

A POISON VERSE DUET



**SWEET
HEART**

PART
ONE

MARIE MACKAY

SWEETHEART: PART ONE

AN OMEGAVEVERSE BULLY DUET

BOOK 1

MARIE MACKAY

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Edited by Caity Hides

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To Skye and Olivia <3

CONTENT

HOLD UP! Is there anything I should be aware of as a reader?

Yes! Let me get you a list so you know what you're getting into!

Reference to SA off screen. Bully between love interests. Dark bonds—alpha (villain) coercing the behaviour of an omega via a bond.

Self harm via compelled actions via dark bond, not by intent. Humiliation/degradation from villains. Cliffhanger.

Anything else?

Passing references of drug use, mental health issues, past sexual, emotional and physical abuse, and suicidal ideation.

Oh, also! I write in British English (Realize/realise) I was born in England and now live in Canada. Sometimes my language and dialogue has some funky flavour (I've given up fighting it)

THREE MONTHS AGO

r/ABOConfessions

I (19/F/Omega) made a huge mistake.

I'm obsessed with the Crimson Fury pack and have been since forever. I've watched every movie and interview. They hosted a signing last week, but their events are betas only. They avoid contact with omegas to stay focused on their careers.

I know it was wrong, but I went. I used contacts and scent dampeners and my fake beta I.D.

Here's the problem: I scent-matched them.

So... my movie star crushes are my mates and they have no idea because I panicked and ran.

I'm still panicking. Sure, I've loved them for years, but everything just got so real. I don't want to ruin their lives—and they'd never want a gold pack omega like me.

But it seems wrong to ignore the match. They'll never get another mate.

I've been losing my mind. Should I just pretend it never happened? Or do I tell them?

What will they do if they find out they have an omega like me for a match?

DARK BOND

Arkology: Studies of Alphas and Omegas, Vol.2:

A dark bond is a bond of ultimate control of an alpha over an omega. It can be claimed by a bite, and without consent.

“Rarely examined, is a lesser known and rather curious phenomenon. Despite the fact that most scent matches dissolve upon a unification of omega and pack, the recipient (omega) of a dark bond—if bitten without consent—will retain a scent match despite being bonded into a pack.

I take it as a cautionary tale: dark bond an unwilling omega, and her mates may still be out there somewhere.” - Professor A.Rhufus.

ONE

DAY ONE

VEX

I broke a dozen laws as I wrung my fingers anxiously, staring up at the iron gates before me.

Contacts altered the golden eyes that marked me an outcast omega. Drugs smothered my scent, leaving me identifiable only as a beta. And finally, makeup covered a poisoned bite on my neck: a pack bond that the world demanded should be visible.

And the pack who had claimed me against my will lurked in the back of my mind. Present with me always. A vile promise that I couldn't fail at the task they'd sent me here for.

The car door slammed behind me, leaving me alone with my suitcase in the warm summer air. Leaving me free of them for the first time since they'd bitten me what felt like an eternity ago. How long had I been locked in a room, visited only by the pack lead I never wanted?

And now, before me was a mansion of a million dreams.

I had seen it in pictures in magazines. It was the home of the Crimson Fury pack: actors famous not only for their films, but also their charity work across New Oxford.

This was a pack I'd grown up obsessed with. But now that I was here, I wished I wasn't for what I was about to do.

Because these alphas were my mates, and I was here to deceive them.

I pressed the button on the stone pillar, my stomach twisting tight as I thrust that thought away.

They were in that house right now.

I hugged myself in the lingering silence, broken only by the rustle of privacy hedges obscuring the property ahead. Around me were the peaceful sounds of a suburban

neighbourhood, the rustle of trees or chirping of birds; and it was starkly unfamiliar to anything I'd ever known.

I wanted Aisha or my mom.

But like everything else, they were gone.

I had nothing and no one left.

After being stolen from my home, I was kept in a windowless cell with peeling wallpaper, then sold to the pack who'd bitten me. A pack who'd locked me in a room until today; whose only interest in me was the mates they knew were mine, waiting in the mansion ahead.

I jumped as a crisp, bored voice crackled through the comms. "State your purpose."

"I'm here for the... job." I tried to sound confident, but my nerves came through. "The... Sweetheart position."

"Ah." There was a clear sigh through the intercom. A louder buzz sounded, and the gates creaked open.

An alpha's Sweetheart.

Against my will, I'd been trained for this job. Against my will, I was here at last, under dark bond commands that forced me in mind and body.

But commands or not, I needed it to work out, because it was my only escape.

I was disguised as a beta because Sweethearts were beta companions to packs of alphas who didn't want omegas. It was the only way to get close to a pack as isolated as these celebrities. To my mates—even if they didn't know it yet.

And I didn't have room to fuck this up.

I had to do better than any Sweetheart before me.

Because the Crimson Fury pack had never accepted a contract of a Sweetheart beyond the first week.

LOVE

I felt a flash of anticipation from Ebony, and then my phone buzzed. I glanced down at it to see group chat was going off.

I sighed, rubbing my face and standing from the couch.

Another Sweetheart?

Jas had to leave off at some point, right?

She was our manager, and she went through Ebony to sort the Sweetheart visits. I was pack lead, but in this, I gave in to my brother.

Only, we were on the third this year. One week they'd stay with us, then we'd reject the contract—if they even *made* it that long—and Ebony would settle down for a little while.

That was how it went every single time.

I headed down to the office where we met them. It was always the same: they'd start off with stars in their eyes and simpering voices that scraped at my sanity.

It would end with a swift exit cloaked in the NDA they'd signed before they even got here.

He never went *too* far—Ebony knew how to toe the line so he'd never have visiting Sweetheart privileges revoked. But no Sweetheart finished the week glad we were the pack they were assigned.

Some were still willing to stay. Those irked me the most. The status that came with being our Sweetheart was worth enough to them to tolerate Ebony.

We only had to make it a few months more, then we were off to Germany for the biggest movie deal of our career. The Dragon Hunters franchise was set to take our name global, but that wasn't why I gave a fuck about our acting career. It was about the stimuli of being on set. Ebony and Rook were the most balanced they'd ever be when we were working.

I sighed.

Two months. That was all, and if tolerating another Sweetheart week was the cost of keeping Ebony sane, I'd unhappily pay it.

Around me, cream wallpaper lined broad hallways, and the heels of my oxfords clipped marble, each sound a claw scraping the back of my brain. Unwilling to linger on age-old irritants of a life I'd never wanted, I returned to lighter issues—like drugs and ruts and Sweethearts.

Drugs worked just fine to keep our ruts manageable, and had for the last few years, but none of us were stable alphas. It came with the territory. It was a high bar, becoming as successful as our elite pack had in the last four years, and it wasn't an environment mellow alphas survived in. We were all high strung in our own ways; vicious, territorial, obsessive.

Eventually, we needed to look at other options. Even with more frequent acting schedules, with less time off between, Ebony was cracking around the edges.

He could always use another outlet, and until I had a better answer, marble floors and Sweethearts would continue scraping away at my sanity. Because this life I'd built up around us was the best I could manage. And it still wasn't enough.

He didn't want them here because of what they should offer—touch, or sweetness, or love.

No.

One thing I'd never been able to get on Ebony, was a solid diagnosis. Instead, I was left covering for him at every misstep, with the words antisocial personality disorder, or psychopath suspended between us.

Undefined and uncharted.

But I was his brother, and I knew more than anyone else on this planet that Ebony wasn't capable of love.

TWO

VEX

The beta who met me at the gates was the same one who'd spoken over comms, and he looked about as enthused as he sounded. Rob—as he'd introduced himself—was their house manager: a spindly man in his mid-thirties wearing a neat grey suit and a pair of white runners.

He'd raised his eyebrows when he'd seen me, and quietly uttered the word, "Fascinating."

I could only assume—based on what he was eyeing—the statement was about my outfit.

I didn't care. How I looked today was one choice I'd all but drawn blood for. Dark bond or not, no other alpha would tell me how to seduce my mates.

Up close, the home was even more extravagant than I'd imagined. It was a modern, sprawling building, with tall windows through which I could see a broad spiral staircase. Even the double doors we entered through were twice my height.

I felt a pang of grief as my gaze swept across the foyer and the cream marble floors leading to the stairs. To the right was an open concept kitchen, and off the main area were several doors and hallways.

It was lush to the extreme, and there was an omega buried deep within me who might, once upon a time, have lost it to excitement, even stepping foot past the door.

This was the home of my mates.

My idols.

The Crimson Fury pack.

But the woman I'd become—the one broken over and over, worn thin and tired—she didn't see any of that. Instead, all I felt when Rob shut the door behind me was an earth-

shattering relief. Not at the building, or glamour, or because the marble beneath my feet was the home of my mates. But because it was the first time in months, there was a solid, safe wall between me and the pack who'd stolen my freedom.

"They live upstairs," Rob was saying as I stared around numbly. "Downstairs are the offices, main kitchen, garage—the practical stuff."

"Where will I be?"

"The Sweetheart room is central on the second floor with the pack."

I nodded.

He hustled me into a small conference room that overlooked vast gardens from a window spanning the far wall.

"They'll be in to see you..." He checked his phone. "Whenever they decide to show."

I nodded, trying not to hug myself as my throat tightened.

They were coming.

I'd seen them once at a signing I'd snuck into. I'd been on scent blockers, so the scent match between us had locked in with them none the wiser, and I'd fled without speaking to them. But now *they* were here to see *me*.

"*You are going to be their destruction.*" Those were words from the men who owned me. And I was a foolish, lying omega who—for the second time—would deceive this pack I'd once been in love with.

With my panic, rose that familiar horror. The cycle of memories that ripped me from reality whenever I gave them an ounce of power.

I'd been locked in that horrible cell for an eternity in silence but for my own singing. It was in those times I could feel my mother here with me. I wanted her so badly it shook me to my bones.

After more days than I could count, I was blindfolded and dragged from the room.

“Get yourself pretty, or I’ll do it for you.” The command was dispassionate as the blindfold was ripped off. I’m sure it was my fear, but the alpha before me smelled like gross old wheatgrass. He wore a mask that covered his face, but I could see his hazel eyes intent on me right now.

I glanced around nervously to find I was in a bathroom. A bath was hot and waiting for me.

The alpha didn’t leave, folding his arms as he waited; the gun at his belt was an unhidden threat.

When I’d climbed in at last, I was still dressed, and I only removed my old clothing once I was submerged.

I didn’t look over at him as I dropped each sopping item onto the floor, but I heard his snort.

I’d been with men before, but I’d stayed away from alphas, leaving them where they belonged for a gold pack omega like me: in day dreams. Wheatgrass was clearly here to make sure I didn’t try to escape, but every time I felt his attention on me, his leer burned hotter than the scalding water.

Safe now, and in the home of my mates, my chest felt too tight. My vision dimmed. Spots of black blossomed to match the abstract art that stretched across the walls.

My fingers fumbled for the epoxy river desk, and I dropped into one of the seats.

If I failed here, the threat was clear by the commands I’d been given only hours ago.

“You’ll never tell them you’re an omega. You’ll never tell them you’re their scent match. And never, under any circumstances, will you let them learn that you’re a gold pack omega.” His commands had settled on me like a weight. The voice of a man

I'd come to hate more than I knew it was possible to hate someone.

"Why?" I asked.

"Your mates are an elite pack. Their reputation is their life. Bonding a gold pack omega like you would ruin them. If they want you—and that's a big if—they'll want to hide those eyes of yours. That secret is the most important bargaining chip you have, besides your scent match."

Something cold coiled in my stomach. "Ebony's a rogue." I said, my voice weak. "Everyone knows it."

Rogue alphas and normal alphas were indistinguishable at a glance—until one went into rages and people got hurt. Gold pack omegas and normal omegas—we weren't that different either. Only for us, we could be identified by our golden irises. For us, society hated us because we'd chosen this, and to the rest of the world, choice was black and white and easy to blame.

But... hide my eyes for the rest of my life?

I'd done it before—despite the risk of the law if I ever got caught. But now my mates would want to hide them, too? A life of contacts, and the dread of being found out.

"Show biz loves taking pity on rogues like Ebony. Taming the rough edge of society—kids born to it without a say. But gold pack omegas? Filth that chose it—" He laughed—"You'll destroy their career in a day."

I hadn't been able to respond to that, the best dream I had to hope for, now a dull and lifeless picture.

"Though, I am starting to look forward to our visits. You always look so lovely, waiting for me like that, Vex. You know, if you fail, I might not be disappointed to keep you."

My fingers were white as I clutched the edge of the epoxy desk in the empty office, and a desperate low whine slipped from my chest, eyes burning. My fingers brushed the foul spot

on the back of my neck. It had taken so much makeup to cover the dark poison of that bite...

My breaths were short and sharp, fear made of daggers puncturing my chest.

I had to calm down.

My job was to get this pack to fall for me as a beta. That was the most important part. But hiding my designation from them was something I would never dream of without my orders. If they fell in love with me, I would want it to be as I was, and nothing less.

But that, like everything else, had been stolen away by the bond on my neck.

Taking a breath, I steadied myself.

If they walked in to find me crying, I'd fail before I began.

I was dosed up on so many scent blockers it would take a hell of a lot of adrenaline to break through them, but that posed its own problem. If they wore off quickly, I'd need more sooner. Even before I'd been stolen from my home, I'd hidden as a beta for much of my life, illegal as it was. At the age of nineteen, I'd already used more drugs to hide or manipulate my designation than most omegas. My hormones and heats were erratic. I'd racked up chemical debts that my tired omega body was going to have a rough time paying back.

I did the only thing that ever promised a reprieve, and the first lines of a lullaby slipped out. "Close your eyes, and drift off to sleep..." The words were shaky through my thick throat.

I dreamed those words. Whispered them in the cold and dark of a cell when I didn't know what would come. My fingers found the cuff of my shirt, rubbing the blank fabric between my fingers.

"...Let all your worries and fears fade away..." I shut my eyes, clinging to the song. My mother would sing it to me every night, so far beyond the age at which most mothers stopped singing to their children.

Until that first night of silence.

And every one that had followed were nightmares and silence. Silence that only I was left to break. But never, not even when she had every right to tears, had my mother cried when she sung. The song deserved better.

I found my voice at last. “Fill your soul with joys and love... And I’ll stay with you until the first break of day.”

My voice was one my mother had cherished, for it had come out bashful and quiet even around her.

“Singing is my strength in the dark, little one,” she’d told me night after night. *“Find your voice and find your strength.”*

My mates were coming. I was going to meet them, truly, for the first time. There *was* a spark there—warm and hopeful at the thought of them—a faint chance that I might still salvage something from today. The spark of innocent excitement of an omega meeting the alphas the universe had chosen for them.

THREE

EBONY

Another Sweetheart to play with.

I could practically feel Love's eye-roll when Rob had sent the text.

Week-long Sweetheart visits were the only thing that kept at bay that ever-present boredom threatening to eat me alive. It was a challenge: unravel a person within a week without laying a finger on them.

And I never touched them.

Sweethearts weren't obligated to *fuck* the alphas they were assigned—they were just supposed to balance us. But most wouldn't know the nuance of alpha instincts if it slapped them in the face. The fact was, I could fuck whoever I wanted, but I never would—even when they begged.

Not that they always did. Sometimes they begged, sometimes they ran. But it was always an outlet in itself, holding that power over someone else. Especially when I couldn't show myself to the rest of the world: bad for the brand, Love said. We'd lose everything.

The fucking brand.

Sometimes I felt sick of it all.

So this was all I had. The last little fragment of thrill, and Love could take that from me too, if I pushed him. I wasn't willing to give this all up, yet.

But it had been *weeks*, and I wanted my Sweetheart.

Even when they were rejected time after time—this was a place I could finally unmask: in the confines of NDAs. All for my pack's desperation to do something about my ever-increasing instability.

Of course, I arrived at the office first. I could feel the rare smile bracing my lips as my fingers closed around the

doorknob.

Then I heard a sound permeating through the door before me.

I froze.

It was something softer and sweeter than my steel exterior was used to. A song in a gentle, lyrical voice that sent shivers pricking every inch of my body. I caught the words through the door, each plucking a chord in a chamber of my soul, dusty and dark and untouched for far too long.

“...Fill your soul with joys and love...”

I blinked, reeling my disturbing reaction back in with all my might.

“...And I'll stay with you until the first break of day...”

I shook myself mentally, rejecting the notion that it affected me. But still, something within me quaked.

I rejected that, too, and with fury.

With more aggression than was necessary, I turned the doorknob and entered.

VEX

I jumped out of my skin as the door violently burst open.

Ebony Starless stepped in with a presence so cold and furious that it almost stopped my heart. The lullaby died on my lips, and my cheeks burst into flames. He stared me down with something icy in his storm grey eyes.

Shock seized me.

I'd seen him with the others at the event, but not up close.

Ebony Starless was a known rogue, and rich enough for it not to matter.

But he wasn't a bad guy—at least, he wasn't from everything I'd ever seen. He was quiet, calm, and kind; holding doors open for fans, buying lunch for a homeless man near where his film crew set up. Then there was that time he paid for the cancer treatment of a fan after she rear-ended his limo on her way to the hospital.

But every fragment of information I'd ever gleaned from a magazine, interview, or news article, died a sudden and violent death as I digested the real thing.

Cold, sharp, and—right now—predatory.

Ebony Starless was fucking terrifying. Terrifying, and also goddamned beautiful because, even if he wasn't aware of it, he was my scent match. And his scent, the cool earthy aroma of twilight grass, flooded the room, a frightening edge of fury to it.

He had straight silver hair that was loose; tucked behind his ears and tumbling to his waist. His skin was a dusky tan, and his eyes were startlingly grey.

The silver fae, he was known as. Drake was quiet, and Rook was the playboy, but magazines referred to Love and Ebony as the fae brothers. Both were tall, with long hair—as if

mirrors of one another. They were elegant and had an almost ethereal appearance.

The magazines were kind of right, actually; he was ethereal. But it didn't offset the danger I felt from him.

This wasn't how it was supposed to feel, meeting my mate. Even now, a small part of me wanted to cross toward him, to reach out and... and do what? I wasn't sure.

He was still just staring, obliterating the instinct that kept trying to surface, begging me to understand that he was safe. *He must be safe.*

Could he possibly *know* I was his mate?

Had something gone wrong with the drugs?

Fear collided with hormones that scent dampening drugs didn't touch, and my brain scrambled.

He'd heard me singing, I just knew it.

I hadn't thought... Well, I just got here, and Rob had made it sound like they'd be a while...

I was spiralling again as this towering alpha watched me like I was prey. I'd fucked up already, and I wasn't even quite sure how.

But I *couldn't* fuck up. The penalty was too high. With a dark bond marking the back of my neck, there was no getting out of it. No way except by this pack I was meeting today—and *only* if I did everything right. Because even if the Crimson Fury pack knew who I was, even *if* they wanted me, the pack who now owned me had to hand me over.

The only thing I'd been able to glean about the alphas who had left this bite on my neck was that they had it out for the Crimson Fury pack.

That was why they'd bitten me.

Scent matches—or fated mates—paired bonds could be strange things. Most often, once a bond was forged between alpha and omega, possibilities of scent matches dissolved.

Except under one circumstance: a dark bond like the one I had. Of the three possible bonds an omega could get, it was the only one that could be forced. I'd been bitten. I hadn't been asked. And so I'd never handed away my rights to my scent match—even though the alphas who had claimed me *had* given up their chance.

The Crimson Fury pack were *still* my mates. One of whom was Ebony Starless: this alpha staring me down with disgust in his eyes.

And still, he wasn't more frightening than the alternative.

An omega's bond with a pack couldn't be destroyed except in this one instance: my mates could override the bond of the pack who'd bitten me.

“Seduce them, Vex. Make them fall for you so hard that they'll give up anything to keep you.”

That's what I was.

A ransom.

I was the fool who had spilled my heart online, claiming to be the scent match of one of the richest packs in New Oxford. In that post I'd admitted I was a gold pack omega—the lowest in society. Marked by the gold of my eyes, I wasn't protected by the Alpha-Omega Institute. And I'd announced my status to the world, not for one moment imagining the consequences.

It was the stupidest thing I'd ever done. I'd scent matched with the Crimson Fury pack on one of the worst weeks of my life. Grieving and devastated, I'd found myself truly alone for the first time, only to discover my scent matches were four alphas completely out of reach. And somehow, asking online strangers had seemed like a good option.

Of course, my IP had been tracked, and I'd been kidnapped and sold.

With my breathing still shallow, I dragged myself out of the spiral.

Neither of us had said anything. He was *still* just staring at me.

Finally, the cogs of rational thought began to turn again. I pushed myself to shaky feet. “I-I’m Vex.” I held out my hand to him.

He flinched back—like, *actually* flinched away from me. The action wasn’t precisely hostile, but I drew my hand back to my side.

Get it together.

The Crimson Fury pack were extremely vocal about not wanting an omega, and the truth of my designation would blow up the contract I needed to claim.

“I’m here for the Sweetheart position,” I said.

“*Vex?*” Ebony spoke for the first time, his voice low and oddly melodious even with just the single syllable of my name. Or I was projecting what I knew of him; I’d heard this man a thousand times through the TV screen. Hearing him in person was jarring enough that more faculties returned to me.

“Yes.” I swallowed. “That’s my name.”

His eyebrow rose, and then he barked a laugh, shattering the strange tension that had thickened the air since the moment he’d walked in. “That’s a stupid name.”

Like the lightest feather, the unruly rage of my mother brushed my soul, demanding attention even in the most inopportune moments. I replied before thinking. “And you *chose* the name *Ebony Starless*.”

Ah.

Shit.

Silver eyes glittered, then he was crossing toward me, a curl forming on those perfect lips of his. I slipped from between the desk in an instant, suddenly not wanting to be trapped by anything, as if I might have to run.

My fists balled instinctively as he drew up before me, almost nose to nose if he didn’t dwarf me by at least a foot. There was something daring in his expression, as if I’d just set goalposts in a game I didn’t know the rules to.

A chill skittered down my spine at the same moment the door was flung open again.

That was when the rest of the Crimson Fury pack entered. Love Hightower was first, followed by Rook Harrison and Drake Jaccard.

“What in the *fuck*’s going on?” Love drew up as we both looked over at them.

All of them were beautiful.

Drake, with his strong nose and dark ringlets dancing about porcelain skin. Rook, with rich brown skin, messy waves of black hair that was shaved shorter on the sides—the few locks in the middle tumbling into chestnut eyes. Love, with bright blue irises and a complexion pale as death. His raven hair was tied back, tumbling down his back in loose waves.

I almost burst into tears right there, and I wasn’t sure why. Was it from seeing, up close, the men I’d been so desperate to meet? Or perhaps seeing the men I knew I’d been sent to ruin? Or maybe the looming threat of Ebony, still towering above me, inches away, and nothing like I’d imagined.

They stared between us, but they seemed much less interested in me than they were their pack brother.

“Ebony.” The single word from Love was dangerous. A warning.

“What?” Ebony’s voice had dropped low, almost a snarl. When I looked up at him, I could see a delighted glint in his eye. He was fixated on Love, the sneer back on his face.

I tried to inch a step away, but no luck. I might have slipped out from between the seat and the desk, but Ebony still had me up against it. There was no way to move without drawing attention to myself. Something in the back of my mind warned me against that. Ebony was still glaring at his pack.

“Rein it the fuck in.” That was Rook.

“Rein it in?” Ebony asked, each word slow, and doused in something frigid.

I felt at that moment, an imminent threat.

The omega half of my mind rejected that: the part that knew that the man beside me was my mate. The other half—wary and still tending wounds from over-trust—told me to run.

Right. Now.

But where? *From* this place? Or perhaps to one of the others in this room?

Despite years of obsessing, I knew them as well as I knew Ebony Starless, and that was not one bit.

I shifted—just the slightest bit—my fear shoving me onward.

Ebony moved like lightning. I let out a little shocked gasp as he seized me, forcing me around and dragging me against his chest by my neck.

I went still, terror for more than just him squeezing my chest tight.

This wasn't right.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

He was my mate.

He was the one who spoke out about gold pack rights on TV even when no one else would.

“Christ, Ebony.” I didn’t like the tremor of nerves in Love’s voice, even when he was so clearly trying to sound calm. “Enough.”

“Why?” Ebony asked from behind me. “She’s here for me, isn’t she?”

“*Let her go!*” Love’s words were a command this time. As pack lead, it held a solid punch. I felt Ebony’s grip loosen, but he wouldn’t be compelled like I might be if it were directed at me.

“Risky,” Ebony murmured, his voice low and delighted. “Don’t want the bond to show wear and tear, do you?” he asked.

A pack lead could make an order, and Ebony could fight it—but if it happened often enough, the pack bond itself would sicken.

As if to make a point, Ebony’s hand squeezed tighter around my throat. A low whine slipped from my chest, my panic getting the better of me.

I wanted to go home.

It took me a moment to realise my mistake; the sound I’d made was a response more common in omegas than betas. I could feel my hormones like an underground torrent, trying to breach the powerful drugs I’d taken.

I saw, through my haze of terror and battle with tears, Drake and Rook exchange a glance. At my back, Ebony stiffened. Love’s eyes were now fixed on me, something wild of his own in them. His next words were a vicious snarl.

“Let. Her. Go!”

FOUR

*Dear Ebony: you hated me the moment
you met me.*

LOVE

Everything was backwards.

Ebony was antagonistic at the best of times, but when it came to Sweethearts, his habits were as predictable as he was.

He liked them here for the week—someone new to torment for a little while. But if they made it that long, even he declined the contract when the week was up. It was a routine. He didn't want them stuck with us, he just liked taunting us with the possibility of trapping another unsuspecting soul to this pack.

So that was how it went, every single time.

Except this one.

And it wasn't just what he was doing, with his fist tight around her throat as he clutched her against his chest. It was her, too. I tried to shake the sound of her whimper of fear, but it echoed in my mind, bouncing around endlessly.

She was unexpectedly captivating.

I'd written Sweethearts off long ago, just like I'd written off any ideas of a real relationship. Not just because of Ebony, but I became famous too young, and there hadn't been many outside of this pack who wanted me for who I was. Sweethearts often came from families just well-off enough to raise spoiled brats, but poor enough to be desperate for fame. They were everything that made me weary.

But this one was different, and I couldn't quite put my finger on why.

She had chocolate brown eyes—large and doe-like as she stared at us desperately. She was clearly warring with herself not to cry, her lip quivering slightly. She had light freckles, rosy cheeks, and her nose had a cute curve to it. Her face was pretty and heart-shaped, and she had dark, silvery hair with a streak of peach at the front. She was tiny, beside Ebony, whose

six foot five frame made her seem far too small. The top of her head barely reached his clavicle, and his hand might be able to circle her neck entirely.

I couldn't explain it, but she was something precious, I knew that truth down to my marrow. She was precious, and so very breakable beside him.

As if feeling the same, Rook took a step forward.

Ebony shifted back, dragging her with him. She scrabbled at his hands, and the next choked sound of distress from her pierced right down to what made me an alpha.

I could feel it from Ebony, too. His grip on the bond was shaky, and the sound the Sweetheart made sent a bolt of shock through him as well.

Nothing shook Ebony.

He was a fucking fortress at its boiling point, his darkness threatening to explode into a million vicious pieces at any given time. That, or he was perfectly silent in the bond—and he leaned on it sometimes, blowing it wide open so that we knew that quiet *was* him, and not his absence.

Never was he an ounce of anything in between.

But right now, for the first time I felt what might be Ebony's brand of panic through the bond. Like everything else Ebony felt, it was coated in cold steel.

Not good.

He was a fully-fledged rogue alpha, with no desire for control over his aura. We all knew he wielded that viciousness whenever he felt out of control. Just like right now, with a pretty Sweetheart caught in the middle, getting a response from us all.

I tried to shut my desperate instincts out of the bond, and my brothers were doing the same, but we were too late.

Ebony knew.

And what we cared about, he broke—whether or not it broke him too.

The smallest smile cracked the porcelain mask he carried around whenever he was in our home. The one he kept for us.

He released her neck.

Instantly, she tried to slide along the table away from him. He dropped his hand to her waist instead, grip digging in as he refused to let her go.

“Tell them you quit, Sweetheart,” he murmured to her, just loud enough for us to hear.

He wanted her gone?

That shouldn't anger me. She was a Sweetheart—the same as all the others. She shouldn't matter. She'd get her payout, keep to her NDA, and vanish forever. So I didn't know why it was a visceral imperative that I stop Ebony frightening her away.

It just was.

Her fingers fumbled where he held her, white knuckled as she tried to pry herself free—panic in her eyes as she gave up looking to us for help.

That was what did it.

Her desperation as she realised we wouldn't save her.

That, and the absence of Ebony's fist around her neck.

With rage hot in my veins, I made a dive for them. Both Rook and Drake were right there with me.

She threw herself toward us, and I clocked the exact moment Drake had her, dragging her from Ebony's reach. He didn't put up the fight I was expecting, squaring up with me and Rook. Predictably, as soon as we laid a hand on him, he threw the first punch. His aura split the air, tangible as nothing but raw energy, and he caught Rook on the cheek, sending him sprawling. I was more prepared, my aura exploding outwards instantly in response. Ebony braced as my blow caught him in the stomach. He was quick and skilled, and in the next instant his fist collided with my cheek. Through the pain, I felt both his thrill and mine, our connection wide open.

And there he was.

Boiling point met, Ebony's cold presence flooded the bond, and for a moment, it was all consuming.

I grinned wildly, tasting the blood that was surely framing each of my teeth as I ducked another of his blows, and then charged him—with brutal force—into the wall behind.

VEX

Drake hauled me from the room. The last thing I saw was Ebony being rammed into the wall by Love. Ebony's silver eyes met mine right before the door slammed shut. In them was danger and a promise of more.

"Fuck," Drake muttered, rubbing his face. His gaze darted back to the closed door, and I heard a loud thump followed by a crash.

My heart was still in my throat.

What had just happened?

Their auras had been out—the energy alphas could release that made them stronger and faster than the rest of us. I was shaking, trying desperately to ground myself.

It hadn't just been Ebony, I swear there had been a flash of delight on Love's expression right before the door had closed. Their tangled scents were edged with a viciousness I wasn't used to.

"It's uh...?" Drake paused, unsure. "Sorry, I didn't catch —"

"Vex." My voice was barely a rasp.

"Are you alright, Vex?"

I blinked, then found myself looking up into deep violet eyes full of concern. Eyes I'd seen a thousand times before, yet it was like seeing art in a new medium. Up close, he was different. He wore a band t-shirt that was tucked haphazardly into dark jeans.

He was slender and tall, if not quite *Ebony* tall, and midnight curls fluttered around pale skin, and his expression was concerned. I seized onto that.

By reputation, Drake was quiet and unknown, but his scent of blackcurrant wine was soothing as he stared at me, kind and

concerned. “Can I call anyone?” he asked.

“C-call?” I asked.

“To pick you up,” he said, as if it were obvious.

I stared at him, lips parted.

He doesn't want you...

It's been five minutes, and he doesn't want you.

My weary, fragile omega heart, that had been ground down over and over in the last three months, finally cracked and tears flooded my face.

I knew how stupid it was to cry over the idea that a man I'd never met before didn't want me.

But he was supposed to.

When the rest of the world was against me, this pack was my last hope.

Ebony had attacked me, and Drake didn't want me.

The world spun.

“Hey!” He sounded more concerned than I was expecting, and I felt his touch return to my shoulder, more steadying this time.

“Can you take me to my room?” I managed to choke out.

I needed to get it together, not bawl my eyes out in front of him.

“Your room?” he asked, confused. “Vex, you—”

“I didn't quit.” I had to force the determined words out. Until the week was up, it was still my choice to quit.

Choice?

I caught a breathless, choked laugh before it bubbled up. “I just... need...” Darkness smudged the edges of my vision, and his grip tightened on my shoulder.

“Hey!” he said again.

If I didn't take my gaze from his worried, violet eyes, the world didn't seem so crazy. So beautiful... So out of reach... "My room. Please."

"It's upstairs, but you're pale. I'm uh, going to carry you," he said.

I couldn't focus. His words were faint.

My fingers were curled around the front of his shirt as I tried to keep myself steady.

"That means touching you, alright?" he asked.

I frowned at the question and the caution in his eyes. So, so different from Ebony, who'd just... Who'd just... Ink seeped into the edges of my vision. The last thing I felt was Drake's firm hands catching me as I fell, and the world went black.

FIVE

Dear Drake: You don't want me.

DRAKE

All I could think of as I laid Vex down on the bed in the Sweetheart's quarters was that she looked like Sleeping Beauty.

Her hair was long and hung in soft waves, and it was a beautiful silver brown with a strip of peach.

I frowned, unable to tear my eyes from where she lay on the expansive bed in the Sweetheart's room.

Resting as she was, she looked fragile.

I knew malnutrition firsthand. I noticed a difference between the brighter skin of her face beneath makeup compared to the more ashen tone to the pale skin of her arm. I hated making judgements on weight—I'd been told I was underweight my whole life, even when I wasn't a half starved teen—but I couldn't help wondering where she came from.

Honestly, I was entirely unsure of what to make of her at all. Sweethearts were usually the epitome of beauty standards, perfect to hang from the arm of whatever pack they were sent to. The Sweetheart Agency might claim to be neutral, but the candidates who'd arrived before her had all come from well-off homes. They'd all had that leg-up that I hadn't had—one I didn't recognise in Vex, either.

She wore all black: waist-high leggings, a simple cropped dark shirt with long sleeves, and combat boots. Long lashes brushed her cheeks, framed with a dark line of winged eyeliner, and there was a small downturn on her plush, pink lips. Her nails were painted with chipped black, and there was a blush of pink on her cheeks and nose, as well as a smattering of freckles that may or may not be makeup. Beautiful, truly, but still the strangest Sweetheart I'd ever seen.

And somehow the most captivating.

It was creepy, staring at her like I was, but I found it impossible to look at anything else. I'd rarely been in this room. Like most of my pack, I avoided Sweethearts when they visited, waiting it out until the week was up or until Ebony scared them away.

But she'd fainted on me, which really wasn't a surprise after what she'd just gone through. A little flutter of rage stirred in my chest at that thought, rare and out of place for me.

Right now, it was all I could do to make sure she was okay.

I had an omega co-star who'd fainted once on set when she'd caught sight of the vat of water snakes she was supposed to climb into for a scene. I hadn't blamed her, even if they were harmless. When she'd woken only a minute later... What was it that they'd done for her?

I dashed from the room to the kitchenette in the lounge and grabbed a glass of water, and one of Ebony's protein bars from the drawer—the cherry brownie flavour, since she deserved that at least.

She was already stirring when I returned, which gave me pause. Would she find it strange if I was here when she woke? I shooed the thought away. It would be much ruder to dump her on the bed and leave.

A vice squeezed my heart as I remembered the look of terror on her face and my boiling rage set me on edge.

Ebony.

What the fuck had that been about?

I didn't understand. We all knew what he could be like, but I'd never seen him lose it like that.

She tucked her hair behind her ears as she sat up, blinking blearily as she looked at me.

I pushed the water and protein bar into her hands, and she took them, a little startled.

“Shit,” she whispered. “I fainted?”

I nodded. I don't know why I was suddenly overcome with nerves, but my throat was dry and I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do with myself. It felt weird, looming over her, so I sat down on the bed at her side, leaving a good distance between us. I'd just stay long enough to know she was okay. "Please don't tell." Her bright brown eyes held mine desperately.

I gave her a half smile and mimed zipping my lips. Then I kicked myself, because that's something a twelve-year-old would do.

But her shoulders sagged in relief. "I have to be the worst Sweetheart ever," she groaned, hugging herself.

I shook my head.

She peered at me oddly, and I realised I'd been mute since she'd woken. I cleared my throat, suddenly not able to meet her eyes. "You're... not."

Was that a lie?

She'd caused a stir, and she *should* leave.

She wasn't a bad Sweetheart, she was just... different. I should tell her that. "Ebony's never wanted a Sweetheart gone, and I've never—" I cut off abruptly, frowning as I realised what I'd been about to say.

I've never wanted one to stay.

I'd never wanted *anyone* to stay. It was a struggle enough, having Rob live downstairs. He wasn't pack. Though to his credit, he remained almost completely unseen, and there were times I forgot he existed at all.

Her brows bunched as she tried to work out what I'd been about to say.

Fuck.

"I've never, uh... seen him like that," I finished weakly.

She shrunk at my words, something crumpling in her expression.

Because I'd reminded her of Ebony? Or because she'd hoped maybe I was going to tell her I wanted her to stay?

She couldn't stay.

Our pack was a mess, and not even Love could control Ebony.

At my side, she shrank further, and I realised there was a tense expression on my face. I fixed it, not wanting her to think it was because of her.

“What happened before we arrived?” I asked. Ebony had been rounding on her when we'd entered.

She set the water down on the bedside table, and I noticed the tremor in her hand.

“Um...” She fiddled absently with the wrapper, not meeting my eyes. “I told him his name was stupid.”

I snorted. I couldn't help it, and she shot daggers at me.

“He told me mine was stupid first,” she said.

I tried and failed to straighten my face.

“Your name is cool,” I said.

Finally, a bright smile tugged at her lips, and with it butterflies scattered in my stomach. “You feeling better?” I asked.

She nodded, but she was still distant, I could see that.

“I'll give you some space, but I'll be out in the lounge—it's just down the hall to the right. To the left, that's my room, and anything down the hall opposite, that's Ebony's territory. Don't go near it—and it's not just you. He doesn't let anyone in.” I said. “But otherwise, take as much time as you need.”

She nodded, and her lack of argument told me I was right in giving her space. I'd want it if I was her.

I stood to leave, then paused. “Vex,” I said, heart in my throat.

She glanced up at me. What I was going to ask of her made my inner alpha kick back in rage. “Please...” I forced

the scowl from my face. “Please don’t stay.”

VEX

Drake left me to a pretty major mental breakdown.

The room around me was as beautiful as the rest of the mansion, a foreign extravagance. It was a huge space with neutrals, creams and gold. In the middle of the wall was a tall window overlooking the gardens beyond, framed by thick beige curtains currently swept to the sides. There was a sprawling set of couches, a fireplace, and a huge TV mounted to the wall. The bed was pack-sized, which was the largest commercially available, and in any other time, that might have soothed the omega side of me.

My makeup was a mess, it had to be.

And I wasn't ready for the panic I felt at the idea that the foundation on my neck was fading to reveal that poisoned bite. The one I couldn't let them see. I was fraying around the edges, the stitches of my unwanted pack bond, unravelling. I began to feel the alphas lurking on the other end of it, and they began to feel me.

For the first time in my life, I wished to be alone with my fear.

I shoved that bond closed the best I could

But there was the matter of the *other* commands. The orders that had nothing to do with my mission or secrecy. They were given to me for the sake of cruelty and nothing else.

My suitcase had already been left beside my door, and I grabbed my make-up bag from it, then made for the bathroom.

More extravagance met me: a huge tub, walk-in shower with glass doors, and a wide mirror that spanned the whole wall around the countertop and sinks.

I hauled myself up onto the marble counter, crossed my legs, and unzipped my makeup bag. Fighting my tears, and

keeping the bond as tightly closed as I could, I opened the page of a little black notebook. With trembling fingers, I did the vile and pointless task that demanded completion.

If my alphas gave me a command, I had to follow it, my body would move on its own accord. I *could* fight their orders, but when I did, the dark bond lit up, leaving me in unfathomable pain. This particular command had triggered the moment I'd first been afraid of Ebony, scratching at the back of my mind to act the moment I was alone.

After I'd finished and tucked the book away, I dabbed away at the makeup destroyed by tears and fixed it, slowly and carefully.

Running on adrenaline for months on end, I hadn't been able to slow down enough to consider real expectations of my mates. If I had, *this* wouldn't have been it. It was a testament to the depths of fucked I was, that even now, Ebony Starless remained my salvation.

The open book on the marble counter, the chains in my mind forcing my hand even now, were proof of worse lurking.

It happened three months ago, after I posted online about my scent match with the Crimson Fury pack. A week later a monster lay in wait for me to return home—the place I was supposed to be safe.

I'd been kidnapped and kept locked away in a horrible prison with faded wallpaper and no windows. There, the days blurred together and I'd had nothing but my own voice to keep me sane. I'd known why I was there: to be bitten by a pack of alphas and left at their mercy.

It was legal for them to dark bond an omega like me. I was a gold pack omega, which it had been a choice I'd made for the sake of survival, but it had put me at risk of one of those bonds.

When an omega perfumed, they have one year to go to the Institute for an injection that would bind them and their alpha offspring to the government's laws. Without that injection, those omegas gave birth to rogue alphas like Ebony. Loose

cannons who could lose control, even kill their own pack mates. They were volatile and dangerous. With the injections, that volatility was tempered down.

I knew the truth, though. Those laws were designed to keep *betas* safe. They had never been written for omegas. At the age of sixteen, when I'd perfumed, I'd already witnessed the cost of that firsthand.

Isolated, and afraid, I hadn't gone for my injection, turning myself into an outcast.

Omegas feared having golden eyes for the risk of being dark bonded without protection, but there were veins of society in which omegas may be dark bonded, anyway—places where the law was trampled and distant. And if an omega *was* to be dark bonded, they were better off with golden eyes. There *were* lines I could cross that normal omegas could not. Crossing those lines was a last resort, it wasn't only agonising, but the consequences may leave me worse off. But it *was* a chance. So when someone asked me why I—or anyone—would ever choose to go gold pack, I didn't have an answer. Anyone that had to ask didn't know the world I had known.

It was a choice.

And that was what I valued more than anything.

It's why I wasn't yet broken. Not even when my freedom had been ripped from me, and my dignity worn down, day by day as the alphas in my unwanted bond tried to force me to become their silent, unquestioning puppet.

They had *almost* won that fight, but my eyes were the reason they would *never* win.

Still, I would forever be left to the mercy of vicious doubt, because I would never know if the choice I made would have left me better, or worse.

I wished I could be as free and trusting as my non-golden-eyed counterparts. Omegas who might meet their mates and feel nothing but giddy excitement and anticipation. Who

wouldn't ruin a pack by association. Who could be who they were, and still be sure it was enough. Enough for what though?

A claim?

For... love?

Was that what I wanted?

Deep down, I knew. I knew the dreams I'd spent years trampling, convincing myself they were echoes of a child long dead. I was further from them now, than I'd ever been.

In this pristine bathroom of expensive marble, I'd been staring into the mirror for an age. With my contacts present, my rich brown eyes stared back.

The fresh layer of foundation hid the ruddy pink of my nose, so I reached for the locked pouch at the bottom of the makeup bag.

I shifted the number until the silver lock clicked open.

Within were three things.

First was a box of contacts. The GPRE had ridiculous regulations on contact lenses so that gold pack omegas couldn't mask their eye colour. I.Ds were needed to purchase coloured contacts, and even then, most only offered subtle shifts in colour. The brightness of a gold pack omega's eyes was hard to hide.

Black market contacts were something I'd managed to keep on hand for years, though. It was how I'd stayed safe for so long. And they weren't like normal coloured contacts. Instead of a solid colour placed over mine, they were coated in a sheen that created just the slightest colour shift, dampening brightness and neutralising the signature gold people noticed so easily.

They were the weakest when it came to eye colour changes, but the most reliable. They turned the bright gold of my eyes to a rich chocolate brown. Up close, no one would notice a thing.

Beside the contacts was a bottle of powerful scent blockers. They were enough to mask my scent for days. I

shouldn't have needed another so soon, but I swallowed one down anyway, hating that I had to. But I'd been scared enough to faint, which meant I likely needed it. Beside the scent blockers, was the cherry blossom spray I carried around. Even betas had faint scents, so to avoid suspicion, I used this spritz to hide my designation properly.

Lastly, was the little silver pouch containing a single heat suppressant.

I stared at the pill.

Before, I'd looked at it with hope, believing maybe there was a happily ever after in reach. My heat was a marker.

The pack who owned me didn't want me just to *meet* my mates, they wanted them obsessed enough to trade anything the day I went into heat and discovered the truth of who I was.

It was perhaps a month away, though I could delay it with that pill.

Taking it would be the conclusion of this nightmare, one way or another. With my heat on the horizon, my mates—if they wanted me—would have to come to the bargaining table. It was why I had to survive this week, get the contract, and stay on. My mates had publicly claimed they didn't want an omega. Staying with them as a Sweetheart—long enough to make them fall for me and offer an impossible bond, was the only option I had.

My touch drifted to the back of my neck where the foundation thankfully remained in place. Tears pricked my eyes again. There was nothing worse than the thought of heat with the pack I was bonded to.

That was what last resorts were for.

Slowly, I turned, leaning against the mirror and dragging my knees against my chest. I fought to contain the second round of tears I couldn't afford.

I hated that I'd become so desperate.

I was everything I'd feared: dependent on alphas.

Drake had seemed nice. He'd been concerned. And the others had tried to protect me from Ebony... But it wasn't enough.

My fingers trembled as I slipped the little silver packet back. I removed my contacts and washed them. I paused for just a moment before I replaced them, staring at myself again. At the eyes that looked like my old eyes before they'd gone golden.

My mother's eyes.

I had finally found my mates, and I was showing them the person I wished I was, not the person I'd become.

I took a breath, trying and failing to steel myself. I was worn so thin, alone for so long with nowhere safe to hide. But this bathroom locked. I had true safety in here that I hadn't had for months.

And my phone was on my bed outside—the one my pack had given me. In this room there was no phone. No texts. No Ebony.

Take as much time as you need.

That was what Drake had said.

So I went over my hair and makeup, singing quietly to soothe my nerves, and pretending I was back in my room with Aisha.

Back in a place where I felt safe.

When I was done I washed it off, and did it once more.

The time ticked, and I couldn't stop, knowing how pathetic I was, hiding in here. I had one week to seduce my mates, and I was too afraid to leave this bathroom.

When I finally slipped out to the huge empty room, and fell asleep, it was to be met by more nightmares.

SIX

DAY TWO

VEX

Three Months Ago

“Come.” That was all the wheatgrass alpha had said when I’d climbed out of the tub and put on the black silk dress he’d given me.

I hated how pretty it was. I hated that I would have fallen in love with it in a shop window. How many dates would I have tolerated if I could have convinced a guy to buy me this?

But getting rich betas to take me on dates to buy me things I wouldn’t have been able to afford was a distant dream, now.

The alpha examined me, tugging my arms from where they were anxiously folded at my chest. He took my chin in a rough grip, tilting it back and forth, reminding me that I was nothing more than an object—that in here, I didn’t belong to me anymore.

“Drop the snarl, it’s not pretty,” he growled as he shoved me down on the stool before a vanity and grabbed a blow-dryer and straightener. Then he pressed a blurry black-and-white photo down.

My chest grew tight as I stared at it.

It was... of me.

It had been taken on my road trip down the west coast. A bar in a small town in Nevada. The waitress had offered to take a picture of us. So there I was, my arm around Aisha as we sat in a booth. It had been the one place in town that had let a pair like us in.

She was my best friend.

Tears blurred my vision, as sharp grief stabbed me in the chest. I blinked them away desperately as I tried to understand why he was showing me this. Wheatgrass jabbed his finger at me in the photo, then pushed the blow dryer in my direction.

I nodded, shoving the photo back at him so I didn't have to look at it anymore.

Don't cry.

Don't cry.

I'd made it this far without crying in front of him.

I switched on the hair dryer to distract myself. It worked. Doing something I loved pushed everything else away. I forgot where I was, pretending, as I blow-dried and straightened my hair, that I was back in my room. Aisha was with me, and I was catching her up on the local gossip or any disastrous dates I'd had as I got ready for another.

Finally, I was done, my hair matching the photo he'd shown me.

Wheatgrass straightened and reached for the door handle. I noticed a faded tattoo on his wrist, a symbol like sideways eight, skewed by a crescent scar through it.

"No... makeup?" I asked, looking back at the box on the vanity. I didn't know why that was the first thing out of my mouth. But vanity was a routine for me, and he was skipping a step.

"They want to know what they're getting."

My blood ran cold.

I wasn't being taken to a pack for the night. The pack that would see me today wanted to know what they were getting for life.

The truth I'd been avoiding since I'd seen the picture, barrelled right into me in that moment. Aisha had been my constant. I'd had the courage to become a gold pack because I knew she had my back.

Less than a month without her, and already I'd been taken.

I woke early from a restless night to the faint sounds of birds outside the window. The first thing I did was check my phone anxiously. Nothing from my pack. They'd intended to keep

communication to a minimum once I was here, but I'd still been commanded to check it in case.

There was, however, a text from an unknown number.

Unknown: Love said to tell you the contract will remain in the office for the week, it's something all the Sweethearts are told. He's sorry there was no formal introduction, and hoping there will be tomorrow.

Unknown: This is Drake. Got your number from the contract. Hope that's okay.

I added his number to contacts, the second one in the phone, since I'd received it only yesterday. There were unreasonably flighty butterflies in my stomach, too.

Drake had taken the time to look for my number? To check on me?

Unsure of what to do with myself at this hour, I snuck out of the room in silence. I'd done what would become my morning routine, I'd rubbed the make-up from my bite and replaced it—though it had survived the night, checked my contacts, and sprayed myself with my cherry blossom scent.

My neck—thankfully, was only faintly marred by bruises. Ebony had been furious, but it had been more of a threat than actual follow-through. It had worked, all the same, I'd been terrified, but the smallest layer of foundation did the trick to cover it.

The mansion was cool, existing in that perfect moment of peace. That moment in time when dawn broke, but the sun hadn't yet touched the world with warm light. When I was at my best, I loved to wake with the sunrise.

I made my way to the office downstairs. Sure enough, upon the long table was the envelope. I pulled up a chair and cracked it open.

Inside was the contract.

In this pristine mansion office, the white space of the last page stared back at me. Any one of their signatures was all I

needed.

The simple stroke of a pen on that blank page, and I'd be safe just a little longer.

ROOK

I was on edge, waiting for Vex to show up.

I couldn't get her out of my head.

She'd spent the whole of the previous evening in her room, which, after the Ebony incident, I sort of got. But she was here as a Sweetheart, right?

Drake had emerged from her room yesterday, and told us she was staying on despite what had happened, and I'd felt an obscene relief. Ebony's expression had gone stony, which warmed my cold little heart. Consequently, he'd also been hiding in his quarters ever since, though I'd call that a win.

Right now I was seated on the couch, an ice pack to my face. Love had snorted at me when he'd seen me refreshing them today, but I couldn't be too careful. I kept myself tattoo (and scar) free, since I hated relying on makeup for photos or interviews, and we always had a few scheduled, even on our time off. Plus, there was the Diamond Tides Gala coming up. I did a lot of the publicity stuff myself—I enjoyed it most, and that suited the others just fine. Sometimes Ebony fought me for it, either when he was bored, or hadn't got a hit of worship for too long.

It was lunch, and I'd anxiously hovered in the living room all day to Aura Boxing reruns. I don't know why, but the brief glimpse I'd had of Vex yesterday wasn't enough.

I needed to scout her out. I was picky about who I was intimate with. Ebony was vicious toward anyone if he thought they might matter to me, but the joke was on him.

Acting was kind of it for me, and I didn't have a problem with that. Intimacy stayed to flings and never anything more. My career and my pack. It's all I wanted. I didn't need a woman coming into my life and making it complicated and shit. But Vex was pretty enough to catch my eye.

Plus... she was already solidly in Ebony's cross hairs without help.

So I was admittedly curious.

I pondered that curiosity, trying to piece together exactly what made me so damned interested at all. The first reason was obvious: she was getting a rise out of Ebony. Anyone who could make a fool of him was curious in my book. Plus, she'd given me the perfect excuse to catch Ebony on the receiving end of my fist and aura a few times before Love had dragged us all apart. (Hypocrite, since he'd landed the first punch). Vex was interesting even without that. She had a draw about her, and I wasn't the only one who felt it.

She was also hot as fuck.

Was it rude to think that about a woman you'd only ever seen frightened out of her mind?

Probably.

Unlike nearly every other thing in the world when it came to my life though, my thoughts were for me only, and I could be as rude as I fucking wanted.

She *was* hot—like, really fucking hot. I'd already rubbed one out to the thought of her last night, which was *definitely* rude. Though, she'd been a whole lot less frightened, and a whole lot more into *me* in my head.

I wasn't the only one curious, though. Love was in the lounge during a Sweetheart week, and he was rarely drawn by anything that didn't involve our pack or career. He was dressed properly, as usual, not like me who preferred sweats and a t-shirt when I lounged about the house.

Love wore clean dark jeans and a black button-up tucked in with the sleeves rolled half way up. His raven-black braid was done to perfection, hanging over his right shoulder where it reached half-way down his torso. He wore his reading glasses, which was *rough* on a style level, and I didn't care how much easier it made the hobby.

Then again, some chicks were into that. What were the chances she would be? But most betas liked an alpha in

sweatpants like I was, though. It was a safe guess.

Fuck me. I'd never before been *worried* about if a woman would like me—I was a literal dreamboat, and I'd yet to meet a woman who didn't.

Nothing was normal today. Sweetheart week routines were usually the same. Love kept to his room while me and Drake hid out in the theatre to avoid disturbance. When Ebony got bored and began ignoring the Sweethearts, that was usually when they'd turn up to bug us.

But not today.

And while Love's side of the bond was slammed shut, I could see the strange tenseness with which he sat, pretending to be entirely occupied by his book.

"You sure we shouldn't go and check on her—?" I began, but Drake cut me off.

"She'll come out when she's ready," he said quickly. He was stiff, a little frown on his face as he watched me. I could feel his worry through the bond, as if I'd barge in there and upset her.

I snorted.

If it wasn't Drake, I'd be concerned he was trying to keep her all to himself, but Drake was painfully sweet, and he valued pack—even when it came to Ebony. If that wasn't enough to convince me of a heart of gold, nothing was. Which meant he was, in fact, worried I'd go in there and upset her.

Strangely protective over a Sweetheart none of us would sign in...

I jumped when I heard a door brush carpet down the hall. I had to work not to spin around and stare like Drake did—she'd think he was too eager and it wouldn't do him any favours.

I noticed Love's eyes flicker to her as she padded into the room, and he subtly tugged his glasses off, setting them on the table beside him. I waited before throwing my arm around the back of the couch, offering nothing more than a quick once over.

Well.

It was *supposed* to be a quick once over, but my eyes snagged on her like magnets, and it was hard to look away. It just didn't matter that she looked nothing like a Sweetheart should, she was everything I'd spent the whole of last night dreaming about. She was wearing a baggy, long-sleeved t-shirt and shorts. Silvery hair with a peach streak, freckles dotted porcelain skin, and a blush of rose on her cheeks. She had that low-key alternative, doll-like grungy style going on, and she looked born for it.

She seemed nervous as she glanced between us, opening her mouth and then shutting it, her cheeks going pinker.

Drake saved her. "This is Vex."

"Hi," she said weakly, still looking between me and Love as if she wasn't sure which of us to focus on. Love was now fixing her with the full attention of his sharp, blue eyes, which was an unnerving experience even for me, and I was bonded with him. Even without the demeanour, he'd be an intimidating guy. Same height and frame as Ebony—those two were taller than necessary, even for alphas—and athletically built even if he wasn't putting in the effort.

"This uh... isn't how I imagined this going..." she said. "Sorry I've been hiding out."

I almost smiled at that, but that might look insensitive. "You're fine," I settled on, instead.

She sat on the couch beside Drake but didn't relax, eyes fixed on the TV as if figuring out what to do with herself. That checked out, since I realised all three of us were still staring at her like lost boys who'd just stumbled upon the first girl they'd ever met.

Again, I forced myself to look away, but the image of her was burned into my brain.

She *was* stunning. Daydreams hadn't done it justice.

I'd checked her file this morning to find she hadn't made a career out of her looks, which meant she was burning money.

But there was no way I could make a statement like that without putting myself on a back foot.

Should we... *say* something? The silence was odd, but there was a rock stuck in my throat—strange and unfamiliar. Usually I was the loud one, the one that put my foot in my mouth, never really sure what I was doing, and happy to speak anyway. I didn't care—my image could handle it, and most people thought it was charming and down to earth.

I couldn't help glancing at her again.

She looked phenomenal next to Drake; their styles matched well, but I'd like to see a picture of her on my arm, too. My brand was stylish and colourful, while staying grounded. The perfect arrogant boyfriend to every fan. High fashion and I, we didn't get along, but Vex was a perfect cross between tomboy and alternative that could stand between me and Drake and look right in place.

Ha.

Ebony and his dumb-as-fuck elf-boy image could get bent.

Only. We didn't actually want that. Any kind of public facing relationship with a woman would be enough to dip interest from fans. They wanted us hot, single, and open to the Cinderella—which every single fan was, and wasn't, all at the same time.

A Sweetheart wouldn't be too terrible, though. They were business. And a contract, which still left it open to breaking down, and then another fan could dream of stepping in.

Maybe it would even be good. Everyone would be reminded we could be romanced on some level...

"Are you alright?" Love asked after a long moment.

She glanced at him, clearly trying to measure her expression. "I'm great—uh, good, I mean. Now I'm settled in..." She trailed off. "First impressions aren't my strong suit."

"I disagree entirely," Love replied, crossing one leg over the other and regarding her carefully from his armchair. I chuckled in agreement. Hers had been one hell of an opener.

She bit her lip, clearly unsure how to take that. I couldn't take my eyes from the movement. "I... hope that's a good thing."

Love did what he did best, and left the meaning of his words up to the rest of the world. He reclined back in his chair as a sign that he was done talking, but didn't take his eyes from her. I'd seen him do that a thousand times in interviews. I had yet to determine if it was deliberate, or if his uncanny ability to make people squirm was simply a birthright. Given his blood relation to Ebony, I'd guess the latter.

Vex shifted back, eyes darting to me and Drake as if we might explain what Love had meant. I couldn't help notice how close she was to Drake now, as if he might offer her comfort.

Damn.

He'd *really* got ahead... I mean, I'd punched a fucker like Ebony for her, but Drake must have done something right...

"I think it's a good thing," Drake said quietly, but I caught the half wince on his face after he said it as if he shouldn't have. She peered up at him with those chocolate doe eyes, and her smile was dazzling.

"Me too," I added, and was rewarded with the tail end of that smile directed right at me before she shrunk closer to Drake. Drake looked as pleased as I felt, and I saw his hand hover near her shoulder, as if he wanted to touch her. That drew me up.

Drake was not the physical type. He was nervous around people, prepping heavily for physicality in scenes, and had to be high to be in crowds. It was something he relied on me for. If he absolutely needed to make a show of it, I'd get him high as fuck, and then take him out into the event. Then I'd make sure all the attention was on me, and that no one got too close to him.

Still his hand hovered, as if he wasn't sure if he was allowed to touch, which—of course we were, she was our

Sweetheart after all. He shouldn't be worried about *hugging* her.

Still, could be a way to get ahead, since she was definitely into him, and Drake's whole thing about boundaries wasn't something chicks found hot. If she sat next to me like that, I wouldn't leave her wondering if she was wanted.

My thoughts tailed off uncomfortably as I realised what had just gone through my head.

Our Sweetheart?

Well, not *after* the week was up... but until then, she was, right? Even without an extended contract, it wasn't untrue.

I'd used the opposite logic with every other beta on these week-long trials.

Not mine, not until our signatures said so.

And they never did.

I wanted more than a signature to claim Vex, though.

The creamy pale skin of her thighs tempted me enough that I imagined what it would be like to sink my teeth in. I wanted to see what the crescent of pearly marks from my bite would look like on her.

I drew myself up, forcing my gaze to the TV screen.

What the fuck was I thinking?

My hind brain was off fucking kilter—had to have been the fight. Still, I couldn't stop the thoughts tumbling into my mind.

She was nervous, and not in a fangirl way. Her nerves were something else, and she was sinking closer to Drake with every glance I was throwing her way.

I frowned, trying to understand why, as I averted my gaze.

Shit.

Did *I* make her nervous? I mean, she had watched me and Love let loose our auras, but it had been to *protect* her... And I mean, she had to want that, right? A bite from me?

It should be obvious, since I'd never even *considered* offering that to anyone before. Take nearly any woman from the street, and it'd be a safe guess for the answer, but after what Ebony had done? He'd made this much more difficult for us.

Besides, she was a Sweetheart, which didn't always mean pack bonds...

Fuck. Me.

I drew my thoughts to a screeching halt.

Seriously, what was I thinking?

This was a road bump—I just wasn't used to *not* being sure when it came to women. But she'd come around. By the week's end, I'd be sure she'd take us.

When that happened, I'd get my head on straight and re-evaluate the idea of wanting a *beta* in the pack at all. Then the world Ebony had just turned upside down would be right.

She'd want us and we wouldn't want her.

We'd go back to normal, and it would be easy to send her off like every other Sweetheart before her.

At the sound of footsteps, Vex straightened, eyes wide as she looked back over the couch.

Ebony emerged from his cave, clearly on his way to the gym—which Love had deliberately made inaccessible from anywhere but the lounge. Not that Love would ever admit it, but I knew it was because if he hadn't, we might not see Ebony for weeks. Ebony had a habit of hyper-fixating and forgetting to eat, so Love needed a way to check in. Though it could also be because it brought him a little spark of delight, forcing Ebony to show his face when he didn't want to. He hid it well, but Love *was* petty when pushed. I was too, I just didn't feel the need to hide it.

Ebony's hair was up in a ponytail, straight silver tumbling down his bare back. He was shirtless, dusky tan of his torso on full display. He'd been half-way through wrapping his hands when his gaze found Vex.

Oh, and there it was again, a flood of viciousness through the bond.

