

ROXIE RAY

A romantic scene between a man and a woman in a forest, surrounded by glowing blue-eyed werewolves. The woman is on the left, wearing a dark, ornate, off-the-shoulder gown with gold lace detailing and a tiara. She has long, wavy, light brown hair. The man is on the right, wearing a dark, patterned jacket over a red shirt. He has dark hair and a beard. They are looking at each other. In the background, several werewolves with glowing blue eyes are visible. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, and there are small red and orange sparks or embers floating in the air.

THE
WOLF
PRINCE II

The Wolf Prince 2

An Opposites Attract Shifter Romance

The Royals Of Presley Acres

Book 2

Roxie Ray

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The Wolf Prince 2

Chapter 1

Ty

“I don’t care how long it takes. Find that motherfucker.”

I sat in the chair across from my father’s mahogany desk and watched the protruding vein in his neck pulse like it always did when he was beyond the point of being reasoned with. Years of experience had taught me to stand back and let him fulfill his alpha duties without getting in the way when he was this upset.

When I was seventeen, Dad had discovered a few members of our pack had been involved in a series of robberies. I’d spent many long afternoons hanging out in his office, like an intern who wanted to gain a better understanding of their future career. I knew the signs of his ire—could probably recognize them before they ever happened.

He’d been so pissed that he couldn’t trust his own pack members to know that if they were in trouble, they could come directly to him. If they needed money, they could tell him. He’d agonized over their desperation and their audacity to steal from their fellow shifters. When he’d instructed his team how to handle the situation, I’d seen his jugular vein pop out for the first time.

As a teenager still trying to get a handle on my own wolf instincts, I hadn’t dared to voice my opinion. Rather, I’d stayed quiet and tried to learn from the way Dad had handled things. Plus, if I was being honest, I’d always been intimidated by him not only because he was my father, but because he was also my alpha.

Back then, I hadn't yet finished growing, and Dad had towered over me. Also, his alpha dominance radiated from him like the full moon that guided our instincts.

My father was a proud alpha who believed in always taking care of the pack members, no matter the situation. His authority and fairness were legendary, and traits all pack members respected, even when they disagreed with him. I'd soaked up all the knowledge I could glean from him. He'd led by example, and I wanted to be exactly like him.

I'd kept my mouth shut because I'd known I had nothing of value to add to the situation. Plus, I was just a kid then, and no matter how tempting it had been, I'd had little to no life experience, so I was hardly in a position to puff out my chest and try to prove myself as the upcoming alpha.

This time, though, everything was different. I was no longer the teenager who had no clue how to be a leader. Even more, I wasn't single anymore, and I had to think about more than my own well-being.

Now I was in the thick of it, with not only our pack's future on the line but my mate being in the crosshairs of a maniac. No way in fucking hell was I going to just sit in the corner, observing my father taking control of the situation. We'd have to work together if we were to have any hope of bringing forth justice and protecting everyone involved.

It had been twenty-four hours since we received the letter from Castro. During that time, we'd reviewed the faked coroner's report at least fifty times. It didn't change anything. No matter how many times we looked at the damn report, we had no new insights, but at least it felt like we were doing something—anything. We had so many questions, we weren't sure where to start. Dad had his best men out searching for Sylas, the coroner, to get some answers.

The tension in the room thickened as more time passed without any luck. Dad's face was red, and that vein was protruding again. He looked like he was about to snap, so I braced myself for whatever was coming. Finally, one of our

searchers called in. Dad put it on speaker as the guy said, “I couldn’t find Sylas.”

Dad completely lost his cool in that moment. The muscles in his jaw ticked, and he slammed the phone on his cluttered desk, the loud thud echoing through the room. He leaned back in his worn-out chair and let out an exasperated huff. His shoulders were stiff with the weight of the situation. “This is bad. Really bad.”

No shit, Sherlock. “You think I don’t know that?” I cracked my knuckles. “The man who wants to take my fated mate as his own is on the loose. Trust me, I’m feeling the pressure to find him just as much.” The very last thing I needed was someone, father and alpha or not, to tell me that this was bad, as though I was unaware.

I wanted to be out there hunting Castro down myself, but even if we had any idea where to start look, it wouldn’t be allowed.

Dad checked his phone yet again, probably hoping to see a text or email that would lead us to Sylas. If we could find him, we’d get the answers we needed from him. Guaranteed. I didn’t care what amount of force, violent or not, it might take. He’d talk.

I stood and paced the floor from one side of the room to the other and back again, trying to dispel the nervous energy building inside me.

My wolf, sensing the danger that still threatened our mate, was restless. “It seems obvious to me.” Perhaps we were missing something, but I couldn’t see it if we were, which left no other explanation.

“What does?” Dad raised his head and eyed me briefly, then looked back at the monitor and typed something on his computer.

“Castro faked his death and must’ve given Sylas a hefty payout to falsify the report and to fabricate a death certificate.” How Sylas could go against his alpha and his future alpha, I couldn’t understand, but I didn’t doubt it at all. And the more

that I thought about it, the more nothing else made any sense whatsoever.

“Yes.” Dad sighed. “I’d agree that’s most likely. However, how did that sick son of a bitch get away with it?” Dad leaned forward, his elbows on the desk, and his head resting in his hands. “I think I’m more upset over the fact that one of our own members betrayed us this way.” His voice was stern. Not what I would have called angry but maybe disappointed. Bone weary.

Dad was right. It was horrible to imagine that someone in a trusted position at our local hospital, in our community, would choose to cause harm to the pack for the sake of a simple monetary bribe. Our pack was known for its loyalty.

“It’s enough to make me paranoid about other members.” Dad looked older than I’d ever seen him. Fresh lines marked his face, and the tension in his body was visible. “I have to wonder how much money it would take for them to betray me and the rest of the pack, and whether we have multiple shifters who are just waiting for the right opportunity to take advantage of us.”

Staring at my dad’s defeated posture and the massive dark circles under his eyes, I decided to keep my opinions locked down. If I spoke, he would know I was just as worried, if not more so than he was. No need to add fuel to the fire.

Someone was trying to take out the pack, and we had secrets we couldn’t afford to set free. If word got out that Dad had led the massacre of an entire pack, we’d have more than just a random coroner turning on us and our supporters. We would have an uprising on our hands.

No one would stop to ask questions to understand the motives behind Dad’s actions, as heinous as they were. Instead, they’d take the information Castro released and proceed to take Dad out. They would more than likely see him as a threat to the pack and remove him from his position. Of course, nobody would want the son of a deranged, evil alpha moving into the leadership position. The Keller name would never be seen in the same light, and it would all be because I

hadn't taken Castro out when I had the fucking chance. We would be ruined, and we'd never recover from it.

My conversation with Castro in the parking lot of the ice cream parlor played on repeat in the back of my mind. He'd had such an air of arrogance about him in the way he'd spoken and acted. I should've followed my gut and slit his throat right then and there. Would've saved a lot of trouble.

Of course, that type of response would've had its own repercussions. I hated every part of this fucked-up situation because it seemed as though my hands were tied while Castro galivanted around, free as a bird, planning his next move.

All of that could wait, at least for this moment. Right now, I had to pay attention to Dad, and shift my focus to what I could clearly see he was going through.

He was exhausted. Honestly, his doctor would be pissed when he learned how much stress my father was under and how much time he was spending on this senseless bullshit. He hadn't kept his word to be in bed by eight each night or to avoid intense and emotional situations like this.

Fucking hell, it wasn't entirely his fault. Things happened, and he was still the alpha, so it was his responsibility to take care of it.

I was surprised he hadn't been knocked off his feet from it all. Instead, he somehow managed to hold his head high and handle everything that came at him. He only raised his voice at the appropriate times rather than shouting at everyone and anyone, which was a testament to his unwavering patience these days. Much of it was for show when his subordinates were around. The last thing he'd want was for his pack to see even a hint of weakness in him.

But I saw it, and so did Mother. Just because he hid it well didn't mean it wasn't there.

I checked my phone just as frequently as Dad checked his, hoping for a text from Liza.

As soon as we'd figured out that Castro was still alive, I drove her to her parents' house and told her to stay put until I

had a better handle on the situation.

She wasn't overly excited about it, but I needed to make sure she was safe. The last thing I needed right now was to worry about losing her. I called a few of my guards, requesting that they stay out of sight but close to her parents' house. Liza was unaware of my plans for a twenty-four-hour security detail, but I'd discuss that with her later.

I hadn't heard from her since I dropped her off. I'd never been particularly needy but with everything going on, I was much more frustrated and anxious than normal. Truth be told, she was probably spending most of her time calming her parents' fears, but that still didn't stop me worrying and keeping me on edge. Plus, she knew I'd be neck-deep in the investigation and trying to find Sylas, so maybe she was giving me the space I needed. We would have to discuss that. I didn't need space. Not from Liza.

My wolf whined inside my head, reminding me why I needed to stay focused on the task at hand. He had a damn good point. Until we found Castro, Liza was in danger, and none of us could rest easily.

The ringing of my father's phone jolted me out of my thoughts. He put it on speaker. "All right, Nico, I've got you on speaker. Ty's here with me, and we're anxious as fuck to find this asshole. Tell us what you've got."

Dad's informant spoke softly, as if he didn't want those around him to hear his report. "Sylas was in debt. Significantly so. He has a gambling addiction, and he owed some loan sharks a hefty amount of money." Significant. Hefty. Words that spoke to his desperation. Fuck.

Dad and I frowned at one another. We didn't have any casinos in Presley Acres. That would've made this too easy.

I interrupted Nico. "The loan sharks must not be members of the Keller pack."

"That's correct," he responded. "We tracked down the loan sharks and found out they received a deposit from Sylas just before he went off the radar."

“Fuck.” Dad slammed his fist against the desk. “Is that it? Have we hit a dead end?”

“Not quite.” Nico cleared his throat. “The one thing you can depend on with an addict is that they’ll always need their fix. Doesn’t matter if it’s drugs or gambling. Hell, even food or shopping. You get the drift. When that itch starts, he’ll need to find a way to scratch it.”

Nico made a valid point. If Sylas’s gambling addiction was really that bad, he’d need to find a place to feed that addiction. He couldn’t stay off the grid for too long before hitting the tables.

Nico continued. “I doubt he’ll return to the casino where he’s already burned his bridges, but I suspect he will probably be found somewhere gambling. And soon.”

We’d have to intercept him when that happened. “Nico, were you able to pick up any other information that would help us narrow down the casino he might hit next?” I asked. If we could narrow it down even a little, finding him wouldn’t be such a labor of energy.

I could practically hear Nico shaking his head over the line. “According to the loan sharks, Sylas’s vice is poker. He rarely bets on or plays anything else, though he likes to spread himself out among several backroom games.”

That narrowed down the options. We could post people at all the big casinos where markers were given out. They had him on a hook. They would feed him until they controlled every part of him, then we’d swoop in and scoop up the mess.

“Thanks for the intel, Nico. Keep me posted, please.” Dad reached to hang up the phone before Nico stopped him.

“One last thing, sir. My teams are being sent to all the casinos in the nearby vicinity. We’re also looking into any underground gambling rings Sylas might stumble upon. If he’s gambling, we’ll find him.”

Dad gave Nico a few more instructions before hanging up the phone and slumping in his chair. He wasn’t just worried. He was exhausted.

I, on the other hand, was on edge, like I could explode with anxious energy at any minute. Castro being alive wasn't just trouble for the pack, seeing as how he had information that he'd gladly share with everyone. It was trouble for Liza, as well. He was obsessed with her—had been since they were children.

I doubted Castro's obsession with her would go away. If anything, it was only ramping up. Time would make it worse, not better. As her mate, it was my job to protect her. I wanted Castro to be found and dealt with as quickly as possible, but it was becoming clear that he would not be an easy man to catch.

"We have to find him," I said, curling my hands into tight fists. "And when we do, I'm handling him."

Dad met my hard gaze. His eyes softened, and he nodded in agreement. He knew this was more than just a pack problem for me—it was personal. Deeply, bone-achingly personal.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, lost in our thoughts about how this horrible mess might end. Dad broke the less than peaceful lull with a question I wasn't ready to discuss. "How much closer are you and Liza getting to mating? Have you made plans for your mating ceremony?"

Damn it. I wasn't in the right mindset to discuss my eventual mating with Liza, even though it was pertinent to the situation.

Dad didn't seem to care or notice my reluctance. "I should not have to remind you that you'll be taking over soon, and when you do, you'll no longer be a private person. You'll be the alpha of this pack, and it's important that you establish yourself as a leader. The pack won't follow a leader who's unattached, unmated."

Oh, for fuck's sake, I knew that all too well. It'd been all my parents had been able to talk about.

"If you plan to mate this girl, now is the time to do it."

I sighed. I wanted to tell Dad that he was wrong and that timing wasn't everything, but deep down, I knew he was right. As soon as I'd handled Castro, I would have no choice but to

start planning my mating ceremony. There'd be no more excuses.

Dad's dwindling health and fading strength were certainly factors that meant Liza and I needed to mate sooner rather than later. Soon, the alpha power would be gone from him. He needed to pass it on to me before he wouldn't be able to anymore. I hated to think of the repercussions of having an all-out fight fest for control of the pack. It was better if the power was passed on to me.

Although, I had no idea when that would be. In the meantime, we had enough to keep us busy. We needed to conduct a full-out search for Syllas and hope he had information on Castro's whereabouts. We had to find him before anything else could happen.

Dad pushed away from his desk and stood up, then walked over to me and dropped his hand to my shoulder. "It's possibly more important than you know, Ty."

Not at all, but I wasn't about to argue with him.

"We can't ignore that I'm getting older and losing my power and stability."

Yeah, I knew, but I squeezed his hand. "We'll worry about the mating ceremony once we know Castro can't get to Liza." Her safety was of the utmost importance to me. "My primary concern is to keep my mate protected and out of harm's way. That's all I care about right now."

He nodded. Perhaps he couldn't understand why I didn't just mate with her now and get done with what I could control in the moment. "I know, son. Just don't lose sight of the entire pack in the midst of this business with Castro."

"I understand time is of the essence." I was telling the truth, but even my wolf knew instinctively that protecting Liza was the main order of business. "The safety of my mate comes first." If we were mated and anything happened to either of us, it would be the end of both of our lives.

When one mate of a fated pair was lost, the surviving partner usually suffered in ways that went above and beyond

normal grief. The remaining wolf fell into a deep depression, and their desire to live disappeared. Eventually, the wolf faded away from a broken heart. I had to protect us both, and right now, while Castro remained an unknown, it meant delaying the mating ceremony, even though it was the singular most important thing my wolf and I wanted.

Dad gave my shoulder a squeeze, then moved to stand in front of the darkened fireplace. “I know this is difficult for you, son. Your mate comes first, but you also have an obligation to the pack. And to me. Don’t forget that.” I’d been raised hearing any number of variations of the same speech. It was tattooed on my soul. There wasn’t much chance I would ever forget it.

I nodded. Before he left the room, Dad looked back at me one last time. “Your concern for Liza’s safety is all the more reason for us to be determined to deal with Castro for good this time.” He leaned against the doorframe and took a deep breath. “I remember what it’s like to be with your fated mate, wanting nothing more than to protect the future mother of your children. You have a heavy load on your shoulders, son. Don’t think that I don’t understand.” When he spoke to me like this, he wasn’t just my alpha, he was my father. Unfortunately these times were coming to an end. I wanted to remember everything about the moment.

He paused, and I caught a glimmer of something in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. “Your relationship with Liza matters to me, too. I’d like to become a grandfather sooner rather than later.”

My body tensed at his words. Dad didn’t know Liza was an omega, and I wasn’t sure if I even wanted to share that information with him. After everything that had been revealed about our family, our pasts, and our secrets, I had decided it was best to keep Liza’s identity a secret between her, her family, and myself.

Dad walked away when he saw the deer-in-headlights expression on my face. He probably thought I was scared of having children, but I’d suddenly remembered that Castro knew what Liza was.

Fuck.

Remembering how important it was to keep the omega information away from the general public only added more justification for me to find Castro and deal with him swiftly and appropriately. Heaven forbid the knowledge of what Liza was got into the wrong hands. That would be a whole other can of worms I didn't want to be popped open.

Chapter 2

Liza

“Liza? Where are you?” Dad’s panicked voice made the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. He didn’t often lose his cool, so when he did, I noticed.

“I’m in the bathroom, Dad. It’s okay.” My voice cracked on the lie. Everything wasn’t okay. It would never be okay again.

Castro was alive.

I’d replayed those words in my mind over and over again, but even hearing them in my own head, in my own voice, somehow, I was struggling to believe it. He was supposed to be dead, but he’d pulled some kind of fucking Houdini act. He’d faked his own death and walked out of the hospital alive, unbeknownst to everyone involved in his medical care. No proof, no trail. *Nobody* saw anything? It must have been a cover-up.

And all I could think was... *what the fuck?*

I couldn’t sleep, could barely eat, knowing that Castro was waiting to strike at any given moment. But he wasn’t impetuous. He didn’t act without forethought. Deep down, I knew he was smarter than that. Everything he did was calculated and perfectly timed. He wouldn’t move until the most advantageous moment—advantageous for him.

My parents had been made fully aware of the situation as soon as we’d received the letter. Despite my pleas for any other solution—I was even willing to consent to packing heat

—Ty had insisted that I stay with my parents while he tried to get to the bottom of everything with his dad’s help.

It wasn’t that I didn’t have faith in him. He wanted this to be done as much as I did. I only wanted to be a part of the solution.

My own father hadn’t let me out of his sight for the last twenty-four hours. He’d even insisted I take his place in bed with Mom while he sat guard by the front door.

All night long.

Every night.

He got a bit of sleep during the day, but Dad’s eyes were bloodshot, and he’d consumed so much coffee that there was a good chance he would drop dead from a cardiac arrest, or—and this was the preferable option—possibly just fall over asleep at any given moment. My father’s lack of a good night’s rest was just another thing on a long list I wanted Castro punished for.

My parents were scared, and with good reason. Castro was the perfect combination of psychotic and genius. He knew what he wanted, and unfortunately, that appeared to be me.

I washed my hands and walked into the living room, interrupting an intense conversation between my parents. They stopped speaking and stared at each other.

“Liza’s back, so why don’t you run it by her?” Mom was using her *I-told-you-so* tone as she gestured in my direction. “I bet I know what she’ll say, though.”

Uh-oh. That didn’t sound good. I didn’t have to be a genius to know that they were arguing over whatever this was. And I hated it. Partly because I always hated when they argued, and partly because, undoubtedly, this argument had something to do with me. They hadn’t talked about anything other than me since Ty dropped me off here.

Dad turned to face me, his five o’clock shadow making him look ten years older. “Sweetheart, your mom and I”—argument or not, they were coming together as a unit—“think

it might be best for the three of us to pack some things and leave town for a while.”

He held up a hand before I could respond. There wasn't a person in this room who didn't know what my answer would be. I wasn't a damn runner. I shook my head and answered anyway. “Absolutely not.”

His voice softened as he continued. “I know you don't want to leave Ty, but if we distance ourselves from Presley Acres, we can go somewhere Castro won't know where to find you. And it'll give Ty time to get this all handled.”

Why did he have to be reasonable and logical? I didn't want reason and logic. As a matter of fact, I freaking hated those things right now.

I sighed and plopped onto the sofa. “Hiding won't do any good, Dad.” If I honestly thought it would help, I'd have done it already. I hated being the reason people were in danger. Loathed it. The sad fact was, no matter where I went, Castro would catch up to me. “My identity has been hidden my entire life, yet somehow Castro still found me.” Of course, he had money, and he apparently used it to employ a crack group of experts who assisted him in all his nefarious endeavors. I had no doubts about his ability to hire people with mad tracking skills. “If I run, he will find me.”

Mom sat beside me and gently took my hand in a show of solidarity as she looked up at my dad. “She's right, Scott.”

Dad turned his back to us, punching his fists on his hips. I'd never seen him so worried in my entire life. As a lawyer, he faced any number of stressful situations on a weekly basis. This was different, though. His only daughter's life was at risk. It made sense that he was desperate to find a solution.

Of course, my parents weren't the only ones who were scared. The maniac was after me. I was anxious and felt like I had no control over my own life, because right now, I didn't. Now that all my memories had come flooding back to me, I was terrified. It hadn't escaped my notice just how unhinged Castro was.

As a young child, he had showed signs of being unstable. His mental health had only declined when he grew older and hit puberty. Now that he was an adult with financial means, Castro was capable of anything. The guy didn't have a moral compass to keep him in check. Whatever the opposite of a moral compass was, that's what he had. An anchor, maybe. A moral anchor, dragging him down into the deep. Fitting.

Dad huffed and slowly walked to the couch. He knelt in front of me, steadying himself as he lowered by grabbing my knees. "Liza, I'm worried about you. Are you okay?" His voice caught in his throat, and he took a few seconds to compose himself. "Mentally? Emotionally? You've been through so much, honey, and your mother and I can't bear to see you wrestling with the memories of your past."

Mom squeezed my hand. "We had no idea what you witnessed as a child. It's unfathomable. Now that you remember it all, we're worried that it could have a negative effect on you. PTSD, possibly."

My parents were as good as gold, and seeing them this upset broke my heart. "I love you both and appreciate your concern. I've had my memories back for weeks. Yes, it hurts, and it's taking me some time to process everything. The more I remember, the deeper the wound. Honestly, though, I'd rather remember my past than forget it. My memories of that time are just as much a part of me as my memories from the age of four until now."

I loved my parents with every ounce of my being, but I also still loved my biological parents and grieved over losing them so tragically. At night, when the house was quiet and I had nothing to distract me, I closed my eyes and racked my brain for tiny details about them. My mother had had a beautiful voice and would sing me to sleep each night while she gently rubbed my forehead with her fingertips.

My father had been a strong alpha, and he'd always made me feel safe. Even in the middle of important meetings, he used to stop everything to lift me into his lap and listen intently as I showed him the flowers I'd gathered in the forest.

I remembered how he held me closely when I was scared, and told me stories of distant lands and incredible creatures.

Fresh waves of grief punched me in the gut as I tried to come to terms with the years I'd missed out on by not having them in my life. One thing was for certain, though. They'd loved me, and I still sensed that love deep down in my bones.

"I'm lucky enough to have had two sets of parents who adored me and treated me so well." I wrapped my arms around my mother and father. "I don't ever want to forget that."

A knock at the door had us all jumping. We really were wound up tightly. Then, I remembered that Ty had texted half an hour ago, letting me know that he was coming to pick me up and take me home. I'd been about to tell my parents when they'd started talking about running.

Dad stood and walked to the door, his shoulders pulled back and his hands clenched into fists at his sides. If it wasn't Ty, I pitied the person at the door.

Ty walked past my father, his shoulders slumped, body stiff and dejected. I could immediately detect the defeat in his stance. "How is everyone?"

I went over and hugged him, then stretched onto my toes to kiss him on the cheek. "We're tired. And stressed. You?" I said it with a smile. I didn't want him to think we were totally defeated. Not yet.

"Same." Twining his fingers through mine, he led me back to the couch. Mom moved to a chair that faced the sofa, and Dad took the other chair.

"What did you find out about the coroner?" I turned to look at Ty, hopeful that he'd figured out where the bastard was hiding or had any new news.

Ty pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes as he let out a soft sigh. "I wish I had better news, but at this point, we're still trying to hunt Syllas down. The good news is that we know where, in a broad sense, to find him. He's a gambling addict with a preference for the poker table, so Dad has his

best men searching regular and underground casinos in the region.”

His best men. Ty’s voice held faith I didn’t share.

Dad sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Gambling, huh? Interesting.”

“How so?” Ty asked.

“I’m helping a friend with a money-laundering case. The details are bizarre, and I won’t go into all of that...” He couldn’t tell us if he was employed and working on the case. Not in more than the abstract, anyway. “But the interesting part is that the client has charges against him for an illegal gambling ring.”

Ty perked up. “Really? Do you know where the ring is located?”

Dad nodded. “As a matter of fact, I do. It happened in Loveska.”

Loveska was about a three-hour drive from Presley Acres and was known as the *City of Sin*. I’d never been there and, quite frankly, had never had even the slightest desire to visit. It was a relatively small city, but an abnormal amount of criminal activities were said to have been going on there since as far back as I could remember. Illegal gambling, of course, but also prostitution and drugs. And rumor was that ‘made men’ ran it all.

Mafia.

All my life, I’d heard that drunkards, prostitutes, drug addicts, and outlaws hung out in Loveska. It wasn’t a place for straight-laced young ladies, and it certainly wasn’t a location the future alpha’s mate would want to visit, therefore, I’d never even thought about setting foot in the place.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Ty groaned and cursed under his breath. “Loveska? That’s the absolute last place on Earth I ever want to be. The alpha there is a pompous dick. We had to stop dealing with him because he was making shady deals outside of pack law and he was a headache. My father didn’t want to be associated with him, but it doesn’t surprise

me in the least that there's a gambling ring thriving in his territory." Ty stood and shook Dad's hand. "Thanks for the information. I'll pass it on to my father."

While I collected my things, Ty said goodbye to my parents, then waited for me to give them each a kiss and a hug. I'd enjoyed staying with them, but I was ready to get back to my own house now.

Just before we walked out the door, Dad grabbed me by the elbow and gently spun me around. "Liza, promise me that you'll check in with us regularly, okay?"

I smiled and rose onto my tiptoes so I could kiss my father on the cheek. "I promise. Try not to worry. I have Ty to protect me." I smiled softly and confidently, and I didn't have to fake it. Ty would never let anything happen to me.

Dad shot Ty a knowing glare that begged him to keep his daughter safe. The look was loaded with threats and promises.

Ty nodded, respecting my father's sincerity, then we walked out the door.

Silently, Ty opened the passenger side door for me, but as soon as we pulled down the street and out of my parents' sight, Ty pulled the car over.

"What's wrong?" I looked at my mate just as he reached for me. He pulled me close and kissed me hard, running his hands through my hair and moaning lightly into my mouth.

Ty's tongue danced around mine, tasting every corner of my mouth.

My mate was intoxicating and addictive.

I reached up to smooth my hands over his chest, down his arms, and then slide my hand up the back of his neck, sinking my fingers into his hair.

Ty's face stayed close to mine, our eyes locked, his pupils dilated with desire, and his chest heaving with each breath.

My mate's body was so big, so hard, and so strong. His strength radiated in just the way he held me.

When we finally broke apart, he left me panting for air with desire pulsing through my body. I stared quizzically at him and the smug grin plastered to his face. “What was that for?”

Ty breathed out hard and fast as he pulled the car back onto the road. “Do I need a reason to kiss you?” I cocked my head to the side, and he glanced at me from the corner of his eyes. “I missed you..”

We spent the next ten minutes talking about my time with my parents, then moved into making safe small talk about anything and everything unrelated to Castro: our favorite holidays when we were kids, television shows that had recently ended or were in their final season, bad drivers we had encountered on the highway, and how long ago our respective childhood dogs had died. Neither of us wanted to acknowledge the intense stress we were under.

Once we pulled up to my house, though, we couldn't pretend that this was a normal day where we'd just returned from a simple visit with my folks. Reality hit hard.

My hand trembled as I reached for the door handle. Just as my fingers were about to grasp it, Ty's hand swiftly intercepted mine, denying me access. “No, ma'am,” he said, his voice laced with an air of authority.

Frustration swelled within me. I really wasn't in the mood for games. Reality had returned, and she was back with a vengeance. Who the hell did he think he was? *Ma'am?*

“Excuse me?” I retorted. His choice of words had caught me off guard.

“Stay put and keep the doors locked until I've done a thorough search of the cottage, both inside and out.” With that, he exited the car, now focused on the task at hand.

Gazing at him, I couldn't help but feel a mix of apprehension and curiosity. I mulled his actions and words over while staring at my quaint little cottage, feeling its warmth and familiarity.

“I’ll let you know when it’s safe to come in,” he *informed* me, then shut the door and hit the button on his key fob to lock the door.

Questions surged through my mind, but for now, I suppressed them. The intensity in the air was palpable, yet a glimmer of trust formed between us as he headed toward his mission of ensuring our safety. He took it damn seriously.

Ty carefully inched past my front door, methodically moving from one side of the house to the other, clearing the outside first. I lost sight of him as he checked the perimeter for any signs of Castro. Finally, he made his way back to the front door and into the house while I waited not so patiently, instinctively looking up and down the street for suspicious cars. Maybe it wasn’t instinct as much as paranoia, but I damn sure was going to know if anyone was coming for us.

A rock of disappointment settled in my stomach as I contemplated the extent of the measures we had to undertake just to gain access to the front door of my own home. I knew it was all for my safety, but it grated on me. Heaving out a sigh, I pondered how *fortunate* I was to be the singular fixation of Castro’s relentless attention. The weight of the extraordinary circumstances I found myself in was so heavy in the air, it nearly suffocated me.

A few minutes later, Ty stuck his head out the front door and gave me a quick thumbs up. All clear. I wished what I felt was relief but it wasn’t. It was... just a lesser sense of the dread I couldn’t seem to shake these days.

He jogged back to the car, picked up my bags, and carried them inside, never more than a step or two away from me the whole time. Once we were both in the house, he dropped my suitcase and overnight bag onto the floor, then locked the door behind us. The alarm pad next to the door beeped as he enabled the door alarm.

“A team will be coming by in a bit to set up cameras around your house. I want to be able to see every inch of this place from every angle. It’s gonna take a magician to get past me and the guards. Only a dumbass would try it,” Ty said.

We both knew Castro was dumb enough to try and make a move. Cameras wouldn't stop him, but it might give us an edge.

I nodded my agreement and didn't even bother to argue. Castro was unhinged, so no one would hear me complaining about extra safety measures, even if said measures were above and beyond what was necessary.

I stood in the hallway as Ty set off through the house, checking all the windows and doors were securely fastened. He was so focused on making sure I was safe that it made my heart swell. I found myself wanting him more than I ever had.

He made his way back to me and pulled me into his arms. "Everything is going to be okay. I promise."

I believed him, but I wondered about another important aspect of my life: work.

"What about my office and the homes I visit for my catering jobs? Surely you won't install cameras there as well, right?"

"You'll need security. They don't have to go inside the homes of your clients, but they will be posted outside their houses. If there's a need for them to enter quickly, they won't hesitate." Ty reached out. "Can I see your phone?"

I pulled it from my purse and handed it over, one eyebrow raised. Surely, he wasn't going to make me give it up for safety's sake.

He tapped the screen a few times. "I'm installing a security app my friend Zephyr came up with. Everyone on your security team has the app on their phone, and if at any time you think you're in danger, all you have to do is hit the power button three times."

"Really? What happens if I do that?"

"Everyone with the app will get an alert and your location will be sent to them." Ty handed me my phone. "It's as simple as that."

Simple? I was put off by the whole thought of being tracked. “I don’t really like the idea.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Suddenly, I’m a prisoner in my own home.” I gestured toward the alarm system. “I can’t go about my day-to-day business without an entourage of security guards standing outside my clients’ homes. How do you think that will look?” I didn’t give him a chance to answer. “To top it all off, someone’s created an app just so all these strange men can track me?”

Ty looked bewildered. “Strange men? They’re reliable members of the Keller security team, Liza, not fucking bums off the side of the street. Why are you questioning any of this? You do remember that there’s a psychotic asshole after you, right?”

I crossed my arms beneath my chest and stared at him.

Ty scoffed and ran a hand through his hair. “You’re in danger, and I need to know where you are at all times just in case something happens. I’d feel better knowing where you are so I can better protect you.”

“You already have a personal security guard following me.” I pointed out the door at the men who’d arrived to install the cameras around the perimeter of my house. “Don’t you think the tracker is overkill?”

Ty wouldn’t hear any of it. He held up his hand and narrowed his eyes at me. “As your mate, it’s my duty to keep you safe, and this is how I’m keeping you safe. I know you don’t like it because you’re used to having all of your freedom with no strings attached, but it’s a dangerous time. If I have to go overboard to protect you, then so be it.”

I clenched my jaw. I couldn’t argue with his logic. As much as I didn’t like it, Ty made a valid point. “Fine. But I’m letting you know that I’m not happy about it.”

That evening, we ate dinner and snuggled up on the couch to watch a romantic comedy. I’d insisted we didn’t watch

anything stress-inducing, even though I really wanted to finish a true crime show we'd been streaming.

By the time we crawled into bed, we both crashed, completely exhausted from the stress of the past day. Ty pulled me into the classic spooning position and draped his arm over my waist. His warm body pressed against my back, and the rhythmic sound of his breathing almost lulled me to sleep, but my wolf was too restless to settle.

After what seemed like a solid hour, I finally drifted off to sleep and straight into a gruesome nightmare.

I suddenly found myself back in the dark depths of my past, reliving the unthinkable tragedy that had shattered my world. My adoptive parents, the only family I had known since I was four years old, stood before me, their faces etched with fear. I watched in horror as the scene unfolded before my eyes, mirroring the night that had scarred me for life.

Castro, the dark figure who had always been lurking in the shadows my entire life and who had torn my biological parents away from me, loomed over my mother and father. The cold steel of the gun clutched in his hand glinted ominously in the dim light. His lips curled into a twisted smile; a chilling reflection of the pleasure he took in causing unimaginable pain.

Mom and Dad were bound and gagged, staring at me with wide eyes, pleading for me to do something.

My heart raced as Castro's words, venomous and filled with sickening satisfaction, sliced through the air. "Come to watch, have you, Liza?" He spoke with an eerie calmness, taunting me. "I'll take everything from you until you have no one left but me." Each word struck me like a blade, penetrating the depths of my soul.

He reveled in the power he had over me, relishing the opportunity to snatch away everything I held dear.

As the nightmare played out, an overwhelming sense of helplessness washed over me. I was powerless to protect the ones I loved. I tried to move my feet, to run at Castro and

knock the gun out of his hands. I knew he'd never shoot me if I made a move, but my feet wouldn't budge. Try as I might, I couldn't do anything to stop the inevitable.

My precious adoptive parents, who had showered me with love and care, were now at the mercy of the very same monster who had taken my biological parents from me.

Time seemed to stretch and warp in the haunting dream. Every second was like an eternity, as if I were trapped in a never-ending cycle of anguish and despair. The weight of the past bore down on my chest, the crippling fear that history would repeat itself suffocating me.

Tears welled up in my eyes, blurring my vision as I pleaded with fate to spare my parents, but my desperate cries fell on deaf ears. The nightmare held me captive, its grip unyielding. The piercing sound of the gunshots reverberated through my being as I watched the life drain from my adoptive parents' eyes. A searing pain etched itself deep into my bones.

As abruptly as it had begun, the dream shattered. I jolted awake, drenched in sweat, trembling and gasping for air. My heart pounded as the echoes of the horrifying nightmare still lingered in my mind. I could hardly catch my breath as I tried to make sense of the vivid images that had upset my wolf. She shuddered and moaned as I clutched my throat.

The terror clung to me like a heavy cloak, refusing to dissipate. My body ached from the residual fear that coursed through my veins.

The nightmare had unearthed a raw truth that resided in the depths of my heart. The possibility of Castro exacting his sadistic revenge and leaving me with no one but him was a haunting reality I couldn't dismiss. His capacity for cruelty was unfathomable, and the nightmare had only amplified my fear of him.

As I lay there in the stillness, paralyzed by the remnants of my dream, I realized the depth of the scars Castro had left upon my soul. The wounds had been ruthlessly torn open, exposing the vulnerability I had tried so desperately to shield.

In my heart, I knew I couldn't underestimate the darkness that lurked within him.

He was evil.

All possibility of sleep erased, I sighed and sat upright, trying not to wake Ty. The nightmare had reminded me of the battles I faced and the demon I had to confront.

Chapter 3

Ty

Stretching, I attempted to look half-interested. The man I was directing this attention to stood at the front of the conference room, his face a shade of crimson.

Tim was one of the financial analysts at Keller Enterprises, and he was passionate about money. It probably had something to do with the fact that the more we made, the higher his salary increased. He had a paunchy belly and a few gray hairs combed over a bald spot. His tie was crooked and loose, and had a gravy or sauce stain about halfway up the fabric. What he lacked in grooming, however, he more than made up for with his enthusiasm.

Regardless of the reason for his overzealousness, I often found myself swallowing a chuckle as he flailed his hands wildly with dark sweat stains appearing under his arms.

“If the next quarter’s trends continue on their upward trajectory as this one has, I could see us wanting to open an additional branch. Supply and demand, people.”

I tapped my pen on the conference table and skimmed over my notes. The Keller companies were thriving, and for that I was grateful. My family’s business legacy would live on.

Behind it all, though, was a shit load of turmoil and anxiety. Little did our employees know that our personal lives were hanging on by a thread. Hopefully, they never had to find out.

We’d been waiting for an answer from Nico, but I was beginning to think Syllas had somehow fled the country. Every

casino search turned up empty, and my wolf grew increasingly anxious. We needed Liza safe, and as long as Syllas was roaming free, she wasn't.

Dad had assured me multiple times that Nico was the best man for the job. "If Syllas is alive, Nico will find him."

If Dad was that confident about his man finding Syllas, I couldn't argue with him. With each passing day, though, I began to lose my trust in the plan Dad and I had formed. It was taking too long, and the danger increased every day. We couldn't keep living this way.

Every fucking man we had to spare had been sent out with one goal: find Syllas and bring him back to the Keller Estate alive without drawing any attention to the capture.

My father and I wanted to deal with Syllas on our own terms without raising the alarms of other local authorities.

I propped my head in one hand and stared at the screen, trying to focus on the graph projected behind Tim, but no matter how hard I tried to pay attention, it was no use. I couldn't get my mind off Liza.

The past few nights, she'd woken up shaking, drenched in sweat and gasping for air. Every time, I held her and tried to comfort her, which was no hardship on my part, but her fear was palpable.

When she was fully awake and no longer trembling, I'd ask her what the dreams were about, but she always refused to answer me. She immediately closed down and shut me out. Up until now, she'd always confided in me when she had dreams about her past or her parents, so I couldn't be sure if that was the nightmare taunting her or if it was a new one because she wouldn't tell me.

She had taken to treating me the same as she would a stranger rather than the man who slept in her bed, who comforted her, and who had gone out of his way to protect her.

I figured she was still upset with me for putting the tracker on her phone, but I sure as fuck wasn't going to apologize for

wanting to know where she was when she wasn't in my presence so I could protect her better.

Regardless of what Liza thought, I didn't want to keep her locked away like a princess in a castle. I just needed some peace of mind. I'd drive myself crazy if I had no way of knowing where she was and whether she was okay.

Every time I asked her if she was doing all right with the stress of Castro being on the loose, she answered that she was fine. She might have thought I couldn't see through her lie, but I'd come to know Liza better than anyone, even Bryce.

She wasn't just scared. There was something else going on, but I wasn't sure exactly what that was. Without her telling me, I sure as hell didn't know what to do to help her. It made my guts ache, but I was at a loss.

I looked up at the clock. Tim had been talking for nearly an hour. Most of the other people in the room had already given up on listening to him as they doodled on paper or stared out the window.

“Well, that's probably all we need to know for today, folks, so unless you have any questions, I think this concludes our meeting.”

It was a bit rude since I was well aware that Tim didn't like being interrupted mid-sentence, but he looked relieved. “Anyone who has questions knows how to get a hold of you, correct?”

He nodded. The poor guy must've thought that my lack of interest meant I wanted more in-depth information.

As everyone filed out of the room, I pulled out my phone and texted Liza.

You, me, and the sunshine. How about a run this afternoon?

We hadn't shifted in a while, and I figured her wolf probably needed a nice long run by now. Even if hers didn't, mine sure as fuck did.

She replied quickly. **Are you sure it's safe for me?**

I didn't have to hear her voice to know how fearful she truly was. She tried to put on a brave face, but she was terrified of Castro. Texting wasn't good enough. She needed to hear me say the words, so I dialed her number instead.

"Hey," I said, my tone gentle and reassuring when she answered. "I would never put you in danger, and if it was too risky for us to go running together, I wouldn't even suggest it." I would have hoped she knew me well enough by now to know that. If she needed some reassurance, however, I could give her that. "The grounds around the estate have been secured with round-the-clock security, so if anyone tries to enter without permission, we'll know." I paused, thinking about her nightmares. "If it makes you too uncomfortable, though, we can certainly do something else."

She was silent for a bit before finally responding. "No, let's go. I need the distraction."

"I'll see you soon." A run was exactly what she needed—what we both needed.

I hung up and exhaled, relieved that I'd been able to convince her and that she hadn't been too afraid to give it a shot. The fear of Castro wouldn't consume her if she had something else to focus on, and hopefully running with me would allow her to forget about it all, if only for an hour or two.

I gathered my notes and shoved them into my briefcase, quickly making my way out the large conference room. To my dismay, Tim was waiting for me in the hallway. "Mr. Keller, do you have a moment to chat?"

I glanced at my watch, hoping he'd get the point that I had somewhere to be. "Sure. I guess I can spare a *minute*." And I certainly meant only the one.

He seemed oblivious. "I hope you don't think this is too forward, sir, but I couldn't help but notice that you cut me off before I was done presenting this quarter's numbers."

Shit. I guess the look on his face earlier wasn't relief. It was disappointment.

I nodded.

“Well, that kind of confirmed what I’ve been hearing around the office.”

I studied Tim’s face, trying to get a read on him and decipher his motives. A fine sheen of sweat glistened on his skin. “What have you been hearing?”

He grimaced and shifted his weight. “It’s nothing serious.”

“For God’s sake, Tim. Out with it.” I was quickly losing my patience.

He sighed. “People, not me of course...” He paused.

I nodded. “Of course.”

Large droplets of sweat beaded his forehead. “It’s just that they’ve been saying you’re... distracted.” He held his hands up defensively. “We all know you have a lot on your plate as CEO, but I can’t disagree with those who are saying that your personal life is getting in the way of your professional life.”

Ballsy.

Did this fucking guy have no idea to whom he was speaking? No way could he think that talking to me like this was professional or okay in any way. “Perhaps you should check yourself and stay in your lane, Tim. Last I checked, you worked in finance, not human resources.” His cheeks reddened, and he took a step back. “You are my financial analyst, and I am your boss. I wasn’t aware our positions had reversed. My personal life is, quite frankly, none of yours or anyone else’s fucking business.” I’d overshoot pissed a couple of sentences ago.

This fucking guy had no business checking up on me, informing me that people were talking. Okay, so maybe I was a little preoccupied with trying to keep the Keller name from being ruined. If my employees knew that my change in behavior was due to a threat that could result in them all losing their jobs, I bet they’d spend less time gossiping and more time working their asses off in a job that paid them well above the average salary.

Instead of sharing my thoughts with Tim, I turned and stormed out of the building, leaving him standing there like an idiot.

My mind was in a million different places. I had to protect Liza and Keller Enterprises at the same time. It seemed like no matter what I did, one or the other would suffer. Sure, I was the upcoming alpha, but that didn't mean I could be in two places at once. As long as Liza's safety was in question, I couldn't give my full focus to our businesses, and that was a problem.

I stopped in front of my car and looked up at the sky. It had been a long day, and I was exhausted, but my wolf kept pushing forward. He knew Liza depended on me, and that was all the motivation I needed to keep going.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the car door and slid into the driver's seat. I tried to remember what our family's yoga instructor had taught me back when I had the time to attend her classes multiple times a week. Something about breathing deeply and releasing the tension in our bodies. It had never worked for me, so I wasn't surprised the cleansing breath had absolutely no effect on my mental state.

As I pulled onto the main road, I tried to push Tim's words out of my mind, but all I could imagine was punching him in his arrogant face.

I was grateful the drive to the estate was long enough for me to cool off. Liza was already stressed enough. She didn't need the added burden of seeing me upset over work.

When I arrived, her car was parked out front and she was sitting on the front porch, staring into the koi pond Mother had recently added to the landscaping. She'd insisted that the front of our house didn't have enough *pizazz*, and had consulted with a local landscaper to get their opinions.

I personally thought the pond was unnecessary and over the top, but I didn't expect any less from my mother. She considered herself the person who set the tone for the rest of Presley Acres.

To be fair, the society women did follow her lead when it came to fashion and home design. It was all a bunch of pandering bullshit, but it gave her something to do while Dad worked in his office all day.

“Hello, beautiful.” I jogged up the sidewalk, leaving my work bag in the car. My hands needed to be free for Liza.

She smiled at me with those full lips of hers that drove me crazy, but there was something troubling behind that smile that made me do a double take. Liza had been deep in thought. I couldn’t help but wish she’d confide in me and let me take some of her burden.

I held out a hand and helped her to her feet. “Are you ready?” She nodded, and I pulled out my phone, pointing to the screen. “This is a map of the grounds.”

Liza squinted. “I still can’t get over the amount of acreage your family owns. It’s hard to imagine.” She laughed softly. “You weren’t kidding about the area being secure. I mean, I trust you, so I knew it was safe to sit on the porch, but it’s definitely something else to actually look out onto hundreds of acres, all gated and secure.”

I smiled and almost told her all of it would be hers someday, but I didn’t want to bring up our mating ceremony right now. All I wanted was to enjoy a run with my fated mate. “You see those red dots? Those are the points of entry. The numbers represent the amount of guards at each location.”

“Wow.” Liza’s eyes widened. “You *really* weren’t kidding about the area being secure.” Her shoulders relaxed, and I could almost see some of the tension leaving her body. She laced her fingers through mine, and I led her to the clearing.

Before we shifted, I needed her to know that she could still depend on me, even though our circumstances had changed. Some things were out of my control, like Castro practically rising from the dead, but I would always protect Liza. There was no question about that.

I pulled her into my arms, kissing the top of her head and taking in the citrus scent of her hair. “You know that I’m

always here for you, right?”

She buried her head in my chest and sighed.

“No matter what you’re dealing with, Liza, you can always tell me. I’m not going to judge you or try to change you.” I stroked her back. “I just want to be there for you. Always.”

She pulled away and stared into my eyes. “I know, but it’s not easy putting all of your problems on someone. It’s a heavy load, Ty, and that’s unfair to you.” She swallowed hard. “I don’t want to be more of a burden than I already am.”

Shock coursed through me. A burden? After everything we’d been through, I thought for sure she recognized my commitment to her. With that commitment came loyalty and understanding, even when it was difficult. If her load was a burden, I would happily carry it because I wanted every part of her. “Why do you feel that way?”

Liza shot me a pointed look and gestured to the space around her. “Everything that’s happening is because of Castro’s obsession with me.” She crossed her arms and sighed loudly. “Yes, I know your father has some fault in this, but I’m sure Castro would have tried to kill my parents even if your father hadn’t attacked our pack. I’m the center of this chaos, not anyone else. So, of course, I feel like a burden.”

My pulse quickened, and my wolf stirred. I was pissed. Not at Liza, but at Castro for doing this to her and planting this seed of doubt in her head. As her mate, it was my duty to alleviate her of those feelings.

“Liza, protecting you isn’t a burden to me, and it never will be.” I grabbed both of her hands. “Can’t you see I’m willing to do anything for you? Not out of obligation but because you mean the world to me. I never want to see you in harm’s way, and I certainly don’t want to see you tormenting yourself over the actions of that son of a bitch.”

I stared into her eyes, hoping she could see the honesty behind my words.

“I know, Ty.” She smiled sadly. “But it’s difficult to shake off the feeling of guilt and responsibility when you’re

constantly reminded of it every day. I thought Castro was gone for good, but it was all a lie. He tricked us into thinking we were safe, then struck when we were most vulnerable and happy. Everything he does is calculated.”

I squeezed her hands tighter. “You don’t have to feel responsible for Castro’s actions because you’re not.” I needed her to understand. “What you can do is focus on your strength and power. You are so much more than a victim, and I’m here to remind you of that every day.” I stared at her, seeing her power and strength, even if she couldn’t.

She smiled, and some of the sadness faded from her eyes. “Thank you for always being there,” she murmured as she leaned into me. Liza laid her hand over my heart, and I enjoyed the touch enough to moan as I kissed the top of her head and held her close.

I was glad to see her smile, even though she had yet to tell me about her nightmares. As much as I wanted her to confide in me, I kept my mouth closed and decided not to push it. I was certain she’d tell me when she was ready.

“I’m ready to shift now.” Without another word, Liza stripped, and I averted my eyes from her gorgeous body.

Just knowing that her breasts were exposed mere feet away aroused me. I shook my head, trying to force myself to focus on something less sexual. This wasn’t the time to fuck in the middle of the woods, though I wanted her with every ounce of my being. She needed to run, and I wasn’t going to delay her any longer.

We shifted and ran side by side, our wolves in perfect sync with each other. After a few moments, I let Liza lead, giving her the freedom she so desperately needed. When we stopped at a clearing, I watched as she rolled around on the grass and basked in the sun. There was something joyous in her that I had been waiting to see. Freedom. Happiness.

She had no restrictions, no guards watching her every move, no phone being tracked by an entire security team. Liza was free, and I ached for that to be a permanent situation as much for me as for her.

Moments like these reminded me why I'd do anything to keep her safe and comfortable, and also caused an ache in my gut when I thought about the terror she was living through.

No matter what happened, I'd never let anyone take away her joy or her spirit. Liza was strong and independent, and I was determined to do all that I could to protect her. Of course, it would be a battle because she tried to do so much on her own and didn't like having to rely on someone else. But I couldn't stop.

It wasn't just a duty, like Liza assumed. It was my privilege and honor.

We ran for hours before Liza finally stopped at the spot that led in the direction of Heather Falls. My stomach churned as I tried to imagine what was going on in her mind. The last time we'd been in this area, her past had come crashing back into her mind, and the cold, hard reality of her parents' death had brought her to her knees. Literally.

With Castro's death certificate, and no heirs to speak of, the Kellers had reclaimed the land and were in the process of having the house torn down. Eventually, we'd give that land back to Liza.

She didn't know about any of it, and I couldn't wait to give her the gift once I claimed her. I wanted to rebuild on that land and give Liza the positive memories she so rightly deserved.

Right now, though, I just wanted to enjoy the moment with her. We didn't need words. The bond between us was strong, sturdy, and it said everything that needed to be said. I rubbed against her, and she leaned into me. Even our wolves shared a strong bond. Nothing we could say would make it more or less so. No words were needed in a moment like this.

I nuzzled her neck, and the scent of her made me growl. My wolf wanted Liza as much as I did. I was ready to claim her in every way I could be ready—heart, body, soul—but we both knew it wasn't the time. It would happen, though, and soon.

The sun was low and painted the sky the color of fire mingling with darkness. Liza led us back to the clearing where we shifted back to our human forms and got dressed. Again, I turned away to avoid looking at her naked body. If I caught a glimpse of it, there was no way in all of hell that I would be able to control myself.

We slowly walked back to the house with my arm around her shoulders, both of us lost in thought. When we neared the edge of the woods, Liza finally spoke.

“Thank you for today,” she whispered as she looked up at me. Her smile was small but potent, and my heart stuttered. “It was nice to be able to run without worrying about being watched or followed.”

I smiled and kissed her forehead. I could do this with her for the rest of our lives. “Any time. Although, I would offer one suggestion for our next run.”

Liza quirked an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah? What would that be?”

My hand slid down her back to cup her perfectly rounded ass. “A little more physical contact would be nice.”

She giggled, and I wanted to fall into the sound and stay there forever. “I think we can arrange that.”

My cock responded to her coy smile, but before I could find a word to speak, a figure standing in the doorway of the house caught my eye. I squinted so I could make out who it was. It was my father.

If Dad was watching, there had to be a reason. I cleared my throat and pulled my hand from Liza’s ass cheek. “Hey, Dad. Is everything okay?”

He narrowed his eyes in my direction. As we walked closer, I caught the tension on his face. His mouth was drawn into a tight line, and he didn’t greet us or even smile at Liza.

Something was wrong.

He took a step toward me, ignoring Liza. “When were you planning on telling me that Liza is an omega?”

Chapter 4

Liza

I reached into my bag and took out a bottle of water. I fumbled trying to open the lid but finally got it twisted open and guzzled it down, trying to quench my dry throat.

So, his father knew about me.

It wasn't that bad.

Oh, who was I kidding? The surprising turn of events had caught me off guard as I went from relaxed and horny to bewildered and ashamed.

I wasn't ashamed of who I was, but I didn't feel great about Dominic learning about my identity from someone other than me. I probably should have told him, but it wasn't the kind of thing we talked about in my family. It was just part of who I was. It made me different. Made me... odd. I didn't tell others because I didn't want or need the scrutiny.

After such a refreshing run, the last thing I'd expected was for him to meet us at the door, proclaim I was an omega, and ask Ty why he hadn't told him.

Ty took a step back, his protective instincts kicking in as he wrapped his arms around me. "Is this really something you think we should discuss right here? Right now?"

He meant they shouldn't go toe to toe discussing my genetic makeup with me standing a few feet from their door. It was a discussion that could happen with or without me, since most of it wouldn't include me, anyway.

Dominic scoffed. “I’m assuming Liza knows what she is, so nothing I have to say should come as a surprise.” He turned to me. “Am I right?”

I blinked hard and tripped over my words. “Erm... yes. That’s correct.”

Within a few minutes, we were in Dominic’s office. Ty sat across from his father’s desk, but I refused to sit. Standing was best since I could breathe better through my anxiety with a straight back as opposed to being bent at the waist in a chair. I needed to move to have the ability to escape the room quickly if need be.

My stress levels had been through the roof the past few days after learning that Castro was still alive, coupled with the intensity of my extremely detailed nightmares. Now, though, my true identity was out in the open. I couldn’t figure out how Dominic had found out, though. Ty wouldn’t have told anyone. At least, I couldn’t imagine him sharing that information with another person. Not without asking me first.

Dominic cleared his throat and tossed a folder in Ty’s direction. “This showed up on the front porch today. My security guard brought it directly to me. The seal hadn’t been tampered with before I opened it.” He glanced in my direction. “This wasn’t what I expected.”

I didn’t try to look over Ty’s shoulder, but I could see enough to know that the papers were official. One side of the folder had a body chart, the other side writing.

Ty flipped through the paperwork. “These are Liza’s private medical records. How the hell did anyone get ahold of these?” More importantly, who?

Dominic grabbed a second smaller envelope from his desk and handed it to Ty. “It came with a personal message from our friend. Castro.”

My heart jumped into my throat as scenes from my nightmares replayed in my mind. Castro truly was capable of anything, as evidenced by this latest breach into my personal

life. If he wanted to, he could rip away everything I held dear, including the people I cared for most in the world.

Ty cleared his throat and read the letter out loud.

Hello, Dominic.

I hope this letter finds you well. You should really do a better job of learning the details of those residing with your pack. Perhaps they hide their true selves from you because it's obvious to everyone that you are untrustworthy. Your own son doesn't even trust you enough to tell you the whole truth. How can you call yourself an alpha?

It would be so unfortunate for your pack if this information about your future daughter-in-law got into the wrong hands. The effects could be quite devastating and far-reaching for everyone involved, don't you agree?

On another note, you might want to look into strengthening your cyber security. It was far too easy for me to access Liza's medical records, so I'm assuming I could pull anything I wanted from your pack's online databases. And I have.

Don't worry, I wiped everything from the medical records system. The last thing I want is for Liza to get hurt. You may have no interest in protecting her, but I do, which is why she belongs with me.

Ty roared. "That bastard is yanking our chains. He knows exactly what he's doing, getting us all riled up when we have absolutely no way to find him. It's psychological warfare." Ty lowered his voice and stared out the window with a resolve that sent chills down my spine. "I'll gut him like a fish the moment he shows his smug face." He stood and paced the room.

I tried to hide my shaking hands by shoving them into the pockets of my jeans. Castro knew exactly where we were, and he knew everything about me and my true identity. Even though it seemed like another life, he'd known me as a child and had made a vow to himself to protect me. More than that, he claimed me as his own, even when my father made it perfectly clear that he'd wanted Castro to stay away from me.

My mind raced as I tried to think of a plan—anything to stop him from telling the world I was an omega. If we couldn't find him and couldn't find the coroner who had helped Castro fake his death, our hands were tied.

I was tempted to follow my parents' idea of getting out of town. Maybe even out of the country. If we were sneaky, maybe Castro wouldn't know where to find me. Perhaps I could take the Keller family jet to avoid being tracked down. Ty had never mentioned a jet, but based on the family's wealth, I assumed one existed.

I bit my lip. No, running wasn't the solution. If Castro couldn't find me, it would only stoke his ire. Then what would he do? He'd become even more unhinged if that was at all possible.

“Why didn't you tell me the second you found out that Liza was an omega?” Dominic leaned back in his leather chair, arms crossed beneath his chest, and his eyes narrowed on Ty. “In order for me to help you, you have to keep me abreast of important details, and I'd say your fated mate being an omega is a pretty big fucking detail.”

“It wasn't my secret to tell!” Ty's voice was so loud that I listened for some type of reaction from the staff downstairs. Hopefully, no one was listening to the conversation.

Dominic looked incredulous. “This is a big deal. You understand that, right?”

When Ty didn't respond and kept his back turned, Dominic shifted his gaze to me.

I nodded. It was, indeed, a huge fucking deal. “Yes. I understand, but it isn't the kind of thing...” He wouldn't care that I never told anyone. He only cared that I hadn't told him. The pack's alpha.

His gaze was unwavering on my face. “Not only is this a serious situation because Castro managed to gain access to this information, but he makes a valid point in his letter. What *if* this had been leaked? Encrypted file or not, this is damaging

intel. Anyone could have hacked into the medical filing system just as easily as Castro.”

That wasn't really my problem to solve. It was a pack issue.

