Just Jon is fine, Your Highness," the alpha said with a smile, picking up Jules's hand and brushing his lips against his knuckles. "You look radiant," he said softly. "I'm happy for you, kid."

Jules's mask of indifference cracked. He stepped forward and hugged him, uncaring that it wasn't exactly socially acceptable to hug an alpha who wasn't a relative at one's own wedding.

Liam crossed his arms over his chest, his jaw tightening.

"We were worried for you, you git," Jules said, pulling back.

"I'm sorry," Anthony—*Jon* said, still looking only at Jules.

Scowling, Liam turned away, finally remembering that he was angry at that asshole and trying to squash down the needy voice whispering at the back of his mind, *Why is he not looking at me, he's mine, he should be looking at me, not Jules.*

Gods, he'd forgotten what a whore for this man's undivided attention he was. Even when he was angry at him, he wanted his eyes only on himself. It was sickening how quickly he'd fallen back into this habit despite the anger and hurt he was feeling.

You're furious at him, remember? Stop giving the asshole moony eyes. It's disgusting. Where's your pride, idiot? He isn't even looking at you.

Liam put on a smile. "Have you seen Michael, Ant? I think I'll go talk to him now."

"Michael," Jon repeated.

"The Earl of Terlaine," Ant clarified. "Liam's suitor."

Jon remained quiet, but Liam could feel his heavy, intense gaze finally settling on him.

It was as exhilarating as it was infuriating. So *that* finally got his attention?

"Liam," Jon said, his voice gentle.

Ignoring the way his traitorous heart lurched at the sound of his name said in that voice, Liam gave him the coldest look he could manage and said in an equally cold voice, "I don't recall giving you leave to use my given name, Lord Selwyn. After all, we've just been introduced."

A grimace crossed Jon's handsome face. "I suppose I deserve that."

"You do."

Ant sighed. "For fuck's sake, Li. Don't be too hard on him. I already told you why he did what he did."

Liam nearly laughed. His brother didn't know the half of it—of what his friend had *done*. Namely, Liam.

"Come on, don't be angry at him," Ant said. He clapped Jonathan on his back. "This one is my brother in all but blood. He's family. I hope he'll be your brother, too. This time for real."

Liam hoped his face wasn't as flushed as it felt. "Right," he said awkwardly.

Unlike him, Jon didn't seem flustered. But then again, of course he didn't. He was a goddamn spy. He lied for a living. He had lied to Liam all the time. Was there something he hadn't lied about?

"I didn't expect you to come to the capital," Ant said, looking at his friend curiously. "I'm glad you managed to... extricate yourself from your job."

Jon shrugged, his eyes flicking to Liam before settling on Ant. He put his hands into the pockets of his dark trousers, the fabric stretching obscenely over his crotch. "I have some unfinished business here," he said.

Unfinished business?

Liam looked around the ballroom, at the other guests who weren't even trying to hide their curiosity. There were so many eyes on them. It was imperative for him to act normal. He knew that, but his gaze kept gravitating back to Jon. Fuck, he felt like a famished person in front of a delicious-smelling but poisonous feast he wasn't allowed to touch.

"Thanks for coming to my wedding," Jules said, glancing at Liam. "How long are you going to stay in the city?"

"I haven't decided yet," Jon said. "It depends." His lips thinned. "I've heard about what happened to Eric. How is he?"

Ant's expression darkened. "He's crushed. He left for Kadar to wait out the scandal."

"Did you deal with the asshole who did it to him?" Jon said.

Ant gave a clipped nod.

Liam frowned.

That was news to him. And what did that even mean? Did Ant beat him up? Or...?

Liam looked at Jon and barely caught him snatching his eyes away from him.

"Let's talk about it later," Ant said, looking at his friend. "Come to dinner tomorrow. There will probably be something to celebrate anyway."

"Hm?" Jon said, raising his eyebrows.

"Li is going to accept Terlaine's suit tonight."

Jon's face went blank.

"Is he?" he said, looking at Liam.

Ant nodded with a chuckle. "Yes. I come home, but all of my brothers are leaving the nest."

Jon's face was like stone, his eyes glinting with an unreadable emotion.

Annoyed with himself for the guilty feeling in his chest, Liam put on a smile that was probably a little too sharp. He had nothing to feel guilty about, dammit. "Michael has always been there for me these past few months," he said, holding Jon's gaze. "He's very honest and dependable. Trustworthy. He never made me feel like a fool."

A muscle worked in Jon's lean cheek. His jaw locking, he looked away.

Liam felt a surge of dark satisfaction for making him feel ashamed, but the satisfaction was short-lived. He hated not having Jon's eyes on him.

He wanted Jon to look back at him. The world felt wrong if this man's attention wasn't solely on Liam.

Beside them, Ant cleared his throat. "There's no need for passive aggressiveness, Li," he said in a placating tone.

Liam ignored him. He bored his eyes into Jon until he finally looked back at him. Something inside Liam positively purred in satisfaction, like a starved little monster that had gotten what it wanted.

Jon's nostrils flared. "I think it'd be better if Liam and I have a word in private, Anthony," he said, still looking at Liam.

"This is neither the time nor the place for that," Ant said with a sigh. "Can't it wait? Your fiancé must be waiting for you, Li."

"He isn't Liam's fiancé yet," Jules cut in, giving Liam a meaningful look. "Terlaine will wait. Go talk to Jon, don't be stubborn. There are a few empty rooms by the main stairs. Use one of them."