He crossed the space toward us.

Drake finally shifted closer to Vex, and Love leaned forward in his chair as if he might have to intervene again—but he said nothing.

What Ebony did, however, was just one of the many things that made him different.

I lived among sharks; I'd seen intimidation from directors, spoiled actors, or managers—no one was beneath it. Most people might cross the room and perch on the arm of the couch as a statement. Then they'd come up with a reason to be there—start a conversation with Love or Drake, for example, all the while making Vex uncomfortable.

Ebony was bound by no such social graces—and I couldn't deny a certain level of respect for that. He didn't come up with shit, he just levelled his hatred at her in those vicious, storm-cloud eyes as he continued to steadily wrap his fists with black fabric.

He was an intimidating guy: six-foot-five of pure, packed, dusky muscle wrapped up in ice-cold psychopath—a psychopath he wasn't hiding from Vex at all, like he did most of the world.

“Ebony—”

“Why is she still here?” He cut Drake off, tone pure ice.

Vex sunk right into the crook of Drake's arm, and he finally took the hint, tugging her against him in the face of Ebony.

Ebony wasn't the only one staring between them in shock. Love was watching Drake with interest, his gaze like mine, drawn to their point of contact. Drake was looking at her like she was the only one in the room, and I felt his protectiveness stirring through the bond.

Ebony's eyes darkened, just the slightest curl to his lips.

Fuck.

He hated her.

He *really*, really hated her.

“I’m thinking of signing the contract.” The insane words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. I had no regrets. Not when Ebony’s eyes snapped to me with as much hatred as he held for Vex. I couldn’t help my smile, thrill like lightning in my veins. Ebony’s pressure points were so rare I was beginning to think they were a myth. But I’d just offered her the signature she needed.

Everyone was staring at me, and Vex’s pretty lips were parted in shock, her eyes wide.

Even *less* regrets.

Love didn’t groan, but he might as well have through the bond.

Drake’s skin was even paler than usual and he held her closer. “Mate... Don’t bring her into this.” He looked horrified.

“That’s what she wants.” My eyes held Vex’s, though I could still feel the laser burn of Ebony’s furious gaze on me. “Right?”

She swallowed, unable to take her gaze from me either, and butterflies joined the thrill. She nodded. “Yes,” she whispered, the word as fragile as tissue paper.

“Right. Then there’s nothing wrong with giving it serious consideration,” I said. I didn’t even know if I was lying or not. Was I just trying to bait Ebony? Or would I actually do it?

The space between Drake and Vex became smaller, his arm tugging her close, it was an image that would be burned behind my eyelids.

Drake didn’t reach out to anyone. He didn’t let anyone in. It wasn’t just Ebony that sealed the deal on our fate: bondless when it came to any woman. None of us believed Drake would ever be ready.

Doors opened and possibilities suddenly came tumbling out as he got to his feet, standing between Vex and Ebony, and

held his hand to her. “I can give you a tour.”

Vex stood quickly, clearly happy for an excuse to put distance between her and a furious Ebony.

My eyes flickered to Love.

Was he feeling the same thing?

I’d known him for as long as I could remember, and while he’d always been hard to read, he had tells. Right now, his jaw was clenched just a little too tight, his gaze too fixed on Drake and Vex.

Like a bunch of lost fucking puppies, we all stared in silence as Drake led her to the spiral staircase to start the tour downstairs.

Drake walked close by her side, rather than his usual rigid distance with hands tucked in pockets.

She turned back once, intense eyes meeting mine briefly with curiosity at what I’d just offered, and I felt a warm pride swell in my chest.

There were clearly more benefits to that offer than pissing off Ebony.

SEVEN

VEX

Drake was safe.

I felt it to my bones. It wasn't just because we were mates, since there was nothing safe about Ebony, and I was unsure about Love and Rook—who'd literally offered to sign me in already.

But I don't think I'd met a man—alpha or beta—who had ever made me feel as comfortable as Drake did.

I'd been on dozens of dates, and I liked boldness in my guys, but only when I could be sure it was paired with respect. But here, there was nothing I could be sure about, caught between a scent match and a dark bond. Unlike on dates, here I had no control.

I had to like them, and I hated that. I had to put up with Ebony, and I hated that even more.

But Drake, I really, actually liked. He'd been bold enough to stand between me and Ebony, and he kept a respectful distance as he showed me around. He wasn't touchy or over-possessive. He was just... company. Company I'd been missing for so long, and I needed that so much right now.

The mansion they lived in was ridiculous. In another life, it might leave me star-struck. Especially now Rook was considering giving me a signature, which should make me excited, even if it had seemed a lot more about Ebony than me.

Instead, I was a nervous wreck, desperately trying to commit the hallways to memory. To know where each one led, and where the exits were. The first floor hosted offices and a kitchen three times the size of the kitchenette upstairs. Rob was their house manager, which in this case I gathered meant everything from live-in chef, to cleaner. His living quarters were downstairs.

“Love insisted,” Drake said, when I dared to point out that a live-in chef was kind of obscene. “Turns out if left to our own devices, we don’t feed ourselves to his standards. So chef it was, since most of the time we’re stupid busy anyways.”

“This is your time off, right?” I asked. I knew they were between movies, and focused on down time before they went to Germany for their big break.

“Yeh,” Drake said. “That’s right.”

That was a few months away.

By then, my fate would be sealed. I would be with my mates, or with the pack I hated.

If I was signed on with them, would they take me to Germany? My gold pack status made travel complicated, since much of Europe held similar stances regarding rogues and gold packs. But with their resources, they could make it happen. There would be restrictions, of course, but... Germany? I’d only ever left this country in my dreams.

What would Europe be like?

Central Asia was my *real* dream; there were countries there that I had to see before I died. What would it be like to walk the streets of a place that didn’t care about the true colour of my eyes?

I felt a hollow pit open in my stomach as those old, dusty fantasies rustled: ancient paper in a light breeze that hadn’t come about in months.

Stupid...

Never for me, with this poisoned bite. *Keep foolish dreams from your mind, idiot, or do you want to jinx the real ones?*

Drake was nodding toward the glass double doors spilling light across the huge foyer. “Do you want to see the gardens? Or I could take you out to the cafe down the street if you need some space? They do great ice-cream.”

“Yes,” I said, much too fast, even if Drake didn’t seem to notice. Every moment until now, I’d looked over my shoulder in case Ebony showed up again. That was a problem, since I

wasn't here just to be *around* Ebony, I had to make him fall for me.

But I could start with Drake. Would he be enough to convince the others?

Or perhaps, Rook; he'd seemed interested, and his bright chestnut eyes and caramel brandy scent were welcoming. Love too, perhaps with his pale skin and intense eyes, but he was more intimidating like Ebony—though I did like his crisp, vanilla winter scent.

Drake led me into the garage, tugging a fob from his pocket and pressing the button. When my eyes followed the little click, all other thoughts were wiped from my mind, and I couldn't help my giggle. There were four vehicles in the garage, and three were expensive looking—I recognised the Tesla. Drake, however, led me straight to the fourth vehicle.

An old, beat up, faded red minivan.

“Drives them all up the walls,” he told me with a grin. “Which is hilarious, but also, no paparazzi have clocked my licence plate.”

I climbed in, and he even chose one of my favourite radio stations as he pulled out a back entrance of the property and drove us down the road. For a moment, in this beat up old car, I almost felt at home, and had the urge to sing to the familiar songs of a radio I hadn't heard in forever.

It was mostly residential around here, with massive sprawling mansions, but we reached a cosy strip mall with a cafe, hair salon, pizza place, and small grocery shop.

We were greeted by friendly aproned workers when we entered the cafe. It was only a minute drive, and I knew, for future, I could walk to it easily. Not that I had money to buy ice-cream, but I hadn't been allowed on a walk for months. I used to love drifting through the city streets with Aisha, sometimes losing hours in urban adventures.

When we'd settled with our bowls of ice cream—Drake had gone for mint, while I'd picked cheesecake cherry—he didn't push the conversation. That was another thing I wasn't

used to. Guys were usually uncomfortable with silence, but Drake was happy to lean back on the chair and take in the cafe. Right now, he tapped his spoon absently on his wrist as he examined one of the art pieces on the wall.

I could see the silvery scars of the mystery bite on his neck, the same one the media constantly debated over. Alpha centric packs weren't formed with bites, but that didn't mean they couldn't give them. It was Rook, Love, or Ebony that had given him the claim on his neck he wore without shame, but no one had ever figured out who.

It was hard not to stare at him from beneath my lashes as I worked on my ice cream. He was tall and slender, with chin-length midnight black waves framing his face and pale skin.

"If you don't want to go back yet, we could go on a walk or something?" he asked casually into the quiet. "Let Ebony get it all out in the gym, then he'll vanish back into his room. You won't have to see him."

I swallowed my bite of ice-cream, eyeing him and trying not to look as nervous as I felt at the mention of Ebony. "I don't want to take up your whole day, if you're—"

"I'm not," he said, cutting me off. "I didn't have plans."

"Oh... okay..." I nodded, not meeting his eyes. "A walk sounds good."

We finished our ice cream and meandered down a few of the streets until he crossed to a little forested path that walked us along a stream.

Still, we drifted between easy conversation and silence without discomfort, which felt a little surreal. I didn't feel pressured by him, nor did I feel like an imposition, and the time trickled by without me noticing. At his side, I felt more peace than I had done in months.

Just like Ebony, he was different from what I'd imagined. He'd always been the quiet one, and no magazine had ever been able to get a read on him. But that quiet wasn't intimidating in person, it was soft, intent, and caring.

We turned around after we'd realised we'd walked far too long, and began back as the daylight became a summer-set orange. He seemed content and unworried, and all the anxiety I'd been drowning in for forever struggled to get its claws in right now.

We'd talked about a lot, and kind of nothing, which was a breath of fresh air when I'd had no one to truly speak to in such a long time. He also hadn't pressed me about... well, anything—not why I was choosing to stay, and he didn't tell me I should leave again.

It was hard to keep my eyes from him, now I'd discovered who he really was.

He was so beautiful, it was an ache building in my chest as I thought of leaving him behind. Scent matches were no joke; I'd known him for hours and this was the first time I'd been afraid of failure for anything other than freedom.

He wore a dark band shirt and jeans, and on style alone, I'd always felt I matched him best from the posters of the Crimson Fury pack on my wall. His scent was blackcurrant wine: sweet, with a hint of sharpness. It was soothing, and I felt as if I could get tipsy just huffing him.

But it was a long time since I'd been in my room with posters on the walls and packs to day-dream over. Ripped from the life I'd stitched together for myself with paperclips, dreams, and Aisha's company, I'd been in survival mode since the day I was taken. Drake was no longer a pretty face on a poster like he had been the day I'd first matched him. The girl, capable of seeing only that—she didn't know how good she'd had it.

I wasn't her any more.

Now, Drake was my mate, my only hope, and the first person who'd made me feel truly safe in months. That meant a million times more, and was a million times more frightening.

EIGHT

LOVE

I waited a while before following Ebony into the gym.

Let him get some energy out first.

When I finally entered, I heard the hollow thunks ringing through the room, which meant he was practising batons on the wooden dummy in the far corner. A few years back we'd been in a movie in which his character had used baton fighting. He'd done what he did best and taken a crash course to learn how to use them.

It had stuck.

I think it was why he liked acting to be honest; chasing new things.

Sometimes I wondered if it was all he was made of anymore: chasing highs. Chasing *feeling*.

He maintained an elegant image, with his long silver hair up in a ponytail, the chorded lean muscle of his chest and arms taut with exertion, and a sheen of glistening sweat on the dusk of his skin.

He ignored me as I approached.

“What happened?” I asked, sitting on a bench.

He'd been ignoring us all since yesterday, and a visit to the gym meant he was strained—if I hadn't been able to infer that through the bond. He'd done an unexpectedly shitty job of keeping it closed over the last day.

I'd played his game and taken his bait; there were throbbing bruises across my body to prove that. I might—just might—get something from him for that.

I had to.

Scaring off Sweethearts was one thing—but Ebony was calculated and knew how to follow the rules.

Nothing about yesterday had been calculated.

As Ebony took another swing at the dummy, not glancing my way, I shoved back the little whisper, warning that it was more than just about him, or about our image as a pack.

Fury was out of character for me. It was simply a matter of space. Our pack bond couldn't take more intensity with Ebony in it; he used up enough frustration for all of us combined. It was tiring—and I wasn't the only one who felt it.

Right now though, the spark of rage at the thought of Vex's pain was purely mine, since there was no way I'd have faced him without my bond tightly locked down.

Finally, when a few minutes had passed with no acknowledgment of me at all, I stood and approached. I didn't flinch as one of the batons whistled by my face, almost connecting. He was a master with them, and he hated unfair fights. He wouldn't land a blow if there weren't two in my hands to start with.

He stopped at last as I leaned my shoulder against the wooden dummy, arms folded.

I didn't repeat my question.

Silver eyes fixed on mine as he considered me, dropping his hands down to his sides, batons still in his fists.

"She didn't do anything wrong," he said at last. "If that's what you're wondering."

I narrowed my eyes, but said nothing.

"It's..." For a moment, his expression tensed, his eyes darting about as if he wanted to be anywhere but here. "It's getting worse."

I waited.

"I wanted to *kill* her..." There was just the slightest echo of uncertainty to his voice, the faintest flicker of what might have been fear. "Just one more squeeze, and I can *hear* the snap of her neck."

I ran my tongue along my teeth, prodding the bond just enough that he'd feel me doing it.

"I can't get it out of my head." His voice dropped to a faint rasp.

Still, I waited.

"I think... I need help."

And there it was.

More likely because he was impatient, and not because he'd give himself up so easily. The fact was, there was no way in hell Ebony would ever ask for help.

Fundamentally, he didn't think anything was wrong with him at all—in fact, he thought I was the mad one for constantly trying to keep him in line.

A sneer finally cracked my expression. "Dovin?"

Dovin Lionard was a villain he'd played in a movie a few years back, and he was regurgitating lines from it. He was messing with me, and he *certainly* didn't want help.

"Had to dig that one up." His smile was, perhaps, more genuine than his usual.

Ebony played villains more often than not—made it easier for us to keep him out of the way of as many other actors as possible. Omegas, especially, as they were love interests to the heroes in almost all the movies we'd ever been in.

How the world would blanch if they knew he was worse than any character he'd ever plastered across the big screen.

"Didn't dig enough," I said. "Dovin didn't *think*. He *knew*."

The faint smile straightened to a line on Ebony's face, and I'd be lying if I said that didn't bring me immense satisfaction. He was the best actor out of all of us at the end of the day, but for one skill: the prediction of behaviours out of the norm.

When he read his scripts he could nail every trait, every movement and tick; each burst of rage, or tone shift. But ask him to replicate what they'd do off the chartered course? He

floundered. He'd stopped attending our improv classes a while ago.

It's why we were sought after as a pack, because me, Rook, and Drake, were opposite to Ebony in nearly every way. Ebony delivered the script, and it was brilliant, terrifying, and everything the producers wanted. We delivered the flavour.

Improv was my strength, not his.

"What really happened with her?" I asked.

"I decided I didn't like her."

"Why?"

"Her voice was irritating."

"Liar."

This time his grin was wider. "Am I?"

Right. This wasn't getting me anywhere.

Ebony was trick after trick after trick, and he found satisfaction in discovering buttons he could push that we had no choice but to react to. Living with him was like living with a beast that never slept. One that constantly tried to smash down the walls of the cage that held it. I couldn't blink or look away for one moment, or it found another weakness.

As pack lead, and his brother—and the one always vying to protect the rest of the world from him—I was target number one.

He hated not having power.

"Do you want her here?"

He leaned back just slightly as if caught off guard by that question, but he didn't answer straight away. As the seconds passed, he cocked his head and this time I thought the uncertainty might be real.

"No." His answer was a whole lot less assured than I'd come to expect.

"Then it's simple. In a week, we'll send her packing."

He didn't move.

“She’s actually staying?”

“Yes.” Though, that was a bit of a mystery to me. I’d seen obsessed fans and could believe this sort of behaviour of them, but Vex didn’t fit the bill. She hadn’t looked star-struck. She’d been exactly like I might expect of a woman attacked: distraught and shaken.

Except for her decision to stay.

Ebony’s bond cracked a little, and I wondered if it was because what he was feeling was so foreign he hadn’t noticed it slip out until too late. And what he *was* feeling when I said that, unnerved me.

It was a collision of fear, anticipation and... want.

A chill crept up my spine.

Want?

For Vex?

I realised I might have read this all wrong.

“Make her leave,” he said, cutting me from my thoughts.

I raised an eyebrow. As if it were that simple. “*You* made sure those contracts were solid. Only she gets to decide if she leaves before the week’s up.”

“I don’t give a *shit* about the contract.”

I breathed a laugh. “Break the contract and the NDA goes poof too, and since you just strangled her—”

“She was asking for it,” he snarled.

I shoved down the little flare of rage, rechecking my end of the bond. He’d dodged my bait, and he was dangling some of his own. He was good at clocking trigger statements from society so he could throw them in our faces for a reaction, prodding us for more weak points. I doubted Vex had been *asking* for anything, but more than that, I doubted Ebony believed she was. His reaction to her had been so far out of left field, if it were true that she’d *somehow* provoked him into it, he’d never admit that to me.

“How?” I asked, not giving him an inch.

He clamped his mouth shut, a scowl on his face. It was clear he’d keep his thoughts on Vex to himself.

But he knew I was right about the contract. Sometimes I thought he might be frustrated enough to burn it all down, but he never did. He liked what we’d built for ourselves; he liked our wealth and fame. I thought sometimes he even found joy in the face we demanded he put on in public, because it gave a thrill. He liked power and control, and from this vantage, he could deceive the whole world. I didn’t think he was willing to give up that power—not even for this Sweetheart who so clearly irked him.

“One week, and she’s gone. I’m sure she’ll be avoiding you.” I dared not tell him to stay away from her, or he might just take it as a challenge.

Ebony lifted the batons again: an obvious dismissal.

I didn’t like the predatory glint in his eyes as I stepped away.

He wouldn’t let this lie. That meant she wasn’t safe—not unless the rest of us intervened.

This Sweetheart was much more trouble than she was worth.

DRAKE

“Hey, wait up!” Rook hurried down the hallway after me as I closed the door on the Sweetheart’s quarters. I glanced at him, knowing there was a blush on my cheeks. “Details mate,” he demanded. “Come on. What’s going on?”

I knew how odd the others must think it was that I’d spent the whole day with her. I’d not been this comfortable around someone for a long time. But Vex was down to earth, funny—even when she was anxious—and when she looked at me, it was like she was really seeing me.

She was... special.

It was hard to explain.

But my brothers weren’t gentle creatures—not like she seemed to be, and I wouldn’t leave her at their mercy. “Not really any details.” I shrugged. “I’m just making sure she’s okay.”

“Right...” Rook sounded far from convinced as we reached my room, and I turned the handle. “That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“You don’t talk to *anyone*,” Rook said.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” I told him, grabbing a pair of sweats from my dresser and changing into them. “Would *you* sleep well after that stunt Ebony pulled? I’m just going to make sure she sleeps easy—”

“Wait.” he cut me off. “You’re going back? Shit dude. You’re... spending the night?”

“I was... going to.” I felt the flush climbing my neck as I met his intense chestnut eyes. “You *saw* Ebony, right?”

His eyes darkened a bit, and he folded his arms, considering. I hadn’t left Vex’s side all day, which was far from my normal with Sweethearts. But it wasn’t *just* because I

was nervous about leaving her alone with the poison still seeping from Ebony's end of the bond.

"You... shouldn't have said you'd sign her," I said.

"Says the alpha sleeping in her room on night two."

"I'm on the couch—and I'm only doing that because *you* pissed off Ebony, and she's scared."

She hadn't said it outright, but I'd seen that little flash of fear in her eyes when I mentioned him. She'd shrunk down before she caught herself and straightened, trying to convince me she was alright.

She wasn't alright.

When I'd suggested crashing on the couch, her protests had been fragile—and there had been a beautiful flicker of hope in her eyes, as if she couldn't believe I was offering it. I'd offer her a thousand times more than that if it meant seeing a glimmer of trust from her again. If that wasn't total insanity, I didn't know what was.

Rook was right, I didn't let people in.

But Vex was different.

"The couch?" Rook sounded incredulous. "First time hitting on a girl that I've ever seen, and you're taking her couch? Did she put you there?"

"No." I drew up. "Actually, she was happy I was staying and said I could take the bed—but I'm not hitting on her."

"Fooling me."

"Fuck you man," I snorted. "She isn't like the other Sweethearts—you don't get it."

Rook was the one I'd defer to when it came to... well, anything social. He could charm people in his sleep. But for some reason, I didn't trust him with this.

"Not like the other Sweethearts?" Rook scoffed, running his fingers through his messy hair, looking a little concerned for me.

“*You* already said you might sign her,” I said.

He drew up at that, folding his arms and leaning against the wall as I rummaged through my drawer. “Don’t convince yourself that she’s different. I was just getting under Ebony’s skin.”

I gave him my best ‘fuck you’ look.

Rook was important to me. All of my brothers were, each offering something invaluable that I still didn’t know I totally deserved. I’d entered this pack after it was formed.

The newcomer. The one with baggage that might have been enough to destroy a regular pack. I’d been Ebony’s choice, too, and Rook and Ebony had always been at each other’s throats, so he could have hated me for that.

He hadn’t.

From the moment he’d understood I was pack, he hadn’t cared about any of it—not the baggage, and not the Ebony thing. He’d welcomed me as his brother instantly.

Love had always been a solid pillar, an older brother, and Ebony was... well, he was Ebony. But Rook had been a friend; pulling me right into acting sessions, advocating for role changes to allow for me to integrate easily—and then he worked with me to match all their styles in acting. Hours and hours he’d spent, until I’d felt confident. It had forged a friendship between us that hadn’t wavered since. Never once had he asked about my baggage—the shit *all* of them could feel.

The nightmares, the panic, the anxiety.

He was solid for me from day one, handing me a piece of him he reserved for very few people.

I wasn’t *with* any of my pack mates—the others were far from romantic, though that had always given me a sense of safety—but I still loved him.

Yet, *none* of that changed the fundamental truth of what he was. “You lot are dicks,” I said, tugging my shirt on. “I’m making sure she’s alright.”

Rook snorted. “Me and Ebony sure, but what did Love do?”

“Let Ebony get this far with the whole Sweetheart shit in the first place.” We all knew it was a power play from Ebony. A fuck you to us, to the system, to the fame he resented being bound to, even when it was what delivered him the power he wanted.

It was fucked up, but before now he’d always recognised lines he couldn’t cross—even if only for the fear of screwing up the pack bonds.

Except for today. Today, he’d crossed those lines and then some, without even a flicker of recognition—as if Vex had wounded him personally. I loved Ebony—truly, but I wasn’t foolish enough not to realise my relationship with him was contingent upon the fact that his coldness was aimed everywhere but me. And it never would be aimed at me. That was a promise I trusted.

Yet, I didn’t care *who* he was—or I hadn’t before now. There had to be people to love the ones who were different or nothing stopped them becoming the monsters the world promised they’d be.

But it still set me on edge when it came to Vex. To Ebony, she was other. *Other* meant an open playing field. And Rook? Well, he thought she was other, too, and he could deny it all he wanted, but he could be just as destructive as Ebony.

I wouldn’t be complicit in any of the fucked up corruption we all knew our money and power and fame would allow us.

Rook was still looking at me like I was missing a joke.

“What?” I asked as I made for the door.

“That’s all?” he asked. “You’re staying with her for *noble* reasons only?”

I scowled, turning to him before leaving my room. “You won’t see me signing her in.”

And I wouldn’t, no matter what she was like.

I loved my pack, but it was broken, and there was no room for the sweetness I saw in Vex.

NINE

VEX

Even with the scent of Drake's blackcurrant wine lingering in the air, it was hard to sleep.

There was Ebony to think about, the pack waiting for me if I failed, and the new room. All my stuff remained in my suitcase. I was too afraid to take anything out and make any of this space my own... I couldn't nest, and luckily the suppressants I was on dampened those urges *almost* completely.

Drake was comforting and sweet, even if much further away than I would have liked, though I appreciated the space he was offering me.

It felt like a sleepover. Like we were friends, and he was here for me.

I left my contacts in, which wasn't a first. They were fine to leave in, I just had to make sure to blink a few times to let them set back in place in the morning. So I curled up in my bed, trying to refrain from glancing over at him too many times before I drifted off.

Still, no matter how much comfort he brought, it wasn't enough to ward off the nightmares that stole me away.

Two Months Ago

I finished doing my hair beneath the constant threat of the gun tucked into Wheatgrass' belt.

Then, I was blindfolded and led along a dozen hallways. When my feet ached in the heels he'd had me wear, I was finally shoved into a car.

The blindfold, at least, gave me hope. If I couldn't see my potential buyers, they were still attached to anonymity, and might not be set on bonding me.

After a long drive, during which the silence and stillness left me alone with imaginative dread for what was about to happen, the engine shut off.

I was led from the car, and Wheatgrass took my arm in his, as if I were his partner. We were outside, and I almost felt tears break free as light rain touched my cheek.

How long since I'd been outdoors?

I could hear the click of my heels beneath me, and on another day that sound would bring a smile to my face. I'd always loved an opportunity to dress up. Heels weren't often my first choice, but I dated like a hobby, and some dates called for heels.

I would never go on a date again.

That realisation was like a gut punch. Countless days and nights in a musty cell, singing to myself and holding on to hope. And all of it would die tonight.

Soon enough, I was met with warm air as we walked back inside. As we stepped across the soft carpet, I thought I could perhaps hear voices through the walls. It was, undoubtedly, people chatting.

The public...?

Right there...

The alpha must have seen the slightest tilt of my head toward the sound.

"Be aware." He sounded almost bored. "I'd snap your fragile little neck before risking getting caught."

I failed to catch the shaky breath of a laugh before it slipped out. My movement had been instinct, but nothing more. I hadn't forgotten the gun in his belt.

Still, his words broke a long silence between us, and I finally found my voice, faint and shaky as it was. "I'm... being bought?"

I needed to hear it before this journey ended. Before I was met by the reality itself.

He drew us to a stop, and there was faint music around us now, as if we were in a lobby of some kind.

Wheatgrass let out a low hmm, that could possibly be a yes. "You're fetching a rather obscene amount, and they don't care if you're broken in. So don't test me."

So... yes.

I was being sold.

For a second, it felt like there was nothing keeping me upright but his arm around my waist. If I could see, I was sure the world would be spinning.

I had to keep it together.

Escape wasn't a thought, not with a blindfold and heels. Not with the gun.

But maybe... Could I prepare, somehow? Might there be a better chance of escape when I'd met them?

Where were we right now?

A place in which a blindfolded omega on an alphas arm was not enough to stand out.

And what would this pack be like?

He'd said they didn't care if I was broken in. What did that mean?

Was there any hope at all, that perhaps, they weren't so bad?

My throat was closing up thinking about it, and I focused on my breathing. There couldn't be much of an intersection between good people, and packs willing to buy an omega.

The scents around me were faint, alphas and omegas who had passed through, but no one seemed to be here now.

I used to love alpha-spotting when I'd go out, pretending to be a beta. How many perfect packs had I built for myself with the lone alphas in my neighbourhood. I'd always liked the idea of being the centre of a pack. The one who started it, the alphas having to bite in through me.

A few times, I'd almost gone on dates with lone alphas, scouting for a pack I'd never have the guts to try for. And I'd chickened out of every date. Omega centred packs were definitely not for gold pack omegas. Not unless it was dark bonds, and not chosen by them at all.

Again I fought tears. Those were just more dreams that had died in the water they'd been left in.

Suddenly, I regretted my own cowardice. Why hadn't I seen that starting a pack—daring as it was—was so much better than the inevitable end I faced right now?

True love wasn't impossible for omegas like me.

Everyone had seen the Saint pack on TV. A 300 alpha brawl started by four alphas when Havoc Saint—their gold pack mate—had been taken from them.

How many times had I rewatched that news clip?

Now it was too late. I'd been too afraid to start a pack. Then I had found my mates, and I'd been too afraid to tell them.

Havoc Saint would have faced her mates boldly, gold pack or not. She wouldn't have tried to run from her scent matches like I had—I jumped violently at a loud ding, before realising it was just an elevator. I had to get it together. I was meeting a pack who must want to dark bond me—the worst nightmare of any omega.

I would show them the strongest mask my mother had left me with, not an omega so jumpy she was frightened of elevators.

DRAKE

Vex was having nightmares.

Each restless shift, or low sob from her side of the room was enough to keep me wide awake. I wanted to go to her. Nightmares were the worst gift a brain could give, handing power to abuse long after it was over.

It went on forever. Finally, I got to my feet and headed over to her side of the room, wondering if there was anything I could do.

Even in the dim light, I could see her trembling, a pillow clutched to her chest, her silver-brown hair scattered in waves around her. She was wearing a baggy, long-sleeved top down to her knuckles. One pale leg was sticking out of the covers.

As I approached, her tension faded, her body relaxing just enough for me to notice. I paused.

Coincidence? Or perhaps... was it my scent? Or just any scent... the presence of someone else there...

I stepped closer, watching carefully as the tightness of her shoulders faded. Her rapid breaths calmed as she loosened her grip on the pillow.

Something stirred in my chest, something protective, warm, and demanding. The makings of a purr crept up my throat before I shoved it back down, afraid to wake her. That was new... I didn't purr often.

Yet, if she woke, what would she see then? Me looming at the foot of her bed like a creep.

Instead, I settled on the floor at the side of the bed she favoured. I rested my back against the side table. Nightmares and I were closely acquainted, and sleep deprivation was something I was equipped for. I could sit here for as long as she needed.

I tried not to peer up at her for too long, but she was entrancing in the low light, still hugging a pillow, face only inches from the edge of the bed. There was a faint trace of kohl on her eyelids, remnants from the day's makeup, and dark lashes brushed her cheeks. Her face was soft in sleep, her lips rosy red to contrast her skin—beautiful, even down-turned as they were right now.

Her hand shifted from the pillow, as if she were reaching for me, delicate fingers curled just slightly over the edge of the bed. I moved tentatively, hand hovering in the air between us. I could take her hand in mine right now. It wouldn't be that strange. She'd invited me in here and even said she didn't want me thinking I had to take the couch. Plus... holding the hand of someone asleep wasn't egregious...

I drew back, still unsure.

A part of me wanted to climb beneath those blankets and hold her against my chest with a purr until she tumbled into better dreams. Only, I imagined what that would be like to wake up to.

A foreign touch everywhere.

Suffocating.

Unknown.

Out of control.

Panic rose in my throat like bile before I pulled myself together.

I swallowed, stuffing my hand firmly into the pocket of the sweats I was wearing.

The spotlight hadn't been kind to my boundaries. It wasn't great for the celebrity image. I was grateful for Rook, who was one of the most tactile people I'd ever met and never shied away from hugs from fans, or even the occasional kiss on the cheek. It counterbalanced my image.

Ebony and Love were more reserved, but they could tolerate more. I couldn't, not unless I was blitzed out of my brain with edibles, and there had been a few events we'd done

where that had been my solution. Rook was my rock during those times, never asking questions and always making sure I made it through the night safe.

It didn't go unnoticed, and there were nastier takes from the media. *"His own fans disgust him, stop tripping over yourselves for an alpha who thinks you're lesser."*

But there were gentler ones, as well. *"Drake seems sweet,"* I remember one news show host saying. *"I have a daughter with autism, you know, and she's the same. Let's be kind folks, you never know what's happening on the inside."*

I wished it *was* that, to be honest, but the truth was, I was just as tactile as Rook. I was isolated from a world I wanted, unable to reach out and ask. Until now, there'd been no one worth risking that fear for.

I didn't really know why it was her.

Before, I'd hidden from Sweethearts, locking myself in my room or the theatre with Rook until they were gone. Perhaps Vex's insane ice-breaker had launched me past barriers I'd never consider breaking.

There was no permanence to it; I knew she couldn't stay. But while she did, I could stick with her. She liked me—at least I thought so. And then the week would be gone and so would she.

That was alright.

I'd never been very good at hope. I could take just a little and be happy before I was left, once more, in silence.

TEN

Dear Ebony: I thought when I got here, I'd feel safe at last. But you make me afraid.

EBONY

Vex's whispered lullaby brushed my ear, worming its way into my soul.

She was a goddess, pale skin silken against my chest as she leaned back, fixing me with those wide chocolate eyes. She wore nothing, and silver-brown hair tumbled around her shoulders, enough to leave me guessing at what was beneath. Her chest heaved as she stared at me, the look in her eyes shifting to lust.

"I want you," she whispered.

She pressed her palm to my chest, leaning close enough that I felt the graze of her hair against my skin.

"Do you want me?"

Yes.

It wasn't like any touch I'd ever felt before. New. Different.

I reached out, needing to claim her, needing more of the way her skin felt against mine—I woke in a sweat, heart pounding uncomfortably in my chest.

I sat up, strips of moonlight filtering through the curtains across my bed. Silence passed for a long, long time, as I tried to piece together what the fuck was wrong with me—wrong with *her*.

I didn't get sex dreams. I had a fucking high sex drive, even for an alpha, and I'd come to the conclusion long ago that women brought nothing extra to the table. I'd fucked women to get shit from them—which Love and the others had hangups about. That had been useful when we were rising stars. Now though, I had everything I wanted, so it was irrelevant.

Vex, however, didn't have anything I needed, so why would I ever need to fuck her?

The thought of sex with her was an uncomfortable shot of electricity to my system. I could still feel the feather of her breath at my ear, her smoky low lullaby a ghost in my silent room. My skin burned where her touch had been. No. It *hadn't* been; the dream was a lie. She didn't want me, and I didn't want her.

I mean... I *could* convince her if I wanted to.

She was a Sweetheart, and even if she wasn't, I never had to work to convince people to want me. It came with the territory I'd claimed for myself.

So, I *could* convince her.

When that thought came back, it tripped me up, the repetition leaving it hollow and unsure. I was *never* unsure. Not with the things I chose to engage in, and Sweethearts were my territory.

If I went to her right now, *could* I convince her?

There was no way I couldn't.

I cycled back to what had happened when I'd first met her, then to the way she'd shrank against Drake on the couch.

I could lie, put on a mask, tell her I was sorry. Then she'd touch me like in that dream.

But what if she didn't?

The voice was unsettling and foreign. I didn't worry often. Things simply were, they weren't, or they were unknown. I didn't linger on the in-between.

But this murky in-between wouldn't let me go, mattering in ways it had no right to. There was the predictable behaviour of every Sweetheart before her, who would trip over themselves to have a moment like in that dream. And then there was Vex.

Vex may never want to touch me like that...

Thrill stirred.

Something real.

Something I spent my whole life chasing.

That, if nothing else, was what drew me up, rage simmering beneath the surface at the *idea* that she could give me that with such ease. In a life in which boredom shredded my mind like a never ending stream of fire ants, thrill was the most precious thing in the world.

She had to fucking go.

I couldn't use her for that thrill. I had yet to even figure out how she was fucking me up like this. It came with too much ease, and that was a level of power I'd never give to another.

I grabbed my phone from my side table, zooming in on one of the pictures I'd downloaded from her socials. Vex's hands covered her face, like she was shy, and her hair tumbled loose over her shoulders. In the background were the craggy reddish rocks of the Grand Canyon. She travelled, I'd gathered that from the photos I could see, which meant she had a bold streak.

Was that why she hadn't left? Was I just another challenge to her?

There was an obvious answer: we were rich and famous and becoming our Sweetheart was a dream of many. Yet, that answer wasn't good enough.

Not for Vex. Her social media was sparse, with very few pictures of herself. I'd read through her file to find nothing special. She came from a well-off family on the Westside. Only child. She'd entered to be a Sweetheart hopeful for a chance at hitting it big. It was typical—far too typical for the person I'd met, and I couldn't put my finger on why.

I shut the phone and tucked it into my pocket.

Fuck Rook for offering her a signature. He wouldn't actually go through with it. There was no way. He was just trying to get under my skin.

But now she was getting to Drake.

I got to my feet. Not a chance would I let that happen. I'd fix it tonight.

The hallways were bright, even when the dark cloak of night covered the grounds outside as I strolled down to the Sweethearts' room. I didn't come here often, my Sweethearts always came to me. At the gym, in the living room, and they tried—always—to meet me in my room. I never let them.

Only I was allowed in my room. No cleaners, no pack. No one else came in. Not ever.

When I reached her room, I turned the doorknob slowly.

The light was on in the ensuite bathroom, and she'd left the door open.

Afraid of the dark, perhaps?

That would be too easy, if not irksome, since I *should* be more frightening to her than a lightless fucking room.

Great.

Now I was making a challenge of literal darkness.

My head was not on straight today—and that didn't happen.

As I crossed toward the huge bed, I noticed the blackcurrant wine in the room.

Drake.

How long had he spent in here today?

Beneath the wine, was the aroma of cherry blossom. Faint. Almost undetectable like most beta scents were. It was pleasant, I supposed, and nothing special.

Neither was she.

I just needed her gone—because my pack wanted to defend her, I told myself. That just made it my mission to fuck it up. My mind was logical to a point, and I knew instantly that the thought didn't fit.

I hated thoughts that didn't fit.

For a moment, I was distracted as I caught sight of her.

The few photos I'd been looking at didn't do her justice. Not like she was in the low light, with one leg free of the

blanket, her skin smooth and pale.

Deliberate, my mind whispered. *Trying too hard to seduce you.*

Fuck.

That was the second thought that didn't fit—as if she was planning on seeing me in here tonight. I returned to the issue that had itched at me before.

The timeline wasn't right—that was why the other thought hadn't fit. I hadn't known they would defend her in those first few moments I'd wanted her gone. So my reaction to her had nothing to do with my pack.

And I hadn't *just* wanted her gone.

I wanted her afraid.

I needed her to know that she had no power over me—

Thoughts cut off at a flicker of movement at her side, and then a pair of violet eyes were peering at me from the floor beside her bed.

Ah.

Fuck.

We stared at each other for a long moment, me and Drake, and then he was on his feet, crossing toward me in a flash, his panic like a spear down the bond.

Double fuck.

He was going to flip.

“What do you think you're doing?” He seized my shirt as he reached me, voice a low hiss. His eyes were burning with rage, but the fear was worse. I could feel it from him right now. Because of me, and *dammit*, that was enough to halt me. I had a job when it came to Drake, and *giving* him fear wasn't it.

I took a step back, scowl on my face, but he wasn't done. He shoved me, trying to drag me out of the room—presumably before Vex woke.

“What were you doing?” he snarled, the moment the door shut, and he all but slammed me into the wall.

I’d be fucking proud of him, except for the chocolate-eyed reason *behind* this abrupt discovery of a spine.

I clenched my jaw, trying to balance the two needs warring with each other. Manage the relationship I had with Drake, and the boiling hatred I had of the fucking Sweetheart that was sending my mind in spirals.

“*What* were you going to do?” he demanded.

Footsteps sounded, and I blew out a breath of frustration as Love and Rook appeared.

Great.

Fucking great.

Drake and his all too loud fear.

He really needed to get a grip on the bond.

LOVE

A spike of panic from Drake had me wide awake in moments.

It didn't take much to find him. He was outside the Sweetheart's room, which was somehow un-fucking-surprising at this point. What *was* surprising, was seeing Drake pinning Ebony against the wall, a snarl on his face, shirt in his fist.

Ebony looked... tense. It was the kind of look he got when he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't by one of the few people whose opinion he was forced to care about.

"Tell me, what were you going to do?" Drake was demanding, shoving his chest. I'd never seen Drake as angry as he was right now.

He was tall and slender, and didn't have a frame to match Ebony. Not that *matching* Ebony would usually be my concern with Drake, but from his expression right now, a fight didn't seem like a leap.

Ebony's eyes slid to me, and his expression soured, nose wrinkling.

"What the fuck is going on?" I asked. Drake spun on me, and then he glanced behind. Light footsteps told me Rook had arrived, too.

"He was in her room." Drake spat.

That drew me up.

He was *what*?

"So were you," Ebony hissed, shoving Drake back a step. "What's that about?"

"She was having nightmares."

"And it's up to you to fix that?" he demanded.

"When you are likely the reason? Yes, it fucking well is."

It was official. I'd *never* seen Drake this mad. He looked wild as he stared at Ebony.

Ebony's gaze lingered on the tremble in Drake's fist for a moment, and I saw the brief flash of discomfort I'd only ever seen reserved for Drake. "I was just going to scare her."

I was still trying to detangle it all. Both the shock, and the little flare of rage in my chest at hearing those words.

"How?" I asked.

Ebony's lips pulled back in a snarl as he looked at me. "I didn't have a plan."

I couldn't help glancing at Rook, who'd obviously also been ripped out of sleep. He was wearing sweats, but was topless, rich brown skin and abs on display as he leaned against the wall, arms crossed. He shot me a curious look right back.

Ebony rarely didn't have a plan. And even rarer would he admit that. I wondered if it was Drake throwing him off—he wasn't used to being on the other end of Drake's rage. None of us were, but Ebony especially.

That, or... or it was her.

Again.

Throwing my brother off balance like I'd never seen. Now she was throwing off Drake, who didn't get close to anyone outside the pack, but was spending the night with her already.

"You were *in* her fucking room, and you didn't know what you were going to do?" Drake hissed, finally releasing Ebony. He didn't look any less coiled to pounce, though.

Only, my attention was ripped away by a shift of movement to the left. The door of the Sweetheart room was cracked, and a bright chocolate eye was peering out.

"Would you feel better if I made something up?" Ebony was asking.

I folded my arms, watching Vex silently for a moment as she fixed her gaze on Drake and Ebony. The door drifted open

a little more, and then her eyes met mine.

She froze, and for a moment, the argument faded to silence.

Fuck, she was cute. Silver-brown hair was sleep-mussed, and she was in an oversized black top, with a band logo across it. It reached her thighs, and the stretch of her bare legs demanded attention right down to the fluffy ankle socks. Her face was free of makeup, and she looked innocent without it; soft in a way I wasn't expecting.

She seemed nervous, too, and I had to fight the mad urge to scoop her up and take her back to my room while the others fought it out. I could protect her there.

I was pack lead, Ebony didn't fuck with me.

Not overtly, anyway.

Then she broke my gaze, and the urge shattered. I realised the rest of the hallway had fallen silent, everyone noticing her presence.

"Vex..." Drake's voice was hoarse. Ebony's expression was even stiffer as he stared at her.

"I uh..." Vex glanced between us. "Didn't mean to interrupt..."

"We *are* rather rudely having a fight outside your room," Rook snorted.

Vex didn't seem to have a response to that. Drake was stepping toward her, but I could see the apprehension in her eyes as she looked to Ebony.

How long had she been there?

Had she heard what he'd been doing?

Likely, by her expression.

"Let's go back inside," Drake was saying to her. She nodded, lip trapped in her teeth, glancing around at us one last time.

The door shut, and we were left in a rather stunned silence.

I felt a spark of Ebony's fury through the bond, something he rarely let slip out of his control. It wasn't what I expected. It wasn't the kind of fury that set me on edge. If anything, it felt wounded. And I doubted Ebony felt wounded often enough to be able to even recognise that.

I reached out to put my hand on his shoulder, but he flinched away. "We should talk—"

"Like fuck we should." He took a step back, then vanished down the hallway to his room.

I sighed, turning back to Rook.

"What the fuck is going on?" I asked.

Rook shrugged, a slight grin on his face. "You want to shake things up? Sign that contract." He scratched his chin, eyes darting back to the hallway down which Ebony had just vanished. "I might do it out of pure curiosity."

He was wild, sometimes immature, and off the rails, but he'd been my best friend for as long as I could remember.

I snorted. "You aren't worried about what he just did?"

Rook shrugged. "It's Ebony. He doesn't cross real lines unless he knows it won't blow up in his face. Drake just drew that line pretty fucking hard, if you ask me."

He wasn't wrong. Drake had always had something special with Ebony. Something I'd never even had.

I was his older brother. The one who'd spent his whole life shackling him to enough social pillars and obligations that he couldn't cause any real damage. Rook was my friend, and he'd never got on with Ebony.

But Drake had been Ebony's find. He was the youngest, the most damaged, and I'd always got the impression Ebony felt a sense of responsibility for him. Perhaps much more in claim than care, but it was *something*. I'd go for anything when it came to Ebony. Which was exactly why Vex was an insistent presence in my mind, and had been since she'd arrived.

“Do you actually want a Sweetheart around?” I asked, eyeing Rook again. It was a serious commitment. She would be as good as pack for the duration of her contract.

Rook’s eyes slid to the door for a long moment before he shrugged. “Call me crazy, but I don’t mind her.”

“You’re all losing your minds,” I muttered.

We’d only known her a few days. But perhaps I was too, because right now I was finding it hard to find reasons not to sign her in.

I couldn’t.

I literally couldn’t, even if she had quickly become a constant presence taking up space in my mind. For example, Drake was in there right now, and I wished it was me.

Damn.

This was too much.

I’d be hiding for the rest of the week. The moment she was gone, life would return firmly back to the known.

ELEVEN

*Dear Rook: You were supposed to be
better.*

DAY THREE

VEX

The third day was strangely quiet up until the evening.

I'd woken with the scent of black currant wine in the room, which was becoming increasingly addictive. Drake had brought me breakfast in bed with a thousand apologies about Ebony. Then he napped on my couch, which confirmed my sneaking suspicion that he'd stayed up the whole night in case Ebony returned.

While he slept, I dared venture out with the intention of finding Rook. He'd offered a chance at a signature, and I was determined to make progress beyond just Drake. The large living room down the hall from the Sweetheart's room separated Rook's room from Love's, while Drake's and Ebony's were in the other direction. After wandering the floor for a while and finding no one, I gathered the courage to knock on Rook's door. No one had replied, so I'd tried Love—with a whole lot more anxiety.

Love answered his door with hair down and a coffee in his hands. He was like a reverse of Ebony, with dark hair rather than light silver, and pale skin to Ebony's dusky tan. There were similarities, though, marking them half brothers. Both were tall as fuck, and neither seemed to have much of an emotional range. Love was both beautiful and intimidating, and his vanilla winter scent was alluring, but, just like Ebony, it felt dangerous. His neutral expression didn't budge as he took me in, and he said nothing.

"Sorry to bother you..." I swallowed, begging myself not to chicken out.

You need to spend time with him.

You literally have to.

Drake is asleep, you can't find Rook. It's the best time.

Love's expression didn't shift, his sapphire eyes, unreadable.

"I..." I tried to find my words, but they were dying swift deaths beneath his gaze. "I was looking for Rook," I stammered, clutching the hem of my sleeves in my fists anxiously.

Dammit, Vex.

"He's at an interview," Love replied. "He'll be back this evening."

"Oh." I nodded, taking a step back. "Okay... Thanks." I tried for a half smile.

Still, nothing from Love. Another step back, my nerves were still getting the better of me.

I couldn't afford this.

He was just closing the door when I finally spoke, all my words tumbling over themselves too quickly. "Would you like to spend some time with... with me?"

Fuck.

Sound more desperate, why don't you?

He paused, the door still almost shut as he peered back out at me.

"No." That was all he said, and then it clicked shut.

Right.

I fisted my palm, eyes darting about the huge living room. There was no one there to see my blazing cheeks.

I spent the rest of the afternoon with Drake in my room. We watched a TV show together until evening came, though we chatted through it all. At dinner, we went out in the main living room, which hosted a massive dining table beside the

towering windows overlooking the gardens. I examined the pool as we ate a really good chicken casserole.

“Is that a maze?” I asked after I’d finished. Beyond the pool and tiled area was a large garden stretching outward. There were clumps of trees, a firepit, and what definitely looked like a sea of perfectly trimmed hedges.

“Yeah. Came with the property, but we upkeep it,” Drake said, following my gaze. “They actually used it to hide the old Alpha’s Hook in the middle—not a cost effective strategy, pricey as it is to have them removed. Mazes are a bitch to upkeep.”

I was distracted by that for a moment. An Alpha’s Hook was a metal ring lodged deep into the ground with the strength to chain an alpha, aura and all. Most had been ripped out, too tangled with nastier parts of our history, before The Institute and regulations.

“Why would you buy a place with one?” I asked, curious.

Drake shrugged. “A lot of these bigger properties still have them. We thought it was a bit funny, to be honest. And you know, if Ebony gets too out of hand, we can always just—”

“You don’t,” I cut him off, eyes wide.

“Nah.” Drake grinned. “Never used it.”

As his gaze scanned the maze again, I took the opportunity to tuck the knife from my meal into a napkin and stash it in my hoodie pocket before he noticed. Not that I didn’t trust Drake to deal with him, but Ebony’s appearance in my room had really set me on edge. I’d feel better with something in my bedside drawer.

It was late, and we were back in my room by the time Drake told me Rook was home. “He said he’d come see you,” Drake said. “Do you want me to stay?”

Rook *wanted* to see me? I’d been planning ways to ask him to spend time with me, my confidence shot by Love and his damn deadpan responses.

That was good though, right?

Really fucking good, especially after he'd said he was considering signing me.

"I'll be fine," I said.

So Drake left, telling me to text if I needed anything, and that Rook would knock when he was ready.

I panicked as I waited, unsure what he was expecting. More movies? Or should I get dressed into clothes I could leave on, in case he wanted to go out? I did my hair as I waited.

Drake and Ebony were both such extremes of what I'd expected, it was strange, now lingering in the anxious middle. It was like a first date with someone you liked.

I both knew nothing of Rook, and had literally crushed on him for years. I didn't know enough of him to scrub that simple idea of him from my mind.

What if he didn't like me, like Ebony didn't? Or Love? None of them had caught my scent and weren't aware of the scent match. What if the only attraction between us was hormones?

I wanted more than that. Scent matches were supposed to be more—true compatibility. The scents... they should just be the beacon. I *should* be enough for these men. Yet, I was failing for Ebony—failing even for Love.

I focused on my hair, braiding it and unbraiding it anxiously now, trying to ignore the nagging worry that I might be so broken that even a scent match wasn't enough...

I scrolled through the music on my phone, and then began to sing along to More Precious than Treasure, by Heart.

Finally, there was a knock on my door, making me jump. It was super late by now, and I was sure he wasn't intending to take me out.

But before I could even hurry from the bathroom, the door was opening.

Rook stepped in, phone in his hand, barely looking up at me as he entered. I paused, unsure. He *really* wasn't dressed

for leaving. His robe hung open, and he wasn't wearing a shirt beneath. His skin was a rich ochre, smooth and tight with muscles. I knew that already, though. I'd seen him topless enough times in movies that it didn't affect me.

Not. At. All.

"Oh... hi," I said, crossing toward him as he took a seat on the edge of my bed. That stalled me. "What, uh... what are you doing?"

He glanced up from his phone, undeniably and obscenely pretty, even acting like a prick. A few messy wisps of his dark hair, trimmed on the sides and longer at the top, fluttered around his bright chestnut eyes. "You had Drake in here last night," he said, as if it were obvious. "You want Ebony creeping in again without one of us here?"

I stared at him, a frown creasing my expression as he glanced back down to his phone, tapping on the screen a few times like I wasn't even there.

A million anxious thoughts tumbled through my mind at once.

This was his house, right? I guess if he wanted to stay here, that was fine.

But Drake had asked—had even taken that couch when I told him he didn't need to.

Still, Rook had offered me his signature. Maybe... maybe he just thought that meant something. If he did, I should go with that.

But... *Drake* had asked.

"You aren't just sleeping in my bed."

Fuck.

Why did I say that?

If Rook wanted to literally climb into my bed on day three, why would I say no? Wasn't that kind of the goal?

I clutched the hem of my sleeves anxiously as he finally shut his phone off and tossed it onto the nightstand like it was

his own.

“You might have the others fooled.” He said with a half smile. “But not me.”

I released my hands, suddenly more alert. “What does that mean?”

Rook shrugged, brows raising like it was obvious. “Don’t go thinking I believe you’re different from the rest of them just because you have Ebony and Drake all fucked up.”

“What?” I asked.

He grinned.

I opened my mouth to speak, but cut off as his eyes wandered down in an overt appraisal of my body.

My fury spiked, and I tried to get a hold of it.

No, Vex. Not now. He was the only one who’d told me he might give me a signature.

But this was... *wrong*. I’d taken too many blows from this pack. This one—my mate looking at me like I was nothing more than a piece of meat—this was my cracking point.

“Get. Out.” I pointed my finger at the door, trying to keep the quiver out of my voice.

From fury, or heartbreak, I wasn’t sure.

He barked a laugh, eyes snapping to my face like I was joking.

I *should* be fucking joking.

“I mean it.” A moment of silence followed.

His eyebrows climbed his forehead as no punchline came. “No you don’t,” he said.

What?

I was crossing toward him in a moment, ignoring every warning bell.

You’re going to fuck this all up.

But I didn't care. I hated him at that moment. I hated him because he was supposed to be better. He was supposed to be my match. The one I'd had on my posters on my wall for years, playful and funny in interviews, sometimes arrogant, but always sweet in the end.

Wrong, again.

Instead, I saw a self-centred prick who could barely make the effort to look up from his phone as he sat on my bed without even asking.

"Get the fuck out." I grabbed him by the arm, ready to drag him out.

He got to his feet too fast, but didn't budge. A shadow crossed his face as he looked down at me.

"This is my house," he snarled, voice more dangerous than I'd heard it yet.

Celebrity.

Mate.

Saviour.

He'd been all those things, yet right now, he was only one: an alpha.

And I'd been here before.

"Curl up tight and close your ears, sweetie."

I staggered another step away, heart suddenly in my throat, too afraid to make a break for it from the predatory look in his eyes.

"You don't tell me where I can go in my house."

"It's m-my room." I took one more step back, and he mirrored the movement. Then my back hit the wall. My eyes darted to the door, but before I could follow every instinct and make a break for it, he pressed his palm to the wall beside me.

"I know what you are," he growled. I was frozen, staring up into cold chestnut eyes, not processing anything.

...Gentle hands grasped mine and placed them over my ears...

“A tier up from regular alpha-hunting-betas.” Rook sneered, forcing my chin up to face him. I grabbed his hand, fear rocketing through my veins at the touch.

“...Sing in your head, but never out loud love... He’ll never find you, alright? I promise.”

Rook didn’t budge.

“Alphas are the top of the pecking order,” he went on. “But that’s not enough for you. You’ve come hunting an elite pack. You, Sweetheart, want the one per cent of the one per cent.”

My lips parted in shock at his words, icy dread sliding up my spine as he laid bare who he was for me to see.

“I’m giving you a chance,” he said. “Something no other Sweetheart has ever had. So if I said I wanted your bed while you took the floor, you’d get on your knees right now.”

Red flashed in my vision and I’d acted before thinking.

I was gold pack. I’d had to brawl my way out of danger a few times, especially if I went out without Aisha.

My fist collided with his nose, then I grabbed him by the robe. One per cent or fucking not, alphas were just as precious about their jewels—perhaps more. My knee snapped up, catching him square between the legs.

Rook buckled, an enraged growl rising in his chest. That sound sent the fear of god through me. I dived from him in a panic, and ran to my drawer where I’d stashed the knife.

I unravelled the napkin, and my heart sank at the glint of silver I found within. I’d been too nervous when I’d stashed it, terrified of being caught.

Shit...

Shit shit shit...

What was I going to do?

Rook groaned, and I glanced back at him in terror. He was on his knees, palm planted against the wall as he tried to catch his breath.

I didn't have time.

I crashed to my knees beside him, shoving the metal against his neck, fist trembling.

Disoriented and shocked, his eyes went wide with horror, and his aura split the air. My heart quaked.

...In the stuffy closet, an alpha's aura split the still air. Palms clamped over ears, eyes squeezed tight shut...

"I want you out." My words were trembling.

There was a pause. "Let go and I'm gone," he said.

A sob caught in my chest.

If I let him go—if he saw what I was holding—I'd have nothing. And he had his aura.

It made him stronger and faster. I didn't stand a chance. And there was no guarantee he wouldn't change his mind.

"Vex." He fumbled for my wrist and I flinched away. He froze again as the metal pressed to his skin harder. "*Let. Go!*" The words were laced with a command that shook me to my bones, but I'd known it was coming. I'd received a thousand dark bond commands, and an alpha's bark was nothing next to those.

I managed to hold still.

Then the door banged open, and I looked up in panic to see Love crashing in. Ebony was hard on his heels.

Love's massive aura was out in full force.

"*Vex!*" Love drew up, shock marring his usually stoic features as he glanced between us. "What's going on?"

I was fucked.

The contract was fucked, but my mind didn't have the space to face that yet. Not with two more auras in the room, and they thought I was threatening their pack brother.

“I j-just... want him out.” I sounded insane. I knew that.

Ebony’s head was tilted as he stared at me. Then his eyes slid down to Rook’s neck. He didn’t look afraid like Love did.

A smile stretched across his lips, seeing exactly what I was terrified they’d see. And then he was striding forward.

“*Ebony!*” Love’s voice was a warning.

Rook finally tensed, his voice a low growl. “Don’t you *fucking—!*” But he cut off as Ebony closed half the distance and I cracked, the world a blur.

I leaped to my feet and flung the silverware at Ebony—who caught it midair—as I dived for the bed. I scrambled onto it and backed up, needing distance between me and them.

I needed to explain.

To escape.

Anything.

When I got them all in my vision, still staggering back paces, I saw none had made for me. Drake was now in the doorway, eyes wide as he took in the scene.

Rook’s usually rich skin was ashen. Love was white as a sheet, staring between us, aura still out.

Ebony, however, burst into laughter. “You fucking *prat,*” he said, eyes dancing as he hauled Rook upright.

Rook flinched as Ebony tapped him on the cheek with a glinting silver spoon.

ROOK

Ebony dragged me from the room by the collar of my robe. I ripped from his grip, a snarl on my face as I caught his grin.

My mind was reeling.

She'd threatened me. Worse, she'd told me she didn't *want* me?

Fucking liar.

There was no way. She was just pissed I called her bluff. She was here for the fame and the money my fucking pack had earned. Spoiled, rich betas—that was what Sweethearts were. Most of them were upfront or obvious—but she was acting noble, as if that *wasn't* what brought her here?

I wasn't fucking having it.

Drake though, he was still in her room, falling for her sh—

“*Rook!*” That was Love's growl, snapping me back to reality. I turned. “And Ebony, both of you, in the living room. *Now!*”

I groaned, following him down the hall. He ignored me, and I slumped down on the couch feeling like a kid in trouble, veins still alight with adrenaline.

My aura was fading at least, but the heat in my cheeks was not, not with the smirk still on Ebony's face and the spoon—the fucking *spoon*—clutched in his fist. Rage boiled in my chest. I'd fallen for that. “She's fucking with Drake. Doesn't that bother you?” I demanded.

“This isn't about Drake,” Love snapped as Ebony refused to sit down, instead glaring at us both with folded arms. “Why are you both losing your minds over a goddamned Sweetheart?”

“She wants our signature, doesn't she?” I asked. “I'm not giving it if I don't know her first.”

“You’re not honestly thinking of signing her in after that.” Love’s words were much more statement than question.

“Don’t tell me what I’m fucking doing.”

Well, no, he was right, but—

The thought cut off at the low growl from Ebony. His gaze was locked on me, fucking deadly at the suggestion that I might still consider signing her. He still twirled that fucking spoon in his fingers, and I felt the white-hot vindictive need to lash back for that.

“I’m giving her honest consideration,” I said, flashing a bitter smile to match his.

Fuck me.

I shouldn’t, not after that. But then, I had been curious about the little beta tying Ebony and Drake up in knots.

And now I had a score to settle.

And Ebony’s jaw was ticking.

“She threatened you,” Love said. “I’ll have her out by morning.”

“Fuck no.” I waved a hand, straightening, the glint of the spoon still in my periphery. I gathered my most chill voice. “We were just messing about.”

I’d known Love for as long as I could remember. He knew my bullshit back and forth, and the look he gave me was flat. “If I go and ask her if that’s how she sees it?”

“No idea.” I grinned, and it was feeling a little more natural now. “But if you want to nuke the contract on those grounds, you’ll still need *me* to say I was threatened.”

The spoon stopped moving, and when I looked to Ebony I saw his lip was curled back in a snarl.

Beautiful.

A perfect remedy to the adrenaline and humiliation still hot in my blood. “And I don’t think I’ll be doing that,” I finished.

Love pinched his brow. “She doesn’t seem to want anything to do with you.”

I almost wrinkled my nose, that suggestion irritating me just as much from Love as it had from her.

What business did a Sweetheart have, rejecting me?

Still, I wouldn’t let them see that.

“Unless she’s packing, I just can’t agree.” I shrugged, shooting Love an indifferent look. “*You’re* the one that made it so that any of our signatures will seal her contract.”

Love’s expression almost mirrored Ebony’s bitterness. He *had* made the contract like that, but only because he’d been trying to dissuade Ebony from risking bringing Sweethearts in too often. Love didn’t believe for a moment that Ebony *wanted* a permanent Sweetheart, so the single signature provision made him less likely to risk it.

I *wouldn’t* actually sign her, of course—not after tonight. She was mad, and fucking manipulative, clearly.

But I would make Ebony sweat, *and* I would get my fucking revenge on the shit she’d just pulled.

TWELVE

VEX

Drake: Are you alright?

That text had come in a minute ago. Drake was still typing.

I stared at the bright screen in the dark space. I'd fled into the walk-in closet. Now, I was under the rack of white dressing gowns that had been here when I arrived, and bundles of extra bedding and pillows. I was pretty sure Drake had stayed, and was just outside in my room right now.