Ty turned on his heels and grumbled. “No one has known or figured out Liza's identity all this time. If anyone had, it would have been mentioned before now, so I highly doubt anybody else knows. Honestly, how would they even have known to go looking for it. Who would ever suspect that Liza's an omega?” He motioned to me by flinging his arm in my direction. “She's a respected businesswoman in the community who doesn't cause any problems. There's absolutely no reason for anyone to look into her.” He spoke through gritted teeth. “Liza's never even had a parking ticket, for fuck's sake.”

I didn't understand how that assimilated to being an omega, but I wasn't about to ask while he was sticking up for me. Details could wait.

“All right.” Dominic threw his hands in the air. “I'll play Devil's advocate. The girl's hair is practically white, and so is her wolf's fur. That's not something you see every day. You really think that somewhere along the way, someone hasn't questioned why she looks so different?”

Again, if they had, no one had mentioned it. Not to my face, anyway.

My stomach lurched, though. I had no desire to be a part of this conversation. They were highlighting all my darkest thoughts and fears, all the reasons I was inadequate to be in the pack, discussing me like I was nothing more than their latest acquisition and they needed to weigh the pros and cons of having me around before bringing me up at the next fucking board meeting.

Ty rubbed his jaw. “Castro only revealed what Liza is as a power play. He's trying to show us that he's powerful enough to have someone hack our system, and powerful enough to decide whether or not to release information to the pack to turn them against us.” Ty's voice was low, deep, and sharp with

anger. “He’s trying to make you doubt my loyalty, and it seems it’s fucking working.”

Dominic’s face paled alarmingly as Ty’s words sunk in—as if he couldn’t deny the undeniable truth.

My heart started, and sweat slicked my palms—the first signs of a panic attack coming at me. Before I could fend it off, a full-on attack hit me like a freight train. I gasped for air until my lungs were raw and aching, and my vision became blurry. I leaned against the wall as I clutched my chest, trying not to collapse to the floor. My wolf growled her distress at a low, keening pitch.

“Liza!” Ty shouted, rushing to my side and pulling me into his arms. He whispered soothing words in my ear as he rubbed circles on my back, trying his best to calm me down. His embrace was warm and strong, but it didn’t do much to help me gain control of myself.

“Everything is going to be okay,” he whispered, his breath warm against my skin as he wrapped his body around mine.

It sure as hell didn’t feel like everything would be okay. My world was crashing around me, and the people I loved most stood like sheep waiting for Castro to slaughter them.

I squinted, trying to focus on Dominic. “My medical records are supposed to be extremely secure. Only my parents and my doctor had access to them. Those files weren’t even kept on the same server as the other medical records.” I paused, trying to make sense of it all. My privacy had been invaded, and I’d never felt more exposed in all my life. “What are you going to do with the information about me being an omega?”

Dominic wouldn’t release the information, would he? Fear churned in my stomach, threatening to expel its contents.

His eyes widened, and his brows pinched together as if he was genuinely shocked by my question. “I’m not going to do anything, Liza.” He shook his head, first at me, then at Ty, before he looked at me again. “It’s not like I’m going to sell you off to the highest bidder, for God’s sake.” When I cocked

a brow, he sighed. “I can admit I’ve done some shady things in the past, but that is not the man I am today.”

He slowly rose from his chair, leaning his weight on the desk. “I have no interest in exploiting you, Liza. You’re Ty’s fated mate, and I can see he cares for you deeply.”

I didn’t trust that. He was an alpha first and a father second—at least, that was my impression of him.

“My intentions aren’t to out you but to keep you protected. We’ll find a way to keep the information buried. You have my word.”

I studied his face, trying to find any signs of deception. There was no sweat on his upper lip, and he held my gaze. He was telling the truth. He was being sincere.

“You can’t blame me for questioning your intentions. My pack’s blood is still on your hands, Dominic.” I swallowed back my scorn for the way he was speaking, as if he was offended I might not believe in him.

His head jerked upright, and genuine regret flashed in his eyes. I’d struck a nerve, even though that wasn’t my intention. I was simply stating the truth so he could better understand my concern. My points were valid, though, and Dominic knew it.

He sighed. “I don’t suppose I can blame you for being suspicious. Your secret is safe with me, whether you want to believe that or not.” He collected the medical records that had been strewn across his desk after Ty tossed the folder. “How are you feeling, by the way?” He switched to a more concerned tone, and it took me a moment to catch up.

I chewed on my lip. “I’m a little panicked at the moment. Is that what you mean?”

He shook his head. “No. These are your current records, and they aren’t showing that you’re taking any new medications. Don’t you need them to control your... omega urges?”

My mouth dropped open. This certainly wasn’t the kind of conversation I intended to have with my alpha or with anyone

else who wasn't a trained physician or my mate. Dominic was neither of those things.

Ty spoke up. "She hasn't needed them since we..." He trailed off, glancing at me before looking away. Ty cleared his throat. "Since we started fulfilling her desires."

Oh, for fuck's sake. I covered my face with my hands, enough heat radiating from my cheeks to bake a cake on my skin. If I could have willed the floor to swallow me whole, I would have. Over the course of my life, I'd had some humiliating moments, but this ranked in the top three. Actually, it was probably *the* most embarrassing moment of my entire life. I was in the alpha's office, discussing my sex life with the father of the man who shared my bed. Embarrassing wasn't a strong enough word.

When I finally peeked at Dominic from between my fingers, he seemed completely unfazed by the conversation. He even went as far as to give us some advice. "I encourage you to have sex as much as possible."

This moment went from uncomfortable to *holy shit*. I couldn't see any possible way that this could get any worse. Where was the hidden camera? There had to be one because this was obviously some kind of prank show.

Staring at the floor, I tried to regain control of my racing heart. I couldn't even look at Ty.

Assuming Dominic was done discussing our sex life, I lowered my hands from my face and reached for a glass of water on the desk. Surely there was enough in it to drown me.

To make matters worse and to increase the cringe factor exponentially, Dominic continued. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about, Liza. It's normal for you to have those urges. If rumors of omegas' past existence are correct, then it's natural for you to have a higher-than-normal sex drive."

If my face grew any hotter, it would probably melt right off my skull. This was fucking unbelievable. If he went on, there was a chance I was going to implode. Or explode. Or whatever came next. Surely, there was nothing else to say.

Dominic cleared his throat. “Ty, make sure you’re doing a good job as her mate and satisfying her needs.”

Shit. Of course, I was wrong. He had more to say.

I glanced at Ty out of the corner of my eye. His face wasn’t in the least bit red. It was as though he was used to having these kinds of conversations with his father. And maybe he was, but I wasn’t. A sly grin spread across his smug face, and he had the audacity to wink at me. I was sure he was getting a big kick out of his father’s speech, but I wasn’t, and it irked me that he was taking my discomfort so lightly. I wanted to crawl out of my damn skin.

My cheeks had to be a bright shade of crimson, and I was grateful for the dimly lit room. It hid my embarrassment somewhat, but it did nothing to ease the agony I was feeling in my core.

Thankfully, Dominic finally finished his sex sermon, and we were able to move along with our conversation about Castro.

Dominic turned and tossed my medical records into the crackling fire burning in the fireplace behind his desk. “Castro is now the only one with access to your information. That is if he really has deleted your files.”

While I was certain I had no reason to believe a single word Castro said, I also felt he was telling the truth. Positive of it. I wrung my hands. “He has a sick obsession with me, so when he says he doesn’t want me to be harmed, he means it. I don’t think he’ll use the information and risk causing a frenzy where I’m concerned.”

Ty nodded and pursed his lips. “She’s right. He may lie to us about other things, but he’ll never make a move to hurt Liza. That’s a guarantee.”

“That’s a comfort, then, and thank goodness for it.” Dominic returned to his chair while Ty and I slumped onto the floor, our backs resting against the wall.

He held my hand and gently caressed my finger with his thumb. Every touch soothed me.

Dominic tapped a pen against his desk. “I don’t think he’ll risk releasing the information, either. But that leads me to wonder about his next move. Why’d he show his hand by letting us know he had the information.” He paused for a moment, sat back, and stared up at the ceiling. “If he’s not going to hurt you personally, he’s coming after the Keller name... and he’s a smart son of a bitch.”

“I’m not underestimating him, if that’s what you’re concerned about.” In all honesty, I didn’t know why Dominic was worried. Though, I was worried when he lowered his head to stare into my eyes if he was going to bring up my sexual urges again.

“Liza, I don’t want to scare you, but I’m going to be very honest with you. There are still plenty of those who believe in omegas and their abilities. They’d pay any price to get their hands on one.” He sighed. “If that information gets out, it opens you up to great danger.” He paused. Amended. “Greater danger.”

I nodded. “Yes, I know.” The thoughts had been tickling the back of my mind, but hearing him say the words brought them into the light.

More danger. Great.

“Now, I don’t know whether the myths are true, and I’m certainly not going to further embarrass you with a line of questioning into the various areas of... development...” *Oh, thank goodness for that.* “Quite frankly, it’s not important. I just want you to know that your secret is safe, and you’ll always be protected by the Kellers.”

A gentle knock at the door broke the heartfelt moment. A second later, Ty’s mother walked in. “I’m sorry to interrupt.” Persephone glanced at me with a sad expression. No, it wasn’t sadness. It looked more like guilt.

I hadn’t talked with Ty about his mother and how much she knew about everything that was happening, but Dominic was her mate, so I assumed she knew about it all, including this last bit of information about me being an omega. The guilty look on her face said as much.

I didn't need her pity or for her to feel sorry for me. She probably carried a heavy burden knowing about her husband's actions in the past, so perhaps I should have felt sorry for her. In part, everything he'd done had led us to this very uncomfortable moment. Sure, Dominic had no control over Castro, but his war with my pack and his slaughtering of my people had fueled the flame that burned within Castro. They were his people, too. His family. His friends. And for a man and his wolf, that justified being pissed off enough to prove dangerous to those he blamed—those responsible.

Ty stood and helped me to my feet. "We're going to head out now." He crossed the room and patted his dad on the shoulder. "Thank you for being understanding, even if you had to find out the hard way."

Dominic looked almost vulnerable as he stood and gripped Ty's shoulders. "I'm your father, Ty. I'll always look out for you. Now it's clear Liza will be your mate, that extends to her, as well." He looked at me and winked, although I was having a hard time understanding how to be normal with the man who'd decimated my pack. My family.

I focused on Ty and the smile that made me melt inside instead. Here was Dominic, the feared leader of the pack, admitting that he did actually care about something other than dominance. At that moment, he wasn't just a powerful alpha wolf but also a father who wanted his son to find happiness with someone he trusted. It brought tears to my eyes and made me feel like part of the Keller family.

Ty kissed his mother on the cheek as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, returning a kiss on his forehead.

"You ready?" he asked as he took my hand. I nodded, and Ty led me down the stairs.

On the way out, I took note of the multiple house staff. They all seemed indifferent as we moved from Dominic's office to the front entrance.

Once we made it outside and shut the door behind us, I whispered, "Do you think they heard about my... identity?"

Ty seemed oblivious. “Who are *they*?”

“The staff. Do they ever listen to conversations happening in your dad’s office?”

He tilted his head back, and a loud laugh escaped his throat. “No way. These people have been with my family for many, many years. They go through an extensive vetting process before being offered a job, and they also sign multiple non-disclosure agreements. We’ve never had an issue. I’d trust them with my deepest, darkest secrets, though I highly doubt they’d eavesdrop on our conversations, anyway. They’re good people.” It was a relief that he trusted them with his secrets, but this was my secret, and I’d learned a long time ago about the dangers of trusting people.

Still, I sighed with relief, hoping Ty wasn’t being fooled by his staff. If one of them heard that I was an omega, it was highly unlikely they’d keep that kind of information to themselves. Of course, there was a chance I was wrong. I hoped I was.

It wasn’t until we reached my car that Ty started to laugh again.

“What? Do I have food stuck in my teeth?” I flashed him a brief view of them.

He gasped for air as he clutched his stomach with one hand and braced the other on the hood of my car. “Can we talk about how awkward that was in Dad’s office?”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” And there wasn’t a truthier truth than that. But since that was what he was referring to, I guessed we would be having that chat. A smile slowly spread across my face and eventually evolved into a full-blown laughing fit. “I never expected to get a sex talk from the alpha of our pack. It was quite unbelievable.”

We laughed as I climbed into my car. Ty leaned in through the window. “I’m so happy you’re my mate. I wouldn’t want my dad doling out sex advice about anyone but you.” As he cupped my cheek, his smile went naughty. “On another note, I’m going to take Dad’s suggestions to heart.”

My cheeks heated up again, and I smiled shyly while trying not to blush. “Yeah, yeah. Now, go on before I pull you in here with me.”

He winked and smiled his million-dollar smile. “Promise to call as soon as you get home. I’ll pick up some food and be there in about an hour. I have to run back to the office and grab some paperwork I forgot.”

He turned to walk away, but I grabbed his wrist and lowered my voice. “Ty? We’re not worried about this omega information getting out, right?”

His smile faded. “Nah. I mean, we’re still concerned about Castro, but not about the omega business. He’s too obsessed with you to try and harm you or put you in harm’s way. Announcing to the world that you’re an omega would do exactly that.”

I tried to convince myself that it was true, considering that had been my argument in Dominic’s office. As I drove home, though, I kept remembering my nightmares and envisioned Castro turning his gun on me.

He wouldn’t do that since he wanted me to be his mate, though. Right?

Chapter 5

Ty

The past week had been a blur as I put all of my efforts into maintaining a positive work relationship with our suppliers and business partners. It was my attempt to squelch any nasty rumors that I wasn't on top of my game. And there were sure to be rumors. Especially these days.

Liza and I seemed to miss each other all the time. I came in late and slept at her place, but she was already asleep because she had early commitments with her clients.

Additional business meetings had popped up out of town, and I hoped to build connections with the surrounding alphas in our state. Since I'd soon be taking over the Keller pack, it was important for the other alphas to respect me and accept me into their inner circle. I had to become one of them, and now was the time to start.

The meetings went well, and though I enjoyed visiting the other packs and seeing how they ran their packs, I missed Liza. There was always a part of me that couldn't focus because I spent so much time worrying about her. I constantly checked in with our security team, ensuring that they had eyes on her at all times, but not talking to her and spending time with her was taking a mental toll on me. I *really* missed her.

When I slept at her place, she didn't startle awake from her nightmares. In fact, she seemed to sleep peacefully. I hoped that whatever had been haunting her dreams had stopped for good.

By the time I woke in the mornings, Liza was already gone, and I was left to battle with my thoughts about Castro and what his next move might be. The world couldn't stop spinning just because we'd received threats from an outside source, but the idea of Liza being in danger kept me on edge.

After not saying much more than hello and goodbye to Liza all week, I decided to take her out on a date. I didn't want another day to pass without spending quality time with her. Liza deserved to be spoiled, so I called and made reservations at the upscale steakhouse downtown.

The place was normally packed on a Friday night, but due to my stature as the future alpha, my request for a table took priority. I didn't normally toss around the Keller name for special treatment, but tonight was important, and I gladly told the hostess who I was and asked her to save my favorite table near the window that overlooked the river.

At five thirty, Liza walked through the door and stopped in her tracks without setting her purse down or taking off her shoes. A slow smile spread across her face as she cocked her head. "You're here? I thought you'd be in late again."

"Surprise!" I threw up my hands in such a cheesy way that I immediately regretted it, but Liza giggled, and the sound spread warmth through me. I gestured toward the bedroom. "More surprises await you, my dear."

Liza raised her eyebrows, but her smile never wavered.. "Oh, really. Should I be scared?"

I shook my head. "Nope. Follow me." I held out my hand and waited for her to set her things on the bench inside her door before she laced our fingers together.

I led her to the bedroom and pointed to the bed, where I'd laid out a new black dress on the comforter. It was one of those thin strapped deals with a low neckline that was shaped like a heart, and a short skirt that should hit her around mid-thigh. Sequins and black pearls adorned the neckline.

Liza scooped it up and held it in front of her body, admiring her reflection in the dresser mirror. "Ty, this is

gorgeous.”

“But wait.” I held up a finger. “There’s more.” I walked to her closet and opened the door. Inside was a black shoe box tied closed with a red velvet bow on top. She cocked her head and walked slowly to the box, as if she was savoring the moment. Or maybe that was me. It didn’t matter. She made a slow production of untying the bow, then laid it open when she simply could have slid it over the top. Everything this woman did was so damn sexy.

She pulled apart the tissue paper, and her mouth opened. “Holy shit. Are these what I think they are?”

I eyed the red soles of the black stilettos. “Nothing but the best for my queen.”

“Ty, you really shouldn’t have.” As she playfully scolded me for spending so much money, she slipped her feet into the shoes. “These are amazing.” And a perfect fit.

“But wait.” From my pocket, I pulled a black, two-by-two square box with a silver bow glued to the top. Instead of smiling, she chewed her lower lip. “There’s more.”

She eyed the box, and her smile spread as I removed the lid and pulled a dainty gold chain from the white, satin cushion. I held it up to the light. A small, circular diamond pendant hung from the chain.

“Oh, Ty. It’s beautiful.” She reached out to touch it but withdrew her hand. Instead of turning so I could fasten it around her, she shook her head. “I can’t accept that. It’s too expensive, Ty.”

“You can and you will.” I moved forward and clasped it around her elegant neck. “Can’t you let a guy spoil his mate?”

She smiled and turned to face me. “What’s all this for? You know I can’t wear any of this to work.”

“I’m taking you out. On a date. Just you and me with no interruptions, no out-of-town business meetings, and you certainly won’t be doing the cooking. How does steak sound?” She was a woman after my heart. Not one of those tofu and hummus kinds of girls, and thank goodness for that.

“Delicious.” She giggled with excitement and took her new dress into the bathroom to get ready.

When we walked into the restaurant, all heads turned to see Liza. Any other woman could spend a million dollars to look good and not be one tenth as beautiful as Liza, and I was so proud to have her on my arm. Not just because she was drop-dead gorgeous, but because she was everything I ever wanted and more in a mate.

Her hot ass didn't hurt, either.

I'd ordered earlier in the day, so we received our food quickly. Presumably because the owner and staff wanted to impress the next alpha. Liza and I took our time eating and staring out over the dark, running waters of the river.

“I missed you so much this week.” I reached across the table and twined my fingers through hers, stroking her palm with my thumb. Sometimes, I just needed to touch her. “I don't like not getting to debrief you on my days and not hearing about all the ins and outs and ups and downs of your catering business. How was your week?”

Liza swallowed her food and took a sip of wine. “I didn't especially enjoy slipping out of the house before you were awake. It wasn't fun for me.” Her smile was everything I needed after my long week. “Honestly, it was a busy week, which kept my mind off you-know-who.” I certainly didn't have to guess who that was. “I have a few new clients who seem nice enough.” She squeezed my hand. “What about you? How did all your meetings go?”

I shrugged. I didn't really want to talk about the meeting, but what I wanted to talk about wasn't necessarily appropriate for a restaurant. “As well as it could have. I'm happy to report that the alphas I met up with weren't total bastards, so that's a plus.”

Laughing, we looked at the dessert menu the waitress dropped by our table, finally deciding to split a slice of cheesecake drizzled with a silky, strawberry sauce.

Liza's bare foot brushed against mine, sending shockwaves up my leg and directly to my dick. She glanced up at me with a longing that I recognized in a split second.

By the time our dessert arrived, we'd eye-fucked each other, scooted our chairs closer together, and kissed twice. It took every ounce of restraint I had not to join her on the opposite side of the table so I could run my hands over her deliciously perfect body. I watched as she slowly bit into the strawberry that garnished the top of our cheesecake, her eyes rolling back in pleasure.

I leaned forward and whispered, "It's a good thing we're out in public or you would be naked on this table, and I would be licking cheesecake from your nipples."

Liza laughed, and her cheeks turned a light shade of pink. "You're the future alpha. Tell these people to leave." She dipped her finger in the whipped cream and slowly inserted it into her mouth, her lips encircling her finger as she closed her mouth and moaned so softly that I barely heard her. But I *heard* her. My cock strained against my pants.

Fuck. My dick was hard enough to cut glass as I imagined it taking the place of her finger.

I drove home fast as I caressed Liza as best I could while paying attention to the road. Heat emanated from her, her pheromones filling the car. I needed her. Now.

The second we reached Liza's front porch, I swung her up into my arms, crushing her against my chest as I devoured her mouth. She moaned and tightened her grip around my neck, twisting to press her breasts into my chest. I set her down, though I would rather have held on to her, pressed her against the wall, and thrust into her until she cried out my name in pleasure.

Instead, I fumbled with my house key, trying to open the door without ruining the moment. "Shit." I pulled away and spent the next fifteen seconds trying to get us through the door.

Finally, she laid her hand over mine and stilled my trembling fingers. "Here, let me." Liza took the key from my

hand. A second later, she pushed the door open, then looked up at me and smiled. “Shall we?”

She certainly didn't have to tell me twice. I slammed the door behind me, and then we were all over each other. Liza kicked her shoes off and stepped in front of me, her hands sliding up my chest, then back down and back up again. Without the heels, she was a good four inches shorter, so I had to lean down to bite her lower lip gently.

A low growl escaped her throat, and my wolf reacted with a reply of his own. I scooped her back into my arms and carried her to the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind me.

“I need to be inside of you,” I whispered into her ear, nipping at the lobe as she raked her hands down my back.

Liza understood my urgency, possibly shared it, so instead of walking toward the bed once I set her on her feet, she turned and faced the wall. “I want you to fuck me right here. Right now.” Something in her voice made my body vibrate with need and made my cock swell until it was almost painful with pent-up desire and want.

She inched her dress up her legs and over her ass, leaned forward, pressed her hands flat against the wall, tilted her head back, and gave a slight tip of her hips, allowing me to see a glimpse of that sexy, black lacy thong.

Holy fuck. The sight was too hot for me to keep my wits about me, but I didn't need fucking wits for what I was about to do.

I pulled my shirt off and tossed it behind me as I walked toward her, kicking my shoes away in the process. Once I reached her, I pressed my body against hers, hard and hot, ready to push inside of her. I put my hands over hers and used my hips to show her how much I wanted her. My cock was hot and hard against her ass.

“Your dick's so fucking perfect,” she whispered breathlessly. “Come on, baby, touch me.”

“As you wish.” I rubbed my hands down her arms to her shoulders, then along her collarbone until I found her perfect

breasts. Even with a bra and the dress on, I could still feel her hard nipples begging for my attention.

My hands skimmed down her stomach and only stopped over her center for half a second, which was long enough for her to arch her back and moan.

“Not yet,” I growled as I grabbed the bottom of her dress and pulled it over her head. My mouth found the side of her neck—the soft spot just above her collarbone. My tongue traced a line up to her ear where I nibbled and kissed. She writhed as I grounded my hips into her ass, and my cock twitched against her soft flesh. I was driving both of us crazy.

Once more, I slid my hands up, pulled the cups of her bra down and curled my fingers around her heavy tits, toying gently with her nipples.

Her head rolled back against my chest. “Oh, yes. Yes, please. Touch me.” She took one of my hands and pulled it down to her thong, which was soaked with her juices. “Here.” Liza’s voice was almost a whimper, so I gave her what she wanted.

I reached down the front of her panties and, using only my middle finger, slowly slid up and down the length of her clit. “Is this what you want?”

“Mm-hmmm.” I couldn’t see her face, but I knew her eyes were closed and her mouth was agape, then I remembered her teasing me with the whipped cream. “I’d like something, too.”

I kept my hand on her wet core and spun her around to face me with the other hand. I didn’t have to ask because Liza went straight for my zipper, quickly pulling my pants and underwear down, freeing my stone-hard cock. She wrapped both hands around it and slowly moved up and down.

I moaned as she moved her hands quicker and squeezed slightly.

To her surprise, I pulled my hand from her panties. She stared at me with wild eyes as I stuck my finger in my mouth, moaning at her taste.

“This isn’t good enough. I need you to be a good girl and remove your bra and thong.”

Liza did as I said. “Yes, sir.”

The words sent a spear of heat right to my cock. While she stripped, I did the same. As soon as we were both naked, I turned her around again and pushed her against the wall. I opened my legs into a wide stance, fitting myself perfectly between her thighs.

My heart pounded as my cock dripped, ready to shove every inch into her soaking wet pussy. I found her breasts again and flicked her nipples, cupping her breasts and sucking on her ear. Both hands stroked down her stomach, and I slid three fingers inside her. She exhaled sharply when I twisted and curled my fingers against the soft upper wall of her pussy, and I knew I’d hit the magical spot.

I thrust my fingers in and out of her, enjoying every sweet sound coming from her mouth. My other hand circled her clit, moving slowly at first and then faster as her juices made everything slick and smooth. “Sweet fuck, I can’t get enough of you.”

I moved my hips slightly as I stood up straighter. Removing my hand from her clit and grasping her inner thigh, I opened her legs wider as I placed my cock at her opening. Teasing her, I barely let the tip enter her as my hand returned to her clit.

Her body vibrated with anticipation as I took two fingers and slid them on either side of her clit. At the same time, I slammed into her.

Liza screamed.

“Don’t move, baby. Let me take care of you,” I said as circled her clit.

She lifted her hands and slapped her palms onto the wall in full surrender as I thrust harder and deeper.

“Don’t stop!” she screamed. I released her clit, and with both hands, I lifted her higher onto the wall, allowing the weight of her body to come crashing down onto me. With one

final thrust, I reached around and pinched her clit, which sent her into convulsions as her inner muscles clamped down around my cock.

“Fuck, Liza,” I groaned as I spent myself inside her. We slowly slid down the wall and into a sweaty heap on the floor. It was the first time either of us came tonight, but it wouldn’t be the last. Not by a long shot. We didn’t sleep much at all, and it was a sweet exhaustion that came for me when it finally did.

The next morning, while we were having breakfast, my phone rang.

I looked from the screen to Liza. “I’m sorry. Do you mind if I take this?” She looked like a walking wet dream with her sex-mussed hair and makeup-free face. “It’s Dad.”

She waved her hand and smiled. “No problem.”

I slid my finger across the screen and put the phone to my ear. “Hey, Dad. What’s up?” I never knew which type of call I was going to be getting from him, but I hoped he had some news.

He sighed into the phone. “Ty, I need you to come to the estate.” And like he thought I wasn’t about halfway out the door, he added, “Now. We’ve located Sylas.”

“Be right there.” Fuck, yeah. I hung up the phone. “Sounds like they’ve located the coroner. Do you want to come with me?”

Liza glanced up at me. “I already promised my parents I’d spend the day with them.” She stood and poured herself another cup of coffee. “They’re so worried about me that I think some actual face time would do them good.”

Although my father had said he needed me to get there now, I couldn’t leave the mess for Liza. I helped her clean up the breakfast clutter, then we left in our respective cars. I followed Liza to her parents’ house and watched until she was safely inside.

Dad was in his office, typing madly on his computer when I arrived at the estate. Whoever was on the receiving end of his

email was in for a long read. “Come on in, Ty. Have a seat.”

I closed the door behind me. “What did you find out? Where’s Sylas?”

Dad tilted his head up and looked at me. “It turns out that we were right about our suspicions concerning Sylas’s gambling addiction. Liza’s father’s tip panned out. Sylas is in Loveska.” He typed a few more lines before turning his attention back to me. “The alpha there, Hiram, called to let me know that he found our missing person.”

I found the phrasing interesting. “Missing person?”

My father was a man who could bend the truth without breaking it and making whomever he was speaking to glad he did. I was familiar with his ways. “As soon as I realized it wouldn’t be easy to hunt Sylas down, I reached out to the surrounding areas to alert them that a traitor may be on their land and to report back if he was found.” He shook his head and snarled. “Out of all the alphas, Hiram’s the one I hate working with the most.” His scoff was one of disbelief. “So, of course, he’s the one who found Sylas.”

“What does Hiram want in exchange for Sylas?” Because he would want something. Hiram was a bastard who did nothing out of courtesy to others. I shifted in my seat. “I’m assuming he’s not just going to hand him over for free.”

“He hasn’t yet specified.” My father was aware Hiram’s price would be steep. “All he said was that he wanted to meet with us, which is exactly what we’re about to do.” Dad stood and gathered his files, pushing them and his laptop into his briefcase.

I hadn’t expected a three-hour drive to Loveska, so I called Liza as we walked to the car. “Hey. It looks like we’re going to Loveska, and I don’t know how long I’ll be away.” I didn’t have to tell her to be careful, that I wanted her to stay with her parents, and that I would worry until I saw her again. She already knew.

“What? Why?” Her voice was pitched higher than normal, and I could hear her parents talking in the background. I

regretted, for their part, that Liza sounded panicked. It would only freak them out even more.

“Listen, there’s nothing to worry about. The alpha in Loveska has Sylas and wants to meet with us before he hands him over.” I buckled my seatbelt and switched the phone call to Bluetooth, although perhaps since I was riding with my father, I should have kept the conversation on the cell for privacy’s sake. “It’s the way this guy works. Kind of like a tit for tat situation.”

“I see. Please be safe, Ty.” Liza paused for a few seconds, and I could almost feel her angst through the phone. “Will you keep me updated?”

“Of course. Promise me that you’ll stay with your parents until I get back.” I couldn’t worry about her and be the future alpha my father needed to accompany him.

“I will. And you promise me that you’ll be careful.” Her voice was almost stern. For the briefest of seconds, I could imagine her using that same tone with our children.

“Yes. I’ll be careful, and I’ll be back as soon as possible.” If I had anything to say about it, we would be back by this evening.

I ended the call, and my father and I made the long drive to Loveska, arriving at Hiram’s office in the early afternoon. For a Saturday, there were a lot of cars in the parking lot, which I found odd.

The receptionist at the front desk led us to Hiram’s office. It was empty except for the rather large alpha who sat behind his desk with a cigar dangling between his lips as a slim line of smoke drifted upward into the air. There was no sign of Sylas, and I couldn’t help but wonder if we were being set up.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the heads of the Keller clan.” Hiram laughed and coughed at the same time. If his lungs were as black as they sounded, perhaps we wouldn’t have to deal with him any longer. “I hear you were betrayed by one of your own. I’m lucky enough to have a pack that fears me too much to ever betray me.”

It was official: I didn't like the snarky, cocky bastard.

"Dominic, how did you become such a soft ruler?"

In my head, all I could see were the dozens of people slaughtered at the hands of my father. Hiram had no idea of the brutality Dominic Keller was capable of. My father had it in him to take down an entire pack, but I was grateful that he'd grown to be a much more subdued alpha.

Dad took a seat across from Hiram, and I followed suit. "Cut the bullshit, Hiram. What do you want in exchange for Sylas?"

Hiram slowly sat back in his chair, his hands resting behind his head, and his cigar hanging out the side of his mouth. "Me? I don't want anything except to know what Sylas did that was so terrible he had to run to the most sinful city in the state of Texas to escape it."

Dad cleared his throat. "Sylas falsified documents of the deceased."

Hiram grabbed his cigar. "Interesting. What do you mean?"

"You know." Dad waved his hand in the air nonchalantly. "He falsified the causes of death that aren't covered under insurance policies. A lot of our pack members have been suffering because of it."

Hiram whistled low. "That is pretty devious, but what would Sylas gain by doing that?"

My mind raced. How was Dad going to get out of Hiram's line of questioning without telling him about Castro? As upcoming alpha, I had to think quickly on my feet, so I spoke up before Dad had a chance to respond. "He was cutting deals under the table with a life insurance broker who we already have in custody."

Hiram placed his cigar in a large ashtray and leaned his flabby arms on his desk. "I was hoping for something much juicier."

This asshole rubbed me the wrong way. I glanced at my watch, anxious to take Sylas and get the hell out of there.

After a few moments of quiet deliberation, Hiram finally nodded and waved his hand in the air. Within seconds, a large man burst into the room, dragging a very drunk-looking Sylas along with him.

Hiram held up two fingers only one inch apart. “We were this close to killing this man for harassing my members. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but whatever money he was getting from that insurance broker is long gone. Sylas has been gambling his life away in one of my underground casinos and causing trouble, since he’s a broke motherfucker.” Hiram stood and gave us a pointed look. “I expect payment for my losses.”

Dad stood and nodded. “Send me the bill. I’ll handle it.”

The large man, who I assumed was one of Hiram’s bodyguards, dumped Sylas onto the floor. Dad and I scooped him up and carried him to the car to drive him home, sober him up, and get some fucking answers.

Chapter 6

Liza

I'd spent all of Saturday with my parents, looking at old photographs and playing more games of rummy than a girl should have to endure in one lifetime. Mom, who had no rest in her bones, insisted that I work in the garden with her, like "the good old days." I helped her weed and prune her plants, eventually making my way inside to watch a late afternoon football game with Dad.

Even though I was a grown woman, there was something nostalgic and comforting about coming home to the house I'd grown up in and spending quality time with my precious parents.

When I was with them, I could be myself without worrying about having to impress someone. I certainly didn't have to deal with the stares and whispers I so often received in public.

Ever since I'd been announced as Ty's fated mate, I'd received mixed responses from the general public. Some people were generally excited for me, others were jealous. Some even believed that I wasn't good enough to mate with the upcoming alpha of the Keller pack—not that their opinion mattered when fate was involved.

Most of the time, their comments and stares didn't bother me. It was only once I was in the solace of my childhood home that I realized how much of a break I needed from it all.

Every now and then, I caught a glimpse of the security guard making his rounds in front of the house, which snapped

me back to reality. The truth was hard to swallow, but it was the truth, no less: Castro was coming for me.

As the sun set, I stopped looking at my phone for an update from Ty. I was tempted to text him, but I didn't want to interrupt. For all I knew, he and his dad were still in Loveska, deep in negotiations with the alpha who had Sylas.

I was more than a little worried that Ty had found himself in the middle of a bad situation, but instead of panicking, I had every confidence in Ty and his family. Someone from the Keller Estate would contact me if the meeting had gone sour.

My eyes burned from exhaustion, and as my parents watched the latest episode of some medical show they loved, I caught myself drifting off on the sofa a few times. It wasn't long after that I finally gave up and trudged off to my childhood bedroom. With my phone next to my pillow, I curled up on the twin bed and fell asleep without having to count sheep.

I woke with a start. It was still dark out, and I immediately grasped for my phone to see if Ty had called or texted. He hadn't, so I took a minute to fully wake up before gathering my things and quietly slipping out the front door and into the dark. As long as they didn't hear me, my parents would be asleep for at least another two or three hours.

I wasn't accustomed to being up that early, so it felt as though I was doing something criminal—if not criminal, then definitely unwise—as I tiptoed to my car. Even though the sun was about to rise, it seemed the entire neighborhood was asleep.

Yes, I'd promised Ty that I'd stay with my parents until he returned, but I'd expected that to be several hours prior to the sunrise. I wanted to take a shower in my own place with my own belongings. Since I hadn't heard from him, my anxiety over Ty's wellbeing grew exponentially, and it wasn't any great hardship to try to justify my decision to break our promise.

On the drive home, I kept a close eye on the rearview mirror, making certain no one was following me. Of course,

the security guard who had been posted right outside my parents' house stayed close to the point of tailgating, but one could never be too cautious... especially when it came to Castro.

I tried to recall my dream from the night before, but it was hazy, and no matter how hard I tried to concentrate, I couldn't remember what it had been about. That was the thing about dreams, they were so fleeting. The more I tried to remember, the farther away the memory fled.

Regardless, it hadn't been a horrible, earth-shattering nightmare, so I decided to take it as a sign from the universe that everything would be okay, and Ty would return safely. He had to. I needed him too much.

I was also just relieved that my dream wasn't another nightmare because my stress level was already at its peak. I didn't know how much more anxiety it would take before I had a complete nervous breakdown, and I didn't want to know. Omega or not, I had my limits.

My house was quiet and dark. I disarmed the alarm, then punched the small circular buttons to re-activate it once the door was locked behind me.

Since all this started and Ty had worked with me, I'd learned how to quickly analyze my surroundings, so I slowly moved through the house, listening and watching for any signs of an intruder. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror that I used to check my outfits in the bedroom, and it was enough to make me realize how silly I looked. The security guard had already swept the house while I disarmed the alarm system, but one could never be too careful. Not when Castro was in the equation.

I walked to the bedroom and tossed my bag on the bed before stripping off my clothes and walking into the shower. When I glanced down at my hands, I gasped, mortified. I still had dirt under my fingernails from gardening the day before.

As hot water cascaded down my skin, I silently pushed positive thoughts and energy out into the universe. Ty *was* okay. He had to be.

I forced my thoughts to the week ahead. My calendar was full of old and new clients who wanted to take advantage of my meal-planning services. I had no large events scheduled, yet, but the calls had already started coming in at the office from well-to-do socialites who wanted to get on my calendar before I was fully booked for the upcoming season. There would be many a brunch and luncheon to cater. I was thankful.

I was so lost in thought with my eyes closed and the steaming water pelting me in the face, that I didn't hear someone enter the house, nor did I notice when the bathroom door opened and shut. A cold draft from the opened shower door snapped me out of my train of thought as I turned in time to see a hand reach around my neck.

“Fuck!” I screamed, turning with both hands raised, ready to fight—to shift if I had to—for my life.

Ty covered his face and broke into a fit of laughter. “Liza, I'm so sorry for scaring you, but you should've seen your face.”

I punched him in the shoulder because it was a dick move to scare me when I had so much on my mind already and so many fears near to being realized. “Why didn't you say my name or something? I thought you were Castro. It's not funny.”

He forced a straight face, but I could tell he was choking back another chuckle. “You're right. In my defense, though, I thought you'd hear me coming in.”

“Well, you were wrong.” I crossed my arms over my naked breasts and glared at him. He'd pissed me off, so he didn't get a free view of the goods. “Why didn't you call or text? I've been worried to death, thinking you'd gotten mixed up with all the criminals in Loveska.”

“I'm sorry I left you hanging like that, baby.” He lowered his eyes, appropriately contrite—or at least smart enough to look it. “The talks took longer than expected and it was a much later night than I had originally planned. I didn't want to wake you.” He studied my face, which I was sure still looked like I'd eaten something sour. “Is it any consolation that I

drove straight to your parents' house once I woke up only to find out that you'd already left?"

No, it wasn't any consolation whatsoever. I turned around and finished rinsing my hair, pretending he hadn't just opened the door to chewing me out for leaving before he arrived and breaking my promise.

"Liza, I thought we agreed that you'd stay put until I came back." There was nothing stern in his voice, but trust was probably going to be a problem next time he asked me to promise.

I sighed. He had a point, but I had one to make, too. "Yeah, that was before you stopped communicating with me and I was about to crawl out of my skin from worrying about you." I shrugged. "Besides, your security guard followed me home, and I set the alarm. Everything's fine."

"Is it fine?" His brow creased. "And how do you know for sure? I don't like you being home alone for long periods of time." First, it wasn't a long period, and wouldn't be because I had to go to work.

"Then, you have nothing to concern yourself with because I've only been home for twenty minutes or so." I grinned, showing him I wasn't upset, even though he'd just scared the shit out of me.

He nodded and pulled me into his muscular arms, smooshing my breasts against his ribcage. Every cell in my body immediately relaxed, the tension leaving my shoulders as I wrapped my arms around his rock-hard torso. His half-erect cock brushed against my stomach, and my nipples stood at attention as my core began to tingle.

I closed my eyes and tried to rein in the lust. We'd just fucked each other's brains out a little over twenty-four hours ago. Surely, I wasn't so desperate and needy that I couldn't control myself long enough to get cleaned up and ready for the day.

Ty caught my eye and smirked. "You know you don't have to suppress all those sexual urges of yours with me. If you

need to use me, I'm more than happy to oblige." The conversation that never should have been came flooding back to my mind.

I swatted at his chest and giggled, though my skin was hot enough to bake cookies, and not from the temperature of the water. "Behave."

He smirked and bent his head to kiss me softly, but with all the passion of a night spent apart. His tongue barely lapped at my front teeth, and I pulled away as the water turned cooler against my back. "We'd better get clean before we end up taking an ice bath."

We quickly washed—well, maybe not quickly—then toweled off and got dressed, which gave me time to calm my hormones. As much as I wanted Ty inside me, I was eager to hear about Sylas.

I scrambled some eggs and fried half a package of bacon while Ty made coffee. Before I took a bite of my breakfast, I raised an eyebrow because he hadn't spoken much since he'd been back. Not about anything important, anyway. "So, are you going to tell me what happened in Loveska?"

Ty shoved a forkful of eggs into his mouth and chewed slowly. I wasn't certain he was going to answer, but he swallowed and said, "It's a long story, but I can tell you that Sylas was safe and sound when we left, although he was barely conscious." He shrugged like it wasn't a big deal.

"Why?" I asked because it was a big deal.

"Apparently, Sylas has spent some time gambling away every cent he got from Castro. When he ran out of money, he got markers from the pit boss and played the poker tables on credit." Ty bit off a piece of bacon and chewed again. "Dad almost let it slip that Castro was involved, but I made up some bullshit story about insurance fraud that Hiram seemed to believe."

"So, he just let you take Sylas? No strings attached or giant payment required? Didn't have to promise him your firstborn son?" No way had it been that easy.

“Not exactly.” He chuckled and shook his head. “Dad had to pay off Sylas’s debts to the casino, the bookies where he started placing bets on horses, and a small fee to Hiram.” He rolled his eyes. “For his inconvenience.”

I sighed in relief and took a sip of my orange juice. “That’s good news,” I said, relieved that the alpha of Loveska truly had had Sylas in his custody and hadn’t been trying to make some power play with the Keller clan. “I wouldn’t put it past anyone in that town to try and take advantage of your family.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ty replied. He took a sip of his coffee, then added, “But it looks like we have Sylas at our disposal.” He smiled and laid his hand over mine. “Which brings me to my next question. Do you want to be there when we question Sylas?”

I hadn’t thought they would give me such an opportunity, but since they were, I nodded without hesitation. “Yes, of course. I certainly don’t want to hear about Castro’s plans thirdhand.” Sylas would already be giving us secondhand info. “That is, if your dad’s okay with me being there.”

Ty nodded as he downed the rest of his coffee in one big swallow. “Absolutely. We discussed it on the way back from Loveska, and it was his idea to ask if you’d like to be there.”

I tried not to be surprised by Dominic’s willingness to involve me in the investigation. After all, he’d assured me multiple times that he wasn’t the same man he’d been when he ordered my pack eliminated. It didn’t erase the fact that he’d given the order, and had probably helped do the job. I couldn’t forgive him for that, but we had to move forward if we were to coexist. Still, I was always taken aback when he extended kindness in my direction. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

After we cleaned the kitchen, Ty drove us to the jail where Sylas was being held. The guards at the front saw us coming and opened the door for Ty, each greeting him with a slight bow of their head and a nod. “This way, sir.”

We followed them down a long corridor and stopped at a room with a pretty basic metal door that opened into another

room. A table stood in the center with several chairs around it and a metal bench against one wall.

Ty stepped into the room first, and I followed. He pointed toward a glass window. “That’s a two-way mirror. Dad and I will be on the other side.”

I stared into the next room where Sylas was brought in and placed in a chair. His hair was disheveled, his clothes wrinkled and crooked, his brow pinched, and his lips pursed. This was a man confused either by his surroundings or what was happening here. He had definitely been on a drinking binge. I couldn’t smell his breath but figured he was still drunk and that was why they hadn’t shackled him to the chair. He wasn’t a physical threat.

“He can’t see you, so don’t worry about that.” Ty gestured to a speaker above the door. “You’ll be able to hear everything.”

I nodded. Instead of taking a seat at the table, I stood at the window and stared at Sylas. What were the chances that he’d be honest with Dominic and Ty?

Dominic stuck his head in the room. “We’re ready.”

Ty nodded and kissed the top of my head before he walked out to join his dad in the room next door.

Sylas stared ahead as if he didn’t notice the presence of his alpha and prince. He didn’t so much as flinch or move, and I wondered if he was physically capable, or if someone had done something to incapacitate him.

Ty and his dad sat across from Sylas and stared at him for a moment.

“Sylas?” When Dominic spoke his name softly, it was as if Sylas was jolted out of some spell.

He sat up, his eyes widening. Gasping, he fell out of his chair and to the floor on his knees. He reached his cuffed hands up to grasp Dominic’s. “Alpha, please forgive me. I swear I never meant for any harm to come to the Keller clan. You have to believe me. Please have mercy on me.”

Apparently, he too was aware of Dominic's penchant to kill or have killed.

Sylas bowed his head, the apologies pouring out of him. Although his words were slurred, it was obvious he'd had time to think about his transgressions. Either that, or he was one hell of a liar, and I couldn't believe that because he was so obviously still drunk.

Ty and Dominic glanced at one another, probably realizing there was no need to question him. Sylas's guilt would speak for itself.

"Castro was bleeding out internally when he was brought to the hospital—that much wasn't a lie. He should've died, quite frankly." I wished Sylas would've minded his own business and let it happen, and I didn't stop wishing even as he continued to speak.

Sylas wiped tears from his face and looked up at Dominic, his gaze not wavering now. "The surgeons operated on him, but not a single one of them was optimistic he would recover. The whole hospital was talking about the man who had been taken down by the hand of the prince." Sylas held up his hand. "No offense to you, Ty, sir. We all heard the story of Castro threatening you and your mate. You did the right thing."

Ty scoffed, and though his back was to me, I could feel his eye roll. "Your approval means more to me than you know, Sylas." And that was sarcasm. "Why don't you tell us the rest of your story."

Sylas bowed his head in what could only have been embarrassment. "Yes, sir." He cleared his throat. "You see, whenever there's a patient nearing death, my office gets a call to prepare us to receive a body. We usually get a couple hours, and that's exactly what happened with Castro... except instead of us going to retrieve his body, that body walked in on its own."

Dominic cocked his head to the side. "What do you mean?"

“Castro recovered from his surgery, but he wanted everyone to believe he was dead, so he snuck out of his room during shift change.” It was the most far-fetched thing I’d ever heard if Castro truly had been so close to death. Wolves healed fast, sure, but it also depended on the severity of the injuries, and I wasn’t certain I was buying it. “He even took the time to change into his normal clothes to avoid catching the attention of the staff.”

“Wait.” Ty leaned forward. “You’re telling me that Castro, who was injured badly enough the doctors didn’t think he was going to make it, walked out of a guarded room and into the morgue without anyone seeing?” Ty wasn’t buying it, either.

“Yes, sir. That’s correct.” Sylas nodded solemnly and held up his hand again. “On my life, sir, that’s exactly how it happened.”

Ty sat back and let out a loud puff of air. “I can’t believe it.” He looked at his father and shook his head. “What can’t that sneaky bastard get away with?”

Dominic waved at Ty to silence him. The drunk in front of them had more to share, and they needed to hear it. “Sylas, continue.”

He nodded. “I had no clue who he was, but when he told me his name, I was shocked at his recovery. He was on my incoming roster. It was only a matter of time. But there he was, standing right in front of me.” He held his hand up in front of his face to show how close Castro had stood to him. “It was truly miraculous.” Sylas seemed to realize that he was still on the floor, so he pushed himself back up into the metal chair. “Castro told me he knew about my debts and that he could help me pay them off... and then some.”

“How did he know your personal business?” Ty asked. Although, since he was gambling in public, it probably would’ve been easy to find out.

“I asked him the same question and he said he had people working for him. He also said he had access to information about everyone in town.”

A chill ran down my spine as I remembered the letter he'd sent to Dominic about me being an omega. I didn't like rogue information any more than I liked rogue wolves spreading it.

Sylas cleared his throat. "He said if I assisted him in faking his death so he could escape free and clear without anyone suspecting anything, he would handle my... situation." Sylas sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face before he looked up at Ty and Dominic again. "I made the biggest mistake of my life when I provided him with a drug that stopped his heart just long enough for him to be declared dead. Once his body was in my possession down in the morgue, I gave him a shot of epinephrine, which returned his heart rate to its normal rhythm. Then I helped him escape via one of the back doors." He sounded as remorseful as he looked. And for his sake, I hoped it was all true.

"That's it?" Dominic asked. "You haven't had contact with him since?"

"Right before he left, he told me to check my bank account. The money had already been deposited. Castro told me that if I knew what was good for me, I'd skip town immediately. So, that's what I did. I haven't heard from him since and have no clue where he is."

"Damn it." Ty stood so quickly his chair crashed to the floor.

"Take it easy, Ty." Dominic leaned forward, folding his hands on the table, speaking in a low, controlled voice. "Sylas, are you sure you have no idea where Castro is? He's causing a lot of grief for our pack, and it's of the utmost importance that we find him."

Sylas shook his head. "I don't know where he's hiding. My business with Castro was finished the moment I helped him fake his death. He'd never contact me again; it'd be too risky." He covered his face with his hands. "I'm so sorry, Dominic. I can't stand to look you in the eye. You'll never know how remorseful I am."

As Sylas sobbed, Ty glanced over his shoulder at the mirror. I knew he couldn't see me, but it still felt as if he was

staring directly into my eyes. He was disappointed. So was I. He turned back to face Sylas. “Is there anything else he might’ve said that could help us find him?”

Sylas took a deep breath and tried to control his sobs. “Castro was pretty fixated on your mate. He mentioned her several times and even went as far as to say that he wouldn’t stop until he got what was his.”

We all knew exactly what that meant. Castro wasn’t going to leave us alone until he had me all to himself. There was no telling what he’d do to get his hands on me and pull me into the sick reality he’d created in his mind where we ruled over some nonexistent pack together, forever.

The reality of it all frightened me more than anything.

Chapter 7

Ty

Dad took out his phone and texted someone while Sylas buried his face in his hands. The guy deserved all the shame and humiliation he felt, and I hoped it resonated in his soul.

But honestly, he had what some might call a disease, and it might not have been his fault. He'd made decisions based on the shitshow that was his life, so what more could the poor bastard say? He'd sold out, given up everything he'd worked for, and all he'd gotten in return was a trip to the police station and a debt to his alpha that would take the rest of his life to repay. He was at the lowest point of his life with his career completely washed down the drain, and Castro was behind it all. Well, except for the parts that Sylas had decided for himself. Hopefully, he would be man enough to own up to his part and not try to blame Castro for his decisions.

Within a few minutes, the Keller family lawyer, dressed in a very official-looking suit, entered the room. "Good afternoon." He nodded toward us and took a seat across from Dad and me. "Sylas, Mr. Keller has filled me in on your situation."

Sylas sat up straight, a look of complete defeat in his eyes. He stared at the table, not allowing himself to make eye contact with our lawyer.

Phil was a tall guy with slicked back hair and a gray, striped suit. His briefcase was monogrammed, and he smelled like money. No way could Sylas afford him without us.

Phil folded his hands in front of him. “I’m here to talk to you about your rights. As I’m sure you know, you have the right to seek out legal counsel if you don’t already have an attorney. In this situation, it would be advised that you speak to someone who can walk you through your options.”

At that last word, Sylas scoffed, threw his head back and laughed for a second before he looked again at Phil. “Options? I may not have a law degree, but I’m fully aware of the damage I’ve caused to our pack and to the Kellers.” At least his remorse was genuine. He wasn’t a good enough or sober enough actor to fake that. “I’ve admitted my wrongs and I’m prepared to face my punishment, whatever that may be.”

I glanced over my shoulder, imagining what Liza was thinking as she watched the conversation with Sylas from the two-way mirror. If I had to guess, based on what I knew and had learned about her since we started seeing each other, she probably felt sorry for him. Sure, he’d caused some serious damage to her by assisting Castro in his escape, and he had put her in an unimaginable amount of danger, but he was obviously regretful. Although, I wondered if he would still be so regretful if we hadn’t found him.

Justice would be served, and Sylas was right. There was no way he would avoid jail time, no matter how open and honest he’d been in his confession. He’d committed fraud for financial gain. It was a felony.

The lawyer leaned forward and placed a hand on Sylas’s shoulder. “I understand you feel guilty about what happened, but you still have rights. You have the right to defend yourself in court and plead your case. You don’t have to face this alone.”

Sylas shook his head, tears welling in his eyes. “I don’t want to fight it. I just want to accept the consequences of my actions.”

Dad cleared his throat. “What kind of punishment is Sylas going to be looking at? Would it be possible to lessen it in exchange for cooperation?”

The lawyer nodded, his expression serious. “It’s possible. Sylas’s cooperation will definitely be taken into consideration during the trial and sentencing. Especially if Castro can be apprehended before Sylas makes it to trial.” That was also assuming Sylas didn’t plead guilty immediately. “However, it’s impossible to say exactly what the punishment will be. It depends on the judge and the specifics of the charges filed against him.”

Sylas wiped his eyes with his sleeve as we stood to leave.

Once we were in the hallway, I turned to face Dad, lowering my voice. “Where will they take him?”

He shrugged. “The jail. They’ll lock him up until we can be available for a formal trial or sentencing.” Dad looked back at the door. “It’s a shame, but he’ll be punished for his crimes against the pack. I might be persuaded to make a case for his cooperation.”

“Don’t forget we had to hunt him down and drag him back.” I scoffed. I was not feeling as merciful as my father. I could forgive Sylas, but he had to do his time for his crimes. Period. “I doubt he would’ve shown up on our doorstep voluntarily vomiting the same information we just received in there.”

“True.” Dad glanced at his watch. “I’m just grateful we got him here without throwing up red flags. With any luck, we’ve managed to keep this business with Castro out of the public eye.”

“For now, at least.” I didn’t want to sound negative, but I also knew the importance of being realistic. “The last thing we want is for people to be worried about a psychopath on the loose and targeting the town.”

“Good point. We’ll have a better chance of cornering Castro if our pack members aren’t running around as if the sky were falling.” Dad walked a few steps in front of me, and I poked my head into the observation room. Liza stood in front of the two-way glass, arms crossed, listening to the lawyer’s conversation with Sylas.

“That was hard to watch.” She crossed the room and wrapped her arms around my waist. “Can we get out of here now?”

I nodded, and we met Dad at the black SUV that had just pulled into the lot at the front of the building to drive us back to the estate.

It was a little too quiet in the car, so I turned to Liza, lowered my voice, and patted her knee. “What’s on your mind?”

She sighed heavily and leaned her head against the headrest. “I wish I could understand how a psychopath’s brain is wired.”

“That seems a little dark.” I gave her my cheeriest smile, trying to lighten the mood because I could see exactly where her mind was heading.

“I just can’t understand how someone could become so fixated on another person that they would commit crimes in order to possess them.” Of course, she was talking about Castro, but I could feel her anguish as if it was my own.

“In a normal situation, I’d agree with you.” I grinned at her again. “But I’m pretty fixated on you, too, so I might be able to understand.”

Liza whipped her head around to face me. “You don’t ever wonder how Castro got to the point of faking his own death in order to claim me?”

“If it were anyone else, I’d be puzzled. But it’s you, Liza.” I wanted to make her feel better. I would have done anything to ease her anxiety. “I can easily see how someone who already had a few screws loose would fixate on you and put all their efforts into making you their own.”

“Are you saying he would have to have a few screws loose? Or that only someone with a few screws loose could fixate on me?” Her eyes flashed as her frown deepened. “Don’t bother,” she said, holding up her hand when I opened my mouth to answer. Probably best if I didn’t speak since she was obviously not flattered by my poor choice of commentary.

She continued the line of thought as if I hadn't spoken at all. "I'm worried more people are going to die because of me."

"Whoa." I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "Let me stop you right there. All of this is one hundred percent Castro's fault. You have nothing to do with the way he is. I won't stand by and let you harbor guilt over something completely beyond your control." I tilted her chin up to look into her eyes. "Do you hear me, Liza? This isn't your fault, and it's not your burden to carry."

Her eyes brimmed with tears, and I hated seeing her so upset. I caught one on the pad of my thumb as it fell. "Just thinking about Castro puts my wolf's back up, and my nightmares match the anxiety I experience every day."

I held my breath. Was she finally going to confide in me? I didn't want to get my hopes up, but I did all the same.

"The nightmares feel so real that it takes me a few minutes to wake up and assess my surroundings. I expect to see Castro looming over me with his weapon of choice, ready to kill me and anyone I've ever loved." Liza inhaled sharply, and her delicate hand went to the base of her throat. Her breaths became a little shallower, and the beat at the pulse point in her throat kicked up a notch.

Recognizing the signs of a panic attack creeping up on her, I rubbed her back soothingly. "Just breathe, Liza. In and out. You're safe. I'm here."

Once her breathing returned to normal, she continued. "In my nightmares, I see Castro standing over my parents. Not my biological parents—my adoptive ones." Chances were, she didn't remember her biological parents well enough to see their faces in her dreams. "He has them bound and gagged, and they stare at me with such expectation in their eyes. They want me to save them, but I can't move." She rubbed her palms on the legs of her jeans. "Castro says he's going to kill them and that he won't let anything stand between the two of us. The scary part is that I believe him. Even when I'm not asleep, I believe it. He's a lunatic, and he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants."

“Damn it.” My stomach twisted. I hated that she had to endure such terrible nightmares, though I knew that her fears were valid, and that Castro was capable of doing heinous things.

“We’ll protect you and your family, Liza. We’ll make sure Castro can’t hurt anyone else again.”

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt because of me.” Liza’s voice was barely above a whisper.

I cupped her face in my hands, forcing her to look at me again. “We’ll do everything in our power to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Dad cleared his throat from the driver’s seat as the car came to a stop. “We’re here.”

He slid out of the SUV, no doubt anxious to be far away from our intense conversation.

“We’ll put security on your parents’ house until we’ve taken care of Castro. It’ll make me feel better about their safety. That is, if it’s all right with you.”

Her demeanor eased as she reached up and kissed me on the cheek. “That would help a lot. Thank you.”

We got out of the car, and I stretched, needing some kind of exercise after sitting all morning. “Dad wants to discuss our next steps. Do you want to join us?”