Liam glared at Jules. Now he was suddenly supportive? "People will talk if I'm seen leaving the room with an alpha. After the incident with Eric, I'm under more scrutiny than usual."

Ant snorted. "It's just Jon. He doesn't count. He's my brother, so he's your brother too."

Liam nearly laughed. Ant had no idea.

"Not in the eyes of society," Liam said.

Ant rolled his eyes. "Fine. I'll go with you and wait outside while you two talk." Laying a hand on Liam's shoulder, he steered him toward the rooms Jules had told them about, with Jon following them. Finding one that was empty, he ushered Liam inside, let Jon enter too, and leaned against the wall outside, pulling out his phone. "Don't take long."

Jon shut the door, the sounds from the ballroom cutting off.

And then they were alone.

Chapter 23

Silence had never felt so thick.

Liam licked his lips, his heart beating so fast he felt nearly dizzy with it. He didn't know what to do with his hands, so he crossed his arms over his chest and smiled bitterly. "Jonathan, huh? How nice to finally learn your name."

The alpha winced. "Look, I know you're angry—"

"No shit," Liam bit out, forcing himself to stay where he was. It was so much harder than it should have been. His body wanted to move forward. His body wanted to close the distance between them and latch onto this man like a parasite in need of sustenance. It was like fighting the current of a strong, mountain river. It took all of his willpower to stay still. He had to remind himself that he was angry. Of course he was angry. He was furious. He didn't trust this man. He couldn't trust him. "You could have told me. You knew how horrible I felt about—about wanting my own brother, but you said nothing!"

Jon's expression became tight. "I couldn't. I wasn't absolutely sure myself that I wasn't Anthony."

"What?" Liam said with a laugh.

"To pass the lie detectors of the Inheritance Department, I had to use the services of a telepath—there are Calluvian mind adepts who do that kind of thing for a fee—a very high fee—if you know the right people. The telepath adjusted my memories to make me think I was Anthony." He

sighed. “The plan was to make the telepath restore my real memories as soon as I passed the security checks, but apparently the man I hired got into an accident and was out of commission for a while. It was just bad luck.”

“You mean... you mean you really thought you were Anthony while we...”

Jon shook his head. “As an intelligence officer, I’m used to having my identity faked through memory implants. There’s actually technology—technology that I can’t talk to you about—that does something similar, so I could recognize the signs of memory tampering and I was reasonably sure I wasn’t actually Anthony. But I couldn’t tell you that until I was absolutely sure. It was dangerous for you to know too much in any case. My handlers would have memory-wiped you if I did.”

Memory-wiped him? That was actually possible?

Liam looked at him uncertainly, despising himself for how badly he wanted to believe him. “I thought your mission was unsanctioned.”

Jon smiled humorlessly. “It was. But I knew that when my superiors eventually tracked me down, they would ‘clean up’ after me if I was compromised. If I told you too much, if you became too much of a security risk, they would have wiped your memories of me. You would have forgotten me.”

Liam stared at him, biting the inside of his cheek, hard. “Why—why did you leave so suddenly? Why did you confront Uncle Wayne in that way?”

“I saw how much our relationship was tearing you up,” Jon said quietly, looking Liam in the eye, his gaze steady and honest. “I needed to know for sure and tell you my real name—but I had to learn it first. I mistakenly thought my mission was authorized by my superiors and they were the ones that locked my real memories away for the mission. I thought I needed to finish the mission first—that’s the normal mission protocol before I could return to headquarters to get my memories restored.” His lips twisted into a bitter smile. “It didn’t work out like that. I was too hasty. Irrational. I fucked up.” He chuckled without humor. “But then again, that

entire mission was one giant fuck-up. Because of you. You were something I didn't prepare for."

Oh, fuck it.

Liam was already moving without a conscious thought. In the next moment, he all but crashed against Jon's chest, a whine leaving his mouth as his face buried in the alpha's neck and the familiar scent filled his nostrils. Strong arms came around him, so familiar and so *safe-good-mine*. He smelled beyond good and Liam's stomach fluttered at the sensation of his lips dragging against the barely-there stubble on Jon's throat. Liam clung to him, sucking on Jon's scent gland desperately, unable to get enough. He felt ravenous, starved—he wanted to consume this man, crawl inside him, and stitch them together. He was literally shaking with that need, the intensity of it making him whimper and blindly mouth Jon's neck, seeking his lips. When he found them, he nearly sobbed from sheer relief and ecstasy. *Missed you, missed you, missed you.*

"I know, sweetheart," Jon whispered, nibbling on his trembling lip. "I know."

Liam parted his lips and sucked Jon's tongue into his mouth, his fingers burying in the alpha's hair. "Missed you," he gasped out between the hungry kisses, his ire forgotten. "So much." So fucking much.

"I know," Jon said, covering his face in kisses. "Me, too, love."

Gasping, Liam ran his hands down Jon's back before gripping his hard buttocks and pulling his crotch against his own, whining as Jon's erection pressed against his stomach. Gods, he wanted him inside him. He wanted this man to fill the emptiness inside him that only he could fill.

Liam palmed Jon's cock, massaging it and giving it a squeeze before jerking Jon's fly open.

"Your brother is just outside—" Jon's words turned into a low groan as Liam's fingers wrapped around his cock.

"Don't care," Liam said, meeting Jon's blue eyes. "Want you."

His eyes darkening, Jon yanked Liam's pants down. Liam helped him as best as he could, but he was too distracted by the thick cock in his hand.

