



The Alpha's Mates

Author: *T.L. Reeve*

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Description: The Greek Shifter Games have come to a close, and Bell must focus on gaining enough pledges to keep her house. Sigma Epsilon Xi doesn't have tons of money. Nor do they have tons of sisters. They need ten pledges in thirty days or they'll lose their ramshackle house. Add to it, their house is on the verge of being condemned. And, as if her life isn't hard enough already, she has two dominant males hot on her tail—Christoph and Jackson. Things take a turn for the worst, when she has to make a good impression for Christoph's parents. She has to deal with the questions from her father and her uncles, as well. At every turn, however, one situation or another arises, threatening the progress she's making. Christoph and Jackson don't see eye to eye on a lot of things, but mating Bell—claiming her for their own—drives their every action. But both men have secrets. Can they put their differences aside and team up to be who she needs?

Please note, if you have read *Sorority Row*, this book now contains additional words and new editing

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Prologue

Five years ago,Capetown, South Africa...

Christoph stepped from his bedroom and stretched. For the last two days, his body ached in weird ways. He didn't understand why he was experiencing something his father explained wouldn't come for a few more years. Rut. Not mating. He'd watched his father go through rut with each female of their pride beside his mother, but this low-in-his-gut tightness made little sense to him, since his father said it wasn't possible. In his mind, for sure, Christoph wouldn't experience any type of estrus with a female feline until he reached the age of twenty-one or thereabouts, yet, he wondered if maybe he'd been wrong.

Or his father lied.

It was the summer after his senior year. He'd already decided to go back to America for college. With a scholarship for football in hand, it meant leaving in a few weeks to join the team. Christoph scratched his chest as he walked into the kitchen, while pushing the unsettled feeling aside. He had more important things to consider. Like, what he'd do with his time before he left home. Pressing a kiss to his mother's cheek, he went in search of some coffee.

"Sleep well, son?" she asked, placing one of her expensive, thin cigarettes to her mouth that smelled of cloves and tobacco.

"I did." He narrowed his eyes. "Those things are poisonous to shifters."

She laughed. “So they are.”

“Where’s father?” He placed the mug against his lips before blowing on the brew. “I wanted to speak to him before I leave.”

His mother frowned. “Where he is every month during estrus.” The jealousy rolled off of her in thick waves he wasn’t prepared for. She’d always appeared to take everything in stride, knowing her place as the mate of an Alpha. Though, now, thinking back on it, she wasn’t Alpha lioness as well. No, Keandra acted more like the Alpha than any of the females in their pride.

Again, another issue he’d have to discuss with his father.

“Ah.” Christoph kept his comments to himself. His mother always appeared distant with his father, but he couldn’t blame her. He didn’t much care for the way his father carried himself and over the years, he’d seen some cracks in the veneer of their lives. Including the fact his father’s debts were higher than their income, hence the reason Christoph had taken the proffered scholarship.

“You’ll be expected to join him soon,” his mother said, sitting him at the table. “Are you prepared?”

He shrugged. “I won’t be here in a few weeks.”

“You still have obligations. Don’t be so naïve to believe your father won’t make arrangements in the states for you.” There’d always been an edge of suspicion about his parents, where he’d been concerned. They were Ex-Pats, born in Florida and North Carolina. They’d married and had Christoph within a year. Then everything changed. By the age of three, they moved clear across the world to South Africa. They had a new pride and his father supported them as a developer.

Until everything changed.

Where they'd become South African citizens, Christoph kept his American citizenship. His life in South Africa until then was as an illegal or whatever. He could never piece together why his family did that or if there was even a significance to it. The minute he set foot in the States, he'd be home. The headache of his life being South Africa would, for all intents and purposes, be over, and he could move forward.

"You should know, all of us had an arranged marriage," his mother stated, drawing Christoph out of his circling thoughts. "You will too when your father finds a suitable mate for you."

Again, he bit his tongue. Mates weren't betrothed. They were organic. Being forced to be with someone would kill shifters or lead to a mating like his mother and father. "In due time, mother."

"Finish your coffee, then get ready. Your father will return soon. You have an appointment with him." She stubbed out the remains of her cigarette in her clear ashtray. "A man's meeting."

He finished the drink in two swallows before grabbing a shower. Nothing his mother said made sense. They were supposed to be progressive shifters, weren't they? Had he been looking at them through rose-colored glasses for far too long? He allowed the warm water to cascade over his tense shoulders. Even with the caffeine racing through his system, he still couldn't shake the unnatural feeling in his groin. Christoph glanced down and frowned. His dick wasn't hard either, so whatever was going on, he couldn't figure out.

Twenty minutes later, he emerged from his room, ready for his father. The man stepped into their penthouse apartment overlooking the South Atlantic Ocean with his chest puffed up and his eyes glassy. His father also stank. He went straight to the

coffeepot and filled a mug before ignoring Christoph's mother. "Good, you're ready."

"What's this about, father?" He watched the man with cautious interest.

"Today is the day you meet the females of the pride," his father said. "They will assist you through your first estrus."

There were many things his father could have said to him, but having sex wasn't one of them. He'd experimented with some girls at his high school, never going too far because of being a shifter, but hell, he wasn't some innocent seventeen-about-to-be-eighteen-year-old. "Oh."

"Yes," his father continued. "You will be away from home, and you must be able to uphold the St. John's name."

"No children out of wedlock, either," his mother admonished.

Never. He wasn't sure he wanted them. However, he also knew in order to become the Alpha and continue the St. John bloodline, he would have to have them. Again, another question popped into his head. Why didn't he have any siblings? They were shifters. He should have at least three or four, if not more. However, he'd been an only child. "Of course."

His father pushed away from the table and sighed. "All right, boy. Let's go. We don't want to leave them waiting."

His mother's snort of laughter drew Christoph and his father's attention. "Don't mind me. I'm a cynical old woman."

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Christoph narrowed his eyes again. He realized standing next to his father, there was a subtle subtext about them he didn't understand, or rather, never understood. He tucked the information away as he followed his father to the elevator. "How far do we have to go?"

His father laughed. "One floor below us. There are three your age. All of them have shifted in preparation."

Shifted in preparation? His lips curled in disgust. "Why are they in feline form?"

"It's how you have sex the first time," his father said with a shrug. Christoph scented the air for a lie, but couldn't detect one. "Your mother and I did. It's how you were conceived."

"So, you're hoping I impregnant one of these girls?" He frowned. "I'm not sure I agree."

His father chuffed. "Stop being such a tight ass." They stepped into the waiting car and his father pushed the button for one floor down. "This is your duty as the Alpha's son. When you return from America, you will be expected to take some lionesses and form your pride. Today starts the process."

His father was moving too fast for him. He didn't understand. He thought he would take over for his father, not create a new pride. "W-What?"

"You didn't think you could come home, did you?" His father chuckled as the elevator chimed. "Son, prides can't have two Alpha males. You'll leave. It's how it's

been for generations.”

Nothing his father said made sense. “But I—” The scent of estrus hit him square in the chest as the doors slid opened. His dick went rigid. His canine teeth elongated. He inhaled the sickening sweet smell, and he wanted to claw his skin off from the intensity of his yearning to shift.

“Later, son. For now, go have fun. We have much to discuss later.” His father touched Christoph’s chest, and a yowl was ripped from his chest as the shift overcame him.

Warmth and lust consumed him as the world was upended on him. When he could open his eyes, he’d been on all fours and the smell of sex and fertility mingled. There was also the tangy musk of scent-marking urine. These females were proving to him they were ready, and they were fertile.

He yowled again, unable to groan.

In the back of his mind, he knew this was all wrong. In the back of his mind, he knew his father was taking away Christoph’s choice along with those females who swished their tails at him while rolling to their backs with their legs spread wide in invitation. His father used their pheromones to create an orgy of sorts. It should have made him sick. Unfortunately, he was only along for the ride. His lion was loose, and he no longer had control of his basic urges.

Sometime later, when his father came to gather him, Christoph was sprawled across the floor. The smell of sex, cum, and urine covered him. He couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move. He’d spent too many hours as the beast. Even his dick was raw, and his balls were dry. Mentally, the things he did there, in that room, left him disgusted and sated. Christoph couldn’t reconcile the two, nor could he understand why he wasn’t repulsed by himself when he should have been.

Perhaps he was, and he couldn't acknowledge it.

"Now," his father said as they stepped onto the elevator, "you can go to America and begin your new life."

Christoph blinked. "Huh?"

His father smacked him on the back, and he lurched forward. "College, my boy. You're leaving in the morning."

Christoph opened and closed his mouth, still confused by what his father was saying. Maybe the old man slipped me something before stepping into the elevator? "What?"

"Oh, did you not know?" his father said. "We sped up your move-in date. You're leaving tomorrow."

"You lost me." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not sure I—"

"Yes, just be ready to go in the morning." His father stepped aside as they stopped on their floor. "I have business to attend to. Your mother is sleeping as well. I'll be back to see you off in the morning."

Christoph's brows furrowed. "O-kay. Sure." Before he could say anything else, his father hit the button on the lift and disappeared behind the closed doors. "What the fuck am I missing?"

As he stepped into their penthouse apartment, he spotted his bags near the door. His father hadn't been kidding. However, the short notice of the changes rubbed him the wrong way. He knew he should be suspicious and want answers to his questions, but at the moment, he needed to sleep more. Without even showering, he climbed into

bed and passed out.

Tomorrow, Christoph started his new life and put into motion a series of events that would change him forever.

Thirteen years ago, somewhere in the desert of Arizona...

Bell startled awake, sucking in a deep breath as pain radiated through her head and body. She tried to move her arms and legs, but nothing would cooperate. It was as if her limbs had no bone or muscle, or maybe her brain couldn't process the signals. Either way, she couldn't move. The last thing she remembered was following Zoe after sneaking out of the house.

Stupid Zoe, always trying to get me into trouble.

If they hadn't left home, none of this would have happened. They would still be safe. Bell blinked several times, trying to figure out where she was, but it was dark. The musty smell of wet earth and damp rocks clung to every surface. She inhaled again, reaching out with her lioness, and recoiled. Blood. Whose or where it came from, she couldn't tell. It wasn't fresh either. Instantly, she wanted to go home. She tried to remember how she got there or who took her, but her memory was jumbled, and her head hurt, too.

"Ah, you're awake, good," a man said, while lurking from the shadows. "I was wondering if those stupid hyenas gave you too much."

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Hyenas... Now she remembered. They were out by some buff. Zoe and she were arguing about going home when three boys approached them. They smelled like rot and sickness. Their teeth were yellow stained and broken. Dirt covered them from head to toe, and they were young, too. Though they were deceptively strong, Zoe had knocked one out while the others grabbed Bell. That was the last thing she remembered until waking up.

“W-Who are you?” she croaked.

He laughed. The rough, gravelly sound sent a chill down her spine. Fear clogged her throat. The man refused to step from the shadows so she could get a better view of him. “A friend.” The way he said those words left a bitter taste on her tongue. Hadn’t Daddy taught her, if a statement tasted like sulfur, and she’d know if it did, then the person was lying?

“No, you’re not.” She tried to gather her knees to her chest, but quickly realized the reason she’d had no ability to move before was because of being tied up. “You’re lying.”

He laughed again. This time it took on a crazed quality and was followed by several other people who must have been in the space with them. The weird cry-like sound made her heart race and her body tremble. “Untie her, it’s time.”

Time? Time for what?

Several pairs of hands came out of the darkness, grabbing for her. They tugged and pulled at her clothing while also undoing the ropes binding her legs and hands. Her

stomach churned while they pinched and groped her. She refused to beg for them to stop because she knew deep down her pleas would only entice them to be rougher and do more to her. Closing her eyes, she tried to block out their lewd actions and gross remarks about her body. She was ten, not a woman.

A little kid.

They carried her out of their cave dwelling and over to a four-wheeler. The man was already on the machine, waiting for her. She didn't know who he was. He was still obscured in shadows and the fading light of the day. The boys who carried her out put her on the back of the off-road quad.

"He should be there any minute, we shouldn't leave him waiting..." The man started the vehicle, then raced away from wherever they were, forcing Bell to hold on to him. He smelled like death and decomposition. Bile bit at the back of her throat with each inhale.

She didn't like this man. He took her from her sister and her family. She didn't understand why. What made her so important? Suffice to say, if he wanted someone more important or stronger, Zoe was the better choice. She was tough and mean and reminded Bell of their father more than anyone else. Then she berated herself for thinking such. Neither of them should be or should've been kidnapped.

They came to a stop near an outcropping of rocks. A small area had been cleared, as though in preparation for the coming events. A bonfire was set ablaze, illuminating the area. There was nothing out there, just desert sand, sagebrush, and Joshua trees. Shadows from the fire played eerie scenes against the stone wall, casting long silhouettes across the ground. She didn't want to be there. The knot of terror in the pit of her stomach expanded, consuming her. She tried to scramble away from the man who'd taken her, but he grabbed her long blonde hair and yanked her back to him.

Bell cried out. Her hands went to her head, to trying to ease some of the pain, but he only tightened his grip, causing her eyes to water and agony to wrack her body. She went still, sniffing back her tears. Bell wouldn't cry in front of him. She had to be tough, like Zoe and her mother, Jasmine. Bell needed to get mean like her aunt Jenna. A pang of longing reverberated through her. Oh, how she wished she was like them. If she had been, maybe she wouldn't have been in this situation. Perhaps she'd have gotten free.

Instead, she stood next to the man who smelled like rotten flesh and sickness, his hand wrapped in her hair, pinning her in place. He licked his lips and an unfamiliar smell assailed her. Adrenaline spiked in her veins. She was a caged. A frightened bunny among predators. She needed to run away, but where?

In the desert, there was nowhere she could hide.

"Hello, Rapier," the man sneered, drawing Bell's attention. "Where's Mackenzie?"

Her father didn't say a word. Instead, she could feel his eyes on her. He took in every inch of her, searching for injuries. Yet, she couldn't see him.

"We're not going to play games, are we?" The man shook Bell, but she refused to make a sound. "I know you're there. Come out, or I kill her."

"Let go of Bell," her father said from the darkness surrounding her.

"And be left defenseless? No, I don't think so. Come out and face me," the angry man said. "Stop being such a coward."

"Pot meet kettle." Her father's voice gave her some comfort and confidence, easing the horrible churn in her stomach.

The man's sinister laugh sent a shiver down her spine. "I'm not the one hiding."

"Let me ask you something, asshole," Rapier spat. "When you were killing all those families and burning out our homes, what was the point?"

"Power," the man said. "Cattle always need to be shown what happens when someone makes a mistake."

"And starving people?"

"Another form of punishment for losing their way." The nonchalant way he gave the answer didn't surprise Bell, however it hurt. People didn't deserve to be hurt because of some man who didn't like them.

"Why me?" Rapier asked.

"You got in the way. You overstayed your welcome and interfered in a personal matter," the man said. "Mackenzie was being taught a very valuable lesson, and you ruined ten years of instruction. I couldn't let you get away with that."

Surprised filled Bell. "Uncle Mac?" She didn't understand. From what her mother said and what she'd seen, Mackenzie was a quiet, frail man. What could he have possibly done to provoke this type of rage?

"What was Mac's transgression?"

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“He whelped a pup in my territory.” The man holding her growled. “Same as his fucking brother. The twin bastard. My primary sources of pussy were tainted from then on out.”

“Marjorie,” her father said. “Have you stopped to think she attacked those boys and Mackenzie?”

The man snorted. “Bullshit. She knew better.”

“She did it anyway.”

The man growled loud and long, shaking Bell. “Enough of your stalling. Get the fuck out here and face me. Stop being a little bitch.”

“The only little bitch I see here is you.” Bell’s father rose from his hiding place and towered over the man. He took a step closer to them. “You using a little girl to shield you from getting your ass beat?”

“Fuck you,” the man said, wrapping his clawed-tipped hand around Bell’s throat. Two of his fingers were poised to dig into her neck. She whimpered, and he laughed. It was then she understood who the man was, Raymond Quincy. The one person her parents hated the most.

“If you spill a drop of her blood, you’ll never make it out alive,” Rapier whispered. “Law be damned.”

“You don’t have the balls to do anything, Rapier Dryer. You proved that.” The

deranged man laughed, then glanced down at Bell. “She is a pretty thing. You couldn’t have fucked Jasmine to get this purebred lioness. I bet she’ll be fun to break in.” He licked his lips, then grinned. “After I fuck her, I’ll give her to the hyenas to play with. I’m sure they’ll enjoy their treat.”

Bell shrank back, bile rose in her throat. She swallowed hard, trying not to puke on her pretty clothes or on the man beside her. If she did, he’d probably hurt her more than he already had. She also didn’t want to draw her father’s attention from the man, either.

Rapier roared. “This is your last warning, motherfucker. Give me my daughter or you will die out here like the sad, pathetic piece of shit you really are.”

“You knew the terms of our agreement, Bell for Mackenzie. You would have been doing all of us a service if you would have followed orders.”

“I don’t follow your orders,” Rapier spat. “Nor do I hand over family members to be tortured by pieces of shit like you.”

“That’s too bad, Mr. Dryer. Your daughter would have been a smooth, perfect lay.” Raymond pierced the skin at Bell’s neck.

She bit down on her cheek to squelch the need to scream. He cut her. She could feel the warm trickle of blood as it slid down her neck. She trembled. Terrified, she stood there, unable to do anything to help her father. She hated this man and feared him, too. What the hell was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she fight back like everyone else?

Her father charged at Raymond; his claws extended. At the same moment her dad jumped at Raymond, the man pulled a gun. Her father closed his eyes. Bell’s heart pounded. She was about to watch her father be killed and still she did nothing. Bell

screamed, angry at herself and the situation she'd been put in. What happened next, she couldn't properly explain. The crack of something hitting skin followed by the hot, metallic scent of what she thought might be blood caused her to crumble.

Her father froze above.

When she looked up, finally, Raymond Quincy lay a few feet from her, blood pooling around him. His eyes were wide in shock. She glanced down at herself and noticed the blood all over her and she panicked. Bell was bleeding. Had she been shot?

"Princess," her father whispered, cleaning the muck and blood from himself.

"Daddy?" She pulled her hands from her ears.

"I've got you, Bell." He eased toward her before gathering her up in his arms. "I've got you."

"Sorry, Daddy. So, so sorry. I-I shouldn't have agreed to go." Her frightened sobs began anew as she plastered herself against his heaving chest.

"It's okay, baby. I've got you. You're safe, that's not your blood." He stroked her fine, silky hair. "I've got you." A content purr filled his chest while he continued to hold his daughter. "And, I'm never letting you go."

Seven years ago, the mountains of Romania...

They were at it again, fighting. It seemed to happen daily now. Varujan stood at his window of his bedroom tucked into the Carpathian Mountains overlooking the countryside. His parents had been in this stone castle for over a millennium, collecting. That's what dragons did after all, they collected. His parents had amassed a fortune in artifacts and gold. They had enough money to rule a large country until

the world stopped turning. Didn't mean a damn thing if they didn't stop arguing.

They were old; he realized. Dragons were immortal. He didn't know their exact ages, but by the way they spoke, they'd been around since at least the fifteen hundreds, if not longer. In those years, they'd hibernated seven times, hoping what they'd find when they awoke would convince them life was better. Instead, they woke during wars. They almost died during the Ottoman War, which lasted until 1858. Then again, during World War I and World War II. He couldn't blame them for being bitter. This argument, though, was different. He could hear it in his mother's tone.

Something wasn't right.

He padded to the door and opened it, hoping to be clued in as to what was happening. Instead, he was greeted with silence. Dragons had exceptional hearing. Probably his parents heard him open his door and paused their quarrel.

Varujan frowned.

Yes, something was terribly wrong.

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He strode down the hall, making as much noise as possible so his parents knew he was there, not because he wished to interrupt them, but if he didn't move from his spot, they wouldn't continue their disagreement, and he'd be left with unanswered questions. As he made his way to the staircase, he paused on the third stair from the top and listened. His parents began again, this time in calmer, though not less frantic, tones.

Once in the kitchen, he grabbed a snack and a bottle of water. He wasn't particularly hungry. Again, he had to keep up pretenses. It was then he noticed how absolutely empty the mansion was and dark. No, they didn't advertise where they lived, however, they also didn't stay in the shadows. Standing there, Varujan knew he was missing something important. What though? He couldn't put his finger on.

On his way back up the stairs, he listened for his parents. Their argument had become a conversation. Their tones were calmer. Yet their hurried, slashing tones brooked no compromises on whatever they were discussing. Again, the closer he got to their door, they stopped talking. A frown tugged at his mouth while he passed their room.

The rest of the night, he spent listening to his parents while finishing homework. Varujan was close to graduating as it was, and he knew his parents would send him to some prestigious college. He'd had his sights on the University of Oxford and had the bloodlines and money to get him in there as it stood. He planned on becoming an archeologist, something he supposed was part of his dragon DNA. Always searching. Always looking for more. He knew coveting riches or artifacts was bad, but his dragon didn't care. It was engrained in his psyche to take and hoard and be greedy.

Varujan scrubbed his eyes and stretched as he finished his homework. It was already

after eleven. His parents' murmured voices were silenced. Whatever they'd been talking about, they were finished. He stood then and stripped out of his clothes. Padding to his bathroom, he yawned. Maybe he was overreacting. Being paranoid. He switched on the shower, then went through the routine of preparing for his bath. When he stepped under the cascade of warm water, he groaned. All the tense muscles of his shoulders unlocked, and his body relaxed. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Varujan, imi pare rau," his mother's soft voice startled him. His eyes snapped open as she struck. The needle entered his neck and whatever drugs were inside of the syringe infiltrated his system.

He was falling... Falling... Falling...

Varujan snapped awake, bolting upright. Instantly, he knew he wasn't in his bed or even in his home. Light from outside poured into the small cabin. His head pounded and his stomach ached. He groaned. A man he hadn't seen before turned away from his desk. He smiled before standing. In his hand was a letter. Varujan could see his mother's handwriting on the outside along with his name. Confusion spread through him. Where was he? How had he gotten there? Who was this man?

"I know you have questions," the man said, holding out the envelope. "First, read this letter from your mother."

The man spoke English. Thankfully, his mother insisted Varujan learn the language, along with several others. He was a dragon after all, and again, like everything else, languages could be coveted too. In other words, Varujan was a linguist. He knew sixteen languages. Proficient in writing twelve of those and could speak each of them fluently.

"Thank you." He cleared his throat. "Where am I?"

The man frowned. “Colorado, United States.”

Dumbstruck, Varujan sat there. Colorado? How had he gotten there without waking? Who brought him there? Why was he there? Where were his parents? His heart pounded, which only caused the headache to rip his skull in half. “I—Where?” He deflated.

“There is much to discuss,” the man with the slight Romanian accent stated. “First, read your mother’s letter.”

He nodded. “I understand.” He broke the wax seal on the back of the envelope and opened it. The letter, written on thick parchment, wasn’t long. The words, “It has begun,” had been the only thing written. What that meant, he didn’t understand. He glanced at the man. “What’s begun?”

The man handed him a long brown packet. “It’s all in here.”

He took the information from the man. Inside were new applications for a birth certificate, license, school records, bank accounts and name. His name was no longer Varujan, but Jackson—so American. Thankfully, the last name had been left open. He wouldn’t give up his name or clan. He was a proud dragon. Glancing at the man who waited, Varujan—Jackson licked his bottom lip, still confused by what had transpired, but also understanding the situation now. Someone had come after his parents. He had no doubt about it. Jackson’s parents were protecting him. It was the only reasonable answer he had for why they’d sent him so far from home. Looking at the desk, he spied the typewriter. Obviously, this man was supposed to help him. Whether he could trust the man was another thing altogether. For now, even those sent to him by his parents were the enemy. Until he was certain he’d keep an eye on the man.

“Have you figured out what you’d like your last name to be?” the man asked.

Varujan nodded. "I shall be forever known as Jackson Dalco, of Clan Dalco. I am dragon, and I will not hide."

The man nodded. "As you wish, Master Jackson. You shall forever be known as Jackson Dalco, of Clan Dalco." The man bowed, then returned to the desk with the stack of papers to finish filling them out. "My name is Elgor, of Clan Dalco. I shall be your footman until you enter college, and then my job will expire. I am to return to the mountains."

Varujan nodded. "I understand, Elgor. Thank you."

"Yes, Master Jackson." He nodded. "Please, practice calling yourself Jackson in the meantime and explore your new home. I hope everything is to your requirements."

He buried his true name deep within his mind, locking the memory of who he was within a box never to be opened again. Jackson. He was Jackson. He must consider himself such from now on. "I believe I will. Can you explain where in this Colorado we are?"

"We're near Colorado Springs. You have been enrolled at a local high school, and your college has already been arranged. In less than two years, you will be a student at Turnskin University. A place known for their shifter community and the ability to hide in plain sight, which was part of your parents' requirements."

Turnskin University...Interesting. "Understood. I will follow their wishes."

"Thank you, Master, and, if I may say, welcome to America," Elgor said with a smile. "I believe you will like this place. There is much to explore."

Jackson nodded. "Perhaps. We shall see. Until then, I will explore my new surroundings." He stood then. "When am I due at this high school?"

“Tomorrow morning, master. I will have everything prepared for the morning,” his footman said. “It is Sunday, young sir.”

“Very good. I believe I will go flying for a while.”

“Yes, sir,” Elgor said. “Please be mindful of the humans, young sir.”

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Jackson grunted. “I will.” Then laughed. “That’s never been something I’ve had to worry about before. This United States might be fun after all.”

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The night of Greek Shifter Game’s Gala...

Jackson challenged Christoph. Forced Christoph into action before he’d been ready. Ever since the day his father threw him into the room with all of those lionesses, his mind had been scattered. Yes, he used sex with others to quiet the anguish and turmoil knotting his gut and turning his insides to blocks of ice whenever he thought too long or too hard about the situation. No matter what his father said, there was no consent from anyone there, most especially him. The minute his father forced Christoph to shift, was the moment he couldn’t say no.

Yet, he had the chance here.

He could tell Bell tonight wasn’t right for them. That if he did something stupid, it would mess up everything. Then again, it seemed he’d been messing up more and more where she was concerned. Laney and Reagan had begun their torture of Bell and Hayden the minute they stepped onto the field at the Greek Shifter Games. Now, it appeared, they were going in harder. Faster. With Hill and Winston behind them, it was only a matter of time before Bell and Hayden got hurt. The idea of his mate suffering because of his inaction compounded the guilt already eating away at his conscience.

No, tonight he had to show Bell without words she belonged to him. He only wished

he could say she was his, but Jackson, he realized, was part of them as well. The unsettled part of him, not because of what happened to him at home, but some foreign instinct reared up within him the minute Bodhi asked Jackson to be Bell's escort. Christoph had willingly agreed to go with Reagan—though, was it really willingly, when she was blackmailing him?

Three days before the games began, Laney approached him. She'd been so sly about her intentions it wasn't until he was sitting down at a table in a restaurant of her choosing, to listen to her spin her version of what happened before he left home that he understood the tangled web she weaved around him. Somehow, Laney had found out about the lionesses and what he'd done that day. In the end, she threatened to go public if he didn't do as she wanted.

Because of his fear and disgust, he followed through, knowing full well others would be hurt by his actions. No matter how much he tried to forget or escape that day, he'd never be able to, no matter how hard he tried. He also understood the longer he kept the truth to himself, the more he'd hurt any chance he had to make things possible for him, Bell, and Jackson.

While Bell talked to her cousins and sibling, he pulled Jackson aside. He had to have the guy's permission. It was a fucked up proposition, but it was also something he needed. "Hey, man, I need a favor."

Jackson stared at him hard. The disgruntled look on his face, along with the air of superiority that always followed the dragon everywhere he went, enveloped Christoph. Of the both of them, they were matched strength for strength, but he also could admit when he saw the superior species standing before him. Didn't make him any less Alpha in his estimates. "Oh? What's the favor?"

"I want to spend the night with Bell—preferably alone." Christoph knew he was reaching. Jackson had every right to say no and be there in that room with them.

“If I say no?” Jackson cocked a brow as though he’d heard Christoph’s churning thoughts. “If I say we claim her together, then what?”

Anger simmered to the surface. He would have to explain everything then, and he didn’t think he could say the words. Let alone expose the deep wound consuming his thoughts since that day. “Then I will refrain from touching her.” Even though the idea only pissed off his lion.

Jackson laughed. “How did we get here, Christoph? How did we end up both trying to win the hand of our mate and each other?”

He turned the question over in his mind. “I don’t understand.” The electric current coursing through Christoph vibrated over his skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind. He couldn’t explain the magnetic pull between them. He associated it with them being fated to Bell. Nothing more. Nothing less. Now, standing there with Jackson, he wondered if their connection ran deeper than some simple explanation could bring.

“I think you do,” Jackson said. “I don’t think you’re ready for it yet.”

Bewildered, he stood there, not sure what to say or how to broach the question again about needing to be with Bell for the night. “Where do we go from here?”

“If you insist on having Bell to yourself tonight, I’ll watch over both of you. You don’t need Laney or Reagan interrupting you.”

“Thank you,” Christoph murmured.

“Don’t thank me yet, cat,” Jackson grumbled. “I have a caveat. You don’t put a single mark on her. We mark her together when I say. Not when you want.”

Christoph stared at the dragon. “Fine, but the same rule applies to you as well.”

“I wouldn’t have made it if I didn’t intend to keep my word,” Jackson muttered. “Where do you intend to have this little rendezvous?”

“I have a room at the hotel in town.”

Jackson grunted. “Of course you do.” He gave a dry chuckle. “Get going before the stupid cows see you leave with Bell. I’ll keep everyone distracted then follow behind you.”

“Thank you, I owe you.” Then Christoph did the one thing that shocked him, yet didn’t cool the arousal burning through his gut. He brushed his lips over Jackson’s in a chaste kiss before turning to walk away.

Jackson’s soft gasp went straight to Christoph’s crotch. His already impossibly hard cock gave a hard throb. Heat filled his cheeks and his spine stiffened with tension. What was that all about? He’d never fooled around with guys before, so what made Jackson different? He refused to glance over his shoulder to stare back at Jackson, afraid if he did, he’d do something irresponsible for an Alpha of his stature—like take him to the floor and mount him in front of everyone.

Instead, he focused on where Bell stood with her family. Nico and Hayden had already departed, leaving Zoe and Tate. However, Victor closing the distance with Tate led him to believe Tate would be on his way as well. Christoph cleared his throat, catching Bell’s attention. When she turned to face him, her expression lit up. There was eagerness, joy, and excitement flaring to life in her sky-blue eyes.

“Christoph,” she murmured. “What can I do for you?”

“Can we go somewhere to talk?” He hated the angsty edge in his tone and the way he

sounded so uncertain about what they were about to do.

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She glanced back at her twin, who shooed her away. “I suppose I could. Where would you like to go?”

Far away from here. Although he didn’t say as much out loud. “I have a place.” He held out his hand. “If you’d like to join me, that is.”

“Why, all of a sudden?” She stared up at him with such openness and understanding. “Is it because of Jackson?”

“Maybe a little because of him. He will be there too, watching over us,” Christoph said, hoping to cajole some of her worry.

“Okay.” She took his hand. “I talk to you later, Zoe. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Isn’t that my line to you?” Zoe arched a brow, then laughed. “Have fun, you two. I’ll let the others know.”

Bell rolled her eyes. “So where is this place you’d like to go?”

“Someplace we can be alone, but it’s a bit of a drive first.” Christoph led her out of the room and into the brisk night air. It was perfect to him, not too hot and not too cold. His lion inhaled, drawing in the fresh scents of fall and the subtle sweetness of strawberries and cream wafting from his tiny mate beside him.

“Tonight was interesting,” Bell whispered. “I’m glad we could help so many people.”

The little bits and pieces he’d learned about her family over the last few weeks, he

liked. They were good people. Kind. They wanted to help their community, not like his father, who'd be happy to tear people apart. He wished he could have grown up with Bell. Maybe then his life would have been different. "Me too. From what I've heard, your aunts and mom are doing a good thing there in Window Rock."

Pink tinged her cheeks, allowing her freckles to stand out in relief against her ivory skin. "Thank you. They've worked so hard since we were little. I am sure they will put all the donations we've raised to good use." She smiled at him, and his heart skipped a beat. She was gorgeous. Perfect, even if she didn't see it yet.

"This is me." When he came back to the states, he'd had enough money to buy a truck. He didn't know why he got the gas guzzler, but it fit him. Perhaps he also used it to hide all of his scars, too. He unlocked her door, then helped her in. When she was settled, he came around the front, then got in behind the wheel. "It'll take us a minute to get there. Jackson will be right behind us."

"So you said." Bell smoothed out the skirt of her satin dress. "Why is he going to follow, again?"

"This is me apologizing to you for everything I've fucked up on. I didn't want us to be interrupted by those she-beasts." Christoph started his truck before backing out of his spot. "I have to explain everything to you, and I hope when I do, you won't hold it against me."

"All of us have our secrets," she murmured. "Even me."

He didn't believe that for a second. She was too pure. Too happy, even if she was shy. There wasn't a mean bone in her body, and she could hurt no one. No, she didn't have skeletons in her closet. "Well, well. I guess you're not as prim as you act." He went for teasing her, hoping to drop the tension a notch or two.

She laughed. The melodic sound did nothing to cool the excitement filling him. “I guess you’ll have to find out.”

Fuck. That was a dare.

He didn’t know what to say after that. Christoph worried if they continued with their playful banter, they’d end up on the side of the road, fucking like cats in heat. He didn’t want their first time in the cab of his vehicle.

When they pulled up to the hotel, the valet greeted them, handing Christoph a tag for his truck. He could bypass the front desk as well, since he had the card in his wallet. He took Bell’s hand and guided her to the bank of elevators against the back wall. While they waited, he stared at their reflection in the mirrored surface. He could see the hunger painted across his features and the nervousness in hers. He needed to take his time. Go slower. He’d been so worried or perhaps caught up in the fact he didn’t want to be interrupted. He hadn’t considered what Bell might have felt, too.

The elevator chimed. He stepped inside and removed the card from his pocket. Bell joined him seconds later, and he swiped the key, giving him access to the rooms on the top floor. He didn’t have tons of money, as it was his father’s pride was almost bankrupt, but he did side work when he wasn’t in class or practicing. Three weeks’ pay went to the room, and he didn’t regret it at all. When they arrived on their designated floor, he allowed Bell to go first and followed her.

“I hope you like it.” He held the keycard to the door handle, then turned it when the screen turned green.

“Christoph...” Bell breathed. “Did you do all this for me?”

“Well,” he said with a shrug, locking the door behind him, “for us. All three of us.”

“So, you’re saying Jackson will join us?” She peered up at him with such appreciation and surprise. Christoph didn’t want to be a jerk about it.

“Jackson said he would be here, but he wouldn’t interfere unless you were okay with it.” Christoph shrugged. Going over to the balcony, he pulled the curtain so she could experience the view just as Jackson, in his dragon form, arrived. “Told you.”

She gasped then giggled as she stared after Jackson. “You’ve both thought of everything.” She went to her tiptoes and kissed Christoph. “Thank you for getting me out of there. I was going stir crazy.”

“My pleasure.” Christoph wrapped his arms around Bell’s middle, tugging her closer to him. “I want to make tonight special for us.”

She dipped her chin, nibbling on her bottom lip. “If you’re expecting me to be a virgin, I’m not.”

He hadn’t even given it a second thought. What Bell did before him was her business, not his. Definitely not Jackson’s either. “Good to know. Neither am I.” He glanced out the balcony door. “How about you, Jackson?”

