

TESSA KANE



LONE  
WOLF

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*To Kelly, this story would have never happened without our weirdly random and often NSFW messenger conversations.*

**No good deed goes unpunished.**

After being exiled by my pack at seventeen, I've spent the last four years constantly on the move trying to avoid all ties to the shifter world.

Unfortunately, I can't outrun fate.

When I step in to break up a fight, the shifters involved realize I'm a rare male omega. Not only does that revelation put me in the crosshairs of competing packs that would do anything to control me, it also leads me to cross paths with an Alpha who claims to be my fated mate.

Past experiences have left scars—both literal and figurative—and, fated mate or not, permanently binding myself to an Alpha is the last thing I want.

But Julien might be exactly what I need.

As my life erupts into chaos and new threats emerge from the secrets of my past, I realize this Alpha is different and placing my trust in him could finally allow me to have the one thing I've always wanted.

*A home.*

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**CONTENT WARNINGS:**

- *Physical assault of a minor (Prologue- Keir is 17)*
- *Depiction of the grooming of a minor (Chapter 53- no details of the physical relationship on page)*
- *Instances of homophobic language*

# CONTENTS

[1. Prologue](#)

[2. One](#)

[3. Two](#)

[4. Three](#)

[5. Four](#)

[6. Five](#)

[7. Six](#)

[8. Seven](#)

[9. Eight](#)

[10. Nine](#)

[11. Ten](#)

[12. Eleven](#)

[13. Twelve](#)

[14. Thirteen](#)

[15. Fourteen](#)



16. Fifteen

17. Sixteen

18. Seventeen

19. Eighteen

20. Nineteen

21. Twenty

22. Twenty-One

23. Twenty-Two

24. Twenty-Three

25. Twenty-Four

26. Twenty-Five

27. Twenty-Six

28. Twenty-Seven

29. Twenty-Eight

30. Twenty-Nine

31. Thirty

32. Thirty-One

33. Thirty-Two

34. Thirty-Three

35. Thirty-Four

36. Thirty-Five

37. Thirty-Six

38. Thirty-Seven

[39. Thirty-Eight](#)

[40. Thirty-Nine](#)

[41. Forty](#)

[42. Forty-One](#)

[43. Forty-Two](#)

[44. Forty-Three](#)

[45. Forty-Four](#)

[46. Forty-Five](#)

[47. Forty-Six](#)

[48. Forty-Seven](#)

[49. Forty-Eight](#)

[50. Forty-Nine](#)

[51. Fifty](#)

[52. Fifty-One](#)

[53. Fifty-Two](#)

[54. Fifty-Three](#)

[55. Fifty-Four](#)

[56. Fifty-Five](#)

[57. Fifty-Six](#)

[58. Fifty-Seven](#)

[59. Fifty-Eight](#)

[60. Fifty-Nine](#)

[61. Sixty](#)

[62. Sixty-One](#)

[63. Sixty-Two](#)

[64. Sixty-Three](#)

[65. Sixty-Four](#)

[66. Sixty-Five](#)

[67. Sixty-Six](#)

[68. Sixty-Seven](#)

[69. Epilogue](#)

[A Note from Tessa](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

# PROLOGUE

## KEIR

TONIGHT IS SHAPING UP to be a disaster of epic proportions, nothing at all like how I pictured the day I'd become an official pack member.

A pack welcoming ceremony is supposed to be a celebration, but any celebratory feeling is lost in the shadow of last night's violence and bloodshed. Everyone is already nervous and on edge, and the gruesome sight of a head mounted on a spike in the center of the compound certainly doesn't help matters.

But Alpha Randall insisted we go through with the ceremony anyway.

The decision makes sense, I suppose. The challenge last night didn't result in a shift of power since Randall won, but he probably wants to give the impression that doing so was so easy that everything is already back to normal. He wants to show how unaffected he is by the whole thing which—

unfortunately for me—means performing this welcoming ceremony as scheduled.

And as soon as I shift, I'm as good as dead.

This might be my first time shifting with the pack, but it's not actually my first shift. That happened about a month ago when I escaped into the woods after an alpha from another pack almost got me killed over something *he* did. I should have run as soon as I found my wolf form that night, but I was so upset over the betrayal of someone I thought cared about me that the truth of what I am seemed inconsequential.

I've always been a little different, but I didn't know exactly *how* different until after that first shift. And it wasn't until I read about wolves like me in a book I stole from the pack cleric's office that I realized my differences would likely end in my death if anyone found out the truth.

If I were smart, I would've run then. If nothing else, I should've taken off yesterday in all the commotion after the failed challenge.

But I didn't.

I have no money, no car, and nowhere to go. My pack lives in the backwoods of Alabama and is the only family I've ever known—even if it's kind of a shitty one. I have no clue how to navigate the world on my own.

My instincts are screaming at me to run *now*, but it's too late. I can't sneak away without anyone noticing when I'm already standing in front of the entire pack with the other five wolves

being welcomed into the pack tonight. At this point, there's nothing I can do but cross my fingers and hope I can slip away before anyone gets a good sniff of my wolf form.

I'm the oldest one up here at seventeen, not that anyone could tell by looking at me. The only other male participating in the ceremony tonight—Alpha Randall's son, Luke—is three years younger than me, but he's at least a full foot taller and as wide as two of me put together. He's an alpha, so it's not really surprising that he's bigger, but I've always been smaller than even the other male betas.

*I guess I know the reason for that now...*

I'm more slender than bulky with androgynous features bordering on pretty. Big blue eyes, small upturned nose, and shiny black hair with a tendency toward natural waves. I chalked my appearance up to taking after my mom. She was a small, sickly beta who died in childbirth—something my dad never forgave me for, just like he never forgave me for not being born an alpha.

Not that being an alpha himself ever made my dad happy. He spent his whole life in his older brother's shadow and never actually became the leader of a pack, the thing that would have earned him the actual title of "Alpha" with a capital A.

Well, after spending my entire life not living up to his expectations, at least I won't have to deal with Dad's disappointment in me tonight.

*One less thing to worry about...*

I brush my hair away from my face and try to focus on what Alpha Randall is saying.

“... proud to have these fine young people join us on their first pack run.” He motions the beta girl closest to him forward, then moves to stand behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. “Please welcome Macy.”

“Welcome, Macy.”

Randall moves on down the line, doing the whole call and repeat thing for each wolf. When he reaches me, his fingers dig into my collarbone painfully and I have to fight back a wince. He has never liked me, whether that’s just because he’s a bit of an asshole or he knew my dad was never happy as his second, I don’t know. I suppose it might not really matter soon anyway.

“My nephew, Keir,” he says in a flat voice.

There’s a slight pause before the pack says, “Welcome, Keir.”

*Awkward.*

“And finally, my son, Luke.” A proud smile curls at his lips. “Welcome.”

The crowd is more enthusiastic this time, yelling out, “Welcome, Luke!”

Luke gives the gathered shifters a tight smile, then shifts his gaze to the ground, seemingly uncomfortable with the attention.

Randall moves back to where he started, blathering on about history, pack, and traditions—the same nonsense he talks about at all of these kinds of things. Eventually, the moon rises over the trees and everyone strips out of their clothes.

Nudity isn't a big deal among wolves, but I still keep my eyes fixed on the ground. No point in making things worse by drawing attention to myself. Once I've removed all my clothes, I cup my hands in front of my groin and wait.

By tradition, the pack shifts only on the Alpha's command tonight.

The pull of the moon buzzes through my limbs and I clench my teeth to hold back my shift until the proper time. Maybe I can just run into the woods before anyone catches the scent of my wolf...

“Shift!” roars Randall.

The command rolls through my body and through the entire pack, twisting limbs, bending backs, cracking bones. Unlike my prior shifts, this one, called up unwillingly by the Alpha, feels unnatural—and *really* fucking painful. By the time I'm finished, it's all I can do to stay on my feet and not curl into a whimpering ball. Dizziness runs through me and I stumble to the side, shaking my head, now on four legs. I can't focus, my stomach twisting and roiling as I fight to hold my dinner in. All I can concentrate on is the pain in my limbs and this horrid feeling of wrongness.

I shake my head again, as if trying to clear away the mental fog. There's something I'm forgetting, something I meant to



do...what was it?

Too disoriented to pull my thoughts together, I stand there with the others, wobbling on my feet, and hoping this awful feeling passes quickly.

None of my other shifts—

*Oh shit.*

I need to run. *That's* what I was supposed to do as soon as I shifted. I glance around at the rest of the pack. Everyone else seems just as disoriented—*because of the command?*—so I might still have a chance. Spinning around, I start toward the edge of the clearing. Before I can make it even three yards, someone growls and a furry shoulder slams into my side, pushing me to the ground.

Luke's large reddish brown wolf looms over me, as close to a suspicious look as a wolf can manage on his face. This is likely nothing more than a show of dominance, but I really don't have time for it. I whimper loudly and submissively bare my neck, giving him what he wants.

*Yes, you're a big bad alpha and I'm just little old me. I don't want any trouble. Please, please, please...*

He makes a dismissive noise and turns away. As soon as he moves, I jump to my feet and race toward the woods like my tail's on fire.

But it's too late.

Even as I register the flare of Luke's nostrils when I pass him, another wolf's teeth clamp down on my tail and drag me

backward, my paws scrabbling at the ground. A high-pitched whine of terror is the only sound I can make as Alpha Randall uses his grip on my tail to slam me onto my back. He leans down, taking a long sniff at my neck, then bares his teeth. A low growl rumbles up from his throat as he recognizes what type of wolf I am.

An omega, a *male* one, something considered at best useless and at worst an abomination depending on who's telling the story. And even worse than that, I'm a male omega whose dad challenged the Alpha—and lost—only yesterday.

Randall shifts back in the blink of an eye, his face twisted with rage and disgust. He leans over me as I cower with my tail between my legs and my vulnerable belly exposed.

“Shift.” The whispered word vibrates with the same command from earlier, and I'm helpless to do anything but obey.

My fur recedes and my limbs reform, leaving me naked on my back in the dirt with my Alpha towering over me, one of his feet pressing against my ribcage and holding me down. I wrap my hands around his ankle and try to push him off.

“Please. I didn't—”

“Silence,” hisses Randall as he presses harder into my chest, compressing my lungs. My ribs creak under the strain and I fight to get a full breath, my mouth opening and closing like a landed fish. Blackness creeps along the edges of my vision as tears drip from the corners of my eyes and trail down the sides of my face.

This is it. He's going to kill me. I knew this would happen, expected it even, but I'd held out at least a little hope that maybe... things could be different.

I'm an idiot.

Randall sneers at me, leaning a little more of his weight onto my body and practically crushing the air from my lungs. Something cracks in my chest—a rib, most likely—and Randall finally lifts his foot away, disgust twisting at his lips. I roll to my side, curling into the smallest ball I can manage as I cough and fight for air, every inhale bringing a stabbing pain from the broken rib.

*“Get up.”*

The Alpha command rolls over me and I scramble to my feet, fear and pain making my movements stiff and jerky. My shifter healing is kicking in, but it's not immediate.

“How long have you known?” asks Randall in a bland voice.

“About a month.”

“And you didn't run?” He eyes me with something almost like respect. “Did you think your daddy was going to spare you? Did you stick around thinking he was going to win?”

“No,” I say. I knew better than that. My dad never spared me from anything.

“Then why stay?”

“Because this is my home and—”

“Because you’re a fool.” He waves away a few younger pack members lingering in the clearing, then motions the large, reddish brown wolf forward. Luke.

My cousin shifts back without being asked and stands beside his father, uncertainty furrowing his brow. A couple of seconds later, two more men move to stand with Randall. One of them is John, the man who took my dad’s place as second after the failed challenge, and the other is Malachi, the pack cleric.

“Omegas are sacred,” says the cleric. “They are meant to be helpmates and guides to their Alphas, mothers to the pack. But a male omega serves no purpose except to lead Alphas from the path of righteousness. They cannot bear children. They are nothing but an unholy mistake of nature.”

*I guess that means Randall and company are in the ‘omegas are an abomination’ camp.*

I swallow and glance up to meet his eyes for a second before moving my gaze back to the ground. “I can’t help what I am.”

“No, you can’t,” says Randall almost conversationally. “But I will not let you lead this pack astray.” He jerks his chin toward Luke. “Hold him.”

“What? Why?” My cousin looks so horribly confused in this moment that I almost pity him. Sure, the kid has never been particularly nice to me—he is his father’s son—but I doubt he’s ever put any serious thought into killing someone.

“Just do it,” snaps Randall.

I want to spare Luke this—he's so damn *young*—and tell Randall that I don't need to be held in place, that I won't run...

But I read some stories of what has happened to male omegas in the past and I don't know if those are promises I can keep once it starts.

Luke moves forward, eyeing his dad as he does, then grabs me by the upper arm with one hand. One of the other men snorts because that's definitely not what Randal meant. It doesn't really matter though once the first fist flies at my face, the shifter strength behind it breaking my nose and shattering my cheekbone. From there, it's nothing but a blur of agony and whimpered screams, flesh bruising and bones breaking much faster than my shifter healing can keep up with.

There are 206 bones in the human body and they must break every one of them once and some, the larger ones like the femur and the ulna, they break at least twice. I'm probably unconscious for some of it, but I can't tell because my entire world has become nothing but pain. At some point, they finally stop. All of them are panting from exertion or adrenaline, even Luke, who I'm fairly certain didn't take part beyond holding me up.

They must be taking a break—for themselves, not me—and they'll probably allow me to heal for a bit before starting again. It's the same thing Randall did to my dad after the challenge yesterday. Beating. Take a break. Beating. Take a break... so on and so on until there was nothing left to heal.

Weirdly enough, that gives me something to aim for before I die.

My dad always called me weak and useless. Even taking a beating isn't new to me, but if I can survive more rounds of this than my dad? Well, then at least I beat *him* at something.

People say our wolves are the animal side of us, wild and ferocious. But I don't think actual wolves would ever do something like this to a packmate. Humans? I'm pretty sure they do shit like this daily.

I let my mind drift as far away from my pain-wracked body as I can, following the wind with my thoughts as it drifts through the trees.

I'm alone now. I'm not sure how much time has passed, but I've healed enough that blood no longer bubbles from between my lips with each breath and the agony has lessened somewhat. Footsteps sound at the edge of the clearing and grow closer until a pair of boots blocks my view of the woods. There's a thud and something falls to the ground beside my head.

"Dad's back at the house and he's already plastered. I don't know if he'll make it back out here tonight or not, but..." Luke crouches down until he's kinda sorta at eye level with me. "I know we aren't exactly friends, but this..." He trails off, shaking his head, and I can see a sheen of moisture over his eyes. *Kid better toughen up or this pack is going to eat him alive.* "I got together as much food and stuff as I could without

rousing suspicion. He's occupied for now, but you need to get out of here."

I can only blink and mumble out a thanks as best I can with my mangled jaw.

"Take care of yourself, Keir." He reaches a hand out, as if to pat my shoulder, then must think better of touching the battered joint and pulls his hand back.

I watch him as he walks away and returns to the only home I've ever known, the place I can never go again.

Dawn is creeping along the edges of the sky before I can pull myself together enough to shift into my wolf. I grab the bag Luke left for me in my mouth and run as quickly as my still healing legs can manage.

I don't look back.

# ONE

## KEIR

### 4 YEARS LATER...

I'm in Hell and this is definitely not where I belong. No really, I'm in the lower level of Heaven & Hell, a gay club in downtown Chicago, which is absolutely *not* where I'm supposed to be working tonight.

"Jerry, look at me," I say to the bartender as I gesture at my outfit of strappy sandals, silver hotpants, white wings, and glitter. Lots and lots of glitter. I couldn't look more out of place if I tried. "I'm supposed to be working the floor upstairs."

Jerry glances down at the schedule clipped to the bar. "Says you're down here tonight."

"But..." I turn around and point at my back. "I've got fucking wings."

He shrugs. "Take 'em off then."



I let out an exasperated sigh. Jerry isn't going to budge. He's one of those 'do what I'm told' type of guys and he won't go against whatever's written on that stupid schedule without someone much more important than me telling him it's okay. If he were a shifter instead of a human, he would make some Alpha a damn good second with that attitude.

Alphas *love* that kind of blind obedience, but it really sucks for me.

I don't mind working down here, not exactly, but I make much better tips upstairs. Being small and pretty, something I don't think I'm ever going to grow out of unfortunately, makes me much more believable as an angel than as a demon. The servers in Hell tend to be taller and bulkier and the clientele expects that body type down here. I'll have to make do, though. Jerry doesn't look like he's budging and I can't afford to miss a shift if I want to make rent.

"Here," says Jerry, holding out a headband adorned with tiny red horns that he pulls from beneath the bar.

Grabbing the headband, I sigh again, then shrug out of my wings and stash them behind the bar before putting the horns on. "I look like a Halloween party reject who forgot what his costume was supposed to be."

Jerry smirks, and I can tell he's holding back a laugh. "Eh, if anyone asks, tell them you're an imp. Those are like tiny demons, right?"

I scowl at him and grab a tray, then move toward the tables along the wall to take orders.

Jerry's hand comes down on my shoulder without warning and I almost jump out of my skin, fighting back the urge to snarl at him—or maybe whine in submissiveness. It's been...a *while* since I shifted and my wolf's instincts are closer to the surface than I'd like.

“You'll do fine, Keir,” says Jerry. “Might even find you like it down here.”

“Yeah. Sure,” I say as I head off through the crowd.

Most of my customers tonight are fine, but I could do without the table of three drunk frat bro types, complete with polo shirts and backward ball caps. Generally, I don't care what category people fall into. Femme, masc, bear... whatever. But these guys are total assholes and I highly doubt I'm getting a tip from them.

They make no secret of their disdain for me. One of them—who I've decided to call Douche One—goes so far as to bitch about wanting to be serviced by a ‘real man.’ Of course, they're still more than happy to grab my ass and Douche Two even asks if bathroom blow jobs are included in the cover price.

*No, shithead. They very much are not.*

I plaster on my customer service smile and ignore their barbs, but they grow more and more belligerent—and handsy—as the night wears on. After a couple hours of their nonsense, my temper is rising. I'd love nothing more than to show them exactly how much I hate bullies like them.

Omega or not, I'm still a shifter. I could throw them across the room if I wanted to, but going furry in the middle of the club would not be a good idea. I'm trying to *avoid* the attention of other shifters, not draw it. So, to prevent myself from breaking the next hand that tries to find its way into my hotpants, I walk to the bar and set my tray down.

"I'm taking a quick break," I say.

Jerry nods in acknowledgment and then returns to making drinks as I head to the back.

I slump into a chair in the staff room and take a few deep breaths. I really, *really* don't want to go back out there. My feet are killing me and so far this shift has been absolute hell. Pun intended. I'd love nothing more than to go home and crawl into bed, but if I want to continue to *have* a bed to crawl into, I've got four more hours on my shift.

I allow myself five more minutes of rest before I plaster my customer service smile back on and head out to the floor. One of my tables calls me over and I take another round of drink orders, ring them up at the bar, then wait for the drinks to be made. Glancing around the room to check on the status of my other tables, my gaze snags on the frat bros.

There's someone new at their table. It seems they've gotten over their aversion to twinks because there's a very cute one sitting at their table with something pink in a martini glass on the table in front of him. He's got a head full of blond curls and a baby face that make him seem out of place down here.

He appears happy enough sitting and talking to those jerks, though, so I'll keep my nose out of it.

After delivering the other table's drinks, I head over to the frat bros to see if they need anything—and maybe just a little to check on their out-of-place guest. The blond is even cuter up close, his loose curls making him look downright cherubic and even more like he belongs with the angels upstairs. He's a little bigger than me, but still looks barely legal. They check IDs at the door though, so he must be at least twenty-one.

The frat bros grunt out their orders, but no grabby hands come in my direction and there are no obscene comments. Maybe they're worried about scaring off Blondie?

Whatever. At least they're off my back.

The next two hours pass uneventfully and I'm about to take another quick break when I notice Blondie sway in his seat. His head lands on one of the frat bros's shoulders before jolting back upward. His behavior isn't exactly strange, not in a bar. But it *is* strange behavior for someone who, as far as I can tell, hasn't had more than two drinks. The guy is small for a human, but not small enough to be knocked on his ass by those watered down cocktails.

As I continue to watch, Blondie sways again. Douche Two slings an arm over his shoulder and pulls Blondie forward until his curls are practically buried in the guy's armpit. *Ugh*. Douche One taps Blondie's cheek, saying something I can't hear even with shifter hearing. When Blondie does nothing but mumble and burrow his face closer, Douche Two smirks and

his buddies mimic the expression. Douche One tilts his head toward the back door. His buddies nod.

Douche Two casts a quick glance around the room, then he stands up and leads a stumbling Blondie to the back door. His buddies wait maybe thirty seconds before following and all of them exit into the alley behind the club.

*Oh, fuck no.*

“I’ll be back,” I mutter to Jerry, dropping my tray, then making my way to the back door. I’m not letting those assholes get away with this. I’m going to show those bullies—and potential rapists—some teeth.

# Two

## KEIR

I DON'T REALIZE MY mistake until about two seconds after the door closes behind me. Inside, with all the smoke, sweat, and alcohol, it's difficult to pick up any other scents unless you're really paying attention, something I definitely wasn't doing. Apparently I should've been because now I'm trapped in the narrow alley behind the club with three other shifters—well, four if you count Blondie, who's perked up a little and is trying to pull away from the other three.

*This is just not my night.*

Douche One takes hold of Blondie's arm, then jerks his chin in my direction. "Get rid of him, Greg. No witnesses."

Douche Two—Greg, I assume—starts in my direction, while his friends drag Blondie toward a green SUV waiting at the end of the alleyway. Greg grabs my arm, digging his fingers in and pulling me toward the dumpster in the opposite direction.

He's muttering under his breath about stupid humans and I almost laugh in relief.

Looks like these guys weren't paying much attention either. They have no idea I'm a shifter and that's going to make getting out of this situation much easier, but... I cast a guilty glance toward Blondie. How am I going to get him out of here too?

I turn my attention back to Greg. Solving my own predicament needs to take priority. I—

Douche One yelps. "That little fucker bit me!"

Spinning around, I watch as Blondie slams an elbow into his captor's stomach, then shakes free and comes barreling in my direction, not exactly gracefully, but fast. Whatever they drugged him with seems to be wearing off.

Greg, all but forgetting about me, moves to intercept Blondie's escape and I use his momentary distraction to spring my surprise. I shift one of my hands into something with claws and I jam the sharp points into Greg's stomach and twist. The injury won't kill him, but it'll take a while to heal and will put Greg out of the fight.

Blondie's about as surprised as Greg, his eyes widening at the blood. I grab his arm as he reaches me, tugging him along beside me as I take off for the unguarded end of the alley, the other two shifters in fast pursuit. We reach the street and I take a sharp left, moving around toward the front of the club. The bouncers might not be a match for a shifter, but the shifters

won't want to make a scene in front of humans and the bouncers can slow our pursuers down while we disappear.

That's my plan, anyway.

Blondie's not as steady as I'd like, but his hold on my arm is tight and he's keeping pace with me. I drag him into the group of people waiting outside the doors to the club. We're both slim enough that getting through the crowd is fairly easy and, even though a couple of people bitch about it, we're soon at the front of the line where two burly men are checking IDs.

"Denny," I huff, resting a hand on the big man's bicep. I point toward the two shifters shoving their way toward us. "Those guys drugged my friend here and dragged him into the back alley."

Denny scowls and nudges the other bouncer, Pike, with his elbow. "We got trouble." He glances down at me. "Go back inside, Keir. We'll take care of this."

"Thanks. You guys are lifesavers."

Pike motions me and Blondie inside, and I lead the way upstairs and into Heaven's staff room. I lock the door behind us, then place my ear against the wood, listening for anything out of place—like shifters shoving their way in and causing a commotion looking for me—or, rather, *us*.

"They won't risk it," says Blondie. "This is already going to create all sorts of problems for their Alpha. They know better than to reveal anything to humans."



“Okay,” I say as I straighten away from the door. “I guess we’re good then.”

Blondie gives me an appraising look. “Thanks for your help back there.”

“Yeah. No problem.” I shrug. “I, uh...”

He waits for me to find some words, but nothing is coming to me.

“You’re obviously not one of Rossi’s wolves, so who are you?” he finally asks.

“Keir,” I say without thinking. *I should not be giving him my real name, but I suppose Denny already let that cat out of the bag.*

“I’m Remy Matisse.” He stares at me expectantly, as if the name should mean something to me.

And maybe it should, but I have no idea what.

“Nice to meet you?” I shoot him a nervous smile. I’m making such a mess of this. It’s been ages since I’ve had a real interaction with another shifter. I know damn well there are formalities and shit like that I’m supposed to follow—or at least *know*.

Remy’s brows pull together, and he cocks his head to the side. “I don’t think I’ve seen you before. Are you here for the summit? Who’s your Alpha?”

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

“Um, I’m not from around here... just passing through.”

“Just passing through but you have a job and the bouncers knew your name? That implies some level of permanence.” He studies my face with an uncomfortable intensity, as if trying to see through me.

“I, uh...”

He walks forward until he’s right in front of me. “Who did you speak with when you requested permission to stay in this territory?”

I swallow. “No one?”

“Where—”

The door crashes open and I spin around. *Shit*. I slide partway in front of Remy as two men storm into the room. They’re not the guys from earlier, but they are shifters and they’re both larger than Remy and me put together.

Remy lets out an exasperated sigh from behind me. “I’m *fine*.”

“Fine?” yells one of the new arrivals, an absolutely stunning Black man, as he stalks toward Remy, all but shoving me out of the way to get there. “You ditched us and went out on your own in another Alpha’s territory. What do you think Julien is going to say about this?”

“Julien doesn’t need to know,” says Remy, smiling and reaching forward to rest a hand on the chest of the man now looming over him. “Nothing happened, Dante.”

“The hell it didn’t,” says Dante, his nostrils flaring with anger. He leans away from Remy’s touch, then fishes

something out of his pocket and holds it up: a cell phone with a smashed screen. “If nothing happened, then what was this doing in the alleyway behind the club?”

“Okay, so, maybe I got in a little trouble, but it all turned out okay.” Remy lets out a nervous chuckle as he shoots me a look I can’t interpret. “My new friend here looked out for me.”

Dante whirls around, focusing on me for the first time. “Who the fuck are you?”

“This,” says Remy, moving toward me, then linking his arm through mine, “is Keir.”

“That your blood, kid?” asks the second guy, speaking up for the first time. It takes me a second to realize he means the blood all over my hand from when I skewered Greg with my claws.

“No,” I reply, moving my hand behind my back and attempting to pull away from Remy. “So, um, glad I could help. I’ve gotta be going. Work and all...”

Remy doesn’t budge, and neither does his arm. “Keir is a waiter at Heaven & Hell. He followed me when Jake and his cronies dragged me outside.”

“Dragged... you... outside...?” says Dante, each word forced through clenched teeth.

“Well, maybe not *dragged*...” says Remy.

Dante narrows his eyes at me and quirks a brow. “What happened?”

I hold my hands up and wave them in front of my chest.  
“Look, I don’t—”

“What. Happened.” A growl rumbles up from Dante’s throat.

Remy huffs. “They drugged me, took me outside, and tried to shove me in a car.”

“They had a car waiting?” asks the second as-yet-unnamed guy. He shares a look with Dante. “This was planned.”

Dante nods. Both of the larger men turn their attention to me, suspicion clear on their faces.

“It’s awfully convenient you were there tonight,” says Dante.  
“Maybe you were in on it?”

“In on it?” I choke out, taking a step backward.

“Not possible,” says Remy, waving his hand through the air.  
“Keir had no idea what he was walking into when he stepped outside. Plus, those guys thought he was human until he partially shifted and half-disemboweled one of them.”

Two sets of wide eyes swing to me and my stomach drops. This is not good. Showing off that particular ability—exclusive to alphas and, apparently, omegas—was a dumb idea. These guys will never mistake me for an alpha.

“Partially shifted?” says Dante. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” says Remy. “Why?”

“That’s not...” Dante’s voice trails off.

“Who’s your Alpha?” the other guy asks me.

I shuffle my feet and look everywhere but at him. There's no good way for me to answer that question. My gaze finds Remy and I internally apologize before ripping my arm out of his hold, then punching him in the face. As I hoped, Dante and the other guy's first instinct is to run to Remy, protecting their charge or whatever he is to them, instead of pursuing me as I dash through the door and take off down the stairs.

# THREE

## KEIR

REMY'S BODYGUARDS AREN'T DISTRACTED for long. I've just reached the bottom of the stairs when I hear them crashing down the hallway after me. Losing them shouldn't be too hard, though. I know my way around this place better than they do. I take a sharp left and dart into the kitchen, through a staff door, and onto the loading dock on the side of the club, leaving me only fifty yards or so away from the street.

Unfortunately, I completely forgot about the other shifters.

This side of the building is closer to the entrance Remy and I used, and Greg and his buddies are standing at the mouth of the narrow passage leading to the street. They're likely trying to figure out how to get past Denny and Pike or maybe just waiting another twenty minutes until last call when the club's going to clear out. Whatever it is they're doing, it complicates things since they're blocking my only way out.

At least their backs are to me. For now.

I catch the door and gently guide it shut. Already exhausted before I got involved in this mess, I don't have the energy to take on three shifters by myself. I need to keep them from noticing me as long as possible. Taking a couple of steps forward, I study their positioning. If I catch them by surprise, I can probably—

Behind me, the door swings open with enough force to slam against the brick with a clang. All three shifters turn to look toward the loading dock as Dante steps onto the loading dock.

*Fuck.*

And next comes bodyguard number two.

*Double fuck.*

I dart forward, away from Dante and his friend, but that only leads me closer to the others. Greg and his buddies fan out, now completely blocking my exit, but they don't make any moves down the alley. Glancing over my shoulder, I take in Dante's furious expression. Retreating into the club is not an option.

My gaze returns to the other three shifters. Their attention isn't on me, probably because I'm not their prey and they think I'm not a threat—though the blood covering Greg's shirt should've disproved that theory. They've underestimated me before, so if I move fast enough, I might be able to—

“Keir,” says Remy from the doorway leading to the loading dock. He meets my eyes and I can tell he's figured out what I'm planning. “Don't. Just wait. We can—”

“Sorry,” I mutter before taking off toward the street at a dead run.

Dante tries to grab me, but since I’m practically naked and covered in whatever oily substance my body glitter is suspended in there’s nothing for him to take hold of and I slip away. The other shifters make a half-hearted effort to nab me, but don’t seem too bothered when I make it past them and head down the street. A part of me feels guilty for leaving Remy behind, but he has his protectors, and I have no one. He’ll be fine.

It takes me almost forty minutes to make it to my crappy apartment. In all that time, it doesn’t dawn on me until I’m standing at my front door that all my stuff is still in my locker at the club. Including my keys. I sigh, then bang my forehead against the door. This night just keeps getting worse.

The door opens and I stumble forward, almost knocking over my startled roommate.

“Dude.” He blinks his red-tinged eyes. “What are you wearing?”

Kevin is human and he’s also not the brightest crayon in the box, nor is he very sober. Still, I’m damn glad to see him, even if he’s looking at me like he’s never seen me before.

“Left my keys at work,” I say.

“And your clothes?”

“Those too,” I reply.

He nods slowly, as if processing. “Good for you.”



I have no idea what that's supposed to mean and I don't have time to translate his stoner speech. Instead of responding, I pat him on the shoulder, then head to my tiny bedroom. Once there, I grab my backpack and start shoving crap into it. My progress slows to a stop as the events of the evening catch up to me.

Whether due to stupidity or just bad luck, I completely screwed myself tonight. Things were going so *well* here. I had a job that didn't suck too badly. I had a place to sleep. I even sort of had people I could call friends or at least acquaintances, though they could never know the real me.

And now...all that's gone.

*Again.*

I sit on the edge of my bed, shoulders slumped, holding one strap of my backpack with loose fingers. Chicago is the first place I've stayed for more than a couple months. I thought that maybe this could be my home, that after *four fucking years* I'd run long enough, far enough, and I could finally *stop*.

But it's never going to end, not really, and I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. I'm exhausted on every level—physically, mentally, emotionally—and the future stretching out before me looks nothing but bleak.

What's the point of any of this?

I release the strap of my backpack and bury my face in my hands. The life I have now is somehow more painful than anything my uncle and his cronies did to me back in that

clearing. If they wanted me to suffer, they certainly got their wish.

Maybe I should have just told Remy the truth. He seemed nice enough and maybe...

*No.*

That's how I got into this mess, by thinking things could be different. I can't change what I am and that means I'll never have a pack, a family, a home... Funnily enough, I didn't even realize how much I wanted those things until the option to have them was taken away from me.

I cast a glance at my half-packed bag. Things will be okay—they *have* to be—but I need a nap and a meal before I can pull myself together enough to hit the road. I flop backward onto the bed, my eyes drifting shut as I allow exhaustion to wash over my body.

*Just a twenty-minute power nap...*

But I don't wake until a few hours later when a shifter wraps their hand around my neck.

# FOUR

## KEIR

STILL HALF ASLEEP, I reflexively try to push the hand away from my throat, but the shifter above me only tightens their grip. Panic floods my body and I become a wild thing, struggling and kicking to get away. One of my heels lands a hit against a hard chest and the hand around my throat disappears as the shifter lets out a grunt. The lamp on my bedside table falls with a crash and between that and the blackout curtains, my room is plunged into darkness.

Heart racing, I leap to my feet in a fluid move that leaves me crouched by the head of the bed, my fisted hands raised in a defensive position. My nostrils flare with quick breaths as I wait for my eyes to adjust. Tension thrums throughout my body, everything in me preparing for an attack.

An attack that doesn't come.

I know the other shifter is still here. I can almost sense him.

“Who's there?” I stammer.

“Keir—”

*Too close.*

My elbow flies toward the voice with very little input from my brain, and the joint cracks against someone’s face.

“Fuck!” yells the shifter.

The door to my room flies open, letting in the meager light from the hallway which silhouettes a second shifter in the doorway. He’s big—though most people are compared to me—and the sight of the shadowy figure combined with the situation and the disorientating effect of being startled awake sends me into overdrive.

My instincts scream conflicting instructions to my brain—*hide, run, fight, run, hide*—leaving me frozen in place. A whimper breaks free from my throat and I’m teetering on the edge of an involuntary shift, something that hasn’t happened to me since that night with my uncle.

Someone’s hand lands on the nape of my neck, squeezing gently.

“Shhh... calm down.” There’s the edge of a growl in the voice, but no command. The calming hold, something mothers often use on their pups, does as intended and my body relaxes, all the tensed muscles going limp. “I’m going to let go and you’re going to stay put and talk to us, okay?”

I nod as best I can with the hand still on my neck.

The person releases me and takes two big steps backward, his hands up by his chest in a placating gesture. As he gets

closer to the door, the light illuminates his face. Dante. My gaze flies to the second shifter, too large to be Remy, so he must be the second bodyguard from earlier.

Eying them warily, I press my back against the wall and wrap my arms around my knees. My heart rate has finally slowed to something almost normal, but the lingering adrenaline has left me jittery.

“How did you find me?” I croak out.

Dante tilts his head toward the other shifter. “Brody asked your boss for your address.”

“And he just gave it to you?” I huff. Of all the things I thought might lead to my death one day, my boss’s disregard for confidentiality was not one of them.

Brody nods as Dante takes a step forward. I almost instantly close my eyes and bare my neck to the larger, stronger shifter. Stupid pack dynamics. Stupid submissive instincts. But at least I know how to play this.

“I’m sorry. Please.” Another whimper escapes from my chest. “I didn’t want to hurt him. I just wanted to be left alone.”

The two men share a look, their brows furrowing.

It’s Brody who crouches down in front of me. “You’re not in trouble,” he says. “We just have some questions.”

I guess they’re not falling for it. Oh well.

“I don’t have one,” I snap out.

Another shared look.

“Don’t have what?” asks Dante.

“An Alpha.” I say. “That’s what you want to know, right?”

Brody shrugs. “I suppose that’s one thing we were curious about, but what we really want to know is why an omega is running around unprotected.”

My heart stops in my chest and I inhale sharply.

“That’s what you are, right? An omega?”

My mouth is too dry to form words. There’s no point in lying, they’d know. I nod slowly. Both men grin and not in the way I expect. It would make sense for their expressions to be malevolent or disgusted, but they’re... pleased? Dante even looks *awed*.

“I’ve never seen one in person,” he mutters.

“Me either,” says Brody. The corners of his mouth twitch as he glances at Dante. “I can’t believe *you* figured it out before *Remy*.”

Dante chuckles. “Me either.”

My gaze bounces back and forth between them. I know omegas are rare, but not quite like what they’re implying. Back home, the cleric always talked about how special and blessed packs were to have an omega. My pack didn’t have one—unless you count me—so I just thought... I’m not sure what I thought.

They both stare at me expectantly.

*Oh.* Brody's question about why I'm on my own. They still want an answer. But I don't really have one, so I shrug.

"Where's your pack?" asks Dante. "Did something happen to them? Is that why you're alone?"

"Alabama," I say, ignoring the other questions. "About eighty miles outside of Tuscaloosa."

"You're a long way from home." Dante's gaze strays toward my half-packed bag. "Where were you headed?"

"I don't know."

"Then what..." Brody starts, but Dante holds up his hand.

"First of all, we're indebted to you for what you did for Remy. His brother, Julien, is our Alpha. As Julien's second, I'd like to extend a formal invitation for you to visit our pack," says Dante.

"And your Alpha wouldn't... take offense at my presence?"

Brody scoffs. "He'd be honored to host an omega, even if you're just passing through."

Either everything I was taught is a lie or these guys have no idea what it means for me to be a *male* omega.

"I'll need to pack my stuff." I slide off the bed, then head toward my bag, an agreeable smile plastered on my face.

The two men nod, watching as I pick up my lamp and set it upright. A little fiddling with the bulb—not broken, thank fuck—gets the thing lit again, casting a yellowish glow into the room.

“Should probably change too,” I say, gesturing at my still bare chest and tiny shorts.

“Of course,” says Dante. “We’ll give you some privacy.”

I wait until the door is shut behind them before slipping out of my work ‘uniform’ and tugging on a t-shirt and some sweatpants. And some running shoes.

Would it be nice if they were telling the truth about their Alpha and his acceptance of me? Sure.

Am I going to take that risk? *Hell no.*

Dante and Brody have been really nice and Remy seemed cool enough, but the last thing I want is to meet an Alpha, especially when the situation sounds a little too good to be true.

I rifle through my drawers and my closet, using the noise to cover the sound of me pulling back the blackout curtains and opening the window. I can’t say I ever thought I’d actually use the rusty old fire escape, but I learned early on in my life on the run to always, *always* have more than one exit.

As quietly as possible, I slide out the window and onto the metal landing, then make my way down the rickety stairs. I have to jump the last bit since the ladder is missing, but that’s no problem for me. Adjusting my hold on the backpack, I jog toward the street.

It won’t take the two shifters long to figure out I made a run for it.



As I round the corner of the building, someone grabs me by the arm, twisting it up behind my back. *How'd they get down here so fast?*

“Look, I appreciate the offer to visit and all, but I think it’s better if—”

“Shut up.” The shifter who has hold of my arm twists the limb farther, sending a jolt of pain through my shoulder. He shoves me forward so we’re by the front of the building where the other two frat bros from the club wait. “Look what I found, Paulie. Seems like he saved us the trouble of going up to get him.”

# FIVE

## KEIR

BEING KIDNAPPED SUCKS. ZERO out of five. Would not recommend, especially if these idiots are the kidnappers. They don't even have a proper vehicle.

Instead, I'm sandwiched between Greg and Paulie in the cramped backseat of a fucking *Ford Fiesta*. The third guy, Jake a.k.a. Douche One, is driving. I almost want to ask them why I don't rate the tricked out SUV they were trying to shove Remy into, but I don't want to antagonize them too much.

Beyond twisting my arm and forcing me into the vehicle, they haven't actually hurt me and I'm smart enough not to make things worse for myself. Unfortunately, I get the impression that the only reason I'm not already in a bloody heap somewhere is because their Alpha prefers to deal with trespassers himself.

Or something like that.

And, at least for now, that's all these guys think I am: a trespasser who didn't ask for permission to be in their Alpha's territory, albeit one who interrupted whatever plans they had for Remy. Hopefully, they'll keep thinking that until I figure a way out of this.

Jake pulls the car up to a luxury apartment building in a section of the city I've never ventured into. Much too rich for me. I couldn't even afford to work as a housekeeper here. Jake tosses the keys to a valet—who side eyes both Jake and the car like *what the hell do you want me to do with this piece of crap?*—and the other two pull me out of the backseat and march me inside.

The building is upscale enough to have a doorman, something that could work to my advantage if I wanted to make a scene and try to slip away. Except for the fact the doorman is a shifter and so was the valet, two things that don't bode well for me as they suggest this entire building probably belongs to the Alpha who runs Chicago.

*Shit.* I'm in way over my head. This kind of money means power, and not just the kind that comes from being an Alpha. If this guy takes real offense to me trespassing in his city, he could simply make me disappear.

I dart my gaze around the lobby, my brain cataloging various means of escape, but nothing that will do me any good since we head directly into the elevator. Jake presses his thumb against some sort of biometric scanner by the keypad, then

pushes the button for the top floor. We zoom upward at a speed that almost makes me want to puke.

Though, that might just be the feeling of my anxiety eating through my stomach lining.

At the top, the elevator doors slide open, revealing a swanky entryway with a hallway leading deeper into the apartment. Or is this considered a penthouse? Whatever it's called, it takes up the entire top floor of the building.

Greg has his hand wrapped around my arm in an iron grip as he tugs me along behind Jake. At the end of the hallway, Jake knocks on a door.

“Yes?” says a voice from beyond the door.

“We've brought you a trespasser.”

“Come in.”

Jake pushes the door open and strides inside. Greg pulls me in after him and Paulie takes up the rear. Jake stops before a large shifter, head bowed and hands clasped together behind his back. The shifter—obviously the *Alpha*—is a broad-shouldered man in his late forties with salt and pepper hair and severe features. His gaze moves from Jake to Greg and then finally lands on me. He scowls.

“That's not the Matisse brat.”

Jake shuffles his feet. “No...”

The Alpha's hard gaze narrows in on Jake. “You had very specific instructions.”

“I know. We—”

“Quiet,” snaps the Alpha. He stands up to his full height and storms over toward us, stopping in front of me.

I don't have to fake submissiveness. His power rolls over me, and I bare my throat as a small whimper escapes my lips. I knew my old pack was a small fish in a big pond, but I hadn't realized until this moment exactly how small. This Alpha is so far above Randall, power wise, he could probably bring me to my knees with half a thought.

Greg digs his fingers into my arm and gives me a shake. “He's not a Matisse, but he's friends with them and he's been living here in the city for a few months. He might be a spy.”

Oh fuck, Greg. *Shut up!* Being thought of as a trespasser is one thing, but if the Alpha thinks I'm a spy...

Acid flood into my stomach and my knees shake as the Alpha pushes more and more power onto me. I whimper again and cringe away from him as much as I'm able with Greg holding on to my bicep.

“I see.” The Alpha cocks his head to the side and studies my face. “Is that what you are? A spy sent by Julien to find the weaknesses in my territory?”

I shake my head frantically, my mouth almost too dry for words. “I don't know anyone named Julien.”

The Alpha shrugs, then turns to speak to Jake. “Take him to the basement. Tell Faris we're still going forward, but with this one instead of the other. Get him to shift into his wolf and

have Faris take the mongrel's claws and send them to Julien with the same message as before. It probably won't be as effective, but it will have to do."

My fingers involuntarily curl into my palms.

"And once that's done?" asks Jake.

The Alpha grips my chin and squeezes, pushing my lips together, then turns my head from side to side. "It'd be a shame to waste such a pretty face. He might be good for a favor or two. Send him along with the group sold to the Vegas Alpha."

He's not...

He can't...

I'm frozen in place, too stunned to move as my brain struggles to process what's happening. The Chicago Alpha is *selling* other shifters.

As the Alpha turns his back to me and walks away, Greg lets out a malicious chuckle. "It'll serve you right to lose those claws after you stabbed me with them."

The Alpha spins around and his nostrils flare as his attention turns to Jake. "Your report mentioned nothing about a shifted fight. Where did this happen? Are you sure you weren't seen?"

"Sir, there was no shifter fight. It—"

Greg interrupts, waving his hands in front of his chest. "No, no, no. The kid's the only one who changed and just his hand."

The Alpha goes absolutely still.

*Oh fuck.*

“Just his hand?”

“Yeah,” says Greg, nodding violently.

The Alpha’s attention goes to the other two. “Did you see this as well?”

They shake their heads.

“Betas can’t partially shift and there’s no way he’s an alpha,” says Jake, narrowing his eyes at his friend. “I think Greg just missed the knife. He’s not always very observant.”

The color drains from Greg’s face as his buddy throws him under the bus. I’d feel bad for him if he wasn’t such an idiot and he hadn’t just thrown me under a *much* bigger bus.

“No,” he says stubbornly. He tugs the bottom of his shirt forward. “The wound’s mostly healed, but no knife did that.”

The Alpha grabs the bottom of Greg’s shirt and runs his fingers over the four distinct holes in the fabric. He nods to himself, and his eyes go out of focus as if he’s thinking. After a moment, he drops Greg’s shirt, then takes a step backward, turning his attention to me.

“Show me,” he whispers. When I do nothing, he grabs my arm to turn my hand palm up, digging his fingers into my skin. “Show me!”

The command rolls over me and my hand shifts into fur and claws.

His gaze is glued to my hand, eyes practically glowing with avarice, as his mouth twists into a malicious smile. “*Omega.*”



# SIX

## KEIR

I KNOW THE BASICS of territories and pack hierarchies and all that, but I'm beginning to think I don't know half as much as I thought I did. My pack—my *former* pack—was fairly small and isolated. They could trace their bloodlines back to sometime in the 1800's and we hadn't had an outsider join in a couple decades.

No one who left came back. None of us went to human schools and there was no internet or other connections with the outside world.

Sure, we had books full of records and we met up with a couple of other nearby packs once or twice a year, but I wouldn't exactly say we were up to date with the norms of shifter society. And, since I spent the last four years *avoiding* other shifters, I've never remedied that lack of knowledge.

Something tells me that was a bigger mistake than I thought. No one is reacting how I expect and that leaves me with no

way of knowing how to navigate my situation.

For example, I expect murderous rage from the Chicago Alpha. After all, that's how the last Alpha who found out what I am reacted and that's what I was always taught a male omega would face. But this Alpha—whose name I still don't know—goes weirdly *polite*.

And I have no idea what to do with that.

He releases my arm and smiles. "I apologize for my zeal."

"No problem," I squeak out, taking a step backward as I rub my wrist with the opposite hand. The Alpha is no longer trying to crush me with the force of his power, which is nice, if a bit confusing. Whatever's going on, he might still kill me, but it's clearly not happening this second. "No, um, damage done."

"Sir?" asks Jake, his brow furrowed as he glances from me to the Alpha. "Are we still taking him downstairs?"

"No." The Alpha steps toward me, a strange, hungry expression on his face. "You don't know, do you?"

"Me?" I say, pointing at my chest. "Don't know what?"

"How valuable you are."

Sounds like selling me is still on the agenda, just not maiming me. I force a bravado I don't feel. "More valuable *with* my claws, I'm assuming."

"You can keep them for now," he says. "Provided—"

The phone sitting on the desk rings, interrupting whatever he's about to say. He picks it up. "Yes?"

The person on the other end is frantic enough that I can hear them from where I stand.

“Matisse is here,” says the tinny voice.

“Alone?”

“Yes,” replies the voice on the phone.

“Fine. Send him up. He and I have things to discuss anyway.” The Alpha places the phone down, a self-satisfied smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “It appears my luck has already improved.”

I’m not sure exactly what he means by that, but I don’t like the sound of it.

We all stand in silence, waiting, until the elevator dings down the hall and the Alpha says, “Jake, go escort Mr. Matisse back here.”

Jake dips his head, then runs off to do his Alpha’s bidding. A few moments later, the most gorgeous man I have ever seen walks into the room. Jake’s probably back too, but I can’t see anyone else but the new arrival.

He’s somewhere in his mid-twenties and clearly related to Remy with that same angelic beauty, but where Remy has the cute cherubic thing, this guy—Remy’s brother Julien, I assume—is more like a deadly archangel. His hair is blond, a few shades darker than Remy’s, and it falls in artfully messy waves to his lightly stubbled chin. He has the same bright blue eyes as his brother, but the similarities end there. Julien’s features

are sharper, giving that prettiness a more severe edge, and he's at least six four with broad shoulders and muscled arms.

Julien Matisse reminds me of a young Brad Pitt mixed with a bit of Thor.

And I kind of want to climb him like a tree, a desire I'm going to catalog under the heading 'what the fuck' because I've seen all sorts of attractive guys and never had that kind of urge. Hell, I've had sex with guys I wasn't this into.

Of course, I'm over here falling deep into lust, and Julien's completely ignoring me. He hasn't even deigned to send so much as a glance my way. *Ouch*. That hits right in the self-esteem.

On second thought, though, it's probably a good thing he's concentrating on the *hostile Alpha shifter* in the room instead of me. I'd very much like the newfound object of my desire to avoid being hurt or killed. And if he can get me out of this too so we have some time to get better acquainted, all the better.

"Have you come to offer amends for your brother's trespass, Matisse?" asks the not-Julien Alpha.

"No, Rossi," replies Julien, addressing the Chicago Alpha. "I'm here to retrieve my pack's guest."

"Guest?" Rossi's eyes narrow.

"Keir." Julien jerks his chin in my direction without taking his eyes off the other Alpha. "The one your goons grabbed and dragged here against his will."

Rossi sweeps his arms outward. “Grabbed? Dragged? I think you misunderstand the situation.” He turns to me. “Isn’t that right, *Keir*?”

His power presses into me, trying to force an answer, but there’s a big difference between forcing submissiveness or a shift and forcing someone to act completely against their will.

“No.” I cough out. “That’s not right.”

Rossi’s eyes go hard. “But you were trespassing. My men had every right to—”

“Actually, they didn’t,” says Julien dryly. “Omegas have free passage in any territory.” The words are confident, but his tone makes it sound like he’s repeating something he heard someone else say.

Rossi’s nostrils flare. He clearly does not like the fact Julien knows what I am. Does this have something to do with me being valuable?

“That’s true,” says Rossi in a conciliatory tone that in no way matches his expression. “But my men took custody of someone thought to be a trespasser, something they have a right to do. It wasn’t until Keir was here that I realized his status. How was I to know?”

Julien’s lips curl into a wide smile as he bares his teeth. “Then I suppose Keir is free to go?”

Rossi scowls in response, his mouth twisting with distaste. He practically spits his response. “Of course. I wouldn’t dare to hold an omega against his will.”

For the first time, Julien turns his full attention to me. His eyes widen and his body goes stiff for a beat. If I hadn't already been watching him so closely, I would have missed the split-second reaction and I'm pretty sure everyone else in the room did. As it is, I'm not sure what the reaction means except that he's just as affected by me as I am by him. He's just better at hiding it.

"There's still the matter of your brother," says Rossi, breaking me and Julien out of our little stare off. "He is not an omega, so his trespass still stands."

"To avoid any further 'misunderstandings,' I would like to *officially* notify you that Remy is here acting as my procurator and as such he is permitted to travel within your territory during the summit." Julien narrows his eyes. "Though I believe you already knew that."

Rossi shakes his head sadly, eyes wide with feigned innocence, as if he can't believe he'd be accused of such a thing. "I had no idea."

Julien scoffs. "Sure you didn't." He tilts his head toward the door and gestures for me to follow. "Come on."

He doesn't have to ask twice.

We're waiting for the elevator when Rossi pokes his head out of his office. "And Julien? You might want to keep a closer eye on your 'guest.' Who knows what could happen to him if he wanders too... freely."