Liza pulled her phone from her purse. “I appreciate you inviting me and keeping me involved in everything, but I’ve got an important client meeting I really should get to. I almost canceled, but since we finished in time, I’d rather not reschedule.”

I waved one of the security guards over. “Please escort Liza back to her house to change, then follow her to her meeting.”

“Yes, sir.” He stepped back and allowed us a moment of privacy, though none of the guards ever strayed too far.

I snatched Liza by the hips and pulled her closer, closing my eyes and breathing in her delectable scent. She looked up

at me and stood on her toes to meet my mouth for a long kiss.

I didn't want her to leave my sight, but I couldn't keep her locked in a cage like a songbird. "I'll see you later. Call or text if you need anything at all, okay?"

"I will." She followed the guard to a black car parked to the side of the driveway, and I watched until the car vanished from view.

I was worried about her. What I'd said about her not feeling guilty for Castro's actions was the truth, but the shame had been written all over her face when she kissed me goodbye. My words might have soothed her, but she still believed that she was responsible for every wrong move Castro made.

I'd have done anything to take that burden off her. It wasn't her weight to bear, which only fueled the rage burning deep inside me.

That motherfucker had no idea what was coming. He had no right to lay a finger on her, to look at her, to even think about her. Liza was mine, not his.

I was going to make sure he paid for every single thing he had done to Liza, her family, and anyone else he had hurt. I clenched my fists, trying to keep my anger and frustration at bay. It was a good thing Dad and I were discussing our next steps because I was ready to take action.

I needed to do something productive with this energy before it consumed me completely. Revenge consumed my thoughts as I entered the house and headed straight to my father's office, not even looking around for food, even though my stomach was threatening to eat itself.

Dad was already deep in conversation with our pack security team when I walked in. As soon as he saw me, he dismissed them and gestured for me to sit.

He stared at me as he waited for the door to close. "Before we get down to business, there's something I've been wanting to talk to you about all day. It wasn't appropriate to talk about in front of other people."

Shit. What now? My mind went straight to Liza. Lately, all our uncomfortable conversations had something to do with her.

Dad rubbed his chin and nodded, although he hadn't said anything more. "I'm proud of the way you handled the meeting with Hiram yesterday." I'd learned it all from him, but I didn't think he would appreciate the praise. "I didn't bring it up yesterday because things were so hectic, but you really thought on your feet. That's the type of characteristic a father could only hope to see in his son... especially one who's about to take over the position of alpha."

It wasn't often my father heaped on the compliments. As a matter of fact, it happened so seldom, I wasn't sure how to handle it. My whole life, he'd nagged, griped, complained, told me everything I was doing wrong or explained in detail how I could improve in specific areas. Of course, even when I was young, I understood that he wanted me to develop into the type of leader our pack could depend on—a strong leader who made good decisions for the benefit of all, while keeping personal feelings reined in.

Regardless, all this back-patting was new to me. It made my skin heat. "Thanks," was the only response I could come up with.

"Listen, son." Dad stared pointedly at me. "I know you're sick of hearing me say this, but I'm going to need to pass the power of the alpha over to you soon, otherwise, it'll be too late, and it will be gone. So, I need you to seriously consider claiming Liza as soon as possible."

My eyes widened. We'd been over this a hundred times before, and him bringing it up now made his compliments suspect.

Dad raised his hands. "I know the situation with Castro and the overall timing isn't the best, but it needs to be done, regardless."

"I agree, but I'm worried it'll backfire on me." If there was ever a time to be honest about my deepest apprehensions, it was now.

“What do you mean?” Dad raised an eyebrow.

“Castro thinks of Liza as his.” The asshole was gravely mistaken. “If he finds out she’s been claimed, what’s to stop him from retaliating?”

I wasn’t afraid for myself—I could handle whatever he threw at me—but Liza could get caught in the crossfire. He might even go after the pack, and that would be my fault. My selfishness and my hurry.

“I mean, this bastard is bat-shit crazy. I wouldn’t put it past him if he’d hunt Liza down and kill her if I claim her before we’ve dealt with him.”

Dad nodded. “I understand what you’re saying, but claiming her could also keep her safer.”

Well, that certainly wouldn’t help me decide.

I couldn’t help but play Devil’s advocate, considering we weren’t only talking about Liza’s life, but my own, as well. “If something happens to her, our pack will no longer have an alpha. This doesn’t stop with my fated mate and me. Castro’s actions could do irreversible damage to a multitude of people. We can’t make these decisions without thinking it through from every direction and angle.”

“You’re right, Ty. There’s always going to be a risk that something happens to you or, in this case, that something happens to your fated mate. And there are always a thousand reasons not to do something. I understand your hesitancy, but in this case, I’m certain it won’t happen.” He sounded so sure, but I didn’t understand.

He took a sip of water. At least, I assumed the clear liquid in his glass was water. After the week we’d had, I wouldn’t have judged him if he chugged down vodka.

I wondered at what point in his life he’d become so confident. Though he was stewing and contemplative below the surface, to the average person, he looked like he had his shit together.

I sure as hell wasn’t at that level, yet. “What makes you so sure that something won’t happen to Liza or me once I’ve

claimed her?”

“Simple.” Dad put the glass down and smirked. “If Castro leaks the truth about Liza out of anger, she’ll already be a claimed *omega*. Anyone with common sense knows what it means to go after an alpha’s mate, let alone his *omega* mate. Even if the stories are completely fabricated and myths, that’s a crime punishable by death.”

I nodded slowly. It wasn’t a foolproof solution, but it made sense. “I’ll talk to Liza about it and see if she’s comfortable with the idea.”

I didn’t need convincing to mate with Liza, but I wanted—no, I *needed* her to want it as much as I did. If we mated and I died, then I’d be stealing the rest of her life from her. She’d die shortly after me, if not right along with me. I didn’t want that for her.

Dad interrupted my train of thought. “It’s unfortunate that Sylas doesn’t know where Castro is hiding. We’ll have to take matters into our own hands again.”

“Have we hit a wall already? Surely Nico and his team can find a trail that leads to Castro.” How could one man slip past an entire pack without being seen? Someone out there must have laid eyes on him.

“I’m going to put feelers out to the packs I have the most trust with. Of course, I won’t give full details about Castro. Just enough for them to think he’s in danger. If they see him or catch wind of his whereabouts, we’ll be the first to know.”

“Genius.” I pulled my phone from my pocket and sent a quick text to Liza, letting her know I’d head straight to her place after Dad and I finished up.

“Here’s a quick alpha lesson for you, Ty.” Dad pushed up from his chair and walked to the window. “It’s always best to keep things close to the vest, even with those you trust. You never know where people’s loyalties truly lie in the grand scheme of things.”

Truer words had never been spoken. I only hoped our pack didn’t have any other traitors like Sylas lurking in the

shadows.

As I drove to Liza's house later that evening, I made the rash decision to cook for her. She was always cooking for others, and I wanted to do something nice for her. Hopefully, it would alleviate some of her stress. It also wouldn't hurt to butter her up before I brought up the topic of us claiming each other.

Liza was the one for me. I'd recognized our connection in my bones the first time we'd locked eyes at the country club. I envisioned her standing by my side through all of our pack's joys and sorrows.

As I scoured the grocery aisles for the ingredients I needed, my mind was hyper focused on the idea of Liza possibly not wanting me as much as I wanted her. I tried to push the negative thoughts out of my mind. After all, I was the next alpha, for God's sake.

The whir of the large fans overhead filled the aisles with a low drone, the beeps and booms of the refrigerated cases mixed with murmured voices and the clank of metal carts shuttling from one aisle to another.

Life continued on in our small town, despite the invisible threat that hung over us. I watched a family load their cart, one of the children fussing over the breakfast cereal the mom had chosen.

These were my people. Members of my pack. Every decision I made could possibly have an effect on them. I would soon be their alpha, but could I protect them from evil? Even more, would Liza want to stand by my side or would she let the trauma of her childhood and the fear of Castro push her further from me?

My status didn't matter to me—not if I couldn't claim Liza. All I could do was hope she wanted this as much as I did.

Chapter 8

Liza

As I trudged to my car, my muscles were leaden with exhaustion from a demanding day of catering to a picky and indecisive client. Those were the only kind I seemed to attract lately. I was all for women supporting one another, girl power and all that went with it, but the client was a bitch. There was no other way to accurately describe her.

Each day was a battle of trying to anticipate her ever-changing preferences and needs, and today had been particularly challenging. I had to charge her for three extra meals that I had meticulously prepared, only for her to reject them. She'd looked right into my eyes and flippantly said that they were too salty. It had taken all my willpower to bite my tongue because I knew damn well my meals were perfectly seasoned—and I had rave reviews from the upper echelon of Presley Acres to prove it.

The frustration lingered as I drove home with the containers filled with the leftovers she'd tried to refuse to pay for. I spent a few miles of drive time contemplating whether to freeze them for a quick meal in the future or offer them to my parents.

I even considered handing them over to my diligent bodyguard, who had faithfully followed me throughout the day without so much as a sneeze, staying quiet and alert at all times. I figured he could use a satisfying meal after babysitting me, which I knew was not at all entertaining. Nothing eventful had happened since we left the house in the morning.

All day long, try as I might, I couldn't get Sylas's tear-stained face out of my mind. As I chopped carrots, fried chicken, and stirred sauces, I tried to imagine what his life would look like now that he'd been brought back to face punishment for his crimes. I hoped the punishment would be severe.

Sylas deserved what was coming to him, regardless of how remorseful he was. Because of him, Castro was a free man with unlimited resources at his disposal.

The entire conversation Sylas had had with Ty and Dominic was interesting, but I kept replaying one thing: Sylas had asked Castro how he knew about his gambling addiction and his debt to the loan sharks. I wouldn't have thought information like that was something that could be discovered easily, by say, a Google search. Not something one could look up, anyway, without being in the know in the casino where the money was owed.

Then, Castro had hacked into the so-called *highly secure* medical database at my doctor's office to retrieve my lifelong medical history. He was a man who obviously had the entire fucking world at his fingertips, and he had some really good connections.

Well, it didn't matter now. He had the information and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

He couldn't be an easy man to get along with, and certainly no one in their right mind who wasn't desperate for a way out of a problem would help a man like Castro. Sylas had been an easy mark.

Of course, perhaps Castro was just better at charming people than I gave him credit for. Or maybe people were intrigued by his light features, and his charm—assuming he had any—was incidental. Whatever it was, it had given him the opportunity to strike up conversations and lure people into his evil web of deception.

Either way, I was fucking terrified of his next move. He was too unpredictable, and too off-the-chart to be anything less than dangerous. Even more than that, I worried others

would learn I was an omega, and I'd have men breaking down my door to have their way with me. Of course, I'd been living with that fear since I'd found out what I was. Since I was a child, certainly.

A vision of the men from the ice cream parlor popped into my head, their fangs practically dripping with saliva as they looked me up and down, taking in every inch of me, their gazes lingering on every curve and every plane.

It was exactly those types of thoughts that had slowly brought me around to the idea of having protectors standing just outside my clients' doors. Although some had given me puzzled looks when I tried to explain that the bodyguard was necessary, they all accepted the idea once I reminded them that I was the future mate of the soon-to-be-named alpha. Even the crab ass from today accepted it.

I couldn't help that it wasn't the whole truth, but if it weren't for my relationship with Ty, I wouldn't have access to a full security detail, so I'd explain it in whichever way worked for me. The details of my private life were mine, and private. No client was entitled to them simply because they were a client.

When I finally made it home, Ty's truck was parked in the driveway, which was a surprise, and a pleasant one. I hadn't expected him to be done with his meeting so early. If I was honest, I'd expected them to be plotting well into the night. Good thing I had the meals the bitch-client hadn't wanted. The thought of standing over a hot stove after cooking for other people all day made me queasy, and I was sick of take-out.

The weariness that clung to my bones from the mentally draining day lifted when I walked through the door. Knowing that Ty and I could spend a full evening together was a relief, though I figured we'd spent a good portion of it talking about Sylas, the interrogation, and whatever plan he and his father had come up with to find Castro.

A mouthwatering aroma assaulted my senses and stopped me in my tracks when I entered the kitchen.

Ty manned the stove, spoon in one hand, potholder in the other, and a playful smirk on his lips.

Delighted laughter bubbled from my chest. “I didn’t know you could cook!” My eyes widened as I took in the roast perched on the counter and surrounded by perfectly golden roasted potatoes and savory carrots. Saliva pooled in my mouth.

The scene was a testament to Ty’s secret culinary prowess, and it filled me with amusement and awe. My man was certainly a Jack-of-all-trades, and I couldn’t help but wonder what other secrets and tricks he had in his magic bag of talents.

Ty laughed, his eyes glimmering mischievously. “You look so surprised. I picked up some things from my housekeeper and chef. Give me a little credit for knowing how to function as an adult.”

I moved to his side and looked at the roast. “I’m not surprised as much as this was the last thing I expected to see today.” I put my hand in the center of his back and smiled. The simple touch spoke of the easiness between us. The comfort. “Honestly, if you were dressed in a tutu with sparkles, I would be equally shocked.” I danced my fingertips along his spine as I spoke. “I have obviously underestimated your abilities in the kitchen. Impressive stuff.” Exactly what women dreamed about.

He smiled and shrugged, leaning closer to me until our lips were mere millimeters apart. “Just wait till you taste it.” Even if the food didn’t taste as good as it smelled, his confidence was easy to love.

“When did you have time to learn how to cook?” I moved to the counter and dipped my finger in the au jus to taste it. “Holy shit. This is delicious. Have you been taking classes behind my back?”

“Well, it’s not something I reveal often,” he confessed, a hint of pride lacing his voice. “I used to sneak into the kitchen and watch the chef work. I was always impressed with his quick chopping and dicing skills. He was so damn fast.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that skill takes many years to perfect.”

“So I learned.” He held up one of his left fingers. “When no one was looking, I picked up the largest, most intimidating knife and tried my hand at chopping a carrot. Needless to say, more than the carrot was cut.”

I took his hand and inspected the finger closely under the light of the cooker hood. A small scar I’d never noticed before cut into the skin just above the nail. “You better be thankful you didn’t lose a finger. Would have had to call you One Thumb.”

“We can’t all have innate chef skills, Liza.” He rolled his eyes, then winked. “My parents never thought cooking was a necessary skill, given our lifestyle, but I found it fascinating, so I picked up a thing or two along the way. You can be the ultimate judge on whether or not it tastes good.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist. “Thank you, Ty. This means a lot to me.”

Satisfaction glinted in his eyes. “You’re welcome, Liza. Now, finish settling in and sit your cute ass down. It’s time for me to feed you.”

I kicked off my shoes and piled my hair into a messy bun on the top of my head before taking my seat at the table. The anticipation built as Ty plated the succulent roast and roasted vegetables. My sense of smell was pleasantly overwhelmed by the delicious scent wafting from the dish before me. With each bite, my taste buds erupted in delight at the tender meat and the delicious blend of flavors. It was a symphony of taste, and a culinary masterpiece crafted by the hands of a man I was growing closer to with each passing day.

Gratitude and affection welled up within me. It wasn’t just the food that warmed my heart—and *other* areas of my body—it was the gesture behind it. Ty cooking for me spoke volumes about his thoughtfulness and how much he cared, and I suddenly realized the depth of his affection and the growing bond we shared.

Not that I hadn't been thinking about him every second of every day, but whenever he did something like this, it showed me he wasn't just this stuck-up prince who expected everything to be handed to him on a golden platter. Ty was genuine, and he looked at me like I was the only other person in the world. I was as lucky as a woman could get.

Between mouthfuls, we engaged in lighthearted banter, our laughter mingling with the clinks of our cutlery against our plates. We avoided all talk of Sylas or anything remotely related to Castro, which was refreshing. My brain needed a break from all that anxiety.

For the first time in a while, I was content sitting in my little house, eating a home-cooked meal I hadn't made.

Beneath all the glowing, happy thoughts of Ty and his masterful cooking, a question tugged at my mind. It didn't take a genius or a psychic to see Ty was struggling with something, and I sensed that there was more he wished to share.

He'd kept up his end of our conversation and had smiled and laughed at all the appropriate times, but his eyes were dark and brooding. There was something he wasn't talking about, and that scared me.

With a gentle sigh and a deep desire to help him work through it, I mustered the courage to address the unspoken tension. "Ty, is something bothering you? Did something happen during your meeting with your dad?"

He lifted his gaze to meet mine, a small crease forming between his brow as his mouth twisted from side to side. I could see he was struggling internally and deliberating over his words. "There is something I want to talk to you about."

There was always something. I swallowed back another sigh. Why couldn't we just have one carefree evening without something heavy coming up?

My anxiety reared its ugly head, and I crossed my arms, waiting for whatever it was. That burst of adrenaline was a

bitch, and it hit every time my flight-or-fight response kicked in, which had been happening more often than I'd liked.

Ty's voice was deeper with a hint of unease. "Dad thinks we should move forward with claiming each other—with our mating ceremony."

A mixture of curiosity and apprehension swirled inside of me. I knew the significance of a fated mate bond, the intertwining of destinies that would tie us together for eternity. Yet, I couldn't shake the reservations clouding my mind. The thought of a forced union, driven by duty rather than love, troubled me.

I ran my tongue over my teeth, keeping my tone cautious as I spoke. "Ty, you know I care for you deeply, but there's a lot at stake here. Fated mates share a bond that goes beyond mere love. If something were to happen to one of us, we would both be lost. It's not like a normal chosen mate. It goes way deeper than that. We'd literally die together." I had no reason to believe that the rush wouldn't be worth the reward, but we hadn't even confessed our love to each other yet.

Yes, we were fated mates, so I had no doubt that the love would eventually come, but I didn't want to be claimed when we weren't even in love with each other. We'd be linking our actual lives together, so there was a lot to lose. "Is it worth the risk?"

My words hung in the air, the silence echoing our shared contemplation.

I sought clarity, a glimpse into his true motivations. "Do you want to mate with me because it's expected or because you're truly ready? I don't know about you, but I'm not sure I'm ready for all of this." There was so much pressure.

Ty's hesitation spoke volumes, and my heart ached. I wasn't angry or resentful. Claiming each other was a decision that couldn't be taken lightly. I understood the burden he carried, being the next in line to lead our pack. Sacrifices were sometimes necessary for the greater good. Not that I thought mating with him would be a sacrifice, but I couldn't ignore the nagging doubts that gnawed at my heart.

He sat back and crossed his arms, lost in his thoughts.

I rushed to explain myself better. “I completely understand that as the alpha’s mate, I’ll be required to make sacrifices for the sake of the pack, but I can’t mate with you simply for the sake of pleasing others. Not when our lives are at stake. Things are dangerous right now. Castro is after me, and I wouldn’t put it past him to hurt you in order to hurt me, purely out of jealousy.”

Ty sighed, but he didn’t respond. He didn’t look at me, either.

My goal wasn’t to hurt his feelings or make him feel unwanted, but a fated pairing was an extremely sacred entity. When the claiming happened, it was meant to be special. I didn’t want any doubts between us, didn’t want anyone to say we’d only claimed each other because we were forced into it.

“I don’t see what the rush is, anyway. We’ve got all the time in the world. Why force the issue when we have a much bigger issue on our hands.”

Ty leaned forward, a look of defeat in his eyes. “You’re right. I understand everything you’re saying.”

Even though his words were meant to convince me of his agreement, his look of disappointment told the truth. He’d been hoping for a different response, and I felt a twinge of guilt.

As the night moved on, the tension between us was palpable. Everything felt awkward. I tried to lighten the mood, to sweep away the heaviness that settled over us, but Ty remained lost in his thoughts, distant and distracted.

I flipped on the TV, found a romantic comedy, and patted the spot next to me. “Join me?”

He gave a slight shake of his head. “I have a lot of work waiting for me.” He flashed a half-smile. “I’ll just get my laptop and get to it.”

I nodded. I wasn’t buying it, but I wasn’t really in the mood to call him out on it, either. “Okay.” Swallowing, I

excused myself to take a shower, hoping the steam and solitude would offer some sort of clarity.

Under the cascading water, my mind wandered through a maze of fear and doubt. It wasn't just the fated bond that troubled me but the shadow that loomed over our lives. Castro's relentless pursuit of me, his capacity for cruelty, and the danger he posed to us were ever-present in my thoughts. The last thing I wanted was to intertwine our lives into a forced mating, potentially exposing Ty to an even greater risk.

On the other hand, if I wasn't mated to Ty, I would be unprotected if word got out that I was an omega. Was that a good enough reason to jump into a mating where love didn't exist?

Perhaps all royals joined in unions where love wasn't a factor. Surely it wasn't all just for gain. Was Dominic and Persephone's union a huge production and a façade?

I shook my head. No way was that the case.

As I emerged from the shower, the lingering veil of uncertainty clung to my skin like the steam clung to the bathroom mirror.

I searched the house for Ty, but he wasn't anywhere. I could still sense him, though, so I figured he was sitting on the porch or by the firepit in the backyard. He carried so much weight as the next alpha, and I chastised myself for putting him in a foul mood. It was my life, too, though, and I had to consider every decision that affected it carefully.

Climbing into bed, I yearned for Ty's presence by my side and hoped for a resolution, or, at the very least, a moment of shared comfort so I could fall asleep peacefully. I made sure my alarms were set and double-checked my calendar for the next day. Just as I was about to power down my phone, a chime interrupted the calm of the room.

My heart skipped a beat as I read the message from an unknown number, my blood turning cold.

Looks like your boy toy and his weak excuse of an alpha are trying to find me. It's almost comical. But I like a

good game of hide-and-seek. So, how about this? I'll leave them some clues as to where to find me. Let's see how smart they really are. I must admit, my love, I don't think they'll be able to crack it. And what a shame it would be for them to fail. Their own ignorance will be their downfall. And once the empire has crumbled, I'll return for you, and we'll show them what an empire is meant to look like.

The words cut through me, their malicious intent leaving me chilled to the bone. Castro's twisted taunt, as well as his knowledge of Ty and his father's search for him was all too much to process.

I sat up, my body zinging with fear as a million questions raged through my mind. How did he know? What was he planning?

The sense of impending danger loomed larger than ever, reminding me that our lives hung in the balance.

That Castro had the upper hand.

Chapter 9

Ty

Fury coursed through my veins, burning hot like a raging inferno. I was beyond pissed after Liza had stormed out of the house last night, gripping her damn phone as if her life depended on it. And maybe it did. After she'd shown me the goddamn text from Castro, I had been on edge and more determined than ever to find that bastard.

The timing of the text bothered me. It was as if he had been watching us. As if he knew I'd slipped into the backyard and wasn't by Liza's side, which meant he was close or he had someone who was. He'd obviously made a move when I wasn't there to console her and had wanted his message to knock the wind out of her. And, of course, because he'd sent it while I was out of the room, he had succeeded.

If he was close enough to know I wasn't with her, why hadn't any of our security team or undercover agents in Presley Acres recognized him? Everyone had been debriefed on his physical appearance and where we thought he might be lurking. Of course, it could have also meant that I had a mole in my security team, but most of the guards had been with the family since I was a child or were related to someone who had been. I found it hard to believe one of my guys had turned on us. They'd witnessed our prosperity as well as some of our lowest points, but they'd always stayed loyal to the Kellers, even when it would've been easy for them to turn on us. Either way, I would be extra careful from now on.

After a sit-down with Dad and the heads of our security, we'd all concluded that he'd probably skipped town. If that

was the case, however, how'd he know Liza was alone in her bedroom at the very moment he texted? Or maybe it was a coincidence. If I was the kind of guy who believed in those, it might've been easier to accept that as the explanation.

Liza already suffered from terrifying nightmares, and I hated the damage Castro's text had done to her psyche. I'd held her close all night, waking whenever she moved or made the slightest noise.

Somehow, though, she made it through the night without waking up in a panic, but the dark circles under her eyes told me she'd been wrestling with the text even in her sleep.

After we ate a quick breakfast, I took Liza's phone from her and invited one of the security guards into the house to stay by her side. "Don't let her leave without you." I didn't know if she would try, but if she did, I expected him to stop her or find a way to make sure he was with her.

With the phone in my pocket, I drove straight to Zephyr's tech shop, hoping he could work his magic and trace that fucking asshole Castro. If he couldn't, I didn't know what we would do. We'd have to wait for Castro to make a move. More than anything, I didn't want that.

Zephyr, with his nerdy, black-rimmed glasses and messy hair, stumbled from the back room, scratching his chest, mumbling something about an all-night gaming tournament. "Sorry. If I'd known you were coming, I would've cleaned up, Ty. It was a rough night."

I rolled my eyes. I couldn't have cared less how he looked as long as he could do the job I was about to pay him to do. "I can't believe you're still caught up in the gaming world." A grown man sacrificing sleep and apparently hygiene to play games? I didn't get it.

"It's much more interesting than reality. Safer, too." He gestured for me to follow him back to his office.

Shaking my head, I pulled Liza's phone from my pocket. "I'd say reality is pretty damn interesting enough for me. A little too interesting, in fact." I pulled up the text and handed

the phone to him. “Castro is back from the dead, so to speak. This is the text he sent Liza last night.”

Zephyr took the phone from me and scrolled through the message. “Damn. He’s not mincing many words, is he?” I wasn’t sure if it was a sarcastic comment as to the length of the text, or if he was speaking about the veracity of the threat. Didn’t matter. He was right.

“No, he’s not. Though, I would have liked it better if he said, *Hey, I’m here. Come get me.*” I shook my head because life was seldom so easy. “Do you have any way to track him down from that text? I realize it’s an unknown number, but surely you can get an idea of his location. Right?”

He hooked the phone to his computer and transferred information from the main screen to one of several larger monitors hanging over his desk. Then he typed rapidly. After several minutes, he shook his head. “That number is bouncing off more towers than a damn basketball.”

I frowned. “What the hell does that mean?”

Zephyr spun his office chair around to face me. “It means whoever sent that text used a high-tech scrambler device, making it damn near impossible to pinpoint their location.” He cocked his head and shrugged. “It’s sophisticated tech. I tried to bypass it, but every time I get close, the tracker seems to reset. Castro either has some serious tech skills or he’s hired someone who does. Either way, this is impressive.”

I stifled a growl. This was Liza’s fucking life. I needed him to take it seriously.

My frustration soared to new heights. Yet again, Castro had the upper hand. “So, there’s nothing you can do to track down Castro or block him from contacting Liza, is that what you’re saying?” I hated to be so short with Zephyr since I was sure he was doing his best to help me, but I didn’t have time to try and wade through the technical jargon.

He spun back around and started typing again. “I’ve managed to salvage some data from Liza’s compromised phone, but tracing that number is a lost cause.”

Zephyr handed me a new phone. “I’ve downloaded the security app on this one, and she should have access to all her normal apps, contacts, and such. This is a burner phone, so Castro *shouldn’t* have access to the number. However, with what I’ve seen today, it’s only a matter of time before he or one of his tech bitches finds her number again. Sorry, Ty.”

Shit! I wanted to find that fucker and put an end to this once and for all. One way or the other, I was going to kill him, but I had to keep my cool for Liza’s sake. I thanked Zephyr for his time, slipped him a wad of cash, then sped back to Liza’s house.

I walked through the door to see her pacing the living room floor. The assigned security guard stood on the opposite side of the room, watching her closely because he knew I would kill him if anything happened to her on his watch.

When I appeared in the doorway, she jumped a little, her hands flying to her chest. “Crap, Ty. You scared me. I didn’t think you’d be back that quickly.”

I couldn’t blame her for being on edge.

“I didn’t have much luck with Zephyr. Apparently, some kind of tech wizard bounced the text off towers or whatever.” I pulled the new phone from my pocket and handed it to her. “This is a new burner phone. As of right now, Castro can’t get the number, but I wouldn’t put it past him to figure it out.”

She tossed the phone onto the couch. “Thanks.” Her hands shook as she lifted them to smooth her hair back. “I have several clients today. As much as I’d rather stay here, I can’t cancel on them. It’s bad for business.”

“No, you’ll have to cancel.” I couldn’t let her out of my sight, not for a fucking second. The situation was more dire than I’d originally thought. “You need to stay with me.”

Liza stepped toward me, her cheeks flushed red, her nostrils flaring slightly. She was anxious, angry, and just as frustrated as I was. “Castro was very clear in his text last night. He isn’t coming after me... not until you find him or fail miserably at finding him..”

Liza was trying to keep a calm façade, but I knew her well enough to see the jitters dancing beneath the surface because we were playing with fire, and the flames were licking at our heels.

“Are you silly enough to actually trust Castro, of all people?”

She glared at me.

Calling her silly probably wasn't the best move.

“It's not about whether or not I trust him, Ty,” she said through gritted teeth. “Castro is a sick, twisted fucker. He's meticulous and calculating and chooses every word carefully. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he spent hours composing that text.” The ire in her eyes cut right through me. “He gets off on playing mind games. He won't step out of this role he's crafted for himself. If he says he's gonna wait to take me, then I have no reason to believe otherwise.” She sighed, her chest deflating. “We're just pieces on his twisted board game.”

Begrudgingly, I admitted to myself that she had a valid point. Castro was a sick son of a bitch who relished the chaos he'd created. He was playing us like a fucking fiddle and enjoying every second of our desperate scramble.

I pulled her close, wrapping my arms around her and burying my face in her hair. “I'm sorry if I've been short with you, baby,” I murmured against her ear. “I'm just trying to keep all the balls in the air while keeping you safe.” It was a big job, and she could've made it a little easier if she'd cooperated without arguing—not that I'd say that out loud when she was this pissed off.

She hugged me back, her touch soothing the turmoil inside me. “I get it, Ty,” she whispered. “This is another example of why we shouldn't be mated yet. We're not ready.”

To my way of thinking, our mating was inevitable. Fighting it was unreasonable at this point, and things were getting more dire by the moment.

I pulled away and studied her. “Why do you think we're not ready?”

She chewed a hangnail on her thumb, not meeting my gaze. “We’re supposed to be a team. Things are always going to seem combative until you recognize me as your equal. I need a say in all of this, not just a protector who barks orders and makes all of my decisions for me.”

Fuck, she had me there. I cursed under my breath, chastising myself for not being ready to be her mate. I had a lot of shit to work on when it came to building a solid relationship. I just hoped we’d have the time we needed before the alpha power completely faded from my father. Time was a luxury we couldn’t afford to waste.

“All right. Let’s compromise.” I took a step back and gestured at the security guard. “He’ll drive you to and from your clients’ houses, and he’ll stay *inside* with you, not outside.” I searched her face for approval. “Is that fair?”

She nodded but her frown remained “It’s good enough.”

I didn’t have the brain power or the desire to argue with her anymore, though I could see that she was still frustrated. All that mattered right now was that she was safe while Dad and I tried to hunt Castro down.

Before she left, I took a photo of the text so I could share it with Dad. Liza couldn’t share it from the burner. As I kissed her goodbye, my mind was already racing with potential next steps.

I made my way to the Keller Estate, eager to update Dad on the shitstorm that had erupted since our last conversation.

As usual, I found him at his desk. He really should have been taking it easy, but there he was, working as though his life depended on it.

“Castro contacted Liza last night.”

He dropped his pen and rose to his feet. “What? Where is he?”

I held up my phone. “He texted her. No way to trace the source.” That still burned my ass. “Zephyr says Castro must have some pretty savvy tech whizzes working for him. And

from how impressed he was with the multiple layers of scrambling, I'd say he's right on his money."

My father's eyes narrowed as he read the text. He scrolled up and reread it. We both knew there was more to it than met the eye. This was just the beginning of a twisted puzzle, and we needed to solve it before Castro could execute whatever sickening thing he had planned.

"There has to be some hint in the text that would give us a clue of his next move." I moved to the other side of Dad's desk, reading the text over his shoulder. "Then again, Castro isn't a dumbass—unfortunately. Maybe we should take his words at face value."

We huddled in Dad's office for hours, dissecting every word and every hint embedded in the cryptic message. This was our only shot at finding Castro, and we couldn't afford to fuck it up. We finally concluded that the text wasn't our first clue, which meant we had to wait for Castro to send it to us.

The worry lines etched on my father's face mirrored my frustration. Despite the gravity of the situation, a ghost of a smile played at the corner of his lips. "Well, son, it seems like we're in for one hell of a game."

I snorted, the tension momentarily easing. "Ain't that the fucking truth. Castro may be a manipulative prick, but he sure as hell hasn't lied to us. Well, unless you consider him faking his own death." I shrugged. "If he says he's giving us a chance to find him, then he means it, but this won't be a walk in the park."

My father nodded, his gaze filled with both caution and determination. "You're right. We need all the help we can get. That's why Nico will be joining us shortly. I texted him an hour ago, so he's on his way. When he gets here, we'll brief him on the situation, and he'll bring his expertise to the table."

My stomach turned sour as another possibility ran through my mind. "What if this is just some sick game Castro is playing? What if he has no intention of giving himself up?" I cracked my knuckles. "Liza seems to think every word in the text is true and that he'll stick to his promise."

Dad's eyebrows shot up. "I'm surprised to say this, but I think I agree with Liza. Castro is a lot of things, a manipulator for sure, but now that I've really thought about it, he never flat-out lied to us. Even when he faked his death, he never verbally committed to anything. It was just part of his escape plan."

"So, you think he's actually going to give us a chance to find him? Even after all of the threats and obvious hate for the Keller pack?" I folded my hands behind my head and leaned back to stare up at the ceiling. "I can almost guarantee, no matter what he has planned, he isn't going to make any of this easy on us." Castro was going to try to use this to prove he was the smartest wolf in the room.

Before Dad could respond, Nico—the stealthy bastard—slipped into the office like a shadow. He paused when he caught the tension in the air, and his eyes narrowed.

We filled him in on the recent developments, and his face contorted with concern, then anger. "That fucker is playing a dangerous game," he growled. "Mark my words, he may present it as a riddle to be solved, but there will be consequences to all of this."

"I agree." I stood and paced the room. "Castro mentioned the fall of our empire, and I can't help but feel like it's connected to this game he wants to play."

Nico nodded. "I'd say you're right."

I heaved a sigh. I wanted to see this expertise Dad promised, and so far, I wasn't seeing a damn thing. "So, what do we do now? Just sit on our thumbs like a bunch of jackasses, waiting for this maniac to call all the shots?"

Dad shrugged. "There's not much we can do until Castro sends us our first clue."

I hated sitting here and waiting. It gave Castro too much power. But what else could I do?

Nico looked from me to my dad. "We'll be ready. I've got men scouting the surrounding areas for any whispers about a white wolf. With them being so rare, Castro won't be able to

hide for long if he makes the mistake of stepping foot in Presley Acres.”

White wolves. Nico was right. He’d be easy to spot. Castro and Liza’s snowy color wasn’t like the blonde you got from a bottle. They stood out like sore thumbs.

My mind drifted to the devastating truth: my father’s actions had wiped out the arctic wolves, making Liza and Castro rarities in these parts. There were more in other parts of the country, but in our neck of the woods and the surrounding states, white wolves just weren’t a thing.

“I’ll keep you both updated. Let me know if he reaches out to you all.” Nico departed just as swiftly and stealthily as he’d arrived. A shiver ran down my spine. Damn, the guy was eerie.

Dad chuckled. “Creepy fucker, but he’s damn good at what he does. He’s exactly the kind of ally we need in times like these. He’s the only man I would trust with our lives.”

I nodded, unease bubbling in my gut. My father was right, though. In this treacherous game, we had to rely on those we trusted with our lives. Nico was one of the few, and I was convinced we’d need him more than ever.

“You’ll need someone like that when you become alpha. Someone you can depend on no matter what, especially when it comes to life-and-death situations.”

I nodded again.

“I know it seems like I’m throwing you in at the deep end, but I’m just blurting out whatever I think of in the moment. There’s so much to pass down to you, and I want you to be prepared.” Dad sighed. “Speaking of being prepared, how did your conversation with Liza go?”

“I really don’t want to talk about it.” I picked at a loose thread hanging from the hem of my shirt, avoiding eye contact. The weight of responsibility pressed heavily on my shoulders as he probed about my conversation with Liza. A tangle of emotions swirled within me: doubts, fears, insecurities threatening to consume me whole. I dodged the

topic, not yet ready to confront my own vulnerabilities about Liza, or about us not being prepared to mate.

“I’m sorry. I know this is a lot of pressure to put on you, but I would be remiss if I didn’t remind you that you mating sooner rather than later is for the sake of the pack. I know you don’t want to hear this, but you might have to consider a temporary mate.”

My head snapped up, and I nearly bared my teeth at my father.

“Don’t look at me like that. This is all for the sake of the pack. You wouldn’t have to stay mated to them. It would just be for the ceremony so I can pass on the alpha power before it fades. Once you take your place, you could break the bond and go on to claim Liza... if that’s what you both wanted.”

The notion of a temporary mate reared its ugly head, and it was a bitter pill to swallow. I groaned, resisting the idea with every fiber of my being. “I’m not going to do that. I won’t settle for a temporary bond. We’ll solve Castro’s twisted game and then I’ll claim Liza as my mate.”

Pride shone from my father’s eyes, but I saw the concern as well. “I expected nothing less from you, Ty. But remember, the pack always comes first. We’ll do whatever it takes to protect our own.”

My resolve solidified. The pack was my family, my responsibility, but Liza was my heart, and I would fight tooth and claw to ensure her safety and happiness.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the challenges ahead. The tangled game had just begun, and we were about to plunge deeper into its treacherous depths.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the office, a sense of urgency lit inside me. We were up against a sadistic fucker. A master manipulator who reveled in tormenting us.

With every passing second, the clock ticked louder, each beat a reminder of the stakes at hand. Liza’s safety, our future, and the pack’s survival hung in the balance.

Chapter 10

Liza

Ty had been acting strangely the past few days, and every time I tried to get him to open up about it, he brushed me off. He'd even held up a finger and shushed me while reading a text. Usually, I wouldn't put up with that kind of thing, but with him being so buried in worry and responsibility, I didn't want to add to his issues.

The tension between us was starting to grate at me, and I had reached a point where I didn't even want him around anymore. I nearly suggested he go back to the Keller Estate instead of moping around my house, but I'd grown accustomed to his presence, and the thought of him not sleeping in my bed made me sick to my stomach.

Regardless, we were walking on eggshells around each other. I had no idea what had transpired during his meeting with his dad, but I suspected it had a lot to do with his current behavior. After mulling it over, I concluded that Dominic must still be urging Ty to move forward with our mating ceremony, and that had probably led to a conversation about us not being ready.

I sat on the edge of my bed, trying to wrap my head around everything that had happened in the past few days. What I couldn't understand was the wall he'd suddenly erected between us. He wasn't attentive and barely spoke to me, and when he did, it was with a bite in his tone.

Maybe he didn't appreciate me standing up to him and insisting I needed to fulfill my commitments to my clients. More likely, though, I'd upset him when I told him we weren't

ready to be mated. I could understand that he was stressed, but so was I, and I wasn't seeing the same understanding from him. Our frustration levels were at a peak.

My phone rang, jerking me from my thoughts.

"Do you have any free time today? Or do you plan to spend your time with Ty between your legs?" Sabrina asked when I answered.

I scoffed. "What, you think I can't pull myself away from Ty? I'd welcome a break from him, actually. What did you have in mind?"

"Lunch at our favorite café?" Sabrina suggested.

"Sounds great." I glanced at my watch. "I can be there in thirty minutes."

"See you then."

We hung up, and I smiled for the first time in several hours. The wariness of the last few hours had dissipated, too. Sometimes, a few minutes with Sabrina was all I needed.

I was relieved to have an opportunity to escape the weirdness and suffocating atmosphere in my home when Ty was present, but seeing my best friend was an added bonus. With all the Castro drama, I hadn't spent much time with Sabrina lately.

As I rummaged through my closet for an outfit that was casual yet fancier than the pajamas I was currently wearing, Ty walked into the room. His furrowed brows spoke to his concern or his apprehension. I couldn't tell which.

"What's going on, Liza?" he asked, worry lacing his tone. "Going somewhere?"

"I'm going out with Sabrina," I replied, attempting to keep my tone level and calm, despite my overwhelming irritation. "I need to get out of the house and away from all this craziness for a little while."

Ty's face went tight as he crossed his arms. "Are you serious? You think it's safe for you to go out? I get that you still have a life to live, but you're in danger. I don't think it's

wise for you to be going out and partying with your friends right now.”

Sighing, I rubbed my temples to stave off the impending headache. “Ty, you know as well as I do that this isn’t a party. It’s not like we’re hitting up the clubs downtown in the middle of the night. Sabrina is my best friend and I miss her. There’s no reason I should turn down her lunch invitation.”

Ty’s face didn’t shift from its stern expression. “You know I’m just trying to look out for you, right? Castro could strike at any fucking minute.”

“Ty, there’s no way Castro is anywhere near our town. He’s not dumb enough to risk getting caught. I understand your concern, but how much danger am I actually in right now? Besides, what are the bodyguards for if I have to stay locked in my house the whole damn time?”

He clenched his jaw so hard I saw the muscles jump. “It’s not that simple, Liza. We can’t take any chances. You could get snatched from a public place before you even realized what was happening.” His wild hand gestures matched the passion in his voice. “We have no idea where Castro is or if he has someone working with him. Anyone you come into contact with could be a possible collaborator.”

I turned around and yanked a shirt off a hanger. “If I can’t trust the bodyguards to keep me safe then what’s the point of having them? Aren’t they trained to spot possible danger?” I snapped. “I can’t live my life in constant fear and isolation, Ty. I need some semblance of normalcy.”

He took a step closer, his gaze hardening, and his voice dropping to a low, intense tone. “Liza, this isn’t just about you. I can’t bear the thought of something happening to you. I need to protect you. If you won’t think about your own safety, think about how it might affect those who care about you.”

As if I hadn’t thought about that. It was all I thought about. “But at what cost, Ty? All your worrying is suffocating our relationship. I can’t breathe anymore. I need some space.”

Guilt flickered in his eyes, momentarily softening his features. “I’m sorry, Liza, but I can’t let you go out alone. If you want to go, the bodyguard is sticking to you and Sabrina like honey. We can somewhat control the environment at home and at your clients’ homes, but anything goes in public. All hell can break loose in the blink of an eye.”

My annoyance had officially reached its peak. “Can’t he just watch from a distance like he’s been doing? I can’t have him by my side at all times.”

Ty’s jaw set in a determined line as he shook his head, “No, Liza, it’s too risky. You know the situation we’re dealing with. You’re not taking any chances on your safety or Sabrina’s. It’s non-negotiable.”

“Non-negotiable? Is that how we’re talking to one another now?” Tears stung the back of my eyes as I tried to keep a stoic face while standing up to the future alpha.

Ty’s face hardened. “He’ll stay by your side. End of story.”

“Fine, I’ll take the bodyguard,” I muttered, my voice dripping with sarcasm and exasperation. “But it’s going to draw unnecessary attention, and that’s on you.”

With that, I quickly changed clothes, brushed my teeth, and swiped deodorant under my arms. I stormed past Ty leaning against the doorframe, watching me get ready as if I might try to escape out a window.

I stomped all the way to the front door, then slammed it behind me. Outside in the fresh air, I dragged in a breath. I yearned for a day of normalcy and a break from the strain that had clouded our relationship, but had I damaged our relationship even more by putting my foot down and arguing with Ty?

And, although I was still pissed at him, I knew he only wanted to protect me from harm and keep me safe. But I wasn’t sure how much longer our relationship could survive with this stress and fear suffocating it.

When I arrived at the café, Sabrina and her bright smile met me on the sidewalk.

She eyed the bodyguard standing a few steps behind me. Her eyes twinkled with amusement. “New accessory?” she teased, her gazing trailing up and down the guy’s body before she looked at me.

I rolled my eyes. While I understood why I had an armed guard trailing after me, I didn’t like it. A small smile tugged at my lips, though, because Sabrina was fanning herself with her hand. “Just ignore him,” I replied, brushing off her comment. “He’s here because Ty insists on keeping tabs on me.” That wasn’t the truth—not entirely, anyway—but I was still salty about my privacy. As salty as he was about the danger.

Sabrina nudged me playfully, her eyes full of mischief. “Well, at least you’ve got some eye candy. Not a bad trade-off, if you ask me.” The bodyguard was tall and dark, handsome in an “I’ll be back” kind of way.

I rolled my eyes at her borderline sexual harassment comment and nudged her back. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. When you have a psycho stalker after you, I’ll send him over and you can see how you like having an extra shadow.”

Sabrina chuckled. “Well, if he’s going to be our designated watchdog, we might as well have some fun with the situation. Let’s see if we can make him crack a smile.”

Sabrina had a knack for turning even the most mundane situations into amusing adventures, even if they were dumb as shit. Sometimes, I wondered if she wasn’t a fourteen-year-old girl trapped inside a woman’s body.

I turned to enter the café, but Sabrina grabbed my arm and tugged me toward a street performer. We watching him juggle, clapping and cheering as he flawlessly maneuvered colorful balls through the air.

The bodyguard stood a few steps away, his expression stoic as ever. The pang of sympathy I felt for the guy surprised me. It had to be horrible to have to play the role of a guardian and be detached from the simple pleasures of life. I couldn’t do it, that much was sure.

“Hey,” Sabrina called out to the bodyguard, a mischievous challenge in her voice. “You think you can juggle like that guy?”

He turned toward us, that stoic expression unmoving on his face except for the hint of amusement that flashed across his eyes. “I’m afraid my talents lie in protection, not entertainment, ma’am.”

Sabrina feigned disappointment, placing a hand on her hip. “Well, that’s a shame. I was hoping for a show. Maybe next time.” She lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned in my direction. “Think he’d give me an *adult* show once he’s off the clock? He’s pretty hot. Especially when he tries to keep a straight face.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Sabrina? Of all the men you could pick up, *this* is the guy you’re drooling over?” Not that he was bad looking—as a matter of fact, he was very delicious eye candy—but if he was doing her, he couldn’t very well do the job Ty was paying him for.

Laughing, Sabrina patted my shoulder. “It’s a joke, calm down. Besides, I think he likes the extra attention.” She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and winked at him as we walked into the café and to our favorite booth in the back. It was private, and whichever one of us was sitting against the wall could see the whole place. We took turns.

I couldn’t help but laugh, grateful for Sabrina’s lightheartedness. It was exactly what I needed to distract myself from the tension of the past few days, and it was good to finally be able to breathe for a moment.

Once we were seated, the security guard plopped into the booth directly behind me, facing the door. Unfortunately, this put him right in Sabrina’s line of sight.

“Damn, Liza. Your bodyguard has tree trunks for arms.” Sabrina sighed overdramatically.

“Pretend he’s not here.” I waved my hand dismissively. “That’s what I’m doing.”

She picked up her menu and used it as a fan. “I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises.”

I shook my head, used to her silliness. We placed our orders, and Sabrina pulled her eyes from the security guard, finally focusing her attention on me. “I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Well, that’s probably because it’s been at least two weeks.” It was the off season, so catering jobs were few and far between.

“So, what’s new with business? Any exciting events coming up?” Sabrina asked, sipping her sweet tea like she didn’t have a care in the world. Right now, I didn’t know if she did or not, but I felt a thousand pounds lighter just being here with her.

I leaned back and shrugged. “Not much lately. I’m expecting things to pick up soon as party season approaches. You know how it gets when everyone starts planning their summer events.” I was looking forward to it. It wasn’t that I was hurting for money—the meals I cooked for my regulars kept me busy and paid well—but I missed the hustle and bustle of three parties in a week, a cotillion, or a dance to cater on a weekend, and any number of brunches and lunches.

Even though we weren’t slammed with clients, I still stopped by the office a few times a week to work on paperwork and make sure the place hadn’t been robbed. Otherwise, the clients who hired me as a personal chef kept us afloat while we anticipated the upcoming party season.

Sabrina nodded; her eyes gleaming with anticipation. “Oh, I can already imagine the fancy parties and glamorous soirées. This year, we’re going to make a splash, Liza. I can feel it. Especially since you’ve broken into the world of the royals. Our clientele is only going to get better once you become the alpha’s mate. Can you imagine? You’ll have to turn people away. They’ll come from several towns over, maybe even out of state, to hire you.”

I tried not to think how my life might change as Ty’s mate, but I couldn’t help it. Would I even have time to continue my

catering business? From what I'd seen of Persephone, I'd be expected to take on several social and philanthropic duties, which probably wouldn't leave much room for my business.

Sabrina didn't seem to notice the sudden shift in my mood as she continued talking. "I went on a date with a beta the other night."

"Excuse me?" I leaned forward, my eyes wide. We'd been here for twenty minutes, and she had me blabbing on about work. "Why am I just now hearing about this?"

"It wasn't that big of a deal." She flicked her hair over her shoulder and glanced at the security guard again. "Well, maybe I'm lying. He was extremely dreamy, but there was just something that kept me from enjoying myself."

"Oh? I can't imagine you not enjoying yourself with a hot beta. You'll have to enlighten me. Did you figure out what it was?"

Sabrina suddenly became very serious and lowered her voice. "I need to let you in on a little secret. Promise you won't be upset."

"Nothing you could say would upset me." I thrummed my fingers on the table and waited. It was true. There were people in the world who could piss me off with nothing more than a look, but Sabrina wasn't one of those. Sabrina was my best friend.

She looked down at her lap, biting her thumbnail. "I might have *hooked up with Bryce*." The last four words were said in a whisper.

"What?" I shot up straight and slapped the table. "I am *scandalized*. I thought you hated Bryce. Am I in the twilight zone right now?"

Sabrina sighed. "I do hate Bryce. That's why we had *I hate you sex*. It was so damn good, so then we had *I hate you more sex*." She grimaced. "Don't look at me like that, Liza. I know it's toxic and we need to stop, but fuck. He's so good in bed and, God, it's just so intense and passionate."

I knew about passion. I knew about desire. I knew about it all. “What about the beta guy? Are you still technically dating him?” I couldn’t wait to hear where this was all going. Sabrina had an exciting life. No doubt about it.

“Yes. Technically. He’s really great and could possibly be a fantastic boyfriend. But...”

“But what? Does he have a tiny little penis?” I laughed, then clamped my lips together when I saw the serious expression on Sabrina’s face.

“He just doesn’t light a fire in my belly,” she admitted and wouldn’t meet my gaze.

I shook my head, trying to grasp the complexities of dating in this day and age, especially the way Sabrina was doing it. She made it so complicated. While I understood the allure of passion, I couldn’t help but worry about the toll it would take on her when it faded or fell apart.

“I know how important passion is, Sabrina, but if he isn’t making you happy, don’t settle, and don’t sacrifice your happiness,” I advised, my tone filled with genuine concern. “You deserve someone who ignites that fire without all the toxicity that comes with Bryce, too.”

What was a relationship without passion? As I pondered that very question, images of Ty in the throes of making love to me flooded my mind and overwhelmed me. The man had a gift. And together, we had the all-consuming flame of passion—the one Sabrina had raved about with Bryce and lacked with her beta. Yet, that passion, that chemistry between us, seemed to be fading out. I missed the way we used to be.

As if reading my mind, Sabrina asked, “How are things with you and Ty?”

“It’s... complicated.”

Our food arrived, and as we ate, I found myself opening up about my own struggles with Ty and the pressure that had seeped into our relationship. The constant awareness of being watched, the overwhelming presence of the bodyguard... While it was for my safety, and I was aware he was giving me

space the only way he knew how, it still felt like an invasion of my privacy, and it was eating away at my sanity.

I didn't go into the reason why we were under so much pressure—the looming threat that was Castro—because I didn't want to worry Sabrina. Once she got worried, there wasn't anything I could do to get her to stop.

Sabrina's mischievous smile widened as her eyes flickered to the bodyguard. "He does seem a little overbearing, doesn't he?" she commented, a playful glimmer in her eyes.

A chuckle escaped my lips. Sabrina's lightheartedness was a balm to my soul. She didn't offer a lot of advice, but some days nothing could beat witty commentary.

"Tell me about it," I muttered, not bothering to keep the sarcasm out of my tone. "I half-expect him to start analyzing my breathing patterns."

"In all seriousness, though, I'm on your side." Sabrina pointed a finger at me. "You shouldn't be forced into a mating when neither you nor Ty seem sure about it. Relationships are always so complicated."

I nodded. "Truer words have never been spoken."

We enjoyed the rest of our lunch, chatting about TV shows, movies, and celebrity gossip, and before I knew it, several hours had gone by, and we parted ways. I returned home and was almost grateful to not see Ty's truck in my driveway. I silently scolded myself for thinking that way, but with things so weird between us, I genuinely didn't want to be around the bad energy he was putting off. Was that so wrong?

I slipped into a pair of sweats and settled in on the couch to continue binge-watching the latest season of my favorite show. My dad said it was reality trash, but I couldn't get enough of it.

As the evening went on, I realized Ty wasn't coming. I pulled out my phone and sent him a text.

What's going on?

A few minutes later, my phone beeped.

I'm staying at the estate tonight.

My fingers tightened around the phone until my knuckles turned white. My heart pounded so hard, my chest ached, and my breathing became labored as I struggled to control my temper.

I'd been happy he wasn't at the house all of a few hours ago, but him not coming home felt like he was punishing me somehow. Like he was purposely distancing himself from me, and I knew damn well I hadn't done anything wrong.

An inexplicable rage consumed me, surpassing any anger I had ever experienced before. It even eclipsed the emotions I had experienced when I'd found out the truth about Castro's role in my parents' death.

I tried to breathe and slow my rising heart rate, but it was no use. It was as if a fuse had been lit and there was no way to keep the bomb from exploding. I was scared.

My wolf's snarl escaped my lips as if I had no control over my own body.

My trembling hands transformed into sharp claws, a physical manifestation of the inner turmoil that ravaged my being.

But as the claws emerged, fear washed over me, piercing through the anger like a chilling gust of wind. I had lost control, and the realization terrified me. With a desperate attempt to regain composure, I forced myself to take deep breaths, grounding myself in the present moment.

My first instinct was to call Ty, but he clearly didn't want me to bother him right now.

The urgency to seek guidance overwhelmed me, and without a second thought, I reached for my phone and dialed my dad's number.

My voice trembled as I spoke. "Something's wrong. I need help. Now."

Chapter II

Ty

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. A small water stain that had been on the ceiling since I was a teenager stared back at me, and I wondered why we'd never had it painted over.

As always, Liza was at the forefront of my mind and had been all throughout my restless night. I wanted her to be happy, and I needed her to *choose* me as her mate, not out of an obligation because fate said we should be together.

My one-track thoughts of Liza had shifted since yesterday, leading me to one conclusion: I was a dick.

Dad's suggestion about finding a temporary mate was my latest train of thought. I couldn't avoid it. Even though I told Dad I wouldn't give it a second thought, my brain kept circling back to it.

He'd mate himself clear: mate with Liza or someone else. At this point, he didn't seem to care who I chose as long as the alpha power was preserved for the Keller pack.

Based on my earlier conversation with Liza, I knew deep in my bones that she wouldn't agree to move forward with a mating ceremony. She'd said we weren't far enough along in our relationship to mate, and I couldn't argue with her. We weren't.

She was my fated mate—I never questioned that for a second—but our time together had been tainted by the whole fucking mess with Castro. If it weren't for that maniac's attempts at claiming Liza as his own and leaving the Keller pack in ruins, maybe Liza and I would be ready to mate.

Instead, we'd spent countless hours worrying about the future and trying to work through Liza's past.

Nevertheless, I found myself torn between my loyalty to her and my loyalty to my pack. I wanted Liza and me to be one-hundred-percent certain about mating before we took such a big step, but I was the next alpha, and I was expected to fulfill certain duties.

The first duty would be taking the alpha powers from Dad. He seemed genuinely concerned that they could fade away before he had a chance to pass them to me at the mating ceremony, and I'd seen his strength slipping away firsthand.

When I'd mentioned moving forward with mating, I'd sensed the pressure Liza felt. Although she wanted me to lead and take control, she was also sensible about the gravity of any permanent decisions we were about to take. I appreciated her caution, but a decision would need to be made sooner rather than later.

As my mind churned with a million thoughts and ideas, I couldn't fight off the need for something tangible. That's when I decided to make myself a sandwich. I hadn't eaten breakfast, so hopefully I'd think more clearly with a full stomach.

I considered asking the chef to prepare it for me, but something in me craved the simplicity of putting it together myself. Perhaps it was a meditative escape from the chaos in my head, or maybe it was the satisfaction of creating something with my own hands when every other aspect of my life was out of my control. Whatever the reason, my growling stomach urged me to take the stairs down two at a time.

I turned the corner and was surprised to find Bryce rummaging through the fridge. His arm hung casually over the fridge door, as if he was in his own house searching for a meal.

"Uh... hey, asshole. What are you doing here?"

He turned and flipped me off. "Can't I grab a snack in peace? Who's in charge around here?"

I laughed. "I thought you were still out of town?"

Bryce had been meeting with business owners to discuss potential expansions we wanted to make on our warehouses. Maybe that's why some of my employees thought I wasn't operating on all cylinders. I'd taken on Bryce's usual responsibilities in addition to my own while he'd been gone.

"I couldn't stand to be away from you another second." He batted his eyes as I crossed the room to punch him in the shoulder.

Whenever Bryce made an appearance, it was a given that there would be some jabs thrown back and forth. After a few moments of playful ribbing, we both laughed. Despite the fact that Bryce could be a total pain in my ass at times, I couldn't deny the bond we shared. Finally, we hugged it out.

"Good to see you, man. Did you just get back?"

"I got in last night." Bryce turned his attention back to the fridge, and I caught a whiff of a woman's perfume emanating from his clothes.

"Did you even attempt to wash off your latest conquest from last night?" I asked.

