



Ryder

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Desparion—the place where they put men with an inner monster.

A place no sensible beta goes unless they're seeking a dark, unrestrained kind of thrill.

That's me. The thrill-seeker. Well, not usually, but it's my birthday, and I'm making an exception.

Only, I think I might have taken on more than I can handle...

Ryder—no other comes close to his level of raw masculine appeal.

All the smoldering good looks that a girl expects from an alpha, along with a brooding stillness that makes me shiver from the other side of the room like he sees things beyond the understanding of us mere mortals.

What did I do about it?

I propositioned him. Told him it was my birthday and I'd like him as my present.

I just wanted to take a big bite out of all that hotness. And that was when I discovered that alphas bite back

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ChapterOne

Emma

“Are you sure this is what you want to do for your birthday?” Sloane had sat me down beside the kitchen island, and she was having one of her sisterly motherly heart-to-hearts, also known as cautioning Emma not to fuck up.

“Yes.” I nodded vigorously, worried she was about to back out. “This is absolutely what I want to do.”

She stared back at me with the same brown eyes that greeted me in the mirror every day. We didn’t otherwise look similar, and as far as our personalities went, we were wildly different.

“Wouldn’t you like to go to Angelo’s instead? I heard the food there is amazing, and?—”

I couldn’t help myself—I rolled my eyes.

Her lips thinned with disapproval. “Bloody hell, Em, you’re talking about going into Desparion.”

“Yes.” I nodded again with equal vigor. “That’s where I want to go for my birthday. I’m twenty-two years old, Sloane. Let me be twenty-two. This is what I want to do.”

“But why?” Her hands remained at her side, but I pictured her mentally ripping out her hair.

I shrugged. “Curiosity. Lots of people go there. My visa is approved. I did one for you too, Sloane, but if you don’t want to go, I understand.”

“I’ve never missed a birthday,” she said.

“We’re not going to do every single birthday together. What if you get that job? You’ll leave and live in another city. Besides, college is over for me now, and I might be moving too.”

She sighed. “I guess you’re growing up.”

“I grew up a while ago, Sloane. I’m twenty-two.”

The tightening around her eyes didn’t escape my notice. We’d grown up quicker than we should’ve had to when our parents died in a car accident. It happened, or so the policeman who notified us had said. I mean, I knew that because you heard about it on the news, except this time, it had been us. Sloane had stepped up into the void they left when she stopped being my big sister and became my mother instead.

I missed my big sister. I missed my mother and father too. I felt like I lost them all.

“You’re set on this, aren’t you?”

I smiled because I sensed her resolve weakening. “Come on, it’ll be fun. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“We leave in a body bag,” she said dryly. “Never ask me what the worst is. I can fill a book with worst-case scenarios.”

I chuckled. “You’re being dramatic. Lots of people go to the alpha zones. Hundreds and thousands of them all over the world. That’s why they have visas. It’s just like visiting a foreign country,” I finished with a shrug.

“A foreign country? They’re fucking animals.”

“They’re people,” I replied. “Just...slightly different from us.”

“Did you see yesterday’s news? Another alpha triggered, revealed, and went on a rampage in the shopping center. It took five security guards to take him down.”

“They’re different in their own zone. They know what they are. It must be confusing for them when it happens. All alone, ripped from their friends and families—the same as omegas are. Nobody talks about it. I feel sorry for them, personally.”

“Well, I bloody don’t,” Sloane said.

“Anyway, we are going. Jude will be here in” —I checked my watch— “two hours to pick us up. He’s fetching Jewels with him. Please say you’ll come, Sloane.”

“Fine. I’ll come.”

“Great! More friends are catching up with us there. When I told the people in my design class, everybody wanted to come.”

“Jesus,” Sloane said. “How many people are going?”

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“Not sure, ten, maybe a few more.” I winced. “Probably double that by now. Word quickly got around.”

“Fuck me. This is going to be a disaster.”

I couldn't help my smile when she began pacing. “Sloane?” I stood, because it seemed like this talk was over, and put my hand on her shoulder. She stopped pacing. “It'll be okay, but yeah, maybe...maybe wear something less formal.” I shrugged when she shot me a glare. “You can borrow one of my dresses if you want?”

“No thanks,” she said.

“What? You are coming, aren't you? I want you to come. I didn't mean all that stuff I said about us not having every birthday together. If that happens, I want it to be the exception. I hope we share all our birthdays for the rest of our lives.”

Her face softened, and the tension left her shoulders. She drew me in for a hug, and I hugged her back just as tightly.

“I love you, Em,” she said.

“I love you too.” I drew back, smirking. “Now, say you're coming with me. It'll be fun. We'll have a few drinks and come home safe and sound.”

“So you're not going there for the alphas?”

“Oh, I'm definitely going there for the hot alphas,” I said. “I want to see what one

looks like up close and personal—that's the whole point."

"Fine," she said, throwing her hands up.

"Yes! I'm going to get ready. Can I do your makeup?"

"No, you can't do my bloody makeup. Jesus, I'll come. That's about as good as it gets."

Laughing, I headed for my room. Sloane would probably wear something terrible. Well, not terrible in the literal sense. She had excellent taste and her style was very classy, but not one item in her closet would work for a night out in Desparion, also known as the alpha zone. I'd picked out a pretty sequined dress that clung to my gentle curves, along with high heels as high as I could walk in. I was petite, so I claimed my inches when possible.

On the other hand, Sloane would look like she was going to a dinner party—sensible, without too much skin showing. Which was fine most of the time, but not for a club.

I hopped in the shower, then took my time with my hair and makeup. I was just slipping into my dress when a knock came from the door.

"Come in!"

"Well, look at you." Wearing a pair of beaten up designer jeans, and a white linen shirt open at the neck, Jude flashed me his signature grin as he swept glossy dark curls back dramatically from his brow like he was overcome by my splendor.

"Don't be a chump, Jude," I muttered, grinning.

"Ready to party, birthday girl?"

I shimmied my hips. “What do you think?”

“Girl, you look stunning. Those alphas are going to go wild.”

“I bloody hope so. I spent hours getting ready.” I glanced toward the door before lowering my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “What is Sloane wearing?”

He grimaced. “Sensible school teacher meets exec.”

“High heels?”

He nodded.

Phew.

“Jude, are those new?”

He ran his hands down his trim torso. “All primped and ready for action. I still don’t know how I didn’t become an omega. I’d have made an amazing omega.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know. You’ve only told me about fifty times.”

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“Fine, girlfriend. It’s showtime. Jewels is getting the safety talk from Sloane.”

Chuckling, I picked up my purse and slipped my arm through Jude’s.

I found Jewels sitting on one of the stools around the kitchen island. Sloane had a cell phone in her hand, but the sparkly red case told me it was Jewels’ and not her own.

I groaned.

“What?” Jude asked.

“Right, hand over your cell phones,” Sloane said. Giving Jewels’ back to her, she motioned us to hand over the goods.

“You checked it earlier,” I said. “Like two hours ago. What could possibly go wrong?”

She gave me the look.

Jude chuckled.

We both handed over our cells.

“All working,” she said. “You all know how to use the app?” Her eyes skimmed over each of us.

“Yes, Mummy,” Jude said. “Did you also install the Play Safe app?”

“Me?” Sloane asked like this request baffled her. “I’m not going to need—Fine.” She sighed heavily and grabbed the cell out of an enormous bag.

“Looks like you packed to spend the night,” Jude said, wiggling his eyebrows.

Jewels snickered.

Sloane shot him a glare and went back to tapping on her cell. A few minutes later, she held it out to us so that we could check it like she’d checked ours.

As part of the visa application, they recommended you download the app. You could then ask any alpha you met for his ID and check it in the app. As long as they didn’t have a criminal record, it would come up with a green tick.

I understood why it was recommended. They wouldn’t let us enter the zone at all if there were any real danger, but the app provided a safety net.

“It’s not so different from here,” I said to Sloane. “There’s a strip with bars, restaurants, and clubs.” Mostly bars and clubs, but I was certain people ate there too.

“Inked,” Jewels said. “The best club in Desparion. Dancing and cocktails, and I’ll be happy.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jude said. “I’m going to make a fine alpha sandwich.”

Even Sloane cracked a smile at that.

Time to party.

* * *

Ryder

“Nice collection of victims—I mean, opportunities,” I said as I joined Jace at the gate.

He glared at me, the grumpy bastard, before going back to his clinical inspection of the bug-eyed betas trailing past. The gates had been thrown wide. It was officially open season in Desparion as cute little beta prey, all primped to entice alphas to pounce, hustled down the strip.

Jace didn’t indulge in the groupies often. He had his share of hang-ups, but then again, didn’t we all?

A few eyeballed me openly...and one almost face planted when I offered her my smile. So much fucking fun.

Some were serial offenders, turning up every week on the dot for their fix of alpha cock. The rest were taking a once-in-a-lifetime trip into the wild side. They would store the memory away and never return again.

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“Don’t talk about them like that, asshole,” Jace muttered, making a mockery of his own words as his head panned to follow the passage of a beta who stood out in the sea of exposed flesh, given she had dressed like she was about to go for an interview at a bank.

Arm looped through miss corporate banker was a pixie, showing a whole lot more flesh. What wasn’t exposed was covered by a little sequined dress that sparkled and had every alpha in the vicinity panting.

I smoothed my face out into my best approximation of innocence. “Willing participants?”

“Better,” Jace agreed.

I loved the big bastard, even if he was a miserable dick who kept his sense of humor under lock and key. I supposed no one had an easy ride toward life in the zone separated from the civilized part of the world by a fucking massive fence and a gate, but Jace’s entry had been tougher because it hadn’t only been about him. “You’re growling.”

“I’m good,” he said.

He didn’t need to tell me—I knew he was thinking about his sister, Ella. She was older than Jace and had been living in a rough neighborhood when she revealed her omega status. Things had gotten fucked-up for a while, but Ella seemed to have put it behind her. Jace, not so much.

I didn't have that issue. My sister was a conceited beta bitch who still lived a life of luxury. The worst thing that had happened to her perfect world was the scandal to our family when I revealed as an alpha. I nearly broke my parents apart. My father became convinced my mother had been indiscreet, as there hadn't been any alphas on his side of the family for generations. A whole heap of digging had ensued, and it turned out my grandmother on my mother's side had covered up the fact she'd had an alpha son. My uncle had been relocated to an alpha zone on the down low. They'd even had a funeral with a closed casket, claiming he'd been killed in a freak accident while rock climbing. That had been convenient for them—him being an outdoorsy type.

My contribution to the dynasty was getting our family all over the tabloid sites. No neat and tidy fake death had been available to them, though I was pretty sure my parents would have offed me for real, given a choice.

They didn't get one. The Agency for Alpha Control had swooped in and snatched me. It was still out there now—a photo of me with my face smeared in blood, fighting with the burly alpha henchmen they'd employed when I went on a rampage in a club...allegedly.

The tabloids liked to drag that snapshot out every time my father cut a deal that pissed off the masses.

The truth was, I didn't go on a fucking rampage. My scent suddenly exploded. Some guy's girlfriend threw herself at me and started humping my leg. Trust me, no one had been more surprised about this than me, which would have been fine if the guy hadn't tried to take her from me. I hadn't known the woman, had never met her in my life, but a newly awakened alpha was possessive and in my confused state, she had been mine.

Farther down the strip, the pixie, corporate banker, and sidekicks appeared to be heading for our club. "You're still growling," I said to Jace while nodding at the

alphas who'd arrived to take over gate duty.

Jace huffed out a breath as we started walking back toward the club. "I know. I'll deal with it."

"You need to get laid," I said, smirking.

He chuckled.

I tried not to wallow in my head. The past was the past and all that. Jace and his antics were always good for a distraction, and tonight, he was very distracted by banker chick, no less. "So, Miss Prim..." I trailed off, laughing when he took the bait and punched me on the arm.

"Off-limits," he said, not even bothering to pretend he wasn't interested.

"Yeah," I replied, giving him my best shit-eating grin. "That one's a screamer of the unenthusiastic variety."

His heavy sigh said he knew I was right. Some people didn't belong here. A few years ago, before I revealed as an alpha, I'd have sneered and flicked imaginary lint from my clothing at the thought of entering Desparion. I'd always been an asshole, I was just a different variety back then.

"She's still off-limits," Jace said.

I didn't taunt him for effectively warding me off. Every alpha had an inner beast, and Jace's was protective. He'd take on the fucking world if anyone messed with those he considered under his care. We had a strict policy in our club regarding enthusiastic alphas—if the betas were willing, fair game, but anyone caught forcing the matter would wake up in the back alley with one hell of a headache.

It was a practice I wholeheartedly endorsed.

Jace rarely indulged in the newbies and certainly not one who looked like that. Nor did I.

Banker chick didn't belong here, but neither did the sequined pixie at her side.

Looked like they were off-limits for both of us.

Chapter Two

Emma

Desparion—the place where they locked the monsters and misfits who revealed as an alpha behind a great expanse of chain-link fencing, separated by a half mile of no-man's-land.

You'd think no one would want to go there. On the surface at least, it didn't sound like the kind of place a sensible person would visit. Yet thousands of unassuming, sensible people queued up for the privilege every week.

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Why?

Because everywhere you looked were alphas; and betas, it would seem, were drawn to the fire.

Alphas didn't follow the same rules we did, and I found that fascinating. They didn't have rules at all. Not that I was a huge rebel. I rarely drank more than one or two glasses, didn't take drugs, and my only vice was my obsession with certain illegal sites where you could watch alphas in action.

But today, I was making an exception. Today was my birthday, and for once in my life, I was doing something wild. Sloane has been, well, Sloane. Persuading her to let me party here had been a challenge of epic proportions. I loved my big sister to the moon and back, but sometimes, I wished she'd be my sister, not my mother.

When we first arrived at Inked, our club of choice, and my stuffy sister took up residence on a barstool, I'd feared the worst, but barely had I finished the first dance when security arrived to whisk us away to a private room, no less.

Freaking amazing! I couldn't believe Sloane had pulled a hot alpha with this much clout...any alpha, for that matter, given she had to be dragged out. I honestly thought she'd never move from the barstool she'd claimed, save for a riot or fire, yet here we were. There was a small private dance floor, a sleek, pink and blue neon lit bar, intimate couches and tables, and a balcony and stairs leading down to the main club, where bright lights rotated through the color spectrum.

Meanwhile, my sister had disappeared and was off having fun with an alpha.

Bet she was glad I'd made her install the app now. I'd have high-fived her, except she was busy and some things even a sister didn't interrupt.

I was glad for her. Maybe this was the start of a new Sloane. Maybe I would finally get my big sister back again.

I hoped so. I'd missed her.

"That's one hot alpha," Jude said, gazing with open appreciation at the alpha standing at the opposite side of the bar.

I grinned, swaying my hips in time with the music while sipping a delicious and pretty cocktail the barman, Art, had just slid across the counter toward me. "What's holding you back?" Jude had never been shy about putting himself out there. Oh, he was subtle about it, but if he wanted a man, he had a way of placing himself in their line of sight that made it all just happen.

"He's not into men," Jude said, smirking. "But I think he's into you."

"What?" My head turned toward the alpha in question so fast, I nearly gave myself whiplash. "He's not even looking at me!" And really, I would know, given I'd been sending covert glances his way since I first spied him.

"Exactly," Jude said. "Every alpha in the room is mesmerized by you, from your sequined cat ears all the way to those cute, pointed shoes. Any man not looking is either gay—which trust me, he isn't, since my gaydar never fails me—or into you on a whole other level."

I dismissed the alpha as a possibility, even as my eyes kept straying his way. I'd come out tonight to have fun, and not necessarily the kind that happened between the sheets, but once we'd arrived, I felt the pull they all talked about.

Pheromones. They didn't impact a beta the same way they impacted an omega, but damn, my whole body was tingling just from our limited time in this private room. It was disconcerting to be this aroused without anyone touching me. No wonder this place was so popular. I tried and failed to imagine how good it would be if an alpha actually touched me.

I mentally fanned myself.

Yet all other plans went out the window when I'd spotted him, because no one here came close to his level of raw sex appeal. He was tall, with medium brown hair that had gotten too long and the smoldering good looks that a girl expected from an alpha. There was also a brooding stillness about him that made me shiver from all the way over here, like he saw things beyond the understanding of us mere mortals. Plus, the guy was big, like freaking massive. Miles of muscles were showcased to perfection in that faded T-shirt, jeans, and boots—really big boots. All very proportional, from what I could see.

My eyes, like they had a will of their own, went straight to his crotch...and wow. I wasn't in the habit of staring at men's crotches, but wow... Was that even real? My eyes snapped up, some sixth compelling me to do so.

Fuck!

I didn't swear very often, but if any situation warranted cursing, this was it. I should've looked away, turned around, done something, anything, but I was like a deer in headlights. His eyes were a kind of blue-gray that always looked fake when you saw them on models.

They weren't fake. Not one damn thing about him was fake. The man was one hundred percent the real deal.

And now he was staring straight at me.

Jude's chuckle snatched my attention, and I scowled at him.

“Girlfriend, he caught you ogling his junk like you were starving and it was a piece of steak. Retreat isn't an option. May as well tough it out and find out where the game goes.”

My lips tugged up. This was why I liked Jude so much. He had my back, looked out for me, and gave me a gentle nudge toward things on my bucket list...like a man I wanted. And I did want him more than my next breath. I'd sell my soul to the devil to have that alpha put his hands on me.

I tapped my cherry red tipped finger on my lips as I eyed Jude. “What approach do you recommend?”

“Drunk party girl,” he said, grinning. “Just in case he's an asshole in a fine package. Can't be too careful.”

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Ryder

“Are you an alpha?”

I looked down at myself, looked back at the little beta, and raised a questioning brow.

She giggled, teetering on her sky-high heels. Glossy dark hair was adorned by a set of sparkling cat ears that managed to ride the line somewhere between ridiculous and cute. They were slightly off center, and I had to fight my OCD urge to straighten them up.

Rubbing absently at the stubble on my jaw, I sized her up. She looked like trouble, from the jut of her little pixie chin all the way down to her toes. I'd been trying to ignore her, mostly because she was stunning, but also because anyone who could shake their ass while drinking a cocktail and not spill a drop took my mind straight to the gutter... Like, what else could she do without spilling a drop?

Also, I could tell from fifty paces that she wasn't a good girl, and I liked my girls good.

Yeah, I lied to myself frequently.

“Aren't you going to offer to buy me a drink?” she asked.

“Nope.”

Her impish smile disappeared. “What? Why not?”

“Because all the drinks are free and you look like you’ve had enough.”

“They’re free?” she asked, her brows drawing together.

I nodded slowly.

The party girl act dropped in a flash, and she tapped one little pointed toe, brows pinching together like she was getting ready to maim someone. “I thought everyone was super generous.”

I shrugged. Someone was super generous. That someone was me, courtesy of my business partner Jace and his desire to bang some corporate banker chick, aka the beta who’d stumbled into our midst.

“And I was faking having had too much to drink. I’ve found it’s the absolute best way for weeding out the assholes.”

I laughed. Her bullshit was cute. Then my smile dropped as I wondered what kind of assholes she’d met to resort to such a tactic.

“You passed,” she said, her little smirk back in play. “It’s my birthday, by the way.”

“Yeah? I kind of figured that part out.” Those damn off-center cat ears made my fingers itch.

“My sister hates my dress,” she said. “Do you like my dress?”

Was this another fucking test? “Baby, I love your dress. I just wish there were a lot more of it, or we were somewhere private and I was the only man looking at it.”

Yeah, that popped right out, except that wasn’t me. I couldn’t give a fuck what a

woman wore or who saw it and enjoyed a pretty view as much as the next man. I didn't do possessive or territorial, but this sassy pixie was poking through my usually stolid façade.

"Hmm. I better get one in every color."

"Brat," I said, smirking as I tested out the word. I didn't mean for that to slip out either, but every man had a type. Tall, short, brunette, blonde, slim, or curvy, it didn't matter because I didn't have a type, other than a weakness for brats. I just wanted to temper them because tempering them was hot as fuck.

"Oh, I definitely am, as my sister will attest."

"Baby, what it brings out in me is nothing like what it brings out in your sister."

Chapter Three

Emma

My well-scripted plans were thwarted by the arrival of another alpha.

"Ryder, I need a word," he said, barely sparing a glance at me.

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Ryder... I tested out how it sounded and decided it suited him.

Ryder and the interrupter continued on in a steadily more heated conversation, talking in low rumbles that I couldn't hope to hear over the music.

"Fine, then," Ryder said before turning back to me. "Gotta go do some work, baby. Enjoy your birthday party. Try not to get up to any mischief."

And with a wink, he was striding off, following the other man to a destination unknown.

I glanced to my left, where Art, the cheerful barman, gave me a grin and a shrug as he unloaded a stack of clean glasses from the rinser. "Want another cocktail, love?" he called.

Smiling back, I lean in closer to the bar. "Who's paying for it?" Ryder said the drinks were free?"

Art chuckled. "They are. Jace said everything is on his tab, so to speak."

"Jace?" I asked. "Is that the alpha with my sister?"

Art nodded. "Yeah, that's Jace. Hard to miss all seven feet of him."

"He must have a lot of money." Some people considered me too nosy. I preferred to think of myself as forthright.

“He owns the place,” he replied, closing the door to the glass rinser, and turned to me. “With Ryder and Dane, the alpha who just came to talk to him.”

“So, Ryder? Was that the alpha I was talking to?”

Art nodded again slowly. “Trust me, they can afford your party. Want that drink now?”

My smile bloomed. “Give me your best cocktail, then.”

“Best cocktail in the house, coming up.” He grabbed a shaker from the shelf behind him, along with a couple of liquor bottles. I watched the whole process. It was quite a work of art. Done with the mixing, he selected a martini glass, poured out a cloudy liquid, dropped in a sprig of something green and a slice of apple, then slid it over the bar toward me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Try it and see. If you don’t like it, I’ll make you another one.”

I took a cautious sip. Sweet, like toffee apples, but with a kick. “Yum!”

He grinned and moved on to serve the next person.

“Hey, Em!” A tipsy Jewels threw her arm around my neck and planted a kiss on my cheek.

“Em!” Sandra and Lexi chanted.

“Oh, what’s that?” Lexi asked, eyeing my cocktail with open envy.

“Here, try it.” I handed it over before thumbing in the direction of the bartender. “Art made it.”

Her eyes rolled back as she took a sip. “Bloody amazing. Let’s all get one!”

As Lexi batted her lashes at Art, I scanned the crowd, looking for Jude. Jewels and Jude were my besties. The rest were more acquaintances from my design class at college. Once they’d heard where we were going, friends invited friends. Before I knew it, my twenty-second birthday had turned into the perfect excuse to party in Desparion. The room was now crowded. Not only my friends, but a fine selection of hot alphas and betas we had been partying with before our relocation to the private room.

“Where did the hot alpha go?” Jewels reached up to straighten my cat ears. “When I saw you talking to him, I thought that was the last we’d see of you tonight.”

Great! Was I talking to him with wonky cat ears? No wonder he jumped at the chance to escape an awkward conversation. Likely, the reason he’d avoided looking at me was that my damn headband had slipped and he thought I was a twit. He owned a bar, for goodness’ sake... with his partners. Either way, a place like this didn’t run without a good businessman running the show.

“His partner came over and called him away for some business. He’s the owner of the place.” I didn’t bother to hide my pout. “Along with two other alphas. Sloane is with one of them now.”

Jewel’s mouth popped open on a gasp. “What the fuck? Go team Sloane! It’s always the quiet ones you have to watch.”

I laughed as she high-fived me. “Yeah, I’m totally jelly. I was a bit worried when I saw her leaving, but you know Sloane. If she was comfortable heading off with a guy,

she'd have already uploaded his ID to the Play Safe app."

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“I can’t believe she made us hand over our cellphones to check we’d installed it properly!”

“I can,” I said dryly, and we both laughed at that.

“Okay, Em. Time for some more dancing, but first, I’m going to grab some water” —she threw a look over her shoulder— “when Sandra and Lexi stop hogging the barman.”

“I’m going to find Jude. Drag him to the dance floor as well.”

“Good plan! I’ll come to find you both.”

Heading for the dance floor, I scanned the crowd, looking for Jude, and spotted him sandwiched between two alpha men.

Lucky Jude! I sipped my drink, finding a spot on the balcony overlooking the main club. The music was louder here, and the bass vibrated through my body. My hips swayed in time with the beat as I watched the strobe lights pan across the sea of bodies. His scent hit me before I turned—alpha, but not Ryder. How I knew this, I had no idea. I glanced up and found a handsome blond alpha, not much older than me.

“You look lonely,” he said.

“Just me and my cocktail,” I replied, holding up the drink. I could tell him that it was my birthday and I knew plenty of people here, and if I wanted to, I could easily find somebody to talk or dance with. While I was officially waiting for Jewels, what I was

actually doing was hoping an alpha would come along. Only not this one, because the one I wanted had darker hair and stormy blue eyes.

The track transitioned into a dark, sensual thrum that made me itch from the effort of standing still.

“You want to go somewhere quieter?” the alpha asked, leaning in under the pretense of talking to me over the music.

I mentally rolled my eyes. Really? He was going straight for the kill, not even attempting a little getting to know you before getting down to it. I didn’t need to put on my drunk party girl act to know this one was an asshole, yet his scent still wafted over me. I swayed a little, but covered it up by taking a sip of my drink as though thinking his offer over.

I was about to politely decline when a big, broad hand cupped the back of his neck. I wouldn’t claim to be gifted in the art of lipreading, but I distinctly saw Ryder mouth, ‘Fuck off,’ as he leaned in close to the younger man.

Which was all kinds of hot and brought an almost painful clench to my pussy.

And all kinds of confusing at the same time, because I’d never been into possessive men. I dated guys for fun, and if it wasn’t fun, I didn’t date them anymore. The minute one showed signs of getting clingy, it was over.

The blond alpha turned a sickly shade of gray, pivoted, and stalked off.

“I thought I told you not to get up to any mischief?” Ryder said, his eyes narrowing on my cocktail, which was almost gone.

“Thank you,” I said, gesturing toward him with the glass before draining it.

He took the empty glass and passed it, without looking, into the hands of Art, who was doing the rounds, collecting empties.

His subsequent stillness was a little unnerving. There was something about the way Ryder stared at me, the intensity in his stormy blue-gray eyes, that made the rest of the world fade away. It sounded cliché when you read about it in books. Yet there was only the two of us, a small, easily covered distance, and the thumping, sensual music making my hips sway. Surrounding us was a party, my friends, and among them Jude and Jewels, whom I loved dearly, but my eyes only saw the man before me. No, not a man, the alpha who'd locked gazes with me.

His eyes lowered to my swaying hips, and the air charged with an electric feel.

“My name is Emma. It's my birthday,” I said. “And now, I'd like my present.”

He raised one brow before smirking, and that smile was enough to weaken my knees. “And what do you want for a present, Emma?”

His voice curled around my name, low, a little husky, and a lot sexy. No false expectations existed. No confusion, because I didn't care if he thought my cat ears were stupid. He was interested, and so was I.

“You.”

He didn't answer. I'd never been shy, but I felt insignificant before this towering male whom I'd boldly requested as my birthday present.

“What are you going to do with your present?” he asked, playing along.

“It's more about what my present can do for me.”

He laughed, his whole face transforming, shoulders shaking. Even over the music, I could hear the timbre, and it was sexy as hell. Then his laughter faded. He threw a look over his shoulder and then back at me before holding out his hand.

I'd never felt anything more significant in my life than when I placed my hand in his, watching his larger one swallow my smaller one. His skin was warm and a little calloused. My skin tingled where we touched, and it flowed all the way up my arm.

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My heart rate jacked up as the enormity of what I'd just done hit me.

Looking back toward the dance floor, I found Jude dancing with Jewels. They were both grinning. I smiled back.

"Ready, baby?"

The man holding my hand drew my focus back to him. Damn, he was so freaking big.

"Yeah, I'm ready."

His business partner, the one Art had called Dane, was standing by the elevator.

Ryder stabbed the button, ignoring the pointed glare Dane sent his way.

"The fuck?" Dane muttered. "We've only just come back."

Ryder placed his hand on the other man's shoulder. "Going to be busy for a little while. You're it. Make sure Jace's guests don't get up to any trouble. It's your balls on the line."

ChapterFour

Ryder

What the fuck was I doing?

I had no fucking idea how I'd ended up in the elevator with a pixie at my side. I swore to myself when I walked away that I wouldn't go there. Then I'd come back, just to look things over, and found some asshole panting over her. Things had gone downhill from there.

"Oh, wait!" She held up one hand and started rummaging in her bag with the other.

"For what?" I asked. "In case you're confused, we're in an elevator, baby. Waiting isn't an option."

The little brat rolled her eyes at me, and that fast, my palm was itchy.

"May I have your ID, please?" she asked, tapping on her cell. "I want to put your details into the Play Safe app."

"Are you shitting me? They have blockers on that app in ninety percent of establishments on this side of the fence, and that's assuming the assholes living here have genuine IDs."

"Do you block them here too?" She looked up at me with those big doe eyes. "Do you have a fake ID?"

The elevator dinged as it came to a stop on my floor. I hit the hold button, wondering if I was going to be heading straight back down. I hadn't wanted a hookup when I entered the club tonight. A truckload of liquor was stolen earlier today, and I'd been more inclined toward beating the shit out of the fucker we'd caught trying to make off with it. Jace had called me in because, for once, he was getting laid. Given I owed Jace and Dane my life, I could suffer an interruption to the much anticipated fun of pummeling the thieving prick.

But when I'd seen another alpha sniffing around the little pixie the beast inside me

coveted, everything had changed. I wanted her, plain and simple. I ought to lie to her. It wasn't like we would ever see each other again. Most betas who came into Desparion were here to tick us alphas off their bucket list and never returned again. We were both just scratching an itch. I should've just handed over my ID and let her convince herself the happy green tick meant it had been registered and the beta police would come screaming in here to rescue her should she disappear. The truth was, they didn't give a shit what we did, so long as it didn't spill over into safe beta turf. Any beta foolish enough to enter did so at their own risk. The visa was granted on a mile-long disclaimer. Most of the fools skimmed past because other people did it, right? Therefore, it must be legit and fine.

Naïve, all of them.

I'd been naïve once.