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“I’m not.” He stepped into the room. “Mighty nice you room you have here, Christoph.”

He gave a silent chuckle. “You could say that. It’s all for our Bell.”

Jackson hummed in approval. “I like the sound of ‘our Bell.’” He caged her in between them. “Just like I am your Jackson, and you are our Christoph.” When his lips crushed Christoph, a ravenous beast took hold of Christoph’s gut, one he didn’t recognize. He became a starved man, desperate to be close to Jackson. The feel of Bell’s small breast brushing his torso while Jackson tugged at his hair, threw him for a loop. He was beyond frantic. He wanted to fuck and rut even though he couldn’t smell estrus on Bell.

Shit. Bell. What must she think of both of them? However, the second he inhaled, he caught the scent of her arousal, and his mouth watered. Watching them turned her on. He took a steadying breath filled with the pheromone perfume of Bell and Jackson’s yearning. Both of them wanted him.

“You’re overdressed, kitten.” Christoph turned Bell to Jackson. “Kiss her like you kissed me.” He leaned in and added, “Undress him, Bell.”

This wasn’t exactly what he’d had in mind when Christoph asked her to join him. He wanted Bell all to himself, yet, seeing them together, only added to the fuel burning his gut. He needed both of them with such a single-minded focus, he almost lost control, shredding her gown.

Christoph hissed the minute their mouths fused together, while her hands trembled

with each button she loosened on Jackson's shirt. He steadied himself, using all of his control to pull the zipper of her dress down. Her pale flesh enticed him. Christoph pushed his hands into her dress, cupping her pert breasts with his palms. The heat of her skin seared him. Bell was tiny compared to him—compared to Jackson. The thought of her little body accommodating his cock sent a bolt of longing to his groin.

“Softest skin ever.” Christoph bent his head to lick her neck as he pushed the garment from her body.

Jackson growled. His eyes took on an eerie iridescent color. Orange and red flames licked at his pupils as they dilated, almost consuming his irises. Transfixed, Christoph couldn't look away. His breath lodged in his throat. His heart pounded. The twisting arousal spread through his gut, yet he still couldn't put a name to what he experienced with Jackson. It made little sense. He should have been satisfied with Bell, however, he also wanted the man in front of him. Had his father done something to him that day before he left the pride?

“Perfect,” Jackson murmured, spearing his fingers through Bell's hair. He guided her toward him. Her lips pressed to his scared, tanned chest. His eyes fluttered closed. A moan was ripped from his chest as she nipped at his nipple, then went lower, pushing her ass right up against Christoph's straining dick.

“We're really doing this.” He said it more for himself than anyone else.

“We are,” Jackson answered. “So, why are you still dressed?”

Good question. While Bell wiggled her hips, enticing him, Christoph removed his suit. Bell had already opened the front enclosure of Jackson's pants and was pulling the zipper down as they spoke. The lion within Christoph snarled and roared, demanding he take what was his—show both of them who the Alpha was in their relationship. His fingers fumbled with the buttons as Jackson groaned.

Bell took Jackson's dick in hand. The tip was a dark, angry red, flaring at the tip. The thickness intimidated Christoph while also intriguing him. With each pump of her fist, more pre-cum pearled at the tip before dribbling down to cover her hand. The translucent liquid glistened in the low light of the room.

"Suck him off, kitten." Christoph pushed his pants down on his hips and groaned when the length of his cock smacked Bell's ass.

She glanced back at him, her cheeks pink, her blue eyes shimmering with pleasure. She licked her pouty bottom lip before running her tongue across the crest of Jackson's tip. Christoph's ass clenched. His grip on her hips tightened. Fuck, that shouldn't be so damn erotic. Jackson let out a string of curses as his head fell back on his shoulders. If he felt a quarter of what Christoph experienced, standing there with them, all three of them were going to be in for a long night.

"Tell me you want it, kitten. Tell me I can fuck you hard and fast." Christoph stared down at her. The silky material covering her pussy was soaked with her desire, giving him a glimpse of her pink little pussy.

She whimpered around Jackson's cock, causing the man to grunt and fist her hair. She wiggled against him again, pressing back in invitation. Christoph pushed her panties to the side and rubbed his dick along her slick labia. The heat of her juices coated his tip, inviting him to push into her without hesitation. The full weight of their situation hit him in the chest as he notched his erection at her entrance.

Bell was theirs.

Christoph entered her with a long, slow thrust. When he was halfway in, he pulled back, then filled her. The way her pussy twitched and clenched around him had him holding his breath for fear of coming too soon. Bell cried out, pulling off of Jackson as she trembled in their arms. Her skin was covered in a sheen of perspiration. Her

fingernails were those of her lioness. She was beautiful. Magnificent.

Jackson directed her back to his dick. His gaze took on a feral quality. When Christoph moved, so did he. Together, they worked their dicks into Bell. Jackson leaned forward, taking Christoph's mouth in dangerous kiss. The way he devoured Christoph should have scared the lion. Instead, he let go. Christoph pounded into Bell, fucking her hard and rough. Her muffled cries and moans were the sweetest sounds he'd ever heard.

"Fuck yeah," Jackson muttered against Christoph's mouth. "Cum inside her, Christoph. Fill her pussy. You know you want to."

Shit. His words were potent. Christoph snarled, biting Jackson's bottom lip while grinding against Bell. She was so fucking wet. So hot and tight. Each thrust forced him to work a little harder to get his big dick inside her. He swore he'd pass out from the pleasure before he could actually climax.

"Take it, blondie," Jackson snapped. "Take what we're giving you, then say thank you when we're finished."

Holy shit.

Bell gripped him hard. The first flutter of her release triggered his own. He slid his fingers down to her clit and manipulated the bundle of nerves, causing her to milk his dick. Her orgasm pulled at him, sending him tumbling. He roared through his release as did Jackson, only he'd pulled out and was coming all over Bell's perfect tits and body. Her cries of bliss as she continued the rhythmic tug of Christoph's cock fed the arousal still pooling in his gut. He'd never experienced this level of euphoria. His chest heaved with exertion as he stood there on wobbly legs.

"Shit," he panted. "Can't pull out yet."

Jackson smirked as he added his finger to Christoph's manipulating Bell's hard clit. "Come for us again, Bell."

She went to her tip-toes then slamming back against Christoph as she screamed. She shook in his arms. With each pulse of her climax, Christoph filled her more until he became light-headed from the intensity. If this was how they were now, he couldn't even grasp what estrus would be like, or even the full moon for Jackson.

Christoph gathered her in his arms, uncaring if he slipped out of her passage and carried her to the bed. If he couldn't stand, neither could she. Jackson was there with him, taking up the other side of the bed. She might have his cum on her, but Christoph was inside of her. The smug beast within him puffed up his chest, proud of what he'd done.

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“We’re not even done yet,” Jackson murmured as he stared down at Bell, whose eyes were closed. “There’s no going back, St. John. This is it for us. Are you ready?”

Even if he wasn’t, he wouldn’t say so out loud. Tonight solidified one thing for him. Bell was his mate. There was no getting around that. The same could be said for Jackson, too. He gave a small nod of head. “Yes.” He didn’t know what else to say. Hell, he couldn’t even think clearly. Seeing Bell covered in cum did things to Christoph. He wanted to add his cum to Jackson’s. He wanted to clean her off, then jerk off on her. Fuck, with Bell, his depravity knew no bounds.

Yet, even that didn’t scare him.

“Good,” Jackson said with an amused little smirk. “Because things are about to get interesting.” He crawled over to where Christoph lay. “While Bell rests, let me help you unwind a little more.”

The second Jackson’s mouth was on Christoph’s hard dick, he groaned, relaxing back into their bed. Yes, they were just getting started...

Two weeks after the Greek Shifter Games...

“There’s not enough.” Bell Dryer shifted through the pledges and groaned. After Nico Lopez, Christoph St. John, her first potential mate, and Jackson Dalco, her second potential mate, took their spots as champions, she thought their worries were over. How could girls not flock to their sorority? Hadn’t they shown they could have a good time, stay poised, and stand up for the fundamental principles of the school? “We’ve worked so hard. What’s the point anymore?”

If anything, the night of the gala, she thought, would have encouraged more girls to join her as well. Everyone had heard about the way Christoph and Jackson claimed her on the dance floor. The not so subtle sexual tension between all three of them had exploded the minute they stepped foot inside the hotel room Christoph reserved for them, leaving her marked in the most hedonistic way.

So, why weren't more people there?

Jackson and Christoph were popular among the student population. She was only the daughter of an Alpha—though she didn't use her status to get what she wanted. Her father always taught her to be kind.

Show respect.

Hadn't she done that? What's wrong with me?

After being kidnapped by Raymond Quincy, she also learned she never wanted to be someone who led their pride with fear. With that in mind, Bell worried, she'd done herself a grave injustice after so many years of hiding herself. Fear was a crazy emotion. Yes, her parents made her talk with Brie about her experiences with the hyenas and Raymond, but it didn't stop the dreams or the anxiety.

"Don't get discouraged. We'll get them." Hayden, her cousin, best friend, and vice president of Sigma Epsilon Xi, pulled one application out of the pile and grinned. "How about this girl?" She handed the paperwork to her. Of everyone who surrounded Bell, the kinship she felt toward Hayden helped her combat some of her apprehensions. She could also freely admit she'd been jealous of her cousin. Hayden had this air about her. Even though she had a tendency to hide, there was a quiet confidence as well.

If her cousin knew what happened between her, Christoph, and Jackson the night of

the gala, she said nothing. Then again, Hayden wasn't one to pry. She also talked little about her relationship with Nico, so maybe Bell was being paranoid.

Bell shook her head, pushing aside her wayward thoughts, and glanced down at the picture attached to the application. The girl's long, black, curly hair had been done in small twist braids weaved with hues of pink and purple. Over her right eye and down to her temple trailed a line of small paw-print tattoos while the large, round black-frame glasses perched on her nose gave her a rocker-nerd vibe.

"She speaks four languages, English, Spanish, American Sign Language, and Spanish Sign Language, and she's human."

"Whoa. What's her G.P.A.?" Hope bloomed inside of Bell. The girl was exactly the person they would love to have with them.

"4.1." Hayden scrunched up her nose. "I didn't know anyone could get a 4.1."

"It's lots of work." Bell glanced at the paper. "Let's offer her a tour of the house, see what she thinks." After placing Raquel's sheet in the "maybe" pile, she grabbed another application off the stack. "What about her?"

Hayden flipped through the paperwork. "I like her."

Joy had approached Bell after the Greek Shifter Games had finished. The slight flush to her cheeks and the way she rambled on about everything and nothing gave her an endearing quality. Then, when she said she was a water elemental, well, it sealed the deal for Bell. She wanted her to become a Sigma Epsilon Xi sister. "She's cute. Funny. She'll make an excellent sister."

"Invite her." Hayden put the applications in the invitation pile. "I wanted to talk to you about something else while we're working on this."

“Okay, shoot.” Bell folded her hands in her lap.

“Let’s throw a party. All the other Greek houses are. We should, too. Who knows, maybe we’ll get pledges from it.” Hayden pulled a folded piece of paper from her pocket and handed it to Bell.

She glanced at the flyer and frowned. “I’m not sure.” She glanced around. The place, though home, could use some work. Their Greek letters had fallen off the front of the house a few days ago. The school maintenance department hadn’t reattached them, even though she’d written up the work order and dropped it off. The windows barely opened, plus the screens had long since vanished. Sometimes the water ran orange because of the old pipes, and the cracked and warped floors were less than desirable, but they called it home. “This place....”

“We’ll use the yard. Ask the guys to clean it up. We’ll do drinks and snacks. I’m sure Bodhi can deal with the music. It’ll be fun.”

The door opened a second later, and Zoe stepped inside. “What up, bitches.” Today she wore a leather vest over a white tank top, and she’d wrapped a purple bandana around one thigh of her jeans. “Why do you guys look like you’ve lost your best friends?”

“Hayden wants to throw a party.”

“Way to go!” She raised her hand for a high five, then glanced between them. “Don’t leave me hanging.”

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“The house isn’t up to par,” Bell huffed.

She lowered her hand. “Do it outside.”

Hayden gave her a smug grin. “See, we’re in agreement.”

“We don’t have time to plan it.” She didn’t want to be such a fuddy-duddy, but she wouldn’t risk the reputation of her sorority by throwing some half-assed party. “If we want to do it properly, we won’t have time.”

“Well, the flyer says Friday for the other mixers.” Hayden nibbled on her bottom lip. “We have eight days. We can put a party together in eight days.” Hayden glanced at Zoe. “Right?”

“Sure. We can. We’ll do a co-sponsored party. Sigma Epsilon Xi and Xi Beta Xi.” She tapped her chin. “You should really have Dad come in here and fix the place up.”

Bell groaned. “No! I am not calling Daddy. I can do this myself.” She didn’t want her father to do anything for her. She wanted to stand on her own two feet. Some people had the tendency to treat her differently because of her being the alpha’s daughter, even without her saying as much. Then there were times, like now, when she wanted to call and ask for help, but she held off. “Why don’t we do this at your place, Zoe?”

“That’s a negative.” Zoe shook her head. “We’re over capacity as it is and we’re having some girls look for housing in dorms and off campus.”

“Dammit!” Bell sighed.

“Wait. Did you just cuss?” Zoe’s eyes went wide before she blinked.

“She’s gotten into the habit.” Hayden chuckled. “I blame all those late nights with Jackson. She came home with a hickey the other evening.”

Bell rolled her eyes, but the heat filling her cheeks gave them more ammunition. It was true. She and Jackson had been spending more time together since the gala. The attraction was growing, yet there was an element missing—Christoph. “Don’t think I didn’t hear you and Nico last night. Miss I-have-a-mate-now.”

She shrugged. “He’s irresistible. What can I say? Plus, I waited a long time for him.”

“You’d also get lucky if you’d give it to your mates.” Zoe grinned. “I’ll bet my left boob, Dad and Mom freak the fuck out when they see who your mates are.”

That’s not all they’d freak out about. If any of them knew the truth.

“Shut up about them.” She didn’t enjoy talking about Christoph or Jackson. It made her uncomfortable. She’d never been the one to put herself out there except for that one time. Now, being the “bitch in heat” had been inconceivable to her. Of all her siblings, she’d been the cautious one.

“Lighten up. They’re yours. There’s nothing wrong with having sex.” Zoe glanced at Hayden. “Tell her.”

“I don’t think she wants to hear the sex talk.” Hayden shrugged. “Although, there is this thing Nico does with his ton—”

“La-la-la. No, I really don’t want to hear the sex talk. I mean it’s not like...you know...I haven’t done it before.”

Zoe gave her a dull stare. “Really?”

“In a roundabout way.” She gave a nonchalant lift of her shoulder. It was too hard to explain, plus she worried about what would happen if she told anyone the truth.

“The only way sex happens is when tab A goes into slot B,” Zoe prodded.

Bell groaned. “You are so crude.” She wasn’t lying to them. The one and only time she’d had sex was a few days before she left for college. She’d asked the guy if he would be her first. She’d thought he’d have said no. Thankfully, being with him was one of the sweetest moments of her life. It was also very taboo. If anyone found out about them being together, she worried he’d get into trouble.

Something neither of them ever wanted.

“Would you prefer visual aids?” Her sister grinned, pulling Bell from her thoughts. “I bet I could find some of your old Barbie and Ken dolls.”

Nico stopped on the bottom step. “What the fuck have I walked in on?”

“Sex 101.”

He changed the direction he was heading in and crossed to the couch to sit beside Hayden. After placing a kiss on the mark on her neck, he picked up the flyer. “We’re doing it with Omega Pi Delta. You guys thinking of joining in?” Nico had quickly and efficiently slipped into school life after spending years apart from Hayden. He’d never struck Bell as being a fraternity guy, but with Bodhi by his side, he’d fit right with everyone else.

Bell nodded, realizing there was no way of getting out of it. “We just have to throw it all together and see what happens.”

“Well,” he replied. “What can the guys and I do to help?”

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Zoe got this dangerous glint in her eyes. “I’m glad you asked.”

Bell winced. Oh God, what have I gotten us into?

2

With only five days left until the big party they were planning, Bell hoped to have some answer on the invitations she’d sent out to those who seemed interested in her sorority. When no one had RSVP’d, she fretted. Maybe this was Bell’s sign to just fold up shop and go home. At least at home, she could hide. At least at home, she knew her family loved her, especially him. As she flipped through the remaining mail in their box, a soft clearing of a man’s throat caught her attention. Bell turned. There, waiting patiently, was Coach Gai. The only reason she knew who he was had been thanks to Tate, and him being on the soccer team.

“Coach,” Bell said, pasting on a smile. “Am I blocking you?”

He shook his head while giving her space. “Ms. Dryer, I’m glad I could catch you. I found these today—this morning. I recognized the house, and your handwriting.”

Bell accepted the envelopes from him. Her heart shattered. Her stomach twisted in disgust. Of course. Of course, they’d be somewhere they shouldn’t be. No wonder no one had RSVP’d. “Where did you find these?” They were a little stained and damp, and some of the ink had bled across the parchment envelope.

“That’s the sad part,” he said, his features twisted in rage and sorrow. “They were in the trash can on the main floor of the sports complex. I have security going through

the footage from the last couple of days. I promise you, I will find out who did this.”

Bell sniffled, trying so hard not to let her tears of frustration and anger roll down her cheeks. She wouldn't show any weakness in front of him. The daughter of an Alpha wasn't pathetic. “I appreciate you finding these. I suppose now I have my work cut out for me.” She gave him a small smile. “Thank you for the help.”

“You shouldn't be thanking me, Ms. Dryer. It's a damn shame some students here are so fucking petty. Excuse my language,” Coach Gai snarled.

Bell smothered a laugh. Her father would have and had said worse. “Well, I appreciate your help all the same.”

“Not a problem. As soon as I have answers, I will let the school know.” He squeezed her shoulder before walking away, leaving her to stare at the ruined invitations.

“Why me?” she muttered to herself. “What have I ever done to deserve this?” Was it punishment for some unknown transgression? Punishment for having sex with someone other than her mate?

Bell blew out a breath and continued back to her sorority house. There was still too much to deal with, including making sure everyone got their invitation to her party. Is it even worth it now? She swallowed the lump in her throat. Was anything worth it? Why did it have to be her? Why did she have to deal with so much bullshit in her life? She didn't have the answers to those questions other than bullshit, seemed to follow her family everywhere. It started with Raymond and now, obviously; it followed her to college.

Later that evening, Coach Gai had sent her an email. They found who had stolen her invitations and dumped them in the trash. There was more. The person who took them to begin with had been found with more. Not just from her sorority, but Terri's

too. Seemed a bit strategized to Bell. If she had to guess, Laney and Reagan. Unfortunately for her, Coach Gai wouldn't tell her the name of the person who stole her pledge envelopes. Other than, the situation had been dealt with.

Still sucked because they might have found the person, but it didn't mean her party would be a success. She had to either refill out the invites or go find them personally and tell them when to be at the house, which was so informal and broke so many traditions. Bell scrubbed her face. She couldn't think about it for now. She had to get ready for bed. Tomorrow was going to be a long day for her between classes and preparing for the party.

The next morning, instead of going to class, she went to see Tate. She knew he might have an idea or two of how to help them, even though he'd been busy with classes and soccer. Before she left, she went through all the applications and found the pledges' emails. She hated this part because the wonder of joining a sorority was gone, but she had to fix the mess. The easiest way was email.

As she walked down the hall of his dorm, she could hear the sounds of moaning and groaning. Wasn't anything new. She'd heard those types of things all her life, living at home, more so now that she was in the sorority house, and Hayden and Nico were there. When everything went silent, she gave a tentative knock at Tate's door.

"Tate? Got a second?" Heat filled her cheeks. Of course, he didn't. He was in the middle of something more important.

"Uh... Just a second." She could hear the scramble in his room before the door opened and a figure, a guy with dark hair and impeccable clothes, raced from Tate's room.

"Hey sorry," Tate said, drawing her attention back to him as he scratched the side of his mussed hair. "What's going on?"

Bell wrinkled her nose. The smell of mates and sex filled her senses. “Sure, asking a question.” She glanced around his room. “You know, stay with us at the house.”

“Not really. You’re a sorority,” he reminded her. “Is that all you came to say?”

“No,” she replied. “I wanted to see if you were still coming to the mixer? We could use all the help we can get, especially with Laney and Reagan still acting like petty bitches.” Of course, it was all still speculation on her part. Coach Gai hadn’t told her either way, but her gut was hardly ever wrong.

“Ooh, they must be getting under your skin if you’re cursing,” he said, teasing her.

“They’re intercepting our invites,” Bell muttered, crossing her arms. “I can’t prove it, obviously. Hell, I didn’t find out about it until Coach Gai came to me. He had the invites in his hands. Said he found them in the trashcan outside the main locker room of the sports complex.” She sighed. “Upside, at least he found the ones responsible for it.”

Tate frowned. “Damn, Bell. That’s rough.”

“Tell me about it,” she said. “Thankfully, we could salvage them and send them out to our prospective recruits.” A small lie. She’d sent hastily written emails to everyone on her list, then crossed her fingers and hoped they all got the invitation in their inbox and not their spam folders.

“I’ll be there. I’ll bring some guys with me, too. Anything else?” He quirked a brow.

“That guy...” She hooked her thumb toward the door. Once she told one lie, the rest seemed to come naturally. However, she smelled their mating. Bell wanted to know everything she could about her brother’s mate. “You hooked up with him, huh?”

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He dropped his head forward and sighed. “Yes, Bell, we did. Yes, he’s a guy. No, I don’t want to talk about it or the fact he’s a man. However, like the rest of you horny little mates, I have needs too.” Okay, maybe that came out sounding defensive.

She held up her hands. “Not my business. I’m not judging you at all, Tate. Besides, I haven’t done anything with anyone.” She lied with ease. “I’ve only kissed Christoph and Jackson. Nothing more. You, on the other hand...” Wow, look at her go. She was getting proficient at telling half-truths.

He smirked. “You got me there. I’m good, Bell. I’ve been stressed out lately with school and soccer. So, I needed a little reliever.”

“Right,” she mumbled. “Anyway, come by the house tonight for dinner. Nico said something about grilling out.”

“Sounds great. I have the rest of the day to myself.” Tate walked her to the door. “And, Bell, could you do me a favor?”

“Anything for you, Tate. What’s up?” She grinned and batted her lashes at him playfully.

“Can you not tell anyone what you saw just now? I’m not embarrassed or anything, but I also haven’t, you know, talked about “it,” either. If that makes sense.” Heat filled her cheeks while the same color burst across Tate’s nose.

“No problem. I saw nothing, and I know nothing.” She zipped her lips and flicked away the key.

Tate sagged. “Thank you, Bell.” He hugged her tight, giving her a lung full of his stallion’s scent along with their mating. “I’ll see you tonight.”

She pulled back; her nose wrinkled as she stared up at him. “Might want to shower first. You stink.”

“Noted. See you.” She gave a last wave, then headed back down the hall. Maybe all wasn’t lost after all.

Ha. Who was she kidding?

She was the queen of whatever could go wrong, went wrong. The party wouldn’t be any different.

What the hell am I missing here?

Bell stood in front of the open fridge and counted the number of trays of sandwiches, and cold-cut roll-ups for the third time in the last thirty seconds, knowing full well she was missing stuff. The gate on the side of the house banged shut, drawing her attention momentarily. Even people were showing up early, which didn’t make a lick of sense. She wrote seven pm on the invitations and the fliers. What the heck. Ignoring the people, she went back to counting, because obviously, the more she added up the numbers, the higher the chances were she was wrong. Is one hiding? Maybe the caterer screwed up. She prayed it had been her count.

“Hey.” Zoe came up beside her and peered into the open refrigerator, then glanced at her. “We need food. Like yesterday.” She glanced down at Bell’s shirt. “Where’s your name tag? If we have to wear these stupid things, so do you.”

“Who the fuck cares?” One-forty-one, one-forty-two...

“Then why the hell are we wearing them?”

Bell turned on her sister. “I am in crisis mode. Frankly, I don’t care if you wear them or you stick them up your butt. Anyway, it doesn’t matter because I can’t make a count!”

“Easy, killer.” Zoe held up her hands. “Your claws are out.”

“I’m aware.” She pushed an errant lock of her hair behind her ear. She wished she’d pulled it into a ponytail, but Hayden had talked her out of it. Said the ribbon she used as a headband matched Bell’s outfit. She should have added a blue scarf to pair with her blouse so she could have pulled it up. “Can you count these for me? I’m so frazzled I keep getting a different number every time.”

“You’re supposed to serve it, not count it.” Zoe playfully elbowed her.

“I don’t have time for your crap, Zoe. Just count the items on the damn tray for me. It’s short, and if my count is correct, we don’t have enough food to cover the party.”

“It’s just food.”

“Exactly! Without it, people won’t stay, and we need them to hang out and have fun.”

“Shit. You’re right.” Zoe scrubbed her forehead and blew out a breath. “Take it all out. It’ll make it easier to count. Maybe it’s why you missed a few.”

A low growl vibrated from Bell’s chest, catching herself off guard.

Zoe slid her shock-filled, wide-eyed gaze to her. “Did you just growl at me?”

“You’re making it seem like I can’t count. It’s basic fucking math!” Bell hissed. She

was angry, but not at her sister. It'd been a Murphy week. Everything that could go wrong had been wrong.

“You need a beer to help you relax and chill the fuck out.” Zoe got into Bell's face and curled her lip. “And, if you growl at me like that again, I'm calling Mom.”

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“There’s no alcohol at the party.” She ignored her sister’s comment. What are we, two?

“No worries. I’ll get Rocky and tell him to stop to get you a bottle of tequila to calm your ass down,” she teased.

“I am calm.”

Zoe snorted. “Sure, you are, and I’m sugar and spice and everything fucking nice.”

“Not today. Please, I’m begging you. Can you just give me one day when you are not being... You?” Bell scrubbed her face. She couldn’t do this. As much as she wanted her sorority to become the best it could be, but this... She never worked well under pressure.

“I’m always me. It’s what makes me so amazing. But, since you begged, I guess.” Her sister shrugged.

“Is Rocky aware of the fact you get off on people begging you?” She grabbed another tray out of the fridge and put it on the counter behind her.

“Umm, yeah, but he also gets off on making me beg.” Zoe grinned, wiggling her brows.

Bell held up her hand, shaking her head. “Stop. Just stop.”

“I got your food count. You have one hundred and fifty pieces of food. That’s not

enough.”

No, it wouldn't be. Not with over a hundred people already in the backyard and more arriving by the minute. Where the heck did Zoe advertise this?

“Thank you, Captain Obvious. It's why I freaking asked you to count!” Bell drew her fingers through her hair. This is a disaster of epic proportions. What am I going to do?

“Relax. I'll text Rocky and ask him to pick up some wings and stuff to cover.” Zoe reached into the pocket of her leather pants and removed her phone. “Go do something. I got it.”

Bell grabbed another batch of punch before stepping outside into the cool night air. There were too many people. Way more than she invited, even with the screwup with the written invites, which she'd fixed in an anxious moment. Though the bowl was still half-full, she wanted to make sure there'd be enough. Zoe followed behind her a few moments later, carrying out the food.

“Did you want people to drink that?” Nico's arms were loaded down with bags of ice for the coolers.

“What's wrong with it?” She raised her voice over the burgeoning crowd as she glanced down at the bowl. Orange and lemon rings floated around, along with strawberry slices and raspberries. If something was wrong with it, she'd rather find out now, before more people drank it or approached the table for a second glass.

“He's right,” Tate murmured. “Smell it, Bell.”

“It's bright red and orange.” Nico placed two of the bags into the coolers near the table.

She quirked a brow. “It’s our sorority’s colors.” Her tone held a bit of a “duh” quality to it. “It’s how we wanted it.”

“It looks fine, Bell.” Hayden came up behind Nico. “Go put the ice in the coolers by the other table.”

“Bell, you need to pull the punch. It’s got alcohol in it.” Nico dipped the ladle into it and poured a small amount into one of the red cups. “Taste.”

Taking the glass, she smelled her drink. Fruit, sugar, and juice. Determined to prove him wrong, she gulped the contents.

Then promptly regretted it.

She gasped and choked, the alcohol burning all the way down her esophagus and heating her already-queasy stomach. “Oh God. This is a bad idea. I told you guys. But did you listen to me? Nope.” She ran the back of her hand across her mouth, unsure if her lips were numb or wet or both. “Big fucking surprise. None of you ever listen to me!”

Tate at least had the decency to wince. “Sorry, Bell.”

Zoe joined them with the last tray. “Did she just say fuck?”

Bell growled again at her sister. “Shut up, Zoe!”

“What did I tell you?” Zoe snapped.

Turning to a surprised Hayden, Bell pointed to her sister. “Keep her away from me. Please.”

“Zoe.” Hayden kept her tone soft. Soothing. “You’re not helping.”

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“If she’d just pull the damn stick out of her ass, she’d see the humor in this.”

Bell lunged for her sister, hands raised, ready to claw her favorite sibling. Hayden wrapped her arms around Bell’s waist, trying to settle her.

“Go,” Hayden demanded. “Let her calm down before everyone sees her lose her cool.”

“Sheathe your claws,” Zoe said as she stomped off. “You’re doing nothing to attract new members.”

Bell complied. Above everything, her twin was right. The red haze covering her vision cleared. “What am I going to do?”

“You know, if you gave your lioness what she wanted, you’d be a whole helluva lot less confrontational,” Hayden quipped.

“Huh?” Bell’s brows furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. It’s not becoming.” Hayden reached up to push Bell’s wayward hair behind her ear. “You need to mate with Christoph and Jackson. The need you’re experiencing, the bitchiness? It’ll only get worse.”

“How’d you do it, Hayden?” She hated the tiny wobble in her voice. The last time she’d had sex, it was more a hurry and get it over with, even if he was sweet and kind to her. This, with Christoph and Jackson, scared the crap out of her. Add in the other stuff, and she wasn’t sure she was ready.

“I left Nico, remember? I was determined to make a new life for myself. Don’t be fooled, though. It killed me every single day,” Hayden admitted, love clear in her voice. Bell had been ecstatic when her cousin got her happily ever after. But what if she wasn’t so lucky? “Look, Bell, can we talk about this later? Bodhi is done setting up the music. The food is out. So are the drinks. You need to relax. Otherwise, instead of drawing in pledges, you’re going to scare them away.”

Hayden had a point. “Did we get a good turnout at least?” She would do whatever it took to get the pledges needed, so she didn’t lose the house.

“Yes. Raquel is here.” Hayden scanned the raucous crowd in the yard. “She’s over by the fire pit.” She pointed to a spot near a group of giggly girls drinking the punch. “Short girl, all in black, long black hair with multicolored streaks running through it. I think she might have more tats than Zoe. She’ll be a good fit here. I’ve already talked to her. She’s interested. Go talk to her.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Hayden smiled.

Strolling to the fire pit where Raquel lingered, she glanced around. People mingled, their conversations filled the shabby area, while others relaxed, drinking and eating. For the first time since the idea had been brought up, and she subsequently freaked the fuck out, she could take a deep breath and unclench a little.

Maybe.

“Raquel?” She tapped the girl on the shoulder.

She faced Bell. Her cornflower-blue eyes, rimmed heavily with black eyeliner, met Bell’s gaze. Raquel had style, even if it wasn’t something Bell could pull off on a

good day. It was as if goth and punk had a love child, and said person sat in front of her. Like in the photo she'd sent along with her application, there were random-sized paw-print tattoos above her right brow to her hairline and down her temple. On anyone else, it would've looked horrible. But on Raquel, it worked perfectly with her dark locks and pretty blue eyes.

"That's me. You must be Bell?" Raquel's husky tone held a slight accent to it. One she couldn't quite place.

"Thank you for coming. Hayden told me you guys spoke, but I wanted to introduce myself and thank you for taking a chance on us."

She froze. They'd agreed to Top 40 hits, stuff with a beat so their guests could dance. Instead, a popular children's song about a purple dinosaur began a nauseous loop of sickly-sweet baby music.

"That's an interesting selection of music to play at a sorority party." Raquel took a sip of her drink. "Or I've had way more of this punch than I should have. Props to its maker. Stuff is wicked."

"I'm sorry. Would you excuse me?" Without waiting for an answer, Bell ran to where Bodhi stood furiously pressing keys on his laptop.

"Bodhi?" The earlier panic returned, and her hands trembled. "What is this?"

"I'm not sure." He glanced up at her. "My laptop has locked up on me."

"Locked up? What do you mean?"

"I can't turn the damn music off unless I unplug the entire system."

“Do it! Anything is better than this!”

The music changed, and “The Wheels on the Bus” played.

“I’ll take care of it, Bell. Calm down.” He pulled the plug, cutting off the preschool music.

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“I seriously wish everyone would stop telling me to calm down. It just pisses me off even more.” She hissed at her cousin.

“It’ll be fine.”

“It’s a party. We need music!”

“I’ll go get your iPod. It has a docking station. I can hot wire it into the speakers. We’ll be golden.” He ran off into the house, leaving her to stand there and watch as everything, once again, went to shit.

“What else can possibly go wrong?”

“Hey, blondie.” Jackson came up beside her with Christoph hot on his heels. “Your white knights are here.”

Fucking perfect timing. If everyone hadn’t been watching her, she’d run screaming and crying from the yard. Instead, she stood tall—or tried to with her petite five-foot-four frame—and lifted her head proudly, walking towards her mates who hadn’t mated her yet. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

Bell trembled in his arms. He wasn’t sure if she was about to cry or scream. Either way, it wasn’t good for him or Christoph. They’d arrived just in time to hear the children the songs emanating from the backyard, and he automatically knew who it was. He wrapped her in his arms, holding her close. He didn’t need to say anything. Right now, she just needed his shoulder. He could give it to her.

“Here come her bodyguards. Everyone stay out of the way.” The obnoxious tone of the half-wit Laney’s voice rankled Jackson’s nerves. Never mind her garish laughter. It reminded him of fingernails on a chalkboard. The girl didn’t know when to shut up and admit defeat. The little —

Don’t say it. Don’t drop to her level. Bell needs you.

The scent of Bell’s upset twined with frustration, and humiliation tasted bitter on his tongue. Blowing fire on all of those who hurt Bell would only destroy her home, and he couldn’t do that, either. He pushed his way through the crowd in the yard, accompanied by Christoph as he tucked Bell into his side. He’d been wrong to think, even for a millisecond, people would show a little respect for the Alpha lion.

“How much you want to bet she called them crying.” Reagan joined in with Laney’s taunting.

“I bet the sex is horrible. She’s cold fish, I tell you. How could she ever be mated to those two?” Laney muttered.

Jackson clenched his fists, trying desperately to rein in his rage. Bell needed him and Christoph. He’d deal with the little bitches later. He came to a halt in front of Hayden with Bell at his side. Both of them appeared worst for wear. “Hey, blondie.” He rubbed her arm, trying to draw her attention away from the empty DJ station and the drink table. The second her gaze locked with his, the wave of relief wrought with embarrassment mule kicked him. “Looks like you could use a little help.”

She sagged in his hold. In the next second, Christoph was there to catch her. “I’m screwed. Ruined even. There’s not enough food or too many people. The music is messed up because someone or something locked Bodhi’s laptop, and the coup de grâce—someone put alcohol in the punch after I specifically said no booze.”

“Breathe.” Jackson took her hands in his and gave them a squeeze. “The music is simple.” He glanced at Christoph, who’d already headed for Bodhi. “The drinks, not so much. Might want to announce it’s been spiked, and everyone is drinking at their own risk.”