Fuck, he missed it. He wanted to suck on it, but he was too desperate for that right now; he couldn't wait to have it inside him, connecting them together in the closest, deepest possible way. Just thinking about it made him so slick and achy with arousal.

Jon shoved him against the wall and hitched Liam's legs around his hips. And then Jon was pushing inside him, so damn thick and hard, and Liam moaned, his eyes rolling to the back of his head.

"Shh," Jon said, going still. He sounded pained, but he gave Liam time to adjust before pulling out and thrusting in.

Liam cried out, clutching his shoulders.

"Shh, baby," Jon said again. "Or Anthony will hear us."

"Don't care," Liam ground out, dragging him into another greedy kiss. Fuck, he wanted to consume this man, to have him so deep inside him he'd never be able to leave.

Jon seemed to be thinking along the same lines, because he started fucking into him with deep, hard thrusts that made Liam moan on every thrust, his noises swallowed by Jon's mouth. Gods, yes—yes!

"Say my name," Jon gritted out suddenly, pressing hot kisses all over Liam's neck. "I fucking hated it when you called me Anthony. Say my name."

"Jonathan," Liam said obediently, his lips slack with pleasure, the air thick with alpha pheromones. Fuck, it felt so good. He didn't care what this man's name was. He could have the most ridiculous name in the world and Liam wouldn't care. Though *Jonathan* suited him. It was as strong and perfect as he was. Or maybe Liam was just biased. Either way, he didn't care. He'd fallen in love with the man, not his name. "Jon—deeper."

Jon gave it to him deeper, the long, hard thrusts taking him higher and higher, until the tension gathering in his lower stomach finally exploded. Liam came with a long moan, clenching hard around the cock in him and shuddering with his whole body. Gods. So damn good.

Groaning, Jon came, too, pulling out at the last possible moment before his knot could lock them.

“You didn’t knot me,” Liam mumbled, unable to hide his disappointment, although rationally he knew it was probably for the best, considering how high he usually felt after being knotted.

Chuckling, Jon kissed him on the nose. “Later,” he said in a low voice, pressing their foreheads together.

Liam gave him a smile that was probably embarrassingly besotted and looped his arms around his neck. “Promise?”

Pulling back a little, Jon looked at him and said hoarsely, “I promise you.”

There was something in his voice that made Liam think he wasn’t just talking about knotting.

Liam licked his dry lips, but before he could say anything, the door opened.

“What are you talking about for so damn long—” Ant fell silent, staring at them.

Liam froze. Even a blind man would guess what they had been doing, and Ant was hardly blind.

“Shut the door,” Jon said, stepping in front of Liam and blocking him from Ant’s view. “From the other side.”

Ant shut the door—from this side. “What the fuck,” he said without any inflection. He looked like he’d been hit by a truck, as if his worldview was suddenly turned upside down.

His face very hot, Liam hurriedly pulled his pants up while Jon fixed his fly.

“What the fuck?” Ant said with building anger, glaring daggers at his best friend.

“Anthony,” Jon said, his expression pinched. “I know how it looks, but—”

Ant barked out a laugh. It wasn’t a nice laugh. “You know what it looks like, man? Unless I’m missing something, it looks like you’ve been

fucking my little brother—while you pretended to be *me*.”

Liam winced.

Because Ant wasn't wrong: put that way, it did look horrible. *Both* of their actions were. Liam couldn't meet his brother's eyes. Didn't dare.

He looked at Jon.

His jaw was set, his expression resolute. “I know you're angry, Ant. I would be too, in your shoes.”

“No shit. He's a kid, Jon. I thought we were friends.”

“I'm not a kid,” Liam tried to cut in, but Ant ignored him, glaring at his friend.

“Remember the promise you gave me years ago?” Ant said, baring his teeth. “That if I died, you would take care of my siblings, be a brother to them.” Ant laughed. “Instead you go and fuck one of them—while pretending to be me.”

Jon averted his gaze, his scent souring with guilt.

Liam stepped forward, a wave of protectiveness making his chest tight. He might be still angry at Jon, but *no one else* was allowed to make him feel like shit. “The only person here who has the right to be angry is me, not you, Anthony,” he said sharply. “Someone who has completely ignored his siblings for the past fifteen years has no room to talk.”

Ant's lips thinned. “That's irrelevant now—”

“Is it?” Liam said, raising his eyebrows. “If you didn't ignore your family for over a decade, this situation wouldn't have happened, because we would have actually known what you *looked* like!”

Ant said nothing, looking like he'd swallowed something sour.

“Don't be too hard on your brother, darling,” Jon said with a smile, putting a hand on Liam's shoulder and kissing him on the temple. “He's not good at accepting constructive criticism.”

Anthony glared at him—at both of them. “I’m this close to beating the living shit out of you, Jon,” he ground out. “Give me one reason not to. It’d better be a good one.”

Jon’s expression became serious. “You won’t beat up your brother-in-law, will you?”

Liam took a deep breath.

Then he lifted his foot and stomped on Jon’s foot, hard. “You’re supposed to propose to me first, you ass,” he hissed, flushing with a mix of indignation and delight.

The bastard was smiling, his eyes full of amusement. “I thought it would be a little awkward to propose immediately after being introduced,” he said with a roguish smile that had no right to be so damn attractive.

Liam glowered at him, but he couldn’t help it—his lips twitched and then he was laughing. “Your sense of humor is awful,” he said, leaning forward and kissing him. Just a short one.