"I don't have a real ID anymore. Most people they toss in here get a black market one asap." Especially snotty-nosed rich bastards whose fathers had fucked over half the neighborhoods where the deadbeats living here came from.

I watched her lower lip tremble.

"Is your name Ryder?"

"It is now."

"Is my sister safe?"

"What the fuck?" I scowled at her in disbelief. I was holding the fucking elevator door, so I could take her back down if she wished. Surely such an act registered me on the not a complete asshole side of the line, and by association, Jace. "She's with Jace—the guy has a fucking hero complex. He doesn't tolerate bullshit of that kind in

our club, and there's plenty of the regular kind going on. We don't rape women or force them. Jace would fucking castrate a man he caught taking a woman against her will, and I'd help him by holding the fucker down."

Her body softened. "I love my sister."

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I fucking hated mine. I still remembered the nasty sneer on her face in that news clip after the journalists had sneaked past her security and questioned her while she was dining in Angelo's with a friend. It might have been a show for the media, but I knew my sister—that haughty disdain went all the way to the core. "I can tell you do, baby."

The elevator dinged, unhappy with me holding the door so long. No sooner did I take my finger off the button when she stabbed it again.

"No," she said. "I'm okay with this, more okay than I thought I would be, and even without the stupid Play Safe app. Please, I want to, but only with you."

Those fucking endless eyes and unguarded words hit me straight in my weak spot.

The elevator dinged again...repeatedly.

She grinned and stepped out of the elevator. Yeah, I was always going to fucking follow.

* * *

Emma

His apartment was nicer than I'd been expecting. I didn't know why. I guessed my impression of men's living situations was they were generally a hot mess. To be fair, Jewel's apartment was affectionately referred to as a chaos by Sloane, so I didn't think women were much better.

Maybe it was because he was older?The place was fastidiously neat and tidy, with an open plan living room, kitchen to one side, and a couple of doors leading off.A massive flat screen TV and couch dominated the center of the room, while a big expensive window offered views of the strip.

As the door clicked shut behind him, I felt...trapped, only it wasn't an unpleasant kind of trapped.It comforted me.I threw a look over my shoulder.Yep, he was huge and intimidating, yet I still felt safe with him.Maybe I was delusional.He might be a psycho, for all I knew.

The damn app Sloane had insisted we install was useless.I felt both foolish and naïve.They had no laws here.It would be reasonable to assume that underhand activity took place commonly.Therefore, by association, the alphas would be unlikely to yield a happy green tick, even supposing they shared their real IDs.It rattled me, though.I wondered why he'd changed his ID.Did everybody have a new ID?Was it to escape the clutches of our government?To disassociate themselves from the beta population that existed on the other side of the fence?To better throw off the chains of the civilized parts of the world?I didn't have the answers, and although now wasn't the right time to ponder them, I thought afterward, when I was safely back in my apartment, that his words would haunt me and I would find myself going over them many times.

I turned back around and walked over to the window to gaze out.I'd seen the pictures on the internet and knew what it looked like.They had interactive street maps that you could walk along, witnessing a snapshot in time.

Desparion was a mixture of old and new, where rough, shady buildings butting up against the comparatively glamorous clubs like this one.I'd known this was one of the best from the numerous positive reviews.It was hard to fake that many, and I figured at least a few of them had to be true.From here, I could see how far it extended.A great curving arc, a fence, and the break in the buildings signified the separation from

the beta world. I couldn't see the river from here, so it must be on the opposite side. It was similarly patrolled to ensure no one slipped across undetected.

How terrible it must feel to be ostracized like this.

I glanced back to find Ryder standing right behind me. I hadn't heard him move. "I didn't notice any omegas," I said. "I thought they would be in the club?"

"They probably are," he said, "but you won't find them out on their own. An alpha protects his ward or mate."

"It must be strange."

"What must, baby?"

"Being ripped apart from everything you've ever known."

He huffed out a breath, and I felt a very faint tickle on the back of my neck. His fingers were gentle as they wove through my hair before his hand settled against my nape. A shiver skittered down my spine. That big, comforting, calloused hand felt like a brand searing into my flesh, making my breath hitch and my stomach dip.

"There is no easy way to come here," he said. "It's worse for some than others." As he leaned in, his warm breath tickling my ear brought a full body shudder. "But we didn't come here to talk about that, did we?"

I shook my head. My heartbeat pulsed heavily in my throat. His arresting scent flooded my nose and lungs, bringing a tingle deep in my pussy. I'd wondered how it would feel to have an alpha put his hands on me, and now I knew it felt freaking intense.

Was it possible to climax from this alone? I'd admit, I was close.

“Just breathe normally, baby,” he said. “I’m not going to hurt you. You know that, right?”

I nodded.

“Give me the words, baby. When you’re with me, I always want to hear the words.”

“I know you won’t hurt me,” I said.

“Good,” he said. Leaning up, he stepped a little closer until I could feel his body heat. Taking the purse from my hand, he put it on the windowsill. “I know you don’t have my ID, but is there anybody you want to call to tell them where you are?”

I shook my head. “No, I told one of my friends that you were the owner. She saw me leave with you.”

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“Why don’t you give her my number. Just in case.”

“Okay,” I said. Although I was actually more interested in getting his number for me, like it would connect us somehow.

He gave me his number, and I sent him a message under the pretext of checking that it worked because I wanted him to have my number too.

“We good?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Then I think it’s time we got your punishment out of the way.”

“P-punishment?” I stammered the word out as I turned to stare at his reflection in the window. It showcased our size difference. When I stood at his side, it wasn’t so apparent, but now I realized how my head came up to his chest, with his broad shoulders higher still.

“Are you joking?”

He shook his head slowly. “Baby, I never joke about discipline, and you are in sore need of some.”

Nerves exploded, but not the bad kind. No, these were the hot, delicious kind. His hand squeezed lightly over the back of my neck, drawing my attention to the place we were connected.

My vulnerability hit me out of nowhere. Ryder could snap my neck with terrifying ease, should he choose to, yet I still liked his hand there. “I’m not due any punishment. Is this...like a pretend punishment?”

His lips tugged up in a smirk. “Baby, it’s really not.”

Chapter Five

Emma

It was quiet here. I could hear the faint drum of traffic coming from beyond the window, but it was distant. Inside my mind, the dark, sensual tune from the club played, wrapping around me, gathering me up, and taking me to a place beyond my understanding.

This man, this alpha, was more than anything I’d experienced before. Instinctively, I knew I wouldn’t be the same after whatever came to be, that he would change me irrevocably, but I was all in now. Perhaps in years to come, I would look back on this as a wild adventure, one I blindly stepped into. I wanted the experience and didn’t care whether it left the kind of scars that never really healed. I already knew no other man would measure up to Ryder. How could they?

I just wanted him. “I trust you,” I said again.

His stillness became absolute. I couldn’t see the color of his eyes through the reflection, but I felt the intensity of his gaze. His big capable hand slid from my neck, skimming over my shoulder and all the way down my arm until he shackled my wrist. I liked men’s hands, and Ryder’s were enormous. Having him touch me like this sent a thrill racing through my body all the way down to my pussy. Beside him, I was tiny and breakable, yet I hadn’t lied—I did trust him.

His hold was gentle, but for reasons that escaped me, I tried to pull away.

I couldn't. There was no pressure. His hand simply held.

How was it even possible without hurting me?

"If you want to be free," he said, "just say so."

But I didn't say, and instead, I tugged a little harder...just as a small test.

"Do you like that, baby? Do you like being trapped?"

If the hitch in my breathing was any indication, I definitely did. I stopped fighting. "Yes," I said. "I very much like being trapped."

"Tell me to let you go."

I shook my head.

"Tell me to let you go."

I was confused. I didn't want him to let go, yet his command was absolute.

"Let me go." The words came out on a pant, and instantly, he released me. It was a lesson, it would seem. He wanted me to understand that whatever he did would always be on my terms and I could always tell him to stop.

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“Do I need a safe word?”

He smirked and shook his head, eyes lowering as he claimed my hand and gave it a little tug, drawing me away from the window and toward the couch. “I’m not a Dom, baby. Just tell me to stop.”

“What if I want to tell you to stop but I don’t actually want you to?” Ryder took a seat on the couch, and with another tug on my wrist, I found myself in his lap.

Oh, this was nice. I was squished up against a big, warm body, feeling his muscles flex as he placed me to his liking.

“Then I guess we would need a safe word,” he said.

My heart was pounding unsteadily, and Ryder hadn’t even kissed me yet.

“We’re not doing that tonight.”

My eyes searched his. Tonight. The possibility of more floated between us. “What about on another night?”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves, baby.”

His gentle admonishment was a douse of cold water. Had I overstepped my place and been presumptuous? I wanted another night. I hadn’t had this night, and already I knew I wanted more.

I wanted to play wicked games of dominance and submission.

I wanted him to hold me down, wanted to beg him to let me go and know that he wouldn't because he also understood the parameters of the game.

Why did I desire that? Why did I get hot thinking about such a thing? It was wrong, dark, even a little taboo. It wasn't something a sensible beta should need, but I hadn't known I needed it until a moment ago. Now I needed it more than my next breath. Still, he'd said not tonight and told me not to get ahead of myself.

He cupped my cheek. "You're so fucking beautiful." Then his lips lowered over mine. They were warm and soft, and they rubbed lightly against mine. I opened to his kiss, my fingers fisting his T-shirt.

A groan escaped my tightly sealed lips. The hand he lowered to my throat was so massive, it spread out across my collarbone. His thumb pressed hard enough to catch all my focus, holding me as we kissed, his tongue rimming my parted lips before delving inside. I fidgeted, trying to get closer, but he merely held me where he wanted. The kisses stopped and started again, over and over, each taste drugging me, taking me deeper under his spell. I grew restless, wanting the kiss to deepen, sensing the wildness within him. Yet on the surface, he was calm, while I was a bubbling, roiling sea.

As though sensing my rising desperation, he stopped completely and stared down at me.

"Please," I said, although I didn't understand what I was asking for, only that I needed something to assuage this ache. My mind went to sea, scrambling, overwhelmed by the sensations and his heady scent that was far richer now that he was close.

Alphas were different to ordinary men, intense, a little wild, dangerous maybe, undoubtedly addictive. I'd thought I could handle this, but now? He was too different to me, too worldly. I sensed he knew things I'd only read about in books. I wanted him to teach me, to take me down the dark path and enlighten me, to mold me. Only I didn't think he would.

"Please kiss me."

"When I'm ready, but first, I need to deal with your punishment."

My tongue darted out to wet my dry lips, and his eyes tracked the movement. "What sort of punishment? What will you do?" His gaze lowered, tracing over my little skimpy dress, lingering on my breasts before passing over my belly, my hips. His hand followed, pausing to cup my breast, and his eyes lifted to meet mine as he brushed his thumb back and forth, making my nipple stone hard, setting all the tiny, sensitive nerves flaring to life.

"Does that feel good, baby?"

I nodded.

"The fucking words, Emma."

"It feels so good."

A deep rumbling sound rose from his chest and turned into a vibration. Was he purring?

I softened in his arms...like I was being drugged.

"Stay with me, Emma."

My eyes snapped to his, only to find he wasn't watching my face anymore. Now he was watching his thumb tease my nipple.

I felt it all the way down to my core, like the two parts of me were connected by a thread. Just as I became convinced I would climax from this alone, his hand moved down over my belly and across my hip to cup the cheek of my ass.

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He squeezed, and his rumble purr deepened. “This dress is fucking alpha bait. I knew you would be trouble and was trying to ignore the pull, but you marched on over, didn’t you, baby? Teetering in those ridiculous heels and not spilling a drop of the cocktail you were waving around. I wanted to put you on your knees and see if you had the same skills when it came to sucking down my cum.”

Heat pooled in my belly as I stared at his lips.

“I could tell from fifty paces you were a brat, and I have a weakness for brats. Makes me want to tame them, to put them over my lap and spank them until they drop the attitude and then make them come. Do you want that, Emma? Want me to spank you until it stings, until the sting turns into a fiery pain that makes your pussy drip with need?”

His words had a mesmerizing quality, sending mind and body reeling. No one had spoken to me like this before. No one had ever spanked me. I’d always presumed it was something I wasn’t into. Sure, it sounded interesting when I’d read about it in books, but that was as far as my curiosity had stretched. Yet Ryder was alpha, and I thought he could put his hands on me in any way he wanted

I was his to command.

“Do you want me to do that? Because if you do, I need the fucking words.”

“Yes, I want to feel your palm against my ass. No, I don’t care if it hurts.”

His lips tugged up, and he pinned me with an indecipherable look. “Remember what I

said. If you want me to stop, you only need to say. This is something I enjoy.” His fingers dug into the flesh of my ass, almost painfully. I pressed my thighs together, trying to ease the growing ache. “But if you’re not into it, if it doesn’t also excite you, then you must tell me. Never be afraid. I won’t be angry. Contrary to popular opinion, not all alphas are beasts. I brought you here. I promised you a birthday present. Whatever you want, baby, I’ll give you.”

I expected him to kiss me or tug up the hem of my dress and set about my spanking, but instead, his big hand skimmed down my leg all the way to my ankle. He slipped my shoes off one at a time and tossed them to the floor, the movement deliberate and sensual. Having liberated me from the painful heels, he paused to work his thumb into the ball of my foot. The pleasure of his hands on my sore feet was near orgasmic. As if to seal my fate, his other hand moved to the back of my neck and massaged the nape. The two sensations—the soothing pleasure as he worked over the muscle of my calves and the shivery bliss of strong fingers playing in my hair—warred against one another.

A groan escaped my lips, and like a trigger, I found myself flipped over onto my belly. My squeak was one of a rude awakening. There was something vulnerable about being sprawled out on a man’s lap, especially one you’ve never met before. But no, he wasn’t only a man—he was an alpha. I needed to remember that.

Beneath my cheek, the gray leather couch was cool and buttery soft. The decision of what to do with my hands was taken from me when he gathered them up and pressed them into the couch above my head.

“Keep them here,” he said. After, he brushed my hair back from my face, exposing me to his eyes. The subtle lighting was enough to illuminate the stark lines of his face.

I would question what I was doing, but I was already too far gone.

“You okay, baby?” He traced his fingers over my cheek.

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m going to pull your dress up now.”

My tummy turned over slowly at his words and the way his fingertips traced over the seam of my lips. At the same time, his other hand tugged the hem of my skirt up. His eyes were on mine the whole time, watching me, observing my reaction. My breath hitched. There was a certain decadence about his broad hand skimming under the skirt before tugging it out of the way. “I was wondering what was underneath this pretty little dress.”

“I thought you weren’t interested,” I said. He’d admitted his attraction to me, but earlier, I hadn’t known that.

“Baby, if I’d been any more interested, you’d have been flat on your back in the middle of the dance floor and I’d have been rutting you the way only an alpha can.”

His words reminded me that he wasn’t a normal human. I thought back on a news article I’d seen a couple of days ago. A newly revealed alpha went crazy in the local shopping mall. Even young, he’d possessed an otherworldly power. I wondered how old Ryder was. I guessed his late twenties to early thirties. Certainly, compared to the young alpha who’d approached me in the private bar, he was mature. There were shadows in his eyes that spoke of brutality and dark happenings.

I remembered what he said a short time ago. There was no easy road to Desparion.

He pinched my ass through my panties, and I yelped.

“You got somewhere better to be, baby?”

“No!” I almost tacked on, ‘sir.’

But I was out of my head and my focus split between the thumb brushing back and forth over my lips and the palm cupping my ass, only my silk panties separating him and my heat.

“I want to pull your panties down,” he said, stroking a fallen lock back from my forehead. “Can I do that, Emma?”

“Yes, I want you to.”

I wanted a lot more.

I wanted him to strip me naked.

I wanted to get my hands on the thing I saw bulging the denim of his pants. I had no shame, had never been reserved about sharing pleasure, yet with Ryder, I had a strong notion I’d bitten off more than I could chew. His thumb hooked under my panties, and he tugged them down, the movement shockingly abrupt.

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My body responded like he'd lit a fire under my skin, and everything coiled up.

"Good girl," he said. "Fuck, your ass looks amazing. Perfect kind of plump." Then his big, warm hand was there against my skin, sliding, squeezing gently, roughly, gently again. "I'm going to spank you now. If you need me to stop, say so, okay?"

"Yes," I said. Subconsciously, I fidgeted, pushing my ass into his hand.

His dark chuckle seemed to emphasize how far out of my depth I was.

"Just get on with it."

His hand lifted, and I thought for a moment he was going to pull away and kick me out the room, then it landed against my skin with a thunderous clap. The sharp sting was followed by my shocked gasp. "The fuck!" I was still processing spank number one when his hand lifted and came back down, this time on the other cheek.

"That's for pretending to be drunk."

"What?"

Spank! Spank!

The next two were sharper still, and I twisted, throwing a scowl at him. A hand planted in the middle of my back, pushing me back down. "Do you want me to stop, Emma?"

“Well, no.”

Spank!Spank!

“Fuck!That stings.What happened to the buildup?”

Spank!Spank!

Jesus!A short time ago, I was gloating over my lack of cursing.Now I was like Sloane!

Spank!Spank!

The pain morphed into a dull ache, and the dull ache kicked off a throbbing between my legs.My pussy clenched with every spank, and now I was biting my lips to stifle my groan.

“There we go,” he said, palm gliding over my ass.

“Was, ah, that it?Are we done now?”I was ready to move on to the good part, restless underneath his touch.My pussy felt slick, and the nipple he’d petted earlier began to throb in tandem.I wanted his mouth there and his hands, and I wanted him to do something about this terrible ache.

What I didn’t anticipate was for him to spank me again.

Spank!Spank!

“If you suspect a man is an asshole, you don’t fucking go up to him.Understood?”

“What?”

Spank!Spank!

“Yes!”

Spank!Spank!

“Fuck!”

“Especially not in the fucking alpha zone!”

Spank!Spank!

“And don’t ever.”

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Spank!Spank!

“Get in an elevator with a man you’ve never met before.”

Spank!Spank!

“But I got in the elevator with you!”

Spank!Spank!

“Exactly!”

I was confused, aroused, and the sting had risen to a fiery kind of roar. My pussy was wet and slippery.

“You need a belt to this ass. That little love tap hasn’t begun to get the point across.”

“Love tap?!”

He chuckled, his big hand moving over my heated skin, pausing to pinch here and there. With every pinch, it was like he was pinching my clit.

“Fine, baby. No more tonight,” he said, only he was wearing a wolfish grin, so I thought he was teasing me. “Open.” His thumb brushed up against my lips, and I opened, allowing it to push inside. My tongue swirled around it, and I sucked.

His eyes turn hooded. The hand skimming my ass slid down, tracing all the way over

the lips of my pussy, making me shudder and suck harder. His fingers grazed dangerously close to my clit before sliding all the way back up. I groaned as he withdrew his thumb from my mouth.

“I want you naked,” he said. “Naked and spread out on my bed.”

“Please. Yes, all of that.”

“Let’s get rid of these, shall we?” My panties were tugged past my knees, over my feet, and tossed somewhere on the floor. Carefully, he turned me over and brushed the hair back from my face with a tenderness that brought a catch to my breath.

“You’re beautiful like this,” he said. “Cheeks flushed, pussy weeping, eager for my touch.”

I swallowed as his head lowered and his mouth came down over mine. There was nothing slow about the kiss. He plundered me, his tongue thrusting in and out and an imitation of sex.

My hands were in his hair, fisting the soft locks, a needy whimper in my throat, thighs scissoring. I needed to be closer. I pushed him back, straddling his hips, and now I was the one kissing him.

Strong fingers speared my hair, dragging me off. We sat there, facing one another, panting gusty breaths. His eyes were so beautiful, I became lost in them. His scent, delicious and spicy, suddenly exploded in the air and became the only thing I could breathe. I groaned, staring at his lips now, wishing they were on me.

“Emma, look at me.” I snatched my eyes away to meet his. “Ask me to take your dress off.”

“Please.Do it.Rip my dress off.I want you to.”

His hands found the hem of my dress, pushing it up over my ass, over my waist, and then he stopped.My breath was trapped in my lungs.He was staring at me, staring at what he’d exposed.

“What a pretty little pussy,” he said.“All slick and glistening.Is that for me?Are you wet, Emma?Is your pussy drenched, thinking about being filled by a big alpha cock?”

I licked my lips.I definitely was.“Yes.”

“Let’s get this all the way off,” he said.I lifted my arms as he dragged it up.It landed with a softwhoosh on the floor behind me.I didn’t have a bra on.I wasn’t generous up top, and the dress was designed so that I didn’t need one, anyway.

His throat worked as he swallowed.He was looking at my breasts.I was slim and while far from perfect, I was comfortable with what I had, but against the impossible alpha before me, I was struck by nerves I’d never experienced before.Ryder was a man mountain, his shoulders straining the material of his T-shirt, his biceps bulging as hands spanned the bottom of my ribs.Was I enough?

His eyes turned hooded, and he seemed to drink me in.“Come here, baby.Feed me these pretty tits.”

He drew me forward with one arm banding around my waist, putting my breasts on the perfect level with his mouth.He nuzzled the side and drew in a deep breath.The first press of his lips was light and tender, then he shocked me when he sucked hard.

I groaned, and he sucked harder still.My pussy began to throb in tandem with his mouth.Was he marking me?

It sent a thrill coursing through me.I wanted him to mark me.I wanted something to remember this when it was all done.He stopped, lips moving onto fresh territory, and sucked sharply once again.His nose rubbed over my nipple, followed by his lips.This time when he sucked, he took my nipple and half my breast into his warm wet mouth.

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He growled, a deep rumbling purring noise that did not bring to mind disappointment but rather satisfaction.

He looked up, still sucking, catching me watching him. His lips popped off, and he snatched a brief kiss from my lips before moving to the other side.

“Absolute perfection,” he rumbled before sucking far too roughly and yet also perfectly. It made me sore, but I couldn’t get enough, and I buried my fingers in his soft, silken hair that was a little too long to be civilized.

He wasn’t civilized. He wasn’t a man, he was an alpha. He feasted. There was no other word to describe his actions as he gave attention to one breast, then the other, making my pussy hot and my body sing, pinching one nipple as he tended to the other with his mouth until I was restless with pleasure.

The longer it went on, the more restless I became, until his hand clamped over my ass, pinning me to him.

I tugged impatiently at his T-shirt. I was naked. I’d really like for him to be naked too. “Please, god, please make me come.”

One hand clamped around my waist, while the other hand dipped down, over my ass and between my thighs, sliding through the wetness that had gathered until thick fingertips paused over the entrance to my pussy. He circled, around and around, but never dipped within. At the same time, he sucked my breast sharply into his warm mouth. I was so wet, restless, and needy beyond my understanding of the word. If only he would pet my clit, I knew that I would come. I became desperate, pulling tighter

and tighter. The rough pull as he sucked my nipple, the awareness of being trapped as he held me open against him, while his fingers played, dipping and circling, dipping again, each time slipping a tiny bit deeper, set nerves fluttering to glorious life. I felt swollen, slick, and near delirious when he plunged his thick fingers inside and I came, arching against him, head back, squealing, riding out the climax as I squeezed, clenched, and spasmed in hopeful anticipation of his cock.

Chapter Six

Ryder

She was everything I'd anticipated she would be, and my beast was rising to the fore. My chest was heaving, and my purr, a deep rumble that was halfway to a growl. My fingers were covered in slick, and her pussy was absolutely fucking drenched. If I didn't get my head between her legs in the next ten seconds, I was going to lose my shit. Taking a tight hold, I stood. She squeaked and wrapped her arms and legs around me, clinging like she was terrified I was about to put her down.

"I'm only taking you to bed, baby. I need some space for what I have in mind." As her lips found the juncture of my throat and neck, she nipped, sending a shudder rippling all the way down to my spine. My cock was so fucking hard, I could've driven nails with it, but my needs would have to wait.

I carried her straight to the bedroom, kicked open the door, and dumped her on the bed without preamble. We'd gotten well past the stage where I would ask her what she wanted. This was my time, on my fucking terms. I came down over her, and her mouth opened for the kiss, our tongues tangling as our breathy gasps mingled.

My beast rumbled his approval. He didn't care that she was a beta. Instincts were clamoring, telling me to claim my mate. I reined that shit in, dragging my lips from hers, and pressed kisses down her throat, over her pretty tits, and the gentle swell of

her belly. Eyeing my prize, I urged her legs wide enough to fit my shoulders.

She groaned and flung her arm dramatically over her eyes.

“Your pretty pussy is making a mess, Emma. How about I clean you all up?”

“God, yes please.” She waved her hand in the general direction before flopping her arm over her eyes once more. “Have at it.”

It took a near heroic effort not to chuckle. Fuck, she was cute, but my amusement fled the moment my eyes lowered and her sweet scent filled my nose. It found a direct line to my balls, tightening them, driving another hot surge of blood into my cock, making it throb like a motherfucker. No way was I letting my dick loose, that was a slippery slope, but my beast was rampaging, getting riled up, and thinking she was our mate. She couldn't be my mate. She was a fucking beta.

My beast didn't care. He liked her scent and wanted to smother himself in it.

I dragged my mouth along her thigh from her knee to her wet pussy, used my forefinger and thumb to hold her open, and took my first taste.

My eyes rolled back in my head. Delicious. Her perfume hit me anew as I lapped up her offering.

Little incoherent mumbles poured from her lips as I ate her out, my tongue digging deep into the source, trying to get more of her taste. I reached down to squeeze my cock through my pants and growled as my beast kept throwing images at me of her on her hands and knees as I plowed her slick cunt from behind, her soft, helpless little body littered with my marks as I rutted roughly. The marks of possession all over her body would signify she was mine.

These urges were new to me, but the sounds she was making and the way she tried to ride my face had me hanging on to the edge. What the fuck was wrong with me? I didn't do this shit. I was the one in control, calm and collected. Even with an omega, I'd never been like this.

I got my fingers all up inside her slick little channel. Fuck, she was tight. It would take weeks of fucking training before I got half my dick in here. I didn't have weeks. I knew her type—she was here to take a walk on the wild side, meet an alpha, experience them, and then never come back. She would return to her safe, easy life. Maybe she had a boyfriend there, a beta she could share her sensible life with, have the obligatory two-point-five kids, and grow old together.

Another growl rumbled as I got a third finger into her pussy. It was a squeeze for her, and I could feel her clenching, like her hot cunt couldn't decide whether it wanted more or not. I swirled my tongue all around her clit, and that fast, she went off, spasming around my fingers in hot tight waves that had me imagining how it would feel when she milked my seed.

I nearly fucking came in my pants from the thought.

Her fingers gripping my hair barely registered through the haze. I wanted to imprint upon her, to carve a place for myself in her memory so deeply that no matter how far she ran and whatever was waiting for her back in beta land, she'd never forget I owned her fucking pussy. I sucked, nipped, lapped her clit, and feasted like I was starving and she was the only thing on the menu. When her wriggling increased and she became sensitive after coming, I clamped an arm over her hips and continued to pleasure her. She rewarded me by coming apart again, screaming herself hoarse, and humping my face. I was fucking ravenous and distantly aware I had taken things too far. Yet the thought of letting her go, of allowing her to leave this room, brought out a feral side in me.

Mine, my beast decided. This little beta was mine. We would make her ours, showing her through pleasure how she belonged to us.

* * *

Emma

“Please, just fuck me!”

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Was there such a thing as too much pleasure? If you'd asked me a few hours ago, I'd have said have at it, do your worst. I could handle anything you've got.

I couldn't remember how many climaxes I'd had. How was that possible? Like how many times could a person come before they lost track? I was pretty sure two or three were doable. Maybe four. Which meant this was more than four. Also, I'd lost count two climaxes ago!

"Not a fucking chance, baby," he rumbled against my pussy, taking me perilously close to—at my best approximation—orgasm number seven. "This tight cunt can't take half of what I'm packing."

I snorted out an inelegant snicker, because men always exaggerated what they were packing and I couldn't see alphas being any different in that regard. "I've seen it." No point in pretenses. I was on my back, and his head was between my thighs. We were way past that.

His head lifted, and he pinned me with a look before surging to his feet.

Was this it? Was Ryder about to finally give me what I needed?

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, which was insanely hot for reasons that escaped my lust fuddled mind.

"Baby, I'm a grower. Whatever you think you saw when you were staring at my junk doesn't come close." He plucked my limp hand from the bed and ground my palm into... I leaned up, trying to get a better look, because really, what the fuck was that?

As fast as he'd claimed my hand, he returned it, and in the same breath, turned away.

I stared at him, wondering where everything had gone wrong.

"I'll get you a cab," he said.

"A cab," I parroted back.

"The smell of your pussy is all fucking over me." What?! "If I don't wash it the fuck off, I'm going to break my own damn rules and you won't be walking straight for a week." His face suddenly softened, because I was gaping and, if I were brutally honest, too high on what he'd just done to me to work out if that was a compliment or an insult.

He cupped my cheek. "I don't fuck inexperienced betas, no matter how pretty they are or how sweet their pussies."

ChapterSeven

Ryder

She was gone. It was the right thing to do, but now I was standing in the bedroom alone, heart pounding in my chest, hands clenched at my sides, resisting the urge to go and hunt her down. She would be out of Desparion by now, beyond the gates, driving towards safety and a place I was no longer allowed to go.

Not officially, anyway.

Despite my earlier determination to wash her scent off, I hadn't. It filled my lungs and set a fire in my belly. No point in trying to fight it. I loosened the buckle on my belt, pulled the zipper down carefully, shoved my pants out the way, and fisted my cock

with a weak groan.

I tipped my head back. My grip was bruising, but it felt so fucking good. It took three rough strokes before my spine tingled in that little telltale sign, my balls tightened, and my mind emptied into bliss as I came. It hit the covers where she'd been laid out a short time ago in a rain of heavy splats. My hand kept jacking up and down roughly, my growl rumbling.

My legs started to tremble, but I locked my knees and kept pumping. I'd been so close to rutting her, to flipping her to her hands and knees and filling that too tight pussy with every inch of my cock.

A beta couldn't handle this without preparation. It would have torn her pussy up, and I wouldn't have given a shit. My ardor cooled, and my pumps slowed. Thinking about hurting her brought a much needed reality check. I heaved a breath, but it only drew more of her heady scent into my lungs and my dick jerked. My hand was covered in fucking come, and so was the bed. I was standing with my pants around my knees and my dick in my hand.