# SEVEN

## JULIEN

DANTE WARNED ME. HE said the guy who rescued Remy was going to be trouble, but I'm fairly certain my second had no idea exactly how *much* trouble. Keir being an omega is one thing, but apparently he's also my fated mate, the absolute last thing I expected to find here in Chicago.

And finding my fated mate is also the last thing I needed on top of all the other complications of this trip.

It was supposed to be simple.

The bi-annual Midwest Alpha Summit is a glorified business conference, complete with laminated name badges and terrible coffee. All I wanted was to make an appearance—as required—maybe make small talk with another Alpha or two, shore up some alliances, and then go home.

But now...

From the corner of my eye, I glance at the shifter standing next to me in the elevator. There's no question that he's stunning. He's a little more than half a foot shorter than me and slender but toned with lean muscle. Black hair sets off the blue-gray color of his eyes and the size of those eyes combined with his defined jaw and sharp cheekbones give him an almost fae-like appearance. And those perfect, pouty lips...

I'm *definitely* not complaining about the gift fate has offered me. I simply wish the timing had been a little better. I'm stuck in Chicago for at least two more days with only three other pack members as backup, one of whom Rossi has already attempted to kidnap, and now I also have a mate to protect.

*I hate politics.*

More than that even, I miss my dad. He was so much better at all this than I am.

For one thing, Dad knew how to do the right thing without pissing off a major power player. I can handle the first part just fine, but the second definitely isn't in my political wheelhouse.

Rossi despises me.

Two years ago, I hosted this same summit for the first time as the Madison pack Alpha. Rossi attended, of course, and he brought along an entourage that included his brother, Victor, and his brother's wife, Evelyn. Only a day after they arrived, Evelyn approached me to ask for sanctuary with my pack. Her husband had beaten the poor girl to a pulp, not an easy feat to accomplish on a shifter, and she was desperate to escape. I didn't hesitate to grant her request, and Evelyn stayed behind



when Rossi's pack left a few days later. Rossi has had it out for me ever since and Evelyn has spent the past two years blissfully ignorant of the problems her 'defection' created.

I knew things were going to be awkward when this year's summit was scheduled to be held in Chicago. When Rossi limited the number of pack members each Alpha could bring into his territory—*there's no room for wolves to run in the city*, he said—I knew there was going to be trouble. But it wasn't until that asshole tried to have Remy kidnapped that I realized exactly how bad things might get.

Now, Keir's been dragged into this feud too, even if he doesn't know it yet.

The elevator reaches the lobby and I gesture for Keir to precede me. More of Rossi's pack members here now than when I arrived and I have to fight off the instinct to grab Keir and run. Even if the other shifters are only looking at him, they aren't *my* wolves, and everything that makes me an alpha is screaming for me to *protect protect protect*.

Keir glances at me over his shoulder and opens his mouth, but I silence him with a minute shake of my head.

"Not here," I say under my breath.

He gives me a sharp nod and continues walking until we reach the street. I guide him over to a black SUV, then open the back door and gesture for him to get in. Fighting the urge to climb into the backseat just to be closer to him—and what that action might give away to those still watching—I shut the door and instead get in the front passenger seat.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say to Brody, who’s driving.

He nods and pulls the SUV away from the curb and into traffic. We ride in silence for a block or two before Keir speaks up from the backseat.

“So... not that I don’t appreciate the save and all, but if you could just drop me off at the nearest bus station or something —”

An involuntary growl rumbles up from my throat at the suggestion of being separated from my mate. “You’re staying with us.”

In the rearview mirror, I watch his blue-gray eyes narrow as his gaze darts from side to side.

“Then all that stuff about free passage or whatever was just bullshit?” he asks, the question laced with suspicion.

Brody glances away from the road for a beat and meets my gaze, his brows pulling together in confusion. I’m just as confused. Sure, omegas are rare and I don’t know if I’ve ever heard of a *male* one, but is Keir truly that ignorant of what his status as omega means? Is that why he let himself be taken to Rossi?

*As obvious as Keir’s ignorance is, if I hadn’t shown up...*

A shudder goes down my back and I nearly have to fight off a shift. If I had been only minutes later, I could have lost my mate before even knowing him.

Rossi knows that Keir is valuable, that an unmated omega—or, rather, the pieces of one—could fetch a high price. But

Rossi isn't stupid. He may have been willing to take advantage of Keir's ignorance, but once I brought up the law, Rossi couldn't claim ignorance of his own.

There were too many witnesses.

But if Rossi had figured out Keir is my fated mate, I doubt he would have cared much about witnesses, too hungry for vengeance to resist striking that kind of blow to me. Losing a fated mate isn't necessarily fatal, but that's definitely a possibility. If I hadn't been able to control my initial reaction to Keir, Rossi would have never let him go, omega or not, since a mated omega isn't worth half as much. Rossi would have used Keir to control me or—

“Is that a ‘yes’ on the bullshit?” asks Keir, interrupting my spiraling thoughts.

“No,” I say, shaking myself out of the various awful scenarios playing out in my head.

He purses his lips. “I see.”

“It's not safe for you on your own,” says Brody. “We can protect you.”

Keir thinks on that for a moment, his gaze moving to the window as he watches the city pass by. “Where are we going?”

“Back to the hotel,” replies Brody.

“The hotel?”

“The Grand Royale,” I say. “Where the summit is being held.”

Keir nods slowly, his gaze moving up to meet mine in the rearview mirror. There’s heat and awareness in his eyes, but also confusion. He’s feeling the fledgling mate bond, but given his ignorance in other areas, he might not know what it is.

“And there are other Alphas at this summit?” asks Keir, turning his attention back to the window.

“Yes,” says Brody. “All the Alphas from the Midwest.”

Keir’s throat bobs as he swallows. He holds himself carefully still, but he’s practically vibrating with tension. He takes a deep breath and then flashes a wide grin my way. There’s something about the expression that doesn’t feel right...

“So, where are you guys from?”

“Madison, Wisconsin,” says Brody, pulling to a stop at a red light.

“Nice,” says Keir absentmindedly. “And Remy’s back at the hotel, right? You guys are keeping a better eye on him?”

“Yes,” says Brody. “Dante’s not taking his eyes off him again.”

“Of course not.” Keir grins to himself, clearly as aware of my second’s crush on my brother as I am.

The light changes, and Brody depresses the gas pedal. A subtle click registers in my ears, but it isn’t until the SUV

dings a warning noise that I identify the sound as the back door opening. Keir hits the ground, already running even as Brody screeches to a halt.

Brody and I leap from the SUV, barely taking the time to close the doors and take off after Keir. However, it quickly becomes clear that Keir knows this area.

And we very much do not.

I could shift and track my mate easily, but the triumvirate would have my head when they received word of an oversized wolf running through the streets of Chicago.

“I think we lost him,” says Brody as we finally slow to a stop. “He should be okay now that you got him away from Rossi. He knows enough to get out of the city and he seems pretty resourceful.”

“True,” I say. “But I *have* to find him. He’s my fated mate.”

“Fuck,” says Brody.

My sentiments exactly.

# EIGHT

## KEIR

I LEFT JULIEN AND Brody behind blocks ago, but for some reason I'm still running. My fight-or-flight instinct is firmly locked into flight even though there's this weird niggling feeling in my stomach telling me I need to go back.

That's not going to happen.

I haven't spent the past four years avoiding other shifters only to get drawn in by an Alpha's pretty face. Nothing good can come from associating with Alphas, no matter how nice they seem—or how loudly my wolf is whining about not wanting to leave Julien's side.

Running was my best option, my *only* option, but I have no idea what I'm supposed to do now.

Every move I've made over the last four years has been centered on being mobile and being able to make myself scarce as quickly as possible when necessary. That's why I

was able to shove everything I need to leave town in a single backpack.

Unfortunately, that bag is who knows where, most likely sitting on the ground in the alley by my apartment, with my phone and my money tucked inside. Meaning the only things I have to work with are the clothes on my back and the shoes on my feet.

I chuckle to myself. *At least they're running shoes.*

Basically, I'm back where I started four years ago—with virtually nothing.

Though, money wasn't quite as vital to getting around when I was first on my own and still in Alabama. There were enough open areas that shifting and traveling on four paws wasn't a problem, but I can't do that here. Shifting at all would be way too noticeable, and the last thing I need right now is to be noticed.

Why I ever thought it was a good idea to settle in an urban area is beyond me.

Sure, after a couple of close calls in small towns where I caught a glance of a familiar face or a whiff of a familiar scent, I thought it would be better to get lost in a sea of faces, but I never considered what would happen if I ran afoul of the shifters here and lost all my escape routes.

Now, I'm pretty much fucked.

Getting out of Chicago on a budget of zero dollars is about as impossible as it sounds. Hell, just getting *around* the city

with no money is a pain in the ass and I need to put as much distance between me and *every Alpha in the Midwest*—seriously, what the fuck is *that* about?—as quickly as possible.

Without my phone, I have no access to rideshare apps, and without my wallet, a taxi is out of the question. My only option is to hop the turnstile at the nearest L station and hope I don't get caught.

Getting caught would be *bad*.

Shifters don't make up a huge percentage of the population, but at least one or two are bound to be cops, and any shifter cops in Chicago would be part of Rossi's pack. I might've escaped the Chicago Alpha once, but I don't think I'd be so lucky again. Not only because of the way the guy was looking at me when he found out what I am, but also because he's under the impression I'm 'with' Julien's pack. I'm not sure what exactly is going on there, but the animosity between those two is glaringly obvious.

And the last thing I want is to be caught in the middle.

*A little too late for that...*

Some part of me has been restless ever since I first locked eyes with Julien. My shifter instincts—the ones I've actively ignored for years—scream for me to go back to him, to curl up with him, to find safety with him, but my past tells me that safety would be nothing but a lie. It's only because I've repressed my wolf for so long that I was even able to leave that SUV.



*Maybe I should have stayed with Julien...*

*No.*

*Bad idea. Bad wolf. Bad brain.*

I shake away that thought and concentrate on locating the nearest L station. Once I've gotten a little more distance, I can figure out what to do.

A couple of blocks later, I follow the signs to an aboveground station, then shuffle up behind a group of tourists. I move into the turnstile next to them as they scan their cards. Once the last tourist scans their card, I glance both ways, then as gracefully as possible, I hop over the turnstile and press closer to the tourists on the other side.

If anyone saw me, they don't say anything. I let out a slow breath of relief. Finally, at least one thing is going right for me. I hop on the first train into the station, not much caring where it's headed, then slump into a seat. If nothing else, sitting down for a while will be nice.

Sometime later, my stomach growls. Loudly. How long has it been since I've eaten?

I grabbed a snack before work last night—

*Last night?*

Has it only been that long?

*It has.*

I got home around two, passed out for a few hours before being rudely awakened maybe around five. It was barely dawn

when I was smooshed into the car with Rossi's goons and now it can't be much past nine.

Damn.

I lean on the back of the seat in front of me, burying my face in my crossed arms, exhaustion hitting me like a bus. This has been the longest seven hours of my life. That's not even an entire work shift...

*Wait.*

I straighten, an idea hitting me. Someone is normally in the office at Heaven & Hell by ten, and I believe I'm owed at least one last paycheck. Or a hefty advance. Sending some cash my way is the least Drew can do after the disaster he led to my apartment by giving out my address.

When the intercom announces the next station, I glance at the route map on the wall, charting the fastest course to the club. I'm on the opposite side of the city and I'll have to change trains a couple of times, but it shouldn't take me much longer than an hour to get there.

I relax into my seat, relieved to finally have a plan—as crappy as it may be. I'll be out of Chicago and on my way in no time.

In the back of my mind, my wolf whines... *but what about Julien?*

# NINE

## JULIEN

NEARLY AN HOUR HAS passed since Brody and I lost sight of Keir and we're no closer to locating him. Every instinct I have screams at me not to give up, but my brain knows continuing the search without some idea of where Keir might be heading is useless.

Fated mate or not, I don't really know him—yet—and I definitely don't know how he thinks. The fact that he jumped from a moving vehicle to escape me and I still have no idea *why* proves that much. The bond between us is too new to be useful in finding him, and scent tracking is nearly impossible in urban environments.

Which means all Brody and I are doing right now is running around the city with no direction.

I haven't spent much time in Chicago and that time has been mostly limited to various hotels and I somehow don't think I'm going to find Keir at a luxury hotel, or any hotel really.

He's running scared and, if I don't find him quickly, he's going to take himself right out of Chicago. That is, if Rossi doesn't catch up to him first.

I sigh. "We need to go back to the hotel. Talk to Remy. He might have some ideas."

Brody nods in agreement. We return to the SUV and head to the hotel. Hopefully Remy can come up with some sort of plan to point us in the right direction. My brother is pretty good at reading people and predicting their actions. He always has been. That's the main reason I named him as procurator—a legal agent who can act in my stead and second only to Dante—when most Alphas choose someone more physically formidable.

I can fight my own fights, not that those happen very often in my pack, but what I can't do is navigate the intricacies of interpack relations. At least not very well.

How in the hell Remy landed himself in that situation with Rossi's men last night, I'm still not sure. It's not like him to take off on his own like that.

*But that's a worry for another day...*

Back at the hotel, Remy leaps up from the couch as Brody and I enter the two-bedroom suite. My brother glances behind us at the closing door and his brows pull together.

"Where is he? Didn't you find him?"

"We found him," says Brody. "We also lost him."

“Lost him,” says Remy in a flat voice. “What does that mean?”

I sigh and drag a hand through my hair. “I’m not sure what happened. I got there before Rossi had time to do anything but threaten him and he left with me without a problem. But when he started asking where we were going...”

“You told him,” says Remy.

“Well, yeah.”

Remy actually rolls his eyes. “I warned you he was skittish.”

I give my brother a hard look. “But you didn’t say he was liable to jump out of a moving vehicle.”

Remy raises his brows. “Really?”

“Really. Once he heard there were a bunch of Alphas in town, I’m surprised he even waited for Brody to slow down.”

Remy winces. “I got the impression he’s not fond of Alphas.”

“Well, isn’t that great?” I close my eyes and let out another sigh.

Remy cocks his head to the side, raising his brows in question.

“He’s my fated mate,” I say.

“How far into the process—”

I shoot him a glare. “How far do you think? The bond is there, I can feel it, but not strong enough for me to track him with it.”

“Shit,” says Dante.

“Exactly.”

“This isn’t good,” says Remy. “If you don’t find him before the mating frenzy starts...”

“Believe me, I know.” I shake my head. Fated mates aren’t common, but everyone knows what happens if they don’t finalize the bond. Well, everyone except for... *Shit*. “And Keir will have no idea what’s going on. I don’t know how or why he was kept so ignorant.”

“I might have an answer on that one.” Remy holds up Dante’s phone and wiggles it back and forth. “I did a little digging. There are only a couple packs near Tuscaloosa where Keir said he was from. None of them have a record of any omegas, male or otherwise. But... if what I’m thinking is correct, they probably wouldn’t have kept a record of him. Some of the older, more traditional packs can be rather inflexible about sexuality. And a male omega? To them, that’s the ultimate abomination.”

“So, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying Keir has a reason to be scared if that’s the kind of pack he grew up in,” says Remy. “From what I’ve heard, he’s lucky they didn’t kill him.”

“But that doesn’t explain why he ran from me,” I say. “I could tell he was feeling the bond even if he didn’t know what it was.”

Remy rolls his eyes. “So, he was feeling something he didn’t understand while in the company of an Alpha he doesn’t know and being taken to an area where there are even more Alphas...”

“Okay, okay, I get it. I’m an idiot. Do you have any ideas or not?”

Remy glances over his shoulder. “Hey Dante, you brought back Keir’s bag, right?”

“Yup.” Dante walks to the corner of the room and holds a ragged looking backpack up by one strap.

Remy makes a grabby motion and Dante hands the backpack to my brother, who sets it on the coffee table. He opens the pack and starts pulling things out, laying the items inside on the table. Remy’s still removing the contents when a knock sounds at the door.

I motion for Dante to open it. Dante complies, revealing a hotel employee in the hallway holding a bottle of what looks like champagne.

“We didn’t order anything,” says Dante. He glances pointedly at his watch. “And it’s barely ten AM.”

The employee smiles. “Mr. Rossi asked us to send this along as a gift for your guest.”

Brody curses under his breath.

“Thanks.” I force a smile and take the bottle. “I’ll be sure he gets it.”

I shut the door, and turn around, the bridge of my nose pinched between my fingers. “This is one of Rossi’s hotels. How did I forget that?”

“And he’s bound to have people watching,” says Dante. “It won’t be long before he knows Keir didn’t arrive back here with you. If he doesn’t already.”

“Which means we definitely need to find Keir first,” says Remy.

“Chicago is Rossi’s city,” I say, my stomach twisting with fear. *What if he gets to Keir before I do?*

“True,” says Dante. “Rossi knows the area and he has an entire pack worth of resources to help him track Keir down.”

“That doesn’t mean we’re out of luck,” says Remy. “Keir has stayed under Rossi’s radar this long, which means he knows how to avoid being detected by other shifters. Rossi also won’t think outside the box. He’ll depend on his underlings to report back to him and they don’t do a lot of thinking for themselves. Rossi’s guys will be searching the entire city. We can narrow it down.”

“And how do we do that?” asks Brody.

“This is likely Keir’s version of a go bag,” says Remy as he gestures to the items from the backpack. *“And he doesn’t have it with him.* The clothes might not be vital, but the money definitely is if he hopes to get out of the city. His phone is also here, so he won’t be able to call anyone for help. That is, if he even has anyone to call. I doubt he’d go back to his apartment



so he'll need to go somewhere he believes that one, will have cash, and two, will give it to him." Remy points at the stack of cash sitting on the table next to Keir's bag. "More than half those bills have glitter on them, meaning most, if not all, of that money came from tips at the club. I highly doubt he has a second job or any other sources of income, so I'm fairly certain Heaven & Hell is the only place he'd think to go to get some more cash."

# TEN

## KEIR

IN THE STARK LIGHT of day, Heaven & Hell looks boring and kind of ugly. Like many nightclubs, the exterior is nothing but a big, gray building and without the pumping music, flashing lights, and line of people, the place is downright plain. But the front door is unlocked and that's really all that matters to me.

I slip inside and make my way toward the manager's office in the back. The overhead fluorescents are on, highlighting the dinginess of the interior, and I nod at the two guys cleaning the floors as I go by. The door to Drew's office is closed, but there's a sliver of light underneath indicating he's likely in there. I tap my knuckles against the wood.

"Yeah?" grunts Drew. Not exactly an invitation, but I'll take it.

"Hey, man," I say as I push the door open and enter the office. "I need to ask a favor."

Drew looks me up and down from behind his desk, frowning. “Can’t help you.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to ask.”

“You’re in here at ten AM wearing raggedy sweats and looking like you barely slept. You either want drugs or money. If it’s the first, I’m not the guy, and the second is a hard no.”

I move farther into the room and prop my hip on the corner of the desk, giving him a coy smile as I glance at him from under my lashes. “Come on, Drew. I just need a small advance. You owe me.”

Completely unaffected, he snorts. “I owe you? How do you figure?”

“You gave out my address last night,” I say, my voice going flat. I gesture at my clothes. “Which is why I’m dressed like this. I had to jet when those goons showed up at my door. If you hadn’t violated my privacy, I—”

“Get out of here, kid,” he says in a flat voice.

“I’m one of your most popular servers,” I say. “Guys ask for me by name and—”

“You’re a pretty face I can easily replace.” He smirks. “Check it out, I’m a poet.” He jerks his chin toward the door. “You want to keep your job? Get out of here.”

“A hundred bucks,” I say. “That’s all I need.” *Not quite, but it will get me further away than the nothing I have.*

“It’s not happening,” he says. “If I gave money to every kid coming in here with a sob story, I’d go broke.”

“Sob story?” I stand up, a snarl tugging at my lips. “All I asked for was an advance on the money *you already owe me* because it’s your fault I need it in the first place.”

Drew also stands, straightening to his full height. He’s a big guy. Six foot or so and probably close to 300 pounds. He could break me in half.

If I were human.

A low growl rumbles in my chest, a sudden and unexpected surge of aggression moving through my body. Just as quickly, the anger drains away and anxiety ratchets up my heart rate as sweat beads on my forehead.

*What the hell?*

Drew doesn’t seem to notice my weird physiological crisis. He makes a shooing motion with his hands. “It wasn’t me who gave out your address anyway. That was the night manager, so don’t go blaming that crap on me.” When I don’t move, he continues. “Get a move on. I got shit to do.”

Heat builds in my chest and my stomach flips. A pain like I’ve never experienced builds in the space where my neck meets my shoulders and I shrug a few times trying to relieve it.

Doesn’t help. At all. Maybe even makes it worse.

I tug at my shirt, my throat going dry. *Too hot.*

The previously unconcerned Drew is now looking very concerned, maybe even *worried*. A chuckle escapes my lips, followed by another and another... Before I know it, I'm doubled over with the force of a half-hysterical noise that bypasses laughter and heads right into some sort of keening.

This is not normal. But damned if I can *stop*.

"You don't look so good. Is this an OD? Do I need to call an ambulance?" Drew steps around his desk, approaching me slowly with his hands out. "What are you on, kid?"

"Not a kid," I spit out between—*oh fuck*—sharpened teeth. I curl my lips inward and hide my mouth with one hand as the weird whining continues.

One of Drew's hands lands on my shoulder and a full-fledged snarl rips out of me at the touch. Drew jumps backward, his eyes going wide. "What the fuck?"

My vision flickers, sharpening and dulling in turns—*my eyes are changing*—and claws extend from my fingertips.

*Shit shit shit.*

I'm going to shift. I can't stop it.

*What the hell is going on?*

Another stab of pain hits the back of my neck, this one even sharper than the first, a fiery knife that makes its way down my spine as every muscle in my body tenses.

And then it's gone...

My muscles relax, my teeth and claws retreat. My vision stabilizes. I straighten, flexing my hands a few times to work out the last of the kinks.

Drew stares at me for a beat without saying a word, then walks to the safe in the corner, never once taking his eyes off me. He presses in a code before swinging the door open, grabbing a stack of cash, and shoving the pile of bills at me.

“Take it. I don’t know what the fuck you are, but I want you out of here,” he says, the waver in his voice lessening the impact of the words. “I don’t need that kind of mess here. I have a business to run.”

My gaze darts from his face to the cash. Is he for real? Slowly, I reach forward, expecting Drew to snatch the money away at any moment.

*There’s no way it’s this easy...*

My fingers make contact with the bills, grip them, then pull them back. I glance down at the money in my hand, a stack of hundred-dollar bills wrapped in a band printed with *\$10,000*.

Well then. I flash a grin at Drew. “Thanks, man.”

He doesn’t respond, but who cares? This isn’t exactly how I planned to get it, but now I have more than enough money to get the hell out of here and never look back.

And that’s exactly what I’m going to do.

I shove the cash into the waistband at the front of my pants and pull my shirt down over it. Not the most ingenious hiding

place, but I have to work with what I have and I'm not dumb enough to prance out of here with the money in full view.

I'm halfway to the front door when a voice calls out from behind me. "Keir!"

The single syllable sends a shiver down my back and I actually shudder as that tight feeling from earlier returns to my muscles. On some instinctual level, I know that voice. I don't even need to turn around to be sure. But I do anyway, my wolf immediately beginning to whine his name.

*Julien.*

# ELEVEN

## KEIR

EVERY NERVE ENDING IN my body lights up and there's a war brewing between my brain, which is telling me to run, and my wolf, which wants nothing more than to go to Julien, to be near him, to feel his hands on me...

My wolf is winning.

I take a step forward. Julien's eyes flash with heat, and his nostrils flare. He's holding himself still, his muscles thrumming with tension and his gaze locked on mine. Want, desire, and *need* tangle in my chest and draw me forward another step. My lips part and the spot on the back of my neck that was so painful earlier tingles with...anticipation?

There's a crashing noise. The door banging open? Boxes falling? Whatever the noise, it breaks me out of the weird trance-like state that was pulling me to Julien. I tear my gaze from his and turn my face away. My forward motion stops and the fog in my brain clears.



*What the hell?*

I dart a glance at Julien, quick enough to hopefully avoid being trapped in whatever mindfuck that was again. What is he doing to me? Is this an Alpha thing?

A faded memory niggles at the back of my mind, something mentioned a few times in my old pack, a kind of fairy tale told to pups: If you were really good, the fates might grant you someone special, someone made just for you.

*A fated mate, my wolf supplies.*

No. That can't be right. Those are just stories.

My mouth goes dry and I swallow as my eyes start to burn. I force myself to take a step backward, shaking my head slowly. Even if I wanted to bind myself to an alpha, there's no way a pack Alpha can take a male mate, fated or not. Otherwise... it'd be just like the cleric said. I'd be leading Julien astray, taking the Alpha from his path and depriving him of heirs.

*Does that make me the abomination they said I was?*

In all the years I've spent running, I've never considered the idea that my old pack might have been *right* about me. My stomach churns and bile bites at the back of my throat.

Julien still hasn't moved, but I can tell the effort of staying put is getting more difficult as I move farther away from him. He's fighting his instincts just like I'm fighting mine.

*Does that mean he doesn't want me?*

As nonsensical as it is since I'm the one moving away, the thought that Julien might reject me is like a painful stab in the center of my chest. A low whimper edges past my lips and Julien breaks, moving toward me with one hand out, a plaintive look on his face.

But Remy—who I hadn't even noticed until now—steps into the space between me and Julien. A growl rumbles from Julien's chest and he bares his teeth at his brother. Remy mutters something over his shoulder and Julien stops in his tracks, closing his eyes and taking a slow, deep breath.

Remy turns to me, his hands up like he's calming a cornered animal. Which is exactly what I feel like. I take another step backward, and Julien snarls. Remy darts a glance over his shoulder and holds one hand out, signaling his brother to stay put.

"Keir," says Remy, his voice soft and cajoling. "Come with us. None of us are going to hurt you, my fussy brother least of all since—"

"I'm his fated mate," I say, my voice cracking like I haven't spoken in months.

Remy's eyes widen almost imperceptibly. "Yes."

My gaze darts to Julien, but I avoid meeting his eyes. "And just how would that work exactly?"

Remy's brows pull together and he cocks his head to the side. "What do you mean?"

“Pack Alphas are expected to have heirs.” I gesture at myself. “Not something I can provide.”

“It doesn’t matter,” says Julien quickly.

“Of course it does,” I snap.

Julien steps out from behind his brother and stalks toward me. I can’t bring myself to turn away, no matter how much I want to. He grips me by the upper arms and waits for me to meet his gaze.

“It doesn’t matter,” he repeats. “My pack will get over it.”

I narrow my eyes. “So it *does* matter. They’ll just ‘get over it.’”

“That’s not what I meant. I—”

I rip out of his hold and back away. “I can’t do this.”

Julien lets out a frustrated noise. “You can’t walk away from this, Keir.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know all I need to.” Another growl breaks free from his chest and his eyes flash silver. “You’re *mine*.”

“Julien, you need to—”

Julien whirls on his brother, seething. “We’ve tried it your way, Remy, now we’re going to try mine.”

Before I can figure out what that means, Julien takes three big steps forward and lifts me, throwing me over his shoulder and causing the stack of cash to press against my hipbone. I should struggle, but now that he’s so close, now that his scent

is filling my nostrils, I can't bring myself to do so. My wolf won't let me. Julien walks us toward the back of the club and into one of the bathrooms, then gently sets me down so I'm sitting on the edge of a sink.

He leans down and runs his nose up my neck, sending tingles up and down my spine. "Tell me you don't feel it. Tell me you don't *want* me." He traces the path of his nose with the tip of his tongue and I shudder, a rush of desire flowing through me as my wolf whimpers in submission. "Tell me that and you can walk out of here. You'll never see me again."

"I don't..." But those are the only words I can choke out. No matter how much I tell myself to say the words to send Julien away, I can't.

Julien might be an Alpha, but he's my fated mate, my perfect match...maybe even my *home*, something I haven't had in far too long, if ever. Something like a sob escapes from my mouth, the sound a combination of relief and joy, and I let myself relax into his hold with the release.

Julien wraps his arms around me, encircling me with warmth and a feeling of belonging I've never had before, not with the only other shifter to ever show an interest in me and certainly not with my old pack. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady sound of his heartbeat. This all might come back to bite me in the ass, but I don't think I can give him up.

Julien leans down, nuzzling at my cheek, and I lift my chin and turn my head so our lips meet. He takes full advantage of the invitation, kissing me aggressively and sliding his tongue

into my mouth to tangle with mine. Without breaking the kiss, Julien presses his hands against my lower back. I scoot forward, wrapping my legs around his waist. My entire body is on fire, my cock like steel in my sweats as it meets Julien's answering hardness, and all I want to do is drag my mate to the floor and let him claim every part of me.

He thrusts into the cradle of my legs as he slides his fingers past my waistband to skim across the top of my ass. I almost come just from that, a moan vibrating in my chest. Julien pulls back, then rests his forehead on against mine, his breath brushing across my face as he continues stroking his fingers against my skin.

"Tell me you're mine," he says, the words half-growled.

"I'm yours," I pant, then press forward, trying to reclaim his lips. Before I can connect, there's a light knock at the door and someone clears their throat from outside.

"Um, it sounds like you guys have worked things out," says Remy. "So congratulations and all, but we need to go. Do you think you can finish this later?"

I chuckle and Julien grins at me, his dark blue eyes sparking with humor.

"Sure," I call out, heat filling my cheeks. "Just a minute."

I hop off the sink and Julien pulls me close, rubbing his nose over my neck, scenting me, as I wrap my arms around his waist. I'm still not entirely sure about all this and I don't know

what I've done to deserve this, but if he's willing to put up with me, I'm not letting him go.

Someone bangs on the door.

“Boss, we gotta move,” says a different voice—Dante, I think. “A couple cars just pulled up outside and I don't think they're friendly.”

# TWELVE

## KEIR

DESPITE THE URGENCY IN Dante's voice, Julien doesn't release me right away. Instead, he tightens his arms and runs his nose over my neck as if memorizing my scent. Which he probably is.

If I weren't so turned on right now, I'd probably find the scenting thing a little weird. I've known I was gay since I was twelve, but given the circumstances with my old pack and spending the last four years avoiding shifters... I've never actually been in a real relationship with another shifter.

I don't know what's normal and what's not.

As if sensing my discomfort with the whole snuffling thing, Julien releases me, then gently cups my chin and tilts my face until my gaze meets his. I'm sure I look kiss drunk, my lips puffy and my hair mussed, but Julien doesn't seem to mind. In fact, whatever he sees on my face makes his eyes darken with

desire even more. His mouth curls into a self-satisfied grin before he presses his lips to mine in another brief kiss.

“Promise you won’t run,” he says, leaning back to meet my eyes again.

“I won’t,” I say almost reflexively.

He cocks a brow.

“Fine, I *promise*,” I say and, surprisingly, I think I mean it even though my cynical side is still trying to protest.

“Thank you,” he says, his face softening as he places his hand on the side of my face.

I shoot him a shy grin, my cheeks heating as I adjust myself in my sweats then shift the money to rest against the small of my back so it’s not adding to the awkward bulge in front. This whole fated mates thing is completely overwhelming and not just because I’m practically drooling at the idea of getting naked with him after I’ve known him less than twelve hours.

And the idea of him claiming me? Yes, please.

But there’s more than desire between us. I can feel it. This isn’t ‘love at first sight’—I’m way too jaded to claim that—but the possibility of something deeper is definitely there, even if I can’t quite put a name to it.

The corner of Julien’s mouth quirks up, and he brushes his thumb over my cheek. He throws his arm over my shoulders and tucks me into his side before striding over to the door and opening it. Dante’s standing on the other side, glowering in Julien’s direction.



“Bout time,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest.

Julien flashes his teeth. “Watch the attitude.”

“No attitude.” Dante sighs and tilts his chin to bare his neck. “It isn’t safe here, and it’s putting me on edge.”

Julien nods, acknowledging the display of submission. “Where’s Brody?”

The shifter in question jogs over from the direction of the front entrance. “Trying to figure out exactly what we’re dealing with.”

“And...?”

Brody shrugs. “I’m not sure. No one’s gotten out of the vehicles and I can’t pick up any scents from in here.”

“They’re likely Rossi’s men and, since we’re in his territory, that limits our options.” Julien pinches the bridge of his nose. “We’re here in Chicago by invitation, so they can’t attack us outright, but at the same time, I don’t have any authority over them. I can’t pull rank or take them out. Something like that would give Rossi cause to have me brought before the triumvirate. Or outright challenge me.”

A shudder runs down my back, the image of my dad’s mangled body flashing through my mind at the mention of a challenge. I don’t think many civilized packs these days do the whole ‘fight to the death and then dismemberment’ thing, but still...I don’t want that happening to Julien.

“Can I just pull the omega card?” I ask. “You said something about free passage. If that works for all omegas, can I extend

that to you guys or something since you told Rossi I was a guest of your pack? That might at least get us out of here.”

Remy shakes his head. “Even if they took your word for it, given what Rossi already knows about you, they probably have orders to kill us and take you by any means necessary. And, with no one to say otherwise, who’s to say you didn’t go with Rossi willingly, or that you even existed at all?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve looked into you,” says Remy. “There’s no record of you anywhere. Your old pack never registered you or your status as an omega. I found that out easily enough, so Rossi probably knows it as well by now. His best course of action is to simply make you disappear.”

“Doesn’t the fated mates thing trump that? I’m not exactly thrilled with the idea of getting claimed in a dirty bar bathroom, but...”

Remy winces. “That might even make it worse.”

“How?”

His gaze darts to Julien, as if asking his permission for something. Julien nods. Remy’s gaze finds mine. “I’m assuming you don’t actually know that much about omegas or the laws—and superstitions—surrounding them.”

“You assume correctly,” I say, then pause, my mind drifting back to my old pack. “Well, I’m pretty clear on at least one superstition.”

“That male omegas are anathema,” says Remy.

No, *abomination*. The cleric's voice echoes in my head, and I flinch away from the thought. Julien tightens his hold on me, pulling me closer to his body, as if protecting me from my own memories.

"It's not true," says Remy firmly. "But we'll talk more about that later. Your legal status is easily remedied by Julien claiming you, but Rossi finding out you're my brother's fated mate makes him even more likely to try to take possession of you."

"Why?"

"If he can't prevent us from consummating our bond, gaining control of you would give him control over me and, through me, my pack," says Julien. "But you're even more valuable to him if we are unmated."

"What do you mean?"

"Omegas bring power and prosperity to any pack they mate into," says Remy. "But from what I understand, that only happens when an omega meets their fated mate. No fated mate, no magical perks. Rossi would much prefer that Julien never receive the benefits of mating an omega and once an omega mates, whatever it is that makes them special is only useful to their mate. But an unmated omega... some think that there's power to be had or, rather, taken."

"I don't get it."

Remy looks distinctly uncomfortable. "Depending on the source, certain parts hold more power than others. Eyes...

hands... er, organs..."

"He wants to sell me for parts," I say, turning the idea over in my head. "But if Julien claims me, I'm worthless."

"Not worthless," says Julien. "*Mine.*" He runs his nose over my neck again and I lean back into his chest.

Dante's lips curl into the ghost of a smile as he watches. Glad his Alpha is happy? "Now that we've settled the fact that we aren't simply walking out the front door, how about finding a back way outta here?"

"We can use the exit by the kitchen. It's the farthest from the front entrance," I say.

"Sounds like a plan," says Dante. He jerks his chin at Brody. "You and me in front."

I direct the group toward the back of the club, where the employee areas are, then to the kitchen and the rearmost exit.

Dante eyeballs the big red 'Emergency Exit' sign. "Is this going to set off an alarm?"

I chuckle and shake my head. "Fire code requires the exit, but they leave the alarm disconnected. Some of the employees like to... get together after their shifts."

Julien growls at the implication in my words. The sound is hotter than I'd like to admit. I've never liked the jealous, possessive type before, but I can certainly see the appeal now.

Dante pushes the door. As I expected, no alarm sounds, and the door swings open, revealing a narrow alleyway with three

dumpsters along one side. My nose wrinkles at the overwhelming scent of rotten food and who knows what else, but the smell should also cover our retreat. Shifters tend to avoid unpleasant scents if they can—I would know since this isn't the first time I've used rotting garbage to disguise my scent.

The five of us walk to where the alley opens onto the street. I move to poke my head around the corner and check things out, but Julien pulls me back, wrapping his arms around my chest and holding me against his body.

“Dante,” he says, jerking his chin toward the corner of the building.

Dante presses his back against the brick and slides to the edge, extending just the side of his face around the building. His nostrils flare, then he ducks back into the alley.

“Well...” he says, an uncomfortable look on his face. “It's not Rossi.”

“Who is it then?” asks Julien.

Dante's gaze darts to me before returning to Julien. “It's Meredith and her brothers.”

A jolt goes through Julien, his muscles going tense.

“Who's Meredith?” I ask, glancing over my shoulder.

Remy lets out a wry chuckle and Julien grimaces before saying, “Until this morning, she was the woman I intended to negotiate a mating alliance with.”

# THIRTEEN

## KEIR

THE GROUND DROPS OUT from beneath my feet—well, figuratively at least—as the stability and hope I just fucking got myself to accept is destroyed by a cold wash of betrayal, taking that tiny bit of rebuilt self-confidence with it.

Was it all bullshit? *Of course it was.*

The frantic touches, the whispered words, the heated kiss... I see it all in a brand new light. Julien was *managing* me. Sure, I'm ninety-nine percent sure the fated mates thing is true—it's a hard feeling to deny—but the emotion I thought was behind it, not so much. Julien was possessive, protective, and a little growly. All things you might expect from someone who knows what a potential liability I am.

I had a make-out session with a guy I barely know in a dirty bar bathroom and my brain turned it into some sort of romantic epiphany.

I am such an idiot.

I take a step away from the other shifters. And another. If I can just—

“You promised,” growls Julien. “No more running.”

I curl my hands into fists to stop them from shaking and inject anger into my voice to hide the hurt I don't even want to admit to myself, much less this asshole Alpha. “That was before I found out you're *engaged*.”

“I'm not,” says Julien. “It never got that far and—”

“So you're saying you're just going to give up a potential mating alliance for *me*?” My gaze darts around, all my instincts transitioning back into flight mode. Too bad the only way out of this alley is through Julien.

“Yes,” he says simply. “That's exactly what I'm saying.” He walks toward me, his hands held to the side, palms out.

I force myself to hold still. My brain is still screaming at me that I'm being stupid, but I can read the truth in Julien's eyes. He means what he says. He's not just going to abandon me.

Maybe if I repeat those things to myself enough times, they'll stick.

“Look,” says Remy. “I realize trust is a hard thing for you, Keir, but my brother is an honorable Alpha. Even if he wasn't, I owe you one. You put your neck on the line for me last night and I won't let anything bad happen to you. We can get this all straightened out once we get back to the hotel.”

“Okay,” I say, taking a deep breath and willing my body to relax.

Julien brushes up against me and takes my hand. “You’re my fated mate. Nothing can stand between us, least of all an alliance that wasn’t even finalized.”

“Okay,” I repeat shakily.

Julien turns to face the mouth of the alley, his fingers still wrapped around mine. “Let’s get this over with. At least this means we don’t need to call for a ride.”

Dante puts a hand on Julien’s chest, glancing pointedly at our joined hands. “Besides the fact we need to keep the fated mates thing a secret until we’re in a more secure location, you cannot disrespect Meredith or her brothers until you officially reject the alliance.”

“You’re right.” Julien deflates, his pained gaze locked on me. “How do you suggest we handle this, Remy?”

Julien’s brother taps a finger against his chin. “Act like you’re happy to see them. Be polite, but not too enthusiastic. If they ask, we came here to offer Keir, a shifter who helped me out of a bind, a place in our pack.”

Julien nods, then plasters a wide smile on his face. He strolls out of the alley and the rest of us follow behind. Three shifters are standing in the parking lot next to two black SUVs. One male approaches our group, smiling with his hand extended.

“Alpha Matisse,” he says. “My sister was worried when you weren’t at any of the morning sessions. Alpha Bashar gave a very interesting talk on things packs can do to lower their carbon footprints.”



I cover my mouth to hold back my laugh. Julien said something about some sort of Alpha summit. I didn't realize it was a conference with speakers and panels. How very human of them.

Julien takes the extended hand and nods an acknowledgment at the woman I assume is Meredith. "We got a little sidetracked. My brother was out last night and ran into some trouble. This shifter helped him out, so we came by to offer him a place in our pack."

I give everyone an awkward wave, suddenly conscious of my ragged sweats and worn t-shirt. Everyone else has a business casual look going on.

The other shifter barely glances in my direction. He claps Julien on the back. "Great. Expansion is always a good thing."

Julien smiles tightly. "Yes, it is."

The shifter guides Julien toward one of the waiting SUVs. "Now that your errand is done, why don't we continue our alliance negotiations?"

"Of course," says Julien blandly. He glances back at us. "I'll see you back at the hotel, Remy. Please help our guest get settled in."

Remy salutes him with two fingers, his smile tight.

Julien and Brody go off with who I assume is the pack Alpha in the first SUV and I end up sitting in the backseat of the other SUV, squished between Remy and Dante. Meredith sits

up front with the other male shifter keeping up a steady stream of pleasant, if a bit shallow, conversation with Remy.

Objectively speaking, Meredith is absolutely gorgeous and I can see where Julien—and his pack—might want a mating alliance with hers. Her pack lives in the northern part of Michigan they call the ‘up’. Which is a super weird name to be honest, but whatever. They operate a string of lakeside resorts and properties, which are likely very lucrative. All big plusses for Julien’s pack.

Compared to me with no pack and nothing to my name but the ten grand I basically stole that’s stuffed in my waistband... Meredith is a much better prospect.

And I think she knows it too. She isn’t rude to me exactly, but she glances at me every now and then, a line forming between her brows as if she’s trying to figure out what I’m doing here with the rest of these shifter VIPs.

I’m beginning to wonder the same thing.

But now that I’ve gotten over the initial shock of finding out about Meredith, I’m going to trust Julien and go with the flow of things. Well, I’m going to try at least.

Before I know it, we’re pulling up outside a hotel that blows anywhere I’ve ever stayed out of the water. There’s even a valet and a doorman like at Rossi’s building—these ones aren’t shifters, though. Someone opens the door and Remy slides out, Dante immediately exiting and coming up behind him.

“Is there anything we can get you, sir?” asks the... bellhop? I’ve never stayed in a place this fancy, so I have no idea what to call him.

“No, thank you,” says Remy. “Has my brother returned?”

The bellhop nods. “Yes, sir. About ten minutes ago.”

Remy waves him off, says goodbye to Meredith and her brother, then strides toward the lobby with Dante right behind him. I scramble after them. The hotel employees would probably kick me out if I got separated because I definitely do not belong here. Halfway through the lobby, Remy jolts to a stop, and I about run into him. Dante moves to stand beside Remy, a low growl rumbling in his throat.

“Gentlemen,” says Rossi. “I’m so glad you made it back safely.”

You know, for once today I’d like to go more than five damn minutes without everything going to shit.

# FOURTEEN

## KEIR

“WHAT DO YOU WANT, Rossi?” asks Dante, his voice low and tense.

Rossi spares the large, angry shifter a quick glance, then turns his attention to Remy. “We’re in the middle of a hotel lobby. Call off your guard dog before someone gets hurt.”

Remy touches Dante’s arm. Dante’s hands curl into fists, his tendons straining with the force of the action, but he bows his head, submitting to Remy’s authority. Remy strokes the bigger man’s arm briefly before addressing Rossi.

“Just tell me what you want, Rossi,” says Remy, sounding more annoyed than angry. “I need to speak with my brother, and I don’t have the time or the inclination to play your stupid power games.”

“Power games?” Rossi places his hand on his chest as if affronted. “I’m insulted that you would think so little of me.”

He wipes his expression and narrows his eyes. “You’re a smart kid. I think you know what I want.”

“Well, you’re not getting him,” says Remy.

“I think our friend is capable of speaking for himself.” Rossi’s gaze goes over Remy’s shoulder and lands on me. “Aren’t you, Keir?”

I really don’t like this guy and I should probably keep my mouth shut, but I’ve had about enough crap for today. I just want to get this confrontation over with. Rossi’s an asshole, but he’s not stupid. He’s not going to attack us in public.

“Yeah,” I say.

Rossi breaks into a wide smile as if I did a particularly amusing trick. “Good. Now, why don’t we—Ah, Cameron, I see you and your brother found your sister’s wayward mate. I’m so glad my directions helped.”

*Rossi sent them to the club? Why?*

The shifter who drove the SUV that brought us here, Cameron, I assume, strides up to Rossi, completely ignoring the tension between our two groups. “My family is in your debt, Alpha Rossi. We never would have located Julien without your help.”

“Was it as I said?” asks Rossi.

Cameron glances at me, his face twisting with disdain. “Exactly. The grimy upstart is angling for a place in Alpha Matisse’s pack.”

*Grimy?* That's the best insult the guy can come up with?

Rossi tsks and shakes his head. "It's awful the tricks some of these lone wolves will try to pull. This one even has Matisse convinced he's an *omega*."

*That son of a bitch.* I take a step forward, intending to prove exactly what I am, but Remy stops me, wrapping his hand around my wrist.

"Not here," he says in a low voice.

Oh yeah. For a second there, I completely forgot we're in the middle of a hotel lobby.

Cameron looks me up and down. "Seems the reject is a little irritated you've revealed his scheme."

Rossi flashes a sharp toothed grin. "Don't you worry. I know how to take care of these kinds of things in my territory."

Remy studies the two of them, his brow furrowed. He's trying to figure out what Rossi is aiming to accomplish with this. Hell, I am too.

What does Rossi gain by trying to raise doubts about me being an omega? His claims are easily disproved. So he's banking on... what exactly? Remy accused Rossi of playing power games, which this clearly is. But to what end? What does Rossi have to gain?

Meredith walks over to join us. Rossi takes her hand in his, then presses his lips to the back of her fingers. "Meredith, you get more lovely every time I see you."

“Thank you, Alpha.” She tilts her head, baring her neck. “I look forward to working with you to improve the relations between my future pack and yours.”

That explains why Rossi might want the mating alliance to go through. Is that his only angle here? Whatever financial benefits Rossi might get if Julien mates with Meredith are likely not worth that much. This is definitely some sort of political maneuver, but without knowing more about the players, I have no way to decipher it.

Remy’s fingers tighten on my wrist. Reassurance?

“I do as well,” says Rossi. His gaze darts to me. “Now that the matter has been settled, I’ll take the problem of this lone wolf off your hands.”

“Of course,” says Meredith. “I’m sure Julien will understand once I explain the situation to him.”

“No,” says Remy. “It’s not your call, Meredith.”

She blinks at Remy. “I’m your pack’s Alpha Mate. Approving or rejecting new pack members is well within my power.”

“You aren’t anything to my pack. Not yet. Not officially,” says Remy.

Cameron speaks up. “What the hell, Remy? You know all that’s left is the formalities.” He glances at me. “I understand the guy helped you out, but you don’t want that kind of riffraff in your pack. Neither would Julien if he were thinking straight.”

“I speak for Julien in this,” says Remy, his voice firm. “If you don’t like it, you can address the issue with my brother later.”

Cameron growls and reaches toward Remy, but Dante steps in front of him.

“Aggression toward Julien’s procurator is aggression toward Julien. Don’t touch him unless you want to deal with the consequences,” says Dante.

Cameron’s upper lip curls, but he backs off. “I don’t get it. Yesterday, you all were bending over backwards to make sure these arrangements went through.”

“Circumstances have changed,” says Remy. “When Julien is ready to discuss them with you, he will do so. Until then, we’re going to our room.”

Meredith tuts and crosses her arms over her chest. “This kind of disrespect will not be tolerated when I’m Alpha Mate.”

“We’ll see.” Remy gives her a saccharine smile, then takes hold of my arm and tugs me toward the elevator, Dante bringing up the rear.

It isn’t until we’ve boarded the elevator and the doors slide close that Remy lets out a slow breath. Dante places his hands on Remy’s shoulders, massaging the lingering tension away.

After a moment, Remy pulls away from Dante’s grip. “Well, the good news is that Rossi is still in the dark about you being Julien’s fated mate.”

“Why do you say that?” I ask.



“That would have been a very different conversation if Rossi knew,” says Remy. “He knows the mating alliance was important to Julien, and he probably thinks Julien won’t give it up for you, omega or not. Fated mates trump any other relationship, even between those already mated. A mating alliance that hasn’t been finalized means nothing in the face of what you and Julien are to each other.”

“Okay. So, what’s the bad news?”

“Derek, Meredith’s other brother and the Alpha of their pack, won’t be happy about canceling the mating alliance. Thanks to Rossi’s meddling, it will appear that Julien is setting aside Meredith to take an unaffiliated *male* shifter as a mate.”

“And that’s important why? I thought Julien said me being a guy didn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t,” says Remy. “Not in the long run, but Derek is going to see this as an insult. I wouldn’t put it past him to issue a challenge to Julien because of the perceived slight. In fact, I think Rossi’s counting on it.”

“Why?”

“Because the challenge would take place here in Rossi’s territory, so Rossi would get to set the terms. He’d use some pretty words to make a fight to the death sound like the most logical choice and then he’d do everything he could to make sure my brother lost,” explains Remy. “So, Rossi either gets some sort of arrangement with my pack through Meredith and the mating alliance, or he gets Julien dead. Either outcome is

beneficial for him and with either outcome he also gets *you*,  
Keir.”

# FIFTEEN

## KEIR

IS SUDDEN ONSET CLAUSTROPHOBIA a thing? Small spaces have never bothered me before, but the walls of this elevator feel like they're closing in on me as what Remy just said plays on repeat in my head. Memories I locked away years ago are flashing through my mind, a slide show of anxiety and fear. My dad. The challenge. The blood. Randall. The snapping sound my own bones made...

By the time the elevator doors open onto whatever the hell floor this is, my knees are barely holding me up they're shaking so much.

Somehow, I force my legs into action, putting one in front of the other and following Remy down the hall. Dante's next to him and their heads tilt toward each other while they have a conversation my anxious brain doesn't even attempt to process.

The past four years haven't been easy. They've been lonely and often miserable, but compared to the last twelve hours, they've been relatively safe. Well, no one was *actively* trying to maim, torture, and/or murder me at least.

Randall and my old pack thought I was dead and, prior to my interactions at the club last night, I wasn't even a blip on Rossi's radar even though I've been in Chicago for a few months. What security my anonymity couldn't provide, I made up for with contingency plans.

Now, I'm locked into a situation I don't understand and any choices I make have consequences I can't predict. Plus, the people I'm pretty much blindly trusting with my life are little more than strangers. Because, let's face it, fated mates or not, I've known Julien and his pack for less than twenty-four hours.

Remy glances over his shoulder at me, his expression quickly turning concerned. "Keir?"

I blink at him. My lungs aren't getting quite the amount of air they'd like, so talking isn't too high on the priority list.

Remy stops. "Are you okay? You've gone a little pale."

My mouth opens and closes, almost involuntarily. Remy says something to Dante and Dante continues down the hallway at a fast pace while Remy walks toward me. He places a hand on my arm.

"Why don't you sit for a minute?" He gently tugs me down to the floor so we're sitting side by side with our backs resting

against the wall. “This is a lot to take in, right? Your entire life just got flipped upside down and you’re overwhelmed.”

“Yeah,” I squeak out.

Hesitantly, Remy places his hand on my back. When I don’t push him away, he rubs small circles between my shoulder blades. “Things look bad right now, but—”

“What if he dies?” I blurt out.

“Julien?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not going to happen.” He smiles. “For all that he’s somewhat socially inept, my brother knows what he’s doing.”

“But you said...”

“I said that was what Rossi was hoping for, not that it was going to happen.” He pauses. “Besides, all that needs to be done to throw Rossi’s plans off is for Julien to claim you. I’m not sure of the exact process, but there are plenty of other Alphas here who could bear witness to you two being fated mates.”

I let out a nervous laugh. “Oh, that’s all? I only need to permanently tie my life to an Alpha I just met in order to prevent another Alpha from killing me.”

Remy’s hand pauses. “Julien would never force you to do something you weren’t comfortable with. If you want to wait, he will. We should probably get out of Chicago if that’s the case since—”

“No, it’s not that.” I sigh. “This day has been like a whirlwind and my head’s still spinning. I haven’t even *showered*.” I hold out my arm. “I’m still covered in body glitter for fuck’s sake.”

“I know.” Remy chuckles. “I’m pretty sure Meredith thinks you’re a stripper. Her pack’s going to be finding glitter in that backseat for *years*.”

I huff out a laugh. “So glad I had a chance to give her the herpes of crafts. Serves her right for... I don’t even know.”

“She’s a bitch,” says Remy. “Unfortunately, the pack elders really wanted Julien to try for a mating alliance, and he tends to go along with them to avoid rocking the boat.”

“Pack elders?” I echo, unfamiliar with the term.

“I don’t know how things were in your pack, but a lot of packs these days have a sort of council of elders who advise the Alpha,” explains Remy. “In our case, because Julien took over so young, some of the elders tend to push the boundaries of their power. The situation is definitely not ideal, but things were a little unstable when my brother became Alpha and the elders did a lot to make the transition as painless as possible so he feels indebted to them.”

“If they were pushing for a mating alliance, how are they going to take it when he comes back with me?”

Remy shrugs. “You’re his fated mate. They’ll have no choice but to accept you. Meredith was available and her pack’s resources were tempting, but Julien would have been

miserable with her. I was never going to allow my brother to end up mated to her.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Her brother Cameron has been sucking up to Rossi since they arrived, so I’m pretty sure any mating alliance would somehow benefit Rossi more than Julien. I was keeping a close eye on the situation.”

“Good,” I say, then glance at Remy from the corner of my eye and sigh. “Sorry about all the... drama. I’m normally much better under pressure than this. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

He shrugs. “Part of it is the mating bond. It’s not happy you and my brother can’t manage to stay in the same room for longer than twenty minutes.”

“And the other part?”

“The other part is the uncertainty of it all. The situation. Your status. Your future. No one, least of all me, expects that this won’t be an adjustment for you. From what I can tell, you’ve spent a long time on your own not allowing yourself to trust anyone. Those instincts aren’t going to magically disappear.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“No problem, that’s what friends are for.”

Warmth fills my chest, and my mouth curls into a smile. “I haven’t had any of those in a really long time.”

“Then it’s good you found us.” He jumps to his feet and holds his hand out to me. “Now, let’s get you to Julien. I know you two have a lot to talk about.”

I take his hand, and he tugs me to my feet. There’s still a sort of buzzing feeling in my limbs, but the worst of the anxiety has receded. Side by side, we walk down the hallway to the door at the end, which opens as soon as we reach it, revealing a flustered-looking Julien.

Julien’s gaze goes from his brother to me, then he releases a long breath. “I’m sorry.”

My brows pull together. “For...?”

He shakes his head. “I never should have left you with Cameron and Meredith, Keir. I should have insisted that—”

“And then we’d likely have never made it back to the hotel,” interrupts Remy. He makes a shooing motion with his hands. “Everything’s under control at the moment. Get inside so you and your mate can spend some time together. It’ll make both of you feel loads better.”

Julien smiles at me, almost shyly, then reaches out to take my hand and pulls me into what looks like a two-bedroom suite. Remy follows, walking over to collapse on a couch in the middle of the central sitting area.

“Where did that bottle of champagne go?” asks Remy. “I think we’ve earned a little celebration.”

“You’re welcome to it.” Julien gestures to a small table by the door. His gaze moves to me, his eyes darkening and his



voice dropping lower. “I’d rather spend time getting to know my mate.”

The heat starts in my cheeks—Julien’s undivided attention is a heady thing—and quickly spreads through the rest of my body. He tugs me closer, running his nose over my neck.

“We don’t have to do anything,” he says. “But I’d love to feel your skin on mine even if we only cuddle. Come to my room with me?”

I don’t even have to think about my answer. “*Yes.*”

# SIXTEEN

## KEIR

AS SOON AS THE door to the bedroom closes behind us, Julien walks me backward until my shoulders are pressed against the wall, then leans over and brushes his nose down my neck, inhaling deeply. Despite what he said about us not having to do anything, given his eagerness in the bathroom at the club—and mine too, I guess—I halfway expect to him to just rip my clothes off and claim me right here.

But that's not what happens.

He simply holds me close, breathing me in as he runs his hands up and down my arms. I'm not sure what to do with that.

I'm no stranger to sex, but I'm entirely new to the whole 'boyfriend experience,' which is what this feels like. Even my first time was...definitely not this. I've had hookups before, rushed and furtive experiences that mostly left me feeling a little used. With anyone else, they would have pushed me to

my knees by now or turned me around—*willingly*, of course, but still.

I don't understand *nice* and *sweet*.

That's not to say I'm not enjoying the hell out of it. Even though we're doing little more than hugging, every brush of Julien's hands against me sends tingles throughout my body that build into a steady heat of anticipation. His hands find my waist, his thumbs skimming over the bared skin above the waistband of my sweats. A whimper escapes my throat and I tilt my head to give him better access to my neck.

"So gorgeous," he whispers against my skin. He nips gently at my ear, and I whimper again. "So responsive."

One of his hands wraps around my back, moving underneath my shirt. His fingers tease at the edge of my sweats, one dipping past the elastic and brushing across the top of my ass. I arch into the touch, but he pauses and pulls away, one of his hands now holding something up between us.

The stack of money. His gaze goes from the cash to me, a quizzical look on his face. It says quite a lot that this man made me completely forget about the ten grand shoved in my pants.

I let out a nervous chuckle. "I kind of accidentally extorted my boss?"

"Kind of...?" Julien's lips twist with amusement. "How do you *accidentally* extort someone?"

“The, um, mating frenzy, I think? I almost shifted in front of him. It freaked him out.”

Julien flips through the stack of bills. “So he gave you ten thousand dollars?”

I shrug. “I think he thought I was going to eat him or something. He grabbed a stack out of the safe and practically threw it at me. I didn’t exactly question him about his reasoning.”

Julien chuckles. He tosses the money onto the nightstand, then cups my face with his hands. “You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“I guess?”

Another chuckle. He leans down and kisses me, his lips working gently against mine for a moment before he slips his tongue out to brush with mine. The action is more sweet than passionate and I have no idea what to do with my hands, so I just kind of stand there and let him kiss me. After a moment, he pulls away and rests his forehead against mine, his eyes closed and his breaths quickened.

“I said we didn’t have to—”

“I want to,” I blurt, running my hand down his chest. “I want *you*.”

“No more doubts?”

“Of course I have doubts, but not about you.” I grasp one of his hands and bring it up to my chest to rest over my heart. “This—you and me—is right. I can feel it.”

He grins and there's a warm affection in his eyes, but also a hint of uncertainty. "Should we, um, move to the bed?"

I open my mouth to agree to the change of venue, but my gaze catches on a streak of glitter on Julien's wrist. "Is the shower in here big enough for two?" I lift his hand and point out the sparkly scourge. "Unless you want to spend the rest of the month covered in this crap."

"I wouldn't mind the extra sparkle, but I'm not going to turn down the opportunity to get you wet and naked." He grabs my hand and tugs me toward the bathroom.

The bathroom is mostly white tile and black marble, with a huge glass-doored shower that's definitely big enough for both of us. Julien walks over and locks the door that connects to the other bedroom. He stops at the shower to turn on the water, then prowls toward me with a heated look on his face.

He lifts my shirt off over my head and tosses it somewhere over his shoulder, then pushes at the waistband of my sweats until they fall to the floor. His gaze skims my body, his hands following the same path over my arms, my chest, my stomach, my sides... He hooks his fingers into my boxers and tugs them off, my cock springing free and bobbing between us. His eyes widen in appreciation and darken with hunger.

He takes a step back, lust flashing in his eyes, as he drinks me in from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. "You're perfect."

Heat gathers in my cheeks, and I avert my gaze. "Not really."

Julien growls and crowds me back against the tile, then tips my chin up with his fingers until I meet his gaze. “You are everything I never knew I wanted.”

That phrasing gives me pause.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask.

His cheeks flush, and he glances away. “I’ve never... with a man.”

“Wait a second,” I say, my voice going flat and all my insecurities flooding back. “You mean you’re not even gay? That the fates stuck you with someone you’re not even—”

“The fates *gifted* me with you,” he says firmly. He takes my hand and presses it to the front of his pants, his arousal obvious. “Just because you’re unexpected, that doesn’t mean you’re not wanted. I’ve found men attractive before, just never acted on it.”

“Oh,” I say softly.

“What am I going to do with you? You’re this odd combination of sweet innocence and prickly belligerence. I never quite know how you’re going to react to things.” He chuckles and gives me a fond smile. “Let’s get in the shower and I’ll show you *exactly* how much I want you.”

He makes short work of unbuttoning his shirt and removing his own clothes, then stands there before me, a breathtaking vision of golden skin over corded muscle. His cock juts away from his body, hard and ready and absolutely mouthwatering. I

step toward him, beginning to lower to my knees, but he tugs me upward and pulls me close instead.

“I want to take care of *you*,” he says, running his hands down my back and cupping my ass, kneading it with a firm grip. His lips find mine, drawing me into a hungry kiss as he slides the glass shower door open and maneuvers us both inside and under the water.

The warm water falls around us, steaming up the glass and relaxing my muscles. I close my eyes and relax into Julien’s hold. He reaches over to grab the soap, then runs it over my shoulders, my arms, my stomach, my ass...

Wrapping a soapy hand around my cock, Julien gives it a gentle tug and I almost fall over with the jolt of pleasure that rockets through me. Lazily, he continues stroking me as he puts the soap aside and then urges me backward so the water falls over my shoulders. He releases my cock and, as the soap suds wash away, he nips and licks at my now clean skin, finally ending up on his knees before me. He presses his face to the crease of my thigh, smiling as his nose brushes against my erection.

The sight of this large man, a blond Adonis, kneeling before me is amazingly hot, but there’s still a tiny part of me that feels awkward about it. I’m not used to being worshiped—I don’t know if there’s any other word for what Julien’s doing—and I’m not so sure I deserve it.

I rub my hand over his cheek. “You don’t have—”

The rest of my—admittedly weak—protest is wiped away as he wraps his lips around my cock and takes me into his mouth, sliding slowly down, then pulling back while pressing his tongue along the underside. My mind is lost to the haze of sensation created by the slick heat of his mouth and the flickers of his tongue. I let out a low groan as he wraps his hand around the base of my cock and starts bobbing his head in a steady rhythm.

If Julien hadn't told me, I would have never known this was his first time giving a blow job. Granted, I haven't been on the receiving end of many, but *holy shit*. I now fully and completely understand the cliché of making up for lack of experience with enthusiasm.

In less than a minute, my legs are shaking and I'm dizzy and whimpering with the desire to come, my muscle straining as my balls tighten with the impending release. I want to warn him. I *should* warn him. But there's no time. In less than a second, I explode, the world going white around me as I come down Julien's throat with a full body shudder.

He doesn't seem to mind, suckling me gently until I've finished. My knees have gone weak, but his powerful arms hold me up as he rises to his feet and pulls me into another open-mouthed kiss. His still hard dick is trapped between us and he thrusts softly against my stomach for friction. I wrap my hand around him and he groans against my neck as he thrusts into my hold. Once. Twice. And then he's coming, his release coating my stomach.



Julien lets out a shaky breath, then leans his head down to press a brief kiss to my lips. “That was amazing.”

“Yeah. It really was,” I say softly.

He pulls me close, tucking my head under his chin, and I wrap my arms around his waist as the water continues to fall around us. I bask in the warmth of his touch and presence, feeling a type of peace I’ve never experienced before. If I could stay here forever, I probably would.

Too bad someone bangs on the door, loudly calling Julien’s name, and popping my little bubble of tranquility, forcing me back to reality.

What could possibly be going wrong now?

# SEVENTEEN

## KEIR

JULIEN AND I HURRIEDLY dry off and throw some clothes on, then I follow him out into the living room area of the suite. Considering the two of us both have wet hair and I'm now wearing—and mostly drowning in—Julien's clothes, I'm sure it's pretty clear what we were up to.

“Sorry to interrupt your fun.” Remy smirks at me, then turns a more serious expression on his brother. “Alpha McAdams and his sister are here. They're insisting on speaking with you.”

Julien drags a hand over his face and sighs. “Do you know what they want?”

Remy rolls his eyes. “To finalize the mating alliance, of course.”

“And you couldn't have gotten rid of them?”

“I did my part downstairs,” says Remy. “I told Meredith you’d come talk when you were ready. It’s not my fault her asshole brother doesn’t have any patience.”

Julien pinches the bridge of his nose. “Where are Dante and Brody?”

“They ran down to the restaurant to grab everyone some food,” says Remy. “They should be back in about ten minutes.” He pauses. “I don’t see a claim mark...”

“Not yet,” says Julien. He shoots me a small smile. “I’m not rushing anything.”

Remy nods. “You probably shouldn’t mention Keir is your fated mate yet, then.”

“I agree,” says Julien. “That’s none of their business at this point anyway. You might as well let our guests in. I’d rather wait until Dante and Brody get back, but I don’t think I can leave them standing in the hallway.”

“Unfortunately,” says Remy as he pulls open the suite door.

Meredith’s brother—whose name I can’t remember—stalks inside, ignoring Remy and heading straight to stand by the coffee table in front of Julien. Meredith trails in behind her not-Cameron brother, nose wrinkling as she takes in my just showered appearance and position at Julien’s side.

The brother sneers at me, then turns a scowling look to Julien and drops a stack of paper onto the coffee table. “I know we included provisions for relationships outside the mating, but the agreement hasn’t even been signed yet and

you're parading this..."—his gaze moves from my bare feet to my messy hair—"boy around the hotel. This is an insult to my sister and my pack."

"As I told Meredith downstairs, circumstances have changed," says Remy. "And the fact that you've come here uninvited after I specifically told Cameron that my brother will speak to you all when he was ready is an insult to Julien."

"Remy is right," says Julien. "I also told you when we got back here I needed to discuss some things with my brother and I would let you know when I was available to talk to you about the mating alliance."

Not-Cameron shakes his head. "That was before my sister came to me and told me how your brother disrespected her. She is your Alpha Mate—"

"No, she isn't," says Remy. "She has no authority in my pack and telling her so was not disrespectful, merely a statement of fact."

Julien's gaze moves to Meredith. "I would have liked to do this in a more private setting, but I suppose I won't get that now. I'm sorry. The mating is off."

"What?" yells not-Cameron. "We've been hammering out this deal for two days and now you want to call it off for what? Some piece of ass?" He narrows his eyes. "You'll still need an heir. Your elders will never accept—"

"It's not up for debate," snaps Julien.

Meredith moves closer to Julien and strokes her hand down his arm. “If you insist on keeping him, I won’t protest, but don’t set aside our alliance for this. Mate me in the eyes of the law. Let me provide your heir.” She sniffs. “You can appease any other needs with him, but I should be the public face of your pack.”

I fight back a growl threatening to explode from my throat as I eyeball her hand, which is still resting on Julien’s arm.

“Meredith—”

“Julien, think of how it would look.” She gestures toward me. “You would set aside a profitable alliance, give up a proper Alpha Mate trained to assist in the running of a large pack, for *that*, some unknown wolf who doesn’t even have a pack?”

She sort of has a point. I have no idea what the role of Alpha Mate really entails and the most I’m bringing to the table in mine and Julien’s relationship is a semi-stolen stack of money that probably wouldn’t even cover his hotel bill.

But that doesn’t mean I’m giving him up.

Meredith continues, “Your elders will not welcome a stripper —”

“Waiter,” I mutter, not sure why I’m bothering, since I doubt Meredith actually cares about the distinction. Also, there’s nothing wrong with being a stripper.

“Fine. *Waiter* then.” Now that I’ve interjected myself into the conversation, she turns her full attention to me. “No matter

your profession, Julien's elders will not accept you. You bring no benefit to his pack and it will throw his pack into turmoil. Is that what you want for him?"

"No," I say in a low voice. That's definitely not what I want, since it's everything my former pack's cleric said I would bring to a pack as a male omega and the exact reason my former pack tried to kill me.

"Then don't you think it would be best if you stepped aside?" Her tone is cajoling, placating, but her eyes are hard and cold as she advances toward me. She sees the cracks in my armor and she's going for them. "You could still have him in secret, where expectations don't matter."

Ugh, it's like every word she says stabs directly into my insecurities.

"I can't imagine you'd enjoy the day-to-day operations of running a pack," she says. "You can leave that to me and—"

"No," I bite out. I force myself to meet her gaze, hoping my resolve will shine through in my eyes. "The odds are I probably won't enjoy it, but I'll learn. I don't give things up just because they're hard. Julien is *mine*."

"No," says not-Cameron. "He's not." The alpha shoots a pitying look at Julien. "I didn't want to do it this way, but if you can't see reason..." He pulls out a cell phone and appears to text someone.

Seconds later, four more shifters flood through the door and into the room. They're dressed in some sort of uniform I don't

recognize, almost like... cops.

Dread coils in my stomach.

They move to surround me as one of them speaks, “Keir Anderson, by order of the triumvirate, you are hereby placed under arrest for revealing yourself to a human.”

# EIGHTEEN

## JULIEN

REMY DIGS HIS FINGERS into my upper arm, holding me in place as the praetorians—the agents of the triumvirate’s criminal justice system—practically drag Keir away. He looks so lost and confused...

I want nothing more than to growl and snarl at them for daring to lay hands on my mate, but that won’t do me or Keir any good. He’ll be safe in their hands for now. Even Rossi can’t get to Keir if he’s being held by the triumvirate.

“What did you do, Derek?” I ask after the praetorians are gone, my voice low and dangerous. I knew he wanted the mating alliance with my pack, but not desperately enough to resort to something like this.

Derek tilts his chin up. “What needed to be done. The boy was a danger to us all.”

Before I can respond to that, Meredith slides up beside me and runs her hand down my arm. “I’m sorry it had to come to



this.”

I curl my fingers into my palms and breathe slowly through my nose. The only reason it ‘had to come to this’ is because her pack got greedy and Derek is too prideful to take losing gracefully.

Derek picks up the mating contract, then holds the stack of papers out to me. “Sign them. You don’t have to lose anything else.”

I fight the urge to snarl at him. He simply believes we’re going to pick up from where we left off like Keir meant nothing? Even if I hadn’t just told him the alliance was off, he went behind my back to have a prospective member of my pack—and my fated mate, though he doesn’t know that—arrested.

Derek continues, “You wouldn’t throw away a solid alliance for someone who’s as good as dead. You know what the punishment is for revealing yourself to a human.”

I take a slow, deep breath, fighting for control of my temper. Derek is just digging the hole deeper and deeper. The triumvirate is the highest authority when it comes to keeping our secret and they do not treat cases of exposure to humans lightly. Humans outnumber us and were they to find out shifters existed, we’d likely be hunted to extinction. Any shifter found guilty of purposely revealing themselves gets an automatic death sentence, a fact Derek is also clearly aware of.

And he *still* had Keir arrested.

But, thankfully, the circumstances of the exposure will matter. The only time Keir has been on his own all day is at the club. He said he ‘accidentally’ extorted his boss because he couldn’t hold back a partial shift. The mating frenzy caused the reveal, and that means the triumvirate isn’t likely to hold Keir responsible, especially since it was just a single human and he didn’t witness a full shift.

As long as Keir makes it to the hearing, that is.

Which means I still can’t declare him as my fated mate.

The triumvirate is based in New York and, on short notice, it’s unlikely they sent more than those few praetorians here. Now that Kier and I are separated, Rossi could probably make him disappear even if he had to make the triumvirate’s agents disappear too. Taking that kind of action would be a big risk for Rossi, but given the level of his animosity toward me, I don’t think that would stop him.

Derek moves closer and shakes the stack of papers, an impatient look on his face. “Let’s get this done, Matisse.”

And that’s about the last straw. I can’t hold my tongue anymore. I take a step backward, my upper lip curling into a sneer. “I wouldn’t sign those papers if your sister was the last shifter on Earth.”

Derek’s eyes go dark, redness creeping up his neck. “Watch what you say, Matisse.”

Remy steps in front of me so he’s standing between me and the other Alpha. “My brother has already made his position on

the alliance clear. What just happened hasn't changed that."

Derek doesn't acknowledge my brother, his attention fully focused on me. "You're breaking the mating alliance?"

"I am," I growl before Remy can stop me.

"And you're comfortable with the consequences of that?" Derek flashes his teeth at me.

Remy presses his hand on my chest, a signal for me to keep my mouth shut, no doubt. "There is nothing to 'break,'" he says in a tight voice. "What my brother means is that the terms of the mating alliance are no longer acceptable to him and there can be no contract without acceptance."

Derek growls with frustration. "Then you deny what you said last night at the bar, Julien?"

Remy tenses and I can sense him fighting the urge to spin around and give me the evil eye. Hell, I deserve that and more. In all the craziness today, I never got a chance to mention to Remy that Derek and I met up for drinks downstairs at the hotel bar last night while my brother was off trying to get himself kidnapped.

*Fuck.*

"No," I say. "I can't deny my words from last night."

Remy spins to face me, his lips pressed together in a tight line and his eyes flashing with what looks like the desire to skin me alive. He's pissed, and he has every right to be. I'm supposed to let him take the lead on any political or legal issues because of situations exactly like this.

Derek shakes the stack of papers a second time, still holding them out toward me. “Then, let’s sign and get this over with.”

Remy raises his brows at me. *Your move*, his expression says. *And you’d better make it a good one.*

I sigh. “I can’t deny what I said, but I’m still not signing the papers.”

Derek blinks, his jaw dropping open even as his eyes narrow. I know what’s coming and I’m simply going to have to deal with the consequences and then figure out a way to get out of it later.

“Alpha Matisse, you have blatantly insulted me, my pack, and my sister. I hereby challenge you.” Derek snarls at me, then grabs his sister by the arm and yanks her with him toward the door. Right before he leaves, he says, “I’ll have our host be in touch with a time and location.”

Remy stares at me as the door slams closed, then shakes his head. “You’re lucky Keir thinks you’re pretty because sometimes I swear you don’t have a single brain cell in your head.”

# NINETEEN

## KEIR

TODAY SEEMS TO BE my day for new experiences, but so far ‘new’ definitely doesn’t translate into ‘good.’ I’ve been kidnapped, informed someone wants to sell me for parts, run all over town, and, to top it all off, arrested by the shifter equivalent of homeland security.

Though that last thing isn’t quite as bad as I always imagined it might be. They haven’t thrown me into a cell or anything, so that’s a plus. Of course, that’s probably only because this is the shifter legal system and they don’t exactly have any regular holding cells outside of wherever the triumvirate is actually based.

Instead, I’m holed up in a room at a luxury hotel. My new accommodations aren’t a suite like Julien’s pack has, but the space is still nicer than my apartment. Sure, I’m not allowed to leave, there are guards at my door, and the hotel is owned by

the guy who wants to sell me for parts, but things could be worse.

Right?

I collapse backward on to the bed, staring up at the ceiling. What am I going to do? Those guys kind of shoved me in here without saying anything and I've heard nothing in the three or four hours since then. I don't even know the specifics of my alleged crime or what's supposed to happen next.

My knowledge of how the shifter legal system works is lacking, to say the least. It's not something they really taught us about in my old pack—where any punishments were meted out by the Alpha with no option for a fair trial—and I haven't bothered to learn since being out on my own.

Do I call a lawyer? Is someone going to read me my rights? Do I *have* rights? Is there going to be one of those hearing things where I plead guilty or not guilty? What are those called anyway?

I sigh. Apparently, my lack of knowledge extends to the human criminal justice system. What little I know of that is cobbled together from *Law & Order* reruns and, somehow, I doubt an old TV show provides an entirely accurate representation.

Worse than almost anything else, I have no idea where Julien is or what might have happened to him after I was arrested.

At the thought of my mate's name, a wave of heat passes over my body then recedes, leaving a chill behind, and that

spot on the back of my neck twinges with pain. The sensation is a little less jarring than it was originally. Mostly because the severity has gone down, but also because I know what it is now—something to do with the unfinished mating bond.

I really should've just let Julien claim me back at the club. Or in the shower. Or really any fucking time before now, so I didn't have to deal with the bond's bitching on top of everything else.

And having that bit of connection would also help hold my fears at bay. As it is, the only thing keeping me from a complete meltdown is burying my nose in the shirt I'm wearing—*Julien's* shirt—about once every two minutes and holding on to the scent of him for as long as possible.

Maybe I just need a nap. Mentally going back over the past twenty-four hours, I don't think I've gotten more than a couple hours of actual sleep and I'm wiped. I'm probably not doing myself any good trying to keep pushing through exhaustion. A little rest might help clear my head.

I close my eyes and try to relax. The hotel is louder than my apartment—Rossi must've skimped on the soundproofing, the asshole—so it takes more effort to block things out. Eventually, I manage and start to drift off. Then, because fuck my timing *and* my luck, the door to the room swings open and three of the shifters from the group who arrested me walk in. I quickly sit up, giving my head a brisk shake to clear away the creeping tendrils of sleep that had been about to take hold.

“What's going on?” I ask, a little groggily.

One of the cop-like shifters walks over to the bed, taking hold of my arm and pulling me to my feet. What he doesn't do is answer my question, and neither does anyone else, as the guy tugs me out into the hallway and over to the elevator.

We all board, and one of the other shifters hits the button for the top floor. The top floors of hotels are normally the expensive rooms or the penthouse or something like that. Since Rossi owns this place, I'm guessing that's where he stays.

*Great...*

I can't help but think that what's going on right now is another one of those new, not good things to add to my list for the day. I *really* don't need to add anything else to my plate today. I'm already on edge, and that panicky feeling of the incomplete bond doesn't help.

*I wish Julien were here.*

That wish becomes a physical sensation, an actual ache in the back of my neck—the place where a claiming bite would be—that travels down through the rest of my joints. I inhale sharply and the guy holding my arm glances at me, something bordering on concern in his eyes.

So, he's *not* a complete robot. Good to know. I can work with that.

“What's going on?” I try again, this time quieter and directing the question to only the shifter with his hand on my arm. “Where are you guys taking me?”



“Your pack has arranged for you to have representation. We’re taking you to meet with them.”

*My pack?* Hope flares in my chest, and I let out a sigh of relief. He has to mean Julien’s pack. Remy must have been able to push through the paperwork or whatever to get me listed as an official member.

The elevator doors open and I step out without being prompted. This floor only has two doors, one on either end of a long hallway. The guy holding my arm leads me toward the door to the right, then raps his knuckles against it.

A smile tugs at my lips as I wait for Julien or Remy or one of the guys to answer. I can’t wait to get this whole thing taken care of and—

Agony rockets across every one of my nerves, the mating frenzy doubling me over with pain as the door swings open. I glance up, my eyes meeting a familiar face, but not the one I hoped for and not one I’d ever expected to see again.

*Alpha Randall.*

# TWENTY

## KEIR

THERE ARE ABOUT A million thoughts bouncing around my head, but I'm too stunned to focus on anything useful. Instead, all I can think is 'WTF' over and over again, like my brain's very own flashing error message.

A brief conversation about transfer of custody occurs without my input—apparently only 'my' pack can take custody of me at this point—and, before I know it, the shifter cops hand me off and I'm left with Alpha Randall. He tugs me inside the room, then shuts the door behind me as my mind struggles to process this new development.

"Keir, it's good to see you," he says, his voice even.

And it's that idiotic conversational nicety, so out-of-place coming from the guy who tried to *kill* me, that finally breaks me out of my stupor and lets my anger take over.

"The feeling isn't mutual," I say dryly. "In fact, I kind of hoped I'd never see you again since you wanted me dead and

all.”

“That was a misunderstanding,” says Alpha Randall in a patronizing tone.

No. Just *Randall*. He’s not my fucking Alpha anymore. I’m not sure what exactly he’s doing here, but I don’t owe him anything. Least of all the respect of a title he doesn’t deserve.

I sneer at him. “How exactly is breaking damn near every bone in my body while I pleaded with you to stop a ‘misunderstanding’?”

“I lost my temper,” he says, baring his teeth at me in something I think is supposed to be a smile. His mask of civility is cracking. “What with the challenge the night before and the full moon—”

“And none of that was my fault. I didn’t ask for any of this.” I narrow my eyes. “Why are you here anyway? If you think I’m ever going back there, you’re dead wrong.”

“Alpha Rossi called.” *Rossi’s behind this?* “He said you were in trouble and—”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what that asshole said. Four years ago, you wouldn’t have pissed on me if I was on fire, so why show up now? What do you get out of this? What did he promise you?”

I study my former Alpha. The past four years don’t seem to have been horribly kind to him. His face is more haggard than I remember and his clothes, though clean, are well-worn and threadbare. He’s lost some weight, not enough to make him

small, but enough to show he probably hasn't been eating like he should. My old pack was never exactly rolling in money, but they took care of themselves better than this.

Everything I've learned recently about omegas plays through my mind. Remy said omegas could bring prosperity to their packs. Would that apply to packs they were members of but not mated into? Could kicking me out have made my former pack's fortunes take a turn for the worse? If so, would Randall have even realized it?

I doubt it and Rossi damn sure wouldn't have told him since Rossi wants me—well, pieces of me anyway—for himself. So, Rossi probably didn't tell Randall to come take me back, instead he brought Randall here with the promise of something else. But what? Whatever Rossi offered, it was enough to draw the good ol' Alabama wolf all the way to Chicago and there aren't a lot of things that motivate Randall—except money.

“How much?” I ask.

Randall's eyes meet mine and his brows furrow in confusion. “How much what?”

“How much money did Rossi offer for you to...what?” I walk a circle around Randall, trying to piece together what Rossi could possibly get out of this. “Sell me to him? But Rossi's past and current practices aside, he couldn't be that blatant with the triumvirate involved.”

I'm completely talking out of my ass, but I doubt Randall knows any more about the triumvirate than I do.

“A mating alliance,” says another voice I haven’t heard in four years, this one slightly more welcome. Not by much, though. My cousin, Luke, exits one of the bedrooms, then sits down on the couch, his elbows resting on his knees and his shoulders slumped.

“Times have been tough lately,” says Randall. “The pack businesses just aren’t bringing in the money they used to and —”

“And you think I’m just going to go along with this?” I throw my hands up, my voice rising. “Are you insane?”

Randall stalks toward me, all pretense of politeness dropping away. “You’ll do what I tell you, boy. As your closest living relative *and* your Alpha I—”

“You’re not my Alpha,” I snarl.

“Pack law says I am.” He grabs the nape of my neck and squeezes *hard*. It’s the same hold Dante used to calm me when he cornered me in my bedroom, but with Randall, the move is painful and malicious. Randall allows his claws out to prick at my skin, then leans down to speak directly into my ear, his voice laced with command. “Kneel, *abomination*.”

Between the grip he has on my neck and the power in his voice, I’m forced to comply. I go to my knees at Randall’s feet, my eyes burning at the humiliation. I haven’t been twisted to an Alpha’s will like this in years—not even Rossi forcing a partial shift was this degrading—and I almost forgot how awful it is.

“Good boy.” Randall releases my neck and pats me on the head like a dog. “Luke, call Alpha Rossi and let him know we’re ready for him.”

The last thing I need is for Rossi to come up here. I don’t want to give Randall any advantages, but I don’t have a hell of a lot of choices right now.

“Rossi played you,” I say in a flat voice. “What’d he offer? Twenty thousand? Thirty?”

“Fifty,” says Randall smugly.

I scoff, then pull my gaze up to meet Randall’s, something I never would have done when I still lived with my old pack. “Is that all you think I’m worth to him? He must’ve looked into my past to find you, so he at least had an idea of how little you think of me. All he had to do was pick an amount that, to you, a backwoods country Alpha, would sound like a lot. He probably spent near that much getting you up here on such short notice. Let me guess, he sent a private plane?” I gesture around the room. “The nightly rate for this room is at least a few thousand and this *entire hotel* belongs to him. Fifty thousand dollars is pocket change to him.”

Randall studies my face, then looks at Luke. “Hold off on that call. I’ll do it myself. Alpha Rossi and I are going to need to renegotiate the terms of our deal.”

I look away to hide my smile. Randall is just as greedy as I remember and I’ve just bought myself some time. Now, all I need to do is find a way to get back to Julien.

# TWENTY-ONE

## KEIR

UNFORTUNATELY, RANDALL'S GREED DOESN'T buy me enough time to do anything at all. Either Randall is too stupid to know how to bargain well or Rossi is too impatient to get his hands on me. Maybe a little of both.

Less than thirty minutes pass before there's a knock at the hotel suite door. Randall exits returns to the living room area, pauses to plaster a giant smile on his face, then opens the door. From the couch, I can't see who's arrived, but I'm not kept in suspense for long since Randall immediately gestures the person inside.

Rossi. Of course.

The Chicago Alpha wears a mildly pleasant expression, but I can see the derision in his eyes as his gaze passes over Randall in his jeans and flannel shirt. Rossi glances over his shoulder and motions for someone behind him to enter as well. One of my kidnappers from this morning, Jake, enters the room

carrying a small gym bag. Rossi tips his chin in Randall's direction, then Jake tosses the bag down at Randall's feet.

“One hundred thousand, as agreed,” says Rossi.

I muffle a snort. Did Randall only ask for double the original amount? Is that what he considers negotiating? He thinks he's playing in the big leagues, but he's like an ant on the field. A hundred thousand dollars might be like winning the lotto to Randall, but that's a drop in the bucket to Rossi.

I'm a little insulted, actually. If my former Alpha is going to sell me out—literally—he should at least have asked for a million. Rossi might have agreed to it, too.

Randall leans down, unzips the bag, and just stares at the stacks of bills for a moment. “You sure it's all there?”

Rossi gives him a tight smile. “Yes. I'm sure.” He withdraws a folder from inside his suit jacket. “Now, if we could please complete the transaction.”

Randall jerks his chin toward Luke. My cousin steps up to take the folder, then opens it to read whatever contract Rossi cooked up. Luke would be... what? Only nineteen now? Or maybe eighteen? Why is he the one reviewing the document?

Luke's brows furrow together and he glances up at Rossi. “This isn't a standard mating alliance contract.”

“No,” says Rossi, holding Luke's gaze, but saying nothing further.

I eyeball the door. Everyone's standing in the center of the living room area, so if I can move off the couch without being



noticed, I might have a chance of making it out of here before any of them could grab me, but... what about the triumvirate?

Is this a 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' situation? Possibly, but I'll be damned if I can figure out who the bigger enemy is at this point. At least Rossi is a *known* danger.

Luke narrows his eyes. "This is closer to a sales contract than anything else. Is this even legal?"

I swing a surprised glance my cousin's way. I guess we were never enemies *per se*, but that almost sounds like he's on my side. Sort of.

Rossi shrugs. "It's legal enough."

"I don't—"

Randall smacks Luke upside the head. "You heard the man. Just get me a pen and shut up."

Luke glares at his father. "Dad, this contract makes Keir his *property*, not a pack member."

Well, fuck. I'm thinking I should take my chances with the triumvirate. I edge toward the door.

"It doesn't really matter to me what happens to the mongrel. He hasn't been a member of my pack since the night we kicked him out," says Randall, shrugging and reaching for the papers. "He's not even my kin. His whore mother—"

"Not your kin?" asks Rossi in a low, tense voice. He grabs the folder back from Luke before Randall can take it.

This news is also a surprise to me and I stop my slow movements toward the exit. If the man who raised me wasn't my real father, then who was?

Randall tucks his thumbs into his pockets. "My brother raised him, but the bitch already had the kid when he mated her."

Already *had* the kid? Dad always told me my mother died in childbirth, but that's not possible if I was born before they mated. If that's not true, then how much of the rest of my life is a lie?

"You're an imbecile," says Rossi, his voice conversational and even.

It takes a second for the insult to register with Randall. "What the hell—"

"The contract is no good unless signed by a blood relative or his Alpha." Rossi looks Randall up and down. "Apparently, by your own admission, you are neither." Then he chuckles, turning his attention to me. "That makes you a lone wolf in my territory."

"A lone wolf who has free passage," I blurt out, trying to remember what else Remy and Julien told me about my omega rights or whatever. "You can't—"

In the blink of an eye, Rossi has me up against the wall, holding me by the throat, one thumb pressed against my jugular. "I can do whatever the fuck I want. You're a criminal

in the eyes of the triumvirate. You have no pack and no Alpha. You—”

“Julien’s my Alpha,” I snarl.

“Not by law. His darling procurator hasn’t even submitted the paperwork yet.” He leans closer to speak directly into my ear. “And Alpha Matisse will be dead before the night is out.”

My body goes cold and I stop struggling against Rossi’s hold. “What are you talking about?”

“The challenge starts in less than two hours.”

“Challenge?” I croak out, visions of blood and death playing through my mind and making my legs go wobbly. Rossi releases me and I slump to the ground, my knees too shaky to hold me up.

Rossi smiles down at me, a cold, predatory expression full of triumph. “Your precious Julien was too stupid to attempt diplomacy in the matter. He flat out refused to continue with the mating alliance, a blatant insult to Alpha McAdams, so McAdams issued a challenge.”

“No,” I say, the horror of my father’s death—no, the man who I *thought* was my father—replaying in my head. I can’t let that happen to Julien.

“It’s too late to do anything about it now,” says Rossi. “The terms have already been set and Matisse agreed.”

No. I *won’t* let this happen. If the challenge is about the mating alliance, then I know at least one way I might be able to stop it.

I narrow my eyes at Rossi. “The challenge can’t go forward because there’s no real basis. Refusing the mating alliance can’t be considered an insult when Julien’s my fated mate.”

# TWENTY-TWO

## KEIR

IT TAKES ME LESS than a second to realize telling Rossi that Julien is my fated mate might not have been the smartest decision. Remy advised against it for a reason but, in my defense, my brain was too stuck on the idea of Julien *dying* that I didn't stop to really think it through. Also in my defense, Rossi doesn't exactly seem surprised at the news, so how much damage could my word vomit really cause?

The Chicago Alpha chuckles, the corners of his mouth stretching into a politician's smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Thank you for confirming that for me."

*Shit.*

"No problem," I reply, forcing a smug tone—not an easy feat since I'm sprawled on the ground, literally looking up at the asshole. He's already gotten me to say more than I should. I don't want him to see how anxious I am on top of that.

“Jake, I want you to deliver a message to Matisse for me,” says Rossi, gesturing the other shifter closer. “Tell him I’ve got the omega and I’ll trade him for my brother’s wayward mate.”

His brother’s *what?* What the hell is he talking about? My brows pull together, and I watch Jake leave before turning my attention back to Rossi.

He looks down his nose at me, probably noting my confusion. “This situation is certainly not ideal, and I had hoped I was wrong, but it is what it is. You’re worthless to me at this point, so I might as well attempt to appease Victor.”

That doesn’t really clear anything up for me, but I’m not planning to ask for clarification. Remy said I only become worthless to other alphas if Julien claims me. Does that mean... *Oh.* I force my confused expression to stay put as another realization crashes over me: Rossi might have already known Julien’s my fated mate, but he doesn’t know that Julien hasn’t claimed me yet.

Half-unconsciously, I tug the shirt I’m wearing down in front so it comes up farther on the back of my neck. Since the shirt is Julien’s and more than a little big on me, that means I’m practically flashing my nipples, but at least it covers my unmarked skin.

Now that I’ve let the cat out of the bag—or at least confirmed there was a cat in the bag?—the last thing I need is for Rossi to realize Julien and I haven’t finalized the bond.

“Now hold on a minute,” says Randall, the first words he’s spoken since Rossi snatched the contract away. “What about my money?”

Rossi rolls his eyes. “Take it and go. It’s not worth my time to argue with you about it.”

My former Alpha’s jaw drops and his gaze darts from the duffel bag to Rossi. *That’s right, dumbass. The amount you bargained for is nothing to the Chicago Alpha. Just. Like. I. Told. You.*

For once in his life, Randall does the smart thing. He grabs the duffel bag and retreats to one of the bedrooms, shutting the door behind him.

Somewhere behind Rossi, Luke clears his throat. “Fated mates are sacred.”

Okay... I’m not sure why my cousin suddenly cares—if that’s even what his statement meant—but Rossi doesn’t look happy about it.

Rossi turns on his heel so he’s in profile to me and narrows his eyes at Luke. “Don’t speak that religious nonsense to me. It’s that same backwoods idiocy that lost your pack the most valuable thing they had.”

“I don’t understand.” Luke’s brows pull together, and he cocks his head to the side. His gaze darts to me. He lifts his brows and tilts his head slightly to the side in the direction of the door, then returns his gaze to the advancing Alpha. *Is he distracting Rossi on purpose?* “What do you mean?”

Using the wall, I push myself to my feet, the movement completely ignored by Rossi as his full attention is now focused on my cousin. I eye the open—and now unobstructed thanks to Luke—exit.

Rossi outright laughs and swings one hand in my direction. “Omegas, no matter their sex, are priceless considering the benefits they provide with their mere presence. An omega brings power and prosperity to any pack blessed to have one.” He moves toward Luke, his voice going lower. “Your father let his blind bigotry cost your pack *everything* when he kicked the omega out on his own.”

“My father wanted him dead,” says Luke flatly, his eyes hard. He swallows. “I’m the one who saved his life. Doesn’t that mean *I* should get the money?”

Rossi laughs again, shaking his head. “Aren’t you an interesting little wolf?”

I slide along the wall, making my way to the door. Luke pointedly ignores me.

“It’s a shame your idiot father needs to be taught a lesson about lying to his betters. I’ll almost regret killing you,” continues Rossi. He grabs Luke by the throat, lifting him off his feet and holding him there for a moment before shaking him like a rag doll.

For all that Luke is also an alpha, he’s no match for Rossi. My cousin doesn’t control a pack and he can’t draw on their strength to supplement his own. Plus, he’s only like nineteen



and judging by the looks of things almost completely untrained.

The open door is beckoning, and Rossi appears to have forgotten all about me, but Luke's slowly turning blue. I don't know if I can just walk away. If it were Randall on the other side of Rossi's claws, I'd already be out the door, but the fact that it's Luke instead gives me pause.

My cousin was never my friend. Hell, apparently he's not even really my cousin. He never defended me from his father. He was never even particularly *nice* to me, but...he saved my life. *Twice*, if I count distracting Rossi this evening. I can't just leave him to die.

*Ugh. Stupid morals.* You'd think after last night I'd have learned my lesson about trying to rescue people. Though I guess helping Remy out led me to Julien, so maybe I shouldn't be so quick to discount my overactive conscience.

I shift my hands to call out my claws, then pounce on Rossi's back and dig them into his shoulder. He snarls and spins around so quickly I lose my grip and fly off him, thumping to the carpeted floor behind him. The jarring landing clacks my teeth together and I bite my tongue, filling my mouth with blood. I jump back to my feet, facing a now growling Rossi.

The Alpha's legs tense as he prepares to jump forward, but before he can move, Luke smashes a lamp over Rossi's head. The damn base must be solid stone or something, because the hit knocks the Alpha to the ground. Rossi pushes himself into a sitting position and wavers in place, a dazed look on his face.

Luke pauses for a brief moment, tensed for Rossi to attack again, then takes hold of my bicep and yanks me to my feet.

“Go,” he says, pushing me toward the door.

“Come with me.” I don’t know who’s more shocked at my offer, him or me. “I mean... unless you really want to go back to Alabama with Randall?”

# TWENTY-THREE

## KEIR

SOMEHOW, LUKE AND I make it out to the street without being stopped. Either that lamp really knocked Rossi for a loop, or the Chicago Alpha is no longer concerned with keeping me now that he thinks I'm useless.

I'm really hoping it's the latter.

The guy definitely deserved a good head smacking, but I prefer to think he's simply decided not come after me. It's already been a hell of a day and getting at least one worry off my plate would be *awesome*. I can only effectively deal with one problem at a time and preventing or stopping the challenge needs to be my focus now, not dodging Rossi.

I glance up and down the street. I'm not very familiar with this part of the city, but I can see a bus stop a couple of blocks away. If nothing else, the bench will provide a place to sit while I think about how to find Julien.

I head in that direction with Luke following behind me. My cousin hasn't said a word since we left the hotel room and I'm not sure what to say to him either. Inviting him along on my not-very-daring escape was pure impulse, but it's a little late to take the invitation back now. Once at the bus stop, I slump onto the bench and rest my head in my hands as I try to pull my thoughts together.

Okay. First things first, how do I stop the challenge?

Rossi said it was happening soon and it's definitely in the city. I just need to figure out where, then get there and kick some ass... or something like that.

My gaze moves toward the front of the hotel we just left. Rossi owns it. There are plenty of shifters there. Maybe... "Do you think the challenge would be in the hotel somewhere?"

Luke gives me a weird look. "Like, does Rossi have a conference room set aside for bloody battles? I doubt it."

"Right, right..." I nod slowly. I'm sure there are plenty of viable options, but my brain isn't coming up with any. My head spins and an uncomfortable itch crawls up my spine as my breaths get shallower and shallower. *Fuck. Not ag—*

Pain jolts through my neck and down to my toes, leaving a lingering ache in its wake. Hey, at least it gets rid of the stupid itch. I curl my fingers into my palms, mostly to prevent my hand from shaking, but also to hide the fact that my nails have darkened and might just do a switchblade-like conversion into claws any second now.

Beside me, Luke's nostrils flare, then his face slowly pans in my direction. He takes me in, his gaze moving from my head to my feet and back up again. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

I shoot him a nervous grin, all teeth and awkwardness, as boulders crash together in my stomach and a shudder moves down my back. "Julien's brother called it the mating frenzy."

He blinks at me. "So the stories are true? Alpha Matisse really is your fated mate?"

I chuckle, half-hysterically, then close my eyes and release a slow breath. I need to get control of myself. If the triumvirate is pissed about me almost shifting in front of one person, I can't imagine they'd be happy about me shifting in the middle of a busy street.

"Yeah," I say.

"Huh." He studies my face. "Do I need to... do something?"

Another strained laugh escapes my mouth. "Nope. It comes in waves. The only thing to do is to wait for it to pass, or get me to Julien."

"Wait for it to pass?" He cocks his head to the side, curious. "How long will that take?"

"No fucking clue," I squeak out as another spike of agony pokes at the base of my neck.

Two blocks down, a bus turns onto the street we're on and chugs toward us. Luke's gaze goes from the approaching public transportation to me.

“Might as well,” I say, answering his unasked question.

“But what about...” He gestures at me.

“The whole frenzy thing?” I shrug. “I don’t know how long it will last and it’s probably best for us to get as far away from the hotel as possible, then regroup or whatever.”

“I guess.” He still looks unsure, but when the bus pulls to a stop in front of the bench with a hiss of its brakes, he links his arm with mine and tugs me to my feet. He leads me on to the bus and then to an empty seat near the back. I slide over toward the window and he sits beside me, facing forward with his brow furrowed in thought.

It’s a good five minutes—me suffering in quiet agony and him in absolute silence—before he speaks again. “Isn’t the frenzy supposed to go away once you’ve been claimed and the bond has been finalized?” he asks in a low voice.

I open my mouth to respond, then pause. What if this is some kind of setup to get me to admit that Julien hasn’t claimed me yet? Rossi could have—

No. That’s stupid. All Rossi had to do to check my claimed status was to look at my neck. There would be no point in going through this whole production just to get me to admit the mating bond hasn’t been completed. Unless there’s some sort of weird strategy behind it...

Ugh. I rub at my temples. I’m getting a little paranoid.

“Julien hasn’t claimed me yet,” I say finally. If this is some kind of trap, I don’t have the mental power to deal with it right

now. “Things have been a little hectic today.”

Luke’s eyes widen. “I thought that kind of thing was supposed to happen immediately? How have you resisted the bond?”

I snort. “I just met the guy this morning. He’s hot and nice and his brother seems pretty cool, but I barely know him.”

“But you’re fated mates...”

“Yeah,” I say. “But that’s biology, not psychology. It doesn’t mean I can’t still have doubts.” I think back over the brief time I’ve gotten to spend with Julien. “Or that I used to anyway.”

A sudden stab of longing shoots through me. More than the mating frenzy, it’s a longing for Julien to be safe and whole and out of danger. I can’t lose him. Not like this. Not when I’ve just found him and am finally willing to admit to myself exactly how much I want him.

Eyes burning, I bury my nose in the fabric of Julien’s shirt, inhaling deeply and letting his scent fill my nostrils. A wave of calm washes over me and most of the pain in my spine recedes.

*Nice trick. Why didn’t I think of doing that before?*

I breathe out in relief as my muscles relax and I tilt my head back to rest on the back of the seat.

“So, where are we going?” asks Luke.

That’s a good question. The club is out. I’m pretty sure Drew would call the cops on me if I showed up there again after

what happened this morning.

“My apartment,” I say after a long silence. Rossi and his goons know where I live—*lived?*—but they probably wouldn’t expect me to go back there. That is, if Rossi is even still pursuing me at this point. If nothing else, I can grab some pants that fit and some food. The latter of which I’ll definitely need before I start scouring the city for my mate.

I’m going to do whatever it takes to find him because I’m not giving him up without a fight.



# TWENTY-FOUR

## KEIR

BRAVADO'S ALL WELL AND good in the heat of the moment, but once the adrenaline fades, hopeless confusion seeps in. Well, for me anyway. By the time Luke and I approach the bus stop nearest my apartment, I'm so tired and disoriented I can't even begin to think about what my next step should be.

I know what *needs* to happen—get myself to Julien and stop the challenge—but I have no clue how to go about it. I don't know enough about shifter politics or government or even *geography* to do what needs to be done on my own. The only idea I can think of is to try to get in touch with the triumvirate and hope that the whole fated mates thing will get them on my side or at least on Julien's side.

Of course, I have no clue how to do that or if the triumvirate would even help me. For all I know, they'll just arrest me again.

My gaze slides to Luke as the bus pulls to a stop in front of my building. “The triumvirate released me into ‘my pack’s’ custody. Does that include you, or am I a fugitive now?”

He shrugs. “I’m not sure.”

*Great.* “Any idea how we might get in touch with them to ask?”

“No clue. My dad and Malachi like to handle matters on their own, so we don’t have many dealings with the triumvirate back at home.”

I blow out a breath. “Well, I think contacting the triumvirate might be my only option right now. I couldn’t fit it in my backpack, so my laptop’s probably still upstairs. Maybe the all-knowing Google will be able to dig up a phone number or something.”

Luke chuckles.

I exit the bus, then head up the stairs in my building with my cousin trailing behind me. As soon as we get to my floor, the sound of music reaches my ears and there’s no doubt in my mind it’s coming from my apartment.

Kevin is throwing a party.

Not surprising since it’s Saturday night and I’m technically supposed to be at work. The whole thing is almost funny. After the day I’ve had coming “home” to thumping music and a bunch of people sitting around drinking and smoking just seems so ridiculously *normal*. At least I don’t have to worry

about not having my keys. Kevin always leaves the door unlocked when he has people over.

“Dude!” Kevin jumps to his feet as I enter with Luke following behind me. “Where have you been?” He claps me on the back and leads me over to the sagging couch. “Sit down. Take a load off. Have a drink or something. You look like you need it.”

It’s easier not to argue with him. My experience is that he’ll just get more and more pushy about it if I contradict him. So, I just shake my head and sit. He’ll forget all about me in a couple of minutes. Luke glances around, his nose twitching from all the smoke hanging in the air.

Tatiana, Kevin’s girlfriend, is leaning against the arm of the couch, her lips pursed around some kind of vape. She smiles at me, offering a small wave, then releases a cloud of white vapor. “How’s it going, Keir?”

I have to laugh at that, otherwise I might just cry. “Things definitely could be better.”

“Kev’s been worried,” she says. “Some guys came by looking for you earlier. You in trouble?”

“Something like that,” I reply.

“He even went over to your work to find you, but you weren’t there.”