“What if someone gets hurt, or worse... You know?” She grimaced, and he understood what she’d been talking about. Raped. Bell would never forgive herself if something happened to anyone, male or female, at her party.

“Better to tell them than be accused of doing it on purpose later. We’ll have to stay vigilant.” He saw something in her sky-blue eyes he’d never seen before. Sure, she was shy and quite proper, but this, the far away quality like she was remembering a time she hadn’t enjoyed, bothered him.

She blew out a breath and gave a quick nod. “You’re right. Make the best of this. My dad wouldn’t allow me to throw a pity party at home. I can’t pull one here.” She marched to where Bodhi and Christoph worked to change out the laptop for his phone and the stereo station.

“This will give you about fifteen minutes to figure out why your laptop locked up and if you can get it going again.” Christoph clicked the jack in place on his phone.

“Wait.” She stopped him from pressing play. “I need to make an announcement.”

“Sure thing.” Christoph leaned in and nuzzled her. “You’re looking amazing tonight, kitten.” He placed a kiss on her neck. “I can’t wait for a little alone time later.”

Shit. Why hadn’t he thought to do the same? Jackson mentally slapped himself. He’d been so busy trying to keep her calm he hadn’t even noticed her beautiful appearance. She wore a white pleated linen tennis skirt. A powder-blue button-down shirt, and, like always, a white cardigan sweater lay draped over her shoulders. Her blue eyes

sparkled at Christoph's compliment. If he said anything, he'd be glomming onto the lion's affections.

Later, he'd say something.

If he got the chance.

"Thanks." She kissed his cheek. "Both of you are the best."

Bodhi handed her a mic. "You're on."

Jackson and Christoph stuck close to her side while she stood before the crowd. When she told him what she'd planned to do, he'd been supportive. However, when he found out about the invitation debacle, well, he wanted to kill whoever had harmed his mate. Thankfully, the school had already taken the trash out for him. Hill was suspended from the football team while Winston was skating on academic thin ice.

"Welcome to the Sigma Epsilon Xi mixer!" Bell said, forcing Jackson back into the present.

The warm round of applause filled his little mate with excitement and a bit of something else. Maybe acceptance? He couldn't tell for sure, but he enjoyed seeing her happy, especially after the way she clung to him when he arrived.

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“Just a couple of quick announcements since the system went on the fritz. First, if you’d like to pledge with either Sigma Epsilon Xi or Xi Beta Xi, we have applications inside by the sliding glass door. Also, some knucklehead has spiked the punch, so drink responsibly. If you need help getting home or a place to stay for the night, our house is your house. Enjoy the party!”

The music came on, and the party was in full swing once more. Crisis averted. Somewhat. “I can have one of my guys go get some food.” Hell, he’d shift and become a dragon if it meant keeping her happy.

“No, it’s okay. Rocky is already on it. Zoe called in a favor. If I try to control all of this, I’ll be too distracted.” She smoothed out the front of her skirt, a nervous habit he’d noticed the first time he met her.

“You’re perfect, blondie.” Jackson dipped his head and kissed her lips. “Smell even better. Like ripe strawberries on a warm summer day. Bet you’re juicy like one, too.” He kissed her again, wrapping her in his embrace. “What do you think if we blow this party and start one of our own?”

She sucked in a breath. The spice of her arousal grew thick. “Jackson. You’re a naughty dragon.”

“Yes, I am. I’ll wait for forever and a day to show you, too.” He kissed her again, nipping at her bottom lip. “Don’t let these stupid little harpies try to ruin your night.”

She relaxed into his arms, and he fell harder for her. For him, a mate meant something more than just a binding of their souls. It’s a simple truth down to the

molecular level. Dragons don't always find a mate. They procreated, and, over the last few centuries, they'd stopped doing that. He and those of his ilk of dragons would be the last.

Or so he'd quietly thought since his parents shipped him off to America under the cover of night. Knowing his mother and father had been desperate to keep him safe from his family shook him. Elgor had kept Jackson—Varujan—abreast of all the happenings back in Romania as well. For now, he couldn't return, which meant starting his life in an unfamiliar land. However, he wished his mother and father could've met Bell—Christoph to boot, even if the big asshole wouldn't admit just how close they really were, even after they'd kissed.

"I won't. Let's party. I've already invited a few pledges to come stay at the house." She grinned, and damn if it didn't hit him right in the solar plexus.

"You're killing me here, blondie. I'm trying to be good, but with your smile and your happiness, all I want to do is sneak you off to a broom closet and have my wicked way with you."

The scenery switched to an ultraviolet hue, showing to him his eyes had changed to those of his dragon. He knew the irises of his eyes danced in brilliant shades of orange and red, with hints of yellow and flakes of blue. There'd been one time when he'd gone flying and stopped to get a drink when he'd seen his unique eyes. He didn't know how long he stared at his reflection just to watch the way the fire flickered in his gaze.

"Your eyes." She cupped his face. The wonder in her voice did little to keep the tethers holding his sanity together secure. "They're beautiful, Jackson. Tell me you'll let me see this part of you more often."

"For you, blondie, I'd give you every star in the universe just to see you happy."

Jackson kissed her fingertips. “For now, give your lumbering lion a little sugar, too. He appears a little jealous.” He lifted his chin in Christoph’s direction where he watched them with hunger burning bright in his eyes.

“Gag me with a spoon.” Laney pushed between them and stormed to where Christoph stood with Bodhi. “What happened to stopping by my party, Christoph?”

Oh, for fuck's sakes, just what they didn't need. A jealous bitch.

3

Christoph witnessed the interaction between Bell and Jackson play out in front of him, and all he could think about was Bodhi hurrying the hell up so he could get over to where his mates stood. His dick was in a bind. The night of the gala he asked Jackson if he could spend the night with Bell first, because he had a shitload to atone for, still did. Yet, somehow, they ended up all together, in the king-sized bed, wrapped in each other's arms. However, when Bell came undone, shit, it'd been amazing. Her soft mewling as she climbed higher and higher until she climaxed aroused him to the point of pain. He wanted to witness it again, but he also promised Jackson he'd have his turn with Bell, too. Christoph watched them, growing more excited by the moment. They were perfect together. There wasn't anywhere else he wanted to be.

Unfortunately, when he spotted Laney pushing her way through the crowd, heading right for him, he realized it wouldn't be happening soon. Laney was like a cat in heat, pushing her pussy in any guy's face just to get fucked. He'd been stupid when he agreed to anything with her. Laney put some shadows in Bell's eyes, and he hated the woman. He didn't have the patience or the time to deal with her bullshit.

Also didn't help his situation any when she loudly announced his invitation to her party. Bell stiffened, stopping mid-stride. Hurt filtered through her features, and her normally sweet scent soured. Jackson cradled her in his arms, which set his lion off.

Big fucking time. He knew even though the guy was trying to protect her; he was also sending an obvious message. If Christoph didn't want them, Jackson would give Bell everything.

That wouldn't do. Bell was his—theirs, which meant Jackson was just as much his as Christoph belonged to Jackson. To some it might not make sense, but to him, it worked, and he didn't care what others thought.

“I'm talking to you, Christoph.” Laney's voice dripped with disgust.

He had to deal with her; otherwise, like a mosquito, she'd continue to buzz around him until she got the blood she craved. Pulling his gaze away from his mates, he finally looked at the woman who drove him bat-shit crazy with her constant nagging. He'd been a means to an end for her. A status symbol. Bagging the Alpha would be a huge win for her, especially since Laney had a wild hair up her ass regarding all the Dreyer's and anyone that associated with them.

Regrettably or, he guessed, fortuitously for Laney, she had overheard a phone conversation between him and his father several months ago regarding what happened to him before he left home. Little did she know, there was more to what his father wanted of him. His father had grand plans for Christoph to mate a woman of standing. Of course, it didn't matter to his if the other woman wasn't his mate, or the fact the mating scent would be missing, because Christoph already found his, wouldn't matter either. True mate or mates were irrelevant to his parents. Mating the other woman would help the Pride, not supply Christoph with love, which his father didn't give a fuck about.

So, Laney used whatever knowledge she'd gathered, after that day, against him every chance she got. She started her shit with him during the games, forcing him to attend the ball on her arm. She'd forced him to go to her stupid party, which he'd hoped to avoid, though he obviously wouldn't be so lucky. In the interim after the initial night

he spent with Bell, Jackson stepped from the shadows and claim what rightfully belonged to him—Bell. Anger helped propel him into action, and at that moment, standing in Bell's backyard, with Laney staring at him with a stupid expression on her face, he allowed his arousal and anger to consume him. He grabbed Bell and kissed her, sealing his claim.

Fuck, she was so fragile. He worried he'd break her. Christoph palmed Bell's ass, pulling her toward him as he devoured her. If she knew nothing else about him yet, it was that he wouldn't give up on her, no matter what. He only hoped she felt the same way.

"You didn't ask," he snapped, glancing up at her from where he sheltered Bell against his body. He wanted to roar at her and tell her to go fuck herself. But he needed to bide his time. He'd deal with telling his parents the truth first, then Laney. "You demanded. I don't do well with demands."

"But—"

"But nothing." Jackson approached them. "You heard him. He never said he'd go. Why are you here?"

"Clearly, I came to find Christoph." She huffed.

"Clearly, he doesn't want to attend your stupid-ass party. You should leave." Jackson snarled, his eyes turning an eerie color.

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Surprise washed over Christoph when Jackson confronted her. Never had anyone ever backed or stood up for him. As an Alpha, he handled his own shit. Even the shit with his dad.

“I never!” Laney screeched.

“That’s not what I heard. I heard you took on the entire football team in less than forty-eight hours,” Zoe snapped. “In my book, we call that being a slut.”

“Are you going to allow them to speak to me like this, Christoph?” Laney stomped her foot and crossed her arms.

“He’s not allowing anything. We’re doing it.” Jackson took a predatory step toward her. “You’ve already been asked to leave once. I won’t ask a second time.”

“The way out is that way.” Zoe pointed to the gate. “If you need help, I’ll gladly show your skanky ass out.”

“Don’t you touch me!” Laney screamed.

“I didn’t touch you. Yet.” Zoe cracked her knuckles.

“You should go.” Christoph stiffened when Bell turned in his arms—only letting out the breath he’d been holding when she situated herself between Jackson and him. She placed her hand in his and the other in Jackson’s, soothing Christoph’s tattered soul.

“I’ll go. Because this party blows, and we all know everyone is waiting for me at

mine. But.” Laney looked at Christoph expectantly, like he’d walk away from his mates to be with her—ha. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Don’t hold your breath, princess,” Zoe mumbled while Laney flounced off toward the gate.

“I’m not sure,” Jackson addressed him when the vapid girls left, “if you’re just stupid or naïve with her.”

He’d have to tell them what happened with Laney at some point, but, in doing so, he’d have to tell them everything about his father’s plans. Which also meant telling both Jackson and Bell about the day his father threw him into the lions’ den. He’d been fucked six ways to Sunday along with the other things he’d done in that room with those female lionesses. A shudder worked through him. If he told them the truth, it would destroy Bell. Worse, if she somehow found out his father had every intention of having him mate with someone other than her, from someone other than him—someone namely Laney—before he could explain the situation properly, he feared he’d go feral.

“Neither.” He’d have to tell them sooner than he wanted to and hope they understood why he kept the truth to himself.

Jackson wrapped his arms around Bell, who had yet to look directly at him. “You need to deal with her. The more you allow her to push you around or bully our mate, the worse it’s going to get for Bell.”

“I’m aware.” By allowing Laney to say and do what she did, he appeared weak. Laney had a hard-on for Bell. Hurting their tiny mate gave Laney immense pleasure, and he’d do anything to prevent her from getting hurt.

“Doesn’t seem like it from here.” Jackson challenged him. Pushed him to the edge,

and Christoph knew why. Jackson wasn't just Christoph's mate because of Bell. No, there was something between them as well. He couldn't quite understand his feelings yet, but he knew eventually they'd have to each acknowledge each other and go from there.

"Stop." Bell's gaze finally found his, confusion swirling in those blue depths. "Now's not the time. Laney is gone, the music is playing, and the pledges seem to enjoy themselves. I want to have fun, too. With both of you, please. I need this more than anything."

"Bell." He cupped her cheek tenderly, hoping she'd believe him when he spoke next. "I never told her I'd go to her party. Tell me you believe me."

"I believe you. But I'm leery. In the past, you've gone to her over me...us." She shook her head. "I want or need some kind of reassurance you won't continue to choose her anymore, Christoph."

She deserved them. He tugged her back into his arms. Marking her seemed to be a simple answer to fixing their situation, but taking the choice of when or how away from Bell didn't seem fair. He leaned in close to her, so he could murmur into her ear. "Would you accept my bite if I gave it freely tonight? Would you all me to claim you in front of everyone?"

Bell gasped. "Christoph. You're joking."

He stared back at her, holding her gaze so she could see just how deadly serious he was. "I'll do it, Bell." He kissed the spot right below her ear. "I'll put my claim on you. Fuck what everyone else says. You're mine. Jackson is mine."

"I trust you," she whispered.

He lifted his chin in Jackson's direction. "You want in on this?" When Jackson stepped closer, he nuzzled Bell's neck. "I can't wait to bite you and feel your pussy clench around my dick." He scored her neck with his long, sharp canine, scoring her skin, leaving his mark until she gave him permission to bite her. "And I promised you both it wouldn't happen again."

"Your word is your bond," Jackson added.

"My word is my bond," Christoph agreed. "Bell is mine, as are you." Without a second thought to those around them, he went to Jackson and repeated the same move he'd made on Bell, marking Jackson in the same fashion. The erotic grunt, followed by the vicious snarl of Jackson's, turned Christoph inside out. "Never doubt me. I will explain everything when I can. Until then, please know we are fated to be, no matter what you might see or hear. I am yours."

"Fuck," Jackson whispered, retreating a step. "All I'm going to be thinking about the rest of the night is getting yours and Bell's mouths back on me and the fun we can have together."

"Good, because I'm not going anywhere." Christoph gathered Bell into his arms, pressing her between him and Jackson. "How about we have a little fun."

The next morning, Christoph didn't want to leave his mates. They still hadn't marked Bell, but they were taking their time. They would do it when the time was right, and not before then. He slid the blankets off of him and eased out of bed so not to wake either Bell or Jackson. He had a few things he needed to take care of, namely dealing with Laney and Reagan. Both girls were causing major issues for Bell and him. Their knowledge of Christoph's past would eventually come out and, when it did, it would destroy everything he'd carefully constructed about himself. Worse, he knew when Bell heard about the situation, she'd more than likely disavow him as her mate, tearing away a piece of his soul.

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After a quick shower and breakfast, Christoph headed to Sigma Pi's house to find Laney and put an end to this shit. Her stunt last night hurt Bell, not to mention tried to discourage others from joining her sorority. Even with the issues and Laney's outburst, the party had been a success. Sigma Epsilon Xi had gained several potential members.

The anxious energy already skirting down his spine, mixed with an overwhelming need to bond with his mates, as he started for the sorority house. The churning of emotions made for a lethal combo of hormones swirling inside Christoph. If Laney gave him any shit, he'd have absolutely no problem putting her in her place. He wouldn't lose Bell or Jackson because of the little bitch.

"Can you believe how stupid they are?" Reagan's voice reached his ears, and he stopped dead in his tracks. "Like, oh my God. The laptop locked up. What are we going to do?"

"How d'you get the virus into his computer?" Laney laughed, playfully shoving her friend.

"I asked Winston to build me a bug." Reagan shrugged. "Which was the straightforward part. Getting into Bodhi's computer was a whole other issue. But I had help." Pride filled her voice.

"And what did Winston charge you for that?"

He didn't recognize the third girl.

“I had to let him pet my kitty for a minute,” Reagan replied.

“You let him touch your pussy?” A hint of disgust laced Laney’s words, and he couldn’t blame her. Winston, the weasel, obviously followed Laney’s blackmail book of how to hook up with a girl. The little shit needed to be taught a lesson before he crossed a line.

“It’s for Sigma Pi,” Reagan responded.

He shook his head. These girls were crazy to give away sexual favors to get revenge on someone who’d never bothered them.

“How d’you get the alcohol in the punch?” Laney clung to Reagan’s arm as they continued to walk together, oblivious of Christoph being behind them.

“Easy. I picked the lock to the front door, took a bottle of their juice, and brought it to our house. After I dumped almost all the juice out, I replaced it with vodka.” Laney giggled. “Stupid bitch had no clue. When I returned it, I saw the caterer information out on the table. So, I called from their phone, impersonated Zoe, and told them I had made a mistake. We only needed half the food.”

Son of a bitch. He was going to kill them. That was all there was to it. Christoph kept at a sedate pace so not to alert them to his presence.

“Devious! I love how your mind works, Laney.” the third girl said, keeping step beside them.

“Me, too,” Reagan agreed. “I’d never have thought of that.”

“Therefore, I’m the president of Sigma Pi and you’re not,” Laney stated.

She couldn't have been any more of a bitch. How do these girls put up with each other? Naturally, their revelations didn't surprise him. The lengths these girls went to shocked him. Having heard enough of their bullshit, he closed the distance between them, revealing himself to the little group. Laney had noticed him first. Her shoulders tensed, and her eyes went wide with surprise. The Reagan and their third.

"You have reached a new low," Christoph growled.

Reagan and the other girl, who he still couldn't place, trembled. Laney just gave him a bored look and took a sip of her coffee. "Please. That bitch is lucky I didn't do more." Laney grinned. "I should have called the police for the underage drinking. She would have lost everything. You should actually thank me."

"Are you for real?" He shook his head, dumfounded at her lack of respect. Thanking him? For trying to harm his mate? "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Of course, duh." She stared at her fingernails. "I think you've been hanging around with too many fake bitches. It's skewed your outlook." Of that, he couldn't agree more.

They could go round and round in this little verbal battle. However, he didn't have time for her games. Christoph curled his lip and snarled, "It ends now."

"It ends when I say it ends." Laney narrowed her eyes, got up, and stepped to him. "And not a second before."

He saw red. His lion bristled under his skin, trying to force a shift so he could physically prove his dominance over the smaller female lioness. "I think you fucking forget yourself. It's time I reminded you." He caught Laney's gaze and held it. He prevented his lion from pushing forward out of sheer willpower. His vision changed to hues of blue and green. The lion yearned to bite into the fragile skin of her neck

and squeeze it until she gave in to his dominance or died because he snapped her neck. The violent thought shocked him, yet didn't surprise him. With Bell and Jackson, he'd do anything to protect his mates.

Laney took a step toward her friends, her gaze flicking to his right shoulder in submission. Her hand trembled as she pushed herself between her friends. There, that's better. His lion grunted, then slid away.

"I'm only going to say this once. You will stay away from the Dryer family, their friends, and anything to do with Sigma Epsilon Xi. If you continue on this course, I'll be forced to act, and you won't like what happens. Trust me," he hissed.

"I think you forget what I know." She crossed her arms and lifted her chin in defiance.

He roared, infuriated by the fact she dared to threaten him. Jackson was right. He'd allowed the whole situation surrounding Laney and Reagan to get out of control. He should've been upfront and honest with Bell, then explained the more intimate parts of what he was going through with Jackson. It would've saved them a lot of heartache.

"You don't know shit. This is your final warning. Do not threaten me or what is mine."

Laney gulped.

Reagan snorted. “You wouldn’t dare touch us.”

“I’ll take your sorority to the board of reviews and explain to them how you broke into a sorority home, spiked their punch so anyone underage would get drunk and I’ll tell them how you also committed fraud in their name. I’ll also inform them you served alcohol to students under the age of twenty-one.”

“They would never—”

“Never what, Laney. Believe me, over you? I’m an Alpha above reproach.” He curled his lip. “I won’t have this conversation with you again. Stay the fuck away from me, Bell, and Jackson.”

Of all the shit to deal with and he’d caused it. Christoph scrubbed his face as he walked away from the group of girls. Shit. He should have stood up to his father the same way he did those three. A mate trumped everything. No matter what. If his father didn’t listen, he could challenge, but then what? He could beat his father. The cocky side of his personality assured him such, but the practical side said he needed to watch his step. If the skeletons in his closet got out to Bell, he’d lose his mate before he marked her.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this pissed off.” Nico joined him, meeting Christoph stride for stride.

He stopped in his tracks and faced Nico. “Whatever you want, it can wait.”

“I’m thinking after the conversation you had, this can’t.” He shoved his hands into his pockets, rocking back on his heels.

Rage burned in Christoph’s veins along with a healthy dose of fear. Nico could break him. He could tell Bell everything. “You heard nothing, and if you know what’s good for you”—he snatched the front of Nico’s shirt, getting into his face — “you won’t breathe a word of it.” He narrowed his eyes. “Do you understand?”

“Whoa, there.” Nico held his hands up. “I meant nothing by it. I swear.”

Christoph snarled and let him go before turning away. “Nothing good can come of this. You know the truth, yes?”

“That you’re being blackmailed? Yeah, I do. So, I’m going to help you out here before it’s too late.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. “Look, I think you need to call him. We’ve all discussed this. I was going to call Rapier myself, but you should do it. He’s Bell’s father and the Co-Alpha for the Window Rock Pack/Pride.”

He took the small piece of paper and opened it up. Sure enough, there was the man’s phone number. He also knew the man was Bell’s father. Calling him would give Bell’s father leverage over him. “I’m not seeing how this is going to help. Calling Bell’s dad might backfire on me and us.”

“Trust me. Rapier isn’t half bad. Then again, I grew up with the asshole.” Nico took a step around him and started walking backwards. “For what it’s worth, Bell would always believe you if you told her.”

Christoph glanced down at the number again. Call Bell’s father and admit a woman and his father had him over a barrel? No. Alpha’s didn’t kowtow. He’d never admit to what his father did to him. Yet, the idea of Bell having to suffer through his

bullshit didn't sit well with him. He pulled out his phone, then dialed the number.

After two rings, the call connected. "Dryer Construction." The deep, intimidating voice of the man who answered gave Christoph pause. This man was Bell's father. "Look, I don't have fucking time for telemarketers or games. So, spit out what you've got to say or I'm hanging up."

Shit. "Nico said I should call you. Said of everyone he knows, you're the one who could help me. Said he grew up with you too."

"What can we do for you?" The man acknowledged nothing.

He scrubbed his forehead. "I don't know. Everything is so messed up. This sorority twit is blackmailing me, and my father is threatening to strip me of everything if I don't mate a female of his choosing. I have a mate, though. She's good and kind and sweet. She doesn't deserve me or the baggage I carry. I don't know what to do."

"I see," the man answered. "Why are you telling me this? I'm not a therapist or whatever the fuck."

Christoph ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. He was going to have to tell her father whether or not he wanted to. "I'm calling you because the mate I told you about is your daughter, Bell."

"The fuck did you just say?" Rapier snapped. "I don't think I heard you properly."

He was a dead man. "Sir, I'm her mate. Well, technically, Jackson is too. I'm... This is difficult to admit. I—"

"I heard you the first fucking time," Rapier said. "What's this about a second mate?"

Christoph swallowed hard. “Uh—”

“I don’t want to hear it. I’ll call you back.” Before Christoph could say another word, the man hung up, leaving him to stare at his phone.

“Mail call.” Hayden stepped into the kitchen with an armload of packages. Most of them had Raquel’s name on them.

Bell stared out at the patio of the house, lost in thought. She hadn’t seen Jackson or Christoph since the night of the party. Nor had she heard from them. She also hadn’t heard from the Dean of Students regarding her sorority invitations being dumped in the trash, either. If she were a paranoid person, which she worked on for years after the incident with Raymond, she’d say the coincidences of not hearing from the Dean of Students were too suspicious. She also couldn’t figure out why the guys were being distant. She didn’t want to think of them in such an ill-mannered way, but were they lying about being her mate?

“Did someone say mail?” Raquel and Joy, along with another pledge, had lived in the house with them. With three new members, they only needed twenty-eight more pledges.

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After the rough start to the welcome party and the non-alcoholic party becoming a booze fest, thanks to whoever spiked the punch, they'd received three more applications—Amanda Hugnkiss being her favorite.

“There are a couple of letters in here for you, Bell. Both are from the school.” Hayden handed her the envelopes. “Are they what I think they are?”

She nodded. “I am sure it's about our pledges not being up to par. I got one the week after the games, so it makes sense after our party debacle.” The letters explained the situation and reminded her how long she had left to find more members before her charter was suspended. Talk about pressure.

Hayden frowned. “We're going to get those pledges. I know it. We've worked too hard not to.” A knock came at the door. “You read the letter. I'll go answer the door.”

Bell nodded, opening the envelope in her hand. Second notice. Not enough pledges. Twenty-five days to fill her ranks. Blah, blah, blah. She groaned. The words blurred together. How in the world would she find twenty-eight more pledges when they'd only collected two and a handful of fake pledges?

“Welcome, Shelly, to Sigma Epsilon Xi,” Hayden announced. “Let me introduce you to Bell, the president of our sorority.”

Hayden guided the girl into the kitchen beside her. Their arms were linked, and Hayden had a brilliant smile on her face as they stopped in front of Bell. At first, she thought it had been some sick joke. The girl wore rainbow suspenders over a plain, white T-shirt with an iron-on unicorn patch. Her brilliant orange-red hair lay, or

rather stuck out, in a mass of tangled curls. Big, bug-eyed glasses sat on the bridge of her narrow nose. Her large, gray eyes, made bigger by the lens of her glasses, stared at Bell through strawberry lashes, while a smattering of freckles dotted her cheeks and arms. She wore skinny jeans a little too short for Bell's comfort and a little too tight, along with low-top Converse. Bell sniffed the air, trying to figure out if she was human or other. When she got no discernable scent, she frowned.

"Hey, Shelly. Welcome to our home." She glanced at Hayden, who shrugged. "What brought you here today?"

The girl fished her application out of her pink-and-purple trapper keeper and handed it to Bell. "I thought I'd try to pledge."

Her husky, almost wild tone of voice intrigued Bell. "I'm sorry. I must ask. What kind of shifter are you?"

The girl glanced between them and licked her lips. "Promise you won't laugh?"

"We promise we won't laugh." Bell straightened her shoulders, curious about the girl who tried to hide behind weird clothes and goofy glasses.

"I'm a unicorn."

Hayden scrunched up her nose and shook her head. "One of the famed mythical creatures who were slaughtered on the banks of the river Suir?"

"Yep." The girl nodded. "That's me or well, us."

"And your family escaped?" Bell arched a brow, unsure how to take the girl standing before her. Her gut told her to send the shifter away—the whole thing had to be a cruel and unusual joke. But if she sent her away and Shelly told the truth, then what?

“They’d have to be thousands of years old. You don’t look a day over eighteen or nineteen.”

A flush crept into her cheeks as she stared at Bell. “Yes. With a little help. It’s a big, complicated story. One I’d love to tell you sometime because it’s epic. However, I really need some place to live. I need family and friends. I’ve got a 3.82 G.P.A, and I’m studying Comparative Literature and Latin. You’re my last hope of joining a sorority. I saw you and you”—she pointed to Hayden— “at the games. Your champions are amazing and dreamy.” A wistful sigh passed her lips. “I wanted to be a part of that.”

Bell glanced at Hayden who bounced on her toes, something she’d done for as long as Bell had known her, when she got excited. Bell took in Shelly’s appearance. Yes, she was intrigued. Of what she knew about the unicorn, they lived in secret. In herds and nowhere near civilization. In fact, she could have sworn they were all in Ireland or near about. Yet, when Shelly spoke, she didn’t hear an accent. “We’re not the best sorority at the school. We might lose our charter too. Are you sure this is what you want?” She couldn’t let the girl be alone. She also didn’t like the fact every other sorority had turned her away. Which meant Zoe did the same. I am so kicking her ass!

“Yes,” Shelly answered. “I understand the issues you’re having. I don’t mind.”

Bell wrapped her arm around the newest member of their family. “Well welcome home, Shelly. Would you like to meet the others?”

Her eyes widened. “Seriously?”

Bell laughed. “Yes, seriously. Raquel. Joy. Could you come down here for a minute?”

The girls appeared seconds later at the foot of the staircase. They reminded Bell of

that Christmas program she loved to watch. The one with the island of misfit toys in it. The moniker fit them. “Joy, Raquel, this is Shelly. She’s our newest sister.”

Shelly gave a shy little wave while hanging onto her notebook in a death grip. “Hi.”

Raquel stepped forward first. “I love your suspenders. I’ve been looking for a pair for forever.”

“Your shirt is so pretty. I love the sparkles. Sparkles are my favorite. It makes everything prettier,” Joy added. “Would you like to see your room?”

Shelly nodded. “Yes, please.” She hurried up the stairs behind Raquel and Joy.

“Three down, twenty-seven to go.” Hayden buffed her nails on the shoulder of her shirt. “When you’ve got it, you’ve got it.”

“Don’t get too cocky, Miss Thang. We got another notice for pledges.” She handed over the letter, then grabbed the one she had yet to open.

“This is bullshit, Bell. How many other sororities aren’t at full capacity?” Hayden slammed the paper down on the counter. God love her cousin. She’d do anything to defend Bell, which made Bell love Hayden even more. “We have to do something.”

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“Get all the pledges. I have to believe the universe and the Fates won’t let us down.”
Bell frowned while she opened the second letter. Fear gripped her. “Oh no.”

Dear Miss Dryer,

Per section 34-15-401 (1) your property has been found to be in violation of the state of Colorado’s Housing Code Enforcement. Attached you will find a list of each infraction and the approximate date of reevaluation. If the house has not been brought up to code by the date listed below, your house and all its belongings will become property of El Paso County and will hereby be torn down.

Fines can be assessed from \$5,000-\$40,000 for each unfixed item on the list.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Barbara Halifax

El Paso County Clerk

Her hand trembled as she flipped the page. Red checks dotted the page. Everything from electrical to plumbing to insulation and termites. How did they have termites, and when the heck did they inspect the house? None of it made sense. However, when she glanced down at the bottom of the sheet, she groaned. Three weeks. They only had three weeks to fix everything?

She handed the letter and checklist to Hayden. “What am I going to do?”

Hayden whistled as she looked over the letter. “When did they get into the house is the biggest question. Besides, weren’t we supposed to be notified by the school? It’s not like we’re not on school property.” She placed the paper on the kitchen counter. “I don’t like this Bell. I think we need to call home for help. Maybe your dad.”

“Daddy?” The thought had occurred to her to call home, but she also knew she couldn’t rely on her father every time something happened. Nevertheless, Hayden had a point. There was something off about the letter, she couldn’t put her finger on it. “I’ll give him a call later. He’s probably busy right now.”

Hayden grunted. “While you wait, I’ll have Nico look at the letter too. Maybe, I’ll even send a photo of it to Keeley; have her dig around too.”

“Every time we think we’re two steps ahead,” she muttered.

“Yeah, you can say that again.” Hayden squeezed her shoulder. “Don’t worry about it too much. We’ll get this straightened out before you can even say, “we’ve got the pledges.” Or something equally ridiculous.”

Bell nodded. She only hoped her cousin was right.

4

The pounding on the front door had Bell looking up from her English book. She’d been sitting in the kitchen, reviewing her notes for the test the following day. At least that’s what she told herself. Instead, her mind returned to the letter she received along with the questions that Hayden brought up. Once Bell had time to think about the whole situation, her cousin had been right. They would have been notified of an inspection, unless someone, she refused to give voice to their names, made sure Bell and Hayden didn’t know a thing about what was going on.

The pounding came again, as Raquel hollered while stomping down the steps. “Got it.”

She should have been giving her full attention to her studying. Unfortunately, she couldn’t focus. Bell grabbed her phone when it chimed and smiled when she saw the group texts between her, Jackson, and Christoph. The guys said they would be heading over to pick her up in twenty minutes for an impromptu date. They’d been patiently waiting for her to give the go-ahead for the mating, but she kept hedging, and they weren’t around very much. Having one dominant mate could be rough, but two. She’d be screwed. She had front-row seats for what her mom went through with their dad. It hadn’t been easy.

Often, her parents got very vocal in their opinions. Her mom would put up a good fight, and sometimes, although not often, Daddy would give in to her, but often he held his ground, and his word became law. When they grew and got older, her mom would often inform them, sometimes Daddy just didn’t need to know. It’d been something she and Zoe continued to do through their teenage years.

On the flip side, everyone knew her dad worshipped the ground her mother walked on. It was his goal to make sure she never wanted for anything, and she knew every single day how much he loved her and their children.

She couldn’t deny she wanted what her parents had, but there was a giant elephant in their metaphorical room—the chemistry between Christoph and Jackson was palpable. So much so, she didn’t have the words to explain the rush of adrenaline or the way her pussy ached for them when she watched them kiss. Though they hadn’t gone any farther, she wondered if they would and if they did, would they have room for her as well.

“Uh, Bell.” Raquel’s voice broke through her musings.

“Yes?” She placed the phone on the table when Raquel’s normal balls-to-the-wall demeanor dimmed. “What’s up?”

“There is a guy... I mean, a man here. Big, scary-ass guy. Demanding to see you.”

“Me?” She pushed out her chair and stood. “Who would be demanding to see me?”

“Yeah.” Raquel blinked a few times. “Want me to get Hayden and Zoe? Just in case?”

“Hayden’s with Nico, and Zoe’s with Rocky.” She took a deep breath in the hopes of steadying herself after ruminating over the letter she’d received. “I got it.”

“I’ve got you covered.” Raquel stuck close to Bell. When she walked past Raquel, her sorority sister reached out to capture Bell’s hand and dragged her behind Raquel.

The big, scary-ass dude had his back to them, but the shape of the body, the hair. It all looked familiar, plus his scent. “Daddy? Is it really you?” Bell had called him, but he’d seemed distracted and of course, at work. She gave him the quick, manic rundown of what was happening, however, she never expected him to show up.

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“Dad? Wait. He’s... That’s your dad?” Raquel stammered.

“Hello, princess.” Her father turned to face her, his arms spread wide and a wicked grin on his face. “Did you miss me?” Bell ran into her father’s embrace. The worry and fear swamping her ability to think in coherent thoughts evaporated as he proceeded to swing her around until she got dizzy. She tapped him on the shoulder, and he immediately put her down, holding her steady until she got her legs underneath her. In the past, he’d do it till she puked, which pissed her mom off.

“What are you doing here?” Nothing smelled better than her father, Rapier Dryer, nor could anything calm her down with just one inhale. A mix of outdoors, masculine spice, and a hint of dark, bitter chocolate.

“I got some business to take care of in town. But first, I wanted to stop by and see my girls, especially after you called me sounding upset. Is Spawn here?”

She giggled at her father’s nickname for Zoe. Her sister would tell anybody who listened she hated it, but secretly Zoe loved it.

“Spawn?” Raquel piped up.

“Zoe,” she replied.

Raquel frowned. “Zoe’s with Rocky.”

Her father stiffened at Raquel’s announcement. Crap, Bell was going to have to smooth out his ruffled mane. Later, she’d have to lay down some ground rules. Like

not telling parents where their children were, especially overprotective parents like Rapier Dryer.

“Who the fuck is Rocky?” her father demanded, stepping into the house.

“Her boyfriend.” Bell flattened out the front of her skirt.

Rapier’s gaze locked with hers. “What?”

“Some say mate. Zoe hasn’t confirmed it, though.” Bell cleared her throat. “Anyway, she’s not here.”

“Boyfriend? Mate?” Her father growled, a sure sign he’d blow his top.

She turned to Raquel. “You should leave. Like now.” Gently, she began to push the girl from the room.

“I’m not leaving. Your dad is hot. Like panty-dropping hot.” She elbowed past Bell, reentering the room.

“Bell!” Her father roared. Holy hell, people across the campus must’ve heard that!