“You’re laughing, so it’s clearly not,” Jon murmured against his lips, wrapping his arms around Liam and pulling him closer, so tightly Liam sighed in bliss from how good it felt. Jon kissed him on the nose, then on his lips, before pulling back and gazing at him seriously.

“I know you’re still angry at me,” he said in a low, intimate voice that enveloped Liam like the softest blanket. “I’m sorry for not being more honest with you. I never wanted to hurt you.” He brushed his thumb against Liam’s bottom lip, stopping him from talking. “I didn’t plan for this—for you. I fully intended to keep my promise to Ant and be a brother for his siblings.” He smiled ruefully. “Well, you know how that worked out. I couldn’t look at you as a brother. I could only look at you as a man.” His voice dropped even lower, only for Liam’s ears. “I want to be the only man who gets to touch you. I want to grow old with you, watch you get wrinkles and liver spots.”

His throat uncomfortably thick, Liam laughed. “Wrinkles and liver spots? Do you think that’s very romantic?”

Jon shrugged with a smile, kissing him on the nose again. “Frankly, I’m looking forward to them. I wish you weren’t so lovely. You make me feel like a green knothead with a one-track mind and I really don’t appreciate it.” His blue eyes were laughing. “If you weren’t such a terrible distraction, I would have wrapped up the mission ages ago—and likely without nearly dying, either.”

Liam tightened his arms around him. “Don’t joke about it,” he said harshly, burying his face in Jon’s neck and breathing. “I was so scared. I was so angry at you but—I was scared.” He knew he was clinging to Jon, but he couldn’t loosen his arms at all. Wasn’t willing to. “Why didn’t you come to see me sooner? It’s been months. Was your injury that bad?”

Jon sighed. “I was on enforced bed rest for the first month, and then I couldn’t find the telepath who locked away my memories—it’s always very risky to use another. It took me another month to find him.”

“Why didn’t you at least call?” Liam said softly.

Jon stroked his back. “I thought about it. But it’s not exactly a phone conversation. I wanted to be able to look you in the eye when I explained myself. It didn’t help that my superiors didn’t want to let me leave the job without putting dozens of NDAs on me. I couldn’t allow it—I didn’t want to be restricted when I explained myself to you.”

“How did you convince them?” Ant cut in.

Liam flinched, having completely forgotten that he was in the room with them.

“I didn’t,” Jon said with a rueful smile. “In the end, I had to resort to some old-fashioned blackmail. The dirt that I found two years ago during the Gerviso mission was pretty useful.”

“You didn’t.” Ant was looking at Jon as if he were crazy. “Do you have a death wish?”

Jon shrugged, looking largely unconcerned. “I had little choice. I couldn’t wait anymore. It’s fine. They’re pissed off, but they’re unlikely to eliminate me. Any top secrets that I knew of are still under NDA.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” Anthony said, shaking his head with a harsh chuckle. “Never thought I’d see the day you’d stop using your brain because of an omega.”

Jon looked at him and said flatly, “Mind your words. They’re disrespectful toward your brother. I’d do anything for *Liam*, because he’s worth it.”

Liam probably had hearts in his eyes. He probably looked like the lovesick fool he was. But, gods, Jon was—he had no words.

His heart warm, he kissed Jon on his stubbled cheek. *You’re my world*, he thought, breathing him in. *I love you so much. So much.*

As if hearing his thoughts, Jon smiled at him, his expression softening.

Ant stared at them. “Fuck, this is so weird,” he muttered, shaking his head, looking genuinely baffled.

It was almost funny.

“Do we have your approval, then?” Liam said.

Ant snorted bitterly. “It doesn’t seem like you need it.”

“We don’t,” Jon said, his voice as steady as his gaze. “But I’d like it. You’re my brother, Ant.”

Ant looked back at him, his face hard. “You’re mine, too. Which is why this is weird as fuck. You’re the last person I expected to…” He looked at Liam. “If you can unglue yourself from him for a moment, go talk to Terline. The man deserves to find out in private that you won’t accept his suit.”

He was right. Liam didn’t want to subject Michael to the same public humiliation and ridicule Westcliff had subjected him to. Michael deserved to be told in private before everyone found out about Liam’s affections.

Liam pulled away with great reluctance, even though all he wanted was to stay in Jon’s arms, and never, ever be parted from him.

Jon seemed as reluctant to let go, their hands lingering on each other.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Ant said, rolling his eyes. “Go. I need to talk to Jon for a moment.”

Liam narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Don’t hurt him.”

“As if he could,” Jon said with a chuckle, earning a scowl from his best friend. “Don’t worry, love. Go. I’ll be right behind you. Save your first dance for me. And second, too. I want to dance with you.”

Smiling, Liam darted forward for a quick, greedy kiss, making Ant groan in exasperation, and strode out of the room.

He felt like he was flying through the air. Everything felt light and bright.

Was that what happiness felt like?

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Chapter 24

Jonathan Marsden didn't feel guilty often. His years in the service had desensitized him to a lot of things and his moral compass had become pretty skewed, if he were honest.

But as he looked at his old friend and felt the strained air between them, the shame and guilt were back. He didn't want to lose their friendship. Anthony was a brother to him, the only family he'd had after his parents' deaths.

Jon sighed. "If you want to punch me, just get it over with." He glanced at the door Liam had just left through and tried not to show his impatience. That wouldn't help his case if Ant noticed how badly he wanted to follow his little brother and put his paws all over him.

"It's nowhere near as satisfying when I know you're just letting me do it," Ant said.

Jon smiled ruefully. That was true enough. Although Ant was slightly broader and heavier than him, Jon had always been better at hand-to-hand combat. Ant was the better shot.