Drake: I'd like to make sure you're okay.

Drake: Won't come in unless you okay it.

My fingers were shaky as I typed out a response on impulse.

I trusted Drake, though.

Me: You can come.

Then I wrote out the question I was so afraid to ask.

Me: Are they dissolving the contract?

I didn't send it.

I had to at least get out of this shelf of bedding before he came in. He was going to think I was insane. I tried to stick my leg out, but there was a little flutter of panic in my chest. I squeezed my eyes tight shut, shoving it away, along with the little whine that rose in my throat. That made me panic more, it was *much* too omega. He *couldn't* hear that.

Still, I couldn't move.

Here, I was safe.

I tried again to shove past the fear. If I didn't get out, Drake was going to find me curled up in this tiny corner, and then what would he think? Shutting myself in the walk-in was one thing, but curling up like this made me look like a child.

Or an omega.

Too late, I heard the creak of the closet door.

"Vex?" Drake asked.

A dressing gown above me shifted. I opened my mouth to reply, but wasn't sure what to say.

Then he was kneeling at my side, his violet eyes finding mine.

"Uh... hi," I whispered weakly.

He brushed the raven waves from his face with a half smile. "Hi."

He was so breathtaking, and safe, I felt like I might be able to tumble out of here and into his arms. Something halted me though. They weren't what they seemed, no matter how my stomach swooped when I saw them.

"This..." I swallowed. "This wasn't the plan."

"Shame," he said. "It's a good plan. I was going to ask to join you."

I glanced around me, unsure. "I don't know if you'd fit."

With difficulty, he joined me, too tall to squeeze in as easily as I had. His blackcurrant wine scent tangled with the fresh laundry of dressing gowns and it soothed my anxious heart.

"I'm more of an under the bed type myself," he said, once he'd settled in. "Had a whole collection of teddies I'd keep under there for when I needed to hide."

"What were you hiding from?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"The monster in the closet," he replied. "You?"

I felt my lips turning up at the edges, the cheeky answer popping into my mind before I could linger too hard on what I was actually hiding from. “The monster under the bed.”

I was rewarded with a delighted smile. “I was a real scaredy-cat,” he said. “But there weren’t any real monsters when I was a kid, not unless you count my brothers forcing me to watch horror movies with them.”

I found myself fixated on him, lingering on the way he rushed through the words ‘*when I was a kid*’. There was something about Drake that felt much more down to earth. He was gentle and attentive.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I paused, heart rate elevating again as I thought about why I was in the closet at all. I swallowed, hugging myself tighter. I needed to ask, but the words wouldn’t come out of my mouth. Instead, I lifted my phone, tapping it on and showing him the text I’d already typed out.

Are they dissolving the contract?

Drake sighed, resting his head against the side of the closet, still watching me intently.

“No.” He didn’t sound pleased.

I nodded slowly, chewing anxiously on my lip. “So uh... Still back to convincing you?” I asked. Drake was back to being my best shot, because Rook aside, I was still fucked if I didn’t get a signature.

“It’s going to take a bit more than spoon threats for me, I’m afraid,” he said.

I winced at that, but his eyes were twinkling.

“How can I convince you?” I dared ask.

The smile froze on his face, then he shook his head. “You can’t stay, Vex.”

“Because of Ebony?”

“Yes—and Rook’s going to be out for blood after that.”

“See—that, right there?” I asked, taking my oh-so-desperate shot that I hated I had to take. “Doesn’t it sound like they do need a Sweetheart?”

Drake shifted back, eyes calculating as he took me in.

“I don’t want to stay *despite* Rook and Ebony,” I added quickly. “I know they’re part of this pack, they’re just as important—”

“They *hurt* you.”

“I know.” I shrank, clutching myself tighter. “I know how it looks.”

Right now, I was hiding in the closet because of Rook, and he was right about Ebony. I was terrified of what he might do if I got signed. But to convince Drake, I had to find a way to explain it that didn’t draw suspicion, *and* that didn’t make me sound like a complete crazed fan. They got enough of those, I knew that.

“I do want to be Ebony’s Sweetheart. He lashed out, but I think that means he needs it, too.”

“You say shit like that, but then you turn around and threaten Rook—and fuck me if he didn’t deserve it, but it doesn’t add up.”

I rubbed my face in my hands.

Yup, I looked fucking insane. I got that.

After a million shitty dates, I was sick of men’s bullshit. I’d decided it wasn’t my job to fix them up a long time ago. And now, here I was, forced to play hopeless ditz with stars in her eyes as she imagined taming a pack so she could feel special.

And I was fucking *shit* at it.

Still, I tried to hold onto that.

“Rook needs boundaries,” I said. “Just because I want this, it doesn’t mean I don’t have standards.”

“Even if you’re right about Rook, you think spoon threats will be enough to handle Ebony?”

“I... don’t know yet.” That was the truth at least. I didn’t want to be Ebony’s Sweetheart or omega. I wanted to run as far from him as I could possibly get, but that wasn’t an option. “But I think... I think I can get through to him.”

“There is no getting through to him.”

“Give me a chance to try,” I whispered. “Look, I had no idea what I was getting into when I came here. I wanted to be a Sweetheart because I thought I might actually have something to offer to a pack. I wasn’t expecting yours to be so...” I trailed off, scrambling for the right words.

“Off the rails?” he asked.

I snorted, but nodded. “I want the challenge. I’m not good at much, and I haven’t got anything else.”

That at least, was the sad fucking truth.

“Vex, Ebony’s one bad week away from blowing up. I don’t want you to be caught in the crosshairs of that.”

“That’s why you should give me a chance,” I said desperately. “What if I can fix it? What if you don’t have to live wondering when he’s going to go off? That will be my job, to figure that out, to find what balances him.”

The role of a Sweetheart—not so far off from what a pack would need in an omega. If they signed me, it would be up to me to figure out how to keep them balanced.

“Ebony doesn’t want a Sweetheart signed in. They come for a week and he chases them away. That *is* what balances him, even if it’s goddamned wrong.”

“Yet, you keep pulling Sweethearts in?”

“*Love* does.” Drake sounded strained. “He’s trying to give Ebony just enough to keep him content. I hate it, though. It feels like deception, and sometimes they’re really upset when they leave.”

“But that won’t happen with me. I already know the deal and I still want to stay. I can figure out what he actually needs.”

He was staring at me like I was mad.

“What you’re doing isn’t working,” I whispered. “You’re just... patching the problem and hoping it doesn’t get worse. But this will literally be my job. To balance him without an omega. If there’s a way to do that, I’ll figure it out.”

“Love’s been trying for years.”

“Love isn’t someone Ebony is... *interested* in.”

There was a moment of silence as he stared at me in the dim light, violet eyes stunned. “Is that what you’re getting from him?” Drake asked. “That he’s interested?”

“Yes.” This time, I was sure. “If he didn’t care, then he wouldn’t be so angry.”

Still, fear brushed up against that conviction.

Better than the alternative, I told myself. It’s better than a dark bond.

Even baiting a man like Ebony while living in *his* home. A man who’d already come into my room while I was asleep.

If Drake wasn’t there, what would have happened?

I didn’t know the nature of what he’d wanted. Neither, it seemed, did any of the others.

Drake was still staring at me, less sure now.

“You said he hasn’t reacted like that to anyone else,” I pushed.

“No.” Drake’s voice was tight. “He hasn’t.”

“So I could make a change?” I asked. I saw the flicker of conflict in his expression.

And there it was: Drake Jaccard’s weakness. Just like everything else with the Crimson Fury pack: it came down to Ebony Starless.

All I had to do was push.

“Isn’t that what you want?” I asked, voice dropping. I reached out and dared take his hand in mine. “No more Sweethearts dropping in without knowing, no more feeling

guilty every time they find out who Ebony is. And I'm choosing this. I can talk to you along the way, you and Love. Keep you in the loop. And maybe... maybe I can figure out how to balance him, and that would carry over to your bond with him, too." That last part was a shot in the dark.

Drake wasn't like the rest of his pack, I got the impression there *was* something else he wanted. His eyebrows rose just slightly in the dim space, something vulnerable shifting behind his eyes: a wounded, guilty shadow.

"What if I could do that?" I asked. "Give me a chance."

It might actually be working. There was an edge to the blackcurrant wine in the space, something desperate in it. So I bundled all that fear from Rook away into a little dark corner and clung to this instead: the first flicker of genuine hope I'd had since I arrived.

"You can keep pulling in random Sweethearts who don't know," I pushed. "But I've seen what he is—what they both are. And I'm not running. I *still* want to try."

Drake winced, running his fingers through his tangle of dark waves. "I'll... think about it," he said. "But it can't just be me that wants you around. At least get Love on board."

I stared at him, hope rising in my chest.

"Yes!" A smile tugged at my lips and before I could catch myself I was flinging my arms around his neck, jostling bundles of dressing gowns out of the way. "*Thank you, thank you, thank you!*"

He snorted, hands placed gently at my waist as if he wanted to hold on tighter, but wasn't sure if he should. "You're fucking insane."

THIRTEEN

DAY FOUR

VEX

Things could be going better four days in.

I'd woken with a demand on my phone to update my dark bonded pack on my progress. It took me a while to wrangle with the command.

Me: Drake likes me. Working on Love.

That, I convinced myself, was an adequate update that told them what they needed about what was going on. Who cared about the two guys in the pack who hated me? I only needed one signature, after all. Plus, it was true: today I would be trying to crack Love. I'd picked Drake's brain all night.

"What's his favourite colour?"

"Shit, I don't know. Does that make me a bad pack mate, not even knowing my pack lead's favourite colour?"

"Favourite animal?"

"Do you really think knowing he has a fondness for monkeys is going to help you convince him?"

"I don't know. I'm down for anything at this point."

I felt no more confident than I had before, so I just had to grit my teeth and demand he give me a chance.

LOVE

Vex found me out on the covered patio. It was my favourite place, with a view of the pool and the gardens beyond, mountain facing, and barely any of New Oxford in sight.

She slipped down onto the day bed beside me, admiring the view.

I usually avoided Sweethearts. When they were particularly insistent, I'd taken to just standing and leaving without a word until they got the message.

Yet, I didn't want to with Vex. It had been hard enough rejecting her the other night. It wasn't just that I didn't mind her presence, but I even found myself drawn to her. I'd not approached her—and I wouldn't, desires notwithstanding—but I certainly had no urge to leave.

We sat in silence for a long while before she said anything. Finally, she lay back on the daybed and fixed me with a curious, upside-down gaze that I couldn't help meeting.

“When you think of courting a woman, what do you think of?” she asked.

I raised an eyebrow. “Rather direct.”

“I prefer direct,” she said, not looking away even as silence hung between us for a moment. Her silvery-brown hair spread like a glossy web around her head, some tumbling from the daybed to brush the stone below.

“I... don't know,” I said at last. That was true enough. I hadn't thought about dating for a long time.

“Is it because you don't like women?”

I snorted. “No.”

I liked women well enough. I was drawn to her right now. She wore shorts and a loose crop-top, tied up at the waist. It was hard not to sweep my gaze across her whole body.

“Then...?” she prodded.

“I’m busy,” I shrugged. “I don’t have time for dating.”

Once, I’d given that dream effort.

Once, maybe I thought I had a shot. Of course, Ebony had destroyed it, and almost destroyed her.

Almost.

I had tried again once or twice after that. I’d gone on secret dates so Ebony would never know, but over and over, I’d run into the same issues. From my vantage, it was next to impossible to find a woman who wanted me for me.

And it turned out, in romance, I was... vulnerable. My experience with meaningful relationships was sparse. All I’d known before the pack was a mother who’d demanded I choose between her or my brother—a brother with no true capacity for compassion.

The result was that I fell embarrassingly hard and fast. The fallout—having Ebony learn about it, only to prove to me the person I cared for was using me to make strides in the industry—that wasn’t something I was ever willing to risk again.

Relationships were off the table for me.

“That’s not the case for most celebrities I’ve heard of,” Vex said. “Especially ones in the market for Sweethearts.”

“We aren’t like most celebrities.”

“Because of Ebony?”

Did my ears deceive me, or did she almost sound *pouty* at that. There was a strange quiet between us, in which I eyed her curiously. “Ebony is... different.”

“I know,” she said. And I supposed she did, which was strangely freeing in itself. There weren’t many people on the planet who did. Sweethearts found out eventually, but by that time they were often running. “You... are the one that manages him, then?”

“If I didn’t, no one would.”

That was the decision I'd made when I was eighteen years old. Five years later, and I still held on to it, even when the weight of it felt heavier by the day.

“So... it's your responsibility, to... protect him from the world? Or the world from him?”

I paused at that, considering her closer.

Both. It was strange how easily she'd come to that conclusion. Ebony was larger than life to most people he met, so that idea that she'd picked up on the fact there might be something else to it caught me off guard.

The truth was, Ebony had been rejected by our mother, and by the world.

Without me, he wouldn't have a pack.

It wasn't something either of us would ever admit out loud, but without us, he'd crack. If you asked him, he'd deny it, but he *did* need a pack. It was a part of who he was, more so than for anyone else I'd met, even when that half of him warred with the other.

But there aren't many alphas on this planet who would opt into a bond with Ebony. Rook's agreement had been a fucking miracle. And Drake had known, but... he was special too.

And now, there was her.

Asking to stay, and I couldn't shake the impression that she had no interest in fame or wealth or status at all, as foolish as that assertion might be.

“What did you say to him when you first got here?” I asked.

It had been nagging at me.

She smiled, blinking those beautiful chocolate eyes, something mischievous in them.

“How much is that secret worth?” she asked, tilting her head and—wittingly or unwittingly—opening her neck to me. I couldn't help my gaze trace it, something primal in me drawn to the stretch of open skin. Not once had I seen her act

in a way I'd expect of a Sweetheart, and not once had it failed to catch my attention.

She was good.

So good I couldn't help answering. "What might you ask for if I told you it was priceless?"

It wasn't.

I was sure I'd get it out of Ebony eventually, though he was playing it tight lipped at the moment.

Vex was considering me though, running her tongue along her teeth. Then she sat up, tugging a knee to her chest and facing me, her waves of silvery hair in disarray around her face. "Give me a chance to show you what I could offer you if I was your Sweetheart."

I regarded her, unable to drag my gaze away, something warming my blood at the way she was looking at me with those heavily winged eyes.

"How?"

I swallowed. It was a hypothetical, of course. There wasn't anything she could offer me that I didn't already have, or that wasn't out of reach.

"Let me visit you tonight," she said.

I raised an eyebrow, both seized by those words and a little disappointed, as if I'd expected something different from her.

"I have a no sex on the first date rule," she went on with a dazzlingly cheeky smile before I could open my mouth to decline. "But I don't think I need that to make my point."

Okay.

So... sex wasn't what she was offering at all.

Then what?

I don't know why that drew my curiosity even more.

"I'm not the one who needs a Sweetheart," I said. Even if we did sign one in—and I was starting to recognise that we might not be as stable as I'd thought—it wouldn't be for me.

It was tempting, though.

Everything about her was tempting. From the precious way she was still hugging a knee to her chest, as if dispelling nerves, to the way she riled up my pack as she had. *That* shouldn't be a temptation in itself, but it fucking well was, and I'd be an idiot to deny it.

“Then no harm in letting me try,” she said with a shrug. “What's the worst that can happen?” Again, her impish smile was back, as she fixed me with a breath-catching gaze full of mock innocence. “That we... discover I'm right?”

FOURTEEN

*Dear Love: I think it's worse that
for a moment I believed.*

*Without the truth, without the scent
match, for a second, you convinced me
I might just be enough.*

LOVE

It had been a while since I'd stopped and focused on... Well, anything. We lived in a whirlwind that never fucking ended. Our downtime always felt like catching up, never long enough.

But Vex made the world stop.

I had no idea what madness had seized me when I'd said she could come tonight. Was it because of the contract? I feared falling for someone again, but we were paying her. What she wanted from us was in black and white. Did that offer me enough safety to give her a chance?

Was I giving her a chance?

No, I told myself.

I was assessing her capabilities—discovering if she truly offered a solution for Ebony. I had to know that she was competent.

Yet, I wasn't prepared for what waited for me when I entered my room that evening.

She waited for me inside, and the sight of her drew me up.

She wore a silken cream nightgown that hung around her shoulders, showing two straps of golden lace beneath. *That* wasn't what halted me.

She was kneeling before the foot of my bed in picturesque subservience. Her hands were tucked into her lap, hair pulled over her shoulder, and her bowed head was the slightest bit angled to bare the side of her neck.

I was crossing toward her before I caught myself—as if, if I stared hard enough, the scene before me would unravel and offer me an explanation.

I needed one.

Not for her, but for me. For the visceral need I felt in this moment to drop to my knees behind her and sink my teeth into her neck right now.

Bond her.

Forget the contract.

Forget every ounce of sanity that usually kept me grounded.

She was mine.

“What... are you doing?” I asked instead, my heart in my throat.

I wasn't used to nerves, but the sight of her set my pulse pounding in my ears. I had to get a grip, so I sank down onto the bed at her side. Still, she remained in that distracting pose, the side of her neck tantalising, bare and open...

“I'm yours tonight.” Her melodic voice was low and deferent. “However you want me.”

Aside from sex, I reminded myself.

She'd said that was out.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the only tempting place my mind was going right now.

“You'll... offer the others this?” I asked. That gave me pause, ice seeping into my veins at the thought of her offering this to Ebony. He could *never* see this—never feel what I was feeling. In fact, I almost rushed to the door right now to ensure it was locked.

“My job as your Sweetheart, would be to assess your needs individually,” she replied.

I swallowed. She wasn't wrong. That's what we would be hiring her for: a true look at what our pack needed. “And you think this is what *I* need?”

She nodded.

“And what exactly... *is* this?”

I didn't know why I needed her to define it for me, but I wanted to hear it from her.

There was a long pause.

“Control,” she said. “A chance to claim something back.”

Control?

I didn't think that was what I was lacking. I was pack lead. Yet, the reaction she was getting from me told a different story.

Silence passed between us as I stared at her.

I should tell her to leave right now—tell her again that I didn't *need* a Sweetheart.

When I opened my mouth, those weren't the words that came out.

VEX

I'd *dared* Love Hightower into inviting me into his room, and he had said yes. Now, I had to convince him to give me a chance. I had to find a way to give him what he needed, to prove that I had something to offer.

Silence passed for an age as I knelt, and I could feel his eyes on me from where he sat. Thankfully, his scent was giving him away. Vanilla winter filled the room with an edge of desire.

I felt a faint flicker of hope. So much had been stolen from me, but tonight I would steal something back.

So now here I was, kneeling before my mate.

And he wanted *me*.

Something softer brushed my soul, a threat in how comforting it was. I let it in, unable to stop myself, knowing I shouldn't.

"You're going to sit with me while I read," he said at last.

How did he manage to say that, like it was the most normal thing in the world?

I waited as he got to his feet and retrieved a book from his bedside table. My mind was reeling. Somehow, it had worked.

He wanted me to sit with him.

What did that mean?

I got to my feet with as much grace as my nerves allowed, letting the dressing gown fall open just enough to flash what was beneath—even if it was lace I despised.

I'd chosen all my outfits when I'd come here, but I hadn't chosen this. No, instead, the lingerie I was supposed to wear for my mates had been chosen for me. And it would be beautiful if it wasn't a taunt: lace made of a golden fabric in a

dozen different styles. I'd forced myself to ignore the hatred searing my veins as I'd picked one out, knowing I needed it for this wild plan.

The room around me was expansive, I'd noticed that first when I'd snuck in. There was a balcony facing the back gardens and pool, the same couches and wall-mounted TV as the Sweetheart's room, and it also matched the colour scheme of neutrals and creams. He had a walk-in closet, a small table for two topped with an empty chess board, but besides that and the indoor tree with large green leaves in a corner, it was quite empty. I noticed there was no art or posters on the walls, and not much to be said for decor at all. It was pristine in here, almost clinically well kept.

Dragging my gaze from the room, I looked back at Love.

He'd settled against his headboard. Even wearing a pair of loose black pants and no top, he managed to look like a king. He had a ridged torso with lean muscle. His long dark hair was braided, hanging down over his shoulder almost to his waist. He was fixed on the page—apparently already engrossed in the crime fiction book—as he held a hand out to me.

I reached for it, a shiver running up my spine as my skin brushed his.

Love had a way of making this feel forbidden.

He tugged me toward him until I was settled right between his knees—closer even, than I'd expected. He didn't glance at me, eyes still scanning the page as he drew me just an inch closer.

“Good girl,” he murmured, his voice was a low breath in my ear as he touched his finger to his tongue and turned a page. Something molten slid into my core, making me hyper aware of every inch upon which his skin touched mine. I had to get my arousal under control. The scent dampeners were the strongest on the market, masking everything of my omega scent. But normal fucking arousal... Would he know?

He adjusted me slightly, so I was curled between his legs, my head pressed against his chest. I couldn't drag my mind

from the fact his free hand, that shifted occasionally to turn a page, rested otherwise on my hip.

This was strange, but oddly... nice.

And I swore the scent of vanilla winter got stronger in the room.

From where I was enveloped by him, I could read his book and hear the slow beat of his heart in his chest.

I closed my eyes for a moment, drowning in his comforting scent, resting in the arms of my mate as I tried to pretend that this was forever.

That he loved me and wanted me.

That I was home.

And it wasn't for the size or extravagance of the mansion, but for the tales of mates who are supposed to love and protect. Who were supposed to *be* home.

And instead, I had a contract.

A contract and lies.

I blinked away the threat of tears just as his hand dropped again to my hip. For a moment, I tensed, but all that happened was his thumb began stroking absently along the skin of my stomach beneath my gown.

Should I be doing that? Touching him more?

Because I really didn't know what I was doing. So I just stayed like this, praying that whatever magic a Sweetheart was supposed to bring, this was it.

An age passed with no sound in the room but for the rustle of a page and the rhythmic beating of his heart.

I almost jumped when he shifted, lowering the book. He paused, hand brushing away the hair that had tumbled over my face. I blinked up at him.

"I thought you might be asleep," he said. His knuckle was still lingering on my cheek.

“Do you want to go to sleep?” I asked, straightening. “I can—” But he caught me as I tried to climb from between his legs.

“In a moment,” he said, and I turned back to him, unsure. “But I want you to do something else for me first.”

“Yes?” I don’t know why I was breathless.

He didn’t say anything for a long time, and I could see a storm of indecision in his intense blue eyes. My hand was pressed against his chest where I’d just been laying, and it was as if I could feel the quickening on his heart.

“Kiss me.”

I stared at him, all coherent thought tumbling from my mind as my pulse picked up. “Where?” I almost winced.

Had I really just said that? I’d gone on so many dates. I knew how to wrap men around my little finger, but alphas? *These* alphas? They made me sound like a crushing teenager.

“Wherever you’d like to kiss me,” he told me, not a waver in his expression.

I blinked, unsure of how to respond to that.

Did I *want* to kiss him? The boiling lust in my core was a clear answer. There was something charming about the curiosity burning in his eyes as he watched me work through that ask.

I turned to face him properly, so I was kneeling between his legs.

He was so fucking beautiful it was a scandal, with flutters of his midnight hair loose from his braid, feathering the pale skin of his broad shoulders.

I dragged my gaze back to his expectant eyes.

Kiss him however I wanted?

Despite who he was, or the fact I was vying for a contract as his Sweetheart, the ask still felt a little arrogant, and I couldn’t help the decision my brain landed on. I leaned close,

palms pressed gently to his chest, and I brushed my lips along his collarbones.

He tensed, and I felt his fingers brush my waist just briefly before falling away as if he were struggling to hold back. It was more than the action, it was the way his scent shifted, vanilla winter edged with something desperate.

Lust?

I tried to shove down the thrill of that as I pressed another kiss to his collarbone and trailed it up to the corded muscle of his neck. I moved slowly, and the edge to his scent got stronger, his body becoming more tense beneath me.

He wanted me.

Love Hightower wanted me.

Butterflies soared in my chest, almost halting me. It took everything I had not to switch my pace. I reached his jaw, pressing my lips to it, once, twice, three times before drawing away, taking him in.

Holy shit.

His pupils were dilated, and his jaw ticked. His sapphire eyes regarded me with lust unmatched by any beta I'd ever seen in the bedroom.

My breath was trapped in my chest.

I wanted him.

I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anyone.

This was what it was like, *truly* having a mate?

I felt like I was staring into the centre of the universe. The safest place in the whole world. I opened my mouth to tell him I was absolutely changing my mind on the no sex rule, but then I got a grip on my hormones.

No.

If I gave everything up right now there was no telling that he wouldn't just get bored.

I would never get bored with him, a little voice whispered. He won't get bored with you.

But foolish little hormonal voices in my head weren't good enough when it came to the rest of my life.

So I leaned close to kiss him on the jaw. I dragged my lips along his cheek, one fraction at a time. Beneath my palms, I felt his breath getting heavier as I moved closer to his lips. Before I reached them, I drew away again.

The sight that met me was more undone than before. His jaw ticked as he watched me, his chest heaving. I leaned close, this time to his other cheek, and his grip bit down on my waist. I felt the faintest smile curving my lips as I pressed them to his skin. Once more, I teased him, dragging my kiss so close before pulling away.

This time, a low, rumbling growl loosed from his chest.

His grip jumped to my hair, and he dragged me forward in one quick motion, tilting my head so he could kiss me properly. He froze at my little gasp of surprise just before he stole it.

I could feel the warmth of his breath on my lips, so close to claiming the kiss I'd denied him.

A part of me was screaming at him to claim it.

"I think," I whispered, instead. "You are in no less need of a Sweetheart than your brothers."

Ever so slowly, he released me, eyes darting between mine. And I saw, in that moment, a flicker of something panicked.

Shit...

I'd fucked up, I knew it even before he spoke. Another silent age passed, and I braced for the gathering storm in his eyes, his scent dangerous and frosty.

"Leave," he whispered at last.

My stomach sank.

I tugged back, but he hadn't let me go, something dark in his eyes as if he were warring with himself.

"I *don't* need a Sweetheart." There was something so threatening in his voice that it sent a chill down my spine. The chemistry between us died a sudden death and instead my fight-or-flight instincts kicked in. "I don't want you Vex, and I won't be signing your contract."

I wasn't ready for how much those words stung. For the way tears burned my eyes.

I didn't cry over men.

That was a rule.

"*No crying over stupid men,*" I'd say to Aisha when I let one get too close.

But I wasn't that woman anymore. Shattered, alone, and desperate for the world to be something it wasn't, Love's words hollowed me out and left me brittle.

I tried to pull away again and he let me go this time, but it was too late.

I felt the hot tear tumble down my cheek as I tore from his grip and fled the room.

LOVE

I'd made her cry.

I'd gone too far, and not far enough. My eyes were still fixed on the door that had slammed shut after she'd fled.

She'd... cried.

As if I mattered to her at all—which I shouldn't.

Yet my own chest still felt tight with guilt, and I warred with the urge to seek her out and tell her I was sorry. I'd seen the flash of golden lace beneath her nightgown when she'd tugged away from me, fear stark on her face, eyes glistening.

I'd almost cracked. Almost admitted I'd lied to her, and there were words I wished I'd said instead.

I want you.

I want you, Vex, more than I've ever wanted anyone.

Somehow, *that* was the truth.

She felt like a missing piece—even more than the last time I believed in love. And she had to leave because that was more dangerous than anything else. If that wasn't enough to send the fear of god into me... of the ways I might screw it up, or she might get hurt... Of the way Ebony might use it if he ever found out...

No.

Better she fled this room in terror and tears.

Better she give up this contract when the week was over. Because there was a burning, heated part of me that wanted to take those spiral stairs by twos and sign her in right now. To lock her in with us.

Claim her.

And that wasn't possible.

Every instinct she lit in me, she might drag from Ebony, too.

And there was nothing more frightening in the world than imagining what Ebony would do if he decided a woman like Vex was his.

FIFTEEN

DAY FIVE

VEX

Two Months Ago

My captor drew us to a stop at last, and I heard a smart rap on a door.

“Word of warning for you, my dear,” Wheatgrass breathed in my ear. “Unlike me, I promise they have the patience to break you. Do yourself a favour, and behave.”

I’d been led in my blindfold up the elevator and down a number of hallways until the faintest sound of music could be heard. My breath was trapped in lungs of stone as I heard a door click open. I was met by the sound of music playing—it was live, I thought—and a tangle of scents. I hated them all, my fear made sure of that.

There was the sound of a door clicking, and then the music beyond became louder.

“Ah. Wonderful.” The voice was smooth and low and sent a chill down my spine.

This was it.

We were at a performance, I thought. There was a show on, the music sounded... alive... real. I was being brought to this pack in the middle of a dance or show.

A hand took my arm, drawing me inside, and then the door clicked shut behind me. Somehow, the scent of wheatgrass vanishing was a discomfort.

I swallowed, trying to hold on to anything of my surroundings. I could feel gazes on me from behind the blindfold.

How many were there?

I tried desperately to detangle the scents, but one was dominant.

Stale cigarettes.

Strong enough it had to be an alpha, not a beta.

I jumped as a hand touched my waist, nudging me forward. When I stepped away, hitting the door behind me, his grip became more insistent, and I had to hold his arm to keep from falling.

“Not used to heels, my dear?” he whispered in my ear, supporting me as I was tugged a few more steps, surrounded by his horrible scent and the crescendo of music that seemed to come from far below.

I said nothing. A million furious retorts drowned by terror.

I heard a chuckle to my right as the alpha drew me to a halt. I felt his hand brush my hair and another on my waist. I grabbed his wrist, halting him, but he peeled my grip away with ease.

“What do you think?” he asked, hands dropping to my hips. The music went on, now an orchestra of strings.

It was beautiful... I'd never been to a live show.

I'd always wanted to.

The alpha forced me to turn as if I were a doll on display, and I caught a sob in my chest. I wanted to reach for the blindfold to get my bearings, but I knew my blindness might well be for my own safety if they were determined to keep anonymity.

I fought every instinct to flee. I'd felt enough pain in my life to know it wasn't worth it. Become small and unnoticeable, that's what I'd learned growing up. But that strategy wouldn't work here, either.

“This is illegal,” I whispered, knowing how stupid those words sounded.

“We might not be able to see those golden eyes of yours right now, but we know they're there.”

“Buying me.” I tried to sound sure. I knew my rights back to front as a gold pack. “I was taken from my home.

Kidnapping is illegal—“

“We stumbled across you here,” Stale Cigarettes said. “I see no private residence.”

“She looks fine.” A new voice spoke. “I’m in.”

Fine...?

These alphas were about to take the most important thing I had to my name, and they were indifferent?

“Yeah,” another voice said, with humour. “Alright.”

If I’d had any food in the last two days, I might have thrown up right then. Next thing I knew, I was being drawn down to sit on the lap of an alpha much bigger than me, and the scent of stale cigarettes was suffocating.

My heart took flight, and I hated how I froze, unable to move at all.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Vex. You can call me Alastor. I’m pack lead,” he said. “You can sing, I was told?”

“Not for you.” My voice shook through clenched teeth. They wouldn’t have my voice. I squeezed my eyes shut beneath the blindfold as his hand cupped my neck gently, pulling me tighter against his chest.

“Is that so?” he murmured in my ear.

When his hand began sweeping my hair over one shoulder, bearing my neck to him, I broke at last.

Consequence or not, I launched myself from his grip, such a visceral threat of a dark bond blitzing past every instinct I’d built over years.

Those instincts proved—once more—correct, because fleeing left me worse off. The world behind my blindfold was impossible to navigate, and I stumbled on a step, crashing to my knees.

Alastor had no issue dropping his own dignity.

I felt his aura hit the air first, but there was nothing in the world that could have braced me for what came next.

With his bite came white hot pain, and I was dark bonded to his pack, crushing weight pinning me to the floor, his huge hand clamped over my mouth to muffle my scream.

My phone lit to a call, vibrating and ripping me out of the nightmare.

I panicked, my heart in my throat as I grabbed the phone and stared at the caller I.D. It was the one contact I'd had on the phone when I arrived—the one I'd renamed to 'Stale Cigs'.

Alastor.

Why was he calling me?

No.

No no no.

Early morning light filtered through my curtains, and Drake was *in* my bed at my side. He'd come in after I'd fled Love's room, a salve on my heartbreak—even if I hadn't admitted what had happened between us.

But Alastor's commands seized me, sending me further into a panic.

Answer the phone if we call.

I stumbled to the bathroom and locked the door behind me. Then I stared at the screen, hands trembling as I sunk to the floor against the far wall.

Finally, I answered, eyes squeezed shut.

"What do you want?" I whispered.

"I want an update," he said. I shook at the voice of the man I'd been trying to pretend didn't exist—and didn't live in a little pocket of my mind. "You've said nothing. Why does it feel like you're hiding from me, Vex?"

"I... I'm not... You said you wouldn't interfere," I pleaded. We wanted the same thing. I'd begged him to let me do this myself.

“That was before you failed,” he said.

“I h-haven’t. There’s two more days.”

“Do any of them want you around?”

Fuck.

Fuck.

I couldn’t lie to him, his command sharp claws in my mind.

“D-Drake does.”

“Drake?”

“Yes, he’s in my room right now.”

“Then where’s his signature?”

“You know it’s not that simple. It’s a big commitment—”

“I know, but isn’t that what you’ve been working on all this time?”

“I’m making progress...” My throat locked up as I scrambled for a way to frame this so it didn’t sound so bad. “Ebony and Love, they’re difficult, but I *swear*—”

“Forget the brothers,” he snorted. “What about Rook? He’s supposed to be the playboy? What does he think of you?”

The direct question was impossible to avoid. “He...” I tried to fight the command for truth. Pain ripped through my blood, and I clamped a hand over my mouth. It was only a hint of that mind numbing agony, a thousand knives on my skin, payment for resisting his commands.

“Tell me.”

“H-he hates me,” I choked, feeling the pain ebb away.

“He *what*?”

My lip trembled, knowing the question that was coming, knowing I’d have to answer it.

“What did you *do*?”

My breath caught, tears tumbling down my face. “He...” I tried to fight it, but a fragment of that agony lit again for defying his orders.

“Tell. Me!” I could hear him losing his patience, his command more forceful this time.

“He came into my room and I told him to leave. When he didn’t I... I threatened him.”

There was a long, long silence, and I felt a flare of his fury through the bond. “Why the *fuck* did you do that?”

“He was arrogant... I was... afraid.” I cringed at the confession. It sounded like such a weak reason now, when matching Alastor.

Again, there was a long silence. “You told me,” he hissed, “that I could trust you wanted the same thing we do—”

“I do.”

“You threatened him when he was interested in you? Might he have signed you in?”

I stifled my choked sob. “I think... s-so.”

Again, I felt another flare of fury through the bond, and his next words were low. “You’re going to find him today Vex, and you’re going to do whatever it takes to get him to accept your apology.”

ROOK

I opened my door at noon to find Vex waiting outside.

“What do you want?” I asked. It was a real fucking sin she was psycho, because I really couldn’t help taking an eyeful every goddamned time I saw her.

“I came to apologise, and then ask what...” She trailed off, taking a breath, those pretty chocolate eyes holding mine. “What I could do to make it up to you?”

I felt the smile on my face.

And there it was: proof I’d been right. She was exactly what I’d accused her of the other night when she was pretending to be all high and mighty.

“Is that right?” I asked. I leaned against the doorframe, crossing my arms. I had been about to laugh and tell her not a chance. It’s what I’d do with any other Sweetheart who came knocking like this—and they had. But the little spark of hatred in her eyes when she saw my expression halted me. It was oddly unexpected.

If she was a doting Sweetheart willing to simper to get a signature, that made sense. If she’d seen what we were like and packed her bags already, that would, too.

But she was neither simpering, nor gone. And she *clearly* didn’t like me one bit. Yet, here she was.

Strangely, that was refreshing, and I found myself wanting that furious gaze on me just a little longer.

“Ebony hates you, Drake pities you, and Love sent you packing. So now you’re here, tail between your legs, begging me for a chance?” I asked.

It was quite beautiful, watching her fight to trap her retort behind gritted teeth. It was all she could manage to nod.

“I’ll think about it,” I said. She swallowed, searching my gaze for a hint. “What did you do for Love last night?” I asked.

“I... can’t tell you that. You know it’s part of the job, the contract—”

“It’s a tainted contract or no contract, baby girl, so you better spill.”

She stared at me, clearly trying to find a way around that. Finally, with a little glance behind her, she said, “I... dressed nice and told him he could pick what we did.”

Oh *fuck* yes.

My blood heated at the thought of it, another smile creeping onto my face.

“I want that. Come back at six.” I needed time to think about *how* I was going to make her dance for me. “If it goes well, I’ll hear your apology.”

Would I sign her in?

Not a fucking chance, not now she was back to making good old gold-digging sense. But I’d get my revenge before I sent her on her way.

VEX

Fuck.

I rifled through the stupid golden lingerie to find something more covering. I'd take a babydoll at this point. *Anything* that didn't collectively have less fabric than the average fucking headband.

I swore as I sank down beside the huge open suitcase, glaring at the mess I'd made. I began grabbing the scattered pieces of lace, furiously tossing them back in.

Fuck this stupid dark bond.

One piece got caught on the suitcase wheel.

And fuck Rook for being such an arrogant—It wouldn't come free—fucking—I ripped at it with a scream—prick!

The golden lace tore.

I stared at the two halves of the ripped lace, frozen for a long moment. Ice crept up my spine, the voice of my nightmares creeping into my head.

“Do you know what a trigger command is, Vex...?” Alastor asked, one visit. “It's an order that triggers under certain circumstances. Ones that I determine.”

My heart was in my throat. Tears burned my eyes as I stared at the torn lace, trying to process the layers of commands Alastor had set.

Don't sabotage anything we send you with. That was a rule.

A rule I'd just broken.

“Being the filthy gold pack you are, you can break the most powerful commands—even if there is a price. But I can’t afford to risk you spilling our plans. So, I need you to know you’ll suffer more than just that moment of pain if you break the rules I give you.”

This... wasn’t a big rule.

An accident.

And none of my mates had learned anything they shouldn’t.

Still, his command locked me in.

Numbly, I got to my feet and made my way to the bathroom. There, I rifled through my makeup bag until I found that tiny silver needle.

I grabbed my side of the bond, locking it down as hard as I knew how. Then I sunk to the floor, huddled against the vanity, as I held the needle in trembling fingers above my thigh.

I balled my fist in my shirt as I jammed the needle in, silencing my whine of pain. Then I opened my mouth, whispering the first lines of my mother’s lullaby as I pulled the needle out. Still shaking, I was only able to hesitate for a moment before pressing it back into the same spot.

Over and over and over again, I re-pierced the wound, until tears streaked my cheeks and I’d sung through my mother’s lullaby four times more.

SIXTEEN

Dear Rook:

*Are you different from the monsters
I'm running from?*

VEX

I needed this to work.

I needed to do whatever the fuck Rook goddamned Harrison wanted, so he'd sign me in. I could deal with it. *Nothing is worse than Alastor*, I told myself.

I huddled in my bathroom long after I was able to drop the needle, shaking with self-hatred and rage. Enough time passed that my tremors were gone and my mind was clear.

Nothing is worse than Alastor.

That was my mantra as I knocked on Rook's door at six, wearing the same thin dressing gown I'd worn for Love.

Rook answered, eyes sweeping over my outfit appreciatively before stepping back and letting me in. "If you want a signature, I need to know it's worth keeping you about."

Worth keeping me about? I fought not to ball my fists.

"I understand," I said, working to keep my voice neutral.

Nothing is worse than Alastor.

It was huge inside his room, just like Love's had been, lending to as much privacy as they needed, aside from having to leave for food. In Rook's, there were a set of French doors, one cracked and leading out to a large balcony, and the summer evening tangled with his caramel brandy scent. Within was busier than Love's: there was a massive TV above a fireplace and some sprawling couches, a broad oak desk, a treadmill, weight rack, and a display cabinet of trophies. It was lived-in, too, which was oddly refreshing, with clothing laying about, and a few cans on side tables. I noticed one slender crystal trophy on his bedside table because—of course—Rook Harrison slept beside his Radiant Aura award.

The fucking prick.

He was palming the back of his neck, glancing about along with me. “Can’t relax when the room’s a mess like this.”

My lips parted at those words and I looked up at him, trying to understand if he meant what I thought he meant. But Rook was already crossing the room to the couch, picking a remote and turning on the TV.

I stood there for a long moment, trying to process.

Cleaning his room?

I don’t know what I’d expected, but it was such a one-eighty from Love last night that I was having trouble keeping up.

He wasn’t even looking at me right now, scrolling through the channels for something to watch.

The longer the time stretched, the harder it was to find my voice. Finally, I forced myself to approach, sitting on the other end of the couch.

“I need you to tell me what you want,” I said.

His eyes flickered to me as if I were nothing more than an annoyance. “Tidy the room.”

“I’m not a maid.”

“You’re whatever I want you to be.” He lowered his remote, finally fixing his full attention on me as if I were crazy.

I warred with the thousand furious things that rose to the surface.

Nothing is worse than Alastor.

“I’m a Sweetheart.”

“Not in here.” He chuckled, tilting his head. “Not that I *enjoy* comparing myself to Ebony, but I’m not a big fan of letting other people into my space either,” he said. “I barely let the cleaner in, and I’ve never let a Sweetheart in.”

It was impossible not to understand what he was saying. “So if I…” I swallowed. “*Tidy* the room, I’ll be worth keeping

around?”

“Don’t know yet.” He shrugged. “Never had a sexy maid.” And with that, he turned his attention back to the TV, pretending I didn’t exist.

Time left the slightest smile curving his lips, as if, for every second that passed with me sitting here in stunned silence, he found a little more joy.

I forced myself to my feet.

Nothing. Is. Worse. Than Alastor.

I’d forgotten that last time, when I’d lashed out at him. I couldn’t afford to forget it again.

I reminded myself over and over as I picked up piles of books and placed them back on his shelves, as I collected up cans and plates and stacked them.

Whatever.

This was just cleaning.

I darted to the little kitchenette outside in the living room with the stack. Rook’s room was blessedly close to it, so no one saw the petite dressing gown I was wearing as I carried his dirty dishes.

After that, it was a fight to keep myself from stomping about, picking up tossed clothes, books, magazines and all the other crap he hadn’t dealt with. I didn’t say a word, not even to ask where shit went. Nothing. I’d make it look presentable, and I wouldn’t fucking talk.

Whenever I spared a glance in his direction, he was attentive to the movie he’d put on, but I still felt his gaze on me when my back was turned.

Finally, I returned to the couch and sat down.

“Is it clean enough?” I asked, when he spared me a glance. He wrinkled his nose, straightening and grabbing the remote. Pausing the TV, he looked around the place. After finding nothing particularly egregious, he shrugged. “Alright, I guess,”

he said. Then his brows furrowed, as if he'd spotted something he didn't like.

“What?” I asked.

“The top shelf never gets enough attention.” He waved across the room, and I followed his gaze to the cabinet full of trophies and awards. “There's some rags in the bathroom. Grab the ones on the top shelf and polish them.”

I nodded curtly, getting back to my feet.

It wasn't until I tried to reach for the trophies that I realised what his game was. On my tiptoes, hand outstretched, my dressing gown rode all the way up.

Finally, I dared glance back to see he was unabashedly watching as I struggled.

Well, the fucking joke was on him. I wanted him obsessed with me. I wanted him unable to take his eyes from me.

Yet, neither that, nor my Alastor mantra helped as I flashed my golden lace panties and struggled to reach the trophies on the top shelf.

Finally, he got to his feet and approached with a satisfied smirk on his face. “Bonus points for the show,” he said, handing me the trophies one by one until my arms were full. I gave him a bitter smile.

Without a word, I set them down on the couch, but he beckoned me closer. “Do it right here so I can see you don't damage them,” he said, nodding toward the spot on the floor before him. I fought another flare of rage.

I was doing this without argument.

I would give him everything he asked for. So I kept my expression neutral as I set the four trophies down on the carpet and got on my knees.

“I'd prefer a better view,” he said mildly.

I swallowed back my snarl, staring at him for a long moment as his eyes drifted back up from the neck of my closed dressing gown.

You know what?

Good.

He was never going to get me out of his head. I'd haunt his fucking dreams. With another false smile, I tugged open my dressing gown enough to show a peek of the golden lace top.

He smirked as he watched, then turned his attention back to the TV.

On my knees, I polished the trophies until there wasn't an ounce of dust, and they shined back at me.

"There. Done," I said at last, setting the final one down.

He tilted his head, examining them. "Give them another round."

"They're fucking done," I said through clenched teeth.

"Not till I say so."

This felt frighteningly close to Alastor.

There was a difference.

There *had* to be a difference. With Alastor, it was punishment. Rook was testing me. He was pushing every boundary he could in order to find out where I'd settle.

And he was learning I had none.

He was learning just how fucking desperate I was.

Only, he thought it meant I was desperate *for* him. A fan. Obsessed. Not running from the sharp end of a dark bond.

"What did Love want you to do?" Rook asked as I reached the third golden trophy again.

"I..." I shook my head. "I told you what I did for him, but I'm not saying a word about him."

Rook's eyebrows rose as he considered me. Finally, he shrugged, and I didn't get the impression that my response made him unhappy.

"For the record, I wouldn't care who you told if *we* fucked."

“I didn’t fuck him,” I said before I caught myself.

Rook laughed, eyes twinkling as if I’d just given him what he wanted. Which I kind of had. There was another pause, where I focused on the last trophy—an old academy sports gold—wanting to get this over with.

“Probably for the best, though,” he noted at last. “That you didn’t, I mean.”

I glanced up at him, actually curious. “Why?”

“Wasn’t a great look. I thought he sent you packing because you were just that terrible at—” He cut off at the snarl on my face, a delighted chuckle slipping out.

“Irrelevant. I’m not interested,” I muttered. Sweethearts *could* be intimate, but it wasn’t required. Thank fuck. I’d be finding every way possible to balance Rook without giving him that.

“Should you be saying things like that?” he asked, his grin still delighted. “If you want my signature so bad?”

“I’m not bargaining with sex.”

He considered that. “Good.”

“Good?”

“Never met a woman who’d seriously say no,” he said. “Even when they pretend otherwise. I don’t need leverage for that.”

“You think you could get me to climb into bed with you?” I asked, not able to hide my shock. *After this? After I’d sent him packing last time—?*

No—don’t bring that up right now.

“Yes.” He said it with such certainty that it circled back dangerously close to being hot.

Fucking.

Prick.

“Try it,” I spat. “Find out.”

“Cute.”

“What?”

“Trying to bait me into saying *I’d fuck you?*” He snorted. “You’re a long way from that, Baby Girl.”

I wrinkled my nose, holding the last trophy out to him once more. “Is it clean enough for you?” I asked.

I wanted this over with, the mantra was losing its power. I was starting to crack.

He took it, examining it quickly before setting it down on the couch beside him. “It’ll do.”

“And have I... shown you that I’m worth keeping around?” It killed me to keep the bitterness from my voice.

He scratched his chin, bright eyes looking down on me. “Unlike every Sweetheart before you, you aren’t *completely* unbearable.”

Because I’m your fucking scent match, you arrogant slice of rotting road kill. Instead of saying that, I forced a neutral expression onto my face with a quick nod.

“I want to make it clear,” he said. “*If* I sign you in, it’ll look like this between us on the other end.”

My blood chilled as those words sunk in. “That’s not how it works.”

“Then where’s the fun?”

“*I* decide what you need when I’m signed,” I said carefully. “We go from there.”

“I think I *need* a little Sweetheart revenge.”

“Not your decision,” I replied, fingers clutching the hem of my sleeves, trying so desperately to calm myself.

“I pay back ten fold what’s done to me. You humiliated me, Vex. If I sign you, this won’t be over for a while.”

I glared, knowing this was the closest I’d come to a signature yet. Alastor lurked on the other end of the bond, always.

Nothing is worse.

I looked away, stamping down my flaring temper.

“Okay.”

“Okay *what?*” he asked, reaching out and nudging my chin so I was forced to look back at him. I could see the dancing pleasure in his eyes as he watched me war with that.

“I’ll be... *this* kind of Sweetheart for you,” I forced out at last.

“And you’ll tell the others that’s what you believe I need?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll hear that apology now.”

My pulse was roaring in my ears. I just had to get through this. Just had to say those two words and then it would be over.

“I’m...” I took a breath, chest catching with rage as he watched me struggle, a smirk upon his lips. He waited.

Just say it.

I could feel the last tug of Alastor’s command shoving me onward.

Just fucking say it, and everything will be over. *Then you can stay here with Drake.*

“I’m... *sorry.*”

Finally, Alastor’s command released me.

Rook grinned, then got to his feet, stepping away from me and waving his hand in dismissal. “I wasn’t all that impressed,” he said. “We go again tomorrow. Do better. I *might* sign you then.”

The world around me melted away, red seeping into my vision.

I couldn’t tell why *that’s* what broke me, after months with Alastor.

I knew what I’d become. I knew I’d been crushed into something barely recognisable.

So why, after all this time, it was now that I saw her, I didn't know. But in that moment, I saw the me that my mother would see.

A wreck.

Debased and desperate, clad in lace and grovelling for a man who was supposed to cherish me.

Rage shattered my control like a bullet through a glass wall.

I moved before he could even turn, red searing my vision. I grabbed that stupid fucking Radiant Aura trophy on his bedside table and I was out on his balcony before I heard his shout.

His aura split the air, just too late. I crashed into the edge of the balcony, flinging the trophy from it with a scream.

He reached me the same moment it shattered on the concrete drive below. I spun, but his fists closed around my arms, a snarl on his face. *"Fuck you!"*

Reality caught up to me from one side and memories collided with the other. Rook's eyes burned with cold fury, his aura shivering in the air, a threat like no other.

Terror stilled me, a fist around my heart.

Like a fucked up time loop, I'd become the woman who'd just pushed me to fling his trophy from the balcony.

His chest heaved, wild eyes darting between mine, and each one of his movements was a shot of adrenaline in my veins.

Dread scorched my system, and I knew what came next, I'd seen it a thousand times. I'd never been the one here, though, could never have predicted a fear so absolute I couldn't even cry.

Then he let me go, taking a step back as if it was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

I didn't understand, so I just did what she'd always taught me.

I ducked around him and ran.

SEVENTEEN

ROOK

Vex was a phantom, burned into my brain.

I hadn't felt anger like I had tonight, not in a long time. There were a *lot* of things I'd felt tonight that I hadn't felt in a long time. Or forever.

Again, I'd lost.

You scared her, too... A little voice whispered.

I shoved it away. She didn't deserve an ounce of pity after what she'd done.

In the rich evening light, I collected every piece I could find of the shattered trophy scattered across the driveway, placing it carefully into a bag.

Still, images of her flashed across my mind.

Vex, in that thin, dark dressing gown that hung open to smooth skin and golden lace beneath. She was so... unexpected. With chipped black polish on her nails, her hair tied up in a messy bun that had no right to be as cute as it was. I thought I might have stared at her hair as much as I stared at the lace that hugged a perfect ass as I'd stolen a look.

Fuck me.

There were pretty women everywhere, why was *she* different?

I couldn't afford this right now.

Five years, I'd been in this pack, eighteen years old and determined to make it work—even if that meant entering a bond with Ebony.

Five years, I'd been climbing this tower of fame, trying to compete with the expectations that had weighed me down since the moment my aura had shown.

I was successful, desired, with another award to claim at the Diamond Tides Gala only weeks away. Of all my brothers, acting means something to me. Drake had natural talent, and I'd never been able to determine if he loved it as much as he was good at it. Ebony and Love were good at a dozen things they could take to a professional level. But acting was mine. The only thing that had ever freed me, made me feel as though I was worth something more.

It was what I was made for. The only thing I was made for.

And with the Dragon Hunters movies on the horizon, I was on the brink of victory, the likes of which even my parent pack—elite and prestigious as they were—couldn't comprehend. I was on the brink of proving to them that acting hadn't been the wrong choice, or a mistake. It was the best decision I'd ever made.

They were wrong.

It had been the right choice for me—a choice I wasn't just worthy of, but that might make me ask if they were worthy of me.

And on the precipice of all that was Vex, stealing the world from beneath me, demanding attention and doubt and insecurity when I shouldn't have attention at all for someone like her.

Why *was* I offering her attention at all?

I was above it. Yet, something about her gripped me.

That something had *almost* made it impossible to not just sign her in tonight, when she agreed to be this kind of Sweetheart for me again, with golden lace flashing, her dressing gown hanging from one shoulder.

All I had to do was walk to the office and drop my signature on that contract.

Fuck no.

Not after tonight.

Relief flooded my system as I finally found the piece of the trophy I'd been so desperate to get back.

It was in the grass, the wood of the base split from the impact, but the plate on the front was saved.

VEX

I fled the house, taking the spiral stairs by twos. I barely looked back until I was out in the warm summer night air, until I was past the pool and into the back gardens.

I could sense him on my heels.

A phantom.

A nightmare.

A part of me knew he wasn't there, knew that I'd left Rook behind in his room. Yet I couldn't stop. The looming walls of the maze appeared before me, offering a strange safety with three tall entrances. I didn't slow down until I was deep within the tall walls of green.

Finally, panting and shaking, I collapsed to the grass between pristine, towering hedges.

There, I wept, great ugly sobs as I buried my fist in my mouth as I screamed with frustration for what I'd done.

I'd been standing on the precipice of victory—one step away. And then I'd shattered it into a million pieces.

All for what?

Pride?

This nightmare coming for me was of my own making.

EIGHTEEN

DAY SIX

DRAKE

I woke up in the morning to find Vex in my embrace.

I'd have believed she slipped into my arms through the night, and if it had been the truth, I wouldn't have been mad. Except, that wasn't the case.

I was on her side of the bed. She was facing the wall, and I had her all bundled up in my arms.

Uh...

Okay. Maybe we *were* in desperate need of a Sweetheart.

Just not her.

A different Sweetheart that Ebony didn't hate.

A low, wounded sound slipped from my chest, and I was tugging her closer.

Shit.

She stirred, and I hadn't let her go.

For whatever crazy reason, I didn't want a different Sweetheart. Not when I'd met Vex. None of them had been like this.

We'd had kind, sexy, fun, and outgoing Sweethearts. There'd been nothing wrong with any of the betas who'd turned up at our door for this job. Yet, never had I felt a connection with them like I did her.

She'd texted me in the middle of the night, asking if I'd come to her room. I had been asleep, but her number was set to ring no matter if my phone was on silent, so I'd woken to the text. I'd entered her room within the minute, crossing to her bed to make sure she was okay. She had been... kind of. Face free of makeup, she'd looked... tired, the faintest trace of red to her eyes as if she'd been crying. I hadn't asked her about it, and she hadn't told me a thing.

She didn't have to. She wouldn't be here long, and I would be whatever she needed for that time.

My signature still wasn't on the paper, and I was feeling the weight of that. But I'd told her I would only sign her if at least one of my brothers accepted her.

They hadn't. Not yet, and I couldn't sign her in without that.

I couldn't be the only one who wanted her here.

Laying as I was right now, arms wrapped around her waist, I really, really should let her go. But I was captivated by her. Her dark eyelashes fluttered, and then she blinked a few times, hand coming up to rub her eyes. I loved how soft she looked without her makeup, just as much as I liked her sharp edges with it.

There was a pinch to her brow as she tried to figure out what was happening.

That the alpha sleeping in her bed was cuddling her without asking first.

And he was completely aware of it and still hadn't let go.

I shifted back in an instant, finally coming to myself, but she grabbed my arms, halting me. A smile crossed her face, delicate fingers dropping to where my arms encircled her as she peered up at me with those breathtaking chocolate eyes.

A purr rumbled to life in my chest.

I'd have to start making a list of ways to get her to smile for me more. Apparently—*thank god*—unrequested cuddles were on that list.

I wouldn't be telling the others.

"I uh... just woke up... like this," I said quickly.

"It's nice," she said, wriggling closer.

The feeling of her ass on my crotch sent blood rushing to embarrassing places.

Shitcakes.

She paused, the smile on her face getting nervous as her gaze darted to me again.

“Sorry,” I said, voice hoarse.

I was obscenely aroused, I could even feel blood rushing to my knot, which usually didn't happen from just normal arousal.

“I really should...” I tried again to pull away, but this time she turned. Facing me, she wrapped one leg around my hips, pressing her face into the crook of my neck as she gripped me close. For a moment, I felt a flutter of nerves, not used to this sort of closeness. But she was right here in front of me. I could see her. My hands were on her hips right now.

“You smell really good,” she whispered.

I smiled, nerves ebbing away. God, I was a mess, though she obviously didn't care.

She leaned back, hands planted on my chest as she stared up at me, pupils blown, lips parted just slightly.

“You're beautiful,” I told her.

Her chest heaved, and I could see the peaks of her nipples through the loose t-shirt she wore. “If...” She seemed to be trying to collect herself. “If you signed the contract, we could do this every morning.”

“Don't say that,” I groaned.

But... she was right.

Joy collided with grief.

It was the thought of having her here, crashing into the realisation of how fucking lonely I was.

I'd slept better with her than I had in as long as I could remember.

“You're very hard to say no to.”

Again, she gave me one of those bright smiles that sent butterflies scattering in my stomach.

“That's the point,” she told me. “Tell me you'll say yes?”

Fuck.

Fuck.

Yet... now more than ever, looking up at her perfectly sweet expression, lip caught in her teeth, I was stalled by a moment of dread imagining her stuck with Ebony.

And he'd be so angry if we signed her on.

"I... can't," I said. My heart shattered at the disappointment that crumbled her expression.

"I can deal with Ebony."

"You don't know him."

Her palms withdrew from my chest as she folded her arms, a pout on her face.

"That's *my* problem," she said.

"It's all of our problem if there's a body to clean up."

I saw a flicker of fear on her face. "He wouldn't go that far."

"I don't know how far Ebony will go. None of us do, and we live in a bond with him."

I had to make her understand.

I didn't believe Ebony lived his life with ill intent, but when he wanted something he didn't have the same limitations as most of us.

She considered that for a long moment, and I saw that vulnerability I had when she'd told me how much she needed this job.

I sat up, so she was caught against me, still straddling my hips as I cupped her cheek and got her to look up at me.

"What happens if you don't get the contract?" I asked.

I saw the smallest flicker in her expression, like everything safe had just cracked beneath her feet and she was in freefall.

"Nothing... happens..." she whispered. "Everything goes back to how it was before I turned up here."

I frowned.

Most Sweethearts came from well off families. They were vetted to make sure they were the best options for packs like us. I'd scrolled what I could of the social media I could find, and public posts were mostly limited to her travels. Rich girl box checked, even if she was a little wilder and willing to step out of her comfort zone. Not all the places she'd been were the type to have five star resorts.

But rich didn't mean happy, and there was something lurking under the surface here. Something she wasn't willing to tell us.

"Is Ebony better than what it was?"

She opened her mouth as if the answer was too easy, then shut it. Her eyes darted to the side as if she were going to run.

"Were you in danger?" I asked.

I wished she'd just tell me.

"No." She swallowed. "No, nothing like that..."

"Help me understand."

What was it? My mind was running in a million directions. She was trying to start over, but from what? Burden of family pressure? An ex?

"I'm just... never going to get an opportunity like this again."

"You don't know that—"

"I *do* know that," she said sharply. Then she winced. "This... This was kind of it for me." She smiled weakly. "I know that sounds pathetic..."

"It doesn't."

"I didn't even expect it to go like this at all. But now... Well, you're more than I expected." She trailed off. "It's worse, because..." She couldn't finish that.

Because it was close.

Because if this had gone the way it did with every other Sweetheart, if we'd all said no, and Ebony had simply got bored of her, she could walk away knowing it never would have worked.

Instead, she was going to leave here knowing it hadn't gone like it usually did. That maybe she'd been so close to claiming this and escaping whatever she was running from.

My heart sank.

"You told me you'd consider it," she whispered.

"I did, Vex." It was the truth. I'd considered it for every second that had gone by in the last few days.

She nodded, working so hard to hide how hurt she was.

She shouldn't be.

She should be trembling in my arms, making me feel as terrible as she could possibly manage.

"Okay," she said instead, with a weak smile. "Thank you."

VEX

I needed to do something drastic, or I'd never get that signature.

Rook was out.

Love was out.

Drake was out.

Ebony was my only hope.

He had been different from the beginning, as if he existed in opposition to me. He was driven by his own instinct, and in that, there was solace. As wild and crazy as it sounded, I decided that if any of them were to make a mad choice, it would be him. So, with still no signatures on the contract, I waited until the evening for him to go to the gym.

Then I slipped down the hallway and into his room, the one place I'd been forbidden from. I was here to bait him, to draw him out of his shell and force him to make a choice about me.

I had a wild idea of how I might do that.

Ebony had tried to scare me off since the moment we'd met, and the daring part of me—the part that trusted in this scent match—believed he was running from the draw he felt toward me. And if I was wrong, and it wasn't that, well, I was fucked anyway.

I'd tried to piece together a picture of Ebony, both from my experience, and from what I'd managed to get from Drake.

I'd only found one solid conclusion: Ebony liked a challenge.

So here I was, staring around his room and running on pure instinct. I was his omega—his *mate*. I should be able to figure this out.

Each step I took into the room was tense, my hairs standing on end at the thought of him returning from the gym early. I was poking a bear—that was fully decided—but when I did, this web of a plan had to be fully formed.

His room was immaculate, and eerily empty. If I thought Love's room had been clinical, it was nothing to this.

My bare feet pressed to cool marble as I stared around the space designed with darks and neutrals.