“Does he know about Christoph and Jackson?” Raquel attempted to whisper, but her father had amazing hearing, and she knew he’d hear it.

“Who the fuck is that, and what the fuck don’t I know?” The lion lurked just below the surface with her father. He peered out through her dad’s eyes staring a hole through Bell as she tried to gather her courage to tell him the truth. “What the fuck is going on Bell?”

She cringed. When her father started dropping multi f-bombs in one sentence, it

meant only one thing. He was pissed. “Daddy.” Without any fear, she walked to her father and laid her hand on his forearm.

“Don’t fucking Daddy me, princess,” he yelled. “I blame your mother. I didn’t want you girls going so far away. But she insisted. Said you both need to learn to spread your fucking wings and fly. Like you’re a fucking butterfly or bird. You both should have stayed your asses home in Apache County. We have an excellent fucking school!”

“Neither of us wanted to go to Apache County College,” Bell blurted then covered her mouth.

“Don’t fucking remind me,” he spat, sitting down on her beat-up, old couch. Any second, he’d start to rub the nape of his neck. Sure enough, he did, and Bell bit the inside of her cheek so as not to smile. No use pissing him off even more. “Have you and your sister been keeping shit from me?”

Never able to lie to her father, she looked him in the eye before she answered. “Yes. Several things.”

“If you tell me you’re pregnant, I’m killing someone. I swear it!”

“I’m not pregnant.” To get pregnant, she had to have unprotected sex in estrus, and that hadn’t happened yet. “I can’t speak for Zoe, though.”

He growled again, only this time longer and louder.

“I mean. I’m sure Zoe isn’t pregnant, either.” Please don’t be pregnant, Zoe!

“Do you need a minute?” Bell peered up at him. “A beer maybe?”

“I need fucking twenty-four hours to digest all this shit. But looks like that won’t be happening anytime soon. Get over here.” He patted the seat next to him. “Sit down and start talking.”

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So she did. She told her father everything about the house being in disrepair and how it had to be fixed in a little under three weeks. She then went on to explain the issue with the pledges and how they'd lose everything if she didn't fix both issues. Broaching the subject about Christoph and Jackson though, she couldn't force the words past her lips. She worried her father would be disappointed in her. Stupid on her part. Their family was a mix of relationships. She didn't have to worry about perception with any of them. Nonetheless, she held back.

"Well." He looked around the room. "I can help with the repairs. I'll call your uncles, and they'll help, too. What I can't do is fix your pledge issue."

She didn't expect him to. It wasn't his responsibility to earn the pledges, it was hers and Hayden's. "Oh, Daddy," she cried. "That would be amazing. Are you sure they will come?"

He gave her a stern look and all but rolled his eyes at her. "Of course, they will. They'd do anything for you. If you have to ask such a silly question, I have to wonder what's really happening here to get you so anxious."

A knock came at the front door. Bell tensed. It had to be Christoph and Jackson. Darn it. She'd just calmed her father down. Plus, she wasn't ready to tell her dad about them yet. Now, they were there, and she couldn't stop the inevitable from happening.

"I got it!" Raquel moved quickly to the door before she could even get off the couch. "Hey. Come on in." She stepped away from the entryway and Christoph entered. Bell gave a silent prayer of thanks when Jackson hadn't joined him yet.

Christoph's eyes immediately locked on to Bell's then darted to her father who had his massive arm wrapped around her shoulder. A deep frown formed between Christoph's sky-blue eyes and his body tensed.

"Hey." She jumped up and out of her father's hold. Hopefully, Christoph didn't turn into a dominate Alpha lion and go after her dad. He'd lose. Her dad had the advantage. Older, bigger, and way more experienced. "Daddy surprised me and Zoe with a visit."

"Your dad?" Christoph quirked a brow.

"What the hell? Why does everyone seem surprised I'm your dad?" Her father stood. She couldn't help but notice he also puffed out his chest.

"Because you're fucking hot," Raquel answered.

"Ew, Raquel. No. Just no!" Bell rubbed her face. "Please don't say those things about my dad."

Christoph scooted around her, heading directly to her father. His whole demeanor relaxed, which, with her father, wasn't always the smartest. "Hello, sir. I'm Christoph St. John." He held out his hand toward her father. "We talked on the phone a few days ago."

They talked on the phone? When? How? How come she hadn't heard about—Oh right, she hadn't seen either of her mates since the night of the party. She glanced between her father and her mate, waiting to see what would happen next, because she knew exactly how her father could get when he became possessive.

Rapier accepted the greeting while giving Christoph a once-over. "You're the real reason I'm here. We need to talk."

Christoph's expression closed off at the mention of their conversation. What happened? She hated to admit she didn't know much about Christoph other than he was supposed to be rich and the son of an Alpha in South Africa somewhere. What's more pathetic on her part, is she knew even less about Jackson.

Then she jerked. "Wait a minute, you knew all along, didn't you, Daddy?"

He gave her a blank stare. "About what?"

"About what," she mimicked him.

"You were being mean to me even though you knew," she pouted.

Rapier chuckled. "I wouldn't be your father if I didn't give you shit."

Bell sighed. "I hate you, Daddy." She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "You're so unfair sometimes."

He tugged Bell into his arms and nuzzled her cheek. "I love you, princess. But I really do need to talk to Christoph."

"Why?" The anger bled from her almost instantly.

"Personal business, princess." He glanced down at her. "I have to talk to him first. If he chooses to tell you what's going on, then it's on him. Until then, it's between him and me."

"Okay." She knew by her dad's tone she couldn't sway him. "But, I still don't understand how you know each other."

"It'll be okay, kitten," Christoph said, placing a kiss to the crown of Bell's head.

“Trust us.”

Rapier bristled before muttering under his breath. “I want you to come with me.” He motioned over his shoulder for Christoph to follow while Bell stayed close just in case.

“Yes, sir.”

“None of this sir bullshit. My name is Rapier. Use it.” Her father leaned down to kiss Bell’s forehead then opened the front door to step out.

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“You better go. It’s not really smart to make him wait,” she informed Christoph.

“Is he always this intense?” Christoph glanced down at her with a guarded expression on his face.

She nodded.

“Your father is a fucking scary-ass dude.”

“Yeah, so I’ve been told. Zoe and I just follow our mom’s lead. Let him scream and yell then calm down. Once he does that, you can rationalize with him.” She shrugged.

Christoph nodded. “Got it.”

“Sometimes. You better go before he comes looking for you. Oh! He doesn’t really know about Jackson. Tread lightly.” Bell gave a nervous laugh. “Good luck.”

“Are you seriously advising me to lie to your dad?” He blinked several times before looking over his shoulder. “Shit, kitten, I can’t lie to you. He already knows about Jackson and us.”

“You didn’t tell him everything did you?” she replied.

“Uh...” He blanched. “No?”

“Good! Go.” Bell shooed him out of the house. “Good luck.”

“I’m screwed,” Christoph mumbled, trailing behind her dad.

“Let’s go for a walk. I need to check out the house,” Rapier said, knowing full well Christoph would follow him.

He didn’t know what he expected between the conversation on the phone and meeting Bell’s father in person. The man didn’t walk, he stalked. Every step was clipped. Purposeful. He prowled like the giant lion Christoph knew he was. The tension radiating off of Rapier could have been a combo of things, the letter Bell received and meeting her mate at the same time or the letter. Either way, he didn’t say a word, if the man meant to talk with him, he could open the conversation. Christoph would gladly give all the answers he wanted.

“For an alpha, you’re quiet. Are you sure you’re not a beta?” Rapier glanced over his shoulder before bending down to check out the wooden patio supposedly filled with termites.

“Jumping into the conversation with both feet didn’t feel prudent.” Also, how did someone go about saying, yeah, when I was eighteen my father forced me to have sex with all the females of the pride? Just didn’t seem wise.

“Well, unless you talk, I can’t help you.” Rapier blew out a breath. “Not termites but also not safe.”

“I don’t even know how to tell this story without it feeling like I’m just saying something to get attention.” Christoph rubbed the back of his neck.

“Start from the beginning. You said your father and some sorority girl is blackmailing you. Why? What do they have to gain from saying anything about your past?” Rapier checked one of the outdoor lights and frowned. “Loose and exposed wiring.”

“Because before I left home to come here, my father threw me into a room filled with females in estrus and forced me to have sex with all of them. Not only that,” Christoph took a deep breath then shuddered, “he forced me to shift, taking away any choice I had, or they had.”

Rapier’s attention snapped to his. “What? Run that by me again, son.”

“He forced my shift then threw me to the lionesses.” Christoph shuffled his feet. The instant humiliation and embarrassment flowing through him, left him uncomfortable in his skin. He wished he could rip it off and run away. “I don’t remember anything. Twenty-four hours later, he put me on a plane and here I am.”

“Fuck,” Rapier snarled, scrubbing his face. “Bell doesn’t know?”

He shook his head. “Didn’t or rather couldn’t find the right time to tell her the truth. Plus, who’d believe me. Everyone at this school thinks I sleep around with every woman on campus.” A theory he never squashed.

“First,” Rapier ticked off with his fingers, “You have to tell her. Second, what’s the blackmail associated with that night?”

“Laney would tell Bell herself, only, I assume, a version of it where I am the bad guy.” He rolled his shoulders. “Second thing, is my father has already chosen my mate, which Laney overheard too.”

Rapier laughed. “Mates aren’t picked by parents. Fuck knows, if they were, Bell and Zoe wouldn’t be mated until they were fifty. Mates are organic. They happen. Sometimes we wait our whole lives to find them. Your father might have found an agreeable female, but she will never be your mate.”

Exactly. Christoph knew that. He tried to explain it several times to his father, but the

man had arrived only hours before, blowing any type of plan he might have, out of the water. “It gets better.”

“Oh, I bet it does.” Rapier snorted.

“He’s here, now. He arrived this morning with my mother and the parents of the female he chose for me. I’m supposed to have dinner with them tonight.” He wouldn’t be going alone though. He meant to bring Bell and Jackson, hence why the guy wasn’t with him when he showed up at the house.

“Kid,” Rapier started.

Christophe held up his hands. “I’m taking Bell and Jackson with me. I won’t do any more harm than what’s already done. My father needs to be put in his place.”

“Yes, he does,” Rapier agreed. “So, what can I help you with right this minute?”

Christoph stood there. What did he need? “Support? I know I will always be the Alpha, but I need support. Someone to stand in my corner if it comes down to fighting my father.”

“You have it.” Rapier turned to him then. “What or better yet where are you thinking of living once you’re done with college?”

Christoph knew he didn’t want to go back to South Africa. He never adapted as well as his father wanted him to. He would go wherever his mates went. “Wherever Bell calls home is where I’ll be.”

“Good answer.” Rapier nodded in approval. “Then my pride will be your pride. You’ll always have a home in Window Rock—if that’s where Bell wants to stay.” Rapier went back to work checking on the house. “So, about this Jackson guy, who is he?”

“He’s a dragon. We don’t know much about him other than he is the last of his clan.” Christoph laughed to himself. All three of them, Jackson, Bell, and himself, never really talked about their pasts or how they got to Turnskin University. For being mates, they were doing everything backwards.

“Sounds like he’d fit in well with our family. We’re all a bunch of loners or those who lost everything. He’ll be a great addition to Window Rock.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Christoph hedged. “This one is about the house.”

“Shoot. You might be able to fill me in better about this place than Bell could anyway,” he said, still checking little aspects of the stucco and facade.

“Doesn’t this seem a little... Planned?” Christoph muttered.

“I have to admit, this does seem a little suspicious,” he said. “It’s not new for counties or municipalities to send out letters of intent, especially with properties that could be considered a blithe on the community. With that said, any communications should have been funneled through the school and then sent to the sorority. It seems a little suspicious a college doesn’t know about damage, especially while students live in the building.”

“Do you think the letter is authentic?” Christoph pushed.

“I have no reason not to believe it isn’t. Everything that has been indicated needing to be fixed has had issues.” He pointed to the patio, wall, and lighting fixture.

Christoph nodded. “Maybe, I’m paranoid due to everything going on with me.”

Rapier laughed. “If you weren’t a little suspicious, I’d be worried about you. The house will take a little work, but we’ll get it up to code again.”

Christoph let out a pent-up breath. “Great, I know Bell is trying her hardest to make this the best sorority house ever.”

“When we get done with it, everyone will want to be part of her house,” her father

said. “Now, is there anything else I should know about?”

Christoph frowned. “No. That seems like all of it.”

“Good, then I have a few phone calls to make. Let Bell know I’ll be back later. Also, let me know how things go with you father tonight. From what you’ve told me, don’t be surprised if he doesn’t have something up his sleeve.” Rapier lifted his hand as he started out the back gate.

“Thanks, and I will.” One issue down, several more to go.

Then my pridewill be your pride. You’ll always have a home in Window Rock—if that’s where Bell wants to stay. Rapier’s statement bolstered his confidence, even though he felt like he’d puke any minute. His stomach rolled worse than a roller coaster ride on crack. His gut knotted, and, for the first time since his eighteenth birthday, he had sweaty palms.

By the time Rapier walked into the house, Christoph had some semblance of a plan. Or he thought he did, until Bell walked outside once her father left. She took his breath away. “Did you make your dress?”

A cute pink blush covered her cheeks. “Yes. Do you like it?”

No. He loved it. She reminded him of those 1950s women. Always with the pleated skirts and fitted bodices. The neckline of her dresses was tasteful but teased the hell out of him. The scarf in her hair matched her outfit. Tonight, she wore a knee-length frock made of powder-blue material. See-through lace, or something, covered the skirt of her dress. Around her neck lay a simple strand of pearls. “I don’t like it.”

She frowned. “Oh.”

“Bell, I love it.” He pulled her into his arms and rubbed his nose against hers before placing a quick kiss to her lips. “You look absolutely gorgeous.”

“I wanted to make a good impression with your parents.” She placed her hand on his hip. “With everything going on lately, I needed this getaway from the house. Forget my troubles for a while.”

He tucked her into his side, knowing full well the dinner wouldn’t be fun at all. If anything, he worried what would happen once his father spotted both of his mates. Unfortunately, even though Rapier wanted him to prepare Bell, he couldn’t get the words past his lips. “Let’s go get Jackson.”

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She nodded. “I really need to come up with a way to explain this to my father.”

“When the time is right, you will,” Christoph said. “Although, I did explain the situation to him when we were together.”

He helped her into his truck then came around the front and got in behind the wheel. “I should prepare you for my parents.”

“I’m sure they’re great people. They raised you, and you turned out to be the most caring, generous man I know—besides the men in my family.”

Oh, how naïvely wrong she’d been. “My parents are... Complicated.” They believed in power. Not love or mating. Heck, if he had to guess, his parents hadn’t been fated but betrothed to each other to keep the purity of the alpha bloodline. He only became surer of that after his mother didn’t protest his father actions that day in their apartment.

“Complicated?”

“They’re not the most approachable type of people.” They’d rather see him marry a girl for her status than for mating. He couldn’t even say out loud, “but once they get to know you, they’ll warm up.” He didn’t think they had an appreciative or loving bone in their bodies.

She frowned. “Oh.”

“We’ll make it work.” He took her hand in his as they pulled away from the curb and

headed for Jackson's place. "I'm sure they'll be completely blown away by you." Lies, all lies. He knew the truth.

She relaxed into the seat next to him. "Oh, I am sure they won't know what to expect since we're, well... A ménage." She'd lowered her voice to a whisper, and he got a perverse pleasure out of it. His kitten. All purr, no bite. Soft and caring.

"We're not a full ménage yet, kitten." He winked at her. "We still haven't gotten to the part where we have sex together. Or, well, I should say, more than a blow job while the other is fucking you."

The subtle perfume of her arousal had him gritting his teeth. Bell controlled their mating. He and Jackson came to the agreement after the ball. Between them, they had all the time in the world with her. When she was ready, they mate her together. As for them, well, they were still working on that aspect.

"I wanted to talk to you about our arrangement." She hurried through her statement. The kick of her pulse increasing made him curious.

"Oh?"

"Yes." She nodded, her stern expression any other time would have had him laughing, but she was serious. She wanted to finish their mating. "Tonight. After dinner. All three of us."

He gave her a moment to gather herself before he responded. "We have time, kitten. We don't have to rush this. We know you're ours, like you know we're yours."

"I got to thinking about it." She smoothed out the pleats of her dress. "After everything with Hayden and Nico, I don't want to hurt us. Hayden and Nico hurt each other because of their age differences and circumstances. None of us have that issue.

So, why harm each other by denying our mating any longer than we should?"

Christoph stopped in front of Pi Beta Alpha where Jackson waited. Once he got into the truck, Christoph continued their conversation. "What part of it, Bell? We have to have the words."

"Uh, mind telling me what's going on?" Jackson sat forward, leaning between the seats.

"Kitten wants to finish our mating, tonight," Christoph said.

A cocky grin tugged at Jackson's mouth. "Does she? What part of it, blondie?" She nibbled on her bottom lip, and Christoph's groin tightened. Not something he needed twenty minutes before they met with his parents. "Don't do that. You might get more than what you bargained for."

She gasped and swamped him with her sweet scent.

"Damn. I don't think going to dinner with your parents with a hard-on is a good thing." Jackson ran his finger down Bell's cheek. "What brought about all of this? We had a plan, Bell. Did something happen that you're not telling us about?"

She turned into his touch, and Christoph swore he heard her purr. "The games. Hayden and Nico. She said it had been one of the most amazing experiences of her life. The night of the gala, too. I don't want to miss another day of us not being mates. I want what my cousin has. Orcousins, as it might seem."

Jackson gave him a look. One filled with desire and lust for this woman, their mate and for him too. Christoph had no doubt the same reflected in his gaze, too. "Well, then I guess we're going to have to make this official." But, probably not tonight.

Bell settled into the seat and let out a soft sigh. “Then we’ll discuss this more tonight, after dinner, when we’re all alone.”

5

Christoph’s father had never bothered to tell him where exactly they’d meet for dinner. Instead, his father had sent him a text with an address. So, the fact he pulled up in front of the swankiest, most expensive restaurant in town didn’t really surprise him. Piss him off, yes, because he had specifically told his parents nothing expensive, especially after he learned the Pride wasn’t as well off as his father projected. His parents always felt the need to show off. It disgusted him.

“I think I’m underdressed.” Bell played with the hem of her skirt as the valet walked up to their car and opened the passenger door for her.

“I’m sorry. I told them nothing fancy.” He reached over, pushing her fingers away from her hem. “You look beautiful.”

“Stunning,” Jackson concurred.

After stepping out of the car, Christoph grabbed Jackson before he could move over to Bell. “No matter what happens or what you hear tonight, it’s imperative you do not respond. I’ll handle it.”

“That bad?”

“Yeah. It’s bad.” He glanced to Bell. “Protect her. Everything else I will explain later.”

“Always. But I’m also going to want to protect you, too. You understand what I’m getting at, right?” Jackson stared at him with those eerie eyes of his.

He nodded, unable to respond due to the varying emotions swirling around inside of him. First Rapier, now Jackson. It was unexpected but welcomed. He finally had people who cared for him and would protect him. Two things he never got from his parents.

He smiled when Bell’s smaller hand touch his. Without hesitation, he intertwined his fingers with hers. He didn’t miss the fact she’d done the exact same thing with Jackson. Slowly, Bell became the glue binding them together. Because of her, he’d realized he didn’t always have to be the strong Alpha. Jackson and he could share the load. A couple of weeks ago, he had issues with it. Today, he hardly had any and contentment filled him. Something he hadn’t experienced in a long-ass time.

Reaching the front entrance, he pulled open the elegant glass door to Haute

Restaurant. Once he released Bell's hand, he gestured for them to enter and followed them. Bell fiddled with her dress again but stopped when he stilled her fingers by touching her hand. Their gazes clashed, and a sweet smile filled her full pink lips. Christoph's dick pushed against the zipper of his pants. He wanted to experience those sweet lips wrapped around his cock once more. Jackson growled, obviously sensing the sexual tension in the air.

"You guys suck," Jackson hissed, reaching down to adjust his own erection.

"And how may I help you?" The maître d's condescending tone set Christoph's hackles up.

"Christoph St. John," he replied, making sure to mimic the tone his father took when dealing with people he thought inferior to him.

"Ah, yes." The man recovered quickly, his tone softer. "Are you all together? The reservation—"

"The reservation is obviously wrong," Jackson snapped, insulted by the man's tone and attitude. This was nothing compared to his parents. Jackson had to get a thicker skin for sure.

"Your party has already been seated." The man handed off their menus to a hostess. "She'll take you to your table."

Christoph made sure to be first, placing Bell between him and Jackson—where she belonged.

As they stepped into the private area made for them exclusively, he stared at the those who sat at the table, waiting on him. Next to his mother and father was a small boy, no more than four who had been, if he had to guess, burned by silver, blinding him in

one eye. The nasty gashes creeping across his right eye were still healing. The only instrument that could have been used to cause those types of marks were his father's silver tipped claws. They were the brass knuckles of the shifter community, used by Alpha's who were past their prime and didn't want to give up control of their prides or packs.

Bell's soft gasp drew Christoph's attention first. "Father." He stared hard at the boy, while taking in his tangled tawny hair, his dull blue eye and one complete silver and black from being injured. He didn't say a word, in fact he barely gave Christoph, Bell, or Jackson a passing look. The boy's medium brown skin appeared pale as well, like he was sick, something Christoph didn't like. Where did he come from? He inhaled, hoping to catch the boy's scent. Unfortunately, all he could smell was his mother's awful perfume and the odor of the cigars his father liked to smoke.

"You're late," his mother's cold, refined voice stated. "It's rude. Very rude, Christoph. We raised you better than that. You should always be ten minutes early for any and all appointments. It sets the tone. You know this."

Fuck. Everything's always a lesson. Either in etiquette, businesses, or how to treat people. He pulled his gaze away from the kid and toward his mother. "Yeah, well, the world won't end because I'm five minutes late." He swallowed what he really craved to say. "I hope you don't mind, but I brought friends." He couldn't say mates yet, he had to know what his parents were up to first. Then he'd drop the bomb on them.

"The proper thing would have been to inform us or better yet ask us before showing up with an additional guest." The mask his mother always wore slipped slightly in her anger.

"Your mother is correct, Christoph." Big, dominant, and powerful, just some of the words he'd use to describe his father. Jackass, abuser, stuck-up, and power-hungry condescending asshole, also words he associated with his father. "How many times

must we remind you?” His father stood, offering his hand while reprimanding him like a child.

Completely ignoring the hand, he gestured for Bell to sit when he pulled her chair out. Jackson took a seat beside her.

“Are you not at least going to do introductions?” His mother clucked in disapproval, and a deep frown formed between his father’s brows.

Before his conversation with Rapier, he’d debated on telling his parents exactly who Jackson and Bell were. Now, he didn’t give a flying fuck. “This is Bell Dryer and Jackson Dalco.” Pausing, he watched his parents intently. “My mates.”

His father’s face turned beet red, and he sat up straighter in his chair. His mother, on the other hand, didn’t even bother to hide the look of disgust filling her features while she eyeballed Jackson and Bell.

He cut his eyes toward the little boy, hopeful to see the child engage a little on their conversation. Instead, he looked down at his lap. It was then Christoph saw the bruise behind the boy’s ear. Small, almost pinprick like. Rage burned in Christoph’s gut. Who’d hurt a child? Why was he there to begin with?

“The time for jokes is long over, Christoph. Need I remind you of your family obligation waiting for you at home?” Anger radiated off the man. His father’s sneer alone would have caused a weaker man to wither before him.

“I refuse to mate with anyone who isn’t my true mate. I won’t live my life like the two of you did. Forming a bond for social hierarchy, greed, and to keep the line strong.”

“No son of mine, let alone an Alpha, will be gay.” His father growled and slammed

his hand on the table, drawing the attention of the other guests.

“Oh, I’m not gay.” He’d been deliberately vague, knowing his parents would assume he was bisexual.

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“Deviant. You’re a sexual deviant.” Mother reached for the wineglass in front of her. “How will I be able to hold my head up in front of our pride?”

“So you say. But unlike you two, I’ll spend the rest of my life with my loving mates. And by the way, Mother, the pride could give a shit. They dislike you both immensely and can’t stand how fake you both are. You rule with fear when they require patience and understanding. But you don’t get it, do you?”

“Need I remind you what is at stake, Christoph?” It didn’t surprise him in the least his father ignored everything he said. He did it every single time. Evidently, his father wouldn’t be distracted from his agenda tonight.

“Oh, you’ve reminded me over the last seven years what’s at stake. Funny how it only affects you two. Not me. I could give a shit.”

Bell’s tiny hand moved from the top of the table to rest on his thigh. She gave it a gentle squeeze, giving him a boost of her strength and determination. Everything would be okay.

“Fuck the little nobody whore and him if you must. Get it out of your system. Sow your oats.” His father stood abruptly, causing his chair to topple over. The little boy beside him covered his ears and began to tremble. Could it be his parents finally had another child together?

“Careful, Father. You’re drawing attention to us. You never know who’s here, watching us—you. God forbid they assume the worst, or they think less of you,” he snarled. Fear no longer controlled him. “Bell or Jackson aren’t nobodies. Nor is Bell

a whore. How dare you speak about her like that. They are my mates!”

His father ignored him. “Fuck them do what you please with them, but don’t impregnate your bitch. I expect you to get your ass home by the end of the school semester. You will do what you’re told, Christoph, or you will regret it.”

Jerking out of his seat, he glanced at Bell and Jackson, who had surprisingly kept his mouth closed during the confrontation with his parents. “I choose my mates. You can shove your expectations up your ass.”

“I hope the little whore is worth it.” His mother placed her empty glass down. “We’ll cut off your funding. Every dime, Christoph. Do you think she’ll want you when you’re penniless? A nobody?”

It didn’t escape his notice his parents still refused to even acknowledge Jackson’s presence.

Jackson stood then. “Listen you piece of shi—”

“Jackson.” Catching his gaze, Christoph shook his head. “Trust me, they are not worth it. Plus, it falls on deaf ears. They hear what they want to hear. Nothing more.” He glanced at his parents, knowing he had an ace up his sleeve with Rapier’s offer. But he didn’t want to lay all his cards out at once. “Dinner is over. I won’t subject my mates to this type of abuse. I’ll deal with you both when I know they are cared for.” He pointed to the kid who cowered in his seat. “You might want to also learn some control, you’ve scared the shit out of this little boy.”

Jackson pulled Bell’s chair out then helped her up, and, together, they walked away from his parents’ table. He handed off the valet ticket to the guy waiting by the door before saying, as they waited, “I noticed you weren’t really clear with your parents about the complexity of our relationship.”

Christoph shrugged. "It's really not their business. I told them I'm not gay."

"Yeah, but you let them assume you're bi," Jackson hedged.

"Yes, I did. I think being bi would piss my dad off even more. We both know what we are to one another. Why do we have to define it to them? All they'd do is make the situation worse for all of us." Christoph shrugged.

"I don't. Just wanted to make sure when we finally end up fucking each other, you don't have any regrets." Jackson held his gaze, daring him.

"You have nothing to fear. I have a feeling once I have my fill of both of you, you'll both be so fucking desperate, you won't be able to move without being fucked first." Cocky much?

The valet pulled up in Christoph's red truck and seconds later, handed him the keys. "Okay. Enough about sex and who is fucking who. Let Jackson drive." Bell spoke for the first time since they had met his parents.

Jackson took the keys out of his hands and moved to the driver's side. He looked at Bell, questioning her odd request.

"I just think you need a hug, and I'm going to be the one to give it to you. We're going to hop in the backseat, and I'm going to hold you till we get home."

"Better hope your dad isn't waiting for you at the house. Hard to explain your arms around me," he teased. For the first time in a long time, the weight of the world eased off his shoulders.

"Wait, your dad's here?" Jackson glanced at him from the rearview mirror. "How come I'm just finding out about this?"

“Bell’s hesitant to tell him about the three of us. After seeing and speaking with him, I completely understand why. Dude is scary, and I don’t scare easily. But, I did explain things, though I believe Bell should speak with her father as well and be honest.”

“Are you going to tell him about us?” He didn’t miss the look of hurt that flashed across Jackson’s face. Bell must have seen it, too, because she leaned forward, resting her hand on his shoulder.

“Yes. But he’s the type of man you ease into these situations. Please trust me to know how to deal with my parents,” she pleaded with Jackson.

“I do trust you, and I will let you handle it.” Jackson turned around, put the car in gear, and drove away from the restaurant.

“Oh, and if he asks directly, skirt the issue. It’s safer that way.” Christoph laid his hand on her knee. “After talking to him, I understand her reasoning.”

Bell snuggled into Christoph’s side and placed her hand over his heart. Her unconditional love and warmth overwhelmed him. He sank into her embrace, but he couldn’t relax. There was something about the little boy he couldn’t shake. Christoph had a feeling before everything was said and done, he wasn’t going to like the answers that he received.

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Jackson stood with Bell on the front porch of her sorority house as Christoph drove away. His parents had called moments before, demanding he come to their hotel, and after the scene they caused, he knew it couldn't be good. Yet, Christoph refused to let them join him. Stubborn cat.

Wrapping his arm around Bell's shoulder, he led her up the stairs onto the porch before opening the front door. He knew somewhere inside the house sat her father. And, with them arriving sans Christoph, he'd have tons of questions. Ones Jackson didn't want to answer for fear of upsetting Bell more than she already had been. Her lithe body sagged against Jackson's when they stepped inside. "Sit. I'll make you some tea, and we'll figure out what to do next."

She gave a weary nod and proceeded to sit in her favorite chair. Heavy footsteps pounded on the stairs coming down to the main floor of the house. When a man came around the corner, Jackson breathed a sigh of relief. He couldn't be her father. He looked too young.

"Hey, man, what's up?" Jackson continued to the kitchen, not sparing the guy another look.

"Daddy?"

Jackson stilled. Every inch of him vibrated with awareness, shocked by Bell's voice. Shit. Not the best way to make a first impression. Pivoting, he returned to the living room. The man she affectionately called Daddy had placed her on his lap, while she cried. Fucking hell. The desire to fix everything flowed through Jackson, but, at the moment, he didn't know how. Christoph had to be the one to confront his

parents and resolve their issues. He thought the lion had, especially after his little speech. Yet, by the way the guy ran home with his tail tucked between his legs, maybe not.

“What happened?” Her father pinned him with a glare. If he’d been a lesser beast, he’d have cowered.

“Christoph’s parents are assholes. They treated Bell horribly.” His gaze never wavered from Bell’s father. “Worse than assholes to be honest.”

“They treated all of us terribly, Jackson.” She sniffed and buried her face into her father’s chest. “They’re so mean. I’ve never met anyone like them with the exception of one person.”

“I’ve dealt with worse,” Jackson replied. “Believe it or not, most dragons aren’t known for their manners.”

“And you’d be?” Her father wrapped his arms around his daughter in a protective gesture.

“Jackson Dalco. From the house Dalco.” He closed the space between them and held out his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. Just wish it was on better terms.”

He eyed Jackson’s hand then shook it. “You’re the one Christoph told me about earlier?”

Jackson glanced at Bell, who’d gone completely still in her father’s arms. “I’m her mate, yes.”

“He said as much.” Rapier exhaled.

“Daddy.” She sat up and narrowed her eyes. If the situation hadn’t been so serious, he’d have laughed. “Don’t do this. I’ve had a rotten night because Christoph’s parents couldn’t accept us, don’t do the same thing.”

He stared at her. “Fine, princess. Later, we’ll talk about why you felt the need to lie to me.”

“She didn’t lie, sir.” The need to protect and defend her pushed at him. “She withheld the information because she knew it would upset you.”

The man visibly deflated in the chair. He cupped her cheek. “Bell, I’ve always told you to be honest with me, no matter how I may react. Why, all the sudden, are you hiding?”

She shrugged. The heady scent of shame wafted from her when she turned away. Bell was the softest, most kind person Jackson knew. He wondered if they hadn’t broached the subject at the gala, if she would have even acknowledged they were her mates.

“If I may be of some assistance.” He edged over to the couch and took a seat. “Things haven’t been the most—settled around here.”

“Not by a long shot.” She grunted.

“Between Hayden mating Nico and having to deal with some really ugly girls, our mating isn’t on the front burner. Plus—”

Rapier growled. “What girls? When did Hayden finally man up and mate Nico?”

“We haven’t had time to talk.” She glared at Jackson, who didn’t flinch.

“Sir, she has been under a considerable amount of stress. This bullsh—” He cleared his throat. “This crap with Christoph is just the tip of the iceberg.” Her father had a right to know what happened with his daughter. “Add in the issues with the house...”

Bell gapped at him. “You knew?”

“Christoph told me.” Jackson shrugged.

“Fuck them.” Rapier grabbed both of Bell’s arms and she turned to face him. “Are you happy with both men?”

She bit her lip. “Well....”

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“We’ve only been together for two weeks.” Jackson bailed her out. “We’re trying to figure out how this works for all of us.”

“You sure are full of answers.” Rapier turned his knowing gaze toward Jackson.

“I’m trying to ease Bell. Do the dirty work, so to speak, so if you get pissed, you don’t direct it at her.”

He chuckled. “You got a good one, princess. The other, I’m not too sure of.” Rapier didn’t have to say his name for Jackson to understand “other” meant Christoph.

“Thank you, Daddy.” She kissed his cheek. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to go to bed. Today has left me completely drained.” She slipped from her father’s lap then stood before Jackson. “Thank you for being with me—us tonight. Even though everything turned out to be a big ole mess, I enjoyed spending time with you.”

His heart gave an awkward thump. “I did, too.” He took her hand into his and lifted it to his lips. “Good night, blondie.” He waited until she stepped out of earshot to speak to her father. “There is something you should understand about me.”

“What? That you’re not a feline or canine?” He sniffed. “Are you a fucking rattler? I hate those damn things with a passion, especially when we have to work under fucking houses.”

“I am from the Dalco clan. Clan—being the operative word. We’re dragons.” He returned to where he’d been sitting.

Rapier nodded. "Hence the scent of brimstone I get from you, too."

He grunted. "I am invested in mating your daughter. I will make her happy beyond hers or your comprehension, and I have enough money to give her a good life ten times over."

"And Christoph?"

"Non-factor as far as I am concerned." Though he hated to say it because Christoph was his mate as much as Bell had been, he wouldn't allow the lion to fuck up their chance to be a family because he didn't have the balls to tell his father, properly, to fuck off.

"You've got balls, kid." He snorted. "I respect your plan, but Christoph isn't having the easiest of times, either."

He realized the same after tonight. "I understand. But, I won't watch Bell get her heart broken because he can't tell his parents to shove it where the sun doesn't shine."

Rapier rubbed his chin. "Would you do the same for Bell if it were your parents who were giving the three of you a hard time?"

He nodded. "I would; however, they've passed from what I've been told."

Her father dipped his penetrating gaze to a spot in front of his feet. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Your question is logical. I'd ask the same in your position."

"What happened?" Rapier asked

He gave a nonchalant lift of his shoulder. "What happens when one covets what

someone else has? Dragons crave things. Money, gold, power, knowledge. We shared for the longest time, and then, out of nowhere, it stopped. My parents went into hiding with me. Then, one day, they argued. The next thing I remembered, I woke up in a strange place, with strange humans. I had a note and access to everything I could ever want for and Elgor to help me navigate this new world.”

“Did you ever find out what happened to your parents?” Rapier hedged. “Does Elgor know?”

If his footman knew where his parents were or how they died, Elgor would have been sworn to secrecy due to his aunt and her greedy ways. “If he did, he wouldn’t tell me. He was here to protect me. About a year after I arrived here, my aunt showed up. Snooping, of course. She had so many questions, and, suddenly, it made sense.”