Silence fell again, strained and thick.

At last, Ant said, "You mentioned the telepath. Did you know that you weren't me when you first touched Li?"

Jon felt his ears become hot. "I recognized the signs—I could tell my memories weren't genuine."

“But you weren’t sure,” Ant stated, glowering at him.

“I wasn’t,” Jon admitted stiffly.

Ant laughed, running a hand through his hair. “I can’t fucking believe you. You know the protocol for situations like this.”

Jon suppressed a wince. Of course he had known it: if an agent wasn’t sure of the authenticity of his memories, he wasn’t supposed to compromise his cover identity, just in case. By stubbornly wanting to believe that he wasn’t related to Liam, he had gone against every rule.

“You got it that bad, huh?” Ant said.

You have no idea.

“Look,” Jon said, glancing at the door again. He was itching to go after Liam. “I really didn’t mean for that to happen. Trust me, I felt like a perv in the beginning.”

“You should have. Even with the whole issue of being me aside, he was still in diapers when you presented as an alpha, Jon.”

Grimacing, Jon took a deep breath. “I’m just twelve years older. There are couples with much bigger age differences than us. The point is moot anyway.” He held Anthony’s gaze firmly. “I’m not proud that it happened while I pretended to be you. I’m really not. But it happened, and he’s mine now. That isn’t going to change. I don’t want to fight you, but I won’t let anyone else have him. He’s mine.”

Part of him—the part that had been an intelligence officer for a decade—watched the conversation from afar, analyzing it coldly. He was aware that he was being too aggressive, pumping out alpha pheromones like an animal, but there was little he could do about it. He’d always been terrible at behaving rationally where Liam was concerned, and for the first time in their acquaintance, Ant felt like a threat. He was Liam’s alpha and legal guardian. If Ant chose to make things difficult for them, he could. It raised Jon’s hackles. He’d gotten used to being considered Liam’s alpha, even if for the wrong reasons, and giving up that role wasn’t easy.

“Tone it down,” Ant said, wincing. “I will allow you to marry Liam. It’s not like I have much of a choice—I don’t want Li to hate me. He barely

tolerates me as it is.”

Jon frowned. “Really?”

Sighing, Ant nodded. “He tends to avoid me and barely looks me in the eye—though it makes more sense now. I thought he just didn’t like me and that’s why he didn’t allow me to scent-mark him.”

Jon tried to look sympathetic, but judging by the dry look Ant gave him, he largely failed. Sue him; he didn’t want another alpha’s scent on Liam, even if that alpha was Liam’s brother.

Ant laughed. “Seriously, you turn into such a knothed when it comes to Li, it’s fucking hilarious. Never thought it’d happen to you.”

“Yeah, laugh it up,” Jon said dryly, the tension in him easing. He could tell that Ant was no longer angry with him. “I’ll do the laughing when it’s your turn.” He clapped Ant on the shoulder. “Aren’t you going to give me the ‘if you hurt him’ talk?”

Anthony shook his head. “I don’t need to,” he said simply. “Despite the shit you pulled, I still trust you with my life.”

“Thanks,” Jon said quietly. “I didn’t want to lose your friendship.”

“But you were willing to, for Li. It’s reassuring, in a way.” Ant gave a chuckle. “That’s one way I never imagined you becoming my brother. Welcome to the family.”

They returned to the ballroom together, drawing double-takes and curious looks. It wasn’t an unusual reaction: people often mistook them for twins at a distance, which was what had actually given him the idea to assume Anthony’s identity to draw out the culprit.

Jon entered the ballroom ahead of Ant, his eyes scanning the room for Liam’s golden head.

He found him next to Terlaine.

Trying to school his face into something more socially acceptable, Jon headed toward them.

They were speaking very quietly, and Jon caught only the tail end of their conversation as he approached them.

“...very sorry,” Liam was saying softly, looking Terlainie in the eyes. “I’m very grateful for your support and kindness this past week.”

He didn’t like the way Liam was looking at that alpha. Or the fact that he was looking at him at all.

Jon grimaced on the inside. He knew he had to do something about his jealousy. This wasn’t healthy or sustainable, considering how lovely Liam was. If he got jealous over every alpha who approached Liam, he’d end up killing someone.

Jon cleared his throat.

Liam turned his head, and Jon’s irritation was forgotten immediately when Liam’s lovely golden-brown eyes lit up at the sight of him. Fuck, that never got old. It made him feel about ten feet tall. Nothing had ever made him feel that way; the satisfaction he’d derived from the hardest missions he’d successfully completed utterly paled in comparison to just getting one such look from Liam. Jon was amused with himself. He felt like a lovesick boy, not a grown man, but he couldn’t stop feeling it. The way Liam looked at him—with such adoration and need—was as addictive as the way he felt when he looked at Liam.

He wanted to step closer and kiss Liam on his lovely lips, right there, in front of Terlainie and everyone else—the urge he’d been forced to suppress when he was posing as Liam’s brother.

“You—you’re...”

Terlainie’s choked-out words made him rip his gaze away from Liam and look at the other alpha.

He was gaping at Jon.

So that answered the question of whether the Division had used a memory-lock on Terlainie or not. It seemed they hadn’t. He was probably just under NDA.

“Jonathan Marsden, the Earl of Selwyn,” he said politely, as if he weren’t the same man who had so rudely rejected Terlainé’s marriage proposal and practically kicked him out of the house a few months ago. “Liam’s fiancé.” It was incredibly satisfying to say that after having to suppress the overwhelming urge to tell Terlainé that Liam was his months ago.