Twilight grass rose in the air, a whispered warning that I was in Ebony's territory. For a moment, I fought an insane urge to scent mark everything in reach. I couldn't, not with the scent blockers I was on—and that wasn't the kind of instinct I needed right now.

There was a kitchenette similar to the one in the living room outside, which neither Rook nor Love's room had hosted. Blackout curtains were tugged aside to reveal a balcony beyond which faced the drive. There was a simple patio set out there, though it was empty of decor. Within was the same cove of couches and wall-mounted TV every bedroom seemed to have. I spotted a set of night clothes folded neatly on the perfectly made bed, and there was an empty record player beside a large set of drawers made of dark wood.

Everything in here was simple and clean. The marble was swept—though Drake had told me no cleaner was allowed in.

I entered the bathroom to find it was the same. Counters were almost bare, only the minimum outside drawers or shelves.

As a polar opposite to Rook, Ebony's organisation was clearly important to him.

Finally, I felt an instinct rising, one that—I hoped—was pointing me in the right direction.

Ebony had rejected me from the instant he'd met me. I couldn't scream the truth at him and make him see me for what I was—someone who should matter. Instead, I was

trapped between vicious commands, and a mate determined to make me feel like nothing.

With perhaps all too much vindictive satisfaction, I wrecked it all.

I ripped records and books from the shelves, and scattered them upon the marble floor. I found his walk-in wardrobe as disturbingly perfect as the rest of the space, with drawers of wrist watches and cufflinks, and iron straight outfits, all hung in coloured order. It was cathartic, tearing his clothing free and redecorating his room with the contents. I made my way to the bathroom, finding delight in destroying what was his.

Last, I grabbed the blankets from his bed and left them strewn across the floor. I stopped at last, when I opened the drawer beside his bed, finding it full of the strangest set of objects I'd ever seen.

A blade of dark wood and metal.

A crumpled, fading train ticket.

A broken cassette.

A USB.

But my eye was drawn to one thing in particular.

The most important thing in the room, the omega side of me knew it soul deep. The object that caught my eye was the rusting length of metal. I recognised the strangely shaped head.

That... was fucked up.

It was a cleaving iron.

It was a tool alphas used if they wanted to drop out of their pack, named after the act of cleaving. It involved an iron like this, but white hot and pressed against flesh to sever the bonds to pack mates. The head was an intricately decorated triangle. Three times, an alpha would press it to their flesh to shatter their pack bonds, and it was an act that could be deadly.

I examined it, something cold coiling in my chest. From any picture I'd seen, the iron was smooth metal, but this one

looked worn, silver marred with black—a sign that it had been used.

What did it mean that Ebony had something like this in his room?

I was drawn to it, though unable to help myself as I turned it in my grip, instincts in overdrive, as if I could feel the weight of its importance.

Everything else was in place.

His room was pure destruction. And now, I had found my target.

This was the item I had come for.

EBONY

I returned to find my room in disarray.

It was hard to quite convey the rage that doused my system as I looked around, the place that was supposed to be *mine*, turned upside down.

Vex.

I knew it, even if I hadn't caught the trace of cherry blossom lingering in the air.

I scanned the room for an age before I found the note.

*Catch me before I find the middle,
and I'll tell you where it is xx*

Something strange and foreign lit my veins as I read the note over and over. It took me too long to understand.

I got there in the end, scanning the room until I realised what was missing. It was strangely unsurprising that she'd managed to find the most precious thing I owned, as if it was natural.

She was in tune with me.

When I did confirm it, a thrill like I'd never felt seeped through me.

A game. One *she'd* set up?

I was crossing my room before I could catch myself. A game meant an even playing field.

A game meant I could win.

I knew where I'd find her, and sure enough, I caught her out in the garden. She was sitting before the dying flames in the firepit behind the pool. She looked up at me, lifting a stick and poking the flames.

A taunt.

A low growl rose in my throat as I watched her, hearing the patio door latch behind me. Her chocolate eyes found me in a moment, wide as she took me in.

She knew.

I was going to fucking destroy her—and she'd dared me to.

She was on her feet in a moment, a tantalising figure in the firelight: her loose shirt silhouetted, along with the curve of her bare legs.

Prey.

That was the last thing I thought before she turned and ran toward the maze. The movement set off every one of my instincts.

My aura hit the air, and it was the last thing I felt before I lost myself completely.

LOVE

I felt something I never had before.

My brother, the man I'd given everything for, stoked the flames of something that might just be hope.

Something real.

Alive.

And I felt it through the bond in one soaring instant of peace. Before he grabbed our connection and sealed it shut, blocking us out just like he always had.

NINETEEN

VEX

My heart thundered in my chest, bare soles pounding against cool grass.

It was just me, in the dead of night, fleeing through a maze from a psychopath I'd just stolen from.

A psychopath that the universe had decided was my fated mate.

I crashed into the wall of a hedge, launching all of my momentum into the first turn.

Ebony's aura shivered in the air: a threat. But if I could reach the next corner, he wouldn't know which way I'd gone.

Another cross road, and fifty per cent became twenty-five.

Then twelve.

I'd done it. I slowed at last, a wild grin on my face as I turned, half expecting to see him on my heels. Instead, the maze was quiet, his aura thinning in the air around me.

It was dark, and around me rose the scent of flowers and grass beneath a blanket of night, no sound but my footsteps and the rustle of my own arm catching the scattering of a million tiny leaves that made up the maze walls.

He didn't know where I was.

I hadn't thought too hard about what he'd do if he caught me—I really, really hadn't.

I'd stolen from his room and left it in shambles. But I was desperate and running out of time.

I had one night left, and he was my only hope.

It had been the most precious item I'd taken—my omega instincts told me that.

And Ebony Starless might truly kill me for it.

EBONY

The blood pounding in my ears was deafening. It elevated every time I heard the soft padding of footsteps.

Everything else melted away.

Who I was, what I'd become. There was no fame. No chains holding me down, suffocating me.

I was on the hunt. She was my prey, and I wouldn't lose. I hit an intersection and stopped. I listened to the low rustle of wind through the trees.

Footsteps.

I chose my turn, launching into a sprint.

I'd win. She didn't have an aura like mine. I liked fair games, but she'd set the goalposts—she knew what I was, and hadn't ruled it out.

Did she truly think she could win?

I hunted for a few silent minutes, fixated on nothing but sight, sound, and smell, prowling past each corner with a vicious need to see her around it.

It wasn't until I saw the flash of silver-brown hair around a corner—all my instincts switching to overdrive—that I realised how little I'd considered what I would do if I caught her.

A laugh escaped my lips—something real, adrenaline in my veins like a drug. I launched after her, knowing it was over.

When I caught her, she'd tell me where she'd taken my trophy.

I rounded the corner to find a dead end, and there she was, spinning as she collided with the hedge, her eyes wide, her chest heaving.

For a moment, I was caught with what came after...

After she'd given me what I wanted?

What then?

But my mind was blank as I stared at Vex and she stared back.

I didn't move, mind extrapolating every piece of the environment as she watched me; a deer in headlights. She knew it was over.

Heat seeped into my veins, smothering years of silence and boredom, electricity lighting every pathway to my brain.

She'd challenged me and lost.

She was fucking mine.

Still I waited, unmoving, every instinct on high alert. She took the slightest step back, finding nowhere to go, and I shifted, lowering my centre of balance, ready to strike.

She froze once more, her breathing picking up, her eyes still fixed on me. I watched them flicker, just for the briefest moment, to the ground at her side.

That was all.

Enough to release every coil holding me in place.

I launched toward her.

She moved in a flash with a gasp of fear that struck me soul deep, diving for the grass and throwing herself between the roots of the hedges below.

No.

Not a fucking chance.

I was halfway toward her, shredding grass, heart in my throat.

She was fucking *mine*.

I'd have her.

No one else in the world would lay a finger on this woman before I did.

I made a dive for the ground just as she scrambled through. My fist closed around her ankle. I heard her cry, something that sent white hot blood through every nerve ending, setting them on fire.

THUD!

Pain blossomed across my face. Her foot collided with my cheek and pain erupted across it.

I wouldn't let go. I was dragging her back.

Terrified breaths sounded, and again—

"FUCK!" My curse slipped out as her foot caught me on the chin again. This time my grip loosened, the world spinning.

No! I wouldn't—

But then she was gone. I could see her through the thicket of roots and branches, scrambling onto her back, chocolate eyes wide and fixed on me as her beautiful chest heaved.

Fuck.

Fuck!

My aura flared, and then I was throwing myself through the hedges, not a fucking care for the workmanship. Not a care for anything other than the woman on the other side.

With a terrified noise, she turned, scrambling back as she realised what I was doing. But it was too late.

I had her.

I launched through the hedge, smashing branches and leaves as I staggered out, looking around. She was on her feet, running, only—

Shit!

I launched myself after her on instinct, already knowing the truth. She backed up, almost tripping on stone stairs to the central gazebo. I could see the Alpha's Hook sticking from the stone platform at the top. We were in the middle of the maze.

She whimpered in fear as I slammed her to the concrete, both of us breathing like we'd run a marathon.

It didn't matter.

She'd baited me. Drawn me into chasing her on this last stretch, knowing if I went for her, and she got through, she'd won already.

We stared at each other for what felt like an age, and then a wild giggle bubbled up her throat. I wasn't sure if it was honest, or pure terror.

"Let me go," she whispered, between a question and a demand, as if she wasn't sure.

I couldn't move. Couldn't even think of releasing my grip on her wrists right now.

"You lose," she told me.

No. Not fucking possible.

"Who would have thought the great Ebony Starless was a sore loser?" she taunted.

A low growl ripped from my throat as I stared at her, blood still hot from the chase, making it hard to think straight.

I couldn't lose.

Not when it came to her.

She was it: my perfect prey.

I let go of her wrists, but her reaction was instant. Primal. She gripped my shirt, eyes still wide, a low whine slipping from her chest that sounded a thousand times more omega than beta.

I didn't care if she'd done it on purpose, something came over me. I had her hair fisted in my grip and I drew her close.

Then I crushed my lips to hers.

VEX

I needed him like the blood in my veins or air in my lungs. All dignity forgotten, I would have let Ebony Starless do anything he wanted to me in that moment.

Twilight grass surrounded me, his scent a match to the maze as he kissed me like I was the last person on earth. When he finally let me go, I was breathless.

His expression was dangerous, eyes much too cold for someone who'd just kissed with that much passion.

Was he in shock?

He kind of looked like it, though he was gathering himself quickly. "Where is it?" he growled.

"You'll have to win it back another way."

He stared at me, eyes glittering as if my words truly mattered. I saw the flash of fury, his grip tensing where he held me, and my lungs turned to stone.

There was nothing in this world I wouldn't believe him capable of.

Then he he shifted back, gaze recalculating.

He... *was* a rule follower, then. He would respect the game I'd set.

Another laugh—this one much more manic—bubbled up as I realised I'd baited him into this, and truly hadn't known the answer.

Desperate fucking idiot.

"Why did you have a cleaving iron in your room?" I asked, needing to shift him further from whatever had just possessed him. "And why does it look *used*?"

His smile was quite genuine, and in that it was terrifying.

“The alpha who *used* that was on his knees before me as I forced him to cleave from his pack.”

I shuddered at those words. They were dark. Impossible. Sick. I could see the victory dancing in his eyes as he said them.

He was broken, and I shouldn't find that beautiful. Yet that, it seemed, was what the universe had destined me for. So when Ebony kissed me again, pressing his tongue between my parted lips, exploring my mouth like a man starving, I groaned, wrapping my legs around his waist. I sank into the moment as if there were no others.

As if there was no pack, lurking on the other end of a bond, their claim already staked.

There was no threat.

No pain.

No hiding behind scent blockers and contact lenses.

Just me and the alpha fate had decided I belonged to.

And that was enough.

Until the kiss broke and his breath was warm against my ear. “I'm not signing you, little beta.”

I drew back, still captivated by his storm-cloud eyes. I swallowed, trying to fix my expression, as if he wasn't crushing my last hope into a million pieces.

I forced a smile on my face—as if it meant nothing at all. “Then I guess you'll never get it back.”

TWENTY

ROOK

I slipped down to the office in the dead of night.

Madness gripped me; an instinct I couldn't shake.

Vex would be gone tomorrow.

But I wasn't done.

I couldn't bear the idea that she was going to leave this house the victor. She'd rejected me, threatened me, ignored me, and then... last night.

Fuck.

What if I never saw her again?

A little flutter of something desperate rose in my chest at that thought. I just... didn't want to risk never living it down.

Only, when I cracked the office door, there was already someone inside.

Drake was sliding into a seat at the table right in front of where her contract lay. "Rook?"

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

He stared at me for a long moment, and I thought I might know the answer before he gave it. "You can't do this," he said.

"I fucking well can."

"Why? When you don't even like her?"

I didn't have a reasonable answer, and Drake knew that as well as I did, but I still locked down my side of the bond tight so he wouldn't feel any of it.

Drake was sweet, and we were fucking assholes—we all knew that, but I still didn't like him prodding at it.

He sounded desperate. "The second she's in, you won't be able to get rid of her—not if she doesn't want to leave."

I shrugged. Did Drake *really* think I hadn't considered that?

I *acted* playboy, but I wasn't stupid.

It wasn't a concern.

If I gave her this contract, she was going to have to work fucking hard if she wanted it to remain intact. I'd have a leg up on Ebony, and fuck if I wouldn't rub that in his face.

I took a step toward Drake, but he was on his feet, and the envelope remained on his side of the table.

"You're a piece of shit, Rook."

I faltered at that, feeling the truth of Drake's words through the bond.

"Don't fucking sign it. Not for your ego."

"My ego?" I cocked an eyebrow with a half smile, circling the table. Super fucking noble of him to be here, but it wouldn't change anything.

He shifted defensively, eyes darting to the envelope on the table. He could have hidden it, but it would go directly against Love's orders: that contract had to remain on that table until the week was up. Another provision Love had made to screw over Ebony which was causing chaos now that it came to Vex.

"Come on mate," I said. "She's been here a week. Why do you care so much?"

Drake didn't seem to have an answer to that, but I could see the flash of fear in his eyes.

He *did* care about her.

That irritated me because I knew she cared about him, too. I wasn't used to feeling jealous over a woman's affection.

Still, if Drake did care so much, why the fuck was he here? Nobility would only get him so far—and it certainly wouldn't get him this girl if he pulled shit like this.

"If I sign it, you can cuddle her all you want," I said. "Then we'll both get a piece of that sweet beta—"

Drake's aura blazed through that space in a flash. It was all I could process before I felt the splitting pain in my jaw.

The blow was hard enough to send me crashing to the ground. My aura came out too late, steadying the spinning world as I turned on him.

Had Drake just... *punched* me?

He'd been the last to join us, but still in four years being bound to him, I'd never seen him as the aggressor. I'd barely seen him use his aura, let alone throw a punch.

His low growl echoed through the space. "You're *not* signing it."

I cracked a smile, still trying to catch a read on him, but his side of the bond was now locked down harder than I'd felt in years.

I didn't need the bond to see how serious he was—that was stark in the fury burning his eyes.

"You're really going to fight me for this?" I asked.

"I'll put you both through the wall before I let you or Ebony destroy her."

"You're being melodramatic as fuck, dude," I said rubbing my cheek.

More goddamned ice packs, for fuck's sake.

And the Diamond Tide Gala was coming up—I had a bloody award to claim.

"We can't have anyone else in this pack," Drake snarled. "I don't give a shit how lonely you are."

"Lonely?" I choked, a grin spreading on my face.

I wasn't *lonely*.

I was a bonded alpha, and the world was literally my fucking oyster. I could fuck whoever I wanted whenever I wanted to.

"You're going to bind her to Ebony—and for what?" Drake demanded. "We have as much as we're ever going to

get. There's no room for anyone else."

I stared at him.

I understood, truly.

We were a mess. A bunch of strange circumstances that had left us tied to a man like Ebony. There weren't many alphas or omegas on the planet who would accept a bond like that.

I'd chosen this with my eyes wide open—I'd been friends with Love my whole life and bonding with Love meant Ebony. Love was bound to him by blood. And Drake and Ebony... they had something different. I'd never found out how much Drake knew before he joined, but he cared about Ebony. Always had.

"She can't be stuck with him because of your pride," Drake hissed.

"She's *choosing* this," I laughed. "What do you think that contract is?"

But I realised, as I said the word contract, how much I hadn't even been thinking of it. Both me and Drake were talking as if Vex was going to enter the bond.

Sweethearts were bonded sometimes, but not always.

Yet, without a shadow of a doubt, if I signed the contract, I pictured her in the bond.

"You're seriously making this challenge?" I asked.

I couldn't help the little thrill of my alpha side as Drake squared me up in answer. He might be the sweetest, but none of us were soft. I'd been born to a pack of the most ambitious, unhinged alphas you could find—I'd never stood a chance.

But it's how we'd all reached these heights: we were determined, driven, always on the edge of cracking—directing it into the grind instead of less palatable areas of society. Drake was the best at hiding it, but I saw it in his eyes right now.

Well.

Shit.

He *was* completely goddamned serious. “If I win,” he growled. “You don’t sign.”

EBONY

I counted every second that passed as if they were numerals carved my skin.

I picked up every strewn item in my quarters; tidying, cleaning, letting the time slip away.

Then I sat on the edge of my bed in silence. I just had to wait for the first light of morning.

Survive that long without stepping downstairs and leaving my signature on that contract, and I could sleep.

When I woke, it would be over.

That shouldn't be hard. The theory wasn't hard.

No one else had told her they'd sign her. If they had, she wouldn't have come to me tonight with such a desperate play.

Survive until the morning, and I was safe.

But as the night crept on, my mind began to spiral, demanding of me what I knew I shouldn't give.

There was a feral part of my brain that needed her. I'd felt alive tonight, for the first time in memory.

Truly alive.

Yet, that was power I could never give to another.

So, I sat in silence until the first sound of a birdsong, and the lightest crack of dawn.

At last, I lay down, shut my eyes and let sleep steal me away.

TWENTY-ONE

DAY SEVEN

DRAKE

“Are you okay?”

Those words, along with gentle hands, shook me awake.

I blinked tired eyes and found myself in the office, slumped against the resin table. I turned my head, stiff and uncomfortable, searching for the source of the melodic voice.

I ached everywhere.

I’d never been as physically strong as the others. I wasn’t built for fighting—that’s what my mom always told me. Except, last night something in me had cracked for the pair of rich brown eyes holding mine in concern right now.

Rook hadn’t gone easy either, but I’d refused to go down.

The envelope was tucked beneath my arms.

Untouched.

“I’m...” My throat was raw and stiff.

I’d fought Rook... I’d fought my own pack mate, and I’d won. Despite my aching body, I felt strangely... alive. Like I was myself in a way I hadn’t been in a long long time.

And that meant nothing, because I knew Vex would hate me forever.

“I’m... sorry.” My voice was rough.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered.

The world was steady, and I had a pounding headache. She hadn’t taken her concerned eyes from me. Hadn’t even glanced down to the envelope that I knew sealed her fate.

I just shook my head.

I didn’t have it in me to explain. She would be heartbroken. This contract meant more to her than she admitted to me.

But... I swallowed. I couldn't watch her with the others. I couldn't let them become the nightmares I'd fled. I couldn't watch her suffer at the hands of men I was bound to.

Her face was pale as she slid into the chair at my side. Finally, she looked down at the envelope.

She was silent, as if she knew what I'd done. Her fingers trembled as she picked it up and held it close to her chest. She reached for the flap, then hesitated, eyes drawn back to me as if she couldn't bear to see it for herself.

I shook my head.

A confirmation of what I knew she feared.

I'm sorry.

I wanted to say it again, but I wouldn't. She'd heard, and it broke her.

I wouldn't rub it in.

"Did...?" Again she trailed off, eyes falling on the upturned chair at the end of the room. We'd taken most of the fight outside, but evidence remained.

"Rook," was all I could say.

She bit her quivering lip so hard I spotted a bead of blood. "I'm..." she began, then trailed off before trying again. "I'm going to go on a walk."

Her voice was thick, as if it was taking everything she had not to burst into tears. My heart cracked in two, seeing her pain. Knowing it was because of me.

"I'll... get my stuff when I'm back," she said, voice now nothing but a husk.

I nodded.

She wanted space.

I got that.

She stood, still clutching the envelope to her chest in delicate fingers. She was the most precious thing I'd ever laid

eyes on, in a casual oversized band shirt and shorts, with those black combat boots she favoured.

Kindred, beautiful, free. And she'd hate me forever.

But I'd make sure she was alright, I owed her that for stealing away this chance.

She'd told me she would never have another opportunity like this again, but I wouldn't let that happen. I had endless contacts, an ocean of opportunities—ones far more fitting for her than a Sweetheart position.

I'd make sure she got the world.

That world just couldn't have this pack in it.

VEX

Two Months Ago

I sat on Alastor's lap, silent and trembling as live music played on from below, flinching every time his lips brushed the mark he'd left.

I was still in a blindfold dampened by the few tears I couldn't keep back.

For a bond to stick between alpha and omega, one bite had to be on the neck. But Alastor had bitten me in the only place possible to hide. He'd bitten me on the back of my neck.

The bond was fresh, and navigating it was hard. It took a while to determine that there were four other alphas in this twisted bond with me. I had to figure this out because I needed to close it off. I didn't want any of them feeling what I was.

Finally, I managed to get a grip on my end and slam it closed.

"Impressive," Alastor said.

I clenched my jaw, ignoring the open offering of his response to that through the bond: a flash of lust.

Disgust turned my stomach, but before I could check if I'd kept the bond shut, he was whispering in my ear, "Maybe you'd be interesting to keep after all."

Keep?

Fear paralysed me.

It was one thing to be dark bonded to a pack I didn't want for the rest of my life, but there was worse that could happen. I'd heard horror stories of gold packs bonded for fun, only to be killed when the pack got bored.

There were many places a gold pack omega could end up, but I had just landed in the worst of them. For the first time in

my life, a purr of terror caught in my throat before I stamped it down—something more vulnerable and broken than a sob, or even a whine.

As if reading my mind, the alpha at my back chuckled. “The plan is not to have you killed,” he told me, almost absent in tone.

“W-why then?” I asked.

“Because, little seductress,” the pack lead said, “we have a job for you.”

I’d failed at that job.

I was going back to them.

Stale Cigs: Bring it to me.

The order had popped up on my phone this morning, short and simple, and he’d followed it with an address. I recognised it the moment I tapped on the map. It was the strip with the cafe Drake had taken me to the other day.

I’d... failed.

I’d been free of them only a few days, but it was enough to give me the space I needed for terror to creep back in.

I was no longer numb from shock and hatred, not with the comfort Drake had offered.

No crying, I begged myself.

There was a flare of pleasure from my pack lead in the bond every time he knew I was distressed. I didn’t want to give him that.

The sun was warm overhead as I walked with the envelope clutched in shaking fingers. It felt so wrong and nice here, with pretty flowers along the walkways, cut grass and groomed bushes.

When I reached the strip, I didn’t need to be told which car waited for me. A long, black limo was pulled up in the lot.

I stared at it for as long as I could, before I felt the tug of his command restless in the back of my mind. Each step across the pavement was torture.

I didn't want to go back...

But as I approached, I heard the door latch click, and it swung open. His scent was the first thing I caught. Perhaps it might be nice in another world, a gentle, woody tobacco.

But not to me.

To me he was stale cigarettes, and had been since the first time I'd met him.

Alastor was the only one in the limo.

He wore one of his usual neat black suits and—just for me—a black mask over his face, obscuring his true identity.

Since the day they first brought me back to the room I'd been locked in, that mask was all I'd seen. He never took it off, and I knew now it was to make sure when this was all over, if they managed to blackmail the Crimson Fury pack, I would never find them.

None of that mattered anymore.

Old commands rose in my mind the second I entered the limo. I stepped toward him, bile rising in my throat at the thought of the ritual he forced me to perform every time I saw him.

Before I could do it, he lifted a hand.

“Not today, Vex. Come.” He nodded to the seat beside him.

I slipped into it, not feeling any less vulnerable. I'd grown up around violent alphas, but Alastor had proven more terrifying than even those nightmares.

I held the envelope out to him and he took it.

I shut my eyes, warring with tears as I heard him tug the contract out and unfold it. “You aren't giving me much hope here, Vex, when we both have so much staked on this deal.”

Silence followed for too long.

“Come here,” he breathed, and I opened my eyes to see him place a hand on his lap.

I shivered as I stood and then sunk against him, closing my eyes once more. His hands rested on my waist, holding me tight as I began to shake. Then his voice was so close to my ear, the faintest breath. “You’ve done so well, Vex.”

I froze, eyes flying open.

What?

I tried to turn subtly enough that he wouldn’t notice, my eyes scanning for the contract. It was laying on the seat at our side.

But the bottom wasn’t the blank white that had haunted every waking moment of the last week. There was one scrawled signature.

Love Hightower.

“The pack lead,” Alastor murmured. “So things weren’t as dire as you thought?”

Still, my mind was reeling.

Love had signed me in?

I was choked with that fact. Love had saved me. He didn’t know it—likely hadn’t even been thinking of me at all—but he *had* saved me. Fighting tears became all but impossible.

Finally, one of my mates had saved me.

“If all of your commands are still active for our meetings, does that mean you’re wearing my favourite?” Alastor asked.

I nodded, barely comprehending, mind still reeling from relief.

There was a pause.

“Are you going to make me ask?”

I... What?

Then I truly processed what he’d said. He wanted... *what?*

I stared up at him.

But I'd... done what he asked. I was going back. I was theirs, now—for a little while longer, at least.

When I found my voice, it was more bitter than I intended. "Yes."

But I would *never* do what he wanted unless he forced me. Only, I knew he enjoyed that even more.

Sure enough, he let out a low laugh. "Show me what you're wearing for me."

The command seized me and I shut my eyes, reaching for the zipper of my jacket and tugging it down. I didn't want to see what was beneath. I looked as little as possible when I'd pulled it from my suitcase and put it on earlier—after his text had come through.

After I'd known I was to see him, regardless of the contract. It was Alastor's favourite. A wine-red set, and the top was a lace bralette.

I flinched as his hand brushed my chin, lifting it as he examined me like a doll, his eyes drifting without apology down to the lace he forced me to wear for him. "You won't wear that for any of them," he murmured. Again, the command slid into my mind, little pincers stealing something from me each time they locked on. "Forgot to add that to the list."

I said nothing.

Just do what he wants and this will be over sooner... Then I can go back to my mates.

To Drake.

"Have you already?" Alastor asked.

I looked up at him sharply, a sneer on my lips

Had I worn *this* for them?

I would *never* put this on for my mates. Not even Ebony. I opened my mouth to say that, then shut it. He would take that as a dare.

Instead, I shook my head. I'd done what he wanted—beyond all odds. Why was he still taunting me?

I hated him.

I fucking hated him so much I wanted to scream.

“Good.” Alastor’s voice was low and melodic. So fucking pleased with me that it twisted my stomach. “Have they touched you?”

“I haven’t slept with any of them,” I said quickly.

“You can, you know?”

I shut my eyes, balling my fists, trying to keep my breathing steady.

I’d been better at this before, better at steeling myself when I hadn’t been around anything but his cruelty for months.

Ebony... I’d even take him over this. I didn’t care what he was, if he was my mate, he was better than this. Ebony cared—he might hate me, but I *meant* something to him.

I wasn’t an object. A tool. A weapon.

I was more to him than whispered threats and promises of men who didn’t care for me at all. Who saw me as nothing more than opportunity.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes,” I said, teeth gritted.

If I failed, if I returned to Alastor’s pack with nothing, I’d been told how I’d be punished.

“My pack will be so very unhappy, if you come back a failure—and you’ve given your body to them, too. What kind of omega would that make you? Not one deserving of any kind of prize...”

“So you’re going to get them to fall in love with you, next?” Alastor asked.

I nodded.

I... I could do it. My mates had chosen me.

Love had chosen me.

“You know you can’t do this by halves, Vex. It’s not enough for them to tolerate you.”

I nodded again, just wanting this meeting over.

He was right, though. There was only one bond the Crimson Fury pack could offer that would free me from this dark bond.

I’d needed them to love me enough that—when I was finally allowed to reveal what I was—they’d offer me the most valuable bond an omega could ask for.

A princess bond. A bond reserved only for mates.

Of the three bonds an omega could be given, it was the hardest ask. The opposite of a dark bond, which gave alphas all the power. A princess bond was a risk for a pack to offer. If I accepted, I would have more sway in the pack bond itself, and they’d never be able to claim another omega beyond me.

Normal, balanced bonds were the most common, while princess bonds were rare. Even more so to an omega like me. I was a gold pack omega by choice and necessity, so I’d never once considered a bond like that for myself. It was beyond even the most unreasonable dream.

Now, I would have to beg that of my mates, too, because sitting here, in Alastor’s arms, I knew there was no worse fate. I wanted what he did: for them to save me, no matter what I might cost them.

Yet, I knew the truth—the one I’d known since I’d first heard what I’d been bought for.

The alphas who’d bonded me were evil and cruel. I felt it lurking in the back of my mind every day. There was nothing they could want of my mates that would be easy to give.

If it was, a scent matched omega wouldn’t be at the heart of that exchange.

TWENTY-TWO

Dear Rook: For one second, I thought
I was safe. You ruined it.
Sometimes, you remind me of him.

I didn't come for your money or
your fame. I came for you. I hate
you for not seeing that.

I hate you.

I want to.

But I'm not even strong enough for
that...

VEX

When I returned to the house, Drake was waiting for me in the foyer. He followed me up the stairs, his face ashen, as if he knew the truth.

I handed him the contract, and he scanned it, his expression darkening with a muttered curse. He was running his fingers through his hair as he followed me into my room. I didn't look into the living room, not ready to see any of the others right now.

I turned to him when I heard the door close. I needed more from him than a worried expression.

“You don't want me.”

He met my gaze, wounded. There were bags under his eyes and he looked exhausted. “You *know* that's not true,” he rasped.

I shrugged, my throat thick. I wasn't sure of anything, not right now. I could still feel Alastor's touch on my waist, his commands low and taunting.

“Stay still, Vex. You're going to be gone for a while, I want pictures.”

I was shaken head to toe, still not totally grasping the truth: I wasn't going back.

Not yet.

I had a chance in this house full of monsters.

Drake reached out, though, tips of his fingers halting just before my cheek as if he weren't sure. I shifted forward before I could stop myself, leaning into that touch.

“I've got it now, okay? I know Love didn't sign it for *me*, but I need...” I swallowed, fingers lacing into his. “Can you just pretend, for me? I just need someone here not to hate me.”

“Fuck, Vex.” He shut his eyes, tugging me into a hug, and I clutched him. “There’s a selfish part of me that’s never been more happy,” he whispered. “But it doesn’t change how wrong this is.”

My heart settled. I needed to hear those words.

From just one of them.

It was enough.

Drake was looking around. “I’m staying with you today.”

“You should get some sleep.” I nodded toward my bed. He looked like hell. “I’ll just be here unpacking,” I said. It was time, at last, to empty my suitcase properly.

“I can help.”

But I was already tugging him toward the bed. “I can unpack myself.”

He didn’t put up a fight, and I wondered how much of the night he’d stayed up. To stop a signature that, by the looks of it, had been there the whole time.

He was out in moments, messy raven hair brushing his cheeks as he clutched one of my pillows in his arms. I shifted the duvet over him properly, unable to rip my gaze away as I held onto this moment.

I circled the bed, gathering pillows, then tucking one at his back and the other on the far side of his head in case he rolled over. The bed had been a mess from a restless night, and he deserved better. Then I re-adjusted the duvet again, so it was closer.

With each action it was like a warm breeze brushed my chest, loosening drug-smothered instincts.

My alpha.

He was mine. The only one who wanted me. The only one who liked me, with purple bruises visible on his cheek, neck, and fists. Ones he’d received fighting for me.

I wanted to burrow into the little cave of blankets I’d made and sink into his arms. To pretend, for a moment, that it was

all I needed for everything to be okay.

I didn't, because it wasn't.

Still, I had so far to go.

I put my earbuds in, but couldn't find a song I wanted to listen to, so I worked in numb silence, unpacking my suitcase for the first time.

My instincts weren't just muted, Alastor had explicitly told me to avoid nesting in case it drew suspicion. But it was still cathartic to finally unpack properly and find homes for all the clothing I'd brought. That, and Drake's blackcurrant wine filled the space, cooling my reeling nerves.

I missed my stuff. I'd bargained for very few things, but my outfits were one of them. They weren't from my home, though; Alastor had given me his phone and told me to put what I wanted into a cart. I picked out what looked familiar, but it didn't make up for my clothes, with all the right prints and inscriptions that I'd built over years.

I was half way unpacked when I found the right lyrics. It wasn't enough to want to put the song on, but I found a sliver of peace as I sung the words to my own melody, quiet as they were.

I was focused completely, folding clothing into another pile, finding the right note as I took the tune in a different direction. The result was that I jumped violently when I heard the door creak open.

Cutting off my song, I spun, t-shirt clutched in my fist and hoping for—well, I didn't know who I'd rather it was.

Love, maybe?

He'd given me the signature, so he wasn't liable to be angry today.

It was Rook, though, once more stepping in as if it was his room, eyes sweeping the space until he halted on Drake, and then found me. He didn't look pissed, not like I was expecting. Cocky might be the right word for it as he pushed the door

shut and crossed toward me, bringing with him that infuriatingly charming scent of caramel brandy.

I was on my feet in a second, shirt still clutched in my fist, but he just flung himself down on the couch beside my suitcase. He lazily threw his feet up on the arm rest, a picture of arrogance: messy dark hair, wearing a black bomber jacket with rolled up sleeves, and matching joggers.

“Don’t stop on my account,” he said. I could see a nasty bruise on his face. He’d fought Drake last night, I knew that.

“I’d like some peace,” I told him, fist still balled in my shirt.

He picked at a nail, ignoring that completely. “So you’re staying?”

I didn’t reply, not wanting to make a scene that might wake Drake. I’m sure if I did, Rook would back off, but he needed to catch up on his sleep. Plus, I could deal with Rook—I *had* to be able to deal with Rook because now I was officially his Sweetheart.

“I tried to sign you, you know?” he asked.

“But you didn’t. Love did. So I don’t owe you shit.” I didn’t know if *that* was the best way to start ‘dealing’ with him, but if anyone needed boundary setting, it was Rook.

He didn’t look deterred, though. “If you think that changes a damn thing, Baby Girl, you’re so wrong.” He grinned. “Look what just came in.” He held his phone out to me.

I stared at him, hating the twinkling delight in his eyes.

A part of me wanted to tell him I didn’t give a fuck, but the larger, self-preserving side knew I had to. I got to my feet and approached him before snatching the phone from his grip. Turning it, I scanned the email on the screen. It took me a while to process what I was reading.

My heart sunk in my chest.

I read over the email again. It was a detailed account written by Rook of the first night he’d turned up in my room. A detailed account of me threatening him. Beneath, he’d

added: *Would this be enough to blow up a Sweetheart contract?*

There was a reply.

Is this for real, Harrison? This could do a lot more than blow up her contract. Do you want me to bury her?

“This is bullshit.” My voice was hoarse.

“Eve is our lawyer on retainer. She doesn’t agree.”

Lawyer?

He’d gone to a *lawyer*?

The world spun around me as I read the words again, as if they might change this time.

‘...Just offering her help...’

‘...Reacted violently...’

I jumped as he tugged the phone from my hands.

“Not the greatest look for you,” he said.

I could barely breathe as I stared down at him.

I’d just got the contract—hadn’t even had a chance to process it was real, and now he was going to take it away.

He was going to take it away... I was going back to Alastor, after all.

“It’s not...” I tried to find my voice, my breathing tight. “You lied.”

He’d said he’d come in to offer me help, that I’d flipped on him for no reason.

“That *wasn’t* what happened,” I said.

He flashed me a half smile. “Not the way I remember it. We could ask the others, but they only turned up when you were threatening me.”

“I don’t...” I grit my teeth, mind still all over the place. And I couldn’t cry. Not right now. Not when he’d see it. “Why would you want to sign me in if—?”

“Shh, Baby Girl, calm down,” he murmured. I flinched as he placed his palms on my hips, tugging me between his legs. My hands landed on his but I still felt winded, frozen with terror. “That message is confidential,” he went on. “No one else knows about it.”

I looked between those warm chestnut eyes that matched his caramel scent. One that smothered me right now, edged with smug victory.

“And it stays that way so long as you behave for me, right?” he asked.

My panicked brain finally caught up to reality.

To the stupidly obvious thing I’d missed in my fear.

He wanted me acting like his fucking Sweetheart puppet just like he had the other night.

That’s what this was—*all* it was.

I was safe from Alastor.

The contract was still intact.

“Why?” I asked numbly. He’d gone to a lawyer. That was so much further than I’d imagined him going. He wanted to crush me, totally and completely after what I’d done, I could see it in his eyes.

“I like seeing you dance for me,” he said. “And you’ll be dancing for a long time before you’ve paid those debts you racked up.”

I swallowed. “What do you want?”

I knew, but I needed to hear him say it, so I could avoid fucking this up and risking him destroying the contract. I believed he would. He’d proven it today.

He was pissed, and he wanted revenge.

“It’s easy, Baby Girl,” he tugged me closer. “If I say jump, you say how high. If I want my room cleaned top to bottom three times over, you clean it. If I tell you I don’t like your outfit, you change it. If I want you on my lap while the others

are around, you climb onto my lap and you look fucking delighted about it.”

I grit my teeth, swallowing every furious instinct trying to claw its way up my throat. “*Okay.*” My fingers still bit down on the grip he had on my waist. “But I’m not sitting on your lap. I don’t want you touching me.”

He snorted, and I fought him as he dragged me down onto his lap with ease.

I snarled, chest heaving as I tried to shove backward, but he ignored me, closing his fist tight in my hair and holding me close. “You’re mine, little Sweetheart,” he murmured. “I can do whatever I want with my stuff.”

I couldn’t deal with this right now, not when I could still feel Alastor’s touch on me.

“I’ll do what you ask, but I’m not doing anything that involves—”

He clamped a hand over my mouth with a snort. “Don’t debase yourself, Vex. I already told you I don’t need blackmail for that. I could still have you begging for me if I wanted it.”

Fuck him.

He released my mouth and my venom spilled out before I could catch it. “I wouldn’t fuck you if you were the last alpha on the planet.” Mate or not, right now that was the absolute truth.

Rook was grinning as he leaned close, breath tickling my ear. “Dance good enough for me, and one day—if you’re really lucky—we’ll see if you’re a liar.”

Then—like the fucking idiot that he was—he nipped my ear after he said it. And of course, that was when my weary omega brain decided it was a good moment to light up like a fucking Christmas tree.

I’d never been around alphas, not since before I’d perfumed. Not until Alastor, who treated me like an animal. Even when he forced me to sit with him, he was cold and

clinical—almost to the point of discomfort for me—and I despised him more than I hated Rook.

I hadn't known how deep I'd buried my omega instincts. How touched-starved I really was. And never in living memory, had I had an alpha's teeth on me aside from the day that I'd been dark bonded. Never gently. Never affectionately. And that was how my body read Rook right then.

It was all I could do to stifle my whine, as I wrapped my arms around myself instinctively, sinking against him. His grip loosened on my hair, letting me.

So then I was left curled up against the chest of a man I'd just decided I fucking hated, my blood warm with a sense of safety it had absolutely no right to.

Neither side of me wanted to move. Not the dumbass half that wanted that fucking bite again, and not the proud half that didn't want to have to look up and see his expression.

I hadn't whined.

Thank the fucking universe I hadn't whined.

I tried to temper my breathing.

Even now his caramel brandy scent soothed me when it shouldn't, whispering '*mate*' in my ear.

Safety.

Which he both was, and wasn't, and I hated him for that.

I didn't know how much time had passed, but I finally clocked it as a little too long. His touch was on my back, strangely comforting, as if he wanted to hold me as close as I wanted to be held.

With all the courage I had, I pulled back, swallowing my pride and daring myself to look up at him. He looked... soft.

Unfamiliar.

And as his warm eyes found mine, I swear his pupils were blown.

“So?” he asked, after we’d stared at each other for an uncomfortable stretch.

“I’ll do what you want if that email doesn’t get out.” My voice was as fragile as dead leaves.

“Cross my heart, little beta,” he replied, touch dropping to my waist as he kept holding me close. He was quickly recovering his arrogance. “This is going to be fun. You’ll come to my room tonight?”

I shook my head. “If you wanted me tonight, you should have fought harder. Love signed me. Tonight is his.”

Rook chewed on his lip as he regarded me with the edge of a smile. “Tomorrow night, then.”

TWENTY-THREE

LOVE

“So. We have a Sweetheart.”

I was seated on one of the couches, examining my pack mates. I'd called a meeting in the theatre.

Drake looked sullen and Ebony was pissed. Rook was the only one who seemed chill, lounging in one of the armchairs with a blossoming bruise on his face. Since Drake matched, I had to assume they'd both gone at it last night. Now I was looking, Ebony's face even looked scratched up, as if he'd lost a fight with a rose bush.

It had been a busy night, apparently. I'd gone downstairs after feeling Ebony's thrill through the bond, signed the contract, and then headed to bed so I didn't have time to overthink it.

Whatever drama had gone down, had happened later in the evening, and they'd all kept their bonds locked down. None of it had woken me.

I didn't care.

I was sure about this choice.

“All of you are expected to participate in what she's offering,” I said. “Two months before we're in Germany for Dragon Hunters.”

All of them straightened at the mention of Dragon Hunters. That was it. The movie franchise that was taking us from domestic to global. And out of all of us, no one cared more than Rook and Ebony.

“We've never had less leverage than we will on that set,” I said. “I need you all on your best behaviour. We're not going to push each other into ruts, start pack feuds, or have tantrums of any kind. I want to see a change before then.”

“Wait,” Rook said. “Is she coming?”

“Her contract is up for renewal the week before we leave,” I replied.

That was deliberate. We couldn't be left dealing with a Sweetheart we weren't compatible with in addition to the stress of being on set. But that wasn't the tack I was going for here. “If I don't see change, I'll be renewing it and she'll be coming.” I supposed if she did well and had settled in by then, I'd renew her anyway. “And she's definitely attending the Diamond Tide Gala in two weeks.”

“She is?” Rook asked, surprised. Predictable, since he was set to get an award in the end ceremonies. “You want her causing issues while we're working?”

I leaned back in my seat. “Way I see it, it can't get any worse.”

My best friend he might be, but Rook was hotheaded and spoiled. Of all of us, he'd grown up under the most pressure. Members of his parent pack were bigger stars than we were—which was exactly why I knew the Dragon Hunters franchise was so important to him. It would push us into stardom even his parents hadn't seen. But he was a nightmare to manage. In the last movie we'd done, he'd started a pack brawl that had ended up in set damages totalling over 100K.

Then there was Ebony, good as he was at up keeping masks, he needed extra provisions for the long days surrounded by people. The few times he cracked, it caused me more trouble than all of Rook's antics put together.

We didn't need another repeat of the fucking Rogan incident. That nightmare had surfaced again last year; the Rogan brother Ebony had targeted all those years ago, was found dead from an OD. Our lawyers had their work cut out for them, even if it had been a few years since the initial incident. There was nothing directly tying Ebony's actions to the death, and we'd set up NDAs with everyone involved. The problem was, upholding an NDA required a certain amount of rational thinking which grief didn't always lend itself to. I'd been worried the truth would get out anyway.

Still, Ebony had never told me why he'd done what he did. Usually there was a reason. Not a reason I'd ever admit to anyone else, but I needed the comfort of knowing that there was some kind of goddamned rationale to his actions. Instead, when I'd demanded he tell me, he'd just shrugged.

“Honestly? Was curious if I really had it in me to push an alpha that far.”

Drake was the only one who didn't give me a headache. I was still hoping he'd get just as much from Vex, though. If she could balance Ebony and Rook *and* offer the companionship Drake needed, I'd triple her pay without blinking—and give her anything else she asked for.

I hadn't thought someone could do *any* of those things, yet Vex was primed for possibly all of them. Rook was interested in her—enough to fight Drake, and I'd never seen him interested in anyone. He liked to be chased; he enjoyed the attention and worship that fame brought him, but he'd never returned any amount of that passion.

The only real issue Vex posed was to me. I had to avoid her as much as I could. For her to offer balance to Ebony, there could be nothing between us or he would leverage her right back at me.

It was just tricky because I found it hard to keep my eyes off of her when she was around. She'd already found me to tell me she was visiting tonight, and thanked me for signing the contract.

I'd told her not to come, and endured watching the obvious hurt on her face when I'd said it. Small price, though, and I'd paid much more to keep this pack together.

“I'm not engaging with her just because you gave her a signature,” Ebony growled.

“You certainly fucking will.”

Ebony leaned back on his seat, fixing me with an arrogant *'fuck you'* look that told me he wouldn't be doing shit without leverage. I'd give him one chance to listen, then he was in for

a shock if he didn't think I had it. "You seemed adequately interested in her last night."

He tilted his head, regarding me with a calculating look as if he wasn't sure how much I knew.

"You know what's going to happen if you try to force me to spend time with her?" Ebony asked.

I fixed him with my most unimpressed gaze. "I'm sure you'll make her regret the day she decided to become a Sweetheart." I rolled my eyes. "Be more predictable." I wasn't fucking having it. "She's your Sweetheart, and you're going to take her out."

EBONY

Vex was staying.

She'd turned into a battleground, and not by any merit of her own. She was nothing more than the woman caught in a fluke intersection. I wanted her gone so we could go back to wars over legitimately challenging things.

Love, it seemed, had other ideas.

Again, I felt that faint and unusual nagging in my mind, demanding to know why I'd reacted to her like I had.

Love and Drake had left the moment the meeting was over, but Rook was still lounging on his armchair, looking thoughtful.

Had I caught that right? He'd tried to sign her in last night?

"You lost to Drake?" I prodded. "She got you in the nuts that night harder than I thought, then?"

Rook wrinkled his nose. "Have you ever been around Drake's aura? It's not a fucking joke."

I grinned. Even the mental image of Drake grounding Rook was enough to bring me a little peace. "I'm surprised you want her to stay when she made such a fucking idiot out of you," I said.

"What can I say?" Rook shrugged, tongue pressing against his canine as he fixed me with his most arrogant look. "I love watching her get under your skin."

Was that all, though?

Drake was the only person in the world I didn't have to keep tabs on, since both Rook and Love were prone to fucking me over if I let my guard down around them. Love, because of his misguided belief that he was helping me, and Rook because he enjoyed any leverage he could get. I didn't blame him. He was pathetic, hormonal and weak, and living with me

did nothing but bring that into constant and stark contrast. Thus, he liked to see me fail. He'd pounce on anything to knock me off balance, even if that meant signing a Sweetheart.

But that wasn't all. While Love would hold Vex at arm's reach so I'd never know if he gave a shit, Rook didn't have such restraint. He'd been circling her like a hyena.

"You're not hard to read, Harrison. She's your first, and you can't handle the idea of watching her walk away with that."

Rook leaned back, giving me that half sneer he always did when he wasn't sure if he should take my bait.

Of course, he took it.

"First what?"

"Rejection from a beta Sweetheart?"

Those sorts of reactions from Rook, they were on the sunny side of the moon for me. When he acted like a prick, I could relate. This one was easy: Vex was a challenge, she hated him, which he wasn't used to, and it was fuelling his obsession.

"She wants me," Rook snorted, just like the predictable idiot he was. "Had her melting in my lap earlier."

My grin widened.

Rook was a lot of things, but he wasn't a liar for bragging rights. So he was telling the truth, only, I didn't believe for a second that Vex *wanted* him. She'd come for me for a signature as a last resort, not expecting his at all, and I could guess why. My balcony and Rook's faced the same way. I'd heard the scream from my room the other night just in time to see her flinging one of his trophies onto the driveway below—which was pretty fucking hilarious. But after, Vex had run from him, terrified.

This was exactly what I'd stayed for. If she was giving him affection like he just claimed, it could only mean one thing.

Blackmail.

Primitive and so fucking Rook.

And the only blackmail Vex would respond to was a threat on her contract. If I found what Rook had on her, I could pull the trigger on it and get her out of here.

At my abrupt silence, Rook's fixed expression poorly masked discomfort. That part was almost its own victory: watching his arrogance calcify as he reached the conclusion that he'd just taken my bait.

Fucking idiot.

Satisfaction coiled tight in my chest, a buzzing cord of contentment warding away the silence.

Rook was good for that. A fool, sure, but compared to the rest of this lifeless world? He was a diamond, finding ways to surprise often enough that I still felt a vibration when I trashed him like I just had.

Now. Was there a way to flip this script on Vex to trick her into spilling? That would be fastest, since Rook would be on lockdown for a while after this.

I got to my feet, watching the calculation in his eyes—the little spark of irritation as I dismissed him while he was still coming up with ways to retaliate.

It would come. Something designed to wound me. Then it would fall short and I'd get another echo of that victory. Spoiled and incapable of not lashing out when beaten, he was always courteous enough to offer me that.

I wondered what it would be? A threat? Perhaps a reminder of a past victory? (Or Love's, since Rook had so few to count).

Five years, and he still hadn't figured out that shame was one of those emotions I just didn't have. Only Love knew that truth, since the world served me better if I could give it the illusion of a win every once in a while.

I was almost at the door when Rook's jab came.

I turned, a smirk on my lips as I rested my shoulder against the doorframe.

But then his words landed.

Truly landed.

“Guess she’s worth losing Drake over, then?”

I realised my smile had slipped too late as I cycled his words a dozen times, searching for the bluff.

Drake?

What the fuck did Drake have to do with any of this?

I took too long, and he leaned forward on his seat, resting his elbows on his knees and drinking in my expression like a man parched. “Blowing it up with her means blowing it up with him. And there’ll be no coming back.”

I fixed my mask. “She’s a Sweetheart. He’ll get over it.”

“Is that your read on him?” Rook asked.

A thinly veiled taunt.

Claiming to have a read on Drake might be the most obvious lie that could come from my mouth. Well, a close runner-up behind ‘I’d never leave my mom to rot in a nursing home’, and ‘letting fans touch me doesn’t make me want to burn my skin off with bleach’.

Still, Rook had one thing that I didn’t. Usually, it didn’t matter—in fact, it was the very thing that left him so weak. Except in one pesky fucking area: his ability to understand the rest of my pack.

Drake Jaccard was a void, nested in an already lodged blind spot.

I’d wanted him as a pack mate.

I’d Claimed him.

But I didn’t understand him.

A sneer curled Rook’s lips as he enjoyed the stretching silence. “Drake’s obsessed, mate. He went full to bat to protect her, and it’s your fault she stayed—you know that, right? Gonna bite your precious relationship in the ass.”

Rook wasn't my claim—nor did he want to be. He was mostly just a pain in the ass and the cost of keeping Love around. But Drake was more than that.

No...

Vex wouldn't take Drake from me. That was years worth of fucking work, and some of my best.

What Rook didn't realise, however, was that he'd just made it more paramount that I figure out what he had on her.

When I got rid of Vex, I needed it to look like his fault.

TWENTY-FOUR

*Dear Love: You want me for him, not
for me.*

VEX

Two Months Ago

They toyed with me, and still hadn't shown their faces. Still, they hadn't touched me. Still, they hadn't told me what they wanted.

Today, Alastor entered my room wearing his familiar black mask. I was compelled to cross toward the armchair the moment he entered.

It was part of the routine.

A part of the ongoing commands that lived between us in this bond. Hatefully, I sunk down onto my knees, curling my hands in my lap, keeping my head bowed and gaze down.

This was the fifth time I'd been forced to wait for him like this. The vile hatred I had for it was enough to steal my breath and burn my eyes every time.

But my pack lead liked to take his time before he asked for my attention, and by the time I looked up to him, I'd cleared my expression of all distress.

I didn't want him having that part.

Sure enough, it felt like an age passed as he sat in the armchair before me.

"Why won't you show me your face?" I asked, at last.

"I'm rather fond of surprises."

"Do I know you?" I asked, mind racing. Sometimes, when he spoke, I felt like I might have heard his voice before.

"Certainly not." His chuckle was derisive. "I thought I would check in before I left and see how you're progressing. Did you finish the book?"

I stared at him, my chest suddenly heaving.

The plan had seemed good at the time, but now I was faced with the consequences... regret was a weak word for what I felt.

"I finished what I could," I said.

There was a pause, and then he leaned forward. "Whatever does that mean, Vex?"

The dark voids where the mask covered his eyes were chilling.

"I read what I could," I said again, trying to keep my voice steady. "But the book isn't readable."

I'd hated it. Every page had felt like a taunt. A book about alpha tendencies and how they can be managed by omegas and betas. They were training me to be a good omega for them, and I couldn't take it. Bile rose in my throat at the thought.

"What did you do?"

"I... destroyed it." My heart was in my throat as I steeled myself for his anger.

There was a long, long silence.

"How?" he asked.

Not the question I'd been expecting.

My voice was a low whisper. "I ripped it to pieces and then left them in the bath."

It was gone. A soggy, irreparable mess. Doing it had been both terrifying and thrilling all at once.

"And why did you do that?"

"You never said I couldn't."

He sighed. "You really are your own worst enemy."

I wasn't a fool, especially not when it came to alphas. I knew what their wrath could look like when it came to defiant omegas.

I knew, and I'd done this anyway.

He would hurt me. I prayed on the other end, I would still believe it was worth it. Because I wanted to be strong enough that I never broke.

I would rather die than become theirs.

Only, there was no explosion of rage from him.

When he spoke, his voice was much more level than I was expecting. "The moment I leave, you'll strip to your underwear, climb into the tub and run it cold. Remain submerged but for your mouth and nose until I return tonight with another copy. If, at any point, the water warms up, you will drain it and run it again."

I stared at him, horror tightening my chest.

When Alastor returned, I was a weeping wreck, holding myself tight in frigid water. He watched me drag myself from the tub, shivering more violently than I ever had in my life. He set down another copy of the book on the vanity.

It was agony, sinking down before him, so cold and weak that all my muscles screamed in protest. All I wanted was to curl up and find warmth.

I hated him.

I hated him more than words could describe.

Shaking violently, I hugged myself, still forced on my knees before him.

Somehow, the worst thing of all, was that before he left, he issued no command not to destroy the book he'd just replaced.

I'd give them what Alastor stole.

I waited beside Love's bed on my knees, hands folded on my lap.

By my choice.

It was the most valuable thing I had to offer, and it had to be enough.

It had worked the first time. Love *had* gotten close to me, and it was the closest I'd ever been to him for a few brilliant moments.

To him, I *had* to become more than just a tool to manage Ebony. But he wouldn't hand me a chance to get to know him if I didn't push, and the Sweetheart contract was the only leverage I had.

And Love had to fall for me. He would make the final decision that would decide my fate—whether or not the Crimson Fury pack would make the trade for me.

Love was the one, in the end, who chose my fate.

LOVE

The sight that met me in my room stole my breath.

Vex knelt at my bedside. She wore a sheer robe, and beneath it was golden lace that wove up the curves and dips of her body.

I'd seen it before, and still, it lost no power.

Her hands were tucked into her lap and her head was bowed. Her wavy silver-brown hair tumbled around her shoulders, reaching to her mid-back, and the peach streak at the front was infinitely more attractive; rebellion tamed as it fluttered before the lace of a woman kneeling at my bedside, awaiting my orders.

Fuck me.

I couldn't do this again.

I'd told her *not* to come.

"What are you doing?" I asked, sitting on the side of my bed, avoiding looking at her.

"I'm your Sweetheart." She didn't move when she spoke, head bowed, neck open to me. "It's my job to offer you balance."

I shut my eyes for a moment. "Look at me, Vex."

It was worse, that when she met my eyes I could see the fear in them, as if she knew exactly what I was going to say.

"I don't want you."

I had to.

She didn't understand that it was for her protection that I had to.

Vex held her head high, not dropping from my gaze even when I could see how wounded she was at that. "You signed me," she said, far too evenly.

“For my pack. Not for me.”

She looked like she was bracing to say something frightening. “It’s my job to make that determination. Not...” She swallowed, and it was an effort not to follow the movement down her throat. “Not yours.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m pack lead. If I don’t want you around, you’ll leave.”

“Respectfully, I’m not a part of your pack. If you want to reject my company, that’s your choice, but I will do the job I’ve been contracted for.”

I let out a sigh of relief at those words, finally understanding her worry. If it came out she was neglecting me, I’d have grounds to dissolve the contract. “Vex, I signed you in. You don’t have to be worried that I’ll accuse you of neglect. I want you to focus on the others, especially Ebony.”

There was a long silence as she regarded me, and she wet her lips before she found the courage to speak. “My assessment is that this is what you need. I’m going to do my job.”

I let out a breath, frustrated.

I clung to the memory that gave me purpose. A bright smile, tumbling brown curls around blushed cheeks and blood red lips.

Beauty and anticipation—and for her sake, I had to shatter it. “...*We don’t want you around...*” I’d said those words before, to a woman I’d claimed to love—though that was paling quickly compared to what I felt when I looked at Vex.

That was exactly what I had to do right now for Vex, only instead of sending her fleeing from Ebony’s grip, I was sending Vex right into his claws.

“So,” I forced myself to say. “You’ll continue to harass me when I don’t want you around?”

She grit her teeth, clearly determined to fight me on this. “No more than you want me to harass Ebony.”

Fuck.

I caught my breath of a laugh before it escaped, regarding her with new eyes.

I respected her determination—a hell of a lot, actually. I *needed* it, in fact. There was no other way she'd get through to Ebony. But I couldn't have a repeat of last time. Yet, how could I explain why? That the problem was how captivated I was by her.

More than I'd ever been.

With the persistence she was showing right now, what might she do if she discovered that truth?

She'd keep pushing, and I didn't trust myself to stay away.

That was unacceptable.

The truth was, Ebony would always push for things I couldn't allow—for his sake, and for the sake of everyone in his reach. So anything I cared for was in danger.

Again, the lost love that haunted me returned once more. It had been her, Rook, Ebony, and me growing up. Destined for a pack that could never be.

Eighteen years old, lying to her that she wasn't wanted—that was when I'd known the truth. If I chose Ebony, there could be no one else. Rook was all I got, though there was a time Ebony had tried to leverage him at every turn. But my last friend had taken the pack bonds with eyes wide open, and now Ebony himself had become part of the collateral for targeting Rook.

But Vex was different.

She haunted every waking moment, stealing every ounce of my attention when she was in the same room.

Risking falling for someone the way I knew I might fall for her? That was too dangerous.

Even if she was in the pack, she wouldn't be tied to the pillars of Ebony's power like Rook was. Our careers did that, but Vex wouldn't be a part of it.

Best to leave her to deal with him from the safety of the contract.

I had to crush this determination now, so she was never tempted to continue.

VEX

I could see the truth in his eyes as he looked at me, nothing like the first night I'd been here. I'd felt safe then. Clearly, I'd done something to change his mind, because Love Hightower hated me right now.

He leaned forward from where he sat on the edge of his bed and placed a finger beneath my chin. "Let me be crystal clear, Vex," he said, eyes icy. "I didn't hire you because you were competent. I hired you because you're unconventional, and that happens to be what Ebony needs. Don't conflate my signature with interest. I find you nothing more than an eyesore and an annoyance."

No bracing in the world could have prepared me for that. Hearing that from anyone would have been hard. Hearing it from my mate was enough to crush my soul into a thousand tiny little pieces.

For a moment, Love blurred in my vision as I fought to hold myself together.

"Do you understand?" he asked, when I couldn't respond quick enough.

"Yes." I blinked the tears away, voice sure, if not a little thick.

He leaned back, withdrawing his touch. I didn't move, even when anxiety was like a million ants scurrying through my veins, telling me to run. To never come back and risk hearing something like that from him again.

But I couldn't.

If I left now, how could I come back?

"I'm going to do my job the best way I know how," I said at last, so proud at how steady those words were when I was still in freefall.

“And how often do you intend to subject me to this?”

I fought my wince, shoving back more tears. “E-every fourth night.”

He leaned back with a grimace. Another dagger to the chest as he appraised me like I disgusted him. “And if I ignored you for the rest of the night?”

“Then I’ll be here when you wake up.”

I regretted the commitment in those words the second I said them.

He nodded, finally breaking my gaze. “Then continue. These nights will be simple for me.”

I dropped my eyes back to the carpet, a chill slowly seeping up my spine as he stood and walked away.

He didn’t say anything else, preparing for the night in his en-suite, and then returning to his bed and cracking his book.

He spoke to me only once more. “I assume, if your plan was to visit me every fourth night, you intend to dedicate a day to each of us?”

“Yes.”

“When is Ebony’s?”

My mind raced for a moment. “I um... haven’t made a schedule, but Rook wanted me to meet him tomorrow.”

“Rook can wait. Ebony will meet you in the foyer at six for a date.”

A date with Ebony?

A small trade off for the relief of not having to deal with Rook tomorrow. No way that was happening unless he was bullied into it. The night just got better and better.

The lights went out, and I heard him settle beneath the blankets. Dread edged in as I remained staring at my hands folded in my lap, one glistening tear beaded on my thumb, perfectly balanced.

He was truly going to leave me here.

Left with my own thoughts, the hours stretched on, the tear perfectly still as it slowly vanished into the air.

My body ached from the stillness, and from the hardwood I began to feel beneath the carpet. And still, I stayed, not daring to move. I couldn't even quite put my finger on why, but I'd told him this is where I would remain, and I would keep my promise.

When he woke, I would be here still.

His words left me hollow, repeating over and over, reminding me I was contracted to my mates, and still, three out of four of them hated me.