“That’s some fucked-up shit, kid.”

“Such is life.” He rested his elbows and forearms on his knees. “Like I said, I protect what is mine. Bell included. You never have to worry about her while she’s with me.”

For long agonizing moments, Rapier sat across from him, not saying a word. Finally, he sat forward, and held out his hand. “Welcome to the family. You’re going to fit in just fine.”

Loud chatter and the sounds of hammers hitting nails brought Bell awake. Her dreams had been filled with negativity. She’d argued with Christoph and with Jackson. Yelled at her father and her siblings. Everything fell apart in her dreams. Taking a deep breath, she shoved the nasty dreams out of her mind and sat up. The scent of coffee and breakfast being cooked wafted into her room. She hadn’t smelled anything quite so delicious since she’d been home, and her mom made it for them.

She pushed her blankets off and sat up. Her stomach rumbled reminding her she

hadn't had any dinner the night before. Bell grabbed her robe off the edge of her bed and threw it on before heading to the door. She'd turned the knob at the same moment someone knocked at it. Talk about timing. "Who is it?"

"Raquel."

She opened the door and smiled. "Good morning, pledge."

"There are men all over the place. One pushed me out of the way and started cooking."

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She grinned. “What did he look like?”

“An older version of your dad. He’s not surly, though. He’s making pancakes.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Shelly is nervous.”

“That’s Cormyr. Shelly shouldn’t be, though. The guys are here to work on the house. They’re family.” She followed Raquel out of the room to where Shelly waited on the landing of the stairs, nervously watching the commotion below. “Morning, Shelly.”

“Morning.” She bit her bottom lip, cowering when someone laughed from inside the kitchen. Bell’s family was loud. It was a sink or swim thing when it came to them. It was the one comforting thing about her family.

Bell placed her hand on Shelly’s shoulder, trying to ease her wariness. “The man you met is Cormyr, my dad’s older brother. Where’s Hayden?” Her cousin’s door stood open, but she was nowhere in sight.

“Good to know.” Shelly pushed her gigantic glasses up her nose, relaxing marginally. “Hayden’s downstairs already. She’s catching up with everyone.”

“Right. Of course.” She grinned. “Have you met all of them?”

“No. Well, your uncle.”

“Then I’ll introduce you to everyone.” She headed downstairs, Raquel and Shelly right behind her as she stepped into the kitchen and cleared her throat. “Morning, everyone.”

The idle chatter and noise stopped. “Bell!” Wy, her youngest uncle, grabbed her up in a hug first. “We were about to start taking bets to see how long you’d sleep.”

She laughed accepting his nuzzle of familial affection. “Everyone, I’d like to introduce to you Raquel and Shelly.” Bell went down the line, introducing everyone to the two new members of her sorority. “And this is Utah.” She signed his name as she spoke. When she arrived in Window Rock with her father after her parents had been apart for ten, long years, she’d never met a shifter who couldn’t hear. It surprised her, but also intrigued her. Then she overheard her father talking to Kalkin, and she instantly wanted to be friends with Utah. And, as taboo as it sounded, though she’d never say as much out loud, Utah had been her first. Some might say she used him, but for them, Utah had been the perfect gentleman and protected her too.

He waved. Good to meet you both.

“It’s good to meet you, too, Utah,” Raquel signed as she spoke.

Bell blinked. She didn’t know Raquel knew ASL. “Whoa. Seems like someone has been keeping secrets.”

Utah’s silent laugh pushed away a bit more of the negativity swirling around her. I think she got you, Bell.

“My younger brother is deaf, so I learned at a young age,” Raquel explained while signing for Utah’s benefit. “You go to school anywhere?”

He shook his head. I’m better with my hands. He wiggled his brows before pointing to Bell. Besides with the brain over here. I think she’s got it covered.

Bell laughed. “We’d love to have you here with us. You could even pledge our house.” She winked at him.

Oh joy. Will we stay up late at night and talk about boys and do our nails together?

Raquel erupted into a fit of laughter. "I like him. Please tell me he's staying."

Bell glanced between Utah and her pledge. The way he watched her. The hungry look in his eyes. Holy crap. "Well, they'll be here for however long it takes to fix the house."

"Well, then, I guess we should get started on getting to know each other," she replied.

If the looks Utah threw her friend's way had been any indication, they'd be doing a hell of a lot more than getting to know each other. However, it wasn't her place to warn Raquel about mating or what it would mean to be Utah's mate. She had to learn on her own. Which caused Bell's dreams to replay in her mind. God, she wished Jackson or Christoph had stayed. It would make this whole situation a helluva lot easier.

Jackson chose that moment to step inside the house. Speak of the devil. She wondered if maybe, like her aunt Keeley, and he had some telepathic ability, and they knew she needed him and Christoph the most. "Morning, everyone. Got room for one more?"

She practically jumped into his arms. "Of course. Let me introduce you to my family."

"You're smiling." He brushed his lips over hers. "After last night, I worried you might never do it again."

She sighed, and relaxed. After last night, she didn't know how things would go, either. She belonged to Christoph and him, but after last night... The encounter with Christoph's parents had left her feeling rejected and alone. However, in Jackson's arms, all had been right. Like she'd been where she'd always belonged. "I slept like

shit. Having my family here is making it easier.”

“And with me here?” He tipped her chin up and kissed her again.

“All better.” Her eyes fluttered closed.

Several male throats cleared. Bell swallowed the laugh bubbling up in her chest.

“We’ve been caught.”

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Jackson grinned and whispered, “Appears so.”

“Okay you two, break it up.” Her father’s voice rumbled over her skin.

“Sorry, Daddy.” She wasn’t the least bit sorry.

Jackson wrapped his arms around her from behind. “Good morning, sir.”

“Kid.” He nodded.

“Now that we’re all here, let’s eat,” she announced, ushering everyone to the table.

“I’m so glad you came. We could definitely use the help any way we can get it.”

6

Last night fucking sucked.

Once Christoph returned to the hotel, the shit hit the fan. His father and mother, along with the sickly boy with a scar made from silver and blinded in one eye, waited for him. He stared at the kid who reminded Christoph of himself at such a young age and wondered, not for the first time, if he was Christoph’s sibling.

He didn’t even know the boy’s name either, which bothered Christoph more than he wanted to say. If the boy was part of their family, shouldn’t they get to know each other? Or was there something else going on?

“Why did you summon me back here?” Christoph’s gaze stayed on the little boy.

“What more is there to discuss? You have my answer. I have mates. Plural. I will not give them up to fulfill your debt.” Because he knew his father all too well. He probably bartered Christoph in exchange for money.

Michel St. John, Christoph realized, didn’t care about anyone other than himself. He hated the situation for his mother, but after last night, with the way she spoke to Jackson and Bell, he didn’t care. They deserved each other, as far as he was concerned.

“You really don’t understand the situation you’re in, do you?” His father placed his hand on top of the boy’s head. The sinister turn of his father’s round face and beady, blue eyes gave Christoph pause. “You aren’t in a position of power, boy.”

Christoph snarled. “From where I’m standing, you’re the one with no power. You’ve been reduced to begging for money and using me as your way to get it.”

His father’s gaze never wavered, the sadistic smile curling his mouth disgusted Christoph. “Perhaps you should sit down before you say something, and my fingers slip...”

A hiss built in Christoph’s throat as his father wrapped his hand around the boy’s throat. Though the expression on the kid’s face never changed, he could see the fear in the boy’s eye. There was no doubt in his mind his father got off on torturing the kid, but why? What was the point of hurting someone so small and weak?

Christoph took a seat away from his father, then held his hand out to the boy. “Come here, little cub. He won’t harm you again.” His gaze flashed to his father when he didn’t move his hand from the boy. “I said, let him go.” Christoph infused enough of his Alpha authority into his voice, even the boy cowered. The momentary shock allowed the child to get away from Michel and over to Christoph. It was then he smelled her, Keandra. His breath lodged in his chest. His mind swirled with the

possibilities of this boy being his. He'd sired a child that day. This boy. This battered and beaten boy was Christoph's, and his father meant to use him to control Christoph.

His world spun out of control. If this boy was his, were there others from that day? Had this been his father's plan from the beginning? A way to keep Christoph under his thumb. He wanted to rage and scream and rip his father's throat from his body, yet he continued to sit there like the doting son he'd always been. His lion roared in outrage, yet still he didn't move. What if there were others like this boy? What if his father was waiting for him to make one false move and then he'd pounce on the others? Would he kill this boy who trembled in Christoph's arms just to make Christoph do Michel's bidding?

The answer was simply, yes. His father was ruthless. If people wouldn't do things the easy way for him, he'd used other underhanded tactics to get his way. Why hadn't Christoph seen this before? Or maybe he had. Perhaps he'd been so focused on getting away from his father, he'd missed the signs of what his father had planned for him. Now, his narrow sightedness had come back to bite him in the ass.

"I see you've figured out what's happening here," Michel said with a dangerous chuckle. "You are going to leave those mates of yours and do as I ask, or I will kill the boy."

"I'm removing him from your chessboard." Christoph stood, holding the boy close. "You thought you could manipulate me by keeping my son from me?" A yowl of anger built in his throat. "You were stupid allowing him into this room." He stared at his mother, who continued to drink. "You were stupid for not telling me about him."

"You leave this room with him, and the others will die," his father hissed. "All I have to do is say the word."

Christoph paused. There weren't others. His father was bluffing. Plus, he wouldn't

kill the females in the pack. He considered them as a status ranking. The more females in his Pride, the better off socially he stood. “You wouldn’t dare. You have nothing but the females in your Pride.”

His father laughed again. “You still think you have the upper hand here.”

“I don’t care if I do or don’t.” He rubbed the boy’s back absently. “This kid is coming with me. All I have to do is call the police and show them his eye. Who do you think they’ll believe? Me, the person who didn’t know he had a son, or the man who tried to kill his grandson?”

His father roared in outrage.

“However, after reconsidering, I’ll take that meeting with this potential mate. It’s the least I can do after taking my son home with me.” He wouldn’t give her a chance in hell, though he would use her to gain information on what his father had planned and if there were others like her in danger. Then he’d do whatever was necessary to help them escape. “See, unlike you, Father, I can compromise.”

“You have nothing,” Michel said. “But you find out sooner rather than later.”

Christoph laughed this time. “I have my son. You lost your bargaining chip.” He exited the room without another word, closing the door behind him. The boy in his arms stared straight ahead the whole time. “I don’t know your name, little cub.” He tried to keep his voice soft and unassuming.

“Isaac,” the boy whispered in a dull, exhausted voice.

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“Well, it’s good to meet you Isaac, let’s get you home.” Christoph hurried from the hotel and hopped into his truck. He thought about calling Bell and Jackson to help him out, but it was late, and he’d already fucked up their plans for the evening. As he pulled away from the hotel, his phone chimed, and an address popped up. No, he wouldn’t be following his father’s orders any longer. Tonight was the last time his father would do anything to hurt Christoph or his mates.

Christoph refused to have the meeting with his “potential mate” anywhere near his parents, especially with how they tried to force him the night before. Instead, he changed their plans, insisting he be met at an off-site location. Currently, he sat on a bench in the park less than a mile from the hotel his parents stayed in, waiting for her to arrive. His son, Isaac, sat in his truck near Christoph, sleeping, something he didn’t believe the boy did much of. Once he’d gotten the boy back to his fraternity house, he’d given him a bath. He put the boy in one of his shirts, then washed his clothes, so they’d be clean for the next day.

They didn’t talk much, but then again, Christoph didn’t know what to say. This boy, Isaac, came from a forced copulation Michel had thrown Christoph into. He wondered if Keandra knew Isaac was with Michel. Then he snorted. Of course she knew. She didn’t have any choice in the matter. Christoph frowned. Of all the people in his father’s Pride, he and Keandra got along the best. Why hadn’t she at least tried to find him?

The answer hit him square in the chest. What if she’s dead? Bile burned at the back of his throat. He knew his father was a cruel, callous man, but would he really kill her after birthing his grandson? Again, the answer was yes. Michel ruled with fear. Every action was calculated. He did things to keep the rest of the Pride subservient to him.

Fuck. I hate him so much.

He glanced down at his watch and frowned. His parents gave him little to no information other than the person he was waiting to meet had long black hair and green eyes. So far, he had seen a half a dozen girls walk by which met the description, minus the eye color, they'd given him.

"Excuse me." A timid girl approached him on his left side. She bowed her head and clasped her hands behind her. "Are you Christoph St. John?"

"Yes." He took in her frail form. Though she wore expensive clothes, and her makeup was applied perfectly, there was a spark missing from her. She appeared withdrawn, hopeless. She was also a lot younger than he expected as well.

"Aislinn Makino." The hand she held out in front of her trembled. "My father said we're supposed to meet here."

He didn't miss the wobble in her voice. Terrified. Of what, he had his suspicions. He'd worry about it later. All his protective instincts kicked in. This couldn't be happening. No freaking way. The young girl who stood in front of him couldn't possibly be who his parents wanted him to mate. Give her a few years, and she'd grow into her striking beauty—especially with those pure celadon-green eyes and all that long, black hair. Not today, though. Damn it. Her round face and body still held some baby fat from being a child. No way she's eighteen. The age of consent to mate.

"How old are you?" He tempered the growl building in his chest.

"Sixteen," she whispered, lowering her hand.

"I'm sorry." He stood slowly, not wanting to scare her more. "This isn't fair to you."

She relaxed, but a fine tremor still worked through her as she waited, pissing him off more. “Do you know what we’re supposed to do?”

“No clue.” He scanned the area. The hairs on the nape of his neck raised. Someone watched them. His gut knotted. “How about we talk for a little while?” He didn’t want to leave Isaac alone, but he also didn’t want the girl to see his son, either. For now, he had to play the game with her as a potential enemy. It sucked because he could tell she didn’t want to be there either, but until he knew what his father’s true motivations were, he couldn’t take any chances.

She nodded, sitting down beside Christoph when he sat. “Thank you.”

“I won’t hurt you.” He lowered his voice so only she’d hear him. “I want you to speak freely and honestly. Do you understand, Aislinn?”

“Yes.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I don’t want to be here.”

It took him a moment to realize she’d answered because her tone had been so soft. “Neither do I? Are you prepared to be the mate of a man who you know nothing about? You have to scent my mates on me.” The thought of mating this baby disgusted him. What could their parents be thinking?

“Of course, I do. I have been training to be a mate for years. This is an honor for my family.” The bitter scent of her lie had his stomach churning.

He lifted her chin so he could look into her eyes. “I thought you agreed to speak honestly?” He didn’t miss the fear in her gaze. “You can be honest with me. I am a friend, not your foe.”

Her head bowed submissively, and she glanced up at him through inky-black lashes. “I have to do this.”

“Tell me what you want. Not what my parents or your parents want you to say.” This time, he let the growl go. He wanted the truth. “Look at me, Aislinn.”

Ever so slowly, she raised her head. “You don’t understand.” The pain and fear in her voice almost killed him. Instinct said her parents forced this on her. He needed her confirmation.

“I understand more than you think. Just tell me the truth. Perhaps, we can help each other.”

“You can’t help me. No one can.”

Taking a deep breath, he pushed forward, making the one statement he already figured out. “You are being forced. You don’t have to say what your parents want you to say.” He laid a comforting hand on her shoulder, and she withdrew from his touch. “Are you being hurt?”

Tears welled up in her eyes. She broke eye contact to glance down at her folded hands. Her knuckles were white from her grip on them.

“Trust me.”

“This mating... Will get me away from my family,” she hedged.

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He needed her to be specific. “You mean your father?”

Her head gave a slight bob. “Yes.”

“Is he hurting you or forcing you to mate?”

“Both,” she whispered. Tears trailed down her round cheeks. Her entire body shook.

“It’ll be all right, Aislinn.” Ever so gently, he pulled her into his arms. “I promise. First, the age of consent to mate is eighteen. I’m not sure how either set of our parents can get around that.”

“My father.” Her voice broke as she continued to cry on his chest. “He said there is some ancient law which will allow it.”

Shit. He knew the law she spoke of. Every Alpha did. The law was put in place to protect the bloodlines of the Alphas. Simply put, it allowed the mating to happen between two individuals no matter age. Problem was, in order to enact the law, you had to show proof of your Alpha lineage and prove the individual had no chance of survival without the mating. His family didn’t fall into that category. He couldn’t speak for hers. “Do you have siblings?”

“No.” She adjusted her position. For this to work, he had to have her trust. “But I have plenty of cousins and uncles. Our line will survive without being forced to mate with you.”

“I know someone who can help—”

“No! No one can know! If my father finds out about this conversation, he would...”
She swallowed hard.

“Beat you?” Christoph hedged.

“Yes.”

Bell and Jackson were his mates, but he had to help her. To do nothing and continue to allow her father to abuse her made him culpable for everything that happened to her. Not to mention his son. If he didn’t show the boy he wasn’t like Michel, what did it say about him? No, he had to do this. He had to figure out a way to get Aislinn out. He had to show everyone, including his mates he had honor and compassion like he suspected Rapier did, too.

“Aislinn, listen to me. I’m going to need a little time. You have to stay with your father until I can make arrangements for your safety. I want you to trust me.”

“Trust must be earned,” she murmured.

“You are correct. The fact I’m telling you to do so means nothing, and you hardly know me. Therefore, I hope you don’t automatically place your trust in me.” He tipped her chin up when she refused to meet his gaze. “Since you’ve been completely honest with me, let me return the favor. I do not want this mating. I have a mate. Mates, actually. I can’t—won’t leave you in your father’s hands or with your father either. You deserve to be set free.”

“How long do you need?” A glimmer of hope flared to life in her features.

“It will require some time to plan. The person who will help is trustworthy.” The minute he told Rapier the truth, he knew the man would lose his shit, but he hoped beyond everything he could get Aislinn, even his son, out of the area to protect them

and free Christoph as well.

Aislinn shoved at him, trying to get out of his arms, but he held fast to her. “He’s a good man. A fair man. And he can be trusted.”

“How do you know?” Aislinn, for all of her fear, could be fierce when she wanted to be. Christoph glimpsed the lioness she’d become.

“Because he offered me sanctuary within his pride. Because he’s my mate’s father. I’m going to take him up on his offer. I will no longer be ruled by my parents and their need to further their own gains. No matter the cost.” Already he knew Isaac would be better off with Rapier until Christoph finished college. At least then the boy would have a stable environment and could grow a little without having to worry about what Michel would do to him.

“That’s you, though. You have no clue if he will offer me sanctuary!” The wild bite of her words didn’t surprise him. She was afraid and worried. She had every right to be considering their situation.

“He will. I know he will.” He suspected her situation had been dire.

“I won’t live to see my next birthday if he doesn’t, and you run off!” she pleaded. “Don’t leave me to this life so you can be happy with yours.”

He glanced down at his watch. The hour time frame placed on them for this meeting quickly approaching. He needed to wrap up. “We need to stay in contact at all times. I will not leave you. I promise.”

“I have no cell phone. My father won’t allow it.”

“Take mine.” He pulled out his cell phone out of his pocket and handed it to her.

“Hide it. It has a full charge and should last long enough for me to get everything set up for you. I’ll call you, Aislinn. Only me. When I call, the name on the caller ID will be Jackson Dalco. Answer it. Got it?”

“Yes.” She reached for his phone and held onto it like a lifeline. And, perhaps for her, it would be. “What if... What if the phone dies or he finds it?”

“If it’s going to be longer than a couple of days, I’ll request another meeting. It shouldn’t raise anyone’s suspicions, especially if we are to be mates.” He winked at her, and a small smile formed on her lips. “You can do this. I know it.”

“I’m tired, Christoph. Tired of trying to maintain my invisibility to my father and my pride, who believes I’m nothing because I’m a girl, but I will do this if it means being free.”

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“Good girl.” Pride washed over him when she straightened her shoulders. “Where am I supposed to drop you off?”

“The main entrance.” She slipped the phone down her shirt and tucked it, he assumed, between her breasts. “I’m ready.”

“So am I.”

Together, they walked to the main entrance of the park. He tugged her hand, bringing her to a stop. Mindful they were being watched, the nagging tingle having never disappeared completely. He leaned in and pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead. “Goodbye, sweet Aislinn.”

“Goodbye, Christoph.” Her guard opened the door of the town car. Christoph didn’t move, waiting till the sedan drove away before he walked to his car. He needed to find and speak to Rapier, but first he needed to grab his son some lunch and explain where they were going next.

Scaffolding surrounded the front of the house when Christoph pulled up. Beside him, Isaac munched away at his kid’s meal, like he hadn’t eaten in days, which concerned Christoph more than anything else. Nervous energy skirted through his stomach as they sat there. He’d have to tell Jackson and Bell the truth now. Whatever happened afterward, he was resolute in sending his son away. In order for him to complete his plan, he couldn’t be worried about the boy. He opened the truck door and stepped out. “Ready?”

Isaac popped the last fry into his mouth and grinned. “Yes. Thank you for the meal. It

was very good.” His accented voice reminded Christoph of Keandra.

“You’re very welcome.” Christoph waited as Isaac scrambled out of the vehicle. They hadn’t talked much about the scar on his eye. If anything, he could figure it out on his own. Michel did it. The only piece of the puzzle missing was why? “These people are our friends. They’re family. Don’t be scared.”

“I’m not. You are here.” Isaac fit his hand into Christoph’s. “I am safe now.”

Gut punched; Christoph nodded. “Yes, you are.”

The ground off to the side of the house had been torn up, and new PVC piping lay waiting to be placed in the ground. Well, I’ll be damned. Excitement coursed through him. Finally, Bell would be left alone—if she got the rest of her pledges. Some of the dour feelings weighing him down lifted. At least, one good thing happened today. As he approached the house with Isaac in tow, he spotted one of the guys who worked away on the gutters while another filled and fixed the stucco facing.

“Excuse me,” he called out to the guy hanging the gutter. All they had to do was point him in the direction of Rapier. When the guy didn’t answer, he called out to him again. “Yo, I need a little bit of help.”

Raquel walked out of the house, carrying a tray of drinks, and stopped. The guy jumped down from the porch railing where he’d been standing and went straight for her, passing Christoph and Isaac like they weren’t standing there. Anger burned through Christoph. Already on edge from the bullshit of his parents, not to mention Aislinn’s and Isaac, he’d been ready to go toe-to-toe with the asshole. However, when he saw Raquel using sign language, he knocked down about a hundred degrees. Shit. Get a grip. You probably scared your kid too. He glanced down at Isaac, who watched the men working with keen interest, paying Christoph no mind.

“Hey, Christoph.” She waved at him, then held up a glass of tea. “You look like you could use this.” She tilted her head as she spotted Isaac. “Who’s this?”

“Thanks.” He took the proffered drink and downed half of it. “This is Isaac. You wouldn’t happen to know where I could find Rapier, do you?” His son gave her a little wave, then took the glass Christoph had drank from and finished the tea.

The guy narrowed his eyes and began signing in rapid-fire succession. What do you want with my Alpha? Why do you have a kid?

“Can you sign, Christoph?” Raquel glanced at him.

“No.” He shook his head.

“I’ll help.” She lifted her hands. “The boy’s name is Isaac.”

“I need a favor, and he’s the only one who can help me,” Christoph said, anxious as fuck to be standing out in the open with his son.

She placed her hand on the guy’s arm, then signed what he said. “It’s okay, Utah. He’s friendly and Bell’s mate.”

Realization filled Utah’s features before he cut his gaze back to Isaac. Out back. In the pool with my dad.

“Thanks.” He took the glass from his son and handed it back to Raquel. “Thank you too, Raquel. I owe you.”

Christoph crossed to the gate, keeping his stride measured so Isaac could keep up. Sure enough, when he stepped into the backyard, there Rapier stood in the pool, throwing chunks of concrete out of it.

“I need to speak with you, in private.” He winced at his tone. He didn’t use it often, but right now, his only concern had been for the green-eyed lioness who could be in deep shit and his son who’d already been damaged by his father.

“I’ll remind you only once not to use that tone with me. Next time, I’ll kick your ass.” Rapier’s lip curled, then his features softened when he spotted Isaac. “Whose kid is this?”

The man beside him laughed. “The kid is a little big for his britches, don’t you think?”

Rapier laughed. “Fucking kids. I swear, Henry did the same shit when he was fifteen. Last time he tried to challenge me.”

Christoph didn’t have time for this. He closed his eyes, trying to steady himself and ease away some of the anxious energy rolling through him. “I’m sorry. But this is really important. It has to do with what I told you about the other day.” He motioned to his son. “This is Isaac. It’s a long story, one I need to tell you and my mates.”

Rapier’s features grew serious. “You can talk while we work.” He glanced at the boy. “Wy?”

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The guy came running from somewhere Christoph couldn't see. He was shorter, leaner than the other man, and happy. Almost like he couldn't help but exude the emotion. "Yeah?"

"Take the kid and bring him inside. I bet the girls will fawn over him." Rapier didn't take his eyes off Christoph.

"Sure. Cute kid," Wy said. "Come on Isaac. Let's get you a treat."

Christoph watched as his son took the man's hand and followed him into the house. "I'm sorry. I'm dropping all of my bullshit on you, and I shouldn't be. But, you're my only hope right now and I'm fucking scared out of my mind." He vomited up the words in such a rapid succession he didn't know what would happen next.

"Shit, son," Rapier said. "Breathe."

He glanced at the man joining him. "Uh..."

"It's okay." Rapier threw a pair of gloves at Christoph. "Helping us while you talk will focus on some of that aggression. This is Osirus. Utah's father. Isaac will be just fine in the house."

Yeah, sure. He could assist them. He glanced back at the house before jumping down into the pit. "Good to meet you." He grabbed a piece of the broken concrete and threw it out of the pool. "I met my betrothed—the one my father insists I take as a mate." He shivered.

Rapier stilled. “And?”

“She’s a kid. A fucking kid. Sixteen.” He took several deep breaths, trying to rein in his anger. “Her father beats the shit out of her. She has cousins who can carry on the bloodline, the same for my family, yet I am being forced into this.”

“That’s some seriously messed-up shit.” Osirus dropped the sledgehammer in his hands and started throwing the debris over the edge. “I didn’t know lions still subscribed to the old ways.”

“We don’t. The old ways were outlawed during the late eighteen hundreds when we began to co-habitat with humans. Alphas and other leaders gathered together to refine our definition of mating and hierarchy structures. Introducing humans came later, when shifter populations remained steady.”

“Well, my father and Aislinn’s father believe in the old ways, and, for whatever reason, both believe I should mate a child.” He snarled, throwing another chunk out of the hole. “I won’t do it. Thinking about it makes me sick to my stomach. Even after he threatened my son.”

Rapier touched his shoulder, halting him. “Run that by me again. I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

Christoph’s shoulders slumped. He slid down into a crouched position and ran his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, you did. Isaac is my son. I know who his mother is. It happened the day I told you about before I came here.”

Rapier whistled. “Fucking hell, kid. You had no idea?”

He shook his head. “I keep going over in my head what happened that day and why she wouldn’t call me. I’ve concluded the worst has happened. My father killed her.”

“Fuck,” Osirus muttered. “That’s some messed up shit. What happened to his eye and his face? Do you know who did that?”

Christoph swallowed the lump in his throat. He didn’t cry. God knows he had that beaten out of him, but at the moment, tears burned the back of his nose and gathered at the corners of his eyes. “My father did it with his silver tipped claws, I’m almost certain of it. He threatened to kill him last night if I didn’t follow through.”

Rapier roared, bringing the work to a halt, drawing the worker’s attention to the pool where Christoph curled into himself. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Crazy mother fucker,” Osirus spat. “What do you need from us, son? What can we do at this moment to help you and your boy?” The calm, loving way those words blanketed Christoph eased some of his pain and worry.

“I have a plan. It’s why I’m here, and I know I have to tell Bell and Jackson the truth about everything.” Christoph took a few more seconds to steady himself before standing.

“What is your plan?”

“I need to get Aislinn and Isaac away from both of our fathers. I fear if we don’t mate, her father will beat her to death and Michel will kill Isaac.”

“What’s his name? Her father.” Rapier pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“Reyku Makino.”

Osirus wrinkled his nose. “The Osaka Alpha?”

Christoph nodded. “Yes.”

“Hey, man. How’s it going over there?” Rapier glanced at Christoph. “HB is fine. She finally mated Nico.” He laughed. “No, I won’t stop calling her that. She’ll always be honey badger to me and she’s fine, better than fine. Happy. Look, I need your help.” He hit the speaker button and held the phone out in front of him. “We’re all here, Kalkin.”

“If Hayden ever hears you call her that, she’s going to kick your ass, and I’d pay good money to see it.” The man grunted. “So, what can I do for you?”

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“I have a new Alpha with us. He has a situation,” Rapier said. “Go on, kid.”

Christoph wiped his brow. “I have been betrothed. The girl is sixteen, and if I don’t follow through, she will be beaten. My father is using my son—Isaac—someone I didn’t know existed until late last night as a pawn in his game. If I don’t do as he says, he’ll kill my son. I fear Isaac’s mother is already dead as well.”

“What do you need from me, Rapier?” the man asked. “I can have all of our resources made available as soon as you give the word.”

“I need a place to hide her. If I can get her out of there, will you offer her sanctuary in Window Rock?” Rapier asked. “As for the boy, he’ll be going to Jasmine. Only seems appropriate. My grandson stays with us.”

Surprise filled Christoph. “Thank you.”

Rapier raised his hand. “Don’t even mention it.”

“Yes.” Kalkin didn’t hesitate. “I’ll do a little digging on Daddy Dearest, including yours too, son.”

“His name is Reyku Makino,” Christoph supplied. “Mine is Michel St. John.

“The Osaka Alpha?” Kalkin hedged. “Interesting.”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Shit,” Kalkin grumbled. “I’ll see what I can come up with. Do you have a timetable for their arrival, so I can have something set up for her?”

Rapier glanced at Christoph.

“I can have her ready to go by Monday,” he answered. “But this has to be done fast. Only the four of us can know.”

“I agree,” Rapier added. “We can’t risk her.”

“Kee and Dani will have space for her at the orphanage. We’ll make sure she gets lost. Name change. Everything,” Kalkin supplied. “Do you have everything for the boy, Christoph?”

“I have nothing,” he answered honestly.

“Don’t worry, we’ll have that waiting for you too,” Kalkin added.

“We have a situation, bro,” another man said, interrupting their conversation.

“Duty calls, guys. Keep me in the loop.”

“We will. Thanks.” Rapier hung up the phone, and they continued working.

“When are you going to tell Bell?” Osirus smacked the concrete with the hammer.

“As soon as possible. Jackson too. I have to make another phone call and meet with Aislinn again. Until I can get her out of there, she is the priority.” He grabbed another chunk of the pool and tossed it over the edge. “All three should know the truth.”

“You should tell them now. I am sure Isaac being in the house will raise a few

eyebrows.” Rapier grabbed the cement out of his hand. “She should be inside with Jackson. Unless she left to grab lunch for us.”

Well, he had to make a phone call. “I will talk to them. But I really need to let Aislinn know the plan. She isn’t safe where she is.”

“No, she’s not. I will have Saber and Wy escort her to Window Rock.” He threw the rock out of the pool. “Go, tell your mates. We’ll meet later and make our plans.”

Christoph climbed out of the pool. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank us yet, kid. Save it for when your son and Aislinn are free and in Window Rock.”

7

“Thankyou for going with me. I don’t think I could carry twelve pizzas home.” Bell laughed as they got out of her Jeep. “I missed you yesterday.”

“I’m sorry. I really wanted to hear about your date night and meeting Christoph’s parents.” Hayden joined her on the sidewalk, then followed her into the University Pub. “How did it go?”

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“Horrible.” She cut a path through the crowd of people watching the college football games. Her school played later, hence why everyone wanted pizza. “His parents are so...”

“Fucked up?”

“Shitty.” Though fucked up worked, too. They came off all high and mighty. Nothing like her mom and dad at all. Plus, she couldn’t get the image of the little boy with the scar across his face and the blinded eye out of her mind. Though she hadn’t said a word to anyone about the child, she could see by looking at him, he’d been abused or was still currently being hurt. “I’ve never seen another Alpha family treat the daughter of an Alpha so deplorably—the exception being Raymond. And, when Christoph mentioned mates, they went nuts. I couldn’t believe the things they said. The little boy too.” She frowned. “Hayden, there was a little boy at the table. He’s been blinded in one eye. Has a horrible scar that could only mean someone used silver on him and he was so fragile looking. He was shaking as he sat there.”

“Not everyone has families like ours, Bell. You can’t expect them all to be nice and caring.” They muscled their way up to the counter. “While we’re here, we should relax a little. It’s going to take some time for the pizzas to get finished. Tell me a bit more about the boy. I’m kind of curious.”

She eyed her cousin suspiciously. “Why do I have a bad feeling about this?”

Hayden laughed. “We’re not getting drunk. You’re too young to buy beer. I meant we should enjoy a game or something mundane instead of worrying about mates and the house and school. If the boy takes your mind off of everything, then let’s talk about

him.”

Her cousin had a point. All she seemed to do lately was worry about everything instead of enjoying the moments when they came. “Okay.” She lifted her hand to get one of the bartender’s attention. When he came over, she smiled. “Hi. We’d like a couple of sodas, please, and do you have an estimated time for our pizzas to be done?”

He poured their drinks and placed them on the polished teak. “Name?”

“Bell Dryer.” Her arch nemesis leaned against the bar, giving the bartender a flirty grin. “Or loser in some circles.”

The guy glanced between them.

“It’s Bell Dryer,” Hayden affirmed. “We have an order for twelve pizzas.”

“Let me guess, Emma’s is at the house and the heifer can’t get her own food?” Laney snarked. While Reagan and a girl Bell didn’t know, laughed.

God, Bell hated Laney, especially because of how she treated Emma, Bell’s friend. She wished she could punch the girl in her perfect teeth and knock them all out. “Actually, I have a crew of people there. You know, two Alpha lions and a pride to take care of and Jackson.”

Laney pulled out her phone. “You mean this Alpha lion?”

In vivid detail, Christoph stood with a raven-haired beauty, his lips pressed to her forehead, their body language that of knowing each other very well. Bell’s stomach dropped. Her heart stopped beating, before tripping over itself. All of her blood went cold as she swayed on her feet. She licked her too-dry lips, unable to comprehend

what she saw. Even though she realized last night what his parents tried to pull, she hadn't thought it worked. Obviously, she didn't count on her mate to betray her, either.

Bell cleared her throat. "Means nothing." She forced the words past her lips while on the inside, she shattered. Unfortunately, she couldn't leave. She promised everyone lunch.

"Oh, on the contrary it does." Laney flipped through the pictures of Christoph and this girl. Even one of him handing her his phone and she slipped it into her shirt. The girl looked at him, the way she did frequently. "I guess he didn't like playing second fiddle to a dragon."

Tears stung the corners of her eyes, but she wouldn't give Laney the satisfaction of crying in front of her. She had to get her shit together and pull on her big girl panties. Besides, after what she saw last night, it could mean many things, though she feared the worst. "Are you done?"

The girl laughed. "Not by a long shot. Give it up, little girl. You don't belong here. You don't deserve your house, and you sure as hell don't deserve even being a side chick for someone like Christoph or Jackson. They are above you. You're gutter slime."

"Excuse me." A guy Bell couldn't place smiled down at her. "You're Bell Dryer, correct?" How did he know who she was?

Then she realized who he was. She glanced up at the man, wearing a tailored three-piece suit, and a jolt of surprise raced through her. The last time she'd seen him, he'd been wearing a toga. Come to think of it, he also looked like the guy who came out of Tate's room, too. "You're Victor Lorenz."

