



KNOT

PART
ONE

a Trace

LILIANA CARLISLE

KNOT A TRACE: PART I

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Cover by Jessa Halliwell

Edited by Courtney Countryman

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book contains adult content not suitable for young readers. There are mentions of narcotics abuse and overdoses, not done by the main characters. There is also the mention of past verbal abuse, not done by the heroes.

SKYLAR

“HEY, SKYE?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“A customer wants to order a custom Valentine’s Day box.”

I grimace as I take the pencil out of my mouth. “Just pick whatever flavors they want,” I say, staring at the inventory sheet in front of me, the numbers suddenly meaningless.

How many pounds of almond flour do we need? Even though I just counted, the number disappears from my brain.

“But they want *us* to pick,” Devyn says. “Do we do that?”

There’s no reason for the flare of anger in my chest, and Devyn does not deserve any of the wrath that threatens to spew from my mouth. “Sure. Just pick whatever flavors you think would work,” I say carefully, twirling the pencil in my fingers.

I keep my gaze on the inventory sheet, hoping the conversation is over.

But it’s not.

“I’ve never done it before,” Devyn says in a sickeningly sweet voice. “What if I mess it up?”

Don't lose it, Skye. It's just a holiday.

I turn to our newest hire and meet her youthful face. “You won’t,” I say gently. “What flavor macarons would *you* put into a Valentine’s Day box?”

The petite Omega chews her lip and glances towards the front of the store. “Probably raspberry, chocolate, and maybe rose? That makes sense, right? That’s what I would want.”

“That’s perfect,” a voice pipes up behind Devyn, and April comes into view, casting me a knowing look as she places a box of paper cups on a shelf. “Remember, twelve in a box, Devyn. And use the pink ribbon, not silver.”

Devyn leaves the supply room and I turn my attention back to the inventory list, dreading the inevitable chastising from my best friend.

“You don’t have to sound like someone is murdering your cat when you talk to her, Skye,” April says, her dark brown eyes narrowed.

“What are you talking about?” I ask innocently, recounting the bags of flour.

“It’s Valentine’s Day, not a funeral,” she replies. “It’s unavoidable, especially in our business.”

“I know that,” I counter. “It will be great for sales.”

April sighs loudly and I glance up from my inventory sheet to meet her empathetic expression.

I’d rather see her annoyed with me. Anything other than *that* look.

“It can’t be worse than last year,” she assures me softly. “Things can only get better from here.”

“I *know* that,” I snap, not quick enough to rein my emotion in. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I cringe internally. I sound like a *bitch*. Just because Valentine’s Day is ruined for me doesn’t mean I need to act like a menace to everyone else.

Especially not to my best friend, who doesn't deserve one ounce of my wrath.

It's not like she has a pack, either. Or even just one Alpha.

April's eyes narrow into slits. "It's all over your face," she says, crossing her arms over her chest. "Even if you don't want to talk about it, your expression speaks volumes."

"Yeah, well—"

"I'm going to say this as your friend, and because I love you," she continues, "but you have to keep it together at work. You *have* to. Devyn is sensitive, and she picks up on your moods. And so will customers."

Ugh. April's right. She's always right.

I sigh and swallow, embarrassed at the lump that swells in my throat.

I had too much espresso today, and my moods are all over the place.

"Yeah, I know," I grumble, biting my lip. "Sorry."

"I'm sorry, too." Her expression softens and she uncrosses her arms, leaning against the shelf with a sigh. "Just keep it together for now, and we can both cry tonight while stuffing our faces."

I smirk. "I like that idea."

And it can't be any worse than last year.

IT'S ALMOST CLOSING TIME AT *APRIL'S CAFE*, AND THE ALPHA at the register is incredibly indecisive.

Less than a month until it's all over, I think to myself.

"She loves your macarons," he continues, his dark eyes staring at the glass display of our treats. "I'm just not sure which ones."

I want to slam my head on the counter until I knock myself out.

How does he not know what flavors his own mate likes?

Careful, Skye. You're being bitter.

At least this Omega has an Alpha that's making an effort for her at all.

Jason never would have.

So, I swallow down my impatience and do my best.

“Well, the vanilla ones are always popular. And the raspberry lemon is a February exclusive,” I offer. “But she's not here, so I don't want to make too many suggestions. I would probably go with safe choices.”

“Hmm.” That seems to confuse him more, and I shift my balance, trying to not appear bored.

Just pick a flavor!

Any of our macarons would be the right choice. We've rarely had complaints, except for the spicy black licorice.

But that only lasted for a day, and neither April nor I ever brought it up again afterwards.

“Skye, I'll see you later,” April calls out as she walks through the front door, leaving me with Mr. Indecisive and Devyn, who is busy cleaning out espresso machines.

“Alright, text me,” I say before turning my gaze back to the Alpha.

His scent is pleasant, with just the slightest hint of clove and cedar, so faint it could be confused with a cologne. It's pleasant and welcoming, but it stirs nothing within me.

My inner Omega has been silent these past months. I've stuffed her down into the darkest parts of my heart, unable or unwilling to let her resurrect.

The Alpha in front of me has barely any impact on my senses.

He's handsome enough, and he's polite, so I stay as patient as I can with him. His intentions are good, after all.

Finally, *ten minutes* after Devyn locks the door, he purchases a twelve-pack of vanilla, espresso, and lemon raspberry. I package them carefully and tie the box with a silver ribbon. He's pleased, and Devyn and I both wish him a good night as we unlock the door to let him out.

"Oh my God, he was *so* cute," Devyn says as I assist with the dish washing. I can't help but crack a smile at her enthusiasm. "That shirt fit his arms *perfectly*, Skye. Ugh!"

"Yeah? I didn't notice," I say, scrubbing at a teacup. "He was cute enough, I guess. He's also *mated*."

"I can't wait until I have a pack," Devyn babbles on, ignoring me. "I'm going to have like ten Alphas."

I snort, amused at her bubblyness. There's a reason April hired her; she's great with customers and personable. "You're like, sixteen. You have plenty of time for that," I chuckle, wiping my hands with a towel.

"I'm nineteen!" she says, incensed. "My clock is ticking."

I audibly groan. "Oh, dear *God*. If your clock is ticking, mine has exploded and evaporated into thin air." I grab a towel and work on drying the cutlery, trying not to let bitterness seep into my tone. She's ten years my junior, and I've never felt so old or jaded as I stand next to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Omega. Her natural scent blends in perfectly with the café; she's honey with the slightest hint of cinnamon.

She really was the perfect hire. Props to April.

"Are you dating anyone?"

It's an innocent question and I should have expected it. Still, I can't help but flinch as I answer her.

"Nah. Not at the moment," I mutter.

Devyn scoffs. "That's ridiculous. Alphas come in all the time and drool over you and April! You could make a super pack!"

I stare at her dumbfounded until she laughs, causing her eyes to crinkle in the corners. “I’m just joking.”

She must see something on my face, because her smile quickly falls. “Sorry if I’m being too nosy. People tell me I talk a lot and ask too many questions,” she says with a hint of insecurity in her tone.

I shake my head. She’s adorable and it’s difficult to stay in a shitty mood when she flits around spreading positivity everywhere.

“You don’t. You’re friendly, and it’s a great quality,” I say gently. “You’re naturally energetic. But sometimes, I’m not going to meet that positivity as much as April or the others might, okay? Don’t take it personal.”

She nods. “I won’t. But if you ever want to talk about Alpha stuff, I’m all ears.”

I huff. If she knew my “Alpha stuff” she would run screaming.

But I nod and give her the best smile I can.

“Sounds good. Let me get the closing checklist done, and we can head out of here.”

APRIL DOESN’T TEXT ME AFTER WORK.

It’s fine, really. Part of me is relieved that I can just crawl under the covers of my bed and pass out early, but it’s a bit out of character for her.

The next morning, I arrive at the café and prep the macarons. It’s my week to come in early, and I pass the time listening to self-improvement podcasts as I separate egg whites and sift almond flour over and over.

Our macarons are incredible, but they’re time consuming to make. But ever since April’s mother taught me how to make them years ago, I’ve worked at the café on and off through college, mastering my craft.

After college, the café became a more permanent job. Instead of just a barista or cashier, I practically run the entire business with April, which is perfect for me.

With a busy schedule and constant tasks, running the café keeps me organized and sane.

If I stay idle too long, I can drown in my thoughts, and the last thing anyone needs is a twenty-nine-year-old Omega weeping on the ground.

You're still healing. It's okay to cry.

You need to be nicer to yourself.

The podcast blares in my headphones and I repeat mantras over and over, desperate to find some truth in them.

I make batch after batch of macarons, focusing on our February specials.

Ideas for different flavor combinations swirl in my head, and after the main batches are prepared, I play around with different ingredients to see what to add to the next month's menu.

Rose and black tea? I'll have April try it; if she spits it out, it's a no.

We can't have another repeat of spicy black licorice.

Three hours later, my apron is coated in almond flour and my fingers are stained with food coloring.

I'm not the tidiest baker, but the cookies always come out delicious.

By the time the café opens, I'm in the back, fixing my hair and switching out my apron. Devyn and Anna are already here, but April isn't.

That's weird. April is punctual to a fault.

"Hey. Have you heard from April?" I ask Devyn as she hurries to the back for a bag of ground coffee beans.

"No. But we're getting busy," she says.

I frown. I can't remember the last time April was late, but I push the thought to the side as I tie my apron tight and head back to the front.

I groan. The line is already out the door, and with one head short, this isn't going to be fun.

By the second hour, we're sold out of macarons for the day. Usually, April and I would celebrate the successful sales day, but she *still* isn't here.

What the *hell*.

When the crowd dies down, I call her, and I'm sent straight to voicemail.

Devyn sees my face as I place my phone back in my pocket. "What's up?" she asks. "Is April alright?"

I shake my head, frowning. "Got her voicemail."

But before I can focus on that, another round of people comes in, and I'm serving up cappuccinos and drip coffees with a fake smile on my face.

Am I overreacting?

Maybe her phone died, or she slept in.

But April doesn't sleep in.

A nasty feeling churns in my gut, and I text and call her three more times throughout the day.

April was supposed to close today, along with Luke and Jamie.

I sure as hell won't leave them to close the store alone, especially with Valentine's Day around the corner.

"I can stay longer, too," Devyn pipes up as I anxiously gulp my iced coffee in the back room. "You can go check on her and see if she's alright."

My hand shakes as I grip the plastic cup tightly. "If you do that, you'll need to take an extra lunch break," I remind her. "I don't want to have you stay that long."

“I don’t mind!” Devyn says, her blue eyes wide as saucers. “I’m worried about her, too, Skye. Go see if she’s alright, *please.*”

I hesitate. There’s always supposed to be a manager here, whether it’s me, April, or even her mother, on occasion.

“Okay. But call me if *anything* happens,” I order, “and I’ll come back here.”

She stands on her tiptoes and salutes me, and I chuckle for the first time all day. “Got it, boss,” she says.

But the nasty feeling grows in my gut as speed to April’s house.

It usually takes ten minutes to get there from the cafe.

It takes me five.

HER CAR IS MISSING FROM HER DRIVEWAY.

My heart threatens to burst out of my chest as I knock on her door, banging louder than necessary.

“April?” I ring the doorbell over and over, jamming the button with my pointer finger.

If she’s in there, she’s going to be pissed, but at least I won’t have to worry anymore.

“APRIL? HEY!”

I try to peek through the tiny window next to her door, but the curtain obscures most of my vision. I crouch down and see the tiny sliver of her front table with the vase of flowers and her burgundy purse next to it.

Her purse is on the front table, but her car isn’t in the driveway.

What the hell?

The nasty feeling in my stomach grows, but I tell myself it’s from the ridiculous amount of coffee I’ve consumed today.

I bang on the door again for good measure, but there's still no response.

"Shit," I hiss, pulling out my cell phone. I call April's mother, Tammy.

"Hi, sweetie," Tammy answers, her voice gentle. "How are you doing?"

"Hey, is April with you?" I ask, pacing her driveway. "She didn't show up today."

Please say yes please say yes—

"No, she's not," Tammy replies, and my stomach flips. "Did you go to her house?"

I swallow, not wanting to give her the news. "Yes. That's where I'm at right now. Her car isn't here."

There's a beat of silence on the other end. "Huh. Well, maybe—"

"Her purse is on the front table, Tammy. I can see it through the window," I breathe, panicked. "And her car's gone."

"Okay, calm down, Skylar," Tammy says. "It's going to be fine. Have you called her already?"

"Her phone goes straight to voicemail," I mutter. I kick a pebble down her driveway, the coffee burning nervous energy through me as I struggle to not flip out.

This isn't like April. She would *never* not show up to work or leave her house without her purse.

Tammy sighs. "Okay," she says. "I'll be there soon with the spare key. If she's not home, we will take the next steps. I'm sure she's fine, Skylar."

I realize the absurdity of the situation. Tammy shouldn't be comforting *me* about this. It's *her* daughter.

April's just my best friend.

But when Tammy shows up, spare key in hand, I dig my nails so hard into my palms they bleed.

April isn't here, and the only thing missing from her purse is her keys.

Her Omega scent is faded; the hints of vanilla and clove are stale and barely waft through the house anymore.

Tammy meets my gaze and narrows her eyes.

“Call the police,” she says. “I’m not taking any chances.”

I swallow and dial 911.

SKYLAR

“AND WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE HER?” THE BETA OFFICER ASKS as he makes a police report. He’s far too calm about this for my liking, but I bite my tongue and try to remain as cordial as possible.

“Yesterday,” I say, watching as he fills out the paperwork. We’re both sitting at April’s dining room table. I sit directly across from him while Tammy stands with her arms crossed, a frown etched into her features.

April’s a spitting image of her. Tammy’s light brown hair is pulled into a low bun, and her eyes are the same shade of brown as her daughter’s.

There were just a few more years of age on her face—but she still looks youthful enough to be April’s older sister instead of mother.

“Yesterday...where?” the officer asks.

“At *April’s Café*. We both work there,” I add.

“And I own it,” Tammy pipes in.

At that, the officer puts down his paper and looks up at me. “Oh, you do? You have the best macarons, you know that?” He flashes me a grin. “That espresso one is incredible.”

I scoff and glance at Tammy, who narrows her eyes. “Officer, my daughter has been missing for almost twenty-four hours now,” she says slowly. “I would like you to advise us of the next steps.”

“Her scent is almost non-existent now,” I add.

He tilts his head at me, confused. “Her scent?” he asks.

I’m two seconds away from screaming at him. “Yes, her Omega scent. It’s very faded. So, whatever happened to her —”

“Okay,” he interrupts, giving me a sympathetic look. “Unfortunately, we’re not going to conduct a search. It hasn’t even been a day yet, and there’s no clear sign of something happening to her.”

It takes me a moment to process his words, but when I do, I have to stop myself from leaping out of my chair.

“*What?*” I cry. “But she’s missing! Don’t you have to look for her? She’s not *here*, her car is stolen—”

“You don’t know if her car is stolen. She could be in it,” he says, shaking his head. “These don’t appear to be suspicious circumstances. Does she have a boyfriend or any other family members that she might visit?”

He says everything so nonchalantly that I want to cry.

“No boyfriend, and she has her mother and her stepfather,” Tammy says. “I’ve reached out to extended family already, and they haven’t heard anything. This is *very* out of character for my daughter. I cannot stress this enough, Officer.”

He continues to ask his questions, filling out a checklist. Tammy and I begrudgingly answer them, and I feel more useless by the second.

“Any history of drug use?” he asks, and I narrow my eyes.

“No. This isn’t normal. She’s *gone*,” I insist. “And we need your help to find her.”

“Look.” The officer sighs. “Miss—”

“Bloom. Skylar Bloom.”

“Miss Bloom,” he continues calmly. “I don’t doubt that you’re concerned for your friend, and you’re taking all the right steps. But we don’t have any suspicious activity that would warrant a police search,” he says gently. “We can’t take our units and spend days looking for someone that most likely is safe.”

I search his gaze, willing him to understand. He’s probably only a few years older than me, and his expression is patient as he regards me.

Please, I think. Please help us.

“But this isn’t *like* her,” I insist. “And why would she leave her purse here?”

“I don’t have the answers to that,” he says, shaking his head. “There could be a million reasons.”

I scoff and shake my head. He just doesn’t *get* it. April doesn’t do this.

“What do you suggest the next steps should be?” Tammy asks.

The officer’s expression brightens. “Organize your own search. Get the town involved. Everyone loves your café, and I’m sure people would be happy to help.” He reaches into his pocket and hands me his card. “Call me if something else does come up.”

I snatch the card from his hand, ignoring his kind eyes.

Logically, I understand what he’s saying. The circumstances aren’t suspicious enough to them, and they don’t know April personally.

But *I* do. And my gut instinct is telling me something is seriously wrong.

“I’m truly sorry about your friend. But the good news is, she’s most likely *not* missing,” he continues, standing up from his chair. “This happens, you know. People need breaks from their families and sometimes they take a vacation without telling anyone.”

“That doesn’t really help,” I mutter, shaking my head. “You don’t know her.”

“Well, now I know her appearance and what her car looks like. I’ll make sure the others do, too.” He stands up and nods at Tammy. “Thank you, ladies. Sorry your day isn’t going better. Please feel free to call me though if something changes.”

I fiddle with his card as Tammy walks him out. When I hear the front door close, I turn to her and frown.

“Am I making a bigger deal out of this than I need to?” I ask her. “I mean...maybe she’s fine, right?”

I shouldn’t be asking my best friend’s mother to reassure me, especially when it’s concerning her own daughter.

But, like always, Tammy is rational. “Reporting her is more of a precaution,” she says gently. “But the longer we can’t contact her, the more worried we should be.”

That’s when I notice it. Tammy is panicking as much as I am, but keeping her calm exterior. “I know my daughter,” she continues, “and if she’s in trouble, she’s more than capable of getting herself out of it. Just like you would, too.”

I give her a half-hearted smile. “This is so messed up, Tammy,” I mutter. “I know I’m not helping by panicking—”

“Which is why we have a plan,” Tammy interrupts me, grabbing my hand and squeezing it. “We’ll figure out where she is.”

I nod. “Okay.”

Internally, I’m screaming.

“I’ll help with the café for the next few days, too,” she continues. “Until we get all of this sorted. We’re going to find her, honey, I promise.”

I want to believe her.

But the putrid feeling in my gut only grows as I head back to the café.

Something terrible has happened.

I just know it.

SKYLAR

1 WEEK LATER

“WHEN’S THE LAST TIME YOU SLEPT?” DEVYN ASKS ME AS I finish another order. My hands are shaky as I prepare a custom Valentine’s box for a customer, my fingers struggling as I try to tie the fancy ribbon.

“I slept just fine,” I murmur, setting that order aside and arranging another box. “I’m fine.”

But judging by the obscene number of macarons around me, I am definitely *not* fine.

“You stayed here all night, didn’t you?” Devyn accuses as I drop a raspberry macaron. “That’s why all the orders are done already.”

“Maybe. I can’t sleep,” I grumble, refusing to look at her. Instead, I focus on the batches of new flavors I crafted in the middle of the night, wondering what the hell to do with all of them.

“You need to sleep, Skye. Please, go home and rest, and I can—”

“Fundraiser!” I blurt, staring too long at an apricot cookie.

“What?”

“A *fundraiser*.” I turn to Devyn, meeting her confused eyes. “For reward money. That’s what we’ll do.”

“Skylar, what—”

“For April,” I insist, half delirious. “To find her. We’ll sell macarons.”

Devyn says something else, but I’m so sleep deprived that I don’t pay attention.

April’s been gone for a week.

Her face is plastered all over our tiny town, in every single business building that would allow me to do it.

And the ones that didn’t, I just showed up later in the night after they closed and taped up a poster, anyway.

No one has reached out. Customers have offered their condolences and kind words, but it’s not enough.

But now an idea brews in my head.

“Special edition flavors,” I murmur. “Only available for the fundraiser.”

“Skylar, what—” Devyn tries, but I continue.

“April’s Apricots.”

“What—”

“Omega Orange.”

“Skye—”

“Vanishing Red Velvet.”

“Skylar! Please!” Devyn slams her hand on the counter and snaps me out of my stupor. “Please, please go home and rest. We’ve got this.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “We don’t have *anything* until we find her,” I snap. “And *you* should be more concerned about this than you are.”

The words slip from my mouth before I can stop them, and Devyn’s eyes widen and turn glassy.

Oh, no.

“I *am* concerned about her,” she says, her cheeks turning pink. “How can you say that? I’ve been posting on social media. I’ve been telling every customer!” she chokes out. “*She’s* been the nicest to me here, so you’re not the only one that’s hurting!”

And when tears start to roll down her cheeks, I realize it’s time for me to go home and sleep.

Devyn doesn’t deserve my misplaced cruelty and bitterness.

She never has.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper as Devyn wipes away a tear. “You’re right.”

I clean up and leave the store to Devyn for the second time.

I WATCH AS THE LOCAL NEWS RUNS A STORY ON APRIL. IT’S barely thirty seconds, but they mention the café, and it gives me a bit of hope.

Every possible surface of Isleton is plastered with her face. The *Isle Times* plans to run a story about her in their Sunday edition and advertise the grid search that night.

But it still feels like I’m not doing enough.

My best friend is *missing*.

It plays on a loop in my brain over and over.

April is the smartest person I know. She’s sensible, practical, and stunning. If there’s ever something I have a question about, I run to her first, because she most likely has the answer. And if she doesn’t, her mother will.

Watching Tammy hold it together while her daughter is missing stabs at my heart. And I know part of the reason she’s being strong is because of me.

I’m doing my best not to fall apart, but it’s hard.

I was a shitty friend to April the last time we spoke.

I was bitter about Valentine's Day. I was feeling sorry for myself instead of just enjoying the time I had with my friend and appreciating a job most people would love to have.

We bake pastries for a living, and instead of being grateful, I'd been piping buttercream between almond flour cookies with a scowl on my face.

I was insufferable to her for no reason.

That can't be the last time I see her.

We have to find her.

I COULD SWEAR THE ENTIRE TOWN SHOWS UP ON SUNDAY evening to help look for April.

The overwhelming support from strangers makes a lump form in my throat.

Customers I've seen once or twice in the café show up outside the store as we close, waiting with flashlights and other search gear to help find her. They give me gentle, sympathetic smiles, and I do my best to not fall apart.

Soon, the area is filled with overwhelming scents of *Alpha*.

Mixed all together, their aromas range from pine and cedar all the way to smoke and bitters. I'm thankful for my suppressants, because without them, I would feel physically ill.

My inner Omegas is still stored away, unable to come out of her cage.

There is, however, a familiar face that I didn't expect. He waves at me with a sheepish expression, and I raise my eyebrows in surprise.

"Hey!" I approach the officer who took my statement and suddenly realize I don't know his name. "Uh—officer—"

“Ben.” He smiles. “Just Ben.” Without his uniform, he looks like the cute boy next door with his close cropped dark brown hair and slight stubble. There’s a backpack slung over his shoulder, and he’s wearing a simple light grey sweatshirt, black pants, and hiking boots.

“Ben.” I smile back. “Thank you for helping.”

“It’s not a problem,” he says. “I meant what I said. I hope you find her. We just don’t have enough officers, Skylar. And the county hasn’t had any missing persons cases in a while.”

I nod. “It means a lot that you’re here.”

He gives me another smile, then turns to people around us and calls out orders.

“Everyone, separate into groups of ten each! There’s enough of us to hit each park within the town. Who here needs a map?”

“Who’s *that*?” Devyn asks. “Do you know him?”

“That’s Ben. He’s the officer that took April’s report,” I say, watching as Ben takes over. It lifts a weight off my shoulders, and I breathe a quiet sigh of relief as I realize Tammy must have coordinated with him.

“Do you really think April is in a park?” Devyn murmurs.

I hear the unspoken question.

Do you think she’s dead?

I watch Ben interact with everyone, pointing them in different directions and handing out maps.

A surge of hope blossoms in my chest.

“I don’t, Devyn,” I say quietly. “I don’t think she’s in there.”

April has to be alive. The other option is unfathomable.

Devyn nods at the same time Ben turns back to us. He smiles when he sees Devyn, and I can see her blush out of the corner of my eye.

Oh God, I think.

Well, Devyn *did* say she wanted a giant pack. There's no reason she can't have a Beta as a part of it.

I'm sure April would get a kick out of her search party being used as a matchmaking session.

We join Ben's group and head out into the park closest to the café.

My anxiety takes over as I walk with Ben and Devyn past the children's playground and into a grove of tall oak trees, struggling to keep my breath calm.

On top of it all, my senses are all over the place due to the overwhelming stench of *Alpha*.

"Doesn't it bother you?" I ask Devyn quietly as we continue down the path.

"What?" she asks.

"All the Alpha scents at once?"

It takes her a moment to realize what I'm referring to. "Oh. No, it doesn't—it just kind of all blends together. Does it bother *you*?"

I regret the conversation as soon as I've started it. I've always been highly sensitive to anything Alpha related, which my past partner made sure I knew.

Too delicate.

Too sensitive.

Too needy during your Heat.

"I was just curious, since you're so young," I blurt, knowing I sound ridiculous. "It was a silly question."

"Maybe you haven't been around Alphas in a while," Devyn murmurs as we head further down the trail.

My face flames.

She's right.

I trip on a rock, but thankfully catch myself in time, only adding to my embarrassment.

I've never felt more useless as a friend or an Omega in my life.

I'm feeling sorry for *myself*, when all my attention should be focused on April instead.

Ben clicks on his flashlight as we head deeper into the trees, and I swallow the lump in my throat.

Please don't be here, April. Please.

"I don't think I asked you this, Skylar," Ben says as I trail behind him and Devyn. "When was April's last relationship?"

"Uh, nothing serious. It was about two years ago. She never had a pack."

"Were they on good terms?"

I rack my brain, trying to remember the last time April even mentioned Will or Darien.

"I *think* so," I say slowly.

Will and Darien both wanted to take things further with April, but she took a step back. Despite being an Omega, she's always been fiercely independent, and she wasn't ready or willing to be mated just yet.

"It might not be a bad idea to reach out to them, if you haven't already," Ben says. "Just to see if they've heard anything."

I nod, making a mental note.

By the time it's dark, we've covered the entirety of Isle Park with nothing to show for our efforts. Everyone else meets back at the café with the same results.

No sign of April.

It keeps the flicker of hope alive in me.

That is, until someone casually mentions the possibility of finding her.

"It's been a week, so it's most likely a case of bringing the body back for closure."

I don't know who says it, but it's enough to knock the wind out of me and cause me to lean against the wall of the café. I don't see Tammy anywhere near me; I'm hoping she didn't hear it.

But Ben hears it as well, and he gives me a sorrowful look as he notices my reaction. "There are still a lot of possibilities," he says quietly. "And you're doing everything you can."

"There's got to be more we can do," I breathe. "She needs national news coverage. Every single person in the *country* should be looking for her!"

Everyone falls silent as I raise my voice in frustration. "It's ridiculous!" I exclaim. "If only she were famous, or in politics, then maybe something would happen, right?"

"Skylar." Tammy's soft voice snaps me out of my stupor, and I meet her weary expression guiltily. "Please," she says gently.

People have gathered around us, most of them glancing my way sympathetically. I was louder than I intended to be, and tears of embarrassment prick at my eyes.

But it doesn't make what I said to Ben any less true. There *must* be more I can do. If national news stations don't want to pick it up, maybe I could—

"Detectives," I say, staring at Ben with wide eyes. "You have detectives on your force, right?"

"We have one detective and he's tied up in other cases," Ben replies, frowning. "Which is why I came out here."

I sigh, defeated. "So...how do I get a detective to help me? I can hire one, right?"

Ben nods. "You can hire a private investigator. One that doesn't work for the police force."

"Do you know any?" I ask. "Any you could recommend?"

He runs his hand through his hair and nods. "Actually, there's a group of Alphas that run a detective bureau. They're the best in the state. Probably even the country," he says.

A flicker of hope sparks in my chest at the information.

“How do I get them to help us? They could find her, right?” I ask excitedly.

This could work. Just keep hanging on, April.

“They work with high-profile cases, Skylar. Murders, trafficking, political cases—I shouldn’t have even mentioned it,” Ben says, shaking his head. “The only reason I know about them is because my cousin works for them.”

“They’re a group of Alphas?” Devyn asks. “Like, the whole department?”

“Yeah.” Ben turns his attention to Devyn, and his gaze softens. “Their cases involve anything Omega related. And obviously, they’re more attuned to that stuff.” His cheeks redden as he regards her. “I’m still learning about Omegas,” he chuckles nervously, and Devyn beams at him.

He’s smitten with her. Any other time, it would be adorable.

“Okay. Ben.” He turns his attention back to me. “How have I never heard about them? An entire bureau of just Alpha detectives?”

“They usually work behind the scenes,” he replies. “The average person doesn’t know about them. Confidential government contracts, classified information, that sort of thing. They’re never mentioned in the news.”

My mind processes the new information.

“You said your cousin is one, right?” Devyn asks, her blue eyes wide. “Could you ask him to help?”

Ben shuffles his feet and runs a hand through his hair. “He kind of hates me,” he says sheepishly.

I frown. I haven’t known Ben long, but I can’t imagine anyone *hating* him. Annoyed, sure. But hating?