I sighed and yanked up my pants as best I could. My cock was still hard, but I didn't think it was going to go fucking down anytime soon.

I headed into the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. In my mind was the image of her standing before me in front of the window. She was so fucking tiny and vulnerable, and I looked like an oaf next to her with my big terrible hands more suited to violence. It wasn't my hands that was the problem, though, was it? It was the beast, the underlying part of me that I kept so tightly under control. I'd been accused of being distant. I fucked the omegas under our care when they needed it, when they asked for it.

I was just scratching an itch, one that satisfied both of us. How was it possible for a

beta to get me this aroused this swiftly?

I washed my hands, dragged my T-shirt over my head, and tossed it into the laundry basket, then I kicked off my boots, shucking my pants down, and got into the shower. I didn't want to wash her off, but it was the right thing to do. I pressed my palms flat against the cool tiles and let the water fall over my head.

"You're a fucking animal," my sister had taunted. I was, and that was the truth. I'd been thirteen when I went through the change. They'd thought I was wild then, when I was just big for my age and athletic.

I'd put on fifty pounds of muscle and at least seven inches since then. I'd thought I was a monster before, but the betas put us here for good reason—we couldn't be trusted. We lived perpetually on the brink, teetering between truth and anarchy. It was a slippery slope from one stage to the other.

I'd told her the truth when I said we didn't force women. Would it always be like this? Would I always be fighting my instincts? It hadn't been a difficult fight before today. Maybe I should stay away from the club for a while, stay away from hot little betas with big doe eyes and a fucking magic pussy that I was sure with a little training would be perfect for my fucking cock.

I washed up, getting plenty of soap on me—the kind that neutralizes omega scent. I kept a bottle in there all the time. If I've been with an omega, afterward, I always wanted to get rid of the scent. I slept better because of it. She wasn't even a fucking omega, though. How had she driven me so close to the edge?

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Done, I turned the shower off and stepped out of the stall. I picked up a big fluffy towel and dried myself off.

It was late, the gray dawn peeking over the horizon. I should get changed and check that everything was fine downstairs, but I was so fucking tired. Fuck!

I didn't think about the past much. I'd put it behind me where it belonged, for the most part.

"Is that even your name?" she had asked.

I didn't like to think of my other name. It was a pretentious name for a pretentious prick, and that was what I'd been.

I padded back into the bedroom and over to the big bed, my cum splattered all over it. I went to the closets and got some clean sheets, then I stripped the bed and re-made it.

I could smell her on the fucking sheets, so I dumped them straight into the basket. This wasn't normal, but then again, neither was I. As I lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling with my hands behind my head, I wondered what life I might have had...

If it hadn't happened. If I'd been a beta. If the pond of my life hadn't been rippled by the arrival of a massive fucking brick.

There would've been fast cars, plentiful women, and a career waiting for me at my

dad's real estate business, buying land and properties and redeveloping them. My father was a ruthless bastard. I didn't claim to have ever loved him, but he knew how to cut a deal. Power was a commodity to my father, and my mother was right there beside him. I wondered if they were still married. They were bound to be. Families like that didn't have messy things like divorce. They picked themselves up from whatever life threw at them.

The family always stood together. I missed it at first when they tossed me here, rolling from one bad situation to another. I didn't know how many times I got a beating and was left bleeding in the gutter. The survival instinct was strong in an alpha. Well, so I learned.

I always picked myself up. That was when Jace found me, lying in a bloody heap in the alleyway, half unconscious. I remembered him testing for a pulse and jerking back when I blinked.

"Fuck! I thought you were dead," he said. "What the fuck happened to you?"

I tried to open my mouth. The words wouldn't come out.

"Don't try to talk," he said. "I'd ask how long you have been on the streets, but I already know long enough."

He pulled a cell out of his pocket and punched some buttons.

"Dane, I'm going to send you my location. Get your ass over here." He looked back at me. "Yeah, some poor newbie bastard. Someone's kicked the shit out of him."

He turned off the phone. I started shivering. They racked all the way through my body. My eye socket was busted, my ribs broken, and I had layers of bruises after days on the streets. Days? It had been weeks, maybe as much as months. I didn't know

how much longer it was when a car pulled up, since the shivers had racked me and I was jerking uncontrollably on the ground.

I thought it was that moment of kindness. I'd never experienced that. My parents didn't have empathy, not for their own fucking kids, and not for the people they ripped off. I didn't think I'd had a genuine experience of empathy in my entire fucking life until that moment.

And then he'd swooped in, a rough around the edges alpha from the wrong side of town. He showed me more compassion in that weak, low moment of my life than my battered soul could deal with. I passed out. When I woke up, I was in a basic room, lying in a bed big enough to fit all of me. The rest of it was scruffy and worn, with grubby curtains pulled across the window. Another guy was there, not as big a bastard as Jace, but something about him seemed a little unhinged. Dane, I presumed.

"Well, he's not gonna fucking die then," Dane had said.

"Don't be a prick," Jace said. "Get him some water."

"What the fuck am I? A babysitter?" Although he grumbled, he snagged a bottle from a nearby table.

I tried to sit up, but Jace put a hand on my shoulder. He was a few years older than me. He just held me there.

"Steady," he said, taking the bottle from Dane and passing it to me. "You're safe here. I know you've been on the streets, running, hiding, doing whatever you need to survive. But you don't need to do that anymore. Not on my fucking watch."

Jace was a man of his word, and that was how they became my friends. I didn't understand these new feelings ripping through me. I wanted to go find her, as

ridiculous as that was. We did go on the other side of the tracks every now and again, when it was necessary, but we did it carefully. It wasn't like we could just walk up to a fucking apartment block, or a house or wherever the fuck somebody lived, and knock on the door.

She'd come from money. I saw the clothes she and her sister had—classy, expensive. I could get away with being an alpha in the rougher parts of town, where the police didn't patrol as frequently, where there were fewer cameras and those cameras that were busted and broken down, but I couldn't get away with it in the rest of the beta zone. Not in the fancy places—places I'd once belonged to. The place where Emma was now.

I wondered what she was thinking. Was she upset? Did she think I was a bastard for sending her on her way? Was she thinking about me in a good way, about how I'd made her come? Or was she already ticking me off as an item on her bucket list and getting ready for tomorrow, when a sensible beta man would claim her affections? I growled and rolled over, shoving my face into the pillow, willing myself to forget how she'd come for me, the feel of her ass under my palm. I couldn't believe she'd asked me about fucking safe words.

“What if I want to say no but I don't want you to stop?”

My cock began to thud against the bed.

“Baby, I've got so much I want to do to you. I've not scratched the surface.”

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If she came back again, I'd work something fucking out. I'd coax that little pussy for me, open her all up, take the time to make her perfect, and drive her so fucking wild with pleasure. No beta man would ever be enough.

"I don't fuck inexperienced betas, no matter how pretty they are, or how sweet their pussies."

It was a fucking delusional fantasy, even if I hadn't acted like an asshole at the end. Betas like her didn't come to live here. I'd be her dirty little secret—the man she'd come to when she needed a fix. I growled and thumped the pillow, willing my mind to go blank. No, I had a terrible feeling if she showed up again, I'd never let her fucking go.

ChapterEight

Emma

In the end, it wasn't a cab but Jude who came to collect me. They were just wrapping up the party, so it was good timing...or lousy timing, more likely. Inside, I was crumbling, but on the outside, I plastered on a happy smile to greet Jewels and Jude with all the enthusiasm of long-lost friends. This might have been hard for anybody else to do, but not me. I'd gotten used to faking a smile because when I didn't, it made it harder for Sloane.

Later, I promised myself I would find some privacy and process what had gone on.

"So, how was it?" Jude demanded as we made the long walk back to the car. The

chain-link fence was far behind us, and we made our way along a dusty street lined by derelict buildings to where Jude had parked. “You were busy for quite a while.”

“Like hours.” Jewels giggled. “So, is he proportional?” She looked me up and down like she was expecting to see some evidence that a twelve-inch schlong had battered my pussy.

“Jewels!”

“What?” She giggled, merry on both alcohol and the night. “You’re still walking straight.”

Which was precisely what Ryder had said I wouldn’t be doing if he’d given me his dick. Only he hadn’t given it to me. The closest I’d gotten was a brief press of my hand against it before he decided it was time for me to leave.

“I don’t fuck inexperienced betas, no matter how pretty they are, or how sweet their pussies.”

Yeah, that had stung a lot, like a freaking mile-wide wound. “We didn’t do that,” I said. “He wouldn’t.” That was as much detail as they were getting. Some things were better kept private. The man had rocked my world and then all but kicked me out the door.

“What?!” Jude screeched. “These alphas are far more complex than I first suspected.”

He didn’t know half of it.

I wished Sloane were here. She had a pair of low heels in her bag for me, since I couldn’t fit them in my tiny purse. I hoped she was okay, but I was sure she was. At least her alpha hadn’t tossed her out of his room after telling her he was packing more

than she could take. I mentally rolled my eyes. That put-down was going to leave the kind of mental scars I'd sworn I could handle. I thought about texting Sloane, then I thought about all the things Ryder had said to me. The fact he'd sent me away and wouldn't fuck me, told me he had command over his alpha side. I wished he hadn't in some ways, yet I couldn't deny that I'd felt safe with him the whole time. He was no blind rutting machine about to go on the rampage. He had values and an honor system, even if he had a fake ID and wouldn't give me his dick. I believed Sloane was absolutely fine and getting better acquainted with her chosen alpha's dick than I had. "I didn't even get a look at it," I said before I could censor myself.

"What?" Jude said for the second time, mouth open on a dramatic gasp.

"Kept his pants on the whole freaking time. I've never been so frustrated in my life." Well, not that frustrated, but I didn't say that part out loud. "We did, um, other things." I was blushing furiously, and I wasn't one for blushing. "I think I'm ruined for all other men." So much for me keeping the details to myself. They hadn't even gotten the thumb screws out or tried to bribe me with a trip to McDonalds for something greasy. "I didn't get anywhere near his cock," I said, sounding disappointed.

Jude gave me a hug. "Damn, girl. I expected him to put out. The guys I met at the bar were great, but not enough for me to call in my pass with Derek. There was this one fine specimen at the door when you were leaving... For him, I'd call in my pass."

I chuckled at Jude's antics. He'd been with Derek for a little while but remained an outrageous flirt.

"The alpha at the door is Dane," I said. "He's business partners with Jace, who Sloane left with, and Ryder, the guy I was with. They own the club, I think. They definitely manage it." It hadn't crossed my mind at the time, but for all I knew, Ryder could have been feeding me a line. He'd spanked my ass for my gullibility. Freaking hell, I was such an idiot. "At least he said so."

“Oh, I believe you,” Jude said, nodding. “The guy oozed power. So, lucky Sloane. Although I admit, it was nothing like I was expecting. I’m a tad disappointed no one ravaged me on sight.”

I laughed as we arrived at the car and bundled in. I was glad Jude could still make me laugh when I felt like I was crumbling inside.

They sat in the front chatting, and I took the back, where I let the drone of their conversation and the music from the radio wash over me. I was confused about what any of this meant. Despite the brutal way he’d thrown me out, I wanted to see him again, but I wasn’t that girl. I didn’t pine over men. I should just call him an asshole and forget about him, but in the back of my mind was a strong feeling that he’d called time out because, deep down, he was tempted and worried about hurting me. And really, his body couldn’t lie. He’d been hard...and freaking huge. He probably expected a sensible beta like me to run screaming after getting a look. The guy was likely fed up with it.

He’d growled, and he’d purred. He’d gorged on me intimately like my juices was mana from the gods. I was still tingling and puffy... It was distracting. But where exactly was I going with this? I’d just finished college. I was going to be an interior designer with a life outside Desparion. What was a beta interior designer going to do inside the alpha zone? Well, I guessed they must have interior designers somewhere. The club looked pretty good. Maybe they had their own or contracted them when needed.

The fence that separated us was far behind me now.

As we pulled up to Jewel’s apartment, the conversation had tapered off. A tired Jewel hugged me. “Happy birthday, babe. See you tomorrow! Keep me posted on all the Sloane gossip.”

I climbed into the front, feeling Jude's eyes on me. He was an expert at playing the fun loving lark, but he was also sensitive. Outside the window, the flashing city lights painted colors across the hood.

"I'll come back and stay with you until Sloane returns, sweetie."

I nodded.

“Are you okay, Em?” His hand closed over mine and gave a gentle squeeze. “I know you hide stuff from your sister.”

“I’m fine. Honestly, I am. I... I like him. I don’t even freaking know him, but I liked him a lot. And not just because the sex was hot. I mean, it was mind-blowing, but there was other stuff too. He was...” I searched for the right words. “Unexpectedly gentle.” It was more than that, though. How did you put into words a spark I’d never felt with any other man? During our brief exchange, there were hints about his past and arrival in the zone. He wasn’t a beast—he was complex and also a man. I wanted to peel the layers back and explore.

“There is no easy way to come here,” he had said. “It’s worse for some than others.”

Why couldn’t he be one hundred percent asshole? It would be so much easier then.

Jude smirked. “Em, you’ve never connected with a guy, ever. I wondered if you were gay and in denial.”

I snorted out a laugh. “I love you, Jude.”

“Love you too, sweetie.”

Turning left, he pulled into the visitor parking bay of our apartment garage.

After our parents died, we sold their house and bought something smaller and more

suitable. It was close to the city center. College was only a fifteen-minute walk for me, and it was convenient for Sloane, who worked in the city. Despite Jude's presence, it felt empty without Sloane.

"Want a coffee, love?" Jude called as he headed for the kitchen. Jude and Jewels hung out here so often, Sloane affectionately called it their second home.

"Hmm, please."

I kicked off my shoes, fished my cell out of my bag, and padded through to my bedroom. I needed a shower and craved something soft against my skin.

My cell dinged.

"Sloane?" Jude called from the kitchen.

"Um, no." I had a different ring and message sound for Sloane. Standing at the foot of my bed, I stared at the name next to the message.

Ryder.

Fuck! Ryder was messaging me.

Are you okay?

I rolled my eyes. Really? He was sending a message to check if I was okay after booting me out of his apartment? All the anger I'd quashed reared its ugly head.

I thought about sending a snippy answer.

"Coffee's up!" Jude called.

“Just taking a shower!” I tossed the cell on my bed, daring him to text again.

He didn’t, and that also made me irrationally mad.

I ripped off the spangly dress and put it in the wash. I could still smell Ryder’s pheromones clinging to my skin. The face staring back at me in the vanity mirror might as well have been a stranger. Here, away from prying eyes, away from the need to put on a bright smile, the real me stared back.

I looked so freaking lost.

Taking out a wipe, I started cleaning my makeup off. On the bed, the cell phone dinged with another message.

I ignored it and continued removing all evidence of the party girl. By the time I was done, I looked like a different person. My skin was pale in the artificial bathroom light, my eyes looked a little too big, and my dark hair was wild where he’d had his fingers in it.

I closed my eyes, hit by a flashback of me on his bed, legs stretched open uncomfortably wide to fit those massive shoulders. Ryder was eating me out, his expression dark, feral, and utterly ravenous. My pussy clenched, and a slippery mess gushed out. I clamped my hand over it, confused and a little shaken. Did I just come?

Sweat popped out across my skin, and my knuckles turned white where I gripped the countertop.

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When I pulled my fingers away from myself, they were covered in a clear, sticky residue. I stared at them. What the fucking hell was happening to me? Was this some kind of weird aftereffect of being with an alpha? Had he broken my pussy? I stepped into the shower and switched it on, letting the water pelt over me, getting my hair wet, and scrubbing away the events of last night. Through the open door of my ensuite, I could see the cell light up as the generic ringtone played out. Was he trying to call me now?

My heart rate accelerated as it continued to ring.

“I don’t fuck inexperienced betas, no matter how pretty they are, or how sweet their pussies.”

Only I didn’t feel like I was innocent anymore. I felt like he’d awakened me to something I hadn’t known existed, and now that I’d dipped my toes into the carnal pool, I wanted to dive all the way in.

The water calmed me, helping me to center myself. Sloane always complained about me spending too long in the shower, but she didn’t know that I used to come in here to cry. Afterward, I would plaster on a bright smile and pretend everything was fine. It hadn’t been fine for a long time, not since my parents died. The gaps between the sadness just grew steadily longer over time, where I could escape the dark cloud.

Death was part of life. I got that, but I’d been young, only fifteen, when it happened. Now I was twenty-two and would be graduating from college next week. Sloane would be there, but at times like this, I missed my parents.

They wouldn't be at my graduation ceremony. If I married or had children, they wouldn't see that either. I had Sloane, I told myself, and that was more than many people had. I wished I'd had a chance to get to know my parents better before they were taken away.

I turned the shower off and dried myself with the extra soft towels Sloane insisted we get.

On the bed, my phone rang again.

I padded through to check if it was him calling. Yep, Ryder. He was persistent. That had to be good, right? I'd always hated clingy men, yet Ryder calling felt unexpectedly comforting.

I huffed out a breath as I tossed my towel into the bathroom. Ryder wasn't even his real name, as he'd openly admitted.

I wondered what his birth name was. It was almost like those motorcycle clubs where they got a street name once they joined—they took on a new identity and their birth name had no context or meaning anymore.

Against my better judgment, I picked up my cell, finding two missed calls and several messages. I couldn't read the whole message from the lock screen and curiosity was killing me, but if I unlocked the screen and read them, he would know.

"I'm drinking coffee on my own!" Jude called, and I fumbled my freaking cell, somehow pressing the damn message button by accident and all the messages sprang up.

I know you read the message. Did you get home safely?

I rolled my eyes.

Tell me you're okay, or I swear to fucking god, next time I see you, you won't sit down for a week!

I dropped the cell for real this time, then snatched it up, fumbling. Finally, I sent I'm fine, before exiting the bloody message app and turning the screen off.

It beeped. My heart lodged in my throat, and my pussy freaking clenched.

What the hell? It was like I was bloody trained or something. I wish I hadn't said I was fine now because—I definitely needed therapy—all I could think about was his big hand against my ass and the hot craziness that came after.

No one had ever spanked me before, and I'd never wanted anybody to. Sure, I'd read about it in books on occasion. I'd read many things in books. That didn't mean I wanted to try them.

Yet I'd liked the vulnerability of being over his lap, a helpless and yet willing participant, and the way he'd given me all the power to stop whenever I wished. He wouldn't even fuck me. What kind of alpha was that? They were nothing like I'd imagined they would be, at least Ryder wasn't. They were far more complex. I'd talked to Sloane before we left, saying how I empathized with the plight of alphas and omegas. I empathized with them tenfold now. Yet I knew other alphas existed—the less virtuous kind who waited on the periphery.

I'd picked Inked because it had such good ratings. Everyone said it was a great place and safe. I thought that was largely down to the three men who owned it, managed it, or whatever it is they did. But I sensed darkness existed in some alphas, and had we gone a little farther down the strip, our experience might not have been good.

I sensed the feral hunger in Ryder too, but he had control over it.

My phone began ringing again. Please stop calling me. Only I didn't want Ryder to stop calling. If he were here right now, I would throw myself at him. I wanted to hear his purr, the sweet noise alphas made, against my ear. I loved the way it calmed me, a beta.

I wasn't an omega, though, I reminded myself. It wouldn't work. Alphas and omegas were so different from betas, they were an entire subspecies.

That was where the Dawn Agency got its name—after the very first omega. At the time, they had lauded her as the next stage of human evolution because of her high empathy, which was seen as favorable in an advanced race. Then the alphas came, aggressive, powerful, territorial. They swept through society, driving anarchy, sending shock waves through our world.

What changed us? A leaked virus from a lab—tactical warfare at its most extreme.

There was no cure.

Worse, the alphas triggered changes in the omegas, calling to their animalistic side, making them into something else. A mating between them created a mysterious psychic bond and connection that lasted all their lives.

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It soon became apparent that alphas were the dominant species, but they were few in numbers. Those who were not afflicted used deadly force to round them up. Many were killed outright. Finally, a humane approach was decided upon. Cities across the globe cordoned off parts of the city to house them.

The alphas fought back, so they gave them the only thing that would keep the peace.

The omegas.

They were not like us—they craved a bond with a mate. Ryder would want and need things I couldn't give to him, so it confused me that he was still calling. Why would he?

I could never go back there.

It was better this way, better if I never went there again, because I could see myself falling for him in a way I'd never fallen for anybody else. Jude was right about that. Why did I have to fall for a freaking alpha? I must have a self-destructive complex or something. I had a good life and a sister who needed me. She might be the strong one, but I thought she needed to care for me because it helped her through the darkest times.

We both changed that fateful day, just in entirely different ways.

My phone finally stopped ringing, and I let out a heavy exhale.

I dragged some comfortable sleep shorts and a T-shirt on, then walked through to the

lounge.

Jude sat on the couch, his untouched coffee on the table between the two couches, head in his hand.

“Fuck,” he muttered, seeing me. “Why did I turn them down?”

I chuckled, and sitting opposite, dropped my cell on the table beside my waiting coffee. I wanted to keep it close in case Sloane called or messaged me. “I don’t know, Jude. Why did you turn them down?”

“I had a boyfriend with this alpha fetish who started training me to take the knot of this freaking huge dildo. I mean, I put a valiant effort in, but we, you know, never got to the full size. I’m pretty sure no beta man is meant to take an alpha cock. Still, I might have died happy trying.” He grinned.

“Too much information, Jude!”

He shrugged. “It got a bit weird after a while. Much as I fantasized about being an omega, I also like who and what I am.” Picking up his coffee, he took a sip before nodding his head toward the cell phone. “Nothing from Sloane yet?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Oh, who was that then?”

“It was, um, a guy.”

“Guy?” His eyes suddenly narrowed knowingly before a shit-eating grin splits his face. “Girlfriend, are you holding out on me? Was that the alpha? Did you give him your number?”

I huff out a breath. “Fine. I gave him my number.”

“So.” He makes a little upward motion with his fingers. “Gimme the details. What did he say?”

“I...haven’t answered it.” Yeah, I actually squirmed at Jude’s gasp of shock.

“Why the fuck not? Give me the phone.” He motioned for me to hand it over.

I snatched it up from the table. “No! You’re not having the fucking phone. I know you—you’ll start answering the messages for me!”

“How many boyfriends have I dealt with for you? I excel at situations like this. Ask Derek. Do you want me to get rid of him? I can handle it, no problem.”

“I don’t,” I blurted out.

He grinned.

“You were fishing, weren’t you?”

He shrugged, not even a little guilty. “You really like him?”

“Fine, I like him.”

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“Then why aren’t you answering these fucking messages?”

“Don’t pressure me!”

“Tut-tut, Em.” He shakes his head. “Playing hard to get. Something tells me that’s not the best approach to take with an alpha.”

“What? I’m not playing hard to get.” I shook my head emphatically. “I’m just...processing it.”

His eyebrows crawled up into his hairline. “Well, don’t process it for too long. Did you at least read the messages?”

“No,” I lied.

“We’ll have a look at them together.”

“If I look at them, then I’m going to have to answer them, and I can’t answer a message like this under pressure. He’ll know I’ve read it.”

I picked up my coffee on what I hoped would bring an end to the discussion. Outside the window, it was daylight.

“He’s probably already calling his backup.”

I nearly spat my coffee out. I scowled at Jude, who laughed so hard, he had to hold his belly. “Don’t be an ass, Jude. You only want to look because you’re nosy.”

“Guilty as charged. Come on, hand it over, girlfriend. You know you want to let me handle this. I’ve handled all your relationships so far.”

“All my previous boyfriends were chumps, and I didn’t care if you messed up.”

“Ouch,” he said, rubbing his chest. “You know how to wound a guy.”

“You’re not wounded,” I said.

Even without his grin, I knew he wasn’t upset. Jude was the most resilient person I’d ever met. His parents disowned him when he told them he wouldn’t marry a ‘nice’ girl and churn out babies. He took it in his stride and said he’d always expected that response and was glad to be himself. I admired how Jude had built a network of caring people around him for support. We were both orphans, just in different ways.

Unlike me, I didn’t think he was pretending to be happy. I thought he genuinely was. He still saw some of his family, like his sister and grandma. But yeah, Jude was one of the good ones, and I was grateful to have him as my friend.

He was also still staring meaningfully between my cell and me.

“No,” I insisted.

He smirked. “You really are sweet on this alpha.”

I took a sip of my coffee. “I really am,” I agreed.

ChapterNine

Ryder

Breakfast was going about the same as breakfast always did when you hadn't had enough sleep. Dane was still brooding about me abandoning him, but the miserable fucker could get over it.

Then Jace had turned up with Sloane, Emma's sister, and my mind blanked the fuck out. She was an omega. I could scent her from all the way over here.

What the fuck? She hadn't been an omega last night, and Emma hadn't mentioned it. I mean, shit like this didn't happen. Omegas didn't live freely on the other side of the fence, and they sure as shit didn't waltz into the alpha zone and party in a club.

A fucking omega?

I was trying to keep my shit together, but inside, my beast was going nuts. I was staring at Sloane, but it wasn't her I was thinking about. It was her sister—the cute as hell brat I'd booted out of my apartment after the mother of all put-downs.

Way to go, asshole!

I'd let her go. Why? Because my inner beast had snarled at me, telling me to mark her as mine. If I'd pushed things, would she have revealed? The genetic markers were buried deep and didn't always manifest in the alpha or omega type. Plus, it could skip generations sometimes. She'd even looked like a fucking omega, small and fragile, although they came in all shapes and sizes. Sloane was taller, the average beta, yet she'd just fucking revealed, if I was right. And I must be right, because there was no other explanation.

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Emma had taken everything I'd given her and begged me for more.

What the fuck had I done? The image of her sprawled out on my bed taunted me. Things had been going great until I'd shoved her clothes at her and all but tossed her out. No wonder she wasn't answering my fucking calls.

"Tone it down, Ryder," Jace snarled.

"So, she revealed as an omega." Murmurs went up around the table. "And she's unmarked."

"She's not to be marked."

Silence cut through the room. The fucker had dared to use his alpha bark on me. I smoothed out my face. The asshole was frightening his omega.

Dane stiffened in his seat beside me. "She has to be marked," he snapped back. "A free roaming omega in the zone?" He shook his head, then glanced at the others. "We're gonna have to lock the place down and assess what weapons we've got. No one goes in or out, for fear of someone outside of this place getting a sniff of her, and if she goes into heat?"

This was sliding downhill fast. I could feel the rage rolling off Dane. He and Jace were tight, but they still butted heads all the time. Mostly, it amused me. Today, my mind was clear and cold.

Sloane swallowed. The poor omega looked like she was about to throw up. Given the

alpha vibes that Dane and Jace were tossing about, her reaction was hardly a surprise.

Finally, Jace, the asshole, redirected his attention to his omega, hauled her into his arms, and purred.

She softened instantly, and that shit sent my fucking beast into a spin. Emma had softened for my purr. She'd fucking submitted to me and everything, then I'd let her walk away.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

Jace was busy coddling his omega, while Dane was getting riled up. No point in trying to head this shit off. Some of my humor returned because their showdowns were always spectacular, and it would be doubly so, given Jace—the mother of all miserable anti-omega-touching douchebags—had, by all appearances, just claimed one.

“Look, Jace, I don’t want to be a prick,” Dane started, which was very much an indication that he was about to be a prick, “but we have to put our heads together. Better that she’s marked like the others. If you don’t, Snake and his crew, they’d give their left nuts for someone like her, especially a classy piece of ass?—”

“Shut the fuck up, Dane.” Jace pinned him with a look, although I thought Dane had made a valid point.

The world moved differently for alphas and omegas. There was no such thing as freedom for an omega once they revealed, as they needed an alpha to protect them from other alphas. It was as simple as that. Dane and I were the ones who cared for the omegas when they went into heat, rutted them, and put a mark on them so that the rest of the lowlifes in Desparion knew that they were ours. It never bothered me. It never bothered them, either. I figured some of them viewed us as potential mates, but

I wasn't into them in that way. I enjoyed the sex. Rutting an omega through their heat was sexual napalm. At least I'd always thought it was.

My beast fucking rumbled at me, moody bastard, reminding me once again that he'd understood what had been under our nose a short time ago.

"And what's going on here?" As if on cue, Dane's mom—known to everyone as Ma—breezed into the room. I swear she had a nose for trouble. Ma didn't take shit from anyone, although she was the first person you could count on in a bind. She'd done a better fucking job than my mother ever had. Ma was sweet and kind, even if she was a total busybody. Dane grumbled about it constantly, but as far as I was concerned, the woman was pure gold. It was Ma who'd bandaged me after Dane and Jace picked me up. I'd been a mess, and she treated me with genuine care and respect—something that had been in short supply all my life.

I shoved a forkful of eggs into my mouth and stared straight ahead.

"You okay, love?" Ma homed in on Sloane like a heat-seeking missile on a large target.

Dane groaned, although Ma's fussing was the least of our concerns. Once our omegas got wind of Jace and Sloane, the proverbial shit would hit the fan. None of them would be happy, given they'd had their sights set on Jace. Now he'd been removed from the pool, so to speak, not that he ever took what was on offer, and he'd never brought an omega in. That he had done so now was telling.

"Oh, sweetheart..." Ma said, gathering Sloane up for a hug I wasn't convinced she appreciated.

"For fuck's sake," Dane grumbled, going back to his breakfast and eating it like a fucking machine.

Sloane was clearly overwhelmed, and Jace had just dumped a newly awakened omega into a room full of people. What a dick!

My beast rumbled, reminding me of my less than sterling performance in aftercare.

“That’s it, lovey, you just let it all out. And, you boys!” That was hissed viciously and in a way that encompassed every man in the room. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, talking such nonsense around an omega who’s just revealed? She’s probably feeling raw, crazy, like her life’s been tipped upside down and put back together all ad hoc. Have something to eat, little omega?—”

“Sloane,” Jace interrupted through gritted teeth. “Her name is Sloane.”

“Then it’s time to have something to eat, little Sloane. I’m guessing that boy of mine has been running you ragged?—”

“Ma.”

“Focused on your body, but not what it needs.”

“Ma.”

“Turning your head until you don’t know what is what. I taught you better than this, Jason Mark?—”

“Ma!”

“For fuck’s sake!” Dane muttered, shoving his fork down on the plate and turning toward me. “What the fuck is wrong with him? Why won’t he put his mark on her? Is he bringing her in? He needs to just do it. No fucking mark! What an asshole! What does this mean?”