He grinned. “At your service.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pledge application, leaving the other until they could sit somewhere private. “I am fully aware of how untraditional this is, but I have a proposition for you. If you and Hayden would kindly join me for a drink, we could get down to business.”

She glanced at the bartender. “Well...”

“You have thirty minutes left on the pies, miss.” The bartender gave her a kind grin. “What would you like to drink, Vic?”

“Beer. Imported. Surprise me. I like surprises.” He winked at Bell. “Shall we?”

She followed him to a table away from the hustle and bustle of the pub. He waited for all three of them to be sitting before giving Bell his full attention. “You need pledges. I have a plan.”

“Hold up a minute.” Hayden raised her hand. “You have a plan? What’s in this for you?”

He sighed and bowed his head and let out a sigh. He unfolded the application and placed it in front of Bell. “You’re right. I should explain myself better. Although, I am very excited to be at this table with you.”

Bell frowned. “Victor, you’re a junior. You’re talking to a freshman and a sophomore. I don’t understand why you’d be excited to talk to losers like us.”

“Hey!” Hayden smacked her shoulder. “We’re not losers. We’re misfits.”

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“Precisely why I wanted to talk to you.” He placed his hand over the pledge application on the table. “I would like to join your merry band of misfits.”

“But you’re part of Kappa Pi.”

He frowned. “Not anymore.” Sadness filled his golden eyes as he looked away. Whatever happened hurt him and pissed Bell off.

“Why?”

“They found out I’m gay. Bi, actually.” He shrugged. “Some of the guys aren’t comfortable with the idea of a gay man being in close quarters with them. So, they stripped me of my home and of my fraternity.”

“They can’t do that!” Hayden slammed her fist on the table, jolting Victor from his thoughts. “They’re discriminating against you. Was the person your mate?”

“Yes, they are. But they also have photos. Kind of like what Laney has against your Christoph. Only mine are with a boy on the soccer team. He’s of age, but they are compromising.” She stared at him. A boy on the soccer team? She wondered if Tate knew who it was and if anyone had gone to the school about the incident.

“So, they have you boinking some guy, who cares!” Hayden raged.

“I’m a power bottom, so they have pictures of me being boinked.” He gave them a rueful smile. “I don’t care about being kicked out. It’s the fact of my privacy being invaded, so I had no issue about walking away. Then I heard about your house

needing pledges, and the fact you are so open with your policies, I thought perhaps we could shake up the school together.”

“What did you have in mind?” Bell glanced at his application. She didn’t prod him for answers or anything as she read over the form. She had no issue allowing him to join. The school, on the other hand, might differ with her assessment or her judgement.

He pulled the Co-Ed application of out his jacket next and laid it on the table. “This is for a Co-Ed Greek house. It means men and women can live together and act like a fraternity or a sorority, only they’re not in the Greek life per se, yet are. It’s like they have all the benefits with none of the most stringent formal rules.”

She frowned. “We’d lose our charter.”

“Not necessarily. I want to challenge the Greek board. I’d like for us to have the first Greek Co-Ed House on this campus with your sororities name. It will be for those who feel like they have nowhere to go, or they don’t feel accepted.”

Bell glanced at the application. The filing fees alone would cost her more than she thought the sorority had, but she couldn’t think about that at the moment. “The fee is pretty steep.”

“We’ll raise the money.” He shrugged.

“How?” Hayden grabbed the packet and flipped through it. “We have a house to fix up, ten more pledges to find in thirty days, and you want us to raise two grand in thirty days too?”

“Fundraisers.” He didn’t even hesitate to answer. “Your house can be a spotlight for those who don’t feel like they fit in. You have a chance to change young shifters’

destinies everywhere.”

Bell looked at Hayden, who held her hands up. “This is your choice, Bell. You’re the president of this shindig. Whatever you want to do, I’m behind you. No matter what.”

She glanced down at the packet and bit her bottom lip. “Two-grand is a lot of money, but Victor has a point. Shifters like us needed a place to feel safe. Our aunts and uncles would be proud of us if we followed this route.” She grinned. “Welcome to Sigma Epsilon Xi, or whatever we’re going to be called when this goes through.” She held out her hand to him.

“Thank you, Bell. I promise we’ll make this work. You don’t even have to worry about the pledges, I have a plan.” He gave her a saucy wink before sliding out of the booth. “For what it’s worth, I’d talk to Christoph before believing a word coming out of Laney’s mouth. She’s a petty bitch who can’t keep a shifter to save her meager life.”

“The pictures are pretty damning, though.” Bell frowned.

He shrugged. “Sometimes. But unless you know the context in which they were taken, you’ll never fully know the truth.”

She nodded. “I’ll take your advice. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He walked away, leaving Bell to stare after him.

“Victor?”

He stopped mid-stride. “Yes?”

“You can move in today. Excuse the mess, though. We’re fixing up the place.” Bell

smiled, feeling better about their situation after talking to Victor.

“How do you think I found you? I’ve already been by the house.” The wide grin he gave her in return made her laugh.

“Sneaky and pretty sure of yourself.”

He lifted his shoulder. “I had a good feeling about you. I’ll see you when you guys return.” With a wave, he disappeared into the crowd of college students, leaving Bell to stare after him.

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“Well, looks like we’re on our way.” She turned to Hayden. “Do you think he’s right about Christoph?”

Hayden growled. “Something is up. I’m not sure what, but I can guarantee you, Laney didn’t get those pictures to protect you. She meant to inflict damage. Plus, you still haven’t told me about the boy yet either.”

“Yeah, I thought so, too.” Didn’t mean it hurt any less. “He can’t be any more than four or five. He’s been abused. You’d have to see him to understand.” She glanced in Hayden’s direction. “Though, I bet you’d understand him more than any of us would.” She sighed before taking a sip of her soda. “I can’t stop thinking about him. I don’t understand.”

Hayden frowned. “Do you think Christoph’s parents are using the boy to force Christoph to do what they want?”

She had thought of that, too. “Maybe. I’m worried about him, and I don’t even know him.”

“You care about everyone, Bell,” Hayden said. “It’s one of your endearing qualities. If you have concerns for the boy’s safety, tell your dad. I bet he’d know all the answers you’re trying to find on your own. Or you can go to Christoph and bring it up to him yourself. You never know, what you saw in that photo could be him trying to protect everyone, including the boy, and he’s all alone.”

That thought hurt her heart more than the idea of Christoph cheating on her or, worse, lying about being her mate. “You’re right.”

“I know I am.” Hayden laughed. “Come on, the pizzas should be done.” She stood. “The only way to the truth is to get it from the horse’s mouth. Or in this case, the lion’s mouth.”

“Jackson,” Christoph yelled over the noise inside of Sigma Epsilon Xi. Isaac was being fawned over by Joy and Raquel, while Bell was nowhere to be found.

“Out here,” a man he didn’t know answered, pointing in the general direction of where Jackson was working.

“Thanks.” He stepped back out onto the new deck he hadn’t noticed when he first arrived. Rapier’s crew worked quickly and efficiently, for damn sure. Scanning the massive yard, he spotted Jackson hard at work in the far-right corner away from the pool where Christoph had been, repairing the dilapidated fence. Not wanting to draw too much attention once more by yelling across the yard, Christoph headed to him.

“Where have you been?” Jackson’s tone filled with scorn while he laid down the wood he had been nailing to the new structure.

“I’ve had some unexpected issues.” Namely, his son and Aislinn. “Plus, I was in the pool helping Rapier and Osirus.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve been mostly absent since the dinner with your parents. Bell needs us. She’s hurting. I don’t like when Bell hurts.” Jackson hammered on another nail.

“Me, neither,” he agreed.

“Whatever, dude. You’re the one hurting her. You’re warm and loving one second and a cold fish the next. Do you want to mate Bell or not?” Jackson stopped what he was doing to face off with Christoph.

Guilt washed over him. He had to tell them both the truth, but getting the words past his lips was harder than he imagined. “Yes. But it’s complicated.”

“No. No, it’s not. It’s simple. We take Bell to bed together, mate her, and mark her. See? Simple.” Jackson sighed. “Instead, our perception of the situation is that you’re not interested.”

“Have you—you know?” The rest of what he was going to say, he couldn’t force past his teeth. With everything he’d dealt with the last few days, if he found out Bell had taken the next step with Jackson, without him, it would kill him.

“No. She won’t unless it’s all together. She’s afraid of one of us feeling slighted.” Jackson went back to work on the fence.

Relief filled him. “We should talk about what’s going on.”

“About fucking time,” Jackson huffed. The scent of brimstone intensified more so than normal—a sure sign both the man and dragon were at the end of their ropes.

Even though Rapier had assured him everyone on his crew could be trusted, he still ushered Jackson away from them. For a man like him, he didn’t automatically trust the other Alpha’s word. Past experiences within his own pride and the trust others had betrayed made him overly cautious.

“Has Bell come back yet?” he pressed.

“No, not yet. She’s with Hayden. They went to go get us some pizzas. No one should hear us. The noise of the saws and hammers blocks out most of the sound.” He motioned to those who worked around them. “What’s going on? Why do you look like you’re about to puke or shit your pants?”

“My parents have set up an arranged mating, like I told you, but it’s worse than even I imagined.” He scrubbed his face. “The boy you saw last night and don’t pretend you didn’t, is my son.”

“The fuck?” Jackson stared at Christoph. “How?”

There was so much he wanted to tell his mates. “Can I explain it when Bell arrives? I’d rather say it once.” His stomach soured. “Anyway, they were going to use the boy to force me to mate someone else.”

“Bell is your mate—I am your mate.”

“They don’t give a shit, and they don’t want me to mate for love. They want me to mate for position. For power and what they can gain from it. For money. It’s fucked up, but it’s the truth. I met my betrothed today.”

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“Whoa. What the fuck? Is that where you’ve been? With her? What the fuck Christoph, you’re not helping yourself right now.” Anger radiated off Jackson, and his eyes turned red and a hint of smoke escaped his nostrils.

“I plan to mate Bell and you, asshole. But I need to wrap up several loose ends. Defying my father means I will be exiled from my Pride.” Sadness overwhelmed him. Yes, his parents’ greed and desire for power had turned most members of their Pride into shells of their former self. From the time he’d been a young cub, he intended to restore his family’s Pride to where they had once been. A strong, righteous family with standing. Going against their wishes and mating, Bell would kill his dream and cause him to forsake his people.

“Son of a bitch.” Jackson placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I did. To Rapier. He’s been helping me get everything in place and is offering me a position within his Pride. Everything has to be in place before I inform my parents. I can’t let them hurt my—our son. I believe his mother has already been killed. It’s all so fucked up.”

“Okay. When Bell arrives, you’re going to fill us in on everything.” Sympathy filled the other man’s eyes.

“I will, I’m sorry, Jackson. I’ve fucked up so bad. So fucking bad.” Disgust filled him again. He still couldn’t wrap his mind around the fact his parents wanted him to mate a baby. Nor the fact his father probably killed Keandra the same day he scared Isaac. It was all too much.

“And?” The impatient dragon folded his arms over his chest. “What about the girl?”

“She’s sixteen and abused by her father. He’ll kill her if we don’t mate.”

“Are you sure, Christoph?” He didn’t miss the doubt in Jackson’s tone. He had his own doubts for a while that perhaps they’d played him. Until Rapier handed him the digital file a little while ago from Kalkin Raftery, Bell and Hayden’s uncle. His parents had nothing on the Osaka Alpha, who often used both mental and physical punishment on his pride. The pictures Rapier provided had turned his stomach. He couldn’t leave Aislinn to suffer because of him.

“I’m 100 percent sure. Rapier has proof. A file filled with pictures and evidence of the Osaka’s atrocities committed on those within and outside of his pride. I didn’t ask how anyone could get the information, but I believe it.”

“What a clusterfuck.” More smoke seeped from Jackson’s nose. At least this time, his anger hadn’t been directed at him.

“I cannot. I will not leave her to suffer for my choices. Rapier and I believe her father will retaliate against her. Aislinn fears the same,” Christoph said.

“Aislinn? That’s your betrothed?”

“Yes,” he answered. “A baby, Jackson. Tiny and slight and unable to protect herself. Even if I don’t have a Pride, it is my responsibility to protect the weaker.”

“Relax. You don’t have to sell me on her protection. I’m not an Alpha, but I know right from wrong. What’s the game plan?”

“Simply to remove her from her parents. Rapier has planned to hide her within his Pride. She will be given a new identity with a chance to mature and live a life of

freedom. Isaac will go to Jasmine. I assume that is Rapier's mate to live with his grandparents, as Rapier said."

"Time frame?"

He shrugged. "Unsure. Monday at the earliest. I can only hold everyone off for so long. I gave her my phone with instructions to not respond or answer to anyone but Jackson Dalco. When the time is right, we will take her."

"You make it sound so damn simple." Jackson shook his head.

"It's not. I, along with Rapier and Kalkin, will spend countless hours making sure we can pull this off without a hitch. If someone finds out who has taken her, I've effectively pulled my mate's family into an all-out war. Bell could be at risk. Hell," he growled, rubbing his hand through his hair. "All the Dryer females could be at risk. Even you too, Jackson."

"From what I can tell, Rapier Dryer isn't the type of man to put his family or his Pride in any unnecessary risks."

"I agree, but there is always a chance."

"We need to tell Bell," Jackson stated. "Everything."

"We?" Surprise filled Christoph.

"Yes, we." A sense of belonging, something he never experienced with his parents, raged to life within Christoph while Jackson lifted his chin. "FYI. She looks pissed."

Bell marched down the steps and headed toward them. Yeah, she did. Her gaze swept through the yard and landed directly on Christoph. Her jeans hugged her softly

rounded hips. His dick, always half-hard whenever he thought about her, pushed insistently against his zipper. Her dark-blue sweatshirt had paint splatter all over it, and her hair had been pulled into a tight ponytail. She looked very un-Bell-like, but still beautiful.

“Do you want my protection?” Jackson mumbled behind him, joking.

“Maybe. But I deserve it.”

“No, you don’t. You forget. Our mate’s father is an Alpha. She’ll be disappointed you didn’t tell her, but she’ll understand.”

“I hope.”

“I know,” Jackson said.

“So, you finally showed up?” She all but roared at him. The hammering and sawing abruptly stopped. The crew turned to watch their Alpha’s daughter.

Shit.They didn’t need an audience. “Bell, I—”

The door banged open, and Rapier Dryer stepped out. “Yo!”

The entire crew, which had been fascinated with their conversation, turned to Rapier. “Lunch break. Everyone inside to eat while the pizza is hot.”

The yard emptied, except the three of them.

“Do you have any idea what my family, friends, and Jackson have been doing for me for the last couple of days? Oh yeah. You wouldn’t because you have been around.” She was a sight to behold. She glared at him while tapping her foot impatiently.

“Blondie. He has a good reason. Just let him tell you,” Jackson spoke on his behalf.

“Stay out of it. This is between him and me.” Her snap of authority only turned Christoph on more.

Jackson held up his hands while smothering a laugh. “Yes, ma’am.”

Honest to the God, at any other time he would have laughed at Bell dressing Jackson down. He could squash her like a bug, but she had no fear of him. And, apparently,

she had no fear of Christoph either, because she intended to give him a proper tongue-lashing. “Bell let’s sit and—”

“Guess who I ran into while getting the pizzas?” When he didn’t answer, she continued, “Laney. She had something extremely interesting to show me. That little bitch brimmed with excitement at showing me pictures of you kissing another woman! How could you!”

He cringed. The sensation of being watched had spurred him into action. He thought it might have been Aislinn’s bodyguards or someone his father paid off. How naïve of him to not think those twits would leave him alone. Laney outed his meeting with Aislinn to Bell.

“Let him explain. Trust me on this, Bell. You have every right to be upset, even disappointed with him. But not angry. If you continue down this road, you might say something you will regret,” Jackson whispered. “It’s not what you think.”

“Do you know?”

“He told me bits, but promised to tell me the rest when you arrived. Although he didn’t mention a kiss. But—” He glanced at Christoph.

“So, he lied to you, too?” she snapped.

“I didn’t lie!” Christoph snarled, feeling backed into a corner. “Laney will do anything in her power to goad you. If you’re not going to believe me, think about everything she’s done to you this semester.” He dragged her into his arms. For the first time in several days, he felt all the tension and angst leave his body. There was still so much to tell her, but having her pressed to him soothed his tattered soul. “Did she have long black hair?”

“Yes.” Bell’s words, spoken against his massive chest, sounded muffled.

“Short in stature with her head barely coming up to here?” Placing his hand in front of him to show where he meant.

Bell nodded.

“And I kissed her forehead. Not her lips.”

“Yes.” Stared up at him. “Who is she?”

“That’s Aislinn the girl my father wants me to mate. For the record, Aislinn is sixteen years old. Do I look like I would have any type of sexual relationship with a sixteen-year-old?” He cocked a brow.

Bell gasped. “Sixteen?”

“Yup. Sixteen.” He pushed her sweatshirt out of the way and wrapped both hands around her small waist.

“She can’t consent to this,” Bell said. “Tell me you have a plan.”

“I do. But, I need your dad’s help.” Christoph pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

“My dad?”

“Yes. Your dad. He’s involved in what I’m about to tell you. So, if you have any doubts or think I’m lying, your dad can reassure you.”

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Again, Rapier stepped onto the deck, Isaac tucked behind him, trembling. “She calm?”

“Yes, Daddy. I’m calm!” She rolled her eyes before her gaze landed on the boy—his son, or rather their son, now.

“I didn’t ask you, princess. I asked them.” Rapier took the boy’s hand, pulling him out from around his back.

“She’s calm enough.” The tension seeped from her body, and she relaxed against Christoph. Thank God. “Who is this?” She knelt in front of Isaac. “Hello, I’m Bell.”

“Isaac,” the boy whispered.

Rapier sat in one of the outdoor chairs. “You ready to tell her everything now?”

“Yes,” Christoph stated.

“Did you get some pizza, Isaac?” Bell tilted her head.

“No. I wanted my dad.” He went straight to Christoph, who picked him up.

“He has a reason to be here,” Rapier said, glancing at Bell. “Listen to your mate. I’m going to eat. We’ll save you a slice, Isaac.”

Finally, a sense of relief filled Christoph, and, without any reservation, he told Bell and Jackson everything. About the day before he left home. He told them about

Laney's blackmail. About his parents and Aislinn's. He told them about his Pride and what helping his son would do to him. "You should also know, I'm not sure what's happened to Keandra, but I have my suspicions." And then, the weight of the world lifted from his shoulders and he found peace.

"So, are you saying Isaac is our son now?" Bell stared at the boy in Christoph's arms.

"Yes. But he is going to go to Jasmine for now. I can't protect him and deal with my father. Nor can we take care of him while we're in school," he said, rubbing his son's back. For the second time, his boy had fallen asleep. It made Christoph wonder how little sleep he'd gotten while with his parents.

"My mom will take excellent care of him. We can go home every break and if need be, I am sure my parents can bring him here." Bell placed her hand on his. "Christoph, you understand what happened to you, right? It's not your fault. It was never your fault."

He swallowed hard. "I know. There are days still where I wonder if I could have fought it off better."

Jackson snorted. "There's no way. Your father forced you. It wouldn't surprise me if he didn't do it on purpose to create this kind of situation. From what we know about your father, he seems like a conniving person."

True. "You've got a point."

"What do you need for him?" Bell's gaze fell on the sleeping boy. "Clothes, food, a place to stay. I don't think he can spend another night at the fraternity with me. People will get suspicious."

"Then he'll stay here. You can too," Bell whispered. "Both of you can. We'll make

sure he has everything he needs.”

“Bell—I—”

“You don’t have to say anything, Christoph,” she murmured. “I understand. I wish you would have told us sooner, but we’ll do all of this together now, because that’s what family does.”

Warmth filled his chest. Family. Something he’d craved his whole life. “I love you, Bell. Same for you, Jackson. Thank you.”

8

Preparing for Aislinn’s escape proved to take longer than they expected. However, the plan was almost set. Of course, it also meant sending Isaac away as well, something Bell realized hurt more than she’d expected it to. The bond between mother and child is always the strongest...Her mother’s words drifted through her mind and now Bell understood. Her protective instincts ran high when she was around the boy, letting him go, even though he’d be with her parents, tore a piece of her soul away. Which was crazy because they’d be home for all the breaks and holidays. It wasn’t like she or Christoph or even Jackson wouldn’t see Isaac ever again.

They would. No matter what happened after tonight, their family would never be torn apart. Yet, a piece of her feared the retribution she and her mates might face when Christoph’s father and Aislinn’s father found out the truth, something they were prepared to share after both were on their way to Window Rock. Aislinn’s father was the Osaka Alpha, which meant power and money. The man might never stop looking for his daughter. If she was ever found, Bell could only imagine the despicable things the man would do to his daughter. She shivered at the thought. She knew men like the Osaka Alpha. They thrived off of fear. Aislinn would pay for all of their missteps, so nothing could go wrong.

“Hey Blondie, are you stuck in that beautiful head of yours, still?” Jackson teased as he opened the door to his home.

“Sorry. I was thinking way too hard.” Bell stepped inside Jackson’s home and glanced around. The place had been built like a giant birdcage. High, rounded ceilings framed with windows—not a stitch of solid wall surrounded her. A gilded cage. The thought struck her as not only poignant but also beautiful too. At night, she could lie on the floor and watch the stars—if she ever wanted to. To the right sat a staircase leading to a giant bed built into an even larger bookcase against one of the few solid walls in the house. It reminded her of a Victorian library of sorts, with its ornate carvings and cupboards with wrought iron lattice-work doors. A wooden dragon sat on an orb overlooking the occupants in the bed below, perhaps a bit of curiosity in his or her eyes.

She let out a wistful sigh, stepping deeper into his home. After Christoph explained the situation with Aislinn, she concluded some shifters were assholes and they created kids like Laney. Or they abused good, happy-natured, or she should say would-be happy-natured kids, and crushed their spirits. For a moment, she wondered how Christoph and Jackson had turned out to be such strong Alpha men, with good moral compasses.

“I think we all are,” Christoph stated, joining her. “So much has happened in such a short amount of time.”

“There’d be something wrong with all of us, if we weren’t in two places at once,” Jackson added. “But, for tonight, we promised to shut everything off and allow nature to take its course.”

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They had, and she agreed. Bell spun in a small circle, taking in the rest of the space before coming face-to-face with both of her mates. Their open, desired-filled expressions startled her. “I like your place.”

Jackson’s chest puffed out. “Thank you. Of course, it’s not my style or how my home used to look, but I like this atmosphere.”

She licked her lips and pointed to the glass. “Why?”

He took a step toward her. “Do you really want to know?”

She swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“Then we need to go upstairs.” He held his hand out to her. “You’re in control here, Bell. Whatever you want to happen or need to have happen here, you only have to ask.”

She slipped her hand into his and then Christoph’s when he came up beside her. “No more waiting or worrying about what’s going to happen. You’re ours. Period.”

Her heart fluttered. Her pulse raced. “I’m afraid.” Her words had barely been above a whisper as she followed them up the stairs. “I’m afraid of messing this up. Of us compounding our problems.”

“Nothing to be afraid of.” Jackson cupped her cheek while he bent his head to kiss her. “When this night is over, we will be one. We’re stronger together, Bell. Believe that when you lose your way.”

“Will the both of you... You know, be together too?” She gave a nervous chuckle before clearing her throat. The idea of seeing Christoph and Jackson having sex made her pussy clench and her clit throb. Her nipples, already hard points, ached to be touched. If someone didn’t get their hands on her soon, she worried she’d combust. Even though they were still not estrus, the full moon spoke to her in ways she couldn’t comprehend. Is this what Nico and Hayden experienced month after month? The forbidden pull. The stretch of her skin prickling as the tiny hairs stood on end. The yowl of her lioness clawing at her to be released, all because one of her mates was ruled by the cycles of the moon.

“One step at a time, beautiful.” Christoph crowded into her side, connecting all three of them. “If you’re not ready for everything we’re offering you tonight, then we’ll go slow. That is my vow to you.”

“All for me?”

Both men nodded. They were so... Sure. Pillars of confidence. Pillars? Really. You’re standing in front of two of the sexiest men alive, and you call them pillars? Her hands trembled when she pressed her palms to their chests. Their hearts pounded. From excitement?

Fear?

Both?

Straightening her shoulders, Bell lifted her chin before she climbed the stairs to the four-poster bed surrounded by books, under a clear night sky. Her feet carried her to where she wanted to be. She realized, standing in her yard listening to what happened to the poor girl in the hotel and her new son, Isaac, she had to make it all right. She had to cement their relationship so no one could tear them apart. Leaving the mating open like they had given Christoph’s father and Aislinn’s father the ability to dictate

what happened.

Well, not anymore.

She couldn't allow either of them, Christoph, or Jackson, to wonder day after day if she would accept them. She wouldn't allow someone else to rule their lives anymore. Bell had to confront her fears and face them head-on. She walked into her relationship with them wide-eyed. From the moment she caught the hint of sweet grass and brimstone, to the second they stepped into that room at the hotel after the gala to now, Jackson and Christoph were laying the framework for their mating. Tonight, they would finish it.

But moving to this point had been the hardest thing she'd ever done. Maybe it was the expectations of her family—father. Or perhaps she worried about what they would think of her after she mated them. She'd realized she wasted time. She had a problem with overthinking things, in a way she and Hayden were more alike than different. Except she saw the issue and now she meant to remedy it. Plus, her father would be more pissed at her for not grabbing ahold of her destiny and claiming it than getting down and dirty with two guys.

When she reached the top of the landing, she looked out over the house. It reminded her more of an aviary than a house. Just how many dragons are on the school campus for him to need a space like this? Then she mentally kicked herself for getting distracted. Who gave a shit how many people lived in the house? She hadn't been there for them, but for the two men joining her.

“What's going on in that sweet little head of yours?” Jackson reached her first. He pushed the material of her shirt out of the way and skimmed her sides with the pads of his fingertips, teasing her heated skin. The jolt of power that followed hummed through her, startling her.

“I’m giving myself a pep talk.” Her voice wobbled with nervousness. “Do you know, before the gala, I asked Hayden what it’s like? You know to—”

“To fuck?” Christoph, for all his refined, polished, upitiness, he had a crass edge to him, reminding her of her father.

Her cheeks heated, and she tingled from head to toe. “Yes.” She bit her lip and gazed up at him through her lashes. “It’s silly, really. I’ve been with both of you before, so I knew, but, well, I—Well, I wanted every detail perfect this time. Mating is different, right? Like, this seals everything, binding us together.”

Christoph gripped her hip. The heat radiating from him washed over her like a thick blanket on a cold winter’s day. It also ratcheted up the pulse-pounding excitement shooting through her system. “Will you tell them about us?” He leaned down and brushed his lips over the shell of her ear. “About how you mated the king of the jungle and the heir-apparent to a clan? How afterwards I fucked Jackson while you watched?”

Her breath hitched as she licked her bottom lip. “No.”

He gave a breathy chuckle before drawing the lobe of her ear into his mouth. “Why not?”

“It’s personal. Between us.” There were certain things no one needed to know about.

Jackson slipped his hand beneath the hem of her skirt and squeezed her rear. “You should know something. Something I hadn’t told you about before because we hadn’t fully mated you yet.”

She snapped her head up. “What?”

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“Dragons are voyeurs. We like to watch and be watched.” He licked the side of her neck. “This little arrangement is perfect. Touch us, Bell. Don’t be afraid. Be bold. Be adventurous. Love us.” There’d been a thread of absoluteness in his voice along with a hint of pleading.

“Yes.” She turned to him. “Show me.”

A cocky grin spread across his face. “I’m going to do more than show you.” The heat of his body in front of her mingled with the heat of Christoph behind her. Both men sandwiched her between them, giving her scant amount of room to move.

Before she could ask what happened next, Jackson wrapped his hand around the nape of Christoph’s neck and pulled him in. Surprise registered on her lion’s face seconds before Jackson covered Christoph’s mouth with his. Both men grunted. At first, it had been a tentative affair. Then, once again, something clicked. She witnessed it in their bodies first. The rigidity in Christoph’s lumbering frame bled out. His hand came up and mimicked Jackson’s, and then they groaned.

Watching them had a full-body flush consuming her. Never had she seen anything so spectacular, or carnal or erotic before in her life. Oh sure, she’d seen Jace kiss Blake, but not with such passion. She feared she’d dissolve into nothing before they turned their attention to her. A whimper of longing fell from her, and they finally broke the kiss. Both men panted for breath as they stared down at her.

“What the fuck?” Christoph’s cheeks flushed, his eyes glazed with desire, and if the thickness of his erection brushing against her butt was any sign of how much he enjoyed the lip-lock... Oh boy. “Why was that different?”

Jackson gave a playful lift of his shoulder. “Dragons are amorous during mating. We like to sample and try everything. It’s what connects us. The full moon makes all of this”—he motioned between them— “pleasurable. Intense. We’re like a walking aphrodisiac.”

“I want more,” Christoph groaned. “I can’t wait for estrus and the full moon to happen at the same time.”

Bell blanched. “Oh, my.”

Jackson laughed. “Not a problem. But, we’ll have to take regular breaks for Bell, don’t want to break her.”

Christoph flipped him off. “No shit. Bell is our priority.” He spun her around. “Her pussy craves us.” Palming her ass, he pressed her against him and captured her lips. He didn’t take his time, instead devoured her with his mouth and tongue until she didn’t know which way was up. She sank into it, wrapping her arms around his neck. He consumed her without even trying. When he broke the kiss, his eyes were hooded. The pink tinge to his cheeks had darkened, and his lips parted. Arousal glittered in his gaze. “Mine first.”

“O-okay.” She held onto his biceps for dear life while he carried her to the bed and laid her out.

“Pull off my shirt.”

“You sure you wouldn’t like Jackson to do the honors?” she teased him.

The bark of laughter from Jackson had him growling. “Good one, blondie.”

Christoph curled his lip and gave a low yowl of warning. “Take off my shirt, Bell.”

She did what he asked, exposing every muscular plane and ridge of his body. In an instant, she became the awkward, bashful girl she'd always been whenever she saw Christoph or Jackson naked. She dipped her chin and turned her gaze from him.

"No, you don't." He lifted her chin, so they looked at each other. "My body is yours. You don't have to be timid around us because I guarantee we'll be staring at your tits, your ass, and everything in between."

"He's right." Jackson sauntered to the bed. Already he had his belt undone on his pants and the first few buttons were open, exposing the tan, hairless flesh of the upper part of his groin. The hard V-muscle... Groove... Whatever it was called tempted her beyond reason. She wanted to trace each vein with the tip of her tongue. If she pushed it down a little, she'd see the top of his penis.

She bit her lip as he slid into bed, and Christoph hovered over her. "What do I do?"

"You're going to open my pants and pull out my dick."

"Why am I still clothed?"

"I can help you there, blondie." Jackson grabbed the zipper on the side of her skirt, then pulled it down. Each tooth being released sounded like a mini-explosion. Her heart pounded, and her breath came in shallow pants. He groaned when her pale flesh had been exposed to his perusal. "Don't move, blondie. I can't wait." He slipped his hand beneath the band of her panties. The tips of his fingers slid through her already slick and sensitive cunt. "Damn, Bell. Why didn't you say something?" He eased into the opening of her fold and continued to rub her.

The pounding of her heart increased. Her hands went to his shoulders, steadying herself as he continued to finger her. "Jackson." She moaned his name, lifting her hips when he swiped her clit.

Christoph pressed her hands to the crotch of his pants, urging her to continue to comply with his instructions. She did so readily, opening his jeans, and fisting his long, thick erection. She gasped at his size. “If I never mentioned it before, you’re huge. I love when you push into me. It feels so good.”

“Thank you, kitten.” He winked at her and grabbed her hand. “I like it like this.” He grunted, helping her tighten her grip then showed her the pace he enjoyed. “Yes... Fuck. How does she feel, Jackson?”

“Heaven. So wet. She’s already coating my fingers with her juices. I think she got off on our kiss.” He flicked her clit, then filled her with his fingers once more.

She clenched around him. Her eyes went wide. “Jackson.”

“What do you need, Bell?” He continued to manipulate the small bundle of nerves while fingering her.

“I want to come.” Her thighs quivered. Her lower belly coiled with this overwhelming intense pleasure.

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Jackson sat up, holding her close as he whispered against the shell of her ear. “Yes, you do.” He nipped her, then soothed it with a lick of his tongue. “You’re ready to come. You’re clenching around my fingers, and your pussy is sucking on them. Don’t force it, blondie. Go with it.”

She humped his hand. It felt too good not too. The pressure grew more powerful in her lower belly until she made the most unladylike noises. She cried out as everything around her melted away and her orgasm rushed through her. Jackson caressed her through her release, whispering sweet words while she drifted back to the world around her.

“Beautiful.” Christoph grabbed the edge of her skirt and removed it, along with her panties. During her haze, he’d gotten naked. He loomed over her with his massive, thickly corded body before slipping between her legs. Jackson removed her shirt, leaving her completely open to their penetrating gazes. “You’re spectacular, Bell. I can’t believe you’re ours.” He kissed her, while running his hand along her side.

“So are you.” She trailed her fingers over his chest, then his stomach, and lower to the trimmed thatch of pubic hair. His heavy sac hung below his hard cock, and she cupped the spheres, rolling them between her fingers. He let out a painful yelp and closed his eyes, causing her to let go. “Sorry.”

“Don’t stop. Felt good. Just got me too worked up.” Christoph pinched the base of his erection and sighed.

She took him into her hand and manipulated the rough flesh of his sac. Christoph rolled his hips, pushing his dick along her lower belly. The tension between them

ratcheted up a notch. She flexed her hips in time with him, not knowing what she was doing, only that it excited her. “Please.”

“Shh, I’ve got you.” He placed the tip of his shaft at her entrance and bent his head. He latched onto her nipple only to have Jackson stop him.

“Dude, condoms.” He reached up into the drawer above their heads and pulled out two foil disks. “If we need more, I have it.”

“We don’t need them.” Embarrassment hit her hard. How could she not remember the basics? Her parents had always been open and honest with them about protecting themselves and going by the moon cycles, but it didn’t mean shit didn’t happen. They learned that firsthand with Alex. She loved her baby brother to pieces, but he’d been a giant surprise for the whole family. “I’m not in estrus yet.”

Christoph laughed while he rolled the latex barrier onto his dick. “No way a mating allows time for preparing. I was ready to get deep inside you without hesitation. At least one of us has our wits about us, and after everything with Isaac, we should take our time. I want that peace of mind, Bell.”

She cupped his face and nodded. “I understand.”

“I’m thinking about her and wanting this to be perfect.” Jackson shrugged, then slid over, giving them room. He wrapped his hand around his cock and pumped his hard flesh. “Carry on.”

Christoph positioned himself once more while drawing her hard nipple into his mouth. He pushed forward, not stopping his thrust. He sucked and nibbled on the taut pebble in his mouth, and she arched to him, the pain and pleasure mixing and warring within her. There, at the tip of that pinnacle, waiting for another orgasm. She shook through the force of her release while flexing her hips. It was all too much.

“Easy, beautiful. I got you.” His voice strained from exertion. “Won’t stop till I’m all the way in.”

He stretched her unbearably so and to the point she thought she split in two. Then he stopped. She pulsed around him, stretching to accommodate his girth. For long moments, he stroked her flesh, and when he moved, she gasped at the blissful tingles skirting along her skin. She clung to him, meeting him with each stroke. Mating under the full moon was different than without.