LOVE

It was an unexpected agony, knowing she was there through the night, kneeling and uncomfortable.

Her aroma of cherry blossom lingered in the space, imposing even as a fainter beta scent.

The silence itself was an assault on my senses, every instinct a crescendo of rage within the nothingness, demanding I fix it. Demanding I take back every lie I'd told her, to hold her close and purr for her until she believed me.

And I couldn't.

It was wrong, but I just had to make it one night. She'd never come back, I was sure of it.

I don't know when I fell into restless dreams, but, as promised, when I woke she was still there. It was early—far earlier than I would usually wake—but I wouldn't be getting back to sleep. Afraid that she would follow through with her threat, I'd turned the temperature of the room up enough that she wouldn't get too cold. Still, when I examined her from where I still lay, she was shivering.

I sat up, placing my feet on the cool marble floor, knowing the room hadn't been warm enough to offset that.

Fuck.

Fighting the urge to sink down beside her and make sure she was alright, I cleared my throat. "Come here."

I didn't want to look at her, couldn't bear the idea of meeting her eyes with the guilt heavy in my chest. But she was shaking, and I wouldn't have a Sweetheart getting sick in my house. I wouldn't have her getting sick for *me*.

Vex got to her feet, each movement stiff and mechanical. Her frame was small, and she looked more fragile than ever as

she stepped up before me, only having to lower her gaze a little to meet mine, even when I was sitting.

She didn't look angry or hurt. Instead, her beautiful eyes were blank, as if she'd long buried her feelings. How could she still be breathtaking, like this?

Waves of silver-brown tumbled to her waist, framing freckled cheeks, much too pale. It was a war not to reach out and draw her into my arms, to cuddle her beneath my blankets until the tremor in her fingers was gone entirely.

"You won't do this again," I said.

She didn't argue, but neither did she nod.

Tell me you won't do this again. I wanted to beg it of her, but it wouldn't do either of us any good. She had to believe I was asking her to leave because I didn't care, not because I did.

"You won't offer anything to my pack until you've warmed up and got some rest. I have no intention of hosting a sick Sweetheart."

I hoped she'd listen to that. She'd claimed her right as a Sweetheart to push me like this, but she'd also acknowledged my authority of my pack, even if she wasn't a part of it.

Her nod was just the slightest shift of her chin, but the tension in my chest eased a bit. If she listened to that, maybe she'd accept a hot tea before she slept?

I shoved the thought away. Too much.

"You can go."

Again, she nodded, then she took a step back. Her lips pressed together for a moment, as if she were going to say something, but then she turned, walking toward my door and leaving me alone at last.

TWENTY-FIVE

VEX

Ebony never arrived for the date.

I'd arrived in the foyer half an hour earlier than expected in a simple black dress, unsure of what to expect.

I was relieved he didn't turn up—mostly, anyway. He would probably have made the date hell, but something had changed for me after the maze. It was the knowledge that no matter how awful Ebony Starless was, he was deadly when it came to my heart. I found him completely fascinating, and the kiss we shared was burned into my mind, surfacing in dreams when it had no right to. I wondered if it was the same for him...

Still, I realised that he wouldn't be showing up once I peeked into the garage to see his Lamborghini missing. As long as I could claim I'd done everything I could, I was happy to duck back into my room and text Drake for company.

The rest of the week was just as bad as the start.

I'd finally received the information about their pack from a rather astounded Rob. I sifted through it in the office, taking in everything I could. Balancing them was now my job, and I couldn't fail at it. I remembered what that stupid Sweetheart textbook Alastor had eventually forced me to read had said.

Sweethearts must have empathy, a good attention to detail, problem solving skills, and a willingness to learn and adapt. Clients are unique individuals with a range of needs and there are no set rules that will apply to all. Sweethearts must be open to the possibility of physical intimacy which, among other solutions, is a common need for unstable alphas.

Before arrival, the pack will have been assessed by The Sweetheart Agency for eligibility. A Sweetheart's duty is to adapt to the needs of the pack she or he is assigned. A package will be received on signing with all relevant information of the alphas in question.

I looked through the pages and pages of reporting. My eyes scanned the self assessment sheets with boxes that each of them had checked off, lingering on the most interesting parts:

Love:

Ruts: 1-3 times a year

Outlets: reading

Rut Management strategy: medication

Mood swings: infrequent

Violence and aggression: infrequent

Drake:

Ruts: 1-3 times a year.

Outlets: job, walks, and hobbies such as music and movies.

Rut management strategy: medication

Mood swings: infrequent

Violence and aggression: none reported.

Rook:

Ruts: infrequent, none on record.

Outlets: workouts, sexual excursions (casual), work.

Mood swings: frequent

Disruptive behaviour enough to cause setbacks on self set goals: very frequent

Violence and aggression: frequent

Ebony:

Ruts: five + times a year.

Outlets: workouts and job.

Rut management strategy: medication

Mood swings: none

Disruptive behaviour enough to cause setbacks on self set goals: frequent

Violence and aggression: none

My eyes scanned the pages further until I found the final summary from the examiner.

Highly unstable with the potential for violence. In need of balancing and currently on an unsustainable trajectory without intervention. Professional recommendations: Experienced Sweetheart or omega.

Writer noted unreliable self reporting with significant differences between self qualifications versus statements made by pack mates. It's clear that these alphas need balancing on both an individual and pack level. For those in a bond, they are isolated, which likely further contributes to individual imbalance.

Experienced Sweetheart?

I almost laughed when I read that, but I was well aware that to get me into this role, the pack on the other end of this dark bond must have bribed some high up people.

I suppose I was, at least, an omega, though I still felt severely underqualified for all of this.

Love still wasn't speaking to me. He left the room if I entered unless I was with Drake. I hadn't seen Ebony in days. Then there were the harrowing moments I spent alone and

locked in the bathroom, following what might be the worst of Alastor's commands. The little black book he'd given me was filling page after page.

Then, there was Rook, who—unlike Ebony—definitely wasn't ignoring me.

And Rook was a fucking prick.

I could only use the excuse of giving Drake and Love two out of four nights. He was aware Ebony didn't want me, so had demanded I come to his room for all the unclaimed ones. I hated that Rook got that time instead of Drake, who was still my only light in the dark. Waking up in Drake's arms was enough, so briefly, to make me forget the nightmare I was trapped in.

Rook, on the other hand, was coming up with more and more infuriating things to ask me to do in the evenings. It was getting ridiculous. Massages, more cleaning, and last time he'd asked me to sort his bookshelves by the Dewey Decimal system. Tonight, he'd handed me a bag and told me to fix what was inside. Within were the fragments of the Radiant Aura award I'd flung from the balcony, along with glue, tape and an all too smug smirk.

Then, at the end of the night when he was ready to turn in, he would force me to sleep at the foot of his bed.

DRAKE

Vex spent time with me whenever she could.

I got her only one out of four nights, but the day was most often ours. She said her professional Sweetheart opinion on what I needed was simple: adventures.

So during the day we bundled into my minivan with me dressed up in what she called my ‘super hero disguise’ (a cap and sunglasses), and we’d find a new place to go.

Typically, I avoided going out when we were living at home, but I wasn’t afraid of exploring New Oxford with her.

My phone, which had never seen much use as a camera, was suddenly becoming filled with photos. She took dozens, telling me I had to do better at keeping memories. I hadn’t the heart to tell her that I never had before, because before, they hadn’t been worth keeping.

But now, even when she was on nights with the others, I’d scroll through the photos or videos, making plans for the next day I had with her.

There were too many for me to pick favourites: Vex and me in front of the starfish tank in the New Oxford aquarium. Vex singing—with the most beautiful voice—to P!nk, as we cycled through our favourite childhood music videos in the theatre after some beers. A picture I’d snuck of her adorably frustrated pout as she’d melted down over which toppings to choose the day we’d hunted BetaButter’s Waffle truck.

There were endless photos of food, of street signs she thought were funny, of wonky trees, or cute dogs. There was one she’d recorded of herself chanting every word to Honey! You’re pure Treasure, by Heart, as I drove us to the local fish and chip shop that I’d promised had food literally to die for.

I stopped on another photo that I’d taken. We’d gone to an old drive-in theatre. She was in the passenger seat of my

minivan, popcorn clutched in her arms, hair bundled in a messy bun as she sported a pair of old-school green and red 3D glasses. Her oversized zip-up hoodie hung around her shoulders as she sat hunched, combat boot propped on the dash, a tense frown on her face at the nineties horror movie that was running.

Fuck, she was perfect—right down the the faint trace of cherry blossom that followed her around. I was an alpha—built to react to omega scents—but I was attracted to every puzzle piece that made Vex who she was.

She was smiling in most of the photos, with canines flashing, her scrunched nose always tipped with a hint of blush, and her eyes black winged crescent moons. She smiled when she was with me, always.

Even when she wasn't happy, she smiled.

Sometimes, she had nightmares. Sometimes, I would walk into her room, and the blush on her nose was a little too pink, or her eyes just a bit red. Then she'd see me, and she'd perk up, that hollow lightlessness vanishing in an instant.

I never asked.

I didn't know if it was the right call, but when it was me, I never wanted anyone asking.

I think I loved her. I understood that it might be insane—that she was with me via contract, and I'd known her for less than a month.

And it didn't change a damn thing.

Despite the fact I woke up cuddling her, she never pushed me for anything, not even a kiss.

Would she want more, eventually?

Would she be upset if I didn't ask for more?

We spent the days together, but she gave Ebony's night—which he wasn't claiming—to Rook. *Was he falling for her like I was?* He'd withdrawn from the bond in the last week—Love, too—and I wanted to give it more time before asking them if they thought I was crazy for falling this quickly.

Because I believed, for sure, this was more than just a contract for her—that what we were building was real. That part, I might truly be right about, but that made it too perfect, and so I should have known it couldn't last.

The dream always started the same.

Those last few moments in which I hadn't realised who Zephyr truly was.

The before and the after.

"Thought of a name, yet?" he'd asked me. "Yours has to match the rest of ours."

"Fuck... uh yeh, I have, actually," I said. "Was leaning toward Atlas, but then there was another one... 'Avenger of evil deeds' or something like that. Sounds cool."

His voice was smooth as silk, marred only by the slightest slur from the booze. "I like that. I think you'll stay Magpie to me, though."

Time shifted in the dream, turning into the nightmare it always became.

"What... What are you doing?"

"What do you think, you and me?" he asked.

I remembered my surprise at that. "I don't... really understand what you mean."

"You like me, Triton said as much."

"Yeh... I mean... It's just, soon. And I don't know, you're all older. I need this to look legit—like I'm here cuz I can act."

"Right," he laughed. "But that's the thing. How many alphas get in on an elite pack of our calibre at eighteen? They're jealous. Besides, I gotta get this rut out of my system before the next auditions come around."

Just... run, *I begged myself.* Run right now.

But the nightmare was fixed.

“If we delay the auditions,” Zephyr told me, “It delays your contract too, you know that right? And your mom’s settling in so well at the facility, plus we’ve already announced you joining to all the fans.”

Tell him you don’t care.

Tell him his threats mean nothing.

A growl slipped from my throat, the nightmare spiralling too fast.

“Wake up Magpie...” A touch wound around my waist, waking me too soon.

I fucking hurt.

No. I wouldn’t...

My aura split the air, and this time it was enough.

I wouldn’t go back there.

But then the nightmare stuttered out, replaced by morning light and cream coloured bedsheets. I wasn’t in a mansion of jades and blacks.

He was dead.

Zephyr was dead. Six feet deep in a grave he’d dug for himself. I would never see him again.

He could never hurt me again.

That, if anything, was a lie, for the world coming into focus around me.

Fuck...

It was *Vex* beneath me, eyes wide as I pinned her to the bed by her wrists, a snarl on my lips.

Fuck.

Stop this...

She isn’t your enemy. I tried to scream that at my body, but it wouldn’t listen, adrenaline scoring my system like a virus, not letting go.

She let out a whimper, and I realised my grip had tightened. The sound broke through the haze. My flaring aura died, my fingers unwinding.

Too slow. It took an age to drag my weight from her, to end up back on my ass, far enough away that I wasn't a threat.

She scrambled back, primal fear in her eyes as she clutched her throat, staring at me like I was a monster.

And I was.

I didn't process leaving, but I'd backed halfway across the room before I realised it.

I tried to open my mouth to say... something. But there were no words good enough, so instead I turned and fled.

VEX

I didn't move for an age, clutching my knees to my chest and trying so desperately to process what had happened.

Every time I woke with Drake, it was to find his arms around me, holding me tight. This morning I'd woken without. I'd missed them. These nights meant so much, the ones I wasn't curled up on Rook's bed or kneeling silently for Love.

So I'd shuffled over to Drake and wove my arms around his waist.

Cycling through that moment over and over, my heart rate wouldn't calm. I'd just wanted... I hugged myself tighter. I'd just wanted to feel him close, like he wanted from me every morning. My breath caught in my chest as my mind flashed past what had just happened.

Drake above me, gripping my wrists deadly tight. His aura was enough to drown the room, edged with rage and terror.

Hot tears leaked down my cheeks from pure shock.

He'd been someone else...

I couldn't move. For the smallest moment, I'd believed that he was going to attack me, his fury taking me back to my childhood—to cupping my ears with my hands and whispering songs to myself until the auras were gone. Then waiting an age longer, terrified of what I'd find when I finally dared creep out. I always took too long, leaving her alone without me.

But that *wasn't* Drake.

I knew monsters, and he was the farthest from one I'd ever met.

Swallowing back more tears, I wiped my eyes on my sleeve.

I had to find him.

It had nothing to do with Alastor's commands—with my mission to ensure they fell for me. I wasn't looking for him because I *had* to. I was looking for him because I wanted to.

The horror on his face was burned into my mind, and I wouldn't let fear win this time.

Never again would it paralyse me so that someone I loved was alone.

I found him on the third floor which, as it turned out, was just a rooftop patio with another pool. Drake was seated, curled up in a daybed beneath its canopy, knees hugged tight to his chest.

He straightened as he heard my footsteps, eyes finding me.

“Vex?” His voice was rough and thick. He shifted away from me. There were tear tracks down his cheeks that broke my heart.

I slipped onto the far edge of the day bed, staring at him, now unsure of what to say.

There was a long silence in which he just stared at me, maybe more frightened than I'd been.

“It's not...” he said finally. “I can't—”

“You don't have to explain,” I said quietly. “I'm not angry.”

Those beautiful violet eyes held mine, unsure. A long time passed, and he relaxed, if only the tiniest bit. “I can't uh...” He swallowed. “I can't stay in your bed anymore. Not by myself. I can't risk hurting you.”

My heart sank, and for one, desperate moment, I just wanted to pretend it hadn't happened.

He was right. I *knew* he was right, even if I didn't want him to be.

“Can I... come closer?” I asked.

He looked so panicked for a moment. “Vex—”

“I’m not afraid of you,” I whispered.

“You’re lying.”

“I was afraid,” I said. “But I’m not afraid of *you*.” The tears I’d wiped away before searching for him, returned. “You don’t know...” My voice caught. “How much you mean to me.”

That was too vulnerable, I knew it, but I couldn’t help it.

He was it.

My only light.

I didn’t want to lose him.

Slowly, he nodded and I got to my feet, circling the day bed and slipping down next to him.

I lifted my hands up before him, palms forward. He stared down at them as I pressed them gently against his chest. “You have monsters, Drake, that doesn’t mean you are one.”

His breathing hitched, something shattering in those beautiful twin galaxies, and then he leaned close, drawing me against him with such care. Gently, I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on tight as he trembled.

TWENTY-SIX

*Dear Drake: Please don't leave me. I
can't do this without you.*

DRAKE

I held Vex in my arms for what felt like forever, until my shaking died down entirely.

When I drew back, I cupped her cheek.

“I’m... sorry.” It finally felt real enough to speak out loud. Not *enough*, but real.

A sad, half smile curved her lips, and she leaned into my palm. If her goal was to soothe me, it worked. She was so fearless, so beautiful.

She unwound her arms from me, leaving her hands lingering on my neck as she drew away, eyes searching mine. “You’re...” She shrunk a little, so unsure. “You’re more important to me than the contract.”

The tone shifted, almost jarringly so. It didn’t have any right to, not after what had just happened, and yet... So gently, her palms drifted up to my cheeks, chocolate eyes fixed on mine, her breathing picking up.

This was not the right time. I couldn’t... not after—

She shifted closer and my fingers drifted to her cheeks before I could stop myself.

Could I be reading this wrong?

“*You have monsters, Drake, that doesn’t mean you are one.*” The echo of those words still shook me. How could she still want to be near me after what I’d just done? Not just because I’d frightened her, but because she must know what those monsters were. Foul and sickening and dripping in shame that had clogged up my heart for years.

Yet, I felt like she could see me, and she was still here, her touch deliberate, her gaze *wanting*.

Before another brambled thought could tangle up my mind, I drew her into a kiss that lit fireworks in my chest.

It was terrifying.

Not *least* because I'd never kissed anyone in my entire life.

I hadn't had girlfriends when I was a teenager, I was too focused on acting. I hadn't come from an elite pack like Rook, or a well off family like Ebony and Love. I'd had to burn the candle at both ends to get noticed.

Then... I *had* been noticed.

After that, I'd never wanted to touch anyone ever again.

Except Vex.

Her tongue explored my mouth, fingers gripping my cheeks as if she couldn't get enough of me, and it wasn't thrilling just because it was my first kiss. It was thrilling because I wanted it. I wanted her when I'd believed I'd never want anyone ever again.

She made me feel, just for a second, like I wasn't just shattered fragments of a person with nothing to offer.

When the kiss broke, I leaned back, tumbling into desperate chocolate eyes. "You're perfect," I told her. "You're like a dream I can't quite believe is real."

Her pupils blew at those words, and she was so close, plush lips parted right before mine, fingers tangling into my hair. "I want you." The plea was half whisper, half whine.

"I..." I swallowed, something lodged in my chest, the fear I'd just stamped down rising its head again.

How did I explain that it wasn't her?

I just... I was broken. I couldn't—

"We don't have to." She cut off my thoughts again, touch gone as she drew back. "But if you *did* want me... I thought maybe..." She tucked her hands behind her back, leaning up to whisper in my ear. "I could stay like this, and you could do whatever you liked."

I blinked, processing what she meant, that nervousness vanishing at what she was offering.

Mother above.

Heat slid through my veins and I knew she'd felt my body's reaction, close as she was. But... "You shouldn't... after what just happened—"

"Is exactly why." She cut me off. "I know I'm safe with you, Drake. If this is what you need to feel safe with me..." Her teeth grazed my earlobe just slightly.

This was madness.

So was the low growl that rose in my chest, possessive and sinful.

I shouldn't.

I really, really shouldn't.

But my sanity was fleeing, alpha instincts clawing at my insides, demanding I tell her yes. It was a thousand moments smothered, something feral and desperate that wanted her like she was asking. A moment in which I could reach out, and demand what had been stolen. A moment in which I could—just for a second—be myself again.

Be the alpha who wouldn't run from this.

I felt the shift the moment it happened, the feral side of me smothering what had been the shell that kept me alive for the last few years. I gave in to that shift, allowing it to sweep me away. And it was then that I knew what I'd lost.

I'd forgotten how to be me. Until her, I'd forgotten the energy and passion. The fierce need to fight, to protect, to love.

And she was giving it back, demanding I show her exactly how I saw her—to learn everything that made her feel beautiful, and gift it to her a million times over.

VEX

Drake knelt before me, dragging my hips to the edge of the daybed.

He'd taken me up on my offer, but I had seen his nerves all the same. It was the unexpected he was unsure of, and I didn't want to risk touching him when he wasn't ready. So, upon my request (which was not entirely driven by selflessness), his belt now strapped my wrists together behind me, leaving me at his mercy.

Drake, it turned out, didn't *have* much mercy when it came to things such as this.

He pressed me back so I was laying against the daybed cushions, still able to see him. Then he tugged my shorts and panties down, leaving me exposed. He left me like that for a moment, still kneeling before me, palms cupping my hips and eyes roaming my body inch by inch. I was still wearing a t-shirt from bed, but it was halfway up my stomach, and his pupils dilated as his gaze traced my nipples, which were solidly giving away my lust.

He gently pressed his lips to my inner thigh, midnight black waves tickling me as his teeth grazed my skin. My breathing hitched and I couldn't help wriggling slightly as he drew back, feeling the faintest touch of his breath along my soaked entrance.

It was thrilling that we were still on the roof with the blue sky stretching above. Anyone could walk out here and find us. A part of me wanted that. For Rook, or Love, or Ebony to see Drake claim me.

I let out a moan of pleasure, biting my lip as his touch found my clit. I couldn't look anywhere but at his starving gaze that caught every reaction to what he was doing to me. I realised I didn't remember the last time I'd been touched like

this. So many dates in a past much too distant all blurred together.

Never, I realised.

Never had I been touched like *this*.

With the care and reverence in his violet irises as he watched me with wonder, discovering just how much I needed him.

He drew away, and I let out another desperate little noise, but his arm circled my hips and he pinned me down by the stomach. He looked delighted at my snarl.

“Fuck...” I tried, again, to fight his grip, needing more.

No one warned me how different it would be with a mate. My heart was slamming into my ribs, every inch of my skin on fire, desperate for more.

“Drake...” I moaned.

With that stunning smile, he worked his finger into me slowly before he lowered his mouth onto my centre, finding my clit with his tongue.

I moaned again, tugging against the restraints and the arm clamped over my stomach, but both were unrelenting as he picked up his pace.

I was so hot for him, and now mentally scrambling to make sure I'd taken enough scent blockers for this. I had, of course. I was safe. He'd feel my wetness, but there would be none of my omega scent or slick.

My breath caught as he sped up just enough to have me shaking, then slowed again. He lifted his mouth from me, adding a second finger, a smile curving his lips as I tried, once more, to arch against him. “I could watch you riding me like this all day,” he breathed. “You're so fucking perfect, Vex.”

A swarm of butterflies rose in my stomach at those words, colliding with the rising tide of heat threatening ecstasy at any moment. I barely stifled a needy whine, desperate not to be *too* omega in case it gave me away.

Dark thoughts tumbled in at that instinct—of my commands, of Alastor, of the alphas lurking at the other end of the—

Fuck.

The bond.

I had to shut it.

They *wouldn't* have this—not one single part of what was between me and Drake.

And then I cursed myself for thinking of them right now—

“Vex.” Drake’s voice was a more demanding growl than I’d ever heard, and suddenly I was lost in violet galaxies again.

“Yes?”

Shit.

He’d noticed me spiralling.

“Come back to me, Dreamgirl,” he breathed. It wasn’t backed by an alpha command, yet it was stronger than anything I’d ever felt. In that moment, it was just me and him on a silent, empty planet.

And he was worried. Worried that wherever it was I’d just gone, it meant I might not want him. “Don’t... stop,” I whispered. “I never want this to end.”

He relaxed, and I was swallowed by his gaze as his two fingers dipped back into my core and he returned his mouth to me, this time twice as desperate.

Fuck.

He turned his head and pressed his teeth to the soft inner flesh of my thigh again. This time, it was enough to leave a mark.

It wasn’t a bond, but it *was* a claim.

His bite.

I came with a cry, back arched as he pumped his fingers faster, drawing out my orgasm, eyes fixed on me as he watched every second until I was a shivering, boneless heap.

“That was...” Shit. I couldn’t find words.

He shifted above me, fingers curling around my chin. “I’m not done. You said you never wanted this to end,” he breathed. His pupils were still wide, and blackcurrant wine was tinged with wildness. I saw the alpha beneath, feral, touch starved, imbalanced. The one with needs I knew *I* could meet.

I couldn’t speak, mind still unscrambling from the most intense orgasm of my life.

He leaned close, teeth brushing my ear, then my jaw as if he wanted to bite me again and again. I shivered, powerful instincts leaving me absolutely frozen as his teeth found my neck for just the briefest second.

Then he spoke, and my mind flatlined.

“I love you.”

Numb nothingness carved a way for those words to sink in.

When they did, I... believed them.

I believed him.

Bound and vulnerable beneath my alpha, it was in this moment that I felt the flooding warmth of safety that I hadn’t in longer than living memory.

I *was* safe with him.

The realisation was like a rush of cold air in deprived lungs, and a breathless smile appeared on my lips. Right then, it was for no one else that I wanted to be his.

Visceral and earth shattering, that truth shifted everything. Splintered fragments making up the final imprint of my soul that had ever dared hope—a child, broken and silenced—breathed a wish.

And in the moment, a soaring dream broke free of miles of packed dirt burying everything good since I’d been ripped from my home. From the second I’d scent matched an impossible pack I knew I could never have. From each moment in which I’d been left alone; by my mother, by Aisha, by my own damning choice—one I’d made of fear.

But *this* was true and real, and I needed it more than I'd ever prayed for anything in my weary, cursed existence.

I want more.

For me.

For him.

Impossible and foolish as it was, for the first time, I truly let myself want his claim, his love, his protection—and to offer him mine, so the demons chasing him would never catch up again.

I realised I'd just been staring at him in silence. I should... say something, right?

He'd just told me... He'd just said...

"I..." *Fuck.*

He pressed his finger to my lips, and he didn't look hurt. There was an impish grin creeping onto his face. "I don't mind being a little crazy when it comes to you, but I don't want you saying anything unless you mean it."

That wasn't it.

Loving him wasn't the problem.

I could do that and still be a hopeless wreck. But *saying* it? When I'd proclaimed love to this pack upon posters a million times over, the word felt diluted. More so, when *he'd* just said it to me. As if it was impossible to make it mean what I wanted.

"Just tell me I haven't scared you off, and I can still make you come until you're begging me to stop."

An embarrassing sound slipped up my throat, needy and desperate. A substitute for what I so desperately wanted to tell him. I nodded, though, still speechless.

He cupped my heat, slipping his fingers to my sensitive clit, making me gasp. I writhed against him, breathing ragged as he drove me to the edge of another orgasm, my body still on fire from the first. This time, his face was inches from mine, watching every movement with wonder.

“Kiss me,” I begged.

He bit his lip in a smile, his raven curls feathering my cheeks as he sped up the friction on my clit until I groaned. Finally, he pressed his lips to mine. His tongue drove into my mouth with passion right as I tumbled into another orgasm.

When I’d come down from it, his touch still lingered, circling ever so slowly now, and I was shivering with each movement, overwhelmed.

“Can you come again, beautiful?” he asked.

Again?

“This is what you want?” I asked. Of everything, this wasn’t what I’d expected him to want when I’d offered submission—for him to make *me* come apart?

“Vex, I’ve never seen anything more captivating in the world.”

I bit back a whine of delight.

He was still watching me, tense, waiting for my answer.

I nodded. “For you.” My mind was hazy with lust and wonder, and I’d do anything he asked right now.

His impish smile returned, and then he took me in his arms, shifting us both so that he was propped up against the back of the daybed and I was straddling him.

Again, two fingers slipped between my legs and the prominent bulge I could feel beneath his jeans. I shuddered as he dipped his fingers back in.

“You get *so* pretty when I find just the right place,” he murmured, curling his fingers against that perfect spot in my core. I let out a little breath, and his free hand tangled in my hair, holding me steady as he began stroking that spot.

“Fuck...” I let my eyelids flutter closed for a second, shaking with the intensity of his touch.

A growl slipped from his chest. “Eyes on me.”

My eyes snapped open at the weight of those words. It was a command, backed by the full force of his damned strong aura—even if it wasn't out in threat.

My lips parted in shock, not just at the intensity of his gaze, with his pupils blown as he watched me, but at hearing Drake use his alpha bark at all. And I hadn't even felt the urge to fight it, which was a simple matter of will, unlike the commands I received through the dark bond.

I didn't *want* to fight it. It hadn't been tainted like commands of other alphas, as if his intent backed it somehow. Not cruel, but protective—over me.

He *was* different.

I could look nowhere but up into burning violet eyes, sinking into the command and letting it hold me as his fingers continued to stroke that perfect spot within me, driving me closer and closer to my third orgasm.

“Tell me how you'd want me if I did fuck you,” he said.

Again, I was left speechless. The rest of his pack had arrogance seeping from their pores, but this might have been the closest I'd seen of it from Drake. It wasn't arrogance—not exactly—but a quiet confidence, peering at me as he was, head half-cocked. His eyes were curious and intent as if he wasn't casually finger banging me with my wrists secured behind my back.

Still holding me by my hair, every time his fingers curled into my core, I shuddered, his command making it impossible to take my gaze from him, and a tiny curve edged his lips.

Maybe a *little* arrogance...

It wasn't just actors, *any* elite packs—career dedicated packs intent on making it to the top of their craft or field—were notoriously instinctual, and often imbalanced, which is why Sweethearts were a thing at all. The lifestyle attracted a certain type, spitting out balanced ones by nature of the requirements to succeed. Instinct lent itself as much to their success as their imbalance.

I'd seen it from the rest of the pack, but never from Drake. Even in the reports, he'd been the least problematic of those assessed.

Until right now.

Sweet, I realised, didn't mean soft.

This was the feral alpha side of him: intensely possessive, protective, and... perhaps a little playful. It was almost enough to get an unwitting purr up my chest.

"Tell me," he asked again.

"I'd..." I tried to think. "I'd want you..." My breath caught as his fingers curled into me again, more insistently this time, a little spark of delight in his eyes as his touch muddled my thoughts. "I'd want you all..." Letting the clamouring, horny omega part of me loose, the rest of my answer came without thought. "You could... have me just like this and stretch me over your knot—" I cut off with a little moan as he leaned forward with a growl, catching my nipple through my shirt with his teeth.

"Could you handle that?" he asked, leaning back, impish grin still on his face, fingers still stroking that perfect spot.

I nodded, eyes wide, another orgasm building in my core. He thought I was a beta, that taking his knot might be hard. I didn't want him believing for a second I didn't want it. "I want you all."

Another rumble slipped from his throat, fingers still making me see stars.

"You could take me however you want," I whined. It was the truth, too. Fuck, he was the most attractive man I'd ever met, from soul to pale skin and wisps of raven hair.

"Bold dare," he breathed, fingers picking up in pace.

But it wasn't.

Mine...

He was mine.

And he wanted me to be his, too. The fresh bite on my thigh said as much.

“Come for me, my Dreamgirl,” he murmured. And with my eyes fixed on his, I tumbled over that cliff one more time.

TWENTY-SEVEN

VEX

Naturally, that high was followed by the biggest crash.

When I got back to my room later, giddy with lust after an hour in Drake's arms on the rooftop, it was to find a text from Alastor.

Stale cigs: I want to see you. Same time and place.

He waited in the limo in the same parking lot as before. The walk there was painfully frightening as I wracked my brain for what he might want.

Could it be because of what had just happened? I'd tried to keep the bond shut, but I'd been delirious with lust.

I shoved the thought away, not willing to entertain it.

The scent of stale cigarettes rose in the limo, enough to make me want to gag.

I slipped onto my knees before him, nothing in my vision but the dark fabric of his dress pants. I'd been here a million times before.

Two Months Ago

I waited on my knees as Alastor took a seat in the armchair again.

When I could finally look up, it was to see him adjusting his tie, wearing that familiar dark mask. I'd never seen his eyes, but I always imagined what they would look like. How cruel they would be.

"I have a big night tonight," he said.

"I don't care." I replied instantly, feeling hatred in my expression.

“You should.” I could hear the humour in his words. “It’s rather important for your future.”

I said nothing, trying to understand what that could mean.

“Stand.” The command was enough for the words to seize me.

“Did you find the courage to destroy the book again, or was an ice bath enough?”

It was a continuation of the taunt he’d left me with: another book, without a command not to destroy it.

I’d cracked once more, late last night when I’d reached the chapter about managing ruts.

“I threw it off the balcony,” I told him, bracing for his anger.

There was a long pause, but he wasn’t tense. Instead, he breathed a laugh. “And you’re hoping I’ll tell you to do the same?”

“Yes.”

He couldn’t, though.

Commanding suicide was one thing a dark bond couldn’t do. But he could—and had—commanded me not to, however. That was the worst of all. Nothing, not even shivering in that bath of ice water made me feel less human. The realisation that death might really be better than what was coming for me.

Knowing he’d taken that choice from me, too.

There was no outburst from him. He was impeccable at keeping his end of the bond locked down. “Such a brat, Vex, when I haven’t harmed a hair on your head.”

“There’s a bite on my neck that says differently.”

He tugged me toward him by my hips, and then he reached up toward my collarbone. I caught his fingers before he could touch me, glaring at him furiously. He pushed past my grip until his huge hand was circling my neck. I tried to jerk back, but his grip clamped down, dragging me back toward him.

“Enough,” he murmured.

That was enough to stop me, the command bringing tears to my eyes.

His touch rubbed up against the bite on my neck he’d left. He’d barely touched me since he’d left it, but there was something possessive in the way he caressed it now.

“You don’t like my bite?”

“I hate you.”

“Then you better pray that tonight goes well for me.”

I stared at him, unsure. What did that mean?

There was no undoing what he’d done.

Not ever.

Not without—

“I’m meeting up with someone who helps organise sweethearts for elite packs.”

My mind raced a million miles an hour as he pushed the lint roller into my hands.

Elite packs?

Like the Crimson Fury pack?

My mates were an elite pack. Ones who accept Sweethearts every few months...

“You aren’t as stupid as I thought,” he said, seeing the conclusion I was so clearly drawing. I realised the soaring feeling in my chest was enough to open the bond between us.

He could feel what I was right now.

In a panic, I slammed the connection shut, pulse racing as I held close the first true moment of hope I’d felt in forever, my eyes darting between his.

“I need to look my best for the meeting. I don’t want a single piece of dust on this suit when you’re done,” he said.

The words tried to seize me, to push me to action, but I warred with them, the phrasing something to untangle. I was

getting better at that. After a few silent seconds, I won. The word 'want' was not a command.

I didn't move, lips drawn in a snarl, chest heaving as I threw every ounce of my energy into fighting control he could drop on me with nothing more than a breath.

He chuckled. "Alright then, throw it out."

I frowned, the ambiguous command throwing me off.

He nudged the lint roller clutched in my trembling fist with a sigh. "Throw it out and then come back."

Seized by the order, I took a step back, knowing this one wasn't worth fighting. Then I strode toward the small bin beside the door, mind still trying to pick apart what he'd said before.

Sweethearts were betas, not omegas.

But he knew I could front as a beta.

Dread crawled up my spine as I watched the lint roller fall from my hands and into the bin. Then I turned and walked back toward Alastor, where he waited arrogantly in the armchair.

He held a hand up when I reached him, halting me, but I spoke before he could get another command out. "What did you mean?"

"I don't know if you deserve to know after that behaviour."

I swallowed. "Tell me."

I had to know.

Hope was a fragment of white-hot coal, burning hotter and hotter with every second that passed.

My mates.

Was he going to send me to them?

They were the only pack in the world that could free me from the bite on my neck.

Alastor reclined, crossing his ankles as he looked up at me from behind his black mask.

“What I will tell you, is that it’s in your best interest that I look respectable tonight,” he said. “Every piece of lint, little omega. You want it all gone. Use your fingers, and”—He gestured to the hem of his dress pants at his ankle—“start there.”

Tonight, in this limo, he wore the same suit as in the memory.

“How is the progress?” he asked.

“The same as I’ve told you,” I said through gritted teeth.

There was no reason for him to call me here. No reason other than taunt.

“They’re falling for you?”

“I... think so.”

“You *think* so?”

“Who did you sleep with, sweet omega?”

I froze, dread creeping in.

No.

No no no. That could not be why he’d called me.

“N-no one.”

“*Someone* gave you something sweet enough we all got a taste through the bond.”

My lips parted in shock, my chest becoming tight.

Why did it matter to him? He didn’t want me, not really.

“Stand up,” Alastor said.

I got to my feet, mind racing. “Y-you’re not interested in me,” I said, as he tugged me toward him, hands possessive on my hips. “And I c-can’t... get them to fall for me if I’m scared you’ll punish me every time I get close—”

“Who said anything about punishment?” he asked. I swallowed, hating the taunt in his voice. “Who was it?” he

asked. The question was direct, and the answer slipped by my tongue before I could control it.

“Drake.”

“No one else?”

“No.”

He chuckled. “Tell me, what did he do?”

Bile rose up my throat, but I shook my head. “No.”

A surge of pain almost drowned me, lighting every inch of my body on fire. I gasped, tensing, helpless as he drew me onto his lap, hand gripping my chin as he forced me to look at him. I squeezed my eyes shut.

“You don’t want to tell me?” he asked.

I was gasping for breath, desperate to fight the order. I managed to shake my head through the agony.

“Was he kinky?” Alastor asked. “Shy? Dominant? Top or bottom? Just give me something so I can picture it next time you send me a little ecstasy.”

I shook my head again, my teeth gritted with another wave of agony.

“Why are you so against telling me?” he asked. “Was he that bad?”

But I wouldn’t.

I couldn’t give him that.

I clung to Drake’s vulnerability, the way he was so gentle and sweet. So nervous to get close, so beautiful when he’d opened up.

What happened between us meant something to him.

It meant something to me.

“I will *not* tell you about him,” I managed to say through the agony.

A thousand orders, he could give me, and I didn’t have the strength to fight them all. But this one, I would fight.

He chuckled, something cruel in the sound. I could barely focus, a rolling wave of white hot pain smothering the world. “You know how tempting you’ve become, Vex?” he asked. “A filthy little gold pack siren. I should have seen it coming.”

Then the pain vanished as he relinquished his need to make me answer the questions.

I gasped, and it took me a moment to get my bearings. For him to swim into my vision.

It was all I could do to shake my head again. I didn’t know what he wanted anymore, the threat of agony just too much.

His breath was hot on my neck as his touch found the bite he’d left. It was in my biology to sink against him, trembling fingers clutching him desperately. I hated that response, as if that bite meant anything real at all.

Drake had nothing like that, and cared for me more.

“I didn’t expect how difficult it would be, claiming an omega and watching her with other alphas.”

Still pressed against him, my body began to shiver, terror leaching into my veins as I remained too afraid to move. I could feel his want for me—something that, before now, I’d denied existed.

I was Drake’s.

I’d decided that today with every ounce of me left that still had a choice.

He held me against him, threat like a blanket in the air around us.

Then he tugged his phone from his pocket and lifted it to my face, the light flashing for just a moment. I shut my eyes, feeling sick.

He was filming me.

“Don’t push me Vex. It can always get worse,” he murmured. “For example, I think the others would love to see this.”

I tried to duck away but his grip was impossible to fight.

“Look at me.” I grit my teeth, opening my eyes, knowing this wasn’t the order to fight. “What do *you* think I should do about how much you made me want you?” he asked cruelly. His fingers wove through my hair, dragging my neck into an arch so I was looking right up at him. “You could give me something to work with, and you can return to them untouched. Or you could fight me, and leave me to claim what I want another way.”

The threat hung between us, clear as day. The phone recorded my fear.

My heart pounded in my chest as every instinct screamed at me to give him exactly what he was asking for.

Tell him what he wants to know, and you’ll be back with Drake.

But Drake had given me his trust.

I couldn’t give that up.

But he wasn’t done. “Tell. Me.” Alastor’s command seized me again, a million threats of pain hiding behind those words.

Tears streamed down my face as I made my choice.

I was a mess when I staggered from the limo. I had to get myself together before I could even consider the possibility of walking back to their house.

There had been one horrible moment when I thought...
Fuck.

That Alastor would finally... I shook, hugging myself, not able to consider it.

I’d avoided it.

Somehow.

Still, I didn’t think I could face my mates ever again.

If they knew what had just happened, they'd never want me.

The limo drove off, and I remained on the curbside for an age, shame burning my system.

I hated him.

I hated him for what he'd turned me into.

Perhaps I could live like that, if I wasn't reminded of the possibility of more.

What Drake offered. What Love, Rook, and even Ebony offered me.

The chance for more than this.

It was a knife, lodged in my throat since the first day in their house. The reality that may never be. A reality that would be nothing but a taunt if I failed, and I ended up back with him.

If my fated mates weren't willing to give them what they were asking for.

Still, I had no choice.

It wasn't until the shadows stretched across the street from trimmed bushes, and my tears had long dried, did I finally stand. I tugged my phone from my pocket and checked my reflection.

Tonight, I realised, was supposed to be Love's night. But he would already be in his room.

Fuck.

I was too late.

I didn't think I could face him anyway, after what had just happened.

TWENTY-EIGHT

*Dear Love: Can't we have this,
always?*

LOVE

Every few evenings, Vex tormented me.

I thought she'd give up, but she hadn't.

She appeared with her offer every fourth night, kneeling at my bedside.

One word.

That's all it would take, and she would be mine. If she believed this was the way to get to me, she was absolutely right.

It was torture.

She unravelled my reality with every step she took into my life, and I didn't know how to pivot. I was doing everything in my power to keep my distance, and I was falling for her, anyway.

She drew my eyes in every room she was in, and I hung onto every word when she and Drake chatted movies and music, and not a page was turned on whatever book I was supposed to be reading.

One word.

That's how far I was from finding out if she could fall for me like that.

And if I spoke it, I could tell her I thought she was wrong about Aura Seven's most underrated song. And I could show her the special cut scenes of *Hunting Falcons* that Prey had sent me back when we used to talk. I would tell her how badly I wanted her. I would beg for that kiss she'd held back. I was watching her fall for Drake, and we were all *feeling* Drake fall for her.

It was real, I just knew it to my bones. I caught every blush he got out of her, or the way her eyes went soft for him when she thought no one was looking. With a rickety path of failure

behind me, of heartbreak, or women who never wanted who *I* was, it was torture.

That one word hung suspended in every moment she was in my room, an infinite chasm of impossibility. But unlike me, Drake was safe, Ebony didn't need leverage on him.

I was not, and would never be.

So, when she came, she waited on her knees, shivering until I woke. And every morning I told her I didn't want her to return the next time.

Until finally, she listened. When I entered my quarters tonight, she wasn't there. And of course, now that she wasn't, I couldn't sleep.

It was just past midnight when I exited my room, wondering if Rook might be up late in the firepit, or interested in watching reruns of aura boxing.

Instead, I found something I was wildly unprepared for.

The lights in the lounge were dimmed, spilling warmth across the couches, dining table, and tall dark curtains framing the massive window facing the garden.

Despite the hour, there was movement.

I stopped when I caught sight of her.

Vex was behind the breakfast bar, full of more energy than anyone had a right to be at this time. On the counter was an open bottle of whiskey, and an empty plate with two halves of an avocado. The small kitchenette up here was host to basic snacks like the one she was making for herself right now, even if most of our meals were made by Rob.

She was singing random lines of a Miley Cyrus song, a large set of headphones cupping her ears while she made a dance out of spreading butter on toast.

Silver-brown waves flew about wildly with the violent—and definitely drunken—dance in crop-top and sweatpants. The slice of her stomach showing between grabbed my attention, which was ridiculous, since it wasn't as if our lives as celebrities left us surrounded by modesty, and I could

usually control where my gaze landed. Her lyric cut off as she flicked the buttered knife a little too energetically, and it splattered the microwave door. She wiped it off quickly, not missing a beat of her song then returning to the out of sync choreography.

Her voice was utterly captivating, even missing half the lines, and I was frozen, absolutely fixated on her.

I didn't even feel guilty, watching the private bubble of reality she believed she was in—though in all fairness, she was in *my* lounge.

Finally, with a particularly aggressive twirl to a punchy line, she spotted me. The lyrics died, her mouth popping open, eyes wide as pink bloomed on her cheeks.

Then she vanished—as in, just dropped down in an instant, knife and toast still in fist—the bar placing her solidly out of my line of sight.

I couldn't help the smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. I should turn back around and leave, but instead I strode across the room, slipping into one of the bar stools.

This, at least, wasn't as dangerous as what she offered when she visited. Here, we were just two people sharing a home. From this vantage I could see where she was sitting, back pressed against the kitchenette. Her hand covered her mouth, her headset was hooked around her neck, and her beautiful chocolate eyes were wide and fixed on me.

“I recommend turning on the floor heating if you intend to stay down there. The bones of this place don't warm up.”

There was another long pause, and then she reappeared slowly, face flushed with embarrassment, and toast still clutched in her hands.

“You have a lovely voice,” I said absently.

“If we can just...” She swallowed. “Pretend you didn't see any of that.”

I snorted.

Impossible. It would be a surprise if I ever managed to get it out of my brain. I wanted, for the rest of my life, to run the risk of catching her singing in my living room.

And I'd *never* tell her that, because then the magic would vanish and ruin the dice roll: the chance that I could step into any room in this house, and stumble unknowingly into something as free and beautiful as Vex.

I couldn't deny that she was special, her freedom loosening joints of a space creaking with the weight of the life I'd built. Despite everything between us, I thought she truly might be healing my pack.

She had wriggled under Ebony's skin, was facing up to Rook's arrogance—spending her extra nights with him right now despite their rocky start—and she was changing Drake from the inside out. I could feel it through the bond.

Drake had been wounded since he'd joined the pack, and no matter how comfortable he'd become with us, he'd never dared step further—until Vex. She was everything Drake needed. He was even leaving the house with her, and for more than just woodland walks. He was brighter through the bond than I'd ever felt.

And... she *was* softening my edges: a heart that had been made of stone since the day I'd walked away from the only woman that might truly have cared for me.

Vex slipped into a chair at my side, eyes darting nervously to the bottle of whiskey, as if I might be angry about it. I wasn't, in fact I felt a strange warmth at the idea she might be comfortable in our house, even if I wasn't sure of the reason behind the drinking. Perhaps there was none, but downing hard alcohol alone tended to signal something. No matter how it killed me, I hadn't positioned myself to ask. Nor to comfort her.

“Do you want me to get Drake?” I asked.

Her eyes widened, and then she shook her head. “He should sleep. Sometimes he uh...” She trailed off, wincing.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just... good if he’s sleeping.”

I held her gaze, and I could see the guilt in it. “Did something happen?”

“No... nothing. I just... he clocked that I sleep into the afternoon after... after your nights, and he started staying up late so he could sleep with me.”

“Oh.”

“But uh... it’s my problem, what I’m doing wrong with you. And... besides,” she added, her voice weaker as a thought or memory seemed to hit her. “It doesn’t uh... matter now, anyway.”

I frowned at that. *Had* something happened between them? I’d had a flash of fear from Drake down the bond this morning—enough to wake me up. Fleeting, and then gone as he slammed it shut. But that wasn’t unusual for him. Drake liked leaving the bond open, I think as evidence of how far he’d come. Knowing he was at a place where he could share what he felt gave him a sense of grounding, of progress. But sometimes, he tumbled back into his pain, and when he did, he locked it down—often before we caught it.

Except when he woke with nightmares.

But aside that, he’d been happy all day—startlingly so—and I knew he’d been with Vex.

“You care about him?” I asked, curious as to her take.

“Yes.” Her eyes were more alert for a moment as her gaze snapped to me, drunkenness fading. I swear there was a moment of panic in her expression. “I mean... of course, I care about all of this—all of you,” she said, as if she’d sounded too desperate the first time. Her dark brows drew together and I thought her lip quivered, her gaze darting to the bottle of whiskey on the table. Then she was composing herself, looking back at me. “But he... matters a lot to me.”

I frowned, trying to detangle that. I believed her, and for me, that was really quite devastating. How could I *not* fall for a woman who cared for the one thing in the world I cared for

more than anything else? Vex's beauty went so much deeper than the way she looked. It was impossible to ignore.

More even than the impossibility of my childhood love.

It hurt, what had happened. In the years since I'd realised it would never have worked—she would never have been happy with us. It was her, or them, and the pack—*Ebony*—that was my path. It was the choice I made, even when five exhausting years made conviction hard to hold onto.

But Vex...

She fit both. Me, and them.

She looked so broken right now, though. I reached out without thought, touch sliding along her jaw, thumb brushing her bottom lip. She leaned into my palm, eyes fluttering closed, face becoming peaceful.

One day you're going to dance like that just for me. I didn't say it out loud. I wanted to, so desperately, but I didn't.

"I wish..." she breathed, but trailed off, frowning again. "I wish I knew how I fucked things up with you."

My chest tightened with guilt.

"Then maybe... I could fix it. You said I was no good as a Sweetheart, that I'm only here because I'm... different..." She trailed off, suddenly unsure. "I know that already..." Her voice was so fragile. "But if you could just tell me... why. Then maybe I could still do better."

"You don't need to worry about my needs, Vex."

She swallowed, frame slumping, expression broken.

I didn't understand. We were supposed to be a job for her. I'd told her she got a free pass with me—that she didn't have to do anything, and she'd still be paid. But she was wounded by that—*truly* wounded.

That was a splinter I couldn't dig out.

Was it possible that she truly cared about the rest of us like she cared about Drake?

I knew how irrational it was to believe that, yet I couldn't shake it, not with the desperation in her eyes. I didn't deserve it from her, yet she was determined to offer it anyway.

I wanted to convince her there was nothing wrong with her at all, to find something to say that might make her smile. To be someone worthy of claiming the kiss she'd denied me on that first night. The alpha in me wanted to claim a lot more than that. I didn't just want her, I wanted the world to know. My gaze slid down to her slender neck, and at the shift of my eyes she swallowed, breathing hitching just slightly. Primal desires spun images of what it would be like to sink my teeth into her flesh right now.

Absolute proof that we really needed a Sweetheart.

An omega was absolutely off the table with Ebony. He was possessive enough as it was without alpha-omega hormones making everything worse. But a beta was safer.

Would she ever consider becoming part of our bond?

I snorted.

Even if she wasn't distressed because I'd rejected her outright, Ebony would make that decision easy for her. The contract was the safest place for her to remain.

"What?" she asked, peering at me. There was a drunken listlessness in her eyes now that spoke to fatigue. I shook my head, finally dragging my eyes from her and forcing them around the room.

"I can never get a read on you," she whispered.

"I get that a lot," I replied.

I saw what was wrong now, as I stared into her eyes, so close. There *was* faint redness beneath them, and even with the makeup, her nose was too pink.

I drew back, suddenly afraid of any gentleness I might be offering. She was sad, intoxicated, and I held far too much power in her life. This was not the distance I needed to keep between us. And it was worse, seeing her like this with her

heart on her sleeve. Caring for Drake, and so honest and vulnerable about the way I'd hurt her.

Sorrow trickled through my chest.

Another casualty of circumstances I'd tied myself to: destined to be separated by a document from a woman I might want more from. Vex would stay because of signatures and a pay cheque, and I would never dare ask more of her.

The smile on her face poorly masked sadness. "The Hightower brothers remain a mystery."

I almost smiled at that, a rush of warmth at the title she spoke. We'd all chosen our names when we'd entered the grind for fame. We were—from title to personality—a brand, though most people kept their last names the same.

Ebony hadn't, and I didn't blame him, but I'd kept mine, since *'Starless'* was more melodramatic than I was willing to commit to.

I sighed.

"I should go to bed," I said.

She shrunk, pain flashing through her rich chocolate eyes, but all she managed was a nod.

"Can't... can't catch a break," she whispered. "And then I missed..." Her gaze darted to me nervously.

She'd missed my night.

Damn.

It had been an accident. She hadn't given up.

"I'm..." I trailed off, having been about to say I was pleased. But she was so fragile already, I didn't want to hurt her more. "I'm not mad," I landed on.

She nodded.

I got to my feet, but couldn't quite bring myself to leave, something whispering that I was missing something.

"Is there... anything else?" I asked.

There *was* something not right about her. A threat, nagging at me, sinking its claws in without reason. I couldn't say why, but I felt her pain was a blow, the alpha part of me stirring as if it were a threat.

"You don't want my secrets," she said, reaching for the whiskey bottle and taking a swig.

"Secrets?"

"Dangerous... things," she whispered. "Ebony... I know he's looking. Rook, too."

"Why?" I asked, frowning. "Would they... blow up the contract?"

She peered at me curiously, then pressed two fisted hands together and mimed a massive explosion, a crooked smile on her face as she looked at me.

"Like what?" I asked, stomach twisting with discomfort.

"You think because I'm drunk I'm going to give you something I shouldn't?" She giggled. "Joke's on you." She leaned forward, voice dropping to a cutting whisper. "I couldn't, not even if I wanted to."

I didn't push, partly because it felt wrong with her being so vulnerable, and partly because I didn't want to. If there was something she was hiding that could ruin this, a guilty fragment of me wanted it to stay hidden. "He's taking you out tomorrow," I said, changing the subject.

She peered at me, unsure for a moment before comprehension dawned on her face like a shadow. "Ebony?" she asked. "I mean... he's not actually going to come—"

"He will this time. He'll turn up."

She shifted just slightly, chewing on her lip, not meeting my eyes. "I'll be there," she said, hugging herself.

For a moment, I wondered what I was doing, forcing her into spending time with Ebony. She didn't deserve that—and I could protect her from it. Then I had to remind myself that it was the whole point in her being here.

And this time, Ebony would turn up, and not vanish from the house until the early hours of the morning—I'd checked the pack statements to find he'd bribed the local shooting range into leaving the doors open all night.

But tomorrow, he had an Evening Stars interview booked, and I'd bullied him into taking her. I'd told him I was pulling the Dragon Hunter posters that were on the contract in Germany if he didn't. They were doing a spotlight on the villains—it was hard, in an elite pack—to get solo exposure. Both he and Rook jumped on the opportunity whenever they could; they wanted to be famous for themselves, not just the Crimson Fury pack.

The truly surprising thing was that the blackmail *almost* hadn't been enough. I'd seen it in his tense expression as he'd opened his mouth to tell me to go ahead. But then I'd mentioned that I'd be securing a new contract for *Rook* to get individual exposure.

That *had* done it.

Ebony would be taking Vex out tomorrow.

I opened my mouth to speak, to say that Ebony wouldn't cross any lines, or that I'd make sure he treated her right, but I didn't get a chance for stupid lies, anyway.

Vex had rested her head in her arms and her eyes were closed. I frowned, watching her for a while before laying a hand on her shoulder, but she didn't wake.

Ah.

I sighed.

I don't know what had upset her tonight, but I would be surprised if I wasn't a part of it. I'm sure the idea of kneeling in my room for another night, cold and ignored, was too much. But then... I reached out, tucking a falling lock behind her ear. She was strong.

Nothing about her felt breakable or fragile. I *shouldn't* matter enough to push her to a night like this. Something about Vex told me her real demons were something else entirely—that kneeling beside my bed was nothing compared.

So I drew her into my arms, knowing there was only one decent thing to do.

She reacted, even in sleep, arms wrapping around me and she nuzzled into my neck.

I froze as she snuggled closer, head brushing my chin almost like she was trying to scent mark me. Of course, she was a beta—and asleep. Nothing happened.

Still, my whole body reacted, my pulse picking up, an unexpected purr rising in my chest, something as innocent as the first blossom in spring.

That was... odd. I couldn't remember the last time I'd purred on instinct.

I held her tight against me as I walked her back to her bedroom. There, I laid her down on her bed and tucked her in, watching as she dragged a pillow into her arms in my place. A pillow that smelled like blackcurrant wine.

A part of me didn't want her alone.

I couldn't worry about that. If she was to survive in this pack, she had to be able to do so without me.

But when I stepped away I heard a sound that drew me short.

I spun on my heels, eyes wide.

Only...

No.

It *had* to be my imagination, but for a moment, I swear a purr had risen in the air. Only, Vex was a beta; she couldn't purr.

I stood, absolutely fixated on her for an age. She'd drawn the pillow with blackcurrant wine closer, as if it were a lifeline.

Silence.

I waited even longer with a furrowed brow, but the room remained quiet. Finally, I shook my head, stepping toward the

door, believing I must have imagined it.

TWENTY-NINE

VEX

The sun beat down, warming my body as I reclined on the deck chair, earbuds in.

I was hungover as fuck, and I'd woken up without Drake.

Pathetic as it was, that hurt more than anything. Multiple orgasms beneath the summer sun would not make up for the absence of his blackcurrant wine in my room, and his purr at my back in the morning.

I discovered a text I'd drafted to him at one point in the night, telling him Love's night was no longer happening, and he should come over. I hadn't sent it. He'd said he couldn't sleep in my room anymore, and I understood why—even drunk, it seemed.

So today I was saying fuck everything and trying to claim a little something back for myself—while also trying to forget the fact that Love Hightower had caught me drunk dancing in his living room last night. I don't totally remember what we'd discussed, but it had probably made me look like a fucking idiot.

The rooftop might have a *stupid* second pool that I refused to go near, but it was pretty up here. A proxy balcony overlooking an unnamed forest—that was the only thing I'd seen of nature or the sun over the last few months.

This was freedom.

A P!nk song came on, soothing my soul. It didn't hurt either that I'd told Alastor I'd smash any phone he gave me that didn't have at least *one* music app with a subscription loaded on. Slim pickings when it came to rights, but hair preference, clothing, and ten bucks worth of a music app were the kinds of win I'd have to live with.

Fuck me.

Thoughts like that were prone to spiral. I opened my eyes, as if the blaring sun above might lend me distraction. I was met by the glint of light refracting from the pool's surface. That, at least, was a good distraction.

Seriously.

Why the fuck did they have two pools?

No one needed two pools. No one needed *one* to be honest—it was a fucking hazard.

Sunbathing, though, this was freeing and comfortable. I'd never lived in a place in my life where suntanning was an option, mostly small apartments in unwelcoming parts of town without balconies or accessible rooftops.

I was pale as shit, and I didn't really feel the need to be tanned, but I did like the feeling of the sun heating my skin. It reminded me of vacations, even if the only vacations I'd ever been able to afford were in bug-eaten motels. Those usually still had pools and deckchairs that worked well enough, though.

I was singing along to the next P!nk song, when my skin cooled. My eyes snapped open to find a great shadow looming over me.

I blinked, trying to get my bearings, ripping my headphones from my ears as I did. Adrenaline shot through my system as I made out the dusky tan skin and bone straight silver locks loose around a pair of broad shoulders.

I sat up so fast my phone went skidding across the tiles.

Ebony was taking a seat beside me on the deck chair before I could get to my feet, and I jumped when I felt his fist close around my arm, holding me in place.

“Stay.”

“Fuck off!”

P!nk was, perhaps, a bad choice to listen to right before facing the jerk of an alpha who was paying for a contract literally keeping me safe. *I'm Not Here for your*

Entertainment’ was still tinny in the air, blaring from the headphones that tumbled from the chair along with my phone.

Still, Ebony hadn’t let me go, and I glared up at him with a scowl. “What do you want?”

“Company.”

“I don’t believe you.”

His smile was cocky, and his grip loosened only for the weight of his arm to settle around my shoulders. “What if I said I just want some affection?”

“I’d say you’re a fucking liar.”

I felt the vibration of his low chuckle right down to my spine.

“Love’s been dogging me about spending time with you. It’s becoming a real pain in my ass.”

“He said you have an interview later?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

I swallowed, the brief boldness my music had leant me, fading. He was still holding me against him, the frighteningly alluring scent of twilight grass filling my senses.

Fuck him and his stupid nice scent. He was a goddamned honey trap, sweet scent luring me in, and then he’d grind my bones to make his bread.

The worst part was that there was the faintest echo within me that liked it—liked how close he held me. Ebony was one that, from the very beginning, had rejected me. And there was a traitorous little part of my withered omega heart that wanted to lean into this touch, even if it was a facade.

I still had dreams about the night he’d chased me through the maze—and embarrassingly, they really weren’t nightmares by a long shot.

“Save yourself some heartache,” he said. “Tell Love that I offered, and you declined.”

I tugged from his embrace and got to my feet. There was a predatory look in his storm-cloud eyes, which were far too dazzling in the sunlight. Then his gaze flickered to my chest for a moment, as if he couldn't help himself. I'd be lying if I didn't feel a little swell of praise at that.

He hated me, sure, but he'd better at least find me fucking attractive, or what was the point in a scent match at all?

I wasn't exactly well-endowed in the chest area, but right now I was wearing a bikini top paired with black harem pants. I loved that sort of clothing. I'd love to get authentic ones from other countries, but I knew that was a dream that would never come true. I was gold pack—I could travel across state borders, but unregistered as I was, a passport was out of the question. Even I wouldn't brave the black market for that. The penalties were infinitely higher than they were if I got caught buying illegal heat drugs or coloured contacts.

I shook that thought from my head, returning my attention to the predator before my eyes. He was watching me with that unnerving coolness.

"It's my job. I'll be coming," I said. There was no way in hell I'd let Ebony swing a neglect accusation at my contract.

"Decline. Tell Love you can't handle me."

"I *can* handle you."

His laugh sounded genuine. I almost lost my footing as he grabbed my arm and tugged me toward him. And before I could say a thing, he pressed his teeth to my wrist.

My heart stuttered out in my chest.

I tugged away but he didn't let me go, teeth sinking in. I had to cover my mouth to stifle the all-too-omega whimper from slipping out. By the time he leaned back, the mark of his teeth was outlining my skin.

I wasn't as frightened as I should be, and Ebony Starless proved, once again, capable of triggering the self-destructive thrill-seeking side of me. Three out of four, was all I could think. *Three* out of four of my mates had bitten me.

It wasn't an official claim, neither had Drake's been, even when that had left a mark, but that was good. If it was a true attempt at a bond—which only Love could give—it would have failed. And then the dark bond on the back of my neck would have been discovered.

Still, my chest was heaving, my pulse thready as Ebony drew away, swiping a drop of my blood from his lips. I tried to pull back, but he didn't let me go. Clearly, he was taking my stunned expression for fear—which it *should* be. At least, I thought it should. For me, there was a sure threat behind an unwanted bite. His teeth on my skin held all the promise of what he was: an alpha, from pack, to bark, to aura. But would a beta feel the same? I assumed, since he'd just sunk his teeth into me thinking I was one—but at the same time, I wouldn't be surprised if Ebony was often swallowed whole by his alpha instincts.