“It means he’s claiming her,” I said, reading the situation for what it was. Jace’s body language, the way he curved around Sloane—there was no fucking mistaking that.

“And carbs,” Ma was saying. “You’ll need to load up for what he has in store for you.”

“God, Ma, stop!” Collective groans went up around the table.

“What? You think I don’t know why these strange girls appear around my table every morning? Not exactly for Sunday prayers, is it? But, Sloane...” Ma beamed at our newcomer. “You’re an omega.”

“Who’s an omega?” As if to throw a grenade into the moment, the door opened and our resident omegas sauntered in. Like Ma, all their eyes were on Sloane, noses twitching as they took in her scent.

“Sloane is,” Jace replied, getting to his feet. “One we need to protect. Fellas, you’re with me.”

Chapter Ten

Emma

Sloane called, and we went to pick her up, but it quickly became apparent that all was not well. I didn’t think it was the alpha, Jace, although she glossed over that with a little color in her cheeks.

No, there was something else wrong, and as the master of disguising my emotions, the signs were all too clear to me.

Jude was being, well, Jude and pumping her for information. But all that went out the window when Sloane’s face turned a deathly pale, and she sprinted from the room. The noisy sounds of her retching followed.

Sloane was never sick, and the sounds freaked me out.

She waved us away when we went to check on her. “She’s hungover. Sloane, I’ll get you some ibuprofen and water.” Only I didn’t think she was hungover

When I returned, she hadn’t moved. “Here, you look terrible.” Maybe she’d had something to drink after I saw her? I had a terrible cold prickling sensation that something was terribly off. “How much did you drink last night?”

She didn’t answer, just took the tablets and glugged back the water.

“You’re dehydrated,” I said. “Come on, let’s get you into bed.” I helped her up, worried and anxious, and yet this was Sloane. Maybe she’d finally let her hair

down?The way she was squinting at the light had all the earmarks of being hungover.She'd cared for me enough times, so it was time for me to return the favor.I pulled the curtains across the windows, and she settled straight away."Sleep, Sloane," I said."And thanks for last night.It was...wild."

She would feel better after a rest.I wanted to tell her about Ryder and my own adventure.My conversation with Jude played in my mind as I shut the door on her.

Last night had been quite the night for both of us.

* * *

Jude left with the promise to check in on us later.I took my cell with me and went to bed.Like Sloane, I was exhausted, and I fell straight asleep.

The beeping of my cell roused me, only this time when I looked, it was Jude...and he hadn't come alone.He had muffins and coffee.

"Sloane still out for the count?"

"Yep," I said.I inhaled the scent of coffee before tucking into the muffin, then padded over to Sloane's bedroom door."Sloane, are you okay?"Nothing.I shrugged as I went to join Jude on the couch."She was pretty wiped out."

My cell began ringing.Freaking hell, it was Ryder again.My heart rate shot through the roof, and I nearly spilled my coffee.

"Aren't you going to answer that?"Jude said."I don't know why you're playing hard to get.We both know you want him."

"It's not that," I replied."I just?—"

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“What?” Jude demanded. “Girlfriend, he’s been wearing out that ringtone all day long. Why don’t you put it on mute?”

The ringing stopped. Thank god, because I was tense. I knew I needed to answer him, if only to tell him no thank you, only I didn’t know what to say. It was one thing to be with him in the moment. Now, in the cold light of day, everything felt both clearer and more confusing at the same time.

“I’m going to head off,” Jude said. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll go and check on her in a minute.”

“Good,” Jude replied. “Maybe take some more water.”

“I will,” I said. “I’ll speak to you tomorrow.”

As the door clicked shut on Jude, my cell began beeping again. Great!

Sloane emerged from her room, looking like a freaking train wreck. Her eyes lowered to my cell, so I reached down and hit the button to turn it off.

She narrowed her eyes, because it was Sloane and even wrecked, she had a nose for trouble.

“Who’s calling?” she asked, voice a hoarse croak.

“Nobody,” I said evasively.

Shuffling over, she dropped down on the couch opposite. “Who is it?”

“It’s just a guy I met last night. You know, the one I was with... I’ll get you some water.” Needing some breathing space before we had that conversation, I clattered around in the kitchen, taking longer than I needed to before handing her a drink. I sat opposite, and that sharp sense of wrongness hit me again, only this time, it was closer to malaise. “You seem different.”

“I’m an omega,” she replied.

I actually felt my blood pressure drop, it happened so fast. “What? How can you be an omega? Are you sure?”

“I’m very sure,” she said. “I’ve just built a nest.”

A nervous giggle escaped my lips. Freaking hell!

Sloane laughed too, but it faded as fast. “I need to get some suppressants.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “Okay, how do we do...that?” I picked up my cell, which immediately started beeping. I frowned, fingers hovering over the keys. He was an alpha. Maybe he would know where to get suppressants? “Do you have other omega urges?”

“Yeah, and I wish I bloody didn’t.” She gave me a look. “Em, you used protection, didn’t you?”

I stopped my frantic typing, feeling my face heat. “We didn’t,” I said. “We talked. We fooled around for a while, and he kept his pants on the whole time. I’ve never been so frustrated in all my life. Well, not that frustrated. But yeah, I wanted it, and he wouldn’t let me have it... I think he’s a Dom.”

“A what?”

“A Dom, like you read about in the books?BDSM.I think that’s him in a nutshell.”

“He’s not a Dom,” Sloane said like she was an authority on such things.

“Well, he’s got some very Dom-like tendencies,” I said, using a hand to fan myself.“I’ve never been so desperate to get into a man’s pants in my life, and he was having none of it.That’s iron control if ever I saw it.”I nod my head toward Sloane.“So did you... Did you...with the other one?”

“Yeah,” she said miserably.“That’s what triggered me.”

Freaking hell!

“I’m glad you’re not an omega,” she replied.“Because everything is hell.”

“I thought it would be hot, you know, to be that into a man.”

She suddenly groaned and pressed her hand to her belly.“Emma, I need those suppressants.”Her face turned waxy, and she emitted a deep, guttural moan that sounded like she was freaking dying.

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“Sloane?”

She staggered from the couch, heading back into her bedroom.

I followed her into her room...and found she'd emptied her wardrobe and the clothes were scattered all over the floor. A great mountain of them had been piled up in the bed, and she crawled into it, moaning piteously.

Suppressants, she needed some freaking suppressants. I went back to my cell, vision coming through a tunnel. Somehow, I found the number for the Dawn Agency, and they answered on the first ring. I didn't remember what they said. My mind wasn't processing any of this. I'd been with an alpha too, only I couldn't think about that while Sloane was in so much pain.

I paced, occasionally checking on Sloane, who had buried herself in the nest. When the people from the agency arrived, all I cared about was helping her with the pain.

“Sloane? Oh shit?—!”

“Just leave it to us, ma'am. You said she was with an alpha last night?”

“Ah...yeah, but what does that?—”

“No way he'd leave a tasty little morsel like this alone. He's rutted her, sent her into a frenzy. She's one step away from her heat.”

“Yes, that. She said she needed suppressants, like right now.”

“We’ll need to get her down to the center. At her age, fucking around with an alpha so soon after discovering her true nature... It complicates things.”

“What? But I thought?—”

“Please, let us do our job. You’ll be able to come and see your sister once we’ve got her settled and sedated. Damn omegas! When they get fixated on something, they can be a bloody nightmare to deal with.”

I felt like I’d been slapped. The way he was talking about Sloane like she was a fucking animal... The malaise I’d first felt when Sloane returned ramped up to a roar.

“Jace...” Her whisper captured all our attention, and she started to thrash.

“Jesus fucking Christ, the little bitch has gone deep! Shoot her up with something to calm her the fuck down!”

“No!”

I screamed, Sloane screamed, and the sense of malaise rose to a fever pitch. Someone had a needle. I made to dart for the bed, only to be cut off when the burly beta guard the orderlies had brought with them threw his arm out to cut me off. “What the hell did you do? I asked for suppressants!”

“You don’t get to make the choices now. She’s an omega. She belongs in the Dawn Agency until a suitable alpha can be found for her.”

“You’re banishing her to an alpha zone? Who the hell do you think you are? She’s not going to live in some slum, popping out alpha babies! Sloane is independently wealthy.” The strip might be nice, but the rest... the rest I sensed was considerably worse. The thought of Sloane being tossed in there, or whatever they were going to

do, made me break out in a cold sweat. She already had an alpha. Well, she'd picked one, and from what I could discern from her tight lips and heated cheeks, it had all gone well. Maybe too well!

"Not any more, she's not. The assets of omegas are seized by the state until a family member is approved to transfer them to. You'll need to put in an application with the Office of Omega Affairs."

"I don't want her 'assets,' I want my sister! Where the hell are you taking her? Sloane? Sloane!"

But it was too late. They lifted her limp body up and carried her off, while the beta guard took me by the arm and frog-marched me out. "What the hell!" I snatched up my cell from the coffee table and snagged my sneakers from beside the front door. I was still in my sleeping clothes, for goodness' sake! Where were they taking Sloane? Where were they taking me?

As I stood in the hall, the guard pulled out a roll of bright orange tape with Dawn Agency splattered all over it and taped up the door. "You have somewhere to go? If not, you'll be given state housing until the case comes to court."

My whole body trembled with suppressed rage. "I want to go with my sister. I'll sleep on the floor in her room if I have to. I go where she goes."

"Not an option." The guard's face smoothed out. "State housing or make a call to a friend or family. Choice is yours."

"I'll call someone," I said. "H-How will I find out about Sloane? When can I see her?"

"The agency will be in contact."

As he walked away, the adrenaline crashed and I sank to the floor outside our taped off apartment. Somehow, I got a call through to Jude, although I could barely get the words out. "Sloane...omega...agency took her. Please come."

His voice on the other end of the line telling me he was on his way was the only thing keeping me together. I existed in a vacuum, while the rest of the world was outside. I made my way downstairs in a daze. It was cold, but I didn't care. It helped to shock me back to life.

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My phone rang. When I saw who it was, I didn't hesitate to answer. "Ryder!"

"I'm here, Emma," he said, his voice the calm one that instantly settled the chaos circling me.

"They took her!" My voice was high, borderline hysterical.

"Who, baby?" Ryder asked. "The Dawn Agency? Tell me what happened, but first, are you somewhere safe?"

How did he know? Sloane was with an alpha, another alpha, his business partner. No wonder he'd been ringing my cell off. "I... Yes. Jude is coming to pick me up. I'm outside. The apartment is in Sloane's name, so they've taken possession of it. There's security tape over the door! She was going into heat or something. She was in pain, so I called the Dawn Agency." My words come out in a rush. "I thought they would send like a doctor or something, maybe give her tablets to ease the symptoms, but they gave her an injection and she went limp. That was when they carried her out into an ambulance. They wouldn't let me go with her. Told me I would be contacted. The way they talked about her—" My voice broke. "I didn't know what to do. She's always been the strong one. I needed to help her, and now I've made everything worse. I'm so frightened for her."

"It's going to be fine," Ryder said. "How far away is Jude?"

"He said five minutes."

"Okay, you stay on the line until he gets to you. We're going to get your sister out."

“You can do that?” Hope surged. I didn’t have a clue how he might make this happen, but he represented a safe place amid the storm. I was in shock, reeling from the cruel words and the treatment of my sister at the hands of the Dawn Agency.

“Baby, you’d be surprised what we can do.”

Jude’s car came tearing into the apartment visitor parking lot. “He’s here!”

“Good girl, now go with him. We’re about to lose signal but keep your phone with you and charged. When I call you, I expect you to answer. We’re going to be having a long chat about your disobedience next time we meet. Don’t make that any worse.”

My stomach dipped. “Okay.” I didn’t care what he did to me or my ass, so long as Sloane was safe.

“What the fuck happened?” Jude demanded as I jumped into his car.

I held my hand up, pointing at my cell. “But, Ryder, you better get my sister.”

* * *

My anxiety skyrocketed as I waited for news about Sloane. She was my sister, the last of my family. It was like the day we learned about our parents all over again, only this time, there was no Sloane to hold me because monsters had turned up and taken her from me.

Jude sat me down on his couch and brought me a glass of water, but I was shaking so badly, I couldn’t drink a drop.

It wasn’t Jude’s apartment. No, we were at his boyfriend Derek’s place. They had an off and on again relationship. Derek was a bit of a commitment-phobe, so it hadn’t

progressed very far. I think Jude secretly loved him, although Jude also liked to play around and acted like he wasn't bothered because Derrick wasn't bothered, either.

As a result, I had not one but two gay men fussing over me.

"What exactly happened?" Derek asked Jude, which was for the best, because I couldn't form words into coherent sentences. I keep seeing Sloane—first, the writhing creature, and then the lifeless version after they'd shot her up. She was alone. I couldn't stand that she was alone and vulnerable.

"The Dawn Agency took her," Jude said. "Fuck knows what's going to happen now. You've heard the rumors about that place."

I rubbed my temples.

"Now's not the time," Derek said, sending a pointed glance at me.

"You don't need to hide it from me," I said. "I've heard about them, too. I just... She was in pain. I didn't know what else to do."

Jude sat next to me and drew me into his arms. I let him, and all the while feeling a terrible guilt that I was getting comfort while Sloane had none. "I just want my sister back safe."

"I know, Em," Jude said. "We all do."

Regrets swamped me. Why hadn't I answered Ryder's call? I couldn't believe Jace would have let Sloane leave. I thought the alphas living in Desparion knew far more about the dark side of our society pertaining to alphas and omegas.

There was no easy way.

Which brought my mind to the riot at the gates when we'd picked Sloane up. "She must have gotten scared when she revealed and fled." I said. "All those alphas at the gates..." I shuddered. "She knew she was an omega. I laughed when she told me. It all seemed so silly and unreal. Why did she pretend everything was fine when she first came back? It's not like you can hide your omega status."

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“We do foolish things when we’re scared,” Jude said. “She probably wanted some time to come to terms with it.”

Sloane wasn’t the only one guilty of that.

The regrets kept on coming, only these went further back. I regretted pretending to be okay, when really, I was struggling inside. I missed my big sister. I missed the woman who’d cared for me as more than just a sister.

“Tell me she’s going to be all right?”

“She’s going to be all right,” Jude said. “Alphas, they’re not like us—they don’t see constraints and barriers in the way we do. If she connected with Jace, the alpha you mentioned, then I really think that he will stop at nothing to get her out.”

My tears came anew, even though I felt cold and empty inside. “How can they possibly get her out?”

“I don’t know, love,” Jude said. “But I suppose all omegas end up with an alpha one way or another. If you’re a strong alpha and you want something, you’re going to make it happen.”

“I just need to know that she’s safe.”

“I can’t believe the bastards kicked you out of your own apartment in your nightclothes,” Derek said. “It’s all a land grab, if you ask me, just an excuse to fill the coffers from someone else’s toil. We’ve been trying to run articles on this for

months. Every time we get an angle, the government swoops in and shuts it down.”

“What do you know?” I asked. Derek was an editor at a small, independent news site. They often posted exposés on corruption. I also know they skirted closure often. They had a few wealthy benefactors who stepped in with a legal team whenever the government got too heavy-handed, but it was a fine line. I’d never really thought much about such things before. Now I saw them in a different light.

“Not as much as I would like to,” he said. “It’s been hard to pin people down for interviews, even if it’s anonymous. What you’ve told us is typical of other stories. Society fears alphas and disdains omegas because propaganda tells us to, and all the while, we forget that they are people.”

My once orderly future was slipping through my fingers. There was no scenario where Sloane ever came back home. I didn’t even know if I still had a home for her to come back to. My expectations were lowering, but all I wanted to know was that she was safe, even if it wasn’t with me.

I couldn’t sit still, but I couldn’t move either. I was caught in a sphere of incapacitating tension mixed with sorrow, hopelessness, and despair.

“I’ve always felt sorry for them,” I said quietly. “The way they mysteriously disappear. There was a girl in college, and she just vanished.” I wondered if she was in Desparion now, one of the omegas that Ryder spoke about—the ones you didn’t see because they were under an alpha’s protection.

The enormity of what was happening hit me anew, only this time, it was my sister. She was an omega, taken like the girl in my design class. The dogs from the Dawn Agency had admitted she would be given over to a suitable alpha in Desparion. Or a different alpha zone. “For all we know, they might not house them in the local zone. Maybe that’s the usual practice. It makes sense that they wouldn’t,

because otherwise, they might come into contact with friends or family on the days the zone is opened.”The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that they would send her far away.

I looked toward Derek.

He nodded.“From what I’ve learned, sometimes they do.There are a few factors involved.”

“Well, once Jace gets Sloane, she will be taken to Desparion,” Jude said before I could question Derek on the mysterious factors.“We’ll be able to go and see her all the time!”

“When have you ever heard of anybody seeing an omega after they’ve left?When?”

“I don’t know, love,” he said.“Maybe they do, but they don’t talk about it.”

“Everybody shuns them,” I said.“Like they’re animals and a stain on the family.”

“That’s the alphas,” Derek said.“The omegas are more...pitied.”

Only pity wasn’t the word for how they’d treated Sloane.They’d treated her like she was a broodmare in heat, acting out until she was bred.Sloane had been in pain and hurting.They hadn’t shown a bit of pity or care.

Another sob bubbled up, and Jude rubbed my back.

A few feet from where I sat, my cell was plugged into a charger.

At my silent cue, Derek picked it up and checked it.“Fully charged.You want it back?”

“Please.” I nodded, feeling better at having it and being able to verify that there were no new messages and that sounds and notifications were on.

“Baby, you’d be surprised what we can do,” Ryder had said.

I clutched the cell in my hands like it was my personal lifeline. In a way, it was.

It rang, and I nearly freaking dropped it when I saw the name on the screen.

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“Your sister’s safe, Emma.” That voice, that husky, ever calm voice, delivering those words was the sweetest sound to my ears.

“Where is she? Can I see her? Can I talk to her?”

“Not yet, baby. She’s with Jace. They’ve got...some stuff to work through. She’s in heat. You need to give them a few days, give or take. I promise she’ll call you as soon as she can.”

I frowned. The relief at knowing Sloane was safe changed to a different kind of emotion at his denial of my request. “I want to talk to her, for a minute. Can’t I have a minute? I need a minute!”

I could feel Derek and Jude’s tension rise in line with my voice, and for reasons that escaped my frantic mind, I thought they were about to intervene and try to calm me down.

“Not happening, baby.”

“Don’t ‘baby’ me! Put my sister on right now!”

He sighed heavily. “Look, Emma, I’m sure you think you know your sister, but right now, you don’t. She’s in heat. The only thing she needs is her mate.”

“Mate?!” If he’d slapped me across the face, the blow would have been lighter.

“Do you love your sister, Em?”

He'd never called me Em before, and his husky voice dripping down the line brought a shudder I didn't appreciate. "Of course I do."

"Then give her some time. Let her work through her awakening."

"I can't," I said, the words ending on a sob.

"You're going to have to," he said.

Silence stretched between us, then was broken when he said, "I gotta go. A shit storm is coming after what we had to do. Take care, Emma."

He hung up.

I stared at the cell. He'd dismissed me, again. Cut me off. Told me to wait while his friend rutted my sister. He was probably marking her and breeding her right now. Sloane would be so out of it, she wouldn't even care.

"Take me," I said to Jude.

Jude shook his head slowly. "I heard most of that... She's safe, Emma. You can see her soon. I think we should wait, like he said."

"She's in heat," Derek added. "From everything I've learned about them, you can't stop that now. The only thing that she wants and needs is her alpha."

"Take me! Please." My eyes pleaded with them.

"What are you going to do when you get there? They might not even let you in. It's not an open day."

I huffed out a breath. “Deliveries and people go in all the time. They must. I need to be close, ready for when she—” I couldn’t bear to think about her in heat, being oblivious to everything but the need to mate. “For when she’s herself again.”

They tried to dissuade me, but I was having none of it.

And so, reluctantly, they took me back to the gates.

Chapter Eleven

Ryder

“Ryder, you need to deal with this bullshit,” Dane said.

As Dane stormed out of our office and into the club’s communal dining room, I looked up from my coffee. He thumbed over his shoulder toward the office. “Gate, asap. Before we have a damn riot on our hands.”

I put my coffee down, rising slowly, scowling at the fucker. After that tense conversation with Emma, I was in a bad fucking mood.

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“What the fuck is it?” I brushed past him...and stopped dead.

There, on the surveillance monitor, was the new bane of my existence—the brat. As if the visual of her rattling the fence wasn’t enough, the voiceover on the intercom between her assault on the gate brought an involuntary snort.

Dane tossed a set of keys at me. I caught them on reflex. “Sort your shit out. Snake might be out of commission for now, but he’s got plenty of assholes in his pocket.”

Coffee forgotten, I stalked toward the elevator, jabbing the button five times, even as I dragged out my cell and hit the dial icon next to her name. No fucking answer.

I messaged her.

What the fuck are you doing?

No, I didn’t care that I was cursing.

And no, she didn’t fucking reply. I hoofed it out of the building and all the way down to the gate.

There she was, standing at the gate, a sweet BMW idling a short distance away. Seeing me, she turned and called something to the driver, who backed up and sped off.

“The fuck are you doing, Em? Call them fucking back!”

“No!” She folded her fucking arms. Brat!

“What the fuck are you wearing?” It was a rhetorical fucking question. I could see everything she was wearing because there wasn’t a whole lot, just sneakers, some kind of skimpy shorts, and a T-shirt that hugged her perky tits and woke up the brain in my dick. I could see her fucking nipples. My throat went dust dry.

“I want to see my sister.”

“No can do, Em. Call your buddy back and get your ass back home.”

“I don’t have a home! The agency took it! I want to see Sloane.”

Her lower lip trembled, and her eyes glistened. They were red-rimmed and puffy. It was clear she’d been crying a lot, and her vulnerability hit me like a sucker punch. I sighed and fished out the keys to the gate. “Come on, brat, I’ll take you up. I can’t make any promises about your sister, but I’ll see what I can do.”

She was small and quiet beside me as we walked back to the club.

I wanted to take my T-shirt off and use it to fucking cover her up.

I wanted to take her hand in mine.

I wanted to rip that little scrap of clothing away and plow her with my cock so that both she and the alpha fuckers eyeballing her understood who she belonged to.

Only she didn’t belong to me, and if this shit hadn’t gone down with her sister, she probably wouldn’t have given me the time of fucking day. Which was my own fucking fault.

I took her to the communal dining room, which was now fucking full of the crew, tucking into platters of crispy bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast.

“What’s happening?” she asked, staring about the room, inspecting the occupants before turning back to me. “Sloane’s not here.”

“I already told you she was in heat and with Jace. You can wait here until they’re done.”

“Wait? For how long?”

Damn, her haughty tone made my palm itch to color her fucking ass.

“A few days.” I smoothed out my face and got ready for the explosion.

“A few days?!”

Yeah, I wanted to smile. It took a near heroic effort to keep my amusement locked down.

Her eyes narrowed. “Take me to her, now!”

“No.”

She darted past me and stabbed the elevator call button.

“What the fuck?” I grabbed her arm and hauled her ass out of the way. “You don’t even know where to go! You can’t go wandering about the fucking building.” The mulish set to her jaw said I’d need rope and a ball gag to keep her ass locked down, which was definitely on the table as far as my dick was concerned. “Fine, I’ll go and check, but if they’re fucking busy, you need to deal with it. And by deal with it, I mean sit your ass down and chill until your sister is ready, which might be a few days.”

She nodded once.

“Emma,” I said, voice dropping. “Give me the fucking words. Tell me you’re going to wait like a good girl while I check if you can see her yet.”

Her eyes flashed to mine, and her pupils dilated. My dick perked right up at that little tell. She was still interested. Perhaps I hadn’t fucked things up beyond recovery. Still, there was Jace to consider. Was Emma now officially under Jace’s protection? While he knew I’d been with her, it was kind of an unwritten rule. Just like neither Dane nor I put our hands on Ella, touching Em felt much the same.

The more I thought about it, the more it fucking rankled.

“Emma?”

“Fine, yes,” she said, although she wouldn’t make eye contact anymore, and there was a slight flush to her cheeks. “I agree—I’ll wait, like a good girl.” She layered on the sarcasm, although the pulse thudding in her jaw told a different story.

One thing at a time.

“Take a seat,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

* * *

My conversation through the apartment door with Jace went about as well as I’d expected it to.

“Handle her,” Jace had roared at me. How the fuck was I supposed to handle a bratty beta while keeping my hands to myself?

As I exited the elevator and was assaulted by a sharp bony finger in the center of my chest, all that went out the window.

“Where’s Sloane?” Emma demanded. “You said you were fetching her.”

“I said I was going to check on her,” I replied, feeling that calm settle over me—the kind that usually foreshadowed someone getting fucked up...or a brat getting the spanking of their life. “And she was pretty busy.”

I didn’t point out that Jace sounded like he would rearrange my face if I didn’t fuck off.

“It was implied,” she snarled, giving another sharp poke.

“For fuck’s sake, Em, stop poking me in the damn chest!”

“Don’t ‘Em’ me, tough guy. I’m not afraid of you.”

On the other side of the room, the entire crew was in attendance, omegas poised with food halfway to their lips, the guys looking on with amusement. Dane chuckled, the fucker.

Why had I let Emma in the gates again?

Yeah, that was right—she’d been shaking the mesh like a madwoman, looking straight up at the surveillance camera, demanding to speak to the manager.

The fucking manager?! Like this was some kind of holiday resort.

She was batshit crazy. It had been a case of bringing her in or having another damn riot on our hands when the rest of the deadbeats in this zone roused themselves to come and check what the fuck was going on.

“Are you even listening to me?” I asked. “You get that your sister is newly mated, right? And from the sounds of things, they were busy alleviating their newly mated needs.”

The frown faded, her eyes went round, and she opened and closed her mouth a couple of times before spluttering, “Newly mated needs!” Her scowl was back in an instant, little chin tipping in a defiant tilt that might as well have been a red flag to the alpha side of me. “I demand to see my sister, this instant, before your brother,” —she air quoted with an exaggerated roll of her eyes— “gets any notions of breeding her.”

I rubbed my jaw as though pondering this. I was confident Jace was already balls deep and well into the process of breeding her formerly sensible sister. I offered Emma a fake smile. “How about no?”

Then she poked me one time too fucking many.

“Oh!”

Her screech accompanied me tossing her over my shoulder. Small fists beat against my back while she cursed me out like a pro.

And just like that, all the tension left me because handling brats was a personal forte of mine. All alphas had a beast, and all had a weakness. My beast's weakness was taming querulous women, and this one needed a firm but loving lesson in boundaries and respect applied to her ass via my hand.

“Keep it down, princess.” I landed the first swat against her backside, chuckling when it roused an outraged squeal. I nodded my head to Dane, who watched with a shit-eating grin. “If Jace and Sloane surface, tell them I’m going to be” —I gestured toward the wriggling spitfire hanging over my shoulder— “handling this little problem.”

I didn’t wait for a reply, just punched the button on the elevator, and with Emma still wailing about her rights, exited the room.

* * *

Emma

I was back in Desparion again, only nothing was going quite to plan. Somehow in my head, I’d pictured my next meeting with Ryder to be more... something. What, I didn’t know. More romantic? Did that word even apply to an alpha? So much had happened since I’d last seen him. I felt like I had aged ten years since Sloane was

taken. Now she was safe, and he expected me to sit on the sidelines and twiddle my thumbs until my sister was ready? I wanted to fucking see her with my own eyes! Mated. I couldn't believe she'd been mated. Surely there should be some discussion about this. Didn't they have a ceremony or something?

"Oh, put me down. What the fuck?" The elevator felt too confined as the door closed on us. I beat at his back, wriggled, and fought with everything I had, but he paid no attention to me. His chest was thrumming, but not in a purr like I'd heard before. No, this was a tempered growl and it was doing riotous things to me.

"I want to see my sister. Why can't I see my sister? This is ridiculous."

He swatted my ass. His hands were big, and the result was a sharp sting and a loud clap.

"You'll see her when I'm fucking ready to let you see her. You'll see her when her mate is ready for you to see her! I've told you she's safe. We fucking got her out of there. I said I'd handle it. We've fucking handled it."

"I don't understand why I can't see her."

The elevator doors opened with a ding, and he strode out into the corridor. I began to feel a little queasy upside down. I hadn't eaten anything since Sloane had been taken, and I'd barely slept last night. I felt like a train wreck, and if that weren't bad enough, his scent, his mere presence, sent my libido rocketing.

I thought he might go to the couch or stand me before the window so that he could have a serious talk with me about this supposed transgression I'd made. Maybe I had been a little forceful when I turned up at the gates. My sister was here somewhere and I needed to see her, but he didn't go to the couch. Nor did he stand before the window or even the kitchen area to the side. No, he strode straight through to his bedroom and

dropped me down on a bed empty of everything but a clean bottom sheet.

“Uff.” I blew all the hair out of my face and scrambled to sit up. I didn’t get a chance.

His hands were on my ankles, tugging my right sneaker off. He all but ripped it from my foot and tossed it to the other side of the room, where it landed with a thud.

“What are you doing?” I thumped him. He was solid, and I was sure it hurt me more than it hurt him. Meanwhile, his hand was on the other sneaker. Those big capable hands held me still as he ripped the other one off as well.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he said. “I’m stripping you naked. Ready for discipline?”

That was when my pussy clenched and my brain turned to mush.

“What? You can’t just discipline me. What have I done? You’re the most unreasonable person I’ve ever met.”

I punched him again. He carried on, tackling my night shorts. I squealed as he yanked them down. The ensuing battle nearly ripped me from the bed.

I fought and kicked, but the only thing I was doing was wearing myself out.

“Oh, what the fuck are you—Uff”

A big square hand landed in the middle of my belly, pinning me to the bed while he grasped my panties, tore them down my legs, and tossed them across to the other side of the room.

He stopped, chest heaving, eyes lit with a kind of feral hunger as he stared at what

he'd exposed, and that fast, a switch flipped inside me. Heat pooled in my belly, and then everything seemed to jump back to reality. Big hands grasped the bottom of my T-shirt, and he ripped it straight over my head, leaving me naked.

An intimidating alpha with determination in his eyes stared down at me.

"Do you know why you're going to be punished?" he asked ominously.

I shook my head. I didn't have a fucking clue.

