



Knot Your Romeo

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult

Description: I've been running from my stepfather, but Romeo's rejection might destroy me faster than any predator ever could.

On the run from my stepfather who wants to breed me like livestock, Mom finds a job at a secluded estate—a place we can hide behind ten feet high walls. It seems perfect until the owner's son catches my scent. Romeo thinks we're scent-matched, but he's wrong. Still, he pursues me relentlessly, but only for one thing.

I try to ignore him by throwing myself into my studies and find my kindred spirit in my biology professor. Jude is brilliant, kind beta, a man who sees the person I am. He becomes my anchor, my secret keeper, the person who makes me feel...

There's also Eli—the broken alpha groundskeeper who I'm desperate to heal.

Then I meet Romeo's father, Beck, and realize he's a man from my past who I never expected to see again.

But they don't know they're meant to be a pack. I need these men to see what I see—that we belong together, that what we have is worth fighting for. And I need it before my stepfather finds me.

But I'm hiding something massive from all of them—a secret about what I really am that could change everything.

Will I survive long enough to claim the pack that's already claimed my heart? And will Romeo accept the truth when he discovers we were never meant to be?

Knot Your Romeo is a why choose omegaverse romance (MMFM) with the usual knots and heats but also with the following tropes:

Rejected Mate, Age Gap, Forbidden Love, Professor/Student, Omega in the Run.

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Emmie

I reach for myphone, checking it for the hundredth time since landing in Boston, but still no missed calls from Mom.

Did he catch her?

I don't know how many times I've asked myself that. The plan seemed so simple when we made it. We were supposed to run after my sister got married, but like Blake knew, he foiled the plan and made us leave the reception early. So we had to wait for Blake to let his guard down before we could escape. While we waited, we hatched the perfect plan.

Mom dropped me at Myrtle Beach airport. I then flew to New York. From there I jumped on a train to Boston, and I'm now sitting in a hotel room in Boston, the second hotel since I arrived here.

I'm still shocked that the plan worked.

I just have to wait for Mom to get here. After she drove to Charleston airport, she caught a flight to Vegas, then onto NewJersey, where she's picking up the car she bought online. From New Jersey, she is driving to Boston to pick me up. Only when we're together and knew the plan worked, would we head to our new life in a small town an hour north of Boston.

By the time Blake realizes we're both gone, our trail will be ice cold. Apart from the red herring, of course, the credit card Mom used in Las Vegas.

The digital clock on the nightstand blinks at 8:47 pm. Mom's flight from Vegas should have landed an hour ago. Now I just have to wait.

My phone buzzes with a text a few minutes later, I rush to open the message.

Mom: Flight delayed. Safe. Will call soon. Don't leave the room. I'll see you tomorrow evening, book another night at the hotel.

I groan, but I shouldn't worry. I'm just glad that Mom finally realized Blake never wanted her, only the monetary value her daughters gave him. But that's how he got rich. So rich that if he catches me, I know I'll never escape again.

My stomach grumbles, and my nerves are twitchy as I pace the room.

When I reach the window, I press my palm against the cool glass. Boston sprawls below me; all glittering lights and freedom. I'm only twenty-one years old, but this is the first time in years that I've been more than fifty miles from home without Blake's permission.

The thought makes my stomach churn—not with fear, but with something that feels a lot like relief. I helped orchestrate my own escape from a house that never felt like home. I hated it from the day Mom married my stepfather.

My stomach growls again. I check the mini-fridge. Nothing exciting there. The hotel bar downstairs seemed busy when I checked in. I could hide in a corner among all those people and grab a hot meal. Nobody here will give me a second glance. Why would they?

I don't second-guess it, though I probably should.

I change from my jeans and sweater into the one dress I packed—a simple black thing that's probably too short but makes me feel older, more sophisticated. Making me look like the kind of woman who eats and drinks alone in hotel bars because she wants to, not because she's killing time while her mother zips around the country, leading her stepfather on a cross-country wild goose chase.

Only when I'm on the elevator ride down do I worry about my decision. I should order pizza instead. Watch TV, and wait for Mom's call like a good girl.

The doors open before I can hit the button for my floor, and suddenly I'm walking across the marble lobby toward the low murmur of conversation and jazz music. I stand at the door of the bar for a moment, glancing around. It's dimly lit, all dark wood and leather. Just how I want it.

As I walk in, I notice it's business travelers mostly, judging by the laptops and loosened ties. I still choose a stool at the far end of the bar, close enough to the bartender to order but far enough from everyone else to avoid conversation.

"What can I get you?" The bartender is young, maybe my age, with kind eyes, and he is obviously a beta by his slim build.

"Vodka soda," I say, then quickly add, "with lime."

He doesn't ask for ID, which is both a relief and slightly insulting. I look young for twenty-one, big amber-colored eyes, and soft edges that Blake used to say made me look "precious."

The way he said it always made me want to vomit.

I lift the glass to my mouth. The first sip burns, but the second goes down easier. By the third, the knot in my shoulders loosens.

This is good. This is exactly what I need.

"First time in Boston?" The voice comes from my right, low and warm, with just a hint of gravel.

I turn and nearly choke on my drink. He's older—mid-thirties, maybe a little older—dark hair and eyes, though it's too dark in the bar to really see their true color. He has the kind of face that could grace magazines for older men. And there is no doubt he is rich. I can tell by the way he holds himself. His suit jacket is propped over his arms, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Only then do I notice the tattoos covering his corded forearms. My throat goes dry.

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"Is it that obvious?" I ask, immediately regretting how breathless I sound.

His smile is slow, almost predatory. He is definitely an Alpha. Not only because of his size. Broad shoulders and wide chest, and he must be six-four. Even in these heels, he'd tower over me.

"You've been checking your phone every thirty seconds and jumping at shadows. Either you're new in town or you're about to make a very bad drug deal."

I laugh despite myself. "Definitely the first one."

"Beck," he says, extending a hand that engulfs mine when I take it.

"Emmie."

"Pretty name for a pretty girl." His thumb brushes across my knuckles before he releases my hand, and something warm unfurls in my chest.

"What brings you to Boston, Emmie?"

The truth sits heavy on my tongue—I'm running away from my stepfather, who thinks he owns me, waiting for my mother to rescue us both—but I can't say that.

"New job," I say instead. "Starting fresh." It's not entirely a lie. Mom has a position waiting for her not too far from here, and by extension, a new life waiting for both of us.

"Brave," he says, signaling the bartender for another round. "Not everyone has the courage to start over." There's something in his tone that makes me think he's speaking from experience. "What about you? Business?"

"Something like that." He studies me over his whiskey. "You seem nervous."

"I'm not nervous." The protest comes out too quick.

His laugh is low, intimate. "Baby, I can practically smell the anxiety rolling off you. When was the last time you ate?"

The endearment should annoy me. Instead, it makes something flutter behind my ribs. The last time someone called me baby was my dad, just before he died. "I'm fine."

"That's not what I asked." His voice carries a note of authority that hits between my thighs and makes me straighten automatically. "Have you eaten today?"

Whenever my stepfather talked to me like this, I rebelled, but for this man, I was ready to fall onto my knees. "I had pretzels on the plane."

He shakes his head, already reaching for his phone. "That's not food." He's typing something, probably ordering room service or calling for a table. He is definitely an alpha, taking charge like it's the most natural thing in the world.

I should be irritated. I've spent years fighting against Blake's need to control everything I do, everywhere I go, everything I eat. But this feels different. Beck isn't trying to cage me—he's trying to take care of me. And I like it.

"You don't have to—"

"I want to—" His eyes meet mine, and there's something there that makes my breath

catch. It looks a lot like heat and promise. And being an Alpha, I should run, but my feet are rooted to the spot. "—take care of you tonight, Emmie."

The way he says my name, all warm honey, and dark intent—and that's how he smells, sweet but dangerous—and it makes my toes curl. I should say no. I should finish my drink and go back to my room and wait for Mom's call like a responsible adult.

Instead, I say, "Okay."

2

Emmie

Dinner is at a small Italian place six blocks from the hotel. Beck keeps his hand on the small of my back as we walk, guiding me around puddles and through crosswalks with the serene confidence of someone who owns whatever space he occupies. But it's his touch that makes my body pop with goosebumps.

"Tell me about this new job," he says once we're seated in a corner booth that feels more intimate than it should.

I twist my napkin between my fingers. "It's...administrative. Nothing exciting." I've been warned not to tell anyone anything, but then I was also warned not to leave the room.

"Administrative work can be very rewarding," he says, but there's amusement dancing in his eyes. "Lots of...filing."

"So much filing," I agree, and he laughs. The server comes and takes our order.

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“You’re a terrible liar, Emmie. It’s adorable.”

“Is it?”

“It is, but I won’t push you until you’re ready to talk to me.”

“We’re talking,” I insist.

The wine he orders is expensive and delicious. It also goes to my head faster than the vodka did. Or maybe that’s just him—the way he leans forward when I talk, like every word matters. The way his fingers brush mine when he reaches for the bread basket. The way his dark gray eyes look into mine.

“What do you do?” I ask when the server clears our plates.

“I solve problems,” he says. “Usually for people who have more money than sense.”

“That’s wonderfully vague.”

“I could be more specific, but then I’d have to kill you.” His grin takes the edge off the joke, but something in his eyes suggests it might not be entirely a joke. The smart thing would be not asking for any more details about his job, his life, and certainly not his intentions. He’s older than me, whatever is happening here doesn’t need me knowing any of these things. So I don’t push for more information.

But I do find myself leaning closer, drawn by the warmth radiating from his skin and the way he smells. I know he’s an Alpha, but luckily for me, not a scent match. I’ve

resigned myself to never finding one of those. But his smell is amazing. As well as honey, he has this delicious masculine, musky scent that sends shivers down my back. I've never smelled anything quite like it. Yet, I still know he's not mine.

"How old are you, Emmie?" The question comes out of nowhere, quiet and serious.

"Twenty-one." I lift my chin, daring him to make an issue of it.

"Christ." He runs a hand through his hair, and for the first time tonight, he looks uncertain. "I should take you back to the hotel and leave you be."

"Should," I repeat. "But you won't." It's a fact, and we both know it. Whatever this is between us—this pull, this electricity—it's bigger than good sense, scent matches, appropriate age gaps or the fact that we're essentially strangers.

"No," he says finally. His eyes are on mine. "I won't."

At the hotel, he presses the panel on the elevator, straight to the top floor.

He opens the door for me, but I linger at the entrance like a teenager at her first party. It's not like I don't know why I'm here. We're just two people, an Omega and an Alpha, about to do the most natural thing we do.

Fuck. It's not like I'm a virgin. I made sure of that when I thought Mom was going to allow Blake to breed me. But I am a virgin with regards to a knot. I swallow as I look around the room.

His hotel room is three floors above mine and twice the size. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panoramic view of the harbor, but I turn away. I'm too focused on the way Beck moves around the space like he owns the entire city.

He takes the tie he loosened earlier from his pocket and places it on the table and picks up a bottle of bourbon.

I'm suddenly nervous.

"Come here," he says, not turning around as he pours himself a drink. My feet move before my brain catches up, carrying me across the plush carpet until I'm standing close enough to feel the heat radiating from his body.

"Nervous?" he asks, finally turning to face me.

"Should I be?"

His hand comes up to cup my cheek, thumb brushing across my lower lip. "I'm going to take very good care of you tonight, baby girl. But if you want to leave, now's the time to say so."

The way his eyes darken as they trace over my body makes me feel like a precious piece of art.

Instead of answering, I rise up on my toes and press my lips to his. The kiss is soft at first, almost tentative, but then his free hand slides into my hair and everything changes. He tastes like whiskey and dark promises, and when his tongue sweeps across mine, I make a sound that's a half gasp, half whimper.

"That's my good girl," he murmurs against my mouth, and the endearment sends heat spiraling through my chest and my pussy gushes with slick. His eyes close as he inhales. "So sweet for me already."

His hands find the zipper at the back of my dress, and I should probably feel self-conscious as the fabric pools at my feet. Instead, I feel powerful. Desired.

“Beautiful,” he breathes, backing me toward the bed. “So fucking beautiful, baby girl. Look at you.”

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I'm wearing my nicest underwear—black lace that I bought at a half-price sale—but under his gaze, I feel like I'm wearing diamond-encrusted lingerie.

“Beck,” I start, but he silences me with another kiss, this one hungrier, more demanding.

“What do you need?” he asks, settling me back against the pillows. “Tell Daddy what you need.”

My eyes open wide. The word should shock me. Should make me push him away and demand he take me back to my room. Instead, I arch toward him, seeking more contact, more pressure, more of whatever this is.

“I don't know,” I admit, and it's the truth. I've had sex before—it was more of a fumbling encounter with a boy my age and he was more concerned with his own pleasure than mine. But this feels different.

“That's okay, baby girl.” His mouth finds the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder, and I shiver. “Daddy's going to teach you exactly what you need.”

His hands map my body with the patience of someone who has all the time in the world, finding places that make me gasp and arch and forget my name. When he finally settles his head between my thighs, I'm already trembling.

“So responsive,” he murmurs, pressing open-mouthed kisses along my inner thigh. “Such a good girl for me. Daddy's going to make you feel so good, baby. Going to take such good care of this perfect little body.”

The first touch of his tongue makes me cry out, back arching off the bed. He chuckles against me; the vibration sends fresh waves of sensation through my core.

“That’s it,” he coaches, his voice muffled but warm with approval. “Let me hear how good it feels. Let Daddy know what his good girl needs.”

My eyes roll into the back of my head. If someone told me I’d like the words coming out of his mouth, I’d have laughed in their faces. But with Beck, I’m losing track of time, lost in the rhythm of his mouth and the filthy praise he whispers between kisses and loving everything he does and says.

When the first orgasm hits, it’s with an intensity that leaves me shaking and gasping his name.

“So beautiful when you come for me,” he says, kissing his way back up my body. “You make such pretty sounds. Daddy loves hearing how good he makes you feel.”

I’m still floating when he reaches for the nightstand drawer, and the sight of him rolling on a condom brings reality rushing back. This is happening. This is really happening.

“You still with me, baby?” he asks, settling over me. He looks bigger, broader, and more solid, and something about being caged beneath him makes me feel small and safe and precious.

“Yes,” I breathe, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Good girl.” He lines himself up, pressing just the tip inside. “Gonna go slow, baby. I’m gonna make sure this perfect little pussy takes every inch of Daddy’s cock before I knot you.”

The stretch is intense. I've never had sex with an Alpha, and his cock is so big. He keeps up a steady stream of praise as he works himself deeper.

"Taking...me...so...well..." he murmurs, punctuating each word with a gentle thrust. "Such a good girl, opening up for Daddy. Feels like you were made for my cock, baby girl. Made for me."

When he's finally seated fully inside me, we both go still. His eyes are on mine, making the connection between us overwhelming. It's not just physical, but something deeper. Something that makes my chest tight and my eyes sting with unexpected emotion.

"Okay?" he asks, and I nod because I don't trust my voice.

"Perfect," he says, starting to move. "Absolutely perfect. Look how well you fit around me, baby girl. It's like this sweet little cunt was designed just for Daddy's cock."

The dirty talk should embarrass me, but instead, it makes me clench around him, drawing a groan from deep in his chest.

"Fuck, yes," he breathes, picking up the pace. "I love feeling you squeeze me like that. Such a responsive little thing. Daddy's good girl knows exactly how to take care of him."

I lose myself in the rhythm, in the feeling of being filled and cherished. When he slides a hand between us to rub my clit, I come apart with a cry that echoes off the windows. And he still hasn't knotted me.

"That's my girl," he praises, his hips moving faster and faster.

“Knot me. Please knot me.”

“What a good fucking girl you are.” He pinches my nipple hard, but the bite of pain only intensifies my pleasure. “Now you need to come around my knot.”

I moan as my hips buck against his, my tits bouncing with every deep thrust.

My fingers slide through his dark strands as he lowers his head and scrapes his teeth over my shoulder. Slick gushes at the thought of letting him claim me. He’s so gorgeous, so caring, that I could tilt my neck and let him take me and make me his. But I won’t. In reality, this is one night. I could never imagine someone like him would ever be mine.

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He thrusts hard. “That’s it. Let me in.”

I can’t do anything but let him take me. His pheromones are making it hard for me to think of anything but him fully inside me. But when his cock thickens and I’m sure I’m not getting his knot, I push against him, working my pussy over his length until his knot is pressing against every nerve ending.

“Fuck!” he snarls as he thrusts. His knot bumps once again against my opening and he stills.

“I’m...” I buck against him. He flattens his tongue against my neck, and I moan as another climax hits me harder than the last two.

And when his knot presses through the resistance and he fucks into me harder, his face contorts as hot cum fills the condom, and we lie in silence for a few moments.

He presses his hands either side of my head and stares at me. “So fucking good. If you weren’t so young, I’d keep you.” His tongue darts out, licking my bottom lip.

“I’d keep you if you weren’t so old.” The words come out harder than I expected.

When I wake, my heart sinks because I know I’m alone.

The bed still smells like him—his expensive cologne mixed with his sweet but somehow manly scent.

I roll over, my hand feeling where he slept, already knowing his side is cold.

When I reach for my phone on the nightstand and check the time 9:47 am; a piece of paper drops onto the floor. First, I check my cell, which shows three missed calls from Mom and a text.

Mom: Picked up the car. See you this evening.

My fingers unfold the note.

Emmie. I had to catch an early flight. Last night was incredible. You're incredible. Take care of yourself. B

On the nightstand, I notice a stack of twenties. I count four hundred dollars. There's also a business card for an upscale spa.

The money makes my cheeks burn. I hope he thought I could use a little pampering before starting my new life. But it feels like payment, like I'm something he bought for the night.

I shove the bills back onto the nightstand with the note and stumble toward the bathroom, needing to wash him away and forget last night ever happened.

I know that's not going to be easy, but as tomorrow is the start of my new life, I have to remember that last night was just a beautiful mistake.

And when I catch sight of myself in the mirror—hair wild, lips still swollen, marks on my neck that will take days to fade—I can't bring myself to regret anything.

Beck gave me something I didn't know I needed. For one night, I was someone's good girl. Someone's priority. He took care of me, and I never knew how much I'd like that. For once, someone thought I was worth taking care of.

Even if it was just pretend.

3

Emmie

The morning sun filtersthrough the sedan's foggy windshield as Mom travels the winding country road, her knuckles white against the steering wheel. I've been staring out of the passenger window for the past hour, watching endless pine trees blur into a green haze while my mind is tangled with memories of Beck's hands, his voice calling me "baby girl," and the way he disappeared without a trace.

My throat feels raw from holding back tears. It's ridiculous really. It was one night. That's all it was. One perfect, impossible night with a man whose surname I don't even know.

"Almost there, sweetheart," Mom says, her voice carrying that forced brightness she's perfected since she married my stepfather. But her shoulders have softened and her voice seems lighter. Maybe she escaped for herself too. "According to the GPS it's just over this hill."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

The car crests the hill, and my breath catches.

"Jesus," I whisper, then immediately clap a hand over my mouth. "Sorry, Mom."

Silvercrest Manor spreads before us like something from a gothic novel, ivy-covered stone walls. The late afternoon sun dazzles on the diamond-paned windows, and the surrounding gardens roll away toward dense forest in every direction. It's beautiful and imposing and completely overwhelming.

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It also looks very safe.

She laughs. “I had the same reaction when I saw the photos online. Can you imagine working in a place like this?”

“Who are you working for again?” I ask, though I’m not sure I want to know. People who live in houses like this have money. And in my experience, money means power, and power means danger.

Mom’s smile tightens slightly. “Mr. Silver. He lives here with his family—two sons and a daughter, and I was lucky to get the job. They needed a full-time housekeeper to start immediately, as the old one is leaving soon.”

“Are they...” I swallow hard. “Are they Alphas?”

“Probably.” Mom’s hand finds mine across the center console, squeezing gently. “But we won’t be living in the main house, remember? There’s a cottage on the grounds that comes with the position. Our own space. Our own sanctuary.”

The word ‘sanctuary’ makes something loosen in my chest. That’s what we need—a place where Blake can’t find us, can’t touch us, can’t sell me to the highest bidder like he did my sisters, or worse, keep me for himself.

Well, he tried to sell my sisters, but Ella sold herself and Ava made a deal with her Alphas. Only Lottie was sold into a loveless marriage to a mafia man. Mom won’t talk about Lottie. She blames herself that her daughter was so distraught at her own wedding and begged her to take her home. I know. I see the guilt in her eyes

every time her daughters' names come up.

When we reach the entrance, Mom drives through massive wrought-iron gates that opened automatically, our beat-up Ford feeling ridiculously out of place on the pristine gravel drive. We pass beautifully landscaped gardens, a fountain that probably costs more than most people's houses, and what looks like a small lake glinting through the trees.

"This is insane," I murmur. "What kind of people live like this?"

"The kind who can protect us," Mom says quietly. "Mrs. Reynolds mentioned that Mr. Silver values privacy. The estate is completely secure—walls, cameras, the works. Blake could never get to us here."

The hope in her voice breaks my heart. She's been living with her mistakes for so long, carrying the weight of what she let happen to her daughters. But I can't help wondering if we're just trading one cage for one brighter.

A woman emerges from the main house as we park near a smaller building tucked behind a rose garden. She's probably in her fifties, with silver-streaked hair pulled back in a neat bun and kind eyes that crinkle at the corners.

"That must be Mrs. Reynolds," Mom says, checking her reflection in the rearview mirror. "Remember, your name is—"

"Jolie Masters," I finish the sentence for her. "I know, Mom. I won't blow our cover."

She nods, but I can see the anxiety on the set of her shoulders. We've practiced this story a hundred times: Rita Masters, widowed housekeeper looking for a fresh start with her college-age daughter.

Mrs. Reynolds approaches our car with a warm smile, her practical shoes crunching on the gravel. She's wearing a simple blue dress and a white apron, and something about her demeanor immediately puts me at ease.

"You must be Rita," she says as Mom steps out of the car. "I'm Janet Reynolds. Welcome to Silvercrest Manor."

"Thank you so much for this opportunity," Mom replies, shaking Mrs. Reynolds' offered hand. "This is my daughter, Jolie."

I climb out of the passenger seat, suddenly self-conscious in my wrinkled jeans and oversized hoodie. Mrs. Reynolds' eyes are sharp as they assess me. "Pleased to meet you, Ma'am."

"Pleasure to meet you, dear," she says. "Mrs. Reynolds will do fine, or Janet if you prefer. I understand you'll be starting at the local college?"

"Yes, Mrs. Reynolds," I manage. "Thank you for helping arrange the enrollment."

"Nonsense. Education is important, especially for young Omega women." There's something in her tone that suggests she speaks from experience. "Now, let me show you to your home. I think you'll find it quite comfortable."

The cottage is tucked away from the front of the main house. It overlooks the rear of the house and has a wall of flowering climbing ivy that fills the air with sweetness. It's small but perfect, like the kind you read about in fairytales. Stone walls, diamond-paned windows, the garden is filled with flowers, and a red door that looks like another world is on the other side.

"This is our new home," Mom breathes, and I can hear the relief in her voice.

It's a far cry from what we've come from, but it looks a lot more like home.

Mrs. Reynolds produces an old-fashioned key from her apron pocket. "I lived here for nearly ten years. I'm only leaving because my husband wants to retire to sunnier climates. Hardest decision I've ever made."

"And you're leaving in two weeks?" Mom asks.

"That'll be more than enough time to get you acquainted with everything." She turns the key in the lock and opens the door.

Inside, the cottage is even more charming. Exposed wooden beams cross the ceiling, and a stone fireplace dominates the living area. The furniture is simple but well-made, and everything smells of lemon polish and dried lavender. It's actually quite overwhelming.

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“Two bedrooms upstairs and a shared bathroom,” Mrs. Reynolds explains, leading us through the space. “Full kitchen, though you’re welcome to take meals at the main house if you prefer. The family is quite informal about such things.”

Upstairs, I peek into the smaller bedroom and immediately fall in love with the window seat overlooking the gardens and the back of the main house. Sunlight streams through the glass, casting rainbow patterns on the hardwood floor.

“It’s perfect,” I say, and mean it.

Mrs. Reynolds beams. “I’m so glad you think so. Now, Rita, shall we walk through your duties? The family is quite reasonable, but there are some...particular requirements.”

As the two women discuss cleaning schedules and meal preferences and the staff Mom will need to manage, I drift to the window, watching the grounds. The whole place feels like a different world, one where I might actually be safe.

“Jolie?” Mrs. Reynolds’ voice pulls me back to the conversation. “I was just telling your mother about the family dynamics. Mr. Silver is often away on business, but when he’s home, he’s very hands-on with the household. And Elias manages the grounds. He’s a lovely man, you’ll meet him soon. And then there are the children.”

“Children?” I ask, though something in her tone suggests they’re not exactly children.

“Well, Romeo is twenty-one, so hardly a child, I suppose. He’s finishing his degree at college. You’ll likely see him around campus.” She pauses, choosing her words

carefully. “He’s...spirited. But harmless.”

The way she says ‘harmless’ makes me think she doesn’t entirely believe it herself.

“And the daughter?” Mom asks.

“River and Remi. River is the oldest, and he plays ice hockey. Remi, she’s twenty-four and away for most of the year. She’s a future Olympian. Figure skater. Such a sweet girl, when she’s home.” Mrs. Reynolds glances at her watch. “Speaking of which, she is competing this weekend.”

My stomach knots at the thought of meeting more strangers, more people who might notice something different about me.

“Will we be expected to serve dinner?” Mom asked me to help her for a few weeks until she got to know her way around the house.

“Oh no, dear. The family has a cook for formal meals. Your mother’s duties are more general housekeeping, cleaning, laundry, organization. Nothing too strenuous.” Mrs. Reynolds’ expression softens. “Mr. Silver specifically requested that his staff have reasonable hours and personal time. For an Alpha, he’s quite progressive in that regard. Anyway, I should let you unpack.”

After Mrs. Reynolds leaves us to settle in, Mom and I unpack our few belongings in relative silence. I can feel her relief radiating through the small space. But I’m the same. It feels like for the first time in months, we’re not looking over our shoulders or jumping at every unexpected sound.

“This could really work,” she says as we put away the last of our clothes. “Mrs. Reynolds seems lovely, the cottage is beautiful, and the pay is more than generous.”

“What about the family?” I ask, settling onto my bed. “What if they’re like Blake? What if they—“

“They won’t be,” Mom interrupts, but there’s steel in her voice now. “I won’t let anyone hurt you again, Emmie. I promise.”

It’s the same promise she made when dad died. The same promise she made when she married Blake. But I don’t say that. Instead, I nod and try to believe her.

As daylight disappears, I hear laughter and conversation drifting across the gardens from the main house.

“I should introduce myself to the cook,” Mom says, checking her appearance in the small mirror. “Mrs. Reynolds mentioned they coordinate on household schedules.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” I ask, though the thought of facing a house full of strangers makes my skin crawl.

“No, sweetheart. You’ve had enough for one day. Why don’t you call Ella? Your sister doesn’t live too far away from here. Perhaps we can visit once we’ve settled in.”

I nod, grateful for the reprieve.

After Mom leaves, I curl up on the window seat with my phone, watching the sun set over the manor grounds. Everything is so green here, so alive. The air through the open window smells of roses and pine and something else—something clean and earthy that reminds me of rain.

I don’t ring Ella; I call the sister I’m not supposed to call—Lottie. But Lottie’s phone goes straight to voicemail, as it has for the past three days. I try not to panic. She’s

probably fine. But it doesn't stop something cold settling in my stomach. I press her name on my phone again and wait when movement near the main house catches my eye.

A young man emerges from what looks like a side entrance, his silhouette tall and lean against the golden light spilling from the windows. Even from this distance, I can tell he's powerful. An Alpha, definitely. It's in the way he moves, the set of his shoulders; everything about him screams dominance. He pauses on the terrace, running a hand through his dark hair, and for a moment, his posture suggests he is frustrated. Or angry.

Then he turns, and though I can't make out his features clearly, I watch as his gaze sweeps across the gardens. Looking for something. Or someone.

When his attention passes over the cottage, I instinctively shrink back from the window, my heart hammering for no reason. He can't smell me. Nobody can. So I don't have to worry.

This must be one of the sons that Mrs. Reynolds mentioned. I don't know why, but something about him makes my skin prickle with awareness. The feeling is familiar yet unwelcome—the same electric tension I felt with Beck, that pull toward danger disguised as desire. I force myself to look away, focusing on the peaceful gardens instead of the man who dominates the terrace like he owns the world. Which, I suppose, he does.

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My phone buzzes with a text.

Mom: Cook is lovely. Home soon. Heat up the soup Mrs. R left for us.

I'm grateful for the domestic task, something normal to focus on instead of the growing unease in my chest. As I heat our simple dinner, I try to convince myself that in a few days it will be better. Starting college will be a distraction where I can blend in and be normal and forget about Alpha men with expensive suits and possessive eyes. But as I ladle soup into bowls, I can't shake the memory of Beck's hands on my skin, his voice in my ear—and the payment he left on the table.

When Mom returns, she's practically glowing with relief, and her talk is full of optimism. She chatters about the cook, the beautiful kitchen, the reasonable expectations.

"This is our fresh start, Emmie," Mom says as we finish dinner.

I smile and nod and try to match her enthusiasm.

"I can feel it. Everything is going to be different now."

I want to believe her. I need to believe her. But when I look out of the window again, I can't shake off the feeling that our troubles are just beginning.

Mom comes up behind me, wrapping her arm around my shoulders, and looks to the same place I am. "We're safe now. Blake will never find us here."

“I hope so.” I lean into her embrace, wanting desperately to believe her. But I’ve seen the darkness in Alphas’ eyes when they think they’ve caught my scent. The hunger. The possession. Just like Beck did. And I let him do things to me I shouldn’t have.

“This time, I am not believing anyone but you.” The words are the right ones, but I’m not so sure about Mom anymore. She gave up her daughters for that man. Only now, when she has one daughter left, has she seen the light? But now isn’t the time to argue about that.

“Get some sleep,” Mom says, kissing my temple. “Tomorrow is the start of your new life. Your first day of normal.”

Normal.

As if such a thing exists for an Omega like me.

4

Emmie

I stand beside the cottage door, my new student ID clutched in one hand and my worn backpack slung over my shoulder. I’m waiting for Mom to finish her conversation with Mrs. Reynolds. We’ve been here for five days now, but this is my first day of college, my first day out of the cottage, and already my stomach is in knots.

Mom hurries over, a smile plastered on her face. “Mrs. Reynolds said Mr. Sampson will take you to the campus.”

“What? No, I can walk—“

Before I can protest further, a sleek black Range Rover rolls to a stop in front of us.

The driver's window lowers, revealing a man in his mid-fifties with fair hair lined with gray and deep brown eyes. When he smiles, I feel relaxed.

“Good morning, Ms. Masters,” he calls to Mom, his voice deep but rattles slightly. “I thought your daughter might appreciate a lift on her first day. She'll have a lot to do before she even gets into a classroom.”

Mom gives me a gentle push and I approach the vehicle cautiously and Mom replies, “Thank you, Mr. Sampson. That's very kind of you. Jolie—“

But I interrupt her, “I can walk. It's not that far.”

“Nonsense,” he says with a gentle smile. “It's nearly four miles, and you'll want to save your energy for when you're at school. Besides, I have another passenger going in the same direction.”

As if summoned by his words, the rear door opens. I approach the vehicle, every instinct screams at me to not get inside. Though I'm not sure why. Mr. Sampson is clearly a Beta, but when I step to the rear door, I'm faced with the most gorgeous boy and he is about my age.

When he looks up, his eyes lock with mine, and the world stops spinning. I don't react to scents but there is something wild about him that makes my inner Omega practically purr. And despite the medication I take to ward off moments like this, my body reacts as warmth floods my core and goosebumps pop all over my arms.

He can't be a scent match. The thought crashes through my mind before I can stop it. I don't have a real scent, so I know it can't be that.

“Are you getting in or what?” he grunts, his tone annoyed.

He doesn't even react to me. But I suppose that's what makes me so different. My mate will feel me, not smell me. But it doesn't stop me from applying a layer of a false scent just to be safe.

I've dressed as plainly as possible—faded jeans, an oversized gray hoodie, and sneakers that have seen better days. My near-black hair is pulled back in a simple ponytail, and I'm not wearing makeup. The goal is to blend in, to be forgettable, to survive my first day with no one noticing I exist.

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“This is Romeo,” Mr. Sampson says. “He’s never one for conversation.”

So this is Romeo Silver, and he is staring at me like I’ve offended him by existing.

He sits in the back of the Range Rover like he owns not just the vehicle, but the entire world around it. He’s tall—easily six-two—with dark hair that looks like he’s been running his hands through it and gray eyes that seem to catalog every detail of my appearance in a single, dismissive glance. Everything about him screams Alpha dominance. But the way he moves along the seat to get as far away from me as possible is with a casual arrogance.

“Get in.”

I force myself to straighten my spine. “God, this is going to be a long ride.”

Something flickers across his expression—surprise, maybe, that I’m not immediately falling in line.

Mr. Sampson clears his throat.

“Sorry, I’m Romeo Silver. And I know you’re the housekeeper’s daughter.” The way he says it makes it sound like an accusation or an insult.

“Pleased to meet you, Romeo. I’m Jolie. Jolie Masters,” I reply, proud that my voice doesn’t shake and happy that I remembered my fake name. “And yes, my mother works for your family.”

And how quickly I hate him.

From the driver's seat, Mr. Sampson clears his throat again. "Perhaps we should get moving? Romeo has an early class, and Miss Masters, you will want time to find the registrar's office."

Romeo's eyes narrow as I slide into the backseat, trying to leave as much space as possible between us. Alphas like him are exactly what I was trying to avoid.

Romeo stretches his long legs, which take up more than his fair share of space. He doesn't look at me again, instead scrolling through messages like I'm not here. Despite his indifference, tension radiates from him.

"Are you excited about your first day at Silvercrest College?" Mr. Sampson asks, glancing at me in the rearview mirror as we pass through the estate gates.

"Yes, sir," I manage, hyper-aware of Romeo's presence beside me. It's a lie. Right now, all I want is to survive the next twenty minutes without completely embarrassing myself.

"Excellent school," Mr. Sampson continues the conversation. "Small enough that the professors actually know their students' names. Romeo here is quite popular with the faculty, aren't you?"

Romeo makes a noncommittal sound without looking up from his phone. But I catch the slight tightening around his eyes, as if Mr. Sampson's praise makes him uncomfortable.

"What are you studying?" I ask, then immediately regret it when Romeo's gaze snaps to mine. Those gray eyes are even more intense up close, framed by thick dark lashes that would be beautiful on anyone else but somehow make him look more dangerous.

There's intelligence there, and anger, and something else that seems familiar.

"Business," he says flatly. "Family obligations...." The way he says it suggests he'd rather be studying anything else. Or maybe he just doesn't want to talk to me at all.

I decide it's best to spend the rest of the drive in uncomfortable silence. At least it would be if Mr. Sampson's occasional comments about local landmarks did not break it.

The car turns sharply and Romeo's leg brushes against mine. His scent seems to intensify in the enclosed space, and it's nice, but as an omega with no prospect of ever scent matching with anyone, my body only reacts to his touch.

But by the time we reach campus, I'm still desperate to get out of the car.

"Here we are," Mr. Sampson announces, pulling up to what looks like the main administration building. "Romeo, are you staying late again?"

Silvercrest College is smaller than I expected, more like an oversized prep school than a traditional university. Brick buildings covered in ivy clusters. From the prospectus I read, the campus was built around a central quad where students are gathering during the day.

It looks prestigious and intimidating and exactly like the kind of place where I'll stick out like a sore thumb.

"Yeah. I'll find my way home," Romeo says curtly, already reaching for the door handle.

He's out of the vehicle before I can even unbuckle my seatbelt and striding across the parking lot with that same predatory grace. Several students turn to watch him pass,

their gazes tracking his movement with obvious interest.

He ignores them all, disappearing into a building without a backward glance.

“Don’t take it personally,” Mr. Sampson says kindly, noting my expression.

“Romeo’s...complicated. Has been ever since his parents died.”

“His parents?” I ask before I can stop myself.

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“Car accident when he was sixteen. His uncle took him and his siblings in, raised him as his own. But Romeo’s never quite gotten over the loss. Tough age, sixteen.” Mr. Sampson’s expression grows thoughtful. “Some people carry their pain differently than others.”

I think about the anger I glimpsed in Romeo’s eyes, the way he seemed to resent even being in the same space as me. Maybe it’s not personal. Maybe he hates everyone. Yet, somehow, that doesn’t make me feel any better.

“The registrar’s office is in this building,” Mr. Sampson continues, pointing to the structure in front of us. “First floor, can’t miss it. And Miss Masters?”

“Yes?”

“Give Romeo time. He’s not as bad as he wants people to think he is.”

I’m not sure I believe that, but I nod anyway. “It’s fine. Thank you for the ride, Mr. Sampson.”

“Anytime, miss. I’ll be here at three-thirty to take you home.”

The registrar’s office is exactly where Mr. Sampson said it would be, and within an hour I have my class schedule, and a campus map that makes the layout look far more complicated than it actually is. My first class is biology but doesn’t start until ten, which gives me time to explore and hopefully figure out where everything is before I have to turn back and find the class.

The campus is beautiful in an old-money way that makes me acutely aware of my secondhand clothes and scuffed sneakers.

Students gather in clusters on the quad, their easy confidence, and expensive accessories showing how different I am from them. I pull the strings on my hoodie tighter and try to make myself invisible as I walk toward the science building.

It almost works.

“Excuse me,” a female voice calls out behind me. “Are you the new girl?”

I turn to find a petite blonde approaching; her smile bright. She’s wearing a cheerleader’s uniform—Silvercrest Ravens, according to the logo—and she’s flanked by two other girls who look like they stepped out of a catalog for expensive prep school fashion.

“Yeah,” I say carefully, noting how their eyes catalog every detail of my appearance.

“I’m Cerise, are you Jolie?” the blonde asks, her smile never wavering. “My boyfriend, Romeo, mentioned there was a new student starting today. Said you’re the housekeeper’s daughter?”

The way she says it clarifies that being the housekeeper’s daughter is several steps below being an actual student. I feel heat rise in my cheeks, but I keep my voice level. “That’s right.”

“How interesting,” Cerise purrs, circling me like a shark who’s just scented blood. “And you’re living on the estate? In the main house?”

“The cottage,” I correct, wondering where this conversation is heading.

“Oh, the cottage.” Her smile sharpens. “How quaint. The Silver’s must feel like they have a new pet. Isn’t that right, girls?”

The other cheerleaders giggle and I can feel other students paying attention to our conversation, some looking curious, others sympathetic. My face burns with embarrassment, but I force myself to stand straighter.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I say, walking away. “I have class.”

“Of course you do,” Cerise calls after me. “Biology, right? With Professor Benson? Romeo mentioned you’d be in his morning class.”

I freeze. How does she know my schedule? And why did he tell her?

“See you around, Jolie,” Cerise says sweetly. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

The threat in her voice is unmistakable.

5

Emmie

I’ve spent a week being taken to school and back again. And I’m liking it here. I don’t like the way Romeo treats me like I don’t exist but it’s better this way.

I make it to the biology classroom with five minutes to spare, choosing a seat in the middle row where I blend in with the other students. The professor differs from the one who taught me before. This one is in his late twenties. He has light brown hair and warm hazel eyes, and he is setting up his presentation at the front of the room.

“Good morning, everyone,” he says once the clock hits ten. He turns to me and smiles, like he is expecting me. “I’m Professor Benson, and welcome to Introduction to Biology. Before we dive into today’s material, I understand you’re my new student, Jolie Masters.”

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I nod as every head in the classroom turns toward me, like they are seeing me for the first time. The scrutinizing looks make me sink lower in my seat, wishing I could disappear entirely.

Professor Benson's smile is kind, though, and something about his calm presence makes me feel slightly less like running.

"We'll get back to covering the basics of cellular biology this semester," he continues, "with particular attention to the biological systems that govern Alpha and Omega scents."

A few students shift uncomfortably at the mention of Alpha/Omega biology, but Professor Benson plows ahead like he didn't notice.

"We've already learned that contrary to popular belief, biological impulses are just that—impulses. They can be strong, certainly, but they're not hard and fast laws. We always have choices about how we respond to our biology."

I lean forward, genuinely interested despite my anxiety. This is exactly the information I need—scientific explanations for the things I've been experiencing, ways to understand and control my Omega responses.

The door opens twenty minutes into the lecture, and Romeo slides in like he owns the place. He's changed from his casual clothes into what looks like football practice gear, his hair still damp.

Several female students track his movement with obvious interest, but he ignores

them all, taking a seat in the back row. I try not to look at him, focusing instead on Professor Benson's explanation of pheromone receptors and scent compatibility. But I can feel Romeo's presence around me and it makes my concentration scatter.

When class ends, I pack my things quickly, hoping to escape to the place I hide out during breaks. But as I head for the door, a deep voice stops me cold.

"Jolie."

I turn to find Romeo standing directly behind me. Up close, he's even more overwhelming—all broad shoulders and contained power and those gray eyes that seem to see straight through me.

"We need to talk," he says, his voice is low enough that the other students can't hear. "Meet me by the oak tree on the south end of campus after your last class," he continues as if I hadn't spoken.

"Why?"

He only responds with, "Three o'clock."

"And if I don't?"

His smile is sharp and humorless. "Then I'll find you, anyway."

He turns, and he's gone before I can respond, leaving me standing in the emptying classroom with my heart racing and the unmistakable certainty that my life just got infinitely more complicated.

Professor Benson approaches as I stand frozen by the door. "Everything all right, Miss Masters?"

I force a smile. “Fine. Just...adjusting to everything.”

He studies my face with perceptive hazel eyes. “Romeo can be intense. Don’t let him intimidate you.” The fact that he’s noticed the tension between us makes my cheeks burn. “I won’t.”

But as I walk to my next class, Romeo’s words echo in my mind: I’ll find you, anyway.

It sounds less like a threat and more like a promise. And I’m not sure which possibility scares me more.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of lectures and syllabus reviews. I try to focus on my classes, on the normal college experience I gave up a year ago, but my mind keeps drifting to that oak tree and what Romeo wants to discuss.

By the time three o’clock rolls around, I’ve convinced myself that ignoring his demand is the smart choice. Whatever he wants to say, it can’t be anything I need to hear. I’ll find Mr. Sampson, go home to the cottage, and hope Romeo loses interest in whatever game he’s playing.

But as I cross the quad toward the parking area, I catch sight of a familiar figure beneath the massive oak tree at the southern edge of campus. Romeo stands with his back against the trunk, arms crossed, waiting. Even from a distance, his posture looks predatory. The stillness marks him as a dangerous Alpha. He’s not just waiting—he’s hunting.

Does that mean he does smell my scent in a way that pleases his Alpha? I don’t know what I think about that?

It’s not possible. But I have to find out what he wants. If I don’t, I know with

absolute certainty that he'll make good on his threat to find me if I don't go to him willingly.

Taking a deep breath, I change direction, my feet carrying me across the grass toward what feels like my doom.

Romeo watches my approach with those unsettling gray eyes, his expression unreadable.

"You came," he says when I'm close enough to hear.

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“You didn’t give me much choice.”

“There’s always a choice, Jolie.” The way he says my name makes me shiver. And not in a good way. “The question is whether you’re brave enough to make it.”

I stop just outside what I hope is a safe distance, close enough to talk but far enough that his proximity doesn’t completely overwhelm me. It’s a futile effort—Romeo’s presence seems to fill the entire space around us.

“What do you want?” I ask, wrapping my arms around myself defensively.

He studies my face with an intensity that makes me want to squirm. “I want to know why you’re here.”

“I live here now. My mother works for your family.”

“That’s not what I mean.” He pushes off from the tree, taking a step closer. “I want to know why you’re really here. What are you running from?”

The question hits too close to home, and I take an instinctive step backward. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?” Another step closer, and now I can see the flecks of silver in his gray eyes. “You reek of fear, Jolie. And desperation. Whatever brought you to Silvercrest Manor wasn’t just a job opportunity.”

“You know nothing about me,” I say, hating how defensive I sound. But he smells

my fear. Does that mean he smells the real me?

“I know you’re an Omega trying very hard to hide what you are.” His voice drops to a whisper that somehow carries more menace than shouting. “I know your scent makes my alpha want to do things that would terrify you. And I know you feel it too—this pull between us.”

Heat floods my face, and I take another step back. “I don’t—“

“Don’t lie to me.” He follows my retreat, stalking me like prey. “I can smell your arousal. Your pupils are dilated. Your pulse is racing.”

“You can smell me?” I whisper.

“Yes. Honey and lemon.” The words sound like they’re torn from his throat. “And I hate every fucking second of it.”

It’s what I expected to hear. He doesn’t know it but he’s not my scent match. Nobody can smell the real Emmie Darling—Jolie Masters. If someone smells that scent, it means something entirely different. And it’s too rare—I’m too rare to believe I’ll ever have a match.

But he said he smells my fear.

“Why?” I ask, my voice barely audible. “Why do you hate it?”

Romeo’s jaw tightens, and for a moment I think he won’t answer. When he finally speaks, his words are carefully controlled, as if he’s fighting to keep some deeper emotion in check. “Because I don’t want a mate. I don’t want the complications, the expectations, the inevitable disappointment when you realize I’m not the Alpha you think you need.”