He turned back around, a faux-guilty look on his face. "Sorry about that," he said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "What can I say? I can't help it if the ladies find me irresistible." He ran a hand through his hair before reaching into the fridge and grabbing an apple. "Oh, and if you must know," he continued as he took a bite, "the perfume is from this morning. I was running late and couldn't find my usual one." Smirking, he leaned against the counter and asked, "Want me to share more of my secrets, or are we good?"

I rolled my eyes as I poured myself a glass of water. "You dirty dog."

"Be that as it may, I'm still your righthand man." Bryce pulled out a stool from the kitchen island and took a seat. "So, what have I missed?"

I let out a deep sigh and proceeded to make myself a sandwich. Eating would comfort me after the complete chaos of the past week, and I didn't mind stalling for time.

As I bit into my sandwich, I realized I had nothing good to share. There seemed to be no end to the madness. “I’m not sure where to start. Let’s just say that things haven’t been great.”

Bryce raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Trouble in paradise with Liza?”

“You could say that.” I grabbed a bag of chips from the pantry. “Castro faked his own death, for starters.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Bryce gaped at me. I thought for sure his eyes would pop out of his head. “How did you find out?”

“He wrote a letter to Liza. He also texted her.” I sat down across from Bryce. “He paid off the coroner to slip him a pill that stopped his heart long enough to fool the hospital staff, then walked right out the door.”

“Son of a bitch.” Bryce whistled through his teeth. “He’s a sneaky fucker, isn’t he?”

“Yep. Now, he’s messing with our minds, saying he’s going to give us clues that will lead us to him.”

“Why would he do that? There’s gotta be more to it.” Bryce took another bite of apple and chewed with his mouth open, bits of apple falling onto the counter.

He was such a slob. Why did women find him so magnetic? It was one of life’s many mysteries we’d just never understand.

“Of course, there’s more to it. Castro’s a smart guy, and he wants Liza. Plus, he’d like to see the Keller pack fail miserably, if not completely burned to the ground.”

“How’s Liza holding up? Are you two still moving toward mating?”

That was a good question, and I wasn’t quite sure how to answer it. “We’re still together, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Shit. That doesn’t sound good.” Bryce tossed his apple core into the trash can from across the room.

“Dad wants us to move forward with mating, but Liza’s not ready. If we don’t mate soon, the power of the alpha might fade completely before he can transfer it to me.”

“Wait. Let me guess.” Bryce stood for dramatic effect, staring off into the distance and gesturing to an invisible audience. “The great alpha wants you to choose another mate lest the entire kingdom he built should perish.”

I scoffed. “How’d you know?”

“Your dad’s pretty predictable, Ty. The pack is his first priority, not yours and Liza’s romance.” He shrugged. “It’s a lot to ask of you, but he does have a point. You need to do what’s best for the pack.”

I groaned and took another bite of my sandwich. Bryce was right. Dad put the pack first, and as the next alpha, shouldn’t I do the same? Maybe choosing a temporary mate was the right choice.

It was good Bryce was here because I knew damn well there wasn’t anyone else I’d speak to so candidly or deeply about my personal affairs.

Dad had said it was important to have a confidant, and though Bryce was no Nico, he was my best friend, and I’d trust him with all of my secrets. He’d take them to his grave, I was certain of it.

Bryce’s hand on my shoulder interrupted my musings. “Listen,” he said in a low voice. “You’ll lose Liza if you even consider taking another mate. Can you imagine her being with someone else? You two have something special. Something others would give anything for.” His words settled on me like an anchor, reminding me of the bond I shared with Liza.

“No,” I said flatly, unable to fathom such a thought. “I don’t want to imagine her with someone else. I’d lose my mind.”

“Then, don’t even think about it. You can still be alpha without having to give up Liza. There must be another way.”

“I wish it was that simple. The fact that I’d lose her is exactly why I hadn’t considered a temporary mate up until

now, but it's like a fucking boulder is permanently attached to my back. I feel like I can't make the right damn decision, no matter what I do." I pushed my plate away. "Dad's getting weaker by the day, and soon others will start to notice. I'm honestly surprised no one's said anything about it already. He tries to be all big and bad when he's in public, but even his stature is smaller."

I closed my eyes, trying to push the image of my dad becoming weaker out of my head. He'd always been such a strong force in my life, and the thought of him aging so rapidly damn near broke my heart.

"I have to take the power of the alpha, and soon. Putting it off any longer just isn't an option anymore."

Bryce crossed his arms. "How much longer do you think your dad has before the alpha power fades completely? A year? Two?"

I sighed. "Two months. Three, tops."

"Do you think that's enough time to get Liza to fall in love with you?" He paused and considered his words. "I'm assuming she *isn't* in love with you now, right?"

"I don't know if that's enough time. And no, I don't think she's in love me. I mean, we haven't had a specific conversation about whether we love one another or not, but she's certainly said things that brought me to that conclusion. Liza thinks there's still too much conflict between us. She also thinks I'm suffocating her with all the security measurements."

Bryce nodded. "Well, you've got two months to change her mind. Try to make her feel safe and secure without making it seem like she's being controlled. Give it a month and see if she comes around. If not, *then* you may want to consider other options."

"When did you become the love doctor?" I joked as I shoved him. His reputation as the Playboy of Presley Hills preceded him, but something in the way he was talking about relationships now seemed different. "Are you turning soft on me?"

Before Bryce could reply, my phone rang. It was Liza's father.

"Hey, Scott. How are you?"

He breathed heavily into the phone. "Where were you last night?"

Whoa. He sounded pissed. "I was here at the estate. Why? What happened?" I asked, a pit forming in my stomach.

I was already grabbing my keys and heading out the door before Scott responded. Bryce followed closely behind, a confused look on his face.

"We're at the clinic. Liza had an episode last night."

I hopped into my car as Bryce hollered from across the driveway. "I'll catch up with you later."

"What kind of episode, Scott? Is Liza okay?" I needed more details.

"She freaked out, so her doctor's checking her out."

What the hell did that mean? "What kind of episode?"

"I don't know, Ty." He sounded put out. "She won't tell us what triggered it, but her rage was uncontrollable, which led to her shifting partially."

Fuck. "I'll be there in ten minutes. Tell Liza I'm coming."

My mind raced trying to come up with possible explanations. Had Castro reached out to her again? Was there some other trouble at her house? I was an idiot for leaving her alone there, but I'd needed some time to really think through my options with the mating situation. Sleeping in my own bed kept me from being distracted by Liza's body. Just the scent of her aroused me and made all other thoughts disappear.

I'd never forgive myself if Castro had made a move and I wasn't there to protect her. Then again, none of the bodyguards had alerted me to any type of security breach. What the fuck was going on?

My heart pounded as I approached the clinic. What would I find inside? I had always found Liza to be level-headed and

capable, but the episode her father had described threw me for a loop. A sense of dread overtook me as I wondered if I'd find a completely changed Liza—one who had no control over her emotions or her wolf.

I skidded into a parking space at the clinic and ran to the door just as Liza and her parents walked out of it. She looked her normal self with no signs of partial shifting.

“Liza? What’s going on?” I reached for her arm, but she pulled away from me.

When she wouldn’t meet my eyes, my stomach sank. Her mannerisms told me the episode was somehow my fault.

“We’re taking her home with us, Ty.” Liza’s mother looked at me with kind eyes, but her mouth was set in a tight line.

“I don’t mind taking her back to her house and staying with her.” I jogged to keep up with their pace. “Really, it’s no trouble at all.”

Scott held up a hand. “No, Ty. She needs rest.”

I jumped in front of them, blocking their path. “Sorry to be this way, but Liza is my mate, and I’m the one who should be taking care of her. She’s coming home with me.”

To my surprise, Scott seemed pleased by my insistence, as if he were hoping that’s what I would say.

“Good, Ty.” He reached over and patted my shoulder a little hard. “I agree that you *should* be more attentive to your mate.”

Damn. Talk about a backhanded compliment. Well, it was better than nothing.

Liza’s mom smiled, approval replacing the worry in her eyes. “All right, then. Thank you, Ty, for taking care of my daughter.”

Liza’s twisted mouth told me she wasn’t pleased with the arrangement. She didn’t fight me, though, when I placed my hand on the small of her back and led her to my car.

I helped her inside. “I’ll be right back.”

After handing her the keys so she could start the air conditioning, I jogged over to Liza's parents before they pulled out of the lot.

Scott rolled down the window when he saw me approaching. "What is it, Ty?"

"Liza doesn't seem like herself." I rested my hands on the top of the car. "What exactly happened to her?"

This time, Rory spoke up. "All we know is that something triggered Liza last night and it caused her to get uncharacteristically angry."

"What did the doctor say?" I needed even an ounce of insight before driving Liza home.

"He said that short tempers and bouts of rage are an omega trait." Scott glanced over my shoulder to check on Liza. "It's only prominent for unclaimed omegas."

He let the words hang in the air as if he wanted me to recognize that this was, in fact, all my fault.

"Damn it," I cursed under my breath as I took a step back. "What can we do to help her?"

Her dad sighed. "It's likely to happen more often now that she's no longer on suppressants." He paused and looked at his wife, who nodded her head, encouraging him to continue. "The doctor warned us that her scent increases with strong emotions. The last thing we need is for her to be at the grocery store and suddenly get pissed off because her favorite ice cream is out of stock. Or, heaven forbid, one of her clients pisses her off. An outburst like that could ruin her life, Ty."

I raked my hands through my hair. This was unbelievable. What the fuck was I going to do?

"The doctor suggested that we put her on a different suppressant, a stronger one, or possibly a combination of suppressants and anti-anxiety medication. It would be temporary, of course, until she is claimed."

"Does he think the medications would truly make a difference?" I asked.

“They could help with the flares of anger which some people experience with anxiety, but there’s no guarantee.” Scott gave me another pointed look and sighed.

Perfect. As if I needed more pressure on me right now.

Chapter 12

Liza

The car was as silent as a crypt while Ty drove, but we sure as hell weren't heading home. I watched out the passenger window, noticing we passed the diner, which was in the opposite direction of my house.

"Where are you taking me?" I tried not to sound too put out, but my emotions were a whirlwind, stirred up last night's involuntary shift.

Despite having shifted countless times throughout my life, the sensations I'd experienced were entirely novel. Fear and anxiety mingled with the resentment I harbored toward Ty for leaving me alone throughout the night. All that had caused an intense surge of emotions within me. Against my will, my wolf had surged forth, its instinctual nature overpowering my own volition.

Ty cleared his throat. "I thought we could go for a drive."

I didn't respond. What was the use? I was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. I really didn't have the energy to argue with him. Sure, I would've rather been at home in my soft bed, sleeping off whatever the hell I'd just experienced, but the trees soothed me as they whizzed by my window.

We drove on the back country roads of Presley Acres for what felt like an eternity, going in circles like a couple of lost souls. I rolled my window down and breathed in deeply. Something about the air quality in the country forced me to think peaceful thoughts. Probably had something to do with

less pollution and a sense of freedom—God knew, I hadn't experienced that in a while.

The farther we drove past massive horse farms and open fields, the more the tension in my shoulders and neck eased. The serene surroundings of towering trees and the wind rustling through their branches comforted my frayed nerves, and I felt a smidgen of gratitude toward Ty for taking a detour up into the mountains.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, Ty mustered up the courage to broach the subject that had sent me into a frenzy the night before. "Do you want to talk about what triggered you last night?"

I wasn't about to let him off the hook without getting some answers of my own, so I shot back, "Do you want to explain why you've been so cagey lately?"

Silence. More damn silence.

We both let out exasperated sighs, our frustration mingling in the air. It was clear as day that we were each dealing with our own twisted demons, but neither of us seemed ready to bare our souls.

Lost in my own thoughts, I stole a quick glance at Ty. His face wore a mix of exhaustion and longing, as if he was battling his own personal Hell. Part of me wanted to reach out to bridge the gap that had grown between us.

Instead, I decided to speak, hoping he'd hear the desperation in my words. "I don't like this, Ty. We're mates. We're supposed to spend the rest of our fucking lives together, but we can't even talk about our problems with each other. How are we supposed to make that work? From where I'm sitting, it seems like a steep hill that you're not willing to climb."

I grabbed the door handle as Ty jerked the steering wheel, pulling the car over to the side of the road and putting it in park. His chest heaved as he tried to keep his emotions in check, but his anxiety was palpable.

I couldn't hide my surprise at his reaction. I watched him with wide eyes. Whatever was bothering him had to be major.

He twisted in his seat to face me, still gripping the steering wheel with his left hand. "Before I tell you everything, I need you to know that you will always be my choice. Period."

Shit. What was he talking about? I pulled on the seatbelt to get some slack, shifting my body so I could tuck a leg underneath my ass. I wasn't prepared for anything serious, but Ty's preface had me scared out of my damn mind.

"I had a conversation with Dad... well, a couple of conversations." Ty paused and rubbed his forehead. "Dad suggested I take a temporary mate for the time being."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"He knows we're not ready to mate yet, but in order for him to pass the alpha powers to me, there has to be a mating ceremony, and I can't have a ceremony without taking a mate."

I stared at Ty as my brain processed his words. Now it was all making sense.

Ty turned away from me, staring down the old country road as if he saw a solution to all of our problems within his grasp. "He's suggesting that I take a temporary mate, just long enough to transfer the power. Then, when we're ready, I'd take you as my mate, instead."

In an instant, my rage peeked its head out. Without me having a moment to try and control it, my fangs extended as an ugly flare of jealousy and possessiveness came over me.

I opened my mouth to speak, but the animalistic growl that escaped my throat sounded nothing like me. "You can't take another mate. Why the fuck is your father in such a rush to marry you off? You're not ready to take me as a mate, but he thinks you're ready to be alpha?" My breathing became erratic as my heart rate elevated. "I thought it was all water under the bridge when it came to him slaughtering my pack. Apparently, though, he still sees me as the daughter of his enemies.

Dominic is willing to marry you off to the first slut who's willing so he doesn't have to look me in the eye every day."

Ty stared at me, his eyes wide with surprise. Instead of arguing with me, he did something completely unexpected. He reached out and cupped my face. His voice was gentle, not defensive. "Liza, look at me. You're fine. I'm here with you, and you're safe. There's nothing here that can hurt you, and I'm not going anywhere. You're my mate. Not anyone else."

His words washed over me, slowing my heart rate, the sensation of his warm hand on my face providing a type of solace in the midst of my unraveling. I absorbed the waves of calm that emanated from his body as I breathed in his familiar scent.

I melted into him, my forehead pressing against his chest while I blinked away the tears that had gathered in my eyes. He wrapped his arms around me and held me close, whispering soft words of comfort until, eventually, all the tension dissipated from my body.

I slumped in my seat, exhausted from my unsolicited transformation. A groan shuddered from my throat. I was drained.

Ty unbuckled me and pulled me onto his lap as I buried my face in his neck, attempting to recover and calm down completely.

"Is this what happened last night?" Ty asked, barely above a whisper.

I nodded. "It scares the shit out of me. I don't like the way it makes me feel so out of control. Plus, when my wolf comes forward partially, it's almost painful, but I can't stop it unless I calm myself down."

"What triggered this kind of reaction last night? Did you hear from Castro again?"

I hesitated. Ty and I were finally having a genuine moment together without arguing or worrying what the other was thinking. If I told him the truth, it would generate additional tension between us, and I wanted to enjoy the moment.

I lifted my head and locked eyes with Ty. His brows were furrowed, his mouth drawn tight in worry.

He was truly concerned for my well-being, so I decided to be honest. “When you texted that you were staying at the estate last night, such raw anger I’d never experienced before consumed me. I couldn’t control it, and before I knew it, my anger was feeding off the anxiety I experienced when my body started to shift against my will. It wasn’t a pretty sight.”

Ty sighed. “So, it was my fault. That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not your fault. I should have been able to control myself and manage my emotions better. You aren’t responsible for me being what I am. It’s the wolf within me, and for better or worse, it’s who I was engrained to be.” I sighed. “It’s a lot tougher being an omega than I expected. It’s probably for the best that I go back on my suppressants because these bouts of rage might only get worse. I don’t want to hurt someone, Ty.”

Ty’s hold on me became tighter. “I’m so sorry for not coming home and avoiding you. We have to do a better job at communicating or things won’t work out between us.” He loosened his grip and stared deep into my eyes. “I want this to work, Liza.”

“We *should* be more open with one another, even if we think we might upset the other person. We were kind of thrown into this relationship by fate, but it’s up to us to maintain a healthy bond.”

Instead of saying anything, Ty bent his head and kissed me. It was long, passionate, and possessive. His tongue danced with mine in a way that made me forget all my pain and sadness.

When he gently nibbled on my lower lip, I sighed, and my wolf growled with longing.

After hearing the bullshit about Ty taking another mate, my desire to have him was the only thing on my mind. Pushing on Ty’s chest with both hands, I hoisted my body up

and over him to straddle him. I lowered myself down, grinding against him slightly, just enough to let him know I was in control.

I placed both hands on his face, taking over the kiss, my tongue lapping against the roof of his mouth. Ty growled and grabbed my shoulders, pulling me down harder against his growing erection.

Ty met my eagerness, and it didn't take him long to figure out what I needed. He didn't question it. Didn't fight it. No words were spoken between us as our bodies did all of the talking.

In one fluid motion, Ty unbuckled his seatbelt and pushed the seat back as far as it could go. My body followed him as we suddenly became parallel to one another.

Our bodies intertwined without even thinking about who might drive by and see us. The thought of getting caught fucking Ty only made me wetter.

His hands roamed my body with a hunger he hadn't shown me before. It was as if he silently claimed me as his own, telling the temporary mates to go fuck themselves, which was just what I wanted. I moaned into his mouth, my body responding to his every touch.

The windows fogged over, and the only sounds were our ragged breaths and the soft creaking of the car's suspension.

Ty suddenly broke the kiss, and I whimpered at the loss of his touch. He looked at me with a fierce intensity, his eyes dark and smoldering. "I want every inch of you," he growled possessively.

I nodded, knowing that, at that moment, I belonged to him and no one else.

Ty's hands moved to my jeans, and he unbuttoned them with slow, deliberate movements. I lifted my hips, allowing him to pull them down, revealing my black lace panties.

He groaned at the sight of me, and my lips curled into a smile. If there were any doubt in Ty's mind about us, he was sure as hell feeling certain now.

Ty quickly yanked off his jeans, and I was pleased to see the evidence of his desire for me pressing against the front of his boxers. I quickly removed my panties and tossed them into the backseat.

“You’re so beautiful,” he growled.

Grabbing my ass and pulling me toward his face, he kissed down my body, planting kisses on my stomach, hip bones, and then my inner thigh.

“Please...” I moaned, my hips arching of their own accord. I wanted him there at the very center of my body—wanted him to give me what I needed.

Ty gave me a wicked grin, then buried his face between my legs.

My eyes widened as his mouth covered the most intimate place on my body, sending electric shocks of pleasure through me. I closed my eyes and let out a guttural moan.

Ecstasy racked through me as I grasped for something to stabilize myself. I slapped one hand against the roof of the car and grabbed the handle above the back door. Ty’s hands gripped my ass harder, gradually increasing the pace of his tongue, drawing out more pleasure than I thought was possible.

He flattened his tongue against my pussy and slowly moved up and down my clit. Then, just as I thought I couldn’t take anymore, his tongue formed a point and thrust into me right where I wanted his cock.

The sudden change in sensation made me scream. Ty paused. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Fuck, *no!*” I pushed his head back against the headrest and maneuvered my clit against his mouth. He moaned and moved his tongue in a circular motion as he slipped a few fingers inside me, swirling them around at the same pace that his tongue lapped against my clit.

His other hand reached around, kneading my ass. His fingers massaged every private centimeter of skin from one end to the other.

I moaned and writhed, pressing my body against his mouth, not wanting him to stop for even a second.

“Ty,” I breathed, quivering around him as my orgasm crashed over me. He held my hips steady as my muscles spasmed, and he lapped up all my juices as they flowed into his mouth.

I looked down at him and watched his eyes roll back in his head as he cleaned me with his tongue, tasting the results of his labor.

Ty’s fingers brushed against my thighs. They were warm and wet from being inside me. Suddenly, a burning, aching sensation rose from deep within my core. I was filled with a need so primal that it was a struggle to remain still.

Before I had a second to rethink it, I grabbed his hand and forced it back to my pussy. “All of them. Every single finger,” I instructed.

Ty’s breath caught in his throat, no doubt desperate to have his cock inside me. I wasn’t ready yet. I wanted to feel every sensation he could give me, so I closed my eyes as he slowly slipped one finger inside, then another, then another, until all five filled me.

I screamed from the intense pressure, the burning ache growing stronger by the second.

I opened my eyes to see Ty’s devilish smirk.

“I can feel you squeezing me.”

I grinned back and bit my lip, my hips pressing down against his hand.

“This is so not fair,” I moaned.

Ty shrugged and moved his fingers in and out of me faster.

“Please.”

“Please, what?” Ty asked. He’d give me anything I wanted.

“I need you. I need you inside me, Ty.”

“I’m here.”

“I need *you* to be inside me.”

Ty slowly, torturously, pulled his fingers from me. “Sit up, Liza.”

I pressed my knees into the seat and raised myself into the air. Ty held my gaze as he quickly shoved his boxers down. My gaze dropped to his shaft, and I gasped. It was harder and thicker than I remembered. My mouth watered, and I couldn’t decide if I’d prefer him in my mouth or in my pussy.

Like a moth to a flame, my hands wrapped around his cock, squeezing and stroking him as if my life depended on it.

Ty’s eyes closed as he writhed in the seat, and he reached up under my shirt to cup my breasts. His fingers found their way to my nipples, then gently pinched and rolled them from side to side. “I want them in my mouth.”

I released his cock just long enough to remove my shirt and bra, tossing them over my shoulder onto the dashboard.

I lowered my body, careful not to give Ty the pleasure he desperately wanted, keeping his dick in front of me as it brushed against my wet clit.

My breasts grazed his face as he grabbed them, squeezing them and pulling one into his mouth. He sucked and flicked my nipple with his tongue, sending chills down my body.

My core tightened as I found myself grinding against him, my arousal coating his rock-hard cock as every movement massaged my clit.

Ty moaned as he dug his fingers into my hip, pumping faster against my slit. “I need you now, Liza.”

I positioned myself over him, reaching down and curling my hand around his dick. Ty expected me to guide him directly into me, but I moved the tip of his cock around in circles, pleasing myself.

“Liza, please.” The ache in Ty’s voice only made me hornier, and I sank down onto him, gasping as he filled and stretched me. I was in control.

Ty wasted no time grabbing my ass with one hand and squeezing my breast with the other as he thrust inside me. When the full length of his cock was in, I screamed. “Yes, right there, Ty. Don’t fucking move.”

I reached behind me and grazed my nails over his balls as I braced my other hand against the ceiling of the car. My body rose up and back down as I moved my feet forward, placing them flat on either side of Ty’s chest.

The added pressure almost sent me over the edge as the position allowed Ty to go even deeper. He moved one hand down my stomach and pressed his thumb against my clit.

I rode him harder, desperate for release, my head almost hit the ceiling with every bounce.

“Liza!” Ty screamed as his cock tightened and then pulsed inside me as he filled me to the brim with his cum.

The warmth of his fluids and the sound of him coming pushed me over the edge. My muscles tightened around him as I threw my head back and screamed, my wolf growling from pure bliss. Heat spread throughout my body as I orgasmed so hard, tears streamed down my face.

As the waves of pleasure washed over me, and the aftershocks jerked my body against my will, everything else faded away. I didn’t think about my nightmares, Castro, or my and Ty’s future together.

All that mattered was here and now as our sweaty bodies found solace in one another.

Chapter 13

Ty

“What about here?” Liza leaned across the doorframe of her kitchen, balancing on a ladder with one foot.

I lunged forward, fear seeping into my veins like an icy river. I couldn't risk Liza falling. Not when our bond meant everything to me. Wouldn't it be so ridiculous if I had all these bodyguards protecting her night and day only to lose her when she hit her head falling off a damn ladder?

“Shit, Liza. Why don't you let me hold that for you?”

She rolled her eyes and grinned, her mischievous charm warming the room like a crackling fire. “That would be too easy. Now, tell me if this looks centered.”

As I considered the picture she had printed off, memories flooded my mind, melding with each pixel. We'd taken the selfie the night I took her to the steakhouse. The aroma of sizzling meat and the clinking of glasses replayed in my senses. I took it as a good sign; a promising message etched into the fibers of the photograph. She wanted us to be the centerpiece of her living room, a constant reminder of our connection. That had to mean something. It was a glimmer of hope shining through the fragments of uncertainty.

She hadn't given up on us, not even when I'd mentioned the possibility of taking a temporary mate. Sure, she'd been pissed and channeled that energy into fucking my brains out. Liza had been so hot for me the night before, telling me exactly what she wanted and moving my hands where she needed them to be. I'd loved every second of it.

“That’s perfect. Right there.”

Liza nodded and passed me the frame, then hammered the nail into the wall.

Things had been a lot better between us since our moment in the mountains. When she had partially turned and I had witnessed her losing control that way, I’d tried to remain calm. What Liza didn’t know was that I had been freaking the fuck out inside.

As the son of an alpha, I’d seen a lot of weird shit in my lifetime, from exhilarating hunts to mesmerizing pack dynamics. But amidst all those experiences, one thing had always held true: the complete and undeniable transformation that occurred when someone shifted. There was never an in-between. Seeing only fangs and claws mixed with Liza’s beautiful face had been fascinating and perplexing. If I was being honest with myself, I didn’t like it. It meant Liza had no control over her wolf, which wasn’t a step in the right direction for us mating, either.

I’d concluded that this wouldn’t be the last mind-boggling situation I’d experience with Liza. She was an omega, and other than what I knew from rumors and myths, I had no clue what she was capable of. The shock I’d seen in her eyes last night led me to believe that she didn’t fully comprehend her true identity, either.

Liza climbed down from the step ladder and backed up to admire her handiwork. “Looks good to me.”

I wrapped my arm around her waist. “My face looks nice hanging on your wall.”

She eyed me coyly. “Your face looks good in lots of places.”

My wolf stirred at her innuendo. Liza’s body was almost more than I could stand, and if I could, I’d spend every second of every day naked in her bed with her. Of course, that wasn’t possible, considering I had a ton of work to do for Keller Enterprises while also trying to save my family and Liza from Castro.

We still hadn't heard anything from him, which had me on edge. Liza noticed right away, and it had been a relief to share my feelings with her.

As if reading my thoughts, Liza turned and wrapped her arms around my neck. "What's on your mind?"

I sighed. "Fucking Castro."

Liza's face softened. "You've got to give yourself a break. You can't worry about him all the time. When he's ready to make a move, he will. Until then, we just have to wait."

"I'm not a very patient man."

"Yes, I know." Liza giggled and stood on her toes to kiss my cheek. "But you're doing your best, and that's all anyone can ask for."

I watched as she turned and walked to the kitchen. Talking to Liza had been exactly what I needed. We'd spent so much time frustrated with one another, and I could tell that she was happy I was confiding in her again.

As Liza pulled two plates from the kitchen cabinet to make lunch, a smile spread across my face. She was everything to me, on every possible level. Liza was sexy as hell, and her body drove me crazy, but her mind and spirit were magnetic. I found myself dying to talk to her to get her opinion and insight on everything.

We might not have fallen in love yet, but we were certainly on our way toward it.

After we ate, I left Liza to work on her laptop. She had scheduling and accounting items to attend to, and I knew she'd be safe with one of my bodyguards right outside her door.

I texted Dad to let him know that I needed to speak with him. Not surprisingly, he'd responded that he was working at home.

I found him behind his desk, as always, working up a storm.

The dark circles under his eyes had turned almost purple, and I wondered if he was getting any sleep. If he was half as

worried about the Castro situation as I was, I assumed he wasn't getting near enough the amount of sleep our family doctor had prescribed. For that matter, he wasn't even supposed to be working more than half a day, but I didn't dare point that out.

He was so engrossed in whatever was displayed on his computer screen that he didn't look up until I was sitting across from him. "Oh, Ty. Didn't hear you come in. What's the latest?"

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "If you're referring to Castro, I've got nothing. You?"

He sighed. "Nope. Nada. That son of a bitch is going to make us sweat it out, isn't he?"

I scoffed. "He's definitely in no hurry to give us a clue. I'm sure he's laughing it up in his secret lair."

Dad closed his laptop and gave me his undivided attention. "You wanted to talk about something?"

"Yeah." I cracked my knuckles, hoping he'd be receptive to my decision.

It wasn't that I was afraid of my father or what he might do if I didn't follow his suggestions. I just didn't want to pile more stress on him. Over the past few days, I'd found myself imagining him slumping to the floor as the last of his alpha strength left his body.

The Castro fiasco was speeding up the process of his decline. I didn't want to add to it.

I took a deep breath. "I'm not going to take another mate." There. I'd said it. Ripped off the Band-Aid.

I stared at Dad, watching his face for some sign of emotion.

He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "I figured as much." Disappointment dripped from his words.

"I'm hopeful that in a month's time, Liza will be ready to take my bite."

“That’s reassuring.” Dad’s tone had shifted. He was frustrated with my answer.

I straightened and held my hands up. “Listen, I’ll be the first to admit that Liza and I have had a rocky relationship, but she cares deeply about me. Of course, I feel the same way about her. We’re both invested enough to navigate this new normal together.”

“*New normal?*” Dad eyed me quizzically.

“You know, all the shit we’ve dealt with concerning her past, our family’s involvement with her pack, and, of course, Castro.” I paused. “Plus her being an omega. That presents its own set of challenges.”

I hoped he wouldn’t ask for more details because I didn’t want to tell him about Liza losing her control and shifting partially.

All I could do was hope that he would understand and accept our relationship.

He just sat there for a few moments, the silence hanging in the air between us.

I broke the silence. “I believe that me being a better partner, which has become a top priority, will help Liza see that we can spend the rest of our lives together. She needs consistency and reliability, and that’s what I intend to give to her. Not because I want to persuade her into mating with me, but because I want to *be* her mate.”

His eyes softened as he nodded slowly. “You’re right. You have to be the best version of yourself if you want her to commit to you for life. That’s all anyone can do in a relationship. But it will take more than that, especially with an omega.” He paused. “I hope you’re right about her coming around within a month. The future of our pack depends on it.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m determined to make this work.” I stood up, ready to let him get back to his work.

Nico popped his head into the room like a thief in the night, scaring the hell out of me. I jumped and my knee hit the desk. “Fuck, Nico. Where did you come from?”

Nico's smirk told me he got a kick out of scaring me. Then he got serious and shifted his gaze to Dad. "One of my men reported a package that was left at the gates."

"What kind of package?" Dad stood from his desk so quickly, his chair screeched along the hardwood.

My pulse ratcheted. This could be the clue we'd been waiting on from Castro.

Nico's face was grim as he shook his head. "I don't know yet, but it looks like it could be important. I figured you'd want to take a look at it before we dispose of it."

"Has security checked for explosives or any other type of security breach? I don't want anything blowing up in here."

Nico nodded. "The package has been thoroughly inspected." He turned and motioned to one of the security guys to bring the box forward.

I noticed that it had, indeed, already been opened. It had to be a clue from Castro. Who else would leave an unmarked package at the gates of the estate?

Nico confirmed my suspicions when he handed the package across the desk to Dad. "It's the first clue, sir."

My heart nearly beat out of my chest as I watched Nico pull out torn sheets of paper.

"Is that it? Our clue is shredded paper?" I leaned over the desk and stared at the pile of trash. "This has to be a fucking joke."

Nico shrugged as he pulled an envelope from the bottom of the box. "Dominic, it's addressed to you."

Dad ripped it open and read it aloud. "*Your first clue is within the enclosed pages. You have twelve hours to solve it. If you can't, the results could be explosive. Good luck.*"

I glanced at my watch. It was noon, which meant we had until midnight. "Let's not waste any time." I pulled one strip of paper from the massive pile and held it up to my face. It appeared to have been torn from a book. After inspecting several other pieces, I decided my first guess was correct.

There were no other markings or additional writing on the slips, and Nico had confirmed that the envelope contained no further clues. We were stuck.

I sat back in frustration, staring at the clutter on the desk. “How the hell are we supposed to get a clue from this mess? It makes absolutely no sense.”

Dad slipped his reading glasses on and turned his desk lamp on. “There has to be some kind of clue within the words on each strip. We’ll have to read them, front and back, until something stands out.”

I texted Liza to let her know that we’d received the first clue and that it would be a while before I made it back to her house. The last thing I wanted was for her to worry about me or to get upset thinking that I’d decided to leave her alone again.

We spent the next hour reading over the pages until my eyes blurred. Nico’s team even brought in magnifying glasses with lights attached to help us see better, but we couldn’t make sense of any of it. It seemed like Castro had torn random pieces of paper from multiple books and mixed them up in a box.

“Maybe there’s a common location on each page, a repeated word or something. If we can find a common denominator, we’d have our clue.”

Nico’s men rolled a whiteboard into Dad’s office where we scribbled words that we thought might be on each page. Some pages did have words in common, but unless we found them on every single page, we eliminated them.

I grabbed Dad’s laptop and searched for specific passages, which then enabled me to nail down the title of each book. “I’ve never heard of these novels, but perhaps they have a common theme or maybe they’re set in the same location.”

Within the next hour, multiple security guards joined us with their laptops. It wasn’t long before Dad’s office looked like the headquarters for the FBI.

The titles of the books were scribbled on the whiteboard, and each person chose a book and searched for anything they could find about the book itself, and even the authors and publishing companies.

Some of them had recurring themes or similar locations, like a beach, but we couldn't nail down one common word, location, or idea for all of the books.

Nico, who was always very cool, calm, and collected suddenly stood, knocking his chair into the floor. "This makes no fucking sense."

He was just as frustrated and exhausted as the rest of us. I imagined Castro, sitting in some dark cave somewhere, watching us on a closed-circuit TV, laughing his ass off. The clue had to be so obvious that we would never consider it as a possibility.

I walked to Dad's desk and picked up the box, examining it closer under the light, hopeful that Castro had left some small clue on the box packaging itself. There was nothing, though.

No longer able to hide my anger, I chucked the box across the room. It hit the door just as Liza opened it.

"Whoa. Maybe I should've knocked." She stopped in her tracks and surveyed the room, shocked at the transformation and the sheer number of people crammed into every corner. "It looks like you all need a brain break."

None of us could argue with her. I glanced around the room. Every single person looked like they might pull their hair out at any second. We'd been at it for hours and weren't any closer to uncovering the clue than when we'd first started.

"I agree with Liza." Dad stood from his chair and stretched. "We need to take a breather. We can come back in thirty minutes and pick back up where we started. You're all welcome to anything we have in the kitchen."

Mutters of relief sounded through the room as the guys filed out of the office.

“I’ll keep looking, Dominic.” Nico stood and pointed at Dad. “You need to get some rest. The stress isn’t good for you.”

“Nico’s right.” I was worried about the sheer amount of stress Dad was under. We could figure this out without him being in the room. He needed a break.

“If you’re sure.” Dad made his way to the door. “I’ll lie down for a moment. If you find anything, let me know.”

Once everyone was gone, Liza shut the door. “Can I take a stab at it?”

I handed her a handful of shredded paper. “Have at it.”

Nico took Dad’s place at the desk. “None of us have been able to figure it out.” He gestured to the whiteboard. “We’ve tried to think of every possible connection, but nothing has panned out.”

Liza wasted no time, spreading the sheets out on the desk and bending the neck of the lamp downward so she could get a better look. Her face scrunched up, and it took all my restraint not to pinch her ass. She looked adorable.

Liza eyed Nico. “Can you hand me a highlighter, please?”

Without another word, she went to work on the sheets of paper while Nico and I stared on. I had no clue what she was up to, but Liza seemed to have found something in common between each sheet.

It took her thirty minutes before she looked up at us. “I’ve got it.”

“No fucking way.” Nico practically leaped over the desk to see.

I laughed nervously, thinking she was joking. Was it possible that she strolled into the office and solved the mystery after twenty men had worked on it for multiple hours?

I stood and looked over her shoulder as she finished putting them in some type of order.

“Look.” She pointed from left to right at each highlighted line. Liza had highlighted the first sentence of every page and put them in the correct order.

I’m always running though I never walk. Sometimes I can sing, but I never talk. I have hands, and I have a face. You use me to decide your pace.

Nico let out a bark of laughter and smiled at Liza. “You’re one smart cookie.”

“I can’t believe you did that. You’re a genius, Liza.” I picked her up and twirled her around, planting a loud kiss on her mouth. “We’d all been looking at the pages separately. We never thought to look at them as a unit.”

A burst of pride erupted in my chest as Nico left the room to tell Dad that we’d figure it out. Once he was out of the room, I pulled Liza down on my lap in Dad’s chair.

I kissed her soft lips and ran my hands through her hair.

She pulled away, giggling. “I guess that means you’re proud of me.”

I nodded and grinned from ear to ear. “Proud is an understatement. I’ve always known you were intelligent, but that was genius-level shit.”

Liza snorted. “It wasn’t that big of a deal, Ty.”

“Oh, yes, it was. In fact, I want to tell you something.” I paused, trying to form the words that would best explain my feelings for Liza. “I’ve always had good things given to me my entire life simply because I’m a prince, but you are the best thing I’ve ever had to work for.”

She looked up at me with her huge, blue eyes, and at that moment, I was certain of one thing.

I didn’t need another month to know that I was very much in love with Liza Mims.

Chapter 14

Liza

“You’re amazing, Liza. Do you know that?” Ty whispered in my ear, and I nestled closer to him.

The adrenaline of solving the clue, and my incredibly handsome mate’s high praise had awakened my wolf.

The more Ty kissed and caressed me, the stiffer his cock grew against my hip.

A girl could only withstand so much temptation, so I quickly found myself turning to face him. I kissed him back passionately, pushing my core against his massive cock.

Ty moaned and pulled me closer, allowing his hands to roam down my back and cup my ass.

Just as I began to writhe against him, I wrenched my mouth from his.

Ty watched me as I pushed myself up and off of his lap, though I would’ve been fine staying there all day. The sound of footsteps approaching down the hallway had snapped me out of my horny daze and brought me back to reality. Ty and I weren’t alone at my house or in his car. We were in his dad’s office trying to outsmart Castro. Now wasn’t the time to get off, even though I would’ve been perfectly happy doing so.

Ever since I’d been announced as Ty’s fated mate, I had a nagging feeling that I needed to prove myself. Not only was I *not* a royal, but I also looked different from everyone in the Keller pack.

The last thing I needed was for Dominic to walk in on Ty and me dry humping on his office chair. That wasn't the type of vibe I hoped to give off, especially since I was expected to be the alpha's mate.

Persephone's face popped into my mind. I was expected to be elegant, mature, and loyal, just like her. Not someone so horny they could hardly wait for their future father-in-law to walk out the door of his office so she could jump his son's bones.

Luckily, I'd solved Castro's puzzle, which had shocked Nico and Ty. To my surprise, Ty was more than a little proud of me. The way he stared at me so intensely and held me close, pulling me into a passionate kiss, left me wondering if his feelings for me were deeper than he'd shown so far.

We'd had our moments where we weren't on the same page, and we'd certainly pushed each other's buttons over my security and how everything was handled concerning Castro, but the past twenty-four hours had been wonderful. Ty was showing me that he was there for me, all the time, no matter what. It's what I needed from him, and he was surpassing my expectations of a mate. Would he keep it up? Only time would tell. I hoped to the gods that he would.

Dominic burst into the room, his face red with excitement. "Liza, my dear. Nico says you've done it. You actually figured the damn thing out. Is it true?"

I smiled sheepishly and shrugged. "Yes. It's really not that big of a deal. I just noticed a pattern with the first sentence on each sheet."

"Not a big deal?" Dominic threw his head back and laughed louder than I'd ever heard. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't really seen Dominic show much emotion other than anger before.

"It's a huge fucking deal, Liza. You solved a puzzle we've spent hours on." He gestured toward the hallway, presumably talking about Nico and his men. "And these are the best of the best. It's not like they're a bunch of amateurs. Very impressive, my dear."

My cheeks burned as Nico and his men filed back into the room. “It was by chance, really. Some of the papers were stacked in a way that formed a sentence from the words. So, I looked through all the pages and began constructing the riddle. You all were in the middle of it. I came in with a fresh pair of eyes, that’s all.”

Nico slow-clapped, and the entire team joined in, giving me a standing ovation. They were already on their feet, but still, I was flattered.

Dominic smiled softly. “You’re a very bright young lady. I dare say that’s a great quality to have in a mate.” He winked at Ty. “Don’t you agree, son?”

Ty snaked his arm around my shoulder and beamed at me. “I couldn’t agree more, Dad. She’s definitely a keeper.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling my cheeks growing even warmer. “I’m glad it was helpful.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Ty whispered in my ear. He gave me a tight squeeze before turning toward Nico. “Now that we have the riddle, what’s the plan?”

Nico cleared his throat and took command of the room, as I assumed he had done many times before. He had an aura that demanded everyone’s attention, so it didn’t surprise me in the least that he was Dominic’s righthand man. “I’m going to read the riddle aloud and then we can brainstorm.”

When he finished reading, he turned to Dominic. “Obviously, the riddle is referring to a clock, but what does a clock have to do with Castro’s location? That could be anywhere in the world.”

Dominic nodded thoughtfully. “It could be, but we need to think outside the box. Could a clock represent something other than time?”

The brainstorming began, and soon several ideas were suggested.

Ty spoke up. “You know how each state has an official bird and flower? Do we know if a clock is an official representation of a city or state?”

One of Nico's men, who'd been typing away on his laptop, shook his head. "I'm not finding anything. At least not in the United States. Should we search in other countries?"

Dominic grunted. "No. That wouldn't make any sense. Why would Castro flee the country and expect us to find him within twelve hours? We've almost used up all the allotted time just making heads or tails out of the strips of paper."

Nico nodded. "I agree. He has to be close by. I'd be surprised if he were outside the Texas borders."

I stared at the riddle that had been scribbled on the whiteboard. "I don't think this is the answer to where Castro is." The room went silent as everyone gave me their full attention. "It's just the next clue."

Nico raised one eyebrow. "Right. I think we can all agree that it's the next clue, but how does it play into the overall goal of finding Castro?"

I sighed. "It's a scavenger hunt."

Ty wrote the word 'clock' on the board and circled it several times with a red marker. "Liza's right. Piecing the sentences together correctly was only the first part of Castro's game. There's got to be more to it. He wants us to hunt him down."

"What the hell does a clock have to do with anything?" Dominic growled, coming down from the high of solving the riddle now that we might be running out of time to solve the clue.

Just then, the large grandfather clock downstairs chimed ten times. The sound of the repetitive bell made me think of my time catering downtown, and something clicked in my mind. "What if the clue is the Presley Acres bell tower? It's not technically a clock, but it rings every hour on the hour. City officials keep it right on track with the UTC, so it's always exact."

"What the hell is the UTC?" Nico asked, his hands on his hips and head cocked to the side.

“It’s the Universal Coordinated Time—the standard everyone regulates their clocks by.” I hoped Dominic didn’t think I was a know-it-all. I just happened to know a thing or two about time. No big deal. “Anyway, now that I think about it, the bell tower is the biggest clock in town. What do you think?” I eyed Dominic, who was staring out of the window.

Finally, he nodded. “You might have a good point, Liza. It’s worth a shot to check it out.” He turned to Nico. “Have your team pull the SUVs around to the front. We’re heading to the bell tower.”

“Yes, sir.” Nico nodded and raced out the door, his security team right behind him.

We were one step closer to uncovering the truth about this whole mess. I had a nagging suspicion that the bell tower clock had something to do with our mission. We just had to figure out what. Hopefully, there would be some answers waiting for us at the top of the tower.

We loaded up into the SUVs and headed into town. I watched as a few people out and about stopped to stare at the convoy of black SUVs with tinted windows. We must’ve looked like a presidential motorcade speeding down the highway. All we were missing was a police escort.

If Castro wanted to watch us attempt to solve his puzzle, he’d have no trouble seeing us coming.

My left knee bounced up and down from the adrenaline and nerves. I prayed I was right about the tower, because if I wasn’t, Dominic and Nico would be pissed. The whole fiasco was coming down to the wire since we only had until midnight to solve the riddle. If I’d sent us on a wild goose chase in the wrong direction, we’d never make it to another part of town in time.

Plus, I had no idea what would happen if we didn’t find the next clue by midnight, but my gut told me it wouldn’t be good. After all, Castro was sick and demented. He’d probably created a horrific punishment if our time ran out.

The bell tower loomed in the distance like a beacon of hope. We were almost there, it was just a matter of getting past the guards and into the tower. Though, I figured having the alpha of the Keller pack with us would be helpful.

We pulled up in front of the tower at eleven thirty. The stress combined with the adrenaline left me feeling nauseated, and I fought back the urge to retch. Judging from the way the security guards were all shifting uneasily in their seats, they felt the same.

Ty grabbed my hand and squeezed it as I stepped out of the SUV. “It’s going to be okay, Liza. Take a deep breath.”

“I’m trying to calm down. I just have a really horrible feeling about this, Ty.” My teeth chattered, and I wasn’t even cold. “If this isn’t the right place, everyone’s going to blame me. I don’t know if I can handle the pressure.”

He pulled me close. “You solved the riddle for us after we spent a mind-numbing amount of time on it. We’re all eternally grateful to you.”

I nodded and took a deep inhale through my nose in an attempt to calm my racing heart. Ty kissed me on the forehead just as Dominic moved to the front of our team, pulling a keyring from his pocket.

“What’s that?” I whispered to Ty.

“Dad has the key to the city, so to speak. He can come and go from any official building without question, so I’m assuming he’s going to unlock the tower.”

As soon as Dominic unlocked the door, Nico pushed his way through. He held up his hand, instructing his security team to spread out and make sure the inside of the tower was secure. “You should stay outside, Dominic. We can’t risk something happening to the alpha.”

Dominic scoffed. “You of all people should know better than that, Nico. I’ll do nothing of the sort. I’m coming in.”

Nico gave a defeated sigh but didn’t argue as he stood back and allowed his boss to step into the dark building. Ty and I followed closely behind.

My eyes adjusted to the dim lighting just in time to recognize a negative energy shift in the room. What had been an anxious and anticipatory moment suddenly changed into full-blown panic.

The security team froze in their tracks the moment Nico shouted, “Nobody move!”

I scanned the room, trying to make sense of it all, then my heart sank to my ass when I saw it. There, attached to the wall next to the clock that signaled for the bell to ring, was a bomb.

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered, covering my mouth with my hand. I squinted at the countdown on the bomb and realized it wasn’t moving.

Why would Castro put a bomb in the tower if he didn’t intend for it to go off?

Nico flipped a light on and moved in closer to inspect the apparatus that had been attached to the brick wall with a mountain of silver duct tape. His team held up flashlights to cast more light and took pictures. Some of them frantically searched online to try and get a better understanding of the bomb.

“Liza, you need to get out of here.” Ty pushed me back toward the open door.

“I’m not leaving you.” I looped my arm through his and stood as stiff as a board. “Don’t ask again, Ty.”

He sighed but acquiesced, which was a welcomed change. Maybe he was starting to understand that I had a mind of my own and wouldn’t be easily swayed.

Nico gestured for us to stay put and stepped back a few feet from the bomb. He placed his hands on either side of it, muttering something under his breath. Then he gently touched a string and followed it to the door. “It was rigged to the door. As soon as the door swung open, the cord snapped. When it snapped, the countdown stopped. My guess is that the whole place would have blown if we didn’t make it here by midnight.”

I glanced back at the bomb and took note of the red numbers frozen on the screen. Twenty-five. We walked into the tower at eleven thirty-five.

“Does that mean it’s dead? It’s not going to detonate?” Dominic stood tall, but I could see he was just as nervous as the rest of us.

“It *should* be dead, but from what we know of this bastard, I can’t know for sure.” Nico pulled out his phone and made a call, telling someone that we had a code red on our hands.

I didn’t have a degree in criminal justice or forensics, but I was smart enough to know that code red meant a damn bomb had been found and the bomb squad needed to get their asses to the bell tower ASAP.

Nico shoved the phone back into his pocket and turned to face us. “We should all get out of here just in case the place is still rigged to blow. There could be more bombs hidden in here, and I wouldn’t put it past that fucker to give us a sense of security right before blowing us to bits.”

He didn’t have to ask us twice. We raced out of the building and sat in the vehicles while we watched the authorities and bomb squad assist Nico’s security team.

My heart raced as I clutched Ty’s hands. It felt like hours had gone by, and I found myself half-expecting the entire bell tower to go up in flames, killing everyone inside.

After thirty minutes or so, Nico’s team emerged with the bomb squad. Nico held the detached bomb in the air to let us know it was safe.

The bomb squad, dressed in their full gear, dispersed the explosives, and we were given the okay to enter the building.

All of us let out a collective sigh of relief. We had narrowly avoided disaster, not to mention the surrounding buildings and the small neighborhood behind the tower.

Nico waved us over, a white envelope in his hands. “This was taped to the wall behind the bomb. I’m assuming it’s from Castro.”

Dominic moved forward, snatching the envelope from Nico. I couldn't help but notice Dominic's hands were shaking as he ripped the envelope open.

Alpha or not, this had been a highly stressful evening, and no one was immune to the anxiety-inducing charade we'd been forced to participate in.

As Dominic scanned the letter, his face fell.

Ty spoke up. "Aren't you going to read it aloud?"

Dominic sighed and read from the beginning.

"Congratulations, you saved your town from a slight tragedy. I must admit, I'm a bit surprised you figured it out. Maybe you're not as dumb as I expected and that... is concerning. But you can rest easy. I'm a man of my word. Your next clue will be arriving soon. Sleep well, you're going to need it."

Chapter 15

Ty

The days following Castro's bell tower fiasco were more than stressful. There was a lot going on at Keller Enterprises, and though I wanted to shut it all out and focus solely on Castro, I couldn't.

Everyone looked to me for final decisions when it came to negotiating deals. In one of our board meetings, I'd found myself in the middle of a heated power struggle between Bryce and the owner of a company we were in talks with.

The owner was well past the age of retirement and had no children or grandchildren to whom he could leave his business. Instead, he'd reached out to Keller Enterprises, hoping we could come to some sort of agreement.

Every time we had a meeting and it looked like we'd come to an agreement where we were prepared to sign on the dotted line, the owner backpedaled and changed the terms of the contract.

Bryce's hair was sticking up all over his head from running his hands through it so often. He looked awful. "If you don't want to make the deal, then why are you wasting our damn time?"

I held up a hand to shut Bryce up before I had to ask him to leave the room.

"You don't really want to sell your company, do you?" I said, calling the man's bluff. "At our last meeting, you told me you were anxious to move forward with the next chapter of your life and enjoying the fruits of your labors on some private

island.” I scoffed. “This doesn’t sound like the same man who swore he’d never sit in on another board meeting.”

He glared at me from across the table. “Tyson, you don’t know what it’s like to build something from the ground up. Not everyone in this world gets their fortune handed to them on a silver platter. We have to earn our keep.” He stood and walked to the window, leaning against the wall. To the casual observer, he appeared indifferent, but I knew he had a bad knee and couldn’t put his weight on it for long.

“Do you trust Keller Enterprises to continue your legacy?” I ignored the asshole’s rude comment about me not having to work hard for anything. If he only knew. “I’ve even offered for you to stay on the board of directors. What more could you ask for?”

Bryce, who’d sulked in the corner long enough, said, “I may be biased, but there’s no one else in Texas—the entire country, for that matter—that I’d trust handing my business over to than Ty Keller. He works his ass off day and night to ensure his companies not only stay afloat, but surpass everyone’s expectations.”

I nodded at Bryce, silently thanking him for his kind words and, more importantly, for taking the time to calm the fuck down before he lost his temper completely and said something that sunk the deal.

By the end of the day, we acquired the company, but it hadn’t come easily. We’d spent several hours going over every detail of the contract for what felt like the hundredth time.

As I drove to the estate, my mind went back to Castro, like it always did when I had a minute alone. The burden of work wasn’t the only thing that left me feeling drained. Castro was due to send us another clue at any second, yet he left us to wring our hands and jump at every unusual sound.

Liza seemed to sleep better now that she knew I wouldn’t leave her side. I hadn’t slept at the estate for several nights, and I was getting used to Liza’s warm, soft body, and her gentle breathing that lulled me to sleep.

All my pent-up nervous energy needed to be released. I had to run. Thank the gods it was a full moon and the pack would be gathering.

But first, food. The meeting to acquire that company had run through lunch. Now, though, my stomach growled, reminding me I needed sustenance to fuel me for the long night of running ahead.

My mother was in the kitchen, supervising the chefs preparing tonight's feast. It was a long-standing tradition for the alpha's family to provide food after a pack run, and it created a cohesive family feel.

"What's on the menu tonight?" I slung my arm around Mother's shoulders, making her jump.

"Ty!" She turned and slapped my shoulder. "You know never to sneak up on me like that, you turd."

I chuckled. "If I can't scare you from time to time, what fun would life be?"

Her smile quickly faded as she turned back to her duty as the alpha's wife, coordinating the meal, ensuring there was enough food and drinks for everyone.

She scowled as she went over her checklist, avoiding my gaze.

"Hey." I snatched the clipboard from her and tossed it onto the counter. "What's wrong? Is Dad okay?"

She sighed. "Your father is perfectly fine, Ty." Her lips were still pursed, so I grabbed a bag of chips from the pantry and popped one into my mouth as I studied her face.

Mother looked tired, but she also seemed extremely frustrated over something. "Then, what is it? Something's bothering you, I can tell."

Grabbing my arm, she pulled me out of the kitchen and into the dining room, away from the chefs. "If you must know, Ty, I'm feeling a little left out." She crossed her arms and huffed like a child. "Your father isn't telling me anything

about this mess with Liza's psycho ex. And, quite frankly, I don't like it."

My head jerked back. What the hell? "Let me correct you on one detail: Castro isn't Liza's ex. Apart from in his delusional mind, they were never together. Are we clear on that? He's just a psycho who's obsessed with her."

Mother mumbled something under her breath, then raised her voice a bit so I could hear her. "That's what I meant."

"So, you're saying Dad's intentionally keeping you in the dark?" I had no idea she was so interested in the shit we'd been dealing with.

"I'm out of the loop, Ty. Even the staff have noticed. You all gather in your father's office and have your little secret talks, and I'm stuck out here doing stupid tasks to keep the house running. I have no clue what's going on."

I pursed my lips. I'd never known how to approach Mother when she started pitching a fit like a toddler because she wasn't getting her way. "Have you told Dad how you feel?"

She nodded. "Of course. He waves me off as if it's not a big deal and then tells me not to worry because he's handling it and has it all under control, but I'm not a fucking idiot, Ty. I have two perfectly good ears and a great set of eyes. I don't need to be cosseted or handled. Something's wrong, and I wish you all would just tell me."

I shoved a handful of chips into my mouth to buy myself some time. She would keep going till she ran out of steam. Maybe if I kept food in my mouth and just let her speak, she would spit out whatever it was she felt the need to say, and we could all move on with our day.

As expected, she spoke up again. "I've noticed Liza is always present at those important meetings. I understand that Liza will be the new... mate to the alpha, but until you take the seat of power, *I* am still the queen of this castle, and everyone should be damn well mindful of that fact."

With that, Mother turned on her heels and stormed up the stairs. I shoved another handful of chips into my mouth as she

slammed her bedroom door.

Yep. That was the temper tantrum I had expected. My mother was an amazing woman who could be depended on for anything, but she took first prize in being high maintenance.

I took a seat at the head of our large dining table and finished off the bag of chips. Her confession of feeling left out had quickly turned into an attack on Liza. If I didn't know better, I'd say my mother was jealous of Liza and was worried about her stomping over her territory as the alpha's mate.

But why was she so upset? Was there more to it than just Liza being included in the meetings concerning Castro?

I thought back to her words and realized that she was probably feeling left out because of all the time Dad had been spending with Liza—time he used to spend with Mother.

What Mother didn't realize was that we weren't only trying to save Liza but our entire pack. I was certain Dad wanted to protect Mother from knowing the truth, and I fully supported him in that decision.

Mother wouldn't be able to handle the stress that came from knowing. Of that much, I was certain.

After grabbing a soda from the fridge, I went up to Dad's office.

"How'd the acquisition go today?" he asked when I sat down.

"It almost didn't happen. That motherfucker tried to pull out at the last second again, but I finally convinced him Keller Enterprises was his best bet."

Dad rolled his eyes. "Nothing can ever be simple, can it?"

"Absolutely not." I looked down at my feet as I wondered how to broach the subject of my mother with him. Better to get it over with. "Speaking of things not being simple, I just had an interesting conversation with Mother."

"Oh, yeah?" Dad raised his eyebrows and sat back in his chair. "What about?"

“She doesn’t like being left out of our meetings.” I cleared my throat. “She is also under the impression that Liza is getting special treatment, even though she’s not the mate to the alpha yet. I think she’s jealous of Liza and feels like her position as queen is being overrun prematurely.”

“Shit.” Dad sighed. “Persephone is overreacting, which comes as no shock. I mentioned something to her the other day, and I’m afraid that’s what’s gotten her all riled up.”

“Are you going to tell me or just leave me hanging?” I fidgeted with the round attachment on the back of my phone. Why would Dad say anything to piss Mother off? I thought he knew better than that.

“I brought up the fact that we’d be moving to the family home once you took over. I suggested we should start packing up some of our personal things and begin moving things over there now so that when the time comes, it’s an easier transition for everyone.”

“Oh. Fuck.”

“Fuck, indeed.” Dad huffed. “She didn’t take it very well and said that she was being pushed out of her home when she hadn’t even lost her place yet.”

Grimacing, I scratched the back of my head. I’d been so wrapped up in the drama with Castro and trying to convince Liza that we should perform the mating ceremony that I hadn’t given much thought to the logistics of becoming alpha.