“You insist on staying, yet you're afraid of me,” he said. “You can't seduce my pack and leave me behind, you know that. So why did you want to get signed in at all?”

I stared at him.

“I don't...” I tried to find my voice. “I don't intend to leave you behind.”

“Yet you clearly can't handle me.”

My eyebrows shot up.

Couldn't... handle him?

How dare he.

If Ebony *fucking* Starless thought he was the worst monster in my life right now, he had another thing coming.

I could handle him.

He was my mate. He was nothing compared to Alastor and the others lurking on the other end of this bond. I acted before thought, my rage getting the better of me.

All I knew was that in the next moment, I'd slid right down onto his lap, catching him off guard. I wound my fingers through his hair and pressed my own teeth to his neck.

Fuck him.

Ebony froze beneath me, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't the hottest thing I'd ever experienced. He was frozen because of *me*.

It was the most empowering thing I'd ever felt, knowing that I'd just caught Ebony Starless off guard.

And...

Fuck...

I could feel him pressed against me, indisputably turned on by the feeling of my teeth at his throat.

So very slowly I leaned back, not loosening my fist in his hair. I didn't break skin. As an omega, I'd form a connection and reveal my designation in a second. "Don't tell me what I can't handle," I breathed.

The way he was looking at me had shifted completely. Calculating and dangerous, as if I'd just turned from prey to... to a threat?

I fucking hoped so.

He swallowed, clearly taking stock of the position I'd just put him in, and the truth I so obviously knew regarding his arousal.

"What in the fuck is going on here?" Rook's voice carried across the space, jolting me back abruptly. I looked over to see him sauntering onto the rooftop, a beer in his hand as he peered at us.

"Fuck off," Ebony growled.

I almost smiled, sensing the possessiveness in his tone, as if whatever was between us right now, he didn't want anyone ruining it.

"I don't think so." Rook dropped down onto the deck chair next to us, cracking the beer casually, though his narrowed eyes were locked on us a little too intently. I shifted, intending to climb off of Ebony's lap, but his grip clamped down on my waist, holding me against him.

I glanced back to see something possessive in his gaze, and he wasn't paying any attention to Rook. "Don't play with me and think you can get away so easily," he breathed in my ear. I don't know what his intention was, but thrill coursed through my veins.

I had climbed onto his lap and challenged him, so at his words, I relaxed, sinking against him to prove I didn't regret a thing, even with the unrelenting feeling that I was sitting before the open jaws of a vicious predator.

I *could* handle him.

Instead, I turned back to Rook, resting against Ebony's chest. Whatever. This was kind of my job anyway. Ebony would swear to the ends of the earth that he wasn't lacking companionship, but it was still my opinion that mattered.

I was leaning heavier and heavier toward loneliness right now.

"You alright, Vex?" Rook asked pointedly, meeting my eyes. Was he making sure I was okay? Rather hypocritical, frankly.

My lips curved up in a half smile. "Yep."

"We were having a private chat, Rook. No one wants you on my roof."

"Your roof?"

"Why do you think we have another pool up here?" Rook asked me. "So the rest of us can swim without sharks."

I laughed, but Rook didn't look like he was kidding.

Oh.

"The pool is yours?" I asked.

"This whole space is mine," Ebony said. "Not that anyone respects that."

I wondered what he'd say if he found out what me and Drake were doing up here yesterday. Rook smiled. "I had a bigger initial contribution to this house. I can go anywhere I want."

“Keep riding your parent’s money, mate, it’s a great look,” Ebony said.

“Happily.” Rook smirked. “If it means going wherever I want. If she decided she wanted to ride you right now—and she does look about five seconds from it—I could insist on staying for the view.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“I’d throw you off the edge before I let you watch,” Ebony snorted.

Uh... How had we gotten here?

Rook leaned back with that cocky grin on his face. I saw his eyes roam again across the way I was seated on Ebony’s lap.

I opened my mouth to remind them I hadn’t agreed to fuck either of them, but then closed it, wondering if I could play this to my advantage. I don’t think I’d seen either Rook nor Ebony as open as they were when they were at each other’s throats.

“It’s Ebony’s day today.” I placed a hand on Ebony’s chest. “His choice.”

Rook’s lips parted as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing, but I was distracted by something else. A vibration that had just passed through my palm.

“Did you just *purr*?” I asked, looking back to Ebony.

“I’ve never purred in my entire life.”

“Why?” I frowned. “Are you secretly a beta or something?”

Rook choked on his drink.

Ebony’s lip curled, but he said nothing.

“You don’t have to suit up around her like she doesn’t know,” Rook said.

“Suit up?” I asked, glancing between them.

Ebony rolled his eyes.

“So the world never learns,” Rook said with a hint of melodrama.

“Learns what?”

“His amygdala is not up to size standards.”

It was Ebony’s turn to snort.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Oh come on, like you haven’t noticed,” Rook scoffed.

“Rook.” Ebony’s voice was low and melodic. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Why?” Rook asked. “You’re worried what she’ll think? You really shouldn’t be. Maybe she’ll be more likely to fuck you if she knows it’s not actually your fault.”

I glanced between them, confused. “What isn’t your fault?”

“That he’s a raging dick?” Rook supplied. “Because he’s just not got the capacity like the rest of us.”

“For what?”

“Sweetness,” Rook said. “He’s like a big empty metal tin can—”

“*Hey!*” I cut him off, something defensive rising inside of me that I couldn’t quite place.

Rook looked at me curiously. “He tried to strangle you the first time he met you. Has he ever shown the first ounce of remorse for that?”

I looked back to Ebony, but was caught off guard by the intensity of his gaze. He was watching me with a strange curiosity, eyes darting between mine like he wasn’t sure what he was seeing.

Finally, he shrugged. “For once in his life, Rook’s not wrong. Unless he thinks I’m ashamed of it.”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s a psychopath, Vex. Keep up.”

That drew me up as I pieced that all together.

Nothing about it *didn't* make sense, which is why it took me out for a moment.

But... he was my *mate*...?

What did that mean for—Ebony shifted me away, getting to his feet, something strangely passive in his expression.

“You know,” Rook said. “I’ve done a lot of research on this shit—”

“Of course you have,” Ebony snorted.

“There’s a serious question of conflict between the brain of a psychopath and the brain of an alpha.”

At that, even Ebony paused. “What do you mean?”

I glanced between them, noting the smug glint in Rook’s eyes as he looked up at Ebony. “Psychopaths are clinical, right? Cost and reward analysis is limited strictly to what affects them.” He looked at me. “Why do you think Ebony only plays villains? Because people out for themselves are the only people he can actually relate to. But add in pack dynamics, alpha instincts, things get a bit murky.”

“You getting to a point anytime soon?” Ebony asked, looking bored.

“If you were a beta, it’d be simple. You wouldn’t need anyone but yourself,” Rook said, looking smug. “But you aren’t. You’re an alpha. We’re fucking dependent, aren’t we? Drawn to packs—to omegas? It’s instinct. A psychopathic alpha might be just as protective over his own pack as he would himself, because biology’ll tell him it’s the same damn thing.”

Ebony’s head was cocked as he watched Rook, and I couldn’t tell if he was thinking of pouncing or not.

Rook wasn’t done, though. “Love, Drake, me, and now...” His eyes trailed to me. “Maybe she counts too?”

Ebony’s sneer was incredulous.

“You can’t tell me you don’t look this shit up?” Rook asked.

“I have a life, Rook,” Ebony said, backing up a few steps to the door. “One that, consequently, doesn’t involve hanging out with you this afternoon.”

Rook chuckled, saluting him. “Run from it all you want, prick. Doesn’t change the truth.”

Ebony turned back to us when his hand was on the door handle. “If that’s your sad little way of convincing yourself I give a fuck about you, carry right on.” And with that, he vanished through the door to the stairs.

THIRTY

Dear Ebony: When you discover the truth, you aren't going to want me.

I think... you're going to leave me with them.

VEX

In the late afternoon, I made my way to the foyer to find Ebony was actually waiting for me.

I almost drew up, not ready for the sight of a fully dressed up celebrity mate. His long, silver hair was tied up, and he wore a black dress shirt with few of the top buttons undone, revealing a simple, silver necklace against his dusky tan skin. His white jeans toned the look down just enough for a hint of casual, which was good, because I didn't do full formal.

My dress was simple and black, with a turtleneck, and a v sliced out below it to reveal my collarbone. There were two thin chains making a mock belt around my waist, and I wore thigh high black boots with heels making an attempt to get me to at least Ebony's shoulders. In the matching black purse, I'd stashed my locked pouch, phone, and a few stray pieces of makeup in case the night went long.

Ebony was fixing a cufflink when he glanced up at me. He appeared to experience that same moment of pause as he took me in, that I had when I'd seen him. Thank fuck.

We exited through the front doors and were met by one of the limos I was becoming familiar with.

The driver—a skinny blond man in his mid thirties with a contagious smile—was leaning against the front door. He lit up as we stepped out.

“Ebony Starless!” he exclaimed. “Here to take you to the Evening Stars studio?”

Ebony nodded as we took the steps, and the driver opened the door to the limo. Before we could enter, however, he lifted a hand, a shy expression on his face.

“I know I'm not supposed to, but you're my niece's favourite. Would you mind an autograph?” he asked. We paused, and I tensed, turning to Ebony in concern, but the

smile that lit Ebony's face was the most shocking thing I'd ever seen.

"Of course," he said, patting down his shirt, but the driver was already producing a pen and photo, handing them to Ebony.

I couldn't stop staring, forcibly shutting my mouth as the driver told Ebony who to make it out to. I jumped as Ebony's hand wove around my waist, his face a mask of concern as he looked at me. "You feeling alright, Vex?"

I couldn't find my voice through the shock as he chivvied me through the limo doors, which was stupid because I had seen *this* man before. This was the Ebony I'd believed he was before I met him. The Ebony from interviews in the public eye. I'd forgotten him, the cold predator I now knew, drowning him from my mind.

"You have a car, why don't you drive?" I asked, trying to find something to say as Ebony slid into the limo beside me. I could practically feel his delight at my shock, and I wouldn't give him anymore of it.

"The studio sent the car. Would be rude to decline it—though I would have if I'd known they were sending an idiot," he murmured. "I prefer driving."

I flinched, gaze snapping to him, but the driver slipped into the front seat, and Ebony's warm smile was back in an instant. "A bit of privacy," he said. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all, not at all Mr. Starless," the driver said, winding up the window between the front and back so we couldn't see him anymore.

The mask dropped from Ebony's expression like water from a duck, a little curl on his lips. "Might mention it to the studio. He'll be fired before my interview's over. We'll have a different one on the way back."

What?

"Don't do that." My voice was hoarse.

"Why not?" Ebony shrugged. "He knew he risked his job."

“But it... wouldn’t be a good look for you,” I said. “Getting people fired.”

“I wasn’t going to *tell* them he’s an imbecile.” Ebony snorted. Then that strange look overtook his face again, and he was smiling. “And the driver—*Jacob Smith*, was it? So charming. They usually aren’t friendly enough to ask for autographs.” This time the mask slid away for a curious look as he took me in. “I didn’t think watching you squirm would be so fun. Should we make it a game? How many people can I get fired in one trip without marring my oh-so-precious reputation?”

I felt sick, unable to take my eyes from him.

He gave me his first honest smile of the night as he leaned close. “Would that break your fragile little beta heart, Vex?”

“Fuck you.”

There was something dangerous dancing in his eyes.

“Maybe that’s what we’ll do. I get every fourth day, right? I could take you on all those dates Love wants, and we can see how many people we can ruin, starting tonight. I’ll even let you choose. Every person you speak to, I won’t just get them fired, I’ll make sure they’re blacklisted from the whole industry.”

He was insane. “I’ll tell Love that’s what you’re doing,” I said.

“You think I give a shit?” Ebony chuckled, letting me go and leaning back on the seat. “You know, these places always have gold pack omegas on staff when I’m around? It’s the business trying to get my endorsement. In the background, of course, never allowed near me. But all I have to say is they came too close—can’t risk a scent match ruining my career.” He snapped his fingers with a smirk, drinking in my expression. “There’s a strike on their worker’s card.”

Hearing him speak those words was like a shot of adrenaline in my veins. There were industries that required gold packs to have a workers card—a special pass that was hard to get approved for—before they could be hired. Take

that away, and they wouldn't be able to do the job anymore. I shoved down my nerves. He was just trying to get a reaction from me. That was all.

It was hard, folding my arms and leaning back against my seat, but I managed it. I shrugged. "Do what you want. I don't care."

He grinned, as if he could see right through my indifference, and the rest of the journey was spent in silence. I couldn't focus, my mind reeling at his gold pack comment.

Finally, we pulled up at a flashy, towering building in downtown New Oxford. It was fronted by broad steps leading up to huge glass doors, and a fountain with a stone koi spouting water before the entrance.

Ebony smiled and thanked the driver before stepping from the limo. There were paparazzi around, and they hurried toward us, cameras clicking as they shouted questions that Ebony ignored. Instead, he turned, holding his hand out to me as I made to exit behind him.

I took his help, keeping my expression neutral. No matter how I felt about him behind closed doors, I would be polite out here. Disrespect to either him or the Crimson Fury pack's image in public was grounds for contract termination.

The moment I was out of the limo, however, I was glad for his closeness. I felt my heart rate elevate at the attention of the journalists, ducking my head down. Ebony gave them a graceful wave before sweeping toward the building, a gentle grip on my arm ensuring I remained close. I hurried to keep pace with him; he was significantly taller than me, and each of his steps were worth three of mine.

It took a little effort to steady my breathing once we were inside, the clicks of cameras and shouts still dim echoes in my brain, keeping me on edge.

"Ebony!" I heard someone exclaim. There was a handshake and niceties that I couldn't focus on. An old friend of the pack, it seemed, with a jolly voice.

“Call me if you want any more future collaborations, oh, and here—I only have a few left, but they’re prototypes, ‘put it by your bedside, and let it organise your life’, something like that, anyway. Maybe drop it in a photo or two? Favour to a friend.”

“Of course.”

Next thing I knew, Ebony was passing me something. “If you wouldn’t mind?” he asked, voice sweet as honey. I took what he was holding without thinking, still trying to get my bearings.

“They’re compatible with...”

The conversation continued, but I just stared down at the small glass cube in my hand. It lit up when I touched it, the time, date and weather forecast displayed within.

I was still unfocused. Each of those clicks just now had been photos. I’d always been nervous around people taking photos of me. I couldn’t control where they were posted—and these ones would have a broader reach. There was a pack out there with a daughter long stolen by a woman who’d fled them... But my name was different. I was different, outside and in.

Rationally, I knew they would neither recognise me, nor would they want me back.

It wasn’t that I was afraid they’d come for me—even if they did care enough to, and levelled me with accusations that constructed my nightmares—it would destroy them.

But it would destroy me, too.

So all those eyes made me nervous. I’d been out with Drake, but he’d not been recognised much, and the few times he had it had been a quiet request for a photo with him before we’d ducked away. I’d never been *in* those photos.

When Ebony was done talking, clapping the man on the arm with a goodbye, he led us to a front desk. There was an excited welcome I didn’t listen to, but I was ripped from my anxiety as I heard a question that drew my gaze sharply.

“How did you find your ride here?” The woman behind the desk was the image of office perfection, with glossy black hair, a blazer, and a pencil skirt. But I was focused on what she had said.

Fuck.

Ebony smiled. “Charming driver, really,” he said.

My blood ran cold.

No.

No no no.

I wouldn’t fucking watch him do this.

“Though...” He paused, considering. I stared at him, seeing the twinkle of delight in his eyes as if he could feel the tension from me.

What the fuck was I supposed to do, though?

As he opened his mouth again, I did the only thing I could to derail the conversation.

“You know, he—?” Ebony cut off at the sound of glass shattering at our feet.

I stared at the marble floor where crystals of the broken cube he’d handed me moments ago, glinted back at us.

Then I looked up at Ebony’s frozen expression. A plan came to me in a wild moment, unbidden and completely insane. But I wouldn’t let him do this, even if that meant playing him at his own game—and he’d have a hard time arguing *disrespect* to him publicly, either.

“I...” My voice was the faintest breath, and I didn’t take my eyes from him. The woman behind the counter—everyone around us—was staring. “I’m s-sorry,” I stammered, throwing everything I had into the tremble in my voice. I was tense as a mouse, drawing up every memory of hiding from monsters that my childhood had leant me.

Ebony frowned, calculating for a moment.

Then I was sinking to my knees, fingers trembling from the adrenaline, body tense as I scrambled at the glass across the floor.

“Vex!”

I froze, rigid and still. Then I continued collecting the little pieces of glass.

“*Vex!*” His voice was firmer this time, and I jumped, having been waiting for it.

“I can fix it,” I said, wild and desperate. “I’ll... I’ll fix it.”

“Vex!” This time I jumped harder when I felt his hand on my arm, dragging me upward. “Hey, hey, come on.” His voice was so gentle, but I didn’t meet his eyes as he helped me to my feet. Instead, I stared down at his shoes, fingers clasped. “It doesn’t matter, I can get another one. Not worth you getting hurt over.”

My gaze darted to the lady at the desk. She was staring, taken aback as, before her eyes, I painted a picture so very opposite to what anyone expected of the charming actor, Ebony Starless.

I forced a weak smile on my face, looking up at him for just a second.

“R-right. Of course.”

He reached up, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear, and I flinched away. He paused, and this time I saw the flash of fury in his eyes, brief and only visible because I was looking for it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Are you feeling unwell?”

I held that rigid smile, one I’d seen a thousand times on my mother. Before today, I’d always wished I could forget it. I looked up at him longer this time, and there it was again, that something deadly glittering in the depths of his eyes. Fucking good.

“Y-yes,” I whispered. “That must be it.”

“You didn’t get hurt, did you?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Come here.” He drew me into a hug.

I clutched him, my voice so close to his ear that no one else would catch my words. “You ruin their reputation,” I breathed. “I’ll ruin yours.”

THIRTY-ONE

EBONY

Manic pixie demon girl.

That was how I'd describe Vex tonight. With her little black dress that showed off perfectly smooth thighs, vanishing into black boots. The tumbling waves of silver-brown with that peach streak elevated her look to another level. She was like a female Drake, except Drake didn't have the kind of vengeance she did.

As the night progressed, she took my challenge literally, she spoke to *no one*. Not one single person aside me.

And she didn't just *not* talk to them: when someone addressed her, she shrank against me, looking up at me with wide chocolate eyes, all worried and letting me answer for her. As if I was five seconds from dragging her into the bathroom and giving her a black eye if she said the wrong thing.

And, *fuck me*, she could act.

I hated, more than anything else in the whole world, that this mad, and oddly genius response to my threat was probably the hottest thing I'd ever seen.

As my makeup was being applied, she waited dutifully beside me, silent. Her submissive gaze, framed by deadly winged liner, was fixed on me; dangerous twinkling voids that let slip a briefest moment of victory when no one else watched, a faint sneer crinkling her nose.

The rest of the world melted away beneath that gaze, the distracted shouts around us, the touch of a makeup brush on my cheeks, the gentle tug of someone fixing my hair. All gone, but for her.

She might taunt me, yet she didn't know what a fool she was. The beast she baited was stirring as I realised *this* was what I wanted. I didn't care if I had to ruin anyone who ever

crossed her path if the result was Vex at my side, speaking to no one but me, *looking* at no one but me.

She was mine.

I wanted her.

For a moment, my lust got away from me. I imagined seizing her by the hair and bending her over the vanity. I'd rut her so hard that her sneer, the twinkling malice, it would all be gone for the way she'd scream for me. I'd make her come until she cried and begged for my knot.

I'd do it in front of all these people she so dearly wanted to save.

Finally, we were left alone. My makeup and prep was done with a bit of time to spare. When the door to the studio room closed and I was left alone with her, I tilted my head meeting her eyes. "Push me some more, Vex, I dare you."

She regarded me flatly. "You don't like when someone challenges you?"

I laughed. "You're reading me wrong."

She paused, brows furrowed.

"Bait me more, I'll cancel the interview and drag your bratty little cunt over my cock on live TV so no alpha would ever dare touch you again."

She went as still as a frightened bird, plush lips parted in shock. By the way her pupils were blown, all composure gone, I knew it wasn't fear at all—and I realised I'd also possibly been misreading her fear before now.

The strings tying me to fame, to Love, to expectation were the only things keeping me from doing what I'd just said I'd do. And I was surprised at how faded those strings were as I stared at her, her chest heaving, and slender neck exposed.

I'd claim her and bite her for the whole world to see in a heartbeat. My fame, my access to a live show, was—in this moment—just a means for more reach of that claim.

Yet, she was a beta, which meant she'd have to agree to the bond to make it stick. I could get her agreement one way or another—that, I wasn't worried about. But *Love* was a problem.

I couldn't bite her in because he was pack lead. She'd used makeup to cover the mark I'd left earlier, and every time I saw her unmarked wrist, I felt a flare of anger.

"I can see why Love puts so much effort into managing you," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear, trying—and failing to compose herself after what I'd just told her. Her pupils were still dilated.

I grinned. "He does, doesn't he?"

"Does it bother you?"

"It's a challenge," I said. One I enjoyed. I got a thrill whenever I caught a whiff of Love's interference in any part of my life. And his tells were obvious. It was a silent game: he tried to keep his meddling undetected as long as he could, just like I hid my discovery of it.

"Who usually wins?" she asked.

I chuckled, cycling through all the silent wars Love and I had waged over the last few years. "Me. But there are a few hills he'll die on—like the omega shit." I didn't *want* an omega, but I also hated being told I couldn't, as if Love was cutting away the alpha part of me that needed to be able to make a claim.

Then there was pack lead. I let him have some—I had to. If I won every time, he'd give up, and Love was my constant. One of the only people I could rely on to challenge me.

I needed him. That was *normal*, though, and had nothing to do with dependency or weakness like Rook had spouted this afternoon.

Then there was the house—I'd won that outright. When we'd first moved in, he'd said my room had to be close to the others for the sake of bonding. I'd diverted him to a dud company for renovations. Love believed everything was sorted when we left for a movie in Taiwan. When we returned, the mansion was the way I'd wanted it, right down to Rook's room, which was the smallest.

Then there were the Sweethearts. I'd won that too easily, though. He'd fucked up last year, trying to sneak an out of pack romance behind all our backs. I'd discovered the relationship, *and* how she was using him for his fame, because... of course she was. She was some wannabe journalist bitch—not even holding a candle to the last relationship he'd cared for, even if both were mistakes. But Love had shown his hand, asking me to let him end it peacefully, even when I knew the truth had wounded him.

My blood still ran hot at the thought of anyone walking free in this world who'd hurt something that was mine. I'd tried to loop back to her a few times, but Love was keeping tabs. Plus, the Sweethearts had been worth the trade.

Well, it *had* been until Vex. Now I wasn't sure.

She was watching me curiously. "What about this?" she asked, glancing around the little studio. "The acting."

I shrugged. "My choice. Love lacks ambition without me." I'd signed us up for career path after career path when we were teens. Elite packs started early, intent on becoming the top in whatever they chose to pursue. Love had discovered each, and shut them down, but I wouldn't do it without him.

"Love didn't want to act?" Vex asked, surprised. She folded her arms and leaned against the vanity. I regarded her for a moment, assessing my own desire to respond honestly. Usually, when people prodded me for truths, I sent them on wild goose chases. But it was quite... freeing, the idea of telling her the truth. And it didn't matter, she was contracted.

"Not at first," I said. "He might say otherwise, but neither of us were built for a nine to five life."

The acting application had been Rook's idea, one I jumped on, knowing I could use him to finally snare Love into ambition. I'd hated Rook since the moment his aura showed and Love got it in his head that he would be pack. Rook was one of the few people Love had growing up—who knew who I was and stuck around, anyway.

At fourteen, Rook had been a lot easier to bully, and I'd made him convince Love to film and audition with him—just for support. I'd submitted it with mine and to no surprise at all, we got in as a trio: prospective elite pack in the making. By the time Love found out, I'd forged a dozen signatures, and blowing it up would destroy Rook's shot as well. He'd had to let it go through.

And Rook was better than the only *other* alpha that might have been the third necessary to form our pack. The alpha Love had fallen for—the woman I preferred to pretend didn't exist. Still, Rook was the most unfortunate cost of keeping Love—though Vex was closing in on a close second.

“Why did you come out as rogue?” Vex asked, ripping my attention back to her.

I grinned, a warm feeling rising in my chest. “Attempted blackmail,” I said, mildly.

That, I wouldn't explain further; the secret was far too precious.

It was a question a lot of people had. Four years ago—almost to the day—I'd come out as a rogue. It hadn't been necessary, and risked my image and career. But we'd played our cards right, pushing on the Gold Pack Protection Campaign, turning me into an icon for the tragedy of rogues—it wasn't in my control, after all, and look at what an upstanding citizen I was.

Contrary to the media belief, I did, in fact, know who my father was.

He was a mega rich gold-pack omega. He'd contacted me years ago, threatening to reveal my status if I didn't pick up the phone and do whatever jobs he asked, whenever he asked.

I did my homework and found out that *this*—blackmailing his own children—*was* his career. My father was example number one why society feared gold packs: their alpha children were rogues. And rogues—like me—could be dangerous, not bound by the laws of the Institute designed to keep the poor little betas safe.

And my *charming* father in his younger years had hidden his golden eyes, and tried to sire as many rogue babies as possible. Then he'd banked on them making it big when they were all grown up, so he could drop in with the secret that could ruin them, and milk them for everything that they were worth.

Naturally, I'd come out as a rogue the next week, and tossed the ball back in his court.

Now my lovely father did *my* dirty work whenever I asked. That is, if he didn't want me spilling his billion dollar secret to the authorities.

“Blackmail?” Vex asked, brows furrowed. But before I could answer, there was a knock at the door and a shouted ten minute warning.

VEX

Ebony got to his feet, adjusting his cuffs.

He was... a problem. And not just because he was a stone cold psychopath intent on evicting me from the island.

The tension between us was insane, and the challenge—this game he was making me play—turned that tension up to eleven. Every time his hand brushed my skin, goosebumps erupted. Even his voice, cold or fake, was enough to make me shiver.

Out of all of my mates, Ebony woke my feral side—and she was climbing the walls right now, desperate to claim him. Every time he shifted, I had to fight my gaze honing in on his neck, though I'd never had the urge to bite an alpha before. It sparked more than a claim, it opened a temporary connection.

Did I actually want that connection with Ebony? To *feel* what he was? He hated me—even now, he was just toying with my emotions, trying to get a rise, I was sure of it. With a bond, I'd know the truth, and that would be inescapable.

Still, he wasn't like anyone I'd ever met, and I couldn't deny an aching desire to know more.

“You're not like Rook,” I said.

Finally, that was enough to seize his attention. “I don't recall doing anything to deserve that comparison.”

“You're both dicks,” I said with a shrug.

Ebony breathed a laugh. “Harrison is a spoiled brat with entitlement issues.”

“And you *don't* have entitlement issues?”

He regarded me for a long moment as if toying with his response, finally releasing the cuffs of his shirt. “To have entitlement issues, I'd have to believe I was owed anything.”

“You behave just as spoiled.”

“I am what nature intended for alphas, Vex—not Rook. I am not *owed* anything. I lay claim to what I want, and when I do, I defend it to the death.”

I stared at him, lips parted, taken completely out of left field by his reply. I was transfixed.

“You want that claim, Sweetheart?” he asked. “Is that why you’re here?”

“I’m...” I cleared my throat, desperately unscrambling my brain. I wouldn’t let him see me flustered. “I’m here because your brother made it clear my contract depends on you.”

Ebony grinned. “Unwanted by my brother, bullied into spending time with me, and blackmailed by Rook, yet you’re still here. Is Drake really *that* appealing to you?”

I drew up at that, ice chilling my veins. “How do you know about Rook?”

There was no way Rook was telling people. And if Ebony got ahold of that email it wouldn’t remain private—he’d blow up my contract the first chance he got.

Fuck.

But... even if Ebony leaked the email, it would mean nothing if Rook didn’t want to push it, right?

Ebony’s eyes were twinkling with delight as he watched my reaction. “It must be good, little Sweetheart. He has you dancing so pretty I’m almost jealous.”

“I don’t think you want that at all.”

The little curve of a smile on his lips was one of the real ones. “You’re right,” he mused. “Blackmail is as useful as it is dull.” He leaned close, breath tickling my ear. “I prefer you crying and fighting the whole way.”

I bit my lip, fighting to hold my ground as he drew back, analysing my reaction. “The night in the maze made that clear,” I said evenly.

An edge of lust seeped into the twilight grass that was drowning me. “Are you sure you could handle what would have happened if I *had* won that night?”

I shivered, eyes locked with roiling storm clouds.

Before I could answer, the magic shattered with a louder bang on the door.

“*We need you ready!*” Someone shouted.

Ebony grinned, then he turned and he was gone.

DRAKE

Fin Briggs.

That was the character I was to play in Dragon Hunters, the younger brother of Love's character. Charming, daring and carefree, I was the one who would get us into trouble, who dropped the dragon egg at the end, kicking off the finale.

Love was reading his script on his usual arm chair in the living room beside me. We did have a number of collaborative scenes, and we were both sifting through our scripts as the TV played in the background.

"What do you think?" I asked, skimming the lines of my script one last time before looking up at Love in challenge. "You got enough left for the two of us to make it through?"

Love's lips quirked in half smile, one eyebrow rising. "You think I'm wasting my magic just so you can ditch me for a lass in the nearest Tavern?"

I sat up on the couch and for a flash, we were on set. Love was carrying a wooden staff, decked in furs and old-timey clothes. "If I swear I'll share."

"You'll be too pissed to remember that promise."

I groaned, rubbing my face in my hands when another voice interrupted.

"You have dragons to study, mate."

I almost let slip my grin of delight as Rook appeared up the stairs, joining in on the script.

"I won't waste healing on the next burn if you do your studies," he went on.

I took my lines piece by piece, but Rook knew his back to front miles before the rest of us.

Case and point, I'd already forgotten the next part, having not expected Rook's entry. I shrugged, improv classes kicking in.

"That'll just get more points with the ladies. Then you'll be begging to bring me along."

Rook snorted, settling down onto the couch at my side.

"You going to write that in?" Love asked, breaking the magic as he returned to himself. "Strengthens the tantrum you kick up in a few scenes."

"They're alright with that?" With still months to go, I'd signed all the contracts, but I wasn't up to speed on the details.

"Give Jos the final scripts, she'll chat with them. But it should be fine, they want our dynamics as a pack, anything to make it more natural."

I began scribbling a few notes in, before I was distracted by the start of the Evening Stars interview with Ebony. We didn't usually watch our own shit, but Love liked to keep an eye on anything Ebony did solo.

I tugged my phone out, to check to see if Vex had texted. She was nervous about tonight, and I'd checked in on her not long ago.

Vex: He's nuts, but I'm fine.

I snorted.

"What's that?" Rook asked, peering at my screen. The screensaver behind the text was a photo of Vex. She hadn't listened when I'd told her to be careful with the Buldak in a local Korean restaurant.

"I can handle hot food," she'd told me. I'd snapped a shot when her eyes began watering, but it was mostly a blurry shot of her middle finger.

I hugged my phone to my chest, eyeing Rook with sudden interest. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"My what?"

“Come on. Tell me she doesn’t take a million shots on your phone too.”

Rook’s brows furrowed and he folded his arms. “Like... of what?”

“Uh. Everything.” Come to think of it, they did spend the evenings together, and often wouldn’t go places like me and Vex did. Maybe she didn’t have as many things to take pictures of. It was the same with Love. Both stuck to evenings with her, and it would be a lie to suggest I didn’t wonder what that meant.

I tapped my phone open to the gallery and handed it to him.

“Come on, just one?” I asked, as he scrolled a little. Vex was even in the habit of taking a night time selfie if she liked my band top, so Rook *had* to have some.

“One what?”

“One selfie of you and her? She’s so fucking cute.” I’d scrolled through mine so much already, and I did wonder how she was with my brothers. Her time with us was so separate.

Rook was scanning my photos intently, though, and for a moment I swear I felt a little flash of jealousy through the bond. It was so brief, I might have imagined it though. Finally, he held the phone back to me.

“Nah mate,” he grinned. “Mine aren’t ones I’ll show around without asking her first.”

My lips parted at the implication behind that and I snatched my phone back.

I barely had a moment to consider my own insecurities before an announcement on the interview caught my attention.

I looked up at what Dean Trance was saying. Love had straightened, eyes now fixed on the screen as we both took in what was happening before us.

“Uh...” *What was going on?* But Love and Rook were clearly as blindsided as I was. “No fucking way would Ebony do that without asking first.”

THIRTY-TWO

VEX

Watching an Evening Stars interview from within the studio was a crazy experience.

Beyond the stage was a live audience and band which I could see from the wings. There were huge pieces of camera equipment, empty coffee cups on messy tables, and people buzzing around like restless ants.

Ebony had been out there for a while, his time split with a commercial break. He was the image I knew from the media: quick-witted, charming, and kind.

A man that didn't exist.

"We need more work done with gold packs, Dean," Ebony was saying right now. "That's just the truth. New Oxford sees far too many deaths a year from omegas self administering heat drugs. Ninety-nine per cent of those are gold pack omegas.

"My job is to make people aware of the free resources. Aura Health has set up clinics across the city. They treat heat, no questions asked, no registration needed, no paper trail. It's safe. Not enough people know about it."

"And what would you say to the critics?" Dean asked. "That gold packs choose what they are? Why should we give them more resources?"

"It's an easy narrative to spin," Ebony said with a shrug. "But it's never that simple, is it? We don't have the stats, but we *know* some are coerced, prevented from reaching the injection. I'm sure you saw the Dirt with Dash episode? That poor girl was forced. The truth is, we don't know enough, and none of it justifies leaving them to die alone."

I shivered, watching the screen, my chest suddenly tight.

"I'm a poster child for this—literally," Ebony said. "I mean, everyone knows..." He paused, cocky posture

vanishing for something much more vulnerable. “My dad *was* a gold pack. I never knew him. He could be one of those statistics.”

“Thanks so much for speaking about this, Ebony. Really brave of you.”

I leaned against the pillar at my back, folding my arms, a lump in my throat as Dean rattled off hotlines and websites for Aura Health donations.

I’d heard this speech before. He’d delivered it over and over.

Aura Health clinics were not a be-all-end-all solution for gold packs, but once upon a time, watching Ebony Starless look at the camera and speak to me—to *my* pain—it was like being seen. Wanted.

Not so alone.

Now, hearing it, knowing it was a lie, made me feel more isolated than ever.

He didn’t care about gold packs at all.

The interview went on, but my attention had drifted.

Eventually, someone approached, and the bright, hazel eyes and mouse-brown curls were familiar. Evening Stars had been one of my comfort shows to watch in lonely nights with Aisha, and I recognised Jay Salazar as one of the omega co-hosts.

“Are you alright?” they asked with a warm smile. “I could grab you a coffee, if you’re getting tired.”

My gaze drifted to the stage, where Ebony and Dean were still talking. Ebony wouldn’t know who I spoke to right now. “No, but thank you.”

“If you need anything, shout.” I could see an undercurrent of concern in Jay’s eyes as they stepped back, as if they’d noticed things might not be quite right for me.

“I appreciate that,” I said, with a faint smile.

They walked away, leaving me to my quiet anxiety, when I was distracted by what Dean was saying in the interview. “I hear through the grapevine some pretty cool news about the Crimson Fury pack.”

“Have you?” Ebony asked.

“Is it, or is it not the case, that you recently signed a Sweetheart?”

My heart tripped over itself, and my eyes were back on the screen. I saw just the faintest moment of surprise on Ebony’s features before he smoothed his expression.

“I wasn’t told you were going to be prying into my private business, Dean,” he said, though he sounded playful.

“Come now, you know that’s what we do. And how private is she, if you brought her with you today?”

Ebony leaned forward in his chair, one eyebrow cocked, but Dean Trance was already turning to the crowd. “Do you want to meet her?”

There was a cheer.

What?

But I hadn’t been told.

Suddenly, people were surrounding me with urgent voices.

“Dean’s fucking done it again,” one said. *“Someone needs to hide his stash.”*

“Hey, love—” A hand was on my arm. *“Bit last minute. You don’t have to, but they’d love to see you.”*

“I...” My voice was caught in my throat. I couldn’t focus as the chaos unfolded. There were people around me, talking to me, even if I couldn’t focus on what they were saying.

“Come on—Vex Eden, is it?”

“You can say no,” a kind, familiar voice said. Hazel eyes found mine, grounding me. That was Jay, I thought, but there were a dozen other voices, drowning theirs out.

“Just tell us now so we can—”

“...Sharon, you see the live stream? it’s off the charts...”

“Make a real name for yourself—”

“Need an answer now, alright?”

“I...” I felt sick. I couldn’t.

I couldn’t.

“She’s in, folks, we just got the confirmation!” That was Dean Trance’s voice, drowning out all the others. “Vex Eden, the Crimson Fury Sweetheart, ladies and gentlemen.”

Suddenly, I was being dragged to the edge of the stage.

“You can say no,” Jay was saying, their voice turning sharper as it was directed at someone else. “Lee, *give her a second—!*”

“We don’t have a second.” A pen was being shoved into my hand. “Just sign here. Puts you on the roster. Normal waiver.”

“I...” I swallowed.

“You’ll really show him up now, if you don’t—”

“Lee!”

“You’ve got ten seconds to make the decision, love, or we’ll have to say you stood us up—”

“N-no.” I couldn’t think straight. What would it look like for the pack, if I didn’t go out right now? What kind of Sweetheart would I look like?

My mind raced to what the lawyer had said to Rook. There were already strikes against me.

I scrawled a shaky signature across the page.

“Out of the way—”

“Shut up.” Then Jay was in front of me again. “Take a breath, Vex.” The irritation vanished from their voice as they spoke to me. “I’m not letting you go until you take a breath.”

I nodded, inhaling deeply. The world steadied around me, if only a little. Then Jay ushered me forward, and I was

stepping onto the stage.

I had to keep it together.

I took another breath, forcing one foot in front of another.

It was too bright, and the crowd was hushed.

Then I saw him.

Ebony had stood from his chair, and he was looking at me, something soft on his expression. That softness, it wasn't real.

But *he* was.

My mate.

I fixated on him, catching faint twilight grass—not strong enough. This wasn't a beta only workplace, and he'd used a dampening spray to keep his scent limited while around so many people, reducing his risk of a scent match.

Still, I could do this with him here. I don't remember walking toward him, but then his hand was in mine and storm cloud eyes were the only thing I could see.

Sounds rushed back. A cheer from the crowd, Dean Trance's voice and more words I wasn't capable of processing.

My face. What the fuck was my face doing? I had to check it.

There was a faint smile on it. Natural. Just natural enough, I hoped.

I didn't look away from Ebony, trying to make him understand that he couldn't leave me right now. If he wanted me not to make a complete idiot of myself—of him, I needed him.

I should be doing something, right?

Speaking, perhaps?

But there was a trace of something I'd never seen in his eyes before—just for me. Was that, *maybe*, real?

His arm wound around my waist, and he was sitting, sweeping me down with him easily. Twilight grass surrounded me, the warmth of his body caging me in protectively, my

back at his chest. My breathing loosened just a bit, and every word he spoke—words I still couldn't process—was a vibration down to my bones. Finally, *finally*, some of them began to make sense.

“Bit of stage fright,” Ebony said. “It can be overwhelming up here.”

I nodded, smile still on my face. Dean Trance was looking at me expectantly, with dark eyes, crows feet, and gelled black hair.

He *was* expecting something. At my back, Ebony was silent now.

“H-hi.”

There was a long silence, in which Dean Trance stared at me, and then he cracked a broad smile, jumping to his feet again. “Take two, nice to meet you, Vex Eden.” He reached out, and finally my body and mind started back up like an old machine that hadn't seen movement in years.

“Take two?” I asked with a shaky laugh as he took my hand. “Well, shit.”

Oh.

Fuck.

Live TV.

Live TV, Vex.

But Dean's booming laugh eased my panic as he shook my hand vigorously.

“Welcome to the show. You're not so used to the spotlight, I gather?”

“Oh no,” I replied, finally forcing myself into a semblance of normal behaviour. “Not at all. This is a, uh... sharp learning curve for me.”

Dean chuckled. “They did tell you before you arrived on their doorstep, *who* you'd be a Sweetheart for, right?”

“I...” I breathed a laugh as Dean seated himself adjacent to where I was on Ebony’s lap. “Yes. They did. I never intended to match a famous pack during application, but when the Crimson Fury pack came up, I mean... who could say no?”

I was still a little breathless. I couldn’t see the crowd, though I could hear its restlessness. The lights were still too bright.

Ebony’s thumb began shifting back and forth along my back where he held me. Soothing me. He was still holding me tight, and if I didn’t know him—and know it was madness—I might say it was protective. Possessive.

“I hope you don’t mind, but you don’t look like a regular Sweetheart,” Dean said.

“I’m... Well, I don’t know what a regular Sweetheart is, really. I just applied, and I don’t know. I’m just being me.”

Dean nodded appreciatively, and finally—thank fuck—his gaze drew away from me. “Ebony, your pack is known for being a little... shall we say, wild? What was it about Vex that made you want her to stay? I’m sure the fans are all taking notes. What’s the trick to the Crimson Fury pack heart?”

Ebony drew me tighter against him. “I don’t know if there is a trick,” he said. “Vex fit in from day one. Perhaps she’s just as wild as the rest of us.”

“Well, there you have it folks,” Dean chuckled. “But what do you think, will there be any more pack openings in the future?”

“I think Vex is more than we can manage already.”

“Keeping you on your toes, then!” Dean looked delighted. “You’re going to have to start your own Sweetheart classes Vex! I’m sure there’s a million hopefuls out there wanting to hear your secrets.”

THIRTY-THREE

EBONY

“No hard feelings, right?” Dean was saying, following me after the interview finally came to a close. Vex had left one commercial break before me. “Just a bit of a trick I used sometimes, and it’s never failed. We don’t stay the top rated evening show by being boring. No better entertainment than by giving them something real.” He waved a hand. “But she was wonderful, really charming. People loved her—very relatable, they’re saying.”

I smiled, shaking Dean’s hand as he wouldn’t shut his arrogant trap.

He’d terrorised *my* Sweetheart.

I was going to fucking ruin him. I’d already fired off a dozen texts to get the ball rolling.

My eyes were sweeping the room, though, something uncomfortable settled in my stomach.

Where the fuck was she?

“Good show, Dean.” I clapped him on the shoulder, cutting him off, then striding away.

The rich could be pricks, and Vex walked around with the word prey written across her forehead. Anxious, quiet, and far too pretty for her own good, she’d easily draw the attention of predators. That was before has-been Dean Trance announced her value to the world.

I had enemies, and this building was swarming with big names.

Where the fuck was she?

Ignoring a few questions tossed my way by set workers, I crossed silently to the hallway where the bathrooms were.

A beta woman walked out, and I held a hand out to stop her. She took one look at me, and that familiar recognition lit

her face.

“Oh... Ebony Starless.” She smiled, tucking a lock of curly brown hair behind her ear nervously.

I smiled that well-worn smile that never felt right on my face. “Would you check the bathroom for my companion?”

She was nodding before I’d even finished my question. “Of course, it was Vex, right?” she asked.

Great, so everyone knew.

The woman hurried back in and I was left to wait impatiently.

When she returned, she was shaking her head. “No one else in there.”

The world drew to a halt. Enough that I didn’t even feel a flicker of irritation as I spotted the pen in the woman’s hand. “Do you think...?”

I was already scanning the hall, my mind going a million miles a minute.

Vex was gone.

My heart rate began to rise, but Love’s rules stuck, and I was signing the little notebook she’d held with barely a glance.

How long had it been? Twenty minutes, maybe?

I checked my mask as the beta woman doused me in thanks.

Still up.

I had to be careful, I knew how easily I might crack when I was off balance, and I hadn’t felt this on edge for as long as I could remember.

I reached for my phone, running through the contacts and calling Drake. Why didn’t I have her fucking number.

“Hey, damn bro, you didn’t say—” Drake began.

“I need her number.”

“Why, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. She wandered off. Big building.”

I hung up, not needing to worry him before anything was wrong. My phone vibrated with Drake’s text, giving me her number.

I dialled it and waited. I heard the muffled ringing in the hallway before she managed to pick up.

What the fuck?

I crossed toward the sound, reaching an unlabelled door right as she answered the call.

“Yes?” Her voice was quiet.

“Why the *fuck*”—I ripped the door open—“are you in a closet?”

She jumped violently as I appeared, curled up on the floor of a tiny supply room.

Safe.

She was fucking safe.

I hadn’t noticed how tense I truly was until every muscle in my body uncoiled at once. And at the same time, I was met by my own rage.

Was she trying to set me off?

This wasn’t the place to be fucking around.

Before she could do a thing, I stepped into the closet and shut the door. I barely fit, though that was the idea. I was going to make a fucking point.

She hadn’t had the chance to get to her feet, and the closet was so cramped that she’d have a hard time attempting it now.

“What are you *doing*?” she demanded, though there wasn’t the usual fire in her voice as she managed to drag herself to her knees.

Every furious word doing pinwheels in my mind came to a screeching halt. Blood rushed to my cock, wiping my mind blank at the sight of her like that. She paused as her irritated gaze met mine, and I realised my lips were parted. She shifted

back, clearly trying to find another way to stand, but... *Shit*. I reached out on instinct, fisting her hair and holding her in place as I gazed down at her.

“One moment, Sweetheart.” The words were out before I could even stop them. “I’m keeping this mental image.”

It was the fucking truth, too, and if that wasn’t the most insane instinct I’d ever had, I didn’t know what was. I’d never met a woman who was so irresistible. There was no shortage of beautiful women around me, but any honest attraction I felt toward them was a red flag. I held them further away for that.

Yet with Vex, I just wanted to grab her and draw her close. As angry as I’d been at Dean, I had enjoyed the way she had shrunk into my arms before the cameras, needing me.

Her eyes flashed and she let out a snarl of rage. Fuck if that didn’t turn me on more.

“Are you fucking joking?” she spat. Next thing, she was unceremoniously grabbing fistfuls of my jeans to haul herself to her feet, and still only managed it at an angle. She reached for the doorknob but I caught her, shoving her back against the wall.

She tried to launch herself out of my grip, but I pinned her wrists above her head and secured them with one hand.

“We’re going to talk,” I hissed. Her eyes were wide, darting between mine. Once again, she was less afraid than she should be.

“Oh, that’s why you’ve shoved in here? To fucking *talk*?” she spat.

Well... That *had* been the plan.

“You can’t run off in places like this,” I snarled, forcing the thoughts to words before I forgot them entirely. “It might look glamorous, but it isn’t safe.”

“I wasn’t running off!” she hissed.

“Not what it looked like to me.”

“You set all of this up on purpose just to freak me out, and now you’re cornering me in a closet because it *worked*?”

I paused, leaning back slightly as I took that in. Was that possibly why she’d been in here?

But who panicked and then climbed into a fucking closet?

“I didn’t set it up,” I said slowly.

“You... didn’t?”

“No. He blindsided me.” I grimaced at that, still furious.

She tried to wriggle free of my grip, eyes still hateful. “I played your stupid game, alright, let me go.”

“You want a prize?”

“I want the truth,” she spat.

I leaned back. “About what?”

“The gold pack campaign.”

I frowned. *That’s* what was bothering her? “What do you want me to say, Vex? Love makes me do it for the image. I’m a rogue. We need to look sympathetic.”

“But you don’t care.”

“About gold pack omegas?” I asked, incredulous.

Had she seriously believed I had?

I almost laughed, but her furious look was enough of an answer.

“You want the truth?” I asked. “I don’t give a shit about gold packs, like I don’t give a shit about anyone else. They’re not special.”

She looked so upset, and it irritated me.

“Does it make you feel better to know I don’t particularly hate them either? I don’t give the first fuck what colour someone’s eyes are.”

Somehow, her anger ebbed away at that.

Her breaths were heaving, each inhale causing her chest to rise, and something about the movement, the warmth of her skin, it was mesmerising. Her lips were parted as she stared at me, and her fury was fading fast. For the second time, without knowing what came over me, my lips were crushing hers. The fingers of my free hand wove through her hair, holding her in place for me.

I could hear Love's warning in my head. *This was completely and utterly not acc*—Vex's legs, the only limbs she could move, tangled around my waist.

Okay.

Wrong.

She wanted me.

Love could get fucked.

And I knew what *I* wanted—I was going to make her beg for me.

I broke the kiss, drawing back.

I dropped my free hand from her hair to her hips. I loved the way her pupils dilated as I slipped my touch beneath her dress and to her panties. Still, she writhed against the hold I had on her wrists, her lips drawn in a beautiful snarl.

“You act scared of me every day, Sweetheart, but I don't hear you telling me to stop.”

Her whimper was hot as I brushed my thumb over the spot on her panties I knew would drive her crazy. She bucked against my grip, but she was tiny next to me, and it was easy to keep her wrists secured with one hand as I toyed with her.

Only, all *I* could think about was what it would be like to free my cock right now. What sound would she make with me deep inside her—stretched over my knot? As a beta, could she even take it?

I hoped not.

I hoped I'd be the one to train her to take all of me. I wanted all of her trapped against me with my knot stretching

her out. I wanted to hear the sounds just like the ones she was making now as I teased her.

A sinful whine of rage slipped from her throat.

“You want me,” I taunted.

She was still panting, the rise and fall of her chest threatening to draw my eyes again.

You know what?

Fuck this.

It wasn't *my* fault this Sweetheart happened to be one of the most beautiful women on the planet. It wasn't subjective—she was simply blessed with a face and body designed to devastate, and I had to treat her like the fucking siren she was.

“I could make you so desperate you'd be begging me to let you come.”

Her cheeks flushed a beautiful pink, her lip caught in her teeth, and for a moment it was as if she was too nervous to meet my eyes. But I needed to know how desperate she was for me. She hated me day to day, that was clear, but I had her suspended right on the edge of pleasure right now.

How far could I push her?

I wanted to see her crack.

“Beg me.”

Again, I brushed that spot over the lace of her panties and she loosed a sinful sound, grinding against my hand. It was a shock of lightning to my blood, and for a moment, staring at her felt like tumbling into oblivion.

She bit her lip harder this time, desperate eyes darting between mine as she arched against me, panting.

But I was paralysed.

This was too much.

I drew my fingers away in a flash, putting a brand new mask on my face—one designed to cover my own lust for a woman I knew I shouldn't want.

Something was wrong.

The nagging thing that had been bothering me from the first moment I met her. I was right on the edge of seeing it.

All these thoughts that didn't fit.

And now, she was angry in defence of omegas—some random Sweetheart beta with no stake in the game.

Oh...

Fuck me.

I didn't move, reassessing everything I'd ever known about her.

But I needed to be sure. Slowly, I leaned forward. "You don't deserve to come, hiding from me like that."

She let out another irate sound, and this time, I paid close attention to the way it lodged in my brain and switched on every alpha instinct I'd ever felt.

If I was right...

If I was right, I'd destroy her just like I would destroy Dean Trance.

I sneered, brushing one more time against her clit, just enough to make her desperate.

"Fuck," she moaned, grinding against my touch. "Please... Alpha."

Ecstasy hit my veins, a thrill I sometimes spent years chasing.

Shit.

I had to keep my head.

But what *would* making her pay even look like for me? I wasn't sure anymore.

Getting rid of her? Would that be enough?

Was that even what I wanted?

It took every goddamned ounce of power to let her go with those wide, desperate eyes begging me for more.

Every instinct drove me forward, whispering that the thrill would be twofold, watching her expression as I made her come apart beneath me.

Mechanically, I drew away, straightening. Her viciousness did at least bring me a semblance of satisfaction as I finally released her. She grabbed my wrist, her lips drawn back in a snarl.

And it didn't change a damn thing.

I leaned close, my words a breath in her ear. "Next time, Sweetheart, behave, and *maybe* I'll let you come."

Vex looked beautifully shell shocked as we exited the building. Once more, she shrunk against me as we passed through the crowds of paparazzi. My mask was back up, the familiar flashing and clamour of reporters all around, but all I could focus on was the warmth of the woman beneath my arm. The need in her eyes.

For me...

It wasn't until we were back in the limo that I truly returned to myself.

Why had I believed any of that was a good idea?

I'd thought hearing her beg for me would make me feel more in control. But if I were to try and describe how I felt right now, *in* control would not be it.

For me, thrill was something I sought in each silent, dull day. Yet, Vex had just given me that with ease, and strangely, it felt like it would never get old. I thought I could reach for her over and over, and I would be met with that thrill every time.

And in that, there was a danger, because that gave her power the likes of which no one else in my life had ever had.

I had to figure it out.

A question from earlier slid back into my mind.

Who panicked and then climbed into a closet?

Again. That went beyond normal behaviour for a beta.

My eyes slid to where she was sitting in the limo, hugging herself. Even now, the resentful look in her glittering eyes set me on edge, something tugging at me to fix it—to fix whatever was making her upset.

Now I was paying attention to it, I recognised it completely from every interaction I'd had on set, in passing, in interviews...

No.

Vex was *not* at all normal for a beta. But everything—*everything*—my pack's response to her, her odd behaviour, the way she could worm into my brain, it all made complete sense if Vex wasn't a beta at all.

But if that was true...

I'd need proof. But then her Sweetheart contract would go up in flames, and there was nothing Love could do about it.

I was going to prove that Vex was an omega.

THIRTY-FOUR

VEX

I screamed into my pillow.

I'd attempted to hurry to my room the moment Ebony and I had stepped into the house, but he hadn't let me get away that easily. His fingers had laced tightly in mine as he led me up the stairs to the main living room. I'd tried to tug away from him, but he pulled me back, taking my chin in his hands.

"Behave next time," he'd growled. "And maybe *next time* you beg, I'll let you come."

A deliberate rehash of what he'd said in the closet, only for everyone to fucking hear. I'd shot one horrified look around the living room to find the other three staring—Drake was on his feet at the way Ebony was touching me—then I'd shoved him away and slammed the door to the Sweetheart's quarters.

Despite that, I'd noticed something had changed during the drive back. There had been a cold shift in him, as if, despite denying me after getting me to beg (I screamed again into my pillow), something had changed between us.

But by the time we arrived home, he was stone cold, his gaze even more predatory than before. We weren't just back where we started, I could swear there was a glint of something in his eyes, as if I'd just handed him victory.

And the only thing Ebony wanted victory in was shattering my Sweetheart contract to pieces.

Right now, it was much easier to focus on how fucking angry I was that I'd *begged* him to finger bang me.

I'd underestimated being around alphas, especially alphas who were also my mates. I'd been so turned on that I'd lost myself. My obsessed little omega heart had wanted him, and not for one second had I even considered he might not do it. I'd forgotten he was Ebony *fucking* Starless, and normal

instinctual things like lust and attraction didn't affect him like it affected the rest of us.

My phone buzzed.

I froze, staring at it, terrified to turn it over in case... I squeezed my eyes shut as I grabbed it, and then peeked with only one.

Rook: Want you on my lap out here Baby Girl.

Thank god.

Annnnd not thank god all at the same time.

But it could have been Alastor. *At least it wasn't fucking Alastor.*

I peeked out of my room, scouting the living room down the hallway.

Ah, shit.

I could see Ebony, arm over the back of one of the couches, joining the others in whatever they were watching this evening.

It was a bonding experience for them, I knew, picking a movie, watching it together and then chatting about it from an acting perspective. Usually, Ebony didn't participate, but he did turn up when he wanted to scare me off.

And after *tonight's* show, I imagined that was exactly his goal.

Well, Rook had made that impossible.

Fuck me.

I sighed, checking my makeup in my bathroom mirror quickly, ensuring my bite was still hidden, and refreshing my cherry blossom scent before I left. Perhaps my hormones were out of whack, because when I crossed toward Rook—passing by where Ebony sat—I felt irrational satisfaction. With less indignation than usual, I did exactly what Rook asked, and slunk down onto his lap in front of them all, even slipping beneath the blanket covering his legs.

Most importantly, in front of Ebony.

Tonight, a sci-fi movie was playing on the TV, and I fixed my attention on it, feeling the burn of Ebony's stare. I wasn't going to look at him; he didn't even deserve that.

Instead, I sunk closer to Rook, inhaling his amazing scent of caramel brandy, not even fighting my hormones.

"Did I hear that right?" he asked, low enough just for me. "*Ebony* got you all hot and bothered?"

"Moment of weakness," I whispered.

Ebony *was* attractive, alright? And he was my mate.

We sat for a while, and I found it impossible to immerse myself in the movie. Drake made a few comments about one of the actors, but I barely paid attention, still stewing in my thoughts.

"You know what," Rook murmured in my ear. "All that wriggling makes me want to play, Sweetheart."

What?

Wriggling?

I turned on him, eyes narrowed.

"If you don't want me touching, you should leave." His fingers walked up my thigh under the blanket.

Lava slid through my veins as I glanced up at him, meeting a pair of blown, feral eyes. I was smothered in caramel brandy, edged with lust, his purr rumbling against my back.

He was telling me I could leave?

I should.

The others were literally in the room right now, and they'd be able to see us, but the thought of moving made my body feel like lead.

I should, though.

Get. Up. Now.

I forced myself to sit up, but the second my back left his chest, his purr stuttered out, the soothing vibrations died in the air. I paused, not looking back, pulse racing as I tried to convince myself to leave.

The emptiness in the air was a weight, a hollowness where that soothing purr had just been.

And then I saw Ebony. He was seated on the other end of the couch, eyes fixed on me, utter fury in them.

I felt the brush of Rook's touch on my waist. I glanced back to see him twirling a lock of my hair in his fingers. His eyes held mind, full of lust. "How mad do you think he'll be if I made you come for me on *his* night, Baby Girl?" His voice was low enough it was just for me.

My lips parted, and I suddenly knew the stupid decision I was about to make.

I sunk back down against him, feeling the rumbling purr start in his chest once more.

The movie was still playing. Drake's attention was stolen by it, but Love glanced at us both with a burning gaze. My stomach fluttered and I felt a challenge rise within me.

Let him watch.

Let him watch his own pack mate want me, while he remained so cold.

Rook shifted so I was positioned right over his *fully* rigid cock. I paused when I felt that, eyes wide, wetness pooling between my legs. His chuckle was low as one hand snaked around my waist, holding me in place as his fingers slipped under the blanket and beneath my dress.

I heard a delighted breath from him as he found how soaked I was, then began circles on my clit.

My breathing hitched instantly, cheeks suddenly flaring red hot as I realised what I'd just agreed to.

And I had no regrets.

He went slow at first until I was wriggling against him again, desperate for more. Then he dipped a finger into me and I had to bite back a moan.

“Sh Baby Girl,” he breathed. “Unless you want every alpha in here staring.”

My eyes scanned the room again. Drake was oblivious, but Love was shooting us occasional looks, as if he wasn't sure what we were doing. Ebony, on the other hand, was fixated on me. I turned, happy to duck my head into Rook's chest to ride the rest out, but Rook began circling my clit harder.

“I want you looking at Ebony.” That was an alpha's command from Rook, so unexpected that I didn't fight it, eyes snapping open and finding Ebony.

He looked fucking deadly.

“Vex.” Ebony straightened. “Come here.”

I stared at him, teeth biting down on my lip as Rook again switched to driving his finger into me. “She's not going anywhere,” he said. “You gave up your nights, Ebony. All those evenings, she's been mine.”

Ebony's lip curled, and he got to his feet, eyes burning. “It's my night,” he growled.

Rook re-adjusted, withdrawing his arm from my waist, instead seizing my hair and shifting me forward. I caught myself, hands on his knees as he began circling my clit faster and I almost loosed a whine.

Fuck, this was getting out of hand.

My cheeks were on fire, knowing that Drake and Love were watching too, now.

“Come. Here.” Ebony snarled, a command in his voice now. I gasped as Rook tightened his grip on my hair, forcing my neck into an arch so I was looking right at Ebony.

His pupils were blown with rage.

“You got her all worked up for me,” Rook said.

I gritted my teeth, trying to keep my expression as blank as possible as pleasure built in my veins—worse with the dark look on Ebony’s face.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Then Ebony reached out in an instant, fist closing around my neck. “I said,” he snarled, “Get. Up.”

In front of the whole room, I came that instant, a long, low moan escaping my chest—and it may have honestly been the most embarrassing moment of my life.

When I got my bearings, Ebony hadn’t let me go, and he looked so taken aback it might have been comical. Except for the fact I was currently hoping the floor would open and swallow me whole.

Finally, he let me go, and I sank back against Rook.

“Fuck.” Rook’s voice was a low growl in my ear, the vibration of that sound rippling up my back. “That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen, Baby Girl.”

I couldn’t look up at any of them, the full weight of what I’d just done slamming down. But then Rook was standing, dragging me with him. Next thing I knew, he’d ducked down, slung me over his shoulder and marched me to his room.

His bedroom door closed with a slam, and he set me down only to hoist me up by my hips. He hooked my legs over his shoulders and reached up, slamming my back against his door.

“What are you doing?” I gasped, staring down at him.

“I’m not nearly done,” he growled. “You’re going to come while you’re looking at me.”

I panted, fingers weaving through the messy dark waves of his hair to keep myself upright. This was no longer a show for Ebony. I could tell him to stop—I *should*. He would, if I believed anything of Rook, it was at least that.

But of course, I didn’t.