This was amazing. Indescribable. She could only feel the drag of his dick along the walls of her sex. The way his fingers worked her clit with each thrust. She could drown on the sensations. Bell wrapped her legs around his waist, allowing him to slip deeper inside of her. She cried out, and behind them, the groan from Jackson turned her on even more. She watched in rapt fascination as he continued to work his shaft. His motions became jerky.

“Bell,” Christoph grunted and pushed deep.

Her eyes went wide, her mouth fell open. Everything locked in her body and when he retreated, the bomb detonated inside of her. Her climax shot through her while his thrusts became erratic. He growled and snarled. Her climax crept up on her, detonating what was left of her senses.

“Fuck... Fuck... Too good. Can’t hold it.”

He pounded into her while he nuzzled her neck. “You’re mine, Bell. Mine and Jackson’s.” He bit down on the juncture of her neck and ground his pelvis against hers.

She pulsed around him once more as the piercing pain of his bite morphed into pleasure. The mini-orgasm sparked along her skin seconds before she marked him as

her mate. Bell clung to him. She'd experienced nothing so intense before in her life, even after their first time together. When he finally pulled from her, she'd been a limp noodle.

"So fucking hot." Jackson climbed over to her. His erection had been dark red, almost purple. "Yes, it hurts. I ache so badly for you, but for this to be our official mating, I have to give you the kiss of the dragon."

She stared up at him, confused. "What?"

"It's part of our mating rituals. We're fire breathers. The fire lives within us, and to complete the mating, you have to be protected against it. Or else, poof, ashes." He ran his palm over her stomach. "I won't mate you fully without allowing this one step."

She gave him a nervous nod. "Sure. What do you need me to do?"

"Not a thing, blondie." He glanced over his shoulder at Christoph. "Give us some room."

The surrounding air shifted, and the scent of brimstone grew thicker by the second. Electricity snapped along her arms, raising the hair there. Her lioness prowled inside of her, wanting out. She kept the feline at bay. The image of Jackson shimmered and grew until he filled the room. Leather-like wings stretched while claws dug into the floor. His beautiful black scales covered his massive body, changing him from the boy she knew to the beast who lurked below the surface.

Claw-tipped hands lowered to the bed, trapping her between his arms. If he thought to scare her, he didn't. In fact, she marveled at his transformation. She stared up into the flickering flames glowing in his eyes. There was her mate. Cupping his snout, she rubbed the scaly skin, and he made a soothing sound. Then, with a gentleness she didn't realize he had in this form, he lifted her in his arms. They rose to the top of his

room and landed on a ledge she didn't even know existed. The moon shined down on him, and he gazed into her eyes, his fierce features softening seconds before he lowered his head.

Instinct took over for her the minute she saw the wisps of smoke breathed from him. She inhaled. Fire raced through her while the cloud of smoke grew bigger. The longer he allowed the dragon's kiss, the more she inhaled his heat. It singed her. Changed her in the most basic of ways. Some of it she couldn't grasp, but she didn't stop the flow. She placed her hands on either side of his snout. The burning twinge shot through her, settling over her heart. She whimpered, then cried out when he pulled away. The orange glow on her chest scared her, but when he lowered her to his bed and shifted, she noticed the same glow on his cheek, right below the corner of his eye.

She didn't know how long it hurt like hell, but it passed quickly, and something new settled within her. She ached for him. Needed to bind her soul to him. When he came near, she saw the red teardrops without their fiery glow. She glanced down and found the same marking on her skin. "How?"

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“Only a true mate receives the tears of a dragon. You and Christoph are my true mates. I will carry both of your marks forever.” He climbed up onto the bed. Grabbing the foil wrapper off the ledge above their head, he then opened the packet. “Can you take me, blondie?”

A tear escaped from the corner of her eye. “Of course.” She swiped at the wetness. “This is a little....”

“Amazing.” Christoph joined them. “Why don’t I have the mark?”

“Impatient. I’ll have to give you the kiss, too,” he replied. “Are you ready for it? Ready for what it can mean for our relationship? If you are, we will discuss this after I complete my mating with Bell.”

Christoph seemed to mull over his proposition. “Yes. I want it. If we are all meant to be together, I will take it.”

“What a fucking thing to say.” Jackson positioned himself at Bell’s entrance and groaned as he filled her.

Her eyes rolled up, and she moaned. She feared it might be painful, but all she felt was pleasure. Such unbiased love and devotion from both men, but the mark connected her to Jackson more so. He held himself still, then lowered his head to kiss her. Their tongues touched and retreated as he moved. The rush of having him inside of her in all ways destroyed her in the best ways possible. They had a direct line to each other.

Christoph joined them, teasing her with each glide of his fingers. He lapped at her mark, sending shards of bliss through her. Both men overwhelmed her, but she took it. She hung onto him, meeting him stroke for stroke. He gazed down at her, locking them in this tandem-sexual thing. She didn't have a name for it, only it had been erotic and different and amazing and everything she could have ever wanted and more. She'd cherish this always. Protect it, and like Hayden, never reveal anything that happened. She respected this moment between all three of them.

"Bell," he groaned. "Give it to me. I'm too far gone."

Christoph fit his hand between them and rubbed her clit. She cried out, arching to Jackson. Her whole body tensed.

"Need to...." She wrapped her arm around his neck and pulled him down to her. She nuzzled his neck, and the aroma of brimstone and her mouth watered.

"Do it, kitten. Mark our mate," Christoph growled.

She bit down at the juncture of his neck and shoulder. She shattered. Her orgasm ripped through her, causing bright flashes of light to filter across her vision as she licked his mark. Above her, Jackson stilled and roared. His grip on her tightened to the point of pain while they rode out their releases. Glorious. She sagged in his arms, completely spent by their mating and unable to form a cognitive thought.

Her chest glowed, and the teardrop warmed. "What?"

Jackson grinned. "Our mating is blessed." He kissed her before pulling from her.

"Whoa."

Christoph looked positively wanton. She understood it. He needed this. "It's

amazing.”

“It feels amazing, too.” Jackson strode to the bed after disposing of the condom in the trash. “Are you ready, mate?”

Christoph nodded. “Yes.”

Again, the air grew heavy. So did the smell of brimstone. When the dragon stood before them, Christoph crossed to him then climbed into his arms. From this position, Bell could watch everything play out.

He landed on the perch, and a few seconds later, she saw the mist and Christoph accept it. It had been beautiful and incredible. Arousing, too. The complimentary moans from both of her mates accompanied the bright-orange glow on Christoph’s chest. Hers tingled, too, and, like Jackson, she carried two tears on her skin. She placed her hand over her heart and finally understood what it meant to be fully mated.

After Christoph had taken the dragon’s kiss from Jackson, they all fell into Jackson’s massive bed, wrapped in each other’s arms, and slept. She woke to the masculine grunts of her mates who were teasing each other. Christoph loomed over Jackson. His chest heaved with each breath. Their tear drops glowed in the soft light of the moon. They were glorious specimens and all hers.

“Are you ready for this?” Jackson whispered.

A lump lodged in Bell’s throat as arousal pulsed to life within her. Holy shit. They were really going to do it, and she got to watch them. Every inch of her tingled to life. She couldn’t wait to watch them become one, sealing their mating forever.

“I think we have company,” Christoph murmured, lubing up his latex covered dick. “You smell so sweet when you’re aroused, kitten.”

Heat filled her cheeks as she continued to watch both men. “I was curious.”

“Oh, she’s curious,” Jackson teased, wrapping his arms around Christoph’s neck. “Show her, Christoph.”

The second he pushed into Jackson’s ass, she thought she’d implode. Her clit throbbed. Her pussy clenched. She could feel their connection through their shared mark. It was incredible and mind blowing.

With each roughened growl and snarl, her heartbeat increased. She was a trembling mess laying there watching them. When Jackson reached her, she went to him without hesitation. He kissed her. Their tongues tangled, and a strangled moan was swallowed by him. It was all too much for her.

“Ride him, kitten,” Christoph groaned. “Together.”

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She trembled as she climbed onto Jackson's lap and was surprised to see he already had a condom on. Were they waiting for her to wake so she could join them? Did it matter? No. Not at the moment. Never. She took him into her with one thrust and cried out in bliss. Jackson's grip on her hips tightened and his hips lifted off the bed. All three of them moaned together.

Because of the position they were in, Bell was along for the ride. Jackson directed her over him while Christoph fucked him from behind. At one point, it was as if they were connected as one. She never wanted this to end. She rested her head on Christoph's shoulder and, as she climaxed, he bit down on her mark, intensifying her release. The rutting sounds Jackson made as he fucked her in hard, quick thrusts extended her pleasure. She bent to him, nuzzling the mark she left to his skin, allowing to dictate how fast they went.

"Fuck Bell," Jackson groaned. "I want to fill you full of cum, marking you on the inside. I want to fuck you all night." He tensed below her. "Shit, this is so good."

Behind them, Christoph yowled as he picked up his pace. "Fuck... Fuck." He bit his bottom lip as the sounds he made became more intense by the second. "Gonna come." He roared as he slammed into Jackson one last time.

Only then did Jackson give over to his pleasure. He fucked her hard and when she bit down on his neck. A vicious snarl of excitement and relief erupted from him when he climaxed. Jackson held her close, his breath coming in hard pants while their tear drops pulsed, and warmth spread through them. She snuggled into his chest, content to be with her mates.

The next time Bell opened her eyes, faint light filtered through the massive windows of the room. A mix of pale yellows, purples, and dark blues filled the sky, pushing away the starry night. She didn't want to get up, but she knew they had to. They still had way too much to resolve before they could have their happily ever after, like Hayden and Nico.

The warmth radiating off both large male bodies on either side of her didn't help with wanting to get out of bed, though. It made her even more lethargic. At least during the winter, she'd be set.

"What are you thinking about?" Christoph's husky voice sent a shiver down her spine. He lay in front of her, their bodies pressed tightly together. The way they were positioned, both men touched in the most intimate of ways.

"That I won't freeze in winter between the two of you."

"Hope not. If you do, I'm failing at my job." Jackson's equally deep voice had her sex throbbing with need.

"Feel that?" Christoph asked while shifting his hips, pushing his length between her legs.

"What, the shiver or the fact that she's soaking us?" Jackson mimicked Christoph, pushing deeper between her legs. Her nipples tightened, and her clit pulsed with desire.

"Both." The aroused lion leaned down to capture her lips. It had been a hard, demanding kiss that had her rolling her hips, effectively caressing both of their dicks.

"I know we'd all love to continue, but there are more pressing issues we need to resolve," Jackson whispered, nuzzling her hair.

“He’s right.” Regret laced Christoph’s words when he broke the kiss—a kiss which left her panting and trembling. “We need to finish the last-minute preparations for Aislinn and Isaac before confronting my dad and Aislinn’s.”

“We also need to find you more pledges,” Jackson rumbled behind her. He captured her chin between his fingers and turned her head to take her lips in a searing kiss.

She moaned into Jackson’s embrace as Christoph slipped from between her legs and moved off the bed.

“Later,” Jackson promised. He rubbed his thumb over the mark he left on her earlier.

“That’s if we can sneak her away from her dad. He’s going to take one look at her and know.” Christoph pulled on his jeans. “Not that I care. Last night was one of the best nights of my life.”

“I’ll shower.” Embarrassment swamped her. Christoph was right, her father would know.

“Won’t help. Your scent is changing.” Christoph held his hand out to her.

“All of our scents are changing.” Jackson slipped from the bed and followed Christoph’s lead.

“He won’t say anything,” Bell said, maybe more for herself than them.

Christoph snorted, and Jackson gave a hollow laugh.

“Okay, he’ll say something, but he won’t be mad.”

“Not at you, kitten.” Christoph pulled on his shirt.

“Why? He knows we’re mates.” She knew the truth, though. Rapier would always see her as his princess, and he would always be her daddy.

“Because he’s a dad, and he’ll know we had sex with both of us, even though I am sure he knows we’ve fucked before now.” Christoph shrugged. “His mind is going to run a shit ton of scenarios on how it went down. And none of them are good for us.”

“I think my father is rubbing off on you.” She took the discarded underwear Jackson held out to her.

“You might have a point there, blondie.” Jackson chuckled.

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Christoph snorted. “And that’s how we’ll be if we ever have any daughters.” He handed her the clothes he picked up off the floor.

They were being ridiculous; her father would be fine. He knew it would happen. “Where is the bathroom?”

“Through the door. You’ll find a full-sized tub and shower. When you’re done, there are steps to the left of the shower, which will lead you to the kitchen. We’ll meet you down there.”

“Ok.” What she wouldn’t give to soak in the massive tub for an hour or two. Her muscles would thank her for it, but she didn’t have time. After finding a washcloth and a set of towels, she quickly showered. Once she dried off, she got dressed. Bell braided her hair to keep the wet ends off her shoulders, then headed to the kitchen where Christoph and Jackson would join her.

“If you’re ready, we can go. Your dad’s waiting for us at your house. He called a minute ago. Must be ESP or something.” Christoph jiggled his truck keys in his right hand.

“Oh! I forgot to tell you. Guess who came to see me the other day?” When neither man answered, she continued. “Victor Lorenz.”

“About?” Jackson quirked a brow.

“He has a great idea. I’ve been mulling it over, and I think I’m going to take him up on it.”

At least it seemed like a great idea, till just a couple of hours ago, when they mated. Would Christoph or Jackson have any issues with her house being co-op since they'd mated? If the shoe had been on the other foot, she'd be less than pleased, maybe.

“Well, what is it, blondie? Don't leave us hanging.”

“Ah, well.” Her gaze darted between her mates, unsure of herself once again. “Victor suggested a co-op house. He feels he can find the remaining pledges for us. All I have to do is come up with the two-thousand-dollar fee. Which we're going to do with fundraising.”

“No, you're not. I'll give you the money,” Jackson declared.

“No. It's my sorority's responsibility.” Jackson's willingness to fund it had to mean he must not hate the idea... Right?

Jackson held up his hand. “It's not up for argument, Bell. You've had enough stress to deal with this semester. It's Christoph and my job to make sure our mate is happy and healthy.”

“I'm not sure.” Her gaze darted to Christoph, who hadn't said a single word at this point.

“Take the money, kitten. Jackson is right. It's our job,” Christoph murmured.

Jackson reached out, capturing her chin to pull her attention from Christoph to him. “I have enough money to keep us all happy and healthy for several lifetimes. Let me do it.”

“Ok. I'll pay you back. Every cent,” she said.

Jackson shrugged. “Not concerned about the money.”

“I promise.”

“I don’t care about the money, Bell.” He grabbed her shoulders. “What I care about is alleviating some of the pressure you’ve been under.”

“Thank you.” She smiled.

“Your smile makes it all worth it.” Jackson leaned down and brushed a kiss over her lips. Unable to help herself, she wrapped her arms around him and pulled herself closer to his strong, warm body.

“You guys get started again and we aren’t going anywhere soon. Rapier’s already texted me twice, wondering where the fuck—his words—we are,” Christoph teased, holding up his phone.

Jackson broke the kiss.

“Neither of you said anything about the house being co-op.” Eyeing both of her mates suspiciously.

“Should we have?” Christoph laced his fingers with hers as they stepped out of the house.

Obviously, they trusted her way more than she trusted them. No. She trusted them, but, thanks to Laney, she doubted herself, which made her trust seem flimsy and threadbare, which filled her with shame. Of everyone she could have faith in, her mates had been foremost. She bore their marks. They wore hers. She needed to stop giving Laney and her gang of goons power over her.

“Mates are forever, blondie. You know this.”

“I do.” She sighed. “If the roles were reversed, I’m not sure how I’d react. I think I’m overthinking it. I should look at it from a Pride and Prejudice standpoint. Instead of a cop.”

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Jackson chuckled. “Sometimes, the human world can also mess with your Pride mentality. Things are simple for us. We understand boundaries.”

Well, some did. Laney, on the other hand, not so much.

“You have a reason to mistrust. In a short amount of time, everything has changed. It’s a learning experience for all three of us, but we’ve got a hell of a long time to figure it out,” Christoph added.

“Forever and ever.” Jackson reached over her and pulled Christoph to a stop.

When their mouths met, their deep moans turned her insides to mush. Every inch of her tingled to life, and she wished they didn’t have to go home and speak with her dad. Her priority lay with her mates, and making sure they were taken care of. Unfortunately, she couldn’t shirk her duties, either, nor could Christoph let Aislinn down.

“I hate to break you two apart, but Christoph’s pants are vibrating. Bet it’s my dad,” she teased.

Christoph reached for his phone the second Jackson broke the kiss off. “She’s right. Better not piss him off any more than he’s going to be.” He scanned his phone, sent a message, then deposited it in his pocket. “We should calm ourselves.”

“Sure.” Jackson winced, adjusting himself. “I’m completely calm.”

“I’ll explain it as boys being boys,” she joked, giving them a playful wink.

“It won’t make a damn bit of difference to him, kitten. He’ll still smell it.” He leaned down and nuzzled her neck. “I’m okay with it, Bell. The whole package and what it means. So, stop worrying.”

“Are you a mind reader?” She batted her eyes.

“Nope. Your facial expressions give you away every time.” He chuckled.

“I must work on perfecting my neutral expressions, then.” She sniffed.

“Please don’t. It’s part of your charm,” Jackson stated. “Let’s go before your dad sends his whole crew here to bring you home.”

9

Bell walked through the door of her house after a long night with her mates and glanced around the living room. Joy sat on the couch while Shelly paced by the stairs. The girl nibbled on her thumbnail while pivoting and continuing the current path she’d been on. Her hair had been unkempt, and her clothes were messy. Some of it, yes, was her, but there’d been more. She crossed to her, almost forgetting Christoph and Jackson followed.

“Shelly?”

The girl glanced up. “Oh hey, you’re home... With your mates.”

“What’s going on?”

The unicorn’s gaze jumped between them, then drifted up the stairs. “Well....”

White canvas shoes appeared at the top of the stairs, drawing Bell’s attention from

Shelly. “Finally. We have a problem.” Hayden, with Nico hot on Raquel’s heels, appeared a few seconds later, while Raquel continued to the landing. “We need to talk.”

A knot formed in the pit of Bell’s stomach. She hadn’t even been gone for very long. Thankfully, once she spoke to her father, her schedule was light with classes. “Sure.”

“I’ll make coffee.” Christoph kissed her forehead.

“I’ll be on the lookout for your dad.” Jackson placed a kiss on the exact spot Christoph pressed his lips.

“Nice tattoos,” Hayden remarked. “When did you get them?”

His chest puffed out. “When we mated.”

She grinned and shoved Bell’s shoulder. “Good for you.” She drew her over to the couch where Raquel sat, tapping away on her computer. “We got mail from the school late yesterday.”

The knot tightened. “All right.”

“It’s a notice about our pledge situation. We have to meet with Dean Ames by the end of the week. Either we have them, or we have to vacate the property and lose the charter.” Hayden pulled the letter out of her pocket and handed it to Bell.

She opened it and read what Dean Ames had to say. Yes, they were behind by more than a few pledges, but they had time. Or, well, they did until the letter arrived. “I have a solution. But, it would mean changing who we are.” Frankly, she didn’t think she’d been cut out for this crap.

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Hayden sat forward. So did Shelly. “I talked to the guys about the co-op. They’re in. If Victor can get us the pledges, I think we should do it. Jackson is going to front the money for it.”

“Holy shit.” Raquel glanced up from her computer. “I found something.”

“She’s been at it all morning,” Hayden said.

Shelly and Joy nodded. “Yep, she helped Victor and Tate before you got here, so she is on a roll.”

“True,” Hayden agreed.

“Really?” Bell scooted closer to Raquel. “So, what did you find and how will it help us?”

“Remember when we got the first letter about the house being condemned, and we had so many days to fix it?”

She nodded. How could she forget? “Yes.”

“I think it’s been forged.”

Bell quirked a brow. Had she heard her right? “Come again?”

“Yeah.” Raquel turned her computer around. “These are public records. Each house, apartment, business, or establishment in the city and, more importantly, the county,

has inspection checks. It's kind of like health department for restaurants. Anyway, all you have to do is put in the information for the place and this comes up." She clicked her touch pad and a list of PDF documents appeared. "When you open each one, it tells you all the good and the bad. It tells you if work has been completed and if not what the fines were assessed at. It also will tell you if there are any trials pending for lack of following through with each citation."

"So?" Bell peered at the screen, confused by what she saw.

"Well, I pulled up our address in the housing section. There's absolutely nothing on us." Raquel went to the search bar and typed in their address once more before hitting enter. "See?"

Yes, she did. NO DOCUMENTS FOUND. "How did this happen?"

Raquel grinned. "I'm glad you asked. I scanned the letter into my computer. You see,"—she returned to typing— "paper has dyes in it. Printers have different ways of printing on a page. Type face. Spacing and letterhead. It means each printer and paper will be unique."

Bell rubbed her forehead, trying to process what Raquel said. "Go on."

"They don't match."

She perked up. "What?"

"I hacked into the system at the county office, and I got the specs on their paper and alignment. I put them into the letter we received, and they didn't match." Again, she showed them the comparisons. "So, I researched printers and who would get into the county office and steal some of their paper and what have you."

“And?”

“It came from one house. Well, technically two hundred houses and businesses have printers like the one used, but I found it highly suspicious Laney’s sorority is on the list. Not only that, but it looks like her mother works for the county to boot.”

Bell snatched the computer off Raquel’s lap and scrolled through her finding. A whimper escaped her. She’d been duped. She realized her house needed the repairs, and she knew she needed to do it last year; however, Laney and her cattiness distracted her from what needed to be done. And for what? Some fucking pledges?
“Did you find anything else out?”

Raquel smirked. “Oh, yeah.” She grabbed the computer and typed away on it. “She’s, and I mean Laney, is a naughty little thing.”

“Naughty how?” Hayden sat forward a bit. After everything she and Nico had been through with the stupid cow, her curiosity didn’t surprise Bell one bit.

“Someone likes the football team.” Raquel placed her computer on the coffee table in front of them and hit play. Laney’s passion-filled cries echoed through the living room, followed by a perfect view of her lying on the locker room bench surrounded by men. Naked and aroused, they touched each other in the most intimate of ways. “Weird how Hill and Winston could try to hurt Victor and Tate with photos like this, but it’s all good fun for Laney and them...”

Her stomach rolled. She closed her eyes and shook her head. “No, I don’t want to see any more of that.” Laney could be a consensual partner in it, but what if? “How do we know she’s a willing participant? You can’t use it for leverage. We have the proof with the stolen letterhead, and the forged document. If Victor comes through with the pledges, we’ll go to Dean Ames with that plan.”

Raquel turned off the video. “You’re right, but tell me it doesn’t feel just a little bit good to see she’s not always so prim and proper.”

It did, and it didn’t. “I can’t. I want to say yes, it does, but it makes me no better than her if I give in to my inner bitch.”

“True, but—”

A knock at the door had Bell glancing up. “I’ll get it.” She stuffed the letter into her pocket and would put it with the rest of their evidence to show the dean. The idea of having to stand before him and explain why they were missing pledges and how Laney had duped them, causing who knows how much harm, sickened her. Heck, she wouldn’t be surprised if Laney didn’t have her hand in more than just the condemned notices. She jumped when another knock sounded. “Hold your horses.” She opened the door and took a step to the side. “Victor?”

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He grinned and stepped inside. "I brought a few pledges with me. I hope you don't mind."

She bit her bottom lip. "Uh, no. Come on in."

Person after person entered her home. Some she knew, some she had no clue where they came from, but each of them handed her a pledge application. She found Victor sitting on the couch with Hayden and Raquel. His relaxed posture and amiable smile unsettled her.

"I have a way to raise the money," he announced. "I'll pay for it."

"We don't have to. I have the money. Well, technically, I will have the money. Jackson is giving it to us." Bell held onto the applications while the new pledges looked around the house. "Where did you find all of them?"

"Here and there. What you have here are the rejects. For whatever reason, whether it's their mixed shifter race or the fact they're pure human, they aren't good enough for the fraternities or sororities here. They want to belong so badly, but no one will give them a chance."

"We will." Bell glanced at Hayden, who nodded. "Okay, girls, let's go meet our new pledges."

As they began tours and introduced themselves, Bell stared back at her mates. Maybe now they could relax a little, feel confident their plans would work out. Now all they had left to do was meet Rapier at the designated place and time to do the exchange.

Christoph and Jackson stepped outside while Bell, and Hayden laughed about something with their new recruits. The relaxed atmosphere of the house had been a novel experience. Everything had been so out of whack for the longest time. Not having anything to worry about really showed just how fucked up things had gotten since the games and the gala.

Rapier and his crew huddled around their worktable. The hum of their conversation not more than a whisper. Already, the house looked brand new. Fresh stucco and a coat of paint along the trim took ten years off the house. The inside of the pool where they'd broken out the old leaky concrete had been resurfaced. Several hundred gallons of water already filled the enclosure.

With purposeful strides, Christoph with Jackson at his side cut a path through the yard and came up behind Rapier when they broke apart to get back to work. Bell's father turned and scrutinizing them for a moment. There was no doubt in Christoph's mind Rapier would scent their mating and, standing in front of him with the physical marks of it, intimidated the hell out of Christoph.

"You went and did it." Not a question.

"Yes."

"Bell?" He crossed his arms.

"She's fine." Jackson stepped forward. "I give you my word we'd never harm her."

Rapier pointed to his cheek. "Your mark?"

He nodded. "It's the mark of a dragon's mate. Christoph and Bell wear one."

He cocked his brow at Christoph. "Interesting. Well, I'm glad you could make it.

Everything is in place.”

“Good.” Christoph shook his head. “It’s time to move Aislinn. The minute my father finds out I have mated with Bell and Jackson....” He struggled to get the words out. He still wasn’t too sure about the whole thing between them. However, they had time, and eventually, they’d get where they needed to be. “Her father will hurt her. I am certain of it.”

Bell’s father nodded. “I agree. Rashid and Wy are ready. Saber has gone ahead to meet them at the state line. They’ll be in a rental van. They will drive in, so they can stay on state routes and roads only we know about. From there, Kee and Dani will drive her and Isaac home with Jace and Lucas as lookout.”

“I can get a message to her. She’ll know it’s me. I’d like to have her out of here before the end of tomorrow.”

He grunted. “Like cutting it close, don’t you, kid?”

He was. He knew if he waited any longer, someone would flub up and make a mistake. If they left tomorrow under the cover of darkness, he could easily deal with his father. “Well, I plan to confront my parents after she and Isaac are safely on the road. I won’t be worried about anything else.”

“You should be worried about Bell,” Rapier replied. “You better hope nothing happens to her.”

“I’ll protect her.” Jackson smirked. “Can’t let the both of you have all the fun. Don’t fret, she’ll be safe and sound.”

The door opened, and Bell stepped outside. The expression had been a mix of relief and worry. “I have some good news and some not-so-great news. I also have some

skanky news.”

“Bell.” Rapier cocked a brow at her. “Where did you learn to talk like that? Where did my precious princess go?”

“Oh, Daddy. I’m only speaking the truth.” She handed the letter to Christoph, who snarled. “We have a meeting on Friday. But, this is the good news.”

“What?” Jackson wrapped his arm around her.

“First, I have all of my pledges I need to keep the house. Second, the condemned notices are all fake!” She giggled. “Fake. Fake. Fake.” She laughed again. “Criminally, I don’t think we can do anything to Laney, because the information was found in not so legal ways. However, we are taking it to Dean Ames.”

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Rapier chuckled. “I bet that’s going to go over well after Kalkin handed him his ass.”

“He did?” Bell’s eyes widened. “Daddy, does this have to do with Tate and Victor?”

He grunted. “Yep.”

Bell flattened her skirt with her hands and cleared her throat. “Well, everyone is inside. We thought we’d have a little party tonight to celebrate.”

“Hold on there, princess.” Her father held up his hand. “What do you mean, a forgery and how illegal are we talking about?”

“Let’s just say a little birdy went digging. She found out some letterhead had been stolen—and how—and what kind of printer had been used and from where.”

“Where?” Christoph narrowed his eyes.

“Laney.”

“Son of a bitch! I told Hill to keep his women in line.” He curled his lip and growled.

“Well, I have a plan for her, don’t worry.” She smiled. “Everything will work out.”

“What else did you find?” Jackson hedged.

“Seems she also likes to get down with the football team in the locker room,” she answered. “You know, there’s a video. It’s kind of hypocritical to be proud of that,

but use the same crap on someone else to ruin them.”

“Wait. Are you serious?” Christoph couldn’t believe what she’d said.

“Deadly. She posted a Snapchat. We found the conversation and saved it. Then Raquel found the longer version online. From what I can tell, same for Raquel, it was taken from the same location the photos of Victor were snapped.”

“Jesus. Bell, you can’t use that. Morally, it’s not right. We’re all allowed to explore our sexuality.” Leave it to her father to be the voice of reason.

“I know, Daddy. I’m not going to.” She held out her hand to Christoph. “Come on, we have planning to do for our celebration, plus we need to eat.”

“I’m all for breakfast.” Christoph came up beside her. “Then, I want to tell you what we have planned for Aislinn.”

Christoph hadn’t realized how anxious he’d been until Jackson slapped him on the shoulder after he kissed Bell goodbye the next day. While she was off getting ready to submit her evidence to Dean Ames and request a hearing, he’d be with her father, dealing with his parents. Aislinn would be picked up in about ten minutes from the park across from the hotel where she and her parents stayed. Isaac was already in the van with Wy and Rashid at the designated pick-up point. As he stood there trying to brace himself for what was to come next, he sent Aislinn a quick text to tell her where to go to meet him.

He made it clear she couldn’t take anything with her. This had to look like she disappeared. Keeley and Danielle promised Aislinn and Isaac would have everything they needed. Jackson also wanted to help. Though the girl would never be Christoph’s mate, he had a duty and responsibility to her. In a few years, they would return to Window Rock permanently, and that knowledge helped ease some of the

guilt he experienced. Even though he had nothing to do with her parents' antiquated ways, it bothered him to leave Aislinn alone.

"You ready to go?"

"Yes. It's time to put this shit behind us." Christoph turned from the bathroom mirror he'd been staring into while his mind churned out all the possibilities of how their mission could go horribly bad.

"I just got a message from Aislinn. She's nervous." Jackson followed Christoph to the door of the room they shared with Bell.

"She's not alone in this. Neither are you."

"In an hour, it won't matter. She'll be on the road, and we'll be meeting Bell for her hearing with the dean." Since Victor explained his solution of turning her sorority into a co-op, the tension building within him had mellowed out marginally. One less thing he had to worry about. Victor's idea held merit. Giving up his fraternity for it didn't even cross Christoph's mind. He'd signed the pledge application the second Victor put it in front of him, same for Jackson.

"You're right," Jackson agreed. "We'll be waiting for you when you return."

The ride to the park was quiet. Christoph had to concentrate on the plan. The anxious questions swirling through his mind ceased. They had at least three contingency plans in case something went wrong. He just hoped, for once, they'd go right. With everyone in position, they only had to finish it. He parked his truck in the city park's lot instead of the hotel. Christoph spotted Wy's van at the end of the block when he exited his vehicle, waiting for the signal. They'd tossed around the idea of nabbing Aislinn in the hotel, but too many variables existed. The park, at least, had multiple exits and lax security.

Aislinn stepped out from behind a tree. She looked horrible. Her normally glossy hair hung in dirty tangles. Her eyes were rimmed in purple from lack of sleep, and her clothes appeared rumpled like she hadn't changed them in days. What in the hell happened? Christoph discreetly gave the signal as he jogged to Aislinn's side.

Christoph jogged to her. "What happened?"

Her bottom lip trembled. "What always happens. I've been in the box." She wiped her eyes. "When I didn't come home the other day with a mark, I went into the box. They let me out once a day to eat and use the facilities."

Which explained why she'd answered his text until that morning. No one saw the phone, no one tried to stop her. Anger spiked within him. "The van is coming. I need you to act normal. We don't want to attract unwanted attention."

She nodded. “Okay.”

“How did you get out without being seen?” Curiosity had gotten the better of Christoph.

“I said I had to go to the bathroom. There’s a second door. I used it to get out.” She sniffed, then glanced down the street as the van drew near.

“Good girl. Listen, I won’t see you again for at least a couple of years. But the people you’re going to are good people. Keeley is Bell’s aunt. Same with Danielle. They take care of shifter kids. You’ll fit in and you’ll disappear. Isaac will be there too, so keep an eye on him, okay?”

She nodded, letting out a shaky breath. “Eventually my father will find me.” She glanced down at her feet and rubbed her arm. “Then what?”

“I’m counting on it.” The van came up to the curb and slid the door open. “Good luck, Aislinn.”

“Goodbye, Christoph. Thank you.” She jumped into the vehicle, and Rashid closed the door.

The van eased into traffic, not causing any alarm, and he stood there until it was out of sight. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. One down, two to go. He sent a quick text to Jackson to let him know it was done. Aislinn was on her way to Window Rock as of that moment. Then he headed straight for his parents’ room. Enough of the bullshit. He wouldn’t be kowtowing to them or anyone else any longer.

Christoph stood at the door to his father's room and knocked. When the door opened, Michel's smug grin and superior stance had Christoph digging deep to keep from doing something stupid. "Well, look who decided to return."

"Tell Aislinn's parents it's time we meet." The gleam in his father's eyes had Christoph's stomach knotting.

"They're already here. We're just finishing breakfast." He stood to the side, allowing them to enter.

"Good, this will be a lot easier with all of you here." Christoph shoved into the room. His lion paced below the surface, ready to fight anyone who challenged him.

"Yes." His father shoved Christoph out of the way to take his seat at the head of the table. "It's about time you got your head out of the clouds. Two mates. No self-respecting Alpha would have two mates."

"Look who's joining us this morning." Michel motioned to Christoph as his mother joined them.

His mother beamed at him. Her perfect dress, along with her perfect gloves adorning her hands, oozed gluttonous spending. "Mother. Mr. and Mrs. Makino."

"Where is Aislinn? She should have been preparing to begin the rights of mating with you. She was left with strict instructions to join us when she was presentable." Mr. Makino placed his napkin on the table.

Good. No pretense, which meant not having to stick around after the little speech he'd prepared. "Aislinn is no longer your responsibility."

"So, the mating took. Excellent." Mr. Makino stood.

“No. You misunderstand.” Christoph gave him a Cheshire grin.

His father stepped to him. His rage-filled gaze narrowed while his lip curled. “What have you done?”

“What needed to be done.” He snarled at the man he’d called father for the last twenty-three years. “For the life of me, I couldn’t understand why you would have me follow the old ways. Our pride is modern. We have equal opportunities for our pride members. Then the men started disappearing. The Pride was dominated by women. Some young. Some old. There were no children any longer. That day, before I left, made me start thinking. You’ve been trying to do this for a while. Bringing Isaac along was another pawn for your game. Well, I eliminated him from the board as well. You’ll never see him again. And, since I’ve had a little free time, I decided to look at our finances the other day.” Christoph grinned. “I love having a hacker for a friend because she saw a deposit into your account for two million dollars.”

“How dare you!” his father roared.

“No, Father. How dare you!” He pulled his shirt off, exposing the marks of his mates. “To deny a true mating for a child is inconceivable. She is sixteen. Not even of age. But you couldn’t wait to denounce our ways, could you?” He turned his attention to Mr. Makino. “You know the law, but have you read the whole thing? No mating of underage shifters can occur, even with the if there are others in your lineage who can produce an heir.”

“You said it was full proof,” Mr. Makino said. “You showed me the law. Said there was no way.”

He gave Mr. Makino his full attention. “Aislinn, as we speak, has disappeared. You will never find her, and you may never hurt her again.”

The man lunged from his chair to attack him, but Christoph stopped him with ease. “You can’t kidnap my daughter. I will kill you.”