"I can't imagine what madness is going on in your mind or what ridiculous perceived thing I've done wrong. I haven't done anything wrong."

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I crossed my arms, which only had the effect of squeezing my small breasts together.

His eyes went straight there. He licked his lips before his face smoothed out to that deadly stillness I'd come to associate with the man, and he met my gaze.

"Coming to the alpha zone and banging on the fucking gates like a crazy woman. You're lucky I spotted you. Well, Art saw you and notified Dane. Anybody could have come down there. They're not all like me, you know?" he said.

"Like you? You mean they wouldn't take me to a room, strip me, and threaten to punish me?"

"It's not a threat, baby."

Damn, my pussy clenched at that. Stupid traitorous thing.

"They're not all like me. Most of the alphas here will take you back to their home and rape you repeatedly, then they'll give you to their buddies. Then they'd rape you some more and keep doing so until you were nothing but a shell."

It was like a cold splash of water. Fuck! I started shivering. I hadn't thought through what I was doing. I hadn't thought through anything at all.

He was right—I did understand what it was like here. I understood that Inked was different from much of the strip, and even so, when the gates opened on designated access days, it likely had a different feel. But when the gates clicked shut again, anything could happen.

He gathered me up into his arms, heaved me to the back of the bed, and settled me on his lap. He purred, his big hands smoothing over me, but not in a sexual way. Instead, his caresses were comforting, as his hands moved over my back, my hips. He drew my face close, so that my cheek was pressed to his chest, where that deep rumble emanated and his beautiful scent was so rich.

“Breathe,” he said. “Just breathe. You’re here, you’re safe.”

But I wasn’t thinking about being here and being safe. I was thinking about the image of that riot when we came to collect Sloane. The gate had slammed shut as feral alphas charged against the fence. What on earth had I been thinking by coming back to the gate, to do what? What madness had taken over me?

“You’re safe,” he said.

Was I? Was I really safe?

Yet I felt safe here in his arms, surrounded by his scent, and concluded that this was the safest place in the world.

“Is Sloane really here? Is she really mated? Promise me. Promise me everything you said is true.”

“I promise, baby,” he said. “But alphas and omegas are different from everything you know. She needs to be with Jace as much as he needs to be with her. They need to strengthen their bond, and the heat...it’s a strange thing. You’re not in control of yourself. I hate to say this because I know you love her and she’s your sister, but we’re not rational at such times.”

I swallowed. “Are you mated?”

“No,” he said. “I wouldn’t be with you if I were mated, would I?”

“You’re not exactly with me,” I said, and that thought cut far deeper than it should’ve. I didn’t know him. We’d shared one night together, and not even all of that. We hadn’t even had sex. He’d helped his friend save my sister because they were an alpha and omega and because they needed each other, but he didn’t owe me anything.

“If I had an omega, if I bonded to her,” Ryder started, “I couldn’t be around another woman. Not like this. Not a naked woman on my lap. I wouldn’t be able to stand it myself, for a start. Also, omegas are possessive of their mates. She would rip you to pieces. Me too, if she found out. So, no. There’s no omega that I’m bound to.”

“But you’ve been with omegas, right?” I didn’t want to ask that question or acknowledge this rage that had started to consume me at the mere thought of him being with somebody else. Yet I didn’t imagine the man had existed in a bubble before I crash-landed into his life. He was mature. I’d been with other men, so it stood to reason that he’d been with other women and, given he lived here in the alpha zone, omegas. Plus, the way he’d spoken about the experience of heat and rut wasn’t clinical. It was personal. “And you’ve rutted one through her heat.”

There was a pregnant pause.

“I have,” he said.

Something cold and dead settled in the center of my chest. Did Ryder care for them, I wondered?

“We have omegas here,” he said. “We look after them. It’s not a good way for omegas to come into the world. Often, they get passed off to unscrupulous alphas. Where we can, we get to them. They have a choice here to decide who they invite into their

bed. We don't force ourselves on them, and when the heat comes, we help them through it."

"You rut them," I say, feeling sick to my core. "You fuck them and knot them?"

"Yes," he said. "And we mark them too, so that everybody else knows that they belong to us."

Feeling nauseous, I pushed at him. He didn't let go. I shook my head. "I need the bathroom!"

He released me instantly. I'd never been in his bathroom, but I guessed where it was. My feet made a patter against the wooden floor as I ran straight to the toilet, where I lifted the seat and emptied my stomach of bile and water.

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“Go away.” I didn’t look back, but I could feel him standing in the doorway.

“I’m not going anywhere, baby,” he said.

My stomach roiled, and I heaved up nothing.

“No.” I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I didn’t feel right still, but he was there, gathering me up, lifting me. He sat me on the broad counter in front of a full-length mirror and brushed the hair back from my face.

“Are you done, baby?”

I nodded. There was nothing there, anyway.

He pulled a toothbrush out of the cupboard, squeezed some toothpaste on it, and passed it to me. Then he filled a nearby glass with water and gave me that to swill.

“Whose toothbrush is this?” I asked suspiciously.

He shrugged, and his lips tugged up.

“It’s mine. I’ve had my tongue down your throat. I figured a toothbrush isn’t too much of a leap.”

“I don’t want you to mark them,” I said. I could feel my lips trembling.

“I won’t,” he said honestly. “Not again.”

I shoved the toothbrush in my mouth and scrubbed until I felt better, then I rinsed my mouth out and spat it into the sink. He cleaned the toothbrush off under the tap and put it on the side before passing me a towel.

“I can’t ask you to do that,” I said, unable to meet his eyes anymore.

Using his fingers, he tipped my chin up, forcing me to look at him.

“I’m choosing not to,” he said.

“You’re an alpha. You should be with an omega.”

“I should be with whomever I want, and despite your level of crazy, I want very much to be with you. Now,” he said, “you’re going to be disciplined in a way that makes sure you never do something that stupid again. If they’d gotten hold of you... I can’t even think about that. It would fucking destroy me. Take better care of yourself, for me.”

I didn’t understand what was happening, but I felt unsettled in my belly and in the center of my chest. There were wounds, raw and open, about what had happened with Sloane and our parents’ death. I was a little broken on the inside. All of it would take time. Even then, some things never settled back the same.

“I’m ready,” I said. “Punish me. I accept it.”

“Good girl,” he said.

He picked me up and carried me back into the bedroom.

Chapter Twelve

Ryder

Lifting Emma up, I carried her into the bedroom, my body and mind in a state of riot. She felt just right nestled in my arms. My beast was clamoring, wanting her in every way, wanting to put his mark on her.

He also needed to make sure she never put herself in danger like that again. Whatever the fuck was happening between us, whether the instincts writhing inside me were accurate—that with a small push, Emma might reveal as an omega in the same way her sister had—remained to be seen. I doubted she'd considered it, stressed as she was after what had gone down with her sister.

I understood how much she cared. In everything she'd done and said, right from the very first moment we met, her sister had been at the fore. There had been no mention of parents, so they weren't in the picture for whatever reason.

But now, I needed her complete submission, or I was never going to calm down.

As I sat on the bed, she clung to me, and that shit went straight to my weak spot. The beast in me fell hard for a needy omega, whether emotional or physical. Emma, and whether she remained the beta or revealed as an omega, had already claimed a piece of me.

It also hadn't escaped my notice that what had triggered her sudden race to the bathroom to empty her stomach had been the thought of me with anyone else, especially an omega. She didn't want my hands on them and definitely didn't want me to mark them.

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I had to be honest with myself as I sat there with her tiny body trembling against mine, her arms and legs wrapped around me, and her nose buried against the crook of my neck. The thought of marking another omega ever again, of even touching one, put my body into revolt.

It had been one hell of a day and night, and the crazy wasn't done yet.

"Come on up," I said, giving her ass a gentle tap to let her know I meant business.

Her head lifted, and she regarded me through eyes puffy from all the tears she had shed.

"What are you going to do? Are you going to spank me again?"

"No," I said, seeing surprise flash across her face. "You need something more."

She blinked a few times. "What do you mean, more?" Her voice was little more than a whisper.

"More means I need to make an impression." Gathering her hair up into one hand, I slowly tightened my grip. She sucked in a sharp breath as we locked eyes with one another. "I need this. I think you need it too, but if you don't, if you can't give me your submission, that's okay."

It wasn't fucking okay. I was lying to both of us, but she had to agree to this. She had to need it.

“I—I don’t understand.”

“I’m going to discipline you with my belt.It’s going to sting like a motherfucker.”

She swallowed.“I realize it wasn’t the greatest idea storming up to the gates like that.I was so upset about Sloane, I completely forgot about how the alphas charged after her...yesterday.I can’t believe it was only yesterday.And it was all so crazy and unreal.So no, I didn’t think it through.”

“Good,” I said.“I’m glad you realize how dangerous it was.”I ran my fingers down her soft cheek.“It’s going to fucking kill me, but if you can’t let me do this, discipline you how I need to, then I’ll need some time to cool off.I’m not going to fucking force it, but unless you can accept it, then you need to go.You can stay with Dane until your sister is ready to see you.”

She clung tighter.“What are you saying?”

“This needs to be done, baby.Firm discipline.It’s going to hurt.You’re going to cry and beg me to stop.I won’t be able to until I know the point is fully made.Afterward, I will comfort you in any way you want, but I need this, and without it, you must go.”

I tried to ease her off.My demand was unreasonable.The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became it would be better all-around if she stayed with Dane while I calmed the fuck down.She was having none of it, though, her arms and legs tightening.She was as strong as a bloody ox for such a tiny thing.Everything about her cried out what she was.Omega, my beast, confirmed.An omega could handle an alpha.They looked so fucking helpless, yet they could take so much.I was convinced Emma could take what I needed, but I would never force anything.I much preferred an erotic sort of spanking, yet I was hard as a fucking rock just thinking about her submitting to me like this.

But it had to be her choice.

She shook her head when I tried to pull her off.

“Don’t you dare put me aside!”

“Baby.” I brushed her hair back from her hot cheeks. “Dane will look after you. He’s a good one, one of the fucking best, along with Jace. I had a shitty introduction to Desparion. My family is full of assholes. I never want to speak their fucking name again. But I was a rich prick, and when I was tossed into the alpha zone, I got the shit kicked out of me, day after day after day.” Tears pooled in her eyes. I wasn’t looking for sympathy. I’d told her this because she needed to know the kind of men Jace and Dane were, so she understood her sister was safe. “It was Dane’s mother who patched me up. Not every alpha is so lucky, and many of them die.”

“That doesn’t sound lucky.”

“I’m not telling you this to upset you.” I brush her tears away with the pad of my thumb. “I’m telling you so you trust that your sister is safe and that you’ll be safe with Dane. I thought I could do this, could be around you, but it’s hard. And it’ll be harder if you can’t allow me to touch you in every way I need.” I was so close to breaking. I was standing on a fucking ledge. “I want inside you more than I want my next breath.” My chest heaved. “I want to pet your sweet little pussy, make you beg and scream in the good kind of way.” I lowered my palm from where it cupped her cheek until I collared her throat. “I want to do some wicked things to you, but I’ll only ever do what you can take.”

“I’m nervous,” she said. “But I want you to. When you first said it, it just shocked me. But you’re different, and I didn’t realize how different at first. All my life, Sloane has been there for me. Our parents died suddenly in a damn stupid accident. I miss them every day. Sloane took it on herself to care for me, to fill the gap, but in doing

so, I lost a sister I loved. We fight and we argue.” Her smile was rueful. “She’s the worst, most overprotective sister you could imagine, but I swear I lost my mind when those people from the Dawn Agency came and took her away. I can’t quite believe she’s an omega. It’s all so unexpected. But I’m so glad she found one of the good ones. That she’s with Jace.”

“Everything you hear about the Dawn Agency, those rumors going around, they’re all fucking true. But we got there. Jace wouldn’t have had it any other way... Then you put yourself in danger. I can’t fucking have that, baby. I’m trying so fucking hard to temper what I am. An alpha isn’t like a normal man. I can sense things, animalistic things, that go beyond natural human understanding.” I was trying to lay the foundations, to tell her in not so many words that I thought she was the match for me—my mate.

She reached up to enclose my face within her hands. “I don’t want you to change a thing. I can handle this, and afterwards, I’m expecting my reward. Please, don’t put me away, even for a moment. I couldn’t bear it again. I want you. All of you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Emma

I am going to get my reward afterwards, I repeated over and over in my head. I was nervous. No, the word nervous didn’t cut it, but I trusted Ryder, just as I’d trusted him to get my sister.

He had.

I figured this wasn’t going to kill me. Most likely, it wouldn’t even leave a mark, but he’d said it was going to sting like a motherfucker, and I trusted his word on that as well. Still, I wanted this, wanted his hands on me any way he needed them.

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I could see it in his face, the banked tension radiating from him, as I cupped his cheeks. The thin layer of stubble along his jaw was surprisingly soft. I leaned in and pressed my lips to his. My hands were shaking, but so was he, tension thickening the air, seeming to encompass both of us in the same sphere. He was right—we both needed this, and whatever came after, we needed that as well.

I'd spent too much time ruminating over what happened the last time I was in his room, wondering where it had gone wrong and why he'd kicked me out, thinking about his cock under my palm through the denim of his pants.

I'd had boyfriends. They came in different sizes, and bigger wasn't always better as far as a woman's body was concerned, but I wanted Ryder and everything about him. Everything he'd said told me that despite his alpha status, he was no animal.

He was complex, with a personality that held nuances built up through all the experiences in his life. He'd said his family were all assholes and hadn't even cared when he was rounded up and tossed in here. No one deserved such cruelty.

Not Ryder, or Sloane.

No, I wouldn't think about that now. Sloane was safe and with Jace, bonding with him. There would be no civilized wedding, or a stylish apartment with fancy restaurants on the doorstep. She would be here in the zone under the protection of a powerful man.

I lifted my head and let my hand slip away. This was down to him now. I'd said what I wanted and had accepted all of him. I had no crystal ball to tell me about tomorrow,

but if my life had taught me anything, it was to grab opportunities when they came and to experience life, because you never knew when it would be ripped away.

If I shied away from this, I would regret it the whole of my life.

“Do you think you can be still?”he asked, brushing my hair behind my ear, exposing me to his critical assessment.

His eyes, I surmised, saw far too much.

“I-I don’t know.I’ve never really thought about it.”

“How about being tied?Restrained?Do you think you can handle that?”

Heat pooled in my belly, and I swallowed.

His eyes lowered to track the movement, then lowered to where I was spread around his much larger body.

I was naked.Ryder was still fully clothed, which added an edge to the situation, making it indecorous, and I liked it very much.

“Baby, I want to do wicked things to you,”he’d said during our first intimate time together.

I trusted that he did and wanted every wicked, depraved imagining in his alpha mind played out on my body.I wanted to be tied down, restrained, vulnerable before him.He could, if he chose to, do anything to me, even without restraints.His power over me was absolute, due to a built body and an unquestionable strength many times greater than mine.Yet even knowing this, to be bound and tied was completely different.I couldn’t even begin to break free.

He hadn't moved, but my body was rising as nerves and arousal bloomed, anticipation bringing a delectable thrill.

"Ah, baby," he said, his face softening. "We're going to have so much fun."

"I never answered," I said.

He smirked. "Em, your pussy is creaming, and your sweet scent is ripening the air." His filthy words kicked off a heavy thud of arousal between my thighs. His big hand splayed over my tummy, making me clench.

"Do you want me to restrain you, baby, while I punish you?"

My breathing turned ragged. "Yes."

"Good, girl," he said. "I think you need it. I think you're the kind of brat that can't stay still."

The way he said brat held affection and hunger. Did he like that about me? Did he like it when I rebelled?

I wanted to say no and for him to make me...to force me. "I want a safe word," I said, emboldened by the heat in his stormy gray eyes.

He nodded slowly. "Yes, if you want one."

"And next time?" I whispered, hardly daring to hope.

His lips tugged up again. He was so sinfully handsome when he smiled.

He cupped my cheek and kissed me too briefly for my liking. "Yes, next time, too."

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His words became a balm over the prior hurt. This, whatever was happening between us, spanned more than now.

* * *

We agreed on a safe word, or in this case, words. Red meant stop immediately, yellow meant slow, green meant go. I liked that it was nice and simple, and given I was already sinking into the moment, I thought simple was good. He also said that if I got confused, I could also tell him to stop.

His eyes held mine. I often thought of them as stormy blue ones, but today, they appeared dark and moody as his hand fisted my hair and his lips lowered over mine, kissing me, tongues tangling. I groaned into his mouth, clutching his shoulders.

Impatient.

Needy.

Desperate for more.

I wanted his hands on me. I wanted to feel his cock sliding in and out of my pussy, to feel him over me, filling me.

When he brought the kiss to an end, we were both breathing heavily. He pressed his forehead to mine. "Get on the bed, on your back, and open your legs."

Damn. Just that command and his husky voice sent a shiver rippling through my

body. I nearly fell off his lap in my haste. His dark chuckle followed as he rose from the bed, stripping everything except his jeans as he headed over to a dresser. I stopped breathing as he peeled his T-shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor, my eyes riveted to the rippling expanse of tanned flesh, the enticing contours of his muscular back, presented for my view. I had never seen a more beautiful man. There was so freaking much of him—Herculean shoulders, a tapered waist, ridges of thick muscle. The power in him was spellbinding.

He opened up a cupboard and took several things out, placing them on top of the nearby dresser with a clatter and clunk. There was something long and metal with what looked like cuffs at the end that defied my limited knowledge.

Then he turned around and tutted as his eyes landed on me. Walking over, he placed the items beside me. I couldn't bring myself to look yet.

"Baby, you can do better than that. Open up for me."

My breath hitched at his crude words, yet I felt the command. He wanted me to open up so that he could look. I didn't think there was a woman on the planet who wasn't self-conscious about her pussy on some level. His expression was as stark and beautiful as his body. He would wait for me to do this for as long as I needed. Steeling myself, I pushed my knees a little wider. My reward was a deep growl emanating from his chest as his eyes locked on the apex of my thighs.

"Perfect," he said. "Every single thing about you is fucking perfect."

His praise soothed my nerves, because I could tell he wasn't making up a line. In his eyes, I was perfect.

"I like you like this," he said, his gaze holding mine. "All spread open. I'm going to keep you that way." Leaning over, he picked up the long metal pole that he placed on

the bed. “This is called a spreader. I guess the name is self-explanatory.”

I fought the urge to clamp my legs shut. He was going to put that on me, and it would hold me open and vulnerable while he disciplined me with his belt. My eyes flashed to his.

“Do you want me to put the spreader onto you? Do you want to be held open? Can you do that for me?”

This wasn’t what I’d imagined when he mentioned restraints. Tying me to the bed maybe, but certainly nothing like this. My legs were wide. He would be able to see all of me once it was fitted in place. I wouldn’t have a choice and couldn’t shut my legs, even if I tried.

“Yes,” I said, knowing after our last time together that he needed the words.

“Good girl,” he said, placing it on the bed between my spread legs. On each side, there was a strap and buckle.

I thought he would begin straight away. Instead, he leaned in, capturing my chin in his strong hand, and gave me a deep, sexy kiss of tangled tongues and panted breath. I groaned into his mouth, wildly aroused, throbbing, and he’d barely touched me yet.

His head lifted, and he pinned me with a look. “Every time you do something like this, it takes you closer to your reward.” Returning to the bottom of the bed, he drew my legs apart. A groan escaped my lips as he eased them wider still, so that he could fit the bar between my feet.

I jerked, but Ryder held me still, a warm hand on each ankle.

“Easy, baby,” he said. “I won’t fit it until you’re ready.”

I sucked in great gulps of air, then nodded.

“Baby?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “Green. Please do it.”

He took his time about it, resting the cuff around my left ankle, letting me get used to the feel of it before he buckled it closed and repeating on the other side. Then his hand enclosed the whole of it within a comforting weight. His other hand caressed from my calf to my lower thigh, then back down again.

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“Good girl,” he said. “How does that feel?”

I’d resisted the urge to try to close my legs, but now, and suddenly, I needed to. My knees tried to snap together, and a jolt of pure arousal hit me deep inside my pussy when I found that I couldn’t.

“Oh god.”

He grinned. “There we go.” His thumb drew a soothing circle against my ankle above the cuff. “Baby, we’re going to have so much fun. Now, I’m going to turn you over, then I’m going to attach these two cuffs to your wrists and the wrists to the bar.”

He hadn’t started spanking me yet, or alluded to what might come after I was restrained to his liking, but I was in free fall. My heart rate jacked up, and calm became lost under the heady sensations awakening in me as he took command of my body.

“So pretty, all spread open like this,” he said. “I’m going to eat this sweet pussy out so good once we’re done. Would you like that?”

“Yes. God, please yes. Green, green, green.”

I didn’t understand what was happening, or my response. I should’ve been more alarmed, but all I felt was an edgy kind of arousal. I could feel the slickness and how open and exposed I was. The cool air conditioning touched me there, seeming to dance across my skin.

“I’m going to turn you over now. Remember what I said last time? If you want me to stop, just tell me to stop. I won’t be angry. I won’t be upset. We’ve come this far, we’ve started. I’ll hold you until you feel fine again. Okay?”

“Yes.” I felt strangely close to tears. Brushing the hair from my cheek, he leaned in and kissed me. I opened to him, chasing his tongue, trying to lean up and get more. His hand collared my throat, holding me still, making the kiss once more on his terms. He gentled and stopped before I was ready.

“I’ve got you now,” he said. “You’re mine. I’ll always take care of you. I’ll never ever be cross with you if you can’t do what I ask. I’m proud of you for doing this much.”

My chest felt full with a giddy kind of light.

“Are you ready to turn over?”

“Please,” I said.

Lifting me with ease, he turned me over, face down, ass up, knees bent. Gathering my left hand, he kissed the knuckles before enclosing my wrists in a cuff. He took his time about it, making sure it wasn’t too tight, that I was comfortable. Afterward, he held my wrist and the cuff all together in his big warm hand. It was the strangest sensation, making me feel somehow both vulnerable and safe.

“I’m going to attach it to the spreader now.”

“Please.”

“Good girl.”

And even in this, he took his time, pausing to skim his hand over my shoulder, down

my back, over the curve of my waist, the swell of my ass, over my hip, thigh, and calf, setting a fire across my skin all the way to my left ankle. My hand was drawn back and then attached.

Awareness bloomed. I wanted to relax into it, but it was like my body teetered on the edge of rebellion, and I tugged. The lack of movement was shocking. His hands were immediately on me, against my shoulder and wrist, holding me still.

“Are you okay, baby?”

“Yes. Green.”

“Good girl, just breathe.”

This time, he leaned down and pressed a kiss against my hip.

I was so wet. All I could think about was the rising need and the relief that would be mine when he finally made me come.

“I’m going to do the other side now,” he said. He applied the same tender care as he attached the cuff, pausing at every step, watching me, before attaching the second cuff.

I concentrated on breathing, reminding myself that he would stop if I needed him to, losing myself in the look on his beautiful face as his eyes drank me in.

“Absolutely stunning,” he said.

* * *

Ryder

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She looked fucking gorgeous, all spread out and vulnerable before me. My cock was so fucking hard that I could have driven nails with it. Best of all, the heady scent of her arousal perfumed the air. She was enjoying this, maybe as much as I was.

I couldn't decide where to let my eyes linger first. Her lips were parted, her chest rising and falling unsteadily, and her wet pussy was on display, but it was her big, doe eyes watching me that sucked me in.

She would come so fucking hard after I was done with this. I would make sure of it.

And afterward, however gentle I needed to be, however long, even if it took me all fucking night, I was getting my dick inside her. If I had to work her up to every single fucking inch, that was what I was going to do. I wasn't coming until I could come inside Emma.

Her pretty eyes grew as wide as saucers as I reached for the buckle of my belt. Her breath hitched as it came out with a whoosh. "Remember what I said before." Her eyes flashed toward mine. "Just say if you need me to stop or slow."

She swallowed. "I'm...really aroused."

"Baby, it's going to sting so good. If everything so far is any indication, the endgame will be so worthwhile."

Laying my belt out beside her so she could look her fill, I circled around to the bottom of the bed. I needed to fucking touch her. My hands seemed obscenely large against the creamy-colored flesh of her thighs. I squeezed, and she groaned softly. My

thumbs skimmed upward to the outer lips of her pussy...that was fucking drenched, and my mouth watered.Maybe one little taste to whet my appetite, so she would know how good I was going to treat her afterwards.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, Emma.”This was a lot for someone to do the first time.The trust that she’d placed in me brought a swell of joy to my chest.She was a treasure, one I wanted to reward, to imprint myself upon so deeply that no other male would compare.One way or another, Emma was mine.

I sank to my knees, and without the slightest preamble, ran my tongue the length of her slick pussy.She jerked, rattling the small chain that connected her cuffs to the pole, groaning when she found they didn’t give.

My smirk was pure feral hunger.

“God, what?Why are you stopping?”

I chuckled, landing an open-handed spank against the right ass cheek.“Baby, an alpha does what he wants to, when he wants to.I don’t take instructions well, unless it’s you asking me to stop.Are you asking me to stop?”

“God, no.I’m green!”

Smirking, I went back to eating her out from behind.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god,” she mumbled into the covers.

Oh yeah, her sweet little pussy was gushing and her ass twitching.She wanted to come.I could feel her tension coiling, and so because I was an alpha and a bastard, I stopped.

She groaned again. I knew that she desperately wanted to curse me out, but my reminder that this was on my terms and not hers was still fresh in her mind.

“You're fidgeting, Emma. Can you be a good girl for me? Can you let me do this how I need to?”

“Ryder, please. I'm so good. I'm so, so good.”

I bit my lip to stifle my chuckle, enamored with her sweet begging, and went back to my feasting, getting my tongue all up inside her drenched little pussy and then swirling it close, but not quite up to her clit. She tensed again, and I could hear her chanting under her breath. I lifted my head. “Relax for me, baby.” I traced soothing circles with my hands on her pretty, heart-shaped ass. “Relax, Emma.”

“God, I want to come!”

“I know, baby, nice deep breaths.” Fuck, she was pure joy, and I hadn't started yet. She heaved a ragged breath. “There we go.” I went back to her pussy, licking and nipping everywhere except that place where she most wanted me to.

She tensed again.

I stopped. “Baby?”

“I'm green. I think there's something more than green, and that's me. God! I'm very okay. Never been better in my life—” She cut off her wild ramble.

This time, I did chuckle.

“God! This is inhuman. Please make me come. Please god, please!”

I landed a sharp spank against her left ass cheek hard enough to raise a nice red handprint.

Her gasp was priceless.

“Not yet.Now relax.”

She growled at me, little brat.I spanked her right ass cheek equally hard.Her gasp morphed into a groan.She was so fucking close to coming, but she wasn't getting her reward until the punishment was done.My cock was hard, jerking enthusiastically, wanting out of my pants.I was leaking pre-cum like a fucking river.

I went back to tending her needy pussy, licking and kissing, getting my tongue all over it, driving her to the edge again, to the point where tension once more invaded her.

I stopped.

“I can't help it,” she said with a groan.“I really need to come.Please make me come.”

“Punishment comes first, baby.Are you asking me to punish you?”

“I'm asking you to make me come,” she said, tone imperious.

My sweet little brat had so much to learn.“You can't have one before the other.”I rimmed the entrance to her pussy with one finger, then slowly, so slowly, sank into her hot, wet sheath.She clenched around me.Fuck!She was so insanely tight.I fucked my finger in and out, delighting in the wet squelchy noises it made.“You're absolutely drenched, Em,” I said.“Can you hear those sweet, sticky noises as I finger you?”

She groaned into the covers again, her face flushed, those big, brown eyes pleading

with me as I played, easing in and out.

“Are you close?”

“No!”

The brat was lying. I was sure of it. I twisted my finger and began to pump with a little more vigor, once, twice, and then stopped.

“Just what? Oh my god! Oh my god! I’m going to kill you!”

“Baby, you’re killing me too. Don’t think my cock isn’t trying to drill a hole through my jeans.” She was going to unravel when I let her come, but not yet. Her scent was all over me again, but this time, there was no thought of retreat. This time, I didn’t fight it. This time, I embraced the throb and the burning desire to grip her hips and plow her hot cunt.

So fucking needy and so desperate. She was exactly where I wanted her to be as I picked up the belt.

“We’re going to begin now,” I said, rising to my feet.

She didn’t argue. Not a peep left her lips.

“Ask me for the first one.”

“Please, Ryder, punish me.”

I wrapped the top of the belt around my fist. The first crack of contact was loud. Emma gasped, and a beautiful red stripe bloomed.

“Oh god, that stings!”

“Remember what I said. Are you good?”

“I’m very, very bad,” she said. “Please do the next one!”

Tenderness wrapped around me, even as her defiance amused me. With every strike, color bloomed. She panted, begged, and groaned, rattling the cuffs against the spreader. Her ass was soon covered in a pretty pink glow. I’d never seen anything more beautiful than her submission to me, and every time I checked with her, all she did was say green or beg me to carry on.

Somewhere along the way, my human mind began to sink and my beast rose to the forefront. He understood the underlying tells better, cataloging every twitch of the sweet human prey spread out before me.

The perfume of her arousal saturated the air by the time I dropped the belt. Her cunt and the tops of her thighs glistened with evidence of her state. “Good girl, you took that so well.”

Her breath turned to a pant as my fingers bit into the hot, pink flesh of her ass. I squeezed hard, and she groaned again, deeper, guttural, steeped with raw pleasure.

“Come for me, baby,” I said, my voice a barely tempered growl. “Come all over me.” I sank to my knees and feasted. From the first swipe of my tongue, she was coming apart for me, her body contorting and then turning rigid as she came, gifting me with a gush all over my waiting tongue.

Chapter Fourteen

Emma

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Ifloated in a heady euphoria as Ryder dispensed with the buckles on my wrists and ankles, freeing me slowly, taking the time to massage and soothe before he crawled up the bed beside me and rolled me over so that I was facing him. He drew my cheek against his warm chest, and I curled into him, blissed out on the climax and the simple pleasure of his arms wrapping me up, pulling me into him.

I heaved a deep breath as my pussy throbbed from the prior pleasure. I shouldn't be needy, but I was. My legs felt odd being closed once again. I wanted more, so much more. The climax that had torn through my body had only awakened me, driving the fever higher. I pressed kisses to his chest, scissoring my thighs, impatient as I snuggled against him.