“Told you I’d grow on you, Baby Girl,” he said, tugging my panties out of the way.

He’d grow on me? *He* was the one who’d just hoisted me to his shoulders and pinned me against his door.

“*Fuck* you,” I hissed, then inhaled sharply as he drove his fingers back inside me and dragged his tongue against my clit. I groaned, back slamming against his door, grip tight in his hair as he worked me with his tongue and fingers.

I was a panting mess before he drew away.

“Admit. It,” he demanded. “You want me.”

“I wanted to get back at Ebony,” I hissed. “I still—” But I cut off with a sharp inhale as I felt one of his fingers shift, and there was a pressure against my back entrance.

“What was that?” he asked with a delighted grin as he drew his tongue from my clit and looked up at me with glittering chestnut eyes.

“I still...” My breath caught as he increased the pressure against my hole. “*I fucking hate you,*” I spat, the words half true, half dare.

I let out a low whine as he pressed two fingers into my pussy and buried a third in my back hole.

Fuck.

Fuck...

I was soaked, thank god, so he wouldn’t be able to tell if there was anything unusual about my arousal. The hormones I was taking reduced my slick, but there might be some biological omega tells, still.

He continued working me, his tongue finding my clit again. I still fisted his hair to stay upright, my breathing heavy as heat rose in my core.

Then he drew back, pumping his fingers in and out, and the sensation was dizzying. “Look at you, Baby Girl, coming apart over me like this, making those pretty sounds, just for me.

I couldn't take my eyes from him, not sure why I was fighting the rising orgasm. I just didn't want to come this fast. That would be like letting him win.

But he felt amazing, and I didn't even quite understand it, looking down at him. Before this pack, no man I'd ever been with took care of me first.

“Say I'm growing on you.”

“I hate you,” I gritted out again.

It wasn't deterring him, quite the opposite. I saw the challenge in his eyes when I said that, picking up his pace brutally and getting a whine from me.

We weren't far from the living room, and for a moment, I wondered if the others would hear.

Fuuuckkk...

With more force than before, I grabbed his hair, using the small leverage I had against the wall to hold him against my centre, my legs tangling around his neck and back.

His growl rose in the air, and the fingers driving into me quickened, his other hand seizing my thigh and dragging me against him harder.

I came with a cry, still gripping his hair, panting over him. It lasted an age, his fingers not letting up until I was a shaking mess, unable to hold my precarious balance over him.

I came an embarrassing amount, actually. I was worried as he let me down, seeing the glistening dampness on his chin and neck.

My lips parted as he wiped his chin on his sleeve.

Shit.

But then his grip was on my hair, a growl in his chest as he tilted my chin up and kissed me, pinning me back against the wall with such passion that my feverish omega side would have gone for another round right then.

Despite everything between us, despite the fact that I did hate him, something loosened in my chest.

He wanted me.

He was fighting the same attraction I was, even if he didn't know why.

When he drew back, he looked feral.

"I didn't think it could get hotter than taunting Ebony," he breathed. "But I'll take you swearing you hate me while riding my face a million times over, Baby Girl."

I could barely breathe, staring up at him.

Then he turned right back into the prick I was used to, flicking me on the nose. "I told you I'd convince you that you'd want me."

I bit my lip, insecurities flooding me at last.

Would he expect me to stay tonight?

If I did, what would happen? I couldn't handle a night of sleeping at the foot of his bed after that.

But before I could say anything, he turned and was crossing the room to his bathroom.

ROOK

The bathroom door slammed closed behind me, and I leaned against it, chest heaving.

Having her look at me while she came, it wasn't a choice, but a visceral need. The first time had been a mistake. I'd wanted to taunt Ebony, but then she'd come apart looking at him.

I hadn't been able to take it.

I'd needed her to look at me as she came.

She was fucking mine.

That's all my hindbrain was screaming right now.

I freed my cock from my jeans, gripping it tight and bracing against the wall. I grit my teeth, keeping myself silent.

She might still be out there, and she couldn't know about this.

By the heat spearing my veins it was going to take an embarrassingly short time, anyway.

Knot her.

Bite her.

Claim her.

A thousand images of what she'd look like, panting beneath me as I stretched her around my knot. She had eyes for no one else but me as she took me all the way with a whine, that perfect body of hers locking over me. In my mind's eyes she still looked flustered, pale cheeks pink, eyelids fluttering in a daze.

Fuck.

I gripped my shaft, braced against the wall, groaning through gritted teeth.

When I'd finished, I realised I'd just left her standing in my room, barely an explanation. But when I stepped out, she was gone. I stared around at the empty room, all my instincts on high alert.

That wasn't how it should be. She was supposed to stay the night.

I wanted her to. I wanted to hold her in my arms and purr for her some more, and get her to come for me over and over until she was liquid in my arms and never wanted to leave.

That was madness, I realised.

Literal fucking madness.

If anything, it was madness because those dreams involved only her, and literally none of me getting *my* dick wet, which meant she was fully scrambling my brain.

If she had the self control to leave, that was best for me. It means I couldn't crack like a goddamned coconut and suddenly begin treating her like a princess. Even if my hindbrain was begging me to.

She'd still humiliated me.

I had to get myself together.

If I gave her an inch—after what I'd done to her over the last few weeks—I was done for.

THIRTY-FIVE

ROOK

I paused on the steps to the second floor, hearing Vex and Drake in the living room beyond. Right now, I could hear music playing from a phone, and Vex was joining in. I paused, the sound drawing me up, close enough to hear the two of them without them knowing I was there.

She could *sing*. Her voice was stunning, actually.

I found myself frozen, waiting for each moment she jumped in on the lyrics.

Last night had been lodged like a splinter in my brain all day. Her beauty as she'd come apart for me, the stone cold silence she'd left me in.

She was a bloody siren, and I couldn't let my guard down like Drake had. Tonight was officially my night, though, so I'd get her to myself.

Drake had asked me about photos. I didn't have any—and didn't *want* any. That went *deep* into girlfriend territory, and I didn't have time for that. But she was hot, so like... it would be nice to have a few pictures... How could I get her to do that for me tonight without sounding desperate?

I didn't actually need the kind of photos I'd implied to Drake yesterday, though the golden lace and silken nightgown wasn't something I'd complain about if she *did* agree...

To be honest, I'd felt guilty since the second I'd said it. Drake hadn't shut the bond down quick enough to hide his hurt. I'd just panicked, not wanting him to suspect the true nature of Vex's visits.

"How can I convince you to give me one of Ebony's nights, too?" Drake's voice cut me off as the song ended.

I could almost hear the smile in Vex's voice as she replied. "You get all my days."

“I’ll trade—Rook should have days with you, too,” he said. I frowned at that, trying to ignore the flutter in my stomach. “Tell him to take you to the Wax Museum downtown, he literally can’t shut up when he’s in that place. Swear he turns into a kid. You know he’s got family in wax?”

“Lenora Harrison, right?” Vex asked. “His grandmother?”

My chest tightened for a moment. Vex knew about that? Not many people connected me to my grandmother. To the public, we were so different.

“Is it because...?” Drake’s voice pulled me from that thought. “I know we don’t...” His pang of insecurity was so strong I felt it through the bond, the same as it had been yesterday.

There was a pause.

“What?” Vex asked, her voice low, something concerned in it.

“Rook’s always been good with people, and Love...” There was a pause. “You literally sleep into the afternoon after nights with him.”

I frowned at that, taken off guard. I’d clocked Love during those nights, attentive to each of my brothers’ time with Vex. Every night Love spent with her, his side of the bond was deadbolted shut. I didn’t get anything from him.

Were they...?

She slept into the *afternoons*?

Fuck me...

I didn’t expect that from Love. She was falling for Drake, but now Love was making strides, too?

“Shit...” Her voice dropped, something desperate in it. “No. That’s not why—”

“I mean, I get it if it is,” Drake said quickly. “I’m not mad. I know I don’t move as fast as the others with the physical stuff, and Rook’s a total lady’s man—”

“No.” Her voice was low and more firm than I’d ever heard her.

Shit.

She better not make him feel worse on my account.

“You can tell me if I’m doing anything that—”

“You’re not,” Vex said, almost frantic. “That’s not why.”

I could almost hear the cogs turning in her mind as she tried to come up with a reason. A reason she couldn’t give because I had made that impossible. I chewed on my lip, trying to shove back a rising discomfort.

“You’re not doing anything wrong.” Her voice had dropped, and I almost missed the words. “I love every minute I spend with you, Drake.”

I wasn’t expecting sadness as I heard her honesty. It was something sad, and... jealous.

I buried it.

Her affection wasn’t the goal—it never had been.

Then what is the goal?

I’d found myself craving the nights she came, desperate for her presence in my room. I didn’t care why she was there, or if she’d rather be somewhere else.

She was my Sweetheart, and I wanted her in arm’s reach. I wouldn’t reach out to her, not ever, not really. But then the nights she was gone, I’d begun to feel... alone.

I’d never known loneliness. Born to a full sized pack, I’d joined my own the moment I hit eighteen. Yet the two nights of four without Vex were getting emptier than ever. I wasn’t the only one who felt it.

The living room post midnight had become something of an unspoken alpha moping zone, where Aura Boxing would run in the background and whoever wasn’t with Vex that night would turn up. Except Ebony of course, who was still hiding.

I'd never even considered that Drake might be on edge about it, worried for all of the wrong reasons.

There was a moment of silence and a soft sound.

Oh.

They were kissing.

I decided that was a good time to walk around the corner. I didn't want either of them catching me overhearing this.

When I stepped out, Vex jumped, breaking their kiss. Both sets of eyes jumped to me. She was seated on the bar table, legs tangled around Drake's waist, her palms to his cheeks. The kiss had been passionate, I'd caught that much.

Again, I buried a pang of discomfort that lifted its ugly head. I forced a grin onto my face as I passed them both, making for my room. "Don't let me distract you love birds."

But Vex was already extricating herself from Drake and slipping from the table. She caught up to me as I reached my bedroom door. I didn't turn to her until I had it half way open, heart still racing in my chest as I tried to decide how I was feeling.

I wasn't sure.

"Hey uh..." Vex was fisting the hem of her sleeves anxiously. "I wondered if I could come later tonight. Give Drake a little extra time—he wanted to watch a movie, and I thought—"

"Yeh," I cut her off, an unexpected lump in my throat. "I'm actually tired. Not up for company."

Her brows furrowed, eyes darting between mine as she processed what I'd said. "You... don't want me to come in?"

"Nah. I'm good Baby Girl." The nickname didn't feel right on my tongue.

Nothing felt quite right.

It felt even less right as she took a few steps back, eyes lighting with relief. There was a smile on her face as she

looked back to Drake, lips parted as if she was about to speak. Then she paused, glancing back at me.

“Okay...I’ll uh, come next time.”

I nodded, but couldn’t take my gaze from her. Not as she backed up. Not as the delighted smile lit up her face in full force as she turned to Drake.

She hurried over to him, animated all of a sudden. “Drake,” she said, excited. “Tonight, if you still—”

I cut off the rest of those words, slamming my door shut.

VEX

It was the day before the Diamond Tides Gala—the massive event that I was supposed to formally attend as the Crimson Fury pack’s Sweetheart.

It was the day that everything went wrong.

Rook had told me he was happy not to see me, and I’d watched a movie with Drake in my room. It was still early when the storm had hit New Oxford. It should have been fine—would have for any normal person—but for me it was worse than a thousand nights stuck with Alastor.

My fucking kryptonite.

So, not trusting myself not to purr in terror, or give something away to Drake, I sent him packing. Then I hurried to the only room in the huge mansion that had no windows: the theatre.

I wasn’t nesting. I pleaded with myself to believe that as I stacked the pillows into a tiny closet within the broad room.

I. Wasn’t. Nesting.

I just needed to hide.

I didn’t have a choice.

The problem was, I didn’t realise how screwed I was until it was too late.

DRAKE

I wanted *more* with Vex—I had since I'd stopped sleeping over in her room. And my nights were lonely without her. The nightmares that used to haunt me resurfaced, reclaiming power I'd tried to pretend they didn't have.

Today she'd been fine until she hadn't, sending me away and I hated how unsure I was. I hated how I worried that I'd never be enough, no matter how hard I tried. Did she regret that Rook didn't want her tonight? Was I not enough to make up for it?

Ebony could feel my need. It was something old—something I hadn't asked for in such a long time.

And through the bond, I felt a rare openness from him, whispering that he would be here for me today, just like he always had been.

I found him in the theatre.

Even the sight of him was enough to cool my nerves.

This location was predictable. One of Ebony's favourite things to do when he was bored was to pull up movies we'd acted in and pick apart every fuck-up Rook had ever made.

I watched from the doorway as he rewound a part three times, head cocked.

Then he pulled his phone out and recorded the massive TV screen projected onto the wall. The ding of my phone as his video hit group chat was what alerted him to me.

He stared at me for a long moment, brows furrowed. It was like I could feel him prodding my end of the bond. Hopeful, almost? Confirming I was here for what we both knew I needed.

He leaned back on the couch and nodded to the spot beside him.

I crossed toward him and slumped down at his side, and Ebony muted the TV. Anxiously, I checked my phone, still not totally ready to face my shit.

The video he'd sent to our group chat had a text attached.

Ebony: Why the random southern drop? You sound like a Larry Masters rip off. Finnegan should have made you reshoot.

I snorted, then clicked the phone off. I glanced down to see Ebony's hand beside me, palm up.

An invitation.

He would never be the sweet type. He'd never ask if I needed help, or if I was okay. And if I was ever in such dire straits that I needed him, I always appreciated that.

It had been getting worse since Vex had arrived. Not because there was anything wrong with her. Quite the opposite. She was perfect, and I... I swallowed, almost tumbling off that cliff again.

I didn't deserve her...

I seized his hand in mine and let my end of the bond fall open completely. Ebony did the same, and I felt my pain collide with him in an instant.

Blades of disgust.

Self-loathing.

Anger.

His stillness swallowed them all.

Ebony said nothing, not looking at me as our bonds wound together, a closeness we'd forged over time.

It wasn't absolute, not a perfect solution, but it was enough of a salve that it saved me. There was one wound he always fixed, even with the imperfect connection between us.

The doubt.

The never-ending sense that all of this pain wasn't real.

I was overreacting.

It hadn't been *that* bad, not really.

Everything I had to my name—everything I should be grateful for—came hand in hand with the part I hated.

How many people would kill to have what I had? No matter what it might cost.

When I really considered it, it *was* my fault. I'd sought them out. I'd been the one who—

The spiralling thought snapped like a brittle twig in the wind as Ebony stole that, too.

Straightforward and cold as he was, he wiped it all clean.

He gave absolute value to every foul slice of my trauma as he traded it piece by piece for his silence.

And I let him sweep me away.

VEX

“Why now?” Ebony asked. “It’s been a long time.” There was an extended silence, and it was Ebony who broke it again. “Her?”

Again, Drake said nothing.

Still in my dark closet, I didn’t know what was happening. First, it had been Ebony, slipping into the theatre and putting on a movie. I’d been pleased, if anything, the sound from the speaker drowned out the crashing thunder from outside.

But now Ebony and Drake were both out there. The movie was paused, and I didn’t know what they were doing. They were talking about me, though.

“That means she’s hurting you,” Ebony said.

Finally, I heard a choked sound from Drake. Maybe a laugh. “Only you could see this and draw that conclusion.”

Another silence passed.

“Are you...” Drake sounded unsure. “Do you not want this anymore?”

Ebony’s voice was low. Compared to his usual, I might even say it was... kind. “I could sit like this for hours.”

“Why?” Drake asked.

“Is it so hard to believe that I want to understand you better?”

“If this is the price you have to pay, then... yes?”

Ebony snorted a laugh, but there was something thick in it.

Was he... *crying*?

What the hell were they doing?

I didn’t realise until then how screwed I was. Ebony wasn’t the type of man who wanted people to know his

weaknesses. There was no way he could know I was here—not a single chance in hell.

After another long time, I heard Drake's voice. "I'm... good. If you are?"

Silence.

I assume Ebony nodded, because then Drake was standing. I heard his footsteps pad out of the room. Then the door clicked shut.

I waited.

He didn't put on another movie, which I regretted. I might be stuck here for a while, but it was better than him catching me.

The silence stretched.

Then, with another thunder clap, I jumped violently, elbow crashing into the cupboard door. I grabbed it as it began to swing open, heart in my throat. The thunder would have drowned the sound, right?

Fuck.

My fingers were curled around the wood, but it was only open the smallest crack.

I waited, shaking and silent.

I had to close it slowly enough he wouldn't notice.

A minute passed before I dared tugged the door closed. Another long time passed, and I knew I had to wait for him to leave, and then sneak out of here.

I couldn't stay and risk Ebony ever finding out what I'd heard. I could hide under my bed like I used to, but I couldn't stay in here.

EBONY

Drake had left me paralyzed. Not in a bad way.

Never in a bad way.

It was thrilling, always, when he came to me.

I couldn't ask for it. I had to let him choose when he came, or it wouldn't be the balance it needed to be. Then he'd never come back.

This wasn't a thing I could bully from him or take by force. His need—his *want*—was paramount.

But when it happened, it was... priceless for me.

I could still feel the ebbing terror he'd handed me. It wasn't the terror itself that was good—that part was stomach turning. It was in its disruption of the predictable, monotone experiences that made up my life, that made it a thrill.

I felt things I rarely felt. Pain, and fear, and even gratitude from him that I had done what I had done that day—even if, at the time, it had been for the wrong reasons.

It was a need to protect, rather than to own.

And something else. Something I had never had the courage to wrap my mind around, or voice, even to myself.

And then, pulling me from my peace, I heard it alongside a thunderclap: a loud bang, much too close to be the storm outside.

My eyes snapped to the closet. It was still. Perfectly still, except... the door... I leaned back slightly to examine it from another angle.

It was open.

I watched for an age until finally it moved, closing ever so carefully and silently.

Vex.

Unusual panic cluttered my mind. Had she been in there the whole time?

She'd have heard it all.

Me and Drake.

I stood, and—keeping my footfalls as silent as possible—I stepped up to the large cupboard. There were a few boxes stacked beside it—boxes that were supposed to be inside of it. Rage boiled in my chest. She'd violated something sacred to me, and I would make her sorry.

When I ripped the door open, I found a bundle of blankets and cushions crammed within, and in the middle of all of that, was Vex.

She scrambled up in an instant, eyes wide.

Everything clicked as the two truths finally became tangible. One an answer, the other, a solution.

I knew, at last, that I was right.

Vex was lying.

She was an omega. It was the only thing that would explain this nesting behaviour...

"I..." She was staring at me in terror. "I didn't mean to—"

But she cut off as a clap of thunder split the air. She ducked, arms coming up over her face. I reacted before thought, dragging her against me and holding her in my arms.

What...?

What the fuck was that?

Her deception was deadly.

There was no way I'd react like this to a simple beta. I didn't react like this to most omegas, even. I had to get to the bottom of this. To get her out of our lives.

"What do you need?" I asked.

"Y-you don't want to help me," she whispered, though it didn't line up with the way her fists were still balled in my shirt. She was trembling violently.

I needed more, though, I needed to find out just how omega she was. She was immune to my lies so far, thinking the worst of me, but everyone had a weakness, and with Vex, I'd just been pressing the wrong buttons.

I took her by the chin and forced her to look at me. "You're mine, Vex. You have been since that contract was signed. I may not like you, but I *will* protect you."

A lie, I told myself. She *wasn't* mine.

She was a snake.

But her pupils, constricted with fear, dilated as she stared at me, as I staked the claim she so clearly wanted.

I finally understood.

This wasn't about the money, I realised. It wasn't about fame, or the contract. It's why she had Drake convinced, because she'd never been lying to him at all.

This is what she'd come for.

The claim of an Elite pack.

And no one but me would see it. Drake was smitten with her as it was, and she was taking advantage of him.

But the truth was its own solution, because to hide her designation from us while living here, she would have to be taking some powerful scent blockers.

Drugs.

I needed to catch her with them—which was unlikely if she was this skilled, or I needed to make them wear off.

"Tell me what you need," I murmured, drawing her against me, thumb brushing her cheek tenderly. A thunder clap shook the house and she whimpered, legs tangling around my waist and her arms around my neck.

Perfect.

The second truth was my clear solution, because Vex, it seemed, was terrified of storms.

I wove my fingers through her hair, holding her close.
“I’ve got you, Vex.” I promised. “I’ll always keep you safe.”

THIRTY-SIX

I've got you, Vex.

I'll

always

keep

you

safe.

VEX

“Where are we going?” I asked, unsure.

I’d been holding onto Ebony too long, and it felt like he was scaling steps beneath us.

In a moment of fear, I’d done something I knew to my core was foolish: I’d believed him. He said he’d protect me, and I wanted that to be true so badly that I was holding onto him for dear life.

And then his reply found me, shattering the hope I’d so stupidly clung to. “The roof.”

He was still scaling steps, and suddenly I could hear the thundering of furious rain.

Fuck.

“N-no... Why?”

“I’d like to storm watch with you.”

“I... can’t.”

“Why ever not, little Sweetheart?” he asked, and finally the kindness had dropped from his voice.

Shit...

I had to come clean.

The sound of the storm was so close, it was sending me into a panic.

He could use it against me, but that was irrelevant now, since he already wanted to go up there. “I uh...” I cleared my throat, leaning back and trying to look him in the eyes, but he held me tight against his chest as I was forced to confess into his shirt. “I’m nervous in storms.”

“Nervous?”

“I can’t go out there.”

Finally, he loosened his grip, and I drew back. His head was cocked, a predatory look in his eyes. “A bit of nerves never killed anyone.”

“I’m scared of them, alright? I c-can’t go out there.”

“Huh.” He was too cool as he regarded me. “Well... if that’s the case.” He took a step back, and for the smallest fraction, I felt a burst of relief.

He wasn’t toying with me at all.

Then, instead of carrying me back down the stairs, he stepped toward the door.

I let out a frightened gasp, flailing in his arms, trying to kick him—to do anything to stop him from dragging me out there, but he didn’t even need his aura to hold me.

A roar of wind and rain slammed into me, and then we were outside, the door to the roof closing behind us.

Everything fell away but for the storm that raged across the sky above.

EBONY

The moment we stepped outside, Vex stopped fighting me. I tried to peel her away from me a little, to get a glimpse of her expression, but she wrapped her arms around me and held on like we were on the edge of a cliff.

Her whole body shook.

It was cold out here, sheets of rain hammering against tile and rough waves of the pool. It soaked me to the bone in an instant.

It wasn't until a crack of lightning split the sky did Vex move again. She tried to dive away from me with a cry, desperate to get to the door. Holding her tight, I finally caught her expression of absolute terror.

I waited for my own response to the victory.

I'd found people's weak points before. I never went for the easy blow—I found the thing that made them terrified, a weakness that made me sure they'd never challenge me again. That's what victory looked like.

And I'd done it a million times before.

But right now I felt no flash of satisfaction. Quite the opposite.

This was because she was an omega...

But that wasn't true. I'd despised a good number of the omegas we'd worked with. I'd definitely felt vindicated when a co-actor broke her ankle on set after ignoring my warning that she wasn't using the equipment right. And I'd never wanted to scoop *her* into my arms and make promises that she'd never hurt again.

In my distraction, my grip had loosened, and Vex finally managed to break from it. It took everything in me to grab her

arm before she could make for the door. A part of me wanted to haul her there myself, to make sure she was safe and happy.

Madness.

She was wild with panic, nothing of the woman who'd lived with us before now. I dragged her across the roof, burying every soft edge that proved how ruinous she was, ignoring how each of her whimpers was a dagger in my chest.

I *had* to do this. My pack needed the truth.

Drake needed the truth.

It wasn't until we were standing on the edge of the pool that she stopped fighting. I heard the unsteady breath catch in her lungs even through the thundering rain.

"W-what are you doing?" she asked, shying back against my hold on her, lowering her centre of balance to use her weight to put distance between her and the pool. Her skin was deathly pale, drops of rain mingling with silent tears tracking down her cheeks.

You did that, a furious voice hissed in my mind. *Shattered the promise you just made.*

It didn't matter. *She didn't fucking matter.*

Her eyes were darting between me and the pool. "You can't. I c-can't swim."

I snorted. "You aren't as good a liar as you like to think."

I shifted, dragging her closer. "N-n-no!" Those pretty doe eyes now orbs of fear, soaked hair stuck to her cheeks, her lips quivering pathetically. "I r-really can't. P-please—" She cut off with a sharp inhale as lightning split the sky again. She squeezed her eyes tight shut, chipped, black nails carving crescents into the flesh of my arms as she clutched me. "E-Ebony..." She shook her head, voice choked. "You s-said... y-you said... you'd protect me."

And you believed me? Every other time in my life, that thought would have come with a laugh.

Instead, it felt like someone had just taken a pickaxe to my heart—one I hadn't previously known actually existed.

It must be the remnants of Drake's time with me.

It had to be.

But what I shared with Drake wasn't hers to ruin.

With a flare of anger, I ripped her grip from my arm and shoved her into the churning water.

THIRTY-SEVEN

VEX

The world was icy cold.

Despair and panic were claws in my throat just as much as the water streaming down it and into my lungs. I tried to reach the surface, my eyes stinging. A flash of lightning was another shot of terror, scattering all thoughts.

I was going to die.

Through the water and rain I could see him standing there, wet silver hair billowed in the wind as he watched.

An alpha, just like my father.

Over and over and over, she surfaced from those nights.

Alive, if barely, until I couldn't watch it anymore.

Until I couldn't hide in a closet and cover my ears and pretend to sing while she could do nothing...

But... It was supposed to be different...

Ebony was my mate.

He was going to watch me die.

And now I was too weak to stop it, just like she had always been.

EBONY

Ah.

Fuck.

Vex hadn't been lying.

She couldn't swim.

If I didn't do something, she was going to drown.

That thought collided with one of the strongest alpha instincts I'd ever felt. It burned through everything, and a low growl rose in my chest at even the slightest notion that anyone might leave her to die.

I was in the water in a second, reaching for her and dragging her against my chest. She didn't stop flailing wildly, and it was a challenge to drag her the few feet back to the edge. I grabbed the ledge and hauled her up first, a genuine panic seizing me as I wondered if I was too late.

It had been *moments* she was under. *No* one died from that. And she'd been kicking me.

But what if she did?

I hauled myself from the pool next, clothing and hair heavy and waterlogged. I reached out desperately to check on her. She coughed up lungfuls of water, her whole body trembling.

She jumped violently at the next flash of lightning, her eyes snapping open. I barely paused, desperation wiping everything else away. She was still scared. I had to get her out of here.

I dragged her into my arms and got to my feet. Then I carried her back inside, down the steps and to my room. I shut my bathroom door and sunk down, still clutching her.

Our clothes seeped water across the floor. It would be soaking into the carpet on the other side of the door, too. I blinked the thought away.

I was trembling and my aura was out.

I felt a buzz in my pocket and withdrew my phone. It was waterlogged and the screen was flickering.

Drake: You alright?

I fought with it for a moment, but managed to react with a thumbs up.

I set the phone down, drawing her tighter against my chest, still not daring to look down at her. Instead, I fixed my gaze to the glittering glass chandelier of my bathroom as I tried to put my thoughts straight.

Guilt was new for me. I'd never felt it, not even when it came to Love. That had to be the thing sending tremors through my bones and setting all my hairs on end.

It was fucking horrible.

I couldn't put it to waste.

My plan had worked.

I clung to that.

I'd broken her. I'd made her afraid enough she'd thought she was going to die, which hadn't been the intention. I felt worse than I had in my life, but there were no drugs on this planet that wouldn't have just burned through her system like salt in the rain.

Vex was an omega, and I'd know the truth by morning.

VEX

At some point I blacked out.

The world was a blur and when I could finally anchor myself back into reality, it was to find myself soaking wet and clutched in Ebony's arms.

I was shaking so hard it felt like my bones were clattering together in their joints. I tried to move, but he was holding me so tight I could barely breathe.

My lungs burned and eyes stung—*shit*. My contacts.

I blinked a few times. They were there. I could feel them.

But the makeup on my neck...

I closed my eyes, trying to get myself together. My hair was soaking wet and plastered down my back. The bite was in a place it could be shielded even without the makeup.

Ebony wouldn't see it.

But the drugs. I needed to take another pill tonight, side-effects be damned.

I'd been so afraid... That was on the warning labels—adrenaline induced events can affect the duration.

I'd never been more scared in my life.

A low sob ripped from my throat, remnant shock making it impossible to catch. Around me, Ebony tensed.

Then he was loosening his grip and turning me to face him roughly.

“Are you hurt?”

I stared into his deadly silver eyes, completely fucking struck by that question.

Hot tears tracked my soaked cheeks.

I didn't... understand.

Another sob broke free, my whole chest heaving with it.

“Are you hurt?” he demanded again, grip suddenly punishing on my chin. I was descending into a full blown panic attack, heaving with sobs as I tried to rip free of him.

“I can’t fix it if you don’t tell me.”

Fix it?

“You s-said...” I couldn’t breathe. “You said you would keep me safe.”

He stared at me, jaw clenched, and for a moment he looked unsure.

“L-let me go,” I sobbed, grip still vice-like on his arm. “P-please j-just let me go.”

Ebony released me, and I hadn’t been paying attention to how hard I was fighting him, because my back hit the tiled floor with a thud. I was scrambling away in an instant, though, trying to get my bearings as I took in the room.

It was his bathroom, and the same as the rest of the mansion, with marble vanity countertops and a stupidly pretentious chandelier above.

He was blocking the door still.

“I-I need to go.”

He scrunched his nose in a half scowl as he stared at me. “You’re staying with me.”

“You’re fucking crazy,” I said. “I’m not staying. The contract—”

“I don’t give a fuck about the contract.” He rested his forearms on his knees, expression finally straightening back to the man I was used to. The one cold, hard and calculated.

Those words were chilling. How could he not care about the contract? “You’re trapping me here?”

“You’re staying with me until the morning.”

My eyes darted to his phone, which was on the wet tile beside him. He glanced at it, then lifted it, tapping the screen. I

could see the water damage from here. The screen flickered a few times and then died.

That drew me up.

His phone was broken? He'd jumped in after me and hadn't taken it out of his pocket. That meant he really hadn't believed me when I said I couldn't swim.

Not that it made it okay, but perhaps he hadn't been trying to kill me.

"I have to go."

"No." Finally, he was getting to his feet. "Get warmed up." He waved at the shower and bathtub. He half turned, reaching for the doorknob.

I was after him in a moment. "You can't keep me in here."

He turned to me when I grabbed him by the arm. He reached up, and tugged the necklace from around his neck. On it was a silver key. He tapped it on my nose.

"I can, actually."

He made to slip through the door, but I redoubled my efforts, halting him. "No no, just... At least let me go back to my room for dry clothes. Then I'll come back."

I *couldn't* stay here all night.

The scent dampeners would be gone by the morning.

"I think, if you left here, you'd go running to Love, or Drake or—"

"I swear," I begged. "You can come with me. I'll come back here and give you your night."

"Chill, Vex. I was going to get you new clothes while you warmed up, anyway."

"Please let me go," I begged.

"If it's just about the clothes and you aren't planning on giving me the slip—or... perhaps... something else?" he cocked his head. "Then why does it matter if I get them or you get them?"

I stared at him, finding no words at all to that. Fresh tears were spilling down my cheeks. Desperately, I reached up to him, praying that something of this fucking scent match might come through. That he'd change his mind and show some goddamned mercy once in his life. "Please Ebony."

He tilted his head just slightly, brows furrowed as he leaned into my touch just the slightest. As if he were exploring something new.

"I..." He swallowed, scrunching up his nose again. "I didn't believe you when you said you couldn't swim."

I stared at him, pleading in my eyes as I held his, hope lighting in my chest.

"Obviously, I was wrong."

And with that, he was gone.

He shoved me back and slammed the door. I leaped at it, grabbing for the handle desperately, but already hearing the sound of the key turning on the other side.

I had to get myself together.

I showered in full clothing under steaming hot water until the door clicked open. He was respectful, at least, slipping in without looking my way once, and setting my dry clothing down on the vanity. Then he left without a sound.

I peeled my clothing off and changed. There were bigger problems for me to deal with. I was shaking as I splashed my eyes. I fought the quiver of my lip as I checked my contacts, hating how sore my eyes were.

I had to calm down. If there was any chance that the scent dampeners would survive until morning, I'd blow it by being terrified all night.

Taking a breath, I focused next on my hair.

I pulled it aside, examining the dark bond on the back of my neck the best I could. The makeup was the best on the market—made for covering tattoos for extended periods of time. It wasn't built to withstand chlorine, but it was holding up okay. I could see a few cracks of darkness here and there, but with my hair down, I could make a good attempt.

On top of that, the only fucking blessing of the night, was that he chose one of my oversized t-shirts, which offered a bit of coverage over the dark bond. He'd also picked out a pair of my shortest shorts, but I was past caring at this point.

Hair towel-dried as much as it could be, and some of it tucked into the collar of my shirt for maximum coverage, I faced the door.

Calm.

I had to act calm.

It was literally the only hope I had.

I shut my eyes, taking a deep breath.

I was his Sweetheart, and he wanted me to stay for the night, that was okay. I could manage one night like that.

Ebony wore a cold mask as I stepped out into the sprawling room. I was in his quarters, I recognised it from the one time I'd come in here without him knowing.

He was seated on the edge of his bed, watching me intently as I stepped out. My eyes darted to the door I knew led to the hallway.

I made for it instantly. He didn't move, and it came as no shock at all that when I rattled the doorknob, it was locked. I tried the lock on it, but clearly whatever key he had overrode it.

I shut my eyes, then turned back to him.

My gaze darted to the couches sprawled along the far end of his living space. My brain did a million calculations. If my perfume began seeping into the space, would he catch it from that distance?

“Don’t make me carry you here.” His voice shredded those desperate thoughts to ribbons.

“Why?” I asked.

I couldn’t figure him out. I was good at reading people, but Ebony was a constant enigma.

“I want a proper night with my Sweetheart,” he said.

“You dragged me into a storm and threw me in the pool.”

“I wanted to see what would happen.” It must be a family thing, as he did what Love was so good at: making insane statements that sounded totally normal.

I felt a flare of anger, mostly because I believed that. “And what did you see?” I asked, voice cold.

He held a hand out to me. “I don’t know yet.”

I stared at his hand in shock. He really expected me to just climb into bed with him?

I took a step away. “You’re sick. I’m sleeping on the couch. I’m protected by the contract.”

He was on his feet in a flash, a curl to his lip. I’d never felt so small as I did right then. “*Are* you protected by it?”

My mind was unravelling. This was a threat. He was saying he didn’t give a shit about the contract I’d signed, and I didn’t put that past him at all. Except, the way he spoke those words, it’s like he meant something else entirely.

In a completely insane moment, I wondered if he knew.

The thought stuck, and everything else slammed into perfect clarity.

Fuck.

Ebony knew I was an omega.

That was why he’d done what he’d done.

It hadn’t been cruelty for the sake of cruelty. He knew what was going through my mind. He’d planned it all.

He was manipulating every step of this night. It was both a shock and, in a strange way, a relief.

It was over.

I didn't know what was going to happen in the morning, but this was all by design, and somehow, that made it safer.

He'd won already, he didn't need to do anything else.

And maybe—just *maybe*—if there had been a reason, then my mate wasn't as much of a monster as he had seemed tonight.

I stepped toward him, a leap of faith that this was until we found what the morning brought.

He took my hand and drew me to the bed, watching me carefully as I climbed in and pulled the blankets around me.

Then he followed and to my shock, he wrapped his arms around my waist, drawing me close.

I frowned, tensing.

“You usually smell like cherry blossom,” he murmured.

I didn't reply.

The pool and shower had washed away the fake scent I wore.

He definitely knew.

And he'd set this up exactly how it needed to be, but whatever he was expecting, it was going to be worse.

What was Ebony Starless going to do when he discovered his mate?

THIRTY-EIGHT

VEX

One Month Ago

“I won’t do it.”

I said those words before a command could come through.

I knew what Alastor wanted, though.

He’d led me into the bathroom, and set down a bowl that smelled distinctly of hair dye. Within was a dark liquid.

Alastor breathed a laugh. “You look like a child with that stupid colour in your hair. Get rid of it.”

No.

I tried to fight it, but the command was enough that I couldn’t help but take the brush he was holding out for me. “This won’t match the rest of my hair,” I said desperately as my hands betrayed me, dipping the brush into the bowl of dye.

“I had this mixed just right. Paint it over the stupid colour and wash it out in half an hour.”

“W-wait, just... Please don’t do this.” I managed to look up at him, and before I could stop it, the world was blurring with tears.

They’d taken everything from me, and now my hair? My lip quivered pathetically, my grip white-knuckled on the brush.

I loved my hair.

I loved the peach strip at the front, even faded as it was right now.

“They’re my mates...” I whispered. But even now I fought the urge to lift the brush and begin painting it on my hair, a low bubbling of pain spread across my skin as I fought the command. It wasn’t strong though, he hadn’t made it absolute yet.

“And you think that means they’ll automatically like trash like you?” he asked. “You aren’t going to them until you stop looking like the street rat you are.”

I stared at him, tears spilling down my cheeks at last.

“All of this, and that’s what breaks you?” He laughed. “Hair dye?”

“Let me keep it.” I hated every syllable as it fled my mouth. He grabbed my chin, tugging me to face him, then he leaned close. “Dye your fucking hair, you little cunt.”

My breathing was short and sharp as I grabbed the bowl from the counter, the brush still in my other hand.

But I wouldn’t.

More tears splashed down my cheeks, hatred burning me to the core.

He’d taken everything from me.

He couldn’t have this, too.

“No.” My word was a snarl. Agony tore through my body as I warred with the command. A whine of pain sounded deep in my chest as I dropped the brush.

A beat, and it clattered to the floor.

Still, pain seared my veins, a thousand solutions rushing to the surface, and I almost dug my fingers into the bowl and grabbed at the streak of faded peach that hung before my face.

Instead, with a wrench of agony, I shoved the bowl at his chest, and his stupid expensive beige suit.

The command shattered—along with the agony—as the bowl upended on his outfit. I wasn’t sure if it was because he relinquished the command, or because my brain found a way to say it couldn’t use the dye anymore.

He didn’t move, head tilted, black mask hiding what I knew was beneath; the scent of stale cigarettes had an edge of fury to it.

There was nothing else for it.

I ran.

I made it out of the bathroom before whipping back around to find Alastor wasn't following. I stood frozen for a long time, heart hammering in my chest.

There was no way out for me, that's why he wasn't in a rush. I took a few steps back, terrified as I peered back into the bathroom.

Alastor was standing where I'd left him, fingers slowly undoing the buttons of his shirt. His suit jacket was already on the floor.

I backed up until I hit the bed, then I clutched the bedpost, mind racing a million miles an hour. I hated how controlled he was.

How slow and calculating.

I hated more when he finally stepped from the bathroom, and he was a fucking beast of a man. Tanned skin stretched across thick muscles. He was frightening, wearing nothing but dark jeans, and the ominous black mask that covered his whole face.

Run and hide.

That's what my instincts were telling me. But for what? So he could drag me out of a closet or from under the bed, kicking and screaming.

No.

It wouldn't be like that for me.

He didn't need to do any of that.

My grip became vice-like on the bedpost as he crossed toward me, but I held my ground. He didn't stop. Instead, he sat on the edge of my bed and then shifted onto it until his back was against the headboard.

"Sit with me," he murmured.

I didn't have time to consider it before I was moving. The dread was instant, though. He'd always been so formal, and now here he was, topless as he lounged on my bed.

He held a hand up as I reached the edge. “Lose the leggings and the top” he said. “I think it’s only fair.”

In a flash of panic, I thought of fighting the command again, but I cringed away from the pain still buzzing in my veins. And I didn’t want him to come after me for this.

I didn’t want him chasing me or attacking me like he had a thousand times in my nightmares.

I felt pathetic and vulnerable in the wine-red lace that remained when I’d stripped the clothing off. There was never much choice in here, all my clothing was supplied by his pack.

I was numb by the time I’d reached him, shock drowning out everything. I’d never felt so small than I did as I sat beside him among my blankets.

When he finally spoke, I jumped violently. “I don’t think you know quite how good you have it, Vex.”

I bit back my sound of derision.

“There are three other alphas in this pack. Why don’t you poke the bond? See if you can tell how they’re getting along having a bonded omega they can’t fuck.”

That drew every thought to a screeching halt, and my gaze snapped to him in horror.

Tremors wracked my whole body as he stared at me through those voids in his mask. Despite the command, his gaze hadn’t slid to my bare legs once. “They won’t touch you because I’ve told them they can’t.”

“Why?” I asked. “Have you...?” The words died in my mouth and I had to try again. “Why have you told them they can’t touch me?”

“You tell me. There are mere weeks until you enrol with the Crimson Fury pack as a sweetheart. If I removed the ban today, do you think you would be capable of performing for your mates?”

It was all I could do to shake my head.

“No. Because you’d be broken. That doesn’t make for a good puppet, does it?”

The rest of the threat lingered between us, unspoken.

I couldn’t fail.

On the other end of that, there was no reason for him to rein in the pack.

“So...” He reached out and took me by the neck, dragging me toward him. He ignored my fingers, trying to break the grip, instead squeezing just enough to get a panicked whimper from my chest. “Instead of torturing yourself fighting me, why don’t you act a little more grateful, since we both want the same thing?”

I shut my eyes, more tears leaking out.

“Yes?” he pushed, shaking me slightly.

I nodded hatefully, needing him to let me go.

He released my neck, but sat up so his mask was inches from my face. He twirled a strand of my faded peach hair in a finger.

“So, next time I come in with hair dye—”

“Sunset paradise.” I cut him off with boldness I wasn’t feeling.

“What?” he asked.

I cringed at the harsh tone. “S-sunset paradise,” I said again. “That’s the colour for the Bright Waves hair dye. A-and I’ll need extra conditioner.” I couldn’t look at him. Instead, my eyes were darting desperately to the wall behind him as I forced the words out. “I kn-know how to get attention, b-but...” I swallowed, tears burning my eyes again. “The colour is too f-faded.” It was almost white, it was so faint. That wasn’t right. I kept it up religiously, but I hadn’t been in my apartment for... I don’t know how long. Months? The only measure of time I’d had was the slowly fading peach from my hair.

And I was out of measurements. For a long time it had been as dull and lifeless as I felt.

“I have to do it up. Guys... Th-they love it. My mates w-will love it.”

Alastor sighed. “You’re a real brat, you know that, Vex?”

I didn’t say anything, staring at him and praying he would show me this one ounce of mercy.

“You know what? Fine. I’ll trust you.” He sighed. Hope burst in my chest, as bright as it was brief for the words that followed. “But the colour, I’ve taken to it. I want you in it whenever I visit.”

“What?”

“If you know you’re going to see me, I want this red lace. Just for me. Do you understand?”

I nodded, numb with terror at what that might mean.

“Good.” He let me go and got to his feet.

He strode across the room, but right as he reached the door, I found my voice. “I want my clothes and my makeup, too.”

He stopped, fist on the doorknob as he turned back to me. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

I held my ground. “You want me to seduce them? L-let me be the mate the universe ch-chose.”

EBONY

Waking was disorienting. I blinked in the dim room, eyes bleary. I was more rested than I usually felt waking up.

Was I in a fucking bakery?

It *smelled* like fresh baking. Raspberry treacle tarts—without a doubt, the best thing I'd ever smelled in my life, and I didn't have a sweet tooth.

Next, I felt warmth against my skin. Something precious. Something mine.

Silvery-brown waves tumbled around me. Pale skin speckled with faint freckles. Eyes shut. She was... perfect. Except... she was restless, eyes shifting beneath her lids, fists balled in the sheets, restless. She was having nightmares.

Unchecked alpha instincts blitzed past the calm of the morning. Because nothing about this was perfect.

She was in my arms and still unclaimed. With my claim, she would never be afraid of nightmares again.

A growl rose in my chest, and I moved—too fast. I didn't know what was happening until the tang of iron hit my tongue and a sound ripped me back to the present.

Her terror filled the air, the scent all wrong, a frightened whimper penetrating my daze.

Fear meant vulnerability. Weakness. Something to be cut away or destroyed or used. Except now. Just like it was with my pack, her fear was *my* weakness.

Fuck.

What was I doing?

My aura was out and I had Vex pinned beneath me, my teeth pressed to her throat. Not a bite—not completely—but

my teeth had drawn blood. She struggled against my weight, a terrified purr rising in her chest, throaty and uneven.

Horror was like a shock of adrenaline injected right into my hindbrain.

I released her in a moment, staggering from the bed and taking one, two, three steps back. Enough to get a hold of myself.

Never had I been so out of control as I was right now.

Sickness roiled in my stomach as I took her in. It didn't matter that the room was dim, I could see every detail. Plush lips parted in shock. Her hand clutched her own neck as her chocolate eyes darted desperately between me and the door.

I had been right.

She was an omega.

And I had been so, so wrong: Vex wasn't just any omega. She was everything Love had feared we'd find, and staring at her now, I finally—finally, understood why.

She was mine.

THIRTY-NINE

VEX

Ebony left me in his room in an unnerving silence.

I'd begged him to keep my secret, to not say anything to Love. He'd said nothing, just staring at me, expression stiff and calculated. Now, I sat alone on the edge of his bed, shivering with adrenaline, unsure what was about to happen. If he told, I would lose everything. I would go back to Alastor.

I couldn't....

I couldn't go back.

And I hadn't been able to tell him that for my commands. Instead, I'd thrown pathetic pleading into the silence between us. At least he hadn't found the dark bond... The makeup had survived the night, masked just enough by my hair.

Finally, he returned, and in his hand was the makeup bag I'd begged him to fetch for me. The one with my pills and makeup so I could get to my room without any of the others realising what I was.

He dropped it in my lap, then turned on his heel and left the room.

I stared at the door that had just slammed, unsure. He'd wanted to prove I was an omega—he'd seemed so sure. Now he had proven it... Fuck. He hadn't been expecting the scent match. He was re-evaluating his plans. I just needed them to land in my court.

I also had to pull myself together quickly. Today was the Diamond Tides Gala.

It was the first official public event I would go on as their Sweetheart. But if Ebony went to Love right now and told him the truth, I would never make it to this evening.

LOVE

“What’s wrong?” I demanded, catching Ebony as he finally arrived home. He’d vanished this morning—a part of a new set of habits he’d formed now Vex was here. Only, we were leaving for the Diamond Tides in less than an hour, and I’d never seen him cut it this close. He took his image as seriously as Rook.

Ebony shrugged, trying to slip by me up to the hall to his room. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“You’re off balance,” I said. “You’ve been out all day.”

He paused, turning back to me with a cocked eyebrow. “So?”

“What happened last night?” I prodded. That had been the strangest flash of fear from him. It had broken through the bond for the briefest second before he’d locked it shut again.

“Last night?” he asked.

“Was Vex... *with* you?” I asked.

“Should she have been?”

“She wasn’t in her room.” Drake had texted, asking if I’d seen her at around midnight. Then she’d turned up this morning, and apparently hadn’t told Drake a thing. Drake had shrugged it off, but I was suspicious.

Ebony shrugged. “She’s scared of storms. Did you check under the bed?”

I frowned, not sure what to make of that. “How do you know she’s afraid of storms?” There was a bubble of anxiety in my chest. I didn’t like Ebony knowing Vex’s fears.

“Sent her packing when she tried to hide in the theatre,” he said.

“Oh.” He *had* been sending scathing reviews of Rook’s performances to our group chat.

But there was something off about this conversation. He was acting too... normal. Usually, he’d have told me to fuck off by now—and I don’t know why he would have volunteered the information about Vex. Weaknesses were secrets to him—ones he’d try to take to the grave.

“Anyway, gotta get ready for Rook’s big night.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ll fucking behave.”

He flashed me an unnervingly sweet smile before he turned and headed back to his room.

It was fine. He would behave. Both Rook and Ebony were scheduled for a Dragon Hunter’s Q&A next week. It was in Ebony’s best interest that our pack be on its best behaviour at least until then, which was better than any threat I could make.

I returned to the living room, settling into my chair to continue the crime fiction book I was almost done with. It had been slow going, and I kept finding myself out in the living room to read it—a place that was full of distractions. Sometimes Drake and Vex came by, and I wasn’t at a point where I could lie to myself about the fact that catching a glimpse of the two of them together wasn’t the reason.

Still unable to focus on the words, my mind drifted to my brother.

What was he hiding?

Something had changed last night... I knew it. I just hoped Vex would be enough to finally make a difference with him. He was more tense than usual these days, but I thought that might be a good sign. Sometimes I had to take a breath and trust in my instincts, the ones that had got me here.

But I had to believe in Vex, just like I’d believed in this path—this career—for my brother. Its power was waning, but it had carried us this far, even when I’d never wanted it.

Because the truth was, Ebony’s misunderstanding of humanity was his fuel just as much as it was his downfall.

From the moment we'd gotten our auras, career application began, entering us into gruelling programs designed to spit out elite packs.

One day, when we were teens, Rook told me Ebony was making another attempt at a career for us both. I'd already shot down law school and med school, cringing at the idea of that kind of power in his hands.

But acting?

Elite packs who got into acting were in the public eye like no other. It wasn't something that sounded remotely appealing to me, until I realised the beauty of it.

Tie the fame to the power, and I would never have to worry if my leash on Ebony wasn't enough. It would be a million leashes from a million watching eyes at every turn, keeping him in line. If he wanted his money and power, he'd have to behave. And the crushing finality of that was the part Ebony had failed to calculate.

So Rook had recorded my audition and given it to Ebony. I faked obliviousness to the fact he was stalking our mail and forging my signatures. I think he even pretended to be me on a phone interview, and acted perfectly outraged when the truth came out. I even got a psychopath vacation when Ebony settled into that period of contentment he did whenever he believed he'd won another war.

Acting was the greatest gift my brother had ever had, and I don't think he would ever understand the extent of that. The kind of faith I'd had in that plan, I hadn't felt in a long time.

Not until Vex.

I almost jumped as Rook's door opened. He nodded to me, dressed to the nines in the best he could manage of formal-wear as he made for the drawers of the kitchenette and sifted around.

"Taken yours yet?" he asked, waving the pack of scent blockers at me when he found it.

I shook my head, and he popped one for himself and then tossed the packet to me. It was Gala rules. Packs and omegas

with the possible scent matches out there took these out of courtesy. They were strong drugs, not something you'd want to take all the time unless you wanted to send your hormones out of whack, but that was a low price to pay to avoid a scent match. These events were swarming with people and it was hard to control who we were in proximity to.

“You excited?” I asked.

It was a mid-tier award—Best Individual Actor Within Pack Dynamics—but wasn't the top the ceremony offered. Rook got excited any time he was nominated to the Diamond Tides, though. Unlike the rest of us, he had a whole checklist of goals he'd set for his career.

“Yeh. Socials are blowing up, I think it's adding to the hype for Dragon Hunters next week.”

He paid attention to shit like that. I did when I had to, but it didn't bring me the excitement it did for Rook.

“It's uh... first night we're all going out with her,” Rook said, sinking down onto the armrest of the couch beside me.

I nodded.

“You think our image will be okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we've always been... available. Makes a difference for the fans, right?”

I shrugged. “Packs get Sweethearts, they do just fine. Besides, everyone already knows.”

Rook nodded, looking a little distracted. “You and her are close, yeh?” he asked finally.

I blinked, trying to figure that out as I watched him. I hadn't told him what went on between Vex and I on her nights with me. I didn't want him knowing what I was forced to do, and I didn't want it getting in the way of the two of them falling for each other. Two of the four nights, he was spending with her.

It was... a new experience, seeing Rook get close to someone. He'd had more flings than the rest of us put together, but he never let anyone close.

"We're doing well," I said evenly.

Rook nodded again. "Same. Me and her, I mean."

"Do you think she's doing her job well?" I asked.

All of this would be worth it if Vex was balancing them.

"Yes." Rook's answer was immediate.

"Good."

The guilt weighed heavier than before. He had no idea how much I was faking, while he was building something real with her. Vex was looking like a more permanent addition and I needed to figure out a middle ground for us.

VEX

Nothing. After I'd fled his room, I heard nothing from Ebony all day.

It was a fight, getting my makeup and hair done, smiling when Drake joined me, all the while terrified that Love would come into my room and tell me the contract was dead.

I was free of punishment from breaking Alastor's rules for now. I hadn't told Ebony anything. He hadn't said anything.

I knew *he* knew I was an omega by assumption only.

That would all come tumbling down, but for now, I was safe from the dark bond's punishment. I don't know how I was going to salvage this. The moment Ebony told me he knew—no matter what he was going to do with that information—I would have to tell Alastor.

The Diamond Tides Gala was a massive event, and I knew there would be press everywhere. We got ready together, which did wonders to my nerves. We'd played Heart's album, *Gilded*, on blast, taking turns to sing along to my hairbrush.

My dress was my usual black, though similar to the classy one I'd worn to Ebony's interview. I hadn't given up my combat boots though. "*Absolutely not*," Drake had said when I tried to pick a more appropriate set of heels.

"They should see the real you," he'd told me with a smile and a stolen kiss.

He was looking unusually formal himself tonight, though there was still a thin chain on his jeans, and his dark button-up was ruffled and only half tucked.

"You look fucking beautiful, Dreamgirl," Drake told me as we made our way down to the foyer. "I'm not even nervous, going with you tonight."

We were first ready, but to my relief, I'd caught Love's gaze snag on me when he came down the spiral stairs. Anything from Love to prove there might be hope I would take. I needed to find a way to reach him.

Rook also warred with an obvious desire to stare, though Ebony pretended I didn't exist at all when he'd arrived.

I made it into the limo on Drake's arm, still trying to pretend everything would be okay. I missed his blackcurrant wine, but the whole pack had taken strong scent blockers—normal when attending an event with alpha-omega attendees of this calibre.

As the limo departed, Drake watched me scroll through the pictures on his phone, tweaking the good ones and deleting the duplicates. I stopped on one, a selfie of us both from a week before. Back when he was still waking up by my side.

He nuzzled into my neck. "You're stunning even first thing in the morning," he whispered to me. "It's ridiculously unfair."

"You don't look so bad yourself," I said with a smile.

He laughed, drawing me closer, and I couldn't help my glance at Ebony. He wasn't looking at us at all, his eyes fixed on the window.

"Have I ever told you how much I love your hair?" Drake asked, drawing my attention away from Ebony.

Uh.

What had he just said?

My beam was, all of a sudden, uncontained as I peered up at him. "Wait wait wait—" I tugged my own phone out of my purse, then I tapped on the camera. "You have to say that again," I said. "Exactly that."

"You want it on record?" Drake sounded amused.

"Call it a bet."

He grinned, as I flipped the camera so we were both on the screen.

“Right then.” Drake fixed his smile, getting serious. “Under harsh duress—”

He cut off with a laugh as I elbowed him. “This is *serious*.”

He straightened his expression, looking back at the camera. “Under no duress whatsoever, I’ve decided to announce that Vex Eden’s hair is the prettiest hair in the whole wide world.” He turned to me, eyebrow raised, something dancing in his eyes as my smile widened. “There, is that what you wanted?”

“Absolute—” I cut off with a yelp as he tugged me toward him, drawing me into a deep kiss. I ended the video instantly.

I was breathless by the time he let me go, cheeks flushed, but this time I didn’t feel the need to look at the others.

Drake was my mate.

He was enough.

But before we left the limo, I also *may* have loaded the video up on a text and sent it to ‘Stale Cigs’ with a middle finger.

FORTY

VEX

It was different, this time, being in front of all the cameras. I was with the whole pack, and Ebony aside, it was the first time I'd truly seen them all in public.

It was Love who offered his hand to help me from the limo, and I took it, knowing mine was clammy.

"Do you mind if I escort you?" he asked. I nodded without really thinking about it, heart already in my throat.

Outside, there were shouts and screams and a huge hustle and bustle up the steps ahead. There were barriers, security, and a mass of fans piling against it. I had to get a hold of myself.

I looked up at Love, who was still holding me protectively. I wished I had his scent—all of their scents would calm me right now. He was so close, and I made myself focus on him to keep myself grounded. On the sharp line of his pale jaw, the loose braid of black hair resting over his shoulder, the flash of his chest through the few top buttons of his shirt that were left undone.

His arm slipped around my waist, and then Drake was on my other side, hand in mine. For the briefest flash, everything was going to be okay.

Still, the cameras were clicking and I was finding it hard to comprehend properly what was going on. There was security around, but we stopped a few times as we made our way up the steps so they could do some signatures for fans. I jumped as I heard my name a few times between the screams and shouts.

I wondered then, why Love had offered to be my escort, I'd thought he would happily let Drake do it. Was he... making a statement for *me*? I was the Crimson Fury pack Sweetheart, seen, not just with the whole pack, but with the pack lead.

At the entrance, another pack stopped us, and then I was shaking hands with a smiling omega. Ebony's smile and charming mannerisms were back. Love wasn't too different, though a little more animated than his usual self, and Rook was full of energy, doing more signings for the fans than the others, easily laughing in a back and forth with one.

Drake held a perfectly smooth smile that looked much too rigid to me. He signed one or two things, and I felt his hand squeeze mine tighter a few times, to comfort me, or for his own nerves, I wasn't sure.

Still, the cameras were clicking.

We stood before a branded backdrop where we were shouted instructions for photos, and I held myself as best I could, glad I could easily lean on Love in case I was no good at this.

Once we were in and past the cameras, things started to settle down.

There was the main event we attended first, with performances and dancers, then we were ushered into a closed off venue while a few scheduled events took place. Later would be the awards—one Rook was set to receive—but until then, I was seated in a VIP booth in a room full of celebrities.

For a short time, I was swept away by the magic of it all, Ebony's threat fading to the background. While the Crimson Fury pack had been one of my favourite celebrity packs, I'd kept up with pop culture before I'd been taken. Following celebrities had been one of my pastimes.

We settled into their pack booth in the spacious after-party room with a table of drinks and snacks. To my relief there was no press back here.

The sound of chatting was a low buzz in the air. Some of the packs or celebrities remained in their seats, while others were out and about, mingling and chatting.

My pack seemed content to relax in the booth, though Rook dropped out a few times to talk with others.

Drake's arm was around me, and he looked amused at my wide-eyed expression and impulsive little gasps reserved for a particularly loved celebrity or pack.

The Rose Vice pack, always starring in my favourite Rom Coms.

Varkiller Emerald pack, who were in most of my top adventure movies.

The Hawk Hunters, who were legendary in the super hero movies they produced, and a staple of mine growing up.

I almost squealed when I spotted Prey Nightingale weaving through the throng. Drake had to catch me from tumbling out of the booth entirely as I jumped to my feet to get a better look.

Prey *fucking* Nightingale: one of the only lone female alpha to stake a name in the industry. And boy had that name *stuck*.

She was an idol.

There was another woman with her though, arm in hers, dragging her to the long table full of food. She had long chestnut hair flowing behind her.

I frowned, squinting. Then my hair stood on end. I recognised her, too.

Was that *Havoc Saint*? A *gold pack* omega, boldly walking through a place like this?

I cocked my head as she turned back to Prey when they reached the table, saying something excitedly. Those were definitely golden eyes.

It *was* her.

But she was... she was different from most gold packs. She had secured a princess bond with her mates.

She was safe, unlike the rest of us.

“Do my eyes deceive me, or does Prey have an omega?” Rook asked, sliding back into the booth and following my gaze. He was watching Love.

Love shrugged, glancing over, but I could see something sad in his eyes as he took the two in.

“No, that omega is packed up already,” I put in. “Not with Prey.”

The Saint pack drama had made news. Dark bonds, fated mates, and princess bonds: it had been a fight for a happily ever after that had given me hope I’d never had. “They must be friends.”

Something sad coiled in my chest as I watched. Prey was smiling as Havoc mimed something with a large gesture and then started loading food onto her and Prey’s plates.

Once I had my mother. Aisha. Someone who wanted to be around me for me.

My eyes slid to Drake.

He was the closest I’d had to that in months. Something real and genuine. With Drake I was safe, and Alastor ruined that, because I hadn’t had a choice in that, either.

“Shame,” Love said mildly.

“Do you know her?” I asked. From what I knew from the news, there was a feud between the Crimson Fury pack and Prey Nightingale, though I had learned to take those things with a pinch of salt.

“Used to be good friends when we were younger. Me, her and Rook.”

“Oh.” I glanced back at Prey, surprised.

“We both came from Elite packs,” Rook said. “High expectations and all. But Ebony got jealous as usual, and blew it up.”

I glanced at Ebony, who was leaning back in his seat. He’d looked nothing but bored up until this point, but he flashed his canines in a nasty grin.

“If you ask me,” Rook went on. “He was threatened by the idea of a female alpha. Mommy issues and all.”

Oh, wow. They'd been *that* close? Like... might have been pack, close?

"She didn't fit," Ebony said. I couldn't help looking at Love. His jaw ticked, something tense in his expression.

"Her movies do better than yours," I noted, looking back at Ebony.

Ebony shrugged. "There's an element of luck in all of this."

"Luck?" I asked, eyebrow cocked. "Prey's an amazing actor."

Rook snorted, but Ebony didn't look phased. "Honestly, she outclassed Rook at every turn, but I let Love choose which one he'd like me to keep, and *he chose wrong*."

Rook froze, glancing between Love and Ebony with narrowed eyes. "*What?*"

"That's not..." Love blew out a breath, cold eyes fixed on Ebony. "What the fuck is wrong with you today?"

Ebony looked down at a nail as he picked it. "Oh? Was that still a secret?" he asked. "It's so old I forgot."

There was a rather uncomfortable silence between the pack. I glanced at Drake, who had a furrow in his brow as he watched Ebony.

"Rook, mate," Ebony said, seeming happy to break the tension. "I would have rode your family's notoriety until we were known, then ditched you. Unfortunately, we needed three for a pack. I told him I'd let him keep *one* of you—but I'd rather watch it burn than be stuck with both. Since he's so *very* attached to me..." He shrugged. "He picked."

"She told me she didn't want a pack," Rook said, glancing between them both. Love was more pale than I'd ever seen.

"Love broke her heart," Ebony said. "And she lied to everyone so her career didn't end up in tatters."

Rook's face twisted into something nasty as he looked at Ebony. "If that's true, you didn't wreck her career. You made

it. She only got more attention for being a lone alpha.”

Ebony grinned. “Sure. Because, unlike you, Prey is competent. Do you think that discrimination pity party PR was something you could have come up with?” he asked. “You’d have been crawling back to your dad’s a crying failure.”

“You’re full of shit. If that was true, he—” Rook looked at Love, “—*You* wouldn’t have chosen me.”

Love’s scowl was cold. “It was complicated.”

The painfully awkward silence after that was broken by someone else entirely. “The Crimson Fury pack!” a familiar voice exclaimed. “It’s been too long!” I turned, and then my mouth popped open.

Khloe.

That was fucking *Khloe Robbins*, omega singer and actor. She was a worldwide sensation most recently known for playing Lilah Darling in the hit movie, *Pack Darling: Part One*. Today she had her dark hair up, and was against the edge of the booth, rooting around in her handbag. She was wearing a ridiculously sparkly golden dress for the occasion.

“Khloe,” Love said with a nod, cold expression fading quickly, though he was still tense.

“Hold up!” she held a finger up to him, still digging in her bag. “Now,” she said at last, pulling out a slip of paper. “It was your idea on set that got me auditioning for that one, Drake,” she was saying. “I held a pack booth for you in the early showing. It’s yours if you want it.”

I stared at the ticket she was holding out to Drake, mouth open in shock.

No.

Way.

Literally-no-fucking-way.

“Come on, a romance?” Rook chuckled. “There are better packs for—” I elbowed him so hard in the ribs that he grunted.

Then I was clambering over him and tumbling from the booth. I swept the ticket from her outstretched hand and cradled it like it was my firstborn. “We’re going!” I declared before any of them could argue with me.

If Ebony burned my life down tomorrow, I’d steal it and go by myself.

Alastor could get fucked. A million dark bond commands wouldn’t stop me.

I. Would. Be. *In. That. Booth.*

Rook snorted, but they didn’t understand.

None of them did.

That cliffy... it had *killed* me dead. The barrel. *The fucking barrel.* Oh, I’d cried for days. “I need the grovel!” I hissed. “It’s non-optional.”

“Who’s your favourite guy from the Wyvern pack?” Khloe asked me.

Me?

She wanted to know *my* favourite?

“Finn!” I said, instantly. “Hands down, no contest.” Although, come to think of it... I glanced nervously at Ebony. Turned out having a psycho for a mate was much cooler in concept than real life. “Uh...” I looked back to Khloe. “What about you?”

“I’m an omega’s girl.” She smiled. “Orion all day—and you know they say he’s a diva, but Romeo is *so* lovely to work with.”

Fuck me.

This was insane. I couldn’t believe I was talking to *the* Khloe Robbins about Romeo Knight in real life. After she’d given me a ticket to an early Pack Darling showing.

This was a dream.

“Guess we’ll be there,” Love said with a roll of his eyes.

“Yes!” Khloe beamed, pulling me into a hug. “See, you’re exactly what they needed. Too much testosterone, if you ask me.”

I placed it carefully in my handbag. It couldn’t get damaged. It might be the most precious thing I’d ever owned.

Emboldened by the Khloe Robbin situation, I wanted to wander about and see more celebrities up close. Love and Drake were both a bit protective, worried about me going off by myself (definitely an alpha thing). But being in this room was like a dream come true, and I wasn’t going to waste it.

Rook, it seemed, was the only one interested in leaving the booth, and beggars couldn’t be choosers, so I stuck with him for a bit. But arrogant and full of himself as he was, it wasn’t hard, once he’d immersed in a conversation, to give him the slip.

I’d had enough to drink to set me on the edge of tipsy as I wandered the room full of celebrities by myself. Drinks were a pure necessity, given the whole... Ebony situation. At the back of my mind, I knew I was one step from this all falling apart, so I would enjoy tonight. The universe owed me that.

So far, I’d only taken photos on Drake’s phone, wanting to build memories for us with something that didn’t belong to Alastor. But since Drake was tucked away in the booth, I had no choice.

My phone was quickly filling up, and frankly I didn’t care if people thought I was weird. Plus, there were some great displays on the food table that I *had* to take shots of.

I was just getting an up close with a platter of strange heart shaped jelly puddings, when I heard my name being called.

“Vex Eden, is it?” I turned, phone in hand, wondering who, in this place, could possibly know me.

I frowned, not recognising the heeled blond approaching, holding her hand out to me. “Lovely to meet you, honey.”

My smile turned a little stiff. “Hi?”

“I’m Alana Swan. *Had* to say hello, especially since we both have so much in common,” she said.

“Oh... yes?” *Did we?* I looked her up and down, from cream dress, to hollywood curves, bright red lips, and ridiculous heels. I had very little confidence in her statement.

“I was close with the Crimson Fury pack—Love especially,” she said with a tinkling laugh.

Uh... *What?*

“You... were together?” I asked, trying to stifle a little burst of omega jealousy.

“Yes,” she said with a smile. “We met in the business, I’m a private journalist.”

“I thought there was no press in here?”

“Oh no.” She waved a hand with a laugh. “I’m here as Evan Sorowitch’s plus one.”

“Oh. Okay.” I didn’t know who that was.

My reaction clearly wasn’t what she wanted, but I wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Bitch bells are going off.” That’s what I’d say to Aisha in a moment like this.

“What uh... do you want?” I asked.

“You know, I was really close with Love,” she said. “The breakup was unfortunate, nothing more than circumstantial. He still messages me sometimes.”

I stared at her. “Right...” I forced a smile on my face, taking a step away.

“I know a lot about that contract you signed,” she said. “I’ve worked with Sweethearts before. Those contracts have a few loopholes. If you ever want to chat, I know how to do it safely.”

My brow furrowed. “You want... dirt on the Crimson Fury pack?” I asked.

On Drake?

Fuck that.

“A bit personal, don’t you think?” I asked. “If you’re Love’s ex?” Not very professional for a journalist.

Her smile turned bitter. “Just business.”

“Doesn’t seem like it, if you’re seeking me out,” I said.

Her smile was now a half grimace, and her voice turned nasty. “You’re not special just because you got signed,” she whispered. “Don’t delude yourself.”

“Right...” I said again. I didn’t have time for heeled bitches today. This was literally the coolest event of my life—one that could very possibly be blown up by Ebony at any second—and I had jelly hearts to photograph.

She got the hint, handing me a card and vanishing into the crowd.

Thank god.

Half the pretty wobbling deserts were gone from the platter by now.

I paused after I’d taken my shots, scrolling my phone and looking her up.

I snorted. *Private journalist my butt.* The best thing she had going for her was a blog with a couple of hundred followers.

FORTY-ONE

DRAKE

Love: Where the fuck is Vex?

Love: How have we lost our Sweetheart?

Rook: IDK. Was watching her like a hawk but she's like a kid in a candy shop in here.

Love: Fuck me. She's going to get herself into trouble.

I breathed a laugh, tucking my phone back into my pocket as I headed for the bathrooms.

Time and space were paramount in places like this. I'd been fine until Vex was gone. Now, I needed to step away and catch my breath.

Not long left, just the awards ceremony before we could go. I wondered if I could maybe convince Vex to watch some movies with me before we went to bed.

We spent the days together anytime we could, but I missed spending the nights with her. I shut my eyes for a moment, pushing that thought away. Then I turned the corner and nearly ran into someone head on.

“Oh, sorry—” I cut off, seeing who it was.

Then I froze, my blood running cold.

Zeus Rogan, current lead alpha of the Lightning pack, towered over me.

He stopped in his tracks, eyebrows raised as he took me in. Then that crooked half smile appeared on his face. “Magpie,” he drawled. A million memories scored my vision. “How are you doing these days?”

I couldn't move.

Just last night—*last fucking night*—I’d needed Ebony to drag me out of this nightmare. And here one of them was, in the flesh, leering at me like a wolf who’d just cornered a mouse.

Triton Star appeared at his side, opening his mouth as if to say something, and then pausing as he caught sight of me.

Fear turned to outright panic.

Both were exactly as I remembered. Zeus was massive—I was tall, but he dwarfed me. He was burly, tanned skin and sweep of black hair framing dark eyes. Even the pack of Marlboro was tucked in his pocket, the cardboard lid creased from a pack half finished. Triton’s brown waves were messy, just like my memories, his jade green eyes lit up with delight as he looked at me.

Triton meant the rest of the pack weren’t far behind. There was no one else out here at the moment. It was just me and them. So I did the only thing I could think of, not caring about the shame burning my cheeks as I did.

I ducked around Triton, staggering back a few steps, then I turned and ran.

Zeus’s low laugh followed me down the hall.

I didn’t head for the main event, not ready for all the people in there. A fist was squeezing my throat closed. And that was when—for the second time—I turned a corner and crashed headlong into someone else.

I heard a familiar squeak as I grabbed the person, steadying them so they didn’t go flying.

“Drake?” Vex’s eyes were wide and fixed on me. “Are you okay?”

“Yeh.” I steadied her, unable to help glancing behind me, but the corner I’d careened around was empty of people.

They weren’t following me.

They wouldn’t, right? I was here with my whole pack.

With Ebony.

Zeus wouldn't try a damn thing if he thought Ebony might get involved.

I was safe.

I was fucking safe—I tried to make that thought stick. And Vex was here, concerned eyes on me, soothing my pounding heart rate. That was when I realised my phone was buzzing in my pocket. I pulled it out, knowing I'd done a shit job of locking the bond down. Of course, it was Ebony.

Ebony: What's going on?

Ebony: Reply Drake, or I'm making a scene.

Fuck.

Fuck. No scene. I scrambled to type out a response.

Me: Nothing. I'm fine.

Me: Found Vex. All good.

"Drake?" Vex reached up, hesitant, not wanting to spook me, I thought. I leaned my cheek against her palm, nodding slightly.

"I'm fine," I told her. "Really. Just... got in my own head. That's all."

"I know what that's like," she whispered. "Do I need to kill any monsters under the bed?"

I smiled, my heart calming more as she watched me. "Sure, Dreamgirl. I'd like that."

She grinned, glancing around, almost comically. "You point, I'll shoot."

My pulse felt almost even now as I was swallowed into her beautiful chocolate eyes. Even if it *was* all make believe, and the monsters under my bed weren't ones Vex could kill.

I finally looked around, trying to see where we were. It was behind the set where they took the celebrity photos. I

could hear the shouts and conversation and a thousand shutters of cameras as more celebrities filed in on the other side.

“What are you doing back here?” I asked.

“I uh...” She blushed bright pink, biting her lip. “Okay so Kleo and Vishnu Victor uploaded a reel where they kissed back here. And then they left a penny on the back of that speaker.”

I snorted, looking up at the little ridge at the top of the speakers that backed onto the little space.

“You want the penny,” I said.

“I want the penny,” she whispered, wringing her hands. “It was posted on their personal account, and there’s less followers on that one, so I’m thinking... maybe no one’s got it yet.”

I grinned, taking her by the hand and dragging her over to the speaker she’d pointed to. And that was how I ended up with Vex on my shoulders, reaching up to the ridge high above us.

“On your toes,” she hissed. “Oh—I’m so close!”

I chuckled, trying to lift her as high as I could. I heard her cute little strained sounds, and then a squeal of delight that she quickly smothered as if knowing she might be heard from the other side.

When I dropped her down her eyes were wide, an old penny clutched in her fingers. “I got it!!!” Her eyes glittered with delight, a massive grin on her face, then she was tucking it into her purse, turning back to me. “Thank you—”

I cut her off, taking her face in my hands and pressing a kiss to her lips.

I’d never met anyone in the world that could make me feel so safe. All my fears were gone, Zeus Rogan and his stupid fucking pack, obliterated from my mind in a way he never had been.

I broke the kiss, and her cheeks were flushed, her eyes on me with blown pupils as if we’d both felt the shift.

“Fuck, Drake,” she breathed. “I... I love you.”

My heart soared at those words, my breathing was suddenly short. She knew I loved her—she’d heard it before, and I needed more with her than just this. I needed more than a contract.

She was different.

“Vex...” But how to put it to words? What would I even ask? “I...”

I trailed off as her eyes darted to the side all of a sudden, brows drawn, something unsettled crossing her face. I turned on instinct, following her gaze, and the moment shattered into a million pieces.

Zeus was leaning against the wall by the corner, phone in hand, holding it up as if snapping a photo.

There was a long moment of absolute stillness as we stared at one another. Then he dropped his phone, tucked it into his pocket, and turned away, disappearing around the corner.

“What... was that?” Vex asked.

I couldn’t answer.

It was one thing, meeting him like this—running from him like the coward I was. But now... she was involved.

I couldn’t...

Wouldn’t...

No.

“Drake...?” Her voice was almost enough to drag me back to reality. I’d taken a few steps back, toward the corner from which my monster had just vanished around.

There was no running from this.

He would never have her.

FORTY-TWO

VEX

I'd never seen Drake so upset.

I was torn between following him and hunting down the rest of the pack. But he was so heated I couldn't leave. He didn't catch up to the alpha until we'd almost made it back to the main room, but these back corridors had no security.

"Delete the picture!" Drake's voice was a low snarl as he stepped in the huge alpha's way, grabbing his shirt. I recognised him now. It was Zeus Rogan, famous actor, and pack lead of the Lightning pack.

"Drake!" My voice was low as I grabbed his hand, heart in my throat as I fumbled for my phone, trying to draw up the contacts list.

"What's got you so upset, Magpie?" That was another voice. Triton Star, Achlys Glade, and Cerus Summer all appeared at Zeus's side. It took me a moment to realise Triton was talking to Drake.

I stared between them. The rest of The Lightning pack were intimidating in person. All faces I recognised from movie posters, suddenly frightening and hostile. I didn't know them the way I'd known the Crimson Fury pack, I hadn't watched their movies, nor their interviews.

Right now, I could feel their gazes on me. I tapped the first contact on my list—Ebony, trying to split my attention between them and my phone, still holding Drake's hand tight.

Me: left of entrance

Me: back hallway

Drake still had Zeus by the shirt, rage in his eyes. "Delete. It!" he snarled.

"Drake!" I pleaded again.

Triton Star was leering at me, not an ounce of attention for Drake, who was all but leaping at his pack lead.

These were predators. I knew it to my bones.

Only, Drake wasn't listening.

Triton took a step toward me—*us*, and I cracked with fear, a whine slipping from my throat.

Drake finally stopped, chest heaving, attention gone from Zeus to look at me.

Every alpha in the hallway was looking at me. Triton's pupils were blown, a sneer on his expression as he took me in.

“Vex!”

Thank fucking god. I didn't think I'd ever been so glad to hear Rook's voice in my life.

“*Drake!*” That was Love.

They were here.

Love and Ebony were at Drake's side in a moment, and Rook was hauling me back, hostility in his frame as he shifted in between me and the rest of The Lightning pack. His arm came around me protectively, offering more of a shield between me and the alphas before us. It was strange and unexpected, yet felt like the most natural thing in the world. I wasn't even ashamed at how I shrank against him, my eyes still fixed on Triton Star and Zeus Rogan, both of whom hadn't taken their eyes from me.

My mind was screaming *danger*, instincts overriding reason. Overriding the fact this was a famous pack, revered and worshipped by so many. Overriding the fact that we were in a public event and they couldn't do anything. Not really.

“What the *hell* is going on?” Love demanded.

“Leash your dogs, Love,” Triton chuckled. “Unless you want to hand that responsibility back to us.”

Drake's aura split the air. Ebony's matched it just in time to hold him back.

“Delete the fucking photo,” Drake spat.

“What photo?” Ebony asked.

Finally, some of Drake’s fury cracked as he looked back at us. “Caught him...” He swallowed. “Taking a photo of me and Vex while we were together...”

He didn’t have to finish. A low growl ripped from Ebony’s throat, Love’s expression became tight, and I felt Rook tense at my side.

“It’s an open event,” Cerus said. “They didn’t ban phones last I checked.”

“It goes, Rogan,” Ebony hissed.

Zeus turned to him. Up until now, I realised, Zeus hadn’t looked at Ebony once, but there was hatred in his gaze when he did.

“Where are her bites?” Triton asked. “Since you’re so very protective of your pretty little omega—”

“She’s not.” Drake cut him off, something desperate in his voice, as if he couldn’t stand them thinking that.

“She’s our Sweetheart,” Love said, voice clipped but much more stable. “But I agree. I’d prefer you weren’t snapping photos of my packs’ private moments.”

“*Sweetheart?*” Triton asked incredulously. “Fuck me sideways if that sweet piece of ass is a beta.”

Even Rook almost cracked, his whole body shifting forward as Triton said that. Love went still as stone, and Ebony’s lip curled with hatred.

DRAKE

“It’s none of your fucking business what she is,” I snarled.

Zeus grinned. “Alright.” He lifted his hands defensively. He leaned close, voice low enough that his words were just for me. “I’d like it said that the photos on my phone are my business and I do what I want with them—But!” He cut off as I shifted forward, still held back only by Ebony. “I’ll let you have at it, since you’re clearly so emotional.”

He lifted his phone, flipping it to me as a peace offering. I stared between Zeus and the phone, searching for the trick.

A long moment passed, and then Zeus withdrew his offer. “Well, I guess if you don’t want—?”

He cut off as I snatched the phone from his hand with a snarl.

I wasn’t focused, my aura still out, Ebony’s hand on my shoulder as I stared at the screen of Zeus’s phone.

Before me his desktop apps stared back, his background a close-up of shot of a woman. All I could see was creamy pale skin of what was possibly her neck, and the edge of red lace. It took me a moment to figure out what I was doing, and tap into his photos.

I stared at the thumbnails before me, scanning them until I found what I was looking for. For a second, I was caught in rage at the zoomed-in photo of me and Vex. I had her face in my hands as I kissed her.

A growl rose up my throat, but I deleted it instantly. I tapped out, scrolling up and down as if there might be more hidden. I didn’t find any, instead I was met by a sea of thumbnails that all looked similar. All silky smooth, pale skin of a woman, too close to identify, all the shots different.

Pale skin. Wine red lace.

Neck, stomach, chest. That was all, photo after photo, an occasional video. No face. There had to be hundreds I was scrolling through, unsure of why or what I was looking for anymore. Then Zeus's voice jolted me out of my rage. "Do you see her anywhere else? Or do you plan on deleting all my photos for good measure?"

I dragged my eyes from the hundreds of pictures, back to the pack who had once been the centrepiece of every nightmare I ever had.

Mechanically, I handed the phone back to him.

I barely process what happened next. The Lightning pack left, and I turned, needing to see her—to make sure she was okay.

There she was, tucked under Rook's arm, staring at me with such concern.

"Fucking pricks," Rook was muttering. "They're just trying to get a rise out of you. Don't think on it. They need to move on."

Ebony's eyes were fixed on me, furious, protective. He lifted a hand, cupping my neck, a little crinkle of a snarl on his face, which was his best way, I thought, of asking me if I was okay.

I nodded.

It was the best I had.

The others knew I'd come from that pack, but Ebony knew *everything*.

He was the only one who did.

"We can leave—" Love began.

"No." I cut him off. "Rook still has an award. I'm good to stay," I said.

"Really, mate," Rook said. "I'm alright—"

"We stay," I snarled. "I'm fine."

Then I saw Vex still huddled under Rook's arms, eyes wide. I paused. "If... if you are?" I asked her. Shame burned my system. She'd been caught in that too. I'd been so taken with rage that I hadn't cared for her the way I should have.

But she swallowed quickly, looking up at Rook. "I'm okay to stay."

LOVE

We returned to the booth tense.

Vex said she was happy to stay, but I could tell she was shaken. I wanted to fix it, and the need itched as if burned into my bones.

“Hey,” I said finally, resting a hand on her arm. She looked at me, still wide-eyed and jumpy. “We have a few final laps to make, to look involved. Join me?”

I could feel my pack’s eyes on me as if they saw right through it. I knew we didn’t need to do anything else tonight. Rook’s award would be announced, he’d claim it, and we’d go home.

Still, none of them argued as Vex slid from the booth to join me. I led her out of the main room, noting how her demeanour shifted the second we were out.

I’d been right.

This didn’t *mean* anything. I was just taking care of her. It was the polite thing to do. It had nothing to do with my need to keep her safe, to make her happy.

I don’t know when I’d become this obsessed.

I gently placed my hand on her shoulder and she jumped, looking up at me. I nodded my head to the exit, and she forced a smile with her nod.

There were people everywhere, of course, but I found a perfect little room full of props and old sound equipment that no one would ever come looking for us in.

“Are you okay?”

She looked unsure. I knew I was going against everything else I’d ever offered her.

“That was a lot with Drake,” I said.

For a moment, I was worried she'd wall me out—and damn it if I didn't deserve it. But this wasn't about me. Luckily, she didn't, hugging herself as her words spilled out. "I... I don't know what happened. He was just so... so angry."

"He has a history with the Lightning pack."

She nodded. I knew it was the truth, even if Drake would never put it to words.

The Lightning pack had been a nightmare for Drake. I didn't know the details, just that he'd been with them for a few months when he was eighteen, projected to be the next member of their pack.

Then Ebony had got involved, and Drake had turned up at our house, a nervous wreck. I'd been angry at what Ebony had done to that pack until the day Drake had entered the bond. Nothing the media could say on the matter held a candle to what I'd felt then.

Then, I wondered if Ebony hadn't done enough.

"I'm sorry you got caught in the middle of it. I just... I need to make sure you're okay. It is..." I swallowed, cupping the back of my neck and knowing how hypocritical I was about to sound. "It's my job to make sure of that. Especially at events like this."

What was I doing?

I was giving her an in, and I knew she'd take it. Every step closer she got to me was forever, I didn't have the strength to push her away. I'd made sure I was seen with her today when we departed the limo—good for the image, I'd told myself. I'd hired her as a Sweetheart, I should be seen beside her. But it had felt like more than that for me.

"I... I'm okay," she said.

"You're lying to me."

The weak smile on her face wasn't comforting. "It's just been one of those days."

"What do you need from me?"

Her wide eyes were something I could tumble into, impossible to step away from. *She* was impossible to step away from. I was crumbling, at last, and a part of me was whispering to let it happen. To never again spend a night darkened by the knowledge that I was leaving her alone and cold.

VEX

It had been a rough night, with so many ups and downs that I wasn't sure what to think. But for the first time, Love was before me, paying me the attention I needed.

“What do you need from me?” he asked.

What did I need?

Him.

How could he not understand that?

I needed him. He was the lead of the pack I was scent matched to. He was the one who could decide my future.

I took his face in my hands, more direct communication of what I needed than anything I could come up with. There was a moment where he stared at me, and I was afraid he'd leave me rejected again. A frightened voice whispered that this was a dangerous game, that if he did it right now, I wasn't ready for it.

But to my relief, he leaned forward and his lips crushed mine, something cool settling the flutter of discomfort in my stomach as he claimed the kiss I'd almost given him on that first night.

In my mind I could imagine the vanilla winter sweeping me away. *This* was everything I'd ever needed.

I was so consumed by him that I didn't realise how I'd begun to shiver with need, my blood warming far too fast.

FORTY-THREE

*Dear Love: The harder I try, the
more I disgust you.
I will never be enough.*

LOVE

The kiss turned into something else.

I was on the edge of a precipice, and Vex dared me to close my eyes and step from it.

Her arms wound around my neck.

I wanted this. I wanted it more than I'd ever wanted another woman.

Only... "Vex..." I pulled back, but she was insistent. "Vex!" I had to take her cheeks in my hands to stop her.

I couldn't.

Her pupils were blown, and she tried to tug from my grip, drawing me closer again.

It was intoxicating—seeing an urgency for me like that, but I held on by the most tenuous thread. I knew now, she was special. She'd called for help when Drake was in trouble. She was protective of my pack.

For her safety, I couldn't. I'd *just* seen Prey. I'd felt, like I had a thousand times in memory, the pain of rejecting her. Of watching Ebony win because I'd given him leverage in my love for her.

But the leverage he would have on Vex would be a thousand times worse, because I'd never felt like *this* about Prey. Everything I'd ever done to leash him to civility, it would all be under threat of crumbling in the face of how important she was to me.

But Vex was panting, a low whine slipping from her chest as I pried her arms from around my neck. "W-what are you doing?" Her voice was desperate, and I wasn't expecting her wounded expression.

That voice, the whine, it flipped a switch in me. On one side was the tidal wave of alpha instincts that tried to swamp

my brain—demanding I pin her up against this wall right now and take her. On the other side, was the panic of knowing I couldn't risk it.

And then all my thoughts crashed into a wall.

Vex was a beta.

None of this was a natural response for her.

My heart sank, realising what was happening.

I tried to fight it, but the truth was staring me in the face.

Indisputable.

I was an actor, and I'd watched betas practise everything she was doing right now for movies. But I'd also seen them use those tricks to seduce alphas. It was something we knew to watch out for.

Different fears stirred as I realised this wasn't Prey at all. Prey had cared about me, but Vex was using me... tricking me—pretending to be what she thought I wanted... I'd seen it before—been hurt by it before.

“You think... behaving like an omega is going to get me to want you?”

It was hard to ground myself—especially when it looked like I might have slapped her when I said those words.

“W-what?” Vex sounded stunned, and her teeth caught her trembling bottom lip. But with every instinct she triggered, I felt my anger boiling to the surface.

“You *know* how often we rut. This is fucking low.” The words were more open and vulnerable than I'd dared be in years, but she... she was supposed to be different.

Her chest was heaving, terror stark in her eyes. “I... I'm not.”

Her fingers were still biting down on my wrists as if she'd throw herself at me if I wasn't still pinning her to the wall.

But I didn't want it. Not if it wasn't real.

“Drop the fucking act!” I growled.

She had to.

I couldn't fucking take it.

Only, she didn't. Worse, her eyes glazed with tears.

I buried the guilt. It's what she wanted, and this was bordering on Ebony's territory of manipulation.

I was more angry than I should be, a small part of me wounded. I didn't realise until this moment, *how* hard I'd fallen for her, even forbidden as she was. She wasn't like any woman I'd ever met, and there was something about her that felt so genuine—as if, with all her attempts, she truly was trying to get to know me. Drake, even Rook and Ebony.

Not as celebrities, but... as us.

Knowing she was capable of this shattered that belief into a million pieces.

She wasn't different at all. And that broke me in a way I wasn't expecting. Cruel words spilled from my mouth before I could stop them. "We pay for more than a cheap whore Vex, so stop behaving like one."

She flinched away from me, lips parted, panic in her expression now.

But it was fake.

She wasn't just the same as every woman I'd ever met. She was worse, because she'd gotten this far.

And what about Drake?

Fuck...

He'd fallen for her. We were stuck in a contract with her until we left for Germany.

"Your focus is Ebony," I snarled. "You're done with Drake." I didn't care if he hated me for it. I'd never seen him open up to anyone like he'd opened up to Vex. When he learned the truth, it would kill him.

Her breathing was coming more ragged now, a panic attack in full force.

But was that a lie too?

If she was capable of this, it could all be a lie.

“I don’t expect to find you waiting in my room ever again,” I snarled. “I don’t want you touching me. I don’t want you near me.”

VEX

I shrank beneath those words, still clutching Love's arms desperately as he released me. He shoved my grip off, stepping away, looking at me as if I disgusted him.

My mind was slow, the world spinning.

Something was wrong... I still felt the insistent urge to reach for him.

I needed him.

And Drake... he'd said... he'd said I couldn't see Drake. A low wail rose in my chest, and I clutched my throat. Love was going to take Drake away.

My only light in a world of darkness.

I needed them both... He should... he should understand that...

"I don't want you near me."

Those words were the only thing holding me back, the cracks from that blow still webbing outward, farther and farther, holding me in place.

Holding me in absolute shock.

He didn't want me.

That fissure struck right down to what made me an omega, splintering against the discomfort in my chest—the one his kiss had soothed.

I needed him, and he didn't want me.

He took another step back, and a choked, pathetic whine slipped again from me, but I didn't lurch after him like I wanted to. Still, I was halted by my own fear.

The sound of my whine drew pure hatred in his deep blue eyes.

My body was too hot, my mind shutting down, heart shattering into a million pieces.

Instead, I clutched myself as he backed up, and left me alone.

And it was then that my sluggish brain finally caught up to what was happening. I buckled, the full force of heat crashing against a dangerous amount of scent blockers—a mighty wave against a fortress.

FORTY-FOUR

VEX

The world faded.

Love was gone.

There was an echo of pain in my knees as they crashed to the floor, then another pain, shooting but distant in my shoulder and chin as the ground came up to meet me.

Too many drugs...

I'd pushed it too far for too long—before Alastor, even.

I couldn't lose consciousness, I had to... I had to do something... Soon. The door to the room... he'd left it open.

It was important...

More than important, my fingers were working without my permission, the tug of a command pushing me onwards.

Good.

This time, that was good...

I fumbled for my handbag, limbs like lead weights.

The zipper.

The lock.

I dragged it up to my face, trying to make the numbers on the silver metal lock focus. It blurred, impossible, and I whimpered as another stabbing heat pain shook me to my bones.

I grit my teeth, gasping for air.

No.

This couldn't be happening now. My heat was the end of the road, but I needed longer... I had to get to my drugs, to put it off.

They didn't love me yet.

It wasn't just that. They didn't just not *love* me, they didn't want me at all.

It was only Drake.

I choked a sob, time becoming hard to nail down as surges of stomach cramps blinded me. No one would know what was happening to me, though. The blockers would smother the scent and hormones... for now, anyway. Even if they were the cause of this agony.

I just had to reach my drugs.

The world swam in and out. I got the lock undone, my fingers shaking.

There was the faint click of heels... someone... *Shit...*

Someone was coming...

But with another pain hit—this one, so much worse—the world went dark, fading out on me all together.

When I returned, I was still curled up in silence.

Alone.

Thank god I was still alone.

The bottle was in my fist, I realised. I didn't remember finding it. Or getting the lock open. Or anything.

How long had I been here?

“Hey!”

That was a voice.

Definitely a voice.

Then a gentle touch brushed my flaming hot skin.

“...You okay...?” The words were hard to follow.

Jasmine, something smokey, and rainfall. Those were soothing scents in the air, but... No... *no no...* I tried to blink my eyes open, to drag them into focus.

What I saw sent a shot of terror through my veins.

The contents of my pouch were scattered about the floor. The scent dampeners, the contacts, the heat suppressants—all of it.

Damning evidence.

A silky feminine voice was speaking. “I’ll go and get help —”

No!

“Wait!” It wasn’t my voice saying that. It was the second person here. I’d *tried* to say it, but my vocal chords weren’t working. I tried to reach for the cap of the bottle with my other hand, but the movement sent another shooting pain into my stomach and I groaned.

“P-please...” I think this time, I think I managed to speak.

No one else could know.

No one could find out I was an omega. And if they discovered I was gold pack... if that got out...

“No...” The second voice faded in again, a low hiss. “Those are contacts. Do you know what that...?”

Again, my attention drifted, but I knew what that last part meant. Another choked sob came from my chest, dread seeping into every pore. I tried to lift the bottle again. Then it was being tugged from my grip, and all I could manage was another whine.

Then my vision was filled with the unmistakably bright eyes of a gold pack omega. Firm hands were helping me up. “Do you need to take this?” Her voice was smokey, just like her scent. Rainfall and firewood.

I tried to nod. I think... I managed it.

“She’s with a pack.” The two women’s scents were finally detangling, and the other—jasmine and myrrh—was saying. “I can go and find them—”

“Not until she says so,” the omega said.

Finally, tears began tumbling down my cheeks and, blessedly, I heard the sound of the bottle crack open. “You’re

okay,” the omega whispered, pressing the pill to my lips. I opened my mouth with a sob of relief. The pill dissolved beneath my tongue instantly. The omega glanced behind her, the movement a blur of messy chestnut hair. “Get the rest back in the bag and lock it up.”

When she turned back to me, I saw the flash of patterns on her neck. Live, shimmering bite marks, bonding her to a pack that loved her, and beneath were the dusky traces of a dead dark bond.

“It won’t take long to kick in,” she whispered.

All I could do was nod.

I knew who she was... I couldn’t take my gaze from her pretty golden eyes, ones she wore with such boldness even in a place like this.

“You’re going to be okay,” Havoc Saint whispered, twining her fingers in mine and squeezing tight. And somehow, hearing those words from an omega who’d conquered the very thing I was being crushed by, I believed them.

Even if just for a second.

Even if Havoc Saint had been backed by the one thing I now knew I’d never have: mates ready to tear the world apart to save her.

LOVE

I expected Vex to return at any moment.

I was on the edge of my seat, trying to keep my expression neutral for my pack, my side of the bond locked down. All I could do was anticipate what had to happen when we got home—the impossible conversation I was going to have with Drake. I tried my best to ignore the hollow pit in my chest, aching for the truth I'd discovered.

Later...

I swallowed. I'd deal with it later—and no more Sweethearts after this. I didn't care what Ebony said. I couldn't... I didn't have the strength to do this again.

Vex had been awhile, and when Ebony asked where she was, I'd only told him she would be back soon. She'd been upset, but how long did it take for her to pull herself together? What was there for her to be upset about? That I'd discovered her lies?

Again, I fought a scowl, gaze darting to the door I'd come through. Even now, I was worried for her—which was more than she deserved. If the Lightning pack left that way, I'd be after them in a moment. I felt like I was falling apart inside—and angry for it—but I wouldn't let her get caught in the middle of a pack war.

Instead, to my surprise, Prey Nightingale stepped up to our booth.

“Prey?” Rook asked, surprised, and across from me, I saw the familiar shadow crossing Ebony's face as he took in the female alpha we'd once been so close with.

She was everything I remembered, dark hair and bright eyes that were fierce enough right now, that they easily made up for her height—which was lacking beside most alphas. As a lone alpha who hadn't claimed silver status, she wasn't at risk

of a scent match, and so didn't have to mask her scent. Her aura and scent of jasmine and myrrh enveloped me, a tense edge to it.

"Your o—" Prey cut off. "Your Sweetheart is in a bit of trouble," she said.

My brows furrowed.

Vex?

What the hell had happened?

"Trouble?" I asked, frowning. "What do you mean?"

Drake was already on his feet, alert.

"That's her business, but she's... dealing with something. She needs to go home. Now."

Dealing with something? What the fuck had Vex told them? Had she said something about me to Prey? By the icy look in the alpha's eyes, I'd guess yes.

And how the fuck had Prey met her at all?

"Where is she?" Drake asked, face a mask of concern.

Prey nodded her head to the exit I'd come from. "Side hallway, little room. My friend's with her. She's—"

She cut off as Drake made in the direction she'd indicated, but I got to my feet, grabbing his arm. "Wait," I said. "Ebony. You go. We'll catch up."

Prey looked unimpressed as Ebony slipped by me without question. Drake was staring at me, confused.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I'll explain later," I muttered. I just couldn't have him going in there and falling for Vex's bullshit before I talked to him properly.

Prey's eyes were narrowed. "You aren't giving me much confidence."

I wrinkled my nose, annoyed that the first time I'd spoken to her in years was tainted by Vex's manipulation.

“I don’t know what she told you,” I said. “But it’s not like it sounds.”

“What does that mean?” Prey asked, nostrils flaring, head tilted just slightly in challenge.

Oh, she was pissed—and on Vex’s behalf? I clenched my jaw. “It’s *not* your business,” I said. “You don’t understand—”

Prey jabbed a finger into my chest, her ambient, female alpha’s aura flaring—so different from ours—likely enough to cut me off by itself. “*Justin Hightower*,” she snarled, drawing me up with the name I’d not heard in years. “You’ll drop what’s between you tonight. You’ll take her home, and you’ll make sure she’s cared for.”

Rook made a little noise in his throat, respect or humour, I wasn’t sure.

I wasn’t up for it.

Fuck this. I knew my expression was sour. *Minutes*, Vex must have had with Prey, and she already had her against me.

There wasn’t anything between me and Prey anymore—hadn’t been in a long time. But, I would always care about her. I *wouldn’t* be dragged into this. “Just... take us to her,” I said through gritted teeth.

If Prey wanted to see me take care of my Sweetheart, I’d do that, and she’d have no reason to believe any of the shit Vex might have told her.

The scene that met us was an odd one.

Ebony and Vex were in the same equipment room I’d left her in, and there was something strangely affectionate in the way he was holding her so close.

She looked... *fuck*.

I drew up. She looked... awful. The sunglasses and hat Prey had forced into my hands on the walk over suddenly

made more sense. Her usually pristine makeup was now racoon smudged around her eyes. She was shaking, I could see that from here—and again, that tapped into my protective side, putting me on alert. I shoved it away, unable to cope with it.

All because I'd told her I didn't want her?

Prey's friend, the chestnut-haired gold pack omega, was rattling off a list to Ebony. To my surprise Ebony looked to be listening intently, even though I knew he could come up with a dozen reasons to tell her to get fucked.

Drake was at their side in a moment. "Vex are you—?" He cut off as she shrank away from him, frightened eyes finding me for a moment.

I felt Prey's weighted gaze on me. But what was Vex playing at? Getting my old friends involved and making me look like a fucking prick.

"...Hot tea," Prey's friend was saying, "Get some good movies on—she said she liked rom coms—or music. And also, you need to check the sheets. You know some of us definitely do better with certain fabrics—it's great for sleep—"

"She's not an omega," Rook huffed.

The gold pack spun on him, rainfall and firewood suddenly a raging storm in the small room. "Because she's a beta she doesn't deserve to be taken care of?" she demanded.

Rook stiffened in surprise, eyes narrowed.

I noticed Prey's aura change in the space, always an ongoing pull and push in the air, unlike ours, right now it became territorial. This omega might not be Prey's by bond, but we all got the memo.

"Let's go," I muttered, handing Vex the sunglasses and cap. She took them from me quickly, not meeting my eyes. The omega looked worried as Ebony began leading Vex away. "You have my number. I have a spare room, Prey does too, and she's nearby now—" She cut off at the growl that rose in Ebony's chest as he turned back to her. That was *definitely* not an act.

The omega's eyes narrowed and, for a moment, I expected her to take a step back. Instead, she did the opposite, planting her hands on her hips and squaring Ebony up.

“If you want her to stay, do fucking better.”

Prey shifted, placing a hand on her friend's shoulder, eyes scanning all of us. “Come on,” she said.

Before I could follow them, Prey stopped me, lowering her voice. “I don't know what happened between you, but you need to drop it tonight. And fix things with her.” She swallowed, glancing back to Vex, something worried in her expression. “Soon.”

Soon?

What the fuck did that mean?

I tugged my arm from Prey, trying to contain my scowl. This was getting out of hand, and I was the only one who knew the truth.

I wouldn't be fixing shit.

There wasn't anything *to* fix.

We managed to get out of the event without too much difficulty, Vex tucked beneath Ebony's wing with hat and sunglasses.

She pulled away from him in the limo, though, and spent the drive huddled up in the corner, rejecting Drake when he tried to comfort her. He looked back to us with worried eyes.

So concerned.

So unsure.

A sense of foreboding settled over me.

I'd expected a fight from her after what I said. Instead, I even felt the pang of concern from Rook through the bond as he watched her.

She wouldn't give me a fight at all. Instead, those frightened glances she was shooting my way were going to get noticed by the others.

Shit.

I knew exactly how this was going to play out. One fight, and she was acting like I was a monster. But her claws were deep, and *I'd* let that happen. *I'd* signed her in.

I'd fucking fallen for her.

I pulled my phone out, not willing to waste another second. There wasn't room for my own weakness in this, for time to slip by in which I forgot tonight, swept up in her beauty again.

I sent a text to Eve.

Me: Terminate renewal contact for Vex Eden. I don't want it on the table. If there's anything we can do to speed up her exit, do it.

Me: I'm overruling any other requests from my pack regarding this matter.

Two months. That was all, and then she was gone and we'd be in Germany, and my brothers would be so consumed with the Dragon Hunters filming that they'd forget she ever existed.

This had been a massive mistake.

Eve's reply came within minutes.

Eve: I have a way. Terminating current and future contracts now. It should go through by tomorrow barring appeals, but I doubt she'll fight what I have on her.

I stared at the text, hating how my heart sank. But Vex wasn't who I'd believed she was. The person I'd fallen for didn't exist. She was the same as every other scheming, manipulative person who'd tried to use us for fame or money.

I'd let my guard down, and I never should have.

Anyone outside of this pack who was good—truly good—they were long gone.

When we got in, Vex went straight to her room and shut the door behind her.

“What about what that omega was saying?” Drake asked. “Should we—?”

“Pack meeting,” I growled before he could finish, because even Ebony looked primed to follow her into the room and take care of her.

I had to talk to them now.

FORTY-FIVE

VEX

I needed to fix this.

I hugged my knees to my chest in my room, cycling through a dozen solutions, shoving back the fear and rejection. The heat suppressant had hit fully, my hormones dampened, the agony of Love's rejection now only a faint buzz in the back of my mind. Present, but not howling and making me want to curl up under my bed and cry for days.

He still hated me, though.

And now I'd taken my suppressant, I didn't have much time. It was powerful, but it would give me weeks, or a month if I was lucky.

I'd also have to tell Alastor what had happened with my heat. That command was an undercurrent, a tug on my mind, but I could hold it off if I set my intention to do it. I just needed to figure out *what* I was going to say. How I could frame it to buy myself more time.

And then there was Ebony.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I still wasn't sure what he was going to do.

My phone buzzed, making me jump, and I picked it up before thought, the dark bond commands taking hold.

Alastor: You fucked up, Vex.

Alastor: This was just blasted in the closing ceremony of the Diamond Tides.

Underneath it was a link.

I stared for a long time, something sinking in my chest.

Finally, I tapped on it, scared, and found myself staring at a post titled, *The Crimson Fury pack deceived: Sweetheart nothing more than a gold pack omega in disguise.*

No...

No no no no no.

I read and re-read it a dozen times, praying I'd missed something.

But Alastor was right.

The faint clicking of heels I'd heard as I'd been in that room... The article was written by Alana Swan. It had gone live in the last twenty minutes.

I read through it once more.

...I saw her leaving with Love—I know him personally. He's been hurt before by people taking advantage. I went to chat after he'd pushed her away—she'd had a bit too much to drink and spilled everything. But I know what it's like to be in the spotlight. I just didn't feel right keeping quiet.

Below were photos of the contents of my purse, the one that usually stayed locked.

Detailed shots, with my contacts and the pill labels. I was in the photos too, and I recognised the back room I'd just collapsed in. I looked out of it, as if I *was* drunk, fist closed around my bottle of pills in one shot.

I clamped a hand over my mouth to stifle a sob, hearing Alastor's warning in my head.

“Bonding a gold pack omega like you would ruin them. If they want you—and that's a big if—they'll want to hide those eyes of yours. That secret is the highest bargaining chip you have, beside your scent match.”

My cell began to ring, the caller I.D 'Stale Cigs' lighting up my screen.

My breath caught, my lungs turning to stone.

I couldn't... but my hand reached for it, answering instantly. I held the phone to my ear, eyes squeezed shut and

terrified. “It... it was a mistake.”

“I don’t care,” his voice was cruel and harsh.

“I can manage it,” I whispered.

“How?”

My mind raced, trying to come up with a solution. But the truth was, I was empty.

“P-please... I c-can... I can still convince them.”

“I don’t think so, Vex. I just got an email. Your contract was terminated.”

The world faded around me.

What?

The contract... was gone? The article... they’d seen it already?

They’d learned the truth.

And Ebony knew I was his scent match—he would have told them that if they read it, wouldn’t he?

They’d found out I was gold pack, and they didn’t want me anymore.

LOVE

We were in the smallest office downstairs, the one tucked away beside the garage.

I didn't want to risk Vex walking in on this meeting.

Ebony leaned against the wall by the door, arms folded, while Drake took a seat, unsure.

"What's going on?" Rook asked, dropping into a chair opposite me.

"It's Vex," I said. "I killed the contract. She'll be gone by tomorrow."

"You terminated it?" Drake's eyes were wide and his voice rough as he stared at me in shock. From his pocket, his phone pinged, though he ignored it. "But... Why—*how*?"

"Eve said she had what she needed. She'll be out by tomorrow."

Rook's face went ashen. "That's not... No. That's not right. You can't just do that without telling us."

I braced myself, readying the explanation I knew would crush Drake. Knowing I needed to give it.

She's not what you thought she was.

Then Rook's phone buzzed, once, twice, and Drake's pinged again. In my pocket, I felt mine vibrating.

I tried to ignore it, still preparing myself for breaking Drake's heart, but the buzzing didn't stop.

"What the fuck?" Rook asked, finally glancing down at his screen.

I watched as his eyes narrowed, his lips parting. "This... this can't be right?" His voice was a rasp.

He handed the phone to me and I read what he had.

It was an article, posted by a name I recognised: Alana Swan. *The Crimson Fury pack deceived. Sweetheart nothing more than a gold pack omega in disguise.*

An omega?

What?

This wasn't real.

But the photos in the article were indisputable... Taken in that side room I'd left her in. And the contacts were telling enough even without the pills.

"Vex... is an omega?" Drake sounded stunned.

My mind was in freefall for a moment, the words truly processing.

She *was* an omega.

Everything that had just happened... That *I'd* accused her of...

"She lied to us..." Drake was saying, but I was only half paying attention. "Why would she lie to us?"

"Afraid we wouldn't want her?" Rook asked. "She's fronting as a beta. It's the only way we'd let her close—and she wasn't wrong. We'd never have let her in here if we knew."

Drake looked distraught as he lowered his phone. I could see his conflict. He was attached to her, I got that. We all fucking were. But for him, this meant more. He'd fought for her not to be here, and then he'd fallen hard.

"Why us, do you think?" Rook asked. "We're known for donating to gold pack charities? Did she think maybe we'd..." He trailed off with a shrug.

Drake shrunk in his seat. "Does it... change anything for you guys?" his voice was weak, as he clearly warred with himself.

Change anything? Fuck, I was still trying to detangle what was truth and what was lie.

“Even if it doesn’t, there’s the PR to think about,” Rook was saying. “It’s not that she’s gold pack, she lied to us and everyone knows.”

My mind flashed to Vex’s urgency as I scrolled up the article, to the photo of pills.

A heat suppressant.

Had she been going into heat?

No. She couldn’t have. I would have known, wouldn’t I?

But with ongoing suppressants, and... *fuck*. The fear in her eyes when I’d pushed her away.

And I’d...

I couldn’t focus, mind scattering a million places.

The contract, Eve had just fucked it.

A chill seeped into my bones as I finally tore my gaze from the phone and to the only person in the room that mattered right now.

And Ebony’s eyes were fixed on me, much too calm.

He had said nothing.

That was wrong.

He should be pouncing on this, using it to his advantage. But he wasn’t. He was still staring at me with the most chilling calm he’d ever offered.

He’d... *known*.

It was the truth that seized me. I believed it to my bones. Nothing else made sense. The news that Vex was an omega wasn’t news to him at all.

But... That didn’t fit.

Ebony despised omegas.

If he knew, he’d have used that truth to blow up Vex’s contract.

“We stay away from omegas because we can’t risk a scent match,” Drake was saying. “But *one* omega isn’t the end of the

world.”

Icy dread slid down my spine at those words, the last puzzle piece finally slotting into place. Rook said something else, then Drake, but I didn't hear it, my mind racing a million miles an hour.

Ebony had three states. Victory, action, and the prowling before the attack.

Right now, he was none of the former.

He was waiting for me, for my verdict, which meant he had stakes in the game. Massive stakes, by the tension of his body.

And that confirmed the nightmare I'd just found myself in.

“If you two could use your words, the rest of us aren't fucking telepathic,” Rook growled.

But I couldn't take my eyes from my brother, the conclusion I was drawing even enough to wipe my own mistakes from my mind. I couldn't fix them—shouldn't, even because...

A scent match? Vex?

She was perfect, in every way I could never say out loud.

I...

I couldn't breathe for a moment, hearing the soothing whispers of a dream, silenced even in sleep.

Impossible.

Never for me. I'd made my choice a long time ago, and that choice was Ebony. I didn't get a scent match, because Ebony couldn't have a scent match.

Except, she was *here*.

This had happened right under my nose. I'd pushed her into Ebony's arms, and so he'd figured it out first.

And now I was too late.

“It's over,” I said. “The contract's dust.”

A smile slowly curved his lips.

“She’s out.” I had to make him understand.

This was *my* play.

It was fucking over. Captivating, beautiful, heart-wrenching or not, Vex was gone.

Ebony cocked his head, shifting forward, and I saw in his expression exactly how late I was. In all these years of chaining Ebony to sanity, of every binding I’d forged with leverage and threat, vitreous and breakable, none were enough in the face of this.

His words were low, a collision of both things that made him a predator, in mind and aura. “She’s *mine*.”

I got to my feet.

I’d seen him destroy people for getting in the way of what was his, and that was nothing in the face of this. The man before me would burn the world to the ground before he let anyone take Vex from him.

In an insane moment, relief washed over me, a numbing wave of peace as every thing I’d ever done to leash the monster that was my brother, finally found its purpose.

I *could* protect her.

I had, already. The contract was gone. I’d hurt her—beyond repair, I knew now, and it was the best thing that could have happened.

Yet, with that peace came a moment of sorrow.

He’d won, I realised.

Ebony had finally taken something from me that would leave me broken. It didn’t matter anymore if he knew how I felt about her, so I told him my truth—the one he’d been waiting for.

“I would rather be six feet deep, than watch you destroy her.”

He needed me if he wanted her.

I was the key to her bite.

He was a rogue, which meant he could kill another in a bond with him. But if he killed me—the current pack lead—the pack would shatter. That would cost him the scent match.

I waited, watching each incremental shift in his furious expression. His eyes darted between mine, searching for a lie that wasn't there.

But I would *never* let him have her.

And then I felt it.

Anticipated.

Predictable.

The thing I'd been waiting for since the day the pack formed.

Drake and Rook froze as they realised what settled across the bond, soft as a blanket of fresh snow, as suffocating as it was calm—and all the more chilling for that.

Ebony had just challenged me for pack lead.

FORTY-SIX

DRAKE

An aura flared and Ebony's next punch caught Love so hard in the cheek that he crashed into the carpet, rolling once, twice, three times before he was hauling himself up with a growl.

Ebony was after him in a second, not giving an inch as he slammed Love onto his back, arm coming down on Love's throat. There was a bruise already blossoming on Love's jaw from one of Ebony's punches, and blood smeared Ebony's cheek.

This had already gone on too long. They were going to kill each other. Love bucked beneath Ebony's weight, a strangled sound ripping from his chest, his eyes wide as his windpipe was crushed.

No...

I moved forward, but Rook grabbed me.

Ebony threw his weight over Love's neck, and Love made a gurgling sound.

"Don't!" I rasped, but Rook's fist was still around my arm.

"Give it up!" Ebony spat.

I glanced desperately at Love. His eyes were fixed on his brother, every strained muscle taut as the breath was crushed from his lungs. Still, he managed with a snarl on his face, to get out the smallest, trembling shake of his head.

"I will never let her go!" Ebony snarled.

His aura shuttered like rickety windows in a storm, and I saw the rogue in him. A thousand echoes split the air. In them, he threw the rest of his weight against his grip, crushing Love's neck.

My heart tripped over itself and I let out a growl of terror, unable to intervene. I was an alpha in this pack. I couldn't interfere in a pack lead fight.

Still, Ebony hadn't moved, but the echo repeated over and over. Then, his gaze found mine. There was panic in his eyes.

"Ebony!" I choked, shaking my head.

He couldn't... He was losing it.

But I couldn't move. I was part of the pack.

Vex...

If my brothers *saw* Vex...

I was backing up, ripping from Rook's grip and racing toward her room.

EBONY

My mind burned. I was out of control like I'd never been before.

Instinct was a lit fuse that I couldn't stamp out.

Beneath me, Love held onto pack lead through the bond. It shouldn't be possible upon defeat. And that meant only one thing: he didn't believe I'd beaten him. He believed that he'd won.

Lead wouldn't be mine unless I killed him.

Only, the pack wasn't strong enough to survive that. And if the pack shattered, so would the scent match.

She wouldn't be mine.

I growled, shoving my weight against him another fraction. His breathing heaved, his body shaking as I crushed his neck.

Why was he making me choose?

Love or Vex.

The world spun, my vision crimson as my instinct ripped me to shreds. Then I felt something that wiped my mind blank.

Danger.

It was a jarring, soul-crushing void that swallowed up a corner of our pack bond.

Danger.

Instinct gripped me and I let go of Love, staggering to my feet.

Drake.

I *had* to get to him.

Now.

But he wasn't here. I saw Rook vanishing through the door, and I was after him in a moment, aura still flaring but the pack lead fight, forgotten.

ROOK

Gone

She was gone.

I knew that much.

I didn't understand why or how, I just knew, as if Drake's end of the bond—his understanding that we hadn't yet reached—*was* me and wasn't me all at the same time.

It was disorienting, being in here. There was a lingering scent in the room. Something sweet, clawing at my senses.

Faint, and no less earth shattering for it.

Syrup sweet...

Raspberries and treacle.

That was her.

That was Vex, I knew it as if she were standing before me right now. Not just any omega—though I'd known from the first moment Ebony had made a claim for pack lead.

She was *our* omega.

Our scent match.

But she was gone. In her room was only Drake, clutching a shirt in his fist and a note in the other.

I crossed toward him, realising her scent was coming from the black fabric he was holding. That scent wove soul deep, dragging me back to it.

My omega.

That thought sent goosebumps head to toe. In those whispered, forbidden dreams. That she was someone to cherish.

Someone to protect.

I'd failed, I realised. I'd failed before I'd even learned what she was.

I took the note from him and stared at the words written in red fading to a murky brown...

Was that... blood?

I didn't...

I didn't understand.

The letters were shaky, written in slender lines as if drawn with something thin and sharp. The paper was crinkled with drying tears.

The words didn't stick, so I read it again. Then I read it again, and again, and again, the letters blurring and jumbling and refusing to process. I rejected them over and over until I couldn't any more, my heart like a rock in my chest.

*Name three things you can leave with
the Crimson Fury pack for weeks,
and still be sure they'll be too stupid
to notice:*

A scent match.

A gold pack.

A dark bond.

For an age, I just stared, and then there was a loud ping from the phone that had been left on the bed. I jumped, my eyes snapping to it.

But my mind was still reeling.

"A dark bond?" That was Love, echoing the shock in my brain.

My mate was dark bonded by another pack...

Every hair on my body stood on end.

Beside me, Ebony's aura splintered the air once more as he read the note.

And I thought it was, perhaps, the first time I'd felt our pack exist as one. Without competition, or resentment, without differences or healing wounds, I felt my truth as theirs in one unified moment: a rejection of the words scrawled in blood upon the paper before me.

Almost nothing in the universe could have been enough, in that moment, to rip me from the creeping madness in my soul from the words I'd just read.

Nothing but for the image on the screen as Drake tapped the phone on.

It was Vex, and even the preview of the video was enough to turn my blood to ice.

FORTY-SEVEN

VEX

The moon was bright and high in the summer sky.

The night was peaceful and warm.

Blood dripped down my arm, unimpeded as my bare feet pressed against smooth paving stones. I was ready to throw up, but my stomach was already empty.

The only sounds were crickets chirping in the night, my quiet footfalls, and my breaths choked and thick. I stepped onward even as the world spun, Alastor's command enough that I couldn't stop, my body trembling to the point of a collapse it was forbidden from. In one hand, I held a tiny book. The only thing he'd told me to bring.

The conversation spiralled in my mind, playing over and over as I desperately tried to pry it apart, to find a way out.

"I can fix it." My mind scrambled for an answer that would satisfy him.

"Don't lie to me, Vex." Alastor had said. "They don't want you."

"Drake..." My voice was a choked whisper. "H-he... he wants me."

"One?" Alastor asked. "One out of four, yet if they claimed you after today, you'd blow up their lives."

"T-tell me what you want from them?" I begged. "Maybe they'd still give it." Tears flooded my cheeks, mind forming web after fragile web of useless plans. "We can tell them I could live hidden," I sobbed. "I've d-done it before." They wouldn't have to see me if they didn't want to. "I-I-If it's money, we could tell them I'd earn it back." I'd spend the rest of my life paying it back if it meant never seeing Alastor again.

"You think they'd do that?" he asked.

“They...” I swallowed. “Even if it’s just Drake, I th-think if it meant getting me out of a dark bond—if it cost them nothing —”

“It’s not free,” Alastor sneered. “They have to bite you, Vex. A princess bond. For the rest of their lives, they’d be stuck in a bond with a filthy gold pack omega.”

“If it’s about another omega, I wouldn’t get in the w-way of that.” My stomach twisted in grief. For a moment, I imagined watching my mates fall for someone out of the bond...

My heart cracked into pieces.

But I couldn’t... I couldn’t go back to Alastor.

I couldn’t be his.

“Please, just let me ask them. Let me tell them everything.” They still didn’t know about the dark bond, and the others might not know about the scent match.

Would that change things? I needed it to change things just enough that they’d save me. Through the bond, I could feel the faint hum of his enjoyment of my terror.

“I don’t think so.”

I clamped a hand over my mouth to cover my sob.

“What we want from your precious mates is so, so much more than you’d ever be able to pay, even if you spent the rest of your worthless little life trying. And they don’t even want you enough to keep the contract.”

After that he’d told me to shut up, then followed with his command. The one that left blood trickling down my arm, and a message to my mates.

His message to them.

Had they found it yet? What if they got to it in time and came after me?

I knew they didn’t want me, yet I begged for it anyway.

I could fight his orders, even now—endure the pain—but for how long? He wouldn't release the command. I couldn't live in that agony forever.

Each step took me further from them.

Please...

Please find it...

The moonlight reflected from the black surface of a limo that loomed closer and closer. I saw my reflection in it as I numbly approached, as stretched and warped over the panels as I felt.

The black dress I'd picked out for my mates still hugged my body, about to be his.

For a moment, I heard Havoc's voice. The little promise I'd held onto. "*You're going to be okay.*"

She was okay. Facing the same thing I was, she'd been okay.

But would she have, if she'd been alone?

Was there a path to freedom for me, without the mates that wanted me?

Blood soaked fingers fumbled with the door latch, and then I was tugging it open.

"Vex." Alastor's voice made me wince, a bright light during a hangover.

As I entered I sank to my knees before him, the world turning numb with my dread at what was coming. "My failed little omega."

I jumped violently as the door slammed at my back.

"Do you really think coming to me as ragged as that will do you any favours?"

Tears splashed into shining crimson drops already pooling on the floor before me.

Alastor's grip was rough on my neck as he dragged me up. He wasn't done humiliating me. His phone was out. Was he...

recording?

“Stay still,” he breathed. “Tell them, what was your job, Vex?”

Tell *them*?

My blood ran cold as I realised what that meant, something surfacing above the numbness and fear.

He was going to send this to them?

His fist squeezed tight around my throat, getting a whimper from me.

Fresh tears leaked down my cheeks as I fought the question—the age old command that I answer him truthfully. I shook with the pain, but I couldn’t... not like this.

He waited as my breathing became ragged, a wail rising in my throat. But Alastor didn’t need to do anything but leave the command in place.

He waited patiently until I shattered, choking the words out through his grip. “T-to get you to... to fall in love with me.”

“And have they?”

Drake was not enough to offset the truth that was settling in. This agony wasn’t from Alastor or the dark bond. My mates knew who I was, and they didn’t want me.

They didn’t want me.

They weren’t coming for me.

The last trickle of hope iced over my chest as the limo engine rumbled to life, and the pack who had dark bonded me, finally claimed me back.

“Were you enough, Vex? To get them to fall in love with you?” Alastor demanded again, grip tightening, voice dripping with cruelty.

“N-no.” I sobbed, not able to face the pain of fighting the dark bond as well as the fissure in my chest. He tapped the screen, then dropped the phone to the seat at his side.

Only, Alastor's next movement wiped my mind completely blank. Releasing my neck at last, he reached up, unhooked the mask, and let it fall.

Shock silenced my mind as I recognised the monster beneath.

I barely noticed as we pulled away—felt only an echo of dread as we left the shops behind. As we left the safety of the home that had sheltered me for weeks.

As we left my mates, who didn't want me.

Because I finally understood the truth.

Drake's monsters were mine.

Zeus Rogan's bright blue eyes twinkled with malice as he sneered down at me. "Then I suppose," he murmured. "We'll have to keep you for ourselves."

THE END OF PART ONE.

WAIT?!?! When's book two coming?

If you want to be on the ARC list for part two, sign up [HERE](#) to get your hands on it as soon as it's ready for human eyes!

My goal is to release book two by November! However, I do want to give myself the time to make it perfect so it's not an exact date. It is, however, the only project I am working on right now! <3

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THANK YOU!

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To my ARC team! Thank you for your incredible support.

To the Havoc Killed her Alpha Kickstarter top tier backers who supported the audiobook, and who have their own characters throughout the Sweetheart Duet: Jay, Lola, Khloe, and Henreka!