“He’s kind of a dick,” he adds at my confused expression. “But he’s good at what he does.”

“Could you ask him?” I plead. “Just ask him to help us?”

“We don’t talk much, and even if I could, he wouldn’t,” Ben says, regret on his face. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I’m sorry, Skylar. They just wouldn’t work with something like this.” His gaze turns back to Devyn, who looks like she’s about to cry. “But I’ll do what I can to help in the meantime. I promise.”

Despite Ben’s pessimism, my hope doesn’t fade.

“Do you have their address?” I ask him.

“Skylar, they won’t—”

“I don’t care. Just give me their address.”

SKYLAR

“HI, HONEY,” TAMMY SAYS SWEETLY AS I ANSWER THE DOOR.
“Just checking to see if you’re doing okay.”

It’s Tammy code for *I’m making sure you haven’t spiraled into oblivion.*

But she shouldn’t be worrying about me—she should worry about herself. I know she’s being strong for me, and she shouldn’t have to be.

Unfortunately, I didn’t know she was coming, so my kitchen looks like a bomb went off. With three electric mixers plugged in, my meager counter is overwhelmed with baked treats and spilled ingredients.

My hair is no better. Flour sticks out as white splotches against the dark strands of my bun, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a blob of raspberry preserves somewhere on me.

I’m working quickly and trying to clean as I go, but my mind is racing faster than my hands.

“Hello,” I answer lamely. “Sorry, everything’s messy right now.”

She looks me up and down and gives me a half smile. “I noticed. Are you overworking yourself?”

“Me?” I step aside as she enters my house. “Never,” I lie, watching as she sets her purse down on the front table. “Just, you know, blowing off some steam.”

Tammy’s grey eyes take in the sight of my kitchen. “And what new flavors have you created today?” she asks, her gaze falling on a batch of dark brown macarons. “Those look interesting.”

“Salted coffee caramel,” I answer, plucking two off the tray. “Caramel buttercream inside, sea salt flakes on top of an espresso cookie.”

I keep one for myself and hand the other to her, and she joins me on the couch. I watch as she takes a bite and her eyes close. That soft expression alone is worth the sleepless nights and frantic panic baking—along with the mess I just created by sitting down on my couch.

“Wonderful,” she says, smiling. “You never cease to amaze me.”

I bask in her praise. She’s the mother I never had—my own mother and I have barely spoken since high school.

Which is why it’s so hard to see her heartbroken over her daughter.

I feel like I’ve lost my sister, and the family I’ve found is fractured.

“You’re doing too much,” she adds, giving me a knowing look. “You’re obsessing, and it’s not good for you.”

Guilt flares in my chest. “You don’t have to worry about me,” I promise her. “I have a plan. I know what I’m doing.”

Tammy gives me a soft, sad smile. “It’s not your job to find her.” Her voice cracks on the last word and the hole in my chest grows.

I swallow and stare at my half-eaten cookie. “I know that,” I say slowly, unable to look at Tammy.

But I don’t know that. In my mind, I *need* to find April.

This is my fault, somehow. Maybe if I hadn't snapped at her that day, she would have done something differently. I should have checked in that night, instead of waiting for her to text me.

"Have you been taking your suppressants?" Tammy continues. "You're still doing everything you should, right?"

"Of course," I answer quickly. "Why do you ask?"

But I still don't meet her eyes. I stare at the macaron, biting my lip.

"I just don't see any blankets around here," she says. "And I know how much you like your luxuries. I just wanted to make sure you remembered our conversation all those months ago."

I swallow the lump in my throat as guilt bubbles in my stomach.

"I'm the last person you need to worry about right now," I mutter, finally looking up and meeting her eyes. "Please."

But Tammy always sees through me. Ever since *Jason*, I've stripped my house of my nesting blankets, comfortable throws, and overstuffed pillows.

I shoved them all into my closet, where they gather dust.

He told me I was too much, too demanding, too overwhelming. And that was the reason he left.

I was *too much* of an Omega.

I shake the memories away, refusing to let tears come to my eyes *now*.

Tammy had literally picked me up off the ground as April tried to drill it into my head that I did *not* have to change for someone else.

That I wasn't *too much* just because I liked a lavish nest and extra attention during my Heat.

That Jason was the defective one for thinking I was too clingy and not wanting to give me the attention I deserved as an Omega.

But still, the blankets stay hidden away, along with every other luxury *Jason* rolled his eyes at.

“I’m always going to worry about you,” Tammy says gently. “You’re my bonus kid, remember?”

I chuckle. “Yeah. I remember. But *as* your bonus kid, I’m telling you that I’ve got stuff handled, and we’re in this together.”

Tammy’s eyes become misty, and I make a face at her. “Nope. If you cry, I swear to God, Tammy, I’ll start crying too and never stop.”

But Tammy, like always, smiles through her tears and takes another bite of macaron.

I sigh.

I miss April so much it kills me.

You better be alive, I think to myself. Your mom can’t do this without you, and neither can I.

Tammy stays for the rest of the afternoon, graciously not commenting on the excessive number of macarons I scarf down.

I have way too much faith in those cookies, but it’s the best plan I have.

The reward money isn’t enough.

I need an Alpha detective.

SKYLAR

“YOU’RE DOING *WHAT?*” DEVYN ASKS AS SHE WATCHES ME smooth out the dark grey blazer. I catch her reflection in my bathroom mirror as I turn in a circle, making sure the outfit is free of creases.

I shrug. “It’s worth a shot.”

“So, you’re going to drive two hours away and just ask them to help you?” She plops down on my bed and groans. “Oh my *God*, this mattress is the most comfortable thing I’ve ever laid on,” she mutters, staring at the ceiling. Her light blonde hair fans around her head, and she dangles her legs off the edge of the bed excitedly.

I smile. “It’s the Omega Series from *Bedlite*,” I murmur, pleased that she appreciates my investment.

“You have the *best* stuff,” she sighs. “Do you need a roommate? I’m not messy.”

I snort. “No, I need your *opinion*. Black or cream blouse with this skirt?”

I’m in the most professional clothing I own, still unsure if this is the right choice. I figure I at least have a shot at getting what I want if I’m dressed sharp and confident.

“What’s the goal with the blouse?” Devyn sits up and reaches for the iced coffee she left on my nightstand, taking a

sip as she eyes both blouses in my hand.

“What do you mean? To convince them to help us.”

“No, I mean, is it ‘hey, I’m super hot and you should help me because you want to fuck me,’ or, ‘I’m an innocent little Omega that needs help from a big powerful Alpha?’”

I grimace. “Neither of those. How about, ‘I mean business and everyone in this town is incompetent?’”

Devyn sticks her lower lip out. “*Ben’s* not incompetent,” she murmurs. “He’s been super helpful.”

I sigh. “He *has* been, you’re right,” I say gently. “But we need more resources than just the Isleton police department. And I’m willing to do whatever I can to make that happen.”

Devyn waggles her eyebrows. “*Whatever* it takes, huh?” She sips her iced coffee loudly, slurping through the straw as she stares at me knowingly.

Devyn’s grown on me. I technically didn’t need her help today, but I knew her company would cheer me up, and I’m starting to consider her a combination of annoying little sister and good friend.

April would be proud.

Still, I glare at her, fighting the urge to smile. “Yes. Whatever it takes,” I deadpan, hoping my face isn’t flaming.

She smirks. “Well, in *that* case, the black blouse.”

I nod. “Perfect. That’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

I can’t remember the last time I bothered to dress up, but as I study my reflection in the full-length mirror and smooth my black skirt, I realize I need to do it more. With my hair curled into loose waves and a subtle bit of chocolate brown eyeliner to make my dark blue eyes pop, I feel like I can take on the world.

And possibly convince a detective to help me.

Is it an impossible task? Probably.

But I’m trying for April.

“What if they won’t help you?” Devyn asks softly, staring down at my comforter. “Then what do we do?”

They have to help, I think.

“We continue doing what we’re doing. We don’t shut up until the whole world knows April’s name,” I say. “And we fundraise enough to make the reward money impossible to ignore.”

“You’re a good friend,” Devyn says with a soft smile.

“Nah, April’s the good one,” I say, shaking my head. “She’s worth looking for. The world’s a crappier place without her.”

“I wish I had a friend like you,” Devyn sighs, playing with a strand of her hair. A pang of guilt hits my chest, and I turn away from the mirror to face her.

“Devyn, you *do*,” I say gently. “We *are* friends.”

She looks at me, dumbfounded, then her mouth slowly pulls into a brilliant smile. “Really?” she asks excitedly, as if she can’t believe what I’m saying.

I bark out a laugh. “Yes! Why would I invite you over if I didn’t consider you a friend?”

“You said you needed my help with something!” she shoots back.

“Yeah, but *why* would I do that if you weren’t my friend?”

Devyn *squeals* and punches the air.

“Oh my God, I’m friends with both you and April! I’m friends with the cool girls! You guys are like my older sisters!”

I stare at her, dumbfounded, as she kicks her feet delightedly and sips her coffee.

“I am definitely *not* cool,” I tell her as she continues to beam. “I’m twenty-nine years old and work at a coffee shop.”

“Yeah, and you have the *best* bed ever, *and* you’re about to get yourself some hot detectives,” she says in between loud slurps of her drink.

And I thought *I* drank too much caffeine.

But Devyn continues to look enthused. It's the peppiest she's been since April disappeared, and I can't help but absorb some of her positivity.

I *do* have the best bed ever, and I *will* get someone to help us.

There's no other option.

MY HEART RACES THE ENTIRE DRIVE TO THE BUREAU'S OFFICE.

I haven't been to Rock Hill in years, even though it's one of the larger cities in Northern California. Any other time, I would have loved to explore the fancy restaurants and trendy boutiques, but now a sense of dread looms as I find my exit.

I have the semblance of a plan in my head, but the closer I get to the city, the more it seems ridiculous.

If these Alpha investigators weren't involved before, why would they want to be involved in April's case now?

What is a box of macarons going to do?

I feel foolish. The optimism that I absorbed from Devyn slowly wavers, and my thoughts spiral.

This won't work.

I fight the negative thoughts as I find my destination and pull into the parking lot, managing to find a spot that doesn't have a warning about being towed. The building is inside of a business park with a pristine white exterior and tinted windows. A large metal sign next to a door reads *Alpha Private Bureau*.

I'm extremely intimidated, and the self-doubt from before creeps in as I carefully retrieve the box of macarons from the passenger seat.

Do this for April. The worst they can say is no.

I step out of the car, box of cookies in hand and purse slung over my shoulder, and smooth out my skirt. I glance at my reflection in the window and stand up straighter, feigning an air of confidence.

“We can do this,” I murmur to the reflection. “We’ve got this.”

I may not know exactly *what* my plan is, but at least I’m trying *something*.

My kitten heels clack against the walkway as I make my way to the main door. I glance at the sign one more time, take a deep breath, and pull open the door.

Here goes nothing.

SKYLAR

ENTERING THE BUILDING IS EXTREMELY ANTICLIMACTIC. I'M greeted by an empty reception area, with two chairs to the left and a vacant desk directly in front of me. A tiny potted plant sits on the desk, along with half a dozen business card holders.

The only sound is the gentle whirring of the air conditioner. There aren't even any lights on, and for a second, I wonder if the entire building is empty.

Then, I smell it.

Alpha.

My entire body tenses and I'm temporarily paralyzed.

I've never reacted this way to a scent. I take my suppressants like I'm supposed to, never missing a dose, especially after what happened with Jason.

But tingles shoot down my spine and my thoughts sputter.

Strong imagery fills my imagination, and I never want to stop inhaling the scent.

It's rain in the forest with a touch of gentle pine.

It's the subtle smoke from blowing out a candle after stepping out of the bath.

Romance.

Longing.

Comfort.

I almost drop my macarons as I stand there slack jawed, looking like an absolute weirdo.

Part of me wants to leave and never look back.

I feel a damp spot forming in my panties, and I'm shocked.

What the hell is going on?

But this isn't about me or my body's obnoxious reaction.

It's about April.

And if that scent leads to someone that can help me, I need to suck it up and locate the source.

My palms are sweaty and my breathing is ragged, but I force my legs to move. I wander down a hall, following the incredible scent.

Almost every door I pass is closed and its window is dark. But there's a light that shines near the end of the hall that streams in from an office.

One that has a door partially open.

There's the faint sound of typing as I inch closer, allowing the scent to lead the way.

My heart pounds in my chest as I clutch the box of macarons tightly in front of me, as if the cookies offer me a sense of confidence that I don't possess otherwise.

By the time I reach the cracked door, I'm holding my breath.

Do it for April.

Holding the cookies in one hand, I knock on the door with confidence, rapping loudly three times with my knuckles.

The typing on the other side of the door stops, and I want to run away.

"Come in," a voice, low and silky, responds.

Of course, Alpha, my inner voice says, startling me.

Then I slowly push the door open.

I don't even think. My body is on autopilot, and when I meet his handsome face, it's all I can do to not drop the damn macarons.

He's sitting at a desk, a computer in front of him. His light brown hair is cropped short and stylishly messy on top. He regards me with dark brown eyes, a slightly curious expression on his clean-shaven face.

And his *scent*.

It envelops me like an invisible embrace. It's safety, kindness, and warmth, all rolled into one delectable man.

My inner Omega does backflips, awakened after months of being shoved to the side.

Mine, she snarls, and I ignore her feral claim, because *what the fuck is happening?*

Instead, I just stare at the Alpha like an idiot, my mouth slightly agape, standing in the doorway.

He's dressed in a fitted white button-down shirt with rolled up sleeves that show off his forearms. His strong jaw and full lips make him the hottest detective I've ever seen in my life.

If Devyn could hear my thoughts, she would be shrieking with delight.

I'm *ogling* him.

"Can I help you?" he asks politely, his brow slightly furrowed.

"Uh..." I dart my eyes away from his gaze and focus on the nameplate on the desk.

Landon Burrows.

"I..." I try again, shifting from one foot to the other, searching for the right words to say. "Um...hi."

Great job, Skye.

His dark eyes dart to the box in my hand, then back to my face. "Is everything all right?" he asks gently, not the slightest

bit annoyed.

He's the exact opposite of Jason.

That makes me snap out of it.

I clear my throat and find my words.

“Yes,” I say clearly, swallowing my nerves down. “My best friend is missing, and I’m hoping you can help me.”

The worst he can say is no.

But please don't say no.

His eyes narrow and his expression falls.

Oh, no.

He opens his mouth to speak, but I interrupt him.

“I know this isn’t normal, and I apologize for barging in like this,” I continue, standing up straighter. “But I’ve heard you are some of the best private detectives in the country, and I’ve done all I can with our local police.”

I swallow nervously, the action betraying my confident tone.

His scent still swirls around me, lingering in the air, and I use it to calm myself.

Even if he rejects me, I know he won’t be cruel about it.

He shakes his head slightly and frowns. A flash of pity crosses his face, and my stomach sinks. “I’m sorry, Miss...” he trails off, and I want to cry at the inevitable rejection.

“Skylar,” I say, my throat suddenly dry. “My name is Skylar Bloom.”

He gives me a sad smile. “Well, nice to meet you, Skylar. I’m Landon. I’m truly sorry about your friend, Skylar,” he says. “But our caseloads are full, and even if—”

“Please,” I say. Gathering my courage, I walk closer to his desk until I’m standing just a few feet from him. Even though he’s sitting, he’s so tall he almost reaches my standing height. “If I could just have five minutes of your time, I could make my case,” I murmur, my gaze locking onto his.

He wants to deny me. I can tell.

But he inhales deeply, and his pupils suddenly dilate.

Oh.

Does my scent affect him as much as his affects me?

He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing, and I have the sudden urge to lick it.

Focus, Skylar.

He nods. "But two minutes," he quips. "Not five."

My stomach flutters and I inhale sharply. Even his harsh tone is attractive.

"April Waters disappeared a few weeks ago, along with her car. And it's not *like* her," I insist. "She didn't show up for her shift at the café we work at, and when I went to check on her, her car was gone but her purse was still inside her house. I told the police, and we've done searches for her, but there's nothing. No one is taking this seriously enough for me."

He quirks an eyebrow. "Did the police assign someone to her case?"

I scoff and shake my head. "They told me the only detective they have is stuck with another case. They've taken a report, but that's *all* they've done. It's not a priority," I mutter, huffing and shaking my head.

He stares at me a moment longer, as if debating something in his head. Then, with a small sigh, he reaches for his keyboard and begins to type. "What city are you in?" he asks, staring at his screen.

"Isleton," I reply.

He stops typing and gazes up at me. "Oh, so you know Ben," he says amusedly, as the corner of his eyes crinkle. "*That's* how you know about us." He chuckles to himself.

"Ben said you were the best," I insist, hoping the name recognition is a good sign. "And that if anyone could help, it would be your bureau."

“Of course, he said that,” he murmurs, sighing deeply. “Well, at least you saw me, and not River.”

I frown. “River?”

“His cousin.”

“Oh.” I shift on my feet as he regards me with his sympathetic dark eyes.

“I’m sorry, Skylar, but your two minutes is up,” he says gently. “I’m truly sorry about your friend, but our entire bureau is booked with cases.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I pray they don’t fall down my cheeks.

“Could I hire you?” I blurt desperately. “I have reward money saved up, and…”

He stands up and walks out from behind the desk, his tall frame towering over me. “Our entire team is busy,” he says softly. “I would work with your local police department—”

He’s rejecting you.

I place the box of macarons on the desk harder than necessary. His eyes widen a fraction as I flip open the box, showcasing the delicate cookies placed in their paper sleeves.

“April and I run a coffee shop, and we’re famous for our macarons,” I say, my eyes dropping to focus on the treats. “I just wanted to leave you some and thank you for your time.”

“Miss Bloom—”

“Or maybe convince you to change your mind,” I chuckle bitterly, shaking my head. “Well, enjoy them. I made some flavors specific for you. I appreciate the help,” I add sarcastically.

I don’t even want to look at him anymore.

We’re running out of time to find April, and I don’t want this Alpha to watch me burst into tears as I think about it.

I need to get out of here *now*.

“Let me walk you out, at least,” the detective tries, a polite smile on his face.

I shake my head and try to return his smile. “That’s okay, I’ll be—”

“Hey asshole, I need your help with—” a gruff voice interrupts, and another Alpha in a dark brown leather jacket enters the room, his spicy scent overwhelming.

He quirks an eyebrow as he regards me, a messy stack of papers in his hand.

“Who are you?” he demands, and my mouth turns dry.

LANDON

THERE'S A BOX OF COOKIES ON MY DESK, AND AN OMEGA that smells like warm vanilla standing in front of me.

I want to say yes to her. Every instinct in me screams to do it. I'm amazed that she walked in here and had the courage to ask for help in the first place—usually only government officials or police officers come in. Yet she waltzed right in with a box of cookies and a hopeful expression, bravely asking for what she needed.

I doubt River or the others would have seen it that way, and I'm grateful she found me first.

But I can't help. We're not the right people to ask, as tempting as it is to drop everything for her and *take care* of her.

For all I know, she has a mate. This shouldn't be personal for me.

Skylar's been in the room for less than five minutes, and suddenly, nothing but her matters.

I need to get a grip.

This is *not* how I expected my day to go.

And now, River has entered the conversation, ruining any semblance of peace that I might have had walking her out.

“Who are you?” he demands to Skylar, ruder and louder than necessary as he slams his pile of papers down on my desk.

I fight the urge to scowl at him—he’s never friendly, but he doesn’t need to be a dick to her for no reason.

And before she can answer, his eyes dart to the large white box where every color of macaron is displayed proudly. “And what the hell is this?”

“Those are macarons, *River*,” I say pointedly, narrowing my eyes at him. “And this is Skylar Bloom. I was just walking her out.”

Skylar darts her eyes between me and my colleague, and her pupils dilate.

She’s attracted to us.

But it doesn’t matter. I need to get her out of here before River says something stupid.

“I’m looking for my best friend,” she says to River, fixing her blue eyes on him. *Beautiful*. “And I was trying to see if you could help me.”

There’s a moment of silence that stretches a bit too long.

River is a loose cannon; he could snarl one sentence that would send her running or flash a smile and charm her.

He’s an excellent manipulator, which makes him an incredible detective.

And if her scent is affecting him at all like it affects me, I’m hoping he doesn’t show his fangs.

“We don’t do random missing person cases,” he says simply, crossing his arms over his chest and raising an eyebrow. “And we don’t take *cookies* as bribes.”

Great.

I can feel a headache forming already. River’s been in a fouler mood than usual this week, and no amount of pretty blue eyes or delicious-smelling Omegas will change that.

And, knowing him, he would see the conspicuous white box on my desk as an insult.

“River, it’s fine. She didn’t know—”

“They’re not *bribes*,” Skylar says, crossing her arms over her chest as well, matching River’s stance. Her scent spikes with cinnamon, a rich, deep fragrance, and her fury and indignation are just as mouthwatering as I imagined. “They’re an act of goodwill, and I was only hoping—”

“Yeah, well, we don’t have time for that,” River snaps, looking down at her. With his unkempt appearance and wrinkled leather jacket, he looks just as unprofessional as he sounds while speaking to her. “We do *real* work here. We see stuff every day that would make you *sick*. So, coming to us with cookies like a child is pointless and a waste of our time.”

“River!” I snap at him, snarling. “Can you act professional for *one* second? She was simply asking—”

But Skylar’s already shaking her head and chuckling to herself. “Right,” she says, biting her lip and looking away. “Sorry for wasting your time. *Asshole*,” she mutters under her breath. Her face is flushed, and her eyes are glassy as she quickly pushes past River and me, avoiding looking at either of us.

“What the fuck?” River says as we hear the main door close. “People just walk in now and ask for charity?”

I turn on him. “Even if they do, you can turn them away politely, like a regular human being. One that knows how to interact with people,” I say evenly, doing my best to not lose it on him.

“Oh, shut the fuck up. Just because you’re a bleeding heart doesn’t mean I have to be one too,” he snaps. I’m ready to argue with him, but his bloodshot eyes tell me now is not the time.

He’s an asshole at worst and a distant coworker at best. We’ll never be friends, and as easy as it would be to spend energy pointing out every way he *doesn’t* do our bureau any favors, we need to find a way to work together.

“What’s all this?” I ask instead, grabbing the pile of papers and flipping through them. I do my best to push the Omega out of my mind, as there’s no room for distraction right now.

“Another overdose,” River mutters, glancing down at the macaron box. “Same stuff. This time it’s a school principal.”

“Shit.” I flip through the documents, glancing down at the autopsy report. “This garbage is everywhere now.”

“A fucking month of these deaths,” River mutters, plucking a pink macaron out of the box. He stares at it, frowning, holding it as if it’s a dead bug. “She really brought these to you?” he asks, turning it over in his hand. “And thought you would help her?”

I shrug. “She runs a café. And she was *nice*. You know, a concept you could try one day.”

“Hey, I’m perfectly nice,” he quips. “I’m charming as fuck, too.”

“I mean, when you’re *not* trying to get answers out of someone.” I watch as he fiddles with the macaron. “You know you’re supposed to eat those, right?”

“She was pretty,” he murmurs, still staring at the cookie.

I freeze. River *never* shows interest in any Omega, much less comments on their appearance.

He never bothers to talk about anything except work with me.

“She was,” I agree slowly.

“What was her deal?” he mutters. “What exactly did she want, anyway?”

“Well, before you, you know, interrupted her—” River shoots me a look, but I simply raise an eyebrow in challenge. “Her friend disappeared, and the local police aren’t doing much.”

He scoffs. “Figures. What city is she from?” But before I can answer, he takes a bite of the macaron and audibly *groans*.

“Holy *fugh*,” he mutters around a mouthful of cookie. “Dats *gool*.”

I never see River eat; much less be enthusiastic about it. The only things I’ve seen touch his mouth are his never ending supply of coffee and the occasional cigarette.

He actually lights up when he eats Skylar’s macaron, and the corners of his eyes crinkle in delight.

Those cookies must be magical, because I swear the asshole looks ten years younger in that moment.

Huh. Interesting.

But before I can marvel more about that, there’s a *screech* of brakes followed by a loud *thud* that comes from the parking lot.

It sounds like someone just got hit by a car.

River drops the cookie and races out of the room, and I follow close behind.

SKYLAR

IMAKE IT OUT OF THE BUILDING BEFORE THE TEARS OF SHAME start to fall because I refuse to let that Alphahole see me cry.

A bribe? River was so cruel and dismissive, the exact opposite of his sweet colleague.

I hope he chokes on the cookies.

I'm sorry, April, I think to myself. *I'll figure something else out.*

Are these Alphas really supposed to be the best of the best?

They both couldn't care less about me, except Landon was more polite about it.

And even more embarrassing, I could feel waves of slick pulse through my underwear and into my slick pad.

I wanted, for the first time in over a year. It's as if my inner Omega woke back up in their presence.

Idiot.

The parking lot is blurry, and I wipe at my eyes as I struggle to fish my keys out of my purse.

But the sense of loss is strong, and the feeling that I've somehow failed my best friend haunts me as I stumble on the

pavement in my heels.

I'm so lost in my head that I don't move away in time from the whirl of black that comes rushing towards me.

There's a screeching of tires, then I'm airborne. I'm looking up at the clouds as my body rolls, and my back slaps hard against something solid.

Then I meet the pavement, my head exploding with pain.

It takes a moment for me to realize what's happening. Someone is cursing, people are shouting, and the contents of my purse are scattered around the parking lot. My tube of pink lip gloss rolls by my head, as if to mock me.

I blink up at the cloudy sky, dazed.

I just got hit by a car.

Groaning, I roll to my side, vaguely aware that my skirt is riding up and my legs are on *fire*. I scramble on my hands and knees, trying to stand, but stumble back on my ass.

"You're going to jail, motherfucker! Who drives through a parking lot like that?!" someone screams, and arguing ensues.

Someone is *much* more upset about this than I am.

This time, I successfully stand, but wince as gravel digs into my bare feet.

Great. My heels must have come off in the accident. I see the sports car that hit me and am amazed I'm still conscious. The windshield is cracked and there's a dent on the hood.

They must have been speeding when they hit me.

"Wow," I breathe, as I blink slowly. "*Ow.*"

"You got her? I'm calling an ambulance!" a panicked voice yells.

Landon, the one that pretended to care but respectfully rejected me, stands at the opposite edge of the parking lot near the entrance to the building. He heads toward me, and I try to shake my head and tell him that I'm *fine*, but I stumble again. Strong arms encircle me, and I'm suddenly pressed against a

clothed chest that smells like linen and the faintest trace of cigarette smoke.

“Whoa, hey, I’ve got you,” the low voice says, slightly breathy. “Skylar? Hey, can you hear me?”

It takes me a moment to realize who’s holding me, but my head hurts too much to argue.

River.

He smells like pepper and chaos, but his embrace is strong. His touch affects me, even though I don’t want it to. A live wire runs through me, and it’s all I can do to not sag against him.

“Asshole,” I mutter into his chest, and I hear him huff out a laugh.

“You’re not wrong. But I’m going to help you sit until the ambulance arrives,” he replies. “Just keep your eyes open for me. Don’t close them.”

“Too late for that,” I mumble. “I’m sleepy.”

“Hey, I need her insurance information,” an irritated voice says. “She walked right in front of me. That shit’s not my fault.”

I snap my eyes open and turn to see the driver that hit me. He’s a short Beta male, middle-aged and balding, wearing an unflattering striped shirt. I open my mouth, ready to tell him off, but River keeps his arm locked around my shoulders as I struggle to find my footing.

“She doesn’t owe you shit,” River spits at him, as if quoting my internal monologue. “You *hit* her, and you’re lucky she’s still standing, or I would have kicked the shit out of you.”

I snort. I still don’t like River, but it’s nice to hear him threaten the entitled Beta in front of me.

And his scent is addictive. I inhale it greedily, hoping he doesn’t notice how desperate I am for it.

River and Landon have the most mouthwatering scents I've experienced since Jason.

And unlike Jason's, theirs don't have the bitter note I forced myself to ignore.

I try to memorize River's scent, wanting to commit it to memory before we have to say goodbye.

"Skylar. Skylar, open your eyes," River commands, his raspy voice low. "Stay with me."

"No," I murmur. "Sleep."

"I think she has a concussion," another baritone voice says. The voice is followed by the comforting scent of the forest, and I sigh.

Landon.

But the comfort is short-lived. I'm in pain, I've embarrassed myself, and they're still not going to help me find April.

Snap out of it, Skylar.

"I'm fine," I insist, opening my eyes to meet Landon's concerned expression. "No ambulance. I just need to hang out for a second." I attempt to struggle out of River's grip, but he simply pulls me closer while Landon watches, scowling.

"You absolutely need to go to the hospital, Miss Bloom," he insists, narrowing his eyes. "I won't argue about this."

Oh. If I thought Landon was cute before, his bossiness makes my inner Omega purr.

"Ambulance is on its way. No arguing," River adds. I look up at him, ready to tell him off, but something in his expression makes me stop.

His eyes are a hypnotizing shade of dark green and slightly bloodshot. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, and I have a feeling he's as tired as I feel.

This is not the face of a stable man.

But it's still sexy.

So instead of arguing, I simply nod.

“Great,” he mutters, then clears his throat and breaks our eye contact. He releases me and I take a step back, only realizing now how close we were.

“I need to sit down,” I murmur. “My head hurts.”

“I’ve got you,” Landon says and extends a hand to me. I take it cautiously, my inner Omega flattered at his politeness and kindness. River stalks off to the Beta driver, demanding all of his information while I watch in awe.

I wish I didn’t want to be taken care of so badly.

“Can you sit here?” Landon asks, gesturing at the curb near the building’s entrance. “We’ll stay with you until the ambulance arrives.”

I sigh and nod.

They’re just being polite. I’ll never see them again after this.

River is yelling so loudly at the driver that the Beta finally puts up his hands in surrender and shakes his head.

“I apologize for River’s behavior,” Landon adds, joining me on the curb. I wince as I maneuver my skirt, doing my best to make sure it doesn’t ride up my thighs. “He’s...well, he’s usually like this, but you didn’t deserve to be spoken to like that.” He sits next to me, and we both observe as River chews the driver out.

I scoff. “It’s fine,” I murmur, watching as River takes out his cell phone to photograph the man’s license. “Some people are just insufferable.”

I turn to see Landon grin. It’s charming, showing off his dimples and perfect straight white teeth. “He is,” he confirms. “But he’s a great detective, unfortunately.”

I sigh. “Yeah. I’ve heard.”

An awkward silence falls between us as I close my eyes and hiss in pain. My back and knees *burn*. As soon as I’m out of here, I’m picking all the gravel out of my skin.

“Skylar—” Landon starts, but the sound of sirens fills the air.

I groan.

“I don’t need an ambulance,” I murmur, even as I struggle to stay sitting upright.

“Yes, you do, sweetheart,” Landon says softly.

I freeze.

Sweetheart.

He’s just being polite. That’s all.

But the term of endearment stuns me and makes my heart thump wildly.

And so, with nothing left to lose, I try again.

“Please help me find her,” I ask Landon, pleading with my eyes. “If I could just have an hour alone with you...”

But I’m fading in and out, the adrenaline wearing off.

I’m suddenly so *tired*.

I just want to sleep.

Strong arms lift me up, and suddenly I’m being held bridal style. My face is pressed against a strong, sturdy chest, and a deep vibration soothes me as those muscular arms cradle me close.

Purring.

An Alpha is purring for me.

I could cry. The last time I felt an Alpha’s purr was more than a year ago, and I almost forgot how euphoric it could be.

The last thing I remember is a low voice murmuring my name before I’m whisked away to the hospital.

RIVER

I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS SHIT.

Neither does Landon.

And usually, I could give a fuck less about what that little preppy boy needs, but this affects us both.

That was the best goddamned cookie I've ever had in my life.

Then suddenly, said creator of those cookies was on the pavement, bruised up because some idiot Beta thought it would be fun to speed through a parking lot.

None of this should bother me.

It isn't my problem. It's not my concern that a random Omega waltzed in here, thinking we'd take on a missing persons case.

And she brought cookies.

Fucking *macarons*.

I hate the effect she's had on me. I keep my Alpha instincts locked up, never letting myself be drawn to any Omega's scent.

But hers was different.

It was sweeter and almost impossible to ignore.

For one wild moment, I fantasized about whisking her away from this bullshit.

I'm a fucking idiot.

I watch as she's loaded into the ambulance, then turn my attention back to the driver that ran her over.

His windshield is wrecked.

Good.

Landon is ridiculously calm, like usual, trying not to escalate the situation as he interacts with the asshole driver.

My eyes hurt, my head aches, and I need a fucking cigarette.

But not before I walk up to the driver, interrupting his dramatics.

"If you keep running your fucking mouth, I'll have you arrested for *attempted murder*," I snarl, and I hear Landon huff in irritation next to me.

The Beta's eyes widen. "You can't do that! You're not a fucking cop!" he snaps, his voice wavering slightly.

I bark out a cruel laugh. "You have no idea what I can do, asshole," I hiss.

"I suggest you leave before Detective Cain makes good on his threat," Landon says calmly. "I have your insurance information; I'll be sure to pass it on to Miss Bloom."

Omega.

I feel a phantom twinge of jealousy that Landon is planning on talking to her again, but I shove that feeling down.

It doesn't matter. I have better things to do.

And if Landon wants to waste his time being a bleeding heart, I don't care.

This isn't my problem.

My hands start to shake, and I curl them into fists.

I need to eat. Or sleep.

Or something.

I stalk off, not trusting myself to not lose my shit on the driver or Landon. Walking over to the the curb, I fish into my jean pocket and pull out a pack of cigarettes. I light one, already anticipating the uncomfortable conversation I'll be forced to have with Landon when he makes his way over to me.

I steady my breathing. I focus on calming down.

I need sleep.

But I can't fucking sleep. These overdoses are haunting me. There's no reason for so many in such a short time period —

"I thought you were quitting." Landon's annoying, arrogant tone fills the air, and I scowl around the cigarette.

I fight the urge to put it out in his eye.

The sooner we solve this shit, the better.

Landon's an insufferable partner.

"I still am," I say, fighting to sound neutral. My emotions are haywire, and the three cups of coffee, two cigarettes, and one macaron aren't doing anything phenomenal for my mental state.

He follows my gaze, and we both stand in silence as cars drive past on the main street. I'm hoping he'll go back inside; I don't want to talk about the Omega or anything else non-case related.

"Her car is still here," he says conversationally. "Someone will need to give her a ride home from the hospital."

"I don't care," I say too quickly.

He hums thoughtfully. "I was thinking you should do it."

Landon's smart, I'll give him that. I shouldn't have let it slip that I found her pretty. I know what he's doing; he's probably happy I showed an interest in *anything* and is offering some type of pity break so I don't kill myself over these cases.

“You can do it,” I snap, dropping my cigarette on the grass and stamping it out. “Why would I care about her?”

And of course she’s pretty, she’s an *Omega*.

She’s designed to be beautiful. It’s in her DNA to attract my inner Alpha.

It’s not special.

She’s not special.

I’m sure if I tried hard enough, I could perfect a cookie recipe too.

“*I’m* going to visit her at the hospital out of courtesy,” Landon says slowly, talking to me as if I’m a child. “Since she came all this way only to be told ‘no,’ then hit by a car.”

He glares at me pointedly.

“*What?*” I snarl. He’s slightly taller than me, but I’m bulkier, and I’m almost positive I could kick his ass in a fight.

“You like her.” He quirks an eyebrow, daring me to deny it.

“I’m not five years old. This isn’t kindergarten.” I shake my head.

“We actually have downtime tomorrow. Meet us at the hospital, give her a ride home, then get some rest, River. You look like shit.”

I fume internally. I could argue with him. I don’t believe in ‘downtime,’ and I certainly don’t need him telling me what to do.

“I’ll rest when I’m dead,” I say bitterly.

But I hate that he’s partially right. Usually, I don’t have a partner to rein me in, and it feels foreign to have someone else looking out for me.

Unfortunately, I can’t stand my partner, so any gesture of good faith he shows makes me want to vomit all over his polished shoes.

It’s a miracle I don’t.

“Do you have her address?” I ask finally, turning to scowl at him.

He fights a smile. “I do. She’s in Isleton.”

I freeze.

“Fucking *Isleton*?!”

Ben must have told her about us.

I’m going to kill that fucker.

“Yes,” Landon says, looking far too smug. “It will do you good to get out of town. And you know, maybe actually return your cousin’s calls.”

I scoff. “You need to stop sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. Did you ever think that maybe you *don’t* have the all the answers, asshole?”

But Landon just shrugs. “I haven’t found that to be the case yet.” He grins, and I groan.

Isleton is more than two hours away.

And if giving the Omega a ride home means I can be a hundred miles away from my partner...

“I guess I’m going to Isleton,” I sigh.

SKYLAR

IS IT POSSIBLE TO DIE OF EMBARRASSMENT?

My back burns, my knees and elbows are scabbed, and my head throbs.

Not only did I *not* get any help for April, but I got run over in the process.

To be fair, she would probably think it's funny.

What's *not* funny is waking up in a hospital bed to the *beep* of my own heartbeat.

I must have passed out in the ambulance.

What happened to my car? To my purse?

I groan in pain, shifting in the hospital bed and struggling to sit up. It feels like someone hit me in the head with a hammer; all I want to do is keep my eyes closed forever.

"You're awake," a low voice sighs in relief. A faint familiar scent washes over me, and I open my eyes to see Landon sitting in a chair on my right side.

Landon, the Alpha who carried me in his arms to the ambulance.

Landon, who *purred* for me.

And who turned me down.

“Why are you here?” I croak, and his dark eyes widen. Then his expression softens, and he smiles, showing off his dimples.

Damn him for being so handsome.

And damn him for staying at the hospital with me. I want to forget today, but his welcoming, delicious scent makes it hard for me to want to stay away from him.

“You were hit by a car,” he says slowly, as if he thinks I lost my memory along with my dignity. “I had to make sure you were safe.”

I swallow a lump in my throat and turn away from him.

This is how an Alpha should behave, I realize. This is how a decent Alpha would treat an Omega he cares about.

And I’m not even his.

“Well, I’m safe,” I say evenly. “So, you don’t need to be here anymore.”

I can’t have him. I can’t *want* him.

Why did he have to *purr* for me?

And the worst part is that it was better than Jason’s purr. He told me he only did it out of obligation, and it made his chest hurt.

The lump in my throat grows.

I turn back to Landon, and there’s a smirk on his full lips. “You need a ride home,” he says matter-of-factly. “You’re in no position to drive.”

When his scent washes over me, I want to agree to everything he says. He smells like home.

But he’s far too busy to deal with me.

“I have a ride,” I lie, knowing full well I have no clue how I’m getting back to Isleton. He holds my gaze for a moment too long, calling my bluff.

“You’re right, you do. River can take you home,” he says.

My jaw drops.

Great, the other Alpha is here somewhere? The Alpha that sneered at my cookies, accused me of bribing them, then almost killed the person that hit me?

I'll be in a car alone with him for at least two hours.

Just as I'm about to argue and tell Landon and his deep, soulful eyes that a ride is unnecessary, the doctor walks in, letting me know they're keeping me a few more hours to observe me and take X-rays.

I listen impatiently as she rambles on.

Concussion. Bed rest. No driving.

Silently, I disagree with her.

I don't have time to rest. I need to find April.

And if that means never sleeping again, so be it.

Before the doctor leaves, she smiles at Landon.

"You'll make sure she takes care of herself?" she asks him, and my face flushes as I realize she thinks he's my partner.

Landon returns the smile easily. "Of course," he says.

I gawk at him after the doctor leaves the room. Not only am I humiliated, but a painful longing in my chest starts to creep to the surface. My inner Omega desperately wants to be taken care of, and Landon is only giving her false hope. "Look," I say, doing my best to not lose it on him, "you really don't have to be here. I have someone I can call—"

"A boyfriend?" he asks, just as politely as before, but his expression hardens slightly. His scent deepens, turning slightly spicy.

I shouldn't be so attuned to him, yet I can sense the sudden jealousy.

It doesn't matter. You're never seeing him again after today.

"Yes," I fib as I sit up.

But Landon gives me a genuine smile, and all traces of bitterness on his face disappear. "You know I'm a detective,

right? I can easily tell when someone is lying.”

I groan and close my eyes. “My coworker,” I mutter, defeated. “I can call her, and she can pick me up.”

I know Devyn would do it, but I also know she would panic the entire time and ask a thousand questions.

Yet anything is better than being alone with either Landon or River for too long.

They’ve already rejected me. The longer I’m with them, the longer I keep my hopes up.

“And I suppose your coworker is trained to deal with someone experiencing a concussion?” he quips, giving me a knowing look.

“You’re busy,” I mutter. “You said that already.”

“You’re right,” he agrees. “Which is why River will be giving you a ride back to Isleton.”

“You agreed with me that he was an asshole earlier,” I snap, sounding like a petulant child. “Why should I ride with that psychopath?”

“Because he’s the only one I trust with you besides myself,” he replies simply, shrugging.

I must have hit my head harder than I thought, because none of what he’s saying makes sense. I don’t matter to him. He made that very clear in his office, so why is he still pretending to care?

“*You* didn’t hit me with your car,” I argue. “I’m an adult, and I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

My words don’t bother him. Instead, he tilts his head slightly, as if trying to understand me better. His eyes narrow for a fraction of a second, and it feels as if he’s attempting to stare into my soul.

He’s trying to figure me out.

“It’s the least we can do,” he says gently. “Arguing is pointless, Skylar. You were injured on our watch; we will take care of you.”

I swallow nervously, fighting a terrifying urge to cry. Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I hope that Landon doesn't notice.

We will take care of you.

How long have I waited to hear those words?

And it's only temporary. They're too busy for me, and they're too busy for April.

Landon has no right to be saying things like that when those words make me ache with *want*.

Alpha will take care of us! My inner Omega screams.

Even his scent is too much. I commit it to memory, knowing that in a few hours, that's all it will be.

Hopefully, my eventual mate smells similar to him.

Or River.

"It's better if you rest for the next few hours," Landon adds, interrupting my thoughts. "River is on his way."

I shake my head. "That's unnecessary," I try again, but Landon simply cocks an eyebrow, and I shudder.

Damn him for being so attractive. He's polite yet firm, gentle, but strong.

Once I realize he isn't going anywhere, I stop fighting the fatigue and lay back down.

I close my eyes, doing my best to ignore the feeling of him watching over me.

"EGG WHITES!"

My eyes snap open, my own voice waking me up from a dream.

It takes a moment for me to realize where I am and who the person in the corner watching me is.

He looks just as startled as I am, a dark eyebrow raised at my sudden outburst.

River stares at me, and I stare back.

“Egg whites?” he repeats, his voice low and amused.

My face flames with embarrassment. “A recipe,” I mutter. “I was making macarons in my dreams.”

There’s a beat of silence, and an amused smirk plays on his face.

“Macarons,” he deadpans.

I narrow my eyes. “Yes. You know, the things you accused me of bribing you with,” I snap, my throbbing head making my attitude worse.

The smirk falls from his face and he sighs. “Yeah. I was kind of an asshole for that,” he murmurs, shrugging. “Sorry. I have a problem with people sometimes.”

I blink at him. “I’ve never seen someone so upset about cookies before,” I say.

He chuckles, and my stomach does a nervous flip. Despite his abysmal attitude, he’s attractive, and the dark circles under his eyes and day-old stubble add to it.

“Yeah, well, I can be charming if I need to. But it’s pretty fucking draining, and when you walked in, I wasn’t thinking when I spoke to you. I’m truly sorry,” he adds, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

I can tell he’s not used to apologizing, so I decide to take it easy on him.

“Apology accepted,” I say, grimacing as my head aches. I place my hand to my forehead and groan. “This really hurts.”

“After your X-rays, we should get you home,” he says. “As long as you’re okay to walk. Or I can get a wheelchair and push you out of here.”

He’s teasing me and, despite my pain, I smile. “I’ll be fine.”

“I also got that asshole’s information for your insurance company. You could press charges if you want. I’d love to see that.”

“I think you scared him enough,” I sigh, moving to stand up out of bed. River’s at my side immediately, steadying me as I almost tumble against a wall. “Shit,” I whisper, leaning into his shoulder. With one arm around my waist, he steadies me, and I grasp at his arm through the leather of his jacket. He’s warmer than I expected, his body heat comforting.

His spicy scent envelops me, making my mouth water and my thighs clench. It settles around me, and my inner Omega wakes up, desperate for more.

He’s touching us.

He’s caring for us.

But he’ll be gone after today. Just like Landon, River has more important things to do.

I force myself to ignore the ache in my chest as I welcome his embrace.

SKYLAR

THE DOCTOR CONFIRMS THAT NOTHING IS BROKEN, AND I'M released from the hospital and assigned to a week of bed rest.

"This is unnecessary," I grumble as I awkwardly plop down onto a cushioned leather seat. River's car is nicer than I was expecting; it's sleek, dark, and surprisingly clean except for the old coffee cup and the packet of cigarettes in the drink holder.

I still can't wrap my mind around it. Why am I in his car? Wouldn't it make more sense for him to drive my car back?

Our Omega scent will linger in his car, a small voice says. I ignore it.

There's no way he'd want my scent in his car. Right?

"I can call my coworker; you don't have to do all of this," I try again.

But the walk to his car took more energy than I thought, and I don't know if I can keep moving.

I want to sleep.

"You already tried that with Landon, and it's not going to work on me," River says simply as he enters the driver's side. "If you couldn't get through to that arrogant prick, you sure as shit can't convince me."

He slams his door shut, and whatever retort I had dies once we're in the enclosed space.

He's *everywhere*.

His scent permeates everything around me, and I sigh contentedly. Tingles spread throughout my limbs as I breathe deeply.

I haven't been in a confined space with an Alpha for a very long time, unless you count a few passing moments in an elevator.

"Seatbelt," he orders, snapping me out of my bliss.

"Huh?" I can barely talk; I'm too comfortable and already drifting to sleep.

"Seatbelt, Skylar."

I snort. "Okay, *dad*."

"*Skylar*."

His tone lowers and my entire being snaps to attention as I open my eyes.

Obey Alpha!

I want to please him. I want to do anything he tells me to; I want to be a good Omega for him...

But I must not react in time, because he's suddenly reaching over me, his face far too close to mine as he grabs my seatbelt. Up close, I can see the flecks of gold in his eyes, pairing beautifully with the green of his irises.

We make eye contact for a moment, then he's yanking the seatbelt over my chest and clicking it into place.

"Are you always this stubborn?" he mutters, pulling away from me. He starts the car, and the engine roars to life.

"Probably as stubborn as you," I reply, yawning. I watch his side profile as he clenches his sculpted jaw, then rolls his eyes.

Does he feel as awkward as I do after what just happened? His lips were far too close to mine, and if I dwell on it any

longer...

“You should sleep,” he says instead, keeping his attention on the road. I watch as his hand reaches for the gearstick and notice how tightly he grips it.

“*You* should sleep,” I slur back instead, aware of how ridiculous it sounds since he’s the one driving me home.

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” he replies easily.

“I’m sure you’ve said that a hundred times,” I murmur, closing my eyes. I listen to the gentle purr of the engine and slow my breathing to savor his scent.

“And I’ll say it a hundred more.”

“Hmm. What are we going to do about my car?” I mumble.

“Landon’s dropping it off. He’ll give me a ride back,” he spits, as if being around Landon is repulsive.

I hum. “He’s nicer than you.” I keep my eyes closed and fight a smile when his scent intensifies.

I don’t know why I enjoy antagonizing River. He’s dangerous and bordering on the side of crazy.

So why am I playing with fire?

He *growls*, and suddenly I’m not entertained anymore. I snap my eyes open, and an ice-cold trickle of fear spreads up my spine.

“Sorry,” I murmur, focusing on his cheek stubble. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m being shitty.”

His hands grip the steering wheel tighter as he stares straight ahead. “You have a concussion. It’s a miracle you’re even speaking coherently,” he says, his voice clipped. “You should sleep.”

I squirm in my seat. Why would he bother to do any of this? Guilt gnaws at my core, and I feel like a burden.

“If you didn’t want to be around me, you didn’t have to drive me,” I blurt out, my voice cracking.

But before he can answer, an annoying chime blares near my feet.

And that's when I notice my purse on the floor for the first time, with my cell phone's obnoxious ring sounding through the satchel.

Groggily, I pull the black bag onto my lap and fish out my phone.

It's Devyn.

I groan.

"Do you have to answer that?" River asks quietly, finally looking over at me. We're stopped at a red light, and I hold his gaze as I reject the call.

I shake my head. "No. I'll text her."

"Her?" he asks.

"My coworker. The one I would have asked to give me a ride," I mumble, looking down at Devyn's text.

Checking in. You okay?

I try to give her the condensed version.

I'm fine. Got hit by a car, but I'm okay. Mild concussion. Got a ride home.

I place the phone on my lap and close my eyes, waiting for the inevitable freak out.

A series of rapid electronic chimes goes off and I switch my phone to silent, not wanting to deal with Devyn's inevitable freak out.

"Holy fuck," River says. "You must be popular."

"Just an overprotective coworker. A little manic, and she worries too much."

"Humph," he grunts. "Is there anyone else you need to call?"

I frown at his strange tone. "Um, no," I mumble, fighting to ignore the ache in my head. "Not really. I don't need

everyone worrying about me when they should be worrying about April.”

“So, no boyfriend or anything like that?” He asks it quickly and conversationally, but I realize what he’s doing.

He’s fishing for information.

How very *detective* like of him.

In any other instance, I would assume he’s interested. But this is all out of obligation.

I snort. “No.”

“Why is that funny?”

I keep my eyes closed and sigh. “Because the last person I dated was a piece of shit, so I don’t recommend you call him.”

He’s quiet for a long time, long enough that the background noise of his driving starts to serenade me.

“Sleep,” he says softly, his tone almost gentle. “We’ve got a while before we get you home.”

But my eyes open one more time as we stop at a red light. “Wait. How *do* you know where I live?”

This time he turns to look at me. He’s the slightest bit amused, and the corner of his lip turns up. It’s the closest thing to a smile I’ve seen from him.

“From your wallet, Skylar.”

I blink.

“Oh,” I mumble.

Duh, idiot.

He chuckles, and it’s more charming than it should be.

My eyes close, and I drown in his scent, allowing his aroma to soothe me to sleep.

“SKYLAR.” THE VOICE IS MASCULINE, DEEP, AND GENTLE.

I keep my eyes closed, humming contentedly.

It's nice to hear my name spoken like that.

"Skylar." A little louder this time, but still with that soothing cadence.

A delicious scent accompanies the voice.

An *Alpha* scent.

I could drown in it. It excites my body, sending tingles down my spine and spreading across my body, focusing on my aching nipples.

There's a warm hand on my shoulder, and I startle awake, jerking away from River's touch. He flinches and returns his hand to his side, seeming surprised he touched me.

"Shit. Sorry," he mutters, shaking his head. "We're here."

He's parked in my driveway.

My face flushes, and I realize with horror that I'm wet. I can feel the slick in between my thighs, and my panties are damp.

This can't be happening. I hope I didn't leave a smear on his leather seats because I will die.

I have to get out of this car.

I quickly unbuckle my seatbelt and reach for the door handle, but River interrupts me.

"Hang on," he orders, and I freeze.

"But—"

"Let me get the door for you," he interrupts, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

My head spins as I watch him exit the car.

Who is this man?

Hours ago, he was an absolute asshole, and now he's chivalrous.

Jason didn't open car doors for you.

I ignore my inner Omega, who is absolutely delighted at the attention she's receiving.

It's temporary. He's leaving, I remind my inner voice.

I refuse to get my hopes up.

All that matters right now is finding April and taking care of the café.

There's no time for whatever these *feelings* are.

The passenger door opens, and River reaches a hand out to me.

I smooth my skirt down, then take his hand, ignoring the pulsing in my core.

"I can walk," I insist when his hand wraps around my waist.

"Yeah, that's a lie," he chuckles, shutting the passenger door. "Don't bullshit me; it doesn't work."

My short heels *clack* against the driveway as he supports me.

It's entirely too intimate for my liking, and my body responds as if it's never been touched before. Another rush of slick drips into my panties, and I awkwardly shift my thighs together, hoping he doesn't notice.

"Smoking is disgusting," I blurt out. "You should quit."

Apparently, my filter is gone.

I watch as he fiddles with my house key (*how* did he get my house key?) and feel him chuckle as he unlocks the door.

"Sure, babe," he says. "Just for you."

Babe.

My inner Omega does a series of cartwheels.

I need an extra dose of suppressants. I'm reacting too strongly to everything he does.

We step inside the front room, and he lets go of my waist as soon as I kick off my heels. I look up at him, meeting his

green, expressive eyes.

“Okay,” I say, doing my best to not sound exhausted. “Well, thanks. I’m good from here. You said Landon is bringing my car back, right?”

His eyes narrow, and I can tell he sees through my bullshit. “You know you have a concussion, right? You need someone to look out for you.”

I blink. “What?”

“I’m staying here for a bit,” he says simply.

I gawk at his audacity. “You’re doing *what*?”

“I’m staying *here*,” he says slowly, as if I’m a child. “You hit your head. The doctor said you need to have someone around you for at least the next few hours.”

He crosses his arms across his chest, daring me to argue.

“Don’t you have cases to solve?” I snap, irritated. I want him *gone*. The longer he stays here, the more I’ll want him around.

“I do. But you obviously can’t be trusted to be by yourself without getting run over, so here we are.”

I gape at him. His expression gives nothing away, but I can tell by the subtle, sweet change in his scent that he’s not being malicious.

He’s joking, which somehow makes it far worse.

“You’re impossible,” I sigh.

“You’re not the first person who has said that,” he confirms as I walk away from him and head into my kitchen. It’s connected to the front room, so with only a few steps I’m at my tile counters, doing my best to organize everything so it’s at least a little presentable.

Not that I care what he thinks.

But still, I don’t want to pass out and wake up to a messy kitchen.

Especially if I’m going to work in the morning.

Not that he needs to know that.

River follows me and leans against the counter, watching me as I open a plastic container to start putting all the extra macarons away.

I pretend that he's not staring. I try not to imagine him analyzing my kitchen, judging me based on how messy, unkempt, and dusted with flour everything is.

I use a paper towel to mop up some empty coffee grounds, and when I turn around, he's only feet behind me, picking up the container of macarons.

"Can I help you?" I ask, uncomfortable at the invasion of my space.

He was so quiet about it too, which makes it worse.

It's hot, my inner Omega says. He's like a shadow. He can sneak up on you whenever.

I silently tell her to shut up.

River drums his fingers on the top of the container, frowning. "Those cookies you made earlier were really fucking delicious," he grumbles, as if admitting defeat.

My heart thumps wildly in my chest. "Oh, you mean the *bribes*?" I sneer, walking away from him. I turn my attention to the espresso machine in the corner, my face flaming and tears threatening to fill my eyes. I close each bag of coffee grounds and line them neatly up against the backsplash of the counter.

I've always been proud of my kitchen. Even though the house I live in is small, I made sure the kitchen was the star of the show.

It's where I do my best work, and when organized, it looks like it could be in a magazine.

Obsessive organization is one of my newest coping mechanisms for dealing with April's disappearance, and having River invade my safe space with his presence does strange things to me.

“Hey, Skylar. Look at me.”

I don't want to look at him. I want to stay where I am, with my back to him and the image of my beloved espresso machine turning blurry.

“*Skylar.*”

Resigned, I turn to face him. I pray the tears aren't visible, but they fall from my face before I can hide them.

River is nothing but a blur of leather jacket and dark hair.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper.

“*You're sorry?*” he says and takes a step towards me. “I—fuck, I'm fucked up, okay? I'm not good at this stuff. I don't do this *stuff.*”

Before I can ask what “stuff” he means, he's in my space and wrapping his arms around me.

I immediately bury my face in his chest and relax in his hold.

His grip is tight around me and I can barely breathe with his chest pressed into my face, but I sob out my sorrow in his arms.

Part of me is mortified, but the other part is too drained to care.

So, we stand in my kitchen with the fluorescent lights illuminating us as I fall apart in his arms.

He's murmuring something to me, but I can't hear it. All I feel is the ache in my head and the searing pain in my chest.

I allow myself to be comforted, even if it will hurt in the end.

Any second now, I expect him to turn back into the River from hours earlier, when he wanted nothing to do with me.

But something incredible happens instead.

Just like Landon, his chest vibrates, and an Alpha purr resonates through him. Combined with his scent, it's so

comforting that I sag my weight against his chest, allowing him to embrace me fully.

SKYLAR

EVENTUALLY, MY TEARS SUBSIDE, AND I PULL AWAY FROM River. I'm embarrassed at the mess of tears I left on his shirt.

But the cry felt good. It was a release I've needed for weeks. The sorrow of losing April has been eating me alive, and the lack of sleep and food has left both my mind and body drained.

I clear my throat to break the silence and look away from River. "Um, I should get to bed. There's food in the kitchen and a bathroom down the hall. Eat whatever you want. Goodnight."

He frowns and looks like he wants to say something, but I push past him before he can and make a beeline to my room. I shut and lock the door behind myself, then collapse on my bed.

Everything in me screams to go back out to him. He may be good at reading people, but working in customer service long enough has helped me figure out personality traits as well.

He's stubborn, guarded, and probably touch starved, like me. I showed him my vulnerability, and instead of being an adult about it, I ran into my room and locked the door.

What did I think he was going to do? Follow me in here?

I can practically see April rolling her eyes at me.

I make my way to the bathroom connected to my room, wincing as I limp onto the cold tile.

And when I slide my underwear down my thighs, I grimace.

The slick pad I wore is *drenched*. Thankfully, I wore shapewear underneath as well to add extra support, but I still shouldn't have been that wet from simple interactions with Alphas.

Just to be safe, I take my suppressant dose before I forget, swallowing the pill down dry.

Then I do my best to wash both Landon's and River's scents off me. I scrub, lather, rinse, and repeat, using my raspberry scented body wash.

But the slick doesn't stop, continuing to dribble down my thighs in rivulets.

I pray that River can't smell me and that my suppressants are working as they should.

My mating gland itches and I pat it gently, but squirm at the sensation.

It's overly sensitive.

My Heats have been less and less frequent since *Jason*, but all the signs are there that one is coming soon.

How inconvenient.

I close my eyes, inhale the steam, and almost lose my balance. I can't even imagine what would have happened if I didn't catch myself—would River have run in here and seen my naked body drenched in water and slick?

Don't think about it!

I force myself to hurry up and rinse, then slowly step out of the shower. I wrap myself in a plush towel and lean against the counter, exhausted. I do my best to brush my teeth, then slump against the tile.

Maybe I shouldn't go to work tomorrow. I'm not sure how long I can last on my feet.

But I definitely don't want to stay home, alone with my thoughts.

I collapse onto my bed, groaning as my body sinks into the specialty mattress made for Omegas.

It was the best investment I've ever made, even though Jason had scoffed at the price tag.

He certainly didn't complain when he slept over or when I was in Heat.

The bastard.

I have a sudden mental image of River and Landon kicking the shit out of him and chuckle stupidly at my imagination.

All I want to do is rest, and the way the specialty material caresses my back, it makes it almost impossible to get back up.

But I need my phone, which is still in my purse in River's car.

Which means I have to face him after running away like a child.

With a groan, I roll out of bed and dress quickly in loose cotton pants and an oversized grey shirt. Taking a deep breath, I unlock my bedroom door and walk out into the hallway, ready to make an apology.

But a soft, deep rumbling comes from the front room, and when I turn the corner, my eyes widen.

River is asleep, sprawled out on my couch.

He's *snoring*.

He's so tall his legs hang over the end of the couch, his black sneakers suspended in the air.

With his head against the cream pillow, he looks peaceful. His leather jacket is draped over the back of the couch and his black shirt has ridden up, exposing a bit of his pale torso.

He looks *hot*.

I stare at him for a concerning amount of time, my mouth open, taking in the sight. His cell phone sits on his lap, and one hand is behind his head, as if he was propping himself up.

He didn't intend to fall asleep, that much is obvious.

I decide not to wake him up. Based on the dark circles and bloodshot eyes, he needs sleep.

And I'd rather not face him after our awkward moment earlier.

I spot my purse on the kitchen counter and sigh in relief. I fish through it, find my phone, then head back into my room.

A quick call to Devyn and a few reassurances later, I have a plan in place for tomorrow.

Devyn will pick me up for my closing shift. And by then, River will be gone, and I'll never have to speak to him or Landon again.

But my phone buzzes, and there's a message from a number I don't recognize.

Hey, Skylar, it's Landon. Checking in to make sure you got home safe. Be sure to rest.

I can't stop the grin that spreads across my face or the butterflies in my stomach. I type my response quickly.

Thank you, I'm on it. When are you picking up River and bringing my car back? I'm fine on my own. It feels weird to have him babysitting me.

Also, the longer River is here, the more I'll want him to stay. I shift my thighs uncomfortably as I watch the text bubbles on my phone pop up, then stop.

No response.

I stop waiting for a reply and set the alarm on my phone. I'm exhausted and I don't have the mental energy to deal with this anymore.

As I stand to shut my door, I hear River's soft snoring again.

I can't imagine he's that comfortable contorted on my couch without even a blanket on him.

Before I can second-guess myself, I make my way to the closet. I stare at the top shelf for a good minute, looking at my folded and unused nesting blankets.

I haven't brought them out in more than a year. They're luxurious, comfortable, and the softest material I've ever felt.

I would argue that they're the best freaking blankets on the planet.

I don't have a throw on the couch. There are only the two pillows, and they're not *that* comfortable.

Just do it. It doesn't have to mean anything.

I pull my favorite lilac colored blanket from the shelf and gather it in my hands. Before I lose my courage, I pad back into the front room to face River's sleeping form.

He hasn't moved. His eyes are closed, his breathing is deep and even, and he looks peaceful. Even his scent is muted—there's not as much spice. It's gentle, and almost as welcoming as Landon's.

It has to mean something that someone so guarded can sleep like that around someone else.

It doesn't matter. He probably never sleeps, and this is his only opportunity. You're not special.

I gently drape the lilac fabric over him, keeping my eyes on his face. His dark stubble complements his strong features, and his hair has fallen halfway into his eyes. His lips twitch as the blanket covers him.

He looks much less intimidating as he sleeps under my blanket.

I don't linger long, though. I need to sleep, and my body aches with need. If he opens his eyes and sees me staring at him, he'll think I've lost my mind.

But before I head to bed, I do something foolish.

I carefully pull his leather jacket off the top of the couch and hold it to my chest. Turning away quickly, I hurry back to bed, clutching my treasure tightly.

I can't believe what I've done.

What if he wakes up *right* now, and sees that I've snatched his jacket like some needy, desperate Omega?

I should give it back immediately.

But as I sit on the edge of the bed, hugging the leather material, I can't bring myself to do it.

It smells like River.

Like the hug we shared an hour ago, like the feeling of his arms wrapped around my waist as I cried quietly into his chest.

It smells like *Alpha*.

I whimper, burying my face in the jacket, and inhale deeply.

Two things happen at once.

My body becomes a live wire, with all the energy focusing directly on my cunt.

Second, an absolute mess forms between my legs.

My Omega awakens with a roar, ready for attention and tired of being put on the backburner.

The concussion must have drained the last bit of my self restraint, because I turn *feral*.

I fall back against my mattress with a *thud* and wrap myself in my bed sheets, gently thrusting against the air, desperate for friction.

My nipples pebble with need, and I rub River's jacket down my chest, the roughness of the leather against my sensitive skin making me hiss.

His scent swirls around me, and before I can second guess it, I'm shoving the sleeve of his jacket in my mouth like an animal and sucking on the leather.

Somewhere, rational Skylar dies of shame.

But she's a mere memory now, and as the taste of River's scent floods my mouth, I imagine it's his cock.

I groan at the thought, and my free hand that's not caressing the jacket travels under the covers and under the waistband of my cotton pants. My cunt is soaked, and it takes less than a few rough circles on my clit before I'm clenching my teeth down on the sleeve of River's jacket and *screaming*.

I haven't had an orgasm in months, and this one makes my hips arch and my entire body tremble.

It's incredible. I feel myself squirting, soaking my pants and making a mess on my bed.

Thankfully, the mattress topper is made of a special material that's extra absorbent for slick, and is much easier to clean than a normal mattress.

The pleasure lasts for at least half a minute, and by the time I'm done, River's jacket sleeve is soaked in my spit and bite marks are embedded in the rich leather.

Catching my breath, I realize what I've done. Post orgasm clarity hits me, dulling some of the ache in my head, and horror consumes me.

I have to give River's jacket back. He can never know what just occurred.

But I need to rest. I'm still catching my breath, and my limbs are heavy.

Just five minutes of rest. I'll set an alarm, I think to myself.

I close my eyes before I can grab my phone, though.

Exhausted, I drift off to sleep before I have the chance to clean up or return the detective's jacket.

LANDON

I DON'T GET JEALOUS.

And I certainly don't get insecure.

But when I read Skylar's text and I realize River is staying at her place, I want to tear my hair out.

I thought he would drop her off and spend the night in a hotel.

It's stupid, really. I should be glad he's there—Skylar has someone with her, and he's needed some type of distraction from this case. Even if he can't stand me, I still need a partner that can mentally show up for work.

Which is why I had him drive Skylar home. And I'll have a chance to see her, too, when I pick him up. I can say goodbye to her, and tell her it was nice to meet her, and thank her for the cookies.

With River away, it gives me time to organize our notes and have some peace and quiet in our building.

The insufferable detective barely sleeps. He prefers to spend his nights in the office, and occasionally I'll catch him slumped over on his desk, exhaustion finally winning.

Tonight, I'm alone, and I sip on a cup of coffee as I compare notes.

But I'm distracted, and I do something I would chastise anyone else for—I utilize our resources for personal use.

I look up Skylar.

I don't do anything too invasive—she deserves her privacy, still—but I check for any criminal records.

Nothing. She's clean.

I stare at the picture on her driver's license too long. The smile she gives the camera is different than the small one she gifted me—the Omega I saw today had a sad, defeated expression behind her eyes.

It's a look I've seen far too many times on people.

Skylar is suffering, and there's nothing I can do to rectify it.

I don't get attached to people—that's one thing River and I have in common. We both dedicate ourselves to our job and put in more time than most people.

But if I had the time...

I would want to help Skylar.

My Alpha wants an Omega badly. I want to provide, I want to nourish, I want to *knot*.

I want all the things that this job makes difficult to have.

I continue to stare at her photo like a lovesick little boy, my cock growing hard.

But I won't debase her like that, even if the thought of touching myself while staring at her photo is tempting.

I close the browser window and sigh, running my hand through my hair. I need to sleep, too. I'm supposed to pick River up in the morning, but it would be helpful if he answered any of my texts.

Unless he's with Skylar and they're...

No. It's not my business.

But the ache in my chest grows, and I realize how attached I've already become to this Omega.

She brought us *cookies*.

No one does that for us.

I look for the box they came in, but it's not at my desk anymore.

I frown.

The only people that saw that box were me, her, and River...

Standing up from my chair, I make my way down the hallway and into River's office.

Sitting on his desk chair is the white box, with half the macarons eaten.

I scoff.

In moving the box off the chair, the armrest nudges his computer mouse, and his monitor lights up.

He must have forgotten to lock his computer.

But *Skylar Bloom* shows on the screen, and I realize we were both doing the same thing.

He had pulled up the police report of her friend's disappearance, which was filled out by his cousin.

I study it quickly, then sigh.

It's a missing persons case we can't afford to take on, yet now both of us are intrigued.

"Shit," I murmur to myself, as I absentmindedly pluck a cookie from the box. It's warm vanilla flavor, and it tastes *exactly* like how Skylar smelled.

Fuck.

I am *not* about to become hard because of a cookie.

But I imagine her slick tastes the same way.

I grip the edge of the desk, steadying my breathing as I swallow.

I *want* her.

I want her so badly it hurts. My cock *begs* to be touched, but I ignore it as best I can and hurry out of River's office.

It's time to get some sleep.

Grabbing my jacket, I make my way out of the building and into the parking lot, where I pull out my phone.

I may be stretched thin, but there's possibly one person that could help Skylar find her friend.

I know his instinct will be to say no, because he's almost as unbearable as River. But it's possible that once he meets her, he'll be just as affected as we both were.

So, I send a text to someone that wants nothing to do with me.

One of the greatest detectives I've ever met.

Vincent.

RIVER

I WAKE UP TO THE SMELL OF COFFEE AND THE INTOXICATING aroma of vanilla.

For a moment, I forget where I am, and the unrecognizable high vaulted ceilings make me panic.

I subconsciously reach for a weapon that isn't there until reality hits me.

Skylar.

I sit up with a start as a lilac blanket falls off my shoulders and pools in my lap. I stare at it dumbfoundedly and rub the material between my fingers.

It's a nesting blanket.

What the *fuck* am I doing under Skylar's nesting blanket?

Did she put this on me?

My inner Alpha roars, and my cock turns to steel.

The blanket smells like pure Skylar, a rich vanilla, along with a subtle hint of fabric softener.

I haven't been near a nesting blanket, much less a nest, in years and this is just *cruel*.

If she knew what was going on in my head, she would have *never* placed that material near me.

Carefully, I move the blanket off myself and fold it neatly, placing it on the opposite end of the couch.

What the *fuck*.

“Good morning,” a gentle voice sounds, and I turn to see Skylar peering at me from behind the kitchen counter.

My mouth turns dry.

She’s in an oversized white shirt that slouches off her shoulders and shows off her neck. My eyes dart to her pink mating gland before I can stop myself, and I clear my throat and force my dick to calm down.

“Hey,” I croak. “Sorry about falling asleep, I meant to stay up—”

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” she says quickly, dropping her gaze and pushing a white mug towards the end of the counter. “I have coffee if you want some. And I put out an extra toothbrush in the bathroom if you need it.”

This is so fucking awkward I want to scream. It’s like the morning after, but we didn’t even fuck.

I dig my nails into my palms, hard enough that the pain grounds me.

I shouldn’t be here. She’s a beautiful distraction, but I don’t have time for this.

Yet all I want to do is stay here and wake up to the smell of Skylar and coffee every damn day.

This is the most rested I’ve been in months.

“Yeah, thanks,” I say, clearing my throat. “Wait. Do you know where my jacket is?”

I left it on the top of the couch, but it’s not there anymore.

Her face turns pink and her scent spikes.

Interesting.

“Yeah, I spilled coffee on it when I was moving it. I’m sorry,” she says evenly, staring at the coffee mug. “I tried to

blot it with a towel, but it didn't help. I'll have it dry cleaned for you," she adds quickly.

She's fucking *lying*, and judging by the look on her face, she knows that I know.

I could push it. I really could, because now I want to know what the *fuck* happened to my jacket.

"No need," I say instead, standing up. I'm sure I look like a mess; my hair is everywhere, and my shirt is ruffled, but her scent sweetens as I approach her. "I'll just use your bathroom, then see where the fuck Landon is."

She nods, still not meeting my eyes. "Okay," she says. "I have work in about an hour, anyway."

I raise an eyebrow and walk closer to her. "You're not going to work," I say evenly. "You have a *concussion*."

Her face flames, but she still won't look at me. Instead, she snatches one of the coffee mugs off the counter and gently blows on the top of it. "I'm aware," she mutters, cradling the cup. "But I have a café to run."

I want to throttle her—she's just as stubborn as she was yesterday. I bring the other cup of coffee to my lips, staring her down. "If you act reckless, you'll end up back in the hospital. You need to take care of yourself."

Finally, she meets my gaze. She stares me down and does her best to look tough, despite the enhanced size of her pupils.

She's aroused.

I look like shit and sound like an asshole, yet somehow, she's still attracted to me?

My head spins.

"Because you're the picture of self-care," she says instead, her pink tongue darting out to lick her lips. "Mister *'I'll sleep when I'm dead*.'"

I rage inside.

Her safety is not your concern, I try to remind myself.

But my inner Alpha, possessive and unhinged, has finally clawed its way out.

And if I never see her again after today, I *need* to know that she's taking care of herself.

"Do you just not care what happens to you?" I snap, placing my mug back on her counter harder than necessary. "Aren't you trying to find your friend? Or are you too wrapped up in feeling sorry for yourself?"

Pot, meet kettle, I think to myself, already cursing my choice of words.

Her mouth falls open, and her scent sours. Gone is the vanilla; it's replaced with a tart lemon. It's still fucking mouthwatering, though.

Her rage makes me hard, despite my own frustrations toward her.

"You know what? *Fuck. You,*" she says quietly, looking bewildered. "You practically laughed in my face yesterday when I asked for your help. And I don't even know why you're still here. Get out of my house, *Detective*. You know nothing about me. I'll reach out to Landon myself for my car."

Before I can reply, she's exiting the open kitchen and turning down the hall.

Fuck.

I place my hand to my forehead, anticipating a migraine. Then I grab my phone and call Landon.

"Where are you, asshole?" I snap into the phone.

"Good morning to you too," he says evenly. "Did you have a good evening?"

I hear the sound of a shower running and sigh. "Sure. How far out are you?"

"Well, given the fact that it's seven in the morning and you never reached out to me before now, I would say more than a good two hours."

I fucking *hate* him.

I can't leave until he brings Skylar's car back, since he'll need a ride.

"You're lucky I don't just drive off without waiting for you. Hurry up," I snap.

"You could. I suppose I could just stay with Skylar the whole day."

A growl sounds in my throat before I can stop it, and I hear Landon chuckle.

"I knew it. You *do* like her," he says.

"It's not your business," I snarl. "Stay out of my personal affairs."

He sighs, and I hear the *beep* of a car key being placed into an ignition. "Fair enough. Is she at least resting?"

I scoff. "No. She's going to work, apparently." I pace through her kitchen, trying to walk off my nervous energy.

"What?" And for the first time, I hear Landon falter. "She can't go to work. She can't be on her feet for that long."

"No shit, dumbass. But unless you want to tie her down, there's not much we can do." I pause at the mental image my suggestion entails.

She would look lovely restrained, handcuffs around her wrists...

Landon's voice breaks my train of thought. "Try to convince her."

"I *did*."

"Did you? Or did you just yell at her?"

"She's not a fucking *hostage*. I'm not going to negotiate with her," I argue. "She's the most stubborn Omega I've ever met."

There's silence on the other end of the line, except for the clicking of a turn signal. "I'll be there as soon as I can," he says. "Try to be nice, for once."

“I’m the nicest fucking person alive,” I hiss as he hangs up.

Asshole!

Speaking to him makes my blood boil.

But it’s obvious he wants the best for Skylar, too, so I’m not as mad as I could be.

Her shower is still running, and I’m full of anxious energy.

I don’t have the time to care about her.

Yet here I am, absorbing every detail of her that I can before I leave.

There’s a photo of her and another woman with light brown hair on her fridge—April.

In the photo, Skylar’s eyes are bright, and her smile is stunning.

I commit it to memory.

If only the police department here could spare a competent detective for her, then she wouldn’t have had to drive for hours, armed with a pretty face and cookies, just to have someone help her.

I studied my cousin’s report before I met Landon at the hospital.

Ben technically did everything right—there’s not much they can do, given how limited their reach is.

Still...

She deserves better.

I survey the kitchen, careful not to touch anything, and just observe.

I deciphered Skylar without even trying, and I saw a frightening amount of myself in her.

She throws herself into her work—the perfect distraction to not have to deal with any personal issues.

The dark circles around her eyes told me all I needed to know about her sleeping habits, and judging by the number of coffee bags lined up on her counter, I'm sure she's also fueled by the stuff.

She's stubborn and defensive.

But to be fair, most people are around me.

Then why would she cover me with her nesting blanket? It's a selfless, vulnerable thing to offer.

It unnerves me.

I make my way out of the kitchen and peer down the hallway. There's a closed door at the end, which I assume is her bedroom. On the left is the bathroom she mentioned, and I enter it and shut the door behind me.

I catch myself in the reflection as I turn on the lights.

I look like *shit*.

Looking in the mirror is just another reminder of my failures.

If I wasn't in her house, I'd punch the reflection looking back at me.

The pain would ground me, and no one would be the wiser.

Instead, I scowl and wash my face, grateful for the products Skylar left out for me.

I was an asshole to her, and she was still kind.

Omega...

My inner Alpha stirs awake, wanting nothing more than to knock down her door and take her into my arms again.

I want...

Knock. Knock. Knock.

There's a frantic knocking at her front door, accompanied by two muffled voices.

The shower has stopped running, so I assume Skylar will answer the door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I rinse my mouth, then head back to the front room, my headache growing as the incessant knocking continues.

“Skylar?” a panicked voice says. “Skylar, open the door!”

I unlock her front door and pull it open.

There’s a young Omega facing me, her eyes shiny with tears.

Only she’s not alone.

My cousin stands next to her, a look of confusion etched in his features.

“River?” he asks cautiously. “I...can we come in?”

Something is seriously wrong.

I nod and step aside to let them in at the same time Landon pulls up to the driveway in her car.

Great.

SKYLAR

I DIDN'T NEED ANOTHER SHOWER, BUT I REFUSED TO LET River see me cry.

It also doesn't hurt to wash off his scent again.

I don't care what he says—I'm going to work.

If I don't, I don't know what I'll do.

I can't rest.

Every time I close my eyes, April's there, and fear claws at my throat.

I spend more time than necessary in the shower, trying to figure out how to give River his jacket back.

What was I thinking? I can tell he didn't buy my lie, either.

I'm sure it still smells like me, even though I spot cleaned as much of it as I could and rubbed the teeth marks out.

It's still in my bedroom, draped over my desk chair.

And my lower stomach keeps cramping as slick pours out of me.

Damn him.

"Do you just not care what happens to you?"

His accusation from earlier still stings, because he's right.

Part of me doesn't care.

"Or are you too wrapped up in feeling sorry for yourself?"

I grit my teeth and try not to cry as I finish washing up.

His words won't matter.

He doesn't know me, and neither does Landon.

But my inner Omega is awakened now, and she wants nothing more than to keep spending time with both of them.

She wants to drown in their scents. She wants to pull out all her nesting blankets from the closet and create a giant, comfortable space on her bed where she can invite both detectives in.

Letting out a frustrated growl, I turn off the water and step out of the shower. I wrap myself in my fluffiest towel, vigorously drying myself off. The fabric grazes my mating gland and I yelp.

It's even more sensitive than yesterday.

"Shit," I murmur, as a violent cramp pulses through my womb. I grip the bathroom counter for support and breathe through the pain.

This Heat is going to be *bad*, and it's all those stupid Alphas' faults.

I open my medicine cabinet and down a painkiller made specifically for my Heat. Then, I dress quickly in faded dark jeans and a basic black shirt that's seen better days.

It's perfect for work, given that I'll likely be covered in coffee by the end of my shift.

I took a longer shower than normal, but then I stay in my room like a coward, unable to face River and his accusations.

When I can't wait any longer and it's time for me to leave for the café, I pull my damp hair up into a bun, then grab River's jacket off my chair, my face flaming. Taking a deep breath, I open my bedroom door and walk down the hallway.

I recognize Landon's scent before I even turn the corner, but my eyes widen when I finally see them.

Devyn and Ben both stand in my front room, along with the detectives. Devyn's eyes are red and puffy, and Ben speaks quietly with Landon as River scowls.

Everyone freezes when I enter the room.

Something is terribly wrong.

They found her; she's fucking dead. You didn't do enough

"What happened?" My voice is low and eerily calm. "Where is she?"

She's dead. This is your fault. You didn't check on her that evening—

Devyn puts her face in her hands and sobs. Ben pulls her close and murmurs something in her ear while she nods.

Landon and River both look at me. River's lips are pulled into a thin line, and Landon sighs.

"They found April's car," he says simply. "

"...okay," I say. "But they didn't find *her*." My skin tingles with chills. "They didn't find her," I repeat, my eyes burning into Landon's.

He shakes his head. "They didn't, Skylar. But..."

Devyn lets out another sob, and I can feel River's gaze on me as I glare at Landon. "But *what*?"

"But it's not a good sign," he says apologetically.

I blink, not comprehending. "Well? Was she in the car?"

"No," River says. "Ben found it and made a report."

Both Landon and River keep staring at me, and finally, I snap.

"If you're not going to help us, you can *leave*," I snarl, tossing River's jacket at him. "Because I have things I need to do. Has anyone told Tammy? I need to visit her."

I make a mental list. I can call the news stations again, make social media posts and print out more flyers.

I'll create a sense of urgency. Now people that didn't care before may suddenly want to be involved.

I'll make more cookies. I can do that.

I can control that.

"Excuse me," I breathe, pushing past River and into the kitchen. The chills rush up my body, and I catch myself shaking as I pull open the notebook of recipes and flip to one I think might do well in a bake drive.

Someone is calling my name, but my head hurts too much to respond back.

Vanishing Red Velvet.

April's Apricots.

I can get some apricot preserves—

A warm hand touches my shoulder, and I shriek. I turn and crane my neck up to face Landon, his face is etched in concern.

"Skylar," he says, his voice low. "You can't go anywhere right now. You're still healing."

I push at his chest, my fingertips connecting with solid muscle under his perfect, crease free white button up. "*You* don't get to tell me what to do. You don't know me, and you certainly aren't—helping—"

The air is sucked out of my lungs. My teeth chatter and my hands are shaky as Landon steps closer and grips my shoulders.

"Look at me. Skylar, *look at me.*"

Devyn says my name, but I keep my gaze locked on Landon, who relaxes his grip. "Breathe. Keep your eyes on me," he orders.

My inner Omega is all too eager to obey.

I take in a shaky breath, taking in his scent. It's a grounding, soothing essence, and my shaking stops within four breaths.

"Good," he praises. "Keep looking at me. Just me."

I nod. "Just you," I repeat softly.

I have the frightening urge to reach up and run my hand through his hair.

"Skylar," Ben says. I turn my head away from Landon finally. "Skylar, I already told Tammy. And I'm organizing another search near the area where we found the car."

"You're not alone in this," Devyn pipes up, sniffing. "It's not all on you."

I glance at River, who nods slowly.

"You can't drive," River adds. "We won't allow it."

I struggle out of Landon's hold and sidestep both Devyn and Ben. I pull open the front door and step out into the driveway, desperate to get away from them.

Why do they care so much? It makes tears spring to my eyes.

They act like they care, but they're just going to leave.

Just like April left. Just like Jason left.

Everyone leaves.

I sit in my driveway and wipe at my face. I can't get sucked into the spiral. If I do, I may drown in sorrow and never resurface.

"Skylar?"

I hear my front door shut, then turn to see Landon slowly walking over to me. His perfect features are pulled into a frown, and I look away to stare out into my neighborhood.

I've always loved this place. It's small, but still charming.

And now it'll be stained with the scent of Alphas that I'll never see again.

He sits down next to me, stretching his long legs out on the driveway as he sighs.

I won't look at him.

I want him too much.

"Just leave before you make this worse," I whisper. "I don't have it in me, Landon."

I can feel him staring at me, but I refuse to glance his way.

His scent caresses me, making me want to collapse in his arms.

"I'm just so *tired*," I whisper, tears forming in my eyes. A car slowly drives by, and I focus my attention on the vehicle instead of the Alpha sitting next to me.

Everything hurts. My head, my joints, my heart, my *soul*.

The wind blows softly, and Landon lets out a soft sigh.

His hand reaches out, and I watch, stunned, as he takes mine.

My inner Omega weeps at the contact, and I shame myself for being so needy.

"Don't—" I say, but he simply interlaces our fingers. I gasp at the intimate contact and turn to meet his expression.

His dark eyes are determined, and I find myself gazing at his full lips.

"We're going to help you," he says solemnly. "River and I."

I shake my head, confused. "But—you can't—"

"We can make time," he says, squeezing my hand. "It won't be a lot, and it can't be all the time, but we want to help."

I stay frozen, my eyes locked on his.

"I think the concussion is making me imagine things," I whisper.

He cracks a tiny smile, and his scent intensifies, notes of cedarwood complementing the earthy pine. “No,” he chuckles. “This is very real.”

“What—what made you change your mind?” I stammer, my eyes widening.

His brown eyes burn into mine. “You,” he says quietly. “You are what changed our minds.”

Tears of disbelief spill from my eyes.

They’re going to help me.

A weight has been lifted from my shoulders, and I let out a laugh, smiling as I cry.

“I could kiss you right now,” I choke out, shaking my head. “I...I don’t know how to thank you.”

He quirks an eyebrow and brings his other hand to my face. His fingers wipe away a tear at my cheek. “That smile is worth it,” he promises me, and my chest tightens.

I seriously debate kissing him.

Would he pull away? Would he rescind his offer?

I wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his chest, and he responds immediately. He embraces me, wrapping his strong arms around me, as I laugh into his chest.

“Thank you, thank you,” I murmur over and over.

He keeps me in his arms, rocking me gently as his chest vibrates.

Landon’s purr echoes throughout my body, soothing the throbbing in my head.

I inhale deeply, his scent caressing my body.

Alpha Alpha Alpha!

I don’t know how long I stay in the driveway with him. All I know is that his touch is just as addictive as River’s.

And now, I get more time with both of them.

A throat clears behind us, and I tilt my head to see River, now wearing his jacket.

Judging by the smolder in his gaze, he has some idea of what I did with it.

I quickly untangle myself from Landon and stand back up, swallowing nervously as Landon follows suit.

But River doesn't say a word to me. Instead, his gaze falls to Landon. "You ready?" he asks him.

Landon nods. "She knows now." Then he turns back to me and smiles. "Right?"

I can't help but smile back. "Yes. Thank you again. You have no idea what it means to me. I'll make you a million cookies. I'll bake you anything you want."

Landon chuckles, but River gives me a smirk. "You've done more than enough already," he says. "You don't have to convince us."

Oh, he definitely knows what I did with his jacket.

Landon watches me carefully, then looks back at River, frowning.

"River, what did you—"

Then Devyn appears, her eyes glassy. Landon doesn't finish his sentence, and instead directs his next words to her. "Will you make sure she doesn't go back to work in the meantime? She needs to rest, and I can't be around her twenty-four seven, as much as I would like to."

My inner Omega screams with joy as River scowls, noticing my reaction.

Is he...*jealous*?

Devyn nods. "Of course. Thank you again for everything."

River mumbles a goodbye to me as his fingers play with the sleeve of his jacket. As the detectives drive away, I stay in my driveway, dumbfounded.

They're going to help me.

But not only that, for the first time in a long time, I have a crush.

On two Alphas.

LANDON

RIVER SMELLS LIKE *SKYLAR*, ALL SWEET AND VANILLA, AND I fight the urge to growl.

I'm not envious—I like to think I'm above acting like a teenager.

But something is different about him.

I sit in the passenger seat of his car, and the vehicle is nothing but musk and sugar.

Nothing but delicious Omega.

“How was it?” I ask as evenly as I can. “Did she sleep okay?”

He chuckles to himself, a smirk forming on his face. “Yeah. She did.”

“I didn't expect you to spend the night,” I add.

That gets his attention. “What are you saying?” he asks, suddenly irritated. “Of course I spent the night. She had a fucking *concussion*.”

I remain silent.

We pull out of the neighborhood, and suddenly it clicks for him. “You think I fucked her?”

I shrug. “It's not my business if you did.”

It is my business, though. Everything about her is slowly becoming my business.

What the hell is wrong with me?

River yanks the wheel so hard my head jostles. “You piece of *shit*. You think I would take advantage of her like that?”

“Can you stop throwing a tantrum for two seconds? You’re going to get us both killed!” I yell at him.

He corrects the car and grips the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turn white. “Listen, asshole,” he growls. “Think what you want of me, but I don’t want *any* harm to come to her. And I sure as shit would never do something like that. To fucking *anyone*,” he snaps.

I sigh. We may not get along, but I’ve worked with River long enough to know that even if he’s insufferable, he does have morals.

“I’m sorry,” I say honestly. “That was a fucked-up thing for me to say.”

He huffs, then nods. “Sure.”

We drive on in silence until I receive a text.

“Hey, they caught a kid selling *O* and want us to come talk to him. The location is only forty-five minutes away,” I say.

River sits up straighter. “Just tell me how to get there. I’m ready.”

I’M NOT SURPRISED WHEN WE SHOW UP TO A SUBURBAN neighborhood. The kid is a high schooler and doesn’t know the power of what’s in his little plastic baggie.

O is powerful and deadly. It mimics the euphoric feelings of an Alpha’s Rut and is laced with synthetic Omega pheromones.

The stuff has shown up everywhere in the past three months and is responsible for an alarming number of deaths.

They haven't arrested the kid yet. It gives us time to question him.

River barrels past the police officer standing in the doorway of the home. I glance at a middle-aged woman, presumably the teenager's mother, who looks stricken with grief.

"What will happen to him?" I hear her ask the officer.

I should catch up to River before he terrifies the teenager, but my thoughts are consumed with Skylar.

I've barely known her two days, yet already I want nothing more than to just inhale her scent—the sweet musk mixed with vanilla.

As if on cue, my phone buzzes.

Hey. What kind of cookies do you like?

I can't help but grin.

You should be resting, Miss Bloom.

The last thing she needs to worry about is what flavors I enjoy.

Although, anything Skylar flavored would be nice—

"Landon," River says, snapping me out of it. "We going to do this or not?"

I catch a gawky teenage boy sitting on his parent's couch, scared out of his mind, while River stares him down.

Our schtick works well. River terrifies them, then I come in and coax answers out.

Once they find out we're not the police, usually the softer ones come around.

And this kid doesn't look like he'll put up a fight.

My phone buzzes again.

Don't tell me what to do, Detective. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Now answer the question.

I fight a smile, and both River and the kid stare at me.

Vanilla. It's a new favorite of mine.

I text my answer quickly, then put my phone back into my pocket.

I do my best to push her out of my mind, but it doesn't work.

She's in the back of my brain. If I'm not focused on work, I'm focused on *her*.

Take Omega. Claim Omega. Help Omega.

Save Omega.

As we leave the neighborhood, River decides to start a conversation for once.

"So..." he trails off, and I glance at him.

"So?"

He drums his fingers on the steering wheel, scowling. "How much have you researched her friend?"

"Who?" I know he's talking about Skylar, but making him squirm about it entertains me.

Maybe he has a valid reason to hate me, after all.

"The Omega," he grunts.

"Skylar," I correct him, and I can hear his teeth grinding.

"Yes," he growls. "You've looked at the police report, right?"

"Of course. I also researched her friend. No wonder Skylar came to us for help. There's really nothing on April."

"Exactly. Well, I was thinking," River continues to tap the steering wheel, staring ahead. "We could take turns. Visiting Isleton and debriefing Skylar on our investigation."

"Debriefing her," I deadpan.

He narrows his eyes and grips the wheel tighter.

"When's the last time you actually tried to date someone?" I ask him pointedly, fighting a laugh. "You want to go all the way out there just to *debrief* her?"

“And they say I’m the asshole,” he mutters under his breath.

“You are,” I say simply. “But yes. We’ll make sure she’s not alone anymore in this.”

My phone buzzes again, and it’s Skylar.

Vanilla is pretty boring. Are you sure you’re not more adventurous than that?

She’s much more flirtatious over text, and it makes me smile.

Like I said, vanilla is my new favorite. I’ve been inspired recently.

River glances over at my phone. “Are you texting her?”

“Yup,” I say, not caring about his jealousy.

Care to elaborate, detective?

I grin.

Nope. Not until I know you won’t slap me if I tell you why.

Yes, this is unprofessional.

No, I don’t do this.

But here I am, breaking all my rules.

Maybe this is how River normally feels—he does what he wants and likes to exist in the blurred grey lines.

My phone buzzes again, and I anticipate her response.

But it’s from a different number.

Fuck you.

The fact that he even replied at all is a good sign.

“I asked Vincent to help us,” I say casually, knowing it’s better to let River know now than later.

His response is exactly what I expected.

“You did fucking *what?*”

SKYLAR

“YOU’RE SMILING,” TAMMY SAYS GENTLY.

“No, I’m not,” I reply as I sip a cup of tea, forcing myself to frown. I’d prefer espresso instead, but it’s eight in the evening, and I don’t need to be wired until three in the morning.

Especially when I’m officially banned from the café for a week.

“It’s nice to see it again,” Tammy adds. We sit on my sofa, some mindless reality show playing in the background. It feels almost like old times, except April would be in between us, munching on some type of pastry.

“They’re helping us,” I say. “They’re really going to help.”

But my excitement doesn’t spread to April’s mother. Tammy’s face has lost color, and her eyes look haunted.

She looks like she’s in mourning.

It’s barely been two days since April’s car has been recovered, but in that time, Tammy has turned from the surrogate mother I’ve always known into a shell of a person.

It’s horrifying, and the only way to fix it is to bring April back.

Landon and River will do it. I just *know* it.

“Honey, you can’t guarantee anything,” Tammy says sadly. “I thought we could do this, but the car...”

Her voice breaks, and my heart shatters. I quickly scoot over to her side of the couch and rest my head on her shoulder. Her arm wraps around me and I listen to her snuffle.

“I just don’t know how we’re going to find her,” she whispers. “I don’t know how we’re going to find my baby.”

“We will,” I say with conviction. “They will. They’re the best detectives in the country, Tammy.”

April’s alive. She has to be.

“C’mon, it can’t just be me and you,” I add, trying my best to sound lighthearted. “April’s the happy medium between both of us.”

Tammy chuckles through her tears and plants a kiss on my hair. “I appreciate you, Skylar,” she snuffles. “I’m so proud of you, after everything. You know that, right?”

I swallow and tears spring to my eyes. “I know.”

“You’re my girls,” she says. “I’m so lucky to have you both.”

A moment of silence passes between us as I force the lump in my throat down.

“We’ll find her,” I say again. “I promise.”

AN HOUR LATER, AFTER TAMMY LEAVES, MY PHONE VIBRATES.

I smile even before I check, hoping it’s Landon. I’ve never been this giddy over a guy, and somehow, texting him makes my day more tolerable.

Or maybe it’s the concussion, or the mandatory week off work.

April’s still always there, though. Her memory haunts me, and even in my peaceful moments, I never truly forget that a

part of me is missing.

But Landon makes me smile, and that's more than I could have hoped for.

I gasp in surprise when I see the text.

Hey, it's River. I know it's short notice, but are you busy tonight?

I frown. I never gave him my number, so he must have gotten it from Landon.

No. Why?

I still feel awkward after our last encounter. I *know* he knows what I did to his jacket, and when he left with Landon, he didn't really even say goodbye.

Landon said River would help me, but I can't help but feel that it might be because he feels obligated to.

Good. Because I'm turning onto your street.

He's *what*?

I reread the text; unsure my eyes are working properly.

Nope. He's definitely turning onto my street, and I'm dressed in nothing but sleep shorts and a thin white tank top.

Practically nothing is left to the imagination—and as tempting as it would be to answer the door like that, I'm not sure what *his* response would be.

I'm elated but terrified.

I'll be alone with him again after smearing my slick all over his clothing like an animal.

But if he's coming over, I'm sure that means he's here to talk about April, which is a good sign.

It's exactly what I wanted.

Maybe he won't even bring the jacket up?

Thankfully, my oversized lavender sweater hangs off the arm of the couch. I toss it on just as there's a knock at my door.

My stomach flutters and his spicy, rich scent infiltrates my senses as I open the door.

It's barely been a few days, but I forgot how handsome he was.

His hair is disheveled, as if he'd been running his fingers through it nervously. His eyes are a stunning forest green, and he looks at me with hunger. His eyes rake over my body before he meets my gaze.

"Hi," he says, his voice low.

He's also wearing a different jacket. It's fitted black leather, and combined with his dark jeans, he looks like every dark fantasy I could have conjured.

My throat is dry, and my mating gland throbs under my sweater.

"Hi," I croak back.

"Can I come in?" he asks. My eyes dart to his lips, and I swallow. Were they always that full?

"Of course," I answer, stepping aside so he can enter. I watch as he places the laptop he has under his arm onto the counter, and then he turns to me.

There's an intensity in his eyes. It's just him and me; there's no Landon, Ben, or Devyn to protect me from all that is River.

River and his expressive, tired eyes.

"When's the last time you slept?" I ask him, already knowing the answer.

He tilts his head and raises an eyebrow, but doesn't respond.

"Don't tell me it was here," I say. "That was days ago."

He crosses his arms across his chest, and I watch as the jacket strains across his muscles. My stomach flutters in anticipation, and my nipples pebble against my tank top.

Throwing that sweater on at the last minute was a great idea.

“When’s the last time *you* slept?” he counters. “You should be sleeping by now. I almost didn’t drive by, but I had a feeling you were probably once again ignoring doctors’ advice.”

I feel myself blush, and he smirks.

“Just like I thought,” he confirms. “You’re incredibly easy to read, you know.”

I scoff. “That’s your job, isn’t it? Reading people around you?”

He considers his answer. “Yes,” he admits. “I couldn’t figure you out the other day, though, when you showed up with those cookies. It takes a lot to catch me off guard.”

“And now?” I ask, dreading the answer. “Am I as boring and predictable as you thought?”

Insecurities flood to the surface, and my ex’s old insults play in my mind.

Predictable. Spoiled. Needy. Boring.

But River simply chuckles and gives me a ghost of a smile. “No. You’re the exact opposite. The more I find out about you, the less I want to stay away.”

It’s not a compliment, though. He says it cryptically.

“Don’t sound too happy about it,” I say sarcastically, stepping closer to him.

How could I not close the distance between us? My inner Omega wants nothing more than to be near him, regardless of how unhinged he is.

I’m inches from him when he takes in a shuddering breath. “I swear I came to help you tonight,” he whispers, his voice pained. “I promised myself I wouldn’t do anything else.”

My inner Omega does a backflip and lets out a yowl of need.

“Anything else?” I ask softly. “Like what?”

His hands are clenched into fists at his sides, and he grits his teeth. “Fuck, Skylar, listen to me. I’m damaged goods. I’m...*fuck*,” he hisses. “You don’t want any part of me. I promise you.”

My head swims.

He wants this, like I do.

The air is thick, charged with electricity, and my cunt throbs.

“But you want me,” I say.

He groans and closes his eyes. “Of course I do,” he mutters, taking in another shuddering breath. “You have no idea what you’ve started. But this won’t end well.”

My body aches. I *need* this. If he doesn’t touch me, I’ll combust.

“You promise?” I ask shakily.

He opens his eyes and his gaze darkens, sending a shiver up my spine. “Tell me no,” he says quietly, reaching out to stroke my cheek. I close my eyes and hum at the contact, sighing deeply.

“I’m not good for you,” he whispers. “I’m not good for anyone.” His other hand reaches out to rest at my waist, and my eyes snap open.

His eyes are a lovely shade of green, so dark and rich I could drown in them.

“You have an impossibly terrible perception of yourself,” I murmur as he tilts his head down.

His lips are inches from mine, and it’s all I can do to not lose my balance.

My cunt aches, slick slowly dripping into my cotton shorts, and he sighs against my lips. He’s all mint, spice, and *River*.

Then his lips are on mine, and I turn feral.

I haven't been kissed in so long that for a second, I'm worried I forgot how to. But judging by the way he growls into my mouth, his tongue tangling with mine, I must be doing something right.

It's not gentle or chaste. It's a desperate kiss, me running my hands under his shirt to feel his abs and him digging his fingers into my waist.

"I know what you did," he breathes into my ear as I grind against him, standing on my tiptoes to push my hips against his. "I know what you did to my jacket, you *filthy* girl."

He's rock hard against me, and I whine as he nips at my neck. "You came on my jacket," he breathes. "You rubbed your pussy on my jacket and expected me to not notice?"

"I..." I gasp, trying to find a reasonable explanation for my actions. "You smelled so good...I needed...*Alpha*..."

He moves me until I'm leaning against the back of the couch, and the hand not holding my waist pushes my sweater out of the way, exposing my mating gland.

"When's the last time someone touched you?" he demands, grabbing my chin and forcing me to look at him. "When's the last time someone worshipped your cunt the way you deserve?"

My mouth falls open at his words as I struggle to think coherently. "More than a year ago," I whisper.

He scoffs. "That's a fucking travesty," he mutters to himself. "A fucking *crime*."

Then, his mouth descends to my mating gland, and I *scream*.

I'm over sensitized, and every suck and lick sends a jolt straight to my clit. I lift my hips and wrap my legs around his waist, desperate to grind myself against the front of his jeans.

My shorts are *ruined*. They're a sopping mess, so wet with slick that the outline of my pussy is visible through the crotch. I leave a mess on River's jeans, wiping my cunt back and forth

on the denim outline of his cock. He grinds back against me, so hard that the couch shakes as I struggle to keep my balance.

“You taste just as good as I imagined you would,” he groans into my skin. “You taste like those fucking cookies you brought us.”

Us.

Him and Landon.

“I knew you would do this,” he hisses, reaching his fingers down to my hipbone, touching the top of my shorts. “I knew you would wreck me, with those pretty blue eyes—”

He grazes the crotch of my shorts with his fingertips, and a wave of euphoria hits me.

I orgasm right there, under his touch. I lose my balance and a gush of slick erupts from me, leaking from the sides of my shorts and dripping down my thighs.

“Fuck, *yes*,” he whispers in my ear as I shake. “You’re so fucking beautiful like that, such a good girl for me...so sensitive, so perfect...”

“Alpha,” I choke out, and he growls.

“Keep coming for me, Omega. Let me watch.”

He pulls back and holds me upright as my cunt spasms, the pressure of my orgasm so intense that there’s a puddle on the floor beneath me.

When I finally calm down, I whimper softly while River kisses me. He murmurs praises against my lips until I lean my head into his chest, breathing deeply. His hand strokes my hair, and he rocks me against him until I relax.

“That was the most powerful orgasm I’ve ever had in my life,” I murmur, dazed.

I feel his lips against my hair. “Don’t boost my ego,” he warns. “I’ll become more of an asshole than I already am.”

“Hmm.”

There's another kiss to my hair, then he's helping me step out of my ruined shorts. "Do you want me to get you a change of clothes, beautiful?" he murmurs, and my heart skips a beat. I lift my head from his shoulder to look at him. There's a kindness behind his eyes now, a glimmer of sweetness that wasn't there before. I lean up to kiss him, and he responds eagerly.

Who is this gentle, considerate Alpha? I never would have imagined River would be as tender as he is right now.

Especially since he hasn't gotten off yet.

A wicked grin spreads across my face as I break the kiss and a million dirty thoughts fill my mind.

"You could always give me your jacket," I say, smirking.

His eyes smolder.

"Yeah?" he breathes against my lips. "You want to squirt on this one too, for me?"

My cunt clenches.

River really is every dark fantasy I could have imagined. The filth that comes out of his mouth only fuels my lust, and suddenly, one orgasm is not nearly enough.

But before I can answer, he's lifting me into his arms, and my legs wrap around his waist as I squeak. He walks over to the front of the couch and deposits me on the cushion before shrugging off his jacket and placing it next to me.

"Sit on it," he orders. "Let's keep your nice couch clean."

I gape at him. "You don't mean that," I mutter. Already, a wet spot is forming on my cushion. If I sit on his jacket...

"I absolutely do," he counters. "Now, plant that pretty ass on my jacket and spread your legs."

I look up at him, taking in his jacket-less chest. Dressed in only a black t-shirt, his chiseled arms are on display, along with intricate tattoo sleeves in black ink.

My mouth waters.

He cocks an eyebrow, and I don't hesitate in moving over to plant my soaking wet cunt on his jacket.

He kneels on the carpet in front of me, his pupils wide with lust.

“Spread your legs, Omega.”

Oh, fuck.

His deep tone speaks directly to my inner Omega. My legs move easily, and I proudly put my cunt on display for him, the lamplight from my front room shining on my most intimate part.

He lets out a choked groan.

“Show me more. Spread your lips, Omega. Let me see all of it,” he demands, his eyes wild.

I should be embarrassed at his request, but River makes me feel emboldened.

Like I can do anything with him, and there would be no shame.

With my eyes locked onto his dark green ones, I moan as I slowly make a show of spreading my cunt lips apart, exposing my hole to him completely.

The air is charged with his scent, and I'm close to coming again just from inhaling him.

“You're so fucking pretty,” he whispers, bringing his face to my cunt. “Like a flower.”

I moan, unable to do anything but watch as he licks his lips.

“You can relax, baby. You're not going anywhere until you've ruined my jacket. I've got all night.”

And with that warning, he leans over and presses his mouth to my aching cunt.

RIVER

I SWEAR I DIDN'T COME HERE FOR THIS.

My plan was to talk to Skylar and resign myself to the fact that I'm not good enough for her.

That she can never be mine, no matter how much I may want it.

I could rid myself of this obsession and rein in my inner Alpha that's been begging to come out since I first locked eyes with her.

Then I would keep my word and do my best to investigate her friend. And once that was done, we would part ways, and she would be out of my mind.

But with my face buried in her perfect, sweet cunt, I realize I'm fucked.

I'm not going anywhere, ever.

She could have a pack of twenty Alphas and I'd sit there in line, waiting for my turn just to lick her vanilla-honey slick.

But for now, she's all mine, and I don't have to share her with *anyone*.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Her legs are wrapped around my shoulders and her ass is tilted towards my face, giving me a perfect view of everything. My tongue finds her clit, dancing little circles around it, and I'm rewarded with a fresh burst of slick all over my face.

Fucking *heaven*.

"Alpha," she moans, and my cock almost bursts out of my jeans.

I'm close to popping a knot in my pants, but I'm content to just lick her cunt all day if it will make her happy.

I could live off of her taste.

A diet of nothing but Skylar.

When I finally come up for air, I meet her wild, lust fueled eyes. "Your perfect cunt tastes just like those cookies," I say, meaning every word. "Even better. Sweeter."

"Oh," she whispers. Her sweater has fallen off her shoulders, and she's left in only a tank top, giving me a view of her rosy nipples.

Wait, maybe I actually fucking died of sleep deprivation, and this isn't real.

Because there's no way that she would be willingly thrusting her delicious pussy on me, unless she was as warped in the head as I am.

But the ache in my cock reminds me that I am fully awake, and by some miracle, this perfect Omega is under my tongue.

I don't even need her to touch me. I could stay here on my knees, doing everything I can to make those sounds come out of her.

It's the sexiest fucking thing I've ever heard, and she's not even in Heat.

Thinking of knotting her and taking her in that lavender nesting blanket makes me groan into her cunt, and she pulls on my hair.

Yes.

“I’m going to come,” she chokes out as she thrusts her pelvis against my face.

It’s perfect.

Her second orgasm is more violent than her first one, and I have to grip the inside of her thighs to keep her from falling off the couch. All I can smell and taste is sugar as she gushes directly down my throat.

I growl into her cunt at the same time she screams, her grip on my hair deliciously painful.

With my mouth on her, there’s no racing thoughts or painful, debilitating anxiety.

There’s just *Omega*.

When she finally comes down from her release, she’s a mess of quivering limbs. She slumps against the couch, her eyelids heavy, and lets out a content, gentle sigh.

It’s a fucking beautiful sound, and she looks as peaceful as I feel.

My face is covered in Skylar, and I never want to wash it off.

But then she sits back up as I rise from between her legs. Her hand reaches out wildly towards me, running down my stomach as I stand over her. “Wait...you didn’t...” she mumbles, her eyes barely open.

I chuckle. As much as I want her hands and mouth on me, I’m not going to have her do it because she feels obligated.

I move her hand away and she flops against the couch, curling on her side and giving me a lazy smile.

“The first time we fuck,” I promise her, leaning over to press my lips to hers, “will not be on your couch, or when you’re falling asleep. Or when you’re still recovering from a concussion. This was about you.”

She hums against my mouth as I kiss her. “Sorry,” she whispers as she pulls away.

I scoff. “You’re just as crazy as I thought,” I mutter. “Apologizing for coming all over my face.”

“Hmm.”

She’s half asleep, her lips now shiny with her slick, and I couldn’t imagine a more perfect sight.

I’m so fucked—if she knew the thoughts I’m already having about her, she would run away.

I get too intense too quickly, and it’s happening right now as I watch her smile up at me.

“Where are your towels?” I ask her.

“My bathroom, top cabinets,” she yawns.

I don’t need to be told twice. My inner Alpha roars, desperate to *fuck*, but I ignore him as I finally make my way to the place I couldn’t stop imagining.

Her bedroom.

I flip on the light and take in *everything*.

Her expensive Omega brand bed. The pictures on the wall. Even the setup of her furniture.

Whether or not she realizes it, it all defines *Skylar*.

My Omega.

Fuck, it feels good to think that.

She’s never getting rid of me now.

I couldn’t leave her even if I wanted to.

SKYLAR’S ASLEEP BY THE TIME I COME BACK AFTER WASHING up.

Gently, I clean her, taking my time wiping away our mess with a damp towel. I push her hair out of her eyes and caress her face, watching her as she sleeps.

Mine.

She wakes up as I slide my jacket out from underneath her, the fabric a ruined mess from her cunt.

I fucking love it.

She opens her dark blue eyes, and my breath catches when she smiles.

“Hey,” she whispers. “What are you doing?”

“Cleaning you up,” I murmur.

She frowns. “You don’t have to do that.”

And suddenly, I’m furious at whoever made her think she didn’t deserve to be treated like this.

I make a mental note to find all her exes and murder them slowly.

I continue running the washcloth down her body and between her legs, making her gasp. “I want to take care of you,” I purr, my chest rumbling. “Let me.”

Her eyes widen and turn glassy, and I wonder if I’ve said too much and this is the moment where she runs away screaming from me.

“Hold me?” she asks instead, her voice soft and vulnerable.

My heart aches.

Placing the cloth down, I join her on the couch, lying beside her. It’s a snug fit, but she wraps herself around me and lays her head on my chest. My arms rest around her waist and she nuzzles into my neck.

It’s fucking heaven. I haven’t been intimate like this with someone in years. Her scent mingles with mine, and I’m at peace.

My chest rumbles, purring for her, and she sighs in my arms.

“I wish it could always be like this,” she whispers.

I swallow and reach up to stroke her hair.

I could do this with her forever. Damn everything else.

You're always too intense and too fast.

So, I bite my tongue and press a kiss to her hair instead of spilling every thought I have of her.

“Why were you really in town?” she asks after a few minutes of silence. I thought she had fallen asleep and was content to feel her chest rise and fall against mine all night.

I play with a lock of her hair, my fingers dancing through the strands. “We’ve been asked to investigate overdoses,” I explain, staring up at her ceiling. “It’s pretty boring stuff. But we were questioning someone not too far from here, and I wanted to check on you. And ask you about your friend.”

Her breathing stills and her scent spikes suddenly. “Well, that didn’t work out,” she mutters into my chest, letting out a bitter laugh.

My grip around her tightens. “I’m not leaving until we do,” I promise her. “I’m not leaving until you give me every bit of information you know about April. You have my word.”

She sighs, and her breathing becomes even again. “Thank you,” she whispers. “I’d like to talk about her in the morning. It’s...too much tonight.”

I press another kiss to her hair, and she sighs into my neck. “Of course,” I say.

I’ll do whatever she wants, I realize suddenly. I’ll drop every other case. I’ll leave the bureau for her.

Too intense, too fast.

You’ll scare her away.

“Overdoses?” she repeats, pulling me out of my spiral.

“There’s a street drug that’s meant to emulate a Rut,” I explain, my hand moving from her hair to draw circles up her spine. “But it uses artificial Omega pheromones and painkillers.”

“That’s...bizarre,” she says slowly. “But isn’t that what police and drug task forces are for? Why are you guys involved in it?”

I'm surprised she's so interested in my work, and it makes me eager to explain to her. "We think outside the box. Some people open up to us better because we seem like normal citizens. Or we do undercover work. We have more resources and fewer rules."

"Hmm. So, like a spy."

I chuckle. "Sure. Like a spy."

"Oh, so do you have handcuffs and a gun?" She lifts her head from my neck and stares down at me, her pupils blown.

"Weapon, yes. Handcuffs, no."

She pouts. "Damn. That would have been fun."

I burst out laughing and lean up to kiss her.

I'm incredibly fucked, and I don't mind one bit.

LANDON

“HEY, THERE’S BEEN ANOTHER ONE,” RIVER SAYS. HE WALKS up to my desk as I’m looking at a toxicology report. “This time ten minutes from Isleton.”

I sigh and look up at him. Even though the news is grim, he’s practically smiling.

It’s another reason for us to be near Skylar.

“There’s probably a new dealer out there,” I add. “I can make a trip, probably tomorrow.”

Ever since Skylar entered our lives, there’s been a sort of...truce with River and me. I know he still doesn’t like me, and I don’t particularly enjoy his company either.

But our banter is easier. He doesn’t shoot daggers at me every time I talk to him, and I don’t have to bite my tongue every two seconds.

We have something in common.

We both want to take care of Skylar.

“I can go, too,” River adds. “Try to buy some *O* and see what happens.”

It’s only then I notice what’s in his hand.

“Is that a macaron?” I ask carefully.

I'm not jealous.

I'm *not*.

But he must sense it because he smirks at me. "Yeah. Skylar gave me a box to bring back. I forgot to tell you. They're in my office."

He's practically gloating and gauging my face for a reaction.

He really is insufferable.

I grip my pen tightly and peer back down at the toxicology report. The newer doses of *O* seem to be more potent.

Nothing in the report tells me what mimics the Omega pheromones, and I rub my forehead.

It's all the same.

We don't have any answers.

I try to ignore the sound of River eating what should have been *my* cookies too, until my phone buzzes.

I can't help but smile when I see the picture Skylar sent me. It's a messy counter, with bags of flour falling over and multiple colors of frosting laid out in large blobs.

First day back at work. The shit I have to deal with.

My heart races as I type out a response.

It's better than staring at reports all day, I assure you.

I need to see her, I decide.

When are you free? I add.

"Her ex-boyfriend is an asshole," River says. I forgot he was there; I look back up to see him watching me curiously.

"What?"

"Skylar. Her ex treated her like shit," he confirms. "Fucker didn't think she was worth having a pack."

That gets my attention. "She told you all that?"

He shrugs. “She alluded to it, and I’m not fucking stupid. He’s a prick.”

My inner Alpha stirs awake, seething with anger at the idea that she was treated so terribly.

Then, I put it together.

“Let me guess. You looked him up?”

River snorts. “Of course I did. He’s clean, no record. But he’s still a piece of shit. Posts on social media about the dumbest shit I’ve ever seen. Who the fuck collects lifted *trucks*?”

I grimace. “An asshole.”

“Yeah. An asshole.”

My phone buzzes again, and I read her response.

I’m off Sunday. Do you have time then?

River keeps staring at me pointedly until I’ve finally had enough.

“River. *What?*”

He’s never in my office unless he needs to be, and he’s lingered longer than usual.

He shifts uncomfortably. “Look. You know I fucking hate you, right?” he says.

I narrow my eyes. “I’m aware.”

“And you know I think you’re a smug piece of shit that thinks he’s too good for everyone else?”

“Did you just come here to insult me?” I snap. “What is your problem?”

“Look, what I mean is...fuck,” he sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Look, you like her, and I like her. And...I think...we could both be good for her.”

I blink at him. “Okay,” I say. “And?”

“I mean if...if you want to, you know, we could both...”

I know exactly what he's saying, even if he can't put it into words. "Are you five years old?" I ask, mimicking his words from earlier in the week.

He scoffs and throws up his hands. "You know what, asshole, I'm trying to be nice, but—"

"Let's go see her Sunday," I interrupt. "She's free then."

He nods. "Okay," he grumbles. "Asshole."

He leaves my office, and I stare at my doorway, dumbfounded.

What the hell just happened?

I expected him to fight me for Skylar, not offer to *share* her.

Can I do this? I can barely tolerate him.

But Skylar deserves the world. And if she wants both of us, I'm not going to be the one to tell her no.

Did I just form a partial pack with River?

"Oh, fuck," I mutter under my breath, pinching the bridge of my nose.

I feel a headache forming, but at least I have plans to see Skylar.

I text her my reply, and my spirits lift.

Sunday is perfect.

I HAVEN'T BEEN TO THIS APARTMENT IN TWO YEARS. THE welcome mat is run down, showing signs of wear, and there's no noise coming from inside. The paint is chipping off the door, and it might as well be an abandoned unit.

But he's in there. I know it.

He's never been a fan of me or River showing up unannounced, especially when we were all under intense stress.

But old habits die hard, and I'm not about to start caring now.

Not when Skylar is involved.

It takes a full minute of knocking, but the door finally cracks open.

The minute he sees my face, he tries to slam the door.

But I'm expecting it, and the steel-toed boots I wear protect me when I stick my foot out to stop it from closing.

"Five minutes of your time," I say calmly.

Vincent looks the same as he did two years ago, except for his eyes. The blue has turned a murky grey, as if part of him died.

I suppose it did.

But River and I chose to stay while he left the bureau entirely after the tragedy.

"No," he says to me, his voice low and raspy. "Go."

"You're the best detective I've ever known," I say. "I wouldn't be here unless I needed to be. Five minutes of your time, Vincent. *Please.*"

He narrows his eyes, but I hear the chain to his door unlatch.

"Two minutes," he says. "Not five. Then you can get the fuck out."

A ghost of a smile crosses my lips.

SKYLAR

I HAVE A FEVER.

I can feel the sweat drip down my back as I struggle to finish up the orders for the day. Devyn is busy running the register, and I stay behind the counter, piping icing onto macarons.

I took too many days off, and even though the staff has done a decent job running the café, I notice the disorganized inventory and messy pastry display cases.

Unfortunately, my concussion left me no choice but to stay home.

Now, my skin is hot and flushed, my mating gland itches, and my womb cramps.

My Heat is coming.

I haven't had one in a year, and it's about to hit me like a tidal wave.

"Oh, God," I groan to myself, wiping flour off my apron.

"Are you okay?" Luke asks me, placing a cup of ice water next to me. "You don't look too great, Skye."

I close my eyes and breathe slowly in and out.

“Honestly? I haven’t been okay in weeks,” I say, wiping my hair from my forehead. “But I’m hanging in there.”

We finally have a break in the stream of customers, and Devyn comes over to join me. “You could have taken another week off,” she insists, organizing the rose macarons into their Valentine’s Day boxes. “We have it taken care of here.”

“No, I need to be back,” I say, grimacing. My hand goes to my stomach, and I exhale through gritted teeth.

“No, really, Ben’s been working on things for April, and you still have your concussion—”

“Devyn. It’s not my concussion” I say pointedly. “It’s something else.”

“What could—oh? *Oh.*” Her eyes widen as she figures it out. “Your *Heat?*” she whispers. “You said you haven’t had a Heat in a year!”

I nod. “Exactly. And Landon is coming over on Sunday. And he’s bringing River.”

She blinks, then a slow, wicked smile forms on her face.

I scowl at her. “No. It’s not for *that*. They’re going to touch base with me about April. And Landon said he wanted to compare some notes with Ben.”

But her grin only grows, and she waggles her eyebrows at me.

“*What?*” I snap, but my tone doesn’t deter her.

“You like them, and they like you,” she says in a singsong voice.

I feel my cheeks get redder. “This is stupid,” I mutter, purposely not looking at her as I finish up the Valentine’s Day boxes.

“Wait, they’re coming over on Sunday? That’s Valentine’s Day!” she says.

I groan. “Devyn, I swear to God—”

“I knew you were going to get yourself some hot detectives!” she continues.

I slam a box down and lean my elbows on the counter, sighing. “It’s not about that,” I mutter. “It’s about April. It *needs* to be about April.”

I’m not sure if I’m reminding myself or Devyn.

“I’ve been selfish,” I say softly, meeting her entertained eyes. “I haven’t been thinking about her as much. It’s like...I have this stupid crush, and I’m distracted. And I feel horrible because of it.”

Devyn’s grin fades. “You’re being *human*,” she assures me. “Beating yourself up because you’re getting along with them isn’t a bad thing. April would agree with me.”

“I’m doing more than getting along with them,” I mutter to the counter, ashamed to look at her.

I expect an excited squeal or some type of celebration, but Devyn surprises me. “Good,” she says simply. “You needed it.”

I look back up at her. “*Huh?*”

“You weren’t eating or sleeping. You only drank coffee and never smiled. Now, you have some color to your cheeks, and occasionally you laugh. You’re still not one hundred percent, but you’re functioning like the Skylar I met before all of this. Maybe even better, now that you’re getting out of your dry spell.”

I snort. “I should never have told you that.”

“You’re doing everything you can for April,” Devyn continues gently. “You’re doing more than most people. That doesn’t mean you have to sacrifice being a complete person.”

I hate that she’s right.

The corner of my lip quirks up. “What would I do without you?” I murmur. “You’re smarter than I was at nineteen.”

Then another cramp hits, and I lean over the counter, exhaling sharply.

“You would still be working and not have someone order you to go home,” she says, playfully pulling on my bun. “This place is like a well-oiled machine. I’ll have it running for you while you’re gone.”

I groan. “I’ve been back for less than a week. I shouldn’t just *leave*.”

“And we’ll be fine without you,” Devyn insists. “Get your Heat sorted, rest, and enjoy Valentine’s Day.”

“Okay, well what about the special flavors for the charity boxes for April—”

“I have it handled. Go back home and prepare for your monster of a Heat.”

I don’t even argue with her. Devyn has kept the place running since I’ve been gone, and the rest of the staff is great.

I wonder if I have the authority to promote her to assistant manager. She has my store keys already, and she knows how to do everything.

And she’s a great friend.

I mull it over as I make my way back to my car, doing my best not to freak out about Sunday.

It will be fine.

I can handle both River and Landon at the same time, right?

I WAKE UP ON SUNDAY MORNING, AND IT’S *BAD*.

I haven’t had to wear slick panties in more than a year, but now I’m digging them out of my closet. They’re extra absorbent and incredibly soft, but it feels foreign to have to use them.

My fever has grown worse, and chills rack my body.

My Heat symptoms have never been this bad.

I'm sensitive to the smallest touch, even when dressing.

My cunt literally aches, desperate to be touched.

I grab my vibrator from the furthest corner of my nightstand, put it on the highest setting, and bite into a pillow as I draw out a pitiful orgasm.

I *cannot* be this horny when River and Landon show up. What I did with River was...*incredible*, but I'm not sure if Landon knows.

I have to get the horniness out of my system.

But the silicone isn't enough, and all I can think about is *Alpha*.

My inner Omega screams with need, begging to be filled and fucked.

"Not today," I mutter, downing an extra dose of suppressants, along with over-the-counter medicine for Heat symptoms. "Please, just hold off until tomorrow."

I brew tea made to alleviate Heat discomfort and take it with an Omega multivitamin.

I even watch a video on Heat Yoga and end up crashing to the floor after attempting an awkward handstand.

Nothing is helping, and both Landon and River are supposed to arrive by noon. Even my softest sweater and lightest lounge pants don't offer any reprieve for my delicate skin.

Finally, I give up and brew a cup of coffee.

I've done my best. At least I won't smell like Heat pheromones, and my house smells like coffee.

This is fine.

But I'm an overheated, overstimulated wreck by the time my doorbell rings.

I expect to see both of them when I open up the door, but instead, I'm met with only Landon smiling at me. He's dressed

in his usual fitted white button up and dark jeans, polished but still casual.

There's a bouquet of dark red roses in his hand.

"Hi," he grins, showing off his dimples. Then, he holds out the roses for me. "Happy Valentine's Day."

In my delirious state, I forgot what day it was.

I take the roses and my heart stutters.

Alpha cares for us!

I can't remember the last time someone bought me roses.

Jason always said they were a waste of money.

"Thank you," I murmur, unable to control my smile. "You didn't have to do that."

I bring the roses to my face and inhale. They're divine.

"It's Valentine's Day," he says simply. "Of course you deserve flowers."

I fight a sudden urge to cry.

My attraction to Landon is different from my attraction to River. River is wild, unhinged, and accesses my dark side. I'm drawn to Landon because of his kindness, his understanding, and his sweet disposition.

And he's hot as hell, too, which my inner Omega never forgets.

He's here to talk about April, I remind myself. The flowers are a nice gesture, but he's not here because it's Valentine's Day.

"Oh! Come in," I say, stepping back when I realize he's still standing in my doorway. As he enters, I flit to the kitchen, opening my cupboards to find a glass vase to put the flowers in.

Placing the roses in the center of the kitchen island, I watch as he takes in my front room. "That's a lot of candles," he comments amusedly, eyeing the five I have lit throughout the area.

“Oh, yeah,” I mutter as a cramp pierces my abdomen. “I’m a big candle fan,” I chuckle.

Even to my own ears, it sounds like bullshit.

His eyes meet mine and his smile fades. “Is everything all right?” he asks, tilting his head. “You seem a little...off.”

I chew on my lip. I’ve never been a good liar, but I also don’t want him to leave if I admit to him what’s happening.

My nipples pucker through my sweater, and I wince.

“Ah, I’m fine,” I say. “I’m just a little under the weather.”

We stare at each other for a moment until he nods. “I can leave if you want...but I won’t be able to visit for another week,” he adds. “I don’t want to impose if you’re not feeling well.”

“It’s fine,” I blurt out, and he tilts his head.

Does he smell me? Are the sprays, candles, and suppressants not working?

Then, an amused smirk graces his lips. “If you say so,” he says, then motions towards the couch. “Do you mind if I sit? I have a lot to discuss with you.”

I don’t know why it’s so disconcerting that we’re going to sit on a couch together, but I nod overenthusiastically. “Yeah. Uh-huh. Do you want something to drink? I have coffee. Do you want coffee?”

I sound ridiculous. I’m doing everything I can to distract myself from how hot Landon looks and how delicious his scent is.

It’s taking everything in me to not drop to my knees and beg for his cock.

Stop it!

“Coffee sounds great,” he says, giving me a knowing look. “As long as you don’t mind, of course.”

I don’t know what he finds so amusing, but it makes my skin tingle as I refill my mug and pour one for him.

“Anything in it?” I choke out, my hands shaking.

I need to get it together. *Now.*

Slick drips out of me, and I shift uncomfortably.

This was a bad idea. A bad, *bad* idea.

But I already told him to stay, and what can I say now?

“Sorry, Landon, but I’m so fucking horny I might die. I’ll see you next week!”

“I’ll take anything you give me,” he murmurs.

I almost drop the mugs.

I don’t miss the double meaning, and I stop myself from whimpering.

Thankfully, I’m able to navigate to the couch without dropping anything and hand Landon his mug. Our fingers brush as he takes it from me, and electricity shoots up my arm.

“Thank you,” he says, keeping eye contact with me as he puts his mouth on the cup.

I fight back a whimper and make my way to the opposite side of the couch, yanking the throw blanket off the top of it. Wrapping myself in it, I lean back against the couch cushions and meet Landon’s smile.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” he asks again, the dimples reappearing. There’s not as much concern in his tone this time, and my stomach churns with anticipation.

He knows.

“Yeah. I think I’m getting a cold,” I lie, wrapping my arms around my knees and leaning back against the armrest. Thankfully, I deep cleaned the couch after River’s visit, and no more slick stains are visible.

That would make for an awkward conversation with Landon.

He holds my gaze for too long, his eyes searching mine. “If you say so,” he says finally. Then he pulls out his phone and scrolls through his notes.

“Wait. Where’s River?” I ask suddenly. “He was coming too, right?”

“He will be,” Landon assures me. “He’s meeting with Ben right now.”

I frown. “Ben told me River hated him.”

Landon sighs. “River hates everyone, including me. But Ben was able to have the department dust for fingerprints on the car, and he’s meeting with River to discuss it.”

My ears perk up. “Really? They did?”

“River pulled strings on his end, too. We have connections to forensics teams,” he says. “It’s not a lot, but we’re doing what we can.”

Once again, I’m reminded of how lucky I am that they’re helping me.

“I can’t thank you enough,” I say sincerely as my heart beats rapidly in my chest. “Both of you, doing so much for me. It means the world.” I shiver as I finish my sentence, chills wracking my body.

I can only put off my Heat symptoms for so long, and they’re starting to show themselves again.

Landon smiles and pats the space next to him. “Come sit with me,” he says softly. “You’re freezing.”

I don’t realize I’m tearing up until one falls down my cheek. “I…” my voice trails off as a cramp hits me.

“Skylar. Come here.” He doesn’t demand like River does, but I still sense the command in his voice. “I can’t in good conscience let you curl yourself up in a ball to stay warm. Let me take care of you.”

Let me take care of you.

Landon is so kind, so *good*, that it makes my heart ache.

“I… I could be contagious,” I bite out. “You don’t want to get sick.”

“I have an immune system of steel,” he chuckles. “Whatever you have, I promise I won’t catch it.”

Yeah, because Heats aren’t contagious, and you’re an Alpha.

Still, I stay curled up in the corner, unsure of how I might act if I get any closer to him.

My inner Omega howls in despair, desperate to be touched.

Desperate to be loved.

“Darling,” he says quietly, and my blood pressure spikes. “Come here.”

I stop fighting it.

Slowly, I uncurl myself and make my way over to his side of the couch, where he wraps an arm around me. I bury my face in his side, inhaling everything that is pure *Alpha*.

Safety. Warmth. Comfort.

Just like it was with River, it’s as if this is the thousandth time he’s held me.

When his chest starts to rumble, I nuzzle my face into him, sighing in pleasure.

“You are a beautiful little liar,” he whispers in my ear, his hand coming to stroke my hair. “You know never to lie to a detective, right?”

His purr increases, and I whimper into his chest.

“The obscene number of candles. The perfume you’re wearing to mask your real scent.” His fingers drift from my hair down to my neck, and I stifle a moan. “You could have told me, and I would have visited another time.”

“Do you want to leave?” I ask, half afraid.

Maybe he doesn’t want to be around me when I’m like this.

“I *never* want to leave,” he admits quietly, his fingers tracing circles around my throat. “That’s the problem.”

Every touch is a live wire directly to my clit, and I shift my thighs. “Then don’t,” I murmur.

“You don’t understand the effect you have on me,” he sighs, his hand traveling to trace under the top of my sweater. When his fingers brush against my collarbone, my cunt spasms at the sensation. “I don’t do this. I don’t lose control. But with you...all rules are thrown out the window.”

I’m melting at his touch. My cunt aches, fresh slick dripping out of me, and I let out a soft moan.

“Landon,” I gasp as his fingers reach to the side and brush my mating gland. “I’m, you’re going to make me...”

“So sensitive,” he whispers as I jerk my hips at his touch. He keeps me in place on the couch with his arm wrapped around my waist, and I’m helpless as he sends shockwaves of pleasure through my body. “So beautiful.”

It takes one gentle tap at my gland with his mouth at my neck, and my back arches. I let out a cry as my release hits me, and he groans into my skin while I writhe under his hold.

When I finally calm down, he lets go of my waist to turn and cup my face in his hands. His pupils are dilated, so big that there’s almost no brown left to his irises.

“Tell me I can kiss you,” he breathes against my lips. “Tell me I can taste you.”

I nod, letting out a gasp. “Yes,” I whisper. “*Please.*”

Still cradling my face, he crashes his lips to mine.

It’s different from the way River kisses. Landon kisses me thoroughly but slowly, taking his time. There’s no desperation; just his tongue exploring my mouth and me moaning into the kiss.

It’s incredibly hot. Sweat beads from my forehead, and I’m so overheated I feel as if I might explode.

“Ridiculous girl,” he chides, grinning against my lips. “You’re going to trigger my Rut. No amount of candles will stop it, I promise you.”

I whimper and nip at his full bottom lip.

“Always testing my control,” he breathes, running his mouth down my throat and sucking bruises into the skin.

Despite the fog of lust in my brain, I suddenly remember that he’s not the only Alpha that will be here tonight.

River should be coming over at any moment.

“Wait,” I gasp, struggling to not rip my clothes off and jump on him. “You should know I’ve been with River,” I say quickly, shame coursing through my veins.

They can’t stand each other. What will he say?

Will he leave?

But before I can spiral, he moves his mouth from my neck and meets my gaze. “I know,” he says gently with a slight smile on his face.

“But...doesn’t that bother you?” I stutter, digging my fingers into his shirt and staring at his chest. I start to panic, and my breathing rapidly increases.

My stupid Heat makes me more emotional than usual.

“Skylar,” Landon says, stroking my hair. “Darling. Look at me.”

My eyes snap up to meet his gaze, which is still just as tender. “Why shouldn’t you be tended to at all times? If we both make you happy, I’m fine with it.”

I open and close my mouth. “But—”

“You deserve as many Alphas as you want,” he says firmly. “If you want a pack of twenty, I’ll happily be in it.”

I blink at him. “What—”

“Besides, River and I already talked about it,” he says, chuckling. “We’re more than happy to share you.”

My mind turns to mush.

“Also,” Landon moves his mouth to my ear, and I shiver. “I’d love to watch you get fucked while I take you.”

I short circuit.

The *filth* that just spewed from his mouth catches me off guard, and I grip at his shirt and pull him closer, kissing him violently.

His scent has changed, too. It's more powerful than it was when he first came into the house and it's making my head swim.

All I can breathe is Landon. He's in my veins, his scent coursing through my bloodstream.

He chuckles against my lips. "Take that blanket off, beautiful. Let me see you."

Slowly, I start to unwrap the fabric as he lets go of my waist. I feel his gaze on me and I blush, looking down at my chest as I expose myself to the air.

"Look at me, darling."

Darling. I've never been called that in my *life*, and every time Landon says it, my heart stutters.

I finally meet his gaze, and he's so handsome I have to kiss him again.

Unlike River, he's clean shaven, and his lips are fuller.

But they're both perfect, in their own ways.

"Touch me," I beg against his lips. "Touch me, *Alpha.*"

He groans, and his strong arms lift me onto his lap. I straddle him, my thighs on either side of his hips, and his kisses turn deeper.

"That's right," he murmurs, pleased at my whimpers. "Such a good Omega for me."

I cry out at his words and grind myself against his lap. He grips my waist and sucks in a breath as I rub myself on him.

He's rock hard.

It's not enough. I want him to see me, to let him have what I gave to River.

“Lift your arms, sweetheart,” he whispers, his gaze turning dark. I don’t even think about it; I obey him instantly. My sweater is off in seconds, and I’m left in just my simple white lace bra. It’s sheer, and my nipples are sensitive against the fabric.

Judging by his dropped jaw, he enjoys the view.

“Perfect,” he breathes, gauging my reaction as his fingers trace over the lace. I *scream*, overheated and over sensitized, and thrust myself against his clothed erection.

“*Fuck*,” he hisses, and I almost finish just from hearing him curse.

I want him to lose control completely. I want his Rut to take over, and I want his knot to lock into me.

I lean into the touch and pant against his neck, desperately needing more.

“Please,” I whisper, as his hand continues to caress my breasts, the other holding my waist. “Please, more, *Alpha*. Make me come again.”

His scent changes, richer than it’s ever been, and suddenly, he’s flipping me onto my back. Landon leans down to kiss me as he leans over me, and I thrust my hips up eagerly, grinding against his hard length.

“Did River take you here?” he whispers into my ear. “Do I get to claim the same spot he did?”

Oh my God.

His hand dips into my pants, pulling down the fabric until I’m only in my underwear. He swipes a finger across my slit and *growls*.

“You’re soaked,” he whispers as he nips at my earlobe. I yelp and jerk upward, forcing my cunt against his finger. “So, so wet,” he continues. “Such a mess you’re making, Miss Bloom.”

He finds my clit, pressing down and rubbing slowly, and I come apart again.

“Do you know what you do to me?” he growls. “Do you know how hard I’ve worked to not *fall to my knees* at a pretty smile? But the minute you walked into my office, I wanted to take you on that desk.”

I’ve died, I think to myself. *There’s no way this is real.*

“You make me irrational, Miss Bloom. And that should terrify you.”

I’m still coming, I realize. My poor couch needs another deep cleaning after this; it’s more slick than cushion by now.

I can’t speak. I’m nothing but white-hot pleasure, my cunt aching and ready to take him.

I reach down to tug at his zipper, but he shakes his head. “Not here,” he says. “You need a nest. You need to be treated like a queen, and we can give that to you.”

I’m halfway between crying and orgasming again. His words speak to my inner Omega, but they also speak to Skylar.

“You’re worth it, darling,” he whispers.

I can barely speak. A hushed *please* falls from my lips, and then I’m lifted into his arms.

He carries me into my bedroom after turning us down the hall.

You’re worth it. Let us give it to you.

His words replay in my mind as he deposits me on the bed. I luxuriate against the mattress, enjoying the feel of the specialty foam against my aching body.

Landon sits at the edge of the bed, and I reach for him. He’s not close enough.

“My Rut is triggering surprisingly fast,” he says through gritted teeth. “I need to know you want this. If not, I have to leave *now*.”

He breathes deeply and his fists clench, and I marvel at how sexy it is to watch him lose his composure.

But then I remember River is still coming over, and the thought makes me moan.

“I want this. I want you and River to take me,” I breathe. “I need it, *please*.”

He swallows, closes his eyes, and groans. “I haven’t done this in a long time,” he says. “I can’t promise I’ll be gentle.”

I’m half convinced I’m dreaming.

“Yes,” I moan, arching my back. “I need this, *Alpha*.”

My cunt is on full display for him. I’ve soaked through my Heat panties, and my pussy is visible through the damp fabric.

“*Fuck*,” he whispers to himself as his eyes lock on my cunt. “You have no idea how beautiful you are, do you?”

“Landon, *please*,” I beg, running my hands over my breasts. “It hurts. It *hurts*.”

He stands up, and for a second, I think he’s going to undress, but instead, he *walks away*.

Alpha is leaving me. I’m too much for him. I’m too needy...

“Where are your nesting blankets?” he asks gruffly. “I need to know *now*.”

“No, just, please—”

But he turns to me, his gaze steely. “You need a nest. Only the best for you from now on, remember?”

It’s a non-negotiable, apparently.

Alpha takes care of us!

“Top shelf of the closet,” I moan, desperately trying to not lose my mind and scream.

I’m going to die if I don’t get touched soon.

He pulls every single one of the blankets down and drapes the luxurious fabrics over me. Instantly, I feel relieved, safe, and comforted.

He was right, of course.

Nests make everything better, and I haven't had one in so long.

He begins to unbutton his shirt, and my mouth waters. A sliver of chiseled abs appear, and I'm more than ready when—

Knock. Knock. Knock.

We both freeze. I peer up at him over the top of the blankets, watching as his hands still.

“River,” he exhales, annoyed.

I tense up. I don't know how this is going to go—they don't like each other. What if somehow it becomes weird? What if they—

“Don't go there,” Landon says. “I can *smell* your panic from here, Omega. Touch yourself until I come back. That's an *order*.”

Bossy Landon makes me feral.

He makes me want to *obey*.

My hand snakes under the blankets and reaches under my panties to find my swollen, neglected clit.

I lose myself in the sensation.

RIVER

A PARTIAL PRINT.

A fucking *partial print* of nothing, and that's all I can tell Skylar.

On Valentine's Day.

Ben is useless, his entire department is useless, and I feel like an even bigger piece of shit for agreeing to help her in the first place.

We don't make promises. We *can't*, and I've all but committed my entire existence to bringing her friend back.

And still, I have fucking nothing.

I didn't even bring her flowers, and it's fucking Valentine's Day.

As I drive to her house, I fight the urge to smoke.

The pack is still sitting in my cupholder, but her snide little comment about my cigarettes stuck with me.

I'm not trying to impress her—I just happen to be trying to quit at the same time she expressed her disgust.

It's not the same thing.

It's fucking *not*.

As I pull into her neighborhood, I see Landon's car already in her driveway.

Maybe he has better news for her.

But when I make my way up her driveway, the *scent* hits me.

I haven't smelled it in so long that I almost forgot what it was like.

It almost knocks me over; it fogs my mind with nothing but need. It's sweet, cloying, and so delicious my mouth waters.

Skylar's in *Heat*.

She's in fucking Heat.

My inner Alpha roars, and I almost break my fist as I bang on the door.

It's vanilla, it's cinnamon, it's perfection, and if I don't get close to her right fucking now, I'll break the door down.

But Landon's the one that answers, and I pause, but only for a second.

He wants what's best for her, and so do I.

My hatred for him aside, there's an unspoken truce between us.

He doesn't say anything to me. He simply nods his head slightly, acknowledging my presence, and I'm almost running down the hallway toward her bedroom.

And the *scent*. The entire house smells like *Skylar*, and my cock is so painfully hard that I could cut fucking glass with it once I enter her bedroom.

She's beautiful. Her dark hair fans around her pillow, and her skin is flushed and slightly pink. Most of her is under her nesting blankets, and I smirk when I see the lavender one she draped over me the other night.

She smiles when she sees me, the widest smile she's ever gifted me, and I'm done for.

Mine.

“She’s nervous,” Landon says, and I finally notice he’s entered the room with me. “She’s worried that we won’t be able to share her, or even want to.”

He keeps his gaze on Skylar, and she swallows and nods sheepishly. Even through her lust-filled haze, those damn insecurities flood to the surface, and I’ll do fucking anything to drive them away.

“Well,” I say, shrugging off my jacket and draping it on her desk chair, “let’s show her how wrong she is.”

I hear Landon chuckle beside me.

SKYLAR

THEY'RE BOTH HERE, IN MY ROOM.

There are two Alphas in my room.

I've never experienced this before.

I never thought I deserved it.

"Fuck," River mutters as he undoes his belt. He steps closer to the side of my bed, while Landon remains at the foot. "Are you touching yourself, *Omega*?"

I barely choke out a *yes*, frantically circling my clit as I lick my lips. He's so close to me that I have a full view of his erection under his denim, and he yanks off his belt and undoes his pants while I watch.

Oh my God.

I want to taste him.

I kick my blankets off, exposing my wet spot of slick to both of them, and Landon lets out a choked groan.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," he whispers, watching as I shimmy out of my panties, showing off my cunt to him.

"Isn't she?" River agrees as he palms himself through his jeans. "Looks like a fucking flower."

I glance back at Landon. His pupils are blown, his eyes almost entirely black as he stares at my pussy hungrily.

“She tastes as good as she smells,” River adds, and I’m transfixed as he finally pulls down his jeans, leaving himself in black boxers. “Even better, actually.”

Fuck, his cock is so close to my mouth. I wanted to do this last time. I wanted to feel him hit the back of my throat as I swallowed around him.

But his hand reaches out to stroke my flushed cheek. “Spread yourself,” he whispers. “Show him what you showed me.”

I should be embarrassed, but there’s no shame as I spread my thighs and expose my most private area to Landon. The growl he makes speaks directly to my inner Omega, and I lift my hips a little to give him a better view of *everything*.

“Fuck, there’s a mess,” Landon groans. “Look at that mess, sweetheart. Is that all for us?”

“Yes,” I moan, spreading my lips apart with one hand and stretching my hole with the other. “This is all for both of you.”

“Fuck,” Landon hisses, his eyes never leaving my cunt. I’m aware of River still standing next to me, stroking my hair, and I nuzzle into his palm. Even though his cock is *straining* for my attention, he makes no effort to offer it to me.

“Tell me what you want,” River says softly, but with command. “Do you want him to lick you?”

The suggestion alone makes me arch my back and moan. “I need both of you,” I pant, desperately needing to be touched. “I need...I need...”

“I know what she needs,” Landon says, pulling my ankles so I’m closer to the foot of the bed. “She needs to come for us.”

Then his mouth is on me, and I *scream*.

Landon finds my clit instantly, flicking in perfect circles with his tongue. He grips my hips, fingers digging into my skin whenever I try to squirm away.

But there's still River, his eyes on me as Landon growls into my core. I reach for him, whimpering, and he leans down to kiss me, his cock still unattended to.

His kisses are as wild as I remember, but this time, he's thoroughly fucking my mouth with his tongue.

Landon's tongue matches River's movements as he moves from my clit to the inside of my cunt. River swallows my scream as Landon ruthlessly moves his tongue in and out of my pussy, and I'm close to coming in seconds.

River finally pulls away from my mouth, leaving me panting. "You're close," he growls. "Aren't you, *Omega*?"

"Yes," I whisper, attempting to lift my hips, but Landon keeps them in place, forcing me to stay still with his strong hands.

But it's still not enough. I still haven't seen River's cock.

"Let me see you," I beg River as he stands back up to his full height, his cock still not visible. "Let me taste."

He lets out a deep growl at the same time Landon's tongue moves back to my clit and two strong fingers enter me. I arch my back, unable to be held down anymore by Landon's one hand.

"Please," I gasp, looking between both Landon and River. I don't know what I'm begging for anymore, only that I need the pleasure in my body to release.

I'm so close, I'm at the edge...

"Come for me, and you can have my cock," River promises.

It's all I need.

I spasm on Landon's fingers and mouth as my entire body locks up. A *violent* gush surges out of me, so strong I push his fingers out of my cunt.

"Yes, fuck yes," River encourages as he watches me writhe and scream. "Squirt for us. You can do it."

Landon removes his mouth from me as a stream of slick shoots out, splashing his face and his button-up shirt.

“Oh, fuck,” he breathes. “Good girl. Good *Omega*.”

I’m not done. My throat hurts from wailing, but white-hot pleasure pulses through my core as my orgasm makes me shake and writhe. I reach wildly for River’s cock through his boxers, and he *finally* strips completely from the waist down.

He’s *huge*. His cock is just as thick as I had hoped, and I grip him greedily with my fist. He’s warm and smooth in my hand, and he lets out a growl as I touch him.

“Fuck, baby, *fuck*,” he chants, just as I feel Landon’s fingers gently brush up my slit. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to...”

Oh, but I want to. I want to do much more than just touch.

I *need* to taste him. I need to taste both of them.

An idea hits me through my lust-filled haze, and I sit up quickly, my eyes wide with excitement.

“I want both of you in my mouth,” I blurt, voicing a fantasy I’ve never spoken aloud before.

For a moment, insecurity floods through me.

They could laugh at me. They could say no.

You’re not worth it. You’re just an overly needy Omega.

But they both respond with a growl, and River is practically hauling me towards the foot of the bed.

My inner Omega squeals in delight.

LANDON

SHE'S PERFECT.

I don't like to use the term, because nothing in life could be perfect.

Until I tasted Skylar's cunt.

It's ridiculous how delicious she is. It short-circuits my brain until all I want is to lick, suck, and devour until I'm no more.

Nothing matters but *her*.

My existence revolves around her pleasure.

So, when I finally come up for air and she tentatively voices what she wants, there's no possible way River or I could ever tell her no.

We're both willing to give her everything she wants.

When she sits on the edge of her bed, naked from the waist down, I don't even think as I take off my belt and undress for her.

"Shirts off, too," she whispers, her eyes glassy as she looks up at me with plump, wet lips.

I'm naked before her in a second, my cock bobbing at attention for her. She sucks in a breath and licks her lips as her

hand reaches out to stroke me.

Fuck.

Her touch is softer than I imagined, and I fight the urge to thread my hand through her soft, wavy hair.

I hear a groan next to me, and I'm so fixated on watching her pump me that I didn't realize River was beside me. She reaches out her other hand to work his cock, and I'm spellbound as I watch her look up at us with wide, lust-filled eyes.

Her scent is deeper than it was before, richer and more delicious.

I taste and feel nothing but Skylar, her movements sending shockwaves directly to my cock.

The air is filled with the sounds of my and River's groans and Skylar's moans.

"I've wanted to do this for so long," she admits in a shaky breath. "I've wanted both of you to take me at once."

Then, still working River's cock in her other hand, she grips my hip. She scoots closer to the edge of the bed and, suddenly, she's taking me in her mouth.

I lose it.

I'm not as gentle as I want to be, but I can't stop. My hand moves to the back of her head, pushing her deeper onto my cock as I thrust my hips forward. With a choked moan, she takes me down her throat, and I hiss in pleasure.

"Holy fuck," I hear River mutter, but all I can focus on is how stunning Skylar's blue eyes are as she looks up at me through thick lashes.

Perfect.

My throat rumbles as she swallows me, tears filling her eyes as I thrust deeper into her mouth. I expect her to pull away, but she holds me there, swallowing around my length.

I'm in awe.

“Baby, you can breathe,” I say to her. “You don’t have to...*fuck*—”

She releases my cock with a *pop* as she gasps for air, strings of saliva falling from her lips. But then she turns her attention to River, wiping her mouth with her hand.

When she takes River’s cock in her mouth, I moan at the sight.

She’s beautiful. Even as River’s cockhead pushes against her cheek, creating a bulge in her mouth, she’s perfection.

I almost lose it when her saliva-coated hand grips me, working me at a rough pace as I watch her deep throat River.

It’s heaven. The sounds of her gagging fill the room as he thrusts into her mouth, letting out a shaky breath.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he says to her as she bobs her mouth up and down his cock. “I can’t believe you’re ours, *Omega*.”

I will forever put aside my differences with River if it means I end up where I am right now, watching her take pleasure from sucking us both off.

She releases him after a few more desperate gags and moves her mouth back to my length.

She switches between us expertly, working one cock with her hand while taking the other one down her throat.

She was made for this.

Made to be *ours*.

“Her throat is so fucking tight,” River says softly, and she whimpers at the praise. “I wonder how much she can fit in there.”

Her eyes widen and she replaces her mouth with her hand, now pumping us both in tandem. She’s a beautiful mess, her face shiny with her saliva and her lips parted in pleasure.

“I can take both of you,” she says, her eyes smoldering. “I can take both of your cocks in my mouth, *Alphas*.”

I almost pop my knot right there.

I'm at a loss for words until I hear River's smug reply.

"You can try," he says easily.

Then, I catch on.

"I suppose, if you're willing to make the effort," I say, grinning at her.

She grins right back, and I'm done for.

SKYLAR

THEY BOTH TASTE *DIVINE*.

River's spicy aroused scent mixed with Landon's earthier one combines into an aroma that makes my cunt clench.

I'm a *mess*. There's slick everywhere, some still staining Landon's face, but most drenching my cunt and thighs. Saliva dribbles down my chin, but they both look at me as if I'm the most beautiful thing they've ever seen.

I *know* I can fit them both into my mouth. My inner Omega does cartwheels, knowing what's about to happen.

They both make me feel safe enough to do this.

I never voiced this fantasy before, but with them it seems right.

River threads a hand in my hair and forces me to look up at him.

"Take what you want, Omega," he says, his green eyes piercing into mine. "Everything we have is yours."

That's all the encouragement I need.

I'm eye level with both of their cocks, and I grip them tightly, one in each fist. Landon is the first to angle his hips and move his cock closer to me, then River follows suit.

I open my mouth, eagerly waiting for their lengths.

Slowly, they both push in, their cocks stretching my jaw as I try to accommodate them.

“*Fuck,*” River groans, and Landon grunts in pleasure. I push myself farther, stuffing both of them into my mouth, moaning around their lengths.

I suck and lick, whimpering as I feel them fill my mouth entirely. I close my eyes and rub my cunt against the blankets, desperate for friction.

Someone brushes my hair from my face. Someone else pulls down my bra strap and rubs their hand down to caress my breasts.

“She’s softer here,” I hear Landon say in awe. “As soft as her cunt was.”

My moan is muffled as I try to relax my throat, but instead swallow around them.

Both of them groan in unison, and another hand reaches towards my chest.

I open my eyes to see both Alphas groping me, each of them with a hand on my breast.

Landon pinches my nipple while River squeezes my chest, massaging me until I’m a whimpering, moaning mess.

“I can’t wait to fuck these later,” River pants as I writhe at his touch.

I release them both finally, gasping for air, and collapse on my back.

My cunt aches, screaming for attention.

I need to get knotted, *now*.

“Fuck, baby, you’re amazing,” River breathes.

“Perfect,” Landon adds. “The word is perfect.”

Suddenly, the weight of the bed shifts as River sits behind me on the edge of the bed. “Flip her over,” he says, and Landon flips me onto my stomach.

“Her ass is phenomenal, too,” Landon adds appreciatively, his hand reaching to caress my globes. He squeezes them both, cursing under his breath as he gropes me.

It’s too much.

“Fuck me,” I say through gritted teeth, thrusting my hips against the bed and staring at River. He’s completely naked, showing off a pale, chiseled chest littered with jagged scars and faded injuries. From the side, I see the definition in his arms, and can appreciate the tattoos that cover them.

He’s a work of damaged art, and I have the insane desire to lick every single scar.

“Fuck, that’s a beautiful sound, baby.” He smirks. “Say it again.”

“Fuck me,” I grit out, my eyes watering.

“Again,” Landon says from behind me, his fingers gently tracing around my crack, dipping lower to gather my wetness.

“Knot me!” I cry out, desperate. I don’t care how ridiculous I sound. I need to be fucked, *now*, in this nest with them.

With my Alphas.

River starts to situate himself on the bed as I sit up, giving him space. His cock juts out, high and proud, and I’m ready to ride him.

I climb on top of him, and his eyes widen.

“Fucking perfect tits,” he whispers as I start to sink down.

I don’t even take my time. I practically impale myself on him, and we both groan in unison.

He hits my inner sensitive spot without even trying. He’s so thick and full, and I’m so wet that we meld together perfectly.

I start to ride him. It’s crazed, fast, and chaotic, but he snaps his hips in time with mine, growling into my ear.

“You have the tightest, sweetest cunt in the world, baby,” he whispers into my ear. “You take it so well.”

Behind me, the bed dips again, and I realize Landon has joined us. I moan, lifting my ass so he gets a better view of me taking River.

“Fuck,” I hear Landon mutter. Filthy squelching sounds fill the room as River slams into my wetness and Landon works his cock in his hand.

“You’re stretching her out,” Landon groans.

“And she’s still so fucking tight,” River adds, slamming up into me even harder. I whine, desperately close to another orgasm.

But I want them both to feel me.

“Fuck me, Landon,” I breathe, arching my ass. “I want to come on both of your cocks.”

“Holy *fuck!*” River snarls as I bounce on him. “How are you even real?”

“Because she’s made for us,” Landon says, his voice low. “This perfect pussy was made to take two thick cocks.”

My eyes roll into the back of my head as I climb higher and higher. And when Landon slowly enters my cunt, pushing against my soaked entrance, I find my release.

I clamp down on both their cocks and *scream*. I pulse around them as they both fuck me through it, Landon pounding me from behind while River fucks up into me.

They’re both inside me, I think wildly. I’m coming on both of them.

“That’s right, Omega,” Landon growls, his voice more commanding than ever. “Come on our cocks.”

I don’t stop. I choke out something between a laugh and a cry, my nerve endings on fire as I gush on them.

Soon, there’s nothing but the incredible sensation as they fuck me, claiming me with each thrust.

But I don't feel degraded or dirty. I feel complete.

As if I'm meant to be here, in this moment, sharing my body with both of them.

River reaches up to tug gently at my nipples, and it sends another jolt of pleasure through my body.

Both Alphas groan as I clench them for a second time, squeezing so tightly that they can barely move inside of me.

"Fuck," Landon says. "You feel like silk around me. The tightest, softest cunt ever."

I've never heard him swear this much, and I hang onto every word he says.

He has a filthy mouth when he's not being gentle.

I wiggle my ass back on him, and suddenly fire spreads across me as a *crack* fills the air.

Landon *spanked* me.

I'm in shock, but River groans as I involuntarily squeeze around him. "Fuck," he growls. "Spank her again."

Crack. Landon's hand comes down again, sending a delicious pleasure throughout me. I grind my hips, gently bouncing on both their cocks as Landon massages my globes.

"Look at me," River demands, and I meet his emerald eyes that are rich with lust. "Look at me while we fuck you."

Those words are what do it. My body grows rigid, and I close my eyes and scream as my cunt pushes both of their cocks out of me at the same time. I gush onto River's thighs while Landon groans, playing with my ass cheeks.

But it's still not enough.

My nest is covered in slick, and the blankets are soaked.

Yet, I still haven't been knotted.

My pussy demands to be filled with cum, to be stretched on a thick, hard knot.

But I know, as pleasurable as it was to have both of them inside me, I need them individually.

The first time they knot me, I want it to be in private, with just the two of us.

I whimper, and it makes River grip my hips and pull me to him.

“Baby, tell us what you need,” he groans.

“Tell us, *Omega*,” Landon orders behind me.

Bossy Landon makes my cunt flutter, and I blurt the words without thinking.

“I need both of you,” I murmur. “I need to feel both of your knots. Take turns with me.”

They groan in unison. “Fuck,” River mutters. “Of course, Omega. Anything you want.”

But the question is...who goes first?

I blurt the first name that comes to mind.

“River,” I moan as he moves off the bed. “River, *please*.”

Within seconds, he’s on top of me, pushing slowly back into me.

He hits me at a different angle, and I lift my hips, begging for more.

“Yes,” he hisses, and he bottoms out inside me. Our hips are touching, but still, I want more.

“So fucking perfect,” he groans as he looks down at me. “I can’t wait to claim you, Skylar.”

He kisses me, and I pant against his lips as he begins to thrust.

It’s not wild like last time. He goes slowly, forcing himself deeper inside me with each movement.

“Squeeze me, baby, *fuck*,” he groans as he starts to kiss my neck. When he reaches my mating gland, tingles of pleasure pulse through my body.

I hear a slapping sound and look up to see Landon in the corner of my bedroom, still naked, with his thick cock still out.

He keeps eye contact with me as he strokes himself slowly, gripping himself hard.

River chuckles in my ear. “You like being watched, baby? You like when I fuck you in front of an audience?”

“Faster, *Alpha*,” I beg, and he crashes his lips to mine again.

He finally snaps his hips, moving at a perfect, rapid pace, and I close my eyes as I climb higher into my pleasure.

“She smells different,” Landon chokes out. “She’s going to come again.”

I fall apart.

I *scream* into River’s mouth, and he silences me with his tongue, swallowing every moan I make. His hips grind into mine, and he tenses.

Fill me, Alpha!

His lips break away from me, and he lets out the sexiest, lowest groan I’ve ever heard.

He stills his hips, and suddenly, my cunt is fuller than before.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Yes, Alpha, give me that knot. I need it...”

He inflates slowly, burying his face in my neck as his cock swells, locking himself inside me. spurts of his cum fill me as he pushes me deeper into the mattress, rocking against my G-spot.

Then he sinks his teeth into my neck.

It’s not on my gland—it’s not a mating bite—but it’s hard enough to leave a mark.

He’s branding me with his mouth, and as he stuffs me fully, I fall apart again.

This time it’s silent, and the only sounds in the room are River’s groans and Landon’s moans as he watches me take a knot.

It's blissful, it's passionate, and it makes me whole.

I struggle to stay awake after my final release, my limbs exhausted and my head spinning.

Alpha is here. Alpha will take care of me.

River murmurs something in my ear, and I close my eyes and sigh.

I vaguely register him rolling me onto my side, still locked in me, as I fall asleep.

THERE'S BARELY ANY LIGHT STREAMING IN FROM MY WINDOW.

I must have slept for hours.

Kicking off my nesting blankets and sitting up in bed, I'm hit with chills.

Goosebumps pebble around my body, and my teeth chatter as I wrap my arms around myself.

River's gone.

Landon's gone.

They're both gone.

My Alphas left me.

I gasp for air as memories flood back to me.

"I don't want to sleep for that long with you. I have work to do."

"Isn't that why you bought all those expensive blankets, anyway? You don't need me with you for hours."

"You're an adult, Skylar. Not a baby."

I take in a shaky breath, trying not to choke on a sob.

I hate waking up alone in my Heats. It's one of the worst feelings in the world.

April always said it wasn't normal for an Alpha to leave during a Heat.

April.

I'm a shitty friend. I've been so distracted by these men that won't even bother to—

“Sweetheart.”

The bed dips with weight, and I look up to see Landon sitting there beside me, his face twisted in concern. He's fully dressed, and his hair is back to its perfect, styled form. There's a glass of water in his hand that he holds out to me.

His earthy scent calms me, and I realize they're still here.

“You didn't leave,” I whisper, amazed.

He frowns. “Of course we wouldn't,” he says, his voice low. “Why would you think that?”

I blink, disoriented. “I...” I swallow, my throat dry.

“Drink,” he says, handing me the glass. “You're dehydrated.”

I drain the glass, the cool water hitting my throat at the same time he wraps a clean, warm blanket around me.

I frown at him, confused.

“I washed them for you,” he says. “I wanted you to have a fresh nest.”

Tears fill my eyes. My emotions are out of control, and I place the empty glass down on the nightstand and lean in to kiss him.

He's so caring.

Both of them are.

As he returns the kiss, I realize my body is clean as well. There's no more slick between my legs, and my face has been wiped clean.

They did this for me.

My Alphas.

Landon takes his time kissing me, his tongue tracing along the seam of my lips. “You taste so fucking good,” he breathes. “I’ve been waiting *hours* for this.”

I whimper at his confession, and he wraps his arms around my waist to pull me closer. “You were so pretty, taking that cock,” he murmurs. “So beautiful when you fall apart like that.”

His scent swirls around me, and slick dribbles out of my cunt.

“And now,” he says darkly, “you’re going to do that for me.”

I nod eagerly, and the corner of his lip quirks up.

“You’re so cold, sweetheart,” he says, smirking. “Do you want me to keep you warm?”

“Yes,” I whisper. I watch as he yanks his jeans and underwear down, exposing his cock. His knot is already halfway inflated, and I’m so turned on by the sight that I whimper.

“Sit on my lap, baby,” he whispers. “Let’s finish what we started.”

I straddle him, my thighs on either side of his waist, and sink down slowly, closing my eyes as he fills me.

LANDON

IT'S DIFFERENT THIS TIME.

I keep eye contact with Skylar, watching every little expression she makes as her cunt envelops me, taking my cock fully.

My knot is already half inflated. That's how hard I am for her.

She makes a gasp as I bottom out in her, and I groan at the sensation.

River had her.

Now it's *my* turn.

Sharing her was one thing...

But now I have her all to myself.

"You were so beautiful, earlier," I whisper in her ear as my hands grab her hips. "The way you took both of us inside you."

She whimpers, and I reach around to slap her ass. She squeezes me and gasps, her full lips pulling into an "o" shape.

"Remember what I said about control, darling?" I say, working her hips with my hands. "You've completely stripped me of mine."

My orgasm is embarrassingly close, and I force myself to keep fucking her without falling apart.

Her beautiful tits are in my face, and I lean over to suck on a rosy nipple. She moans, and her walls contract around me again.

This time, she floods my lap with her wetness, and I groan into her chest, doing my best to not come and knot her fully.

I need her on the bed.

She squeals as I flip her over, still inside her, and position her so she's lying on the mattress, looking up at me.

Beautiful. She's stunning, and *mine*.

"Please, Alpha," she whispers. "Don't make me wait."

Her brilliant blue eyes shine up at me, and my resolve crumbles.

I thrust inside of her, enjoying the feel of her silk against my cock. It's already difficult to move; my half knot stays locked inside her as I snap my hips against hers.

"Faster," she moans. "I can take it faster, *Alpha*."

I don't hold back. I lift her leg so it's over my shoulder, then I pound her into the bed, the frame creaking with our movements.

It's fucking heaven, and her second orgasm swells at the time my own does.

"Gonna come," she whimpers, her eyes wide and glassy. "Gonna come on your knot."

That does it.

I explode.

My knot swells, locking us in place, and my vision whites out. I pump load after load of my cum into her, her tight cunt milking and squeezing my cock for everything I have.

I'm in awe of her. I kiss her lips, hungrily claiming them as my own, as she moans into my mouth.

There's nothing but pleasure as I lock inside her fully, connecting us together.

Mine.

What have I done to deserve this?

She whimpers against my lips as I thrust again, rocking us together lazily.

“My beautiful girl,” I whisper in her ear. “I wish I had found you earlier.”

Because maybe my nights wouldn't have been spent dedicated to work.

Maybe I could have had someone to come home to, instead of falling asleep in an empty bed.

I roll us onto our sides with my knot locked inside of her.

She mumbles something, but it's incoherent and laced with sleep, so I just press a kiss to her ear.

A word I never thought I'd say attempts to tumble from my lips.

But I keep it inside.

Instead, I stare longingly at her mating gland, wishing I could sink my teeth into it.

It's tempting. I could do it now, and she would be mine permanently.

I shake the thought away. If she wants me fully, it will be on her terms.

Holding her close, I fall asleep with her, our bodies entwined.

I WAKE UP LATER TO SKYLAR WHIMPERING, HER SCENT clouded with grief.

It pulls me out of my own dreamless sleep.

She's suffering from a nightmare so terrible that she lets out a quiet sob.

"Shh, shh, baby," I murmur, holding her closer and pressing a kiss to her ear. "I'm here, sweetheart."

"I'm sorry," she mumbles, sniffing.

"Sorry for what?" I whisper, running my hands through her hair. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

She continues whimpering, and I speak the words before I can stop myself.

"I want to give you everything," I confess. "I want to claim you, beautiful. I never want to leave you alone after this."

She's silent for a moment at my confession, and I'm worried I fucked up.

I'm still knotted inside her, but that doesn't mean she wants me to mate her.

Idiot, I think to myself.

I put off having a Rut for so long and took more supplements than necessary for years, just so I could focus on cases.

Now, the hormones are making me say things I never thought I would.

But my admission of feelings falls on deaf ears.

"I'm sorry...April," she whispers, and guilt makes my chest clench.

She's having a nightmare about her best friend.

The friend that we still haven't been able to find.

"I'll find her," I whisper to her. "It'll be okay, sweetheart. I promise."

Her whimpers quiet and her breathing steadies, but I curse myself internally for what I just did.

You *never* promise something like that.

Even if she was asleep, I still did it.

And somehow, I have to stay true to my word.

No matter what it takes.

SHE'S STILL SLEEPING WHEN I SLIP OUT OF HER, HER breathing deep and even. Her skin isn't as flushed, and her scent has softened.

It was an intense Heat, but it seems as though it's already fading.

The Alpha in me wants *more*, though.

More than just knotting her.

I dress, pulling up my jeans and buttoning up my shirt before heading out of the bedroom to find her food for when she wakes up.

It seems River was on the same page, too.

He's fully dressed and standing at her stove, making what looks like a complicated omelet. Neatly chopped peppers, mushrooms, and a cylinder of goat cheese sits on a cutting board, and he gently works the eggs in the pan.

"I didn't know you knew how to cook," I observe as he turns to me. "Since you never eat, I thought all you would know how to make was toast."

"Fuck off," he mutters, but there's no malice to it. "Vincent taught me. Said I needed to learn some basic recipes like a normal human being."

I pause at Vincent's name. The fact that River even brought it up is a huge deal after everything that happened. "He agreed to assist us," I say, watching as River flips the omelet. He does a decent job for someone who thrives on coffee and cigarettes.

"Good, because we fucking need him," he growls, placing the omelet on a plate. "He can work when we can't."

“So, you’re suddenly okay with him helping?” I ask curiously.

He sighs, turns off the burner, and turns fully towards me. “I want what’s best for Skylar, and I want to find her friend. If Vincent can help, so be it.”

I nod. “I agree.”

He grunts in reply.

It seems our truce only revolves around Skylar. Any other time, River’s back to being an asshole.

But that’s fine. We both care for Skylar, and that will have to be enough.

“By the way, you’re meeting with Vincent on Wednesday,” I add. “That’s the only day he agreed to, and I have a meeting with a police chief.”

“Absolutely fucking not,” he growls, turning to me. “I have nothing to say to that prick—”

“He has better connections than we do. And he’s still willing to use them for us.”

River opens his mouth to argue, but we hear whimpers from the bedroom.

Conversation dropped, we both head back to Skylar.

SKYLAR

MY HEAT ONLY LASTS THE WEEKEND, BUT IT'S THE MOST powerful one I've ever had, possibly due to not having one for more than a year.

My limbs are weak and fatigue wracks my body, but I still feel a thousand times better than I did before.

I nap most of Sunday away, occasionally waking up to either Landon or River spooning me. They take turns holding me, feeding me, and doting on me.

I'm ashamed to say I love it. I wish I didn't need to be taken care of.

I'm scared to ask for too much, even as River brings his mouth to my mating gland, inhaling deeply.

"You're like a fucking drug," he whispers into my skin as I doze. "You're everything I shouldn't want."

I'll disappoint you, I think. I'll want too much. Need too much.

I don't voice it. Instead, I allow myself to believe his words.

When I awake again, Landon is washing my face with a damp cloth and giving me one of his dimpled grins.

"Hey," he whispers. "How are you feeling?"

I sigh lazily. “Better,” I admit. “Much better.”

He traces my lips with his finger, looking at me curiously. He joins me in the bed, lying on his side so he faces me.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re smiling,” he whispers, putting his forehead against mine. “I’m trying to memorize it.”

I giggle as he chuckles, snuggling closer to him through the blankets. They’ve been thoroughly cleaned *again*, and I’m in awe at how much they’ve done to ensure my comfort.

“You didn’t have to do all this,” I mumble. “Clean up and cook for me.”

His smile fades. “Of course we did,” he says, smoothing my hair from my face. “And we’d happily do it a thousand times more.”

I bite my lip and look down, suddenly interested in the fabric count of my blankets.

“Skylar,” Landon says. “Look at me.”

I meet his dark, soulful eyes in the lamplight.

“You’re worth it,” he says, his eyes searching mine. “Don’t ever forget that.”

I swallow and nod, still not believing it.

But I want to.

AN HOUR LATER, I’M SHOWERED AND DRESSED, AND THE SUN is setting on Sunday night. I walk into the front room to see River and Landon quietly talking while looking at a laptop on the counter. River is squinting at the screen while Landon types.

Their scents are muted now. They mix into a warm, welcoming blend, and I realize that I could be content with this for a very long time.

Just River and Landon, occupying space with me.

But I shake the thought away.

We have to find April.

“Do you want me to pay you gas money?” I blurt out, and they both turn to look at me.

All three of us stand in awkward silence until River finds his voice.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he demands, his brows furrowed.

“You came all this way and have done so much for me,” I say. “And gas isn’t cheap. I could pay—”

Landon’s expression matches River’s. “Skylar, I mean this as respectfully as I can, but don’t ever ask us that again,” he says.

“We can pay for our own gas,” River adds, searching my gaze. “Why would you—” Then realization dawns on his face.

“Has anyone *ever* asked you for gas money?” Landon adds.

My silence is all the answer they need.

Jason *hated* visiting. He said I lived too far and only wanted to come over if I gave him gas money.

Or if I was in Heat.

“Fuck this,” River adds, fishing into his wallet. He pulls out a card and places it in my hand. “If you ever need something,” he says.

I stare at the credit card in shock. “What? You don’t have to—”

“You live by yourself, and shit happens,” River snaps. “We can’t be here as often as we’d like to. Hold on to it. Use it.”

I stare at him, dumbfounded. “You can’t mean that,” I say. “I’m more than capable of making my own money—”

“Skylar, please,” Landon insists. “He’s right. We can’t be here all the time. Let us take care of you, sweetheart.”

My inner Omega does ten backflips in delight.

I never intend to use it. But it's the intention behind it that makes my heart skip a beat.

I nod. "Okay," I whisper. "Thank you."

Landon gifts me a smile. "Now come here," he says. "We have a lot to discuss."

I stand around my kitchen counter with them late into the evening, answering questions and discussing their findings.

Hope rekindles in my chest.

I miss you, April.

But I'll find you.

VINCENT

THE BAR IS QUIET ON A WEDNESDAY NIGHT. IT'S JUST AS joyless as I remember, and the cheap counters are stained from years of wear. My less than impressive glass of well whiskey sits untouched as I take in my surroundings.

It's just like old times.

I haven't been here in ages.

"Hey, old man," a voice grunts, and I turn to see River in his worn brown leather jacket and ripped jeans. There are more dark circles under his eyes than I last remember.

I thought he couldn't look worse.

"You look like you aged ten years," I mutter in reply. The last time we saw each other didn't end well, and I don't need to have him start talking shit already.

I'm twelve years his senior, but I don't need to be reminded of it.

Fucking forty-four years old.

"And you're the spitting image of health," he snaps back, and I sigh.

Despite being a recluse, I haven't stopped taking out my frustrations at the gym. But I've adopted a habit of coffee and energy drinks, with little appetite for food.

I've picked up on River's habits I used to give him shit for.

"What the fuck are you here for? I don't have time for your bullshit," I say as he takes the stool next to me.

"From what I've heard, you have all the time in the world," he counters, narrowing his eyes.

"No, asshole, I don't have time for *you*," I say, drumming my fingers on the bar counter. "I gave Landon two minutes. You've got one."

"Prick," he mutters under his breath. "Fine. We want your help. I'm sure he told you that."

I nod. "Yeah. Some Omega in Isleton. Landon said I could help with pulling strings."

River's eyes narrow. "She's not just *some* Omega," he snaps, and my eyes widen slightly.

"Wow. So, she's got you too, huh? You and Landon, interested in the same girl? What changed? You're not working sixteen hours a day now?"

He huffs and fidgets on the stool. He bites his lip, and I can tell he wants to admit something.

Back when we were still partners, I could call him on his shit. But now the dynamic has changed, and my slightly crooked nose from when he punched me shows just how much.

"Fuck you, alright?" River exclaims, slamming his hand down on the counter, causing the few patrons to turn their heads towards us. "I didn't want to be here. I *don't* want to be talking to you, much less looking at your fucking face. I'm doing this for *her*. So will you help or not?"

I'm slightly stunned. River had all but sworn off any type of relationship or feelings for *anyone*, and now he's meeting with me to ask for a favor.

I wonder how bitter his pride tasted when he swallowed it.

"Tell me more about it," I finally say.

“Her best friend went missing, alright? And we don’t have enough time with all these *O* overdoses to put in the effort needed.”

Oh.

No wonder River doesn’t want to be here.

“Look, after everything that happened, I know you don’t want to do this, but—”

I chuckle humorlessly and shake my head. “You’re a fucking idiot. Go home.”

River’s nostrils flare, and I brace myself for a fight.

“The Isleton police have *one* detective. *One*, and they’re busy with *O* cases. We don’t need a lot. Just look at what we have, talk with her once—”

“You’re out of your fucking mind if you think I’m working on a missing persons case,” I say, my voice low. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

His eyes narrow. “Fuck, can you just fucking *listen* for a second? The reason we’re asking is that you’re the best private investigator we know. You specialized in missing persons! You have more contacts—”

“No. Fuck off.”

“Damnit, Vince. You can’t let this shit haunt you forever. We stayed, you didn’t. You owe us this.”

My fists clench.

It would be so easy to tell him to fuck off, but he’s right.

They *did* stay.

Even after what all three of us saw, Landon and River stayed.

And I fucking left.

“I don’t owe you anything,” I say slowly, doing my best not to repeat the last interaction River and I had two years ago.