"That's my good girl," he said, a light purr rumbling as his strong fingers played in the hair at the back of my scalp. His heat surrounded me while his heady scent latched onto nerves, creating a tingle all the way down to my belly and lower.

My ass throbbed too, and more so when his hand lowered to cup and squeezed a little too roughly, yet even that kicked off an echo deep inside.

"Someone is very needy," he said.

"You made me so." My tone was a little waspish, and a sharp spank to my ass was my reward.

I didn't understand, nor could I process half of what had transpired, but I felt an awareness unfurling inside my chest, a warm, comforting sensation of safety, of being cherished, and of trust.

But a need, sharp and visceral, had also been roused. I was aware of his heavy cock pressing against my belly through his pants and the way it flexed. My hand slid down over the warm, ridged flesh of his chest, petting him, familiarizing myself. He hissed, closing his hand over mine when I reached for the button of his pants.

“Don’t you want to?” I lifted my head and stilled as I noted the raw desperation lining his face. He did want to. “Don’t you dare.” His eyes narrowed, but I pressed on. “Don’t you dare deny me again. You promised, said I could have my reward.”

His face softened, and he rolled, taking me under him, cupping my face as he kissed me, open-mouthed, taking even as he gave. That fast, I was on fire again, my body rising. He didn’t even have to tell me to open. My legs parted the instant his hand skimmed from my knee upward. He played in the slick folds, his touch gentle as he kissed me, sliding his fingertips up and down, giving, but not quite enough. His mouth left mine, trailing kisses down my throat, sucking harder, kicking off a sharp ache...just as he plunged a single thick finger inside me. I arched up. Everything about this was heaven. He was marking me like he did last time, and I wanted him to. I wanted him to mark me all over, and leave my body littered with the evidence that I belonged to him. Where these thoughts had sprung from, I didn’t have a clue. I only knew that this was perfect, everything I wanted and more.

I widened my legs further, giving him room. He rewarded me by pushing a second finger inside, stretching me so good as his thumb pressed down over my throbbing clit, rubbing back and forth. His lips trailed down over my collarbone, turning my breaths choppy as he enclosed my nipple and a good portion of my breast in the hot cavern of his mouth.

He sucked a little too hard, his fingers making those filthy squelching noises as he pumped them with maddening slowness in and out. My body rose but then hung, wanting to come too much.

He stopped, the heel of his hand grinding against my clit while his fingers remained buried deep, holding me intimately as he sucked and nipped my breast, then moved on to the other side to suck and nip again. My tension coiled, and I grew ever more restless. I desperately wanted to come, only he wasn't moving. He was simply holding me still while he ravished my breasts. The coil turned tighter. My pussy pulsed around his fingers, a thick invasion keeping me open for him.

The orgasm sideswiped me, like a great wave crashing over me, and I was spasming deep inside, clenching over thick fingers as that powerful climax just kept coming. He took my lips once again in a drugging kiss as he finally began to move his hand. It kicked off a flutter inside me, leaving me hanging on the cusp of another climax, my body and mind lost in a state of heightened arousal.

He began to pump his fingers more vigorously, scissoring them, finding my clit with his thumb, and circling it over again. Our tongues tangled, and I sank into the sensations—his kiss, his scent, the sounds. I was so open before him, and he was plundering me, touching me how he wanted.

An awareness of surrender welled up. Ryder would care for me, on both the higher level that pertains to the safety of my family and this deeper intimate one where he tended to me, driving my blood ever higher.

But I wanted more than what he was giving me, so much more. I was falling into him with every kiss. The gentle thrust and withdrawal of his fingers, the steady swirl of his thumb, and the wetness seeping from me, drenching the bedding, all conspired to take me further under his spell. I was lost, so lost, but the only thing I needed was him. The fluttering rose until it was an inevitability—I was going to climax again. Then I was going under, groaning into his mouth.

This time, when I was done, he lifted his fingers to his lips and licked them clean. I swear I climaxed again, just watching him and the rapture on his face. This wasn't a

man who did anything because he felt he ought to or because it was asked of him. This man took his pleasure how he wanted, entirely on his terms.

Alphas were different from beta men, and as I watched him, I understood just how different.

His hooded eyes lowered to meet mine. "I want you," he said, husky voice low and steeped with need. "I want to fill your sweet cunt with every fucking inch I have. I want to stretch you, open you in ways you've never experienced before. You're so fucking tight, and it won't be easy, but you'll take it, won't you? You'll take me because I asked this of you."

"Yes." He always wanted the words, and I offered them gladly. "I want you, and to feel you inside me, all of you. I might go mad if you don't."

He kissed me, sweet and lingering, yet underneath, the air seemed to crackle because he was finally going to give me what I desired.

There was nothing more to discuss. He popped the button on his jeans, eased the zipper down, and shucked out of his pants. I swallowed, my eyes riveted to the thick, long club he'd exposed. It disappeared from my view as he kicked his pants away and rolled above me, nudging my thighs open and placing his knees between mine.

I wanted another look, to touch and taste him, but he cupped my face and held my eyes prisoner. "Look at me, Emma." He was so big over me. Our size difference was emphasized as I lay beneath him. I was tiny, and he was twice the size of an average beta male. His cock, I had every reason to believe, would be proportional to the rest of him. He kissed me, easy, gentle little nips, coaxing me back into the moment.

"Good girl," he said between kisses. "Open yourself up for me. Relax. You can take me, I know you can. There's no rush. We'll take as long as we need to, and if you need

me to stop, I'll stop. You understand that, right? That I'll never ever do more than you can handle?"

"Green, Ryder. Don't stop. I don't want you to." My arms and legs wrapped around him as fear bloomed in me that he might perceive me to be more fragile than I was. I might be small but I wasn't weak, and I was far tougher than I looked.

"Baby, I haven't even started yet."

Emboldened, I leaned up to kiss him, opening my mouth under his. He groaned, mouth covering mine, pushing me back into the bed, taking control of the kiss. Our tongues danced as his hand cupped my breast, testing the weight, thumb skimming back and forth over my nipple, building a sense of urgency inside me.

My knees made a cradle for his hips, heels digging into his ass, trying to pull him closer. He shifted a little, and I felt wet stickiness pooling against my thigh as his cock leaked over me. My fingers sought and sank into his hair, holding him to me. I was surrounded by him, caged, and inside here, I was safe. His hips rocked, his cock nudging my slick folds. His arm slid under my ass, bringing a hiss to my lips as the sore flesh was grasped in his big hand. He drove forward, his lips popping from mine as the tip lodged against my entrance.

He stared down at me, and I stared back, not wanting to look away and miss a moment of this. I tried to relax, open myself, and think of passivity and acceptance, yet a tendril of fear weaved its way around the outside of the anticipated bliss. Dropping a little more weight, he sank inside, forcing the tip of his cock into me. The pressure was intense, and I gasped, instinctively trying to shift away to ease the discomfort.

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“I’ve got you, Em,” he said. “Can you relax for me, baby? I won’t press any deeper until you’re ready.” Between his body and the arm he had clamped around me, I had nowhere to go.

“Yes,” I said. True to his word, he didn’t go deeper, but neither did he retreat. He was watching me, watching every emotion play across my face.

His cock flexed, kicking off a throb inside me, making my pussy squeeze around him. Enticed by the arresting fullness, all the tiny nerves he’d awakened with his fingers and mouth flared to life. I tried to move, shift, and take him a little deeper. Instead, he pulled out, leaving the tip resting at my entrance, making me feel empty before surging a small way back in.

I groaned.

“Such a good girl.” He nibbled on my lips as he rocked in and out, over and over, until I was frantic, torn between wanting more and the fear that this was only the beginning. I couldn’t possibly bear it all, yet the stretching sensation made me flutter. It also made me hot. The tendril of fear dissipated into a heady, hot haze. “Open up for me and take your alpha’s cock.”

Each thrust took him a little deeper, and my panic surfaced again. He slowed, withdrew, and kissed me silly before beginning again. Heat sparked across my skin, bringing a pop of perspiration. His kisses distracted me, gentle, coaxing, dragging my mind from the thick club spearing me intimately.

My mind splintered, suddenly aware of how deep he was, and panic bloomed.

He stopped filling me, not withdrawing this time, and cupped my cheek. “Eyes on me, Em.”

“I’m okay. Don’t stop.” I tried to wrap my arms and legs around him, but he wouldn’t budge, just held, flexing his thick cock inside me. “Oh god, I’m going to come.”

The fluttering kicked off in earnest, and he was sinking, dropping more weight, pinning my hips. There was so much of him filling me, filling me all up. As he sank into me, I was sinking too, setting off a dark carnal wave rippling through me as my pussy spasmed painfully around him.

“God, I’m coming.” I was drowning, falling deeper, and he was still sinking into me. Everywhere was fluttering, clenching, tumbling, trying to contract over his impossible girth and failing. I felt invaded, penetrated in the deepest of ways. A guttural cry rose up from my chest, but he swallowed it, his tongue plundering my mouth, and I sucked greedily, my eyes locked with his as waves of dark skittering pleasure tore through me in a rolling climax that never seemed to end. Still, he was pushing, and the pressure rose even as I convulsed around him.

Bliss. Every nerve along my channel woke up and flared to life. This was wickedness of the highest order, debauched and depraved, and I loved every second of it.

His mouth moved to my throat, sucking little bites, nipping at the lobe of my ear. “My sweet filthy little beta, stuffed full of alpha cock.” He flexed inside me. “Can you feel that, baby? Feel how deep I am inside you?”

My groan had an edge of desperation as his words coaxed another hot wave of pleasure.

Then I felt it—something thicker testing my entrance.

“Oh god!” I realized what it was, and I came again, harder, deeper than I’d ever come before.

His neck arched, and his face contorted, mouth open for a deep rattling growl that brought a sharp clench to my pussy. Inside, I was pulsing, and there, so deep, I felt the hot flood as he bathed the entrance to my womb.

My pussy spasmed joyfully. I clung to him, my eyelids heavy under the sensual onslaught, yet I fought to hold them open, not wanting to miss the rapture on his face.

Teeth gritted, he growled again and flooded me with another heavy jet of cum. His hard length pulsed inside me, bringing an echoing pulse in me, the rush of adrenaline connecting us together. His hand tightened on my ass as he sank deeper still, my pussy quivering, trying to bear the unnatural sensation as the bulge of his knot stretched me obscenely.

God, the pleasure was never-ending, as wave after wave swamped me. I was oh so full, surrounded by him.

His lips found mine, and I opened eagerly as our combined cum flooded out.

My legs begin to tremble, the strain of trying to hold them open around his much greater bulk finally catching up, while my poor pussy throbbed with a different kind of strain, holding his monstrous length inside.

Chapter Fifteen

Emma

It took three long, smut filled days before Sloane roused from her heat, by which time, my body had enjoyed more pleasure than I’d thought it was capable of. I’d

learned a lot about Ryder during that time—he was comforting, attentive, and being held in his arms after he'd wrested a climax from me was the best feeling in the world.

I was falling for him, so bloody hard. I'd never wanted a relationship. I was supposed to be graduating in a few days, but all that paled in significance to the feelings I had for Ryder.

The message from Sloane was like a cold splash of water. It reminded me that I had a life that didn't begin and end with Ryder. I had responsibilities. I'd barely checked my email for three days. There was a job offer waiting for me, and I had life on the other side of the chain-link fence, a beta life, but Ryder didn't fit into it any more than I fit into his world.

I felt his eyes on me as I stared at the text message.

“You okay, baby?”

We were naked and in bed. Ryder was lying sprawled out behind me, and I was sitting with my legs dangling over the side, my cell phone in my hands, staring at the message from Sloane. It was a long message. She wanted to know if I was okay and told me how sorry she was for not answering me for three days. She didn't need to be sorry. I was relieved. My fingers hovered over the keys. I needed to answer. She would start worrying if I didn't.

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I glanced back at Ryder, which was a mistake. His too long hair was messy and tangled from sleep. He looked like a big, sexy god sprawled out with a lazy smirk on his lips.

“Has Sloane finally roused?”

“Yeah,” I said, but I didn’t sound as enthusiastic as I should have.

He gestured toward the cell in my hand. “So are you going to message her back?”

“Yeah,” I said again. “Yeah, I am. I... This is really weird. I don’t know what to say.”

“Start with the basics,” he said. “Tell her you’re happy that she’s well. Tell her you can’t wait to see her.”

So I did.

I love you, Sloane. Please don’t apologize. I’m fine, I’m well. I know that Jace got you out. I’m relieved you’ve come through okay. I’ll be here when you’re ready.

Suddenly, everything welled up, and the back of my eyes stung with the heavy onset of tears.

“Hey?” He gathered me up into his arms as I started sobbing.

“I’m so happy that she is okay.” But it wasn’t only that. It was also the recognition that this interlude was over. I could see Sloane, and then I needed to go back home to my

apartment—I'd received a message yesterday to say ownership had been transferred to me—to my friends, the job offers, and to the graduation ceremony that was only two days away.

It all felt surreal, empty, and meaningless. "Why do they separate alphas?" I asked. "Why do they do that? You're not monsters or animals. You don't deserve to be locked behind a chain-link fence."

I was asking a deeper question, one pertaining to why we couldn't be together.

"It's complicated," he said, and I sobbed harder. "There's a lot going through your head, baby."

"I can't process any of it," I said honestly.

"Don't try to," he said. "Take it a step at a time."

My cell beeped with another message.

"You're going to have to let her know that you're here. She can't leave now. Omegas, they have no place in the beta world." There was bitterness and his tone. "And given how we busted her out of the Dawn Agency, we really don't want to risk her face appearing on any security cameras." He nodded his head toward my cell. "Do you want me to sort this out for you?"

I dashed the tears from my cheek and heaved a troubled breath.

Cupping my face, he wiped the tears from my cheeks with the pads of his thumbs, but more fell to take their place. "Emma, do you want me to sort this out?"

"Yes."

He grabbed his cell from the nightstand, swiped the screen, tapped a button, and held it to his ear. I could hear it ringing. Pressing a kiss to the top of my head, he slipped out of bed and moved to stand before the big window.

He was gloriously naked, and the dawn sky cast his big body into silhouette. I drank him in greedily, wanting to store up the sculpted lines of his back, his broad shoulders, the trim waist, remembering how his muscled ass felt under my fingers as I'd held him to me when he came deep inside me a short time ago.

His hand raked through his hair, sending muscles rippling in his arm, shoulder, and back.

He said something I couldn't quite hear from here, then he chuckled, threw a look over his shoulder at me, and winked.

My stomach performed a slow tumble. I was so freaking gone.

"Don't you dare give me any shit... Yep... No problem."

He hit the button on his cell. There was a slight delay before he turned around. "Better get your ass in the shower, baby. You got fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes? Panic gripped me as I realized the state I was in. My hair was a knotty mess and a little crusted in places. I'd hardly slept since I entered Ryder's room. I ached from head to toe... and my pussy was... full of cum.

Despite all of this, I wanted him again.

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Tossing my cell to the bed, I surged up and nearly collapsed. My arm shot out to brace against the wall. Damn, I was in a worse state than I'd thought.

He was at my side, an arm anchoring around my waist. "Gez, Em. Take your time. Sloane has been in heat for three days. She's not going anywhere."

Slipping an arm under me, he carried me to the shower. "I can manage," I said as he put me down on the mat. My sister had eagle eyes. She would notice something was up for sure if I couldn't bloody walk.

Ryder paid no attention to my protests. Arm around my waist, he held my body against his as he put the shower on and tested the temperature, and like a freaking kitten being petted, I melted against him, enjoying the feel of his firm flesh against me. Satisfied with the temperature, he lifted me in...and came right in with me.

It was a spacious shower, but with Ryder, it became far too intimate. Especially given I was trying to distance myself from everything we'd done.

Closing his big hand over the back of my neck, he planted my head under the spray.

I spluttered.

He chuckled, and that warm sound did stupid things to my heart.

"Hold still, Em. Let me get you all cleaned up."

God! Why did that make my mind digress? Why was I thinking about him saying that

yesterday before he pushed his head between my thighs and ate my pussy?

His broad palm connected with my ass, the clap loud and surprisingly sharp under the water. “Bad girl. I can practically hear your pussy creaming.”

“Oh god!”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Such a needy beta.” His voice was full of affection as he squirted a dollop of shampoo into his palm and vigorously lathered it into my hair. “Thinking about alpha cock when you should be getting showered.”

He was too rough about it, and my palms slapped against the cold tile wall.

He chuckled again and dunked my head under the jets to rinse me off. I was still sputtering when he spun me around and backed me up. I started as my back and ass hit the cold tiles. With a familiar gleam in his eyes, he grabbed the shower gel, squirted a generous dollop into his hand, and proceeded to clean me up.

He started at my throat, then worked his way over my shoulders and all the way down to my fingers, then back up, lingering on my breasts, tugging tender, oversensitive nipples into hard points.

“You said we had fifteen minutes?” But I was meek under his spell, and a few minutes either way seemed unimportant against the feel of his big hands on my ass, squeezing, not even pretending to clean me anymore. My breaths turned choppy as his slippery fingers played between my thighs. As the soap bubbles washed away, he pressed two thick fingers into me.

My legs turned weak, and his other hand collared my throat, holding me against the

wall as he finger fucked me.

“Oh god!”

“That’s my good girl,” he said, face intent, determination in every contour. “Let me clean you all up.”

He shifted, arm twisting, two fingers spearing my pussy and another sinking into my ass.

“Such a dirty, filthy girl,” he said. “How can I clean you up when your pussy keeps making a mess?”

I was going under again, sinking into the carnal spell Ryder cast with ease.

The shower was cool, but my skin felt feverish and my legs turned to jelly. I grasped Ryder’s wrist, where he held me pinned to the wall. If he weren’t holding me up, I’d have been a puddle on the floor.

Then his thumb found my clit, rubbing a little too roughly and yet driving me towards that glorious high at startling speed.

“God!” I came, gasping, groaning, shaking up a storm, half insensible. I blinked water from my eyes as he slowed his fingers to a lazy pump and finally eased them out.

I shuddered.

My eyes lowered to his thick cock, bobbing between us. In the last three days, he’d seemed intent upon keeping it out of my grasp.

“Please,” I said. “Let me.” My trembling fingers closed around his hot, silken length.

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He groaned, and I liked that I could do this to him, this powerful male, an alpha weakened by my touch.

“I want you all the fucking time,” he said. “Every fucking minute.”

I pumped slowly, entranced by his size and by the faint swelling near the base. I couldn't span my fingers around his girth. How did he fit this inside me? How did I take him?

I was shaking, body high in the wake of my climax. There was so much I wanted to do with Ryder, but our time was running out. Sloane would be waiting, scrambling to get ready, or maybe she was distracted by her alpha and would appreciate the time. A few moments wouldn't matter either way.

“I want to do this.” My eyes pleaded. I needed to taste him. I hated how the shower washed over him and took his scent away. “Please let me.”

His fingers unpeeled from my throat. “Baby, I don't have it in me to deny you anything. I'm yours, Em.”

This powerful male was mine. But only for now, I reminded myself.

I sank to my knees, heedless of the hard tile floor.

“Fuck!” he muttered gruffly.

I met his eyes as I took his big cock in my hand and lowered the tip to my waiting

mouth, where I lapped up the sticky pre-cum.

His growl was low and steeped with pleasure. I licked and sucked the head as the water sluiced over me.

He slammed his hand against the wall as I sucked him deeper, cheeks hollowing, and his eyes turned hooded as I worshiped him. “Fuck, baby, I’m not going to last ten fucking seconds.”

I opened my mouth wider, forcing my jaw to relax, and sucked as much of his length as I could into my mouth. He was shockingly big, and I gagged a little, but I was also determined. He’d imprinted himself on me so heavily, driven my body to the heights of pleasure, and taken his pleasure from me. I wanted to do this for once. I needed him to remember me when I was on the other side of that high, chain-link fence.

I took him into me deeply, my head bobbing and hands working up and down his length, and I never once looked away. The muscles of his throat were drawn tight, with more corded lines down his chest and abs. His legs trembled faintly with the strain. I sensed his need to touch and take control. He was an alpha—it was hard-wired in his nature.

But he gave me this.

Cupping the heavy sacs of his balls, I rolled them gently in my hand as I lapped up the spicy pre-cum leaking from the tip. He tasted unique, and I craved more of him, gripped by a savage urge to score my nails in his thighs, to sink my teeth into his throat, to mark him as mine.

But I couldn’t, and I didn’t.

So I sucked, swirling my tongue around the head, fingers gliding up and down his

thick length.

“I’m going to fucking come.”

I sucked harder, determined to have my prize, rewarded by the first thick, shocking jet of cum. I coughed, sucked, and coughed again.

“You want this baby, don’t you? Want my cum in your belly?”

My eyes pleaded with him, showing him with my actions how much I did.

“Fuck! Ah, fuck!” His fingers tangled in my hair, holding me to him, forcing me to take the next heavy jet of cum deep. I swallowed, with no thought to struggle. His hips jerked, and his cock hit the back of my throat just as another heavy gush shot down my throat.

He popped out of my mouth, fisted his length, and jacked it in his big hand, jerking roughly, sending heavy splats of cum over my chin, throat, and chest before he pushed into my mouth again.

I sucked.

He was still coming.

I might never get used to the way an alpha could come over and over.

“Good girl,” he said, voice hoarse. “Clean me all up.”

I did, licking and lapping, sucking him, playing with the thick ridge that had inflamed near the base, and being rewarded by more of his cum.

His legs trembled harder, but I didn't let that deter me. My jaw ached and my knees hurt, but I didn't even care. I was making memories that I would hold on to in the lonely days to come.

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His fist tightened on my hair, and he dragged me from my prize long before I was done.

“Baby, you just blew my damn mind.” He pulled me up, hauling my smaller body against his as his mouth took mine. The kiss was hungry, ravenous even. He was still hard as he turned, lifted me, and pinned me against the shower wall. The water had turned cold, and I shivered as he lowered my body until the tip of his cock snagged my sore pussy.

His lips popped off mine. I looked up into the stormy eyes of this powerful, towering male.

“Do it,” I said. “Fill me. I want you to. I want to feel where you’ve been and ache.”

He lowered me, letting gravity impale me on his thick length. I groaned, sore from prior attention, but it was so, so good.

I knew when I left this room, the spell would be broken, and I needed to store all this up, to brand every touch and sensation on my memory so it could last the rest of my life.

He pulled out, only to slam all the way in...but not fully, because his knot remained outside. To take his knot, I would need to accept several inches more.

We didn’t fit. We weren’t compatible, and there was simply nowhere else for him to go. The pain, when he drove too deep, was both agonizing and enticing. I willed myself to accept him, but it didn’t help.

He began to piston in and out, deep, rough strokes that made me quiver. I tried to stave off my climax, but like my mere desire to make this last was the catalyst, I came again, splintering, squeezing around his hard length, mumbling nonsense.

He growled, took a tighter grip, and slammed me on and off him.

It was wild.

It was savage.

And I couldn't get enough.

"I'm going to ruin this fucking pussy," he said. "Ruin it for everyone but me."

"God, yes." I would beg him for anything, so long as he was inside me. I didn't care.

I clung to him as best I as could, shaken about like a rag doll in his arms. A sound emanated from his chest, one he'd only made a few times, like a growl mixed with a purr. It triggered a sharp clench deep inside.

A mask fell over his face. I didn't recognize Ryder anymore. This was an alpha—powerful and determined.

The word *rutting* sprang to my mind. That was what alphas called it when they took an omega. He plowed me over and over again, crushing my smaller body against the cold, wet, tile wall, forcing me to acknowledge in the most basic of ways that he was not merely a man, but an alpha.

I splintered yet again, coming around him, and this time, he roared and stilled. The adrenaline rush was followed by a hot flood as he filled me with his seed.

“Mine,” he rumbled. “Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.”

The little warning voice in the back of my head told me these were just words said in the heat of passion.

His hand closed over my throat, tightening, bringing a surge of panic that went straight to my sore pussy, making it fist his cock so hard, it stirred a whimper from my lips. I gazed up into the eyes of the huge, feral alpha. “I’m yours.” This time, I put my heart and soul into those words, pouring in all my hidden wants and needs and filling them with everything I desired.

“Better,” he said, eyes turning hooded as he eased the pressure on my throat and lowered his lips to mine.

The kiss was gentle, like a balm over the savagery that had just passed.

I wanted so badly to cling to the words, even as I clung to him. Although I knew in my heart I was his, life and circumstance were about to rip us apart.

* * *

Ryder

I didn’t know what the fuck was happening between us. I was convinced Emma should have tipped over by now if she was going to. Panic clawed at me. I wanted her to be a fucking omega so badly, but if she was going to reveal, it would have happened by now. She couldn’t take all of me. She couldn’t take my fucking knot. Every time I drove a little too deep, pain clouded her face and I fucking hated myself.

Yet I couldn't temper it.

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Turning the cold shower off, I eased out of her hot cunt. I hated the way she winced, hated that it reminded me I'd been like an animal with her.

I lowered her feet to the shower floor. When I brought her in here, she hadn't been too steady on her feet. She was worse now. My beast wanted her and was determined she could take us, even though she clearly couldn't.

I felt like I was being ripped in fucking two.

Her screams should be of pleasure, not because I'd womb fucked her, but my beast didn't care about her status or the nuances of her caste. Putting a mark on her and claiming her was his one and only aim.

I'd already marked her. Welts littered her body, where I had sucked against her delicate flesh and nipped her with my teeth, and her poor beat pussy was well claimed after I just hammered her into the shower wall. Something was fucking wrong with me, because I wanted to fuck her all over again and keep doing it until she said she was mine and meant it.

Even as I berated myself, my beast fucking preened, thinking about how she'd feel where I'd fucked her for days.

Sitting on the side of the bed, I stood her in front of me and carefully dried her off. She let me, all the while looking small and lost.

I should be fucking shot.

Afterward, I helped her into some clothes I'd had picked up for her...not that she'd spent a second in them since I first brought her to my room.

She sat on the side of the bed, unmoving, while I wiped the last of the dampness from my body and dressed.

Something was happening, but I had no clue what. I needed to stop thinking about her as an omega, because it was all terribly clear that really, she was not.

Now, I had to decide what that meant, because I knew I couldn't let her out of my life.

Personal desires aside, this wasn't a place for a beta, especially not a sweet, bratty one. Emma deserved nice things and to feel safe. We could keep her safe, my beast whispered, but it wasn't the same kind of safety. Her sister was an omega and there were no other options for her now, which made her situation completely different.

Emma had friends out there and a life she'd told me all about. She'd just finished college and was trained in design, ready to step out into the world. She would graduate in a few days and mentioned a job offer was waiting for her reply. I couldn't go there, and while she could visit me here, it wasn't the same.

We were like two planets circling, passing briefly and drifting away again.

I was dressed, but I stood there, drinking her in, taking a moment before I took her hand in mine.

She was so fucking tiny and precious, and for the first time, all the sass had left her. "Are you ready to go see your sister, baby?" She smiled, but it was weak, and a sick feeling settled in my gut. I tipped her chin. "Was I too rough?"

Her eyes went wide, and she shook her head vigorously. “No, never.”

I thought I might have been, but for reasons that eluded me, she wasn’t prepared to admit it.

“I can be gentle,” I said. “I’ll learn to be fucking gentle.”

She shook her head again. “Please don’t ever try to be something that you’re not. I loved everything about what happened between us, and I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Her words hit me right in the gut...and in the chest. They were earnest and held sincerity. I also sensed that something was underlying them, but now wasn’t the time.

My cell began to beep where it rested on the nightstand. I snatched it up, hit accept, and lifted it to my ear. “Yeah, we’re leaving now.”

I tucked it into my back pocket. “Come on, Em. Your sister’s waiting for you.”

Chapter Sixteen

Emma

I was weirdly nervous as Ryder guided me along the corridor to the elusive apartment where Sloane was waiting for me. I had a terrible feeling that when I saw my sister again, she would be different somehow and that I might not know her. The memory of her lying in bed, writhing in agony as her heat ripped through her, would haunt me for the rest of my life. That hadn’t been my sister. My sister was the strong one, who looked after me. The one time she’d needed me, I’d failed.

I tried telling myself I hadn’t known better. Why would I assume those rumors circulating on the internet about the Dawn Agency were true? Yet I still felt guilt over

the fact that my call became the catalyst for life-changing events. The circus that had followed was the stuff of nightmares—Sloane screaming and begging, them injecting her, then the horrible silence as they carried her away.

Ryder had assured me that now her heat had passed, she would be fine again, would be herself, the Sloane that I knew. I worried, though, that the version of her I knew was gone forever, both the nurturing, mother version and the big sister who I'd fought with and yet loved as deeply as siblings could.

I guessed it was part of life that we changed as circumstances moved us forward and events and experiences remade us into something else.

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But in my life, change had rarely been good.

“It will be okay,” Ryder said as he stopped outside a door.

I stared at it, wondering what I would find on the other side, nerves exploding as he hit the buzzer.

The door swung wide, and an alpha, all seven feet of him, loomed in the doorway—Jace.

Ryder held up a hand in the universal sign of peace. I had the oddest feeling Jace was about to punch him. “Not in front of Emma,” he said.

Jace heaved out a breath, nostrils flared like a bull about to charge.

“Emma? Em!” That familiar voice brought a quickening to my heart rate. “Jace, get out the fucking way.”

I grinned. Yep, that was my Sloane. Then Jace stepped back... My lips trembled from the first glance. I had a vague notion of being ushered forward, but everything was a blur through the tears. A soft click told me the apartment door had been closed, then I heard the two men move away, but I only had eyes for my sister.

“I was so worried about you,” Sloane said.

“Me?! I swear I aged ten years when they came and took you away. It was the most horrifying moment of my life.” The words came out garbled through my sobbing.

“It’s over now,” she said, her hand stroking through my hair, before hugging and rocking me. The empty place inside me belonging to Sloane began to fill up with love, seeping into me from her and topping me up, filling me to the point where I knew whatever had changed within her, she was still my Sloane. She leaned back and pressed her forehead to mine.

“It’s been a rough few days,” she said.

I snickered.

“Don’t,” she said. “Seriously, don’t.”

“I can’t believe you’re an omega,” I said. “Do you feel different?”

She leaned up and tucked the hair behind my ear like she used to when I was smaller.

“Yeah,” she said. “I do.” Her eyes cut to the right, and I looked over my shoulder to where Jace was staring back at her.