“*Kevin* went to H&H? I bet that was an eye-opening experience for him.” I snort, picturing my super straight roommate walking into a gay club, and Tatiana grins at me.

“This your new boyfriend?” asks Tatiana, jerking her chin toward Luke. “He’s cute.”

I huff out a laugh. “*No*. He’s my cousin. Luke, this is Tatiana,” I say, gesturing to the blonde woman beside me. “And my roommate, Kevin.”

Tatiana gives Luke a mock salute, and Kevin reaches up to shake his hand.

“Nice to meet you, dude,” says Kevin. He eyeballs me. “I didn’t know Keir had family in the area.”

“I don’t live around here,” says Luke.

My roommate nods slowly like Luke just gave him some sage advice, then out of nowhere, says “Those cop guys were kind of rude.”

I perk up. I’m pretty sure the actual police aren’t looking for me, so maybe... “Cop guys?”

Kevin’s got the vape to his mouth now, so he holds up a finger for me to wait as he takes a hit. “Yeah,” he coughs the vapor, then reaches into his pocket to retrieve a ceased business card. “They were like private security or something, though, not actual cops.”

I take the card. All that’s on it is a name, a phone number and a logo. But the logo is a laurel wreath framing a barely there profile of a howling wolf and there’s really only one organization that could symbolize. The triumvirate must have figured out where I lived. Not great news that they’ve done

that extensive of an investigation into me, but at least I might have a way to contact them now.

I pat at my pockets, forgetting for a second that my phone is... who knows where at this point. "Can I borrow your phone?"

Kevin blinks and glances at the coffee table. "Uh..."

"Here," says Tatiana. "Use mine."

"Thanks." I jump to my feet. "I'm just going to make this call in my room, so I have some privacy."

I grab Luke's sleeve and drag him down the short hallway and into my tiny bedroom. The space is still a mess from earlier, the covers in a bundle on the floor and clothes and other items strewn all over.

"Sorry about the mess," I say. "I had to leave in a bit of a hurry."

Luke nods and sits down on the edge of the bed. "Who are you calling?"

"Hopefully, the triumvirate." I show him the business card, then type the number into Tatiana's phone and hold it to my ear.

"This is Smith," says the gruff voice that answers after two rings.

"Hi, um, this is Keir Anderson," I say.

"Are you calling to turn yourself in?"

“Sort of,” I say. “I mean, if you guys need to arrest me again, that’s fine, but I was hoping you might be more interested in helping me stop an illegal challenge.”

Luke raises his brows.

“Illegal challenge?” asks Smith.

“Um, yeah.” I don’t know where I’m going with this, but I seem to have gotten his attention.

“I’m going to need a little more information than that,” says Smith in a flat voice. “For example, why you believe the challenge to be illegal.”

“Of course,” I say, running every fact I’ve learned today about shifter laws through my brain, trying to find the one I need. My gaze darts to Luke, knowing he can hear everything and hoping he might have some ideas, but he only shrugs. “Well, I don’t know if you guys know this or not, but I’m an omega.”

*That always seems to get a reaction out of people...*

Smith scoffs. “There are no registered male omegas and there haven’t been any for a long time.”

“My pack never registered me,” I reply quickly. The guy’s not shooting me down, so maybe I’m on the right track. “When they found out, they just tried to kill me.”

“Kid, lying about something like this isn’t going to endear you to anyone, least of all my bosses.”

Luke gestures for me to give him the phone. “This is Luke Anderson. I’m the pack Alpha’s son and I was there the night Keir first shifted. I can confirm not only that he’s an omega, but that my father attempted to murder Keir on the advice of the pack cleric.”

Smith is silent for a moment. “And the illegal challenge?”

I snatch the phone back. “Rossi, the Chicago Alpha, arranged for a challenge he knows has no basis because he knows Julien Matisse is my fated mate. It’s a revenge thing that has something to do with Rossi’s brother’s mate.”

When Smith doesn’t respond, I continue my rambling and list as many of Rossi’s maybe crimes I can think of. “He also violated that whole omega free passage thing because he kidnapped me a couple times. Or maybe it was only once? It’s been a long day. He planned to murder Julien’s brother, who’s acting as a pro-something or other, and I think that’s against the summit rules?” I wrack my brain, trying to think of more and something Rossi said the first time I met him suddenly comes into glaring focus. “And I think Rossi’s trafficking other shifters, too.”

# TWENTY-FIVE

## JULIEN

GETTING OUT OF A challenge is much harder than getting into one. I didn't expect it to be easy, but I assumed Derek would see reason once he had a chance to cool down and we could discuss things. Apparently, I underestimated how much his injured pride would affect his common sense.

The whole situation is ridiculous.

My pack hasn't even had a challenge for succession in at least three generations. Since my great-grandfather, each transfer of power has been peaceful, made easier because the Madison pack is healthy, prosperous, and happy. If there's any discontent, people bring it up with the elders, who in turn consult with me as the Alpha and a solution is reached without bloodshed.

But a fight—in this case to the death because we're on Rossi's territory and that's what he wants—over what amounts to little more than hurt feelings? It's utterly absurd.



But it's too late to do anything about it now.

Remy, Brody, and I arrive at Rossi's chosen location, but twenty minutes later, we have yet to see the Chicago Alpha. Derek and his brother are already here along with Meredith, who's sitting in a chair off to the side looking bored.

I'm not sure if Rossi uses this building for challenges often or if he already thought ahead far enough to have the place set up, but the large warehouse is empty except for a few rows of chairs facing a raised area similar to a boxing ring in one corner.

Remy has been mostly silent since he told me how stupid I was, but I can see the wheels working in his head as he tries to think of a way out of this. If anyone can find one, my brother can. There's a reason I depend on him so much to help me navigate sticky situations. Unfortunately, I don't think there's enough time for him to come up with a workable plan.

Remy elbows me in the side and jerks his chin toward the far door where I can just make out the top of Dante's head coming through the crowd. Before we left the hotel, Remy sent Dante to try to talk with the praetorians. Remy's hope was that they'd release Keir to us so we could announce he's my fated mate in a last ditch effort to get me out of this idiotic challenge.

Dante's not smiling when he reaches us.

"No luck?" asks Remy.

"Well," he says, hesitantly. "I got to meet Keir's former Alpha."

“What the hell?” An involuntary growl vibrates in my chest.

“Yeah, that was my reaction too.” Dante sighs. “Seems Rossi contacted the guy, Randall, and flew him out here to get the praetorians to release Keir into the custody of ‘his’ pack.”

Exactly what Remy had been hoping they’d do, but to the wrong damn pack. Another growl rumbles in my throat. *My* pack is Keir’s pack, not some asshole who threw him away.

“On the bright side, Keir ran off when Rossi showed up with some sort of mating contract,” says Dante. “so he’s not *currently* in any danger from his old Alpha or from Rossi.”

“That’s...” Remy presses his lips together and his brows draw together. “It seems too convenient. Keir ran off and Rossi just let him go?”

Dante shrugs. “Randall wasn’t particularly helpful. He said his kid, Keir’s younger cousin, bopped Rossi on the head with something and the two of them took off.”

“Something’s not right.” Remy rubs a hand over his brow, his face and shoulders tense as he shakes his head. “No teenage shifter can take down someone of Rossi’s power level with a ‘bop on the head.’ Rossi let them go. I just can’t figure out *why*.”

Unease creeps up my spine as I observe my brother’s agitation. It only gets worse when Rossi strides into the building, an enormous grin stretched across his face and a confident tilt to his chin. That is not the look of an Alpha who

thinks he's lost. That's the look of someone for whom things are going exactly as planned.

Rossi stops by Derek's group first, shaking Derek's hand, then clapping him on the back as he says something. Probably wishing him luck. Tradition demands that he greet my pack as well, so he walks toward us, his hands clasped together behind his back. He puts his hand out toward me, but I ignore it.

After a beat, Rossi drops his hand. "Only a few minutes to go," he says. "Are you sure you don't just want to sign the mating alliance and avoid all this?"

I narrow my eyes. "I'm not signing anything."

"I thought not." He leans closer, speaking in a low voice only I can hear. "It's a good thing you didn't claim him. This way he doesn't have to take the risk of sharing your death."

I go still, forcing my expression to stay blank. The only person he could be referring to is Keir, but how does he know Keir is my fated mate? For that matter, how does he know Keir is unclaimed?

Rossi smirks, then tugs something from his pocket: a piece of fabric sprinkled with glitter.

*Is that Keir's shirt?*

"My staff just hates it when guests don't clean up after themselves." He tosses the shirt to me. Half-instinctively, I catch it, Keir's scent drifting into my nostrils as the fabric lands in my hands.

“My brother is looking forward to having his mate back once Derek takes over your pack,” says Rossi as he walks away.

“What was that all about?” asks Dante, his brow furrowed.

“I have no idea,” I say, my fingers tightening on the shirt.

Remy’s eyes are darting from the fabric. “What just happened?”

“He knows Keir is my fated mate,” I say, my fingers tightening on the shirt in my hands.

Remy thinks for a moment, his gaze now locked on the fabric. “Does Rossi also know Keir is unclaimed?”

“Yeah,” I reply. “I don’t know how, but—”

“Fuck!” Remy starts pacing back and forth. “Rossi’s planned this all out. Well, as much as he could. I don’t know how or when he figured out Keir was your fated mate, but it must have been sometime after Keir’s arrest. Then, Rossi got Keir released to his former Alpha, likely to prevent Keir from saying anything to the praetorians about being your fated mate. At some point, Rossi also figured out Keir was unclaimed, so he probably said something about the challenge and then let Keir escape. I’m sure he’s arranged it somehow to be sure Keir—who would have no idea where the challenge is being held—would eventually make his way here. Likely, just in time to watch you lose.” Remy’s eyes meet mine. “If you were to die right in front of him, Keir would be insensible and Rossi could easily grab him and make him disappear, which is what he’s wanted all along.”

“But what’s with the shirt?” asks Brody.

“That’s how Rossi makes sure Julien loses.” Remy shoots me a pained smile. “The challenge starts in less than five minutes. Rossi gave you the shirt, the one infused with Keir’s scent and not only the scent of his desire but of fear and many other emotions, to draw out your instincts as Keir’s mate.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You haven’t claimed Keir yet and Rossi knows that. He’s hoping to induce the mating frenzy to distract you from the fight,” says Remy. “And by the looks of your pupils, his plan is going to work.”

# TWENTY-SIX

## KEIR

I'M NOT SURE WHICH of Rossi's misdeeds get things moving on Smith's end, but move they do and surprisingly quickly. I have just enough time to change into a pair of my own pants—I'm keeping Julien's shirt—and scarf down a couple pieces of cold pizza before a knock sounds at the apartment door.

One of Kevin's friends opens the door and invites the two uniformed shifters inside. The two 'cop guys,' as my roommate called them, eye the humans scattered around my apartment in varying stages of drunkenness. The shorter of the two shifters, a pretty Asian woman, sniffs at the air, then wrinkles her nose. They decline the invite to come in, choosing instead to wait just outside the doorway.

From the kitchen, I hold up my finger in a 'wait a second' gesture, then finish the glass of water in my hand and make my way to the door with Luke behind me. I wait until we're in

the hallway with the door closed behind us before making any introductions.

The dark-haired man is Smith, the guy I talked to on the phone, and he introduces his partner as Yang. They lead us down to the street, where they have a car waiting. Smith hops in the driver's seat, with Yang in the front passenger seat as my cousin and I pile into the back. We're barely away from the curb before Yang speaks.

"If you're an omega, why are you living in a drab little place like that, with humans no less?" she asks, sounding more confused than anything else.

"Um..." My gaze darts to Luke. "My former pack is kind of isolationist and they follow the old ways. My uncle wasn't too keen on the idea of a male omega after the pack cleric brought up some outdated superstitions that said male omegas were abominations. After I had my first shift with the pack, the plan was to kill me."

She blinks in shock. "Kill an omega?"

"Yup," I say. "If it wasn't for my cousin here, they would have."

Yang leans across the console and turns to face Luke. "On behalf of the triumvirate, I would like to thank you for preventing the murder of an omega."

Luke's cheeks go red. "I didn't really do much."

"But you did enough," says Yang. "There haven't been many omegas born in the past few decades and every single one is

important.”

I snort. “Are you sure that it’s not more like a case of omegas not making it to the whole registration part? I got the impression that to shifters ‘in the know’ omegas are more like valuable chattel than anything else.”

She has no response to that except a frown.

Smith drives us out to some industrial zone near the river, an area I’m not familiar with. After a few sharp turns, he pulls up to a large fenced property with a sign out front that says ‘Waste Management Plant’.

“Are you kidding me?” I glance around at the garbage trucks and lines of unused dumpsters. “Rossi is in the *waste management* business? Could he be any more of a mafia stereotype?”

Smith is silent, but Yang snickers. I kind of like her.

There’s a large group of vehicles parked near a spot in the back. Smith parks the car near the others and we all file out, heading toward the door by the corner of the building.

There’s a shifter standing outside, presumably guarding the door. As we get closer, I recognize him as Greg, the idiot from earlier this morning, which probably explains why despite the obvious official nature of the two uniformed shifters with me, he scowls and says, “This is an invitation only event.”

Yang snorts and Smith shoots Greg a droll look, as he lifts some sort of medallion on a chain from underneath his shirt.



“Inter-pack challenges at this level are supposed to be witnessed by at least one representative of the triumvirate.”

Greg clearly doesn't know what to say to that. Neither do I, but in my case it's more because I don't know much about shifter laws. Greg, on the other hand, probably doesn't know what the word 'inter-pack' means, much less how it applies to this situation.

Greg simply stares at Yang blankly. I understand and even expect his confusion, but the almost complete lack of reaction to the medallion or to the shifter cops feels off to me. Yang and Smith share a look, and a shiver of unease goes down my spine. I'm clearly missing something. Isn't the triumvirate supposed to be like the shifter version of Big Brother?

I glance around the dark parking lot, taking in the number of cars, then back to Smith and Yang. There are only two of them and who the hell knows how many shifters inside. As far as I know, these two and the group who arrested me at the hotel are the only triumvirate representatives in Chicago right now and since they held me in a hotel room earlier, they clearly don't have an office or base of operations here.

Rossi's already shown a complete disregard for other laws, like the one that is supposed to allow me free passage and whichever one protects Remy as an agent of his brother. Would he even think twice about ridding himself of a few unwanted triumvirate agents?

I straighten up to my full height—in other words, up to Greg's chin—and pull my shoulders back. “You're going to let

us in.”

Greg sneers at me. “Am I now?”

“Well, that is, unless you want to be arrested for obstruction,” says Yang, her expression darkening. “Your choice really.”

“Fine.” Greg scowls and his eyes narrow, but he says nothing as he steps to the side and allows the four of us to enter.

“Stay close,” says Yang, her gaze darting around the interior of the warehouse. “This situation could get out of control rather quickly.”

“Yeah,” I say dryly. “It would have been nice to know you guys don’t really have any backup before I threw my lot in with you.”

She glares at me. “You didn’t exactly leave yourself any other options, now did you?”

I concede her point with a nod. “Thanks for getting me here. I wouldn’t have found it on my own.”

“Just find your mate so we can put a stop to this nonsense and get out of here,” she replies.

Luke tilts his head toward the far corner. “There’s Rossi.”

Damn. I’d been hoping the hit from the lamp might have kept him out of commission longer, but here he is with not even a hair out of place.

The Chicago Alpha is smiling, shaking hands with a couple of other Alphas around him as if this is just another day. More shifters stand fanned out behind the group, including Jake, who I'm beginning to think is Rossi's second, or maybe close to that rank.

One of the other shifters near Rossi turns, and I recognize him in profile: Cameron, Meredith's non-Alpha brother. He has a grim look on his face as he leans over to say something to Rossi, but Rossi only grins and claps him on the shoulder.

And then Rossi's eyes land on me. That's definitely not a good thing, but it doesn't really become concerning until his grin only grows wider. Why would he be happy to see me? He smirks and glances toward the far corner of the room. I follow his gaze to find what looks kind of like a raised boxing ring.

My stomach drops and my whole body goes cold.

The challenge has already started.

And Julien appears to be *losing*.

# TWENTY-SEVEN

## KEIR

IT MIGHT SEEM A bit overdramatic for me to say time stops, but I swear it actually does. At least it certainly *feels* like it does. The rest of the room and the surrounding people disappear, my focus solely on my mate.

Julien is in his wolf form, a pale golden color accented with white on his face and paws. The tip of one of his ears has a chunk taken out of it, and one of his hind legs is hanging at a strange angle by his side. Blood mars his chest and muzzle and he's turning in place as Derek walks around him, darting forward with a snap of teeth every few seconds to keep Julien off guard, *taunting* him.

I think I hear someone call my name, but at this moment, nothing else matters. Not Rossi. Not Derek. Not any of the other shifters watching this farce of a challenge. The only thing that matters is getting to Julien, and damn the consequences.

As I watch, Julien's muscles tense up, his canine face contorting with pain though Derek's not even touching him. What the hell? He twists his head to the side, wincing like his neck hurts.

*His neck...*

Realization washes over me. The mating frenzy. Those waves of pain will only fully go away when our bond is sealed, but if I can get myself closer, they might stop for a while.

Derek uses Julien's distraction to dart in, slashing at Julien's side with one paw. Julien moves to the right just enough for Derek's claws to rake across his side rather than ripping open his stomach. Julien yelps, and more blood wells up on his fur as four furrows open over his ribs. Derek prances backward, tail up, and a smug doggy grin on his face.

How. Fucking. Dare. He. Touch. *My*. Mate.

White hot rage fills my chest, followed quickly by a low, rumbling growl, and I can feel my teeth and nails elongating. I'm not sure if the crowd actually parts around me or if I'm moving so fast that I don't notice pushing my way through, but what feels like only seconds after entering the warehouse, I'm leaping into the ring, my clothes tearing away as I shift in the air.

I land on four black-tipped silver gray paws, crouching low in front of Julien and baring my teeth at Derek. A commotion picks up around me, but I don't take my eyes off the enemy in front of me. The other wolf is nothing special. A plain dark

gray all over, his coat dull and his eyes a boring brown. He growls at me, his lips pulling away from his teeth as the fur along his spine rises.

I snarl back in a canine version of ‘come at me, bitch.’

Derek growls again, but doesn’t move, not taking a single step toward me or Julien. I want to shift back and scream about how this stupid challenge is over, but I’m not giving up my only weapons—my claws and teeth—not while Derek is still in wolf form and posed to pounce on my already injured mate.

Someone’s yelling my name again. My ears perk up, swiveling toward the sound. There. On the edge of the ring. *Remy*. He’s saying something, but he’s talking too fast or I’m too worked up to pay enough attention to decipher the words.

Behind me, Julien’s panting, but whatever pain he was in seems to have passed, my nearness appeasing the mating frenzy for the moment. I edge backward until my side presses against his non-injured one, nuzzling my snout into his fur while still on guard in case the other Alpha decides to attack again. I push against Julien with my hindquarters, urging him toward the edge of the ring and farther away from Derek.

I’m getting my mate out of here and I don’t care what anyone else has to say about it.

Derek, presumably noticing what I’m doing, shifts back to human form. He remains crouched, his hands covering his groin. “He’s forfeit now, you mongrel. Get out of my way or I’ll kill you, too.”

I chuff, almost amused that this asshole thinks I'm going to let him anywhere near my mate.

“So be it.” Derek’s body shimmers as the change starts.

“Stop!” yells someone at the top of their lungs. “By order of the triumvirate, this challenge is over.”

I glance to the side of the ring. Yang and Smith are standing next to Remy facing the crowd with Dante and Brody fanned out behind them.

“You don’t have the authority to—” starts Derek.

Yang puts her hands on her hips, head and shoulders back. “Alpha, I would suggest you not complete that sentence before you understand what’s going on here.”

Derek juts out his chin. “What’s going on is a valid challenge. Matisse broke the mating alliance he brokered with my pack and—”

“He found his fated mate,” snaps Yang. “That trumps your alliance.”

Derek’s bushy eyebrows draw together. “But he didn’t...”

“Say anything?” asks Remy, the question laced with pure scorn. “Of course he didn’t. *On my advice.*” Remy stalks forward, moving closer to Derek. “Julien didn’t mention what Keir is to him because we were trying to protect Keir until we got him the hell out of Chicago. My brother is on another Alpha’s territory—an *enemy* Alpha—with little back up and his fated mate is a male omega Rossi has already attempted to take custody of in order to sell him for *parts.*”

Yang pales a little. I think I may have forgotten to mention that particular detail to her. She shares an unreadable look with Smith. Derek blinks at Remy, disbelief clear on his face.

Remy rolls his eyes. “Use your nose, dumbass. One sniff of Keir’s wolf will tell you the truth of what he is.”

Derek’s head swings in my direction and his nostrils flare as he take single step forward, his eyes widening. “It’s true. He’s an omega.”

A murmur travels through the crowd and Derek’s packmates, even Meredith, turn to stand side by side with Dante and Brody, Remy and the two praetorians behind them. Gradually, more and more people gather on “our” side until only Rossi and his men are left standing in opposition to the crowd.

The tension drains out of Yang. I suppose this could have gone either way, but Remy’s quick thinking to expose exactly how horrible Rossi really is turned the tide in our favor. She nods at me, then turns to walk toward Rossi, the crowd parting around her.

“Alpha Rossi, you are hereby under arrest by order of the triumvirate,” says Yang. She tilts her head toward the crowd of shifters behind her. “Are you going to come quietly, or are you planning to make this difficult?”

“I’ll submit myself to the judgment of the triumvirate.” Rossi scowls and his gaze focuses in on me. “But this isn’t the end.”



Yang doesn't respond to the last part, only steps forward and fastens a set of silver handcuffs around his wrists. "While your case is pending, you will be stripped of your Alpha designation. You are permitted to suggest someone to take charge in your stead, otherwise a praetorian will be assigned the role."

He huffs, but says nothing. I suppose he'd rather his entire pack fall than let someone else take care of it for him, even temporarily. It's somewhat anticlimactic watching Yang and Smith lead Rossi away, even though every eye in the room is on him as he goes, the entire warehouse silent until he's gone.

Derek clears his throat, then drops his chin to his chest. "I apologize, Alpha Matisse, for letting Rossi bait my temper."

Behind me, Julien shifts and rises to stand on two legs. "No harm done."

*No harm?* I let out an indignant canine grumble and consider if the consequences of biting off Derek's... dangly bits would be worth it.

"Easy," says Julien, brushing his hand over my head. I lean against him and close my eyes, pushing at his hand with my nose when he doesn't immediately continue petting me. He chuckles and resumes combing his fingertips through my fur.

I relax and let my mind drift, enjoying the scent and comfort of my mate after this really long and awful day. At some point, I must actually doze off, because the next thing I know, I'm back to human form in the backseat of an SUV with my head in Julien's lap, his hand stroking my hair.

“Where are we?” My voice cracks.

“About an hour outside the city,” says Remy from the other side of the backseat. He pokes at my ankles. “Now that you’re awake, do you think you can get your feet off of me?”

I swing my feet over the edge of the seat and reluctantly sit up. Julien’s lap is pretty damn comfortable. “What happened?”

“I think the day’s events finally caught up with you,” says Remy. “You practically passed out on your feet.”

“But everyone’s okay?” Glancing around the interior of the vehicle, I take a quick headcount. Me, Remy and Julien are sharing the backseat and Dante and Brody are up front. “Where’s Luke?”

“He stayed behind to talk to the praetorians,” replies Brody. “They had some questions about your old pack.”

“Makes sense.” I nod absentmindedly. “So, what now?”

Julien throws his arm over my shoulders and pulls me closer until I’m pressed up against his side. “Now, I’m taking you somewhere I can properly claim you with no interruptions.”

I smile. “That sounds just about perfect.”

# TWENTY-EIGHT

## KEIR

THE NEXT TIME I'M awake, I find myself burrowed into a nest of soft, fuzzy blankets in the middle of a king-sized bed—completely alone. I don't recognize the large, airy room with light blue walls and dark wood furniture, but the place is steeped in Julien's scent. I'm assuming that means this is his bedroom. In his house. In... Madison, I think is where he said his pack is based?

I should probably get to learning these things about my mate and future pack.

Light is flooding through the windows, so it's probably around midday, but whether that means I was out for twelve hours or over twenty-four, I have no idea. I wiggle out of the blankets and swing my feet over the side of the bed. I'm dressed in only a pair of unfamiliar boxers and a too-big shirt that's probably Julien's. Tugging the fabric up to my nose, I take a deep inhale. Yup. Definitely belongs to my mate.

My neck is still unmarked so Julien hasn't claimed me yet, but I imagine half-asleep Keir wouldn't have been much fun and I damn sure want to be awake and aware for something so important. I jump to my feet and walk around the edges of the room, running my fingers over the furniture, trying to get a better feel for the space Julien and I will, presumably share.

A minute or so later, the door opens and Julien comes in with a tray in his hands and a wide smile on his face. He's moving a little more slowly than normal, likely because he's sore and his wounds are still healing. Shifter healing is fast, but not immediate.

"Hey, we heard you stirring and my mom thought you might want some food," he says.

"Your mom?"

His cheeks turn pink. "Yeah. She's really excited to meet you."

Huh. That's... weird to me. I really don't know much about moms, but I figured she might not be happy about the no grandkids thing. And there's also the whole 'I bring absolutely no benefit to this pack' thing.

My face must do something odd because Julien sets the tray on a side table and takes me into his arms, hugging me to his chest. "It's nothing to worry about. She'll love you."

*If you say so...*

"Does that mean she's downstairs?" *As in within hearing distance?*

Julien shakes his head. “No. She lives in the cottage out back and went home as soon as I came up here.” He clears his throat. “We’re... alone. For now.”

“That sounds promising.” I grin up at him, shoving my insecurities as far down as possible, then nuzzle my nose against his chest. “I remember someone promising me a claiming, one without any interruptions.”

His lips widen into a smile, and he presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Yeah. There’s no rush though. If you want to wait, we could—”

“No,” I blurt. “This whole fated mates thing might be a little weird, but destiny doesn’t make mistakes, right? I don’t want to go another day without being yours, fully and completely. My hang-ups could have gotten you killed.”

Julien shakes his head and takes my chin into his hand, tilting my face up to meet his gaze. “That had nothing to do with any deficiency on your part and everything to do with that asshole Rossi. Sure, if circumstances had been different, we probably would have been able to take the time to get to know more about each other, but don’t think for a moment that anything that happened was your fault. You’re allowed to be nervous. Fated or not, mating is a big deal.”

I blink quickly against the burn in my eyes. How did I get so lucky?

“I thought you might want to take a shower first?”

I nod eagerly. The last time I bathed was back in Julien's hotel room. I might not be covered in glitter, but I did plenty of running around since then. "That'd be great."

Julien leads me into the bathroom. It's bigger than my bedroom at my Chicago apartment, the shower the size of my old kitchen and clearly built for two with frosted glass doors, gray-tiled walls, and two shower heads like something straight out of a luxury resort.

Julien turns on the water, testing the temperature with his fingers, then wastes no time stripping out of his clothes. He stalks toward me in all his naked glory, and it's all I can do to keep from drooling. Miles of golden skin. Broad shoulders. Muscular legs with a dusting of blond hair. Flat stomach with a trail of darker blond hair leading down to his mouthwatering cock. I can't decide what part I want to touch first.

Seconds later, he's in front of me, skimming his fingers along the tops of my thighs, taking hold of the t-shirt and lifting it off of me, then pushing the boxers down to my ankles. He takes my hand as I step out of the boxers and leads me into the shower stall. Under the warm fall of water, he washes me slowly, first rubbing the soap across my skin, then rinsing it away and pressing soft kisses to the now clean skin. We're both hard and ready, but Julien ignores both of our erections in favor of light touches and gentle, almost chaste kisses.

Once we're both clean and soap free, Julien wraps me in a towel and dries himself off before turning his attention back to

me. There's a new heat in his eyes, a glint of anticipation and hunger that he'd held back in the shower. He picks me up, swinging me into his arms and carrying me back into the bedroom to toss me onto the bed.

My back hits the mattress and Julien crawls up my body, nipping and licking as he goes. When he reaches my lips, he takes my mouth in a hungry kiss. His hands stroke my sides, fingers tickling along my arms and thighs as he explores my skin. He cradles my face with one hand while the other trails down my chest, then my stomach. Moving lower, he takes my cock into his hand and squeezes gently as he strokes upward once. That alone is almost enough to make me come.

I've never been so turned on in my life.

Julien's lips catch my gasps and moans as he swipes his thumb to gather the liquid at my tip and then continues moving his hand in a slow, steady rhythm. I grab his wrist, stopping the movement after barely more than a couple seconds.

"Too close," I say. "I want to come with you inside me."

He nods, shifting his hand down to stroke over my balls and then to brush against the crease of my ass. He freezes for a second before pulling away from my mouth as he brings his hand up to stare at his fingers.

"What?" I ask.

Julien shifts back so he's crouching over me and rubs his fingers together. "When did you have time to find the lube Remy bought for us?"

“I didn’t.” I put my own hand where Julien’s was, my fingers encountering a very lube-like liquid that appears to be... *oh*. “That’s different. Maybe it’s an omega thing?”

“Has it ever happened before?”

“Have I ever self-lubricated? Um, no. Definitely not. But I can’t think of any other explanation, can you?”

Julien chuckles. “I guess we still have a lot to learn about male omegas.”

“I guess so,” I say. “I’m not complaining, though. No more fumbling for the lube bottle? Sign me up.”

Julien’s laughter shakes the entire bed, and he leans down to run his nose over my neck.

“Okay. Let’s get on with the claiming part,” I say. I thrust my hips upward so my erection brushes against his. “Before I take matters into my own hands. I’m dying down here.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want that to happen.” Julien runs his nose down my cheek and buries his face in my neck, biting gently at the muscles in my shoulder and sending a shiver of desire down my body. He drags a finger through the slick, super convenient lube, then pushes it into my body, gently loosening the muscle to prepare me for something much larger.

One finger becomes two, then three, opening me up slowly and carefully until I almost can’t take it anymore.

“I want you. I need you,” I pant. “Now.”



Julien presses a lingering kiss to my mouth, then pulls his hand away and gently urges me over onto my stomach. I hate losing the opportunity to stare into his eyes, but a claiming bite goes on the back of the neck and that means hands and knees for me. At least shifters can't carry or transmit any STDs, so we don't have to bother with condoms.

Moments later, Julien presses the tip of his cock to my entrance and pushes inside in one long, slow thrust. The burn of the stretch quickly fades into pleasure as he pulls out and pushes in again. Gradually, his movements build into a steady rhythm and I'm lost to the sensation of my mate inside me.

The ecstasy builds and just as I'm teetering on the edge of coming apart, Julien's sharpened teeth sink into the skin at the base of my neck. The flash of pain barely registers as the force of the orgasm shatters through me, the world going white around me as I release onto the sheets. Above me, Julien lets out a muffled growl, his teeth still attached to my neck, as his muscle tense and the heat of his release fills me.

It takes a few moments for both of us to come back to Earth and I whimper a little as he pulls out. Julien lies down and turns me to face him, pulling me away from the wet spot, then tucking my head under his chin and wrapping me tightly in his arms.

"You're stuck with me now," I joke, my throat tight with emotion.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," says Julien, his breath warm against the lingering ache from my new claiming mark.

All in all, I wouldn't either. Things aren't perfect and this relationship will take work, fated mates or not. Nothing about Julien and I has been easy so far, but things can only get better from here.

Right?

# TWENTY-NINE

## KEIR

I WAKE UP ALONE. Again. Not the best feeling after what Julien and I shared, but I vaguely remember him saying something about going to talk to the pack elders before I fell back to sleep.

The world outside the window is dark, the only light in the room coming from the bedside lamp someone switched on. Still fuzzy from sleep, my brain tries to do the math—claiming sex at approximately midday plus how much time equals a night sky?—and comes up with Julien being gone for at least a couple hours.

That is not a good sign. The only reason Julien went to talk to the elders was to tell them about his newly claimed mate: me.

And there aren't many ways to interpret the length of his absence. Either they're planning a huge surprise party to welcome me, or Julien's pack elders aren't quite as accepting

of the idea of a male mate for their Alpha as he and Remy claimed they'd be.

Between those two options, the latter is much, *much* more likely, and I have no idea what that would mean for me.

Julien and I are supposed to be fated mates, but as I've said before biology isn't the same as psychology and I'm worried that now that the 'biological' component—claiming me so he's no longer under the influence of the mating frenzy—is taken care of Julien's pack will convince him to set me aside.

As overly pessimistic as my brain tends to be, I don't think that's a completely unfounded worry.

I'm not much of a catch being broke, packless, and unable to give Julien any heirs. Plus, it's not like something similar hasn't happened to me before. Not the fated mates part, that's once in a lifetime, but the ghosting me after getting me into bed part, that's an experience I'm familiar with.

And I hate it.

Did I make a mistake coming here? Have I completely fucked up? Maybe I should go...

*No.* I promised I wouldn't run.

Blowing out a long breath, I try to pull back my rapidly spiraling thoughts. Sitting here and driving myself crazy isn't helping anything. Least of all myself.

My stomach rumbles, dragging my mind away from the next avenue of doom and gloom it wanted to wander down. This is

good. Hunger is something I can actually *fix*. Plus, focusing on food might help me stop overthinking everything else.

Shoving the blankets off, I swing my legs over the side of the bed. I'm wearing one of Julien's too big shirts and a pair of boxer briefs with smiley faces on them courtesy of Remy. Julien's shirt comes down to my thighs, so all the necessary bits are covered, and I don't feel like trying to hunt down something else to wear.

My first stop is Julien's palatial bathroom. If my stomach weren't so empty, I'd drown my sorrows in a bubble bath in the huge jetted tub, but wallowing would not be productive or helpful. Instead, I empty my bladder, splash some water on my face, and fix my hair as best I can with zero product. How Julien manages to keep his blond locks looking perfectly styled without even gel, I have no idea.

I turn my back to the mirror, tugging at the neck of the shirt and trying to twist around to get a look at the claiming bite. The angle doesn't show me much, just some redness, but it's definitely there. Knowing that, having that ache to remind me I belong to someone now, helps ground me a little.

My next stop is the kitchen. I rustle through the cabinets and the fridge to find something I can put together for a quick meal. I'm not much of a cook, but I can manage cheesy scrambled eggs and toast.

I crack the eggs into a bowl, give them a quick whisk, add some shredded cheese, and pour them into a heated pan. Next, I stick a couple pieces of bread into the toaster. The bread is

the super healthy, full of grains and seeds type that would not typically be my first choice, but it was all I could find.

When everything's ready, I pour myself a glass of OJ—if I'm having breakfast for dinner, I might as well go all out—then take my bounty to the small table in the kitchen to eat. Alone. If I thought appeasing my stomach would make me feel better and maybe less neglected, I was wrong. Eating by myself just makes everything so much worse and gives all my insecurities the freedom to run around in circles in my head.

I dump my dishes in the sink, an asshole thing to do since the dishwasher is *right there*, but I'm feeling kind of petty at the moment. Then I wander into the living room and plop down on the couch. Julien has a Netflix subscription, so I take a tour through his history.

*I haven't known him for long enough to even know what TV shows he likes...*

Julien's taste is pretty eclectic. Mostly documentaries with some sci-fi fantasy stuff and even a couple of anime mixed in. Nothing concerning at least.

I spend a couple more minutes scrolling through and looking for something to watch, but nothing catches my attention. Blowing out a breath, I turn the TV off and set the remote down on the table.

Sitting here and staring at a blank screen is not a good idea. My thoughts are starting to spiral again and the longer I go without distracting myself from all the worries swirling around

in the back of my head, the more likely I am to do something stupid.

Like run.

Because even though I promised Julien I wouldn't do that, I don't know if I can keep that promise if there's no place for me in his pack. I grew up in a pack that didn't accept me and trying to fill that void almost killed me. Fated mates or not, claimed or not, if his pack won't accept me, I have no idea where that leaves me except for me to, well, *leave*.

For one, because I don't need to get anymore attached to Julien than I already am. The last thing I want to do is come between Julien and his pack, and I'd never ask him to step down just for me—if he'd even be willing to do that just for me. That would only be a recipe for resentment.

I sigh. Maybe I should just go back to bed for a while. Things might look better when—

The front door swings open with a bang and I jolt, jumping to my feet, my muscles instinctively tensing as if preparing for a fight. A large man—an alpha I don't recognize—strolls through the now open front door like he owns the place. He's bulky, but soft in that 'middle-aged man gone to seed' type of way and what little hair there is on his head is blond.

I straighten, narrowing my eyes at the new arrival. "Who the hell are you?"

The alpha ignores my question as he runs his gaze over me, a sneer on his face. "So, you're the whore who's leading my

nephew around by the dick.”



# THIRTY

## KEIR

BEING CALLED A WHORE is an accusation I really would have liked to be wearing pants for, but it is what it is. Besides, this guy is in *my* house talking crap about *my* mate and—

Huh. Who knew all I needed to take my mind off of my ‘woe is me’ attitude is this asshole alpha insinuating I’m a prostitute?

I hold back the growl that wants to break free from my chest, my wolf wanting nothing more than to rake my claws over the guy’s stupid face. Unfortunately, he’s related to Julien—as short and stubby as that branch of the family tree seems to be—so attacking him wouldn’t be the best idea. I’ll play nice. For now.

“Hello. I’m Keir,” I say as politely as possible while plastering what’s hopefully a friendly-ish smile on my face. “I know the whole me being a guy part is a little unorthodox, but Julien and I are fated mates, so—”

“Bullshit.” He crosses his arms over his barrel chest.

*Okay then.*

I release a careful, quiet breath, pushing down my temper, and try again. “I might not be what you expected, but I am definitely—”

“Some low-life, degenerate loner who latched onto Julien so you could join a prosperous pack?”

*Be nice. Be nice. Be nice.* I chant to myself, trying to remind my wolf that ripping this asshole’s head off is a bad idea.

“Look,” I say, my words coming out through my teeth. “I think you and I have gotten off on the wrong foot and maybe we should wait for Julien to clear all this up before you say something you can’t take back.” Well, something *else* anyway.

“I don’t care what you think,” he says. “My nephew had a perfectly good mating alliance in the works before you came along and tricked him. Julien isn’t a f—”

And that’s about as much as I can take.

“Don’t you dare,” I hiss, all desire to be diplomatic gone. After putting up with plenty of people just like this guy while growing up in Alabama, I refuse to make nice with bigots. “You want to call me a whore? Fine. There’s nothing wrong with safe and consensual sex work anyway. But you will *not* disrespect Julien in my presence, and you damn sure will not use that word.”

The alpha looks me up and down, then sneers at me. “And what are *you* going to do about it?”

My teeth grow sharper and I curl my upper lip in a snarl.  
“Leave.”

“You can’t kick me out of my nephew’s house.”

I rise slowly to my feet, feeling my nails lengthen as I go.  
“The hell I can’t. This is my house, too.”

Well, presumably. The house should technically be considered my territory since Julien and I have completed the mate bond, but it’s not something he and I have actually talked about—just another one of the many, many things I need to discuss with him.

“You think I’m scared of you?”

My nostrils flare. “You should be.”

A growl rumbles in my chest, and he matches the sound. My gaze glued to his, I widen my stance and prepare to pounce on him.

“What the hell is going on in here?” exclaims a woman standing in the kitchen doorway with her hands on her hips. She’s middle-aged and maybe my height, with blue eyes and a familiar shade of blonde hair. “Everett, just what do you think you’re doing?”

The alpha scowls, his attention shifting away from me to focus on the woman. He flings a hand toward me. “Your son has disgraced our entire line by taking up with *that*.”

That means the latest arrival to this shit show must be Julien’s mom. For all that this is a rather awkward way to meet

my new mother-in-law, I'm glad she appears to be sort of on my side. Or at least not on Everett's.

Julien's mom crosses her arms over her chest and leans against the door frame. "You would do well to remember that 'my son' is your Alpha."

"Yes, Julien is the most recent in a long line of Matisse Alphas leading this pack, but he'll be the last if he continues carrying on with this mongrel. There won't be any heirs if Julien insists on being mated to this useless degenerate. Is that what you want, the Matisse line to die out?"

She rolls her eyes. "Besides the fact that's none of your business, adoption is a thing."

"But the Matisse bloodline—"

"Can rot if that's what makes my son happy," she snaps. "It's not *your* bloodline anyway, so what do you even care?" She turns to me. "Keir, let me apologize for my jerk of a brother."

"No problem," I say, shuffling my feet and smoothing the edges of Julien's shirt over my thighs, suddenly self-conscious about my lack of pants. "It's fine. He's uh..."

"A complete and total asshole?" She raises her brows.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"And I did." She smiles. "If you haven't figured it out by now, I'm Julien's mom, Rachel."

"Nice to meet you." My gaze darts to Everett. "Wish it were under better circumstances."

“Julien was supposed to introduce us earlier, but you were fast asleep and then he decided to run off to argue with the elders by himself.” She lets out an exasperated huff. “What he should have done was just taken you with him, introduced you as his mate, and told them to take a hike if they don’t like it.”

Everett snorts. “And you think that would work out well for him, do you? Julien might be Alpha in name, but you know as well as I do that the elders are the ones actually in control of this pack.”

“I know no such thing,” she snaps back at her brother. “I’ll admit Julien hasn’t been as forceful with them as he should be. He saw no point in arguing with them over minor issues like how to kick off full moon ceremonies or who should pick the contractor to renovate the rec center, but now he actually has something important to fight for.” She glares at Everett. “Besides, I imagine at least one of the old coots might remember the last time this pack had an omega and will understand that’s better than any mating alliance.”

“An omega?” Everett’s gaze swings to me, his eyes going wide.

“Yup,” I say. “Bet you feel kind of stupid now.”

“Impossible.” He scoffs.

“You know, I’m getting really tired of people telling me my existence isn’t possible.” I roll my eyes, then lift my partially shifted hand, wiggling my claws. “I assure you, me being an omega is quite possible.”

Everett gapes, his mouth opening and closing silently.

Rachel walks over to him and shoves his shoulder. “Get out of here before you stick your foot any farther down your throat.”

“But...” he protests.

“Now,” says Rachel firmly, flicking his ear, then pointing toward the door.

And he actually listens, walking back out the front door without saying another word.

Once he’s gone, Rachel turns to me. “What do you say I go ahead and take you over to meet the elders? There’s no point in letting the situation fester and the quicker you’re officially part of the pack, the better.”

“That sounds great,” I say. “But I should probably put on some pants first.”

“Yes, you should.” Another laugh. “As nice as your legs are, I doubt the elders would appreciate them as much Julien does.”

# THIRTY-ONE

## JULIEN

THE WORST THING ABOUT taking over as pack Alpha while barely into my twenties—well, besides my dad’s premature death—is that the pack elders still think of me as the wide-eyed little kid who used to follow the former Alpha around everywhere. Even now, five years later, they don’t see me as an adult and they sure as hell don’t see me as the leader of this pack even if I could command every one of them to their knees if I wanted to.

I don’t though. That would only piss them off and that’s the absolute last thing I need right now.

The elders have overstepped their authority in the current situation, but this system of governance has kept the Madison pack happy and stable for three generations now, and I’m not trying to upset that delicate balance. Their word goes a long way with the rest of the pack and I want them on my side,

even if that means I have to stand here like a penitent child while they tut and tsk and generally act like pompous assholes.

I knew they weren't going to like the idea of me taking a male mate, fated or not, but I didn't expect quite this level of resistance.

The six of them are sitting in a row at a long table at the front of the room and they've been taking turns for the past hour telling me with varying levels of disappointment how I need to think about what's best for the pack and how I need to put the pack's needs first.

I've had about as much as I can stand. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, struggling to hold on to my temper.

*I will not growl.*

*I will not growl.*

*I will not growl.*

“Elder William,” I—*fuck*—growl out between clenched teeth. “I’ll say this one more time. I don’t need the elders’ approval to claim my fated mate.”

William straightens in his chair, then glances from side to side at the other elders. “While that may be true, you should have at least presented your chosen mate to us before—”

“There wasn’t time,” I bite out.

“I’m sure it felt that way to you,” he says, his patronizing tone grating my nerves even further. “I know what it’s like to be young and think everything is an imminent crisis.”



I close my eyes, breathing slowly through my nostrils. Losing my temper will only make them feel justified for thinking me immature.

William continues, “You turned down a lucrative mating alliance, and you destroyed any chance of a positive relationship with the Chicago pack.” *Here it comes again...* “How can we trust that you have the pack’s best interests at heart when you act so recklessly?”

I huff out a laugh of disbelief. “First of all,” I say, curling my fingers into my palms. “I turned down that alliance because I met my fated mate. Any of you would have done the same in my position. Second of all, the continued hostilities between us and the Chicago pack aren’t my doing. There was never going to be a positive relationship, not with Rossi in charge. He’d like nothing more than to see me dead because of what happened with his sister-in-law.”

“An issue that could have been handled much more diplomatically if you hadn’t acted unilaterally to grant the girl sanctuary,” retorts William. “If you had consulted us before —”

“Did you miss the part where Rossi tried to have me killed?” I ask, shaking my head. “Or how he tried to kidnap my brother? Or how about the fact that he wanted to cut up an omega for parts? And let’s not forget that he was also *trafficking shifters*. This is the guy you want our pack to have a positive relationship with?”

The elders blink at me in shock.

Daniella is the first to speak up, her hand resting on her chest. “We were not aware of the trafficking allegations.”

“Of course you weren’t,” I say. “Because you didn’t ask. I’ve been back for less than a day and instead of meeting with my second or spending time with my new fated mate, I’m here being treated like a misbehaving child.”

“Your uncle said—”

“Everett has his own motivations,” I snap. “Besides, he is not the Alpha of this pack. *I* am.” I stalk forward. “If my dad thought my uncle was Alpha material, he would have named him as his successor. He did not.”

“Adrian didn’t know he would die so early,” says Quinn. “If he had, then—”

“Then *nothing*,” I snarl. “I am the Alpha of this pack. Yes, I was young and inexperienced when I took the title and I would have loved nothing more than decades more of my dad’s guidance, but I didn’t get that chance.”

All six of them shift in their seats, but only Daniella actually looks contrite. They’ve gotten too comfortable with power and it’s my fault. I let them guide me when I first took over, listened to them, even acquiesced to their decisions on some matters, because I trusted their wisdom and most of those things weren’t worth an argument.

“I’m so sorry we upset you,” says Tabitha in a conciliatory tone. “We’re simply worried about the future of the pack. Omega or not, fated or not, a male mate cannot give you heirs.

You must have an alpha heir if you wish to continue the tradition of peaceful transfers of power started by your great-grandfather.”

William breaks in. “You could help put our fears to rest if you’d just make a simple concession.”

“Like what?” I ask, narrowing my eyes. I’m pretty sure I’m not going to like whatever it is they’re about to suggest.

William smiles, then gestures to a guy at the back of the room. The guy opens the side door and three young women file in. The first two are smiling brightly at me as they make their way to the front to stand by the elder’s table, but the third scowls and rolls her eyes. I’m pretty sure all three of them are the daughters or granddaughters of elders which, unfortunately, doesn’t surprise me at all.

William sweeps his hand toward the young women like a game show host showing off a prize. “Take a surrogate. Any of these would be acceptable.”

I open my mouth to refuse, but William holds up a hand to stop my words. “If you cannot reassure us that you have the pack’s best interests at heart, we will be forced to question your suitability as pack Alpha and consider appointing a new one in your place,” says William.

# THIRTY-TWO

## KEIR

RACHEL DRIVES LIKE A maniac, taking her little sports car around the curves in the winding road like she's a NASCAR driver. The ride wouldn't be so bad if the other cars on the road also drove like she does.

But they very much do not. Rachel zips around them, weaving back and forth over the freaking *double yellow line* and lurching me from side to side in my seat. I'm not sure what's worse: the terror or the nausea.

And I thought being kidnapped and squashed in the backseat of a Ford Fiesta was bad...

By the time we reach our destination, my fingers have permanently molded themselves around the appropriately called 'oh shit' bar and my stomach is churning.

Rachel shoots me a glance, raising her brows at whatever expression she finds on my face. "Is my driving really that bad?"

“Well,” I say as I force myself to let go of the bar. “It could have been worse. We’re both in one piece at least.”

She chuckles, then we both exit the vehicle into a parking lot beside a small building that looks kind of like a doctor’s office or a bank and is made of red brick with a glass-fronted entrance. Nothing about the structure screams ‘shifters gather here,’ but neither did the place I first met Rossi.

Rachel heads to the set of glass double doors with me close behind. Inside there are two guys in security uniforms sitting at a long desk, both of them shifters.

“Hey boys,” says Rachel, tilting her chin up. “I need to get up to the council room.”

The one on the right, a redhead, scowls. “They’re in session. We aren’t supposed to let anyone in unless they’ve been previously approved.”

“And *I’m* not on the approved list?” asks Rachel, her voice going low and a little growly.

The shifter shakes his head, offering an apologetic shrug.

“Well, then you can consider allowing me entry an order from your new Alpha Mate.” She gestures at me as if I’m now in charge and my word is law.

And maybe it would be after whatever hoops I have to jump through to become ‘official,’ but I doubt these guys are going to listen to me as I am. Both sets of eyes swing to me, open shock on their faces. Derision flashes in the redhead’s eyes as

he stares at me, likely taking in my still slightly bedraggled appearance and ill-fitting clothes.

Rachel pokes me in the back where they can't see, and I straighten up to my full height. Which isn't much and I'm sure doesn't look any more impressive.

"No one said anything about there being a new Alpha Mate..." says the dark-haired guy on the left slowly, his brows drawing together with confusion.

"Not my problem that the elders like to keep the pack in the dark." Rachel grins, showing off her teeth. "Besides, you know who I am and you know my son is in there. The elders' edicts don't supersede Julien's, so..."

The two guards share a look and the one on the left shrugs. Whatever silent conversation they have resolves in our favor and the redhead waves us past. I follow Rachel as she walks quickly toward a bay of elevators. Her chin is up, shoulders back, and I try to mimic that confidence as I pass the guards. She doesn't say a single word until the elevator doors close and the car starts to rise.

"I can't believe they had the nerve to try to keep me out of the council room." She's practically vibrating with anger. "This has got to be the last straw. If Julien can't rein them in, then everything is going to fall apart."

"I'm a little confused," I say. "Isn't Julien the Alpha? Why wouldn't these elders listen to him?"

She glances at me, her lips pressed into a thin line. “Julien is the Alpha, yes, but our pack has come to treat that more like a hereditary title.”

“You mean no one challenges for power or the right to rule?”

“No, not here,” she says, then sighs. “Not for the last three generations, anyway.”

“How does that work?”

“The council of elders is meant to provide guidance to the Alpha, and they often settle disputes between pack members that aren’t deemed important enough to bring to Julien.” Her shoulders slump and she gets a faraway look on her face. “Julien’s father died before he could officially pass the title on, and Julien was young, the youngest Alpha this pack has ever had, and entirely untested. The elders managed to consolidate a lot of influence within the pack in those first couple years, and they’ve used it to try to push Julien into more of a figurehead position.”

My mind flashes back to Meredith saying the elders would never accept me and then to Remy saying the elders wanted Julien to form a mating alliance. I’d worried that the pack might convince Julien to set me aside, but I never actually considered that these elders might actually have enough power within the pack to *insist* he do so.

My entire body goes cold. What would that mean for me?

I swallow back the burn of bile in the back of my throat. “Why hasn’t Julien just... deposed them or whatever?”

“I know you haven’t known him long, but I’m sure you’ve realized my son is a bit of an idealist,” she says in a dry voice.

I huff something close to a laugh and nod.

Rachel smiles. “Even though Julien’s been butting heads with them for years now, he doesn’t want to set them aside completely. He thinks the role they play is valuable to the pack and so he’s been lenient—much too lenient, if you ask me—letting their opinions have a lot of sway over pack matters.”

“And now…” I let my words trail off, not sure exactly what I’m asking.

“The elders try to use their influence to control Julien’s actions. When Julien left for the summit, the elders strongly ‘suggested’ that he should return with a mating alliance in place. I’m not sure what they would have done had he actually done that, but they certainly weren’t expecting him to meet his fated *male* mate.”

The elevator draws to a stop and we exit into a long hallway, Rachel leading the way toward a set of double doors at the end.

“I’m starting to get the impression that they would have *loved* Meredith,” I mutter under my breath.

Rachel glances back at me over her shoulder and chuckles. “From what Remy’s told me, they probably would have.” Her face softens, and she smiles. “I’m glad Julien brought you home instead.”



“Really?” I stop in my tracks, unable to keep the shock out of my voice. “*Why?*”

She pauses just outside the double doors and gives me a considering look. “Everything my sons have told me about you tells me you’re a fighter. There aren’t many who could survive four years as a lone wolf, especially as young as you are. I think you’re exactly what Julien needs to learn to stand up to the elders and force them back into the role they’re supposed to have.”

“But what if...” I let the question trail off, not sure what I’m trying to ask.

She pats me on the shoulder. “You’re his fated mate, his perfect complement, and that makes you his strongest ally.” The corner of her mouth tilts up into a half smile and she jerks her chin toward the doors. “Now, let’s introduce you to the elders before they try to gaslight my son into doing their bidding. *Again.*”

# THIRTY-THREE

## KEIR

YOU KNOW WHAT I hate? Doors that look heavy, but really aren't. Like the ones to this council room or whatever it's called. I swear I barely touch the damn things and they whoosh open and slam into the wall inside the room, marking my arrival with an awkwardly loud bang.

I plaster what I hope is a confident smile on my face and stride into the room, trying to convince myself with every step that I belong here. The group of shifters eying me from the front of the room aren't doing much to help with that. In fact, if I didn't have pretty thick skin, I would probably be turning around about now.

The six of them sit side by side at a long table on a slightly raised section of the floor that faces a few rows of chairs with a walkway through the center. Julien stands in front of them at the end of the makeshift aisle with his back to me. The set-up comes across like a weird combination of a comic-con panel

and a court hearing. Going by what Rachel said, the elders are probably treating it more like the latter.

With my mate being the person on trial.

Julien turns around, his brows drawing together when his eyes meet mine. I'm not sure whether that concern is for me or himself, but it's too late to turn back now. I swallow down my nerves and continue forward.

*I can do this.*

Three women standing off to the side come into view as I walk further into the room. They're all perfectly made up in flimsy white dresses, and all of them are staring at my mate. Only two of them are smiling, though.

*What is going on?*

Julien glances from the women to me, then shakes himself and walks to meet me, taking my arm and leading me the rest of the way to the front of the room. The elders look on with varying levels of interest and one with downright irritation.

"May I present my mate, Keir..." Julien's eyes widen as his voice trails off. He doesn't remember my last name. And I thought my *entrance* was awkward.

"Anderson," I say under my breath, shrinking into myself a little as my cheeks heat. Granted, Julien only heard my last name once and I was being arrested at the time, so it's understandable he'd forget, but still...

"Keir Anderson from Alabama."

The irritated elder, a quintessential old white guy, sneers. But only in my direction, not Julien's.

One of the women gives me a gracious nod, though her expression is a bit bemused. "Welcome, Keir. It is a pleasure to meet you."

I shuffle my feet. "Um, thanks?"

The asshole guy shares a look with a different woman at the end of the table, then scoffs before turning to Julien with an exaggerated look of bewilderment. "You turned down a mutually beneficial alliance with the Michigan pack for *this*?"

And, of course, he punctuates that question by gesturing at the totality of me. He couldn't be any more condescending if he tried.

Though he definitely tries. He wrinkles his nose like he smells something unpleasant. "You're from Alabama? Who are your parents? What is your lineage? What benefit do you bring to this pack?"

Straightening my shoulders, I let my growing anger leak into my voice. "Yes, I'm from Alabama, but my parents and my 'lineage' don't matter." I tilt my chin up, all the things Remy told me about omegas bolstering my confidence. "As far as what benefit I bring to Julien's pack? I'm an omega. What does this pack have to offer *me*, besides my mate?"

The elder has no reaction except for a slight rolling of his eyes. He glances from side to side as if visually polling the other elders' expressions, then says, "The boy clearly wasn't

thinking, too blinded by the mating instinct to realize how this would reflect on the rest of the pack.” He sends that pitying look at my mate again. “Julien, you—”

And that’s about the last straw.

“Alpha Matisse,” I say in a low voice with an edge of a growl. “I might not know all the protocols, but I know you’re not showing your Alpha proper respect by addressing him by his first name.”

“And who are you to tell me how—”

“The Alpha Mate,” I say, this time in a louder voice.

“That’s yet to be determined.” Asshole makes a dismissive wave in my direction. “But it doesn’t really matter anyway.” He shoots me a poisonous smile and his voice turns to something laced with false sweetness. “Alpha Matisse has already agreed to our compromise. In exchange for our support of his continued leadership of this pack, he has agreed to select a surrogate from—”

“A surrogate?” I turn toward Julien. “We’ve been official less than a day and you’re already letting them pressure you into this nonsense?”

“I have *not* agreed to taking a surrogate,” says Julien in a tense voice.

“A surrogate is your only choice,” says the asshole elder dryly. “Unless you have the secret ability to get pregnant, this... ‘relationship’ will not produce an alpha heir and we will

not allow you to present him to the pack as your mate without an agreement from you to provide an heir.”

I bare my teeth at him. “Adoption is a thing, dude. And—”

The door bangs open behind me—nice to know it’s not just me that happens to—and Everett strides into the room, a stormy look on his face.

“What’s this I hear about setting up my nephew with a surrogate?” asks Everett.

Old Guy, who still hasn’t bothered to introduce himself, rolls his eyes again. “In order to continue this pack’s tradition of a peaceful transfer of power, Julien must have an alpha heir.”

Everett comes up to stand beside Julien. “If the boy doesn’t want to take on a surrogate, we shouldn’t make him,” he says, which is surprisingly reasonable of him granted what little I know about him. “The bloodline can be preserved through me instead.”

*Ah, so that’s his angle.*

Everett continues, “Julien can keep his whore and—”

“You will *not* continue to disrespect my mate,” snaps Julien. His narrowed eyes shift from Everett to the elders. “And neither will the rest of you.”

The one elder sneers at me. “If you truly think we’ll accept this wolf as Alpha Mate—”

“I don’t need your acceptance,” replies Julien, his voice growing harder. “I am your Alpha and I don’t have to justify

myself to you.”

“If you insist on continuing down this path, you will not like the consequences.”

“Consequences?” Julien tilts his head to the side. “Are you referencing your *empty* threat to appoint a new Alpha? You don’t have the power to do that.” He pauses. “Unless *you’re* planning to challenge me for the position?”

The elder has no response to that.

“I didn’t think so,” says Julien. His gaze moves to Everett. “What about you, Uncle? You seem pretty keen on the idea of being the Alpha.”

Everett stutters out a denial and takes a step backward.

“Then I’m done with this nonsense.” Julien grabs my hand and tugs me toward the exit. Only silence follows us out and I don’t release a full breath until the door has shut behind us and we’re halfway to the elevator.

We find Rachel waiting for us in the downstairs lobby area. She lifts her brows. “So, how did it go?”

Julien grimaces. “It could have gone better. They aren’t happy, William especially, but at this point they’re going to have to get over it.”

“Good,” says Rachel, smiling at the two of us. “It’s about time you put your foot down.”

“Let’s head back to the house and figure out our next steps,” says Julien, sighing. “Mom, please give Remy a call and ask

him to meet us there to discuss any damage control that might be necessary.”

She nods her agreement and the three of us head out to the parking lot.

I eye Rachel’s car parked crookedly across two spaces. *Nope. Not doing that again.*

“I’m riding with you,” I say to Julien, tugging him toward a black SUV I’m fairly sure belongs to him.

“I wonder why...” My mate smirks at me.

I narrow my eyes and poke him in the shoulder. “Your mom drives like a maniac.”

“Believe me, I know,” says Julien. “I grew up with her.”

“Hey, you made it to adulthood,” says Rachel.

“Barely,” replies Julien in a dry voice.

Rachel huffs in exaggerated offense, sticks her nose in the air, and walks to her car.

The ride to Julien’s house is much less nerve-wracking than my trip with Rachel. By the time Julien pulls into the driveway behind his mom’s car—she, of course, beat us here—Remy, Dante, *and* Brody are all waiting for us.

As Julien and I exit the vehicle, the three shifters tilt their heads to the side, baring their necks to Julien. And then to me.

*What the hell?*

Remy must catch the confused look on my face because he gives me a wide smile. “You’re Alpha Mate now, Keir.”



True. I guess.

But that doesn't make this any less awkward. I didn't ask for a title, and I don't really want one. My gaze strays to Julien. Though, I suppose I don't have a choice if I want *him*.

“Let's go inside,” I say, cutting through the awkwardness. Sort of.

This is going to take some getting used to.

# THIRTY-FOUR

## KEIR

FOR THE NEXT FEW days, things are pretty quiet while we wait and hope the elders come to their senses without any additional arguments. Julien could simply present me to the pack as the new Alpha Mate and be done with it, but he's trying to keep the peace. Rachel thinks he's being too naïve—I kind of do, too—but I definitely appreciate the bit of downtime. There have been a lot of changes in my life in a very short period of time and having some breathing room is going a long way toward helping me adjust.

The first day Julien and I spend most of our time in bed cementing our mate bond. Having a lover who's actually kind and considerate is still something I'm getting used to, but I'm damn sure not complaining. We're certainly not lacking for chemistry and the physical intimacy is slowly chipping away at my fears and insecurities.

The second day is much of the same except Julien and I actually leave the bedroom to sit down and eat dinner with Rachel, Remy, Dante, and Brody at the dining room table. The whole family meal thing is a novelty to me. I can't remember ever sharing a table, much less light-hearted, friendly banter with my dad or anyone else in my former pack. I don't say much during the meal, still feeling slightly out of place, but there's a smile on my lips the entire time.

By the third day, we still haven't heard a word from the elders and I'm getting a little antsy. Having this little reprieve from life's dramas is definitely nice, but there's also a heavy sense of apprehension hanging over me, as if something's waiting in the wings to snatch my newfound happiness away.

That evening, Julien and I are sitting on the deck together when Remy pops his head out the back door and asks us to come inside. There's something in his tone that sends anxiety spiking through my body.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"We have a bit of a situation," says Remy as he leads me toward the living room.

"Like what?"

Remy gestures to a dark-haired man sitting on the couch. "He showed up a few minutes ago."

"And...?" My gaze darts from the stranger to Remy.

"And he claims he's your father."

I've been expecting *something* to go wrong, but this... My jaw drops as my mind goes blank with shock. Every thought in my head deserts me, leaving me simply staring silently at the stranger with my mouth wide open.

In other words, I'm standing here looking like a complete dumbass.

I force my gaze away from the man on the couch and back to Remy. I stammer for a second before my brain manages to put words together into something coherent.

"He claims he's my what now?" I glance between Remy and the interloper—who've I've never seen before in my life.

"He claims he's your father," repeats Remy.

"That's impossible..." *But is it?* Randall was pretty clear on the fact that I'm not actually his nephew by blood. But even if I accept this guy's claim as truth, that still brings up plenty more questions.

Julien enters the living room, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and tugging me to his side as he glares at the man on the couch. His whole body is stiff with tension, but his expression softens when his gaze finds mine. He glances at his brother. "Remy, who exactly is this person you let into my house?"

Remy blows out a breath. "He says he's Keir's father."

Julien's mouth goes tight with irritation. "And you just took his word for that?"

Remy sighs and the stranger, perhaps realizing we're talking about him, turns around in his seat. And I fully understand why Remy took the guy's word about who he is to me. The man on the couch looks just like me. Well, an *alpha* version of me, anyway.

Same dark, wavy hair. Same blue eyes. His features are sharper, giving his face a masculine edge whereas I'm more on the 'pretty' side of the spectrum, but there's a clear similarity in the shape of our noses.

The man dips his chin respectfully at Julien, then smiles hesitantly as he rises to his feet and holds his hand out in my direction. "Hello, Keir. I'm... Ben."

I gape at him, frozen in place once again. My brain is still buffering as it tries to process the visible resemblance between us.

After a moment, Ben drops his hand and nods to himself. "I know this is probably a little strange for you, but—"

"*Strange?*" The word comes out in a half-choked snarl as an emotion finally breaks through my stupor. It's anger, of course. Because with how my life has gone leading up to now, getting angry is the only thing that will keep me from freaking out entirely.

I narrow my eyes, ignoring the almost hurt look on Ben's face. "Yes, this is very, very 'strange' for me," I drawl. "But more than that, it's suspicious. Where have you been for the past, oh, *twenty-one years?*"

Ben presses his lips together and moves his gaze to the ground. “There are things—”

“Of course there are things!” I yell nonsensically, having no idea what the hell I’m even trying to say.

Remy lets out a cough that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. I glare at him and he looks away, covering his mouth with his hand like he’s trying to hide a smile.

Ben opens his mouth, but I hold a hand up to stop him. “Look, I can’t deal with this at the moment. There are too many other things going on right now and...” I shake my head. “Just no. We can talk later. Or something.”

I move toward the stairs, intending to head up to Julien’s—our—bedroom to decompress. Before I head up, I turn back to Ben. As much as I don’t want to deal with him at the moment, there is one thing I’d like to know before I go stick my head in the sand for a little while.

“Why are you showing up now?” I ask. “What’s in this for you? Is it because of the whole omega thing? I mean, you didn’t seem to care much when you ditched my mom and—”

“That woman was *not* your mother.” Ben hisses the words out through clenched teeth, his face twisting with pure hatred.

“Not my...” And I’m back to staring at him with my mouth wide open like an idiot.

Ben’s face softens and his hand twitches like he wants to reach out for me, but he’s holding himself back. “Karina said she had left her pack, so we took her in. She said she wanted

to repay us somehow, so one evening we left her to babysit while we went out.” He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “When we came back, Karina had left and taken you with her.” He blinks rapidly as a sheen of tears covers his eyes. “I didn’t even know you were alive until a week or so ago when one of my contacts at the triumvirate got wind of a male omega and passed word on to me.”

I think that over for a second, trying to piece things together. “But I don’t understand *why* she’d do that. They always told me she died in childbirth and her mate, the guy who I thought was my father, wanted an alpha kid. Even though nobody knew I was an omega in the beginning, they damn sure knew I wasn’t an alpha. What was the point in taking me?”

“I don’t know,” says Ben softly. “We never saw or spoke to her again and when...” He swallows, obvious grief twisting at his face. “After that, I assumed...” He trails off, shaking his head.

“So what happened to my real mom?”

Ben’s jaw tenses, and he glances at the other shifters around us. “I think that’s something we should discuss in private.”

I’d completely forgotten we had an audience.

Beside me, Julien bristles. “My mate won’t be going anywhere ‘private’ with you. I don’t care who you say you are.”

Ben lifts his chin and meets my mate’s gaze. “Would you trust everyone in this room with his life?”

*My life?* Why would my mother's identity be that important?

Julien studies my father—so sue me, I believe him—and the two of them have some sort of silent conversation.

“Everyone clear the room,” says Julien. Remy opens his mouth to protest. “I do trust you with my life, brother, but I want you to make sure everyone gives us privacy while I find out what's going on.”

Remy nods and ushers everyone toward the kitchen. Julien leads me to the small office connected to the living room. My father follows and Julien shuts the door once we're all inside.

“Well?” says Julien impatiently. “Explain.”

Ben bites at his lower lip. “How much do you know about male omegas?”

That's a tangent I wasn't expecting. Julien and I share a look.

“Not much,” says Julien. “My brother has done some general research, but the information is sparse, and some of what he's found out has been contradictory.”

Ben stares at me as he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a wallet. He removes a creased photo and hands it to me. In the picture, a younger version of the man in front of me has his arms around a smaller person—a visibly pregnant *male* person.

“You didn't have a mother,” says Ben. “Your omega father is the one who carried you.”



# THIRTY-FIVE

## KEIR

I DON'T KNOW THAT I ever really understood what it meant to have your mind blown, but I damn sure do now. The idea that male omegas—presumably including *me*—can get pregnant is outlandish enough that my head feels like it might explode as my brain struggles to process this new information.

It's not going very well.

My mind is nothing but a mess of 'does not compute' and 'error 404: words not found.'

I press my palms against my eyes hard enough that I'm seeing stars and take a long, deep breath, trying to calm the jumble of half-finished thoughts racing around my head so I can find at least a semi-coherent reaction.

*That's not...*

*How would...*

*What if...*

*Does that mean...*

Of course, of all the things I could ask, the first question to make it past my lips is: “Where did I come *out*?”

In my defense, it’s a perfectly valid question and, being a male omega myself, a very concerning one. Unless my... other father had something I don’t, there’s only one exit route I can think of.

*Oh god, I think I’m going to be sick.*

I run to the trashcan beside Julien’s desk, fall to my knees, and quickly lose my breakfast among the various pieces of office detritus. Once there’s nothing left in my stomach, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and rise onto shaky legs as I turn to face Ben. He still hasn’t answered my question and I’m not sure I want to think about why.

“Well?” I ask, my voice tight with anxiety.

Ben’s lips twitch and I narrow my eyes. This is *not* funny. He raises his hands in a calming gesture. “Don’t worry. Male omegas don’t have a birth canal in the same way female omegas do. You were born via c-section.”

Relief floods through me, and I blow out a breath as my muscles relax. That’s one less thing to freak out over, but there are so, so many more.

Like, what if I’m already pregnant?

Almost involuntarily, my hand moves to my stomach.

Julien and I obviously didn't think there was any need for contraceptives when he claimed me, nor for any of the other times over the last few days. I poke at my abdomen with one finger. Nothing *feels* any different. Wouldn't I know something like that instinctively?

Or maybe not. Considering all the various brands of pregnancy tests on the market, I doubt anyone *knows* for sure without one. Which means it's not very likely that I have some sort of magical omega pregnancy sense. Is it weird that I'm relieved? I've spent my life being 'different' in one way or another and I don't want to add any more oddities if I can help it.

I glance at Julien, who hasn't said a single word. His blue eyes are wide, his gaze locked on Ben like the guy just... blew his mind, too.

Shit. I've been nothing but a complication since Julien met me, and he didn't ask for any of this madness.

*Well, neither did I, but that's neither here nor there at the moment*

The pack elders already hate me and would like nothing more than to get rid of me. Could *this* be the last straw for Julien? I mean, there's dealing with me and all my baggage and then there's the idea of me being some sort of freak of nature.

“Julien...?”

My mate shakes himself, then turns his attention to me, his expression unreadable. He must see my fear and uncertainty, because he gives me a soft smile, then grabs my hand and pulls me closer to his side.

“That information will definitely take some time to process,” says Julien, “But how would it endanger Keir’s life?”

“As I’m sure you’re aware, omegas in general are rare and valuable,” says Ben. “Only one in a hundred thousand or so births is an omega and only one in a million is a male omega. Most births are betas, with about one in a thousand being an alpha. The child of an omega and their fated mate is either an alpha or an omega, about a 60/40 split.” Ben pauses. “But any child born of a second generation male omega is an alpha nearly one hundred percent of the time.”

*And what does every Alpha want? An alpha child of his blood.*

“Is that why my—Karina took me? To pimp me out as an alpha producer? How would she have known what I am?” My voice is strained and I have to swallow back my nausea at the thought of what might have happened.

“I don’t know,” says Ben, his brows pulling together. “You were already a week old before we ran into her and offered to help her. We let her think you were adopted, but she must have figured something out.”

Julien tenses beside me, his hold growing tighter as he pulls me even closer. “I’ve already claimed Keir,” he says. “The

mating bond is complete and Remy said that means the, uh, magical perks can't go to anyone else."

"This is biology, not magic." Ben pinches the bridge of his nose. "Sure, omegas can bring power and prosperity to a pack, but that's only because they tend to have alpha children. There are no magical perks. Half the information out there about omegas, especially male omegas, is pure superstitious nonsense."

"Then how..."

Ben lets out a dry chuckle. "How did Theo and I figure all this out?"

I nod.

"Much the same way you might have if I hadn't shown up," he replies. "Theo and I grew up together, but didn't know we were fated mates until after his first shift when he figured out he was an omega. My uncle was the Alpha of our pack and he was... not a kind person. I knew what would happen if he found out about Theo."

"He would have killed him," I say. "Like my pack tried to do to me."

Ben nods. "So, we left. I claimed him, and we lived in secret among the humans. When Theo started experiencing strange symptoms, I thought he was sick and didn't know what else to do, so I reached out to the triumvirate and told them what Theo was. They directed me to a shifter doctor who'd been studying omega biology. The doctor monitored Theo

throughout the pregnancy and she was also the one who delivered you. Afterward, she explained some of the stuff I've told you today and told us to keep your birth a secret."

"So you did," says Julien slowly. "And that's why you had no recourse when Karina stole your child."

Another nod. "The birth wasn't recorded for obvious reasons and there were no adoption papers. To anyone who could have helped, Keir didn't exist and even if we had been able to prove he did... Theo and I had no legal connection to him."

"It doesn't make sense." I say half to myself. "Unless Karina already knew I was an omega, something you say is unlikely, why would she have taken me in the first place?"

Something tells me the answer to that question might be important.

But the only other person who I could ask about her—the guy who I spent most of my life thinking of as my dad—is dead. Unless...

I sigh. "As much as I hate to say it, I think I need to talk to Randall."

# THIRTY-SIX

## KEIR

UNFORTUNATELY, EVERYONE AGREES WITH me. Someone doesn't kidnap a baby just on a whim, so Karina's motivations for taking me, whatever they were, are better figured out now rather than waiting for them to come back and bite me in the ass somehow.

Because, given my luck lately, I'm sure they would.

That means contacting Randall has now been added to the evening's agenda, though what I most want to do right now is curl up in bed with my mate. My former Alpha—and I guess former uncle—might be the last person in the entire world I want to talk to. He was attempting to sell me to Rossi the last time I saw him and the last time before *that* he tried to kill me. He's also, generally speaking, not someone I'd want to keep in touch with, which means I don't really know *how*.

Julien is one step ahead of me. He grabs the phone and calls over to Rossi's hotel, the Grand Royale, since that's

presumably where Randall was staying as of a couple days ago. The person on the other end speaks loudly enough for me to hear that Randall checked out yesterday.

Honestly, I'm sort of glad he's already gone. Sure, that fact only *delays* the unpleasantness of talking to the asshole rather than putting it off completely, but this evening has been stressful enough without dealing with getting information out of Randall.

"Do you have another number to reach him at?" asks Julien.

I snort. "I don't think I even had his phone number when I lived with him. My pack is still probably well behind the times as far as cell phones and the internet goes, so I can't exactly look him up on social media either."

Ben's brow furrows. "Any idea how we might find him?"

I shake my head. "Not unless we want to go to Alabama and wait for him to get back."

"Are you sure that's where he's headed?"

I shrug. Randall and I were never close, so I have no clue where he might have decided to go. For all I know, he's taking a side trip to Alaska or something, though I'm not entirely sure how he would get there.

"Rossi paid to fly him up to Chicago and my—*Randall* is too cheap and possibly too incompetent to buy his own plane ticket," I say. "So maybe we could check with car rental companies?"



“What about Luke?” asks Julien. “Do you have a way to reach him?”

“No, I don’t have his number,” I say. “But Remy said he stayed behind to talk to the praetorians after the challenge. I bet one of them will have Luke’s number.”

And I might still have Smith’s card.

“What happened to the clothes I was wearing the night of the challenge?” I ask.

“I think Remy tossed them in the back of the SUV,” says Julien.

I blow out a breath. *Good.* As I head toward the door, I glance back at Ben. “There’s nothing else I should know, right? You’ve dropped all the bombshells you have for the evening?”

Ben’s lips twitch into a small smile. “Yeah.”

“Okay. I’m going to see if I can get Luke’s number, but I think we should put off figuring anything else out until the morning.”

*And I really want to talk all this over with my mate before making any decisions.*

Ben nods in agreement, then glances at Julien.

“I’ll ask my mom to make up one of the guest rooms for you,” says Julien in answer to Ben’s unasked question.

That settled, I make my way out of the office. The living room is still empty, so no one stops to question me when I jog

out to the SUV in the driveway. I tug at the latch on the back, but the hatch doesn't move.

*Crap. I need the—*

The vehicle lets out two quick chirps, and I glance toward the house to see Julien standing just inside the front door, holding the keys up. He gives me an amused smile and I return it, warmth flooding my chest. It's nice to have someone looking out for me, even with something as simple as remembering to unlock the car.

My second attempt at opening the back hatch works like a charm. I glance inside and grin. The backpack from my apartment—that I'd long given up for lost and had no idea anyone picked up—is also tucked into the corner of the trunk area. Next to it rests a small pile of clothing, my ripped sweat pants folded neatly on top.

Exactly what I was looking for.

I grab the pants and search the pockets. Thankfully, Smith's card is still there. The card stock is dirty and a little crumpled, but still plenty readable. Next, I take hold of my backpack, pulling it toward me.

My cell phone—another thing I thought I'd never see again—is in the front pocket exactly where I put it what feels like a million years ago but was really less than a week ago. An even more unexpected sight is the stack of money from H&H tucked in next to my phone.

*Looks like I can bring some benefit to the pack after all.* I chuckle and make a note to myself to give the cash to Julien.

My cell is unsurprisingly dead, so I tuck it back inside the front pocket next to the money, swing the backpack over my shoulder and head back into the house. Julien leads me into the office and hands me his phone. I quickly dial the number on the card.

After the first ring, a gruff voice answers. “This is Smith.”

“Hi,” I say. “This is Keir Anderson. I need—”

“What the hell, kid?” he exclaims. “I’ve been trying to reach you for hours. I was just about to try getting in contact with Matisse.”

“My phone is dead....” I say slowly, unnerved by the frantic tone of his voice.

“Well, I’m glad I’ve got you now because there’s something you need to know,” says Smith.

*I don’t even want to ask...* but I do anyway. “What?”

“Your uncle’s body turned up this afternoon.”

“His *body*?”

“Yeah,” says Smith. “We were getting ready to wrap up our report and head out when we got the call about a shifter murder. From the looks of it, Randall was tortured before he died. Any ideas who might have had it out for him and what they could have wanted from him?”

# THIRTY-SEVEN

## KEIR

RANDALL IS *dead*?

I've had about all the shocks and surprises I can take tonight. I'm not even sure how to begin processing this additional piece of information right now. My complete mental overload must be bad enough to show on my face, because Julien gently takes the phone from my hand, then puts his arm around my shoulders. He speaks quietly to Smith as he leads me upstairs to our bedroom.

At some point later, Julien is no longer on the phone and he's stripped everything off me but boxers and an over-sized t-shirt and tucked me into bed. He joins me, crawling in from the other side, then tugs me closer, curling his body around mine and burying his nose in my hair.

My libido perks up, but my utter exhaustion, both mental and physical, smashes it back down. There will be no fun times tonight.

*I hope Julien doesn't mind...*

The next thing I know, it's morning and I'm waking up cocooned in a comfortable warmth. Julien's larger form is wrapped around me, his morning wood making its interest known by poking me in the back. I wiggle back against him and Julien makes a pleased noise before running his hand down my side and grasping my hip to hold me still.

"There are at least two other people in this house right now," he says, his voice raspy. "My mom is more than likely already in the kitchen making breakfast and Ben is in one of the guest rooms."

I turn around to face him, nuzzling my nose against his neck and inhaling his sleep-warmed scent. "I can be quiet."

Julien chuckles. "Not quiet enough for shifter hearing."

"That's... probably true." I say reluctantly.

The corners of his mouth curve upward. "Plus, as tempting as you are, the praetorians will be here soon."

"What do you mean? Smith and Yang are coming here? Why?"

"You don't remember me telling you about their visit last night?" Julien leans back, then reaches up to stroke my cheek with his thumb. "I didn't realize you were quite that out of it."

I huff out a low laugh. "Yeah, my brain shut down somewhere between the revelation you might be able to put a bun in my oven and Smith telling me about Randall."

Julien makes a humming noise, his hand still pressed to my face. “And how are you feeling now?”

I consider the question for a second before shrugging. “I’m not sure, honestly. The whole omega pregnancy thing is still too abstract for me to get my brain around. It doesn’t feel *real* without seeing—or, I guess experiencing—it myself.” I sigh. “And as far as Randall’s death goes... I’m not sure what I’m *supposed* to feel about that. He wasn’t exactly the greatest person.”

“It’s still okay to feel sad,” says Julien. “There’s no right or wrong way to feel about someone’s death, regardless of who that person may have been in life.”

My mate has a point. Just because Randall isn’t someone I’m going to particularly miss, that doesn’t mean his death doesn’t affect me. Even now, twelve hours or so and a good night’s sleep later, there’s a hollow feeling in my chest that’s not quite grief or sadness, but something closer to... I don’t know. Disappointment maybe?

I didn’t lose a loving uncle—literally or figuratively—but I lost the *possibility* of ever having one and that’s the thing I’m not sure how to process.

There’s no five stages of mild disappointment.

In fact, I think I’m a little more upset about the woman I thought was my mother not being my mother than about Randall being dead. I never knew her. Well, not that I remember anyway, but I’d always held on to the fact that she’d loved me.

I suppose that was bullshit, though.

Sighing, I cuddle closer to Julien, and he wraps his arms around me, just holding me. I'll never get enough of moments like this, where I can simply relax and enjoy my mate's company. Sure, there's plenty of crap waiting for us once we get out of bed, but for this tiny space of time, there's only me and Julien.

"Any chance of kicking everyone out for a bit and taking some time for ourselves before we have to deal with any of this crap?" I ask, only half joking.

"Sorry." Julien shakes his head, then curls his hand around the back of my neck, guiding me to place my cheek against the bare skin of his chest.

"Yeah. I didn't think so."

"I need to talk to Remy before the praetorians get here. He didn't ask any questions last night when I asked him to get rid of everyone else, but I think he should know what's going on."

"Even about..." I let the words trail off as one of my hands curls around my stomach.

Julien sighs. "Yes, even about what Ben said. I'm not entirely sure I trust the guy yet and I'd like Remy to look into him more." He pauses. "That is, unless you..."

"I'm not sure I trust him either," I say. "Ben, I mean, not Remy. Sure, I believe most of what he said, like about Karina not being my mother and Theo was obviously pregnant at some point, but his timing is still odd."

Julien presses a kiss on the top of my head. “If anyone can figure out the truth, it’s Remy.”

“I suppose we have to get out of bed, don’t we?”

“Unfortunately.”

The idea of leaving this little slice of peace and contentedness isn’t very appealing, but the sooner we deal with this mess, the sooner Julien and I can get back to it.

I drag myself out of bed, happy to find my backpack sitting on the floor next to the dresser. Someone must have brought it in. At least I’ll face the day in my own clothes.

As I dig through the mis-mash of clothing shoved into the backpack, my fingers brush against the jagged edge of a piece of paper tucked along the side. I tug it out of the bag, my brows drawing together as I take in what’s written across it in unfamiliar handwriting: *Watch your back.*



# THIRTY-EIGHT

## KEIR

A VAGUE WARNING IS a useless warning, especially in this case. Whoever left this stupidly vague note is kind of an asshole in my opinion. The only thing this note does, besides making me paranoid, is make me suspicious of everyone I've met in the last week or so.

Hell, maybe even the last few months, since I have no idea how long this note has been in my backpack. For all I know, this note came from someone at my last stop before I ended up in Chicago and has been in there for months.

“What is it?” asks Julien, probably noticing how tense I suddenly am.

I hold the piece of paper up and wave it around. “Someone left me a note telling me to watch my back.”

“Who?”

“Damned if I know.” I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. Can’t I just have a normal life where something isn’t always going wrong?

Julien comes up behind me, one arm wrapping around my waist as he takes the note with his free hand. He skims it, then flips the paper over. Finding nothing else other than the vague warning, he makes a puzzled noise.

“Do you recognize the handwriting?” he asks.

“Nope. And I have no idea when it was put in my backpack either, so it could be referring to just about anything...” *And isn’t that just my luck that on top of everything else? Now I have to figure out who in my rather small social circle might be just waiting to betray me somehow.*

As if knowing exactly how quickly I’m descending into anxiety, Julien turns me around to face him, then tilts my chin up with one finger, forcing me to meet his eyes. “We’ll figure it out. For all we know, the note writer is the one we shouldn’t trust.”

“We?” I raise my brows.

“Of course, *we*.” Julien chuckles, then presses a kiss to my forehead. “You’re not alone anymore, Keir. You don’t have to do any of this on your own.”

“Somehow I think it’s still going to take me a while to get used to that,” I reply as I allow the tension to leak out of my body.

His lips brush across my forehead again. “And I’ll be here when you do.”

And he really means that. Because he’s mine and I’m his.

For maybe the first time, the fact that I found my actual *fated mate* truly registers. Sure, my heart got the idea, but my brain didn’t catch on until right this second. Just last night I was worried he might leave me because I’m so much trouble, but now it’s really sinking in that *he’s not going to leave me*.

I’ll have to tell myself that about a million more times before I truly believe it on every level, but it’s definitely progress that I can admit to myself that he’s here to stay. After spending twenty-one years on the planet, most of them alone and four of them on the run...I actually have someone in my corner.

This is what Rachel meant when she said I’m Julien’s strongest ally. Because he’s mine too.

“Thanks,” I whisper, burying my face in his chest and wrapping my arms around his waist. “I know things are a little crazy right now, but—”

“It doesn’t matter,” says Julien. “You’re my mate. Whether things are crazy or perfectly calm, I’m not going anywhere.”

This time, he doesn’t bother with a gentle brush of lips over my forehead. Instead, he claims my mouth in a fierce kiss, his tongue sweeping past my lips to tangle with mine. I match his hunger, pressing as close to him as I can, practically devouring his mouth. He slowly pushes me backward, our lips never parting, until my shoulder blades hit the wall. His hands slide

down my sides and cup my ass, then lift me so my legs can wrap around his waist.

My cock goes rigid and an answering hardness meets mine as Julien slowly thrusts his hips, creating an almost maddening friction that's somehow both too much and too little. A keening, hungry noise breaks free from my chest and Julien lets out a groan. He deepens the kiss and snaps his hips forward, then slides a hand past my waistband. One finger trails down to—

A loud knock on the door startles us apart, the two of us red-faced and panting.

“*What?*” growls out Julien, still holding me up against the wall.

“Sorry to interrupt,” says Remy, a hint of amusement in the words. “But I thought you should know that you aren’t exactly alone right now.”

Julien sighs, leaning forward to rest his forehead against mine. “Who else is here besides Mom and Ben?”

“Well, me for starters,” replies Remy. “Dante and Brody are downstairs too.”

Julien slowly releases my legs. “Fine. We’ll be down in a minute.”

“Try not to get distracted again. I’ll pull Mom away from the kitchen and meet you and Keir in your office. We need to have a quick family meeting.”

Julien grumbles something, but my brain is stuck on a single word: *family*.

Rachel's welcome and Remy's easy acceptance of me are more things that hadn't fully registered yet, but I actually have a family now. Even *without* adding Ben to the equation.

No matter what the problems going on in the pack are, Remy and Rachel are clearly on Team... Julier? Keilien? Andertisse? Yeah, I don't think there's a good combination of mine and Julien's names, so I'll just say Team Matisse. After all, Julien has claimed me as his mate even if I haven't legally taken his name, and I have no emotional attachment to Anderson, anyway.

Julien gives me another quick kiss before we get dressed, and ten minutes later, the two of us make our way downstairs. My mate ushers me toward the office, then detours into the kitchen, where he grabs two cups of coffee, handing one of them to me as the two of us enter the office together.

Julien walks behind his desk, tugging me along with him. He sits in the chair, then pulls me down on his lap. Remy winks at me and my face heats. But I don't move.

"So," says Remy. "What's the story with Keir's dad?"

Julien and I share a look. I nod.

"That's something I wanted you to look into a little more," says Julien. "But first, how much do you actually know about male omegas?"

# THIRTY-NINE

## JULIEN

I DON'T THINK KEIR is handling everything life is currently throwing at him half as well as he's pretending. But, then again, even though he's my fated mate, we haven't known each other very long, so his coping strategies simply might not look the same as mine.

Still, my alpha instincts bristle at the worry in those beautiful blue-gray eyes every time some new complication pops up. I hate that he doesn't fully trust me yet—trust *us* yet—and my wolf just wants to take him back upstairs and keep him naked and satisfied until he can fully relax into our mating bond.

Unfortunately, that's not going to happen today and the best I can do is keep him close, reassure him, and hope he'll realize I'm not going anywhere despite what the damage from his childhood and his experiences the last four years on the run might be telling him.

I swear, if Randall wasn't already dead, I'd kill him myself, along with everyone else responsible for putting all this shame and doubt into my beautiful mate's head. Ever since Ben showed up yesterday, Keir has seemed off, like he truly thinks that if he's too much trouble, I'll set him aside and kick him out.

That will *never* happen.

The timing may not have been ideal and the current circumstances make things extra stressful, but the fates gave him to me and I'm not letting him go. He might not be exactly what I expected, but Keir is perfect, both as a person and for me. I just wish he could see that.

I quickly fill Mom and Remy in about Ben and what he said, then wrap my arms around Keir's waist and tug him closer, pressing my nose into his hair to inhale his scent. His body is tense, as if bracing for impact—or, more likely, rejection—though I don't think he realizes it. He's practically vibrating with anxiety in my lap, biting at his lower lip as he waits to see how Mom and Remy respond.

Remy blinks a couple times, shocked into silence, but Mom hops to her feet and comes over to take Keir's hands in hers. She squeezes his fingers. "Sure, it's a little strange, but this doesn't change anything. I'm glad Julien brought you home, and I'm happy to have you as part of the family."

I guess Mom picked up on Keir's anxiousness about being accepted as well. She's nothing if not perceptive. Of all the things I have to offer Keir besides my love and loyalty, my

family is the most valuable. Mom, Remy, and even Dante, if he ever gets his head out of his ass and makes a move on my brother.

Remy chuckles. “Well, on the bright side, this might get the elders to shut up about a surrogate.” He grins at Keir. “I don’t want to be the one to explain it to them, though. William might blow a gasket.”

Keir’s body relaxes, and he lets out a soft laugh. “That guy does seem a bit high-strung.”

“I’ll deal with William,” says Mom in a hard voice.

“Before we tell anyone about this, I want to know a little bit more about Ben,” I say, giving Remy a pointed look.

“Of course,” he replies. “I figured you’d want me to look into him, so I already did a cursory search last night after you went to bed. Assuming he is who he says he is, Ben O’Connor was born into a pack who holds territory near Bangor, Maine. He lived there with his pack until about twenty-four years ago. After that, he stayed off the grid for a while and didn’t pop back up until a few years ago.”

“What about... my other dad?” asks Keir. “Did you find any mentions of a Theo?”

Remy shakes his head. “But I didn’t know to look for any either. That’s what I’ll focus on today.”

I nod. “Good idea.”

A knock sounds at the office door. “Julien?”



“You can come in, Dante,” I reply.

Dante opens the door and pokes his head inside. “There are two praetorians at the door asking for you and Keir.”

“Go ahead and let them in.” I pat Keir’s thigh and he stands. I follow suit, then turn my attention to the rest of my family. “We’ll regroup this evening for dinner.”

Mom and Remy both nod, then head out of the office. Dante’s gaze tracks my brother, my second turning his head and staring after Remy for a beat before giving himself a shake and going to let the praetorians inside. Keir must catch Dante’s antics too, because he smirks and his eyes dart up to me. He raises his brows in question.

“The pining has been going on for years,” I say, smiling. “But Dante’s too stubborn to do anything about it.”

Keir cuddles into my side, rubbing his cheek on my chest. “Thanks for... being here.”

I press a kiss to the top of his head. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

A minute or so later, Dante is back, directing two praetorians into my office.

“Alpha Matisse,” says the male as he dips his chin in greeting. “I don’t know if you remember us from Chicago, but I’m Craig Smith.” He gestures to the female praetorian beside him. “And this is Miranda Yang.”

“Welcome,” I say, striding over to the two of them. I shake hands with both of them and then gesture to the chairs. “Please

have a seat.”

They each take a chair and I move to sit behind my desk. My mate remains standing and leans against the back of my chair.

Smith gets straight to the point, focusing his attention on Keir. “The best we can tell your uncle died around three AM this morning. When was the last time you saw him?”

“A few hours before the challenge,” replies Keir. He explains about the negotiations with Rossi and how Randall retreated to his room once he had his hands on the money.

“We found no money on him or left behind in his hotel room,” says Yang.

“Could it have been a robbery?” asks Keir.

“That’s doubtful,” says Yang, shaking her head. “First of all, Randall was a shifter, so there’s no way a human did this and if another shifter wanted to rob him, they wouldn’t have bothered with the rest of it.”

“You mean the whole torture thing?” asks Keir.

“Yes,” says Yang. “Given the location and the condition of the body, the perpetrator likely drugged or incapacitated Randall then brought him to a remote location for questioning.”

“So, what do you want from me?” asks Keir. “I have no idea who might have killed him.”

Smith and Yang share a look, then Smith reaches into his pocket and pulls out a folder sheet of paper. “I wanted to get

your take on this,” says Smith as he slides the paper across the top of the desk. “We found it on the ground near the body.”

Keir grabs the paper and unfolds it, holding it out so I can see it as well.

It’s a missing child poster with a picture of a young boy, maybe three or four, with reddish hair and brown eyes. He’s a stranger to me, but Keir inhales sharply.

“That’s *Luke*,” he says.

# FORTY

## KEIR

RANDALL WAS NEVER EXACTLY a doting father to Luke, but this... I don't understand.

I stare down at the flyer, my gaze tracing the familiar-but-not features of the young child's face under the '*Have You Seen Me*' banner. The picture is clearly old, but I can still see Luke in those brown eyes. If I hadn't seen my cousin—not *my cousin, doubly so apparently*—recently I might not have noted the similarities, but there's no mistaking them now.

Smith rubs at his chin. "How sure are you of that?"

"If this kid isn't Luke, he's at least related," I say, picking at the edges of the paper. "Do you think the person who killed Randall was looking for Luke?"

"That's the current theory," says Yang. "What we can't quite piece together is why now. The person we'd really like to talk to is Luke. We've tried calling him at the number he left with

us, but it goes straight to voicemail. Do you know where he might have gone?”

“No clue,” I say. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t really care who killed Randall. Given this flyer, it’s clear the guy was a criminal and kidnapping seems to be something my old pack had a habit of.”

“What do you mean?” asks Yang, her brows drawing together.

I glance at Julien. “We recently found out that I wasn’t born into the pack either.”

Smith and Yang share a look, clearly surprised by this new information.

“I don’t think it has anything to do with Randall’s death, except maybe tangentially,” I continue. “But it might not be a bad idea for the triumvirate to send some people down to Alabama and check things out.”

Smith pulls a notepad from his pocket and flips through the pages. “That would be the Sweet Water pack located outside Tuscaloosa, right?”

I nod. “Whoever ends up going should take backup. Luke is technically Randall’s heir, but if he hasn’t taken control of the pack, then I’m not sure who will be in charge now. My old pack was never been fond of outsiders.”

Yang arches a brow. “How much of an understatement is that, Mr. Anderson?”

A laugh breaks out of my chest. “If I thought it would help, I’d offer to go along, but I’ve already got enough to deal with.”

Yang smiles. “Of course.”

“While you’re here,” says Julien, “do you mind giving me an update on the situation with Rossi and the Chicago pack?”

“Rossi is still in custody. He’s currently being transported to New York where he’ll stand trial for his crimes,” says Yang. “Since he refused to name someone to lead in his absence, a praetorian has taken over responsibility for the pack.”

“Is there anything I should be worried about?” asks Julien.

Yang shakes her head. “I know Farah Khan personally. Chicago is in good hands with her.”

“Thanks,” says Julien.

Both praetorians nod.

“I’ll be in touch about what we find out,” says Smith as he passes both me and Julien new business cards. “If you hear anything or if Luke shows up here, please give us a call.”

“Of course,” says Julien, taking the card and tucking it into the top drawer of his desk. He rises to his feet and walks to me, resting a hand on my lower back. “Now, if—”

The office door flies open, and William comes stomping inside. “Julien, I must insist that you...” The older man’s voice trails off as he notices our company, then his eyes narrow in on

me. “Just what have you done to bring down the triumvirate’s attention on this pack?”

I shrink back at the venom in his voice. He was an asshole the other day, but now his tone holds nothing but absolute hatred. My mate tenses beside me and I can practically feel his hackles rising, but William’s attention is focused only on me.

“You’re nothing but trouble.” A malicious glint flashes in his eyes. “An abomination.”

My breath stalls in my chest and I freeze in place as the word ‘abomination’ echoes through my head. If he’d said something like that at the meeting the other day, I would have had some smart-ass comment for him. Today, after all the crazy revelations yesterday evening, I’ve got nothing.

“Get. Out,” says Julien in a low voice.

William glances at him. “Excuse me?”

“Get out of my office. *Now.*”

William makes a choked noise and redness creeps up his neck and into his face. “Who do you think—”

“I am your Alpha,” growls Julien. “And I’ve had about enough of your disrespect toward myself and especially toward my mate. I’ve tried to be reasonable, to give you time to adjust to the idea of your new Alpha Mate, but you’ve fought me at every turn and it stops. Today.”

“Fine. I will await your summons, *Alpha.*” William sneers the title, then turns on his heel, and strides back out of the office.

Smith glances at me. “Is that what you meant by having enough to deal with?”

I shrug and look away. “It’s a long story.”

Smith’s brows pull together, but he nods in understanding before he and Yang exit the office, shutting the door behind them.

I take a deep breath and force some snarkiness into my voice. “How long should we let that jerk wait?”

“I’m an idiot,” says Julien in a low voice.

“Huh?” My gaze shifts from the door to my mate, who has returned behind his desk, his elbows resting on the surface and one hand rubbing at his forehead.

He glances up at me, his expression stricken. “I’m so sorry, Keir.”

“Um... okay? What exactly are you apologizing for?”

“The other day at the council meeting to start with,” he replies. “I wasn’t assertive enough about getting you officially instated as Alpha Mate, and now William thinks he can just walk into my office and say something like that to you.”

“No worries,” I say, shrugging. “It’s not anything I haven’t heard before.”

“That doesn’t make it right.” He shakes his head. “You’ve been so unsure about your status here—and with me. I never considered it’s *because* of me. I’ve taken your seemingly unflappable ability to adapt for granted. You’ve been thrown



into the deep end in more ways than one and I've been watching you drowning without realizing I'm holding a life preserver."

Warmth fills my chest and I walk over to him, then lower myself into his lap and rest my cheek on his shoulder. "Yes, I've been more anxious about this whole thing than I've been willing to admit, but you're not responsible for someone else's actions."

Julien wraps his arms around my waist and buries his nose in my hair. "If I haven't said it enough, I'm happy you're here and I'm so glad I found you. Regardless of what anyone else thinks, I'm not letting you go."

"I'm coming to realize that," I say, then softly add, "Thanks for not giving up on me. I've never had that before."

"Thanks for supporting me with the elders, even though I haven't done the best job of returning the favor," says Julien. "I promise I'll do better from now on."

I chuckle, the sound barely more than a puff of breath. "You and me against the world?"

"If that's what it takes, then yes. *Always.*"

# FORTY-ONE

## KEIR

A SINGLE CONVERSATION CAN'T solve every problem. My standing here in Madison with the pack—and with Julien—might feel a little more solid at the moment, but that doesn't mean everything is instantly fixed. Besides the fact that there's still the whole male pregnancy issue and figuring out what to do about Ben, William is going to need to be dealt with.

I haven't been here long enough to truly understand the dynamic between Julien and the elders, but I know it's not good for the pack. But that's an issue we can deal with later. William isn't going anywhere.

I'm not passing up this opportunity to steal a little cuddle time with my mate. So, I just sit here in Julien's lap, his arms curled around me, as we simply enjoy each other's presence. The mating bond is a cheerful hum under my skin as the closeness helps cement it even further.

Emotional intimacy is just as important as physical, and that's something Julien and I haven't had enough time to build. I still have doubts, but that's more because of my general sense of unworthiness than anything Julien has done. I believe Julien when he says he'll never leave me, but it will definitely take some time before all the programming of my past lets me believe I really *deserve* to be here.

There's no critic quite like the one in my own head.

After a few minutes of silent cuddling, Julien nuzzles at my neck. "What problem do you want to tackle first?" he asks, his breath brushing across my ear. "Or maybe we can just kick everyone out and go back to bed?"

I chuckle, closing my eyes and leaning into his touch. "I think we'd both feel better if we went ahead and dealt with William. If you kick him out, he'll only come back later. We might as well figure out what the hell he wants now."

"He wants me to follow along like a good little puppet as he tugs my strings," mumbles Julien.

"Probably true," I say. "But it's time you put that idea out of his head once and for all. Your mom told me how this whole thing with the elders started and it's admirable that you want to keep the peace or whatever, but catering to their whims isn't a good long-term plan."

Julien sighs. "They never would have pulled this shit with my dad."

“Maybe, maybe not. They only pull it with you because you have a history of appeasing them and they think they can get away with it.” I turn around, straddling his legs, and cup his face with my hands. “The council of elders isn’t the strength of this pack. *You* are. They might be here to help you, but you don’t *need* their approval.”

His blue eyes soften, and he leans forward, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “Does it make me weak if I say I really needed to hear that?” His gaze goes to his lap. “After my dad... I’ve been so terrified I’d mess up, that something I did would bring the entire pack down. That’s why I’ve let the elders have so much say. Mom’s been trying to tell me that, but I was too stubborn to listen.”

“It’s a good thing you have me then.” I wink.

Julien growls playfully. “Yes, it is. Your ‘council’ is worth ten times more than anything the elders have to say.”

My brows draw together. “I don’t know if I’d go quite that far. I don’t know much about running a pack, but after having a front-row seat to the rougher side of pack politics, I can see the benefits of having some ways to check an Alpha’s power.”

“What do you mean?”

“My... I’ll just call him ‘dad’ otherwise it’ll get too confusing. He was Randall’s brother, the two of them only a couple years apart, but my father was never happy with his position as second. He waited, biding his time until Randall was injured on a hunt, then challenged for control of the pack. Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately since I have no idea

what kind of Alpha he might have been—Randall’s injury didn’t prevent him from winning the challenge.” A shudder travels down my back, and Julien tightens his arms around me in response. “And my old pack follows the doctrines of blood debt.”

“I’ve heard the term before, but what exactly does that mean?”

“Basically, Randall won the challenge, therefore my dad had to pay in blood and Randall got to choose the method by which the debt was paid. Randall beat my dad repeatedly, until he was unable to heal, then Randall forced him to shift and skinned him alive in front of the entire pack. Once he completely removed the pelt, Randall mounted my dad’s decapitated head on a spike in the center of the compound.”

“Shit...” Julien whispers, his voice a little shaky as he pulls me closer. “Is that all?”

I shake my head. “No. If I hadn’t been beaten almost to death and kicked out the next night, I would have been expected to either challenge Randall myself or demonstrate my loyalty to him... *a hand raised against the Alpha shall be removed.*” I sigh and flex the fingers of my right hand. “Even if it was my dad who challenged Randall, he was dead, so that debt would fall on his blood—me. Well, we all thought I was his blood at the time anyway.”

“If you hadn’t gotten out when you did...” Julien intertwines his fingers with mine and pulls my hands up, pressing his lips

to the back of them. “I never thought I’d be *grateful* for them nearly killing you.”

“Me either.” I let out a shaky laugh. “But now you can see why a council of elders might not be such a bad thing. If nothing else, my dad’s death might not have been such a spectacle if there had been someone to talk sense into Randall.”

“But didn’t you say your pack had a cleric? Isn’t that kind of brutality in opposition to the sanctity of life or whatever? Why didn’t the cleric put a stop to it?”

I snort. “It was the cleric’s idea.”

# FORTY-TWO

## KEIR

FOR ALL THAT JULIEN is Alpha of a fairly large, successful pack, sometimes he seems pretty naïve when it comes to the darker side of pack politics. Or maybe I'm just cynical as hell. I guess that makes sense growing up in the pack that I did.

“The cleric...?” starts Julien, but his voice trails off and then he just blinks at me like he can't figure out how to complete the sentence.

“The cleric was kind of my pack's version of William, except exponentially worse,” I say. “What happened with my dad—the beating and the skinning after losing a challenge—is some kind of outdated ritual outlined in an obscure legal code. I don't know all the details, but the cleric has an entire library of old books that lay out every pack law going back hundreds of years. As you can imagine, the older the law, the more bloody it is, and the pack goes by whichever laws the cleric decides are ‘appropriate.’”

“That’s... I don’t even know what. Why in the world would people choose to stay there? Why didn’t they leave and go to other packs?” asks Julien.

“There wasn’t a whole lot of *choice* in the matter,” I say. “By design, the laws and customs the pack followed kept the members uneducated, isolated, and indoctrinated. Most of us rarely left the compound and none of us attended human school. I’d never even used a computer before I left. Those first couple weeks on my own were terrifying. I knew nothing about how the world worked. I had no ID, no money, nothing but the clothes on my back.”

I look away from my mate, glancing down at my hands before continuing, “You think they’re stupid for staying, but if I’d had the option of going back at that point? I would have done it without a second thought. That’s how weak I am. If I’d been stronger, I would have left the moment I figured out what I was, but the fear instilled in me for my entire life kept me there until I was *forced* to leave.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply I thought less of anyone for staying.” Julien gently grasps my chin and lifts my face until I meet his gaze. “You’re not weak. You were barely more than a child and everything you’d ever known was ripped away from you. The fact that you kept going and built a life of your own is a testament to your strength.”

“Yeah, some ‘life’ I built,” I say dryly. “Constantly on the run. No attachments. Shitty apartment. Crappy job. No—”

“But all that led you to me,” he says, tugging me closer.



“True.” I give him a soft smile. “That’s definitely a plus.”

Julien chuckles, then sighs. “Now that I know exactly how lucky I am to only have disgruntled elders to deal with, do you think we’ve let William stew long enough?”

I laugh. “Yeah, as much as I’d prefer to leave him out there for the rest of the day, we should probably figure out what’s got him all worked up this time.”

Julien calls Remy and tells him to show William back into the office. I get out of Julien’s lap and position myself next to his chair with one hand resting on my mate’s shoulder. As William enters, his gaze takes in the new tableau—Julien and I side by side—and his expression sours, clearly not fond of the idea of seeing Julien and me as a united front.

His eyes narrow. “Jul—Alpha Matisse, were you aware this boy was kicked out of his former pack?”

*Really? That’s the emergency he barged into Julien’s office for?* I hold back a snort.

“You mean am I aware that my mate’s former pack tried to kill him and then abandoned him? If so, yes,” replies Julien in a smooth voice.

“Is that the story he told you?” William wrinkles his nose. “Well—”

“Silence!” yells Julien, slamming his fist on top of the desk to punctuate the word. “If all you’re here to do is disparage my mate, you are free to leave.” His gaze slides to me and we share a look of understanding before he turns his attention

back to William. “Keir and I have agreed to discuss surrogacy.”

It’ll never happen, but William doesn’t need to know that.

“That’s not enough to appease the council anymore,” says William. “Not after I tell them what I learned about his past. This wolf brings no benefit to this pack.”

“We already covered this, William,” says my mate, remaining calm. “Keir is my fated mate. He doesn’t have to do anything but be himself and stand by my side.”

“No one will accept—”

There’s a loud knock at the office door and Julien holds up a hand to stop the elder from continuing.

“Come in,” calls Julien.

The door opens and Remy pokes his head in. “Sorry to interrupt.” He waves at his brother, then his gaze scans the room until his eyes find me. “I need to borrow Keir for a minute.”

Julien’s brows pull together. “We’re in the middle of something. Can you—”

“It’s important,” says Remy, his gaze darts toward William and then back to me. “It won’t take long.”

“Okay...,” I say slowly, confused as to what Remy could possibly need from me. I squeeze Julien’s shoulder, then head out of the office. Once I’m in the living room with the office

door shut behind me, I turn to Remy, taking in his furrowed brow.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

Remy releases a slow breath, his expression softening into sympathy as he reaches out to touch my shoulder. “I don’t know exactly how you guys left things last night, but Ben’s gone.”

“Gone?” I repeat, an uncomfortable feeling settling in my stomach as Remy nods.

“Mom asked me to check to see if he’d gotten any breakfast and when I got up there, the guest room was empty.” He holds out a folded sheet of paper. “He left a note at least.”

# FORTY-THREE

## JULIEN

WILLIAM WATCHES KEIR LEAVE with an unreadable expression, then turns his attention to me. He seemed caught off guard by Keir and I standing together when he first entered, but he quickly reverts to his ‘I know what’s best’ attitude as soon as the door closes behind my mate. The elder lifts his chin, doing his best to look down his nose at me, and purses his lips like he just sucked on a lemon.

I wish I could just throttle that condescending attitude out of him. Or at least take a swipe at him with my claws. But neither of those things would be a good idea.

As much as I hate the current situation with the elders, their input can be helpful and, if possible, I’d rather have their support than not. As a group, they have enough sway with the pack that they could make my life very difficult if they wanted. So, for now, I’ll play nice.... well, I won’t draw blood anyway.

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms in front of my chest. “How can I help you, William?”

“You can help me, this pack, and yourself by getting rid of him.”

*Straight to the point, huh?* Not that I expected much different.

I let out a disbelieving huff. “I’ve already told you that’s not happening. Keir is my fated mate and whatever you think—”

“You see, that’s the problem,” he says, cutting me off. “Your bond has never been verified. How do you know he’s your fated mate?”

My brows draw together, and I straighten in my chair. “Excuse me?”

“How do you know *for sure* that boy is your fated mate?” William speaks slower this time, emphasizing each word as he studies my face. He tilts his head to the side. “How do you know there’s not some...feature of male omegas that allows them to fake being an Alpha’s fated mate?”

“That’s ridiculous.” I shake my head, immediately dismissing the idea. “How did you even come up with that nonsense?”

William pauses, a calculating glint in his eyes. “It has been brought to my attention that there are recorded instances of male omegas tricking pack Alphas into mating bonds in order to gain control of prosperous packs.”

“That’s impossible.” *Is this guy insane?* “There’s no way to fake a fated mate bond.”

“It’s entirely possible,” he replies. “That’s why, historically, male omegas are considered abominations. They have a reputation for leading Alphas astray, resulting in the ruination of any pack they are a part of.”

I narrow my eyes. “If that’s the case, how come I’ve never heard anything like that?”

William shrugs. “The records surrounding male omegas aren’t as comprehensive as they could be.”

“Okay, let’s assume that what you say is possible. Why did you wait until now to bring it up? Why didn’t you attempt this argument in front of the other elders?”

Those questions give him pause. His gaze darts to the side as he appears to consider his answer. Finally, he says, “I did not have a chance to verify the information I received in time for that meeting.”

“Information you received from whom exactly?” I ask, my voice dropping low. Whether or not what William is saying is true, I don’t like it. Not because I doubt Keir, but because I know how much Keir doubts himself.

Keir’s first instinct is to run. If there’s any truth at all to these claims of William’s... Keir will convince himself that he’s done something wrong and he’ll be out the door before I can try to convince him to stay. Even if there’s some truth to William’s assertion, I don’t want Keir to go.

If male omegas can have more than one fated mate or if they can choose them somehow, Keir didn't know that. There's no way he's been faking this whole time. What we have is real, and I'm damn sure not planning to give him up.

Keir's *mine*.

William's lips tilt into an arrogant smile, one that makes me bristle. "Where do you think I got the information?"

My hands involuntarily curl into fists, my claws beginning to extend and digging into my palms, as my nostrils flare with anger. "Answer the fucking question."

He tuts, then rolls his eyes. "Where else would I have gotten it? I called his former pack."

My body goes cold as everything Keir just told me about his old pack runs through my mind. Thanks to William, the odds are good they now know Keir is still alive, but what that means, I'm not entirely sure. Randall's dead, but there's no telling what the cleric might do. Something tells me that sadistic asshole is probably the source of William's information.

*Would the pack come after Kier? Try to finish what they started that night?*

"What. Did. You. Tell. Them." I bite the question out, struggling to control my wolf that wants to rip William's throat out for likely putting my mate in danger.

"That one of their wayward wolves was here claiming to be your fated mate," says William dismissively.

“Who gave you permission to—”

“The elders have a right to know the background of someone you’re putting forth as Alpha Mate,” he snaps. “And it’s a good thing I called to check. Did your so-called ‘mate’ tell you about his history of flaunting pack laws?”

I glower at the older man across from me. “I don’t care about whatever laws Keir may have ‘flaunted.’ They probably weren’t worth the paper they’re written on. That pack follows outdated—”

“And did you know you aren’t the first Alpha Keir’s tried to charm?”

I’m stunned into silence for a moment, processing his words.

William smirks at my lack of response. “A month or so before Keir was exiled, he tried to seduce a visiting Alpha, one who already had a mate. It was an embarrassment to his pack, and it was only because of the benevolence of the Alpha in question that Keir wasn’t put down right then.” A smug smile breaks across William’s face. “I guess your ‘*fated mate*’ didn’t bother to tell you about that little... indiscretion, did he?”



# FORTY-FOUR

## KEIR

I STARE DOWN AT the sheet of paper Remy handed me, the edges crinkling in my grip. My mind is surprisingly blank. Much like Randall's death, I don't know how to feel about Ben leaving. There's disappointment that I didn't have a chance to get to know him, but there's definitely some anger, too. What was the point of him coming here at all if he was just going to abandon me again?

Remy leads me to the couch and takes a seat next to me, setting his hand gently on my elbow in a supportive gesture as I open the note.

Unfolding the paper causes the small photo of Ben and Theo that had been tucked inside to flutter down and land on my thigh. I glance at it, taking a moment to study the two young men—neither of them any older than I am now—in the picture before beginning to read.

*Keir,*

*First, I must apologize for leaving like this. Finding out you are alive and seeing for myself the man you have grown into has brought me more joy than you can imagine.*

*The second thing I need to apologize for is much harder to explain. You're under the impression that Theo is dead, and that's my fault because I didn't bother to correct that assumption.*

*As far as I know, Theo is alive. He's just no longer my mate.*

*For most shifters, mate bonds are nearly unbreakable, but that's not the case for omegas. I don't know how it works, but I've always thought of it as a way for nature to make sure omegas weren't forced to stay in a relationship with someone who would use them or mistreat them.*

*I'm not sure how Theo found out about that loophole, but he never forgave me for your loss. He broke our bond and left me not long after you were taken, but I've never stopped loving him. I need to find him to, If nothing else, at least let him know you're alive.*

*I'll be in touch.*

*Love, Ben*

What the hell? I thought fated mates *had* to stay together. Isn't that where the whole 'fated' bit comes in? I understand where Ben is coming from and why he left—sort of—but that doesn't make the situation any less confusing. I silently hand the note to Remy and wait as he skims the words, his brows rising as he reaches the end.

“Is what he says about omegas being able to get out of mate bonds true?” I ask.

“I’m not sure,” says Remy, frowning. “But if the elders get wind of this...”

Remy doesn’t need to complete the sentence for me to know exactly where his mind is: If the elders find out there’s a possibility my bond with Julien could be broken, they’ll be even more insistent on getting rid of me—especially William.

*But Julien would never do that... right?*

The fact that my first instinct is still to doubt my mate makes nausea churn in my stomach, but even though Julien and I have made a lot of forward progress over the past few days, my baggage hasn’t disappeared. Closing my eyes, I blow out a breath, smother my insecurities, and pull myself together. I’m Alpha Mate. I should act like it.

*Well, fake it till I make it, anyway.*

Yet, even as I try to convince myself everything is fine, my brain decides to jump to an unwanted conclusion. Secrets always have a way of coming out and, as much trouble as this one could cause for Julien with the elders, maybe me leaving would be the best thing for him.

Remy narrows his eyes at whatever expression must be on my face. “You’re not going anywhere, Keir. You promised him you wouldn’t run and, despite what you might be thinking at the moment, he’s *not* better off without you.”

Sometimes I could swear my mate's brother is a mind reader. The way he can predict my thoughts so accurately after knowing me less than a week is almost like magic. There's no point in claiming I wasn't thinking exactly what he accused me of, because, once again, Remy can read me way too well and he'd know that was a blatant lie. My cheeks heat and I avert my eyes, feeling a little too *seen*.

Despite the hint of discomfort, the fact that someone cares enough about me to want me around gives me a warm feeling in my chest. Sure, it's not necessarily about *me*. After all, I punched Remy in the face not long after meeting him, but he knows I make his brother happy even though I have my own doubts.

Remy places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "We'll figure it out. Until then—"

A loud crash from inside Julien's office interrupts whatever Remy was about to say. A loud thud vibrates the door as something is slammed into it, followed by another thud and then a roar rips through the air. I haven't seen Julien angry enough to make a sound like that, but something deep inside my chest recognizes the sound of his rage.

I take a half involuntary step toward the door, but Remy grabs my arm. "I think we need to see what's going on," I say. "Julien sounds almost murderous and a dead elder is the last thing we need."

Remy's brows are drawn together with concern, but he still looks undecided. Another loud thump comes from inside the

office.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” says Remy finally as he releases my arm.

In the office, we find a livid Julien, red-faced and snarling, holding William up against the wall by bracing his forearm against the elder’s throat. As we watch, Julien lets up for a second, then slams William back into the wall.

I guess that explains the thudding noise. It was the back of William’s head hitting the plaster. Repeatedly. It couldn’t have happened to a better guy. Though... probably not the best way to keep the peace with the elders. A fact Remy recognizes right away. He rushes over to Julien, tugging at his arm, trying to get his brother to release William.

“Julien,” says Remy firmly. “Let. Go.”

Julien turns his snarl on Remy. “This mangy asshole is so fond of packs who follow the old laws. Maybe I should show him what that would mean for him.”

Remy stops pulling at his brother’s arm and takes a step backward, his hands up in a calming gesture. “Whatever the problem is, this isn’t the way to solve it.”

Julien narrows his eyes on William, the expression colder than any other I’ve seen before on my mate. “You are old, well past your prime. You are weak. Under the old laws, you would already be dead, cast out when you were no longer useful.”

William coughs, his face turning red, but he can’t get enough air to respond. Still, there’s defiance in his gaze. Julien presses

his arm harder against William's throat and the elder's arrogance turns to fear, then panic as his face turns blue and he scratches desperately at Julien's arm.

Does it make me a bad person if I'm kind of turned on seeing this side of Julien? I know there was the whole challenge with Derek, but I've never seen my mate act quite so... Alpha-y. It's pretty hot.

Hot enough that—okay, I'm definitely a horrible person. I glance down at the floor and try to think the least sexy thoughts I can. In the thirty seconds it takes for me to, ahem, calm down, Remy has gotten Julien to release the elder and the younger Matisse has his hand on William's back, muttering into his ear.

Julien retreats to the corner, facing the wall as he clenches and unclenches his hands. I walk to my mate's side, conscious of the rage practically vibrating off of him. But none of that anger is aimed at me. In fact, the second I'm close enough, Julien grabs me, picking me up and wrapping me in his arms, like he's afraid I'm going to disappear.

I relax into his hold, running a hand up and down his back in a comforting gesture. Julien buries his nose in the crook of my neck, inhaling deeply, as if he's memorizing my scent.

“What's going on?” I ask.

“He called your old pack,” says Julien in a strained voice.

“Okay,” I say, drawing out the word. “I'm not thrilled about that and it's a shitty thing for him to do, but why is it causing

this reaction?”

Julien lets me go, setting me down on my feet, then placing his hands on my shoulders. “They’re claiming that you were never released from the pack and that they won’t approve our mating.”

I scoff. “They tried to kill me. I’m pretty sure that means they released me.”

Julien shakes his head. “You said they go by the old laws.”

“Yeah...and?”

“Death would have released you,” says Julien. “*Escape* did not.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.”

“That’s what I said.” Julien’s gaze shifts to William, and his lips pull away from his teeth in another snarl. “But after talking to your old pack, William took it upon himself to contact the triumvirate and request a hearing.”

“What does that mean?”

“That means they’re going to send a magistrate to hear the case.”

“The *case*?” I exclaim. “What case?”

“The case your old pack is bringing to demand you be returned to them.”

# FORTY-FIVE

## KEIR

I HAVE TO SAY, of all the ways for my old pack to screw me over, this has got to be one of the most ironic. They didn't want me when they had me, even before they knew I'm an omega. But now that someone else *does*? They think they can just waltz back into my life and I'll go willingly. Nothing can make me go back there.

*Or can it?*

I shoot a worried look at Remy. "Can they do that? Make me go back to Alabama?"

Remy's brow furrows, his face wearing an expression that I can't quite read. "I don't know," he says after an uncomfortably long pause.

Isn't that just great? The person who normally has all the answers doesn't have one for this. That definitely doesn't bode well for my chances.



I blow out a breath and try to calm my racing heart—and brain. “Okay. So what’s the plan? Do I get a lawyer? Wait... Do *you* know any lawyers? Because I don’t. I’ve never needed one before because I don’t think I’ve ever had a hearing for, well, anything. Ever. Not even that time I was arrested the other day. Because—”

Julien places his hand over my mouth, gently pressing his fingers against my lips to stop my anxious ramble. “It’s okay, Keir. We’ll figure it out. No one here is going to let them take you anywhere you don’t want to go.”

A snort comes from the corner of the room. William. I forgot all about him. He’s leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. He’d pull off the nonchalant attitude much better if not for the red marks on his neck and his general air of disarray thanks to Julien’s rough handling.

“Get out of my house,” says Julien in a low voice, the corner of his lip lifting to show off sharpened canines.

William opens his mouth as if he’s going to speak, but then must think better of it because he simply sticks his nose up in the air and strides out the front door without another word. Well, that’s one problem taken care of for the moment.

Julien pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. “I’m such an idiot. If I hadn’t—”

“No use worrying about that now,” says Remy. “We need to sit down and make a plan.” He glances at me. “You said your former pack follows the old laws. Do you know anything more specific than that?”

I shake my head.

“Is there anyone who *would* know?”

“No one who’d be willing to talk to me,” I say. “I didn’t exactly have any friends in the pack.”

“With Randall gone, do you have any idea who might be in charge?”

I shrug. “Presumably Luke, but I don’t know for sure.”

Remy goes quiet, thinking.

“I don’t care what happens at this farce of a hearing,” says Julien after a few seconds. “I’m not letting Keir go.”

“And if the magistrate orders you to do so?” asks Remy.

“They’ll have to kill me first.”

My body goes cold and I can feel the color draining from my face. “No. That’s not an option. If it comes down to it, I’ll go with them and we can figure something else out later.”

“I—”

“No,” I say, more firmly this time. “You have an entire pack to think of. If you fight this too much, you’ll be playing directly into what William wants. You’d only be proving those claims he made about you being a liability to the pack.”

“He has a point,” says Remy.

Julien glares at his younger brother, then lets his shoulders slump. “I know.”

Remy approaches and places a hand on Julien's arm, squeezing gently. "Let's not get all doom and gloom. All is definitely not lost. We just need to prepare. The triumvirate isn't unfair and whatever case Keir's old pack thinks they have likely isn't very strong, especially since it's taken them over four years to demand his return."

Julien nods, his expression thoughtful.

Remy's gaze shifts to me. "No matter what laws they follow, there was no excuse for what they did. I'm sure the triumvirate will see it that way."

I raise my brows. "Really? Because that's not what you just said."

The younger Matisse sighs. "I'm trying to think positively."

"What about the whole kidnapping issue?" asks Julien. "Does the pack even have a claim on Keir?"

Remy makes a see-saw motion with his hand. "Sort of. I imagine they'll argue that Karina kidnapped Keir without anyone's knowledge and the pack still expended the cost of raising him."

"Yeah," I say sarcastically. "They spent soooo much money on me."

"I don't know if we even want to raise the kidnapping anyway," says Remy.

"Why not?" I ask.

“It might bring up questions we don’t want asked—like who your real ‘mother’ is,” replies Remy. “And it might also bring up the issue of whether your birth parents’ former pack or Theo’s current pack have any claim on you.”

Julien’s brows pull together. “Current pack? I thought Keir’s omega father was dead.”

Remy winces. “Not so much.” He gives his brother a quick rundown of what he found out and what Ben wrote about omegas and their mates. “This information isn’t common knowledge so—”

“William knows something.” Julien shakes his head. “He was trying to claim the fated mate bond was faked, that Keir was manipulating me in some way.”

My stomach flips, and bile rises in the back of my throat.

“I don’t believe that. At all,” says Julien, firmly holding my gaze with his. “But it might be a problem, especially since William implied there was some scandal involving you and a mated Alpha.”

My gut is now in full revolt, twisting and churning with nausea. It doesn’t take any big leaps of logic to know exactly who William was referring to and—

“No,” I blurt out, my arms curled around my stomach. “That was...he pursued me...it was...”

Julien gently squeezes my shoulders. “You don’t have to explain. I can do the math. You were barely seventeen when you left your old pack. Any Alpha sniffing after you back then

would have been substantially older and in a position of power over you. Whatever the ‘scandal’ was, it wasn’t your fault, Keir.”

“Thanks.” I blink back the burn in my eyes and offer Julien a small smile. He kisses the top of my head and wraps his arms around me, pulling me to his chest.

“How much does this information help their case?” asks Julien. “Is there any way we can get ahead of things, do some damage control or whatever?”

“I don’t know,” replies Remy. “They’d have a hard time proving a negative—that you and Keir *aren’t* fated mates—but it does introduce an element of doubt into things. Based on what Ben’s letter said, I’m fairly certain the ability of omegas to choose to keep or break a mate bond might be where the ‘free passage’ law comes into things.”

“Could we use that?” I ask. “As an omega, I have that whole free passage thing, so shouldn’t I be able to go where I want?”

Another see-saw motion. “I’m not sure how that applies to an omega’s actual pack. Because they’re so rare, the laws governing omegas can be vague.”

“So, what do you think the options are?” asks Julien.

Remy thinks for a second, tapping a finger against his chin. “If we take the omega aspect out of the equation, there are plenty of ways for regular shifters to leave their pack without a mating alliance or being formally released.” He pauses. “Our

best option is probably having Keir claim sanctuary like Rossi's sister-in-law."

"Sounds great," I say. "How do I do that?"

"It's fairly simple," says Remy. "But there's a problem."

Of *course* there is.

He continues, "With her, there was plenty of evidence of abuse—the most common basis for a sanctuary claim."

I sigh. "And since so much time has passed, I have no evidence of what they did to me."

Remy nods. "It's going to be extremely difficult to prove."

# FORTY-SIX

## JULIEN

KEIR VISIBLY DEFLATES, HIS shoulders slumping. That's about all I can take. My mate needs a break. *I* need a break. I've had more than enough of politics and diplomacy for the morning. Hell, except for the moments I've managed to steal with Keir, my time's been almost entirely consumed by that political crap for the past week or so.

And if *I'm* about to go insane from all the pressure, I can't imagine how difficult this has all been for Keir. I can practically feel his anxiety rising second by second. Actually, if the stories about fated mates are true, then I probably *am* feeling his anxiety even if it's a little hard to distinguish it from my own at this point.

I'm calling a timeout.

The triumvirate's magistrate and whoever will be representing the interests of Keir's old pack won't be here until tomorrow at the earliest. Nothing is going to be solved in

the next few hours, so I'm taking Keir out of here for a while. At the very least, we're going for a run so the two of us can get rid of some of this tension.

I wrap my hands around Keir's waist and tug him toward me. "Is there anything you desperately need us here for, Remy?"

"Not at the moment," he replies, the corners of his lips curling into a small smile. He jerks his chin in the direction of the back door. "I'll run interference if you guys want to take some time for yourselves. I know this is a lot."

Keir's brows draw together. "But what about—"

Not bothering with my hand this time, I cut my mate off by pressing my lips to his in a quick, hard kiss. "Everything and everyone else can wait," I say. "We both need a break, and I want to spend some time with you without all these other ears around."

"Oh," he says softly. "I'd like that too."

Decision made, I intertwine my fingers with Keir's and tug him toward the back door. Remy gives me a mock salute as we pass, and I wink at him. I don't know what I'd do without my brother sometimes.

Once outside, I stride across the backyard toward the trees bordering the lawn, with Keir following close behind. I own almost one hundred acres, most of that the wooded section behind the house extending all the way to the border of one of the state parks.



As soon as I hit the tree line, I shed my clothes, leaving them in a crumpled pile under a large pine tree. I turn around to find Keir has done the same, his smooth skin pale in the sunlight. His eyes darken and he shoots me a mischievous grin as his gaze slides down my body. He starts toward me, shifting as he crosses the distance between us until he's rubbing the fur of his face over my thigh, eyes closed as he nuzzles me.

I haven't spent much time with Keir's wolf, but he's just as gorgeous in this form as he is in human form. His fur is a shiny silvery gray with hints of black on his paws and ears. I run my hand over the top of his head and he leans into the touch, a soft whine in his throat. After a few seconds of petting, he steps back, sits on his haunches, and lets out a sharp yip. I suppose that means he wants me to shift already, and I'm more than happy to oblige.

My own golden wolf is much larger than Keir's, my mate's head coming up only to my shoulder as he trots back to me and rubs himself against my side. I nudge him with my nose, urging him toward the woods. There's a narrow game trail and I take off down it at a run, Keir nipping at my heels with a short, joyful bark. The two of us dash through the trees, jumping over fallen logs, crashing through the leaves, and following various scents as they meander through the woods.

Eventually, we reach a small clearing surrounding a deep pool of water fed by a natural underground spring. Keir walks to the edge of the water, his pink tongue darting out to take a drink. He sticks one of his front paws in and does the canine

equivalent of wrinkling his nose before taking a few steps backward and returning to his human form.

“My wolf doesn’t enjoy swimming,” he says, glancing over his shoulder at me. “But I love it.” He grins and wades into the water, ducking under once he reaches the center of the pool. He swims a couple laps, then turns his attention back to me, still in my wolf form sitting on the grass. “Care to join me?”

I flatten my ears and shake my head.

He chuckles. “It’s a little cold, but you get used to it.”

I huff in disbelief and Keir grins again.

“You’re right,” he says. “It’s fucking freezing.” My mate barrels out of the water and onto the bank, then stands there shivering a little as he glances around. “No towels. I guess I didn’t think this through very well.”

He jolts when I wrap my now human arms around his shoulders, pulling him close, his slick, wet skin cold against mine. “I’ll keep you warm.”

Laughter bursts from his mouth, his whole body seeming to brighten with the sound. “That is the cheesiest line I’ve ever heard.”

I tug him closer until his groin and hardening cock meet my leg. “Well, it worked, didn’t it?”

He throws his head back in another laugh, then glides his hands up my sides, wrapping them around the back of my neck as he pulls my face downward to meet his lips. I answer

his kiss, running my tongue over the seam of his mouth, then push it inside to tangle with his.

Keir lets out a small sigh and goes up to his toes so he can deepen the kiss. I smooth my hands down the damp skin of his back to cup his ass, lifting him so he can wrap his legs around my waist as he rubs himself against me, his breath quickening into soft pants. Without releasing his lips, I move the two of us toward a wide tree until Keir's back rests against the trunk.

“Okay?” I ask, pressing him harder against the rough bark.

He nods eagerly, then pulls my mouth back down to his.

The fingers of my right hand glide down his side and around to the crease of his ass, once again finding that odd—and amazingly convenient—slippery substance dripping from him. We've made good use of the stuff over the past couple days. I coat my fingers with it and press one inside him, moving slowly as I open him up. Adding a second finger, then a third, I gently thrust into him as he gasps against my neck.

“Julien...” he says, half breathless and almost whining. “Please. I need you.”

“You have me,” I reply as I remove my fingers and position myself at his entrance.

Keir's head tilts back to rest against the tree, exposing his neck as I push into him inch by inch until I'm fully inside him and his rigid cock is pressed tight against my abdomen. I start up a steady rhythm, thrusting into his body over and over as he lets out a low, keening sound of pleasure. My movements

gradually speed up and Keir's cries grow in volume until he lets out a stuttered groan and tightens around me as his cock spills between us. I follow him a second later, releasing inside him as he continues spasming around me.

Slipping from his body, I slowly lower his legs until he's standing on his own, his back still against the tree. He's red-faced and panting, but a wide grin stretches across his lips and I can't help but lean down and kiss him again, simply enjoying the feeling of his mouth.

"I really needed that," he says as he rests his cheek against my sweat damp chest.

"Me too."

"Do we have to go back now?" he asks, sighing.

"Not yet," I say. "Remy can handle things at the house for now. This time is for us."

So, we shift back into wolf form and chase each other through the woods for most of the day, only moving back toward the main house in the early evenings. Upon reaching to the backyard, we return to human form, hunt down our clothes, then get dressed and walk up to the house. Keir tucks himself into my side and I slide my arm around his waist as we share a contented smile.

But both our smiles drop away as Remy steps out onto the back deck, his expression grave.

Apprehension twists my stomach. "What is it? What's wrong?"

“I found something,” says Remy. “And you’re not going to like it.”

# FORTY-SEVEN

## KEIR

NOTHING CAN KILL MY floaty, contented post-orgasm slash post-run feelings than bad news. By the look on Remy's face, whatever information he has to impart is not only going to kill those feelings, but violently murder them. That's kind of how my life has gone lately—amazing highs immediately followed by crushing lows. Thankfully, my mate and my new family are worth every bit of it.

*I just hope I get to keep them.*

I glance up at Julien, then rest my forehead against his arm. The longer I can avoid literally facing whatever Remy has to say, the longer I can avoid it altogether... Right? Too bad my mate isn't really the avoidant type.

“What did you find out?” asks Julien, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as he pulls me closer to his chest.

“I looked as into as many pack codes as I was able. The older they are, the more extreme the restrictions when it comes

to mating alliances, especially regarding omegas. Depending on which set of laws we're working with, we might have a problem even if we can prove the abuse." I feel Remy's eyes turn to me. "Any ideas exactly which laws your old pack follows?"

"Not for sure," I mumble into Julien's chest. "But you can bet they're whichever ones are the most backward." I lift my head enough to meet Remy's gaze. "Why does it matter so much which ones as long as they're old? Wouldn't there be more recent laws to supersede them?"

"Possibly," says Remy. "But certain aspects of shifter law are entirely pack-based, one of those being anything related to the joining and leaving packs. The triumvirate enforces the overall shifter laws, the ones that govern all of us, and they help resolve interpack disputes, but they can't interfere with something that's technically outside their jurisdiction. Think of it like a 'state's rights' thing versus federal law."

Julien scoffs. "It would be a pack from the South making an argument analogous to state's rights."

"Well, a lot of the humans there tend to ignore the fact that they already lost that particular war," says Remy.

"And also the fact that the 'rights' they were fighting over were the rights to own people," I add.

Julien leans back to look down at me, his brows drawing together. "I thought your old pack was isolated. When did you learn about the human Civil War?"

“I might not have had a human education—or even a high school diploma—but once I was out on my own, I snuck into a few community college classes,” I say. “Ignorance is not bliss to me and I knew I needed a better idea of how the outside world worked than what I was taught in my pack.”

Julien tucks my head under his chin, and his arms tighten around me. “You amaze me more every day that I know you.”

“All five of them?” I joke before miming looking at a watch. “Or is it six now?”

The huff from Julien is barely a laugh, but it’s something. He sighs. “There’s no point in worrying about this right now. There’s nothing we can do until we know for sure what argument the Sweet Water pack is trying to make.”

“You’re right,” says Remy. “We should try to relax this evening. We’ll get this all straightened out tomorrow when the magistrate gets here.”

“Tomorrow?” asks Julien. “You actually received confirmation of the schedule?”

“Yes,” replies Remy. “A rep from the triumvirate called a little over an hour ago to let us know the details of where the hearing will be held and the general policies and procedures.”

“Any idea who they might have sent to hear the case?” asks Julien.

Remy shakes his head. “We won’t find that out until we get there, but I don’t think it matters much.”



“What about who my old pack is sending?” I ask, dreading the answer. “Were you able to find that out?”

Another head shake from Remy. “The only thing I know is that since William put this all in motion yesterday or the day before, whoever your old pack is sending is likely to be on their way if they’re not already in the area.”

Nerves twist in my stomach. If things continue going the way they have been, whoever they sent is going to be bad news for me. But, like Julien said, there’s nothing to be done today.

My stomach lets out a loud rumble and Remy chuckles. “What? I haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

“Yeah, you were too busy screwing my brother,” retorts Remy with a semi-normal grin.

I follow his lead in lightening things up, waggling my eyebrows. “Well, there are some things better than food.”

“You haven’t had my mom’s lasagna yet,” says Remy. He tilts his head toward the house. “Come on. She has dinner in the oven.”

The three of us head inside, and Julien leads me into the dining room. He pulls out a chair for me, then takes a seat at the head of the table.

Rachel comes in and out of the dining room a couple times, the first with a salad and the second with a basket of what smells like garlic bread. The third time she enters, she’s

carrying a large casserole dish that she sets in the center of the table.

She raises her brows at Julien and then pointedly glances at the table. “Just because you’re Alpha doesn’t mean you can’t set the table. You and your brother go get the plates and silverware.”

Julien stands, then walks into the kitchen and returns carrying a stack of plates. He sets one down at each place setting while Remy follows along behind him, distributing silverware and napkins. The process is so practiced, I can almost see younger versions of the two of them completing the same chore together. Once everyone has what they need, the two Matisse brothers go back to their seats.

Rachel grabs the dish from the center of the table, lifting the lid and setting it to the side. She cuts herself a piece of lasagna, then passes the dish to me. The salad and bread follow the same path until everyone has a full plate.

Julien cuts a small piece of the lasagna off and brings it to his mouth, but before any of the cheesy pasta can pass his lips, the doorbell rings. The sound is normal enough, but in this moment it seems almost ominous, making every instinct in my body vibrate with apprehension.

# FORTY-EIGHT

## KEIR

THE DOORBELL RINGS AGAIN and everyone at the table freezes, going silent as they all—including me—look to Julien. He is the Alpha after all. His brows pull together as he sets his still full fork back on his plate. He glances at Remy. “Are we expecting anyone else?”

Remy shakes his head. “Dante and Brody went downtown. They aren’t planning to come by until tomorrow before the hearing.”

Julien frowns. He pushes away from the table and rises to his feet, then heads toward the front door. I leave my own seat and follow him, catching up just as he places a hand on the doorknob.

He pauses when my fingers touch his elbow, glancing at me from the corner of his eye. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.” I huff out a semblance of a laugh. “Surprises have been going oh so well for me these days.”

My mate's lips curl into a tight smile. "Whoever it is, it's probably nothing to worry about."

I want to believe him, I really do. But experience has taught me that relying on optimism often leads to unpleasant surprises. Especially lately.

Julien pulls open the door, then stands in the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest and an intimidating look on his face.

"Are you Julien Matisse?" asks an unfamiliar male voice from the doorstep. Leaning around Julien, I take a look at the guy. He's a shifter, maybe in his late thirties, with blond hair and brown eyes and not someone I've ever seen before.

"Yeah," replies Julien. "And who might you be?"

"I'm Harold Eames. I'm representing the interests of the Anderson pack from Sweet Water, Alabama."

Great. This guy is here on behalf of my old pack, probably a lawyer of some kind. On the plus side, he's still referring to it as the "Anderson" pack, so either they haven't received word of Randall's death yet or no one's challenged Luke succession.

Julien stiffens. "Why are you here?"

Eames breaks into what I think is meant to be a friendly smile. Instead, it mostly looks like a predatory showing of teeth. "I was hoping we might sit down and discuss a settlement before the hearing tomorrow."

"Why would I want to do that?" asks Julien.

Malice gleams in the attorney's eyes. "Because we're hoping to resolve this amicably."

I snort.

Eames turns a patronizing smile on me. "And I'm sure there are some things Alpha Matisse might prefer were not brought up tomorrow and put on record at the hearing." His gaze shifts to Julien. "Information about the lack of faith your pack elders have in you as Alpha, maybe?"

"What do you want." Julien's voice has gone so flat, it's not even a question.

"Perhaps this might be a discussion better moved somewhere more private?"

Julien's nostrils flare and he purses his lips, but he steps out of the doorway, gesturing for Eames to come inside. "We'll go to my office." He glances at me. "Keir, can you go grab Remy?"

"Sure."

I dart into the dining room and catch the younger Matisse's eye, before tilting my head in the direction of the office. Remy nods, rises to his feet, and then the two of us head to Julien's office. Julien is still standing in the doorway glaring daggers at the back of the lawyer's head as he lounges on a chair inside. Remy and his brother share a look I can't interpret, then Remy puts out a hand to stop me from entering.

"I think it might be better if you weren't here for this," says Julien.

Confusion, followed quickly by hurt, washes through me.  
“What do you mean?”

Another look shared between the brothers.

Julien steps forward, placing his hands on my shoulders.  
“There are things you don’t know and I don’t think discussing them for the first time in front of a hostile stranger is wise.”

My hurt vanishes in a flash of—admittedly somewhat irrational—irritation.

“Fine.” I yank myself out of Julien’s hold and something flashes in his eyes. Regret maybe? Well, he damn well should regret what he just said to me. He knows I have trust issues, and this kind of behavior isn’t exactly going to make them better.

“Finish dinner,” says Remy in a low voice. “You can’t miss out on Mom’s lasagna. We’ll be done soon and can tell you all about it.”

I nod, my face blank while a war rages inside me. “Yeah. Okay.”

Julien and his brother step into the office, closing the door behind them and leaving me staring at the wood, fuming with anger. I debate for a second simply walking into the office and telling the two of them to get over it, but the last thing I want to do is act like an unruly child in front of someone Julien considers a ‘hostile.’ Especially when I have no idea exactly *why* I’m this pissed off about being shut out.

My emotions aren’t normally quite this volatile.

I turn away from the office and pause. I have two choices here. If I turn left, I can go back to the dining room, sit down with Rachel, and eat my dinner. A right turn will take me to the front door, fresh air, and a little time to myself to calm down. My emotions are ping-ponging all over the place and I don't know if I can just go sit at the dinner table and pretend nothing's wrong. So, I head to the right before I have a chance to change my mind.

At the front door, a twinge of guilt hits me. I might be pissed, but not 'I'm leaving you' level of pissed. I don't want Julien to worry that I've run, so I call out over my shoulder as I walk outside. "I'm going for a walk. I'll be back."

Outside, I strip down and shift into my wolf. I've already seen a lot of the extensive backyard, so I head out to explore the stretch of land between the house and the main road. I trot along the edge of the half-mile driveway that curves between the trees, my nose twitching with all the fresh scents.

I haven't made it very far when my ears perk up at the sound of a vehicle turning into the driveway and starting upward. Who's here now? I duck into the trees, keeping out of sight as a black SUV barrels up the driveway, then screeches to a halt in front of the house.

Dante hops out from the driver's side, his face set in a worried frown, and Brody exits the passenger side. The two of them rush inside, barely even taking the time to close the SUV's doors. Something's clearly wrong. Remy said they wouldn't be here until tomorrow and I doubt they normally

barge into their Alpha's house unexpected. I'd better go back to find out what's going on.

I call up my shift, but before I can so much as imagine my human feet touching the ground, there's a sharp pain in my side. Glancing back, I find a dart sticking out of my rear flank. Barely a second later, my head goes fuzzy as my legs give out.

Not just any dart then... a *tranquilizer*.



# FORTY-NINE

## JULIEN

“I THINK IT MIGHT be better if you weren’t here for this.”

As soon as the words pass my lips, I know I’ve screwed up. There are about a million better ways I could’ve phrased that and, of course, I choose the one sure to poke at my mate’s insecurities.

Keir’s brows draw together with confusion and his eyes flash with hurt. “What do you mean?”

I glance at my brother, hoping he can think of some way to smooth this over, then place my hands on Keir’s shoulders. “There are things you don’t know and I don’t think discussing them for the first time in front of a hostile stranger is wise.”

My mate’s expression darkens, and he presses his lips into a thin line.

“Fine,” he snaps, yanking out of my hold.

“Finish dinner,” says Remy, jumping in to back me up. “You can’t miss out on Mom’s lasagna. We’ll be done soon and can tell you all about it.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Keir nods, his mouth set into an angry scowl.

I try to apologize with my eyes, try to make him understand, but he won’t even meet my gaze. Remy takes my arm, studying me with narrowed eyes. He’s not sure what’s going on and he doesn’t like it.

*Well, brother, neither do I.*

Remy pulls me into the office, shutting the door behind us and leaving my angry—and sometimes unpredictable—mate outside. Here’s hoping I’ll be able to salvage this situation later without too much groveling.

I walk around my desk and sit down in the chair, frowning at the Sweet Water pack representative. Harold Eames is not what I would have expected from them. He gives off a kind of slick, urbane impression that doesn’t match up with what I know of Keir’s backward thinking former pack. The discrepancy makes me uneasy.

The guy obviously isn’t a pack member, so they must have hired him, but how the hell can they *afford* him?

Remy moves to stand at my side in a show of support, though I can tell from the way he keeps glancing from me to Eames that my brother can’t figure out what’s going on.

“I did as you asked,” I say to Eames. “Are you satisfied?”

The smile that curls along Eames's lips is slimy and reptilian. "Of course."

"Why didn't you want Keir to be here?" asks Remy, his quick mind picking up on at least that much.

Eames splays his hands out in a placating gesture. "I believe this will go much more smoothly without an overemotional omega to...stir things up."

My eyes narrow. There's something this guy isn't saying. I cross my arms over my chest. "Fine. Whatever. You claimed you're here to negotiate settlement. What's their offer?"

Eames chuckles. "Before we get to that, I think we should discuss the basis of their claim. I'm sure your..."—he glances at Remy—"procurator?"

Remy gives him a curt nod.

"Yes, your procurator has likely already looked into things and has realized the Anderson pack's case is solid."

I open my mouth, but Remy squeezes my shoulder. Probably a good idea to let him do the talking. If it were up to me, I'd just rip this guy's head off and send it back to the Sweet Water pack gift-wrapped as a great big 'fuck you.'

That likely wouldn't help matters.

"I don't know that I'd say the case is solid," says Remy. "Certainly there are some antiquated statutes that the Sweet Water pack is relying on, but there are still loopholes. The biggest one being that Keir doesn't want to go with them and will testify that the pack was abusive toward him."

Eames smirks. “Testimony that will be useless when we present evidence of his mental instability.”

Remy’s fingers tighten on my shoulder, digging in painfully to keep me in place. Still, a low growl starts in my chest. He’s insulting my mate, and my wolf is livid.

“Mental instability?” Remy manages to inject a substantial amount of disbelief into those two words. “What evidence could you possibly have of that?”

Eames removes a stack of papers from the folder in his lap. “Notarized affidavits from the other pack members in his age group detailing the omega’s antisocial behavior and tendency toward emotional outbursts.”

Remy shakes his head. “Those are worthless.”

Eames shrugs. “Maybe. Maybe not.” He takes out another piece of paper. “But *this* is not.” He leans over the desk to hand it to Remy.

My brother skims whatever is written on the paper silently. The longer he reads, the more his brow furrows.

My shoulders tighten as my agitation rises. Finally, I ask, “What is it?”

“What did Keir tell you about the night they tried to kill him?” asks Remy, biting at his lower lip.

“Not much,” I say.

“He was officially welcomed into the pack that night,” says Remy.

“Exactly,” says Eames, a smug look on his face.

An icy dread spreads over my body. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” says Eames, “that by accepting the pack’s welcome following the death of his father, Keir became a ward of the pack until he reached the age of majority. In doing so, he agreed to submit to any discipline the pack found appropriate. Even if the omega could prove his allegations of abuse, it would fall under the category of pack discipline.”

“What do you want,” I ask in a flat voice, ignoring another painful squeeze from Remy.

“Adequate financial compensation for the loss of a pack member,” says Eames.

It’s like they’re holding Keir for ransom though they don’t even have custody of him.

“And what does ‘adequate’ mean in this case?” asks Remy, his voice strained.

“Two hundred thousand dollars,” says Eames, a triumphant gleam in his eyes.

Remy makes a choked noise that I unconsciously mimic. It’s not uncommon for money or assets to change hands with a mating alliance, but those are *trades*. If I’d completed the alliance with Meredith, my pack would have paid a sum of money to them, but her pack would have signed over partial interests in some of their pack’s businesses as part of the agreement.

The Sweet Water pack isn’t offering *anything* in exchange.

I don't have those kind of funds lying around and I'll never convince the elders to pay what is essentially a ransom for Keir—who William has already declared as useless—from the pack's funds.

“That's ridiculous,” says Remy. “By law, financial compensation of the type you're speaking of must be a *reasonable* amount.”

“It is perfectly reasonable,” says Eames. “Legally speaking, an amount can only be considered *unreasonable* if someone hasn't already made an offer of equal value.” He smirks again. “It seems, Alpha Matisse, you're not the only Alpha who has an interest in acquiring the wayward omega.”

# FIFTY

## KEIR

WAKING UP WITH A hangover when I didn't actually choose to go through the process of getting one is patently unfair. My head feels like it's stuffed with cotton while also throbbing like an open wound, and someone seems to have replaced my tongue with sandpaper. To top it all off, my stomach is in open revolt and churning with nausea.

All of that and I never even got to enjoy a pleasant buzz.

I blink a few times to get some moisture to my desert dry eyes as I glance around and take in my surroundings. Even with the fog clouding my brain, I can tell the situation doesn't look promising. I'm in the cargo area of an SUV with blacked-out windows, my hands cuffed behind me and, considering the vibrations of the vehicle, we're moving quickly.

There's a haze obscuring the details of exactly how I ended up here, but it definitely appears I've been kidnapped. *Again.*

It does not bode well for my future that I seem to be making a habit of that.

Well, on the bright side, someone thought to put some clothes on me while I was out, so I'm not going through all this naked. Though the clothes are definitely not mine and the scent on them is unpleasant enough to make my nose wrinkle with distaste.

At least these guys have better wheels than my last kidnappers. If they'd crammed me into another tiny car, I would have probably thrown up by now given the state of my stomach. Rossi's goons didn't drug or restrain me, though, so the more spacious ride isn't that much of an improvement taking into account the whole tranquilizer dart thing.

Maybe that's why I'm so queasy.

Closing my eyes, I swallow a few times, struggling to settle my stomach, before pushing myself up to a sitting position. Not the best idea. A wave of dizziness passes over me and I slump to the side of the vehicle, cracking my head on the paneling. I let out a hoarse groan, squeezing my eyes shut as the impact vibrates through my skull. The level of pain in my head spikes into a whole other stratosphere. My stomach roils and bile burns at the back of my throat, but I manage to avoid vomiting.

Barely.

I'm not sure how long it takes the nausea to fade, but when I open my eyes again, one of the guys in the backseat in front of me has turned around. He's looking at me with something like



concern on his face. My observer is young, maybe my age, with dark hair and eyes and he's much leaner than the guy beside him. In other words, he's not built like someone I'd expect would go around kidnapping people.

"Please be careful," he says. "Until the drug is out of your system, your reflexes will be dulled considerably and you will be prone to injuring yourself."

My sluggish brain takes a moment to process the words before my vocal cords manage a questioning noise, which was *supposed* to be me asking "Who the hell are you? What am I doing here? And where are you taking me?"

Apparently my mouth isn't working correctly.

The guy—a shifter my nose tells me. All... one, two, three, five...no, *four* of them are shifters—actually leans over the back of the seat and pats me on the fucking head like a dog.

"Don't worry," he says as I shoot him my best glare. "There will be no lasting side effects."

Like *that's* what I'm worried about and not the fact that I've been kidnapped by random strangers. Again.

I try to force my mouth into motion to ask more questions—or even *a* question—but that's not happening. There's some sort of disconnect between the thoughts in my head and the formation of words and sounds with my mouth.

The guy must notice me gaping like a fish because he pats my head again and gives me what I think is supposed to be a reassuring look. "The aphasia will wear off as well." He smiles

a little. “Drugs that can take down a shifter quickly often have undesirable side effects, but the one I designed is one of the safest.”

What. The. Fuck.

The other guy in the backseat speaks up. “Don’t worry about it, Doc.”

Am I the ‘it’ he’s referring to? I’m not sure, but I don’t think that’s the case. So, what the—

Another stab of agony behind my temples has me hissing in a breath through my teeth.

“... doesn’t improve soon, we’ll have to stop.”

*Dammit, what did I miss?*

Something has to improve, or they’ll stop. The odds are that ‘something’ has to do with me. Stopping... is good.

If we stop, that means I don’t get any further away from Julien.

As soon as my brain makes that connection, I know what I need to do.

Well, sort of.

I glance at the back window of the SUV, judging the distance behind me. *This is going to hurt.*

I wait till Doc is looking at me again, then roll my eyes to the back of my head like I’m passing out. Shifting my weight, I let my body fall backward, slamming my head into the thin carpeting on the floor of the vehicle. I ignore the pain and the

pull of unconsciousness, jerking my limbs around in the best impression of 'this is not an improvement' I can manage.

Doc yells something about pulling over. There's a brief argument between him and someone else in the vehicle before I feel the rumble of the SUV moving onto the gravel shoulder of the road and coming to a stop. A door flies open and Doc exits the vehicle, coming around to open up the back. When no one else gets out, I force my body into stillness and wait.

Doc leans over me, pulling up one of my eyelids and shining a light directly into my eye. I imagine my pupils must not indicate whatever medical emergency I'm trying to fake because Doc's brows pull together in confusion. And he hesitates, something I use to my full advantage.

In the space of a breath, I sit up, then use my feet to shove Doc away from the back of the SUV. He lands on his ass in the gravel by the side of the road and I jump from the vehicle. Between my fuzzy head and having my hands cuffed behind my back, my center of balance is way off and I wobble in place. By the time I steady myself and stumble into a run, the shifter in the front passenger seat is already opening his door. Still, I take off toward the trees as quickly as I can with at least one kidnapper in hot pursuit.

# FIFTY-ONE

## KEIR

THE THING ABOUT RUNNING while suffering from the side effects of an unknown tranquilizer is you don't go very fast. Not only that, you don't run in a straight line. Of course, those two things only matter if you're running for your life.

Which, unfortunately, I am.

I make it maybe thirty yards from the kidnapper's vehicle before someone tackles me from behind and brings me down to the ground—face first. The shifter who caught me lands on top of my back, knocking the air from my lungs and, since my wrists are oh-so-inconveniently cuffed behind my back, there's no way to stop my face from slamming into the rocky dirt.

Thankfully, the behemoth who took me down quickly gets up instead of continuing to flatten me. He grabs one of my arms and pulls me to my feet, more roughly than I think is strictly necessary considering he didn't have to actually exert himself much to catch me.

I wheeze in a breath, my impact-stunned lungs fighting to expand my chest. Once my oxygen level is no longer in the danger zone, I break into a coughing fit, expelling the dirt I got a mouthful of as a result of my face plant. I turn my head, lifting my shoulder and rubbing it against my mouth to clear out anything else that might not belong in there.

*Yuck.*

The shifter gives me a shake, digging his fingers into my bicep and glaring at me with dark eyes. “Don’t pull that shit again.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” I croak out, thankful my brain-mouth connection appears to have been restored.

My captor rolls his eyes, then half drags me back to the SUV. The distance I covered in my piss-poor escape attempt seems even more pathetic in reverse. Probably closer to ten yards than thirty.

*Note to self: wait until brain is engaged before putting body into motion.*

Doc is standing near the rear passenger door with his arms crossed over his chest. He frowns as his gaze moves over my face and then to the guy behind me. “Was is really necessary to injure him, Francis?”

Huh. Who would have thought the guy I just knocked on his ass would sort of be on my side?

Francis mutters something that sounds vaguely uncomplimentary, but that doesn’t faze Doc at all. The

younger, smaller shifter's expression turns into an actual glower. Doc steps forward and takes hold of my chin, turning my face so he can see where it impacted with the ground. He gently presses against my cheekbone and I hiss in a breath at the sharp pain.

“That’s going to bruise unless we get some ice on it,” he mutters to himself before releasing my chin and turning his attention to Francis. “My brother isn’t going to be happy if his omega is delivered with injuries.”

My brows shoot upward. It’s nice to know they aren’t planning on torturing me or selling me for parts like Rossi, but it’s unnerving to think some unknown shifter considers me *his*. Who the hell is Doc’s brother?

Francis scoffs. “Would you have preferred I let him get away?”

“Of course not,” snaps Doc. “But it’s not like there was any danger of him outrunning you. Instead of tackling him, you could have simply grabbed hold of his arm.”

“I did.” Francis shakes me again, demonstrating the grip he has on my arm.

Doc presses his lips together as his nostrils flare with irritation. “Fine. You’ve done your duty. Now let him go.”

Francis grunts and releases my arm. “He’s all yours then, Doc.”

“I can’t believe the idiots they saddle me with,” mumbles Doc to himself as he shakes his head. He guides me closer to

the vehicle, then opens the back door of the SUV and pokes his head inside. I don't hear the conversation, but when Doc turns back to me, he has a set of keys in his hand.

"I'm going to unlock the cuffs," he says. "Provided I can depend on your cooperation?"

Sure. I can agree to that. *For now.*

At this point, the best thing for me to do is go along with these guys. Since I'm clearly in no shape to make a run for it, I might as well try to learn as much as I can. And wait for another opportunity to escape.

I nod and turn around to present my cuffed wrists to Doc. He unlocks the cuffs, then takes hold of my arm and leads me to the backseat of the SUV. Better than going back to being stuffed in the cargo area, I guess.

I slide into the seat, scooting up against the guy Doc was talking to earlier whose name I don't know yet. Doc climbs in beside me, then shuts the door. Francis returns to the front passenger seat and the driver pulls away from the shoulder, getting back on the road.

A quick look at the dashboard clock tells me only ninety minutes or so have passed since these guys grabbed me. Julien likely knows I'm gone by now, but I have no idea how he's going to find me—or how I'm going to find my way back to him.

I send subtle glances out the windows, hoping for a landmark or sign or something, but we're on a two-lane back

road and all I can really see are flat, empty fields stretching out in all directions that are occasionally broken up by groups of trees. Nothing at all helpful.

Doc leans over the seat into the cargo area and grabs a small red pouch—a first aid kit from the looks of it. He unzips it, pulling out one of those instant icepack things. After massaging the icepack a few times to activate it, he hands it to me.

“For your face,” he says. “Zachariah’s already going to be pissed enough about the delay. Might as well avoid giving him something else to be angry about.”

*Zachariah?*

It’s not exactly a rare name, but... what are the odds?

Assuming this Zachariah is the brother Doc mentioned, I study Doc’s features, looking for any similarities that might confirm my fears. Because if he’s talking about the Zachariah I’m thinking of, then I think I’d prefer to be tortured.



# FIFTY-TWO

## JULIEN

I STARE ACROSS THE desk at the smarmy shifter lawyer, gritting my teeth to hold back a growl. Every word out of this guy's mouth sets my nerves on edge and tests my control. I'm getting really fucking sick of people referring to Keir like he's a possession, just a 'thing' to barter for rather than a person.

It would take all of two seconds—and very little effort—for me to leap across this desk and simply tear out his throat. My wolf is near desperate to do so, but I'm pretty sure that wouldn't go over well when I had to explain my actions. There's no 'my wolf *really* disliked the guy' defense for murder, not even for an Alpha. Plus, I'd get blood all over my office and that's a bitch to clean up.

Unfortunately, I'd know.

So, instead of giving in to my instincts and ripping this asshole's head off, I take a deep, calming breath, forcing my

wolf back as I tighten my hands around the arms of my chair. The wood cracks audibly under my palms.

*Ooops.*

Remy glances at me, his brows pulled together with concern. Whatever expression is on my face must tell him my capacity for rational thinking in this situation is rapidly declining and that maybe he should be the one doing the talking.

“How do you know that the offer you’ve received is even legitimate?” asks Remy after a moment.

A small, self-satisfied smile curls at Eames’s mouth. “The Anderson pack has a long-standing relationship with the other Alpha and his pack.” He removes yet another sheet of paper from the folder and slides it across the desk to me. “The agreement has already been signed and the funds are being held in escrow in the hopes that we can resolve this situation without the necessity of a hearing.”

I grab the paper, the edges crinkling under my too tight grip. My nostrils flare as I skim over the page, my gaze landing on the unfamiliar name listed as one of the parties to the contract.

“Who the fuck is Alpha Zachariah Stevens?” I ask in a gruff voice.

“The details of Alpha Stevens’s identity are not important, only that he has made an offer the omega’s pack feels is reasonable, and they have accepted it. They are, however, willing to entertain a counter offer...” He raises his brows, but that creepy smile doesn’t leave his face. He knows I have no

way of matching that offer, much less countering it. He's expecting me to fold.

But I'll be damned if that will happen.

The held back growl finally rumbles up from my chest.

"This is bullshit," I snap, tossing the paper back in Eames's direction.

Eames shrugs and his lips twitch with disdain as he watches the paper flutter to the ground. "You're entitled to your opinion, but that doesn't change the fact that the agreement is valid and, unless you have a counteroffer, I'll be presenting it to the hearing officer as the Anderson pack's 'compromise.' You say the omega doesn't want to return, fine, but the Matisse pack should not be able to *steal* a pack member. Even if you can refute all our evidence, your own procurator can't deny the fact that the omega is legally a member of the Anderson pack."

My rage grows as I wrack my brain for a coherent response, but all that comes out is another loud growl. Something is off. My wolf isn't normally quite this close to the surface.

"Whether you like it or not, the—"

I slam my fist down on the top of my desk, making Remy jolt in his seat. "Keir is my fated mate. *Mine.*"

And now *I'm* the one talking about Keir like a possession... what's going on?

Remy's gaze darts from me to Eames, and I can practically see the thoughts racing through his head. *Come on, brother. I*

*know you have a solution in that amazing brain of yours.*

“My brother has a point,” says Remy. “Fated mate status trumps everything. Any agreement Keir’s former pack might have with another Alpha is void since Keir has found his fated mate.”

“And your brother can provide proof of the ‘fated’ status?” asks Eames. “Not even your own elder believes that to be true.”

*Fucking William.* The other elders might go along with this idiocy, but he’s definitely the ringleader.

“Whether you believe it or not,” I start, mocking Eames’s condescending tone, “the mating bond has already been completed and Keir wears *my* claiming bite on his neck.”

Eames scoffs. “All that means is that when Alpha Stevens takes possession of the omega, he can bring a case against you for damage to his property.”

That’s it.

That’s the last straw.

I rise to my feet, claws extending from my fingers and digging into the wood of my desk as I stand. My vision sharpens as my eyes shift to that of my wolf and my teeth elongate in my mouth.

For the first time, Eames actually looks a little scared. *Good.* I want him scared. Though, I’d really prefer him dead along with everyone else trying to take Keir away from me.

Eames chuckles nervously. “Now, Alpha Matisse, this display is unnecessary. I—”

“Get. Out,” I snarl. Eames opens his mouth like he’s about to argue and I bare my teeth at him. “These negotiations are over. We’ll take our chances at the hearing.”

“Very well,” says Eames before standing and gathering up his things. He’s still nervous, but he’s got a ‘cat that ate the canary’ look on his face that I don’t like.

It’s too late to worry about that now, though. Once Eames exits my office and Remy closes the door, I collapse back into my chair and lean my elbows on my desk, resting my forehead on my palms.

“Well, that could have gone better,” says Remy after a long pause. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I have no idea. My wolf slowly got more and more agitated the longer Eames was here.”

“And is it better now?”

I pause for a second, then shake my head. “No. Even though Eames is gone, my wolf is refusing to settle. It’s like that feeling you get when you know something isn’t right, but you can’t figure out what.”

“Interesting...”

The sound of someone jogging toward the office brings my head up as the door flies open and Dante rushes inside, quickly followed by Brody.

“Sorry to interrupt,” says Dante, though he doesn’t really look sorry. He focuses on me, his brows pulled together. “I ran into your uncle having dinner downtown, which wouldn’t normally be a big deal, but he was with two unfamiliar shifters and I’m pretty sure he referred to one of them as ‘Alpha.’”

*Fuck.* That’s just what I need. What is Everett up to now?

# FIFTY-THREE

## KEIR

I FIRST MET ZACHARIAH Stevens when I was thirteen years old. At the time, I was a moody teen who certainly didn't follow all the rules and wasn't anyone's favorite person, but I wasn't yet a complete outcast.

My pack had spent almost two months preparing for a visit from a larger, more prosperous pack. Alpha Randall ingrained on us all how important it was that things go smoothly, that this could be the beginning of an important alliance for our pack. I didn't know any of the details—still don't actually—and I didn't much care.

When the day of the visit finally arrived, I made myself scarce rather than being present for the other pack's arrival. Just before noon, I slipped outside the gates of the compound and wandered a little distance into the woods, heading toward the nearby spring-fed pond that I hiked to when I wanted to be alone. I shed my clothes and took a quick swim before

spending the rest of the afternoon laying on a blanket and swishing my feet through the chilly water as I stared up at the sky. It was nice to relax, but my main goal was to kill as much time as possible before I had to return to the constraints of the compound.

Sure, I wasn't exactly trapped there—as evidenced by my trip to the pond on such an important day—but it felt like the walls of the compound were closing in on me more and more each day. I knew there was a bigger world out there, one hidden from me and the rest of the younger pack members, but I was too timid to go out there and find it on my own.

Too bad it found me.

By the time the sun was nearing the horizon, my stomach was growling. I didn't care about the visiting pack, but I damn sure wasn't going to miss the huge celebration meal. I was putting my clothes back on when I heard a stick break in the woods behind me. I whirled around, eyes wide as my gaze darted around the area looking for the source of the noise.

A second later, someone stepped out from between the trees.

He was another shifter, maybe in his early twenties, and clearly an alpha, one I didn't know, so I knew he must have been from the other pack.

*How long had he been there?*

My cheeks filled with heat as I thought about how this intimidatingly good-looking alpha might have seen me naked.



Normally beta shifters were more filled out by my age, but I was still only scrawny limbs on a gawky body.

“Hey,” I said, my voice cracking.

The alpha smirked at me and the fire in my cheeks shot all the way down to my toes as I self-consciously crossed my arms in front of my body. I would have given almost anything to have been able to shift into my wolf at that moment, but that ability was still a few years off. He said nothing, simply looked from my head to my feet and back again, before turning and walking away.

*Weird.*

I saw the alpha again at dinner that night, but he ignored me and I never learned his name.

A year later, however, he was back. Whatever angle Randall was working with the other pack involved annual visits. That visit, the strange alpha actually sought me out. There was no other reason for him to return to the pond than to find me.

At least that time he didn't find me naked.

“I'm Zachariah,” he said, his lips twisted into the same smirk as the first time I saw him.

“Hi.” I gave him an awkward wave. “I'm Keir.”

He moved to sit down beside me on the blanket I had spread out on the ground. “You're the Alpha's nephew, right?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Why are you hiding out here all by yourself?”

I shrugged, shyly glancing away. “It’s nice here and nobody bugs me.”

“I see.” He glanced at me from the corner of his eye. “I’m supposed to be with my Alpha, but I’m a little sick of him right now.” He paused, then winked at me. “That can be our little secret, right?”

I nodded eagerly, pride filling my chest that this older alpha would trust me with something. After all, nobody else in my life did. We exchanged small talk for a little while until Zachariah glanced at the shiny—and obviously expensive—watch on his wrist.

“I have to get back,” he said. “It was nice talking to you. I’ll see you around.”

He mostly ignored me again at dinner, but I caught him sending a couple of sly glances my way.

By the following year, I’d finally come to a realization about my sexuality. There were zero viable prospects in my pack, but I was nurturing a bit of a crush on Zachariah and looking forward to seeing him again, so I returned to what I had decided was ‘our spot’ and waited.

When Zachariah showed up—cue butterflies in my stomach—I jumped to my feet, straightening my shoulders and puffing out my chest, hopefully making my slender body look bigger and more appealing. Strangely enough, it seemed to work. A gleam of what just had to be appreciation entered Zachariah’s eye as his gaze roamed over me.

*Of course, I know now that it wasn't appreciation.*

“I brought you something,” he said. He held out a brand new cell phone and foolish, fifteen-year-old me preened at the gift. I'd never received anything that expensive, nor had anyone ever paid that much attention to me. Well, not anyone who looked like Zachariah, anyway.

“This way, we can stay in touch. You can't tell anyone about this though, okay?”

Without hesitation, I agreed.

The coverage in the compound was so bad as to be practically non-existent, but we were able to exchange text messages that grew progressively more flirty over the next year.

By the time I was sixteen, I fancied myself in love with him. He told me he understood me like no one else and I thought he was the prince who was going to rescue me from my boring, ordinary life. It didn't matter to me that he was nearly thirty by that point or that I knew next to nothing *real* about him. All that mattered was that he paid attention to me.

That year, he once again met me out by the pond. He fed me pretty words and promises, and it didn't take him long to talk me out of my clothes. My kisses were clumsy, but his hands were not. He maneuvered me where he wanted me, only taking the time to unbutton his pants before entering my body.

Sex wasn't at all like I'd expected. It hurt. A lot.

When he was done, he fastened his pants back into place and stood up. “Thanks,” he said, giving me a somewhat chilly smile. “I really needed that. See you next year.”

Then, he walked away, leaving me naked and alone, without so much as asking if I was okay.

And that still wasn't enough to get rid of the hearts in my eyes.

That didn't happen until the following year when he almost got me killed. Or, rather, when he stood aside and almost let his fucking *pregnant mate* kill me.

# FIFTY-FOUR

## JULIEN

I'M A LOT OF things, but I'm not an idiot. Well, not a complete one anyway. No matter how quickly I want to get downtown and confront my uncle, I know apologizing to Keir and filling him in on what's going on is more important at the moment.

Agreeing to the asshole lawyer's terms and telling Keir to sit out the meeting was dumb. Hell, simply letting Eames in the house was a bad idea, but I can't take it back now. Hopefully, my mate won't hold that momentary stupidity against me. We've finally reached a semi-stable point in our relationship and I don't want him to be looking for an excuse to run.

I take a deep breath, putting aside my irritation with Everett for the moment, then rise from my chair. "Dante, take Brody and wait for me in the car," I say. "I'll be out in a minute, and we'll go see what my scheming uncle is up to now."

Dante nods, then he and Brody leave the office and head outside.

I glance at Remy. “How mad do you think he is?”

“Well... I don't think he's going to run, but you might have to grovel a bit.” He cracks a smile. “Maybe Mom's lasagna has put him in a good mood.”

“Here's hoping,” I mumble before straightening my shoulders and heading toward the dining room. I have no idea exactly what I'm going to say to make this right, but ‘I'm sorry’ is definitely a good start.

Mom looks up from her plate when I enter, her brows pulling together. “Did I hear Dante say something about Everett?”

“Yeah,” I say. “He's up to something again. Dante saw him meeting with a couple of strange shifters downtown. I'm planning to go down there and find out exactly what's going on as soon as I talk with Keir.”

I glance around the table, quickly taking in the fact that Mom is the only person sitting there.

Keir wouldn't have... *No*.

“Where is he?” I ask.

Mom raises her brows. “He yelled something about going for a walk. I thought it was strange, but...” She lets the words trail off and studies my face for a moment before sighing. “What did you do, Julien?”

Between the tone of her voice and the look she's giving me, I feel like I'm a child being scolded for breaking a vase.

"The lawyer didn't want him in the meeting and—"

"As much as I love you, son, sometimes you're a real dumbass." She sighs again. "He hasn't been gone that long. I'm sure you can catch him or just wait for him to get back."

Remy speaks up from behind me. "You don't know how long Everett will be at the restaurant. If he's conspiring with another Alpha in your territory, you need to catch him in the act if you want the elders to back you on any disciplinary measures."

Shit. He's right.

"Your brother and I will wait for Keir and explain things to him," says Mom. "I'm sure he'll understand it was an emergency."

*I sure hope so.*

My wolf is agitated and I hate leaving things unsettled with Keir, but I can't argue with what my brother said. Catching Everett in the act is vital if I want him to face any true consequences.

"Thanks," I say, nodding to both Remy and my mom before heading out the front door and climbing into Dante's SUV.

As soon as my door shuts, Dante starts up the vehicle and heads down the driveway. I stare out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of Keir, but no such luck. As we exit the driveway and turn onto the main road, another SUV almost

sideswipes us as it pulls away from the shoulder and then speeds around us without slowing.

*Assholes.*

Dante lays on the horn for a moment, but the vehicle doesn't even pause, just takes off down the road and disappears around the curve in front of us.

Whoever they are, they're in a hell of a hurry.

It takes almost twenty minutes to get to the restaurant Dante saw my uncle at. I recognize Everett's car in the parking lot, so the odds of him still being inside are high... along with the odds that whomever he was meeting with is still here as well.

I stride into the restaurant, Dante and Brody flanking me. The floor plan is open enough that I can't miss my uncle's big head over in the corner, so I head immediately in that direction.

Three other men are sitting at the table with him. Two of them I don't recognize, but the third is William. I don't know why I'm surprised to find that snake here, but I am. This level of blatant disrespect absolutely can't be tolerated. I give my uncle and the elder an icy stare, then turn my attention to the other two.

The first guy is on the scrawny side with a pinched face and appears to be somewhere in his fifties or maybe sixties. The second guy must be the Alpha Dante heard Everett addressing. He's only older than me by maybe ten years, but there's



something cold and intense about him that gives him an almost palpable aura of control and power.

I'm less than ten feet away from the table before Everett even notices me. His eyes widen and he blusters for a moment, then plasters on a big, fake smile.

"Julien, I'm so glad—"

"Cut the shit, Everett," I snap, my gaze shifting from him to William. "What the hell is going on here? Who gave either of you permission to invite non-pack members into my territory?"

Everett chuckles nervously, but William gives me a tight-lipped smile.

"As the hearing is being held here, the normal rules don't apply," he says. "I thought it best to—"

"Shut up, William." I turn my attention on the dark-haired Alpha. "I don't appreciate you coming into my territory without announcing yourself."

"I apologize for the oversight," he replies smoothly. "You're Alpha Matisse, I assume?"

"Yes." I narrow my eyes. "Now, who the hell are you? I know you're not the Alpha of Keir's former pack."

"You're right. I'm not," he says. He stands, a placating smile on his face, and holds his hand out across the table. "I'm Alpha Stevens."

Rage floods my body. This is the guy trying to buy Keir.

I ignore his hand, curling my upper lip back to flash my teeth. “You won’t take my mate from me. Keir is mine.”

Stevens lets out a mocking chuckle. “I believe that is yet to be determined. Besides the fact that I had him first, there’s something else you aren’t considering.” His expression goes dark and malicious. “What’s the saying? Possession is nine-tenths of the law?”

# FIFTY-FIVE

## JULIEN

IF IT WOULDN'T BRING all sorts of trouble down on my head, I'd leap across the table and tear this guy to pieces. I can't be one hundred percent sure, but based on his comment about having Keir first, I think this guy might be the Alpha that William claimed Keir 'seduced.'

If he is... Keir is only twenty-one now and he left his pack at seventeen. This sleazeball is at least in his mid-thirties. I already knew there was more to the story—and that William was full of shit—but doing the math makes it very clear that Keir was taken advantage of and there was no so-called seduction.

But that's not what I need to be concentrating on right now.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" I ask, narrowing my eyes at Stevens.

The other Alpha smirks. "Exactly what I said."

“Stop playing these childish word games,” I say, a growl rising in my throat, “and tell me what the fuck you meant. Possession of what?”

“Of the only thing that matters,” replies Stevens. “I have Keir.” He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. “Didn’t you even notice the absence of your supposed mate?”

My wolf’s earlier agitation suddenly makes sense. The mating bond was warning me that something was wrong, but I was so distracted by that damn lawyer...

My nostrils flare as I fight to keep my rage and frustration under control. I can’t risk going furry in public. “Do you mean my *fated* and *claimed* mate? You have gone too far. The consequences of abducting another Alpha’s mate—”

“Do not apply in this circumstance,” says the scrawny shifter, speaking up for the first time. There’s a glint in his eyes as he looks me up and down, his upper lip curling with distaste.

“And who the fuck are you to tell me—”

It’s Stevens who responds, another smug smile on his face. “I suppose the two of you haven’t been introduced. This is Malachi. With Alpha Randall... out of the picture, he’s the interim leader of the Sweet Water pack until the heir, Randall’s son, steps into the role or someone challenges for it.”

“Seriously?” I can’t hide the disbelief in my tone. There’s no way this guy can lead a pack, even temporarily. He doesn’t

exactly exude confidence or authority. I don't see how anyone would respect him enough to follow him.

The unimpressive asshole sneers at me. "Just because your pack no longer respects the old ways doesn't mean others are so blasphemous."

The pieces click into place as I process his words and their pseudo-religious tone. This guy must be the cleric for Keir's former pack, someone at least equally as horrible as Stevens. A whole new rage fills me. This is the guy who advocated Keir's murder. Hell, he took part in the attempt. And he's likely the driving force behind the current situation.

But that means I might have a solution.

"I challenge you, Malachi, for control of the Sweet Water pack," I say. If I control the pack that wants Keir back, then I can drop the case—and cut off any negotiations with Stevens.

The cleric only rolls his eyes and both William and Stevens snicker while Everett looks on with a hint of confusion.

"You can't challenge me," says Malachi. "You can only challenge the rightful Alpha of the pack and, since he hasn't officially taken control and currently can't be located, there's no one for you to challenge."

"And even if there was," adds William, "the other elders and I will not support you in such a frivolous challenge. Should you choose to pursue that route, I will bring a vote of no confidence." He gestures to Everett. "Your uncle is more than

willing to step into the position in your stead if your actions go against the best interests of the pack.”

“I just bet he is,” I mutter, glaring at my uncle.

*I wish Remy was here. He's so much better at this diplomacy crap than I am.*

William tuts and shakes his head. “Really now, Julien, all this fuss over some uneducated, useless shifter whom you could have simply... gotten out of your system and then set aside if you weren't so stubborn. We wouldn't be in this situation at all if you had just completed the mating alliance we'd already approved.”

“Keir is my fated mate,” I snarl. “And I'm not giving him up because you think he's somehow unworthy.” I send my gaze around the table, finally landing back on Stevens. “There's no way Keir went with you willingly, so what did you do? Where is he?”

Stevens scoffs. “As if I'd tell you.”

A growl rumbles in my chest, and I curl my hands into fists at my side. “What gave you the right—”

“I did,” says the cleric, his lips curled with distaste. “As Alpha Stevens has a prior... interest in the omega and has already made a substantial offer to procure it, I thought he should have the opportunity to examine the goods prior to the purchase.”

Who knew there was something more infuriating than referring to Keir as simply a possession? The cleric's words

manage to strip my mate of even his status as a living being.

Before I have a chance to respond, there's a slight commotion behind me as the door to the restaurant opens. Stevens's expression goes blank, but there's a frustrated rage brewing in his eyes that he can't hide. William and Everett both simply look confused while Malachi lifts his chin and straightens in his seat, never taking his gaze away from whoever just walked in.

I cast a glance over my shoulder to find a young man storming his way toward our group. He has reddish brown hair and looks vaguely familiar, but it isn't until he reaches the table and the cleric lowers his eyes and tilts his head to bare his neck that I place the newcomer.

He's Keir's cousin, Luke, and, I suppose, now the rightful Alpha of Keir's former pack. The only question is if his presence makes this situation better or worse.

# FIFTY-SIX

## KEIR

THE MOST OMINOUS PART of any kidnapping—and believe me, I know how utterly ridiculous it is that I even *have* a metric for that—is probably the part when you get wherever it is your kidnappers are taking you. It’s likely nothing too awful has happened at that point, but you already know you’re screwed. You just haven’t found out exactly how much.

Unfortunately, I’ve reached that part of this particular kidnapping, which means I’m about to find out how bad things really are. Not that I don’t already have a decent idea. There is not a single thing Zachariah Stevens could want with me that could be anywhere near good.

All in all, I’m pretty sure I’m absolutely fucked. The only thing left to figure out is whether there’s any metaphorical lube involved. And if I can still find a way out.

The SUV pulls to a stop in front of a nondescript farmhouse at the top of a low hill. Empty fields stretch out in all



directions around it, which makes for awesome visibility, but not so great as far as making a run for it goes.

On the plus side, the SUV is the only vehicle here, so hopefully that means this might be some kind of rendezvous point and we'll be waiting here for a bit. The longer I stay in one place, the easier it might be to plan an escape, and the better the chances that Julien will be able to find me.

All of us get out of the SUV and the two shifters from the front seat enter the house first. After a couple minutes, one of them pokes his head out the front door.

“The house is clear.”

Doc gives a sharp nod and wraps his hand around my upper arm. My legs are steady at this point, but Doc still uses his hold to lead me inside like he's worried I might fall. Or maybe run.

The interior of the house is dusty, the air stale like the place has been empty for a while. We all file into the living room and Doc gestures for me to sit on the couch, then takes a seat beside me. Francis and the other two take positions at various entry points: one by the front door, one by the doorway leading toward the back of the house, and one at the bottom of the stairs.

And we wait.

The room is dead silent, the quiet only sharpening the edge of my apprehension. My stomach chooses that moment to let

out an embarrassingly loud gurgle, and Doc's gaze goes to my abdomen. He frowns.

"I didn't get a chance to eat dinner. Too busy being drugged and kidnapped," I say, my mind drifting back to the smell of Rachel's lasagna. My stomach grumbles again as another pang of hunger hits, followed quickly by a hint of nausea.

Earlier, Doc was at least semi-worried about my physical *condition*, so maybe that also extends to my physical *comfort*. Maybe I can use that as a distraction?

I look to the shifter who's standing near the doorway that leads toward the back of the house and possibly the kitchen. "You guys got any crackers or anything?"

The shifter scowls at me. "We aren't here to—"

"Go check the pantry," snaps Doc.

Grumbling, the other shifter shuffles off to do as he's told as I eyeball Doc.

Doc is not an alpha, at least not that I can tell and, regardless of who he's related to, I wouldn't expect any of these other guys to listen to him unless there's something I'm missing.

In the pack pecking order, Doc is the last person I would expect to be in charge of this group. Of course, Remy isn't the most physically imposing shifter either, and Julien's guys respect him. There's no respect for Doc, though. These guys just kind of reluctantly listen to him. It's a little strange, but also not my problem. There are enough things for me to worry

about without trying to figure out the dynamics between these guys.

Speaking of problems, while we wait for the other shifter to rustle around in the kitchen, I might as well attempt to get some information about things that actually do concern me.

Like what the hell Zachariah even *wants* with me after all these years.

“So...” I start. “Care to explain exactly what’s going on here? Because if your brother is who I’m thinking of, then he wouldn’t piss on me if I was on fire, much less go through all this crap to get me.”

“You do remember him then.” Doc gives me an appraising look. “When you didn’t say anything before I wasn’t sure.”

Well, that confirms my suspicions about the identity of Doc’s brother.

“Remember him?” I shoot Doc a droll look. “The asshole starting grooming me at thirteen and then almost got me killed. I think that would make him a little hard to forget.”

“Zachariah is... impulsive,” says Doc, unsurprised at my revelation of his brother’s predatory past. “But he only does what’s best for the pack.”

“How does kidnapping me fall under ‘what’s best for the pack’? Is your brother getting laid that vital?”

“No,” says Doc. “But he needs a mate.”

“Zachariah already has a mate,” I say. “I remember her too, since she tried awfully hard to disembowel me for supposedly seducing her man.”

“Petra was unable to provide an alpha heir,” says Doc in that same bland voice. “After the third beta child, Zachariah lost his temper and, like I said, he’s impulsive.”

“I don’t understand.” But on some horrifying level, I do. I simply don’t want to admit that even to myself. As much as I disliked Petra, she didn’t deserve to—

“He killed her.”

*Yup. That’s exactly what I thought he meant.*

I swallow. “I still don’t get what that has to do with me.”

“Zachariah’s two other matings also proved unsuccessful, leaving the pack vulnerable to a take over from an outsider. My brother needs an alpha heir to avoid that,” Doc explains. His gaze darts down to my abdomen again. “And we’ve been assured you can provide one.”

Well, shit. I guess a male omega’s biology isn’t quite as much of a secret as Ben thought.

# FIFTY-SEVEN

## JULIEN

I DIDN'T GET A very close look at Luke back in Chicago, since I was a little preoccupied with that stupid challenge at the time. Keir's cousin is not what I expected. For one thing, he's young, even younger than I was when I became Alpha.

Given his age, the Sweet Water pack's history of kidnappings, and the fact Luke himself is likely one of those kidnapped children, that begs the question of whether or not the Sweet Water pack is going to respect him enough to follow him. Not that I've met any of them except the asshole cleric. Sure, Malachi is showing some deference to Luke, but if anyone knows how precarious taking over a pack young is, it's me.

Add in the rest of this mess and I'm pretty sure Luke's hold on the pack as Alpha is weak. Of course, I could be feeling sympathetic for someone who's about to make things even

worse, but I really hope that's not the case. The last thing this situation needs is more complications.

I watch the young Alpha from the corner of my eye as his gaze passes over the shifters sitting at the table, my body tense as I wait to find out whether he's a friend or an enemy. He was helpful to Keir back in Chicago, but I don't know anything else about him or where his loyalties actually lie.

Luke's eyes stop on the cleric and he straightens his shoulders, staring down the older man until the cleric averts his gaze. Point to the kid for not taking any shit. It's more than I knew to do when I was his age.

Finally, his attention turns to me. "Alpha Matisse," he says, acknowledging me with an upward jerk of his chin. "It's good to finally meet you. Your brother told me where to find you."

Some of my tension drains away. Remy wouldn't have sent Luke here if he thought the other Alpha would be a problem. Now, whether the kid can exert enough power to take control from his wayward pack member and be a *solution* is my next concern.

I return Luke's greeting. "I take it you weren't aware your cleric and my..." I glare at William, "soon to be *former* pack elder have taken it upon themselves to hand Keir over to Stevens even before the farce of a hearing?"

Luke's expression darkens and his jaw tenses. "No. I wasn't." His eyes narrow on the cleric, who still hasn't looked up from the table. "And I absolutely don't approve. We will cancel the hearing, as I'm renouncing any claim my pack

might have on Keir. It is Keir's—and *only* Keir's—decision as to where he wants to be.”

A growl rumbles up from Stevens as he sneers at Luke. “I’m paying good money for the omega. You—”

“Keir is not for sale,” says Luke succinctly. “Any money that may have exchanged hands will be returned to you.”

A wave of relief rolls over me and I shift slightly to stand closer to the younger Alpha.

“Luke...” says Malachi in a sickly sweet patronizing tone I recognize hearing from William when I first became Alpha. “I realize this situation might be confusing for you, given the suddenness of your father’s death. As the pack’s interim leader, it is best you let me guide you during this difficult time and—”

I can’t help my snort of disbelief. “I can tell you from personal experience, no matter how young you might be, giving up any of your power will not turn out well for you.” I tilt my head toward William. “Case in point.”

William blusters. “How dare you—”

“Shut up, William,” I snap. “I’ll deal with your betrayal once I have my mate back.”

“If you think the council will ever approve of—”

“Are you an idiot, or are you simply homophobic?” Luke asks in a conversational tone.

I muffle a laugh with the back of my hand. *I'm starting to like this kid.*

William gapes at the younger Alpha, whether because he's shocked Luke dared to ask or because the elder doesn't want to admit his answer.

*Not that I don't already know.*

"I'm leaning toward both," I say, glancing at Luke.

He shoots me a small smile and nods. "I agree. Though, I find it hard to believe someone who claims to have the best interests of his pack in mind can be so blind."

William has the nerve to look affronted. "What are you—"

I respond as if I didn't hear William's interjection. "I know, right? Keir can't possibly be as 'worthless' as he thinks when more than one Alpha has been desperate to get their hands on him. Granted, Rossi's interest partially had to do with getting to *me*, but this asshole," I gesture dismissively at Stevens, "doesn't even know me, so all that money he's willing to pay is solely about Keir."

William's brow furrows as he considers that angle, clearly for the first time. Which isn't surprising. The elder has never been the most forward or creative in his thinking. The only thing he ever saw was the fact that Keir is male.

Stevens's face has gone blank, his eyes cold and hard as he glares at Luke. "You can't back out of the deal that easily. The contract—"



“Is null and void if not signed by the current Alpha now that he has stepped forward,” says—of all fucking people—*William*. “I think it might be best if we all go somewhere more private to discuss this.”

Stevens slams his hand down on the table. “No. I was promised—”

“Whatever you were promised was bullshit,” I growl back. “And you know that, since anyone who made a promise to you made it without either mine or Luke’s approval.”

“It doesn’t matter,” snarls Stevens. He points at Luke. “He’s not the rightful Alpha, so I don’t need his approval.”

“What do you mean?” asks the cleric.

A dark smile spreads across the older Alpha’s face. “I killed Randall. Which means *I’m* the Alpha of the Sweet Water pack.”

# FIFTY-EIGHT

## KEIR

CAN SOMETHING TRULY BE called your ‘worst fear’ even if you never previously considered the situation a possibility? I’m thinking the answer to that is yes. Because that’s definitely how I feel about being a baby maker for my sociopathic ex... *not* boyfriend.

I still haven’t fully gotten my head around the fact that male omegas can get pregnant and now an unpleasant blast from my past wants to impregnate me? That’s terrifying. On multiple levels.

Having Julien’s baby would be one thing. Weird as it is and as much as I’m not sure I’m ready for kids—or even entirely sure I *want* them, but that’s an issue for another day—Julien is my fated mate, so he and I making a baby would make sense.

Or at least the idea doesn’t make my skin crawl.

Having a baby with Zachariah is another matter. I spent a long time coming to terms with what he did to me when I was

younger, and the thought of his hands on me now utterly repulses me. I might have thought I was in love with him when I was a teenager, but a lot has changed since then. *I've* changed.

Mainly, I'm not a naïve idiot anymore.

And then there's also the possibility that any child of Zachariah's that I bore might not be an alpha. Sure, Ben said the odds of an alpha birth are pretty high, but not one hundred percent. Should worst come to worst, what would Zachariah do to me if I didn't give him an alpha heir?

From what Doc said, Zachariah seems to have a habit of killing mates who don't deliver what he wants. My stomach churns and my entire body goes cold as something even worse occurs to me: What did he do to the *babies*?

A memory of the coldness in Zachariah's eyes the last time I saw him flashes through my mind and a shudder travels down my back. Even if he *has* a conscience—something definitely up for debate—I doubt it would be enough to keep him from killing a defenseless infant.

And if I failed to deliver an alpha, he'd just make me try again.

And again.

Bile climbs the back of my throat and now, more than ever, the direness of my situation registers. I need to find a way out of this. *Quickly*.

A small, cylindrical package lands in my lap, startling me out of my spiraling fears. I glance down to find a stack of crackers still wrapped in their plastic sleeve. The minion must have taken my request rather literally.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

“Eat up,” says Doc. “As soon as Zachariah gets here, we’re leaving.”

*Yeah, I figured that much.*

“Where are you guys taking me?” I ask as I open the package and start shoving crackers into my mouth. I need whatever strength I can get.

Surprisingly, Doc answers without hesitation. “We’ll be staying in a secure location nearby until the hearing is over.”

Well, it’s nice to know they’re not dragging me across the country back to Alabama. *Yet.*

That gives me some time to find a way out of this. Hopefully.

“A secure location *here*?” I ask. “How did Zachariah end up with property in Wisconsin?”

“He didn’t,” says Doc. “The location has been provided by the hosting pack’s council of elders. Or it will be. Zachariah is meeting with them now.”

*Fucking William.* It’s no surprise he’s involved in this somehow. I should have let Julien strangle him.

“And once the hearing is over?” I ask.

Doc shrugs. “Then you come home with us.”

“Um, you seem to be forgetting something. What if the hearing doesn’t go the way Zachariah is expecting?”

“Then you come home with us,” he repeats, his voice tight.

I blink. “Zachariah would bring down the wrath of the triumvirate on your entire pack?” *Not to mention Julien.* “How in the hell could that be considered doing what’s best for them?”

“If that situation comes to pass, we’ll have to deal with it.” Doc’s jaw tenses. “Zachariah is my Alpha. I am bound to obey him.”

Not exactly a ringing endorsement for Zachariah’s leadership. Is it possible Zachariah has somehow *commanded* sustained obedience? I’m not entirely sure how the whole Alpha command thing works, but maybe Doc isn’t as unaffected by his brother’s unreasonable behavior as he tries to pretend.

*Can I use that to my advantage?*

I glance around at the three other shifters in the room. They take orders from Doc, albeit reluctantly, but if he wanted to go against Zachariah’s wishes, where would their loyalty fall? I guess that’s something I’ll have to leave to chance. For now, I’m going to do what I can to get Doc on my side, or at least get him to see his brother’s behavior is not doing his pack any favors.

“So...” I say. “Why do they call you Doc? Are you a doctor?”

“Not a medical one,” he responds. “I have a PhD in biology.”

I nod, not bothering to hide the fact that I’m impressed. Not many shifters bother with higher education. “Is that how you knew how the drug would affect me?”

He shakes his head. “I knew how it would affect you because I developed it.”

“I see...” *Not really.* “That seems like an awful lot of work to kidnap me when a plain old horse tranquilizer would have worked.”

“Your biology is unique,” says Doc. “Zachariah wanted to be certain nothing would be damaged.”

Of course, because then I might not be able to be his alpha baby factory.

I tilt my head. “You were able to create a custom tranquilizer in only a few days? That’s pretty impressive.”

“No,” he says. “I actually developed the drug two years ago when Zachariah first learned of a male omega’s... capabilities.”

“Two *years* ago?”

His gaze passes over me. “One of my instructors used to work for the triumvirate. He mentioned something in passing about some old myths related to male omegas. I was intrigued,

so I looked into it a little further, only to find they weren't myths at all."

"I get how you might have found some truth to the old stories, but if everyone thinks male omega pregnancy is a myth, then how did you get enough information to develop an omega safe drug?"

"There was a research project funded by the triumvirate," he replies. "The records were well hidden, but—" He stops, cocking his head to the side.

Outside, there's the sound of a vehicle pulling to a stop in front of the house, and a bone-deep terror fills me.

My time's up.

*Zachariah is here.*

# FIFTY-NINE

## JULIEN

SOMEHOW, THE FACT THAT Stevens killed Randall is both shocking and entirely unsurprising. Given what little I know about him, I'd definitely expect him to try to bulldoze his way through problems either with money or, in this case, with murder.

But something about him waiting to reveal this until *now* is off.

Stevens sits back in his chair, a smug smile on his face as if he just showed off a winning poker hand and is prepared to take the pot. Which I suppose he sort of has... in a way.

If the asshole's claim to be the new Alpha of the Sweet Water pack is valid, then that definitely complicates things. My gaze darts toward Luke. For one, if Stevens is the Alpha, that puts Randall's heir in an extremely precarious position right now.



But then again... if Stevens were as sure of himself as he's acting, why would the offer to buy Keir ever have come up? That's a lot of money to pay for something he thinks he already owns.

"You're lying," says Luke, eyes narrowed.

Not the direction I would have gone, but effective enough as it gets the asshole talking.

Stevens scoffs. "No, I'm not. Randall definitely died by my hand."

*That* I don't doubt.

I run over what I know about Randall's death in my mind. He was tied up and tortured, probably for information. Possibly even for information about *Keir*. But no matter what Stevens wanted from Randall, it wasn't control of the Sweet Water pack or he wouldn't have gone about it the way he did.

As far as I'm aware, nobody witnessed Stevens issuing any challenge, and I don't think what happened could even be called an 'altercation,' much less the type of formal fight required to win the position of pack Alpha. So, all Stevens's assertion means is that he killed the Sweet Water pack's Alpha, not that he can actually take over the pack.

"I believe the part about you killing Randall," I say. "But you're stretching the truth about being the new Alpha." I pause, watching the older Alpha's face as I say my next words. "Unless I'm wrong and you had a witness for your challenge?"

The scowl is only a flash, disappearing almost as quickly as it appears on Stevens's face, but it's enough for me to know I've got it right.

There was no challenge.

Which means Stevens is full of shit about being the new Alpha.

"I didn't think so," I say. "Randall was tied to a chair and tortured to death. Sure, those things could have happened after a formal challenge, but I highly doubt it."

Luke breaks in, "You already knew about Keir being an omega somehow, maybe even knew back when he left the pack, but he's been in hiding for years so you weren't able to do anything about it. When you heard Randall and I were headed up to Chicago and why, you must have followed us." The younger Alpha turns to me. "His pack has been sniffing around ours for years. His father had some sort of arrangement with mine, but soon after Zachariah took over, he cut all ties with our pack. That happened not long after Keir left."

*Interesting...* If Stevens already knew about Keir being an omega, why didn't he try to claim him then? Was his father of a similar mindset to Keir's old pack? Or did Stevens just expect Keir to be there waiting for him?

Before I can voice any of my questions, William speaks up.

"Alpha Matisse is correct," he says.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. *Thanks for finally supporting me, asshole.*

Of *course* William has shifted his loyalties now that he's realized Keir is valuable, even if the elder isn't sure in what way.

The cleric pinches his lips together, obviously not happy with any of this—probably because he didn't get to make a spectacle of Randall's death like he did of the man who raised Keir—but he nods his head. “The Matisse pack elder speaks the truth. In the absence of a formal challenge, the position of Alpha automatically passes to Randall's heir.”

“Fine,” says Stevens in a flat voice. “I'm not the Alpha, but I will be.” His gaze focuses on Luke. “By the laws of blood, I hereby challenge you for leadership of the Sweet Water pack.”

Luke's nostrils flare, but that's the only outward sign of his discomfort. Stevens is older, bigger, and more experienced, and Luke probably knows his chances of winning the challenge are slim.

“I accept,” he says, straightening his shoulders. “As the challenged Alpha, I have the right to pick the location and I pick wherever it is you're holding Keir.”

Even Stevens looks impressed at the unexpected tactic, but I'm just happy Luke is on my side. Well, Keir's side.

My stomach twists. *I'll likely watch him die for that loyalty.*

“I attest to the issuance of a challenge and the acceptance,” says the cleric stiffly.

*This is happening too fast. I need to—*

“You’ll require at least four objective witnesses,” says William, gesturing to himself, Everett, Dante, and Brody. If he thinks I’m staying behind and not—

“And Alpha Matisse, of course,” he adds. “Since there will be plenty of witnesses present, I believe it would also be prudent to determine whether or not Julien and the omega share a fated mate bond before we go through the hassle of a hearing.”

Everett sputters and mumbles something under his breath I don’t catch. William places a hand on my uncle’s bicep and squeezes, then makes a placating gesture with his other hand. I’m not quite sure what William’s angle is now, but I doubt it’s as altruistic as he’s trying to make it seem. Either way, giving William what he wants is not a good idea.

Luckily, there’s a way to simplify this whole mess, get Keir back, *and* save Luke.

All I have to do is kill Stevens.

I turn to Luke. “I volunteer to answer the challenge in your place and fight as your proxy.”

# SIXTY

## KEIR

ON AN INTELLECTUAL LEVEL, I've always understood the concept of the fight-or-flight response, but not until this moment did I *really* get it. Wolves don't often feel like prey, but there's something about abject terror that can kick someone into motion no matter the species.

Every system in my body goes into high alert, my pulse picking up, my muscles tensing, and my mind going blank except for a single urgent thought.

*I have to get away.*

My gaze instinctively darts around the room, cataloging the potential escape routes. The front door. One guard. The stairs. Two guards. The doorway leading toward the back of the house...

*No guards.*

The guy who searched out the crackers for me is away from his post, standing by the stairs chatting with Francis. My breath catches and my brain latches on to the empty doorway, pulling my hopes along with it.

*If I can just...*

“Bathroom,” I mutter, clutching my abdomen like I’m about to be sick, something I’m not so sure I have to fake. My stomach aids in my deception with a convincing gurgle.

I jump to my feet and head toward the empty doorway. Doc makes a noise of protest, but subsides when I gag on the bile in my throat as I stumble into the kitchen. I make it to the counter—there’s no bathroom in here—just in time to vomit what little I’ve eaten into the sink. Though still queasy, my stomach settles, but I make an exaggerated gagging noise, then spit into the sink as I slide my gaze toward the living room.

*Nobody followed me.*

I force out another retching noise, then groan and spit again before turning on the water full blast and casting another glance in the direction of the other shifters.

*They’re still in the living room.*

I can work with this.

The sound of the tap won’t be loud enough to cover what I need to do, but it will give me a few extra seconds before they’re on to me. Water still running, I tiptoe to the back door. Ever so slowly, I turn the knob, wincing at the click it makes as the door unlatches. I dart back to the sink and make a

couple more gagging noises as I slide out of my clothes. Just as my pants hit the ground, there's the sound of raised voices from the front of the house.

I'm not waiting around to find out what that's all about. Instead, I use the distraction and quickly shift, then nose the back door open before running as fast as I can across the yard. They're going to figure out I'm gone and be on the chase eventually. Hopefully, that happens later rather than sooner.

I ignore my surroundings, not bothering to look around as I run. The only place I want to be is *away*. My heart beats frantically in my chest and it isn't long before my tongue hangs from my mouth as I pant with exertion, but another burst of fear pushes me into a slightly faster pace.

A stand of trees appears over the next small hill and I change direction to head toward it. The spindly trunks won't provide much cover, but it's better than nothing. The last thing I want is to be hit with another one of those darts, and at least I won't be out in the open.

I swivel my ears, trying to catch any sounds of pursuit, but all I can hear is my own panting breath echoing in my head. Lifting my head, I sniff at the air. Unfortunately, I'm not as well acquainted with my wolf as most shifters—being in hiding means I haven't spent as much time in fur as other shifters my age—so I'm not sure how to interpret everything I'm smelling.

So, I just keep running.

And running.

I'm not sure how long I've been moving before the almost blind fear that propelled me gives way to exhaustion. My legs crumple underneath me and I flop to the ground on my side. My tongue lolls from my mouth and I pant heavily as I try to figure out what to do next. Gradually, my heart rate slows, and my lungs stop struggling for air. I sit up, glancing around to take in my surroundings.

Of course, I have zero idea where I am. But, on the bright side, that means no one else does either, and I still can't detect any signs of pursuit. Which, now that I think about it, is strange.

And more than a little concerning.

I push myself up onto my paws and lift my nose to sniff at the air. Nothing out of place that I can tell. Well, I'm not going to take this reprieve for granted. The best way to use this time is to get back to Julien.

*But how the hell do I do that?*

The bite on the back of my neck pulses with my heartbeat, pulling up a memory of Julien, or maybe Remy, saying something about how the mate bond can be used for tracking. I suppose it's worth a shot. Closing my eyes and stilling my body, I concentrate on the feeling of my bond with Julien, the fluttering of what could become love, the safety I feel in his presence, and that instinctual urge to be near him.

I take a step forward, letting instinct guide the direction, and it feels right somehow. Another step. And another.



*This is working!*

Speeding up, I keep moving as something close to giddiness breaks over me and—

*Ow. Shit.*

I blink my eyes open to glare at the tree I crashed into. Mental note: following the pull of a mating bond does not help you avoid obstacles. Lesson learned, I keep my eyes open as I continue forward. That sense of Julien grows closer and closer until I reach the top of a hill and catch sight of a house in the distance.

A very *familiar* house.

I'm back where I fucking started.

And the mating bond led me here.

Which means... Zachariah might have done something to Julien.

# SIXTY-ONE

## KEIR

THE THOUGHT OF JULIEN— *my mate*—in Zachariah’s clutches is enough to drown out my instinctual fear of the monster from my adolescence and propel me forward. I don’t have even the beginnings of a plan, but I’m not letting Julien get hurt if I can help it.

I crouch down, practically crawling down the hill on my belly. It’s dark enough out here that I probably won’t be seen from the windows, but I’m not taking any risks. Well, not any more than the ones I’ve already committed myself to in order to make sure my mate is safe.

In a few minutes, I make it to the back door of the house, but I’m not sure where to go from here. There’s a difference between winging it and being stupid. Blindly walking into whatever’s happening on the other side of the door probably falls into the latter category, no matter how much my wolf is urging me forward.

*Nope. Not this time.*

For once in my life, I'm going to take some time to investigate the situation before jumping into action. I creep along the edge of the house, my fur brushing along the siding as I move toward the front of the house. Once I reach the front, I glance at the driveway from around the corner, taking a quick count of the vehicles parked on the gravel. Including the one I arrived in, there's a single sedan and five SUVs in various shades of 'dark' parked in front of the house.

That's at least three more vehicles than I was expecting. I don't remember hearing more than one pull up, but it's definitely possible some of them arrived after I made a run for it. Does that mean Zachariah has some sort of backup? Or that someone else is helping him? *Like someone local.*

I stick my nose to the ground and take a few deep sniffs. My ability to differentiate between the scents of different shifters isn't something I've practiced much, but I recognize some of the smells. I definitely recognize Julien's scent and I'm pretty sure the two scents layered with his belong to Dante and Brody. There are a couple more vaguely familiar scents grouped with them as well.

Then, one that's really familiar, though I can't quite put my paw on it... I sniff again. Is that *Luke*?

*What is he doing here?*

Another inhale brings in Zachariah's sour scent and my lips curl away from my teeth in an instinctual response as a low growl vibrates in my chest and the fur along my back rises.

There's a semi-familiar scent is near Zachariah's, but I can't place it except that I know it belongs to no one good.

So, that's at least one additional hostile on top of Zachariah and the four shifters who brought me here, maybe as many as three additional hostiles depending on what my cousin is doing here and who the other two scents belong to. But Julien didn't come here alone, which is a positive. It means he probably wasn't drugged and kidnapped like I was.

At worst, this is a four against nine fight. Not the best odds considering I don't really know how to fight, but better than the alternative, which would be me and Julien against everyone else. I allow a tiny bit of relief to seep in. Now that I have a better idea of what I'm up against, I just need to get inside.

Which is easier said than done.

In my wolf form, I lack the opposable thumbs needed to open a door, but I left the only clothes I have behind in the kitchen and barging in the door butt naked doesn't seem like a good idea. Shifters might not have the same hang-ups about nudity as humans do, but it would still be hella awkward and I'd rather be in fur than nothing but skin.

I pad over to the front door, scratch at it with my paw, then let out a sharp yip to get someone's attention. A few seconds later, the door swings open, and I find myself looking up at William. That explains one of the other scents near Julien's. Whether his presence is good or bad is yet to be determined, though.

William might be a member of Julien's pack, but he hasn't been particularly helpful so far, and there's no telling whose side the guy is on right now. The elder's lips twist into a tight smile and he gestures me inside. I narrow my eyes, letting my lips pull back from my teeth to flash some fang at him. He's not my Alpha and I don't have to listen to him.

"Alpha Matisse is inside," he says. "We've been waiting for you."

I huff, then stick my nose up in the air and trot inside, fighting the urge to bite the asshole as I pass. Making my way into the living room, I take a quick glance around before my attention lands on Julien.

After that, he's the only thing I see.

I dart across the room, leaping onto the couch and half into Julien's lap. I butt his chin with my head, letting out a soft whining noise, then curl into his side as close to him as I can get.

Julien's arms come around me and he buries his face in the scruff of my neck as he lets out a tense breath. "Are you satisfied now?"

I pull back, giving him a quizzical look.

He smiles softly at me. "Not you." He jerks his chin in the direction of the rest of the room. "Them."

I tilt my head to the side, still not understanding what he's talking about.

"You used the mate bond to find me, right?" he asks.

I nod, then lean forward and lick his cheek.

“Then you just proved to all these other shifters that we really are fated mates.” He rubs his cheek across my fur, then adds in a low voice only I can hear, “Not that you would have needed to if William weren’t such an asshole.”

I chuff in agreement, letting out another soft whine and nudging Julien with my snout.

“Very well,” says William. “I’m willing to attest that Julien and Keir are fated mates, which means the omega belongs with our pack. There is—”

“You said you would support my case,” says Zachariah, the ice in his voice sending a chill down my spine.

William sniffs. “That was before there was undeniable proof of the omega’s status as my Alpha’s fated mate.”

“You mean before you thought the omega was valuable,” says a voice I’d hoped to never hear again. I peek out from under Julien’s chin. Yup. That’s definitely Malachi, my old pack’s cleric.

Zachariah rises to his feet, moving to stand closer to William. The carefully blank expression on Zachariah’s face is one that’s familiar to me—and one that scares me even more than if he were more obviously enraged.

“My reasoning doesn’t really matter,” says William. “All that matters is that the laws about fated mates are—”

Zachariah moves so quickly that no one has a chance to react before he shifts his fingers into claws and drags them across

William's throat. Blood sprays outward, pulsing from the injury as William falls to his knees, then crumples to his side on the floor. A few seconds later, the elder is dead.

# SIXTY-TWO

## KEIR

FROM PRETTY MUCH THE time I could walk, I was exposed to random violence almost constantly in my former pack, so William's sudden and rather bloody demise isn't at all shocking to me. In fact, it's barely a blip on my radar. Sure, Zachariah practically ripped the elder's throat out with no warning, but it's not like I haven't seen the lunatic do something similar before.

However, the same cannot be said for my mate and the three other members of his pack who are present. Granted, none of them look particularly upset over William's death—though Everett looks a little green—but they are clearly dumbfounded and none of them seem sure about what to do.

Even Julien, who had William up against the wall by his throat not too long ago, is staring down at William's body with a stunned expression he's not bothering to hide.



I knew Julien was slightly naïve to many of the realities of life in the less civilized packs. He didn't quite get it when I talked about my former pack's traditions and beliefs and the idea of the blood debt disgusted him, but I figured he at least had seen a violent death before.

Now, I'm not so sure.

I nose at Julien's arm, whining quietly until he glances down at me. His face softens, and he runs his hand over my head and down my flank. He probably thinks he's comforting me, but shit like this happened *all the time* in my old pack. For Julien though, this might be the first time he's seen such casual brutality so normalized, and I want to be sure he knows I'm here for him, too.

Zachariah cleans the blood from his hand by wiping it on his pants, then glances at Francis and gestures toward William's body. "Get this mess cleaned up," he says in an utterly calm voice as he returns to where he was sitting before turning his attention to Julien. "Now that that's taken care of, let's finalize the details of the challenge."

My eyes about bug out of my head. *The challenge? What the hell is he talking about?* I cast a glance up at Julien and tilt my head to the side in question.

My mate runs his hand over the fur on my side in a soothing motion, but his gaze is fixed on Zachariah. "You're still planning to go through with the challenge for control of Luke's pack even though it's been verified that the Sweet Water pack has no claim on Keir?"

“Of course,” replies Zachariah in a flat voice.

“To what purpose?” asks Julien. “What do you hope to gain now?”

My eyes dart back and forth between my mate and Zachariah as I struggle to put the pieces together. Why does Julien even care? What does it matter to him if Zachariah challenges Luke? I’m not too keen on the idea of Zachariah having any more power than he already does, and I definitely wouldn’t want to see Luke lose his life to the asshole. But why is Julien involved at all?

*I don’t like this.*

Zachariah shrugs, then sends a sneering glance at Luke. “Your father was weak and stupid. You don’t deserve to lead a pack and that’s reason enough for the challenge.” He smirks, returning his gaze to my mate. “Besides, you’re one witness down, Alpha Matisse, and the objectivity of the others is questionable. I don’t think that sniveling weasel’s little demonstration means anything in the long run.”

I mean... I don’t know all the legal ins and outs of whatever William was trying to prove and I don’t want to *agree* with Zachariah, but the asshole does kind of have a point.

A dead man can’t testify to anything.

Julien only scowls in response and Zachariah’s lips turn up into a smug smile.

“And since that whole fated mates nonsense is still up for debate, that means when I take control of the Sweet Water

pack, all its members are *mine*,” says Zachariah, an obsessive gleam in his eyes as his icy gaze lands on... me.

But it makes no sense for him to be looking at me. I’m not a member of that pack anymore. Right? Before this moment, I was one hundred percent certain I wasn’t, but now...

My gaze darts to the cleric as I wait for him to start blathering on about the ‘abomination’ being no pack member of his. But Malachi is silent. He doesn’t look particularly pleased, but he’s not arguing. Julien isn’t arguing either. He’s simply gone tense and locked eyes with Zachariah in what looks like some sort of Alpha staring contest. There must be some information that I’m missing here, something Julien already knows about.

The only thing I can think of is that the slimy lawyer who showed up at Julien’s house must have done some underhanded legal maneuvering and somehow everyone’s now under the impression I’m still technically a member of my old pack. But how could that possibly be true?

Zachariah moves his unwanted attention back to Julien, grinning. “So Matisse, are we doing this tonight or did you need time to get your affairs in order?”

Wait a second.

*Julien’s fighting Zachariah?*

For this, I definitely need to be human. I shift back, ignoring the fact I’m now butt naked in Julien’s lap.

“He’s not fighting you,” I say to Zachariah, snarling the words. “Whatever bullshit—”

“I’m only fighting as Luke’s proxy,” says Julien calmly.

I elbow him in the chest. “And how is you dying for someone else any better?”

“You’re so sure I’d lose?” He sounds almost insulted, but I don’t care.

“No,” I snap. “But it’s not worth the risk.” I bare my teeth at Zachariah. “And I know he doesn’t fight fair.”

“Whether or not it’s a ‘fair’ fight doesn’t matter,” says Malachi in a patronizing tone. “Alpha Stevens’s challenge was issued by the laws of blood. That means anything goes.”

# SIXTY-THREE

## JULIEN

AS MUCH AS THE whole ‘challenge under the laws of blood’ nonsense obviously unsettles Keir, it actually makes me feel better about the whole thing. The fact that Stevens was planning on fighting dirty was never in question. Him being up front about it rather than trying to hide it seems more like an attempt at intimidating me—much like what he just did to William—than anything else.

And I don’t think the other Alpha is as confident as he pretends.

Or maybe he’s just stupid.

Sure, Zachariah Stevens is an Alpha and can probably hold his own in a fight... generally. He’s definitely physically strong, but I doubt he’s ever fought in a true challenge for power. The reckless and impulsive way he uses his strength makes him appear immature and doesn’t inspire respect or admiration.

Not even in his own pack members.

One of them actually rolled his eyes when Stevens started goading me about getting my affairs in order and none of them looked particularly impressed by William's sudden murder. But those small details have gone unnoticed by Keir, who's practically vibrating with tension in my lap at the idea of me fighting the older Alpha. I hate upsetting my mate, but this is something I have to do.

For both our sakes.

Once I win this challenge, that will be it. There will be no one else trying to take my mate away from me.

I wrap my arms around Keir, pulling him closer to my chest and trying to block everyone else's view of my mate's naked body as much as possible. His muscles tense, but he allows me to maneuver him without complaint.

"I've got this," I say into his ear in a low voice.

And I do.

I haven't taken part in many actual challenges, but I know how to fight. My dad wouldn't settle for anything less. Just because my pack has had peaceful transitions of power for a few generations doesn't mean that couldn't change at any time and he made sure to prepare me.

Thoroughly.

I was sparring with shifters twice my size from the time I was ten years old, and I still spar regularly with Dante and

Brody. Keir just hasn't known me long enough to have learned all that yet.

Keir nuzzles at my chest. "I just got you. I refuse to lose you."

"You won't," I say firmly.

Keir pulls back and stares up at me with those big blue-gray eyes, studying my face and, for a second, he looks like he might try to argue with me, but instead he gives me a clipped nod and tucks his head back under my chin.

I don't love the fact that Keir doubts my abilities, but I understand why he does. The only time he's ever seen me in a challenge was that farce back in Chicago. What my mate doesn't realize is that my true opponent in that challenge was Rossi, not Derek.

The only reason there was any question of me winning then was because Rossi is a calculating and intelligent opponent. The Chicago Alpha was able to manipulate the situation in such a way as to put me at a huge disadvantage.

Stevens clearly does not have that kind of finesse. He's more like a wrecking ball with no mental precision whatsoever. I'm not concerned about fighting him.

I turn my gaze on the asshole in question, my expression hardening. "Let's get this over with."

He smirks and rises to his feet. "Eager to die, huh?" He glances over his shoulder at one of the shifters in his group—the one who rolled his eyes earlier. "Get everything ready to

transport my omega back home with us. This won't take long."

"Keir won't be going anywhere with you," I say in a flat voice.

Stevens's response is simply, "We'll see."

*Yeah, I suppose we will.*

Everyone heads outside, Keir and I the last to exit the house. There are too many cars in the gravel drive to make it a suitable space for a fight, so everyone heads around the back of the house where there's nothing but patchy grass.

Keir is still tense and I'm sure his nakedness isn't helping. I'm not sure where exactly his clothes ended up, so I pull my shirt over my head, then drop it over Keir's so the fabric settles around him. He's short enough that my shirt covers the important bits, something that greatly appeases my wolf who wasn't fond of the fact that all these other shifters were getting an eyeful before. Keir wraps his arms around his waist and dips his chin to sniff at the shirt, comforting himself with my scent.

"Are you sure?" he asks, glancing up to meet my eyes as he bites at his lower lip.

"Absolutely," I say. "I know what you saw of my performance at the challenge back in Chicago wasn't very impressive, but this isn't anywhere close to the same thing. Being a murderous asshole doesn't give Stevens the advantage he thinks it does. It's one thing to attack those weaker than him



or subjugate a fractured pack, but in an actual challenge—by blood laws or not—the way he’s ruled by his emotions will make him prone to mistakes and easy to defeat.”

“But why do *you* have to do it?” asks Keir.

“Because, in the end, it’s my fight, not his,” I reply. “Luke is young and, given what you’ve told me about your old pack, likely untrained. If Luke fought Stevens and lost, I’d still end up fighting the asshole, but Luke would be dead and his pack would be left without an Alpha.”

“Okay.” Keir takes a deep breath and lets it out in a huff. “Okay,” he repeats, as if giving himself a pep talk. “I’m going to trust that something is going to go right for once this week.”

I wrap an arm around his shoulders, tugging him to my side.

“Promise me you’ll be fine,” he says, taking hold of my hand and giving it a squeeze.

“I promise.” I lean down and rub my cheek over the top of his head. “I won’t let anything take me away from you, especially not Stevens.”

# SIXTY-FOUR

## KEIR

RURAL ALABAMA AND RURAL Wisconsin don't have much in common—well, not the part of Alabama I'm from anyway—but being here now takes my mind right back to the last challenge like this I witnessed: the one between Randall and the man who raised me.

The challenge itself wasn't too awful, a bunch of growling and snarling, but surprisingly little blood...until the aftermath.

*I trust Julien.*

*I believe in Julien.*

But the anxious dread festering in the pit of my stomach simply won't go away mainly, I think, because of who his opponent is. I know on an intellectual level that my teenage mind turned Zachariah into my personal boogeyman and made him much more scary than he actually is, but that doesn't mean my brain can convince my anxiety to stand down.

Julien leads me over to where Dante and Brody are standing, positioning me in between the other two shifters. He gives both of them a pointed look, then kisses the top of my head and walks into the center of the circle of observers to stand across from Zachariah.

The slight chill in the air and the sense of growing tension pulls me back into the past again, my mind playing out a mental movie of the night the man who called himself my father died.

I think I'm going to be sick.

Half lost in memories and trying to prevent myself from puking, I jolt when Brody puts a hand on my shoulder. He doesn't say anything, only squeezing gently in a show of support.

Luke moves to stand beside Julien and Malachi steps forward, his lips pressed into a thin line.

“If there are no objections, as a representative of the Ander—*Sweet Water* pack, I will perform the duties of official,” says the cleric. No one responds, so he nods and gestures to the three Alphas in front of him. “Tonight we gather to witness a challenge under the laws of blood.”

*This asshole makes it sound like a wedding.*

“Alpha Zachariah Stevens has challenged Alpha Luke Anderson for control of his pack. Alpha Julien Matisse has agreed to fight as Alpha Anderson's proxy. Are you all in agreement with this?” They all nod their assent and the cleric

continues, “Though typically a fight to the death, the victor has the option to grant their opponent mercy if they deem it appropriate.”

Yeah, there’s no way Zachariah would grant anyone mercy. Only one of them is leaving here tonight.

*And it damn sure better be Julien. If it’s not...* I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying again to settle my nerves. It doesn’t work.

A hand lands on my other shoulder—Dante.

“He’s got this,” says the larger man.

“He better,” I mutter. “I didn’t escape that bastard when I was seventeen only to end up as his breeding stock.”

Dante and Brody both make confused noises.

Oh, that’s right. Neither of them were there when we found out about the whole pregnancy thing, but I suppose the secret will be out eventually.

“We recently found out that male omegas can get pregnant,” I explain under my breath. “And there’s this whole ‘male omega born of male omega will only bear alphas’ thing. That’s what Zachariah wants from me.”

Brody coughs. “I see...”

Malachi is still blathering on about the moon and the tides and other semi-religious sounding bullshit. He always did like to sermonize and he’s kind of got a captive audience right now. I don’t remember this much talking when my supposed

father challenged Randall, but I wasn't paying much attention then either.

Finally, the cleric stops talking and steps backward, his hands raised over his head to either side. Once he reaches the boundary of the circle of shifters, he lowers his arms like he's signaling a car race to begin.

I guess he sort of is.

Both Julien and Zachariah immediately shift into their wolves. Unsurprising, since fighting with teeth and claws is much quicker than bare hands.

The two wolves are of equal height. Zachariah's black wolf is slightly bulkier, but Julien's golden fur is shinier and his eyes are brighter. Even as a wolf, Zachariah's eyes look hard and cold. The two wolves stare at each other, muscles tensed and hackles raised, as they puff out their chests and lean their bodies slightly forward.

Zachariah's lips twitch and a low growl comes up from his chest. Julien mimics the sound.

When Julien doesn't move, Zachariah lunges forward a few steps, punctuating the movement with a snarl, before darting backward again. Julien ignores the movement, staying in place, his steady gaze focused on the other wolf as he continues his low growl.

Zachariah does the same lunging move a couple more times, but Julien continues to maintain his position, as if taking the time to study how the other wolf moves.

The longer Julien just stands there staring, the more agitated Zachariah gets and I see what Julien's strategy is: wait until the hot-headed Zachariah's impulsiveness leads him to make a mistake.

Finally, Zachariah rushes forward in a direct attack. Julien waits until the other wolf is almost to him before leaping to the side to avoid the charge. Zachariah skids through the gravel as he struggles to stop his forward momentum and Julien watches, still alert but also a little smug.

Zachariah turns and bares his teeth before barreling forward again. Julien side steps and Zachariah rushes past him again. After a couple more reckless charges, Zachariah seems to catch on to Julien's tactic. Instead of attacking again, he makes another one of those aborted lunges. The action draws no reaction from Julien beyond general wariness, and Zachariah growls in frustration.

Seconds later, Zachariah shifts in a ripple of movement, ending up crouched naked on the ground, his teeth still bared in Julien's direction.

“Are you a coward, Matisse? Dancing around instead of facing me straight on like a real Alpha?”

No response from Julien.

Zachariah's eyes narrow. Then he takes an exaggerated glance in my direction. He smirks. “Keir's a great fuck, isn't he? Does he squeal for you like he did for me?”

Julien's lips curl back to reveal his teeth as he lets out another deep growl.

*Shit. Don't fall for it, Julien. He's only trying to wind you up.*

But it's too late. Zachariah has figured out the best way to antagonize my mate and Julien is gradually letting his anger take over.

"You think he's cute now?" asks Zachariah, a reptilian grin on his face. "You should've seen him at seventeen. Hell, even at fourteen he already had those blow job lips."

Julien's body vibrates with the effort of keeping himself in place, his growl rising in volume.

Zachariah chuckles. "I could've done without the tears, but getting inside him that first time—"

And that's all Julien can take. He flies forward, but Zachariah is ready for him, kicking the golden wolf in the side and forcing him off course. Zachariah shifts back into his own wolf, then goes straight for Julien's throat, his gnashing teeth getting close enough to their target to rip out some fur.

Julien twists his head around, trying to bite at Zachariah as the two wolves struggle, kicking up a cloud of dust. The two wolves become wrapped together in a snarling, whirling bundle, both biting and clawing at the other.

One of them yelps, and Julien backs out of the tussle. My mate has blood on his muzzle, but he's also limping, one of his rear legs held off the ground. He's panting heavily, but his

steady focus has returned and he doesn't look too worried despite the injury.

Zachariah circles the golden wolf and Julien turns in short hops to keep the other wolf in sight. The darker wolf has a satisfied look on his face as he watches my mate's awkward maneuvers. He darts forward, appearing to aim for Julien's shoulder but changing direction at the last second and clamping his jaws around Julien's already injured leg and giving it a yank.

Julien stumbles as he scrabbles to stay upright with Zachariah tugging at his injured leg. Twisting around, Julien snaps at Zachariah's snout and leaves bloody furrows across his nose.

Zachariah releases Julien's leg and head butts him in the flank, knocking my mate to the ground. Then, the dark wolf jumps forward and snaps his teeth at Julien's throat. Instead of protecting his throat—like he damn well should—Julien rolls onto his back and kicks upward with his one good hind leg, knocking Zachariah away.

Julien doesn't waste another second. He leaps onto Zachariah's back and brings the darker wolf to the ground. He buries his teeth in Zachariah's shoulder, ripping away a chunk of flesh and fur. Zachariah tries to scramble away, but Julien wraps his mouth around the dark fur of Zachariah's throat and growls.

Zachariah goes limp, submitting to Julien's hold.



Julien growls again, shaking Zachariah by the neck in a show of dominance. The subdued wolf whimpers as if asking for the mercy he never would've granted.

Julien doesn't grant it either. He snarls, then rips Zachariah's throat out before stepping back to watch as the black wolf bleeds out onto the ground.

# SIXTY-FIVE

## KEIR

BLOOD, DIRT, AND WHATEVER other bodily fluids might be in his golden fur be damned, I run to Julien, fall to my knees, and wrap my arms around his neck. He huffs out a breath at the force of my hold, then rubs the side of his face against mine as a pleased rumble vibrates in his chest.

“You’re *never* doing something like that again,” I say. The statement is both a little unnecessary since Zachariah is dead and kind of unrealistic since there might come a time when my mate needs to defend his pack or something, but it’s the thought that counts.

If nothing else, I’d prefer never to have to *watch* my mate involved in a fight to the death again.

Julien takes a small step backward, then sits on his canine haunches, dragging me along with him since I refuse to let go. Somebody behind me chuckles. Whatever. I’m sure I look ridiculous and I’m probably flashing everyone now that I’m

leaning forward so much. Julien's shirt doesn't exactly provide a lot of coverage in this position. My clothes are probably still in the house, but I don't give a shit. I could have lost him tonight and...I just don't care about anything or anyone else right now.

Someone clears their throat and I glance up to find Doc stepping toward us. I bare my currently very human teeth and growl at him. Right now, I feel like I could rip his throat out even without shifting—and probably enjoy it.

Doc holds his hands up by his chest in a placating gesture. “The challenge is complete. I have no quarrel with you, omega.”

“Call me omega again and you just might,” I snap.

In my arms, Julien shifts back, ending up crouched on the ground with my arms still locked around his neck. He wraps one arm around my butt to cradle it, then stands, pulling me up with him as I wrap my legs around his waist. I don't care that I'm literally acting like a stage-five clinger. Every one of my instincts is screaming at me to keep my mate close right now.

Julien's injured leg hasn't had enough time to heal yet, so there's a hitch in the step he takes toward Doc, but the action is no less threatening.

“Take your trash and leave my territory,” says Julien, his upper lip curling in disgust as he glances at Zachariah's body. “You have an hour.”

Doc is smart enough—or, unlike his asshole sibling, he actually has a sense of self-preservation—not to argue. He tilts his head, baring his neck to Julien, then gestures his pack members toward their former Alpha. “Load the body into the back of the car. We’ll deal with this mess when we get home.”

Julien turns his back on them as they head toward Zachariah’s body, and walks over to Dante and Brody, one arm still curled under my thighs to hold me up.

“Follow them and make sure they leave,” says Julien. “I’ll get Luke to take us home.”

The two shifters nod, then head toward one of the SUVs. They watch as Doc and the others load up Zachariah’s body and then themselves. Brody climbs into the driver’s seat, and Dante crosses in front of the vehicle to get in the passenger seat.

The SUV with Doc and the others in it pulls out first, Julien’s men following close behind. Julien watches them go silently, his shoulders slumping with exhaustion once both vehicles are out of sight. But he still doesn’t let me go. He buries his face in the juncture of my neck and shoulder, simply breathing me in.

I’m not sure how long Julien and I stand there, lost in our own little world, before someone else clears their throat.

Luke. My...*not* cousin steps closer. “Thank you, Alpha Matisse.”

Julien huffs out a laugh. “No worries. As much as I would have preferred to avoid a challenge altogether, killing that asshole isn’t something that will weigh on my conscience. At all.” He pauses. “Plus, I know what you did for Keir and what you were willing to do tonight.”

Julien pats my thigh and I release my legs as he gently lowers me to the ground, then tucks me into his side and slightly in front of him.

“I’m just sorry I couldn’t have done more,” says Luke, holding his hand out to me. “I know we were never close, but you’re the only family I have left, so I’m hoping we can at least be friends.”

I debate for a second before speaking. “That thing about being your only family might not entirely be true.”

His brows draw together. “What do you mean?”

I glance up at Julien, and he nods. “It seems the Anderson family—maybe even the whole pack—had a habit of kidnapping shifter kids. I was one of them.” I pause. “And so were you.”

Luke doesn’t respond, only blinks as if his brain is failing to process that information—or he doesn’t believe me.

“I don’t know all the details,” I continue. “But I met my real father yesterday and when Smith and Yang—the praetorians we met in Chicago—came by to tell us about Randall’s death, they showed us a poster that was found near Randall’s body. It

was one of those ‘have you seen me’ things and the picture on it looked just like you.”

“Okay,” says Luke slowly. “And this means...what?”

I shrug. “No idea, but I don’t think Randall was your real father. Whoever killed Randall—”

“Zachariah killed Randall,” interrupts Julien. “He admitted it earlier this evening.”

For some reason, I’m not surprised.

“Zachariah then,” I say. “He knows...er...*knew* about it somehow. Maybe his pack was involved in whatever was going on, too.”

Luke’s eyes widen, and his gaze falls back on me. His voice drops to a whisper. “But that would mean I’m not really Randall’s heir. If I’m not the new Alpha, then I don’t have the authority to release you.”

Julien holds a hand up, leaning closer to Luke. “Since both the cleric and Zachariah treated you as the Sweet Water pack’s Alpha, then we’ll just go with the idea that you’re Randall’s *adopted* heir. The whole kidnapping mess is not something that needs to be dealt with or figured out tonight.”

Luke nods in agreement. “You’re right.”

“Now, how about giving me and Keir a ride home?” asks Julien.

“Sure. I can—”

“Hold on a minute,” stammers Everett, whom I’d completely forgotten about. Julien’s uncle charges over to where we’re standing, his chest puffed out like he’s trying to be intimidating. “Julien Matisse, I hereby challenge you for leadership of the Madison pack.”

# SIXTY-SIX

## KEIR

IF EVER THERE WAS a time when someone needed to read the room—or the yard, whatever—it’s now. But Julien’s uncle is clearly not that smart.

In fact, he’s an even bigger idiot than I thought. He repeats his asinine challenge, the poorly timed declaration landing with a thud as me, Julien, and Luke kind of blink at him in stunned disbelief.

*Is he serious? Does he really think...?*

“No,” I say, because that’s really the only response I’ve got at the moment. “Just no. Not happening.”

Everett puffs out his chest. “You don’t have the authority to —”

“As Alpha Mate, I’m pretty sure I do,” I say.

“You aren’t Alpha Mate.” He sneers, looking me up and down. “The pack elders never accepted you as Julien’s mate at



all, much less as Alpha Mate for the pack.”

I roll my eyes. “Do you really want to go there? Are you forgetting what just happened to your head elder?”

“Not to mention,” adds Luke, “before his...untimely death, that same elder acknowledged Keir’s status as Julien’s fated mate.”

“Exactly,” I say with a confidence I don’t quite feel. “Which makes me Alpha Mate by default.” *Probably.*

“That’s—”

“Just shut up, Everett,” says Julien. “Before I decide to actually take you up on that challenge.” He gestures at himself. “Sure, I’m injured at the moment and fresh from another challenge, but that just means I can choose to either wait to accept your challenge or have someone fight as my proxy. My brother might be the one with the head for the more intricate aspects of our laws, but even I know that much.”

Everett sputters out another protest, but I turn away from him, pulling Julien along with me toward Luke’s SUV. There’s no point in arguing with the asshole.

There’s a growl from behind us, and I hear someone rushing toward us. Julien doesn’t even turn all the way around, just shifts to the side, lifts his arm and catches Everett by the throat before shoving the mangy jerk off to the side. Everett lands on his ass in the dirt, his face red.

“Really now, Uncle. If you want to take this up later with an actual formal challenge, then fine,” says Julien. “But for now

you need to just fuck off.”

I snort. There’s no way Everett would have the nerve to reissue that challenge when my mate is back at full strength. We turn away from a still scowling Everett and continue walking toward Luke’s SUV.

Luke walks ahead of me and Julien and grabs a pair of sweats out of the back of his SUV. He tosses them to Julien, who quickly pulls them on before hopping into the backseat. I could also use some pants, but I doubt any other spare clothes Luke might have will fit me, so I’ll have to make do.

I pull myself up into the backseat beside my mate, tucking Julien’s shirt under my ass as I sit down on the leather seat. Julien pulls me to his side, slinging an arm around my shoulders and nuzzling my hair. I relax against him and my tension and anxiety slowly drain away.

The most pressing problems are all resolved.

*Zachariah is dead.*

*Julien is here with me.*

*And I’m not going anywhere but home with my mate.*

Of course, Malachi chooses this moment to waylay Luke before he can get in the driver’s seat, grabbing my cousin by the arm.

“Alpha, I don’t think it is in your best interests to ally yourself with Alpha Matisse. The omega—”

Luke snarls, cutting off the cleric's words, then shakes out of his hold. "You don't have permission to touch me, and your opinion on this matter means nothing." He leans closer. "You should be much more worried about what you're going to do once I exile you from the pack."

Malachi has no response. He only stares at Luke open-mouthed as my cousin climbs into the driver's seat. Luke starts the SUV and heads down the driveway without a single backward glance, leaving both Everett and Malachi behind.

The two of them aren't *completely* stranded, though. There's still a sedan left in the driveway, presumably the vehicle William arrived in. If neither one of them has the keys, then they can probably go find William's body and search his pockets.

I chuckle to myself at the idea.

For a while I watch the world pass by outside the window, but at some point I must drift off because the next thing I know, Julien is nudging me awake.

"We're home," he says in a soft voice.

*Home...*

In my half-awake state, the word sounds almost foreign. Then again, I suppose to me it kind of is, since a home is something I've never really had. 'Home' sounds like stability and safety. Two more things I've never really had.

We trudge inside and go directly upstairs to the shower. After rinsing off the blood and dirt and who knows what else,

Julien and I tug on some clean clothes, then head downstairs into the living room to find Remy and Rachel waiting for us, along with Dante and Brody. I guess Doc wasn't inclined to delay his departure.

*Good riddance.*

Rachel embraces Julien, while Remy does the same to me. Then they switch, Julien's mom hugging me tightly as if she's assuring herself I'm really here.

"We were worried sick about you," she says.

"You were?" I ask, not able to help the note of surprise in my voice.

She releases me and leans back to look me in the face. "Of course. You're family."

"Thanks," I say softly, warmth filling my chest. My stomach lets out a loud noise.

Rachel chuckles and throws her arm across my shoulders. "You must be starving since you didn't get to eat your dinner. Thankfully, I saved some lasagna for you." She leads me toward the dining room table, calling back over her shoulder, "You too, Julien."

Julien takes the chair beside me as Rachel goes into the kitchen and returns with two plates. She places the plates on the table, then hands each of us a fork. We do as instructed and dig in.

The lasagna is every bit as delicious as Remy said.

At some point, Luke is also ushered to a seat at the table and provided with his own plate and fork. He looks just as flustered by everyone's easy acceptance of him as I probably did before. I suppose he's never had much of a home or a family either.

The others settle around the table as we eat, and the conversation picks up around me. I catch snippets of chatter about how to handle the hearing, what to do about William's death, and what Luke plans to do now, but I ignore it all.

My brain has had enough problem solving for the day. No, for the *year*.

Once I've cleaned my plate, Julien leads me upstairs and practically pours my exhausted body into the bed. I'm asleep before my head hits the pillow, content with the knowledge that, for now, everything is perfect.

We can deal with all the rest of the BS in the morning.

## SIXTY-SEVEN

### KEIR

THE NEXT FEW DAYS pass in a whirlwind of activity. The hearing is—of course—canceled. Now that Luke is Alpha, he's not trying to force me to be part of his new pack or contesting the idea of me staying here with Julien. In fact, the two of them actually signed an 'official' mating alliance. It's not much more than a piece of paper with signatures on it, but it appeases the elders of Julien's pack.

Well, for the most part.

They weren't too thrilled to hear about William's death, but since it didn't happen by Julien's hand and the guy who killed him is already dead, there's not anything they can do about it. They can, however, do something about Everett who's still complaining to anyone who will listen that Julien is not fit to lead the Madison pack.

So, on the fourth day after, well, *everything*, I wake up snuggled in Julien's arms and am actually looking forward to

visiting the elders. I cuddle with my half-awake mate for a few minutes before hopping out of bed, pulling on some clothes, and going downstairs.

Julien follows not much later and the two of us sit together in companionable silence at the kitchen table as we sip at our coffee. The contented simplicity of it is a novelty to me even after over a week with my mate. Eventually, I'll probably take moments like this for granted, but right now, there's nothing I enjoy more than basking in the little everyday things I've missed out on.

About an hour later, we arrive at the building where Julien and I met with the elders before. The semi-polite woman from before—whose name I don't remember—is now sitting in William's chair and she directs a kind smile at Julien and then at me.

This is already shaping up to be so much better than the last time I was here.

A red-faced Everett is waiting off to the right, his mouth set in a scowl as he watches me and Julien take our place on the left side of the space in front of the elders.

The woman doesn't waste any time. "Everett, is it true that you attempted to challenge our Alpha while he was already injured, which is in direct violation of our pack laws?"

"And the laws of common decency," I mutter under my breath.

"Yes," says Everett. "The boy has lost his head over that—"

Julien cuts him off with a low growl. “Do *not* disrespect your Alpha Mate.”

Everett sneers. “You put the pack in danger offering to fight as proxy for the no-name Alpha. If he couldn’t hold his power on his own, then what does it matter to our pack?” When no one responds, Everett continues. “You don’t deserve to lead this pack after you risked your life for that damn omega.”

I roll my eyes. I am so sick of people treating me like I have no name.

Julien glares at Everett and opens his mouth to speak, but the woman holds her hand up.

“You had to realize we would not back your leadership, Everett,” she says. “You’ve tried to gather support to your cause before and failed. We cannot let you continue to undermine the pack’s rightful Alpha, as it has a detrimental effect on the stability of the pack. Either you will formally give up any and all claims to leadership of this pack or you will be exiled.”

My eyes widen. Exile is a pretty extreme, but I can’t say the asshole doesn’t deserve it. The only question now is if his pride will let him accept the lesser punishment.

“That’s ridiculous!” he shouts. “I have done nothing that—”

The woman speaks over him, “As you can’t seem to take the mercy that was offered, pending the Alpha’s final approval, you are hereby exiled from this pack.” She nods to someone behind us and two shifters I don’t recognize step forward to



take hold of Everett's arms. "These men will escort you to the pack-owned house you reside in and assist you in gathering your belongings. You have one week to leave Alpha Matisse's territory."

Everett looks like he's going to say something else, but Julien cuts him off with a snarl.

"Shut your mouth and get out," growls Julien, flashing sharpened teeth in Everett's direction.

Everett's fear must overtake his anger because not another sound passes his lips as he leaves flanked by the two other shifters.

Once the door has closed behind him, the elder turns to us. "While your actions in agreeing to that fight might have been reckless, we understand they were taken in defense of your fated mate." She dips her chin at me. "Keir Anderson, the elders of the Madison pack hereby recognize you as our Alpha's fated mate, making you this pack's Alpha Mate."

I kind of want to be snarky about it and say something along the lines of 'now that wasn't so hard, was it?' but I manage to hold my tongue.

Julien is not so restrained. "If you had simply listened to me in the first place, all of this nonsense could have been avoided."

The elder nods, looking properly chastised. "I apologize for our ignorance and our overstep."

“Fine.” Julien throws his arm around my shoulders. “My mate and I have plans this evening, but tomorrow we need to sit down and get a few things straight—like how I’m the Alpha of this pack and I will be taking back the power I inadvertently gave this council when I first took over.”

The elders glance at each other, but not one of them says anything in response as Julien turns and leads me toward the exit.

Back home—that word still makes me feel giddy—we spend the rest of the morning in bed *not* sleeping. Sometime in the late afternoon, we drag ourselves into the shower, then get dressed and head downstairs before everyone starts to arrive.

I’d prefer to spend more time in bed with my mate, but Luke will be going to the airport later this evening. He’s been sticking around to make sure things got settled and somehow we got talked into hosting a small dinner as a sendoff.

Rachel is sitting on the loveseat in the living room with a glass of wine while Remy is lounging on the couch, drink in hand, chatting with Luke. Remy straightens and waves Julien and me over to the couch. My mate and I take a seat next to each other and join in on the conversation.

“I was just telling your new brother-in-law that Malachi seems to have disappeared,” says Luke. “He dropped Everett off, then drove away and no one’s heard from him since.”

“Good riddance,” I say. “I hope he drove off a cliff or something.”

Luke chuckles. "I'd share the sentiment if I wasn't a little concerned that he might be headed back to Alabama to stir up trouble with the pack before I arrive."

"And if he hadn't taken your transportation with him," chimes in Remy. He turns to Julien. "I told him we could have Brody drop him off at the airport."

"Of course," says Julien, focusing on Luke. "We are in your debt. This situation could have turned out much worse if you hadn't shown up when you did."

"It was the least I could do." Luke's gaze darts to me. "There was a lot I needed to make up for..."

I shake my head. "No, there's not. Randall was the asshole. You were too young back then to stand up to him, but you helped in the only way that you could. If it wasn't for you that night, I wouldn't be alive."

Luke gives me a tight smile and looks like he wants to disagree, but doesn't say anything.

"Speaking of Randall," says Julien, "Now that you're the Sweet Water Alpha, have you made any plans to investigate the kidnappings, Luke? It's possible you and Keir weren't the only ones."

"Specific plans? No," replies Luke. "But I'm definitely going to do what I can to find out what happened. If nothing else, I want to know where I came from."

"What if..." I pause, trying to put the right words together. "Since you and I have the whole 'kidnapped as children' thing

in common, what do you think the odds are that you had an omega father as well? ”

Luke blinks, then slowly nods. “It would make sense that there would be some connection between us since we ended up in the same pack.”

“What if it’s more than that?” I ask. “I mean, how many male omegas can there be?”

The color drains out of Luke’s face. “You think you and I...?”

I shrug. “I have no idea *what* to think at this point. Based on the missing poster, you weren’t taken as an infant like I was, so I might be completely wrong about there being a connection.”

“I can probably find out where Theo is,” says Remy. “That way, Luke could go talk to him and at least rule out some possibilities.”

Luke nods slowly. “Yeah...”

I mimic Luke’s movement. “I—”

“No,” says Julien, pulling me into his chest. “I just got you back. I don’t think I can stand the idea of you leaving again, even for this.”

I glance at him over my shoulder, raising my brows and giving him a pointed look. “What I was going to say is that I think it’s a good idea.”

“Oh,” says Julien. “Good.”

“I’m too exhausted to want to go anywhere,” I say. “Plus, I think I’m coming down with something.”

Rachel’s full attention narrows in on me, and she tilts her head to the side. “Are you more tired than normal?”

My brows pull together. “I guess? It’s been a hell of a week, though.”

“How has your stomach been feeling?”

“Well, I’ve been a little queasy and...” I let the words trail off as a realization dawns on me. My hand goes to my abdomen. “But...it’s only been...how?”

Rachel smiles. “Even as an omega, I imagine your male body isn’t used to those kinds of hormones, so the symptoms are showing up much earlier.”

“Wait a minute.” Julien goes still. “Are you saying Keir is pregnant?”

“He’d have to take a test to be sure,” says Rachel. “But, yes, I think so.”

Well, shit. That’s unexpected, to say the least. But also... exciting? Amazing? Just what I didn’t know I needed? I can’t say I ever imagined being pregnant, but not too long ago, I couldn’t have even imagined having a mate. A family. A *home*.

And now I have all those things.

Julien holds me tightly, his face buried in my hair as lets out a startled—but happy—laugh. If I have to go through a

pregnancy, I'm glad it's with him.

I rub my hand over my stomach, smiling to myself and imagining the child to come.

How did I get so lucky?

# EPILOGUE

## KEIR

AN ELBOW OR MAYBE a knee pokes at my bladder, nudging me awake. I glance at the clock. 2 *AM*. Again. I've slept less than three hours. *Again*.

I've never been anywhere close to a misogynist, but over the past almost nine months I've developed *a lot* of respect for women. This pregnancy thing is no joke. I have to pee all the time. My center of balance is completely off. The 'morning' sickness never quite went away. Heartburn has been my constant companion. And finding a comfortable sleeping position is nearly impossible.

Even if I'm terrified at the thought of being responsible for a breakable little person, I'm ready for this kid to be *out*.

And not only because I can't wait to hold a cuddly baby in my arms. There's the added benefit of my shifter healing, which will allow me to bounce back much more quickly than a

human once the pregnancy is over. Even with a c-section, I'll be mostly back to normal within a day or two.

Another poke urges me into motion. I push myself upright, awkwardly swing my legs over the side of the bed, and slowly rise to my feet. My protruding stomach leads the way as I head toward the bathroom with one hand pressed against my aching lower back.

Preemptively squinting my eyes, I flick on the light and waddle over to sit down. Yes, sit, because for the last three months or so, my stomach has been too big for me to be able to aim while standing. Another reason pregnancy sucks for me.

Once my bladder is as empty as it's going to get for now, I leverage myself to my feet by holding on to the counter, wash my hands, and head back to bed. Julien rolls over as I lie back down, tugging me backward so my ass is cradled against his body and nosing at my neck.

"Is the little one restless again?" he mumbles in a sleepy voice.

I huff out a soft laugh. "Of course. When is this baby ever not restless?"

Julien's arm curls around what little is left of my waist, one of his hands coming to rest against my belly. He rubs soft circles on my skin. The baby must sense their other daddy's presence, because they start pushing back against Julien's hand.



Julien chuckles. "Let your father rest, little one."

Maybe my mate put a touch of Alpha command in there because my passenger settles down almost immediately. I'm able to drift back to sleep with Julien's soft breath a steady comfort against the back of my neck.

A dull but slowly crescendoing pain yanks me out of sleep not much later. I instinctively curl around my stomach as I squeeze my eyes shut. A small whimper escapes from between my lips.

Julien is instantly awake, though not necessarily coherent.

"What? Who?" He thrashes around, trying to push the covers down, but only tangling his legs up in the fabric even more.

The pain recedes and I blindly reach backward to pat Julien's thigh reassuringly.

"Just another one of those Braxton-whatevers," I say, fairly certain in my self-diagnosis. My due date, as best anyone could tell without a clear ultrasound, is still a couple weeks away and the pack doctor has scheduled my c-section for eight days from now. I'll never get to the point of actual labor.

And thank everything holy for that. Topping off months of general discomfort with an indeterminate number of hours of physical pain is definitely not high on the list of things I want to experience in my life.

My confidence in my ability to recognize real contractions disappears ten minutes later when another one hits, followed by the unmistakable feeling of liquid dripping from my ass.

I scramble out of the bed—well, struggle would probably be the more accurate description—and whirl around to stare at the sheets. There’s definitely a visible wet spot. Reaching around, I brush my hand over the back of my boxers. Those are wet too.

“What the fuck?” I mutter, shock making the words much louder than I intended.

Julien jolts awake for the second time tonight. “Huh?”

“I think...I think my water broke?” I hold my damp fingers up like proof. “But I don’t know how that’s possible since I don’t have a birth canal?”

That’s what Ben said anyway, and I’d been depending on the accuracy of that information. The last thing I want to do is try to...er, *push* a baby out.

An even worse thought hits me and my entire body goes cold. “What if something’s wrong?”

“I’m sure everything is fine.” Julien drags his hand over his face and gives himself a shake as he tries to banish his lingering sleepiness. “Let’s call Doctor Benton.”

“Okay,” I say in a weak voice.

Julien grabs his phone off the nightstand and makes the call. He quickly explains to the pack doctor what’s going on and then says ‘uh huh’ a lot while glancing at me.

“What did she say?” I ask as soon as Julien hangs up.

“She said you’re probably right about your water breaking, but not to worry. Based on what Ben originally said about male omegas lacking a birth canal, she believes that although you’re not built to deliver children naturally because you, uh, don’t stretch the same way, there’s still a passage to your womb so that’s why you’re, uh, leaking from there.”

I doubt Doctor Benton’s explanation was quite that vague, but it’s still reassuring.

“But...” says Julien, a more tentative note in his voice, “She doesn’t know what effect full blown labor might have on your body and she wants me to bring you into the office so she can do the c-section. Now.”

I curl my arms around my middle, suddenly terrified and so not ready for this.

But what other choice do I have?

Twenty minutes—and three more contractions—later, Julien pulls up to the building where Doctor Benton has her office. It’s not some huge medical complex since shifters rarely need doctors and, even if they did, they could go to a human one for most things.

Obviously, that’s not something I could have done.

Elizabeth Benton isn’t even an OB, just a general practitioner—which is why I haven’t had a real ultrasound—but she was the only option. I couldn’t very well go to a human doctor and, although male omega biology might be kind of an open secret now since there was no hiding my

pregnancy from the pack, I'm not so sure I trust the triumvirate after finding out about the study Doc mentioned.

Doctor Benton has really come through for us, though. She made sure she'd have everything she needed on hand when the time came, so Julien and I are quickly whisked into one of the exam rooms. Thankfully, as shifters we don't need to worry about infection. The room doesn't have to be completely sterile in order for Doctor Benton to perform the c-section, only clean.

Doctor Benton puts an IV in my arm and adds something to help delay the labor. Once the contractions slow, she carefully administers an epidural, then has me lie down. After pulling a thin fabric curtain across my chest to block my view of the surgical area, she gets right to work.

There's a weird sort of pressure in my abdomen for a couple minutes, then a soft cry. Doctor Benton smiles, her warm eyes meeting mine over the top of the drape.

"It's a boy." She holds the baby up so we can see him.

*A boy...*

My eyes burn, and tears trail down my cheeks. Julien grabs my hand and squeezes, his own eyes looking watery.

*We have a son.*

Doctor Benton cuts the cord, briefly looks the baby over, then wraps him in a blanket and hands him to Julien. My mate curls protectively around the little bundle and hums under his breath. I about melt into a puddle at the sight.

“I just have to take care of the placenta and then I can get you sewed back up,” says the doctor, pulling my attention away from my little family.

That weird pressure returns. Then stops.

Over the edge of the drape, I see Doctor Benton’s brows draw together and my heart stutters with fear.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I ask frantically, trying to push myself up on my elbows.

At a motion from the doctor, Julien holds my shoulders down.

“Nothing’s *wrong*,” she says. “It’s just...I wasn’t expecting twins.”

*Well, shit. Neither was I.*

---

A shaft of sunlight from the window cuts across my face, jolting me awake. I blink a few times as my groggy brain comes back online. Sleep has been hard to come by over the past few weeks since the babies were born, so it takes longer than it should for me to realize something’s wrong.

It’s way too quiet.

*The twins.*

*They should have woken me up by now.*

Suddenly I’m wide awake, panic flooding my body. I scramble out of bed, hitting the floor with a thump when the

comforter tangles around my legs. Extracting myself from the bedding, I run full speed across the hall and into the nursery.

I jerk to a stop in the doorway, my racing heart slowing as I take in the scene before me.

Julien is sitting in the recliner clad only in pajama pants. He's fast asleep with the footrest up and his head tilted backward at an awkward angle. Two empty bottles sit on the side table and my mate has one baby cradled in each arm, their little cheeks resting against the bare skin of his chest.

It might be the sweetest thing I've ever seen. Warmth expands in my chest as I take a couple of deep, quiet breaths and push away my blind panic from a few seconds ago.

The babies are fine. *Perfectly fine*. Julien must have gotten up with them earlier and didn't want to wake me getting back into bed. Because he's amazingly thoughtful like that.

My mate is the best thing fate has ever done for me. Well, except for giving us our perfect little munchkins.

I'll admit when Doctor Benton said the word 'twins,' I was terrified. I never gave much thought to being a parent. For me to not only be the person actually going through a pregnancy—something I *never* thought I'd have to do—and then having not just one, but *two* babies to take care at the end of it...

To say the idea overwhelmed me would be a major understatement.

I glance at Julien, a soft smile curling at my lips. There's no way I would have been able to do any of this without him.

My recovery went quickly, and I was back on my feet within a couple of days after the c-section with only little twinges of pain in my stomach muscles every now and then, but it took me a couple of weeks to really get into the hang of this parenting thing.

I loved both little ones at first sight, but I'd never taken care of an infant before, so I was at a complete loss. Julien, however, was a natural from the first day and nothing made me melt more than seeing my big strong Alpha cooing at two tiny babies while he rocked them in his arms.

Of course, Rachel, Remy, and even Dante and Brody have been helping out, too. It's great to have people to fall back on if we need them, but Julien and I try to spend as much time as possible with our little miracles.

A buzzing noise comes from Julien's pocket and he startles awake, instantly freezing in place when he realizes he's holding the twins. He glances up, his gaze finding me standing in the doorway, and he smiles, the expression overflowing with love and happiness.

And maybe just a hint of exhaustion.

"Can you grab my phone?" he asks, jerking his chin toward his right pants pocket.

"How about I take the little ones off your hands instead?" I cross the room and scoop up one baby and then the other. Pressing my lips to each of their foreheads, I inhale their soft baby scents as Julien answers his phone.

“Yeah, Mom, of course I know what time it is.” He shoots me a slightly frantic look, clearly having no idea what time it is. “We’ll be there. We just need to get the twins ready.”

Rachel says something I don’t hear, Julien nodding along, then my mate hangs up the phone and sets it on the table.

“She was calling to remind me that the presentation ceremony starts in an hour,” he says.

“Then I guess we’d better get moving,” I reply, chuckling.

I gently lay the twins down in their cribs, then grab Julien’s hand and drag him into our bathroom.

We shower together, the process more functional than fun, but we manage to steal a minute for ourselves, simply holding each other and kissing softly under the running water. After all, when you’re a parent, you gotta take these moments as they come.

The twins are just starting to stir when we get back to the nursery, my mate and I now clean and fully dressed. We divide and conquer, each of us getting one baby changed and into clothes. Then Julien packs the diaper bag while I head downstairs to warm a couple of bottles up.

Twenty minutes later, the twins are fed, burped, and changed again. We load them into carriers, one baby strapped to each of our chests, then walk out the back door and into the woods.

The Madison pack has a special gathering area on Julien’s property. The space is deep enough into the woods to be hidden from prying human eyes, but close enough that it only



takes us another twenty minutes to get there. Of course, everyone is already here, since Julien and I are running a bit late.

But, given that the ceremony can't start without us—well, without the twins anyway—everyone is currently just standing around.

I've met some of Julien's pack members before, but never so many at one time. Maybe two hundred shifters are gathered in the circular clearing. Near the front of the gathering, there's an open space where the pack elders are standing in a line off to the side and Rachel and Remy are waiting in the center.

The whole thing reminds me of the night of my first shift with my old pack, but the atmosphere is lighter somehow, happier.

And there's also the fact I'm not scared for my life like I was that night.

Rachel raises her brows when she catches sight of us on the trail behind the crowd. Julien speeds up, quickly making his way along the edge of the gathered shifters. I follow behind, smiling at the assembled pack members as I go.

Once we reach the front, Julien sets the diaper bag down, hands the baby carrier to Remy, then turns to face the crowd, a big smile on his face. "Thank you all for coming. It's been a long time since we've had an occasion like this. About twenty-five years ago, my father stood in this same spot to present me to this pack. I only wish he could have been here when I do the same with his grandchildren." He motions me and Remy

forward, taking his brother's tiny burden, then wrapping his arm around my shoulders. "Let me present to you my son, Aidan, and my daughter, Annette, the new alpha heirs of the Madison pack."

The crowd cheers and Aidan scrunches his face up at the noise. Cradled in Julien's arm, Annette barely reacts. Not surprising since month old infants, even shifter ones, don't really do much besides eat and sleep.

Over the next two hours, the pack members come up one by one to officially greet the twins and pledge their loyalty, not just to the pack, but to my little family as well. The pledge thing is foreign to me, but apparently, this is how Julien's pack has done things for at least three generations.

I'm certainly not complaining.

Even though the pledge is just words, there's a weight to it, reassuring me that these tiny babies will never have to face the same trials I did. My children will never have to know the old ways, the blood laws, or the violence of my childhood. Julien and I will protect them with our lives and, if the worst were to ever happen, this pack—this extended *family*—would do the same.

The elders may have screwed up when Julien initially took over, but with the exception of William, they were mainly just trying to look out for him and the pack. Julien doesn't hold it against them, and neither do I. Well, not anymore.

There was some groveling from the elders and a few instances where Julien really had to put his foot down, but he

and the elders work together much more smoothly now and the entire pack is better for it.

At least I think so.

As for my former pack and the whole kidnapping thing, there are still a lot of unanswered questions. Despite his promise to be in touch, I haven't heard from Ben. Remy has hit only dead ends in his search for Theo, and Luke, as the new Sweet Water Alpha, is busy trying to move the pack out of the dark ages. Luke barely found the time for a brief congratulatory phone call when the twins were born, so he hasn't exactly been able to do much digging into our shared history.

But I'm not making any of that my problem. My only concern is making sure my babies are happy and loved. Sure, I'm curious about what happened with Karina and how I ended up in Alabama, but, like I told Julien, I'm leaving the task of finding answers up to Luke. He'll get to it eventually.

I'm tired of worrying about the past.

I'm done looking over my shoulder and waiting for the worst.

My future is here, with my mate, my family, and my new pack.

And those are the only things that truly matter.

---

Join Luke as he meets his own omega fated mate while searching for answers about the past. [Preorder your copy of Lost Wolf today!](#)

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## A Note from Tessa

Thanks so much for taking the time to read Lone Wolf!

If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#) so other readers can join Keir on his journey to finding (and accepting) his fated mate as well as the home he's always wanted.

I love hearing from my readers and chatting about books, so feel free to shoot me an email at [tessa@tessa-kane.com](mailto:tessa@tessa-kane.com).

Stay up to date on my newest releases by [signing up for my newsletter](#) or joining [Tessa Kane's Reader Lair](#) on Facebook.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tessa Kane writes MM paranormal romance and swears tea fuels her creative escapades better than coffee ever could.

When not crafting stories featuring a diverse range of supernatural creatures finding love, you'll often find her engrossed in books spanning almost every genre—a habit that may occasionally hinder her word counts.

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