When the alpha retired, he and his family moved out of the estate house and into the smaller family home. It was still on the same land, but it was a less grandiose home that sat on the other side of the property.

“You know, you guys don’t have to move out. You’re welcome to stay here.”

Dad pushed away from his desk and walked around it to stand in front of me. His lips turned up into a small smile as he reached out and patted my cheek. “Yes, Ty. We do need to move out. When you take over, this will be the place for you to grow and eventually start your own family. It’s where you’ll

begin your legacy. If your mother is in this house, she'll just railroad Liza and want to keep running things her way."

I groaned. "She's going to want to run everything her way, anyway. Might as well do it from within the estate instead of from a distance."

Dad chuckled. "Change is scary for everyone, especially your mother. She's a creature of habit who finds solace in the familiar. It was scary when we became king and queen, and it'll be scary for us to step down. But don't forget that you have a voice, too. You can make your own decisions and shape your future however you want to. We just want the best for you, always."

I grinned, enjoying the side of Dad I didn't see often in my life. I supposed aging and seeing his time as alpha coming to an end had left him feeling a little more nostalgic and sentimental than normal.

"I want you to know that I'll always be there for counsel, son. You don't have to do everything alone once you take on the alpha position."

I sighed, a surge of emotions overtaking me. I stood and pressed my forehead against his. My wolf rumbled with recognition of not only our alpha but our sire.

An hour later, Liza arrived just in time for the pack run. I met her at the front door and scooped her off her feet. Tucking my face into her neck, I inhaled her scent, then kissed her deeply.

She giggled. "Wow, what a welcome."

I curled my fingers in between hers. "Most of the pack are already here, but I wanted to talk to you about something before we join them." I led her to the small parlor, where we took a seat near the fireplace. "I spoke with my mother today, and I get the sense she's feeling a little left out."

"Really? Why?"

"Well, she feels like you're involved in all of the important meetings regarding Castro while she's left on the outskirts, not knowing what the hell's going on."

Liza sat back and stroked her thumb over my knuckles. “Does she blame me? I don’t have any control over who attends what meetings. If it were up to me, I’d say she should be in every single one. It involves her just as much as it does me. Why leave her out?”

I shifted in my seat. “It’s not that Dad wants to keep her in the dark, per se, but he’s trying to protect her from the stress and anxiety. It doesn’t help that Dad told her they need to start moving their belongings to the other house on our property to make it an easy transition when you and I take over.”

Liza’s eyes widened. “I hadn’t thought about that. So, essentially, we’ll be kicking her out of her own home?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s just how these matters are handled. Custom dictates that the retired alpha and his mate move out so the new alpha can... raise a family in the larger house.”

“What should I do?” Liza lowered her voice to a whisper. “I don’t want your mother to hate me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” I said, rubbing her arm. “I do think it would be a good idea for the two of you to get to know one another better.”

Liza glanced across the hall into the dining room, where Mother was directing the staff on how to set up the buffet table. She turned back to me. “Are you sure she even wants me around? I don’t want my presence to piss her off.”

I sighed because, honestly, I wasn’t sure. Liza was going to be my mate whether or not Mother liked her, and while it was important to me that the two of them got along, Liza would always come first. “I think it would be good for you to learn some things from Mother while she’s still in the queen’s role. She can give you a better idea of what’s expected from the mate of the alpha. It would also be a chance for you both to get better acquainted, and maybe give her the opportunity to warm up to you.”

Liza shrugged. “I’ll give it a shot, but I need to run first. My wolf is feeling angsty.”

I kissed her gently on the lips. “Then, we shall run.”

I led Liza to the clearing, which was already empty. The rest of the pack had shifted while we were talking inside, so we quickly stripped and shifted. Liza nudged me, allowing me to take the lead.

I took off at a breakneck speed, racing through the underbrush and dodging trees. Liza kept up with me, barely a few paces behind. We eventually settled into a comfortable pace, running and leaping all around the Keller property.

After running for about an hour, Liza nipped at my heel and nuzzled my neck before darting off back toward the house. She was done running and wanted to take some time to chat with Mother.

Not wanting her to run by herself, worried that Castro could be around any corner, I followed her back to the clearing. Once she shifted, I watched from the woods as she walked up the path to the back door.

I wasn't done running. My wolf needed more time to rid ourselves of this anxious energy. Sensing Dad was close, I followed his scent and found him sitting alone near the creek.

Dad's wolf was massive and strong. Much larger than everyone's, including mine. Only another alpha, however, could sense the change in Dad's aura. The pack might notice a slight change but not the full effect. His aura might seem softer to them somehow, but it wouldn't alarm them.

When it got to a point where they couldn't sense anything from him at all, that was when worry would settle over the pack's members. Luckily, they couldn't see the alpha fading from him. It was only a matter of time, though.

I slumped down next to him and stared out over the water reflecting the moonlight. I understood why Dad had chosen this spot to rest. It was peaceful.

The worry radiating from Dad's wolf was overwhelming. We both knew that this could possibly be his last full moon as the alpha.

I had told Bryce that Dad had a few months, but the slump in my father's posture indicated that the weight of the alpha

was becoming too much for him. He was doing his best to hold on, to wait for me to mate with Liza, but time was running out.

I pressed in close, our fur blending as I sent comforting waves to him. I didn't want him to worry.

It was a defining moment. With unwavering determination, I decided I would claim Liza by the next full moon. I needed to prove to her that our connection was destined—a bond that surpassed all others—and when that time came, I would accept the alpha power from Dad, symbolizing the passing of the torch and taking my place as the head of the pack.

Chapter 16

Liza

Ty insisted on following me to the clearing in his wolf form, making sure I shifted without any trouble. Even though the Keller Estate had more security than the fucking White House, we were all on edge over Castro and his Houdini-like abilities to hunt us down and discover buried information about our pasts.

Having seen the bomb that could've blown our downtown area to bits made the situation all the more real to me. Not that I'd thought it all make-believe, but it just brought everything into perspective. Castro was willing not just to destroy property or leak information, but to kill innocent people. I no longer argued about the bodyguards or the app on my phone that enabled Ty and his security team to pinpoint my location if needed.

I shifted back to human form and dressed quickly. When I turned, I found Ty still watching. I nodded in his direction to show my appreciation and that I'd be fine walking the rest of the way to the house, knowing full well he wouldn't budge until I was safely inside. Honestly, though, I felt safer just knowing he was close.

The run had been therapeutic for me. I'd been tied up in knots from everything that was happening around me. It had been a welcome release of endorphins to run free under the full moon. My head was clearer, my steps were lighter, which gave me courage to attempt to get better acquainted with Ty's mom.

By the time I made it through the back door, I found Persephone putting the finishing touches on the buffet table. Several pack members had already completed their run and were lining up to eat.

Persephone smiled warmly, greeting each person by name, and handing them a plate.

How did she remember all their names? I could barely remember the names of my staff members and was certain I'd never memorize the upper echelon of the pack. There were so many of them, and even more of the lower pack members. Had she taken the time to learn their names as well? I doubted it.

"Hi, Persephone." I approached the table cautiously. If what Ty had said was true and she was feeling pushed out, I didn't want to piss her off just by being here.

She whipped around, narrowing her eyes at me, obviously confused as to why I was there and looking for an ulterior motive.

"Do you need any help?" I gestured toward the buffet line. "Ty's still running, and I thought I'd join you inside. Looks like you've got a long line of people to feed."

"Oh, er... Certainly." She couldn't have been any more surprised if I had sprouted wings and flown up into the vaulted ceilings of the mansion. Regaining her composure, she gestured to a small table. "Some help would be very much appreciated, Liza. Thank you. There's a stack of plates over there that need to be filled. Would you mind taking care of that?"

I nodded and set to work filling the plates with food from the chafing dishes. While I worked, several more pack members arrived. I watched as Persephone welcomed each one with a warm smile and some personal commentary about their family, children, or work.

Not only did she know everyone by name, but she seemed to have some form of relationship with them, even if it was just surface level. She'd even asked one woman if her children

had been accepted to daycare—Persephone had written a personal letter of recommendation.

It was truly baffling. I stared in awe as I mindlessly filled plates and handed them to the hungry line of shifters.

I hadn't been to many of these full moon runs—I usually ran with the lower members—but the few I had attended since being acknowledged as Ty's mate hadn't included a big dinner afterward. It had always been light refreshments and snacks.

This was a full-blown meal, complete with a dessert table in the corner of the room and a wet bar with various wines and cocktails. Impressive, to say the least.

Finally, there was a lull in the line of people waiting for food, and Persephone turned in my direction. I felt uncomfortable, not knowing how to relate to the woman I had only ever known as the wife of the alpha.

Deciding to start with a safe topic, one I could easily relate to, I focused on the food. “So, is this a normal amount of food for a full moon event? How often do you host this many pack members inside your home?”

She grinned, dazzling me. “We only do it on the first day of the full moon. That's when the moon is at its strongest. We usually invite the pack members to a large communal dinner so they can all celebrate together and share in the experience.”

I nodded slowly, taking it all in.

“The first night of the full moon can take a lot of energy as it pulls on our wolves' connection to the moon and its power. The run is a way to strengthen our ties as a pack, and the food is a way to replenish our energy.” She paused and leaned in, lowering her voice. “From your questions, I'm assuming this isn't something you all do *down the hill*.”

It took me a minute to realize that *down the hill* was referring to us middle class pack members—the ones who weren't privy to such extravagant celebrations and feasts. I shook my head, refraining from making a snide remark.

Persephone sighed. “Maybe someone should change that and start doing something similar. It's important for all pack

members to come together to run and have sustenance on the first night of the full moon, not just the rich.”

Was I hearing her correctly? The great Persephone Keller, the one who turned her nose up at most people, thought that the lower class citizens of the pack should receive the same treatment as its elite members? I must have misunderstood.

All my life, I never thought Persephone—or Dominic, for that matter—cared much for those not in their ranks. Now, I was more confused than ever. Did she actually *care* about the shifters who didn’t have the means to make large donations to the causes she deemed worthy?

Persephone must’ve seen the surprise on my face, though I was trying hard to conceal it. She raised one of her perfectly groomed eyebrows, then she sighed and turned her attention to doling out plates of food as more shifters emerged from the trees.

She’d gone all out with the catering: smoked ribs, baked beans, chicken thighs, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, green beans. It all looked amazing. My stomach growled as I scooped it all onto the plates, hoping everyone would move quickly through the line so I could eat.

Once the wave of shifters had their food and moved away from the buffet table, Persephone turned back to me. “It probably seems like we’re cold and uncaring,” she admitted. “That’s not the case, though. We care deeply for all our pack members, not just the ones who are well off. Everyone. Rich, middle, and lower. It’s just that it’s hard to relate when you’re seen as royalty. It’s almost as if we scare the poorer people. Like they don’t know how to act around us.” She paused to say hello to a friend before continuing.

“We have people in place to take care of the different classes. They plan events and try to keep up the morale of our people, updating us on anything we could do to make their lives better. I hate to admit that I haven’t been diligent in keeping up with how they’ve been running things lately. That’s awful, isn’t it?”

I didn't know how to respond, though I was thinking that, yeah, it was pretty fucked up not to keep tabs on the staff members tasked to take care of your pack members. I wondered what had fallen through the cracks that could have made people's lives better, or what morale-boosting events had gone unplanned because Persephone hadn't taken the time to approve them.

I hadn't had time to form a response to her question before she spoke again. Maybe it was hypothetical and she didn't want to give me the chance to agree that it was, indeed, awful.

"As the mate of the alpha, that will also be one of your duties. Once you and Ty officially mate and go through with the mating ceremony, of course."

I noted the sarcasm in her voice and assumed she was just as anxious for Ty and me to mate as Dominic was. Why was everyone getting their panties in a wad over us mating so quickly? What business was it of theirs? Couldn't we take our time and solidify our relationship before the ceremony?

Everyone I'd ever known who had found their fated mate took the time to date and get to know each other on a deeper, emotional level before jumping into mating. It was simply good sense to know your partner and develop a strong bond before taking that next step.

Persephone broke through my thoughts. "People in positions of power tend to get a big head and need people they trust to keep them in line to stop them going off the rails with their ideas and proposed plans for the pack." She gave me a wry look. "It's been a while since I checked in on my most trusted advisors, so I'll be calling a meeting in the morning. You should be there to get acquainted with the current council. Obviously, you and Ty will decide if you want to keep them on board, or if you'd rather choose your own council members."

Wow. An invitation to a council meeting? I was shocked that she was being so open and accepting.

So much so that I couldn't keep it to myself. "Persephone, I'm honored that you'd invite me to the meeting, but I must admit, it's a bit surprising."

“Oh, really?” The slightest line creased the skin between her brows. “Why is that?”

“Well, I’ve gotten the feeling that you hated me. At least, that’s how it seemed when Ty and I discovered we were fated mates. You wouldn’t even look me in the eye.”

Persephone’s mouth fell open as she dropped the ladle back into the baked beans. She turned to face me, no longer keeping her voice low since we’d just served the last pack member in line. “Liza, I’ve wanted to talk to you for a long time about all of that.” She reached out and gently touched my arm, then recoiled, second-guessing her kind gesture. Maybe she assumed it would make me uncomfortable. The mate to the alpha showing such kindness to a middle class pack member? It was unheard of. “I know you’re aware of what Dominic did to your pack... to... to your parents.”

I tried not to flinch at the mention of the horrific slaughter of my parents and their pack as Persephone continued.

“I knew about it. Actually, I’ve known about it from the moment it happened. I hated to see you without a family at such a young and innocent age, being placed for adoption in a pack that wasn’t your own. It was gut-wrenching, but it was the best we could do for you.”

She sighed and brushed a stray hair out of her eyes. “Knowing who you were and where you came from made it extremely difficult for me to accept that fate had chosen you for our son. I want you to know, though, it was nothing you had done or not done. Guilt made me react the way that I did. I also admit that, as much as I’ve wanted Ty to find his mate and for Dominic to retire as alpha, I’ve had a hard time accepting that things are changing around here, even though I’ve wanted it for a long time.”

A pack member walked up with a smile and grabbed a plate.

Persephone stopped talking long enough to greet him and fill his plate to the brim. “There’s plenty of food, so if you want seconds, please help yourself.”

The man smiled, nodded, and made his way to the beverage table.

She turned back around, obviously not done spilling her guts to me. I wondered where all this was going.

“Like I said, I’ve wanted Ty to find his fated mate. Likewise, I want my husband to retire from his position with dignity, handing the alpha powers to Ty in a beautiful mating ceremony. However, change has always been difficult for me, and I’ve found myself feeling slightly more vulnerable through the whole process than I ever believed I would. Ty is our only child, and I love him with a fierceness as any mother should. You’ll understand that love someday when you, too, become a mother. Until then, trust me when I say that you’ll never stop worrying about your children, even when they’re adults with families of their own. I think I’ve worried more about Ty as an adult than I ever did when he was a child. As a boy, if I said no, he listened. Now he does what he wants.”

She studied my face. “Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“No, not at all.” That was a lie. I was extremely uncomfortable. At the same time, though, I wanted to hear everything. I needed to hear it, so I urged her to continue.

“I’ve been the alpha’s mate for a long time, so I have a good idea of what the role entails. I’m scared for what Ty is taking on, but I have to trust that Dominic and I raised him well enough to take on his role with grace and dignity. As Ty’s mother, it’s my job to make sure his mate is ready to rule beside him.” She fidgeted with the edge of the ladle.

I didn’t know Persephone had it in her to be nervous.

“What I’m trying to say is that I apologize for waiting so long to bring you into the fold. Please allow me to make up for lost time.”

Persephone straightened her back as more shifters emerged from the woods. She shook her head, as if shaking off the conversation and trying to get back into the moment. Her bright smile was in place when the pack members approached the buffet table.

I blinked away the unexpected tears that had formed against my will, not realizing it was possible to be moved so deeply by someone I'd thought had a heart of stone.

She glanced at me and whispered out of the corner of her mouth, "Time for your first lesson on being the alpha's mate Liza. Never let them see you cry unless it's in times of great joy or sorrow. Even then, only a few tears. Never let them see you look weak. Ever."

I cleared my throat and forced my tears back as I turned to greet the members with a sweet smile. Even though I was only serving food to pack members, I didn't miss the grin that spread on Persephone's face. She almost looked... proud of me.

After filling several more plates, we finally spotted Ty and Dominic emerging from the woods. They were the last shifters to leave the forest and eat, so Persephone and I fixed them each a plate.

Ty raised his eyebrows as he approached, and I knew he was wondering how everything was going between his mom and me. I inclined my head and smiled, surprised when his shoulders relaxed. I hadn't realized how much it meant to him that his mother and I got along.

Dominic took his plate from Persephone. "Thank you, my love. Now, you ladies need to make your own plates. After serving everyone else, I'm sure you're both starving. Especially you, Liza, since you ran tonight." He turned back to face Ty. "I'd like the four of us to sit down together."

"Sounds good." Ty took his plate and waited at the buffet table while I filled my own.

Dominic led us to the back porch, which had been decorated for the occasion.

Soft, warm lights were strung above us, casting a gentle glow on the enchanting garden. Tiki torches were thoughtfully placed around, their flickering flames adding a touch of romance and allure. The gentle breeze made for the perfect

temperature, creating the ideal setting for a meal under the starry sky.

Ty and I sat next to each other, and Dominic took the empty seat across from us. Persephone slid in next to him and didn't waste any time digging into her food. We all followed suit.

"Mm. This is delicious, Mother," Ty said between bites.

Dominic had slowed his eating and pushed his plate back a few inches so he could rest his elbows on the table. He sighed deeply. "Liza, there's something I want to make you aware of."

Crap. I didn't like the tone of his voice. This wasn't going to be an uplifting conversation like I'd had with Persephone in the buffet line. Of that much, I was certain.

"The alpha power is leaving me." He was direct, didn't beat around the bush, and I wondered how long he'd planned on giving me that information and what it meant for Ty and me.

The casual tone of the evening shifted. Persephone huffed out a breath, and I stiffened.

Dominic raised his head and looked at me with sad, tired eyes. "I apologize for keeping it from you, and I'm sorry for putting a strain on your relationship with Ty. He has felt added pressure to mate with you because he knows I don't have much time left to pass the alpha power on to him." Dominic glanced at Ty with a knowing look, as if he were apologizing for pressing him so hard for a mating ceremony.

I looked at Ty, who was staring at his feet. Was he ashamed that he hadn't given me all of the facts? Had he thought I'd be angry he hadn't told me? Or was he worried I'd somehow look at him differently now I knew the truth?

Ty had never explained why his father wanted to fast track our mating, and it had made me feel defensive about not rushing into things. I believed we should have time to get to know and enjoy our new fated mate bond. Now, though, it all

made sense. Guilt replaced annoyance as I realized the amount of stress Ty had been under.

He had silently tried to protect me and the pack without exposing his father's weakness. Between the Keller businesses and all the shit with Castro, Ty had taken on more responsibility than one man could handle, and now this. All this time, he'd been worried about his father, as well.

I reached over and grabbed Ty's hand, knowing that no words were necessary. Hopefully, this gesture would be enough to show him how much I admired him. Ty smiled back at me, and his gratitude shone from his eyes.

Persephone set her fork on her plate and took a deep breath. "Being the head of the pack means that we often have to make sacrifices for the sake of the pack. I confess, Dominic and I were a mating of convenience, not of love." She paused and glanced at her mate, who smirked and nodded in agreement. "We weren't each other's first choice, but I loved this pack, and Dominic had been my friend for many years. I mated with him so his father could pass the alpha power to him. Though I hadn't been in love with him, I grew to love him." Persephone put her hand over Dominic's and smiled at him. "Now, he is the greatest love I've ever known, and I swear I would do it all over again."

Dominic squeezed her hand. "Thank you, my love. I was never sure why you chose me, but I am glad that you did." He leaned forward and kissed her forehead tenderly, then he turned his attention back to me. "Liza, I understand your reasoning for not being ready to mate, and I respect your choice. You were thrown into a new world of royalty amidst learning of your past and having to worry about Castro. It's a lot for anyone. Please don't think I'm trying to add to your mental load. I swear, I'm not."

Ty put his hand on my leg under the table and gave me a soft squeeze to let me know that he was there, by my side, not leaving me. He knew my anxiety would probably get the best of me from such an intense conversation, and I appreciated his reminder to breathe.

“My intentions are good,” Dominic said. “I only brought this up because it’s time you knew the true extent of what’s at stake here.”

Persephone gave me a pointed look. “Being in a position of power isn’t easy. Sometimes you have to make decisions for the greater good. Do you have it in you to make those types of decisions? Are you the type of leader who can make sacrifices for the sake of the Keller pack?”

Chapter 17

Ty

I stared at my parents, wishing they'd have given me a heads up before they dumped all this shit on Liza and basically told her that she needed to mate with me before Dad's alpha power faded away. Talk about added pressure.

All this after such a pleasant run, too, and a real moment where I felt I connected with my father on a new level. And during a wonderful meal outside with my parents and the woman fate had decided was mine. I'd hoped we could talk about normal stuff so my parents could get to know Liza better, and for Liza to be more comfortable around them.

Plus, it was important for Liza to see a different side of my parents, and to see they weren't defined by the royalty aspect. They were regular shifters just like everyone else, except Dad just happened to be the alpha, and my mother just happened to be his mate.

After the revelation of what the Keller pack had done to Liza's pack, I thought my parents would recognize the need for some normalcy and lighter conversation.

Nope. They had to drop a fuck-load of reality right into Liza's unsuspecting lap while I sat there sheepishly, attempting to avoid her gaze. If I'd known, I could have been prepared for Liza's inevitable questions as to why I hadn't been the one to tell her.

It had been a few days since the pack run, and Liza had been quieter than usual. I wanted to give her time to process

everything my parents had told her and to allow her to bring it up when she was ready, but so far, she hadn't mentioned it.

I found myself walking on eggshells, never knowing when she might blow up on me for not telling her the truth about Dad's condition and the need for us to complete the mating ceremony as soon as possible. But it didn't happen.

Instead, she seemed almost numb and lost in her thoughts, as if she didn't know how to react. We needed to talk about it, though. We couldn't just ignore that Dad's alpha power was quickly fading. I wanted to be the one to bring it up and to get everything out in the open and discuss it like a mature, fated couple, but on the other hand, I didn't want to stir the pot.

I was certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Liza now felt the same pressure as I had when I discovered we were running out of time. She'd already dealt with so much in such a short period of time, I worried this would be too much for her.

I'd already been awake for an hour when my alarm went off. Liza hadn't been in bed when I woke. I lay in the darkness of the dimly lit room, contemplating the whole situation and replaying my parents' words.

As much as I wanted to sit down with Liza and talk to her, I had a business meeting to attend. Bryce was already out of town, tending to another Keller Enterprises matter, so he couldn't fill in for me.

The meeting was just a few hours away from Presley Acres, but with Castro's fucking scavenger hunt, I wasn't all too eager to be away for any length of time. We couldn't afford to underestimate him. He was fixated and determined. Anything could happen, and it worried me to damn near death.

The unmistakable scent of coffee wafted from the kitchen. I quickly pulled on my shorts and T-shirt, then went through to the bathroom. Like most mornings, I woke with a massive boner, but I ignored it and thought through this morning's meeting as I pissed, waiting for my erection to soften before making my way to the kitchen. Liza didn't need a hard dick

poking her in the back when she was contemplative and stressed out.

When I entered the kitchen, Liza was pouring creamer into our coffee cups. She wasn't paying attention to anything else around her, just staring off into space, her usual sweet smile nowhere to be seen.

I sighed and hugged her from behind, pulling her back to my chest, thankful that my cock was back in its regular resting position in my boxers. "Good morning," I murmured against her ear.

She startled at the contact, spilling creamer all over the kitchen counter.

"Damn it!" She moved back and grabbed a kitchen towel from the sink, sopping up the mess and muttering under her breath.

"Oops. Sorry, Liza. I didn't mean to scare you." I took a step back. "You aren't really here today, are you? You seem kind of... distant."

Liza's face was flushed, her hands trembling ever so slightly as she cleaned up the creamer. Her breathing was shallow, and her eyes were downcast.

"What's on your mind? You okay?"

She stopped cleaning and lifted her head. "It's nothing."

It was more than nothing, but I didn't want to push her to talk until she was ready. I thought that was the end of the discussion, but then she said, "Why didn't you just tell me about your dad and his alpha powers fading?"

Liza tossed the dirty towel into the sink and handed me a mug of coffee as she waited for me to respond.

I gestured to the kitchen table, and she sat down across from me.

I sighed. "Believe it or not, I had several reasons for not telling you."

“I’m all ears.” She took a sip of coffee and leaned back in her chair.

“You need to understand that it’s an extremely delicate subject for Dad. After being alpha for so many years, it can hurt a man’s pride to slowly lose his powers. Losing the alpha power... it’s almost like a slow death. You’re waiting for your strength to diminish entirely, turning you into a mere shadow and a shell of the man you used to be.”

Liza frowned. “That sounds horrible.”

I shrugged. “It’s all part of the process; circle of life and all that. Just because it’s a normal process to pass those powers down to your son doesn’t make it easy. Sure, Dad’s proud of me, and he’s excited to see me lead the next generations of the Keller pack, but I can tell he’s grieving over losing his position. Though, I doubt he’d ever admit it.”

Liza set her cup on the table and folded her hands in her lap. “What else? You said there were several reasons for keeping this from me.”

I nodded. “It wasn’t my secret to tell. It was my father’s. The changes his body is going through are only obvious to Mother and me because we’re his family and we’re around him all the time. It’s not so noticeable to others yet. Who was I to strip that dignity from him by telling anyone about it?”

Liza pondered my question, and when she spoke again, her tone was gentle. “I’m not just anyone, though, Ty. I’m your fated mate.”

Good fucking point.

“Yes, I know, but I didn’t want to betray my father’s confidence. If I’m going to be the next alpha, I have to prove myself to him—not that he’d ever say that out loud. If he tells me something in confidence, I’m expected to keep it to myself.”

I paused. I’d told Bryce about it, but that was different, right? He was my righthand man, the Nico to my Dominic. If he didn’t know what was going on, how could he help and advise me?

“If I’m being honest, one of the biggest reasons I kept the information from you was because I didn’t want you to carry my burden.” I stared at my feet, hoping she’d hear the sincerity in my words. “I care so much for you, Liza. I’ve had to watch as you’ve been mentally tormented by Castro and the memories of my dad attacking your pack ravage you. Not to mention the changes you’ve experienced in your body due to being an omega. Me heaping more pressure on you and telling you that it was up to us to mate now in order to keep the alpha powers within the Keller pack might have...” I trailed off, but Liza finished my sentence for me.

“It might have sent me into another rage and made me shift against my will. Right?” Her huge, beautiful eyes bore into my own.

“Yes.” She had hit the nail right on the head.

Liza reached across the table and took my hand, linking her fingers with mine. “I understand your reasoning, and it make sense now why you and your parents were in such a rush to move forward with the claiming.”

I sighed, and it was as if all the tension in my neck and shoulders evaporated. “Thank you for understanding. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before my parents blindsided us.” I felt lighter now that Liza knew what was at stake. Hopefully, we could face it together. “Are you okay? How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been replaying the conversation with your parents over and over again, giving everything they said a lot of consideration. I’ve also been spending a lot of time with your mom.” Liza’s smile at the mention of my mother made my heart swell. “I’m just now starting to realize what my role would be as the alpha’s mate and how important it is. I admit that it’s a lot of pressure—more than I would’ve imagined.”

Liza paused, and I squeezed her hand. “What else? You can tell me no matter what it is.”

She smiled. “I also realize now that keeping a pack running properly requires a lot of love. I sort of thought your mom was more of a figurehead. I never imagined Persephone

getting her hands dirty and doing all of the behind-the-scenes tasks she does, or working with the council to ensure that all members are taken care of—mentally, physically, even financially. It's a lot to wrap my mind around."

"How are you handling all of this? Mentally, I mean." I hoped my asking that wouldn't piss her off, but now was my chance to understand how she was really doing.

Could she handle all of it or was she on the verge of shifting against her will again?

Liza took her empty cup in the sink, then came to stand next to me. Looking at me, she bit her lip before answering. "It feels like a lot more pressure has been put on me now that I better understand the gravity of the situation."

"That's the issue in my mind. I don't want you to feel as if you have to move faster than you're willing." I took a chance and tugged her onto my lap, taking a second to smell her hair and enjoy her ass on my thighs.

"Your reasons for us not claiming each other yet are valid. We *do* still have a lot to learn about one another. Plus, like you said, we have to learn to work together as a team."

She pressed her cheek against mine. "But will we have time for all of that?"

I pulled her close and gently kissed her along her shoulder and her neck. "We'll make the time. I don't want you to feel forced into the claiming. I want you to do this because you want to." I slid my finger under her chin and pulled her into a kiss. "We have time, Liza. Don't worry."

I wanted to tell her that I loved her, but I wasn't sure if it was the right time. I didn't want to keep putting it off because Liza needed to know how I truly felt about her. Maybe there was no time like the present.

I opened my mouth to confess my love for her, but my damn phone started ringing. I glanced at the screen. Bryce.

I held up a finger. "Just a second, it's Bryce. I have to take this." I swiped the screen and put the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

“Hey, man. Just wanted to make sure you were on the road.”

Shit. The meeting.

“Uh, yeah. I’m heading out the door right now.”

“Fuck, Ty.” Bryce sighed into the phone, the speaker crackling in my ear. “I know you have a lot going on, but you can’t be late for this meeting.”

“I know. Don’t worry. I’ll be there on time.”

I hung up and gently pushed Liza forward so I could stand. “I’m sorry. Time got away from me. If I don’t leave soon, I’ll be late, and then there will most certainly be hell to pay. It’s an important meeting, and I’m expected to be there and lead the whole damn thing.”

Liza smiled and gave me a quick hug. “No worries. We’ll talk more later.”

She seemed cool, calm, and collected, which gave me the confidence I needed to leave her. With the ever-present threat of Castro in the back of my mind, I texted my security team to be extra vigilant while I was away, letting them know that I would be a good two hours away should anything happen.

On the drive, I turned on a jazz station. It usually did the trick to calm me, but today it was of no use. All I could think about was Liza and yet another burden my family and I had put on her shoulders. I’d been carrying that same weight around for over a month now, so I had a good idea of how she was feeling. All I wanted to do was be around her and assure her that everything was going to work itself out. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure about that myself, but I had to believe it. If I didn’t focus on the positives, I’d succumb to the pressure, and so would Liza.

She needed me by her side, not two fucking hours away.

When I finally rolled into the convention center’s parking lot, I noted that I was the last one to arrive. Everyone else had parked, gone in, and presumably made dumb ass small talk all morning.

I resolved to get out as quickly as possible after presenting the update on Keller Enterprises to the board who had traveled from all over the state of Texas to hear me speak.

If I could skip the chit-chat and get right down to business, maybe they'd follow my lead, and we wouldn't be stuck in networking purgatory for hours.

Once inside the center, I was relieved to see that everyone had already been seated and were attentively listening to Tim, our head financial analyst—the same Tim who had called me out for not being as present as he'd have liked.

How'd that fucker get asked to speak? I glared at him, hoping he wouldn't make the same mistake and attempt to pull me aside. Surely he'd learned his lesson last time. His job was to provide an update on the numbers, not to give me advice on appearances to our employees.

As luck would have it, I was up next. My fifteen minutes of fame, and I hoped it only lasted fifteen minutes.

I stepped up to the podium and cleared my throat. "Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedules to hear about the exciting advancements we've experienced this past year at Keller Enterprises. If you'll open your binders to page three, you'll see the order in which I'll be speaking today. Please hold any questions until the end of the presentation, as I intend to zoom through this pretty quickly." I decided it might be best to insert a joke to keep things lighthearted. "I don't want any of you falling asleep on me this time. I'm talking to you, Bill," I said, pointing at the elderly man who'd served on the board for as long as I could remember. He was an old family friend who had known my parents longer than I'd been alive. I knew he could take a joke.

I spent the next several minutes running through our new facilities, acquisitions, and new positions. I built off the numbers Tim and our accounting team had provided me, showing the audience that Keller Enterprises was projected to grow in profit by at least ten, possibly fifteen percent over the next twelve months.

When I finished my presentation, the room erupted with applause, and hands shot up. Luckily for me, there weren't any surprising questions, and most people just wanted to voice their approval and excitement over the company's growth.

When the meeting finally ended, I rushed to my car before anyone could stop me to chat. Any other time, I'd normally welcome the opportunity to grab a drink with one of our board members and catch up, unwind, but not today. I needed to be with Liza.

Just as I put the car in reverse to back out of the parking lot, my phone buzzed with a text notification. Thinking it was from Liza, I put the car back into park and took my phone out.

The text was from an unknown number.

It was a photo of Liza coming out of the Presley Acres farmer's market entrance. The picture had definitely been taken today because she was wearing the same clothes she'd had on when I'd left this morning.

The message under the picture made my blood run cold.

How easy it would be to just take her. To bring her to me and make her mine. Hurry home, Alpha. Your next clue is waiting for you.

My breath caught in my throat as I dialed Liza's number.

After a few rings, she answered. "Hey, Ty. Is your meeting already over?" She sounded calm; completely at ease.

"Where are you?" My words came out in a panicked rush as my heart nearly tore through my chest.

"I'm just leaving the farmer's market. Why?"

"Where's your bodyguard, Liza?" I knew my tone was not my normal charming self, but fear had my balls firmly in its grip. Fuck being charming right now.

Liza sighed. "He's right behind me. What's wrong? Don't you trust me? You sound upset. What's going on?"

"Will you please turn around and make sure he's right there?" I needed to know someone was with her, that she

wasn't alone, and that Castro couldn't just grab her and go.

Liza huffed. "Yes, Ty. He's right here behind me. What the hell is going on?"

I put her on speaker and sent a quick alert to her bodyguard, letting him know that Castro was in the area and had just photographed Liza. How the fuck had he gotten into town without being seen?

"Listen to me very carefully. I want you to keep calm, stay with your bodyguard, and get to your car. When you get there, lock yourself inside. Do you understand me?"

I could hear her bodyguard's voice telling Liza to hurry.

Without another word, Liza hung up the phone, and I slammed my fist against the steering wheel.

Before I could call her back, I received an alert confirming that Liza had been safely escorted to her car.

I sent an alert to the entire security team, telling them to search the area for Castro. The fucker couldn't have gotten very far. I put my car back into gear and punched the gas.

Liza phoned me back. Her shaking voice filled the car. "Ty? What the fuck is going on? Everyone's scrambling with their hands on their guns."

I hated this. I hated that fucker Castro for doing this to her. To us.

The last thing I wanted to do was stress Liza out even more, but she had to stay vigilant. "I just received a photo of you leaving the farmer's market, and a text from Castro."

Her breath came quickly over the phone, like she was hyperventilating. Hating that I couldn't be there with her to protect her, to calm her, I schooled my voice to project calm. "Liza, listen to me. Breathe for me, babe. Breathe in and out. Slow down. I'm on my way." I could hear her breathing slowing.

Once her breathing had evened out, Liza said, "That's so weird. How is Castro doing all of this? He can't get into town, right?"

I didn't have the slightest idea how Castro was pulling it off. "Maybe he's changed his identity so no one recognizes him. He's definitely too smart to waltz into town looking like himself."

"Think about it, Ty." Liza's voice lowered, as if she was afraid Castro could hear us. "Who planted the bomb? Who is taking pictures of me? He can't be doing all of this himself. There are enough people in town looking for him."

Cold shuddered through me, and I dreaded her next words.

Liza's voice was so soft now I almost missed what she said. "Someone *has* to be helping Castro, Ty. Who could it be?"

How had I not seen it? "You're right." Castro wasn't in town. He was pulling the strings from afar, and he'd hired a Presley Acres' local to be his latest puppet. "I promise we'll get to the bottom of it."

Chapter 18

Liza

My patience was running thin as I watched through my windshield. Ty's security team descended on the Presley Acres downtown area like a SWAT team in an action movie.

How did they get here so fast? I wasn't sure how they operated, but I was grateful. Castro, or someone working for him, was nearby. They'd taken a photo of me, and I'd been none the wiser.

I clutched my throat as a chill ran down my spine, the realization of my vulnerability washing over me. It hit like a tidal wave. I had been so carelessly strolling out of the farmer's market, oblivious to the dangers lurking around me. Anything could have happened, and I wouldn't have had a second to respond since I was lost in my own thoughts, my hands filled with bags of fresh vegetables and fruit. I shuddered at the thought of Castro grabbing me and claiming me as his own.

The security team combed the area, and I watched a few of them go down an alley. If Castro was there, they'd find him because he'd have nowhere to go. I doubted they'd find him, though. He had never been here.

After more than an hour of waiting in my car, helplessly watching as the team searched for any clue of Castro or an accomplice in the area, my phone buzzed. It was Ty.

I answered right away, relieved to hear his voice on the other end. "I'm driving as fast as I can."

I sighed. “Slow down, Ty. It’s not worth you getting in an accident. Your team is here. I’m safe. Annoyed and a little shaky but otherwise fine.”

“I’d rather you be fucking annoyed than gone forever, Liza.”

Good point. I wasn’t perturbed by his straightforward words. He was worried and he couldn’t get here fast enough. I appreciated his sense of urgency and his desire to protect me at all costs.

“I’m going to instruct your security guard to drive you to the estate. I think you’ll be safer there than your house.”

“Okay.” I couldn’t argue with his logic. Castro and his lackey wouldn’t dare try to penetrate the secure walls of the Keller Estate. My tiny house in a lower middle-class neighborhood, however, would be much easier to access.

“I’ll meet you there.” He sounded breathless. “Be safe.”

The call ended, and a chill run through me. Who the hell would be twisted enough to work for someone like Castro? Dominic and the local law enforcement did a good job of keeping criminals off the streets of Presley Acres, but then again, Castro had had no problem finding Syllas. He’d been vulnerable and needed help, and Castro exploited his vulnerability. Up until that point, the head coroner of the local hospital had been no criminal.

With his endless resources, Castro would have no trouble finding a similar lost soul—one who would do his bidding in return for assistance in some area of their life.

It could be anyone.

Turning in my seat, I surveyed the market area, watching for any suspicious pauses or glances in my direction. Everyone went about their business, paying no attention to my vehicle. I hated that I’d become suspicious of people, some who I’d known my entire life. This town was my home. Castro had no fucking right to use these people against me.

Whoever had taken my picture was probably long gone, prepped, and ready for whatever Castro had planned next.

My bodyguard ran up to my car and tapped on the window. I climbed over the center console into the passenger seat and pressed the button on my keys to unlock the door for him.

He slid into the driver's seat without a word, locked the doors, then grabbed the keys from me and shoved them into the ignition.

“I'm assuming you're taking me to the Keller Estate?”

He nodded, checking his blind spot before turning onto the crowded street.

The drive gave me time to think more about the fragility of our situation. I had to be smarter and more aware of my surroundings from now on.

As soon as we arrived, several guards met me at the door and escorted me into the house, bolting the door behind me.

Dominic stood at the stop of the stairs. “Come on up, Liza. Ty will be here soon, but he wants you with Nico until he gets here.”

I trudged up the marble staircase and into Dominic's office. Nico stood by the desk, murmuring into his phone. A handful of his security team were strewn across the room, conferring with one another while staring at their laptop screens.

The tension in the room was palpable. I could feel my heart racing as I made my way over to Nico and stood next to him, trying to focus on the conversation he was having.

He hung up abruptly and turned to me. “Liza, I wish I had concrete news for you.”

I sighed and slumped into a chair. They hadn't found the person who'd been stalking and photographing me without my knowledge.

Nico crossed his arms and leaned against the desk. “My team has seen no signs of Castro. He hasn't entered town, and there have been no reports of him being seen near the outskirts of town. As you know, there's only one road that leads in and

out of Presley Acres, so if Castro tried to cross into town, we would've spotted him."

I nodded. It was a relief to know that Nico's team was scouring the area. Against my will, my heart still raced with anxiety and fear. Maybe it wasn't Castro they should've been keeping an eye out for. But who else?

Nico gave me an understanding look before continuing. "My team will continue to monitor things carefully and report any suspicious activity they find in the area. We've got things covered, so try not to worry too much, okay?"

My leg bobbed up and down, and I forced it to still. Who or what was I so afraid of? Not even Nico could answer that question.

"Thank you for all your help. I really appreciate it."

He smiled reassuringly before leaving the room to take another phone call.

Dominic sat down behind his desk and focused all of his attention on the computer screen. After a few minutes of typing, he looked up in my direction. "How are you holding up?"

I blew out a breath. "I'm trying to stay strong, but I can't shake the feeling that something bad is going to happen. I just don't know who I should be keeping an eye out for since Castro hasn't been spotted in the area."

Dominic's expression softened as he leaned back in his chair. Just when I thought he might say something kind and reassuring, Ty came rushing into the room.

He locked eyes with me and hurried to my side, dropping to his knees next to me and wrapping his arms around my body. "Are you okay?"

I forced a smile. "I'm a little shaken up, but I'm doing fine."

He let out a deep sigh and lowered his voice. "Are you feeling... anxious or upset?"

"No, Ty. I'm remaining calm. Don't worry about me."

“I’ll always worry about you.” He moved to the seat next to me and turned his attention to his father. “What’s the latest?”

Nico burst into the room, holding an open envelope in one hand and a flash drive in the other. “This was in the mailbox. We found it a few minutes ago after the mail was delivered.” He pulled a piece of paper from the envelope and handed it to Dominic. “We need to run the drive through software to make sure there isn’t a virus on it, but in the meantime, here’s the note that came with it. I’ll be back shortly.” He left the room without another word.

Ty stood and snatched the note from Dominic, and I wondered if I would witness an all-out brawl between the fading alpha and his protégé.

Dominic raised an eyebrow. “All right, then. I guess you’re going to read the letter first?”

Ty recoiled and winced. “Sorry. I’m a little amped up.”

“With good reason.” Dominic nodded and gestured toward the letter. “Go ahead.”

Ty cleared his throat and read the letter aloud. “*Sorry to say that the stakes have been raised for your next round of hints.*”

I scoffed. He’d planted a bomb in the dead center of town. How much higher could the stakes get?

As Ty read on, I soon realized just how much more Castro could raise the stakes, and it was terrifying.

“*You have exactly twelve hours to find my next clue. If you fail, a buried secret will be uncovered.*”

That didn’t bode well. I glanced at Dominic, whose fists were clenched tightly, his jaw set squarely as he stared straight ahead.

“This is not good. Considering everything Castro already knows about our family’s past, there’s no telling how much he’s dug up on the Keller pack.” He pounded his fist on the desk. “We can’t let that motherfucker beat us.”

The next hour was spent contemplating what deep secret Castro would reveal if we failed at his sick game. All I could think about was my being an omega, and how that information being leaked could lead to a plethora of issues—not just for me but for Ty’s family, as well.

Nico returned as quietly as he’d slipped out of the room, the flash drive raised over his head. “Good news. The drive is clean. No spyware or bugs. It’s safe.”

“So, does our twelve-hour time limit start now or an hour ago when the envelope was found?” Ty asked.

“We’re not sure.” Nico moved to the other side of Dominic’s desk and inserted the flash drive into his laptop. “Either way, we don’t have time to waste.”

Dominic instructed one of the other men in the room to flip off the lights as he projected his screen onto the large television mounted on the back wall.

We watched the video with growing confusion. Several random clips of disasters happening all over the world streamed across in quick succession. Each clip was quick, no more than three seconds long, and the video only lasted fifteen seconds.

What the hell?

It ended just as quickly as it had begun, and we all stared at the blank screen in stunned silence.

Dominic scratched his head. “I don’t even know where to begin with this shit.”

Nico tapped the laptop. “Let’s watch it again. I’ll slow down the speed so we can better digest the images.”

“Good idea.” Ty leaned forward in his seat; eyes narrowed at the screen.

“Let’s see if we can make out the locations in the video.” Nico gestured to his team, and they stood at the ready, dry erase markers in their hands.

The video was slowed down significantly enough to where we could make out five distinct disasters: an earthquake, a

tsunami, a forest fire, a tornado, and a flood.

I had no idea what to make out of it. The images alone were anxiety-inducing. All those towns ripped apart and people running for their lives.

My nerves got the better of me, and my pulse pounded in my throat. I fidgeted in my chair, looking around the room for a sign that we would figure this out. Unfortunately, all I saw were confused faces. No one knew what the fuck it all meant.

Suddenly, a countdown appeared in the upper right corner of the screen.

The twelve hours had started. At least we had our answer on when the countdown began, but my gut told me that twelve hours might not be long enough to unravel the hidden clues.

I glanced at my watch. It was two in the afternoon.

I sat in the chair, my legs crossed and my foot kicking from side to side, eyes glued to the screen as the video played on a loop. The images of the devastating natural disasters flashed before me: earthquake, tsunami, forest fire, flood, tornado. Each one held its own story of destruction and despair.

Ty, Dominic, Nico, and the security team huddled around the table, their fingers flying across their keyboards as they researched the disasters. The room filled with the soft hum of laptops and the occasional mutterings of frustration.

I leaned over to Ty, trying to keep my voice steady. “Have you found anything yet?”

He shook his head, his face withdrawn. The muscles in his jaw were strained. “Nothing substantial. We’re still trying to find the exact disasters and their dates.”

Nico chimed in, his voice tinged with disappointment. “I’ve checked multiple databases, but it’s like finding a needle in a haystack. Matching the images to an exact disaster when the world has seen so many is almost impossible.”

One of the security team member’s brows furrowed as he peered at his laptop screen. “Wait a minute,” he exclaimed.

“The flood in the video. I think it’s the catastrophic flooding that happened in my hometown, Houston, during Hurricane Harvey in 2017.”

“Really?” Ty turned to face him. “How can you tell?”

“Look.” He pointed to the upper left corner of his paused screen. “That’s the church my parents were married at. I’d recognize it anywhere because of a wedding photo that hung in our living room my entire childhood.”

A burst of energy. A glimmer of hope. “That’s a start. Maybe we can find connections like that for the other disasters, too.”

We all turned our attention back to our screens, determined to find a lead. As we delved into our research, time seemed to blur. Websites, news articles, and historical archives filled our screens, each team member scouring for any semblance of a connection.

Minutes turned into hours, and the frustration began to mount. The team grew restless as evident in their furrowed brows and weary expressions. The constant scrolling and clicking of mouse buttons filled the room and screamed of desperation.

“That tornado footage,” Dominic finally said. “It seems to resemble the deadly tornado outbreak in Joplin, Missouri, back in 2011.”

Nico raised one eyebrow. “Were you in Missouri in 2011? I don’t recall that.”

Dominic shook his head. “No, but this news reel I found matches the clip in the video.”

We all gathered around Dominic’s computer. Sure enough, Castro had pulled the clip from a news station’s archived stories.

Hours later, we’d managed to figure out the locations and dates of all five disasters. The words and numbers were scribbled on the whiteboard for everyone to see.

Ty hit the table and growled. “This doesn’t make sense! There has to be something connecting these disasters. Some underlying thread we’re missing.”

Nico leaned back in his chair, a defeated sigh escaping his lips. “I’ve searched through all the major cities affected by earthquakes, tsunamis, forest fires, and tornadoes during the corresponding dates, but I can’t find any significant connections.”

Dominic ran a hand through his hair, his frustration mirrored in his eyes. “Damm it. I thought for sure we’d have found something by now. Maybe Castro is toying with us, leading us on a wild goose chase. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

I tuned out, my mind racing with possibilities. We had to be missing some hidden clue that had yet to be deciphered. I had an inkling that the answer was right in front of us, just out of reach.

But, despite our best efforts, the puzzle remained elusive. The disasters didn’t seem to be connected, having occurred in different parts of the country with no discernible pattern or relationship. Gods, what were we missing.

We were back at square one, no closer to unraveling Castro’s cryptic clue than when we first viewed the video hours ago.

Ty looked around at our weary faces, and he sounded exhausted when he spoke. “We can’t give up. There has to be a connection we’re missing. Let’s regroup, gather our thoughts, and approach this from a different angle.”

He lowered his voice and turned to face me. “I need a breather.”

I nodded and watched him leave the room with his shoulders hunched.

After a few minutes, I went to hunt Ty down. He was sitting on the back porch, sipping from a clear glass. I couldn’t tell if it was water or vodka, but I wouldn’t blame him if he needed a drink after the insanity.

“Mind if I join you?”

Ty gave me a small grin and patted the seat next to him. “Of course.”

We sat in silence for a moment, staring out over the woods.

“I’m really worried, Liza. I’m afraid we won’t figure this out in time.”

I curled my arm around his neck, pulling him close and kissing his cheek. As much as I wanted to encourage him, I had nothing to say. I was just as stumped as everyone else.

“This could be bad.” Ty set his glass on the wicker side table. “If Castro lets it leak...” He took a large swallow of whatever was in his glass. “What happened to your family—a lot of others will be involved, too. My dad paid off a lot of people to cover up the massacre.”

I winced. It was a knee-jerk reaction to that word. Massacre. Images of the bloody snow popped back into my mind, and I had to force them out before I fell prey to another anxiety attack.

“Fuck. I’m sorry.” Ty squeezed my knee. “I know this is a touchy subject, but that secret getting out could fuck up the credibility of a lot of packs, not just the Kellers.”

I nodded, biting down on my lip. It wasn’t just my identity as an omega that hung in the balance. The Keller pack could crumble with one brief statement from Castro.

Once a royal family that I had no interest in, I suddenly found myself caring very much whether or not the Keller pack survived this mess. I was the future mate to the alpha, and if it all came crashing down, where would that leave my relationship with Ty?

He turned his head, his eyes tiny slits as he thought out loud. “Losing this round isn’t an option. We have to figure out this clue. Otherwise, shit is really going to turn on its head.”

Chapter 19

Ty

After several hours and only one break, Dad called down to the kitchen and requested food for the entire room. We continued to work as the staff brought in food, drinks, and even painkillers for the people who, like me, had developed stress headaches.

As I chewed mindlessly on some chicken salad, I imagined Castro tracking our progress somehow—through our internet usage, perhaps. If I closed my eyes, I could see his ugly face jeering at me as he drew closer and closer to Liza's side.

I didn't consider myself to be psychotic like Castro, but I knew what it was like to be driven by one singular goal that wouldn't allow you to focus on anything else.

Castro was coming at us from a place of longing. A lonesome existence where he wanted nothing more than to have Liza by his side. If I had to guess, I'd say it wasn't all about a sexual relationship with Liza, though that was probably at the forefront of his twisted mind.

Instead, Castro wanted what was promised to him long ago when Liza's parents had practically betrothed them to each other. Of course, they had no idea that Castro would show his true colors as he aged and start wreaking havoc on any child who so much as looked in Liza's direction.

From a young age, he'd thought her to be his. He wanted her full attention, and if he even thought for a second that her affections were given to someone else, he couldn't stand it. He lost his mind and chose to eliminate his own parents for

standing in his way. To Castro, Liza wasn't a person to be cherished and loved. She was property that belonged to him.

Now, Liza was mine, and Castro refused to accept that.

The countdown continued on the screen, mocking us. It was as if the flashing numbers were laughing at our stupidity for not being able to figure it out.

It wasn't that we'd given it a half-ass effort. In ten hours, we had disposed of multiple possibilities, discussing and jotting down any vapor of an idea that could pan out. Each time, though, we hit a dead end, and had no choice but to start back at the beginning of our search.

"Wait a second." Nico jumped to his feet, his plate sliding to the floor, splattering food on the hardwood. He didn't seem to care. "What if the times and dates are different coordinates in town?"

Brilliant. "That could be it." I joined Nico at the temporary desk the house staff had rigged up in the corner of Dad's office.

We plugged the numbers into our laptops, trying multiple combinations. All the coordinates led us to places entirely too far from Presley Acres, and we'd already determined during the hunt for the first clue that Castro was keeping things local.

"Damn. I thought I had it." Nico sighed and stepped to the side as a maid cleaned his mess from the floor. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "The locations have no correlation—no common denominator. I'm out of ideas."

Dominic slapped Nico on the back. "Don't give up yet. We still have time." He raised an eyebrow and looked at Liza. "Maybe we should use Liza's tactic from last time."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Dominic moved to the whiteboard. "Remember how she took the first sentence from each sheet of paper and strung them together? It formed a riddle. What if the words for each disaster, their location, and the dates can be pieced together to form some kind of message, too?"

I stood and joined my father at the board. “You might be onto something.”

I pulled out my phone and opened the notes app, typing multiple combinations of the words, locations, and dates. Other members of the security team joined me while Liza scribbled on a notepad. We worked for a solid thirty minutes, but no combination created a coherent clue.

“Fuck.” I paced the room. The tension was so thick it was a struggle to breathe.

I threw open the window and gulped the fresh air into my lungs. My wolf stirred, recognizing my need to run and rid myself of the stress and anxiety.

Unfortunately, I wouldn’t be going on a run until we’d solved this puzzle.

I glanced down at my phone again, blinking hard as the words jumbled together. My eyes were tired—hell, I was tired—and I had to force myself to focus.

I scrolled and clicked, moving back through the videos I’d watched a hundred times. Suddenly, I noticed something I hadn’t before. “Wait.”

Everyone stopped and stared at me expectantly.

“I think I found something.” I cast my phone screen to the TV so they could see what I was looking at. “Look.”

I’d searched YouTube multiple times over the past several hours and had a tab open for each of the disasters. “We’ve been focusing on the news stories that featured each individual disaster instead of the full thirty minutes of news coverage.” I paused one of the videos just as the story about the flooding began. “Look at the timestamp.”

“What is it?” Nico took a step closer to the screen. “I’m not following you, Ty.”

I played each newscast, pausing the videos just as the full stories of the disasters began. Pulling up the notes app on my phone again, I showed everyone the list of timestamps. “I’ve added up the times and they equal these two numbers. Nico

had a point about the coordinates because when I put the two numbers into the map..." I paused and everyone stared as the Presley Acres library popped onto the screen.

Dad leaned forward. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

Nico jaw dropped. "How the hell did you figure that out?"

I shrugged. "Fuck knows."

Dad glanced at the countdown on the screen, then at his watch. "We have to go. Now. Everyone, load up."

Nico's voice rose over the chaos in the room. "All right, team. You heard the boss. We're leaving in three minutes. Pull the SUVs around the front. Load up your supplies and weapons. There's no telling what we're about to walk into."

As everyone filed out of the room, Liza made her way to my side and wrapped her arms around me, her smiling lighting up her face. She planted a loud kiss on my lips. "I knew you were more than just bronze."

I rolled my eyes and laughed. "Can you handle this? Would you rather stay here?"

Her smile vanished. "I'm going with you."

Fair enough. I could get on board with that, mostly because I wanted her by my side, no matter what.

Dad pulled on his jacket and walked out the door, giving us a moment of privacy.

"Do you think we're walking into a trap?" She twined her fingers through mine. Her eyes were clouded with so much worry that I wanted to scoop her into my arms.

I shook the idea out of my head since we needed to leave. "Like you said, Castro's going to give us a chance to figure out the clues. But we better go. Not making it in time could prove to be dire."

Fingers laced, we rushed out of the house and joined Dad in the front SUV. As soon as we were in, the team rolled out, speeding toward town with the emergency lights on.

Liza couldn't keep still, her leg bouncing so hard I thought she'd wear a hole through the floorboard. Adrenaline pumped through all of us as we wondered what we'd find at the library.

We finally pulled into the empty parking lot, and I checked the time. We had ninety minutes left before Castro told the whole world what Dad had done to the Wylder pack.

I envisioned swarms of angry shifters from different packs tearing down the stone wall that surrounded Keller Estate, kicking down the door and burning our house to the ground. It's what we deserved after all, wasn't it? Or had time forgiven my father's sins? Could people look beyond the terrible act and see the reasoning behind it: the horrible leadership and disgusting dealings of the Wylder alpha, and how there was only one way to stop him?

Liza's soft voice broke through my thoughts. "What exactly are we looking for?" Her face was pressed to the window, straining to see the library's entrance.

I frowned and wiped my sweaty brow. "Honestly, I didn't think that far ahead. I have no clue what we're looking for." I thought of the bell tower and how quickly we'd discovered the bomb taped to the wall just inside the entrance.

If I had learned anything about Castro up to this point, it was that he loved the element of surprise. There was no way in hell he'd make it that easy on us again. We had a long search ahead of us with only a very small amount of time left on the clock. The odds weren't in our favor.

Everyone lined up and looked to me for instructions. I'd uncovered the clue and, of course, I was the future alpha. I wasn't used to calling the shots when my father was around, but it was a welcome change to step into that leadership role, proving to myself that I could handle the stress.

I glanced at Dad. His nod gave me permission to take the reins. I would be calling all of the shots before long. Why not start now?

I scanned their faces, praying to the gods that I wasn't leading everyone astray or right into Castro's hands. "Let's

split up and search the entire library. Leave no book unturned since we have no idea what we're looking for. It could be as obvious as the nose on your face, or it could be subtle.”

Everyone nodded, divided the library into sections, and entered once Dad used his key to unlock the main doors. At after midnight, the library was deserted, so we could move freely through the building.

Every second counted, and we didn't have time for distractions.

When I walked through the door, I half-expected to see a bomb attached to the wall, but the only thing hanging above the checkout desk was a very large clock, reminding me of our time limit.

I ran down the steps to the basement, flicking the light switch as I passed.

Rows upon rows of books were shoved in so tightly that I wondered if we needed to look into upgrading the building.

The smell of musty books and dusty air made me sneeze, the sound reverberating off the walls of the empty basement.