“Are you mated now?” I asked.

She shrugged and smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, we are.”

My eyes were drawn to the mark at her throat, and her hand immediately went there, trying to cover it. “Don’t.” I shook my head. “You don’t need to hide it. I think it’s beautiful.”

Then it was her turn to narrow her eyes on the mark Ryder had left on my throat. Not the same kind of mark, but still, it made a similar statement. “Emma, something you want to tell me?”

“What?” I tried to fake innocence, but I wasn’t very good at it. She’d seen through it my whole damn life. How I thought I might get away with it was a mystery, even to me.

“What the fuck, Em?”

“I demanded to see you,” I said, like that was all the explanation she needed.

“Huh?”

“Ryder sent me a message to say you were here and safe. I wanted to see you. I acted a bit reckless, to be honest, stormed up to the gates and shook them. I was jabbing the hell out of the intercom there, demanding to speak to... I’ve forgotten exactly who I demanded to speak to.”

“The manager,” Ryder offered from the other side of the room, grinning. “She was crazy. Lucky we didn’t rouse half the fucking alphas in the zone.”

“Rattling the gates? Are you crazy?” Sloan asked.

I shrugged. “A little. I’ve never been one for holding back, have I?”

She shook her head. Ryder came toward me, and I felt a blush creeping over my cheeks.

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“I’ve...I’ve been with him, while you were busy.”

“Jesus!” she said.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about it. Ryder is one of the good ones,” I said, repeating his phrase, feeling the eyes of both men on us.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s been a rocky road, but so is Jace.”

There was a knock on the door, and a portly lady with steel gray hair breezed in, carrying a tray loaded up with food.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “How are you feeling, lovey?”

“I’m good. Thanks, Ma,” Sloane said.

I gave the woman a double take.

“Emma, meet Dane’s mother,” Jace said. “You met Dane?”

I nodded.

“Everybody calls me Ma,” she said. “You can call me that too.”

“Thank you,” I said, not at all sure what to make of her. Still, my nose was twitching at the delicious food on her tray, and my stomach rumbled.

Ma scowled over her shoulder at the two men. "Don't you feed your women?"

"Don't fucking go there," Jace said. "Of course we do. Well, I fucking do." He threw a pointed look at Ryder.

"What?" Ryder said.

"Your woman is hungry," Jace said. "I can hear her belly rumbling all the way over here."

Sloane snickered. "Don't mind it. She might be small, but she eats like a fucking horse and is surprisingly strong."

"Have a sandwich, dear," Ma said, taking a seat with us. "How are you feeling, Sloane? How's the baby?"

"Baby?" My head swung around.

"I don't think it's more than a bunch of cells just yet," Sloane said.

"You're pregnant?" I hadn't thought through that part, but I understood omegas could only conceive while in heat and when they did go into heat, there was a high probability they would get pregnant.

"Yeah," she said. "I am."

"Oh my god. I'm going to be an auntie!"

Sloane laughed. "You think you've got problems? I'm going to be a mother."

The men came and joined us. The minute Jace sat down next to Sloane, they both

turned to one another, their hands reaching out and touching each other. His rested on the back of her neck, rubbing soothingly, while hers went to his thigh. The intimacy between them was startling. Sloane wasn't much of a hugger. She put up with me because...well, I never gave her any choice. She wasn't cold, just reserved.

Ryder sat to my other side. "How are you doing, baby?"

"I'm good," I said. There was no moment of intimacy between us. On the tray was a selection of sandwiches and some muffins cut in half. I picked up a sandwich without looking at what it was and stuffed it into my mouth. I was so hungry, I could have eaten anything.

Polite conversation followed. I was in a state of shock that Sloane was expecting a baby, but the more I watched her with Jace, the more wonder and revelation unfurled inside me. I'd never been jealous of Sloane a single day of my life. I would never have wished being an omega on anybody. Yet, as I witnessed the two of them together, I found that their relationship had bloomed both wholly and swiftly. I didn't know this man. I'd only seen him from a distance before Sloane was whisked away. They looked...like they belonged. I wished I had that.

Ryder was talking to Ma, teasing her about her muffins being substandard today. Ma smacked his hand when he went to take another 'to be sure.'

"Don't sass me, young man."

He laughed good-naturedly.

I could feel myself disconnecting, so I plastered on a bright smile, which lasted right up until Sloane told me what had happened to her. We'd moved away from the alphas and gone over to the window, where we stared out at the strip.

"You were unconscious when they took you out," I said. "It was the worst moment of my life. I'm so sorry that I called the Dawn Agency. I didn't know what to do."

Her hand closed over mine. "It's not your fault, Em. How could you have known? I woke up on a gurney, some sick alpha fuck asking to inspect me." She shuddered. "I was out of it still. I hit the bloody fire alarm and ran, with no idea where I was running to. I just kept going. That's when I bumped into Art."

"Art, as in the barman who makes amazing cocktails?"

"I don't know about that," she said. "I didn't get to drink any cocktails after I woke up. I was pretty distracted. But yeah, Art. After he helped me escape the alpha zone, he had no job here. I have a weird feeling about that guy, like he's a plant or something."

"For the government?"

She shrugged. "No, I don't think so. Maybe he's working independently for someone else. Anyway, he helped me escape, then Jace picked me up and beat the shit out of the other alpha that wanted me. That's when I went into heat."

"Sloane, that is so freaking scary. The worst I got was being kicked out of the

apartment.”

“Fuck,” she said. “Those bastards.”

“Yeah, I got a message yesterday saying the case had been reviewed. They signed it over to me as the surviving family member. Although, between you and me, I suspect Jude’s boyfriend, Derek, called in some favors. You know he works for that independent news agency—the one that keeps exposing government corruption. I think he has friends in positions of influence, not that I’m complaining.”

“Thank fuck for that,” she said. “What are you going to do now? It’s only two days until your graduation.”

“You can’t go,” Jace said, coming over to join us. “You know that, right?”

Her face softens. “I know. I want Jude to video it. I want to see everything, and you can come back and visit me, right? She can come back and visit, can’t she?”

“Of course,” Jace said. “Any fucking time she likes.”

I could sense Ryder’s eyes on me. It seemed like my cue to leave.

“I’m going to call Jude,” I said. “To see if he’s free. Would you—” I turned toward Ryder, noting the tension around his eyes and the way a tic began thumping in his jaw. “Would you walk me to the gate?”

“Sure,” he said easily. “Anything you want.”

It was time for me to go back home. I felt it. This entire experience has been surreal, but I needed some normality. I was still a beta, and he was still an alpha, so it was never going to work. The more time I spent around Sloane and Jace, the more this

dawned on me.

“I’ll sort everything out at home.” Only it wasn’t Sloane’s home anymore. “Send me a list of stuff you want me to bring back, and I’ll come back after graduation.”

“Did you get any job offers?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I got the grades I needed, and Cartwrights offered me a job.”

“Oh, my god, that’s fantastic,” she said. “That was the one you wanted, wasn’t it? Your first choice?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “They want me to start next week.” A week ago, I’d been hoping for this offer, but now I felt flat.

I shot a message to Jude, who texted straight back, saying he was picking up Jewels and would be straight over.

“I’ll see you in a few days,” I said as I rose and gave Sloane a hug.

Then I was leaving, Ryder walking beside me like a looming presence.

“You don’t need to go,” he said. “You can come back whenever you like. You could stay, if you wanted to.”

I stopped before the gate, and my eyes searched his, noting how his face hardened.

“But I understand,” he said, a note of bitterness in his voice. “Who would want to live here?”

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I didn't understand what he was saying. Was he asking me to stay? Would I stay? Could I? I didn't think I could.

"Send a message when you come back." He leaned in and brushed a kiss to my temple before taking a half step back.

I wanted him to kiss me properly on the lips.

I wanted the alpha who'd pinned me against the shower wall and fucked me silly.

That alpha was gone, and I needed to find myself again.

"Enjoy graduation," he said. Pulling a bunch of keys from his pocket, he unlocked the padlock and drew the heavy chain slowly out. The gate rattled as he rolled it open.

The sound of a car snagged my attention, and Jude pulled up beside us.

"Emma!" Jewels hung out the window. "Yay! Get in the car, come on. Tell us all about it. Tell us about Sloane."

I stepped forward, over the line separating the two parts of the city. As I glanced back, Ryder pulled the gate closed and looped the thick chain around it twice before snapping the padlock into place. He didn't move, and neither did I, but I had to. So I did, turning my back on him, taking the steps to the car, feeling a genuine smile bloom on my face for my two dearest friends. The smile was bittersweet, though, because I was leaving something equally precious and yet unattainable behind.

ChapterSeventeen

Emma

I put my cell down on the kitchen counter and went through the motions of wiping down already clean surfaces. It was a mess after the Dawn Agency stomped all through here, drawers opened, contents removed from cupboards and tossed all over the place. Jude and Jewels had helped me to straighten most of it out, but it still felt dirty.

Jewels had called me, asking if I wanted her to come over. She was worried about me. Given how many messages I'd received from Jude, I knew he was concerned too. Today was the day of my graduation ceremony, and it was going nothing like I'd expected.

When I was little, I'd never thought that far ahead, and then my parents were gone and when I did, I'd always imagined Sloane being there. It was funny how I'd spent so much time wanting her to be my sister again, yet it was only now that I thought about it, I realized she'd never stopped being my sister. She was just something more as well.

Since I'd returned to the apartment, I'd existed in a strangely depressed state, which hit me anew every time I moved around the space. There was no Sloane, so it was quiet, not that she was particularly noisy, but when you cohabitate with someone, they just had a presence.

I'd caught up with my collage friends earlier today, who'd all raved about the party in Desparion. Most wanted to go back to the alpha zone again, as did I, but not for the same reasons.

Either way, it wasn't like I could simply stay there.

I could apply for a working visa, I supposed, but then what? With no job there, I'd be a dead weight on my sister and her alpha, abandoning a career I'd spent three years working on all so I could explore a relationship that might be far bigger on my side than his. Whatever was happening between Ryder and me was all too new. Better if I returned to my life and took it slowly, sounded it out, and saw where it went.

Besides, I worried that he would always feel like he was missing out on a soul deep connection with an omega. It all sounded very mystical in my mind whenever I thought about it, maybe a little romantic. When I saw Jace and my sister, I witnessed how they instinctively turned to one another. While I could never know the true depth of the bond, I understood, at least from an outside perspective, a hint of something both animalistic and beautiful.

Try as I might, I couldn't shake myself out of the dark place I was wallowing in. Of course, I'd realized at some point Sloane and I would move apart, have relationships, maybe even marry and have kids. We'd want and need our own space, but we would still see each other regularly.

I'd never suspected that a night out could set in motion such life-changing events, which would, in turn, separate us completely. I'd thought something had always been missing from Sloane's life, so maybe this was it? I had presumed that an omega revealed much younger, but what did I know? I'd never met an omega. Nobody did, unless you happened to have a close relative or a friend. Even so, you didn't know them as a happy omega. Instead, your only experience was that terrible, horrible writhing creature suffering a world of pain. Like I had, they probably thought whatever the Dawn Agency did was a kindness because it eased their suffering.

Even as they ripped loved ones from your grasp, they were telling you it was necessary, how they would take care of them, but with that slight lip curl of distaste, as though an omega were already less than human in their eyes. But you wanted to believe them so badly, because it was the government and if you couldn't trust them,

then we were all screwed.

If I hadn't met Ryder, if I hadn't had a contact in Desparion, I would have probably convinced myself it was for the best because her suffering had been truly terrifying.

Now I knew the other side, the corruption, how omegas were traded off and experimented on. I felt sick to the core, thinking of that happening to my sister or any woman. What happened to the alphas was equally heinous.

I wanted to help them, to pull the curtain back and show everyone what was happening, but how? I wondered about the world, about many things. It was like there was a sickness creeping over the landscape—one we were all blind to, existing in our happy, ignorant bubble, not realizing what was going on. I was sure some people who'd lost alphas or omegas put up a fight, yet many others greeted the development with a sneer for lesser beings, a subcaste we must purge, telling ourselves that tossing them behind a wall of mesh and letting them fight it out was the humane option.

My heart broke, imagining Ryder being tossed into the zone as a young man, beaten by the other alphas and left to die. What kind of society would condone such an act?

I guessed alphas, like betas, came in a great variety of both good and bad.

I needed to make a decision, I realized, to work out what the hell to do with my life.

There was a job offer waiting for me. If this hadn't happened, I'd be so excited about it. Now I'd left my preferred company awaiting my answer, citing a family emergency. Polite beta etiquette dictated they accept my request, but if they suspected my sister had revealed as an omega, likely they would have retracted the job offer and had my family name blacklisted with every recruitment agency in the sector. Such was the fear within our community of falling prey to our animal side. No one wanted to be associated with ravaging alphas or weak emotional omegas.

I snorted out a humorless laugh.Nothing could be further from the truth, but the press, the government, and whomever else might be pulling the strings, they were all keeping the two parts of humanity forever apart.

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I would give them my answer after graduation. It bought me two days. That was as much as I could hope for. I had gotten the apartment back and there was a small nest egg of money our parents had left, but I wanted to live off my own earnings. I needed to get a job. I could downsize the apartment and find somewhere smaller.

Thankfully, I'd written my speech a long time ago, so it was all ready for this afternoon. Certainly, I was in no frame of mind to formulate one now. I needed to knock myself out of this melancholic state. Sloane had a new life now, which didn't easily include me. She was having a baby. How would I be there for her? Once a week when they opened up to visitors? I didn't want to be apart from her, but my turmoil wasn't only about Sloane. It was about Ryder and our three wild days of passion.

I kept telling myself that a relationship needed a hell of a lot more than that. Was it stupid that I felt a connection to him? It sounded so fanciful to be convincing myself that he was the one, that I was falling for him when I barely knew him, yet I liked what I saw and wished to learn more about this complex man.

Then I reminded myself that he owned a bar in Desparion, and what the heck would I do? I had a mind with wants and needs that went beyond tussling in the sheets.

I tossed the cloth I'd been using to wipe the kitchen down before switching the dishwasher on.

It was odd not having Sloane here. No one was checking up on me to see if I'd replied to this email or completed that.

The world didn't offer up what you desired ever, as far as I could see. Instead, it gave

you some strange, twisted version that wasn't quite in line with your expectations, and at others, a wild deviation.

Finished with my tidying, I showered and got changed into a classic black dress. People went to graduation ceremonies in all kinds of things, but Sloane would have expected me to wear something like this.

Today, I wore it gladly without a thought of complaint.

Opening my jewelry box, I took out the pearl choker that had belonged to my mother, along with the matching earrings and bracelet. Putting them on felt symbolic, like I was casting off the wild events beyond the chain-link fence and returning to the sensible beta state, one carefully placed piece of jewelry at a time.

Picking up my small purse, I slipped my cell phone inside. My makeup was light with a dash of cherry red lipstick.

My cell rang.

"We're outside," Jewels said. "Are you ready? Or do you want us to come up?"

"I'm ready. See you in a few." Slipping my cell back in my purse, I checked myself in the mirror, thinking Sloane would be proud of me. Scratch that, I knew she would be.

I was going to give myself today and tomorrow to work out what I was going to do with the rest of my life.

As I exited the apartment, I found Jude waiting in a smart suit, leaning against the side of a sleek BMW. Derick had let him loose in his baby, it seemed.

"Look at you!" I said, smiling.

“How are you feeling, love?”he asked.

“I’m good,” I replied, plastering on a bright smile. “I really am.”

“Okay, lots of photos. You wouldn’t believe the list of instructions Sloane sent me.”

I burst out laughing. Yep, that would be Sloane.

“I’m armed and ready to accept the challenge.”Jude wagged his eyebrows at me and swung the door wide open, then I graciously climbed in.

* * *

The graduation was everything I’d expected it to be—noisy, crowded, and full of happy faces. We met up with the rest of my design class, and Jude took lots of photos. I chatted to Sloane on the video, Jace hovering in the distance. I admit, I’d been distracted, wondering if Ryder was also there.

But why would he? I’d walked out without giving him any indication I was interested in more.

And neither had he.

A sharp shot of jealousy hit me right in the center of the chest. He marked the omegas who lived with them to keep them safe. I couldn’t stand the thought of him with an omega. Was he with one now, comparing her to me? They would be able to take his knot. They wouldn’t wince if he went a little too deep. It would drive them delirious with pleasure and make them beg him for more.

I couldn’t change what I was, so it was for the best that we’d cut things off. Tomorrow, I’d accept that job offer, sell the apartment, and find a smaller one-

bedroom.I could pack up Sloane's stuff and work out how the heck to courier it into Desparion.I was sure there were ways.People must take goods in and out.Such logistical nuances served me poorly as a distraction from the great hole a man I barely knew had left in my life.

My call to collect the diploma interrupted my musings.

As I stood on the stage erected on the campus playing fields, the words I'd practiced flowed, only they felt like they didn't fit me anymore.All my future plans were cast into turmoil by the events that had followed my sister's reveal as an omega.

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As I came to the final part, the authenticity returned. I dedicated my achievement to my big sister, who'd stepped up when we lost our parents. As I spoke, I imagined Sloane on the other side.

Sloane wasn't a sentimental person, but my words were heartfelt, and I knew, even without her being here, that she would be proud.

But as I exited the stage, I experienced a sharp cramp low in my belly.

My stomach churned, and heat washed over my body. I groaned and pressed my hand into the ache. I could feel wetness seeping. I had a sickly feeling that being with an alpha might have broken something in me.

"Are you okay, love?" Jude asked. "You've gone pale."

"I need to get to the restroom," I said. I knew I sounded panicked, but I just had to go. I made it to a cubical before another savage contraction spasmed through my gut—no, lower. Like a tiny little fist was abusing my womb.

Another wave of heat hit me. Why was it so hot suddenly? Was it some kind of virus?

The dull strip lighting in the ceiling hurt the back of my eyes. My skin felt feverish, hot, and clammy...and the place between my legs was gushing.

I dragged my dress up, expecting blood.

What I got was clear sticky fluid.

Slick.

The scent hit me. I knew that scent. It was the same one that had saturated the nest Sloane made in the apartment.

Fuck!

Another wave of cramping tore through me, and the fire dancing across my skin morphed into pain, diving deeper, igniting muscles, setting them twitching and pulsing.

Sweat popped out across my brow and between my breasts. This had to be a bad dream. This couldn't be happening to me.

I was so fucked.

* * *

I experienced instant empathy for all Sloane had gone through. What had happened to her was now coming for me. What were the chances? As far as I knew, there were no omegas in our family. Families who'd revealed an omega or an alpha in the past were registered in a database. I'd never thought about the details, but now, there was a sinister overtone to it. Ryder had alluded to bad things happening to omegas in the Dawn Agency, even before Sloane told me about her ordeal.

She'd only narrowly escaped.

Everything was coming through a tunnel. As I fumbled in my bag, I grabbed my cell. My fingers turned to jelly as I jabbed buttons.

"Jude. It's happening to me—what happened to Sloane." I dragged the cell from my

ear and bit back a groan as another wave of pain engulfed me. I was going to black out if it got any worse. "I need to get out of here."

I swallowed hard, terrified I was about to be sick.

"Fuck!" Jude muttered. "Can you get out of there? I don't want to draw attention, but there are two guys here who've been subtly watching you. I didn't want to alarm you earlier, and I wasn't even sure... They're only watching us, but if I suddenly walk into the lady's restroom, I have a bad feeling they're going to act... I've flagged Jewels down."

I sucked in a deep breath. "I'm coming out."

Somehow, I staggered out of the stall, splashed water on my hands and face, bracing myself against the pain, and pushed out. The area was crowded. Two girls brushed past me going into the restroom.

The light momentarily blinded me, and I blinked through the tears pooling in my eyes.

"Fuck, Em!" Jewels said. "If anyone sees you like this, they'll send for fucking medical assistance, even without the assholes watching. We need to get you back to the car."

They wrapped their arms around me. "Nice bright smiles," Jude said. "We're going to walk as casually as we can back toward the car."

I didn't feel casual, but I bit my lip hard enough to taste blood because it helped me to keep the whimpers inside. I wanted to curl up in a ball. I wanted softness surrounding me to ease this pain. I wanted strong hands on me, holding me down, pinning me into the softness as he filled this terrible ache ripping through my womb.

I needed Ryder.

I needed his husky voice in my ear.

I needed his stillness to calm the frantic beat of my heart.

“Why the fuck did I park so far away?” Jude muttered under his breath.

“Where are you going to take me?” I asked, my voice slurred. My eyes were streaming against the sunlight, and I couldn’t see a thing.

“She can come back to my home?” Jewels suggested.

“Not in this state,” Jude said. “We don’t have the kind of painkillers that are going to help this. I don’t even know if painkillers work. We need to get her back to Desparion.”

“They won’t let us in,” Jewels said. “It’s not open day!”

The sky felt like it was closing in on me as the sleek gray BMW loomed before me, but I was so out of it, I couldn’t follow what was happening. The door opened, then someone pressed me in, a seat belt clicking around me.

“They’re coming,” Jewels said, voice high and urgent. “I’m going to distract them.”

“How?” Jude asked.

“I’ll work something out. Just get her away from here!”

Another door slammed shut, tires rumbling over gravel, and then a dizzy sensation hit me that set another round of cramping as Jude tore out of the parking lot.

“I’m calling Sloane. Her alpha got her out of the Dawn Agency. Sloane won’t let him do anything less for you.” He hit the call button on the interactive dashboard, the ringing sound coming through the car speaker.

Please pick up, Sloane. Please don’t be busy.

“Jude!” Sloane’s cheerful voice was the sweetest sound. The words I’d intended to say were lost under a groan as another wave of heated pain assaulted me.

“Fuck! What’s happening?” Sloane demanded. “I’m putting you on speaker.”

“It’s Em,” Jude said. “We’re in the car. It started at the graduation ceremony. I think Em is revealing as an omega too. We don’t know what the fuck to do or where to go. We think somebody is following us, but we’re on the move.”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” That gruff voice could only be Jace.

“What are you going to do?” Sloane demanded. “Jace, we need to get her out of there. We can’t let her be taken to that place.”

Her panic crawled under my skin, latching onto frayed nerves like a pit bull with a juicy bone.

“I’m going to sort it out, baby. Don’t worry.”

More words followed, but I rolled in and out of awareness. I was going to pass out or throw up, and I couldn’t decide which was worse. I curled up into a ball on the seat as best I could.

“I’m going to message you an address,” Jace said. “Head straight there. Don’t let any fuckers stop you. Got it?”

“Gotcha,” Jude said.

“I’m coming with you!” Sloane said, her voice distant.

“No fucking way, baby. You’re pregnant with my child. I can’t concentrate on doing what I need to do to get your sister out if I’m worried about you.”

“Fine!” Sloane hissed. “I’m staying on the phone with her.”

“Good girl,” Jace said. “I’ll patch into the call. Here’s the address.”

“You want me to take her where?!” Jude asked. I blinked, trying to see what was on the satellite navigation, but the light hurt my eyes and it was all a colored blur. “Fine. I trust you. Derick will pop a fucking blood vessel when he finds out I took his BMW there! I’m pretty sure we’re being followed. Just get Emma out!”

ChapterEighteen

Ryder

Today was Emma's graduation day, which I knew because Sloane was chatting excitedly about it over breakfast with Baby, one of our resident omegas. The two of them couldn't have been more different—Sloane looked awkward in a borrowed set of jeans and T-shirt, while Baby Doll wore a barely there negligee that used to give me a hard-on from across the room...used to. After that weird rocky start when Sloane first fled, the two of them had put their differences aside to at least be civil.

"You're in a miserable fucking mood," Dane said, eyeballing me from the opposite side of the table. Ma, our stout matriarch, came bustling into the room bearing platters of bacon and eggs. It was fair to say nobody was starving on her watch.

"I'm not in a mood," I said.

"Yes, you fucking are."

I scowled at him, despite knowing I was in a mood, but I thought I had the right to be after three days of crazy monkey sex. Emma had just walked out, gone back to her happy beta world, and probably forgotten all about me by now. Maybe she was already getting cozy with some beta prick who could share a life with her beyond the chain-link fence.

She'd be back to see her sister, only I didn't have a fucking clue what I was going to do when she turned up. Would she even speak to me? Would she ignore me and only talk to Sloane, or would she use me to scratch an alpha itch before returning to her home?

My inner beast was all up for option number three—putting a mark on her, even though she wasn't an omega. I couldn't claim a beta, because they weren't like omegas. There was no bond, so they were permanently free to do whatever the hell they liked.

“So,” Dane started, grabbing a slice of extra crispy bacon from the platter and using it to point at me before stuffing it in his mouth, “you and Sloane’s beta sister. How the fuck did that work out? And how did you not get the shit kicked out of you by Jace?”

I shrugged.

“But she’s going to be back, right?”

“I don’t fucking know,” I said, snatching up my coffee and taking a gulp. I didn’t take it with milk, so it burned my fucking tongue and throat.

Dane chuckled. “You’re such an asshole when you’re in a bad mood.”

“She’s a beta,” I said.

“So fucking what? Not every alpha gets an omega. It works. I’ve seen it work for lots of people. I’ve never seen you like this ever over a woman—any woman, omega or otherwise. You may as well accept it. Don’t pull a Jace. You know how he was while he was living in denial.”

“Jesus! What are you? A fucking therapist of a sudden?”

“I’m just calling it like I see it.” He went to snag another slice of bacon off the platter and got his knuckles rapped by his mother, who was walking past.

“Eat it properly, Dane. And since when have you been plainspoken? More like

borderline insulting—that's your father's fault."She walked off to fuss over Sloane and Baby Doll before Dane got a word in.

I chuckled and went back to my coffee, which had cooled enough to drink, although my tongue and throat felt like a layer of skin had been removed and I wasn't enjoying it anymore. Much as I wanted to wallow in denial, as Dane had pointed out, I wasn't doing a very good job of it.

"So with you out of commission, it looks like it's me dealing with the omegas in heat."

"They're not a fucking chore."

"What? You don't hear the way they talk about us? I came into the room the other day to find Baby Doll giving Michelle a rundown of our attributes and techniques. It made me fucking uncomfortable."

I rubbed my jaw, smirking. "And what did she conclude?"

"Don't be a bigger dick than you already are."

I laughed and stretched out a phantom crick in my neck. "So that's what they said?"

Dane chuckled. "Not every woman wants her internals rearranged every time they get dirty."

I went back to my coffee, trying to shut down the playback of a shower scene where I pinned Emma against the shower wall and took her roughly after we'd already been through a fucking sex marathon.

Then, right after she saw her sister, she'd walked out the fucking gate.

I was distracted from my morose thoughts when Sloane stood, Jace right beside her, his arm sliding around her protectively. I didn't want to stare at them, but I couldn't fucking look away. So that was what being mated was like? A few alphas in Desparion were mated, not many, but a few.

There were too few omegas, which meant those who fell into less scrupulous hands tended to get passed around.

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We gave our omegas a choice. They got our mark whether or not they shared intimacy with us. Most did, some didn't but they still got our protection. Dane's mom coddled them something silly, and then there was Jace's sister, Ella. Between them, they made sure the new girls understood they were free to do as they pleased, within reason, so long as they didn't put their asses in danger.

As the door closed on Jace and Sloane, I realized I hadn't had anything to show me what a healthy relationship should be like, either before or after I revealed as an alpha. My parents were much more enamored with power and prestige than each other. I couldn't imagine them ever getting dirty, and certainly, there weren't any public displays of affection.

My instinct told me that Sloane and Jace wouldn't hesitate with their children when the time came.

I went back to my bacon and eggs, although it tasted like ash in my mouth.

"Geez! You need to lighten up," Dane muttered. "I can hear you grinding your teeth. Ma's bacon isn't that crispy."

"You know telling somebody in a miserable mood to stop being miserable doesn't work, right?"

"You didn't realize she was close to her heat, did you?" Dane asked.

My brows drew together, and my eyes shifted left, to where Baby Doll was sipping a cappuccino complete with chocolate sprinkles Ma had just put down. She smiled at

the older woman in an unguarded moment. Dane was right. We all could tell when one of them was going into heat. It was like ants under your skin and a low-grade arousal that never went away. If they indicated they wanted one of us, we let it run its course. If not, we found other places to go so we could fucking think straight.

“Got it bad, bro,” Dane said.

Yeah, I really did. My phone beeped with a message from Art to say the delivery had arrived. “The liquor shipment is here,” I said, pushing back my chair. “I’ll catch you later.”

Dane nodded, distracted by Baby Doll.

I left, not wanting to think about why her imminent heat wasn’t affecting me. I was an alpha—that shit was a biological imperative. It didn’t mean I acted on it, but my lack of awareness was freaking me out.

Was I fucking broken?

The shipment kept me busy for the next few hours. At least it kept my hands busy. My mind was thinking about Emma’s graduation ceremony. I never got a graduation ceremony myself. That privilege had been ripped right out of my life long before I got anywhere close.

I barely know her, I kept reminding myself, not that it made any difference.

The delivery was all done, the loading door closing, and I was signing off when my phone beeped in my back pocket.

I hit accept.

“She’s gone into heat. We’re mobilizing now,” Jace said.

“Who?” I muttered, trying to catch up with the conversation.

“Your fucking omega, dickhead. Meet me in the garage asap.”

Omega? Heat?

I took off at a run to find Jace, Dane, and the crew waiting.

“This moment has a certain déjà vu about it,” Dane said as we loaded up into the back of a blacked out van.

Chapter Nineteen

Emma

As abruptly as it had started, the cramping stopped. The relief was profound, leaving me a shaky, trembling mess.

“You okay?” Jude asked.

“Yeah?” I said. “I think so. Sloane was okay for a while though, before it came back worse.”

His hand reached across and closed over mine. “We’re nearly there.”

There?

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I blinked crusted tears away as I stared out the window. “Where...where are we?” Beyond the windows were derelict-looking buildings, which clearly weren’t derelict because I could see people standing on doorsteps and grubby curtains blowing out of open windows. My skin prickled as awareness bloomed. “Jude, where are you taking me?”

“Exactly where I was told to.”

There was a grim set to his jaw. Jude was a happy, playful sort of guy. I didn’t recognize the stranger sitting next to me, gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles.

Beyond the car window, the people turned to watch our passage. “How much farther do we need to go?”

“We’re about five minutes away.”