River sighs loudly and rolls his eyes. “Fine,” he grits out. “Whatever is left of your cold, dead, whatever-the-fuck you

have for a heart, could you *please* just talk to her?” He looks like he wants to vomit as he says it. “Just once. And if you really want nothing to do with any of it, then you can fuck right back off into your hovel of an apartment.”

We hold each other’s gaze, neither of us daring to blink.

Fuck.

I finally turn away from him and swallow the whiskey down, letting the alcohol burn my throat.

“Tell me where to meet her,” I say finally, staring into the empty glass.

I don’t want to do this...

But for once, River is right.

I probably owe them this.

MY FINGERS TWITCH AS I GRIP THE STEERING WHEEL.

I haven’t been out much in the last two years, much less driven this far out of my town.

I don’t want to fucking do this.

I’d like to be anywhere but in the parking lot of *April’s Café*.

Fuck.

That’s the name of the missing girl, isn’t it?

Fuck Fuck Fuck

But I force myself to open the car door, ignoring the absolute shitstorm that swirls in my head.

I’m supposed to be the one in control. I’m not supposed to act like River, like a loose cannon that can barely function every day.

But the crunching of leaves and the snap of twigs under my feet in the parking lot remind me of a tangled mess of hair

caught in branches...

I exhale slowly and pull open the door to the café, and I'm welcomed with warmth.

The noise in my head quiets enough for me to focus.

The scent of vanilla, cinnamon, and other sweets fills the air, along with the dark smell of coffee.

It's just like any other café. I catch whiffs of sweet Omegas mixing with the freshly baked cookies. Subtle Alpha scents fill the air as well, tempering down the aromas. The well-lit cases are full of different baked goods, and on the counter there's a *Macaron Flavor of the Day* sign next to the cash register.

As I walk up to the counter, I notice the flavor is *April's Apricots*.

The café is quaint, well-kept, and welcoming.

"Hi there! Can I help you?"

I'm greeted by a petite blonde girl with a warm, friendly smile, likely in her early twenties. She's an Omega, her scent sugary but subtle. *Devyn* is written on her name tag.

"Hello," I say, trying my best to act like a normal person. "I'm looking for Skylar Bloom. Is she around?"

Devyn widens her blue eyes, and her mouth falls open slightly. "Are you here about April?" she asks excitedly. "Are you friends with River and Landon?"

I cock an eyebrow. The River and Landon I knew from two years ago would certainly not be on a first name basis with this girl.

"Not friends," I confirm. "I'm just here to talk to Skylar."

Her smile falls, just slightly. "Sure," she says, keeping the upbeat inflection in her tone. "I'll be right back."

I stare at the *Flavor of the Month* sign.

All proceeds from April's Apricots go to reward money for information on April Waters and her disappearance.

There's a small picture as well, showcasing an attractive brunette with dark eyes and light brown hair.

April Waters. Despite never wanting to do this again, the cogs are already turning in my brain.

I barely glanced at the notes Landon sent me, but now I wish I had paid more attention.

“Hi there,” a voice chirps, and I'm met with a pair of dark blue eyes.

Oh, shit.

My reaction is involuntary. It's as if something activated the Alpha part of my brain. I'm suddenly *very* aware of the Omega in front of me.

Her scent is just like the café, only with more notes of blossoms, honey, and...

Perfection.

She's older than I expected, too. She's not some young college-aged girl. This is a woman with depth, wisdom, and experience.

And she has no right being so damn beautiful.

I should walk away right now, I think.

Now it makes sense why River and Landon were so focused on helping her.

She smiles at me, and I realize I'm well and truly fucked.

SKYLAR

“THERE’S SOMEONE HERE FOR YOU,” DEVYN WHISPERS excitedly.

I’m on my break, munching on a chocolate chip cookie when she barrels into the storage room, full of energy.

It’s been almost a week since my Heat ended, but I still can’t stop thinking about River and Landon.

They text me occasionally; but I haven’t heard from them much.

I tell myself it’s because they’re busy; not that they’re done with me.

Besides, April still looms in the forefront of my mind.

I’ve made more apricot macarons than I thought possible, offering them to every single customer.

And if they don’t want one, I’m still sending them home with a sample.

Landon and River have all the information I could give them. They’ve also interviewed every coworker in the café, along with Tammy.

Ben worked with them too, accessing security cameras and all the video feeds where she might have shown up.

And all I've done is make macarons and have my brains fucked out.

“What are you talking about? Why do you look so scandalized?” I ask around a mouthful of cookie.

“I think he's a *detective*,” she whispers. “And he's super hot. And old.”

“Old? What do you mean by *old*?” I ask.

“He's in his forties or something—hey!” she makes a face as I sling a piece of cookie at her.

“I'm almost thirty, you little shit,” I growl at her. “Watch who you call *old*.”

Our friendship has grown, and we have a comfortable banter, but having April here would definitely balance us out.

Wiping my hands of crumbs, I start to head up to the register, but almost freeze in shock.

Oh, come *on*.

Dressed in dark jeans, a black t-shirt and a hooded leather jacket, I could almost bet money he knows Landon and River. He has his hands in his pockets and an air of superiority to him.

This man has *power*.

His scent is a low note of dark chocolate mixed with an undercurrent of cognac—dark, mysterious, and warm.

A perfect complement to Landon and River.

His hair is dark blonde, almost shoulder length and messily tousled. His beard is slightly darker, with hints of grey in it.

“Hi there,” I say politely, keeping my customer service voice on, just in case he's here for entirely different reasons. “What can I do for you?”

The question seems to catch him on off guard, and it gives me a moment to gaze into his grey, tired eyes.

But this is a different expression than River's.

This is the face of someone who looks like they haven't slept in years, not just mere days.

As if he's carrying a heavy weight all by himself.

Still, it doesn't distract from his good looks.

It only makes him more mysterious.

"You're Skylar," he says, his voice low and gravelly. The bass is delightful to my ears; sexy, and deep.

I nod. "Are you Landon's friend?" I ask. "He mentioned something about you, I think."

I rack my brain. Sometime during my Heat, Landon had said something about a retired private detective...

The Alpha scoffs. "Not his friend, no. But we did work together a few years ago," he confirms. "Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

Nervous energy bubbles in my chest.

"Of course," I say automatically. "Just give me one moment, please."

I walk into the back, untie my apron, and do my best to brush the flour off my pants.

If we're going to talk about April, I need to let him know I'm serious.

I also grab two of the macarons that were left open in their box—both dark chocolate espresso.

He seems like a guy that doesn't appreciate too much sweetness.

When I walk into the front, I see he's taken the small table furthest away from the cash register. His massive body is tucked into a small corner of the café, and it would be comical if this wasn't so nerve-wracking.

I also grab us both cups of coffee, thankful that we had just made a fresh batch for some of the afternoon customers.

He raises an eyebrow as I hand him the paper cup and the napkin-wrapped macaron.

“You look like you could use a coffee,” I say, shrugging. “Also, we have an abundance of macarons. This flavor compliments the dark roast perfectly.”

He blinks at the cookie in his hand, small compared to the size of his palm.

“Right,” he grumbles. “Thanks.”

My heart hammers in my chest as I take a seat opposite from him, watching as he sips his coffee. The macaron sits uneaten on the table, but I fight a small smile as his eyes slightly widen when he takes a drink.

“That’s *really* good,” he says, almost to himself.

“It’s local,” I say. “And it’s worth every extra penny the café pays for it.”

He nods appreciatively.

I point at the dark brown macaron. “And this is made to compliment it. It’s the tiniest bit of sweetness to offset the bite of the roast.”

He looks down at it and frowns. “I’ve never had... whatever kind of pastry this is.”

This time, I can’t fight the grin. “Try it. It’s my way of thanking you for taking the time to talk to me.”

His frown grows as he picks it up. But as I watch him take a bite, and the minute he chews, I know I’ve won.

“Fuck,” he says, and I burst out laughing. The combination of this giant, broody Alpha looking so impressed by a cookie has me entertained.

The corner of his full lip quirks up, and his scent changes slightly. It’s not as bitter anymore.

It’s tempered by a slight sweetness.

My stomach flutters.

“I’m glad you like it,” I say. “I’m usually never wrong with macaron flavors.”

“Oh?”

“I gave some to River and Landon, and they’ve been hooked ever since.”

At the mention of their names, his gaze hardens again. “Right.”

“Anyway, I’m Skylar. It’s nice to meet you,” I say quickly, trying to change the subject, even though I know he already knows my name. “And April is my best friend. She’s been missing for almost a month now. If you could help me at all, or offer me any advice, I would appreciate it.”

He nods. “I’m Vincent,” he says. “I apologize for not introducing myself sooner.”

Vincent.

The name fits him. With his hardened disposition and his rugged looks, it works for him.

And that *scent*.

I didn’t think any other Alpha scent could top River’s and Landon’s, but I was wrong.

Very wrong.

I ignore my body’s response; as much as I would enjoy sitting at the table with him and just pushing my thighs together, it’s not the time or place.

“I’m up to date with everything regarding your friend,” he says. “But I want to double check to make sure there’s nothing I’ve missed.”

Everything matches up. He has all the information that the other Alphas have. There’s nothing new, and he rambles off all the facts about April dispassionately.

It rubs me the wrong way.

As we talk, it starts to feel like he’s here out of obligation.

Or maybe he just did Landon and River a favor.

I don’t expect him to have the same passion that either of them does, but he seems sort of...bored.

“The frustrating thing is that I feel like more could be done. Maybe we could—” I start to say, but he interrupts me.

“From what I see, everything has been done. They’ve interviewed any potential witnesses; and they pulled security footage from the day she disappeared. It’s been more than three weeks—and I don’t want to give you false hope.”

I blink at him. “False hope?” I squeak.

I have the urge to fling my coffee at him.

He’s much too nonchalant about this for my liking.

“Skylar, people go missing every day,” he says, exasperated. “Believe me. I’ve seen it. And the longer they aren’t found...the statistics get worse.”

“No,” I say, unable to process what he’s saying. “No, there’s always hope.”

“There’s hope, and then there’s being realistic,” he adds coldly. “I applaud you for doing all this. I believe you want your friend back. But if she’s found, I would prepare yourself for the worst possible outcome.”

I stare at the monster in front of me, my mouth open in shock.

Angry tears fill my eyes. “Is there anything at all you can do to help me?” I whisper. “Can you think of *something* that might have been missed?”

He sighs, looking off into the distance. Then he nods. “Do you have any enemies?” he asks suddenly.

“*Enemies?*”

“Someone that doesn’t like April or you. Maybe an angry ex-boyfriend, or someone you’re no longer friends with—”

“I have a shitty ex,” I say. “He was kind of an asshole to me.”

And for the first time since trying the macaron, I sense a reaction out of him. It’s not big—it’s as if he’s still trying to be as unbothered as possible—but I catch his eyes narrow. “Did he hit you, or did he—”

“No. He was a narcissist, I think. Just selfish.”

He slightly relaxes in the chair. “And April?” he asks.

I shrug. “Her breakups were all amicable.”

He nods his head. “Okay. I’ll tell Landon to poke around more.” He drains his coffee and places the cup down. “Sorry for bothering you. I’ll let you go back to work now.”

I frown—he seems so put out by this conversation. “Well, do you have any suggestions?” I ask gently. “I mean, I’ve already talked with local news, but maybe there’s something I’m missing.”

“Like I said,” he says, “you’re doing everything you should be.”

“Okay, well, is there anything *you* could do? I mean, since you’re here and all—”

“I’m not a detective anymore,” he says coldly. “And frankly, I don’t want to stick around to see you disappointed when all this is over.”

My jaw drops. “Excuse me?”

His scent turns overwhelmingly bitter. “It’s just numbers, Skylar,” he says, as if I’m a child. “Getting your hopes up will only make this worse for you in the long run. Believe me,” he continues, his voice growing soft, “I’ve seen it happen before.”

I feel sick to my stomach. The coffee churns around in my gut, and nausea overwhelms me.

I want to vomit right on his fucking shoes.

“I’m sorry, just so I’m clear,” I rasp, “you came here to tell me that I’m *not* going to find my friend?”

He stares at me a beat too long with his grey eyes. “No, I came here as a favor to Landon,” he replies.

My temper flares. “Great. Well, you can get the *fuck* out of my café, *Vincent*,” I snap.

His eyes widen. “Really,” he says, his voice low. “Do you normally talk to people that try to help you out like this?”

“You just told me my friend was probably *dead*,” I hiss.

“Just because you don’t like what I said doesn’t make it any less true,” he retorts, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, if I believed that, I would probably lock myself in my house for the next few years,” I say. “Because if I don’t have any hope, there’s no way I’m carrying on.”

Something I said strikes a nerve with him. “Hope is pointless,” he says lowly. “Reality always sets in.”

I bark out a humorless laugh. “I’m sure it does,” I say, trying my best to not lose it on him. “Thank you for reminding me of that.”

He continues to study me, then sighs, frustrated. His fingers card through his hair as he regards me. “Look, I’m not —”

“Please leave,” I say quietly, giving him a sad smile. “I’m done having this conversation.”

Maybe I’m being dramatic and rude. I don’t know how far Vincent came to visit me, and he *did* spend time discussing April with me.

But I can’t fathom the idea that she’s...

I just *can’t*.

I can’t go down the route, and this Alpha just tried to extinguish the spark of hope I have left.

Finally, he stands up, keeping his eyes on me. “Nice to meet you,” he grumbles. “I’ll tell Landon what we discussed.”

I nod curtly, refusing to let him see the tears that threaten to spill. Yet as he walks away, I can’t help but feel like I made a mistake.

But I snatch up our cups and napkins to toss them away in the back. Then I pull out my phone and send a group text to both River and Landon.

Your friend is an asshole.

RIVER

I'M TWENTY MINUTES OUTSIDE OF SKYLAR'S TOWN, IGNORING the angry looks of officers as I walk past crime scene tape and into a house.

I'm with the Alpha Bureau. If they have a fucking problem, they can call the government.

It's another *O* overdose.

This time, it's a nineteen year old college kid.

Landon is already there, and he gives me a rundown of events.

"They think this is a new formula," he says, frowning. "But it's the first known overdose in this town."

"Shit," I say. "*Fuck.*"

"Very astute," he says dryly. "I'll be sure to give the parents your regards."

"Hey." One of the Beta officers I *didn't* annoy comes up to us. "Are you guys working on any missing person cases right now?"

We both turn to him. "There's a missing Omega in Isleton," I say. "Why? Have you heard anything?"

The officer shakes his head. “Not about that. The Omega that lived here has been missing all weekend. Twenty years old. Her best friend went missing that same night, too.”

“Wait, what?” I snap. “What do you mean, they’ve been missing all weekend? Did you idiots even make a report?”

“River,” Landon warns.

The officer frowns. “Look, I get that you think you’re hot shit cause you’re with the Bureau,” he snarls. “But we do our jobs here, too. Her parents didn’t mention it until right now.”

I share a look with Landon.

Three missing Omegas within twenty minutes of each other?

“Shit,” I say, at the same time my phone buzzes.

Your friend is an asshole.

I notice she sent it to both of us, and Landon pulls out his phone and sighs.

“What did he do?” he mutters.

“He was probably himself,” I say. “His unique, charming self.”

“I really thought he could help her,” he murmurs, shaking his head. “A stupid assumption.”

“The Vincent of five years ago could,” I say. “Not whatever he is now.”

I shoot off a quick reply to Skylar before continuing to speak with the officer.

Sorry to hear that, gorgeous, but I’m not surprised. Can we stop by at your place tonight? We’re in the area.

She sends a smiley face back, and for a moment, all is right in the world.

A FEW HOURS LATER, EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED.

I drive to her house, dreading the conversation that's going to take place.

Landon says it will go fine.

But I know her.

It won't be fine, and she won't want to listen.

But now, we need a united front when we talk to Skylar.

In a perfect world, I would keep her with me at all times. Take her away from Isleton and lock in her in my apartment where I can have her all to myself.

But that's selfish, and I would drive her nuts.

Landon balances us out, as much as I hate to admit it.

I'm not even all the way up her driveway when I notice the change in her scent.

It's slightly soured.

She's upset, and I fucking hate it.

By the time I'm at her door, I smell the salt of her tears.

When she answers it, her eyes watery, I can't help but pull her into my arms.

"I've got you," I murmur, as she buries my head in my chest. "I'm here."

I allow her scent to ground me, and I rumble my chest, offering a subtle purr for her.

She sighs in my hold, then steps out of the doorway so I can step in. Landon's on the couch, a yellow macaron in his hand and a mug in front of him on the coffee table.

"Just used my French Press. You want some?" she asks, a look of defeat on her expression. She looks paler than she did before, and the dark circles are back.

"What did that asshole say to you?" I demand, following her into the kitchen. I watch anxiously as she pours a large cup of coffee, then hands it to me wordlessly. She goes to sit on the couch next to Landon, sighing.

I join on the opposite side of her, so she's sandwiched between us.

"He has a very defeatist attitude," Landon says. "He wasn't very hopeful when discussing April."

"No," Skylar chuckles, staring at the coffee table. "He said she was probably dead."

I clench and unclench my fists. That *fucker*.

There's a way to approach those subjects, and now that Vincent stopped giving a fuck, I can only imagine what that piece of shit said to her.

"I promised myself I wouldn't cry," she adds, wiping at her face. "She may very well be gone. It's just...he was so negative about it. He didn't even want to try." Her voice cracks and she groans. "Fuck," she mutters, shaking her head. "What is his deal? And he said you guys aren't even friends?"

I exchange a look with Landon, and he raises an eyebrow, as if saying *I'm not the one that's going to tell her*.

It's a story even I don't want to tell.

"A case went sideways," I say, doing my best to keep it brief. "And after that, he retired early. We had some disagreements."

She looks up at me, her blue eyes shining. "He's still a dick," she mutters. "I almost threw my hot coffee on him."

Landon quirks his lip. "I would have enjoyed witnessing that," he chuckles.

We fall silent, and I relax onto her couch, sipping my coffee. It's a peaceful moment, after the stressful day, and I want to bask in her scent and company while I can.

"Oh, well," she says. "I could organize more searches. And when I'm back at work tomorrow, I'll make plans with the others. I just have to keep going, so I don't fall apart."

She takes a deep breath and leans back against the couch and presses her legs up on the coffee table.

The sight is adorable. She's in pink sweatpants and a grey sweatshirt, and her socks have a variety of colorful cookies on them.

I don't want to ruin this moment.

"Sweetheart," Landon starts, his gaze falling to her socks as well. "We need to talk to you about that."

Landon said it would be fine. We will get her to understand.

We're excellent negotiators, after all.

She stiffens and sits up straight. Her scent, which had started to sweeten back up, develops a hint of sourness. "About what?" she turns to him. "What's going on?"

"Two Omegas went missing in the next town," Landon says slowly. "And more overdoses are happening with the Omega drug."

"And?" she snaps, her tone harsh.

I just know she's not going to like what he's about to say.

"We don't think you should go back to work for the time being," he continues.

SKYLAR

I BLINK AT LANDON, UNCOMPREHENDING.

“What?” I say finally, turning to look at River. His expression is just as serious as Landon’s, and I realize I don’t have an ally in this situation.

“You’re safer at home,” River says stoically. “There’s something going on, but we’re not sure exactly what it is. But three Omegas going missing in under a month is a fucking red flag.”

“*Okay*,” I say slowly. “I’ll be more vigilant. I’m not just staying home, though. I *have* to be at work. The café needs me.”

“You have a whole staff that I’m sure would be able to cover for you,” Landon says gently. “And technically, you’re still getting over a concussion.”

I look at him incredulously. “You weren’t worried about my concussion when I was in Heat. What are you *talking* about?”

Panic bubbles in me.

“What are *you* talking about?” River snaps. “Of course, we were worried about that. We’re always worried about you,” he says intensely. “And right now, you need to listen to us.”

I have to get off the couch.

They can't make me stay home.

I can't be trapped in this house alone, pacing around, doing *nothing*.

I stand up and turn around to face them. "I *am* listening," I say softly, my gaze drifting from Landon to River's. "And I know it's dangerous. But I'll just always have someone walk me to my car. I'll keep pepper spray on me. I'll do whatever. But you *cannot* stop me from going to work."

The Alphas look at each other, silently communicating.

"Besides, what about Devyn? You haven't said anything about her needing to stay home, right?" I demand, starting to pace nervously. "If it was a big issue, wouldn't there be a curfew or public warning?"

"This isn't public yet, sweetheart," Landon says. "And it's probably only going to get worse."

"I don't care about Devyn," River says immediately afterwards. "I care about *you*."

Landon glares at him as I chuckle humorlessly and shake my head. "You're an asshole," I mutter. "She's my friend."

This night is slowly unraveling.

"Fuck," River growls, running a hand through his hair. "Fine. It's not safe for her, either, and we can have Ben talk to her. But you're not going back to the café until we figure out exactly what's going on."

I freeze.

"Sorry," I say finally, "but you don't get to dictate what I do and don't do."

My hands are shaking, and I fight the instinct to lash out at them.

But the café is what I have left of April. It's where I can put all my nervous, erratic energy and channel it into something good.

I walk around the couch and head into the kitchen, wringing my hands.

“It’s not that simple,” Landon says as I open my cupboard. I pull out the glass containers and run my fingers over the labels.

Almond flour. Sugar.

There’s a hand on my shoulder, and I jump.

“Hey,” River says, and I shrug away his touch. “This is serious.”

I whirl around to face him. “I *cannot* stay here,” I snap. “I can’t just stop what I do. I have to keep telling people about April—”

“You have to stay *safe*,” he snaps, his eyes narrowing. “You’re not listening. *Two* Omegas went missing, just twenty minutes from you!”

“River—” Landon says, standing up from the couch.

“Every time you step outside, you put yourself at risk,” River hisses. “And I can’t lose you.”

His scent is overpowering, now more peppery now that it’s mixed with his anger.

“And I can’t lose April,” I whisper.

Landon sighs. “Skylar...” his voice trails off as he shakes his head.

River reaches for me again, but I shake his hand away. “You think she’s dead,” I realize with horror. My eyes lock with Landon’s, and his expression is somber.

“If there’s a pattern of missing Omegas, that’s something that we need to consider,” Landon says solemnly.

I look back at River. “No,” I whisper, shaking my head. “No. That’s not possible.”

“Nothing’s for certain,” he says. “Not yet. But I’ll be damned if you go missing, too.”

“NO!” I yell, and both of the Alphas flinch. “You *promised*,” I half snarl, half sob as I point at Landon accusingly. “You *promised* me you’d find her!”

“You did *what*?” River snaps, turning to him. “You never promise something like that, you idiot!”

Landon’s brown eyes widen as I storm over to him. “You remember that?” he murmurs.

“Yes,” I choke out. “In bed. During my Heat. You *promised*.”

Suddenly, Landon and River are screaming at each other.

The walls are closing in.

This is too much.

I put my hands to my face and take slow, deep breaths.

A sob threatens to form, but I force myself to keep it down.

“You’re asking me to give up the one thing I have left of her,” I say. “And I can’t. I *won’t*.”

River growls and slams his hand on the counter. “Damn it, Skylar, you need to listen! This isn’t about making cookies and selling coffee. This is about keeping you *safe*!”

“You think this is all about running the café?” I gasp. “It’s mine and April’s place! It’s the last bit I have of her!”

“And I don’t want it to be the last bit we have of *you*!” River yells.

“He’s right,” Landon says, his voice low. “This is serious, Skylar. I’m sorry it has to be like this, but you *have to lay low*.”

They’re taking her away from me, I think wildly.

“She’s my family,” I snap. “*You’re not*.”

The room goes quiet, and their scents change into something muddled and dark.

I laugh bitterly to fight off the tears that threaten to spill as I tear myself open. “I have two people that I cherish in this

world: April and her mother. Everyone else has *left*. Do you understand that?"

I don't want to have this conversation now. It's something I try not to think about too much, and loneliness pricks at my chest as I open myself up to them.

"My own dad bailed on me as a teenager, and my mom is in a totally different state. They don't want anything to do with me," I continue, pacing. "The last Alpha I stupidly dated barely tolerated me and made it *very* clear I was only an accessory to his ego," I admit, shame flushing my cheeks. "April is the only constant through all of it. She's my sister, without the blood relation."

I can't help it anymore. I start to sob, my face in my hands as I cry. Landon curses and pulls me into his arms, and this time, I don't push away. I bury my face in his chest, letting out every single pent-up emotion for the last month.

"I've got you," he murmurs, his earthy scent washing over me. "I know, sweetheart. I know it's hard."

"Don't ask me to do this," I cry into his chest. "*Please*, don't ask me to give up hope."

"We're not," he says, pressing his lips to the top of my head. "I promise, we're not."

When I step back, wiping away the mess of tears, his expression hasn't changed. "It's important for you to remember, though," he says, "you can only do so much for her. You've done more than enough already, Skylar. More than I've seen most people do."

My stomach drops.

He still doesn't get it. Neither of them does.

"There's always more I can do," I murmur.

"Not if she's a ghost," River mutters, and Landon turns to look at him sharply.

My eyes widen and it feels as if I've been struck.

"What did you say?" I whisper.

At that moment, he looks as sick as I feel, and he just shakes his head. “It doesn’t look good, Skylar. And we won’t let you be the next one. I’m sorry.”

My heart shatters.

The hope that they brought with them flickers and dies.

If they believe that she’s gone...

No.

No.

I stumble backwards in shock.

“Skylar,” Landon reaches for me, but I slap his hand away.

“Get the fuck out of my house,” I say slowly. “Both of you.”

“Skylar—” River tries, but I turn to him.

“You think she’s dead. You think this is pointless,” I say, my voice low. “How long have you thought that she’s a *ghost*?”

“It’s *complicated*,” he insists, his scent spiking.

I can’t breathe.

“It’s not just black or white,” Landon adds. “But statistics show—”

“You sound just like *him*,” I whisper. “Just like Vincent.”

“I am nothing like him,” Landon growls, startling me. “I’m simply telling you to be realistic about this.”

“Realistic,” I repeat slowly.

He nods, his scent spiking with anger.

“Realistically, I need you to get out of my house,” I snarl. “And if you really think she’s dead, leave me *alone*.”

Landon flinches. “Sweetheart, you need to listen—”

“I don’t have to *do* anything!” I yell. “You are *not* my Alphas!”

I'm dangerously close to breaking down and having a repeat of Valentine's Day last year.

And I will *not* do it in front of them, the two allies I thought I had.

They think April's dead. I can't be around them anymore.

Part of me knows I'm not thinking straight. My inner Omega is heartbroken, betrayed by the two Alphas who gave me hope.

But all they did was help me through my Heat.

We're not mated, and we're certainly not even a partial pack.

I was messy, stupid, and emotional.

And it's ending now.

"Like hell you're not," River snarls, and he hurries toward me. But I hold my hand out to stop him.

"If you respect me at all," I say. "If you *care* about me, you will get out. *Now*."

Their scents are thick and smokey, as if they're going up in flames.

Landon is solemn while River is agitated.

I can't be near them anymore.

"Out," I say again. "Get out and leave me alone."

I head to my bedroom, slam and lock the door behind me, and bury my face in a pillow.

Then I let out a muffled scream, letting tears wash over me again.

They think she's *dead*.

When I finally hear the front door shut and the sound of cars driving away, I allow myself to stop being silent.

I let despair take over me, my body wracked with sobs until my throat hurts.

TIME PASSES. IT COULD BE A FEW MINUTES OR A FEW HOURS, but finally, I stop crying. My body is exhausted, and I curl up in a ball and snifle.

I meant what I said. If Landon and River truly believe she's...*gone*...there's no point in them hanging around.

No matter if my heart thinks otherwise.

It wouldn't have worked with them, anyway. They're too busy. Their work is their life, and they made it very clear that they're making an exception for me.

They would grow bored. Or I would want too much, just like last time.

I grab my phone and see unread text messages from both of them. I ignore them, unwilling to read whatever they sent.

But when I hear my front door open, I can't help but feel a tiny bit hopeful.

I didn't lock it after they left, so maybe they're coming back to talk.

Talk about what, though?

They still don't think April is coming back.

Still, I sit up and make my way to the bedroom door, unlocking it.

I make my way to the front room, but they're not there.

My door is left wide open, the chilly night air blowing in from outside.

What the hell?

"River?" I call out hesitantly. "Landon?"

No response.

A chill runs down my spine.

Their scents are muted, and slowly fading from the wind.

They're not here.

That's fine. The door is only a few steps away.

I'm probably overreacting. I'm sure the wind blew it open.

But as I hurry to the front door to shut it, something covers my mouth, while an arm wraps around me and shoves me backwards.

I stumble into a broad chest and gasp in surprise as a chemical smell fills my nose.

I don't have time to struggle. I can barely form a coherent thought as I slip out of consciousness, darkness invading my senses.

I start to fall, but I don't register hitting the ground.

They were right, I think.

I surrender to the void.

END OF PART 1

TO BE CONTINUED...

Skylar's story concludes in *Knot A Trace: Part 2*.

Coming in 2024!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liliana Carlisle is a romance author that loves angst, drama, and passion. Her characters are always flawed, but almost always redeemable.

She resides in Northern California with her husband, stepchildren, and two emotional cats. She started her writing “career” in seventh grade writing Backstreet Boys fan fiction in her notebooks. When she’s not writing she can be found studying classical voice, playing video games, or gulping cold brew coffee.



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