I rushed up and down each aisle, looking for anything out of place. All I found were old reference books and a few microfiche machines. Nothing seemed out of place, so I ran back up the stairs.

Nico met me in the main lobby, letting me know that the third floor had been scanned by his team. Everything was in order. There were no signs of further clues, and there were certainly no bombs.

There had to be something specific we were looking for. I checked the time, and my heart jumped into my throat. We were running out of time, but what the hell were we trying to find?

After working with Nico to search the reference desk area, I found Liza in the nonfiction section of the library. Moving in her direction, I passed a row of encyclopedias. A thought suddenly occurred to me.

“Everyone, listen up!” I shouted, hoping the entire team could hear my voice. “The dates of the disasters must have some significance.” I pulled up the notes app on my phone again. “Meet me in the archives section and I’ll assign each of you a date.”

Everyone lined up, diligently receiving their assigned date and making a note of it on their phone. We all spread out and wasted no time finding the dates, digging through the books, hoping to find the clue.

Liza joined me in searching for the same date Hurricane Harvey had caused so much destruction in Houston.

“How much time do we have left?” she asked in a tight voice.

I quickly glanced at my watch. “We literally have fifteen minutes left.”

“Holy shit!” Liza yelled and stood to her feet. “I found something.”

I rushed to her side. On the inside cover of the book she was holding, a small rectangle had been carved out, and an SD card was pressed into it.

A few more shouts filled the room as everyone realized Liza had done it again. She held the clue in her hands.

“Somebody boot up one of these computers. Now!”

Dad stood behind me, staring in awe at the small SD chip that would save our pack from impending disaster. “Shouldn’t we scan this for viruses? What if it somehow fucks up the library system?”

“There’s no time for that. Worst-case scenario, we buy the library new computers.” My heart was close to exploding. As soon as the computer booted up, Liza shoved the SD card into the slot. A few seconds later, a long number popped up on the screen.

“Fuck. What does it mean?” I squinted at the screen, expecting some additional verbiage to be hidden behind the numbers.

Liza tapped the screen with her fingernail. “It’s a Dewey decimal number. You know, the number used to organize the books.”

I checked the time. We had three minutes to find the book.

Liza grabbed the mouse and opened the library’s online catalog system, typing faster than I thought was humanly possible.

The name of the book and its location popped onto the screen, a green *available* flashing below the title, letting us know that we could, indeed, borrow the book.

“This title looks familiar,” I said as Liza jotted down the location.

“Yeah, it’s a book about betrayal. It’s about a king who built his empire on lies and deceit, and the eventual fall of the empire.”

Of course. Nothing Castro did was accidental. He took jabs wherever and whenever he could.

We ran to the adult fiction section, scanning each shelf as we rushed by, following the alphabetically ordered signs until we reached the letter of the author’s last name.

Finally, we found the book. Liza flipped it open. A rectangle had been carved out of the pages, and a phone was nestled inside it.

If I didn’t hate the bastard so much, I might’ve been impressed with his creativity.

I grabbed the phone and powered it on, but just as the screen lit up, the timer on my phone went off. It was too late. Our time was up.

Liza looked at me with tears in her eyes, and I couldn’t find the words to comfort her. We were fucked.

Once the phone powered on, the screen lit up with an incoming call.

I pushed the green button and put the call on speaker phone.

My heart dropped as Castro's voice echoed off the library walls. He chuckled. "Wow, I'm impressed. You all were *so* close."

His words hung in the air as the rest of the team gathered around. Nico pulled out his phone and recorded Castro as he spoke.

"I commend you for figuring it all out. To my own surprise, I'm feeling a little generous, considering you were only seconds off."

My anger was its own living, breathing entity. Liza pressed against my side to try and keep me calm, no doubt sensing my rage.

Dad spoke up. "What the hell do you want from us, Castro?"

Castro laughed in his own sadistic way, making the hairs on my neck stand at attention. "Is Liza there?" He laughed again. "I'm sure she is. She's the actual brains behind figuring all of this out, isn't she?"

My hands tightened around the phone as I imagined squeezing Castro's neck until his face turned blue, choking the very life out of him.

"My request is simple," Castro began. "I want Dominic to tell Liza just how he massacred her clan."

What the hell? Liza already knew all about it. What was Castro getting at?

"He needs to tell her that, even though I was the one who pulled the trigger, her parents were still breathing when she ran from the cabin."

Liza's entire body went stiff as she pulled away from me. "No. That's impossible."

Castro sighed into the phone. "I shot them in the chest, but they weren't dead when I left the cabin." His voice was stern as he turned his attention back to Dominic. "Go on, Alpha Keller. Tell Liza how her parents *really* died."

Chapter 20

Liza

My body automatically recoiled at Castro's voice booming through the speaker.

Ty turned to face his father, who stood frozen like a statue. "What the fuck is he talking about?"

The look on Dominic's face told me he was just as bewildered as the rest of us. Nico leaned over and whispered something into his ear.

Dominic's perplexed expression quickly morphed into devastation. "I didn't know," he whispered, his breath catching in his throat.

My voice was much smaller than I intended when I finally spoke up. "What's going on? I don't understand."

Castro's voice boomed once more. "My patience is running thin, Alpha. I don't have all night." He paused before yelling louder. "Liza needs to know who really ended her parents' lives!"

Dominic cleared his throat and eyed Nico, trying to decide what to say.

"If you don't tell her right this fucking second, *I'll* tell her. I'll tell the whole fucking country. This secret will be exposed tonight. So, who will it be, Dominic? You or me?"

My mind raced, trying to make sense of Castro's demand. What could he possibly be referring to? Castro had killed my parents. I saw it happen, and I finally remembered every gory detail of that moment. He had shot them in the chest. Two

more victims, he decided, were necessary to have me to himself.

Whatever Dominic had to say must've been severe, and the last thing I wanted was for him to broadcast information about my parents to the entire country.

I turned to Dominic, pleading with my eyes, gesturing toward the phone. No matter how horrible the truth was, he needed to speak now before we lost our chance to keep the secret between us.

It wasn't Dominic's voice that broke through the silence, though. It was Nico's.

"Dominic had no idea."

"That's a fucking lie!" Castro screamed.

"No. It's not a lie, Castro." Nico's voice remained calm and steady, and I wondered how the hell he managed that in such a stressful situation. "Dominic has no fault in what happened after Liza's parents were found shot and believed to be dead."

Wait a fucking second. Did he say *believed to be* dead?

The room spun, and I grabbed Ty's arm to keep my balance, trying desperately not to fall over. My stomach lurched, and I covered my mouth with my hand, hoping I wouldn't vomit all over the row of fiction books.

Nico took a step closer to the phone Ty was still clutching with a death grip. "Dominic instructed us to burn down all of the cabins, but then I realized Liza wasn't in the house."

I gripped my stomach, not knowing if I could stand to listen, but I had no choice. I needed to hear the truth.

Nico turned to face me. "Dominic didn't want you dead, but I advised him to take you out."

I took a step back as Ty growled.

Nico's gaze never wavered from mine as he continued. "Your parents were still breathing when Dominic ran off to find you in the woods, though your father was on his last

breath, and your mother was barely alive. Could they have been saved?" His lips flattened into a tight line. "I think so. But their living meant a drug war could leak over into Presley Acres. I know that to you, Liza, your parents were your parents, but to everyone else, they were a cartel that dealt in weapons and drugs. This is probably hard for you to hear, but the facts are the facts. They were dangerous people, and they were a threat to our pack. My loyalty was and always will be to Dominic, so I had no choice but to eliminate the threats against him."

I closed my eyes. I couldn't stomach looking at Nico any longer. Everything was quiet, the silence thick as we all stood there, not knowing what to do or say next. Then finally, Nico cleared his throat.

"That is why I did what I did, Liza. You can hate me for it, but I am not sorry. I am loyal to Dominic, and that means protecting him, no matter the cost." When I opened my eyes, he looked away, unable to meet my gaze. Before he could turn away completely, he added one final sentence. "This is what it means to be loyal to the alpha."

I couldn't find the words to respond. I had so many questions, but the words just wouldn't come.

I'd almost forgotten Castro was still on the phone until he finally spoke again, spitting his words out with rage. "It's a lie, Nico. You've always protected Dominic, but today, the truth will be out in the open. Dominic burned down the cabin while Liza's parents were still alive. I can prove it."

Nico scoffed. "You can't prove anything. How can you possibly think that Dominic was behind this?"

Castro ignored him, hatred spewing from his voice. "Liza, I have evidence that proves your parents died because of Dominic. He ordered his pack to burn everything down, and they followed his orders without question. I have the transcripts of a recorded conversation."

"You're wrong, Castro, because Dominic didn't even know they were still alive when the cabin was burned down." Nico's voice raised just enough for us to notice that he was losing his

typically calm demeanor and constant composure. “I never told him. I was the one to make the call, and I have my own proof of the event.”

Castro was furious. He growled into the phone, and a loud crash in the background made me jump. I wondered what expensive equipment he’d just shattered by having a temper tantrum. “You are all snakes.” He growled, deep and guttural, and the hairs on my arms to stand on end. “That’s fine,” he continued. “I have plenty more on you. You have more disgusting secrets. You’re safe for now.”

Castro ended the call, and it unleashed a flood tears. Seconds later, rage surged through me.

It was swift, like a living thing that couldn’t be controlled. The sensations took over my body before I could recognize and push them back down. My neck snapped back as a vicious snarl escaped my throat, my claws and fangs appearing against my will.

It wasn’t my fault. I’d been pushed to this point. My entire body shook as the mania built from the image of my parents lying on the cold floor, Nico’s face being the last they ever saw.

I imagined my mother pleading for her life, watching the love of her life bleed out only a few feet from her as the cabin lit up in flames.

Nico had chosen murder and loyalty to his alpha over the sanctity of life. The realization was so stunning, so jarring, that I didn’t question my extreme reaction to the truth.

I turned to face Nico and Dominic; my lips curled back to display my fangs. “You’re both murderers. My parents may not have been the best people, according to you, but at least they weren’t murderers.”

I wanted to hurt them, to rip them apart limb by limb, to make them bleed and beg for their lives before I ended them.

My heart broke all over again, just as it was beginning to heal and find peace. “When will this family stop taking from me?” I screamed, raking my claws through my hair so

violently that my hand came away bloody. “How can you ask me to be mated to the next leader of this pack when all you do is take and take and fucking *take*?”

“Liza.” Ty whispered my name, but I was too far gone. There was no coming back from the brink of insanity the Kellers had pushed me to.

I was too deep in my heartbreak to even react to his soft and broken tone. He was there by my side, not recoiling in fear. It didn’t matter, though. Once again, I was broken, and this time I wasn’t so sure I could come back from it.

“I still hate Castro. I don’t want that to be confused, but I hate you all just as much.”

I didn’t stop to look at their pathetic faces to see what type of response I’d elicited with my fury. Maybe something I’d said rang true to them and they realized what monsters they’d been. Even if it did, it wouldn’t make a difference. I was done with them. I refused to stand there another second.

I stormed past Nico, needing fresh air. He didn’t try to reach out to me, but he did turn and speak as I rushed past him. “I’m sorry you’re hurting, but you shouldn’t blame Dominic. He had a soft spot for your parents, regardless of the threat they were to the pack. I’m sure if he had known they were alive, he would’ve had them saved.” I slowed down but didn’t stop moving as Nico’s voice became louder. He wanted to be sure I heard his final plea. “I’m the one to blame, Liza. I made the call. Not Dominic.”

I paused when Dominic’s quiet voice reached me. “Liza, I would have saved them.” He sounded so broken. “I would’ve saved them.” When he repeated himself, his voice cracked, and he stared at the floor.

Nico stood tall, showing his resolve for the situation. “And that’s why we had to see to their end.” He turned back to me, his eyes narrowed in determination to make his final case and somehow convince me that killing my parents was the best decision he could have made. “I’m sorry for your loss, Liza, but I did what I had to do.”

I stormed out of the library. Ty called after me, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. My arms tingled, and I knew I needed to shift before I broke out of my skin in the middle of the library.

My wolf needed to sink its teeth into something, so I ran toward the trail where Ty and I would have had our first date. The one where he stood me up. To be fair, he'd had a good excuse.

At this time of night, the park was empty, allowing me the freedom to run through a public place only half shifted—part human and part wolf. I silently thanked the gods for keeping people away, not knowing how I'd react to their stares.

As soon as I reached the tree line, I stripped out of my clothes and shifted fully, running deep into the densely wooded area. I bounded over logs and leaped over streams, finally coming to a stop on a massive boulder overlooking the river.

My heart pounded, and I found myself scanning, watching, and waiting for something, anything, to move. The desire to kill overwhelmed my senses. No longer thinking straight, I followed a scent along the stream in the opposite direction.

After several minutes of sniffing the ground and listening for rustling in the underbrush, I finally found it.

A buck stood in the dim moonlight. I could see the fear in its eyes and the taut muscles of its body, waiting for a false move or wrong decision that would cost it its life.

My motions were swift. So fluid, in fact, that I didn't remember how I got from one point to the other. Instincts took over, and my wolf was at full power as all human reasoning went out the window.

The buck tried to run to dodge the predator that ran at full speed and lunged at its neck. He was too slow, and my desire to kill was too strong. I felt my teeth sink into its neck, and the buck fell to the ground, lifeless.

“Liza. It's okay.”

The words were distant but soothing. Ty was near. I could sense his warm breath on my ear. I came to slowly, still in wolf

form. Ty was sitting on the ground, his arms wrapped around me.

I blinked hard, trying to understand where I was and what had happened. I must've blacked out at some point. Suddenly, it all came rushing back to me. My eyes focused on the large mound and pool of blood next to me.

I gulped for air as the buck's terrified eyes and loud snorting flooded my memories.

Oh, God, what had I done?

The poor buck. It hadn't been hunted for food, nor had it just simply been killed. It had been slaughtered. I'd torn it to shreds.

I exhaled sharply as Ty held me closer. My wolf whined at what we'd done.

Tilting my chin upward, I howled remorsefully, my grief overwhelming me. I was completely broken.

"I'm sorry, Liza," Ty whispered in my ear. "I'm so sorry."

My wolf slowly receded, and when I was fully human again, I shivered from the cold and buried my face in Ty's chest. I couldn't look at the buck's corpse any longer, its broken body a visible reminder of the brokenness within me. A loud sob tore through the silence, and I realized it had come from me. There was no way I could hold back, my mourning consuming me.

It was all too much. The loss of my parents, the betrayal of Ty's family, even the paralyzing emotions I experienced as an omega—I couldn't take anymore. I sobbed until there were no more tears and the exhaustion caught up with me.

I clung to Ty's shirt, breathing him in before finally blacking out in his arms.

My eyes fluttered, and I pulled the sheet over my head. The image of the dead buck popped into my mind, and I sat up, scanning the room, not sure where I was.

I was disoriented for a minute, but then everything came back to me.

Castro hadn't killed my parents. Sure, he'd shot them, but they were still alive when Nico had found them. Dominic had created such a cult-like following that Nico chose to kill my parents without even consulting his alpha.

It was all so fucked up I couldn't even begin to process it.

My entire body ached, though I wasn't sure if it was from the physical exertion from slaughtering the innocent buck, or a physical manifestation of my mental anguish. The pain was alive. It encircled me and held me down so I couldn't move. It was a living, breathing entity. If I wasn't careful, it would pull me down and I'd never recover.

I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing in an attempt to keep myself from having another meltdown like the one last night.

Ty opened the door slowly, knocking as he entered. His eyes were huge, and I saw the fear he was trying to hide. It broke my heart to see him so apprehensive about approaching me. My anger wasn't directed toward him. If I was honest with myself, it wasn't directed at Dominic, either. As upset as I was last night, I still recognized the pain and sincerity in his voice when he'd spoke the truth.

He hadn't known. Nico had kept it from him.

Nico had been so focused on doing what *he* thought was right that he hadn't even considered anything else other than eliminating an assumed threat. That threat just happened to be my parents.

Ty placed a mug of steaming coffee on the bedside table and sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to touch me. "How are you feeling?"

I pulled my legs to my chest and wrapped my arms around my knees. "Drained."

"Your pheromones were exploding off you last night, so I'm not surprised that you're so tired."

"What happened?" I remembered Ty holding me while I cried, but after that, it was all a blur.

“Your adrenaline finally wore off, and you passed out.” Ty gently rested his hand on my knee. “I carried you back to one of the SUVs and brought you home. You didn’t wake up the entire time, even when I dressed you.”

I glanced down at the silk pajamas I had on. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” He grabbed the coffee mug and handed it to me. “This might help wake you up.”

I took a long sip, savoring the hot liquid as it warmed my insides. “How’s your dad doing?”

Ty’s eyebrows nearly rose to his hairline at my question. “He’s worried about you.”

“And Nico?” I asked, not sure if I really cared how he was faring.

“He and Dad shared words about Nico keeping the truth of your parents from him. Dad was pissed he was left in the dark, yet Castro, of all people, knew about it.”

“How did Castro know about it?” I asked, taking another sip of my coffee. The caffeine was finally kicking in, and my brain was starting to work again.

Ty shifted on the bed, pulling his leg underneath his body. “Apparently, Castro found an encrypted transcript of a recorded briefing where Nico described the incident. Castro mistook Nico’s voice for Dad’s. Back then, Nico kept a record of all his undercover missions as a safety net should anyone try to betray him—that included Dad.”

My phone buzzed, and I realized I hadn’t checked it since the night before in the library. I scanned a few emails from clients, promising myself I’d reply after chatting with Ty. I tossed the phone beside me on the bed and turned my attention back to him. “So, how did Castro get his hands on the recordings?”

“The files were on a secure server, which brings up a whole other can of worms. Castro most probably has *all* of Nico’s secret missions and dirty work. Most of them are connected to Dad and consist mainly of dirty dealings they had a hand in until they went clean.”

I shook my head. “This is bad.”

Ty nodded. “Castro wasn’t happy about his plan backfiring, so we think he’s still going to release something to the public.”

I sighed. “This is such a shit show.”

“I agree, but we can’t give up.” Ty moved as if to cup my face, but drew his hand back as if frightened of my reaction to being touched. “I may not be able to get you justice for your parents, but I’ll do my best to heal the hurt my family has caused you.”

I stared into his eyes. My mate was devastated. I moved forward and wrapped my arms around him, pulling him into a tight hug. He relaxed under my touch as I kissed his neck and whispered, “Thank you.”

His hands inched to my shoulders as he gently pushed me away so he could see my face. “I don’t want to lose you, but I can understand if you can’t look past this. If you want out of the mating just tell me. Once Castro is taken care of, I’ll accept your rejection. If that’s what you decide.”

Chapter 21

Ty

I spent the next few days at Liza's home, refusing to leave her side.

After everything that happened at the library, and the overload of emotions she'd experienced, I didn't want to leave her alone for too long.

I drank my morning coffee with closed eyes. Visions of Liza lying next to the eviscerated buck, covered in the condemned beast's blood kept flashing through my mind. She'd been unresponsive when I'd got to her. Her normally expressive eyes had stared out at everything and nothing, completely blank. A true thousand-yard stare. She'd been so unresponsive I'd feared she was lost completely. The possibility of her not returning to me...

Slowly, though, she came back to me. My heart had shattered into a million pieces when I saw the recognition flash through her eyes.

The anguish in her howl had nearly brought me to my knees. She was devastated over what she'd done, but I never once considered her guilty of anything other than heartbreak.

What Nico had shared had been shocking. Hearing the truth about the events of what happened the day Liza's parents died had torn something in my soul, and I could do nothing but watch something shift in her demeanor. Couldn't do a damn thing when her rage caused another partial shift.

I was just grateful that in the heat of her anger, her wolf had chosen to rip the buck to shreds and not Nico or Dad.

Liza had spent most of her time in bed watching TV or sleeping. She'd called Sabrina and had her take over her jobs for the week because she was in no mood to put a smile on for her clients, which, given the circumstances, was understandable.

Self-care was very much needed, so I did what I could to cater to her every need. I even hired a nail technician to come over with all her supplies to give Liza a manicure and pedicure.

Yesterday, I called in a favor from one of my favorite masseuses who brought her massage table into the bedroom, along with candles and soft spa music. Sure, I could've hired the best masseuse in Texas, but I didn't want to watch another man put his hands on Liza's body. Ever.

It was worth it, though, when after a two-hour full body massage, I'd noticed some of the tension leaving Liza's body. She'd slept better last night, not waking from the nightmares that usually chased her into wakefulness.

"Good morning." Liza emerged from the bedroom around ten. "I can't believe I slept that late. Guess I was more tired than I realized."

I took her hand and led her to the kitchen. "You haven't slept properly the last couple of nights. You needed the sleep." I pulled a chair out from the table and nudged her into it. "What would madame like for breakfast?" I placed a clean tea towel over my arm in my best imitation of a waiter. "You're in luck. I know the chef. He's a grumpy bastard, but he owes me a favor or four." I wagged my eyebrows at her. "I can get him to whip up whatever you like."

She giggled. "Toast and coffee, please."

I placed two pieces of bread into the toaster. While I waited for it to do its magic, I turned to the coffee pot. I'd made coffee earlier this morning, so all that was required was to pour it into a mug. After a few minutes, the toast popped up, and I spread butter onto the golden-brown slices. I put them on a plate, then carried it over to Liza, grabbing the mug of coffee along the way. She was reading an email on her phone.

“What are you looking at?” I asked as I placed the plate and mug down in front of her.

“Just checking work emails,” Liza said, not lifting her gaze up from her phone.

I shook my head and clucked my tongue gently. “You’re supposed to be on vacation. Let Sabrina take care of it.”

She sighed and placed her phone on the table, face down. “You’re right, but it’s really hard to not know what’s happening.”

“If something needs to be handled, Sabrina will let you know. She’s not going to run your business into the ground.” I grinned. “At least not in the span of a few days.”

Liza laughed, then picked up her mug and took a sip of her coffee. “Thanks for the reminder. I needed it.”

I sat across from her and watched her eat. It pleased me that she felt well enough to put something in her stomach. “I think you need some more pampering today.”

She raised one eyebrow. “You’re cooking for me. I’ve had my nails done and the most amazing massage. I was sure you’d have to pick me up from the bedroom floor yesterday. I’m not sure what else I could possibly need.”

I took her plate and placed it in the kitchen sink. “How about a long, hot bath?”

“Well, I suppose that wouldn’t hurt.”

I drew her a bath and poured citrus-scented bath salts into the steaming water.

Liza tapped on the bathroom door. “Ready for me?”

“Yeah, come on in.” I eyed her as she slipped into the bathroom and turned her back to me, then dropped her robe.

Holy fuck. I averted my eyes, not wanting to ruin her Zen moment because I couldn’t control myself. All I wanted to do was grab her and fuck her from behind.

She sighed as she submerged her body in the water, leaving only her head peeking out above the water. I folded a

towel and placed it behind her neck so she'd be more comfortable.

I turned to leave. "I'll be right outside when you're ready to get out. Maybe we can watch something together."

"Uh-huh. Sounds nice." Her eyes were closed as she relaxed into the hot water.

An hour later, Liza emerged from the bathroom. Her hair fell in wet tangles over her shoulders. She'd tied her robe at the waist and joined me on the bed, taking the remote from my hand and switching the TV off. "I want to talk to your father."

I stiffened. Definitely not what I'd expected her to say. Was that a good idea? She'd clearly done some serious thinking in the bathtub, but I couldn't hide my surprise and concern. What if she lost control again and lashed out at him?

"Don't look at me like that. I promise I'm not mad anymore." She paused. "No, wait. Let me rephrase. I'm not mad at *him* anymore."

"Sounds like you've given this some thought." I draped my arm over her shoulders, and she snuggled against me, her wet hair making my body erupt in gooseflesh.

"It's all I can think about now I'm thinking more clearly. My mindset has shifted." She cleared her throat. "I understand my parents did bad things, and those bad things were leaking over into Presley Acres. They obviously wanted to cause problems. Do I think they deserved to die for it? No. But at the end of the day, if it hadn't been Dominic or Nico, it would have been Castro."

She lifted her head and seemed to stare right through me, as if she could see into the depths of my soul. "Castro always planned to kill my parents. It was inevitable as long as he was in the picture. He's the enemy, not your father."

Her words hung in the air between us. I opened my mouth to speak, but there weren't enough words to describe the depth of emotions running through my mind.

Liza stared out the window, so I gently cupped her cheek and turned her face toward me.

I couldn't believe fate had matched me with this incredible woman. After everything she'd learned about how her parents had died and my father's involvement, she still found it in her heart to forgive him. I saw nothing but honesty in her eyes. This woman was fucking amazing.

At that moment, I couldn't help but share my true feelings with her. "Liza, I love you."

And I did love her, with every fiber of my being. Her willingness to forgive spoke volumes to the kind of person she was. She would be an incredible leader for the pack, and she was the only woman I could picture by my side. Forever.

Liza's heart beat so loudly that I could hear it. Her pheromones assaulted my nose.

"What did you just say?" she asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

I held her face with both hands, ensuring she could see the truth of the words in my eyes. "I love you, Liza Mims. More than you'll ever know."

I didn't expect her to say it back, so I kissed her gently, stopping her from responding—or *not* responding.

She kissed me back passionately. After days of trying to help her relieve her stress, I decided an orgasm might just do the trick.

A spark ignited somewhere deep within me, sending shivers of pleasure through my body as my lips moved over hers.

I broke the kiss, searching her eyes for some sign of approval or understanding. Liza's lips curled into a sultry grin before she crushed her mouth against mine again. My tongue flicked out to part her lips, seeking entry to duel with hers.

I pushed my hands into her damp hair, gripping the back of her head and pulling her down into the kiss. Her arms locked around my neck, pulling me closer still.

Without breaking the kiss, I lifted her onto me, nudging her thighs apart. She rubbed against my groin, needing the

friction, and my cock hardened on command.

The heat building between us was excruciating. I had to control myself, or I'd embarrass myself and come in minutes like a horny teenager.

Trailing my fingers down her arm to her breast, I slipped my hand beneath her robe. Her nipple was hard and stiff as I brushed my thumbs over the pink peak. Liza moaned into my mouth, the sound of her desire arousing me even more. The kiss became urgent as I slid my hand down to the hem of her robe.

"Ty, baby... wait..." she pleaded when I reached for her thigh.

She took my wrist and slowly removed my hand from her body. I sighed as she pushed away from me and sat beside me. "Ty, I..."

I let her go. I could barely breathe, and the throbbing in my cock was unbearable. The air around me crackled with sexual tension. I wasn't sure what had made her hesitate.

"Do you want me to stop?" I asked.

She sighed, her voice coming out in a whisper. "No, don't stop. Just take it slower. I need this..." Her voice dropped even lower as a flush of embarrassment crept up her face. "I feel like I need a huge release."

A sly grin spread across my face. "It's your lucky day. You're in excellent hands, my love. I'll give you exactly what you need. Always."

I kissed her again, and she pulled me down on top of her, her hands reaching for my belt buckle.

I palmed her breast, caressing her nipple through the fabric. A swift tug at the belt of the robe, and she was gloriously naked before me. Liza shrugged the robe off her shoulders and down her arms, and I tossed it to the floor.

I kissed my way along her neck, nipping gently with my teeth, then lapping at the bite to ease the sting with my tongue.

Her moans were my favorite song, and I continued my trail down from her collarbone to her breasts.

I closed my mouth around one of her hard nipples, sucking on it before biting down. Releasing it with a pop, I swirled my tongue around it to ease the sting.

Liza's moans grew louder. While my mouth played with one nipple, I pinched the other one and rolled it between my thumb and forefinger.

My cock throbbed, and a rumble emanated from my chest. She reached for my belt again with frantic urgency.

A primal need was building deep inside of me—a need I had to release. I wanted to stay in control, but I was quickly losing the battle. Her scent was too intoxicating.

I sat upright and pulled my shirt over my head.

As I leaned back down to kiss her once more, my hands traced a path down her stomach to her mound. My fingertips found her damp seam, and I slid my finger along her opening.

I trembled as my fingers slipped between her folds, circling her clit. She made the most amazing sound when I pushed my finger inside of her, making a come-hither gesture with my fingers. I stroked her inner walls, hitting that magnificent spot within her.

“Oh,” she moaned softly and threw her head back.

I pressed my lips back to her throat, nipping and licking as I worked my fingers inside her and brushed my thumb across her clit. My hand slid back up her body, and I squeezed her nipple, pinching it between my thumb and index finger.

She was first to lose control, pressing tight to my palm, her pussy throbbing and clenching around my hand. She didn't make a sound. Did she really think I wasn't going to notice her orgasm?

Finally, Liza let out an uncontrolled squeak as she convulsed.

After a long release, her body went limp against the bed.

“Oh, no. Don’t you dare think for a second that I’m done with you, Liza. You asked for a big release. That was nothing compared to what’s about to happen. I’m going to fuck you until you levitate off this damn bed.”

I pulled my hand away, making her whimper at the loss. I made quick work of getting naked, fisting my cock while my eyes roamed her body.

“Spread your legs,” I demanded, and she did.

I leaned over her, my cock pressing against her thigh as I kissed her again before pulling away to look into her eyes.

“You feel that?” I asked.

“Mm, yes,” she panted.

“That, my love, is my throbbing cock. It’s rock hard for you.”

Her eyes grew wide at my words.

“I’m going to fuck you, Liza, and you’re going to love it. You’re going to beg me for more. I’ll give you what you want. I’ll give you everything you need. Always.”

Lust and desire swirled in her eyes when they locked on mine.

I thrust my cock along her pillowed lips, brushing against her clit, careful not to slip inside of her. Liza’s juices created a smooth lubrication between my dick and her clit as I slid back and forth slowly, savoring the feel of her.

“I need to be inside of you, Liza. I need to be inside of you right now.”

I pressed my cock against her pussy, sliding it up and down, coating it with her wetness. Her body seemed to respond to my touch more than before. The head of my cock was slick, and I ran my hand up and down the shaft, squeezing it and readying myself.

“Move down the bed, ass up,” I demanded, and she complied, sliding down so her head was at the foot of the bed. She was on her knees, her beautiful ass in the air. I reached

beneath her, spreading her cheeks, giving myself a perfect view of her needy pussy as it contracted and pulsed. The sight enthralled me.

I took a deep breath and ran my hand over my shaft, savoring the moment. She turned her head around.

“Please,” she begged as her arousal dripped down her thighs.

I gripped her hips and slowly slid my cock inside of her.

She moaned, a low, sultry sound that made my dick throb even more. It took every ounce of control not to slam inside her but to slide in slowly, inch by inch, my cock throbbing with each passing second.

“Oh, God, Ty,” she whimpered.

I paused when my pelvis pressed against her ass. She held the foot of the bed so tightly that her knuckles turned white. A loud groan escaped her as she begged me to make good on my promise to fuck her so hard she’d fly.

I pulled nearly all the way out, then thrust inside all the way to the hilt.

Her back arched, and her head fell forward. I flipped her over, her legs dangling off the end of the bed.

Liza eyed my slick cock and licked her lips. Without a word, she opened her mouth wide. I grabbed the back of her head, and she enveloped me in her hot, moist mouth.

“Fuck,” I hissed as she lapped the pre-cum that had beaded on the tip of my cock, flattening her tongue against the head. A wonderful chill ran down my spine.

Gripping her head, I thrust hard, hitting the back of her throat.

Liza’s eyes rolled back in her head, the vibration of her moans sending a whole new sensation from the tip of my dick to my balls.

I pulled out, because if I didn’t, I’d come in her mouth, and I wanted to save that for her pussy.

Shoving Liza onto her back, I grabbed her thighs, then slammed back into that magnificent wet heat. Her breath burst out of her in short gasps, sweat glistening on her bouncing breasts. My balls tightened as her pussy contracted around me, soaking me as she whimpered, “Oh, yes! Right there, Ty. Fuck me harder!”

“Yes. Say it. Let me hear you say it,” I demanded.

“Yes, yes. Harder. Don’t stop,” she cried, bucking her hips against me.

I could feel her pussy wanting more, pulsing, and squeezing around me as she lost control. She shuddered, groaning low in her throat as she exploded.

“Oh, God!” she cried as she collapsed into the mattress.

I pulled her up, splaying my hands on her back. My thrusts came faster and harder as I watched her tits rise and fall against my chest.

“Fuck!” I yelled as my balls tightened and the tingling began at the base of my spine. My orgasm barreled through me, and I came inside of her, the release so violent I had to shut my eyes. My body pulsed against her as my cum painted her cervix and womb.

As I fell to the bed, careful not to land on her, I rested my hand on her mound, my finger pressing on her sensitive clit. Her body jerked involuntarily. A satiated smile spread across her face.

“Will two orgasms do for now?”

She placed her hand over mine and giggled. “For now.”

Once we recovered, we showered together and then drove to the estate. Liza fidgeted with her purse, clearly nervous. “Maybe I’m not as forgiving as I thought.”

I put my hand on her thigh and squeezed.

“I’m worried I might rip Nico’s head off when I see him. I know that sounds horrible, but I keep seeing him standing over my parents, them begging him to save them, to get them to a

hospital before it's too late. Instead, he burned the house to the ground with them inside. What an awful way to die.”

“I don't blame you at all for feeling that way.” How could I? What Nico did was fucked up, even though I understood his reasonings. Still, his actions had left Liza an orphan. I silently thanked the gods that her adoptive parents had been a good match. They'd cared and loved her as if she were their own. “If you want to slap the shit out of Nico, I won't stop you.”

Of course, I didn't expect her to lay a finger on Nico, but when we walked into Dad's office and Liza saw Nico standing next to his desk, that's exactly what she did.

Dad and I watched with wide eyes as Nico's head whipped to the opposite side when Liza did, indeed, slap the shit out of him. The sound was like a gunshot.

I stood at the ready, prepared to take Nico down if he so much as looked like he'd attack Liza. Instead, he didn't seem upset in the slightest.

Nico looked down at Liza. She glared up at him.

“You're a heartless bastard.” She shook her hand, trying to rid it of the stinging pain that resulted from hitting Nico so hard. “I understand that it's part of your job, but you aided in the death of my parents, and for that, I think you're a piece of shit. I don't forgive you for what you chose to do because it wasn't your call to make. I'll tolerate you because I have no other choice, but I'll always see you as the man who left my parents there to die.”

I took a step forward, not sure what to expect from Nico.

To my surprise, he nodded at her. “I can accept that.”

They stared each other down for what felt like minutes before Liza finally walked around Nico and stopped directly in front of Dad.

She was so small compared to all of us, but there was so much fire in her that it only made me love her that much more. Her tenacity was fucking sexy. She was standing up to the alpha and his righthand man. Harder men had cowered in fear before them.

Dad looked as if he was holding his breath, waiting for Liza to attack him in the same way.

It was important to Dad that Liza didn't despise him. I could tell by his frown and the sad look in his eyes. He wanted her to forgive him.

"I don't agree with what you did, but I understand why you did it." Liza paused as her breath caught in her throat. After a few moments of composing herself, she continued. "I loved my parents, but I've come to realize they made poor decisions. I can't blame you for protecting your pack from the corruption that was leaking into it. You've made your bed, I believe you when you say you didn't know my parents were alive when Nico set the fires, and I know that guilt will follow you until the day you die. That's all the vengeance I'm capable of carrying without it consuming me." Liza took a step back and wiped a tear from her face. "It isn't complete forgiveness, but it's more than you deserve."

Dad knew what Liza said was correct—every bit of it. So he simply nodded his head, and that was that.

Chapter 22

Liza

I gripped the steering wheel tighter as I glanced into the rearview mirror. The assigned security guard for the day trailed close behind me, looking all badass in his blacked-out SUV. I'd finally managed to convince Ty that they didn't need to be in the car with me, but it still felt strange having a bodyguard trailing after me.

How much my life had changed in such a short amount of time.

It had been a week since the incident at the library, and we hadn't heard a word from Castro. Much to Sabrina's relief, I'd resumed my daily catering jobs, and Ty had returned his focus on Keller Enterprises. It was far from over, but we couldn't stop living, and living meant going about our day-to-day lives, albeit with everyone still on high alert.

Even though a week had gone by, I didn't allow contentment or ease to become the norm. Castro loved the element of surprise, and I feared I would become complacent and drop my guard just in time for him to attack me.

It could happen anywhere and at any time, especially since he probably had a team of people working for him, slipping in and out of the Presley Acres city limits completely unnoticed.

The thought frightened me, but I couldn't stay holed up in my house with Ty all day, though I was surprised to realize that wouldn't have bothered me in the slightest. He was so attentive to my every need, which only made my affections for him stronger. The more time we spent together, the more I

found myself watching the clock, waiting for the workday to end so we could be together.

I pulled into the grocery store and checked my list for what felt like the hundredth time. My brothers were in town, and we planned to have dinner at my parents' house. I was in desperate need of some family time after the weeks I'd had.

Locking the car door, I glanced over my shoulder to check the bodyguard was close by.

He nodded. "I'll stand at the door and keep an eye out for anyone who looks suspicious."

I thanked him and walked inside, the blast of the air conditioner sending stray hairs into my eyes. Pushing them aside, I pulled out my list.

The store was busier than usual, with only a few grocery carts available at the front. I cursed under my breath, hoping I didn't run into anyone I knew.

I made my way down the aisles, mentally crossing items off on my list. Just as I was about to check out, someone called my name.

I turned to see Cecily holding a bottle of kombucha in one hand and her designer purse in the other. "Liza? I wasn't sure if that was you or not."

I sighed. "Yep, it's me." Who else would it be?

I pushed past her, hoping that would be the end of our interaction, but she held up a hand. "I'm surprised you come out in public looking like *that*." She gestured up and down my body.

What the fuck? Sure, I hadn't washed my hair today, but the rest of my body was clean. I brushed my teeth and even swiped some lip gloss on my lips before walking out the door. Maybe I could've spent more time getting dolled up, but a full face of make-up wouldn't help me in the kitchen, and this was just a quick trip to the grocery store, for fuck's sake.

"Excuse me?"

Cecily scoffed. “Well, as the future mate to the alpha, I question your decision-making skills. Shouldn’t someone of your... stature put more care into her appearance?”

I turned to face her, my wolf stirring. “Are you serious?” I glanced at the other shoppers as they walked by nonchalantly, not realizing that I was about to tear into Cecily in the middle of the cereal aisle.

She rolled her eyes and tittered. “Of course, I’m serious. Everyone knows I’m the one who sets the standards in this godforsaken town. So, yes, I’d say that I’m the most qualified person to call you out on your appearance. It’s the right thing to do.” She shook her head, full of fake concern. “Really, Liza, you can do better.”

My hands balled into fists as a low growl escaped my throat. “I think you should apologize for speaking to me like that, Cecily. It would be the *right* thing to do.”

My voice was so low I wondered if she had even heard me.

Cecily opened her beverage and took a sip. I wondered if she’d even paid for the drink—wouldn’t surprise me if that was a no.

She eyed me as if I were crazy. “Is this your attempt at intimidating me, Liza? I have to say that it’s not working. Again, you can do better.”

My heart raced as I stared at her fucking smug face. I shook my head as my pheromones emanated from my body. “How dare you, Cecily? Who the hell do you think you are? You’re just a stuck-up snob who’ll fuck anything with two legs, maybe four. Is that how you got that purse? How many losers did you go down on to afford it?”

Oh my God. Did those words really come out of my mouth?

“Does Ty know you talk to his pack members this way?” Cecily pulled her phone out and snapped a picture of me. “Maybe he’d like to see how you represent the pack when you’re out in public.”

That was it. The bitch was going to die.

Before I could move any closer to her, an odd movement over Cecily's shoulder caught my attention, keeping me from lunging for her neck.

A man in his twenties drifted down the aisle as if in a trance. He sniffed the air as he continued to walk in my direction.

Suddenly, I realized what was happening. My pheromones were drawing him in like a moth to a flame, just like that time at the diner.

Cecily, who was none the wiser since she wasn't an unmated male, continued to stand in my way. It was as if she wanted me to fight her, but right now, I didn't have time.

“Shit.”

I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing, allowing my muscles to relax. I must've calmed myself down just in time as the rage dissipated. The man turned the corner, sniffing the air. He'd lost my scent and looked confused.

He was a scary-looking bastard, and I knew better than to stick around for him to realize the scent was coming from me.

“You know what, Liza?” Cecily took a step forward, lowering her voice and spitting her words in my direction. “You're not worth all the trouble you cause Ty.”

I wanted nothing more than to give her what she deserved, but I blocked her out and pushed past her, nearly jogging to get the hell out of the store.

I breezed past my security guard. He could tell something was wrong, so he hurried over to me. “Are you all right? What happened?”

Before I could answer, he was spinning in circles, his hand on the butt of his weapon, surveying the parking lot for any suspicious activity.

“I'll be fine. Let's get out of here.”

Grateful that he didn't ask any more questions, he just followed me across the carpark, waiting until I was safely locked in my car before getting into the SUV.

As I buckled my seatbelt, I looked up to see the man who'd caught my scent standing at the entrance. He stared right at me, a look of animalistic desire written all over his face.

I groaned before booking it out of the parking lot. As I drove, I called Ty using the Bluetooth in the car.

"Hey." He answered after only one ring. I hated that I was phoning him to admit I'd lost control of my pheromones because the town bitch had goaded me, but after seeing the expression on the man's face when he stared at me in the carpark, I didn't want to take any risks. I had to tell Ty.

"Listen, I don't want you to worry, but—"

"What happened?" The panic was loud and clear in his voice. "Are you okay? Where's your guard?"

"I'm fine, Ty." I sighed. "When I was in the grocery store, I ran into Cecily. She was being a total bitch."

"What's new?"

"Exactly. She kept pushing me more and more, and I'm ashamed to admit that I almost lost control."

Ty was silent on the other end, and I wondered if he was picturing the buck I'd killed. It wouldn't have surprised me since it had crossed my mind.

"My pheromones must've been stronger than I realized because there was a man who picked up on my scent." I made a U-turn, suddenly remembering I'd left my cart of groceries in the store, so I needed to make a stop before heading to my parents' house. "I calmed myself down enough to get out of there, but he was standing at the entrance staring at me when I left. What if he hunts me down?"

"Shit." Ty was silent for a moment. "All right. It's going to be okay. Don't worry. I'll find out who he was and take care of it."

I adjusted the rearview mirror and noticed my hand was shaking violently. "This can't keep happening, Ty. I'm driving

straight to the clinic now to see if I can get a prescription and go back on the suppressants.”

“I think that’s a wise decision. It’s the best we can do for now.”

He didn’t say it, but I knew in his mind he was thinking that our completing the mating ceremony would take care of it. He loved me, though, and he didn’t want to push me into something I wasn’t ready for.

I hung up just as I pulled into the clinic. This time, I wasn’t taking any risks. I asked the security guard to come inside with me. He gladly sat next to me in the waiting room and stood outside the lab door as my blood was being drawn.

After waiting thirty minutes in a consultation room, Doctor Reynolds finally came in. Without a word, the security guard got up and went to stand outside the door. The look on the doctor’s face didn’t give me the warm fuzzies.

“Hello, Liza. I understand you’re hoping to go back on the suppressants. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” I shifted in my seat. “I had a scary experience today with my pheromones, and I’m afraid it’ll happen again.”

“Well…” He skimmed the pages in my chart. “Unfortunately, we may have a minor problem.”

“Damn it.” Of course, there was a problem. If I’d learned one thing, it was that nothing could be easy. At least not where I was concerned. What the hell else could go wrong?

“Your white blood cell count is a lot higher than it should be. With you being an omega, they already multiply rapidly, but now they’ve multiplied exponentially. Suppressants wouldn’t help you at this point.”

I swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the lump in my throat. “Are you sure there’s nothing you could get for me? Maybe a higher dosage from Mexico. Something experimental. Anything?”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid not. Even the strongest legal dosage would probably have little to no effect on

combating the cells multiplying so rapidly within your body.” He took a seat on a black leather stool and tossed my file on the table. “Are you in heat?”

I rolled my eyes. “I think I’d know if I were in heat, and I’m not.” If I was in heat, I would’ve been all over Ty. Yeah, we’d had some fun, but it wasn’t the same as me having no control over my sexual urges.

“Hmm.” Doc Reynolds crossed his arms. “Your bloodwork is suggesting otherwise.”

I frowned. “Sorry, but I certainly don’t feel like I’m in heat. Are you sure the bloodwork is correct?”

He scratched his forehead. “I’ll admit that this is confusing. The bloodwork doesn’t lie, yet I also believe you when you say you don’t feel like you’re in heat. I’m assuming you haven’t had the typical urges you’ve seen in the past when you were in heat?”

I nodded. “That’s correct. I haven’t.”

Reynolds frowned. “This is concerning.”

Great. Just the words you wanted to hear from your doctor.

“Have you been spending a lot of time with Ty?” he continued. “I wonder if your wolf might be reacting to Ty’s regular proximity.”

“Yes.” In fact, we rarely left each other’s side, only for work. Even then, we rushed home to spend the late afternoons and evenings together. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, he’s your mate, and as an omega, your wolf will want to be... bred.”

I choked on air, gasping and spitting.

Doc Reynolds handed me a glass of water and gave me a moment to recover. “It’s quite normal for your wolf to want to start bearing cubs now that she’s no longer being suppressed. She may be feeling like she needs to exude pheromones to...

entice Ty to breed with her. Which, to me, would explain the high white blood cell count.”

My head pounded as I tried to make sense of this new and confusing diagnosis. “What the hell am I supposed to do with this information?”

He gave me a pointed look. “You need to stop putting off the inevitable. You’re not going to reject Ty as your mate, and the longer you wait, the more your wolf suffers.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His voice lowered as he asked me the question I was afraid of answering. “What is it really that you’re waiting for? Ty is fated to you, and fate is never wrong.”

I thought about my conversation with the doctor all the way to my parents’ house. When my brothers met me at the door with hugs and teasing, I had to force myself to smile and at least seem interested in conversation.

“Come on in.” Dad gestured for us to join him in the living room.

Before I could protest, Mason scooped me up and threw me over his shoulder like he used to do when we were much younger. “Look what I caught, Michael.”

Michael leaned in and pretended to inspect me, lifting my hair, and tugging on my ears. “It’s a dud. Throw it back in.”

“If you say so.” Mason flipped me over and tossed me onto the couch, both of them falling into chairs as they laughed at their own ridiculousness.

“How’s the catering business, sis?” Michael opened a can of soda and took a swig. “Haven’t heard from you in a while. I bet you’re staying busy.”

He could say that again, though it wasn’t the housewives’ dinners that kept me occupied. I certainly couldn’t tell my brothers the truth. What would I say? *Oh, I’ve actually been spending most of my time trying to live through the attacks of a sociopath. The same one who tried to kill my biological parents. Also, since I’m an omega, I’m shifting out of rage and could snap at any moment.*

Instead, I forced a smile. “Yeah, things are starting to pick back up for the season. In fact, I thought you all might want to try one of my new Italian recipes. I picked up the ingredients on the way in.”

“My mouth is watering already.” Mason turned his attention to his phone, and I took the opportunity to sneak out of the living room and into the dining room.

Mom had already set the table, and a gorgeous floral centerpiece, no doubt from her garden, adorned the center of the table. I touched the delicate petals as I allowed myself to contemplate Doc Reynolds’ question.

What was keeping me from moving forward with Ty?

Mom rounded the corner and startled me with a light touch on the shoulder. “Sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I turned to face her, trying my best to hold back the tears. There was something about being in her presence that allowed me to drop the pretenses and let my emotions move to the surface.

“Oh, sweetheart.” She cupped my face with both hands. “What’s going on? Did something else happen with that Castro character?”

“No.” I shook my head and stared at the floor. “Apparently, my wolf wants to have Ty’s cubs.”

Mom took a step back, her reaction very similar to the one I’d had back at the clinic. She took a moment to compose herself while I explained the situation.

“I stopped in to have bloodwork, hoping Doc Reynolds would go ahead and put me back on the suppressants. I’m losing control more and more lately. When that happens, my pheromones go crazy. It’s just not safe.”

“What did he say?” Mom pulled me down into a chair and sat next to me.

“My white blood cell count is higher than it should be, so the suppressants won’t help at all, no matter the dosage or strength.”

“I see.” Mom picked at invisible lint on the white tablecloth. “So, what did he suggest?”

I cleared my throat, finding it somewhat uncomfortable to explain the next part to my mom. “Since Ty and I have been spending so much time together, my wolf expects us to mate. As an omega, she has an even stronger desire to bear Ty’s cubs, and she won’t be satisfied until I do.”

Mom took a deep breath. “You know what, Liza? Being claimed and claiming someone isn’t something to sneeze at. Most mated pairs spend years courting each other before deciding to mate, much like humans do when they decide to get married. The desire for one another is stronger, and I imagine with you being an omega, your wolf feels it ten times more than others. We suppressed you for so long, though, that you’re feeling everything all at once.”

I hadn’t considered that there would be a buildup after all the years popping pills to suppress my desires. That would explain the intense reactions I’d been having.

“I understand your hesitancy, sweetheart.” Mom squeezed my hand. “You want to be sure about your mate, and there’s nothing wrong with that. I just want you to take some time to think long and hard about your reasons to hold off. Are they really valid enough to keep putting yourself at risk and causing more stress on your wolf?”

We spent the rest of the day cooking, eating, reminiscing, and laughing at old family videos Dad had found when he’d cleaned out the basement. We talked about all the fun times we had together, back when the hairstyles were much higher and the biggest problem I had to deal with was choosing soccer over basketball. As if it was an unspoken rule, no one mentioned Ty or Castro. Just family memories and fun times. I couldn’t have been more grateful.

I watched my parents as they laughed together, scooting their bodies as close to one another as they could. They’d built a life that they could easily look back on with joy and contentment.

Was it possible for Ty and me to have the same bond in the future, not just at the beginning when we wanted to devour each other's bodies? What about when I got older, and my tits weren't as perky as they were now? Would Ty still look at me the way my father looked at my mother?

I hated to leave, but I finally told everyone that I was tired, which wasn't a lie. The rage and adrenaline I'd experienced earlier in the day had completely zapped my energy.

When I walked through the front door, I turned on the alarm system and took a long, hot shower, mulling over the question that had been posed by Doc Reynolds and Mom.

Was holding off on being claimed really worth it? Ty loved me, and I knew he meant it. So, why was I so hesitant? Why was I holding back from letting the man I was fated to be with claim me?

Chapter 23

Ty

“Son of a bitch!” I tossed a pen across Dad’s office as I stared at the screen in disbelief.

Zephyr had pulled some strings and obtained the security footage from the grocery store. Based on the time Liza had called me, it didn’t take long for him to narrow down the footage and find the fucker who’d followed Liza out of the store.

I watched as he sniffed the air, hunting her down, just as Liza had described. As if it weren’t bad enough that there was a potential threat against Liza from Castro, it turned out that the man in question was an ex-convict named Dennis Felter. Of all the residents whose attention Liza could’ve caught, it had to be him. He’d been arrested on a number of occasions. It seemed Mr. Felter had an issue understanding boundaries after having harassed and assaulted a human woman.

The man had a history of tracking a woman down and attacking her.

Fuck.

Zephyr pulled Dennis’s arrest records for me. The man had a temper on him. While he was incarcerated, he’d instigated more than one fight with multiple inmates.

He’d been under psychiatric care since his release and, luckily, hadn’t caused any issues, and seemed to be lying low.

That was until he’d caught wind of Liza’s pheromones.

I wasn't sure if he was a definite threat to Liza, but it didn't sit well with me. As a shifter, he had the ability to hunt her down in the night, sniffing until he tracked her scent all the way to her front door. I could only hope that his obsession with Liza's pheromones would dissipate, but there was no way to know for sure how someone with a criminal record and under psychiatric care would recover after catching a whiff of her scent.

A flashback of the men snarling and moving toward Liza in the diner popped into my mind. I assumed those men hadn't been criminals, and yet they'd been unable to control their primal desires when met with Liza's scent.

How could I expect a guy like Dennis to forget and move on? I couldn't.

I called Nico.

"What can I do for you, Ty?" He sounded out of breath.

"I need your men to keep an eye on someone for me."

Nico cleared his throat. "Sure. Sorry, you caught me in the middle of a run. Of course, I can do that. Care to fill me in on the situation? Is it related to Castro?"

"No, I haven't heard anything else from Castro. Liza stirred quite an interest in another shopper earlier today. His name is Dennis Felter. I'll text you the information I have on him." I tapped my fingers against the desk. "Don't make any moves right now, just have someone trailing him at all times. The last thing I want is him hunting Liza down." Even though Nico had made the call to kill Liza's parents, he'd done it to protect Dad. I could trust him to do whatever it took to protect Liza, which was exactly what I needed—someone who wouldn't think twice about going to extremes to keep her safe.

"Got it," Nico said. "Anything else?"

"No, that'll do for now. Thanks, Nico."

We hung up just as Dad walked into his office. He grinned at me. "You look like you belong at that desk."

I scoffed. “No way.” Standing and gesturing toward the chair, I watched my father make his way across the room.

He looked tired, which wasn’t new, but his gait told me his exhaustion was catching up to him. “Are you okay?”

He sank down into his chair. “Yeah, just one of those days. I’ve been on edge since the shit hit the fan at the library the other night.”

“Haven’t we all?” I walked around the desk and fell down in the chair I usually took.

He sighed. “Castro having access to all of Nico’s transcripts is distressing, to say the least. I admit there are some dark things in those files, and if any of it gets out, our allies could turn into enemies real fast.”

I couldn’t argue with that, and I didn’t want to think of what would happen if Castro spread the pack’s dirty laundry around for the whole world to see.

“You make it sound like the Keller pack has more to hide than other packs. Do you think that’s true?” I had to ask, considering I would be taking over soon. It would be better to have as much information as possible before I took the throne, rather than getting hit with surprises later.

“Honestly, Ty, I’d say that most packs have a history of making knee-jerk reactions or choosing one path over the other that wasn’t exactly kosher.” Dad ran a hand over his face. “Some might have more dirt to hide, like our friends in Loveska, while others truly try to do what’s right. Sometimes mistakes are made that lead to wrong choices, but I think the most important aspect of leading a pack is learning from your mistakes, acknowledging them, and moving forward. That way, you always get better and move in the right direction.”

I snorted. “I’ve never heard you speak about other packs that way before.”

Dad reached across the desk and placed his hand on mine for a brief second. “I know, but I believe in the value of understanding your wrong moves and reevaluating, taking a different route the next time you’re faced with a similar

adversity. Even mistakes can be turned into lessons. That's something I want you to remember when you take over as alpha."

I nodded, considering his words. What could we have done differently about Castro? Well, that was easy. I should have killed him properly the first time round instead of thinking he would have left town with the tail between his legs after being bested. We hadn't realized how deeply his obsession for Liza went.

Dad turned his attention to his inbox. His hands weren't as steady as they used to be, and it took him longer to type his replies.

The stress was speeding up the fading of his alpha powers. It didn't help that we'd had a general idea of the game Castro was playing before it all blew up in our faces. Now, all bets were off.

A few days after the library incident, Dad called a meeting where the security team and Nico shared their opinions on the situation. After much discussion, we all agreed that Castro was probably done playing his game, since it hadn't turned out the way he wanted.

Yes, Liza had learned that Castro hadn't actually killed her parents, though he was the one who had shot them. However, Castro hadn't anticipated Nico being the one who had made the call to burn Liza's childhood home to the ground while her parents were still alive.

Castro was reckless but focused, so there was no telling what his next move would be. Whatever was coming, though, we needed to be prepared for the fallout.

Dad finally pulled his eyes from the computer screen and gestured toward my phone. "You seemed to be on an intense call when I walked in earlier. What did I miss?"

I hesitated but figured Nico would eventually tell him, anyway. "Liza had a bit of a run-in with an ex-convict today at the grocery store."

Dad raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

“Her pheromones drew some asshole to her, and he followed her as she left the store and watched her pull away. I’ve got Nico and his team on it. They’re going to keep a close eye on him and make sure he doesn’t attempt to track Liza down.”

“That’s good to hear. Keep me updated.” He stood and stretched, slowly shuffling toward the door. “Sorry to be a party pooper, but I think I’m going to head to bed. It’s been a long day.”

“Yeah, don’t let me keep you. I’m going to head home myself.”

I smiled. I saw Liza’s place as home. At least for now. The estate would be our home for the duration of my leadership as alpha, and then our son would take over when it was his time.

As I drove and thought about my future life with Liza, something shifted in my chest. The thought of Liza carrying my children caused my wolf to rumble. My imagination wandered as I took each turn without a second thought, having memorized the way to Liza’s house weeks ago. I pictured children running around, laughter and excitement echoing through the halls of the estate.

I could almost see them playing tag in the gardens and exploring all of the many nooks and crannies I had enjoyed as a child. The thought of Liza and me ruling over the Keller pack together almost made me giddy, but I had to slow my roll and stop letting my imagination run away with me.

Liza wasn’t ready. She had made that very clear. She wasn’t ready for the mating ceremony, never mind kids. There was no use in getting my hopes up, so I tried to push the image out of my head. It was too soon to consider it now, but hopefully one day.

It was dark outside when I got to Liza’s house, and I didn’t see any lights on.

I quietly snuck in and discovered the alarm wasn’t set. Before I could panic and start searching every room for Liza, I glanced through the window and saw a fire burning in the

firepit. Making my way through the kitchen, I spotted her on the back porch, drinking a glass of wine. She was so beautiful in her pajamas with no makeup. I stopped and stared, wondering how I was so lucky to have fate match me with Liza as my mate.

When I stepped outside, she barely acknowledged my presence. Her hair was wrapped in a towel, and she was lost in her thoughts, staring at the fire she'd built in the firepit.

“Are you okay?”

She glanced up at me, and I could tell by the look on her face that there was definitely something specific on her mind.

“Hold that thought.” She hadn't said anything, but I wanted to grab a glass of wine before we had a conversation.

I filled my glass with red wine and took a seat next to her. “Before you tell me what's on your mind, I want to update you on the man from the grocery store.”

Liza pulled her legs up and tucked them underneath her ass, her brow furrowed with worry. “Were you able to get the security footage? Did you figure out who he is?”

“Yes. He's a local shifter who's served some time for harassing and attacking a human woman.”

She sat up and grabbed my knee. “Are you fucking kidding me? Of all the men I could attract, it had to be an ex-con?”

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.” I squeezed her hand. “On the bright side, there's no reason to think he'll come after you. He's been on his best behavior since being released. Plus, I sent his information to Nico, and they're going to watch him like a hawk.” I took a small sip of wine. “I don't think he'll be a problem, but Nico's team will take care of it if he becomes one.”

She nodded and turned her attention back to the fire.

We sat in silence until I couldn't stand it any longer. “Are you going to tell me what's bothering you?”

As soon as I asked the question, her scent washed over me. The wind must've blown in just the right direction for me to

smell her, but there was no doubt it was her. I'd know her scent anywhere. It was different from before, though, almost like the scent of a wolf in heat, but less potent. Something had most certainly changed.

I turned and sniffed the air in her direction. "Did you take your suppressants?" If she said yes, I would call the doctor myself because they weren't working. If anything, her scent was more enhanced since the last time I saw her.

Liza tipped her glass back and chugged her wine as if she'd never get an ounce of alcohol ever again. Once she downed the last drop, she turned to face me. "My day didn't go exactly as planned. I was hoping to start the suppressants, but Doc Reynolds wouldn't give them to me."

"How come?" I took the empty wine glass from her hand and placed it on the table.

"My white blood cell count was elevated. He thought I was in heat, but I'm not. I can tell."

"So, why is your count elevated?" A million thoughts raced through my mind. "Are you sick?"

Liza bit her lip. "He thinks there might be some connection between my wolf and her desires."

I was even more confused. "What does your wolf have to do with your white blood cell counts?"

"Apparently, that happens when an omega wolf is satisfied with the close proximity to her mate." She paused and glanced back at the fire. "I can't take the suppressants. They won't work since my wolf is in the mood to be bred."

I choked on my wine at the mention of breeding, dribbling wine down the front of my shirt.

Liza jumped to her feet, laughing as she ran to the kitchen and grabbed a towel.

"That's the third time that's happened today, if you count my mom's reaction."

I cleared my throat and dabbed at the red wine stains on my white polo shirt. It was no use.

Once I recovered, I pulled Liza down next to me on the wicker loveseat. “You had the same reaction, huh?” I tried to hide my smile.

“Naturally. No one expects to hear that type of recommendation from their doctor.” She shook her head and laughed. “Can you imagine how shocked I was when I showed up at the clinic to get suppressants, only to be told that I shouldn’t suppress my wolf any longer so she can have cubs?”

I shook my head. “That’s definitely a shocker.” I paused, thinking of all the implications. Was Liza actually considering having children?

Liza sighed. “I’ve been thinking all evening, and I’ve come to one conclusion: I can’t keep putting off us claiming each other.”

My breath was knocked out of me, but I stayed quiet as Liza continued to process her thoughts out loud.

She looked at me, her lower lip quivering. “I’m scared. Committing to someone for life alone is a terrifying concept. To make matters even more daunting, because of what I am, I never thought I’d find someone who could handle me with care or respect for being an omega. Trust is hard at any level for me after everything I’ve been through.” She took a deep breath and stared deep into my eyes. “It’s taken me a long time to realize it, but I know I can trust you, Ty.”

My heart raced. I assumed I understood where she was going with all of it, but I waited for her to say the words. I needed to hear them come directly from her mouth, not mine.

Liza gently reached for my hand. “As scary as all of this is, I know it’s inevitable. My fear has kept me from admitting that I love you, but I do love you. I also know deep down that there will never be another man meant for me the way you are. I have no doubt that you’re my fated mate, and I’m not going to fight fate any longer.”

I launched myself at her, kissing her reverently on her forehead, her cheeks, and then finally I took her lips in a sweet kiss.

She kissed me back, and we clung to each other. I never wanted to let her go, wanted to savor the moment forever.

In the midst of all the stress, this one moment meant more to me than I expected. A range of emotions swirled around inside me, and my voice was near a full growl when I finally spoke. My wolf was at the surface because we both knew what it all meant. “Does this mean you’ll take my bite?”

Liza nodded and smiled, her voice confident when she said, “Yes.”

I moved forward, ready to pick Liza up and drag her into the house to have my way with her, but then both our phones beeped in unison. I ignored it because my only focus was taking Liza to her bedroom and claiming her, so I scooped her into my arms and walked toward the back door.

Then my phone rang, and I growled before putting her down. “Who the fuck needs my attention at nine in the evening? What?” I growled into the phone, not even attempting to hide my annoyance at the interruption.

It was Dad. My lust for Liza vanished.

“Sorry to bother you, Ty, but I thought you’d want to know that Castro has made his move, and it’s bad.”

“How bad?” I asked, glancing toward Liza.

“It’s really bad, son. You and Liza need to get here immediately.”

“Oh my God,” Liza whispered as she stared at her phone, a look of shock and horror washing over her face.

“What happened, Dad?”

Before he could answer, Liza turned her phone so I could see the screen. My blood ran cold as I watched a shaky video recording on a local news site. Castro had just released a recorded video of what appeared to be the massacre of the Wylde pack.

“I hear the video playing.” Dad sighed. “Did you read the article?”

I took the phone out of Liza's hands and scrolled down, my breath catching in my throat as I scanned the article, my eyes stalling when I read the word *omega*.

The first omega in centuries was born to the massacred pack and is now living with the Keller pack.

Shit. Castro hadn't just put a target on our backs, he'd put one on Liza's as well.

We were all fucked.

Chapter 24

Liza

Nico's face turned an alarming shade of red as he punched the back of an armchair.

We'd spent the last hour staring at the newscast, trying to make sense of the footage Castro had leaked.

"I never recorded any of our missions. Ever!" He pointed a trembling finger at the screen, where every major news station was airing the grainy footage. "Dominic, I swear I never recorded nor approved recording on any of our missions. It would have been a major breach of security."

Cold sweat formed on my brow, and my heart was dangerously close from beating right through my chest. The room seemed to tighten around me, suffocating me.

I remembered what Mom had told me to do when I was anxious, how I should focus on everything around me—colors, shapes, smells, sounds—anything to get my mind out of the downward spiral of gloom and doom. I tried to focus on the patterned rug, the thickness of the pile, and the bright red colors that swirled with blues and greens. It worked for a moment as I avoided the images that flickered across the screen.

I turned my head, needing a mental break from the gruesome scenes. The TV had been on ever since Ty and I arrived, streaming the leaked footage repeatedly. Quite frankly, I'd had enough.

"Someone must have altered the footage," Nico insisted, clenching his fists at his sides. "AI and movie editing can

create stuff like this. But I swear, no one was recording the mission. Not to my knowledge. The whole thing is baffling.”

He paced the floor, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Maybe they took footage from another battle and added to it with some kind of editing program. Technology has come so far. I wouldn’t put it past someone with Castro’s means to pull this off.”

No one said a word. The air was thick with tension and fear. My mind raced through the implications of the video and the danger it posed not only to our pack but to my own fragile sense of belonging.

I thought about how much time I lost with my biological parents, and how I was so close to creating a new family with the Kellers. Now, it was all in jeopardy because of Castro. His psychotic obsession with me could put an end to it all.

The phone in Dominic’s office rang off the hook as he stared emotionlessly at the TV. I’d never seen him so defeated, which wasn’t a good sign. The alpha was overwhelmed and frozen with indecision. I wondered if there was a way for any of us to recover from this.

Persephone sighed in the seat next to me. “As much as I hate to admit it, I think it looks like real footage, Nico.”

At some point, she’d reached over and taken my hand. Probably because she could see that I was slowly spiraling downward and losing my mind. I appreciated her trying to comfort me.

She was right about the footage. The images were grainy and a bit distorted, indicating that the recording took place long before quality digital video cameras were available.

Persephone continued. “The angle of the video looks like it’s from a body cam. Could it have been recorded from the point of view of one of your men? Did you have that kind of technology at your disposal back then?”

Nico raked his hands through his hair and stared at the TV. His face told us everything we needed to know. He was worried, and that didn’t bode well for the rest of us since he

was the head of security and also Dominic's righthand man. If he couldn't see a solution to this mess, it could truly be the end of the Keller pack, and the end of them protecting me.

As the video played from start to finish again, someone on the screen shouted, "Burn everything to the ground!" It sounded like Dominic's voice. The sigh that escaped from his lips indicated that he believed it was very much his voice, too.

It was followed by Nico coming into view and reminding them of their mission. "*No one* left alive."

I shut my eyes tightly, trying to rid myself of the memories that still haunted me. Blood-stained snow. Screams of helplessness. The image of my parents lying on the ground, bleeding to death as Castro stood over their bodies. My attempt at escaping, the fear that almost crushed me. In those moments, as a little girl, I'd truly believed I would die at the hands of our attackers or Castro.

Somehow I'd made it out alive. If only I'd been taller and stronger, maybe I could've attacked Castro. I could've climbed into a tree and dropped down on top of him as he walked by in his search for me.

If I had taken him out back then, none of this would be happening. Ty and I would've already been officially mated, and Dominic could've passed the powers of the alpha to Ty. My world would have looked far different than it did right now. Watching the screen felt like staring down the barrel of a gun, wondering how we could possibly come out of the other end of this unscathed.

Survivor's guilt hit me like a Mack truck, and I doubled over, trying not to retch all over the Persian rug. It didn't matter that I'd barely been four years old. I had survived. Castro had survived. Everyone else... all of those innocent children, women, and men who had nothing to do with the drug and weapon activity... they'd all died a slow and painful death.

What made me so special? Just because I was an omega didn't mean my life was more valuable than theirs. Yet, there I sat, crippled by my anxiety but alive. How was that fair?

Now the whole world would see the truth. There would be no hiding from it, and no pushing it to the deepest recesses of my mind.

The destruction of an entire pack, the slaughter of its citizens, and the fires that consumed their homes would be the talk of the town. Every moment of the video would be broken down, analyzed, and discussed for weeks, maybe months, or even years. Nothing would ever be the same.

As much as I wanted to believe the footage was fake, that someone had created it as a cruel hoax or as a favor to Castro, the terror in my gut told me otherwise. It was real, and it threatened to tear apart the carefully constructed life I had built since being adopted within the Keller pack.

Shouts and screams came from my pack members as they tried to escape the attack, while blurry images of families scrambling to avoid their inevitable death played across the screen.

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. No, I would not give in to fear or despair. There was too much on the line for me to become emotional. I didn't want the attention, and I didn't want to distract everyone from trying to find a solution to this hopeless situation.

My entire body shook against my will, and Persephone tightened her grip on my hand. Her eyes were moist, and her lips were turned down. Though I'd never considered her a particularly emotional woman, her motherly instinct to protect me in that moment spoke volumes. Despite her hard exterior, she was a good person.

Persephone turned to face her husband, her eyes pleading with him. "How do we handle this, Dominic?"

Her simple question was loaded. She wanted him to make a call, to bring some order to the chaos. He was the alpha, after all, even if his powers weren't as strong as they once were. She depended on him. We all did.

Dominic shoved his hands into his pockets and sat on the edge of his desk. "Regardless of whether the footage is altered

or not, we still have a problem on our hands.” Dominic’s voice was calm, bringing some much-needed sense of leadership into the mix. “We need to act fast before things spiral out of control.”

“Don’t you think this is real, though?” Persephone was adamant, ignoring the glare Nico shot her. “I don’t care how advanced technology is nowadays. You can’t replicate those grainy images and static in that way.”

Nico had been quiet for a few minutes, deep in thought, and we all stared at him, waiting for him to throw something or punch his fist into the wall as he doubled down on his opinion that the video was fake.

He never opened his mouth.

“What do you think, Nico?” Dominic asked. “Who could’ve taken footage that day without our authorization?”

Nico stared at the floor for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “I know who it was.” His face was red as he raised his eyes to meet Dominic’s gaze. “It was my son, Ilya.”

The air was sucked out of the room, creating a vacuum of shock. I didn’t even know that Nico *had* a son, not to mention one who was involved in the slaughter of my pack. Why had I never met him before, especially if he was a part of Nico’s security team?

For the first time since I’d met him, Nico looked heartbroken. His shoulders slumped and his demeanor changed completely. “The Wylde pack fought back fiercely, and not all our men made it out unscathed. A lot of the men were injured in some way. And, unfortunately, some of them didn’t make it. My son was one of them.”

Dominic sighed and placed a hand on Nico’s shoulder. “I had no idea.”

“With good reason.” Nico walked to the window and leaned against the wall, staring out into the dark night. “I kept my son’s identity a secret because the work he did was dangerous, and I didn’t want him to be a target. He was

determined to follow in my footsteps.” Nico covered his eyes with the palms of his hands.

“How can you be sure this footage is from your son?” Persephone’s question brought Nico’s head up.

“The position of the camera. When I think back to the mission, he was the only one in the position to have captured the images we’re seeing now. I don’t understand it, though. There was no camera on Ilya’s body when I found him after he’d been stabbed to death. I have no idea why he was recording this or who would’ve known he was recording. I will find out, though.”

Silence settled over the room as we each processed the gravity of the situation. A sense of defeat filled the air.

Dominic’s phone pinged, breaking the heavy mood. “Liza, your parents will be here soon. I’ve invited them to stay here. With the news of your existence out there for the whole world to see, I’m sure it won’t take long for the pack members to figure out who the omega is. I don’t want your parents to be hassled because of it. They’ll be much safer here.”

I nodded, my voice barely above a whisper. “Thank you.”

My parents’ faces flashed before my eyes. God, they must’ve been so terrified when a security team descended on their home, telling them they needed to come with them to the Keller Estate. I assumed one of Nico’s men would have debriefed them on the ride over. No doubt they’d blame themselves for not doing a better job of keeping my identity a secret.

The news anchor’s voice broke through the video footage. “As you can see, this is damning evidence that the Keller pack was involved in some sort of attack on another local pack. To date, nobody has come forward to identify the massacred pack, and Dominic Keller’s representatives have refused to comment. Meanwhile, speculation has begun on the identity of the omega in Presley Acres. Authorities say they’ve received no tips on abnormal activity, so they could neither confirm nor deny the existence of the mystical creature.”

The ringing of my phone drew attention away from the screen. Dominic, Persephone, and Ty all stared at me as if the device was a ticking time bomb. It was an unknown number. With shaky hands, I answered the call and put it on speaker.

“Hello?” My voice wavered, betraying my anxiety.

Before a word was uttered, I knew it was *him*.

“Hey there, Liza,” Castro’s smug voice came over the line. It had an almost sing-song quality to it, sending shivers down my spine. “I’m sorry it had to come to this, but I couldn’t expose them without exposing you.”

I clenched my jaw, my nails digging into my palm, leaving half-moon indentations in my skin. There were so many things I wanted to say to Castro, but I bit my tongue, allowing him to explain why he’d called. From what I understood about Castro’s mind, I was certain this wouldn’t be a pleasant conversation. He had a plan, and this was part of his execution.

Castro continued, his voice so calm that I wondered if he was drunk or high. “This was the best course of action. I hope you can see that. It’s obvious that this pack is corrupt and will continue to taint you the longer you’re associated with them.” He paused and sighed loudly. “You know you don’t have to stick around there, right, Liza? I can make all of this go away. One call and I can report that they were all false rumors. I’d tell them that the video was fabricated, even though it clearly wasn’t.”

Everyone in the room seemed to be holding their breath as they waited for me to respond. “What do you want?” I spat out, trying my best to keep my emotions in check. Across the room, Ty growled.

Castro chuckled darkly on the other end of the line. “I have a little friend in town who will be waiting for you. They’ll bring you directly to me. Don’t even think about bringing someone with you or having them follow you.” He laughed. “You must know me well enough by now to believe me when I say that anyone trying to follow you will be killed.”

I swallowed past the heavy lump in my throat.

“Once I’ve got you, I promise to make everything go away. One call to the media from me and it all disappears. It’s that simple, sweet Liza. Make your decision quickly, though. I don’t like being made to wait. Phone me back on this number when you’re ready to come to me, but don’t take too long. You only have twenty-four hours to decide, and not a second more. I won’t be so... generous this time.”

“Never,” I whispered, my heart pounding, but Castro had already ended the call.

Ty’s viscous snarl reverberated through the room, and I looked at him. He shook his head and growled, “Don’t even think about it. You’re not sacrificing yourself to that monster to protect us.”

Nico stepped forward, his face still red with frustration. “We have to move now that Castro’s given us a twenty-four-hour deadline.” His voice was resolved, as if he’d snapped out of his mourning and back into his role as head of the security team. “I’ll get to the bottom of this footage.” He turned to me. “In the meantime, you should stay put. Don’t step a foot outside the mansion—not even for a quick breath of fresh air. Understood?”

I nodded.

It was Persephone’s grip on my hand that captured my attention, breaking me from the spell Castro had cast with his offer.

Her eyes held a fierceness I hadn’t seen before. “You’ve suffered enough because of us. Don’t even think about going to that monster. We will protect you now, no matter what led us to this moment.” She cupped my chin and forced me to look her in the eyes. “Get *any* ideas of going to that monster out of your head. Do you hear me, Liza?”

I blinked back tears just as the door opened and my parents walked in. They rushed over to embrace me, their concerned faces a testament to the love they felt for me. I clung to them,

tears streaming down my cheeks as I locked eyes with Ty over their shoulders.

His expression was resolute, all traces of doubt vanishing. At that moment, I decided that going to Castro was not an option. My pack—my family—would stand by me, come what may.

Chapter 25

Ty

I scanned Dad's office, which was a prominent display of his power and influence. The massive mahogany desk, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, the paintings of past alphas and family adorning the walls all served as reminders of the legacy I would inherit soon.

We had spent the last twenty-four hours tirelessly working to put out the firestorm caused by the massacre allegations. Dad's connections had come in handy, and with just a few calls, all news stations had agreed to cease airing any more segments about the incident until the video footage was authenticated. If any station dared to air anything regarding us, they'd be sued for defamation. That had been made *very* clear.

"Let's hope that buys us some time." Dad rubbed his temples as he leaned back in his chair. Maybe it was the sleepless nights and the crushing anxiety, but as I stared at Dad's wrinkles and drooping eyelids, I realized he'd aged even more in the past day. We all had. None of us could have predicted how quickly things could change, yet here we were.

A sudden wave of exhaustion washed over me, and I slumped down into the seat across from Dad. The adrenaline was wearing off. It would only be a matter of time before reality hit us again with full force. Castro would soon realize we had no intention of allowing Liza to meet up with his *little friend*. I'd love to know who the traitorous bastard was who thought they could take my fated mate and deliver her to Castro. Who did the fucker have in his pocket?

Dad yawned and stretched his arms over his head. “We need Castro to make some sort of move. Maybe then we could spring into action.”

“Agreed.” I cracked my knuckles. My wolf’s anger was barely contained within me after everything Castro had been putting us through.

“The halt on the news story is only a temporary fix.” Dad waved his hand in the air dismissively. “I’m sure they have some fancy technology that enables them to determine whether or not footage has been tampered with. It’s only a matter of time before they call my bluff and double down on the original reports.”

“What did the council say?” I tried to relax my tense muscles, but my shaking foot gave me away.

Dad glanced at his watch. “My closest advisors say I should make a statement debunking the video and the allegations against me for slaughtering an entire pack. It would have to be a public broadcast, and it needs to happen sooner rather than later.”

“Do you think everyone will believe you?” I understood the importance of not staying silent, but the whole country had seen the footage by now. Would Dad’s words make a difference?

“It doesn’t matter if they do or don’t. Appearances count for a hell of a lot, and if I don’t come out claiming my innocence, it won’t matter what happens next. The public expects the alpha to speak, so that’s what I’ll have to do.”

The door creaked open, and one of the kitchen staff slipped into the room, carrying a tray with two steaming mugs of coffee. “I’ve made it extra strong for you both,” she said, offering a weak smile before leaving. “I’ll leave the creamer and sugar here on your desk, Mr. Keller.”

“Thank you,” I replied, taking a deep breath to steady myself. I took a sip of the scalding liquid, feeling it burn down my throat and reignite my resolve. No creamer for me. I didn’t

want the caffeine diluted. Otherwise, my mind wouldn't stay as sharp as it needed to be.

As I watched Dad type feverishly on his laptop, I thought about how Liza's pack's existence had been carefully concealed from the world, thanks to his efforts and wealth.

As far as the world knew, the Wylde pack had never existed. If someone searched the internet, they'd turn up empty. The amount of money Dad had paid to wipe the pack's existence from the face of the earth was staggering.

All that work, all that money, and it could all be unraveled in an instant if we couldn't get ahead of this story.

As if on cue, my thoughts were interrupted by the television coming to life after a soap opera ended. To our dismay, even though the conversation about the massacre might have ceased, the stations were still buzzing about the possibility of an omega existing among the Keller pack.

The newscaster's voice filled the room, her words dripping with excitement. "Could it be true? A rare arctic wolf omega hidden among the powerful Keller pack. Speculation runs wild as more and more sources claim to have seen the elusive beauty."

"Fuck!" I growled, every muscle in my body locking up.

Liza was now a prisoner at our estate. If she stepped foot outside, a reporter could zoom in on her, and before we even knew what happened, her face would be on every TV screen in Texas.

I shuddered at the thought of Dennis Felter and any other horny male hunting her down. Depending on the sheer number of men who figured out she was here, we might not be able to hold them back. After all, Liza's pheromones were strong, and being under this much stress didn't help. Based on my own experience with her scent, even the holiest of virgin saints would find themselves completely overtaken by the smell of her, and they'd stop at nothing to rip her clothes from her body and have their way with her.

“Fuck!” I said again as I flipped the TV off and tossed the remote onto Dad’s desk. “I can’t stand this. Surely there’s something else we could do to be proactive. Is there anyone else we could call?”

“I almost forgot to tell you.” Dad looked up from his computer screen. “I reached out to the pack who took Castro in when he was a child.”

“Really?” This could be interesting. “Were they aware they practically adopted a psychopath?”

Dad scoffed. “Not quite. The current alpha said that when Castro came to them, he only told them that he was running away from his abusive parents. He showed them scrapes and bruises that were, no doubt, from his tirade the day the Wylde pack was slaughtered.”

“And they believed him?”

“They had no reason not to. No one knew about the Wylde pack, so they had no reason to believe he was lying. They took him in and made him one of their own. Unfortunately, to this day, they had no knowledge of what truly led Castro to their doors.”

That sneaky son of a bitch. I had to give Castro credit, he knew how to manipulate anyone to get what he wanted. “So, the alpha couldn’t give you any more information on Castro?”

“Correct.” Dad answered a text on his phone before turning his attention back to me. “It goes without saying, but I highly doubt anyone from his former pack is currently helping him. The alpha seemed genuinely surprised that Castro wasn’t who he claimed to be. They haven’t seen or heard from him in years.”

Great. Our options for finding Castro’s accomplices, or any connections to him for that matter, were dwindling.

As I stared at my phone, wondering what keywords to use for my next round of searches, Dad’s phone rang. He glanced at the screen before putting it on speaker and motioning for me to close the door. It was Hiram, one of the last people I was interested in speaking with.

“Hey there, old friend.”

Dad rolled his eyes. “What can I help you with today, Hiram?” Sarcasm dripped from his words.

“I always knew you were a shady bunch of motherfuckers, considering some of our past deals. You know, before you went clean. But I never thought you were capable of mass murder.” Hiram chuckled and coughed, no doubt sucking on one of his cigars. “I guess I need to be taking notes, since you’re obviously the master.”

Dad sighed. “I deny any and all of those allegations, Hiram.”

Hiram laughed again, but this time he didn’t choke on his own saliva. “Of course, you do. And why would I question your stance? I’m not one to judge. As a matter of fact, I’m actually calling about something else entirely.”

“What is it?” Dad shot me a look of frustration.

“I’m calling to discuss the omega.”

I froze at the mention of Liza.

“Is it true?” Hiram asked, his voice heavy with curiosity. “Did you really kidnap an omega?”

“Those allegations are false, Hiram. You should know that it’s all a myth, anyway.” Dad’s voice was cold and stern.

“Ah, but I’ve heard whispers that your son’s future mate is a natural blonde. A lone, arctic wolf amongst a pack of brown and black.”

What the hell was he getting at? I didn’t trust the bastard as far as I could throw him, and that wasn’t very far.

“It would be best to not go there, Hiram.” Dad stood, the vein on his neck protruding.

“Do you know how much I could make selling off some omega snatch?” Hiram’s laugh made my skin to crawl with rage. He whistled. “I’d make a fucking killing. I could retire from the casino business three times over.”

My growl escaped me, a vicious snarl that left no doubt about my feelings on the matter.

“Watch your words, Hiram,” my father warned menacingly. “This is your final warning.”

“Relax, relax.” Hiram chuckled. “I have no intention of holding a woman against her will. But I will warn you that whispers are spreading about that girl and what she is, so you better keep her locked up tight.”

“Why are you even taking the time to warn us?” Hiram had always had it out for the Keller pack because he envied our prosperity over the years.

“Just take it as a sign of good faith. I have a feeling that things could get bad for you, especially since someone out there hates you enough to even *risk* putting out such information. I’ll be the first to admit that I enjoy a little chaos in my life. You may not like getting your hands dirty, Dominic, but I’m a simple man.” He paused for dramatic effect. “Money—that’s what makes me happy, and I don’t mind getting my hands dirty. I’m a good ally to have in your back pocket should things go south. You’d do well to remember that.”

“Your warning is appreciated,” my father said cautiously. Like me, he was suspicious of Hiram’s motives.

Hiram ended the call, and I turned to Dad. “This is going from bad to worse.”

My phone rang, and I glanced at the screen. “It’s one of the pack representatives calling again.” I swiped my finger over the screen. “This is Ty.”

“Hey, Ty,” the older man squeaked. He was nervous to ask again, but I knew exactly what he was about to say. “Any update on the situation?”

“No, sorry. As soon as I have any information, our council will be the first to know.” I hung up, not waiting for further questioning. “We’ll have to address this soon. Especially with me getting calls from the pack every thirty seconds, wanting answers.”

Dad sighed. "I can't blame them. Their lives went from normal to chaos within a matter of minutes."

My phone rang again, but this time I ignored the call. "And Liza's presence in the pack is enough to cause doubt and worry amongst our pack members."

"Once Nico has more information on the video and whether it can be authenticated, I'll make an announcement," my father assured me. "Until then, we need to keep Liza at the estate. One of my men reported that they'd spotted random men around her place."

The thought of strangers lurking near Liza's home made my blood boil. She was an unclaimed omega, and one whiff of her scent would confirm their suspicions about her true nature.

My wolf stirred as I imagined ripping the heads off any fuckers who tried to attack Liza.

To make matters worse, we hadn't figured out who the hell was stupid enough to play with the enemy to be Castro's 'little friend'. He made it clear that someone in town was helping him, but we were at a loss.

Though we'd suspected a traitor amongst us, we hadn't been able to figure out who would be foolish enough to betray the Keller family.

"Nico's team needs to hunt Castro's accomplice down. What if it's someone working in this fucking house?" I opened the door quickly, peering out into the hall to make sure no one was listening to our conversation.

"Calm down, Tyson. We'll figure it out," my father replied. "Castro will make his next move soon. Especially now that it's clear Liza isn't going to him. And when he does, we'll have something to work with. Right now, there's not much we can do." Dad pointed to the door. "Go spend some time with your mate. All we can do is wait it out, and she needs your support."

"Right," I agreed. "I'll go find her."

As I walked down the long halls of the estate, I thought about how Liza had reacted to the leaked video. I couldn't

imagine having to relive the day my pack was slaughtered. Somehow, she'd remained calm and hadn't shifted.

I had watched Liza from across the room as my mother held her hand, speaking soothing words to her. She was family now. Everyone accepted who she was, regardless of her identity as an omega, and she had finally told me she loved me.

We were ready to mate, ready to start our new lives together, but Castro had other plans.

My phone pinged, and I stopped in my tracks to read a notification from my social media page. Bryce had sent me a link to a post where a local artist had rendered a charcoal drawing of what he believed to be the elusive omega being held hostage by the Keller pack.

I rolled my eyes and responded to Bryce's message.

Don't send me anymore of this shit. I can't handle it. Too much on my plate right now.

He responded almost immediately.

Sorry, man. Just wanted to make sure you knew what was going on. I'm hearing a lot about an omega. Stay safe and holler if I can help in any way.

I shoved my phone into my pocket as I entered the study. A fire crackled in the fireplace, and the lights had been dimmed to their lowest setting. Liza was asleep on the couch, curled up in her mom's arms.

Rory held a finger to her lips. "Shh." She gestured to her sleeping daughter. "Liza didn't get much sleep last night," she whispered. "Poor thing cried herself to sleep."

"I was up all night, too, doing damage control with my father."

We had stayed up until the early morning hours, contacting all the pack leaders who knew of the massacre. We had to make sure they understood the gravity of their silence and the importance of finding Castro, the man responsible for releasing the damning information.

The one positive aspect to come out of the whole fucking mess was everyone understanding that Castro was the enemy, not us. He was the one leaking information, and who knew which pack could be next? The alphas all agreed that Castro was dangerous.

In order for the packs to keep the peace around them and to keep their deepest secrets buried, he needed to be found. Now, it wasn't just the Keller pack who was desperate to find him. Everyone was united in our efforts to locate and eliminate the threat.

Crouching in front of the sofa, I reached out to caress Liza's tear-stained face. My heart ached for her. I wished I could take it all away and give her the worry-free life she deserved.

"Let me take her to bed where she can rest more soundly," I suggested, gently lifting Liza from her mother's lap. She instinctively pressed into my chest and snaked her arms behind my neck as I cradled her.

Rory's voice cracked as she spoke. "Ty, you have to fix this for her," she pleaded, tears welling in her eyes. "Liza can't be tortured by this anymore. We're all feeling the guilt, but Liza is suffering the most."

Now that I was looking closely at Rory, I could see she'd been crying. Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed.

She sighed. "Your father brought her to us when she was just a little girl—barely more than a toddler. We'd been trying for another child, but it seemed we were destined to only have our boys. Liza was a blessing, and we loved her immediately.

"We trusted Dominic when he brought her to us. We never would've imagined that she'd been torn from her pack and her parents." A few tears trickled down her cheeks as she gazed at her daughter. "This has to stop. The whole thing is ripping her apart. And as her mother, it's killing me that I can't fix this. I can't stand to see my baby girl in pain a moment longer."

I glanced down at the love of my life; the woman who would lead by my side with courage and strength. "I swear to

you that I won't rest until Castro is dealt with, no matter what."

Liza, with her infectious smile and genuine care for others, had become the center of my universe and the foremost concern in my life. Her well-being and safety had become not only a priority but an unwavering commitment. It drove me to take every possible measure to protect her, whatever the cost.

Chapter 26

Liza

I jolted into alertness, heart beating like a drum and body covered in a fine sheen of sweat. I was breathing hard.

In the dim light, I took in my surroundings, trying to figure out where the hell I was.

Everything felt strange, and I couldn't shake off the disorientation clouding my mind. I stretched my limbs, shaking off the remnants of sleep. Taking a deep breath, I tried to ground myself in the present moment.

The refreshing scent of cedar and pine brought with it familiarity and comfort. As my senses sharpened, I realized I was snugly tucked in Ty's bed, a safe haven of warmth and comfort.

The last thing I remembered was being in the small study, crying into Mom's arms as she rubbed my back and murmured soothing words. There was nothing she could say to calm me, though, and the tears just wouldn't stop.

My heart raced as I reached over to his side, longing for Ty's warmth only to find the bed empty and cold to the touch. Had he even slept here at all last night? Or had he stayed up, pacing the floors, trying to find solutions for the seemingly unsolvable problems that plagued us?

The weight of our current situation settled on me like an oppressive fog, making it difficult to breathe. As son to the alpha, Ty bore the responsibility of protecting the pack. And now that my secret was out—my fucking omega status

revealed—he faced the challenge of navigating the political and social upheaval that would inevitably follow.

I could only imagine the turmoil brewing inside him. Despite his strong, confident exterior, beneath the surface was a man who struggled to reconcile the needs of his people with the love blossoming between us. Ty was caught in a battle of duty and desire, and it pained me to know that my very existence was the cause of his distress.

Yet, even in the midst of all this chaos, Ty never failed to show how much he cared for me. His absence from the bed spoke volumes about his dedication to finding a way through the darkness. And though I felt guilty for the burden I'd placed on him, I couldn't deny the warmth that spread through my chest.

“Ty?” I whispered into the empty room, hoping against hope that he might appear and wrap his strong arms around me. But there was no response, only the distant sound of muffled footsteps as the staff moved through the mansion.

My fingers grazed the cool surface of the bedside table, searching for my phone. A sticky note was attached to it, Ty's familiar handwriting scrawled across the paper.

I carried you to my bed in hopes that you could get a full night's rest. Call down to the kitchen once you wake up. They'll make you anything you want for breakfast.

A smile tugged at the corner of my lips. Yet more evidence to prove how much he cared for me. Even in the midst of the shitstorm around us, he'd thought of my wellbeing.

I thought of my parents and wondered in which room they were staying. Dominic had insisted they remain at the estate where it was safe, and I was glad for it because now I wouldn't have to worry about psychos swarming their house to find me.

We'd known Castro would retaliate. It had been inevitable. Knowing what had happened to my birth parents was one thing, but actually having it played out in front of me... It felt like I was spiraling. Any control I had was slipping from me.

If I looked at the situation as a whole, it seemed insurmountable. I needed to take charge of the situation one step at a time. First step, I sat on the bed and quickly used the phone in the bedroom to call the kitchen and place an order for breakfast.

Standing up, I grabbed my phone from the bedside table, unplugging it from the charger. My finger hesitated above the power button, knowing full well what would come next. As soon as the phone powered on, notifications flooded the screen—missed calls and texts from clients. But as I'd expected, most were from Sabrina, desperate to know what was going on.

I scrolled to Sabrina's number and dialed quickly before I changed my mind. It rang once before she answered. "Liza. Liza, is that you?"

"Hey, Sabrina," I said softly, pressing the phone against my ear.

"Liza! Are you okay? Where are you? Do you know what's happening?" She sounded frantic, genuine concern lacing every syllable. Another layer of guilt slithered through. I should have let her know as soon as the news report went out that I was safe.

"I'm safe," I reassured her, though I knew that wouldn't appease her.

"Everyone's been talking, Liza. A reporter cornered me earlier, asking if I knew my best friend and boss was an omega." She paused for a moment before continuing. "People are running their mouths, spreading rumors like wildfire."

I clenched my free hand into a fist, anger bubbling in my blood. They had no right to invade my personal life, but there was little I could do about it now.

The truth was out there, Castro had seen to it that I was exposed for all to see, and there was no hiding it.

"Unfortunately, it's not surprising," I sighed into the phone. "I knew it wouldn't be long before people started putting two and two together. We might be able to hide the

truth about what happened to my family, but we can't hide the fact that I'm an omega."

"Gods, Liza, this whole situation is just so messed up," Sabrina replied, her frustration evident in her voice. "But you know I'll always have your back, right?"

"Of course, and I appreciate it more than you'll ever know." I sat back on the bed, rubbing my hand back and forth on the cool satin sheets.

"Promise me you'll stay safe," Sabrina urged.

"Promise," I assured her, though the tinge of uncertainty in my own voice didn't go unnoticed. "I can't risk going out in public right now, but I'll keep you updated as much as I can."

"I don't know what I would do if something happened to you," she said, her voice cracking with emotion.

"Nothing's going to happen to me, Sabrina. I promise." I ended the call. The desire to check in on my employees burned within me, but venturing out into the world was not an option at the moment. Who knew who Castro's 'little friend' was?

The thought of it being someone I knew or employed didn't sit well with me. I was almost certain I trusted everyone I knew, but it was the *almost* that stopped me.

My mind raced with concerns for my employees, my friends, who were caught in the crossfire of my new reality. What did they think about it all?

Had they suspected there was something different about me all along? I could imagine one of them saying, "That bitch always seemed to be up to something." Another would reply, "Of course, she's an omega. No one can cook like that without magic being involved."

Would they talk to the press?

I groaned out loud. I couldn't even begin to think how the press would spin the story or who would speak to them...

Cecily fucking Banks.

You could be as sure of the phases of the moon that she would have an opinion. *“She used her omega powers to steal my man. Ty Keller was mine until she used her powers to take him for herself.”* Okay, I was being ridiculous now. Like Ty would ever have looked at that phony bitch.

I almost laughed at my vivid imagination. Needing to get moving, I stood from the bed before padding silently to the window and peering through the heavy drapes. The world outside seemed so distant, as if I were looking at it through a foggy veil.

How could being labeled an omega change everything? I hadn’t changed since yesterday when no one knew I was an omega. And, for that matter, how did I go from cooking in mansions to being a prisoner in one?

Ty had mentioned reporters prowling around like vultures, seeking any opportunity to sneak into town or onto the estate. Sabrina had confirmed they were in town, but Ty had been adamant that they wouldn’t get to me. His words provided some comfort, but I couldn’t ignore the gnawing unease in the pit of my stomach.

I closed my eyes, trying to block out the fear, the unknowns, and the danger that seemed to lurk around every corner. Despite it all, I found solace in the knowledge that Ty would do everything in his power to protect me.

That thought steadied me, grounding me enough to get moving just as someone knocked on the door.

“Yes?” I crossed the floor, hoping there was no need to worry about someone within the house.

“Miss Mims? I have your breakfast, ma’am.”

I opened the door and took the tray of bacon and eggs from the staff member. “Thank you so much.”

She smiled and nodded. Was that pity I saw on her face? Did everyone know about my situation?

My phone buzzed with a text from Ty as I shoved a bite of egg into my mouth.

Meeting in five minutes in Dad's office. Nico has an update.

My hands shook as I quickly replied.

I'll be right there.

I turned my phone off, not wanting to be disturbed, and if I was honest, hoping to block Castro. I knew that was naïve thinking, but it made me feel like I was doing something.

My footsteps echoed through the halls adorned with exquisite paintings and ornate chandeliers as I navigated my way to Dominic's office. It struck me as odd that the staff weren't bustling about, attending to their morning duties, but I chalked it up to the increased security.

The poor staff must've been terrified that the home they worked in was now the center of attention, and not for good reasons.

I knocked softly on the office door. Ty opened it within seconds, his eyes reflecting his concern and exhaustion. He stepped out and kissed me on the cheek. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a baby," I replied with a smile. "Thanks for carrying me to your room last night."

As I took in his appearance, my earlier suspicions were confirmed. He must've stayed up all night because he looked rough. His five o'clock shadow cast a rugged air about him, and his usually well-groomed, black hair was wildly disheveled.

Ty took my hand and led me into the office. We settled into a cozy seating area in the corner, our bodies pressed together. I was surprised to see my parents and Ty's mother sitting across the room. Apparently, Dominic had decided to fill everyone in at once. After the broadcasts, nothing was top secret—not anymore.

We were all in this together.

"Are you okay?" Ty asked softly, his gray eyes searching mine for any signs of distress.

“I am,” I said, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. My mind, however, couldn’t help but wonder what had transpired during the night and how it would affect us going forward.

Nico entered, dragging a battered man behind him, and the mood in the room changed from nervous tension to ominous apprehension. A sickening mix of blood and bruises marred the man’s face, leaving it nearly unrecognizable.

His swollen eyes were half shut, and his dislocated jaw hung crookedly, giving him a grotesque appearance. I fought the urge to shudder.

“Meet William,” Nico announced grimly. “He’s the one who took the video, not my son. He was his partner on the mission and several others before the Wylde Pack incident.”

My attention snapped back to the conversation as Dominic stood in front of the man who dripped blood onto his rug. “Why, William? Why did you do it?”

William struggled to speak with his damaged jaw. “I... I grew up poor,” he began, his voice barely more than a whisper. “I joined the military program to make money for my family. After we’d been briefed on the mission, I convinced Nico’s son to wear the camera in case we got caught during the mission...” His voice trailed off, and a low gurgle came from his throat.

“Go on,” Ty urged, his voice tight with barely suppressed anger.

“Thought... thought I could use the footage someday. A man approached me a year ago. Said he knew about the video. For the life of me, I had no idea how he found out about it. Then I remembered that there had been a young shifter in the sidelines. He wasn’t one of ours, but he was just a kid. I didn’t think he was dangerous. He was watching our pack, hiding in the shadows during the fight.”

Castro.

He paused, collecting himself, before continuing. “He must have seen me take the hidden camera off Ilya when he died.”

“Wait a minute,” I interjected, bile rising in my throat. “You knew someone was watching. You knew they’d seen the camera, and yet you didn’t think to destroy the footage?” How could someone be so selfish as to endanger his own pack for personal gain?

William tried to turn to me, but he howled in pain.

“Continue, William,” Dominic ordered, his voice cold and unyielding.

“I didn’t keep it out for anyone to see. I buried it in my backyard,” William admitted.

A heavy silence enveloped the room. His betrayal hung heavily in the air, and I couldn’t help but wonder what the future held for us all.

“Castro? You gave the footage to that psychopath?” Dominic roared, a vein in his neck pulsing.

William flinched and stared at the floor in shame.

“I didn’t have a choice,” he muttered, wincing as Nico tightened his grip on his arm. “He threatened to kill my family and expose me for what I did if I didn’t comply.”

A storm was brewing in the room, and it wouldn’t take long before someone snapped.

Ty cleared his throat, his eyes laser-focused on William. “Why didn’t you use the tape to blackmail our pack like you obviously intended? You could have demanded a lot of money for that footage,” he asked in a cold, demanding voice.

William glanced up, meeting Ty’s gaze for only a moment before looking back down. “Because I met my mate in your pack,” he explained, his voice barely audible. “When she got pregnant, I realized the kind of trouble it would cause if I released the tape. So, I buried it in my backyard.” He paused, swallowing hard. “I know now that I should’ve destroyed it, but something told me I might need it one day.”

His words left a bitter taste in my mouth. How could someone be so selfish. He’d put his own mate and child at

risk, not to mention the entire Keller pack. I dug my nails into my palms, fighting off the urge to lash out at him.

If he truly didn't want it to come to light, he would've destroyed it. There was no reason to keep hold of it, unless William had a feeling it might come in handy to fill his bank account someday.

Nico's grip on William's arm tightened, the veins in his forearm standing out. "Tell me, was the video Castro released tampered with in any way?"

William winced under Nico's hold, but nodded. "There was never any audio on the video," he admitted, his voice strained. "The mic was messed up. The original video only had static."

I glanced at Ty, watching his teeth grind together.

"Are you telling us that Castro manipulated the footage to make it seem like my father was giving the orders?" Ty growled, his eyes narrowing into slits. I saw the predator in them, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

"Looks like it," William mumbled, avoiding Ty's glare.

I focused on my breathing, trying to keep the rising anger and fear at bay. A part of me wanted to leap out of my seat and tear William apart for putting us all in danger, but we needed answers and needed to know more about Castro's plans.

Dominic covered his face with his hand. I held my breath. All eyes were on our alpha as we awaited his verdict on William's fate.

"I'm going to show you leniency for your honesty, William." Dominic's voice was low and controlled, hiding the turmoil that surely raged within him. "But you will face a punishment. You have one week to gather your belongings and pack up your family. Traitors are not tolerated in this pack, and you are a traitor for your actions. Your wife and child may choose to remain as they are innocent. As much as the evidence points to the contrary, I do not punish innocents. If they remain, they will have no contact with you, but we will ensure their continued protection."

It was hard to believe what was happening—the betrayal, the fear. It all felt surreal. As a private chef for the pack’s elite, I’d always felt out of place and uneasy among them, but now that sense of unease threatened to consume me. This was a side of our world I’d never expected to witness firsthand. I couldn’t look directly at William without my stomach flip-flopping.

William’s shoulders sagged with relief, but terror still shone in his eyes. I couldn’t help but feel a pang of sympathy for him. His life had just been spared, but at what cost? He would lose everything he had ever known, forced to leave behind his community, his friends, and his job, not to mention any ties his mate and child had within the pack if they chose to leave with him. It seemed an almost cruel kindness, but he deserved all of it, if not more.

“Thank you.” His voice trembled, barely audible.

Dominic’s gaze remained unyielding. “This is your only warning.” His voice took on a dangerous edge. “If you talk to anyone, even so much as nod in another pack member’s direction, you will be executed on the spot. No questions asked.”

William nodded in understanding. He tensed as Nico jerked his arm violently and dragged him out the door.

Ty, Dominic, and I watched in silence until they disappeared from view.

Dominic turned to me, concern etched across his face. “Has Castro reached out to you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I turned my phone off after Ty texted me. I only switched it on earlier so I could call Sabrina back and let her know I’m okay. I didn’t look through my other texts or missed calls.”

My insides churned. I needed to tell Dominic and Ty about my current state of mind.

I cleared my throat, my emotions forming a boulder that pressed against my chest. “I have to be honest with you both, my sanity is hanging by a thread right now. My emotions are

all over the place, and my wolf... well, she wants to have Ty's babies." The words tumbled out of my mouth like an avalanche, unstoppable and unrelenting. "I shut my phone off because I don't think I can handle hearing Castro's voice or dealing with people calling me with a million questions about the whole omega thing," I muttered.

Dominic blinked rapidly, as if his brain was trying to catch up. "Your wolf wants what?" he stammered.

"Never mind that," I waved him off, not wanting to dwell on that particular aspect of my situation. "What does it mean that the video was edited?"

"It means it can't be used as proof of anything," Dominic replied, a glimmer of hope shining from his eyes.

Ty chimed in, "It's a small victory for us, but it doesn't change the reality that everyone is aware there is an omega here. It's not going to take much before the media know it's you if they don't already."

As I mulled over their words, I couldn't help but wonder why I was relieved that it was a victory. That video would have been the proof I needed to seek justice for my pack and my parents if I were so inclined.

I glanced from Ty to my parents. I was now part of two worlds—the Wylde pack and the Keller pack. In the end, the peace of mind for my current family and pack took priority. I couldn't change the past, and dwelling on it wouldn't help me heal, but I could take control of the present in a way that would preserve my future here with Ty and my family.

Taking a deep breath, I stood and faced Dominic with renewed determination. "I have an idea."

Chapter 27

Ty

Liza's sudden movement to the front of the room caught everyone's attention. The determination etched on her face was unmistakable, leaving me curious and a bit apprehensive about what the hell she was going to say.

Liza had surprised me at every turn since we'd met. Just when I started to think I really understood her personality, her moods, and the way her mind worked, something new got thrown in the mix and she'd step up to find a solution or a workaround. She never threw in the towel or left the decision to others.

She'd always been an independent woman, speaking her mind and following through with what she felt was right. Now, as she stood in front of Dad, our families, and Nico, I could tell she had chosen to take a stand, and it scared the ever-living shit out of me.

"I've made up my mind," she began, her voice unwavering. "I want to make a statement addressing the truth about what I am... about being an omega." Her icy blue eyes scanned the room. "We need to take the power out of Castro's hands. He wants us scrambling around like chickens with our heads cut off, and we've been doing exactly that. What better way to remove his power than me coming clean publicly? Plus, if I'm being honest with you all, I don't want to have to hide forever. I've spent my whole life pretending to be something I'm not, as if being an omega was something to be ashamed of. It's time to reveal the truth."

My heart pounded in my chest as I considered her words. When did Liza become so brave? She was willing to speak out about being an omega, revealing her identity to strangers and friends alike. Once she did that, there would be no going back... but she was right. Castro only had power because of the information he carried. If she told the truth, his power would no longer exist.

He'd lose his grip on Liza, our pack, and wouldn't be able to manipulate us into playing his sick games any longer.

"Are you sure about this, Liza?" I asked.

"Absolutely," she replied, her gaze never leaving mine. "It's time for me to own who I am and not let anyone else control my life."

Dad nodded in support but kept quiet.

I tried not to think about the repercussions of Liza announcing her true identity to the world, but my wolf paced inside me, anxious about the potential danger that could come from Liza's revelation.

"Think about it," she continued. "Once the truth is out there, Castro loses his power over us. We can focus on what truly matters: protecting our pack and building a stronger future." She gestured toward the TV. "Even though the video was edited, I still exist, and I had to come from somewhere. People aren't going to let that die."

Dad nodded. "I agree with you on that."

I laced my fingers together so tightly I was losing feeling in the digits. There was undeniable truth in what she said, and it struck a deep chord in my being. But amid her bravery, a lingering fear crept in and gnawed at my consciousness. I worried that her boldness would put a bigger target on her back.

My protective instincts surged, overwhelming my senses and compelling me to shield her from harm. She was my fated mate. Wasn't it my job to protect her even when she was determined to speak out?

“Liza, I understand your point, but I worry about the backlash. We don’t know how Castro or other members of the pack will react, and I can’t bear the thought of anything happening to you.”

She stepped closer to me and put her hand on my arm. “Ty, I appreciate your concern, but I need to do this—for myself *and* for the pack. I’ve spent my whole life feeling different and trying to fit in. It was always a struggle as a child, but even now, as an adult, I stick out like a sore thumb. I’m a fucking arctic wolf among black and brown wolves.” She closed her eyes, and a breath hissed out from between her teeth. “I think a statement from me would carry more weight than Dominic speaking alone.”

I looked at Dad, who shifted in his seat. “What exactly do you want to say, Liza?”

She sat back down next to me and crossed her legs, her foot shaking up and down, obviously anxious. I was proud of her, though, because she was determined to make this happen.

“I thought maybe you all could help me with that part.” She smiled weakly and turned to face Dad. “Do you have someone who helps you write these sorts of things?”

“Absolutely.” Dad picked up the phone and called his personal assistant to arrange to have Keller Enterprises’ press coordinator join us in the office immediately.

Within minutes, she showed up, laptop in hand, ready to write. “For those that haven’t met her, this is Barb. She’s been waiting in the wings, knowing I’ll be making my announcement this evening.”

Barb smiled. “Nice to meet you all.”

Dad gestured in Liza’s direction. “This is Liza Mims. She’ll be making a statement as well. It’ll be a tricky one because we’ll need to bend the truth, but you’re used to that, aren’t you, Barb?”

I felt Liza relax slightly. My dad had just told her in so many words that Barb could be trusted.

Barb laughed softly. “That’s kind of my job, Mr. Keller. What’s the main topic of Liza’s announcement?”

Dad cleared his throat. “She’ll be announcing her identity as the rumored omega.”

“Oh.” Barb shifted her weight and glanced nervously in Liza’s direction.

“We need to let the public see that she’s still the same Liza they’ve known since she was adopted into our pack when she was only four years old.” Dad winked at Liza to lighten the mood. “Think you can handle that?” Barb nodded as Dad turned his attention back to Liza. “You’re leading this meeting, Liza. Tell us what you have in mind.”

She sighed. “Honestly, I think I should tell the truth about what I am, but also allow people to see that I’ve been a productive member of the Keller pack all these years. I’ll introduce myself, remind them of my parents, and talk to them about my catering business and all of the people who have trusted me to cook for their families.”

My mate had clearly put a lot of thought into this.

“Everyone’s always thought omegas to be mythical creatures, so it would be a good thing for them to put my face with the title. That way, they can see that I’m harmless, and it will take away their fear and reservations about something new and different they don’t quite understand.”

Brilliant. My mate was a fucking genius.

Dad smiled. “That sounds like a great start to me.” He turned to Barb. “Did you get all that?”

She nodded as she typed quickly, trying to keep up with Liza’s fast pace.

“I’m not finished. I have another idea I’d like to run past you.” Liza paused and glanced back at me. “What if we flip the script, so to speak? If I focus on Castro and what a horrific person he is, outlining all the grief he’s put me and your family through, the general public will see that he’s the one who needs to be focused on. We can even show a picture of him on the screen, and ask them for their help in finding the man

responsible for planting a bomb in the bell tower and nearly detonating it, without caring who was hurt.”

We all gave our input but allowed Liza to lead the discussion. She knew exactly the kind of outcome she wanted from her press release and also had a decent idea of how to get there. Three hours quickly passed as we discussed her *coming out*, and her version of how she came to be a part of the Keller pack.

Liza would include the truth of her pack’s existence, but with a fabricated story of how they came to an untimely end.

When the decision was made to lie about how every member of the Wylde pack had died, I growled. “I hate this, Liza. I don’t want you lying on our behalf.”

She looked me dead in the eye. “I’m your mate, which means that this pack is now mine to protect, not just yours. My parents are a part of this pack, and so are my brothers and my best friend. I’ll do my part in protecting them, whatever that may look like. It’s no longer a ‘me versus you’ situation. I *am* one of you.”

A hum of appreciation came from my mother, and I when I looked at her, a soft smile adorned her face. When I shifted my gaze to Dad, pride emanated from his expression. They all knew this wasn’t an easy choice for Liza, but it displayed not only her loyalty to the pack, but also her loyalty to me. This was going to be our legacy, and she had chosen to protect it.

“Ty,” my mother called out gently, bringing me back to the present moment. “We’re all so proud of Liza for making this choice. She’s truly proven herself as a valuable member of our pack.”

“Thank you, Mom.” A surge of gratitude and love for my family and my mate almost took my breath away. “I know how much this means to all of us, especially to Liza.”

My father chimed in; his voice strong despite his weakened state. “Son, remember that our pack is built on loyalty and trust. Liza’s decision shows her dedication to our

people and her commitment to you. Never forget what a gift she is.”

I nodded in agreement. Our future together would be filled with challenges, but with Liza by my side, I knew we could face anything. The fate of our legacy rested on our shoulders, and we would do whatever it took to protect our pack and uphold the Keller name.

I placed my hands on Liza’s cheeks. Her eyes met mine, filled with determination and a vulnerability that tugged at my heart.

“I love you,” I whispered earnestly, hoping she could feel the depth of my emotions behind those three simple words. “I know this is a big deal for you, and I’m so proud of you, Liza. I promise I’ll be by your side during the entire thing.”

“Thank you, Ty,” she murmured, leaning into my touch. “That means everything to me.”

The tender moment was interrupted by Nico’s security team entering the room, wheeling in a camera on a tripod. They began setting it up in front of my father’s desk, adjusting the lens and checking the lighting.

“Is this happening now?” I glanced at my watch. I hadn’t realized how much time we’d spent discussing Liza’s speech.

“We’re setting up for Dominic to record his announcement to the pack,” Nico explained, glancing over at my father, who seemed to straighten his back with renewed energy.

A member of the security team stepped forward and applied a light amount of makeup to my father’s face. Before our eyes, he made Dad appear more alert and awake than he really was.

“Everyone ready?” Nico asked, taking charge of the situation, as usual.

My father nodded, sitting at his desk with an air of authority that hid his true physical state.

“Three, two, one,” Nico counted down, then pointed at my father to signal the start of the recording.

“Hello, and thank you for tuning in for this special message from your alpha,” my father began, his voice steady and strong. “Tonight, I’d like to address the rumors that are being spread about our pack. Please know that these truly are rumors being supported by fabricated and altered video footage. It’s important for you to know that there is a man out there who, for selfish reasons of his own, wants the demise of the Keller pack. This man is obsessed with obtaining power, and he will stop at nothing to get the recognition he thinks he deserves. Do not be fooled by this man. He is, in fact, the lowest of the low and doesn’t deserve to be in the Keller pack’s presence.”

As I watched my father, I couldn’t help but be awed by his unwavering resolve. No one watching the video would be able to tell that he was at his weakest. We were all grateful that Castro, our enemy, wasn’t aware of my father’s waning power. If Castro had known, he surely would have attacked us more swiftly, knowing he truly had the upper hand.

“Rest assured that we will always be prosperous, and it’ll take much more than a deranged man to tarnish the Keller name.” He paused and stared into the camera, and for a moment I thought he’d forgotten what he was going to say.

“Our pack has always been recognized as leading the community, the state, and even the country when it comes to shifter’s rights and our responsibilities to humanity. We will continue to stand strong together and rely on our core values of strength, courage, loyalty, and honor. That is what makes us the Keller pack.

“We will continue to lead, guide, and direct those who need us, and we will not falter under this threat being posed to us. The Kellers will remain a strong and solid pack for years to come. Thank you for your support.”

When Dad completed his speech, and Nico stopped the recording, we all cheered for him. He slumped over, exhausted from the effort it took to appear strong and undeterred.

“I guess it’s my turn now.” Liza squeezed my hand and stood.

“Wait.” I stood, too, and wrapped my arm around her waist. “Let’s talk first.” I inclined my head at Nico. “Liza will be back in a minute.”

Nico nodded and continued fiddling with the digital camera, adjusting the settings to match the change in lighting after Dad stood from his place behind the desk.

Liza followed me upstairs to my room so we could have a private moment together.

We came to a stop just inside the door as I tried to find the right words. “I just wanted you to take a moment to think and make sure you’re really okay with all of this.”

Liza’s eyes locked on mine. “That’s all I’ve been doing. I’ve been thinking about it nonstop, Ty. I know that telling the truth about being an omega is the best thing for all of us.” Her voice was resolute, confident.

A gust of wind blew through the open window, rustling the curtains and threatening to topple a stack of papers on my desk. I quickly got up to close the window, eager to keep the conversation focused on the matter at hand.

I sat down next to her again. “You were saying?”

Her eyes were steely as she said, “I’ve realized that I have power here, Ty. Power to shift the narrative. I’m tired of Castro having the upper hand, and he won’t expect me to do this. It’s going to piss him off, but I feel like it’s the best move for all of us.”

I took both of her hands in mine, stroking my thumbs along her delicate skin. “As long as you are comfortable with it, I’ll support you. I’ll follow you to the edge of the earth, Liza, if that’s what you want.”

Her eyes misted over. “We have to leave a legacy behind that our kids can be proud of, and I don’t want it tainted because of choices we had no say in.”

Every time she mentioned the future, the possibility of having children, my wolf preened within me.

A possessive need consumed me, and Liza must have sensed it, too. Her head cocked to the side as she tried to make sense of the change in the air.

My pheromones betrayed how much I wanted her, needed her, right then and there.

As my inner wolf growled, a fierce and possessive longing surged through me, yearning to claim her as mine. The sweet sound of Liza choosing us, choosing me, ignited an untamed fire deep within my primal instincts. It was an overwhelming desire that consumed me, driving me to seize her in my arms and reveal the depths of my affection, to show her just how passionately I had chosen her, too.

Chapter 28

Liza

Desire took over every facet of my body at the possessive look in Ty's eyes. Something in the air had shifted, and I breathed it in. My heart fluttered as he met my gaze. His eyes, so full of desire and devotion, locked onto mine, and a surge of electricity passed between us.

In that moment, there was no doubt that we were meant to be together. Two halves of a whole. The undeniable connection between us strengthened, and suddenly it was more than just being with Ty. It was about being a part of something bigger. Something special the two of us shared.

He looked like he wanted to consume me and pull me into his body until we were one, yet at the same time, he wanted to protect me from anything or anyone that tried to come between us.

My eyes tracked his movements as he pulled his phone from his pocket and held it to his ear. "Hold off on Liza's recording. There's something we need to handle first."

A loud chuckle filled the room, and I realized he'd accidentally called Dominic on speaker phone.

Ty ended the call, tossing the phone onto the dresser, then he got up to lock the door.

He stalked toward me, nudging my thighs open so he could step in between them. "Where were we?" he whispered, a sly grin spreading across his face.

My heart raced as his hands roamed freely over my body. My breaths became shallow with anticipation. With one sweeping motion, Ty had me pinned beneath him on the bed.

My wolf whimpered at his scent as we both recognized what was about to happen. I didn't want to fight it. Not anymore.

So, I didn't.

I met Ty with passion, desire, and need. I allowed myself to truly feel everything I'd suppressed up until that moment.

Our emotions exploded between our bodies as our carnal needs drove us.

Ty pushed himself off the bed, his body hovering just above mine. "Will you take me as your mate?" he asked, his gray eyes sparkling with anticipation.

I didn't hesitate with my answer. "Yes, of course I will. Will you take me as yours?"

His answer was clear on his face as he smiled and growled. "You better fucking believe it. Yes. A million times, yes, Liza Mims." His fingers traced the outline of my mouth. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too, Ty."

Ty's emotions shone from his eyes as he prepared to take me as his mate. My own emotions were stirring as well. In that moment, it was easy to let go of any insecurities I had and concentrate on what was important. I wanted to be with Ty. I wanted his love. I wanted to be his mate.

I trusted him.

I wanted him.

And I knew he wanted me.

I loved him.

Ty's lips brushed against mine in a gentle kiss. His tongue swirled around mine as though searching for something deeper—something beyond the physical pleasure. I gasped at the

intensity of the sensations coursing through me as desire scorched my skin.

Ty pulled back gently and whispered, “I want you to experience pleasure like you’ve never experienced before. I want to make you feel beautiful and cherished. I want to show you just how much love can be shared between two people.”

His words were enough to make any woman melt into a puddle, and it didn’t take long before he had me writhing beneath him in ecstasy. His touch was electric as he explored every inch of my body from head to toe, teasing me without release, until I thought I would go insane from an overload of pleasure.

His fingers worked their way down over my stomach, tracing circles around my navel before slowly making their way under my waistband and down toward my wetness.

“Not yet,” he growled, skimming his fingers over my clit, eliciting a moan from my lips before his finger trailed down through my plump lips.

“Please,” I whispered, pushing my mound into his hand, urging him to give me what I so desperately needed.

“Not yet,” he repeated with a wicked grin.

He cupped the backs of my thighs in his strong hands as he pushed my legs apart, settling himself between my knees. His lips planted a trail of soft kisses up my leg before he reached my center.

He gently nibbled at my core over the top of my jeans, wrapping his hands around my waist and squeezing my ass.

“I think these need to go.” He unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans, and I lifted my hips, allowing him to pull them down my legs. “That’s much better.” He lifted my shirt and unhooked my bra, discarding the garments as he took in my tits. “I can’t get enough of you. You’re so damn gorgeous.”

He lowered his head to rest between my breasts, and moved his face from side to side, his hands cupping each one, pushing them upward. His breath quickened, and I smiled with satisfaction. My body drove him crazy.

I found the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head in one fluid motion, needing to see his naked chest and the muscles that rippled from top to bottom. I ran my hand along his washboard stomach. “God, Ty. You are so fucking hot.”

He smiled and kissed me hard before tracing kisses over my neck, stopping at my ear and nibbling on the lobe.

His teeth grazed my neck, a precursor for what was to come. “I’m going to make you scream my name, Liza. Are you ready?”

“Mm.” My wolf moaned and whined. She was ready as well.

His mouth found my nipple as he sucked and flicked the tip with his tongue. One hand squeezed my other breast while he reached down and gently brushed over the front of my panties.

His mouth released my nipple, and he licked me from my breast down to my navel. Both hands pulled my panties down as his mouth moved lower and lower.

My body trembled as his hot breath washed over my pussy.

He glanced up at me with a mischievous look in his eyes before he flicked his tongue out to tease me.

I cried out in ecstasy as my hands slid into his hair, grasping tightly onto the strands.

I moaned as his tongue explored my folds, teasing my sensitive nub while his calloused fingers kneaded my thighs.

An electric shock shot through my body as Ty tightened his grip on my thighs and plunged his tongue deep into my slick folds, licking and sucking the nectar from my core.

My fingers curled into the comforter beneath me as I bit my bottom lip to stifle my cries. I was about to come, and I wanted to make it last as long as I could. My body shuddered as he pulled away.

“Stop teasing me,” I begged.

Without saying a word, Ty looked up at me with a feral grin and latched onto my throbbing clit. I cried out as he sucked hard, his fingers sliding deep into my core, rubbing along the internal walls. My hips bucked in unison with his tongue, matching his rhythm perfectly as the telltale contractions of my orgasm started to build.

My hands tangled in his hair as he lapped at my clit, his tongue flickering in time with the movements of his fingers inside me. My muscles tightened when the first wave of pleasure swept over my body. Pressure released from my core as I came hard, my juices flowing from my pussy, the orgasm crashing over me like a tsunami.

Ty pulled back slowly, licking his lips as he cleaned them of my nectar. He moved quickly to cover my mouth with his. I could taste myself on his lips, and I couldn't get enough.

I kissed each and every inch of his face. Tasting myself on his skin was the most erotic thing I'd ever experienced. I couldn't get enough of him. I wanted to be closer than we were. I wanted to be one with him.

He smiled down at me, his eyes filled with love. I pulled him to me and pressed my lips to his, deepening the kiss as I felt my soul being drawn into his.

Just before I reached for his cock, Ty slipped one arm beneath me and flipped me over onto my stomach. He hovered over me, thrusting inside of me with a primal growl.

His hips moved in perfect rhythm as he thrust deeper and deeper into my depths, creating sparks of pleasure that shot through my body with every stroke. I could feel myself getting closer and closer to the edge of another orgasm as he pounded into me harder and faster.

He grabbed hold of my hips and pulled them up toward him so he could penetrate me deeper. "Fuck, Liza. You feel so good. I want you to scream for me. *Scream, baby.*"

"Harder!" I wanted every centimeter of him inside me. I wanted his thick cock to fill me to the brim. He touched every part of me, and I couldn't get enough.

With one quick movement, Ty pulled out and flipped me onto my back again. He was breathing hard and staring at my pussy.

“What do you want, Ty?” I sat up on my knees and pressed my tits against his chest. Reaching behind him, I grabbed his ass and squeezed, his hard cock pressing into my stomach.

He moaned with pleasure when I moved my hands to his chest, down his stomach, and wrapped them around his shaft. I slid one hand down to his balls, the other circling the engorged head of his dick. I stood and then squatted, pulling his cock to me and using it like a vibrator, moving him up and down my clit, soaking him with my juices.

Desire flashed in Ty’s eyes as he moved forward, pushing me into the head of the bed. “Stay just like that.”

I did as I was told, and he positioned himself on his knees over me, grabbing my hips and pulling me up his body while simultaneously thrusting hard and entering me with such force that my eyes rolled back in my head with pleasure.

As he thrust, he reached around my back and squeezed my ass, pulling me apart and rubbing his fingers across every sensitive spot he could find.

“Oh, Ty. I’m going to come again,” I whimpered.

“You’d fucking better.” He thrust harder and faster as I reached up behind, taking hold of the headboard to steady myself.

With one final thrust, Ty leaned forward and bit down on my shoulder as I lowered my head to bite him. His cock tightened as he released his seed inside of me and we both let out a cry of pleasure.

The sparks between us seemed to light up the room as we experienced an intense bond that was not only physical but spiritual, too. Our souls intertwined in an unbreakable connection, sealing our fated bond for the rest of our lives.

Our bodies shuddered as the last waves of pleasure diminished. Ty collapsed onto the bed beside me, pulling me

into his arms. I snuggled against his chest and listened to his heart as it slowed to a steady beat.

Ty would always be there for me. I loved him.

I sighed in contentment as Ty rolled over onto his back, pulling me on top of him. I looked up at his face and smiled.

“You’re mine now,” he whispered.

“I always was yours,” I whispered, resting my head against his chest, listening to the slowing rhythm of his heart.

I closed my eyes and hummed, finally allowing myself to relax completely. I was exactly where I was always meant to be.

My limbs felt boneless, and my eyelids were growing heavy.

Ty tucked a strand of hair behind my ear as he whispered, “I love you.”

I smiled as I snuggled closer to him, already halfway to sleep. “I love you.”

My eyes fluttered open, and I tried to make sense of the darkness that enveloped the room. Ty’s chest moved up and down slowly and rhythmically as he slept.

I had no idea how much time had passed since we’d locked ourselves in his room. We’d gone at it like rabbits for a while and then nodded off to sleep.

Ty stirred and opened his eyes. “Hey there, beautiful.”

“Hey, yourself.”

He flipped on the bedside lamp and rolled on his side to face me. Without a word, he reached out and traced the now-permanent teeth marks on my shoulder. “Did we just do that?”

I smiled. “We most certainly did.” I glanced at my watch. “Oh, shit, Ty. They’ve been waiting on us for hours. Should we head down?”

He laughed and pulled me in for a kiss. “Not before taking a shower. Don’t you want to be fresh for your big television

debut?”

I scoffed. “Ty Keller, are you saying I don’t look my best?”

He smoothed my unruly hair down with his hand. “You look amazing, but you also look like you were just thoroughly fucked.”

We both laughed, then Ty led me to his large, two-headed shower. I stood under the steaming hot water, and Ty wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close to his chest. I loved that even after showering, I could smell him on my skin. As I leaned into his kiss, I realized that he still smelled like me, and I loved it.

After drying off and getting dressed, I searched my purse for some mascara and lip gloss, not wanting to look too tired under the lights. As Ty had pointed out, I’d just had the best sex of my life, but I didn’t necessarily want the entire state of Texas to know that.

Ty pulled his T-shirt over his head and smiled in my direction. “Are you ready?”

I nodded and took his hand. Together, we walked down the hall and into Dominic’s office.

My cheeks flamed immediately as I caught the embarrassed look on my parents’ face. Fuck. Had they heard everything? Had I really screamed that loud?

I glanced at the other faces in the room and noticed they were avoiding eye contact. Oh, God. I turned and covered my mouth with my hand when I heard Dominic chuckle over my shoulder.

Mustering up every ounce of courage in my body, I turned to face his smiling face.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

My nerves took over as I took in the camera and the lighting gear. It was one thing to watch Dominic give his speech, but now it was my turn, and I wasn’t sure I could actually go through with it.

I clutched my chest and bit my lower lip. What if I fucked up? What if I forgot what I was going to say and accidentally spilled the damn beans about the Keller pack attacking the Wylde pack?

The future of Ty's family, and now mine, hinged on this one televised statement. I'd taken on the responsibility, but could I actually follow through?

Dominic patted my arm gently. "It's okay, Liza. Trust me, I understand your jitters. Just imagine you're talking into a mirror, practicing for a speech in school. We can all leave if that would make you feel more comfortable."

"No." I shook my head. "That won't be necessary. I need my support system in the room."

He smiled. "Just take your time. If you forget what you're going to say, it's okay to pause. We're not live. If you make a mistake, we can film it again. Don't feel like you have to rush. People will be hanging on your every word, anyway, so give them time to absorb the information. They want to see you as someone they can relate to and trust, which they can."

I stared down at my feet. "What if I'm not convincing enough and they don't believe me?"

Before Dominic could answer, Nico interrupted from across the room. "All right, people. We need to get this show on the road. I need to get this footage to the local stations in time for them to air it on the eleven o'clock news."

I sighed. "I guess it's now or never." I turned and walked toward the desk, but Dominic reached out and grabbed my hand.

"Just say what's on your heart, Liza. You'll do great."

I nodded and took my seat at the desk, blinking as the lights flared to life and the camera turned on.

Nico whispered. "Okay, in three, two, one..."

Chapter 29

Ty

“It’s time.” Dad gestured for us to follow him downstairs to the movie room where one of the house staff had already turned the projector on and tuned in to the local news station.

We’d spent the past hour discussing how we thought the general public would react to the statements Dad and Liza had made. Everyone agreed that they couldn’t have done any better.

Liza was tired, not just because I’d fucked her like she’d never been fucked before, but because the mental strain of speaking directly to strangers about the pain she’d experienced in her life had exhausted her.

The house staff had been generous, bringing us drinks and food whenever we requested it, even though some of their shifts had ended hours ago. We had the best people working for us, and I made a mental note to make it up to them once this whole ordeal was over. They’d each get a nice bonus along with extra paid vacation time.

We walked solemnly to the movie room, Liza clinging to my arm, and her parents following close behind. They’d been silent all throughout Liza’s statement, but once Liza had spoken about her past and the kindness of her parents for taking her in, they’d become emotional, and with good reason. Trying to protect their daughter had put them under an immense amount of stress.

We got situated in our seats, anxious to see how the public would react to the recordings.

The news anchor began the broadcast with a brief introduction, then Dad's face appeared on the screen.

“Dominic Keller, alpha of the Keller pack, has come forward this evening with a statement regarding the video that has circulated on televisions and computer screens over the past twenty-four hours.”

I watched as Dad recited the words that had been carefully crafted by Nico and a team of lawyers, expressing his feelings and stance about the current situation with Castro.

He denied all allegations about slaughtering an entire pack, stating that the Keller pack would never be involved in such a violent act. “We are pleased to announce that the video has been officially debunked with proof that it was altered. I want to apologize to our pack members and the general public for the confusion this video caused. Rest assured that this type of misinformation will not be taken lightly as we seek to hunt down the man who's responsible for this upheaval in our peaceful community.”

I shuddered at his lies and took Liza's hand. This was hard for her, yet she sat stoically, staring at the screen with so much damn resolve it made me want to ravage her again.

Her grip on my hand was unrelenting, and I brushed a kiss on her forehead. “You've got this,” I whispered. “I'm so fucking proud of you.”

Liza smiled weakly before turning her attention back to the screen.

There was a brief pause after Dad's statement before the anchorwoman appeared on the screen again. “You just heard from Dominic Keller as he claimed to not be involved in the deaths of hundreds of men, women, and children. Though our sources have been unable to identify the slaughtered pack, many have questioned if they did, truly, exist. Here now, with another statement that sheds more light on the situation, is Liza Mims, mate of Ty Keller, the Keller pack's alpha-in-waiting.

The screen faded to black, and then Liza's beautiful face filled up the screen. A heavy breath left her nose as the video began.

My pride in her became fierce as I watched her sit regally behind my father's desk, staring straight into the camera. She didn't look nervous at all. In fact, she looked badass, ready to take Castro fucking down.

Liza looked so confident and at ease, as if she was meant to be in a place of power, whether as a mob princess or as his queen. This was her destiny, I was certain of it.

Liza stared into the screen. "Good evening. My name is Liza Mims, and I was born to Josef and Portia Wylde. My father was the alpha of the Wylde pack, and my mother was his biggest supporter, leading the pack with grace and elegance." She paused and cleared her throat. "My parents loved and adored me, and I had the most wonderful childhood anyone could ask for. I never wanted for anything, and that included their time and attention, even though they were both extremely busy."

The camera slowly zoomed in at the perfect moment so the viewer could see the sincerity in Liza's eyes. "I was born an omega. Though my parents did their best to protect me from the world, they knew that there would be people who wanted to hurt me. Despite their best efforts, my parents were killed by a boy who wanted me to himself. That boy is now a man named Castro Neal."

Liza's eyes widened, and the muscles around her lips tightened. She stared into the camera as if speaking directly to Castro, daring him to try and control her ever again. She continued her speech, giving Castro a big *fuck you*.

"Castro used to go by the name Stone Black. My earliest memories are of Stone watching and following me. He wanted my affections all to himself, so he harassed any children who attempted to be my friend. I almost always found myself playing with him, but even then, he dominated me, hardly letting me lift a finger. He would push me on the swing or bring my dolls and lay them out in the order I wanted them. It

was as if he wanted me to see him as the most important person in my life. And for a while, it worked. I asked to play with Stone and begged my parents to let him come over.”

She sighed and pushed her shoulders back, sitting up even straighter than before. “Stone was obsessed with me. As he grew older, he pulled other boys from me and beat them to a pulp for so much as looking in my direction. Of course, being a four-year-old girl, I didn’t recognize him for the monster he truly was. His obsession culminated in him murdering his own parents and then mine. Stone—Castro—wanted to be the center of my universe. The truth is that my pack was taken from me, and they were slaughtered not because of the Keller pack, but because Castro leaked my existence. My pack was murdered in an attempt to get me.”

Liza paused again, shifting almost imperceptibly in her seat. It was only because I knew her like the back of my hand that I was able to recognize the signs of her nervousness. To everyone else in the room, her composure and self-assurance shone through, not even a shred of nerves evident in her voice.

She continued. “The Keller pack did come to aid in the massacre of my pack, but the ones responsible for their murders are still unknown. Dominic Keller and his team took me in when I was found roaming in the woods. I had run away after witnessing Castro murder my parents, and I was terrified. The Keller pack saved me.” Tears threatened to spill down her cheeks, but Liza took a deep breath and finished her speech with a boldness that sent chills down my spine.

“If it weren’t for the Keller pack, I would probably be dead. Instead, I was given the chance to be a part of this wonderful community. My adoptive parents, Scott and Rory Mims, loved me as if I was their own. It’s because of their love and devotion that I am the woman I am today.” Liza briefly glanced in her parents’ direction, swallowing hard.

“I’ve served the Presley Acres community for years with my catering business. I went to school and played on the same sports teams with many of your children. I am simply a grateful member of the Keller pack—one who is begging you to help us find the man responsible for leaking the video and

altering it to make it seem as if the Keller pack was responsible for the deaths of my people when, in fact, he was the reason. He is a murderer, and he won't stop until he gets what he wants: me."

By the end of the video, there would be no doubt in anyone's mind who the actual criminal was. The segment came to an end with the anchor wiping at tears. "Thank you to Dominic Keller and Liza Mims for providing their statements in this exclusive newscast." Castro's photo appeared on the screen. "If anyone has any information on the whereabouts of Castro Neal, please contact the local authorities. Do not approach this dangerous man. Call the authorities so that he can be taken into custody and justice can be served."

The lights came on as the projector shut off. After a few moments, Dad stood. "Liza, I understand that this wasn't easy for you. I want you to know that I'll forever be in your debt for protecting the pack."

He hesitated and cleared his throat, and I could see he was trying to keep his emotions at bay. "I know I can't take back what I did, but I hope we'll be able to move forward and heal." He turned his gaze to me. "Ty, this goes without saying, but at the next full moon, it will be time to pass on the alpha power."

I took a deep breath. "Yes. I'm ready." I took Liza's hand in mine, and the serene smile on her face reminded me a lot of my mother's smile.

Liza's parents stood—Scott shaking hands with me, then my father, "Thank you, Dominic. You brought a wonderful gift into our lives. With everything she has done and everything she has gone through, I couldn't be prouder of our daughter right now." He turned to me. "Ty, I ask you to keep my daughter safe, love and cherish her the way she should be. If you'll excuse us, I think Rory and I would like to get some sleep." Scott and Rory both hugged Liza, telling her how proud they were, before departing for their room.

"Tyson, why don't you come on a walk with me? I think some fresh air might do us good."

I nodded and joined Dad just as Mother stood and made a beeline to Liza's side. "Care to join me in the kitchen? We have a lot to talk about."

Liza glanced at me, and I winked. "Sure, Persephone. I could use a snack, anyway."

I assumed Mother wanted to talk to her about becoming the mate to the alpha, since she'd need more lessons about the role she was about to take on. Poor Liza, having to jump from the newscast to listening to Mother blab on about various community obligations. She smiled at Mother, though, and it was genuine.

Dad led the way to the garden in the backyard, the gravel trail illuminated by a row of solar lights. It was a quiet night, and the crunching of our shoes against the rocks was the only sound aside from the occasional chirp of crickets. I took a deep breath, savoring the scent of blooming roses in the air and letting it wash away some of my worries.

We'd done it. We were now two steps ahead of Castro, not the other way around. I wasn't naïve, though. That bastard would retaliate, and when he did, I'd be ready.

We made our way to a bench that overlooked the forest. Dad took a deep breath and crossed his legs. He was more at ease than I'd seen him in weeks.

He turned to face me. "I'm damn proud of you and the man you've become. I still remember you running around buck naked through these gardens. At that time, it was hard to imagine you as the alpha of the pack. I see it now. You've become the leader our pack deserves."

"Thank you, Dad." I watched as a bat flittered above our heads, trying to catch bugs mid-air. "That means so much coming from you."

He nodded. "I know I've handed a lot over to you and Liza, but the way you've both reacted to all of this is impressive. I know the pack is in the best hands possible. I have no reservations about handing the alpha powers down to you."

I smiled at him. “I promise I’ll do my best to lead the pack with honor and integrity.”

He clapped me on the back. “That’s all any father could ask of his son. I have to warn you, though, that sometimes the power of the alpha can be a heavy load to carry. At times, it will feel like too much, but that’s why it’s important to have a loyal council and a partner who can help you carry the burden. Fate obviously knew what was to come and that there would be no better partner for you than Liza.”

“I agree. I can’t imagine my life without her.”

Dad stood and placed his hands on his hips. “I’m not dumb enough to think that this is over. Castro is going to make a move to punish us, and when he does, it will be harder than before. I’ll be there by your side to see this to the end. Just because I’m passing the alpha powers to you doesn’t mean I’m abandoning you. I’ll be with you every step of the way.” Dad put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “Are you ready for all of this?”

I nodded.

“Glad to hear it, Ty.” Dad yawned and stretched. “I’m going to head to bed. You?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I’m going to walk in the woods for a few minutes. Clear my mind. Today has been... a lot.”

“I understand. See you in the morning, son.”

He turned and made his way back up the gravel path. I watched for a few minutes, noting how much slower he moved, and the extra effort it took him to walk uphill.

My mating with Liza couldn’t have come at a better time.

Walking through the trees, I reached out and touched them, needing that connection with nature and its energy. Soon, these woods would be filled with pack members shifting at my command under the light of the full moon.

In some ways, it was hard to imagine. There had been so much build up to get to this point, and now that we were on

the cusp of transferring the alpha powers, I found myself contemplating the future more than ever.

As I ventured deeper into the woods, the scent of damp earth and moss mingled with the fragrance of pine. It was my second home, the place I was most at ease.

The symphony of nature surrounded me: rustling leaves, the distant chirping of insects, the susurrus of the nearby stream. The familiar sounds grounded and gave me a sense of direction and purpose as if they were aware of the shift in my identity. Did they know I would soon be the leader of the forest, the one who would lead the other wolves that roamed the area at my command?

Dad had asked if I was ready for the next step, for the powers to be handed down to me. I was.

It was fucking time for me to become the alpha.

Chapter 30

Ty

I paced the floor, my heart racing in anticipation of the upcoming ceremony. A mix of excitement and anxiety surged through me as I imagined the shifters arriving from all corners of our territory, gathering together to bear witness to the transfer of the alpha power from my father to me.

The ceremony itself might be short, but as with anything where my mother was involved, it would be nothing less than a grand spectacle.

I cracked my knuckles. “Damn it.” I couldn’t believe how nervous I felt. I had no doubts about taking charge. I was more than ready for this, but it was a monumental moment, and one that would change everything, not just for Liza and me and my parents. This impacted the entire pack.

The impending ceremony was making my stomach churn. I hadn’t even received the powers yet and the responsibility was already bearing down on me. The ticking clock only made me more nervous. Seconds felt like an eternity.

“Get a grip, man,” I whispered to myself, shaking my hands to get rid of my nerves. My fingers flexed, then balled into fists, releasing some of that pent-up tension.

Everything was about to change. For a moment, I allowed myself to get lost in the enormity of it all. As the future leader of our pack, I’d been groomed for this moment my entire life. I knew what was expected of me: strength, control, and fierce loyalty. But there were also personal goals I hoped to achieve,

such as a lasting peace among the packs and a safe haven for those who needed it.

Tyson Keller, Alpha. The words echoed in my mind like a mantra, calming the storm brewing in my gut, providing a sense of purpose and determination.

I tapped the top of the desk in Dad's—*my*—office before moving to the window and staring out at the spectacle below.

Mother barked orders and pointed this way and that as the staff put the finishing touches to the setup. “Did you not listen to my instructions? The black tablecloths do not go over there. They are for this table.” She huffed and slapped her hand on the tabletop. “This will be Liza’s parents’ table. They’re special guests, so they get the black tablecloth. Understood?”

I couldn’t help but feel sorry for the staff. No one was more familiar with being scolded by my mother than I was. The staff’s eyes were downcast, their shoulders slumping as they stood there, unable to look her in the eye. She had a low tolerance for anything that wasn’t done to her exact standards, and if she thought they weren’t being done correctly, she could be a real bitch.

The whole thing was a circus. A damn over-the-top spectacle. The finest linen tablecloths and napkins adorned each table. Silverware and crystal glasses were placed at each seat with red roses and green ivy draped over every surface imaginable.

I didn’t want to think about the money she’d spent on this because I had a feeling it was astronomical.

My gaze shifted to the two golden thrones placed prominently in the center of the backyard. I took a deep, shaky breath, letting the significance of them wash over me. This was fucking it. Go time.

A hand touched my back, and I nearly jumped a foot into the air.

“Hey, there.” Liza’s voice was like soothing honey on a sore throat, and I relaxed into her touch. She pressed against my side as we both stared down at the scene below.

I held her close, burying my nose in her hair and breathing in her scent. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

Liza chuckled. “Don’t you think it’s a little too late to back out now?” She tilted her head toward the bite mark on her shoulder.

Memories of that night came rushing back. I’d replayed our mating several times since it happened. It was the best damn night of my life. When Liza took my bite, the electricity between us had shot straight to my core.

My heart beat faster and all I wanted was to kiss her again. “I want you more than anything in the world,” I whispered, cupping her face in my hands and leaning in.

Our lips met for a brief second before we both pulled away. Our desire for each other was unsatiated, but right now we had bigger things to worry about than our carnal desire.

Liza grinned, and I took in the magnificence that was my mate. She was a beautiful woman, but there was an extra *something*. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but ever since she took my bite, something was different about her.

I touched the tip of her nose with mine. “What’s different about you? Ever since I claimed you, there’s been a shift. I don’t know what it is, but it’s a good thing.”

Liza smiled. “Peace will do that for you. I’m at peace with the choices I’ve made because I know they were the right ones to make.”

She stared out the window, watching Mother put the final touches to the center pieces. “I’d always wondered about my life before...” She was quiet for a beat, staring off into the distance. “I always knew pieces were missing. Now I know who I am and where I came from. I know I was loved, and everything else is miniscule.”

I brushed a strand of hair from her face. “Do you feel confident that you can lead by my side without the past burdening you? Because that’s the last thing I want... you having an extra load to carry as the wife of the alpha while still being consumed with what happened to your parents.”

Liza's lips curled into a grin. "My biological parents are gone. I can't change that, and there will always be a part of me that misses them and wishes they were still alive to see the woman I've become. But I'm fortunate to be loved beyond measure by the parents I was given, and I'll always be grateful for that. So, yes, I'm a little different because I finally know who I am. I'm Aliza Mims, but I'm also Aliza Wylde. And soon, I'll be Aliza Keller. And this is who I was meant to be."

I kissed her and nuzzled the spot where I'd claimed her.

Liza was everything I'd imagined in a mate and partner. No, she was more than I ever imagined. I leaned in to kiss her again just as Mother walked into the room.

"Whoops, sorry to interrupt." The laugh that followed told me she wasn't sorry in the slightest. "Liza, dear, it's time to get ready for the ceremony. I have everyone set up in the master suite."

Liza squeezed my hand and kissed me on the cheek. "I'll see you down there."

I nodded.

"Diane is the best hairdresser in Texas. I told her you had some ideas you'd saved on your phone, and she said she'll fix it however you'd like it." Mother grabbed Liza's hand and led her out of the office.

Sighing, I took a seat and scrolled through my phone, hoping that the stupid memes Bryce had sent me would distract me from my nerves. I chuckled at a photo of two praying mantises. They both appeared to be smiling. The male had a thought bubble above his head that said *I'm gonna get laid tonight* while the female was thinking *I don't have to cook dinner tonight*.

After staring mindlessly at my phone for half an hour, Dad joined me in the office.

"There he is. The man of the moment."

I stood and crossed the room, shaking his hand, then giving him a big hug and slapping his back. We stood in

silence for a moment until I decided to address the elephant in the room.

“So, how does it feel knowing this is your last day as an alpha?”

To my surprise, Dad threw his head back and laughed hard. “What does it feel like? It feels like fucking peace. For the first time in a very long time, I can act like other retired men my age, drinking beer, watching football, maybe even getting in a round of golf without having to worry about the pack and a million other little problems.” He wiped his eyes and squeezed my shoulder. “I have a question for *you* now. How do you *feel* about becoming a husband *and* an alpha on the same day?”

I chuckled and mimicked his words. “It feels like peace.”

Dad followed me to my bedroom, where he sat and chatted with me while I got ready. The suit I’d chosen was very similar to what a human groom would wear, just with some extra flare, obviously. It was a deep purple suit with a blood-red shirt and bowtie that marked my new rank as alpha.

Wolves were inherently proud creatures, and that was exactly what I felt as I put on the suit and caught my reflection in the mirror. Dad stood behind me. I smirked at him, and he nodded in approval.

“It looks like you’re ready to go, son. Let’s get this show on the road. It’s time to make you the alpha.”

Time had been a strange concept today with each minute passing both agonizingly slowly but with rapid acceleration. And now it was finally time.

I took a deep breath and rehearsed the different elements of the custom in my head.

First, I would walk out, and my father would give a speech.

Then the ritual of passing the alpha powers onto me would begin.

Then Liza would come out and our mating ceremony would begin. We'd share our vows in front of the pack.

I stood at the door and peered out over the hundreds of pack members in attendance. This was an opportunity for them to dress up while showing their respect for the retiring alpha and future alpha of their pack.

The men were dressed in their finest suits, and the women all adorned in their couture gowns, their wrists and necks dripping with diamonds as they subtly tried to outdo each other.

This wasn't like an annual event—the Oscars, for example—where people became complacent. An alpha passing his power to his son was the event of a lifetime, and none of them would've missed it for the world.

My heart pounded as the moon cleared from the clouds, signaling the beginning of the ceremony. Dad couldn't pass the alpha powers to me without the energy from the full moon bathing us in its light.

I watched as Dad, in the red ceremonial robes of the alpha and crown on his head, took his place front and center at the altar. He gave a subtle nod in my direction—my cue to walk down the center aisle.

I took my time, enjoying the moment, letting everyone see me.

The static charge of power in the air felt different from anything I'd experienced before. I straightened my spine and pulled myself up taller, chest puffed outward, and walked confidently toward Dad.

The guests turned in their seats to get a better look at me. Some whispered to their partners, who nodded in agreement. No one could argue that I looked damn good, but what they didn't know was that I felt even better.

Just a few short months ago, I'd thought I'd never find my mate and fulfill my destiny of alpha. All the years of hints and comments from well-meaning pack members suggesting I settle and choose a mate of convenience so I could take the

alpha powers were behind me now. I was glad I'd waited for fate to bring Liza into my life.

Castro had made sure it hadn't been a bed of butterflies and roses, but ultimately, his attempts to tear us apart and destroy the pack had backfired. All it had done was bring Liza and me closer together.

Castro had no business being here with me, in my head, as I walked to my father and my future. I pushed all thoughts of the bastard out of my mind and lifted my chin high.

Everything was coming together as it should. The time was right. I had my fated mate, and I relished the moment, knowing that my life was on the precipice of fulfilling my potential as leader of the pack.

The unexpected rush of emotions took me by surprise. A lump formed in my throat. My parents had never been shy about showing their love for me, but it was the unadulterated pride radiating from my father's face that nearly brought me to my knees.

With unwavering determination, I propelled myself forward, keeping my mind set firmly on the task at hand.

The swell of pride in Dad's chest made me think of the future. Liza and I would have children of our own. One day, I'd be standing in front of the altar going through the same ritual with my own son, and so the circle of the Keller legacy would continue.

I made my way in front of the altar, my heart pounding in my chest, and adrenaline coursing through my veins. My hands trembled with both excitement and nerves.

This was a pivotal moment, not just for my father and me, but for everyone in attendance, and the wider pack as a whole.

The passing of the alpha power from father to son.

As I stood at my father's side, his voice resonated through the clearing, rich with pride and emotion. "Pack members, today marks a significant milestone in our pack's history. It is with immense pride and gratitude that I stand before you all ready to pass on the alpha power."

The crowd hushed, their collective anticipation building. They looked at Dad with reverence, their loyalty clear in the unwavering gazes fixed upon him.

I caught Mother's eye, seeing the same expression of pride there I'd seen in Dad's. She sat to the side of the front row, dressed in a long, fitted red dress that fell to her calves. As the moon illuminated her face, her beauty shone through.

She turned her head and watched Dad closely. Like the rest of the pack, she was hanging on his every word. My mother was just as invested in the ceremony as he was, if not more.

Tonight, her son would take the place of her husband, her duty of raising me and preparing me to be alpha complete.

"I want to take a moment to express my deepest gratitude," my father continued, his voice carrying the weight of his years of leadership.

"To each one of you who has stood by my side, who has shown unwavering loyalty and support, I am eternally grateful. Your dedication has been the bedrock upon which our pack has thrived."

A resounding display of appreciation and admiration erupted with the crowd's thunderous applause. The echoes reverberated through the clearing, their cheers a testament to the unbreakable bond between our pack members and their alpha.

As the applause subsided, my father's voice filled the silence, once again. "Today, I stand before you, humbled by the privilege of serving as your alpha. It has been an honor to protect and guide this pack, to witness your strength and unity in the face of adversity. Now, as I pass the mantle to my son Tyson, I do so with complete trust and confidence in his ability to lead."

The crowd's reaction was a symphony of emotions. Some cheered, their voices filled with hope and anticipation for the future. Others murmured with nostalgia, their expressions mirroring the depth of their connection to our pack's history.

My father's words stirred something deep within me. The trust and pride that radiated from him fueled my determination. I couldn't help but feel a swell of gratitude and responsibility, knowing that I carried the hopes and dreams of our pack upon my shoulders.

As the crowd's emotions settled into a hushed reverence, my father stepped forward, placing a hand on my shoulder. His touch was both comforting and reassuring, a silent acknowledgment of the bond we shared.

"Together," my father said, his voice strong yet filled with a touch of nostalgia, "we have weathered countless storms, triumphed over challenges, and grown stronger as a pack. Today, I entrust you, my son, with the power to protect, to lead, and to forge a future that will honor our legacy."

The words hung in the air, a solemn reminder of the responsibility that lay before me. The pack—my family—looked upon me with such hope and support, their faith in me evident in their unwavering gazes.

In that moment, as I stood at the altar, surrounded by the pack that had become my second family, I was determined to not let them down. The ceremony marked not just a passing of power, but a commitment to protect, guide, and nurture the pack that had embraced me as their own.

I knelt in front of Dad as my mother stepped forward. She kissed him on the cheek and gently removed his crown, then placed it on my head.

It was heavier than I'd expected. Not only in physical weight, but with the gravity of responsibility that now rested on my shoulders. *Heavy is the head who wears the crown.* The phrase popped into my mind, something Mother would say often to Dad when he had a lot on his plate.

I bowed my head in respect as a tear rolled down Dad's face, and he smiled proudly at me.

Dad placed a hand over my claiming bite, and a surge of energy moved through me as he spoke. "From this day until it's time for you to pass it on, you are now alpha."

My fangs extended as every part of me felt electrocuted. I tilted my head back and howled. As soon as the howl ended, I immediately noticed a difference within myself. I felt stronger, my senses sharper.

Dad was right, though. It was heavy.

When I stood, my father was a beta, and the entire pack took a knee, acknowledging me as their alpha.

Chapter 31

Liza

Pride swelled inside me as I watched Ty taking on the alpha powers Dominic transferred to him.

My heart overflowed after witnessing him take his place, and I had to fight back the prickle of tears. Persephone would kill me if I messed up my makeup.

She and her glam squad had spent hours fluttering around me, getting me all dolled up for the occasion. It was the most makeup I'd ever worn in my life, but I was happy to do it for this once-in-a-lifetime event.

I was wearing a dress in deep red, the color of the alpha. The silk sheath had a deep V neckline and fell down to my knees, accentuating my curves. A purple lace overlay covered my décolletage, the pleated skirt flaring down to my ankles. It could have looked tacky, but it was elegant and cost more than I'd make if I cooked dinner for every family in town every night for a month. Persephone had chosen it, but I had to admit the style suited me and the occasion.

From my place to the back of the pack, where I'd been sitting with my dad, Dominic's voice reverberated clearly.

"Today, we come together not only to witness the transfer of power but also to celebrate love," Dominic announced to the gathered crowd.

My breath hitched as I glanced at Ty, standing tall and proud before our pack. His newfound authority radiating from every pore, making him appear larger than life.

As if he felt my stare, he turned, and his eyes met mine briefly. The warmth in his gaze sent shivers down my spine.

The ceremony had an undeniable similarity to a human wedding. My father would give me away, and Ty and I would recite our vows. Instead of exchanging rings, a ceremonial sash would wrap around us, symbolizing the eternal bond that would tie us together.

“Are you ready?” my father whispered, squeezing my hand gently as he helped me to stand.

“More than ever,” I replied, and I could barely hear my own voice.

As we began our walk down the aisle, Ty’s gaze never wavered from mine. My breath caught in my throat. He seemed bigger, wider... and I wasn’t exaggerating.

His newfound alpha powers had transformed him, making him even more captivating than before. Ty chuckled at my wide-eyed expression, and his infectious smile set my heart racing. This was truly happening; I was about to become his mate. His queen.

“Who gives this woman away?” Dominic asked when we reached the front.

My father didn’t hesitate. “I, Scott Mims, give this woman away. With her birth parents, Josef and Portia Wylde, in spirit.”

His words were a balm to my soul as he acknowledged not only his role in my life but also that of my birth parents.

My heart swelled with love for him, and I glanced up at my father, silently thanking him for being the constant anchor in the whirlwind that was my life. The lump in my throat threatened to choke me, and I bit the inside of my cheek, willing the tears not to fall.

With one last tender kiss on my forehead, Dad released me and took his place next to Mom. Persephone stood beside them, clutching a tissue as she battled her own tears.

“Thank you,” Dominic said, nodding in respect. He turned to Ty and me, his expression softening. “Are you both ready to begin?”

“We are,” we replied in unison, our gazes locked on each other.

Dominic began the ceremony, addressing the gathered crowd. “We are here today to witness the union of Tyson and Liza. Fate brought them together, and love has united them as mates. Their bond is one of loyalty, honor, and devotion—the foundation of our pack’s strength.”

As Dominic continued to speak, Ty reached out and took my hands, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me. His thumbs traced lazy circles along the back of my hands.

Dominic continued. “The bond between mates is one of the most sacred connections in our world. Today, we celebrate your union and acknowledge the love and loyalty that will guide your lives together. Are you prepared to share your vows?”

We nodded in unison, and Ty cleared his throat. “I’d like to go first,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

He turned to me, his eyes blazing with the emotions his voice had held, his gaze never leaving mine.

“Liza, the first time I saw you across the room at the country club, I knew you were destined to be my mate and queen. Every day, you continue to blow me away with your tenacity and strength, not to mention your ability to make me smile with your presence alone. I promise to stand by your side, to guide and support you through every challenge we face. You are my heart, my soul, and my reason for being. My life is yours, now and forever. I will stand by your side through all that comes our way. I love you.”

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes and spilled down my cheeks. To hell with the makeup.

I took a deep breath and squeezed Ty’s hands. “Ty, my love, from the moment we met, I knew you were different from anyone else I’d ever encountered. You’ve proven time

and time again that you will always be there for me, enjoying the good as well as supporting me through the bad times. Together, we will face whatever challenges come our way, bound by our love and devotion. I vow to cherish you, support you, and honor you as my mate and king.”

My voice wavered slightly, but I pushed through, pouring all my emotions into my words. “You are my rock, my safe harbor, and I promise I will always trust in your strength and lean on your wisdom. I promise to be everything for you that you are for me. I vow to love you with all that I am.”

A collective snuffle rippled through the crowd.

Dominic stepped forward, the ceremonial sash in his hands. “As you embark on this journey together, may the moon shine down upon your path.”

He handed Ty one end of the sash, then walked around us, wrapping it around our waists. When he reached the front, he took the end from Ty and brought the ends together in his large hands. “This sash is a symbol of your life, your love, and the eternal connection that the two of you have found together.”

Dominic tied the ends. “It is knotted beneath the full moon, symbolizing your commitment to each other and to the pack. When the night is dark and challenges arise, like the moon, your love will be a source of constant light. You will be a guiding beacon of hope and support to the pack, casting away shadows of doubt and fear. And with each passing lunar cycle, your bond will deepen.”

Dominic’s clear voice reverberated through the air. “The ties of this vow aren’t formed by this sash, or even by the knots connecting it. They are formed, instead, by your pledge, your souls, and your two hearts, now bound together as one.”

Ty wrapped his arms around me, holding me close and giving me a long, languid kiss as Dominic declared, “Keller pack, I have the honor of introducing you to your new king and queen, Alpha Tyson and Queen Liza.”

They cheered as we reveled in the moment. Our family moved forward to congratulate us first, my mom hugging me

so hard I couldn't take in any air. "I'm so happy for you, honey. You're absolutely glowing."

My brothers, who'd made a special trip back into town for the ceremony, gave me high fives and bowed playfully.

Across the yard, the live band began to play as Dominic grabbed the microphone one last time. "We'd like to invite everyone to the reception just down the hill as we celebrate Ty and Liza's union."

We formed a line, Dominic and Persephone—the retiring alpha and his mate—then Ty and me, the new alpha king and queen, giving pack members an opportunity to share their congratulations. Persephone stood next to me, running a discreet commentary on names and tidbits about the pack members. I stifled a grin. It seemed lessons in being the mate to the alpha were continuing despite it being my wedding day.

The reception was in full swing, and Sabrina's tear-streaked face glistened under the soft glow of the lanterns. She clutched my hands tightly, her voice cracking as she spoke. "I can't believe my best friend is a queen now!" Her emotions were contagious. My own eyes welled up with tears as we embraced.

"All right, ladies, don't start crying or else you'll have me joining in." Bryce approached us with Ty by his side. He pretended to toss his non-existent long hair over his shoulder and batted his eyes. "You know how emotional I get at weddings."

Sabrina rolled her eyes and sniffled, trying to regain her composure. "Well, some people fear commitment and just like to play games," she grumbled. "I wouldn't call those people *emotional*, just simply assholes."

Bryce's smile disappeared as he turned his intense stare to Sabrina. "Some men can't help but be assholes when they're dealing with snippy little women who can't make up their minds about what they want." His eyes twinkled with mischief as I took a step back, not wanting to get caught in the crossfires of whatever the hell was going on between these two.

As Sabrina huffed and crossed her arms, Ty came up behind me and leaned in close, his warm breath tickling my ear. “My queen, may I have this dance?” His deep voice resonated within me, sending shivers down my spine.

“Of course, my king.” The warmth of his strong hand enveloping mine made my stomach flip. We glided across the dance floor, our bodies swaying to the rhythm of the music. The world faded around us, until it was just me and Ty, and his warm embrace.

Slowly, I became aware of other couples joining us on the dance floor, including my parents. I watched them as they laughed and moved across the floor. For the first time in a very long time, they seemed carefree, and I hoped it would stay that way. They deserved the world.

Once the song was over, we made our way around to the tables, visiting the various pack members that had been unable to attend the ceremony but had joined us for the reception. Remembering my lessons from Persephone, I took the time to hold eye contact with each person, gracefully greeting them with confidence and a gentle smile.

“Have I mentioned that I’m quite impressed with your ability to handle the pack?” Ty whispered in my ear. “You’ve grown so much since we first met.”

I laughed. “You can thank your mother for that.”

Ty’s eyes softened as a proud smile spread across his face. “Together, we’ll be unstoppable,” he murmured before pulling me closer.

As we finished making our rounds, Ty gently guided me toward the grand staircase leading to our private quarters. The excitement in the air was electric as the pack members watched us ascend, their cheers and well-wishes echoing through the hall.

Upon entering our bedroom, I was greeted by the sight of rose petals scattered across the floor, and a bottle of champagne chilling on the dresser.

Ty pulled me into his arms, his lips brushing against mine in a tender, passionate kiss.

He pulled out his phone and turned on soft jazz music that poured from the Bluetooth speakers around our room. “May I have another dance?” he asked, bowing in front of me.

“I thought you’d never ask.” I giggled as he pulled me flush against his broad chest, then pushed me away and twirled me into a dip. He rested his hand on the small of my back, and I twined my arms around his neck until our movements became one.

As we danced in the silvery glow of the moonlight streaming through the window, I allowed myself to bask in the joy of being loved and cherished by my alpha, my king, my mate.

Ty’s fingers grazed the small of my back as we swayed to the music, his touch causing shivers to race down my spine. I couldn’t resist commenting on the changes I’d seen in him since his father had transferred the power and he’d become alpha.

“You’ve really grown, you know,” I teased.

He chuckled, his warm breath caressing my ear. “It’s one of the perks of taking on the alpha powers.” Mischief glinted in his eyes.

Despite the lingering threat of Castro, I chose to savor the moment with Ty, focusing on our love for each other and our new titles as king and queen of the Keller pack. It was a testament to our strength and resilience. We’d been through so much, yet here we stood. Together.

When the music faded, Ty’s lips found mine again, the intensity of his kiss sending my pulse racing. He led me toward the dresser, where the chilled champagne awaited us. But instead of reaching for the bottle, his hands found the hem of my dress, slowly lifting it to my waist. His eyes never left mine.

“Did I mention,” he whispered against my ear, his voice rich with desire, “that it’s not just my chest and shoulders that

have gotten bigger?”

A growl rumbled deep within me, my inner wolf responding to his suggestive words. Pheromones filled the air around us, adding fuel to the fire that already burned between us.

With a swift motion, Ty lifted me onto the edge of the dresser, scattering rose petals and pushing aside the bottle of champagne. The cool wood pressed against my bare skin in sharp contrast to the heat emanating from our bodies.

Our lips crashed together, passion and need woven into every touch. His hands moved down my body, grasping my hips as he pushed me back onto the smooth, hard surface.

I responded by placing my hands on his bulging chest, kneading his muscles as I moved lower and lower. With my lips still locked on his, I tugged his zipper down.

He groaned into my kiss as my hand slipped into his pants, pulling out his hard cock.

Ty reached between us, and in an instant, my panties were ripped from my body. My wet pussy was exposed to the cool night air. He reached for the champagne with one hand, keeping me pinned between him and the dresser with the other.

His lips left mine and trailed down my neck, his kisses burning my flesh. As I breathed in our combined scents, I arched my neck to give him better access, shuddering with pleasure when he bit down gently, his teeth grazing my skin.

He moved back slightly and popped the bottle, taking a sip before setting it back down and moving his hands up my thighs, pushing the dress up and over my head before it joined the rose petals on the floor.

The cold room was a shock compared to the heat of his hands on my body, but it wasn't the temperature making me shiver.

With one hand, Ty pushed the straps of my bra down and expertly freed the clasp and removed it with the other. He

moved back slightly and reached for the champagne again. “Ready for a bath?”

Before I could respond, I watched in shock as he poured the chilled alcohol down my chest. It streamed down, leaving droplets behind as it pooled on the dresser under my pussy.

Ty grinned and took both breasts in his hands, pulling them to his mouth. He licked and sucked every drop of champagne, lingering on my nipples as he gently bit them. I yelped as pleasure zinged directly from my nipple to my clit.

“I bet you taste even better down there.”

Heat rose to my cheeks. Ty placed his lips on mine, his tongue tangling with mine in a passionate kiss that had my head swimming with desire.

He kissed the corner of my lips, my chin, and my neck, all the way down to my chest. With his hands on my hips, he pulled me forward to the edge of the dresser. He resumed his kisses along my stomach before stopping at my center and nudging my thighs wider.

For a moment, Ty stared at me, my core exposed and bare in front of him. “Beautiful,” he whispered reverently. His hands slid up my body, reaching my shoulders, and he pushed me back until I was leaning back against the dresser mirror. I grasped the back of Ty’s head for stability as he devoured my clit.

He moaned as I arched my back, giving his tongue better access.

Ty swirled it around, exploring every inch of my pussy, licking up every bit of my juices and the champagne until I could no longer stand it.

I needed him inside of me. Now.

“Fuck me, Ty,” I begged. “Please.”

He stood quickly, pulling me off the dresser, and turned me so my back was pressed against his chest. I watched him in the mirror as he kissed me from my ear down my neck until his

lips grazed my mating bite. The sensation of his lips there sent ripples of pleasure through my body.

There was something deeply erotic about standing naked before him while he was still dressed. He grabbed his hard cock from his open pants. “I want you to watch me fuck you, Liza.”

I braced myself against the dresser as I watched Ty, not taking my eyes off his gaze as he stepped back to remove his trousers. Standing behind me, he began laying kisses along the curve of my neck. He grabbed his cock and moved it between my slit, rubbing it across my clit. I moaned loudly at the sensation, my pussy aching from being so empty. His eyes rolled back in his head with ecstasy as he entered me with one quick thrust, filling me completely.

“God!” I screamed. “Your cock is fucking huge.” My mouth hung open in shock.

I saw myself in the mirror, and I’d never felt more beautiful than I did in that moment, totally exposed with Ty towering over me.

I watched in the mirror as he reached around and grabbed my breasts, rolling my nipples between his fingers.

The scene was so erotic that I had to close my eyes, not wanting to orgasm too soon. I needed him to bring me to the brink without losing control.

Ty rubbed his palm against my clit, reaching around to spread my juices over my tight, swollen bud. “I love you,” he whispered into my ear.

“Show me.” I moaned as his fingers teased me, pushing me closer to the edge. His thrusts became quicker, his thumb moving faster.

I looked over my shoulder to see his eyes locked on my tits, his erection somehow growing harder inside me with each breath.

“I’m going to come,” I gasped as he continued to stroke me. My entire body tensed as the first waves of my orgasm washed over me. “Ty!” I cried out again, letting go of the

mirror, reaching over my head to wrap my arms around his neck.

He grabbed my waist, thrusting wildly as he came, his cock almost painful inside me as he released his hot cum deep inside.

Ty and I stood silently for a moment, trying to slow our frantic breathing.

“That was even better than I expected for our first night as official mates,” he finally managed to say as he kissed his bite mark on my neck.

I panted and turned to face him, pulling him into a passionate kiss. “I think your new alpha powers are going to get you in trouble, Ty Keller.”

He grinned and palmed my ass. “This was my plan all along, my queen.”

Chapter 32

Ty

I sat behind the desk in my office, a room that bore the weight of my father's legacy. A week had passed since I'd taken over as alpha, but my mind still hadn't completely accepted that it was mine now and not my father's.

Although my job hadn't changed drastically from what I'd been doing as prince regent, there were notable differences. One of those changes was Nico's resignation.

Nico had come to me the day after the ceremony and turned in his final notice, requesting his leave as the alpha's informant. With everything that transpired with Castro and the leaked information about the Wylde pack, guilt gnawed at him. He decided his duty was over. I couldn't say I was surprised; I knew the day would come when he'd step down.

As if reading my mind, Nico walked into the room, stealthy as ever. He cleared his throat. "Sorry to bother you, sir. I just wanted to drop this off." He slid a piece of paper across my desk.

I raised an eyebrow. "What's this?"

"It's a list of men I would have trusted to protect Dominic had I fallen in duty," he explained.

I nodded. It didn't surprise me that Nico had taken the time to cultivate such a list, and I was grateful for it. It would save me some time.

"Thank you, Nico," I said sincerely. "For this, and for your years of dedicated service." I officially relieved him of his

duty, watching as he disappeared from my office like a shadow melting into darkness.

I was sad to see the stealthy bastard go but excited at the prospect of finding my own informant—one who would learn and grow with me now that a new generation had taken over the Keller pack.

I examined Nico's list, impressed at the meticulous organization of it. He had ranked the men in order of his recommendation. Picking up the phone, I dialed the first name: Arthur Cummings.

"Arthur Cummings speaking," came a deep voice on the other end of the line.

"Arthur, this is Tyson Keller, the new alpha of our pack. I'm calling because I have a proposition for you." I kept my tone steady and authoritative.

"Go on, sir," he replied, curiosity evident in his voice.

"I'm looking to fill the position of alpha's informant, and you came highly recommended. Are you interested in coming in for an interview?"

"I'd be honored, Alpha Keller," Arthur responded, his enthusiasm clear in his voice. "When would you like to schedule the interview?"

"Let's set it up for next week. I'll have my assistant contact you with the details."

"Thank you, sir. I look forward to meeting you in person."

"Likewise, Arthur. Goodbye." Hanging up, I made a few more calls, scheduling interviews with the top three candidates on Nico's list. An alpha needed a trustworthy informant. Without one, things could go south quickly, and I wasn't willing to put our pack at risk any more than necessary.

With the interviews arranged, I turned my attention to my calendar. It was crammed with appointments and obligations, a constant reminder that I was now responsible for the welfare of the pack.

The phone rang again, interrupting my thoughts, and I sighed as I picked it up. I never knew my father had spent so much time talking to people when he held this position.

“Tyson Keller speaking.”

“Keller!” Castro’s venomous voice immediately put me on edge.

I clenched my jaw. I’d expected this confrontation ever since his face had been plastered all over the news. He was enemy number one to the world.

“Castro,” I acknowledged coldly. “What do you want?”

“Your family forced Liza into submission, and I won’t stand for it.” He spat out the words, his rage barely contained. “You’re all snakes, and I’ll make you pay for corrupting her.”

“Castro, I suggest you stop obsessing over my mate. Liza is no longer an unclaimed omega. She’s mine in every way possible.” My voice was ice. “If you even think about coming near her again, I won’t hesitate to kill you.”

“Enjoy your temporary safety, Keller,” he snarled. “Your pack will pay for everything they’ve done. You might feel safe now, but I’m only getting started. It’s unfortunate that I now have to take Liza down with you.”

The line went dead, and I slammed the phone back into its cradle, fury coursing through me and setting my blood on fire.

The hunt for Castro had only just begun, and I hoped the fucker would be found soon. I couldn’t wait to rip him limb from limb.

I was still fuming when my phone rang again, the shrill sound piercing through my thoughts. Expecting Castro’s voice once more, I barked into the mic, “What do you want now?”

“Ty, it’s Nico,” he said calmly, unfazed by my outburst. “Sorry to bother you again, but this just came to my attention.”

I sighed, trying to shake off my anger. “What is it?”

“My associate just uncovered information you’ll want to know. He found out who’s been helping Castro from within

our pack,” Nico said, his tone grave.

Adrenaline surged through me.

“Who?” I demanded.

Nico shared the name with me and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

No fucking way.

Ending the call, I grabbed my jacket and stormed out of the office, seething with a fresh wave of rage. As I moved to my car, I sent a message to my team, directing them to meet me at the address I’d text them.

I drove like a bat out of hell, gripping the steering wheel so hard I was surprised it didn’t shatter. I couldn’t believe it. I never would have even expected it, and I was pissed at myself for not seeing it sooner. It all made sense, though. The photos, the packages, and how Castro seemed to be one step ahead of us every fucking time.

I was livid.

The traitor had betrayed us all, helping Castro stay one step ahead while endangering our pack. Unforgivable.

As I pulled up to the house, several police cars were parked outside, their lights flickering ominously as several officers rolled yellow crime-scene tape around the house. An officer jogged over to my vehicle, stopping by the driver’s side window.

I rolled the window down. “What’s going on here?”

“Sir, the premises are off-limits,” he informed me, his face somber. “We found someone dead inside.”

My blood ran cold at the news. Just then, my phone buzzed with a new text message.

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The Wolf Prince 2

The Royals Of Presley Acres: Book 2

Roxie Ray

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