Turning away from Terlainé’s stunned stare, he found himself on the receiving end of Liam’s exasperated look.

Liam took Jon’s hand and led him away. “Was that posturing really necessary?” he whispered, glancing back at his unlucky suitor.

Jon snorted, interlacing their fingers and bringing them to his mouth. “Of course not. But I wanted do it months ago. Sometimes you have to indulge yourself.”

Liam shot him another exasperated look, but his cheeks were a little flushed now, that adoring look returning to his eyes. Fuck, he was so damn endearing, especially when he tried to look composed for the sake of their audience—and utterly failed, smiling charmingly at him. Jon wanted to kiss him, suck on his full bottom lip and make him tremble.

“Stop telling people that we’re engaged without properly proposing to me first,” Liam said. “It’s very off-putting.”

Smiling wryly, Jon squeezed his fingers, and murmured quietly, “I basically proposed to you the first time I helped you through your heat. I didn’t use protection. You didn’t really think I’d be so irresponsible?” He had been, in fact, that irresponsible, but it was neither here nor there.

Liam blinked. “Oh,” he said softly, that endearing blush appearing on his cheekbones again. Then, he glared. “Don’t be ridiculous. It doesn’t count.”

Jon lost the battle with himself: he leaned in and pecked the corner of that full, scowling mouth.

“Jon!” Liam hissed, his blush deepening. “Everyone’s looking at us!”

“How do you know that?” Jon said with a teasing grin, tapping him on the nose. “You haven’t looked away from me.”

Liam glowered at him. “I can make an educated guess,” he said primly, *still* not looking away from him.

It was incredibly heady. And fuck, Jon could absolutely relate. He had trouble tearing his gaze away, too.

“We’re holding hands, kitten,” he said softly, stroking Liam’s fingers. “In the eyes of society, it’s practically as scandalous.”

“Not nearly as scandalous,” Liam said, glancing around and moving closer to Jon. “Told you—everyone is looking at us. At least Michael has left already.”

Jon shrugged, unconcerned. A quick look confirmed that everyone was indeed gawking, the murmurs around them growing more evident. Jon wondered if they even recognized him. Unlikely. He hadn’t attended society gatherings in a decade—hadn’t had a reason, considering that he didn’t have a family to nag him into socializing. “They’ll find out that you’ll be marrying me soon enough, anyway.”

“I’m still waiting for my proposal!” Liam shot him the cutest glare, that he utterly ruined with a laugh. “You’re horrible, and I hate you.”

Jon stared at him, drinking him in. He hadn’t seen Liam laugh nearly often enough. Until now, Jon had never seen him truly, genuinely happy without the happiness being tainted by guilt and shame.

He’d never looked more beautiful. Liam always looked beautiful, but happiness was a good look on him. He was so beautiful right now with his bright eyes and a blinding smile, it was an effort to stand there and not pull him into his arms.

“I love you,” he heard himself say. “Marry me.”

Liam’s smile froze on his lips. His expression became a little pinched and tight. “You have the worst fucking timing,” he ground out before closing the distance between them and kissing him.

The noise level of the ballroom rose drastically, but Jon didn’t give a fuck. They’d been courting scandal from the moment they’d met. This was nothing in comparison.

Pulling Liam close, Jon hugged him tightly and smiled.

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Epilogue

The baby was red, wrinkly—and kind of ugly, to be honest.

Liam gave it a dubious look, still waiting for his omega instincts to wake up. Jules had said that he fell in love with his baby daughter at first sight. No such thing was happening to Liam.

A laugh snapped him out of his thoughts.

“You look like you’re holding a bomb,” his husband said, smiling at him from where he was leaning against the doorway.

Liam glared at him, but he couldn’t help grinning. He missed him. He hadn’t seen him in what felt like forever. Ten hours.

“He’s kind of ugly,” Liam said honestly.

Jon laughed and walked over. Sitting down beside Liam, he wrapped an arm around his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek before peering down to look at his son.

They both stared at the sleeping newborn.

“Huh,” Jon said. “You’re right. He looks kind of ugly.”

“See!” Liam said, before realizing that Jon was shaking with laughter. “I hate you,” he grumbled.

“No, you don’t,” Jon said, kissing him on the mouth, still grinning.

Liam really wished he weren’t holding the baby, so he could wrap his arms around his mate and cuddle up to him. He was feeling terribly needy

after giving birth—at least that part about pregnancy the books got right. He wanted cuddles and hugs and kisses. He wanted his alpha.

“You’re being ridiculous,” Jon said, pressing their foreheads together. “I think you’re worrying over nothing, silly.”

Liam suppressed a sigh. He wished Jon didn’t know him so well sometimes. He’d never explicitly told him about his self-doubts, but it seemed he hadn’t needed to.

“It’s not nothing. What kind of omega looks at their firstborn and thinks that he looks ugly?” Hiding his face in Jon’s neck, he breathed in his scent and finally told him what had been bothering him. “I didn’t even like being pregnant, Jon. Or rather, I liked it, but for the wrong reasons. I liked the idea of having a piece of *you* inside me, not because I was excited for the baby itself. There’s something—something fundamentally defective about me. I’ve always been bad at the stuff omegas are typically good at: nurturing, giving comfort, caring for someone else. I always had to force myself to comfort my brothers and I always feel so awkward when I do it. I was hoping to feel differently when I looked at our baby, but... I don’t think I feel anything.” His eyes burned with frustration, anger and disappointment with himself. Why was he like this?

“Hey,” Jon said, tipping Liam’s chin up with his fingers and forcing him to look at him. He held his gaze, his blue eyes serious and so full of love it made Liam feel much better. Jon always made him feel good.

“You’re perfect to me the way you are,” Jon said, stroking Liam’s tear-streaked cheek with his thumb. “I still think you’re panicking over nothing, but even if you’re right and you can’t feel anything for our son, I’ll be here, always. He won’t be unloved, I promise. I love you, and I’ll love him for both of us.”

His throat thick with emotion, Liam kissed him softly, his chest full with overwhelming affection and love. Sometimes he thought he loved Jon too much—so much that his capacity to love anyone else was severely limited.

A baby’s whimper made them pull apart.

Liam shifted his gaze to the infant in his arms.

He was waking up, his little face scrunching up unhappily. Puffy eyelids blinked open and blue eyes stared at Liam.

Liam stared back.

Okay, maybe the baby wasn't really ugly. It was kind of... cute, maybe. He had Jon's eyes. No baby with Jon's beautiful eyes could possibly be ugly.

The baby made a small sound, his tiny hand reaching up.

After a moment of indecision, Liam touched it tentatively. Tiny fingers wrapped around his finger, unexpectedly strong, and the baby made a contented noise, his scent sweetening.

No, it wasn't the baby's scent—it was his own, Liam realized with a distant sort of amazement. He was the one exuding that sweet, comforting scent. Maybe his instincts weren't entirely useless, after all.

Beaming, Liam turned to look at his husband.

He found him smiling softly. "See, I told you," Jon said, covering Liam's hand with his own. "I know you will be a wonderful parent, love."

Liam looked down at their hands, the baby's hand so very tiny between their palms, and he felt a lump form in his throat. His husband. His son.

He cleared his throat, blinking the tears away. But these tears were happy ones. Jon smiled when he saw them.

"What are we going to call him?" Liam said, curling his fingers against Jon's.

His husband kissed him on the cheek. "Whatever you want," he said, leaning their heads together as they gazed at their son.

Liam hummed thoughtfully before grinning. "How about Anthony?"

Jon laughed. "It is a pretty good name," he said, his blue eyes bright with amusement.

Gods, he was so handsome. So wonderful. And he was his.

Looking at his husband adoringly, Liam murmured, “It is. I love yours better, though.”

“I sure hope so, darling,” Jon said with a smile. He kissed Liam, and Liam kissed back, their mating bond lighting up with affection and warmth and a single emotion:

I love you.

The End

An excerpt from *Expert* (The Wrong Alpha Book 4)

“Please take a seat.”

Eric took a seat across from the doctor and curled his hands in his lap, dropping his gaze. He felt incredibly awkward. He’d had no idea the doctor would be an alpha. Especially an alpha who was handsome and relatively young. Back home, he wouldn’t even be allowed to be alone with a strange alpha like this.

But he wasn’t home.

Eric cleared his throat a little and looked back at the doctor.

It was hard not to notice that Dr. Hugh Randall was an attractive man. His thick chestnut hair was streaked with gold, his face full of character and strength: sharp cheekbones, a patrician nose, well-shaped lips, and a firm jaw dusted with dark stubble. The blue coat he was wearing over his white shirt did little to hide that he was fit and broad-shouldered like most alphas.

“Are there—are there no omega doctors?” Eric said.

Dr. Randall’s eyes softened. They were an unusual color, something between blue and green. Turquoise—that was the color.

“I know that in Pelugia omegas are treated by omega or beta doctors, but in Kadar we treat all genders and designations.” The doctor’s voice was

smooth and soothing. “There’s no need to be embarrassed, Eric. I treat dozens of omegas every day. It’s just a job for me. You should forget that I’m an alpha. I’m a doctor, you’re my patient, and my designation doesn’t matter.”

Rationally, Eric understood that. But it was still incredibly hard to force himself to talk about such intimate issues with an alpha.

He wondered if Dr. Randall knew about the scandal.

Pushing the thought away, Eric sat up straighter and, fixing his gaze on Dr. Randall’s blue tie, said, “I’ve been experiencing problems with my—my cycle for the past few months.”

Dr. Randall made a humming noise, writing something down. “You’re a Vos omega, correct?”

Eric nodded.

“What, exactly, is the problem? Has your cycle become irregular?”

Eric shook his head. “No, it’s not that. I’ve been... My heats are much stronger now. Too strong. Like, I know what a normal heat is supposed to be like for a Vos omega—my heats have been textbook-normal since I presented at thirteen. My last few heats were very much not normal.”

Randall stopped making notes and lifted his gaze to him, frowning. “There’s no such thing as normal, Eric. Everyone is different. People change. Their bodies do as well. There are many reasons why an omega’s heat might change its intensity. Losing a mate, meeting a potential mate, birth of a child.” His eyes became piercing. “Sometimes a very stressful situation is enough to change the heat’s intensity.”

Eric suppressed a grimace. So that answered the question of whether the doctor was aware of the scandal or not.

“But first, we need to exclude the possibility of a malignant growth, so I will examine you before we proceed further.”

“Ex—examine me?”

Dr. Randall gave him a steady look. “Of course. Please undress below the waist and lie down on the examination table. I’ll perform a manual examination.”

Eric swallowed. He looked at the doctor’s long, strong fingers and tried not to blush.

Manual examination.

Right.

To be released in 2022

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Many thanks to my wonderful editor and friend, Eliot Grayson, for working on this book despite her health issues.

And thank you to my loyal readers for reading my stories. I hope you enjoyed this one.

What's next?

I intend to release 3 new books in 2022:

1. My New Year's resolution is to get past my writer's block on *Dearly Despised* (Calluvia's Royalty Book 5) and release it in 2022. We'll see how it goes, but I'm targeting May 2022.

2. *Just a Bit Heartless* (Straight Guys Book 13), Jordan's story.

3. *Expert* (The Wrong Alpha Book 4). As you can see from the excerpt, it's Eric's story. We're going back to Kadar, to Royce and Haydn's family, though Eric's brothers and their mates will feature in the book too.

That said, the order isn't set in stone yet. I'll keep you updated!

Thank you for reading Liam and Jon's story. I really hope you liked it.

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About the Series

Book 1: [Unnatural](#)

A planet at war. Two alphas forced into a political marriage. Attraction that defies all reason and logic... Or does it?

The Kingdom of Pelugia and the Republic of Kadar have been at war for decades. Peace isn't popular, but the planet can't survive without it.

Forced to marry an enemy prince for the sake of peace, Senator Royce Cleghorn doesn't like his husband, his alpha scent, or his damned pretty blue eyes. More than anything, Royce hates what Haydn makes him become: a primitive alpha cliché who'll do anything to mark his territory, even if that territory is his alpha husband. Royce likes omegas; he isn't into alphas, no matter how pretty their eyes are. It's just a weird territorial instinct. It has to be.

Prince Haydn has always tried to be the perfect alpha his father wants him to be. He's the heir to the throne. He's a war general. He isn't supposed to bare his throat to an enemy alpha—and it isn't supposed to feel so good. Everyone knows a marriage between two alphas is a recipe for disaster. He isn't supposed to crave his husband—their marriage is just a political arrangement, nothing more.

But when disaster strikes and loyalties are tested, which bond will be the strongest: their marriage, or their allegiances?

Book 2: [Feral](#)

Sometimes kissing the Beast doesn't turn it into Prince Charming—instead, he's a charming prince you want to punch.....

Jules is an ordinary nineteen-year-old omega from a perfectly respectable family. He's not the most beautiful, or the smartest, or the strongest of the four Blake siblings. And he's fine with it, really. He isn't ugly or anything, but by omega standards, he's nothing special. "Nothing special" describes Jules's whole life. It's utterly boring.

So when strange things start happening in their house, it piques Jules's curiosity. There's a beast in the Blake family mansion; Jules is sure of it. He sometimes hears growls and screams coming from the basement, and the men guarding the door look positively terrified.

What could terrify grown alphas? Jules will have to investigate!

But his investigation comes with surprises...like the Beast's overwhelming effect on Jules's omega nature. It doesn't mean anything. Of course it doesn't. Jules is just curious; that's all.

Curiosity can change a life—but when you're attracted to a feral alpha whose real face you haven't even seen...will it change for the better? What if the Beast is no Prince Charming but a cold-hearted, cynical bastard? A bastard Jules shouldn't still want—but does. A bastard Jules should stay away from—but can't.

Book 3: Illicit

Other MM Romance series by Alessandra Hazard

Calluvia's Royalty

Book 1: [**That Alien Feeling**](#)

He's the most precious human being Adam has ever seen. Too bad he isn't human.

Banished by his parents to the third planet in the Sol system, Prince Harht'ng'h'chaali of the Second Grand Clan is completely fascinated by its inhabitants. Assuming the human name "Harry," he tries to pass for a human to survive, but being human is so much harder than Harry expected. Humans are so confusing.

Adam Crawford isn't looking for love. Financially secure and good-looking, he's in a good place in his life. He doesn't mean to fall in love with the quirky guy working at the coffee shop near his office. Harry is ridiculous—and ridiculously endearing. He wears ugly shirts and flowers in his hair, and he has a kind word for everyone. Adam falls hard and fast.

Little does he know that Harry isn't what he seems and anything between them is impossible.

Star-crossed love between a human and an alien prince from a world half a galaxy away.

Book 2: [**That Irresistible Poison**](#)

Book 3: [**Once Upon a Time**](#)

Book 4: [**Prince's Master**](#)

Straight Guys series

Book 1: [**Just a Bit Twisted**](#)

Professor Derek Rutledge is hated and feared by all of his students. Strict, reserved and ruthless, he doesn't tolerate mistakes and has little patience for his students.

Shawn Wyatt is a twenty-year-old struggling to provide for his younger sisters after the death of their parents. On the verge of losing his scholarship, Shawn becomes desperate enough to go to Professor Rutledge.

Everyone says Rutledge doesn't have a heart. Everyone says he's a ruthless bastard. Shawn finds out that everyone is right.

He strikes a deal with Rutledge, but unexpectedly, the deal turns into something so much more.

Something all-consuming and addictive.

Something neither of them wants.

Book 2: [**Just a Bit Obsessed**](#)

Book 3: [**Just a Bit Unhealthy**](#)

Book 4: [**Just a Bit Wrong**](#)

Book 5: [**Just a Bit Confusing**](#)

Book 6: [**Just a Bit Ruthless**](#)

Book 7: [**Just a Bit Wicked**](#)

Book 8: [**Just a Bit Shameless**](#)

Book 9: [**Just a Bit Gay**](#)

Book 10: [**Just a Bit Dirty**](#)

Book 11: [**Just a Bit Wrecked**](#)

Book 12: [**Just a Bit Bossy**](#)