My laugh was nervous. “I really wish I’d stayed out of it.”

How was it possible for this place to exist? We hadn’t crossed the barrier yet. Litter billowed in the wind, plastic bags, bits of paper, old rags. Cars in every flavor were parked haphazardly, some missing wheels, some missing doors, and some being openly stripped. I felt like I’d stepped into a darker, more sinister, alternate reality. As if to emphasize the stark, desolate environment, the clear blue skies cast the area into glorious, detailed relief.

Jude was driving way too fast, and there was a slight reckless edge to it that made me

grip the door handle a little tighter. I also wanted to tell him to put his foot down and go faster.

“Is that...sirens?” They sounded faint but getting closer.

“Yeah. We lost them for a bit, but I’m guessing they’ve got eyes on us somehow, because they’ve picked us up again several times.”

My mind blanked out and then rushed back with a painful jolt. How were we going to get out of this? We were being followed. We were in the worst neighborhood in the city. How could this possibly end well? “I’m so sorry, Jude.”

“Hey.” He reached across the gap to place his hand over mine, giving it a squeeze. “It’s not your fault, Emma. I wasn’t going to let them take you. I don’t know how, but Sloane, you know what she’s like. No way will she let Jace abandon you here. I just need to get to the destination they gave me.” He took a right at the intersection and then ground to a screeching halt. “Fuck!”

“Back up!”

Blocking our path was a black SUV. The doors swung open, and alphas surged out, only not the kind of alphas I was familiar with. These alphas were in royal blue tactical uniforms. They were official. This should have comforted me in a neighborhood that was so evidently criminal.

It did not.

Jude threw the car into reverse and then came to another juddering halt.

“FUCK!”

Behind us was another SUV with more alphas piling out. They looked equally official, with gas masks over their faces, and were holding... “Is that a fucking baseball bat?” Jude muttered.

The door beside me was ripped open, and a squeal tore from my lips. On the other side, Jude cried out as he was plucked from the vehicle. I kicked and wrestled as my assailant fumbled for the seatbelt catch. It popped off, and then he was on me, only he wasn't tearing me out like Jude. The man above me wasn't wearing a mask, and his face twisted before my eyes from one of blank neutrality into a feral beast.

I screamed as he pinned me down and reached for his belt.

My omega heat scent was sending him straight into a rut!

I kicked and punched as his thick scent saturated the air. There was something off about it, something that made me want to vomit. Around us was a cacophony of violence—roars, snarls, and the meaty thud of blows. The alpha was ripped off me, the momentum tearing me from the car and sending me sprawling to my hands and knees.

I looked up in time to see a bat swing. The alpha who'd tried to take me buckled under the savage blow and crashed to the floor. The masked alpha came down over him, bloody bat in hand. More brutal blows followed, and blood splattered across the tarmac, me, and the alpha wielding the bat.

He stopped, turned, and focused on me.

My breath trapped in my lungs.

I recognized those shoulders, that hard body I'd become intimately acquainted with over three hot days and nights of pleasure.

The alpha in the mask was Ryder.

* * *

Ryder

She was in shock.

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I'd just fucked up an agency alpha with a baseball bat in front of her.

Mine.

I heaved a breath, trying to rein in my beast. Seeing that asshole over her, trying to fucking touch my sweet omega, ripped what little rationality I'd retained from me. I checked around. Jace, Dane, and the crew had taken out the rest.

"We need to get off the fucking street," Dane said through the comms. His hand was on the back of Jude's neck. The little beta was nursing a bloody nose and his face was as white as a sheet.

I crouched down before Emma. "Baby, it's me. Can I touch you?" I didn't know what the fuck I'd do if she said no. I had to get her to safety, but I'd seen enough shit on the other side of the chain-link fence to know the fear center of her brain was in overdrive mode. Likely, I represented an equal threat to her overstimulated mind. I wanted to take my mask off, but she'd gone through her first heat calling, and I wouldn't be thinking any straighter than the asshole who'd been on her if I took the damn thing off.

"Ryder, we don't have fucking time," Dane said through our comms.

Impatient bastard.

I was about to tell him to fuck off when Emma launched herself at me. Arms and legs wrapped around me. I swear a piece of my earthly soul shattered with her first sob. "I've got you, Emma. I've got you."

“You got insurance on this car?” Jace asked Jude.

“It... It’s my boyfriend’s. Please don’t damage it...any worse than it already is.”

The car was a mess. The back window had gotten shattered somewhere during the fray, and there were numerous dents to the hood and sides.

A distant siren stirred us into action.

“It’s a write-off. Better we report it stolen than you be recorded in this area,” Jace said coolly.

“Fuck! Fine!” Jude muttered. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m going to be blowing Derick nonstop for a month!”

“I’ll get the BMW,” Dane said. “Let’s get the fuck off the street.”

* * *

We loaded up and peeled out of the area as the sirens closed in. Emma and Jude had only been two blocks from their destination when the alphahole agency blocked their path.

As we rounded the corner, the underground garage roller door was open, and Dane’s contacts were waiting. We drove straight down the ramp into a workshop used predominantly for stripping cars, although they would strip anything they got their hands on for parts. The BMW would offer decent compensation. They could wipe the serials, have new ones imprinted, and knock it back into shape for sale in no time, taking a cut before handing it over to dealers in the nicer parts of town. Fancy buyers there wouldn’t have a fucking clue that they were buying a stolen car.

As the roller doors rattled shut, the sirens blazed past.

No one would venture in here. They would clean their shit off the streets and get the hell out again.

Emma was trembling in my arms, and her breathing was erratic as I stepped out of the vehicle. An omega in heat without either heavy sedation or an alpha could fall into a kind of toxic shock. Her body was flooding with chemicals that wouldn't dissipate on their own. We were way past the stage where drugs would work, even if we had some. I needed to tend to her now before she sank any deeper.

"Nice compo," a beta man said, stepping forward to bump fists with Dane.

"Thanks, Reeve." Dane jerked his head toward me. "We need a secure room for the omega and her alpha. We'll need to hold up here for a few days until her heat is done."

Omega and her alpha. The words settled like a balm over my aggression.

Mine.

My beast prowled, lording over his prize. Her scent was muted by the gas mask, but I knew the moment I removed it, all bets were off.

"No problem, man," Reeve said. "Anything for you, Dane. Got a bunker below. Hey, Mike, clear out the bunker and get a mattress in there. See if Jimmie next door will offer up some of his container loot. Pete, get some of that neutralizer spray for the shop."

"No problem, boss." The beta men moved to do his bidding.

As if on cue, Emma let out a high, needy moan.

“I’ve got you, baby.” As I tightened my arms around her, she burrowed her face into the crook of my neck, nipping at my skin. I cupped the back of her head, barely suppressing a growl. I didn’t fucking like the other alphas being here. They were closer than blood to me, but my beast was having none of it. They all wore masks, and the neutralizer spray would sort out the scent once we were out of the way, but I needed to get her somewhere safe.

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“I’ll take you down,” Reeve said. “The guys will bring down all the shit you need promptly.”

I look toward Jace and Dane. An ashen-faced Jude was standing to their right, along with the rest of my crew. “We got you covered, Ryder,” Jace said. “Nothing is going to happen on my watch.”

I nodded, so fucking grateful that they’d picked me up and brought me under their protection all those years ago.

I was taken along a warren of corridors that must span much farther than the above building. Down some metal steps, we came out beside a thick metal door, and inside was a bunker. A mattress had been dumped in the corner, and an open door on the opposite wall revealed a small, functional shower room. Behind us came an army of betas, carrying a carton of bottled water, snack bars, and big sealed clear plastic cubes with the logo of a fancy hotel chain in gold on the wrapper—new blankets and bedding.

“Container was full of fucking bedding,” Reeve said. “Jimmie’s struggling to shift the damn stuff.” He jerked his head toward the door. “Bolt is secure. No one is coming in here until you open it up.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I owe you.”

“Nah, man. I owe Dane more. Take care of your omega. See you on the other side.”

Emma

The door shut with a hiss, and Ryder shoved a huge levered bolt into place.

It was dark, save for an emergency light in the ceiling. His hand went to the light switch near the door. "Please don't," I said. The dim lighting was a blessing to my sensitive eyes.

He stopped, and his hand returned to me.

I liked this, being in his arms. There were just too many clothes in the way.

My nose twitched. A mattress had been laid out in one corner, and it smelled relatively clean. Stacked up against the wall beside us were bottles of water and snacks, along with new, sealed packages of bedding. Imagining how soft and clean they would be, my fingers clenched in anticipation of getting hold of them and putting them to my liking.

My tummy clenched again, more slick trickling out, and I whimpered.

Snagging a bottle with me still in his arms, Ryder strode for the mattress and sat with me nestled on his lap. "Drink some, Emma," he instructed, voice raspy behind the plastic. Snapping the water bottle open, he presented it to me.

I took the bottle, thirsty yet disinclined to drink. "Please take the mask off."

He shook his head, taking the bottle and my hand within his and directing it toward my lips. "Baby, when I take this off, I'm not going to be able to think rationally anymore."

I shivered, wanting him out of control in a way that was probably unhealthy. Taking a

sip, I stared at the alpha who was about to rut me through my heat. The moment had a tinge of disassociation with it, like a living dream. I felt like I should be more frightened than I was. He'd just beaten another alpha to a bloody pulp before my eyes. The former beta me would've been horrified. The newly awakened omega delighted in a strong mate who did whatever it took to keep me safe. The two parts sat in contrast, but there was no going back. I loved my inner self—the animalistic side that wanted to be bred by a worthy mate.

I took another sip while shamelessly grinding my wet pussy against the bulge of his crotch, all the while staring boldly at my chosen alpha.

Behind the mask, the corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement. “Your pussy getting needy, baby?” He brushed the hair back from my flushed cheeks in an unmistakably tender way.

I nodded, embracing the calm before the carnal storm. The pain was throbbing low in my belly but bearable. I sensed it wasn't going to stay that way for long. Nature would demand my heat run its course, and soon, Ryder would remove his mask.

He took the bottle from me. “Let's get you cleaned up. You're covered in that asshole's blood.”

Rising, he carried me through to the tiny, stark shower room. Here, he stripped me, turned the shower on, and ushered me under the spray. Still wearing the gas mask and fully clothed, he cleaned me up.

I fought him. I had no idea why. It was like a fire sparking inside me that demanded I rebel.

“Little fucking brat,” he rumbled, landing a firm swat against my ass. Ignoring my weak struggles, he scrubbed me down with methodical attention, not satisfied until I

was squeaky clean. My body and mind went into riot mode as he dumped me, shivering, next to the mattress. I stood there trembling all over. He might not have access to my scent, but his was driving me wild, especially now that the water had washed the blood off.

The plastic bedding packages were sliced open, and the vacuum-packed contents sprung out.

Selecting the nearest blanket, he went to dry me off.

I hissed at him like some kind of feral kitten and snatched the blanket from his grasp. The moment it was in my hand, a calm came over me, and he stepped back, giving me space.

Goosebumps sprang up across my flesh, my cold hair making rivulets as it trickled over my breasts, back, and ass.

“Baby, you need to dry off.”

I glared at him lest he dare to interfere. He held up both hands and made no move to approach me.

There, I became lost in the softness calling to me. I rubbed it against my cheek, heedless of my chilled skin, and spread it carefully over the mattress. Much better. I forgot about the male whose scent belonged to me as I layered the soft blankets, creating a wall around the edges and a deep layer in the center. The dull lighting, the bolted door, and the brooding male all gave me a feeling of being safe. The rhythmic whir of the air conditioner soothed me as I completed my tasks. My heated skin dried, and the worst of the dampness left my hair. Distantly, I heard the shower, but I was too busy to care.

Finally, I knelt back and admired my nest.

A shadow fell over me, and I smelled fresh, clean male and a hint of alpha musk that made me quiver in anticipation. Then I heard a faint hiss, followed by a thud, and I knew he'd taken the mask off.

A deep, rattling growl followed. I felt it vibrate all the way through my body, and it kicked off a heavy thud deep in my pussy. My tummy turned over, and I ejected a great flood of slick.

His growl rattled deeper, almost like approval.

There was a monster behind me, his name was Ryder, and he was about to rut me.

My mind sank into a state of frenzy, hyperaware of his scent, of his presence, of his body rising, and with every rattling growl, taking him deeper into a rut.

I couldn't look back.I wouldn't.Instead, I did what felt right and crawled into the center of the nest, pressed my cheek against the fresh, soft bedding, and arched my back, ass up, pussy on display.

Waiting.

Waiting for my mate to rut me to assuage this desperate ache.

* * *

Ryder

On her hands and knees in the middle of the nest was an omega, my omega, waiting for me.

I couldn't hold back my growl.It was rattling with the force of a thunderclap and seemed to bounce off the stark walls of the bunker room.The dull, red lighting lent an otherworldly quality to the situation about to unfold.The world could fall apart outside that metal door, and I couldn't give a fuck.

As I came down behind her, she didn't so much as twitch.She kept her face pressed to the bedding, slim thighs parted, waiting.Her inner thighs glistened with the evidence of her arousal.

Slick.The scent of it saturated the air, setting a fire in my belly.My cock hung long and heavy, the knot already burgeoning.I wanted inside her hot cunt more than I wanted my next breath.

Her body trembled as she hung on the cusp. She'd gone through the first wave, but the next would be worse. My growl rose to a purr, and the trembling eased. "Good girl," I said. "I'm going to take good care of you and tend to this needy pussy, give her everything she needs."

My fingers gripped, turning her ass flesh white. Around her was fresh bedding, courtesy of a stolen container and crafted into a beautiful nest. Soon this bedding would be filthy. I was the one who was going to make it that way.

"What do you need, Emma?" I demanded. "Tell your alpha."

It felt so good to say that, to acknowledge what I was. My beast was fucking preening, like he'd known this all along. Maybe he had. Maybe the man in me had just refused to accept what was now apparent.

"Rut me," she said. "I ache so badly. Please, I can't stand it. I'm so hot inside." Her words came out between breathy pants. It cost her to be still, my little feral kitten, who'd snarled at me when I tried to dry her off.

My grin was all teeth. My omega wanted my cock, but Emma would have to earn it.

Grabbing a handful of her ass, I lifted her pussy to my mouth and feasted. Her spluttered squeak turned to a moan, while my purr shifted to a growl of pleasure as I lapped up all the sticky goodness.

Fucking heaven. I couldn't get enough.

She fluctuated between hanging submissively and letting me do my thing, and hissing and wriggling if I slowed, but I'd got a firm hold and she was going fucking nowhere until I was done. I let her slick weave its magic upon me, calling my beast to the surface, where he needed to be. My mind became hyperaware, reading every slight

twitch, every little moan, the way she tensed and relaxed under me, the gush of slick when I got my tongue nice and deep.

But I wasn't getting her off, and her patience was soon used up. My beast wasn't happy with her fighting while he claimed his dues. I shackled both her wrists in one hand, pinned them to the small of her back, and continued doing as I pleased.

My kitten turned feral, straining and arching, cursing and hissing, all the while sweetly gifting me more of her slick. She didn't mind what I was doing. She fucking loved it. It was taking her higher, driving her into her heat. Any moment now, it was going to fully break.

She did. A ragged squeal accompanied a great gush of slick. My mouth popped off, and I flipped her onto her back, pinning the wriggling omega still, snatching her hands away when she tried to put them on her belly.

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“Oh god! Oh god, not again.”

Pinning her hands above her head, I watched her belly ripple, her slick trickling down to saturate the bedding. “That’s my good girl. Let your heat take you.”

Her head thrashed from side to side. There was a certain cruelty involved in rutting an omega through her heat. There was no danger to her now. Her alpha was here, and I would give her everything she needed once I’d driven her high enough.

My hand lowered, sliding over her belly until I could cup her pussy.

“God please!” She strained against me, so fucking slick under my fingers. Slowly, watching her face contort with pleasure, I slid my fingers into her drenched hole. She clenched over them. My fingers were thick, yet she was so wet that three slid into her with ease. I pumped them slowly in and out, mesmerized by the play of rapture on her pretty face.

“More,” she begged.

My movements became rougher as I pumped my fingers, driving my mate where she needed to be. “Do you want to come?”

She snarled at me, her teeth bared, her face a mask of fury.

By contrast, I became calm. I’d killed a fucking alpha for Emma, and I’d do it all again. She was mine. Ours, my beast corrected. Ours from here until eternity. I was going to mark her. I was going to breed her and fill her so fucking good. She wouldn’t

remember any other man's name. "Do you want to come?" I asked her once again.

"Go to hell," she snarled at me. Then I got my thumb all over her slippery clit, and she gasped, groaned, and tried to lift her hips so she could get more.

"Good girl," I said, circling the pad of my thumb around and around her fat, slippery clit. "Does that feel good?" She lay panting, her eyes hooded as she stared at me. I forced a fourth finger in, pushing her to a limit.

The things an alpha did to his omega were absolutely depraved. These tiny, helpless creatures were designed perfectly to accept our rough ways. Her legs had fallen wide open somewhere during my tending, the muscles quivering as she held herself open for me. I was up to the knuckles, her pussy fluttering around my fingers, gushing slick, making those wet slapping noises as I took her higher still, all the while keeping the movements not quite enough to get her off.

"I need to come. Let me come. Make me come. Oh, why can't I come?"

Detached, I read her every twitch. She wouldn't come, not until I was ready, yet this wasn't only torture for her. I suffered the same agony, my dick throbbing and drooling a long thread of pre-cum all the way to the nest as I braced over her, holding her open so intimately, forcing her to take whatever I chose to give.

She needed my seed in her, bathing the entrance to her womb. Before, when I fucked her, I had held back. That sensitive place inside that had made her wince when I'd fucked too deeply wasn't the entrance to her womb but a second hymen that all omegas had. It was the final barrier between me claiming her as my mate. I couldn't reach it with my fingertips, even as deep as I was. The next time I got my cock inside her, I wasn't holding back, not now I understood that she could take so much more.

"Beg me," I demanded.

She hissed and tried to arch away, but I was having none of it.

“Beg me.” My beast wanted everything, wanted her to understand who owned her, who owned her pussy.

“Beg!” My voice turned to gravel, and I backed it up with a growl that rattled with all my alpha force.

She bowed, arching. “Ryder. I need you. I’m so hot inside, so empty.”

“You don’t look fucking empty, baby,” I said. “I’ve got half my fist up inside you.”

She groaned, actually fucking groaned with that admission.

“Do you think your tight little cunt can take my knot? I don’t think we’re even close.” I let off her clit and started working my fingers deeper, my knuckles at her entrance, scissoring my fingers in her hot, clenching passage, forcing her to take more.

“I can,” she sobbed out. She wanted to come, her desperate need contorting her face.

“I need to get deeper, baby, much deeper than this.”

“Please!”

Her legs trembled as she strained to hold them as wide as she could, presenting herself to me.

Then my knuckles slipped inside, leaving only my thumb outside, pressing against her clit.

A shudder rippled through her whole body, all the way down her torso, over her belly before she turned rigid, coming, convulsing around me, squeezing my fingers so fucking tight. Her mouth was open, and the guttural moans that poured from her lips were so fucking hot.

Mine.

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Her climax seemed to go on forever, clenching and gasping, and I held her through the waves.

I needed to fucking breed her.

As she came down, panting unsteadily, I flipped her roughly onto her belly, grabbed a handful of hair, planted an arm around her waist, and hauled her ass up. My cock snagged the entrance to her slippery cunt, and I thrust.

There was no preamble, and a scream tore from her lips as I tore through her barrier and filled her to the root.

My knot threatened to lock as her pussy fluttered around my whole length. It was so fucking good. Gritting my teeth, I fought the urge to empty my balls. She didn't get my seed yet, but the little omega didn't stop coming as I began to drive into her, connecting us together as I slammed in and out, the pleasure almost painful as her tight, slippery cunt squeezed over my knot.

Right here was where I was meant to be. Her sweet, aroused scent, her pheromones, her giving body, her cries of rapture belonged to only me. This heady arousal was a storm claiming me as I claimed my mate.

My growls deepened, and she responded with another savage fisting of my cock. This time, I got my fingertips all over her slippery clit. "Come for me, baby. Come all over my cock. Encourage your alpha to rut, fill, and breed you."

Moans and gibberish poured from her lips.

My rutting gained force, heavier, violent almost. She screamed and begged for more, and then she was coming again, squeezing over me, demanding, coaxing, and then demanding again that I gift her my seed. I did, my knot blooming to the point of no return.

Taking her by the waist, I gritted my teeth and forced the sensitive ridge into her slippery pussy one last time.

My roar was one of claiming—the savage sound of a savage beast. I was not human anymore, but the vessel receiving my seed wasn't a human either. She was a creature, just like me.

My mouth found the juncture of her throat, and my teeth sank into flesh until I tasted blood. She fucking loved it, coming apart all over me again, squeezing, gushing slick, even as my dick jerked and spewed my cum deep.

* * *

Emma

Ryder had knotted me and filled me so deeply that I thought we might have become one. I was stuffed, completely. Even the slightest twitch sent my pussy into spasms around his hot, heavy length. I throbbed everywhere, but especially deep inside, where we were connected, and at my throat, where he'd bitten and claimed me.

It comforted me, reminded me that I was alive.

Face mashed into the bedding, I was surrounded by him, his warmth, scent, and presence.

Inside, a strange tendril of awareness plucked like gentle fingers on a string.

I hung limp, fuzzy mind floating, curious about the tickling sensation. It felt like he was pouring into me in ways more than just his seed from cock, filling my heart, soul, and mind.

Then it popped, and emotions flooded me, heavy, endless, a vast awareness that threatened to swamp my mind.

“Munnnm.” I tried to move.

Iron hard arms and fingers clamped over me, a thick fingertip finding my clit and circling it.

I mumbled nonsense. The words were in my mind, but they couldn’t manifest into coherence.

The presence was back, but this time, the mental touch was gentler, probing, seeking, and then flooding me with euphoria.

Mine.

Ryder. But not only Ryder, but another presence was also there, darker, more animalistic. His beast?

Ours.

A climax came for me slowly, rising up. Like a flower blooming one petal at a time, completion was inevitable. My pussy spasmed around his thick girth and knot. His low growl accompanied a hot flood filling me, leaking out around the knot, soaking my thighs, lower belly, and the bedding beneath us.

Euphoria flooded my mind again, along with a sense of territorial possession. He was

going to breed me.

Lips were at my throat again, sucking lightly over the soreness of the claiming mark, waking it up. The pain aroused me, making me convulse. My reward was another hot gush of cum.

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He petted me, hands roaming possessively over my limp body, familiarizing himself with what was his. As his fingers and thumb began to pluck rhythmically on my nipple, yet another climax, almost violent in its intensity, rippled through my pussy.

I felt it everywhere, skittering over my skin like a thousand threads pulling all at once, sending me tumbling.

I lost track of how many times he coaxed my body to climax, how often he flooded the entrance to my womb with his cum. Time lost meaning, and when his knot finally softened and he eased from my warmth, it came as a shock...like being together was the perfect state, and this open emptiness was no longer who I was.

As he coaxed me onto my back, I made halfhearted swipes at him.

His chuckle was dark and not entirely human.

He was an alpha. He had an inner beast. Why would I think he was human anymore?

Then again, neither was I.

With his big body caging mine, his lips latched onto a nipple, his hand cupping my breast, squeezing it. My poor abused pussy clenched, sending out a flood of cum. His head popped up, and I blinked to find him staring at my pussy with a brooding expression that stopped and started my heart in quick succession and brought another unwelcome contraction.

I felt...full still, and yet empty.

I did not like the way he was staring, nor the flare of arousal battering my mind.

Wicked.

He was going to do wicked things to me—tease me, teach me, make me beg to be knotted.

I knew I would. This emptiness demanded I be filled. I was sore, exhausted, yet when a wave of heat flushed over my body, I knew my heat was not close to being done with me yet.

A single thick finger pressed into me.

I hissed and bared my teeth at him, reminding him that I wasn't human either, not anymore. Perhaps I never had been. I needed more than his inadequate finger that was pumping with agonizing slowness. I needed the rough rutting. I needed his knot.

“What’s the matter, baby?” He pulled his finger out, scooped up some of the spilled cum, and forced it back in.

When I struggled, he captured my hands, pinning them under the flat of his palm against my belly, trapping me.

I fought, slipping one hand free and raking his chest with my nails, both of us breathing heavily, staring at one another with matching feral hunger. His fingers left my pussy. I missed even that small intimacy. Expression darkening, he took both wrists and pinned them to the nest above my head and dropped enough of his weight onto my wriggling body to make his domination of me absolute.

“Let me go!”

“No.”

He was calm where I was a storm.

I wanted to rake my nails over his flesh. I wanted to bite until I tasted blood.

And I would.

But most of all, I felt a deep imperative—an ache to be filled, to be complete, to find that place again where we were one.

“You swore you would always let me go,” I threw back at him.

Even as I said the words, I knew the connection blooming between us would reveal it as a lie.

Blue-gray eyes held mine as he brushed the pad of his thumb over my cheek in a demonstration of tenderness, like he was further taunting my inner vixen that was very much in heat.

“Ah, baby,” he said. “Did you think this was a game? You’re an omega in heat. I’m an alpha, and in case you’re confused, I’m giving you exactly what you need. Now be a good girl for me. You know you want my knot, and I’m going to give it to you. I’m going to fill your hot, needy cunt until it’s full, and then I’m going to force you to take more.”

The bond told me the truth of this, and then the man demonstrated it to me, over and over again.

Chapter Twenty-One

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Emma

A warm body blanketed me as I roused from my heat.

I was a crusted, knotty mess, and I ached everywhere, but especially there. I shifted, groaning, and instantly, Ryder was steadying me.

“Take your time, baby. Let me help you.”

I didn’t have the energy to refuse. Knotty hair was brushed back from my face before he lifted me so that I was sitting across his lap.

He presented me with a water bottle. “Drink a little, Em,” he said. “You’re going to be dehydrated.”

I hissed at him, actually hissed and, finding a reserve of energy, sank my teeth into his throat. Blood pooled into my mouth, and I bit harder still.

“Fuck, you’re a little savage,” he said. “Didn’t you mark your mate enough?”

He knew exactly what I was thinking, how my jealousy had exploded as I realized why he would know I was dehydrated. He’d been with other omegas before me, and I couldn’t stand it.

His fingers rubbing soothingly at my nape helped to bring me down, along with the sweet rumble of his purr.

“Only you, baby. You know there’s only you.”

I knew it. Somewhere underneath this feral need to mark and claim, I knew all that he felt. The bond, the sacred connection between an alpha and an omega, blazed with it.

Feeling his cock rise in response to my possessive fit, my teeth eased their lock. I had to be hurting him, but he showed none of it. Pride. His pride blazed like a beacon.

This wasn’t the first mark I’d made. I’d spent the duration of my heat sinking blunt teeth and blunt nails into his flesh. The distant, formerly beta part of me wanted to be horrified. The newly awakened omega was trying to find a new place to sink my teeth.

“Are you ready for some water now, baby?”

I took the bottle from him. Well, I tried to. He kept hold of the bottom, which was a fair precaution, given my hands were shaking like a leaf.

I drained it.

“Are you hungry?”

I shook my head. “No, I think the blood made me feel a little queasy.”

He chuckled and handed me a candy bar. “You should probably try and eat something. It’s not great, but some sugar will help.”

I ate it slowly, and all the while, I felt his satisfaction through the bond. He liked this, liked providing for me, caring for me. He wanted to do better, to give me more, but most of all, he was deeply, wholly, unwaveringly enamored with his new mate—me. There was no room for confusion. The bond did not lie.

“Will it always be like this?” My eyes searched his stormy blue ones, only now they looked different, like I could see and feel into his soul with that one look.

He took the empty wrapper from me and put it on the floor. “Yeah, it will.” His lips tugged up. “And no, I don’t have any experience to go on, only what I feel and what I’ve seen with other bonded alphas and their mates.” His face softened. “You are so fucking perfect.”

I felt those words as much as I heard them.

They ought to be cloying.

They weren’t.

“What will happen now?”

“Now, I’m going to get you cleaned up. Then I’m going to take you back to Desparion with me. The rest, we’ll take a day at a time. That sound okay with you?”

It did. I could be near Sloane and the baby when it came. I huffed out a breath. “I’ve just spent three years studying to be a designer. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do? What if I’m pregnant? I don’t know anything about being pregnant or babies. I’m going to be a disaster.”

His purr cut through my manic words, and calm flooded my mind.

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“You’re not going to be a disaster,” he said, hands tightening on me. “And in case you’re confused, there are two of us and we will work it out together. If you want to be a designer, baby, you’re never going to be short of work. Do you have any idea how hard it is getting designers in the zone? Fucking nightmare. Jace has a whole section he wants to rework at the club. It’s not all like the strip, you know. Sure there are rough parts, but there’s also some swanky places. Most betas would be surprised. They see the strip, but that’s not the half of it.”

“How much more is there?” I asked.

He smiled. “I’ll show you, baby. Just as soon as we get back.”

We washed up in the shower room, slowly, because I could barely hold my weight and Ryder had to do most of the work.

Then he opened up the door.

Clothes arrived, along with a takeout coffee that I practically inhaled. Once I felt alive enough to emerge, he carried me out.

I didn’t remember much of the place, but I remembered the workshop. Jace, Dane, and other men I didn’t recognize were waiting for us, ready to load up into a blacked out SUV.

“Is that... Is that Derek’s car?” I asked in a hushed whisper, seeing the sleek, black BMW changing to midnight blue at the far end of the garage.

“Don’t mind it,” Ryder said. “Compensation for our stay.” He put his hand on the back of my head as he ducked into the car.

“Sloane’s chewing my ear out,” Jace grumbled from the front passenger seat.

“Is she okay?” I asked, snuggling close to Ryder, not even caring that I was nestled on his lap in the back. Judging from the tightness of his hold and his low rumble purr, he wanted me right there too.

“Anxious,” Jace said honestly. “But she’ll be better once we’re back.”

Dane lowered his window, then called out to the men in the shop. The big roller doors rattled open, and we drove out into the dark, wet night.

“How are we going to get in?” I asked.

“The same way we got out,” Dane said from the driver’s seat.

A few blocks later, a ramp took us down into an underground garage. Only it wasn’t an underground garage, it was a tunnel.

“Gun it,” Jace said. “Time to go home.”

* * *