“Once you paid for her to mate me”—he pointed to Aislinn’s father— “and you accepted the money”—he pointed to his father— “you set the ball rolling for me to take over Aislinn’s day-to-day activities. I can also request monetary compensation for any damage inflicted on her, if you wish, because you kept her in a fucking box. Be glad I don’t know where the box is. I’d shove you into it and never let you out.”

“You will bring my daughter to me, or you will be sorry.” The man snarled at Christoph.

“All of you will return to your homes.” Christoph cut his gaze to his parents. “I am no longer your son.” He glanced at Mr. Makino. “Aislinn is no longer your daughter.”

His father laughed. “And how will you survive without your money?”

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Christoph laughed. “What money?” He released Aislinn’s father before turning his back. “You have two hours to vacate these rooms and leave this state. If you’re not gone by then, I have people who will do whatever I ask of them, and you will disappear.” A bluff, but his parents and Aislinn’s didn’t need to know that. He pulled out his phone to let Jackson know he was on the way home. “Oh, and one more thing. If I find out you are looking for Aislinn at any point, I will make you suffer. Slowly and painfully.” Physical violence wasn’t his thing, but he understood how to hit his father where it hurt most. “Goodbye, Mother.” He closed the door behind them and sagged.

The whoosh of his blood filled his ears, while his body shook from the adrenaline rush. He needed to get out of there and find Bell. Finally free. He hurried down the hall to the bank of elevators and Facetime’d Jackson.

When he answered, Jackson laughed. “Man, you look like warmed-over shit.”

“I bet I do. That was fucking crazy.” He sagged against the wall of the elevator. “I’ll be there shortly. Be ready.”

“You know it, mate.”

10

The day of the trial...

Requesting a meeting and actually getting one were two different things. Even with as much evidence as she had, Dean Ames was a slippery fellow. However, that

morning, his office called. They had two hours to arrive at the meeting hall with all of their documentation and their pledges.

It hadn't been long since Tate and Victor had gone to Dean Ames' office with Nico in tow, but whatever happened sure lit a fire under his ass. Then, when she saw Winston and Hill escorted off of the school's property by security, she'd become even more curious about the situation. It wasn't until they were at dinner together that Victor told them about Kalkin's threat. She bet anything Dean Ames didn't want to deal with any of the Raftery or Dryer family members. Which, after thinking about it, she wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor with all that pacing." Christoph teased, coming up beside her along with Hayden and Jackson.

Bell stopped mid-stride. "Force of habit." She'd chew her nails, but her mother would kill her for picking up the nasty habit. When she'd been little, especially right after she'd been kidnapped by Raymond Quincy, she made her fingers bleed from all the chewing she did. It took several months of reassurance and therapy for her to stop. She used other coping mechanisms to combat the need, allowing her to heal properly.

Until today.

"It's going to work out, Bell. Don't worry so much." Hayden stood beside her. "We have all the evidence we need, plus we have more than enough pledges to keep the house."

She took a deep breath. Bell wasn't so much worried about herself. It was the other plans in motion that had her on edge. She thought she would have relaxed a little more after hearing from her mom that Isaac and Aislinn were safe in Window Rock, yet dread still wriggled through her. "Yes, we do. I think it's the idea of having to defend ourselves in front of Dean Ames. I've never been called to the principal's

office, let alone had to deal with this kind of pressure.”

Her cousin laughed. “It’s no biggie. Let the proof do the talking, and don’t allow any of the other sororities rattle you.”

“You’ve got this, blondie,” Jackson said, joining them. “I’m sure if you don’t, Kalkin will be ready to throw down for you.”

There was that. She knew if she went to her family for help, they’d drop everything and come back. Hadn’t they already done so when her father inspected the house? But this was about her and her fight. She wouldn’t allow a bunch of bitchy girls to dictate how she’d live her day-to-day life, not after everything they’d been through. Not after all the evidence Raquel found against them. No, Bell had to put her foot down and fight fire with fire.

Last night, while they put the last touches on their appeal, an email arrived in her inbox. Initially, when the letter arrived from the Dean, she thought it would be a request for all her evidence. Instead, it detailed who’d be in the meeting, and, if asked, she would be required to answer all questions from the sorority sisters. The email made little sense. Why would anyone want to question her? She was a small sorority who’d been tricked and duped for the last month. None of it made any sense. Bell printed out the email to add to their growing pile of bullshit Laney and Reagan were responsible for. “You’re right.”

“Of course, I am,” Hayden teased. “There’s no denying the evidence. This isn’t a criminal court. If Dean Ames wants to pursue anything against Laney and Reagan, let him do it. All of this shit happened under his nose. So he is just as much responsible.” The doors opened moments later, and they stepped inside. “You’ve got this, Bell. I’ll be right beside you the whole time.”

Bell turned to Christoph and Jackson, her mates. The warmth of her mark radiated

across her chest. It seemed like so long ago she'd not only met them, but realized they were hers forever. She blew out a breath, releasing some of the tension filling her. "Well, here we go."

"You've got this, kitten." Christoph pressed his mouth to her forehead. "Be brave for us."

Warmth and acceptance filled her. "I will."

"That's our girl." Jackson turned her toward the door. "Go get 'em."

She lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders, then took the first step into the conference room. Per the email, every sorority had made an appearance. Well, at least that part of the email was correct. Maybe it came from Dean Ames after all. Terri, Emma, and Zoe sat together with Hayden, while Laney, Lacy, and Reagan sat near the head of the table. The disdain oozed from them. Their cruel smirks and haughty dispositions had her second-guessing all of her confidence.

Don't let them get to you. The minute you do is the minute you lose. Besides, you have the evidence in your corner. It sat in the envelope she'd tucked away in her satchel—thank you, Raquel. Laney might be feeling a little too smug, but after Bell got done with her, she'd never harm another person again. She had a feeling Laney would never grow up and never stop trying to hurt people just because she could.

Taking her seat beside Hayden, Bell laid her bag on the table and waited. A few moments later, the door opened, and Dean Ames walked into the room. He took his seat at the head of the table and opened his folder. She took in his appearance. If he was nervous, he didn't show it. The dressing down Kalkin gave the man should have made him leery of them. Instead, he seemed nonplussed about the situation.

"Good morning, ladies. I am glad you could all make it on such short notice. I've

been informed there have been some changes... Recent developments within the last few days.”

“Recent developments?” Hayden glanced at Bell, who shrugged. About the only thing she knew of was the fact they had the pledges and the evidence. Could it be he hadn’t emailed them after all, and security made it known? Curiosity filled her. All of her questions sat on the tip of her tongue. Instead of giving them voice, she waited.

“Why don’t we begin with the initial issue, then we’ll move on to the more delicate items.” He glanced around the room at all of them, then stopped at Bell. “Miss Dryer, you are here because of the lack of pledges for your sorority. I have the stack of new applications along with your proposal. Though you have made the cut-off number and then some, there are some serious issues with your new roster. Care to explain your solution to the rest of the sisters?”

Bell flinched, startled by the question. Lack of pledges? They had more than enough. Even if she didn’t count the co-ed portion of her presentation with the girls who signed up in the last few days, she’d be able to save her charter. Not wanting to start a pissing match, she swallowed hard as nodded while grabbing her things out of her bag. She wouldn’t allow him to dictate how the meeting went. She would do it her way. Because, it seemed, he hadn’t learned his lesson from her uncle Kalkin. “A few weeks ago, I received two notices. One for not having enough pledges, and the second was a condemned property notice for our house.” She handed out a copy of the notices to everyone at the table. “The first one, I’ll admit, we had a hard time fulfilling. The second was much easier. My father owns a construction company and volunteered to help renovate the house. I am happy to say the place is 90 percent renovated, and the other 10 percent will be finished within the next two weeks.”

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“Let me stop you there.” Dean Ames pointed to the condemned property letter from the city. “You would have gotten one from us first, then the county. Did you ever receive one from the school?”

She shook her head. “This is the only notice I received.” Bell retrieved the information Raquel gave her about it being a forgery. “But I have something I’d like to share with you, if it’s appropriate to do so in a public meeting.”

“Does it pertain to your case?”

“Yes, sir, it does.” Adrenaline and anxiousness swirled through her system. Her hands trembled while she held the information to set her sorority free.

“Then I’d like to see it.” He held out his hand.

She pushed away from the table and started for where the dean sat. Hayden gave her the thumbs-up as she delivered the documents to the man. “A source, I will not divulge her name in public, did a little digging when she noticed inconsistencies with the condemned property notice. Subsequently, two weeks later, we also received a code violation letter from the county detailing every minor and major infraction about the condition of the house.”

“I’m sorry, let me stop you there,” Dean Ames said. “If I’m to believe you, your sorority house received two notices without anyone in the college being made aware?”

Bell shrugged. “Stuff has been happening all around you, Dean Ames. You’ve been

kept out of the loop, obviously. Or need I remind you of the incident with Tate Dryer and Victor Lorenz?"

He blanched. For the first time since he walked into the meeting hall, he looked chagrin. "No, I don't need any reminders. However, I would remind you to watch your tone."

Bell cleared her throat. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Now I remember. So, because we weren't exactly sure why the college hadn't contacted us over the letters, nor the fact I'd put in maintenance orders since the beginning of school, we took it upon ourselves to trace it. You see, Dean Ames, we were a little suspicious about the whole situation. I won't bore you with the details of how my source found the truth. But she figured out the ink and the printer lines didn't match any other printer for the city offices. So, she dug a little deeper. If you'll turn to page two, you'll see her explanation."

There, in black and white on the results page, sat the distinct marks on the paper and the style of how the letters were presented on the pages. "You can see the city uses an industrial printer made by Xerox, and the sorority who stole the letterhead and printed the condemned property letter used an off-brand printer."

He glanced down at what she'd presented, and, for long moments, he said nothing. "It could be a coincidence."

"I thought about that, too." Raquel had also checked out how many people in their small area had a printer like the one used to write the letter. "You can see on the next page, over two hundred people have that type of printer. Of those, only thirty people live within a ten-mile radius of the school. However, only one lives on the school's campus."

"Hmm... Laney, what do you have to say about this?" He glanced up at the girl who'd

made Bell's life a living hell since the semester began.

"She's lying, of course. There is no way those letters came from a printer in my sorority." She crossed her arms and pouted.

"Of course, I'm the liar," Bell said with a small, humorless laugh. "Dean Ames, did you know Laney's mother actually works in the county offices?"

Dean Ames sat back. "No, not at all."

"Well, she does. Low and behold, Laney's mother is the assistant to Barbara Halifax, who coincidentally wrote the code violations letter." She presented the public information that anyone who looked online could find with a couple of keystrokes. "That's when we became suspicious of the whole thing. Finding pledges, well, we'll admit to that. We had a hard time. Though, Hill only complicated it more by swiping our invites and throwing them into the trash in the guy's locker room. I am super grateful for Coach Gai and his help with that issue."

Dean Ames stared at her.

"If you're concerned, I'm sure we could call Coach Gai and he'll corroborate everything I've just said regarding the invitations." Bell tilted her head.

"No, I don't suppose we need to bring the Coach in. Besides, I'm sure he wouldn't appreciate me taking him off the field." Dean Ames scrubbed his forehead as he read through Bell's findings.

Laney jumped to her feet. Her chair slammed into the wall behind her. "This is bull crap, Dean Ames."

"So, you won't have a problem with security searching your house for the printer?"

he pressed.

Her eyes widened. “Dean Ames, this is ridiculous!” She pointed at Bell, her eyes narrowing to slits of pure rage. “We’re not here for me. We’re here because Bell didn’t gain enough pledges.”

“A simple yes or no will suffice,” Dean Ames said.

Laney glared at her. “No. I will not allow you to ransack my home because some twit faked some evidence against me.”

Dean Ames frowned, folding his hands on the small stack of information Bell had given him. “Then I will bring you to the school’s Code of Conduct board. I am confident when they’re done with you, we will search your home. I’ll also be putting in a phone call to the county commission office to find out if the letters sent to Ms. Dryer’s house are authentic. I’d hate for your mother to lose her job because of some ill-conceived notion.”

Laney screeched in indignation. “You can’t do this!”

He grinned—not a nice one, either. It was filled with intent and purpose. One that if Bell hadn’t dealt with her father’s anger frequently, Bell would fear the Dean meant to cause harm to Laney. “Oh, but I can, and I will.” He stood and braced his hands on the table, getting into Laney’s face. The color of his eyes changed to an eerie golden hue. “Sit down, Miss River.”

She squealed in outrage. “My daddy will have your job!”

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He shrugged, easing into his chair. “He can try, but I am sure the postal service and the city would love to know how you forged documents and used the postal service to assist your fallacy. Anything else, Miss Dryer?”

Bell couldn’t believe what she saw. Rooted in her spot, she stared at Laney and Mr. Ames, unable to speak. She shook her head. “N-no, sir.”

“Perfect. Moving on to your pledges. You submitted an idea, using another college’s model. While I don’t appreciate another school’s methods introduced into our school, this time, I believe it is appropriate to look at the model.”

Bell took a deep breath, settling herself. The hardest part was over. Now, all she had to do was convince Dean Ames a Co-Ed house would work for them and how it could help the students of TSU. “Victor Lorenz approached me, Dean Ames, with a fantastic idea. I had noticed for a few days we attracted a certain sect of students—”

“Losers more like it,” Reagan snorted.

The dean tapped his gavel on the table. “Quiet. Reagan, there is no talking during these hearings unless you are called upon to speak. If I have to tell you again, I will have you removed from this room. Do you understand?” About the only thing she was doing anyway was making it harder on Laney. Bell would have laughed if it wouldn’t have interrupted the proceedings.

“Yes,” Reagan snarked.

“Good.” Dean Ames folded his hands. “Go on, Bell.”

“Anyway. Maybe we are losers. I don’t know and I don’t care. But I opened my house to all those who need a place to call home, and it feels pretty damn good.” She covered her mouth. “Sorry, sir.”

He chuckled. “It’s all right. Continue.”

“So, when Victor came to me with his idea, I immediately liked it. Hayden, my Vice-President, was present also at the meeting, and she, too, agreed.”

“Hayden?” He glanced at her cousin. “Is this true?”

“Yes, sir. Bell and I both noticed how we’d become a beacon of sorts for students. It made sense to us right away when he explained the co-op house.” Hayden shrugged. “Our family motto has always been to help those who need it the most. To take care of those who might not have family or friends, and to protect the sick and injured. Our fathers and uncles would be ashamed of us, if we turned our back on someone who might need help.”

Bell took her cousin’s hand. “We thought if we could change our policies and allow a place to stay for male and female students who didn’t feel welcomed in other houses, we’d be impacting student relations. Just think, Dean Ames, a house where a loner and a preppy person could live together and become friends. A place where a gay student could come out, and be himself or herself—or even themselves. We want to be known as a bastion of hope to all those who feel like they don’t matter. Some may call us misfits in a derogatory way.” Bell cut her gaze to Laney. “However, we wear it with honor because we don’t want to fit into society’s crazy molds.”

He scrubbed his chin with his fingers while studying their proposal. “You understand your house isn’t big enough for this type of venture, correct?”

“Yes. We hoped, with some fund-raising and a little ingenuity, we could either add

on to our present house or move to a bigger location. Some of our members would have to stay in their dorms until it's possible for us to accommodate them." She hated the idea of them not all being together, but sometimes, they had to do what they had to do.

He nodded. "There's three acres of land available near your current residence. If you'd like to use it, you must do the following. Submit a proposal for the site and submit a set of blueprints for the remodeling of your house or a new one. The third and fourth year architectural students are at your disposal, so is the blueprint printer. I have a list of candidates I believe will be the best to help you out in this situation. Plus, I'll need a budget and a completion time frame. You'll have three weeks to turn it in."

"You can't do that!" Laney shouted. "That's my land for my house."

"I can and I just did, Miss River." Dean Ames stared at her.

Bell couldn't believe what she'd heard. "Wait, so you're saying yes?"

"I'm saying yes with the contingency that you build a bigger house," he replied. "If, as you say, you've made significant upgrades over the last few weeks, this shouldn't be too hard to accomplish either."

Her vision went fuzzy, and her blood whooshed in her ears. She won. Her heart pounded as excitement and nervous energy mixed. "Holy cow." She covered her mouth as she giggled. "I will have the proposal to you in the allotted time. I already know a good construction company." She couldn't wait to tell her father.

"Do you have enough pledges, Bell?" the Dean asked. "Before we can go any farther, I have to know."

“Yes. Of course.” One by one, they stood. “This is all of them.” She motioned to the gallery where everyone watched the proceedings.

“Thank you,” Dean Ames said. “I appreciate your dedication. I’m sorry you had to experience this much malice. Hopefully, everything will go back to normal now.”

“We hope so too.” Bell grinned. “Thank you, Dean Ames.”

“If there’s nothing else?” Dean Ames glanced around the room. “Excellent. This meeting is adjourned.” He smacked the gavel against the table’s wooden surface. “Congratulations, Ms. Dryer, and good work.”

She shook his hand. “Thank you, sir. I won’t let you down.”

Finally.

No more being worried sick. No more three a.m. anxiety attacks on what she’d do next. No more having to fight with Laney. For the first time since the semester began, the weight of the world lifted from her shoulders. She could breathe. The rush of winning her case left her wanting to cry and laugh, then puke because of the nervousness still churning in her belly.

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“We did it,” Hayden said as their house surrounded them. “Told you we’d win.”

Being told and it actually happening were two entirely different things. She was confident in their ability, obviously, yet there was still a chance Laney would still wiggle herself free from the consequences. The fact Dean Ames was going to wait to have a conduct hearing for her left Bell excited but edgy. It was giving Laney a chance to clear up her missteps. “You did. Now, we have to wait and see what the Conduct hearing says.”

Hayden frowned. “True, but I have a good feeling about it.”

Moments later, Jackson and Christoph joined them at the table. She pushed through her housemates and went straight to her mates. Excitement, love, and relief filled her. Everyone was safe. “We won!” She kissed both men. “It’s all over.”

“Congratulations, kitten.” Christoph gathered her into his arms. “You should know Isaac and Aislinn are settling in. Your father just texted me.”

Bell sagged in his arms. “Perfect.”

“Way to put Laney in her place, blondie.” Jackson grinned.

“We should celebrate.” Hayden joined them. “Pool party at our place.”

Bell laughed. “Sure, but not today. I feel like celebrating with my mates.” She glanced up at her men. “Take me home, boys.”

Christoph chuckled. “Your wish is our command.”

“I love you both.” She pressed her palm to their chests. “Forever.”

“We love you, too, blondie.” Jackson reached down and tipped her chin up to press a kiss to her lips. “Forever.”

The tepid autumn air whipped around her as she stepped out of the building. Everything was brighter now, not so dull around the edges. Even though they still had a way to go where their new family was concerned, after all the stuff she’d been through, she’d face it head on. She was a Dryer after all.

Epilogue

Three years later, Colorado Springs, Colorado, Dalco Estate...

Christoph woke to the sound of his phone ringing. They’d only been at Jackson’s estate for a couple of days after graduation. Because of the Co-Ed house, Bell was still transferring over everything to the newest President and Vice-President, so they could begin the recruiting process. It was a bittersweet moment for his mate. She’d spent the last few years cultivating the house, making it a place where everyone, no matter their gender, orientation, shifter or human, could call home. He was so fucking proud of her and honored to be her mate. The phone rang again, drawing him out of his thoughts. He grabbed the device as he slipped out of bed, hoping not to wake her or Jackson. His gaze clashing with that of Jackson’s iridescent eyes as he answered. “Hello?”

“Is this Mr. Christoph St. John?” the man said in greeting.

“Yes, this is he.” Christoph continued to stare at Jackson, who’d gathered a still sleeping Bell in his embrace, concern etched on his face. “What can I do for you?”

“My name is Detective Richard Hopkins of El Paso County Sheriff’s Department, in conjunction with Denver County Sheriff’s. I’m calling you regarding an unaccompanied minor, named Alexia, no last name.”

Christoph knew Jackson could hear the entire conversation without trying. His mate perked up at the mention of the girl’s name. Three years ago, when his father had showed up with a little boy—Isaac St. John, his son, demanding he mate Aislinn Makino, daughter of Reyku Makino, Alpha of the Osaka Pride, Christoph refused. She was sixteen. Abused and scared. She’d been locked in a fucking box because she hadn’t bedded Christoph or mated him. It was at that moment, after he’d sent Aislinn to Window Rock, that he knew his parents were repugnant, depraved degenerates. As much as he hoped to become the son they always wanted, he knew he could never be that sinister or vile.

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand why you’re calling me about this child.” His mind spun. His stomach clenched. After everything they’d had to deal with because of his father and the Osaka Pride. Had his father decided to test Christoph, to see how far he could push his son until Christoph attacked? He wouldn’t put it past the old man.

“Sorry, I should have explained this better. I’m a little confused as well,” the Detective said. “I have a letter with your name on it along with your address at Turnskin University, but we were advised you’ve graduated. Are you still in the area so we can speak face to face?”

He swallowed hard. He couldn’t say no. Even if the child wasn’t his, someone knew where to find him and how. He racked his brain trying to figure out who the girl belonged to and why she was sent to Christoph. “Yes, I can meet you at the Sheriff’s Department if that’s okay with you?” He ran his fingers through his hair while pacing a small strip across their room.

“Sure. How long do you believe it will take you?” the Detective pressed.

Jackson roused Bell, and Christoph mentally kicked himself. He hated waking his little mate. They’d been so busy since graduation that any sleep she got was needed. Plus, they’d been through one of the harshest estruses they’d ever had. Nothing calmed the ardor racing through his veins. Nothing stilled the lion within him. He’d only experienced the sensation once, when he was seventeen. Bile bit at the back of his throat and he swallowed hard. “I can be there within the hour.”

“Perfect. We’ll keep Alexia occupied until you arrive,” Detective Hopkins said.

“Thank you.” Christoph hit end on his phone while he stared at his mates. Bell rubbed her eyes and stretched, while Jackson watched him closely.

“Who is Alexia?” Jackson said, sitting up.

“I don’t know. Maybe a sibling?” His father had relations with all the females within the Pride. He wouldn’t put it past his father to do something so dastardly as impregnate a female, then rip the kid away from her mother. Christoph rubbed the back of his neck, worried about what fresh hell his father brought upon him. “I’m not sure what’s going on, though I have a sneaky suspicion my father is behind it.” He placed the phone on the dresser, then turned to the closet to grab some clothes. “We have to be at the Sheriff’s department in an hour. We should all get ready.”

“In an hour?” Bell stifled a yawn before lifting her arms in the air, exposing her soft belly and porcelain skin. She was his everything, along with Jackson.

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They hadn't had the best of starts. Within weeks of taking the first steps of claiming his mates, his father had shown up in town with his mother and the Alpha of the Osaka Pride. He always knew his father was a disgusting human being. Christoph understood the situation he and his mother lived in, wasn't normal. After being with Bell and Jackson, and seeing her parents, the conflicting ideals of family threw him for a loop. The biggest issue he had with his Pride, was the fact there were no children. There was no land. He couldn't put his finger on all the inconsistencies he'd noticed now over the years, but as he rushed to get ready to go, the locks on his memories released and his past came flooding in.

"We need to meet a child at the Sheriff's department," Jackson whispered. "A girl named Alexia. Come on, blondie. We can't lazy around all day."

She frowned. "A child? Shouldn't they have gone to my aunt or to a nearby Pack or Pride?" She scrubbed those beautiful blue eyes of hers and Christoph's cock twitched. She was perfect for him. Both of them were. Where she was soft and cradled his body, Jackson was hard. He gave Christoph the power and control he craved when they were together. His mates stabilized him. He knew his life would never be complete without Bell and Jackson.

Christoph couldn't say when he figured out he wasn't like others. He supposed, if he were being cliché, he'd say in college, because that's when everyone experimented. But, deep down, he probably always knew, but repressed his feelings because of his father. What Jackson and Bell experienced with his father the few times they'd met him was nothing. The man had been a tyrant for as far back as Christoph could remember.

Of course, he didn't put two and two together until he was almost eighteen and thousands of miles away from his Pride. At least now he understood why his mother gave up on his father. It became painfully obvious before he left. She only showed her loyalty to his father when it helped her. She'd even climb over her son to get whatever his father offered her, which should have hurt Christoph, yet in the end, he'd been more disappointed than anything.

"Not if they were part of my father's Pride," Christoph said. Of course, it was all speculation on his part. Maybe someone saw him and—What, idiot? Left you their kid?" "Could be wrong though."

Her eyes widened in surprise. Her mouth dropped open. "Oh, wow." She scrambled to the edge of the bed. "Then I suppose we should get ready."

He grunted, stomping into the bathroom to change. "We only have a single name for her, Alexia. The detective didn't tell me how she got here, though."

"I like her name." Sweet, soft Bell. Fuck, she could make his back teeth ache with her sugary voice. Obviously, she handed him his ass a couple of times in the very beginning, but she was always so cordial. She didn't meet a stranger, and she had this prim properness to her. He wanted to fuck it out of her, but held back because something about her screamed fragile. Like, everything she did was a mask or a performance. He couldn't put his finger on it. The one time he and Jackson really hurt her feelings, she'd forgiven them within hours. She didn't even yell.

Guilt ate at him.

Anger chased the guilt.

Whatever happened to his Bell left her this Stepford acting mate. He made it his goal in life to see the woman beneath the veneer. When he stepped out of the bathroom, he

pulled up short. Bell faced the mirror over her dresser. She wore a pair of skintight jeans and a tank top—not normal Bell attire. A quick glance at Jackson showed the man wore the same confused expression as him.

She turned around and stared at both of them, placing her hands on her hips. “What? Can I not wear comfortable clothes today?” The knees of her pants were threadbare and open, exposing her creamy flesh. She’d tucked the front of her shirt behind her top button on her button-fly jeans, challenging the whole esthetic of who their Bell was. Or at least, who he thought Bell was.

“You can, kitten,” Christoph said. “Do you wear clothes like this often?” Had he missed it? They’d all been busy trying to get through school so, some days they got little time together. This, though... he couldn’t say whether or not he liked it.

She frowned. “No. Zoe gave me some of her clothes. She said I needed to update my wardrobe.”

Jackson coughed to cover his chuckle. “She was right, blondie. You look amazing in street clothes. Not that I mind the innocent version of you, too. Makes me want to corrupt you.” He joined her at the dresser. “This though, fuck Bell. I can’t take my eyes off your ass.”

In an instant, he hated Jackson and appreciated him. From the very beginning, he’d been able to say the things Christoph couldn’t. He’d done it at the gala dinner for the GSG—Greek Shifter Games. Then he broke the tension at Bell’s sorority party when Laney and those stupid bitches almost wrecked everything. He was smooth where Christoph was stoic. “I like both versions of you, Bell. This though...” He scratched at the stubble on his cheek. “I feel like I’m cheating on you.”

She laughed while Jackson shook his head.

“Are we ready?” Christoph hedged. “Don’t want to be late.”

Bell nodded. “I—”

The doorbell rang, drawing their attention to the front of the house. No one knew they were out there. This place had been Jackson’s. Built into the side of the mountain, the mansion boasted six bedrooms, four bathrooms, a gym, family room with a view of the forest, and a home theater. Not to mention the ten-car garage and pool/jacuzzi combo. He’d only told Christoph and Bell about the house the year before when they wanted to spend more time together instead of with family. So, it begged the question, how had they been found? The chime signaled again, and Jackson started for the stairs.

“It’s probably nothing,” Jackson said as Bell and Christoph followed him. “I’ve had several reality agents contacting me recently to ask if I’m selling.” He opened the door and the man who stood there with a small boy in his arms didn’t appear to be any kind of real estate agent. “Elgor?” The way Jackson said the man’s voice sounded more like he’d been gut punched by confusion. Like he’d actually thought an agent would be standing there.

“Master Jackson,” Elgor said, stepping forward. “It has been years, young sir.”

“Please, please come in.” Jackson stepped aside, sliding his gaze to Christoph. The flames he’d usually banked with obsidian flickered and raged. “What... Who is this?”

“Acest lucru este, Maliki,” Elgor said. “Your young brother.”

Jackson’s mouth fell open. “But, I thought, I mean, they were...” He swallowed hard. “I need to sit.”

The elderly man nodded solemnly. “Yes, your aunt. I have so much to tell you before

I must take my leave, young master.”

Christoph watched the play of emotions on Jackson’s face. “You stay here, Jackson. Bell and I will go check out what’s happening at the Sheriff’s Department.”

Jackson nodded. “Sure, yeah. It’s for the best.” His distant tone made Christoph's ears twitch and his lion sit up and take notice. However, he didn’t have the time to suss out what was happening to Jackson or how he had a younger brother. He needed to book it to the station and find out why—better yet, who Alexia was, and why she was there.

“Bell, would you like to go or stay?” Christoph hated putting her in the middle. It wasn’t fair to her. She shouldn’t have to choose. Everything important should be done together, but this... “I won’t force you to go with me.”

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She shook her head. “I won’t let you do this on your own. Besides, which one of our families owns and operates a safe haven for orphaned and abandoned kids? And, which one of us has taken care of more than their fair share of lost children?” She quirked one of her blonde brows in challenge.

“Has to be the clothes,” he teased, ushering her out of the house. “Only explanation I can come up with.”

“For what?” She licked her bottom lip as she stared up at him. Christoph wrapped his arms around her. He bent his head and inhaled her fresh summer strawberry scent. When he brushed his lips over hers, she pressed herself to him. His sweet innocent Bell. She was corruptible, like Jackson said. Though sullyng her wasn’t high on his list of things to do. He loved this version of Bell.

“Why you’re sassy,” he said before helping her into the passenger seat of their SUV.

Bell giggled. “I’m not sassy.” She clicked her seatbelt into place as he closed her door and went around the front to get in.

Christoph started his vehicle and backed out of the driveway. “Yes, kitten, you are. When you want to be. The rest of the time you’re our soft, adorable, and thoughtful mate.” He laced their hands together as they drove down the mountain and into town.

“I love you, Christoph, but you smother me sometimes. I’m not as nice as you think I am.” She frowned. Even her pout was cute.

“I believe you, mate.” He kissed the back of her hand as they slowed for a school x-

ing. The days were getting longer, which meant the schools in the area were keeping the kids outside more than inside, especially the shifter children. He'd captured glimpses of them since they'd been there. He wondered if Isaac was having fun with his schoolmates as well.

She snorted. "Maybe I need lessons from Zoe or Hayden. Both of them might whip me into shape. Or my brother." She wiggled her brows. "I'd bet he'd teach me how to peg you and Jackson."

Christoph's mouth fell open. He didn't know if he was scared or turned on or a bit of both. Staring at her like he was, she gave nothing away. Arousal pooled low in his gut. Christoph had been very specific with Jackson. He was a top, and he never fantasized about taking a dick. He could suck his mate off, and he could fuck Jackson. However, he just didn't think he could bottom. He knew his preference wasn't an issue, because everything was about consent, but this. This version of Bell, he'd call her Bell 2.0, also turned him on. She motioned to the light that had turned green while he'd been struck dumb by her. He went through the intersection, still taken aback by her comment. "I—"

"Gotcha." She laughed.

The sound of her happiness hit him square in the chest, and his lion purred. He loved hearing the tinkling sound of her glee. "I should spank you." First because with one statement she made him hard as a rock and second because he entertained the idea and found himself intrigued and ready to make it happen if she wanted.

"Not a punishment," she hummed, her brilliant smile lifted some of the nervousness still churning in his gut.

"No, it's not," he agreed. "Thank you, Bell."

She turned in her seat. “For what?”

“For taking my mind off all this stuff.” He kissed the back of her hand once more. “You have no idea how anxious I am right now.”

“I can smell you,” she said. “The normal sweet grass aroma I love has soured into something twisted and filled with fear.” Her features became serious. “We never talk about your family after everything that happened. I figured it was for obvious reasons, but you know we’re here for you if you ever need us.”

“A lot of dark, not so nice things happened to me, Bell.” He shuddered at the thought.

She peered up at him, terror and sadness filled her crystal blue eyes. “I’ll tell you my secrets if you tell me yours.”

Why did he have a bad feeling about this? Why did his gut scream at him to back away from the subject, not because of him, but because whatever she had to tell him, it would enrage and destroy him more than he already was torn in two? “Bell, you never have to tell me about any of it.”

She swallowed audibly. “Yes, it’s time. We’re going home. You might hear about it through rumors and conjecture in town. I’d rather it be from me first.”

“Right now, though?” He was giving her a way out before they arrived at the Sheriff’s department. “We can do it later with Jackson. So you only have to say it once.”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. “Maybe you’re right. Hey, who do you think Elgor and Maliki are?”

Thankful for the change of subject, he shrugged. “Not sure, but the old man seemed

to know Jackson, and he said the boy was Jackson's brother, but is that possible?"

"Kind of like a butler." The man had been sharply dressed in a three-piece tailored suit. Even the little boy was wearing nice clothing for a three-year-old, if Christoph had to guess, going by his size and what he'd remembered from the last time he'd seen pictures of Adam, Bell's baby brother. "Talk about horrible timing, huh?"

Yeah, she could say that again. He hated leaving his mate alone to deal with whatever was going on with the old man and Maliki. "Do you wish you would have stayed?"

She shook her head. "More like I wish there were two of me, so I wouldn't have let either of you do this alone." The somber look on her face fit Christoph's mood. "I knew leaving the house with you, whoever Elgor is, he's part of Jackson's clan. The surprised look on Jackson's face showed me. He believed everyone was dead. Now, he knows the truth."

"Shit, I don't know which part is more fucked up," Christoph said, pulling into the parking lot across from the Sheriff's department. "Us leaving him alone, or us being here." The knot of trepidation and sickness swelled in his gut.

"I can't answer that either," she said. "I'm here for both of you."

"Then let's go find out who Alexia is," Christoph said, parking the SUV.

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Once they stepped into the building, Christoph went to the reception desk. It was nothing like Kalkin's. This place was an open floor plan. There were several desks group together while detectives and deputies milled around. There were shelving units filled with big white binders, along with several locked filing cabinets. To the right of the area was a door that went back to another section of the building.

"Can I help you?" the woman at the desk said, greeting them.

"Yes, a Detective Hopkins called me. My name is Christoph St. John," Christoph said.

"I'll let him know you're here," she said, motioning to the chairs in a little waiting area. "Have a seat and he'll be right with you."

Bell took his hand when they sat. "Whatever happens, I am behind you one hundred percent. No matter what."

He wanted desperately to believe her. Dropping the subject in the car had saved him from having to tell her what he'd been exposed to. His father was a monster, of that he was sure. The little bits Bell had been exposed to, wasn't even the tip of the iceberg. Whatever the circumstances of the girl being brought there, Christoph had a feeling it would cause their lives to change. The door he spied while taking in the space opened and a man stepped through. He appeared overworked and underpaid. He wore an ill-fitted suit, unlike Elgor put-together attire. The man's hair was thinning, and he had a bit of a belly to boot. The lines around his eyes were deep from stress, if Christoph had to guess, as were the ones bracketing his mouth. The muscle of his jaw ticked with each step he took, as though the tension or strain was getting to

him.

He stopped in front of Christoph and gave a small smile that didn't meet his dull brown eyes. "Mr. St. John?" He held out his hand.

Christoph stood. "Yes, sir," he said in way of greeting, shaking the man's hand. "This is my mate, Bell." They weren't married yet. They were still young, and they could figure it out later. Plus, they were shifters, not like they really had to prove anything to anyone.

"Ma'am," Detective Hopkins said, shaking her hand. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you to Alexia."

TO BE CONTINUED IN: