



Switched

A TWIN SWAP
SWEET OMEGAVERSE ROMANCE

ROMY LOCKHART

Switched

**A Twin Swap Sweet Omegaverse
Romance**

Romy Lockhart

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- Author's Note

Foreword

Switched is the first book in a sweet omegaverse duology, following the lives of a set of identical twins (Sapphire & Scarlett) who trade places for a week.

This story is slow burn with eventual steam. It's set in the same universe as my Sweet Omegaverse series and is a reverse harem romance, however, these books are strictly all about the female main character so the men (all Alphas) only have intimate relationships with the female, and brotherly relationships with each other.

These books are also lighter-hearted, so while there may be some angst and mildly threatening moments, the storylines are less intense. These relationship dynamics and lighter storylines apply to both books, and to any additional books that may release in this series in the future.

Chapter One

Sapphire

Swallowing down a double dose of suppressants, I slip the bottle back into my purse quickly. I really shouldn't be carrying them around in the prescription container, but I haven't found time to switch them into an aspirin bottle and the labelled prescription container is safer in my purse than it would be in my bathroom cabinet, where my spare supply is already hidden away.

Paranoia hits the second I let the bottle drop out of my fingers. I should at least stash it inside the little zip-pocket to keep it safer. Sighing, I root through the seemingly bottomless purse. Ironically enough, I can't find my pills now.

Shaking my head, I zip the purse shut.

If I can't find it, no one else will find it.

Hah! That's a Scarlett-ism if I ever heard one.

My reckless twin sister would take that kind of chance a million times over and never stop for a second to worry about the consequences.

I know it'll bug me until I make sure my secret is as safe as possible. Which means I'm going into a drug store on the way to work to buy aspirin so I can ditch the prescription bottle into a public trash can and keep myself safe from being outed as an Omega at work, or by my on-again, off-again Beta boyfriend, Ben.

We're on-again, for the record, and I'm not sure how I feel about that yet.

Breaking up every time he needs to go on a two or three-month long business trip is starting to make our relationship feel like a rollercoaster ride in the worst possible way. It's like he pauses that ride while we're upside down and leaves me there feeling lightheaded and clinging on for dear life until he comes back and starts everything back up again.

My heart can't take much more of it, but I'm not sure I'm ready to stop the ride myself to get off and walk away. We've been together off and on for a few years now.

There's a connection between us that feels too strong to deny.

"Hey," he calls out.

I turn to see him leaning in the bedroom doorway wearing nothing more than a pair of boxer shorts and a lazy smile. He has seriously sexy come-to-bed eyes that he uses to get his own way, and right now his gaze is telling me he doesn't care that I'm supposed to be at work.

“Where’s my kiss goodbye?” he asks, not moving a muscle from where he’s standing.

Alpha-leaning Betas are the demanding type.

I didn’t always think that was hot, believe me, but he makes me feel like it’s something I need.

Sometimes it’s sexy, and sometimes it’s annoying. This morning, I’m leaning more toward the latter.

He expects me to come back to him. He *always* expects me to do the legwork.

Because in his mind, he’s the Alpha, and I’m his Beta.

If only he knew.

Despite feeling a strong connection between us, and not being sure about stopping this ride, I’ve never been tempted to reveal my big secret, because no matter how close we seem to get, he always wants to pause our relationship when he’s gone.

He has no damn idea what he’s missing out on.

All over that one little maddening condition that he feels he has to make, every time he goes out of town, because he’s so damn Alpha he can’t handle feeling tied down.

I push a smile to the surface as I walk back toward my newly returned boyfriend, knowing the extra few minutes he’s pushing me for are all it’ll take to make me late for work.

Feeding his ego isn’t my favorite task, but part of me kind of likes it when he plays Alpha.

I stop in front of him, and he wraps an arm around me.

“Call in sick,” he tells me, as his searing gaze fixes on mine.

He’s already starting to smile, like he knows I’ll do what he’s asking, because I always do what he asks, even if he can’t ever seem to return that favor.

I can’t keep doing this, and I know it.

If I don’t change, my situation won’t change.

I shake off the urge to comply. “I can’t.”

He frowns lightly and lets out a soft sigh. “I hardly ever see you, Saffy.”

Don’t feel bad, just stick to your guns.

“Sorry. You know I could have put in vacation days if you’d asked.”

I don’t know how many times I’ve reminded him of that option.

He never asks me to take a vacation to spend time with him.

His requests are always last minute.

“It’s fine,” he mumbles, letting me go. “You’d better get to work. Don’t let me hold you up.”

He moves back into the bedroom, slapping the door closed on me.

God, I hate it when he does that.

I brush off the guilt before it can sink in too deep.

We don’t spend enough time together.

I promise myself I’ll make it up to him tonight.

Right now, I need to haul my ass to work before it gets any later.

Chapter Two

Sapphire

It's ten after nine when I make it to my office, only slightly out of breath and trying to tell myself it's all good. Divina never asks for meetings before ten a.m. There's no way I've missed something important. I sling my jacket and purse on top of the filing cabinet that's next to my desk, and I sink into my seat just as Julie walks in with a cup of coffee.

“Oh, there you are!” she exclaims, her eyes widening. “You'd better get your ass to the kitchen. Divina wants to speak to you.”

“She does?” I ask.

“Like seriously, Saph. She's got that ready to burst look on her face. If you don't go now, she might actually explode, and I for one don't want to be cleaning her guts off the walls.”

I snort as I get to my feet. Jules definitely has a way with words.

Smoothing my clothes down, I head for the door.

My hand shakes as I open it.

Divina Malone is the woman I looked up to as a journalism student, and when I met her, I realized she's as formidable in person as she always seemed on TV.

She knows bullshit when she hears it.

That's virtually her personal catchphrase.

Nothing gets past her, and I can't help worrying that she's not happy about my timekeeping lately.

Ben didn't help me this morning, but I haven't been too great at getting here before nine this last year or so. I've had to keep setting my alarm earlier and earlier to make it in on time.

The staff kitchen is at the end of the hall, past the door to her office, which is open and empty.

I can hear her talking in the kitchen with one of the other column writers.

Slowing down, I identify the other voice as belonging to Patrick Hardin, my only real competition when it comes to the features editor job that's going to be up for grabs soon.

He's a lot more forward than I am, so he's probably going to get it.

I open the door and step into the kitchen.

Patrick looks up and nods at me, his gaze not meeting mine. I nod back out of courtesy.

We're not the best of friends, but we're not exactly enemies. That's likely because he doesn't see me as a threat. No one ever does.

Divina's head turns toward me. She smiles brightly and sets her mug down by the side of the sink.

“Sapphire Faris, just the woman I was looking for. Come with me.”

She moves away from the sink and leads me out of the room.

Thankfully, she's a professional.

I don't think I could have handled being ripped apart for my timekeeping in front of Patrick.

There are only so many pitying looks a girl can take.

I don't want to go back to Crystal Lake and have to admit to my parents that I failed at everything I came to Cressidan City to achieve. Mom is so proud of me for figuring out what I wanted and deciding on an actual career. Dad is, too, though he worries about both of his daughters being out in the world on our own.

I follow Divina into her office. The aesthetic is a weird mix of scary, and comforting. Her chair has a medieval look to it, with a high oak-colored back and rich purple velvet cushioning. The desk is big and covered in files and folders, with her laptop off to one side. The seat I sit on is plush and relaxing, but I'm too nervous to take the usual comfort from it.

“Finally!” Divina says as she sits down opposite me.

I smile back at her, trying to keep my lips steady.

I can feel a tremor under the surface.

She smiles back. “Okay. Now, you might be aware that Edward’s leaving us in a month ...”

I nod, feeling my nerves double up. Edward’s the current features editor. Everyone heard about it when he handed in his notice last month.

“Well, I looked at your record, and Patrick’s.”

Finally, my nerves slip away. She’s clearly about to tell me Patrick has the job.

She knows us well enough to know we’ll both apply for it. She must want to give me the news before I can get my hopes up. Considering I knew he’d get it, those hopes were never anywhere close to up.

“Okay,” I say, when she doesn’t say anything else.

“You’re my choice, Saph. If I could pick anyone on my team for this, it would be you.”

I blink at her, not believing it. “I ... Uh ...”

“There’s just one problem,” she says, giving me a wry smile. “That aversion you have to going on location?”

I feel the color draining from my face.

She knows. Oh, God. She knows.

“Well, you have three days to get over it, because I need you to get on a private plane with Chaos Burning and deliver the interview of your career. This is the opportunity of a lifetime, and if you show me you can do it, you’ve got the promotion.”

I stare at her, sure I must have misheard what she just said to me.

The room feels like it's spinning.

“You want me to *fly* somewhere?” I ask.

She nods slowly. “We’re partnered with Cressidan Travel now, Saph. All of our writers are going to be expected to go out as and when required, as part of that partnership. The features editor job and my own will be the only two positions here that *won't* require regular travel. Do you get what I’m saying?”

I can't believe this. My boss knows I'm terrified of flying.

She knows, and she's still giving me a chance to get the job I've been wishing for.

All I have to do is get over that fear for one flight. Just *one single flight*.

If I don't do it, I'm completely screwed.

My old comfortable job is no longer going to exist.

I swallow the lump that's rising in my throat.

She's asking me to face my worst nightmare.

“I get it,” I tell her, sounding like I mean every word.

If she needs me to do this, and I'll have my dream job afterwards with no expectation of further travel, I'm going to have to find a way to do it.

She looks at me and nods. “Okay. I realize you might need some time to prepare. So, why don't you tie up any loose ends

this morning, and take the next few days off work to get ready?”

“Sure,” I tell her. “Where will I be going?”

“You’ll be travelling to a beach resort in Golden Palms on Saturday afternoon. It’s only a two-hour flight. The band are willing to give you some time at the resort as well as during the flight to ask them questions, so you can do the interview where you see fit. I’ll email you all the details. You’ll have a whole week to spend time with them and relax at their resort, before you’ll be expected back.”

“Does it matter how I get back?” I ask, hoping a rental car might be acceptable.

She gives me a wry smile. “You’ll be flown back. Anything less would make your appointment questionable to the higher ups.”

I nod. “Okay.”

She nods back. “You can go. If you change your mind, let me know tomorrow at the latest.”

“I won’t change my mind,” I tell her, before I get up and leave her office.

My legs feel shaky as I head back to my desk.

I’m landing my dream promotion as long as I can make myself get on a plane. *Twice.*

My stomach churns at the thought of it.

For as long as I can remember I’ve been afraid of flying.

Maybe it's an irrational fear, but the phobia is very real.

When my parents tried to help me get over it as a kid, I freaked the hell out and started yelling about bombs in the overhead luggage until we were kicked off our flight and questioned for hours by airport security.

I'm pretty sure we only got released after that because my father's lawyers threatened to sue the airline for detaining an overly imaginative child over some nonsense she spouted.

Julie looks up from scrolling on her phone when I step back into the office.

She double-takes and lowers her cell.

"Are you okay, Saph? You look like you just saw a ghost."

I laugh. "I wish. A ghost, I could handle."

"That bad is it?" she gives me a sympathetic smile. "I can help if you need to stay late ..."

"Oh, it's nothing like that. She offered me the job. I just have to do something first."

She blinks at me. "She offered you the ... That's awesome!"

I nod, sitting down, feeling dazed. "It's awesome. For sure."

"I'm so glad it's you, and not you-know-who," she adds, quietly, rolling her chair over to the side of mine, leaving her phone resting face up in her lap.

I force out a smile. She frowns at me in concern, so I quit trying to act happy.

Glancing down, my gaze is drawn to her phone.

What the hell?

That can't be right. I must be seeing things.

There's an image on her screen of a guy who looks a whole lot like my boyfriend.

He doesn't just have the same smile, or the same eyes.

It's literally the same guy.

It's Ben.

"What is that?" I ask Jules.

She looks down and shrugs. "Oh, nothing. I just like to check my matches in the mornings. Nothing like dick pics and lewd innuendo in your inbox to make the day a little brighter."

I blink at her and look back down at the logo on the top corner of the screen.

Oh my God. I recognize it from the ads we run in the personals.

"That's a dating site?" I ask, shock rolling over me.

"It's Every Beta," she confirms, frowning at me and then passing me the phone.

I take it from her with a shaky hand.

The guy she matched with is Ben Blackmore, the same guy I've been in an on-off relationship with practically ever since I started working for the magazine.

His profile states that he's *single and ready to meet his perfect mate.*

My whole body feels like it's trembling as I look at him, the man I've been unable to break away from because I thought we had some deep connection that was holding us together despite our circumstances. He's smirking in the picture, his gaze searing, exactly like it does when he's ordering me into bed.

I scroll down and see the final two words on his profile.

Omegas preferred.

"Saph, what is it? What's wrong?" Jules asks, touching my arm.

I shake my head, my stomach churning madly. I shove the phone back into her hands and grab the trash can from under my desk, dry heaving over it. My only saving grace is apparently that I didn't have time for breakfast. I close my eyes and tell myself I need to stop this. *Now.*

"Oh, God, are you pregnant?" Jules sounds shocked as she blurts out the question.

Why wouldn't she be stunned?

She has no idea I was dating someone. Partly because I was too afraid to label our relationship out loud, and partly because I knew, deep down, my closest workmate would have told me the guy was no good for me by the second time he pressed pause on us.

I shake my head in answer to her question, but I heave a little more after that, still feeling queasy even though my stomach's totally empty.

“Are you getting sick? You should go home and curl up in bed.”

She rubs my back lightly, and that simple touch helps so much.

My shakes slow to a stop, and I can take a breath without feeling the need to double over.

“Thanks,” I murmur. “Maybe I should do that.”

The door opens as I’m putting the trash can back down and straightening back up in my seat.

Patrick raises an eyebrow at me. “Everything okay in here? I heard ... something.”

Nothing’s okay right now, but I can’t tell *him* that.

That’s okay, because my friend and officemate is in full Momma-Bear mode, and I know she’s going to answer for me before she even opens her mouth.

“Everything’s fine, asshole.” Jules scowls at him. “Why don’t you mind your own bees and queues?”

My lips twitch lightly at her mixed metaphor. It’s a weak expression, but I’m glad I can find something to smile about.

She looks at me and shakes her head. “Can you believe this guy?”

“Hey!” Patrick protests, holding his hands up. “I was only asking out of concern.”

“Sure you were,” Jules mutters. “As if we don’t know what you really barged in here for.”

He looks thoroughly insulted, but he drops his too-curious eyes when I meet his gaze.

She's not wrong. He knows Divina just pulled me into her office.

It would be weird if he wasn't wondering why puking sounds were coming from mine the second I got back from speaking to our boss. Still, he's a rival, and I don't owe him answers, especially while I'm freaking out over how I'm going to manage to get through the impossible task Divina just set me.

"I'm leaving," Patrick assures us, as he puts his hands down and turns on his heel.

He bumps awkwardly into the door, making Jules snort, and then he's gone, and we're alone again.

"Go home," Jules tells me. "Get some rest."

I nod. Divina told me to finish up anything I needed to and leave.

Lucky for me, I'm up to date with everything.

Well, almost.

"Can you proof the article I saved to the drive yesterday afternoon?" I ask Jules. "That's all I need to do today. Divina's given me a couple days off because I'll be working all weekend."

"No problem," Jules tells me, before she wheels her chair back over to her desk. "I'm on it."

I get to my feet and gather up my jacket and purse.

“If anyone needs me ...” I start.

“If anyone needs you, they can send an email, and you can get back to them when you’re on the clock,” she reminds me. “You’ve earned a break. Clearly, Divina knows that. Take it.”

I nod slowly, feeling weird about it.

Working from home isn’t unusual, but this?

Heading back to my apartment before ten a.m. because my boss just dangled my dream job in front of me before adding a terrifying catch, well that’s not something that happens every day.

Add in just finding out that my boyfriend has been messing me around, and the thought of leaving the office only becomes fraught with complications.

Jules gives me a sympathetic glance. “I don’t know exactly what’s going on, Saph, but if Divina’s asking you to do something that doesn’t sit right with you, don’t do it just to get the job. It’s not worth it if it if you feel this bad.”

I smile at her. “I think I’m coming down with something. I’ll be fine.”

She nods slowly. “Well, rest up, and don’t come back here until you’re bug free. I don’t want to get sick while I’m working up the courage to meet one of the men behind the dick pics.”

“Oh my God, Jules. Do not meet one of those guys. Only creeps send unsolicited dick pics.”

She smiles. “Who says they were unsolicited?”

Laughing, I shake my head at her. “I really hope that’s joke.”

“Maybe it is, maybe it’s not.”

I make my way to the door, pausing when guilt reminds me Ben was one of her matches.

“Just don’t meet Ben. That creep you matched with.”

Explaining that comment would sting, but I’d rather have to do that than risk my friend getting hurt.

She blinks at me, and nods. “Oh, yeah, *that* guy. He was kind of hot, don’t get me wrong, but I already deleted that connection while Patrick was fumbling around looking for the door handle. Everyone knows *Omegas preferred* is code for Asshole, with a capital A.”

She’s not wrong about that. I should have known what he was.

“Alpha-leaning Betas are the worst,” she mutters, sounding like she has personal experience.

Maybe when I’m back, we can swap war stories.

Right now, I need to figure out the best way to get that Alpha-leaning Asshole out of my apartment.

“Yeah,” I agree, as I open the door to leave. “I’ll see you later, Jules.”

Chapter Three

Sapphire

Once I get out of the building and take in some fresh air, everything hits me so much harder.

The thought of going home to confront Ben makes my stomach start to churn all over again.

Concentrating on my breathing to get through it without doubling over on the sidewalk, I slow to a stop outside of a storefront, staring past the pretty display while I try to pull myself together.

Suppressants might prevent my perfume from coming out, but they don't stop my emotions from overwhelming me when I'm upset. I've always been over-sensitive, which is one of the worst things about being an Omega, if you ask me.

Struggling to avoid bursting into tears in a public place shouldn't be something anyone has to navigate regularly. It sucks, and I'm sick to death of feeling like I'm weaker than everyone else.

You are, though.

Even Jules knew better than to respond to matching with Ben on that dating app.

Where was that same self-preservation instinct when the Alpha-leaning bastard gave you that searing stare of his on the day you met?

I can't answer that question. All I saw that day was an attractive guy who seemed to like me, despite the fact that I was barely able to look him in the eye while he flirted and bought me a drink.

Going back to the apartment doesn't feel like a smart idea right now.

I know the second I see his face I'll have a hard time remembering why I'm angry with him.

And that is so messed up. I can't forgive him for this. *I won't.*

I take in a deeper breath and focus on my reflection in the glass of the storefront.

My heart sinks at how lost and lonely I look.

How could I have been so stupid?

I should have known he was playing me. I should have seen it the first time he said we should break things off when he had to leave for a two-month work assignment. Why else would a guy want to do that other than to be free to screw around with other women? What would make him stop if he was so damn used to doing what he wanted whenever we were on a break?

Nothing. That's the answer, and it probably always has been.

I don't have it in me to storm into my apartment and yell at him to get out.

We're over, but I need to find a way to push him without an in-person confrontation.

I blink back tears and look back out onto the street.

It takes a second, but I know what to do.

All I need is a place where I can sit for a little while, until I'm sure he's not going to be waiting for me at home, ready to convince me I need him regardless of how shitty his behavior is.

I head to the nearest coffee shop.

I wait in line, get my usual order, and find a solo seat at the front of the shop where I can watch the world go by as I end the only adult relationship I've ever been in over text message.

Typing out a message, I stop before I hit send.

It's not guilt that stops me from sending the text.

I don't feel guilty. He's the one who's been doing something wrong. He doesn't deserve a chance to explain his actions in person. I don't owe him that. I don't owe him anything.

It's a flare of anger that gives me a more satisfying idea than sending a text message.

He can't pretend he's not on a dating app if I create an account and message him through it.

I download Every Beta and sign up for a free trial.

I put in my details and check to say I'm a Beta, and then I simply state on my profile that I don't want to be matched with anyone named Ben.

Despite that one damning statement, and despite not adding any more details or preferences, he's one of the first matches they send me.

I ignore that and send him a direct message, telling him to get the hell out of my apartment.

Sending that message makes me feel a little less weak.

It makes me feel like I'm in control.

A few sips of coffee later, and I'm ready to leave the coffee shop.

When my phone vibrates, and his number flashes across the screen, I pick up and answer, "Get out of my apartment. Now."

I hear a frustrated intake of breath right as I hang up, but I don't give him enough time to use his pet name for me, never mind anything else. I won't let him try to cajole, persuade or gaslight me.

We're done, and that's on him.

On the walk home, I prepare mentally for the possibility that he hasn't left.

I slow down a little once I'm close, taking a few moments to steel myself.

All I need to do is tell him to get out.

I don't need to explain anything. I don't need to say anything else. I don't have to listen to anything he has to say. If he won't leave, I can threaten him with the police.

I can do this. He'll leave.

When I'm sure my resolve has no cracks in it, I enter the building.

I storm up the stairs to the fourth floor, anger rising as I climb, until I'm fully ready to unleash hell on the asshole who hurt me. I'm so ready to tear a strip out of him that I can't believe it when I see he's not inside. His jacket and shoes are gone from the doorway, and the bedroom is empty, the bed unmade.

I'm so mad I can't think straight. I slap the apartment door shut with a bang, only realizing my fingers are stinging after the sharpness of the sound makes me wince.

Shuddering, I reach out and deadbolt the door.

Every last sliver of rage that was burning through my body seconds ago drains right out of me.

I might have been pissed for a moment that I wouldn't get to confront that asshole, but it's better that he isn't here.

I wanted him gone, and he's gone. Mission accomplished.

I dump my purse and jacket on the kitchen table, and I let my shoulders sag.

I feel like shit. My head hurts, and my heart aches, and I'm so deflated that I can barely stand.

Emotional burn out, I guess. Haven't gone through that in a while.

I've been up and down a lot, but there was always hope of another upswing before.

Now? I feel like I've hit rock bottom, only there is no more up.

Everything's on one level now. All bad. All the time.

I dig my cell phone out of my purse and call a locksmith.

Ben has a key, and I point-blank refuse to give him a chance to get back in here whenever he wants.

Especially when I might be ...

When I might have to ...

God, I can't even think about what I'm supposed to be doing on Saturday without feeling queasy.

The locksmith answers his phone and I agree to pay the extra fee to have him come out straight away to change the lock, then I rattle out my address and hang up with a sigh.

One thing at a time.

I just broke up with my boyfriend. I can't think about facing my worst fear head-on right now.

It's too much all at once. I've got a couple days to get over Ben's betrayal.

I need to forget about the other thing.

Cursing under my breath, I wipe a tear away before it can roll down my cheek.

Maybe Dad was right. Maybe it is too tough for an Omega to be out in the world on her own.

My phone starts to ring in my hand, and I jump, free hand going to my chest as I sigh out a breath when I realize it's only my twin sister, Scarlett.

I answer the phone with one pleading question.

“Please tell me you’ve never matched with a guy called Ben on Every Beta?”

She snorts in reply. “Ben? What kind of shithead name is that? Is it short for Benjaline? No, I’ve never matched with anyone on that stupid site. You know I don’t use dating apps. Why are you asking? And why did you rage out a minute ago? Is it because of that asshole Benjaline?”

“You felt that?” I ask, because it’s been a long time since we had one of those weird twin Omega moments, where we can feel each other’s emotions no matter how far apart we are.

It usually only happens when the emotions involved are extreme.

“Of course I did. My twin sister is in pain. How could I not feel it?”

“Oh, Scar. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too, Saph. It’s been a long time.”

It has, but that's because she lives in Silver Valley, and there's a whole Beta exclusive town between there and here. Even if we both lived in the city, I know we wouldn't see each other that much. She's always out doing new things, while I'm always home watching old movies or catching up on work.

"Things got busy for a while," I tell her, wishing I'd told her about Ben while it was happening.

We haven't spoken too often in the last few years, but that's not why I avoided telling her about him. I know she would have told me to ditch him the first time he went away for work. That was when the first red flag was raised, and I was so intent on ignoring it that I made sure I didn't tell anyone else who would spot it and point it out.

Maybe if I hadn't been stuck in that ghost of a relationship, I would have found some time to spend with my twin, who's the one other person in my life who knows exactly how it feels to be an Omega out in the big, wide world without a safety net.

I didn't realize how much I'd missed my sister.

I wish I'd never met Ben.

"Ugh, I know, right? It's been a year since I was even in the city. That's how much time has passed since we met for lunch at that weird pizza joint."

"It's almost been a year and a half, actually," I correct her.

"No shit," she murmurs. "Anyway, my point is, it's time for a visit."

“Okay. Silver Valley, or Cressidan City?” I ask, more than willing to go rent a car and get out of this place just as soon as that locksmith has been and gone.

“It’s been too long since I came to the city. I’ll come to you,” she says. “And I’ll bring the ice-cream.”

Chapter Four

Sapphire

The drive from Silver Valley to Cressidan City is a few hours long, but knowing my sister she'll spend some time packing up her car and rushing back and forth to her room for things she's forgotten before she actually gets out on the road, so I have plenty of time to waste before she arrives.

I spend a couple of hours cleaning, mainly because I want Ben's man-smell out of my sheets and anything he owns tossed into the trash before I can randomly stumble across it later when I might be feeling emotional again.

I have a filled bag when I'm done, ready to go down to the trash, and a basket of laundry ready to go down to the basement with once the locksmith is done with the door.

He finishes up and passes me two keys. "All done."

I take the cash out of my purse and hand it over in return. "Thanks for coming out so fast."

"No worries." He nods, picks up his tool case and leaves.

The new keys work fine, and I feel better knowing Ben has no way to get back into my home.

I deal with the laundry first and get the machines started before I come back up the stairs to grab the trash. The trash bag is full of T-shirts I stole from him to sleep in, cologne, bathroom supplies and spare sets of clothes he kept here for when he slept over. I think I caught everything that might remind me of him. It was a little depressing to realize he never actually bought me anything in the three years we kind of dated, but I guess he planned those so called ‘work trips’ to avoid holidays that might require gift-giving.

“What an asshole,” I mutter, before I toss the bag into the dumpster.

Any guilt I might have felt for throwing away another person’s belongings is completely obliterated by the three years of my life Ben kept me on the hook while he had no intention of ever giving me a real commitment. I might have blinded myself to that, but my biggest sin was hoping for the best.

He did what he did with his eyes wide open.

I hope the next girl he messes around has a big brother with anger management issues.

I go back upstairs and put fresh sheets on the bed.

Then I change out of my work clothes, putting on my comfiest sweatpants, a tank top, and a sporty hoodie with cozy fleece lining. I look like I’m ready for bed, and I could easily

sleep, but this is my favorite comfort night-in outfit. It's not man-friendly and it doesn't need to be.

All I want is to grab ice-cream from the freezer and put on a sweet rom-com movie, something where the hero is actually a great guy who loves the heroine.

Movie boyfriends are the best.

They're almost always way sweeter and more caring than any guy a woman would ever meet in real life. It gives me hope that sweet, caring men exist, out there, somewhere.

I find a personal sized tub of chocolate ice-cream in the freezer, and I let out a relieved sigh.

Scarlett said she'd bring ice-cream, but she might not be here for a while.

This will be enough to perk me up until she gets here.

I pick a spoon out of the silverware drawer and then I head to the living room.

It's a decent sized room with pale blue painted walls, an oak hardwood floor and a mid-blue colored sofa and armchair. The TV is a modest 32" and sits on an oak cabinet that's full of DVDs and it's hooked up to a DVD player.

Ben laughed when he saw my collection.

He asked how old I was.

I told him it's not a crime to love movies so much you need to own copies of them.

He didn't seem convinced.

I'm glad I didn't let his ridicule force me to let them go.

I put on one of my favorites and pick up the remote as I move back to the sofa.

The starting scene music helps me relax as I sit down and open the small tub of ice-cream.

The world melts away as I watch two of my favorite characters stumbling over their feelings for each other, until finally they admit how much they mean to each other, and they fall into one another's arms.

The end credits song plays, and I sigh softly.

A noise makes me turn my head toward the door, but I don't hear it again.

It takes a second to realize the sound I just heard was a knock.

Oh, right! Scarlett was on her way over.

I jump to my feet and leave the living room.

When I answer the door, I find Scarlett standing in the hall in her usual ripped jeans and red leather jacket combo, her bright blue eyes fixed on something going on at the end of the corridor.

We might be identical, but everyone always notices there's something special about Scarlett.

Her eyes are always sparkling, and she's basically always excited about something.

She looks back at me, her eyebrows rising. “Your neighbors just made up after one hell of a fight.”

“I’ve literally never met anyone in this building, so I don’t even know who you’re talking about.”

Blinking, she glances me over and frowns, before she announces, “I think this is going to have to be a make-over montage instead of an ice-cream movie-thon.”

I roll my eyes as I step back to let her in. “No thanks. I’m just exercising my right to be comfortable.”

She walks into the apartment and takes a look around the kitchen as I close the door.

“So, this is the fancy writer’s apartment in the city. Nice.”

“Like you didn’t come out here and help me paint it when I moved in.”

“Oh, yeah. I did, didn’t I? Best sister ever.”

“I thought I won that award back when Mom found out about your tattoo.”

“Right,” she agrees, nodding. “That was an inspired call, telling her it was for a music video.”

“The coverup foundation did the real work.”

“That stuff is incredible,” she admits.

Mom probably would have gotten over it, eventually.

I don’t think it’s a thing she has against body art as much as it’s the thought that one of us did something that created an undeniable way to tell us apart.

Like one tattoo stops us from being identical.

We still look exactly like we always have.

Scarlett just has a snarling red dragon on her right side now.

It's pretty much only ever on show if she wears a bikini.

I guess a top with rips down the side shows it, too.

She puts her jacket down on top of mine and then dumps a bag from a local store beside them.

“Happy hump day, best sister ever,” she says, as she opens the bag and brings out a massive package of salted popcorn, a bottle of vodka, a bottle of cola, and a carton of vanilla ice-cream. She leans back against the counter in front of the microwave. “So, who is this asshole Ben, and where can I find him to cut his dick off?”

I pick my phone up and open the Every Beta app.

It takes seconds to find his profile.

I show her the page, and she raises an eyebrow.

“You met the guy on a dating app?”

“Nope, that's just where he was fishing for other women while we were together.”

She takes the phone out of my hand. “Ugh. What a dog, and not the cute kind. He deserves to be put down.” She looks up. “Wait ... Saph, you have a profile on here ...”

“Yeah, I know. I made it after I found his, so I could dump him through it.”

“Ah.” She nods. “So that’s why your profile states no matches with guys named Ben.”

“Pretty much. I should delete it.” I hold out my hand.

“Hold up,” she says. “You have like fifty-six messages from matches.”

“What?” I ask, not believing it. “I made that profile this morning.”

Scarlett smiles at me. “Well, you do share my good looks. Most of them are probably dick pics, though. Let me check ... Oh, shit. You have a new message from that bitch Ben.”

“What?” I ask.

“I should delete it.”

“No, let me see it,” I insist, needing to know what he said.

I’m not sure why he’d say anything. Not when the reason I kicked him out of my apartment is so obvious.

Some part of me wonders if he regrets what he did. I need to know.

Scarlett frowns at me. “Just remember, the guy’s an asshole.”

She passes me the phone back.

She hasn’t opened the new message.

I click to open it, and all I experience is my own instant regret.

Every word I read only makes me angrier.

I'm sorry you couldn't handle the truth, Saffy. I thought we had something special. I thought you knew you were my number one. I never told you we were exclusive.

“What a dickhead,” Scarlett mutters.

I click on the message, opening the bubble to send a reply.

You're a liar, and I'm glad I'm done with you. Oh, and by the way, I'm an Omega, you fucking idiot.

I hit send and then block him from replying.

“Shit,” I mutter, looking back at the message I just sent.

“What?” Scar asks, looking over my shoulder.

“I didn't mean to do that. I just ...”

I just told my idiot ex that I'm an Omega. I broke the one rule that keeps me safe from predatory men. I can't believe I let that slip out. I feel so stupid.

“Oh, that,” Scarlett says, as if it's nothing. “I wouldn't worry about that. There's no way he'll believe it. Men are all the same, Saph. He knows you as a Beta and he thinks he knows everything. He'll just think you're trying to make him regret his actions. You didn't just out yourself as an Omega.”

She's probably right, if only because he's so full of himself. Ben always thinks he knows better than everyone else. He probably thinks I'm only lying to hurt him because that's what he would do if the tables were turned.

“Trust me,” Scarlett adds.

The relief she just gave me is erased in the heartbeat it took her to add that sentence.

Why did she have to say that?

My sister can be overconfident.

She's been that way since forever, and it feels like she never learns from past mistakes.

It's kind of hard to be reassured when things have a long history of going sideways right after she utters those two little words, "Trust me."

Yeah, sure.

"That's not the reassurance you think it is, Scar."

She laughs. "Oh, come on, Saph. We were kids the last time I asked you to trust me for a bad reason. This is completely different."

"Is it?" I ask, jumping when my phone starts to ring in my hand. I stare down at the screen in horror. "It's him. It's Ben."

Scarlett snatches the phone away from me. "He doesn't deserve to be heard out, okay? Not one more word between the two of you. Cut him off, and he'll crawl back under his rock and stay there. Don't give him a chance to worm his way back in."

"I wasn't ..." I start, pressing my lips together when she raises her eyebrows at me.

"You just need to be tough for a little bit, okay?" she asks, her voice softening.

I nod, knowing I would have picked up his call if he kept trying.

Persistence is hard to ignore. Sometimes it can feel like love.

Scarlett ends the call and blocks Ben's number.

"I'm glad you're here, Scar."

She smiles at me. "Me too. It's been way too long."

"Tell me things are going better with you than they have been here?"

Her smile turns wry. "Well, that kind of depends on what you mean by better."

"Sounds like a long story."

"Well, then it's a good thing we've got plenty of popcorn."

Chapter Five

Sapphire

Once Scarlett breaks out the vodka and snacks, we curl up on my comfy blue sofa with ice-cream float cocktails and a big bag of salted popcorn to keep us company. Scarlett asks to borrow sweats and I give her a set that's almost exactly the same as what I'm already wearing, basically because that's all I have.

“Same old Sapphire,” she says, giving me a wry smile. “I’m guessing you still buy clothes in bulk when you go shopping?”

“I just know what I like.”

“It’s cute,” she says, as she stands up and changes in front of me, kicking off her ankle boots and letting her trendy clothes fall in a pile on the floor as she gets into my comfy sweats.

She pulls the hoodie on and lets out a soft sigh. “So comfy. Now, it feels like a girlie sleepover.”

It does, and I guess that’s what this is. I hadn’t really thought about it, but she has a long drive back to Silver Valley and we’ve just started drinking alcohol. There’s no way she’s

leaving here tonight. It relaxes me knowing I'm not alone after ... everything.

She drops back onto the sofa and picks up her drink.

We're basically wearing the exact same outfit right now, but somehow Scarlett makes the borrowed sweats look like a fashion statement. It's the way she holds herself, I think. She oozes confidence.

My twin sister has always been so bright, so vibrant.

Everything she does is in full living color.

I've always felt a bit like her shadow in comparison.

We might be identical, but I'm missing something that she has in spades.

I can fake confidence, when I pretend to be her, but I never truly feel it.

"So, what's the long story?" I ask, eager to be distracted from my woes.

She leans back, sips at her drink and then sets it down on the arm of the sofa.

Looking around the room slowly, she lets out a sigh.

"Whatever it is ..." I start.

She blows out a breath. "It's embarrassing."

"It is?" I ask, trying to remember the last time my ballsy twin was ever embarrassed.

There were a few minor moments in high school, but she acts so cool and deflects so well that no one besides me ever really notices.

“It’s super embarrassing,” she admits.

Okay, now I’m really curious.

“What happened?”

“Well, okay. I’m out with the girls and we head to this place that’s like the local drinking hole for cops and whatever, because Karma loves a man in uniform and it’s somehow the first time she’s heard about this place.”

“Something embarrassing happened to you in a cop bar?”

“Yeah. I’m not super thrilled because there’s a gig across town we could be at, but whatever. It was Karma’s turn to pick the place. We go in, and I get my usual, and then I see there’s a section with pool tables.”

“Oh my God, Scar. Please tell me you didn’t try to hustle a bunch of cops.”

“Hey, it’s not a crime to pretend to be bad at something you’re actually good at.”

“But it’s not legal to place a bet on a game in a bar.”

“Well, kind of,” she murmurs, picking at the frilled edges of one of the couch cushions.

“What do you mean, kind of?”

She looks up at me. “You’re just not allowed to gamble with cash.”

“O-Kay.”

“I lost a bet to a group of these losery, stick-in-the-mud guys,” she complains, clearly still irritable about it. “So, now I have to ...”

She picks up her drink and mumbles the rest into the glass, so I can’t hear it.

I let out a laugh. “What was the wager of this bet you lost, exactly?”

She puts the drink down. “If I won, they would spend a week cleaning our house.”

I blink at her. “Cleaning your house?”

She shrugs. “We’re busy career women. Who has time to clean?”

“Anyone who doesn’t want to live in a pigsty?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes. “I’d hardly call it a pigsty. Anyway, these guys totally hustled me and now I have to clean their house for the week.”

“Just you? Not you and your friends?”

“I’m the one who made the bet,” she grumbles. “They take nothing to do with it.”

It’s kind of funny. Or it would be, if it didn’t sound like she made this bet with strangers.

“You’re not going to honor it, are you?” I ask.

“I kind of have to. They’re our next-door neighbors.”

“Um, what?”

“Captain Bishop and his team from Silver Valley Fire Department live right next door to us,” she says, not sounding too impressed. “They’re so boring, Saph. They told us off about the barbeque we had set up when we had that backyard party last year.”

“Wait, was that the barbeque that singed Karma’s bangs ...”

“When she used it to light her cigarette, yeah. It was, and maybe they had a point about that one, but some of the other stuff they bug us about is just annoying. Like leaving our trash cans out on the street after they’ve been emptied. And now I have to go spend a week scrubbing their floors and whatever.”

“Whatever?”

“They’ll be around while I’m there. They made sure they scheduled their vacation time around it.”

“That’s kind of weird.”

“One or two of them don’t exactly trust me. They probably think I’m going to buy fish and hide them in their vents or something instead of cleaning.”

“Is that what you were thinking of doing?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. Cleaning is so damn boring, and these guys are so meh, Saph. I thought fire fighters were supposed to be hot.”

“Considering you don’t find a guy hot unless he looks like he spent all night in a mosh pit ...”

“Don’t yuck my yum,” she tells me, before she takes another sip of her drink.

“I wasn’t,” I protest. “I was just ...”

“You were just telling me my neighbors are probably hot and I just can’t see it.”

“Well ... Maybe.”

She laughs. “Maybe you should go clean their house for me.”

“What? No. You’re not roping me into that.”

“Please?” she pleads. “You know I’m allergic to cleaning.”

“You don’t like cleaning. You’re not allergic to it.”

“Same thing.” She sits back and sips at her drink, and when she puts it down empty, she has a sneaky smile on her red-painted lips.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing,” she sings, as she reaches for the vodka.

If there’s a single word that’s more terrifying from my twin’s lips, I don’t know it.

That sing-song “Nothing” always means *something*.

“Top up?” she asks, offering me the bottle.

I take it and add more to my float.

I get the feeling I’m going to need it.

Chapter Six

Sapphire

Somewhere between hooking up the karaoke machine Scar stashed here the last time she visited and raiding the kitchen cupboards for more salted snacks to soak up the litre of vodka we managed to drain between us, Scar's sneaky smile comes out again.

And this time, I'm not letting her get away with a loaded "Nothing" of an answer.

"What is it, seriously?" I ask.

"You remember the mischief we used to get up to when we were younger?"

"You mean the mischief you used to get up to?"

She laughs. "Yeah, sure, okay. I was the naughty one I guess."

Not that it mattered. We always both got into trouble for Scarlett's crazy schemes and pranks.

"But you did enable me, like a lot," she adds.

“Only because I was too dumb to realize it when you were up to something.”

That’s not completely true. Sometimes, I knew. Sometimes, I kind of wanted to be bad.

Being good all the time can get a little boring.

“Or I was offering you something you wanted,” Scarlett says, nodding at me knowingly.

I feel my face flush. “I did *not* have a crush on your tenth-grade boyfriend.”

“He was hardly my boyfriend. I only asked him out because you were into him, and it would give you a chance to live a little when we switched on him.”

It’s not the first time she’s admitted that, and it still makes me feel kind of pathetic.

I was way too shy to have a shot at dating in high school.

When she suggested we ‘switch’ for the night, so she could go see a movie with my quiet friend Sadie, and I could go on a first date with the popular guy, I jumped at the chance. The one time it felt okay to do something wild was while I was pretending to be Scarlett. I knew I could handle the date acting like I was her. He wouldn’t know the difference.

There was a chance Sadie might notice the difference between me and my sister.

Scarlett is a bit louder than me, and sometimes she forgets she’s supposed to be the shy, quiet one when we’re switched.

I doubted it would bother Sadie too much. All she was concerned about was the movie.

That actor with the boundless energy and the bright eyes was in it.

I can't remember his name. I can never remember actor's names.

"I'm just glad he didn't realize we switched," I admit.

Mostly because he killed my crush dead with his behavior, and I was completely over him by the time the date was over, and he was moving in for the kiss.

"I'm just glad you decided you didn't like him," she says. "He was so fucking gross."

I kiss my teeth to keep from trying to defend him.

He was my first experience with an Alpha-leaning Beta.

Before my Omega hormones matured, it was easy to identify that behavior as disgusting.

Too bad they kicked in after high school, and even the suppressants couldn't stop me from being attracted on some basic, primal level to Ben.

Those pills only really prevent my perfume from coming in, making it easier to be around Alphas, which was kind of important if I wanted to live in the city.

I wish I could do something about the hormones.

I really don't want to keep making the same mistakes.

“I get it. I have bad taste in men,” I admit. “So, what else is new?”

She gives me a wry smile as she untangles the karaoke microphone cables. “You don’t have bad taste in men. You’ve had bad experiences, that’s all.”

“Yeah, okay,” I murmur, not quite willing to believe it’s not my fault.

“It’s not like I haven’t dated some losers.”

“Um, what?”

I stare at her.

It’s not the kind of confession she would ever make.

She’s had some crazy relationships, but she’s never once expressed regret.

“My love life has been ... interesting.” She shrugs. “I’m good with that. It’s how I like life to be. It works for me.”

Clearly, it does work for her.

She’s not the one feeling sad and pathetic over a lost relationship that was basically one-sided. I might as well have been dating a cardboard cut-out, or one of those robots built for sex, if they even make those for women.

With the microphone cables untangled, she switches the machine on, and the start screen flashes on the TV.

Scarlett holds a microphone out to me.

“Okay, are we starting with *Roar*, or *I’m Just a Girl*?”

Ugh. The last thing I feel like doing is singing.

“Uh, maybe we start with more vodka?”

“I’m not here to let you wallow, Saph. Sing. It’ll make you feel better.”

She thrusts the mic into my hand, and my fingers close around it automatically.

“This isn’t even your kind of music,” I protest, knowing full well that she doesn’t care.

Karaoke is a form of therapy for Scarlett. It doesn’t matter what the song is, she just needs to sing something upbeat to blast away whatever she feels bad about. I know that, and I know she’s just trying to help me do the same.

“Well, they don’t have any Chaos Burning songs on this thing,” she says, coincidentally reminding me that I’m not just getting over a break-up.

I’ve also basically been given an ultimatum at work.

If I want to land my dream job, I need to get on a private plane with my twin’s favorite rock band, and somehow survive the experience without losing my lunch or messing up the interview.

My stomach growls loudly, and suddenly those milky cocktails seem like they were a horrible idea.

I toss the microphone to the floor and cover my mouth with my hand as I rush out of the room.

I make it to the bathroom, and that's where the night ends for me.

Chapter Seven

Sapphire

The room is swirling when I wake up in the morning, but I don't have the immediate urge to puke. No, that was last night. When Scarlett came over and convinced me those weird cocktails were a great idea. It's funny the things you'll believe when you're looking for a pick me up.

I force myself to get up, leaving Scar snoring softly on Ben's side of the bed.

Ugh. Ben.

I don't want to feel like I miss that asshole.

That rollercoaster finally stopped, and Scarlett dragged me out of my seat before it could start back up.

I'm not trapping myself in that cycle again. Not now that I know.

He was sleeping around the whole damn time.

I wasn't his girlfriend. I was his local hook-up.

It makes me feel dirty.

My eyes tear up as I go into the bathroom and run the shower.

I had my doubts, but I pushed them to the back of my thoughts, and I did everything I could to avoid the obvious. I told myself we had something special. I let myself believe he was a good guy.

Whenever we were together, he made me feel like I was his girl.

I start to cry while I wait for the water to warm up.

I don't want Scarlett to see me like this.

I shouldn't be this upset over a creep who used me.

If anything, I should be mad at him, not sad that we didn't mean what the biggest part of me thought we did.

Those doubts never went away, but I never looked at them.

I pretended they didn't exist, but I knew they did.

If I'd really been sure, I would have told him I was an Omega while we were together.

All it would have taken was for him to stop putting us on a break whenever he left town, and he couldn't even do that.

I feel like such an idiot.

When I step under the stream, I let my thoughts drift away and I concentrate on how good the warm water feels as I clean up, taking the time to wash and condition my hair.

I'm a little more ready to face the day by the time I step out of the shower.

When I step out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, I meet my mirror image in the hall, leaning in the bedroom doorway, with that sneaky smile on her lips.

“What?” I ask, knowing there’s something and hoping she’s finally ready to tell me what that something is.

“I think it would do you good to get out of the city,” she starts, running her hand down the doorframe. “Just for a little bit.”

I can already tell where she’s headed with this, and my energy right now is way too low to consider that kind of craziness, never mind agree to it.

“I’m not switching places with you just because you lost a bet, Scar.”

“We’re not going to get in trouble this time, Saph. All that would happen is you’d get a chance to relax and get over that cheating asshole while you do something you love to do anyway.”

“I have work to think about,” I remind her.

“I know,” she says. “I can take care of that stuff for you. That’s kind of how this whole switching thing works, Sis.”

She probably could. Article writing is a little different than song writing, but Scarlett took some of the same classes I did to get her degree. She would know what she was doing.

“It’s not a normal week for me,” I reveal, closing my arms around my middle.

“So, you’re not about to rush into the office with a deadline to meet?” Scar asks.

“If I was, I’d be late. I have a couple days off,” I confess. “I’m supposed to get on a plane on Saturday. My boss wants me to do one interview that includes travel before she offers me the job I’ve been working toward.”

Scarlett blinks at me. “A plane? Doesn’t she know ...”

“She knows. I mean, I think she figured it out herself.”

“That’s fucked up,” she says. “She shouldn’t be trying to force you to do something you have a genuine phobia about, Saph.”

“She’s not forcing me, Scar. She told me she wants to give me the job, but that I have to do this, just once, before she can give it to me. It’s one thing. One little thing.”

I’m trying to talk myself into being okay with it as I attempt to convince my twin that it’s fine.

I don’t think it’s really working.

Scarlett looks annoyed, but then her annoyance melts into excitement.

“Oh, my God, Saph,” she murmurs. “This is actually perfect.”

I blink at her. “Perfect?”

“I can take that flight for you, and you can clean that house for me.”

She’s beaming back at me as I let the idea sink in.

“I don’t know, Scar. It’s been so long since we did something like that, and this ... It isn’t nothing.”

“There are no bad consequences to this, Saph. You get the chance to recover from your breakup, and I don’t have to put up with the humiliation of losing a bet to my dumb, boring neighbors. It’s a win-win situation.”

“If something bad happens ...” I start, frowning at her.

“Nothing bad is going to happen,” she assures me, too quickly. “What’s the flight itinerary?”

“I need to switch on my laptop to check, but you’d have to be gone for a week.”

“Ooh, a week on location. Is it just one interview?”

“Just one,” I tell her.

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense,” she says. “Who are we interviewing?”

This is it now. I know the second I admit who I’m supposed to interview that there’s no way Scarlett will drop the idea to switch places for the week.

Would it really be a bad thing?

I wouldn’t have to face my fear, and I’d be getting away from the city, and the urge to wallow in my relationship mistakes.

It’s unethical, probably, and unprofessional.

“You would have to actually act like me, Scar. I know you think on some level that the act doesn’t matter because no-

one's ever going to think it's not me when you look exactly like me ...”

“Scouts honor, hand to God, I'll wear your clothes *and* your attitude.”

She kisses her teeth and raises her eyebrows.

She's trying not to say those two little words she always says, I can feel it.

Just like I can feel how excited she is over the idea of switching places.

Why do I get the feeling I'm going to regret this later?

“Fine,” I tell her. “I'll clean your neighbors' house, and you can interview Chaos Burning for me.”

Her eyes go wide, and her mouth drops open. She blinks. “Chaos Burning? You're supposed to interview my favorite band in the universe, and you don't tell me?”

“Well, I only found out yesterday, around the same time I was breaking up with Ben and trying to talk myself into going on that flight.”

“I can't believe this. I get to meet them. Holy hell, Saph. You'll never have to buy me a Christmas present again.”

“You're welcome, I guess.”

Chapter Eight

Sapphire

My transformation into my sister isn't quite as simple as putting on her clothes. The ripped jeans are tight enough to be annoying, but I can cope with the pinch of discomfort. The top is thankfully more forgiving.

Scarlett applies my makeup, talking about each step as she does it, so I can remember and approximate it on my own for the whole week, starting tomorrow.

“This stuff is magic,” she tells me, as she puts a thin layer of what feels like gloss over my red-painted lips. “It'll keep the lipstick on all damn day.”

She steps back, and smiles. “Perfect.”

I glance past her at the mirror above my dresser.

It's kind of weird seeing my sister when I look at myself, but it only lasts for a second. I'm a bit more of a slouch, and I tend to keep my head down, so I don't have that spark of confident energy that makes her so lively.

I stand up straighter.

“Looking good,” Scar says. “I wish I had body paint. I know I could make a realistic copy of my dragon on your side if I did.”

“I’ll just wear stuff that hides it,” I tell her.

She nods. “That makes sense. Wear my plainer T-shirts.”

“Tell me you have comfier jeans?”

“Good call. I have a couple faded black older pairs in my closet. I would wear old stuff if I was actually going to clean, anyway.”

“I assume you have Chuck Taylors in your closet, too?”

“Tons of them,” she confirms. “Just don’t wear the red ones. They’re new.”

I’m about to say red really isn’t my color, when I catch myself.

It’s not supposed to be my color, it’s hers.

Kind of always has been.

Our parents dressed me in blue and her in red when we were kids, and we never really grew out of the habit. They weren’t typical parents of identical twins. They never dressed us in the same outfits.

“Your turn,” I tell her, not willing to get in her car and start the long drive to Silver Valley until she shows she’s got to take this whole thing seriously.

She goes to my closet and opens it. “Pick my outfits and tell me what I’m doing with my hair and makeup.”

Basically, I need to pack a suitcase for her for the week that she'll be around her favorite band every day. I head over the closet and start putting clothes onto the bed.

"No bikini's," I start. "You have a tattoo, and I don't."

I put a plain black bathing suit in the pile, among my black skirts and pants.

I pick out my nicest blouses, in a range of pale blues and creams.

"Dresses," Scar reminds me. "You might need to dress up if they go someplace fancy for dinner, or whatever."

She's probably right.

I have one navy bodycon dress that's kind of a date-night dress, and one pale blue designer dress that's well cut but not skin-tight. I put them both on the bed.

"This is gonna be so weird," Scar murmurs, as she frowns at the clothes.

I throw in a set of blue checked flannel pajamas.

"That's probably everything."

"Besides underwear," she says. "But don't worry. I'll go buy some before Saturday comes around. I wouldn't want to accidentally flash the lead singer, or anything."

She's joking, but I realize I'm about to let her get on a private plane with four Alphas, and she's actually attracted to all of them. I'd be a little freaked about that myself, and I'm not into their general vibe or look at all.

“You have suppressants, right?” I ask, making sure I look her in the eye.

“Hmm?” she asks, as if she’s caught up in a daydream.

She looks at me, her gaze coming back into focus. “Suppressants?”

“To block your perfume from coming in around Alphas?”

She laughs. “God, it’s been so long since I even thought about those.”

“You can take some of mine. I have a decent supply.”

“I stopped taking them years ago,” she admits. “I’ve never perfumed, Saph, and I’m around Alphas *a lot*. Some Omegas never actually perfume. No one really knows why, but considering I’ve been out in the big, wide world for years now and I’ve never had even the tiniest trace of a scent awakening, I think it’s safe to say it’s not on the cards for me.”

“Scarlett! It’s not safe to be walking around without protection like that!”

“I can handle myself, Sapphire. It’s not like I’m a defenceless little girl.”

“It’s not about handling yourself! You don’t know how hard it’ll hit if or when it does happen. You could end up in a really dangerous situation that you can’t fight your way out of. You don’t know how you’ll react.”

She lets out a sigh. “Look, if you’re this worried about it, I’ll take them while we’re switched.”

“You should be taking them every day.”

I leave her in the bedroom as I go into the bathroom cabinet and take out the emergency bottle I have that’s been decanted into an aspirin container already.

I bring it into the room and pass it to her.

“Oh, yeah,” she says with a nod. “I forgot about the whole hiding them in plain sight thing.”

“Take one now,” I tell her. “And make sure you do the same every day. I don’t want to have to worry about you, being alone in that plane with those rock stars you’ve been crushing on for the last few years.”

She snorts. “Give me some credit. I’m not a groupie, Saph.”

She takes a pill and dry swallows it, wincing afterward.

“Yeah, well, you’re also not you.”

“I know that. I promise I’ll be as prim and proper as you would be, even though they’re extremely talented musicians who probably flirt with every woman who crosses their paths.” She holds up a hand. “Scouts honor. I’m not saying I won’t ask for autographs, though. That would be insane.”

“I think my reputation can handle that,” I admit, giving her a wry smile.

“Good, because it was non-negotiable.” She glances at my alarm clock. “You know, you should probably get moving if you want to be at my place before it gets dark out.”

She has a point. “Where did you park the rust-bucket?”

“Hey, that’s my faithful steed you’re talking about. You don’t have to be so mean.”

“Okay, then, where did you park your faithful steed?”

“The main college parking lot,” she admits, shrugging. “It looks like it belongs to a student so I figured I wouldn’t get a ticket. It’s not like there’s many places to park around here.”

“Right side, left side?” I ask, not wanting to have to walk out there and wander around like a lost child, especially not in Scarlett’s ankle boots.

“Kind of in the middle,” she says.

“Okay,” I tell her, as I grab my sneakers from the bottom of the closet. “I’m putting these on to drive out there. There’s no way I’ll make it to the car without breaking an ankle otherwise.”

“Have fun this week, okay?” Scarlett says as I step into my sneakers. “Forget about that loser, and don’t worry about the interview. I’ll tape everything and you can write it over from scratch if you don’t like the version I come up with. Everything’s going to work out great.”

I let out a relieved sigh. “Thanks so much for doing this, Scar. I don’t think I could have gone through with it. Not after everything else that happened yesterday.”

“We’re doing each other a favor here, Saph. I get to meet my favorite band, and you get to do what you love all week.” She moves away from the side of the bed to give me a hug. “It’s a win-win for both of us. Team Faris are winners.”

I let her go, letting out a breath. “Okay. You have my phone and yours is in your purse. We’re all set. I guess I should get moving.”

It’s time to find out if switching places with each other still works like it used to.

Chapter Nine

Sapphire

I feel weird every time I look in the mirror and remind myself I'm supposed to be Scarlett. We haven't switched places like this in years, and we've never done it for anywhere close to a week.

It's crazy, and I basically only said yes because it felt like a better option than getting on a plane.

"It's still the better option," I remind myself, not feeling any differently about that.

All I have to do is be a little more upbeat and carefree than usual.

The girlfriends Scarlett shares her house with are out a lot anyway.

I know little bits and pieces about them despite never having met them before.

Cleo's a lounge bar singer slash hostess, and she also occasionally tours with a burlesque group as a lead act. She's a bottle redhead, and she posts the most glamorous pictures on

social media. She's always in heels and classy dresses, and she likes to mix cocktails.

Erin is more of a behind the scenes girl, and I only know about her because she's occasionally in pictures that Scarlett shares on her socials. She's a shy brunette who spends a lot of time in her room and is rarely coaxed out of the house for a night on the tiles. She's a photographer so she does go out during the day when she has clients to shoot for.

Karma's a wilder version of Scar, with tattoos all over her arms. She has poker-straight black hair that hangs down to her waist, she never seems to blink, and she dresses like she's just about to go make a RAP music video. Her actual job is in the therapy field, using music, but I've always been kind of fuzzy on what that means exactly.

Scarlett told me I shouldn't have to interact too much with them.

They'll probably tease me about losing the bet, but that allows me to be in a bit of a mood which is just as well. The neighbors' probably won't have a clue that I'm not Scarlett, particularly since they have no idea she has a sister, never mind an identical twin. Her friends know about me, and they're aware that I'm Scarlett's opposite. I'm not sure how fooled they'll be when I show up, especially considering I'm not really nailing Scar's infectious energy.

The drive is a pain in the ass. There are road works in Silver Lake, so it takes an hour longer than I expect. By the time I'm pulling into the driveway of the rented house, it's dark out, my

butt has gone to sleep, and I'm stuck somewhere between hunger and queasy nervousness.

I park and change from my sneakers into Scarlett's ankle boots.

Five-inch heels are a pain to walk in, but I won't have to wear them for too long.

I'm home, I guess.

I get out of the car.

The porch lights go on as I approach the front steps.

It takes a second to find the right key, and then I realize the door isn't locked.

The hallway is dark, and I stumble over something the second I step inside.

A discarded boot. I realize I'm standing on a jacket as well the second before my fingers find the light switch by the side of the door. The nightmare the inclusion of light reveals is nothing short of horrifying. The hallway is being used as a dumping ground for books, shoes, knick-knacks, bits of furniture, and piles of clothing.

I close the front door and then push the discarded boot to the side of its partner with one foot.

After picking the dropped jacket up, I dust off the footprint I made on it.

I find the hooks next to where it fell.

They're pretty much jammed full.

I find a tiny bit of space for the jacket and hang it back up.

Once I'm sure there's nothing else that might be seen as an obstruction in the middle of the hallway, I lock the door behind me and switch off the hall lights.

Moving forward slowly, I head toward the room at the back of the property.

I'm not really looking forward to finding out how Scarlett's room looks. I lived with her for eighteen years. I know how messy and disorganized she is, and I know I won't be able to get comfortable until I clean things up a bit, and it's not because I love cleaning. It's more that I don't like mess.

The kitchen light is on, and the door to the backyard is open.

I can hear murmuring out there.

Either Karma got a phone call when she went out for a cigarette, or Cleo's out there with her.

At least the kitchen seems to be reasonably clutter free.

I take a look around while I'm on my own, managing to grab a mug out of a cupboard and work out the coffee maker before Karma comes back inside, sighing dramatically.

"Oh, good, you're home," she tells me, her unblinking gaze fixing on me until I give her my full attention. She frowns lightly before her expression goes blank. *God, she's terrifying.*

"I was starting to think you were going to stay at Saffron's house for the whole week to avoid that dreadful situation with those idiot neighbors' of ours."

Scarlett did also warn me that Karma calls me Saffron.

I'm careful to keep my expression steady. "Oh, that? It's nothing. Seriously."

She raises an eyebrow at me. "Nothing?"

"Not one little thing," I answer, in a vaguely sing-song way, just like Scarlett would.

"Hmm," Karma murmurs. "Well, fine. Whatever. It's your turn to pay for dinner tonight."

"Like I would forget," I mutter back.

"Just get our usual order. Cleo isn't having one of her gentleman callers tonight so it's only us."

She leaves the room, thankfully before I can say something to mess up this switch.

I take Scarlett's phone out of her purse, and I ask her what the usual order is.

She tells me to call a number and tell the guy who I am, and he'll know what the usual order is.

I make the call, the guy who answers flirts a little bit and tells me he'll make sure it's here soon.

Putting Scarlett's phone down on the counter, I check her purse and let out a soft sigh.

She has a decent amount of cash. It reminds me some things have changed since high school.

We might mostly be the same people, but Scarlett's making money now and, apparently, she's not treating it the same way

she used to treat her allowance, which was always gone the day after we got it.

I take off Scarlett's red leather jacket, hanging it over one of the chairs.

Concentrating on making the coffee helps with my nerves.

I know where some of the stuff is in the kitchen now, too, which will stop me from looking like a clueless moron later if I'm expected to grab something for someone in here.

I walk over to the door that looks out over the backyard, and I take a good look out there.

It's too dark to see much, but at least the lawn looks maintained.

The yard to the right is dark right now, too.

I look at the side of that house, and I wonder if all of the houses in the street are rental properties.

Silver Valley is packed full of rich families, a lot of which have Alpha head of households.

Mom and Dad were way happier about Scarlett's choice to move here than they were about mine to move out to the city. This is a safe place. Emergency services have super-fast response times out here. Though crime is so low I doubt the cops have to deal with anything more dangerous than the occasional noise complaint.

I move away from the door and sit down at the table, ready to sip at my coffee.

It's not late enough to worry about one cup keeping me up all night, and besides, I might need it if Scarlett's room is messy enough to drive me up the walls.

The pizza arrives within twenty minutes of the call I made to the pizza place.

I answer the door and tip the delivery guy a twenty, because I know it's what Scarlett would do.

Most of the people working in the service industries around here probably drive in from Silver Lake.

It's not a super quick journey.

The kid beams at me as he tells me to enjoy my pizza.

I close the door and balance the two large boxes in one hand while I lock it.

They smell good. I'm definitely calm enough now to be hungry.

My nerves are probably still there, waiting to get out, but right now, there's food to be eaten.

I stop at the bottom of the stairs and yell out, "Pizza's here!"

Then I walk into the kitchen and put the boxes on the table.

I put my keys in my pocket, knowing the girls here have locks on their bedroom doors. Scarlett might never usually lock hers, but I know I won't be able to help it. It's too weird to be in a strange place with people I don't really know for a whole week. I need to know no one's going to mix my room

up for theirs when they're drunk and try to crawl into bed with me, or whatever.

I shudder at the thought.

Cleo's the first to appear at the kitchen doorway.

She looks as glam as she always does in a tight-fitting dress and heels, her hair perfectly styled as if she just walked out of the salon. I'm pretty sure she's wearing false eyelashes, and her square cut, French polished nails are too perfect to be real.

"If you haven't yet, you're still going to have to text Karma and Erin," she tells me. "I knocked their doors in passing, but Karma has music on, and Erin never takes her wireless headphones off."

"Oh, right," I say, rolling my eyes. "Guess I forgot."

"I figured," she says, going to the cupboard that's full of plates.

"They have roadworks in Silver Lake. It took even longer than usual to get back."

She brings four plates out and sets them down, before getting a single set of silverware out of the drawer to the left of the sink. "How was Sapphire?"

I press my lips together. It's a weird question to have to answer, considering it's about me.

I have no idea how much my sister shares about me to her house mates.

These women are her friends, too, I guess.

It would be strange if she didn't tell them anything.

“She was feeling a little better when I left. She's up for a promotion at work, so that'll take her mind off other things for a while.”

“That's good,” Cleo says, arranging the boxes on the table so they're both open, with the lids leaning against the wall. “I hate to hear about men who do such awful things to the women they're supposed to care about. There are so many of them out there. Where have all the real gentlemen gone?”

She doesn't just sound like she cares, she actually feels bad for me.

I swallow the lump that starts to rise in my throat. I don't need to cry.

Especially not over that idiot. I'm out here to forget about him.

“They're a dying breed for sure,” I respond, giving her a wry smile.

She puts two slices of pizza on her plate, alongside the silverware.

“You've got nothing to worry about if you're looking for real gentlemen,” she says. “But I won't bother you about that again. I know you're not there yet.”

I blink at her, not sure what she's talking about.

Does Scarlett have a boyfriend? Or an admirer?

Someone who wants to be her mate?

I open my mouth to ask, but Cleo leaves the room and I'm left feeling stunned as Karma steps in next, raising her eyebrow at me.

"You forgot about texting us again, didn't you?"

I shrug helplessly. "Sorry."

She shakes her head, making her shiny hair swish against her silky top.

She grabs a plate and piles up the pizza slices, topping to topping.

It looks like we have one vegetarian, and one pepperoni.

I put a couple slices of each on my plate. There's still half of each left in the boxes.

"Well?" Karma asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

"Uh ..." I start, trailing off because I have no idea what she wants from me.

She lets out a sigh. "Are you watching the finale with us, or not?"

Oh. Right. They watch those reality music shows together.

I completely forgot that was a thing with my sister.

"I'll be there in a sec," I tell her. "I'm thirsty."

She leaves the room, and I text Erin to let her know the pizza's here.

I'm still wondering what Cleo meant before, but I know I can't just come out and ask.

I check the fridge and grab a can of diet soda.

Whatever relationship stuff my sister's got going on that she didn't want to tell me, I'm going to get to the bottom of while I'm out here. There's no way I'm letting her pass up on a good thing if it's standing right in front of her.

Chapter Ten

Bishop

As far as long days go, those are usually the ones spent stuck in the firehouse for an entire shift, waiting to be called out to an emergency. Since Silver Valley is relatively quiet, with a low crime rate, those long days are more common than the active ones. Even adding in the fact that our firehouse is positioned to be close enough to make us second call for the two closest nearby towns, we still have more quiet days than busy ones.

Life outside of the city is slower moving for sure, but we've all gotten used to the pace.

It's interspersed with enough activity to keep us interested in our work, while giving us a good chance to relax at the end of the day. It's the perfect place to live while you're getting ready to settle down and raise a family, and that's where we're at now.

That's why the last few years have been a special kind of torture.

We're at that stage, and we've met our true mate.

The only trouble is, she hasn't shown any sign of being interested in what we have to offer.

Scarlett Faris, the singer/songwriter next door is *not* the kind of woman I was imagining when I started to look for our fated mate, but I felt a connection from the moment we met.

I had to find a way to get closer to her, and now, finally, after three years of failed attempts, I came up with that wager at the cop bar, and I played just well enough to make sure she lost the game.

Today is a different kind of long day because of that.

It's taking forever for the shift to be over, because we all know tomorrow is our first shot at starting to convince Scarlett that she's meant for our pack.

Easier said than done, considering the woman is a wild card.

I've been trying to figure out what it is that we might have in common, but I haven't found one tiny little thing. If I hadn't felt that connection on the day we met, and every time we crossed each other's paths from that moment on, I would have written her off as a party girl who takes nothing seriously.

I know she can't be too restless to settle down if we're fated to be with her, even if it turns out to be a later rather than sooner situation, but we're all starting to run seriously low on patience while she acts as if we don't even exist.

There must be another side to her.

Something deeper that we haven't seen yet.

Whatever that something is, we've got a week to find it.

I'm hopeful that we can start to bond with her in some way.

If we need to be patient for a little longer until she's ready to get serious, we'll find a way to do that, but I know we can't go another week feeling like we're invisible in her eyes. It's not the way things are supposed to go between fated mates, and it's driving us all crazy.

"Is lunch almost ready?" Gus asks, his low, rumbling voice behind me taking me by surprise.

I realize the chili has thickened up a little more than I intended, and I turn off the heat.

"It is now," I tell my grumpiest pack brother.

Rueben's usually the one complaining if food is taking too long, but, clearly, today we all have other things on our minds.

Gus waits by my side while I dish up the food into bowls.

We're both six foot tall, but Gus has dark brown hair that grows fast enough to need a trim every few weeks. He has a permanent five o'clock shadow, and he rarely smiles.

He's also the only one of my brothers who denies any feeling of connection to Scarlett. I'm honestly not sure if that's the truth, or if he's just so resistant to the idea that he doesn't want what he felt for her to be real.

He takes two of the bowls to the table, and I pick up the other two.

Rueben already has the tortilla chips over there, and we'll be lucky if there are a few left to dip in our food. He's crunching on one as Gus puts his bowl down in front of him.

Our resident redhead, and the last probie we took on at this station, is a couple inches taller than me, and he's almost always talking whenever he's not eating or sleeping.

He barely has that last chip swallowed before he opens his mouth.

"I was just telling Scout, I don't know why we can't all be off for the entire week," he complains, as he picks up a fork. "It's not like we have too much work on our hands. The guys in Silver Lake could easily send a couple men out to cover for us for the extra couple days if we asked."

I glance at Scout as I sit down.

He shrugs at me in apology.

"Don't mention our lack of vacation days. I already tried," Scout murmurs.

Our quietest pack brother is a few inches shorter than me, but he's built a lot more solidly. With the lightest blond hair that I've ever seen in real life, and the palest blue eyes, he probably could have been a model when he was kid. Before he grew up and bulked up with thick layers of muscle. He looks like a wrestler now, or a quarterback, but he's the sweetest, friendliest guy I know. That's why Rueben tends to spend a lot of his time talking with him, which mainly means rambling on

until he's gotten all the words out of his head. Scout lets him do that, and we all appreciate it.

"We've got six days off each, Rueben," I remind him. "That's practically a week."

"Practically, Shmactically," he mutters.

Gus snorts. "None of us *need* to be off at all."

"Oh, come on," Rueben scoffs. "You can't seriously still be thinking Scarlett isn't our true mate. We've all felt a connection to her. There's no way three of us are wrong about this. No way."

I look at Gus, wondering once again what he's really thinking whenever he insists she's not ours. His expression doesn't give anything away. Instinctively, I know he's holding something back, but I have no idea what that something might be.

He rolls his eyes at Rueben. "She's a reckless musician, and she's not the slightest bit interested in any of us. Whatever you three felt ... Whatever that was, clearly, she doesn't feel it, and if she doesn't feel it, that means it's not a true mate match."

Rueben shakes his head. "We just haven't given her the chance to get to know us, and we haven't had much time to get to know her, either. This next week fixes that problem. She's meant to be with us, and she'll realize that herself soon enough."

"Whatever you say," Gus mutters, starting to eat his food.

“Soon enough is not soon enough,” Rueben adds, letting out a sad sigh.

Scout gives him a sympathetic smile. “One more day for you.”

“One more day for me,” Rueben repeats, starting to smile.

Apparently, being reminded that he has less time to wait than Scout to start spending time with Scarlett is what he needed to hear to quit complaining.

We eat lunch in relative silence, with very little crunching involved since Rueben did already eat most of the tortilla chips. All of ten minutes later, after I’ve just cleared the table, we get a call.

There’s an apartment building fire in Silver Lake. The local FD are already dispatched, but they could use a second unit if we’re free. I confirm we’re on our way, and signal to everyone to get moving.

We drop everything, suit up quickly and get into the rig.

We’re on the road seconds later, on the way to do our job.

Chapter Eleven

Rueben

Everything else stops when there's an emergency to get to. Our training kicks in, and we go into work mode. It's not possible to work any other way. Lives depend on what we're doing. Every second counts. Distractions can get people killed.

Bishop drives like a bat out of hell through the traffic, siren blazing as we aim to get to the site of the fire as fast as we can. The Silver Lake unit will already be there, and we'll take our orders from their captain.

Like everyone else in Silver Lake, Captain Marshall is a Beta. But if I didn't know that I'd swear he was an Alpha. He has the same instincts, the same drive.

He's a good captain. He knows his shit. We trust him.

We can see the smoke before we get close, rising up over the buildings we're passing.

I can already feel the adrenaline pumping through me, getting ready to snap into action the second the rig stops, and

we get out. When we stop in front of the building, SLFD are already hard at work, and keeping the blaze under control.

“What do we have here, Marshall?” Captain Bishop calls out to our site Captain.

Marshall turns to him. “My men are evacuating the remaining residents now. The fire’s almost under control. Could use another hose on it, and a couple men inside helping with the evacuation.”

“On it,” Captain Bishop says, motioning to Gus to go with him, and for me and Scout to go inside.

We put on our masks and make our move, radioing the other team for more precise directions.

Most of the building’s been cleared, it seems, but the fourth floor, right under where the fire started has been blocked off by a collapse. We move straight there to assess the damage and find a work around.

The fourth floor landing is dark, and flooded with smoke.

The wooden boards creak under my foot and I step back, only to see those boards break and a gaping hole open up in that spot.

“It’s unstable,” I yell back to Scout. “We need to get a ladder to the windows to get these people out.”

He makes the call to Captain Marshall as we head back down the stairwell.

One of Silver Lake's rigs are already on it when we get out there, with a second rig joining as we exit.

Captain Marshall motions to us to go to the second rig.

I climb the ladder as it moves toward a window. The glass has already been broken. One glimpse into the apartment and I can see the floor is gone inside. I call back to Scout on the ladder, asking if he can see anything in the window below.

SLFD already cleared the third floor, but we don't know when that floor collapsed.

"I think we've got something!" Scout calls back to me.

He radios down to have the ladder moved to the third-floor window and I see the woman lying on the ground straight away. I smash the glass and climb inside.

With no time to lose, I rush over to the woman and carry her to the window.

She's not conscious, and she's bleeding, but she's alive.

Scout puts her over his shoulder and carries her down the ladder.

I radio to Captain Marshall that I'm going to check the other evacuated rooms.

I rush into the hall and go methodically, room by room, checking for collapsed roofs and people who might need help to get out. I find one older man passed out in an armchair that must have come through from the floor above. I lift him over my shoulder, and then I hear the tiniest miaow I've ever heard.

Goddamn it.

Where did that come from?

Chapter Twelve

Scout

I pass the unconscious woman over to Silver Lake paramedics and I look back up at the ladder.

Rueben's still inside the building. I glance around, knowing if Captain Bishop were in charge, he'd be sending me in now to drag Rueben out. I climb back up the ladder, but I can't see anything through the window. I'm so ready to climb inside and go looking that I jerk back in surprise when he appears suddenly and passes me an unconscious old man.

"I'll be right back!" Rueben shouts, before he disappears again.

"Rueben!" I call back, feeling helpless.

I need to get this guy to the paramedics, but Rueben seriously needs to get out of that building.

I hesitate for a fraction of a second before I get moving.

He might be my pack brother, and best friend, but it's up to the captain in charge to decide if or when to get him out of there. I don't like it, but it's part of the job.

And right now, my job is to get this injured man to the bottom of the ladder.

I concentrate on that, getting him down to where the paramedics are waiting with another stretcher at the ready. They help to move him carefully onto it.

He groans lightly as he's rolled away.

I rush straight back up the ladder, heart pounding loudly in my chest as I wait for Rueben to return.

There must be someone else inside the building. He wouldn't have gone back inside if there wasn't.

The waiting feels like it might kill me. My knuckles go white on the ladder.

Then, he appears, alone.

I move back, letting him climb out.

He doesn't offer any word of explanation.

I climb down the ladder, and he follows close behind.

When he drops down to the ground beside me, I frown at him.

He smiles mysteriously, but he still doesn't say a word.

"All clear," Captain Marshall calls out. "All of the residents are accounted for, and the fire's out. Silver Valley team can go home. Thanks for the assist, Captain Bishop."

"Any time, Captain Marshall."

We're done, apparently.

Everything's tied up.

We head to our rig, where Gus is putting the hose back, and Cap is collapsing the ladder.

Rueben takes off his mask and I narrow my eyes at him.

“What were you doing in there?”

“I was checking the other rooms. What did you think I was doing?”

“You were taking too long,” I grumble at him.

“I was taking a perfectly reasonable amount of time,” he argues, as he climbs into the back of the rig.

I can tell there's no point in continuing to bug him about it. I'm probably just being over-protective. It's kind of hard to avoid that when we're basically family. These guys are closer to me than my real brothers ever were, and I would still stand up for those guys against anyone who said a bad word against them. It's just the way I was raised. Family means everything to me.

I climb into the rig after Rueben, and slide into the seat across from him.

Cap steps into the driver's seat right before Gus gets in back and closes the door behind him.

As usual, I say a silent prayer that we're going home tonight, and that no one lost their lives in that fire. I close my eyes and send my thanks to God, opening them a second after the rig starts to move.

Rueben has a guilty smile on his face when I look back at him.

I'm about to ask what he did, when a tiny sound comes from his lap. My gaze drifts, the question disappearing as he uncovers the kitten he was hiding with his hands.

It miaows again, a lot more clearly this time.

“Do not tell me you went back into a collapsing building, to rescue a fucking cat,” Gus snaps.

Rueben shrugs. “Okay, pretend you didn't see anything, and I won't tell you.”

He's kind of ridiculous, but I have to admit, the kitten's cute.

Rueben looks at me. “Tell him you would have done the exact same thing.”

I can feel Gus staring at me, as if he's expecting me to actually answer.

Usually, I try to avoid getting involved in their arguments.

They end way faster if I stay out of them.

Too bad this isn't one of those situations.

“I would have done the same thing.”

Rueben grins triumphantly. “See?”

“That was fucking stupid,” Gus mutters, shaking his head at us.

The cat miaows even louder.

“Hm, I think he's hungry,” Rueben says.

“Is that a cat I’m hearing?” Bishop calls back from the front seat.

“No,” Rueben calls out. “It’s a kitten!”

“So fucking stupid,” Gus grumbles, turning to look out of the window.

“You know you can’t keep him though, right?” I ask.

“We’ll see,” Rueben says. “His owner’s currently on the way to hospital, and there’s no way in hell he’ll be going back to that apartment to live. Maybe he’ll let me keep him.”

“You can’t ask to keep the man’s pet,” I tell him, laughing at the audacity of it.

“I won’t, but I bet you anything he doesn’t want him back when it comes to it.”

“Just ... don’t get your hopes up.” I reach over and pet the little guy’s head.

He seems to like scratches. I move back and tell myself not to get attached.

It’s been a long time since I had a pet, and I kind of miss having a little fuzzball to fuss over.

It wouldn’t be fair to have a dog, since we work full-time, but I’d never considered a cat.

“We don’t have any pet stuff at home.”

Rueben nods at me. “I know. Do you want to come with me to get stuff on the way home later? I’m going to google for

vets in the area and book him a check up as soon as possible, too.”

Oh, we’re definitely getting attached to this little ball of grey and black fluff.

“I guess I’ll need to find something to feed him before then though ...”

“There’s a can of tuna in the kitchen cupboard at the station,” I let Rueben know. “I keep forgetting it’s there.”

“Perfect!” Rueben beams at me. “Now, what do we call you, little guy?”

“No one’s naming him,” Gus grumbles. “He’s not ours.”

“I’m not *naming* him,” Rueben says. “I’m just thinking up something to call him while we have him.”

“Sounds like the same thing to me,” Gus mutters.

He’s probably right, but no one’s listening.

“How ‘bout Probie?” I ask, making Gus snort.

“Cute, but nah.” Rueben shakes his head. “He’s too little to do all the grunt work around the firehouse.”

“Grunt?” I try.

The kitten miaows again.

“I don’t think he likes that.”

“Tiny?”

“Maybe.”

We run through name suggestions until we get back to the station. Nothing fits, and honestly, it's probably better if we don't give him a name. We're already too attached to the little guy.

That's only going to make things harder when we have to give him back.

Chapter Thirteen

Gus

Rueben's keeping that damn kitten. I knew it the second he revealed the little grey and black ball of fluff. It doesn't matter how much he denies it. How much he says he's going to give him back to his owner, somehow, someday, I just fucking *know*, he's keeping it.

Same way I know Scarlett Faris is absolutely one-hundred-percent *not* our fated mate.

The woman might be drop-dead gorgeous, but she's also careless and free-spirited.

If my pack brothers let her, she'll break their hearts into millions of tiny little pieces right before she moves on to the next pack of oblivious chumps.

She doesn't have to be malicious about it to do that.

She only needs to be exactly who she is.

Whatever happens over the next week, I'm not going to just stand around and watch her do that.

If she actually shows up, I'll be keeping a close eye on things, because I'm the only one who sees her presence in our home as a threat.

I don't really care about the kitten.

Rueben can keep that fluffball if he wants.

It's not going to do anything terrible to my pack.

Scarlett Faris, on the other hand, is trouble with a capital T.

I don't care what my pack brothers think, she doesn't belong with us, and I'm not about to let her walk right in and tip our lives upside down.

If my brothers don't show any signs of figuring out their mistake while she's around, I'll do what I need to do to make sure she doesn't worm her way into their hearts.

She doesn't belong with us.

We're not keeping her.

Chapter Fourteen

Sapphire

Friday morning, after I've showered, I throw on one of Scarlett's old Chaos Burning tour T-shirts, and I hunt through her wardrobe for the old black jeans she said were comfier than her other pairs.

She's probably going to kill me for organizing her room last night, but honestly, I don't know how she could find anything in here, and there's no way I could have stayed for a week if I hadn't tidied everything up before I went to bed last night.

I find the jeans and put them on. They're way better than the skin-tight ones I had to drive out here wearing. I almost think I need a belt, then I realize they just hang a little lower than I thought.

Of course. If Scarlett owns them, they've got to be sexy.

They're still comfy, and the T-shirt's long and loose enough that the cut of the jeans doesn't matter.

I'm pretty sure Scarlett would have worn these with a cropped top, but I'm not willing to take this transformation

that far. Modesty aside, I don't have the skills with body paint that Scar does. There's no way I could paint a convincing dragon on my right side. I found her make up kit, though, and I'm about to use it to give myself her trademark lips and dewy skin, but that's as far as my cosmetics skills go.

When I'm done, I make myself stand a little straighter, and walk around the room, getting into Scarlett's shoes, before I pick a pair of yellow Converse out of the bottom of the closet and actually put them on.

I guess now I'm ready.

No. Wait.

I go through Scarlett's purse, looking for my suppressants.

It's hard enough to find them in my own slightly over-sized purse. I end up having to tip Scarlett's black leather shopper upside down before I locate the bottle.

Letting out a relieved sigh, I snatch it up.

There's no way I'm walking into a house full of strange men without taking my usual precautions to keep my Omega status a secret. I can't believe Scarlett doesn't use these. That's insane. She's lucky she hasn't perfumed before now.

I take a deep breath and put everything back into the purse.

It's almost ten a.m. when I check the time on Scarlett's phone.

If I were being me, I'd be over there already.

Since I'm not, I sit down on the edge of the bed and wait.

I'm too nervous to eat right now, but I have a nut bar in Scarlett's purse if I need it later, and I don't expect to spend more than a few hours cleaning, no matter how dirty their house is.

Scarlett's doing this grudgingly because she lost a bet.

There's no way she'd go in there intending to actually do a good job.

At about ten minutes past ten, I get up and leave the house.

It's bright out, with a breeze cool enough to make me shiver.

I move down the path to the sidewalk, noting that there are two cars in the neighbors' driveway. A Jeep, and a Mercedes, both new and shiny. Could be lease rentals, I guess. They seem kind of flashy to belong to four firemen who are renting a house together.

It's not until I'm on the front porch, ready to ring the bell, that I realize I don't know anything about these guys. Scarlett reminded me about her girlfriends, but she didn't fill me in on her neighbors.

All I know is she thinks they're boring and unappealing.

Coming from Scarlett, that could mean anything.

I ring the bell before I can think more about what I'm doing out here.

I agreed to this, and it's definitely better than trying to force myself to get on a plane.

Folding my arms, I wait.

When the door opens, and I set eyes on the man who opened it, I feel like the air just got knocked right out of my lungs.

He's tall, with short dark blond hair, a sharp jawline, and soft hazel eyes that seem to sparkle as he looks back at me.

Something inside me just melts, and I *know* this guy is an Alpha.

Scarlett didn't tell me there was an Alpha living here.

Why the hell wouldn't she tell me that?

Focus, Sapphire. You're here for one thing, and one thing only.

I smile wryly. "Scarlett Faris, cleaning lady, at your service."

"I wasn't sure you'd come," he admits, his voice deep with a hint of gravel to it.

As far as Alphas go, this one might be the hottest I've ever met, and I've barely been in his company for five seconds. The Alphas I meet at work are usually older, kind of predatory, or happily mated.

This one might have a girlfriend, but if he does, she's not getting his full attention.

His stare is too hungry.

God. Is this what Cleo meant when she insinuated Scarlett had a gentleman ready and waiting?

If it is, I shouldn't be here.

I'm not Scarlett, and he wouldn't look at me like that if he knew.

We're not in high school anymore.

This isn't some dumb date with a cute boy.

I hesitate, and he sees it. He doesn't try to convince me of anything.

He just waits, watching, a hint of concern showing in his pretty eyes.

"A bet's a bet," I tell him, deciding I need to know more.

He smiles. "That's true."

He steps back and invites me in with a gesture.

I follow him into the house, telling myself it's safe.

I'm on suppressants. He won't figure out what I am.

If today gets tricky, I'll call Scarlett and tell her the switch is off.

Chapter Fifteen

Bishop

Scarlett's here, and something's changed in her, I can feel it. The second I look into those bright blue eyes I can tell she's feeling something other than indifference. Maybe it even surprised her. She did hesitate for a moment after I saw that spark of ... *something* ... in her eyes.

It probably isn't going to be easy, but I know by the end of the week, we'll have our mate.

"All the cleaning supplies are in the kitchen, under the sink," I tell her as I lead her into the kitchen.

"This place really doesn't look like it needs cleaned," she admits.

I should have left things to get a little messy. I knew it.

Too bad that would have driven me up the wall.

"Then it'll be an easy week for you," I tell her, flashing her a smile.

"I'm not going to complain about that."

We step into the kitchen and Rueben gets up from the table, leaving behind a bowl of milk that's been turned into chocolate milk by his sugar-packed favorite weekend cereal.

"You're here," Rueben says, sounding awestruck.

He's still in the boxers and T-shirt that he slept in, and his red hair is sticking up like one of those anime cartoon characters in the TV shows he sometimes watches with Scout.

Scarlett presses her lips together as he approaches.

He stops right in front of her. "Hey, do you want to meet my kitten?"

"Is that *code* for something?" Scarlett asks, narrowing her eyes slightly.

"No. He's literally looking after a kitten. The owner's in hospital. Rueben pulled them out of a fire yesterday afternoon."

Literally every time we've tried to talk to her, about anything, she zones out, but right at this second, she looks seriously impressed. I start to wonder if she bumped her head or something.

"Oh, wow," she murmurs. "Sure ..."

"You can bring him out here. You're not luring Scarlett to your bedroom. She's our guest, Rueben."

Rueben rolls his eyes. She smiles at him before he leaves, bolting out of the room.

"Is he okay?" she asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

I nod. “He has ADHD. He’s medicated and that helps with some of his issues, but he still gets excitable about certain things.”

I won’t tell her that she’s what he’s excited about today.

I’m pretty sure she’ll work that out on her own soon enough.

“ADHD?” she asks, nodding slowly. “Right.”

Maybe she thinks it’s something I’ve told her before.

It’s not, and that’s probably because she’s never given me more than a minute of her own undivided attention at a time. She’s not usually much of a listener.

“I actually wondered if you might have a little of the same,” I admit.

She blinks at me, before realization dawns in her eyes. “Oh. Oh! No. I don’t think so.”

She goes quiet, and I kick myself mentally for being such a dumbass.

I don’t know why I brought that up. It was stupid.

It’s the first chance I’ve gotten to have a real conversation with our true mate, and I used it to try and diagnose her as neurodiverse.

What the hell was I thinking?

I can’t believe I just did that.

I’ve seriously got to think harder about what I say and do around her.

Scaring her off isn't in the plan, so I keep my mouth shut, hoping Rueben's foster kitten can get us back on track.

Chapter Sixteen

Sapphire

Tall, blond and handsome just threw me for a loop with the whole ADHD thing. It's possible, I guess. I always thought Scarlett was just easily bored by nature.

Though she is also kind of messy, and always on the go ...

Maybe there's something in that, but it only makes me realize he's been paying that much attention to her that he's been able to notice something like that. Clearly, he's besotted.

It makes my heart sink a little, and that doesn't make any sense.

I've barely met the guy. He's still a stranger to me.

He might be an Alpha, and an extremely handsome one, but that doesn't mean he would make a good rebound guy. In fact, he'd be the worst choice of rebound I could ever make if he's in love with my sister.

I shudder a little as I try to shake off that creepy thought.

Nothing's going to happen here.

All I'm here to do is clean.

The cute redhead with the freckles darts back into the room holding a tiny grey and black kitten in his hands. He holds the kitty out to me, and I pet its little head.

“Oh my God, he’s so cute.”

“I knew you’d like him,” he tells me, sounding a little smug.

“Who wouldn’t ...” I start, realizing Scarlett wouldn’t.

She’s allergic, and she’s not really a pet kind of person, besides.

“Exactly,” he says, smiling at the tiny cat.

Clearly, they have no idea my sister isn’t an animal lover.

So, I pet the kitty a little longer.

His owner seems sweet, and he’s just as attractive as his friend.

Rueben is tall, with pale skin and green eyes. I can see tattoos on his right arm but they’re a little faded, so he probably got them when he was a teenager. He has as much Alpha energy as the other guy, but he also seems kind of scattered and it definitely feels like the other guy is in charge.

“Okay,” the other guy says, clearing his throat. “You can put the probie away now, Rueben.”

“Aw, Cap.” Rueben pouts a little before he leaves the room with the kitten.

“And put on real clothes before you come back,” he calls after him.

He shakes his head when a groan comes back in response.

“Sorry about that,” he says. “This is where the cleaning stuff is.”

He opens the cupboard.

“Start where you want down here. I’ll be back in a second.”

He disappears, and I hear him go upstairs where Rueben just went a second ago.

I want to text Scarlett so badly. I can’t believe she didn’t tell me these guys were Alphas.

I know I’ll only be distracted if I do it now, so I put the purse down on one of the kitchen chairs, and I start bringing out the cleaning supplies.

I might as well get started on the job I’m here to do.

Chapter Seventeen

Rueben

My heart's racing as I bolt up the stairs and back into my room. I want to get back down there as quickly as possible. Scarlett's here, and she actually smiled at me like she meant it!

That's a first.

Usually, she tries to avoid us, which makes getting any kind of response impossible.

I'm pretty sure she thinks we're boring because we don't do creative work like she does.

It's been so damn hard trying to convince her to give us a chance. We'd basically given up when she walked into that bar with her friends.

Now, *that* felt like fate.

We'd all heard about her hustle from her girlfriends, and Bishop proposed we turn the tables on her.

Best idea our lead Alpha ever had. Now she's going to be hanging around all week, and we'll get the chance to show her what she's been missing out on.

I set the kitten down in the little pen I set up for him last night.

He has a bed and a potty, and food and water bowls I'm about to refill.

He stands at those bowls and miaows up at me.

I take another can of kitten food out of the loaded bag I've got sitting next to the cage. I open it and drop the contents into his dish. Then I grab a bottled water from the mini fridge next to my bed to refill his other dish.

"Okay, Probie. Be a good boy while I'm getting washed and dressed."

I leave him eating his breakfast as I get back to my feet.

"Rueben," Bishop calls out from the hall.

I go to my door and peer out. "What's up?"

"I think we should give Scarlett a little space for a while. She seems a bit ... I don't know."

"Different?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "Nicer? More willing to listen?"

He laughs. "I'm not saying it's a bad thing, but until we figure out what's going on we shouldn't push too hard."

"It's not like we were intending to just strip naked and propose a marking," I remind him.

“You know what I mean. If something’s upset her, we don’t want to make it worse.”

“You think something bad must have happened?”

Man, that’s depressing. The only reason our true mate is opening up to us is because someone else made her feel vulnerable? Show me that someone else, because he needs a foot up his ass.

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling.”

“An instinct, you mean?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Okay. I’ll be up here getting dressed and stuff.”

And trying to be patient, I guess. We’ve waited a few years so far. I suppose we can afford our mate a little more time if she’s hurting over something.

That won’t kill us. Even if it feels like it might.

Chapter Eighteen

Sapphire

The kitchen is already super clean, which really doesn't take much looking around to discover. It's so damn strange. For one thing, they're guys and I've never met a guy who was this good at cleaning. For another, I don't understand why this was the wager they placed with Scarlett.

Why would these guys make this bet with my sister when a cleaner is the last thing they need?

It's weird and confusing, until I think about the way that tall, blond looked at me (her) and the answer suddenly seems so damn simple.

Oh, wait, right. They're crushing on her, and they think this is the way to her heart.

Well, maybe not that exactly, but they wanted her attention at least.

I know that can be hard to capture. Scarlett's always on the move.

She's got so many projects going on.

They probably thought this would be the one way to make sure they got a bit of her time.

I can't imagine how disappointed they'd be if they knew the woman they're trying to romance now isn't the same one they've been falling for. If Scarlett knows they're into her, and she did this anyway, I'm going to be so mad at her.

I start washing the breakfast dishes in the sink, figuring it's the one small job that does actually need done. After that, I start cleaning the already sparkling counter tops.

Every surface in the room is practically gleaming.

The oven looks brand new when I peek inside.

Even the toaster and microwave look like they get scrubbed after every use, and there's no trace of dust underneath either when I move them to check.

They can't be using this kitchen to cook. There's no way it's a working kitchen when it's this clean.

I take a look inside the fridge, hoping to find something that needs to be cleaned, and I find the most organized, tidily arranged food storage system that's easily as clean as the rest of the room, that I actually think about getting Scarlett's phone out to take pictures so I can organize my fridge exactly the same way when I get home.

I force myself to resist that urge as I close the door, but only because it's not something Scarlett would ever do. Not in a million years.

I move away from the fridge, and I get the mop and bucket ready to start cleaning the floor.

Whatever these guys really got Scarlett here for, as far as I'm concerned, I'm here to clean.

That's what I agreed to, and that's what I'm going to do.

Even if it seems like nothing in this house needs it.

Chapter Nineteen

Bishop

Scarlett's stepping into the hallway with the mop and bucket when I walk back down the stairs.

Something is definitely going on with her, and it's something more than just being annoyed that she lost the bet and has to spend seven days cleaning our house as the penalty.

I know she sings loudly while she does anything she deems as boring. I've seen her do it, and I've heard her housemates complain about it.

Yet, she just cleaned our entire kitchen without singing a single note.

She looks up as I approach, her hand staying on the mop that still looks like it's in a bucket full of clean, soapy water. There's no hint of dirt in there at all.

Yeah, I should have quit my cleaning routine for at least a couple days.

"No feet on that floor until it's dry," she warns me, as if I might be about to ruin her hard work.

It's cute how defensive she looks standing there by the door with that mop handle in her hand.

“Actually, I wondered if you might want to take a break?” I ask, motioning to the lounge door next to the kitchen. “We have snacks in the lounge.”

Her bright eyes light up at the s-word. “Sounds good to me.”

She really is different today.

I need to understand why.

Putting my hand under hers on the mop handle, I feel her fingers shake as she lets the handle go.

She's quick to fold her arms around her middle to hide it, but I can see she's nervous.

That cool, confident air she usually has wrapped so tightly around her is nowhere to be found.

Her posture is slouched, and her eyes are wary.

She looks like a woman who needs the protection of Alphas.

If she would just give us the chance to show her we're meant to be hers, she'd see it's not a weakness to need something.

I let the mop lean against the wall by the doorframe, and then I move past Scarlett to open the door to the lounge.

She straightens up and nods before she steps into the room ahead of me, arms still folded across the front of her favorite band's T-shirt. I'm more of a classic rock guy myself, but I don't think that would impress her too much so I'm not going to try talking music with her.

“Oh my God,” she murmurs, moving straight past the leather sofas to the row of vending machines at the other end of the room. “This is so cool.”

“They were Scout’s idea,” I admit. “They work without money. You just need to punch in the number of whatever you want.”

She glances back at me. “Don’t tempt me. I skipped breakfast.”

“Seriously, take whatever you want. We can’t have you fainting on us.”

“I promise not to faint,” she tells me. “Scout’s honor.”

Now, she sounds a little more like herself.

I let go of the door and it closes quietly as I approach the machines.

She’s in front of the candy machine, so I go straight to where she is and punch in the code for a packet of M&Ms. They drop into the slot, and I move around her to grab them.

I offer them to her.

She smiles at me. “You didn’t just get those for yourself?”

I shrug. “I figured if you’re not going to choose, I’ll just empty the machines punching in all the codes until I work out what you like.”

She takes the M&M’s, her cheeks flushing lightly. “Don’t do that. I’ll eat something, I promise.”

I have never seen Scarlett blush before. Nothing ever seems to get to her like that.

Something's definitely going on with her today.

I hope to hell it's the realization that we belong to her.

“Well, I'll feel a whole lot better if you eat some chips and have something to drink, too.”

She nods slowly, before she breaks her gaze from me and moves to the next machine.

She picks a plain salted bag of chips, and a bottle of water from the drink selection.

I grab a water and a bag of M&Ms, just picking something so she won't have to eat on her own once we're sitting down. She looks around and her gaze fixes on the ridiculously huge TV that's mounted onto the wall, her eyes widening as she takes it in.

“Wow,” she murmurs. “That is one insane set-up you have there.”

“Is it really that much bigger than yours?” I ask, remembering the 50-inch screen I saw in their rental house's living room the last time they had a party that we were actually invited to, thanks to Cleo.

“Are you kidding? This is way bigger. And that TV was Karma's doing, by the way. I was perfectly fine with something less ... flashy.”

She follows me to the sofas and sits down on the one opposite me, her gaze still moving around the room a little. She's not totally comfortable around me, obviously.

“So, how've you been?” I ask, drawing her attention back to me.

She shrugs, putting the chips and candy by her side. “Same old Scarlett, different day.”

“Not quite,” I let slip, making her blink.

“Sorry, what?” she asks, her voice soft.

She's looking at me now with worry in her eyes.

“I can tell you're not ... feeling like yourself.”

“Oh ...” she murmurs.

“Do you feel like talking about it?”

“I don't know.” She opens and closes the water bottle, twisting the cap around in one hand and the bottle in the other. “It's kind of embarrassing.”

“I'm not here to judge you. If you want me to listen, I can do that. If you don't want to talk, I get it.”

I wait, breath held, while she considers the offer.

Chapter Twenty

Sapphire

I should have known I would screw this up. I'm not acting enough like my sister, so he knows something is wrong, and literally the only way to make this better is to give him an answer that makes sense.

Right now, all I have is the truth. My heart is broken, and I can't just smile and dust myself off. As much as I might want to, I can't pretend it didn't happen.

"I was seeing someone," I admit, looking away because I can tell this guy is attracted to Scarlett.

I don't want to hurt him, but she's never going to agree to date him, and I can't hang around here for a week acting like a wonky version of my sister without trying to offer up an explanation.

"One of those music industry guys?" he asks, sounding like he's trying way too hard to be cool about it. He rips open the pack of M&M's and they scatter into his lap and start rolling onto the sofa.

The soft, blue leather sofa that's sitting a few feet across from the identical one I'm sitting on now.

"Yeah," I lie, knowing they're the only kind of guys my sister dates. "Do you need any help with those?"

He laughs. "It's okay, but I feel like I need to tell you, I'm not usually this big of a klutz."

He gathers the candies up in one hand and looks back at me with those pretty hazel eyes.

"What happened?" he asks, giving me a concerned look that makes me feel all weak inside.

I clear my throat and take a long sip of the water, then I sit up straighter. If I'm going to admit why I'm a little off, I need to keep trying to be Scarlett underneath it all. "He broke up with me. Can you believe that?"

I give a little huff of laughter like she does when she's kinda pissed.

"No. What kind of idiot breaks up with you?"

God, the way he says that is so growly and possessive. It really makes me wish I wasn't pretending to be my sister right now. But I am, and he's talking about her. Scarlett's always been the bright, shiny twin. The one with the spark everyone is drawn to. This poor guy has no idea how badly she'd burn him if she ever actually gave him a chance to date her.

"Apparently the same kind of idiot who thought it was cool to date other women at the same time."

Something dark and dangerous flashes in his eyes, and his expression makes my heart hammer.

Of all the times I've wanted to do something bad, this is the most desperate I've felt to do it.

It takes everything in me to stay right where I am. I want so damn badly to climb into his lap and find out what happens between an Alpha and Omega when they get passionate.

Slow the hell down, Sapphire. He doesn't even know who you are.

He thinks you're a singer/songwriter with a fiery attitude and a buttload of unshakeable confidence.

He's never heard of Sapphire Faris, and he'd probably think she was boring if he had.

I might look like my ballsy twin, and we have a whole bunch of stuff in common, but we're nowhere close to being the same kind of person. I'm Little Miss Cautious. I take my suppressants every day, and I make sure I never do anything to attract unwanted attention.

I date Betas and I don't go looking for trouble.

This guy has trouble written all over him, because of who he is, and who he thinks I am.

I can't believe how badly I want to feel his lips on mine.

How much I want him to show me what it's like to take an Alpha's knot.

I stay very still, watching him while my breathing quickens.

It doesn't matter how much I want to, I'm not going to move any closer to the sexy Alpha with murder in his darkly pretty eyes.

Chapter Twenty-One

Bishop

The stab of pain when Scarlett admits she was dating some random musician is nothing compared to hearing what that asshole did to hurt her. Anger bubbles up inside me, turning quickly into rage and feeling ready to boil over. I want to use the feeling to burn him. Whoever messed her around, he has no idea the world of hurt that's in store for him.

“Who is he?” I ask, fully aware that I'm growling a demand through gritted teeth right now.

She blinks at me and presses her lips together.

I wait. Giving her time but needing to know.

“You don't know him,” she tells me, her voice quiet.

Shit. I've scared her.

She sounds strange again.

No fucking shit, dumbass.

You just sat here planning a stranger's murder inside your head while she was probably trying to figure out if she could

make a run for it before the psycho sitting across from her could make a move.

I seriously need to calm the hell down.

She doesn't look scared, exactly, and I'll take that as a good sign, but if I don't get a grip on my emotions, I'm going to mess things up before our true mate gets a chance to see why she should be with us.

I look down and see melted chocolate bleeding through my fingers.

Damn it. I've made a mess.

The dark liquid drips onto my jeans and I let out a soft curse.

"Oh no," Scarlett murmurs.

"I need to go clean this up," I tell her, barely able to concentrate as I get to my feet.

The melting candy feels gross in my fist, and I really don't want to drip it all over the carpets.

I put my fist against my chest, wrapping the bottom of my T-shirt around it.

Scarlett gets to her feet and dashes to the door.

My heart stops until I realize she's holding the door open for me.

Oh, thank God. She's not leaving.

"I'll be right back," I promise, before I leave the room.

She shoots me a weak smile.

Whoever the guy is, he's officially on my shit list.

I march upstairs, and Rueben instantly appears in his bedroom doorway.

His curious gaze moves to my wrapped hand, and he straightens, raising his eyebrows.

“Did you punch a wall, or something?”

I let out a sigh, and nod at him to follow me into the bathroom.

He trails after me. “I got dressed.”

“I can see that,” I tell him, though I'm not sure sweatpants and a tank top really constitutes getting dressed. It looks more like he's trying to show off his body while Scarlett's in the house. If it wasn't a regular look for him, I might think that's what he's doing.

“So, can I hang around downstairs, then?” he asks.

I move to the sink and drop the mess of melted chocolate and shell pieces into the basin.

“Ooh,” Rueben murmurs, looking over my shoulder. “M&M's.”

“They melted while she was telling me about her ex-boyfriend,” I confess, growling out that last word. I don't like the way it feels in my mouth.

I turn on the faucet and start rinsing my fingers.

“Her ex-boyfriend,” Rueben repeats. “Did she call him that? Because I really can't see her using that word. I think the last

time she was talking about a guy he was ... what did she call it ... hmm.”

He stands next to me, lost in thought.

I know better than to interrupt him.

He’ll either remember, or he won’t.

Saying something now will only intrude on his process.

I concentrate on washing my hand, which takes a little longer than I expect.

It takes scrubbing under my nails to get the last of the chocolate off.

I doubt I’ll be reaching for another pack of those again soon.

“A bedwarmer!” Rueben exclaims, smiling triumphantly that he was able to remember the word.

I kind of wish he hadn’t remembered. It’s way more casual than boyfriend and it absolutely sounds like a word Scarlett would use, but I don’t want to think about her with another guy like that.

Waiting for her to want something more than the party lifestyle she’s been living has been a strange kind of torture. The moment I knew she was meant for us, that we had a true mate, no other woman could hold an ounce of appeal for me. I quit dating overnight. Scout did the same. Rueben was still hitting night clubs for a little bit with his younger friends, but he quickly admitted that it didn’t feel the same anymore.

And Gus, well, he hasn’t cared about dating since college.

Something happened back then that he won't talk about.

He hasn't dated for as long as I've known him. He says it's a waste of time.

This is different, and I know he knows that. I just don't think he can admit it.

I hope having Scarlett around will help him see this is our destiny.

There were times I when I questioned staying in Silver Valley, but the second Scarlett showed up and I could tell what she was going to mean to us, I knew why we never left.

She's the reason. We had to be here to meet her.

If we'd moved on that never would have happened.

I realize Rueben's talking, and that I've zoned out on him.

It can get hard not to. He has a habit of talking ceaselessly about things he's excited about. It can be a little much, sometimes.

I turn the faucet off and tune back into what he's saying.

"... definitely likes the kitten, so maybe I should ask her to name him?"

Right. He wants to go spend time with Scarlett.

"Sure," I tell him as I pick up a towel and dry my hands.

It'll probably cheer her up more than speaking to me would.

Pretty sure I didn't say anything to make her feel better about her breakup.

“Wait. Did you say sure?” Rueben asks, raising his eyebrows.

“You can go downstairs. Just, try not to talk Scarlett’s ears off, okay? She’s not used to that.”

He smiles. “Relax. She’s our true mate, right? That makes her the perfect match for us.”

He has a point.

True mates are supposed to be perfectly matched.

I don’t know what it says about us that ours spent so long acting as if she didn’t feel the same things we could feel, pushing us away at every attempt to get to know her, but I know how free-spirited Scarlett is, and accepting a mating bond to a pack would be like saying yes to a marriage proposal.

It’s a forever bond, a lifelong commitment.

I don’t know if our mate is ready for that, but I know we’re willing to wait for as long as she needs.

I just hope she’s started to get closer to accepting it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rueben

Darting down the stairs before my pack's lead Alpha can change his mind, I completely forget it would be smart to bring the kitten with me. By the time I think of that, I'm already at the door to the lounge, and Scarlett's looking up at me from where she's sitting on the couch, eating a bag of chips.

"Hey," I greet, taking in the elevator look she's giving me and feeling glad I went for my most casually sexy outfit. Ladies love sweatpants. At least they do when there's Alpha cock involved.

"Uh, hey," she murmurs. "Where's ..."

"Oh, Cap's still up there cleaning his hands. He'll probably be at it for a while. You know how he is about cleanliness. What am I saying? You probably don't know. He usually tries to hide his OCD streak. Except he didn't do that so well, did he? You won't find a speck of dust in this house. I'd place a bet on it, but I guess that's what landed you here in the first place."

And I'm rambling, so I stop. I suppress the urge to apologize for it, knowing my apology would only end up longer than the original ramble.

"Cap?" Scarlett asks, raising her eyebrows.

"Oh, right. That's firefighter speak. We don't always call him Cap, but we never call him Jack."

"So, then, what *do* you call him?" she asks, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Bishop, same as everyone else."

"Right," she murmurs, nodding.

I step into the room, and perch on the arm of the couch across from where my mate is sitting.

She uncaps a half-full bottle of water and sips at it.

It's funny. I've seen her chug beer and gulp down cans of soda.

I think this is the first time I've watched her drink like she's self-conscious.

"So, who's the guy we need to go beat up?" I ask.

She caps the bottle and presses her lips together before she looks at me.

"No one, really. You wouldn't know him, and you're not obligated to hurt him for me."

"If he upset you, he deserves to have someone upset him even harder. Preferably with their fists."

She gives me a wry smile. “I’d rather forget the whole thing, honestly.”

Maybe she would, but it’s probably not going to be that easy.

I don’t know who the guy is, or what he meant to her, but any vaguely intimate relationship can leave scars that need time to heal.

“Then we should talk about something else. Like what I should name the kitten.”

“Didn’t you say he belongs to someone?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Well, yeah, but we’ve got to call him something while he’s here.”

“I thought you did call him something?”

“Not really. Cap’s been calling him the probie because I joked about giving him that name. It’s what we call new firefighters still in their probationary period. It’s not really a name.”

“Oh,” she says.

“What would you name him?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I’ve never had a pet.”

“So, you wouldn’t call him Xane or Kian?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at her.

She’s Chaos Burning’s biggest fangirl. I know at least that much. Those guys all have crazy rockstar names. I can’t remember the other two off the top of my head.

She blinks at me, frowning a little. “Uh ...”

“We’re gonna burn this whole world down,” I sing the only line I can remember from one of their insanely emo songs. I’ve been trying to get into them, but so far, if you ask me, they kind of suck.

And despite my efforts, Scarlett’s still looking at me like I’ve started speaking in tongues.

Huh. Maybe that ex-boyfriend of hers was a big deal. I can’t imagine the woman I know not immediately giving me shit for pronouncing the band member’s names wrong or for mangling one of their hit songs with my popstar-esque singing voice, but so far, no reaction.

This is starting to freak me out, and I really don’t want to end up rambling about the more random details of her favorite band’s lives, just because I hyper focused on knowing stuff about them to try and impress her the next chance I got. Somehow, I don’t think she’s in the mood to be stunned by my knowledge, and I don’t want it to sound like I stalk Chaos Burning, either.

“I should grab the probie. You really look like you need hugs, and I’m guessing the kitten will be more welcome in your lap than me.”

I leave before I can embarrass myself any further.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sapphire

Rueben rushes out of the room faster than Bishop did. I'm glad I know both of their names now, but I don't know what Rueben was talking about when he started asking what I would name the kitten.

"Zane or Ian," I murmur, checking my pocket and realizing Scarlett's phone is in her purse, in the other room. I doubt google would be much help anyway, but she might have guys with those names in her phone. I don't think I've ever heard of them before, but she knows a lot of people.

It takes me a second to connect the dots between what he was singing to the image on Scarlett's old band shirt. *Burn This Whole World Down, The Tour.*

Of course. It's a Chaos Burning song.

My face heats up.

He just sang a line from maybe the most famous Chaos Burning song, ever, and I didn't even notice.

Scarlett would be shaking her head so hard right now.

She's their biggest fan, and clearly these guys know that.

Oh, my God. The main singer's name is Zane, spelled with an X.

That's why he thinks I'd name the kitten Xane.

I'm acting like a freaking zombie. I never should have agreed to this.

Now they both know I'm bruised from a breakup, and they think it's affecting me so badly that I've had a personality change. I seriously need to pull myself together. I'm not acting like my sister right now, and that's supposed to be what I'm here for.

All I need to do is make them believe I'm Scarlett so I can pay off the bet she made with them.

It's the single easiest thing I've ever had to do.

At least, it should have been.

These guys know way more about my sister than neighbors' who've barely interacted with her socially should.

Clearly, they're completely besotted, like I already suspected.

I'm used to feeling like the whole world is in love with Scarlett.

Everyone who meets us is always drawn to the animal magnetism she seems to exude.

This is the same thing, only made a little worse because it feels like I'm the one they want, and I'm not. I'm just

Scarlett's boring-ass shadow, her quiet twin.

I'm not the one they want, and I'm not really attracted to them.

Hah! I'm kidding myself on that second thing, but a girl's got to do what a girl's got to do.

They're not hot, Sapphire. They're crushing on Scarlett, so you'd have to be crazy to go there.

I take a few deep breaths and tell myself to relax.

It's going to be fine. This is still an easy task.

They won't try anything romantic while they know I'm getting over someone else.

They seem sweet. They've been acting like real gentlemen.

I don't think I need to worry about anything happening, as long as I don't start falling for them.

I know Scarlett would never have asked me to do this if she didn't believe these guys to be harmless.

I sip the rest of my water until the bottle's empty, and I get to my feet just as I hear someone coming back down the hall.

Bishop stops at the door. He's in a new shirt, and he looks a whole lot less murderous.

"Hey," he murmurs. "How are you feeling?"

"Better now that I had a snack," I admit, trying not to notice how good he looks.

It's impossible. He's a ten.

“Good,” he says, flashing a smile.

“Can you point me to the bathroom?” I ask.

“Right over here,” he tells me, opening the door across the hall. “I need to go out for a couple things, but I’ll be back in an hour. Tell Rueben if you run out of anything you need. I can grab it while I’m gone.”

“Sure, thanks.” I give him a smile, my heart sinking just a little.

If I wasn’t here as Scarlett, I might be disappointed that he didn’t come back to keep talking to me.

As it is, things are complicated enough. I seriously don’t need to be crushing on guys who have the major hots for my sister. I don’t need the emotional flashbacks to every high school crush I ever developed.

High school was definitely the worst. Going to college in the city together was a little less awful.

We found our own groups there, and the guys we were interested in were completely different.

She still got way more attention than me, but I was used to that by then.

It didn’t bother me.

Not like this does.

I slip into the bathroom while Bishop leaves the house.

It’s only a week. I can handle it.

I really hope so.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Bishop

Grocery shopping used to be an early morning task, before I found out Scarlett's housemate Cleo does her fresh food shop mid-morning on a Friday. It feels a little sneaky to meet her for coffee, but she's become a friend, and I could really use some advice about what's going on with my true mate. Cleo might understand what's going on with that.

If not, she's always a good sounding board.

I head out early enough to get what I need to make meals over the weekend, and once the Jeep is packed up with the groceries, I cross over to the coffee shop at the corner of the marketplace.

As usual, when we meet for coffee, Cleo's already at the table at the back of the room, a bag full of berries and fresh cut roses sitting on the empty chair beside her. The tall redhead has a glamorous style that really turns heads in Silver Valley, which she admits she cultivates because it puts up a barrier that most people don't want to have to navigate past. It weeds out the unsavory types, as she would say.

“Jack!” she calls out, waving me over.

I wave back and put in my order at the counter before I head over to the table.

“How’s it going today, Cleo?”

“Well,” she says, as I sit down across from her. “I’ve decided to write a book.”

“Interesting. Where did that idea come from?”

“I was talking to my mother,” she says, picking up her teacup with both hands. “And while she harangued me about my choice of career, I realized I might just have it in me to write about murder.”

I laugh. “Let me guess. The book is about a lounge singer who murders her Mom?”

She takes a sip of her drink and puts the cup down. “Of course not. That would be too obvious. My mother would see right through it. And I’d never get away with the real murder if I wrote the book about it first.”

She taps her head with one finger.

“Well, that would make it harder to deny your involvement, I guess.”

The barista gives us a strange look as she places my coffee down in front of me.

Cleo’s dark sense of humor seems to make people nervous.

I think it’s the delivery. She never sounds like she’s joking.

“So, spill the tea,” she demands, as the server walks away. “How’s your plan going so far?”

“It’s been kind of strange,” I admit. “Was Scarlett seeing someone up until recently?”

“Hm,” she murmurs, sitting back in her seat. “No one that she spoke about, but she doesn’t always mention her entanglements. They’re usually a flash in the pan. She says that’s how she likes it, of course. That said, she did seem a bit subdued when she got back from her trip to the city.”

“She was in the city?” I ask.

“Work trip, apparently. I suppose she’s had a few of those recently. This was the first time she came back acting like ... well, unlike herself, I suppose.” She picks up her cup in both hands again.

“How long was she gone?”

“It was an overnight trip. She drove out there Wednesday afternoon, came back Thursday right before dinner.” She sips her tea.

“Was she supposed to be gone for longer?”

Cleo shrugs and sets her cup back down. “Scarlett does her own thing. She’s usually vague about details. Sometimes she changes her mind on a whim.”

She’s not wrong, and she knows Scarlett a lot better than I do.

“I’m sorry I don’t know anything useful,” she tells me. “But if she’s just been hurt by one of those idiot musicians’ she always goes crazy for, then maybe she’s finally ready for someone who’ll treat her better. Every cloud has a silver lining. This could be yours.”

Sighing, I nod. Despite not finding out anything useful, I feel a little better.

I knew it wasn’t going to be easy to get Scarlett to see us as her pack, and with her recent breakup it looks like we’ve got an even rockier path ahead of us now.

I can’t let that make me doubt that she’s ours.

True mates come along once in a lifetime.

We’ll do whatever it takes to show her we’re hers.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sapphire

I go straight from the bathroom to the kitchen, heading for my sister's ridiculously huge purse. It takes a fair amount of riffling around to lay my hands on her phone, and once I have it in my hand, I pause.

My emotions are a little raw right now, and I don't want to be typing out an irritable text message to Scarlett only for Rueben to walk back into the room with his excitable energy and a baby cat in his hands.

The more I think about it, the madder I am at Scarlett for asking me to do this without telling me the real reason she didn't want to do it herself.

When she said it was embarrassing, I should have known she was covering something up. Nothing ever embarrasses my sister so much that she can't do something about it on her own.

She didn't want me to come out here because she's embarrassed that she lost a bet.

She doesn't hate cleaning so much that she would have begged me to switch places with her, either.

Those were just her excuses. I can see that now.

There's really only one reason she would have sent me out here.

She knows these guys are into her, so she thinks they'll automatically be into me.

Considering how boring she thinks they are, she probably thinks this is killing two birds with one stone. If I like them, it gets them to leave her alone and it gets me over my loser ex.

I doubt she's considered the fact that we're not interchangeable.

She probably thinks a quick fling will solve everything for everyone involved.

Calm down, Sapphire. You don't know that.

You're spinning out. Stop, and take a damn breath!

Taking a calming breath, I make myself put the phone back into the purse.

I don't know anything for sure, and I know my sister can be reckless, but she knows I'm not like that.

I'm going a little nuts because I like these guys, and they like her.

One look at my reflection in that bathroom mirror, and I knew.

She knows they like her. She knows they made that bet because they're into her.

She should have told me, but if she had I wouldn't have agreed to do this.

It's torture. I had no idea this was what I was coming out here to experience.

Spending any more time with these sweet, attractive Alphas doesn't feel like a smart idea.

I don't want to fall for them, and I know I will.

I seriously want to call her, but I can't. Not until I'm back in her room.

I need an explanation, and an apology.

I'll give her the chance to give me those before I decide what comes next.

She deserves the benefit of the doubt.

And these guys ... They deserve the truth.

If she's not interested in them, she should have told them that straight up.

When I turn around, Rueben's walking past the kitchen door, furry bundle in his arms.

I head toward the door, and he steps back into view, stopping and raising an eyebrow at me.

"Back to work already?" he asks. "Because seriously, you don't really need to clean anything. Even if you do, Cap will be all over it again later. No offence to your skills with the

mop or whatever. He's just built that way. Does not know how to relax."

"I was just checking my phone," I admit, before I move closer to get another look at the kitten.

Baby animals are the cutest, and this tiny grey and black striped kitty is absolutely adorable.

"Well, you can hold him while I move the couches next door," Rueben says. "There's a game on tonight. I know they're small fry, but we're big Tempests fans."

"Oh ..." I start, stopping myself before I can admit I still support the Crystal Lake Crocs.

Scarlett doesn't follow sports. She was a cheerleader in high school, I was the basketball fan.

If we'd had a female team, I might have tried to join.

Scarlett tried to convince me to start one.

It was kind of sweet. She even attempted to do it for me when I wouldn't, but everyone knew it wasn't really for her, so we were never going to get enough sign ups.

The memory makes me smile.

"Do you like basketball, at all?" Rueben asks, as he holds the kitten out to me.

"Uh, no. Not really," I murmur, feeling kind of mad that I can't be honest with him.

I take the kitten out of his hands, heart melting when he lets out a tiny miaow.

He's so soft and fluffy. He's also kind of squirmy, but he settles after a few seconds.

"I think this little guy's kind of attached to you," I tell Rueben.

He smiles, clearly pleased by it. "I'm kind of attached to him too. I'm hoping his owner doesn't really want him back."

"Aw. Who wouldn't want this cutie back?" I ask as I follow Rueben into the hallway.

He shrugs as he walks into the lounge. "It's wishful thinking, I know. Maybe once I need to give him back, I can go rescue a new kitty from the pound. Now that I've got all the stuff for a cat, it would be kind of a waste not to."

"Be honest, was that your plan all along when you rescued this guy?"

He smiles again. "No, but maybe it should have been. It is now."

I watch as he moves the couches around as if they're made of air.

His muscles are easy to see in the tank top.

"When did you get the tattoos?" I ask, noticing they're only on his right arm and they're pretty faded. Now that I know he's into basketball, I can see the Tempests' silvery-grey logo in amongst some less obvious designs.

"Oh, those," he says. "I was a dumb kid. Literally. I had a fake id when I was sixteen. Guess what I used it to do?"

I laugh. “Seriously? You went out and got all those at sixteen?”

“Well mostly. I didn’t get them all at once. I got one a month for a while. I think I was close to eighteen when I stopped. It didn’t seem as thrilling once it was going to be legal.”

“You got those for the thrill of it?”

“It was kind of a thing with me for years. I was always chasing one high or another. Tattoos and drinking were the big things in my teens. After high school, I gambled for a bit. That was less fun. Alpha instinct helped, to a point, but eventually I was betting on stuff I had no clue about, and I was losing, and losing. My Mom eventually sat me down and told me I was going to see a psychologist. That’s when I got diagnosed. My meds help a lot. At first, I wasn’t sure being medicated was a good thing, and I kept going off them. You can imagine how that went.” He gives me a wry smile. “I thought I knew best, but when my Mom sat me down again and made me see the vicious cycle I was running around in, I knew. I had to stick to the meds. God, that was hard. It took so damn long to get into a routine with them, but once I did, everything started clicking into place. I quit screwing around, quit trying different college courses, trying to get something to stick. I’m not built for school. Once I realized that, everything got a little easier. I stopped beating myself up about the stuff I couldn’t do, and I found something I was good at.”

He lets out a sigh. “Sorry. One of the things with my ADHD is I can ramble on a bit long ...”

“Don’t apologize. I understand. Besides, I like listening to you.”

God, did I think he was smiling before? He beams at me now, and his whole face lights up.

“I *knew* you liked us,” he says. “I mean, not at first. And not for a long time. For a while I kind of thought you might hate us, or at least think we were so boring it might turn you boring to be around us. And ... I’m starting to ramble again, so I’ll stop before it can turn into a whole thing.”

Damn, Scarlett. How can these guys be so into you when they don’t even really feel like you like them?

It’s bad enough that my sister can’t see how sweet and sexy they are.

If I were her ...

No, Sapphire. We’re not playing that game.

Rueben goes back to arranging the couches. When he’s done, he has them side by side in front of the TV, just slightly angled inwards so there’s a bit of a space in the middle. He moves past the vending machines and pulls a stool out from under a small breakfast bar area I didn’t pay much attention to when I was in here before.

He brings it over to the space between the couches and sets it down there. Then, he lifts the right arm of the sofa that’s closest to the door and takes a remote control out of the hidden storage area.

“You mind if I put the Sports Channel on in the background? I just want to check some stats before tonight. I missed a couple of last weeks’ games.”

“I don’t mind.” I sit down with the kitten, who’s started to purr in my arms.

He moves around the couch and sinks into the seat, right next to me.

“Wow,” Rueben says, glancing down at the kitten, his voice soft. “You must have the magic touch. He’s sleeping.”

“Well, he’s a baby. I’ve heard they like to do a lot of that kind of thing.”

“Maybe that’s true,” he says, hitting the mute button as he turns the TV on. “But you do realize you’re stuck here at least until he wakes back up now, right?”

He’s so cute. “I don’t think you’ve thought that through, Rueben. He’s taking a nap, he’s not down for the night.”

Rueben shrugs. “I guess we’ll see.”

He sets the remote down and puts his arm around my shoulders as he sits back.

It feels kind of nice, and it’s completely harmless so I just raise an eyebrow when he looks at me as if he’s checking that I’m okay with the move.

His lips twitch as he looks back at the screen.

“I knew you liked me.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Rueben

We get about thirty minutes of relaxation time on the couch before the probie wakes up and decides he's bored of Scarlett's lap. He chews on her shirt and bats at my hands before he leaps to the ground and goes racing around the room like a mini-tornado made of fluff.

"It was definitely just a nap," Scarlett says, giving me a wry smile as I'm forced to get up from the couch and attempt to capture the kitten before he can get up to anything he shouldn't.

She gets to her feet at the same time and goes straight to the door to close it.

"Smart move," I tell her. "Thanks."

"Maybe I just don't want him to make a mess in the kitchen," she says. "I did just clean it."

I laugh. "Bishop's going to clean it again after he makes dinner anyway. That's like his routine, or whatever. He can't

not do it. He tried last night, but he just ended up coming down here after he went to bed to do it then.”

“Cute *and* housetrained,” she murmurs. “Where can I get myself one of those?”

“Um, right here in this house,” I remind her, making her face flush just slightly.

I’ve got to admit, I like how different she seems today.

It’s probably kind of messed up to think that, considering it seems to be because she’s feeling more vulnerable than usual, but this softer side of her is incredibly appealing.

I can’t say I usually notice my Alpha instincts outside of work, but right now all I can think about is taking care of her. She’s my mate, and I want her close, where I can see her, and hold her, and make sure she’s safe.

“What?” she asks softly.

I realize I’m staring at her, instead of dealing with the kitten who’s running wildly around the room. I want nothing more than to take the two steps forward to close the gap between us, and lean down to kiss those glossy, red-painted lips.

It’s been three years since we met. Almost three and a half years since I last went to bed with someone. Just under three years since I last really, properly kissed someone, and the same amount of time since I completely quit bothering to go near other women.

One little kiss might seem like a perfectly chaste and innocent move, but I know it wouldn’t be.

The second we touched I'd barely be able to control myself. She wouldn't know what hit her.

I can't pull something that risky.

Even if it does drive me crazy to know she was with some other guy until recently.

I can't stand the thought of that now.

She's not supposed to be with some dumb idiot who would cheat on her and discard her like that.

She's supposed to be with us. We've been here all this time, waiting for her to notice, to acknowledge that we're hers. She has to feel it. She can't not.

Even if she doesn't understand what it means.

"Stay for dinner, okay?" I ask.

She blinks at me. "Um ... It's barely noon."

"I know," I admit. "Just ... Stay for dinner. Bishop's a good cook, and he won't expect you to do any dishes afterward."

I don't care what time it is, or what the rules of the stupid bet are.

If she walks out that door, we have no guarantee that she'll come back.

Bishop thinks she's afraid to commit. He thinks that's why she's been staying away.

If that's true, then it would be really dumb not to at least try to get her to stick around a little longer.

“I don’t know,” she says. “We have a whole taking turns to order food thing going on next door. If I stay, I’ll be messing up the schedule.”

Damn. She really doesn’t want to stay any later than she needs to.

Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned Bishop’s cleaning habits.

Clearly, the best way to keep her around is to use the lost bet’s consequences.

If there’s really no cleaning for her to do, she’s going to end up leaving soon.

“You know, there is one place Bishop never cleans.”

She raises an eyebrow at me.

Yeah, it’s risky, but I don’t think she’s a clean freak so it should be fine.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve never vacuumed under my bed,” I admit.

“Well, I guess I did agree to cleaning the whole house, but I think I’d rather finish up down here first. I’ll be back once the tiny tempest is done rolling around the floor in here. I need to get the dusting supplies from the kitchen. Where’s the vacuum?”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sapphire

Getting back to cleaning seems like the smartest move. The house might already be clean, but doing something other than snuggling up on the couch together will stop me from wishing these guys had been my neighbors' rather than Scarlett's. I doubt they would have noticed me if I was, so it's dumb to even think about that.

No more thinking! Just clean.

I find out the other two downstairs rooms other than the bathroom are a gym and a study with one full wall of bookshelves. There's a crazy mix of fiction and non-fiction on the shelves, and despite the large area, everything is dust free.

Bishop must spend so damn long cleaning every day to get the house looking this perfect.

I end up dusting around, looking for anything he might have missed.

I find the occasional tiny piece of dusting cloth, but that's about it.

The vacuuming seems a little more worthwhile.

It's got to be the cleanest bachelor pad that exists.

I take my time with the work while Rueben puts the kitten back upstairs. He returns to lounge on one of the couches while I clean that room.

Bishop comes home once I've started on the bathroom.

I'm almost done with downstairs, and it's not even 2 p.m.

If I do anything more, I'll be done with this supposed week-long job in a day, rather than a week.

Scarlett might have the bargaining power to get away with changing the rules like that, but I would feel weird about it. A deal's a deal, and clearly Bishop likes this whole place to shine like a diamond.

I can hear him cooking in the kitchen as I put the vacuum back into the hallway closet.

Rueben comes back down the stairs as I'm closing the closet door.

"Ready to come upstairs, yet?" he asks.

"I think I'll save that for tomorrow," I tell him.

I might go insane if I have to re-clean things that don't need it all over again tomorrow.

"Don't tell me you're ready to leave," he says, giving me sad eyes.

"I kind of have work stuff to get back to," I lie, not wanting to make him feel bad.

“At least, stay for lunch.”

Whatever Bishop’s cooking, it does smell really good, and I have to get my purse out of the kitchen before I can leave anyway ... “Sure.”

He beams at me, which makes the decision feel worthwhile, even if a second later I’m feeling guilty of leading him on.

I had no idea this switch was going to get so damn complicated.

Rueben reaches for my hand, and I give it without thinking.

He leads me into the kitchen.

“Scarlett’s staying for lunch,” he says as we walk by Bishop at the stove.

He’s making some kind of soup, I think. It smells amazing.

I suddenly feel like I’m starving.

I pull out the chair next to my purse, and Rueben takes the seat directly across from me.

“We named the kitten,” he tells Bishop.

I blink at him. “We did?”

“You called him a tiny tempest, remember? It seemed to suit him, and considering we’re all Tempests supporters here, it seemed appropriate.”

“You’re giving him back when his owner can take him,” Bishop reminds him, a hint of threat in his tone. “Named, or not.”

“I know,” Rueben says. “I didn’t steal him. I’m just looking after him.”

“Well, you can drive out to Cressidan City hospital and let his owner know about that after lunch.”

“After lunch?” Rueben complains. “I’ll miss the start of the game later.”

Bishop shrugs. “It was your idea to bring the kitten home.”

“No good deed goes unpunished,” Rueben murmurs.

“You could just call the hospital and pass along a message,” I suggest, making Rueben’s eyes light up.

“That sounds way better.”

“It’ll save time and gas money.”

“I’ll do *that*, after lunch,” Rueben agrees.

Bishop shakes his head from where he’s standing over the stove top.

He starts to bring bowls out of the cupboard, and silverware out of a drawer.

It feels weird to be sitting at a table waiting for someone else to put food in front of me.

I’ve been cooking for myself for so long that this kind of feels like being home in Crystal Lake where my mom won’t let me lift a finger.

“Do you always cook?” I ask as Bishop starts putting things down on the table.

Place mats come first, followed by silverware.

“He cooks fifty percent of the time,” Rueben blurts before Bishop can open his mouth. “He gets the rest of us to take turns. I usually just call for pizza when it’s my turn. I can’t cook. I can make a mean sandwich, but that’s about it.”

Bishop puts a plate of fresh bread in the middle of the table, and a slab of butter in a dish next to it.

Rueben goes straight for a thick slice of bread, buttering it up quickly.

“Scout is always trying new stuff he sees online,” Rueben goes on, between bites. “It’s usually pretty good. Gus has a couple recipes he sticks to, so he’s our roast dinner guy, usually. Sometimes he’ll do mac and cheese or lasagne.”

Four guys in a house together, and only one of them can’t really cook.

This is like a dream living situation, for the right woman.

Too bad I’m not that woman.

Bishop puts bowls of soup in front of us.

I smile at him. “Thanks.”

He sits down at my side which is kind of the head of the table.

If I had to guess, that’s his usual seat. He’s the lead Alpha in this pack, and the captain of these guys at work too, so their power dynamic is pretty well laid out.

I haven't met the other two guys, yet, and I can't help wondering if they're Alphas.

Packs can be a mix of Alphas, Betas and Omegas, and the dynamics can get complicated.

These two seem pretty content about their place in this one. They feel settled.

I taste the soup and I can get why Rueben might think it would sell me on staying for dinner.

"This is so good," I tell Bishop.

I have no idea what kind it is. I just now it's spiced perfectly and it's delicious.

"Mmm," Rueben agrees. "As always."

He's somehow already halfway done when I look at his bowl.

I guess dunking huge pieces of bread into it soaks the soup up pretty fast.

I try a piece, and I can't believe how good it is.

"Oh, my God. Do you bake this yourself?" I ask Bishop.

"He does," Rueben murmurs through a full mouth.

Bishop gives him a warning look. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

Rueben rolls his eyes and swallows before he says, "Sorry."

"We have a bread maker," Bishop tells me. "It makes it easy. I try to make things from scratch as much as possible, because

there's so much garbage in most of the pre-packed stuff you get in supermarkets."

"I like to cook," I admit. "When I have time. Those pre-packed meals and snacks are just so easy. Real cooking takes time."

"That's true," Bishop admits. "I'm guessing your work takes priority?"

"Basically." It's sort of true for me, but it's especially true for Scarlett.

"She can't stay for dinner because she needs to get some work done tonight," Rueben adds.

I shrug, still feeling guilty for turning down that offer. "Got to keep hustling. A music career isn't born out of sitting back and waiting for something good to happen."

Scarlett usually says stuff like that with a bit more enthusiasm behind it, but it's exactly the kind of thing she always says when anyone asks why she doesn't take too many vacations.

"I'm sure it isn't," Bishop agrees. "You're welcome to stay for dinner any time you like."

"Thanks," I murmur, hoping it's the last time they ask.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sapphire

I dart up the path to Scarlett's rented house, and I find the door unlocked again. I leave it that way this time. I guess everyone has locks on their bedroom doors, and this is a quiet, low crime kind of town, but still. It feels crazy to leave the front door unlocked. It's just asking for trouble.

Taking Scarlett's phone out of her purse, I dial my number as I walk up the stairs to her bedroom.

She takes her time to answer the call. I'm already locked in her room and switching her laptop on when she picks up.

"Was it awful?" she asks quickly. "I'm so sorry. Those guys are so annoying."

"Why didn't you tell me they're Alphas?" I ask, going with that first, because it's not linked to strong emotions and I'm still feeling kind of raw.

"Oh," she says. "I don't know. I didn't really think about that. They're four guys who own a house in a rich

neighborhood. I kind of just assumed you knew, I guess. Sorry, Saph. I honestly didn't think it mattered."

I let out a sigh. "Of course it matters. I'm an *Omega*, Scarlett. If I forgot my suppressants ..."

"But you didn't, did you? You never forget that stuff." Now, she's back to sounding like her usual overconfident self, and I'm starting to feel really annoyed.

"I didn't, but I could have. Then, what?"

"Then, maybe you find out you're never going to perfume like me, or maybe you have a fun week with a bunch of Alphas you'll never have to see again?"

"Are you kidding me, Scarlett?" I feel my voice raising and I press my lips together.

"You could use a little fun, Sapphire. Especially after ..."

"They're *in love with you!* I'm not going to sleep with a bunch of Alphas who wish I was you, Scarlett. I might be hopeless when it comes to men, but I'm not that desperate."

"What? They're not in love with me," she scoffs.

"Of course they are!" I complain. "Why the hell do you think they made that bet with you in the first place? They're seriously into you, and I can't believe you didn't tell me this was the real reason you didn't want to come out here."

"The real reason? I don't know what you're talking about, Saph."

"Just ... Tell me you don't have feelings for any of them."

“I don’t,” she says, sounding certain. “Sapphire, I’m sorry for however they’re acting, but I’ve never shown the slightest bit of interest in any of them, and there’s a good reason for that. They’re not my type and they never will be. I don’t care how boring I get, I’ll never in my life get so boring that I would ever think about settling for the Alphas next door.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like they’ve gotten that message,” I grumble, not really sure why I’m still mad at her. It’s not her fault they’ve fallen for her, like most guys she meets. It’s not like she led them on. I know she would never do something like that.

“Then they’re dumber than I thought, and I’m sorry you’re stuck with them.” She pauses to sigh. “Do you want to drop this and come home?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, not feeling comfortable enough to confess I might like the guys who like her.

She can’t do anything about that, and I have no idea what I should do about it.

They don’t like me. They don’t even know I exist.

Scarlett hasn’t told them she has a sister, let alone an identical twin.

“It’s okay if you want to come home, Saph. I’ll still go to that resort for you if you want me to, either way. Or we can forget the whole thing. That’s okay, too. I’m fine with whatever you decide. This is your rodeo.”

She means it, and I wish that made the decision simple.

I let out a sigh.

I don't want to run away from my feelings, but letting something happen with those Alphas would be a bad idea, too. Leaving would end this whole charade, but if I did, I wouldn't want to go back to the reality of my own life right now, either. I know I can't get on that flight, and I'm not ready to face the fact that the job I've been working toward is too far out of reach for me.

I didn't go to college and live for years as a Beta just to take a bottom of the rung job that I can never call a career.

"I don't know what my stupid neighbors have said or done to upset you, Saph, but they don't love me, okay? If they're attracted to how I look, well, then, you need to take a look in the mirror and remember we're identical. They don't know enough about me to love me, or even to like me, really."

"You've lived beside them for three years, Scar."

"And we've let them come to what, six parties in all of that time? That's nothing, Saph. They mean nothing to me. Like, seriously. They don't even like Chaos Burning. Who doesn't like Chaos Burning?"

"A bunch of firefighters who maybe don't like the message that band relays?" I ask, making her laugh.

"I never thought of that," she admits. "Because I don't think about them. At all. Okay? You know what, you have my permission to go makeup free and dress how you want to for

this if you even want to keep going. They're not going to notice. I promise."

I seriously doubt that, but it does make me feel a little better.

"If you're still cool with taking that flight for me, I'm still okay with cleaning for you," I tell her.

"Are you sure?" she asks. "Take your time, Saph. Maybe it isn't the best time for you, and I'll be fine with that ..."

"I'm all good," I confirm, sounding a little firmer about the choice.

"You're more than good," she tells me. "You're the best sister ever, and I promise, after this week, I'm going to take some time off work and we can go do something cool together. Whatever you want. It doesn't have to be my kind of cool. Okay?"

I smile at the thought of actually taking a vacation and spending time with my wayward sister.

It's been a long damn time since we did anything like that.

"That sounds great."

"Good. I'm looking forward to it already."

I feel a lot more relaxed once I hang up the call. I take off the yellow Converse sneakers and lie down on the bed, feeling like I need to rest my eyes for a second. That second becomes a few minutes, and those few minutes become a lot longer.

I'm startled back awake by a knock at the door, and I see the room has gotten dark while I've been sleeping. I switch on the

lamp beside the bed, and I stretch as I sit up.

“Scarlett, are you alive in there?” Karma’s bemused voice floats through the door.

“Sorry, I was napping,” I call back as I get to my feet.

“Well, dinner’s getting cold downstairs,” she says. “So, hurry up.”

“I’ll be there in a sec,” I tell her, not opening the door.

I really don’t want her to see how clean Scarlett’s room is.

If anyone can match my sister’s level of messiness, it’s Karma.

She’s always posting selfies on her socials that have been taken in her bomb site of a bedroom, and it looks way worse than Scarlett’s room did before I organized it.

Karma would definitely think something strange was going on if she saw this room right now.

It probably wouldn’t take her too long to realize Scarlett was just in the city, where her identical twin happens to live, before she came back acting a bit off. Apparently, she knows we did this kind of thing in high school. She might work out we’re doing it again now.

I go into Scarlett’s bathroom and clean up for dinner.

I remember what Scarlett said to me about makeup and clothes, but I take a few minutes to reapply the lipstick because her friends are not her neighbors. Those women would be asking what was going on if I went makeup free.

Scarlett never usually leaves the house without her signature bold lip. I really need to make sure her girlfriends' don't find anything else to question about me.

They already noticed my lack of a tattoo last night, which I told them I had to cover up to meet my mother in the city for a coffee yesterday. Luckily I shrugged it off in exactly the right way.

I head downstairs once I look a bit more Scarlett.

There's Mexican food on the table tonight, and it doesn't look half as good as the lunch Bishop made earlier today. The takeout containers are all open and half the food is already gone. I guess it really is going kind of cold, then. I get myself a plate and re-heat a burrito in the microwave before I get a soda out of the fridge and take my meal into the living room where my housemates are gathered around the TV.

"Naps are nobody's friend," Karma tells me after a brief glance at my face.

Cleo rolls her eyes. "Oh, don't be silly. The poor girl has been cleaning her behind off next door. She's bound to need a rest."

"I still can't believe you decided to honor that stupid bet," Karma says.

"If you don't have honor, what do you have?" I ask, sitting down on the couch next to Cleo.

"Eyes that don't look exhausted," Karma answers, fluttering what are clearly false lashes at me.

They're overlong and silver. As usual she looks like she's about to start dancing in the background of a RAP music video. The silvery pants she's wearing are insane. She's showing off her toned midriff in a cropped black shirt while she picks through the contents of her bowl with her fork.

"You don't look exhausted," Cleo says. She's wearing a black velvet dress that looks like it's been tailor made for her body. Her own false eyelashes are a little less obvious than Karma's silvery tips.

Cleo shakes her head at Karma. "Stop being a bitch. We're all friends here."

Karma rolls her eyes. "I was only being honest."

"You were being mean," Erin speaks up from the corner of the room, where she's eating her food at the small desk beside the door that leads to the hall. Her long hair hangs poker straight, and she looks pale as she gives us all a wry smile.

"Ugh. Fine," Karma mutters. "Be oversensitive little princesses. See if I care."

I set my can of soda down on the floor next to me, and I start to eat.

The TV gets taken off mute when the show we're watching comes on.

Karma's in control of the remote, which seems to be normal.

Last night's reality show made sense.

A singing competition with a recording contract prize, I can see why Scarlett and her friends would want to watch it.

Alpha Island is a whole other story.

I've seen clips like everyone else, but I had zero desire to ever watch an episode.

Too bad Scarlett's friends seem to watch it religiously.

"Oh, my God. I told you Olive was an Omega," Cleo says, her eyes lighting up as the show starts with a clip of the horrified girl perfuming in front of one of the island's awful, arrogant Alpha males.

"Well, it was pretty obvious," Karma says.

"It's *always* obvious," Erin adds, sounding like she's sick of the show.

"Well, I didn't realize until last week," Cleo defends. "When she freaked out about having her bathroom washbag stolen."

"I knew the minute she started crying when someone else was upset," Karma says.

"I thought they explained that by saying she was just homesick?" Cleo says.

"That was to throw everyone off," Karma scoffs.

Karma looks at me, her eyes narrowing. "You're being awfully quiet, Scar. What's up?"

Shit. She does think something's wrong with me.

I try to think about what Scarlett would say about this stupid show.

My mind comes up blank. All I can think is that it's painful to watch and exploitative as hell.

There's no way Scarlett would say something like that. She probably finds it entertaining.

I clear my throat. "*I think* you guys are talking too loud. I want to see what Olive's going to do now that she's been found out."

"Well, clearly, she's going to pretend she didn't know," Karma mutters.

It sounds like a dumb answer, but it turns out to be exactly what the bikini-clad Omega does.

She pretends that she didn't know she was an Omega.

That she actually thought she was a Beta.

It's such a big trope for TV shows and movies.

There are tons of works of fiction about Omegas who think they're Betas, until, suddenly, they find out they're not. It's not so common in real life, because most Omegas know who their parents are, and if the character traits don't make it clear in a child's early life, a blood test can clear up any confusion later.

I knew reality shows were scripted, but this one seems painfully cringe-inducing.

I concentrate on eating my food while Scarlett's friends eat up the melodrama on the screen.

Erin snorts a few times, and Karma scowls at her.

Cleo sighs softly at the end. “If only they’d accept my application.”

“You’ve applied to be on that show?” I ask, shocked.

“Only every year that applications open up, since forever,” Karma says, frowning at me. “Like you didn’t know that. What is up with you today, seriously?”

“I don’t know,” I mutter. “I’m tired.”

“Are you done with that?” Cleo asks, glancing at my plate.

“Um, yeah.”

She takes it out of my hands and puts it on top of her own. “I’ll clean up. You should go to bed early. Maybe take a bath, or something.”

“Hell, no,” Karma complains. “It’s Scar’s turn to do the dishes tonight.”

I get up. “And I’m doing them, don’t worry.”

I take the plates from Cleo. “Thanks, but I’ll do this before I go to bed.”

Because clearly if I don’t, Karma will be a pain in my ass for the rest of the week.

I might be starting to regret my decision to stick around.

Karma passes me her plate and flicks her hair over her shoulder after.

I move on to Erin and she gives me a sympathetic smile. “Hope you’re feeling better in the morning.”

“Thanks.” I take her plate and go out into the hall with the stack, taking them into the kitchen and finding the back door open like it was last night. I put the dishes next to the sink and I sort the leftovers first, putting what might still be good to eat into one container and storing it in the fridge before I move on to putting the rest out in the trash.

It’s a little dark outside and we don’t seem to have exterior lighting in the garden.

I can see someone’s standing outside next door, but I can’t tell who it is.

I don’t think it’s Bishop or Rueben.

But there are two more guys living next door that I haven’t met.

Scout, who uses online recipes when it’s his turn to cook, and Gus who likes to make comfort food.

I wonder which one of them is standing at their back door right now, and why.

I guess I’ll meet them at some point this week. I just hope they aren’t as tempting as their pack brothers. They can’t all be perfect. That’s just not possible. Here’s hoping they’re so awful that it puts me off their pack brothers.

I can’t imagine how bad they’d have to be to manage that, but I’m going to have to live in hope because I seriously need to get over my crushes on Bishop and Rueben. The sooner, the better.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Gus

I step outside after the game to get away from Rueben's constant chatter. Every other word out of his mouth right now is Scarlett.

She's been here for one day. Less than five hours if Bishop's telling it right. A few hours spent with that woman and Rueben is completely obsessed.

I can't say Bishop's any less besotted, considering he's been quiet all night and he only gets like that when he's deep in thought. It's messed up how easily she has them both wrapped around her little finger.

I know Scout will be the same way once he's had a chance to be around her. He kept asking if I thought she'd show up. Eventually, I told him to go send Rueben a text and find out.

He couldn't get to his phone quickly enough.

None of my pack brothers can see that she's nothing but trouble.

I knew that the moment I saw her face.

She's much too beautiful to be a Beta.

Her housemates are pretty, but she stands out like a diamond glittering in their midst, and the worst part of that is she *knows*. She can tell she's stunning. She's cocky and flirtatious and no one seems to ever be good enough to keep her attention.

I felt that same attraction my pack brothers did that night, but I knew it was only physical.

She might be a rare beauty, but she's not the kind of woman I want as my mate.

I don't care if she is an Omega.

That's not enough to make me want her.

She's too flighty and arrogant to ever be right for me.

Bishop seems to think there's more to her.

Rueben's blinded by her beauty.

Scout is too nice to think anything bad about anybody.

The only defence my pack have against Scarlett Faris is me.

So, I can't let her walk in here and steal all their hearts.

I need to be the one to stop this before it goes too far.

It that means being a prick to her, then I guess I'd better get ready to be sharp and uncompromising.

I lean against the wall, staring out into the night.

No one's going to thank me for what I'm going to do, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let an entitled Omega tear us apart

from the inside out.

The woman has no idea what's about to hit her.

She'll regret ever setting eyes on Pack Bishop.

Chapter Thirty

Bishop

Gus might be the first person I would leave in charge at the firehouse in my absence, but I'm not feeling good about leaving him in charge at home today, while Rueben and I work our last day for the week.

Our least cheerful pack brother made his feelings about Scarlett crystal clear from the moment we met her. He doesn't believe she's our true mate, and I'm a little worried that he'll scare her off.

I find Scout on one of the treadmills in the gym while I'm waiting around for Rueben to finish giving his foster kitten his breakfast so we can get in the Jeep and leave.

"Oh, hey, Cap," Scout greets me, nodding my way as he keeps his running pace steady.

"Have you seen Gus this morning?" I ask, wondering where he's hiding.

"He was still in bed when I got up," Scout admits, shrugging.

“Can you try to keep him out of Scarlett’s way while she’s here?” I ask.

“Didn’t he kind of promise not to take anything to do with Scarlett?” Scout asks as he starts to slow down. He hits a few buttons on the machine and gets down to a walk before the treadmill switches off and he comes to a stop.

“He did, but ... I don’t know. He was kind of irritable last night.”

I trust my pack, but this might be the one thing I don’t trust Gus with.

“Right,” Scout murmurs. “You think he might do something dumb?”

“I’m not sure. Just look after her while she’s here, okay? She hasn’t been acting like herself lately.”

“Because she broke up with someone,” he adds.

“Seems like it.”

“No problem. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

I nod slowly, wondering if I might find Gus out back.

Sometimes he sits out there for the quiet.

I go into the kitchen while Scout hits the showers.

A glimpse out the window into the backyard makes me realize the grass needs mown, but I don’t see Gus out there. He wasn’t in his room when I got up, either. I guess it’s possible he went out to make himself scarce that way.

I check the lounge. Empty.

When I heard feet thundering down the stairs, I turn around to see Rueben rushing toward me.

“Ready for another day of cleaning up the firehouse waiting for a call to come in, Cap?”

“Almost,” I tell him. “Did you see Gus upstairs?”

He grins. “Of course. I gave him a job that should keep him out of Scarlett’s hair.”

“A job?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Someone has to look after Tiny Tempest while I’m gone.”

That ... might actually not be a terrible idea.

I smile. “Good one.”

“I thought so. Let’s go! Sooner we leave, sooner we get back.”

“That’s not really how it works ...”

He’s already out the door, the Jeep’s keys in his hand.

“Hey, wait up. I didn’t say you could drive ...”

Chapter Thirty-One

Scout

It feels kind of weird to be left in charge of something. Gus is usually second in command after Bishop, and being asked to make sure he doesn't do anything to scare our elusive true mate away is pretty much the most important task I've ever been given. It feels doomed to failure.

Gus can't really be told what to do. He does what he wants, and his promises aren't always super reliable. If something gets to him, he can change his mind in a heartbeat.

I know having Scarlett in our house will get under his skin.

He'll hear her singing or see her touch something that's his and he'll do something to get her to leave. I don't know what that something will be, but I know it'll be intended to make her forget about coming back here.

I can't let that happen.

Gus might not want Scarlett as our mate, but I'm open to seeing what happens with her.

People aren't cardboard cut-outs. The side we've seen so far isn't all there is of Scarlett Faris.

I know there's more.

She's not just a party girl looking to have fun.

She writes songs. That's an emotional creative process that shows she has depth.

She also seems to be hardworking, which is a good quality to have.

The truth is we don't know too much about her right now, and that's exactly why Bishop made this bet with her. We want to know more. We need to find the common things that make us undeniably compatible. The things that make us mates who are fated to be together.

I have confidence that we'll find those things.

All we need is to spend time looking for them.

The fact that she showed up yesterday is encouraging.

Rueben seemed to think she's already showing a softer side.

Bishop admitted the same thing, though he added that he was a little worried that she's vulnerable after breaking up with another guy.

I take a shower and throw on clothes before I go looking for Gus.

Finding him lying down on the floor in Rueben's bedroom is unexpected, but I understand when I see he's in front of Tiny Tempest's pen.

“Rueben got you on cat-sitting duty?”

He turns slightly and glances at me. “Yeah. Don’t worry, I’ll be staying up here out of your way.”

“Do you really think she’s not meant for us?” I ask, not understanding why.

He sits up and stretches a bit. “I think she might be the most stunning woman I’ve ever set eyes on in real life.”

“You do?” I ask, not sure why he’s so against this if he thinks that.

“I also think there’s a lot more to fated mates than physical attraction. She’s not it for us. You might be wondering why I don’t want her, but I’m wondering why the three of you want her so badly when she’s such a bad match for us.”

“I get what you’re saying ...”

“But you don’t, Scout. You still think she’s our fated mate. She’s not.”

“Then, what does it mean that we all felt a connection when we laid eyes on her? We all felt the same thing, Gus. We all knew, instinctively, what it meant.”

“You felt something, sure,” he says. “I don’t think it was anything fated, but you’ve mistaken it for that and now you can’t tell if it might have been something else.”

“Like what?” I ask, not understanding.

“Like the natural draw an Omega has over Alphas.”

“She’s not an Omega,” I remind him.

He smiles wryly. “You don’t see it, but you will.”

“She would have perfumed by now, Gus.”

“Not necessarily,” he says. “She could be on suppressants. They don’t always work against fated mates, but that depends on the dosage, and it depends on whether she feels the attraction as deeply as the Alpha or Alphas do.”

“I don’t know ...” I start.

“You don’t have to know anything right now, Scout. You just need to keep her away from me when she arrives. I can’t promise I won’t ask if she’s an Omega if I happen to see her.”

“Stay up here,” I tell him. “Cat-sit for Rueben. I’ll bring you lunch when it’s time.”

He nods and lays back down next to the pen.

I really hope he stays there.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Sapphire

Switching places with my sister, day number two. I might be even more nervous than I was yesterday, and that's completely because I know I like at least two of the guys who are head-over-heels for my sister. And, of course, today has the added pressure of being the day Scarlett becomes me and takes that flight to help secure my promotion at the magazine.

I send her a good luck message that she probably won't get for a couple of hours, then I sit up in her bed and force myself to eat a nutbar, so I've at least had something to eat before I leave the house today. I take my suppressants afterwards, and then I get up to get ready for another day of cleaning a house that's already sparkling.

I moisturise and put on foundation once I'm dressed in another old band T-shirt.

I skip the lipstick, opting for a little bit of balm instead.

It's funny how much more I look like me without the bright lipstick.

I'm a nude girl when I need wear that stuff, maybe sometimes with a hint of sparkle.

I guess we'll see if they look at me any differently today.

Scarlett could be right that they won't notice.

I think sometimes men don't when it comes to that stuff.

Ben always had an opinion when it came to my makeup, and my clothes, and basically anything that was a personal choice for me that he had no real right to voice an opinion about.

Just another red flag I ignored in the hopes that he might be mate-worthy material, one day.

That day never came, and it was never going to come. I wish I'd realized that sooner.

I wish I'd dug my head out of the sand before I had to see his stupid profile on Every Beta.

"Stop thinking about that idiot," I mutter to my reflection in the mirror.

I finish brushing my hair, and then I leave the house.

One day down. Six more to go.

I'll be glad when that's reversed, and I only have one day left to get through.

I get to the neighbors' door, and it opens before I get the chance to put my hand out to knock.

I blink at the stranger who's standing there, wondering how the hell three of the men living in this house can be drop-dead-gorgeous Alphas. The fourth guy *has* to be a dud. It's not

possible to be this insanely attractive and have so many equally handsome friends.

“Uh, hey,” I greet the muscular blond.

His hair is so light it’s almost white, his eyes are baby blue, and he’s a little bigger built than the other two that I’ve met so far. He kind of looks like he might play football. I didn’t know I was into that, but I definitely am.

“Come in,” he says, moving back to let me into the house. “I wasn’t sure what time you’d show. Bishop forgot to mention it. I was just checking for mail when I saw you coming up the path.”

“I’m not really sure what time it is,” I admit. “That’s the disadvantage of not wearing a watch.”

“I’m guessing Bishop showed you where everything is already,” he says. “I was about to have a coffee if you want one before you start?”

“Sounds good,” I tell him, as he shuts the front door and leads me into the kitchen.

He’s wearing a Silver Valley Tempests T-shirt, and it almost looks two sizes too small, in the sexiest possible way. He has a six-pack, for sure. Too bad his jeans are the right size.

I got a good idea of how big Rueben must be from those sweatpants yesterday and it was impressive to say the least. I’d be willing to bet this guy is just as well-hung.

I put my purse down on the same chair I left it in yesterday, and I look around while the hot blond quarterback gets our

coffee from the machine on the counter.

“How’d you take it?” he asks, glancing over at me.

“Oh, uh . . . black, thanks.”

Pretty sure that’s still how Scarlett takes hers.

I prefer a dash of creamer, but it’s not a big deal.

“So, how was last night’s game?” I ask, nodding at his shirt when he raises his eyebrows at me.

“You follow sports?” he asks, sounding surprised.

“Not really. Rueben mentioned the Tempests were playing last night. I used to follow basketball, way back when I was in high school.” I can probably get away with that little reveal. I doubt they’d buy that Scarlett still watches it, but high school was a while back now.

“Oh, cool,” he says. “I didn’t figure you for a sports fan, but we’re big basketball fans here. The Tempests won last night, which was awesome. They’ve been pretty solid this season.”

“That’s great. The Crocs were on winning streak way back when I used to go to games. It was pretty fun being there with the whole stadium going wild.”

“We should go out to a game sometime,” he says, as he hands me my coffee.

I take the mug out of his hands. “That could be fun.”

It’s fun to imagine it, at least. It’s not actually going to happen.

We’re not going to start dating.

I'm not who he thinks I am.

I sip my coffee, and he does the same.

"I'm guessing Bishop and Rueben are at work?" I ask.

He nods. "We all have the rest of the week off starting tomorrow, but we had to make sure yesterday and today were covered. Silver Valley Fire Department is small enough to shut down for a week without any real issues, but we usually try to get the station covered when we're off. It gives some of the part time guys from Ruby Grove and Silver Lake extra hours if they want them and it's usually an easy shift. Whenever we get a call to an actual fire, it's usually in Silver Lake."

"Interesting. Does that make the job harder?"

"Not really. I mean, we need to drive a bit farther than most, and usually it means we're backup for a local team who are in charge, but it's not harder because of that. It's just different."

"It sounds like an intense career choice to me," I admit.

"It can get pretty crazy at times," he says. "I didn't think you were too impressed when you found out what we do for a living. In fact, I remember you telling someone else we were only slightly less boring than a bunch of accountants. I think that might have been the exact quote."

Oh, my God. It does sound like something Scarlett would say, and it's completely mortifying.

I can feel my cheeks burning.

I take a sip of my coffee, trying to hide my wince.

“Would you believe I don’t remember saying that?”

He laughs. “No, but I’m willing to pretend it didn’t happen if you want a do-over.”

“I’ll take that do-over.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Scout

The guys were right. There's something different about Scarlett this week. It's almost like she's embarrassed for insinuating our jobs were boring, and she definitely didn't care about how it came across when she first made that comment when we met and looked right back at me afterward.

Either she was pushing us away intentionally before, or she's just figured out what we are to her.

I'm not sure which it is. Not yet.

"I should get started cleaning up," she says, looking around before setting her mug of coffee down by the side of the sink. She takes the cleaning stuff out from under the sink and starts with the table, which is already spotless thanks to Bishop's after dinner routine.

I feel a little weird just standing around watching her like this.

Getting my phone out, I check my emails while I drink my coffee.

I look up as she moves from one task to the next, realizing she's not singing.

As far as her housemates tell it, she's always practicing.

"Any new songs you're working on lately?" I ask as she brings the mop and bucket out for the floor.

"Um, nothing I feel like talking about," she says after a second of hesitation.

"Too personal?"

"Something like that."

She must be really cut up over the guy she was dating.

Bishop said he cheated on her.

It had to be kind of serious if it ended over something like that, and it must have been a secret at the time, considering she didn't tell anyone about it while she was actually seeing him.

I don't need to know any more to know the guy sounds like an absolute dickhead.

"I'll be in the lounge if you need anything," I tell her, giving her the space to get the floor cleaned.

I'm actually kind of surprised at how seriously she's taking the cleaning up.

It's the last thing I would have expected her to put any real effort into.

She gives me a smile as I leave the room.

I could get used to this version of Scarlett.

I really hope she's feeling like she might like to get used to us.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Sapphire

Why do all these guys have to be so hot, and so damn sweet? Great looking guys are supposed to be assholes. Especially when they're Alphas. This pack is way too good to be true.

I finish mopping in the kitchen and leave the mop in the bucket by the side of the door.

I'm thinking about heading into the lounge, which is where I know Scout is, when I hear a creaking sound. I turn and glance at the stairs. Movement catches my eye and I look up as a door clicks shut on the landing.

Huh.

Impossibly hot and sweet guy number four must be up there.

For a second, I'm curious enough to take a step toward the staircase.

Then, I remind myself that it isn't super-smart to follow an Alpha into his bedroom.

I'm already secretly drooling over these guys. I don't want to make it too obvious I'm attracted to them, especially while I'm supposed to be Scarlett.

My sister has made her feelings clear.

She's not interested.

I move toward the open lounge door.

The couches have been moved back to where they were yesterday, and Scout is sitting in one of them, mug placed on the arm of the couch while he reads a newspaper. He glances up when I step into the room, straightening in his seat and folding the paper closed.

"Sorry, do you need me to move?" he asks, already getting to his feet.

"It's up to you," I tell him. "The kitchen floor is wet and I only really need you to move a little once I get the vacuum out in here."

"Oh," he says, nodding slowly. "Right."

He's feeling kind of uncomfortable with this weird situation.

Even if I wasn't an Omega, I could tell.

He sits back down, but he doesn't open his paper back up.

"The room really doesn't need cleaned," I admit, as I move past him. "Rueben offered to let me clean his room since Bishop doesn't go in there, but I don't know if that's a smart idea."

He laughs. “It’s not. I definitely wouldn’t go in there if you don’t have to. If Bishop knew Rueben made that suggestion, he would have spent all of last night cleaning Rueben’s room before you could set foot in there.”

“That bad, huh?” I ask, not really surprised.

“Worse, probably,” Scout admits, standing back up and coming toward me.

He gets the cleaning products out of their hiding spot before I can reach it.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to go up there without him,” I find myself saying, only realizing how it sounds after I’ve said it. I can feel my cheeks getting hot as Scout looks back at me.

It’s kind of hard not to put a bit of a sexy spin on everything around an attractive guy.

Scout starts to look and feel disappointed.

He pushes out a vaguely wry smile. “He’s a great guy.”

“I know,” I admit, wondering what I did to make him feel bad.

The urge to ask comes and goes quickly.

I’m used to ignoring it.

I might out myself as an Omega if I wasn’t practiced at ignoring those impulses.

That doesn’t make it suck any less. The instinct to do something to make him feel better is so damn strong that I

pick up the furniture polish and duster before I can be tempted to touch him.

“I should be cleaning,” I mutter, avoiding his pale blue eyes.

“I’ll get out of your way,” he says, friendly tone covering up hurt feelings.

He leaves the room and I let out a soft sigh as my shoulders sag.

“Once this day is over,” I murmur, as I start to reclean what’s already clean, “There are only five more days to go.”

What could happen in five more days?

It’s not a lifetime. I can get through this.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Scout

I take my empty coffee mug upstairs with me, intending to clean it in my bathroom sink and leave it there so Scarlett doesn't have to do anything with it. I don't know what I expected when Bishop made this the wager for his bet with her, but hearing her talk like she's as into Rueben as he is to her ...

I don't know why that stung, but it still smarts.

Three years of stone cold nothing.

One day around my most reckless, impulsive and over-the-top pack brother and it sounds like she's ready to dive right into bed with him.

I should be happy for Rueben, and I think I am.

It's just that I'm starting to realize my worst fear.

Ever since I became apart of Pack Bishop, everything's been so good.

Discovering Scarlett as our true mate was a shock to all of us, but we've been working through what it means together, and honestly, it feels like it's been making us stronger as a pack.

Gus is holding out, sure, but Bishop's certain that having Scarlett here is the thing that's going to make him crack. Whatever's been holding him back, whatever his issues are, he's going to have to let them go to accept her as our mate.

I believe that he will.

But what if she decides that not all of us are her true mates?

My stomach churns when I think about that.

I'm not good at keeping conversations interesting like Rueben.

I'm not a great cook like Bishop.

I'm not brooding and mysterious like Gus.

The truth is, I'm as interesting as Scarlett assumed when she met us. Catching that look thrown over her shoulder after she compared us to a bunch of accountants ... It didn't feel so much like a slam as an accurate representation of my character.

My brothers didn't deserve that slight, but I'm the one she looked at after she said it.

It was like she could see right through me.

Sometimes, the truth hurts.

It hurts even more now that I'm starting to realize what it means.

I walk into my bedroom and put my mug in the adjoining bathroom's sink.

I know what happens when she takes my brothers as her mates, and she doesn't want me.

The home and the family I found, the brothers I love more than life, it all goes away.

I can't stay where I'm not wanted.

I was forced through that as a child.

I can't go through it again.

I won't.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I fight the temptation to lay back and let myself pass out.

It's hard, but I force myself to get up.

I know Bishop and Rueben are relying on me to keep Gus from scaring Scarlett away before they get a real chance to connect with her. I need to do whatever I can to make sure they get the true mate they've been waiting patiently for, even if that mate is going to take nothing to do with me.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Sapphire

I get basically all of the vacuuming done while Scout is upstairs. I'm just winding the cable back when he's coming down those stairs, amazingly dressed exactly like Rueben was yesterday, in a tank top and sweatpants.

Good lord. He must *really* have to sweat to keep that body. It's like a work of art.

I realize I'm staring, so I force myself to put my attention back on the vacuum.

Once the cable's clipped into place, I'm ready to put it away.

Just as soon as my heart stops racing.

I press my lips together as Scout gets to the bottom of the stairs and I realize the mistake I just made in looking down. Now, I need to look back up, and my gaze can't help but fix on the lump in his pants.

Oh my God. He's even bigger than Rueben, and Rueben wasn't exactly small.

“Here, let me get that.” He takes the vacuum by its handle and opens the closet door, storing it away while I try to get a grip on my overly excitable libido.

“You really don’t have to ...” I start, stopping when he looks at me and I’m reminded that something upset him. He’s feeling kind of down right now, and the urge to touch him is stronger than ever.

I smile. “Thanks for the help.”

He nods. “No problem. I’ll be in the gym if you need anything.”

Right. He’s probably in there all the time.

It’s not like men come by that kind of body without a lot of effort.

“Scout?” I ask, as he turns away.

He looks back at me, a hint of hopefulness now lighting inside him.

He stares at me as if I’m the answer to everything he’s desperate to know.

Too bad it’s Scarlett he’s looking at.

My guts twist up as I realize I can’t do a damn thing to make him feel better.

I’m not Scarlett, and I don’t want to give him false hope.

“Do you mind if I clean in the gym while you work out?” I ask.

He gives me a weak smile. “I don’t mind.”

Translation: He does mind, but he doesn't want to say it.

I follow him into the gym anyway, ready to wipe down all the equipment like I did yesterday.

I tell myself I'm not really attracted to him, or his pack brothers, but I can't help watching as he warms up with stretches before he begins his routine.

He works out quietly, and I realize I'm being quiet, too.

Scarlett isn't quiet when she's doing boring things.

Chores make her loud. She sings, or whistles, or starts calling through to people in other rooms.

These guys wouldn't know that, but it's probably weird to them that I've been kind of quiet.

My story about being dumped helps with that, I know, but if I'm going to get through the rest of the week, I'm probably going to have to step a little outside of my comfort zone.

I move over to where Scout is while he's between sets on the different machines.

"How does this one work?" I ask, stepping onto the treadmill, and realizing the control panel does seem a little bit complicated now that I'm looking at it.

He moves to my side, and my stomach flutters at how close he gets to me.

I breathe in and wonder what it is that makes man-sweat so sexy.

He smells musky and I know he'd be warm if I touched him.

It makes me a little breathless.

“This sets the incline,” he tells me, keeping me steady as the treadmill moves slightly.

He’s so warm, and hard and his heart is racing just like mine.

Lust rushes through his body. Lust, and something much more primal.

My breath catches in my throat.

I accept that lust as if it’s my own, leaning into the feeling and letting it intoxicate me just a little.

If he made a move right now, I’m not sure I’d be able to resist.

I want him too much.

Everything else falls away.

His fingers brush my side and I realize my shirt has ridden up on the right side.

I’m a heartbeat away from hauling it off, and demanding more, when I catch sight of myself in the mirror. I’m in a Chaos Burning shirt. I’m supposed to be Scarlett. She’s the one he’s thinking about when his hand rubs over the naked skin at my waist.

That single thought kills the moment dead for me.

I clear my throat and straighten up, peeling myself away from him.

He’s quick to pick up on my mood-change, his own change following swiftly.

He removes his hand and touches something else on the treadmill.

“That’s the speed,” he murmurs, as he puts it up a little.

I put it back down a bit and he gets the hint, backing fully away.

“Thanks,” I tell him, too afraid to look him in the eye.

It doesn’t matter how much I want him.

I’m not sleeping with someone while I’m pretending to be my sister.

That’s way too creepy.

I jog a little on the treadmill while Scout works out, and I try not to notice how good he looks when I catch sight of him in one of the mirrors, but that’s pretty much impossible.

Eventually, I decide looking is okay.

But I definitely can’t touch.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Bishop

It's a surprise to find out Scarlett's still in the house when we get home from our last shift of the week, and it's even more of a shock to find out she's in the gym with Scout.

"I'm guessing the cleaning is done?" I joke as I enter.

I half expect Rueben to rush in after me, but I made a point to send him upstairs to relieve Gus from his kitten-sitting duties, so he must actually be going to check on his foster pet first.

Scarlett stops the treadmill she's jogging on and lets out a vaguely weary breath.

"There's *nothing* to clean in this house," she admits, drawing me a pointed look. "I cleaned anyway, but still, if I cleaned any harder, I probably would have set something on fire."

"So, you decided to join Scout for an extra workout instead?"

Scout stops his reps on the bench press and brings our woman a towel.

She smiles at him, her usually vibrant lips naked. “Thanks.”

I blink at her face, studying the area around her lips, wondering if Scout kissed her.

It looks more like she just isn’t wearing lipstick than it got kissed off, but I guess that might be hard to tell. She dries off her face, and Scout brings her a bottle of water.

“I’m not used to working out,” she admits, as she takes the bottle.

“I should take you through some stretches,” Scout murmurs.

He doesn’t seem as excited as I thought he’d be about spending time with her, especially if something physical actually happened.

“I’ll be fine,” she tells him, before she takes a sip of the water. “I should head home.”

“You could stay for dinner?” I offer, already knowing she’s going to refuse.

She shakes her head. “We have a whole system next door. I can’t be the one to mess it up. Thanks, for the offer.”

Next time, I promise myself.

“Then, I guess we’ll see you in the morning,” I tell her.

She nods, passing Scout back the towel. “Thanks for the workout.”

She’s quick to leave, and Rueben’s going to be mad that he missed seeing her, but I guess at least she’s coming back

tomorrow, despite admitting there's nothing in this house that needs to be cleaned.

I can't hold back a smile.

Our plan is working, I can feel it.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Sapphire

I get outside, march down to the sidewalk, and pour the rest of the bottle of water over my head. It's fucking cold, and it makes me gasp, but I need the shock, badly. I seriously need to remember these guys are not an option for a rebound, or a fling, or anything else.

I can't think of anything worse than falling into bed with one of the sexiest men I've ever met, only to have him call me Scarlett.

The thought makes me shiver.

I need to get over my little crushes and push past this week.

I have a promotion to grab, and I won't have time to think about guys once I step into the feature editor's shoes. It's not the kind of job I can phone in. I'll have to be at the office more than I've ever been. I'll have to work hard to prove myself.

It sounds exhausting, honestly, but I know that's probably only because of how deflated I'm feeling.

A vacation sounds good right about now. A road trip to someplace relaxing, and a whole lot of time spent laying around doing nothing.

That's what I want once this week is through, and I'll find a way to get it.

I get to the driveway of Scarlett's rented house, and I decide to go around back instead of trudging through the front door with wet sneakers and a drippy face.

It's a bad decision, but I don't realize that until I see Karma's thin frame leaning over the fence on the back door's porch. She blows out a breath and lowers her cigarette as she leans back and looks my way. One overplucked eyebrow raised, she gives me a curious look.

"Did those next-door assholes give you a swirly, or something?"

I bite back on my initial response, which is to defend them.

"Or something," I mutter, deciding vague and irritable is the way to go.

"I told you not to make that stupid bet," she says as I sit down on the porch steps to take off the sneakers.

I don't know how my feet got so damn wet. My shoulders are barely even a little bit damp, and my jeans are fine. But my head and my feet are soaked.

"Well, maybe next time, I'll listen," I tell Karma.

She snorts. "I fucking doubt it."

I do, too, but I don't tell her that.

I leave the wet sneakers on the porch and head inside in my wet socks.

Going upstairs, I head straight for Scarlett's shower.

Maybe that'll wash away the thoughts Scout left me with after he put his hand on me.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Bishop

Scout lets out a sigh when I follow him over to the bench press. He looks at me and shakes his head.

“Don’t even ask.”

“Gus?” I ask, holding my breath.

He laughs. “Gus didn’t even come out of Rueben’s room.”

“Then, what happened?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “You were right, at first. She seemed different. Then, it felt like she was giving out mixed signals.”

“Mixed signals?”

“You know, like giving me a look one second, and then freezing up the next.”

Scout is more sensitive to little details than the rest of us, so I don’t doubt that he picked up on something real.

“If she’s changing her mind about us, that might happen,” I remind him.

He nods. “I know. It just ... One second it felt like we were right all along, and it felt so damn good. She felt good. She felt like she was meant to be ... ours.”

“And then?”

“Then?” he laughs, a bitter note in his tone. “I don’t know. She just froze up, backed off. She didn’t say anything. I didn’t do anything. She just froze.”

He frowns, and I can tell he’s going back over it, trying to see where he went wrong.

“We knew this might be hard,” I start.

“I didn’t think it would make me feel this bad,” he admits. “I’m used to being with women who want to be with me. I know this is different, but it’s messing with my head.”

“It’s going to be worth it,” I promise him.

He shrugs. “I need to finish my workout.”

I leave him to it, knowing he won’t feel better until he’s burned off the excess energy that he’s full of right now. I find Rueben in the hallway, the kitten in his hands.

“Gus fed him early,” he complains. “I told him what time to feed him, and he just ignored me.”

“It’s one time, Rueben. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Sure, whatever. Why did Scarlett throw a bottle of water over herself when she left?”

I blink at him. “Sorry? What?”

He grins. “I bet Scout got her all worked up.”

“Go back a step and pretend I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He takes a literal step back and nods. “Okay. So, I picked Tiny up and told Gus off and I followed him to his room, where he shut the door in my face, but then I heard the front door close, and I went to the hallway window so I could watch Scarlett leave. Well, she left. As soon as she got to the end of the driveway, she stopped, dropped her purse and poured a bottle of water over her head.”

“That’s ... a little weird.”

“It’s a good sign, though, right?”

“I don’t know, Rueben.”

“Well, I do,” he insists, stroking the kitten’s head.

“I think maybe we should sit her down and talk to her tomorrow. Let her know exactly what we’re thinking and find out how she feels about it.”

He frowns at me. “If you want to scare her off, sure. She just got through a bad break-up and you know what she’s like. She’s not exactly open at the best of times.”

“I know, but she was blowing hot and cold with Scout today, and I think if she’s still trying to deny what she’s feeling, we’re going to scare her off anyway.”

“Oh,” he murmurs. “Well, then maybe.”

“We can talk about it over dinner. Scout’s finishing up his workout. You can play with the cat in the kitchen if you clean

up after you put him back in his pen.”

“Sounds good,” Rueben says, following me into the kitchen.

Chapter Forty

Sapphire

The dreams I have because of those men ... I don't remember much when I wake up, but it feels like my body enjoyed every second. I'm so hot and bothered when I step into the shower that I can't resist the urge to slip a hand between my legs. It barely takes a few seconds of touch to make me cry out.

I clamp my hand over my mouth after, disturbed by how loud and needy that cry sounded.

My pussy throbs as I take my fingers away from my clit. It doesn't feel like I just sated an urge. It feels like I've barely awoken a deep craving that might never be satisfied.

I ignore the temptation to touch myself some more.

I can tell it's not going to help.

It doesn't matter how many times I make myself come.

What I really need is something only an Alpha can give.

Oh, God. I must be ready to go into heat.

Being around those Alphas, getting so close to them ...

My suppressants have been working, but feeling this way, I should be taking more.

I lectured Scarlett for not taking them, and here I am playing loose and fast with mine.

If I want my Omega side to stay buried, I need to triple the normal dosage, and I need to start now.

I finish up in the shower and I take my triple dose before I do anything else.

Eating a nut bar and then getting dressed, I tell myself I can do this.

Five more days. That's nothing.

I throw on light blue underwear, and then I grab another plain band shirt and the last pair of Scarlett's comfy jeans. I steal a blue pair of Converse, because that's totally my color.

I leave off the lipstick and I tell myself I can go over there without feeling anything for any of these guys. Sure, they're hot, and maybe they're also sweet, cute, thoughtful, considerate ...

None of that stuff matters.

They're hooked on my sister.

They're a no-go area.

I nod to myself before I pick up her purse and leave the house.

Nothing is going to happen today.

Nothing but cleaning.

Chapter Forty-One

Rueben

I have to admit, I've been up since six a.m., wearing down the floorboards in my bedroom. First, I had to figure out what to wear. Then, I had to get showered and dressed. And, lastly, I had to check my room carefully for anything that might be gross to find when it's being cleaned by my future mate.

There were no suspect items by the time I was done, save for a lone cheese-puff that must have rolled under the bed a long time ago before it became the dustiest looking thing I've ever seen.

The vacuum probably would have eaten it, but I put it in the trash, so I don't need to worry about it.

"It'll be better for you to be in here when this room is cleaner, too," I tell Tiny Tempest.

He miaows at me like he knows what I'm talking about.

I wait until it's a little closer to nine to empty his litter.

He's been going in his box, so I don't need to change the pee-pads in the pen I made for him.

"I really hope your owner doesn't want you back."

I called Cressidan City hospital already, and I know which ward his owner is in.

They said someone would let him know his kitten was being taken care of while he's recovering.

I almost didn't want to leave my number, but I knew I had to.

"Who am I kidding? Look at you," I tell him, getting onto my knees in front of his pen. "Who wouldn't want this bundle of cuteness in their life?"

He attacks my hand when I bring it near him, and I let him scratch me up a little while he plays.

I'm getting too attached, and I don't care. I'll deal with feeling sad when he has to leave.

That's later.

Right now, he's here and he's the smallest Tempests' fan in Silver Valley.

"Okay, little buddy. You stay here. I'll be back to show you off to Scarlett when she gets here. If we can't convince her that we're awesome on our own, you're up."

"That's a lot of pressure to put on a cat." The grumpy voice of his sitter comes from the doorway.

I get to my feet. "Well, he's a special kitty."

“He’s a pest,” Gus mumbles.

“You look like crap,” I tell him, wondering if he slept last night.

“Thanks,” he says, pushing his dark hair back. “That’s the look I was going for.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be around Tiny too much,” I muse. “Your bad attitude might rub off on him.”

“You don’t know what a bad attitude is,” he says. “Get out of here. I’ve got this.”

I leave him alone, suspecting Gus might fall asleep in front of the pen.

I didn’t tell him that I plan to have Scarlett clean my room today.

We talked a lot over dinner last night, and Bishop agreed we would play today by ear.

If Scarlett seems fine, we’ll go on with trying to get to know her while she cleans.

If she seems off, Bishop’s going to ask to talk to her.

I don’t like option number two.

Scout didn’t like it either.

Gus mostly ignored our conversation, but even he shook his head when Bishop mentioned it.

We can’t talk to Scarlett unless she’s at a point where she’s willing to open up to us.

None of us think she's there yet.

Whatever happened between her and Scout, it wasn't tangible enough to count as a breakthrough.

So, today, Scout and I are looking for breakthroughs.

While Gus hides in my room and Bishop watches out for any behaviour that might signal that Scarlett's ready to bolt and pretend the last few days never happened.

I move down the stairs slowly, meeting Scout in the lounge.

He's already had his daily workout, but I can tell he has a lot more energy to burn off.

"Hey," I greet as I sink into the couch opposite his.

We're both in tank tops and sweatpants.

I doubt his decision was made the same way mine was, unless she looked at him like a hungry tiger, the same way she looked at me when I wore this. Even if she did, he probably didn't notice.

"Hey," he murmurs, looking up from his newspaper.

"Twinsies!" I blurt as I flop down opposite him.

He raises an eyebrow, and I motion to what I'm wearing.

Letting out a sigh, he puts the paper down. "I should go change."

"Why?" I ask. "It's a good look. Guaranteed to get Scarlett in the right kind of mood."

He shakes his head. “I put this on because I’m going to work out again.”

“Right, because she almost let something happen when she saw your muscles covered in sweat.”

I know that’s not why, but he’s hiding something and I’m a little hurt that he doesn’t feel like telling me what’s wrong. We’ve been best friends since practically the day we met, and we’ve been pack brothers for almost that long.

Secrets aren’t a thing with Scout. He doesn’t keep stuff to himself like Gus.

I don’t know what’s going on with him now, but I don’t like it.

“It’s not a sex thing,” Scout mutters. “Why is it always a sex thing with you?”

“It’s not *always* a sex thing,” I protest, before I blow out a breath and lean back in my seat. “If it seems like that, it’s only because I haven’t had sex in three years.”

That sounds crazy when I say it out loud.

Scout gives me a wry smile. “You’re not exactly alone in that boat.”

“True.” I laugh. “We’ve all been living like priests for at least three years.”

For Gus, it might have been longer, but that’s been his choice.

It's not like we never invited him to come out with us on the weekends.

He's had plenty of chances to bring pretty women home.

It's just not something he's ever done.

Scout sighs. "It feels like something's wrong."

"Like what?" I ask, wondering what it could be.

"I don't know," he admits. "It's not Scarlett, exactly. There's something different about her, and it seems like a good thing, but I can't help wondering why."

"Well, she got dumped," I remind him.

"I know," he murmurs. "I just ... I can't explain it. I don't know if I can handle being around her for who knows how long while she makes up her mind about us."

"Her mind is already made," I scoff. "She's just trying to fight it."

"Doesn't that make you nervous? What if she decides we're not worth taking a chance on?"

So, that's it. He's worried this isn't going to work out.

"She's fated to be ours, Scout. That means, no matter what, she'll figure out the same thing we have. We just need to be patient for a little bit longer."

He snorts. "You? Be patient?"

I grin. "Well, I can try."

I don't think I'll need to try *too* hard.

We were vibing before.

She's definitely interested.

All I need to do is keep being me.

Chapter Forty-Two

Bishop

Every tick of the clock feels like it's coming from inside my head as I waste time putting away the breakfast dishes that I washed before I could stop myself. The sound of every minute that passes is starting to make my jaw clench. I close the cupboards and turn to where the clock hangs on the wall opposite where I'm standing in front of the sink.

I'm ready to stalk over there and wrench it off the wall.

I want to shake the damn batteries out of it until that sound stops.

It won't make the waiting around any less pleasant, but it might take the edge off the tension that's mounting inside my body.

Then, it happens. The minute hand takes its first move past the hour, and the uncanny certainty that our true mate is on our doorstep takes me over.

I move out of the kitchen, heading past the lounge where Rueben and Scout are talking, and toward the front door. I see

her shadow through the glass panels at the side of the door right before she rings the bell.

Handle within grasp, I pause and turn to see Rueben peering out of the lounge doorway.

“Sit down,” I instruct him quietly.

He slinks back into the room.

I turn to the door, and I hesitate.

If there’s one thing I’ve realized since yesterday, it’s that we might not have a whole week to help us convince Scarlett we’re the right pack for her. We need to take every minute as it comes. There’s no guarantee that she won’t bolt if something happens that freaks her out.

All we’ve done for the last three years is chase her.

I don’t want to have to keep doing that.

I open the door, and she raises an eyebrow.

She’s less made up than usual. There’s no red paint on her lips, no shine on her cheeks.

In fact, I don’t think she’s wearing makeup at all, and she’s more stunning than I’ve ever seen her.

“Hey,” she says, giving me a ghost of a smile. “Your cleaning lady’s here.”

She’s wearing blue today, and something about the color seems to really suit her.

Strange, considering red tones are usually what she prefers to wear.

“Nice shirt,” I tell her as I open the door wider to let her inside.

She glances down and shrugs. “It’s okay.”

“It’s a nice color,” I find myself muttering.

I haven’t felt this nervous around anyone since high school.

At least back then I had the excuse of being a clueless teenager.

As a thirty-year-old Alpha, I can’t believe I’m in this situation.

She steps inside and I close the door, noticing her sneakers are blue today, too.

“Do you want me to start with the kitchen again?” she asks, as she takes her purse off her shoulder.

“Uh ...” I trail off, unprepared for the question.

“Rueben mentioned his room might need vacuumed.”

“Oh, did he? Well, his room is his own area to keep clean, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

She nods slowly. “Then, I guess I’ll get started scrubbing the shine off of everything in the kitchen.”

“Do you want something to eat first? We had breakfast a while ago, but it’s no trouble to make something ...”

“That’s okay,” she says quickly. “I had something before I left the house.”

She moves past me, and Rueben appears at the lounge doorway.

“Hey, Scarlett,” he murmurs. “Did you miss me?”

I shake my head at him behind her.

He doesn't care, he's already smiling at her like he knows she did kind of miss him.

She laughs lightly. “You barely gave me a chance to miss you.”

“Damn,” he jokes. “I was hoping you'd be desperate for my company by now.”

“Well, it depends how good you are at cleaning,” Scarlett says. “If you feel like helping me ...”

“Lead the way,” he says, surprising us both.

He's not really the kind of person who cleans anything, at least not without being told to do it, multiple times over. He can tidy, sort of, when he needs to, but usually that means hiding piles of stuff that was laying around for a while by stuffing it into a drawer or closet and forgetting about it.

“Uh, it's your house, but sure,” Scarlett tells him as she moves toward the kitchen.

Rueben follows her, whistling as he goes.

I let them go, knowing if I tag along, Rueben will only crack jokes about me being his boss.

Scout looks up from his seat when I step into the lounge and close the door.

There's a folded-up newspaper on the cushion next to him, but he isn't reaching for it.

"Are you feeling okay?" I ask.

He frowns. "I don't know. Maybe I should exercise."

"I don't think so. If something's bothering you, we should talk about it."

"It'll sound crazy." He leans back in his seat.

"Well, whatever it is, I bet it won't sound crazier than any of those conspiracy theories Rueben used to go on about when he went through that phase."

He snorts. "I don't know. One of those theories could be the answer."

"Okay, now you've got to tell me."

"There's something really different about Scarlett," he admits. "It feels like she's a whole different person. I know she's been dumped and that's probably never happened to her before, but seriously, Cap, she doesn't *feel* one tiny little bit like the same woman who once looked at me like I was lower than dirt in her eyes."

She did look at him like that once. I'm pretty sure she's looked at the rest of us the same way at some point, too. I should have guessed that Scout might take it a little more personally. His parents are assholes. They had one golden child, and they expected Scout and his other brothers to compete to get up to his level, which none of them ever could in their eyes.

“We can’t get too caught up in the past, Scout,” I remind him, gently. “We need to take things as they come. Maybe she’s changed, or maybe this is the real Scarlett, the parts she never showed us while we barely knew her.”

He sits there for a second, frowning at the wall, before he gets up.

“I can’t explain it,” he says, shaking his head. “I don’t know how, or why, or what it even means, but she’s not Scarlett.”

His parents really did a number on him. I’m not sure how to unpick what they did. I don’t know if that’s even possible. It just makes me angry and sad at the same time.

He can’t trust Scarlett now, or how he feels about her.

The changes he sees in her are too good to be true.

“I know it feels that way now,” I start.

He shrugs, and I can tell he’s done talking about this.

“Don’t overdo it,” I finish, knowing he has energy building up that he needs to get rid of.

“I won’t,” he tells me, before he leaves the room.

A few seconds later, the front door opens and closes.

He’s gone for a run. He doesn’t even want to be around her.

I wouldn’t be surprised if he stayed out until she was done for the day.

Chapter Forty-Three

Rueben

Cleaning is gross when there's actually grime involved. It gives me the shivers. Thankfully, Bishop's a total clean freak so we're basically wiping down surfaces that are already sparkling.

"So, do you need to work when you get home?" I ask.

She looks at me from across the table. "Uh ... yeah, a little bit."

"What does that look like?"

I imagine it must look like Scarlett sitting on her bed with her guitar, because I have no idea what song-writing actually involves.

She flushes a little, and I realize she's not wearing makeup today.

That's kind of strange. I don't think I've ever seen her without it.

I like it. Feels like she's more herself, more stripped back.

“Oh ... Um, I have some audio files to edit,” she murmurs, shrugging.

“So, computer stuff, then?”

“I guess,” she agrees.

Clearly, she doesn't want to talk about that.

I doubt she wants to talk about the guy who just left her.

What does that leave?

“Have you seen anything good on TV lately?”

“I saw the latest episode of Alpha Island,” she says, “but I wouldn't call it good.”

“It was crazy, but you're right, it's not actually good.”

“You watch that show?”

She looks surprised.

“I'm a bit of a channel surfer, so I end up watching bits of everything,” I admit. “I just happened to catch that one mid-Omega reveal, which I have to say I found pretty attention-grabbing.”

It was staged, and scripted, clearly, but something about it had me glued to the screen.

Omegas are so damn rare. I've never met one in my life.

The Alpha who smelled her perfume looked completely besotted.

It's crazy to think a scent could have that kind of effect on someone like me.

“It *was* kind of shocking,” Scarlett admits.

“Have you ever met an Omega?” I ask, knowing it’s unlikely.

She blinks at me and shakes her head slowly. “Uh, no. Where would I have met one? Aren’t they all in Omega Academies, or something?”

“I guess they don’t really present until their late teens or early twenties, so neither of us probably would have known if we met one in high school, or whatever.”

She nods. “That’s true.”

“Not that I’m interested in Omegas,” I add, making sure she doesn’t think I’m considering what it would be like to be with one.

She’s our fated mate. That’s way more important than making a rare biological match.

I couldn’t care less if my kids are Betas or Alphas. I just want to make sure I have them with the right person, and this woman standing in front of me now is that person.

She’s my forever, and she doesn’t seem to know it.

Dropping her gaze, she goes back to cleaning.

“So, what kind of TV shows do you actually like to watch?”

“I don’t really watch a lot of TV.”

“So, you read, then? Or ...”

“Sometimes, I read. A lot of the time, I work.”

I probably should have guessed that. She's a creative, and I've overheard her making a lot of ambitious comments in the past. Of course she's focussed on her music. It's her passion.

Even if it doesn't seem like it right now.

She hasn't been singing at all since she's been here.

If she hadn't just gone through a breakup, I might be wondering why.

"Maybe I could go get Tiny Tempest after we're done in here," I suggest. "I think he misses you when you're not around."

That gets a laugh out of her, and her smile sticks around after. "Yeah, sure. Why not?"

"Great." I can't keep the grin from my face.

She's definitely ready to fall for me.

My tiny accomplice will make sure she does.

Chapter Forty-Four

Sapphire

I shouldn't have let Rueben help me clean. He's not just a hot redhead with a cute smile. He's also so damn sweet and his enthusiasm is seriously contagious. It's a potent combination that I'm having a really hard time trying to ignore.

He grins when I say yes to taking a break to play with his foster kitten, and, when I glance up while I'm mopping, I catch him watching me with a longing look in his bright green eyes.

What I'm doing is hardly sexy, and I know I'm not looking my best, but I can feel his desire when I gaze back at him. He's so full of longing that he aches with it.

For a split second I feel it as if it's my own.

His desire swallows me whole, pulsing over my body and sinking deep.

The mop's handle slides out of my fingers, hitting the tiled floor with a clatter.

It takes a second for that sound to penetrate and remind me I'm not supposed to be standing here staring at an Alpha until I can feel what he's feeling so deeply that I can barely move.

"Scarlett, are you okay?" Rueben asks, moving toward me slowly with concern in his eyes, and worry in his voice.

The desire I just absorbed from him drifts away slowly as his emotions change.

I blink slowly as I come out of the weird daze I went into that's left my body in a seriously needy state of arousal. For a second, I'm afraid I might have perumed. I take in a breath and let it out in relief. *Thank God!* My suppressants are still working.

Of course they are. It would be really messed up if they stopped working under these circumstances.

"I'm fine," I manage to murmur.

He wasn't thinking about me, even if it felt like he was.

He wants Scarlett. She's the one he's having those feelings for.

That desire wasn't meant for me at all.

Rueben frowns as he stops in front of me. "I don't think you're okay."

"Don't tell me you're an Omega?" I joke, trying to hide how much it hurts that he can't be mine.

"What's going on?" he asks, taking my hands in his and keeping his gaze steady on my face.

Should I tell him?

He's sweet enough that I know he would listen to the whole crazy story before he inevitably released me from my sister's debt, and I'd get to go home to my city apartment feeling awful and knowing I'll never be good enough for these guys I've been starting to fall for.

I know that's how it would play out. I've been lying to them for days, and they've been nothing but nice to me.

I don't think I could stand to have him look at me with disappointment in his eyes.

As much as it hurts my heart, I can't tell him who I really am.

"Too much caffeine this morning, I guess," I murmur. "I'm starting to get a migraine."

"Then you should be resting," he tells me. "I've been warned not to take you upstairs, but the lounge is closer anyway."

"I'll be fine in a minute. It'll pass."

"I'm not having you passing out on me. Now, either you let me walk you to one of the couches in the lounge, or I pick you up and carry you like you're someone I need to drag out of a burning building."

He's completely serious, and I can't go back on the lie I just used to cover up the bigger one.

I nod slowly. "I'm letting you walk me."

Letting him pick me up wouldn't be smart.

He puts an arm around me instead, keeping me close as he leads me into the other room.

I try not to think about how good he smells, or how sweet he's being looking after me like this.

It's impossible. He smells incredible, and everything inside of me is leaning toward him like a flower under the sun. This week was supposed to be helping me heal a broken heart, yet I already know it's going to wreck me when I have to walk away from these Alphas.

Ben might have hurt me, but I know I'll get over him.

I might never recover from saying goodbye to Pack Bishop.

Chapter Forty-Five

Bishop

I'm in a bit of a daze when Rueben brings Scarlett into the lounge, still thinking over what Scout was trying to articulate about our guest. It takes me a second to realize something's wrong, and Rueben's bringing our future mate into the room because of this.

"What happened?" I ask, getting to my feet quickly and looking Scarlett over.

She looks embarrassed. "I'm fine. Honestly. I just get migraines sometimes."

I frown at Rueben, and he knows I'm asking him to explain.

"She dropped the mop and spaced out a bit, for a second," he says.

"It was nothing," she says, as she sits down. "I'll be fine. I just need to be rest until it goes away."

"You get migraines a lot?"

"Not really ..." she starts, sounding hesitant.

“Well, then I probably have more experience than you do,” I tell her, as I kneel down in front of her and take her face in my hands.

Staring into her pretty blue eyes feels very intimate, but I’m looking for any sign that we might need to rush her to the clinic in town to be seen by a doctor. I check both eyes carefully, but there’s nothing unusual going on. When I move a hand down to check how her pulse is, her heart starts to beat a little faster. I count inside my head, but I already know it’s a normal response.

I can’t help wondering if Rueben did or said something that made Scarlett realize he’s her mate.

“Okay,” I tell her, letting my hands move back to my sides as I stand back up. “You should lay down on your side. I’ll close the blinds.”

“What’s that for?” Rueben asks, standing over Scarlett with his arms crossed over his chest.

“What?” I ask, absently as I move over to the window.

“What test are you doing by closing the blinds?” he asks.

“I’m not doing a test. I’m making sure the room is dark. It should help with Scarlett’s migraine.”

“So, it was a migraine then?”

“I told you it was,” she protests.

“I checked for anything more sinister,” I tell Rueben. “Her reactions were normal. She probably just needs to take a nap.”

“Well,” Rueben says, as I close the blinds. “I’d better make sure she’s comfy then.”

I expect to hear him leave, to grab blankets or something.

I hear him sit down instead, and when I turn back around, he’s perched on the couch opposite Scarlett, and he’s bringing one of her legs up between his.

I catch the little lip-bite she does as he starts unlacing her sneaker.

I don’t know if she really has a migraine or not, but it’s easy to see she’s attracted to us now.

My heart races as I bite back a smile. Three days in and I can see a real difference.

Maybe we don’t even need a whole week to show her we’re meant for her.

I think she already knows, even if she’s trying not to admit it.

I move back over to where she’s sitting, just as Rueben releases her second foot from its sneaker.

I touch his shoulder, and he lets out a sigh, because he knows what I’m about to say.

“We’ll get you a blanket,” I tell Scarlett. “And we’ll leave you to rest.”

“You know, I could kind of use a nap myself,” Rueben starts.

“She’s not going to sleep if she can feel you staring at her from the other couch,” I remind him.

He sighs, putting her foot down. “Fine. Have a good nap. I hope you’re feeling better when you wake up.”

“Thanks,” she murmurs, as she sorts the cushion next to her.

I usher Rueben out of the room and close the door.

He looks ready to protest, or beg, to get to stay in the room with our future mate.

I shake my head, pre-empting him. “Go grab her a blanket out of the cupboard upstairs.”

“Yes, Cap,” he mutters as he moves toward the stairs.

It takes him all of six seconds to get a blanket.

I take it out of his hands, provoking a pout from his lips.

“Go finish the kitchen floor.”

He frowns as he moves away from me, muttering under his breath as he goes into the other room and picks the mop up off the floor.

“I’m doing it,” he calls out when he catches me looking in on him.

He’s not doing it well, but it was already done, so I leave him to it.

I open the door to the lounge and Scarlett lifts her head from the cushion.

“Blanket,” I tell her, putting it over her bottom half, and letting her arrange it herself.

“Thanks,” she says, giving me a smile that seems sad.

“If you need anything else ...”

“I’ll ask,” she assures me, her voice quiet.

I nod as I close the door, leaving her alone in the dark.

I don’t buy Scout’s weird feeling that this isn’t Scarlett.

She’s the same woman we all felt a connection to. Circumstances and events can change people, and everyone grows up and develops in different ways. She’s not a whole other person just because she’s showing her softer side to us now.

This Scarlett is our Scarlett.

She’s just showing us her heart now that it’s been bruised a little.

Everything happens for a reason, and I have to believe she’s here because she’s finally ready to have a pack of mates that she can call her own.

Chapter Forty-Six

Scout

My usual run around the outskirts of the park in central Silver Valley feels too quick and easy this morning, so I end up completing two circuits of it before going for a longer jog past the main residential areas around town. My phone shows me I've hit the thirteen-mile mark when I check it on my way back to the house. I didn't come out expecting to run a half marathon, but I could probably come back out and do the same again later.

My heart is racing even as I slow down on entering the street.

The excessive energy I have is being stirred up by the presence of our mate, and my conflicting feelings. I had a moment with her yesterday. I had a few of them, actually, but the moment that I keep coming back to is the one that was super-charged with heat.

I felt what Bishop and Rueben have been feeling.

I knew in split-second that the woman in front of me was made to be with me, and everything inside of me agreed, vehemently. The primal urges that feeling stirred up were so powerful they almost felt like they were coming from an outside force. I've never felt anything like it before.

I get to the front porch of the house, and I do my stretches there, making sure I'm cooling down properly from my run. I'm a little dehydrated, but I'll grab some water once I'm inside.

I've been gone for long enough that our mate should be done with the kitchen.

I'm having a hard time thinking of her as the same woman who's been avoiding us for the past three years, calling us boring to her friends and showing zero signs of attraction whatsoever.

I don't think I can keep calling her Scarlett.

She doesn't feel like the same person.

Scarlett Faris is an aloof musician who never would have given us the time of day.

Our true mate decided to work out when I did because she wanted to spend time with me.

She felt what I did when I moved in behind her and started showing her how to work the treadmill.

I could feel her heartbeat quicken. I could see her skin flush.

I can't reconcile her sweet nature with the Scarlett I know.

I want it to make sense, but it just doesn't.

Finishing my stretches, I take a few seconds to talk myself in to going inside.

I step into the house and close the door behind me.

The kitchen is my first stop, and it's where I find Bishop, standing by the open back door with a mug in his hand. I can hear a ball being smacked around outside, so I assume Rueben's out back shooting hoops.

"Hey," I murmur as I grab a bottle of water from the fridge.

Bishop takes a couple steps toward me. "Feeling any better yet?"

I shrug as I uncap the bottle. I can't give the answer he wants, so I stick with my noncommittal, nonverbal response as I start to deal with my thirst.

"Well, Scarlett has a migraine," Bishop goes on. "She's resting in the lounge."

I stop drinking, and suck in a breath. "A migraine?"

He shrugs this time. "She dropped the mop when she was cleaning, and she told Rueben it was a migraine. I checked her over, but I couldn't see any signs of anything more sinister. So, she's laying down in the dark. She might be asleep. We're trying not to disturb her."

I know Bishop would have done a thorough job in making sure she was okay, but I can't help the anxious feeling that settles over me knowing our mate isn't well. Instinctively, I

want to check on her, to see for myself that she's safe and that she has everything she needs.

It's hard to ignore that instinct, but I force down the urge to rush to her side.

"She's okay," Bishop assures me. "Lunch is on the stove. Go shower and tell Gus he can join us to eat. I'll check on Scarlett after lunch, and I'll bring her food if she's awake."

I nod slowly and then take another gulp of water before I screw the cap back on the bottle and set it down on the counter.

"Gus might not come down for lunch."

Bishop raises an eyebrow at me. "He spoke to you?"

I shake my head. "Nah, but he's been taking his cat-sitting duties very seriously."

Bishop snorts. "Hit the showers already. I can smell you from here."

I make my way into the hall, glancing back at the closed lounge door before I sprint up the stairs.

I'm drenched in sweat and it's definitely not a state I want my future mate to see me in.

Regular workout sweat, sure.

Half-marathon sweat is another thing completely.

I knock Rueben's bedroom door in passing.

Gus sighs loudly before he stomps across the room and opens it.

“What?” he asks, frowning at me.

“Lunch is almost ready. Bishop said to tell you to eat with us.”

“None of you want me in the room with that woman, trust me.”

“She’s sleeping in the lounge right now,” I tell him, knowing it wouldn’t be smart to admit I’m having some reservations that might kind of fit in with his.

He doesn’t think Scarlett’s our fated mate at all.

I do. At least, I did.

I’m probably only feeling weird about it now that it’s happening because she’s opening up to us so easily and I don’t trust how simple it seems. She was closed off completely from us before, and she made it so damn clear that was how she wanted things.

I can’t understand why she’s had such a big change of heart.

Gus frowns at me. “Fine, but don’t blame me if she’s suddenly awake and I upset her.”

He’s practically growling as I walk onward toward my own bedroom.

I have to walk away. He’s threatening my mate.

If I stayed, I’d end up using one of my tightly curled fists on his sour face.

He’s my pack brother, and I look up to him as a leader when Bishop isn’t around, but if comes down to it, I would choose

our mate over him. Even if I'm having some complicated feelings about her right now.

I hope it doesn't come to that.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Gus

Scarlett Faris is not our true mate, and I wish my pack brothers would hurry up and realize that for themselves. It's driving me completely insane that they're clinging to this idea that she's meant for us when she's shown us time and time again that she isn't interested.

Scout gets all riled up when I talk about upsetting her.

He clenches his jaw before he walks away without a word because he doesn't want to start a fight with me.

It's not the first time I've seen him do that.

He knows his size gives him an unfair advantage in most physical altercations, and he doesn't want to risk doing any real damage to another person. He never throws the first punch, and if he comes across a bar-room brawl, he always tries to break up the fight before anything bad can happen.

It might not be the first time he's gotten riled up enough to have to walk away from someone, but it's definitely the first time he's had to do it over Scarlett.

She's already got him twisted all the way around her little finger.

Three days in our house, and she's got all three of my pack brothers bending over backwards for her.

I wish I knew what it was exactly that she did to cause them to think she's their mate.

Whatever spell she's got them under needs to be broken to set them free.

I've tried to stay out of it, to wait for my pack brothers to see their mistake for themselves, but if they're not going to figure it out, I'm going to have to intervene before they do something stupid that they can't take back.

I step out of Rueben's bedroom and head down the stairs, gaze drifting to the lounge door as soon as it's in sight. It's closed, like I expected. Too bad the kitchen door is open.

I won't get away with sneaking into the lounge and having some harsh words with our 'guest'.

Bishop sees me the second I take one step away from the staircase.

"Oh, good," he murmurs. "I thought I was going to have to come and get you."

"Scout did his job like a good little soldier," I remark, as I step into the room.

The smell of his homemade tomato soup simmering on the stove top makes my mouth water, and I realize I'm actually

hungry. I suppose that's because I skipped breakfast to sit in front of Rueben's stolen kitten while he munched his way through a bowl of the fancy packet food he apparently loves.

"You can cut the bread," Bishop tells me, pointing out the loaf that's sitting on the chopping board in the middle of the table.

Rueben walks in from the backyard, closing the door. He looks a bit sweaty. Bishop probably sent him out there to get rid of some of the excessive energy he's always doused in.

He nods at me. "How's Tiny?"

"As fluffy and annoying as he was yesterday," I answer him, gesturing to my clothes.

He rolls his eyes. "You love him. Just admit it."

"Go shower," Bishop tells him as he puts the silverware down on the table.

"I thought you said lunch was ready?" Rueben complains, grimacing.

"It is, but we're not starting without you and Scout, so go wash up."

Rueben makes a huffing sound as he moves past me and heads out of the room.

I pick up the bread knife and start slicing the loaf.

Bishop moves around me, putting down placemats and positioning silverware.

There's a specific way and order he tends to do things, and he's in the zone with that while I finish up with the loaf.

"How are you feeling today?" he asks, when we're both done.

Now, all there is to do is wait for Scout and Rueben.

"No different than yesterday," I tell him.

"Scout says you stayed upstairs all day while Scarlett was here."

"I was cat-sitting for the tiny terror in Rueben's room."

He doesn't look amused by that answer, but I'm not surprised.

This whole thing with Scarlett has become ridiculously important to him.

"I don't know what it means that you're not interested in our fated mate, and the rest of us are," he admits, quietly. "We're supposed to be a pack."

He's worried. I can see it in his eyes.

"It's not unheard of for packs to have disagreements," I counter, because I know there's no use in re-treading ground we've already covered ad nauseum. I'm not going to bend, and neither is he.

"Usually, those disagreements are less earth-shattering than whether or not someone is a true mate." He gives me a wry smile. "This is more than a simple disagreement, Gus."

“Well,” I start, straightening up. “Either you’re right and she is our mate, or I’m right and she’s not. Now that she’s here, I’m guessing we’re about to find out which of us is right, and which of us is wrong, so why don’t we just wait and see how the coin falls?”

He lets out a soft sigh. “What if I’m right? If you never spend any time with her, how will you know?”

I may be stubborn, but I’m capable of admitting it when I make a mistake.

This just doesn’t happen to be one of those times.

“If you all still feel like she’s ours by the end of the week, I’ll come down here and have a conversation with her,” I assure him. “I can’t promise I’ll change my mind, but I’ll make an effort.”

His eyebrows jump up before he manages to contain his shock. He nods slowly once his expression slips back into neutral.

“You’ll spend time with her on the last day if we still believe she’s our fated mate.”

“I will,” I agree, knowing it won’t come to that.

If it does, I’ll spend that entire conversation working out her angle.

With women like Scarlett, there’s always an angle.

I can hear Scout and Rueben thundering down the stairs as Bishop nods to himself, while he goes over to the stove to dish

out lunch.

Everything's as it should be, for now.

But if that woman thinks she's getting a mating mark from any of my pack brothers before this week is through, she's sorely mistaken.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Sapphire

I don't sleep, because for one thing, I don't actually have a migraine, and for another, I don't know what the hell to do anymore. I felt something for Rueben back there. It was potent and it was primal. Some deep buried urge that was unfamiliar enough to feel alien to me.

It would be stupid not to consider that it could be something to do with the fact that I'm an Omega, and I'm spending time around the most attractive Alphas I've ever met right now.

Suppressants have always worked for me in the past, but they come with a warning.

If sufficient time is spent in the company of Alphas I feel a strong attraction to, the dampening effects of the medication could wear off.

The pills are made for light interactions with Alphas I pass on the street or have to sit across a meeting room table from for an hour. They're not really meant to stop the natural

processes that occur when an Omega is of age and meets Alphas she would actually want to choose as her mates.

It feels scandalous that I'm attracted to them so much that the suppressants might stop working.

So far, I'm just a little hot and bothered, but if I don't do something soon, I know I could perfume.

And if that happens, well, my first heat won't be far behind.

I can't even imagine how that would go.

I've spent my whole life getting ready to go out into the world and live as a Beta.

Everything I learned about being an Omega was in the event of something going wrong.

It's been like a backup plan and thinking about it as if it might start to happen feels crazy.

I know if I get my first heat now, I'm likely going to feel the consequences of suppressing my nature.

I could get painful cramps that can only be eased by an Alpha's knot, and that's just the start of the side effects of suppression. If I don't take an Alpha as a heat mate, I could end up sick with a fever, or worse. In the rarest cases, Omegas have been known to die from the sicknesses they can develop if their heats go unattended.

I should walk away now, while I still can.

While my life as a Beta still exists.

I might like these guys, but they don't like me. They're attracted to my shiny, perfect twin.

Giving up everything I've worked for to be with them would be a huge mistake, and it's not like they'd be cool with the fact that I'm not Scarlett once they found out.

I've been lying to them, and they're good guys.

Heroes don't like liars.

Besides, I would always feel like I was second best in their eyes if I tried to make this crazy situation work out. I can't try to do that. I need to walk away. Before I make a bad decision that wrecks everything for everyone.

I sit up, letting the blanket Bishop placed on me fall away.

It takes a second to find Scarlett's sneakers and start putting them on.

I'll get out of here, and I won't show up for the rest of the week.

There's nothing I can say to explain any of this, to excuse it or apologize.

It's better if I say nothing, and I can drive back to the city in the morning.

Scarlett can decide what to tell them later, if she even bothers to tell them anything.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Bishop

I'm not sure I believe Gus's promise that he'll spend time with Scarlett if we all still believe she's our mate on Thursday morning, but he sounded convincing enough that I can't justify bringing it up again. Once we're finished eating, I get a tray and put soup and bread on it, alongside a bottle of water.

"You're not clearing the dishes?" Rueben asks, as he puts his empty bowl by the side of the sink.

"You can clear them for me," I tell him, watching his face fall.

"But ..." he mumbles, trailing off when he realizes he doesn't have an excuse.

"I'll open the lounge door for you," Scout says, drawing an irritated glance from Rueben.

"Sure," I agree, shooting Scout a bemused smile.

Gus clears his throat. "I'll get back to looking after the cat you stole from that old man."

“I did not *steal* anything!” Rueben calls back as Gus leaves the room.

I hear him head upstairs, and I breathe out a relieved sigh.

Maybe by the end of the week, the cat-sitting duties will have mellowed Gus out a little.

Scout moves to the kitchen doorway, and I follow him into the hall.

Rueben starts rushing around the kitchen, clearly intent on cleaning up as quickly as possible.

I have a feeling I’m going to have to re-wash everything later.

He’s not too observant when it comes to that stuff at the best of times.

Having him clean while there’s something else he’d rather be doing in that same moment is just asking for a cupboard full of dirty dishes and a floor covered in soap suds.

Scout opens the lounge door and hits the switch for the lamps, dousing the room in a warm glow.

Scarlett looks up from the couch, where she’s hunched over, tying the laces on her sneakers.

“You’re awake,” I murmur. “How are you feeling?”

She straightens in her seat and gives me a vaguely guilty look when she sees the tray in my hands.

“Oh ... Um ... I’m a little dazed from napping, I guess.”

“I thought you might be hungry if you were up.”

Scout sinks into the seat opposite her, surprising us both.

She looks over at him, and then back at me. “Maybe I should ...”

“Maybe you should eat,” Scout suggests, in a tone that suggests he isn’t asking.

She blinks and nods slowly. “I probably should.”

Wow. For a second there, I thought she was about to take whatever happened with Rueben as an excuse to go home for the rest of the day. Scout saved the day with that growly near-command.

I put the tray next to Scout, and I bundle the blanket up in my arms.

“I’ll put this away,” I start.

Scout nods, his gaze on Scarlett. “We’ll be fine on our own.”

I nod back, leaving without another word.

If he can get her to stick around, I’d best leave him to it.

Chapter Fifty

Scout

Why do you feel like you're mine? I gaze at the woman sitting across from me and I don't understand the mixture of deep, primal urges that are surging through my body. The need to take care of her, to protect her and claim her as my mate is so strong that my teeth are tingling, ready to sharpen so I can make my mark on her slender throat, showing the world that she belongs with me.

I could accept these feelings if they weren't such a far cry from how I felt about Scarlett before she came over here to pay off her debt.

Despite feeling that same strange, yet undeniable connection to her the same way Bishop and Rueben did on meeting the new girl next door, her behavior since that moment made it obvious she was nowhere close to ready for fated mates, and, to be honest, it killed any attraction I might have otherwise felt toward her.

Feeling so undeniably attracted to her now is ... odd.

I clear my throat, and she blinks at me.

She looks so vulnerable, sitting across from me practically buzzing with nervous energy and a hint of concern in her bright blue eyes.

Everything inside of me wants nothing more than to take care of her.

Yet ...

“I can’t pretend the past never happened,” I admit. “It feels like everything’s changed, and that’s a good thing, believe me, but I don’t feel right about wiping our slate clean without knowing what happened and without having some kind of explanation for why you used to act like you hated us.”

Once it’s out, I simultaneously feel better, and worse.

We can move past this. I know we can.

It might not be simple.

But nothing about this is.

She blinks, nodding slowly. “I ... I understand.”

Her gaze seems watery, and all I want to do is take back my words and hold her close, but I know I can’t. Her words were a lot more vicious than mine when she was pushing us away.

I can’t forget them. I’ve tried. I don’t know how to erase them from my memories.

From the moment I knew she was fated to me, I’ve been taking all of her words and actions in, and they’ve felt like

betrayals. Every time I made up some excuse to make it okay to still think of her as my mate, I only hurt a little more.

I stopped thinking about her entirely for a while and that was the best I'd felt since before we met.

That's completely messed up. It's not how things should be between fated mates.

"I'll understand if you don't want to talk about it right now," I go on, not wanting to scare her off. "I just needed to get that off my chest. I know Bishop and Rueben are happy to let the past stay in the past, but we all know relationships have to be built on trust. I want to trust you, Scarlett. I really do. But you need to show a little trust in us first or I don't see how we can move forward."

"I know," she whispers, looking down.

I watch as a tear drips from her eye down her cheek, and I feel my guts twisting up inside me.

Sinking to my knees in front of her, I wipe away that tear and stroke her cheek softly.

"It's not my intention to upset you," I tell her. "That's not what I want at all."

"I need some time," she says, her voice cracking a little. "I don't know what I'm doing here."

She wants to leave, or to be left alone.

It's so fucking hard to move away from her, but I do it, because I have to.

“We’ll be right here when you’re ready, Scarlett. We’re not going anywhere.”

Why do I get the feeling these words are going to haunt me?

Scarlett nods as she gets to her feet. “Can you bring me my purse?”

She wipes at her eyes as she waits for me to answer.

“I’ll be right back.”

Chapter Fifty-One

Sapphire

I'm shaking with emotion as Scout leaves the lounge. My legs feel weak under me, and I can't stop the tears that start to fall. Clearly, these men are ready to ask Scarlett to be their mate. The way he looked at me, the way he felt when he looked at me ... None of that was meant for me.

It was meant for my twin.

Scarlett's the woman they're besotted with.

Of course she is. That's how it's been our whole lives.

It doesn't matter that she thinks these guys are boring losers.

They're completely devoted to her anyway, ready to ask her to be theirs, for life.

I feel sick to my stomach.

I love my sister more than life, but right now I hate her just a little bit for getting me into this messed up situation.

It was easy to fall for these Alphas, and maybe that's because I'm an Omega, or because I'm getting over a break-

up, or maybe it's simply because they're incredible men.

The why doesn't matter.

It happened.

There's no denying it.

But now I have to walk away.

If I thought I was heartsick before, when I found Ben on that dating site, I was wrong.

That was a betrayal I should have seen coming. The red flags were all there.

I blinded myself so I could keep a dead relationship going.

This is completely different.

Everything's so new and hopeful at the start of a relationship, and that's honestly how it's felt since I've been coming here. Getting to know Bishop, Rueben and Scout showed me that there are decent guys out there.

Sweet, handsome hero-types, no less.

This feels like a real loss.

I use the edge of my shirt to wipe away my tears, and I do my best to pull myself together before Scout brings me back my purse.

He steps back into the room, and I force a smile to the surface.

It feels more like a grimace.

He passes me the purse, and presses his lips together before he asks, “Is it okay if I hug you?”

I nod, because honestly, I could use a damn hug right now.

He wraps his big arms around me, and I wish he never had to let go.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Bishop

Rueben's sitting on the kitchen floor, back to the fridge, staring at the opposite wall as if he might be able to burn a hole straight through it. Scout's confession was unexpected, and I'll admit to being slightly anxious about the results myself, but ultimately, he did the right thing.

"I never would have thought Scout would be the one to screw this up," Rueben mutters.

He isn't feeling quite so good about our pack brother's talk with Scarlett, but he's a lot more forgiving than Scout is, and I'm not so sure that's a good thing where our future mate is concerned.

"He hasn't screwed anything up," I assure him. "This is going to be a good thing, Rueben. You'll see."

Rueben grumbles something mean about Scout under his breath, before the sound of the front door closing makes him jump to his feet. A few seconds later, Scout walks back into the kitchen.

“She went home,” he tells us.

“When is she coming back?” Rueben asks, in the tone of a demanding teenager.

Scout sighs. “There’s no clock on this, Rueben. She said she needed time. I told her we’d be here waiting whenever she was ready.”

“So, you screwed everything up,” Rueben growls.

“Nothing is screwed up,” I tell him. “If she needs time, we’ll give her time. This is no different than if she asked us for that time herself, Rueben.”

“But she didn’t,” he argues. “He scared her off asking her to explain why she was mean to us before. I thought we all agreed that didn’t matter? People change!”

“We need to be able to trust her,” Scout says, calmly. “She’s changed a lot since she last blew us off, and that wasn’t that long ago, if you remember. Even that night at the cop bar, she was making snide comments and acting like she was too good for us. I need to know why. We all do.”

“Who cares about some dumb comments or whatever?” Rueben mutters, kicking at the ground.

“You would,” Scout tells him. “Maybe not now, or in the near future, but eventually, you’d want to know why she had so much venom and indifference toward us while we did nothing whatsoever to justify any of it.”

Rueben frowns at him. He might not want to admit it, but he knows Scout is right. We both do.

“It would have come up sooner or later,” I remind him.

He turns his frown on me, but he doesn't say another word.

I shrug at Scout, and he nods at Rueben.

“Come and beat me on the court. It'll make you feel better.”

They both have some energy to burn off now, I guess.

Rueben pulls a face as Scout heads for the door to the back yard, but he lets out a sigh once Scout's out there.

“I have to, don't I?” he grumbles at me as he heads to the door.

“You'd rather re-wash the dishes?” I ask.

“No way,” he scoffs as he disappears into the yard.

My own disappointment slips in once he's outside.

It finally felt like we were starting to get somewhere, and now?

Now, it feels like we're back to square one.

Let's just hope Scarlett isn't going to make us wait around forever.

I don't think I can handle another three weeks of that, never mind anything longer.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Sapphire

I go back to Scarlett's bedroom in her shared house, limbs heavy and getting heavier still with every step, as I succumb to the numb aftermath of my emotional release. I need to get out of Silver Valley, to put as much distance between me and those Alphas as possible, but I'm way too drained to make the drive this afternoon. Exhaustion is setting in, and I know I need rest to recover.

It's been a long time since I felt this awful.

I'd almost forgotten how much being an Omega can hurt.

I chose the life of a Beta so I wouldn't have to feel this kind of pain.

It doesn't matter that I'm no longer sure about that life.

Anything is better than this.

I lock the door when I get into Scarlett's room and ditch my purse on the floor. The bed looks inviting, but I head straight into the adjoining bathroom.

The harsh lighting makes my patchy skin and puffy eyes look worse.

This is what I get for letting myself get close to Alphas.

A bruised heart, and a heavy soul.

I never want to feel like this again.

Splashing cold water on my face, I let out a gasp.

I shiver as I dry my skin off afterward, trembling all over as I set down the towel.

Moving back into the bedroom, I accept what needs to come next.

Sleep, first. It'll restore my energy, and I'll feel a little better when I wake up.

The pain of these past few days isn't going to erase overnight, but it'll fade faster once I'm back on the right track. The city is where I belong, working at the magazine.

I'm not supposed to be out here.

That's what's wrong with this picture.

I should have faced my fear and got on that flight, instead of agreeing to switch places with my twin.

Scarlett's bedroom is dark, the shades are drawn and they're keeping the late afternoon sun at bay.

Slumping onto the bed, I kick Scarlett's sneakers off my feet, and then I roll onto my back.

I sink into the soft duvet. I'm cold, but I'm too tired to care.

My head's on a pillow, and I'm beyond ready to pass out.

Rolling onto my side, I slip into darkness and the emptiness it promises.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Sapphire

I wake up and pass back out a half dozen times before I'm finally able to drag my weary ass out of bed. At some point during the night, I found my way under the covers and got a little tangled in them. Getting untangled and out of the bed is enough to leave me out of breath, and kind of tempted to crawl back under the covers for a couple more hours.

I know I can't. I have a long drive back to the city today, and it's definitely going to take more than coffee to get me into a fit state to get behind the wheel. Besides the vicious growling my stomach is doing from missing out on too many meals during my emotional hangover, I also have a killer headache, which feels kind of ironic considering I faked a migraine yesterday.

It takes me a few seconds to decide what to do first, and I only end up going for a shower after I remember the protein bars I have in Scarlett's purse. I demolish one quickly before I step into the bathroom and start getting ready for the long day ahead.

The shower helps a little with my headache.

I'm pretty sure a decent meal and good dose of coffee will get me the rest of the way there. I might also need to drink some water, I guess.

I steal another shirt from my sister's closet, because I don't have any of my own clothes out here.

I put the blue Converse on and decide that I'm keeping them. That's the price Scarlett's going to have to pay for hauling me out here to play this part. If I'm leaving with a broken heart, I'm stealing a pair of shoes to help me feel a little better about it.

When I'm ready, I sit in front of Scarlett's bed and I plug her phone into the charger that's closest to the bed, the one by the side of the nightstand.

I don't know what to tell my sister about any of this.

She already knows I'm upset with her.

She doesn't think these guys have real feelings for her, but they do.

They must, if they want her as their mate.

Trust Scarlett not to notice when men are falling at her feet.

I pick up her phone and open a text message to my number.

Suddenly, I know what I need to do.

It's going to hurt, but I can't leave without telling Scarlett's neighbors' they haven't been talking to her at all these last few days.

She isn't interested in them. I can't let them think that she might be.

Some tiny part of me feels hopeful that they might be interested in me, but I brush that part away quickly. It's wishful thinking, and it isn't going to help me get through this mess.

Once the phone is halfway charged, I put it in my purse and take it downstairs with me.

The kitchen's empty, but the door to the backyard is open, as usual.

It's a little after ten when I find out buttered toast is the best breakfast I'm going to find in this party girl central kitchen. The fridge is full of dubious looking takeout containers and mixers for drinks, and the cupboards are mostly filled with chips and bottles of alcohol.

The milk has gone bad, so I guess I'll be having my coffee black.

I make it while I wait for my toast to pop up, and Karma steps in from the back porch a second later.

"Well, well, look who decided to drag herself out of her bedroom," Karma mutters.

I roll my eyes. "I was hyper-focused on work yesterday."

She snorts. "If you say so. You owe me for dinner last night. Erin and Cleo are working a ton of night shifts so we're on our own the rest of the week. Leftovers are in the fridge."

“How much?” I ask, ready to grab it out of Scarlett’s purse.

“It’s fine,” she says. “You can pay for us both tonight.”

“I’ll be out tonight.”

“Since when?” She looks me over suspiciously.

I might be ready to go next door and tell them who I really am, but I don’t want to tell Karma the same thing. Knowing how overly dramatic she can be, it’ll only make getting out of here a much bigger task. Plus, I hate that she calls me Saffron, and I would bet my last dollar she’s bitchy enough to do that to my face, even if I ask her not to. Maybe especially if I ask her not to.

“Since this morning. I have a meeting in the city. I won’t be back soon.”

“A meeting, hm?” she raises an eyebrow. “Lead singer, or drummer?”

Oh my God. I do not need to know this much about Scarlett.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I tease, somehow pulling it off.

Karma sighs. “Fine. Keep it to yourself. You know you’ll spill the tea the next time we have a girly night in. Venmo me ten bucks, for last night.”

Right. I nod. “I’m on it.”

She shakes her head as she leaves the room, heading out into the hall.

I hear her trudging up the stairs, so I guess she's not working today.

I take my time with my tea and toast. My headache is gone by the time I've eaten, but I drink a glass of water anyway. I've got a long drive ahead of me. I want to feel prepared for that.

Messing around in my purse, I realize I'm only delaying the inevitable.

I steel myself for a frosty reception as I leave the house.

I need to tell them I'm not Scarlett.

I'd rather I wasn't the messenger here, but I don't have much of a choice.

Going back to the city without trying to fix this mess, or at least to stop these guys from wasting time on my sister while she couldn't care less about them, would feel too awful.

They're good guys. Real sweethearts.

They deserve to know the truth.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Rueben

All of a sudden we have a week off for no damn reason, and I'm agitated enough to join Scout in the gym for one of his insane daily workout sessions. My pack brother is built like a tank from weight training like a maniac ever since he was a teenager. He used to win competitions, way back when, alongside his brothers. They're all into that stuff, and they're all competitive about it, to the extent where it feels more like they're rivals than brothers.

I'm not interested in cultivating that kind of relationship with Scout, so I usually just do my own thing while he trains as if he's trying to build up the strength to go into business as a human bulldozer.

Today, I need to focus more intently or I'll go crazy, so I'm asking him to show me his personal routine. It's probably driving him insane that I'm asking him to explain the why of every step, but if it is, he's keeping that to himself.

He's probably just glad I'm speaking to him after yesterday's stunt.

He's lucky I don't hold grudges.

"Holy hell," I mutter, as I test the weight he's put me down to on the bench press. "Do I look like The Incredible Hulk?"

He shakes his head. "No, but you look like a firefighter who needs to lift heavier weights than this in an emergency. I think you should be training with me more often, Rueben. This is a little worrying."

"Adrenaline always gets me through at work," I scoff, as I attempt to lift again.

This time, I realize I can do it, but man, it sucks ass.

I'm going to be a sweaty, shaky mess by the time we're done in here.

There are much better ways to get into that kind of state.

Fun ways that would make me breathless for all the right reasons.

I rest and stare into space. "When do you think she'll be back?"

It's already a half hour later than she usually gets here, so I know she won't come over today, at least not for the remainder of the bet, which was the only way we were anywhere close to guaranteed to seeing her.

"I don't know," he answers, shrugging lightly.

"This isn't driving you crazy?" I ask.

"I wouldn't say that," he says, giving me a wry smile. "But there's not much we can do when she needs time to work

through things.”

“I need more hobbies,” I tell him. “Like another ten of them, starting yesterday.”

“Why don’t we start with finishing this training session first?”

I screw up my face, and the sound of the doorbell ringing makes me straighten on the bench.

“Was that ...” I start, almost tripping over my own feet to get off of the bench.

He shakes his head. “It was the door, but it’s probably the mail.”

“What? No way. The mailman is never here before noon.”

I dart over to the gym door, and I see Bishop has already beaten me to the punch.

Gus is standing at the bottom of the stairs as our Captain and pack leader answers the door.

Scout is crossing the gym to me when I see our mate is here.

I smile back at him. “It’s Scarlett. She’s back.”

Chapter Fifty-Six

Bishop

The last person I expect to see standing on our doorstep today is the woman who's destined to be our fated mate, but I can feel her presence the second the bell rings, and I know before I see her face that she's come back to us because she couldn't stay away.

She gives me a weak smile when I open the door. "Hey. Can we talk?"

"Sure," I tell her. "Just you and I, or ..."

She shakes her head. "All of you. If everyone's home, I mean."

"Everyone's home," I tell her, wondering if she's including Gus, and wondering if I should try to, either way. Clearly, she has something she needs to say, and if it has something to do with the talk Scout had with her, even Gus might change his mind when he hears it.

"Okay," she murmurs, clutching her purse straps tighter. "Great."

She seems nervous, and I'm not completely sure she's okay.

"Are you feeling better today?" I ask.

She nods slowly. "The migraine thing ... I feel fine."

She's just anxious, I think, which is the polar opposite of how she usually comes across.

I guess everything she's been through has affected her even more than we thought.

"Come in," I offer, pulling the door open. "I'll ask everyone into the kitchen. I just made coffee, if you want one?"

"That would be nice," she murmurs as she steps inside.

Rueben doesn't give her two seconds to get into the house before he's bounding toward her from the gym with a wide grin on his face. "Scarlett! You're back!"

She smiles back at him, but there's something subdued about her posture.

I give him a warning glance. He rolls his eyes, but I know he'll be careful.

We all need to be. She feels vulnerable, and she wants to talk to us.

We can't make any assumptions about that, no matter how much we might want to.

Scout steps out of the gym next, and she gives him a wave.

I glance back at the staircase, but Gus has vanished from sight.

Looks like I'll have to go find him.

“Make Scarlett a coffee,” I tell Scout. “She has something she wants to talk to us about. I need to go get Gus.”

“Gus?” Scarlett asks, sounding a little dazed.

“It'll just take a second,” I assure her.

Rueben puts an arm around her and leads her into the kitchen, starting to yammer on about the training Scout was just giving him.

Something feels wrong, or off, but it's because she's so full of nervous energy.

Whatever she needs to tell us, clearly, it's not going to be easy for her.

Scout nods at me as he follows Rueben and Scarlett into the kitchen.

I check the lounge quickly before I head upstairs.

I find Gus in Rueben's room, sitting in front of Tiny Tempest's cage.

He looks up at me. “I assumed I was relegated to kitten sitting duties since she came back.”

“Well, you assumed wrong,” I tell him. “Something's going on with Scarlett, and we should all be there when she tells us whatever it is that she needs to say. We're a pack, and it's time we started acting like one.”

“What happened to respecting each other's differences?” he asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

“I know there’s something in your past that you don’t want to talk about, but that doesn’t mean you get to ignore it when the rest of us have strong feelings about someone who might be fated for us as a mate. I’m lead Alpha for a reason, and I expect you to respect that.”

He sighs. “I’ve stayed away to avoid upsetting her.”

“I know, but she’s upset anyway so you might as well come downstairs and hear what she has to say.”

“No apology covers the way she’s been treating you,” he warns me, as he rises to his feet.

“That’s debatable. I’m not ready to judge before I’ve heard her reasons.”

“And that would be why you’re in charge,” he mumbles. “Fine. I’m coming down there with you.”

That was ... easier than I expected.

I nod and leave the room.

He follows me down the stairs silently.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Sapphire

I'm a bundle of nerves as Scout makes me coffee and Rueben walks me over to the kitchen table. I can't predict how they'll react to what I'm about to tell them. It's not a normal situation, and I have no idea how I thought I was going to be able to do this.

"So ... is this a conversation Tiny Tempest should be in on?" Rueben asks, giving me an uncertain smile.

I shake my head. "You can probably fill him in later."

Scout puts my coffee down in front of me.

Honestly, I'm too anxious to even try picking the mug up.

My hands are a little trembly. I don't want to risk spilling anything.

This is going to be hard enough without a klutzy incident added on top.

"Well, okay," Rueben says. "But he's going to want to hear every last detail, so it might be better if you tell him yourself. I

tend to forget things. You might even need to tell me twice.”

I manage to laugh, but I sound kind of weird.

God, where's Bishop?

I just want to get this over with.

I've never even met this fourth guy he's gone to go get. I understand that they're a pack, and that they might have wanted to ask Scarlett to be their mate, so it kind of makes sense that they'd want everyone here, but honestly, I'm nervous enough without having to worry about a random fourth guy listening to any of this.

It's going to hurt them, and they're going to think I'm awful for going along with it.

Still, at least then they won't have their hopes up that Scarlett might say yes to their imminent proposal.

I really hope that's not where they think this is going.

I don't think it can be.

Not after what Scout said to me.

They're expecting an apology, and they're about to get one.

Only it's not exactly the one they've been waiting all this time for.

Scout sits down across from Rueben, who's sitting next to me.

“Did I miss anything?” he asks, his voice soft.

“Nothing important,” Rueben says, starting to drum his fingers on the table.

“Are you doing okay?” Scout asks me, his pale eyes full of concern.

I’m willing to bet he beat himself up a little over what he said to me yesterday.

He seems quiet and thoughtful. I don’t think it was something he did without really thinking about it and making sure he put it across as gently as possible.

“I’m okay,” I tell him. “I just needed to come over and clear the air.”

He nods slowly, not pushing for more.

“Come on, Cap,” Rueben mutters next to me. “What’s taking so long?”

“Stop with the fingers,” Scout tells Rueben. “Relax. Drink your coffee. I’ll go get them if they take much longer.”

“Promise?” Rueben asks, quitting his finger drumming.

“When do I ever not do something when I’ve told you I’ll do it?”

Rueben shrugs. “I was just checking.”

Scout shakes his head. They act a little like real brothers, I guess. They can get a little bit testy with each other, but I can tell it’s all done with love behind it.

It only stings more to notice this stuff when I know I’m leaving today.

This is the last time I'll see them, probably ever, because there's no way in hell I'm coming back out here after I've told them I'm not Scarlett and that my sister isn't into them one little bit.

I don't want to see the lucky woman they inevitably move on with. It would hurt too damn much.

"What are you thinking about?" Scout asks, after a few seconds of awkward silence.

Me? Oh, I'm just thinking about how hard it's going to be to walk away from you all, but once you know the truth it'll probably be easy, because you'll think I'm a terrible person.

"Nothing much," I murmur, wishing it were true.

"I think I can hear them coming," Rueben blurts.

Scout turns his head toward the door as it's pushed inward.

I guess I'd better get ready to come clean.

It's almost time to tell them why I came here this morning.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Gus

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about what Scarlett wants to tell us, but if she pulls some lame attempt at an apology, I'm a little afraid that my pack brothers will eat it right up.

It's better if I'm there for this, whatever the hell this turns out to be.

She might have all three of them wrapped around her little finger, but she doesn't have me, and she never will. I had hoped she might never darken our doorstep again after Scout got brutally honest with her yesterday. Now, I can only hope my brothers wake up to the act she's been putting on to make them believe she gives a damn about them.

The smell of coffee hits me before Bishop even pushes the door to the kitchen open.

It's usually a welcome aroma in the mornings, but today something else is pulling at my attention as I step into the kitchen behind our pack's lead Alpha.

It feels like the world is moving in slow motion around me as Bishop leads the way to the table, where a blonde woman with bright blue eyes that shine like diamonds is sitting, her gaze locked on me.

The pull I feel from within toward this woman is utterly undeniable.

I recognize her instantly as my one true mate.

It takes a few more seconds to remind myself who she also is.

“No.” I shake my head.

She’s not Scarlett, because Scarlett is not our true mate.

It doesn’t matter how much she looks like her.

“What?” Bishop asks, turning to frown at me.

I frown right back at him and then I move around the table toward her.

It doesn’t make sense, and at the same time it makes perfect sense.

This woman has awakened a primal need inside of me, and every instinct I have tells me she’s mine.

She’s beyond a doubt, one hundred percent my one true mate.

She stands when I stop in front of her, and the tension that hangs between us is palpable.

One look in those sparkling eyes and I know she’s feeling the exact same things that I’m feeling, right here and now.

There's no denial, no refusal. Our fated bond is being exposed and both of us are lost to the potency of our awakening desires.

I can feel my teeth sharpening in my mouth as the urge to mark her as mine washes over me.

Somewhere, in the distance, I can hear my pack brothers muttering.

Whatever they're saying and whoever they're talking to, I no longer care.

All there is in this moment is me, and her.

She blinks and her eyes start to glow, faintly, with a golden hue.

Then, my own vision brightens, bathing us both in warm light.

This is what it feels like to meet the person you're fated to be with, and the one I'm destined to claim as my mate is the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on. Her soul is bared to me in those bright eyes, and I see who she is on the inside.

She's everything I've ever needed.

She's not Scarlett Faris.

I don't know what her name is, but she's mine.

"I see you," I murmur, as I dare to reach up and cup her face in my hands.

"You do," she whispers back, eyes wet with unshed tears.
"You *know* ..."

The raw emotion in her stare is impossible to ignore.

She's been so lost, and she's filled with longing.

All she wants is to be wanted.

By me, and my pack.

That's why she came over here.

Scarlett never would have done that.

I run my thumb over her lower lip, and she lets out a soft moan.

She's so full of need that it's practically dripping from her body.

I can feel it, and I want nothing more than to give her everything she could possibly desire.

Once she's been claimed and marked as mine, she'll never need to feel lost again.

"This is where you belong," I tell her. "With all four of us."

"Yes," she agrees, sounding a little far away.

She lets out a throaty growl as I lean in and kiss the left side of her throat.

I'm so damn close to moving back and opening my mouth.

I want to bite down and make my mark on her.

I'm ready to pierce her skin, my mouth opening to let my sharpened teeth graze her throat when I suck in a breath, and the scent of her seductively sweet perfume fills my senses.

Distracted, I breathe her in deeply, and there's no sliver of doubt in my mind that she's ours.

Our true mate is perfect, and she also happens to be an Omega.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Sapphire

How can everything be so clear and so hazy all at once?

HThe guy standing in front of me can't be real. He's too perfect, and that golden glow around him only makes him seem even more impossibly attractive and angelic. He's like some kind of earth-bound God who somehow stumbled into this room.

But there's no mystery in why he found his way here.

He belongs with me. I knew it the instant I laid eyes on him.

The deep connection I feel to this stranger is unmistakable. I don't know how many times I've watched a movie where the leads lock-gazes and suddenly, they both know, but I never thought it would happen to me.

We're true mates.

He kisses my throat, and I don't care that I know nothing about him.

I want to be claimed by him. I want his mark on my body.

The way he looks at me, I know he's seeing me, the real me.

He knows I'm not Scarlett.

If he didn't, this wouldn't have happened.

"Gus?" I ask, wondering where I heard his name to know it.

Who the hell is this guy? I need to know.

He looks up from my throat, dark eyes glittering with lust.

Oh, who the hell cares who he is? Just let him claim you.

My teeth start to tingle in my mouth, and my heart is pounding so fast and hard it's all I can hear.

"What do I call you?" he asks curiously.

He's asking my name, because he knows I'm not Scarlett.

I can't believe how good it feels that he knows that.

We've never even met, never spent a second in each other's company, and he *knows*.

It's unbelievably attractive that he just knew.

"Your mate," I tell him.

He smiles. "I like that."

God, I do, too.

I'm perfuming for him.

My suppressants have worn off.

Those little pills don't work against true mates.

Mates, plural, Sapphire?

Right, yeah.

This guy is part of Pack Bishop.

Packs tend to take a single mate, unless there's some polyandry involved.

If this guy is mine, then his pack brothers are, too.

The thought of that makes my heart hurt.

They're mine, too.

I know it.

But ... it's different with them.

They thought Scarlett was their mate.

Probably a wires-crossed situation because she looks exactly like me, and I'm supposed to be theirs. Of course, they had no idea I existed, so why wouldn't they think they were meant for Scarlett?

I should be happy to know that they're my fated mates, but it's tinged with disappointment that they've been chasing my sister this whole time.

Not Gus, I remind myself.

He knew the second he saw me.

Whatever the others felt when they met Scarlett, he didn't feel it.

If he had, I don't think we would have had this reaction to one another.

It feels good when I don't think about his brothers.

This is how my life was always supposed to turn out.

I'm an Omega. I was never meant to hide that.

I'm not a Beta, and I shouldn't have tried to live like one.

He pulls me in closer, and glances to his side before rolling his eyes at whoever just spoke.

"I could use some time alone with my mate," he snaps in reply, making me smile.

I put my arms around his neck, letting my fingers stroke through his thick, dark hair.

My slick is starting to come in, and his body is reacting to the scent.

He's ready to lift me onto the table, and I'm ready to let him.

"She's not Scarlett," Gus protests when his brothers get loud again.

He turns away from me for a second to scowl at someone.

"I'm not," I agree, firmly, before he leans in, lowering his lips to mine.

The charged kiss has me lightheaded and breathless within seconds.

He breaks it and holds me tighter against him as the room spins around us.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I barely open my mouth to answer before I collapse against him.

“Scarlett!” I hear his brothers gasp in unison before the world goes dark.

Chapter Sixty

Bishop

Everyone's concerned when Scarlett passes out in Gus's arms, after our moodiest pack brother experienced what I can only assume was a mating bond acceptance, led by the fates, if their glowing eyes can be trusted as an indication of otherworldly guidance.

"For the last damn time, this is *not* Scarlett," Gus growls at us.

Rueben raises an eyebrow at him. "Then who is she?"

"Denial?" Scout murmurs, with a shrug of his shoulders when Gus focuses his glower on him.

The glow disappears from Gus's eyes, and he nods at me. "Take our mate."

I move to his side and lift Scarlett into my arms. She lets out a soft sigh as I rest her sleeping form over my shoulder.

Gus stumbles and grabs onto the back of the chair. He grimaces at me.

“I might be about to faceplant the floor.”

“Sit down before you fall down,” I tell him. “Was that what I think it was?”

“Was it ... Wait, what did you think it was?” Rueben asks, his eyes wide when I look back at him.

Gus pulls the chair out and sits down. He lets out a heavy yawn.

“It was a mate bonding acceptance,” I tell Rueben, when Gus doesn’t respond.

He covers his mouth and nods. “She just accepted all of us.”

“She did?” Rueben blurts.

“Sort of,” Gus amends, yawning again the second he takes his hand away from his mouth.

“What do you mean, sort of?” I ask, knowing something was weird about it.

Typically when there’s an Omega involved in a true mates situation, there’s perfuming the second the Omega feels a connection with any of the mates, Alpha or not. I can see why she wouldn’t have perfumed when we met since we barely spent any time around her. But we’ve all spent a little time with her this week, and I know we all felt something, strongly, while we were with her.

We’re all Alphas, and she only perfumed once Gus came into the room.

It doesn’t make any sense.

It makes even less sense considering he's the one brother who's been swearing blind that she isn't our mate. Of course, he's also insistent that she isn't Scarlett, and he couldn't have bonded with her if she wasn't ...

"Oh my God," I murmur, looking at Gus's smugly happy face. "She's really not Scarlett, is she?"

"It's about time you started listening," he says, right before he passes out on the table, knocking over one of the apparently full coffee cups.

I look at Rueben. He pulls a face.

"Would you rather I asked you to carry Gus to bed?" I ask him.

"Cleaning up, here I come," Rueben says, heading for the sink.

Scout moves around the table and lifts Gus over his shoulder.

Gus is already snoring by the time Scout and I are headed up the stairs with our sound asleep bonded mates. I take not-Scarlett into the spare room and put her down on the bed. Taking her sneakers off gently, I stay quiet as I slip them onto the floor and put a blanket over her sleeping frame.

Her perfume is fainter now than it was when it was triggered, but it's still intoxicatingly sweet and tempting. The desire to lay down beside her and stay with her until she's awake comes and goes on an inhale and exhale. I ignore my impulses, moving away from the bed.

I leave the room and close the door quietly.

Scout is coming out of Gus's room next door at the same time.

He looks over and gives me a wry smile. "Well, that was pretty unexpected."

"It was something," I tell him, reminding myself that Gus was the one who was right all along.

Maybe if I'd listened to him when he told us Scarlett wasn't ours, things would be a little different right now. Maybe this was the way they had to happen.

Regardless, I don't think Rueben is going to be pleased about what this means. Gus might be the only one with a smile on his face until our mate is ready to forgive the rest of us.

"What is it?" Scout asks, frowning at me.

"Gus might have been right about Scarlett."

He blinks at me. "What? I don't understand."

"We'll have to wait for our mate to wake up to get the full story, so let's leave it at that. Will you make sure these two don't wake up and go looking for each other?" I ask as I head back toward the staircase. "I want to be sure they're feeling ... like themselves before they make any life changing decisions."

"You want me to stand guard?" He raises an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," I tell him. "They might still be under the influence of the fates when they wake up."

"You really think so?"

“I don’t know, but we don’t need any more surprises right now.”

“Fine,” he says. “I’ll stay out here and yell if anything weird starts to happen.”

He sits down on the landing floor, opposite the wall that’s between the bedroom doors.

I retreat to the kitchen, where Rueben is probably making a bigger mess instead of cleaning up.

Chapter Sixty-One

Rueben

I can't believe that just happened. Our mate kissed Gus. *Gus!* Of all the guys in this house she could have made out with this week, she picked that grumpy asshole.

First Scout upsets her, and now Gus is completely changing his mind about her.

Well, maybe. Not really, though.

He kept yelling that she isn't Scarlett.

Denial, like Scout thinks, or perhaps something stranger?

Oh, yeah, and she's an *Omega*. That reveal was way crazier than the last one on Alpha Island.

The sweet, citrusy scent that filled the air was like a little taste of what heaven must feel like.

It's faded now, but there are still traces of it on the air making me take in deep breaths and let out satisfied sighs on the exhale.

Our true mate is an Omega, and she might not be who we think she is.

What a wild way for this day to start. I can't wait to see what happens next.

I clean up the coffee from the table and dry it off with a towel, and I'm moving away from the table when I notice Scarlett left her purse hanging over the back of the chair she was sitting in.

Tossing the towel toward the sink, I get an impulsive thought.

Bishop would notice the look in my eyes if he was here, but he's not.

I glance into the hallway, and swing the door closed for good measure before I creep over to Scarlett's purse and swiftly tip it upside down over the table.

"Oops," I murmur as I put the purse back where it was and start to pick through its contents.

Some stuff is basic and tells me nothing. Gig ticket stubs. Oh, look, they're all for Chaos Burning, what a surprise! A scarf. Red lipstick after red lipstick. How many shades of red are there, exactly? I toss all that stuff back inside. It's not until I'm moving her phone that the bottle of pills roll to the edge of the table, and basically right into my hand.

It's a prescription bottle, for suppressants.

Not that surprising considering she turned out to be an Omega, but still.

“Oh, shit!” I blink at the name on the bottle, and I read it over again in case my brain was glitching.

Nope. I read it right the first time.

Sapphire Faris.

It’s possible that Scarlett is a nickname, or a stage name, I guess, but it would be weird to change your name when it’s already pretty cool.

I yank my phone out of my back pocket and google search the name Sapphire Faris.

I don’t get a lot of hits, but there is a prominent by-line for a women’s magazine.

It states that she’s a current contributor.

“This is insane,” I mutter as the kitchen door creaks open.

I look up and give Bishop a sheepish smile. “It’s exactly what it looks like, but hear me out ...”

Chapter Sixty-Two

Bishop

I take the bottle of suppressants out of Rueben's hand while he rambles on about a writer named Sapphire Faris. He says he got other hits, and I turn the bottle over in my hands, wondering if this is why she seemed so different these past few days.

I'm reluctant to buy into a theory that support's Gus's insistence that Scarlett isn't our mate, but that's mostly because it probably means we've been chasing the wrong woman for the past three years, and there's no way Scarlett's identical twin sister is going to be happy that her true mates mixed her up with her twin.

"Wow," Rueben says, shaking his head. "If this isn't confirmation, I don't know what is."

He shows me a high school class picture that's zoomed in on two blonde girls at the end, one who's front and centre, looking like a star in the making, the other who's hanging back shyly with a tight smile on her face.

“Oh my God,” I mutter.

“We have a twin situation,” Rueben says, laughing as he takes his phone back. “How cool is that?”

“I wouldn’t say it was cool,” I tell him. “We just spent three years focused on getting the popular twin to notice us, meanwhile her quiet sister was in another place putting up with a shitty boyfriend and God knows what else ...”

No wonder she seemed so upset about her breakup. She probably had a nice normal relationship that went bad, like most people who don’t date rockstars.

“We should definitely get that guy’s name and make him regret hurting her,” Rueben says. “But this makes so much sense. No wonder she didn’t recognize that Chaos Burning song. I’m so glad our mate isn’t a fan of that shit.”

“We don’t know anything about our mate,” I murmur, as I go back over everything that’s happened this week. There are so many out of character moments that it’s hard not to see everything as obvious evidence that Scarlett wasn’t Scarlett. That’s now that we know. It’s easy to see mistakes in hindsight. It’s not so easy to correct them once you realize you’ve made way too many that have hurt the one woman you never would have wanted to hurt.

“We know she’s a writer for a magazine,” Rueben says. “And she doesn’t really seem to like having her picture taken.”

He seems excited about his online search, so I won’t burst his bubble, but I know there’s a good reason why our own

fated mate didn't perfume for us. It happened with Gus because he knew she wasn't Scarlett. It might have happened with us if we'd been as certain as he was, but since it didn't ...

I have no doubt that we have a long way to go before we can say we've been forgiven.

"Go show Scout," I tell Rueben. "He's on the landing."

He nods and heads out there, not rushing for once.

I doubt he'll stop messing around on his phone until he knows as much as there is to know about Sapphire Faris, our one true mate.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Scout

I stand up as Rueben gets to the landing, ready to tell him not to disturb our mate. He moves toward me, instead of toward the spare bedroom door, which throws me off completely.

“Wait until you see this!” he exclaims, shaking his head as he hands me his phone.

There’s a photo on the page that looks like it’s from high school ... Scarlett’s high school.

“Twins!” he blurts as I look back up at him. “Can you believe it?”

“Actually, I think I can,” I admit, seeing something of the woman we’ve been hanging out with in the image of the quiet girl standing behind her extroverted twin. “She hasn’t seemed very much like Scarlett since she’s been around us these last few days, and I’ve never had the kind of feelings I’ve been having for her for Scarlett.”

It makes a little too much sense.

“Her name is Sapphire. Isn’t that cool? Blue’s always been my favorite color.”

“It’s pretty,” I admit. “Why is she here, though?”

Rueben rolls his eyes. “Twin swap, what else? Do you really see Scarlett coming here to make good on that bet? She would have done anything to get out of that. I guess in this case that meant sweet talking her twin into doing this for her.”

He’s probably right. I didn’t expect Scarlett to show up, much less actually do any cleaning over here. She took all of us by surprise when she showed up.

Except it seems now that maybe she didn’t.

Sapphire did.

Damn. If she’s really not Scarlett, then I feel even more awful for upsetting her.

I frown at Rueben. “This is crazy. We don’t know that this woman isn’t Scarlett. We can talk to her when she’s awake, but we shouldn’t be jumping to conclusions over a photo you found online ... Wait. What do you think you’re doing?”

He opens the spare room door and slips inside before I can stop him.

So much for guarding our mate.

I follow him quickly, freezing on the spot when I see he’s already at her side and pushing back the blankets Bishop gave her.

What the hell?

“Get. Out. Of. Here.” I tell him.

He looks up at me and shakes his head slowly. “I can *prove* she’s Sapphire.”

I move closer, ready to grab him by the arms and drag him out of the room like a nightclub bouncer.

He pushes up the side of her shirt and suddenly I’m staring at her hip.

Holy hell, those jeans are low cut.

Her perfume has lightened since it first came out for Gus, but it’s still sweet and potent enough to make me wish she was awake and ready to be claimed.

We’re a damn long way away from that at this point, especially if she’s Scarlett’s twin.

“Well?” Rueben says, waving his hand over her exposed skin.

I frown at him. “You’re sick, you know that?”

He blows out a breath. “No tattoo! Scarlett has a red dragon, right here.”

His finger hovers over her body, and I blink as I look back at her pale skin.

No tattoo. Come to think of it, she’s been dressed kind of different this week, too.

Long, loose shirts instead of the tight, revealing kind she’s always wearing under her red leather jacket. I don’t think I’ve

ever seen Scarlett wearing something that didn't show off her tattoo, now that I really think about it.

I shoot Rueben a glare. "Point made. Out."

He rolls his eyes and walks around me to leave the room.

I cover Sapphire back up. She's sleeping soundly when I follow Rueben out into the hall.

"See?" Rueben says, looking gleeful.

"I wouldn't get too hyped about this," I tell him. "It means we've been acting like we're interested in Scarlett, right to our actual mate's face. Whatever her relationship with Scarlett actually is, I don't know anyone who would just be cool with that."

His face falls. "But it's all been a crazy misunderstanding. She can't hold that against us. Right? I mean, she can't. Tell me she can't?"

"Go check on your kitten, Rueben. He's been left alone for a while now."

"Don't act like you're the boss of me," he says, as he sticks his phone in his pocket and goes into his room. He turns at the door. "You're not Bishop."

He closes his door. I let out a sigh as I sink back down to a sitting position.

It's going to be a long day, and I don't think anything's going to get much better once our mate wakes up.

We've been chasing the wrong woman for our mate. I can't think of a worse mistake to make when it comes to the opposite sex.

I lean back against the wall.

Our mate isn't who we thought she was.

I hope she's more forgiving than I was when I thought she was Scarlett, because otherwise we're in for a rough ride before any bonds are forged.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Gus

I blink awake into darkness, my jaw aching a little as I start to sit up. I smacked my head off the table when I passed out. I also knocked something over, I think. My body feels a bit stiff as I get out of bed, rubbing at my jaw, and I'm a little wonky on my feet as I head toward the bedroom door.

I take my phone out of my back pocket to check the time.

It's a little after two p.m. so I've lost a few hours at most.

I open my door and wince at the sudden influx of light from the hallway.

Waiting a second for my eyes to adjust, I blink at Scout as he gets to his feet across the hall from my door. He's eyeing me suspiciously as I come out of my room and shut the door behind me.

"Hey," he says. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I lost a fight with the kitchen table. Where is she?"

“She’s still sleeping,” he tells me, his gaze flicking to the spare bedroom door.

Of course. My pack brothers did the gentlemanly thing and gave her a bed of her own.

I guess it would have been kind of weird to wake up next to her.

Considering we’ve just met it would be good to get to know each other a little before we start sharing a bed. A name would be nice, though I’m happy to call her my mate if it’s what she likes.

“And?” I ask.

“And?” Scout echoes back.

“Tell me you felt it.”

“Felt what?”

“That she’s not Scarlett.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“She *might* not be Scarlett,” he admits after a pause. “Rueben found out Scarlett has an identical twin sister, Sapphire.”

“An identical twin?” I let out a laugh.

That must be why they all thought Scarlett was our mate.

Well, they might look alike, but they’re nowhere close to the same person.

“We don’t know anything for sure,” Scout goes on.

I move past him. “Keep an eye on our mate for me while you’re up here.”

I wouldn’t want Rueben sneaking in to get a lungful of her perfume.

That’s for my enjoyment alone until Sapphire decides my pack brothers are worthy.

“No worries,” he mutters, leaning back against the wall as I head downstairs.

I could use some water, and I want to see what Bishop has to say about the bombshell our mate just dropped without having to say a single damned word.

I can’t help but feel a little gleeful that I was right.

This whole time the three of them have been acting like I was being a contrarian dickhead, going against what they all considered to be the truth, because they all felt “something” when we met Scarlett. Despite the mounting evidence that she was never going to be a good match for us as a mate, none of them changed their minds.

Well, Scarlett was never on my radar as a potential mate.

That woman is a walking red flag, and that’s the last thing we need.

Sapphire ... well, I may not know much, but I know enough to tell she’s nothing like her sister.

The fates showed me her soul. It was beautiful, but lonely.

She's been alone for too long, and in too many ways.

It's time she had a pack to look after her.

Our pack, once she's forgiven my brothers their trespasses, of course.

I find Bishop in the kitchen, mopping the floor.

"You're awake!" he exclaims when he sees me. "How are you feeling?"

"A little tired, but good," I admit. "It's not every day a guy gets to meet his true mate."

He leans the mop against one of the chairs and moves away from the part of the floor that's been cleaned. He has a wry smile on his face when he looks back at me.

"Sapphire Faris, writer for *Bold Woman* magazine in Cressidan City. Who would have guessed Scarlett had an identical twin sister?"

"They might look alike, but Sapphire ... She's perfect for us."

"I can't believe you got guided by the fates. I thought that was a myth. I've never known anyone who got to experience it. What was it like?"

"It's hard to explain. I knew she was my mate the second I looked at her, and I knew she wasn't Scarlett. Considering how unusual our situation is here, I guess that was enough for the fates to intervene to offer some reassurance, or whatever you want to call it."

I can't help wondering if that reassurance was for Sapphire.

I was sure. I knew the second I saw her face.

She might have taken a little longer, and I don't blame her for that.

"I think the fates might have needed to reassure her that I knew she wasn't Scarlett."

Bishop sighs. "I wondered if that might be the reason they were involved."

"It's a pretty crazy situation we're caught up in here."

It's way rougher for him than it's going to be for me, but I think he knows that.

"I feel pretty stupid," he confesses. "And I'm sure Scout does, too. Rueben might be excited over the whole twin thing for a while, but that's not going to last once he realizes our mate isn't too impressed with most of us."

I snort. "He watches way too much daytime TV."

As much as part of me wants to gloat, I know Bishop's already ripping himself to shreds over this, trying to see the moment when he should have figured out his choice was the wrong one.

He'll torture himself enough over it, because mistakes in our line of work can get someone killed.

"This isn't a fire," I tell him. "So don't go retracing your steps to work out where you might have done something different or better. There's nothing you could have done

differently for things to be better now. You guys all felt a connection to Scarlett for a reason. It's not your fault it turned out to be crossed wires, or whatever you want to call this mess. It's not something any of us could have foreseen."

"Maybe," he says, nodding. "But you knew, and you didn't waver. All three of us were sure about feeling a connection, but all three of us had moments of doubt. We should have known that meant *something*. Even if it wouldn't have been possible to figure out what."

It doesn't matter what I say, he's going to beat himself up over this.

Scout will do the same, and Rueben will do it even harder once it hits him what it means.

I don't want my pack to feel punished over something that was outside of their control, but that's down to what Sapphire wants now. Her feelings have to come first. My pack brothers can roll with the punches. They've been doing it for long enough. They can handle waiting for a little longer.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Sapphire

It's dark when I crack open my eyes to find out I'm lying on a bed in an unfamiliar room.

I sit up quickly, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the absence of light. It doesn't take long to remember I passed out in Scarlett's neighbors' kitchen.

Right after I met hot neighbor number four, a.k.a. Gus, who instantly accepted me as his fated mate.

He knew I wasn't Scarlett. I saw that ... or felt it ... somehow.

My grasp of what happened feels like it's slipping through my fingers.

The fates guided us.

It was surreal.

They showed me things I can't remember.

I felt things that I'll never forget.

How did he know I'm not Scarlett?

He absolutely knew. He told the others to stop calling me that.

I don't understand how he could have known.

But he did, and I accepted him as my mate.

In accepting him, I accepted his pack brothers, too.

"I have fated mates," I murmur out loud, needing to hear it to believe it.

True mates are so rare, but I don't doubt that these men are mine.

I would have chosen them if we weren't fated ... if I didn't think they really wanted Scarlett.

I know for sure Gus only has eyes for me, so that's probably why he was the one who made my perfume come out.

His pack brothers actually think Scarlett's their mate.

She's the one they've been trying to spend time with.

She's the one they made that bet with.

"Fated mates, with complications," I add, a wry smile forming on my lips as I get up from the bed.

Nothing good ever comes easy, and this is the kind of good that most people would pay almost any price to find. I'm so damn close to hitting the relationship jackpot. A pack of gorgeous Alphas want me as their mate. Four sweet, sexy guys want something deep and meaningful with me.

There's just one problem.

They might be a little bit more into my sister than they'll ever be into me.

If that's the string that comes attached to this once in a lifetime deal, I don't want it.

It doesn't matter if one of them isn't into Scarlett.

If the others are, I can't ever take their marks.

I find the bedroom door, and I step out into the empty hallway.

All the doors are open as I pass, heading toward the staircase.

I can hear the sounds and smells of food being cooked coming from the kitchen. I'm guessing it must be dinner time because it looks a little dark outside when I pass a window.

I think everyone is downstairs. I can hear Rueben rambling away, even if I can't make out what he's talking about. Bishop's short but distinct orders let me know he's the one doing the cooking, which isn't that much of a surprise. I don't hear Scout, but I don't expect to. He seems kind of quiet.

Gus's rumbling laughter makes me smile.

It probably shouldn't.

I need to be a little more careful around all of them.

Breaking up with Ben hurt me badly enough, and he wasn't anywhere near as devastatingly sweet and handsome as any of these Alphas. They have serious potential to break my heart into tiny little pieces and forget finding a way to put it back

together again. I know what I'll be left with if this goes wrong. There'll be nothing but an empty space where my heart used to be.

I already have seriously warm and fuzzy feelings for these guys, and we've barely spent any time together so far. I'm in serious danger of falling too fast and too hard to ever recover if they let me down.

I wish I had some of Scarlett's carefree energy right now.

My fingers tremble on the banister as I reach the bottom of the stairs.

I fold my arms to try and stop the shaking. I feel like I'm breathing too hard, and I know my face is flushing with color; I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks.

Swallowing, I force my feet forward.

I get to the kitchen doorway, and Rueben's the first one to look my way.

He darts over to me, skipping past Scout, and gives me a warm smile.

"Hey. How are you feeling?" he asks, his voice soft.

I feel like a nervous wreck, but I don't want to admit that.

First things first, they need to know what I came over here to tell them this morning before Gus accepted me as his mate, and the divine power of the fates caused me to pass out.

"I ... There's something I need to tell you," I start, glancing at the others as they look my way. "All of you, if that's okay."

“Sure,” Rueben says, smiling.

“What is it?” Bishop asks, moving away from the stove and wiping his fingers on a towel.

Gus and Scout move closer, and I take a single step into the room.

I feel ready to burst into flames in front of them all.

This is so damn embarrassing.

“I’m not Scarlett Faris,” I admit, not seeing any surprise in their expressions so far. “Scarlett’s my identical twin sister. She asked me to switch places with her because she was embarrassed about losing that bet and, honestly, she hates cleaning. My name is Sapphire. I came over here this morning to tell you guys the truth, before ... well, before I met Gus.”

Rueben smiles at me. “I knew you’d tell us.”

He glances at Bishop. “Didn’t I say it? I knew!”

Bishop rolls his eyes. “You called it.”

“You all know already?” I ask, not sure if I should be relieved or worried about that.

“Gus knew,” Bishop explains. “He must have some seriously finely-tuned instincts because none of the rest of us realized we were wrong when we met Scarlett and felt a connection to her.”

“Rueben’s the one who did some online searching,” Gus admits. “I just knew you weren’t Scarlett. We didn’t know she

had an identical twin. Now we do, and her name is Sapphire, like the color of her eyes.”

He gazes at me intently, and I can't help the way my stomach flutters when he says my name.

“You saw something different when you looked at me,” I murmur, feeling good about that right before I catch the scent of my perfume getting stronger.

I don't think I can be around him without doing that. It's going to get embarrassing if it doesn't stop.

“I knew you were my mate,” he admits.

“I knew you were mine, too,” I confess.

“Starting to feel a little left out here,” Rueben complains.

I smile at him. “I like the rest of you, too.”

“Just *like*? Ouch,” Rueben complains, frowning. “You don't feel like we're yours?”

“Rueben,” Bishop cuts in sharply.

“It's okay,” I tell him. “Honestly, I don't know what to think right now. Pretending to be Scarlett has messed things up for all of us. I didn't come here thinking you guys were going to be my fated mates. I came here thinking I'd get some time to relax away from the city. I'm attracted to all of you, but you were all attracted to Scarlett, for how long?”

I look around, and I can tell they don't like the question.

I don't like it either. It's bad enough that they've been thinking about her at all.

“We’ve suspected she might be our true mate for few years,” Bishop admits. “But it wasn’t because of an attraction, believe me. We just saw her and felt a connection. It wasn’t how I imagined a true mate connection would feel, and I think that’s probably because it was false. I didn’t know that was a thing, but apparently it does occasionally happen.”

“And I haven’t helped things by coming out here pretending I’m her,” I add.

“Maybe not.” Bishop, being the sweet guy he is, remains non-committal about my involvement in the creation of this mess. He shrugs.

“So, maybe we should try to start over?” I ask, not feeling sure about it, but knowing we need to start somewhere.

He smiles. “I think we’d all like that.”

“Including with Gus,” Rueben adds quickly.

Bishop shakes his head. “That’s up to Sapphire.”

I look at Gus. I can’t help the warm fuzzy feelings he’s giving me.

He has an advantage, I guess, and I’m not mad about it.

“It’s fairer if we all get to start over,” Rueben says, clearly feeling a little desperate.

I press my lips together, and when I open them, I disappoint him.

“Sorry, but I’ve been suppressing my perfume for eight years. My first heat will probably come in soon now that I’ve met

you all, and I'll need an Alpha when it does."

It's only the truth, but sometimes that hurts more than a lie.

So much for trying to take things slow. I've basically just told Gus I want to sleep with him, not that he couldn't already tell what I wanted when he smelled my perfume before. It's awkward, because I can't admit to wanting the same from the rest of his pack and I don't know if that condition's going to change anytime soon.

Rueben stays uncharacteristically quiet.

"We understand," Bishop assures me.

"Does that mean you're staying here with us?" Scout asks.

Considering my heat could come in at any time, and it could be painful if I don't have a mate around who can ease it quickly, I nod. "For now, I think I might need to. If that's okay?"

"We'll be happy to have you," Bishop says. "If there's anything you need from next door, we can get it for you, if it helps?"

"Actually, I don't have anything of my own out here at all," I admit. "Aside from a bottle of suppressants and those are pretty much going to be useless now."

"I can take you into the city if you want to pick up some of your clothes," Gus offers.

"After dinner, at least," Bishop starts, hesitating for a second before adding, "The morning would be better, so you're not

coming back while it's dark out."

The temptation to do what Bishop wants me to do is strong. I know he's the lead Alpha of this pack, and I'll be expected to take direction from him when I'm officially a part of that pack, but right now I want nothing more than to be wearing my own clothes, and, honestly, using my own shampoo and makeup. I'd also kind of like to grab my laptop so I can keep up with work. I really wasn't thinking straight when I came out here without it.

I realize Gus is watching me, waiting for me to decide.

I'll get to spend hours alone with him when we go and considering I'm not sure of my feelings for the rest of his pack right now, getting a bit of distance from them wouldn't be a bad thing.

"Tonight would be good," I tell Gus. "I miss my own clothes."

And I really don't want to continue looking like my sister while it feels like three of my mates were immediately attracted to Scarlett when they met. It's not going to be possible to find a way to get over that while I'm still walking around wearing her clothes, if it's even possible at all.

"Well, dinner's almost ready," Bishop says. "So why don't you pick a seat?"

I do what he asks, Gus following and sitting down right next to me in what I thought was Bishop's chair. Rueben quickly

slides into the seat across from me, as if someone else might be about to steal his spot or something.

“So, you’re not a fan of Chaos Burning then?” he asks, sounding hopeful.

I laugh. “How did you guess? Did I give it away when I didn’t recognize the song you started to sing the other day?”

He smiles. “Yeah. Kind of. It seemed a little strange.”

“Especially since the title was on the shirt I was wearing,” I add. “Which I didn’t realize until later.”

“So, what *do* you like?” He rests his head on one hand, while he gazes at me.

“In general, or are we just talking music?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at him.

He laughs. “Well, I do want to know everything, but we can start with ... Actually, wait. Do you like basketball?”

“I’m a Crocs fan,” I admit. “I was raised in Crystal Lake, so ...”

I trail off with a shrug.

“Awesome!” his smile turns into a grin.

“Awesome?” I ask, as Bishop begins to put plates on the table. “I don’t support your team.”

“You will,” he says, sounding sure about that.

Gus shakes his head. “We only support the Tempests because we live here.”

“They’re an awesome team,” Rueben protests.

“As are the Crocs,” Gus counters.

I feel my face flush.

Having Gus rush to my defence feels good, I have to admit.

I’m not used to having a guy stick up for me.

Ben wasn’t like that.

It might just be an Alpha thing, or a mate thing.

Either way, I just met this guy this morning, and I already know he’s nothing like my ex.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Gus

It feels pretty good to be the only one our mate is interested in right now. It's the perfect validation for what I knew all along. Scarlett Faris is not, and never has been, our true mate.

I had no idea her sister would be, but I can already see there are huge differences in Sapphire's nature that add up to an attraction I never could have felt for her twin.

Rueben does his best to monopolize her attention throughout dinner, clearly trying to gain ground and get Sapphire to like him. He's being way too obvious about it if you ask me, and she's entertaining him a little because she's not rude, but we can all tell she's not super happy with him.

She's also a little clipped with Bishop and Scout, though as usual Bishop is taking it in his stride and Scout is being quietly stoic. Rueben's the only one visibly affected by Sapphire's resistance.

"Are you done eating?" I ask, when it's been a few minutes since she last picked up her fork.

Her plate is still half-full, but Bishop's portions tonight were a little more out of control than usual.

He tends to cook in bulk, and that's never a bad thing when you have a house full of men who are pretty much always hungry. There are always leftovers in the fridge. Take-out is a once a week treat when someone (Rueben) can't be bothered to cook on a night that Bishop can't.

Sapphire nods. "I'm done."

"We have dessert!" Rueben blurts when I get up, ready to clear our plates away.

"Dinner was amazing, thanks," Sapphire says, her gaze on Bishop before she looks back at Rueben. "But there's no way I could eat anything else now."

He looks crestfallen.

He'll get over it.

She's not going to give him the cold shoulder forever.

I clear the plates away.

Sapphire gets up, picking up her oversized purse.

She's ready to get out of here.

I can tell without asking.

Her eyes are practically screaming when she looks at me.

I look back at my pack brothers. "We'll see you later."

Bishop gets up and brings his own plate to the sink. "Take the Jeep and call me when you get there."

“No problem,” I tell him, heading out into the hall once Sapphire’s at my side.

He didn’t need to give me instructions, and I think he knows that, but everyone’s a little tense so I’m not going to be a dick about it.

I never would have taken the Mercedes to the city, and I know they’ll all be sitting around here worrying until we’re back. I would have called once we got out there without needing to be told.

I take the Jeep’s keys from the rack by the door, and I look at Sapphire.

“If you need the bathroom, we probably won’t get a good chance to stop until we’re almost out of Silver Lake.”

“I’m fine,” she says. “I just really want my own clothes.”

Nodding, I open the front door and lead her out to the Jeep. The Mercedes is boxed in by the more sensible car because we rarely use it. The Jeep has a lot more trunk space and it can fit five people.

“Who owns what?” Sapphire asks, raising an eyebrow at the Mercedes as we pass it by.

“We share,” I confess. “We’ve been a pack for close to a decade, so we pooled money on the house, which was a no brainer, and later the cars. Bishop and I wanted the Jeep. Rueben wanted the Mercedes, and he knew he could convince Scout to go for it, too. First year we had it, those two were

always taking turns with it. After that, the novelty wore off. It basically sits in our driveway collecting dust now.”

“That’s one expensive dust-catcher,” she muses, shaking her head as she moves around the Jeep to the passenger side.

I open the driver’s door and get in, messing around with the seat before I’ve got it how I like it.

If there’s one thing that’s a pain in the ass about sharing, it’s having to make tiny adjustments to the seat and the mirror virtually every time I need to go drive somewhere.

Sapphire gets in the passenger seat and places her purse at the side of her feet. She closes the door while I’m adjusting the mirror, and I realize that being in such an enclosed space with her is going to be a little more difficult than I imagined. The scent of her perfume starts to fill the air, a seductive mix of sweet citrus and soft floral aromas that seem perfectly blended to make my mouth water and pants tighten within seconds.

I had no damn idea how thoroughly intoxicating the right Omega’s perfume could truly be.

My cock feels huge as it continues to fill out the limited space in my jeans.

I crack the window, and make it look like I’m checking the side mirror.

The couple breaths of cold air I take in help.

I feel a little less intoxicated as I put my seatbelt on and start the car.

It's breezy outside, so my concentration improves in leaps and bounds within a few minutes.

The physical effects that Sapphire's perfume has on my body start to fade. My cock stops beating against the front of my jeans as if it's knocking to get out. My mouth stops watering, and my heart rate goes back to normal.

We spend the first twenty minutes or so in silence, while Sapphire gazes out of the window, looking as if she's lost in thought. I consider switching on the radio, and I decide not to. The silence doesn't feel awkward, at least it doesn't now that I'm not fighting against primal urges.

Eventually, I feel her gaze on me, and I glance her way to find her turned slightly in her seat.

I give her a smile. "This whole thing is crazy, right?"

She laughs. "Which whole thing? Finding out I have true mates and they've been living right next door to my sister while I've been dating an absolute idiot in the city this whole time? Or finding out those mates thought my sister was theirs?"

"Well, one of those mates knew better," I remind her. "But it's a lot, right?"

"It's a lot," she agrees, her voice soft. "How did you know?"

"How did I know?" I find myself echoing.

"That Scarlett wasn't your mate."

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I didn’t feel what my pack brothers felt. She didn’t feel like you do.”

“She didn’t?” she asks, smiling when I glance at her again.

“Not one little bit.”

She lets out a sigh, and I can tell she’s relieved.

“I love my sister,” she starts, pausing and pressing her lips together.

“But?” I ask.

“She’s just always been the one everyone is drawn to,” she confesses. “Ever since we were kids. There’s something magnetic about her. There always has been.”

“I have a kid brother kind of like that,” I tell her, not believing I’ve been alone with her for less than a half hour and I’m ready to spill my biggest secret to make her feel better. I haven’t given Luke space in my head since he did what he did. He ceased to exist to me, and here I am now, about to resurrect the fucker.

“Really?” she asks. “Was he the one with all the friends?”

“Later, yeah. Before he accepted his Alpha status, I was his only friend.”

It hurts my heart to think about that time. He was my best friend.

Virtually since the day he was born, we were close.

And then, we weren’t.

“He was pretending to be a Beta?” she asks. “That’s usually something Omegas do. I didn’t know Alphas did that.”

“Yeah, me neither. Until Luke. He was such a dork up until the last couple years of high school. Then, suddenly, he decided he didn’t want to be like everyone else after all. It was like a switch flipped overnight. He went from this geeky kid who wanted to study theoretical physics and had zero real friends outside of home, to a track star who made friends with literally everyone he met.”

“Oh, wow. That must have been something to see.”

“It was. My parents were proud of him. I was worried, but he was still Luke. He was just a bit cockier, and a bit more physically fit. He studied less and ended up applying to sports management courses instead of science at college.”

“Did you ask him what made him decide to accept being an Alpha, instead of continuing pretending to be a Beta?”

“I tried to talk to him a couple times, but he brushed it off. He made jokes that I was jealous.”

“Ouch. Sorry, that sucks.”

I shrug. “We’re both Alphas. Sometimes that can breed competition. I didn’t feel that way, but he did, which I turned a blind eye to because it felt easier. He showed his true colors the day I brought home my college girlfriend. We’d been together for close to two years. She was my first love.”

“I don’t think I like where this is headed,” Sapphire admits.

“You and me both,” I mutter. “It was Thanksgiving. My dad sent me out for a case of beer, because I was the only sober one. Luke was acting like a dickhead, and I didn’t want to leave Amy there, but she insisted it was fine.”

My knuckles go white as I grip the wheel tighter.

Just thinking about what Luke did makes me so fucking angry.

I take in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“It wasn’t fine. I ended up getting caught in traffic coming back to the house. I was gone for more than an hour. When I got back, my mom was in the kitchen working on dinner, my dad was trying to fix the TV reception for some stupid special that was coming on, and I couldn’t find Amy or Luke. At least, not downstairs.”

“Oh no,” Sapphire murmurs.

“I found them upstairs. Fucking in my old bedroom. It was the worst night of my life.”

“That’s awful. What did you do?”

“I left the room, stood in the hall for a minute to pull myself together. I tried to find a reason for it, something that made sense, but there wasn’t one. I went back in and asked what the hell they thought they were doing.”

She gasps. “Oh God, you went back in? I could never.”

“Believe me, I wish I hadn’t.”

The smirk Luke gave me when he looked back at me, not stopping, not even slowing down, that fucking killed me. It told me he didn't give a shit. That what he was doing meant nothing.

“Amy was drunk. She let him mark her.”

“She didn't!”

“Unfortunately, she did.” I let out a sigh. “That was the end of us. We both knew that without having to say it. She moved out of my apartment when we got home. Packed up, said sorry and left. I tried to speak to her a couple days later, to make sure she was okay. She wasn't, but nothing I could say or do was going to help. You want to know the worst part?”

“No,” Sapphire says, her gaze sad when I look at her.

“You don't?”

“I like happy endings,” she admits, giving me a rueful smile.

“Me too,” I tell her, with a laugh. “But don't worry. We'll still get one of those. Together.”

She smiles, and I'm reminded that all that shit with my brother might as well have happened a lifetime ago.

I'm over losing Amy. I would have lost her sometime. She didn't really want me.

“Amy just wanted an Alpha to mark her,” I finish. “I realized that later. She was fixated on it, thinking it would mean forever. Luke showed her it doesn't have to mean anything. He's an asshole. He's not the brother I grew up with.”

My pack brothers are my family now, just like Sapphire will be soon.

Amy learned the wrong lessons from the stories she'd heard about fated mates.

She didn't go out looking for a real true mate. She just went out looking for an Alpha.

I learned a powerful lesson from that experience. I learned that fate is the only thing you can rely on.

Finding my pack was my destiny, and meeting Sapphire is the single best thing to happen to all four of us.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Sapphire

I'm left reeling from Gus' story about his brother. I can't imagine Scarlett ever doing something that awful. She's fiercely protective of me, and I have her back, always. I can tell Gus is still hurting over what happened. He basically lost the brother he knew.

I don't know what I'd do if I lost Scarlett.

We might not see each other often, but I know she's only a phone call away, no matter what.

"Scarlett rushed right over when I told her about my breakup," I tell Gus. "I know she's not the kind of woman you're attracted to, and believe me I'm still glad about that, but she's the best sister. I would do anything for her, and I know she feels the same way back."

"I'm glad you have that with her," he says, giving me a smile. "I love my pack brothers, and we all look out for each other even if sometimes we drive each other crazy. I'll always

miss Luke because it feels like he died when he changed the way that he did. My sweet, dorky kid brother was just gone.”

“I read once that the grieving process never really ends, when you lose someone from your life, no matter how it happens. The pain fades, and sometimes you don’t feel it at all, but it can still hit hard when you least expect it.”

“That’s exactly how it feels,” he admits.

“I wish it wasn’t something you had to go through.”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

“It does. Like us. If I hadn’t said yes to coming out here, pretending to be my sister to work off her debt, I never would have met you.”

“And if my pack brothers hadn’t decided Scarlett was their mate, they wouldn’t have made that bet with her in the first place.”

“Oh, wow,” I murmur. “That’s right.”

If they hadn’t made that bet, my sister wouldn’t have suggested switching places with me, and I wouldn’t have met Pack Bishop at all.

I’m never going to like that they thought Scarlett was their mate, but I’m going to have to get over it somehow. My sister is pretty awesome, and we do look exactly the same.

“I don’t think there’s a precedent for this,” Gus says. “If you think of it that way, it’s hard to stay mad of them. They might have gotten it wrong, but it did bring us together.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out when we get back if I’m over them thinking my sister was their mate.”

“Rueben might lose his mind if you’re still mad at him, so I kind of hope you are.”

“I’m not mad ... well, not really.”

He laughs. “You’re definitely mad.”

“Well, if you had the sister all the boys went crazy for in high school and forever after, you’d be a little mad at your true mates for falling for her first, too.”

“Hold up. You think they fell for her?”

“I mean ... they thought she was their mate?”

“Yeah, but she blew off every attempt they made to get a chance to spend time together. They were in agreement that she looks good, don’t get me wrong, but her personality was a constant source of frustration. I wouldn’t say they were head over heels. Nowhere close. They were just getting desperate for a chance to get to know the real Scarlett. They were always talking as if she must have another side to her that they weren’t seeing. Something that would make her make sense as their mate.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” I admit.

“It should. They were always talking about the universe playing a cosmic joke on them, giving them signals that Scarlett was their mate, but then making her refuse to entertain a conversation with any of them for more than five seconds.”

I can't help but laugh. "Yeah. You guys aren't exactly Scarlett's type."

"I figured," he says. "They thought she might just have commitment issues, but we all saw the kind of guys that got invited to her parties."

"Musicians, right?"

He nods. "It only makes sense. She'll have way more in common with guys who work in the same industry that she does."

"That's true," I murmur, wondering how she's getting along with Chaos Burning.

She's probably at the island resort with them now, sipping cocktails at a bar or something.

It makes me smile. I hope she's having a good time.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Gus

Driving into the city is usually a pain in the ass. I don't like to come out here too often, because it's a total life suck. It always feels like I've lost way more than a few hours of my time, and whatever I've had to come out here for never feels like it's been worth it.

Tonight, I don't grudge the journey one little bit.

Talking with Sapphire makes three hours pass in what feels like minutes, and I find out so much about her life that every question she answers gives me a few more.

I want to know everything.

It's been a long time since I let myself open up like this.

My pack brothers know something happened with an ex, but they don't know the whole story.

It's not something I thought I'd ever talk about, but it helped me connect with Sapphire, and we understand each other a little better now.

“I can’t believe we’re almost there,” Sapphire tells me as we reach Silver Lake’s exit.

“How far is your apartment from the college?” I ask.

“A few blocks,” she says. “That’s the closest, most convenient parking spot for sure.”

“Perfect,” I murmur as we start the slow crawl into Cressidan City in Saturday night traffic.

Sirens are ringing out all over. Typical weekend in a big city.

“I worked in the city for a little bit,” I tell her. “Once I got through training to work as a firefighter.”

“Really?” she asks. “That must have been pretty different to working out in Silver Valley.”

“Oh, it was,” I tell her with a laugh. “It could get pretty crazy. Don’t get me wrong. There are still times when nothing much is happening and we’re all waiting around cleaning and checking equipment or whatever, but for the most part it was a lot faster paced.”

“Did you prefer it?” she asks.

It takes a second to realize why she’s asking.

She lives out here. It’s where her job is.

We live in Silver Valley.

At some point we’re going to have to make a decision about who moves where and that doesn’t necessarily mean we’ll all be living at my place in the valley. It’s daunting to think about

moving. We've been so settled in Silver Valley. It's a nice place.

"I don't know," I tell her honestly. "It had good points, but so does working in a place where you only have to run into a burning building once or twice a month."

She nods slowly. "I can't imagine ever doing that."

"And you shouldn't. We're well trained. We know how to assess risk in dangerous situations. We know when it's safe, and when it's not." I don't add that there's also an element of intuition involved. That's an Alpha thing, and it can look more like arrogance in action.

We approach the college, and I can see there are plenty of empty spaces in the lot.

It's supposed to be for staff and students only, but from what I've heard, that's very rarely enforced.

If I get a ticket, I'm not going to be mad about it.

It's worth it for the convenience.

She picks her purse up off the floor at her feet and digs around inside it while I park the Jeep.

I find a trio of parking spots and swing into the middle one.

I roll the window back up as I bring the car to a stop.

Sapphire's got a set of keys in her hand, and her purse in her lap when I take the key out of the ignition and unbuckle my seatbelt.

"Ready?" I ask, curious to see what her apartment looks like.

“Let’s go.”

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Sapphire

I take in the sights and sounds around us as I lead the way to my apartment building. For the first time since I moved out to Cressidan City for college, I'm wondering what it would be like to go back to living in a small town.

I wouldn't say I'm attached to the city in any meaningful kind of way. It was just where all the jobs seemed to be once I started applying for work.

"This is my building," I point out to Gus as we get closer to the entrance.

"There's no door entry system," he murmurs, frowning.

"The buildings that have those are *way* more expensive."

"You're an Omega," he reminds me, quietly.

"I live like a Beta," I remind him. "That means I live in the same kind of apartment that most Betas live in. It's nothing fancy, but I've never had any problems from the lack of security systems."

He doesn't seem pleased, and I don't want to try to defend myself over it.

I like that he's protective over me. It's not something I've felt from someone I've dated before.

Not that we're dating. It's just a little more serious than that.

"We should make this quick," he tells me. "If you forget anything we can come back some other time."

I lead him up the stairs to my floor, keys ready in my hand.

When I'm halfway up the last flight, I slow to a stop, hearing someone cursing and making a lot of noise on my hallway landing. Gus catches up to me and draws me a curious look. I nod my head toward the sound. He frowns for a second, and then the cursing guy starts to get loud again.

Trust me to bring Gus back here when there's a lunatic neighbor in my hallway.

Despite the fact that I've never met any of them before, of course there would be one up there acting like a nutcase the second I bring one of my future Alphas out here.

There's no way Gus is going to let me come back to this apartment now.

He moves up the stairs first, and I follow a couple steps after him.

My stomach sinks when we get to the top, and I see that the neighbor causing a disturbance isn't a neighbor at all.

It's Ben. He's trying to get into my apartment, and he's getting more and more pissed off that his key isn't working. The doors all scratched up where he's been scraping his key off the wood around the lock.

Oh my God.

I can't think of a worse way for Gus to meet my ex.

"Fucking bitch!" Ben seethes at the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" Gus asks him, in a vaguely threatening tone.

Ben turns slowly, staring icily until he locks his gaze on Gus.

I see it when my ex realizes he's looking at an Alpha.

The anger in his eyes turns into fear.

He's revealing the true nature of a Beta who only knows how to act like an Alpha when it doesn't matter. That's the trouble with Alpha-leaning Betas.

They have no real Alpha qualities. They just like to think they do.

Ben straightens up slowly and clears his throat. I can tell he's attempting to look like a harmless, mild-mannered Beta to avoid starting a fight. "I was trying to get back into my apartment, but it would seem that my girlfriend has changed the lock."

"I'm *not* your girlfriend," I protest, drawing his attention to me.

He stares at me and starts to frown. “What the fuck are you *wearing*, Saffy?”

“That’s none of your business,” I tell him. “And it’s not your apartment. It’s mine.”

He frowns at me, looking from me to Gus and back again.

“Who the fuck is *he*?”

“I’m the guy who’s going to smash your head into the wall if you don’t leave,” Gus growls, advancing another step. “Now.”

Ben backs up automatically and stumbles, bumping into the wall at the side of the door.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he mutters, bringing his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll have the cops charge you with aggravated assault. You’ll get the book thrown at you for abuse of power as an Alpha.”

Gus slaps the phone out of his hand, hard.

It flies onto the staircase and smacks against the wall before it tumbles farther away. Sounds like it’s shattering into a million tiny pieces. Ben looks pale as he stares after it. His eyes are a little glassy when he looks back at us. A few seconds of silent staring later, and he frowns at me.

“My *God*. You really *are* an Omega.”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” I tell him. “Leave. Now. Before my Alpha murders you for interfering with our nest.”

He shakes his head at me, and his gaze clears. “I ... I left stuff here. I want it back.”

“Well, I put it in the trash on Wednesday night. Pickup was Thursday, so you’ve got a few days worth of garbage to sift through at the dump if you *really* want the stuff you left here. Good luck with that.”

“You fucking bitch!” He takes half a step toward me, and Gus throws a punch.

It lands, and it lands *hard*. I hear something crack, and then Ben is on his knees on the ground, howling like a damned banshee, covering his face as blood drips onto the floor.

A door opens down the hall.

The old woman closes it again quickly when she sees us.

For a second, my stomach starts to churn.

God, I hope she’s not calling the cops.

Then, I get mad.

What do I care if she does?

Ben’s the one who’s in the wrong here.

Gus punched him because he was going to hurt me.

I don’t honestly know if Ben would have hit me or crashed into me or screamed in my face.

The level of emotion he’s showing right now is way beyond anything he ever showed me in the past.

“Go inside,” Gus tells me, his voice hard.

I blink at him. “What? No.”

He's so full of rage right now, all of it directed at my idiot ex who's already bleeding on the ground.

What we've got right now, we can explain.

Explanations won't mean a thing if Gus kills him, accidentally or not.

"Go inside," Gus says again, growling at me now.

I shake my head and touch his arm. "I just found you. I'm not letting you go to prison over this idiot, Gus. We're both going inside, and we're calling the police to report him for trying to break in and for trying to assault me."

I step past Ben as he groans on the ground, blood dripping from his nose.

"I hope that fucking hurt," I tell him as I pass. "You deserve worse."

Unlocking the door, I take Gus by the hand and lead him into my apartment.

He lets out a sigh once we're inside, and I can tell he's still trying to cool down.

I lock the door, and Ben starts shrieking out there.

The sudden abrasive sound makes me jumpy.

There's a loud bang a minute later, and Gus glances out the peephole.

"He kicked the door, I think," he says.

"It's smart to call the cops, right?" I ask.

He nods after a second of hesitation. “Might as well do it before he reports me for assault.”

“I’m so sorry about this,” I tell him, feeling terrible that he might get a criminal charge, basically because of me. I’m about to dig Scarlett’s phone out of her purse when I notice his hand is bleeding.

His knuckles are scraped.

“Oh, that looks painful.” I have his hand in mine before I really stop to think about what I’m doing.

That one simple touch brings so much desire with it that when I let out a gasp, I have a hard time catching my breath again afterwards.

Oh, God. My heat is starting.

I can sense it. My body feels strange in a way I’ve never experienced before. It’s almost a feverish feeling, in the way it spills over me, making me hot and ready and desperate to be mated.

The anger drains out of Gus as I lift his hand and lower my head.

I kiss his fisted fingers, below the scrape across his knuckles, and when I look back up at him, my nerves die instantly.

He wants this as much as I do. He wants me. He waited for me.

The banging sounds continue out in the hallway, but neither of us care about that any longer.

He looks down at me and reaches out to stroke my hair back from my face.

“I know this is fast,” he says. “But I’ve been waiting for my true mate for years, Sapphire, and now that you’re with me, I never want to be apart. I know it can hurt when an Omega’s perfume is triggered beyond the usual window, but I don’t want you to think you have to let me claim you just because it might be painful if you don’t. There are things we can do to ease the pain until you’re really ready.”

“I’m really ready.”

“You are?” he asks.

“I am,” I murmur, as he moves a little closer and leans in to kiss me.

He’s tall, and I’m not, so I push onto my toes to meet him halfway.

The kiss feels like it’s going to be teasingly brief when he breaks it quickly, but he lifts me onto the countertop, and I’m the one who has to lean down a little to get my lips to meet his.

I wrap my legs around him and move in close, hands stroking through his thick, dark hair.

My slick starts to soak through my panties as we kiss.

I know it’s my body’s way of preparing for his knot, but I’ve never experienced it before.

Arousal could make me wet for sure, but my slick is thicker and scented with my perfume.

It feels completely different. It feels like I might go crazy if I'm not filled with a knot soon.

Only an Alpha can give me one of those, and only an Omega can make an Alpha's cock expand and lock. The two of us are a perfect fit for one another.

Alpha and Omega. Fated mates.

God, I want him to claim me.

Right now. I wish we were naked.

I would slide down onto his cock and make him fuck me against the counter.

The thought of that makes my pussy clench, and a second later my stomach starts to cramp.

I suck in a breath, and he moves back, concern in his dark blue eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he whispers. “Are you ...”

“Cramps,” I murmur. “My heat has started.”

His eyes widen. “Now? It’s happening right now?”

I nod slowly. “Right now.”

The cramping sucks, but it’s dying down to a dull ache.

I think I can handle it, as long as it stays low-key.

“You’re in pain,” he says. “Do you have something you can take for that?”

I give him a wry smile. “My prescription for this particular problem is located inside your pants.”

He laughs. “I was talking about pain killers.”

“I know. I shouldn’t need them. When we start ... The pain will stop.”

“I don’t like to think you’re hurting,” he tells me.

“Then, don’t make me wait too long for your knot.”

He smiles. “I don’t intend to, but I think we need to at least talk about protection before I take you to bed. I don’t have anything with me, but I did notice a late-night pharmacy on the walk out here.”

“I came off the pill a few days ago, after ... once I was single again. I didn’t expect to be thinking about having sex with anyone anytime soon.”

I might have condoms in a drawer in the bedroom, but I don’t mention those. They’re made for Betas. They wouldn’t contain his knot. They make them special for Alphas.

I bite down on my lip as my cramps get a bit sharper.

“You need to take something for the pain,” Gus says.

“I don’t,” I insist.

“I don’t want you passing out while I’m out getting protection.”

“Then, don’t go out,” I suggest.

“That’s the heat talking,” he tells me, though his gaze is searing, and his voice is a little growly.

“You’re not like other men, Gus. I don’t want to be careful with you.”

I’m not afraid of what might happen after.

I know he’s ready to be my true mate, like I’m ready to be his.

“I’ve heard first claimings can be extra potent,” he warns me. “You could get pregnant tonight.”

“I’ve heard the same rumors,” I admit. “How do you feel about having kids?”

He smiles. “I’m beyond ready to start a family.”

“Then we’re on the same page,” I murmur, surprised at how quick and easy the decision really is.

I guess when you’re with the right person that’s how things can be.

This is so not a conversation I expected to be having when I woke up this morning.

“You’re sure that’s not the heat talking?” he asks.

“It’s not the heat talking,” I assure him.

I put my entire life on hold for three years for that asshole Ben. I waited for him, hoping and wishing he would look at me one day and decide I was it for him. Every day that passed while he messed me around only made me feel worse.

That’s not how things will be with Gus.

Our paths were always destined to cross.

He's my true mate. He'll never walk away from me.

"You're sure?" he asks, this time in a low growl.

Make my slick thicken why don't you?

"You're my true mate," I tell him. "I've never felt more certain about anything in my life."

His smile widens into a grin. "Then, I should take you to bed where we can take this nice and slow."

He puts one hand under my ass and spins me around.

"Which way to the bedroom?" he asks.

God, it feels so good to be pressed up against him like this.

It takes me a second to get a clear enough head to mumble the answer. "First right."

He carries me into the room, helping me duck the doorframe before setting me down on the edge of my bed. The first thing I do is haul off Scarlett's T-shirt. Then, I kick off her sneakers and peel her old jeans off. My thighs are kind of damp, and my silky dark blue briefs are soaked through.

I look up at Gus, and I find him watching me intently.

"What?" I ask, feeling weirdly self-conscious.

"You're beautiful," he says, before he closes the door.

He takes off his shirt and lets it fall to the ground.

His body is breath-taking.

Besides the hints of Scout and Rueben's bodies under their tight clothes, I've never seen a guy with a six-pack in real life

before, and this one ... *Wow*. He's not a slacker, that's for sure.

"You've definitely been in one of those firefighter calendars, right?" I ask, making him laugh.

"I've definitely been *asked*," he admits, as he moves in close. "But I don't take my clothes off for just anyone."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Honestly, I think I'd be a little jealous if his gorgeous body was splashed all over a calendar where anyone could see it. I want it to be for my eyes only. For my touch, only.

"You wouldn't want to share me?" he asks, teasing.

"God, no. You're mine."

"I'm yours," he confirms, leaning forward to kiss me.

Chapter Seventy

Gus

My mate is a lot more possessive than I first thought, and I have to admit, it's seriously hot when she gives me a smouldering stare and tells me I'm hers. I didn't expect to be claiming her this quickly, but she knows it's what she wants, and I know she's what I want.

Neither of us see any reason to wait.

She helps me strip out of the rest of my clothes and takes me by surprise when she sinks to her knees in front of me. Her little pink tongue flicks out over the wet tip of my cock and a soft moan exits her lips as second later. She looks incredible as she starts to stroke me in one hand while she licks and sucks down my length, taking me into her mouth until I hit the back of her throat.

The rhythm she's working is way too perfect. The way she's pumping my length while she takes me as deep as she can? *Holy hell*, the woman knows what she's doing, and if she's not careful, my knot won't get a chance to swell up inside her pussy tonight.

“No more of that,” I tell her softly, stroking her hair as she slowly stops.

She lets my cock pop out of her mouth, and the flushed stare of arousal she hits me with makes me swallow hard.

“Was it that bad?” she asks.

I shake my head. “It was that good.”

The smile that comment earns me is so sweet and shy, it’s adorable.

“Lie down,” I tell her. “Take off your panties and spread your legs wide for me.”

She does what I ask without a hint of hesitation, and I follow her onto the bed, pushing her legs a little wider as I get closer.

The bare skin of her pussy is soft and has been made slick with her juices. The scent of her perfume here is maddeningly sweet and utterly intoxicating. There’s no way to resist tasting her. I wouldn’t want to. I move down there and spread her lips open with one finger, checking how tight she is, so I know how wet I need to get her. She takes a second finger easily, but she tightens around those the moment I run my tongue over her clit.

The gasp she gives out is one of shock.

Her body tenses under me.

I gaze up at her, keeping my fingers buried in her wet entrance, but removing my tongue from her clit. “Too hard?” I ask, not sure how to judge what I’m doing from that sound.

“God, no. It felt good,” she admits, her voice a little dreamy.
“I had no idea it could feel like that.”

I rub my thumb slowly over her clit and she lets out a soft, satisfied sigh.

“You had no idea what could feel that good?”

“Being licked,” she says.

“You haven’t been getting licked?” I ask, wondering how in the hell that’s possible.

She has a waxed smooth pussy, and her scent is too intoxicating to ignore.

“Is that weird?” she asks, sitting up a little.

“It’s just another reason you’re lucky you found us,” I tell her. “This pussy was made to be licked and sucked, Sapphire. Lay back down and relax. I want to make you feel good.”

Chapter Seventy-One

Sapphire

I had no damn idea oral could feel so much better than being touched. His tongue feels soft, and he moves it so perfectly, licking me slowly enough to drive me a little crazy while I feel the first sparks of a climax begin to ignite. I can feel myself getting wetter and wetter as Gus licks my clit while he fucks me with his fingers. Those slow, rolling movements push me closer and closer to the edge, until, finally, I'm soaring over it, gasping in a sharp breath as I sink into the sensation and start to come.

I push harder into his touch, and he sucks on my clit as I grind into him.

I'm breathless as he keeps me close, using his free hand to grasp my ass while he sucks my clit and rolls his tongue over it slowly. I moan in pleasure as I run my fingers through his hair, keeping him in place, right where he is, while I recover.

I can feel his lips twitching against me, his stubble a little rough against my pussy.

He's pleased with himself; I can tell before I feel it from him.

He should be. He just gave me the most incredible orgasm I've ever had.

I catch my breath before I start rocking my hips, letting him move against me all over again. His eyes close and his tongue works slowly back up to the same perfectly delicious pace that made me come the first time. He moves the hand that's been fucking me, and I almost expect to feel another finger enter my pussy.

That's not what happens.

His ring finger penetrates my ass instead, along with his pinky.

I bite my lip as my body starts to tense up for the second time.

Every part of me loves what he's doing.

My slick makes it so easy for him to finger both holes while he licks my clit, and it gives me all kinds of ideas about what it's going to be like to live with four Alpha males who look as good and feel as good as he does. I'm going to want to have them all, as often as I can, in as many ways as I can.

I unclasp my bra and stroke my fingers over my nipples as he starts to suck lightly on my clit.

"Oh my God," I murmur, not believing the feeling can get any better.

Somehow, it does.

I moan softly when he slows down, but he only teases me for a few minutes with fast sucks and slow licks, before he starts rolling his tongue over my clit until I come for him all over again.

He comes up for air this time, and I gaze down at him.

“Get up here.”

He wipes his wet mouth and moves over me, understanding what I need immediately.

My cramps start up again, getting sharper and more frequent as we start to make out, our bodies pressed tight together on the bed. I get a dull, aching sensation added to the pain as my walls clench around nothing.

I’m getting needy for his knot, but I know he won’t be able to kiss me while he knots me, so I ignore the aches and pains as I enjoy the way my mate feels against me in my bed.

We’re close to claiming each other now.

I can handle being a little sore while I wait for him to give me what my body is craving.

He breaks the kiss to gaze down at me, and I can see his eyes are glowing lightly.

“How do you feel about mating marks?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I admit, breathlessly. “I never thought I’d have one, but I want to be yours, Gus. Completely.”

“The mark is just symbolic,” he says softly. “And it doesn’t have to be on your throat.”

I guess I knew that, though I’ve never given it much thought.

It’s symbolic in the way a wedding ring is symbolic.

It shows I belong to him, and I like the thought of people knowing that.

Even so, I’m not completely convinced that a mark is right for me.

I can’t just tell him to do it.

I’ve lived as if I was a Beta for so damn long, and I thought it was what I wanted.

A big part of that was staying away from Alphas, and avoiding anything that might reveal my Omega status. If I take his mark, I’ll be closing the door on my old life completely and I don’t think I’m ready for that.

I know I want my mates, but I don’t think I want to give up on the idea of having some kind of career.

I can’t see how to reconcile that with becoming mated to Alphas.

I can’t ask him to mark me, and I don’t really know what to say about it.

I can tell my silence is making Gus a little worried.

“Can we do this one step at a time?” I ask him, trying to do some damage control before he thinks I don’t want him, or

something. “I want to be yours, Gus. I’m ... I’m not sure I’m ready to pick a spot for a mark.”

“This *is* happening really fast,” he says, as if he’s reminding himself of that.

“It is, but it’s right,” I add, hoping I can find the words to tell him why I’m not sure about being marked after we’re past claiming each other.

Chapter Seventy-Two

Gus

Sapphire doesn't seem sure about mating marks, and I can't quite wrap my head around that. She wants to be claimed, and she accepted me as her mate virtually immediately, and she's even willing to take the chance that this mating might make her pregnant, but she doesn't seem to want to be marked.

It doesn't make sense, and it's messing with my head more than a little.

Why wouldn't she want to be marked?

I can't help flashing back to seeing the mark on Amy's throat after she let my brother fuck her.

That was different, Gus. You didn't want to mark her.

Exactly. I didn't want to mark her, just like Sapphire doesn't want to be marked.

As sure as she is about me, apparently, there's *something* that she's not sure about.

Until I know what it is, I'm going to be freaking out, worrying that she might walk away from us.

A mark might be symbolic, but it's also done to seal a bonding.

It's not going to feel like we're really mates until she asks for my mark.

My teeth sharpened while we were making out, and they stay sharp even as I try to force the urge to mark my mate down.

It's so fucking primal. I know my eyes are glowing too.

My control is seriously lacking right now.

"Are you okay?" Sapphire asks, sounding a little worried.

I let out a breath and give her a wry smile. "My teeth are staying sharp. I'm trying to get them to go down."

"Oh," she murmurs. "Your eyes are glowing a little bit as well."

"I know. I'm not sure why."

"Maybe we should talk for a little bit," she says, reaching out and stroking her fingers over my jaw.

It feels nice. I lean into her touches, and she gives me a smile.

"We could," I murmur, capturing her hand in mine and kissing her fingers. "What should we talk about?"

"I don't know." She shrugs. "What happens next?"

"Next?"

“Once we’re mated.”

“Well, we can head back to the house, or we can stay here until your heat passes. I’m fine with either option. It just depends on how you feel.”

“I think we go back there,” she says. “I know Rueben’s upset, and you’re right that I would never have met you guys if they didn’t make that bet with Scarlett, so I can’t really stay too mad at them for it. But that’s not really what I was asking.”

“It’s not?”

She presses her lips together before she looks back at me. “I meant with all of this. I live in the city, and you guys live in the valley. I have a job out here. You have jobs out there. What do we do?”

“I think we have a discussion with everyone and try to work out the best solution,” I admit. “Are you happy at your work? Do you like living out here? We probably have a lot of questions to start asking ourselves.”

“Am I happy at my work?” she asks, frowning. “I don’t even know how to answer that.”

“Why don’t you know?”

She shrugs. “I ... It’s not what I wanted to do when I started looking at careers, but trying to live as a Beta was going to mean compromise. I knew that. If I wanted freedom, I had to pick a career that wouldn’t cause me to out myself as an Omega.”

I blink, and the golden glow disappears from my vision.

“If you wanted freedom? I don’t understand.”

“My choices after high school were taking suppressants and learning to live as a Beta or being sent to an Omega Academy to wait for the right Alpha to come along and choose me as his mate.”

“Fuck,” I murmur. “That’s a really shitty choice.”

And I had no idea it was what she’d had to do.

Suddenly, I understand why she’s reluctant to be marked.

“If we mark you, you’ll be our Omega, and you won’t be safe to work.”

Because everyone will know what she is, and Omegas are a rare commodity to creepy Betas and shithead Alphas who think it’s okay to buy and sell them as if they’re not living, breathing human beings. We don’t work where she works so we can’t be around to protect her all the time.

She sighs. “I thought this life was what I wanted, but it hasn’t turned out to be what I’d hoped.”

“What was it that you originally wanted to do?” I ask, curious now.

She flushes a little. “It feels silly to admit it, but I wanted to be nurse. I wanted to do something that mattered. Something that would make a difference. Of course, it’s the kind of job where emotions run high, and you can come into contact with Alphas a lot so that makes it practically impossible for an Omega to carve out a career in that field. There are too many chances you’ll be detected. Besides, it would be unethical to

lie about it when it could have an adverse effect on patients. That's the part that stopped me from pursuing it. I couldn't justify lying to everyone constantly while doing such an important job."

"Writing for a magazine is pretty far away from becoming a nurse."

"It's about as far away as you can get," she agrees. "But that's why it was appropriate. I get to work alone and from home a lot. I might be in the city, but I don't have to deal with too many Alphas, and I have easy access to suppressants."

"So, you could kind of write from anywhere, if it's not your dream job?"

"I *could* ..." she starts. "But I am also kind of up for a promotion right now."

"While you're not at work?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm not exactly *not* at work," she says, giving me a wry smile. "Scarlett's filling in for me."

"Uh, what?" It sounds like the plot of a crazy Eighties movie or something. "She's filling in for you? Like at your work, right now?"

"It's not half as insane as it sounds," she assures me, wincing lightly.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She nods slowly. "I'm still cramping up a bit. I'll be fine in a second."

“Do you have painkillers or something? I can go get them for you, if you tell me where they are?”

“It’s not that bad. It’s passing already.”

I’ll have to keep a close eye on her. She’s too quick to brush off pain.

She takes in a deep breath. “Like I was saying, Scarlett’s working for me this week because I agreed to clean your house for her. I was going to have to take a private jet to an island resort with Chaos Burning, and I’m kind of afraid of flying.”

I blink. “Wait. Isn’t that the band she’s always talking about?”

“They’re her favorite. It was kind of a no-brainer once we thought about it. She already mentioned switching with me before I mentioned the flight.”

“Wait. What does that have to do with you getting a promotion?”

“I only get the promotion if I take the flight. It’s supposed to be a one and done kind of deal, but we’ve started working with a travel company so that’s probably a condition that will change once I’m in. I’m not sure about it, and I’m definitely willing to considering moving to Silver Valley.”

“You are?” I ask, smiling.

“It seems like a nice place to settle down,” she admits.

“Oh, it’s the best. And we already have planning permission to build an extension on the house, so if you’re thinking it

would be a little small once kids are in the picture, I can guarantee it won't be."

She smiles. "You think of everything, don't you?"

I run my tongue over my teeth. The sharp points are gone.

I don't think they'll come back. Not now that I know why Sapphire's reluctant to be marked.

I move in closer and kiss her. She kisses me back, her hands moving down my chest slowly.

The second her fingers wrap around my cock I know this is it now.

There's no turning back.

We're about to claim each other.

Chapter Seventy-Three

Sapphire

Now that we're both feeling relaxed again, the desire we ignited in each other when Gus carried me through to the bedroom comes back in spades. My slick hasn't stop dripping from my pussy and my ass since he had his fingers inside me. I'm so well lubricated that I know I'll be able to take every last inch of his over-sized cock. The walls of my pussy clench as I stroke his length.

He breaks our kiss. "We can keep making out, or I can knot you."

"As much as I love the way you kiss, I'm getting a little desperate for your knot."

"I've only been with two other women," he admits as he moves between my legs. "And they were both Betas. I've never knotted before."

"My ex-boyfriends were both Beta's, too," I murmur, kind of thrilled that we get to have this first together. "You're my first Alpha."

He smiles at me. “You’re my one and only Omega.”

Oh. God. That sounds so damn sexy, and it’s because it’s true.

I get to have four Alphas and they all just get to have me.

“Claim me before you make me any wetter with that silver tongue.”

He strokes the head of his cock against my slit, rubbing it up and down and stroking it against my clit.

I let out a soft sigh, anticipating more. Slick is still dripping from me as he teases me with his tip.

When he finally pushes forward, sinking his cock into my pussy, I find myself gasping at how deeply he thrusts into me. I feel every inch, and he’s definitely got at least ten of those.

“You feel so good,” he moans, his hands rubbing over my hips as he does some gentle rocking, which rubs his cock against all the right places inside me.

I bite down on my lip, knowing he’s going to make me climax.

And that’s when it happens.

He gets thicker, and thicker, stretching out my walls and throbbing against the sensitive spots that make me tremble with an imminent orgasm.

“Oh, God,” I moan. “Is that what a knot is?”

His hands grasp my ass as he rocks a little slower. “Fucking hell. I can see my knot moving inside you.”

I look down and run my fingers over my swollen lower belly.

He closes his eyes. "I can feel that."

Oh, God. That's sexy.

I can stroke his knot while he's inside me?

He opens his eyes, and I can tell he's close to losing it, just like I am.

I stroke a little harder, and it happens.

I tip us both over the edge at once.

He groans as he comes inside me.

I push my head back against the pillow and rock my hips harder into his movements as I climax with a low moan. I clench hard around him, and he murmurs curse words under his breath, his grip tight on my ass. My own climax is prolonged, but his is insane. He comes inside me for minutes, the heat of his spend letting me feel every thread.

When he slows his rocking to a stop, he's breathing hard, but his knot is still locked inside me.

It feels good, but there's no way in hell there's anything left in him.

"That was amazing," he tells me.

"It still is," I murmur, giving his knot another gentle rub from my stomach.

"Oh!" he gasps, his eyes wide as he looks back at me.

“We’re not done yet.”

Chapter Seventy-Four

Gus

Just when I think this night can't get any more incredible, Sapphire shows me it can. Knotting is something every Alpha learns about when he's in high school, but given the ratios of Betas and Omegas, most Alphas don't experience it unless they go looking for an Omega of their own, usually via an Omega Academy. I remember learning that a knot can keep an Alpha's dick locked in their Omega's pussy over multiple climaxes, but considering how much I cum I just spilled into Sapphire, I seriously doubted my knot would stick around for another Big-O.

Apparently, I was wrong to doubt that, because my swollen cock shows no sign of doing anything other than swelling a little more, making a tighter lock and teasing soft, breathy sighs out of my mate.

"Holy hell," I murmur as Sapphire strokes her hands up and down the swell of my knot.

She's rocking her hips, controlling how deep she takes me, and damn she's taking me deep.

She moans softly as she rocks and strokes, looking like a goddess laid out in front of me.

This is not where I thought my day would end, but I have zero complaints.

I'm so damn glad I didn't let my pack brothers convince me I was wrong about Scarlett.

Sapphire needs this. She needs me.

She needs my knot to satisfy her heat.

I don't care if we have to wait to mark each other.

I knew before I claimed her that she was mine.

She wraps her legs around me, tugging me closer and pulling my cock deeper.

I never want tonight to end. This is the best thing that's ever happened to me.

The bond we're making is unbreakable. It's forever.

I'm giving her my heart to hold and she's giving me a piece of hers.

We might as well be standing on an altar, exchanging vows.

The only things missing are the rings.

I lean forward and stroke my hand over the side of her throat. She leans into my touch.

"You're so damn beautiful," I murmur, wondering how much sexier she'll look with my mark on her pale, slender throat.

The need to mark her isn't going to disappear overnight. I'm going to think about it a lot until she wants it. Other Alphas need to know she's off the market. And everyone needs to know she has protectors who'll fuck them up if they try anything.

“My mate,” I murmur, leaning in to kiss her throat. “My sweet, sexy mate.”

Mark or not, she's mine to protect, and I intend to make sure she's very well protected.

Chapter Seventy-Five

Sapphire

When Gus leans in and starts kissing my throat, I want nothing more than to ask him to mark me.

Yet I hold my tongue, hesitating as his lips skim the flushed skin on my throat.

I know how good it would feel, and I know how much I want to be his mate.

Despite those desires, I can't make myself ask.

It feels too much like slamming a door shut on the normal life I came out to Cressidan City to find.

I could leave my job. It wouldn't be a huge loss.

I'd be willing to leave the city.

Silver Valley is a good place to raise a family, and it already feels like we're making a start on that part of our future together.

I just don't think I could go out there and not work, and I don't know how much an Alpha's mark or four would hamper

my attempts at finding something that might suit my abilities.

Most of the world is designed around Betas.

They make up the majority of the world's population, after all.

The thought of having to find my place in a world that's not designed to accommodate me, for the second time in my life, makes me feel weary.

I worked hard to get to where I am.

Throwing all that effort away feels wasteful.

Even if it didn't get me to where I really want to be.

I guess that's not really true, considering I never would have agreed to switch places with Scarlett if I was never offered that promotion with strings attached.

I might have had to stumble a bit along the way, but if I hadn't been on this path, I might never have met my mates, and I can't think of anything worse than that. Not now.

"I want to live in Silver Valley," I admit, slowing down my rocking movements on his knot. "I want to move into that big house with the four of you."

Gus stops with his trail of kisses over my throat and collarbone. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "I'm not a city girl. I tried to be, but I'm just not."

He grins, gazing down at me with a sparkle in his dark blue eyes.

"You won't regret that decision."

“Oh no?” I ask, as he takes control of my hips.

“Well, you already know my pack brothers are going to be on their best behavior in order to win you over, and I’m ready and willing to be your partner in crime when it comes to keeping them on their toes.” He leans in just enough to kiss me softly on the mouth.

He moves back and rocks me onto him, movements slow and jerky enough to make me feel every sensitive place inside me that he’s bumping and rubbing against so perfectly.

I feel so damn close to coming again.

The thought of my other mates only makes my desire swell.

I’m through being mad at them. I just want them to be mine.

That’s how it’s supposed to be. All five of us are meant to be together as a pack.

“Can we drive back home tonight?” I ask.

He smiles at me. “Tonight?”

I nod slowly. “I want to wake up in a bed I can make into a nest.”

I can’t do that here. I don’t intend to keep living here.

“That sounds perfect,” he tells me, as he thrusts a little harder, making me gasp.

My back arches as I come, my pussy clenching his knot while a wave of pure pleasure rocks over my body, making me flush with heat and spark with desire.

“Oh my God, Gus,” I murmur, in between gasping breaths.
“I love your knot.”

How the hell did I get by without a perfectly swollen cock before this?

I can't imagine a normal dick making me feel much of anything after that.

It's just as well I don't have to experience a normal cock ever again.

I'm so damn glad all of my mates are Alphas.

Chapter Seventy-Six

Gus

Once Sapphire's heat is sated, I start packing up the contents of her closet while she takes a shower and gets changed into her own clothes. She's about as tidy and organized as Bishop. Not only does she have a pile of collapsed boxes in a storage cupboard, she also has plenty of packing tape to help put those boxes back into working order.

Considering she's done with the city, I'd like it if we could empty out her apartment tonight and haul everything she owns, or at least everything she cares about, back to Silver Valley in one trip.

Despite not having a crazy huge closet, she still has enough clothes and shoes to fill three of the large boxes. I'm just wondering what to pack up next, when she steps back into the room.

Now that she's showered and dressed, I can see that she's wearing a cute light blue fitted sweater and stonewashed jeans, and her blonde shoulder length hair is tied back in a low ponytail.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

“Good,” she admits, before she locks eyes on the empty closet. “Oh, wow. You’ve been busy.”

I shrug. “Just trying to get you all packed up.”

“Thank you,” she says, coming over and kissing my cheek. “It would have taken me ages to sort through all that stuff.”

I can imagine. She probably has folding techniques.

“I bet you pack everything precisely, don’t you?”

“No. Well, maybe,” she admits. “It’s a gift and a curse.”

“Well, I’m here so we’re going to get everything else packed up fast, too. If you’ve got any breakables, I’ve left a bit of room in the tops of these boxes. That kind of stuff will do better wrapped in the clothes.”

She nods. “I don’t have a lot of ornaments, or whatever, and I’m happy to leave most of my kitchen stuff for the next person who rents this place. I just need to pack up my DVD player in the living room, and the blue lamp through there.”

“Wow. You really do have a lot in common with Bishop. He’s still watching DVDs, too. He only watches streaming stuff if someone else puts it on.”

“I just really like rom-coms. I have a whole bunch of them. Oh, and my sister left her karaoke machine here. I should probably make sure that gets back to her.”

“Have you heard from her since she’s been on your business trip?”

“Uh, no, actually, but I kind of expected that. Chaos Burning are her favorite band of all time. I figured she’d either be texting me, non-stop fan-girling so she can be cool with the band, or she’d go radio silent until she feels like giving me an update.”

“Well, she won’t have been there long, I guess.”

I pick up one of the boxes. “Where’s this blue lamp you were talking about?”

She leads the way out into the hall and into the living room.

I can’t help but laugh when I see her blue couch. “You really like blue, don’t you?”

“Who doesn’t?” she asks, shrugging. “It’s kind of always been my favorite. You know how most parents of twins do the whole thing where they dress them up identically from birth? Well, ours actually wanted to be able to tell us apart as babies so I was always in blue, and Scarlett was always in red. We just ended up really liking those colors.”

“Rueben has a thing for blue, as well. He picked the couches in the lounge back home. I couldn’t believe blue leather was a thing.”

“I like those couches.”

“I’m not surprised to hear that.”

She laughs, and I can’t help laughing along with her.

It’s been a long time since I outright laughed.

Rueben's always telling me I'm too dour or serious, and maybe I should have actually listened to his critique. It's almost like I've been punishing myself ever since I lost Luke and Amy. Like it's not okay to have fun when I know the last two people I really cared about are doing so damn badly. There's nothing I can do about either of them. I should have realized I was only really hurting myself long before now.

"This is the lamp," she says, unplugging the small round-based table lamp and winding the cord around it. It's a nice bright shade of cobalt. Rueben will likely love it.

I set the box down and open it, then I hold out a hand for the lamp.

Once it's nestled safely in amongst her sweaters, I look up.

"What's next?"

She looks around before she heads over to the TV.

Apparently, she wasn't kidding about not needing a fancy one.

It looks so small compared to the huge wall mounted monster we have back home.

"I think I had a TV like this when I was still living with my mom and dad."

"Well, I've had this thing for eight years, so it might even be the same model as the one you had."

"I doubt it. That would have been fourteen years back, almost."

“Then, you’re a little older than I thought,” she says.

“Depends how old you thought I was, I guess.”

She laughs. “I’m not going to guess your age, Gus. It wouldn’t matter what I said, you’d make fun of me for getting it totally wrong.”

“I mean ... only if you guessed forty or twenty. Then, I might be a bit concerned about your judgement, and probably your eyesight.”

“Thirty?” she blurts.

“Close enough,” I admit. “Thirty-two.”

“How ‘bout Bishop?” she asks. “He seems like the oldest.”

“He’s a year older than me. If he seems even older than that, it’s only because he’s old-fashioned.”

“I’m guessing Rueben and Scout are closer to my age.”

“They’re twenty-seven and twenty-eight.”

“Knew it.” She opens the TV cabinet and pulls out a bundle of DVDs. “Where should I put these?”

“I’ll go grab another box.”

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Sapphire

It takes less than an hour to box up everything I actually care about. In the end we have a stack of five big boxes and a few smaller ones piled up by the side of the door.

I've cleared out the fridge and Gus took out the trash for me.

I can't believe it was that quick and easy.

I mean, I'll have to call the landlord to arrange to give the keys back and pay whatever I owe for breaking my lease. I bet he'll charge me for leaving some furniture behind, even though he'll probably just leave it in the apartment anyway.

If I cared I might do something about it.

The truth is I don't.

I'm moving on to something better.

"No carrying anything," Gus warns me, while he figures out the best way to carry two of the big boxes at once.

"I'm not an invalid. The smaller boxes aren't even that heavy."

“I need you to open and close doors for me,” he says.
“You’re not carrying anything.”

“Okay, fine.” I unlock the apartment door and Gus steps into the hallway in front of me.

It’s dark out here, and completely silent. It must be after 1 a.m. by now.

It’s hard to believe Ben was out here a few hours back, acting like an asshole and crying like a baby.

He probably left a little while after his hissy fit. We don’t even come across the broken bits of his phone on the stairs so he must have gathered them up before he left the building.

Clearly, he didn’t bother calling the cops, so I’m glad we didn’t involve them, either.

We wouldn’t have had half as much fun if I’d had to spend the first couple hours of my heat waiting around for cops and having to make coherent statements while dealing with those weird stomach cramps.

I lock the apartment door behind us, and Gus insists on walking ahead of me, only letting me move forward when it comes to any doors that I need to open for him. I still think I could have helped carry the boxes, but I’m not going to argue with him about it. So, we end up taking four trips back and forth rather than two.

I don’t have any complaints about that, really.

It’s a nice night, and I’m in good company.

I'll admit I'm glad when we're finally getting into the car for the drive home though.

I doze off a little on the kind of long journey back, and we leave the boxes in the car once we're parked in the driveway. I smile up at the house as we walk down the path toward the front door.

I guess from now on this is what I'll be calling Home Sweet Home.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

Bishop

I'm already awake when I hear Rueben storming down the staircase, probably because I barely slept at all last night. At first, I was worried that Sapphire might never warm to us after ... well, after we basically thought her twin sister was our mate for three years.

We pursued Scarlett without really stopping to consider that she wasn't a good match. We never once questioned the connection we felt, and that was our biggest mistake.

We can say our situation was unprecedented, but we also didn't try to look into what it might mean if a fated mate doesn't feel like the right match. We might have realized there could be more than one answer if we had. We could have avoided hurting our true mate and making her reluctant to be around us.

That's the realization that really stings.

Then, the later it got, the more I started to worry about Sapphire and Gus.

I knew the chances were good that Sapphire's first heat would start while they were alone together, but I didn't expect Gus to forget about calling or at least sending a text message.

Eventually, I heard the Jeep pulling in out front, and I went out to the hallway window to put my mind at rest. When I saw them exiting the car, I could rest easy knowing they were home safe.

I went back to bed and tried to clear my head after that, to finally get some sleep.

It didn't happen, and I don't even really know why.

All I could seem to do was lie there on my back staring at the ceiling.

Like I'm basically still doing now.

Sighing, I get up, and stretch.

I'm tired, but I'm not sleepy.

Coffee will probably fix that problem.

I get showered and dressed before I head downstairs for my first hit of caffeine.

Rueben's still in his shirt and shorts from last night, and he's having a casserole dish full of his favorite cereal, apparently.

"Were we all out of bowls?" I ask, raising an eyebrow at him from the kitchen counter.

"Ha ha," he mutters, as he overloads the pot with the chocolate coated rice puffs.

He doesn't look like he slept well, either.

“They’re home,” I tell him. “In case you wondered.”

That perks him up. “They are?”

“They got in a few hours ago, so they’ll probably sleep pretty late, but they’re here.”

Rueben looks down at the full box of cereal he was likely about to drown in milk, and he pushes it away from him.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” he admits.

“I can see that,” I tell him as I fix myself a coffee.

“She’s back, so she must not hate us too much,” he says, not sounding quite as confident as usual.

“I doubt she hates us,” I reassure him. “This is all just a bit unusual.”

“I never had any sex dreams about Scarlett,” he says, in complete earnest.

“It’s probably better if we don’t talk about Scarlett around Sapphire at all for a bit,” I tell him.

We don’t want to make a bad situation any worse.

“But then how do we convince her we’re interested in her, not her sister?” he asks, picking up a handful of cereal from the bowl.

“Talk to her about basketball, or food, or your foster kitten.”

I pour my coffee while he starts to crunch his handful of dry cereal.

“I can’t believe Gus knew,” he murmurs, shaking his head and crunching some more.

“All that matters is, our true mate is here,” I remind him. “And don’t talk with your mouth full.”

He smiles, and finishes what he’s eating before he tries to talk again.

“We did it. Kind of.”

“We did.”

Whatever happens now, we got our mate out here and she only went home to get her stuff.

It’s a win, even if it doesn’t totally feel like it yet.

Chapter Seventy-Nine

Sapphire

I wake up on what would have been day five of my week of cleaning for my sisters “boring” neighbors’. It’s a Tuesday, and I’ve managed to sleep until after two p.m. next to the first mate I’ve claimed in my new pack.

It feels like I must be dreaming.

There’s one hunky Alpha in my bed, snoring lightly in his sleep beside me, and despite how well he knotted me last night, I still feel an intense spark of desire when I look at him. Even if I’m a little tender right now, and kind of hungry.

I get out of the bed and look around the room that Gus told me is mine.

It’s much bigger than Scarlett’s room in the house next door, and the adjoining bathroom is much nicer. There’s a closet and a dresser, but Gus told me we can go buy anything else I decide I need.

Right now, I can’t think of anything, but I know that’s because I’m practically floating on a cloud after last night.

Everything is different for me now. My whole life is going to change, and I can't imagine what it's going to look like, only that it's going to be so much better than it was before.

Eventually, I remind myself.

Part of me wishes I didn't need to leave this room.

I feel safe and happy in Gus's company.

It's his pack brothers I'm not sure I'm ready to deal with.

I shower and get dressed anyway, in my usual jeans and a sweater look. I leave my hair down after a second of hesitation. I usually only wear it up to get things done, like packing my apartment up.

I guess I'll be unpacking at some point, but it's probably important to start talking to Gus's pack brothers so I can start to feel better about them.

It's not like they did anything truly awful.

They didn't even know I existed when they started to think of Scarlett as their true mate.

I take in a few deep breaths before I leave the room.

Gus is still passed out cold in the bed when I close the door and make my way downstairs.

Rueben's at the kitchen table when I get to the doorway, and Bishop is leaning against the counter by the sink, sipping from a mug. Both of them straighten up when they see me standing there.

I give a smile that freezes the second it hits my lips.

I'm so damn tempted to turn around and walk back upstairs.

No. Nope. Can't do that, Saph. You can't run from this. These guys are your future mates.

I take in a deep breath, and blurt out, "Hi, I'm Sapphire Faris. It's nice to meet you."

Chapter Eighty

Rueben

Our true mate is adorably awkward. The way she introduces herself as if she hasn't been hanging around with us for a few days already is super cute, even if there's a look in her eyes that shows she's vaguely regretting that choice.

"Hi, Sapphire," I respond to her introduction, getting to my feet and pulling out the chair next to mine. "I'm Rueben, and this is my boss, Bishop. Won't you join us for breakfast?"

"I just made coffee," Bishop adds.

"That would be good," she says, nodding as she takes a couple more steps into the room.

"Take a seat, and I'll bring it over," Bishop says.

She does as he asks, pulling out a chair opposite mine instead of letting me play gentleman.

I guess she's still not feeling too happy with us.

I don't like it, but I can understand it.

I would probably be kind of mad if I were in her shoes.

Sitting back down, I pick up another handful of chocolatey cereal puffs.

“I’d offer to share, but I’m guessing this isn’t something you probably class as a breakfast food?”

She looks at the bowl and shakes her head. “When I was a kid, I might have, but it looks like more sugar than anything else.”

“It is,” I admit, as I start crunching my way through another handful.

“You’re not seriously going to eat all that, are you?” she asks, concern in her gaze.

I laugh. “What? No. I just spilled the whole box of cereal in there. It was an accident.”

I’m not sure she believes me. I wouldn’t believe me.

Bishop puts her mug of coffee down in front of her.

“Oh, okay, I was totally going to eat it all,” I blurt.

“I don’t think you’d feel too well if you did that,” she says.

“Probably not, but I might still be considering taking the risk.”

“I’m making eggs,” Bishop says. “Do you like scrambled, or fried?”

“Or whites only,” I add, knowing that’s what Scout will opt for when he finishes his work out.

It's not a health thing. It started as a health thing, but now he doesn't like the taste of regular scrambled eggs.

"Um, normal scrambled will be good, thanks," she says, giving Bishop a weak smile.

I can't stand the tension that feels like it's filling up the room, but Bishop warned me not to mention Scarlett, and I don't think we can really explain ourselves without mentioning her.

"Normal scrambled for me, too," I say, making Bishop draw me a questioning glance.

"I probably shouldn't eat all of this," I say, as I let the remains of what's in my hand fall into the bowl.

Now, Bishop's looking at me like I just grew horns.

When it comes to sugar, I have zero self-control.

Turns out all it takes to get some is to have my future mate worry about my health out loud.

I shrug at Bishop, and he shakes his head as he moves to the counter and starts preparing to cook.

"Scout's the only one who eats whites, only," I tell her. "He got me to try them once. Never again. If you're not looking, they've got the same texture, I guess, but only one of them is the real thing."

I give Sapphire a pointed look, while I hope I wasn't being too subtle with my analogy.

She raises an eyebrow and her lips twitch, just a little. “Are you seriously trying to compare me and my twin sister to *eggs*?”

She laughs a little, her bright eyes fixed on me while she waits for me to come up with an answer.

“I just wanted you to know ...”

“That you like my texture?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“That I feel something for you that I don’t for ... your sister.” I glance up at Bishop.

He’s cooking, but I can tell he’s listening, too.

He doesn’t know how to do anything without taking in what’s going on around him.

It comes from years of being on high alert in the firehouse.

We’re kind of always ready to drop everything at a moment’s notice, if we need to.

“That doesn’t change the fact that you felt something for her at some point,” Sapphire tells me.

“The only thing I ever felt was some kind of connection that I couldn’t explain,” I go on, wondering when she’s going to shut me down. Bishop didn’t want me talking about this, but there’s no way I could stand to let it go. “There was no attraction involved in that whatsoever.”

She sips her coffee. It looks like she’s mulling over my words, trying to decide if she believes me.

“I’ve never been attracted to Scarlett Faris,” I state, sitting up straighter. “Give me a bible to swear that on, and I’ll do it.”

She laughs. “Stop! You almost made me spit out my coffee!”

I smile at her. “I didn’t know it would make you laugh. I wasn’t joking.”

“I know,” she says, nodding.

Her voice has softened up a little, and she seems more receptive.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know about me,” I propose. “Anything. Bishop can confirm if I’m being honest. He knows almost everything about me.”

“Almost?” she asks, sounding curious now that she’s warming up to me.

“Well, a guy has to have some secrets,” I admit.

“Like, what?” she asks, leaning in a little and lowering her voice.

I can taste her sweet, citrusy perfume and I forget what we were talking about.

All I can think about now is how good she smells, and looks, and how much I want to lean forward just a tiny little bit more to kiss her.

“What secrets do you have, Rueben?” she asks quietly.

Right. I was supposed to be sating her curiosity. Not ... other things.

“Well, for one thing, I hide snacks in my nightstand drawer.”

“Snacks?” she asks. “I think you can do better than that.”

It is a little lame as far as secrets go, and it might not be that big of a secret anymore. I’m pretty sure everyone’s caught me eating something from that drawer at least once.

She wants something bigger, something with some kind of consequence attached.

“I have a big one, but it’s kind of embarrassing.”

“That sounds more like a real secret.”

I glance up at Bishop, who’s got our eggs cooking in a pan now.

He doesn’t look over, but I know he will the second I reveal this.

“It happened at a party next door,” I start, catching the hint of concern in her expression and moving quickly to the punchline of the story before she can wonder what else might have happened at that party. “I peed on Karma’s favorite shoes.”

She blinks at me, and then snorts. “What?”

“That was you?” Bishop asks sharply from the stove.

I roll my eyes. “See, that was a real secret. Even my lead Alpha didn’t know.”

“What happened, exactly?” she asks. “I’m assuming you didn’t just walk up to her, and ...”

I laugh. “What? No! It wasn’t like *that*. I was a little drunk, but that’s not something I’d ever do, just so you know.”

Everyone knows that woman has a vicious streak a mile wide. I can't imagine what she'd do to someone for walking right up to her and using her feet as a urinal.

"It was a long night," I start. "We'd all been drinking for hours, and the house was getting pretty packed full of musicians and hipster types. Eventually, I needed to use the bathroom and the main one had a line, so I snuck upstairs to find another."

"Oh, God. You didn't go into Karma's room."

"Oh, I did, and let me tell you, I did not realize her room was only unlocked because seconds before I crept in there she'd dragged some guy in there to ... well, you know."

"You *saw* them?"

"I got an eyeful, but I still had to pee and her bathroom door was open, so I went in there and closed the door. Of course, it was pitch dark and I couldn't find the light switch. And there was no way in hell I was going to ask Karma. I fumbled around, found the toilet and made good use of it. I didn't know she'd left her favorite heels right next to it, and I could hardly see a thing so ..."

"You peed on her shoes accidentally."

I nod. "Freak accident, but they were suede, and I missed my real target a lot, it turns out. I saw that when I heard Karma leave the room and I managed to find the light switch. It kind of made me laugh, but I got out of there quickly and avoided her for the rest of the night. Inevitably, she went back upstairs

at some point and came back downstairs screaming bloody murder about her shoes.”

“I can’t believe that was you, Rueben. You should have bought her a new pair,” Bishop scolds me as he puts our breakfast plates on the table.

“I might have considered that if she was nicer in general,” I admit.

“That doesn’t matter,” Bishop says, laying on the guilt trip. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“Ugh. Fine. But I’ll leave them on her doorstep. I’m not giving her an apology.”

Sapphire gives me a sympathetic smile. “I know how mean she can be.”

“She’s always calling me a Mick just because my hair is red.”

“I’m assuming you’re not Irish?” Sapphire asks.

“I have some Scottish blood in me, going back a bit,” I tell her. “My grandmother’s mother, I think. I never met her.”

“That’s cool,” Sapphire says. “Karma calls me Saffron for no real reason. I think she hates me. I’m pretty sure.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. She hates everyone,” I assure her.

“Who hates everyone?” Scout asks as he steps into the room.

He double-takes when he realizes Sapphire’s at the table, but he recovers that reaction by the time she turns around.

“Karma,” Sapphire tells him.

“Oh, right.”

“Rueben’s the one who peed on her shoes at that party,” Bishop tells him as he puts his egg whites and toast on the table.

“Rueben!” Scout scolds me. “You didn’t ...”

“It was an accident!” I blurt out, making Sapphire laugh. “Not *that* kind of accident!”

“You’re buying her another pair,” Bishop warns.

“I don’t know what they were or what size she is, or anything,” I grumble, realizing he’s completely serious.

“I could find out,” Sapphire tells us.

“You don’t need to do that,” Bishop tells her, as he sits down with his own plate.

“But I could,” she says. “I have keys to the house.”

“You’re not pretending to be Scarlett anymore,” Bishop says. “Besides, I don’t think it’s smart for you to be out of our company. Not now.”

“Not now?” I ask, right after I’ve shovelled a forkful of egg into my mouth.

Bishop gives me a pointed glare.

I cover my mouth and swallow the mouthful.

Then, I frown at him. “What did you mean by that?”

Sapphire sighs softly and sets her coffee mug down.

“It’s fine,” she tells Bishop. “I’m not going to pretend to be my sister to anyone anymore. I’m just going to go over there while she’s out and see if any of her shoes are laying around. Rueben can come with me.”

Fucking score! Time alone with Sapphire.

I can’t hold my smile in as Bishop does his best to dissuade our mate with his disapproving stare. She ignores it, clearly still peeved at him. I guess my explanation only worked for me.

I don’t mind being the one with the unfair advantage.

In fact, I could seriously get used to it.

Chapter Eighty-One

Sapphire

I feel better about Rueben already, and that's probably at least partly because he's so good at making me laugh, whether it's intentional or not. It does help to know he was never attracted to Scarlett, even though we're identical. Three years is a long time to go around thinking someone is your true mate, when they're not.

We finish breakfast in relative silence, and probably only because Bishop reminds Rueben it's rude to talk with his mouth full. He eats the rest of his food super-fast, probably because he wants to get the chance to talk again sooner.

Meanwhile, I enjoy the simple hot breakfast without thinking too much about the men sitting around the table with me.

Scout gave me a quiet greeting when he sat down, and he's barely looked at me since.

I think he's still processing all of this. He's having mixed emotions. I don't let myself focus on what they are. Right now, I'm having some mixed emotions of my own. One of the first

things I learned as an Omega was to make space for my own feelings. That's how I need to be until I've cleared the air with Scout and Bishop.

I think I've forgiven Rueben. He shared an embarrassing secret that's going to cost him hundreds of dollars. I know I can trust him. He's so earnest and open. I can't imagine ever staying mad at him for too long.

"I'll be back in a sec!" Rueben says the second he's done with his food.

He gets up and darts out of the room, leaving me alone with his two more solemn pack brothers.

"He's showering and getting dressed," Bishop tells me.

"He wasn't already showered and dressed?" I ask, kind of surprised.

Bishop shakes his head. "He slept in yesterday's clothes last night. He just got up and fed the kitten before he came down here and did this."

He gestures to the casserole dish full of sugary cereal.

"He was really going to eat all of that?" I ask.

"Usually does at weekends," Scout says. "Not that much, though."

"Comfort food," Bishop reveals.

I feel a little pang of guilt. Rueben was feeling bad because of me, and honestly, that wasn't his fault.

It isn't any of their faults.

I sigh softly. "I'm attracted to all of you, and I think that's obvious. I like the things I know about you. I just really wish all of this had happened differently."

"Me too," Bishop agrees. "We made a mistake, and we had no way of knowing. Believe me, if I'd realized sooner that the connection could mean something else, I would have looked into that."

"I wish you had," I murmur. "But I know it's not your fault."

It's all I have to say to them right now.

Bishop seems to know I'm in heat.

I know that's why he said I should always be in their company.

Heat is an unpredictable mistress. It's going to mean a lot of sex, sure, but it also means a lot of rest, and food, and comfort. I can have my physical needs met by Gus until I'm ready to forget about how this started and fully move on with all of my mates.

I finish my coffee and put the empty cup down.

"I'll wait for Rueben on the front porch," I tell them as I stand up.

I need to grab Scarlett's purse anyway. I'll leave it in her room before we come back over here. All I really need is her phone and her keys, at least until she's back.

Chapter Eighty-Two

Rueben

My mate has forgiven me, and it's the best feeling I think I might have ever had in my life. My spirits are soaring as I shower and get ready to spend time riffling through Scarlett's bitchy roommate's closet with her. I'll actually be alone with Sapphire in another house. None of my pack brothers will be around to steal her attention.

I make sure I'm quick, and as quiet as possible while I dry off and throw on clothes.

The T-shirt and jeans are basic, and they won't get me as many lingering looks as the tank top and sweatpants, but it doesn't matter. She's already checked out my goods.

I slap on aftershave and then sit down for a second to slip into my sneakers.

A few minutes later, I'm back in the kitchen, and Bishop is telling me she's waiting on the porch.

I guess that's why Scout's creeping around in the hall then, keeping an eye on the glass panels by the front door.

“Don’t wait up,” I tell him as I pass.

Scout rolls his eyes. “Don’t be a smartass. Look after our mate.”

I ignore his first flyway comment, but he means every word of the second, complete with a threatening growl at the end. He doesn’t need to tell me what he’ll do to me if I don’t make sure I take care of Sapphire. I’d make the same kind of threat to anyone who wasn’t one of my pack brothers so it’s a little insulting that he’s saying that to me, as if he doesn’t trust me with his own life on a regular basis.

“I’m her Alpha, I’ll look after her.”

Honestly. Sometimes I think they forget I’m an Alpha the same as they are.

Well, maybe not completely the same. The whole ADHD thing messes with my focus enough that I can get a little chaotic without a lead Alpha to help nudge me in the right direction sometimes.

I leave Scout skulking in the hallway, stepping outside to find Sapphire looking at her phone.

I close the door behind me. “Hey. What’s up?”

She shakes her head and slips the phone into her back pocket. “It’s nothing. I’ve just been sending Scarlett messages to check on her and she isn’t answering.”

“Maybe she thinks you want to bail on this cleaning gig she earned herself?”

“I already sent her a message explaining what happened between us. I thought that would catch her attention, but I guess not.” She shrugs.

Shit. She’s worried.

“Where is she? Could you try calling a landline?”

“Long story short, she’s in a resort in Golden Palms with Chaos Burning,” she says, shooting me a wry smile when my jaw actually drops.

“Are you kidding? You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope,” she says. “I don’t know the resort’s details off the top of my head, but I sent Scarlett the email, so I can check her laptop while we’re in her house anyway.”

“I think I can guess why she hasn’t called,” I admit.

“I know, I know. She’s with her all-time favorite rock band. Why would she bother checking her phone, right?” She sighs. “I’m just worrying about her like I always do, I guess. She’ll probably tell me something I don’t want to hear when I get through to her room at the resort.”

“How did she end up at a resort with Chaos Burning, anyway?” I ask, as she moves down the porch steps.

“Basically, we did a life swap,” she starts, making me grin.

“I knew it! Twin swap!”

She laughs. “Oh, so you know about those, do you?”

“Well ...” I start. “Probably not as much as you do.”

“It’s not the first time we’ve pretended to be each other, but we’ve never tried it for a week before.”

“So, if you hadn’t done that, you would be the one at a fancy beach resort with Chaos Burning?”

Damn. I’m glad they switched places.

“If I could have made myself get on the plane. I have a phobia about flying.”

She shrugs as she moves down the path to the sidewalk.

“That’s pretty common,” I tell her. “I had a friend in college who was afraid to fly.”

“Well, the magazine just partnered with a travel company, and I was basically told I had to take a flight to interview the band in order to get a promotion. I won’t be expected to travel like that again, but if I don’t get the promotion, my old job will have travel expectations so I kind of had to say I’d do it.”

“That sucks. Is your boss a dickhead?”

“My boss is actually pretty great. It’s just the way the magazine is going.”

“Well, I’m glad you got Scarlett to do it for you.”

“It was kind of like fate, I guess. Her favorite band. My worst fear.”

She takes a set of keys out of her purse as we get closer to the house next door.

I really hope Karma isn’t home. That would be a real pain in the ass.

I follow Sapphire to the front door, and we find out she doesn't need the keys.

"Please tell me Karma's not home," I mutter.

Sapphire shrugs. "It's not like any of Scarlett's friends keep a regular schedule, but to be honest, they also don't seem to like to keep the doors locked, either."

"Seriously?" I ask. "This isn't the nineteen-fifties."

"I know, right?" She shakes her head, and then leads me inside.

The hallway's a mess of piled up junk, like it was the last time we were over for a party. Not the one where I peed on Karma's shoes. That was a year ago, maybe. The one where Bishop tried to talk to Scarlett was about six months ago, and she kissed a tatted-up hipster in front of him.

I didn't see that, but he told me about it when I asked what was wrong.

I can't believe we didn't give up on her.

She showed us so many times that we weren't what she was looking for.

"There are eighteen fire hazards in this house," I tell Sapphire. "I can point them out, if you want."

"I'm pretty sure I already counted those," she says as she leads me into the living room.

"When Karma's around, there's one more."

"She does seem awfully fond of her cigarettes."

“And super-flammable fabrics.”

“That, I hadn’t noticed.”

She finds a pair of heels discarded by the side of the sofa and picks one up.

“Ooh. You might want to get saving. These are pricey.”

“I figured as much,” I tell her, getting my phone out of my pocket. “What’s the brand?”

“Knivves, with two v’s,” she says. “They’re new, but they went viral pretty much overnight.”

I look up the online store and let out a low whistle. “Damn. You’re not kidding. These are two grand a pair? Geez. Do they come with a whole new wardrobe that matches?”

“Unfortunately not, and they don’t even come in a box.”

“What?” I ask, just as I notice the shipping information. I scroll down. “Oh. They come packed individually in these weird plastic bubbles full of air. That’s actually kind of sick, but I still wouldn’t drop two grand on them.”

“Honestly, I don’t think she’ll even care if a pair show up for her. She’ll probably just shrug and assume an admirer sent them.”

“Well, probably, but like Bishop would say, we don’t do the right thing to get rewarded for doing it.”

I pass her the phone. “Pick a pair you think she would wear and let me know the size and I’ll get them ordered.”

“You’re serious?” she asks, shaking her head when I nod.

She takes a look and picks something, taking another look at the heels on the floor before she passed the phone back to me. “I added them to your cart.”

I click through the arduous purchasing process, probably subscribing myself to their mailing list without knowing it, and who knows what else, and then, when it’s done, I let out a sigh and shove my phone back into my pocket.

“Done. What’s next?”

Sapphire nods. “Checking Scarlett’s laptop.”

“Lead the way.”

Chapter Eighty-Three

Sapphire

I can't believe Rueben dropped two grand on a pair of fancy heels for a woman who won't even appreciate it, just because replacing the pair he ruined was the right thing to do. I guess it was Bishop who told him to do that, but, clearly, it's the way they usually do things as a pack.

I like that they care about doing the right thing, but I can also completely understand why Rueben kept it a secret when he accidentally ruined Karma's shoes.

I probably would have done the same thing.

I lead Rueben back into the narrow hallway and up the staircase to Scarlett's room.

Stopping at the door, I find the right key on the set, and I look for the keyhole. It's kind of dark up here, even though it's bright outside. The blinds are drawn on the only window on the landing, like always. I had a look at it my first night here, but it was so dirty and tangled there was no way I was going to

attempt to get the blinds to open properly, so dark hallway it is.

“Is the key not working?” Rueben asks behind me.

“It’s just kind of hard to see what I’m doing,” I admit.

“Oh! Give me a sec,” he says, right before he shines a light on my hand.

His phone. Of course. I should have thought of that.

“Thanks,” I tell him, getting the key into the lock and turning it.

I push the door open, and move over to the nightstand, where I left the laptop.

Rueben steps into the room and closes the door behind him.

It’s a little dark in here, too, with a couple of thin strips of light coming through the gaps in the drawn shades, and suddenly, I’m very aware that we’re alone together.

His vivid green eyes glitter when he walks into the light. He has sharp cheekbones, light-colored freckles on his cheeks, and the soft smile he gives me is the heart-melting kind.

I drop Scarlett’s purse, and I let the warm fuzzy feelings he’s giving me fill me up as I close the gap between us and put my arms around his neck. I gaze up at him, and he smiles down at me.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t accept you like this last night. I would never hurt you like that on purpose. I just ...”

“I understand,” he says. “You were hurt. You needed time.”

His arms close around me, fingers stroking against the material of my sweater.

“I don’t need any more time to know you’re my true mate,” I admit as my vision starts to glow just a little.

He gasps out a breath, and I see it when his eyes take on a golden tint, too.

“The fates ...” he whispers. “They’re here.”

Everything feels a little hazy and unreal as I gaze up at his stunned face.

I can feel our connection forming as a bond that we’re about to make solid.

I was always meant to come out here to Silver Valley. I was always meant to be his.

Pushing up onto my toes, I lean in and kiss his throat.

He moans softly as he leans down to capture my lips with his.

The kiss we share is our acceptance of our bond.

My stomach flutters wildly as he slides his tongue against mine.

The groan he lets out when my perfume gets stronger is so deep and so full of desire that it triggers my own lust, bringing in my slick to douse my panties and get me ready for his thick knot.

He breaks the kiss and gazes down at me breathlessly. “You’re in heat!”

“I am,” I admit.

He bites down on his lip. “You smell too good. You feel incredible.”

“Why does it feel like you’re complaining?” I ask, keeping my voice soft.

I know he wants this. I don’t understand why it feels like he’s resistant.

“Because I want to do the right thing and stripping you naked so I can give you my knot feels like it might be a little wrong.”

I feel his cock harden against my belly, and I move back a couple steps to strip out of my sweater.

“It’s not wrong, Rueben. You’re my true mate, and I’m yours.”

He swallows, his gaze searing as he watches me slip out of my bra.

“I’m not the lead Alpha,” he murmurs.

“I’m not asking you to mark me,” I tell him. “I’m just asking you to claim me.”

“Holy hell,” he whispers, as he takes off his shirt and lets it fall on the floor.

My stomach flutters come back twice as hard as I take in his pale, muscular body.

“Holy hell,” I echo my agreement.

“This is really happening,” he says, finally snapping out of his shock and grinning widely.

“Only if you take off the rest of those clothes,” I warn him.

He moves fast, kicking off his sneakers and whipping off his jeans. The boxers he’s wearing are probably loose-fitting when he’s not stretching them out to breaking point with his huge cock.

I hear a tear as he hauls them off. “Oops! Oh well.”

He lets the torn shorts fall to the floor, and my jaw tries to go with them.

He’s as big as he looked, and then some.

“You’re still overdressed,” he points out.

“I might be underprepared,” I murmur, my gaze fixed on his fully erect shaft.

He laughs. “Oh, you like what I’ve got?”

He runs his hand up and down his length, squeezing it just a little.

“I definitely like what you’ve got,” I tell him, as I unzip my jeans and start to wriggle out of them, pushing my panties down at the same time. I lean down and help tug my feet out of my sneakers, so I can leave the last of my clothes in a pile on the floor as quickly as possible.

My stomach isn’t cramping quite as insistently as it was last night, but I can feel that dull ache beginning to form as the walls of my pussy start to clamp down on nothing.

When I'm finally standing naked in front of Rueben, ready to claim him as my true mate, it feels like this was the way it was always meant to happen.

I found my true mates right when I needed them most.

And now I get to have this one service my heat until we're both completely spent.

"You've got this look in your eyes," Rueben tells me.

"This is the look of a woman who knows exactly what she wants," I inform him, as I move him toward the bed backwards until he crashes down into a sitting position, leaning back. I slide into his lap and run a hand over his chest.

"Oh, I like a woman who knows what she wants," he murmurs back, his gaze fixed on my body.

I feel my lips curl as I dip a hand between my legs and bring the taste of my perfumed slick to his mouth. He flicks out his tongue eagerly, moaning softly.

"Do you like an *Omega* who knows what she wants?" I ask.

His eyes get wide as he takes in what I'm asking.

"I love *this* Omega," he says, keeping his gaze steady and locked with mine. "She's the only one who gets to ever have my knot."

I know he means every damn word, and I can't wait a second longer to make him mine.

Moving up, I rub my slick soaked entrance over the tip of his cock.

He moans softly as I sink down slowly until he's buried deep.

"Fucking hell," he groans, hands stroking down my back and grasping at my ass. "How do you feel this good?"

"I'm about to feel even better," I promise him, before I press a kiss to the side of his throat.

"There's no way that's possible," he murmurs, as he strokes his hands over my ass.

I think about how much I need his knot, and slowly, his cock begins to expand.

His bright green eyes go wide, and he lets out a gasp as he locks inside me.

"Holy hell!"

I smile as I start to rock my hips, taking his knot deeper. "Holy hell."

Chapter Eighty-Four

Rueben

Now, I finally get why Alphas do whatever it takes to get accepted into socials at Omega academies. Knotting is the craziest fucking thing, and it feels so damn good I can barely handle looking at my gorgeous mate while she rocks on me.

“I had no fucking idea,” I tell her, shaking my head.

My true mate is an Omega, and that means this is what sex is going to be like all the time. It’s on a whole other level, way beyond anything I ever imagined in my wildest dreams.

Even the scent of her perfume is addictive, and the way she tastes ... I still have that uniquely sweet flavor in my mouth and it’s better than anything I’ve ever tasted.

Nothing can compare to what I’m feeling right now.

She nods slowly and bites her bottom lip.

There’s a look in her eyes.

“What?” I ask, hearing how husky my voice is and feeling how close I am to losing it at the same time.

“It gets better,” she tells me, before she proves that statement, by running her hands over the outline of my knot that’s bulging out from her skin.

Holy fucking hell, it’s too much!

I make a choked sound as I start to come inside her.

Oh fuck. I’m coming inside her.

We didn’t even talk about protection.

I’m such an asshole. How could I forget about that?

“It’s okay,” Sapphire tells me, as my knotted cock pumps so much cum into her tight pussy that I don’t know how I can still have anything left in my balls.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt as I hug her close. “I don’t know how the hell that happened, and I should have remembered about protection ...”

She blinks at me. “Oh, right. Protection. Uh ...”

I guess we both forgot about that. It would make me feel a little better, except I just put so much baby batter into her that it’ll be a miracle if she doesn’t wind up having octuplets.

“How many kids did you want to have?” I ask. “Because whatever that number is, you might want to prepare yourself for a few more.”

She laughs, and I realize my cock is still fully knotted inside her.

“What? Why?”

“Because you’re definitely pregnant after that. I didn’t come that much the one day I decided to see how many times I could jerk off in a row. The answer I got that day was nine. After that I was pulling rope.”

She laughs again, and my knotted cock starts to feel crazy good all over again.

Second wind, I guess.

“I’m good with having your babies,” she tells me. “However many there turn out to be.”

I smile. “Then you’d better get ready to have a whole basketball team, because I think I’m ready to see how good this knot can make you feel.”

Chapter Eighty-Five

Sapphire

Rueben moves us fully onto the bed and manages to roll us so he can be on top. His knot only gets thicker to keep us connected while we move, and I love how much he's clearly enjoying every second of this. I'm still a little raw from everything I did with Gus last night, but that's starting to feel more like a positive thing now that Rueben's thickened cock is rubbing me in all the right ways.

"You feel so good," Rueben breathes, as he slowly thrusts deeper.

"So do you," I admit as I wrap my arms around his hard body.

My legs shake a little as my climax starts to build.

"You're shaking," he says.

"I'm close," I murmur.

His eyes go wide, and he stops moving, before seeming to realize he maybe should have kept going the way he was.

“Oh ...” He starts thrusting again, going deep and pushing me over the edge in seconds.

I cry out under him, and he gasps as my pussy clamps down around his knot.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters as he gazes down at me.

He thrusts harder, and I can tell by the look in his eyes that he’s ready to come again.

This time, when he has his release, I’m sated enough to let his knot ease off.

The swelling goes down slowly, and Rueben lets out a soft sigh once his cock has returned to normal.

“I feel like my virginity grew back, and I just lost it all over again,” he tells me, earnestly.

“Because of the knot?” I ask, smiling at him as he moves back.

He nods slowly. “It had been a while, but the whole knotting thing was definitely new. I’ve never been with an Omega before. And I’ve definitely never claimed a true mate until now.”

He leans his head back and then he looks back down at me with a twinkle in his eyes.

“What?” I ask, leaning up on my elbows as he moves slowly down the bed.

“It doesn’t seem fair that I came twice while you only got to come once.”

“I’m perfectly well satisfied,” I confess, feeling a spark of lust when he tugs my legs apart a little more.

“And yet you look like you’d like to be licked,” he says, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Well, I wouldn’t say no if you’re offering,” I admit, though I feel extremely wet with his spend as well as my own juices.

He doesn’t seem to care about that.

“Good,” he murmurs, giving me a smile before he moves down and starts to tongue me slowly, making soft moaning sounds after almost every lick.

I lay back and enjoy the feeling as he presses his tongue deeper and harder through my lips and starts to swirl his tongue up and over my clit. He moves faster around that sensitive spot, and I feel myself getting more and more breathless as he pushes me closer and closer to a second climax.

When it finally comes, I’m left gasping and trembling in pleasure.

He lifts his head up. “Do you want to get under the sheets?”

“I’m not cold,” I assure him. “You’re just making me feel really good.”

He smiles. “Good, because I’m not done yet.”

Chapter Eighty-Six

Rueben

Getting to know my mate's body feels more intimate when we've slowed things down. I might still be aroused by what I'm doing to make her feel good, and I know my knot would swell up again if she decided she needed it, but I'd rather learn the things she likes outside of just the awesome new party trick my cock can do.

Now, I know she likes my tongue, and my fingers and I'm more than welcome to lick her pussy clean between bouts of teasing her clit and making her tremble every time she comes.

The way she tastes, I could spend all damn afternoon and night licking her.

I've added salt to that citrus sweetness, and I don't hate that, either.

When she's come four times from my eager tongue, I realize I might be chasing my own pleasure more than hers, and I pull myself back.

“I’ll get something to clean you up,” I tell her, as I move off the bed. “We should probably head back home soon. The guys might be starting to worry.”

I don’t know how long it’s been, but I know we’ve been over here longer than we planned to be.

She sits up, and I realize the room has gotten darker.

We’ve definitely lost more time than we realized.

“We might be too late to avoid Karma,” she says. “I think she might be home already.”

I pull a face. “I’m not apologizing to her.”

“I wouldn’t either,” she admits.

“Bishop and Scout are way too good, am I right?” I ask as I head for the bathroom.

“They’re the perfect amount of good,” she denies. “We’re just slightly less perfect than they are.”

“I like that,” I say, nodding as I step into the adjoining bathroom.

I grab a towel and run the hot water tap. Once the water’s warm, I get part of the towel wet.

Then, I bring it into the bedroom, where Sapphire already has her bra on.

It’s a pale blue color, and that makes me smile. “Did I tell you my favorite color is blue?”

“Mine too,” she says. “My parents always used to dress me in blue, and Scarlett in red.”

“That’s kind of cute, because of your names.”

She nods. “I think those have always been my parents’ favorite colors, too.”

She takes the towel from me and cleans herself up.

I watch for a second before I realize I should probably be getting dressed, too.

My underwear is torn now, so I just stuff it into my jeans pocket and haul those on.

We get dressed quickly and she puts her phone into her back pocket.

She takes the keys out of her purse and looks at me. “Ready to sneak out of here?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I admit, fingers crossed that we don’t run into Karma.

“Let’s go,” she says, leading the way.

Chapter Eighty-Seven

Sapphire

We move into the hallway quietly and I listen out for sounds of someone moving around downstairs. I don't hear anything. It's definitely well after the kind of time Karma usually gets home now, and I wouldn't be too surprised if she was out back smoking while we're creeping toward the front door.

I lead Rueben down the stairs, and my heart jumps into my mouth at the sound of muttered cursing coming from the living room.

“One of these bitches have been touching my shoes again!”

Rueben raises his eyebrows when I glance back at him.

I consider a retreat to the bedroom, but I'm not sure that's a smart idea either.

Karma thinks Scarlett's gone to the city to meet a guy.

My sister has done that before without taking her car, so Karma probably thinks she's already gone.

I don't want to trap us in Scarlett's bedroom for God knows how long until Karma goes back out again, whenever that'll be.

"No, I'm not kidding! These are two-thousand-dollar heels, and they have one of my skanky roommate's fingerprints all over the velvet!"

"Skanky?" Rueben whispers. "Look who's talking."

I smile at the jab.

It sounds like Karma's on the phone.

We're probably safe to make a run for it.

"Let's go," I mouth, before I make a dash for the door.

Unfortunately, I don't get there before the living room door opens in front of us.

I take a step back, and the damn floorboard creaks.

Wincing, I watch as Karma steps into the hall with her phone to her ear.

She looks me over suspiciously. "Yeah, just the usual order for one, please. Bye."

I raise an eyebrow at her. "You were speaking to a delivery guy?"

"Are you trying to tell me I need to lose weight?" she asks, narrowing her eyes.

"Uh, no. I wasn't saying that, at all."

“What are you doing here anyway?” she asks. “Scarlett’s out of town.”

Great. She knows I’m Sapphire.

“She’s letting me use her car while she’s gone.”

“Hm,” she murmurs, before she glances at Rueben. “Don’t I know you?”

He snorts, and then clears his throat. “Uh, no. I don’t think so.”

“You look familiar ... No. I’m thinking of someone else.” She looks back at me, crossing her arms. “I wouldn’t trust a Mick as far as you can throw him. Did you find Scarlett’s car keys yet?”

“He’s part Scots, actually,” I tell her. “And I’ve got them.”

“Okay, good. I’ll see you later, Saffron. I’ve got things to do.” She flicks her hand our way as if I’m a nuisance she’s trying to shoo away.

I step around her, taking Rueben’s hand as I go.

We leave the house and I let out a sigh.

“I think you should cancel that order,” I tell him.

“Just what I was thinking. It’s a good job I recognized the voice of the guy from the pizza place.”

He gets out his phone and dials a number.

I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Hello? Yes, I’d like to cancel a food order I just placed.”

I put a hand over my mouth as I start to laugh.

He gives the name and address and cancels Karma's dinner order.

He shoots me a grin after. "You know I'd never hear the end of it if I cancelled those shoes. But this one can be our little secret. It's only a mild inconvenience."

"Agreed," I tell him, more than happy to go along with it.

Oh, we are so much less perfect than Bishop and Scout.

Chapter Eighty-Eight

Bishop

Gus comes into the kitchen while I'm prepping dinner, and while Scout is out back trying to burn off some energy with a basketball. It's been almost five hours since Sapphire and Rueben left the house, and considering how quickly our mate forgave Rueben, I can guess what they're up to over there.

"Where's Sapphire?" Gus asks, going from half-awake to completely alert in the two seconds it takes him to realize our mate isn't in the room with me.

"She's next door with Rueben."

He frowns. "The TV isn't on ..."

"I didn't mean the lounge. I meant Scarlett's house."

"What? What are they doing over there?" He looks ready to march over and find out.

"I think Sapphire forgave Rueben for thinking Scarlett was his mate. He told her he was the one who peed on Karma's

shoes at that party last year, and I told him he needs to replace that girl's shoes ...”

“So, of course, Sapphire offered to help figure out what shoes or whatever,” Gus finishes for me, looking about as pissed off as he can get. He frowns at the kitchen door, and then looks back at me. “How long have they been over there?”

“A few hours,” I admit.

He rubs a hand over his face.

“She's safe with him.”

He knows she is.

Rueben might sometimes get a little over excited or be a bit impulsive, but he knows how to protect someone, and he cares about Sapphire as much as the rest of us do.

“If they're not back in the next thirty minutes, I'm going over there.”

“To do what? Drag them back here as if they're a couple of unruly teenagers acting out? Don't be stupid, Gus. You know why they're taking their time. Don't interfere.”

He lets out a heavy sigh. “And that would be why you're the lead Alpha.”

“Exactly,” I say. “Now, get over here and chop these vegetables for me. Scout's too busy shooting hoops outside to help.”

“You can't boss me around like I'm Rueben or Scout,” he grumbles, before he moves to my side and does what I asked.

“I’m just keeping you busy until Sapphire and Rueben get home.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever.”

We work quietly, side by side until dinner’s cooking, and the sound of the front door opening makes us both turn. Rueben sounds more excitable than usual, and he’s beaming when he looks in on us in passing.

“We’re just checking on Tiny Tempest. Back in a few!”

Sapphire’s hand is in his, and she barely gets the chance to wave before he leads her up the stairs at a sprint. I shake my head at the racket they make running up the stairs.

“You know he’s keeping that kitten,” Gus mutters.

I let out a sigh. “I know. His owner called while you were sleeping. His new apartment block doesn’t accept pets and apparently little Norman was a gift from his daughter and he didn’t want him anyway.”

“I fucking knew it.”

Chapter Eighty-Nine

Sapphire

Dinner is a lot less stilted than lunch was, though that might be because I've claimed two of my mates now, and I'm feeling a bit less frosty toward the other two. Bishop really is an amazing cook, and Scout is so thoughtful, doing little things like refilling my water before I notice it's gone down.

This house feels like a home to me, and that's before I've even really moved in.

After dinner, with the added happy news that Rueben is getting to keep Tiny Tempest, or Norman, as his owner named him, everyone seems to be in good spirits.

"We should unpack Sapphire's stuff tonight," Rueben says, as he puts his dessert fork down.

The low-fat cheesecake dessert was surprisingly delicious, and it's apparently Scout's specialty.

"Oh!" I exclaim. "Yeah. I need my laptop."

I forgot to check Scarlett's computer when we were next door, and I really need to know she's okay.

I'll have the resort's details on my laptop, so I can call them.

"Right!" Rueben says. "I can't believe we forgot."

"Forgot what?" Bishop asks, as he starts to clear the table.

"Scarlett's in a resort in Golden Palms with Chaos Burning," Rueben tells him.

Bishop's eyes widen. "Isn't that the band she loves?"

"It is," Gus confirms.

"It was a twin swap, remember," Rueben says. "Sapphire was meant to be at that resort to interview those guys."

"Wow," Scout murmurs. "Is that the kind of stuff you do for the magazine?"

"Um, no, not usually. Long story short, I'm afraid to fly, and I would have had to get on a plane to do the interview." I shrug.

"So, because Scarlett didn't want to be here, and Chaos Burning would be there ..." Rueben goes on.

"We switched places like we used to when we were in high school," I finish. "I just need the resort's details so I can call them and check on her. She hasn't been answering her messages, and I know she must be having an amazing time with the band, but I need to know she's doing okay. That info is on my laptop, and that's in my stuff in the Jeep."

Bishop nods. “Well, let’s get the Jeep emptied and we can give that resort a call.”

He puts the plates in his hands down by the sink, and we all get up from our seats.

Emptying the Jeep doesn’t take long, especially since I’m allowed to carry one of the smaller boxes.

Everyone else gets everything else out and into the house in one trip, and a few minutes later I’m standing in my new bedroom, surrounded by men, and boxes.

This room is going to be my nest, and these men are my mates.

I can’t help the smile that comes to my lips.

“What?” Rueben asks, nudging my shoulder and clearly insinuating that he’s the one making me smile. “Are you thinking about how awesome I am, and how perfect we are together?”

Gus snorts as he opens one of the boxes.

I laugh. “Something like that.”

Rueben leans in and whispers, “I can lick you some more later.”

I feel my skin flushing with heat at the memory of what we did.

It seems a little scandalous that he’s making me think of that in front of everyone else.

In a good way. The kind of way that makes me wonder how soon my mates might be willing to share me while we're all naked in service of my heat.

Rueben gives me a sly smile before he moves away to open one of the other boxes.

He knows exactly what he was doing.

Lucky for me, I seem to be satisfied enough that my heat isn't being triggered.

I don't know how much more I could handle tonight. The last twenty-four hours have been pretty steamy. For a woman who had two previous partners in total before she met her pack, two guys within the same twenty-four-hour period feel like kind of a lot.

"Found the laptop," Rueben calls out after a few minutes of raking around inside one of the boxes.

I move over to where he is and take the case out of his hands. "Thanks."

"Where do you want your sweater collection?" he asks.

"Um, the closet, or a drawer. You pick."

I bring the laptop over to the bed and take it out of the case.

There's no life in the battery so I pull out the cable and plug it into the socket by the nightstand.

I guess I won't be calling the resort tonight. It's already after eight p.m. and I probably don't want to know what my sister's up to with her favorite band at this time of night.

Rueben's putting my rolled-up sweaters in one of the dresser drawers.

Gus is hanging up some of my other clothes, while Bishop and Scout put random bits and pieces on top of the dresser. It's probably going to take way longer with all of them helping me, but it feels nice to be doing this with all of them.

This is my home now, and these are my mates.

Everything is exactly how it should be.

Chapter Ninety

Scout

Helping Sapphire get settled into her new room feels kind of strange. She has a lot less stuff than I would have guessed, and there isn't much in the boxes to show us who she is. I have to smile at the Crystal Lakes Crocs shirt I come across, which shows she really does support that team, but other than that, and the collection of romantic comedy DVDs, I don't know much more about her than I already did.

“Was it just you and Scarlett when you were kids?” I ask, as I unpack a photo album with old pictures inside. “Or did you have any brothers or sisters?”

She laughs. “Me and Scarlett were more than enough trouble for our parents. They wanted two kids at most, so they said getting us at the same time was like God answering their prayers.”

“How 'bout pets?” I ask, as I pass her the album.

“None that I can remember,” she tells me. “How about you? Brothers, sisters, hamsters?”

I laugh. “No hamsters, and no sisters. I have five brothers. I was never close to any of them.”

“All Alphas?” she asks.

“How did you guess?” I ask, giving her a wry smile.

“Oh, I don’t know. The fact that a lot of Alphas seem to butt heads, unless they’re just the right combination of personalities.”

“That’s pretty much spot on,” I admit. “My brothers and I were encouraged to compete in body building tournaments. My eldest brother Jimmy was a bit of a legend in those circles and my parents ... I don’t know. They were kind of obsessed, I guess. It’s like they got addicted to seeing him win. None of the rest of us ever measured up. It didn’t matter how well we did. They always insinuated that he could do better, and that he had done better.”

“That’s awful,” Sapphire says. “It must have been hard to grow up like that.”

“It was ... different. We all sort of just tolerated each other until everyone started growing up and leaving home. No one ever came back. Apart from Jimmy. To be honest, I think my parents only had enough space in their hearts for one kid. I don’t know why they had the rest of us. They only care about Jimmy. The three of them are the family. The rest of us ... We were just around. A nanny took care of us when we were young. My mom was too busy with her own friends. My father was too busy working.”

“You had a nanny?” Rueben asks, sounding shocked.

I nod. “We had an older woman who was criminally underpaid and overworked, so don’t go thinking she was like Mary Poppins. She was more like prison warden. If we didn’t do what we were told, we got to skip a meal or scrub the floor in her place.”

“Geez,” Rueben says. “I didn’t know you had the life of a Dickensian orphan.”

I can’t help but laugh at Rueben’s overly dramatic commentary on my life.

“It wasn’t *that* bad.”

“Your nanny made you skip meals and scrub floors. I was a spoiled brat in comparison.”

“You *are* a spoiled brat, Rueben.”

He pretends to be insulted, pouting like a real spoiled brat.

“He’s not a spoiled brat,” Bishop cuts in, as usual playing the part of peacemaker, even when it’s not required.

I don’t think he knows how to switch that off.

Rueben smirks at me. As usual, Bishop’s sticking up for him.

Bishop looks at me. “And you had a tough childhood. No one’s going to debate that. Let’s just keep it civil. Okay?”

“We weren’t even arguing,” Rueben complains.

“Yeah, Dad,” Gus mocks Bishop. “They weren’t even arguing.”

Sapphire bursts out laughing. “Dad? Oh my God.”

“You don’t think he acts like he’s our dad?” Rueben asks her, clearly trying to wind Bishop up.

“No!” she says, shaking her head. “He’s just used to being in charge, and you guys clearly try to push each other’s buttons for amusement.”

“Alright kids,” Bishop says. “I’d better haul my decrepit old ass to bed. Don’t you stay up all night now, you hear me!”

Rueben rolls his eyes. “You have no idea how ridiculously Dad-like that actually was.”

Bishop doesn’t care. He leaves the room, and suddenly it seems like Rueben’s waiting for me to leave, next. He makes little gestures to me when Sapphire’s not looking, trying to get me to clear out. I act like I don’t know what he’s doing, because I’m not missing out on time with Sapphire when he’s already mated to her. He can’t keep her all to himself. Not while she has four mates.

“Rueben, I think I can hear your kitten crying,” I tell him.

“Aw!” Sapphire exclaims. “He must be lonely.”

Rueben frowns at me. “Don’t joke about that.”

“I wasn’t joking.” I was straight up lying, but you don’t need to know that.

“You should go see to him,” Sapphire says. “I’ll see you in the morning. I’ll be going to bed soon anyway, to sleep.”

Is she actually helping me? Or does she just love that kitten as much as Rueben does?

“Get moving,” Gus tells him, ushering him out the door before turning to Sapphire and kissing her on the lips. “Sleep well, my mate.”

He leaves with Rueben, closing the door and blocking out our spoiled brat’s complaints.

I stare at the door for a few seconds in utter shock before I manage to pull myself together.

When I look back at Sapphire, her gaze locks with mine.

“I wanted to get a chance to talk to you,” I admit. “But I didn’t think it would be this easy.”

“I know, right? I thought everyone else was going to linger around all night.”

“You wanted to speak to me, too?”

“I did. I do. But you can go first.”

Okay, I guess. Here goes nothing.

Chapter Ninety-One

Sapphire

Scout is quiet after I tell him he can go first. It feels like he's gathering his thoughts, going by the mixed emotions I can feel from him.

“You're not used to having any of the spotlight, are you?” I ask, knowing it's true even more than I did before. After hearing about his past, I can see why he's usually so quiet. He seems to find it easier to stand back and let everyone else do most of the talking.

“I guess not,” he admits. “I'm also not used to feeling this awful for something I did wrong.”

“You didn't do anything wrong.” I can say that now without feeling bittersweet about it.

I know, beyond a doubt, that none of my mates were actually attracted to my twin.

They've all taken this case of mistaken identity to heart, and it's hurt them to know they hurt me.

They're good men. I couldn't have gotten any luckier with my fated pack.

"I doubted the fates when they seemed to be telling me Scarlett was my true mate, and the more I got to know her, the less I wanted it to be true. She was pretty mean to all of us. I guess she thought we were attracted to her, and she wanted to make sure we knew she wasn't interested. I wasn't happy about the bet Bishop made with her. We were ready to move on. This was his last-ditch attempt to get her to spend time with us."

"Well, as far as last-ditch attempts go, I think this one worked out pretty well, don't you?"

"I was confused when you showed up, acting like you might actually like us. At first I was pleased, then I got kind of mad. All I could think about was the way Scarlett used to treat us. I was done with making excuses for her. That's why I spoke to you like that. I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"I should have come clean sooner," I admit. "I tried to pretend I wasn't catching feelings for anyone, but it was basically immediate. Then it seemed like you guys were into my sister and I couldn't handle that. I liked you too much. I can see now that it was more complicated than that."

"You can?" he asks, sounding hopeful.

"Of course," I confirm, as I move around to be closer to where he's standing by the side of the dresser. "I've already claimed two of my mates, and I'm hoping I might claim a third soon."

His light eyebrows jump as I stop in front of him.

“How soon?” he asks, his voice soft.

“Not tonight,” I tell him, letting him off that hook because I feel like he needs more time to process the change than Rueben did. I don’t want to leave him feeling like he’s making a hasty decision.

He nods slowly, but I can feel a little bit of disappointment welling up inside him.

“Don’t get me wrong, Scout. I want you. You have no idea how much.”

I hold my hands out for him to take.

“I claimed two of my mates in less than a day. I’m a little ... tender, right now.”

“Oh ... Oh!” he nods “I should leave you to ...”

“Actually, I was hoping you might want to sleep beside me tonight?”

“I can do that.”

I smile. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Chapter Ninety-Two

Scout

I leave Sapphire's room to get ready for bed. It's past the usual time that I go to bed, so I'm definitely tired, but I'm not sure all my mate's going to want to do is curl up together and actually fall asleep.

I saw the way she kissed Gus the other day.

I saw the looks she was exchanging with Rueben up here before he was practically dragged away out of the room to give us some time alone with each other.

I can't lie. I'll be disappointed if she doesn't need anything like that with me.

It won't be a big surprise, but it'll still hurt.

I'm used to being picked last in teams.

I'm used to being overlooked and underappreciated.

The wing man, the middle brother, the bronze medallist.

I go back into Sapphire's room with low expectations and an open mind.

I find her sitting up in bed in an oversized shirt, lamp on her nightstand the only light in the room.

“Aren’t you going to be warm in all that?” she asks, motioning to my T-shirt and pajama bottoms.

Closing the door behind me, I take off the shirt. “Is that better?”

Her eyes drift down my body, and I can tell she’s interested.

Not at all like Scarlett.

Not one little bit.

I smile as I approach, dropping my T-shirt on the carpet.

She moves in a little, giving me room, before she flips back the duvet to reveal the empty mattress beside her, and, coincidentally, most of her bared leg.

It looks like she isn’t wearing underwear under that baggy shirt.

“If you’re not tired ...”

“Oh, I’m tired,” I assure her, before I take the plunge and get into the bed beside her.

The mattress creaks a bit, but the frame is decent enough.

She pushes the cover over me and lies down facing me.

“Will you hold me?” she asks as if she’s desperate to be held.

I lie down and wrap my arm around her middle.

She snuggles up closer, until her perfume is all I can breathe in, and it's the sweetest, purest scent I've ever smelt. I hold her close, and I close my eyes.

She feels like she's mine, like she belongs to me.

The one woman on this planet who's meant for me.

My true mate. We're fated to be together.

Nothing can change that.

Chapter Ninety-Three

Sapphire

I fall asleep wrapped up in Scout's arms, and I wake up the same way. Well, almost. The one item of clothing I was wearing has gotten pushed up around my arms which are at the side of the pillow, so I might as well be naked.

My bare ass is pressed against Scout's morning wood, and his hand is cupping my right breast, keeping the nipple hard and making me a little bit squirmy.

We might have done nothing but sleep last night, but I've woken up with the desire to provoke more of a reaction out of my quietest mate, and the way he's holding me is going to do more to push him toward claiming me than any obvious move I could have made.

I wriggle against him a little, moaning when his fingers move and my nipple brushes against them.

My slick starts to come in, and I can't help but rub my ass against the thick column of his shaft.

He lets out a soft moan and his fingers flex, kneading my breast and rubbing my nipple.

“Scout,” I murmur, craning my neck back a little.

He’s still sleeping. *Damn.*

I move his hand slowly away from my breast, with the intention to turn around and wake him up with chest kisses. His hand slips down and his fingers graze my clit.

Oh my God. I get so much wetter from that one accidental touch, and so damn greedy for more.

“Scout,” I try again, wishing he’d wake up and really touch me.

I want to feel these thick fingers inside me. I want him to stroke my clit until I’m begging him to knot me. I put my hand over his and move it down just slightly.

I gasp out a breath and rock my hips to get more.

“Oh, dear fucking God,” I moan. “Please, Scout, please ...”

“Hm?” he murmurs sleepily.

I rock a little harder and he wakes up with a sharp inhale.

“Scout?” I ask, waiting so damn patiently for him to realize what’s happening.

“Sapphire,” he whispers huskily. “Sweetheart, you’re in heat.”

“I know,” I moan. “Please help me, Scout. Please?”

He moves, and it feels like he's trying to get up and get out of the bed.

What the hell? I keep my hand over his and I tug him back to me.

"You need Gus, or Rueben," he tells me.

"No, Scout, I need you," I deny, moving his fingers over my slick coated pussy. "Feel how wet I've gotten through the night just lying here in your arms."

"I did this?" he asks, like he can't believe it.

Finally, his fingers move on their own, and it feels so much damn better.

"You're still doing it," I murmur. "Oh, yes. Right there ..."

He strokes slowly, lightly, and it's agonisingly perfect.

"You're making me so damn wet."

"I can feel it," he whispers, nuzzling into my neck.

"Just a sec," I tell him, moving my head and arms and getting rid of the oversized shirt I slept in. "Much better."

I lay back down, and I know I'm ready, for more than just his massive knot.

"Scout?"

"Mmhm?"

"Mark me," I beg. "Mark me right now while you're making me come."

He sucks in a breath. "Mark you? Are you sure?"

I see the hint of gold in his eyes as I turn to show him I'm really sure.

"This is fated, Scout. You'll be the first of my Alphas to mark me as his mate. I want you to be the first."

He's breathing hard as he strokes my clit now, and I feel it when his teeth scratch against my throat, lightly, teasingly. I'm close to the edge when he bites down fully and triggers my climax with his mark.

I gasp out a breath, and my body goes rigid in his arms.

Holy hell, that felt incredible.

He kisses my throat, and I know I need more.

"Will you please claim me?" I ask, feeling like I'm begging.
"Please, Scout?"

He doesn't make me wait a second longer.

His hand moves away, and he strips off those pants.

The next thing I know, he's nudging my legs apart with that monster cock of his.

My slick makes it easy for him to glide into my entrance, and my clenching pussy pulls him deeper as he pushes inside, inch by inch.

"You're so damn big," I murmur.

"Sorry," he says quietly.

"Don't apologize," I chide him. "I'm about to make your cock even bigger."

“I’m not sure that’s possible.”

“Oh, it’s possible. You’re going to love it. Trust me.”

Chapter Ninety-Four

Scout

I'm still fixated on being asked to mark my mate when she starts to ask for more. I had no great expectations when I went to bed with her last night, and now my mark is on her throat and my cock is buried in the tight warmth of her pussy. I can't see how it can possibly get any better than this, until, somehow, it does.

She gasps as my cock expands inside her, pushing hard for more space to swell and lock.

I hold her close, and she cries out as she comes for me.

My knot locks in place a second later, making it harder for her walls to tighten too firmly.

“Oh, God, Scout, you're so damn big.”

“I'll go slow, I promise,” I tell her, leaning into kiss her mark.

She moans softly. “Don't you dare. I love how big you are. How full you make me feel.”

She leads my hand down over the swell of my knot and I can feel how full I've made her.

It's hot how much she seems to love it, and I can't say it feels bad to have her touch me while I'm buried deep inside her.

I can't believe how perfect she is.

I go slow, because I know I'm big, and she gasps and moans at every little hip thrust I make. I'm buried as deep and as far as I can get inside her, but the tight pull of her walls is enough to make it feel like I'm being yanked just a little deeper with every movement.

I rock into her, and I let my hand sink to her clit, to tease that slick-coated swollen little spot until she comes for me a third time, crying out loudly enough to wake the dead.

I lose it hearing the sheer pleasure in her voice and seeing it on her stunning face.

My cum pours into her, going deep and making me hope I've gotten her pregnant.

The way my knot makes her swell, up, I can't help stroking her stomach and imagining it's swollen for that other reason. I don't even really know how she feels about having kids, but considering she's supposed to be our perfect match, and all of my pack brothers want a big family, I'm guessing it's something she'll want at some point, if not now.

"Well?" she asks, a little breathlessly.

“Well?” I ask, trying to remember if she asked me something.

“How much do you love knotting?”

“It’s really something,” I have to admit. “I love seeing you come more than anything.”

“More than being the first to mark me?”

“Well, I didn’t hate that, either,” I tell her, smiling. “What made you change your mind?”

She sighs softly. “This is where I belong. With all of you. I realized that last night, when you were all helping me unpack. I’ll still want to do some kind of job, once I figure out what I should be doing, but I’m ready for more than I had in the city. I want a family. I want all of you with me.”

I smile as I rest my head back down on the pillow just above hers.

“Well, then maybe we should stay in bed all day,” I suggest.

“I’m listening,” she says, clearly pleased that I’m not finished with this experience yet.

“We could get a good start on that family we both want.”

She laughs lightly. “You know you’re more like your brothers than you think.”

“So, Gus and Rueben have already had a good attempt at getting you pregnant then?”

“Well, they seemed to think so,” she says.

“Then, between us we’re starting to get somewhere.”

“Feels like it.”

Feels like my knot is staying right where it is.

“Well, lets make sure my odds are just as good as theirs.”

She smiles back at me. “I was hoping you might say that.”

Chapter Ninety-Five

Sapphire

I take a long hot shower once Scout is happy with his performance, and I'm a little floaty from all the orgasms. I feel a little stretched after an hour or more of being pinned on his huge knot, but I also couldn't be happier. I have my first mark, and I'm falling head over heels for my mates.

I don't think I'll ever lose the smile that's been on my lips all morning.

It feels like everything's finally going right in my life.

I had no idea how trapped I'd felt living as a Beta in the city, working a job that did nothing to make me feel good and the less said about my awful love life the better.

The thought of living as an Omega is a little scary, but it's already making me so much happier.

I dry off and get changed in the bathroom because Scout is still in my bed.

He's getting up when I walk into the bedroom, and he smiles at me as I approach.

“Good morning,” he says.

“The best, isn’t it?” I ask, my smile widening.

“Absolutely,” he agrees, giving me a chaste kiss on the cheek. “I’ll get washed and dressed in my own room and meet you downstairs for breakfast.”

“What, no workout this morning?” I tease.

“Oh, I think you gave me a good enough workout in bed.”

I wave as he leaves, and then I go straight to my laptop.

I want to call Scarlett and make sure she’s okay as soon as possible, and I’m now also kind of excited to tell her my news. I know she’ll be happy for me, even if these guys aren’t her kind of cool.

It only takes a few minutes to find the information on my desktop where I saved a copy.

I put the number to the resort in my phone and I make the call.

The line rings, and rings, and rings.

It’s early, I guess, but it’s supposed to be a luxury resort.

Usually, those places have excellent customer service.

I google for reviews online when no one picks up.

They’re all stellar. The place is super exclusive, and luxurious, and the staff apparently prioritise the guests over everything.

Well, I guess that's why they don't bother to answer their phones.

I send an email instead, asking if someone can get a message to Sapphire Faris for me, asking her to call her sister A.S.A.P.

I get one of those instant replies: *we've got your email and will reply within a day.*

A day. Great.

I'm buzzing with the need to tell someone, and I don't have anyone to tell.

Well, besides my parents, I guess, and I'd rather not have them visit before I've had a chance to spend more time with my mates on my own, so they'll have to wait, too.

"Scarlett, you'd better be having the time of your life out there."

I close the laptop down and leave the room, putting the phone in my back pocket.

It's kind of a pain in the ass that I have Scarlett's phone right now, and she has mine.

I can't check my emails on her phone. All my passwords are saved on my phone and the laptop.

I'll just have to remember and check later for a response.

I can always try redialling the number later, too.

Plans made, I head downstairs to get breakfast.

Chapter Ninety-Six

Bishop

Another sleepless night later, and I end up burning a pot of oatmeal while I go to the pantry to look for salt. Then, I break a saltshaker getting it out of a cupboard. I can't seem to settle while everything feels a bit like it's still in motion, and I'm starting to become a hazard. Someone else is going to have to deal with making food today.

Clearly my motor skills and my concentration are fucked.

Scout is the first to appear in the kitchen, and I let out a sigh of relief.

“Scout. Thank God it's you.”

“What's ... Why do you look like you've been on back-to-back emergency shifts in Cressidan City Center?” He frowns at me.

Yeah, I look a little worn out. I noticed that in the mirror this morning.

“Thanks for telling me I look like shit. I haven't been sleeping well.” Or at all.

“You need to sleep,” he tells me, as if I don’t know that.

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. My brain isn’t happy with that plan lately.”

“Is it about Sapphire?” he asks. “Are you running weird risk assessments in your head all night?”

“No. Yes. Maybe.” I shrug. “Nothing’s working to make me sleep.”

“Exercise,” he says.

“Well, that’s your answer to everything.”

“It’s my answer to a lot of things,” he clarifies. “It should help. You haven’t used the gym this week.”

“I’ll try it later,” I tell him. “Thanks. I need another favor.”

“You want me to do the cooking today?”

“Are you psychic?”

“I don’t need to be for this.”

I guess he doesn’t. I get a mug from the cupboard, ready to grab a coffee when the mug flies out of my hands and crashes on the floor.

“Whoops,” I mutter.

“Sit down,” Scout tells me. “I’ll clean that up and get you a coffee.”

I don’t bother trying to argue. I know when I’m being hopeless.

Sitting down at the table, I rub at my temples.

“How did it go last night?” I ask, knowing something happened this morning, at least.

For a woman who is kind of quiet, Sapphire can really be loud when she’s enjoying herself, and by the sounds of things, that was some party Scout threw her.

“She asked me to mark her,” he admits, glancing up at me before he starts to sweep up the pieces of the broken mug.

“I thought she wasn’t totally sure about marking?”

He smiles. “She changed her mind about that.”

“That was fast.”

“Everything happened pretty fast,” he says. “But I’m not complaining.”

No, he wouldn’t. Nor would Rueben or Gus.

I’m looking forward to getting the chance to talk to her, but I’m really going to have to try and relax and get some rest first.

“You know what? Forget the coffee. Can you make me a hot milk?”

That always used to make me sleepy when I was a kid. Maybe it’ll work for me now.

It’s got to be worth a try.

“Sure,” Scout says, making it without asking questions.

He puts it down in front of me before he checks the fridge and starts cooking breakfast foods.

I'm yawning between sips, but I'm still considering the gym idea because I've been yawning tired every night and I still haven't been able to get to sleep.

I finish the hot milk and get up.

"You okay?" Scout asks, looking ready to rush to my side if I look unsteady on my feet.

"I'm fine. I'm just going to watch TV in the lounge for a bit."

Daytime soap operas have a good history of putting me to sleep as a kid, too. If it used to work, I'm down to try it again now.

"Well, okay. Yell if you need anything."

"Sure."

Chapter Ninety-Seven

Sapphire

I head downstairs for breakfast, and find Scout alone in the kitchen, making oatmeal.

“Where is everyone?” I ask.

“Gus and Rueben still seem to be in bed. Bishop’s not been sleeping well. He’s in the lounge right now, but he really needs to be in bed.”

“So all that oatmeal is for the two of us?”

I don’t mind the stuff, but there’s no way I can eat a mammoth portion of it.

“Nah,” he says. “I’ll shout Gus and Rueben down in a second. They should already be up by now anyway.”

“Maybe I should talk to Bishop.”

“It couldn’t hurt,” he says. “This’ll be ready in a few.”

I nod. “I’ll be right back.”

I kiss him on the cheek and then I move out into the hallway.

The lounge door is open, and it sounds like a Spanish soap opera is on the TV.

I push the door inward and find Bishop sitting on one of the blue leather couches in front of the big screen. The Spanish soap opera is playing on a low volume, and he looks more like he's staring through the screen than paying attention to anything that's on it.

He looks up and straightens up when I walk into the room.

"Hey," I greet him.

"Hey, Sapphire," he says, his gaze going straight to my mark.

His pretty eyes are lined with dark shadows today.

He definitely needs to get some sleep.

I bite my lip as I move over to where he's sitting.

"You're blocking the TV," he murmurs, as if he's looking at anything other than my mark, anyway.

I kneel down in front of him. "Better?"

"Um ..." He looks down at me. "What are you doing?"

"I thought I'd better explain why I let Scout mark me first."

He smiles. "You don't need to explain. It made him feel good. It doesn't bother me."

"Something does bother you, though," I tell him. "I think you're worried that I'm walking around without your mark, and that's like I'm not protected. So, I want you to mark me."

He leans forward. “I’m just a little tired. Nothing’s bothering me. We can wait until you’re ready to be ... What are you doing?”

“Taking off my clothes.” It seems obvious to me.

He watches silently, his gaze darkening as it drifts down from my face to my mark to my breasts to my pussy. I climb onto his lap.

“I’m ready to be marked, Bishop. I’m ready for everything you’ve got.”

Not that I’m expecting him to give me much of anything right now.

He’s exhausted, and he needs to rest.

I don’t think he will until he’s marked me.

Claiming me can wait.

Marks show who my protectors are.

He’s my lead Alpha. The one I’ll take orders from.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmurs, as he slides a hand into my hair. “And smart, and brave. I’m the lead Alpha, and here you are, dominating me.”

“Like only a true mate can,” I remind him.

He leans in and kisses me on the lips softly.

I sink down into his lap and kiss him back.

We stay locked in that embrace for a few sweet moments, and then a low-whistle disturbs us.

I already know we're going to see Rueben when we look to the doorway.

Should have closed the door.

"A claiming before breakfast? Can I join in, or is that a faux pas?"

"Go eat your breakfast," I tell him. "I'll be there in a second."

"Can you be naked, still?" he asks, his eyes lighting up.

"Sure," I tell him. "But close the door when you leave."

He smiles as he closes the door.

"Nicely done," Bishop tells me. "But he's going to keep expecting you to give him everything he wants if you keep saying yes to his crazy requests."

"I'm okay with that." I lean back and pile my hair up on top of my head. "Mark me in the highest place, so everyone knows I'm yours."

His pretty hazel eyes darken as he gazes at my throat.

He wants to mark my left side above Scout's mark.

I can tell by the way he's appraising that spot.

He leans in, his hands warm on my naked back as he kisses my throat.

"I'm yours," I whisper, as that familiar golden flow lights up my vision.

His eyes are lighting up too. I see it when he moves back a little before he bares his sharpened teeth and marks my throat. A euphoric feeling moves through me as he makes his mark.

It leaves me feeling a little weightless and floaty.

“You’re mine,” he agrees, in a low growl.

His head dips forward and he sucks my left nipple into his mouth, surprising me.

The little moan he makes as he moves back is the last sound he makes before he slumps back and passes out cold on the couch.

I get up and put my clothes in a pile on the other couch.

I’m tempted to put them back on, but I did promise Rueben I’d come into the kitchen naked.

I didn’t promise I’d do anything else, but like Bishop warned, he’ll ask for more if he thinks he can get it.

I’d better go see what he wants.

Chapter Ninety-Eight

Sapphire

I feel pretty strange, walking into a room full of men I've slept with, naked.

Reuben smiles widely. "I told you guys she would do it."

"Do what?" I joke, making Gus smile grudgingly and Scout snort.

"Stay naked after you claimed Bishop. That was a super-fast claiming, by the way. Did he even get his knot in you?" Rueben asks.

Gus shakes his head. "You know there wasn't a claiming."

"There wasn't. He's asleep now, if someone can lift him upstairs," I say, looking around the table expectantly.

"I can do it," Scout says, getting up.

"Can you put him in my room?" I ask.

"No problem."

Scout leaves the room.

Rueben's gaze never leaves my naked body.

"Well, well," he says. "What are we going to do about this?"

"Admire the view?" I ask, knowing there's more to this request than Rueben just wanting to look at me. "Well, drink it in fast, because I'm about to put clothes on and sit down for breakfast like the rest of you."

"Aw," Rueben says, putting on a fake pout. "You're not going to stay like that all day?"

"That's impractical, you ass," Gus mutters, shaking his head.

I struggle to keep a straight face after that and dart out of the room to get my clothes so I can laugh a little while I'm in the other room. Scout's already gone upstairs with Bishop.

I return to the kitchen in clothes, to an unimpressed Rueben and a smiling Gus.

Breakfast is filling and I've already done the one thing I needed to do today, so when we're cleaning up, I ask, "So, what are we doing today?"

"Uh ... waiting around for your heat to need serviced?" Rueben asks, sounding hopeful.

"Besides that," I ask. "I'm supposed to relax with my mates, too."

"Isn't that what laying around in bed together between times is for?"

Clearly, Rueben has a one-tracked mind this morning.

"We can watch a movie," Gus suggests.

“With Tiny Tempest!” Rueben adds.

“A movie’s a good idea,” Scout agrees as he steps back into the kitchen.

“I’m getting our furbaby,” Rueben tells me, before he leaves the room.

“So, what kind of movies do you guys’ watch?” I ask as I follow Gus and Scout into the lounge.

“Action comedy if you don’t want Rueben to get bored to death and leave the room,” Scout admits. “Though if he’s bringing the kitten down, he’ll spend half the movie playing with him anyway.”

“Sometimes horror,” Gus adds, shrugging.

“Let’s stick with an action comedy,” I say, happy to watch something different from my usual girly flicks since I’m with my guys.

“That’s the best idea.” Scout picks up the remote and puts the TV back on.

I let them choose the flick, and I let them argue over who gets to sit where.

I end up snuggled in between Gus and Scout for half the movie, and beside Rueben for the other half, but *someone* makes an argument about fairness.

It turns out to be a fun day spent relaxing with my mates.

It’s not until a little before dinner time that I go and check on Bishop to find out he’s waking up.

I sit on the edge of the bed as he pulls himself up.

“What happened?” he asks, sounding a little confused.

“I asked you to mark me, we had a little visit from the fates, and bam, you passed out.”

“Wow,” he laughs. “That’s kind of crazy.”

“I figured it might help, and it did.”

“How long have I been sleeping?”

“Seven hours, maybe. Are you feeling better?”

He nods slowly. “I am. I was worrying too much. Everything felt out of control.”

“But it wasn’t ...”

“Because the fates were involved.”

I shrug, reaching out to stroke his dark blond hair back from his forehead.

“It’s a mess, isn’t it?” he asks.

I smile. “It’s sexy bed hair. We all should be so lucky. Mine looks like a bird’s nest in the mornings.”

“You know this whole thing has been so ...”

“I know,” I say. “It’s been crazy and upsetting and now it’s all kinds of wonderful.”

“Where is everyone?” he asks, as he reaches out for my hand.

“Oh, um, they’re downstairs. We’d had kind of a movie day. Dinner’s in an hour or two. Rueben convinced us we need to

order pizza.”

He smiles. “Good. Get everyone up here while I go wash up.”

I blink at him. “Get everyone ...”

“It’s my turn to claim our mate, and I want to make sure she has everything she wants.”

Oh my God. He’s completely serious, and my body reacts as if he just licked all my sensitive parts at once. My heat triggers with a gust of my perfume and a fresh outpouring of slick into my panties.

“Of course, Lead Alpha Bishop.”

If these are the kind of orders he’s going to give as my lead Alpha, I’m definitely going to enjoy myself in this house.

Chapter Ninety-Nine

Bishop

Everyone's waiting in Sapphire's room when I get out of the shower and make my way back in there, naked and ready to claim our one true mate. Sapphire's already naked on the bed, with Rueben beside her in his boxers. Gus is half dressed standing next to the dresser and Scout is fully dressed on the floor next to the bed.

"No clothes are needed in here," I tell them.

It's not as if we haven't seen each other naked before.

No one's shy around this house.

Rueben whips his underwear off and launches it across the room.

Gus snorts as he starts unbuttoning his jeans.

Scout hesitates, but that's because he has to think about everything before he joins in.

I know he'll get into it once he understands what we're doing.

“This is so fucking awesome,” Rueben murmurs, leaning in to kiss Sapphire’s shoulder.

“What exactly are we all doing?” Sapphire asks, eyeing me curiously, her gaze drifting down my body.

She’s never seen me naked before, and I can tell she likes what she sees.

“We’re doing what good mates should do, making sure you’re well taken care of.”

Scout moves to undress, and I see Gus has already lost the last of his clothes and he’s shut the bedroom door. There’s no one who could interrupt us now, but I understand the force of habit.

I climb onto the bed. “Lay down, Sapphire.”

She does what I ask, spreading her legs wide.

I lean forward and inhale her perfume.

It makes my cock go from rock hard to solid steel.

Her scent is perfect. It’s sexy and sweet and completely uniquely her own.

Everything in me tells me this woman is mine.

There’s no confusion, no hesitation.

She’s the perfect woman for our pack.

And I want us to be the perfect Alphas for her.

“Rueben, it’s time you marked our mate,” I tell him.

His eyes go wide, and he lays down beside her.

Sapphire smiles at him. "I'm beyond ready for your mark."

"Holy hell," Rueben murmurs, licking his lips.

Sapphire pulls her hair up and away from her throat.

The marks Scout and I have made at the other side look good. They look big and threatening, perfect for scaring off idiots who might otherwise think she's an easy target.

"Make it a good one," I tell Rueben, before I look at Scout.

"Come closer and help me make our sweet mate feel good."

He moves onto that side of the bed and lays down beside Sapphire.

He kisses his mark, and she moans softly.

Rueben's taking his time, but he's looking at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Aren't you going to touch her while I mark her?" he asks.

He makes a good point. She'll enjoy the way a marking makes her feel even better if she's being touched when we do it.

I smile, and motion to Gus. "Get up here."

He moves beside me quickly, clearly ready to get this started.

"Help me get her pussy stretched for my knot," I tell him.

"What about her ass?" Gus asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

I look at Sapphire and she nods slowly.

“You want two knots at once?” I ask, a little shocked when she moans suddenly, and I see Gus has just pushed his fingers into that second entrance.

“God, yes, I want two knots at once.”

“Not mine,” Scout murmurs. “Too big.”

He’s not wrong. Out of all of us, he’s the one with the monster cock. It’s probably hard for Sapphire to take it cock on its own, knotted, without a second one swelling up inside her ass.

“Not tonight,” Sapphire tells him. “We’ll have to work our way up to that.”

He smiles at her, pleased that she’s even willing to try.

She’s special, our true mate.

She cares about us, and she wants us to be hers.

It’s not a feeling that’s easy to find. Not much is certain in this world.

“Okay, here’s what happening,” I tell them, watching Sapphire to make sure she’s into every suggestion I make and every order I give.

She looks like she’s desperately ready for what I’m proposing by the time I’m done detailing it out.

Her body is flushed and pretty, her nipples sucked into hard points, and her pussy soaking the sheets with her arousal fluids.

“Are you ready to have two knots inside you, Sapphire?”

“I’m beyond ready, Bishop. I need them. Now.”

Chapter One Hundred

Sapphire

Everyone has to move to let Gus lay down, his cock jutting upwards, as Rueben and Scout lift me up and press me down onto his thick tip. I gasp out a breath as the first nip of pain hits. My slick is compensating quickly, but his dick is so big he still stretches me a little as I'm lowered down onto him. I breathe slowly after my ass is fully impaled by his shaft.

I can't get too excited too quickly or I'll risk making him knot before Bishop's cock is inside my pussy and then they both might not fit.

Holy hell, this feels a little dangerous.

In a good way.

Rueben leans in and kisses me once I'm positioned on Gus's front, and Scout sucks on my nipples.

Everything they're doing all at once feels incredible, but at the same time I'm a little afraid to breathe right now. I'm trying my hardest not to want a knot.

I know it's an Omega's desire that causes an Alpha's cock to knot, and I don't want to make it happen at the wrong time.

Bishop's cock pushes slowly into my pussy while Rueben's tongue is in my mouth and Scout's mouth is keeping my nipples hard. My slick thickens in increased arousal when I have two of my mate's cocks inside me at the same time.

My heart starts to race like crazy, and I feel like I'm about to start sweating if someone doesn't say it's okay to think about being knotted within the next few seconds.

Bishop smiles down at me. "I need to be knotting you to claim you, Sapphire, and you do want me to claim you, right?"

"God, yes. A million times over. Knot me, knot me right now."

My desire opens the floodgates, and it happens to both of them at once.

I let out a loud gasp as I'm filled so full I can hardly handle the feeling.

I come, hard and fast, and in multiples as Bishop makes tiny thrusts that I should barely be feeling.

With two swollen cocks locked inside me, I'm so crazy aroused and so stimulated that every time I think it's over, I come again, and again, and again.

I lose my breath, catch it, and lose it.

I shudder and tense and shiver.

I cry out and moan and whimper.

And then, Rueben makes his mark on my throat, and I come so damn hard it feels like I'm about to pass out. The room spins a little and I fight a little harder to catch my breath.

A few seconds of recovery later, and Scout makes his mark close to Rueben's.

I cling to my men as I have the most crazy, intense, long-lasting orgasm I've ever felt.

My whole body feels incredible when the feeling rushes over me, and it lasts long after we've collapsed together, breathless and sated, in my bed.

These guys are my pack, my true mates, and my family.

I'm never going to let them go, and I know they're never going to let me down.

This is what the start of forever looks like.

Chapter One Hundred One

Sapphire

On the seventh day that I was supposed to be playing Scarlett and cleaning Pack Bishop's house, I walk into the lounge with Tiny Tempest to sit with my pack and cheer on the Silver Valley Tempests in their game against the Cressidan City Crowns.

My mates are already there, Scout in his tight Tempests' shirt, Rueben in a Tempests' vest, Gus in dark colors, and Bishop in a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

Rueben makes space for me between him and Scout, and Bishop puts the set on mute as a news bulletin starts up in the five minutes before the game is about to get started.

"I don't care how good the Crowns are, we're going to stomp them tonight," Rueben says.

"You say that every time we play them," Scout reminds him.

"Yeah, so?" Rueben shrugs, before he starts playing with Tiny, making the kitten hyper.

“So, we’ve never stomped them. Not once,” Scout says, his smile wry. “I’m as hopeful as the next person, but when it’s not going to happen, it’s not going to happen.”

I blink at the screen as the words “Chaos Burning” roll across the bottom.

I glance over at Bishop. “Turn that up, please.”

“Sure,” Bishop says, putting the volume up to loud.

“The band are thought to have crash landed in the water somewhere south of Golden Palms, where they were expected to perform last Sunday. Their plane was registered as the private jet belonging to lead singer Xane. The black box has not been located and no wreckage from the craft has yet been found.”

My stomach sinks as I stare at the screen. “No.”

I pass the kitten to Rueben and I stand up, getting my phone out of my pocket.

My hands are shaking as I call Scarlett.

Her phone (my phone) goes straight to voicemail.

“No,” I say, shaking my head.

Scout gets up and puts his arm around me.

Gus’s face is ashen when I look up.

“I don’t understand,” I whisper, not believing it. Not wanting to even think about it.

I call Scarlett again, and again.

She's not picking up.

Her calls are going straight to voicemail.

Giving up on that idea, I redial the resort she's supposed to be staying at.

They don't answer, so I keep trying.

"Pick up the damn phone!" I curse as I redial again.

I won't stop calling until they pick up. I can't.

I can't lose Scarlett like this.

Not like this.

I start to cry when the resort ignores every last phone call I make to try and get through to them. Scout hugs me close and Bishop wraps his arms around me from behind.

"It's okay," Bishop tells me. "We'll figure this out."

"We have to," I mumble against his shoulder.

My twin has to be alive.

I would have felt it if something awful had happened to her.

No, Sapphire. She's the one who feels what you're feeling.

You've never had that same experience. Not once. *Ever.*

Oh, God. I think that's true.

I wouldn't know if Scarlett was in trouble.

I never know. She's always the one who knows.

This can't be happening.

I can't lose her.

I just can't.

Chapter One Hundred Two

Sapphire

Numb is how I'm feeling after two days of sifting through news channels for any new information about the crash. My guys have been solid throughout this craziness, but it's all felt completely surreal to me. From calling the cops, to finding out from the resort that neither my sister nor the band showed up at the hotel.

I keep calling her phone (my phone) but there's never an answer.

I had to call our parents, right after I called the cops.

Mom and Dad got a flight to the city as soon as they could and they drove out to Silver Valley afterward. They got in late last night, and they stayed in a local hotel.

I have no idea what they think of my mates, or my sudden embrace of my Omegahood, or anything else except what's happened to Scarlett.

I called my boss after I spoke to the police, and she was able to tell me the private plane they were on belongs to Chaos'

Burning's lead singer, Xane.

That's literally all we know right at this minute.

"Oh, sweetheart, please stop pacing," my mother chides from the kitchen table.

"She's just worried about Scarlett. It's okay," my father says, taking her hand in his.

"It's not okay," My mother goes on. "I'm worried about you, Sapphire. This whole thing, it's not like you. Agreeing to one of your sister's crazy ideas like this. Coming out here and pretending to be her ..." She shakes her head, her eyes going to my throat before she starts to frown.

"Can we not talk about that please?" I ask, wondering what the hell my mates are making of my parents. I introduced them as my true mates, and it's obvious from my marks that I meant all four of them, but my parents have been reacting as if these guys are just Scarlett's neighbors.

"Really, Sapphire, you could go home to the city, and we can switch to a hotel there. There's no need to be out here just because it's where Scarlett's been living for a few years."

Oh my God. I forgot how insufferable my mother could be.

She's an old school traditional Omega.

She thinks the choices Scarlett and I make are strange no matter what they are.

"I live here now, Mom. With my true mates."

Bishop shoots her a smile, though I can tell she's driving him insane.

“Will you stop with this charade, sweetheart? I told you before, I can't deal with this nonsense while your sister is missing.”

My father gives us a weary shrug. He doesn't have the energy to chime in.

When a phone starts to ring in another room I glance at Bishop.

He frowns. “Odd. We don't get too many landline calls anymore. I'll be back.”

He abandons me in the kitchen with my parents. It's not his fault. I can only have one of my mates with me during the day, every day right now because they have to cover their shifts when they're off work and their vacation time is kind of limited.

“Sapphire!” Bishop calls out.

I dart out of the room, glad for the excuse to escape my parents.

He's in the lounge, holding up a cordless phone.

Clearly, he yelled for me so I could get away from them.

He's a lifesaver.

“What is it?” I mouth, not wanting to speak to another reporter.

“Scarlett,” he says, laughing lightly.

My eyes go wide, and I grab the receiver out of his hand.

“Scar?” I ask, pressing the phone to my ear tightly. “Is that you?”

“Oh, Saph, am I glad to hear your voice,” she says. “You would seriously not believe what I just went through.”

“What happened? Where are you?”

“I’m in Golden Palms with Chaos Burning. We took kind of the long way around to get here. Turns out a bunch of people might have thought we were dead. At least, they might have thought Chaos Burning were dead. No one really cares about me. I mean ... You know what I mean.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” I tell her, feeling happy tears pricking my eyes.

“I’m way better than okay, but that’s a story for when I’m home and we’re doing cocktails or whatever.”

“I’m off alcohol,” I admit.

“You’re off ... You’re ... No. Don’t tell me that, Saph! That ex of yours was such an asshole. His kids will be unbearable ...”

“I’m not saying I’m definitely pregnant. It’s too early for that.”

“Too early for what?” She gasps. “No! You’re mated to my neighbors? The super boring guys’ next door?”

“I can hear you,” Bishop calls out, shaking his head.

“Oh my God, Saph. You are! Congratulations. That’s so awesome.”

“It is?” I ask, kind of confused.

“Oh, I mean they’re totally your kind of guys. You know, they like sports, they’re dependable and handy and whatever.”

“Why does that feel like an insult?”

Bishop laughs. “You want me to go tell your parents?”

“Mom and Dad are there?” Scarlett asks. “Wow.”

“Mom is ignoring that I’m mated to Bishop and his pack, and Dad is just trying not to get in the middle of anything. Can you tell Mom something to take the heat off of me?”

She laughs. “I can think of a thing or two. Send her my way.”

Bishop nods and goes to get her.

“I’ve missed you so much Scar.”

“I’ve missed you, too, Saph. I might be gone for a bit longer than we thought, but I promise we’ll do something fun once I’m back. Scout’s honor.”

I know she means that, and I can’t wait.

Chapter One Hundred Three

Sapphire

Nine Months Later

About nine months ago, I had the best day of my life, followed by a few of the worst, followed by the most amazing six months and then followed by three months of killer morning sickness and a ton of bed rest thanks to the discovery that I'm having fraternal quintuplets. Turns out, multiple partners plus a ton of knotting equals several babies all at once.

It also turns out that telling your Mom who doesn't like the idea of packs that she's about to be grandma to not one but five adorable little babies, well that's the kind of news that can swiftly change a traditional Omega mother's mind.

The birth part was hazy. I took all the drugs. I couldn't *not* take all the drugs.

I was loopy for a few days and in hospital for a week thanks to all the babies being a little underweight. Now that I'm home, and my guys have a couple weeks paternity leave, I'm

hopeful that we'll figure out names for our testosterone-laden children.

Somehow, all five are boys, and even though they're not identical, two of them look a little like twins. They have blond hair that's kind of a mix of dark and light shades. We also have one little freckly redhead, and two dark-haired boys who have different features.

"Rueben Junior," Rueben suggests.

"Let me guess, for the redhead?" I ask, rolling my eyes.

He shrugs. "You have to admit. He's definitely my kid. We have the same everything."

"We're not giving the kids your names. That's way too confusing."

"Then how about Mikey?" he suggests.

"Would that be Mikey, short for Michael, which is a normal, regular guy's name, or Mikey as in Michaelangelo, the ninja turtle?" I ask.

Scout snorts. "It's totally the second one."

"What's wrong with that?" Rueben asks.

"Nothing," Scout says. "We'll just name them after the ninja turtles and their rat father who all happened to live in a sewer, by the way."

Rueben laughs. "I was joking. Seriously. As if I'd name our kids after ninja turtles."

"Luke could be a good name," Gus suggests.

I know he misses his brother and I like that he's picked a name that means something to him.

"I like that. It's definitely going on our list."

He smiles at me and puts an arm around me as we all look down at the two double carriers and the single, that all our babies are currently sleeping in. They're all so precious.

"How about Han, and Lando?" Rueben asks.

"Oh my God, shut up," Scout tells him. "Stop naming film and TV characters."

"I think we should use at least one color inspired name," Bishop says. "Cobalt, maybe?"

"See, that's cute. I like it," I tell him. "What other colors make good names?"

"Copper?" Rueben tries.

"Sounds like a policeman," Scout screws up his nose.

"Oh my god," I murmur as I look down at our kids.

"What?" Bishop asks, as everyone moves closer.

"I just realized, we've got five future Alphas here. What if they don't get along when they get older?"

I can't stand the thought of that. All the stories about Scout's brothers, and Gus's kid brother ... I have to admit I'm worried.

"They'll get along," Gus assures me.

"They will?" I ask. "How do you know?"

"We all get along, and they're our kids," Bishop says.

“We’ll teach them the right things,” Scout adds.

“And the cool things,” Rueben says.

Gus smiles. “See? There’s nothing to worry about.”

He’s right. Everything’s so perfect.

I have four amazing mates and five gorgeous little kids.

I’ve been working on making my own online educational magazine for Omegas, to show them they have more choices than they might think. Writing might not be my dream career, but I like what I’m doing, and it fits around everything else for now. Maybe later, I’ll get to do something that’s more me, but all I really want right now is to focus on my mates and my family.

They’re my world. They’re everything that matters to me.

I never would have met them if I hadn’t switched lives with Scarlett.

It’s easily the best decision I ever made.

Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed *Switched!*

Scarlett's story is coming soon, titled *Stranded*.

I'm also working on a series about the Colvindale Omegas, and more books in the Sweet Omegaverse world, so I have plenty more sweet, spicy and suspenseful omegaverse novels coming soon.

If you loved this book, please consider leaving a review.

Thank you!

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