“What if I don’t need an alpha at all?” I counter. “What if I just want to be left alone?”

“Then we have a problem. I have fought it since you got here. I know you must be too,” he says quietly. “Because biology doesn’t care what either of us wants. This thing between us—it’s not going away. It’s only going to get stronger.”

He’s right, and the thought terrifies me. I’ve spent my entire life trying to avoid exactly this situation—being claimed by an Alpha who sees me as an object rather than a person.

“Even if that were true,” I say through gritted teeth, “it doesn’t matter. You have a girlfriend.”

Romeo’s laugh is harsh and humorless. “Cerise? She’s a Beta who likes the status of dating an Alpha.” The admission hangs between us like a live wire. I can see the conflict in his eyes. Desire fighting against something that looks almost like loathing. He wants me, but he hates wanting me.

“So what do you suggest?” I ask, proud that my voice doesn’t shake.

Romeo’s expression grows cold, and when he speaks, his words hit me like ice water. “Stay away from me at school. Don’t acknowledge me, don’t seek me out, don’t give anyone reason to think there’s anything between us. As far as the world is concerned, you’re just the housekeeper’s daughter and I’m completely indifferent to your existence.”

Each word cuts deeper than the last. “I wasn’t planning on chasing you. I’m the same as you. I don’t want anything.”

His smile is sharp and cruel. “Then we can have an arrangement. I keep Cerise as my

public girlfriend—the relationship everyone expects. And you...” His eyes rake over my body in a way that makes me feel exposed. “You help me manage the biological needs she can’t fulfill.”

I stare at him in horror, finally understanding what he’s offering. “You want me to be your secret fuck toy? To service your Alpha needs while you maintain your perfect public relationship.”

“I want you to be practical,” he corrects coldly. “This match exists whether we like it or not. We can either pretend it doesn’t and suffer the consequences, or we can find a way to manage it in a way that works for both of us.”

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“That’s not management,” I say, my voice rising with anger. “That’s using me.”

“And you’ll be using me too,” he points out. “Omega needs are just as biological as Alpha ones. Don’t pretend you wouldn’t benefit from the arrangement.”

The casual cruelty of his words takes my breath away. This is what he thinks of me—a problem to be managed, a biological need to be satisfied. Not a person with feelings and dignity and the right to choose her own path.

“No,” I say firmly, backing away from him. “Absolutely not.”

Romeo’s expression doesn’t change, but something flickers in his eyes that might be disappointment. Or relief.

“Your choice,” he says with a shrug. “But Jolie? The offer stands. When you realize that fighting biology is a losing battle, you know where to find me.”

He walks away without another word, leaving me standing beneath the oak tree with my heart racing and my mind spinning. I watch his retreating figure until he disappears behind the science building, then I sink onto a nearby bench with my head in my hands.

This is exactly what I was afraid of. A fake scent match with an Alpha who sees me as nothing more than a convenient solution to his biological urges.

Romeo may be beautiful and powerful and everything my Omega instincts crave, but he’s also cold and calculating. Just like Blake, but wrapped in a prettier package.

Emmie

The next night, I curl up on my bedroom windowsill with my phone, hoping to speak to my sister Lottie again. I need to hear her voice more than I need my next breath. The cottage is quiet when I press her name. Mom is having dinner with the staff at the main house, part of her integration into the household. My heart pounds when she answers on the third ring.

“Emmie!” Her voice is bright, almost too bright, but it’s still hers. “I’ve been meaning to call you back. How are you settling in?”

Relief floods through me so completely that I almost start crying. “Lottie, thank God. I was getting so worried. You haven’t been answering your phone.”

“I know, I’m sorry. Carlos has been...he’s been keeping me busy.” There’s something in her tone that makes me sit up straighter. “But enough about me. Tell me about your new place. Is it as grand as it sounded?”

I launch into a description of the estate, the cottage, my time at college. But as I talk, I notice the sounds of music and laughter drifting across from the main house. The kind of rowdy noise that suggests a party in full swing.

“There’s actually a party happening right now,” I tell her, glancing toward the manor’s lit windows. “Some kind of celebration at the main house. It’s pretty loud.”

“A party? How fun!” But Lottie’s enthusiasm sounds forced. “Are you invited?”

“God, no. I’m the housekeeper’s daughter, which everyone is happy to keep reminding me of. I’m supposed to be invisible.” I shift on the window seat, trying to

get comfortable. “And the son, Romeo. Well...he’s...complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

I hesitate, unsure how much to tell her. “He’s attracted to my scent.”

“Your scent is false, isn’t it?” she whispers.

“My primary scent is enhanced to hide my rare scent, which totally changes how my perfume really smells. But I think enhancing the primary has made Romeo think we’re scent matches.”

“And what do you think? Is there a possibility that you can have a scent match?”

I sigh. “I can obviously smell his scent too, but...I don’t know...”

The silence stretches so long I wonder if the call dropped.

Finally, Lottie sighs deeply. “Oh, Emmie, you don’t sound too thrilled by him—“

“Definitely not thrilled. He wants me to be his secret partner while he keeps his perfect girlfriend in public.” The words taste bitter as I say them.

“What the hell?”

“I know. I told him no, obviously.”

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“Good. You don’t need that kind of complication. And in reality, if he can fight his instincts, he can’t be a true scent match. He can smell your top layer, but not the real you.”

“I know, and the last thing I need is an alpha complication. Not when I’ve just escaped one,” I whisper into my phone like someone is going to hear me.

I stare out of the window. The night is clear, stars winking above Silvercrest Manor like it’s part of a fairytale.

“Just a minute...” There’s a pause, then Lottie’s voice drops to a whisper. “I have to tell you that Carlos has been asking about you and Mom.”

My blood runs cold at the mention of her husband. “You haven’t told him anything, right?”

“Of course not. But Emmie, he knows something’s up. He keeps checking my phone, monitoring my calls. That’s why I waited for him to be at the club before I answered your call.”

“Is he hurting you?” I ask, my grip tightening on the phone.

Another pause. “Not physically. But...I hate him, Em. I hate what this marriage has become.”

The bitter irony isn’t lost on me. Lottie was married off to a mafia alpha who wanted heirs. She thought getting away from our stepfather was easy. Now she is trapped in a

different gilded cage.

“I just wish...” I trail off, staring at the manor house.

“What?”

“I wish I had an Alpha who actually cared. Someone powerful enough to protect me, but who wouldn’t treat me like property?” I laugh without humor. “Stupid Omega dreams, right?”

“Not stupid,” Lottie says softly. “Just unlikely in our world.”

“Are you okay?” I ask her. “You sound a little down.”

“Fine. Just sad that I don’t know when we’ll see each other again.”

“We’ll work something out.” I just don’t know how.

There’s another pause, and when she speaks again, her voice is quieter. “Emmie, I need to tell you something about—“

The line goes dead.

I stare at my phone in confusion, then try calling back. It goes straight to voicemail. I try three more times with the same result, that familiar knot of worry reforming in my stomach.

An hour later, I’m still thinking about my sister. Something isn’t right with her. I can feel it in my bones, the way she sounded too bright, too careful. Like she was performing happiness rather than feeling it. But there’s nothing I can do from here except hope she’s safe and call again tomorrow.

The party sounds are getting louder now, music thumping across the grounds. I try to focus on my biology textbook, reading about metabolic processes, but the noise is distracting. Every few minutes, bursts of laughter or shouting pierce through the night air. I'm halfway through a chapter when I give up and grab my e-reader and open it to where I finished reading the mafia romance I'd downloaded. But the moment I read my book, movement near the garden catches my eye.

Two figures emerge from the main house, silhouetted against the warm light spilling from the windows. Even from this distance, I recognize Romeo's tall frame, the confident way he moves through the space like he owns it. The woman with him is smaller, blonde—Cerise, I realize. Her cheerleader uniform is now traded for a short dress that shows off her perfect figure.

I should look away. I should close the curtains and mind my own business.

But I don't.

Romeo backs Cerise against the garden wall, his hands tangling in her hair as he kisses her hard. She responds eagerly, her leg wrapping around his waist as she pulls him closer.

Even from my window, I can see the heat between them, the way they move together like they've done this a hundred times before.

My chest tightens with something that feels suspiciously like jealousy—which is ridiculous. I turned Romeo down. I told him I wanted nothing to do with his arrangement. I have no right to feel anything about who he kisses or how. But watching him touch Cerise makes something crack inside my rib cage. This is what he chose instead of fighting for the match he feels.

Romeo's hands move to Cerise's dress, pushing it up her thighs as she arches against

him. The moonlight catches on her blonde hair, her perfect skin, the expensive jewelry at her throat. She looks like she belongs in his world in a way I never could. They're beautiful together. Perfect.

Everything I'm not.

Even though I don't want him, the pain in my chest intensifies, making it hard to breathe. I press my hand to my sternum, trying to ease the ache, but it only gets worse as I watch Romeo move in and out of the woman he chose as his.

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This is what I gave up. This is what I walked away from.

Suddenly, the cottage feels suffocating. The walls seem to press in around me, and the air tastes stale and wrong. I need space, need air, need anything but the sight of Romeo Silver fucking someone else.

I grab my hoodie and slip out of the cottage as quietly as possible.

Outside, the night air is cool against my heated skin. It carries the scent of roses and dew and something else—the faint traces of Alpha arousal that make my breath hitch.

I wander through the gardens, trying to escape the sounds from both the main house party and the more intimate celebration happening against the wall. But their sounds follow me, embedded in the very air, a constant reminder of what I felt today and what I rejected.

Maybe I made the wrong choice. Maybe accepting his arrangement would have been better than this hollow ache in my chest, this sense of mourning something I never had. I hate being an Omega. I hate it makes me feel like this.

He is not mine. He can't be.

And Romeo's offer wasn't about partnership or even desire—it was about convenience. He wants to have his cake and eat it too, keeping his perfect public relationship while using me to satisfy his baser needs.

He's just an Alpha who needs an Omega and is trying to make me believe something

that is false. And even I know I deserve better than that. Don't I? I have to believe I deserve better than that. But watching him with Cerise makes me question everything I thought I knew about what I want.

I don't make it far before I hear footsteps on the gravel path behind me. Loud enough to announce their approach rather than startle me.

I quickly duck behind a large hedge, praying whoever it is won't notice me. The last thing I need is to be caught wandering the grounds. When the footsteps pass by without slowing, I'm left alone, trying not to think about why seeing Romeo with Cerise bothered me.

When I think it's safe enough, I peek over the hedge to see Romeo walking between the garden hedges. He's alone, his hair disheveled and his shirt slightly wrinkled.

The air where he walked by was now scented with her cloying perfume and mixed with his natural alpha musk.

My stomach turns.

I duck back behind the hedge and wait for his footsteps to disappear.

Only then do I let myself breathe.

7

Emmie

"Did you enjoy the show?" Romeo's deep voice cuts through the night air.

Heat floods my cheeks, and I'm grateful for the darkness that might hide my

embarrassment. “I was just getting some air.”

“Right.” He steps closer, and I catch the full force of the scent that covers him—the smell of arousal and his Beta that lingers on him—and it makes my stomach drop.

I want to vomit.

“It’s a free country,” I snap, hating how my body responds to his proximity despite everything. I tell myself it’s only because he’s an Alpha and nothing else. One day, when I’m brave enough, I’ll let my full scent run free and not be affected by him. “And I live here now, in case you forgot.”

A humorless laugh slips through his lips. “Trust me, I’m very aware of where you live. And I also never expected for you to be watching me from your window like some lonely voyeur.”

The cruel accuracy of his words makes me flinch. “I wasn’t watching you.”

“Liar.” Another step.

He’s close enough that I can see the silver flecks in his gray eyes, and the slight swelling of his lips from Cerise’s kisses.

“You couldn’t look away, could you? Couldn’t stop wondering what it would feel like if it were you against that wall instead of her.”

“You’re disgusting,” I whisper, standing on my feet and walking backward away from him.

But Romeo follows, stalking me with predatory grace until my back hits the trunk of a tree. He plants his hands on either side of my head, caging me in, his body radiating

heat and dominance.

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“Am I? Or am I just honest about what we both want?” His voice drops to a whisper that somehow carries more menace than shouting. “Tell me you felt nothing watching me with her. Tell me your Omega didn’t react.”

I can’t. Because he’s right, and we both know it. Watching him with Cerise had awakened something ugly and possessive in my chest. A fierce jealousy that had no right to exist. I had watched another woman receive an Alpha’s attention and had mourned the sight like I was a scorned Omega.

But I can fight it...him.

I’ve fought for my freedom, and Romeo Silver won’t take that away from me now.

We stand in tense silence, the moonlight casting ethereal light across his face. He’s even more beautiful up close—all sharp angles and intensity, his gray eyes now dark but still burning with lust from his moment with Cerise.

“Why did you follow me?” I ask.

“I’m not following you.” He moves closer, closing the distance between us until his body is too close to mine. “This is my home. You’re the one trespassing.”

“The cottage...”

“Is on Silver land.” He encloses my feet inside his. He’s so close now I can feel the heat radiating from his body. “Everything here belongs to us. Including you while you stay here.”

Anger flares through me, cutting through the haze of attraction. “I don’t belong to anyone.”

He grabs me, one hand circling my throat—not squeezing—just holding me in place against the tree.

I don’t flinch. The touch is electric, sending shockwaves of unwanted pleasure through my body. But this isn’t his scent doing this. This is my Omega wanting what her body needs.

“You don’t understand how things work around here,” Romeo growls, his face inches from mine. Then he slams his mouth on mine. It’s violent and passionate all at once, his lips claiming mine with a hunger that steals my breath.

For one traitorous moment, I want to kiss him back, my Omega instincts overriding all rational thought. When he pulls back, we’re both breathing hard.

“I’m repulsed by you,” he says, but his dilated pupils and the hardness pressing against my hip tell a different story.

“Then why did you kiss me like I was yours, Romeo?” I demand, hating the breathless quality of my voice.

Instead of answering, he kisses me again, deeper this time, his tongue probing through my lips and sliding against mine in a way that makes my knees weak. His hands tangle in my hair, pulling slightly, and I can’t stop the small moan that escapes my throat.

He pulls back again.

“I’m repulsed that I want you, but I am your Alpha,” he murmurs against my lips. “I

hate that your scent drives me crazy when I already have someone.”

“Romeo.” Someone shouts. The sound rings out in the distance.

He tenses, pulling back slightly but keeping me pinned against a tree. “Don’t make a sound,” he warns.

“Why are you doing this? Why are you saying these things?” I whisper, confusion and desire warring within me. “If you like my scent—“

“Because I can,” he cuts me off, eyes hard even as his body remains pressed against mine. The voice calls again, it’s closer now. “Just because I reject you as my Omega doesn’t mean I can’t use you. We can both give each other what we need. Cerise is a Beta, but I want her. You’re the Omega who can give me what she can’t.”

Horror washes over me, clearing the fog of desire. “No,” I say firmly, my hands slamming against his chest, but he refuses to be pushed away.

Romeo’s smile is sharp and cold. “I want you to stop pretending this isn’t happening. Stop acting like you’re above the biology that’s driving us both crazy.”

“I told you no—“

“You turned me down because you didn’t want to be a secret,” he corrects, his thumb brushing along my jaw in a gesture that’s both tender and possessive. “But you didn’t say no to this.”

Before I can ask what ‘this’ is, his mouth crashes down on mine again.

The kisses he gives are nothing like the gentle exploration I experienced with Beck in Boston. His are conquests, simple. Romeo’s lips are demanding, his tongue invasive,

his teeth nipping at my lower lip hard enough to make me gasp. He is claiming what he sees as his with such hunger that it steals my breath.

Romeo pulls back just enough to speak, his lips brushing against mine with every word. “This is what you want, isn’t it? To be claimed by your Alpha, to submit the way your biology demands.”

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The words break through the haze of desire, reminding me who I'm with and what he represents. I plant my hands against his chest and this time I shove him hard enough to make him stagger back a step.

"You're not my Alpha," I say fiercely, wiping his taste from my lips with the back of my hand. "You're just a selfish boy who wants to have everything without paying the price."

Something dangerous flickers in Romeo's eyes. "Careful, Omega. You're walking a very thin line."

"What line?" I demand, my anger finally overriding my fear. "The one where I'm supposed to be grateful for your attention? The one where I should accept whatever scraps you're willing to throw at me while you play house with your perfect Beta girlfriend?"

"Cerise isn't perfect," he mumbles, and there's something almost vulnerable in his tone. "She's what I'm supposed to want. What makes sense for someone in my position?"

"Then have her," I snap. "Stop playing games with me and commit to the girl who obviously adores you."

Romeo laughs, but there's no humor in it. "You think it's that simple? You think I can just choose to stop feeling this?" He gestures between us, his expression twisting with something that looks like pain. "Every time I touch her, all I can think about is you. Every time I try to claim her the way an Alpha should, my body rejects her."

The admission hangs between us, but it's unwanted. I don't want to know about his relationship problems.

He stares at me. There's conflict in his eyes. Desire warring with resentment, his need fighting against something that looks almost like self-hatred.

"That's not my problem," I say, though my voice lacks conviction. I need to try harder.

"Isn't it?" He steps closer again, and this time I don't retreat. "We're scent matches, Jolie. Whether you like it, or not, my biology recognizes you as mine. And yours recognizes me as your alpha."

"Biology isn't destiny," I quote from Professor Benson's lecture instead of telling him the truth. I won't complicate my life any further. "We have choices."

"Do we?" Romeo's hand comes up to cup my face, his thumb tracing the line of my cheekbone with tenderness. "Because right now, all I want to do is mark you, claim you, make sure every Alpha for miles knows exactly who you belong to."

Heat floods through me at his words, my Omega instincts responding to the possessive promise in his voice despite my brain's protests.

"And then what? Hide me away so you go back to Cerise and pretend I don't exist?"

"Then I do whatever it takes to make this bearable for both of us," he says quietly. "I can't claim you publicly, Jolie. My family has expectations, obligations. Cerise comes from the right background, has the right connections. She's what I'm supposed to want."

"But she's not what you want," I retort.

“No.” The word is so quiet I nearly miss it. “What I want is standing right in front of me, and I can’t have her. Not the way I should. Not the way my Alpha demands.”

There’s genuine pain in his voice now, a vulnerability that makes my chest ache despite everything. For the first time, I see past his cruel facade to the conflict underneath. Romeo isn’t just being selfish. No, he’s trapped between his biology and his obligations, between what he wants and what he thinks he should want.

“So, what are you suggesting?” I ask carefully, not sure why I need him to spell it out once again.

His expression hardens, the momentary vulnerability disappearing behind his usual mask of cold control. “I’m suggesting we be realistic about what this is. You need an Alpha’s attention, and I need an Omega who can actually satisfy my biology. We give each other what we need without the complications of a public relationship.”

“You want me to be your mistress because you can’t knot your girlfriend,” I say flatly.

“I want you to be practical.” His hand slides down to rest against my throat again, not squeezing but making his point clear. “This pull between us isn’t going away, Jolie. We can either manage it, or we can both suffer in silence while our biology tears us apart.”

I stare up at him, taking in the sharp angles of his face, the desperate hunger in his gray eyes, the way his scent is stronger the more he is with me. He’s beautiful and dangerous and everything my Omega instincts crave. He’s also offering me exactly what Blake threatened to do to me. Give me a life as an Alpha’s secret pleasure, being used when convenient.

“What about Cerise?” I ask. “What happens to her in this arrangement?”

Romeo shrugs, as if her feelings are irrelevant. “She gets what she wants.”

“And that is?”

He gives me a look that tells me if thinks the question is stupid. “The status of being my girlfriend, the social connections, the security of my name. What she doesn’t get is the biological side of our relationship, which she can’t handle, anyway.”

“And she’s okay that you’re prepared to knot another woman?”

“She won’t know about it.” His smile is wide and dangerous, like he is daring me to tell her. “As far as Cerise is concerned, I’m just a caring alpha who would never expect her to take a knot. She’s not exactly complaining about not having to deal with knots and marking bites.”

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The casual cruelty of his words takes my breath away. This is what he thinks about both of us. We're problems to be managed. We both have needs that need to be satisfied, but in different ways.

But Romeo thinks I exist purely for his sexual benefit.

"What makes you think I'd agree to something like that?" I ask quietly.

Romeo looks me in the eye as he strokes my neck with his thumb. "Because you're already wet just from talking about it. Because your pupils are dilated and your pulse is racing and your scent is telling me exactly how much your Omega wants to submit to her Alpha."

He's not totally wrong, and that's the most infuriating part. It's not my scent that is betraying me, but my body as it responds to his dominance. The space between my thighs throbs with need, and I don't want to think about how much slick is there.

"Physical response isn't consent," I manage.

"No," he agrees. "But it's honest in a way words aren't. Your mouth says no, but your body is begging me to take what we both know belongs to me."

"I don't belong to you."

Romeo's laugh is low and dark. "Don't you? Tell me, Omega—when you touch yourself at night, who do you think about? When you imagine being claimed and knotted and marked, whose face do you see?"

Beck.

The answer surprises even me. It sits heavy in my throat, unwanted but undeniable.

Romeo smiles because he thinks it's him. "That's what I thought," he says softly, reading my silence incorrectly. "We're matched, Jolie. Fighting it is only going to make us both miserable."

"So I should just accept being your dirty secret?" My voice cracks as I say the words. "Let you use me whenever you can't get what you need from your perfect girlfriend?"

The truth washes over me with crystal clarity. I fled one monster only to find another wearing a different face. Blake wanted to breed me and sell my children. Romeo wants to use me while keeping up appearances with his girlfriend. I hate being an Omega.

"Romeo. Is that you?" The voice is very close now, and a flashlight beam cuts through the trees.

Romeo gives me a warning look that promises this isn't over. "You should accept reality." His thumb strokes along my pulse point, and I know he can feel how hard my heart is racing. "Whatever this is between us is bigger than what either of us wants, but we can work with it, or we can let it destroy us. Those are our only options."

"I need time to think," I whisper.

Romeo's hand slides away from my throat, and immediately I miss the contact. "Take all the time you need. But remember, the longer you wait, the harder this gets for both of us." He steps back, putting physical distance between us, but his scent still

surrounds me. “Sweet dreams, Omega. Try not to think about what you’re missing.”

The masculine voice calls out his name again.

When he turns and walks away to intercept whoever is searching for him, I lean against the tree, legs shaking.

The worst part isn’t his threat. It’s that despite everything, my traitorous body still wants him. Slick is running down my thighs, making me hate myself almost as much as I hate him. I slide down the trunk until I’m sitting on the ground and draw my knees up to my chest as his words echo in my mind.

Fighting it is only going to make us both miserable.

Is he right, and Professor Benson wrong? Is this biological pull strong enough that denying it will cause us both genuine suffering? Or is that just what he wants me to believe so I’ll agree to his convenient arrangement?

I think about Cerise, beautiful and confident and completely unaware that her boyfriend is planning to cheat on her with the housekeeper’s daughter.

She doesn’t deserve that betrayal, no matter how much Romeo justifies it, and no matter how horrible she is to me. I quickly get to my feet again, needing to get home. The safety of the cottage windows glow warmly in the distance.

But I can’t shake the feeling that safety is just an illusion, especially here behind these high walls.

Romeo has made his position clear—he wants me, and he’s not going to simply accept rejection and move on. But how long can I hold out against both his persuasion and my own traitorous biology before I give in to what we both know is

inevitable? And when that moment comes, will I be strong enough to set terms of my own, or will I simply become another Omega crushed under the weight of an Alpha's selfish desires?

The night air carries no answers, only the distant sound of the party still raging at the main house and the lingering scent of my supposed mate.

But tomorrow, I'll be stronger.

Tomorrow, I'll remember why I said no.

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Because tonight, I know I can't forget the way Romeo looked at Cerise like she was his entire world...

Not me.

8

Eli

The night air carries a scent that doesn't belong among the carefully cultivated roses of Silver Manor. Something wild, honeyed, with notes I've never encountered before. I pause in my evening garden rounds, my gun still in my hand, and breathe deeper.

Omega. But not just any Omega.

The scent is layered, complex in a way that makes my Alpha instincts surge with interest despite myself. There's the expected sweetness, yes, but underneath—something like sunshine breaking through storm clouds, warm and golden and utterly unique. It's the kind of scent that could drive lesser Alphas to madness, the kind that wars are fought over.

And it's laced with fear.

I holster my weapon and follow the trail through the moonlit garden, past the marble fountain where my brother and I used to play as children, toward the wooded area that borders the eastern edge of the property. The voices reach me before I see them—Romeo's aggressive tone, sharp with dominance and frustration, followed by

a female voice I don't recognize.

Something protective stirs in my chest. Whatever's happening in those shadows, my instincts scream that it's unacceptable.

I quicken my pace, pulling out my flashlight and letting the beam cut through the darkness as I call out, "Romeo? Are you out here?"

The voices stop abruptly, the sudden silence more ominous than the arguing had been. When I round the copse of pine trees, the scene before me makes my blood run cold. Romeo stands with predatory stillness, his posture screaming barely leashed aggression. His scent is spiked with arousal and possession, the dangerous combination that precedes an Alpha's rut or worse, a claiming.

In front of him, a young woman leans against a tree trunk, her slight frame dwarfed by the massive tree. Her eyes are wide and her scent now smells like fear, but there is also a look of defiance on her face that reminds me of a cornered animal preparing to fight despite hopeless odds. She was the source of that intoxicating scent. And from the way Romeo has positioned himself between her and any escape route, he knows exactly what kind of prize he's cornered.

I call his name once more. Finally, he turns and walks to me.

"What's going on here?" I ask when he reaches me, keeping my voice deliberately calm as I lower my flashlight. The last thing this situation needs is another Alpha adding to her fear.

Romeo's jaw tightens, his eyes flashing with irritation at my interruption. "Nothing, Eli. Just having a chat with our housekeeper's daughter." The way he emphasizes "our" sends warning signals through my brain. There's ownership in that word, like she is a possession he's already claimed despite the girl's obvious distress.

I turn to her, taking in her delicate features properly for the first time. Amber eyes that reflect golden in the moonlight as they stare at me, dark hair escaping from a ponytail, and clothes that look like this girl doesn't give a damn about how she is perceived by anyone.

She's beautiful in a way that hits me like a punch to my guts. She's all soft curves and quiet strength. But it's her scent that nearly brings me to my knees—that sunshine warmth wrapping around me like a promise of better days.

“You must be Jolie,” I say, walking to her and offering what I hope is a reassuring smile. “Mr. Sampson mentioned you'd arrived. I'm Elias. I take care of the grounds.”

Her eyebrows lift slightly as she takes in my work clothes and dirt-smudged hands. She doesn't know, then. She doesn't know that I own half of everything she can see, that the manor house Romeo lives in with my brother is half mine.

It's refreshing, actually. People treat me differently once they learn about my wealth. But right now, this girl sees me as just a groundskeeper, and there's something liberating about that.

“Nice to meet you,” she breathes, but her eyes dart nervously to Romeo, and I can smell the spike of anxiety in her scent.

“It's late,” I observe, noting the slight tremor in her hands, the way she's pressing herself against the tree as if it could somehow protect her. “Were you headed back to the cottage?”

Before she can answer, Romeo steps between us, his movement fluid and territorial. “I was just about to walk her back myself, Eli. No need for you to trouble yourself.” The possessiveness in his tone is unmistakable, as is the subtle threat underneath. Romeo may be younger, but he's never lacked arrogance. The fear that flashes across

Jolie's face at his words tells me everything I need to know.

My inner Alpha rises in response, a slow burn of protective fury that I keep carefully leashed.

"Actually," I say, my voice carrying just enough authority to remind Romeo exactly who he's talking to, "your father called earlier. He wants to speak with you about tomorrow's board meeting. Something about the quarterly projections you were supposed to prepare and if you're not ready tomorrow, he's getting an outsider in to do the job."

It's a lie, but a believable one. My brother has been pushing Romeo to take more responsibility in the family business, with limited success.

"I'm ready," Romeo growls, but uncertainty flickers in his eyes.

"Are you? Because he seemed to think you weren't taking it seriously." I let just a hint of disappointment color my voice. "Maybe you should call him before he gives up on you entirely. I'm sure Jolie won't mind if I escort her home instead."

Romeo's eyes narrow dangerously, his scent spiking with aggression. "She's fine with me."

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“I can walk back alone,” Jolie suddenly interjects, her voice stronger than before. “It’s not far.”

What a brave little Omega, trying to defuse a situation between two alphas. It makes something protective and tender unfurl in my chest.

“Nonsense,” I say, stepping closer to her but keeping my movements non-threatening. “These woods can be confusing at night, even to those who know them well.” I turn to Romeo, letting my expression grow serious. “I’ll see you at breakfast tomorrow. Now go call your father. He should still be at the Chicago hotel.”

For a moment, I think Romeo might challenge me. His Alpha pheromones spike aggressively, and I can see him weighing his options—his desire to claim whatever he thinks he’s found in Jolie against his respect for my authority and his fear of disappointing his father further.

I hold my ground, letting my Alpha assert itself subtly. I’m older, more established, and despite Romeo’s size and strength, right now my Alpha outranks him in every way that matters.

With a last glare at Jolie. One that promises this conversation isn’t over. Romeo stalks off toward the main house, his movements sharp with frustrated anger.

Once he’s out of earshot, Jolie’s shoulders slump as if she’s been holding herself together through sheer willpower. “Thank you,” she whispers, and the gratitude in her voice closes the hole in my chest slightly.

“Don’t mention it.” I hesitate, then ask gently, “What was he doing to you out here?”

She wraps her arms around herself, suddenly looking very young and vulnerable in the moonlight. “It’s complicated.”

I nod, respecting her privacy even as every protective instinct I have demands details. “May I walk you home? No ulterior motives, I promise. I just want to make sure you get there safely.”

After a moment of consideration, she nods.

We fall into step along the garden path, moonlight silvering the white roses on either side of us. I keep a respectful distance, acutely aware of how overwhelming my Alpha scent might be after whatever Romeo put her through. But I can’t help breathing in traces of her scent as we walk—that impossible combination of honey and sunshine that makes something deep in my chest ache with longing.

“So you’re the gardener?” she asks after a minute of comfortable silence.

I smile, running a hand through my hair. It’s easier to let her think of me as just the groundskeeper for now. “Among other things. I handle the estate grounds, the orchards, the organic vegetable gardens that supply the local restaurants.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“It is. I love being out here.” I glance at her profile, struck by how the moonlight catches in her dark hair, how it illuminates the delicate line of her neck. “Nature makes sense to me in a way people often don’t. Plants are honest—they either thrive or they don’t. No games, no hidden agendas.”

She laughs softly; the sound sends unexpected warmth through my chest. “I’ve never

thought about it that way.”

“And you?” I ask, genuinely curious about this enigmatic girl who’s appeared in my perfectly ordered world. “Are you in school?”

“College,” she nods. “Just started at Silvercrest College.”

“Studying?”

“Biology, maybe pre-med. I haven’t decided yet.” She hesitates, then adds, “I enjoy understanding how things work. Bodies, cells, the science behind... everything. But—” She pauses, as if she’s revealed more than she intended.

“But what?” I prompt gently.

“Nothing,” she says quickly, but I suspect I know what she was going to say. She wants to study Omega biology, probably to understand her own nature better. And judging by her reaction, she’s scared to admit it—which suggests she’s been hiding her true self for reasons that have nothing to do with shame and everything to do with safety.

My curiosity about her intensifies. There’s something different about this girl, beyond just her unusual scent profile. Something that calls to me on a level I don’t fully understand. I’ve been careful not to let any Omega get close since Kate left me three years ago. We weren’t scent matches, but losing her still nearly destroyed me.

And Jolie...there’s something about her that makes me want to take risks I swore I’d never take again.

As we near the cottage, warm light spilling from its windows like a beacon of safety, Jolie slows her pace.

“Can I ask you something, Elias?”

“Call me Eli,” I say automatically. “And of course.”

She bites her lip, clearly weighing her words carefully. “If Romeo doesn’t like me, will Mr. Silver fire my mother?”

This brave girl is worried about her mother’s job security because my nephew decided to terrorize her in the woods. “Of course not. Your mother’s employment has nothing to do with Romeo’s behavior. And I’ll be having a conversation with my Mr. Silver about tonight as soon as he gets back from his business trip.”

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Relief floods her features, and she turns to face me fully for the first time since we started walking. The porch light illuminates her delicate features—high cheekbones, full rose-pink lips, and those extraordinary amber eyes that seem to hold secrets. But it's that scent... I'm drowning in it. Not the primary scents of honey and lemon that could be perfume from a bottle. No, the scent I love is the sunshine warmth that undercuts it. A scent that seems impossible for someone who carries herself like she's expecting disaster around every corner, not happiness.

“Thank you for walking me back,” she whispers.

“Anytime.” I mean it more sincerely than I expected to. “Jolie...if Romeo bothers you again, or if you need anything while you're staying here, my cottage is just past the white rose garden. The one with the green door and probably too many wind chimes.”

She smiles—a genuine one this time that transforms her entire face. “Wind chimes?”

“I tell people they help me track wind patterns for gardening purposes,” I admit with a self-deprecating laugh. “But honestly, they were my...they belonged to...I can't bring myself to take them down.” It's more than I usually share with anyone, but something about Jolie makes me want to be honest.

“I'll remember that,” she says, then pauses with her hand on the doorknob. When she turns back to me, her face lights up with another smile that hits me like sunshine after a storm. “Goodnight, Eli.”

“Goodnight, Jolie.”

I wait until she's safely inside before turning away, but I can't bring myself to leave immediately. Instead, I stand in the shadows of the garden, watching the warm light in her windows and breathing in the lingering traces of her scent.

She stands at her window, looking out, and catches me. I lift my hand and give her a wave before turning and walking back toward my cottage.

The night air seems emptier somehow without her presence. I breathe deeply, trying to recapture traces of that sunshine warmth, but it's gone, leaving only the familiar scents of roses and pine. My scent.

Another Omega who doesn't match me. Not that it matters. I shouldn't be thinking about her this way. Jolie can't be over twenty-one, eight years younger than me, and the last thing she needs is another Alpha complicating her life. But I can't shake the memory of how she looked at me—not with fear or calculation, but with genuine gratitude and something that might have been trust.

When was the last time someone looked at me like that?

When was the last time I felt this surge of protectiveness, this need to shield someone from the world?

Not since Kate. And even then, it wasn't quite like this.

The thought troubles me as I reach my cottage. Kate left because she couldn't fight her biology, couldn't deny the pull of her true scent match. I understood then, even as it destroyed me. But understanding and accepting are different things, and her departure left scars I'm not sure have fully healed.

What happened between Jolie and Romeo tonight clearly involved more than casual conversation. My nephew has always been volatile, possessive traits he inherited

from his father. A man who died before he could teach Romeo how to channel that darkness productively.

But the fear in Jolie's eyes suggested what he was doing or saying was something beyond typical Alpha posturing.

I wonder if her scent made his alpha purr. I have to admit I've never encountered anything like it. Most Omega scents are pleasant but straightforward—floral notes, fruit, simple sweetness designed to attract and soothe. But Jolie's scent is layered, complex. I might not match with her primary perfume, but why does the sunshine warmth scent that dances underneath it call to something deep in my alpha soul?

The walk cleared my mind enough to make several decisions. First, I'll keep a closer eye on Romeo and his interactions with Jolie. Second, I'll make sure she knows she has allies on this estate—people who will protect her if needed. Me, specifically. And third... Third, I'll try very hard not to think about the way her scent made every protective instinct I have roar to life, or how her smile made my lungs feel like an iron had wrapped around them and squeezed out the last of my air.

The last thing she needs is a jaded Alpha who's already proven he's not good enough to keep the Omega he loved. Yet, despite every rational thought telling me to stay away from Jolie, I hope she'll need my help again soon.

9

Jude

As I arrange my lecture notes, my mind keeps drifting to the conversation I had with Principal Morrison yesterday. Her concern about our new student—Jolie Masters—had been clear in her careful phrasing, though she'd tried to mask it behind administrative protocol.

“Keep an eye on her,” she’d said. “The girl’s enrollment was handled through some unusual channels, and I’d appreciate your professional assessment of how she’s adjusting.”

I’d agreed, of course. Morrison’s instincts about potentially problematic situations are rarely wrong, and if she’s worried about complications arising from irregular admissions, then so am I.

Students filter into my classroom, and I find myself genuinely curious about this young woman who’s somehow warranted special administrative attention.

Jolie enters quietly, choosing a seat in the middle rows, which I found strange the first time. She isn’t trying to hide in the back, but she’s also not seeking attention in the front either. Smart positioning for someone who wants to observe without being observed.

She pulls her hoodie from her head and then reaches in her bag and removes her books. Her dark hair is pulled back in a simple ponytail, and she’s dressed in clothes that are clean but clearly old.

Everything about her screams ‘trying not to be noticed.’

But there’s something about her scent that makes my Omega instincts prick with interest. I don’t know if it’s because I’m a hidden Omega, but the first time I caught it nearly knocked me over.

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It was the hints of something complex and layered underneath the suppressants. And it's not the scent everyone can smell. That scent is like a blend of honeyed sweetness with a dash of citrus.

That scent is obvious.

It's also false.

What isn't so obvious to everyone else are the notes I've never encountered before. The notes I've studied. Her secret scent is heavily masked with professional-grade suppressants, the kind that cost serious money. Money I don't know how she affords.

Fascinating.

"Good morning, everyone," I begin, settling into my familiar rhythm. "We have a lot to get through today. We'll be continuing our exploration into secondary biological systems that affect some alphas and omegas."

Jolie leans forward slightly, genuine interest replacing her earlier anxiety. Good. This is exactly the kind of information that could help her understand whatever situation she's dealing with.

I continue my lecture, but part of my attention remains fixed on the undercurrents in the room. Romeo Silver is glaring at Jolie from his seat in the back of the room. And like she feels his eyes on her, she glances over her shoulder. He keeps his eyes focused on her, not looking away.

When class ends, Jolie packs her things quickly, clearly trying to escape before Romeo can corner her. But as she pushes out her chair, his voice stops her cold. “Jolie.”

She freezes, her shoulders tensing.

Everyone thinks I’m a Beta, and that’s how I act as I busy myself with organizing my papers, but every instinct I have is tuned to their interaction.

“We need to talk,” Romeo says, his voice low but carrying an alpha authority that makes most Omegas comply automatically.

“I don’t think we do,” Jolie replies, and I’m impressed by the steadiness of her voice despite the anxiety rolling off her in waves.

Romeo’s smile is tight, his eyes wild. “We do.”

“What do you need to talk to her about?” Cerise asks, sliding her arm around Romeo’s waist.

“Nothing important.” He wraps his arm around Cerise and quickly leaves without another word.

Jolie’s hands tremble slightly as she finishes packing her bag. When she notices me watching, she forces a smile.

“Everything all right, Miss Masters?” I ask, keeping my voice gentle.

“Fine,” she says quickly. “Just adjusting to everything.”

“Romeo can be intense,” I say carefully. “Don’t let him intimidate you.”

Surprised that I've noticed flickers across her expression. "I won't."

"If you need someone to talk to. I'm always around."

She smiles. It's bright and beautiful and makes her entire face light up. "I'll remember that."

The rest of the morning passes in a blur of classes and administrative duties, but I can't shake off my concern about Jolie Masters. During lunch, I walk past the windows that overlook the main campus quad, pretending to review lesson plans but actually watching for any sign of the drama I sense brewing. I don't have to wait long.

Romeo appears near the student center at noon, looking around and moving with that predatory grace that marks him as an apex alpha.

He's changed from his practice gear into expensive casual clothes that probably cost more than most teachers' monthly salary.

But it's not his appearance that catches my attention—it's the way he scans the quad like a hunter seeking prey. He finds what he's looking for near the library steps. Jolie Masters.

Jolie sees him too, grabs her bag and disappears from view, as Cerise Hamilton, along with her cheerleader friends' watch.

Romeo doesn't follow Jolie, but approaches his girlfriend and her group. There's tension in his movements that suggests he is nervous about what his girlfriend saw.

I'm too far away to hear their conversation, but their body language tells the story clearly enough. Cerise reaches for Romeo with obvious affection, but he steps back,

putting space between them. Her smile falters, confusion replacing the calm confidence she usually wears like armor.

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Romeo says something that makes Cerise's friends exchange uncomfortable glances.

Whatever it is, it's clearly not what she wanted to hear.

Cerise stands, her posture going rigid, and they walk toward a more secluded area but nearer to the building I'm watching from.

From this distance, I can see the moment their discussion turns heated. Cerise's voice rises—not enough for me to make out words, but her tone is unmistakably upset. Romeo's response is quieter, more controlled, but there's an aggressive edge to his posture that makes my protective instincts flare. Then Cerise gestures wildly toward the main campus building, where Jolie went. Romeo's response makes Cerise stagger back as if he's struck her, and her perfectly made-up face crumples with what looks like betrayal.

She says something, then storms off toward the parking lot, leaving Romeo standing alone.

But instead of following her or showing any remorse, Romeo's attention immediately shifts back to scanning the quad.

Looking for Jolie, I realize.

By mid-afternoon, my concern had escalated into genuine worry. I haven't seen Jolie since this morning's class, and the confrontation between Romeo and Cerise has left an ugly tension hanging over the entire campus.

Several students have mentioned seeing Cerise crying in the parking lot, while Romeo has been spotted prowling the grounds like a caged predator.

When my afternoon class begins, I wait for Jolie to take her usual seat. The class is small enough that every absence is obvious, and her empty chair seems to draw my attention like a beacon.

Fifteen minutes into my lecture, there's a commotion in the hallway. Raised voices, the sound of something splashing, followed by cruel laughter that makes my Omega instincts bristle with protective fury.

Through the glass panel in my door, I glimpse movement. Several figures are clustered around someone on the ground. The scent of distress drifts under the door and it's layered with that same complex sweetness I noticed from Jolie this morning.

"Please continue reading," I tell my class, already moving toward the door. "I'll be right back."

I step into the hallway to find exactly what I feared. Jolie sits on the linoleum floor, soaking wet. Her clothes plastered to her body and her dark hair dripping water onto the tiles. Standing over her are Cerise Hamilton and two other cheerleaders, their faces twisted with the kind of vicious satisfaction that comes from successful humiliation.

"Oops," Cerise says with mock sweetness, holding an empty water bottle. "So clumsy of me. I hope you're not too wet, the hired help's daughter."

The way she spits out the last words makes it clear this attack was motivated by more than simple bullying. This is personal, targeted, designed to put Jolie in her place according to some twisted social hierarchy.

“Ladies,” I say, my voice carrying enough authority to make all three cheerleaders freeze. “I believe you have somewhere else to be.”

Cerise’s eyes narrow when she sees me, but she can’t quite hide the flicker of fear. Faculty involvement means potential consequences, and Cerise Hamilton has worked too hard to maintain her perfect record to risk real trouble.

“We were just—“ she begins.

“Leaving,” I finish firmly. “Now! Before I call the principal.”

The three girls exchange glances, but they can’t argue with direct orders from a professor. Cerise drops the empty bottle at Jolie’s feet like an ultimate insult before stalking away, her friends trailing behind her like loyal hounds.

Jolie remains sitting on the floor, water pooling around her, her arms wrapped around her knees. She’s shivering—whether from cold or shock, I can’t tell—and the scent of humiliation and distress rolling off her makes my chest ache.

“Jolie,” I say gently, crouching down to her level. “Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head without looking up, but I can see tears mixing with the water on her cheeks. “I’m fine,” she whispers, the words so obviously untrue they make my heart clench.

“You’re not fine,” I breathe. “And you don’t have to pretend to be. Come on, let’s get you somewhere warm and dry.”

I help her to her feet, noting how she sways slightly—whether from the shock of the attack or something else, I’m not sure. She’s smaller than I realized, delicate in a way that makes the cheerleaders’ assault seem even more cowardly.

“Your class—“ she starts.

“Can wait,” I finish. “I’ll call someone to take over.”

I guide her down the hallway toward my office, aware of the curious stares from other students, but more concerned with getting Jolie somewhere private. The wet clothes clinging to her body make her vulnerability even more obvious, and despite being an Omega too, my protective instincts are screaming at me to shield her from any more exposure.

My office is small but warm, lined with books and comfortable furniture that invites confidence. I grab a clean towel from my emergency supplies and hand it to her. Years of working with emotional students have taught me to be prepared.

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“There’s a bathroom just through that door,” I tell her. “Take your time.”

When she emerges a few minutes later, she’s stopped dripping, but her clothes are still damp and her hair hangs in wet tangles around her face. She looks young and lost and utterly defeated.

“Sit,” I say gently, gesturing to the comfortable chair across from my desk. “I’ll make some tea.”

“Please,” she says quietly. “I just want to go home.”

“Of course.” I stand slowly, keeping my movements non-threatening. “But let me drive you. You shouldn’t be alone right now.”

She protests, but I can see the exhaustion in her posture, the way she’s holding herself together through sheer willpower.

“My mother will be worried when she sees me.”

“I’ll explain,” I promise.

Something seems to break her resolve. Fresh tears spill down her cheeks, and she nods wordlessly.

The drive to Silvercrest Manor is quiet except for Jolie’s occasional sniffles and the soft classical music I play to help calm her.

My mind is racing, putting together pieces of a puzzle that become more disturbing with each connection. Romeo's aggressive interest in Jolie. His confrontation with Cerise. The way he's been prowling campus all day like a predator denied his prey. And now this. His girlfriend attacked Jolie in a way designed to destroy her appearance, to mark her as damaged goods.

When we reach the estate, I turn to Jolie. "Should I speak to your mother?"

"No, it's unnecessary," she says as I park near the cottage. "And thank you. For everything."

"Jolie," I say carefully, "if you need someone to talk to, someone who understands what it's like to be an Omega in a complicated situation, my office hours are posted on my door. Or you can call me anytime."

She looks at me with those expressive amber eyes, and I can see her weighing whether to trust me and then she whispers, "You're an Omega?"

I nod. "I take suppressants to neutralize my scent. Most people think I'm a Beta and I prefer it that way."

"Why?"

"The same reason you are," I tell her. "To hide." I can't tell her I'm hiding from more than an Alpha scenting me and thinking I am theirs. I can't tell anyone how rare I am.

"It's hard," she mumbles, and I know I don't have to ask her to keep quiet about my status. "Always looking over your shoulder."

"It is." Her words tell me more about her fears than any direct confession could. "But remember. Power without choice is just biology. What makes a relationship

meaningful is the decision to build something together, not just the chemical pull. I don't know what is happening between you and Romeo, but you can say no."

She nods slowly, processing this. "I know that's what you said in class, about always having choices...but do you really believe that?"

"I do," I say firmly. "No matter how strong the biological pull, no matter what anyone tells you about destiny or fate, you always have the right to choose what happens to your body and your life."

"Even if saying no makes everything harder?"

"Especially then." I turn to face her fully. "The right choice isn't always the straightforward choice, Jolie. But it's always worth fighting for."

She gets out of the car without another word, but I see her shoulders straighten slightly as she walks toward the cottage. It's not much, but it's something.

When I return to campus, I head straight to the administrative office. Principal Morrison looks up from her paperwork as I knock on her open door.

"Jude," she says, gesturing for me to sit. "How did things go with Miss Masters?"

"Not well," I admit. "She was attacked today. Cerise Hamilton and two other cheerleaders dumped water on her in the hallway. Public humiliation, and clearly targeted at her."

Morrison's expression darkens. "Was this reported through proper channels?"

"I'm reporting it now. And she needs some counseling support. That girl is petrified of something. I'd also like permission to provide additional academic help, because

she's bright, but she's also struggling with the change."

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“Approved,” Morrison says without hesitation. “And I’ll deal with Cerise.”

10

Emmie

I quickly change into dry clothes and look around the empty cottage. The thought of lying in bed replaying not only Romeo's words but also his girlfriend's, makes my stomach clench.

I need to see Eli. There was something about him I liked. He's possibly the kindest Alpha I have ever encountered. And he invited me to his cottage in the woods whenever I wanted to talk.

I think about Professor Benson's words as I take the route through the estate's gardens. The grounds are beautifully maintained, with flower beds transitioning seamlessly into more natural woodland areas.

It's peaceful here.

The wind chimes grow louder as I follow the sound through the gardens, past the rose beds and toward the eastern edge of the estate.

Eli's small cottage comes into view. Dozens of wind chimes hang from the covered porch, creating a symphony of gentle notes that carry through the air.

I should turn around, go home, but I don't. Maybe it's the Omega in me seeking

comfort, or maybe I'm just desperate for Alpha contact that doesn't come with ulterior motives.

I smile when I hear the soft sound of someone whistling nearby. Hoping it's Eli, I follow the sound; I discover him kneeling beside a bed of herbs, his hands dark with soil as he carefully transplants seedlings.

He looks up as I approach, a genuine smile lighting his face. "Jolie. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you."

He studies me for a moment, taking in my damp hair and the obvious distress I had tried to wipe from my face.

"You look upset. And you're shaking." When he speaks, his voice is gentle, lacking any of the commanding authority I associate with Alpha men.

I glance down at my hands and realize he's right. My whole body is trembling, whether from cold or fear, I'm not sure.

"I'm fine," I say. I think I am. The combination of Professor Benson's support and the walk to this peaceful setting has done more for my mood than I expected.

"What are you planting?"

"Lavender," he says, sitting back on his heels. "It is good for relaxation, and the bees love it. Plus, it makes excellent tea for settling nerves."

I crouch down beside him, studying the delicate purple flowers. "You really do know everything about plants, don't you?"

“Not everything,” he laughs. “But I’ve had a lot of time to learn. There’s something honest about gardening. If you put in the work, provide the right conditions, things will grow. Much simpler than dealing with people.”

There’s something wistful in his tone that makes me study his profile more carefully. “Do you ever miss it? Dealing with people, I mean. Don’t you get lonely out here?”

Eli pauses in his planting, his green eyes meeting mine. “Sometimes,” he admits. “But loneliness is better than the alternative, in my experience.”

“What alternative?”

“Trusting someone and having them leave when something better comes along.” His voice is matter-of-fact, but I catch the old pain underneath. “At least plants are honest about their needs.”

I think about his story of Kate, the Omega who left him for her scent match. “Not everyone leaves,” I say softly.

“Don’t they?” He turns to face me fully, and there’s something vulnerable in his expression. “In my experience, people stay until they have a reason not to. And there’s always a reason, eventually.”

The cynicism in his words makes my chest ache. “That’s a sad way to live.”

“Let’s go inside,” Eli says, gesturing toward his cottage behind us. “Let me make you some tea.”

Every instinct I have screams at me to politely decline and go home. I consider why I came here. I don’t know this man, don’t know his intentions, but there’s something in Eli’s demeanor that feels safe. He has a calmness that Romeo completely lacks, and I

sense that he's offering comfort expecting nothing in return.

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“I don’t want to bother you,” I say quietly, still wondering why I came.

“You’re not bothering me.” His smile is warm and genuine. “And the beautiful company would be welcome.”

He called me beautiful. Against my better judgment, I nod. “Okay. Thank you.”

The inside of Eli’s cottage is a revelation. Where my place feels like a carefully maintained rental property, this feels like a home. Books line every available wall, plants cascade from windowsills, and the furniture is comfortable, pieces that invite you to curl up and stay awhile.

The scent that fills the space is uniquely Eli—he smells like the outside and sunshine. I know he’s not my scent match, but his scent is calming in a way that makes my shoulders relax for the first time all day.

“Sit wherever you’re comfortable,” he says, moving toward a small kitchen area. “Chamomile okay? It’s good for settling nerves.”

I settle into a corner of his oversized couch, tucking my legs beneath me. “How did you know I was upset?”

Eli glances back at me while he fills a kettle. “Call it intuition. Plus, you’ve been crying.”

I smile as I touch my cheek.

“Bad day?” he asks gently, not pushing for details.

“The worst,” I say.

“And how has Romeo been with you?” Eli’s tone is carefully neutral, but I catch the slight tightening around his eyes.

“He’s left me alone for a few days.” The lie tastes bitter, but I’m not about to dump too many of my problems on a stranger, no matter how kind he seems.

Eli brings over two steaming mugs, handing me one before settling on the opposite end of the couch. He’s careful to leave plenty of space between us, I notice, respecting my boundaries in a way that feels foreign after Romeo’s aggressive invasion of my personal space.

“You don’t have to tell me what happened,” he says quietly. “But if you need to talk, I’m a good listener. And I promise, nothing you say will leave this room.”

The tea is perfect and soothing, chamomile with hints of honey and lavender. I wrap my hands around the mug, letting the heat seep into my fingers.

“Can I ask you something?” I say after a few moments of comfortable silence.

“Of course.”

“Have you never had an Omega since Kate?”

He’s quiet for so long that I think he might not answer. When he finally speaks, his voice carries a weight that suggests old pain. “I loved her very much. We were together for three years, planning to bond formally.” He stares into his tea as if it holds answers. “But she wasn’t my scent match. And when she met hers...”

“She left,” I finish softly.

“She left,” he confirms. “Couldn’t fight the biology, couldn’t deny what her Omega recognized as her true mate. I understood, but that didn’t make it hurt any less.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a few years ago.” He looks up at me, and I can see the old sadness in his green eyes. “But it taught me something important about the difference between love and biology, between choosing someone and being chosen by your instincts.”

The parallel to my situation with Romeo is so obvious it makes my chest tight. “Do you think...do you think scent matches are really that powerful? That they can override everything else?”

Eli studies my face carefully. “Are we talking hypothetically, or is there something specific you’re dealing with?”

Heat rises in my cheeks. “Hypothetically.”

“Hypothetically,” he says with a small smile that suggests he doesn’t believe me, “I think scent matches create a powerful biological pull. But I also think we’re more than our biology. We have choices, even when those choices are difficult.”

“But what if the Alpha doesn’t want to choose? What if they want to have it both ways?”

Something shifts in Eli’s expression, a sharpening that reminds me he’s an Alpha too, despite his gentleness. “Then they’re a coward and a fool. Any Alpha who would string along an Omega. Especially his supposed match, rather than making a real commitment, doesn’t deserve either woman.”

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The vehemence in his voice surprises me. “I take it you’re speaking from experience.”

“I speak from watching too many alphas treat omegas like possessions instead of people.” He sets down his mug with careful control. “It’s disgusting behavior, and any Alpha who engages in it deserves to lose both relationships.”

I think about Romeo’s proposition, his casual dismissal of Cerise’s feelings, his expectation that I should be grateful for whatever scraps of attention he’s willing to offer. Eli is right—it is disgusting behavior.

“What if the Omega is tempted?” I ask quietly. “What if she feels the biological pull, and it’s strong enough that she’s considering accepting an unhealthy situation just to...to have some connection?”

Eli leans forward, his green eyes intense. “Then I’d tell her she deserves better. That accepting less than she’s worth will only lead to heartbreak and regret.” His voice softens. “And I’d tell her that real Alphas—the ones worth having—don’t make those kinds of selfish demands.”

Tears prick my eyes at the kindness in his voice, the way he’s affirming things I know in my head but can’t quite feel in my heart. “What if she doesn’t think she can do any better?”

“Then she’s not looking in the right places,” Eli says simply. “Trust me, Jolie, any Omega brave enough to ask these questions is smart enough to recognize when she’s being treated poorly, and she deserves an Alpha who will cherish her completely. Not

someone who wants to hide her away like a shameful secret.”

Using my name makes it clear we’re no longer speaking hypothetically. I should be embarrassed that he’s seen through my transparent questions, but I feel a sense of relief at being understood.

“You make it sound simple,” I whisper.

“It is simple. That doesn’t mean it’s easy.” Eli reaches over and tenderly touches my hand where it rests on the couch between us. His touch is warm and comforting, completely different from Romeo’s possessiveness. There’s no demand in it, no expectation—just comfort offered freely. “But choosing your own worth, refusing to accept less than you deserve, is always the right choice, even when it’s the harder one.”

“I should go,” I say reluctantly. “Mom will worry if she gets home and I’m not there.”

“Of course.” Eli withdraws his hand and stands. “But Jolie? If you ever need to talk again, or if anyone makes you feel unsafe, my door is always open. Day or...night.”

I notice the subtle ripple along his throat. “Why are you being so kind to me?” I ask as he walks me to the door.

Eli pauses with his hand on the doorknob. “Because I think you need my help. You carry yourself like you’re expecting the worst but hoping for the best. And you’re trying so hard to be strong when everything feels like it’s falling apart.”

“Do I remind you of someone else?” We both know I am talking about his ex.

“No.” His voice is quiet, but certain. “I’m helping you because you deserve help.

Because you're clearly struggling with something that's tearing you apart, and because..." He trails off, looking almost surprised by his own words.

"Because what?"

"Because in the few minutes we've been talking, I've felt more comfortable, more myself, than I have in years." He meets my eyes, and there's something vulnerable in his expression. "I know that probably sounds strange, given that we barely know each other."

It doesn't sound strange at all. Sitting in his cottage, drinking tea and talking about complicated feelings, has been the most peaceful I've felt since arriving at Silvercrest Manor. Maybe for years.

"It doesn't sound strange," I admit. "I feel...safe here. With you."

Something shifts in Eli's expression, a warmth that makes my chest flutter in a completely different way than Romeo's aggressive dominance. This feels like sunlight instead of lightning. He is gentle and nurturing rather than overwhelming.

"Good," he says softly. "You should feel safe with me. I want you to."

And there's something about Eli that feels different, safer. He's not making demands or expecting immediate submission. He's just...there, offering comfort and wisdom without asking for anything in return. Maybe that's what real alphas do. Maybe the difference between Romeo and Eli is the difference between taking and giving, between using and cherishing.

"Thank you. I should head home now," I say.

He actually looks disappointed, but hides it well and replies, "I'll walk you."

“No need. But can I come back tomorrow?”

His smile is wide as he takes my cup from my hand. “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

Mom is already home, bustling around the small kitchen with unusual energy.

“You’re glowing,” she observes as I wash my hands. “Good day?”

“Better than expected,” I say, not telling her about what Cerise did as I helped her set the table. “I spent some time in the gardens with Eli.”

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Mom's expression grows concerned. "Emmie, I told you to be careful around the Alphas here."

"Eli isn't like other alphas," I protest. "He's gentle. Kind. He doesn't make me feel like I need to be afraid."

"That's exactly what makes him dangerous," Mom says quietly. "The ones who seem safe are often the most skilled at making you lower your guard. Like Blake."

Her words echo in my mind as we eat dinner, but I can't reconcile them with the man I spent the afternoon with. Eli feels genuine in a way that Blake never did, honest in a way that Romeo definitely isn't, and he has that gentle confidence that Beck had. Maybe Mom's paranoia is justified given our history, but maybe she's also seeing threats where none existed.

After dinner, I settle into my window seat, my attention drifting to the manor house across the courtyard. Lights move behind the windows, suggesting the family is home for dinner. My phone buzzes with a text.

Lottie: Sorry I've been quiet. Carlos has been...attentive lately. Miss you.

I frown at the message. There's something in the phrasing that worries me. 'Attentive' doesn't sound like a good thing in Lottie's context. But before I can respond, another text comes through.

Lottie: Can't talk yet. Love you.

The abrupt ending leaves me staring at my phone with growing unease. Whatever's happening with my sister, it's clear she can't talk freely. The thought of her trapped in another kind of cage, possibly suffering while I'm safe here in my cottage, makes my chest tight with guilt.

A soft knock at the cottage door interrupts my spiraling thoughts. Mom answers it, and I hear the low murmur of conversation before she calls up to me.

"Jolie? Professor Benson is here to see you."

I make my way downstairs to find Jude standing in our small living room, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he says. "I wanted to check on you after today, and to give you this." He hands me a thick packet of papers. "Additional reading on Omega biology, social dynamics, and rare scents. I thought you might find it interesting, given your questions about choice and biological imperatives."

"Thank you," I say, genuinely touched by his thoughtfulness. "That's very kind."

"Also," he continues, glancing at Mom before returning his attention to me, "I wanted you to know that I've spoken with Principal Morrison about the incident today. There will be consequences for the students involved."

Mom's expression sharpens. "What incident?"

Heat rises in my cheeks. "It was nothing, Mom. Just some girls being mean."

"It wasn't nothing," Professor Benson says gently. "And it won't be tolerated. Jolie, you have every right to feel safe at school."

After he leaves, Mom corners me in the kitchen. “What happened today that you didn’t tell me about?”

I reluctantly explain about Cerise and the water incident, watching Mom’s face grow increasingly grim.

“This is exactly what I was afraid of,” she says when I finish. “You’re drawing attention. The wrong kind of attention.”

“I’m not doing anything,” I protest. “I’m trying to be invisible.”

“Then try harder,” she says sharply. “Because if these girls are targeting you now, it means someone important has noticed you. And we both know that never ends well.”

11

Emmie

The weekend brings a distinct energy to the estate, a sense of anticipation that makes even the air feel charged. I notice it first in the increased activity around the manor house. The catering vans coming and going, staff polishing windows that already gleam, and the sound of expensive cars arriving.

“What’s happening over there?” I ask Mom as we watch another delivery truck stop on the circular drive.

“There’s a party tonight,” she says, not looking up from her ironing. “Romeo’s sister won some figure skating competition. Nationals, I think. The whole family’s gathering to celebrate.”

I settle onto my window seat while watching the preparations continue outside.

By evening, the manor house is ablaze with lights, every window glowing warmly against the darkening sky. Cars fill the circular drive and overflow onto the lawn. Music drifts across the grounds, sophisticated and classical, nothing like the raucous parties I glimpsed at Romeo's party.

This is different.

I grab my romance book and try to focus on my reading, but a light switches on in a room in the manor house, drawing my attention. Romeo and Cerise stand at the window, and my stomach clenches at the sight of them together. She's dressed in a stunning mini dress that sparkles and probably costs more than my entire wardrobe, her blonde hair perfectly styled, her makeup flawless. She looks like she belongs with him.

Romeo spins Cerise until her back is against the window. He's in a dark shirt and pants that emphasize his tall frame and broad shoulders. But even from this distance, I can see the tension in his posture, the way he holds himself like he's performing rather than celebrating.

Romeo presses Cerise against the window, his hands tangling in her carefully styled hair, his mouth on her neck. There's an aggression to his movements that makes me uncomfortable. And I can see Cerise's surprise at his intensity, the way she tries to gentle his touch.

But Romeo isn't interested in being gentle. His hands move over her body with a hunger that borders on desperation and when he lifts her against the wall between the two windows, wrapping her legs around his waist, his eyes sweep toward my window.

Our gazes lock across the distance as his mouth nears her neck once more. Even in the dim garden lighting, I can see the want in his gray eyes, the way they fix on mine with an intensity that makes my breath catch. He doesn't stop what he's doing—if

anything, his movements become more pronounced, his performance more deliberate.

He's putting on a show, and I'm his unwilling audience.

The realization makes my cheeks burn with humiliation. He's using Cerise to send me a message, to remind me of what I turned down, what I'll never have now. He is letting me know he'll claim her if he doesn't get me.

I force myself to look away, focusing instead on the rest of the house where other guests move behind the lit windows.

But it's when my eyes roam the different rooms that I see him. A man standing in what looks like a study or library, a glass of whiskey in his hand as he speaks with an older woman I don't recognize. His profile is familiar. Even across the distance and through the pane of glass, I know that silhouette as intimately as I know my heartbeat.

"Beck," I whisper.

My mysterious stranger from Boston. The man who whispered "baby girl" against my skin and left me feeling cherished and devastated in equal measure. The man who disappeared before dawn, leaving nothing but four hundred dollars and a business card like I was some high-end escort he'd hired for the evening.

Beck has to be Mr. Silver. The estate owner. Romeo's father. The Alpha who holds my mother's employment—and, by extension, our safety—in his hands.

He's also a man who can afford to treat random Omegas like expensive toys.

As if sensing my attention, he turns toward the window. And for a moment, the lighting obscures his features. Then he steps closer to the glass, and there's no

mistaking those sharp cheekbones, those penetrating dark eyes that seemed to see straight through me. Beck. The man who'd made me feel precious and powerful and utterly desired, then vanished like I meant nothing at all.

Our eyes meet across the space between the cottage and manor, across the chasm of wealth and status that separates us, and I see the exact moment recognition hits him. I see the moment his entire body goes still, the whiskey glass frozen halfway to his lips. And for several heartbeats, we simply stare at each other before his free hand comes up to touch the window.

Slick runs between my thighs as he presses his palm flat against the glass, and the gesture is so reminiscent of that night.

It all comes back to me. The way he'd touched my face with such devastating tenderness, and I jerk back from my window, my heart hammering against my ribs.

This can't be happening. The universe can't be cruel enough to strand me in the home of the man who'd used me so thoroughly and discarded me so casually.

But even as I try to convince myself it's some terrible coincidence, memories flood back with crystal clarity. The way he'd commanded the hotel staff with casual authority. The expensive whiskey in his room. The business card for that upscale spa—of course, someone like Beck would have connections to the finest establishments.

And the money. God, the money he'd left me like it was payment for services rendered. The memory of those crisp bills makes my cheeks burn with fresh humiliation. I'd convinced myself he was being kind, giving me resources for my new life. But maybe he was just paying his bills like any other wealthy Alpha who'd purchased an Omega's time.

The sound of voices approaching the cottage makes me scramble away from the window. Mom's key turns in the lock, followed by her tired footsteps on the staircase.

"How were the party preparations?" I call, proud that my voice sounds relatively normal.

"Exhausting but educational," she replies. "The Silver family knows how to entertain. Very...impressive operation."

I wait until I hear her bedroom door close before returning to the window, drawn by a masochistic need to confirm what I've seen. Romeo and Cerise have moved their performance elsewhere. But the study window still glows with warm light, and Beck still stands there, his silhouette unmistakable.

As I watch, he raises his phone to his ear, speaking briefly before ending the call. Then he looks directly at my window again, as if he knows exactly where to find me. The intensity of his gaze across the distance makes my entire body respond with unwanted heat.

Even knowing what he is, what he thinks of me, my Omega instincts still recognize him as the Alpha who'd claimed me so thoroughly that night. Knotted me for the first time. My body remembers his touch, his masculine scent, the way he'd made me feel beautiful and desired.

My brain, however, remembers the money.

I close the curtains with more force than necessary, shutting out his watchful presence. But I can still feel him there, can still sense his attention like a weight on my skin. This changes everything. I'm not just hiding from Blake's threats anymore—I'm living under the roof of a man who's already had me, used me, and

paid me for the privilege. A man who could destroy my mother's livelihood with a single word. A man who holds all the power.

The cottage suddenly feels like a cage rather than a sanctuary. The walls that seemed protective now feel like barriers keeping me trapped within reach of a predator I can't escape.

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I sink onto my bed, pulling my knees to my chest as the full implications hit me. I gave Beck my real name. He'll wonder about my new identity. He knows where I live, where I go to school, who my mother is. He can destroy everything my mom worked so hard to protect me from.

And tomorrow, I'll have to pretend I've never seen him before. I'll have to act like the housekeeper's innocent daughter while he decides what to do, knowing that his one-night stand is now living on his property.

I don't even know what a man like Beck would do when his past indiscretions threaten to complicate his carefully ordered life? I have a sinking feeling I'm about to find out.

Outside, the party continues, laughter and music drifting across the grounds like everything is normal, like my world hasn't just tilted off its axis. But through my closed curtains, I can still feel Beck's presence like a burning brand, a reminder that some mistakes follow you no matter how far you run. And some alphas never really let you go.

My phone buzzes with a text. I check the caller.

Unknown: We need to talk.

I stare at the message, my hands trembling.

Only one person could have gotten my number, could have found me so quickly. The same man who'd found me in that Boston hotel bar and taken me apart so thoroughly

I'm still picking up the pieces. It could be worse. It could be Blake. But unless I tell my mom what I did, there's nowhere left to run.

12

Beck

The morning sun streamsthrough the windows of the breakfast room as I settle into my usual chair with coffee and the financial reports I've been avoiding. Yesterday's celebration for Remi's gold medal at the National Championships was a success by all measures, but now it's back to the reality of running a business empire.

"Dad, pass the orange juice?" Remi reaches across the table. Her dark hair is still damp from her morning shower.

"Here, princess." I slide the pitcher toward her, then glance at my other son. "River, you're unusually quiet this morning. Is everything all right?"

River looks up from his phone, his green eyes slightly unfocused. "Just tired. The party went pretty late."

"Not too late, I hope. You have training today."

"It's Saturday, Dad," Remi laughs, stealing a piece of bacon from River's plate. "Though I should probably get back tothe rink. Coach wants to work on some extra turns for the Olympics."

Romeo enters the breakfast room with his usual morning surliness, moving to the sideboard and loading his plate with more food than he'll actually eat. He's been doing that since he was thirteen—nervous eating that he never quite outgrew. Since his parents died, he came to live with me, along with his brother and sister.

“Morning, sunshine,” Remi teases, dodging the grape Romeo throws at her. “Someone’s grumpy.”

“I’m fine,” Romeo mutters, settling into his chair and attacking his eggs with unnecessary violence.

“Right. And I’m planning a career change to accounting,” River deadpans, earning a laugh from Remi.

I study Romeo’s profile, noting the shadows under his eyes and the tension in his shoulders. “How are things going with Cerise? She seemed upset when she left last night.”

“We’re fine,” Romeo says curtly, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

“Are you?” Remi raises an eyebrow. “Because she looked like she was about to cry when I saw her in the garden.”

Romeo’s fork pauses halfway to his mouth. “You were watching us?”

“Hard not to when you’re having dramatic conversations right outside the main windows,” I observe. “Everything all right?”

For a moment, none of the kids speak. Then River says, “Cerise thinks Romeo likes someone else.”

“River,” Romeo warns, his voice carrying just enough Alpha authority to make his less aggressive brother back down.

“I’m just saying what everyone’s thinking,” River shrugs. “You’re acting weird.”

“Weird how?” I ask, genuine concern creeping into my voice.

Remi exchanges a look with River, some sibling communication passing between them. “He keeps staring at the cottage,” she says finally. “Like, constantly. It’s kind of creepy.”

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“I do not stare,” Romeo protests, but his cheeks flush red.

“You absolutely do,” River confirms. “Yesterday you spent twenty minutes pretending to read on the terrace just so you could watch the windows.”

“That’s enough,” Romeo snaps, his scent spiking with embarrassment and anger. But my curiosity is piqued now. But I act like I know nothing. “What’s at the cottage that’s so interesting?”

“The new housekeeper and her daughter,” Remi explains, clearly enjoying Romeo’s discomfort. “Mrs. Masters took over from Mrs. Reynolds two weeks ago. I haven’t met them yet. But I think Romeo likes the girl.”

Something cold settles in my stomach. “You like the housekeeper’s daughter?”

“No.”

“Yes, you do,” Remi adds. “What’s her name, River?”

“Her name is Jolie,” Romeo answers. Her name on his tongue sounds like he’s been stabbed in his throat. “She started at college.”

Jolie is good. Jolie is not Emmie.

“I take it you don’t like her,” I say carefully.

“You don’t glare at a girl’s bedroom window if you don’t like them,” Remi

interrupts.

I laugh. “How old is she?”

Romeo shrugs his shoulders. “Twenty-one, I think. She’s in some of my classes.” He is acting far too nonchalant, and I’m doubting everything he is telling me.

“Cerise hates her,” River adds.

Romeo finally looks up, and what I see in his gray eyes makes my chest tighten with concern. There’s a hunger there, raw and desperate, the kind that leads young Alphas to make catastrophic decisions.

“Romeo,” I say quietly, “please tell me you’re not developing feelings for someone when you have a girlfriend.”

“I’m not developing anything,” he replies, but the defensive edge to his voice suggests otherwise.

Remi and River exchange another look. “He definitely likes her,” Remi says. “You should see the way he acts when her name comes up.”

“She’s nothing special,” Romeo says too quickly. “Just some Omega trying to blend in.”

The casual dismissal doesn’t fool anyone at the table, least of all me. I’ve seen Romeo with Omegas before—polite but distant, never particularly interested. The fact that he’s protesting this much means Jolie Masters has gotten under his skin in ways he doesn’t understand. The same way Emmie got under mine, and despite how young she was, I hoped she’d still called me.

“Where are they from?” I ask, trying to keep my voice conversational.

Romeo shrugs. “South somewhere. The girl has an accent she’s trying to hide.”

“Why would she hide her accent?” River asks, genuinely curious.

“Same reason she’s trying to make herself invisible,” Romeo replies. “They’re running from something.” The observation is sharper than I expected from Romeo, whose emotional intelligence usually extends only to his own feelings.

“How do you know they’re running?” I press.

Romeo hesitates, as if he’s revealed more than he intended. “She’s too careful. Too aware of her surroundings. Jumps at loud noises. Classic signs of someone who’s used to looking over her shoulder.”

“You’ve been paying very close attention,” I observe.

“Professional interest,” Romeo says defensively. “You always taught us to be aware of potential security risks. And you allowed strangers into our home.”

“Is that what she is? A security risk?” The question hangs in the air for a moment. Romeo’s jaw tightens, and I can see him weighing his words carefully.

“She’s...complicated,” he says finally.

“Complicated how?”

He sighs heavily. “I think she might be my scent match.”

The words drop into the breakfast conversation like a bomb. Remi’s eyes widen, River’s mouth falls open, and I feel like someone’s just punched me in the gut.

I’ve waited forever for an Omega to be mine. Waited for the perfect scent. Unfortunately, not even Emmie’s scent was an exact match.

“Your what?” Remi breathes.

“Scent match,” Romeo repeats, his voice flat. “Perfect biological compatibility. The whole nine yards.”

“Romeo,” I say carefully, fighting to keep my voice steady, “are you certain? Have you asked her what scent she smells on you?”

“No, but I know. My body knows,” he replies with bitter humor. “Trust me, I wish I was mistaken.”

“Why?” River asks, confused. “That’s supposed to be a good thing. Like finding your soulmate or whatever.”

Romeo’s laugh is harsh. “It would be, if she wasn’t completely unsuitable in every other way.”

“Unsuitable how?” The question comes out sharper than I intended, and Romeo’s eyes narrow slightly.

“She’s the housekeeper’s daughter, Beck. No family connections, no money, no social standing. Everything Grandfather taught us not to get involved with.” The casual dismissal of Jolie based on her economic status makes something dangerous unfurl in my chest.

“Your grandfather was an elitist bastard who died alone because he valued money over people.”

“Beck,” Remi says quietly, clearly recognizing the warning signs of my temper. But I’m not done.

“If she is a match. What exactly are you planning to do about it, Romeo?”

“Nothing,” he says, but there’s something in his expression that suggests otherwise. “I’m with Cerise. This changes nothing.”

“Doesn’t it? Because Remi said Cerise thinks you’re interested in someone else. And I’m assuming that someone else is Jolie.”

Romeo’s scent spikes with frustration. “I can manage my biology. I don’t need to act on every impulse.”

“That’s not how scent matches work,” I breathe. “Denying it will only strengthen it.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Romeo snaps. “That I abandon my relationship with Cerise to pursue some Omega who’s probably only here until she finds something better?” The dismissive way he talks about Jolie makes my hands clench around my coffee cup.

“I suggest you treat her with respect, regardless of your decision.”

“I’m not treating her with anything,” Romeo says. “I’m staying away from her, like I should.”

But even as he says it, I can see the lie in his eyes. Romeo isn’t staying away from anyone. Absolutely not. He’s watching, circling, fighting a battle between desire and duty that he’s too young to understand.

“Has she given you any indication that she’s interested?” I ask.

Romeo’s jaw tightens. “She turned me down.”

“You approached her?” The words come out colder than I intended.

“Once. She made it clear she wasn’t interested in complications.”

There’s more to this story, I can tell. Romeo’s body language suggests rejection, but there’s also anger there, the kind that comes from wounded pride.

“Good for her,” Remi says approvingly. “Smart girl.”

Romeo’s glare could melt steel. “Thanks for the support, sister.”

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“I’m just saying, if she turned you down, maybe you should respect that and move on.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re too focused on getting onto a podium and taking every medication known to man to stop your biology from working against you.”

“You’re deflecting because of your bad behavior,” I point out.

“I’m not behaving badly,” Romeo protests. “I told you, I’m staying away from her.” But the defensiveness in his voice tells a different story. And the way he keeps checking his phone, the restless energy that’s been radiating from him since I got home doesn’t make me believe he is an Alpha who’s successfully avoiding temptation.

“Maybe you should introduce us,” I say casually. “If she’s living on the estate, it would be polite to welcome her properly.”

Romeo’s eyes narrow. “Why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do. And because if she’s really your scent match, I’d like to meet the Omega who’s got my son so twisted up.”

“I’m not twisted up, and I’m not your son,” Romeo mutters, but he’s already standing, clearly done with this conversation. “I have to go. I have football training before school.” He’s gone before anyone can respond, leaving the three of us in uncomfortable silence.

“He’s lying,” River says finally. “About staying away from her, I mean. Yesterday, I saw him watching her when she came home from school.”

“River,” I warn.

“I’m just saying. And Cerise has been asking weird questions about the cottage.”

A chill runs down my spine. “What questions?”

“Like where she is from and why did they move here? Stuff like that.” Remi and I exchange a look.

Cerise Hamilton comes from old Boston money and would never accept rejection gracefully. Her family was surprised when she didn’t reveal as an Omega. And if she sees Jolie as a threat to her relationship with Romeo...

“Monitor things,” I tell both of them. “If you see anything concerning—arguments, confrontations, anything that doesn’t feel right—I want to know immediately.”

“You think Cerise might do something?” Remi asks.

“I think jealous Betas can be just as dangerous as possessive Alphas,” I reply. “Sometimes more so, because they’re underestimated.”

When everyone finishes breakfast and heads off to their respective activities, I remain at the table, staring out the window toward the cottage. Somewhere in that small building is the Omega who’s been haunting my dreams for weeks, the woman I left sleeping in a Boston hotel room because I was too much of a coward to face that she was too young for me. But I suspect that Emmie would have left me first had she woken up in time.

And if her sister is Romeo's unwanted scent match, maybe I should let her mother go. Because the smart thing would be to get Emmie and Jolie away from here. It would be better for everyone—Romeo could focus on his relationship with Cerise. I could pretend that night in Boston never happened.

But now that she is here, the thought of her leaving, of never seeing those amber eyes again, makes something primal in my chest roar. She's here. In my territory, under my protection, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let her go again. Forgetting her is no longer an option. Not when I can almost taste her scent in the morning air. And every instinct I have is screaming out that she belongs to me.

13

Beck

I pull out my phone, scrolling to the number I'd obtained on Friday night through channels I prefer not to examine too closely. I checked the text I'd sent.

We need to talk.

Three days it's been, and her silence speaks volumes. She remembers me. Or did she know who I was all along?

The smart thing would be to let her run. To pretend that night in Boston never happened, that the memory of her soft skin and broken sighs doesn't haunt me at every quiet moment. The smart thing would be to protect my family, my business, and my carefully constructed life from what I know is going to turn my life upside down. But I've never been smart where beautiful Omegas are concerned.

"Sir?" Mr. Sampson appears in the doorway, his expression professionally neutral but his eyes sharp with curiosity. "Will you be needing the car this morning?"

“Actually, yes. But I’ll be driving myself.” I finish my coffee and stand, already plotting a plan that’s probably going to end in disaster. “Ask my assistant to cancel my ten o’clock when he turns up. Something’s come up.”

If Mr. Sampson finds my change in schedule unusual, he’s too well-trained to comment. “Of course, sir. I’ll have Mr. Harris rescheduled.”

“Tell him I’ll call him this afternoon.” I’m already moving toward the garage, my mind racing with possibilities and consequences. “And if anyone asks where I’ve gone, I’m handling a personal matter.”

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The drive to Silvercrest College takes less than twenty minutes, but it feels like hours. Every rational part of my brain is screaming at me to turn around, to leave this alone, to let sleeping dogs lie. But the memory of Emmie's face on Friday night—the recognition, the fear, the hurt—makes rational thought impossible. She looked at me like I'd betrayed her, like the money I'd left was an insult rather than an attempt to help. But what else was I supposed to do? Disappear without a trace and leave her with nothing?

After I park outside the administration building, I stride into the office and use my position on the board of trustees to gain access to student schedules.

“Are you sure Emmie Masters isn't on the role?” I recheck. “Maybe Emmaline. Emily...”

“Sorry. There are three Masters on the roll. Jolie, Elena, and Harry.”

I walk out of the office and to my car, and make a call. This time, it takes the promise of a significant donation to get her class timetable, along with her current academic standing. But nobody can find her.

“Okay. Send me Jolie's details.” The two sisters must have different surnames, but I'm sure they'll meet up for lunch. And I'd like to know who has gotten Romeo so twisted.

“It'll be a few minutes. Come to my office and I'll print everything for you.”

After I receive the document I wanted, I take a seat in the staff room and read the

details of my son's scent match.

Jolie Masters. Excellent grades, perfect attendance until this week, enrolled in advanced sciences with a focus on biology and she also studies art. A student who flies under the radar not because she lacks ability, but because she's trying to avoid attention.

Smart girl. Too bad she caught Romeo's attention.

Jolie's next class is art in the main campus building. Hoping to spot her with her sister, I position myself near the entrance, ignoring the curious looks from students who recognize me from various campus events.

Being on the board has its privileges, but it also makes anonymity impossible.

Luckily, Emmie arrives first at the building. She's walking with her head down, books clutched against her chest like armor. She's wearing jeans that hide her gorgeous curves, an oversized hoodie that swallows her frame. She is nothing like the confident girl in a black dress. Everything about her screams 'invisible,' but to me she might as well be lit up in neon.

"Emmie."

She freezes at the sound of my voice, her entire body going rigid with tension. When she turns to face me, her amber eyes are blazing with an anger that takes me by surprise.

"It's Jolie," she says quietly, but there's steel underneath the soft tone. "Jolie Masters."

My heart stops beating when I realize there's no sister. It's Emmie who my son

believes is his scent match.

My stomach drops to the floor.

“Right. Of course.” The words come out like I forgot. “Did you give me a false name?” I study her face, taking in the subtle changes since that night in Boston. She’s sadder, more guarded, but still heartbreakingly beautiful. “Did you know who I was?”

“No,” she gasps. “This isn’t about you.”

I believe her. No idea why. But I do. “We need to talk.”

“Do we?” She glances around the busy courtyard, clearly conscious of the students streaming past us. “I think we said everything that needed to be said in Boston.”

“Did we? Because I seem to remember our conversation being cut rather short.”

Her cheeks flush with color, but her expression remains defiant. “Your choice, as I recall. You were the one who disappeared.”

“I had a flight to catch—“

“At four in the morning?” The words come out sharper than she probably intended, drawing attention from nearby students. She lowers her voice, but the hurt underneath is unmistakable. “Right. Of course. Very important business, I’m sure.”

I realize we’re drawing stares, that this conversation is exactly the kind of public scene that could destroy my reputation. “Not here. Get in the car.”

“Excuse me?”

“Please,” I add, softening my tone. “Just let me explain. You deserve that much.”

For a moment, I think she’s going to refuse. Her amber eyes study my face with the kind of intensity that suggests she’s cataloging every micro-expression.

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“Five minutes,” she says finally. “That’s all.”

My car is parked in a faculty spot that, technically, I’m not supposed to use, but board membership has its privileges.

Emmie—Jolie—slides into the passenger seat with obvious reluctance, keeping as much distance between us as the confined space allows. The moment the doors close, the smell of the industrial-strength suppressants she’s using fills the car. But I can detect traces of that impossible sweetness that haunted my dreams for weeks. It’s weird, it’s something so unique it makes every possessive instinct I have roar to life. Just as it had in that bar. When my feet walked toward a girl I knew was too young for me. One night was all I thought I needed. Looking at her now and knowing how I haven’t slept properly since that night, I know I need so much more.

“Start talking,” she says, staring straight ahead through the windshield.

“First, I want you to know that I had no idea you were coming here. No idea your mother was our new housekeeper. If I had known—“

“You would have what? Fired her before we arrived?” There’s bitter amusement in her voice. “Or maybe you would have arranged for a different kind of welcome party?”

The accusation hits like a slap. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Then what? Because from where I’m sitting, this looks like an incredibly convenient coincidence. The kind that happens when wealthy Alphas decide they want to add a

particular Omega to their collection.”

“My collection?” The suggestion is so far from the truth, it’s almost laughable. “Emmie, I haven’t been with another Omega since that night. Haven’t even looked at another woman.”

She finally turns to meet my gaze, and I can see the war between want and mistrust playing out across her expressive features. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because it’s the truth.” I resist the urge to reach for her, to touch her and prove through scent and contact what words apparently can’t convey. “That night in Boston...it wasn’t just casual sex for me. It was...”

“What? Meaningful? Special?” Her laugh is sharp with pain. “Special enough that you left money on the nightstand like I was some high-end escort you’d hired for the evening?”

The hurt in her voice cuts deeper than I expected. “The money wasn’t payment, Emmie. It was—“

“It was humiliating,” she interrupts, her composure finally cracking. “I woke up thinking we’d shared something beautiful, something real. I let you knot me. It was my first time and then you ruined something beautiful by leaving four hundred dollars and a business card for a spa, like you were taking care of some unfortunate problem.”

I was her first Alpha.

“That’s not—“ I start, but she’s not finished.

“Do you have any idea what that felt like? To realize that the most incredible night of

my life was just a transaction for you?”

“It wasn’t a transaction,” I hiss. “It was the opposite of that.”

“Then why did you leave? Why disappear without a word if it meant something to you?” The question hangs between us, loaded with weeks of hurt and confusion. How do I explain I left because staying would have meant admitting I was already half in love with a stranger? That the money was every cent I had in my wallet and was left there so she could have a massage and soothe away the aches I knew she would wake with? That every instinct I had was screaming at me to claim her, mark her, make her mine in ways that would have terrified us both?

“Because I’m fifteen years older than you and powerful enough to destroy your life without trying,” I say finally. “Because you deserved better than being in someone’s midlife crisis. Because I thought the kind thing was to let you go before I did something we’d both regret.”

“And now?” Her voice is barely audible. “What’s changed?”

Everything, I want to say. Everything changed the moment I saw you from my study window, the moment I realized fate has dropped you directly into my world. Everything changed when I understood that walking away was just a coward’s way of postponing the inevitable.

“Now you’re here,” I say instead. “And running away isn’t an option for either of us.”

“Isn’t it?” She reaches for the door handle. “Watch me.”

“Emmie, wait.” This time I do reach for her, catching her wrist and wrapping my fingers around it. The contact sends electricity shooting up my arm, and I see her pupils dilate in response. “Your mother’s job, your safety, your education—it’s all

connected to my estate now. You can't just disappear."

"Are you threatening me?" But even as she asks, her body is responding to my touch, leaning slightly toward me despite her obvious anger.

"I'm stating facts." I release her wrist, immediately missing the contact. "Like it or not, we're going to have to figure out how to coexist. The question is whether we do it as enemies or..."

"Or what?"

"Or we continue what we started in Boston." The suggestion hangs in the air between us, loaded with possibility and danger in equal measure. I can see the conflict in her eyes. I see her desire for me fighting against the hurt I've already caused.

"I'm not interested in being anyone's secret," she says finally. "I've had enough of Alphas who want to use me."

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“Who said anything about secrets?”

“You did. Just now. When you talked about coexistence and finishing what we started.” Her smile is sharp with pain. “I know what that means. It means you want all the benefits of having an Omega with none of the complications of actually committing to one.”

“That’s not—“

“Isn’t it?” She meets my gaze directly, and the hurt there makes my chest ache. “Because from where I’m sitting, that’s exactly what you’re offering. The same thing your son Romeo suggested. You’ve just given your offer with better manners and more expensive gifts.”

The mention of Romeo makes something cold and dangerous unfurl in my chest. “What did Romeo suggest?”

“Nothing I was interested in hearing.” She opens the car door, effectively ending our conversation. “Thanks for the ride down memory lane, Mr. Silver. But I think we’re done here.”

She’s gone before I can respond, leaving me alone in the car with her lingering scent and the growing certainty that I’ve just made everything infinitely more complicated.

Emmie is my son’s scent match, not mine, which means biology will win out in the end, despite what I want or Cerise demands. So what I have to ask myself is, what am I willing to sacrifice to have her for myself? Especially as Romeo has made it clear he

doesn't want her, and she doesn't want him as far as I can make out.

Yet, for me, walking away isn't an option anymore. For better or worse, Emmie Masters—or Jolie, or whoever she's trying to be—is now part of my world. And I'll be damned if I'm going to let anyone else hurt her the way I already have.

14

Emmie

I'm still shook up when I reach my biology class. And I'm so lost in thought I almost bump into him—Romeo—standing outside the classroom door. His arm is draped possessively around Cerise's shoulders, her long blonde hair cascading down her back as she laughs at something he's said.

He sees me the moment I see him, and something flashes in his eyes before his expression hardens.

"Masters." He steps away from Cerise, blocking my path. "We need to talk."

Cerise's perfectly sculpted eyebrows rise as she looks between us. "Romeo, leave her alone."

He doesn't listen. His hand shoots out, gripping my arm. Not painfully, but firmly enough that I can't pull away without making a scene. "Stay away from me at school. And stay away from Eli."

Cerise grins and turns to her friend, suitably happy.

The mention of Eli's name sends a chill through me. Before I can respond, Romeo turns back to Cerise. She turns and gives me a sickly sweet smile when he wraps his

arm around her waist and leads her into the classroom. She's so fucking stupid that she doesn't understand it's him that follows me.

I follow a moment later, choosing a seat in the front row instead of the middle. I need to be as far from Romeo as possible.

Throughout the lecture, I feel his eyes boring into the back of my skull, but I refuse to turn around. I'm not taking in the lesson as I wonder why Romeo cares if I talk to Eli or not.

When the bell rings, I gather my things quickly, determined to escape before Romeo can corner me. But as I hurry down the hallway to my next class, I spot him and Cerise by the lockers, his varsity football jacket a stark contrast to her cheerleading uniform. They look perfect together. The Alpha football star and his beautiful Beta girlfriend. Nausea churns in my stomach as I watch him kiss her.

I duck into the nearest bathroom, splashing cold water on my face. The girl in the mirror looks pale, frightened. Not at all like Emmie Darling, the girl who once had so much confidence she commanded attention in every room. That girl not only had confidence, she had style, a future mapped out. This Jolie Masters is a shadow, hiding beneath baggy clothes and downcast eyes.

Put your shoulders back and go to the classroom.

Before I can gather enough courage, a commotion erupts in the hallway. I stand still as female voices and laughter get closer. The door bursts open and Cerise enters, flanked by two other cheerleaders. The same three girls as before. Their cruel eyes lock on me.

"There she is," Cerise hisses, her lip curling. "The little Omega who thinks she can steal my boyfriend. I think it's time for us to have a chat, considering the water didn't

put you off.”

The threat in her voice is unmistakable. I shake my head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I don’t even like your boyfriend.”

She studies me for a moment, then laughs. “Really. He tells me you’ve been smiling at him whenever my back turns. He’s already told you to fuck off. Now fucking back off. Or else.”

“Or else.” Her flat hand slaps across my face.

The walk home feels longer than usual, each step heavy with dread. What had I done to make Cerise hate me so much? Romeo had been the one to approach me, to kiss me. I never wanted any of this. If she knew what her perfect boyfriend suggested, she’d realize what a bastard he was.

As I walk down the driveway after my disastrous conversation with Beck, I consider going to find my mother who’ll be working inside the manor, but the thought of facing any more Silver family complications keeps me walking toward the cottage.

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I walk straight past our front door, through the gardens, eventually to the lake Eli mentioned. The water is still, reflecting the afternoon sun like liquid gold. I sit on a fallen log near the shore, wrapping my arms around my knees.

“Rough day?” I startle at the voice, turning to see Eli standing a few feet away, a small wicker basket in hand.

“Sorry,” he says immediately. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay,” I say, wiping hastily at my eyes. “I was just thinking.”

He gestures to the log. “Mind if I join you?”

When I nod, he settles beside me, placing the basket between us. “I was about to have lunch,” he says, opening it to reveal sandwiches, fruit, and a thermos. “Care to share?”

My stomach growls in response, and Eli laughs—a warm, rich sound that somehow eases the tension in my shoulders.

“Shouldn’t you be at school?” he asks, handing me half a sandwich.

“Shouldn’t you be gardening?” I counter, accepting it gratefully.

He grins, the expression transforming his face from merely handsome to breathtaking. “I’m taking a well-deserved break.”

We eat in companionable silence for a while, watching a pair of ducks glide across the lake. The sandwich is delicious—fresh bread, avocado, and some herb I can't quite identify.

“Did you make this?” I ask.

Eli nods. “Bread and all. The herbs are from my garden.”

“It's amazing. I'm surprised you're not an Omega.”

“High praise from an Omega and a southern city girl,” he teases.

“How do you know I'm from the city?”

He unscrews the thermos, pouring what smells like herbal tea into the cap. “Your hands,” he says, passing me the makeshift cup. “Soft and perfect nails. And you got lost in the woods, which most country kids wouldn't do.”

I accept the tea, our fingers brushing briefly. “Observant.”

“I notice things,” he says simply. “Like how you're not at school when you should be. And how your eyes are red from crying.”

I look away, suddenly uncomfortable with his perception. “It's nothing.”

“If Romeo's bothering you—“

“He's not,” I say too quickly. “He told me to stay away from you, actually.”

Eli's eyebrows rise. “Did he now? And what did you say?”

“Nothing.” I sip the tea, the warm, slightly bitter liquid calming my nerves. “It’s none of his business that I like being with you.”

He studies me for a long moment, his eyes the same deep green as the pines surrounding the lake. “You do?”

“What?”

“You like being with me?”

I set the cup down, staring at my hands. “More than I care to admit. I’ve never felt more at ease with another Alpha before.”

Eli is quiet for so long, I think he might not respond. When he finally speaks, his voice is low, thoughtful. “It’s reciprocal.” He takes a deep breath, his gaze fixed on the horizon. “There’s something about you, Jolie. Something that makes me want to be better than I am. Braver than I’ve been.”

“You’re already brave,” I say softly. “And kind. And honest in a way that most people aren’t.”

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“I’m also damaged,” he admits. “Broken in ways that might never fully heal.”

I turn to face him fully, seeing the vulnerability in his green eyes. “We’re all damaged, Eli. The question is whether we let it define us or whether we choose to heal together.”

“Choose,” he repeats, something shifting in his expression. “You keep talking about choice.”

“Because it matters.” I reach for his hand where it rests on the log between us. “Romeo thinks biology is destiny. But I think we get to choose who we are, who we love. And who we trust with our hearts. I have to believe that.”

Eli’s fingers intertwined with mine, warm and callused and steady. “And who are you choosing, Jolie?”

My heart hammers against my ribs as I meet his gaze. “Not Romeo. If I had a choice, I’d choose someone like you.”

Something raw and wonderful breaks across his features. “Jolie...”

“Can I kiss you?” The words tumble out before I can stop them. This feels bold and terrifying, but absolutely right.

His intake of breath is sharp. “I’ve been waiting to kiss you since the moment I smelled your scent.”

The admission confuses me. “But we’re not scent matches. We can’t be—“ I can’t tell him I’ll never find a match. I can only hope that one day an Alpha will choose me and not wait for their fated mate.

“No,” he agrees, his free hand coming up to cup my cheek.

“Then what do you mean?”

Instead of answering, he leans closer, his lips barely brushing mine. “You taste like sunshine,” he whispers against my mouth.

My heart nearly stops. The phrase is so unexpected, so specific, that it takes my breath away. “I taste like what?”

“Sunshine. Warmth after a long winter. Hope after losing everything.” His thumb traces along my cheekbone. “You taste like home.”

The tenderness in his voice breaks something open in my chest. This isn’t the desperate hunger Romeo showed me, or the sophisticated dominance Beck wielded so effortlessly. This is something gentler, deeper. We’ve slowly built a connection on choice rather than biology. And his description of my scent is the closest anyone has ever gotten to who I am.

I close the distance between us again, pressing my lips to his with all the certainty I’ve been lacking. Eli responds immediately, his mouth warm and patient as he kisses me like I’m something precious. His scent wraps around me, and surprisingly, it makes my Omega purr with contentment.

When we break apart, we’re both breathing hard. But instead of pulling away, I thread my fingers through his hair and pull him back to me. This time, the kiss is different. It’s urgent and hungry, like it’s filled with weeks of tension and longing. Eli

groans against my mouth, his arms coming around me to pull me closer. I lose myself in the sensation of his hands on my back, his tongue sliding against mine, the way he holds me like I'm exactly where I belong.

When we finally separate, we rest our foreheads together, sharing the same air.

"Eli," I whisper, my voice shaky with want and something deeper.

"Yes?"

I meet his eyes, seeing desire there. "Will you take me home?"

He searches my face. "To the cottage?"

"No." I take a shuddering breath, making the choice that feels as natural as breathing. "Your home."

15

Eli

The walk back to my cottage passes in a haze of anticipation and disbelief. Jolie's hand in mine is soft, warm and trusting. It also feels like a miracle.

She chose me. Not Romeo. Not the scent match that biology demanded. Me.

The wind chimes sing their gentle melody on the porch, welcoming us back to my sanctuary. My heart is racing, my Alpha instincts warring between protective tenderness and desperate need.

"Second thoughts?" Jolie asks quietly, noticing my hesitation as we reach the front

door.

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“Never,” I say, turning to face her. “Just...making sure you’re certain. Once we cross this threshold, everything changes.”

She steps closer, her amber eyes steady and sure. “I told you by the lake, Eli. I’m choosing you. All of you.”

The conviction in her voice breaks the last of my restraint. I unlock the door and guide her inside, immediately pulling her into my arms. This time, when our lips meet, there’s no hesitation, no gentle exploration. Just hunger and need, and three years of loneliness finally finding its answer.

Jolie melts against me, her hands fisting in my shirt as she kisses me back with equal fervor. Her scent—that impossible sunshine warmth—fills my cottage, mixing with the familiar smells of home to create something entirely new. Something that feels so right.

“I’ve wanted this since that first night in the garden when I found you with Romeo,” I confess against her lips, my hands roaming over her back, memorizing every curve. “Wanted you.”

“Then you have me,” she whispers, and the simple offer nearly brings me to my knees.

My mouth lands on hers as I guide her toward the living room.

We stumble slightly as we dance around the furniture, laughing breathlessly against each other’s lips.

When the back of my legs hit the sofa, I sink down, pulling her with me. Jolie settles onto my lap, straddling my thighs. The position bringing our bodies into perfect alignment, and I can feel the heat of her even through our clothes. My hands span her waist, holding her steady as she rocks against me.

“You’re so beautiful,” I murmur, trailing kisses along her jaw to a spot just below her ear. “So perfect.”

She shivers at the contact, her head falling back to give me better access. “Eli, please...”

The breathy plea undoes me completely. My hands find the hem of her hoodie, tugging it upward. She raises her arms without hesitation, letting me strip the garment away. Underneath, she’s wearing a simple cotton bra that somehow looks more erotic than the finest silk.

“Your turn,” she says, her fingers already working at the buttons of my flannel shirt.

I help her push the fabric from my shoulders, watching her eyes darken as she takes in my bare chest. I’m not gym-buffed and hairless like my brother. My body is hard from working the land and I don’t care to shave. She seems to like it. Her hands explore tentatively at first, then with a growing confidence, she maps the planes of muscle and the scars that tell the story of a life lived outdoors.

“You’re incredible,” she breathes, leaning down to press kisses across my collarbone. The feel of her mouth on my skin makes my Alpha purr with satisfaction. This is what I’ve been missing, what I’ve been denying myself for years. Not just the physical pleasure, but the emotional intimacy, the sense of completion that comes from being with someone who truly sees me.

I roll us over, pressing her back into the soft cushions of the sofa. She looks up at me

with such trust, such desire, that my chest tightens. “Are you sure about this, sunshine?”

“Don’t call me that,” she says, but there’s no heat in it. “It makes me feel too much.”

“Too much what?”

“Like I might fall in love with you.” The admission hangs between us, raw and honest.

I cup her face in my hands, studying every detail of her features. “Would that be so terrible?”

“Terrifying,” she corrects softly. “But not terrible.”

I kiss her. She responds eagerly, her legs wrapping around my waist to pull me closer. The new position brings us into intimate contact, and we both groan at the sensation. My hands explore the soft skin of her torso, reverent and worshipful.

When I reach the clasp of her bra, I pause, giving her time to object. Instead, she arches against me, silently granting permission.

When the bra falls, the sight of her bare breasts takes my breath away. She’s perfect—all soft curves and creamy skin that flushes pink under my attention. I lower my head to worship her properly, drawing one peaked nipple into my mouth.

“Oh God,” she gasps, her back arching as her hands fist in my hair. “Eli, that feels…”

I lavish attention on her breasts, alternating between gentle kisses and firmer pressure until she’s writhing beneath me. Her slick is soaking through her pants as her scent grows heavier, richer, telling me exactly how much she’s enjoying my ministrations.

“I need more,” she pants, tugging at my hair to bring my mouth back to hers. “Please, I need more of you.”

She pushes at my shoulders, and I pull back, confused. But then she’s sliding off the sofa, sinking to her knees on the soft rug between my legs. The sight of her there, looking up at me with dark eyes and swollen lips, nearly stops my heart.

“Jolie,” I start, but she’s already reaching for the button of my jeans.

“Let me,” she says simply. “Let me take care of you.”

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Her fingers make quick work of my zipper, and then her small hands are freeing me from the confines of the fabric. I'm already aching. My cock jerks with embarrassing eagerness.

"You're beautiful," she murmurs, her breath ghosting over my sensitive skin.

When her mouth closes around my cock, I have to grip the edge of the sofa to stop me from losing control completely. It's been so long, I'm going to come down her throat in a few seconds. Like she knows, she slows.

"Sunshine," I groan, one hand gently tangling in her hair. "You're going to kill me."

She pulls back with a smile that's pure wickedness.

Her head lowers against and she takes me inside her mouth. She swirls her tongue around the head and down the underside. With each sound I make, she's learning what I like, and soon she finds a rhythm that has me seeing stars. But as much as I'm enjoying her attention, I need more. Need all of her.

I gently extract myself from her mouth, ignoring the keening noise of protest she makes, and pull her back onto the sofa.

"My turn," I say, already working at the button of her jeans. She lifts her hips to help me strip away the last barriers between us, and suddenly she's naked beneath me, all creamy skin and trusting eyes. I take a moment just to look, to memorize this perfect moment before everything changes.

“You’re staring,” she says, but there’s no self-consciousness in her voice, only patience.

“Can’t help it,” I admit, trailing my fingers down her body. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

I worship her with my mouth and hands, licking and sucking her clit. Learning every sensitive spot, every place that makes her gasp and arch beneath me. When I finally settle between her thighs, she’s already trembling with need.

“Please,” she whispers, her hands reaching for me. “I need you. Now.”

I position myself at her entrance, pausing to meet her eyes. “This changes everything, you know that?”

“I’m counting on it,” she breathes.

I enter her slowly, giving us both time to adjust to the incredible sensation. She’s perfect—warm and tight—and when she wraps her legs around my waist, I have to fight not to move too fast.

“Okay?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“More than okay,” she sighs, pulling my mouth down to hers. “You feel perfect.”

We move together slowly at first. But as our passion builds, gentle becomes urgent, and tender becomes desperate. I lift her from the sofa; her legs still wrapped around me, and carry her to the kitchen.

“What are you—“ she starts, but her words dissolve into a moan as I press her back against the wooden table.

“Need more room,” I explain breathlessly, adjusting our position so I can move more freely. The new angle draws cries of pleasure from both of us. Jolie wraps her fingers around the edges of the table as she meets my thrusts with equal fervor. Her head falls back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. My tongue slides over my upper teeth as my alpha instincts surge with the urge to mark her. I resist. This is about choice, about a connection that goes beyond biology.

This is about trust.

“Eli,” she gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders. “I’m close, I’m so close—“

I increase my pace, driven by the need to give her everything she wants. But then she’s pushing against my chest, asking me to stop, and I freeze immediately.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, searching her face for signs of pain or distress.

“Nothing,” she pants, sliding off the table with shaking legs. “I think I have a splinter in my ass.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“No way.”

I laugh as fresh heat courses through my veins. “Come here.”

I pick her up and wait for her to wrap her legs around my waist. She shuffles down a little until my cock rests on her clit. I laugh. “Such as needy Omega.”

“I am. Against the wall.”

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I don't trust myself to speak again, just nod and walk to the living room wall. When there, I press her back against it, and she reaches for my dick with hungry hands.

"Like this," she breathes, guiding me back inside her. This position is different, more intense. I brace my hands on either side of her head, using the wall for leverage as I move within her.

"Yes," she moans, her head falling back against the wall. "Just like that. Don't stop."

Our passion nears its peak, and my knot swells. Jolie's hands frame my face. "Knot me," she purrs. "Please, Eli. I need you to knot me. Take me to your bed and knot me properly."

The request stops me cold. My knot, half-formed, recedes as the implications hit me. "Jolie, I can't."

"Yes, you can," she insists, her eyes bright with need and something deeper. "I want you to. I want to be yours completely."

"You don't understand," I say, pulling back slightly.

"You don't want to knot me? Oh... You don't want me in your bed," she whispers, her voice full of hurt. "Is that it, Eli?"

My heart shatters at the sadness in her voice, at the trust she's offered me so freely. "I'm sorry, I can't give you that," I say quietly, pulling out of her, lowering her feet to the floor and stepping back completely. "I'm not ready for that..."

The change in her expression is immediate and devastating, as her trust in me transforms into betrayal. She crosses her arms over her chest, suddenly aware of her nakedness in a way she wasn't moments before. "I see," she says, her voice carefully controlled. "So this was just...what? A casual fuck?"

"No," I say desperately, reaching for my discarded shirt to cover her. "It's not like that. You mean everything to me, but—"

"But not enough to take me to your bed and knot me. It's just a knot. I'm not asking for you to bite me," she finishes, hurtbleeding through her carefully maintained composure. "I'm not asking you to risk your precious independence."

I run my hands through my hair, hating myself for the pain I'm causing her. "Jolie, please try to understand. I've been hurt before. Badly. I can't...I'm not ready to risk that kind of vulnerability again."

She stares at me for a long moment, and I can see her processing my words, understanding dawning in her amber eyes. "You're not ready for an Omega."

The simple statement hits like a slap to my face. "That's not—"

"It is," she says quietly, bending to gather her scattered clothes. "You're not ready for an Omega, Eli. Maybe you never will be."

I watch helplessly as she dresses with shaking hands, each piece of clothing another barrier between us. "Jolie, please don't leave like this. Let me explain—"

"What is there to explain?" She pulls her hoodie over her head, hiding the beautiful body I was worshipping moments ago. "You made your position clear. This was fun, but it's not serious. I understand."

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you meant.” She moves toward the door, and panic claws at my chest.

“Thank you for the lovely afternoon, Eli. I hope it was everything you needed.”

The formal politeness in her voice is worse than any screaming would have been. She’s already pulling back, already protecting herself from further hurt.

“Jolie, wait—“ I growl, trying to use my stern voice to get her to stay.

But she doesn’t even flinch. She’s gone, the door closing behind her with a soft click that sounds like the end of everything.

I sink onto the sofa, my head in my hands, replaying every moment of the past hour. The look of hope in her eyes when she asked me to knot her. The trust she offered so freely. The devastating hurt when I refused.

You’re an idiot. I actually feel it’s my Alpha snarling at me from inside. She offered you everything, and you threw it away.

Jolie Masters. A beautiful, brave Omega chose me over biology and I denied her what her body needed because I was too much of a coward to risk being hurt again. Kate had left me for her scent match, but she’d never offered me a true claim. Never looked at me the way Jolie had, like I was her entire world. And I’d thrown it away because I’m too damaged to recognize the gift I was being given.

The cottage feels empty without her presence, hollow and cold despite the lingering traces of her scent.

I’d had paradise in my hands, and I’d let it slip away because I was too afraid to trust again. She won’t forgive this, I realize with growing horror. She’ll find someone else,

someone brave enough to give her what she deserves.

The thought of another Alpha's hands on her skin, another man claiming what I'd been too cowardly to accept, makes my chest burn with regret and possessive fury. But it's too late now. I've shown Jolie exactly who I am—a broken Alpha too scared of his own shadows to claim the woman who had taken a piece of his heart when she walked out of the door.

Trouble is, I never realized that until now.

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I should run after her. But I know I can't. She deserves better than a man who needs to work on himself before he can give her everything she needs.

She deserves an Alpha who won't hesitate to claim her, who won't let fear override desire. She deserves someone who isn't me.

But I still feel like I've just made the biggest mistake of my life.

You're an idiot, my Alpha repeats, and for once, I completely agree.

16

Emmie

"Were you with the gardener?" Mom asks as she chops vegetables for dinner, her tone deliberately casual. I look up from my textbook, my chest still tight with the memory of Eli's rejection.

"Elias? We were just talking."

Talking, I think bitterly. Among other things.

"Mmm." She slides the diced carrots into a pot. "Talking about what, exactly?"

"School. The grounds. Nothing important." I shrug, trying to downplay the connection I thought I felt with him. The connection that apparently meant nothing when it mattered. "He's nice, Mom, that's all."

The words taste like ash in my mouth.

Nice. Right. Nice enough to let me bare my soul and body to him, but not nice enough to actually want me for more than an afternoon's entertainment.

She sets down her knife, turning to face me fully. "Jolie, Alphas are very good at seeming nice when they want something. Especially from young Omegas."

"It's not like that," I insist, though my voice lacks conviction. Maybe it was exactly like that. Maybe I was just another conquest for a bored Alpha with too much time on his hands.

"That's what I thought about Blake, too," she says quietly. The mention of my stepfather sends a chill down my spine. "Eli isn't Blake."

"No, he's probably worse," Mom says, her voice hardening. "Blake was obvious in the cruelty he dished out. The truly dangerous ones are the ones who seem kind, who lure you in with gentleness before showing their true nature."

Before rejecting you when you offer them everything, I add silently, my hands clenching around my textbook.

I close my textbook with more force than necessary. "You don't even know him." And I don't know why I'm wanting to protect him.

"I know Alphas," she counters. "Especially wealthy ones who think they own everything and everyone around them."

This catches me off guard. "Wealthy? Eli is just a gardener."

Mom gives me a look of surprise, then sighs. "Oh, Emmie. Elias Silver isn't just a

gardener. He's Beck Silver's brother. Co-owner of this entire estate, the tech company, everything. The difference is he chooses to work on the land, but make no mistake—he's as rich and powerful as his brother. And probably as ruthless."

Another lie. Another deception.

Eli had let me believe he was just an employee, had played the humble groundskeeper while he owned half of everything I could see. No wonder he wouldn't give me his complete self.

"I asked around town," Mom continues, returning to her chopping. "The Silver brothers are old money, with fingers in every pie from tech to real estate. Some people say Beck has dealings with the mafia. But I'm not speculating on that. As far as I know, Beck runs the business side of their legal business and Elias manages the land holdings. They're practically royalty in this town."

My mind races, reevaluating every interaction with Elias. The confidence beneath his casual demeanor. The authority in his voice when he confronted Romeo. The way Mrs. Reynolds referred to him. The expensive cottage, filled with first-edition books and handcrafted furniture. How could I have been so naïve? So utterly, completely stupid?

"Did you know Romeo isn't actually Beck's son?" Mom adds. "The story is that his parents died in an accident. Beck took him in and his siblings in, raised his niece and nephews."

"Elias told me that much," I murmur, still processing everything else. At least that hadn't been a lie.

"Well, there's more. Apparently, Romeo's quite the troubled young man. Wild parties, fights, rumors of drugs. The only reason he hasn't been expelled from that

fancy college is because of Beck's donations."

Great. The Alpha who thinks he is my scent match is not just a jerk, but a dangerous one with a powerful protector.

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“And that’s why I need you to stay in the cottage tonight,” Mom says, changing the subject. “Romeo’s older brother, River, is having a big birthday party at the manor. He’s a hockey player, and that means there’ll be alphas everywhere, drinking, getting rowdy. I don’t want you anywhere near it.”

"Another one?"

"Yep. According to Mrs. Reynolds, there is always a party. Mr. Silver should put his foot down, but obviously guilt eats away at him. Anyway, stay away."

“Trust me, that’s the last place I want to be,” I assure her, and mean it. The thought of facing any of the Silver men right now makes my stomach churn.

She studies me for a moment, then her expression softens. “I know this is hard. New place, new identity. But we’ll make it work, okay? We just need to keep our heads down, do our jobs, and avoid complications.”

By “complications,” I know she means the Silver men. All of them. The ones who want me for my biology, the ones who want me for convenient sex, and the ones who think four hundred dollars is adequate compensation for a night of passion.

“I understand,” I say, though part of me wants to scream at the unfairness of it all.

“I need to run to the store for a few things for dinner,” Mom says, wiping her hands on a towel. “Will you be okay here alone for an hour?”

I nod, forcing a smile. “Of course. I’ve got studying to do, anyway.”

After she leaves, I try calling Lottie again, but it goes straight to voicemail. A knot of worry tightens in my stomach. It's not like her to be unreachable for days. I send her a text message.

Lottie, getting worried. Please call when you can. Love you.

With nothing else to do, I close my eyes and drift off to sleep.

Hours later, I wake to the sound of shouting and laughing. I stumble to the window and gaze toward the manor to see that half the town has arrived for River's birthday party. I close my curtains and go downstairs.

"Have you heard from Lottie?" I ask Mom after she kisses me goodnight.

"I haven't tried to call. I'm sure Blake will ask Carlos to let him know the moment we contact her."

At that moment, the music gets louder, a pulsing beat I can feel even from the cottage, but my stomach churns not because of the party but as I think about all the calls that I've made to my sister. But I don't tell Mom about them as I go to my room.

I curl up on my windowsill, watching the festivities from a safe distance. I'm relieved to be away from the chaos, but at the same I feel achingly lonely.

All these people are having fun. It's loud, crowded, and full of beautiful people with more money than sense. In the distance, Romeo is holding court near the pool, but Cerise is conspicuously absent when she is normally welded to his side.

By ten o'clock, the party is in full swing. Drunk guests spill onto the lawn, cups in hand, laughter, and music floating across the grounds. I'm about to turn away when movement near the pool house catches my eye. Romeo emerges, his arm around a girl

who isn't Cerise. They stumble together toward the poolside cabana, his hands already working at her clothes. They disappear inside, but the cabana's wall-to-wall windows leave little to the imagination. Romeo presses the girl against the glass, just as he did with me in the woods, just as he did with Cerise in the garden.

Tears burn my eyes as I watch, but my mind isn't on him—it's on Eli. A man who I thought I had a wonderful connection with. A man who couldn't give me any more of himself than a fumble on his sofa.

When Romeo finishes with her, another figure enters the cabana—a male this time. Instead of leaving, Romeo welcomes him, the three of them entangling in a way that makes my cheeks burn.

And suddenly, I'm furious. Not just hurt or disappointed—absolutely livid. Romeo, who thinks he can have anyone he wants, anytime he wants, without consequences.

And there is Beck. A man who left me money like I was some prostitute he'd hired for the evening. And Eli, who took everything I offered and then rejected me when I asked for the one thing that mattered. The one thing I needed.

But I'm more angry at myself for being stupid enough to trust any of them.

I'm tired of being treated like I'm disposable, like my feelings don't matter, like I'm just some convenient Omega to be used and discarded.

I'm tired of being lied to, manipulated, and made to feel like I should be grateful for scraps of attention.

I grab my jacket and storm out of the cottage, slamming the door so hard the windows rattle.

For once, I don't care who hears me or who might be watching. I'm done being the good girl, the invisible girl, the girl who takes whatever treatment she's given with grateful silence.

The estate gates are open for party guests, and I slip through them unnoticed. I don't have a destination in mind—I just need to get away from this place, away from the Silver family and their entitled assumptions about what they can take from me.

I walk for what feels like hours, following the road away from the estate and toward the town. The late-night air is cool against my flushed cheeks, and gradually my anger settles into something more manageable—an icy determination to stop letting other people dictate my worth.

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By the time I reach the main strip of town, most businesses are closed except for a small diner with neon lights flickering in the window. Inside it's light and I can see a few late-night customers nursing cups of coffee, and suddenly I'm desperate for something normal, something uncomplicated.

I walk faster to get there.

The bell above the door chimes as I enter, and I breathe in the smell of coffee and fried food. It's warm and ordinary and exactly what I need.

"Jolie?" I turn toward the voice and see Professor Benson sitting in a corner booth, a stack of papers beside him and a half-empty coffee cup in his hands. He looks surprised but pleased to see me.

"Professor Benson," I say, suddenly self-conscious about my windblown appearance and the pajamas I realize I'm still wearing. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt—"

"You're not interrupting anything important," he says, gesturing to the empty seat across from him. "Just grading papers and trying to remember why I thought teaching was a good idea. Please, sit."

I slide into the booth gratefully, and a tired-looking waitress appears almost immediately with a menu and a coffee pot.

"Coffee, honey?" she asks.

"Please," I say, turning over the mug in front of me.

“You’re out late,” Professor Benson observes after the waitress moves away. “Everything all right?”

I laugh, but there’s no humor in it. “Is anything ever really all right?”

He studies my face with those perceptive eyes. “That sounds like the voice of experience. Rough night?”

“Rough life,” I correct, wrapping my hands around the warm mug. “Do you ever feel you’re stuck in the wrong story, Professor? Like everyone around you is playing by the rules you never learned?”

“Jude,” he says quietly. “When we’re not in class, just call me Jude. And yes, I know exactly what you mean.”

The simple admission breaks something loose in my chest. “How do you do it? How do you live as an Omega in a world that seems designed to diminish us?”

Jude is quiet for a moment, considering the question. “Carefully,” he says finally. “And with the understanding that most people will only see what they expect to see. They see an Omega and they make assumptions. The trick is not letting their assumptions become your reality.”

“But what about connections? Real connections?” I lean forward, desperate for answers. “How do you find someone who sees you as a person first, and an Omega second?”

“That’s harder,” he admits. “Alphas are taught from birth that they’re entitled to Omega attention. Many of them never learn to see us as anything more than biology wrapped in convenient packaging.”

“So what’s the point?” The words come out more bitter than I intended. “Why even try if we’re just going to be reduced to our designation every time?”

Jude’s expression grows thoughtful. “Because occasionally, you find someone who surprises you. Someone who sees past the biology to the person underneath.”

“And when you find that person? What then?” I can’t keep the pain out of my voice. “What happens when they decide you’re still not worth the complications?”

“Then they weren’t the right person,” he says gently. “And you keep looking.”

“I’m tired of looking,” I whisper. “I’m tired of hoping and being disappointed. I’m tired of offering everything I have and being told it’s not enough.”

Jude reaches across the table, covering my hand with his. “Who hurt you, Jolie?”

The gentle question breaks down the last of my defenses. “Someone I thought was different,” I say, tears finally spilling over. “Someone who made me feel seen and valued, right until I offered him everything I had. Then suddenly I wasn’t worth the risk.”

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. “He told me he wasn’t ready for an Omega. Like I’m some burden to be undertaken rather than a person to be loved.”

Jude’s grip on my hand tightens. “I’m sorry. That’s not fair to you.”

“None of it’s fair,” I say, my voice steady with anger. “But I’m done pretending it doesn’t hurt. I’m done being grateful for scraps and making excuses for Alphas who can’t see past their own selfishness.”

“Good,” Jude says firmly. “You should be angry. You deserve better than that.”

We sit in comfortable silence for a while, the weight of shared understanding settling between us. Finally, Jude speaks again.

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“Can I tell you something?” he asks.

I nod.

“I used to think if I was just good enough, accomplished enough, perfect enough, then Alphas would see me as more than just my biology. I thought I could earn respect through achievement.” His voice grows quiet. “But even the kindest Alphas carry assumptions about Omegas that they’re not always aware of. They can care for us deeply and still not fully see us as equals.”

“How do you live with that?” I ask.

“By finding my worth in myself first,” he says. “By building a life that doesn’t depend on Alpha approval. And by cherishing the connections that do transcend biology, even if they’re rare.”

Something in his tone makes me look at him more closely. “You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

Jude’s smile is sad and knowing. “We all have our stories, don’t we? Our moments when we realized that love and respect aren’t always the same thing.”

The confession hangs between us, loaded with implications I’m not sure I’m ready to examine. But there’s comfort in knowing I’m not alone in this struggle, that even someone as accomplished as Professor Benson wrestles with the same questions about worth and recognition.

“I should get back,” I say finally, though the thought of returning to the cottage fills me with dread. I’m scared that the show Romeo made was for my benefit and he is waiting to see if I run.

“Should you?” Jude asks. “Or do you just think you should?”

I meet his eyes, seeing my loneliness reflected there along with something warmer. “What are you asking?”

“I’m asking if you want to come home with me,” he whispers. “Just for tonight. Just to not be alone.”

The invitation sends warmth spreading through my chest, but I force a laugh. “Isn’t that forbidden? Student-teacher relationships and all that?”

“Probably,” he agrees, but his eyes don’t leave mine. “Does that matter to you right now?”

I study his face, seeing the same need I feel reflected in his expression. Not for sex or biology nor the complications of Alpha-Omega dynamics, but for simple human connection.

“I can’t give you a knot,” he says softly, “and you can’t give me one either. But we can share something we both need.”

“To be held,” I finish, understanding washing over me.

“To be held,” he confirms. “To be seen. To not be alone.”

The honesty in his voice breaks something open in my chest. Here is someone offering exactly what I need without demanding anything I can’t give. Someone who

understand the loneliness of being reduced to our designation, and the exhaustion of always having to prove your worth.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I’d like that very much.”

17

Jude

My apartment feels different with Jolie in it. Warmer, somehow. She’s curled against my side on the couch, her head resting on my chest as we watch *Notting Hill*. The scent of her floral shampoo mingles with the chamomile tea cooling on the coffee table.

“Do you think it’s really like that?” she asks during the scene where Hugh Grant stumbles through his bookshop explanation. “All awkward and charming and accidentally perfect?”

“In London? Maybe.” I adjust my arm around her shoulders, marveling at how natural this feels despite us both being Omegas. “Though I suspect real life has fewer orchestral swells.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” Jolie smiles at me before turning back to the movie. On screen, Julia Roberts laughs that famous laugh, and Jolie tries to imitate it.

“Oh darling,” she says in an exaggerated British accent, “I’m just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her.”

The attempt is so ridiculous that I burst out laughing. “That was terrible and Julie Roberts is American in the movie.”

“Terrible?” She sits up, mock-offended, her accent growing thicker. “I’ll have you know I studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.”

“Oh really? And what did they teach you there?”

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She clears her throat dramatically. “Well, first you must hold your pinky just so,” she demonstrates with her teacup, “and then you must say ‘bloody hell’ at least three times per sentence.”

“Bloody hell, that’s brilliant!” I play along, attempting my own accent.

“Bollocks! You sound like Dick Van Dyke in Mary Poppins.”

We dissolve into giggles, and for a moment I forget everything—my complicated life, my recent heartbreak—including the fact that this beautiful girl is technically my student. But when was the last time I laughed like this? Really laughed until my stomach hurt and tears pricked my eyes? Years. It’s been years. The realization sobers me slightly.

Jolie must notice the shift in my mood because she settles back against my chest, her fingers absently tracing patterns on my sweater. “This is nice,” she says softly.

“It is.” I stroke her hair, dark strands sliding through my fingers like silk. “It’s strange, isn’t it? How easy this feels.”

“Mmm. Omegas aren’t supposed to get along this well. We’re supposed to be competitive, enemies...territorial.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re female and I’m male,” I suggest. “Different dynamics.”

She tilts her head to look at me. “Or maybe we’re just both tired of pretending we don’t need a connection.”

The honesty in her voice makes my chest tight. When did I become so starved for simple human warmth that sitting with a student on my couch feels like the most intimate thing I've done in years?

"Can I tell you something?" I ask.

She nods against my chest.

"I was the quiet kid at school. The only male Omega in my year, maybe in the whole district. Nobody knew what to do with me. Not the teachers, not the other students, certainly not my parents." The words come easier than I expected. "I spent most of high school convinced I was some kind of mistake."

Jolie's hand finds mine, squeezing gently. "It took me years to feel worthy of love. To believe that being an Omega didn't make me less than." I pause, remembering those dark years of self-doubt. "And then one day, this pack approached me. Three Alphas who said all the right things, made all the right promises. They courted me properly, made me feel cherished, special."

"What happened?"

My throat tightens. "They brought home a female Omega. A scent match for one of them. Suddenly I went from beloved pack member to...an inconvenience."

Jolie sits up completely, turning to face me. Without a word, she wraps her arms around me, holding me tight. The simple comfort of it nearly undoes me.

"I'm sorry," she whispers against my neck. "That's awful."

"It would be worse if I'd been claimed, but they obviously didn't feel me."

Her breath hitches. “Feel you. That’s the missing thing, isn’t it? Everyone talks about scent matches, but I don’t have that yearning for perfumes. I have a deep need to feel someone.”

I smile and nod. “Exactly.”

“Can an Omega feel another Omega?” she asks.

“I believe so. I also think being an Omega doesn’t mean you have to accept whatever scraps Alphas offer you.”

We hold each other for a long moment, sharing the weight of similar pain. Finally, she pulls back, her amber eyes serious.

“Can I tell you my story?”

I nod, settling back against the couch cushions as she finds her words.

“My stepfather,” she begins hesitantly. “He was...he planned to claim me, and keep me pregnant for years, and then he was going to sell off my Omega children.”

“Fuck!”

“My mother and I ran. We’ve been running ever since.” The simple statement carries enormous weight. I can see the cost of telling me in the tension around her eyes, the way her hands tremble. I know she wants to tell me more, but I won’t push her until she’s ready.

“Thank you,” I say quietly. “For trusting me with that.”

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“Will you—“

“I won’t breathe a word,” I promise. “To anyone.”

Relief floods her features. “Thank you.”

The movie plays on, forgotten, as we sit in comfortable silence. But Jolie’s presence beside me feels like a gift I don’t deserve.

“I should probably get you home,” I say eventually, though the thought of her leaving makes my chest ache.

“Should you?” She echoes my words from the diner, a small smile playing at her lips.

“Do you want to stay?”

“Is that an invitation?”

“It’s whatever you want it to be.”

She studies my face for a long moment. “I’d like to stay. If that’s okay. You make me feel safe.”

“It’s more than okay.” I take her hand and pull her off the sofa and lead her away.

My bedroom is simple. I have minimal furniture, but books are stacked on every available surface. Jolie examines the titles on my nightstand while I gather extra

pillows from the closet.

“Austen, Brontë...” she reads. “You have excellent taste in literature.”

“Says the girl studying molecular biology.”

She grins, settling onto the bed in her pajamas. I join her, keeping a respectful distance despite every instinct urging me closer. The bed suddenly feels enormous and intimate at the same time.

“This is probably the most scandalous thing I’ve ever done,” she admits, pulling the covers up to her chin.

“Sleeping in your professor’s bed?”

“Yes.”

The quiet admission breaks something open in my chest. I turn onto my side, studying her profile in the dim light filtering through the curtains. I hate that I’m in a position of trust and I shouldn’t have invited her into my home. I certainly shouldn’t have allowed her to stay. But I’m struggling to separate all of that from my attraction to her. I have to fight the urge to pull her into my arms. I shouldn’t blur the lines anymore than I already have.

“Jolie?”

“Yes, Jude?”

The breathless way she says my name sends molten heat down my spine. She turns on the bed. Her thighs press against mine and for the first time in years, my cock throbs.

“Can I—“

Her eyes are bright despite the darkness. And the tension crackles in the air between us as we consider if this is right. “Can you what, Jude?”

The sass in her voice makes me smile, and like she knows how I’m struggling between my trust as her professor and my instinct to have her in my arms, she whispers, “Just do it.”

I don’t know if she moved first or me. But when our lips crash together, everything else falls away. I drag her closer to me, my cock hard between us. She doesn’t seem to mind, as I devour her mouth like I know this is our only time. We’re both Omegas, so that’s a good possibility.

Her hands find the back of my neck, fingers threading through my hair as she pulls me closer. This is so fucking good. My cock is so hard as my lust climbs harder. I want her so fucking much. I’m out of control, needing more. But I know I can’t go any further.

Her teeth dig into my bottom lip. The sting doesn’t hurt, but it sends a zing through my body. I pull away from her.

Watching as her tongue slides over her lips and her finger reaches to my mouth.

“Sorry, I bit you.”

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“I’m not.” My mouth crashes onto hers again, despite how much I know we need to end this.

I can’t get involved with another Omega. I know she’ll leave me for an Alpha or a pack in the end.

“Jolie, we need to stop,” I whisper against her lips.

“I know,” she breathes back. “I know.”

18

Emmie

Three days of peace with Jude have given me a strength I didn’t know I possessed. I’d only been home to get clean clothes and reassure Mom that I was fine, and she’d been too busy with her new position to ask too many questions.

But Monday morning brings me back to reality.

I approach the Range Rover with my usual reluctance, only to freeze when I see who’s behind the wheel.

Beck Silver sits in the driver’s seat, his dark hair perfectly styled despite the early hour. Our eyes meet, and I feel that familiar jolt of recognition, of unwanted attraction that I’ve been trying to suppress since that night in Boston.

I slide across the back seat just as Romeo jogs up from the manor house, his backpack slung carelessly over one shoulder. He seems surprised to see his father driving but doesn't comment, settling into the seat beside me rather than the passenger seat.

He grunts with his usual morning surliness.

"Morning, Jolie," Beck says, glancing back at me. "How was your weekend? Quiet, I hope?"

There's something pointed in his tone that makes me defensive. "Actually, no. I had a date, so it was quite eventful."

Beck's phone rings at that moment, filling the car with the sound.

"Silver," Beck answers through the Bluetooth, his attention shifting to whoever's on the other end.

From my periphery, I watch Romeo's jaw tighten almost imperceptibly before he hisses under his breath. "A date?"

"Mmm. Very nice evening. We watched movies, had dinner." I let a small smile play on my lips. "I'm sure I had just as much fun as you did at your brother's party."

His knuckles whiten where they grip his phone. "What makes you think I had fun?"

"Oh, I don't know. You seemed to enjoy yourself thoroughly from what I could see." The words slip out before I can stop them, and I immediately regret the petty dig.

Romeo twists in his seat to face me more fully, his gray eyes dangerous. "Were you watching from your window like a lonely voyeur again?"

“I told you, I had a date,” I reply, my voice even. “I just happened to notice the...performance art happening in your pool house while I was getting ready.”

“Performance art?” His voice is barely a whisper now.

“Three people, wasn’t it? Very avant-garde.”

Romeo’s face flushes red. Whether from embarrassment or anger, I can’t tell. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? Does Cerise know about your artistic endeavors?”

He grits his teeth, glancing toward his father who’s still absorbed in his call about quarterly projections and board meetings. “Stay out of my business, Jolie.”

“Gladly, as long as you stay out of mine.”

The rest of the ride passes in tense silence, Beck’s business call providing cover for the hostility radiating from the back seat. When we finally reach the college, Romeo practically launches himself from the car, not waiting for it to come to a complete stop.

I follow him, but Beck’s voice stops me.

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“Jolie, wait.” I pause, one foot already on the concrete.

“I need to get to class—“

“We need to talk,” he says. “Please.”

While he ends his call, I close the door and glance ahead.

Cerise appears at Romeo’s side, like she’s been waiting for him. She’s perfectly put together, as always. Today, her blonde hair is in an elegant updo that is too old for college, and the designer dress probably costs more than my mother makes in a month. But there’s something sharp in her expression as she takes in Romeo’s agitated state.

I watch through the windshield as they have what’s clearly an intense conversation. Cerise gestures toward our car, toward me, and Romeo’s body language grows increasingly defensive.

“She knows,” I murmur.

“Knows what?” Beck asks, ending his call.

“That he’s not faithful. Look at her face—she knows exactly what kind of person she’s dating.”

Romeo rushes away from Cerise, practically fleeing toward the main building.

Beck catches my wrist gently. “That’s what we need to talk about.”

I settle back into the seat, hyper-aware of his touch. “About what?”

“About Romeo. About what’s happening between you two.”

“Nothing’s happening between us.”

“But something could,” he says quietly. “If you let it.”

I study his profile, trying to read his expression. “Have you ever scent matched with anyone?”

The question seems to surprise him. “No. Never.”

“If you were with someone you cared about, and then you met your scent match, what would you do?”

Beck is quiet for a long moment, his fingers drumming against the steering wheel. “I don’t know,” he finally admits. “I’d like to think I’d choose the person I loved, but biology is...complicated.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“What would you do?” he asks, turning to face me fully.

I look toward the building where Romeo disappeared, then back at Beck. “I’d reject him.”

“Even if it meant fighting your biology every day?”

“Especially then.” I take a shaky breath. “Can I tell you something?”

He nods.

“Romeo isn’t my scent match. Not completely.” The admission feels dangerous, but something about Beck’s steady presence makes me want to be honest with him. “He smells me as his perfect match, but my scent is false. I have an undertone that I suppress with blockers and that is my real scent, but...it’s complicated. Just believe me when I tell you that nobody will match with that part of me.”

“Nobody—“ Beck’s eyebrows draw together. “That’s unusual.”

“It’s more than unusual. It means I probably don’t have a true scent match anywhere. And if I ever bonded with an Alpha, there’s always the risk that he’d find his actual mate someday and leave me behind.”

“So Romeo isn’t actually your match?”

“Not the moment I stop hiding my full scent.” I look down at my hands. “And until I do, he is struggling to reject me despite how much he wants to.”

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“And you? How do you feel about Romeo?”

“Sorry, but he's easy to turn down. It helps that he has the personality of a snake. Though, I admit, the physical attraction was there for me. At least, at first. But believe me, it is now very one-sided.”

Beck stares at me for a long moment, something shifting in his expression.

“Jolie—“

But before he can finish whatever he was going to say, my phone buzzes with a text.

Jude: Missing you already. See you at lunch?

I smile despite the heavy conversation, and Beck notices.

“Your date?” he asks.

“Something like that.”

There's a moment of loaded silence before Beck clears his throat. “You should get to class.”

“Right.” I reach for the door handle, then pause. “Beck? Why are you suddenly interested in my relationship with Romeo?”

His dark eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror, and for a moment I see something

raw and vulnerable there. “Because I care about you. More than I should.” The admission hangs between us, but if I’m honest, the entire conversation was loaded with implications neither of us is ready to explore.

I get out of the car on shaking legs, trying to process what had just happened.

Beck Silver. Not only a successful businessman and Alpha of Alphas. He is also the man who left me money like a paid companion, and now he’s just admitted he cares about me.

The morning passes in a blur of lectures and note-taking, but I can’t stop thinking about Beck’s words. When lunchtime arrives, I’m so lost in thought that I don’t notice Cerise and her friends until it’s too late.

“Well, well,” Cerise says, stepping into my path outside the science building. “If it isn’t the little housekeeper’s daughter.”

I try to sidestep her, but two of her friends move to block me. “Excuse me, I need to get to—“

“You need to listen,” Cerise interrupts, her perfectly manicured hand shooting out to grab my hoodie. In one swift motion, she yanks the hood down and pulls the elastic from my ponytail. My hair tumbles down my back, the dark waves spilling over my shoulders. I’ve been growing it out for three years, and it’s longer than it’s ever been.

“Look at that,” one of Cerise’s friends breathes. “No wonder Romeo can’t stay away.”

“I don’t—“ But before I can get the words out, Cerise pushes me to the floor.

“Amber, get the scissors from my bag,” Cerise orders, her hands keeping me down.

“No!” I yell as her knee presses into my back, replacing her hands.

“Cerise, I don’t think—“ the friend starts.

But Cerise fists my hair in her hands and pulls my head back. “Get them. Now.”

“Please,” I gasp, trying to twist away. “I’ve done nothing—“

“You’ve done everything,” Cerise snarls. “Getting in that car every morning, batting your eyes at my boyfriend, making him think he needs to protect you.”

“Your so-called boyfriend was fucking another girl at his brother’s party,” I spit out, anger overriding my fear. “Did he tell you that?”

Cerise’s grip on my hair tightens painfully. “Liar. He wouldn’t do that to me.”

“Then why are you so bothered about me if he wouldn’t cheat on you?” The logic of my question only makes her angrier. I hear the metallic snick of scissors opening behind me.

“We just need you to not be so pretty,” Cerise says, and I feel the cold metal against my neck. “It’s not my hair he’s attracted to,” I whisper desperately.

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She leans down, inhaling near my cheek. “You smell pretty bad, so it’s not your scent either.”

“It is,” I beg as the scissors glint in the overhead light. “Please don’t.”

But it’s too late. “He’s not your Romeo. He’s mine.” Menace coats her voice, but it’s the blades opening and closing that ring in my ears.

My hair falls away. Chunk after chunk falling to the ground around my feet. Years of growth scattering before my eyes. The girls laugh as Cerise pushes me. My hands slam on the floor as I stumble forward, only just saving my face from crashing to the floor.

I turn to sit on my ass and see my long strands covering the floor. Tears are already streaming down my face as my hands fly to my head. What’s left of my hair hangs in uneven chunks, some pieces barely reaching my chin.

“Stay away from Romeo,” Cerise calls as I get to my feet. “And start walking to school. I don’t want to see you in that car again.”

I wait until she is gone before I run blindly, tears streaming down my face, only stopping when I reach an old maintenance shed behind the athletic building. The corrugated metal walls provide blessed privacy as I sink to the floor, pulling out my phone with shaking hands.

“Lottie?” I sob when she finally answers. “Lottie...” Another hiccupped breath. “I need to get out of here.”

“Emmie? What’s wrong?”

“Can you put me on video? Please?”

When her face appears on the screen, her expression immediately crumbles. “Oh, my God. What happened to your hair?”

I’m crying too hard to explain coherently, just showing her the damage through the phone camera. We’re talking frantically when I hear voices approaching the shed.

“I have to go. I’m going home. I’ll call you from there.” I end the call and creep to the small window. Three groundskeepers walk past, their voices fading as they head toward the main building. When I’m sure they’re gone, I slip out of the shed, away from school, and start the long walk home.

I’m walking down the high street when a familiar Range Rover pulls up beside me. The window slides down and I hear, “Who did this to you?”

My eyes lock with Beck, but I can’t tell him.

I shake my head, stepping back from the car. “Nobody. I’m fine.”

“You’re clearly not fine,” Beck says. “Get in the car.”

“No, thank you,” I say stiffly. “I’d rather walk.”

“Jolie,” he tries again, softer now, like he is conscious of his tone. “Please get in the car. Let me help you.”

When I don’t answer, he says calmly, “Please let me take you home.”

I shake my head, not trusting my voice.

“Please. Let me help you.”

I’m worn out and just need my bed. And something in his tone breaks through my defenses. I climb into the passenger seat, immediately feeling small and exposed under his concerned gaze.

Beck reaches over without asking, his fingers gentle as they touch what’s left of my hair. “Who did this to you?”

I can’t answer, too afraid of the consequences.

“My son?” he asks quietly.

“No. His girlfriend.”

Beck’s jaw tightens, his hands gripping the steering wheel. “I’m taking you back to college. We’re going to find out exactly what happened and—“

“No!” The word comes out as a sob. “Please, I can’t go back there. I’m too scared.”

Beck stares at me for a long moment, then puts the car in drive. “Okay. I’ll take you home.”

19

Beck

My Alpha roared when I saw her walking along the road, shoulders hunched against the world.

Even now, she looks so fragile, so broken as she stares at the road ahead.

“Emmie.” She jumps, startled by my voice.

When she turns, my heart breaks seeing the tear tracks on her face, the redness around her eyes. But it’s her hair that shocks me most—chopped unevenly, the once waist-length locks now barely reaching her chin in some places.

Her scent fills the car. The honey-sweet Omega notes are now laced with distress, but beneath that is the sunshine warmth both Eli and I detected. It’s stronger now, less masked, as if her emotional state has stripped away some of her careful control.

I grip the steering wheel tighter, fighting the urge to pull her into my arms and promise that no one will ever hurt her again.

“Why did she do it?” I ask.

She touches what’s left of her hair self-consciously. “Stupid fucking Beta thinks being pretty is what Romeo is attracted to.”

My heart breaks for her casual acceptance of the cruelty. “I need a word with my son.”

Her eyes widen slightly, then narrow. “Don’t get involved. It doesn’t matter and it’ll make it worse. I’m fine.”

“It matters to me,” I hiss.

She turns to look out the window, silent for so long I think she might not speak again. When she finally does, her voice is so quiet I can barely hear it. “Cerise and her friends. They... they held me down and cut it off. Then threatened to kill me if I didn’t stay away from Romeo.”

White-hot rage courses through me. It’s so intense I have to focus on breathing to keep me from turning the car around and hunting down Cerise Hamilton myself.

“It’s not a big deal,” Jolie says quickly, clearly regretting her admission. “Just girls being mean.”

“That’s not meanness, Jolie. That’s assault.” I pull over to the side of the road, too angry to drive safely. Turning to face her fully, I reach out, gently running my fingers through what’s left of her beautiful hair. “Who else was involved?”

She flinches at my touch initially, then surprisingly leans into it, her eyes fluttering closed for just a moment. “This time it was just Cerise, Amber, and a girl I’ve just seen around. But please, don’t make it worse. They’re already targeting me because of Romeo.”

“What exactly did Cerise say to you?”

Jolie looks down at her hands, her cheeks flushing. “That Romeo belongs to her. That

she needed me to not be so pretty.”

“And Romeo? What has he said to you?”

The flush deepens, creeping up her neck, and her silence is answer enough. My son has been pursuing her despite her obvious discomfort, despite having a girlfriend, despite every social convention that should have stopped him.

“I’m going to have a very serious conversation with Romeo,” I say, my tone leaving no room for argument. “And with the school about Cerise’s behavior.”

“No!” Jolie grabs my arm, panic flashing in her golden eyes. “Please, don’t. It will only make things worse. I’m already the weird new girl. If the owner of half the town storms in demanding justice, I’ll never fit in.”

I cover her small hand with mine, struck by how delicate she feels, how much trust she’s placing in me despite our history. “Jolie, what they did isn’t acceptable. There have to be consequences.”

“Please,” she repeats, her eyes pleading. “Let me handle it my way. I’ll stay away from Romeo, lie low for a while. It will blow over.”

I study her face, seeing strength beneath the vulnerability. She’s survived worse than this—I can see it in the way she holds herself, the way she’s already planning her next move.

“Fine... For now. But if anything like this happens again, I won’t stay out of it.”

Relief washes over her features. “Thank you.”

We sit in charged silence. The air between us is thick with unspoken tension. I should

start driving, take her home, maintain the boundaries I promised myself I would respect. Instead, I ask, “Where were you headed?”

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“My bed to hide for the rest of my life,” she admits with a self-deprecating laugh. “I couldn’t face going back to school looking like this.”

I restart the car, making a decision that probably violates every rule of appropriate behavior. “Then we’re going to fix it.”

“Fix what?”

“Your hair.” I pull back onto the road, turning toward town instead of the estate. “I know someone who can help.”

She touches her choppy locks again, uncertainty in her voice. “It’s okay. I can just wear a hat until it grows out.”

“Emmie,” I say gently, “let me do this for you.”

“You should call me Jolie.”

“Tell me why?”

“I can’t.”

“You won’t.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

As we drive toward town, I notice her studying me from the corner of her eye, clearly

working up the courage to ask something.

“You can ask,” I say, keeping my eyes on the road. “Whatever you’re wondering.”

“Did you pay me for that night?”

The question makes me laugh—not at her, but at the absurdity of the misunderstanding. “God, no. Emmie, I’ve never had an Omega keep up with me the way you did, but I knew you’d be completely worn out the next day. The money was for a massage, maybe some room service. That’s why I left the business card for the spa I use.”

She’s quiet for a moment, processing this. “Then why did you never want to see me again?”

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. “I wanted to see you again. But look at you—you’re young and beautiful and have your whole life ahead of you. I’m in my late thirties, set in my ways, carrying more baggage than any person should have to deal with. I don’t deserve someone like you.”

“Have you ever had an Omega long term before?” The question hits deeper than I expected.

“I was in a pack,” I say carefully. “Three Alphas, one Omega. We were happy, or I thought we were.”

“What happened?”

I take a deep breath, surprised by how much I want to tell her. “Car accident. They were picking up Romeo, Remi, and River from their grandparents’ house. I was supposed to go, but I had a business emergency that couldn’t wait.”

“Were Romeo’s parents part of your pack?”

“No, my brother was Romeo’s father, and his pack and mine were traveling together, two cars in convoy, picking up the children and then camping afterward.” The memory still cuts like a knife. “My pack was angry with me for choosing work over family time again. If I’d been there, if I’d insisted we postpone the trip...”

“Beck.” Her voice is soft but firm. “You’re blaming yourself for something that wasn’t your fault.”

“I disagree,” I say, but there’s less conviction in my voice than usual. I turn onto the main street of town, slowing as we approach a small storefront with an elegant script. “Vivian’s Hair Boutique. We’re here.”

Emmie looks at the salon skeptically. “Do they take walk-ins?”

I smile, parking in front. “They will for me.”

Inside, a slender woman with platinum blonde hair styled in a perfect bob squeals when she sees us. “Beckett Silver! It’s been ages!”

“Hello, Viv.” I greet her with a kiss on the cheek. “I need a favor.”

Vivian’s experienced eyes move to Jolie, instantly assessing the damage with professional discretion. “Oh honey, what happened?”

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Before she can answer, I interject smoothly, “A styling mishap. Can you fix it?”

Understanding crosses Vivian’s face—she’s been in this town long enough to know when not to ask questions. “Of course I can. Come on, sweetheart, let’s get you to a chair.”

As Vivian leads Jolie to the washing station, I pull out my phone and send a quick text to Jude Benson.

Incident at school today involving Jolie. She was assaulted by Cerise Hamilton. Please ensure security footage isn’t wiped. Will need it later.

His response is immediate.

Jude: On it. Is she okay?

She will be. I reply, then put my phone away to focus on what matters.

For the next hour, I watch as Vivian works her magic, transforming Jolie’s butchered locks into a stylish, chin-length bob that frames her face perfectly. The cut is sophisticated—it makes her look less like a girl trying to hide and more like a woman who knows her worth.

With each snip of the scissors, Jolie’s posture straightens a little more. And when the blow dryer finishes, her confidence visibly returns. But it’s when Vivian finally spins the chair around to show Jolie the result. The smile that breaks across her face makes something in my chest tighten.

“It’s perfect,” Jolie breathes, turning her head to see all angles in the mirror. “I love it.”

“You look beautiful,” I say before I can stop myself. Our eyes meet in the mirror, and for a moment, everything else fades away—the salon, Vivian bustling around us, the lingering anger about what happened to Jolie. All I see is Emmie, the enigmatic Omega, with sunshine in her scent and steel in her spine.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and I know she’s thanking me for more than just the haircut.

20

Emmie

The small bookstore tucked between the coffee shop and the antique dealer has become my refuge over the past three days.

After the incident with Cerise, I’ve been avoiding the estate grounds—Romeo specifically—as much as possible, only returning to sleep and reassuring Mom that I’m fine.

Luckily, the bookstore owner, Mrs. Vincent, is a sweet Beta woman who doesn’t ask questions about why a college student spends her afternoons reading in her store instead of attending classes.

“You’re here early today,” she observes as I settle into my usual corner chair. “Is everything all right, dear?”

“I just needed some quiet time,” I reply, which isn’t entirely a lie.

The cottage feels suffocating lately. Since Mom found out that Beck took me to the hairdressers after my run-in with Cerise, she's watching my every move. And on top of that, I'm constantly aware that the Silver men are just mere steps away.

Here, surrounded by books and the gentle hum of the afternoon customers, I can almost pretend I'm just a normal girl with normal problems.

My new haircut catches my reflection in the window, and I'm still adjusting to the bob Vivian created from Cerise's destruction. It makes me look older, more confident—which is ironic since I've never felt more uncertain about anything in my life.

The bell above the door chimes, and I glance up automatically.

My heart stops seeing Eli standing in the doorway, his green eyes scanning the store until they land on me. He's wearing a simple Henley and jeans, dirt under his fingernails suggesting he came straight from the gardens. His expression shifts from surprise to something that looks almost like relief when he sees me.

I duck my head back to my book, hoping he'll buy whatever he came for and leave. But when his footsteps approach, and I can smell that familiar scent of pine, roses, and earth that makes my Omega purr despite everything.

"Jolie." His voice is soft, careful. "I thought that was you I saw earlier."

I don't look up from the page I'm not actually reading. "Hello, Elias."

"May I?" He gestures to the empty chair across from me.

Every instinct tells me to say no, to maintain the distance I've worked so hard to establish. But Mrs. Vincent is watching from behind the counter with curious eyes,

and making a scene would only draw more attention.

"It's a free country," I say, still not meeting his gaze.

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He settles into the chair, and immediately the space feels too small, too intimate. His presence wraps around me, bringing back memories of our afternoon by the lake, the way he'd kissed me like I was something precious.

"Your hair," he breathes. "It's beautiful, but...what happened to the rest of it?"

Now I look up, meeting his concerned green eyes. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

But Eli knows me well enough to read between the lines. His jaw tightens, and I can see his alpha instincts stirring. "Who hurt you?"

"It doesn't matter." I close the book, preparing to leave. "It's handled."

"Jolie, please." His hand moves toward mine on the armrest, then stops just short of touching. "I know I hurt you. I know I was a coward about what happened between us. But if someone else hurt you—"

"Then what?" I finally look at him directly, seeing the conflict in his eyes. "You'll protect me? Take care of it? Be my knight in shining armor?"

"Yes," he says simply, and the conviction in his voice nearly breaks my resolve.

"Until when, Eli?" I lean forward, keeping my voice low but letting the pain I've been carrying bleed through. "Until your scars bleed again? Or until you decide I'm not worth the risk?"

He flinches like I've slapped him. "That's not what happened."

"Isn't it?" I stand, clutching the book to my chest like a shield. "I offered you everything I had, and you only gave me part of you because you're still in love with a ghost."

"Kate is—"

"Kate is gone," I interrupt, feeling tears prick my eyes. "She left you three years ago, Eli. But you're still waiting for her to come back, aren't you? Still hoping she'll realize she made a mistake and choose you after all."

The raw pain that flashes across his face tells me I've hit the mark. "You don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly." I move toward the door, but he stands, blocking my path. "You're terrified that if you let yourself love someone again, they'll leave you. So you push people away first. You make sure you're the one doing the leaving. So what is this? You want to be my friend?"

"That's not—" He runs his hands through his hair, frustration radiating from every line of his body. "Jolie, please. Just let me explain."

"There's nothing to explain." I try to step around him again, but he moves with me, his larger frame effectively trapping me between the chair and the bookshelf. "You made your choice clear when you pulled away from me. You're not ready for an Omega, remember?"

"I was scared," he admits. His voice is so quiet that I barely hear it. "You're so young, so full of life. I couldn't bear the thought of watching you realize you'd settled for a broken Alpha when you could have anyone."

The vulnerability in his confession nearly undoes me. But I've learned the hard way

that good intentions don't protect hearts from breaking.

"I'm not Kate," I say firmly. "I wouldn't have left you for my scent match because you are my choice. Biology didn't make that decision for me—I did. But you couldn't see that, could you? All you could see was your own fear."

"I see it now," he says desperately. "I see you, Jolie. I see how strong you are, how brave. I see you chose me over Romeo, over biology, over everything that should have mattered more. And I threw it away because I was too much of a coward to believe I deserved that kind of love."

Tears are flowing freely now, but I swipe them away angrily. "You don't get to do this, Eli. You don't get to break my heart and then show up with pretty words when it's convenient for you."

"It's not convenient," he protests. "I haven't slept since you left my cottage. I can't eat, can't focus on anything but the memory of how you looked at me when I rejected what you were offering. I've been going out of my mind trying to figure out how to fix this."

"You can't fix it," I whisper. "Because the problem isn't what you did—it's what you couldn't do. You couldn't trust me enough to believe that I meant what I said. You couldn't trust yourself enough to take the risk."

"I trust you now—"

"No, you don't." I finally step around him, putting distance between us before his proximity destroys my resolve. "You're still the same scared Alpha who would rather be alone than risk being hurt. And I deserve better than that."

The words hang between us in the quiet bookstore, and Elias stares at me like I've just

delivered a death sentence. His face pales despite his tan.

"Jolie," he says. "Please don't give up on us. I know I don't deserve another chance, but I'm begging you—"

"There is no us, Eli." I back toward the door, clutching the book so tightly my knuckles are white. "There never really was. That was just me, fooling myself into thinking I'd found something real."

"It was real," he insists, following me. "What we had was the most real thing I've felt in years. Don't let my cowardice destroy that."

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I pause at the door, one hand on the handle. For a moment, I let myself look at him—really look. He's beautiful and tortured and everything my Omega heart wants to heal. But I've learned that you can't save someone who's not ready to be saved.

"Goodbye, Elias," I say softly. "When you're ready to stop living in the past, when you're ready to be the Alpha someone deserves instead of the broken man Kate left behind—maybe then you'll understand what you lost."

I push through the door before he can respond, the bell's cheerful chime a bitter contrast to the pain I'm leaving behind. I don't look back though, despite every instinct screaming at me to turn around, to throw myself into his arms and pretend that love is enough to overcome fear. But love isn't enough when it's one-sided. Not when one person is willing to risk everything while the other clings to their safe, lonely existence.

The afternoon sun is warm on my face as I walk down Main Street, but I feel cold inside. Empty. Like I've just closed the door on the last chance at happiness I might ever have.

My phone buzzes with a text as I reach the bus stop.

Jude: How are you holding up? Want to grab dinner tonight?

I stare at the message, remembering the peace I felt in his apartment, the way he held me without asking for anything in return. Jude understands what it's like to be an Omega in a world that doesn't see past biology. He understands the exhaustion of always having to prove your worth.

Me: Yes. I need friendly company.

Jude: My place at 7? I'll cook.

Me: Perfect. Thank you.

I slip the phone back into my pocket and board the bus that will take me back to the estate.

But as the bookstore disappears behind us, I glimpse Elias standing in the window, watching me leave. His face is sad, possibly heartbroken, desperate, but I force myself to look away.

Some bridges, once burned, can't be rebuilt. Some trust, once broken, can't be repaired with pretty words and regret.

Elias Silver had his chance to choose me, to choose us. He chose fear instead.

And I refuse to spend my life waiting for someone to become brave enough to love me the way I deserve.

21

Emmie

The bus rumbles to a stop just outside of Silvercrest Manor, and the entire journey I've wondered about what comes next. I don't know what that looks like yet, but I know one thing for certain... I won't settle for scraps of affection ever again. I won't beg anyone to see my worth. I deserve an Alpha who will choose me without hesitation, who will fight for me instead of pushing me away. I deserve someone who sees forever when they look at me, not just the ghost of someone who left them

behind.

Romeo Silver isn't that Alpha. He's a walking contradiction. Rejected me so brutally, but still wanted me in secret. I don't care if he turns out to be my full scent match when I'm eventually brave enough for the world to know who I really am.

I won't choose Romeo Silver ever—he blew it.

With Elias Silver, I found a man I thought was definitely my Alpha. But it's time I stopped pretending he could be.

And then there is Beck Silver. I admit he's different. I actually believe him now. But somehow, I feel Beck gives up an awful lot for everyone else and I doubt he will pursue me once he knows who I really am and the danger that brings.

I turn the corner. The estate gates come into view, and I steel myself for whatever awaits me, knowing that Mom will probably have a hundred questions about where I've been. After what she did to save me, I can't tell her my life feels like it's falling apart again. But I'll survive this. I've survived worse. And maybe, just maybe, one day I'll find an Alpha who isn't afraid to love me back.

The cottage feels smaller than usual when I slip inside, the familiar scents of home doing little to comfort my aching heart. Mom is in the kitchen preparing dinner with such care and attention, but it means she's thinking about something else entirely.

"How was your day, sweetheart?" she asks without looking up from the carrots she's dicing. I have a suspicion she already knows.

"Fine," I lie, settling at the small table with the book I always start, but I've never finished reading. "Quiet."

“Good. Quiet is good.” She pauses in her chopping, finally looking at me with those sharp eyes that miss nothing. “You’ve been spending a lot of time away from the estate lately.” It’s not quite a question, but it carries the weight of one. I shrug, pretending to read.

“I like the bookstore in town. It’s peaceful.”

“Peaceful is important,” she agrees, but there’s something in her tone that suggests this conversation isn’t over.

“Romeo asked about you this morning. He wanted to know if you’re sick, since you haven’t been riding to school with him.”

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My stomach clenches. “I’m taking the bus now. I know my way around now and I like the independence.”

“Independence.” Mom repeats the word like she’s testing its flavor. “Yes, I suppose that’s important, too. For someone your age.”

I glance up from my book, catching the worried expression she’s trying to hide. “Mom, is everything okay?”

“Of course, darling. I just...” She sets down her knife, wiping her hands on her apron. “I just want to make sure you’re being careful. This is a good situation for us. We can’t afford to complicate things.”

“I’m not complicating anything,” I say, a defensive edge creeping into my voice. “I go to school then I come home. Afterward, I help with dinner. What’s complicated about that?”

“Nothing, if that’s all you’re doing.” She sits across from me, her expression growing serious. “But if you’re developing feelings for anyone in the Silver family—“

“I’m not,” I interrupt, the lie bitter on my tongue, but I know she thinks it’s Romeo, so it’s not really a lie.

“Good.” Her relief is palpable. “Because Alphas like the Silvers, they don’t see girls like you as anything more than temporary entertainment. They might seem kind, might make you feel special, but in the end, they’ll choose someone from their own world. Someone with the right connections, the right background.”

“I know that, Mom.” And I do know it, but hearing it stated so bluntly still stings.

“Do you?” She reaches across the table, covering my hand with hers. “Because you’re a beautiful, intelligent young woman, and men like Beck Silver have ways of making you forget your place in the world. They make you think you’re different, special even, and that the rules don’t apply to you.”

My breath catches. “Beck Silver?”

Mom’s eyes narrow. “You seem surprised that I mentioned him specifically.”

“I just...he’s barely spoken to me,” I stammer, which is technically true even if it omits significant details.

“Hasn’t he?” Mom’s voice carries a skeptical note. “Because someone mentioned seeing you in his car the other day.”

Heat floods my cheeks. Of course, someone had noticed. Nothing happens on this estate without the staff knowing about it. “It was probably the day he took me to get my hair fixed.”

“But why did he do that?”

“He was being kind. After what happened with Cerise and her friends.”

“Kind.” Mom repeats the word like it leaves a bad taste in her mouth. “Men like Beck Silver aren’t kind without expecting something in return. The sooner you learn that, the safer you’ll be.”

“He’s not Blake, and he expected nothing,” I protest, but even as I say it, I remember the electricity that sparked between us in that car, the way his touch had made my

entire body respond.

“Didn’t he?” Mom’s expression grows knowing. “Then why do you smell like him?”

I freeze. “What?”

“Your scent,” she says quietly. “It’s been different lately. Layered. Like you’ve been around Alphas whose pheromones have affected your biology.”

Panic claws at my chest. If Mom can smell Alpha influence on me, if she knows I’ve been intimate with someone... “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t lie to me, Emmie.” Her voice hardens. “I’ve been dealing with alpha manipulation my entire adult life. I know the signs. Your scent has changed and there is only one reason, and that is your suppressants are failing.”

The book slips from my nerveless fingers, hitting the floor with a soft thud. “Mom—“

“How many?” she asks quietly. “How many of them do you feel?”

“It’s not what you think—“

“How many?” The question hangs between us like a blade. I can see the fear in her eyes, the terrible certainty that her worst nightmares are coming true.

“Three,” I whisper, the admission torn from my throat.

Mom’s face goes white. “Oh, God. Oh, Emmie, what have you done? This is why I asked you not to get close to Alphas.”

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“I have to find a pack eventually,” I say desperately, standing so quickly my chair scrapes against the floor. “I need Alphas, Mom. I need—“

“I asked you to wait. We had to know this place was safe first.” Mom’s voice cracks with anguish. “Don’t you see that?”

“Blake doesn’t know we’re here.”

She stands too, her hands shaking as she grips the back of her chair. “But three Alphas, Emmie. Three men from the same powerful family, and you think that’s a coincidence? You think they all just developed feelings for you?”

“They’re not from the same family,” I protest weakly. “Jude isn’t—“

“Jude?” Mom’s voice rises to a near shriek. “Your professor? Oh, Emmie, no. Tell me you haven’t—“

“He’s an Omega!” I shout, the words exploding from me before I can stop them. “Jude is an Omega, just like me. He understands what it’s like. He wants nothing from me except friendship.”

The admission hangs in the air between us, loaded with implications I’m not ready to examine. Mom stares at me like I’ve grown a second head.

“Omega,” she repeats slowly. “Your professor is an Omega.”

“Yes.” I lift my chin, some of my defiance returning. “And he’s the only person in

this entire place who sees me as more than my biology. Who values my mind, my opinions, and my feelings?”

“And the other two?” Mom’s voice is deadly quiet. “Beck Silver and...”

“Eli, but it’s over with him.”

Her head nods lightly. “His brother? And what do they see you as?” she asks, like I never just told her what I did.

I open my mouth to defend them, to explain that it’s complicated, that there are feelings involved. But the words die in my throat because I can’t explain it. Not in a way that won’t confirm all of Mom’s worst fears.

“I thought so,” she says, reading my silence correctly. “Oh, Emmie. My brilliant, beautiful daughter. They’ve gotten to you, haven’t they? Made you think you’re different from every other Omega they’ve used and discarded.”

“You don’t understand—“

“I understand perfectly.” Mom’s voice turns cold, controlled. “I understand that I’ve failed you. That I brought you to this place thinking we’d be safe, and instead I’ve delivered you directly into the hands of predators.”

“They’re not predators,” I insist, but my voice lacks conviction.

“Aren’t they?” She moves around the table, standing close enough that I can see the tears gathering in her eyes. “A professor taking advantage of his student? A wealthy alpha old enough to be your father? His brother—“ Her head tilts back, and she sighs as she stares at the ceiling.

“It’s not like that,” I whisper, but I’m not sure I believe it anymore.

“Then what is it like?” Mom demands. “Explain to me how three powerful men all developing an interest in the same vulnerable Omega isn’t predatory behavior. Explain to me how this isn’t exactly the situation we escaped.”

I can’t. Because when she puts it like that, it does sound calculated. It sounds like the situation Blake would have orchestrated if he’d been clever enough.

“Pack up your things,” Mom says quietly. “We’ll leave by the weekend.”

“What?” The blood drains from my face. “Mom, no. We can’t leave. This is our home now.”

“This was never our home,” she corrects. “This was a temporary sanctuary that’s become a trap. I won’t let you become another casualty of Alpha entitlement.”

“You can’t make me leave,” I say desperately. “I’m twenty-one. I can make my own choices.”

“Can you?” Mom’s smile is bitter. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like alpha pheromones, and their sneaky manipulation has heavily influenced your choices. When was the last time you thought clearly about what you actually want versus what they’ve convinced you to want?”

The question stops me cold because I can’t answer it.

“That’s what I thought,” Mom says softly. “You can’t tell the difference anymore, can you? Between your own desires and their influence.”

“I...” I sink back into my chair, suddenly exhausted. “I don’t know. I’m the one

choosing.”

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“Are you Emmie? Or are you doing what they expect? Don’t you see that’s how they operate, sweetheart? They make you think every feeling, every choice, every decision is your own. But it’s not. It’s all carefully orchestrated to make you dependent on them, to make leaving seem impossible.”

“But what if it’s real?” I ask quietly. “What if some of it, at least, is genuine?”

Mom kneels beside my chair, taking my hands in hers. “Then it will survive separation. If any of these men truly care about you, they’ll understand why we need to leave. They’ll respect your need for space to figure out your own feelings without their influence.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then you’ll have your answer about their true intentions.”

I stare down at our joined hands, seeing the small scars she got from Blake while protecting me however she could. She’s sacrificed everything for us, and now she’s asking me to trust her one more time.

“Where would we go?” I ask.

“I have contacts,” she says. “People who can help us disappear again if we need to. We’ll figure it out.”

“What about your job? Your position here?”

“There are other jobs.” Mom’s voice is steady, certain. “I failed your sisters and have no other daughters to save.”

The simple statement breaks something inside me. Here I am, agonizing over men who may or may not actually care about me, while the one person who has never wavered in her love for me is willing to sacrifice everything to keep me safe.

“Okay,” I whisper. “Okay, we’ll go.”

Her shoulders relax as relief floods Mom’s features. “Thank you. I know this is hard, but I promise we’ll figure out a new plan. A better one.”

I nod as I walk away, but when I reach the bottom of the stairs, Mom’s voice stops me cold.

“Emmie.” Her tone has shifted, becoming the one she used when I was small and had done something dangerous. “I need you to promise me something.”

I turn slowly, dreading what’s coming. “No more contact with any of the Silver men. Not Beck, not Elias, not even casual conversation. And absolutely no more private meetings with your professor.”

Her eyes are steel. “I mean it, Emmie. Not a word, not a glance, nothing that could be misinterpreted.”

“Mom, you can’t make—“

“I can and I am.” She crosses her arms, every inch the protective parent. “You said you’d trust me. This is part of that trust. Complete separation until we leave.”

“But school—Jude is my professor. I can’t just—“

“You’ll sit in the back, keep your head down, and speak only when directly questioned about coursework. No lingering after class, no office hours, no casual conversations.” Her voice brooks no argument. “Promise me.”

The cage she’s building around me feels suffocating. “What if they approach me? What if—“

“Then you’ll be polite but distant. You’ll make it clear that your circumstances have changed.” Mom’s expression softens slightly. “I know this feels harsh, sweetheart. But it’s only for a few days. Just until we can leave safely.”

A few days that feel like a lifetime stretching ahead of me. “Fine,” I bite out. The idea of cutting all contact feels wrong. Worse than wrong. It feels like I’m betraying something fundamental about myself.

“Good.” Mom’s relief is visible. “Now go get some rest. Tomorrow we’ll start making arrangements.”

22

Eli

The flames dance higher as I feed another photo into the fire, watching Kate’s smile curl and blacken at the edges before disappearing entirely.

Three years of memories reduced to ash and smoke, and for the first time since she left, I feel something other than the hollow ache that’s lived in my chest.

I feel free.

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The fire pit behind my cottage casts flickering shadows across the garden as evening settles over the estate. I've been at this for an hour now, methodically burning every trace of Kate's presence in my life. Photos, letters, the expensive perfume she left behind—all of it feeding the cleansing flames.

There's only one thing left.

I look up at the wind chimes hanging from my porch, their gentle melody filling the night air. Kate had hung them there during our second summer together, claiming they'd help track wind patterns for the gardens. We both knew it was just an excuse to mark my space as partly hers.

For three years, I couldn't bring myself to take them down. They were my penance, my reminder of what I'd lost, what I'd failed to keep. But now, standing in the warm glow of the fire with Kate's ghost finally banished, I realize they represent something else entirely. They represent my inability to move forward. My commitment to living in the past rather than building the future I deserve.

I reach for my phone, my fingers hesitating only briefly before typing out a message to Jolie.

We need to talk. Can you meet me by the lake? It's important.

I hit send before I can second-guess myself, then immediately start pacing around the fire. What if she doesn't come? What if she's already moved on completely, found someone who isn't carrying enough emotional baggage to sink a ship? What if I've waited too long?

My phone buzzes almost immediately.

Jolie: I can't. I promised my mother I wouldn't have any contact with you or your family.

The words hit me hard, but I force myself to type back.

Please. Just this once. I have something that belongs to you.

Jolie: I never left anything at your cottage.

My heart, I want to write, but even in my current state of emotional revelation, I'm not quite that dramatic.

Something I should have given you weeks ago. Please, Jolie. After tonight, if you want me to stay away forever, I will.

The minutes stretch endlessly before her response comes.

Jolie: The old oak tree by the water. Twenty minutes.

I bank the fire carefully, making sure the last of Kate's belongings are nothing but embers before I head toward the lake.

My hands are shaking—with nerves, with hope, with the terrifying possibility that I might actually get this right.

The moon is full tonight, casting silver light across the water where Jolie and I first kissed. Where I first tasted what it felt like to be chosen rather than settled for.

The memory of that afternoon—her soft lips, her trust, the way she'd looked at me

like I was everything she'd been searching for and now gives me the courage to keep walking.

She's already there when I arrive, standing at the water's edge with her arms wrapped around herself defensively. The moonlight catches in her shorter hair, emphasizing the elegant line of her neck, the determined set of her shoulders. Even angry with me, even trying to protect herself, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Thank you for coming," I say quietly, stopping a few feet away to give her space.

She doesn't turn around. "You said you had something of mine."

"I do." I take a deep breath, letting the words I've been practicing spill out. "My complete honesty. My trust. My willingness to fight for us instead of against my fear."

Now she turns, her amber eyes reflecting the moonlight.

"Eli—"

"I burned everything tonight," I interrupt, needing to get this out before I lose my nerve. "Every photo, every letter, every reminder of Kate I've been clinging to for three years. I should have done it the day she left, but I was too much of a coward."

Jolie's expression softens slightly, but her posture remains guarded. "Why now?"

"Because losing you hurt worse than losing her ever did." The admission tears from my throat, raw and honest. "Because I realized I wasn't mourning Kate. I was mourning the version of myself that existed before she left. The man who believed he was worthy of love."

“You are worthy of love,” she says quietly.

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“I’m starting to believe that, thanks to you.” I take a tentative step closer, encouraged when she doesn’t back away. “Jolie, I know I hurt you. I know I was a coward when you offered me everything I’d ever wanted. But I’m not that man anymore.”

“What’s changed?” There’s something in her voice—not quite hope, but not complete dismissal either.

“Everything.” I laugh, the sound carrying three years of suppressed emotion. “I realized that being afraid of losing you is no reason to push you away. That my fear of not being enough is exactly what makes me not enough.”

She studies my face in the moonlight, and I can see her weighing my words against the hurt I’ve caused her.

“What exactly are you asking for, Eli?”

“A chance to prove that I can be the Alpha you deserve. The man who will choose you every day, not because biology demands it, but because I can’t imagine a life without you in it.” I pull something from my pocket—a small velvet box. “I’m asking you to let me love you the way you should be loved. Completely. Without reservation. Without fear.”

Her eyes widen as she slides her fingernail over the box as we stand beside the lake where we first kissed, where I first understood what it meant to be chosen.

“I’m not asking you to marry me,” I say quickly, seeing the panic that flashes across her face. “It’s a key to my home. For you to come and go as you please, or...move in.

But what it also represents is proof that I'm ready to be your Alpha in every way that matters."

"Eli..." Her voice is breathless, uncertain.

"I know you said I had one chance, and I threw it away. But Jolie, if you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I swear I will spend every day proving that your faith in me wasn't misplaced."

She stares down at me for a long moment, moonlight playing across her features. When she finally speaks, her voice is thick with emotion.

"I can't." My stomach drops to the floor, but I force myself to hear her out completely. "I can't because my mother was right about one thing—alpha pheromones have influenced me. I've been making decisions with my body instead of my head, and I need space to figure out what I actually want versus what biology is telling me to want."

Hope flickers in my chest despite her rejection. She's not saying no forever—she's saying not right now.

"How much space?" I ask quietly.

"I don't know." She wraps her arms tighter around herself, and that's when I notice she's shivering. "We're leaving, Eli. Mom and I. This weekend."

"Leaving?" I shoot to my feet. "Where?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Jolie, please—"

“Don’t.” She holds up a hand, stopping my approach. “This is what I need, Eli. Time away from all of this to figure out who I am when I’m not surrounded by Alphas who make me feel things I can’t trust.”

“What things?”

“Like I belong with you. With your brother—“

“Beckett?”

She nods and I want to argue, to point out that running away won’t solve anything, that what we have is real regardless of biology. But the determined set of her jaw tells me that pushing now will only drive her further away.

“Okay,” I say instead, the word tasting like surrender. “If that’s what you need.”

Surprise flickers across her features. “You will not fight me on this?”

“I spent three years fighting my happiness,” I whisper. “I won’t make the same mistake by fighting yours. If you need space to be sure, then I’ll give you space.”

“Thank you.” Relief clear in her voice, but there’s something else there too—disappointment, maybe, that I’m not fighting harder.

“But Jolie?” I wait until she meets my eyes. “When you’re ready—if you’re ever ready—I’ll be here. However long it takes, wherever you go, I’ll be here waiting for you to come home.”

She nods, tears spilling down her cheeks. “I should go. Mom will worry.”

“Wait.” I catch her hand gently as she turns away. “The wind chimes. On my porch.

Do you want them?”

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She looks confused. “Why would I want them?”

“Because Kate hung them, but they sing with your laughter now. Because they’ve been marking time until you came into my life, and now that you’re leaving...” I swallow hard. “I was going to take them down tonight, but I thought maybe you’d want to keep them. As a reminder that some things are worth waiting for.”

Fresh tears spill over as she shakes her head. “Keep one, Eli. We’ll take it down together one day.”

She pulls her hand from mine and walks away, leaving me standing alone by the water with moonlight reflecting off the key I never got to offer properly.

I watch until she disappears into the shadows between the trees, then sink onto the fallen log where we shared our picnic.

The night air carries the faint trace of her scent—honeyed sweetness with that sunshine warmth underneath that calls to something deep in my soul. Even leaving, even protecting herself from me, she smells like home.

I sit by the water for hours, turning the box over in my hands and listening to the gentle lap of waves against the shore. By the time the sun rises, painting the sky in the most beautiful shade of deep red, I’ve made a decision to give her the space she needs. I’ll let her leave without the pressure my Alpha so desperately wants to do.

But I won’t give up hope that someday, she’ll realize what I’ve finally figured out. It took me a while. I just hope it doesn’t take her as long to work out that what we have

is worth any risk, any fear, any obstacle we might face. And when that day comes, I'll be ready for her. No matter how long it takes, no matter how far she goes, I'll be here when she's ready to come home. Because some love is worth waiting for.

And Jolie Masters is worth everything.

23

Emmie

Mom is asleep when I return, so I climb the stairs on my tiptoes, trying not to cause a creak on the old wooden staircase. By the time I reach my room, my heart is still racing from my conversation with Eli, and I want to scream.

I hold the handle and slip into my bedroom without a sound, but the small space suddenly feels like a prison cell, the walls pressing in from all sides.

I pace from the window to the dresser and back, my hands balled as I go over the conversation with Eli and wonder if he's really coming around to us being together. His face keeps flashing through my mind—the raw pain in his eyes when he spoke about his past, the careful distance he maintained even as every fiber of my being screamed at me to close the space between us.

I'd wanted to hold him so badly it physically hurt. I'd wanted to smooth away the lines of hurt around his eyes, to promise him that I wasn't her, that I wouldn't leave him. But I couldn't. The moment I touched him, really touched him, I would have crumbled. All my carefully constructed walls would have come tumbling down, and Mom's thoughts would have been proven right about everything.

But Mom doesn't understand. She can't understand what it felt like to see Eli vulnerable, to know that beneath all that controlled Alpha exterior is someone who's

been as broken as I have. Someone who understands what it means to have your trust shattered by the people who were supposed to protect you.

Mom wants us to leave, to start over somewhere new. She thinks I'm being manipulated, that I can't trust my own feelings. But what I feel for Eli is not manipulation. I've thought about it. It's surely recognition. Eli and I are two wounded souls seeing themselves reflected in each other. And now she wants me to throw it all away based on her own trauma, her own fears.

But even as the angry thoughts spiral through my mind, a small voice whispers that maybe she's right. Maybe I can't trust my judgment anymore. Maybe everything I think I feel is just a stupid Omega being manipulated when I thought I'd been so brave. The uncertainty makes me want to claw at my skin.

I throw myself onto my bed, burying my face in the pillow to muffle the frustrated growl that tears from my throat so she can't hear me.

I toss and turn in my bed. There's an odd tingling sensation running along my nerve endings, like electricity sparking just beneath my skin. I feel so strange, restless in a way that has nothing to do with emotional turmoil.

I roll onto my back, staring at the ceiling as the restlessness intensifies. My skin feels too tight, too warm, and there's a peculiar ache building low in my abdomen. I check the time—just before eight p.m. Exhaustion pulls at me like I've been awake for twenty-four hours. Only sleep will help. Maybe tomorrow this will all seem less catastrophic.

But sleep doesn't come. Instead, I toss and turn, kicking off the blankets, only to pull them back up minutes later when a chill races through me.

The ache in my abdomen spreads, becoming a persistent throb that makes it

impossible to find a comfortable position. Every time I close my eyes, I see Eli's face—the way he looked at me like I was something precious he couldn't quite bring himself to touch. And then there is Beck who wants me, I'm sure of it.

By ten o'clock, I'm grouchy and drenched in sweat despite the cool night air drifting through my window. I've changed my pajamas three times. Had cold showers. And now the sheets cling to my skin uncomfortably, and there's a strange, sweet scent filling the room that I don't recognize.

Needing to cool down once again, I stumble to the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face and neck. In the mirror, my face is flushed, my pupils dilated. When I press the back of my hand to my forehead, my skin burns hot against my knuckles.

"Just stress," I whisper to myself. "Just stress from everything that happened the past few days."

But even as I say it, a terrible suspicion forms. The restlessness, the fever, the way my scent has changed—all of it suddenly clicks into place with horrifying clarity. No. No, this can't be happening. Not now. Not when everything is already falling apart.

I race back to my dresser, frantically searching through the drawer where I keep my suppressants. The small white pills rattle in their bottle as I shake it. I pour them onto my palm and count them, but it only confirms what I already know—I've been taking them religiously, never missing a dose. I'm confused. I know suppressants can fail. Stress can trigger breakthrough heats. And being around multiple alphas, especially ones I have feelings for...

My legs give out, and I sink onto the edge of my bed as the full implications hit me. If I'm going into heat now, here, with Beck and Eli and even Romeo... If the scent carries, if they catch even a hint. Mom was right. We do need to leave. But now it might already be too late.

The ache in my abdomen pulses stronger, and despite my terror, my body responds with a flush of want that makes me hate myself.

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I'm faced with the worst possible timing, but my biology doesn't care about convenience or safety or the promises I just made to my mother. The need claws at me, primal and desperate. I need comfort, need someone to hold me, to tell me everything will be okay. But the Alphas I know are off-limits. Yes, they would take me through my heat. But at what cost? And Romeo... Romeo has never been an option.

But Jude... I press my hands against my mouth to stifle the whimper that wants to escape.

"Jude," I whisper into the darkness, my voice barely audible even to myself. "I need... I need someone to hold me. I need you to hold me."

But would he break his celibacy for me? The words hang in the air like a prayer, desperate and broken. I curl into myself, pulling my knees to my chest as another wave of heat washes through me.

And then, soft as a whisper in my mind, I hear: Come to me.

The voice is warm, familiar, unmistakably Jude's. But that's impossible. He's not here. He can't be here. I sit up straighter, my heart pounding.

"Jude?" I whisper again, but there's no response except the sound of my own ragged breathing.

I must be hallucinating. The heat, the stress, the emotional upheaval—it's all catching up with me. Making me hear things that aren't there. But the voice had sounded so

real, so present. And for just a moment, the ache in my chest had eased, replaced by something that felt like hope.

But I have to do this alone. I have to pretend everything is normal while my body betrays me at every turn. I have to keep my promise to stay away from the very people my Omega instincts will be screaming for me to find. And I have to do it all while my world burns down around me.

24

Jude

The knock on my apartment door comes at nearly eleven p.m. It's soft but insistent. I'm grading papers at my kitchen table, a cup of lukewarm tea forgotten beside a stack of essays on cellular biology, when the sound pulls me from my work.

Through the peephole, I see Jolie swaying slightly on her feet, one hand pressed against the doorframe for support. Even in the dim hallway light, I can see she's flushed, her new haircut damp with perspiration.

I unlock the door immediately.

"I had to come." She practically falls into my arms, her skin burning hot even through her clothes. The scent that hits me makes my breath catch—her usual honeyed sweetness is there, but it's overlaid with something richer, more complex. Something that makes my Omega instincts sit up and take notice despite the suppressants I take religiously.

"I'm sorry," she gasps against my shoulder. "I didn't know where else to go. Something's wrong with me."

I guide her inside, kicking the door shut behind us. Her legs are unsteady, and she leans heavily against me as I help her to the couch.

"Tell me, when did this start?"

"This evening. Maybe earlier." She curls into the corner of the sofa, pulling her knees to her chest. "I thought it was just stress from everything with Mom, and then Eli, but it keeps getting worse. I'm so hot, Jude. And I ache everywhere."

My heart sinks as the pieces click into place. The fever, the restlessness, the way her scent has intensified—I've seen this before, during my own heats, before I found suppressants strong enough to prevent them entirely.

"Jolie," I say gently, sitting on the coffee table so I can face her directly. "When was your last heat?"

She looks up at me with glassy eyes. "I've never had one. The suppressants..." She trails off, understanding dawning across her flushed features. "Oh God. I need to stop it. I can't go through a heat, Jude. You must know how to stop it."

"It's too late." I press the back of my hand to her forehead, confirming what I already know—she's burning up. "Stress can cause breakthrough heats, especially if you've been around multiple Alphas whose pheromones have been affecting your system."

A broken laugh escapes her. "Mom was right. She said they were influencing me, and I didn't listen."

"This isn't about being right or wrong," I say firmly. "This is about getting you through the next few days safely. How long have you been feeling symptoms?"

"I've felt weird since yesterday, but it's gotten so much worse tonight. Like one

hundred percent worse." She doubles over slightly, a soft whimper slipping from her lips. "Jude, I need... I can't think straight. Everything hurts, but it also feels like I'm on fire."

I've never felt so helpless in my life. As an Omega myself, I understand exactly what she's going through—the desperate need for an Alpha's knot, the way heat makes every nerve ending scream for relief that only claiming can provide. But I can't give her what she needs, and seeing her suffer, knowing there's nothing I can do, makes my chest ache.

"Okay," I say, forcing my voice to remain calm. "Let's get you more comfortable. I'm going to set up a nest in my spare bedroom—it's smaller, easier to make cozy."

Her hand shoots out, gripping my wrist with surprising strength. "Don't leave me. Please."

"I'm not leaving," I promise, covering her hand with mine. "I'm just going to gather some blankets and pillows. I'll be right back."

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I work quickly, stripping my spare bedroom of everything unnecessary and building a proper nest with every soft surface I can find. My Omega instincts are responding to her distress, making me want to create the most comfortable, secure space possible for her.

When I return to the living room, she's curled into an even tighter ball, making soft sounds of distress. Her scent has intensified again, filling my apartment with a sweetness that makes my head swim despite my suppressants.

"Come on," I say, helping her to her feet. "Let's get you settled."

The nest seems to provide some comfort. She burrows into the blankets immediately, but continues to shift restlessly, unable to find relief. I sit on the edge of the bed, running cool fingers through her shortened hair.

"This is embarrassing," she mumbles into the pillow. "I should have known. Should have prepared better."

"There's nothing embarrassing about this," I tell her firmly. "Having a heat is natural Omega biology. The fact that stress triggered yours doesn't make it your fault."

"Jude," she whispers, turning to look at me with desperate eyes. "I need... can you...?" She doesn't finish the sentence, but I know what she's asking. What her body is screaming out for? What I can't provide despite every instinct demanding that I try to help her.

"I can't give you what you really need," I say softly, hating the words even as I speak

them. "But I can try to help in other ways."

I fetch a damp cloth from the bathroom, placing it on her forehead. I bring water and protein bars, knowing she needs to stay hydrated and maintain her strength. When she begs me not to leave her alone, I stay beside the nest, holding her hand while she drifts in and out of restless sleep.

By three a.m. her condition has worsened significantly. The fever is higher, and her tears flow freely—not from emotional distress, but from the physical need her body can't ignore.

"Please," she sobs, reaching for me. "Jude, please. I can't take this anymore."

My heart breaks as I gather her into my arms, letting her bury her face against my neck. "I know, sweetheart. I know it hurts."

"Help me," she begs. "Use your fingers, anything. I just need..."

The request tears at something fundamental in my chest. She's not asking for romantic intimacy—she's asking for basic relief from biological torture. And while I can't give her the knot her Omega demands, I can try to ease her suffering in smaller ways.

"Are you sure?" I ask quietly. "I don't want to take advantage—"

"You're not," she gasps. "You're the only person I trust right now. Please."

With gentle hands, I help ease the worst of her physical distress, using my fingers to bring her to climax after climax. It's not romantic—it's a medical necessity. A friend helping a friend survive something neither of us can control. But even temporary relief isn't enough. Within minutes of each orgasm, the need builds again, stronger

than before.

Hours pass in a cycle of desperate need and brief respite. She dozes between waves of heat, and I hold her, trying to keep her cool and comfortable. But as dawn approaches, I realize something that makes my blood run cold.

My temperature is rising.

At first, I tell myself it's just exhaustion, stress from caring for her through the night. But when I press my hand to my forehead and feel the familiar burn of fever, and my scent starts to shift and intensify, I know the truth. Her heat has triggered mine.

It's rare but not unheard of—Omegas in proximity can sometimes trigger each other's cycles, especially during times of high stress or emotional connection. My suppressants, strong enough to prevent spontaneous heats, are no longer powerful enough to override a biologically induced response.

"Jude?" Jolie's voice is weak but concerned as she notices my distress. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lie, but I'm already pulling out my phone with shaking hands. "I just need to make a call." She doesn't need to deal with my heat on top of her own. She needs help—real help—from Alphas, who can give her what she truly needs. And despite every complicated feeling I have about the Silver men, I know they care about her enough to put her needs first.

I scroll through my contacts, finding Eli Silver's number from the faculty directory as one of Romeo's next of kin. My hands shake as I type out a message.

Emergency. Have Jolie with me. She's in heat and needs help. Can you come? Bring Beck.

The response comes within minutes.

Elias: On my way. Address?

I send my location, then return to Jolie's side. She's watching me with glassy eyes, lucid enough to understand what's happening.

"You called them," she says. It's not a question.

"You need Alphas," I tell her simply. "And despite everything complicated between you all, they care about you. They'll help."

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"What about my promise to Mom? What about—"

"Right now, the only thing that matters is getting you through this safely," I interrupt gently. "Everything else can be figured out later."

Within twenty minutes, I hear the front door open—I'd given Eli the spare key code. Heavy footsteps approach the bedroom, and the Silver brother appears in the doorway. His face is full of concern, his Alpha pheromones already responding to Jolie's distressed scent. Elias looks devastated, like seeing her in this state is physically painful for him.

"How long?" he asks quietly.

"Since yesterday evening. It's getting worse." I stand up, immediately feeling dizzy from my own rising fever. "She needs Beck too."

"I know what she needs," Elias says, already moving toward the nest. "The question is whether she wants it from me."

Jolie's eyes flutter open as Eli's presence fills the room. Despite her fever, despite the biological demand making rational thought nearly impossible, she focuses on the Alpha.

"I'm scared," she whispers.

"I won't hurt you," Eli promises, his voice gentler than I've ever heard it. "I'll only do what you want us to do."

"Promise?" The word comes out as a broken whimper.

"Promise."

25

Beck

The sound of steelblades cutting through ice fills the empty rink as I settle into the bleachers with my coffee, watching my daughter practice her routine for the upcoming Olympics in Italy.

At this hour—six a.m.—the rink belongs entirely to Remi, her coach having unlocked it early so she can work on the triple axel that's been eluding her for weeks.

She moves across the ice like poetry in motion, all grace and controlled power. Her dark hair is pulled back in a severe bun, and even from this distance, I can see the fierce concentration on her face as she approaches the jump.

She launches herself into the air, spinning—one, two—but something goes wrong. Her rotation is off, her landing awkward, and she crashes hard onto the ice, her left leg twisting beneath her with the sound of the thud echoing through the space.

"Shit," I breathe, already moving toward the rink as Remi struggles to get up, her face contorted in pain and frustration. I pull her off the cold ice and help as she slides toward the boards, one hand pressed against her left thigh, tears of anger more than pain streaming down her face. When she reaches the barrier, she slams her fist against it.

"Remi—" I start, but she cuts me off.

"I can't do it anymore, Dad. I just can't." Her voice breaks on the words. "Six months until Italy, and I'm getting worse, not better. What the hell is wrong with me?"

I climb down to the ice level, opening the gate so she can step off. "Hey, take a breath. You just won your competition last week—"

"That was different. That was easier jumps, basic combinations. This—" She gestures helplessly at the ice. "I used to land this in my sleep. Now I can barely complete two rotations without feeling like my body's going to fall apart."

She's still favoring her left leg, and I can see her rubbing her thigh unconsciously. Something about her whole demeanor seems off—not just frustrated, but almost...fragile.

"Are you ill?" I ask gently. "You seem different lately. Tired, maybe?"

Remi looks away, suddenly interested in unlacing her skates. "I'm fine."

"Remi."

"I said I'm fine, Dad."

But she's not fine, and we both know it. I've watched her skate for years, seen her push through injuries and setbacks, and this isn't normal competitive stress.

This is something else.

"When did you last have bloodwork to check your suppressants were working?" I ask quietly.

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Her hands are still on her skates. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, when did you last have your levels checked? Your body feels weird—your words from last week, remember?"

She's quiet for a long moment, and when she looks up, there's something almost desperate in her eyes. "I think... I think I need to change them. My body doesn't feel right. Everything's off—my balance, my strength, even my focus. It's like I'm fighting against myself."

The fear in her voice makes my chest tighten. "How long have you been feeling like this?"

"A few weeks, maybe a month. I kept thinking it would pass, that it was just stress about the Olympics, but..."

"But it's getting worse."

She nods miserably. "What if it's too late, Dad? What if I've screwed up my body so badly that I can't compete at the level I need to?"

"Hey." I sit down beside her on the bench, pulling her into a side hug. "It might be too late to make major changes before Italy, but that doesn't mean you can't compete. We just need to figure out what's going on."

"I'll talk to my doctor," she says, leaning into me. "And I'm coming back tomorrow to train with Coach. I'll have a chat with her too, see if she's noticed anything."

"Excellent plan." I kiss the top of her head. "And Remi? Even if the Olympics don't go exactly as planned, you're still one of the best skaters in the world. That doesn't change."

"For how long?"

"You know I'm proud of you regardless, right? Medal or no medal, you've already accomplished more than most athletes dream of."

"I know, Dad." Her smile is genuine now, soft with affection. "But I also know you understand why that's not enough for me right now."

She's right. I understand. The drive to excel, to push past limitations and achieve something extraordinary—as an ex-ice hockey player, it's carved into both our DNA and our upbringing. The difference is that her ambition is pure, focused on something she loves, now mine is tangled up with responsibility and obligation.

"Breakfast?" I suggest as she unlaces her skates. "We can grab something at that café you like."

"That would be nice. And..." She hesitates, suddenly looking younger than her twenty-four years. "I was hoping we could talk about something."

My protective instincts immediately sharpen. "Everything okay?" There's something in Remi's tone that suggests this conversation is heading somewhere I might not like.

"Everything's fine. It's just..." She pulls on her shoes and grabs her bag. "It's about Steele."

"What about Steele?"

She's quiet for a moment, then: "Remember when he left?"

The subject change catches me off guard. "To join the Scented Scorpions? What about it?"

"He didn't even tell me he was considering it. I found out from River after he'd already signed. After two years of...whatever we were, and he just left." Her voice is bitter now, hurt in a way that goes deeper than professional disappointment.

"You feel betrayed."

"I feel stupid. Like I meant nothing to him."

"You were both busy, Remi. You and Steele were both so competitive that you trained together more than dated."

Understanding dawns slowly. "Is that why you kissed Crew at River's party?"

Remi freezes, her eyes going wide. "You saw that?"

"I overheard Steele arguing with River about it. He said you seemed to make a point."

"I wasn't—" she protests, then stops, her shoulders sagging. "Okay, maybe I was. Maybe I wanted Steele to see what he gave up."

"But River told Steele to forget about you and then he marched off to find Crew. I'm sure he told him the same."

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"Ugh. Why doesn't River mind his own business?" Remi grumbles.

"Brotherly love."

"It's still none of his business."

"Remi." My voice carries all the gentle reproach I can manage. "You're playing with fire. Crew's a good kid, but using him to make someone else jealous isn't fair to anyone involved."

She winces, rubbing her thigh again. "I know. I just... I was angry. Anyway, Steele and Crew are leaving tomorrow."

"You seem angry about that."

"I'm not. You're right, I'm too busy, but..." She sighs. "And I'm just tired of feeling like everyone leaves, eventually."

The pain in her voice nearly breaks my heart. I'm about to respond when she suddenly gasps, pressing both hands against her leg.

"Remi? Do you need a doctor?"

"No, it's fine. I'll ice it at home." But she's still wincing as she stands, and I make a mental note to keep an eye on that injury. We gather her things and head toward the parking lot, Remi moving carefully beside me.

Once we're in the car, she settles back with a sigh.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"When are you going to stop using work as an excuse and find someone who makes you happy?"

The question hits closer to home than she realizes. "I'm happy."

"You're content," she corrects. "There's a difference. When was the last time you went on a date?"

"I go out—"

"Business dinners don't count." She crosses her arms, adopting that stubborn expression that means she's not dropping this topic. "I'm talking about actual romantic interests. Someone who makes you smile the way you used to smile."

I'm quiet for a long moment, then: "There is someone."

"Really?" Her whole demeanor perks up. "Tell me about her."

"She's too young. I know I shouldn't pursue her."

"How young are we talking?"

"Twenty-one."

Remi's eyebrows shoot up so high they nearly disappear into her hairline. "Wow.

Okay, that's...young."

"Which is why I know it's wrong."

"Is she mature for her age?"

"Remi—"

"I'm just asking! Some people are old souls, and some forty-year-olds act like teenagers. Age is just a number if you're both adults and you genuinely care about each other."

Before I can respond, my phone buzzes with an incoming call. Professor Benson's name appears on the screen, and something cold settles in my stomach.

"I need to take this," I tell Remi, answering on the second ring. "Professor?"

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The conversation is brief but urgent, and when I hang up, Remi is watching me with concern.

"Everything okay?"

"I need to drop you at home," I say, already changing direction. "Something I need to attend to."

"Is it about the girl?"

"Possibly." I glance at her, noting she's still rubbing her thigh. "Will you be okay? Ice that leg, and if it gets worse—"

"I'll call you. Take me home and then handle whatever it is."

After dropping Remi home, my mind races between worry for Remi and whatever emergency Professor Benson has called about. But underneath it all, one thought keeps circling back: if this is about Emmie, if she needs help, then nothing else matters right now. Not age differences, not complications, not the hundred reasons caring about her might be a mistake. She needs help, and I'll be there. Whatever it takes.

My anxiety is building by the time I reach Jude's apartment building. He rushes to my car, opening the door.

"She needs you."

Does she though?

"How bad is it?" I ask as we approach the building together.

"Her heat is controlled at the moment..." He stops walking, turning to face me with something raw and desperate in his eyes. "I'm going to stay in the room."

"You don't trust me?"

"I can't lose her. Not when I finally figured out what she means to me."

"You're a Beta, Jude. This is bigger than your feelings."

When Jude doesn't answer, I continue, this time a little calmer. "You won't lose her," I say firmly, though I'm not sure if I'm reassuring him or myself. "We'll figure this out. Together."

"Really?" His voice has a wistful sound to it that makes me stare at him for a beat too long.

"Let's get inside." Right now, Emmie needs us more than she's ever needed anyone. And maybe that includes the Beta.

26

Jude

The apartment feels charged with tension and pheromones as Beck and Elias stand at the side of the nest. Jolie's scent has intensified to where it's almost overwhelming—honey and sunshine and desperate need layered so thick I can taste it on my tongue.

My fever is climbing steadily, but I've taken two extra suppressants to push it aside. Right now, she needs all our focus.

"Emmie," Beck says softly, approaching the nest slowly. His Alpha pheromones are carefully controlled, soothing rather than demanding. "How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

"Emmie?" I whisper.

Beck groans and says, "Her real name is Emmie. Call her by her name or Omega, but not Jolie."

She turns toward his voice, her amber eyes glassy with heat-haze but still aware enough to recognize him. "Alpha."

"I'm here, Omega."

"I'm so hot. Everything hurts."

"I know." He crouches beside the nest but doesn't enter it without permission. "Can we both help you? Jude says you've been suffering for hours."

"I need..." She struggles to form the words, her body trembling with need. "I need you both. But I'm scared."

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Elias moves to the other side of the nest, his green eyes dark with concern and barely leashed desire. “We won’t hurt you. We’ll only give you what you want, what you ask for.”

“Promise?” The word comes out as a broken whimper.

“Promise,” they say in unison.

She reaches out with shaking hands, first toward Beck, then Elias. “Come here. Please. Into the nest.” The invitation is clear—in Omega culture, being invited into someone’s nest during heat is the ultimate expression of trust and consent.

Both Alphas manoeuvre, settling on either side of her in the carefully arranged blankets and pillows. The moment they’re close enough to touch, Emmie’s scent spikes with relief and renewed arousal. She turns toward Beck first, pressing her face against his neck and breathing in his scent like it’s oxygen.

“Better,” she gasps. “So much better.”

Beck’s hands are gentle as they stroke her hair, her back, offering comfort even as his own control visibly frays. “What do you need, baby girl?”

The endearment makes her keen softly, and I remember her telling me about their night in Boston, how those words affected her then.

“I need you, Daddy,” she whispers against his throat. “I need your knot. Need to be claimed.”

“Are you sure?” Elias asks, looking at his brother and lifting an eyebrow at the nickname she gave him. Beck shakes his head, letting him know that this isn’t the right time.

“Don’t claim her,” I beg.

“Please.” She turns to Eli now, her hands fisting in his shirt. “I’ve been thinking about you for weeks. Wanting your knot. Not just because of my heat, but because I chose you.” She turns back to Beck and says, “I need both of you.”

That’s all the permission they need. Beck’s mouth finds hers first, kissing her with a tenderness that gradually builds to desperate hunger. Elias’s hands map the curves of her body, drawing soft sounds of pleasure from her lips.

I should leave. Give them privacy. But when I move toward the door, Emmie’s voice stops me.

“Jude, don’t go. Please. I need you here, too.”

“Jo...Emmie—“

“Please.” Her eyes find mine across the nest, lucid despite the heat-haze. “I trust you. I need you to stay.”

So I stay, settling in the chair by the window where I can see but not intrude. My temperature continues to rise, but watching the three of them together feels more important than my discomfort. I’m trusting my extra suppressants will kick in quickly.

Beck and Elias work together with surprising harmony, taking turns kissing her, touching her, gradually removing the tee shirt I gave her when she arrived, until she’s

naked between them. Her skin is flushed and burning, and she arches into every touch like she's been starved for contact.

"So beautiful," Beck murmurs against her collarbone. "So perfect."

"Our Omega," Elias adds, and the possessive note in his voice makes her shiver with desire.

They worship her body with hands and mouths, bringing her to climax twice before she starts begging for more. A knot. Something only they can give her.

"Please," she sobs, pulling at their clothes with desperate hands. "I need your knots. Need to be filled. Please, I can't take much more."

Beck strips first, his body powerful and tattooed. When Emmie sees him, her pupils dilate further and fresh slick coats her thighs.

"My Alpha," she breathes, reaching for him.

He settles between her legs, positioning himself carefully. "Tell me if it's too much."

But she's beyond words now, lost in the biological imperative that drives her. When he enters her slowly, she cries out in relief and pleasure, her back arching off the nest.

"Yes," she gasps. "More. Please, more."

Beck sets a rhythm that's careful but thorough.

Elias supports her from the side, his hands on her breasts, his mouth at her neck, whispering praise. I watch through my growing haze as they love her together, taking turns, working in harmony to give her what she needs. When Beck's knot begins to

swell, she begs for it with words that would make a saint blush.

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“Please, Alpha.” She almost sounds like she is purring with each word she breathes. “Knot me. Fill me up. I need it so badly.”

Beck thrusts in and out of her and when he finally locks inside her, the relief on her face is profound. She goes limp as the deep satisfaction her body has been craving overwhelms her.

But her heat doesn't end with one knotting. Within an hour, she's restless again, turning to Elias with the same desperate need. The cycle continues through the day and into the night. They take turns caring for her, knotting her, holding her through the brief periods of rest between waves of need.

And through it all, I suffer.

By the second day, my heat has fully manifested. I'm burning up, my Omega instincts screaming for relief I can't provide for myself. When I whimper involuntarily during an intense wave of need, all three of them notice.

“Jude,” Emmie calls softly. “Come here.”

“I'm fine,” I lie, but my voice cracks on the words.

“No, you're not.” She extricates herself from Beck's arms, crawling to the edge of the nest. “Come here. Let us take care of you, too.”

“Emmie, I can't—“

“Not for sex,” she says gently. “Just for comfort. Please. I hate seeing you suffer alone.”

Beck and Elias exchange a look I can’t quite read, then Eli nods. “She’s right. Come here, Jude.”

Against my better judgment, I join them in the nest. The moment I’m surrounded by their combined scents—Alpha musk and Omega sweetness—my fever breaks slightly. Emmie curls against my side, her skin still hot but soothing against my own.

“Better?” she whispers.

“Much,” I admit.

“Do you need more? I know you’re celibate, but I know you must need something...” she whimpers. She sounds so much clearer now that her haze must be lifting. I swallow. “It would help.”

“Jude...” I like there is a slight whine when she says my name. “Then please let me help you.”

I shake my head.

“Please. I want to.”

Beck stares at me as I crawl to her, settling between his Omega’s slick and cum-covered thighs. I’m honestly quite petrified about how he might react. Especially when a growl escapes from deep in his throat. But I stop worrying when her hand reaches out and touches my cock, wrapping her delicate fingers around it. Or maybe I stop worrying because I’m going to come. This is the first sexual contact I’ve had with another person in five years. With just a few strokes of her hand, my breath

comes harder, faster, in time with her hand.

“What do you need, Jude?” she whispers, but her eyes tell me she wants me as much as I want her.

“I want the woman I go to bed dreaming about. I want you.”

A deep grunt comes from my left. But it’s not Eli, it’s Beck who asks, “And do you want Jude, Emmie?”

Her eyes are on mine when she nods. “I do.”

“Should we give you some space?” Beck asks.

Emmie turns to look at me with eyes that look more in control since this started. She shakes her head and turns to Beck. “I think you’ve realized that Jude is an Omega and he might need you.”

Beck looks at her like she has placed a curse on his future grandchildren.

“It’s okay,” I say as Emmie shuffles herself closer to my dick. The tip of my cock dips into her soaked heat, and she closes her eyes and moans. “I can cope. I don’t need to be knotted. You’ll be enough.”

Even though the more I look at Eli’s rugged, hard body, my mouth dried.

Since I fled my life with a pack, I thought I only wanted women but thought I’d never find an alpha female in a world that had so few. So I’d resigned myself to taking suppressants to ward away any carnal thoughts.

But now, as my eyes stray to Eli, Emmie turns to where I’m looking and smiles.

“Will you join us?”

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“Are you asking me, Omega?” Eli asks, his big, weather-beaten hand strokes his enormous cock. But I don’t know who he is asking.

Emmie’s eyes meet mine, wide with wonder and something that looks like recognition. She sees it too—this rightness, this completion that goes beyond anything we could have imagined separately.

“It’s okay. I’m happy to share him with you. Your scent spikes whenever you talk about him.”

I slam my cock inside her, and it hardens at the thought. I’ve never been taken by an Alpha since my Alpha pack, and I didn’t particularly like it then. But Eli...

Eli and Emmie lock eyes. He swallows, and I know he’s conflicted. “Are you saying you want me, and you’re not leaving?” he asks Emmie. “This isn’t just about your heat?”

“I want the three of you. And no, I don’t want to leave you. But I want to feel safe.”

My mouth slams on hers as I fuck her slowly. It feels so good. Like she was made for me. And when hands stroke my back, something weird roils in my stomach, a strange twisting as I thrust in and out of my Omega.

A finger plays between my ass cheeks, sliding through the slick that is wetting my inner thighs. Wetness that I thought was Emmie. Now I know it’s me.

“Do you want this?” Eli’s voice is deep and sexy, sliding over my body, making me

hum. “Do you want me to knot you, Omega? Do you want me to fuck you into our Omega?”

“Yes!” Emmie shrieks.

“I want to be knotted while I make Emmie come.” My voice sounds like I’m begging.

“Oh my god. I want that. Please Eli, do it.” Emmie looks at Beck and I see want in her eyes. It’s unspoken, but he knows what she needs.

“Give me Emmie’s ass,” Beck says.

“Oh yes,” Emmie whispers. It’s so quick after that. Emmie doesn’t take too long to have her ass seated on Beck’s cock. He’s sitting with his back to the headboard with his large muscular thighs opened wide. And I crawl between her thighs once more.

“Oh god that is so good,” she cries out when I enter her. “I feel so full.”

And then Eli positions himself behind me. The moment our bodies come together, something shifts in the universe. Not just the physical connection—though that’s overwhelming enough—but something deeper, more fundamental. Like puzzle pieces that have been scattered for years, finally clicking into place. I’ve felt nothing like this. Five years of isolation, of convincing myself I didn’t need this kind of connection, yet now... now I understand what I’ve been missing. What we’ve all been missing.

“I never thought it could feel like this,” I whisper against her skin, my voice breaking with the weight of the emotion. Because it’s not just the desire—it’s the way my soul seems to expand, to encompass not just her but Beck and Eli too. Four separate people harmonizing into something beautiful.

“I feel complete for the first time in years.” Beck’s voice is rough when he speaks, almost reverent. His hands on her waist are gentle despite his size, and I can see the amazement on his face, like he can’t quite believe this is real. He rests his lips on her shoulder as I move in and out of her.

When Eli leans over my shoulder to kiss Emmie, his lips brush against my neck and I shiver at the unexpected tenderness. “Such a good Omega,” he murmurs to her, but his eyes include me in the praise. “So perfect for us.”

The barriers between us dissolve completely. There’s no shame, no fear, just this overwhelming sense of belonging. Of home.

“Together,” Beck commands, but it’s not harsh—it’s desperate, like he needs this unity as much as any of us do. “All of us, come together.”

And we do. The sensation crashes over us like a wave, pulling us under and lifting us up simultaneously. There’s grunting and moaning. But it’s the sensation that speaks to me the most. And when I feel Emmie’s release, hear Beck’s groan of completion, and Eli’s shuddering breath, my own overwhelming climax completes the shared experience. Like we’re not four separate people anymore, but something new, something whole.

For a moment, the world stops. There’s just us, breathing in sync, hearts beating the same rhythm. Then reality crashes back. This was supposed to be about helping Emmie through her heat. A onetime thing. But now, lying here with them, feeling more complete than I ever have in my life, I know I can’t go back. I don’t want to go back.

Tears sting my eyes before I can stop them. Because what if this was just the heat? What if tomorrow, when the pheromones fade, they realize they don’t actually want me?

What if I'm the odd one out again?

"Jude?" Emmie's voice is soft, concerned. She shifts to look at me fully, her hand cupping my face. "What's wrong? Did we hurt you?"

I try to shake my head, to reassure her, but the tears come anyway. "No, you didn't hurt me. It's just..." I struggle to find words that won't make me sound pathetic. "I wish this was real. I want to be real."

Her thumb brushes away a tear, and the gesture is so tender it makes my chest ache. "This feels pretty real to me."

"What if you change your mind when your heat ends?" The question tumbles out before I can stop it. "What if you decide you don't actually want an Omega professor who comes with more emotional baggage than an airport carousel?"

Beck's laugh rumbles through his chest. "Are you kidding? After that? Jude, I'm pretty sure we're all ruined for anyone else."

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Eli's arm tightens around us protectively. "You're not getting rid of us that easily, Omega. Heat or no heat, you're ours now. If you want to be."

"I do," I whisper, the admission barely audible. "I want to be yours. All of yours."

Emmie kisses me softly, sweetly. "Then you are. We all are."

And for the first time in years, I believe that maybe, just maybe, I've found my place in the world. Not as a substitute or a temporary solution, but as an essential part of something bigger than myself.

A pack.

A family.

A home.

This connection is getting stronger.

You're mine. I hear Emmie's voice whisper, though her lips aren't moving. The thought drifts through my mind like it belongs there, and I understand with startling clarity that this connection we have goes deeper than any of us understand. And somehow, that doesn't scare me the way it should. Instead, it feels like the most natural thing in the world. The sense of belonging, of being cared for, of not having to suffer alone.

We spend the next day like this—the four of us tangled together in various

combinations, meeting each other's needs in whatever way we can. I find my voice. Asking for what I want. Eli and Emmie give me everything I need, but Beck still only has eyes for one Omega. But this is how this pack will work.

By the third day, both of our heats are finally breaking. Emmie's fever drops, and her desperate need subsides into manageable want. My own symptoms ease, leaving me exhausted but clear-headed for the first time in days.

"How do you feel?" Beck asks Emmie, as she stretches languidly between us.

She gives me a soft smile. "Complete. Like I found something I didn't know I was missing."

"And you, Jude?" Elias asks. I contemplate the question. How do I feel? Emotionally overwhelmed, certainly. Confused about what this means for all of us. But also...

"Safe," I say finally. "For the first time in years, I feel completely safe."

Emmie reaches for my hand, intertwining our fingers. "Good. Because I don't want this to end."

"Even knowing how complicated it will be?" Beck asks gently.

"Especially because of that," she says firmly. "The best things in life are complicated. Simple was never going to be enough for me."

As we lie together in the aftermath, I know she's right. Some families are chosen rather than born. And that's what we've done. We've chosen each other. Now we just have to figure out how to make it work in the real world.

Emmie

I wake slowly, my body feeling deliciously heavy and satisfied in a way I've never experienced before.

The afternoon sun streams through Jude's bedroom windows, casting golden light across the tangle of limbs and blankets that have become our temporary sanctuary.

Beck's arm is draped across my waist, his breathing deep and even against my neck. Eli lies on my other side, one hand resting protectively on my hip, even in sleep. And Jude is curled between my thighs, his Omega scent now calm and content instead of the distressed spikes it carried during his heat.

For the first time in days, my mind feels clear. No longer the clawing need that drove me to seek them out. Now it has faded into something manageable, and I can think with my heat clouding my judgment. And what I feel isn't regret or embarrassment. It's a wonder and sense of completeness.

"You're thinking too loud," Beck murmurs against my ear, his voice rough with sleep. "I can practically hear the gears turning."

I turn in his arms, studying his face in the afternoon light. Without the careful mask he usually wears, he looks younger, more vulnerable. There are lines around his eyes that speak of years of responsibility, of putting everyone else's needs before his own.

"I'm thinking about how right this feels," I admit quietly.

His dark eyes search mine. "Even now? When your heat isn't driving your decisions?"

"Especially now." I reach up to trace the line of his jaw, marveling at how such a

powerful alpha can be so gentle. But what if he leaves me again?

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Eli stirs beside me, his green eyes blinking open slowly. When he sees me looking at him, a soft smile crosses his features—not the guarded expression he usually wears, but something open and hopeful.

“Good morning, sunshine,” he says, and the endearment that once made me protest now fills me with warmth.

“Afternoon,” I correct with a laugh. “We’ve been asleep for hours.”

“My body feels like I’ve run a marathon,” Jude says as he shimmies to the foot of the bed, stretching languidly.

“I’ll run a bath,” Beck says gently, pushing away from me and off the bed. I feel his loss immediately, but if this is just for my heat—for Jude’s heat—I’ll have to get used to that pretty quickly.

“What happens now?” I ask, propping myself up on my elbow. Fearful of what I’ll hear, but needing to hear it, anyway.

Beck turns at the bathroom door and all three men exchange glances, and I can see them weighing their thoughts carefully.

“Anything you want,” Eli says slowly. “If you want this Emmie, we can give you it. But I’ll not make you do anything.”

“And what would that mean, exactly?” Jude asks, looking at Eli and then me. I understand his fear. He let his guard down with me...with these alphas. And I don’t

want Jude to run again. I take his hand in mine, stroking his knuckles as I say, “We come together.”

Beck runs a hand through his tousled hair. “We can make that work.” He turns to Eli, who nods.

“We can. Like a pack,” I say, testing the word. “I like the sound of that.”

“It won’t be easy,” Beck continues, his expression growing serious. “Two Omegas. Your age. Romeo. And we’re going to get judged by others. Jude’s job... None of that will be simple.”

“When has anything worthwhile ever been simple?” I counter. “Besides, I’m tired of living my life based on what other people think is appropriate.”

“Your mother,” Eli says quietly. “She won’t approve.”

The mention of Mom makes my chest tighten with guilt and anxiety. “No, she won’t. She’ll think you’ve manipulated me, that I can’t trust my own feelings. She’ll say it’s just my Omega being weak.”

“And she might not be entirely wrong,” Beck says with brutal honesty. “We have influenced you, Emmie.”

I sit up fully, pulling the sheet around me. “Do you think I can’t tell the difference between manipulation and genuine feeling?”

“I think it’s complicated,” he replies carefully. “I think we all need to be honest.”

“Then let me be honest,” I say firmly. “Yes, you’ve all affected me. Yes, my biology responds to your pheromones. But I’m not challenged by scents. My honey scent is

manipulated too. It's not my actual scent. I'm here because of my heart, my mind, and also it's my choice. I wanted to be here. And if you can't see that, if you think I'm just some helpless Omega who can't make her own decisions, then maybe we don't know each other as well as I thought."

Jude laughs.

I glance at Beck. "That's why I know I'm not scent matched with Romeo. So he shouldn't be a problem."

The silence that follows my words is heavy with tension. Then Jude laughs again—a soft, amused sound that breaks through the seriousness. "She's got you there," he says to Beck and Eli. "You're so busy trying to be honorable that you're insulting her intelligence."

"Thank you," I say gratefully, turning to Jude. "I feel you all more than I smell you."

"Feel?" Beck's expression shifts, understanding dawning.

"I've been making my own choices since I was sixteen," I tell him. "When my scent profile came back, and—" I hesitate. I feel these men, but telling them everything feels dangerous. Luckily, Eli reaches for my hand, intertwining our fingers and not pushing me for what I was going to say.

"So what are you choosing, Emmie? Really choosing, with no pressure from us?"

I look around at the three of them—these complicated, damaged, wonderful men who somehow fit together in ways that shouldn't work but do. Beck with his protective instincts and hidden vulnerability. Eli with his gentle strength and artistic soul. Jude with his gentle wisdom and fierce loyalty.

“I’m choosing all of you,” I say simply. “I’m choosing to see where this leads, even if it’s messy and complicated and completely outside social norms. If you want me, that is.”

“Even if it means standing up to your mother?” Beck asks gently.

“Especially then.”

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“Tell me why you were leaving,” Eli says.

“My stepfather...” I take a deep breath, feeling more certain than I have about anything in my life. “Mom is a good person, really. She saved me from Blake, and I’ll always be grateful for that.”

“Your stepfather,” Beck whispers.

“He wanted to breed me.”

“Fuck! No wonder you ran,” Eli hisses.

“I did. And I’ll always be grateful, but I can’t let fear control my future.”

“Then why did you come to Jude and not me or Beck when your heat started?” Eli asks.

Jude bites his lips as he looks from me to Eli and then Beck. A look of contemplation crosses his face, like he is worried to say something. Then I realize it’s because he wants to know why I went to him first. Not Beck. Not Eli. But an Omega.

I take his face in my hands. “I trusted you. I know we’re both Omegas, but we’ll figure it out as we go, make mistakes, fight sometimes, and then remember why we chose each other in the first place.”

“What did your scent profile show?” Eli asks like he has just put two and two together and worked out why my stepfather wanted me so much.

I consider lying. Because if I tell him the truth, I don't know if Eli will run and protect his heart from me. "It's complicated."

Beck laughs, the sound rich and genuine. "Everything is complicated about you, Emmie."

I curl deeper into the blanket, feeling my scent shift. This time to something melancholy and clean. I can see the way Beck and Eli are watching me, their concern barely contained, and it makes my chest tight with anxiety.

"She doesn't understand what she is," Jude says quietly, and my head snaps up. There's something in his tone that makes my skin prickle with unease. "Emmie thinks she doesn't have scentmatches because she's never experienced the traditional Omega scenting process."

Beck's brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"Most Omegas and Alphas have a primary scent—lavender, vanilla, pine, whatever. It's consistent, identifiable. But Emmie..." He gestures toward me, and I feel exposed, like he's seeing right through me. "She doesn't have a primary scent. Her hidden scent determines what Alphas can smell depending on her emotional state. Her true scent changes constantly based on her mood."

My heart races. How does he know this? How could he possibly—

"That's why she's always seemed different," Eli murmurs, understanding dawning in his eyes.

"But why does Romeo think you smell of honey?" Beck asks, his eyes narrowing.

"It was the best scent enhancer for my blood type." The words come out like I've

been caught lying.

Jude continues, “But you have scent matches, despite what you believe. Yes, it’s rare because your scents aren’t traditional perfume notes—they’re descriptions, experiences, moments in time.”

Eli looks at Beck, something soft and knowing passing between them. “Like sunshine breaking through clouds.”

Beck nods slowly, his voice rough with emotion. “Or when it first rises after a stormy day.”

My eyes fill with tears, but panic is rising in my throat. Jude knows too much. This is exactly what I’ve always been afraid of—someone figuring out my secret, understanding what makes me different.

“How do you know all this?” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

“It’s what I study,” Jude tells me gently. “Rare Omega presentations, genetic variations, anomalies that most people dismiss as impossible.” He pauses, his eyes meeting mine directly. “Sometimes these Omegas have a deeper sense of connection than others. A bond that goes beyond scent, beyond the physical.”

“That’s not—“ I start, panic making my voice tight. “I’m not that rare. It’s just—” But I can’t explain without giving away everything, without admitting to the voices in my head, the way I sometimes know things I shouldn’t know. “Can we please not talk about this?”

But before he can answer, his voice appears in my head, warm and reassuring: It’s okay, Emmie. Your secret is safe with me. I understand what you’re afraid of, but you don’t need to be scared. Not with me.

I stare at him in shock, my mouth falling open slightly. He's like me. He can do what I can do.

You're not alone. His voice continues in my mind, gentle and understanding. And you're not broken. You're extraordinary. You're an Aurora Omega. Jude says in my head, his lips not moving. One of the rarest types. Your scent is like the northern lights—constantly shifting, impossibly beautiful, and utterly unique. This Omega type is so rare that only five have ever been documented in modern history.

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My breath catches. “Five? That’s all?”

Eli and Beck stare at me, and I realize I answered aloud, and I have to cover it up. “It is rare, but I don’t want it to define me.”

“But it’s the reason you’re on the run, so everything changes from now, Emmie. You need bodyguards,” Beck replies.

My mouth opens and then shuts. “Oh my god, no way.”

I’m sorry, Jude adds, settling back against the pillows like he’s realized he’s opened a massive can of worms.

It’s okay, I reply.

“Now you know about my stepfather. I want you all to call me Emmie,” I say. “That identity was about hiding, about being less than I am. If we’re doing this, I want to be called Emmie again. Emmie Darling. And I want everyone to know exactly who I am.”

“Emmie Darling,” Beck repeats, testing the name. “It suits you better. And yes, we are doing this.”

“What about Romeo? Your children?” I ask.

“Remi will be fine. I’m sure River will think I’ve hit the jackpot and Romeo. Well, he’s about to realize you were never his. And if he thought you were, then he should

never have rejected you. He should never have wanted to use you.”

So we’re doing it. We’re testing this fragile new pack against the pressures of the outside world. And for the first time in my life, I’m not facing those pressures alone. I have my pack, and an absolute certainty that whatever comes next, we’ll handle it together.

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Emmie

Walking across the campus on Monday morning feels like stepping into a new skin. Everything looks the same—the ivy-covered buildings, the manicured quad, the clusters of students hurrying to their first classes—but I feel fundamentally different. No, I feel transformed. My steps are confident, my shoulders back, my chin raised. The nervous energy that used to make me hide in my oversized hoody has been replaced by something steadier, more grounded.

I belong here. Not as someone trying to hide or blend in, but as exactly who I am.

The neat chin-length bob that Beck helped me get feels perfect now, sophisticated and deliberate rather than the result of malicious destruction.

I’ve paired it with clothes that actually fit properly—a fitted sweater in deep green, dark jeans that show my figure instead of drowning it, boots that make me feel tall and strong.

I’m no longer Jolie Masters, the housekeeper’s daughter, nor a girl who is trying to disappear. I’m Emmie Darling, and I’m done apologizing for existing.

Though, I hate that I’m not on talking terms with my mother.

“Oh my God, your hair!” I turn to see a girl from my biology class. Joey, I think her name is, approaches with genuine admiration. “It looks absolutely gorgeous. So chic and sophisticated. I wish I was brave enough to go that short.”

“Thank you,” I say, surprised by the compliment. “It was a bit of an adventure getting here, but I love how it turned out.”

“It really suits you. You look so confident and put-together.” She grins. “Like a whole new person.”

As Joey hurries off to her next class, I catch sight of Romeo and Cerise near the student union building. They’re standing close together, but their body language suggests tension rather than intimacy. Cerise’s perfectly manicured hand grips Romeo’s arm possessively, while he stares in my direction with an expression I can’t quite read.

Instead of ducking my head and changing course—like the old me would have done, I walk directly past them, my spine straight and my gaze forward. I don’t slow down, don’t acknowledge them, don’t give them any power over my movements. But I do catch the sharp intake of breath from Cerise. The way her grip on Romeo’s arm tightens to the point where he actually winces.

“That little bitch,” she hisses under her breath, loud enough for me to hear. “Look at her, prancing around like she owns the place. Someone needs to remind her exactly where she belongs.”

Part of me wants to keep walking, to avoid this drama entirely. But another part—the part that’s been finding my voice over the past few days—makes me turn around fully.

“Did Romeo tell you that his father came to my rescue after your assault?” I say, my

voice carrying clearly across the space between us. The mention of Beck makes something complicated flash across Romeo's features. Cerise looks like she's been slapped.

"No, he didn't?" Cerise turns to Romeo.

"He was very kind," I say with a sweet smile. "Took me to get it properly styled, made sure I felt taken care of. He has excellent taste in salons. And a very caring Alpha."

Cerise makes a sound like a strangled cat, but Romeo's attention is completely focused on me now. His nostrils flare slightly as confusion replaces the anger in his expression.

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“My scent is false, Romeo. I can’t scent match with anyone.” I sense match. I want to tell him, but it’s none of his and certainly none of Cerise’s business.

“Then fuck off.” Cerise takes a step in my direction, malice radiating from every line of her body. But Romeo’s hand shoots out, catching her wrist and stopping her forward motion.

“Don’t touch her again, or we’re done, Cerise...” His voice carries an authority I’ve never heard from him before—not the entitled demand of a spoiled Alpha, but something deeper, more serious. “No, we are done.”

“You’re choosing her over me?” she demands, her voice rising to a pitch that draws stares from nearby students. “That nobody Omega over your actual girlfriend?”

“I’m choosing not to be with someone who thinks assault is an acceptable response to jealousy,” Romeo replies coolly. “What you did to her was inexcusable. And just so you know, she’s not my Omega.”

“I barely touched her—“

“You held her down and cut off her hair with scissors while she begged you to stop,” he interrupts, his gray eyes flashing with anger. “If that’s your idea of ‘barely touching’ someone, then we have nothing more to discuss.”

Cerise’s face goes white, then red, then white again. “You can’t be serious. Romeo, she’s nothing. She’s—“

“She’s under my family’s protection,” he says, looking me in the eye now. “And even if she weren’t, what you did was wrong.”

I turn and walk away without responding.

“Jolie, wait,” he calls as I turn to continue toward the science building.

I pause despite myself, glancing back to see Cerise staring at Romeo with shock and fury. Against my better judgment, I let him catch up to me. Cerise remains frozen by the student union, watching our interaction with the kind of intensity usually reserved for car accidents.

“What I did was wrong, too. I’m sorry.” He glances at the floor like he is a toddler waiting to be chastised.

“It was.”

“But your scent is different,” Romeo says quietly.

“I don’t have a real scent,” I reply honestly. “I’ve worn perfume for years. This is me, Romeo. The real me.”

His eyes widen as understanding dawns. “Your false scent was my match.”

“I suppose it was. But that’s why I turned you down.” I laugh as I adjust my backpack strap, meeting his gaze directly. “That and you were a terrible alpha.”

He sucks back a breath. “I was. I’ll do better...”

“For your Omega?” It’s a question.

He nods. "Happiness will do that to a person. Make them better."

"Happiness," he repeats, and there's something almost wistful in his tone. "Are you happy with your new pack?"

"I'm happy, Romeo. Genuinely, completely happy for the first time in years." I smile, and I know it reaches my eyes. "It's amazing what a difference it makes when you stop trying to be someone you're not."

He stares at me for a long moment, and I can see him processing the implications. My real scent is nothing like what he originally detected. Whatever pull he felt toward me was based on an incomplete picture, a masked version of who I really am.

"You're really not my scent match," he breathes.

"No, I'm not. But if I'm honest with you, I thought there was a chance you were. This is all new to me, too. And for a moment, I genuinely believed you were mine. I don't know why. But I know now for certain that you're not. And even if I had been..." I shrug. "Your actions were easy to repel, don't you think?"

"I'm really sorry about the way I acted with you. I promise if I do find my scent match, no matter who she is, I'll treasure her." Tears lace his eyes.

I nod. "Then what you put me through was worth it."

Before he can respond, I hear the sharp click of high heels on the pavement. Cerise has apparently decided to join our conversation, her face a mask of barely controlled fury.

"Are you quite finished with your little heart-to-heart?" she asks, venom dripping from every word. "Some of us have classes to attend."

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“Actually, yes, I am finished,” I say pleasantly. “Have a wonderful day, both of you.”

I walk away without looking back, but I can hear the beginning of what sounds like a spectacular argument breaking out behind me. Cerise’s voice rises to near-shrieking levels while Romeo’s responses grow increasingly cold and clipped.

Good. It’s about time Romeo stood up to her toxic behavior.

My phone buzzes as I reach the science building, and I smile when I see the message.

Beck: How’s your first day back going, baby girl?

Me: Better than expected. Just had an interesting conversation with your son.

Beck: Should I be worried?

Me: Not about me. But you might want to check on him later. I think he and Cerise are having some relationship difficulties.

Beck: I’ll keep an ear out. Proud of you for holding your head high.

The simple words make warmth bloom in my chest. Proud of me. When was the last time someone said that and meant it?

Me: Thank you. That means everything.

I slip my phone back into my pocket and head toward my first class, feeling lighter

than I have in months.

The old Jolie would have been shaking after that confrontation, would have spent the rest of the day analyzing every word and expression, wondering if she'd made things worse for herself.

But Emmie Darling knows exactly who she is and what she's worth. And she's done being afraid.

The morning passes in a blur of lectures and note-taking, but I'm aware of the subtle changes in how people react to me. My confidence seems to draw positive attention—classmates who never spoke to me before offer friendly smiles, professors seem more engaged when I take part in discussions, even the barista at the campus coffee shop comments on how radiant I look. It's like I've been broadcasting "ignore me" signals for months, and now that I've switched them off, people are actually seeing me for the first time.

When my phone rings during lunch, I'm surprised to see Lottie's name on the screen. We haven't spoken in over a week, not since that strange, interrupted call that left me so worried.

"Lottie!" I answer immediately, finding a secluded corner of the student lounge. "I've been so worried about you. Are you okay?"

"Emmie." Her voice sounds different, like it's tight with fear, but also urgent. "I need to tell you something important. About Blake."

My blood runs cold. "What about Blake?"

"He knows where you are." The words come out in a rush. "Carlos has been tracking my phone calls, monitoring everything. When I called you last week, when we video

chatted... Blake saw everything. He knows about the estate, about the Silver family, all of it."

The student lounge suddenly feels too small, too exposed. I press myself further into the corner, lowering my voice. "Lottie, are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Carlos told me last night. He thought it was funny that Blake was so obsessed with finding you." Her voice breaks. "Emmie, I'm so sorry. I led him right to you."

"It's not your fault," I say automatically, but my mind is racing. Blake knows where I am. Blake, who wanted to breed me like livestock, who saw me as nothing more than a profitable womb. "How long has he known?"

"I don't know, but—" She's crying now, soft sobs that make my heart ache. "He's already on his way, Emmie. Carlos was laughing when he told me he left yesterday morning to get you."

Yesterday morning. That means he could already be here, could already be watching, waiting for the right moment to—

"I have to go," I say, panic clawing at my chest. "I have to warn everyone, have to—"

"Be careful," Lottie pleads. "Please, Emmie. Don't let him take you back to that place."

"I won't," I promise, already moving toward the exit. "I'll call you when this is over."

I end the call and immediately dial Jude's number, my hands shaking as I walk quickly across campus toward the parking lot where Mr. Sampson usually waits for me.

"Emmie?" Jude answers on the first ring, immediately picking up on my distress.

"What's wrong?"

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"Blake knows where I am," I say, not bothering with pleasantries. "He's coming for me, Jude. Maybe already here."

"Where are you?"

"Campus. Heading for the car." I can see Mr. Sampson's familiar figure leaning against the Range Rover, and relief floods through me. "I need to get home and I need to warn Beck and Elias—"

"I'm calling them now," Jude says, and I can hear him moving around his office. "Get to the estate as fast as you can. Don't stop anywhere, don't talk to anyone you don't recognize."

"Jude—"

"We'll figure this out, Emmie. We won't let him take you."

The conviction in his voice steadies me slightly, but fear still courses through my veins as I approach the car. Blake is coming. The monster from my past has found me just when I finally found happiness.

But I'm not the same scared girl who ran away in the middle of the night. I have a pack now, people who will fight for me. And this time, I'm not running.

This time, we're making a stand.

Eli

The helicopter appears out of nowhere, a black wasp against the afternoon sky, dropping toward the estate grounds with military precision. I'm pruning the rose bushes near the main house when the rotor wash hits me, sending petals and debris flying in all directions.

The chopper is sleek, expensive, and unmarked. The kind wealthy men use when they want to move fast and avoid questions.

My Alpha instincts immediately surge to high alert. This isn't a scheduled arrival—I know Beck's calendar better than my own, and there's nothing about aerial visitors today.

I drop my pruning shears and sprint toward the landing area, my heart already hammering with dread. Through the swirling dust and noise, I can see figures emerging from the aircraft. Five large men in dark clothing. Men, I don't recognize but whose very presence makes my skin crawl. The leanest of them barks out orders. Even from a distance, he radiates the predatory Alpha energy that makes other Alphas want to bare their teeth in warning.

"Find her?" he shouts over the rotor noise to one of his companions, a man built like a linebacker with dead eyes and scarred knuckles. "Find the girl. Now."

Ice floods my veins as I realize what's happening. Emmie. They're here for Emmie. This must be Blake. I pull out my phone, hitting Beck's number as I continue running toward them. It goes straight to voicemail. I know he's in meetings all afternoon. Shit. I try the house line, but no one answers. The staff must be dealing with their own confusion about the unexpected arrival. I hope someone gets a message to Beck.

By the time I reach the helicopter, blood is roaring around my veins as Blake and his

men move toward the cottage with military efficiency. The pilot remains with the aircraft, rotors still spinning, ready for immediate departure.

“Stop!” I shout, putting myself between them and the cottage. “This is private property. You’re trespassing.”

Blake turns toward me, and I get my first clear look at the man who terrorized Emmie for years. He’s tall, well-dressed, probably mid-fifties with salt-and-pepper hair and cold blue eyes that seem to catalog my weaknesses in a single glance. He’s old but handsome, in how predators often are.

“Elias Silver, I presume,” he says with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “I believe you’re harboring something that belongs to me.”

“No one here belongs to you,” I snarl, my Alpha rising to meet his challenge.

“Emmie does. She’s my stepdaughter, and she’s been missing for months. I’m here to collect her and take her home where she belongs.”

“Like hell you are.”

Blake’s smile widens, becoming genuinely amused. “I was hoping you’d say that. It’s so much more entertaining when there’s resistance.”

He nods to his men, and I barely have time to register the movement before something hits me from behind. Pain explodes through my skull, and I stagger, vision blurring.

The second blow drops me to my knees.

Through the haze of pain, I hear the cottage door open.

Rita's voice, sharp with panic. "What's happening? What are you—?"

"Where's my daughter?" Blake's voice cuts through the air like a blade.

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“She’s not your daughter, Blake. I’ve called the police.”

“Where is Emmie? Where is she?” he yells. The silence that follows is deafening.

Then Rita’s voice, smaller now. “She’s at school. She won’t be back until this evening.”

He glances at his watch. “Then we’ll wait.”

I try to push myself up, to get between Blake and Rita, but one of his men—the one who looks like he eats nails for breakfast—plants a boot in my ribs.

Argh! Air rushes out of my lungs in a painful whoosh.

“Stay down,” he growls. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“Everything on this estate concerns me,” I wheeze, struggling to my feet despite the pain. “And if you think I’m going to let you take her—“

The punch catches me across the jaw before I can finish my sentence, snapping my head sideways. I swallow the metallic taste, but I don’t care about the warm blood filling my mouth. I’m her Alpha. Emmie is my pack mate, and I’d rather die than let these bastards touch her.

I charge the nearest thug, catching him around the waist and driving him backward into the cottage wall. We go down in a tangle of limbs, and I manage to land a few solid hits before his partner joins the fray.

The fight is brutal and brief. Two against one, and they're clearly professionals. Within minutes, I'm on the ground again, zip-tied and bleeding from a dozen slight cuts. But I've bought time, and hopefully someone has heard the commotion.

"Spirited," Blake observes, straightening his tie as if the violence was nothing more than a minor inconvenience. "I can see why she likes you. Emmie always had a weakness for broken things."

He knows? The casual cruelty in his voice makes my vision blur with rage. "You know nothing about her."

"I know everything about her. I raised her from the time she was fourteen. Fed her, clothed her, protected her." His smile turns predatory. "And when I found out how special she was, I took my time and shaped her into exactly what I needed her to be."

"You abused her."

"I never touched her. But I prepared her for her purpose in life. The fact that she ran away before fulfilling that purpose is inconvenient, but hardly insurmountable." Blake checks his expensive watch again. "School gets out at three-thirty, I believe? We should have her back within the hour."

That's when I hear it—the rumble of a car engine coming up the drive. My heart lurches as I recognize the sound of Beck's sports car. He's supposed to be in meetings until five, but one of the staff must have called him—

"Perfect timing," Blake says with genuine glee. "I was hoping to meet the famous Beck Silver."

The car pulls up near the helicopter, and Beck emerges, looking every inch the powerful Alpha he is. His dark suit is perfectly tailored, his hair immaculate despite

the wind from the rotors. There's a deep tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes immediately catalog the scene—the helicopter, the strange men, me on the ground bleeding.

His gaze finds mine across the distance, and I see the exact moment he understands what's happening. His expression goes absolutely cold, the kind of winter freeze that kills everything it touches.

"Gentlemen," he says, his voice carrying easily over the noise. "I don't believe we've been introduced."

Blake steps forward with the confidence of a man who's used to getting what he wants. "Yet I know exactly who you are. Beckett Silver. I've heard so much about you."

"I wish I could say the same." Beck's tone is polite, but there's steel underneath. "However, I don't recall inviting you to my property."

"I'm just here to collect what's mine and be on my way. No need for unpleasantness."

"What's yours?" Beck's eyebrows rise slightly. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

"My stepdaughter. Emmeline Darling. According to my sources, she's been hiding here for weeks under a false name, and I've come to take her home."

The silence that follows is loaded with violence. Beck processes this information, and I can practically see when he shifts from confused host to lethal protector.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Beck says finally.

“Oh, but it will.” Blake signals to his men, and suddenly there are guns visible and pointing at my brother. “You see, Mr. Silver, I have legal guardianship papers. Emmie is mentally unstable, prone to delusions and self-harm. She needs specialized care that only I can provide.”

“Bullshit,” I spit from the ground. Blake glances at me with amusement.

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Beck's hands clench into fists, the only visible sign of his rising fury. "Get off my property. Now."

"I'll leave as soon as I have my daughter."

"She's not your daughter. And even if she were, she's an adult who can make her own choices."

"Not according to these documents." Blake produces a folder from his jacket, waving it casually. "Signed by three psychiatrists and a judge. Emmie Darling is legally incompetent to decide about her own welfare."

The papers are fake—they have to be. But they look official enough to muddy the legal waters, to give Blake just enough justification to take her by force and sort out the details later.

That's when I hear the second car. Beck grabs his phone to call Mr. Sampson, but it's knocked out of his hands.

The car door opens and then closes. But Emmie and Mr. Sampson are out of sight. I have one chance to get them out of here.

"Emmie, get in the car and go!" I yell before my head is slammed into the wall.

I'm dazed when my eyes open again seconds later.

She looks beautiful and confident in her fitted clothes and stylish haircut, completely

unaware of the danger waiting for her. Didn't she hear me?

Only when she sees the helicopter does confusion and then panic cross her face. But it's when she sees Blake that every drop of color drains from her cheeks.

"Hello, darling," Blake says with genuine warmth, as if he's greeting a beloved daughter instead of stalking his prey. "Did you miss me?"

The sound that escapes Emmie's throat is barely human—a wounded animal cry that cuts straight through my chest. She takes an instinctive step backward, but Blake's men are already moving.

"No!" she screams, breaking into a run. "No, no, no!"

But there's nowhere to go. Two men flank her expertly, cutting off her escape route. When she tries to dart toward the main house, the linebacker catches her around the waist, lifting her off the ground despite her struggles.

"Put her down!" Beck roars, starting forward, despite the guns still trained on his body.

Blake produces a gun from inside his jacket. This one is larger, more serious. "I really wouldn't recommend that, Mr. Silver. My associates are very well trained, and accidents happen."

Beck freezes, and I can see the calculation in his eyes. He's weighing options, looking for an opening, but Blake has chosen his moment perfectly. Too many variables, too much risk to Emmie.

"Let me go!" Emmie fights like a wildcat, clawing at her captor's arms, trying to break free. "Beck! Eli! Help me!"

The desperation in her voice breaks something fundamental in my chest. I struggle against the zip ties, not caring that they're cutting into my wrists, not caring about the guns or the odds or anything except getting to her.

"It's all right, sweetheart," Blake says soothingly, holstering his weapon now that the situation is under control. "Daddy's here now. We're going home."

"You're not my father!" she screams, her legs kicking wildly. "You're a monster! A fucking psychopath!"

Blake's expression doesn't change, but something cold flickers in his eyes. "Language, Emmie. We'll need to work on that once we're home."

They're moving toward the helicopter now. Emmie fights every step of the way, but the pilot has increased the rotor speed, preparing for immediate departure.

"Wait," Beck calls out, his voice carrying absolute authority. "Name your price."

Blake pauses, interested despite himself. "I'm sorry?"

"Whatever you think she's worth to you, I'll double it. Triple it. Name any figure, and I'll transfer the funds immediately."

For a moment, I think it might actually work. Blake is a businessman, after all, and money talks in his language. But then he laughs—a sound like breaking glass.

"Mr. Silver, you misunderstand the situation entirely. This isn't about money. This is about family. About a father's love for his daughter." The way he says "love," makes my skin crawl. "You see," Blake continues, "Emmie has a very specific genetic profile. Excellent Omega genes, proven fertility in her female line, exceptional intelligence. She's going to give me beautiful, valuable children. And no amount of

money can replace that kind of investment.”

“Over my dead body,” Beck snarls.

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“That can be arranged,” Blake replies pleasantly. “But I’d prefer to keep this civilized. Much less paperwork.”

They’ve reached the helicopter now. Emmie is still fighting, but her struggles are growing weaker as shock and fear take their toll. The sight of her being forced into that aircraft makes something primitive and violent rise in my chest.

“Emmie!” I shout over the increasing rotor noise. “I choose you, Emmie. Don’t let him win!”

She turns toward my voice, tears streaming down her face. “Eli—“

The helicopter door slams shut, cutting off her words. Through the window, I can see her pressed against the glass, her mouth open in a scream I can’t hear over the engine noise.

Beck lunges forward, but it’s too late. The aircraft lifts off, rising quickly above the estate grounds. Within seconds, it’s nothing more than a black dot against the sky, carrying away the most important person in my world.

I try to stand but sink to my knees, the zip ties finally cutting through skin to draw blood.

Rita is sobbing somewhere behind me, and Beck is on his phone, probably calling every resource he has. But all I can think about is the look in Emmie’s eyes as they took her away. The terror, the betrayal, the desperate plea for help that I was too weak, too slow, too fucking useless to answer.

She's gone. And I don't know if we'll ever get her back.

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Beck

The helicopter disappears into the distance, a black speck against the darkening sky, and with it goes everything that matters. I stand frozen in my own driveway, watching my Omega—my pack mate, my heart—being carried away by a monster, and for the first time in decades, I feel completely helpless.

“Beck.” Eli’s voice cuts through the roar of blood in my ears. He’s managed to get to his feet despite the zip ties, blood trickling from his split lip. “We need to move. Now.”

The practical words snap me back to reality. I pull out my phone, scrolling through contacts with hands that shake with barely contained rage. “I’m calling the FBI. This is kidnapping, clear as day. Federal crime, interstate—“

“Beck, no.” Rita’s voice stops me cold. She’s standing in the cottage doorway, her face pale but determined. “You can’t involve law enforcement.”

“The hell I can’t. They just took—“

“Blake has papers.” Her voice cracks on the words. “Legal documents claiming Emmie is mentally incompetent. Guardianship orders, psychiatric evaluations—all fake, but they’ll look genuine enough to muddy the waters legally. By the time the courts sort it out...”

She doesn’t need to finish.

By the time bureaucracy runs its course, Blake will have moved Emmie somewhere untouchable, probably out of the country. He'll have what he wants from her, and she'll be broken beyond repair. If she survives at all.

I send a message to another contact. A man I haven't needed to use for a very long time. I hit send, pocket the phone and move to Eli, using my key to cut through his restraints. The moment his hands are free, he's pulling out his own phone.

"Jude needs to know," he says grimly. "And we need to figure out where Blake would take her."

"I might know," Rita says quietly. "There's a compound in Montana. It's remote, off the grid. He used to talk about it when he thought I wasn't listening—his 'retirement property.' If he's planning to...to keep her long-term..."

The thought makes my vision blur with fury. I've dealt with dangerous men my entire adult life, but Blake represents something beyond ordinary criminal behavior. He's a monster.

My phone rings, the contact name making my blood freeze. Dmitri Volkov.

I asked for his help. I stare at the screen for a moment, knowing that answering this call will change everything. Dmitri doesn't need to help anyone unless he wants something, and what he wants usually involves crossing lines I swore I'd never cross again. But for Emmie...

"Beck, don't," Eli says, reading my expression. "Whatever you're thinking, there has to be another way."

I answer the call. "Dmitri."

“Beckett Silver.” The voice carries a slight Russian accent, cultured but carrying undertones of violence. “Your text. You have a problem. Helicopter, yes? Man takes what is yours?”

“That’s right.”

“And you need my help.” There’s amusement in his voice.

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“I do. Name your price.”

“We’ve been friends for years. My price is twenty-five percent of your import business. And a fresh start between us as business partners.”

This deal would compromise everything I’ve built. But now...

“Find my Omega and kill her stepfather and I agree,” I say without hesitation.

“Beck,” Eli grabs my arm. “You don’t know what you’re agreeing to.”

I meet his eyes, seeing my desperation reflected there. “I know exactly what I’m doing. And I’d give far more to get her back.”

Dmitri’s laugh is genuinely pleased. “Good. Send me a photograph of the Omega and the man, any information you have. Location if possible. Consider the problem solved.”

“How quickly can you—“

“Is already in motion. I have a helicopter too, better than his. Faster.” His Russian accent gets more and more pronounced the more he talks. The line goes quiet for a moment. “Beck. A man who steals from your family will learn this is a mistake. You understand?”

I understand perfectly. When Dmitri’s people find Blake, there won’t be enough left to identify through dental records.

“I understand.”

“Good. I will bring your Omega home safely.”

“I want to go with you,” I tell him.

“That’s not a good idea.” The line goes dead, and I immediately start gathering the information Dmitri will need. Blake’s photo from Rita, who I doubt is really called that. But I’m trying to remember the tail number I glimpsed on his helicopter.

“Here.” Rita hands me intelligence about the Montana compound.

“Beck.” Eli’s voice is carefully controlled. “You made a deal with the Bratva.”

“I made a deal with someone who can get results faster than the legal system.”

“At what cost? You think Dmitri’s going to eliminate Blake and just walk away? You’ll owe him forever. Whatever he asks for next—“

“Then that’s what I’ll pay.” I turn to face him fully, letting him see the absolute conviction in my eyes. “You know better than most that it’s just money.”

His jaw tightens, but he doesn’t answer immediately. Because we both know the truth—when it comes to protecting the people we love, there are no lines we won’t cross.

“If we’re doing this,” he says finally, “we do it together. Like a pack.”

“I can’t risk your life, Eli—“

“She’s not just your Omega, Beck. She’s ours. All of ours.” His green eyes blaze with

determination. “You want to make deals with dangerous men? Fine. But you don’t do it alone.”

The simple statement breaks something loose in my chest. I’ve been carrying the weight of responsibility for everyone in my family, making decisions in isolation because I thought it was my burden to bear. But Eli is right—he is our pack now, and Emmie’s safety is all our responsibility.

“Together,” I agree.

My phone buzzes with a message from Dmitri containing coordinates and a timeline. Whatever resources he’s mobilizing, they’re moving fast.

“Jude should know what’s happening,” Eli says, pulling out his own phone. “He’s probably losing his mind with worry.”

“Tell him to stay put. This is going to get ugly, and someone needs to be here when we bring her home.”

While Eli makes the call, I turn to Rita. “I need everything you can tell me about Blake’s operation. Financial assets, business contacts, properties—anything that might help us track him.”

She nods, her face set with grim determination. “He has accounts in three different countries, properties in Montana, Wyoming, and somewhere in South America. The compound in Montana is where he...” She swallows hard. “Where he planned to keep his children and Emmie until they came of age.”

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“Security measures?”

“Armed guards, surveillance systems, probably attack dogs. He’s paranoid about law enforcement, but also about rival Alphas trying to steal his ‘investment.’” The disgust in her voice is palpable. “He thinks of Omegas as livestock, Beck. Valuable breeding stock to be protected and controlled.”

The words make my alpha snarl with protective fury. “How long would it take him to reach Montana?”

“He won’t be going by helicopter? It’s too far.”

“He’ll be flying to a private airstrip.”

Which means he’s getting close to having Emmie locked away in whatever hell he’s created. Every minute we waste is another minute she’s suffering, another minute she’s losing hope that we’ll find her.

My phone rings again—Dmitri, with an update. “We have the location confirmed. But it’s not the Montana compound, as you suspected. But Beck...” His voice grows serious. “Is more complicated than anticipated.”

“How complicated?”

“He’s hired mercenaries, private security. He has a professional operation. I need to hire more resources to penetrate.”

“Whatever it takes,” I say without hesitation.

“Good. We move in one hour. You want to be there?” The question hangs in the air, loaded with implications. If I go with Dmitri’s team, there’s no pretending that this is just a rescue operation. I’ll be directly involved in whatever violence follows, complicit in ways that can’t be undone. But the alternative is sitting here helplessly while someone else fights for Emmie’s freedom.

“We’ll meet you at the airport,” I say.

“We?” Dmitri sounds amused. “Bringing your friends to the party?”

“My pack,” I correct. “We do this together.”

“Interesting. Very well. Airfield outside town, at hangar seven. One hour.” The line goes dead, and I look up to find Eli watching me with a mixture of respect and concern.

“Last chance to back out,” I tell him. “Once we get on that helicopter, there’s no going back. Whatever happens, we’ll all be complicit.”

“She chose us,” Eli says simply. “All of us. Now we choose her back.”

We do and tonight, I’m going to find out exactly what I’m capable of when everything I love is on the line. And God help anyone who gets in my way.

31

Jude

Something tears loose inside my chest. A physical ripping sensation that drops me to

my knees in my apartment, gasping for air as waves of terror that aren't mine crash through my consciousness.

Emmie. Her fear hits me like a sledgehammer, so intense and overwhelming that for a moment I can't tell where my emotions end and hers begin. Panic, confusion, the sick dread of being trapped with a predator—it all floods through me with crystal clarity.

Soul bond. My Emmie, my AuroraOmega, is soul bonded to me.

When did it happen?

My finger touches my lip and I remember she bit it. That has to be the moment she bonded us together forever.

We've talked telepathically, and that in itself is unique for two Omegas but this is something else. I feel her. Truly feel her. I knew we had a connection, but not a Soul bond. The rarest, deepest connection possible between two people, transcending biology and choice.

I've been teaching about this for years, describing it in academic terms to students who see it as romantic fantasy. The mythical connection between two souls that allows them to share emotions, thoughts, even physical sensations across any distance. Most scholars consider it theoretical at best.

But there's nothing theoretical about the terror flooding my system right now, as her feelings are nothing but fear.

My hands shake as I grab my phone, speed-dialing Beck's number. He answers on the first ring.

“Jude—“

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“She’s my soul match,” I blurt out, not bothering with pleasantries. “Beck, she’s my fucking soul match. I can feel everything she’s feeling right now, and she’s terrified. She’s so scared I can barely think straight.”

Silence on the other end, then Beck’s voice, deadly calm: “Are you certain?”

“I’m certain. I can feel her fear like it’s my own.” I pace across my small living room, running my free hand through my hair. “We have to find her. We have to find her now.”

“We will,” Beck says with absolute conviction. “This pack doesn’t go down without a fight. Eli and I are already mobilizing resources—“

“What resources? Blake has a head start, professional security, probably multiple escape routes planned.” The panic in my voice is climbing toward hysteria. “He could take her anywhere. Out of the country, somewhere we’ll never—”

“Jude.” Beck’s Alpha authority cuts through my spiral. “Breathe. If you really have a soul bond with her, then you have an advantage Blake can’t account for. You can reach her.”

He’s right.

If Emmie and I truly are soul-bonded, then distance is irrelevant. I can maintain direct mental contact, assuming I can calm down enough to focus.

“I need something of hers,” I say, already moving toward my bedroom. “Something

she's worn recently, something that's touched her."

I know she borrowed a T-shirt after her shower. I find it crumpled in the corner where she'd tossed it—a soft cotton shirt in pale blue that still carries traces of her natural scent. I press it to my face, breathing deeply, using the familiar smell to anchor myself.

"I'm going to try to contact her," I tell Beck. "If this works, if I can reach her mentally, I'll get whatever information I can about their location and plans."

"How long will it take?"

I settle cross-legged on my bed, the T-shirt clutched in my hands like a lifeline. "Could be minutes, could be hours. The bond has to be strong enough, and she has to be receptive to the connection. She might be a little scared to focus right now."

"Do whatever you have to do," Beck says fiercely. "And call me the moment you learn anything."

The line goes dead, and I'm alone knowing that Emmie's terror is still echoing through my consciousness. I close my eyes, focusing on the sensation of the soul bond, that invisible thread connecting us across whatever distance Blake has already put between us.

Breathe, I tell myself. Center yourself. This is just like the meditation exercises you teach your students. But it's nothing like those peaceful academic exercises. This is a desperate, clawing need to reach the person who's become essential to my existence. The fear that if I fail, I might lose her forever.

I hold the T-shirt against my chest and reach to the golden thread of connection, going deeper and deeper until—

Jude? Her mental voice is faint, confused, hardly a whisper in my mind. But it's definitely her, and definitely real.

Emmie. Relief floods through me so intensely I nearly break the connection. Oh God, Emmie, I can feel you. Are you hurt?

I don't... There's wonder mixed with the fear sliding through our bond line now. We really can do this.

Yes. We're soul-bonded, love. I can reach you anywhere as long as you're receptive. I pour every ounce of love and reassurance I can manage through the connection. Where are you? What's happening?

Helicopter. Blake is... he's talking to the pilot about flight plans. Her voice grows stronger as she focuses on our connection. Wait, let me listen.

The bond goes quiet for a moment, then her voice returns with urgent clarity. He's asking about fuel stops. The pilot is saying they need to land at... Lawrence Municipal Airport in New Hampshire. Small private strip. Then they're changing to a plane and continuing to Aspen.

Aspen, Colorado?

Yes. Blake has a house there. He's telling the pilot about landing clearance for a private residence. Her fear spikes again. Jude, I'm so scared. He keeps looking at me like... like I'm a prize he's won.

Help is coming, I promise her, already reaching for my phone to call Beck with the location information. Beck and Eli are mobilizing everything. We're going to find you.

What if you can't? What if he takes me somewhere you'll never find me?

That won't happen. I pour absolute conviction through the bond. Emmie, listen to me. You are my soul match. My other half. I will move heaven and earth before I let him keep you.

Soul match, she repeats, and I feel her latching onto the concept like an anchor. I love you, Jude. I love all of you so much. Please let Eli and Beck know in case I don't come back. I'm glad I got to love you, even if it was for a short time.

I love you too. More than I knew was possible. The admission comes easily, naturally, carrying my absolute truth. Stay strong, love. Keep the bond open if you can. I'm going to call Beck with this information, then I'll contact you again.

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Hurry, she whispers, and the connection fades as she focuses back on her physical surroundings.

I immediately speed-dial Beck, pacing again as I wait for him to answer.

“What do you have?” he asks without preamble.

“Lawrence Municipal Airport in New Hampshire. They’re stopping there to take a plane, then they’re continuing to Aspen, Colorado. Blake has a house there with private landing clearance.”

“Not Montana...Aspen. Are you sure?” I can hear him already moving, probably heading for his own transportation. “How is she holding up?”

“Scared, but unharmed so far. The soul bond is...intense. I can feel everything she’s feeling.” I swallow hard against the renewed wave of her terror washing through me. “Beck, we have to get there before he...”

“We will,” he says grimly. “I’m coordinating with my contact now. We’ll have people waiting at both locations. Because one is obviously a lie.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Jude—“

“She’s my soul match,” I repeat fiercely. “My soul match, Beck. I’m not sitting here helplessly while she’s in danger.”

He pauses for a moment. “Understood. But if you’re coming, you follow orders. This isn’t going to be a gentle rescue operation.” The implications in his voice are clear—people are going to get hurt tonight. Probably killed. And I’ll be directly involved in whatever violence follows.

For Emmie, I’ll carry that weight.

“I understand,” I say. “Just get me to her.”

“Twenty minutes. Be ready.”

After ending the call, I settle back on the bed, clutching her T-shirt and reaching out through the bond again. This time the connection forms more easily, that golden thread between us growing stronger with practice.

Emmie? Are you there?

I’m here. Her mental voice is steadier now, drawing strength from our connection. We’re landing at the airport I mentioned. There are men waiting—more of Blake’s people.

How many?

Three, maybe four. All armed. Fear spikes through the bond again. Jude, Blake is talking about moving me to some kind of facility. Somewhere secure where I can’t escape. The casual way she relays this information makes my blood run cold. Blake isn’t just planning to use her—he’s planning to imprison her permanently.

That won’t happen, I tell her with fierce certainty. Help is already on the way to all locations. Beck has resources Blake doesn’t know about.

What kind of resources?

I hesitate, not wanting to frighten her further. The kind that gets results. Just focus on staying safe and keeping this connection open. Can you do that?

I think so. It's getting easier. There's wonder in her mental voice. I never believed soul bonds were real. But that was why I studied it. I wanted to know. And now this...feeling you in my mind, knowing you're fighting for me. It's keeping me sane.

Good. hold on to that. Hold on to us. I pour every ounce of love I can manage through the connection. Whatever happens, remember that you are loved. Completely, unconditionally loved.

I love you too. More than I knew was possible. Her mental voice grows faint as physical demands pull her attention away. They're moving me to another aircraft. I have to go.

Stay strong, love. We're coming.

The connection fades, leaving me alone with her steely determination mixing with her fear. But something has changed in the quality of her emotions—beneath the terror, there's a core of steel I hadn't felt before. She's not just surviving anymore. She's preparing to fight.

My phone buzzes with a text from Beck. Car outside. Time to go.

I grab a jacket and head for the door, still clutching her T-shirt like a talisman.

Whatever's waiting for us in Aspen, whatever violence and chaos Beck's "resources" might unleash, I'm ready for it.

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Emmie is my soul match, my other half, my everything. And I'll burn the world down before I let her stepfather keep her.

The golden thread of our connection pulses steadily in my consciousness as I head out into the night, a beacon guiding me toward the woman who owns my soul.

Your pack is coming, love. Hold on.

32

Emmie

The private jet touchesdown with a jarring bump that sends my stomach lurching. Through the small window, I can see snow-capped mountains rising like jagged teeth against the darkening sky.

It hours later and now we're in Aspen, Colorado. I've never been here before, but the landscape feels ominous, isolated—the perfect place for someone to disappear forever.

Jude? I reach out through our mental connection, that eternal thread that's become my lifeline. We've landed. It's so remote here, mountains are everywhere.

I'm here, love. His mental voice wraps around me like a warm embrace. Tell me everything you see.

The aircraft door opens with a hydraulic hiss, and the frigid mountain air rushes in,

sharp with the scent of pine and snow.

I wrap my arms around myself as Blake's men motion for me to move, using their weapons.

Small airfield,I relay to Jude as we descend the stairs.Maybe four or five hangars. There's a black SUV waiting, engine running. Two more men by the vehicle.

I've probably counted twelve men up to now. The concrete beneath my feet is slick with ice, and I nearly stumble as they escort me toward the waiting car. One of Blake's men steadies me with a grip that straddles between painful and helpful. Enough to keep me upright, yet tight enough to remind me I'm not going anywhere.

Getting in the car now,I tell Jude, sliding across leather seats that smell like expensive cologne and underlying menace.Blake is sitting across from me. He keeps staring.

Blake does keep staring, his deep blue eyes cataloging me like I'm the livestock he's considering purchasing. When he finally speaks, his voice carries the same false warmth I remember from childhood—the tone he used right before delivering punishment.

"You've grown into quite the beautiful young woman, Emmie. Your mother did well with you. I'll give her that."

I turn to stare out the window, focusing on the passing landscape instead of acknowledging him. Pine trees flash by in the headlights, their branches heavy with snow. The road winds upward, climbing steadily into the mountains.

"Don't ignore me, darling." Blake's voice carries a warning edge now. "You'll show me the respect I deserve as your guardian."

"I've never respected you," I say without looking away from the window. "And I never will."

The silence that follows is loaded with violence as his anger radiates across the small space. But I refuse to give him the satisfaction of showing fear.

"You know," he says conversationally, "I remember when you first came to live with me. Fourteen years old, all defiant eyes and protective instincts toward your sisters. You thought you could keep them safe from me."

My hands clench into balls at the mention of my sisters. "You sold them. Like cattle."

"I found them appropriate matches with men who could provide for them properly. That's what good guardians do." His smile is sharp enough to cut. "Though I must admit, I had such high hopes for all three of you. Such beautiful, intelligent girls with excellent genetic profiles."

The car takes a sharp turn, headlights sweeping across a wall of rock on one side and a steep drop-off on the other. We're climbing higher, moving deeper into the wilderness where my screams will only echo off the snow-capped mountains.

Still in the car, I tell Jude, trying to keep my mental voice steady. Winding mountain road, very isolated. No other vehicles, no lights except what we're making.

How long have you been driving?

Maybe ten minutes? We're climbing steadily.

Blake leans forward suddenly, reaching out to grip my chin with fingers that press just hard enough to bruise. "Look at me when I'm speaking to you."

I meet his eyes, letting him see the hatred burning there. "What do you want me to say? That I'm grateful? That I'm happy to see you?"

"I want you to understand your purpose." His grip tightens slightly. "You're going to give me what I need, Emmie. Beautiful, intelligent children who I hope will carry your genes. You can scent match to everyone, yet nobody. Once claimed, you'll be able to feel every emotion I have."

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That's how this started with Jude. I bit his lip and bonded us together. My heart hammers against my rib cage.

He continues, "I need to make sure that your DNA is passed to our children. The tests will begin tomorrow."

The casual way he discusses using me like a breeding animal makes my stomach turn. But it's his next words that truly break my heart.

"But do not disappoint me. I choose you. And I hope I chose more wisely with you than I did with your sister. It seems Lottie turned out to be quite the disappointment."

"What do you mean?" The words escape before I can stop them.

Blake's smile turns genuinely cruel. "A dud, I'm afraid. Barren. What a poor excuse for an Omega she turned out to be. All that investment, all those careful genetic considerations, and she can't even fulfill her most basic biological function."

Lottie. My sister's name echoes through my mind like a prayer and a curse. The sister who called to warn me, who risked her own safety to give me information about Blake's plans. The sister who's been living knowing that she's considered worthless by the man who controls her life.

"You're lying," I whisper, but I can see the truth in his satisfied expression.

"One year of trying, four heats and multiple medical consultations, every fertility treatment money can buy. Nothing." He releases my chin with a dismissive flick. "At

least Carlos is understanding about it. Some men might demand a refund."

The casual cruelty of his words makes something break inside my chest. Lottie, my sweet, gentle sister, reduced to a failed transaction in Blake's ledger. My beautiful twin sister. The one who used to braid my hair and tell me stories. The one who always tried to shield me from the worst of his attention is now living with the daily reminder that she's considered defective.

Emmie? Jude's mental voice carries concern. Your emotions just spiked. What's happening?

I can't answer immediately, too overwhelmed by grief and rage on behalf of my sister. The unfairness of it all—that any woman should be judged by her fertility, that Lottie should suffer for something completely beyond her control.

The car begins to slow, headlights illuminating what looks like a massive log structure ahead. Through my tears, I can make out the details of Blake's mountain retreat.

We're arriving, I finally tell Jude. Large log cabin, maybe three stories. There's smoke coming from the chimney. Very isolated—I can see higher mountains on the far side of the house, but nothing else. No other buildings, no neighbors. It took less than fifteen minutes from the airstrip.

Good. Was the sun behind or in front of you when driving from the airstrip?

It was ahead for most of the way. But now it is lowering behind me.

Good. Keep giving me details. We're mobilizing now.

The car stops in a circular driveway, gravel crunching under the tires. Motion-sensor

lights flood the area, revealing the full scope of Blake's "retirement property." It's not just a cabin—it's a fortress. High tinted windows, heavy doors, probably equipped with every security measure money can buy.

"Home sweet home," Blake says with genuine pleasure. "What do you think, darling? I had it built with you specifically in mind."

I stare at the structure that's clearly designed to be my prison, fighting down the panic that threatens to overwhelm me.

Getting out of the car now. The house is enormous, definitely designed for security. Multiple levels, lots of windows, but they're all high up. Heavy front door, probably reinforced.

Blake's men flank me as I get out of the car and approach the entrance, their presence making it clear that running isn't an option. Not that there would be anywhere to run to in this wilderness.

"You're being awfully quiet," Blake observes as we reach the front door. "Not planning anything foolish, I hope?"

I force myself to meet his gaze directly. "Like what? I'm not that special, Blake. I'm just scared and trying to process everything."

The moment the words leave my mouth, I realize I've made a mistake. Blake's eyes narrow, studying my face with renewed interest.

"But you know you're special," he repeats slowly. "Why would you say that?"

My heart hammers against my ribs, but I force myself to look confused. "Because I don't believe I am."

Blake stares at me for a long moment, then seems to dismiss his suspicions. "Once your tests start, we'll know just how special you are. If as an Aurora Omega you can speak to me telepathically."

He chews his lip for a moment and I think for a moment he is considering I already know I can. So when the front door opens to reveal an interior that's simultaneously beautiful and terrifying, I gasp. "This is lovely."

It is.

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He smiles, liking my opinion, it seems. I hope it was enough to pacify him. I glance around the room. At the exposed wooden beams, stone fireplaces, and expensive furnishings. Everything creates the illusion of rustic luxury while serving as an elegant cage.

"Let me show you to your room," Blake says, placing a proprietary hand on my lower back. "I think you'll find it quite comfortable."

He leads me up a sweeping staircase to the second floor, then down a hallway lined with what look like guest rooms. At the end of the hall, he opens double doors to reveal a space that takes my breath away. The room is enormous, dominated by a massive four-poster bed draped in rich fabrics. But it's the spiral staircase in the corner that draws my attention—it leads up to what appears to be a reading loft with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of the mountains.

"I designed this space especially for you," Blake says with genuine pride. "The loft has a complete library—I remembered how much you enjoyed reading as a child. I thought you might appreciate having a quiet space to retreat to."

The thoughtfulness of it makes my skin crawl. He's trying to create the perfect gilded cage, complete with amenities, to keep me docile and grateful. It feels very Beauty and the Beast, but I'll definitely not fall in love with him.

I do like the reading space but the bedroom is far too big.

In my room, I tell Jude silently. It's like something from a luxury hotel, but clearly designed to keep me here long-term. He's trying to make it appealing.

We're coming, Jude promises. Just hold on a little longer.

"I'd like to be alone for a while," I tell Blake, exhaustion seeping into my voice. "To process everything that's happened."

"Of course, darling. Rest is important." He moves toward the door, then pauses. "Dinner will be at eight. I'm having your favorite prepared—do you still love pasta carbonara?"

The fact that he remembers such a specific detail from my childhood makes my stomach turn. "Yes," I lie.

"Wonderful. I'll see you then."

The door closes behind him with a soft click, and I hear the unmistakable sound of a lock engaging.

I'm alone in my beautiful prison, surrounded by luxury and utterly trapped. I sink onto the edge of the massive bed, finally allowing myself to feel the full weight of my situation. The soft mattress and expensive linens feel like what they are—comfort designed to make captivity bearable.

Jude? I reach out desperately. He's locked me in.

We know where you are now. Beck has people mobilizing. It won't be much longer.

The promise helps, but I can't shake the feeling that Blake is planning something immediately. He didn't bring me all this way just to let me settle in comfortably.

Footsteps in the hallway confirm my fears. The lock disengages, and Blake enters without knocking, his expression thoughtful.

"You know," he says conversationally, "I've been thinking about what you said earlier about not being special. When you know you're an Aurora Omega. And only Aurora Omega's have the ability to speak telepathically."

My blood turns to ice. "Blake—"

"It was odd for you to say that. Almost like you were trying to deflect from something real." He moves closer, his eyes never leaving my face. "Tell me, Emmie—can you speak telepathically?"

"That's ridiculous," I say, but I can hear the tremor in my own voice. "You're being paranoid."

"Am I?" He reaches out to stroke my cheek with false gentleness. "Because if you could do something like that, it would explain how certain people always seemed to know things they shouldn't. For instance. The reason why your mother finally believed you."

I jerk away from his touch. "You're losing your mind if you think—"

The slap comes without warning, sharp enough to snap my head sideways and bring tears to my eyes. The taste of blood fills my mouth. I spit it onto the pristine floor.

"Don't lie to me," Blake hisses. "I can always tell when you're lying. You have the same look you've had since you were fourteen—that little flutter in your left eyelid."

Jude, I call out silently, panic flooding through our bond. He knows. He knows about my telepathy.

Stay calm. We're almost there.

Blake studies my face intently, watching for some sign of mental communication. When I don't immediately respond, his expression grows suspicious.

"You're doing it right now, aren't you? Talking to someone." His voice drops to a whisper. "Who is it, Emmie? Who did you call?"

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"No one," I insist, but we both know he doesn't believe me.

Blake leaves the room without another word, and I hear his footsteps retreating down the hallway. But he's back within minutes, carrying something that makes my heart stop. A syringe filled with clear liquid.

"No," I breathe, scrambling backward on the bed. "Blake, please. Not that."

"You need to sleep for a while," he says with false sympathy. "Just until I can be certain you're not causing trouble."

Jude! I scream through our mental connection as Blake approaches the bed. He's going to drug me. He has a syringe—

We're coming! Just hold on—

Blake lunges forward, catching my arm before I can escape. I fight with everything I have, clawing at his face, trying to break free. But he's stronger, and his men have clearly taught him how to restrain efficiently.

There's a prick first and then the needle slides into my neck. Bile rises in my throat when I feel the drug beginning to work. My limbs grow heavy, and my vision blurs at the edges.

"There's a good girl," Blake murmurs as darkness creeps in from all sides. "Sweet dreams, darling. When you wake up, we'll begin your new life properly."

Jude, I manage one last mental whisper as consciousness slips away. I love you. I love all of you. Find me.

But blackness swallows me whole.

33

Beck

The military-grade helicopter cuts through the night sky like a blade, its rotors churning through mountain air so thin it burns my lungs.

Dmitri's mercenaries are silent, waiting. These are men who've done this kind of work in places where mistakes mean death. I silently watch as they check their weapons, review tactical positions, and communicate with short, clipped Russian phrases. I've worked with dangerous men before, but never like this. These aren't corporate security or even high-end bodyguards. These are soldiers of fortune, the kind who destroy governments and extract hostages from war zones. The kind who don't ask questions about collateral damage.

"ETA three minutes," the pilot announces through our headsets.

Beside me, Jude grips the armrest of his seat, his face pale with concentration as he tries to maintain contact with Emmi through their soul bond. He's been reaching out every few minutes since we left the airfield. But for the past half an hour, he is growing more frantic each time he fails to connect.

"Anything?" I ask him for what feels like the millionth time.

He shakes his head, jaw clenched with frustration. "Nothing. She said he had a syringe."

"She's not dead," Eli interrupts sharply from across the cabin. "If she were dead, you'd feel it. Soul bonds don't just disappear."

Jude nods, but I can see the fear eating at him. The fear that we're too late, that Blake has already done something irreversible.

"He won't kill her. She's too valuable for that," I say and watch Jude's shoulders drop.

The helicopter begins its descent, and through the windows I can see Blake's compound spread out below us—a fortress of logs and stone nestled in a valley between snow-capped peaks. Motion-sensor lights illuminate the perimeter, revealing armed guards patrolling the grounds like a military operation.

"Target confirmed," Dmitri's team leader announces. "Multiple hostiles visible, probable additional personnel inside structure. Recommend tactical approach from three vectors."

Within minutes, we're on the ground, boots crunching through snow as Dmitri's men move between the trees and head toward the compound. A hand raises in the air for us to stop.

"Four targets in view. Permission to kill."

Dmitri glances at me. I nod. "Granted."

The night erupts in controlled violence. All four men are now dead on the floor, with red snow pooling around them.

Hand grenades shatter windows and ears, suppressed gunfire cutting down Blake's security team before they can retaliate.

I've seen corporate espionage, white-collar crime, even organized crime enforcement.
But this is war, swift and brutal and absolutely final.

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"Jude," I bark as we approach the main house. "Try to contact her again. Now."

He closes his eyes, reaching out through the soul bond while Eli and I cover his position. Around us, Dmitri's team systematically neutralizes resistance, moving through the compound with nothing but death on their minds.

"Still nothing," Jude whispers, his voice thick with desperation. "Beck, what if he's moved her? What if she's not here?"

That's when Eli freezes, head tilted in that predatory way that means his enhanced senses have caught something the rest of us missed.

"There," he says, pointing toward a line of footprints in the snow leading away from the main house toward the mountain face. "Fresh tracks. Someone was carried this way recently."

Two of Dmitri's men immediately peel off to follow the trail, but something in Jude's expression stops me from joining them.

"What is it?"

"The trail it's a decoy. She's here," he breathes, his eyes suddenly bright with certainty. "Beck, she's here. In the house. I can...I can smell her."

I lift my chin, drawing in a deep breath of mountain air, and there it is—faint but unmistakable beneath the scents of gunpowder and the chemical tang of sedatives, is the smell of thunder before the storm begins. "She's stressed."

Eli's nostrils flare as he catches the scent trail, his senses immediately locking onto Emmie's location. "Basement," he says with absolute certainty. "She's below ground level."

We move through the house like hunting wolves, following that precious thread of scent past expensive furniture and elegant artwork, past the bodies of Blake's men who chose violence over surrender.

The trail leads us to a hidden door behind the main staircase, revealing steps carved into living rock. The basement isn't a basement at all—it's a bunker, complete with reinforced walls and what looks like multiple holding cells. But only one is occupied.

Emmie lies unconscious on a narrow bed, her face pale, and slack from whatever Blake injected her with. She's breathing steadily, but when Eli checks her pulse, his expression darkens.

"Heavy sedation," he reports grimly. "Whatever he gave her, it's designed to keep her under for hours."

I want to carry her myself. I want to be the one to bring our Omega to safety. But Eli is faster, stronger, better suited for extraction under fire. He lifts her carefully, cradling her against his chest like she's made of spun glass.

"I've got her," he says. "Let's go."

We're halfway up the basement stairs when gunfire erupts from the main floor—not the controlled bursts of Dmitri's team, but the desperate spray of someone making a last stand.

"Blake," I snarl, passing by Emmie and Eli to cover them. I point to another stairway. "Go that way."

I find Blake in the main hallway, his back against a massive stone fireplace, a high-end assault rifle in his hands. One of his bodyguards lies dead at his feet, blood pooling on expensive hardwood. Blake himself looks like a cornered animal—wild-eyed, desperate, but still dangerous.

"Beck Silver," he says with a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "I underestimated you."

"It's over, Blake. Your men are dead, your compound is taken. Surrender now and maybe—"

"Maybe what? You'll let me live to face trial? To spend the rest of my life in prison?" He laughs, a sound like breaking glass. "I don't think so."

Behind him, I can see Eli emerging from the basement access, with Emmie in his arms and two guards covering them. She's still unconscious, her head lolling against his shoulder, completely vulnerable.

"But you can't have her," Blake continues, his grip tightening on his weapon. "She belongs to me. I made her what she is."

"That's why I came for her," I reply, raising my gun. "Because she's mine. My pack's Omega. Not yours."

Blake's attention shifts as he catches sight of Eli carrying Emmie toward the exit. His expression twists with possessive rage, and his rifle swings in their direction.

"If I can't—"

I raise my gun. My bullet takes him between the eyes before he can finish the sentence, the back of his skull exploding against the stone fireplace in a spray of

blood and bone. His body crumples like a puppet with cut strings.

"No," I say to his corpse. "You can't."

The flight back from Colorado passes in a blur of medical checks and anxious watching. Emmie remains unconscious for most of the journey, the sedatives Blake used still working their way through her system. But her breathing is steady, her color gradually improving, and Jude maintains constant contact through their soul bond.

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"She's dreaming," he reports at one point, his hand resting gently on her forehead. "Nothing coherent, but I can feel her consciousness stirring."

It's as we begin our descent toward home that her eyes finally flutter open. For a moment she looks confused, disoriented, her gaze moving between the three of us with growing wonder. Then understanding hits, and she bursts into tears. Not from fear or pain, but with overwhelming relief.

"You came for me," she whispers, her voice hoarse from the sedatives. "You actually came."

"Of course we came," I tell her, taking her hand in both of mine. "We choose you, baby girl. We'll always choose you."

Eli moves to her other side, stroking her hair with infinite gentleness. "You're our Omega. Our pack mate. Did you really think we'd leave you with him?"

"But the risk," she protests weakly. "The danger. Blake could have killed you all."

"He could have tried," Jude says with quiet conviction, his hand finding hers. "But we're stronger together than he ever understood. And you're worth any risk."

She looks between the three of us—her pack, her family, her chosen mates—and something settles in her expression. The fear and uncertainty that's haunted her for months finally gives way to absolute trust.

"I love you," she says simply. "All of you. So much."

"We love you too," I reply, speaking for all of us. "And we're letting no one take you away again."

"Is he—"

"He's dead, Emmie. You're safe."

As the lights of home appear below us, something shifts in the fundamental bonds that hold our pack together. Through violence and the test of separation that pushed us to our absolute limits, we've emerged stronger than ever.

34

Emmie

Two weeks after the rescue

I pause outside the university's main lecture hall, smoothing down the soft cashmere sweater Eli insisted on buying me last week. It's the first time I've been back to campus since Blake took me, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. But it's a different kind of nervousness than I used to feel—not the anxiety of someone trying to hide, but the anticipation of someone ready to reclaim her space.

"You sure you don't want one of us to come with you?" Beck had asked this morning over breakfast, his protective instincts clearly warring with his respect for my independence.

"I need to do this alone," I'd told him, and I'd meant it. This isn't about having backup or proving anything to anyone else. This is about proving something to myself.

The hallway buzzes with the familiar energy of students between

classes—conversations about assignments, weekend plans, relationship drama. Normal university life continues exactly as it always has, completely unaware that one of their classmates recently survived a kidnapping and helped orchestrate the death of her abuser.

I spotted Cerise immediately. She's holding court near the coffee cart, surrounded by her usual circle of admirers, her perfectly styled blonde hair catching the light. She's wearing designer jeans and a top that probably costs more than most students' monthly rent, radiating the casual privilege that used to intimidate me.

Now it just looks...hollow.

"Emmie?" One of her followers notices me first, her voice carrying a mix of curiosity and fake concern that spreads through social groups like wildfire. "Oh my God, where have you been? There were rumors that you'd dropped out."

The conversation around Cerise stops as heads turn in my direction. I can see the calculation in her eyes as she takes in my appearance—the expensive clothes, the confident posture, the way I'm no longer trying to make myself invisible.

"I've been dealing with some family issues," I say smoothly, moving closer to their little circle. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

"Family issues," Cerise repeats, her tone suggesting she doesn't quite believe me. "How mysterious. I suppose Professor Silver was understanding about your extended absence?"

There it is—the subtle dig, the implication that my relationship with Jude might have influenced my academic standing. The old me would have blushed, stammered, maybe even apologized for something I hadn't done wrong. The new me just smiles.

"Actually, Professor Silver has been incredibly supportive," I say, letting my voice carry just far enough for the gathering crowd to hear. "All of my professors have been. It's amazing how accommodating the university can be when you're honest about your circumstances."

"I'm sure they have been," Cerise says with a laugh that doesn't reach her eyes. "Some people just seem to have all the luck with...understanding authority figures."

The implication tastes like poison, and I can see several students exchanging glances. This is the moment—the choice between letting her continue her subtle campaign of character assassination or finally standing up for myself. I choose to stand up.

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"You know, Cerise," I say, my voice clear and steady, "I've been thinking about something you said about how I should be careful not to embarrass myself by reaching too high."

Her expression shifts slightly, wariness creeping in around the edges of her practiced smile. "I don't recall—"

"You told me that someone like me—" I emphasize the phrase, "—could never really fit into their world. That I was fooling myself if I thought they actually cared about me."

The circle of students has grown larger now, drawn by the unmistakable tension crackling between us. Several people have their phones out, probably hoping to capture whatever drama is about to unfold.

"I'm sure I was just looking out for you," Cerise says carefully. "Sometimes an outside perspective can be helpful."

"You're right," I say, and I can see her relaxing slightly, thinking she's won. "An outside perspective can be helpful. So let me share mine."

I take a step closer, and she instinctively steps back.

"My perspective is that you're a deeply insecure person who tears down other women because you can't stand the thought that they might achieve something you can't." My voice remains perfectly calm, conversational even. "You saw me finding happiness with people who genuinely care about me, and it threatened you because you've never

experienced anything real in your life."

Cerise's face flushes red. "How dare you—"

"I'm not finished," I continue, my Omega nature finally finding its voice—not submissive, but fierce in protection of what matters to me. "You tried to make me doubt myself, doubt them, doubt everything good that was happening to me. And for a while, it worked. I let your poison get into my head because I believed you when you said I wasn't good enough."

The crowd around us has gone completely silent now, everyone straining to hear every word. "But here's what I've learned," I say, my voice growing stronger with each word. "The only person's opinion that matters is my own. And I know who I am now. I know what I'm worth. I know I deserve love and respect and happiness, regardless of what anyone else thinks about it."

Cerise opens her mouth to respond, but I hold up a hand. "I'm also done pretending that your cruelty is somehow normal or acceptable. You don't get to tear people down just because you're unhappy with your own life. You don't get to make other women feel small just to make yourself feel big."

I can see tears of rage gathering in her eyes, her carefully constructed facade cracking under the pressure of being called out publicly.

"So here's what's going to happen," I continue, my voice taking on a quiet authority I've learned from watching Beck in action. "You're going to stop spreading rumors about me and my relationships. You're going to stop making snide comments and passive-aggressive digs. You're going to treat me with the basic respect that one human being owes another."

"And if I don't?" she snaps, her mask finally slipping completely.

I smile—not the nervous, apologetic smile I used to hide behind, but something with real teeth. "Then you'll find out exactly what kind of resources someone in my position has access to," I breathe. "Trust me, Cerise. You really don't want to find out."

It's not an empty threat. Beck's connections, Eli's strength, even Jude's academic standing—they all come with a certain amount of influence. But more than that, I'm not the scared, isolated girl I was when I got here. I have a pack now, people who would move heaven and earth to protect me.

Cerise seems to understand this, because the fight goes out of her all at once. She looks around at the crowd of students watching our confrontation, many of whom are nodding in approval at my words, and I can see her calculating the social cost of continuing this war.

"Fine," she says through gritted teeth. "Whatever. I have better things to do than worry about your...situation."

"I'm sure you do," I agree pleasantly. "I hope you find them fulfilling."

She turns and stalks away, her little circle of followers trailing behind her like uncertain satellites. The crowd begins to disperse, several students offering me supportive smiles or thumbs up as they head to their next classes.

I stand there for a moment, feeling the adrenaline slowly drain from my system.

I did it. I actually stood up for myself, claimed my space, and refused to be diminished by someone else's insecurity.

My phone buzzes with a text from Jude:How did it go?

I type back quickly: Better than expected. Heading to your office now. But you know we no longer have to text.

His response is immediate: Can't wait to hear everything. Proud of you. And I think I look constipated when I speak telepathically.

I laugh out loud as I make my way across campus toward the faculty building.

I catch my reflection in a window and barely recognize the woman looking back at me. Confident posture, head held high, eyes bright with self-assurance. This is who I was always meant to be. This is who I am when I'm not hiding, not apologizing for taking up space, not letting other people's fears define my worth. This is who I am when I'm loved and supported and valued for exactly who I am. I push open the door to Jude's building, ready to share my victory with the man who helped me find my voice in the first place.

Ready to continue building a life where I never have to make myself small again.

Ready to be as magnificent as my pack believes me to be.

35

Emmie

Three Weeks Later

The morning sun streamsthrough the kitchen windows of the main house, warming me as I sit cross-legged in my favorite pajamas on the floor. I'm sorting through wedding magazines. It's become my new obsession—not because I'm in any rush to get married, but because planning something beautiful and hopeful feels like the perfect antidote to everything that came before.

"This one," I announce, holding up a photo of an outdoor ceremony with string lights and wildflowers. "This is exactly what I want."

Beck looks up from his laptop where he's been working through emails, his reading glasses perched on his nose in a way that makes him look intelligent but impossibly handsome.

"Including the fairy lights?"

"All of it. The lights, the flowers, the way it looks so natural and romantic." I turn the magazine toward Eli and Jude, who are sharing the couch nearby. "What do you think?"

Eli abandons his book to study the image seriously. "It's beautiful, sunshine. Very you."

"The setting reminds me of the back gardens," Jude adds, looking up from the paper on Aurora Omegas he is reading. "We could definitely create something similar on the estate."

The casual way they discuss our wedding—not if, but when and how—still makes my heart flutter with happiness.

Five weeks ago, I wasn't sure I'd live to see another sunset. Now I'm planning a ceremony that will bind me legally and spiritually to the three men who've become my entire world. And afterward, I want each man to claim me and I'm going to claim them.

I hope.

"Your mom called while you were in the shower," Beck says, closing his laptop and giving me his full attention. "She wants to know if you'd like her to reach out to your sisters about the wedding."

The mention of my sisters sends a familiar pang through my chest. "Did she say anything about Lottie? About how she's doing?"

Beck's expression grows gentle. "She's safe, baby girl. Carlos isn't Blake, and from what I've learned, he's actually been quite understanding about...everything."

The fertility issues Blake mentioned. The cruel way he dismissed my sister as "defective" when she couldn't get pregnant. I've been carrying that knowledge like a stone that rested on my heart, knowing Lottie is probably blaming herself for something completely beyond her control.

"I want to call her," I say impulsively. "I know it might not be safe yet, but I need her to know that I'm okay. That Blake is gone and can't hurt any of us anymore."

"We can arrange a secure line," Eli offers immediately. "Dmitri's people have ways of making calls that can't be tracked or monitored."

The casual mention of their Russian connection doesn't even make me flinch anymore. I've accepted that Beck's methods for rescuing me involved crossing lines that can't be uncrossed. I don't remember the sound of gunfire, or the sight of Blake's lifeless eyes staring at nothing, but I do remember what he planned to do to me, what he'd already done to my sisters. For that reason, I can't bring myself to feel guilty about his death. I'm actually glad he is gone.

"I'd like that," I tell Eli. "Maybe this afternoon?"

"Consider it done."

Jude sets aside his papers and moves to the floor beside me, gathering me into his arms with such tenderness that it still makes my pulse quicken. "How are you feeling about everything? Really?"

It's a question he asks regularly. Our soul bond gets stronger every day and with that, he sees every one of my emotional states, and I see his. But as Jude watches me more closely for signs of trauma or delayed stress reactions. What he doesn't seem to understand is that being here with them, planning our future together, is the best therapy possible.

"Happy," I say honestly, settling against his chest and breathing in his familiar scent of books and coffee. "Scared sometimes, when I think about everything that could have gone wrong. But mostly just...grateful."

"Grateful?" Beck raises an eyebrow, moving from his chair to join us on the floor.

"That I found you. All of you." I reach out to touch his face. "I thought my life was

over. Now I can't imagine wanting anything different from this."

"Even when we're being overprotective?" Eli asks with a smile. "Because I know we've been hovering."

It's true—none of them have let me out of their sight for more than a few hours since the rescue. Someone always volunteers to drive me to town, to accompany me on walks around the estate, to check on me when I've been quiet for too long. Months ago, it might have felt suffocating. Now it feels like love.

"Even then," I assure him. "Though I might start taking advantage of the hovering if you're not careful."

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"How so?" Beck asks, his voice dropping to that low rumble that means he's intrigued.

I grin and hold up another magazine page—this one showing an elaborate multi-tiered cake covered in sugar flowers. "I was thinking we might need to sample a lot of different cake flavors. You know, for research purposes."

"Research," Jude repeats solemnly. "Very important for proper wedding planning."

"Absolutely essential," Eli agrees. "Though I could think of something much more...naughty. We could probably start this afternoon. Right after your call with Lottie."

"Naughty, eh?" I grin at Eli. "Any thoughts on how naughty?"

"I thought we could fill all your holes and you can relay to Jude everything you're feeling."

I laugh. "Well, it has been a while."

"You were recovering." Jude presses a kiss against my temple.

My smile is wide. I love the way they indulge my every whim, and treat my happiness like their personal mission. It still takes my breath away sometimes.

For so many years, I believed love meant sacrifice and compromise, settling for less than what I truly wanted. But being cherished by three incredible men who see my

joy as their greatest achievement feels like nothing I ever thought I would feel.

"There's something else," Beck says, his tone shifting slightly. "Something we've been discussing while you've been recovering."

I tense slightly, old habits making me expect bad news. "What kind of something?"

"The kind that involves making this arrangement official in every possible way," Jude says, stroking my hair soothingly. "Not only legal, but spiritual."

My heart beats faster, but with excitement rather than fear. "Yeah."

"But before we claim you, we want you to see a specialist to make sure your body can accept our bonds," Eli explains gently. "We're ready, but only when you're sure, and only when we know it's safe for you."

The thought of bearing their marks, of being connected to them in the deepest way possible, sends warmth flooding through my entire body. "I don't need a specialist. I was going to ask the three of you to do it once we're married."

Beck's smile turns distinctly predatory. "We still want to ensure the Alpha bonds don't conflict with your link to Jude, because that would be a tragedy."

I look between the three of them—my two Alphas and my Omega—my everything, and feel that familiar surge of absolute certainty that this is where I belong. "I don't want that either. When do I see the specialist?" I ask simply.

"Whenever you're ready," Beck promises. "There's no rush, no pressure. We have all the time in the world."

"But if you wanted to think about it," Eli says with studied casualness, "the new

moon is supposed to be auspicious for pack to bond."

"Which is next weekend," Jude adds helpfully.

"That's for wolves, not humans." But I laugh at their transparent eagerness. "Next weekend sounds perfect."

The smile that spreads across Beck's face is brilliant enough to rival the morning sun. "Perfect. I'll get a specialist here tomorrow to make sure you'll be fine."

I'm getting married to my pack.

No longer am I the girl I was. The scared, alone girl who was convinced she'd never be worthy of genuine happiness. That girl couldn't have imagined this. She couldn't have dreamed that running away from one nightmare would lead her straight into her very own fairy tale. But here I am, planning a wedding to make us legal and afterward I'll bond with my pack mates.

At last I have a future that looks nothing like the life I thought I could only wish for.

And I did it my way.

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Eli

One week later

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The evening air carries the scent of possibility as I stand on the terrace outside Beck's study, watching Emmie and Jude in the garden below. They're walking slowly between the flower beds, deep in conversation about something that has them both gesturing animatedly. The sight fills me with a contentment so profound it still catches me off guard sometimes.

Three months ago, I was convinced I would spend my life alone. The broken Alpha who thought nobody would ever love him, who'd convinced himself that his intensity and need for control made him unlovable. That his scent was too unique to match with an Omega. Now I realize not that nobody could love me—it was that I'd been stopping it from happening, building walls instead of bridges.

"Brooding again?" Beck's voice carries amusement as he joins me on the terrace, two glasses of whiskey in his hands.

"Reflecting," I correct, accepting the drink gratefully. "There's a difference."

"Is there?" He settles beside me against the railing, his attention also drawn to our mates below. "What thoughts are occupying that mind of yours this time?"

I take a sip of whiskey, letting the warmth spread through my chest before answering. "I'm thinking about how wrong I was about everything. About packs, about belonging, about what I thought I needed."

Beck's eyebrow raises. "Care to elaborate?"

"I spent years thinking I needed to dominate others, to maintain complete control so I

wouldn't get hurt again." I gesture toward the garden where Emmie has apparently said something that's made Jude throw back his head in laughter. "Instead, I found something better. I found people who didn't need me to be anything other than myself."

"Even me?" Beck asks with a tight smile. "I haven't changed."

"No, but what it means has changed. At least for us." I turn to face him fully. "Being my brother, I never expected to be in a pack with you. But here we are. You're my pack mate now because we built something together."

Beck's expression grows serious, touched by something deeper than his usual confident amusement. "You know, when I had my first pack, I thought I knew exactly what I was looking for. Traditional roles, clear hierarchies, everyone in their proper place."

"And now?"

"Now I realize I was building a boardroom, not a family." He takes a long drink, his gaze never leaving our mates. "What we have now is messy and unconventional and completely unprecedented."

"But it will work," I finish.

"It will because we'll make it work. Because we choose each other every day, not because biology or tradition tells us we should have sought a scent matched Omega."

The study door opens behind us, and Jude appears with Emmie close behind. Both of them are flushed from the evening air and whatever conversation they've been having, their connection is a reminder of the soul bond that connects them in ways Beck and I can only imagine.

"Are you two having deep Alpha thoughts out here?" Emmie asks with a teasing smile, moving to slip her arms around my waist from behind.

"The deepest," Beck replies solemnly. "We were just discussing who the real number one Alpha is in this pack."

I feel Emmie's laughter vibrate against my back before it bubbles out into the evening air. "Oh, please. You're both ridiculous if you think there's any kind of ranking system here."

"Excuse me," Beck says with mock offense. "I'll have you know as the elder—"

"And I've been running businesses since I was sixteen," I interrupt. "Leadership isn't about age, it's about—"

"It's about all of us being exactly equal," Emmie cuts us both off firmly, moving to stand where she can look at all of us directly. "This pack is beautiful because we are all so different that we make something whole and wonderful."

"And you're our heart," Jude says softly, taking her hand. "The one who reminds us why we're building this in the first place."

She smiles, and when she does, we all stare at her. The moment stretches between us, and all I can think about is we're about to make us permanent. This perfect unconventional pack.

"So," Beck says after a moment, his voice carrying a tone that means he's shifting into serious mode. "Are we ready for this? Really ready?"

It's the question we've been dancing around all week. Tonight is the new moon, the night we've chosen to complete our pack bonds. To mark each other, claim each

other, make this unconventional family official in every way that matters.

The specialist signed an NDA before treating Emmie and Jude. Because there was no way Jude wasn't an Aurora Omega too. He admitted it beforehand. He'd always know. Not only that, but he's the only male one known.

But he will never be outed. He's now in as much danger as Emmie. But Beck and I will burn the world down to stop anyone from hurting our Omegas ever again.

"I've been ready since the moment I realized what this was," I say without hesitation.

"Even knowing it's permanent?" Beck presses as Emmie and Jude, deep in conversation, walk away. "Even knowing there's no going back once we do this?"

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I look around at the three people who've become my entire world, especially her. The Omega who saw my strength instead of my damage, the one who challenges me to be better every day. And him. The Omega I never knew I needed. The one who accepted Emmie needed her alphas during her first heat, and he waited despite his own discomfort. For that, I will love and trust him every day.

"Especially knowing that," I say firmly. "I'm going to ask Jude if I can claim him, too."

"You should ask Emmie first if she wants you too," Beck says.

"Did I hear my name being mentioned?" Emmie calls from where she stands with Jude looking at the gazebo being built in the distance.

"Can I talk to you alone for a minute?"

Emmie nods, her eyes bright with certainty. "Of course."

In the house, I relay what I told Beck about claiming Jude. Her eyes shimmer with water as I ask, "But I can only do it if you give me permission. I don't want to cause a pack war."

"If you're asking for my blessing. I will give it to you it. How can I not? I love Jude. If you love him too and you feel him, then ask him."

I swallow and nod when she asks, "Do you want me to send him in?"

When Jude stands before me, I say, "I spent so many years hiding who I really was, afraid to let anyone see the real me. I never knew I'd love two Omegas."

"You love me?" Jude murmurs.

I sigh deeply. "I do and I'm done hiding. I want to belong to you and I want to belong to Emmie. But only if you want it."

Jude's expression goes from surprise to something that looks a lot like hope. His eyes are on mine as he says. "I'd love that."

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Emmie

This is so good. I love you, Emmie. I cover Jude's hand, which is on my breast, and squeeze. Eli covers him from behind, his thigh over his hip while he sucks on the bite he made to his shoulder.

Being an Omega, I should envy that development, but how can I be when I want Jude as well? I want them all. But right now, it's Beck's eyes that are on mine as his knot presses against my clit.

He's gone from fucking me hard to grinding as his hard knot pushes against my clit. "Let me in, wife," he growls against my neck before sliding his tongue over his claiming bite.

"Let him in." Eli reaches between where we meet and his fingers pinch my clit.

"Beck...Oh yes," I pant as my pussy pulses around his dick and I'm sure I've just entered Omega heaven.

Jude's hand falls away from my breast as he sinks harder into the mattress. "Eli..." A low ragged groan escapes his lips and I know it's not only me in Omega bliss.

"That's it. Come for me, Omega," Eli grunts into his neck. His eyes flick to mine and instinctively I do what I know Eli wants. I reach down and hold Jude's cock in my hand and stroke.

"Fuck!" Jude cries out.

"Good boy. That's it."

I like the thought of my Alpha taking my Omega.

Your Omega?

"I hope you two aren't talking," Beck grumbles in my ear, as he continues pounding his thick cock into me.

I wrap my hands around Beck's neck and meet each of his thrusts as my slick helps him surge forward. "That's it, Alpha. It's so good. I need your knot. I need to feel your cum inside me."

"Good girl," he says. "Open wider and let me in, Omega. You know how good I make you feel."

The fingers pinching my clit suddenly start stroking with featherlight touches. But it's not Beck who knots first. Eli is whispering sweet words into Jude's ear while he is pounding into him. My fingers reach down and wrap lightly around Jude's cock again.

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He starts moaning.

“Jesus!” Eli grunts as Jude cries out. “I’m going to knot you.”

“Alpha!” Jude yells.

Eli’s face convulses behind him as pleasure washes over his features, and he stills. After a few minutes, Jude lifts his head and looks at me, beaming.

“I want to fuck you next,” he says to me as Eli wraps his arms around him, pulling him against his chest.

“We’ll fuck her together,” Eli says.

I moan at the thought. We’ve done it before, one after the other. But not... “Together. Like both at the same time?” My pussy pulses at the thought.

“Keep talking to her like that,” Beck grunts. Her pussy is pulling me in. She likes it.”

I wrap my legs around Beck’s hips and meet each of his thrusts as my eyes roll into the back of my head.

“That’s it. Oh my god. That’s it, Beck. Don’t stop...”

His knot pops inside, and Beck yells out my name as his mouth sucks over his mark.

Jude

After my shower with Eli, I wanted more. I wanted to be inside my Omega. Because she was as much mine as she was theirs.

More so. Nobody had a connection like we did. Nobody in the world was going to get that. Only Emmie and I had that special something, and now I wanted to give her something she'd never had before.

I want to come inside my omega while my alpha knots us together. My cock jerks at the possibility.

Beck, being Beck, had Emmie in his arms in the possessive way he always did lately. Never wanting her to leave his side. He'd been the same since he's told his kids that Emmie was his and he wasn't giving her up.

Surprisingly Romeo didn't fight for her. He'd accepted that Emmie was never his scent match. And Remi wanted what was best for her father. River, on the other hand, hadn't taken it very well. He's considering moving to the south and finding a new hockey team to play for. He told his father he wanted to be where his best friends lived. Beck told him he was an adult and to do it.

I crawl up the bed between my Omega's legs, lowering my face until my head is between her thighs,.

"Jude," she whispers when I lick the slick that is already coating her pussy. My tongue languidly sliding through her folds, tasting the most delicious flavor in the world. I've no idea what it is. It can't be described by fruit, flowers or anything that is usually mentioned. But she is so unique. There is nothing like her.

"I want you inside me," she begs.

My gaze finds her, and she is smiling at me.

My god. I love her. I'd choose her every day for the rest of my life. What I feel for Emmie goes beyond anything I've read on Alpha/Omega biology. It goes beyond anything I've read about Aurora Omegas. But to understand more, that would mean we would need to be studied. I'd ever allow that. Not for my safety. I'd allow no one to know she existed. I'm glad Blake is dead. There's a good chance he'd worked it out before his end.

I pull her into my arms. "Fuck, I love it when you say it like that."

Beck kisses her on the lips before he moves off the bed. "I'll leave you two alone. I need a shower."

"Eli and I are going to knot you. But we'll go slowly."

Her tongue slides over her lips.

"Don't you fucking hurt her." I glance over my shoulder. Beck's voice is gravelly as he stands in the doorway. But he's not talking to me. He's looking at his brother.

"I love her. Why the fuck would I hurt her?" Eli responds.

"How does it feel being loved so much?" I ask Emmie as I lie back on the bed and she straddles my thighs.

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"Pretty good. You?" Her perfect pussy slides over my cock and she rocks over me, taking me inch by inch. I grin. "Amazing."

Eli lies beside us, watching his two Omegas fucking, and he's not jealous at all. Beck is the jealous one of the two Alphas, but that seems to be the way he is rather than anything to be worried out.

"You two look beautiful together," Eli says. "I saw it during your heats."

"We'd look better with you inside me too," Emmie says, glancing over her shoulder.

Eli chuckles, but he listens, settling behind Emmie as she rides me. "Take a deep breath, Omega."

While I'm deep inside Emmie, Eli holds her hips steadily as he presses his cock inch by inch inside her. His cock is so thick as presses alongside mine.

Emmie moans and her slick gushes around our cocks, lubricating us both. I pull my hips back and let Eli push further inside her. He stills, waiting like a good alpha to move.

"I'm so full..." A strangled moan flees her lips.

"Tell me when I can move, Omega," Eli grunts.

"Please..."

The movement becomes fluid—one in, the other out—over and over.

Each time Eli's cock slides against mine, I groan. It's not only from his cock but also the feeling of being inside my Omega with my Alpha. There's a heavy feeling deep inside my belly, and my head spins, not only because our movements quicken but also because of the sounds in the room, and I know none of us is going to last much longer.

"I'm so close," she whimpers. She is still between us, unable to move as I hold her waist and Eli presses against her back, jamming her between me and him as we make slow thrusts into her.

"Me too," I whisper as Eli's cock bottomed out with mine and I feel the solid lump of his knot as it presses against my balls.

"Fuck. I'm going to come," I cry out.

"Hold the fuck on. Are you close, Emmie? I want us to come together."

Eli pulls back and thrusts inside again, sliding his heavy cock over mine. I whimper. He thrusts back again.

My body zings, our slick gushes, her pussy throbs, our cocks belong together, and it's almost too much. Every nerve ending is firing and I know if Emmie doesn't come soon, I'm going to struggle to hold on.

We move again. This time Emmie moves between us. And it's like we're finally fitting together as we rock with gentle waves.

"Oh god," Emmie gasps, her head back. Eli kisses her cheek as he slides back inside the messy slick, this time much faster.

"Can you take my knot, wife?" Eli's pace becomes brutal. "Hard and fast, like he is holding on as best he can, too."

"Yes. Give me it. Lock us together."

We're all panting as our pleasure rises. And when his knot slides over my balls and inside of her, the shock on her face must match mine.

"Oh fuck!" I cry.

Emmie's eyes widen with sheer awe.

I'm panting. Nearly breathless as my cock is locked inside of Emmie along with Eli's. But when her pussy convulses, and she cries out, I relax. It's enough for me to hold her hips and press into her as my cock pulses and I come inside her. Like a great Alpha, Eli held out until his Omegas had come and with a low ragged groan he releases into her, and covering me at the same time.

"Good omegas." Eli's hot breath skims over my shoulder, where he kisses my claiming mark, and then he kisses Emmie's.

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Beck

I need her again. Watching her riding Jude while my brother knotted the two Omegas together was the hottest thing I've seen. And now I have a desperate physical need clawing at my chest—I want to hold her. I want to wrap my arms around her and feel her heartbeat against mine, want to breathe in the sunshine coating her skin and know that she's safe, that she's here, that she's ours.

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I wait, forcing myself to be patient as the three of them slowly untangle from each other. Emmie looks dazed, satisfied, but there's still something fragile in her eyes that makes my protective instincts flare.

When they finally separate, I move forward and lift Emmie away from them, cradling her against my chest. She melts into me immediately, and I carry her toward the bathroom.

"Let me take care of you," I murmur against her hair, and she nods, too exhausted to protest. I fill the tub with warm water and settle us both into it, positioning her so she's sitting between my legs, her back pressed against my chest. For a long moment, we just breathe together, the water lapping gently around us. I press gentle kisses along her shoulder, lingering over the spot where I claimed her. The mark is already healing, but I can still see the indent of my teeth, and something primal and satisfied rumbles in my chest.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper against her skin, and she shivers despite the warmth of the water.

We stay like that until the water starts to cool, and I can feel Emmie beginning to relax completely in my arms. When I turn, I see Jude watching from the doorway.

"Your turn to hold her," I tell him quietly, and he nods, understanding passing between us. I top the tub with hot water and get out, letting Jude take my place.

Elias and I watch from the doorway as Jude settles into the tub with Emmie, both of them looking peaceful and content. There's something beautiful about seeing them

together like this—not sexual, just... connected.

"How do you feel?" Eli asks me quietly. "Having a new pack. Does it feel like you're betraying your old pack?"

The question hits me harder than I expected, and I have to take a moment to find the words. I run a hand through my hair, feeling the weight of old grief mixing with new hope.

"I never knew what I needed," I finally say, my voice rough. "My pack mates always thought you should be in it too, you know. They said I was incomplete without my brother."

Elias's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "They said that?"

I nod, a sad smile tugging at my lips. "Maybe it took losing everything to know that."

Eli is quiet for a moment, his gaze drifting to where Jude and Emmie are still wrapped together in the warm water. Then he turns back to me, his expression soft. "They would be happy for you, Beck. They'd want you to love again, to build something beautiful from the ashes of what was lost that day."

The words break something open in my chest, and suddenly I'm crying—not the controlled tears I've allowed myself over the years, but deep, wrenching sobs that come from somewhere I thought I'd locked away forever.

Emmie rushes out of the bath, water streaming from her skin as she wraps her arms around me, her body warm slick against mine. She purrs softly against my chest; the sound vibrating soothingly through me.

"I mentioned his old pack," Elias explains quietly, his hand coming to rest on my

shoulder as Jude wraps a towel around Emmie and then himself.

I shake my head, struggling to speak through the tears. "That's not why I'm crying," I manage to say between sobs. "It's because it took me losing something special to find something special. But what if—"

"Don't, Beck," Emmie interrupts, her small hands framing my face as she forces me to look at her. Her voice is fierce despite how gentle her touch is. "You deserve to be happy. You deserve this. We all do."

I lean into her touch, feeling some of the tension leave my shoulders. "I just need to sleep in your arms," I tell her, my voice shaky as I whisper. "I'm just overwhelmed. That's all."

She takes my hand, her fingers intertwined with mine, and leads me to the bed. We settle in beside each other, her body fitting perfectly against mine.

"I love you, Beck," she whispers against my neck. "I'll always love you."

My arms tighten around her instinctively. "I love you, Emmie. God, I love you so much. I'm so scared of losing you."

She pulls back slightly to look at me, a knowing smile crossing her features. "That's what this is about. Because you lost your last pack."

I swallow hard; the admission scraping my throat raw. "It's because I've nearly lost you so many times, and I'm sure I'm cursed."

Her hand comes up to stroke my cheek, wiping away the lingering tears. "But I'm still here. We're all still here."

I nod, feeling the truth of it settle into my bones. "We are. You are."

"And you claimed me," she says, her fingers tracing the mark she left on my neck, "and I claimed you, so I'm not going anywhere." She takes my hand, pressing it over her heart as happiness and love pulses between us through our bond.

"Do you feel me?"

The sensation is like warmth spreading through my entire body, her emotions mixing with mine until I can't tell where I end and she begins. "I feel you. I've always felt you."

Her smile brightens, radiant in the dim light. "And I felt you at that bar in Boston."

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"You'll never wake up without me again," I promise, sealing it with a soft kiss on her forehead.

From across the room, I hear Jude and Elias chatting quietly before they join us; the bed dipping as they settle on the other side of Emmie.

Emmie's scent shifts back to the sunshine she exuded on occasion since she turned up at my estate. The happiest place she'd lived in years, she told me.

"Is this real?" she whispers, looking around at all of us.

"As real as it gets," Jude murmurs, his arm wrapping around her middle as he kisses her.

Only now do I finally understand that we are all the same. We all needed to find a love strong enough to build something beautiful from the broken pieces.

And I found it.

We all found it.

Epilogue - Emmie

Six Months Later

Today marks six monthssince our bonding ceremony, and Beck insisted on throwing a celebration to match the occasion.

The estate grounds have never looked more beautiful. Spring has transformed the landscape into something from a fairy tale. The garden bursts with cherry blossom, and the air carries the sweet promise of my scent.

Two long tables are draped in white linens, both laden with food and flowers, while strings light up the evening.

I stand at the edge of the terrace, watching our guests mingle below, and marvel at how much has changed. How much I've changed.

"You look like you're thinking very serious thoughts," Jude says, appearing at my elbow with two glasses of champagne.

"Happy thoughts," I correct, accepting the drink gratefully. "I was just thinking about how different everything is now."

"Good different?"

"The best different." I lean into his side, breathing my omega in. "How are your new students treating you?"

Jude's face lights up with genuine enthusiasm. "Brilliant. Challenging. Eager to learn about pack dynamics beyond traditional models." He pauses, grinning. "And art. Is it everything you hoped for? Or are you missing my tutoring?"

"I like the break because sometimes you're as bossy as our alphas," I say with a laugh.

Eli emerges from the house carrying a tray of something that smells incredible. He's traded his usual gardening attire of flannel shirt and muddy trousers for casual slacks and a button-down that brings out his eyes, and he's looking more relaxed than I've ever seen him.

"Romeo's outdone himself with the appetizers," he announces, setting the tray on a nearby table. "Though he keeps muttering about 'fancy rich people's food' under his breath."

"Who'd have thought that Romeo would have set up a kitchen for the homeless, and use the estate's produce?" I say.

Romeo has had quite the transition over the past six months. From a rich boy who cared only for himself to someone who gives back.

"I like the direction he wants to take the business." Eli's smile is wide. "I like he reflected on his treatment of you."

Me too.

"Where is Beck hiding?" Jude asks, scanning the crowd.

"Kitchen, I think. He wanted to thank Romeo personally for today."

Eli moves closer, his hand finding the small of my back with a casual possessiveness I've come to love. "How are you feeling about everything, sunshine? Not overwhelmed?"

The question touches me. Even now, months later, they all still check in regularly, making sure I'm comfortable with large gatherings, and with being the center of attention.

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"Happy," I say simply. "Grateful. I'm a little amazed that this is my life now."

Movement near the garden gates catches my attention, and I let out a delighted gasp. "River is here!"

River bounds up the terrace steps with the energy of a man who just signed a massive hockey deal, his now famous smile even brighter than usual. Behind him, two men I recognize from sports coverage follow more slowly—Crew Banks and Steele Oliver, former Boston players who now play for the Scented Scorpions.

"Emmie!" River sweeps me into a hug that lifts me off my feet. "Look at you, all glowing and gorgeous. Pack life agrees with you."

"It does," I agree, laughing as he sets me down. He fell out with his father for months, but came around one day—out of the blue—he arrived at the house with flowers and asking for forgiveness. He never needed our forgiveness—he needed time. "How was the flight?"

"Long, but worth it. I wouldn't miss celebrating your half year anniversary." His expression grows more serious, though no less warm. "I'm thrilled for all of you. What you've built here—it's special."

"Are you ready to talk to Remi?" Remi is in Italy, readying herself for the Olympics. In two days, we're flying out to watch her.

"Yeah. Oh, Emmie, Jude. Do you remember Crew and Steele?" River says, gesturing to his friends.

Crew steps forward first. "Congratulations on your bonding. River told us a lot about your pack."

"All good things, I hope," I reply, shaking his offered hand. Jude follows..

"The best things," Steele adds with a grin. He's smaller than Crew but radiates the kind of confidence that comes from being exceptional at what you do. "It's not often you meet a pack that's rewriting all the rules."

"We're not trying to rewrite anything," I protest. "We're just doing what works for us."

"Which is exactly why it's so revolutionary," Crew says with obvious admiration.

Beck chooses that moment to emerge from the house. He's with Romeo, and the reunion that follows is warm enough to make my chest tight. Watching him with his sons—proud, affectionate, completely at ease—reminds me of how much healing has happened here.

Before I can respond, another voice calls my name, and I turn to see my mother approaching with two women who make my heart leap with joy.

"Ava! Ella!"

My older sisters converge on me in a tangle of hugs and tears and excited chatter. Ava looks radiant as she rushes to me with her beta, Seb. Her two alphas trail behind. Silas holds their toddler on his hip, while her other alpha, Max, has their daughter on his shoulders.

Ella hugs me after Ava. Her three alphas crowding her like she was their world. I suppose she is.

"Look at you," Ava breathes, holding me at arm's length to study my face. "You're absolutely glowing."

"Pack life suits her," Ella agrees, then lowers her voice conspiratorially. "Are we going to get to meet these famous mates of yours properly?"

Over the next hour, I watch my sisters and their families integrate with my pack. Beck charms them with his easy confidence, Eli wins them over with his genuine interest in their lives, and Jude fascinates them with stories about his research.

But it's my mother's reaction that touches me most. She stands slightly apart from the main group, watching me interact with my pack and extended family, and when our eyes meet, hers are bright with unshed tears.

"Happy tears," she assures me when I approach her with concern. "I just... I never imagined seeing you like this."

"Like what?"

"Free. Confident. And completely yourself without apology." She reaches out to cup my cheek gently. "You spent so many years hiding, making yourself small. Look at you now. You're the biggest person here."

I cover her hand with mine. "Thank you for fighting for us, even when it was dangerous."

"I should have fought harder. Should have gotten you all away from him sooner."

"Mom." I turn to face her fully. "You did everything you could. And look how it turned out—we're all safe, we're all loved, we're all free."

Well, almost all of us.

The thought of Lottie casts a shadow over my perfect day, and I step away from the celebration to pull out my phone. I've tried calling her twice today already, but both attempts went straight to voicemail.

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This time, I don't even get that much. The call fails to connect entirely.

"Still no answer?" Beck appears beside me, his alpha instincts clearly picking up on my distress.

"Nothing. The call won't even go through now." I try to keep the worry out of my voice, but Beck knows me too well.

"I'll make some calls tomorrow," he promises immediately. "Dmitri's people can track her down discreetly to make sure she's safe."

"What if Carlos isn't as understanding as we thought? What if Blake's death changed things for her?"

Beck's arm comes around me, solid and reassuring. "Then we'll handle it. Whatever she needs, whoever she needs protection from—we'll handle it."

The certainty in his voice soothes the anxiety that's been building all day. This is what having a pack means—knowing that your family's problems become everyone's problems, that no one faces anything alone.

"Thank you," I whisper against his chest.

"Always, baby girl. Always. Are you ready to talk to Remi?"

"Definitely." We rejoin the celebration, and I let myself be pulled back into the joy of the moment.

Beck disappears into the house for a moment, returning with Romeo and River as we all get ready to watch Remi on a large screen. The evening air fills with excited murmur as our guests gather around, curious about what's happening.

"Connecting now," Romeo announces, fiddling with his laptop until the screen flickers to life.

Suddenly, Remi's face appears larger than life, her dark hair pulled back in a messy bun and her cheeks still flushed from training. Behind her, I can see the gleaming ice of an Italian rink.

"There's my girl!" Beck calls out, his voice thick with pride and emotion.

"Dad!" Remi's smile is radiant as she takes in the crowd gathered on screen. "River! Romeo! Oh my god, is that everyone? This is amazing!"

"We couldn't celebrate without you," I tell her, stepping closer to the screen. "How are you feeling?"

"Incredible. Terrified. Ready." She laughs, the sound bright and confident. "Just finished my practice session, and everything feels... right. Like all the pieces are finally falling into place."

"One week to go," River says, shaking his head in amazement. "My little sister at the Olympics."

"Not so little anymore," Remi grins, then her expression grows more serious. "I wish you could all be here for the opening ceremony."

"We'll be there for your events," Beck promises. "Front row, cheering loud enough to embarrass you."

The gathered crowd erupts in cheers and well-wishes, voices overlapping as everyone calls out encouragement. Remi's eyes are bright with tears as she takes in all the love and support.

"You're going to be amazing," Ava calls out. "We're all so proud of you!"

"Bring home that gold!" someone else shouts, and soon everyone is chanting their support.

"I love you all so much," Remi says, her voice breaking slightly. "This means everything to me. Having all of you behind me... I can do anything."

Everyone cheers before the screen goes black.

The celebration continues around us, but for a moment, the four of us stand in our own little bubble of perfect understanding. This is what we've built—not just a romantic relationship, but a family. A place where everyone matters, where no one gets left behind, where love multiplies instead of dividing.

"I want to say something," I announce impulsively, then immediately feel my cheeks heat as dozens of faces turn toward me.

"Go ahead, sunshine," Eli encourages softly.

I take a deep breath, drawing strength from my pack's presence, and raise my voice so everyone can hear.

"Less than a year ago, I thought my life was over," I begin, my voice carrying clearly in the evening air. "I thought I'd never be free, never be safe, never be truly loved for who I really am."

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The gathering has gone quiet. Everyone's attention focused on me with warm encouragement.

"But I was wrong. Because of all of you, I've learned that love doesn't follow rules or traditions or other people's expectations. But if you're brave enough to reach for it...if you're willing to build something new instead of settling for something safe. That's when you find it."

I turn to look at each of my mates. "You all taught me to believe in me." My voice wavers slightly, but I press on. "That I am enough, exactly as I am. That I deserve happiness, deserve love, deserve a place to belong."

"You do," my mother calls out, her voice thick with emotion. "You all do."

A chorus of agreement rises from our guests, and I feel overwhelmed by the support, the acceptance, the sheer amount of love surrounding us.

"So thank you," I continue, "for choosing us, for celebrating with us, for believing that love wins even when it looks different than expected."

"To love," Beck says, raising his glass.

"To love," everyone echoes, and the sound of clinking glasses fills the air like music.

Here I am, living proof that fairy tales don't always follow traditional scripts. Sometimes the princess saves herself. Sometimes she chooses three princes instead of one.

Sometimes the happily ever after looks nothing like what anyone expected.

And sometimes, that makes it even more beautiful.

The End.